

2017年诺贝尔文学奖得主

石黑一雄中英双语 作品系列

(全八册)



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双语版石黑一雄作品

长日将尽

The Remains of the Day

二〇一七年诺贝尔文学奖获奖作家

Kazuo Ishiguro



〔英〕石黑一雄

—— 著

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为无可慰藉之人提供慰藉

The Remains of the Day

Dedication

PROLOGUE: JULY 1956

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DAY TWO- MORNING

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长日将尽

纪念莉诺·马歇尔太太⁽¹⁾

- ⁽¹⁾ 石黑一雄在一篇题为《撒切尔夫人的伦敦与政治变革时代的艺术家角色》（Thatcher's London and the role of the artist in a time of political change）的回忆性文章中称，莉诺·马歇尔太太（Mrs Lenore Marshall）是一九八二年冬他搬入的伦敦一幢维多利亚时代住宅的房东太太（“A few years later, following Lenore's sudden death, I dedicated *The Remains of the Day* to her memory.”）。

引子：一九五六年七月

达林顿府

看来，这些天来一直在我心头盘桓的那次远行计划越来越像是真的要成行了。我应该说明的是，这是一次叨光法拉戴先生的福特轿车的舒适旅行；一次依我看来将带我穿越英格兰众多最优美的乡村盛景，去往西南诸郡的远行，而且会让我离开达林顿府的时间长达五六天之久。之所以有此旅行的念头，我应该特意指出，是源自差不多两个礼拜前的一个下午，由法拉戴先生本人主动向我提出的一个最为慷慨的建议。当时我正在藏书室里为那些肖像掸尘，准确地说，我记得是站在梯凳上为韦瑟比子爵的肖像掸尘，我的雇主拿着几本书进来，大概是准备放回书架上。看到我在那儿，他就趁便通知我，他刚刚确定下来，要在八月和九月间返回美国，为期五周时间。说完正事之后，我的雇主将那几本书放到书桌上，往chaise-longue⁽¹⁾上一躺，两腿一伸。就是在那个时候，他抬头看着我，跟我说道：

“你该知道，史蒂文斯，我可不希望你在我离开的这段时间里就一直被闭锁在这幢房子里。你何不开着那辆轿车，到某个地方消遣几天呢？你看起来是该好好享受一次休假了。”

这个建议突如其来，我一时间不知该如何应答才好。我记得我对于他的体恤下情表达了谢意，不过很有可能并没有做出任何明确的表态，因为我的雇主又接着道：

“我这话是认真的，史蒂文斯。我真的认为你应该休个假了。汽油的花费由我来承担。你们这帮家伙，你们总是把自己闭锁在这些深宅大院里忙这忙那，干吗不出去四处走走，看看你们这个美丽的国家呢？”

这不是我的雇主第一次提出这样一个问题了；看来，这倒确实是让他大为费心的一件事。在这种情况下，当我站在那个梯凳上的时候，我脑子里倒是浮现出了一个回答；大意是：虽然从旅行观光、游览乡村盛景的角度上来说，我们确实对这个国家所知甚少，但是干我们这一行的，对于英格兰的“见识”却实际上比大多数人都更胜一筹，因为我们就身处这个国家名流显贵云集的显赫府第当中。当然了，我在向法拉戴先生表达这一观点的时候，却又不太可能不给人一种自以为是的冒昧感觉。所以我也只能满足于简单地如此答复：

“这些年来，就在这幢府第当中，我已经尽享饱览英格兰的无限精华之特权了，先生。”

法拉戴先生似乎不太明白我的言下之意，因为他仍旧只是继续道：“我是认真的，史蒂文斯。一个人不能到处走走，见识一下自己的国家，这是大不应该的。接受我的建议，到外面去待上个几天吧。”

你也能预料得到，那天下午我根本就没把法拉戴先生的建议当真，只是把它当作一位美国绅士不太熟悉在英格兰通常哪些事该做、哪些事又不该做的又一例证。而我在接下来的几天里对这一建议的态度之所以发生了改变——的确，前往西南诸郡一游的打算在我的思绪中越来越挥之不去——无疑实质上应该归因于一我又何必隐瞒呢？——肯顿小姐的来信，如果不算圣诞贺卡的话，这是几乎七年来她写给我的第一封信。但还是让我马上讲清楚我这话是什么意思吧；我想说的是，肯顿小姐的来信引发了我一连串与达林顿府的管理事务相关的想法，我需要强调指出的是，正是由于府第的管理事务已经成为眼下的当务之急，才促使我重新考虑我的雇主那完全出自好意的建议。不过，还是让我进一步作一番解释吧。

事实上，在过去这几个月里，我在履行自己的职责方面犯下了一系列小小的差池。我应该说明，这些差池毫无例外，本身都是非常微不足道的。尽管如此，我想您也能理解，对于一个不习惯于犯下此类差池的人而言，这一发展趋势还是令我备感不安的，实际上，针对其源头，我也确实已经开始认真考虑各种防微杜渐的措施了。正如在这种情况下屡见不鲜的，之前我对于最显而易见的事实竟然一直都视而不见——也就是说，一直到我开始反复琢磨肯顿小姐来信的个中深意，我才终于豁然开朗，看清楚了这个简单的事实：最近几个月来的那些小小不言的差池也确实没什么大不了的，全都源自人员配置上的先天缺陷。

当然了，尽最大的努力做好府第中的人员配置规划本就是每一位管家的职责和本分。谁知道到底有多少的口角争执、诬告栽赃和完全没有必要的解雇，有多少原本大有前途的职业生涯却半途而废，实际上应归咎于一位管家在人员配备规划阶段的马虎和疏懒呢？有人说，制订一套良好的人员配置规划是任何一位称职的管家所有技能的基础和柱石，的确，我可以说是同意这种说法的。在过去这些年中，我已经亲自设计过很多的人员配备规划，如果说这些规划当中极少有需要

调整和改正之处的话，我相信我也并没有过分地自我吹嘘。同时我也该特别指出，这一次的状况的确是异乎寻常地困难才算是公道。

具体的情况是这样的。房产交易一旦结束——这次交易使达林顿家族在长达两个世纪之后，失去了对这座府第的所有权——法拉戴先生就知会我们，他不会马上入住这里，而是将再花四个月的时间对美国的事务做一个了结。不过与此同时，他又最殷切地希望前任东家的员工——他已经听说这批雇员具有极佳的声誉——能够继续留任达林顿府。当然，他所指的这批“员工”，仅是达林顿勋爵的几位亲属在房产交易期间临时照管这幢宅第时所留用的那六位骨干人员；但我很遗憾地向新雇主汇报，交易一旦完成，除了克莱门茨太太以外，对于其他员工另寻其他工作的情况我实在是无能为力。当我向法拉戴先生写信表达我对此种状况的遗憾时，我接到来自美国的答复，指示我去招募一批“配得上一座堂皇的古老英国府第”的新员工。我立刻着手尽力满足法拉戴先生的愿望，但您也知道，在现在这个时候要想招募到一批令人满意的高标准员工实在殊非易事，尽管经由克莱门茨太太的推荐，我很高兴地雇用了罗斯玛丽和阿格尼丝，但是直到去年春天法拉戴先生短暂地先期探访达林顿府，我跟他进行第一次事务性会晤之时，招聘工作并无更大的进展。也正是在那个场合下——在达林顿府那个显得异常空旷的书房里——法拉戴先生第一次跟我握了手，不过，在那之前我们相互之间也已经算不上是陌生人了；除了招聘雇员这一事务之外，我的新雇主在好几个其他方面也发现有必要求助于那些我也许只是因为走运才拥有的才能和品质，并且发现它们——我不妨冒昧地直言——是值得信赖和托付的。因此，我认为，他马上就感觉可以跟我以一种讲求实际、充分信任的方式坦诚地交谈，在这次会面结束前，他留给我一笔不算可观的资金由我全权掌管，为他不久之后入住达林顿府进行各个方面的准备之用。别的方面姑且不论，我想说的是，正是在这次面谈的过程中，当我提出在现在这种时候招聘到合格员工的难处时，法拉戴先生在经过片刻沉吟后，向我提出了他的要求：我应尽力拟定出一个人员配置规划——用他话说就是“某种仆佣的轮值表”——按照这一规划，这座府第或许可以就依靠目前的这四位员工正常地运转起来——也就说克莱门茨太太、那两位年轻的姑娘，外加我自己。他充分地理解，这样也许意味着要将这座府第中的好些部分“深藏密闭”起来，但我能否充分调动我所有的经验和专长，尽我之所能确保将此类损失控制在最低限度之内？回想过去，我手下曾有过十七名员工可供调度，而且就在不久前，达林顿府雇用的员工人数甚至达到过二十八位，相形之下，希望依靠设计出一个完善的人员配置规划，仅用四个人就能将这么大的府第管理得井井有条，这种想法往轻里说，

至少也是令人望而却步的。尽管我竭力不把自己的想法表露出来，我那深表怀疑的态度想必还是遮掩不住的，于是法拉戴先生又补充了一句，似乎是为了消除我的顾虑，说如果证明确属必要，也可以再增加一位雇员。但他又重复道，如果我能“试一下就用四个人”的话，他将感激不尽。

说起来，就像我们当中的很多人一样，我自然也不太情愿对旧有的方式做出太多的变更。但像某些人那样仅仅是为了传统而固守传统的话，却也并无任何益处。在这个电气和现代化供暖系统的时代，确实也没有必要再雇用甚至只是上一代人所必需的那么多种类的员工了。说实在的，实际上长久以来我已经形成了这样一种想法，即只是为了传统的缘故而维持不必要的冗员——结果造成雇员们拥有了大量不但无益反而有害的空闲时间——这正是造成职业水准急剧下降的重要原因。再者说，法拉戴先生已经明确表示，他难得会举办过去达林顿府所司空见惯的那种盛大的社交活动。在这之后，我就全身心地投入到法拉戴先生所交付给我的这个任务当中；我花费了大量的时间拟定人员配置规划，而且在我从事其他的工作以及就寝以后尚未睡着的时候，又花费了至少同样多的时间反复斟酌推敲。只要是我感觉又有了什么新的想法，我都会反复探究它是否还有任何纰漏，从所有的角度对它一一进行检视。最后我终于拟出了一个规划，也许还并不完全符合法拉戴先生所提出的要求，但我确信这已经是人力所及的范围之内的最好结果了。这座府第中几乎所有富有魅力的部分都能继续保持正常运转；而庞大的仆佣生活区——包括后廊、那两间茶点整备室，还有那间老式的洗衣房——以及三楼上的客房都将关闭，不再使用，保留一楼的所有主要的房间以及相当数量的客房。平心而论，以我们现在这四人团队的力量，也只有再借助一些临时工的增援才能胜任这一安排；因此，我的人员配置规划当中也已经加入了临时工的服务内容：一位园丁每周来一次，夏季则增加为两次；两位清洁工每周来两次。除此之外，我的人员配置规划意味着我们四位常驻员工每个人各自的常规职责也要进行根本性的调整。以我的预期，那两位年轻姑娘并不会感觉这些调整和改变非常难以适应，而我尽最大的可能确保将克莱门茨太太需要承受的调整幅度降至最低限度，结果我自己也就肩负起了许多您可能认为唯有思想最为开通的管家才会去承担的工作职责。

时至今日，我也不至于会说这是个糟糕的人员配置规划；毕竟，它可以使得只有四个人的团队能够承担起这么多其范围远远超乎预料的职责。不过，您无疑也会同意，最好的员工规划是能够留出清楚的误差范围的那一种，万一某位雇员生了病或是出于这样那样的原因而

状态欠佳，也好留出余地。如果碰到这样的特殊情况，我当然就将面对一个稍稍异乎寻常的棘手的任务，不过，即便如此，我都一直并没有忽视，只要是有可能，就把预留这样的“余地”也体现在规划当中。我尤其注意克莱门茨太太或者那两位姑娘可能产生的任何抗拒心理，因为她们承担了超出传统界限之外的职责，她们可能会认为她们的工作量也已经大为增加。在反复斟酌、不断完善员工规划的那些日子里，我也已经特别为此而大费思量，以确保她们一旦克服了因承担这些“五花八门的”额外角色而产生的反感，她们就会发现这样的职责分配其实是饶有兴味的，而且也并不会成为很大的负担。

然而，我担心在我急于赢得克莱门茨太太和两位姑娘支持的同时，我也许并没有对于我自己的局限做出非常严格的评估；尽管我在此类事务上的经验以及习惯性的审慎，使我不至于冒失地承担超出我实际能力所及的任务，但我也许疏忽了给我自己留出足够的余地。如果在几个月的实际应用当中，这种失察会以一种很不起眼却又相当显著的方式表现出来的话，我丝毫都不会感到吃惊。归根结底，我相信这个问题一句话就能说清：我给自己分派的工作实在是太多了。

人员配置规划中这样一个明显的缺点居然一直都未能引起我的注意，您可能会为此而感到吃惊，但您也会同意，一个人如果在一段时间内持久不断地沉湎于某种想法中无法自拔，是会经常出现这种当局者迷的问题的；直到相当意外地受到某种外部事件的激发，才会憬然醒悟到事情的真相。所以正是在这样的情况下，也就是说，我收到肯顿小姐的来信，她在这封长信中以深藏不露的笔触表达出对于达林顿府无可置疑的怀旧之情，而且一对此我相当肯定一还明确地暗示了她重返故地的强烈愿望，这不禁迫使我重新审视已经拟定的员工规划。直到这时，我才醒悟到达林顿府确实还需要另一位员工来扮演一个至关重要的角色；实际上，也正是因为缺少了这样的一个角色，才是我近来麻烦不断的的关键的中枢。我越是认真地考虑，事情也就越发清楚了：以其对于这座府第的衷心挚爱，以其堪为典范楷模的职业水准——这种素质如今几乎已经是无处寻觅了——肯顿小姐正是能使我为达林顿府完成一个完全令人满意的员工规划所需要的关键要素。

对目前的局面做出如此分析之后，没过多久我就觉得应该重新考虑一下几天前法拉戴先生主动提出的那个慷慨的建议了。因为我想到，那驱车远行的计划可以在工作方面很好地派上用处；也就是说，我可以在驱车前往西南诸郡的过程中，顺道拜访一下肯顿小姐，这样就可以当面探查一下她希望重返达林顿府工作的虚实。我应该说明的

是，我已经把肯顿小姐最近的那封来信反复阅读了好几次，她那方面有重返达林顿的这种暗示，绝对不可能只是出诸我的想象。

尽管如此，我有好几天却无法鼓起勇气向法拉戴先生再次提起此事。在这件事上，不管怎么说，有好几个方面我感觉需要自己先行厘清之后才能采取进一步的行动。比如说，这里面就有费用的问题。因为，即便我的雇主慷慨地主动表示“承担汽油的花费”，考虑到还有诸如住宿、用餐以及在旅途中可能消耗的各种小零食的开销，这样一次旅行的总花费仍旧可能会达到一个惊人的数目。此外还有什么样的服装适合这样一次旅行的问题，以及是否值得专门为此添置一套新衣服的问题。我已经拥有好多套顶级的礼服正装，有的是过去这些年间达林顿勋爵本人好心送给我的，有些则是曾在府里做客，因为有理由对于这里的服务水准深感满意的各位客人送的。很多套正装或许对于计划中的这次旅行来说太过正式了些，要不然就是以现在的眼光看来太过老式了些。不过我还有一套非正式场合穿的休闲套装，是一九三一或者三二年爱德华·布莱尔爵士送给我的一在当时实际上是全新的，而且差不多完全合身—这套服装应该很合适在我可能宿夜的任何宾馆旅店的客厅或是餐室穿着。不过，适合旅行时穿的衣服我却一套都没有—也就是我开车时穿的衣服—除非是我打算穿年轻的查默斯勋爵在大战期间送给我的那套服装，如果不计较对我来说明显太小了一些，也可以认为是适合这一场合的理想之选了。最后我自己计算了一下，我的积蓄应该能应付所有可能的花销，此外也许还足可以添置一套新衣。我希望您不要因为我在服装上面的盘算就认为我过于虚荣了；我这么计较只是因为谁都不知道在什么情况下你将不得不承认你是达林顿府里的人，如果碰到这样的情况，你的穿着装扮是否与你的地位相称就显得至关重要了。

在这段时间里，我也花了不少时间去查阅道路交通地图，还细读了简·西蒙斯太太撰写的《英格兰奇景》的相关卷帙。如果您对于西蒙斯太太的这套著作还有所不知—这套系列丛书多达七卷，每一卷集中描写英伦诸岛的一个地区—我衷心地向您推荐它们。这套书是三十年代写的，不过大部分内容都还并不过时—再者说了，我也不相信德国人的炸弹已经对我们的乡村面貌造成了如此大的改观。事实上，西蒙斯太太在战前就是我们这府上的常客；而且她确实也是最受员工们喜欢的客人之一，因为她从不吝惜对我们服务工作的热情赞赏。也正是在那个时候，出于我对这位女士由衷的仰慕之情，只要有一点点空闲时间我就跑到藏书室里，第一次开始细读她的大著。我记得一九三六年肯顿小姐离开达林顿府前往康沃尔郡以后，我因为从未去过那个

地方，我确实还经常翻阅一下西蒙斯太太著作的第三卷，那一卷向读者描述的正是德文和康沃尔两郡的怡人美景，并且配有大量的照片以及一更能使我产生情感共鸣的是一画家们描绘那一地区各种景致的很多素描作品。我是由此才能对于肯顿小姐婚后定居之地获得了些许认识的。不过正如我已经说过的，那是三十年代的情况了，据我所知，西蒙斯太太的著作那个时候在全国都是家喻户晓的。我已经有好多年未曾翻阅这套丛书了，直到最近的情势发展，才又使我重新把描写德文和康沃尔两郡的那一卷从书架上取下来。我又从头至尾认真研读了一遍那些精彩的描述和插图，您也许能够理解，一想到现在也许终于可以开着车到那个区域去亲眼看看了，我就按捺不住万分激动的心情。

事已至此，看来除了主动再跟法拉戴先生提出这次旅行以外，也别无他法了。当然，也有可能他半个月前的建议只不过是突发奇想，说过即忘，他已经不会再对这个想法表示赞同了。不过，通过这几个月来我对法拉戴先生的观察，他并非那种反复无常的绅士，而在一位雇主身上再没有比这种出尔反尔的品性更让人恼火的了。没有理由怀疑他会对自己之前自己热情提议的驾车远游计划表现得前后不一——他肯定不会再主动重提“承担汽油的花费”这一最为慷慨的承诺了。尽管如此，我还是要非常谨慎小心地选择一个向他重提这件事的最佳时机；因为，虽然如我所言，我从未有一时一刻怀疑过法拉戴先生会是个出尔反尔之辈，不过，如果专拣他心事重重或者心烦意乱的时候去提，那可就非常不智了。如果在这种情况下贸然拒绝了我的请求，其实并不能反映出我的雇主在这件事上的真实意图，可是否决的话一旦说出了口，我也就很难再把它提出来了。因此，显而易见，我必须明智地选择合适的时机。

最后，我认定一天当中最明智审慎的时刻应该是在客厅里摆好下午茶的时候。在那个时候，法拉戴先生通常外出去高地上散了一会儿步刚刚回来，所以他的思绪极少会沉浸在傍晚时分经常从事的阅读和写作当中。事实上，当我把下午茶端进来的时候，法拉戴先生总是会把之前正在阅读的图书或是杂志合上，站起身来在窗前伸展一下双臂，似乎预先就准备要跟我聊上几句。

如上所述，我相信我在时机选择这个问题上的判断是合情合理的；但实际情况的非我所愿则应完全归咎于我在另一个方向上的判断失误。换句话说，我并没有充分考虑到这样一个事实，即在一天当中的那个时刻，法拉戴先生想要进行的是那种轻松愉快、诙谐幽默的闲谈。如果昨天下午我把茶点端进来的时候知道他是这样一种心情，如

果我当时能意识到他在那种时候会倾向于用一种揶揄谈笑的口吻跟我闲谈的话，更明智的做法当然就是压根儿都不提肯顿小姐的名字了。但您也许能够理解，在请求我的雇主的某种慷慨的恩赐时，我这方面总会有一种天然的倾向，竭力暗示在我的请求背后还隐藏着某种良好的职业动机。所以我在陈述自己很想开车前往西南诸郡一游的原因时，并没有提及西蒙斯太太那卷著作当中所描述的那些个迷人的细节，反而错误地宣称达林顿府的一位前任的女管家就居住在那个区域。我的本意原是打算向法拉戴先生解释一下，我为什么会认为这不失一种可能的选项，借此也许可以成为解决目前这座府第的管理当中现存的一些小问题的理想方案。一直等到我已提到肯顿小姐的名字以后，我才突然意识到我如果继续讲下去将是多么不妥的冒昧之举。不仅是因为我尚不能确定肯顿小姐重新回到这里的意愿是否是真，除此以外，当然还有自从一年多以前我跟法拉戴先生第一次会面以来，我甚至都还没有跟他讨论过增加员工的这个问题。如果继续大声地宣布我对于达林顿府未来的考虑，退一万步讲，也是非常冒昧和唐突的。想到这一点，我当时相当突然地停住了话头，我猜想，我的表情应该是有点尴尬的。总之，法拉戴先生抓住这个机会，冲我眉开眼笑，并别有一番深意地说道：

“哎呀，哎呀，史蒂文斯。一位女性朋友。而且是在你这个岁数。”

这场面真是再难堪不过了，达林顿勋爵是绝不会置一位雇员于这样的境地的。不过我这么说也并非对法拉戴先生有任何贬损之意；他毕竟是一位美国绅士，他的行为举止经常是大为不同的。他没有任何恶意，这一点是毫无疑问的；但您无疑也能理解，这处境对我而言是多么不自在。

“我还从没想到你居然是这样一位大受女性欢迎的男人啊，史蒂文斯，”他继续道。“这肯定能让你在精神上永葆青春，我猜想。但如此一来，我就真的不知道帮你去赴如此暧昧的约会对我而言是不是应该啦。”

自然，我忍不住想立刻而又毫不含糊地坚决否认我的雇主强加在我头上的这种不实的动机，但我及时地察觉到，我这么做的话无疑等于一口吞下了法拉戴先生的钓饵，那局面只会变得越发令人难堪。于是我只得继续尴尬地站在那儿，等着我的雇主允许我进行这次驾车的旅行。

尽管这个场面对我来说备感难堪，我却丝毫不希望暗示我在任何方面有可以埋怨法拉戴先生的地方，他的为人绝没有丝毫刻薄之处；我敢肯定，他这么做只不过是在享受那种善意地揶揄取笑的乐趣，在美国这无疑是在雇主和雇员间关系良好、友善的一种表现，他们将其当作一种亲切友好的游戏而乐在其中。的确，站在适当的角度上来看，我应该指出的是，恰恰是这种在我的新雇主身上体现出来的善意的逗趣儿，才真正体现出这几个月来我们主仆关系的融洽——尽管我必须承认，对此应该如何回应我仍旧很没有把握。事实上，在我刚开始为法拉戴先生工作的那些日子里，有一两次我真是为他对我所说的话大感震惊。比方说，我有一次曾请示他，如果我们邀请到我们府上来做客的某位绅士希望带夫人同来，我们该怎么办。

“她要是真的来了，那就只能求上帝保佑啦，”法拉戴先生回答道。“也许你能让她尽量离我们远一点，史蒂文斯。也许你能把她带到摩根先生农场上的某个马厩里去。就用那些干草来招待她吧。她也许正是你的绝配呢。”

有好一会儿，我都不知道我的雇主到底在说些什么。然后我才意识到他是在开玩笑，我便竭力展露出恰如其分的微笑，不过我怀疑在我的表情当中应该能觉察得出一丝困惑，如果还算不上是震惊的话。

不过在接下来的日子里，我渐渐学会了对于我雇主的类似言语不再表示诧异，而且只要察觉到他的声音中有这种揶揄打趣的语气，我就会还以恰如其分的微笑。话虽如此，我却又从来都不能肯定在这种场合之下我确切地应该做些什么。也许我应该开怀大笑；或者报以自己的看法。这后一种可能性这几个月来都快成了我的心病了，而且对此我仍旧还没拿定主意。因为在美国很有可能是这样的：一位雇员提供的良好的专业服务当中应该包括有令其雇主开怀解颐的玩笑和戏谑。

“庄稼汉的纹章”酒馆的店主有一次说过，他要是个美国酒保的话才不会以那种友好然而永远谦恭有礼的方式跟我们聊天呢，相反，他会粗鲁地指责我们的恶习和缺点，直接骂我们酒鬼以及所有诸如此类的名号，因为他的顾客就期望他如此扮演他的角色。我还记得几年前，作为贴身男仆陪侍雷金纳德·梅维斯爵士前往美国旅行的雷恩先生曾经说过，纽约的出租车司机惯常跟乘客说话的方式要是在伦敦重复一遍的话，结果即便是这个家伙不会被反剪着双臂扭送就近的警局，也八成会引发一场骚乱的。

如此说来，我的雇主极有可能满心期望我也能以相仿的方式去回应他善意的揶揄打趣了，我如果不予回应的話反而会被认为是一种疏

忽和失职了。这一点，如我之前所说，简直成了我的一块心病。但我又必须承认，我感觉这种揶揄打趣的事务并非我能以满腔的热情去履行的职责。在现如今这个瞬息万变的时代中，调整自己以适应那些传统上来说并非自己分内工作的职责，固然是非常好的；但是揶揄打趣就完全是另外一个范畴的事情了。别的且不说，首先第一点，你怎么能确定，在某个特定的场合哪一种对于此类揶揄打趣的回应才是雇主所真正期待的呢？如果你贸然回出一句意在打趣的调侃，结果却发现完全驴唇不对马嘴，那种灾难性的后果简直想都不太敢想。

不过，不久前我倒是确实有一次鼓足勇气尝试了一下那种戏谑的回答方式。当时我正在早餐室里伺候法拉戴先生喝早上的咖啡，这时他对我道：

“我猜想今天早上那公鸡打鸣一样的声音应该不是你弄出来的吧，史蒂文斯？”

我意识到，我雇主指的是一对收废铜烂铁的吉卜赛夫妇一早从这儿经过时那惯常的吆喝声。碰巧，那天早上我也正在琢磨我的雇主是否期望我去回应他的揶揄打趣这个进退失据的难题，而且一直都很担心他会如何看待我对他意在逗乐的开场屡屡都毫无反应这个问题。因此我就开始思考该如何机智地应对；我的回答应该是在万一对情况做出了误判也仍旧是安全稳妥、不会造成丝毫冒犯才对。过了有一会儿，我才说：

“依我看，与其说是鸡打鸣，不如说是燕子叫，先生。从流浪迁徙的角度来看⁽²⁾。”说完后我继之以恰如其分的谦恭的微笑，以便以毫无歧义的方式表明我说的是句俏皮话，因为我可不希望法拉戴先生出于不必要的故作尊重而强忍住自发的笑意。

可是结果法拉戴先生却只是抬头看着我道：“你说什么，史蒂文斯？”

只有到了这时我才想到，我的俏皮话对于并不知道是吉卜赛人从我们这里经过的人来说，自然是不容易领会和理解的。到了这时，我就不知道到底该如何将这场戏谑的逗趣继续下去了；事实上，我决定最好是就此打住，假装想起某件需要我马上去处理的急事，就此告退，留下我的雇主大惑不解地坐在原地。

对于要求我去履行的这么一桩实际上是全新的职责而言，这个开端实在是再令人气馁不过了；令人气馁的程度之深，使我必须承认，在这方面我再也没有进行过进一步的尝试。不过与此同时，我也无法

逃避这样一种感觉，即法拉戴先生并不满意我对于他形形色色的揶揄打趣所做出的回应。确实，他近来甚至愈发频繁地坚持跟我逗乐打趣，应该就是加倍鼓励我以趣味相投的兴致予以积极的回应。可是即便如此，自打我那第一次说的关于吉卜赛人的俏皮话以来，我就再也没能当场就想起其他类似的俏皮话。

现如今，碰到类似的困难尤其会让人忧心忡忡，因为你已经不能像过去那样去跟同行们讨教以后再做决定了。在不久以前，如果你在工作上产生了任何类似职责不清的困扰，你都不会过于心焦，因为你知道，要不了多久，你的某位其见解颇受人尊重的同行就将陪同他的雇主前来做客，如此一来，你就有充裕的时间跟他讨教这个问题了。当然啦，在达林顿勋爵的时代，因为贵妇和士绅们经常一连多日在府里做客，你也很容易能跟随侍来访的同行们发展出一种相互理解的良好关系。确实，在那些繁忙的日子里，我们的仆役大厅里经常荟萃了一大批英格兰最优秀的专业同行，我们经常围坐在温暖的炉火旁边一直聊到深夜。而且不瞒你说，如果你在那样的任何一个夜晚走进我们的仆役大厅，你听到的将不只是各种闲言碎语和小道消息；你更有可能见证我们针对占据了楼上我们雇主们全副精力的那些重大事件，或者报上刊载的那些重大新闻所展开的激烈辩论。当然了，正如来自各行各业的同行们聚在一起的时候惯常都会做的那样，你也会发现我们正在讨论我们这个职业的方方面面。有时候，我们中间自然也会产生严重的分歧，大家争得个面红耳赤，但更常见的是，那里充满了互敬互谅的友好气氛。如果我报出几位常客的姓名的话，也许可以使您对于那些夜晚的格调气氛具有更直观的概念；我们的常客中包括了像是詹姆斯·钱伯斯爵士的贴身管家哈里·格雷厄姆先生，以及悉尼·狄金森先生的贴身男仆约翰·唐纳兹先生这样的人物。也有很多或许没那么著名的同行，但他们现场那生动活泼的表现使得他们的每一次造访都令人难忘；比如说约翰·坎贝尔先生的贴身管家威尔金森先生就以善于模仿知名人士而大名鼎鼎；又如伊斯特利府的戴维森先生，他在为某一观点辩论时表现出来的澎湃激情有时真会让陌生人惊骇万分，而在其他时刻的表现则唯有最为讨人喜欢的单纯善良；再如约翰·亨利·彼得斯先生的贴身管家赫尔曼先生，他那过激的观点无论是谁听到都不可能处之淡然，但他那与众不同的纵情大笑以及约克郡人特有的魅力又使得他备受所有人的喜爱。这类人物真是不胜枚举。尽管我们在处理问题的方式方法上难免有些小小的分歧，但在当初那些岁月里，在我们这个行业当中是存在着一种真正的同志情谊的。打个比方说，我们本质上都是从同一块布料上剪下来的布头和布尾。可是现在的情况已经是大为不同了，就算难得碰到某位雇员陪侍主人到我

们这儿来做客，他也更像是个完全的陌生人，除了英式足球以外就再也没有什么话可说，而且宁肯去“庄稼汉的纹章”喝几杯，也不愿在仆役大厅里围坐着炉火消磨那个夜晚——而且照现如今的风尚，他可能更愿意光顾明星酒馆。

刚才我曾提到詹姆斯·钱伯斯爵士的贴身管家格雷厄姆先生。事实上，两个月前我就高兴地得知詹姆斯爵士要来达林顿府做客的消息。我期待这次来访，不仅是因为达林顿勋爵时代的客人们现在已经极为少见了一法拉戴先生交往的圈子自然是跟爵爷大为不同的一而且还因为我想当然地以为格雷厄姆先生也会像往常那样陪侍詹姆斯爵士一同前来，这样的话我就可以就调侃打趣的这个问题征求一下他的意见了。当我在詹姆斯爵士来访前一天才得知他将一个人过来的时候，我真是既诧异又失望。而且，在詹姆斯爵士逗留期间，我又获悉格雷厄姆先生已经不再为爵士服务了；事实上詹姆斯爵士已经根本就不再雇用任何一位全职的雇员了。我很想知道格雷厄姆先生的现状，因为我们之间虽然相知并不算深，至少在我们碰面的场合我们都一直相处甚欢。但结果我却没有任何合适的机会能获知相关的信息。不得不说，我真是大失所望，因为我原本很希望能向他讨教一下调侃打趣的这个问题的。

不过，还是让我回到原来的话题吧。正如之前所说，昨天下午在法拉戴先生对我进行他的调侃打趣的过程中，我不得不站在客厅里度过那颇不自在的几分钟时间。我只能像往常一样以微笑来应答——至少借以表明我也在某种程度上以愉快的心情参与了他正在进行的打趣和调侃——一边等着看我的雇主是否会兑现有关我外出旅行的承诺。正如我所期盼的那样，他没经过多少耽搁就好意地照准了，不仅如此，法拉戴先生竟然还记得并重申了他之前“承担汽油的花费”的慷慨提议。

事已至此，我似乎也就再没什么理由不正式启动我前往西南诸郡的驾车出游计划了。我当然必须给肯顿小姐写封信告诉她我有可能从她那儿路过；我还需要安排好旅行中的穿着问题。我外出期间有关达林顿府里工作安排的其他各种问题也需要安排好。总之一句话，我已经找不到任何真正的理由不进行这次计划中的远行了。

[\(1\)](#) 法语：躺椅，贵妃榻。

[\(2\)](#) 一语双关，是以燕子的季节性移栖来喻指吉卜赛人的居无定所、四处流浪。

第一天一傍晚

索尔兹伯里

今晚，我入住索尔兹伯里⁽¹⁾市的一家宾馆。我旅途的第一天已经结束，总的说来，我不得不说我是相当满意的。我早上出发的时间比原本计划的要晚了几乎一个钟头，尽管在八点前我就已经整理好了行装，把一应用品全都装进了那辆福特车。由于克莱门茨太太和那两位姑娘本周也不在，我想我是非常强烈地意识到这样一个事实：我一旦离开，达林顿府有可能就在本世纪里头一次空无一人了——自从它建成之日起这可能也是头一次。这种感觉非常怪异，也许正是为此我才耽搁了这么长时间，我在整个大宅里数度逡巡，最后再检查一次，确认是否一切都已安置妥当。

当我终于把车子开动的时候，复杂的情感实在难以言喻。在起初二十分钟的车程中，我很难说曾感受到丝毫的兴奋或是期待之情。这无疑是由于，尽管我距离大宅越来越远，周遭的景物却并不陌生，至少还都是我曾经涉足的地方。我因为被我的职责禁锢在这座大宅里，在此之前我一直都感觉自己极少外出旅行，不过这些年来，因为这种或是那种工作上的原因，我当然也难免会有各种各样的短途出行，所以看来我对于周边这些区域要远比我臆想中熟悉得多。也正如我说的，当我迎着明媚的阳光朝伯克郡⁽²⁾的边界开去时，我对于沿途乡村景色的熟悉一再地出乎我的意料之外。

不过，周围的景物终于变得无法辨识了，我知道我已经跨出了之前所有的边界。我曾听人描述过这一时刻，当扬帆起航，当终于看不见陆地的轮廓时的心情。我想，人们经常描绘的有关这一刻内心当中不安与兴奋混杂在一起的情感经验，应该跟我开着福特车渐渐驶入陌生区域的心情非常相近吧。这种心情就是在我转过一个弯道，发现自己驶上了一条环绕一座小山的盘山公路时袭上心头的。我能感觉到我左侧是壁立的陡坡，只不过由于路边树木丛生，繁茂的枝叶使我没办法看清罢了。那种我确实已经将达林顿府远远抛在后面的感觉陡然间涌上心头，我得承认我还当真感到了一阵轻微的恐慌——这种感觉又因为担心自己也许完全走错了路而变本加厉，唯恐自己正南辕北辙地朝荒郊野外飞驰而去。这种恐慌只不过一闪而过，但却让我放慢了车速。即使在我已经确认自己并没有走错路以后，我仍旧感觉必须先将车子暂停一会儿，等把情况完全探明以后才能安心。

我决定从车上下下来，伸展一下腿脚，刚来到车外，那种正位于半山腰的感觉就更其强烈了。在道路的一侧，灌木丛和矮小的树木陡直地上升，而在另一侧，透过扶疏的枝叶，我能看到远处的乡野。

我相信自己已经沿着路边走了一小段，不时透过林木的缝隙窥视，希望能找到一个更好的视野，正当这时，我听到背后传来一个人的声音。到此为止，我想当然地以为就我一个人的，所以有些诧异地转过身去。就在不远处的公路对过，我能看到有一条人行小径的入口，小道沿山势向上，消失在灌木丛中。标志着小径入口的一块大石头上，坐着个白头发的瘦削男人，戴着顶布帽，正在抽一支烟斗。他又冲我喊了一声，我虽然听不清楚他说了些什么，但能看出他正向我招手示意我过去。我一时还以为他是个流浪汉，然后才看清楚他就是个本地人，正在享受清新的空气和夏日的阳光，我也就恭敬不如从命了。

“我只是有些好奇，先生，”他在我走近时说道，“你的腿脚到底有多硬朗。”

“你说什么？”

那人指了指上山的小径。“你的腿脚一定得非常硬朗，肺活量也得够大，才能到那上面去。我呢，两样条件都不具备，所以我只能待在这儿。但如果我的身体条件再好一点的话，我就会爬到上面去坐着啦。那儿有一块很不错的小地方，还有一条长凳什么的。在整个英格兰，你都甭想找到一处比那儿风景更好的地方啦。”

“如果你所言非虚，”我说，“我想我还是宁肯待在这儿。我碰巧正要进行一次驾车的远游，期间有望欣赏到诸多绝佳的胜景。倘若还没正式踏上旅途就已经见识到了最美的景色，那岂不是有些过于草率了吗？”

那人似乎没明白我的意思，因为他仍旧重复道：“你在整个英格兰都甭想找到更美的景色啦。不过我告诉你，你的腿脚一定得非常硬朗，肺活量也得够大才上得去。”然后他又补充道：“我看，以你的年纪来说你的身体状况还是很不错的，先生。我得说，你是完全能爬上去的，没有问题。我是说，就连我这样的，碰到天气好的时候都能上得去。”

我抬头看了看那条小径，确实很陡，而且高低不平。

“我跟你说，先生，你要是不上去看看，肯定会后悔的。再者说了，谁知道呢，也许再过上个一两年就太晚了呢。”——他相当粗鄙地哈哈一乐——“最好趁你还行的时候上去看看。”

直到现在我才突然想到，那人当时这么说很有可能只不过是一种幽默的表达方式；也就是说，那只是一种善意的调侃。可我必须说，今天早上我只感觉他的表现实在是很无礼，不过也正是为了证明他那番暗示是多么愚蠢无稽，我才会赌气登上那羊肠小径的。

不管怎么说，我都非常高兴我这么做了。当然，那段山路走得确是相当费力——不过我可以夸口的是，这并没有真正难倒我——一小径沿着山势曲曲折折地向上延伸了一百码左右。随后就到达了一小片空旷地，那个人说的无疑就是这个地方了。迎面摆了一条长凳——确实，展现在面前是绵延数英里、最令人叹为观止的乡村胜景。

映入我眼帘的基本上就是一片片层层叠叠的田野，绵延不绝直到天际。地势起伏平缓，每一块田地都以树篱和树木为界。远处的田野中有一些小点点，我猜想那应该是绵羊。在我右手边，几乎就在地平线上，我想我能看到一座教堂的方塔。

似那般站在那里感觉确是妙不可言，周遭夏日的天籁将你笼罩，和煦的微风轻拂你的面颊。我相信正是那时，看着那片风景的时候，我才第一次萌生了一种跟展现我面前的旅途相契合的心境。因为也正是在那时，对于我明知未来几天即将展现在我面前让我去尽情体验的诸多有趣的经验，我才第一次产生了一种健康合理的兴奋和期盼。而且确实，也正是在那时，我才下定决心，决不再为这趟旅途我交托给自己的工作任务而畏缩气馁；我有信心处理好有关肯顿小姐和我们目前在人员配置规划上所面临的难题。

不过这都是今天早上的事儿了。今天傍晚，我在这家舒适的宾馆里安顿下来，位置就在距索尔兹伯里市中心不远的一条街上。据我看这是家相对简朴的旅店，不过非常干净，完全符合我的要求。老板娘大约四十岁出头，由于法拉戴先生的那辆福特车，再加上我那身高品质的行头，显然把我当成了一位非常尊贵的上宾。今天下午——我是大约三点半到达索尔兹伯里——当我在她的登记簿上填写我的住址“达林顿府”时，我觉察到她看我的眼神中带上了一丝惶恐，显然是把我当成了某位住惯了里兹和多切斯特那类豪华饭店的士绅，担心我一旦看到这里的客房就会怒冲冲地离开她的宾馆。她告诉我前排朝向的客

房中还有一间双人房空着，不过她欢迎我以单人房的房价入住这间客房。

接着我就被领到了这个房间，在一天当中的那个时候，阳光正好将壁纸上的花卉纹样照亮，看着让人赏心悦目。房间里有两张单人床，还有两扇可以俯瞰街景的大窗。当我询问浴室在哪里的时候，老板娘以胆怯的声音回答说浴室就在我房间的对面，但要等晚餐过后才有热水供应。我请她为我送一壶茶上来，她离开后，我又进一步检查了一下这个房间。床很干净，铺得很齐整。屋角的洗脸池也很干净。朝窗外望去，可以看到街道对面有一家面包店，橱窗里陈列着各色糕点，还有一家药店和理发店。再往前，还能看到这条街跨过了一座小小的圆拱桥，再往下延伸就是相对郊区的地段了。我在洗脸池里用冷水洗了洗脸和手，提提精神，然后就在靠窗的一把硬背椅子上坐下，等我要的茶送上来。

我想应该是在四点刚过不久的时候，我离开宾馆，到索尔兹伯里的大街上去探个究竟。这里的街道宽阔而又通畅，赋予这个城市一种不可思议的开阔感，让人真想就在温暖和煦的阳光下，在大街上闲逛几个钟头。此外，我还发现这个城市拥有很多迷人之处；我屡次发现自己漫步经过一排排可爱的旧圆木门脸儿的住房，或是翻过某一座架在流经这个城市的众多溪流上面的步行小石桥。当然了，我并没有忘记去参观那座优美的大教堂，西蒙斯太太在她的著作中对这座大教堂可是赞誉有加。这座庄严的建筑并不难找，无论置身索尔兹伯里的什么地方，它那高耸的尖顶都清晰可见。确实，我在傍晚时分返回宾馆的途中，好几次扭头回顾，而每一次都会欣赏到灿烂的夕阳在那巍峨的尖顶后面逐渐西沉的景象。

然而今夜一个人待在安静的房间里，我发现这第一天的旅程真正在我脑海中留下深刻印记的并不是索尔兹伯里大教堂，也不是这座城市任何其他的迷人景色，反倒是今天早上意外所见的那一片延绵起伏、美丽绝伦的英格兰乡村胜景。现在，我很乐于相信其他的国家能够奉献出更为雄伟壮观的景色。的确，我也在百科全书和《国家地理杂志》上看到过全球各个角落那令人屏息赞叹的风光照片：气势磅礴的峡谷和瀑布，粗犷壮丽的崇山峻岭。我当然从来都无缘亲眼目睹这些奇景，但我还是有充分的信心不揣冒昧地断言：英国那些最优美的风景一就像我今晨所见一拥有一种其他国家的风景所付之阙如的特质，尽管它们表面上看来或许更加具有戏剧性。我相信，这样的一种特质会使英国的风景在任何客观的观察者眼中，都成为世界上给人印象最深、最令人满意的景色，这种特质或许以“伟大”这个字眼来形

容是最为贴切的。因为千真万确，今天早上当我站在那个高崖上饱览我面前的那片土地时，我真真切切地体会到了那种极为罕有却又确定无疑的情感——那种只有置身于“伟大”面前才会产生的情感。我们将这片土地称为我们的大不列颠，也许还有些人觉得这未免有些妄自尊大，但我却敢于冒昧地直言，唯有我们国家的风景才配得上使用这个崇高的形容词。

然而，这个“伟大”的确切含义到底是什么呢？它到底在哪里，或者体现在什么当中呢？我知道，这样一个问题是要远比我更为聪明的头脑才能回答的，但如果一定要我斗胆一猜的话，我会说，使我们的国土之美显得如此与众不同的正在于它欠缺那种明显的戏剧性或者奇崛的壮观色彩。个中的关键就在于那种静穆的优美，那种高贵的克制。就仿佛这片土地明知道自己的优美，知道自己的伟大，又感觉无须去彰显，去招摇。相形之下，像非洲和美洲这样的地方所呈现的景观，虽然无疑是令人赞叹激赏的，我敢肯定，正是因为它们这种毫无节制的自我标榜，在态度客观的观察者看来反倒会相形见绌。

这整个问题倒是跟这些年来在我们这个行当中曾引发诸多争议的那个问题非常相似：怎样才算得上一个“伟大的”管家？我还清楚地记得一天的工作结束后，我们围坐在仆役大厅的炉火旁，针对这个话题长时间展开的那些愉快的讨论。您应该注意到我说的是“怎样”才算是一个伟大的管家，而不是“谁”：因为对于在我们这代人中是谁确立了本行业的标准，其实是没有什么严重分歧的，也就是说，像沙勒维尔府的马歇尔先生或是布莱德伍德的莱恩先生就是个中翘楚。如果您有幸得识这样的人物，您无疑就会知道我所指的他们所拥有的特质到底是什么了。但您无疑也会明白，我为什么会说要对这种特质下一个确切的定义殊非易事了。

捎带说一句，由于对此我又有了深一层的思考，恐怕也不能说在谁算得上是伟大的管家这一点上是毫无疑问的。更严密的说法应该是：至少在那些对此类问题具有真知灼见的专业人士中间，对这一点是没有太大争议的。当然啦，达林顿府的仆役大厅就像任何地方的仆役大厅一样，必然要接受不同智力层次和认知水平的雇员，所以我记得曾有好多次我不得不紧咬嘴唇，才能容忍有些雇员——我不得不很遗憾地说，有时甚至是我自己属下的员工——兴奋不已地为比如说杰克·内伯斯之流的人物大唱赞歌。

我对于杰克·内伯斯先生并无任何成见，据我了解，他已在大战中不幸阵亡。我提到他只是因为他是个典型的实例而已。在三十年代

中期有那么两三年的时间，内伯斯先生的大名似乎成为全国每一个仆役大厅里谈论的热门话题。如我之前所言，在达林顿府中亦复如此，许多随侍主人来访的雇员都会带来内伯斯先生最新成就的传闻，于是，我和格雷厄姆先生这样的人也就只能万般无奈地被迫听着一则又一则有关他的趣闻轶事了。而这其中最令人懊恼的莫过于，不得不亲眼见证那些在其他方面堪称正派得体的雇员们在讲完每一段轶事之后，都要叹赞不已地摇头晃脑，发出这样由衷的感叹：“那位内伯斯先生，他可真是最棒的。”

说起来，我并不怀疑内伯斯先生拥有良好的组织才能；据我理解，他的确以引人瞩目的方式主持、策划过好几次重大的社交盛会。但是在任何阶段，他就从未曾达到过一位伟大管家的境界。我本该在他声誉最隆之时说这番话的，正如我早该预料到的，他在出尽风头不过短短的几年之内很快就声名扫地了。

一位一度曾是他那一代口中交相赞誉的业内翘楚，短短的几年之内却又被确切地证明他其实一无是处，这样的翻覆多长时间会出现一次？然而，当初曾对他不吝溢美之词的同样那些雇员，又将忙着对某一新角色赞颂不已了，他们从来不知道适可而止，检讨一下自己的判断能力。这些仆役大厅里的话题人物总是集中于某个豪门巨室的管家，可能因为成功地筹办过两三次重大的社交盛会而一下子声名鹊起，成为众所瞩目的焦点人物的。随后，全英格兰上上下下的各个仆役大厅里就会谣诼纷起，其大意不过是某某要员或是显贵已经向他伸出了橄榄枝，或者全国至尊至贵的几户门庭正以堪称天价的高薪竞相对他进行延揽。但不过短短的几年之后，情况又复如何呢？同样是这位所向披靡的人物对于某桩大错却负有了不可推卸的责任，要么就是由于其他的原因而失去了雇主的宠幸，已经离开了他当初建功立业的门庭，就此不知所终了。与此同时，那同一批飞短流长的传播者们已经又找到了另一位后起之秀，继续津津乐道他的丰功伟绩了。我发现，那些来访的贴身男仆往往就是罪魁祸首，因为他们通常总是急不可耐地一心觊觎着管家的职位。就是他们这批人，总是一口咬定这位或是那位人物是最值得我辈效仿的榜样，要么就像是应声虫一样，热衷于一遍遍地传播某位特别的英雄人物据说已经就我们的专业问题所发表的卓识高见。

不过话说到这儿，我得赶紧补充一句，也有很多贴身男仆是从来都不会沉迷于这种蠢行的一他们事实上是具有最高鉴识能力的专业人士。当两三位这样的人士齐聚在我们的仆役大厅时—我指的是比如说像格雷厄姆先生这种水准的有识之士，只可惜我现在似乎已经跟他失

去了联系——我们能针对我们这个行业的方方面面进行某些最饶有興味、最才华横溢的辩论和探讨。的确，时至今日，那些夜晚都算得那个时代留给我的最美好的记忆。

话休絮烦，还是让我们回到那个让我们真正感兴趣的问题吧，当年我们在仆役大厅度过的那些夜晚，若是没有被对这个行业缺乏任何基本认识的无知之徒的喋喋不休所毁掉的话，我们最热衷于讨论的问题便是：“怎样才算是一位伟大的管家？”

据我所知，这些年来这个问题虽然引发了无数的讨论，我们业内却鲜有制定出一项官方答案的尝试。我能想到唯一可以援以为例的便是海斯协会所设立的入会标准。您也许对海斯协会不甚了了，因为近些年来已极少为人谈及。不过在二十年代及三十年代早期，该协会却曾在伦敦及周边各郡产生过相当大的影响。事实上，已经有人觉得它的势力过于强大了，所以当它最终被迫关闭时，很多人认为这并非一件坏事，我想那是一九三二或者一九三三年的事儿。

海斯协会号称，“唯有第一流”的管家他们才接受入会。它的势力与威望的日渐增长，大部分源自它与其他那些昙花一现的组织的不同诉求，它始终将它的会员人数控制在极低的范围之内，这就使得它的入会宗旨具有了一定的信誉度。据称，它的会员人数从未超过三十名，大部分时间都仅仅保持在九到十位。这一点，再加上海斯协会颇有些类似于秘密社团的事实，一度为它蒙上了不小的神秘色彩，由此也使得它偶尔针对职业问题所发表的见解会被众人视如圭臬、奉若神明。

不过，这个协会一度拒不公之于众的内容之一就是它自家的入会标准。随着公众要求其公布入会标准的压力与日俱增，也是为了答复《士绅男仆季刊》上刊登的一系列询问的信函，这个协会终于承认，他们接受会员入会的先决条件是“申请者须服务于显赫门庭”。“不过，当然了，”这个协会又继续解释道，“仅此一条尚远不足以满足入会之要求”。除此之外，该协会还明确表示，他们并不将商贾之家或是“新贵”阶层视作“显赫门庭”，而依我看来，单单这一食古不化的过时观点就已经严重削弱了该协会在我们的行业标准方面原本可能享有的任何严肃的权威性。在回应《季刊》后续刊发的来函时，该协会为它的立场作了辩护，声称他们虽愿意接受部分来函的观点，承认在商贾之家确实也有素质极佳的管家之存在，但“前提必须是纯正的淑女士绅之家不久即将前来礼聘延揽”，他们才会给以最终的认可。“纯正的淑女士绅”的标准必须作为最终判断的依据，该协会辩

称，否则的话“我们差不多等于是遵行了苏俄布尔什维克的仪轨”了。此番言辞引发了更激烈的论战，读者来函的压力与日俱增，力促该协会明确全面地公布其会员入会之标准。最终，在写给《季刊》的一封信中该协会算是公开表了态——我将凭记忆尽量精确地引用其原文——“入会标准之首要条件是申请人须拥有与其职位相称之高尚尊严。申请人无论有何等光耀之成就，倘若被确认在这一方面不符合标准，则将不能满足入会之要求”。

尽管我对海斯协会向来都缺乏热情，我却认为它这一特别的声明倒至少是建立在一个重要的事实之上的。如果我们来审视一下那些我们公认为“伟大的”管家，如果我们来审视一下比如说马歇尔先生或者莱恩先生，那么那个看起来将他们与那些只不过是极有能力的管家区别开来的因素，最切近的描述也确实只有“尊严”这个词差堪承当了。

当然，这只会引发进一步的争议：这个“尊严”又包含何种内容呢？也正是在这一点上，我跟格雷厄姆先生这样业内的翘楚人物进行过几次饶有兴味的辩论。格雷厄姆先生是一直都认为这个“尊严”是有点类似于女性之美的，因此试图去对它分而析之是无甚意义的。我认为这样的比拟有贬低马歇尔先生之辈所拥有的“尊严”之嫌。不仅如此，我之反对格雷厄姆先生的这一类比的原因主要还在于，它暗示一个人是否拥有这种“尊严”纯粹出自造化的侥幸；如果某人并没有不证自明地先天就拥有了它，那么出自主观的奋力争取也就像是东施效颦般徒劳无益了。尽管我也承认，管家中的绝大多数最终都会清楚地认识到他们并无获得此种素质的能力，但我仍然坚信，这种“尊严”正是我辈应该终其一生在职业生涯中有意识地去努力追求的标的。那些像马歇尔先生这样“伟大的”管家们，我相信，也都是经过多年艰苦的自我训练和认真地吸取经验才终于拥有了这一素质的。所以，依我看来，如果站在职业的立场上接受格雷厄姆先生的观点的话，那可就无异于失败主义者的论调了。

不管怎么说，尽管格雷厄姆先生对此一直秉持怀疑主义的态度，我犹记得曾经有好多个夜晚，我跟他一起深入地交换意见，试图厘清这种“尊严”具体内涵的情景。我们从来都未曾达成任何共识，不过我可以这样说，至少在我这方面，在我们深入探讨的过程中就此问题我已经形成了相当坚定的看法，而且大体而言，这些信念我迄今仍信奉不渝。如果可以的话，我想就在这儿试着谈谈我对这个“尊严”究为何物的看法。

如果说沙勒维尔府的马歇尔先生和布莱德伍德的莱恩先生是当代世所公认的两位伟大的管家，我料想应该不会有有什么争议。或许您也会认可，布兰伯里堡的亨德森先生同样隶属这个凤毛麟角的范畴。但如果我说家父在很多方面也足堪与这些人物并驾齐驱，我一直将他的职业生涯当作我细究“尊严”这一定义的样板，您或许就会认为我这只只是出于偏私的小见识了。不过我坚信，家父在拉夫伯勒府服务时的事业巅峰期的确就是“尊严”这个词的鲜活化身。

我也明白，若是客观地看待此事，我们不得不承认在家父身上是缺少通常人们会期望一位伟大的管家所具备的某些特质的。不过，我必须据理力争的是，他所缺少的这些特质毫无例外的都是那些肤浅和装饰性的东西，虽然无疑都是很有魅力的特质，就像蛋糕上的糖霜一样，却又都是跟真正的本质并无实际的相关性的。我指的是诸如标准的口音、对语言的驾驭能力，以及对于诸如驯鹰术或是蝾螈交配这类包罗万象的话题的无所不知——这一类的特质没有一样是家父可以引为自夸的。再者说了，不要忘记家父是上一辈的管家，在他开始起职业生涯的时候，这些特质并不被认为是合宜得体的，更不用说是一位管家值得拥有的了。对于雄辩的口才与广阔的知识执迷似乎是在我们这一代才兴起的，也许就正是大力效仿马歇尔先生的结果，那些等而下之的同行在努力效仿他的伟大之时错将表面文章当作了精髓和本质。依我看来，我们这一代人未免过于专注于这些“花色配菜”了；天晓得，为了训练标准的口音和对语言的娴熟驾驭我们到底花费了多少时间和精力，我们花费了多少个钟头去学习各种百科全书以及各类知识测试，而这些时间原本应该花费在熟练地掌握本行业的基本原理之上的。

虽说我们必须时刻小心，不要试图去推卸那些从根源上讲需要我们去自己承担的责任，不过我也必须指出，某些雇主在鼓励这类潮流上也确实起到了推波助澜的巨大作用。这话说来未免令人遗憾，不过看来近些年来颇有些府第，有些还是至尊至贵的显赫门庭，都倾向于采取一种相互攀比的态度，并不耻于向宾朋们“炫耀”他们的管家对于这类鸡毛蒜皮的本事的掌握是何等娴熟。我听到过各种各样的例子，府里的管家在盛大的招待会上被当作玩杂耍的猴子一样展示给一众宾朋。我本人就曾亲眼目睹过一次非常令人遗憾的例子，在那府上已经成了一项保留节目，那便是由宾朋们打铃把管家唤来，要他回答各种随机的提问，比如说某某年的德比马赛⁽³⁾中是谁赢得了桂冠，那场景活像是在杂耍戏院里向表演节目的“记忆达人”连珠发问。

如我所言，家父那一代管家幸好还没有那些有关我们的职业价值的缠杂不清。我还是要再强调一遍：尽管他对英语的掌握和他的知识面都相对有限，他不仅通晓管理一幢宅第所需的所有知识和窍门，而且在他事业的全盛时期，他已经具备了海斯协会所谓的“与其职位相称之高尚尊严”。如此，如果我试图向诸位描述清楚我认为使得家父如此出类拔萃的原因到底是什么，那么在这一过程中或许也就能讲清楚我对于“尊严”究为何物的看法了。

多年以来，有一个故事是家父总喜欢反反复复多次讲述的。我记得我还是个孩子以及后来在他的督导之下开始做一个男仆的时候，都曾听他向客人们讲过这个故事。我记得我在得到我第一个管家的职位后——那是在牛津郡奥尔肖特⁽⁴⁾的一幢相对朴素的住宅，为马格里奇先生和太太服务——第一次回去探望他时，他又把这个故事给我讲了一遍。很显然，这个故事对他来说意义重大。家父那辈人并不像我们这代人那样习惯于喋喋不休地讨论和分析事理，我相信，讲述以及反复地讲述这个故事对于家父而言就等于是他对自己所从事的这个职业所进行的批判性的省思。果如此，则这个故事也就提供了解他的所思所想的关键线索。

这显然是个真实的故事，内容大致是有位管家随侍雇主远赴印度，多年服务于斯，在只能雇用当地仆佣的情况下仍能始终维持跟英国国内同样高的专业服务水准。话说有一天下午，这位管家走进餐厅去检查晚餐的准备工作是否已经全部就绪，结果却发现有一只老虎正懒洋洋地趴在餐桌底下。那位管家不动声色地离开餐厅，小心地把门关好，然后镇定自若地来到客厅，他的雇主正和几位客人在那儿喝茶。他礼貌地轻咳了一声，引起了雇主的注意，然后凑近主人的耳边悄声禀道：“非常抱歉，先生，有只老虎此刻正在餐厅里。也许您能许我使用十二号口径的猎枪？”

据传说，几分钟后，主人和客人听到了三声枪响。之后不久，当这位管家再度出现在客厅里更换新茶的时候，雇主问他是否一切顺利。

“非常顺利，谢谢您，先生，”他回答道。“晚餐的时间将一如既往，而且容我高兴地回禀，届时，刚刚发生的意外将不会留下任何可见的痕迹。”

最后这句话——“届时，刚刚发生的意外将不会留下任何可见的痕迹”——家父总会呵呵带笑地重复一遍，并且赞赏不已地摇摇头。他从未声称知道这位管家的尊姓大名，也从未说起还有人认识他，但他总

是坚持事件的过程就跟他的讲述不差分毫。不管怎么说，这个故事是真是假其实并不重要；重要的，当然是它透露了家父心目中理想的典范是什么样子。因为，当我回顾他的职业生涯时，我以后见之明能够看得出来，他有生之年都在努力成为他故事里的那个管家。而在我看来，在他事业的巅峰时期，家父已经实现了他的雄心壮志，夙愿得偿。因为尽管我可以肯定他绝对不会有在餐桌底下邂逅一只老虎的机会，当我将我所知道或者听人说起的他的事迹细细掂量之后，我至少能想起好几个实例，足以显示出他已完全具备了故事中他钦敬不已的那位管家的素质。

这其中有一个例证是由查尔斯与雷丁公司的大卫·查尔斯先生讲给我听的，他在达林顿勋爵的时代不时会造访达林顿府。事有凑巧，有天晚上由我临时充当他的贴身男仆，查尔斯先生就跟我说起，多年前他造访拉夫伯勒府时跟家父曾有过一面之雅。拉夫伯勒府是实业家约翰·西尔弗斯先生的宅第，家父在其事业的巅峰时期曾在那里服务了十五年之久。他对家父真是没齿难忘，查尔斯先生对我说，就因为他那次造访期间发生的一个小小的插曲。

令查尔斯先生愧悔不已的是有天下午，他居然纵容自己跟另外两位客人一起喝得酩酊大醉——我姑且只将这两位绅士称呼为史密斯先生和琼斯先生，因为在某些社交圈子里很有可能有人还记得他们。在喝了一个多钟头以后，这两位绅士临时起意，想开车前往周边的几个村子兜兜风——那个时候汽车还是一样挺新奇的玩意儿。他们劝说查尔斯先生跟他们一起去，由于司机不巧正在休假，于是就请家父暂代司机之职。

一旦上路之后，史密斯和琼斯先生尽管都已是十足的中年人了，其行为举止却像是学童般轻佻幼稚，一路上高唱粗鄙俚俗的小曲儿，对沿途所见之事物风景所发的评论更是粗鄙不堪。尤有甚者，这两位绅士在当地的地图上注意到附近有三个村庄，名字分别叫作莫菲、萨尔塔什和布里戈恩。现在我已经不能完全肯定确切的村名了，但重点是它们让史密斯和琼斯先生想起了杂耍剧场里的一出表演，叫作“墨菲、萨尔特曼和布里吉德猫”，您也许也听说过。在注意到这一奇妙的巧合后，这两位绅士就燃起了去这三个村子一探究竟的雄心——权当是为了向这三位艺人致敬。照查尔斯先生的说法，家父在已经遵命带他们去过了一个村子，正要进入第二个的时候，史密斯或是琼斯先生注意到这个村子是布里戈恩——也就是说，照艺人姓氏顺序的话这应该是第三个，而非第二个。于是他们愤怒地要求家父马上掉转车头，以便“以正确的顺序”依次参观这几个村子。这样一次折返势必大大增

加行车的里程，不过，查尔斯先生向我保证，家父将其当作完全合情合理的要求，毫无异议地接受下来，而且之后的表现也几乎是一如既往地彬彬有礼、无可挑剔。

可是史密斯和琼斯先生的注意力现在已经被吸引到家父身上，而且无疑已经对车窗外的景物感到相当厌烦了，于是就继之以对家父的“错误”大声嘲骂以自娱。查尔斯先生犹记得他对于家父的表现大为惊叹，因为家父没有流露出一丝一毫不安或是恼怒的迹象，仍旧镇定自若地继续开车，其表情既充满个人尊严，又随时乐于效力帮忙。然而家父的沉着镇定却没有办法再持续下去了。因为那两位绅士在厌倦了对家父的肆意辱骂之后，居然开始议论起了招待他们的主人——也就是家父的雇主约翰·西尔弗斯先生。而且其措辞越来越卑劣和恶毒，就连查尔斯先生都听不下去了——至少他是这样声称的——不得不出言制止，暗示这样的议论是颇为失礼的。

可是这番劝说却招致了极为激烈的反驳，以至于查尔斯先生不但要担心他将成那两位绅士接下来辱骂的对象，甚至真的害怕自己有遭到人身伤害的危险了。可是正在这时，就在他们针对家父的雇主爆出了一句特别恶毒的含沙射影的攻击之后，家父突然间来了个急刹车。正是接下来发生的那一幕给查尔斯先生留下了不可磨灭的深刻印象。

后车门被打开了，家父就站在车门外，距离汽车几步之遥，目光紧盯着车内。据查尔斯先生的描述，他们三位乘客似乎这才意识到家父的体魄是何等威风凛凛，不约而同地全被震慑住了。确实，他的身高足有六英尺三英寸⁽⁵⁾，而他的表情，虽然当你知道他在乐于听命效劳的时候是让人感觉安心可靠的，但在某些特定的情境之下却着实也会是令人望而生畏的。按照查尔斯先生的说法，家父并没有表现出任何明显的怒气。他似乎只不过是拉开了后车门。然而他却有一种不怒自威的力量，不必开口就胜似正言厉色的训斥，再加上他那赫然耸立的魁伟身躯稳如泰山般坚不可摧，一见之下，查尔斯先生那两位醉醺醺的同伴马上就俯首帖耳地畏葸不前了，活像是偷苹果的小男孩被农夫抓了个现行一般。

家父就这样在那儿站了一段时间，一句话不说，只是用手拉着敞开的车门。最后，不知是史密斯还是琼斯先生说了一句：“我们不再继续走了吗？”

家父没有搭腔，而是继续默不作声地站在那里，既没有要求他们下车，也没有流露任何愿望或者意图。我很可以想象得出他那天的那

副模样：在车门构成的那个方框里，他那威严的黑色身影几乎完全挡住了他身后那柔美的赫特福德郡风光。查尔斯先生回忆说，那短短一段时间真是不可思议地令人怔忡不安，在此期间，尽管并没有参与方才两个人的不良言行，他仍旧感觉愧疚不已，罪责难逃。这种沉默的局面仿佛要无休无止地持续下去，一直等到史密斯或者琼斯先生终于鼓起勇气嗫嚅道：“我想我们刚才确实有些放肆鲁莽了。我们保证不会再这样了。”

家父沉吟了片刻，然后轻轻地把车门关上，回到驾驶座，继续那三个村庄的环游之旅——查尔斯先生肯定地对我说，剩余的游程几乎就是在一片沉默中完成的。

既然已经回忆了这个插曲，我便也想起了同样发生在家父职业生涯那段时间的另一件事，而这件事也许更能清楚地展现出他所拥有的特殊的职业素养。在此我应该先解释一下，我们家一共是兄弟两个——我哥哥伦纳德在我还是个孩子的时候就在南非战争⁽⁶⁾中阵亡了。家父自然是深感丧子之痛；而使这件大不幸雪上加霜的是，一位父亲在这种情况下唯一能够得到的安慰——即坚信自己的儿子是为了英王和国家光荣捐躯的——又由于家兄是在一次特别声名狼藉的机动行动中丧生的这一事实而受到玷污。那次行动被指控为非但是针对布尔人的平民聚居区发动的一次最不符合英军荣誉的军事袭击，而且更有确凿的铁证证实，此次行动的指挥极端不负责任，数度违反了基本的军事预防原则，因此阵亡的兵士——包括家兄在内——死得可以说是毫无意义的。有鉴于接下来我要讲述的内容，我不宜再对那次机动行动做更为精确的指认了，不过如果我说那次行动曾在当时引发轩然大波，控辩双方针锋相对的冲突本身使得那场争论更加引人瞩目的话，那么您也许已经猜到我所指的了。当时曾有舆论呼吁将涉事的将领就地免职，甚至移交军事法庭审判，但军方出面力保该将领，并许其继续履职，打完那场战役。而鲜为人知的是，在南非冲突临近结束之时，这位将领主动选择悄然引退，然后进入商界，专营往来南非的货运生意。我之所以提到这些是因为在战争结束大约十年后，也就是说当丧子的创伤仅只在表面上已经愈合的时候，约翰·西尔弗斯先生将家父叫进书房，告诉他这位要人——我姑且简单地称他为“将军”吧——即将前来府上做客几日，参加府里举行的宴会，家父的雇主希望借此机会为一桩获利颇丰的商业交易打下基础。不过，西尔弗斯先生也想到了这次造访将对家父造成的重大影响，所以特意叫他进来，主动提出在将军逗留期间他不妨休假几天。

毋庸讳言，家父对这位将军自然是憎恶已极；不过他同样也认识到雇主目前生意上的前景全系于此次乡宅宴会能否成功举办——预计将有十八位客人莅临，这样的规模可绝非是小事一桩。于是家父做出了这样的答复，大意是他由衷地感激他个人的情感深得主人的体恤，但他可以向西尔弗斯先生保证，举办乡宅宴会期间所提供的一切服务都将符合应有的水准。

结果，家父所承受的磨难甚至比原本的预期还要严酷得多。一则，家父原本或许还抱有一线期望，以为在亲自见到这位将军以后也许能心生些许尊敬或是同情，从而缓解他对此人怀有的憎恶之情，而事实证明，这根本就是毫无来由的一厢情愿。这位将军身材痴肥、相貌丑陋，其仪态举止毫无教养，言谈话语粗鲁不文，不论说到什么都往军事术语上硬套。尤有甚者，这位绅士的贴身男仆并没有随侍前来，因为平常伺候他的男仆不巧病倒了。这就带来了一个微妙的难题，因为另有一位客人也没有带他的贴身男仆，于是乎府上的管家将亲自担任哪位客人的贴身男仆，哪位客人的贴身男仆只能由府上的普通男仆临时充当就成了一个问题。家父因为体贴雇主的处境，当即主动接下了为将军做贴身男仆的差事，这么一来就不得不跟他厌恶的那个人亲密相处长达四天之久。与此同时，那位将军因为浑然不知家父的感受，还利用一切机会大讲特讲他那丰功伟绩的从军历史——当然了，许多从过军的绅士都喜欢在房间里私下面对贴身男仆大肆夸耀当年的神勇。然而家父居然一丝不漏地隐藏了自己的情感，完美无瑕地履行了他的专业职责，以至于将军在离别之际由衷地向约翰·西尔弗斯先生盛赞他的管家是何等优秀，并留下一笔可观的小费以示谢意——家父毫不犹豫地请雇主将其捐献给了慈善机构。

通过从家父的职业生涯中援引的这两个实例——两者我都曾经经过确证，相信其确凿无疑——我希望您会同意，家父不但是证实了，他几乎就是海斯协会所谓的“与其职位相称之高尚尊严”的化身。若是有人将这种时刻下的家父与某位即便拥有杰克·内伯斯那类最高等级花式技巧的管家做一番对比，我相信他或许就能够初步分辨得出“伟大的”管家与只不过颇有能力的管家之间的不同了。至此，我们或许也就更能够理解家父为什么那么喜欢在餐桌底下发现了一只老虎却丝毫不惊惶失措的那个管家的故事了；那是因为他本能地知道在这个故事当中就隐含着“尊严”的真谛。言已至此，就容我这样地假定吧：“尊严”云云，其至关紧要的一点即在于一位管家无论何时何地都能坚守其职业生命的能力。那些等而下之的管家只要稍遇刺激就会放弃其职业生命，回复原形。对于这样的人来说，身为管家就好比扮演某

个哑剧里的角色；轻轻一推，稍一翘起，那个假面就会跌落，露出底下的真身。伟大的管家之所以伟大，是由于他们能够化入他们的职业角色，并且是全身心地化入；他们绝不会为外部事件所动摇，不管这些事件是何等出人意料、令人恐慌或是惹人烦恼。他们呈现出的职业精神和专业风范就好比一位体面的绅士坚持穿着正式的套装：他绝不会容许自己因为宵小无赖的干扰或任何意外状况而在大庭广众之下宽衣解带；他在，也只有在他主动要这样做时才会将正装脱下，而且也毫无例外地是在他完全独处的情况下才会这么做。如我所言，这是关乎“尊严”的大计。

常听人说，真正的管家只存在于英国。在其他国家，无论实际上冠以什么样的头衔，有的只是男仆。我倒是认为此言不虚。欧陆民族无法造就管家，是因为他们从人种上说就不擅长克制情绪，极端的情绪自控是只有英国人才做得到的。欧陆民族一总的说来凯尔特人亦然，我想您无疑也会赞同——通常在情绪强烈的时刻难以自控，所以除非是在那种丝毫都不会有刺激和挑战的场合下，他们是无法保持其专业风范的。如果允许我再次沿用先前的那个比喻——请原谅我表述得如此粗俗——他们就像是一个受到一点最轻微的刺激就会把正装和衬衣一把扯下，尖声喊叫四处乱跑的人。一句话，“尊严”可不是这种人力所能及的。我们英国人在这方面比外国人具有重要的优势，也正是为此，当你想到某位伟大的管家时，他几乎理所当然地注定就是个英国人。

当然了，对此您也许会不以为然，就像当初开心惬意地围炉夜话时，每当我阐述这样的见解格雷厄姆先生都会进行反驳一样：就算是我所言非虚，你也只能在亲眼目睹他在严峻的考验下的所作所为之后才有定论。然而事实上，我们都会承认像马歇尔或者莱恩先生等人都在伟大的管家之列，而究其实我们当中的绝大多数都无法声称已经在这样的环境下考察过他们的实际作为。我不得不承认格雷厄姆先生的话自有其道理，但我只能这么说，当一个人在这个行业内干了足够长的时间以后，他只需凭直觉就能判断出某个人职业素养的深浅，无须亲眼目睹他在压力下的表现。确实，一旦能有幸亲炙一位真正伟大的管家，你非但不会对其有所怀疑，一心只想要“考验”一下他的含金量，你反而会觉得根本无法想象这样一位威信如此之高的人物会在任何情况下背弃其与生俱有的职业素养。事实上，多年前那个周日的午后，也正是这样的一种体悟，才能穿透酒精所造成的重度思维混沌，使得家父的那两位乘客陷入愧疚的沉默。面对这样的人物，就如同今

天上午面对那最优美的英格兰风光一样：一见之下，你自然会知道你就站在了伟大的面前。

我知道，总会有人断言任何像我这样试图去对“伟大”条分缕析的行为都是徒劳。“有些人就是有，有些人就是没有，清楚明白，”格雷厄姆先生总会这么说。“除此以外，就没什么好说的了。”可我认为，在这个问题上我们有责任去对抗失败主义的论调。对所有我们这样的从业者而言，对这些问题进行深入的思考就更是一种职业责任了，唯其如此，我们每个人才可能为我们自己赢得“尊严”而更好地努力。

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- (1) 索尔兹伯里 (Salisbury)，英国英格兰威尔特郡城市，位于埃文河与威利河交汇处，历史上一直是该郡的主要城市和英国圣公会大主教区中心，市中心有著名的索尔兹伯里大教堂。
 - (2) 伯克郡 (Berkshire)，英格兰南部郡，位于伦敦西面，地处泰晤士河中游和其支流肯尼特河谷地，英国王室行宫温莎城堡和著名的伊顿公学都位于该郡。
 - (3) 德比马赛 (Derby)，始于一七八〇年的英国传统马赛之一，每年六月在萨里郡的埃普瑟姆丘陵举行。
 - (4) 奥尔肖特 (Allshot) 这个地名应系作者杜撰。
 - (5) 合一米九〇点五。
 - (6) 南非战争 (South African War)，又称布尔战争或英布战争，英国与南非布尔人之间的战争。布尔人是南非荷兰移民后裔，十九世纪中叶在南非建立德兰士瓦共和国和奥兰治自由邦，一八九九年十月英国发动战争，布尔人战败，一九〇二年媾和，德兰士瓦和奥兰治被英国吞并，一九一〇年并入英国自治领南非联邦。

第二天一上午

索尔兹伯里

我生性择床，换个地方总是睡不着，很不安稳地勉强浅睡了不长时间以后，我在大约一个钟头前就醒了。那时天还很黑，知道自己还要开整整一天的车，我努力想再多睡一会儿。结果证明是徒劳以后，我最终决定干脆起来算了，那时候还很黑，为了去屋角的洗脸池那儿刮脸我不得不打开了电灯。不过等我刮完脸以后我又把灯关了，我能看到晨光已经从窗帘的边沿透了进来。

就在刚才我把窗帘拉开的时候，外面的光线仍旧非常暗淡，还有一层类似薄雾的东西影响了我的视线，就连街对面的面包店和药房都影影绰绰的。确实，顺着街道朝远处望去，在街道跨上那座小圆拱桥的地方，能看到薄雾从河面上升起，有一根桥柱子都几乎完全看不见了。外面阒无人迹，除了远处传来的某种锤击敲打的回声，以及这家旅店后侧的一个房间偶尔的咳嗽声以外，四下里仍旧悄无声息。老板娘显然还没有起床走动，看来要想在她宣布的七点半以前就吃上早饭是绝无可能了。

眼下，在我等待这个世界醒来的安静时刻里，我发现自己又在心底里温习起了肯顿小姐那封来信的内容。说起来了，我其实早就该解释一下我为什么还称呼她为“肯顿小姐”的。“肯顿小姐”其实应该被称呼为“本恩太太”才对，而且这已经有二十个年头了。可是因为我跟她认识并共事的时段仅限于她的少女时期，自从她去了英格兰西南成为“本恩太太”以后就再也没有见过她，您也许会原谅我仍旧使用我认识她时那已经不合礼俗的方式称呼她，而且这么多年来我在心里一直都是这样称呼她的。当然了，她的来信也给了我额外的理由可以继续把她当作“肯顿小姐”，因为她的婚姻不幸最终还是就要走向终点了。信里并没有细讲这方面的情况，这当然也是意料中的事，不过肯顿小姐已经明确无误地谈到，她事实上已经搬出本恩先生那位于赫尔斯顿的住宅，目前寓居在小康普顿村附近的一位熟人家里。

她的婚姻以失败告终当然是个悲剧。此时此刻，她想必正在抱憾地思量多年前做出的那个决定是如何使得她在中年的后期落得如此孤独凄凉的。不难看出，处在这样的一种心绪之下，想到能重返达林顿府对她而言将是个不小的安慰。诚然，她在信中并没有一字一句明确

地表示故园重返的意愿；但遣词造句的种种委婉幽微之处在在传递出这一明白无误的讯息，字里行间深深地浸透着对于她在达林顿府度过的那些岁月的怀恋之情。当然了，肯顿小姐是无法期望在这个时候旧地重返就能重拾那些已经失去的岁月的，我们见面时我的首要责任就要提醒她这一点。我将不得不向她指出，现在的情况已经跟当初判若云泥——那种有一大帮仆从任凭差遣的日子恐怕在我们的有生之年都是一去不返了。不过再怎么说明肯顿小姐也是一位聪颖的女性，不须我多嘴她应该也已经意识到了世事的变迁。确实，头等重要的一点是，只要肯顿小姐愿意重返达林顿府并在那里一直工作到退休，我看这样的选择没有理由不会为她那已经充满了光阴虚掷、岁月蹉跎况味的人生带来一份真正的慰藉。

当然了，从我本人的专业角度来看，尽管肯顿小姐不再工作已经有了这么多年的时间，她显然仍将被证实是解决达林顿府目前困扰我们的最大难题的最佳解决方案。事实上，将其称之为“难题”，我或许都已经言过其实了。我所指的毕竟只是由我自身所造成的一系列微不足道的小差池，而我现在所力求的也不过是一种防患于未然的预防措施。诚然，这些小小不言的疏失一开始也确实让我大伤脑筋，不过一旦我腾出手来对这些病患进行一番正确的诊断，发现它们不过就是由明显的人手短缺所引发的表面症状以后，我也就不再为此而忧心忡忡了。正如我之前所言，肯顿小姐的到来就将彻底解决这些问题。

不过还是回到她的信上。里面有时的确透露出她对当前现状的某种绝望的情绪——这一点还是挺让人揪心的。她有一段话是这样开始的：“虽然我还不知道该如何有效地将我的余生填满……”在另一处，她又这样写道：“我的余生在我面前伸展为一片虚空。”不过正如我已经说过的，信中大部分的语气都透露出一种怀旧的乡愁。有一处，比如说，她写道：

“这整个插曲不禁让我想起了艾丽丝·怀特。你还记得她吗？事实上，我很难想象你会忘记她。就我而言，我仍旧时常想起她那些元音的发音方式以及只有她才能造得出来的、完全不合文法的独特的句子！你可知道她后来的下落如何？”

事实上我并不知道她后来的归宿，不过我不得不说，一想到那个恼人的女仆，的确给我带来了不少的乐趣——她最后成了我们恪尽职守的员工之一。在她信里的另外一处，肯顿小姐写道：

“当时我是多么喜欢从三楼的那几间卧室俯瞰大草坪以及远处那绿草如茵的开阔高地。那景色是否一如往昔，别来无恙？夏日的傍

晚，那景色中总带有某种神奇的魔力，现在我要向你坦白，想当初我不知浪费了多少宝贵的时间，就站在一扇窗前，直看得心醉神迷。”

然后她又继续写道：

“如果这回忆令人痛苦，敬请谅解。但我永远都不会忘记那一次我们俩一起望见令尊在凉亭前来回徘徊的情景，他低头看着地上，就仿佛一心想找回他失落在那里的某样珍宝。”

三十多年前的那个情景居然也如此鲜活地留在了肯顿小姐的记忆中，真让人又惊又喜。的确，那肯定是发生在她上文提到某个夏日的傍晚，我还清楚地记得爬到三楼的平台，但见一道道橘红色的夕照穿过每一扇半掩的卧室房门刺破了走廊上的昏沉。当我走过那一间间卧室时，透过其中的一扇门看到了肯顿小姐映在窗前的侧影，她转过身柔声叫道：“史蒂文斯先生，您有空吗？”我走进的时候，肯顿小姐已经又回头望着窗外了。下面，白杨的树影横陈在大草坪上。在我们视野的右侧是缓缓隆起的草坡，一直延伸到凉亭前，家父的身影就出现在那里，全神贯注地在那儿来回踱步——肯顿小姐形容得确实很形象，“就仿佛一心想找回他失落在那里的某样珍宝”。

我对这一幕情景一直永志不忘是有非常充分的理由的，我希望能解释清楚。此外，现在想来，考虑到初到达林顿府时她与家父之间关系的某些方面，那么这一幕情景会给肯顿小姐留下同样深刻的印象，或许也就并不那么令人惊奇了。

肯顿小姐和家父差不多是同时来到达林顿府的一也就是说，在一九二二年的春天——因为当时我一下子失去了女管家和副管家两位得力干将。原因是我这两位干将决定结婚并且辞职不干了。我一直都认为，这一类的男女关系对于整幢宅第里的秩序是一种严重的威胁。从那时算起，我又因为同样的原因失去了好几位雇员。当然了，在女仆和男仆中间发生这样的事情是完全可以预期的，而一个优秀的管家在进行人员配置时是一直都应该将这一因素考虑在内的；但是这样的婚配如果发生在高级职位的雇员当中，则将会对工作造成极具破坏性的影响。当然，如果两位员工碰巧相爱并决定结婚，那要进行问责就未免失礼之至了；但我发现真正让人着恼的是对本职工作并无真正的奉献热忱，频频更换工作岗位主要就是为了寻求罗曼司的那些人——女管家们就尤其难逃其咎。

不过得容我立刻补充一句，我说这话时脑子想的可绝非肯顿小姐。她当然最后也离了职并且结了婚，但我可以担保，她在我手下担

任女管家期间绝对恪尽职守，从不允许任何外务干扰到她的职业操守。

不过我扯得太远了。我方才讲到我们同时需要招聘一位女管家和一位副管家，而肯顿小姐正是在这时来到达林顿府接任了女管家一职——我记得她带来的推荐信对她的评价非常之高。事有凑巧，家父也正好在这个时候因为雇主约翰·西尔弗斯先生的去世，行将结束他在拉夫伯勒府杰出的服务工作，等于是既失去了工作，又没有了栖身之地。他当然仍旧是第一流的专业管家，但当时已经是七十几岁的高龄，并且饱受关节炎和其他病痛之苦。如此一来，若是要他跟那些高度职业化的年轻一辈管家竞争同一职位恐怕也难操胜算。有鉴于此，延请家父以其丰富的经验和卓著的声誉来达林顿府继续服务，将不失为一个合情合理的解决办法。

我记得那是家父和肯顿小姐加入我们的工作团队不久以后的一个早上，我正在餐具室里坐在桌前审阅文书账目，听到有一记敲门声。我还没说“请进”，肯顿小姐就推门走了进来，我记得当时我还有些错愕。她捧着一大瓶鲜花，笑吟吟地道：

“史蒂文斯先生，我想这些花能让您的餐具室显得明亮一点。”

“您说什么，肯顿小姐？”

“您的房间竟然如此阴暗冰冷，这实在太可惜了，史蒂文斯先生，您看外面是多么阳光明媚。我想这些花能给这里带来一点生气。”

“非常感谢您的好意，肯顿小姐。”

“不能让更多的阳光照进来真是太罪过了。墙面甚至都有点潮湿呢，您说是不是，史蒂文斯先生？”

我重新回到自己的账目上，说：“不过是水汽凝结罢了，我想，肯顿小姐。”

她把花瓶放到我面前的桌子上，然后又环顾了一下我的餐具室，说道：“如果您愿意的话，史蒂文斯先生，我以后可以给您多剪一些花送来。”

“肯顿小姐，我很感激您的好意。但这不是一间娱乐室。我倒宁肯将分心的因素保持在最低限度。”

“可也没有必要把您的房间弄得这么光秃秃的，而且全然没有色彩啊，史蒂文斯先生。”

“它现在这个样子就完全符合我的需要，肯顿小姐，不过还是非常感激您的好心。事实上，既然您正好在这儿，我倒确实有个具体的问题想跟您提一下。”

“哦，真的吗，史蒂文斯先生？”

“是的，肯顿小姐，只不过小事一桩。昨天我碰巧经过厨房，听到您在呼唤某个名叫威廉的人。”

“是吗，史蒂文斯先生？”

“确实，肯顿小姐。我听到您喊了好几遍‘威廉’这个名字。我能问一下您那是在跟谁说话吗？”

“哎呀，史蒂文斯先生，我想我当时应该是在跟令尊说话。这幢房子里再也没有第二个人叫威廉了，据我所知。”

“这是个很容易犯的小错误，”我面带浅笑道。“肯顿小姐，我能否请您以后称呼家父为‘史蒂文斯先生’呢？如果您是在向第三者提到他，那么您也许可以称他为‘老史蒂文斯先生’，以便于将家父跟在下区分开来。为此我将感激不尽，肯顿小姐。”

话说完之后我就又回到我的文书工作上来。可是让我感到惊讶的是，肯顿小姐并没有就此告退。“请原谅我打搅您了，史蒂文斯先生，”过了一会儿她说道。

“喔，肯顿小姐。”

“恐怕我不太明白您到底什么意思。我过去一直都习惯于直呼下属的教名⁽¹⁾，我并没有看出到了这里就有需要改弦更张的理由。”

“一个最可以理解的小差错，肯顿小姐。不过，如果您愿意稍稍考虑一下具体的情况，您可能就会看得出来，像您这样的人以对待‘下属’的方式跟家父这样的人说话，是不太妥当的。”

“我还是不太明白您的意思，史蒂文斯先生。您说像我这样的人，可是照我的理解，我是这里的女管家，而令尊则是副管家。”

“他的职位当然是副管家，如您所言。可是令我感到意外的是，以您的观察能力，您居然没有发现他实际上不止是个男管家。远远不止。”

“我的观察能力无疑已经差到了极点，史蒂文斯先生。我只观察到令尊是位很有能力的副管家，并以其相应的职位来称呼他。而照您的说法，令尊居然被像我这样的人直呼其名，他一定会感觉屈辱已极的。”

“肯顿小姐，听您的口气，您显然是根本就没有观察过家父。否则您就会明白，以您这样的年龄和资历是不该直呼他‘威廉’的，这本该是显而易见的。”

“史蒂文斯先生，我担任女管家的时间或许不长，不过应该说至少在我担任这个职务期间，我的能力还是得到过不少相当慷慨的评价的。”

“我一刻都没有怀疑过您的能力，肯顿小姐。但是只要您愿意多加观察的话，有成百上千的事例会让您意识到家父是位多么非同寻常、鹤立鸡群的人物，您必定可以从他身上获益良多的。”

“那我真是太感激您的忠告了，史蒂文斯先生。那就再请您不吝赐教，我到底能从观察令尊这上面学到哪些了不起的本领呢？”

“我还以为这对任何一个长眼睛的人来说都是不言而喻的呢，肯顿小姐。”

“但我们已经达成了共识，我在这方面的能力特别欠缺，不是吗？”

“肯顿小姐，如果您觉得以您现在的年纪来说您已经尽善尽美的话，您将永远都无法提升到以您的能力无疑可以达到的高度。如果容我直言不讳的话，比如说，到现在您仍然经常不太确定哪样东西究竟放到了哪里以及哪样东西到底是哪样。”

这一下似乎挫了肯顿小姐的锐气，让她有些下不来台。她一度甚至看起来有点心烦意乱。然后她说：

“我初来乍到，是有一点手足无措，可这也是完全正常的吧。”

“啊，您这话算是说到了点子上，肯顿小姐。您要是观察过家父的话，就会看出他对府里的大事小情真是了如指掌，而且几乎从他踏入达林顿府的那一刻起就是这样的，而他还比您晚到了一个礼拜。”

肯顿小姐似乎思考了一下我这番话，然后才有点愠怒地道：

“我敢肯定老史蒂文斯先生对他的工作是非常擅长的，不过我向您保证，史蒂文斯先生，我也同样能把自己的工作做得很好。我会记

住以后用他的全称来称呼令尊的。现在，如果您没有别的事了，就请容许我告退了。”

在这次遭遇之后，肯顿小姐就不再试图把花往我的餐具室里送了，而且总的说来，我很高兴地观察到她的工作很快就步入了正轨。不仅如此，她显然是位对待工作非常严肃认真的女管家，而且年纪虽轻，却似乎毫不费力地就赢得了她属下各位员工的尊敬。

我还注意到，此后她的确开始以“史蒂文斯先生”来称呼家父。不过，我们在餐具室里的那段谈话过去两周以后的一个下午，我正在藏书室里做着点什么，这时肯顿小姐走进来对我说：

“打搅您了，史蒂文斯先生。不过如果您在寻找您的簸箕的话，我看到它就在外面的门厅里呢。”

“您说什么，肯顿小姐？”

“您的簸箕，史蒂文斯先生。您把它放在外面了。要我替您把它拿进来吗？”

“肯顿小姐，我刚才并没有用过簸箕。”

“啊，呃，那就请您原谅吧，史蒂文斯先生。我想当然地以为刚才是您使用过簸箕，并且把它放在了门厅里。很抱歉平白打搅了您。”

她已经准备离开了，又在门口转过身来说：

“哦，史蒂文斯先生。我本想自己把它放归原位的，可是现在必须先上楼一趟。不知道能否请您记得把它还回去呢？”

“当然了，肯顿小姐。多谢您留心 and 提醒。”

“这是我应该做的，史蒂文斯先生。”

我听着她的脚步声穿过门厅，开始上了主楼梯，然后我才朝门口走去。透过藏书室的两扇大门，可以一览无遗地将门厅和宅第的大门尽收眼底。肯顿小姐提到的那个簸箕就最为惹人注目地矗立在那空荡荡的、擦洗得光洁如镜的地板中央。

那是个虽说微不足道，但却令人恼火的疏失；那个簸箕不但从底层开向门厅的那五道房门那儿看去极为惹人注目，而且从楼梯和二楼的那几个露台上也可以看得一清二楚。我穿过门厅，把那个碍眼的物事拿起来，而直到这时我才意识到这次疏失的全部内涵：我突然想

起，约莫半个钟头前，正是家父在擦洗门厅的地板来着。起先，我简直都不敢相信家父会犯下这样的错误，不过我马上就提醒自己，这种小小不言的疏忽是每个人都难免偶尔会出现的，于是我的恼怒马上就转到了肯顿小姐头上，怪她居然如此毫无道理地小题大做。

然后，最多又过了一个礼拜，我正从厨房来到后廊上的时候，肯顿小姐从她的起坐间里出来，跟我说了一通显然是经过了一番排练的话；大意是尽管她因为让我注意到我的下属所犯的 error 而深感不安，不过她和我本来就是一个团队，不得不通力合作，所以她希望我如果注意到女员工出了什么差错，请我务必也像她那样直言相告。说完这番话后，她接着又指出，餐厅里有几件已经摆上餐桌的银餐具上有明显的擦拭剂的残留。有一把餐叉的齿尖简直就是黑色的。我谢了她，她就又退回到了自己的起坐间。当然，她根本就没有必要特地来提醒我，银器正是家父的主要职责所在，而且是他深感自豪的一项工作。

很有可能还有不少其他这类的事例，我现在已经不记得了。反正在我记忆中，事态在某种程度上达到了高潮是在一个细雨蒙蒙的阴沉的午后，当时我正在弹子房里护理达林顿勋爵的各种运动奖牌和奖杯。肯顿小姐走了进来，站在门口说：

“史蒂文斯先生，我刚注意到这门外有样东西令我百思不得其解。”

“那是什么呢，肯顿小姐？”

“是爵爷的意思，要把楼梯平台上的那尊中国佬跟弹子房门外的这尊调换位置吗？”

“中国佬，肯顿小姐？”

“是的，史蒂文斯先生。原本一直摆在楼梯平台上的那尊中国佬的塑像，现在就在这扇门外面。”

“我恐怕，肯顿小姐，是您有点搞错了吧？”

“我不认为是我搞错了，史蒂文斯先生。我特别要求自己熟悉府内所有物品的摆放位置。那尊中国佬，我猜想，是被某个人擦拭过以后摆错位置了。如果您不相信的话，史蒂文斯先生，也许您可以移步出来自己看一下。”

“肯顿小姐，我现在手头还有事。”

“可是，史蒂文斯先生，您似乎并不相信我的话。既然如此，我想还是请您移步出来亲自看一下。”

“肯顿小姐，我现在正忙着，过会儿我再处理这件事吧。说起来这也算不上什么急务。”

“如此说来，史蒂文斯先生，您是认可我在这件事上并没有弄错喽。”

“肯顿小姐，在我腾出手来处理这件事之前，我是不会贸然认可任何结论的。可是我现在手头上还有事。”

我转身继续做我的事，可是肯顿小姐仍旧站在门口观察我。最后她又道：

“看得出来您手头的事很快就会做完了，史蒂文斯先生。我就在门外等您，等您一出来，这件事就可以最后定案了。”

“肯顿小姐，我想您是有些小题大做了。”

可是肯顿小姐已经离开了门口，而且果不其然，我在继续自己工作的时候，偶尔的脚步声以及其他的声响都会提醒我，她仍旧在门外等着。于是我就决定在弹子房里再多找些工作来做，寄希望于过一会儿以后她能意识到自己的位置是多么荒谬可笑，就此识时务地走开。然而，又过了一段时间以后，我已经把利用手边的工具能做的工作全都干完了，肯顿小姐却显然仍旧待在外面。我决定不再在这种幼稚的事情上浪费时间，于是考虑通过法式落地窗脱身。然而天公不作美——说白了，放眼一望，外面就有好几个大水坑和一块块烂泥地——再者说，还得有人再重新回到弹子房，从里面把落地窗闩好。最后，我认定最好的办法就是出其不意地冲出门去，怒气冲冲地大踏步离开。我于是尽可能悄无声息地先来到一个最佳的位置，从那儿可以发动这样的一次急行军，我紧握自己的清洁工具，一鼓作气地冲出门去，还没等大吃一惊的肯顿小姐醒过神来，我已经沿着走廊迈出去好几步了。可是她很快就回过味儿来，眨眼工夫已经抢到我的前头，挡住了我的去路。

“史蒂文斯先生，这尊中国佬摆错了地方，您不会不同意吧？”

“肯顿小姐，我忙得很。我很奇怪您除了一整天都在走廊里站着，居然就没有更好的事情可做了。”

“史蒂文斯先生，这尊中国佬摆放的位置到底是对还是不对？”

“肯顿小姐，我想请您把嗓门压低一点。”

“我只是想请您，史蒂文斯先生，转过身去看一看那尊中国佬。”

“肯顿小姐，请您把嗓门压低点。如果下属们听到我们扯着嗓门争论中国佬是否摆错了地方，那成何体统？”

“事实是，史蒂文斯先生，府里所有的中国佬塑像都已经脏了有一段时间啦！而现在，居然又摆错了地方！”

“肯顿小姐，您实在是莫名其妙。现在能否请您行个好放我过去？”

“史蒂文斯先生，劳您驾看看您身后的那尊中国佬好吗？”

“如果这对您来说如此重要，肯顿小姐，我可以认可，我后面的那尊中国佬或许是摆错了地方。可我必须要说，我实在有些搞不明白，您为什么会对这些微不足道的疏失如此地关切备至。”

“这些疏失本身或许微不足道，史蒂文斯先生，但您自己却要认识到那其中隐含的更重大的意义。”

“肯顿小姐，我不明白您的意思。现在能否请您好心让我过去。”

“那事实就是，史蒂文斯先生，您交托给令尊的工作已经远非他这个年纪的人所能承担得了啦。”

“肯顿小姐，您显然并不清楚您暗示的是什么。”

“不管令尊曾有过怎样的辉煌，史蒂文斯先生，他现在的力量都已经严重衰退了。这就是您所谓的这些‘微不足道的疏失’所暗含的真正意义，而如果您对此掉以轻心，那么要不了多久，令尊就将铸成大错。”

“肯顿小姐，您这只不过是在给自己出洋相。”

“我很抱歉，史蒂文斯先生，可我必须把话说完。我认为令尊身上的很多职责都该被卸下来了。比如说，不应该让他再继续端那些沉重的托盘了。他端着它们走进餐厅的时候，他那两只手抖得实在令人心惊。他迟早肯定会失手将托盘砸到某位夫人或是士绅的大腿上，就只是个时间问题罢了。不仅如此，史蒂文斯先生，这话我说出来很是冒昧，但我已经注意到了令尊的鼻子。”

“真的吗，肯顿小姐？”

“很遗憾是真的，史蒂文斯先生。前天傍晚，我眼看着令尊端着托盘脚步非常迟缓地朝餐厅走去，恐怕我很清楚地看到他的鼻尖上拖着长长的一条鼻涕，就在那些汤碗上面摇摇欲坠。我恐怕这样的上菜方式是很难令人食欲大开的。”

不过这会子经过细想以后，我倒不能肯定肯顿小姐那天当真把话说得如此毫无顾忌了。在我们多年密切共事的过程中，我们诚然越来越坦诚地交换意见，可是眼下我正在回忆的那个午后尚属我们订交的初始阶段，我觉得即便是肯顿小姐也不会如此直言不讳的。我不敢肯定她当真会冒昧到说出像是“这些疏失本身或许微不足道，可你自己却要认识到那其中隐含的更重大的意义”这样的话来。事实上，经过一番仔细的回想以后，我感觉应该是达林顿勋爵亲自跟我说这番话的，那是我跟肯顿小姐在弹子房门外那番交锋过后的大约两个月后，爵爷将我叫进了他的书房。那时，家父的境况在他摔倒以后已经有了重大的变化。

书房的两扇大门正对着从主楼梯上下来的每个人。现在的书房门外放了一个陈设法拉戴先生各种小摆设的玻璃柜子，不过在达林顿勋爵的时代，那个位置一直都立着一个书架，专用来摆放卷帙浩繁的百科全书，包括一整套的《不列颠百科全书》。达林顿勋爵一个惯用的策略就是在我从楼梯上下来的时候装作在这个书架前检索百科全书各卷的书脊，有时候为了增加偶遇的效果，他还会真的从书架上抽出某一卷来，在我走完最后几级楼梯的时候佯装专心致志埋头阅读的样子。然后，在我从他身边走过以后，他才会说：“哦，史蒂文斯，有件事我想跟你说一下。”说完后，他就会漫步走向书房，表面上仍旧埋头于他拿在手里的那卷大书当中。达林顿勋爵在采取这种方式的时候，总是因为他要谈的事情让他感到有些为难，甚至在书房的门已经在他身后关好以后，他仍旧经常会站在窗户跟前，在整个谈话过程中一直做出查阅百科全书的样子。

我在这里顺带描述的这一事件，不过是众多事例当中的一桩，而这些事例无不鲜明地表现出达林顿勋爵那羞涩而又谦逊的天性。近些年来，有关爵爷本人以及他在诸多重大事件当中所扮演的重要角色，坊间出现了大量不实之词，有些口耳相传，有些则付诸笔墨；更有甚者，有些极端无知的报道居然指鹿为马，断言爵爷的行为是由自我中心，要不然就是傲慢自负所驱使的。请容我在此说上一句，再也没有比这种论调更加悖乎常理、罔顾事实的了。爵爷后来所坚守的那些公

开立场是与他的本能和天性完全背道而驰的，而我敢断言，爵爷之所以能够勉为其难地克服他那远为恬淡退隐的一面，纯粹是出于深厚的道德责任感。无论近年来对达林顿勋爵的功过如何评说一如我之前所言，这其中的大部分纯粹是无稽之谈——我都该为爵爷说句公道话：他本质上是个真正的好人，一个彻头彻尾的绅士，时至今日，我都为自己能将最好的年华奉献给为这样一个人服务上而深感自豪。

在我说起的那个特别的午后，爵爷的年纪应该还在五十四五岁上；不过据我的回忆，他的头发已经完全灰白，他那瘦高的身形已经出现了在他的晚年变得异常显著的驼背的迹象。他几乎是在说话时，眼睛才会从那卷百科全书上抬一抬：

“令尊身体感觉好些了吧，史蒂文斯？”

“我可以很高兴地说，他已经完全康复了，先生。”

“听到这个消息真让人高兴。非常高兴。”

“谢谢您，先生。”

“听我说，史蒂文斯，令尊那边有任何一呃——迹象没有？我的意思是，有没有任何迹象显示令尊也许希望他的工作负担稍许减轻一些？撇开这次摔倒的事故不谈，我的意思是。”

“正如我所说的，先生，家父看来已经完全康复了，我相信他仍旧是个堪当重任之人。诚然，他最近在履行职责时确实出过一两个明显的差错，但在性质上无论如何都是微不足道的。”

“不过，我们谁都不希望任何类似的事情再度发生，是不是？我的意思是，令尊不小心跌倒这类的意外。”

“那是自然，先生。”

“而且当然啦，这种意外既然会发生在草坪上，那也就可能发生在任何地方。而且在任何时候。”

“是的，先生。”

“有可能发生在，比如说，令尊正在侍餐的晚宴当中。”

“是有可能，先生。”

“你听我说，史蒂文斯，不出半个月，那些代表当中的第一批就会来到这里了。”

“我们都已做好了充分的准备，先生。”

“在那之后，这幢房子里发生的所有事情都可能产生非同小可的结果。”

“是的，先生。”

“我的意思是说非同小可的结果。对于欧洲的发展全局而言都是如此。只要看看将要出席的人员名单，我认为这么说一点都不算夸张。”

“是的，先生。”

“这种时候可容不得有半点差池。”

“的确如此，先生。”

“你听我说，史蒂文斯，我的意思绝非是要令尊离开这个岗位。我只是请你重新考虑一下他所承担的职责范围。”我相信，说到这里的时候，爵爷再次低下头去假装看书，并局促不安地用手指比画着一个条目：“这些疏失本身或许微不足道，史蒂文斯，可你自己却必须要认识到那其中隐含的更重大的意义。令尊堪当重任的时代正在成为过去。在那种任何一个疏失都可能危及会议成功的工作领域，请切莫再派给他任何任务了。”

“绝对不会了，先生。对此我完全理解。”

“很好。那我就把此事交给你去斟酌办理了，史蒂文斯。”

应该说明的是，大约在一个礼拜以前，达林顿勋爵是亲眼看到家父意外跌倒的过程的。爵爷当时正在凉亭里招待两位客人，一位年轻的女士和一位绅士，眼看着家父端着一大托盘大受欢迎的茶点穿过草坪朝他们走来。草坪和凉亭之间有一段长约几码的小缓坡，那时候跟现在一样，有四块石板嵌入草中充当进阶的梯级。家父就是在走到这几块石板附近时摔倒的，托盘上所有的东西——茶壶、茶杯、茶托、三明治、蛋糕——在石板上方的草皮上撒得到处都是。等我接到警报赶过去的时候，爵爷和他那两位客人已经让家父面向一侧躺好，从凉亭里拿来的靠垫和小地毯权充枕头和毯子。家父已经神志不清，面色呈现出一种古怪的灰色。已经派人去请梅雷迪思大夫了，不过爵爷认为等大夫赶到之前应该先把家父从太阳地里转移出来；结果是让人搬来了一把带篷的轮椅，费了不少劲儿把家父转移到了室内。梅雷迪思大夫赶到的时候，家父已经苏醒过来，感觉好多了。大夫并没有待多久，

临走前只模棱两可地交代了几句，大意是家父也许是“工作过于劳累”了。

这整个意外的发生显然让家父感觉非常难堪，到我们在达林顿勋爵的书房里谈话的时候，他早已经跟之前一样继续忙碌地工作了。于是，怎么才能提出这个减免其工作职责的话题可就殊非易事了。对我来说尤其麻烦的还在于这些年来家父跟我之间的交流越来越少，其原因我从来也没有真正搞清楚。以至于在他来到达林顿府以后，即便是针对工作进行一些简单的必要沟通时，那气氛也让双方都很尴尬。

思之再三，我认定最好还是选在家父的寝室里跟他私下谈这件事，这样的话等我走后他也可以不受打扰地仔细考虑一下他所面临的新处境。能在寝室里找到家父的时间只有他刚起床的一大早和临睡前的深夜里。我选择了前者，于是在某一天的清晨，我爬上仆役厢房的楼顶来到他居住的小阁楼外，轻轻敲了敲门。

在此之前，我极少有理由进入家父的寝室，一见之下我深为那个房间的逼仄和简陋而吃惊。确实，我记得当时的印象是跨入了一间牢房，后来想来，这种感觉或许跟天刚破晓时那苍白的光线以及空间的局促或者四壁的萧然也不无关系。因为家父已经拉开了窗帘，脸已经刮好，穿好全套制服坐在床沿上，显然他就一直坐在那里观看着天色的变化，等待黎明的到来。至少揣测起来他应该是在观看天空的，毕竟从他那个小小的窗口望去，只能看到屋瓦和雨水槽。他床头的那盏油灯已经捻灭，当我发现家父不以为然地瞥了一眼我手里的油灯——那是我特意带了来给摇摇晃晃的楼梯照个亮的一我就赶紧捻灭了它。油灯捻灭以后，我才更加清楚地注意到那照进房间的苍白光线的效果，以及它是如何照亮了家父那皱纹堆垒、棱角分明、仍旧令人敬畏不已的面容轮廓的。

“啊，”我说，短促地一笑，“我就知道父亲肯定已经起了床，而且为白天的工作做好了准备。”

“我起来已经三个钟头啦，”他说，颇为冷淡地上下打量了我一番。

“希望父亲不是因为关节炎的困扰才睡不好觉的。”

“我的睡眠已经足够了。”

父亲朝屋内唯一的那把椅子靠过去，那是把小小的木椅子，他把两只手全都撑在椅背上，借此站起身来。当我看到他站立在我面前的

时候，我真不知道他的腰弯背驼在多大程度上是因为年老体衰，又在多大程度上应归咎于为了适应这个小阁楼那陡斜的天花板而养成的习惯。

“我来是要跟您谈一件事，父亲。”

“那就简明扼要地说。我不能整个上午都听你瞎叨叨。”

“既然如此，父亲，那我就直奔主题了。”

“那就直奔主题，说完了事。我们这里还有人有工作要做呢。”

“很好。既然您希望我长话短说，我就恭敬不如从命了。事实是，父亲已经是越来越年老体衰。以至于现在就连履行副管家的日常职责也已经是心有余而力不足了。爵爷认为，我自己也有同感，如果允许父亲继续承担目前的职责，他随时都可能危及府内日常事务的正常运转，尤其是下周即将举行的国际盛会。”

父亲的面容，在那半明半暗的光线之下，没有丝毫的情绪波动。

“重点在于，”我继续道，“我们感觉父亲不应该再承担伺候用餐的工作了，不论席间是否有宾客在场。”

“在过去的五十四年间，我每天都负责伺候用餐，”家父说道，话音不疾不徐。

“除此以外，也已经决定父亲不该再端送盛放任何物品的托盘，不管需要走动的距离有多近。有鉴于已经做出的这些限制，也知道父亲尤其看重简洁明了，我已经在此列出了经过修正的日常职责的清单，切盼父亲自今日起就遵照执行。”

我自己都感觉不太情愿将我手里的那张清单直接递给他，于是就放在了他的床尾上。家父瞥了它一眼，然后就转过目光凝视着我。他的表情仍没有丝毫情绪变化的蛛丝马迹，他那双扶在椅背上的手却似乎完全放松了下来。不管是否已经弯腰驼背，他那威严的身形所造成的绝对影响仍旧不容小觑——正是那同样的影响力使得后座上两位烂醉的绅士恢复了清醒。最后，他说道：

“我上次摔倒纯粹是因为那几级石阶的缘故。都已经歪歪扭扭了。应该吩咐谢默斯赶快去把它们挪挪正，以免别的人也在那儿摔倒喽。”

“的确。总之，父亲能答应我务必细看一下那份清单吗？”

“应该吩咐谢默斯赶紧去把那几级台阶修理好。绝对要在那些绅士们从欧洲来到之前就弄好。”

“的确。那么，父亲，祝您早安。”

肯顿小姐在信中提到的那个夏日傍晚就在这次短暂会晤的不久后——当然，也可能就是那同一天的傍晚。我记不清到底是为了什么爬到宅第的最高层，来到一侧全都是一间间客房的那条走廊上了。但我想正如此前已经说过的那样，我仍生动地记得当时那最后的斜阳穿过每扇敞开的房门，一道道橘红色的光线投射到走廊上的情景。当我从那一间间无人使用的卧房门前走过时，肯顿小姐的侧影就映衬在其中一间卧室的窗户前，她看到我之后就喊我过去。

当你细想此事，当你想起肯顿小姐在初到达林顿府时曾如何反复地讲起家父的所作所为，那天傍晚的情形何以会长久地留在她的记忆中，历经这么多年而不衰，恐怕也就不足为奇了。当我们俩从窗口望着楼下家父的身影时，她无疑是感觉到一定程度的负疚感的。白杨树的树影占据了大半块草坪，不过落照仍旧照亮了远处通向凉亭的那段草坡。我们望见家父就站在那四级石头台阶前，陷入了沉思。一阵微风轻轻地拂乱了他的头发。然后，我们看见他非常缓慢地走上了那几级石阶。上到坡顶以后，他转身又走了下来，比上去的时候步幅稍快。再度转身之后，家父又一次凝神伫立了几秒钟，仔细端详着他眼前的石阶。最后，他第二次拾阶而上，异常郑重其事。这一次他朝前走，越过草坪，几乎走到了凉亭边上，然后转过身又慢慢地走回来，眼睛一刻都没有离开过地面。事实上，要描述他当时的行为举止，我再也想不出比肯顿小姐在信中打的那个比方更为形象的了；的确，他“就仿佛一心想找回他失落在那里的某样珍宝”。

不过我看我是越来越沉溺于这些回忆当中了，这或许有点蠢吧。毕竟，目前的这次旅行是我千载难逢的一个机会，可以尽情品味英格兰乡村的众多绝胜佳景，我要是任由自己这么过度分心的话，以后我肯定会后悔不迭的。事实上，我注意到自己还没有在此记下来到这座城市途中的任何见闻——只约略提到一开始那在山坡上的短暂停留。考虑到我其实非常享受昨天的旅程，这真算得上一个不小的纰漏。

我相当仔细地规划过前往索尔兹伯里的这趟旅程，避开了几乎所有的主干道；在有些人看来这次行车路线像是在不必要地绕圈子，不过这样一来我就能欣赏到简·西蒙斯太太在其佳著中推荐的好多处美景了，我必须说，对此我是相当满意的。大部分的时间我都行驶在农

田牧地间，置身于绿草萋萋的怡人芳香中，而且我经常会不由自主地放慢车速，缓缓徐行，为的是更好地欣赏途经的一条溪流或是一道山谷的美景。不过据我的记忆，一直到已经行将接近索尔兹伯里的时候，我才真正又从车上下下来了一次。

当时我正行驶在一条长长的直路上，道路两旁都是开阔的草甸。事实上，到了这里土地已经变得非常广袤而又平坦，四面都可以看得很远，索尔兹伯里大教堂的尖塔已经在前方的天际线上清晰可见。一种宁静的心绪涌上心头，因为这个原因我想我又一次把车子开得非常慢了一可能时速不会超过十五英里。也是幸好如此，因为开得这么慢我才及时发现有一只母鸡正以最悠闲不过的步态横穿我前方的道路。我赶紧把福特车停下来，离那只母鸡只剩下一两英尺的距离，这么一来它倒也停下不走了，就站在我车前的路当间。过了一会儿，我见它仍旧一动不动，就按响了汽车喇叭，但这并没有什么用，只使得那只母鸡开始在地上啄起什么东西来了。恼怒之下，我打开车门开始下车，一只脚刚刚踩到脚踏板上的时候，我听到一个女人的声音喊道：

“哦，我真是太抱歉啦，先生。”

往周围一瞧，我才发现自己刚刚经过了路边的一幢农舍——一个系着围裙的年轻女人从里面跑了出来，想必是汽车喇叭惊动了她。她从我身边走过去，一个突然袭击把那只母鸡抓住，她把它抱小孩一样抱在怀里，一边再次向我道歉。我请她放宽心，这对我并没有造成什么妨碍，她说道：

“真是非常感谢您特意停下车来，没有从内莉身上轧过去。她是个好姑娘，总是给我们生出最大的鸡蛋。您特意把车停下来真是菩萨心肠。而且您可能还急着赶路吧？”

“哦，我一点儿都不着急赶路，”我微笑道。“这么多年以来，我这是头一回能这么消消停停地享受一下，我得承认，这真是一种相当愉快的经历。您看，我这纯是在享受驾车出游的乐趣呢。”

“哦，那敢情好，先生。您是要去索尔兹伯里吧，我估摸着。”

“确实。事实上，前面我们能看到的就是那座大教堂吧？听说那是一座恢宏壮丽的建筑。”

“哦，可不是嘛，先生，是很漂亮。呃，跟您说实话吧，我自己都还没去过索尔兹伯里呢，所以也讲不清楚它近看是个什么样子。不过我跟您说，先生，我们从这儿天天都能看到那个尖塔。有些日子雾

太大了，它就仿佛完全消失了似的。可是您自己也看得出来，像今天这样的好天气，它看上去有多漂亮啊。”

“赏心悦目。”

“您没有从我们内莉的身上轧过去，我真是感激不尽，先生。三年前，我们的乌龟就是这么被轧死的，也就在这个地方。为此我们全都非常伤心来着。”

“真是太惨了，”我说，面色非常沉重。

“哦，可不是嘛，先生。有人说我们庄稼人早就习惯了家畜伤亡了，才不是那么回事呢。我的小儿子一连哭了好几天。您肯为了内莉停车真是菩萨心肠，先生。既然您都已经下了车了，何不进屋喝杯茶呢？我们欢迎之至。这会给您在路上提提神的。”

“您太客气了，不过说实话，我觉得应该继续赶路了。我希望能适时地赶到索尔兹伯里，好有时间去看看那个城市的众多胜景呢。”

“说得也是，先生。那好吧，再次感谢您。”

我又上了路，出于某种原因——也许是因为我觉得还会有更多的家畜悠闲地横穿马路吧——我仍旧保持着刚才的缓慢车速。我必须得说，刚才的这桩小小的遭遇不禁使我的精神为之大好；我因为一念之善受到感激，又得到淳朴的善意回报，不禁使我对于未来几天里吉凶莫测的旅行计划感到一种特别的振奋之情。也就是怀着这样昂扬的情绪，我来到了索尔兹伯里。

不过我觉得还是应该暂时回头再说两句家父的事；因为我突然想到，在处理有关家父能力衰退这个问题上，给大家的印象可能是我的态度太过生硬，有些操之过急了。事实上，除了采取那样的方式以外，我当时也是别无选择的——一旦我把当时的整个大背景解释清楚，您肯定也会认同我这种说法的。概括说来，将在达林顿府召开的重要的国际会议已经迫在眉睫，处理问题已经容不得有任何放任姑息或是“转弯抹角”的余地了。还需提醒诸位一句的是，尽管在此后的大约十五年间，达林顿府确曾见证了诸多具有同等分量的重大事件的发生，但别忘了，一九二三年三月的那次会议正是这些重大事件中的第一桩；可以想象，正因为相对来说缺乏经验，大家也就更不敢马虎大意了。事实上，直到今天我仍然会经常回顾那次会议，出于不止一个原因，我将其视作我整个一生的转折点。首先，我想我的确把它看作我真正成长为一名成熟的管家的重大时刻。这并不代表说我认为自己

已经必然地成了一位“伟大的”管家；不管怎么说，这样的评判都是不应该由我来论定的。不过，如果有人愿意假定在我的整个职业生涯中至少已经具备了一丁点“尊严”的核心素质，那么此人应该也会希望将一九二三年三月的那次会议当作一个代表性的时刻，在那其中我也许显示出我已经具备了那种素质所要求的能力。那次会议无疑属于那样的重大事件之一：如果它在某个人发展过程的关键阶段不期而至，必将会挑战并且拓展其个人能力的极限，所以自那以后，此人便会以全新的标准来检视和要求自己了。当然了，那次会议之所以令人难忘亦有其他颇为不同的原因，在此我愿详细解释一下。

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一九二三年的那次会议可以说是达林顿勋爵长期擘画的最终成果；的确，现在回顾起来，可以清楚地看到爵爷是如何从会议的大约三年前就开始朝着这个目标努力的。我记得，在大战结束合约起草的时候，他对此还并没有这么全神贯注，我想，公平合理地说来，他对合约的兴趣与其说是源自对于其内容的关注，还不如说是由于他跟卡尔—海因茨·布雷曼先生的友谊。

大战结束不久后，布雷曼先生初次造访达林顿府，那时他还是一身戎装，任何人都看得出来，他跟达林顿勋爵之间已经建立起了深厚的友谊。这并没有让我感到吃惊，因为任何人只要一瞥之下就看得出布雷曼先生是位高尚正派的士绅君子。从德国陆军退役以后，他在之后的两年间每隔一段时间都会再次造访，而你忍不住会有些震惊地注意到，他的境况已经是每况愈下了。他的衣着越来越敝旧，他的身形越来越单薄；他的眼睛里现出一种惊恐不安的神色，在他最后的几次造访中，他会长时间地凝视着虚空，忘记了爵爷就在他身旁，有时甚至在爵爷跟他说话时都茫然不觉。我本以为布雷曼先生是罹患了什么严重的疾病，可是听了爵爷当时的一番话，我才明白情况并非如此。

应该是临近一九二〇年末的时候，达林顿勋爵踏上了他数度柏林之行的首次旅程，我还记得那次初访对他造成的深刻影响。他回来以后一连好几天都心事重重，我还记得我有一次问他柏林之行是否愉快时，他的回答是：“令人不安，史蒂文斯。令人甚为不安。如此对待战败的敌人对我们而言实在是名誉扫地。这完全背离了我们国家的传统。”

不过，还有与此有关的另一件事一直生动地留在我的记忆当中。如今，原来的宴会厅已经不再摆放餐桌，那个宽敞的大厅由于其天花板极高且非常华美，法拉戴先生就将其派作了类似画廊的用场。但是在

爵爷的时代，宴会厅还是经常使用的，常设的长餐桌可供三十位或更多的客人就座用餐；实际上，那个宴会厅是如此宽敞，只要在常设的长餐桌一头再加设几张小餐桌，就能供差不多五十位客人就座用餐。当然，在寻常的日子里，达林顿勋爵就跟如今的法拉戴先生一样，是在气氛更加亲切的餐厅里用餐的，那是招待十二位客人用餐的理想场所。不过我记得在那个特别的冬夜里，餐厅因为某种原因无法使用，达林顿勋爵只得跟唯一的一位客人——我想应该是爵爷任职外交部时期的同僚理查德·福克斯爵士——在那空旷的宴会厅里共进晚餐。您无疑也会同意，在侍餐的时候，最困难的情况就莫过于只有两个人用餐了。我本人是宁肯只伺候一位用餐者用餐的，哪怕他是个素不相识的陌生人。在有两个人一起用餐的情况下，就算其中一位是自己的主人，你也会发现最大的难题就在于很难做到既要全意殷勤又须完全不引起注意这一优质侍餐服务的核心要义；在这种情况下，你难免会有这样的怀疑，即你的在场是否妨碍了两位用餐者的谈话。

那天晚上，宴会厅里的大部分空间都处在黑暗中，两位绅士肩并肩坐在长餐桌的中间位置——因为餐桌过于宽大，不宜于对坐——照明只有餐桌上的烛台以及对面噼啪作响的炉火。为了将我的存在感减到最低，我决定站在比平常距离餐桌远得多的暗处。当然了，这一策略也有其明显的不利之处，每次我走向光亮处侍餐的时候，还没等我走到餐桌前，我前进的脚步就会产生又长又响的回声，以最招摇的方式让用餐者注意到我的到来；不过也确有一大优点，可以使我站在一旁待命时几乎不会被人注意到。正是在我这样侍立于离开两位绅士有一段距离的暗处的时候，我听到坐在两排空椅子中间的达林顿勋爵谈起了布雷曼先生，他的声音一如既往地平静而又温文，然而却在高大的四壁间产生了强烈的回响。

“他曾是我的敌人，”爵爷说道，“可是一一直都表现得像个绅士。在我们两国相互炮击的六个月期间，我们彼此都能以礼相待。他是位绅士，必须恪尽职守，我对他本人并无丝毫怨恨。我曾对他说：‘听我说，我们现在是敌人，我会不惜一切跟你战斗到底。但是在这一可悲的事务结束之后，等我们之间不必再相互为敌的时候，我们一定要一起喝一杯。’但可悲的是，这一君子协定却让我成了一个骗子。我的意思是，我跟他说过一旦战争结束以后我们就不再相互为敌了。如今我有何面目再去见他，跟他说我所言不虚呢？”

就在那同一个夜晚的稍后时段，爵爷一边摇着头，一边语气沉重地说：“我是为了维护世界的正义才打那场战争的。据我的理解，我并没有参加到针对日耳曼种族的仇杀当中。”

时至今日，每当听到针对爵爷的各种说法，每当听到这些日子里甚嚣尘上的有关他的行事动机的那些愚蠢的诛心之论，我就会高兴地回忆起他在那间空荡荡的宴会厅里说出的那番肺腑之言。在以后的这些岁月当中，针对爵爷的所作所为无论曾有过如何纷纭复杂的说法，至少我个人从未怀疑过，他所有的言行无不源自他内心深处渴望伸张“世界的正义”的终极愿望。

那个夜晚过后没多久，就传来了布雷曼先生在汉堡至柏林的一列火车上开枪自杀的噩耗。爵爷自然是很难过，并马上制订计划，对布雷曼夫人致以哀悼之情并予以经济援助。然而，在经过好几天的努力之后——其间我本人亦曾竭尽所能给以协助——爵爷都寻觅不到布雷曼先生家人的任何行踪。看来，他已经有挺长一段时间无家可归、妻离子散了。

我相信，即使没有这个不幸的消息，达林顿勋爵也会开始他日后的那些作为的；他那唯愿终结不义与苦难的渴望就深深地根植于他的本性中，他是不可能改弦更张的。事实上，布雷曼先生死后不过几个礼拜，爵爷就开始花费更多的精力和时间致力于解决德国的危机。众多政府的权贵与社会上的名流都成为府里的常客——我记得，这其中就包括了丹尼尔斯勋爵、约翰·梅纳德·凯恩斯⁽²⁾先生和H·G·威尔斯⁽³⁾先生，那位著名的作家，以及其他很多“不宜公开”的人士，在此我也就姑隐其名了——这些来宾经常和爵爷一连好几个钟头闭门密商。

有些来宾事实上是绝对“不宜公开”的，我得到指示要确保不能让仆佣们得悉他们的身份，有时甚至都不能让人看到他们。不过——我可以自豪而又感激地说一句——达林顿勋爵从来都未曾试图避过我的耳目；我还记得有好几次，某位大人物一句话说到一半就停下来，警惕地瞥上我一眼，而爵爷无一例外地都会保证说：“哦，但说无妨。在史蒂文斯面前您什么话都可以讲，这一点我可以向您保证。”

于是，在布雷曼先生去世后的大约两年间，在爵爷与那段时间已成为其最亲密盟友的大卫·卡迪纳尔爵士的不懈努力下，已成功地聚集起一个由重要人士组成的广泛联盟，其共同的信念是德国的现状已经不能再这样持续下去了。这其中不但有英国人和德国人，还有比利时人、法国人、意大利人和瑞士人；他们的身份则是高级外交官和政要、杰出的神职人员、退役的军方士绅、作家与思想家。其中的有些绅士是因为跟爵爷的见解一致，深切地感觉到在凡尔赛签订的和约远非光明磊落，为了一场已经结束了的战争而继续惩罚一个战败国是不道德的行径⁽⁴⁾。其他人显然对于德国或是她的子民并不这么关心，但

他们认为该国的经济乱象若不得到遏止，则极有可能以惊人之势蔓延至全世界。

等到一九二二年初的时候，爵爷已经开始为心中一个明确的目标而努力了。这就是将这群同道中那些最有影响力的人物齐集达林顿府，举办一场“非官方的”国际会议——会议将集中讨论《凡尔赛和约》中最为苛刻的几个条款的修订办法。为了使他们的努力不至于付诸东流，任何此类的会议都必须具有足够的分量，如此方能对于“官方的”国际会议产生决定性的影响——专为重新检讨和约的内容这一目的已经正式召开过几次会议，但其结果却只是徒增混乱和怨愤。我们当时的首相劳合·乔治先生已经呼吁于一九二二年春在意大利再次召开一次大型会议，爵爷最初的打算就是在达林顿府组织一次聚会以便确保意大利的会议能取得令人满意的结果。虽然爵爷和大卫爵士不遗余力地辛苦工作，但这一时限确实还是过于紧迫了；但随着乔治先生倡议举行的会议再度无疾而终，爵爷于是着眼于计划来年将于瑞士举行的下一次大型会议。

我还记得那段时期里的一天早上，我在早餐室里为达林顿勋爵端上咖啡的时候，他有点愤愤地把手里的《泰晤士报》折起来，说道：“这些法国人。我真是，说实话，史蒂文斯，有点受不了这些法国人。”

“是的，先生。”

“而且想想看我们还必须得在全世界面前跟他们手挽着手，肩并着肩。一旦被人提醒到这一点，你就巴不得好好去洗个澡。”

“是的，先生。”

“上次我在柏林的时候，史蒂文斯，奥费拉特男爵，家父的老朋友，走上前来跟我说：‘你们为什么要这样对待我们？难道你们看出来再这样下去我们就承受不了了吗？’我真是很想直接告诉他，这全是那些可鄙的法国人干的。这么胡闹可绝非英国人的行事风格，我想跟他说。可我转念一想还是不能这么做：绝对不应该诋毁我们亲爱的盟国。”

可是事实上，正是由于法国人在解除德国人免受《凡尔赛和约》苛刻条款的限制方面最不肯通融，也就更为迫切地需要在达林顿府举行的聚会上至少请到一位对于本国的外交政策拥有明确影响力的法国绅士与会。的确，我就听到爵爷数度表达过这样的观点：如果没有这样的一位人士出席，则任何关于德国问题的讨论都不过是自娱自乐。

于是，爵爷就和大卫爵士开始着手解决筹备工作的这一至关重要的环节，在此期间，我亲眼目睹他们迭遭挫败仍不屈不挠的精神境界，真是令我感佩不已，五体投地。他们发出了无数信函和电报，而且在短短两个月内爵爷就三度亲赴巴黎斡旋。最后终于征得一位声名显赫的法国人的承诺——我将只称呼他为“杜邦先生”——同意在严格地“不宜公开”的基础上参加此次聚会，会议的日期也由此得以确定。也就是一九二三年那个令人难忘的三月。

随着会期越来越近，我所承受的压力在性质上虽远不如爵爷肩负的那么巨大，但也绝非是微不足道的。我非常清楚地意识到，如果有任何一位客人在达林顿府逗留期间稍感些微地不够舒适，就有可能造成无法想象的严重后果。不仅如此，由于与会人数的不确定性，我事先的准备工作也就格外复杂化了。这次会议的级别极高，正式的与会者仅限于十八位位高权重的绅士和两位女士——一位德国的伯爵夫人以及那令人敬畏的埃莉诺·奥斯汀太太，她当时还住在柏林；不过由于每位与会者都有充分的理由携秘书、贴身男仆和翻译一同前来，要想确知这些随同人员的人数几乎是不可能的。再者说来，有一部分与会者肯定会在三天的会期之前提早到来，以便为自己留出充足的时间做好准备工作并估定其他客人的具体心态；然而他们提前抵达的准确日期仍属未定之数。我能够确定的只有府里所有的仆役员工不仅需要不遗余力地努力工作，需要随时保持最为警觉的待命状态，而且还得具有非同寻常的灵活和变通性。事实上，我一度曾经认为如果不从府外引进更多人手帮忙的话，我们面临的这一巨大的挑战恐怕难以顺利完成。但如此一来，不但是爵爷肯定担心会引起外界的谣诼蜂起，也会使得我在承担不起任何失误的情势下，出现不得不仰赖完全不知底细的外人的窘境。于是，我开始着手以一种，在我想象中，一位将军为一场战役做准备的态度来为即将到来的重大日子做好准备：我以无以复加的谨慎态度拟定了一份特别的员工配置规划，预先考虑到各种可能发生的意外和不测；我仔细分析了我们最薄弱的环节所在，为此专门制订了若干应急计划，以便在果然出现问题时即可施行补救措施；我甚至对全体员工做了一次军队里惯用的“鼓气讲话”，让大家认识到，尽管他们必须拼力工作到精疲力竭的程度，但能在未来的那几天里克尽厥职，他们必将感到莫大的自豪。“历史极有可能就在我们这个屋檐下创造出来，”我这样告诉他们。而他们因为深知我绝非那种夸大其词之辈，也就都能清楚地认识到某件意义重大的事件即将在我们府里上演了。

这样您或许就能理解，家父不巧在凉亭前摔倒时整个达林顿府里所笼罩的紧张气氛——那一意外就发生在第一批与会客人可能会到达的两周前——而且也该明白我为什么要说我们已经没有什么“转弯抹角”的余地了吧？可不管怎么说，家父居然很快就找到了办法，巧妙地规避了由不许他再端托盘的禁令对他的工作效能所造成的限制。一时间，大家经常看到他推着一辆手推车在府里到处走动的身影，车上满载着清洁用具、拖把、刷子，虽总是摆放得整整齐齐，旁边却又极不协调出现了茶壶、茶杯和茶碟，有时候看起来活像是街头小贩的卖货车。显然，他仍旧无可避免地只得放弃他在餐厅里侍餐的职责，但除此以外，拜那辆手推车之赐，他却完成了惊人的工作量。事实上，随着国际会议的巨大挑战日益迫近，家父身上似乎也发生了令人惊讶的变化。给人感觉简直就像是他被某种超自然的力量附了体，让他一下子年轻了二十岁；前些日子他脸上那种意气消沉的神色几乎一扫而光，他在府里各处工作起来简直浑身洋溢着青春的活力，在外人看来几乎要以为不是只有一个，而是有好几个这样的身影推着手推车在达林顿府里的各个走廊上奔忙呢。

至于肯顿小姐呢，我记得那些日子里日益增加的压力似乎也对她产生了明显的影响。举例说来，我记得那段时间里我有一次在后廊上跟她偶遇时的情形。对于达林顿府来说，后廊在整个仆役区域起到了主干的作用，由于进深过长，阳光无法照射进来，走廊里总是一副阴沉沉的场景。就算是在大晴天，后廊上也是一片昏暗，从那儿走过就像是穿过一条隧道一样。在我说起的那一次，如果我未曾从她朝我走来时鞋子踩在地板上的脚步声里认出她来，那就只能通过她的轮廓来辨认了。我在木地板上少数几处有道光线透进来的地方选了一处停下脚步，待她走近以后叫了一声：“啊，肯顿小姐。”

“有事吗，史蒂文斯先生？”

“肯顿小姐，不知道可否提醒您留意一下，楼上的床单需要在后天之前准备妥当。”

“床单已经全都准备好了，史蒂文斯先生。”

“啊，很高兴听您这么说。我不过是突然想到了而已，没什么别的意思。”

我正要起步往前走的时候，肯顿小姐却站在了原地。然后她朝我走近一步，一道光纹刚好落在她的脸上，我这才看清楚她那愤怒的表情。

“非常不幸，史蒂文斯先生，我真是忙得不可开交，我发现我几乎连一刻都不得闲。而您却明显地闲得很，我要是有您那么多闲工夫的话，我也会很高兴在府里四处溜达溜达，然后再同样地提醒您去特别注意一下那些你早就已经做好的工作的。”

“喔，肯顿小姐，根本没必要发那么大的火。我只是觉得有必要提醒您一声，您并没有因为太忙而疏忽了……”

“史蒂文斯先生，这已经是在过去的两天当中您第四或第五次感觉有此必要了。您居然有这么多时间在府里上上下下地闲逛，并且以您那毫无必要的指责无端地去打搅别人，这实在是让人感觉匪夷所思。”

“肯顿小姐，如果您居然有那么一时一刻认为我还有空闲时间的话，那就比以往任何时候都更清楚地显示出您是多么地缺乏经验了。我相信假以时日，再过几年，您对于在这样一幢府第里到底有多少大事小情需要操心，是会获得一些更为清楚的概念的。”

“您总是没完没了地提到我有‘多么缺乏经验’，史蒂文斯先生，然而您却显然无法指出我的工作中有任何疏失。否则，我确信您老早就不厌其烦地不吝赐教了。行了，我手头上还有很多工作要做，如果您不再这样跟在我屁股后面指手画脚，妨碍我做事，我将会感激不尽的。如果您实在是太多的闲暇需要消磨，那我建议您不如到外面去呼吸点新鲜空气，倒是更为有益一些。”

她咚咚地踩着地板从我身边走过，朝走廊那头走去。我决定最好还是到此为止，不要再深究下去，于是也就继续走我的路了。我就要来到厨房门口的时候，忽听得她怒冲冲的脚步声再次尾随而至。

“事实上，史蒂文斯先生，”她大声叫道，“我想请您从今往后不要再直接跟我说话了。”

“肯顿小姐，您这话到底是什么意思？”

“如果有必要传递什么信息的话，那就请您通过一位信使来传达。或者您也可以写一张字条，派人给我送来。这样的话，我们之间的工作关系，我肯定，将会融洽很多。”

“肯顿小姐……”

“我实在是太忙了，史蒂文斯先生。如果信息太复杂怕说不清楚的话，就请写张字条。或者您愿意的话，也可以跟玛莎或多萝西讲，

要不然就跟您认为值得信赖的某位男性员工讲。我现在必须得回去忙我的工作，只能留您一个人继续闲逛下去了。”

肯顿小姐的行径固然令人恼怒，可我也实在无暇多想，因为那时第一批客人已经到了。国外的代表预计还要两三天后才会陆续到达，不过被爵爷称作“主场团队”的三位绅士——外交部两位绝对“不宜公开”身份的公使和大卫·卡迪纳尔爵士——为了尽可能把准备工作做到位已经提早来到。一如既往，我在出入几位绅士正坐而论道，进行深入讨论的不同房间时，他们几乎不会对我有任何避讳，于是我不免对于进展到这一阶段的整体氛围多多少少也有了一定的印象。当然，爵爷和他的同僚们着重对于每一位即将与会的代表的基本情况相互间都尽可能精准地做了简要介绍；不过，他们关注的焦点都不可避免地集中在了一个人身上——也就是杜邦先生，那位法国绅士——同样重要的还有他个人可能的好恶倾向。实际上，有一次我走进吸烟室的时候，确信我听到其中一位绅士正在说：“欧洲的命运事实上可能全系于我们是否能在这一点上劝说杜邦先生改变他既有的观点。”

也正是在这一初步讨论的阶段当中，爵爷曾信托给我一项极不寻常的任务，而正因为它的不同寻常，它才同那意义重大的一周当中发生的其他明显更加令人难忘的事件一起，至今仍深深地铭刻在我的脑海当中。达林顿勋爵特意把我叫进他的书房，我马上就看出他有点心烦意乱。他端坐在书桌后面，像通常一样，手里捧着一本打开的大书作为遮掩——这次是本《名人录》——来来回回地翻着其中的一页。

“哦，史蒂文斯，”他假作漠不关心地开口道，可是下面似乎就不知道该怎么继续下去了。我站在原地，准备一有机会就为他排忧解难。爵爷继续翻弄了一会儿书页，俯下身去细看其中的一个条目，然后才说：“史蒂文斯，我也知道我想请你去做的这件事有些不合常规。”

“先生？”

“只是因为现在我有太多重要的事情需要操心，实在分身乏术。”

“我很乐于为您效劳，先生。”

“我很抱歉向你提出这样的要求，史蒂文斯。我知道你自己也肯定忙得不可开交。可是我又不知道究竟该如何才能妥善地解决此事。”

我静等吩咐，而爵爷的注意力又重新回到了《名人录》上。然后他才又开了口，说话的时候头都没抬：“你应该，我想，熟谙人生的事实吧？”

“先生？”

“人生的事实，史蒂文斯。男女之事。你应该清楚的，是不是？”

“恐怕我不太明白您的意思，先生。”

“就让我们摆明了说吧，史蒂文斯。大卫爵士是我多年的老友。而且他在目前这次会议组织工作上的贡献是无可估量的。要是没有他，我敢说，我们就无法确保杜邦先生会同意出席此次会议。”

“的确如此，先生。”

“不过呢，史蒂文斯，大卫爵士也自有他的古怪之处。你自己或许也已经注意到了。他是带他的公子，雷金纳德，一起来的。充当他的秘书。问题是，他已经订婚了。小雷金纳德，我指的是。”

“是的，先生。”

“最近五年以来，大卫爵士一直试图告诉他的公子一些人生的基本事实。这位年轻人已经二十三岁了。”

“的确如此，先生。”

“我就有话直说了，史蒂文斯。我碰巧是这位年轻人的教父。所以呢，大卫爵士就请求我来负责向小雷金纳德传达有关的人生事实。”

“的确如此，先生。”

“大卫爵士本人发现这是个颇为艰巨的任务，他怀疑自己在雷金纳德的大婚之日前恐怕是完不成这个任务了。”

“的确如此，先生。”

“问题是，史蒂文斯，我也忙得分身乏术啊。对此大卫爵士应该是知道的，但他仍旧来求我帮忙。”爵爷停顿了一下，又继续去研究面前的书页了。

“您的意思是不是，先生，”我接过话头，“希望我来向这位年轻的绅士传达这方面的信息？”

“如果你不介意的话，史蒂文斯。这会让我如释重负的。大卫爵士每隔一两个钟头就会问我是不是已经跟他的公子讲解过了。”

“我明白，先生。这在目前的压力之下肯定是很令人心烦的。”

“当然，这已经远远超出了你的职责范围，史蒂文斯。”

“我会尽力而为的，先生。可是要找到合适的时机来传达这样的信息，恐怕会有一些困难。”

“你只要愿意一试，我已经是感激不尽了，史蒂文斯。你真是太乐于助人了。听我说，没必要小题大做。只需传递基本的事实就够了。简单明了就是最好的方式，这是我的建议，史蒂文斯。”

“是的，先生。我将尽力而为。”

“真是感激不尽，史蒂文斯。请把进展的情况告诉我。”

您或许也能想象得到，我对于这一要求还是感到有点错愕的，而且放在平时，碰上这种事我一定会花上一点时间好好琢磨一下的。然后，这次却是在如此繁忙的节骨眼上突然降临到我头上来的，我可没那么多时间腾出来专门让它来占用，于是我决定一找到机会就速战速决。我记得就在我接受这个任务不过一个钟头左右，就注意到小卡迪纳尔先生独自一人待在藏书室里，他正端坐在一张写字台后面，埋头于几份文件当中。只要近距离地仔细观察一下这位年轻绅士，也就能体会爵爷——当然还有这位年轻绅士的尊亲为什么会知难而退了。我主人的这位教子一看就是一位态度诚恳、学究气十足的年轻人，五官清秀正派；可是碰上这样一个话题，你倒是宁肯对方更加轻松快活一点才好，甚而至于宁肯他是那种有些轻浮之气的年轻绅士。不管怎么说，既然已经决定了要快刀斩乱麻，我也就硬着头皮走进藏书室，在离卡迪纳尔先生的写字台不远处停下脚步，轻轻咳嗽了一声。

“打搅了，先生，我有个口信要转达给您。”

“哦，是吗？”卡迪纳尔先生急切地道，把目光从那些文件上抬了起来。“是家父的口信吗？”

“是的，先生。也可以这么认为吧。”

“请稍等。”

这位年轻绅士伸手从脚边的公文包里取出笔记本和铅笔。“请讲吧，史蒂文斯。”

我又轻咳了一声，尽可能保持一种就事论事的语气。

“大卫爵士希望您能知晓，先生，女士和绅士们在几个关键的地方是大为不同的。”

我在构思下句话的措辞时想必是停顿了片刻，因为卡迪纳尔先生这时叹了一口气，说：“对此我真是再清楚不过了，史蒂文斯。就请你有话直说好吗？”

“您已经很清楚了，先生？”

“家父总是低估了我的能力。对这整个领域我已经进行过广泛的阅读和扎实的基础研究工作。”

“真的吗，先生？”

“在过去这整整一个月里，除此以外我实际上就没考虑过其他的事情。”

“是吗，先生。既然如此，我要传达的这个口信或许就是多余的了。”

“你可以向家父保证，对于基本的情况我已经做到了充分的了解。这个公文包，”——他用脚碰了一下那个公文包——“就塞满了我对于但凡能够想到的每个可能的角度所做的笔记。”

“真的吗，先生？”

“我真的认为我已经充分考虑到了人类的大脑所能想到的每一种排列组合方式。希望你转告家父，请他放宽心。”

“我会的，先生。”

卡迪纳尔先生显得轻松了一些。他又碰了碰那个公文包——我很想把眼睛别开，不去看它——然后说道：“我猜你也一直都纳闷为什么这个公文包我从不离手。好了，现在你知道了。想想要是给不该打开的人打开了会有什么样的结果吧。”

“那可就不能再尴尬了，先生。”

“可不是嘛，”他说，突然又把身子坐直了，“除非家父又想出了什么全新的因素，希望我进一步斟酌考虑。”

“我想不大可能会有了，先生。”

“没有吗？关于这位杜邦伙计就再也没有更多的资讯了吗？”

“恐怕是没有了，先生。”

我竭尽所能不流露出丝毫恼怒的情绪：原本以为已经圆满解决了的难题，这才发现实际上根本就还是原封未动地摆在我面前。我相信我正集中思想，准备重整旗鼓的时候，那位年轻的绅士突然间站起身来，一把抓起他的公文包，说：“好了，我想我该去呼吸点新鲜空气了。多谢你的帮忙，史蒂文斯。”

我本想在最短的时间内就另找机会再跟他谈一次的，可是实际证明已经是不可能了，主要是因为当天下午一比预定的时间早了足足有两天——美国的参议员刘易斯先生就到了。当时我正在楼下的餐具室里核对供货的清单，突然听到上头传来无可置疑的好几辆汽车驶进庭院停下来的声音。我赶忙上楼去的时候，在后廊里碰巧遇到了肯顿小姐——当然也就是我们上次不欢而散的同场景——而或许正是这一令人不快的巧合促使她继续采用了跟上次一样的幼稚举动。因为在我问她是谁到了的时候，肯顿小姐径直地继续走她的路，只丢下一句话：“如果事态紧急就请人传个口信，史蒂文斯先生。”这实在太令人恼火了，不过当然了，我别无选择，只能赶紧往楼上跑去。

在我的印象中刘易斯先生是位人高马大的绅士，脸上总是挂着亲切的笑容。他的早到显然给爵爷和他的同僚们带来了不便，因为他们原指望还有一两天的独处时间可以比较充分地做好准备的。不过，刘易斯先生那不拘小节、令人愉快的举止态度，以及他在餐桌上的一番表态——美国“将永远站在正义的一方，为此而不惜承认凡尔赛已经铸成的错误”——却大大赢得了爵爷那“主场团队”的信任；随着酒过三巡菜过五味，席间的交谈已经慢慢地从诸如刘易斯先生的家乡宾州的诸多优点这样的话题，明确地转回到即将召开的会议上，而等到饭毕绅士们悠然点起雪茄的时候，他们提出来的某些深思熟虑的意见已经跟刘易斯先生到来前只在他们之间私下交流的看法同样私密了。其间，刘易斯先生曾对在座的诸公说道：

“先生们，我同意你们的看法，我们这位杜邦先生可能是位非常难以逆料的人物。不过容我告诉诸位，关于他至少有一点是肯定的，可以说有十足的把握。”他俯身向前，挥动着雪茄以示强调。“杜邦憎恨德国人。在战前他就憎恨他们，而如今更是变本加厉，他仇视德国人的程度之深恐怕是在座的诸位先生所难以理解的。”说完这句话后，刘易斯先生再次靠回到椅背上，脸上重又堆满亲切的笑容。“不过请告诉我，诸位先生，”他继续道，“你很难因为一个法国人憎恨

德国人而责怪于他，是也不是？毕竟，法国人这么做也是有其正当理由的，是也不是？”

说完，刘易斯先生环顾了一下餐桌边就座的几位绅士，一时间气氛略有些尴尬。这时达林顿勋爵说道：

“有些怨恨当然是在所难免的。可是话又说回来了，我们英国人也曾跟德国人进行过长期的苦战。”

“不过你们英国人又自不同了，”刘易斯先生道，“貌似你们已经不再真心憎恨德国人了。但法国人是这样看的：德国人毁灭了欧洲的整个文明，再怎么惩罚他们都不为过。当然了，这在我们美国人看来未免不切实际，不过我们一直感到困惑的倒是你们英国人为什么没有跟法国人持相同的观点。毕竟，诚如您刚才所说，不列颠在那场战争中也损失惨重。”

餐桌上又是一段尴尬的沉默，大卫爵士这才相当不确定地说：

“我们英国人在看待事物的方式上经常跟法国人有所不同，刘易斯先生。”

“啊，一种性情上的不同，您也许可以这么说。”刘易斯先生在说这句话时脸上的笑意似乎又加深了一点。他顾自点了点头，仿佛很多问题对他而言已经迎刃而解了，然后就抽起了雪茄。也可能是后见之明影响了我的记忆，不过我有一种明确的感觉：就是在那一刻我第一次在这位表面看来非常迷人的美国绅士身上觉察到某种古怪的，或许是某种两面三刀的东西。不过，就算我当真是在那一刻起了疑心，达林顿勋爵却显然是居之不疑。因为在又一次一两秒钟的尴尬沉默之后，爵爷似乎下定了决心。

“刘易斯先生，”他道，“让我开诚布公地说吧。我们大部分英国人都认为法国人目前的态度是有些可鄙的。您当然也许会称其为一种性情上的不同，不过容我冒昧地说一句，我们现在要讨论的却远非这一点东西而已。在冲突已经结束以后，再继续这样地仇视敌人是一种很不得体的行为。一旦你已经把一个人打倒在地上，就应该到此为止。你就不能再继续对他拳打脚踢了。在我们看来，法国人的行为已经变得越来越像野蛮人了。”

这番言辞似乎让刘易斯先生感到了某种程度的满意。他咕哝了一句什么话表示赞同，并透过餐桌上已经相当浓厚的雪茄烟云冲着几位共同用餐的绅士满意地微微一笑。

第二天早上，又有更多的客人提前到达；就是来自德国的那两位女士——尽管大家都会觉得她们出身背景悬殊，两人居然是结伴同行的一随行的有一大群男女仆从，以及数不胜数的行李箱。下午的时候，一位意大利绅士也先期抵达，有一位贴身男仆、一位秘书、一位“专家”以及两位保镖随侍左右。我无法想象这位绅士究竟以为来到的是什么地方，竟然特意带来了保镖，不过我必须得说，在达林顿府看到有这么两位身材魁伟、一声不吭的壮汉，无论那位意大利绅士出现在哪里他们都如影随形，时刻以怀疑的目光警觉地窥伺着周围数码内的动静，这实在算得上是诡异的一景。顺带说一句，在这之后的几天当中我们才得知，这两位保镖的工作模式是两人轮流休息，以确保整个夜里至少有一位在主人身旁当值。我在刚听说这一安排以后就想马上知会肯顿小姐，以便她能相机做出安排，可是她再次拒绝跟我交谈，为了尽快落实此事，我也只得勉为其难地写了张字条，把它塞进了她起坐间的门下。

第二天，又有几位客人到达，距离正式的会期足足还有两天的时间，而达林顿府已经挤满了各个国家的客人，要么聚在房间里闲谈，要么无所事事地闲逛，在门厅里、走廊上和楼梯平台上，细看墙上的画作和各种饰品。客人们相互间当然都以礼相待，尽管如此，这一阶段却似乎弥漫着一种相当紧张的气氛，主要的原因是缺乏互信。这种焦躁不安的气氛也表现在随行的贴身男仆和仆佣相互之间那明显的冷淡态度上，我自己的员工则很高兴由于过于忙碌而无暇跟他们过多地打交道。

正是在这个节骨眼上，面对各路要求应接不暇之际，我偶然往窗外一瞥，发现了小卡迪纳尔先生的身影，他应该正在庭院里呼吸新鲜空气。他一如既往地紧紧夹着自己的公文包，正沿着环绕草坪的小径缓步闲行，深深地陷在思绪当中。我当然会想起对于这位年轻绅士，我还有任务没有完成，而且我灵机一动，感觉户外的环境因为可以亲近大自然，尤其是旁边还有鹅群可以拿来当作实例，倒不失为是传递我肩负的那类信息的理想场合。而且我还看出，如果我现在就快步走出去，藏身于小径旁边那高大的杜鹃花丛背后守株待兔，很快就能等到卡迪纳尔先生从我身边路过。到了那时，我就可以现身出来，向他传达我的信息。这诚然算不上什么无比精妙的谋略，可是话又说回来了，你也得承认这个任务固然有其自身的重要性，可是在那个节骨眼上却怎么也算不上最该优先考虑的要事。

地面和多数植物的叶子上都笼罩着一层薄霜，不过对于一年当中的这个时节来说，那算得上是温煦的一天。我快步穿过草坪，藏身于

灌木花丛之后，不久就听到卡迪纳尔先生的脚步声近了。不幸的是我稍稍估错了现身的时机。我原打算在卡迪纳尔先生距我的藏身之处尚有一段距离的时候就从树丛后出来的，那样他就会提早看到我，以为我正要前往凉亭，或者也许是园丁的小屋。这样的话我就能假装是意外撞见了，如此，便能赋予我们的谈话以一种临时起意的意味。结果却是我出来得稍晚了一点，恐怕真是吓了那位年轻绅士一跳，他马上把那宝贝公文包拿得离我远远的，用两条胳膊紧紧地抱在胸前。

“我非常抱歉，先生。”

“我的天哪，史蒂文斯。你吓了我一大跳。我还以为发生了什么不测呢。”

“非常抱歉，先生。不过我碰巧有件事要向您转达。”

“我的天哪，好吧，你可真是把我吓了一跳。”

“那就容我有话直说了，先生。您会注意到在我们的不远处有几只鹅。”

“鹅？”他有些困惑地四顾一望。“哦，是的。还确实有几只鹅。”

“同样的，还有鲜花和灌木。事实上，现在并非它们一年当中的鼎盛时节，不过您自然明白，先生，随着春天的到来，我们将会看到周围的环境发生一种改变——一种非常特别的改变。”

“是的，我确信现在的庭院并非它们最美的时节。可是跟你实话实说吧，史蒂文斯，我其实并不太留意大自然的美好。眼下的事态实在令人忧心忡忡。杜邦先生是满怀能够想象得到的最恶劣的心绪来到这里的。这也是我们最不想见到的情形。”

“杜邦先生已经来到了这里，先生？”

“大约半小时前。情绪简直坏透了。”

“那抱歉了，先生。我必须马上去招待他了。”

“那是自然，史蒂文斯。呃，感谢你特意出来跟我聊天。”

“请您原谅，先生。关于这个方面——也就是您所谓的大自然的美好，我碰巧还有一两句话要跟您说。如果您肯屈尊听我唠叨几句的话，我将不胜感激之至。不过恐怕这得等下次找机会再说了。”

“好的，我愿闻其详，史蒂文斯。虽然我个人更偏爱鱼类。对于鱼类我可以说是无所不知，不管是淡水的还是咸水的。”

“所有的生命都跟我们预期中的讨论息息相关，先生。不过，我必须向您告退了。我都不知道杜邦先生已经到了。”

我匆忙返回室内，迎头撞到的第一男仆忙不迭地跟我说：“我们正四处找您呢，先生。那位法国绅士已经到了。”

杜邦先生是位个头高挑、举止优雅的绅士，蓄着灰白的胡须，戴着单片眼镜。抵达时他穿的是一身人们经常看到欧陆士绅们度假时穿的那种服饰，确实，他在整个逗留期间，都始终刻意地保持着一副他完全是出于游赏和交情才会来到达林顿府的架势。正如卡迪纳尔先生指出的，杜邦先生抵达的时候情绪不佳；现在我已经记不清楚在他来到英国的这几天里到底都有什么事情惹得他不开心了，不过最让他难过的应该是他在伦敦观光时脚上就磨起来的几个痛疮，而且他很担心它们会化脓感染。我知会他的贴身男仆有事可以找肯顿小姐帮忙，可是这并没有妨碍杜邦先生每隔几个钟头就冲着我打一下响指，跟我说：“管家！我还需要一些绷带。”

见到刘易斯先生以后，他的情绪明显地大为改观。他跟这位美国参议员相互就像老同事那样亲热地打招呼，而且在那天剩余的大部分时间里，他们俩都待在一起开心地谈笑忆旧。事实上，明眼人都看得出来，刘易斯先生跟杜邦先生这么几乎寸步不离其实对于达林顿勋爵造成了极大的不便，因为爵爷自然是切望能够在讨论正式开始前，先跟这位著名的人物进行一番密切的个人接触的。在几个场合，我都亲眼见到爵爷试图把杜邦先生拉到一边好私下里说几句话的，可是刘易斯先生却每次都故意插进来作梗，笑嘻嘻地说一句类似这样的话：

“请原谅，先生们，但是有件事让我百思不得其解。”如此一来，爵爷很快就发现自己不得不去听刘易斯先生讲他更多的趣闻轶事了。不过除了刘易斯先生之外，其他的客人或许是出于敬畏，或许是因为敌意，都刻意地跟杜邦先生保持距离；这一点即便是在当时普遍都心怀戒备的气氛下都显而易见，而这也似乎更加凸显了这样一种感觉，即杜邦先生果然是能够左右未来数日会议的最终成果的关键人物。

会议在一九二三年三月最后一周的一个下雨的早上正式召开，为了顾及很多与会者“不宜公开”的性质，会场特意设在会客厅这样一个有些超乎想象的地方。事实上，在我看来，这种“非正式”的做派已经达到了稍显滑稽的程度。这样一个相当女性化的房间里挤满了这

么多表情严峻、一身深色正装的绅士，有的沙发上一下子并肩坐了三四个人，这一场景本身就够古怪的了；而且有的与会者又是如此坚决地一定要维持一种“这不过是次社交活动”的表象，居然到了不惜为此而将一份打开的报章杂志故意摊放在膝头上的程度。

在第一个上午的会议进程中我因为不得不频繁出入于会客厅，所以无法完全跟进会议的整个过程。不过我记得达林顿勋爵的开场白是首先正式欢迎各位嘉宾的莅临，然后就概述了一下需要放宽《凡尔赛和约》诸多条款的苛刻规定这一强烈的道德诉求的基本内涵，强调指出了他亲眼目睹的德国人民正在承受的巨大苦难。当然，这同样的感想我之前已经在很多场合听爵爷表达过了，可是他在这个庄严的场景中的发言句句出自肺腑，是如此令人信服，我不禁再次为之而动容。大卫·卡迪纳尔爵士接下来发言，虽然我错过了他发言的大部分内容，不过感觉基本上更偏重技术性的层面，而且坦白说我觉得是有些高深莫测。不过其基本的要旨似乎与爵爷的意思非常接近，他的讲话以呼吁不要让德国再继续赔款以及法国军队撤出鲁尔区做结。那位德国伯爵夫人紧接着发言，不过这个时候我不得不离开会客厅相当长一段时间，具体原因已经不记得了。等我再次进去的时候，来宾们已经开始进行开放式的讨论，而这些讨论的内容一大部分是关于商业贸易和金融利率的一就不是我能理解得了的了。

至少据我的观察而言，杜邦先生并没有参与到讨论当中，从他那闷闷不乐的行为举止上也很难看出他到底是在认真倾听别人的发言呢，还是全神贯注在别的思绪当中。在某个阶段，我碰巧在一位德国绅士的发言中间有事要离开，杜邦先生也突然站起身来，跟我一起走了出来。

“管家，”我们一走进门厅他就说道，“不知道能不能叫人帮我换换脚上的纱布。它们现在搞得我不舒服极了，根本就听不进那些绅士们在说些什么了。”

我记得，我在请求肯顿小姐给予协助以后一自然是派人送去的口信一就把杜邦先生安置在弹子房里坐等护士的到来，正在这时第一男仆急匆匆地从楼梯上奔下来，面带痛苦的神情告诉我家父在楼上病倒了。

我匆忙朝二楼跑去，刚转过楼梯口，就看到了一幅奇怪的景象。在走廊的尽头，几乎就正在那扇大窗户前面，映着灰蒙蒙的光线和窗外的雨景，家父定格在一个姿势当中，就好像正在参加某种庄严的仪式一般。他单膝跪地，脑袋低垂，好像正在奋力推着面前那辆手推

车，而那辆小车不知何故竟顽固地纹丝不动。两位卧房的女仆表示尊敬地离开一段距离，面带敬畏的神情注视着他所做出的努力。我走到家父面前，把他紧抓在手推车边缘的手松开，扶着他在地毯上躺下来。他双目紧闭，面如死灰，前额上满是汗珠。我叫人前来帮忙，及时搬来了一辆带篷的轮椅，家父就被转移到了他自己的房间。

将家父安置在床上以后，我一时间颇有些手足无措，不知道接下来该如何是好；因为家父正处在这种情况下，我就这么一走了之实在不合情理，但我又真是一点空余时间都匀不出来。正当我站在门口踌躇不决之际，肯顿小姐出现在了身旁，并且说道：“史蒂文斯先生，在目前这种情况下，我比您还稍微多那么点空余时间。如果您愿意的话，我可以代您照顾一下令尊。我会带梅雷迪思大夫上这儿来进行诊治，要是有什么要紧的情况我会通知您的。”

“谢谢您，肯顿小姐，”我说，然后我就离开了。

当我返回会客厅的时候，一位神职人员正在讲述柏林的儿童所遭受的苦难。我立刻忙着为客人们添茶倒咖啡。有几位绅士，我注意到，正在饮用烈酒；尽管有两位女士在场，有一两位绅士已经开始抽起烟来。我记得当我手持空茶壶离开会客室的时候，肯顿小姐叫住了我，说：“史蒂文斯先生，梅雷迪思大夫正准备离开了。”

她说这番话的时候，我看到那位大夫正在门厅里穿戴雨衣和帽子，于是我就走上前去，那把茶壶还在我手里拿着。大夫面带不悦地望着我。“令尊的状况不太乐观，”他说。“如果情况恶化，马上通知我。”

“是，先生。谢谢您，先生。”

“令尊高寿了，史蒂文斯？”

“七十有二了，先生。”

梅雷迪思大夫想了一会儿，然后又说：“如果情况恶化，务必马上通知我。”

我再度向大夫致谢，然后送他出去。

也正是在那天傍晚，晚餐即将开始前，我无意中听到了刘易斯先生和杜邦先生的谈话。当时我出于某个原因上楼来到杜邦先生的房间，在敲门前我习惯性地稍停了片刻，听一下门内的动静。您或许没有养成这种习惯，为了避免在某些极不适宜的时候敲门打搅了别人而

采取这种小小的预防措施，我却一直都有这种习惯，而且我敢担保这在我们许多同行当中也是非常普遍的做法。也就是说，我们这样做的背后并无什么不可告人的动机，就拿这次来说，我根本不是有意要去偷听他们讲话的。然而，也是事出偶然，当我把耳朵贴到杜邦先生的房门上时，正巧听到了刘易斯先生的说话声，虽然我不记得当时听到的确切字句了，可他讲话的语气引起了我的怀疑。这位美国绅士的声音听来仍旧一如既往地亲切而又和缓——自打他来到这里以后，这声音已经为他赢得了很多人的好感——可是这会子却又带上了某种绝不会弄错的鬼鬼祟祟的成分。正是因为这一点，再加上他正在杜邦先生的房内、应该正在跟这位至关重要的人物侃侃而谈的事实，使得我没有去敲门，反而继续听了下去。

达林顿府各间卧室的房门都是很厚实的，我是无论如何也听不清楚完整的谈话内容的；因此上，我现在也很难回忆得起当时听到的确切的语句，其实当天的稍晚时候我向爵爷汇报此事时，情况就已经是如此了。话虽如此，这并不等于我对当时房内正在发生的事情没有一个相当清楚的概念。事实上，那位美国绅士正在表明这样的一个观点，即杜邦先生受到了爵爷以及其他与会者的操纵；他们故意将邀请杜邦先生与会的时间推后，以便于其他人等在他不在场时先行讨论重大的议题；即便在他来到之后，也有人看到爵爷与几位最重要的代表举行了好几次私下的讨论，而没有邀请杜邦先生参加。然后刘易斯先生就开始打小报告，把他来到这里第一天的晚宴上爵爷和其他人说过的那些话讲给杜邦先生听。

“坦白说吧，先生，”我听到刘易斯先生这么说，“我因为他们对于贵国人民的态度而惊骇万分。他们实实在在地使用了‘野蛮’和‘可鄙’这样的词汇。事实上，几个小时之后我就把它们原原本本地记在了我的日记里。”

杜邦先生简短地说了句什么，我没听清，然后刘易斯先生又说道：“我就跟您说吧，先生，我真是惊骇万分。这样的词汇能用来形容仅仅几年前还并肩站在一起的盟友吗？”

现在我已经不能确定当时自己有没有去敲门了；考虑到我听到的内容那令人警醒的性质，我当时的判断应该还是撤退为宜。反正是并没有在门外逗留太久——正如事后不久我责无旁贷必须跟爵爷解释清楚的那样——没有听到更多的内容，以便可以据以判断杜邦先生听了刘易斯先生的这番话以后到底会持一种什么样的态度。

第二天，会客室里的讨论已经达到了一个全新的激烈水平，到午餐时间的时候，唇枪舌剑的往还已经趋于白热化了。我的印象是发言的内容已经带有责难的意味，发言的态度也愈发无所顾忌，矛头直指杜邦先生，而他则手捻胡须，端坐在扶手椅中，几乎不言不语。每次暂时休会，我注意到一爵爷无疑也会有些担忧地注意到一刘易斯先生都会马上就把杜邦先生拉到某个角落或是别的他们能够不受打扰地密商的所在。我清楚地记得，用过午餐后不久，我无意中撞见这两位绅士就在藏书室刚刚进门的位置颇为鬼鬼祟祟地交谈，让我印象格外深刻的是，他们一见到我走上前来，就马上闭口不谈了。

与此同时，家父的状况既没有好转，也没有恶化。据我的理解，他多数的时间都在昏睡，有几次我有点空余时间爬到那个小阁楼上去探望他的时候，他确实是沉睡不醒。我实际上一直都没有机会再跟他说话，直到他病情再次发作后的第二天傍晚。

那次我进去的时候，家父也在睡梦中。可是肯顿小姐留下来照看家父的那个卧房的女仆一看到我就马上站起来，开始摇晃家父的肩膀。

“蠢丫头！”我叫道。“你这是在干什么？”

“史蒂文斯先生交代过，如果您再来的话就叫醒他。”

“让他睡吧。他这个病就是累的。”

“他说过一定要把他叫醒，先生，”那姑娘道，又开始摇晃家父的肩膀。

家父睁开眼睛，在枕头上微微侧了一下头，看着我。

“希望父亲现在感觉好些了，”我说。

他继续盯着我看了一会儿，然后问我：“楼下一切尽在掌控中吧？”

“情况一直都瞬息万变。这才刚过六点钟，所以父亲也很可以想象此刻厨房里的气氛了。”

家父的脸上掠过一丝不耐烦。“但一切都尽在掌控之中吧？”他又问了一遍。

“是的，我敢说您对此可以尽管放心。我很高兴父亲感觉好些了。”

他有些慎重地慢慢把胳膊从被单底下抽出来，疲惫地盯着自己的手背。看了好长一段时间。

“我很高兴父亲现在感觉已经大好了，”我最后又说了一遍。“现在我真的最好还是回去了。就像我说的，现在的情况真是瞬息万变。”

他又继续看了自己的手背一阵子。然后才缓缓地道：“真希望我对你来说是个好父亲。”

我轻轻一笑道：“真高兴您现在感觉好些了。”

“我为你感到骄傲。一个好儿子。希望我对你来说也是个好父亲。但我想我并不是。”

“恐怕我们现在真是忙得不可开交，不过我们可以明天早上找时间再聊。”

家父仍旧望着自己的双手，仿佛对它们略有些恼怒似的。

“真高兴您现在感觉好些了，”我又说了一遍，然后就告退了。

*

来到楼下，我发现厨房里几乎是一片混乱，而且总体来说，各级员工无不笼罩在一种极端紧张的气氛当中。不过，我很高兴地记得，到大约一个钟头以后的晚宴时间，就我的团队而言，展现出来的就唯有高效以及专业性的镇定自若了。

看到那座富丽堂皇的宴会厅高朋满座的场景，总是让人过目难忘，那天傍晚就是如此。当然了，略显美中不足的是那一排排鱼贯入场、清一色身着晚宴礼服的绅士们在数量上超过女性的代表太多，整体的氛围未免显得有些过于严峻；不过话又说回来了，当年餐桌上方悬挂的那两盏巨型的枝形吊灯还是以煤气为燃料的一整个大厅因此都笼罩在一片清浅而又柔和的光晕之中——不像电气化时代以后的灯光那样亮得刺眼。在会议期间那第二次也是最后一次晚宴上一大部分来宾预计第二天用过午餐后就将动身离开——在座的来宾已经卸去了那在前几天里显而易见的大部分矜持和拘谨。不仅是闲谈更加随心和大声，我们发现斟酒的频率也显著提升。从专业的角度来看，晚宴进行得可说是相当顺畅，并无任何明显的差池；宴会临近结束之时，爵爷起身向众位宾客致辞。

他首先向在座的所有来宾表示感谢，因为在前两天的讨论当中“虽不时有令人振奋的坦率陈词”，却也始终秉持友好的精神以及乐见“善”最终获胜的意愿。他在前两天中亲眼目睹的团结一致已经远远超出了他之预期，他确信，在次日上午举行的“总结”会上，与会者必将达成充分共识，承诺各自都将在瑞士即将举行的重要国际会议之前采取有效的行动。大约正是在这个节骨眼上一我不知道他是否事先就已计划好要这么做—爵爷开始缅怀起了他的故友卡尔—海因茨·布雷曼先生。这实在是个小小的不幸，这一直都是爵爷心念系之的一个话题，而且他一提起来就会滔滔不绝地说个没完。或许有一点也该说明，即爵爷从来就不是那种可以被称为天生演说家的人，所以没过多久，整个宴会厅就响起了坐立不安的噉噉喳喳声，这表明听众们已经渐渐失去了耐心。说实话，到了爵爷终于把话讲完，敦请诸位来宾全体起立为“欧洲的和平与正义”而干杯之时，那种嘈杂的程度—或许也是大家尽兴畅饮的结果—在我看来已经迹近于失礼了。

众人纷纷再次落座，闲谈重又开始启动之际，突然响起一阵颇有权威性的指节敲击桌面的声音，杜邦先生已经站了起来。立刻，室内全都安静了下来。这位显赫的绅士以近乎严厉的目光环视了餐桌周围的众人一眼。然后他说：“我希望我并没有僭越在座的某位绅士所肩负的职责，不过迄今为止我还没有听到任何人提议大家共同举杯感谢我们的主人，最可敬、最仁厚的达林顿勋爵。”现场响起一阵喃喃的赞许声。杜邦先生继续道：“在过去这几天的时间里，大家在这幢府第里讲过了很多令人感兴趣的事。很多非常重要的事。”他稍作沉吟，此刻的宴会厅里一片肃静。

“有很多言论，”他继续道，“非常含蓄甚或坦率地批评—这个措辞还不算是言过其实—批评了敝国的外交政策。”他再次稍作沉吟，神色相当严峻。你也许都会以为他动怒了。“在这两天当中，我已经几次听到对于欧洲当前异常复杂的情势所做的详尽而又睿智的分析。不过恕我直言，还没有一种分析对于法国为什么会对其邻国秉持这样的态度表现出真正的理解。然而，”—他伸出一根手指—“现在不是进行此类辩论的时候。事实上，在过去的这几天当中我一直都刻意地避免参与这类辩论，因为我来到这里主要是为了倾听的。现在请容许我告诉诸位，我在这里听到的不少意见都给我留下了深刻的印象。不过诸位也许要问了，这印象到底有多么深刻呢？”杜邦先生再度稍作沉吟，以一种近乎悠闲的态度挨个儿扫视了一圈所有注视着他的面孔。最后他才继续道：“先生们—还有女士们，请原谅—对此我已进行过反复的思考，我希望借此机会推心置腹地跟诸位交个底：尽

管对于如何解读欧洲目前的真实现状，我本人与在座的诸位之间仍然存在着分歧，尽管如此，对于大家在这次会议中所提出的要旨，我深为信服，先生们，既为其正义性又为其务实性而深深信服。”一阵既宽慰而又欢欣的喃喃低语传遍了餐桌周围，可是这时杜邦先生却稍稍提高了嗓音，压过这阵窃窃私语继续道：“我很高兴向在座的诸位做出保证，我保证竭尽个人的绵薄之力，努力促成法国政策的重心之改变，以期符合本次会议的多数意见。而且我将赶在瑞士会议之前及早地采取行动。”

宴会厅里响起了阵阵掌声，我看到爵爷跟大卫爵士交换了一个眼色。杜邦先生举起手来，不知道是表示接受还是阻止大家的掌声。

“不过在我接下来向我们的主人达林顿勋爵表示感谢之前，我还有件小事不吐不快，希望能在此一抒胸臆。诸位也许有人会说，在餐桌上把自己胸臆中的东西吐出来可是有些失礼之举。”这句话引来了热情的欢笑。“不过我在这类事情上一直都是直言不讳的。这就像一定要正式地、公开地向达林顿勋爵表示感激之情一样，是他将我们召集到这里，并使得目前这种团结一致、友好善意的精神成为可能的；同样，我也相信一定要公开地谴责任何跑到这儿来滥用主人的殷勤好客，一门心思只想着散布不满和猜疑的宵小之辈。这种人不但在社交场合令人厌恶，在我们现今的社会气候之下更是极端危险的。”他再次稍作沉吟，整个宴会厅里再次鸦雀无声。杜邦先生继续语气平静、从容不迫地道：“对于刘易斯先生我只有一事不明：他那令人憎恶的行径在多大程度上代表了美国当局的态度？女士们、先生们，那就请容我斗胆一猜吧，因为对于这样一位几天来已经充分地展现出其欺诈水准之高的绅士，我们是没办法指望他能给我们提供一个诚实的答案的。所以，我也就只能姑且一猜了。当然了，如果德国不再继续赔款，美国自然会很关心我们对其债务的偿付能力。不过在过去这半年当中，我也曾有机会跟不少位高权重的美国人士直接讨论过这个问题，依我看来，该国对这一问题的看法要远比他们这位在座的同胞所代表的观点高瞻远瞩得多。我们所有这些关心欧洲未来福祉的人尽可以放宽心，因为事实上刘易斯先生现在的影响力——我们该怎么表述呢？——已经是今非昔比了。您也许会觉得我这么丝毫不肯假以辞色未免过于不近人情，但事实上，女士们、先生们，我已经算得上是仁至义尽了。您瞧，我并没有把这位绅士一直以来对我说的那些话原样搬出来——关于在座的每一位。他所说的那些话，其技巧是如此拙劣低能，其态度是如此厚颜无耻，其内容是如此粗鄙下流，简直令人难以

置信。不过谴责的话已经说够了，该是我们表示感谢的时候了。那就请跟我一起，女士们、先生们，我们一起举杯敬达林顿勋爵。”

杜邦先生在讲这番话的过程中，一直都不曾朝刘易斯先生的方向看过一眼，也确实，大家在向爵爷敬酒致谢、再次落座后，目光也似乎全都刻意地避免朝那位美国绅士看去。一种令人难堪的沉默一度笼罩了宴会现场，然后刘易斯先生终于站起身来。他的脸上仍习惯性地堆满了亲切的笑容。

“喔，既然每个人都发表了讲话，我不妨也来说上两句，”他说道，听他的声音明显是已经喝得很不少了。“对于我们的法国朋友刚才的那一番无稽之谈，我没什么话好说。对那样的言论我根本就不屑于理会。有多少人都曾妄图将此谰言强加到我头上，我见得多了，但让我来告诉诸位吧，先生们，这也不过是枉费心机。枉费心机罢了。”刘易斯先生突然停住了话头，一时间似乎不知该如何接下去才好了。终于他又笑了笑，继续道：“如我所说的，我不会再在我们那位法国朋友身上浪费时间了。不过事有凑巧，我倒确实还有几句话想说。既然我们现在都这么坦诚相见了，我也就实话实说吧。你们在座的诸位先生，恕我直言，你们全都不过是一群幼稚的梦想家罢了。你们要是不这么一门心思地想着掺和影响全球的那些重大事务的话，你们其实还都挺有魅力的。就拿我们这位善良的东道主来说吧。他是何等样人呢？他是位绅士。这一点我相信在座的没有任何人会反对的。一位典型的英国绅士。正派，诚实，用心良苦。可是这位爵爷却是个外行。”他在这个字眼上面略作停顿，并且环顾了一下众人。“他是个外行，而如今的国际事务已经轮不到这些外行的绅士们插手了。这一点，你们这些欧洲人越早明白越好。诸位在座的为人正派、用心良苦的绅士大人们，让我问你们一句，你们知道你们周围的这个世界正在变成什么样子吗？你们可以出于你们那高贵的本性治国理政的日子已经一去不复返了。只不过当然啦，你们这些欧洲人似乎都还没有意识到这一点。像我们善良的主人这样的绅士仍旧相信，他们就该去瞎掺和那些他们根本就不懂的事务。这两天以来，在这儿说了多少蠢话和废话。用心良苦、天真幼稚的蠢话和废话。你们这些欧洲人需要专业人士来掌管你们的事务。你们如果仍旧执迷不悟，很快你们就要大难临头了。举杯吧，先生们。让我们一起举杯一敬专业精神。”

现场一阵惊愕，寂然无声，没有一个人动弹。刘易斯先生耸了耸肩膀，举起酒杯向所有人照了一圈，一饮而尽，坐了回去。达林顿勋爵几乎马上就站了起来。

“我本不希望，”爵爷道，“在我们这济济一堂的最后一个夜晚陷入无谓的争执当中，因为这是个欢庆胜利的时刻，大家本该好好享受一下的。不过正是出于对您这种观点的尊重，刘易斯先生，我感觉就更不应该把它当作某个街头怪人的演说那样置之不理了。让我这么说吧：您所谓的‘外行’，先生，我想在座的大多数人更愿意称之为‘荣誉’。”

这番话引来了一阵响亮的赞许声，夹杂着几句“听听，听听”的感叹声以及几声鼓掌和喝彩。

“更重要的是，先生，”爵爷继续道，“我相信我很清楚您所谓的‘专业精神’指的是什么。它指的无非是通过欺骗和操纵的手段来为所欲为。它指的无非是依照自己的贪欲和利益来排定轻重缓急，而绝非是为了看到善良与正义在世界上获得胜利。如果这就是您所谓的‘专业精神’，先生，我实在是有些嗤之以鼻，巴不得对它敬而远之呢。”

这一席话赢得了迄今为止最为热烈的赞许声，继之以热情而又持久的鼓掌和喝彩。我看到刘易斯先生冲着自己的酒杯微微一笑，萎靡不振地摇了摇头。也正是在这个时候，我觉察到第一男仆来到我身边，附耳对我悄声道：“肯顿小姐想跟您说句话，先生。她就在门外。”

我尽可能小心翼翼地悄悄退出，因为爵爷仍然站在那儿，正在发表进一步的看法。

肯顿小姐一脸忧色。“令尊的情况非常危急，史蒂文斯先生，”她说。“我已经派人去请梅雷迪思大夫了，不过据我所知他可能要稍微耽搁一会儿。”

我的面色想必是有些摸不着头脑，因为肯顿小姐又接着道：“史蒂文斯先生，他的情况真的非常不好。您最好是去看看他。”

“我只能抽出一点点时间。先生们随时都有可能离席前往吸烟室。”

“当然。不过您现在务必要去一趟，史蒂文斯先生，要不然事后您也许会追悔莫及的。”

肯顿小姐已经在头前领路了，我们急匆匆地穿过府第，朝家父那个小阁楼上的房间奔去。莫蒂默太太，我们的厨娘，正站在家父的床头，身上的围裙都没摘。

“哦，史蒂文斯先生，”我们一进来她就道，“他已经快不行了。”

确实，家父的脸色已经变成了一种暗红色，我还从没见过哪个活人有过这样的面色。我听见肯顿小姐在我身后轻声说：“他的脉搏非常弱了。”我凝视了家父一会儿，轻轻摸了一下他的额头，然后就把手抽了回来。

“依我看，”莫蒂默太太道，“他是中风了。我这辈子亲眼看到过两次中风，我想他是中风了。”说着，她就哭了起来。我注意到她身上散发出浓烈的煎炸和烧烤的气味。我转过身对肯顿小姐道：

“这太让人难过了。可是，我现在必须回到楼下去了。”

“当然，史蒂文斯先生。大夫到的时候我会告诉您的。或者出现任何变故的时候。”

“谢谢您，肯顿小姐。”

我匆忙来到楼下，及时地赶上了绅士们正开始移师到吸烟室。几位男仆一看到我也似乎松了一口气，我马上示意他们各就各位。

不管在我暂时离开期间宴会厅里到底发生过什么，反正现在的客人当中洋溢着的是种货真价实的欢庆气氛。在整个吸烟室里，绅士们三五成群地站在一起，全都有说有笑，相互拍着对方的肩膀。刘易斯先生，据我判断，已经告退回自己的房间去了。我穿梭于诸位宾客之间，托盘上摆着一个装满波尔图葡萄酒的酒壶。我刚为一位绅士斟了一杯，一个声音在我背后说：“啊，史蒂文斯，你对鱼儿也感兴趣的，你说过。”

我转身，发现是小卡迪纳尔先生正对我笑逐颜开。我也微微一笑，说：“鱼儿，先生？”

“我小时候曾在鱼缸里养过各个品种的热带鱼。简直可以称得上个小水族馆了。我说，史蒂文斯，你没事吧？”

我又笑了笑。“我挺好的，谢谢您，先生。”

“你说得很是，我真该春天的时候再到这儿来一趟。那时候的达林顿府肯定美极了。上次我来这儿的时候，我想也是在冬天。我说，史蒂文斯，你确定你没事吗？”

“我好端端的，谢谢您，先生。”

“不是身体有什么不舒服吧？”

“绝对不是，先生。我暂且告退了。”

我又继续为他们几位客人斟酒。我背后爆发出一阵响亮的笑声，我听到那位比利时神职人员兴奋地嚷道：“这可真是异端邪说！绝对是异端邪说！”然后自己又放声大笑。我感觉有什么东西碰了一下我的胳膊肘，转身发现是达林顿勋爵。

“史蒂文斯，你没事吧？”

“没事，先生。我很好。”

“你看起来好像哭了。”

我笑了笑，掏出手帕迅速地擦了擦脸。“非常抱歉，先生。是劳累了一天，太紧张了。”

“是呀，确实够累的。”

有人跟爵爷讲话，他转过身去作答。我正准备继续四处走动侍酒的时候，透过敞开的房门看到了肯顿小姐，她正朝我点头示意。我就穿过人群朝门口走去，可是还没到门口，杜邦先生就拉了一下我的胳膊。

“管家，”他说，“不知道你能不能帮我找些干净的绷带过来。我的脚又受不了了。”

“好的，先生。”

我继续朝门口走去的时候，意识到杜邦先生就跟在我后头。我转过身对他说：“我会过来找您的，先生，一拿到绷带就马上过来。”

“请快一点，管家。真有点疼。”

“好的，先生。非常抱歉，先生。”

肯顿小姐仍然站在门厅里我第一次看到她的地方。我一出来，她就默不作声地朝楼梯走去，奇怪的是举动中又没有一点着急的意思。然后她才转过身来对我说：“史蒂文斯先生，我深感遗憾。令尊在大约四分钟以前过世了。”

“我知道了。”

她看了看她的手，然后又抬眼看着我的脸。“史蒂文斯先生，我深感遗憾，”她说。然后又补充道：“真希望我能说些什么。”

“不必了，肯顿小姐。”

“梅雷迪思大夫还没有到。”她低下头好一阵子，忍不住迸发出一声啜泣。不过她几乎马上就控制住了自己，声音沉着地问：“您想上去看看他吗？”

“我眼下实在是太忙了，肯顿小姐。过一会儿再说吧。”

“这样的话，史蒂文斯先生，您允许我为他合上眼睛吗？”

“如果您肯的话，我将感激不尽，肯顿小姐。”

她开始走上楼梯，但我又叫住她，跟她说：“肯顿小姐，请别把我此刻不肯马上上楼去为家父送终看作不近人情之举。您知道，我相信家父也会希望我现在履行好自己的职责。”

“当然，史蒂文斯先生。”

“否则的话，我感觉，反而会让他感到失望。”

“当然，史蒂文斯先生。”

我转过身，那装着波尔图葡萄酒的酒壶仍旧在我的托盘里，重又回到了吸烟室。在那个相对狭小的房间里，就像是出现了一片由黑色的晚宴礼服、灰白的头发和雪茄烟雾组成的森林。我在这帮绅士们当中缓步前进，寻找需要添酒的酒杯。杜邦先生拍了拍我的肩膀说：

“管家，我的事情你关照过没有？”

“我很抱歉，先生，可是眼下还没办法立刻为您提供帮助。”

“你这是什么意思，管家？你们的医疗用品都用光了吗？”

“实际的情况是，先生，有位大夫正往这儿赶。”

“啊，太好了！你已经叫了大夫来了。”

“是的，先生。”

“好，很好。”

杜邦先生重新回到他跟旁人的谈话中，我则继续在房间里转悠了一段时间。其间，那位德国伯爵夫人突然从男人堆里冒了出来，我还没来得及为她斟酒，她就自己拿起酒壶给自己倒了些波尔图。

“你得替我夸奖一下你们的厨娘，史蒂文斯，”她说。

“当然，夫人。谢谢您，夫人。”

“还有你和你的团队也表现得非常出色。”

“非常感谢您，夫人。”

“在晚宴进行当中，史蒂文斯，我一度还当真以为你至少一下子变成了三个人呢，”她说得开心地笑了起来。

我马上也报以一笑，说：“我很高兴能为您效劳，夫人。”

一会儿以后，我看到小卡迪纳尔先生就在不远处，还是独自一人站在那里，我猛然想到，这位年轻的绅士置身于这么一大群显赫的人物当中可能会有些畏畏缩缩的。反正他手里的酒杯也已经空了，我于是朝他走了过去。他看到我过来显得非常高兴，立刻把酒杯朝前一递。

“我想，你热爱大自然是件极好的事，史蒂文斯，”他在我给他斟酒的时候说道。“我敢说，达林顿勋爵有你这么一位行家里手帮他督促园丁的工作，也真是一大福气。”

“您说什么，先生？”

“大自然呀，史蒂文斯。那天我们不是一直都在谈论大自然的神奇奥妙吗？我非常同意你的看法，面对我们周围的这些伟大的奇迹，我们都未免太过沾沾自喜了。”

“是的，先生。”

“我的意思是说，你看看我们整天谈论的都是些什么。合约啦，疆界啦，赔款啦，占领啦。而大自然母亲却一直都以她美好的方式生生不息。这么想问题的话确实挺可笑的，你说是不是？”

“是的，确实是这样，先生。”

“我有时在想啊，如果万能的上帝将我们都创造成为一呃一某种植物什么的，是不是会更好一些？你知道，全都牢牢地扎根在土壤当中。这么一来，像战争啊，疆界啊之类的这些鬼话岂不从一开始就根本不会出现了吗？”

这位年轻的绅士似乎觉得这是个很有趣儿的想法。他笑了笑，又想了想，又笑了笑。我也和他一起笑了笑。然后他用胳膊肘轻轻捅了捅我说：“你能想象得出吗，史蒂文斯？”然后又笑了起来。

“是的，先生，”我也笑着说，“那将成为一个最为奇特的替代性选择。”

“可是我们仍旧需要像你这样的伙计来回地传递口信、端茶倒水什么的。要不然，我们又怎么能办成任何一件事呢？你能想象得出吗，史蒂文斯？我们全都扎根于土壤中？你想象一下！”

正在这时，一个男仆出现在我身后。“肯顿小姐想跟您说句话，先生，”他说。

我跟卡迪纳尔先生告了罪，朝门口走去。我注意到杜邦先生显然一直就守在门边，看到我走近了，他就问我：“管家，大夫到了吗？”

“我正要出去看看，先生。我马上就回来。”

“我真是有点疼。”

“我很抱歉，先生。大夫应该很快就到了。”

这一次杜邦先生就干脆跟着我走了出去。肯顿小姐又一次站在门厅里候着。

“史蒂文斯先生，”她说，“梅雷迪思大夫已经到了，现在到楼上去了。”

她是特意压低了声音说的，可是我身后的杜邦先生却马上大声叫道：“啊，太好了！”

我转身对他道：“那就请您随我来吧，先生。”

我把他领进弹子房，他在一把皮椅子上坐下来开始脱鞋子的时候，我赶紧把壁炉里的火拨旺。

“很抱歉这里实在有点冷，先生。大夫马上就会过来了。”

“谢谢你，管家。你做得很到位。”

肯顿小姐仍在门厅里等着我，我们俩默不作声地一起穿过整个府第。来到父亲的房间，发现梅雷迪思大夫正在做着一些记录，莫蒂默太太哭得很伤心。围裙还在她身上，显然她一直就是拿它来擦眼泪的；结果弄得她脸上尽是一道道油渍，她那副模样简直就像是在参加一场假扮黑人的滑稽说唱秀。我原本以为房间里肯定会弥漫着死亡的气息，但是拜莫蒂默太太一或者是她的围裙所赐，房间里居然一股子烧烤味儿。

梅雷迪思大夫起身对我说：“请节哀顺变，史蒂文斯。令尊发作的是一次严重的中风。他应该没有遭受太多的痛苦，这也算是不幸中的万幸。他这个病你无论做什么都已经无能为力了。”

“谢谢您，先生。”

“我这就走了。你会安排好一切后事吧？”

“是的，先生。不过如果方便的话，楼下有一位最为尊贵的绅士还需要您的诊治。”

“紧急吗？”

“他表达了迫切需要见到您的愿望，先生。”

我领梅雷迪思大夫下去，带他来到弹子房，然后立刻又返回了吸烟室，那里的气氛如果说有什么不同的话，就是已经变得越发欢快友好了。

当然了，绝不应该由我来暗示，我已经配得上跟我同辈的比如说马歇尔或是莱恩先生一样，跻身于“伟大”的管家之列了——虽然也不应讳言，确有很多人或许是出于谬赏之意，过于慷慨地倾向于如此认为。请容我澄清一下，当我说一九二三年的那次会议，尤其是那个夜晚在我的职业发展进程中构成了一个转折点的时候，我主要是以我自己那远为卑微的标准来衡量的。即便如此，如果您能考虑到那一晚我所承受的那些不可预料的压力，倘若我斗胆认为我在面对一切意外情况时，也许的确表现出了至少是某种程度上的“尊严”素质——这种素质只有像马歇尔先生，或者实事求是地说，像家父这样的管家才能具备的，您或许不会认为我是过于自欺了吧？的确，我又何必要惺惺作态呢？那一晚诚然会有种种令人悲痛的联想，但每忆及此，我发现一种巨大的成就感总会油然而生。

(1) 西俗通常只有长对幼、上对下，或熟识的朋友间才会直呼其名（教名），否则应称呼对方的姓氏以示客气。

(2) 凯恩斯（John Maynard Keynes, 1883—1946），英国经济学家、凯恩斯主义创始人，认为失业和经济危机的原因在于有效需求的不足，主张国家干预经济生活并管理通货，主要著作有《就业、利息和货币通论》等。

(3) 威尔斯（Herbert George Wells, 1866—1946），英国作家，主要作品有科学幻想小说《时间机器》和《星际战争》、社会问题小说《基普斯》、《托诺—邦盖》以及历史著作《世界史纲》等。

(4) 第一次世界大战结束后，一九一九年六月二十八日，协约国与德国在法国凡尔赛宫签署《凡尔赛和约》（Treaty of Versailles），于一九二〇年一月十日生效。一九一八

年十月德国政府请求美国总统威尔逊协调停战时，宣称接受威尔逊提出的十四点精神作为公平合约的基础。但协约国要求“德国赔偿一切从陆海空入侵协约国时对人民及其财产所造成的损失”。条约是一九一九年春巴黎和会时起草的，当时的决策者为“四大领袖”：英国首相劳合·乔治、法国总理克列孟梭、美国总统威尔逊和意大利总理奥兰多，前三人事实上握有决定权。战败国根本无权过问条约内容，其他协约国也只起配角作用。条约规定，德国的人口和领土均减少百分之十，德国的海外殖民地全部被瓜分。条约起草时，很难计算德国人赔偿损失的精确数字，尤其是对法国和比利时的赔款。到一九二一年，有一专门机构估定德国民众的损失总额为三百三十亿美元。尽管当时的经济学家认为筹集此项巨款势必扰乱国际金融秩序，协约国仍坚持要德国赔款。条约还规定，如果德国拖欠款项，协约国可以采取惩罚措施。四大领袖，尤其是克列孟梭，希望确保德国永远不会对世界造成军事威胁。和约包括许多这样的细则条款，比如德军人数不得超过十万，撤销总参谋部；禁止制造装甲车、坦克、潜水艇、飞机和毒气；只指定少量工厂生产武器弹药；拆除莱茵河以东五十公里内的一切堡垒和工事。《凡尔赛和约》遭到德国人的强烈反对，他们认为合约是强加给他们的，这与十四点精神背道而驰，认为合约要他们做出破坏德国经济的难以忍受的牺牲。《凡尔赛和约》在被批准后的几年间做出了不少有利于德国的修改。许多历史学家认为苛刻的合约以及后来对其条款的不认真执行，实际上为二十世纪三十年代德国军国主义的兴起铺平了道路。

第二天一傍晚

莫蒂默池塘，多塞特郡

看来，对于“怎样才算得上一个‘伟大’的管家”这个问题，似乎还有很大的一个维度迄今为止我还没有好好地思考过。对于这样一个如此心念系之，尤其是这些年来我已经反复思考过的问题，意识到这一点，不得不说真让我颇为忐忑不安。现在想来，我当初对于海斯协会有关其会员资格之规定的某些方面嗤之以鼻，或许是有些操之过急了。请先允许我解释清楚，我并无意收回自己对于“尊严”及其与“伟大”之间关键联系的个人观点。不过，我不免对于海斯协会的另一项规定做了些更为审慎的思考——亦即其公开承认加入协会的先决条件之一是“申请者须服务于显赫门庭”。我现在的感觉跟当初并无二致，仍旧认为这表现了该协会的一种不假思索的势利心态。不过，我现在想到，我所特别反对的或许只是他们对于何为“显赫门庭”的过时理解，而非其中所表达的一般原则。确实，在进一步对此问题进行一番思考以后，我相信，“伟大”的先决条件是“须服务于显赫门庭”这种说法本身也许确有其道理——只要对于“显赫”的理解比海斯协会的认识更加深入即可。

事实上，只要将我对于“显赫门庭”可能的诠释与海斯协会对它的理解做一比较，则我相信就能极为鲜明地体现出我们这一代与上一代管家在价值观上的根本差异。我这么说，不仅是想请您注意到这样一个事实，即我们这一辈对于雇主到底是地产贵族还是“经商致富”的态度已经没有那么势利了。我想说的是一我并不认为这种说法有失公允——我们是远比上一代更加理想主义的一代。我们的老辈更加关心的或许是雇主是不是有封号的贵族，或者是否出身于“旧”族，而我们更在意的则是雇主的道德地位。我这么说的意思并不是指我们一心瞩目于雇主的私人行为，我的意思是我们更加热切地希望效力于那些——可以这么说——其作为正在促进人类进步的绅士，这一追求在上一代看来想必是颇不寻常的。打个比方说，我们宁肯效力于像乔治·凯特里奇先生这样尽管出身卑微，却为大英帝国未来的福祉做出过无可争辩之卓越贡献的绅士，而不愿意侍奉那些虽有显赫的贵族出身，却只会把光阴虚掷在俱乐部和高尔夫球场上的老爷们。

当然，在实际中，很多出身于最高贵家族的绅士一直都有着致力于缓解当前面临之重大难题的传统，所以乍看之下，我们这代人的抱

负可能表现得与我们的先辈也并无多大差异。不过我敢断言，在态度上还是有根本之不同的，这种不同不仅表现在业内的同行相互间热衷于传达的种种话题，更反映在我们这一代中的众多翘楚人物在职位去留方面做出的选择上。做出这类决定所考虑的已不仅仅是所得薪水的高低、手下员工的多寡或者雇主门庭的显赫与否了；对我们这代人而言，我们职业声望的高低最根本地取决于我们雇主道德价值的高下，我感觉这不失为一种公允的说法。

我相信，借助形象化的比喻方式可以最为鲜明地突出这两代人之间的不同。可以这么说，家父那一代管家更倾向于将世界看成是一架梯子——王室成员、公爵以及出身最古老世家的勋爵们居于顶端位置，那些“新贵”阶层等而次之，以此类推，直到降到一个基准点，基准点之下的层级就全由财富的多寡甚或有无来确定了。任何一位有雄心有抱负的管家只管竭尽全力往这架梯子顶上爬就是了，总的说来，爬得越高，其职业声望也就越大。这当然也正是海斯协会那套“显赫门庭”的观念所体现出来的价值观，而迟至一九二九年该协会还在大言不惭地公开发表此类声明，这一事实本身就已清楚不过地说明为什么其灭亡是不可避免的，甚至早就该到来的了。因为到了那个时候，这样的想法已经完全跟不上我们这个行业中涌现出来的佼佼者的观念了。对于我们这代人而言，这个世界已经不再是一架梯子，而更像是一个轮子了，我相信这种说法还是相当准确的。或许我该进一步做些解释。

在我的印象中，是我们这代人最先认识到了前几代人全都忽略了一个事实：即世界上的那些重大的决定事实上并不是在公共议事厅里，或者在会期只有寥寥数日又完全置于公众和新闻界关注之下的某个国际会议上做出的。更多的情况下，那些关键性的决定反倒是在国内那些隐秘而又幽静的豪宅里经过讨论、进行权衡后做出的。在众目睽睽之下伴以无比盛大的排场和典礼所发生的一切，经常不过是执行在这样的豪宅内部经过几周甚或几个月的时间达成的决议，或只是对其进行官方的认可。因此在我们看来，这世界就是个轮子，以这些豪门巨宅为轴心而转动，由他们做出的那些重大决策向外辐射到所有围着他们转的人，不论穷人还是富人。我们所有这些拥有职业抱负的人，莫不竭尽所能以尽量靠近这个轴心为志向。因为正如我说，我们是充满理想主义的一代人，对我们来说，问题并不是简单地在多大程度上发挥出了我之所能，而是以我之所能达至了何种结果；我们每个人都怀抱着这样的渴望，愿为创造一个更加美好的世界略尽绵薄，做

出贡献；我们也都认识到，身在我们这一行，要想做到这一点，最可靠的途径就是效命于那些肩负着当代文明重任的伟大的士绅。

当然了，我这么说不过是最为宽泛地概而论之，我乐于承认，我们这一代中有太多人根本就没耐心去做这样深入的思考。反而言之，我敢肯定家父那一代当中也有很多人出于本能，已经意识到了他们的工作的这一“道德”维度。不过总的来说，我相信我这些概括还是准确无误的，而且我所描述的这种“理想主义的”动机至少在我个人的职业生涯中，确实起到了至关重要的作用。在我职业生涯的早期，我曾动不动就更换雇主——就是因为意识到那些环境全都无法给我带来持久的满足感——总算是天道酬勤，一直到有机会效命于达林顿勋爵我才终于安顿下来。

说也奇怪，我是直到今天才头一次从这个角度来考虑问题的；的确，当初我们在仆役大厅里围炉夜话的时候，曾花了那么多时间来讨论“伟大”的本质，像格雷厄姆先生这样杰出的管家和我都从来没有考虑到在这个问题当中还有这样的一整个维度。尽管我不会收回之前我对于“尊严”的特质所发表的任何观点，但我必须承认对于这一论题应该附加一个补充条款，即无论一位管家已在多大程度上具备了这样的素质，如果他未能成功地找到一个适当的通道来将他的成就发挥出来，他也很难期望同行们能够认可他的“伟大”。当然，我们也注意到像马歇尔和莱恩先生这样的人物，他们都只效命于那些其道德地位毫无争议的绅士——韦克林勋爵、坎伯利勋爵、伦纳德·格雷爵士——你未免会得到这样的印象，即他们是不会屈身侍奉那些成色不足的绅士的。确实，这个问题你越想就越明显：隶属于一个真正的显赫门庭确是达至“伟大”的先决条件。一个“伟大的”管家肯定只能是那种人：他在指点自己多年的服务生涯时能够自豪地说，他已经将他的全副才能用以服务一位伟大的绅士了——而通过这样的一位绅士，他也等于是服务了全人类。

我说过，这些年来我居然从来没有从这样的角度考虑过这个问题；不过话又说回来了，或许正是难得地出门进行这样一次旅行，才促使我对于这个我本以为早就彻彻底底思考清楚了的题目产生了如此出乎意料的新鲜观点。而且大约一个钟头之前发生的一个小状况想必也起到了推波助澜的作用，促使我沿着这样的思路来思考问题——我得承认，这个小状况还颇使我担了不小的心。

我在极为宜人的天气中心情愉快地开了一上午的车，然后又在一个乡村小酒馆里享用了一顿丰盛的午餐。但在刚驶入多塞特郡不久，

我就觉察到从汽车引擎那儿发出了一种过热的气味。一想到我可能对主人的福特车造成了某种损害，我当然吓得不敢，赶快就把车停了下来。

我发现自己正处在一条狭窄的小路当中，小路的两侧全都被繁茂的林木遮了个严实，很难看清周围的情况。往前也看不远，因为那条小路在前方大约二十码的地方就拐了个大弯。我意识到我不能在这儿长时间停留，因为如果前方有车转过那个弯道，弄不好就会跟我主人的福特车撞个正着。于是我又重新发动了引擎，发觉这次的气味已经没有先前那么强烈了，这才稍稍安了一下心。

我知道最好的办法是找一家修车行，或者是找一家绅士的大宅，宅里极有可能找到能看得出毛病出在哪里的司机。可是那条小路继续蜿蜒了不短的距离，道路两旁高大的树篱也一直都不曾间断，很大程度上挡住了我的视线，所以尽管我经过了几户人家的大门，有的院内明显是有车道的，我却一直都没办法瞥见里面的宅第。我又开了约莫半英里远，那恼人的气味已经是越来越浓了，这才终于摆脱了那条小路，开上了一段乡村的主干道路。我看到前方的不远处，没错，就在我的左侧，隐约浮现出一幢高大的维多利亚时代的宅第，宅前有一大片草坪，还有一条显然是由旧的马车道改造而成的汽车道。当我驶近那幢大宅时，我就更是大受鼓舞了，因为主建筑附设的车库大门敞开着，里面赫然停着一辆宾利汽车。

宅第的大门也敞开着，我于是将福特车沿着车道开了一小段，下车朝宅第的后门走去。开门的是个只穿了件衬衣的男人，也没有系领带，不过我在向他打听府上的司机时，他开心地回答说我“一下子就中了头彩”。听我描述了一下问题以后，他大步流星地来到福特车前，打开引擎盖只查看了几秒钟的时间就跟我说：“水，您哪。您的散热器里得加点水啦。”他貌似对这整个状况感到非常好笑，不过又很热心帮忙；他回到屋里去，不一会就提着一壶水和一个漏斗回来了。他在把散热器灌满的过程中，头低在引擎上方，开始亲切地跟我闲聊起来，知道我正驾车在这一区域旅行以后，他向我推荐了当地的一处美景，是个距此不过半英里远的池塘。

趁着这个工夫，我也好好观察了一下这幢大宅；宅子的高度要大于其宽度，有四层楼高，正立面几乎爬满了常春藤，一路都爬到了顶端的山墙上。可是透过窗户往里看去，却发现至少有一半的房间里都蒙着防尘布。一等那个人给散热器加满了水，重新盖好引擎盖，我就跟他说起了这件事。

“真是可惜啊，”他说。“这是幢很招人喜欢的老房子。实际情况是上校打算把它给卖了。他现在也是用不着这么大的房子了。”

我忍不住向他打听这里一共雇了多少人，听他说就只有他一个人，再有就是一个厨子每天傍晚过来做做饭的时候，我也并没有感到吃惊。看起来他是身兼管家、贴身男仆、司机和清洁工于一身了。他在大战期间曾是上校的勤务兵，他解释道：德军入侵比利时的时候他跟上校正在那里，协约国联军登陆时他跟上校也躬逢其盛。之后他又仔细地打量了我一番，这才说：

“现在我才明白了。一开始我还没看出来，不过现在我弄明白了。您就是他们说的那种顶尖级别的大管家。是那种名门贵族的大宅门里出来的。”

我跟他说话也不算离谱以后，他又继续道：

“现在我算是明白了。一时间我还没看出来，您瞧，因为您说起话来十足就像个绅士。而且您还开着这么辆漂亮的古董车，”——他朝那辆福特做了个手势——“一开始我还想，哟，来了位货真价实的贵族老爷子。这就对啦，您哪。真是上流社会的做派，我是说。我还从来都没真正领教过呢，您瞧。我不过就是个退了伍的老勤务兵。”

然后他又问我受雇于哪户人家，我跟他说了以后，他侧着头，脸上露出好奇的神情。

“达林顿府，”他自语道。“达林顿府。肯定是个上流社会的人家，就连在下这样的白痴听着都觉得耳熟。达林顿府。等等，您说的不会就是达林顿勋爵的那个达林顿府吧？”

“以前确实是达林顿勋爵的府第，直到三年前爵爷逝世，”我告诉他。“如今是约翰·法拉戴先生的住处了，他是位美国绅士。”

“您在那样的地方工作，那就肯定是顶尖级别的大管家无疑啦。像您这样的如今剩下来的可不多了吧，呃？”然后他在问的时候语气明显有了变化。“您是说，您当真曾为那位达林顿勋爵工作过？”

他再次细细地打量了我一番。我说：

“哦，不是，我是受雇于约翰·法拉戴先生的，就是那位从达林顿家族手里买下那幢宅第的美国绅士。”

“喔，那您就不大可能认识那位达林顿勋爵了。我只是很好奇他到底什么样子。他是个什么样的人。”

我告诉那人我得上路了，郑重地感谢了他的热心帮助。他可真是个可亲可爱的小伙子，不厌其烦地引导我把车倒出大门，分别前，他俯下身再次推荐我去参观一下当地的那个池塘，反复告诉我该怎么到那儿去。

“那是个很美的小地方，”他补充道。“要是错过了你肯定会后悔的。事实上，上校这会子就正在那儿钓鱼呢。”

福特车确乎又回到了最佳状态，既然那个池塘离我预定的线路并不远，只需稍微绕一下，我就决定从善如流，采纳那位勤务兵的建议。他的指示听起来原本挺清楚的，可是我一旦离开了主干道，打算照他的指示往那儿开，我就发现自己在那些狭窄而又曲里拐弯的小路上迷了路，那些小路就跟之前我第一次闻到那令人心焦的气味时的路段非常相似。有时候道路两旁的树木是如此浓密，几乎完全把阳光给遮住了，于是我的眼睛就不得不努力地去适应明亮的阳光与阴暗的浓荫之间的强烈反差。不过在经过一番搜寻之后，我终于还是找到了那个指向“莫蒂默池塘”的路标，于是在半个多钟头前，我顺利抵达了这个景点。

此刻我觉得自己真该深深地感激那位勤务兵，因为除了帮我修好了车以外，他还让我发现了这么一个万分迷人的所在，要是没有他，我是绝不可能找到这儿来的。池塘并不大一周长估计不过四分之一英里左右一只要站在任何一个突起的位置，它的全景你都可以尽收眼底。这里弥漫着一种异常静谧的气氛。池塘周遭遍植树木，其密度恰好能为池畔提供宜人的荫蔽，这里那里一丛丛高高的芦苇和香蒲钻出水面，也打破了那静止不动的天光云影。我脚上的鞋子颇不便于我绕着池畔走上一圈一从我现在坐着的位置就能看到池畔的小径逐渐没入了一片片深深的泥泞中一不过我要说，一见之下这正是此地风景的魅力所在，我真想踩着泥泞走上那么一圈。只有在想到这样一番探险可能导致的灾难性后果，想到这么一来我身上这套旅行服装就要毁于一旦了，我这才按捺住这一时的冲动，退而求其次地满足于坐在这条长凳上静静地欣赏。半个钟头过去了，我就这么坐在这里，静观池畔各个位置静坐垂钓者的进展。从我坐的那个位置，我大约能看到十来位钓客，不过那强烈的日光再加上低垂的枝柯形成的树荫却让我无法看清楚他们当中的任何一位，于是我也不得不放弃之前期望着不妨一试的那个小游戏：猜测哪位钓客有可能是刚刚帮了我一个大忙的那幢宅第的主人一那位退役的上校。

无疑，正是周遭环境的清幽使我能够更为全面透彻地细细思考这半个多钟头以来进入我思绪的那些念头。的确，要不是周围的这份静谧，我也不太可能再细细去咂摸跟那位勤务兵邂逅以后我自己的言行举止。也即，我为什么要给人留下我从未受雇于达林顿勋爵这样一个明确的印象。因为毋庸置疑，方才发生的情形确实是这样的。他问我：“您是说，您当真曾为那位达林顿勋爵工作过？”而我给出的回答只能被理解为我并没有为爵爷工作过。当时我也可能只是突发奇想，并无深意——不过对于如此明显的怪异举动，这恐怕很难说是个令人信服的解释。因为不管怎么说，我现在都得承认，像是跟勤务兵之间发生的类似的小插曲，这已经并非是一遭了；虽说我对其性质还没有明确的认识，不过这个小插曲无疑跟几个月前威克菲尔德夫妇来访期间发生的那件事有些必然的联系。

威克菲尔德先生和太太是对美国夫妇，已经在英国——据我所知，是在肯特郡的某个地方一定居了有二十年了。因为跟法拉戴先生在波士顿的社交圈里有些共同的熟人，他们有一天就造访了达林顿府，待到用过午餐，在下午茶之前离开。那个时候法拉戴先生来到达林顿府也不过几周的时间，他对这处房产的热情正是最为高涨的时候；于是威克菲尔德夫妇来访的大部分时间都花在参观这处房产上，由我的雇主亲自带领上上下下看了一个遍，连那些罩着防尘布的区域都没放过，实在是显得没这个必要。不过，威克菲尔德夫妇对于四处探访表现出来的兴致至少跟法拉戴先生一样高涨，我在府里各处忙我工作的时候，经常会听到从他们刚刚到达的地方传来的各式各样美国人所特有的赞叹和惊呼声。法拉戴先生是带领客人从顶楼开始参观的，等他们来到底层逐一参观那些富丽堂皇的厅堂时，他已经像是坐上了一飞冲天的飞机，陶陶然、飘飘然了，不厌其烦地向客人指出檐口和窗架上那精雕细琢的细部，手舞足蹈地描述“那些英国的爵爷”在每个房间都曾做过些什么。我当然不会有意去偷听，不过从听到的一句半句当中也就知道他们谈话的大意了，我不禁为我的雇主知识面之广博而感到吃惊，其中除了偶有不尽不实之处以外，足以透露出他对英式传统和习惯的深深迷恋。值得注意的还有，威克菲尔德夫妇——尤其是威克菲尔德太太——对我国的传统其实也所知甚详，从他们的言谈话语当中可以得知，他们自己也拥有一幢颇为富丽堂皇的英式旧宅。

在那次参观探访活动的某个阶段——我从门厅那儿穿过，本以为宾主一行已经到户外参观庭院去了一发现威克菲尔德太太并没有出去，正在仔细地检视通往餐厅的那道石质的拱形门廊。我从她身边经过时，轻声道了声“请原谅，夫人”，她转过头道：

“哦，史蒂文斯，也许你能够告诉我。这座拱廊看起来像是十七世纪的，不过它难道不是相当晚近的时候才添造的吗？也许就是达林顿勋爵的时代修建的？”

“有这个可能，夫人。”

“非常美。不过它有可能是仿造时期的一个产物，其实只有几年的历史。难道不是这样吗？”

“我不能确定，夫人，不过确实有此可能。”

接着，威克菲尔德太太刻意压低嗓音道：“不过请跟我说说，史蒂文斯，这位达林顿勋爵到底是什么样子的呢？你想必肯定是为他工作过的。”

“没有，夫人，我并没有。”

“哦，我还以为你有过呢。奇怪了，我怎么会有那样的想法呢。”

威克菲尔德太太转回头去继续端详那座拱廊，把手放在那上面道：“如此说来我们是没办法确定了。不过，在我看来它还是像一件仿制品。非常精妙，但是仿造的。”

本来我可能很快就会把这次短暂的交谈完全忘掉的；然而，在威克菲尔德夫妇离开后，我把下午茶给法拉戴先生端到会客厅里的时候，却注意到他显得颇为心事重重。经过开始的一段沉默后，他说：

“你知道吗，史蒂文斯，威克菲尔德太太对这幢宅子的好感并没有我原本料想的那般强烈。”

“是吗，先生？”

“事实上，她似乎认为我夸大了这座庄园的背景和世系。认为所有那些可以追溯到几世纪前的建筑特色都是我编造出来的。”

“真的吗，先生？”

“她不断地断言每一样东西这也是‘仿造的’那也是‘仿造的’。她甚至认为连你都是‘仿造的’，史蒂文斯。”

“真的吗，先生？”

“真的，史蒂文斯。我跟她说过你是货真价实的，一位货真价实的老牌英国管家。跟她说你在这幢老宅里已经工作了三十多年，效命

于一位货真价实的英国爵爷。可是威克菲尔德太太在这一点上都敢于反驳我。事实上，她反驳我的时候显得可有把握了。”

“是吗，先生？”

“威克菲尔德太太确信，史蒂文斯，你是在被我雇定以后才到这儿来工作的。事实上，她给人的印象是这都是你亲口告诉她的。你应该能够想象，这让我显得十足像个傻瓜。”

“这真是太令人遗憾了，先生。”

“我的意思是说，史蒂文斯，这确是一幢名副其实、历史悠久的英国府第，难道不是吗？我就是为了这个才花钱买下它的。你是一位名副其实的旧式英国管家，并不是什么小男仆假装冒充的。你是货真价实的，不是吗？我想要的是真货，我得到的难道不是真货吗？”

“我敢说您得到的确实是真货，先生。”

“那么你能跟我解释一下威克菲尔德太太到底在说些什么吗？对我来说这可真是个不解之谜。”

“关于我的职业，我确实有可能对这位夫人造成了一点点误导，先生。如果由此而导致了您的难堪，我要向您郑重地道歉。”

“我得说，这确实让我很难堪。那些人现在肯定把我当成吹牛大王和骗子手了。可是，你说你有可能对她造成了‘一点点误导’，你这话到底是什么意思？”

“我深表歉意，先生。我原不知道我有可能让您这么难堪的。”

“真该死，史蒂文斯，你为什么要跟她编这么个故事呢？”

我权衡了一下当时的情势，而后说道：“我深表歉意，先生。不过我这么做是出于本国传统礼俗的考虑。”

“你到底在说些什么呀，伙计？”

“我的意思是说，先生，在英国，一个雇员随便议论他前任的雇主是不符合礼俗的行为。”

“史蒂文斯，你不希望辜负前任雇主对你的信任，这很好。但你至于离谱到空口白牙地否认在我之前就再没有为别的人工作过吗？”

“如果您要这样说的话，这确实显得有些离谱了，先生。不过对于雇员来说，给人这样的印象的确经常被认为是值得称许的。就让我这么来说吧，先生，这就有点像是婚姻方面的习惯性做法。如果一位离过婚的女士陪同她的第二任丈夫抛头露面，通常认为还是压根不要提及她的前一段婚姻更为合适。在我们这一行里，也有类似的习惯性礼俗。”

“好吧，要是我能早点知道你们有这些讲究就好了，”我的雇主说着靠回到椅背上去。“这让我看起来活像是个傻瓜。”

我相信即便就在当时，我也已经意识到我对法拉戴先生的解释——虽说，当然了，并没有全然违背事实——非常不幸，是很不充分的。不过当一个人有太多别的事情需要考虑的时候，也就很自然地不会过多地去考虑这类问题了，所以有段时间我也确实把整个儿这个插曲全都抛在了脑后。可是如今在池塘边这静谧的环境中再次回想起此事，就可以看出，那天我对威克菲尔德太太的那番举动毫无疑问跟今天下午刚刚发生的这件事是有明显的关联的。

当然了，现如今很多人对于达林顿勋爵都发表过很多无知的谬论，也许您会以为我是对自己跟爵爷的关系感到难堪或是羞耻，而正是为此才会做出了那样的举动。那就让我在此明确地予以澄清，事实绝非如此。现在人们听到的有关爵爷的传闻，其绝大多数都纯属无稽之谈，几乎没有任何事实的根据。在我看来，如果将我那古怪的举动解释为希望借此避免再次听到有关爵爷的无稽之谈，这确实倒是颇为讲得通的；也就是说，在这两次事件当中我都选择以善意的谎言予以应对，无非是为了避免不愉快的事情发生。我越想越是觉得这的确像是一个非常合理的解释；因为确实，这些日子以来最让我感到恼怒的就莫过于反复听到这种无知的谬论了。让我这么来说吧，达林顿勋爵是一位具有崇高道德地位的绅士——这种高度足以使那些传播有关他的无知谬论的绝大多数人都相形见绌——而且我非常乐意担保，他这种高度的道德感一直到他逝世都未曾有过丝毫的松懈。如果有人以为我会因为自己跟这样一位绅士的关系而感到后悔的话，那可绝对是大谬不然。事实上，您应该可以理解，在过去那么长的岁月中我都得以朝夕侍奉、亲炙爵爷，就等于是最为接近了这个世界运行的轴心，而这正是我这样的人所梦寐以求的最佳契机。我为达林顿勋爵整整服务了三十五年；如果我说在这些年间，我是真正意义上的“隶属于显赫门庭”的话，这肯定是有丝毫疑义的。回顾我迄今为止的职业生涯，我最大的满足即来自那段岁月所获得的成就，今天，对于自己居然能获得如此之殊荣，我体验到的唯有最为深切的自豪与感恩。

第三天一上午

汤顿市，萨默塞特郡

昨夜我投宿于萨默塞特郡汤顿城外不远处的一家小旅店，名叫“马车与马”。这是位于路边的一幢茅草屋顶的小村舍，在最后一线夕阳当中我来到这里的时候，从福特车内望去，那小旅店显得异常迷人。店老板领我走上一段木质楼梯，来到个小房间里，屋内陈设相当简朴却非常适用。他问我是否用过了晚餐，我就请他送一份三明治到我房间里，结果证明我这个选择虽说简单无比，却非常令人满意。不过随着夜幕的降临，我在房间里开始有点坐立不安了，最后我决定还是到楼下的酒吧里去尝一点当地的苹果酒。

总共有五六位顾客，全都聚在吧台周围——从外表看来都是干各种农活儿的一房间的其余部分还是空荡荡的。我向店老板要了一啤酒杯的苹果酒，在距离吧台有段距离的一张桌子边坐下来，打算放松一下，并且整理一下这一天来的思绪。不过没过多久我就意识到，我的出现还是干扰了那几位本地人，他们似乎觉得有必要表现一下好客之道。每次他们的闲谈稍有停歇，他们其中就总有一位朝我坐的方向偷瞄上一眼，仿佛是一心想找个机会跟我攀谈两句。最后，终于有个人提高嗓门对我说：

“看来您是要在楼上住一宿了，先生。”

我跟他讲正是如此，说话的那位表示怀疑地摇了摇头道：“您在楼上恐怕是睡不了几个钟头的，先生。除非是您喜欢老鲍勃弄出来的动静，”——他指了指店老板——“砰砰地在这底下一直闹到夜半三更。天刚破晓您就会被他老婆冲他吼叫的声音给吵醒的。”

尽管店老板一叠声地抗议，还是引来周围人等的哄堂大笑。

“确实如此吗？”我说。说话间，我突然想到——最近有好多次在法拉戴先生面前也有同样的念头浮起——这时候我应该回应一句俏皮话之类的。的确，那帮当地人此时都颇有礼貌地保持着沉默，等着我下面的言辞。我于是搜索枯肠，最后终于道：

“堪称本地的鸡鸣变奏曲喽，无疑该是。”

起先，沉默仍在继续，仿佛那些当地人以为我还有进一步的发挥。不过在注意到我脸上那逗人发笑的表情时，这才爆发出一阵笑声，但笑得总有点困惑不解的意思。完了以后他们又重新回到之前的闲谈当中，我也再没有跟他们有什么言谈往还，直到不久之后互道了一声晚安。

我刚想到那句俏皮话的时候，还颇曾感觉沾沾自喜，而且我得承认，眼看着它的效果居然不过如此，我还是稍稍有些失望的。我尤其感到失望之处，我想，正在于最近的这几个月来我颇花了不少时间特用来提升我在这一领域的技巧。也就是说，最近我一直竭尽所能将这一技巧添加到我的职业锦囊当中，以便于可以满有把握地充分满足法拉戴先生在打趣调侃方面对我所抱的期望。

比如说，近来我只要有一点空余时间，就会回到房间里去听无线电广播——像是碰到法拉戴先生晚间外出的时候。我经常收听的一个节目叫作《每周两次或更多》，实际上每周播出三次，基本上是由两位主持人针对读者来信提出的各种话题进行幽默的评论。我一直都在认真地研究这个节目，因为它表现出来的谐趣，其品位一直都是最高的，而且在我看来，其基调也跟法拉戴先生可能期待我表现出来的风趣相去不远。从这个节目得到启发以后，我已经设计出了一个简单的演练方案，我争取每天至少实际操练一次；只要一有空闲，我就尝试以当时所处的即时环境为素材，构想出三句俏皮话来。或者，作为这同一种演练的变通方式，也可能会尝试着以过去一个钟头内发生的事件构想出三句俏皮话来。

如此一来，您可能也就会理解对于昨天晚上的那句俏皮话，我所感到的失望之情了。起先，我以为它不太成功的原因可能是我说得不够清楚。可是在我已经回房休息以后，我才想到我有可能已经冒犯了这些当地人。毕竟，我那句俏皮话很容易被理解为我是在暗示老板娘就像一只鸡——当时我可是绝无此意的。这个想法在我尽力入睡的过程中继续不断地折磨着我，我甚至都有些想在今天一早跟店老板正式道歉了。可是他在为我端来早餐时表现得非常愉快，情绪上没有任何的保留，最后我也就决定略过不提了。

不过这个小小的插曲极好地说明了那些脱口而出的俏皮话有可能带来的风险。由于谐趣的本质就在于当下的急智反应，你在顺应情势把一句俏皮话抛出去之前是不会有时间去充分评估它可能引发的各种后果的，你要是没有事先就掌握了必要的技巧和经验，就有极大的风险会脱口说出各种不甚得体的话语来。只要假以时间和勤学苦练，没

有理由认定我在这个领域就成不了行家里手，不过既然存在这样的风险，我已经决定现在最好还是暂时不要急着去履行法拉戴先生期望于我的这一责任，等我多加练习、熟谙此道以后再去表现不迟。

不管怎么说吧，我很遗憾地向诸位报告，昨晚那些当地人当作玩笑来说的一预计我是睡不好的，因为楼下不时地会有干扰—倒是被证实了果不其然。老板娘倒是并没有大呼小叫，可是你能听到她跟她丈夫两个人一直在楼下四处走动忙活这忙活那，一边喋喋不休地说个没完，而且今天一大早就又开始了。不过，我能够体谅这对夫妻，因为他们很显然已经养成了辛勤劳作的习惯，至于他们制造出来的那些噪声，也全都应该归因于此。再者说了，我昨天也说过那么一句很不得体的俏皮话，所以我在向店老板致谢的时候丝毫没有提及我其实一夜未曾安枕，然后我就动身前去探访汤顿这个著名的集镇⁽¹⁾了。

也许，我昨晚本该在我眼下正愉快地享用一杯早茶的这家店里住宿的。因为的确，外面的店招上大字写着，店里不仅提供“茶点、小吃和蛋糕”，还有“干净、安静而又舒适的客房”。这家店就位于汤顿的主街之上，离市集广场咫尺之遥，是一幢有些沉陷的建筑，外观以深色的木质桁梁为特色。眼下我就坐在它那宽敞的茶室里，墙面是橡木镶板，茶桌的数量我猜就是同时招待二十几位客人都丝毫不会显得拥挤。两位快活的年轻姑娘站在柜台后面负责招待顾客，柜台上陈列着琳琅满目的各色糕点。总而言之，这是个享用早茶的绝佳场所，可是愿意光顾此地的汤顿居民却出奇地稀少。眼下，店内的顾客除了我以外就只有两位上了年纪的女士，并肩坐在我对面靠墙的一张桌子边；还有一位男士—可能是位退休的农夫—坐在一扇巨大的凸窗旁边。我看不清他的长相，因为明亮的晨光此刻将他照得只剩下一个剪影。不过我能看得出他正在仔细地阅读手里的报纸，时不时地抬头望一下窗外人行道上的过路人。他的这一举止起先让我以为他是在等什么人，不过后来看来他不过是想跟路经此处的熟人们打个招呼。

我自己几乎隐藏在茶室最里面的靠墙位置，不过即便隔着整个房间的距离，我依然能清楚地看到户外阳光朗照的街道，还能辨认得出对面人行道上的路标，上面指出了几个附近的目的地。其中一个目的地是默斯登村。您或许也会觉得“默斯登”这个地方听来耳熟，我昨天在道路交通图上第一次看到这个地方时心里也是一动。实际上，我必须承认，我甚至一度想稍稍调整一下既定的路线，绕点路前去亲眼看看那个村庄。萨默塞特郡的默斯登曾是吉芬公司的所在地，在过去，人们都是向默斯登发送订单，订购吉芬公司生产的抛光用深色蜡

烛的，该产品是“切成薄片后与上光蜡粉以手工混制而成”。在很长一段时期里，吉芬的产品绝对是市面上最好的银器上光剂，一直到战前不久，市场上出现了新式化工替代品以后，对这一优质产品的需求才开始衰落。

我记得，吉芬银器上光剂是二十年代初问世的，而且我能肯定，我并非唯一一个将这一产品的出现与我们业内心态上的转变紧密联系在一起的人——那一转变将为银器清洁上光的工作推到了至为重要的中心位置，而且总体说来直到今天仍是如此。这一重心的转移，我认为，就像这一时期其他众多的转变一样，是一种代际间的变革；正是在那些年间，我们这一代管家已经“长大成人”，尤其是像马歇尔先生这样的人物，在使银器上光成为核心要务方面扮演了关键性的角色。当然这并不是说为银器清洁上光的工作——尤其是那些会摆上餐桌的银制器皿——在过去并没有得到严肃的对待。但如果说，比如家父那一代管家并没有把这项工作看得有如此重要，这应该不算是有失公允的；有如下事实可资证明：在当时，大户人家的管家极少有人亲自监管银器清洁上光的工作，大都认为交给像是副管家这样的下属去督管也就足够了，只不过时不时地检查一下而已。大家公认是马歇尔先生首度全面认识到了银器的重要意义——亦即，阖府上下再也没有其他任何物件会像餐桌上的银器那般受到外人如此深入的仔细审视，由是，银器也就起到了衡量一户人家整体水准的公共指数的作用。马歇尔先生是第一位因为将沙勒维尔府的银器抛光到前此无法想象的程度，使得来访的淑女士绅为之而心醉神迷的人物。势所必然，全国上下的管家们在各自雇主的压力之下，很快也就将全副精力集中在银器的清洁上光这一问题之上了。我记得，很快也就有好几位管家异军突起，每一位都宣称自己发现了可以超过马歇尔先生的妙方——这种妙方他们又无不装模作样地当作独得之秘概不外传，就如同那些独守祖传食谱秘方的法国名厨一般。可是我确信——在当时我就这么认为——像是杰克·内伯斯之辈所卖弄的那些煞有介事而又神秘兮兮的上光步骤对于最终的结果是极少甚至根本就不会有任何作用的。在我看来，这项工作并无任何神秘可言：只要你使用上好的上光剂，只要你加以严格的督责即可。吉芬曾是当时所有独具慧眼的管家们的共同选择，只要使用得法，你就无须担心自家的银器会比任何人家的有丝毫逊色。

我很高兴能够回忆起，达林顿府的银器有好几次都对于客人产生了可喜的影响。比如说，我记得阿斯特夫人曾经说过，语气中不无一定的苦涩，我们的银器“有可能是无与伦比的”。我还记得曾亲眼看到萧伯纳⁽²⁾先生，那位著名的剧作家，有天晚上在餐桌上极为仔细地

检查他面前的那把吃甜点的小银匙，还特意把它举到灯光底下，拿它的表面跟手边的主菜盘进行细细的比照，对于周围的客人则完全视而不见。不过，如今回忆起来最让我感到得意的，应属某个夜晚一位相当显赫的人物——一位内阁大臣，不久后即出任外交大臣——对达林顿府进行的一次绝对“不宜公开”的访问。事实上，既然当时那些来访所造成的结果早已详细地记录于文献当中，我也就没有理由再遮遮掩掩了，我所说的这位访客就是哈利法克斯⁽³⁾勋爵。

结果，那次特别的来访只是哈利法克斯勋爵与时任德国驻英大使里宾特洛甫⁽⁴⁾先生之间整个一连串此类“非官方”会晤的开始。不过在那第一个晚上，哈利法克斯勋爵的态度却极为审慎；实际上他来到达林顿府的第一句话就是：“说实话，达林顿，我真不知道你敦促我到这儿来干什么。我知道我肯定会为此而后悔的。”

里宾特洛甫先生估计还要一个多钟头才能到，爵爷于是就建议先带客人参观一下达林顿府——这个策略曾帮助不少精神紧张的客人放松下来。不过我在继续忙我的工作的时候，多次听到哈利法克斯勋爵在府里不同的地方不断地表达着他对于当晚那次会晤的疑虑之情，达林顿勋爵对他的反复安抚也终归是徒劳。可是又过了一段时间，我突然听到哈利法克斯勋爵惊叫道：“我的天哪，达林顿，尊府的这些银器真是太赏心悦目了。”当时我听到这样的赞誉自然是非常高兴，不过这个小插曲所带来的真正令人满意的结果却是两三天后才出现的，达林顿勋爵特意对我说：“顺便说一句，史蒂文斯，咱们的银器那天晚上给哈利法克斯勋爵留下了极为深刻的美好印象，使得他整个的心绪都为之而一变。”这是一我记得很清楚——爵爷的原话，所以那可绝非是我个人的想入非非：银器所保持的良好状态对于缓和那晚哈利法克斯勋爵和里宾特洛甫先生之间的紧张关系，的确做出了虽说微不足道却又是意义重大的贡献。

话已至此，关于里宾特洛甫先生的情况我再多说几句或许也不为过。当然，现在大家普遍接受的想法是里宾特洛甫先生是个大骗子手：那些年间希特勒的计划就是尽可能长时间地欺骗英国，隐瞒其真实意图，而里宾特洛甫先生在我们国家唯一的使命即具体地实施这一骗术。如我所说，这是大家普遍持有的观点，我并不想在此提出异议。然而，令人着恼的是听到大家如今说起这件事来的那种口气，就仿佛他们从未有一时一刻上过里宾特洛甫先生的当似的一仿佛就只有达林顿勋爵一个人相信他是位高尚的绅士，只有爵爷一个人跟他建立过工作上的关系似的。事实是，在整个的三十年代，里宾特洛甫先生在所有那些最为显赫的宅第中都被视为一位备受尊敬的人物，甚至是

位光彩照人、富有魅力的人物。尤其是在一九三六和三七年间，我还记得仆役大厅里随侍主人来访的仆佣们围绕着“那位德国大使”的所有那些话题，从他们的谈话当中可以清楚地了解到，当时本国的许多最为显赫的名媛和士绅都很为他着迷和倾倒。如前所说，听到同样这些人现在谈起当时的情况居然完全变了样，尤其是有些人说到爵爷的那些话，实在是令人着恼。只要看看他们其中几位当年的邀客名单，你立刻就会明白这些人有多么伪善；你就会看得清清楚楚，当初里宾特洛甫先生不仅仅是在同样这些人的餐桌上用过餐，而且还经常是作为贵宾被奉为上座的。

不仅如此，你还会听到同样这些人说起来就好像是因为达林顿勋爵做了什么见不得人的事，所以他在那些年间的几次德国之行才受到了纳粹的特别礼遇。如果，比方说，只要《泰晤士报》刊登一份纽伦堡集会⁽⁵⁾期间德国人大宴宾客的邀客名单，我想这些人肯定就不会这么大言不惭地胡说八道了。事实上，英国最为显贵、最受尊敬的名媛和士绅都曾受到德国领导人的殷勤款待，而且我敢发誓，我亲眼所见、亲耳所闻这些人当中的绝大多数从德国回来以后对于招待他们的东道主都赞誉有加。任何对于达林顿勋爵当初是在跟一位众所周知的敌人暗通款曲的暗示，都可以说是只图自己方便而完全罔顾了当时真实的政治气候。

还需要说明的一点是，有人声称达林顿勋爵是个排犹主义者，或者说他跟类似英国法西斯主义者同盟那样的组织过从甚密，这都绝对是卑鄙龌龊的无耻谰言。这类说法只能是那些对于爵爷的为人一无所知之辈的诬罔之词。达林顿勋爵对于排犹主义憎恶之极；我就亲耳听他在好几个不同的场合表达过他在面对排犹主义情绪时的厌恶之情。还有人指控爵爷从不允许犹太人踏入达林顿府一步或者从不雇用犹太员工，这也是完全没有根据的信口雌黄——唯一一次例外或许就是三十年代发生过的一个非常微不足道的小插曲，结果后来却被言过其实地大肆渲染。至于说到那个英国法西斯主义者同盟，我只能说任何有关将爵爷跟这些人联系起来的说法都是非常荒唐可笑的。我要说的是，奥斯瓦尔德·莫斯利爵士⁽⁶⁾，领导“黑衫党”的头目对达林顿府的造访最多只有三次，而且全都是在该组织成立的早期，那时候他们还没有背叛其初衷。一旦黑衫党运动的丑恶嘴脸大白于天下一旦不说爵爷比大多数人都更早地看穿了他们的真面目——达林顿勋爵就再未跟这些人有任何瓜葛了。

再怎么讲，这类组织对于本国政治生活的核心而言也根本就是无足轻重的。您应该能够理解，达林顿勋爵是那种只会致力于那些真正

的核心事务的绅士，而且多年以来他所努力罗致的也都是那些对于这类令人厌恶的边缘组织避之唯恐不及、距离十万八千里的人士。他们不但备受尊敬，而且都是对英国的政治生活具有真正影响力的人物：政治家、外交家、军方人士和神职人员。的确，这其中就有犹太人，单单这一个事实就足以说明，有关爵爷的大多数传闻是多么地荒诞无稽。

不过我跑题了。我谈的原本是银器，以及哈利法克斯勋爵跟里宾特洛甫先生会晤的那天晚上，达林顿府的银器给他留下了多么深刻的印象。请允许我特别澄清一下，我可从来就没有暗示过一个原本极有可能令我的雇主大为失望的夜晚，完全是因为银器擦得雪亮就变得无比成功了。不过，正如我说过的，达林顿勋爵就曾亲口表示过，那些银器至少有可能是那晚使来宾的心情大为改观的一个小小的因素，如果我在回顾这样的事例时怀有一种称心满意的心情，或许也不算是太过荒唐可笑吧。

我们这一行中也有一些人认为无论为什么样的雇主服务都是没什么实质性的不同的；认为我们这代人中盛行的那种理想主义——即我们这些做管家的应力争去为那些能够促进人类福祉的伟大的绅士们服务的这种观念——只不过是唱高调，并无现实的基础。当然，显而易见，散布这种怀疑主义论调的个人，结果无一例外地证明自己只是我们这一行中的平庸之辈——他们知道自己根本就不具备跃居显要位置的能力，所以只能力图将尽可能多的同行拉低到他们自己的水平——没有人愿意认真对待这样的观点。即便如此，如果能够从自己的职业生涯中举出一些实例，以清楚地烛照出他们是何等大谬不然，这仍旧是令人感到满意的赏心乐事。当然了，我们所追求的是为自己的雇主提供全面而又持久的服务，其价值绝不该被降低至几个特定的实例——比如上述跟哈利法克斯勋爵有关的这件事。但我要说的是，正是这一类的实例，透过时间的流逝愈加清晰地彰显出一个无可辩驳的事实；即此人曾经有幸身处于那些重大事件至为枢纽的位置，实践了自己的职业操守。而且此人或许有权利体验到一种满足感，这是那些安于为平庸的雇主服务之辈所永远无缘体味的一这种满足感就在于，它让你有理由可以说，我所付出的努力，不管多么微不足道，毕竟对于历史的进程做出了属于自己的贡献。

不过也许一个人不该如此频繁地回望过去。毕竟，摆在我面前的仍有要求我尽心服务的好多个年头。法拉戴先生不仅是位最好的雇主，他还是位美国绅士，这肯定是我责无旁贷的义务，向他充分展示英国最高的服务水准。既然如此，将自己的注意力聚焦于当下就是至

为重要的了；必须谨防因为过去所取得的一点点成就而滋生任何自满的情绪。因为不得不承认，在过去的几个月中，达林顿府内的现状已经显得不那么尽如人意了。近来已经出现了几次小小的疏失，这其中就包括去年四月发生的那个跟银器有关的小插曲。万幸的是当时法拉戴先生并没有客人在场，不过即便如此，那对我而言也是极端难堪的一刻。

事情发生在某天上午的早餐时间，在他那方面，法拉戴先生一要么是他宅心仁厚，不忍苛责，要么就是因为他是美国人，所以对那次差错的程度缺乏认识——自始至终未曾有过只字的埋怨。他在餐桌前就座以后，只是拿起一把餐叉细看了一下，用指尖碰了碰叉尖，然后就将注意力转移到晨报的头版新闻上去了。他整个的姿态都是以一种漫不经心的方式做出的，不过当然了，我已经全都看在了眼里，马上快步走上前去，拿走了那样碍眼的东西。可能因为我心里不安，动作太快了一点，因为法拉戴先生略为有些吃惊，嘟囔了一句：“啊，史蒂文斯。”

我拿着那把餐叉快步走出房间，没作任何耽搁马上又拿了一把令人满意的餐叉回来。我朝餐桌走去的时候——法拉戴先生显然已经全神贯注于他的报纸当中——我也想到我可以悄没声地把餐叉放在桌布上，不要打搅了我的主人读报。可是，我已经想到了法拉戴先生有可能是为了不让我感到难堪才佯装浑然不觉的，如果我这么偷偷摸摸地把餐叉换回去，恐怕会被主人误解为对于自己的疏失我非但不痛心疾首，反而自鸣得意——或者更糟，是试图予以遮掩了。正是为此，我于是决定我应该带有某种强调的意味把餐叉放回到桌上才算合适，结果是又让主人吃了一惊，他抬眼一看，又嘟囔了一句：“啊，史蒂文斯。”

类似这样的疏失，在过去的这几个月里，自然是对我身为管家的自尊心的一种伤害，不过话又说回来了，我认为这只是人手短缺造成的，并没有理由相信它们是更加严重的问题的先兆。并不是说人手短缺的问题无足轻重；不过只要肯顿小姐当真愿意重返达林顿府，我相信这样的小小疏漏也就自然会成为过去。当然了，我们必须谨记，肯顿小姐在来信上并没有愿意复职的明确表示——顺便提一下，昨晚在关灯之前我又在房内重读了一遍。事实上，我必须承认确实有这种可能，即我出于一厢情愿的工作上的考虑，而过于夸大了她那方面有此意愿的蛛丝马迹。因为我必须承认，昨晚我不无惊讶地发现，还真的很难明确指出她来信当中有任何一段清楚明白地表示出了她想回来工作的愿望。

不过话又说回来了，现在也不值当地再在这样的问题上煞费苦心地去思忖揣测，因为很可能在四十八个钟头之内我就能够跟肯顿小姐当面进行晤谈了。不过我还是得承认，昨天晚上我躺在黑暗当中，听着楼上传来的店老板和老板娘洗洗涮涮的声响，我还是颇花了不少的时间，在我脑子里反复地琢磨肯顿小姐信中的字句。

- (1) 集镇 (market town)，定期举行集市贸易的市镇。
- (2) 萧伯纳 (George Bernard Shaw, 1856—1950)，英国剧作家、评论家，费边社会主义者，主要剧作有《恺撒和克娄巴特拉》、《人与超人》、《巴巴拉少校》、《皮格马利翁》、《圣女贞德》等，获一九二五年度诺贝尔文学奖。
- (3) 哈利法克斯 (Edward Frederick Lindley Wood Halifax, 1881—1959)，英国保守党人，历任印度总督、上院领袖等要职，在外交大臣任内对纳粹德国实行绥靖政策，后任驻美大使，称号为哈利法克斯伯爵一世。
- (4) 里宾特洛甫 (Joachim von Ribbentrop, 1893—1946)，纳粹德国战犯，外交部部长，一九三六至三八年曾任驻英大使，一九三九年赴莫斯科签订《苏德互不侵犯条约》，战后被纽伦堡国际军事法庭判处绞刑。
- (5) 纽伦堡集会 (Nuremberg Rally)，即德意志帝国一九二三至一九三八年每年一度的纳粹党代会，在一九三三年希特勒掌权后尤其成为盛大的年度纳粹宣传活动。
- (6) 莫斯利爵士 (Sir Oswald Mosley, 6th Baronet, 1896—1980)，英国法西斯主义者同盟头目，一九一八至一九三一年在下院工作，相继为保守党党员、无党派人士和工党党员，一九二九至三〇年在工党政府任职，一九三二年创立英国法西斯主义者同盟。

第三天一傍晚

莫斯科姆村，近塔维斯托克，德文郡

我觉得也许有必要再回到爵爷对待犹太人的这个问题上多说几句，既然排犹主义的这整个问题，我意识到，近来已经变得如此敏感。尤其是，让我在此澄清一下外界有关达林顿府绝不雇用犹太人的传闻。既然这一指控直接就落在我本人的管辖范围，我也就能有绝对的权威予以批驳了。在我服侍爵爷的这全部的岁月当中，我的雇员里面一直都有很多的犹太人，而且我要再补充一句的是，他们从来都没有因为其种族的缘故而受到任何不同的对待。你真是猜不出这些荒唐无稽的指控到底所为何来—除非，这是非常荒谬可笑的，它们全都源自三十年代初期那短暂的几个星期里发生的几件完全无足轻重的小事，在那段时间里卡罗琳·巴尼特太太曾对爵爷拥有过某种非同寻常的影响力。

巴尼特太太是查尔斯·巴尼特先生的遗孀，当时四十开外—是一位非常健美端庄，有人也会说是光彩照人、魅力四射的女士。她拥有聪颖无比、令人敬畏有加的盛誉，在当年，你经常能听说她是如何在宴会上就当今某个重大问题将这位或是那位饱学之士羞辱得无地自容的传闻。在一九三二年的大半个夏季里，她曾是达林顿府的常客，经常跟爵爷一谈就是几个钟头，就重大的社会或者政治问题深入地交换意见。我记得，也正是这位巴尼特太太，曾带领爵爷数度深入伦敦东区最贫穷的地段，进行“有向导引领的视察工作”，其间，爵爷曾亲自实地访问了那些年间很多身陷赤贫境地的人家。这也就是说，巴尼特太太极有可能在促使爵爷越来越关心我们国家的贫困问题上做出过重要的贡献，如此说来，她对于爵爷的影响也不能说全都是负面的。不过当然了，她是奥斯瓦尔德·莫斯利爵士领导的“黑衫党”组织的成员，而爵爷与奥斯瓦尔德爵士仅有的几次接触也就在那年夏天的几个星期之内。我猜想，应该就是在这短短的几周里发生在达林顿府里的几桩完全不具有典型意义的事件，给那些荒唐无稽的指控提供了完全站不住脚的所谓依据。

我将其称为“事件”，但其中有一些根本就不值一提。比如说，我记得在一次晚宴上听到他们提到某一份报纸，爵爷对此的反应是：“哦，你们说的是那份犹太宣传单啊。”同样还是在那段时期里另有一次，我记得他指示我不要再给某个定期上门募捐的当地慈善组织捐

款，因为其管理委员会“或多或少都是犹太人组成的”。我之所以记得这些确切的表达，是因为当时乍听之下我真是大为惊讶，爵爷此前可是从未对于犹太民族表露过任何的敌意。

再后来，当然就是终于出了那档子事。有天下午爵爷把我叫到他的书房里，起先只是一些大而化之的闲谈，问问我府里的情况是否一切正常，然后他就说：

“最近我反反复复思考良久，史蒂文斯。思考良久。我已经得出了结论。我们达林顿府里不能雇用犹太员工。”

“先生？”

“这是为了我们府里着想，史蒂文斯。是为了来我们这里做客的客人的利益着想。我已经就此做过认真的调查，史蒂文斯，我现在就是要让你知道我的结论。”

“很好，先生。”

“告诉我，史蒂文斯，目前我们的员工当中就有几位，对吧？犹太人，我是说。”

“我相信目前我们的员工当中有两名是属于这个类别的，先生。”

“啊。”爵爷沉吟了半晌，凝视着窗外。“当然，你必须让他们离开。”

“您说什么，先生？”

“这非常令人遗憾，史蒂文斯，可我们别无选择。必须考虑到我的客人们的安全与康乐。我可以向你保证，对此问题我已做过认真的调查，而且彻彻底底地考虑清楚了。这完全是出于我们最大利益的考虑。”

这其中涉及的两位员工，事实上都是卧房的女仆。所以，如果不事先将此情况告知肯顿小姐就采取任何行动的话，那将是极为不妥的，于是我决定当天傍晚去她的起坐间里喝可可的时候就跟她讲一声。对于每天工作结束以后去她的起坐间里碰个面的这种安排，或许应该稍作说明。应该说，这种安排完全是事务性的一虽说时不时地，我们也会讨论一些非正式的话题。我们安排这种会面的理由非常简单：我们发现我们各自的公务经常都过于繁忙，经常是一连好几天我们连交换一些最基本的信息的机会都没有。我们认识到这种情况会严

重地危及正常工作的平稳运转，而最直接有效的补救办法莫过于在一天工作结束以后，在肯顿小姐的起坐间里不受打扰地待上个一刻钟左右的时间。我必须重申的是，这些会面主要都是工作性质的；也就是说，打个比方，我们可能会商量即将举行的某一社交活动的具体计划，或者讨论某位新近招募的员工的适应情况。

总之，言归正传，您应该可以理解，考虑到要告诉肯顿小姐我将解雇她手下的两位女仆，我内心也难免会有些波澜起伏。实事求是地说，这两位女仆一直以来都是非常令人满意的优秀雇员——既然近来犹太人的问题已经变得如此敏感，我不如索性把话挑明了一出于本意，我是完全反对将她们解雇的。尽管如此，我在这一问题上的职责又是非常明确的，而且我也看得很清楚，即便是我不负责任地将我个人的质疑和盘托出，也是完全于事无补的。这是个艰巨的任务，可是正因为如此，就尤其要求我要颇有尊严地予以完成。也正是为此，当天傍晚在我们的日常交谈即将结束的时候，我才把这件事提了出来，而且是以尽可能简明扼要和就事论事的态度提出的，我具体是这样说的：

“明天上午十点半，我将在我的餐具室里跟这两位雇员谈一下。如果届时您能差她们过来一趟的话，肯顿小姐，我将感激不尽。至于您事先是否要将我会跟她们谈的内容知会她们，就交由您全权决定吧。”

话已至此，肯顿小姐像是全然无言以对了。我于是继续道：“那好，肯顿小姐，谢谢您的可可。我想我也该回房休息了。明天又是繁忙的一天。”

在这个时候，肯顿小姐终于开口说话了：“史蒂文斯先生，我简直不相信自己的耳朵。鲁思和萨拉在我手底下已经工作了有六年多了。我完全信任她们，她们也的确信任我。她们在达林顿府里的工作非常出色。”

“我相信这都是事实，肯顿小姐。可是，我们决不能让私人情感渗透进我们的判断中来。好了，我现在真的要跟您道声晚安了……”

“史蒂文斯先生，我非常气愤，你居然可以坐在那儿轻轻松松地说出刚才那番话，就仿佛你不过是在跟我讨论家用食品的订货似的。我实在是无法相信。你说鲁思和萨拉要被解雇，就因为她们是犹太人？”

“肯顿小姐，我刚刚已经把全部的实情跟您解释过了。爵爷已经做出了决定，你我是没有任何可以争辩的余地的。”

“你难道就没有想过，史蒂文斯先生，以这样的理由解雇鲁思和萨拉根本就是一错的吗？我不会容忍这样的事情发生。我不会在居然发生这种事情的宅第中继续工作下去了。”

“肯顿小姐，我请求您不要这么激动，并请您以与您的职位相称的态度规范您的言行。这是一桩简单明了的事务。如果爵爷希望终止这两份特定的雇用合同的话，那么别人谁都没有资格说三道四。”

“我警告你，史蒂文斯先生，如果你明天把我的两位姑娘给解雇了的话，我也跟着一起走。”

“肯顿小姐，我很惊讶于您居然做出这样的反应。我肯定不需要提醒您我们的职业责任不应以自己的癖好和情感为出发点，而应遵从我们雇主的意愿。”

“我要告诉你的是，史蒂文斯先生，你如果明天解雇了我的两位姑娘，那将是大错特错的，那将是莫大的罪恶，我决不会继续在这样的宅第中工作下去了。”

“肯顿小姐，请容我向您提个忠告，您所处的地位还不足以使您做出如此趾高气扬的决断。事实上，现今的世界是个异常复杂而又危机四伏的所在。有很多事情，比如说有关犹太民族的本质这样的问题，都不是处在你我这样地位的人能够理解的。然而爵爷，我冒昧说一句，肯定比我们更有资格判定怎么做才是最好的。好了，肯顿小姐，我真的必须告退了。再次感谢您的可可。明天上午十点半。请让那两名相关的雇员过来见我。”

第二天上午，从那两位女仆踏进我餐具室的那一刻看来，肯顿小姐已经跟她们说过了，因为她们俩都是抽抽搭搭地进来的。我尽可能简明扼要地将情况向她们解释了一下，特别强调了她们的工作一直都是非常令人满意的，因此肯定会拿到评价很高的推荐信。据我的记忆，她们俩自始至终都没说过任何值得注意的话，那次面谈最多也就持续了三四分钟的时间，她们就像来的时候一样，抽抽搭搭地离开了。

自从解雇了那两位女仆以后，肯顿小姐一连好多天对我的态度都极其冷淡。确切说来，有时对我甚至相当粗鲁，而且还是当着其他员工的面。尽管我们仍旧保持着每天傍晚碰个头、喝杯可有的习惯，会

面的时间却变得异常短促，而且气氛也很不友好。事情都过去半个月了，她的态度仍然没有缓和的迹象，我想您也应该能够理解，我也开始有些不耐烦了。于是在我们某次碰头一起喝可可的时候，我故意语带讽刺地跟她说：

“肯顿小姐，我还以为您这会儿应该已经递上辞呈来了呢，”说完我轻轻一笑。我想，我当时是希望她的态度能够终于和缓下来，做出某种和解的回应之类的，如此一来，我们就能把这整件事彻底抛到一边去了。可是肯顿小姐却只是目光严厉地看着我说：

“我仍旧一如既往，很想把辞呈递上去，史蒂文斯先生。只是因为我这段时间实在太忙，没有时间实际着手这件事。”

我得承认，她这番话还当真让我担心了好一阵子，唯恐她的这个威胁是当真的。不过随着时间一周周地过去，显然她并没有离开达林顿府的打算，而且随着我们之间的气氛逐渐趋向和缓，我想我也开始时不时地提起她曾经威胁要辞职的这件事来取笑她。比如说，如果碰上我们正在讨论府里即将举行的某项重大的社交活动，我就会故意找补一句：“也就是说，肯顿小姐，那得假设您届时还会跟我们在一起。”即便是在事情已经过去了好几个月以后，这样的取笑仍会让肯顿小姐一下子就默不作声了——虽说到了这个阶段，我想这更多的是出于尴尬而非恼怒。

最后，当然了，这件事基本上也就逐渐被淡忘了。不过我记得这件事最后一次又被提起，是在那两位女仆被辞退的一年多以后。

有一天下午我在会客厅为达林顿勋爵奉上茶点的时候，是爵爷首先旧事重提的。那个时候，卡罗琳·巴尼特太太对爵爷拥有巨大影响的时期已经过去了一的确，那位夫人已经完全不再是达林顿府的座上宾了。还有一点值得指出的是，爵爷到了那时也已经认识到“黑衫党”那丑陋的真面目，跟该组织中断了所有的联系。

“哦，史蒂文斯，”他对我道。“我一直都想再跟你谈谈。关于去年的那件事。就是那两位犹太女仆。你还记得吧？”

“当然，先生。”

“我想，现在也没办法找到她们的去向了吧，是不是？我当初的处理方式是错的，所以我总想能为她们受到的错待做一点补偿。”

“我一定去追查一下这件事，先生。不过时至今日，我一点都没有把握是否还有可能查明她们的去向。”

“你就尽力而为吧。当初的做法是错的。”

我猜想我跟爵爷的这番交谈肯顿小姐应该是有兴趣知道的，而且我也认为只有把这件事告诉她才是唯一正确的做法——即使冒着再次把她激怒的风险。却不料，在那个雾蒙蒙的下午，我在凉亭里碰到她跟她说起这件事的时候，竟产生了某些意想不到的结果。

我记得那天下午我横穿草坪的时候，雾气已经开始降了下来。我到凉亭里去是为了将爵爷刚才招待几位客人在那儿享用茶点的残剩收拾干净。我记得我远远地就看到一距离家父当年摔倒的那几级台阶还很远——肯顿小姐的身影在凉亭内走动。我走进凉亭的时候，她已经在散放于里面的其中一把柳条椅子上坐了下来，显然正忙于手上的针线活儿。走近一看，发现她是在缝补一个靠垫。我开始把散放在盆栽当中和藤编家具上的各种瓷器收拾起来，我应该是一边收拾，一边跟肯顿小姐相互打趣了几句，也许还讨论了一两件工作上的事情。事实上，一连好几天都在主楼里面足不出户，这会子能来到这个户外的凉亭里，感觉格外神清气爽，所以我们俩都不着急把手里的活计干完。也确实，虽说因为那天雾气渐浓，外面也看不到很远的地方，再加上那时候天光正迅速地暗下去，迫使肯顿小姐不得不就着最后几缕光线飞针走线，我记得我们仍旧经常停下手上的工作，只是为了抬眼望望我们周遭的景色。事实上，我也只能望到草坪那头沿着马车道种植的那排白杨树，那里已经被浓雾所笼罩了，这时我才终于把话题引到了去年解雇两位女仆的那件事上。也许可以预见，我是这么说的：

“我刚才还一直在想呢，肯顿小姐。现在想来感觉还是挺滑稽的，可是您知道，就在一年前的这个时候，您还一直执意打算要辞职来着呢。一想起来我就觉得挺好玩儿的。”我说完呵呵一笑，可是我身后的肯顿小姐却默不作声。等我终于回头去看她的时候，发现她正透过玻璃，怔怔地望着窗外铺天盖地的浓雾。

“您可能没有想到，史蒂文斯先生，”她终于说道，“我曾经多么认真地考虑过要离开这里。发生的那件事对我的冲击太大了。我如果还有一丝一毫值得让人尊敬的地方，我敢说老早就已经离开达林顿府了。”她沉吟片刻，我把目光转向外面远处的白杨树。然后她用倦怠的口气继续道：“那是怯懦，史蒂文斯先生。完完全全就是怯懦。我能到哪儿去呢？我没有家人。只有一位姨妈。我很爱她，可如果跟她住在一起的话，我没有一天不会感觉我整个的一生都被蹉跎掉了。当然，我也的确曾安慰过自己，我很快就能找到一个新的职位。可是我太害怕了，史蒂文斯先生。每次我一想到要离开这里，我眼前

就会浮现出我孤零零流落在外的情景，而周围没有一个认识我、关心我的人。您瞧，我所有的高尚原则总共也就值这么多。我真是为自己感到羞愧难当。可我就是离不开这儿，史蒂文斯先生，我就是下不了一走了之的决心。”

肯顿小姐再次停了下来，像是深陷在思绪当中。于是我想这倒是个好机会，就尽可能精确地把之前我和达林顿勋爵之间的那番对话复述了一遍。转述完以后，我又加了一句：

“事已至此，覆水难收，不过能听到爵爷如此毫不含糊地宣称当初那件事完全是个可怕的误会，至少让人心下大为宽慰。我只是觉得您应该愿意听到这个消息，肯顿小姐，因为我记得您当时为了这件事是跟我一样深感苦恼和难过的。”

“不好意思，史蒂文斯先生，”我身后的肯顿小姐以一种全新的声音说道，就仿佛她刚从梦中被惊醒一样，“我真是搞不懂你了。”我转过身来面向她的时候，她继续道：“我记得，你当时认为让鲁思和萨拉卷铺盖走人才是唯一正确而又正当的做法。对于这件事你当时根本就是兴高采烈的。”

“肯顿小姐，您这种说法实在是既不正确又不公道。那整个事件曾引起我极大的忧虑，的确的确是万分的忧虑。在这幢宅子里发生这样的事情，那绝非是我乐于看到的。”

“那为什么，史蒂文斯先生，你为什么当时不这样跟我说呢？”

我笑了笑，可是一时间竟也无言以对。还没等我想出应对之词，肯顿小姐已经把手里的针线活放下来道：

“你有没有意识到，史蒂文斯先生，如果你去年就肯跟我分享你的感受的话，那对我的意义有多么重大？你明知道我那两个姑娘被解雇的时候，我是多么五内俱焚。你有没有意识到那会对我有多大的帮助？为什么，史蒂文斯先生，为什么，为什么，为什么你总是要去假装呢？”

对于我们的谈话这突然间匪夷所思的转向，我又笑了笑。“说真的，肯顿小姐，”我说，“我不是很确定能明白您的意思。假装？真是的，我为什么要……”

“我因为鲁思和萨拉不得不离开我们而痛苦万分。而令我感觉更加痛苦的是我当时以为自己是完全孤立无援的。”

“说真的，肯顿小姐……”我端起那个我用来放使用过的瓷器的托盘。“对那样的解雇我自然是极不赞同的。我还以为那是不言自明的。”

她没再说什么，离开前我回头看了她一眼。她再次怔怔地望着窗外的景色，但到了这个时候，凉亭里面已经差不多完全暗了下来，我能看到的，就只是暗淡和空茫的背景映衬下的她的侧影。我向她告了个退，就走出了凉亭。

由于回忆两位犹太雇员遭到解雇的那一事件，连带地也让我想起另一件事，我想可以被称为是那整个事件的一个有些奇怪的必然结果：就是那个叫丽萨的女仆的到来。也就是说，我们不得不找人替代那两位被解雇的女仆，而这位丽萨就成为其中的一位。

这个年轻女人是带着一封最为可疑的推荐信前来应征那个空缺的，任何一位有点经验的管家从中都能看出，她离开前一个职位的时候是蒙受着某种嫌疑的。更有甚者，肯顿小姐和我在面试的时候发现，显然她在任何一个工作岗位上最长都没有干够一个月的时间。总之一句话，她整个的态度和作风在我看来都极不适合在达林顿府供职。然而，令我吃惊的是，对这个姑娘的面试结束以后，肯顿小姐却开始坚持我们应该雇用她。“我在这个姑娘身上看到了极大的潜力，”面对我的反对她继续道。“我会将她置于我的直接监管之下，我会负责让她证明她是能够干得好的。”

我记得我们因为意见分歧僵持了好一阵子，或许只是因为解雇那两位女仆的事件在我们的脑海中是如此切近，我才没有像原本可能的那样坚持己见，反对肯顿小姐的主张。不管怎么说吧，结果是我终于让了步，尽管我还是这么说：

“肯顿小姐，我希望您能意识到如此一来，雇用这个姑娘的责任就完完全全落到你的肩膀上了。因为在我看来，至少在目前她毫无疑问是远远没有资格成为我们团队的一员的。我现在姑且允许她加入进来，但前提是您必须亲自负责监督她在职业上的发展。”

“这姑娘会表现得很不错的，史蒂文斯先生。你就等着瞧吧。”

让我吃惊的是，在接下来的几个礼拜当中，这位年轻的姑娘倒是的确取得了长足的进步。她的态度简直是每日一新，就连她走路和执行任务的仪态一在刚开始的那几天里实在是懒散邈邈到了惨不忍睹的程度一居然也有了极为显著的改善。

随着时间一周周过去，这姑娘像是发生了奇迹一般，居然已经蜕变为我们团队中非常有用的一员，肯顿小姐的成功是显而易见了。她似乎特别喜欢给丽萨分配一些需要负担那么一点额外责任的工作任务，我要是在旁边看着，她肯定就会特意跟我交换个眼神，脸上不乏几分揶揄的表情。那天夜里我们在肯顿小姐的起坐间里一边喝可可一边闲谈的时候，丽萨可是个逃不过的重要话题。

“毫无疑问，史蒂文斯先生，”她对我这么说，“听说丽萨迄今为止居然还没有犯什么值得一提的大错儿，您想必非常失望吧。”

“我一点都没有感到失望，肯顿小姐。我很为您也为我们大家感到高兴。我承认，到目前为止，您已经在这个姑娘身上取得了些微的成功。”

“些微的成功！瞧瞧您脸上的微笑，史蒂文斯先生。我一提到丽萨，您就总会浮现出这样的笑容。这笑容本身就在告诉我们一个有趣的故事。一个非常有趣的故事，一点没错。”

“喔，真的吗，肯顿小姐？我能请教到底是个什么样的故事吗？”

“的确非常有趣，史蒂文斯先生。您居然对她抱有如此悲观的偏见，这本身就非常有趣。一定是因为丽萨是个漂亮姑娘的缘故，这一点是毫无疑问的。而且我已经注意到了，您对于咱们团队中的漂亮姑娘总是抱有一种奇怪的厌恶之情。”

“您自己也很清楚您这绝对是无稽之谈，肯顿小姐。”

“啊，可我真的已经注意到了，史蒂文斯先生。您不喜欢我们的团队中有漂亮姑娘。也许是因为我们的史蒂文斯先生害怕因此而分心？难道我们的史蒂文斯先生终究也是血肉之躯，不能完全信得过自己吗？”

“真有你的，肯顿小姐。我要是觉得您这番话里哪怕有那么一丁点儿的道理，我也许就会耐着性子跟您好好地探讨一番了。照目前的情况来看，我想我还是省点心想想别的去吧，由着您怎么高兴怎么说去。”

“啊，可是为什么那心虚的笑容仍旧挂在您的脸上呢，史蒂文斯先生？”

“那根本就不是什么心虚的笑容，肯顿小姐。我只是为您那惊人的瞎扯功夫感觉有些好笑罢了。”

“您脸上挂的就是心虚的笑容，史蒂文斯先生。而且我已经注意到您是如何几乎都不敢正眼瞧丽萨了。当初您为什么那么强烈地反对录用她，那原因现在已经开始变得非常清楚了。”

“我当初的反对意见都绝对是有真凭实据的，肯顿小姐，您自己也心知肚明。这姑娘前来应聘的时候是完全够不上录用标准的。”

当然了，您想必也能理解，我们是从来不会在员工们听得到的情况下以这样的语气调侃抬杠的。不过也差不多就在那个时候，我们的可可之夜在本质上虽然仍属于工作性质，却也经常会为这种无伤大雅的闲扯留出相应的空间——应该说，这对于纾解辛苦工作的一天所带来的压力是大有益的。

丽萨和我们一起工作了大约有八九个月的时间——到了这个时候我已经基本上忘掉她的存在了——然后就跟第二男仆双双消失不见了。当然了，对于任何一位大户人家的管家而言，这种事情已经是其日常生活的一部分了。事情诚然非常令人恼火，不过你也得学着去接受。事实上，在这类“夜奔”的事件当中，这一次还算是比较文明的。除了一点食物以外，这对小情侣并没有顺带携走任何府里的财物，不仅如此，人家两位还都分别留下了书信。第二男仆，他的名字我已经记不得了，留了一张短笺给我，大致的内容是：“请不要对于我们过于苛责。我们相爱了并且就要正式成婚。”丽萨给“女管家”写了一封长信，在他们失踪以后的第二天一早，肯顿小姐带着这封信来到了我的餐具室。我记得那封信里有很多拼写错误和不通的句子，详细描述了他们俩是如何相爱，第二男仆是个多么出色的人，以及他们的未来是何等地美妙无比。我还记得其中有一句的大意是这样的：“我们没有钱但是谁在乎这个我们已经有了爱情谁还想要别的什么呢我们拥有了彼此再也别无所求。”这封信虽然足足写了有三页纸，可是没有一个字对肯顿小姐给予她的无微不至的照顾表示感激，也没有任何因为让我们大家都感到失望了的歉意表示。

肯顿小姐明显地非常难过。我在快速浏览那年轻女人的长信期间，她始终都坐在我面前的桌子旁边，低头看着自己的双手。事实上——这也让我觉得挺匪夷所思的——我真不记得曾见过她有比那天早上更失魂落魄的时候。当我把那封信放到桌子上的时候，她说道：

“这么看来，史蒂文斯先生，还是你对了，是我错了。”

“肯顿小姐，你实在没必要自寻烦恼，”我说。“这种事情总是有的。我们无论做什么，都是没办法防止这些事情发生的。”

“错在我身上，史蒂文斯先生。我诚心接受。你一直都是对的，一如既往，错的是我。”

“肯顿小姐，你这话我实在是无法苟同。你在那个姑娘身上创造了奇迹。通过你的指导，她已经多少次用事实证明实际上当初是我错认了她。说真的，肯顿小姐，现在发生的这种事情也可能发生在任何雇员身上。你在她的身上已经取得了了不起的成就。你有绝对充分的理由为她的忘恩负义感到失望，可是没有任何理由为她的错误感到自责。”

肯顿小姐看上去仍旧很灰心丧气。她轻声道：“你这么说真是宽宏大量，史蒂文斯先生。我非常感激。”然后她疲惫不堪地叹了口气，说道：“她真傻。她本来完全可以有一个锦绣前程的。她有这个能力。有那么多年轻女人就像她那样把大好的机会全都浪费掉了，为的又是什么呢？”

我们俩不约而同地看着我们之间桌子上的那几张信纸，然后肯顿小姐怒冲冲地把头别了过去。

“的确，”我说。“真是种浪费，你说得没错。”

“真傻。那姑娘以后肯定会后悔的。她只要肯坚持下去，会过上不错的生活的。不出一两年，我就能让她够资格去个规模不大的公馆里担任女管家的。你也许觉得这有些痴心妄想，史蒂文斯先生，可是你瞧瞧这才几个月的时间，我已经把她调教成什么样子了。可是现在，她就这么把这一切全都抛下了。真是白忙活了一场。”

“她真是傻透了。”

我已经开始收拾面前的那几张信纸，想着或许应该把它们存档备查。可是我在这么做的时候，又有点不太确定肯顿小姐是否打算让我保留这封信，抑或她更希望由她自己保留，于是我又把那几张信纸放回到我们之间的桌子上。可是不管我怎么做，肯顿小姐一直都显得心不在焉。

“她日后肯定会后悔莫及的，”她又说了一遍。“太傻了。”

不过看起来我已经有些迷失在这些陈年往事的记忆中了。这绝非我的本意，不过或许这也并非什么坏事，因为如此一来，我至少就可

以避免过分地沉溺于今天傍晚发生的那些事情中——我确信这些事情终于算是告一段落了。因为刚刚过去的那几个钟头，我必须坦言，对我来说实在是一种煎熬。

此刻，我正借宿于泰勒先生和太太那幢小小的农舍的阁楼上。也就是说，这是一幢私人住宅；泰勒夫妇非常热心地供我今晚借宿的这个房间原本是他们的长子住的，他早已长大成人，如今住在埃克塞特⁽¹⁾。房间里最显眼的就是顶上粗重的梁椽，木地板上没有铺任何地毯和地垫，气氛却出奇地舒适惬意。很明显，泰勒太太不只是为了我铺好了床铺，她还特意清扫收拾了一番；因为除了椽子那儿还有几个蜘蛛网以外，几乎看不出这个房间已经有好多年无人居住了。至于泰勒先生和太太，我已经探听清楚，他们夫妻俩自从二十年代起就经营村里的蔬菜水果店，一直干到三年前退休。他们夫妻心地善良、为人和气，尽管今晚我不止一次提出要为他们的好意收留给以报酬，可他们一概都坚辞不受。

眼下我之所以来到这里，今晚之所以流落到只能仰仗泰勒先生和太太的慷慨大度才有地方过夜的地步，全都是因为我自己的一个愚蠢的、令人恼怒的简单疏忽造成的：即我居然把那辆福特车开得完全没有了汽油。一位旁观者如果从这件事以及昨天因散热器缺水而造成的麻烦上得出我这个人办事天性就缺乏条理的结论，那也不能说是完全没有道理的。当然了，可以稍稍为我开脱的理由也不是没有：我在驾车长途旅行方面毕竟还是个新手，这类愚蠢的疏忽也还不算是特别离谱。可是话又说回来了，当我想到良好的组织才能和深谋远虑恰恰是干我们这一行最重要的职业素养之时，不管怎么说，我也就很难避免再次深为自己感到失望和沮丧了。

不过在汽油耗尽之前的那一个小时候左右的时间里我一直都有些丧魂失魄的，这也是事实。我原本是计划夜宿塔维斯托克镇的，在不到八点的时候我就到了那里。可是在镇上那家最大的客栈里，店家却告诉我，由于当地正在举办一个农产品交易会，他们所有的房间都已经客满了。他们向我推荐了其他几家旅店，我一家家问过去，但每一家都以同样的理由向我道歉。最后，在镇子边上的一家家庭旅馆里，老板娘建议我不妨继续朝前再开个几英里，路边有她亲戚开的一家小旅店——那家店，她向我保证肯定会有空房，因为距离塔维斯托克太远，不会受到交易会的影响。

她给了我详尽的指示，当时感觉是够清楚的了，现在也不可能说清楚到底是谁的错了，反正结果我是没有发现这家路边旅店的任何踪

影。而在往前开了十五分钟左右以后，我发现自己已经驶入了一条蜿蜒穿越荒凉开阔的高沼地的长路。道路两侧看上去都像是沼泽地，而且一阵薄雾正慢慢漫过我眼前的道路。在我左手边，我能看到太阳落山的最后一缕霞光。天际线时不时会被不远处田野当中的谷仓以及农舍的轮廓打破，否则的话，我真像是已经被遗落在了荒无人烟的野地。

我记得大约是到了这个时候，我才掉转车头，往回开了一段距离，想找到之前经过的一个岔路口。可是等我开上那条岔路以后，却发现这条路比我刚才离开的那条路线更加荒凉。有一段时间，我就在近乎全黑的道路中行驶，两旁都是高大的树篱，然后又发现那条路开始爬起了陡坡。事已至此，我已经放弃了找到那家路边旅店的希望，决定还是继续往前开，等来到下一个城镇或是乡村的时候再找栖身之地。我可以明天一早再返回预定的路线，那应该是很容易做到的，我这样说服自己。就在这个时候，在山路爬了一半的时候，引擎开始发出了突突的噪声，我这才第一次注意到汽油已经用光了。

福特车又继续爬行了几码远，然后就停了下来。我走下车来评估一下当下的情势时，发现我只剩下几分钟的天光可用了。我站在一条陡路之上，被茂密的树木和灌木树篱夹在当中；再往山上望去，在老远的地方才看到连绵不断的树篱有了个缺口，衬着背后的天空现出一道栅栏门的宽大轮廓。我开始朝山上的那个地方走去，心想从那道栅栏门那儿也许能辨明自己的方位；或许甚至有希望在附近看到一家农舍，我能够指望得到及时的帮助。可是最后出现在我眼前的景象却不禁让我有点仓皇失措了。那扇门的另一侧是一片地势陡降的草地，视野所及只能看到面前二十码左右的距离，再往下就什么都看不清了。越过那片牧场隆起的高坡，远远的有一个小村庄一直线距离十足有一英里左右。透过薄雾可以辨别出一座教堂的尖塔，尖塔周围是一片深色石板瓦的屋顶；散布四处的烟囱里正冒出缕缕白烟。我得承认，在那一刻，我的内心是颇为灰心丧气的。当然了，当时的情况绝对说不上令人绝望；福特车并没有损坏，只不过没了汽油。半个小时之内就能走到那个小村庄，到了那里以后我肯定是能找到个投宿的地方和一桶汽油的。可是独立伫立在一个荒凉的山坡上，透过一扇栅栏门望着远处一个村庄的灯火，天光几乎已经完全褪尽，雾气越来越浓，那滋味实在不怎么好受。

可是徒然地意气消沉也于事无补。不管怎么说，浪费掉那天光仅存的最后几分钟时间就真是太傻了。我下坡走回福特车旁，把一些必需品放进一个公文包里。然后用一盏自行车灯把自己武装起来——那盏

灯投射出来的光柱居然出人意料地明亮——我就开始寻找一条能让我步行前往那个村庄的道路。虽然我往山上走了挺长一段距离，已经把那扇栅栏门远远抛在后面了，可我还是找不到这么一条道儿。这时我才感觉到那条路已经不再向上攀升，而是开始朝那个村庄相反的方向缓缓地蜿蜒而下一透过树篱枝叶的缝隙我不时能瞥见那个村庄的灯火——我的心头再次感到一阵灰心丧气。事实上，我一度怀疑最好的策略是不是应该重新回到福特车那里，干脆在车里坐等另一位司机开车经过。可是到了这个时候，天色几乎已经完全黑了下来，我很清楚，如果在这样的情况下招手去拦截路过的车辆，是很容易会被人误以为拦路抢劫的。再者说了，自打我从福特车里出来，还没有一辆车从我身边开过；事实上，打从我离开塔维斯托克以来，我压根就不记得曾经看到过一辆其他的汽车。最后我打定主意，还是回到那扇栅栏门附近，就从那儿走下那个草坡，尽量朝着村里的灯火直线前进，不去管它有没有什么适合行走的道路了。

结果我发现，那个斜坡倒并非太过险峻。一片片牧草地，一片紧接着一片，朝着村庄的方向铺展开去，而下坡的时候只要尽量贴着草地的边缘，走起来倒也并不太费力。只有那么一次，在距离村庄已经很近的地方，我实在找不到一条可以进入下面一片草地的明显通道了，我只得拿着那盏自行车灯来回地探照挡住我去路的灌木树篱。最后终于被我找到了一个小缺口，我人是可以勉强钻过去，只不过我外套的肩部和裤脚的卷边就得做出点牺牲了。不仅如此，最后那几片草地变得越来越泥泞不堪，我只能故意强忍着不把灯光朝我的鞋子和裤脚上面照，免得自己越发灰心丧气。

渐渐地，我发现自己终于走上了一条通往村庄的经过铺砌的小路，也正是在沿着这条道路往下走的时候，我碰见了泰勒先生，今晚好心接待我的东道主。他从我前面几码远的一个拐弯处走出来，很有礼貌地等着我赶上他，然后他碰了一下帽檐向我致意，主动问我是否有可以为我效劳之处。我尽量简明扼要地解释了一下我的处境，补充说明若是承蒙他指点一处不错的旅店，我将不胜感激之至。言已至此，泰勒先生不禁摇头道：“本村恐怕没有这样的旅店，先生。约翰·汉弗莱斯先生平常倒是会接待过往的客人入住‘十字钥’的，可是不巧他眼下正在整修旅店的房顶。”不过，还没等这个令人失望的消息发挥其全部的效力，泰勒先生马上就接口说：“如果您不介意稍微将就一点的话，先生，我们可以为您提供一个房间和一个床铺供您过夜。没有任何特别之处，不过我老伴儿肯定会负责把一切都收拾得干干净净、舒舒服服的。”

我相信自己也客套了几句，或许是颇为言不由衷，大意是我不能这么麻烦他们。泰勒先生对此的回答是：“实不相瞒，先生，您若是肯光临寒舍，那将是我们的莫大荣幸。我们这个莫斯科姆村可是不大见到像您这样的人物莅临的。而且恕我直言，天都这么晚了，除此以外您恐怕也没别的办法可想了。我要是就这么着把您扔在这黑更半夜里不管的话，我老伴儿是绝不会轻饶于我的。”

我于是恭敬不如从命，就这样接受了泰勒先生和太太的热情招待。不过我方才说起今晚的经历实在是种“煎熬”时，指的可并非只是汽油耗尽以及来到村里这一路上的狼狈不堪。因为随后发生的事情——在我坐下来和泰勒先生和太太以及他们的邻人共进晚餐以后所发生的一系列事件——以自己的方式证明了它们对我身心的压力可远比之前那单纯的肉体不适繁重得多。不瞒您说，等到我终于能够退回到这个房间，可以把时间花在回味达林顿府那些陈年往事上的时候，这真算得上是一种巨大的解脱。

事实上，近来我变得越来越容易沉湎于这些回忆当中了。自打几周前第一次产生了再次见到肯顿小姐的希望之后，我想我已经花费了大量时间用来反复思量我们之间的关系为什么会经历了那样的变化。经过多年的共事，我们之间已经稳定地确立起一种良好的工作互信，可是在一九三五或是一九三六年，这种关系却产生了确确实实的转变。实际上，到了最后，我们就连每天的工作结束后一起喝杯可可、聊聊天的例行性会面都放弃了。可是引起这种改变的到底是什么，究竟哪一串具体的事件真正要为此负责呢？我始终都没办法完全确定。

近来在反复琢磨的时候，我觉得那天傍晚肯顿小姐不请自来、发生在我的餐具室里的那个奇怪的小插曲有可能就是个关键的转折点。她为什么要到我的餐具室里来，我已经记不真切了。感觉上她可能是捧了一瓶花来使“餐具室显得明亮一点”，可是这么一来，我可能又把它跟多年前我们刚开始共事时她那次同样的举动给搞混了。我确实记得在这些年间，她至少有三次试图把鲜花带进我的餐具室，不过也许真是我记混了，认定这就是那个特别的傍晚她来找我的原因。可是无论如何，我都想特别强调一下，尽管这些年来我们的工作关系都很融洽，我却从来也没有放任到允许女管家可以成天随意进出我的餐具室的程度。管家的餐具室，至少在我看来，是个办公要地，是家务运营的心脏，在性质上并不亚于一场战役当中的司令部，所以，在这其中的大小物件，每一样都必须完完全全依照我的意愿摆放得井井有条——并且要维持原样——这是绝对不能含糊的。我可不是允许各色人等进进出出、又是质询又是聒噪抱怨个没完的那种管家。如果想要一切事

务都能顺畅协调地得以施行，管家的餐具室就一定得确保私密和清静，这是显而易见、毋庸置疑的。

事有凑巧，那天傍晚她进入我的餐具室的时候，我其实并没有在处理公事。也就是说，那时正是一天的工作接近尾声，那个礼拜又碰巧风平浪静，因此我也难得地享受到一个钟头左右的闲暇时间。前面已经说过，我已经不太确定肯顿小姐是不是捧着一瓶花进来的了，不过我确实记得她是这样说的：

“史蒂文斯先生，您的房间在晚上显得甚至比白天还要令人不快。那个电灯泡太暗了，肯定是不适合用来阅读的。”

“它完全合乎需要，谢谢您，肯顿小姐。”

“说真的，史蒂文斯先生，这个房间活像个囚室。只需要在墙角摆上一张小床，就完全想象得出那死刑犯在这儿度过最后几个钟头时光的情景。”

也许对此我也说过一句什么，我不记得了。总之，我的目光并没有离开面前的书本，时间一分一秒地过去，我正等着肯顿小姐告退然后离开呢，却不料突然听到她说：

“现在我很好奇您到底在读什么呢，史蒂文斯先生。”

“不过一本书而已，肯顿小姐。”

“这个我看得出来，史蒂文斯先生。可到底是本什么书呢——这才是让我大感兴趣的。”

我一抬头，发现肯顿小姐正朝着我走过来。我把书一合，把它紧紧地抓在手里、贴在胸口，站起身来。

“说真的，肯顿小姐，”我说，“我必须请您尊重我的隐私。”

“可是你为什么对自己读的书感到这么难为情呢，史蒂文斯先生？我相当怀疑这可能是本相当下流的书呢。”

“这是绝不可能的，肯顿小姐，爵爷的书架上面是没有一本你所谓的‘下流’的书的。”

“我曾听说很多学术性的书籍当中都包含最下流的段落，可我从来都没有胆量去找找看。好了，史蒂文斯先生，请你务必让我看看你在读的到底是本什么书。”

“肯顿小姐，我必须请您不要再纠缠我了。我难得有这么点属于自己的空闲时间，而您却非要这样胡搅蛮缠，这真是让人难以忍受。”

可是肯顿小姐却继续向我走来，我必须承认，在这种情况下最好以什么样的举动来应对还真是有点难以确定。我曾想到过干脆把书往桌子的抽屉里一扔，然后把抽屉锁上，不过这未免有些过于戏剧化了。我只能往后退了几步，那本书仍紧贴在我胸口上。

“请让我看看你抱在怀里的到底是本什么书，史蒂文斯先生，”肯顿小姐道，继续步步紧逼，“看过以后我就不再打搅你，让你尽管去享受阅读的乐趣了。这到底是本什么书啊，为什么你这么着急上火地要去藏藏掖掖呢？”

“肯顿小姐，您是否发现了这到底是本什么书，其实对我来说根本就无所谓。可是就原则而论，我反对您就这么不请自来，并且侵犯我的私人时间。”

“我很好奇，这到底是一本完全高尚的书呢，史蒂文斯先生，还是你其实是在保护我，以免我受到它可怕的影响呢？”

这时她已经站到了我面前，而突然间，气氛发生了奇怪的变化——就仿佛我们俩一下子一起被推到了另一个时空当中。恐怕我也很难把我的意思完全解释清楚。我所能说的只是，我们周围的一切突然间变得完全凝固了；在我的印象中，肯顿小姐的态度也发生了突然的变化；她的表情奇怪地严肃了起来，我猛然间感觉她几乎像是被吓到了。

“请让我看看你的书，史蒂文斯先生。”

她伸出手，开始轻轻地把我手里的那本书往外抽。我感觉在她这样做时我最好还是把目光从她身上避开，可是她人靠我这么近，要想做到这一点，就只能把我的脑袋扭到一个很不自然的角度。肯顿小姐继续非常轻柔地掰开我握着那本书的手指，简直可以说是一根手指掰开以后再去掰另一根手指。这个过程似乎持续了很长的时间——在此期间我一直都尽量保持着那个很不自然的姿态——一直到我听到她说：

“天哪，史蒂文斯先生，这根本就不是什么见不得人的书嘛。只不过是感伤的爱情故事。”

我相信，大概正是在这个时候，我决定无须再忍耐下去了。我不记得当时我所说的具体字句了，不过我记得我相当坚决地将肯顿小姐

请出了我的餐具室，这个小插曲也就此告一段落。

我想，我应该就这个小插曲所实际涉及的那本书的情况再多说两句。那本书确实可以被描述为一部“感伤的罗曼司”——有不少这类小说摆放在藏书室里，也放在几间客房里，主要是供女客们消遣之用。而我之所以会选择阅读此类作品，有一个很简单的原因；这是一种维持并且提高自己对于英语这门语言的掌握程度的极为有效的方法。我个人认为——不知道您是否同意——就我们这一代管家而言，都一直过于强调高雅的口音和对语言的掌握在专业期许方面的地位；我的意思是说，有时候这些因素被强调得过了头，甚至不惜以牺牲更为重要的专业素质为代价。尽管如此，我从来也没有否认优雅的口音和对语言的熟练掌握自是一种极有魅力的特质，而且一直都认为，尽我所能地发展自己在这方面的能力也是我分内的职责。而最直接有效的一种方法就是在零碎的空余时间里尽可能多读上几页文辞优美的书籍。这就是我多年以来一直采取的策略方法，而我之所以经常选择肯顿小姐那天傍晚发现我在看的那类作品，只是因为其中那众多措辞优雅的对话对我具有极大的实用价值。换了一本分量更重的书籍——比如说一本学术专著——虽然总体来说更有提高自身修养的价值，但它更倾向于大量使用学术术语，这对于我在跟绅士淑女们日常交流过程中起到的作用反而非常有限。

我极少有时间或者意愿把任何一本这类的罗曼司从头到尾读一遍，就我的认识，它们的情节全都甚为荒唐可笑——确实够得上感伤已极——若非因为前面提到的那些益处，我是一分一秒的时间都不愿意浪费在它们身上的。不过话虽如此，如今我也不介意坦白承认——我并不觉得这其中有任何应该感到羞愧的地方——从这些故事当中我有时候也确实能得到一些附带的乐趣。或许当初我不太愿意承认这一点，不过就像我说过的，这有什么好自感羞愧的呢？一个人为什么就不该放松心情，去享受那些绅士淑女陷入爱河的故事之乐呢？况且他们之间又是以最为优雅的遣词造句去尽情倾诉爱慕之情的。

不过我这么说并非是想暗示那天傍晚我处理这件事的方式有欠妥当。因为您必须理解，问题在于这牵涉到一个重要的原则。事实上，在肯顿小姐长驱直入我的餐具室的那一刻，我已经“下班”了。当然，任何一位以其职业为荣的管家，任何一位矢志于追求海斯协会所谓“与其职位相称之尊严”的管家，在面对他人时是决不会允许自己“下班”的。所以在那一刻走进来的到底是肯顿小姐还是一个完全的陌生人，都是无关紧要的。任何一位具有专业素养的管家在别人面前都必须完全彻底地活在自己的角色中；他一刻都不能被人看到自己一

会儿将这个角色抛到一边，一会儿又披挂整齐，就仿佛那职位不过是哑剧演员的一件戏服而已。只有在唯一的一种情况之下，一位注重其尊严的管家可以随意地卸下他的职业角色；那就是在他完全独处的时刻。如此说来，您也就可以理解，肯顿小姐在我不无道理地认定自己是独自一人的时刻硬闯了进来，这件事也就成了一个至关重要的原则性问题、一个的确的确关乎尊严的问题了，因为我在任何人面前都不得有一丝一毫不符合我的角色设定的表现。

不过，我的本意并非是想在此分析多年前这个小插曲的不同方面。而重点是这件事使我警觉到肯顿小姐和我之间的关系已经发展到了一无疑是经过了很长一段时间的渐进过程——一种很不合适的状态。她居然会有那天傍晚如此这般的举动，这个事实本身就等于是敲响了警钟，我在把她送出餐具室、稍稍集中了一下思想以后，我记得我就决定要着手在一个更为适当的基础上来重建我们的工作关系。不过至于说到那一事件对于那以后我们之间的关系所经历的巨大变化究竟有多大的影响，那就很难说得清了。或许还有其他更加根本性的事态发展导致了最后的结果。比如，肯顿小姐的休假问题。

自从来到达林顿府工作，直到餐具室那一事件发生前大约一个月，肯顿小姐的休假安排一直都遵循着一个可以预期的模式。每过六个星期她会休两天的假，去南安普敦⁽²⁾看望她姨妈；要不然就学我的样，不会真正去休假，除非有段时间特别平静无事，在这种情况下，她会整天都在庭院里四处逛逛，或者就在她的起坐间里看看书。可是到了我说的那个时候，这种模式也起了变化。她突然开始充分利用合同上规定的休息时间，经常一大早就不见了人影，除了当晚预计返回的时间以外，别的信息一概不留。当然了，她从来没有超出她应该享有的休息时限，所以我觉得再去询问她这些外出的详细情况也并不合适。不过我想她的这种改变确实使我有些心绪不宁，因为我记得自己曾跟詹姆斯·钱伯斯爵士的贴身男仆兼管家格雷厄姆先生提起过此事——他真是一位极好的同行，可是顺便提一句，我现在已经跟他失去了联系——就在他随主人定期造访达林顿府的某天晚上，我们围炉谈心的时候。

其实，我不过就说了句我们的女管家情绪“近来有些阴晴不定”，所以颇有些惊讶于格雷厄姆先生闻言居然点了点头，探身挨近我，以一种心照不宣的语气对我说：

“我早就料到了，只是不知道还有多长时间。”

我问他这话到底什么意思，格雷厄姆先生继续道：“你们的肯顿小姐呀。她今年多大年纪了？三十三？三十四？已经错过了做母亲的最佳年龄，不过还不算太晚。”

“肯顿小姐，”我向他保证，“可是位恪尽职守的职业女性。我碰巧知道，她根本就无意于组建家庭。”

可是格雷厄姆先生却面带微笑摇了摇头道：“如果一个女管家告诉你她不想组建家庭，你可千万不可信以为真。说起来了，史蒂文斯先生，咱们就坐在这里掰着指头数一下，至少得有十多位女管家都信誓旦旦地这么宣称过，结果还不是嫁了人，离开了我们这一行。”

我记得那天傍晚我还颇有自信地对格雷厄姆先生的理论置之不理，可打那以后，我必须承认，我就发现自己很难摆脱肯顿小姐这些神秘外出可能是去会一位追求者这样的想法。这的确是个令人颇为困扰的念头，因为不难看出，肯顿小姐的离开将是我们工作上相当重大的损失，一个达林顿府将很难从中恢复过来的重大损失。而且，我不得不承认，颇有些其他的小征兆看来也在支持格雷厄姆先生的理论。比方说，收取信件一直都是我的一项职责，我忍不住注意到肯顿小姐已经开始相当规律地收到一大约每周一次一同一位通信者的来信，而且这些信件上盖的都是本地的邮戳。在此我或许应该指出的一点是，这样的变化我几乎是不可能注意不到的，因为此前她在达林顿府里这么多年间本来是极少收到信件的。

此外，还有其他一些隐微的迹象也在支持格雷厄姆先生的观点。比方说，虽然她继续以一贯的全副勤勉态度履行其职责，她的情绪总的来说却变得有些阴晴不定，这是我迄今为止从未有见到过的。而事实上，当她一连好几天情绪特别高涨的时候一而且没有任何明显的理由一几乎就跟她经常性地突然陷入长时间的郁郁寡欢同样让我备感困扰。如我所说，她自始至终都保持着绝对的专业态度，可话又说回来了，为达林顿府的长远利益着想是我的职责，如果这些迹象果如格雷厄姆先生所言，预示着肯顿小姐正考虑为了爱情的缘故离开工作岗位，我自然是有责任就此事做些进一步的探究的。于是在某个我们惯常碰面一起喝杯热可可的傍晚，我就不揣冒昧把问题提了出来：

“您星期四还要外出吗，肯顿小姐？我是说您休假的那天。”

我原以为我这么问她，她多半是要生气的，可是恰恰相反，她简直就像是好长时间以来一直都在等着提出这个话题的机会似的。因为她以几分如释重负的口气说：

“哦，史蒂文斯先生，那不过是之前我在格兰切斯特宅工作时认识的一个人。事实上，他当时是那座宅子的管家，不过他现在已经完全离开了这一行，受雇于附近的一家商号。他不知怎的得知了我在这里工作，就开始给我写信，建议我们重续旧交。史蒂文斯先生，长话短说就是这么回事。”

“我明白了，肯顿小姐。偶尔离开这儿出去走走确实也能让人感觉身心舒畅。”

“我发现正是如此，史蒂文斯先生。”

出现了一阵短暂的沉默。然后肯顿小姐像是下定了决心，继续道：

“说起我的这位旧相识。我记得他在格兰切斯特宅做管家的时候，他可真是壮志凌云。事实上，我想他的终极梦想就是成为像达林顿府这样的豪门巨室的管家。哦，可我现在一想起他当初的那些管理方法！说真的，史蒂文斯先生，如果您现在看到他那些做法的话，我能想象得出您会有什么样的表情。也真是难怪他壮志难酬了。”

我轻轻一笑。“以我的经验，”我说，“有太多的人相信自己有能力在更高等级的岗位上工作，对于这更高的岗位所要求的素质却没有丝毫的概念。这样的工作肯定不是任何人都干得了的。”

“这话说得是。史蒂文斯先生，如果您当初就有机会对他做出观察的话，真不知道您到底会怎么说！”

“干我们这一行的，肯顿小姐，到了这样的级别以后，就真不是每个人都能胜任的了。心怀凌云壮志自是容易，可是如果不具备特定的素质，一个做管家的到了一定的层次以后就真是再难有所进境了。”

肯顿小姐像是对这番话默想了片刻，然后道：

“我突然想到，您肯定已经心满意足了，史蒂文斯先生。毕竟，您看，您已经处在了事业的顶峰，对于这个领域的方方面面，无不尽在您的掌握之中。我真是无法想象您还会有什么样的人生目标。”

我一时还真想不出对此该如何回应。在继之而起的一阵略显尴尬的沉默当中，肯顿小姐把目光转向手里盛热可可的杯子的底部，就好

像被她在那里发现的某样东西给吸引住了。最后，在经过一番考虑之后，我说：

“就我而言，肯顿小姐，我得一直等到尽我之所能协助爵爷把他为自己设定的那些伟大的任务统统完成以后，我的职业才能算得上是圆满了。爵爷的工作大功告成之日，到他对自己已经取得的荣誉终于感到满足了，到他满意地知道他已经做到了每个人对他提出的所有的合理要求以后，只有到了那一天，肯顿小姐，我才能够自称为，如您所言，一个心满意足之人。”

她可能对我的这番话感到了一丝困惑；或者也许是其中有些地方让她感到了不快。总之，她的情绪似乎就是在那一刻发生了改变，我们之间的谈话马上就丧失了一开始那种相当私人化的基调。

就在那次谈话以后不久，我们在她的起坐间里举行的这些热可可聚谈便无疾而终了。事实上，我清楚地记得我们最后那次以这种方式进行的聚谈；我本来是希望跟肯顿小姐商量一下一桩即将到来的社交盛会的安排——苏格兰的一群名流显贵将来此举行一次周末聚会。事实上，那个活动尚有一个左右的时间才会举行，不过对于盛大活动的具体安排及早进行讨论一直就是我们的习惯。就在那天傍晚，对于那次活动的方方面面我已经径自谈论了有一会儿了，这才意识到肯顿小姐一直都没怎么表态；又过了一段时间，我已经清楚地发现她的心思其实完全就不在这上头。我有几次还特地问她：“您在听我说话吗，肯顿小姐？”尤其是在我针对某一点说了一大段话以后，虽然经我这么一问以后，她每次都会变得稍稍警醒一点，可是不出几秒钟，我就看得出来她已经又神游天外了。在我滔滔不绝地讲了好几分钟以后，她唯一的反应也不过就是回一句类似“当然，史蒂文斯先生”，或者“我非常同意，史蒂文斯先生”这样的话。最后我终于对她说：

“很抱歉，肯顿小姐，不过我看我们再继续下去也没什么意思了。您像是根本就不觉得这次讨论有什么重要的。”

“很抱歉，史蒂文斯先生，”她说，稍稍坐直了身子。“只是因为今晚真的有点累了。”

“您现在越来越容易累了，肯顿小姐。在过去您可是从来不需要求助于这样的借口的。”

让我吃惊的是，肯顿小姐突然勃然变色道：

“史蒂文斯先生，我这个礼拜都忙得不可开交。我已经很累了。事实上，三四个钟头以前我就希望赶快上床休息了。我真是非常、非常累了，史蒂文斯先生，难道您一点都看不出来吗？”

我原本也没有期望她会为一直都心不在焉而向我道歉的，可是这个回答之强硬，我必须说，还是让我有点吃惊。不过，我决定还是不跟她卷入一场无谓的争执，我刻意停顿了好一会儿以后，这才心平气和地道：

“如果您的感受是这样的话，肯顿小姐，那我们也就根本无须再继续这些晚上的碰面了。我很抱歉，我居然一直都没有觉察到这样的碰面给您造成了这么大的不便。”

“史蒂文斯先生，我只是说我今天晚上很累……”

“不，不，肯顿小姐，这是完全可以理解的。您本来就工作繁忙，这些碰面等于又给您增加了不必要的负担。即便是不以这种方式每天碰面，也还有很多其他的方法可以保证在我们之间实现工作层面上的必要沟通。”

“史蒂文斯先生，实在没这个必要。我只是说……”

“我是认真的，肯顿小姐。事实上，已经有一段时间，我一直都在考虑是不是还要继续这样的碰面，既然它们平白又延长了我们本已经非常忙碌的日常工作。我们每天在您这儿碰面晤谈的方式虽已延续了多年，但这一事实本身并不成其为我们就该寻求一种更方便的安排方式的理由。”

“史蒂文斯先生，请别这样，我相信这些碰面还是非常有用的……”

“可是它们给您带来了不便啊，肯顿小姐。它们使您精疲力竭。请容我建议，从今往后，我们就只在正常的工作时间内找些空当来沟通重要的信息。万一不能及时地找到对方，我建议我们写个字条留在对方的房门上。在我看来这不失为一种完善的解决办法。好了，肯顿小姐，很抱歉耽误了您这么长时间。非常感谢您的热可可。”

自然—我又何必不肯承认呢？—我偶尔也会暗自思忖，如果对于我们晚间的晤谈问题我的态度不是如此决绝的话—也就是说，如果在那以后的几个星期里，面对肯顿小姐好几次恢复晚间晤谈的建议，我的态度肯于软化的话，长远看来事态的发展究竟会是怎么样的。直到

现在我才开始考虑这个问题，是因为有鉴于此后事态的发展，我很有理由认为当初我在一劳永逸地决定终止那些晚间碰头的例会之时，我也许并没有完全意识到我的所作所为可能带来的全部影响。的确，甚至可以说我的这个小小的决定竟在某种程度上成为一个关键的转折点；我的这一决定使得事态的发展无可避免地迈向了最终的结果。

不过话又说回来了，人一旦凭借着后见之明，开始在自己的过去当中找寻类似的“转折点”，我想就常常会开始觉得它们无处不在。不仅是我针对我们的晚间晤谈所做的决定，还有在我的餐具室里发生的那个小插曲，如果愿意这么想的话，也可以被视作是这样的“转折点”。人们也许会问，如果那天傍晚肯顿小姐捧着花瓶走进来的时候，我的反应稍有不同，那又会有什么样的结果呢？还有，在肯顿小姐收到姨妈的死讯后，我跟她在餐厅里不期而遇的那一次一大约跟这些事件发生在同一个时期——或许也可以被视作另一个这样的“转折点”。

那死讯是几个钟头前送到的；的确，那天早上就是我敲开她起坐间的房门，亲手把那封信递给她。我走进去待了一小会儿，跟她讨论了某件工作上的事务，我记得我们围坐在她的桌前，而她就是在我们交谈中间把那封信拆开的。她一下子就呆住了，值得赞扬的是她的神态仍能保持镇定，将那封信从头到尾看了至少有两遍。然后她把信小心地塞回信封，抬头看着桌子对面的我。

“是我姨妈的伴当约翰逊太太写来的。她说我姨妈前天去世了。”她顿了顿，然后说：“葬礼定在明天举行。不知道我能不能告假一天？”

“肯定可以安排的，肯顿小姐。”

“谢谢您，史蒂文斯先生。请原谅，不过我也许现在想单独待一会儿。”

“当然了，肯顿小姐。”

我告退离开，可是直到我已经出来以后，这才想起我实际上并没有明确向她致以慰唁之意。我完全可以想象这消息对她是个多大的打击，因为她姨妈一直以来在方方面面对她而言就像是她的亲生母亲一样。我在走廊里犹豫了一会儿，思量着我是否应该返回去敲开门，好好弥补一下我的疏漏。可是我接着又想，要是我真这么做的话，极有可能会打扰到她不欲公开流露的哀伤之情。的的确确，就在那一刻，肯顿小姐极有可能就在距离我只有几英尺之遥的屋内痛哭失声。这种

想法在我心里激起了一种奇怪的感觉，使得我就在那走廊上独自踌躇、徘徊了良久。不过最终我还是判定，最好还是另找机会表达我的慰问之情，于是就先离开了。

结果是我直到当天下午才又见到她，如前所说，我是在餐厅里碰到她的，她正把瓷器往餐具柜里放。在此之前，肯顿小姐的丧亲之痛已经在我心头盘踞了好几个钟头，我一直都在琢磨最好是做点什么或是说点什么才能稍稍减轻一下她的情感负担。因此，我在听到她走进餐厅的脚步声以后——我当时正在门厅里忙着某样工作——我等了约莫有一分钟，就放下手里的工作走进了餐厅。

“啊，肯顿小姐，”我说。“今天下午您感觉还好吗？”

“挺好的，谢谢您，史蒂文斯先生。”

“一切都还正常吧？”

“一切都很正常，谢谢您。”

“我一直想问问您，最近这批新到的员工有没有给您带来什么特别的麻烦。”我轻轻一笑。“一时间有这么多人同时到来，很容易出现各种各样的小麻烦和小问题。我敢说，在这样的時候如果我们能稍稍探讨一下，即便是我们这一行当中的佼佼者都经常能得益匪浅呢。”

“谢谢您，史蒂文斯先生，不过我对新来的那两个姑娘感到非常满意。”

“有鉴于近来有多位新员工加入进来，您不觉得目前的人员配置规划有必要做些调整吗？”

“我不觉得有什么调整的必要，史蒂文斯先生。不过如果我的想法有变的话，我会第一时间告诉您的。”

她转头继续整理餐具柜，我一时打算就此离开餐厅了，事实上，我相信我实际上已经朝餐厅门口走了几步了，不过我停下脚步，转过头来又对她说：

“这么说来，肯顿小姐，您觉得新来的几位员工适应得还不错喽？”

“两个姑娘表现得都非常好，我可以向您保证。”

“啊，很高兴听您这么说。”我又短促地一笑。“我只是想了解一下情况，因为我们都知道，她们俩都没有在这样规模的宅第里工作过。”

“的确如此，史蒂文斯先生。”

我看着她把瓷器往餐具柜里摆，等着看看她还有什么想说的。过了好一会儿，看到她很明显再没有什么话要说了，我才开口道：“事实上，肯顿小姐，请恕我直言。我已经注意到最近有一两件工作做得有失水准。我真觉得对于新来的这批员工，您也许还是不要这么沾沾自喜才好。”

“您这话是什么意思，史蒂文斯先生？”

“就我个人而言，肯顿小姐，每当有新的员工到来，我都会加倍注意，以确保一切都不出问题。我会在各个方面检查他们的工作成效，并试图评估他们与其他员工相处得如何。毕竟，对于他们在业务方面以及整体的精神面貌方面的影响有个清楚的认识是非常重要的。我不得不很遗憾地指出，肯顿小姐，不过我相信您在这些方面可能稍稍有点粗心大意。”

肯顿小姐一时间显得有些困惑不解。然后她转身看着我，脸色明显绷得紧紧的。

“您说什么，史蒂文斯先生？”

“比方说，肯顿小姐，虽说这些餐具清洗的情况符合我们一贯的高标准，可是我注意到它们摆放在厨房架子上的方式，尽管目前来看并无显而易见的危险，不过长此以往，餐具的破损率恐怕就会超过必要的标准了。”

“是这样吗，史蒂文斯先生？”

“是的，肯顿小姐。还有啊，早餐厅后面那个小壁龛也有段时间没有打扫过了。恕我失礼，不过还有一两件其他的小事可以提一下。”

“您不必再特别强调了，史蒂文斯先生。我会遵照您的建议，重新检查新来的女仆的工作。”

“忽略了这么明显的小瑕疵，这可不像是您的做派啊，肯顿小姐。”

肯顿小姐把脸别过去，脸上再次出现了那种表情，就像是努力想弄清楚让她困惑不已的某一件事。她的神色与其说是生气，不如说是疲惫。然后她把餐具柜一关，说：“失陪了，史蒂文斯先生，”径自离去。

可是，总是在悬想当年的某时某刻若是不像当初那般行事的话，结局将会怎样，这又有什么意义呢？这样下去，恐怕只会徒然让自己心烦意乱。总之，说说当初的哪件事成了“转折点”自是无妨，可是这样的时刻也只能在回顾当中才能追认。自然，如今在回顾这些往事的时候，它们在我的人生当中确实呈现为异常关键而又珍贵的时刻；可是在当时自然是不会有这种想法的。反而会觉得在我面前还有数不尽的日、月、年，可以在其中慢慢地理清我跟肯顿小姐关系当中的那些别扭和无常；将来还有无数的机会可以弥补这个或那个误会所造成的影响。当时可是绝对没有丝毫迹象显示，这些显然都是渺不足道的小事竟会致使所有的梦想永远都无法兑现。

不过我看我是变得有些过度内省了，而且还是一种性质相当阴郁的内省。无疑，这肯定是跟夜静更深，以及今晚所经受的那一连串恼人的事件有关。无疑，我现在的心境肯定也跟明天我应该就能在多年睽违之后终于又能见到肯顿小姐这一事实不无关系——只要我能在当地的汽修厂买到汽油，就像泰勒夫妇向我保证的那样——我预计明天午饭时间就能到达小康普顿。当然，没有任何理由认为我们的重逢不会是友好而又热诚的。事实上，以我的预期，我们的会晤——除了几句在此情况下必不可少的朋友间的嘘寒问暖以外——主要应该还是以谈工作为主。也就是说，既然肯顿小姐的婚姻已经是不幸地貌似走向了失败，而且连家都没有了，那么我的责任就是要确认她是否还有兴趣回到达林顿府重操旧业。在此我也不妨直说了吧，今晚再次重读她的来信以后，我倾向于认为我此前对于其中某些字句的解读或许有先入为主和强作解人之嫌，实在不够明智。不过我仍旧认为她来信当中的特定段落的确流露出一不只是一星半点的怀旧之情，尤其是当她写下类似这样的话语时：“当时我是多么喜欢从三楼的那几间卧室里俯瞰大草坪以及远处那绿草如茵的开阔高地。”

不过话又说回来了，既然明天就能当面获悉肯顿小姐目前的真实意愿，再这样没完没了地反复猜度思量又有什么意义呢？反正，我也已经远远偏离了对于今晚各种遭遇的讲述。就容我这么说吧，最后这几个钟头过得实在是活活要把人给累死。我原以为，在一个晚上不得不把福特车弃置于荒郊野岭、不得不摸黑从根本没有路的山上跋涉到这个村子里，这些遭遇已经是够我受的了；而且我相信，我那善良的

主人泰勒先生和太太也绝非是故意让我承受刚刚经历的这番苦楚的。但事实就是如此，一旦我在他们的餐桌前坐下来准备用晚餐，一旦他们的几位邻居开始过来拜访，那一连串最令人难熬的事件就在我身边轮流开始上演了。

农舍楼下的房间看起来被泰勒先生和太太用作了餐厅兼日常的起居室。房间相当温馨舒适，正中摆放着一张农家的厨房里常见的那种做工粗糙的大木桌，桌面没有上漆，布满了切肉刀和切面包的刀子留下的细小刀痕。尽管我们仅靠墙角架子上的一盏油灯那昏黄的光线照明，这些刀痕仍旧清晰可见。

“并不是说我们这个偏僻地方没有供电，先生，”用餐期间泰勒先生对我说，同时朝那盏油灯点了点头。“可是线路出了问题，我们有差不多两个月没有电了。不过实不相瞒，我们也并不太想念有电的那些日子。咱们这个村子里有几户人家就从来没用过电灯。油灯的光线给人的感觉更加温暖。”

泰勒太太给我们端上来可口的肉汤，我们以脆皮面包佐餐，那时还没有什么迹象预示着今天晚上还会有什么令人发怵的事情发生，我本以为也就再花一小时左右的时间愉快地聊聊天就可以上床休息了。然而，我们刚刚吃完晚饭，泰勒先生正给我倒一杯邻居家酿的艾尔啤酒的时候，听到屋外的砾石路上传来了脚步声。在我听来，黑暗当中逐渐逼近一幢孤零零的偏僻村舍的脚步声里自有一点点不祥的味道，不过无论是主人还是主妇倒都像是并没有觉得来人有什么恶意。因为从泰勒先生的问话当中就只听得出好奇的语气：“哈啰，来的是谁啊？”

他这话更像是自言自语，可是接着我们就听到门外有人大声地自报家门，就像是回答他这句问话一样：“是我，乔治·安德鲁斯。正巧打这儿路过。”

紧接着，泰勒太太就将一位身材魁梧、五十来岁的男人迎了进来，看他的穿着打扮，他这一天应该都在干农活儿。从他熟不拘礼的态度上可以看出他是这儿的常客，他在进门的一个小凳子上坐下，有点费劲地脱下脚上的威灵顿橡胶靴，一边跟泰勒太太闲聊了几句。然后朝餐桌走来，停下脚步，在我面前以立正姿势站得笔直，就像是军队里向长官进行汇报一样。

“敝姓安德鲁斯，先生，”他说。“祝您晚上好。听闻您的不幸遭遇我深感遗憾，不过我希望您在敝村莫斯科姆度过的这一夜不至于

让您太过失望。”

我有点困惑不解，这位安德鲁斯先生又是怎么听说他所谓的我的“不幸遭遇”的呢？不管怎么说，我还是面带微笑地回答说，我绝没有感到什么“失望”，对于受到的盛情款待唯有不尽的感激之情。我说这话当然指的是泰勒先生和太太的好心相助，谁知安德鲁斯先生像是自认为也被包括在我所感激的对象当中了，因为他马上就自卫一样地举起两只巨掌，说道：

“哦，不，先生，您太客气啦。我们非常高兴您能来到这里。像您这样的人物可是不会经常途经敝村的。您能在此停留我们更是高兴还来不及呢。”

听他这话的意思，像是说这整个村子的人都已经知道了我的“不幸遭遇”以及随后入住这幢农舍的经过。我后来发现，事实上也差不多正是如此；我只能猜想，就在我刚刚被领进这个卧室以后一在我洗净双手，正尽力补救一下外套和裤脚的污损之际一泰勒先生和太太就把有关我的消息讲给了路过的村民们听了。总而言之，几分钟以后就又来了一位客人，那人的外貌跟安德鲁斯先生非常相像一也就是说，同样是肩宽背厚、务农为业，脚下一双沾满泥浆的威灵顿橡胶靴，而且他进门和脱靴的方式就跟安德鲁斯先生如出一辙。事实上，他们两位的相貌和做派真是太像了，我还真以为他们是兄弟俩，直到新来者自我介绍说：“敝姓摩根，先生，特雷弗·摩根。”

摩根先生先是对于我的“不幸”表达了遗憾之情，向我保证第二天一早一切都会迎刃而解，然后又表示整个村庄是多么欢迎我的到来。当然，稍早之前我已经听到过类似的亲切致意了，可是摩根先生的原话居然是：“像您这样的绅士居然来到莫斯科姆村，这真是我们的无上荣光，先生。”

我还没来得及想好跟如何回答他这番话，屋外的小径上就又传来了更多的脚步声。不久，一对中年夫妇就被迎了进来，主人向我介绍他们是哈里·史密斯先生和太太。这两位看起来却全然不像是务农的；史密斯太太是位发了福的大块头女人，不禁令我想起了二三十年代在达林顿府服务近二十年之久的厨娘莫蒂默太太。哈里·史密斯先生却和太太形成了鲜明的对比，是个小个儿，眉头紧锁，表情一直都很紧张。他们在桌边坐下以后，史密斯先生对我说：“您的车就是停在荆棘山上的那辆古董福特吧，先生？”

“如果您说的就是俯瞰这个村子的那座小山的话，”我说。“不过听您说您居然见到了那辆车，我倒是挺惊讶的。”

“我并没有亲眼见到，先生。不过戴夫·桑顿刚才开着拖拉机回家的时候，在路上见到了它。看到居然有那么一辆车停在路边，他大为惊讶，他还特地停下拖拉机，下来看了看。”说到这里，哈里·史密斯先生转过头去对着围桌而坐的其他人说道：“真是漂亮极了，那辆车。他说他从来也没见过这么漂亮的车。把林赛先生从前开的那辆车完全给比下去了！”

这引起大家的哄堂大笑，泰勒先生特地给我解释说：“林赛先生是从前住在离这儿不远的那幢大房子里的一位绅士，先生。他干过一两件挺出格的事，惹得周围的乡亲们不大待见他。”

这话引起一阵噼噼啪啪的赞同声。然后有个人说：“祝您健康，先生，”举起一大杯泰勒太太刚才给大家斟满的艾尔啤酒，紧接着大家就全体共同举杯向我敬起酒来。

我微笑道：“我向诸位保证，能来到贵地是我的荣幸。”

“您太客气了，先生，”史密斯太太道。“这才是真正的绅士风度。那个林赛先生根本就不是什么绅士。他也许有很多钱，可他绝不是个绅士。”

这话再次赢得大家的一致赞同。然后泰勒太太凑在史密斯太太的耳边悄声说了句什么，史密斯太太回答说：“他说他会尽快赶过来的。”这两位太太一起转脸看着我，神色有些不太自然，还是史密斯太太开口道：“我们跟卡莱尔医生说了您在这儿的消息，先生。医生表示非常高兴能有机会跟您结识。”

“我想他还有病人要接诊，”泰勒太太表示歉意地补充道。“恐怕我们无法确定他能在您需要休息之前及时赶过来。”

这个时候，那位眉头紧锁的小个子男人哈里·史密斯先生再次探身向前说道：“那位林赛先生，他真是大错特错了，不是吗？做出那样的事来。自以为不知道比我们高明多少，把我们全都当傻瓜。哼，我可以告诉您，先生，很快他就知道不是这么回事儿啦。咱们村里可是有不少肯动脑筋、喜欢讨论的人。咱们这里有的是明确的主见，而且从来不会羞于把它表达出来。你们那位林赛先生很快就知道厉害，学了乖啦。”

“他不是绅士，”泰勒先生平静地道。“他根本就不是个绅士，那位林赛先生。”

“一点都不假，先生，”哈里·史密斯先生道。“你只要打眼一看，就看得出他不是个绅士。不错，他是有一幢漂亮的房子，一身上等的套装，可尽管如此你就是知道。他也很快就露了馅儿啦。”

又是一阵噼噼啪啪的赞同声，一度所有在场的人都似乎在考虑向我透露当地这位名人的故事是否合适。后来还是泰勒先生打破了沉默。

“哈里说得没错。你一打眼就能看得出谁是真正的绅士，谁是衣着光鲜的冒牌货。就拿您自己来说吧，先生。使您成为一位绅士的可不是您身上衣服的剪裁，甚至不是您谈吐的优雅方式，而是别的某一种特质。很难说得清楚，可是只要眼睛不瞎，一打眼就看得出来。”

这话引来了大家更多的赞同。

“卡莱尔先生应该很快就到了，先生，”泰勒太太插嘴道。“您肯定会跟他谈得很愉快的。”

“卡莱尔先生也有那样的特质，”泰勒先生道。“他是有的。他是个真正的绅士，一点不假。”

摩根先生自打进来以后就没怎么开口，这时候探身向前对我说：“您觉得这种特质到底是什么呢，先生？也许拥有这种特质的人能说得更加清楚。我们一直都在这么议论谁有谁没有的，可我们绝不可能比我们议论的对象更明智。也许您能指点我们一二，先生。”

大家顿时安静了下来，我能感到所有人都把脸转向了我这边。我轻咳了一声，说：

“让我来对于我可能具备也可能不具备的特质发表意见，是极不合适的。不过，就这个具体的问题而言，我料想大家所谓的这种特质可能可以最为方便地用‘尊严’二字来界定。”

我认为对此无须再做任何进一步的解释了。的确，我不过是在倾听大家谈话的过程中将我头脑中一闪而过的想法随口说了出来，若非大家的突然要求，我都很怀疑自己是否还会说出这番话来的。不过，大家对我的回答倒似乎是颇为满意。

“您的话很有道理，先生，”安德鲁斯先生道，频频点头，其他几位也应声附和。

“那位林赛先生也确实需要更多一点尊严才好，”泰勒太太道。“可是他这一类人的问题就在于他们错把装腔作势、趾高气扬当成了尊严。”

“不过请注意，”哈里·史密斯先生插嘴道，“应该说我非常尊重您的意见，先生。不过，尊严可并非绅士们所独有的。尊严是这个国家的每一个男人和女人都可以凭自己的努力去争取并且能够最终得到的。恕我冒昧直言，先生，不过就像我方才说过的，我们这里的人在需要表达自己观点的时候是不会客套的。而这就是我的看法，不管说得对不对。尊严可并不只是绅士们所独有的。”

当然，我觉察到哈里·史密斯先生对于“尊严”的理解跟我的原意是大相径庭的，不过要想跟这些人解释清楚我的观点，这个任务就未免过于艰巨了。所以我觉得最好的办法莫过于简单地微微一笑并加以认可：“当然，您说得很对。”

这话非常有效，马上就驱散了哈里·史密斯先生刚才说那番话时所造成的那种轻微的紧张气氛。而哈里·史密斯先生本人却似乎变本加厉，变得毫无顾忌了，因为他倾身向前，继续说道：

“毕竟，这就是我们抗击希特勒的目的。如果希特勒得逞了的话，我们现在就全都沦为奴隶了。全世界就将只有几个主子和数以亿万计的奴隶了。而我不需要提醒在座的任何一位，作为奴隶可是没有任何尊严可言的。而这正是我们为之而奋斗，也是我们最终所赢得的。我们赢得了成为自由公民的权利。这就是生为英国人的一项基本人权，不管你是谁，不管是贫穷还是富有，你生而自由，你生而拥有自由表达你的观点的权利，你可以投票选举你支持的议员，或者投票将其罢免。这就是尊严的真正意义，如果您恕我冒昧直言的话，先生。”

“好了，好了，哈里，”泰勒先生道。“我看得出你又在为你的某个政治演说热身呢。”

这引起一阵笑声。哈里·史密斯先生有点腼腆地微微一笑，不过却又继续道：

“我这不是在谈政治。我只是想说说我的看法，仅此而已。你要是个奴隶的话，你就不可能有任何尊严。不过每一个英国人，只要他愿意，对此都会有深刻的体会。因为我们曾为了这种权利而浴血奋战。”

“我们这个村子也许看起来只是个偏僻的小地方，先生，”他妻子道。“可是我们在战争中的付出超过了我们分所应该的程度。远远超过了。”

她这句话一说完，气氛一下子就变得相当凝重了，一直到泰勒先生最终对我说：“哈里为我们地方上做了大量的人员组织工作。只要给他半点机会，他就会详详细细地告诉你这个国家的管理方式到底错在了哪里。”

“啊，可我这次说的倒恰恰是这个国家对在了那里。”

“您本人跟政治的关系算得上密切吗，先生？”安德鲁斯先生问。

“并没有什么直接的关系，”我说，“尤其是这些年。战前也许算得上有过接触吧。”

“我刚刚想起一两年前的时候有位下院议员就叫史蒂文斯先生的。我在无线电上听过他的一两次演说。他对于住房问题有一些很有道理的看法。那不会就是您本人吧，先生？”

“哦，当然不是，”我笑道。现在回想起来，我真是一点都搞不懂当时我怎么会说出下面那番话来的；我只能说，置身于当时的那种环境当中，看来确乎是有如此表达的必要的。因为我接下来是这么说的：“事实上，相比而言，我个人更关心的是国际事务而非内政方针。是外交政策，也就是说。”

这番话对于我的听众们似乎产生的效果真让我有点感到吃惊。也就是说，他们似乎油然而生出一种敬畏之情。我赶紧补充说：“我可从来都没担任过任何高级职务，请注意。我所能够施加的任何一点点影响，都纯粹是非官方意义上的。”不过那种鸦雀无声的寂静仍旧维持了好几秒钟。

“请原谅，先生，”泰勒太太最后道，“不过您可曾见到过丘吉尔先生？”

“丘吉尔先生？他确实有几次造访过敝府。不过坦白说来，泰勒太太，在我最为经常地与闻国际大事的那段时期内，丘吉尔先生还不是如今这样关键的人物，也没人当真以为他日后会成为这样的大人物。当年更为经常性的来访者是艾登⁽³⁾先生和哈利法克斯勋爵这些人。”

“可是您毕竟是见到过丘吉尔先生本人的，对吧，先生？能够这么说说是多大的荣幸啊。”

“丘吉尔先生的很多观点我也并不认同，”哈里·史密斯先生道，“不过毫无疑问，他的确是个伟人。能跟他这样的人物商讨大事，那肯定也是相当了不起的。”

“呃，我必须重申，”我说，“我跟丘吉尔先生并无太多的接触。不过您说得很对，能有机会结识他确是令人深感满足的幸事。事实上，总而言之，我想我的确是非常幸运的，这是我首先必须承认的一点。毕竟，我何幸之有，不但能够结识丘吉尔先生，而且还跟其他来自美洲和欧洲的众多伟大领袖和重要人物打过交道。您可能会觉得我何幸之有，居然能蒙这些伟人不弃，倾听我对于当时那些重大事件的意见，不错，回想起来，我的确备感荣宠。毕竟，能在这样一个国际的舞台上扮演一个角色，无论那个角色是何其渺小，的确是一种莫大的荣幸。”

“请恕我多嘴，先生，”安德鲁斯先生道，“不过艾登先生到底是个什么样的人呢？我的意思是在私底下。我一直都有个印象，觉得他是个非常正派的君子。是那种无论高低贵贱，他都愿意跟你交谈的人。我这个印象对吗，先生？”

“我想，大体而言，这是一种很精确的描述。不过当然了，最近这些年来我都再没有见过艾登先生，也许压力之下他已经有了很大的改变，也未可知。因为我曾经亲眼目睹过这样的实例，公共生活在短短的几年内就能把一个人改变到你都认不出来的程度。”

“这一点我毫不怀疑，先生，”安德鲁斯先生道。“就连咱们的哈里也不例外。他自己涉足政治也就几年的时间，打那以后他就跟变了一个人一样。”

大家又是一阵哄笑，而哈里·史密斯先生则把肩一耸，脸上勉强掠过一丝微笑。然后他说：

“我的确把大量精力投入到了竞选工作中。这当然只是地方性的，不要说是您交往过的那些大人物了，就算是重要程度只及他们一半的那种人，我也一个都没见过，先生，可是尽管我人微言轻，我相信我是在竭尽绵薄，做好我的本分。在我看来，英国是个民主国家，为了捍卫它的民主制度，我们这个村子里的人经受过的磨难并不亚于任何人。现在也该当我们来行使我们的权利了，这是我们每个人的职责。我们村里有不少优秀的年轻人为了能使我们享有这种权利而牺牲

了生命，依我之见，我们在座的每一个人都对他们有所亏欠，唯有尽好我们的本分才是对他们应有的回报。我们都有自己坚定不移的主见，我们的责任就是让大家都听到我们的见解。没错，我们这里地处偏远，我们只是个小村庄，我们大家都不再年轻了，而且我们的村子也越来越小了。在我看来，我们必须对我们村子里那些为国捐躯的小伙子们有个交代。这也正是为什么，先生，我投入这么多的时间和精力，就是确保我们的声音能够被上层听到。就算是我本人因此而有了改变，或者是提早把我送进了坟墓，我也在所不惜。”

“我可是警告过您的，先生，”泰勒先生微笑道。“好容易碰上个像您这样的人物，哈里是决不会不让您听听他那套长篇大论就轻易把您放过去的。”

大家又是一阵哄笑，不过我几乎马上就接口道：

“我想我非常理解您的立场，史密斯先生。我也很能理解您希望这个世界变得更加美好、您和本地的村民们应该拥有为使这个世界更加美好而贡献一己之力的良好愿望。这种情怀值得我们为之而鼓掌喝彩。我敢说，这跟促使我在战前投身于那些国际大事的出发点是非常类似的。所以，就如眼下的情形一样，尽管我们对于世界和平的把控无比脆弱，我也唯愿自己能够竭尽绵薄。”

“恕我直言，先生，”哈里·史密斯先生道，“不过我的观点跟您略有不同。对于像您这样的人物来说，要发挥您的影响总是轻而易举的事情。您可以将国内那些最有权势的大人物视作自己的朋友，跟他们称兄道弟。可是像我们村里的这些人呢，先生，我们年复一年可能连一个真正的绅士都见不着——也许应该把卡莱尔医生除外。他确实是位一流的医生，可是容我冒昧，他可没有像您这样的人脉。我们这些身处穷乡僻壤的人，很容易会忘掉我们身为公民的责任。这也正是我这么卖力地投身竞选活动的原因所在。不管大家同不同意我的政见——我知道，就算是在眼下的这个小屋里也没有人会同意我说的每一句话——至少我能促使他们开始思考。至少我提醒他们应该想到自己肩负的职责。我们生活于其中的是一个民主国家。我们曾为了它而浴血奋战。我们全都应该尽我们的本分，做好我们的本职工作。”

“真不知道卡莱尔大夫到底出了什么事，”史密斯太太道。“我相信我们这位绅士应该是需要来一点有教养的谈话了。”

这话又激起了更多的笑声。

“实际上，”我说，“尽管非常高兴能跟大家坦诚相见，但我得坦白承认我开始觉得有些疲惫不堪了……”

“那是肯定的，先生，”泰勒太太道，“您一定是已经非常累了。或许也应该再去给您拿一条毯子来。这个时候晚上真是冷得多了。”

“不，真的不用了，泰勒太太，夜里我肯定会睡得非常舒服的。”

可还没等我从桌边站起来，摩根先生就又道：

“我刚才还在想，先生，我们都很喜欢无线电里的有个伙计，叫作莱斯利·曼德雷克的。不知道您会不会碰巧认识他？”

我回答说并不认识他，正要再次起身准备告退的时候，却又被更多的这种是否认识各色人物的问题给耽搁住了。于是，一直等到史密斯太太大声宣告又有人来了的时候，我仍旧在桌旁坐着：

“啊，有人来了。我想应该是大夫终于到了。”

“我真的该告退了，”我讨饶道。“我真感觉筋疲力尽了。”

“可我敢肯定这次一定是大夫到了，先生，”史密斯太太道。“请您一定再多待几分钟。”

她正说话间，有一记敲门声响起，有个声音道：“是我呀，泰勒太太。”

被迎进来的那位绅士还相当年轻—大概四十开外—又高又瘦；真是够高的，事实上，他进门的时候必须得稍稍弯弯腰才行。他刚刚向我们大家道了个晚上好，泰勒太太已经忙不迭地跟他说：

“这位就是我们的绅士，大夫。他的汽车在荆棘山上抛了锚，结果他就不得不忍受哈里没完没了的政治演说了。”

医生走到桌前，向我伸出手来。

“在下理查德·卡莱尔，”我起身跟他握手时，他笑容可掬地道。“您的车运气真是糟透了。不过，相信您在这里肯定会得到很好的照顾。恐怕会被照顾得太好了一点，也未可知。”

“谢谢您，”我回答道。“每个人对我都再好不过了。”

“那敢情好，很高兴您能来到敝村。”卡莱尔大夫在几乎正对着我的桌对面落座。“您是从国内的哪个地方来的？”

“牛津郡，”我说，确实，我还真不容易抑制住加上“先生”这个称呼的本能。

“好地方啊。我有个叔叔就住在牛津城外。真是个好地方。”

“这位绅士刚刚才告诉我们，大夫，”史密斯太太道，“他认识丘吉尔先生呢。”

“是吗？我以前认识他的一个侄子，不过早就失去联系了。我还从来没有荣幸见这位伟人一面呢。”

“不光是丘吉尔先生，”史密斯太太继续道。“他还认识艾登先生。还有哈利法克斯勋爵呢。”

“真的吗？”

我能感觉到大夫的目光正在仔细地审视我。我正准备恰如其分地解释几句，还没等我开口，安德鲁斯先生就对医生道：

“这位绅士刚才告诉我们，他想当年曾参与过很多外交事务呢。”

“这是真的吗？”

我感觉卡莱尔大夫又继续观察了我相当长的一段时间。然后他又重拾愉快的态度，问我道：

“这次驾车出游是四处游玩喽？”

“大体上算是吧，”我说，轻轻一笑。

“附近可是有不少的乡村胜景。哦，对了，安德鲁斯先生，很抱歉那把锯子还没还给您呢。”

“完全不用着急，大夫。”

有那么一小会儿，大家关注的中心暂时从我身上转移开来，我也终于能够不再说话了。然后，抓住一个貌似恰当的时机，我站起身来道：“恕我先行告退了。这真是个最令人愉快的夜晚，不过我现在真的必须告退了。”

“真遗憾您已经要离开了，先生，”史密斯太太道。“大夫才刚到。”

哈里·史密斯先生越过他妻子欠身跟卡莱尔大夫说：“我原本还希望这位绅士能对您那些有关大英帝国的观点发表些意见呢，大夫。”然后他又转向我继续道：“我们的大夫主张帝国内的所有小国都应该独立。我没什么学识，明知道他这个观点是错误的却又没法予以证实。不过我一直都有浓厚的兴趣，想听听像您这样的人物对这个问题究竟是怎么看的，先生。”

于是卡莱尔大夫的目光似乎再度审视了我一遍。然后他说：“是很遗憾，不过我们必须得让这位绅士上床休息了。这一天真够辛苦的，我想。”

“的确，”我说，再次轻轻一笑，然后开始起身绕过餐桌。让我尴尬的是，屋里所有的人，包括卡莱尔大夫在内，全都站了起来。

“非常感谢大家，”我面带微笑地致谢道。“泰勒太太，晚餐美味极了。祝各位晚安。”

大家齐声回答：“晚安，先生。”我都快走出房间的时候，医生的声音又让我停在了门口。

“我说，老伙计，”他说道，我转过身，看到他仍旧站着。“明天一早我就要去一趟斯坦伯里。我很愿意把你捎到你停车的那个地方。省得你再走过去。我们还可以顺道从特德·哈达克的修车铺那儿买上一桶汽油。”

“那真是太感谢啦，”我说。“可我不希望给您增添任何麻烦。”

“一点都不麻烦。七点半你看可以吗？”

“您这可真是帮了我的大忙了。”

“那好，就七点半了。请确保您的贵客在七点半前起床并且吃完了早饭哦，泰勒太太。”然后又转向我补充道：“这样的话，我们终究还是可以谈一谈了。只是如此一来哈里就没办法心满意足地亲眼目睹我出乖露丑了。”

大家又是一阵哄笑，再一次互道晚安之后，我才终于能够上楼来到了我的这间避难所。

我确信我无须强调今晚由于大家对我个人那不幸的误解，使我感到多么地惶愧不安。我现在只能说的是，我实在也是不知道自己该怎么做，才能适时地避免情势演变成那样；因为等我意识到正在发生什

么的时候，事态已经进展到我若是把真相挑明势必会让所有人都大为难堪的程度。不管怎么说吧，这整件事虽说令人感到遗憾，倒也并没有造成任何实质性的伤害。我反正第二天一早就要离开这些人，而且应该再也不会碰到他们了。再对这件事耿耿于怀看来也就没什么必要了。

不过，撇开那不幸的误解不谈，今天晚上发生的事件当中也许还真有一两个方面值得让人琢磨一番——即便仅仅是因为如不现在想想清楚，接下来的好几天里势必会让人心神不宁。比如说，哈里·史密斯先生对于“尊严”的本质所发表的看法。在他的那番陈述当中，当然并没有什么值得认真思考的地方。诚然，我必须得允许哈里·史密斯先生对于“尊严”这个字眼的应用与我对它的理解是大为不同的。即便如此，即便是以他自己的阐释为准，他的那番陈述也肯定是太过理想化和理论化了，不值得认真对待。他的观点无疑在一定程度上也有他的道理：在一个像我们这样的国家当中，人民确实有一定的责任去思考国家大事、形成自己的观点。可是以真实的生活现状而言，你又怎么能指望普通的老百姓对五花八门的国家事务都有“明确的主见”呢——就像哈里·史密斯先生相当异想天开地宣称此地的村民所做的那样？对于老百姓有这样的期许非但是不切实际的，而且我也相当怀疑老百姓那方面果真会有这样的意愿。毕竟，寻常百姓的所学和所知都有限，要求他们每个人都对于国家的大是大非都能贡献“明确的主见”，这肯定是不明智的。不管怎么说，如果有人居然自作主张地以这方面的考量来界定个人的“尊严”，那肯定是荒诞不经的。

事有凑巧，我突然想到了一个实例，我相信恰好可以充分说明哈里·史密斯先生的观点所包含的真确性的实际限度。这一实例又碰巧是我的亲身经历，是发生在战前大约一九三五年的一个小插曲。

我记得，某一天的深夜——已经过了午夜——爵爷打铃把我叫进了会客室，用完晚餐以后爵爷就一直在那儿款待三位贵宾。那天夜里，我自然是已经有好几次被叫进会客室添补酒水饮料了，而且这几次我都发现宾主正就某些重大的议题进行深入的讨论。不过，就在我最后这次进入会客室的时候，宾主却都停下了话头，而且目不转睛地看着我。这时候爵爷道：

“请过来一下好吗，史蒂文斯？斯潘塞先生想跟你说句话。”

爵爷所说的那位绅士继续盯视了我一会儿，并没有改变他扶手椅里略显慵懒的坐姿。然后他才说：

“我的朋友，我有个问题想问问你。我们有个一直争执不下的问题需要你的帮助。告诉我，你认为我们跟美国之间的债务状况是导致目前贸易低迷的关键性因素吗？抑或，你认为这只是个幌子，问题的根源其实是我们放弃了货币的金本位？”

乍听之下，我自然是对这个问题有些吃惊，不过我很快也就明白了真实的状况；也就是说，很明显对方原本就期望我对这个问题束手无策的。的确，在我弄明白这是怎么一回事并且想出该怎么回答的这一小会儿中间，我甚至刻意表现出一副苦思冥想的表情，因为我看到在座的那几位绅士正愉快地相视而笑。

“非常抱歉，先生，”我说，“可对于这个问题我实在是无能为力。”

到了这个时候，我已经对当时的状况心知肚明了，不过那几位绅士仍继续窃笑不已。然后斯潘塞先生又开口道：

“那么，你也许能在另一个问题上帮到我们。倘若法国和布尔什维克之间当真达成了裁减军备的协议，你认为这对于欧洲的币值问题到底是利还是弊呢？”

“非常抱歉，先生，可对于这个问题我实在是无能为力。”

“哦，天哪，”斯潘塞先生道。“所以在这方面你也帮不上我们的忙了。”

又是一阵强忍住的笑声，然后爵爷才说：“很好，史蒂文斯。那就这样吧。”

“拜托了，达林顿，我还有一个问题想请教一下我们这位朋友，”斯潘塞先生道。“我亟需他在这个困扰我们许多人的问题上给予帮助，我们也全都认为这个问题对于我们该如何制定外交政策至关重要。我的朋友，请一定帮帮我们这个忙。赖伐尔⁽⁴⁾先生最近针对北非形势的演说的真实意图到底是什么？你也认为他这只不过是对于他自己党内民族主义极端分子迎头痛击的一个策略吗？”

“很抱歉，先生，可我在这个问题上实在帮不上忙。”

“你们看，先生们，”斯潘塞先生转向其他人道，“在这些问题我们的朋友都无法对我们有所帮助。”

这话又引起了一阵笑声，这一次几乎是毫无遮掩的了。

“然而，”斯潘塞先生继续道，“我们却仍旧坚持要将这个国家的重大决策权交到我们这儿的这位朋友以及像他这样的数百万民众手中。这也就难怪，受制于我们目前的议会制，面对众多的难题我们全都一筹莫展了，不是吗？那还不如干脆就请母亲联盟的委员会去筹备一场战役得了。”

这句话引来了一阵毫不掩饰的开心的大笑，爵爷在笑声当中悄声对我说：“谢谢你，史蒂文斯。”我这才得以告退。

这当然是一个稍稍令人有些不舒服的场景，不过这在我的职业生涯中根本算不上是我碰到的最难应付、甚至最不寻常的事情，您无疑也会同意，任何一位像样的专业人士都应该有能力镇定自若地予以应对。第二天早上，我几乎已经把这个小插曲完全都抛诸脑后了，我正站在弹子房里的一个梯凳上为肖像画掸尘的时候，达林顿勋爵走了进来，对我说：

“你瞧，史蒂文斯，那实在是太可怕了，我们昨天夜里让你承受的那番折磨。”

我停下手里的工作，说：“没有的事，先生。能效犬马之劳，我高兴还来不及呢。”

“那实在是太可怕了。我想全都是因为晚餐吃得太尽兴的缘故。请接受我的歉意。”

“谢谢您，先生。不过我很高兴地向您保证，昨晚我并没有感觉太过为难。”

爵爷相当疲惫地走到一把皮扶手椅前，坐下来叹了口气。从我在梯凳上的有利地势望去，我可以清清楚楚地看到他那映照在阳光中的整个瘦高的身形——冬日的阳光透过法式落地窗照进来，几乎洒满了整个房间。我记得，就在那一刻，我又一次深刻地认识到，短短几年的时间当中，生活的重压已经让爵爷付出了多么沉重的代价。他的体格原本就偏于纤瘦，如今已经瘦得让人有些心惊了，瘦得甚至都有些脱了形，他的头发已经过早地变白了，他的面容则显得紧张而又枯槁。良久，他望着落地窗外远处那开阔的草坡，然后他才又说：

“那实在是挺可怕的。不过你知道，史蒂文斯，斯潘塞先生是想向伦纳德爵士证明一个观点。实际上，如果这对你算得上是种安慰的话，你的确协助我们证实了一个非常重要的观点。伦纳德爵士一直都

在重复那些老套的废话。说什么人民的意志就是最明智的仲裁这类的老生常谈。你能相信吗，史蒂文斯？”

“的确，先生。”

“我们这个国家对已经过时的观念的认识实在是太慢了。其他的大国都已经充分地认识到，要想迎接每个新时代的各种挑战，就必须扬弃那些陈旧的，有时甚至是广受爱戴的习惯做法。可是我们的大不列颠却不是这个样子。仍旧有很多就像昨晚伦纳德爵士那样的论调。这也是为什么斯潘塞先生觉得有必要证实一下他的观点的原因所在。而且我告诉你，史蒂文斯，如果伦纳德爵士这样的人物能够因此而清醒过来，并认真思考一下，那么请相信我，你昨晚上所受的那番折磨就并没有白费。”

“的确，先生。”

达林顿爵爷又叹了口气。“我们总是落在最后，史蒂文斯。总是最后一个死抱着已经过时的体系不放。可是我们迟早必须要去面对现实。民主已经是一种属于过去的时代的诉求了。目前的世界太过复杂，已经不适合普选这一类的制度了。因为数不胜数的议会辩论只能导致停滞不前。在早些年也许还很不错，但在当今的世界呢？斯潘塞先生昨晚是怎么说的来着？他已经表述得很清楚了。”

“我相信，先生，他是将现今的议会制度比作了母亲联盟的委员会企图去筹备一场战役。”

“一点没错，史蒂文斯。我们这个国家，坦白说，已经远远落后于时代了。所有有远见卓识的人士都有必要让伦纳德爵士这类的守旧之士认识到这一点。”

“的确，先生。”

“我问问你，史蒂文斯。我们如今正处在一连串持续不断的危机当中。这是我跟惠特克先生一起去北方的时候亲眼所见的。人民在受苦。普通的正派的劳动人民尤其苦不堪言。德国和意大利已经开始以实际行动进行内部整顿。我想，包括无耻的布尔什维克也在以他们的方式进行整改。就连罗斯福总统，你看看他，他也代表美国人民义无反顾地采取了若干大胆的改革。可是你再看看我们这儿，史蒂文斯。年复一年，情况没有丝毫的改善。我们所做的就唯有争吵、辩论和因循守旧。任何不错的想法还没等经过一半必需的各种委员会的审批，就已经被修改得功效全无了。为数极少的几位有见识有职权的人士也

都被他周围那群无知之辈聒噪得止步不前。你从中会得出什么样的看法，史蒂文斯？”

“这个国家看起来的确正处于一种令人遗憾的境地当中，先生。”

“就是嘛。看看德国和意大利，史蒂文斯。看看强权的领导一旦得到认可，将有多大的作为吧。人家那儿可没有这套普选的谬论胡言。要是你的房子着了火，你是不会把全家都召集到会客厅里，花上一个钟头的时间来讨论各种逃生办法的，是也不是？这个办法也许曾经是挺不错的，可当今的世界已经变得无比复杂化了。你不能指望每个路人都通晓政治、经济和国际贸易之类的事务吧。况且他又为什么要去通晓这些东西呢？事实上，你昨晚回答得就很好，史蒂文斯。你是怎么说的来着？大意是这不属于你的认识范畴？⁽⁵⁾就是啊，它为什么应该属于你的认识范畴呢？”

在回忆达林顿勋爵当初的这些言论之时，我突然认识到以现在的眼光看来，他的很多观点自然是已经显得相当奇怪—有时候甚至是令人讨厌了。但无可否认的是，他那天早上在弹子房里对我说的那番话中自有某种重要的真确性存在。当然了，期望任何一位管家居然能够令人信服地回答斯潘塞先生那晚向我提出的那类问题，本身就是极为荒谬的，而哈里·史密斯先生那类人居然宣称人的“尊严”就端赖他是否能够对这样的问题具有明确的主见，那自然也就大谬不然了。就让我们把话说清楚吧：一个管家的职责就是提供优质的服务，而不是去瞎掺和那些国家大事。事实上，这一类国家大事无一例外都远远超出了你我这类人的理解范围，像我们这样的人若想做出一点成绩来，就必须认识到最佳的途径便是专注于属于我们认识范畴之内的那些事务；换言之，就是全心全意为那些真正掌握了文明命脉的伟大绅士们提供可能的范围内最好的服务。这一点貌似显而易见，但我马上就能想出太多相反的实例，即太多的管家至少曾经一度对此并不以为然。的确，哈里·史密斯先生今晚的那些话颇让我想起整个二三十年代困扰了我们这一代很多人的那种具有误导倾向的理想主义。我指的是在我们这一行中曾经盛行一时的一种观点，它主张任何一位具有严肃抱负的管家都应该以不间断地对其雇主进行重新的评估为己任—审视雇主的行为动机，分析其所持观点可能产生的结果。唯有通过这种途径，这派观点认为，你方能确保自己的服务善为人用，自己的才干得其所哉。虽然我在某种程度上愿意认同这种论点当中所包含的理想主义色彩，不过几乎毫无疑问的是，这正如史密斯今晚的那番慷慨陈词一般，是思想误入歧途之后的产物。你只需看看那些试图将此要求付

诸实践的管家们的实际情况，就会看到他们的事业——有些人的事业原本可能前途无量——结果只能是一事无成。我本人至少就认识两位同行，原本都是颇有些能力的，却从一个雇主跳到另一个雇主，永远感到不满，从来无法在任何地方安顿下来，终于落得个四处漂泊、销声匿迹的结果。出现这样的结果是丝毫都不会令人感到吃惊的。因为就实际操作的层面而言，你根本就绝无可能一边对雇主采取挑剔批判的态度，同时还能提供优质的服务。你的注意力如果因为这些考虑而受到干扰，你不单单是无法满足更高水准的服务所提出的各项要求；更为根本的问题在于，一个总是一心想就其雇主的事务形成他自己“明确的主见”的管家，就必定会缺乏所有优秀的从业者理当具备的一项根本性的素质，那就是忠诚。请不用误解我的意思；我所指的并非那些平庸的雇主因为留不住高素质的专业人士为自己服务，因而抱怨员工们缺乏的那种盲目的“忠诚”。的确，我倒是最不会主张将自己的忠诚轻率地奉献给任何一位碰巧暂时雇用了你的绅士或淑女的那种人。然而，一个管家若是真想对于生命中的任何事情或是任何人具有任何一点价值的话，那就必须要在某个时刻停止无休止的找寻；就必须要有个时刻，他可以对自己这么说：“这位雇主具备了所有我认为高贵而且可敬的品质。从此以后我将献身于为他提供服务的事业当中。”这才是一种明智的忠诚。这其中又有什么“有损尊严”的呢？你只不过是接受了一个不容回避的事实：像你我这样的人是永远都不可能来到一个可以理解当今的世界大事的位置上的，最好的办法无一例外就是要完全信任我们已经认定为明智而又可敬的那位雇主，将我们全副的精力都奉献给为他提供最好的服务上，鞠躬尽瘁，死而后已。看看像马歇尔先生或者莱恩先生这样的管家——两人无疑都是我们这一行里最了不起的人物。我们能够想象马歇尔先生会跟坎伯利勋爵就其最近调任外交部一事进行磋商吗？我们会因为莱恩先生并没有在伦纳德·格雷爵士每一次发表下院演讲前对其进行诘难的习惯，就对他减少了丝毫的敬佩之情吗？我们当然不会。这样的态度当中有什么“有损尊严”的地方，又有什么该受谴责之处呢？既如此，如果由于时移世易的缘故，达林顿勋爵当初的那些努力已经被证明是受到了误导、甚至可以说是愚蠢之举，我在任何意义上又有什么该当受到责备的地方呢？在我为爵爷服务的这几十年间，一直都是爵爷独自一人在判定是非、权衡利弊，做出决断并一以贯之，而我只是恰如其分地谨守本分，负责处理好我本职范围内的那些事务。就我的工作而言，我可以说不论鞠躬尽瘁、克尽厥职，确实做到了众人或许会认定为“第一流”的水准。如果爵爷的一生及其事业在今天看来，已经至多被当

作是一种可悲的浪费，那也实在并非是我的过错——如果我为此而感到任何的遗憾或是羞惭的话，那可就真是违情悖理的苛责了。

- [\(1\)](#) 埃克塞特 (Exeter)，英格兰西南部城市，德文郡首府。
- [\(2\)](#) 南安普敦 (Southampton)，英格兰南部港市。
- [\(3\)](#) 艾登 (Robert Anthony Eden, 1897—1977)，英国首相 (1955—1957)，保守党领袖。一九三五至三八年任外交大臣，曾因反对绥靖政策而辞职。一九四〇年起先后任战时内阁大臣和外交大臣，一九五一至五五年任外交大臣兼副首相。首相任内，因策划侵占苏伊士运河失败而被迫辞职。
- [\(4\)](#) 赖伐尔 (Pierre Laval, 1883—1945)，法国维希政府总理 (1942—1944)，曾参加社会党，历任公共工程、司法、劳工、外交等部部长，一九三一至三六年三次组阁，推行绥靖政策，法国投降德国后，任维希政府副总理、外交部部长、总理，第二次世界大战后以叛国罪被处决。
- [\(5\)](#) 事实上史蒂文斯昨晚并没有做出这样的回答。

第四天一下午

小康普顿，康沃尔郡

我终于抵达了小康普顿，此时我正在玫瑰花园旅店的餐厅里坐着，刚刚用完了午餐。窗外的雨一直下个没完。

这家玫瑰花园旅店虽说称不上豪华，却绝对算得上家常而又舒适，住在这里即使有些额外的花销你也会乐于承担的。它就位于村镇广场的一角，位置非常便捷，是一座相当迷人地爬满常春藤的庄园主宅第，我想大约能容纳三十几位客人入住。不过，我现在所在的这间“餐厅”却是在主宅一侧加盖的一幢现代风格的附属建筑——一个很长的平顶房间，其特色是房间的两侧各有一排宽大的窗户。从一侧望出去就是村镇广场；另一侧对着的是后花园，这家旅店应该就是由此而得名的。花园的避风设施看来做得很到位，园内也摆放了几套桌椅，天气晴好的时候应该是个用餐或是享用茶点的理想所在。事实上，我知道就在刚才还有几位客人已经开始准备在那儿用餐了，可是天公不作美，被来势汹汹的乌云给扰了清兴。大约一个钟头前服务员把我迎进餐厅的时候，员工们正急急忙忙地把花园里的桌椅拆除——而那几位刚刚还坐在那儿的客人，包括一位衬衣的领口还塞着一块餐巾的绅士，全都站在旁边，一脸手足无措的表情。在这之后，暴雨很快就倾盆而至，其势头之猛使得所有的客人一时间全都停止了用餐，惊讶地望着窗外的雨势。

我自己的桌子位于村镇广场的这一侧，所以过去这一个钟头的大部分时间里我都在观望那大雨落在广场以及停在外面的福特和其他几辆汽车上。这会子雨势已经有点稳定了下来，不过仍旧甚大，我也只好打消了出去在村里四处逛逛的雅兴。当然，我也曾想过不如现在就动身前去拜会肯顿小姐；可是我已经在信上告诉她我将在三点钟登门拜访，所以我觉得如果提前过去给她一个措手不及恐怕殊为不智。看来雨势如果不能尽快停歇的话，我很可能只得待在餐厅里喝喝茶，一直等到合适的时间直接从这儿动身了。我已经跟侍餐的那位年轻的女招待确认过了，到肯顿小姐目前的住处步行需要一刻钟左右，也就是说我至少还有四十分钟的时间需要消磨。

我也应该顺带说一句，我还没有傻到会到事情万一不谐的可能性没有任何心理准备。我其实再清楚不过了，我从未接到肯顿小姐任何

表示她很高兴跟我会面的答复。不过，以我对于肯顿小姐的了解，我倾向于认为大可把没有任何回信视作她的默许；如果会面果真有什么不便的话，我确信她肯定会毫不犹豫地告诉我的。再者说了，我也已经在信中讲清楚了我在这个旅店里订了房间，任何临时的变故都可以通过旅店留话给我；既然并没有任何此类的留言，那我相信我是可以将其视作一切正常的另一重保证的。

眼下的这瓢泼大雨真是令人始料未及，因为自打离开达林顿府，我实在是三生有幸，每天早上都是阳光明媚的好天气。事实上，今天一开始总的来说也是相当顺遂，早餐享用的是泰勒太太为我准备的产自农场的新鲜鸡蛋和吐司，卡莱尔大夫七点半的时候也依约开车来到门前，我因此得以在任何令人尴尬的交谈得以展开前就辞别了泰勒夫妇一夫妻俩再次坚拒了我给予酬劳的任何提议。

“我给你找到了一罐汽油，”卡莱尔大夫一边请我坐到他那辆路虎车的副驾驶座，一边对我说。我对他周到的考虑表示感谢，当我问及油钱的时候，我发现他也是坚决不肯接受。

“这是什么话，老朋友。不过是我在车库后面找到的一点剩油。不过也该够你开到克罗斯比门了，你可以在那里把油箱加得满满的。”

现在的莫斯科姆村沐浴在朝阳当中，其中心地带是一座由几家小店铺簇拥环绕的教堂，昨天傍晚的时候我曾经在山上看到过它的尖塔。不过，我并没有机会细细观赏这个村庄，因为卡莱尔大夫已经迅速地把车开上了一座农场的车道。

“这是条捷径，”他说，我们一路经过了几个谷仓和停在那儿的农用车辆。到处一个人影都不见，我们一度被一扇紧闭的大门挡住了去路，大夫说：“抱歉，老伙计，有劳你帮个忙吧。”

我从车上下下来，刚要举步朝那扇门走去，附近的一个谷仓里就传出一阵狂怒的狗吠声，我把门打开，再度回到大夫的路虎车上时，不禁长出了一口气。

汽车沿着被大树夹在中间的狭窄山路往上攀爬时，我们交换了几句客套话，他问了我几句昨晚在泰勒家睡得可好之类的话。然后他相当突然地说道：

“我说，希望你不会认为我太过失礼。不过你该不会是某户人家的男仆之类的人吧？”

我得承认，听他这么说，我真是长出了一口气。

“您说得没错，先生。事实上，我是位于牛津附近的达林顿府的管家。”

“我想也是。所有那些见过温斯顿·丘吉尔等等的说法。当时我心里想，要么这个家伙是在大吹牛皮，要么就是一然后我突然想到，这倒是个简单的解释。”

卡莱尔大夫继续驾驶着汽车沿陡峭蜿蜒的山路往前开，一边转头向我微微一笑。我说：

“我并没有有意欺骗任何人，先生。可是……”

“哦，无须解释，老伙计。我很明白那是怎么回事。我的意思是说，你是那种一见之下就会给人深刻印象的样本。本地的这些村民肯定至少要把你当成一位勋爵或是公爵了。”大夫开怀大笑。“时不时地被人误认为一位爵爷，那感觉想必也不坏吧。”

继续往前行驶的过程中，有段时间我们都没再说话。然后卡莱尔大夫又对我说：“喔，希望你在这段跟我们短暂相处的时间内过得还算愉快。”

“的确非常愉快，谢谢您，先生。”

“那你觉得莫斯科姆的这些居民怎么样？都还不坏吧，呃？”

“非常迷人，先生。泰勒先生和太太待人尤其亲切善良。”

“希望你别总是这么叫我‘先生’了，史蒂文斯先生。确实，他们真是相当地不赖。就我而言，我很乐于就在这里安度余生。”

我感觉从卡莱尔说这番话的语气当中听出了一丝古怪的意味。他再度发问的时候，口吻中也流露出一种有些奇怪的审慎意味：

“这么说，你觉得他们都挺迷人的，呃？”

“的确，大夫。非常意气相投。”

“那么他们昨晚都跟你说了些什么呢？希望他们没有用村里那些愚蠢的飞短流长惹得你不胜其烦。”

“绝对没有，大夫。事实上，昨晚的谈话显得相当真诚，还发表了一些非常有趣的观点。”

“哦，你说的是哈里·史密斯，”大夫笑道。“别把他放在心上。他的话听上一小会儿还是挺好玩儿的，不过他的脑子真是乱成了一锅粥。有时候你会觉得他像个共产党，可是他紧接着发表的那些言论，又让他听起来像是个极端保守反动的铁杆托利党⁽¹⁾。而事实是他的脑子就像是一锅粥。”

“啊，他那些言论听起来非常有趣。”

“昨晚上他对你做的是什么样的演讲？大英帝国？还是国民医疗？”

“史密斯先生将自己限制在了更为普遍性的话题上。”

“哦？比如说？”

我轻咳了一声。“史密斯先生对于尊严的本质有些自己的思考。”

“啊哈。哈里·史密斯居然开始谈论哲理性的话题了。他怎么会说到这上面去的？”

“我相信史密斯先生是在强调他在村里开展的竞选工作的重要性。”

“啊，是吗？”

“他一直在向我强调这样一个观点，即莫斯科姆村的居民们对于各种各样的重大政治事件均持有非常明确的主见。”

“啊，那就对了。这听起来才像是哈里·史密斯其人。你大概也猜得到，那当然全都是一派胡言。哈里一天到晚地四处鼓动每个人都来关注各种重大议题。不过事实上，大家都宁肯不受他这个打扰。”

我们又有了片刻的沉默。最后，我说：

“恕我冒昧问一句，先生。不过我可否认为史密斯先生在某种程度上被大家视为了丑角？”

“嗯。这么说的话就有点过了，依我看。这儿的老百姓的确还有拥有某种政治良知的。他们感觉他们应该对这对那拥有明确的态度，正如哈里敦促他们去做的那样。可是其实，他们跟任何地方的老百姓没什么两样。他们只想平平静静地过他们的日子。哈里总有一大堆主意，想要改变这个那个的，可是说实话，村里头没有一个人希望发生什么剧烈的变动，即便是这些变动有可能会给他们带来好处。这里的

老百姓只想不受打扰地去过他们平静的小日子。他们不想受到这样或是那样问题的烦扰。”

大夫的语气中带出来的那种厌恶的腔调让我有些吃惊。不过他马上就恢复了常态，短促地一笑，道：

“从你那侧望去，村子相当漂亮。”

的确，在那一路段，下方不远处的村庄已经清晰可见。当然了，晨光赋予了村庄一种非常不同的面貌，但除此之外，那景色就跟昨天我在傍晚熹微的暮色中第一次看到它时相差无几，从这一点上我也可以猜想得出，我们距离我丢下福特车的地方已经非常近了。

“史密斯先生的观点似乎是，”我说，“一个人的尊严端赖于是否具有明确的主见之类的。”

“啊，不错，尊严。我都忘了。不错，这么说来哈里是想给它下一个哲学上的定义了。我的天哪。我想肯定全都是一派胡言。”

“他的那些结论也不一定都能得到大家的认可，先生。”

卡莱尔大夫点了点头，不过似乎已经沉浸在了自己的思绪当中。“你知道吗，史蒂文斯先生，”终于，他说道，“我刚来到这个乡下地方的时候，我还是个坚定的社会主义者。信奉要全心全意为全体人民服务这类的信条。那时候是四九年。社会主义能让老百姓活得有尊严。这就是我初来乍到时的信念。对不起，你肯定不想听这样的蠢话。”他快活地转向我。“那么你呢，老伙计？”

“对不起，您指的是什么，先生？”

“你认为尊严到底是怎么一回事。”

我不得不说，这样直截了当的询问还是让我颇感意外的。“这是很难用几句话就解释清楚的，先生，”我说。“不过我想，这个问题归结为一点，无非就是不要当众宽衣解带。”

“对不起。什么意思？”

“尊严啊，先生。”

“啊。”大夫点了点头，不过看起来有点茫然。然后他说：“喏，这段路你应该觉得有些熟悉了吧。白天看来也可能大为不同了。啊，这就是那辆车啦？我的天哪，实在是太漂亮了！”

卡莱尔大夫把车停在福特车的正后方，从车上下来后再次说道：“天哪，多漂亮的车。”话音未落，他已经从车上拿出一个漏斗和一桶汽油，非常友善地帮我将汽油注入福特车的油箱。我原本还担心车子出了更严重的毛病，等我试着点火发动，听到引擎马上发出健康的突突声苏醒了过来，所有的担心也就烟消云散了。我向卡莱尔大夫道了谢，彼此别过，不过之后仍旧跟在他的路虎车后面又沿着蜿蜒的山路走了约莫一英里路，这才分道扬镳。

大约在九点左右，我越过郡界，进入了康沃尔郡。这时距离暴雨倾盆至少还有三个钟头的时间，天空中的云彩仍旧是一片雪白。事实上，今天上午我途经的很多景色都堪称迄今为止我所见到的最为迷人的美景。可不幸的是，我在大部分的时间里却不曾好好地给予它们应得的关注；因为我不妨直说，由于在当天之内我就将与肯顿小姐久别重逢——那些无法预知的意外状况姑且不谈——一念及此，我就不由得有些心神不定。还有就是，在开阔的田野间飞速行驶，一连好几英里都不见一个人影和一部车辆，要么就是小心地从那些妙不可言的小村庄中穿村而过，有的只不过是几幢石砌的村舍凑在一起，我发现自己重又沉溺于某些陈年旧事的回忆中不能自拔了。眼下，我坐在小康普顿这家舒适的旅社的餐厅里，手上还有一点时间可供消磨，我一边望着窗外村镇广场人行道上溅起的雨滴，一边忍不住在那些回忆往事的同一轨迹上继续低回徜徉。

有一个回忆尤其已经在我的脑海中翻腾了整整一上午——或者说只是个记忆的片段，记忆中的那一刻出于某种原因在这些年间一直异常鲜明地印刻在我的脑海中。那个记忆是我独自一人站在肯顿小姐起坐间门外的后廊上；门是关着的，我也并没有正对着那扇门，而是半对着它，为是否应该敲门而举棋不定；因为我记得，我就在那时突然间确信一门之隔、距我仅几码之遥的肯顿小姐实际上正在伤心地哭泣。如我所说的那样，这一刻已经牢牢地嵌入了我的记忆中，同样难以忘怀的还有当时我站在那里内心深处升腾而起的那种特别的感受。然而，我现在却记不清到底是什么原因导致我那样站在后廊之上了。现在看来，之前我在试图理清类似回忆的时候，很有可能将这一幕情景归到了肯顿小姐刚刚收到姨妈死讯之后了；也就是说我将她一个人留在房间里独自悲伤，来到走廊的时候才意识到我并没有向她致以应有的慰唁那一次。可是如今在经过仔细的思量以后，我相信在这件事上我极有可能有些搞混了；这个记忆当中的片段实际上是源自肯顿小姐的姨妈去世至少几个月后的某个晚上——事实上就是小卡迪纳尔先生相当意外地突然造访达林顿府的那一晚。

卡迪纳尔先生的父亲大卫·卡迪纳尔爵士多年来一直都是爵爷的挚友兼同僚，但在我此刻正在讲述的那天晚上，爵士因为一次骑马的事故不幸去世已经有三四年时间了。与此同时，小卡迪纳尔先生已经开始成为知名的专栏作家，专擅以警言妙句来评论国际事务。显然，达林顿勋爵颇不喜欢这样的专栏，因为我就记得有好几次，他放下手里的报纸，特意对我说出这样的话来：“小雷吉又在写这些哗众取宠的玩意儿了。幸好他父亲是眼不见心不烦了。”不过卡迪纳尔先生的专栏倒是并没有妨碍他在府里常来常往；的确，爵爷从未忘记这位年轻人是他的教子，一直将他视如己出。尽管如此，卡迪纳尔先生倒也谨守礼仪，从来都不会不提前打个招呼就跑过来用餐，所以那天傍晚我去应门的时候，发现是他双臂抱着公文包站在门外，还是有点吃惊的。

“哦，哈啰，史蒂文斯，你好吗？”他说。“今晚不巧碰上了点小麻烦，不知道达林顿勋爵会不会许我借宿一夜。”

“很高兴再次见到您，先生。我这就去禀报爵爷您来了。”

“原本打算住在罗兰先生府上的，可是好像是有了些误会，他们已经去了别的什么地方。希望这个时候贸然前来不会造成太大的不便。我是说，今晚没有任何特别的安排，对吧？”

“我相信，先生，晚饭后爵爷是有几位客人要前来造访的。”

“哦，真不走运。我好像来得不是时候。我最好还是低调小心为上。反正今晚我还有几篇稿子要赶出来。”卡迪纳尔先生指了指他的公文包。

“我这就启禀爵爷说您来了，先生。不管怎么说，您正好可以跟他一起用餐。”

“那太好了，我正希望如此。不过我想莫蒂默太太应该不会很高兴见到我这时候过来蹭饭的。”

我把小卡迪纳尔先生一个人留在会客室里，前往书房去禀告爵爷，发现他正全神贯注地阅读某一本书。我向他禀告卡迪纳尔先生刚刚到访的时候，意外地发现有一抹不耐烦的神色从他脸上闪过。然后他往椅背上一靠，就像是想弄清楚某个难题。

“告诉卡迪纳尔先生我马上就下去，”他终于道。“他可以先自己随意消遣一小会儿。”

我回到楼下后，发现卡迪纳尔先生正相当烦躁不安地在会客室里走来走去，没事找事地细细查看着那些他想必早就已经再熟悉不过的小摆件。我传达了爵爷的口信，问他需要我给他送些什么酒水茶点过来。

“哦，眼下就给我来点茶吧，史蒂文斯。今晚爵爷要会什么客？”

“抱歉，先生，这个问题恐怕我帮不到您。”

“什么都不知道？”

“很抱歉，先生。”

“唔，奇了怪了。哦，好吧。今晚最好还是低调小心为上。”

我记得此后没过多久，我下楼来到了肯顿小姐的起坐间。她正坐在桌前，但她面前的桌子上空空如也，她手上也没有任何的活计；的确，从她的行为举止上可以看得出来，恐怕在我敲门前她已经这个样子坐了有段时间了。

“卡迪纳尔先生来了，肯顿小姐，”我说。“今晚要睡在他通常使用的那间客房。”

“好的，史蒂文斯先生。我外出前会安排好的。”

“啊，您晚上要外出吗，肯顿小姐？”

“确实要外出，史蒂文斯先生。”

也许是我脸上流露出一丝惊讶，因为她继续道：“您应该记得，史蒂文斯先生，我们半个月前就讨论过的。”

“是的，当然了，肯顿小姐。请您原谅，我只是一时间把这件事给忘了。”

“有什么问题吗，史蒂文斯先生？”

“没有，肯顿小姐。今晚有几位客人要来，不过您没有理由为此就留在府内。”

“我们确实半个月前就说好我今晚要外出的，史蒂文斯先生。”

“那是当然，肯顿小姐。我必须请您原谅。”

我转身要离开，不过在门口又因为肯顿小姐的话停了下来：

“史蒂文斯先生，我有件事想告诉您。”

“是吗，肯顿小姐？”

“跟我那位旧识相关。今晚我就是要去见他的。”

“是这样啊，肯顿小姐。”

“他已经向我求了婚。我想您有权知道这件事。”

“的确，肯顿小姐。这是件很让人高兴的事。”

“我还在考虑是否答应。”

“是吗。”

她低头望了一眼自己的双手，不过目光几乎马上又转回到我的身上。“我那位旧识下个月就要去西南部担任一个新职了。”

“是吗。”

“我也说了，史蒂文斯先生，求婚的事情我还在考虑。不过，我想还是应该让您知道这件事。”

“对此我非常感激，肯顿小姐。衷心祝您度过一个愉快的夜晚。我这就先告退了。”

应该是在大约二十分钟以后，我又再次碰到了肯顿小姐，而这个时候我正忙着准备晚餐。事实上，我当时捧着一个摆得满满的托盘，正走到后楼梯的中间，突然听到楼下一阵怒冲冲的脚步踩得地板砰砰直响。我转过身去，看到肯顿小姐正从楼梯下面瞪着眼睛望着我。

“史蒂文斯先生，据我的理解，您是不是希望今天晚上我留下来当班？”

“没有的事，肯顿小姐。正如您指出的，您的确早就已经知会过我了。”

“可我看得出来，您对于我今晚外出表现得很不高兴。”

“恰恰相反，肯顿小姐。”

“你以为在厨房里弄得这么一连片鸡飞狗跳，在我门外头来回这么砰砰砰地跺脚就能让我改变主意了吗？”

“肯顿小姐，厨房里的那一点点小骚动只不过是因为卡迪纳尔先生最后一刻才赶了来用餐。绝对不存在任何您今晚不该外出的理

由。”

“我希望把话跟你讲清楚，史蒂文斯先生，不管有没有你的恩准我横竖都是要去的。我几个礼拜前就已经安排好了。”

“的确如此，肯顿小姐。而且我想再次向您表明，希望您今晚过得非常愉快。”

用餐的时候，两位绅士之间的气氛似乎有点古怪。好一阵子，两人只是一言不发地默默用餐，爵爷尤其显得心不在焉。有一次，卡迪纳尔先生问道：

“今晚有什么特别之处吗，先生？”

“嗯？”

“您今晚的客人啊。不同寻常吗？”

“恐怕我不能奉告，我的孩子。事关绝密。”

“老天爷。我想这也就意味着我不该列席打扰了。”

“列席什么，我的孩子？”

“今晚将要发生的不论什么事呀！”

“哦，那些事你是丝毫都不会感兴趣的。总之，今晚的事情是最高机密。你是不能与闻的。哦，不，绝对不行。”

“哦，老天爷。听起来这可真是非同寻常。”

卡迪纳尔先生非常热切地望着爵爷，可是爵爷却自顾继续用起餐来，再没多说一句话。

饭毕，两位绅士退席来到吸烟室喝波尔图、抽雪茄。在收拾餐厅同时也为迎接今晚的客人整理会客室的过程中，我不得不几次三番经过吸烟室的大门，于是我也就不可避免地注意到两位绅士跟刚才用餐时的不言不语大为不同，而是开始用相当激烈的语气交谈起来。一刻钟以后，甚至响起了怒气冲冲的声音。当然了，我并没有驻足细听，不过也免不了听到爵爷的喊叫：“可是这不关你的事，我的孩子！不关你的事！”

两位绅士终于从吸烟室出来的时候，我正在餐厅里。两人似乎都已经冷静了下来，走过门厅时只听见爵爷对卡迪纳尔先生说：“给我记住了，我的孩子。我是信任你的。”对此，卡迪纳尔先生恼怒地嘟

嚷了一声：“是，是，我向您保证。”随后两人的脚步声就分开了，爵爷返回自己的书房，卡迪纳尔先生则走向藏书室。

差不多正好八点半的时候，院子里传来汽车停下的声音。我打开大门，迎面是个司机，越过他的肩膀我能看到几位警员正分散到庭院四处不同的位置。下一刻，我就将两位显贵的绅士迎进屋内，爵爷在门厅里迎接，然后马上将来客引入会客室。约莫十分钟以后，又传来一辆汽车的声音，我开门迎接的客人是里宾特洛甫先生，德国大使，那时候已经是达林顿府的常客了。爵爷前来迎接，两位绅士交换了一个尽在不言中的眼神，然后一起走进了会客室。几分钟后，我被叫进去为客人提供茶点酒水，四位绅士正在讨论不同种类的香肠各自的优点，至少表面上看来气氛还是挺欢快友好的。

这之后，我就在会客室外面的门厅里坚守自己的岗位——也就是门厅的拱门入口处，每逢重要会谈我照例都守在这里——一直到大约两个钟头以后，后门的门铃响了，我才不得不离开那里。下楼后，我发现一位警员和肯顿小姐站在一起，要求我证实后者的身份。

“完全是为了安全起见，小姐，绝无冒犯之意，”警官这么嘟囔了一句，重又回到了户外的夜色当中。

我在给后门上门的时候，注意到肯顿小姐在等着我，就说：

“相信您肯定度过了一个愉快的夜晚，肯顿小姐。”

她没有搭腔，于是，在我们一起穿过黑暗的厨房时我又重复了一遍：“相信您肯定度过了一个愉快的夜晚，肯顿小姐。”

“确实如此，谢谢您，史蒂文斯先生。”

“听您这么说我很高兴。”

在我身后，肯顿小姐的脚步声突然停了下来，我听到她说：

“你就没有一丁点的兴趣，想知道今晚在我的旧识和我之间发生过什么事吗，史蒂文斯先生？”

“我不是有意要有所怠慢，肯顿小姐，不过我真的必须马上回到楼上去。事实是，具有全球性重要意义的事件此时就正在府内进行当中呢。”

“府里又何曾发生过不重要的事呢，史蒂文斯先生？好吧，既然你这么匆忙，我也就直接告诉你得了：我已经接受了我那位旧识的求婚。”

“您说什么，肯顿小姐？”

“我已经答应嫁给他了。”

“啊，真的吗，肯顿小姐？那就请您允许我向您道贺了。”

“谢谢你，史蒂文斯先生。当然，我会很高兴服务至合约期满。不过，如果您能够稍早些许我离职的话，我们都将不胜感激。我的旧识两周后就得前往西南部就任他的新工作了。”

“我将尽我所能及早找到顶替您的人选，肯顿小姐。现在，我就先失陪了，我必须回到楼上去了。”

我重又开始迈步向前，可就在我已经来到通往走廊的门口时，我听见肯顿小姐叫了一声：“史蒂文斯先生，”于是我再度转过身来。她仍旧原地未动，因此在跟我讲话时不得不稍稍提高了一下嗓门，结果在黑暗而又空寂如洞窟的厨房内造成了一种相当诡异的回声。

“我是不是该这样认为，”她说，“在我为府里服务这么多年以后，除了你刚才的那句话以外，对于我可能离开的消息你就再没别的可说了？”

“肯顿小姐，您已经得到了我最为热忱的道贺。不过我要再重复一遍，楼上正在进行事关全球意义的重要会谈，我必须回到我的岗位上去了。”

“你知道吗，史蒂文斯先生，在我的旧识和我的心目当中你一直都是个非常重要的人物。”

“真的吗，肯顿小姐？”

“是的，史蒂文斯先生。我们经常拿有关于你的逸闻趣事来自娱自乐，消磨时间。比如说，我的旧识就总是喜欢让我向他展示你在往膳食上撒胡椒时把鼻孔捏起来的样子，真是乐此不疲，我的演示总能逗得他哈哈大笑。”

“是吗。”

“他还很是喜欢你对员工们的‘鼓气讲话’。我必须说，我已经成为模仿你那些讲话的行家里手了。我只消模仿你的口吻说上个两三句，就能让我们俩全都笑破了肚皮。”

“是吗，肯顿小姐。请您原谅，我必须得告退了。”

我上楼来到门厅里，重又回到我的岗位上。不过，还没过五分钟时间，卡迪纳尔先生就出现在藏书室的门口，招手叫我过去。

“真不想麻烦你，史蒂文斯，”他说。“不过能不能请你再给我拿点白兰地来？先前你送进来的那一瓶像是已经喝完了。”

“您想要什么酒水点心请尽管吩咐，先生。不过，有鉴于您还有专栏文章须要完成，我很怀疑再喝更多的白兰地是否妥当。”

“我的专栏不会有什么问题的，史蒂文斯。你就行行好，再给我拿点白兰地来吧。”

“那就好，先生。”

过了一会儿，当我回到藏书室的时候，卡迪纳尔先生正在书架前往来徘徊，仔细查看着架上藏书的书脊。我能看到旁边的一张书桌上胡乱地散放着好几张稿纸。我走上前来的时候，卡迪纳尔先生感激地轻呼了一声，扑通一声坐在一把皮质扶手椅上。我走上去，往杯里倒了点白兰地，给他递了过去。

“你知道，史蒂文斯，”他说，“咱们已经是多年的老朋友了，对不对？”

“的确，先生。”

“每次到这儿来，我都期望着能跟你好好聊一聊。”

“是的，先生。”

“你愿意跟我一起喝一杯吗？”

“非常感谢您的好意，先生。可是不行，谢谢您，我不能那么做。”

“我说，史蒂文斯，你在这儿过得好吗？”

“非常之好，谢谢您，先生，”我说着，轻轻一笑。

“没觉得有什么不舒服的吗？”

“有点累吧，也许，不过我身体很好，谢谢您，先生。”

“既然如此，你就该坐下来。不管怎么说，我刚才也说了，咱们是多年的老朋友了。所以我真是应该跟你以诚相待。你无疑也该猜到了，今晚我到这儿来并非纯粹是出于凑巧。是有人向我通风报信的，

你知道。关于今晚这儿将有什么事情发生。就在此刻，就在门厅的那一侧。”

“是的，先生。”

“我真心希望你能坐下来，史蒂文斯。希望咱们能像朋友那样说话，你站在那里端着那个该死的托盘就像是随时都打算走开似的。”

“对不起，先生。”

我把托盘放下，在卡迪纳尔先生指给我的那把扶手椅上坐下一以谦恭得体的坐姿。

“这样就好些了，”卡迪纳尔先生道。“听我说，史蒂文斯，我猜想首相⁽²⁾现在就在会客室里吧，是不是？”

“首相吗，先生？”

“哦，没关系，你不必告诉我的。我很理解你的位置相当微妙。”卡迪纳尔先生长叹一声，厌倦地看了一眼散置在书桌上的稿件。然后他说：

“我应该都无须向你说明我对爵爷怀有的是种什么样的感情，是不是，史蒂文斯？我是说，他对我来说一直就是我的另一位父亲。我都无须向你说明，史蒂文斯。”

“是的，先生。”

“我对他关切备至。”

“是的，先生。”

“我知道你也一样。对他关切备至。是不是，史蒂文斯？”

“的确如此，先生。”

“那就好。这么一来我们也就知道彼此的立场了。可是我们必须面对现实。爵爷正身处险境。而且我眼看着他越陷越深，不瞒你说，我真是忧心忡忡。他已经深陷其中无法自拔了，你知道吗，史蒂文斯？”

“真的吗，先生？”

“史蒂文斯，你知道就在我们坐在这里闲话的同时正在发生什么吗？距我们只有几码之外的地方正在发生什么吗？就在那个房间里——”

我并不需要你来证实——英国的首相和德国的大使此刻正共处一室。爵爷真是神通广大，居然能促成这样的会谈，而他相信——衷心地相信——他这是在做一件高尚的好事，善莫大焉。你可知道爵爷今晚为什么会将这几位大人物邀请到这里吗？你可知道有什么样的事情正在这里发生吗，史蒂文斯？”

“恐怕我并不知道，先生。”

“恐怕你并不知道。告诉我，史蒂文斯，难道你根本就不关心吗？你就不好奇吗？老天爷，伙计，这幢房子里正在发生一件至关重要的大事。你就一点都不感到好奇吗？”

“处在我这样的位置上是不宜于对这样的事感到好奇的，先生。”

“可是你关心爵爷啊。你对爵爷关心备至，你刚刚告诉我的。如果你真心关心爵爷的话，难道你不该感到担心吗？不该至少有那么一丁点好奇吗？英国首相和德国大使经由你的雇主的撮合，深夜来到这里进行密谈，你就一点都不感到好奇吗？”

“我并不是说我不感到好奇，先生。可是我的职责本分是不允许我对这类事情表现出好奇的。”

“你的职责本分不允许？啊，我想你肯定是认为这才叫忠心耿耿。对不对？你认为这就是忠心耿耿吗？如此说来，到底是对爵爷，还是对王国政府忠心耿耿呢？”

“很抱歉，先生，我不明白您这话到底是什么意思。”

卡迪纳尔先生再次长叹一声，摇了摇头。“我没什么意思，史蒂文斯。坦白说吧，我不知道应该怎么做才对。可是你至少可以感到好奇吧。”

他沉吟半晌，在此期间，他像是一直在茫然地紧盯着我们脚边的那一圈地毯。

“你确定不想跟我一起喝一杯吗，史蒂文斯？”他终于开口说道。

“不了，谢谢您，先生。”

“我还是告诉你吧，史蒂文斯。爵爷正被人玩弄于股掌之上呢。我已经做了大量的调查，我对于德国当下情势的了解不亚于国内的任何一个人，我告诉你吧，爵爷正在被人愚弄和利用呢。”

我没有搭腔，卡迪纳尔先生则继续茫然地盯着地面。过了半晌，他才继续道：

“爵爷是个高尚的大好人。但事实是，现在的局势他根本就玩不转了。他被人算计了。纳粹拿他当个小卒子一样摆布。你注意到没有，史蒂文斯？至少这三四年以来情况一直都是这样，你注意到没有？”

“很抱歉，先生，我并没有注意到曾出现过任何类似的情况。”

“难道你就从来都没有产生过怀疑？哪怕一丝一毫的疑心：那位希特勒先生，通过我们亲爱的朋友里宾特洛甫先生，一直都把爵爷当作一个小卒子一样摆布利用，就像他摆布柏林他眼皮子底下的其他任何一个一个小卒子一样易如反掌吗？”

“很抱歉，先生，我恐怕并没有注意到曾出现过任何类似的情况。”

“不过我也猜到你大概是不会注意到的，史蒂文斯，因为你从来都不会感到好奇。你只是任由一切在你眼皮子底下发生，从来也没想过要去看看那正在发生的到底是什么。”

卡迪纳尔先生调整了一下在扶手椅上的坐姿，以便坐得稍微端正一点，有一度他像是一心专注于旁边书桌上尚未完成的文稿。然后他又说道：

“爵爷是个真正的绅士。这正是问题的症结所在。他是个绅士，他跟德国人打了一场战争，他出于本能就要对那已经败北的敌人表现出慷慨和友谊。这是他的本能。而这就因为他是个绅士，一个货真价实的英国老绅士。这一点你肯定已经看到了，史蒂文斯。你怎么可能看不到呢？他们也正是一直都在利用这一点，对他的这种本能进行操控，将这种善良高贵的本能转变成了另一种东西——某种他们可以用来为自己邪恶的目的服务的东西，这一点你怎么可能看不到呢？你肯定已经看到了，史蒂文斯。”

卡迪纳尔先生再次紧盯着地板。沉吟良久之后才说：

“我还记得好几年前来这儿的那次，那位美国老兄在这儿的那次。我们举行了一次盛大的会议，家父亲自参加了筹备工作。我还记得那位美国老兄比我现在醉得还厉害，他当着所有来宾的面，在宴会上站起来致辞。他指着爵爷的鼻子说他是外行。说他是拙劣的外行，成事不足败事有余，说他根本就是书生意气不自量力。唉，我不

得不说，史蒂文斯，那位美国老兄还真是说到了点子上。这还真是无可否认的事实。当今的世界太过险恶，是容不得你那些善良高贵的本能的。你自己也亲眼看到了，是不是，史蒂文斯？他们是如何操控那些善良和高贵的力量，将它们玩弄于股掌之上的。你自己也亲眼看到了，是也不是？”

“很抱歉，先生，可我不觉得自己已经看到您说的这些情况。”

“你不觉得已经看到了。哦，我真不知道你到底是怎么了，可我一定得采取点行动了。要是家父还在的话，他绝对不会袖手旁观，肯定会出面阻止的。”

卡迪纳尔先生再次陷入沉默，而且一度显得极度伤感——可能因为重又勾起了对亡父的回忆。“你难道就心安理得吗，史蒂文斯，”他终于道，“眼看着爵爷就这么走到了悬崖边上？”

“很抱歉，先生，我不是很明白您到底是什么意思。”

“你不明白，史蒂文斯？好吧，既然我们是朋友，我就把话挑明了吧。在过去这几年当中，爵爷可能是希特勒先生在本国为他摇旗呐喊，助他实施其宣传诡计最为得力的一枚棋子了。尤其是因为他为人真诚、品德高尚，根本认识不到他所作所为的真实性质，那效果就更好了。仅仅在过去的三年当中，柏林已经跟我国六十余位最有影响力的人士建立起了卓有成效的联系，而爵爷就是最为关键的推动者。这对于德方起到的作用可是大了去了。里宾特洛甫先生几乎可以完全绕过我们的外交部门，直接接触到我们的最高层。就好像他们搞过那次卑鄙的纽伦堡集会又举办了那届卑鄙的奥运会⁽³⁾还嫌不够似的，你知道他们现在正撮弄着爵爷鼓捣什么吗？你知道他们现在正在讨论什么吗？”

“恐怕我并不知道，先生。”

“爵爷之前一直试图劝说首相本人接受邀请，访问德国与希特勒先生会面。他真心诚意地认为首相对于德国的现政权存在着严重的误解。”

“我看不出对于这件事有什么好反对的，先生。爵爷一贯都致力于促进国与国之间更好地相互理解。”

“还不止于此，史蒂文斯。就在这一刻，除非是我大错特错了，就在这一刻，爵爷正在讨论请陛下⁽⁴⁾亲自访德，与希特勒先生会面的构想。我们的新国王一直都很热衷于纳粹思想，这也不是秘密了。

哼，显然陛下本人现在都很急切地想接受希特勒先生的邀请呢。就在这一刻，史蒂文斯，爵爷正在尽一切努力想排除外交部对这一骇人听闻的提议所持的反对意见。”

“很抱歉，先生，可是我看不出爵爷的所作所为当中哪怕有一丝一毫不够高尚的地方。毕竟，他在尽其所能，确保欧洲能继续维持既有的和平。”

“告诉我，史蒂文斯，你当真就从未想到过我有可能是对的吗，不管这种可能性有多小？难道你对我这长篇大套的说法就没有一丝一毫的好奇吗？”

“很抱歉，先生，可我不得不说，我毫无保留地信任爵爷的判断是最为明智的。”

“任何一个具有明智判断力的人，都不会在莱茵兰事件⁽⁵⁾之后对希特勒先生说的每一句话仍旧坚信不疑了。爵爷真是螳臂当车，不自量力啊。哦，老天，这么一来我算是彻底得罪你了。”

“没有的事，先生，”我说，因为我已经听到会客室传来了叫人的铃声，立刻站起身来。“看来爵爷有事要吩咐。恕我告退了。”

会客室里弥漫着浓厚的雪茄烟雾。的确，那几位无比显贵的绅士还在不停地抽着雪茄，每个人的表情都异常肃穆，而且一言不发，爵爷吩咐我去酒窖里取一瓶特别年份的上好波尔图葡萄酒来。

时值夜静更深，这个时候从后楼梯下楼的脚步声肯定会显得格外响亮，无疑也因此而惊醒了肯顿小姐。因为当我摸黑沿着走廊往前走的时候，通往她起坐间的门打开了，她出现在门口，屋内的灯光照亮了她的身影。

“没想到您还在这儿，肯顿小姐，”我走近她的时候说。

“史蒂文斯先生，我刚才的举动真是太傻了。”

“请原谅，肯顿小姐，不过我现在实在没有时间跟您交谈。”

“史蒂文斯先生，您千万别把我刚才说的任何话放在心上。我真是一时犯了傻。”

“您说的任何一句话我都没往心里去，肯顿小姐。事实上，我都不记得您指的到底是什么了。极端重大的事件正在楼上进行当中，我实在没时间停下来跟您闲话客套了。我建议您还是早点休息吧。”

说完后我就忙不迭地继续往前走，一直等我都快走到厨房大门口的时候，走廊上才重新陷入一片黑暗，这说明肯顿小姐已经关上了她起坐间的房门。

我在酒窖里没花多长时间就找到那瓶要找的葡萄酒，并为把酒端给客人做好了必要的准备工作。如此，就在我跟肯顿小姐短暂邂逅之后不过几分钟的时间，我就再次沿着同样那条走廊往回走了，这次是用托盘端着那瓶酒。当我走近肯顿小姐的房门时，我从门框的缝隙中透出的灯光知道她还在里面。而就是那一刻——我现在可以肯定——这些年来一直牢牢地铭刻在了我的记忆当中：就是那一刻，我在黑暗的走廊中停下脚步，手里端着托盘，内心深处涌起一种越来越肯定的感觉，就在几码开外、房门的另一侧，肯顿小姐正在哭泣。据我的记忆所及，我的这种确信并没有任何确凿的证据可以证实——我当然也并没有听到任何的哭泣声——然而我记得当时我非常肯定，如果我敲门进去的话，一定会发现她正满面泪痕。我不知道我在那儿站立了多久；当时的感觉似乎很久很久，可事实上我想也只不过几秒钟罢了。因为，当然了，我的职责是赶快回到楼上去为国内那几位至尊至贵的绅士上酒，我认为自己是不可能耽搁太久的。

我回到会客室的时候，发现那几位绅士的神情仍旧相当严肃。不过除此之外，我也没有机会对当时的气氛产生其他印象了，因为我刚刚把酒送进去，爵爷就亲自接过托盘，对我说：“谢谢你，史蒂文斯，交给我就行了。这里没你的事了。”

再次穿过门厅，我又回到拱门下我惯常的位置，在接下来的一个钟头左右的时间里，也就是直到客人最终离去之前，再没有任何需要我离开这个守望的位置的事情发生。不过，我侍立在那里的那一个钟头的时间，这些年来却一直异常鲜明地留在我的记忆当中。起先，我的心情——我并不介意承认这一点——是有些低落的。不过就在我继续伫立在那里的过程中，一件有些奇怪的事情就开始发生了；也就是说，我的内心深处开始涌起一种深切的成就感。我不记得当时我对这种感觉是如何认识的了，不过如今回顾起来，这其中的缘由也就并不难解释了。毕竟，我刚刚经历了一个极端煎熬的夜晚，而在此期间我竭尽所能，始终都保持了一种“与我的职位相称的高尚尊严”——不仅如此，我还是以一种就连家父也会引以为傲的方式做到这一点的。在门厅的对面，就在我的目光一直停驻其上的那两扇大门后面，就在我刚刚履行过职责的那个房间里，欧洲几位最有权势的绅士正在商讨着我们这块大陆的终极命运。有谁还能怀疑，就在那一刻，我已经真真切切地靠近了所有管家都梦寐以求的那个决定着世界运行的轴心？我可

以这样认为，当我伫立在那里思量着当晚的那些重大事件时——那些已经发生以及仍在进行当中的事件——在我看来，它们就是我这一生所能达到的所有成就的一个总结。除此以外，我看不出还能有别的什么原因，可以解释那晚我何以会感受到那种令我如此振奋昂扬的成就感了。

- (1) 英国保守党的前身。
- (2) 时任英国首相的应该是斯坦利·鲍德温（Stanley Baldwin, 1867—1947），英国保守党政治家，一九二二至三七年三次出任英国首相，压制一九二六年英国工人大罢工，纵容法西斯侵略政策，获封鲍德温伯爵一世。
- (3) 一九三六年八月在柏林举行的第十一届奥运会实际上沦为纳粹宣传的工具。
- (4) 此时的英王是爱德华八世（Edward VIII, 1894—1972），一九三六年一月即位，因坚持与辛普森夫人结婚，于当年十二月退位。爱德华八世由此成为“不爱江山爱美人”的现代传奇，不过据说他本人对纳粹是持同情态度的，其最终退位与此也不无关系。
- (5) 莱茵兰（Rhineland）是西欧历史上争议不断的一个地区，傍莱茵河，位于近代德国与法国、卢森堡、比利时、荷兰边界以东。第一次世界大战后，《凡尔赛和约》不仅规定将阿尔萨斯—洛林划归法国，而且准许协约国军队占领德国莱茵河左岸和右岸莱茵兰地区，占领期限为五到十五年，并且规定左岸和右岸各五十公里以内为永久非军事区。希特勒于一九三六年三月七日公开表示拒绝承认《凡尔赛和约》中有关莱茵兰的各条规定，拒绝履行《洛迦诺公约》，同时宣布德国军队已开进非军事区，旷日持久的国际谈判都未能阻止纳粹德国重新武装莱茵兰。

第六天一傍晚

韦茅斯

这座海边小镇是多年来我一直都很想来看看的地方。我已经听很多人谈起曾在这里度过了多么愉快的假期，而西蒙斯太太也在《英格兰奇景》中称其为“连续多日都能让游客游兴不减的小镇”。事实上，她还特别提到了这个我流连漫步了半个钟头的码头，尤其推荐游客在傍晚时分码头被各色彩灯照亮的时候前来游赏。刚刚我才从一位管理人员那里得知，彩灯“很快”就要亮起了，所以我已经决定就坐在这张长椅上，等待这一刻的到来。从我坐的位置可以尽情欣赏海上落日的奇景，尽管还余留着不少的日光——那天是个响晴的好天——我能看到沿海岸一线，这里那里已经开始亮起了灯光。与此同时，码头上依旧人群熙攘；在我背后，无数脚步踩在木板栈道上发出的咚咚声不绝于耳，从来就没有间断过。

我是昨天下午来到这个小镇的，决定在这儿多住一晚，好让自己能够从容悠闲地在这儿享受这一整天的时光。我得说，有一整天的时间不用再开着车在路上走，对我来说委实是种解脱；因为自己开车虽说也是种颇有乐趣的活动，但开久了也是会让人觉得有点疲累的。不管怎么说，我还有充足的时间可以在这儿多待这么一天；明天一早动身的话，就能确保在下午茶之前返回达林顿府。

从我和肯顿小姐在小康普顿玫瑰花园旅店的茶室见面到现在，已经有整整两天的时间了。的确，结果我们是在那里见的面，是肯顿小姐主动来旅店找的我，这完全出乎了我的意料。用过午餐以后，我正在无所事事地消磨时间的时候——我也不过就是坐在原地，望着窗外不绝如缕的雨滴——一名旅店的员工来通知我说，前台有位女士想要见我。我起身来到外面的大堂，却没有见到任何我认识的人。这时前台的接待员才跟我说：“那位女士在茶室里等您呢，先生。”

走进接待员指示的那扇门，我发现那间茶室里摆满了各不匹配的扶手椅和临时凑合的茶桌。除了肯顿小姐以外就再没有别的客人了，我一走进去，她就站起身来，面带微笑把手伸给了我。

“啊，史蒂文斯先生。真高兴再次见到您。”

“本恩太太，非常高兴。”

由于下雨的缘故，室内的光线特别昏暗，于是我们就将两把扶手椅挪到了那扇凸窗前。在灰蒙蒙的天光中肯顿小姐和我就这样谈了两个小时左右的时间，在此期间雨仍旧毫不停歇地落在外面的广场上。

当然，她是有些显老了，不过起码在我看来，她老得还是非常优雅的。她的身材仍旧很苗条，她的身姿也一如既往地挺拔。她仍旧保持着跟过去一样的姿态，把头高高地仰起，几乎带一点挑衅的神气。当然了，由于惨淡的日光正落在她的脸上，我也不由得注意到那到处出现的皱纹。不过总体说来，坐在我面前的肯顿小姐看起来还是与这些年来一直留驻在我记忆中的那个人惊人地相似。也就是说，总的来说，能够再次见到她真是极其让人高兴的一件事。

刚见面的那二十分钟左右，我们的交谈就跟初次见面的陌生人差不多；她礼貌地问起我旅途一路上的情况，我的假期过得是否愉快，我都经过了哪些市镇，参观了哪些名胜，等等。继续深谈下去的时候，必须说，我想我才开始注意到岁月的流逝对她造成的更大的影响，给她带来的更加微妙的变化。比如说，肯顿小姐显得，在某种程度上，更加迟钝了。也可能这只是随着年岁渐长而变得更加沉静了，在一段时间内我的确也尽量想这样来看待她的这一变化。可是我心下仍旧不免觉得，我看到的其实是一种对于生活的厌倦；那曾经让她显得那么生机勃勃，有时甚至显得激动易怒的火花，现在看来已经不复存在了。事实上，时不时地，在她停下话头，在她面色平静下来的时候，我想我在她的面容当中瞥见的是一种类似忧伤的神情。不过话又说回来了，这也可能完全是我的误解。

过了一小会儿，我们乍一相逢，最初那几分钟内出现的那种小小的不自在就已经涣然冰释了，我们的交谈也就转向了更为私人性的话题。我们先是叙旧，回忆起过去的众多旧相识，交换了一些有关他们的后续的消息，我得说，这真是最为愉快的时刻。不过，与其说是我们交谈的内容，倒不如说是她讲完一段话后的浅浅一笑，她不时流露出来的淡淡的反讽口吻，她肩膀和双手的习惯性姿态，开始明白无误地让我们渐渐重拾起多年前我们交谈时的节奏和习惯。

也大约正是到了这个阶段，我才能够对她的现状有了些确切的认识。比如说，我得知她的婚姻状态并非如她的来信让人感觉到的那般岌岌可危；虽然她的确曾经离家在外住了四五天时间——我收到的来信就是在那期间写的一她其实已经搬回去了，而本恩先生也是非常高兴她终于已经回心转意。“幸好我们当中至少有一个人能够理智地对待这类事情，”她微笑着说道。

当然了，我也知道，这种事情我本是无缘置喙的，而且我也应该澄清一下，若不是出于非常重要的工作方面的考虑，您也许还记得，我是做梦也不会想去打探这方面的私事的；我之所以如此不揣冒昧，完全是为解决目前达林顿府里人手缺乏的问题。不管怎么说，肯顿小姐倒似乎完全不介意向我倾诉这方面的私事，而我也将此视为一种令人愉快的证据，足以充分证明我们当年的工作关系是何等密切而又深厚。

我记得，那之后肯顿小姐又继续泛泛地谈了几句有关她丈夫的一些情况，他很快就要退休了，时间是早了一点，主要是因为他健康状况欠佳，也因为她女儿已经结了婚，今年秋天就要生孩子了。事实上，肯顿小姐把她女儿在多塞特郡的地址也给了我，我必须得说，看到她如此热切地要我在返程的途中一定去看看她，我真有点受宠若惊。虽然我向她解释了我不会途经多塞特郡的那一部分，肯顿小姐却仍竭力敦促于我，说：“凯瑟琳久闻您的大名，史蒂文斯先生。她要是能见到您一定会高兴坏了的。”

我这方面，我则尽我所能向她讲述了一下达林顿府的现状。我试着向她说明法拉戴先生是位多么蔼然可亲的雇主；讲述了宅第本身发生的一些变化，我们做出的一些调整和变更，哪些部分干脆盖上防尘布暂时关闭起来，还有就是目前员工的配置安排。我感觉我一谈到达林顿府，肯顿小姐的兴致就明显更高了，很快，我们就一起回忆起各种各样的陈年旧事，一边说一边忍不住开怀畅笑。

我记得我们只有一次提到了达林顿勋爵。我们很开心地回忆起跟小卡迪纳尔先生有关的一两件往事，我也就不得不告诉肯顿小姐，这位年轻的绅士后来在大战当中在比利时阵亡了。而且我也顺势说到了爵爷对这一噩耗的反应：“当然了，爵爷一直将卡迪纳尔先生视若己出，这一噩耗真是让他悲痛欲绝。”

我本不想让令人难过的话题破坏了融洽愉悦的气氛，所以几乎立刻就想把话头转开。可是正如我所担心的，肯顿小姐早已经读到了报刊上对于爵爷的那些诋毁和中伤，尽管它们的意图并没有得逞；不可避免地，她也就借着这个话题稍稍问了我一些具体的情况。我记得自己原本很不愿意接这个茬儿的，不过最终还是这么对她说：

“事实上，本恩太太，整个大战期间一直都有不少对于爵爷的可怕的诋毁——尤其是那家报社。国难当头之际，爵爷也就一直都隐忍不发，可是战争结束后，那些含沙射影的攻击仍旧持续不断，喔，爵爷也就觉得没有理由再继续默默地承受下去了。现在回过头来再看，也

许一眼就能看出在那种时候、那样的气候之下跟媒体对簿公堂的风险之大。可是你也了解爵爷的为人，他真心诚意地相信他一定能讨回公道。当然了，其结果反而使那份报纸的发行量激增。而爵爷的令名却彻底给毁了。真的，本恩太太，官司打完以后，爵爷整个人完全垮了。达林顿府里也变得无比萧索。那天我把茶点为他端进会客室，结果，唉……那景况真是惨不忍睹。”

“我非常难过，史蒂文斯先生。我根本就不知道情况糟到了这个分上。”

“哦，是呀，本恩太太。可是不谈这个了吧。我知道你记忆中的达林顿府，还是当初经常举办盛大聚会、贵客盈门的样子。那才是爵爷应该被记住的样子。”

就像我说的，这是我们唯一提到达林顿勋爵的地方。总的来说，我们谈到的都是非常令人愉快的往事，我们一起在茶室里度过的这两个钟头，应该说是极为愉快的。我依稀记得在我们畅谈期间还有不少别的客人进来，坐上一会儿就又走了，不过我们的注意力丝毫都没有因此而受到一点分散。的确，当肯顿小姐抬头看了一眼壁炉架上的时钟，说她必须得回去了的时候，你简直都不敢相信时间已经过去了整整两个钟头。得知肯顿小姐得冒着雨走到村外还有点距离的公共汽车站以后，我坚持开车送她过去，我们从前台借了一把雨伞，一起来到了外面。

我停放福特车的地方，周围已经形成了好几个大水洼，我不得不略为搀扶了一下肯顿小姐，送她来到副驾驶那边的车门前。不过，很快我们便沿着村里的主要街道开了下去，途经几家店铺后，我们就来到了开阔的乡野中间。坐在我身边的肯顿小姐原本一直都安静地望着车窗外的景色，这时转向我说：

“你干吗那样子顾自微笑呢，史蒂文斯先生？”

“哦……你一定要原谅我，本恩太太，不过我正好想起你信上写到的某些事。一开始读到的时候，我还真有点担心，不过现在看来应该是没什么担心的理由了。”

“哦？你指的具体是哪些事呢，史蒂文斯先生？”

“哦，倒也没什么特别的，本恩太太。”

“哦，史蒂文斯先生，你真的一定要告诉我。”

“喔，比方说，本恩太太，”我说着轻轻一笑，“在信上的某一处，你写道——让我想想看——‘我的余生在我面前伸展为一片虚空’。大概是这个意思。”

“真的吗，史蒂文斯先生？”她说，也轻轻一笑。“我不可能写过这样的话呀。”

“哦，我敢保证你确实写了，本恩太太。我记得非常清楚。”

“哦，天哪。好吧，也许有那么几天我的确有那样的感受。不过那很快也就过去了。我可以向你保证，史蒂文斯先生，伸展在我面前的人生并非是一片虚空。首先，我们的外孙就要出生了。这是头一个，后面也许还有好几个呢。”

“是呀，的确。对你们来说真是好极啦。”

我们默不作声地又朝前开了几分钟。然后肯顿小姐道：

“那么你呢，史蒂文斯先生？你回到达林顿府以后又会有什么样的未来在等着你呢？”

“喔，不管等着我的到底是什么，本恩太太，我知道那都不可能是一片虚空。如果是的话倒好了。可是不会的，只有工作，工作，做不完的工作。”

说到这里我们俩都笑了。接着，肯顿小姐指了指前面不远处已经可以望见的一个有顶棚的公共汽车候车亭。我们驶近以后，她说：

“你能陪我一起等一会儿吗，史蒂文斯先生？公共汽车只要几分钟就会到的。”

从车上下来的时候，雨仍不住点地下个不停，我们赶紧钻进了候车亭。那候车厅是石砌的，上面有个瓦顶，看起来相当牢靠，它也确实需要建得牢靠些，因为它毫无遮蔽地矗立在那里，背后就是空旷的田地。候车亭里面，处处油漆剥落，不过倒是挺干净的。肯顿小姐在候车的长椅上坐下，我则一直在看得见公共汽车驶来的地方站着。公路的对面，目光所及也只有更多的农田；一排电线杆将我的视线一直引向遥远的天边。

我们默不作声地等了几分钟以后，我终于还是鼓起勇气说：

“恕我冒昧，本恩太太。可事实上我们可能很长时间都再也不能见面了。不知道你是否允许我问你一个相当私人性的问题？这个问题已经困扰了我相当一段时间了。”

“当然可以，史蒂文斯先生。毕竟我们是有多年交情的老朋友了。”

“的确，就像你说的，我们是有多年交情的老朋友了。我就是想问问你，本恩太太—如果你感觉不该告诉我的话，那就不必回答我了。可事实是，这些年来你写给我的那些信，尤其是最近这一封，似乎一直在暗示你过得—这话该怎么说呢？—很不幸福。我就是想知道，你是不是在某种程度上一直都在受到虐待。原谅我这么冒昧直言，可就像我说的，这个问题已经让我担了很长时间的心的。如果我这么大老远地特地来看你，结果却连问都没问你一声，我会感觉非常愚蠢的。”

“史蒂文斯先生，你根本没必要这么难为情。毕竟我们都是老朋友了，不是吗？事实上，你竟然这么关心我，我真是深受感动。在这件事上，你尽可以大放宽心。外子从来没有以任何方式错待过我。他压根儿就不是个性情残忍、脾气暴躁的人。”

“我必须说，本恩太太，听你这么一说真是让我如释重负。”

我朝雨中探身出去，寻找公共汽车的踪影。

“我能看出你并没有非常满意，史蒂文斯先生，”肯顿小姐道。“你不相信我的话吗？”

“哦，并非如此，本恩太太，完全不是这么回事。只不过事实并没有改变，这些年来你过得好像并不幸福。我的意思是说—请恕我直言—你已经有好几次离开你丈夫了。如果他并不曾错待于你，那么，喔……这可就真让人想不通，你的不幸福到底是什么原因导致的了。”

我再次望向外面的蒙蒙细雨。过了半晌，终于，我听到身后的肯顿小姐说：“史蒂文斯先生，我该如何解释才好呢？连我自己都不太清楚我为什么会做出这样的事情来的。可这是事实，我已经有过三次离家出走了。”她沉吟了片刻，在此期间我继续呆望着马路对面的农田。然后她说道：“我想，史蒂文斯先生，你是想问我是否爱我的丈夫。”

“说真的，本恩太太，我绝不会自以为是地……”

“我觉得我还是应该回答你，史蒂文斯先生。正如你所说，我们可能很多年都无缘再见了。是的，我确实爱我丈夫。一开始我并不爱他。一开始我有很长一段时间都不爱他。多年前我在离开达林顿府

的时候，我其实并没有真切地意识到我的的确是离开了它。我想我只不过是把它当作了又一种激怒你的伎俩，史蒂文斯先生。来到这里并且发现自己已经嫁为人妻以后，对我来说不啻于一记晴空霹雳。在很长很长的一段时间里面，我都很不幸福，确实是非常不幸福。可是一年一年地就这么过去了，爆发了战争，凯瑟琳也渐渐长大了，有一天我猛然惊觉我是爱我丈夫的。你跟某个人一起生活了这么长时间，你发现你已经习惯跟他在一起了。他是个善良、可靠的好人，所以是的，史蒂文斯先生，我已经渐渐爱上了他。”

肯顿小姐再一次陷入沉默，过了一会儿她才继续道：

“不过，当然了，这也并不意味着偶尔就不会有这种的时候——在极其孤独的时刻——你会想要对自己说：‘我的人生中犯了个多么可怕的错误。’而且你会开始想象一种不同的生活，一种你原本可能拥有的更好的生活。比方说吧，我开始想象一种本来可以跟你在一起的生活，史蒂文斯先生。而我想正是在这样的的时候，我会为一些琐事而怒不可遏，而离家出走。不过我每次这样做了以后，要不了多久我也就会明白过来——我的本分就是跟我丈夫在一起。毕竟，时光是不能倒流的。一个人是不能永远沉溺在可能的状况中无法自拔的。你应该明白你所拥有的并不比大多数人更差，或许还更好些，应该要心存感激才是。”

我想当时我并没有马上做出回应，因为我是颇花了一点时间才完全消化了肯顿小姐所说的这一番话的。不仅如此，您应该也能体会，这番话里隐含的深意也真是让我心有戚戚。的确——我又何必再遮遮掩掩？——在那一刻，我的心都碎了。不过，很快地，我还是转向她，面带微笑地说：

“你说得对，本恩太太。诚如你所说的，时光是不能倒流的，已经来不及了。的确，我要是知道正是这样的想法造成了你和你丈夫的不幸的话，我是绝对没办法心安理得的。我们每个人都应该，正如你指出的，对我们实际上拥有的东西心怀感激。而且从你告诉我的情况来看，本恩太太，你是有理由感到满意的。事实上，容我冒昧多嘴，随着本恩先生即将退休，还有马上就要降生的小外孙，你跟本恩先生以后还有好多无比幸福的岁月在等着你们。你可千万不要再让任何这类愚蠢的想法横亘在你自己和你应得的幸福之间了。”

“那是当然，你说得对，史蒂文斯先生。真是感谢你的良苦用心。”

“啊，本恩太太，公共汽车好像开过来了。”

我走出候车亭招手示意停车，肯顿小姐站起身来到候车亭边。直到汽车停了下来，我才又偷觑了肯顿小姐一眼，结果发现她眼里盈满了泪水。我微笑着说：

“好了，本恩太太，你自己一定要好好保重。大家都说，退休以后才是夫妻生活中最美好的那一段。你一定要尽你的所能使这些岁月成为你自己和尊夫的幸福时光。我们也许再也无缘见面了，本恩太太，所以我请求你务必把我的这番话记在心上。”

“我会的，史蒂文斯先生，谢谢你。也谢谢你特意开车送我这一程。这次能再次见到你真是太高兴了。”

“再次见到你真是非常非常高兴，本恩太太。”

码头上的彩灯已经亮了起来，我身后的人群刚刚发出一阵大声的欢呼表示欢迎。还有不少天光尚存一海面上的天空已经变为浅红色——不过看来过去半个钟头之内聚集在码头上的人群都希望夜色快点降临。我想，这倒正好印证了刚才还跟我坐在一条长凳上的那个人的观点，我们之间曾有过一段略显奇特的交谈。他的说法是，对于好多人而言，傍晚是一天当中最好的部分，是他们最期盼的一段时光。依我看来，这种说法似乎也不无几分道理，要不然的话，码头上的这些人又怎么会只不过因为灯光亮起，就不约而同地欢呼雀跃呢？

当然了，那人也只是拿黄昏来打个比方，不过眼看着他的话这么快就在现实中得到了应验，也实在有趣得紧。我想在我注意到他之前，他应该已经在我旁边坐了有一会儿了，因为我只顾沉溺在两天前跟肯顿小姐见面的回忆当中难以自拔了。事实上，一直到他大声地开口说话，我才觉察到原来旁边还坐着他这么个人：

“海边的空气对人可是大有裨益啊。”

我抬起头来，看到一位体格健壮、年近七旬的男人，穿了件已经很旧了的花呢夹克，衬衣的领口敞着。他正凝望着海面，也许是在看远处的几只海鸥，所以根本就闹不清他到底是不是在我说话。不过既然没有别人回应，既然附近也看不到还有其他的人可能会做出回应，我最后还是回了一句：

“是呀，我相信肯定是大有裨益的。”

“医生都说这对你有好处。所以只要天气允许，我就尽可能多地到这儿来。”

那人接着又跟我絮叨起了他的各种小病小灾，只是为了对我点点头、笑一笑，才会偶尔把一直凝视着落日的目光掉转过来。我也是在他无意间提及直到三年前正式退休，他一直都是附近一户人家的管家，这才真正开始注意去听他讲话。经过询问以后，我得知他担任管家的那户人家的宅第规模很小，也只有他这么一个全职的雇员。当我问到他手底下可曾有过专职的员工跟他一起工作时一或许在大战前一他回答道：

“哦，那个时候，我还只不过是个男仆。那个时候啊，我还压根儿都不知道当管家的窍门儿呢。要真想成为那些大户人家的管家，对你的要求得有多高，你真是做梦都想不到呢。”

话已至此，我想也该向他表明我的身份了，虽说我不太确定他是不是明白“达林顿府”的斤两，我这位伴当看起来倒是肃然起敬。

“我还一本正经地想向你解说其中的窍门儿呢，”他笑道。“幸亏你及早告诉了我，要不然我可真是关公面前耍大刀了。这也正好说明，你在跟一位陌生人攀谈的时候，永远都不知道你到底是在跟谁讲话。这么说来，你手底下肯定有过一大帮子雇员吧，我想。我是说战前。”

他是个性情开朗的伙计，又像是真的很感兴趣，所以我坦诚我的确花了点时间跟他讲了讲昔日达林顿府的盛况。主要的我是想告诉他，在筹备和监管我们过去经常举办的那些盛大活动时，需要掌握哪些一用他的话来说一“窍门儿”。的确，我相信我甚至还向他透露了我的好几个用以调动员工额外潜能的“秘诀”，以及当管家需要掌握的各种“戏法儿”一就跟变魔术的没什么两样一靠这些戏法儿，一个管家就能让某一样东西在合适的时间出现在合适的地点，而根本不会让客人们窥见这样的操作背后那经常是庞大而又复杂的运作机巧。我也说过，我这位伴当看起来是真的很感兴趣，但在说了一阵以后我也觉得应该见好就收了，于是就以这样一句话做了个归结：

“当然了，在我现在的雇主手下，情况可就大不相同了。他是位美国绅士。”

“美国人，呃？说起来，现在也只有他们才能摆得起这个谱儿了。这么说来你还继续留在那个府里。大概也是一揽子交易的组成部分吧。”他转过脸来冲我咧嘴一笑。

“是呀，”我说，也轻声一笑。“就像你说的，是一揽子交易的一部分。”

那人又把凝视的目光再次转回到海面上，深吸了一口气，又心满意足地叹了口气。然后，我们又默不作声地一起在那儿坐了好一会儿。

“事实上，当然了，”半晌后我又说，“我把我全副的精力都献给了达林顿勋爵。我把所能奉献的一切全都奉献给了他，而现在一喔——我真是发现我还可以奉献的已经所剩无几了。”

那人没有言语，不过点了点头，于是我继续道：

“自打我的新雇主法拉戴先生来到以后，我一直都非常努力，真的是非常努力地想向他提供我希望他能享受到的那种服务。我已经竭尽了全力，可是不管我怎么做，我都发现距离我当初为自己制定的标准还差了一大截。我的工作中也开始出现了越来越多的失误。尽管这些失误本身都无足轻重——至少到目前为止是这样。可它们都是我以前从来都不会犯的那种失误，而且我知道它们意味着什么。老天作证，我真是已经竭尽了全力，可就是没有用。我能够付出的已经全都付出了。而我把它们全都奉献给了达林顿勋爵。”

“哎呀，朋友。我说，要不要块手绢儿？我应该揣着一条来着。找到了。还挺干净的。今天早上只拿它来擤了一次鼻子，仅此而已。你拿去用吧，朋友。”

“哦天哪，不用，谢谢你，我没事了。很抱歉，恐怕是因为这次旅行让我太累了。非常抱歉。”

“你肯定是非常依恋这位什么勋爵。你说他已经过世三年了？我看得出你真是对他情深义重啊，朋友。”

“达林顿勋爵并不是个坏人。他绝不是个坏人。至少他还有勇气在他生命的最后阶段承认是他自己犯了错误。爵爷是个勇敢的人。他在人生中选择了一条自己的道路，结果却发现他是误入了歧途，但他至少可以说，那是他自己的选择。而至于我，我连这样的话都不能说。你知道吗，我信赖他。我信赖爵爷的智慧。在我为他服务的所有这些年来，我一直坚信我所做的全都是有价值的。我甚至都不能说是我自己犯了错。说真的一你不得不扪心自问——在这其中到底又有什么样的尊严呢？”

“听我说，朋友，我不敢保证听明白了你说的每一句话。可如果你问我的话，我得说，你的态度可是完全不对头，知道吗？人不能总是朝后看，要不然肯定是要意气消沉的。好吧，你的工作是不能做得像当年一样好了。可我们不全都是这样吗，对不对？到了某个时候，我们全都得把脚搁起来休息了。你看看我。自打我退休的那天起，我就快活得像只云雀一样。好吧，就算是你我都已经不再是精力充沛的青春盛年，可是你仍旧得继续往前看。”我相信就是在这个时候他又说：“你得学会享受你的人生。傍晚是一天当中最美好的时光。你已经做完了一天的工作。该是你搁起脚来好好享受一下的时候了。我就是这么看的。随便找个人问问，他们也都会这么说的。傍晚是一天当中最美好的时光。”

“我确信你说得很有道理，”我说。“真抱歉，我真是非常失态。我想我是有些累过头了。这些天来我一直都在路上奔波，你知道。”

那个人离开已经有二十分钟左右了，不过我仍旧坐在长椅上没动，等着观看当晚那刚刚已经开始的余兴活动——即码头彩灯亮起的进展情况。像我已经说过的，特意聚集到码头的那些寻欢作乐的人群为迎接这个小小的节目表现出来的欢快之情，似乎再次印证了我刚才那位伴当所言的真确性；因为对于这么多人来说，傍晚确是一天当中最令人享受的时光。如此看来，他的建议或许果真是有点道理的，我的确应该不要再这么频繁地回顾往事，而应该采取一种更为积极的人生态度，把我剩余的这段人生尽量过好。毕竟，总是这样没完没了地往回看，总是自责我们当初的生活并没有尽如人意，终究又有什么好处呢？而且对于你我这样的人来说，现实的残酷肯定还在于，除了将我们的命运交付到身处这个世界的轴心、雇佣我们的服务的那些伟大绅士们的手中之外，归根结底，我们别无选择。整日地自寻烦恼，忧心于当初究竟该怎么做又不该怎么做方是人生之正途，又有什么意义呢？你我之辈，只要是至少曾为了某项真实而有价值的事业而竭尽绵薄、稍作贡献，谅必就已经足够了。我们当中若是有人准备将大部分的生命奉献给这样的理想和抱负，那么毋庸置疑，值得为之自豪和满足的就在于这献身的过程本身，而不应计较其结果究竟如何。

顺带说一句，几分钟前，就在彩灯刚刚亮起后不久，我还特意从坐着的长椅上转过身去，更仔细地研究了一会儿在我背后那些有说有笑的人群。在码头上漫步徜徉的人各种年龄段都有：有带着小孩的一家人；有手挽手一起散步的夫妻，小夫妻老夫妻都有。我背后不远处聚在一起的那六七个人稍稍引起了我的好奇心。我一开始想当然地以

为他们是趁此良宵结伴外出的一帮朋友。可是听了一会儿他们的谈话以后，这才发现他们不过是碰巧在我身后的这个地方偶遇的一帮陌生人。显然，他们刚才全都一时间驻足观望，等待彩灯初上的那一刻，随后才又继续友好地攀谈起来。此刻他们就在我的注视之下，一起开心地大笑。真是奇怪，人们相互间居然能这么快就建立起热络的感情。可能只是因为对于即将到来的夜晚的共同期待，才将这几个人联系在一起。不过呢，我倒也觉得这其实是跟揶揄打趣的本事有更大的关系。眼下听着他们的谈话，听得出来他们相互间玩笑逗趣个不断。想来，这正是很多人都会喜欢的搭话和交谈方式。事实上，刚才跟我坐一条凳子的那位伴当恐怕原本也期望我能跟他玩笑打趣一番。一果真如此的话，我可真是扫了他的兴了。也许我真应该开始更加热心地看待戏谑打趣这件事了。毕竟，认真想来，热衷于开开玩笑也并非什么要不得的蠢行——尤其是在它真能成为联络人际关系的锁钥的情况下。

不仅如此，我还想到，雇主期望他的雇员能跟他说两句俏皮话，也真不能算是不合情理的要求。我当然是已经花了很多时间来提升自己说俏皮话的本领了，不过也许之前我还没有做到全情投入的程度。这么看来，也许在我明天返回达林顿府以后——法拉戴先生本人还要再过一周才回来——我就该重新开始更加努力地加以练习了。如此一来，我有理由希望到我雇主回来的时候，我就能让他感到一种愉快的惊喜了。

为无可慰藉之人提供慰藉

《长日将尽》译后记

日裔英国作家石黑一雄（Kazuo Ishiguro, 1954年12月8日—）因“以其巨大的情感力量，发掘了隐藏在我们与世界的虚幻联系之下的深渊”而荣获二〇一七年度诺贝尔文学奖，瑞典文学院并进而明确指出石黑一雄的文学创作的三个关键词是“时间、记忆与自我欺骗”。想来，石黑本人对此应该也是非常认可的，因为他在访谈中谈到自己创作的要点时，就说过：“我基本上就是依赖回忆。”

《长日将尽》（*The Remains of the Day*）是石黑一雄的第三部长篇小说，荣获一九八九年度的布克奖，真正奠定了他国际一流作家的地位，这部小说与之前的两部长篇《远山淡影》（*A Pale View of Hills*, 1982）和《浮世画家》（*An Artist of the Floating World*, 1986）的的确确全篇都是以主人公的回忆展开和构成的。

以第一人称回忆过去、讲述奇遇、敷演故事甚至说三道四可以说是长篇小说这一体裁最传统也最常用的一种叙事策略，与全知全能的第三人称（也称为“上帝视角”）叙事分庭抗礼，共为长篇小说叙事方式的两大宗派。相较于第三人称叙事，采用第一人称的好处在于容易获得读者的共鸣，读者很容易就会对叙述者的价值观产生认同，甚至在情感上都会与主人公同悲同喜。但这仅限于可靠的叙述者，在叙述者是“可靠的”情况下，叙述者的情感倾向和价值判断与作者或者说体现在作品中的整体倾向是一致的，读者可以大体上将叙述者的声音等同于作者的声音，现代主义兴起之前的小说基本上都是这种情况，典型的如维多利亚时代长篇小说繁荣期的众多作品，像狄更斯的《大卫·科波菲尔》和夏洛蒂·勃朗特的《简·爱》等。现代主义兴起之后情况就大不一样了，亨利·詹姆斯的小说艺术就集中在对叙事角度的强调上，与此联系在一起的是叙述者的声音首次变得不那么可靠起来。詹姆斯故意选择感知视角、理解能力受到限制的叙述者，典型的比如说孩子，用这种受限的视角去观察，用这种尚不能完全理解叙述对象的声音去讲述，由此就会造成叙述者讲述的内容与成熟的读者实际感受到的内涵之间的一种微妙的、巨大的偏差，这种有意味的偏差对于读者所造成的审美和情感的冲击是极大的。美国文学批评家韦恩·布斯（Wayne Booth）在其叙事学名著《小说修辞学》（*The Rhetoric of Fiction*）中首次对所谓“不可靠的叙述”进行了命名和

论述：“当叙述者的言行与作品的范式（即隐含作者的范式）保持一致时，叙述者就是可靠的，否则就是不可靠的。”

《长日将尽》的第一人称叙述就是典型的“不可靠叙述”。如果说亨利·詹姆斯的不可靠叙述源于叙述者观察和理解能力方面的受限，石黑一雄的不可靠叙述则是由于叙述者自身的有意回避和遮遮掩掩。

《长日将尽》的情节是由英国豪门巨族达林顿府的管家史蒂文斯独自驾车前往西南部六天行程中的回忆所构成的。史蒂文斯为达林顿勋爵工作了三十多年的时间，亲眼见证了达林顿府一战和二战期间最为辉煌的鼎盛时期，在这个时期，这个显赫的贵族府第实际上成为对于整个大英帝国的大政方针尤其外交政策起到巨大影响的权力中枢，“这世界就是个轮子，以这些豪门巨宅为轴心而转动”，通过达林顿勋爵，纳粹德国的驻英大使“里宾特洛甫先生几乎可以完全绕过我们的外交部门，直接接触到我们的最高层”。但在二战以后，由于达林顿勋爵在战前一直奉行不光彩的亲纳粹政策，达林顿府盛极而衰，已经由世界的“轴心”沦落到“门前冷落车马稀”的境况。在爵爷也身败名裂、郁郁而终（小说暗示爵爷是自杀身亡）之后，连达林顿府都已转手卖给了美国商人法拉戴先生，达林顿府作为世袭贵族达林顿家族的祖产，在世代相传以后终于为外姓——而且是外国人所有了。在达林顿府的全盛时期，身为管家史蒂文斯手下有三十几个全职员工供他差遣，而在此时，府里的员工加上他这个大管家也就只剩下了四个人，宅第的相当一部分已经关闭起来，不再使用。新主人法拉戴先生好意地主动提出让史蒂文斯驾车外出去休个假，汽油费由他来负担；而更主要的是因为府里现在的人手实在是捉襟见肘，史蒂文斯就想力促三十年前共事过的女管家肯顿小姐重返达林顿府任职，由此即可一举解决府里人手不够的难题，所以想借此休假机会顺道前往肯顿小姐的住处亲自劝她重新出山，结果却无功而返。《长日将尽》这部小说写的就是史蒂文斯这六天驾车出游的沿途见闻，更主要的是对于过去他这大半辈子管家生涯的断续回忆与思考。

那么他都回忆和思考了些什么？我们为什么又说他的叙述是不可靠的？他为什么要有意无意地躲闪和回避？他躲闪和回避的又是什么呢？

干了大半辈子职业管家的史蒂文斯，他回忆和思考的一个最为重要的问题就是：怎样才能算得上是个“伟大的”管家？一个“伟大的”管家与一个极有能力的管家的本质区别又在哪里？史蒂文斯认为

就在于他是否拥有一种“尊严”。那么这种“尊严”到底又是一种什么东西，它具体的内涵应该如何表述？史蒂文斯在经过一番深入的思考，并以自己的父亲管家生涯中的实际言行作为实例，得出结论说：“‘尊严’云云，其至关紧要的一点即在于一位管家无论何时何地都能坚守其职业生命的能力”；“伟大的管家之所以伟大，是由于他们能够化入他们的职业角色，并且是全身心地化入”。身为“管二代”，史蒂文斯还进而将他们这代管家与以他父亲为代表的上一代管家在价值观上的不同做了一番比较，他认为老一辈更关心的是雇主是否是有封号的世家贵族，而他们这一代更关心的则是雇主的道德地位，他们更加理想主义，更希望效力于那些为人类的进步作出贡献的士绅：这个世界是个轮子，以那些豪门巨族为轴心转动，而他们这些有理想的管家莫不以尽可能地靠近这个轴心为志向，他们这个职业的终极价值就体现在为那些肩负着当代文明大任的伟大士绅们服务，如果，也只有做到了这一点，你才可以被称为一位“伟大的”管家：“一个‘伟大的’管家肯定只能是那种人：他在指点自己多年的服务生涯时能够自豪地说，他已经将他的全副才能用以服务一位伟大的绅士了——而通过这样的一位绅士，他也等于是服务了全人类”。

那么史蒂文斯为之而效力了三十多年的达林顿勋爵，他是否居于这个世界的轴心位置，他是否是位伟大的士绅，他的作为是否促进了人类的进步呢？

达林顿勋爵当然居于这个世界的轴心，用史蒂文斯自己的话说：“是我们这代人最先认识到了前几代人全都忽略了一个事实：即世界上的那些重大的决定事实上并不是在公共议事厅里，或者在会期只有寥寥数日又完全置于公众和新闻界关注之下的某个国际会议上做出的。更多的情况下，那些关键性的决定反倒是在国内那些隐秘而又幽静的豪宅里经过讨论、进行权衡后做出的。”小说中集中描写过在达林顿府召开的两次会议（外加无数“不宜公开”的密谈）：一是一九二三年三月召开的国际会议，达林顿勋爵邀请了来自世界各国的高级外交官和政要、杰出的神职人员、退役的军方士绅、作家与思想家共二十几位正式代表参加；还有一次规模虽没有这么盛大，却直接邀请到包括纳粹德国驻英大使与英国首相在内的最高级别的官员到达林顿府进行密谈。正如史蒂文斯和肯顿小姐之间的那段对话所显示的那样：史蒂文斯向肯顿小姐抱歉说他实在太忙，没时间详细探问她跟他的求婚者会面的结果，因为“具有全球性重要意义的事件此时就正在府内进行当中呢”，而肯顿小姐则回答：“府里又何曾发生过不重要的事呢，史蒂文斯先生？”

那么达林顿勋爵是否是位伟大的绅士呢？他的作为是否促进了人类文明的进步呢？用史蒂文斯自己的话说：“无论近年来对达林顿勋爵的功过如何评说……我都该为爵爷说句公道话：他本质上是个真正的好人，一个彻头彻尾的绅士，时至今日，我都为自己能将最好的年华奉献给为这样一个人服务上而深感自豪。”达林顿勋爵参加过一战，对阵的敌人是德国，但他出于绅士的原则和本能，对于已经败北的敌人就自然会表现出慷慨和友善。加之战后签订的《凡尔赛和约》的确对于德国有诸多不公开的条款，这就激起了达林顿勋爵的同情和义愤，尤其是在他的一位德国挚友自杀之后，他开始致力于为德国争取平等的国际权益，一九二三年的那次重要的国际会议就是专门为此而召开的。可以说到此为止，达林顿勋爵的所作所为是完全正当的。但在纳粹政权上台以后，德国已经从之前的牺牲者一变而成咄咄逼人的侵略者，达林顿勋爵却仍旧秉持之前的亲德、挺德立场，执迷不悟，终至于成为纳粹德国的帮凶。如果说一九二三年的那次会议还是完全正当的，那么到一九三六年他一手安排纳粹德国的驻英大使与英国首相到达林顿府密谈，甚至想促成英王在那个时候亲访德国，与希特勒会谈，用勋爵的教子的话说就是：“在过去这几年当中，爵爷可能是希特勒先生在本国为他摇旗呐喊，助他实施其宣传诡计最为得力的一枚棋子了”。而之所以走到这一步，居然正是因为勋爵是位真正的绅士，因为他为人真诚，品德高尚。所以答案是：达林顿勋爵确实是位品德高尚的绅士，但他却并没有成为一位伟大的绅士，他非但未能促进人类文明的进步，反而沦落为纳粹的棋子和帮凶。

这也可以解释史蒂文斯的回忆为什么会躲躲闪闪、避重就轻，甚至自我欺骗了。表面看来，史蒂文斯的遣词造句非常正式、规范，面面俱到而又谨小慎微，恰合他大半辈子的管家身份，但表面上滴水不漏的叙述当中，暗底里却有潜流涌动，甚至暗潮汹涌。他一方面说他们这代管家有着理想主义的追求，良禽择木而栖，要选择真正伟大的绅士为其服务，在助其促进全人类的福祉中实现自己的职业价值，成为“伟大的”管家；另一方面在勋爵的教子小卡迪纳尔明确向他指出勋爵已成为纳粹的棋子和帮凶以后，他又采取鸵鸟政策，故意视而不见，并且为自己找借口，说像他们这样的人是完全不可能理解当今的国际大事的，最好的办法就是完全信赖他们已经认定是既明智又可敬的那位雇主，将全副精力奉献于为他提供最好的服务上。他一方面坚称达林顿勋爵是位伟大的绅士，他为自己将最美好的年华奉献给为这样一个人服务上而深感自豪，另一方面却又在两次截然不同的场合有意地回避他是否曾为达林顿勋爵服务的话题，甚至不惜矢口否认。他一方面义愤填膺地为爵爷声辩，说人们攻击爵爷是个排犹主义者绝

对是卑鄙龌龊的无耻谰言，一方面又因为奉爵爷之命开除了两个犹太女仆而难以释怀，几成心病……这种前后不一，甚至完全矛盾的表述实在是太多了，而其根源则在于达林顿勋爵并非如他所愿意相信的那般完美，但正视这一点就等于抹杀了他三十年来鞠躬尽瘁地工作的意义，乃至把他整个人生的意义也都一笔抹杀了，而这是他绝对无法面对的残酷真相。

达林顿勋爵具有真正的绅士精神，秉持Noblesse oblige（位高则任重）的道义责任，在一战后为明显受到不公平待遇的战败国德国鸣不平，并且不限于道义上的支持，勇于行动，以殚精竭虑的实际作为运筹帷幄，奔走呼号，其精神何等高尚，其行为何等高贵。在为德国争取平等待遇的那次国际会议上，勋爵曾跟美国的政客刘易斯先生有过一次正面的交锋，刘易斯先生说他们凭借自己高贵的精神治国理政的时代已经一去不复返了，现在的国际事务需要专业人士来掌管，他们都是外行，他们根本就搞不清状况，仅凭着美好的愿望只能是成事不足败事有余。勋爵则反驳说他所谓的专业精神无非是通过欺骗和操纵来为所欲为，是依照自己的贪欲和利益来排定轻重缓急，而他所谓的外行，他更愿意称之为“荣誉”。多年后，当爵爷运用自己的影响力居然将英国首相拉到自己家里来和纳粹德国的驻英大使进行密谈的时候，他当初的至交兼同道的儿子，也是他的教子的小卡迪纳尔因为不愿看到他所尊敬的教父跨入万劫不复的境地，特意赶来苦苦相劝，但爵爷却置之不理。借酒浇愁的小卡迪纳尔对史蒂文斯吐露了真情，他重提当初刘易斯与爵爷争执这一幕，而他现在的看法已经完全倒了个个儿：“唉，我不得不说，史蒂文斯，那位美国老兄还真是说到了点子上。这还真是无可否认的事实。当今的世界太过险恶，是容不得你那些善良高贵的本能的。你自己也亲眼看到了，是不是，史蒂文斯？他们是如何操控那些善良和高贵的力量，将它们玩弄于股掌之上的。你自己也亲眼看到了，是也不是？”执迷不悟的达林顿勋爵一意孤行，直至成为纳粹德国最有力的棋子和帮凶，直落得身败名裂、自杀身亡的下场，而所有这一切，他又都是出于最为高贵的本性，秉持最为高尚的道义责任而做出来的。这是何等的悲剧！

而怀抱理想主义、一心想做一个“伟大的”管家的史蒂文斯呢？他年轻时也曾频繁更换雇主，直到他有机会效命于达林顿勋爵才安顿下来，这一干就是三十几年。因为他认为“良禽择木而栖，良臣择主而事”，他认定了勋爵就是他要找的明主，就是能够实现他伟大管家抱负的伟大绅士。史蒂文斯的父亲也是位管家，而且他对父亲评价甚高，认为父亲的作为体现出了他最为看重的职业尊严，堪为伟大管家

的表率。他曾因为肯顿小姐只称呼父亲的教名不尊称他先生而跟她翻脸，造成很长时间内男女管家之间的不和。那么按说史蒂文斯跟父亲的关系应该是相互尊重、非常融洽的了吧？却并不尽然。我们看到父亲意外摔倒受伤后，史蒂文斯再奉爵爷之命去跟父亲摊牌，规定他已经不便行使哪些职责的时候，父子俩的关系是何等地僵硬：父亲对他的态度异常冷淡，很不耐烦，而他对父亲竟然只以第三人称称呼，没有丝毫亲热之意。紧接着的就是那最为盛大的国际会议了，这也是他身为管家可以尽情发挥的最盛大的舞台，结果呢，一边是需要他施展全副本领，展现他伟大的职业精神的盛大会议和宴会，另一边则是他视之为职业表率的亲生父亲在寒酸的顶层阁楼里等着咽气。丝毫不出意料，他当然是为了所谓的职业精神而置垂死的父亲于不顾了。他为了成为伟大的管家首先是完全牺牲了亲情——父子之情。

然后又牺牲了爱情。史蒂文斯虽说差不多一开始就跟肯顿小姐有过冲突，但在多年的共事中逐渐建立起工作上相互信任、情感上也相互信赖的亲密关系。整部小说都是以史蒂文斯的口吻叙述的，正如对于达林顿勋爵的叙述是一种不可靠的叙述一样，他对于肯顿小姐的叙述也一直都是躲躲闪闪的，原因就在于他不敢正视他对肯顿小姐的真情，而根源仍在他为了所谓的管家的职业精神而只得压抑甚至牺牲自己的情感。尽管在对有关肯顿小姐的往事回忆中史蒂文斯没有只字提及自己对她的真情实感，但在貌似客观中立的叙述中随处可见他对她的依恋以及因无法对她的情感做出回应而隐含的负疚之情。已经分离三十多年后的史蒂文斯反复阅读肯顿小姐的来信，几乎到了能够背诵的程度，切盼她能重返达林顿府再次与他共事，为此而不惜有意地曲解信里的字句，故意夸大了肯顿小姐重返达林顿府的意愿。有关肯顿小姐有几个场景深深地印在史蒂文斯的脑海中，永远无法忘怀，仅各举一个无限美好、一个无限伤痛的场景为例：他反复提到一次傍晚时分，他不知因为什么工作而来到楼上，夕阳透过客卧一扇扇半掩的房门照射到走廊上，而透过一扇门，他看到肯顿小姐映在窗前的侧影；肯顿小姐向他挥手，柔声叫他过去，他和肯顿小姐一起看到花园中他父亲在凉亭前来回踱躅的身影。三十多年以后，肯顿小姐在来信中再次提到这个场景，形容老史蒂文斯“就仿佛一心想找回他失落在那里的某样珍宝”，史蒂文斯认为形容得非常形象，这个场景对他来说是否也正是一样已经失落的珍宝呢？另一个场景则让他伤痛不已，尽管他抵死也不会承认。他独自一人站在肯顿小姐起坐间外面的后廊上，为是否敲门而举棋不定，因为他突然间确信就在一门之隔、相距仅几码之遥的地方，肯顿小姐正在伤心地哭泣。他一方面说这一刻已经牢牢地嵌入了他的记忆中，“同样难以忘怀的”还有当时他在那里内心

深处升腾而起的那种特别的感受，但另一方面他又说现在他却又记不清他到底出于什么原因站在那后廊上了。他甚至（有意无意地）把这个场景张冠李戴，安在肯顿小姐得知姨妈的死讯之后了，那么那恸哭就是哀悼她姨妈了。但结果却并不是。既然这个场景已经根植在他的记忆深处，他又怎么会张冠李戴呢？他然后才好像恍然大悟一般，想起那是在肯顿小姐的姨妈去世已几个月后的事情，确切地说是发生在小卡迪纳尔意外来访的那个夜晚。那个夜晚发生了什么？明的层面上是我们上文已经提到的，达林顿勋爵居然安排英国首相和纳粹德国驻英大使在那个夜晚到他家里密谈，小卡迪纳尔为了让教父能悬崖勒马，闯上门来做最后的规劝（小说并没有明写，而只通过史蒂文斯的口吻说听到他们爷俩在吸烟室里激烈地争吵）。在史蒂文斯职业生涯的层面上，他由开始的情绪低落而渐渐涌起了一种深深的成就感，认为在如此煎熬的一个夜晚，当欧洲几位最有权势的绅士就在他的服侍之下决定着这块大陆的终极命运的过程中，他始终都保持了一种与他的职位相称的“高贵尊严”，他因此而将这一晚视作他职业生涯的顶点，是他“这一生所能达到的所有成就的一个总结”。这是明的层面，那么暗的层面呢？——则是肯顿小姐在多年的期盼、多次的努力和试探之后，终于灰心绝望，在那一夜接受了一位旧识本恩先生的求婚。肯顿小姐为之痛哭失声的是自己已经破碎的爱情，那站在门外的史蒂文斯内心翻涌的又是一种什么样的“特别的感受”呢？

为了实现自己成为伟大管家的理想和抱负，史蒂文斯不惜牺牲父子的亲情（这种牺牲并非单方面的，可以看出老史蒂文斯也做出了同样的牺牲）和男女间的爱情，以至于成为一个几乎压抑了一切正常情感、完全不近人情的工作机器。就在他自以为已经实现了人生的终极目标、职业的终极价值以后，却才发现他借以实现目标和价值的这位伟大的绅士，其实却是纳粹的帮凶、民族的罪人，他最后竟羞于承认他曾是一位爵爷的管家。这是何等的悲剧！

那么肯顿小姐呢？她的人生遭际又是怎样的呢？透过史蒂文斯的讲述，我们大体上可以理清肯顿小姐如下的人生轨迹：她和老史蒂文斯先生差不多同时来到达林顿府，担任女管家的职务。她的长相我们不得而知，但我们知道她是一个热情、活泼、性格开朗而又倔强的女子（“她仍旧保持着跟过去一样的姿态，把头高高地仰起，几乎带一点挑衅的神气”）。刚来没多久，她就捧着一瓶鲜花闯入史蒂文斯那修道院一样寒素的餐具室里，想为他那间阴暗的房间带来一点生气。谁知史蒂文斯非但不领情，还在有关老史蒂文斯的称呼问题上向她兴师问罪，导致颇有一段时间两人在工作问题上相互挑刺，甚至不相往

来，靠传递口信或是小纸条进行工作上的沟通。随着老史蒂文斯身体的恶化，两人的关系也日渐改善，两人一起透过窗户看着老史蒂文斯在花园里徘徊的场景就出现在此时。老史蒂文斯去世的时候是肯顿小姐守在他的床前，并为他合上了双眼。到这个阶段，肯顿小姐明显已经对史蒂文斯由最初的好感进入愿意信托终身的阶段。由她提议，两人养成了一天的工作结束后一起在她的起坐间里喝杯热可可、聊聊天的习惯。之后两人的关系又经受过一次严峻的考验，即史蒂文斯遵照爵爷的指示解雇了两个犹太女佣，嫉恶如仇的肯顿小姐强烈反对，甚至声称如果当真解雇她们，她也会随之而辞职，她对于史蒂文斯的态度也由此变得冷淡甚至粗暴。直到几个月后，两人在凉亭里不期而遇，史蒂文斯第一次谈到他对解雇犹太雇员这件事也一样深感苦恼和难过时，两人这才冰释前嫌，而且无疑情感又更进了一步，不但重新和好，还相互调侃。之后肯顿小姐采取了关键性的一步，她不请自来地闯入史蒂文斯的餐具室碰到他正在读一本浪漫小说那一次无疑是要进行表白的，当然她更希望史蒂文斯能主动向她表白。结果却因为史蒂文斯的不通人情、不解风情而不欢而散。事已至此，肯顿小姐已经感觉到她的感情付出就要落空了，但她仍不死心，在一次可可聚会上又做了最后的一次试探，她问史蒂文斯，在他的事业已经到达顶峰，对此他已心满意足以后，他还有什么样的人生目标。对于肯顿小姐而言，这是个生死攸关的问题，她付出的情感能否有个完满的结果就在此一举了。结果史蒂文斯竟然说，一直得等到他协助爵爷实现了他为自己设定的所有伟大目标以后，他的人生才算是圆满，而丝毫没有个人情感方面的考虑。加之肯顿小姐最为亲近的姨妈去世后，史蒂文斯非但没有对她致以慰唁之情（他本来是打算这样做的），却（阴差阳错地）反而对她负责的工作横加挑剔，于是在对于史蒂文斯的感情上，肯顿小姐基本上已经完全绝望了。她开始跟之前的一位旧相识本恩先生约会，并在那个关键性的夜晚接受了本恩先生的求婚，婚后随丈夫迁居康沃尔郡的小康普顿。肯顿小姐的婚姻（有可能）幸福吗？在史蒂文斯开车前去跟她会面前，我们已经知道她有好几次离家出走的经历了，而在那次会面当中，虽满怀伤痛却仍比史蒂文斯更勇敢地直面自己真情实感的肯顿小姐这样对他说：“不过，当然了，这也并不意味着偶尔就不会有这种的时候——在极其孤独的时刻——你会想要对自己说：‘我的人生中犯了个多么可怕的错误。’而且你会开始想象一种不同的生活，一种你原本可能拥有的更好的生活。比方说吧，我开始想象一种本来可以跟你在一起的生活，史蒂文斯先生……”

为了所谓的理想抱负，史蒂文斯不但虚掷了自己的一生，还辜负了肯顿小姐的真情，使她的前半生尽付蹉跎，余生成为“一片虚空”。对于肯顿小姐而言这又是何等的悲剧！

石黑一雄说他写《长日将尽》的出发点是想书写“你是如何为了成就事业而荒废了你的人生，又是如何在个人的层面上蹉跎了一辈子的”，他写的一直都是公共历史之下的个人记忆，是内在的冲突而非外在的压力，他认为个人的疏离感源自自我的认同，来自内心深处，而非外部强加。石黑一雄的创作基本上都建立在一种回溯型的叙事结构之上，不管具体采用第一还是第三人称，小说的主人公都有一个痛苦的过去，不愿去直面却又摆脱不了往事的纠缠，为了能够继续生活下去，就必须对这个痛苦的过往进行一番清理。情感上的不愿和不忍直视导致了讲述本身的犹疑、躲闪和自我欺骗，但这个过去又必须得到清理，否则这种回溯本身也就失去了意义。由此而导致了主人公不同层次的叙述层层叠加，导致不同层次的含义之间的微妙差异，而只有越过这层层遮蔽的“死荫的幽谷”，才能最终抵达自我和解的彼岸，获得继续生活下去的勇气。

石黑一雄曾说过，对他而言“创作从来都不是宣泄愤怒或狂躁的手段，而是用来抒发某种遗憾，纾解忧愁”，“现实世界并不完美，但作家能够通过创造心目中的理想世界与现实抗衡，或者找到与之妥协的办法”。可以说他的文学创作就是为了给人们提供一种“缓慢前进的勇气和信心”，是为那无可慰藉之人提供心灵的慰藉（to console the unconsole）。

冯 涛

二〇一八年五月

KAZUO ISHIGURO

The Remains of the Day

In memory of Mrs Lenore Marshall

PROLOGUE: JULY 1956

Darlington Hall

It seems increasingly likely that I really will undertake the expedition that has been preoccupying my imagination now for some days. An expedition, I should say, which I will undertake alone, in the comfort of Mr Farraday's Ford; an expedition which, as I foresee it, will take me through much of the finest countryside of England to the West Country, and may keep me away from Darlington Hall for as much as five or six days. The idea of such a journey came about, I should point out, from a most kind suggestion put to me by Mr Farraday himself one afternoon almost a fortnight ago, when I had been dusting the portraits in the library. In fact, as I recall, I was up on the step-ladder dusting the portrait of Viscount Wetherby when my employer had entered carrying a few volumes which he presumably wished returned to the shelves. On seeing my person, he took the opportunity to inform me that he had just that moment finalized plans to return to the United States for a period of five weeks between August and September. Having made this announcement, my employer put his volumes down on a table, seated himself on the *chaise-longue*, and stretched out his legs. It was then, gazing up at me, that he said.

'You realize, Stevens, I don't expect you to be locked up here in this house all the time I'm away. Why don't you take the car and drive off somewhere for a few days? You look like you could make good use of a break.'

Coming out of the blue as it did, I did not quite know how to reply to such a suggestion. I recall thanking him for his consideration, but quite probably I said nothing very definite for my employer went on:

‘I’m serious, Stevens. I really think you should take a break. I’ll foot the bill for the gas. You fellows, you’re always locked up in these big houses helping out, how do you ever get to see around this beautiful country of yours?’

This was not the first time my employer had raised such a question; indeed, it seems to be something which genuinely troubles him. On this occasion, in fact, a reply of sorts did occur to me as I stood up there on the ladder; a reply to the effect that those of our profession, although we did not see a great deal of the country in the sense of touring the countryside and visiting picturesque sites, did actually ‘see’ more of England than most, placed as we were in houses where the greatest ladies and gentlemen of the land gathered. Of course, I could not have expressed this view to Mr Farraday without embarking upon what might have seemed a presumptuous speech. I thus contented myself by saying simply:

‘It has been my privilege to see the best of England over the years, sir, within these very walls.’

Mr Farraday did not seem to understand this statement, for he merely went on: ‘I mean it, Stevens. It’s wrong that a man can’t get to see around his own country. Take my advice, get out of the house for a few days.’

As you might expect, I did not take Mr Farraday’s suggestion at all seriously that afternoon, regarding it as just another instance of an American gentleman’s unfamiliarity with what was and what was not commonly done in England. The fact that my attitude to this same suggestion underwent a change over the following days - indeed, that the notion of a trip to the West Country took an ever-increasing hold on my thoughts - is no doubt substantially attributable to - and why should I hide it? - the arrival of Miss Kenton’s letter, her first in almost seven years if one discounts the Christmas cards. But let me make it immediately clear what I mean by this; what I mean to say is

that Miss Kenton's letter set off a certain chain of ideas to do with professional matters here at Darlington Hall, and I would underline that it was a preoccupation with these very same professional matters that led me to consider anew my employer's kindly meant suggestion. But let me explain further.

The fact is, over the past few months, I have been responsible for a series of small errors in the carrying out of my duties. I should say that these errors have all been without exception quite trivial in themselves. Nevertheless, I think you will understand that to one not accustomed to committing such errors, this development was rather disturbing, and I did in fact begin to entertain all sorts of alarmist theories as to their cause. As so often occurs in these situations, I had become blind to the obvious - that is, until my pondering over the implications of Miss Kenton's letter finally opened my eyes to the simple truth: that these small errors of recent months have derived from nothing more sinister than a faulty staff plan.

It is, of course, the responsibility of every butler to devote his utmost care in the devising of a staff plan. Who knows how many quarrels, false accusations, unnecessary dismissals, how many promising careers cut short can be attributed to a butler's slovenliness at the stage of drawing up the staff plan? Indeed, I can say I am in agreement with those who say that the ability to draw up a good staff plan is the cornerstone of any decent butler's skills. I have myself devised many staff plans over the years, and I do not believe I am being unduly boastful if I say that very few ever needed amendment. And if in the present case the staff plan is at fault, blame can be laid at no one's door but my own. At the same time, it is only fair to point out that my task in this instance had been of an unusually difficult order.

What had occurred was this. Once the transactions were over - transactions which had taken this house out of the

hands of the Darlington family after two centuries - Mr Farraday let it be known that he would not be taking up immediate residence here, but would spend a further four months concluding matters in the United States. In the meantime, however, he was most keen that the staff of his predecessor - a staff of which he had heard high praise - be retained at Darlington Hall. This 'staff' he referred to was, of course, nothing more than the skeleton team of six kept on by Lord Darlington's relatives to administer to the house up to and throughout the transactions; and I regret to report that once the purchase had been completed, there was little I could do for Mr Farraday to prevent all but Mrs Clements leaving for other employment. When I wrote to my new employer conveying my regrets at the situation, I received by reply from America instructions to recruit a new staff 'worthy of a grand old English house'. I immediately set about trying to fulfil Mr Farraday's wishes, but as you know, finding recruits of a satisfactory standard is no easy task nowadays, and although I was pleased to hire Rosemary and Agnes on Mrs Clements's recommendation, I had got no further by the time I came to have my first business meeting with Mr Farraday during the short preliminary visit he made to our shores in the spring of last year. It was on that occasion - in the strangely bare study of Darlington Hall - that Mr Farraday shook my hand for the first time, but by then we were hardly strangers to each other; quite aside from the matter of the staff, my new employer in several other instances had had occasion to call upon such qualities as it may be my good fortune to possess and found them to be, I would venture, dependable. So it was, I assume, that he felt immediately able to talk to me in a businesslike and trusting way, and by the end of our meeting, he had left me with the administration of a not inconsiderable sum to meet the costs of a wide range of preparations for his coming residency. In any case, my point is that it was during the course of this interview, when I raised the question of the difficulty of recruiting suitable staff in these times, that Mr Farraday,

after a moment's reflection, made his request of me; that I do my best to draw up a staff plan - 'some sort of servants' rota' as he put it - by which this house might be run on the present staff of four - that is to say, Mrs Clements, the two young girls, and myself. This might, he appreciated, mean putting sections of the house 'under wraps', but would I bring all my experience and expertise to bear to ensure such losses were kept to a minimum? Recalling a time when I had had a staff of seventeen under me, and knowing how not so long ago a staff of twenty-eight had been employed here at Darlington Hall, the idea of devising a staff plan by which the same house would be run on a staff of four seemed, to say the least, daunting. Although I did my best not to, something of my scepticism must have betrayed itself, for Mr Farraday then added, as though for reassurance, that were it to prove necessary, then an additional member of staff could be hired. But he would be much obliged, he repeated, if I could 'give it a go with four'.

Now naturally, like many of us, I have a reluctance to change too much of the old ways. But there is no virtue at all in clinging as some do to tradition merely for its own sake. In this age of electricity and modern heating systems, there is no need at all to employ the sorts of numbers necessary even a generation ago. Indeed, it has actually been an idea of mine for some time that the retaining of unnecessary numbers simply for tradition's sake - resulting in employees having an unhealthy amount of time on their hands - has been an important factor in the sharp decline of professional standards. Furthermore, Mr Farraday had made it clear that he planned to hold only very rarely the sort of large social occasions Darlington Hall had seen frequently in the past. I did then go about the task Mr Farraday had set me with some dedication; I spent many hours working on the staff plan, and at least as many hours again thinking about it as I went about other duties or as I lay awake after retiring. Whenever I believed I had come up with something, I probed it

for every sort of oversight, tested it through from all angles. Finally, I came up with a plan which, while perhaps not exactly as Mr Farraday had requested, was the best, I felt sure, that was humanly possible. Almost all the attractive parts of the house could remain operative: the extensive servants' quarters - including the back corridor, the two still rooms and the old laundry - and the guest corridor up on the second floor would be dust-sheeted, leaving all the main ground-floor rooms and a generous number of guest rooms. Admittedly, our present team of four would manage this programme only with reinforcement from some daily workers; my staff plan therefore took in the services of a gardener, to visit once a week, twice in the summer, and two cleaners, each to visit twice a week. The staff plan would, furthermore, for each of the four resident employees mean a radical altering of our respective customary duties. The two young girls, I predicted, would not find such changes so difficult to accommodate, but I did all I could to see that Mrs Clements suffered the least adjustments, to the extent that I undertook for myself a number of duties which you may consider most broad-minded of a butler to do.

Even now, I would not go so far as to say it is a bad staff plan; after all, it enables a staff of four to cover an unexpected amount of ground. But you will no doubt agree that the very best staff plans are those which give clear margins of error to allow for those days when an employee is ill or for one reason or another below par. In this particular case, of course, I had been set a slightly extraordinary task, but I had nevertheless not been neglectful to incorporate 'margins' wherever possible. I was especially conscious that any resistance there may be on the part of Mrs Clements, or the two girls, to the taking on of duties beyond their traditional boundaries would be compounded by any notion that their workloads had greatly increased. I had then, over those days of struggling with the staff plan, expended a significant amount of thought to ensuring that Mrs Clements and the girls, once they had got over their aversion to

adopting these more 'eclectic' roles, would find the division of duties stimulating and unburden-some.

I fear, however, that in my anxiety to win the support of Mrs Clements and the girls, I did not perhaps assess quite as stringently my own limitations; and although my experience and customary caution in such matters prevented my giving myself more than I could actually carry out, I was perhaps negligent over this question of allowing myself a margin. It is not surprising then, if over several months, this oversight should reveal itself in these small but telling ways. In the end, I believe the matter to be no more complicated than this: I had given myself too much to do.

You may be amazed that such an obvious shortcoming to a staff plan should have continued to escape my notice, but then you will agree that such is often the way with matters one has given abiding thought to over a period of time; one is not struck by the truth until prompted quite accidentally by some external event. So it was in this instance; that is to say, my receiving the letter from Miss Kenton, containing as it did, along with its long, rather unrevealing passages, an unmistakable nostalgia for Darlington Hall, and - I am quite sure of this - distinct hints of her desire to return here, obliged me to see my staff plan afresh. Only then did it strike me that there was indeed a role that a further staff member could crucially play here; that it was, in fact, this very shortage that had been at the heart of all my recent troubles. And the more I considered it, the more obvious it became that Miss Kenton, with her great affection for this house, with her exemplary professionalism - the sort almost impossible to find nowadays - was just the factor needed to enable me to complete a fully satisfactory staff plan for Darlington Hall.

Having made such an analysis of the situation, it was not long before I found myself reconsidering Mr Farraday's kind suggestion of some days ago. For it had occurred to me that the proposed trip in the car could be put to good

professional use; that is to say, I could drive to the West Country and call on Miss Kenton in passing, thus exploring at first hand the substance of her wish to return to employment here at Darlington Hall. I have, I should make clear, reread Miss Kenton's recent letter several times, and there is no possibility I am merely imagining the presence of these hints on her part.

For all that, I could not for some days quite bring myself to raise the matter again with Mr Farraday. There were, in any case, various aspects to the matter I felt I needed to clarify to myself before proceeding further. There was, for instance, the question of cost. For even taking into account my employer's generous offer to 'foot the bill for the gas', the costs of such a trip might still come to a surprising amount considering such matters as accommodation, meals, and any small snacks I might partake of on my way. Then there was the question of what sorts of costume were appropriate on such a journey, and whether or not it was worth my while to invest in a new set of clothes. I am in the possession of a number of splendid suits, kindly passed on to me over the years by Lord Darlington himself, and by various guests who have stayed in this house and had reason to be pleased with the standard of service here. Many of these suits are, perhaps, too formal for the purposes of the proposed trip, or else rather old-fashioned these days. But then there is one lounge suit, passed on to me in 1931 or 1932 by Sir Edward Blair - practically brand new at the time and almost a perfect fit - which might well be appropriate for evenings in the lounge or dining room of any guest houses where I might lodge. What I do not possess, however, is any suitable travelling clothes - that is to say, clothes in which I might be seen driving the car - unless I were to don the suit passed on by the young Lord Chalmers during the war, which despite being clearly too small for me, might be considered ideal in terms of tone. I calculated finally that my savings would be able to meet all the costs I might incur, and in addition, might stretch to the purchase of a new

costume. I hope you do not think me unduly vain with regard to this latter matter; it is just that one never knows when one might be obliged to give out that one is from Darlington Hall, and it is important that one be attired at such times in a manner worthy of one's position.

During this time, I also spent many minutes examining the road atlas, and perusing also the relevant volumes of Mrs Jane Symons's *The Wonder of England*. If you are not familiar with Mrs Symons's books - a series running to seven volumes, each one concentrating on one region of the British Isles - I heartily recommend them. They were written during the thirties, but much of it would still be up to date - after all, I do not imagine German bombs have altered our countryside so significantly. Mrs Symons was, as a matter of fact, a frequent visitor to this house before the war; indeed, she was among the most popular as far as the staff were concerned due to the kind appreciation she never shied from showing. It was in those days, then, prompted by my natural admiration for the lady, that I had first taken to perusing her volumes in the library whenever I had an odd moment. Indeed, I recall that shortly after Miss Kenton's departure to Cornwall in 1936, myself never having been to that part of the country, I would often glance through Volume III of Mrs Symons's work, the volume which describes to readers the delights of Devon and Cornwall, complete with photographs and - to my mind even more evocative - a variety of artists' sketches of that region. It was thus that I had been able to gain some sense of the sort of place Miss Kenton had gone to live her married life. But this was, as I say, back in the thirties, when as I understand, Mrs Symons's books were being admired in houses up and down the country. I had not looked through those volumes for many years, until these recent developments led me to get down from the shelf the Devon and Cornwall volume once more. I studied all over again those marvellous descriptions and illustrations, and you can perhaps understand my growing

excitement at the notion that I might now actually undertake a motoring trip myself around that same part of the country.

It seemed in the end there was little else to do but actually to raise the matter again with Mr Farraday. There was always the possibility, of course, that his suggestion of a fortnight ago may have been a whim of the moment, and he would no longer be approving of the idea. But from my observation of Mr Farraday over these months, he is not one of those gentlemen prone to that most irritating of traits in an employer - inconsistency. There was no reason to believe he would not be as enthusiastic as before about my proposed motoring trip - indeed, that he would not repeat his most kind offer to 'foot the bill for the gas'. Nevertheless, I considered most carefully what might be the most opportune occasion to bring the matter up with him; for although I would not for one moment, as I say, suspect Mr Farraday of inconsistency, it nevertheless made sense not to broach the topic when he was preoccupied or distracted. A refusal in such circumstances may well not reflect my employer's true feelings on the matter, but once having sustained such a dismissal, I could not easily bring it up again. It was clear, then, that I had to choose my moment wisely.

In the end, I decided the most prudent moment in the day would be as I served afternoon tea in the drawing room. Mr Farraday will usually have just returned from his short walk on the downs at that point, so he is rarely engrossed in his reading or writing as he tends to be in the evenings. In fact, when I bring in the afternoon tea, Mr Farraday is inclined to close any book or periodical he has been reading, rise and stretch out his arms in front of the windows, as though in anticipation of conversation with me.

As it was, I believe my judgement proved quite sound on the question of timing; the fact that things turned out as they did is entirely attributable to an error of judgement in another direction altogether. That is to say, I did not take sufficient account of the fact that at that time of the day,

what Mr Farraday enjoys is a conversation of a light-hearted, humorous sort. Knowing this to be his likely mood when I brought in the tea yesterday afternoon, and being aware of his general propensity to talk with me in a bantering tone at such moments, it would certainly have been wiser not to have mentioned Miss Kenton at all. But you will perhaps understand that there was a natural tendency on my part, in asking what was after all a generous favour from my employer, to hint that there was a good professional motive behind my request. So it was that in indicating my reasons for preferring the West Country for my motoring, instead of leaving it at mentioning several of the alluring details as conveyed by Mrs Symons's volume, I made the error of declaring that a former housekeeper of Darlington Hall was resident in that region. I suppose I must have been intending to explain to Mr Farraday how I would thus be able to explore an option which might prove the ideal solution to our present small problems here in this house. It was only after I had mentioned Miss Kenton that I suddenly realized how entirely inappropriate it would be for me to continue. Not only was I unable to be certain of Miss Kenton's desire to rejoin the staff here, I had not, of course, even discussed the question of additional staff with Mr Farraday since that first preliminary meeting over a year ago. To have continued pronouncing aloud my thoughts on the future of Darlington Hall would have been, to say the very least, presumptuous. I suspect, then, that I paused rather abruptly and looked a little awkward. In any case, Mr Farraday seized the opportunity to grin broadly at me and say with some deliberation.

‘My, my, Stevens. A lady-friend. And at your age.’

This was a most embarrassing situation, one in which Lord Darlington would never have placed an employee. But then I do not mean to imply anything derogatory about Mr Farraday; he is, after all, an American gentleman and his ways are often very different. There is no question at all that he meant any

harm; but you will no doubt appreciate how uncomfortable a situation this was for me.

‘I’ d never have figured you for such a lady’s man, Stevens,’ he went on. ‘Keeps the spirit young, I guess. But then I really don’t know it’s right for me to be helping you with such dubious assignations.’

Naturally, I felt the temptation to deny immediately and unambiguously such motivations as my employer was imputing to me, but saw in time that to do so would be to rise to Mr Farraday’s bait, and the situation would only become increasingly embarrassing. I therefore continued to stand there awkwardly, waiting for my employer to give me permission to undertake the motoring trip.

Embarrassing as those moments were for me, I would not wish to imply that I in any way blame Mr Farraday, who is in no sense an unkind person; he was, I am sure, merely enjoying the sort of bantering which in the United States, no doubt, is a sign of a good, friendly understanding between employer and employee, indulged in as a kind of affectionate sport. Indeed, to put things into a proper perspective, I should point out that just such bantering on my new employer’s part has characterized much of our relationship over these months – though I must confess, I remain rather unsure as to how I should respond. In fact, during my first days under Mr Farraday, I was once or twice quite astounded by some of the things he would say to me. For instance, I once had occasion to ask him if a certain gentleman expected at the house was likely to be accompanied by his wife.

‘God help us if she does come,’ Mr Farraday replied.

‘Maybe you could keep her off our hands, Stevens. Maybe you could take her out to one of those stables around Mr Morgan’s farm. Keep her entertained in all that hay. She may be just your type.’

For a moment or two, I had not an idea what my employer was saying. Then I realized he was making some sort of joke

and endeavoured to smile appropriately, though I suspect some residue of my bewilderment, not to say shock, remained detectable in my expression.

Over the following days, however, I came to learn not to be surprised by such remarks from my employer, and would smile in the correct manner whenever I detected the bantering tone in his voice. Nevertheless, I could never be sure exactly what was required of me on these occasions. Perhaps I was expected to laugh heartily; or indeed, reciprocate with some remark of my own. This last possibility is one that has given me some concern over these months, and is something about which I still feel undecided. For it may well be that in America, it is all part of what is considered good professional service that an employee provide entertaining banter. In fact, I remember Mr Simpson, the landlord of the Ploughman's Arms, saying once that were he an American bartender, he would not be chatting to us in that friendly, but ever-courteous manner of his, but instead would be assaulting us with crude references to our vices and failings, calling us drunks and all manner of such names, in his attempt to fulfil the role expected of him by his customers. And I recall also some years ago, Mr Rayne, who travelled to America as valet to Sir Reginald Mauvis, remarking that a taxi driver in New York regularly addressed his fare in a manner which if repeated in London would end in some sort of fracas, if not in the fellow being frogmarched to the nearest police station.

It is quite possible, then, that my employer fully expects me to respond to his bantering in a like manner, and considers my failure to do so a form of negligence. This is, as I say, a matter which has given me much concern. But I must say this business of bantering is not a duty I feel I can ever discharge with enthusiasm. It is all very well, in these changing times, to adapt one's work to take in duties not traditionally within one's realm; but bantering is of another dimension altogether. For one thing, how would one

know for sure that at any given moment a response of the bantering sort is truly what is expected? One need hardly dwell on the catastrophic possibility of uttering a bantering remark only to discover it wholly inappropriate.

I did though on one occasion not long ago, pluck up the courage to attempt the required sort of reply. I was serving Mr Farraday morning coffee in the breakfast room when he had said to me:

‘I suppose it wasn’t you making that crowing noise this morning, Stevens?’

My employer was referring, I realized, to a pair of gypsies gathering unwanted iron who had passed by earlier making their customary calls. As it happened, I had that same morning been giving thought to the dilemma of whether or not I was expected to reciprocate my employer’s bantering, and had been seriously worried at how he might be viewing my repeated failure to respond to such openings. I therefore set about thinking of some witty reply; some statement which would still be safely inoffensive in the event of my having misjudged the situation. After a moment or two, I said:

‘More like swallows than crows, I would have said, sir. From the migratory aspect.’ And I followed this with a suitably modest smile to indicate without ambiguity that I had made a witticism, since I did not wish Mr Farraday to restrain any spontaneous mirth he felt out of a misplaced respectfulness.

Mr Farraday, however, simply looked up at me and said: ‘I beg your pardon, Stevens?’

Only then did it occur to me that, of course, my witticism would not be easily appreciated by someone who was not aware that it was gypsies who had passed by. I could not see, then, how I might press on with this bantering; in fact, I decided it best to call a halt to the matter and,

pretending to remember something I had urgently to attend to, excused myself, leaving my employer looking rather bemused.

It was, then, a most discouraging start to what may in fact be an entirely new sort of duty required of me; so discouraging that I must admit I have not really made further attempts along these lines. But at the same time, I cannot escape the feeling that Mr Farraday is not satisfied with my responses to his various banterings. Indeed, his increased persistence of late may even be my employer's way of urging me all the more to respond in a like-minded spirit. Be that as it may, since that first witticism concerning the gypsies, I have not been able to think of other such witticisms quickly enough.

Such difficulties as these tend to be all the more preoccupying nowadays because one does not have the means to discuss and corroborate views with one's fellow professionals in the way one once did. Not so long ago, if any such points of ambiguity arose regarding one's duties, one had the comfort of knowing that before long some fellow professional whose opinion one respected would be accompanying his employer to the house, and there would be ample opportunity to discuss the matter. And of course, in Lord Darlington's days, when ladies and gentlemen would often visit for many days on end, it was possible to develop a good understanding with visiting colleagues. Indeed, in those busy days, our servants' hall would often witness a gathering of some of the finest professionals in England talking late into the night by the warmth of the fire. And let me tell you, if you were to have come into our servants' hall on any of those evenings, you would not have heard mere gossip; more likely, you would have witnessed debates over the great affairs preoccupying our employers upstairs, or else over matters of import reported in the newspapers; and of course, as fellow professionals from all walks of life are wont to do when gathered together, we could be found discussing every aspect of our vocation. Sometimes, naturally, there would be strong

disagreements, but more often than not, the atmosphere was dominated by a feeling of mutual respect. Perhaps I will convey a better idea of the tone of those evenings if I say that regular visitors included the likes of Mr Harry Graham, valet-butler to Sir James Chambers, and Mr John Donalds, valet to Mr Sydney Dickenson. And there were others less distinguished, perhaps, but whose lively presence made any visit memorable; for instance, Mr Wilkinson, valet-butler to Mr John Campbell, with his well-known repertoire of impersonations of prominent gentlemen; Mr Davidson from Easterly House, whose passion in debating a point could at times be as alarming to a stranger as his simple kindness at all other times was endearing; Mr Herman, valet to Mr John Henry Peters, whose extreme views no one could listen to passively, but whose distinctive belly-laugh and Yorkshire charm made him impossible to dislike. I could go on. There existed in those days a true camaraderie in our profession, whatever the small differences in our approach. We were all essentially cut from the same cloth, so to speak. Not the way it is today, when on the rare occasion an employee accompanies a guest here, he is likely to be some newcomer who has little to say about anything other than Association Football and who prefers to pass the evening not by the fire of the servants' hall, but drinking at the Ploughman's Arms - or indeed, as seems increasingly likely nowadays, at the Star Inn.

I mentioned a moment ago Mr Graham, the valet-butler to Sir James Chambers. In fact, some two months ago, I was most happy to learn that Sir James was to visit Darlington Hall. I looked forward to the visit not only because visitors from Lord Darlington's days are most rare now - Mr Farraday's circle, naturally, being quite different from his lordship's - but also because I presumed Mr Graham would accompany Sir James as of old, and I would thus be able to get his opinion on this question of bantering. I was, then, both surprised and disappointed to discover a day before the visit that Sir James would be coming alone. Furthermore, during Sir James's

subsequent stay, I gathered that Mr Graham was no longer in Sir James's employ; indeed that Sir James no longer employed any full-time staff at all. I would like to have discovered what had become of Mr Graham, for although we had not known each other well, I would say we had got on on those occasions we had met. As it was, however, no suitable opportunity arose for me to gain such information. I must say, I was rather disappointed, for I would like to have discussed the bantering question with him.

However, let me return to my original thread. I was obliged, as I was saying, to spend some uncomfortable minutes standing in the drawing room yesterday afternoon while Mr Farraday went about his bantering. I responded as usual by smiling slightly - sufficient at least to indicate that I was participating in some way with the good-humouredness with which he was carrying on - and waited to see if my employer's permission regarding the trip would be forthcoming. As I had anticipated, he gave his kind permission after not too great a delay, and furthermore, Mr Farraday was good enough to remember and reiterate his generous offer to 'foot the bill for the gas'.

So then, there seems little reason why I should not undertake my motoring trip to the West Country. I would of course have to write to Miss Kenton to tell her I might be passing by; I would also need to see to the matter of the costumes. Various other questions concerning arrangements here in the house during my absence will need to be settled. But all in all, I can see no genuine reason why I should not undertake this trip.

DAY ONE - EVENING

Salisbury

Tonight, I find myself here in a guest house in the city of Salisbury. The first day of my trip is now completed, and all in all, I must say I am quite satisfied. This expedition began this morning almost an hour later than I had planned, despite my having completed my packing and loaded the Ford with all the necessary items well before eight o'clock. What with Mrs Clements and the girls also gone for the week, I suppose I was very conscious of the fact that once I departed, Darlington Hall would stand empty for probably the first time this century - perhaps for the first time since the day it was built. It was an odd feeling and perhaps accounts for why I delayed my departure so long, wandering around the house many times over, checking one last time that all was in order.

It is hard to explain my feelings once I did finally set off. For the first twenty minutes or so of motoring, I cannot say I was seized by any excitement or anticipation at all. This was due, no doubt, to the fact that though I motored further and further from the house, I continued to find myself in surroundings with which I had at least a passing acquaintance. Now I had always supposed I had travelled very little, restricted as I am by my responsibilities in the house, but of course, over time, one does make various excursions for one professional reason or another, and it would seem I have become much more acquainted with those neighbouring districts than I had realized. For as I say, as I motored on in the sunshine towards the Berkshire border, I continued to be surprised by the familiarity of the country around me.

But then eventually the surroundings grew unrecognizable and I knew I had gone beyond all previous boundaries. I have heard people describe the moment, when setting sail in a ship, when one finally loses sight of the land. I imagine the experience of unease mixed with exhilaration often described in connection with this moment is very similar to what I felt in the Ford as the surroundings grew strange around me. This occurred just after I took a turning and found myself on a road curving around the edge of a hill. I could sense the steep drop to my left, though I could not see it due to the trees and thick foliage that lined the roadside. The feeling swept over me that I had truly left Darlington Hall behind, and I must confess I did feel a slight sense of alarm - a sense aggravated by the feeling that I was perhaps not on the correct road at all, but speeding off in totally the wrong direction into a wilderness. It was only the feeling of a moment, but it caused me to slow down. And even when I had assured myself I was on the right road, I felt compelled to stop the car a moment to take stock, as it were.

I decided to step out and stretch my legs a little and when I did so, I received a stronger impression than ever of being perched on the side of a hill. On one side of the road, thickets and small trees rose steeply, while on the other I could now glimpse through the foliage the distant countryside.

I believe I had walked a little way along the roadside, peering through the foliage hoping to get a better view, when I heard a voice behind me. Until this point, of course, I had believed myself quite alone and I turned in some surprise. A little way further up the road on the opposite side, I could see the start of a footpath, which disappeared steeply up into the thickets. Sitting on the large stone that marked this spot was a thin, white-haired man in a cloth cap, smoking his pipe. He called to me again and though I could not quite make out his words, I could see him gesturing for me to join him. For a moment, I took him for a vagrant, but

then I saw he was just some local fellow enjoying the fresh air and summer sunshine, and saw no reason not to comply.

‘Just wondering, sir,’ he said, as I approached, ‘how fit your legs were.’

‘I beg your pardon?’

The fellow gestured up the footpath. ‘You got to have a good pair of legs and a good pair of lungs to go up there. Me, I haven’t got neither, so I stay down here. But if I was in better shape, I’d be sitting up there. There’s a nice little spot up there, a bench and everything. And you won’t get a better view anywhere in the whole of England.’

‘If what you say is true,’ I said, ‘I think I’d rather stay here. I happen to be embarking on a motoring trip during the course of which I hope to see many splendid views. To see the best before I have properly begun would be somewhat premature.’

The fellow did not seem to understand me, for he simply said again: ‘You won’t see a better view in the whole of England. But I tell you, you need a good pair of legs and a good pair of lungs.’ Then he added: ‘I can see you’re in good shape for your age, sir. I’d say you could make your way up there, no trouble. I mean, even I can manage on a good day.’

I glanced up the path, which did look steep and rather rough.

‘I’m telling you, sir, you’ll be sorry if you don’t take a walk up there. And you never know. A couple more years and it might be too late’ - he gave a rather vulgar laugh - ‘Better go on up while you still can.’

It occurs to me now that the man might just possibly have meant this in a humorous sort of way; that is to say, he intended it as a bantering remark. But this morning, I must say, I found it quite offensive and it may well have been the

urge to demonstrate just how foolish his insinuation had been that caused me to set off up the footpath.

In any case, I am very glad I did so. Certainly, it was quite a strenuous walk - though I can say it failed to cause me any real difficulty - the path rising in zigzags up the hillside for a hundred yards or so. I then reached a small clearing, undoubtedly the spot the man had referred to. Here one was met by a bench - and indeed, by a most marvellous view over miles of the surrounding countryside.

What I saw was principally field upon field rolling off into the far distance. The land rose and fell gently, and the fields were bordered by hedges and trees. There were dots in some of the distant fields which I assumed to be sheep. To my right, almost on the horizon, I thought I could see the square tower of a church.

It was a fine feeling indeed to be standing up there like that, with the sound of summer all around one and a light breeze on one's face. And I believe it was then, looking on that view, that I began for the first time to adopt a frame of mind appropriate for the journey before me. For it was then that I felt the first healthy flush of anticipation for the many interesting experiences I know these days ahead hold in store for me. And indeed, it was then that I felt a new resolve not to be daunted in respect to the one professional task I have entrusted myself with on this trip; that is to say, regarding Miss Kenton and our present staffing problems.

But that was this morning. This evening I found myself settled here in this comfortable guest house in a street not far from the centre of Salisbury. It is, I suppose, a relatively modest establishment, but very clean and perfectly adequate for my needs. The landlady, a woman of around forty or so, appears to regard me as a rather grand visitor on account of Mr Farraday's Ford and the high quality of my suit. This afternoon - I arrived in Salisbury at around

three thirty - when I entered my address in her register as 'Darlington Hall', I could see her look at me with some trepidation, assuming no doubt that I was some gentleman used to such places as the Ritz or the Dorchester and that I would storm out of the guest house on being shown my room. She informed me that a double room at the front was available, though I was welcome to it for the price of a single.

I was then brought up to this room, in which, at that point of the day, the sun was lighting up the floral patterns of the wallpaper quite agreeably. There were twin beds and a pair of good-sized windows overlooking the street. On inquiring where the bathroom was, the woman told me in a timid voice that although it was the door facing mine, there would be no hot water available until after supper. I asked her to bring me up a pot of tea, and when she had gone, inspected the room further. The beds were perfectly clean and had been well made. The basin in the corner was also very clean. On looking out of the windows, one saw on the opposite side of the street a bakery displaying a variety of pastries, a chemist's shop and a barber's. Further along, one could see where the street passed over a round-backed bridge and on into more rural surroundings. I refreshed my face and hands with cold water at the basin, then seated myself on a hard-backed chair left near one of the windows to await my tea.

I would suppose it was shortly after four o'clock that I left the guest house and ventured out into the streets of Salisbury. The wide, airy nature of the streets here give the city a marvellously spacious feel, so that I found it most easy to spend some hours just strolling in the gently warm sunshine. Moreover, I discovered the city to be one of many charms; time and again, I found myself wandering past delightful rows of old timber-fronted houses, or crossing some little stone footbridge over one of the many streams that flow through the city. And of course, I did not fail to visit the fine cathedral, much praised by Mrs Symons in her volume. This august building was hardly difficult for me to

locate, its looming spire being ever-visible wherever one goes in Salisbury. Indeed, as I was making my way back to this guest house this evening, I glanced back over my shoulder on a number of occasions and was met each time by a view of the sun setting behind that great spire.

And yet tonight, in the quiet of this room, I find that what really remains with me from this first day's travel is not Salisbury Cathedral, nor any of the other charming sights of this city, but rather that marvellous view encountered this morning of the rolling English countryside. Now I am quite prepared to believe that other countries can offer more obviously spectacular scenery. Indeed, I have seen in encyclopedias and the *National Geographic Magazine* breathtaking photographs of sights from various corners of the globe; magnificent canyons and waterfalls, raggedly beautiful mountains. It has never, of course, been my privilege to have seen such things at first hand, but I will nevertheless hazard this with some confidence: the English landscape at its finest - such as I saw it this morning - possesses a quality that the landscapes of other nations, however more superficially dramatic, inevitably fail to possess. It is, I believe, a quality that will mark out the English landscape to any objective observer as the most deeply satisfying in the world, and this quality is probably best summed up by the term 'greatness'. For it is true, when I stood on that high ledge this morning and viewed the land before me, I distinctly felt that rare, yet unmistakable feeling - the feeling that one is in the presence of greatness. We call this land of ours *Great Britain*, and there may be those who believe this a somewhat immodest practice. Yet I would venture that the landscape of our country alone would justify the use of this lofty adjective.

And yet what precisely is this 'greatness'? Just where, or in what, does it lie? I am quite aware it would take a far wiser head than mine to answer such a question, but if I were forced to hazard a guess, I would say that it is the very

lack of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of our land apart. What is pertinent is the calmness of that beauty, its sense of restraint. It is as though the land knows of its own beauty, of its own greatness, and feels no need to shout it. In comparison, the sorts of sights offered in such places as Africa and America, though undoubtedly very exciting, would, I am sure, strike the objective viewer as inferior on account of their unseemly demonstrativeness.

The whole question is very akin to the question that has caused much debate in our profession over the years: what is a 'great' butler? I can recall many hours of enjoyable discussion on this topic around the fire of the servants' hall at the end of a day. You will notice I say 'what' rather than 'who' is a great butler; for there was actually no serious dispute as to the identity of the men who set the standards amongst our generation. That is to say, I am talking of the likes of Mr Marshall of Charleville House, or Mr Lane of Bridewood. If you have ever had the privilege of meeting such men, you will no doubt know of the quality they possess to which I refer. But you will no doubt also understand what I mean when I say it is not at all easy to define just what this quality is.

Incidentally, now that I come to think further about it, it is not quite true to say there was no dispute as to *who* were the great butlers. What I should have said was that there was no serious dispute among professionals of quality who had any discernment in such matters. Of course, the servants' hall at Darlington Hall, like any servants' hall anywhere, was obliged to receive employees of varying degrees of intellect and perception, and I recall many a time having to bite my lip while some employee - and at times, I regret to say, members of my own staff - excitedly eulogized the likes of, say, Mr Jack Neighbours.

I have nothing against Mr Jack Neighbours, who sadly, I understand, was killed in the war. I mention him simply because his was a typical case. For two or three years in the

mid-thirties, Mr Neighbours's name seemed to dominate conversations in every servants' hall in the land. As I say, at Darlington Hall too, many a visiting employee would bring the latest tales of Mr Neighbours's achievements, so that I and the likes of Mr Graham would have to share the frustrating experience of hearing anecdote after anecdote relating to him. And most frustrating of all would be having to witness at the conclusion of each such anecdote otherwise decent employees shaking their heads in wonder and uttering phrases like: 'That Mr Neighbours, he really is the best.'

Now I do not doubt that Mr Neighbours had good organizational skills; he did, I understand, mastermind a number of large occasions with conspicuous style. But at no stage did he ever approach the status of a great butler. I could have told you this at the height of his reputation, just as I could have predicted his downfall after a few short years in the limelight.

How often have you known it for the butler who is on everyone's lips one day as the greatest of his generation to be proved demonstrably within a few years to have been nothing of the sort? And yet those very same employees who once heaped praise on him will be too busy eulogizing some new figure to stop and examine their sense of judgement. The object of this sort of servants' hall talk is invariably some butler who has come to the fore quite suddenly through having been appointed by a prominent house, and who has perhaps managed to pull off two or three large occasions with some success. There will then be all sorts of rumours buzzing through servants' halls up and down the country to the effect that he has been approached by this or that personage or that several of the highest houses are competing for his services with wildly high wages. And what has happened before a few years have passed? This same invincible figure has been held responsible for some blunder, or has for some other reason fallen out of favour with his employers, leaves the house where he came to fame and is never heard of again.

Meanwhile, those same gossipers will have found yet some other newcomer about whom to enthuse. Visiting valets, I have found, are often the worst offenders, aspiring as they usually do to the position of butler with some urgency. They it is who tend to be always insisting this or that figure is the one to emulate, or repeating what some particular hero is said to have pronounced upon professional matters.

But then, of course, I hasten to add, there are many valets who would never dream of indulging in this sort of folly - who are, in fact, professionals of the highest discernment. When two or three such persons were gathered together at our servants' hall - I mean of the calibre of, say, Mr Graham, with whom now, sadly, I seem to have lost touch - we would have some of the most stimulating and intelligent debates on every aspect of our vocation. Indeed, today, those evenings rank amongst my fondest memories from those times.

But let me return to the question that is of genuine interest, this question we so enjoyed debating when our evenings were not spoilt by chatter from those who lacked any fundamental understanding of the profession; that is to say, the question '*what* is a great butler?'

To the best of my knowledge, for all the talk this question has engendered over the years, there have been very few attempts within the profession to formulate an official answer. The only instance that comes to mind is the attempt of the Hayes Society to devise criteria for membership. You may not be aware of the Hayes Society, for few talk of it these days. But in the twenties and the early thirties, it exerted a considerable influence over much of London and the Home Counties. In fact, many felt its power had become too great and thought it no bad thing when it was forced to close, I believe in 1932 or 1933.

The Hayes Society claimed to admit butlers of 'only the very first rank'. Much of the power and prestige it went on

to gain derived from the fact that unlike other such organizations which have come and gone, it managed to keep its numbers extremely low, thus giving this claim some credibility. Membership, it was said, never at any point rose above thirty and much of the time remained closer to nine or ten. This, and the fact that the Hayes Society tended to be a rather secretive body, lent it much mystique for a time, ensuring that the pronouncements it occasionally issued on professional matters were received as though hewn on tablets of stone.

But one matter the Society resisted pronouncing on for some time was the question of its own criteria for membership. Pressure to have these announced steadily mounted, and in response to a series of letters published in *A Quarterly for the Gentleman's Gentleman*, the Society admitted that a prerequisite for membership was that 'an applicant be attached to a distinguished household'.

'Though of course,' the Society went on, 'this by itself is far from sufficient to satisfy requirements.' It was made clear, furthermore, that the Society did not regard the houses of businessmen or the 'newly rich' as 'distinguished', and in my opinion this piece of out-dated thinking crucially undermined any serious authority the Society may have achieved to arbitrate on standards in our profession. In response to further letters in *A Quarterly*, the Society justified its stance by saying that while it accepted some correspondents' views that certain butlers of excellent quality were to be found in the houses of businessmen, 'the assumption had to be that the houses of *true* ladies and gentlemen would not refrain long from acquiring the services of any such persons'. One had to be guided by the judgement of 'the true ladies and gentlemen', argued the Society, or else 'we may as well adopt the proprieties of Bolshevik Russia'. This provoked further controversy, and the pressure of letters continued to build up urging the Society to declare more fully its membership criteria. In the end, it was revealed in a brief letter to *A*

Quarterly that in the view of the Society - and I will try and quote accurately from memory - 'the most crucial criterion is that the applicant be possessed of a dignity in keeping with his position. No applicant will satisfy requirements, whatever his level of accomplishments otherwise, if seen to fall short in this respect.'

For all my lack of enthusiasm for the Hayes Society, it is my belief that this particular pronouncement at least was founded on a significant truth. If one looks at these persons we agree are 'great' butlers, if one looks at, say, Mr Marshall or Mr Lane, it does seem to be that the factor which distinguishes them from those butlers who are merely extremely competent is most closely captured by this word 'dignity'.

Of course, this merely begs the further question: of what is 'dignity' comprised? And it was on this point that the likes of Mr Graham and I had some of our most interesting debates. Mr Graham would always take the view that this 'dignity' was something like a woman's beauty and it was thus pointless to attempt to analyse it. I, on the other hand, held the opinion that to draw such a parallel tended to demean the 'dignity' of the likes of Mr Marshall. Moreover, my main objection to Mr Graham's analogy was the implication that this 'dignity' was something one possessed or did not by a fluke of nature; and if one did not self-evidently have it, to strive after it would be as futile as an ugly woman trying to make herself beautiful. Now while I would accept that the majority of butlers may well discover ultimately that they do not have the capacity for it, I believe strongly that this 'dignity' is something one can meaningfully strive for throughout one's career. Those 'great' butlers like Mr Marshall who have it, I am sure, acquired it over many years of self-training and the careful absorbing of experience. In my view, then, it was rather defeatist from a vocational standpoint to adopt a stance like Mr Graham's.

In any case, for all Mr Graham's scepticism, I can remember he and I spending many evenings trying to put our fingers on the constitution of this 'dignity'. We never came to any agreement, but I can say for my part that I developed fairly firm ideas of my own on the matter during the course of such discussions, and they are by and large the beliefs I still hold today. I would like, if I may, to try and say here what I think this 'dignity' to be.

You will not dispute, I presume, that Mr Marshall of Charleville House and Mr Lane of Bridewood have been the two great butlers of recent times. Perhaps you might be persuaded that Mr Henderson of Branbury Castle also falls into this rare category. But you may think me merely biased if I say that my own father could in many ways be considered to rank with such men, and that his career is the one I have always scrutinized for a definition of 'dignity'. Yet it is my firm conviction that at the peak of his career at Loughborough House, my father was indeed the embodiment of 'dignity'.

I realize that if one looks at the matter objectively, one has to concede my father lacked various attributes one may normally expect in a great butler. But those same absent attributes, I would argue, are every time those of a superficial and decorative order, attributes that are attractive, no doubt, as icing on the cake, but are not pertaining to what is really essential. I refer to things such as good accent and command of language, general knowledge on wide-ranging topics such as falconing or newt-mating - attributes none of which my father could have boasted. Furthermore, it must be remembered that my father was a butler of an earlier generation who began his career at a time when such attributes were not considered proper, let alone desirable in a butler. The obsessions with eloquence and general knowledge would appear to be ones that emerged with our generation, probably in the wake of Mr Marshall, when lesser men trying to emulate his greatness mistook the

superficial for the essence. It is my view that our generation has been much too preoccupied with the 'trimmings'; goodness knows how much time and energy has gone into the practising of accent and command of language, how many hours spent studying encyclopedias and volumes of 'Test Your Knowledge', when the time should have been spent mastering the basic fundamentals.

Though we must be careful not to attempt to deny the responsibility which ultimately lies with ourselves, it has to be said that certain employers have done much to encourage these sorts of trends. I am sorry to say this, but there would appear to have been a number of houses in recent times, some of the highest pedigree, which have tended to take a competitive attitude towards each other and have not been above 'showing off' to guests a butler's mastery of such trivial accomplishments. I have heard of various instances of a butler being displayed as a kind of performing monkey at a house party. In one regrettable case, which I myself witnessed, it had become an established sport in the house for guests to ring for the butler and put to him random questions of the order of, say, who had won the Derby in such and such a year, rather as one might to a Memory Man at the music hall.

My father, as I say, came of a generation mercifully free of such confusions of our professional values. And I would maintain that for all his limited command of English and his limited general knowledge, he not only knew all there was to know about how to run a house, he did in his prime come to acquire that 'dignity in keeping with his position', as the Hayes Society puts it. If I try, then, to describe to you what I believe made my father thus distinguished, I may in this way convey my idea of what 'dignity' is.

There was a certain story my father was fond of repeating over the years. I recall listening to him tell it to visitors when I was a child, and then later, when I was starting out as a footman under his supervision. I remember him relating

it again the first time I returned to see him after gaining my first post as butler - to a Mr and Mrs Muggerridge in their relatively modest house in Allshot, Oxfordshire. Clearly the story meant much to him. My father's generation was not one accustomed to discussing and analysing in the way ours is and I believe the telling and retelling of this story was as close as my father ever came to reflecting critically on the profession he practised. As such, it gives a vital clue to his thinking.

The story was an apparently true one concerning a certain butler who had travelled with his employer to India and served there for many years maintaining amongst the native staff the same high standards he had commanded in England. One afternoon, evidently, this butler had entered the dining room to make sure all was well for dinner, when he noticed a tiger languishing beneath the dining table. The butler had left the dining room quietly, taking care to close the doors behind him, and proceeded calmly to the drawing room where his employer was taking tea with a number of visitors. There he attracted his employer's attention with a polite cough, then whispered in the latter's ear: 'I'm very sorry, sir, but there appears to be a tiger in the dining room. Perhaps you will permit the twelve-bores to be used?'

And according to legend, a few minutes later, the employer and his guests heard three gun shots. When the butler reappeared in the drawing room some time afterwards to refresh the teapots, the employer had inquired if all was well.

'Perfectly fine, thank you, sir,' had come the reply.

'Dinner will be served at the usual time and I am pleased to say there will be no discernible traces left of the recent occurrence by that time.'

This last phrase - 'no discernible traces left of the recent occurrence by that time' - my father would repeat with a laugh and shake his head admiringly. He neither

claimed to know the butler's name, nor anyone who had known him, but he would always insist the event occurred just as he told it. In any case, it is of little importance whether or not this story is true; the significant thing is, of course, what it reveals concerning my father's ideals. For when I look back over his career, I can see with hindsight that he must have striven throughout his years somehow to *become* that butler of his story. And in my view, at the peak of his career, my father achieved his ambition. For although I am sure he never had the chance to encounter a tiger beneath the dining table, when I think over all that I know or have heard concerning him, I can think of at least several instances of his displaying in abundance that very quality he so admired in the butler of his story.

One such instance was related to me by Mr David Charles, of the Charles and Redding Company, who visited Darlington Hall from time to time during Lord Darlington's days. It was one evening when I happened to be valeting him, Mr Charles told me he had come across my father some years earlier while a guest at Loughborough House - the home of Mr John Silvers, the industrialist, where my father served for fifteen years at the height of his career. He had never been quite able to forget my father, Mr Charles told me, owing to an incident that occurred during that visit.

One afternoon, Mr Charles to his shame and regret had allowed himself to become inebriated in the company of two fellow guests - gentlemen I shall merely call Mr Smith and Mr Jones since they are likely to be still remembered in certain circles. After an hour or so of drinking, these two gentlemen decided they wished to go for an afternoon drive around the local villages - a motor car around this time still being something of a novelty. They persuaded Mr Charles to accompany them, and since the chauffeur was on leave at that point, enlisted my father to drive the car.

Once they had set off, Mr Smith and Mr Jones, for all their being well into their middle years, proceeded to behave

like schoolboys, singing coarse songs and making even coarser comments on all they saw from the window. Furthermore, these gentlemen had noticed on the local map three villages in the vicinity called Morphy, Saltash and Brigoon. Now I am not entirely sure these were the exact names, but the point was they reminded Mr Smith and Mr Jones of the music hall act, Murphy, Saltman and Brigid the Cat, of which you may have heard. Upon noticing this curious coincidence, the gentlemen then gained an ambition to visit the three villages in question - in honour, as it were, of the music hall artistes. According to Mr Charles, my father had duly driven to one village and was on the point of entering a second when either Mr Smith or Mr Jones noticed the village was Brigoon - that is to say the third, not the second, name of the sequence. They demanded angrily that my father turned the car immediately so that the villages could be visited 'in the correct order'. It so happened that this entailed doubling back a considerable way of the route, but, so Mr Charles assures me, my father accepted the request as though it were a perfectly reasonable one, and in general, continued to behave with immaculate courtesy.

But Mr Smith's and Mr Jones's attention had now been drawn to my father and no doubt rather bored with what the view outside had to offer, they proceeded to amuse themselves by shouting out unflattering remarks concerning my father's 'mistake'. Mr Charles remembered marvelling at how my father showed not one hint of discomfort or anger, but continued to drive with an expression balanced perfectly between personal dignity and readiness to oblige. My father's equanimity was not, however, allowed to last. For when they had wearied of hurling insults at my father's back, the two gentlemen began to discuss their host - that is to say, my father's employer, Mr John Silvers. The remarks grew even more debased and treacherous so that Mr Charles - at least so he claimed - was obliged to intervene with the suggestion that such talk was bad form.

This view was contradicted with such energy that Mr Charles, quite aside from worrying he would become the next focus of the gentlemen's attention, actually thought himself in danger of physical assault. But then suddenly, following a particularly heinous insinuation against his employer, my father brought the car to an abrupt halt. It was what happened next that had made such an indelible impression upon Mr Charles.

The rear door of the car opened and my father was observed to be standing there, a few steps back from the vehicle, gazing steadily into the interior. As Mr Charles described it, all three passengers seemed to be overcome as one by the realization of what an imposing physical force my father was. Indeed, he was a man of some six feet three inches, and his countenance, though reassuring while one knew he was intent on obliging, could seem extremely forbidding viewed in certain other contexts. According to Mr Charles, my father did not display any obvious anger. He had, it seemed, merely opened the door. And yet there was something so powerfully rebuking, and at the same time so unassailable about his figure looming over them that Mr Charles's two drunken companions seemed to cower back like small boys caught by the farmer in the act of stealing apples.

My father had proceeded to stand there for some moments, saying nothing, merely holding open the door. Eventually, either Mr Smith or Mr Jones had remarked: 'Are we not going on with the journey?'

My father did not reply, but continued to stand there silently, neither demanding disembarkation nor offering any clue as to his desires or intentions. I can well imagine how he must have looked that day, framed by the doorway of the vehicle, his dark, severe presence quite blotting out the effect of the gentle Hertfordshire scenery behind him. Those were, Mr Charles recalls, strangely unnerving moments during which he too, despite not having participated in the preceding behaviour, felt engulfed with guilt. The silence

seemed to go on interminably, before either Mr Smith or Mr Jones found it in him to mutter: 'I suppose we were talking a little out of turn there. It won't happen again.'

A moment to consider this, then my father had closed the door gently, returned to the wheel and had proceeded to continue the tour of the three villages - a tour, Mr Charles assured me, that was completed thereafter in near silence.

Now that I have recalled this episode, another event from around that time in my father's career comes to mind which demonstrates perhaps even more impressively this special quality he came to possess. I should explain here that I am one of two brothers - and that my elder brother, Leonard, was killed during the South African War while I was still a boy. Naturally, my father would have felt this loss keenly; but to make matters worse the usual comfort a father has in these situations - that is, the notion that his son gave his life gloriously for king and country - was sullied by the fact that my brother had perished in a particularly infamous manoeuvre. Not only was it alleged that the manoeuvre had been a most un-British attack on civilian Boer settlements, overwhelming evidence emerged that it had been irresponsibly commanded with several floutings of elementary military precautions, so that the men who had died - my brother among them - had died quite needlessly. In view of what I am about to relate, it would not be proper of me to identify the manoeuvre any more precisely, though you may well guess which one I am alluding to if I say that it caused something of an uproar at the time, adding significantly to the controversy the conflict as a whole was attracting. There had been calls for the removal, even the court-martialing, of the general concerned, but the army had defended the latter and he had been allowed to complete the campaign. What is less known is that at the close of the Southern African conflict, this same general had been discreetly retired, and he had then entered business, dealing in shipments from Southern Africa. I relate this because some ten years after the conflict, that is to

say when the wounds of bereavement had only superficially healed, my father was called into Mr John Silvers's study to be told that this very same personage - I will call him simply 'the General' - was due to visit for a number of days to attend a house party, during which my father's employer hoped to lay the foundations of a lucrative business transaction. Mr Silvers, however, had remembered the significance the visit would have for my father, and had thus called him in to offer him the option of taking several days' leave for the duration of the General's stay.

My father's feelings towards the General were, naturally, those of utmost loathing; but he realized too that his employer's present business aspirations hung on the smooth running of the house party - which with some eighteen or so people expected would be no trifling affair. My father thus replied to the effect that while he was most grateful that his feelings had been taken into account, Mr Silvers could be assured that service would be provided to the usual standards.

As things turned out, my father's ordeal proved even worse than might have been predicted. For one thing, any hopes my father may have had that to meet the General in person would arouse a sense of respect or sympathy to leaven his feelings against him proved without foundation. The General was a portly, ugly man, his manners were not refined, and his talk was conspicuous for an eagerness to apply military similes to a very wide variety of matters. Worse was to come with the news that the gentleman had brought no valet, his usual man having fallen ill. This presented a delicate problem, another of the house guests being also without his valet, raising the question as to which guest should be allocated the butler as valet and who the footman. My father, appreciating his employer's position, volunteered immediately to take the General, and thus was obliged to suffer intimate proximity for four days with the man he detested. Meanwhile, the General, having no idea of my

father's feelings, took full opportunity to relate anecdotes of his military accomplishments - as of course many military gentlemen are wont to do to their valets in the privacy of their rooms. Yet so well did my father hide his feelings, so professionally did he carry out his duties, that on his departure the General had actually complimented Mr John Silvers on the excellence of his butler and had left an unusually large tip in appreciation - which my father without hesitation asked his employer to donate to a charity.

I hope you will agree that in these two instances I have cited from his career - both of which I have had corroborated and believe to be accurate - my father not only manifests, but comes close to being the personification itself, of what the Hayes Society terms 'dignity in keeping with his position'. If one considers the difference between my father at such moments and a figure such as Mr Jack Neighbours even with the best of his technical flourishes, I believe one may begin to distinguish what it is that separates a 'great' butler from a merely competent one. We may now understand better, too, why my father was so fond of the story of the butler who failed to panic on discovering a tiger under the dining table; it was because he knew instinctively that somewhere in this story lay the kernel of what true 'dignity' is. And let me now posit this: 'dignity' has to do crucially with a butler's ability not to abandon the professional being he inhabits. Lesser butlers will abandon their professional being for the private one at the least provocation. For such persons, being a butler is like playing some pantomime role; a small push, a slight stumble, and the façade will drop off to reveal the actor underneath. The great butlers are great by virtue of their ability to inhabit their professional role and inhabit it to the utmost; they will not be shaken out by external events, however surprising, alarming or vexing. They wear their professionalism as a decent gentleman will wear his suit: he will not let ruffians or circumstances tear it off him in the public gaze; he will discard it when, and only when, he wills

to do so, and this will invariably be when he is entirely alone. It is, as I say, a matter of 'dignity' .

It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only manservants. I tend to believe this is true. Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race is capable of. Continentals - and by and large the Celts, as you will no doubt agree - are as a rule unable to control themselves in moments of strong emotion, and are thus unable to maintain a professional demeanour other than in the least challenging of situations. If I may return to my earlier metaphor - you will excuse my putting it so coarsely - they are like a man who will, at the slightest provocation, tear off his suit and his shirt and run about screaming. In a word, 'dignity' is beyond such persons. We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman.

Of course, you may retort, as did Mr Graham whenever I expounded such a line during those enjoyable discussions by the fire, that if I am correct in what I am saying, one could recognize a great butler as such only after one had seen him perform under some severe test. And yet the truth is, we accept persons such as Mr Marshall or Mr Lane to be great, though most of us cannot claim to have ever scrutinized them under such conditions. I have to admit Mr Graham has a point here, but all I can say is that after one has been in the profession as long as one has, one is able to judge intuitively the depth of a man's professionalism without having to see it under pressure. Indeed, on the occasion one is fortunate enough to meet a great butler, far from experiencing any sceptical urge to demand a 'test', one is at a loss to imagine any situation which could ever dislodge a professionalism borne with such authority. In fact, I am

sure it was an apprehension of this sort, penetrating even the thick haze created by alcohol, which reduced my father's passengers into a shamed silence that Sunday afternoon many years ago. It is with such men as it is with the English landscape seen at its best as I did this morning: when one encounters them, one simply *knows* one is in the presence of greatness.

There will always be, I realize, those who would claim that any attempt to analyse greatness as I have been doing is quite futile. 'You know when somebody's got it and you know when somebody hasn't,' Mr Graham's argument would always be. 'Beyond that there's nothing much you can say.' But I believe we have a duty not to be so defeatist in this matter. It is surely a professional responsibility for all of us to think deeply about these things so that each of us may better strive towards attaining 'dignity' for ourselves.

DAY TWO - MORNING

Salisbury

Strange beds have rarely agreed with me, and after only a short spell of somewhat troubled slumber, I awoke an hour or so ago. It was then still dark, and knowing I had a full day's motoring ahead of me, I made an attempt to return to sleep. This proved futile, and when I decided eventually to rise, it was still so dark that I was obliged to turn on the electric light in order to shave at the sink in the corner. But when having finished I switched it off again, I could see early daylight at the edges of the curtains.

When I parted them just a moment ago, the light outside was still very pale and something of a mist was affecting my view of the baker's shop and chemist's shop opposite. Indeed, following the street further along to where it runs over the little round-backed bridge, I could see the mist rising from the river, obscuring almost entirely one of the bridge-posts. There was not a soul to be seen, and apart from a hammering noise echoing from somewhere distant, and an occasional coughing in a room to the back of the house, there is still no sound to be heard. The landlady is clearly not yet up and about, suggesting there is little chance of her serving breakfast earlier than her declared time of seven thirty.

Now, in these quiet moments as I wait for the world about to awake, I find myself going over in my mind again passages from Miss Kenton's letter. Incidentally, I should before now have explained myself as regards my referring to 'Miss Kenton'. 'Miss Kenton' is properly speaking 'Mrs Benn' and has been for twenty years. However, because I knew her at close quarters only during her maiden years and have not seen her once since she went to the West Country to become 'Mrs Benn', you will perhaps excuse my impropriety in referring

to her as I knew her, and in my mind have continued to call her throughout these years. Of course, her letter has given me extra cause to continue thinking of her as 'Miss Kenton', since it would seem, sadly, that her marriage is finally to come to an end. The letter does not make specific the details of the matter, as one would hardly expect it to do, but Miss Kenton states unambiguously that she has now, in fact, taken the step of moving out of Mr Benn's house in Helston and is presently lodging with an acquaintance in the nearby village of Little Compton.

It is of course tragic that her marriage is now ending in failure. At this very moment, no doubt, she is pondering with regret decisions made in the far-off past that have now left her, deep in middle age, so alone and desolate. And it is easy to see how in such a frame of mind, the thought of returning to Darlington Hall would be a great comfort to her. Admittedly, she does not at any point in her letter state explicitly her desire to return; but that is the unmistakable message conveyed by the general nuance of many of the passages, imbued as they are with a deep nostalgia for her days at Darlington Hall. Of course, Miss Kenton cannot hope by returning at this stage ever to retrieve those lost years, and it will be my first duty to impress this upon her when we meet. I will have to point out how different things are now - that the days of working with a grand staff at one's beck and call will probably never return within our lifetime. But then Miss Kenton is an intelligent woman and she will have already realized these things. Indeed, all in all, I cannot see why the option of her returning to Darlington Hall and seeing out her working years there should not offer a very genuine consolation to a life that has come to be so dominated by a sense of waste.

And of course, from my own professional viewpoint, it is clear that even after a break of so many years, Miss Kenton would prove the perfect solution to the problem at present besetting us at Darlington Hall. In fact, by terming it a

‘problem’ , I perhaps overstate the matter. I am referring, after all, to a series of very minor errors on my part and the course I am now pursuing is merely a means of pre-empting any ‘problems’ before one arises. It is true, these same trivial problems did cause me some anxiety at first, but once I had had time to diagnose them correctly as symptoms of nothing more than a straightforward staff shortage, I have refrained from giving them much thought. Miss Kenton’s arrival, as I say, will put a permanent end to them.

But to return to her letter. It does at times reveal a certain despair over her present situation - a fact that is rather concerning. She begins one sentence: ‘Although I have no idea how I shall usefully fill the remainder of my life ...’ And again, elsewhere, she writes: ‘The rest of my life stretches out as an emptiness before me.’ For the most part, though, as I have said, the tone is one of nostalgia. At one point, for instance, she writes:

‘This whole incident put me in mind of Alice White. Do you remember her? In fact, I hardly imagine you could forget her. For myself, I am still haunted by those vowel sounds and those uniquely ungrammatical sentences only she could dream up! Have you any idea what became of her?’

I have not, as a matter of fact, though I must say it rather amused me to remember that exasperating housemaid - who in the end turned out to be one of the most devoted. At another point in her letter, Miss Kenton writes:

‘I was so fond of that view from the second-floor bedrooms overlooking the lawn with the downs visible in the distance. Is it still like that? On summer evenings there was a sort of magical quality to that view and I will confess to you now I used to waste many precious minutes standing at one of those windows just enchanted by it.’

Then she goes on to add:

‘If this is a painful memory, forgive me. But I will never forget that time we both watched your father walking back and forth in front of the summerhouse, looking down at the ground as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there.’

It is something of a revelation that this memory from over thirty years ago should have remained with Miss Kenton as it had done with me. Indeed, it must have occurred on just one of those summer evenings she mentions, for I can recall distinctly climbing to the second landing and seeing before me a series of orange shafts from the sunset breaking the gloom of the corridor where each bedroom door stood ajar. And as I made my way past those bedrooms, I had seen through a doorway Miss Kenton’s figure, silhouetted against a window, turn and call softly: ‘Mr Stevens, if you have a moment.’ As I entered, Miss Kenton had turned back to the window. Down below, the shadows of the poplars were falling across the lawn. To the right of our view, the lawn sloped up a gentle embankment to where the summerhouse stood, and it was there my father’s figure could be seen, pacing slowly with an air of preoccupation - indeed, as Miss Kenton puts it so well, ‘as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there’.

There are some very pertinent reasons why this memory has remained with me, as I wish to explain. Moreover, now that I come to think of it, it is perhaps not so surprising that it should also have made a deep impression on Miss Kenton given certain aspects of her relationship with my father during her early days at Darlington Hall.

Miss Kenton and my father had arrived at the house at more or less the same time - that is to say, the spring of 1922 - as a consequence of my losing at one stroke the previous housekeeper and under-butler. This had occurred due to these latter two persons deciding to marry one another and leave the profession. I have always found such liaisons a serious

threat to the order in a house. Since that time, I have lost numerous more employees in such circumstances. Of course, one has to expect such things to occur amongst maids and footmen, and a good butler should always take this into account in his planning; but such marrying amongst more senior employees can have an extremely disruptive effect on work. Of course, if two members of staff happen to fall in love and decide to marry, it would be churlish to be apportioning blame; but what I find a major irritation are those persons - and housekeepers are particularly guilty here - who have no genuine commitment to their profession and who are essentially going from post to post looking for romance. This sort of person is a blight on good professionalism.

But let me say immediately I do not have Miss Kenton in mind at all when I say this. Of course, she too eventually left my staff to get married, but I can vouch that during the time she worked as a housekeeper under me, she was nothing less than dedicated and never allowed her professional priorities to be distracted.

But I am digressing. I was explaining that we had fallen in need of a housekeeper and an under-butler at one and the same time and Miss Kenton had arrived - with unusually good references, I recall - to take up the former post. As it happened, my father had around this time come to the end of his distinguished service at Loughborough House with the death of his employer, Mr John Silvers, and had been at something of a loss for work and accommodation. Although he was still, of course, a professional of the highest class, he was now in his seventies and much ravaged by arthritis and other ailments. It was not at all certain, then, how he would fare against the younger breed of highly professionalized butlers looking for posts. In view of this, it seemed a reasonable solution to ask my father to bring his great experience and distinction to Darlington Hall.

As I remember it was one morning a little while after my father and Miss Kenton had joined the staff, I had been in my

pantry, sitting at the table going through my paperwork, when I heard a knock on my door. I recall I was a little taken aback when Miss Kenton opened the door and entered before I had bidden her to do so. She came in holding a large vase of flowers and said with a smile:

‘Mr Stevens, I thought these would brighten your parlour a little.’

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Kenton?’

‘It seemed such a pity your room should be so dark and cold, Mr Stevens, when it’s such bright sunshine outside. I thought these would enliven things a little.’

‘That’s very kind of you, Miss Kenton.’

‘It’s a shame more sun doesn’t get in here. The walls are even a little damp, are they not, Mr Stevens?’

I turned back to my accounts, saying: ‘Merely condensation, I believe, Miss Kenton.’

She put her vase down on the table in front of me, then glancing around my pantry again said: ‘If you wish, Mr Stevens, I might bring in some more cuttings for you.’

‘Miss Kenton, I appreciate your kindness. But this is not a room of entertainment. I am happy to have distractions kept to a minimum.’

‘But surely, Mr Stevens, there is no need to keep your room so stark and bereft of colour.’

‘It has served me perfectly well this far as it is, Miss Kenton, though I appreciate your thoughts. In fact, since you are here, there was a certain matter I wished to raise with you.’

‘Oh, really, Mr Stevens.’

‘Yes, Miss Kenton, just a small matter. I happened to be walking past the kitchen yesterday when I heard you calling to someone named William.’

‘Is that so, Mr Stevens?’

‘Indeed, Miss Kenton. I did hear you call several times for “William”. May I ask who it was you were addressing by that name?’

‘Why, Mr Stevens, I should think I was addressing your father. There are no other Williams in this house, I take it.’

‘It’s an easy enough error to have made,’ I said with a small smile. ‘May I ask you in future, Miss Kenton, to address my father as “Mr Stevens”? If you are referring to him to a third party, then you may wish to call him “Mr Stevens senior” to distinguish him from myself. I’m most grateful, Miss Kenton.’

With that I turned back to my papers. But to my surprise, Miss Kenton did not take her leave. ‘Excuse me, Mr Stevens,’ she said after a moment.

‘Yes, Miss Kenton.’

‘I am afraid I am not quite clear what you are saying. I have in the past been accustomed to addressing under-servants by their Christian names and saw no reason to do otherwise in this house.’

‘A most understandable error, Miss Kenton. However, if you will consider the situation for a moment, you may come to see the inappropriateness of someone such as yourself talking “down” to one such as my father.’

‘I am still not clear what you are getting at, Mr Stevens. You say someone such as myself, but I am as far as I understand the housekeeper of this house, while your father is the under-butler.’

‘He is of course in title the under-butler, as you say. But I am surprised your powers of observation have not already made it clear to you that he is in reality more than that. A great deal more.’

‘No doubt I have been extremely unobservant, Mr Stevens. I had only observed that your father was an able under-butler and addressed him accordingly. It must indeed have been most galling for him to be so addressed by one such as I.’

‘Miss Kenton, it is clear from your tone you simply have not observed my father. If you had done so, the inappropriateness of someone of your age and standing addressing him as “William” should have been self-evident to you.’

‘Mr Stevens, I may not have been a housekeeper for long, but I would say that in the time I have been, my abilities have attracted some very generous remarks.’

‘I do not doubt your competence for one moment, Miss Kenton. But a hundred things should have indicated to you that my father is a figure of unusual distinction from whom you may learn a wealth of things were you prepared to be more observant.’

‘I am most indebted to you for your advice, Mr Stevens. So do please tell me, just what marvellous things might I learn from observing your father?’

‘I would have thought it obvious to anyone with eyes, Miss Kenton.’

‘But we have already established, have we not, that I am particularly deficient in that respect.’

‘Miss Kenton, if you are under the impression you have already at your age perfected yourself, you will never rise to the heights you are no doubt capable of. I might point out, for instance, you are still often unsure of what goes where and which item is which.’

This seemed to take the wind out of Miss Kenton’s sails somewhat. Indeed, for a moment, she looked a little upset. Then she said:

‘I had a little difficulty on first arriving, but that is surely only normal.’

‘Ah, there you are, Miss Kenton. If you had observed my father who arrived in this house a week after you did, you will have seen that his house knowledge is perfect and was so almost from the time he set foot in Darlington Hall.’

Miss Kenton seemed to think about this before saying a little sulkily:

‘I am sure Mr Stevens senior is very good at his job, but I assure you, Mr Stevens, I am very good at mine. I will remember to address your father by his full title in future. Now, if you would please excuse me.’

After this encounter, Miss Kenton did not attempt to introduce further flowers into my pantry, and in general, I was pleased to observe, she went about settling in impressively. It was clear, furthermore, she was a housekeeper who took her work very seriously and in spite of her youth, she seemed to have no difficulty gaining the respect of her staff.

I noticed too that she was indeed proceeding to address my father as ‘Mr Stevens’. However, one afternoon perhaps two weeks after our conversation in my pantry, I was doing something in the library when Miss Kenton came in and said:

‘Excuse me, Mr Stevens. But if you are searching for your dust-pan, it is out in the hall.’

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Kenton?’

‘Your dust-pan, Mr Stevens. You’ve left it out here. Shall I bring it in for you?’

‘Miss Kenton, I have not been using a dust-pan.’

‘Ah, well, then forgive me, Mr Stevens. I naturally assumed you were using your dust-pan and had left it out in the hall. I am sorry to have disturbed you.’

She started to leave, but then turned at the doorway and said:

‘Oh, Mr Stevens. I would return it myself but I have to go upstairs just now. I wonder if you will remember it?’

‘Of course, Miss Kenton. Thank you for drawing attention to it.’

‘It is quite all right, Mr Stevens.’

I listened to her footsteps cross the hall and start up the great staircase, then proceeded to the doorway myself. From the library doors, one has an unbroken view right across the entrance hall to the main doors of the house. Most conspicuously, in virtually the central spot of the otherwise empty and highly polished floor, lay the dust-pan Miss Kenton had alluded to.

It struck me as a trivial, but irritating error; the dust-pan would have been conspicuous not only from the five ground-floor doorways opening on to the hall, but also from the staircase and the first-floor balconies. I crossed the hall and had actually picked up the offending item before realizing its full implication; my father, I recalled, had been brushing the entrance hall a half-hour or so earlier. At first, I found it hard to credit such an error to my father. But I soon reminded myself that such trivial slips are liable to befall anyone from time to time, and my irritation soon turned to Miss Kenton for attempting to create such unwarranted fuss over the incident.

Then, not more than a week later, I was coming down the back corridor from the kitchen when Miss Kenton came out of her parlour and uttered a statement she had clearly been rehearsing; this was something to the effect that although she felt most uncomfortable drawing my attention to errors made by my staff, she and I had to work as a team, and she hoped I would not feel inhibited to do similarly should I notice errors made by female staff. She then went on to point

out that several pieces of silver had been laid out for the dining room which bore clear remains of polish. The end of one fork had been practically black. I thanked her and she withdrew back into her parlour. It had been unnecessary, of course, for her to mention that the silver was one of my father's main responsibilities and one he took great pride in.

It is very possible there were a number of other instances of this sort which I have now forgotten. In any case, I recall things reaching something of a climax one grey and drizzly afternoon when I was in the billiard room attending to Lord Darlington's sporting trophies. Miss Kenton had entered and said from the door:

'Mr Stevens, I have just noticed something outside which puzzles me.'

'What is that, Miss Kenton?'

'Was it his lordship's wish that the Chinaman on the upstairs landing should be exchanged with the one outside this door?'

'The Chinaman, Miss Kenton?'

'Yes, Mr Stevens. The Chinaman normally on the landing you will now find outside this door.'

'I fear, Miss Kenton, that you are a little confused.'

'I do not believe I am confused at all, Mr Stevens. I make it my business to acquaint myself with where objects properly belong in a house. The Chinamen, I would suppose, were polished by someone then replaced incorrectly. If you are sceptical, Mr Stevens, perhaps you will care to step out here and observe for yourself.'

'Miss Kenton, I am occupied at present.'

'But, Mr Stevens, you do not appear to believe what I am saying. I am thus asking you to step outside this door and

see for yourself. ’

‘Miss Kenton, I am busy just now and will attend to the matter shortly. It is hardly one of urgency. ’

‘You accept then, Mr Stevens, that I am not in error on this point. ’

‘I will accept nothing of the sort, Miss Kenton, until I have had the chance to deal with the matter. However, I am occupied at present. ’

I turned back to my business, but Miss Kenton remained in the doorway observing me. Eventually, she said:

‘I can see you will be finished very shortly, Mr Stevens. I will await you outside so that this matter may be finalized when you come out. ’

‘Miss Kenton, I believe you are according this matter an urgency it hardly merits. ’

But Miss Kenton had departed, and sure enough, as I continued with my work, an occasional footstep or some other sound would serve to remind me she was still there outside the door. I decided therefore to occupy myself with some further tasks in the billiard room, assuming she would after a while see the ludicrousness of her position and leave. However, after some time had passed, and I had exhausted the tasks which could usefully be achieved with the implements I happened to have at hand, Miss Kenton was evidently still outside. Resolved not to waste further time on account of this childish affair, I contemplated departure via the french windows. A drawback to this plan was the weather - that is to say, several large puddles and patches of mud were in evidence - and the fact that one would need to return to the billiard room again at some point to bolt the french windows from the inside. Eventually, then, I decided the best strategy would be simply to stride out of the room very suddenly at a furious pace. I thus made my way as quietly as possible to a position from which I could execute such a

march, and clutching my implements firmly about me, succeeded in propelling myself through the doorway and several paces down the corridor before a somewhat astonished Miss Kenton could recover her wits. This she did, however, rather rapidly and the next moment I found she had overtaken me and was standing before me, effectively barring my way.

‘Mr Stevens, this is the incorrect Chinaman, would you not agree?’

‘Miss Kenton, I am very busy. I am surprised you have nothing better to do than stand in corridors all day.’

‘Mr Stevens, is that the correct Chinaman or is it not?’

‘Miss Kenton, I would ask you to keep your voice down.’

‘And I would ask you, Mr Stevens, to turn around and look at that Chinaman.’

‘Miss Kenton, please keep your voice down. What would employees below think to hear us shouting at the top of our voices about what is and what is not the correct Chinaman?’

‘The fact is, Mr Stevens, all the Chinamen in this house have been dirty for some time! And now, they are in incorrect positions!’

‘Miss Kenton, you are being quite ridiculous. Now if you will be so good as to let me pass.’

‘Mr Stevens, will you kindly look at the Chinaman behind you?’

‘If it is so important to you, Miss Kenton, I will allow that the Chinaman behind me may well be incorrectly situated. But I must say I am at some loss as to why you should be so concerned with these most trivial of errors.’

‘These errors may be trivial in themselves, Mr Stevens, but you must yourself realize their larger significance.’

‘Miss Kenton, I do not understand you. Now if you would kindly allow me to pass.’

‘The fact is, Mr Stevens, your father is entrusted with far more than a man of his age can cope with.’

‘Miss Kenton, you clearly have little idea of what you are suggesting.’

‘Whatever your father was once, Mr Stevens, his powers are now greatly diminished. This is what these “trivial errors” as you call them really signify and if you do not heed them, it will not be long before your father commits an error of major proportions.’

‘Miss Kenton, you are merely making yourself look foolish.’

‘I am sorry, Mr Stevens, but I must go on. I believe there are many duties your father should now be relieved of. He should not, for one, be asked to go on carrying heavily laden trays. The way his hands tremble as he carries them into dinner is nothing short of alarming. It is surely only a matter of time before a tray falls from his hands on to a lady or gentleman’s lap. And furthermore, Mr Stevens, and I am very sorry to say this, I have noticed your father’s nose.’

‘Have you indeed, Miss Kenton?’

‘I regret to say I have, Mr Stevens. The evening before last I watched your father proceeding very slowly towards the dining room with his tray, and I am afraid I observed clearly a large drop on the end of his nose dangling over the soup bowls. I would not have thought such a style of waiting a great stimulant to appetite.’

But now that I think further about it, I am not sure Miss Kenton spoke quite so boldly that day. We did, of course, over the years of working closely together come to have some very frank exchanges, but the afternoon I am recalling was

still early in our relationship and I cannot see even Miss Kenton having been so forward. I am not sure she could actually have gone so far as to say things like: 'these errors may be trivial in themselves, but you must yourself realize their larger significance'. In fact, now that I come to think of it, I have a feeling it may have been Lord Darlington himself who made that particular remark to me that time he called me into his study some two months after that exchange with Miss Kenton outside the billiard room. By that time, the situation as regards my father had changed significantly following his fall.

The study doors are those that face one as one comes down the great staircase. There is outside the study today a glass cabinet displaying various of Mr Farraday's ornaments, but throughout Lord Darlington's days, there stood at that spot a bookshelf containing many volumes of encyclopedia, including a complete set of the *Britannica*. It was a ploy of Lord Darlington's to stand at this shelf studying the spines of the encyclopedias as I came down the staircase, and sometimes, to increase the effect of an accidental meeting, he would actually pull out a volume and pretend to be engrossed as I completed my descent. Then, as I passed him, he would say: 'Oh, Stevens, there was something I meant to say to you.' And with that, he would wander back into his study, to all appearances still thoroughly engrossed in the volume held open in his hands. It was invariably embarrassment at what he was about to impart which made Lord Darlington adopt such an approach, and even once the study door was closed behind us, he would often stand by the window and make a show of consulting the encyclopedia throughout our conversation.

What I am now describing, incidentally, is one of many instances I could relate to you to underline Lord Darlington's essentially shy and modest nature. A great deal of nonsense has been spoken and written in recent years concerning his lordship and the prominent role he came to

play in great affairs, and some utterly ignorant reports have had it that he was motivated by egotism or else arrogance. Let me say here that nothing could be further from the truth. It was completely contrary to Lord Darlington's natural tendencies to take such public stances as he came to do and I can say with conviction that his lordship was persuaded to overcome his more retiring side only through a deep sense of moral duty. Whatever may be said about his lordship these days - and the great majority of it is, as I say, utter nonsense - I can declare that he was a truly good man at heart, a gentleman through and through, and one I am today proud to have given my best years of service to.

On the particular afternoon to which I am referring, his lordship would still have been in his mid-fifties; but as I recall, his hair had greyed entirely and his tall slender figure already bore signs of the stoop that was to become so pronounced in his last years. He barely glanced up from his volume as he asked:

‘Your father feeling better now, Stevens?’

‘I’m glad to say he has made a full recovery, sir.’

‘Jolly pleased to hear that. Jolly pleased.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Look here, Stevens, have there been any - well - *signs* at all? I means signs to tell us your father may be wishing his burden lightened somewhat? Apart from this business of him falling, I mean.’

‘As I say, sir, my father appears to have made a full recovery and I believe he is still a person of considerable dependability. It is true one or two errors have been noticeable recently in the discharging of his duties, but these are in every case very trivial in nature.’

‘But none of us wish to see anything of that sort happen ever again, do we? I mean, your father collapsing and all

that.'

'Indeed not, sir.'

'And of course, if it can happen out on the lawn, it could happen anywhere. And at any time.'

'Yes, sir.'

'It could happen, say, during dinner while your father was waiting at table.'

'It is possible, sir.'

'Look here, Stevens, the first of the delegates will be arriving here in less than a fortnight.'

'We are well prepared, sir.'

'What happens within this house after that may have considerable repercussions.'

'Yes, sir.'

'I mean *considerable* repercussions. On the whole course Europe is taking. In view of the persons who will be present, I do not think I exaggerate.'

'No, sir.'

'Hardly the time for taking on avoidable hazards.'

'Indeed not, sir.'

'Look here, Stevens, there's no question of your father leaving us. You're simply being asked to reconsider his duties.' And it was then, I believe, that his lordship said as he looked down again into his volume and awkwardly fingered an entry: 'These errors may be trivial in themselves, Stevens, but you must yourself realize their larger significance. Your father's days of dependability are now passing. He must not be asked to perform tasks in any area where an error might jeopardize the success of our forthcoming conference.'

‘Indeed not, sir. I fully understand.’

‘Good. I’ll leave you to think about it then, Stevens.’

Lord Darlington, I should say, had actually witnessed my father’s fall of a week or so earlier. His lordship had been entertaining two guests, a young lady and gentleman, in the summerhouse, and had watched my father’s approach across the lawn bearing a much welcome tray of refreshments. The lawn climbs a slope several yards in front of the summerhouse, and in those days, as today, four flagstones embedded into the grass served as steps by which to negotiate this climb. It was in the vicinity of these steps that my father fell, scattering the load on his tray - teapot, cups, saucers, sandwiches, cakes - across the area of grass at the top of the steps. By the time I had received the alarm and gone out, his lordship and his guests had laid my father on his side, a cushion and a rug from the summerhouse serving as pillow and blanket. My father was unconscious and his face looked an oddly grey colour. Dr Meredith had already been sent for, but his lordship was of the view that my father should be moved out of the sun before the doctor’s arrival; consequently, a bath-chair arrived and with not a little difficulty, my father was transported into the house. By the time Dr Meredith arrived, he had revived considerably and the doctor soon left again making only vague statements to the effect that my father had perhaps been ‘over-working’.

The whole episode was clearly a great embarrassment to my father, and by the time of that conversation in Lord Darlington’s study, he had long since returned to busying himself as much as ever. The question of how one could broach the topic of reducing his responsibilities was not, then, an easy one. My difficulty was further compounded by the fact that for some years my father and I had tended - for some reason I have never really fathomed - to converse less and less. So much so that after his arrival at Darlington Hall, even the brief exchanges necessary to communicate information

relating to work took place in an atmosphere of mutual embarrassment.

In the end, I judged the best option to be to talk in the privacy of his room, thus giving him the opportunity to ponder his new situation in solitude once I took my leave. The only times my father could be found in his room were first thing in the morning and last thing at night. Choosing the former, I climbed up to his small attic room at the top of the servants' wing early one morning and knocked gently.

I had rarely had reason to enter my father's room prior to this occasion and I was newly struck by the smallness and starkness of it. Indeed, I recall my impression at the time was of having stepped into a prison cell, but then this might have had as much to do with the pale early light as with the size of the room or the bareness of its walls. For my father had opened his curtains and was sitting, shaved and in full uniform, on the edge of his bed from where evidently he had been watching the sky turn to dawn. At least one assumed he had been watching the sky, there being little else to view from his small window other than roof-tiles and guttering. The oil lamp beside his bed had been extinguished, and when I saw my father glance disapprovingly at the lamp I had brought to guide me up the rickety staircase, I quickly lowered the wick. Having done this, I noticed all the more the effect of the pale light coming into the room and the way it lit up the edges of my father's craggy, lined, still awesome features.

'Ah,' I said, and gave a short laugh, 'I might have known Father would be up and ready for the day.'

'I've been up for the past three hours,' he said, looking me up and down rather coldly.

'I hope Father is not being kept awake by his arthritic troubles.'

'I get all the sleep I need.'

My father reached forward to the only chair in the room, a small wooden one, and placing both hands on its back brought himself to his feet. When I saw him stood upright before me, I could not be sure to what extent he was hunched over due to infirmity and what extent due to the habit of accommodating the steeply sloped ceilings of the room.

‘I have come here to relate something to you, Father.’

‘Then relate it briefly and concisely. I haven’t all morning to listen to you chatter.’

‘In that case, Father, I will come straight to the point.’

‘Come to the point then and be done with it. Some of us have work to be getting on with.’

‘Very well. Since you wish me to be brief, I will do my best to comply. The fact is, Father has become increasingly infirm. So much so that even the duties of an under-butler are now beyond his capabilities. His lordship is of the view, as indeed I am myself, that while Father is allowed to continue with his present round of duties, he represents an ever-present threat to the smooth running of this household, and in particular to next week’s important international gathering.’

My father’s face, in the half-light, betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

‘Principally,’ I continued, ‘it has been felt that Father should no longer be asked to wait at table, whether or not guests are present.’

‘I have waited at table every day for the last fifty-four years,’ my father remarked, his voice perfectly unhurried.

‘Furthermore, it has been decided that Father should not carry laden trays of any sort for even the shortest distances. In view of these limitations, and knowing Father’s

esteem for conciseness, I have listed here the revised round of duties he will from now on be expected to perform. ’

I felt disinclined actually to hand to him the piece of paper I was holding, and so put it down on the end of his bed. My father glanced at it then returned his gaze to me. There was still no trace of emotion discernible in his expression, and his hands on the back of the chair appeared perfectly relaxed. Hunched over or not, it was impossible not to be reminded of the sheer impact of his physical presence - the very same that had once reduced two drunken gentlemen to sobriety in the back of a car. Eventually, he said:

‘I only fell that time because of those steps. They’re crooked. Seamus should be told to put those right before someone else does the same thing. ’

‘Indeed. In any case, may I be assured Father will study that sheet? ’

‘Seamus should be told to put those steps right. Certainly before these gentlemen start arriving from Europe. ’

‘Indeed. Well, Father, good morning. ’

That summer evening referred to by Miss Kenton in her letter came very soon after that encounter - indeed, it may have been the evening of that same day. I cannot remember just what purpose had taken me up on to the top floor of the house to where the row of guest bedrooms line the corridor. But as I think I have said already, I can recall vividly the way the last of the daylight was coming through each open doorway and falling across the corridor in orange shafts. As I walked on past those unused bedrooms, Miss Kenton’s figure, a silhouette against a window within one of them, had called to me.

When one thinks about it, when one remembers the way Miss Kenton had repeatedly spoken to me of my father during those early days of her time at Darlington Hall, it is little

wonder that the memory of that evening should have stayed with her all of these years. No doubt, she was feeling a certain sense of guilt as the two of us watched from our window my father's figure down below. The shadows of the poplar trees had fallen across much of the lawn, but the sun was still lighting up the far corner where the grass sloped up to the summerhouse. My father could be seen standing by those four stone steps, deep in thought. A breeze was slightly disturbing his hair. Then, as we watched, he walked very slowly up the steps. At the top, he turned and came back down, a little faster. Turning once more, my father became still again for several seconds, contemplating the steps before him. Eventually, he climbed them a second time, very deliberately. This time he continued on across the grass until he had almost reached the summerhouse, then turned and came walking slowly back, his eyes never leaving the ground. In fact, I can describe his manner at that moment no better than the way Miss Kenton puts it in her letter; it was indeed 'as though he hoped to find some precious jewel he had dropped there' .

But I see I am becoming preoccupied with these memories and this is perhaps a little foolish. This present trip represents, after all, a rare opportunity for me to savour to the full the many splendours of the English countryside, and I know I shall greatly regret it later if I allow myself to become unduly diverted. In fact, I notice I have yet to record here anything of my journey to this city - aside from mentioning briefly that halt on the hillside road at the very start of it. This is an omission indeed, given how much I enjoyed yesterday's motoring.

I had planned the journey here to Salisbury with considerable care, avoiding almost entirely the major roads; the route might have seemed unnecessarily circuitous to some, but then it was one that enabled me to take in a fair number of the sights recommended by Mrs J. Symons in her excellent volumes, and I must say I was well pleased with it. For much

of the time it took me through farmland, amidst the pleasant aroma of meadows, and often I found myself slowing the Ford to a crawl to better appreciate a stream or a valley I was passing. But as I recall, I did not actually disembark again until I was quite near Salisbury.

On that occasion, I was moving down a long, straight road with wide meadows on either side of me. In fact, the land had become very open and flat at that point, enabling one to see a considerable distance in all directions, and the spire of Salisbury Cathedral had become visible on the skyline up ahead. A tranquil mood had come over me, and for this reason I believe I was again motoring very slowly - probably at no more than fifteen miles per hour. This was just as well, for I saw only just in time a hen crossing my path in the most leisurely manner. I brought the Ford to a halt only a foot or two from the fowl, which in turn ceased its journey, pausing there in the road in front of me. When after a moment it had not moved, I resorted to the car horn, but this had no effect other than to make the creature commence pecking at something on the ground. Rather exasperated, I began to get out and had one foot still on the running board when I heard a woman's voice call:

'Oh, I do beg your pardon, sir.'

Glancing round, I saw I had just passed on the roadside a farm cottage - from which a young woman in an apron, her attention no doubt aroused by the horn, had come running. Passing me, she swooped up the hen in her arms and proceeded to cradle it as she apologized to me again. When I assured her no harm had been done, she said:

'I do thank you for stopping and not running poor Nellie over. She's a good girl, provides us with the largest eggs you've ever seen. It's so good of you to stop. And you were probably in a hurry too.'

'Oh, I'm not in a hurry at all,' I said with a smile.
'For the first time in many a year, I'm able to take my time

and I must say, it's rather an enjoyable experience. I'm just motoring for the pleasure of it, you see.'

'Oh, that's nice, sir. And you're on your way to Salisbury, I expect.'

'I am indeed. In fact, that's the cathedral we can see over there, isn't it? I'm told it's a splendid building.'

'Oh, it is, sir, it's very nice. Well, to tell you the truth, I hardly go to Salisbury myself, so I couldn't really say what it's like at close quarters. But I tell you, sir, day in day out we have a view of the steeple from here. Some days, it's too misty and it's like it's vanished altogether. But you can see for yourself, on a fine day like this, it's a nice sight.'

'Delightful.'

'I'm so grateful you didn't run over our Nellie, sir. Three years ago a tortoise of ours got killed like that and on just about this very spot. We were all very upset over that.'

'How very tragic,' I said, sombrely.

'Oh, it was, sir. Some people say we farm people get used to animals being hurt or killed, but that's just not true. My little boy cried for days. It's so good you stopped for Nellie, sir. If you'd care to come in for a cup of tea, now that you've got out and everything, you'd be most welcome. It would set you on your way.'

'That's most kind, but really, I feel I should continue. I'd like to reach Salisbury in good time to take a look at the city's many charms.'

'Indeed, sir. Well, thank you again.'

I set off again, maintaining for some reason - perhaps because I expected further farm creatures to wander across my path - my slow speed of before. I must say, something about

this small encounter had put me in very good spirits; the simple kindness I had been thanked for, and the simple kindness I had been offered in return, caused me somehow to feel exceedingly uplifted about the whole enterprise facing me over these coming days. It was in such a mood, then, that I proceeded here to Salisbury.

But I feel I should return just a moment to the matter of my father; for it strikes me I may have given the impression earlier that I treated him rather bluntly over his declining abilities. The fact is, there was little choice but to approach the matter as I did - as I am sure you will agree once I have explained the full context of those days. That is to say, the important international conference to take place at Darlington Hall was by then looming ahead of us, leaving little room for indulgence or 'beating about the bush'. It is important to be reminded, moreover, that although Darlington Hall was to witness many more events of equal gravity over the fifteen or so years that followed, that conference of March 1923 was the first of them; one was, one supposes, relatively inexperienced, and inclined to leave little to chance. In fact, I often look back to that conference and, for more than one reason, regard it as a turning point in my life. For one thing, I suppose I do regard it as the moment in my career when I truly came of age as a butler. That is not to say I consider I became necessarily, a 'great' butler; it is hardly for me, in any case, to make judgements of this sort. But should it be that anyone ever wished to posit that I have attained at least a little of that crucial quality of 'dignity' in the course of my career, such a person may wish to be directed towards that conference of March 1923 as representing the moment when I demonstrated I might have a capacity for such a quality. It was one of those events which at a crucial stage in one's development arrive to challenge and stretch one to the limit of one's ability and beyond, so that thereafter one has new standards by which to judge oneself. That conference was also

memorable, of course, for other quite separate reasons, as I would like now to explain.

*

The conference of 1923 was the culmination of long planning on the part of Lord Darlington; indeed, in retrospect, one can see clearly how his lordship had been moving towards this point from three years or so before. As I recall, he had not been initially so preoccupied with the peace treaty when it was drawn up at the end of the Great War, and I think it is fair to say that his interest was prompted not so much by an analysis of the treaty, but by his friendship with Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann.

Herr Bremann first visited Darlington Hall very shortly after the war while still in his officer's uniform, and it was evident to any observer that he and Lord Darlington had struck up a close friendship. This did not surprise me, since one could see at a glance that Herr Bremann was a gentleman of great decency. He returned again, having left the German army, at fairly regular intervals during the following two years, and one could not help noticing with some alarm the deterioration he underwent from one visit to the next. His clothes became increasingly impoverished, his frame thinner; a hunted look appeared in his eyes, and on his last visits, he would spend long periods staring into space, oblivious of his lordship's presence or, sometimes, even of having been addressed. I would have concluded Herr Bremann was suffering from some serious illness, but for certain remarks his lordship made at that time assuring me this was not so.

It must have been towards the end of 1920 that Lord Darlington made the first of a number of trips to Berlin himself, and I can remember the profound effect it had on him. A heavy air of preoccupation hung over him for days after his return, and I recall once, in reply to my inquiring how he had enjoyed his trip, his remarking: 'Disturbing, Stevens. Deeply disturbing. It does us great discredit to

treat a defeated foe like this. A complete break with the traditions of this country.'

But there is another memory that has remained with me very vividly in relation to this matter. Today, the old banqueting hall no longer contains a table and that spacious room, with its high and magnificent ceiling, serves Mr Farraday well as a sort of gallery. But in his lordship's day, that room was regularly required, as was the long table that occupied it, to seat thirty or more guests for dinner; in fact, the banqueting hall is so spacious that when necessity demanded it, further tables were added to the existing one to enable almost fifty to be seated. On normal days, of course, Lord Darlington took his meals, as does Mr Farraday today, in the more intimate atmosphere of the dining room, which is ideal for accommodating up to a dozen. But on that particular winter's night I am recollecting the dining room was for some reason out of use, and Lord Darlington was dining with a solitary guest - I believe it was Sir Richard Fox, a colleague from his lordship's Foreign Office days - in the vastness of the banqueting hall. You will no doubt agree that the hardest of situations as regards dinner-waiting is when there are just two diners present. I would myself much prefer to wait on just one diner, even if he were a total stranger. It is when there are two diners present, even when one of them is one's own employer, that one finds it most difficult to achieve that balance between attentiveness and the illusion of absence that is essential to good waiting; it is in this situation that one is rarely free of the suspicion that one's presence is inhibiting the conversation.

On that occasion, much of the room was in darkness, and the two gentlemen were sitting side by side midway down the table - it being much too broad to allow them to sit facing one another - within the pool of light cast by the candles on the table and the crackling hearth opposite. I decided to minimize my presence by standing in the shadows much further

away from table than I might usually have done. Of course, this strategy had a distinct disadvantage in that each time I moved towards the light to serve the gentlemen, my advancing footsteps would echo long and loud before I reached the table, drawing attention to my impending arrival in the most ostentatious manner; but it did have the great merit of making my person only partially visible while I remained stationary. And it was as I was standing like that, in the shadows some distance from where the two gentlemen sat amidst those rows of empty chairs, that I heard Lord Darlington talk about Herr Bremann, his voice as calm and gentle as usual, somehow resounding with intensity around those great walls.

‘He was my enemy,’ he was saying, ‘but he always behaved like a gentleman. We treated each other decently over six months of shelling each other. He was a gentleman doing his job and I bore him no malice. I said to him: “Look here, we’re enemies now and I’ll fight you with all I’ve got. But when this wretched business is over, we shan’t have to be enemies any more and we’ll have a drink together.” Wretched thing is, this treaty is making a liar out of me. I mean to say, I told him we wouldn’t be enemies once it was all over. But how can I look him in the face and tell him that’s turned out to be true?’

And it was a little later that same night that his lordship said with some gravity, shaking his head: ‘I fought that war to preserve justice in this world. As far as I understood, I wasn’t taking part in a vendetta against the German race.’

And when today one hears talk about his lordship, when one hears the sort of foolish speculations concerning his motives as one does all too frequently these days, I am pleased to recall the memory of that moment as he spoke those heartfelt words in the near-empty banqueting hall. Whatever complications arose in his lordship’s course over subsequent years, I for one will never doubt that a desire to see

'justice in this world' lay at the heart of all his actions.

It was not long after that evening there came the sad news that Herr Bremann had shot himself in a train between Hamburg and Berlin. Naturally, his lordship was greatly distressed and immediately made plans to dispatch funds and commiserations to Frau Bremann. However, after several days of endeavour, in which I myself did my best to assist, his lordship was not able to discover the whereabouts of any of Herr Bremann's family. He had, it seemed, been homeless for some time and his family dispersed.

It is my belief that even without this tragic news, Lord Darlington would have set upon the course he took; his desire to see an end to injustice and suffering was too deeply ingrained in his nature for him to have done otherwise. As it was, in the weeks that followed Herr Bremann's death, his lordship began to devote more and more hours to the matter of the crisis in Germany. Powerful and famous gentlemen became regular visitors to the house - including, I remember, figures such as Lord Daniels, Mr John Maynard Keynes, and Mr H. G. Wells, the renowned author, as well as others who, because they came 'off the record', I should not name here - and they and his lordship were often to be found locked in discussion for hours on end.

Some of the visitors were, in fact, so 'off the record' that I was instructed to make sure the staff did not learn their identities, or in some cases, even glimpse them. However - and I say this with some pride and gratitude - Lord Darlington never made any efforts to conceal things from my own eyes and ears; I can recall on numerous occasions, some personage breaking off in mid-sentence to glance warily towards my person, only for his lordship to say: 'Oh, that's all right. You can say anything in front of Stevens, I can assure you.'

Steadily, then, over the two years or so following Herr Bremann's death, his lordship, together with Sir David Cardinal, who became his closest ally during that time, succeeded in gathering together a broad alliance of figures who shared the conviction that the situation in Germany should not be allowed to persist. These were not only Britons and Germans, but also Belgians, French, Italians, Swiss; they were diplomats and political persons of high rank; distinguished clergymen; retired military gentlemen; writers and thinkers. Some were gentlemen who felt strongly, like his lordship himself, that fair play had not been done at Versailles and that it was immoral to go on punishing a nation for a war that was now over. Others, evidently, showed less concern for Germany or her inhabitants, but were of the opinion that the economic chaos of that country, if not halted, might spread with alarming rapidity to the world at large.

By the turn of 1922, his lordship was working with a clear goal in mind. This was to gather under the very roof of Darlington Hall the most influential of the gentlemen whose support had been won with a view to conducting an 'unofficial' international conference - a conference that would discuss the means by which the harshest terms of the Versailles treaty could be revised. To be worthwhile, any such conference would have to be of sufficient weight so that it could have a decisive effect on the 'official' international conferences - several of which had already taken place with the express purpose of reviewing the treaty, but which had succeeded in producing only confusion and bitterness. Our Prime Minister of that time, Mr Lloyd George, had called for another great conference to be held in Italy in the spring of 1922, and initially his lordship's aim was to organize a gathering at Darlington Hall with a view to ensuring a satisfactory outcome to this event. For all the hard work on his and Sir David's part, however, this proved too harsh a deadline; but then with Mr George's conference ending yet again in indecision, his lordship set his sights

on a further great conference scheduled to take place in Switzerland that following year.

I can remember one morning around this time bringing Lord Darlington coffee in the breakfast room, and his saying to me as he folded *The Times* with some disgust: 'Frenchmen. Really, I mean to say, Stevens. Frenchmen.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And to think we have to be seen by the world to be arm in arm with them. One wishes for a good bath at the mere reminder.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Last time I was in Berlin, Stevens, Baron Overath, old friend of my father, came up and said: "Why do you do this to us? Don't you see we can't go on like this?" I was jolly well tempted to tell him it's those wretched Frenchmen. It's not the English way of carrying on, I wanted to say. But I suppose one can't do things like that. Mustn't speak ill of our dear allies.'

But the very fact that the French were the most intransigent as regards releasing Germany from the cruelties of the Versailles treaty made all the more imperative the need to bring to the gathering at Darlington Hall at least one French gentleman with unambiguous influence over his country's foreign policy. Indeed, I heard several times his lordship express the view that without the participation of such a personage, any discussion on the topic of Germany would be little more than an indulgence. He and Sir David accordingly set upon this final crucial lap of their preparations and to witness the unswerving determination with which they persevered in the face of repeated frustrations was a humbling experience; countless letters and telegrams were dispatched and his lordship himself made three separate trips to Paris within the space of two months. Finally, having secured the agreement of a certain extremely

illustrious Frenchman - I will merely call him 'M. Dupont' - to attend the gathering on a very strict 'off the record' basis, the date for the conference was set. That is to say, for that memorable March of 1923.

As this date grew ever nearer, the pressures on myself, though of an altogether more humble nature than those mounting on his lordship, were nevertheless not inconsequential. I was only too aware of the possibility that if any guest were to find his stay at Darlington Hall less than comfortable, this might have repercussions of unimaginable largeness. Moreover, my planning for the event was complicated by the uncertainty as to the numbers involved. The conference being of a very high level, the participants had been limited to just eighteen very distinguished gentlemen and two ladies - a German countess and the formidable Mrs Eleanor Austin, at that time still resident in Berlin; but each of these might reasonably bring secretaries, valets and interpreters, and there proved no way of ascertaining the precise number of such persons to expect. Furthermore, it became clear that a number of the parties would be arriving some time before the three days set aside for the conference, thus giving themselves time to prepare their ground and gauge the mood of fellow guests, though their exact arrival dates were, again, uncertain. It was clear then that the staff would not only have to work extremely hard, and be at their most alert, they would also have to be unusually flexible. In fact, I was for some time of the opinion that this huge challenge ahead of us could not be surmounted without my bringing in additional staff from outside. However, this option, quite aside from the misgivings his lordship was bound to have as regards gossip travelling, entailed my having to rely on unknown quantities just when a mistake could prove most costly. I thus set about preparing for the days ahead as, I imagine, a general might prepare for a battle: I devised with utmost care a special staff plan anticipating all sorts of eventualities; I

analysed where our weakest points lay and set about making contingency plans to fall back upon in the event of these points giving way; I even gave the staff a military-style 'pep-talk', impressing upon them that, for all their having to work at an exhausting rate, they could feel great pride in discharging their duties over the days that lay ahead.

'History could well be made under this roof,' I told them. And they, knowing me to be one not prone to exaggerated statements, well understood that something of an extraordinary nature was impending.

You will understand then something of the climate prevailing around Darlington Hall by the time of my father's fall in front of the summerhouse - this occurring as it did just two weeks before the first of the conference guests were likely to arrive - and what I mean when I say there was little room for any 'beating about the bush'. My father did, in any case, rapidly discover a way to circumvent the limitations on his effectiveness implied by the stricture that he should carry no laden trays. The sight of his figure pushing a trolley loaded with cleaning utensils, mops, brushes arranged incongruously, though always tidily, around teapots, cups and saucers, so that it at times resembled a street-hawker's barrow, became a familiar one around the house. Obviously he still could not avoid relinquishing his waiting duties in the dining room, but otherwise the trolley enabled him to accomplish a surprising amount. In fact, as the great challenge of the conference drew nearer, an astonishing change seemed to come over my father. It was almost as though some supernatural force possessed him, causing him to shed twenty years; his face lost much of the sunken look of recent times, and he went about his work with such youthful vigour that a stranger might have believed there were not one but several such figures pushing trolleys about the corridors of Darlington Hall.

As for Miss Kenton, I seem to remember the mounting tension of those days having a noticeable effect upon her. I

recall, for instance, the occasion around that time I happened to encounter her in the back corridor. The back corridor, which serves as a sort of backbone to the staff's quarters of Darlington Hall, was always a rather cheerless affair due to the lack of daylight penetrating its considerable length. Even on a fine day, the corridor could be so dark that the effect was like walking through a tunnel. On that particular occasion, had I not recognized Miss Kenton's footsteps on the boards as she came towards me, I would have been able to identify her only from her outline. I paused at one of the few spots where a bright streak of light fell across the boards and, as she approached, said: 'Ah, Miss Kenton.'

'Yes, Mr Stevens?'

'Miss Kenton, I wonder if I may draw your attention to the fact that the bed linen for the upper floor will need to be ready by the day after tomorrow.'

'The matter is perfectly under control, Mr Stevens.'

'Ah, I'm very glad to hear it. It just struck me as a thought, that's all.'

I was about to continue on my way, but Miss Kenton did not move. Then she took one step more towards me so that a bar of light fell across her face and I could see the angry expression on it.

'Unfortunately, Mr Stevens, I am extremely busy now and I am finding I have barely a single moment to spare. If only I had as much spare time as you evidently do, then I would happily reciprocate by wandering about this house reminding *you* of tasks you have perfectly well in hand.'

'Now, Miss Kenton, there is no need to become so bad-tempered. I merely felt the need to satisfy myself that it had not escaped your attention ...'

‘Mr Stevens, this is the fourth or fifth time in the past two days you have felt such a need. It is most curious to see that you have so much time on your hands that you are able to simply wander about this house bothering others with gratuitous comments.’

‘Miss Kenton, if you for one moment believe I have time on my hands, that displays more clearly than ever your great inexperience. I trust that in years to come, you will gain a clearer picture of what occurs in a house like this.’

‘You are perpetually talking of my “great inexperience”, Mr Stevens, and yet you appear quite unable to point out any defect in my work. Otherwise I have no doubt you would have done so long ago and at some length. Now, I have much to be getting on with and would appreciate your not following me about and interrupting me like this. If you have so much time to spare, I suggest it might be more profitably spent taking some fresh air.’

She stamped past me and on down the corridor. Deciding it best to let the matter go no further, I continued on my way. I had almost reached the kitchen doorway when I heard the furious sounds of her footsteps coming back towards me again.

‘In fact, Mr Stevens,’ she called, ‘I would ask you from now on not to speak to me directly at all.’

‘Miss Kenton, whatever are you talking about?’

‘If it is necessary to convey a message, I would ask you to do so through a messenger. Or else you may like to write a note and have it sent to me. Our working relationship, I am sure, would be made a great deal easier.’

‘Miss Kenton ...’

‘I am extremely busy, Mr Stevens. A written note if the message is at all complicated. Otherwise you may like to speak to Martha or Dorothy, or any members of the male staff

you deem sufficiently trustworthy. Now I must return to my work and leave you to your wanderings. ’

Irritating as Miss Kenton’s behaviour was, I could not afford to give it much thought, for by then the first of the guests had arrived. The representatives from abroad were not expected for a further two or three days, but the three gentlemen referred to by his lordship as his ‘home team’ - two Foreign Office ministers attending very much ‘off the record’ and Sir David Cardinal - had come early to prepare the ground as thoroughly as possible. As ever, little was done to conceal anything from me as I went in and out of the various rooms in which these gentlemen sat deep in discussion, and I thus could not avoid gaining a certain impression of the general mood at this stage of the proceedings. Of course, his lordship and his colleagues were concerned to brief each other as accurately as possible on each one of the expected participants; but overwhelmingly, their concerns centred on a single figure - that of M. Dupont, the French gentleman - and on his likely sympathies and antipathies. Indeed, at one point, I believe I came into the smoking room and heard one of the gentlemen saying: ‘The fate of Europe could actually hang on our ability to bring Dupont round on this point. ’

It was in the midst of these preliminary discussions that his lordship entrusted me with a mission sufficiently unusual for it to have remained in my memory to this day, alongside those other more obviously unforgettable occurrences that were to take place during that remarkable week. Lord Darlington called me into his study, and I could see at once that he was in a state of some agitation. He seated himself at his desk and, as usual, resorted to holding open a book - this time it was *Who’s Who* - turning a page to and fro.

‘Oh, Stevens, ’ he began with a false air of nonchalance, but then seemed at a loss how to continue. I remained standing there ready to relieve his discomfort at the first opportunity. His lordship went on fingering his

page for a moment, leaned forward to scrutinize an entry, then said: 'Stevens, I realize this is a somewhat irregular thing to ask you to do.'

'Sir?'

'It's just that one has so much of importance on one's mind just now.'

'I would be very glad to be of assistance, sir.'

'I'm sorry to bring up a thing like this, Stevens. I know you must be awfully busy yourself. But I can't see how on earth to make it go away.'

I waited a moment while Lord Darlington returned his attention to *Who's Who*. Then he said, without looking up: 'You are familiar, I take it, with the facts of life.'

'Sir?'

'The facts of life, Stevens. Birds, bees. You are familiar, aren't you?'

'I'm afraid I don't quite follow you, sir.'

'Let me put my cards on the table, Stevens. Sir David is a very old friend. And he's been invaluable in organizing the present conference. Without him, I dare say, we'd not have secured M. Dupont's agreement to come.'

'Indeed, sir.'

'However, Stevens, Sir David has his funny side. You may have noticed it yourself. He's brought his son, Reginald, with him. To act as secretary. The point is, he's engaged to be married. Young Reginald, I mean.'

'Yes, sir.'

'Sir David has been attempting to tell his son the facts of life for the last five years. The young man is now twenty-three.'

'Indeed, sir.'

'I'll get to the point, Stevens. I happen to be the young man's godfather. Accordingly, Sir David has requested that *I* convey to young Reginald the facts of life.'

'Indeed, sir.'

'Sir David himself finds the task rather daunting and suspects he will not accomplish it before Reginald's wedding day.'

'Indeed, sir.'

'The point is, Stevens, I'm terribly busy. Sir David should know that, but he's asked me none the less.' His lordship paused and went on studying his page.

'Do I understand, sir,' I said, 'that you wish *me* to convey the information to the young gentleman?'

'If you don't mind, Stevens. Be an awful lot off my mind. Sir David continues to ask me every couple of hours if I've done it yet.'

'I see, sir. It must be most trying under the present pressures.'

'Of course, this is far beyond the call of duty, Stevens.'

'I will do my best, sir. I may, however, have difficulty finding the appropriate moment to convey such information.'

'I'd be very grateful if you'd even try, Stevens. Awfully decent of you. Look here, there's no need to make a song and dance of it. Just convey the basic facts and be done with it. Simple approach is the best, that's my advice, Stevens.'

'Yes, sir. I shall do my best.'

'Jolly grateful to you, Stevens. Let me know how you get on.'

I was, as you might imagine, a little taken aback by this request and ordinarily the matter might have been one I would have spent some time pondering. Coming upon me as it did, however, in the midst of such a busy period, I could not afford to let it preoccupy me unduly, and I thus decided I should resolve it at the earliest opportunity. As I recall, then, it was only an hour or so after being first entrusted with the mission that I noticed the young Mr Cardinal alone in the library, sitting at one of the writing tables, absorbed in some documents. On studying the young gentleman closely, one could, as it were, appreciate the difficulty experienced by his lordship - and indeed, by the young gentleman's father. My employer's godson looked an earnest, scholarly young man, and one could see many fine qualities in his features; yet given the topic one wished to raise, one would have certainly preferred a lighter-hearted, even a more frivolous sort of young gentleman. In any case, resolved to bring the whole matter to a satisfactory conclusion as quickly as possible, I proceeded further into the library, and stopping a little way from Mr Cardinal's writing desk, gave a cough.

'Excuse me, sir, but I have a message to convey to you.'

'Oh, really?' Mr Cardinal said eagerly, looking up from his papers. 'From Father?'

'Yes, sir. That is, effectively.'

'Just a minute.'

The young gentleman reached down to the attaché case at his feet and brought out a notebook and pencil. 'Fire away, Stevens.'

I coughed again and set my voice into as impersonal a tone as I could manage.

'Sir David wishes you to know, sir, that ladies and gentlemen differ in several key respects.'

I must have paused a little to form my next phrase, for Mr Cardinal gave a sigh and said: 'I'm only too aware of that, Stevens. Would you mind coming to the point?'

'You are aware, sir?'

'Father is perpetually underestimating me. I've done extensive reading and background work on this whole area.'

'Is that so, sir?'

'I've thought about virtually nothing else for the past month.'

'Really, sir. In that case, perhaps my message is rather redundant.'

'You can assure Father I'm very well briefed indeed. This attaché case' - he nudged it with his foot - 'is chock-full of notes on every possible angle one can imagine.'

'Is that so, sir?'

'I really think I've thought through every permutation the human mind is capable of. I wish you'd reassure Father of that.'

'I will, sir.'

Mr Cardinal seemed to relax a little. He prodded once more his attaché case - which I felt inclined to keep my eyes averted from - and said: 'I suppose you've been wondering why I never let go of this case. Well, now you know. Imagine if the wrong person opened it.'

'That would be most awkward, sir.'

'That is, of course,' he said, sitting up again suddenly, 'unless Father has come up with an entirely new factor he wants me to think about.'

'I cannot imagine he has, sir.'

'No? Nothing more on this Dupont fellow?'

‘I fear not, sir.’

I did my best not to give away anything of my exasperation on discovering that a task I had thought all but behind me was in fact still there unassaulted before me. I believe I was collecting my thoughts for a renewed effort when the young gentleman suddenly rose to his feet and clutching his attaché case to his person, said: ‘Well, I think I’ll go and take a little fresh air. Thanks for your help, Stevens.’

It had been my intention to seek out a further interview with Mr Cardinal with minimum delay, but this proved to be impossible, owing largely to the arrival that same afternoon - some two days earlier than expected - of Mr Lewis, the American senator. I had been down in my pantry working through the supplies sheets, when I had heard somewhere above my head the unmistakable sounds of motor cars pulling up in the courtyard. As I hastened to go upstairs, I happened to encounter Miss Kenton in the back corridor - the scene, of course, of our last disagreement - and it was perhaps this unhappy coincidence that encouraged her to maintain the childish behaviour she had adopted on that previous occasion. For when I inquired who it was that had arrived, Miss Kenton continued past me, stating simply: ‘A message if it is urgent, Mr Stevens.’ This was extremely annoying, but, of course, I had no choice but to hurry on upstairs.

My recollection of Mr Lewis is that of a gentleman of generous dimensions with a genial smile that rarely left his face. His early arrival was clearly something of an inconvenience to his lordship and his colleagues who had reckoned on a day or two more of privacy for their preparations. However, Mr Lewis’s engagingly informal manner, and his statement at dinner that the United States ‘would always stand on the side of justice and didn’t mind admitting mistakes had been made at Versailles’ seemed to do much to win the confidence of his lordship’s ‘home team’; as dinner progressed, the conversation had slowly but surely turned

from topics such as the merits of Mr Lewis's native Pennsylvania back to the conference ahead, and by the time the gentlemen were lighting their cigars, some of the speculations being offered appeared to be as intimate as those exchanged prior to Mr Lewis's arrival. At one point, Mr Lewis said to the company:

'I agree with you, gentlemen, our M. Dupont can be very unpredictable. But let me tell you, there's one thing you can bet on about him. One thing you can bet on for sure.' He leaned forward and waved his cigar for emphasis. 'Dupont hates Germans. He hated them before the war and he hates them now with a depth you gentlemen here would find hard to understand.' With that, Mr Lewis sat back in his chair again, the genial smile returning fully to his face. 'But tell me, gentlemen,' he continued, 'you can hardly blame a Frenchman for hating the Germans, can you? After all, a Frenchman has good cause to do so, hasn't he?'

There was a moment of slight awkwardness as Mr Lewis glanced around the table. Then Lord Darlington said:

'Naturally, some bitterness is inevitable. But then, of course, we English also fought the Germans long and hard.'

'But the difference with you Englishmen,' Mr Lewis said, 'seems to be that you don't really hate the Germans any more. But the way the French see it, the Germans destroyed civilization here in Europe and no punishment is too bad for them. Of course, that looks an impractical kind of position to us in the United States, but what's always puzzled me is how you English don't seem to share the view of the French. After all, like you say, Britain lost a lot in that war too.'

There was another awkward pause before Sir David said, rather uncertainly:

'We English have often had a different way of looking at things from the French, Mr Lewis.'

‘Ah. A kind of temperamental difference, you might say.’ Mr Lewis’s smile seemed to broaden slightly as he said this. He nodded to himself, as though many things had now become clear to him, and drew on his cigar. It is possible this is a case of hindsight colouring my memory, but I have a distinct feeling that it was at that moment I first sensed something odd, something duplicitous perhaps, about this apparently charming American gentleman. But if my own suspicions were aroused at that moment, Lord Darlington evidently did not share them. For after another second or two of awkward silence, his lordship seemed to come to a decision.

‘Mr Lewis,’ he said, ‘let me put it frankly. Most of us in England find the present French attitude despicable. You may indeed call it a temperamental difference, but I venture we are talking about something rather more. It is unbecoming to go on hating an enemy like this once a conflict is over. Once you’ve got a man on the canvas, that ought to be the end of it. You don’t then proceed to kick him. To us, the French behaviour has become increasingly barbarous.’

This utterance seemed to give Mr Lewis some satisfaction. He muttered something in sympathy and smiled with contentment at his fellow diners through the clouds of tobacco smoke by now hanging thickly across the table.

The next morning brought more early arrivals; namely, the two ladies from Germany - who had travelled together despite what one would have imagined to have been the great contrast in their backgrounds - bringing with them a large team of ladies-in-waiting and footmen, as well as a great many trunks. Then in the afternoon, an Italian gentleman arrived accompanied by a valet, a secretary, an ‘expert’ and two bodyguards. I cannot imagine what sort of place this gentleman imagined he was coming to in bringing the latter, but I must say it struck something of an odd note to see in Darlington Hall these two large silent men staring suspiciously in all directions a few yards from wherever the

Italian gentleman happened to be. Incidentally, the working pattern of these bodyguards, so it transpired over the following days, entailed one or the other of them going up to sleep at unusual hours so as to ensure at least one was on duty throughout the night. But when on first hearing of this arrangement I tried to inform Miss Kenton of it, she once again refused to converse with me, and in order to accomplish matters as quickly as possible I was actually obliged to write a note and put it under the door of her parlour.

The following day brought several more guests and with two days yet to go to the start of the conference, Darlington Hall was filled with people of all nationalities, talking in rooms, or else standing around, apparently aimlessly, in the hall, in corridors and on landings, examining pictures or objects. The guests were never less than courteous to one another, but for all that, a rather tense atmosphere, characterized largely by distrust, seemed to prevail at this stage. And reflecting this unease, the visiting valets and footmen appeared to regard one another with marked coldness and my own staff were rather glad to be too busy to spend much time with them.

It was around this point, in the midst of dealing with the many demands being made on my attention, that I happened to glance out of a window and spotted the figure of the young Mr Cardinal taking some fresh air around the grounds. He was clutching his attaché case as usual and I could see he was strolling slowly along the path that runs the outer perimeter of the lawn, deeply absorbed in thought. I was of course reminded of my mission regarding the young gentleman and it occurred to me that an outdoor setting, with the general proximity of nature, and in particular the example of the geese close at hand, would not be an unsuitable setting at all in which to convey the sort of message I was bearing. I could see, moreover, that if I were quickly to go outside and conceal my person behind the large rhododendron bush beside the path, it would not be long before Mr Cardinal came by. I

would then be able to emerge and convey my message to him. It was not, admittedly, the most subtle of strategies, but you will appreciate that this particular task, though no doubt important in its way, hardly took the highest priority at that moment.

There was a light frost covering the ground and much of the foliage, but it was a mild day for that time of the year. I crossed the grass quickly, placed my person behind the bush, and before long heard Mr Cardinal's footsteps approaching. Unfortunately, I misjudged slightly the timing of my emergence. I had intended to emerge while Mr Cardinal was still a reasonable distance away, so that he would see me in good time and suppose I was on my way to the summerhouse, or perhaps to the gardener's lodge. I could then have pretended to notice him for the first time and have engaged him in conversation in an impromptu manner. As it happened, I emerged a little late and I fear I rather startled the young gentleman, who immediately pulled his attaché case away from me and clutched it to his chest with both arms.

'I'm very sorry, sir.'

'My goodness, Stevens. You gave me a shock. I thought things were hotting up a bit there.'

'I'm very sorry, sir. But as it happens, I have something to convey to you.'

'My goodness, yes, you gave me quite a fright.'

'If I may come straight to the point, sir. You will notice the geese not far from us.'

'Geese?' He looked around a little bewildered. 'Oh yes. That's what they are.'

'And likewise the flowers and shrubs. This is not, in fact, the best time of year to see them in their full glory, but you will appreciate, sir, that with the arrival of

spring, we will see a change - a very special sort of change - in these surroundings. '

'Yes, I'm sure the grounds are not at their best just now. But to be perfectly frank, Stevens, I wasn't paying much attention to the glories of nature. It's all rather worrying. That M. Dupont's arrived in the foulest mood imaginable. Last thing we wanted really. '

'M. Dupont has arrived here at this house, sir?'

'About half an hour ago. He's in the most foul temper. '

'Excuse me, sir. I must attend to him straight away. '

'Of course, Stevens. Well, kind of you to have come out to talk to me. '

'Please excuse me, sir. As it happened, I had a word or two more to say on the topic of - as you put it yourself - the glories of nature. If you will indulge me by listening, I would be most grateful. But I am afraid this will have to wait for another occasion. '

'Well, I shall look forward to it, Stevens. Though I'm more of a fish man myself. I know all about fish, fresh water and salt. '

'All living creatures will be relevant to our forthcoming discussion, sir. However, you must now please excuse me. I had no idea M. Dupont had arrived. '

I hurried back to the house to be met immediately by the first footman saying: 'We've been looking all over for you, sir. The French gentleman's arrived. '

M. Dupont was a tall, elegant gentleman with a grey beard and a monocle. He had arrived in the sort of clothes one often sees continental gentlemen wearing on their holidays, and indeed, throughout his stay, he was to maintain diligently the appearance of having come to Darlington Hall entirely for pleasure and friendship. As Mr Cardinal had

indicated, M. Dupont had not arrived in a good temper; I cannot recall now all the various things that had upset him since his arrival in England a few days previously, but in particular he had obtained some painful sores on his feet while sightseeing around London and these, he feared, were growing septic. I referred his valet to Miss Kenton, but this did not prevent M. Dupont snapping his fingers at me every few hours to say: 'Butler! I am in need of more bandages.'

His mood seemed much lifted on seeing Mr Lewis. He and the American senator greeted each other as old colleagues and they were to be seen together for much of the remainder of the day, laughing over reminiscences. In fact, one could see that Mr Lewis's almost constant proximity to M. Dupont was proving a serious inconvenience to Lord Darlington, who was naturally keen to make close personal contact with this distinguished gentleman before the discussions began. On several occasions I witnessed his lordship make attempts to draw M. Dupont aside for some private conversation, only for Mr Lewis smilingly to impose himself upon them with some remark like: 'Pardon me, gentlemen, but there's something that's been greatly puzzling me,' so that his lordship soon found himself having to listen to some more of Mr Lewis's jovial anecdotes. Mr Lewis apart, however, the other guests, perhaps through awe, perhaps through a sense of antagonism, kept a wary distance from M. Dupont, a fact that was conspicuous even in that generally guarded atmosphere, and which seemed to underline all the more the feeling that it was M. Dupont who somehow held the key to the outcome of the following days.

The conference began on a rainy morning during the last week of March 1923 in the somewhat unlikely setting of the drawing room - a venue chosen to accommodate the 'off the record' nature of many of the attendances. In fact, to my eyes, the appearance of informality had been taken to a faintly ludicrous degree. It was odd enough to see that rather feminine room crammed full with so many stern, dark-jacketed

gentlemen, sometimes sitting three or four abreast upon a sofa; but such was the determination on the part of some persons to maintain the appearance that this was nothing more than a social event that they had actually gone to the lengths of having journals and newspapers open on their knees.

I was obliged during the course of that first morning to go constantly in and out of the room, and so was unable to follow the proceedings at all fully. But I recall Lord Darlington opening the discussions by formally welcoming the guests, before going on to outline the strong moral case for a relaxing of various aspects of the Versailles treaty, emphasizing the great suffering he had himself witnessed in Germany. Of course, I had heard these same sentiments expressed by his lordship on many occasions before, but such was the depth of conviction with which he spoke in this august setting that I could not help but be moved afresh. Sir David Cardinal spoke next, and though I missed much of his speech, it seemed to be more technical in substance, and quite frankly, rather above my head. But his general gist seemed to be close to his lordship's, concluding with a call for a freezing of German reparation payments and the withdrawal of French troops from the Ruhr region. The German countess then began to speak, but I was at this point, for some reason I do not recollect, obliged to leave the drawing room for an extended period. By the time I reentered, the guests were in open debate, and the discussion - with much talk of commerce and interest rates - was quite beyond me.

M. Dupont, so far as I could observe, was not contributing to the discussions, and it was hard to tell from his sullen demeanour if he was attending carefully to what was being said or else deeply engrossed in other thoughts. At one stage, when I happened to depart the room in the midst of an address by one of the German gentlemen, M. Dupont suddenly rose and followed me out.

‘Butler,’ he said, once we were in the hall, ‘I wonder if I could have my feet changed. They are giving me so much discomfort now, I can hardly listen to these gentlemen.’

As I recall, I had conveyed a plea to Miss Kenton for assistance - via a messenger, naturally - and had left M. Dupont sitting in the billiard room awaiting his nurse, when the first footman had come hurrying down the staircase in some distress to inform me that my father had been taken ill upstairs.

I hurried up to the first floor and on turning at the landing was met by a strange sight. At the far end of the corridor, almost in front of the large window, at that moment filled with grey light and rain, my father’s figure could be seen frozen in a posture that suggested he was taking part in some ceremonial ritual. He had dropped down on to one knee and with head bowed seemed to be pushing at the trolley before him, which for some reason had taken on an obstinate immobility. Two chambermaids were standing at a respectful distance, watching his efforts in some awe. I went to my father and releasing his hands from their grip on the edge of the trolley, eased him down on to the carpet. His eyes were closed, his face was an ashen colour, and there were beads of sweat on his forehead. Further assistance was called, a bath-chair arrived in due course, and my father was transported up to his room.

Once my father had been laid in his bed, I was a little uncertain as to how to proceed; for while it seemed undesirable that I leave my father in such a condition, I did not really have a moment more to spare. As I stood hesitating in the doorway, Miss Kenton appeared at my side and said:

‘Mr Stevens, I have a little more time than you at the moment. I shall, if you wish, attend to your father. I shall show Dr Meredith up and notify you if he has anything noteworthy to say.’

‘Thank you, Miss Kenton,’ I said, and took my leave.

When I returned to the drawing room, a clergyman was talking about the hardships being suffered by children in Berlin. I immediately found myself more than occupied replenishing the guests with tea and coffee. A few of the gentlemen, I noticed, were drinking spirits, and one or two, despite the presence of the two ladies, had started to smoke. I was, I recall, leaving the drawing room with an empty teapot in my hand when Miss Kenton stopped me and said: 'Mr Stevens, Dr Meredith is just leaving now.'

As she said this, I could see the doctor putting on his mackintosh and hat in the hall and so went to him, the teapot still in my hand. The doctor looked at me with a disgruntled expression. 'Your father's not so good,' he said. 'If he deteriorates, call me again immediately.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.'

'How old is your father, Stevens?'

'Seventy-two, sir.'

Dr Meredith thought about this, then said again: 'If he deteriorates, call me immediately.'

I thanked the doctor again and showed him out.

It was that evening, shortly before dinner, that I overheard the conversation between Mr Lewis and M. Dupont. I had for some reason gone up to M. Dupont's room and was about to knock, but before doing so, as is my custom, I paused for a second to listen at the door. You may not yourself be in the habit of taking this small precaution to avoid knocking at some highly inappropriate moment, but I always have been and can vouch that it is common practice amongst many professionals. That is to say, there is no subterfuge implied in such an action, and I for one had no intention of overhearing to the extent I did that evening. However, as fortune would have it, when I put my ear to M. Dupont's door, I happened to hear Mr Lewis's voice, and though I cannot

recall precisely the actual words I first heard, it was the tone of his voice that raised my suspicions. I was listening to the same genial, slow voice with which the American gentleman had charmed many since his arrival and yet it now contained something unmistakably covert. It was this realization along with the fact that he was in M. Dupont's room, presumably addressing this most crucial personage, that caused me to stop my hand from knocking, and continue to listen instead.

The bedroom doors of Darlington Hall are of a certain thickness and I could by no means hear complete exchanges; consequently, it is hard for me now to recall precisely what I overheard, just as, indeed, it was for me later that same evening when I reported to his lordship on the matter. Nevertheless, this is not to say I did not gain a fairly clear impression of what was taking place within the room. In effect, the American gentleman was putting forward the view that M. Dupont was being manipulated by his lordship and other participants at the conference; that M. Dupont had been deliberately invited late to enable the others to discuss important topics in his absence; that even after his arrival, it was to be observed that his lordship was conducting small private discussions with the most important delegates without inviting M. Dupont. Then Mr Lewis began to report certain remarks his lordship and others had made at dinner on that first evening after his arrival.

'To be quite frank, sir,' I heard Mr Lewis say, 'I was appalled at their attitude towards your countrymen. They actually used words like "barbarous" and "despicable". In fact, I noted them in my diary only a few hours afterwards.'

M. Dupont said something briefly which I did not catch, then Mr Lewis said again: 'Let me tell you, sir, I was appalled. Are these words to use about an ally you stood shoulder to shoulder with only a few years back?'

I am not sure now if I ever proceeded to knock; it is quite possible, given the alarming nature of what I heard, that I judged it best to withdraw altogether. In any case, I did not linger long enough - as I was obliged to explain to his lordship shortly afterwards - to hear anything that would give a clue as to M. Dupont's attitude to Mr Lewis's remarks.

The next day, the discussions in the drawing room appeared to reach a new level of intensity and by lunchtime, the exchanges were becoming rather heated. My impression was that utterances were being directed accusingly, and with increasing boldness, towards the armchair where M. Dupont sat fingering his beard, saying little. Whenever the conference adjourned, I noticed, as no doubt his lordship did with some concern, that Mr Lewis would quickly take M. Dupont away to some corner or other where they could confer quietly. Indeed, once, shortly after lunch, I recall I came upon the two gentlemen talking rather furtively just inside the library doorway, and it was my distinct impression they broke off their discussion upon my approach.

In the meantime, my father's condition had grown neither better nor worse. As I understood, he was asleep for much of the time, and indeed, I found him so on the few occasions I had a spare moment to ascend to that little attic room. I did not then have a chance actually to converse with him until that second evening after the return of his illness.

On that occasion, too, my father was sleeping when I entered. But the chambermaid Miss Kenton had left in attendance stood up upon seeing me and began to shake my father's shoulder.

'Foolish girl!' I exclaimed. 'What do you think you are doing?'

'Mr Stevens said to wake him if you returned, sir.'

'Let him sleep. It's exhaustion that's made him ill.'

‘He said I had to, sir,’ the girl said, and again shook my father’s shoulder.

My father opened his eyes, turned his head a little on the pillow, and looked at me.

‘I hope Father is feeling better now,’ I said.

He went on gazing at me for a moment, then asked: ‘Everything in hand downstairs?’

‘The situation is rather volatile. It is just after six o’clock, so Father can well imagine the atmosphere in the kitchen at this moment.’

An impatient look crossed my father’s face. ‘But is everything in hand?’ he said again.

‘Yes, I dare say you can rest assured on that. I’m very glad Father is feeling better.’

With some deliberation, he withdrew his arms from under the bedclothes and gazed tiredly at the backs of his hands. He continued to do this for some time.

‘I’m glad Father is feeling so much better,’ I said again eventually. ‘Now really, I’d best be getting back. As I say, the situation is rather volatile.’

He went on looking at his hands for a moment. Then he said slowly: ‘I hope I’ve been a good father to you.’

I laughed a little and said: ‘I’m so glad you’re feeling better now.’

‘I’m proud of you. A good son. I hope I’ve been a good father to you. I suppose I haven’t.’

‘I’m afraid we’re extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning.’

My father was still looking at his hands as though he were faintly irritated by them.

'I'm so glad you're feeling better now,' I said again and took my leave.

*

On descending, I found the kitchen on the brink of pandemonium, and in general, an extremely tense atmosphere amongst all levels of staff. However, I am pleased to recall that by the time dinner was served an hour or so later, nothing but efficiency and professional calm was exhibited on the part of my team.

It was always something of a memorable sight to see that magnificent banqueting hall employed to its full capacity and that evening was no exception. Of course, the effect produced by unbroken lines of gentlemen in evening suits, so outnumbering representatives of the fairer sex, was a rather severe one; but then again, in those days, the two large chandeliers that hang over the table still ran on gas - resulting in a subtle, quite soft light pervading the room - and did not produce the dazzling brightness they have done ever since their electrification. On that second and final dinner of the conference - most guests were expected to disperse after lunch the following day - the company had lost much of the reserve that had been noticeable throughout the previous days. Not only was the conversation flowing more freely and loudly, we found ourselves serving out wine at a conspicuously increased rate. At the close of dinner, which from a professional viewpoint had been executed without any significant difficulties, his lordship rose to address his guests.

He opened by expressing his gratitude to all present that the discussions during the previous two days, 'though at times exhilaratingly frank', had been conducted in a spirit of friendship and the desire to see good prevail. The unity witnessed over the two days had been greater than he could ever have hoped for, and the remaining morning's session of 'rounding up' would, he trusted, be rich in commitments on

the part of participants concerning action each would be taking before the important international conference in Switzerland. It was around this point - and I have no idea if he had planned to do so beforehand - that his lordship began to reminisce about his late friend, Herr Karl-Heinz Bremann. This was a little unfortunate, the topic being one close to his lordship's heart and one he was inclined to explicate at some length. It should also be said, perhaps, that Lord Darlington was never what might be called a natural public speaker, and soon all those small sounds of restlessness that betray that an audience's attention has been lost grew steadily around the room. Indeed, by the time Lord Darlington had finally come round to bidding his guests rise and drink to 'peace and justice in Europe', the level of such noises - perhaps on account of the liberal amounts of wine that had been consumed - struck me as bordering on the ill-mannered.

The company had seated themselves again, and conversation was just beginning to resume, when there came an authoritative rapping of knuckles upon wood and M. Dupont had risen to his feet. At once, a hush fell over the room. The distinguished gentleman glanced around the table with a look almost of severity. Then he said: 'I hope I am not trespassing over a duty ascribed to someone else present here, but then I had heard no proposals for anyone to give a toast in thanks to our host, the most honourable and kind Lord Darlington.' There was a murmur of approval. M. Dupont went on: 'Many things of interest have been said in this house over the past days. Many important things.' He paused, and there was now utter stillness in the room.

'There has been much', he continued, 'which has implicitly or otherwise *criticized* - it is not so strong a word - *criticized* the foreign policy of my country.' He paused again, looking rather stern. One might even have thought him to be angry. 'We have heard in these two days several thorough and intelligent analyses of the present very

complex situation in Europe. But none of them, may I say, has fully comprehended the reasons for the attitude France has adopted towards her neighbour. However,' - he raised a finger - 'this is not the time to enter into such debates. In fact, I deliberately refrained from entering into such debates during these past days because I came principally to listen. And let me say now that I have been impressed by certain of the arguments I have heard here. But how impressed, you may be asking.' M. Dupont took another pause during which his gaze travelled in an almost leisurely manner around all the faces fixed upon him. Then at last he said: 'Gentlemen - and ladies, pardon me - I have given much thought to these matters and I wish to say here in confidence to you, that while there remains between myself and many of those present differences of interpretation as to what is really occurring in Europe at this moment, despite this, as to the main points that have been raised in this house, I am convinced, gentlemen, *convinced* both of their justice and their practicality.' A murmur which seemed to contain both relief and triumph went around the table, but this time M. Dupont raised his voice slightly and pronounced over it: 'I am happy to assure you all here that I will bring what modest influence I have to encourage certain changes of emphasis in French policy in accordance with much of what has been said here. And I will endeavour to do so in good time for the Swiss conference.'

There was a ripple of applause, and I saw his lordship exchange a look with Sir David. M. Dupont held up his hand, though whether to acknowledge the applause or to stem it was not clear.

'But before I go on to thank our host, Lord Darlington, I have some small thing I would wish to remove from my chest. Some of you may say it is not good manners to be removing such things from one's chest at the dinner table.' This brought enthusiastic laughter. 'However, I am for frankness in these matters. Just as there is an imperative to express

gratitude formally and publicly to Lord Darlington, who has brought us here and made possible this present spirit of unity and goodwill, there is, I believe, an imperative to openly condemn any who come here to abuse the hospitality of the host, and to spend his energies solely in trying to sow discontent and suspicion. Such persons are not only socially repugnant, in the climate of our present day they are extremely dangerous.' He paused again and once more there was utter stillness. M. Dupont went on in a calm, deliberate voice: 'My only question concerning Mr Lewis is this. To what extent does his abominable behaviour exemplify the attitude of the present American administration? Ladies and gentlemen, let me myself hazard a guess as to the answer, for such a gentleman capable of the levels of deceit he has displayed over these past days should not be relied upon to provide a truthful reply. So, I will hazard my guess. Of course, America is concerned about our debt payments to her in the event of a freeze in German reparations. But I have over the last six months had occasion to discuss this very matter with a number of very highly placed Americans, and it seems to me that thinking in that country is much more far-sighted than that represented by their countryman here. All those of us who care for the future well-being of Europe will take comfort from the fact that Mr Lewis is now - how shall we put it? - hardly the influence he once was. Perhaps you think me unduly harsh to express these things so openly. But the reality is, ladies and gentlemen, I am being merciful. You see, I refrain from outlining just what this gentleman has been saying to me - *about you all*. And with a most clumsy technique, the audacity and crudeness of which I could hardly believe. But enough of condemnations. It is time for us to thank. Join me then, please, ladies and gentlemen, in raising your glasses to Lord Darlington.'

M. Dupont had not once looked over in Mr Lewis's direction during the course of this speech, and indeed, once the company had toasted his lordship and were seated again, all those present seemed to be studiously avoiding looking

towards the American gentleman. An uneasy silence reigned for a moment, and then finally Mr Lewis rose to his feet. He was smiling pleasantly in his customary manner.

‘Well, since everyone’s giving speeches, I may as well take a turn,’ he said, and it was at once apparent from his voice that he had had a good deal to drink. ‘I don’t have anything to say to the nonsense our French friend has been uttering. I just dismiss that sort of talk. I’ve had people try to put one over on me many times, and let me tell you, gentlemen, few people succeed. Few people succeed.’ Mr Lewis came to a halt and for a moment seemed at a loss as to how he should go on. Eventually he smiled again and said: ‘As I say, I’m not going to waste my time on our French friend over there. But as it happens, I do have something to say. Now we’re all being so frank, I’ll be frank too. You gentlemen here, forgive me, but you are just a bunch of naive dreamers. And if you didn’t insist on meddling in large affairs that affect the globe, you would actually be charming. Let’s take our good host here. What is he? He is a gentleman. No one here, I trust, would care to disagree. A classic English gentleman. Decent, honest, well-meaning. But his lordship here is *an amateur*.’ He paused at the word and looked around the table. ‘He is an amateur and international affairs today are no longer for gentlemen amateurs. The sooner you here in Europe realize that the better. All you decent, well-meaning gentlemen, let me ask you, have you any idea what sort of place the world is becoming all around you? The days when you could act out of your noble instincts are over. Except of course, you here in Europe don’t yet seem to know it. Gentlemen like our good host still believe it’s their business to meddle in matters they don’t understand. So much hog-wash has been spoken here these past two days. Well-meaning, naïve hog-wash. You here in Europe need professionals to run your affairs. If you don’t realize that soon you’re headed for disaster. A toast, gentlemen. Let me make a toast. To professionalism.’

There was a stunned silence and no one moved. Mr Lewis shrugged, raised his glass to all the company, drank and sat back down. Almost immediately, Lord Darlington stood up.

‘I have no wish,’ his lordship said, ‘to enter into a quarrel on this our last evening together which we all deserve to enjoy as a happy and triumphant occasion. But it is out of respect for your views, Mr Lewis, that I feel one should not simply cast them to one side as though they were uttered by some soapbox eccentric. Let me say this. What you describe as “amateurism”, sir, is what I think most of us here still prefer to call “honour”.’

This brought a loud murmur of assent with several ‘hear, hear’s’ and some applause.

‘What is more, sir,’ his lordship went on, ‘I believe I have a good idea of what you mean by “professionalism”. It appears to mean getting one’s way by cheating and manipulating. It means ordering one’s priorities according to greed and advantage rather than the desire to see goodness and justice prevail in the world. If that is the “professionalism” you refer to, sir, I don’t much care for it and have no wish to acquire it.’

This was met by the loudest burst of approval yet, followed by warm and sustained applause. I could see Mr Lewis smiling at his wine glass and shaking his head wearily. It was just around this stage that I became aware of the first footman beside me, who whispered: ‘Miss Kenton would like a word with you, sir. She’s just outside the door.’

I made my exit as discreetly as possible just as his lordship, still on his feet, was embarking on a further point.

Miss Kenton looked rather upset. ‘Your father has become very ill, Mr Stevens,’ she said. ‘I’ve called for Dr Meredith, but I understand he may be a little delayed.’

I must have looked a little confused, for Miss Kenton then said: 'Mr Stevens, he really is in a poor state. You had better come and see him.'

'I only have a moment. The gentlemen are liable to retire to the smoking room at any moment.'

'Of course. But you must come now, Mr Stevens, or else you may deeply regret it later.'

Miss Kenton was already leading the way, and we hurried through the house up to my father's small attic room. Mrs Mortimer, the cook, was standing over my father's bed, still in her apron.

'Oh, Mr Stevens,' she said upon our entry, 'he's gone very poorly.'

Indeed, my father's face had gone a dull reddish colour, like no colour I had seen on a living being. I heard Miss Kenton say softly behind me: 'His pulse is very weak.' I gazed at my father for a moment, touched his forehead slightly, then withdrew my hand.

'In my opinion,' Mrs Mortimer said, 'he's suffered a stroke. I've seen two in my time and I think he's suffered a stroke.' With that, she began to cry. I noticed she reeked powerfully of fat and roast cooking. I turned away and said to Miss Kenton:

'This is most distressing. Nevertheless, I must now return downstairs.'

'Of course, Mr Stevens. I will tell you when the doctor arrives. Or else when there are any changes.'

'Thank you, Miss Kenton.'

I hurried down the stairs and was in time to see the gentlemen proceeding into the smoking room. The footmen looked relieved to see me, and I immediately signalled them to get to their positions.

Whatever had taken place in the banqueting hall after my departure, there was now a genuinely celebratory atmosphere amongst the guests. All around the smoking room, gentlemen seemed to be standing in clusters laughing and clapping each other on the shoulder. Mr Lewis, so far as I could ascertain, had already retired. I found myself making my way through the guests, a decanter of port upon my tray. I had just finished serving a glass to a gentleman when a voice behind me said: 'Ah, Stevens, you're interested in fish, you say.'

I turned to find the young Mr Cardinal beaming happily at me. I smiled also and said: 'Fish, sir?'

'When I was young, I used to keep all sorts of tropical fish in a tank. Quite a little aquarium it was. I say, Stevens, are you all right?'

I smiled again. 'Quite all right, thank you, sir.'

'As you so rightly pointed out, I really should come back here in the spring. Darlington Hall must be rather lovely then. The last time I was here, I think it was winter then too. I say, Stevens, are you sure you're all right there?'

'Perfectly all right, thank you, sir.'

'Not feeling unwell, are you?'

'Not at all, sir. Please excuse me.'

I proceeded to serve port to some other of the guests. There was a loud burst of laughter behind me and I heard the Belgian clergyman exclaim: 'That is really heretical! Positively heretical!' then laugh loudly himself. I felt something touch my elbow and turned to find Lord Darlington.

'Stevens, are you all right?'

'Yes, sir. Perfectly.'

'You look as though you're crying.'

I laughed and taking out a handkerchief, quickly wiped my face. 'I'm very sorry, sir. The strains of a hard day.'

'Yes, it's been hard work.'

Someone addressed his lordship and he turned away to reply. I was about to continue further around the room when I caught sight of Miss Kenton through the open doorway, signalling to me. I began to make my way towards the doors, but before I could reach them, M. Dupont touched my arm.

'Butler,' he said, 'I wonder if you would find me some fresh bandages. My feet are unbearable again.'

'Yes, sir.'

As I proceeded towards the doors, I realized M. Dupont was following me. I turned and said: 'I will come and find you, sir, just as soon as I have what is required.'

'Please hurry, butler. I am in some pain.'

'Yes, sir. I'm very sorry, sir.'

Miss Kenton was still standing out in the hall where I had first spotted her. As I emerged, she walked silently towards the staircase, a curious lack of urgency in her manner. Then she turned and said: 'Mr Stevens, I'm very sorry. Your father passed away about four minutes ago.'

'I see.'

She looked at her hands, then up at my face. 'Mr Stevens, I'm very sorry', she said. Then she added: 'I wish there was something I could say.'

'There's no need, Miss Kenton.'

'Dr Meredith has not yet arrived.' Then for a moment she bowed her head and a sob escaped her. But almost immediately, she resumed her composure and asked in a steady voice: 'Will you come up and see him?'

‘I’m very busy just now, Miss Kenton. In a little while perhaps.’

‘In that case, Mr Stevens, will you permit me to close his eyes?’

‘I would be most grateful if you would, Miss Kenton.’

She began to climb the staircase, but I stopped her, saying: ‘Miss Kenton, please don’t think me unduly improper in not ascending to see my father in his deceased condition just at this moment. You see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now.’

‘Of course, Mr Stevens.’

‘To do otherwise, I feel, would be to let him down.’

‘Of course, Mr Stevens.’

I turned away, the decanter of port still on my tray, and reentered the smoking room. That relatively small room appeared to be a forest of black dinner jackets, grey hair and cigar smoke. I wended my way past the gentlemen, searching for glasses to replenish. M. Dupont tapped my shoulder and said:

‘Butler, have you seen to my arrangements?’

‘I am very sorry, sir, but assistance is not immediately available at this precise moment.’

‘What do you mean, butler? You’ve run out of basic medical supplies?’

‘As it happens, sir, a doctor is on his way.’

‘Ah, very good! You called a doctor.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good, good.’

M. Dupont resumed his conversation and I continued my way around the room for some moments. At one point, the German

countess emerged from the midst of the gentlemen and before I had had a chance to serve her, began helping herself to some port from my tray.

‘You will compliment the cook for me, Stevens,’ she said.

‘Of course, madam. Thank you, madam.’

‘And you and your team did well also.’

‘Thank you most kindly, madam.’

‘At one point during dinner, Stevens, I would have sworn you were at least three people,’ she said and laughed.

I laughed quickly and said: ‘I’m delighted to be of service, madam.’

A moment later, I spotted the young Mr Cardinal not far away, still standing on his own, and it struck me the young gentleman might be feeling somewhat overawed in the present company. His glass, in any case, was empty and so I started towards him. He seemed greatly cheered at the prospect of my arrival and held out his glass.

‘I think it’s admirable that you’re a nature-lover, Stevens,’ he said, as I served him. ‘And I dare say it’s a great advantage to Lord Darlington to have someone to keep an expert eye on the activities of the gardener.’

‘I’m sorry, sir?’

‘Nature, Stevens. We were talking the other day about the wonders of the natural world. And I quite agree with you, we are all much too complacent about the great wonders that surround us.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I mean, all this we’ve been talking about. Treaties and boundaries and reparations and occupations. But Mother Nature just carries on her own sweet way. Funny to think of it like that, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, indeed it is, sir.’

‘I wonder if it wouldn’t have been better if the Almighty had created us all as - well - as sort of plants. You know, firmly embedded in the soil. Then none of this rot about wars and boundaries would have come up in the first place.’

The young gentleman seemed to find this an amusing thought. He gave a laugh, then on further thought laughed some more. I joined him in his laughter. Then he nudged me and said: ‘Can you imagine it, Stevens?’ and laughed again.

‘Yes, sir,’ I said, laughing also, ‘it would have been a most curious alternative.’

‘But we could still have chaps like you taking messages back and forth, bringing tea, that sort of thing. Otherwise, how would we ever get anything done? Can you imagine it, Stevens? All of us rooted in the soil? Just imagine it!’

Just then a footman emerged behind me. ‘Miss Kenton is wishing to have a word with you, sir,’ he said.

I excused myself from Mr Cardinal and moved towards the doors. I noticed M. Dupont apparently guarding them and as I approached, he said: ‘Butler, is the doctor here?’

‘I am just going to find out, sir. I won’t be a moment.’

‘I am in some pain.’

‘I’m very sorry, sir. The doctor should not be long now.’

On this occasion, M. Dupont followed me out of the door. Miss Kenton was once more standing out in the hall.

‘Mr Stevens,’ she said, ‘Dr Meredith has arrived and gone upstairs.’

She had spoken in a low voice, but M. Dupont behind me exclaimed immediately: ‘Ah, good!’

I turned to him and said: 'If you will perhaps follow me, sir.'

I led him into the billiard room where I stoked the fire while he sat down in one of the leather chairs and began to remove his shoes.

'I'm sorry it is rather cold in here, sir. The doctor will not be long now.'

'Thank you, butler. You've done well.'

Miss Kenton was still waiting for me in the hallway and we ascended through the house in silence. Up in my father's room, Dr Meredith was making some notes and Mrs Mortimer weeping bitterly. She was still wearing her apron, which, evidently, she had been using to wipe away her tears; as a result there were grease marks all over her face, giving her the appearance of a participant in a minstrel show. I had expected the room to smell of death, but on account of Mrs Mortimer - or else her apron - the room was dominated by the smell of roasting.

Dr Meredith rose and said: 'My condolences, Stevens. He suffered a severe stroke. If it's any comfort to you, he wouldn't have suffered much pain. There was nothing in the world you could have done to save him.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'I'll be on my way now. You'll see to arrangements?'

'Yes, sir. However, if I may, there is a most distinguished gentleman downstairs in need of your attention.'

'Urgent?'

'He expressed a keen desire to see you, sir.'

I led Dr Meredith downstairs, showed him into the billiard room, then returned quickly to the smoking room

where the atmosphere, if anything, had grown even more convivial.

Of course, it is not for me to suggest that I am worthy of ever being placed alongside the likes of the 'great' butlers of our generation, such as Mr Marshall or Mr Lane - though it should be said there are those who, perhaps out of misguided generosity, tend to do just this. Let me make clear that when I say the conference of 1923, and that night in particular, constituted a turning point in my professional development, I am speaking very much in terms of my own more humble standards. Even so, if you consider the pressures contingent on me that night, you may not think I delude myself unduly if I go so far as to suggest that I did perhaps display, in the face of everything, at least in some modest degree a 'dignity' worthy of someone like Mr Marshall - or come to that, my father. Indeed, why should I deny it? For all its sad associations, whenever I recall that evening today, I find I do so with a large sense of triumph.

DAY TWO – AFTERNOON

Mortimer's Pond, Dorset

It would seem there is a whole dimension to the question 'what is a "great" butler?' I have hitherto not properly considered. It is, I must say, a rather unsettling experience to realize this about a matter so close to my heart, particularly one I have given much thought to over the years. But it strikes me I may have been a little hasty before in dismissing certain aspects of the Hayes Society's criteria for membership. I have no wish, let me make clear, to retract any of my ideas on 'dignity' and its crucial link with 'greatness'. But I have been thinking a little more about that other pronouncement made by the Hayes Society - namely the admission that it was a prerequisite for membership of the Society that 'the applicant be attached to a distinguished household'. My feeling remains, no less than before, that this represents a piece of unthinking snobbery on the part of the Society. However, it occurs to me that perhaps what one takes objection to is, specifically, the outmoded understanding of what a 'distinguished household' is, rather than to the general principle being expressed. Indeed, now that I think further on the matter, I believe it may well be true to say it *is* a prerequisite of greatness that one 'be attached to a distinguished household' - so long as one takes 'distinguished' here to have a meaning deeper than that understood by the Hayes Society.

In fact, a comparison of how I might interpret 'a distinguished household' with what the Hayes Society understood by that term illuminates sharply, I believe, the fundamental difference between the values of our generation of butlers and those of the previous generation. When I say this, I am not merely drawing attention to the fact that our generation had a less snobbish attitude as regards which

employers were landed gentry and which were 'business'. What I am trying to say - and I do not think this an unfair comment - is that we were a much more idealistic generation. Where our elders might have been concerned with whether or not an employer was titled, or otherwise from one of the 'old' families, we tended to concern ourselves much more with the *moral* status of an employer. I do not mean by this that we were preoccupied with our employers' private behaviour. What I mean is that we were ambitious, in a way that would have been unusual a generation before, to serve gentlemen who were, so to speak, furthering the progress of humanity. It would have been seen as a far worthier calling, for instance, to serve a gentleman such as Mr George Ketteridge, who, however humble his beginnings, has made an undeniable contribution to the future well-being of the empire, than any gentleman, however aristocratic his origin, who idled away his time in clubs or on golf courses.

In practice, of course, many gentlemen from the noblest families have tended to devote themselves to alleviating the great problems of the day, and so, at a glance, it may have appeared that the ambitions of our generation differed little from those of our predecessors. But I can vouch there was a crucial distinction in attitude, reflected not only in the sorts of things you would hear fellow professionals express to each other, but in the way many of the most able persons of our generation chose to leave one position for another. Such decisions were no longer a matter simply of wages, the size of staff at one's disposal or the splendour of a family name; for our generation, I think it fair to say, professional prestige lay most significantly in the moral worth of one's employer.

I believe I can best highlight the difference between the generations by expressing myself figuratively. Butlers of my father's generation, I would say, tended to see the world in terms of a ladder - the houses of royalty, dukes and the lords from the oldest families placed at the top, those of

'new money' lower down and so on, until one reached a point below which the hierarchy was determined simply by wealth - or the lack of it. Any butler with ambition simply did his best to climb as high up this ladder as possible, and by and large, the higher he went, the greater his professional prestige. Such are, of course, precisely the values embodied in the Hayes Society's idea of a 'distinguished household', and the fact that it was confidently making such pronouncements as late as 1929 shows clearly why the demise of that society was inevitable, if not long overdue. For by that time, such thinking was quite out of step with that of the finest men emerging to the forefront of our profession. For our generation, I believe it is accurate to say, viewed the world not as a ladder, but more as a *wheel*. Perhaps I might explain this further.

It is my impression that our generation was the first to recognize something which had passed the notice of all earlier generations: namely that the great decisions of the world are not, in fact, arrived at simply in the public chambers, or else during a handful of days given over to an international conference under the full gaze of the public and the press. Rather, debates are conducted, and crucial decisions arrived at, in the privacy and calm of the great houses of this country. What occurs under the public gaze with so much pomp and ceremony is often the conclusion, or mere ratification, of what has taken place over weeks or months within the walls of such houses. To us, then, the world was a wheel, revolving with these great houses at the hub, their mighty decisions emanating out to all else, rich and poor, who revolved around them. It was the aspiration of all those of us with professional ambition to work our way as close to this hub as we were each of us capable. For we were, as I say, an idealistic generation for whom the question was not simply one of how well one practised one's skills, but *to what end* one did so; each of us harboured the desire to make our own small contribution to the creation of a better world, and saw that, as professionals, the surest means of doing so

would be to serve the great gentlemen of our times in whose hands civilization had been entrusted.

Of course, I am now speaking in broad generalizations and I would readily admit there were all too many persons of our generation who had no patience for such finer considerations. Conversely, I am sure there were many of my father's generation who recognized instinctively this 'moral' dimension to their work. But by and large, I believe these generalizations to be accurate, and indeed, such 'idealistic' motivations as I have described have played a large part in my own career. I myself moved quite rapidly from employer to employer during my early career - being aware that these situations were incapable of bringing me lasting satisfaction - before being rewarded at last with the opportunity to serve Lord Darlington.

It is curious that I have never until today thought of matters in these terms; indeed, that through all those many hours we spent discussing the nature of 'greatness' by the fire of our servants' hall, the likes of Mr Graham and I never considered this whole dimension to the question. And while I would not retract anything I have previously stated regarding the quality of 'dignity', I must admit there is something to the argument that whatever the degree to which a butler has attained such a quality, if he has failed to find an appropriate outlet for his accomplishments he can hardly expect his fellows to consider him 'great'. Certainly, it is observable that figures like Mr Marshall and Mr Lane have served only gentlemen of indisputable moral stature - Lord Wakeling, Lord Camberley, Sir Leonard Gray - and one cannot help get the impression that they simply would not have offered their talents to gentlemen of lesser calibre. Indeed, the more one considers it, the more obvious it seems: association with a *truly* distinguished household *is* a prerequisite of 'greatness'. A 'great' butler can only be, surely, one who can point to his years of service and say

that he has applied his talents to serving a great gentleman - and through the latter, to serving humanity.

As I say, I have never in all these years thought of the matter in quite this way; but then it is perhaps in the nature of coming away on a trip such as this that one is prompted towards such surprising new perspectives on topics one imagined one had long ago thought through thoroughly. I have also, no doubt, been prompted to think along such lines by the small event that occurred an hour or so ago - which has, I admit, unsettled me somewhat.

Having enjoyed a good morning's motoring in splendid weather, and having lunched well at a country inn, I had just crossed the border into Dorset. It was then I had become aware of a heated smell emanating from the car engine. The thought that I had done some damage to my employer's Ford was, of course, most alarming and I had quickly brought the vehicle to a halt.

I found myself in a narrow lane, hemmed in on either side by foliage so that I could gain little idea of what was around me. Neither could I see far ahead, the lane winding quite sharply twenty yards or so in front. It occurred to me that I could not remain where I was for long without incurring the risk of an oncoming vehicle coming round the same bend and colliding into my employer's Ford. I thus started the engine again and was partially reassured to find that the smell seemed not as powerful as before.

My best course, I could see, was to look for a garage, or else a large house of a gentleman where there would be a good chance I might find a chauffeur who could see what the matter was. But the lane continued to wind for some distance, and the high hedges on either side of me also persisted, obscuring my vision so that though I passed several gates, some of which clearly yielded on to driveways, I was unable to glimpse the houses themselves. I continued for another half-mile or so, the disturbing smell now growing stronger by

the moment, until at last I came out on to a stretch of open road. I could now see some distance before me, and indeed, ahead to my left there loomed a tall Victorian house with a substantial front lawn and what was clearly a driveway converted from an old carriage track. As I drew up to it, I was encouraged further to glimpse a Bentley through the open doors of a garage attached to the main house.

The gate too had been left open and so I steered the Ford a little way up the drive, got out and made my way to the back door of the house. This was opened by a man dressed in his shirt sleeves, wearing no tie, but who, upon my asking for the chauffeur of the house, replied cheerfully that I had 'hit the jackpot first time'. On hearing of my problem, the man without hesitation came out to the Ford, opened the bonnet and informed me after barely a few seconds' inspection: 'Water, guv. You need some water in your radiator.' He seemed to be rather amused by the whole situation, but was obliging enough; he returned inside the house and after a few moments emerged again with a jug of water and a funnel. As he filled the radiator, his head bent over the engine, he began to chat amiably, and on ascertaining that I was undertaking a motoring tour of the area, recommended I visit a local beauty spot, a certain pond not half a mile away.

I had had in the meantime more opportunity to observe the house; it was taller than it was broad, comprising four floors, with ivy covering much of the front right up to the gables. I could see from its windows, however, that at least half of it was dust-sheeted. I remarked on this to the man once he had finished with the radiator and closed the bonnet.

'A shame really,' he said. 'It's a lovely old house. Truth is, the Colonel's trying to sell the place off. He ain't got much use for a house this size now.'

I could not help inquiring then how many staff were employed there, and I suppose I was hardly surprised to be

told there was only himself and a cook who came in each evening. He was, it seemed, butler, valet, chauffeur and general cleaner. He had been the Colonel's batman in the war, he explained; they had been in Belgium together when the Germans had invaded and they had been together again for the Allied landing. Then he regarded me carefully and said:

'Now I got it. I couldn't make you out for a while, but now I got it. You're one of them top-notch butlers. From one of them big posh houses.'

When I told him he was not so far off the mark, he continued:

'Now I got it. Couldn't make you out for a while, see, 'cause you talk almost like a gentleman. And what with you driving an old beauty like this' - he gestured to the Ford - 'I thought at first, here's a really posh geezer. And so you are, gov. Really posh, I mean. I never learnt any of that myself, you see. I'm just a plain old batman gone civvy.'

He then asked me where it was I was employed, and when I told him he leant his head to one side with a quizzical look.

'Darlington Hall,' he said to himself. 'Darlington Hall. Must be a really posh place, it rings a bell even to an idiot like yours truly. Darlington Hall. Hang on, you don't mean *Darlington* Hall, Lord Darlington's place?'

'It was Lord Darlington's residence until his death three years ago,' I informed him. 'The house is now the residence of Mr John Farraday, an American gentleman.'

'You really must be top-notch working in a place like that. Can't be many like you left, eh?' Then his voice changed noticeably as he inquired: 'You mean you actually used to work for that Lord Darlington?'

He was eyeing me carefully again. I said:

'Oh no, I am employed by Mr John Farraday, the American gentleman who bought the house from the Darlington family.'

‘Oh, so you wouldn’t have known that Lord Darlington. Just that I wondered what he was like. What sort of bloke he was.’

I told the man that I would have to be on my way and thanked him emphatically for his assistance. He was, after all, an amiable fellow, taking the trouble to guide me in reversing out through the gateway, and before I parted, he bent down and recommended again that I visit the local pond, repeating his instructions as to how I would find it.

‘It’s a beautiful little spot,’ he added. ‘You’ll kick yourself for missing it. In fact, the Colonel’s doing a bit of fishing there this minute.’

The Ford seemed to be in fine form again, and since the pond in question was but a small detour off my route, I decided to take up the batman’s suggestion. His directions had seemed clear enough, but once I had turned off the main road in an attempt to follow them, I found myself getting lost down narrow, twisting lanes much like the one in which I had first noticed the alarming smell. At times, the foliage on either side became so thick as practically to blot out the sun altogether, and one found one’s eyes struggling to cope with the sudden contrasts of bright sunlight and deep shade. Eventually, however, after some searching, I found a signpost to ‘Mortimer’s Pond’, and so it was that I arrived here at this spot a little over half an hour ago.

I now find myself much indebted to the batman, for quite aside from assisting with the Ford, he has allowed me to discover a most charming spot which it is most improbable I would ever have found otherwise. The pond is not a large one – a quarter of a mile around its perimeter perhaps – so that by stepping out to any promontory, one can command a view of its entirety. An atmosphere of great calm pervades here. Trees have been planted all around the water just closely enough to give a pleasant shade to the banks, while here and there clusters of tall reeds and bulrushes break the

water's surface and its still reflection of the sky. My footwear is not such as to permit me easily to walk around the perimeter - I can see even from where I now sit the path disappearing into areas of deep mud - but I will say that such is the charm of this spot that on first arriving, I was sorely tempted to do just that. Only the thought of the possible catastrophes that might befall such an expedition, and of sustaining damage to my travelling suit, persuaded me to content myself with sitting here on this bench. And so I have done for the past half-hour, contemplating the progress of the various figures seated quietly with their fishing rods at various points around the water. At this point, I can see a dozen or so such figures, but the strong lights and shades created by the low-hanging branches prevent me from making any of them out clearly and I have had to forgo the small game I had been anticipating of guessing which of these fishermen is the Colonel at whose house I have just received such useful assistance.

It is no doubt the quiet of these surroundings that has enabled me to ponder all the more thoroughly these thoughts which have entered my mind over this past half-hour or so. Indeed, but for the tranquillity of the present setting, it is possible I would not have thought a great deal further about my behaviour during my encounter with the batman. That is to say, I may not have thought further why it was that I had given the distinct impression I had never been in the employ of Lord Darlington. For surely, there is no real doubt that is what occurred. He had asked: 'You mean you actually worked for that Lord Darlington?' and I had given an answer which could mean little other than that I had not. It could simply be that a meaningless whim had suddenly overtaken me at that moment - but that is hardly a convincing way to account for such distinctly odd behaviour. In any case, I have now come to accept that the incident with the batman is not the first of its kind; there is little doubt it has some connection - though I am not quite clear of the nature of it

- with what occurred a few months ago during the visit of the Wakefields.

Mr and Mrs Wakefield are an American couple who have been settled in England - somewhere in Kent, I understand - for some twenty years. Having a number of acquaintances in common with Mr Farraday amidst Boston society, they paid a short visit one day to Darlington Hall, staying for lunch and leaving before tea. I now refer to a time only a few weeks after Mr Farraday had arrived at the house, a time when his enthusiasm for his acquisition was at a height; consequently, much of the Wakefields' visit was taken up with my employer leading them on what might have seemed to some an unnecessarily extensive tour of the premises, including all the dust-sheeted areas. Mr and Mrs Wakefield, however, appeared to be as keen on the inspection as Mr Farraday, and as I went about my business, I would often catch various American exclamations of delight coming from whichever part of the house they had arrived at. Mr Farraday had commenced the tour at the top of the house, and by the time he had brought his guests down to inspect the magnificence of the ground-floor rooms, he seemed to be on an elevated plane, pointing out details on cornicings and window frames, and describing with some flourish 'what the English lords used to do' in each room. Although of course I made no deliberate attempt to overhear, I could not help but get the gist of what was being said, and was surprised by the extent of my employer's knowledge, which, despite the occasional infelicity, betrayed a deep enthusiasm for English ways. It was noticeable, moreover, that the Wakefields - Mrs Wakefield in particular - were themselves by no means ignorant of the traditions of our country, and one gathered from the many remarks they made that they too were owners of an English house of some splendour.

It was at a certain stage during this tour of the premises - I was crossing the hall under the impression that the party had gone out to explore the grounds - when I saw

that Mrs Wakefield had remained behind and was closely examining the stone arch that frames the doorway into the dining room. As I went past, muttering a quiet 'excuse me, madam,' she turned and said:

'Oh, Stevens, perhaps you're the one to tell me. This arch here *looks* seventeenth century, but isn't it the case that it was built quite recently? Perhaps during Lord Darlington's time?'

'It is possible, madam.'

'It's very beautiful. But it is probably a kind of mock period piece done only a few years ago. Isn't that right?'

'I'm not sure, madam, but that is certainly possible.'

Then, lowering her voice, Mrs Wakefield had said: 'But tell me, Stevens, what was this Lord Darlington like? Presumably you must have worked for him.'

'I didn't, madam, no.'

'Oh, I thought you did. I wonder why I thought that.'

Mrs Wakefield turned back to the arch and putting her hand to it, said: 'So we don't know for certain then. Still, it looks to me like it's mock. Very skilful, but mock.'

It is possible I might have quickly forgotten this exchange; however, following the Wakefields' departure, I took in afternoon tea to Mr Farraday in the drawing room and noticed he was in a rather preoccupied mood. After an initial silence, he said:

'You know, Stevens, Mrs Wakefield wasn't as impressed with this house as I believe she ought to have been.'

'Is that so, sir?'

'In fact, she seemed to think I was exaggerating the pedigree of this place. That I was making it up about all these features going back centuries.'

‘Indeed, sir?’

‘She kept asserting everything was “mock” this and “mock” that. She even thought you were “mock”, Stevens.’

‘Indeed, sir?’

‘Indeed, Stevens. I’d told her you were the real thing. A real old English butler. That you’d been in this house for over thirty years, serving a real English lord. But Mrs Wakefield contradicted me on this point. In fact, she contradicted me with great confidence.’

‘Is that so, sir?’

‘Mrs Wakefield, Stevens, was convinced you never worked here until I hired you. In fact, she seemed to be under the impression she’d had that from your own lips. Made me look pretty much a fool, as you can imagine.’

‘It’s most regrettable, sir.’

‘I mean to say, Stevens, this *is* a genuine grand old English house, isn’t it? That’s what I paid for. And you’re a genuine old-fashioned English butler, not just some waiter pretending to be one. You’re the real thing, aren’t you? That’s what I wanted, isn’t that what I have?’

‘I venture to say you do, sir.’

‘Then can you explain to me what Mrs Wakefield is saying? It’s a big mystery to me.’

‘It is possible I may well have given the lady a slightly misleading picture concerning my career, sir. I do apologize if this caused embarrassment.’

‘I’ll say it caused embarrassment. Those people have now got me down for a braggart and a liar. Anyway, what do you mean, you may have given her a “slightly misleading picture”?’

‘I’m very sorry, sir. I had no idea I might cause you such embarrassment.’

‘But dammit, Stevens, why did you tell her such a tale?’

I considered the situation for a moment, then said: ‘I’m very sorry, sir. But it is to do with the ways of this country.’

‘What are you talking about, man?’

‘I mean to say, sir, that it is not customary in England for an employee to discuss his past employers.’

‘OK, Stevens, so you don’t wish to divulge past confidences. But does that extend to you actually denying having worked for anyone other than me?’

‘It does seem a little extreme when you put it that way, sir. But it has often been considered desirable for employees to give such an impression. If I may put it this way, sir, it is a little akin to the custom as regards marriages. If a divorced lady were present in the company of her second husband, it is often thought desirable not to allude to the original marriage at all. There is a similar custom as regards our profession, sir.’

‘Well, I only wish I’d known about your custom before, Stevens,’ my employer said, leaning back in his chair. ‘It certainly made me look like a chump.’

I believe I realized even at the time that my explanation to Mr Farraday - though, of course, not entirely devoid of truth - was woefully inadequate. But when one has so much else to think about, it is easy not to give such matters a great deal of attention, and so I did, indeed, put the whole episode out of my mind for some time. But now, recalling it here in the calm that surrounds this pond, there seems little doubt that my conduct towards Mrs Wakefield that day has an obvious relation to what has just taken place this afternoon.

Of course, there are many people these days who have a lot of foolish things to say about Lord Darlington, and it

may be that you are under the impression I am somehow embarrassed or ashamed of my association with his lordship, and it is this that lies behind such conduct. Then let me make it clear that nothing could be further from the truth. The great majority of what one hears said about his lordship today is, in any case, utter nonsense, based on an almost complete ignorance of the facts. Indeed, it seems to me that my odd conduct can be very plausibly explained in terms of my wish to avoid any possibility of hearing any further such nonsense concerning his lordship; that is to say, I have chosen to tell white lies in both instances as the simplest means of avoiding unpleasantness. This does seem a very plausible explanation the more I think about it; for it is true, nothing vexes me more these days than to hear this sort of nonsense being repeated. Let me say that Lord Darlington was a gentleman of great moral stature - a stature to dwarf most of these persons you will find talking this sort of nonsense about him - and I will readily vouch that he remained that to the last. Nothing could be less accurate than to suggest that I regret my association with such a gentleman. Indeed, you will appreciate that to have served his lordship at Darlington Hall during those years was to come as close to the hub of this world's wheel as one such as I could ever have dreamt. I gave thirty-five years' service to Lord Darlington; one would surely not be unjustified in claiming that during those years, one was, in the truest terms, 'attached to a distinguished household'. In looking back over my career thus far, my chief satisfaction derives from what I achieved during those years, and I am today nothing but proud and grateful to have been given such a privilege.

DAY THREE – MORNING

Taunton, Somerset

I lodged last night in an inn named the Coach and Horses a little way outside the town of Taunton, Somerset. This being a thatch-roofed cottage by the roadside, it had looked a conspicuously attractive prospect from the Ford as I had approached in the last of the daylight. The landlord led me up a timber stairway to a small room, rather bare, but perfectly decent. When he inquired whether I had dined, I asked him to serve me with a sandwich in my room, which proved a perfectly satisfactory option as far as supper was concerned. But then as the evening drew on, I began to feel a little restless in my room, and in the end decided to descend to the bar below to try a little of the local cider.

There were five or six customers all gathered in a group around the bar – one guessed from their appearance they were agricultural people of one sort or another – but otherwise the room was empty. Acquiring a tankard of cider from the landlord, I seated myself at a table a little way away, intending to relax a little and collect my thoughts concerning the day. It soon became clear, however, that these local people were perturbed by my presence, feeling something of a need to show hospitality. Whenever there was a break in their conversation, one or the other of them would steal a glance in my direction as though trying to find it in himself to approach me. Eventually one raised his voice and said to me:

‘It seems you’ve let yourself in for a night upstairs here, sir.’

When I told him this was so, the speaker shook his head doubtfully and remarked: ‘You won’t get much of a sleep up there, sir. Not unless you’re fond of the sound of old Bob’

- he indicated the landlord - 'banging away down here right the way into the night. And then you'll get woken by his missus shouting at him right from the crack of dawn.'

Despite the landlord's protests, this caused loud laughter all round.

'Is that indeed so?' I said. And as I spoke, I was struck by the thought - the same thought as had struck me on numerous occasions of late in Mr Farraday's presence - that some sort of witty retort was required of me. Indeed, the local people were now observing a polite silence, awaiting my next remark. I thus searched my imagination and eventually declared:

'A local variation on the cock crow, no doubt.'

At first the silence continued, as though the local persons thought I intended to elaborate further. But then noticing the mirthful expression on my face, they broke into a laugh, though in a somewhat bemused fashion. With this, they returned to their previous conversation, and I exchanged no further words with them until exchanging good nights a little while later.

I had been rather pleased with my witticism when it had first come into my head, and I must confess I was slightly disappointed it had not been better received than it was. I was particularly disappointed, I suppose, because I have been devoting some time and effort over recent months to improving my skill in this very area. That is to say, I have been endeavouring to add this skill to my professional armoury so as to fulfil with confidence all Mr Farraday's expectations with respect to bantering.

For instance, I have of late taken to listening to the wireless in my room whenever I find myself with a few spare moments - on those occasions, say, when Mr Farraday is out for the evening. One programme I listen to is called *Twice a Week or More*, which is in fact broadcast three times each

week, and basically comprises two persons making humorous comments on a variety of topics raised by readers' letters. I have been studying this programme because the witticisms performed on it are always in the best of taste and, to my mind, of a tone not at all out of keeping with the sort of bantering Mr Farraday might expect on my part. Taking my cue from this programme, I have devised a simple exercise which I try to perform at least once a day; whenever an odd moment presents itself, I attempt to formulate three witticisms based on my immediate surroundings at that moment. Or, as a variation on this same exercise, I may attempt to think of three witticisms based on the events of the past hour.

You will perhaps appreciate then my disappointment concerning my witticism yesterday evening. At first, I had thought it possible its limited success was due to my not having spoken clearly enough. But then the possibility occurred to me, once I had retired, that I might actually have given these people offence. After all, it could easily have been understood that I was suggesting the landlord's wife resembled a cockerel - an intention that had not remotely entered my head at the time. This thought continued to torment me as I tried to sleep, and I had half a mind to make an apology to the landlord this morning. But his mood towards me as he served breakfast seemed perfectly cheerful and in the end I decided to let the matter rest.

But this small episode is as good an illustration as any of the hazards of uttering witticisms. By the very nature of a witticism, one is given very little time to assess its various possible repercussions before one is called to give voice to it, and one gravely risks uttering all manner of unsuitable things if one has not first acquired the necessary skill and experience. There is no reason to suppose this is not an area in which I will become proficient given time and practice, but, such are the dangers, I have decided it best, for the time being at least, not to attempt to discharge this

duty in respect of Mr Farraday until I have practised further.

In any case, I am sorry to report that what the local people had themselves offered last night as a witticism of sorts - the prediction that I would not have a good night owing to disturbances from below - proved only too true. The landlord's wife did not actually shout, but one could hear her talking incessantly both late into the night as she and her husband went about their tasks, and again from very early this morning. I was quite prepared to forgive the couple, however, for it was clear they were of diligent hard-working habits, and the noise, I am sure, was all attributable to this fact. Besides, of course, there had been the matter of my unfortunate remark. I thus gave no indication of having had a disturbed night when I thanked the landlord and took my leave to explore the market town of Taunton.

Perhaps I might have done better to have lodged here in this establishment where I now sit enjoying a pleasant mid-morning cup of tea. For indeed, the notice outside advertises not only 'teas, snacks and cakes', but also 'clean, quiet, comfortable rooms'. It is situated on the high street of Taunton, very close to the market square, a somewhat sunken building, its exterior characterized by heavy dark timber beams. I am at present sitting in its spacious tearoom, oak-panelled, with enough tables to accommodate, I would guess, two dozen people without a feeling of crowding. Two cheery young girls serve from behind a counter displaying a good selection of cakes and pastries. All in all, this is an excellent place to partake of morning tea, but surprisingly few of the inhabitants of Taunton seem to wish to avail themselves of it. At present, my only companions are two elderly ladies, sitting abreast one another at a table along the opposite wall, and a man - perhaps a retired farmer - at a table beside one of the large bay windows. I am unable to discern him clearly because the bright morning sunlight has for the moment reduced him to a silhouette. But I can see

him studying his newspaper, breaking off regularly to look up at the passers-by on the pavement outside. From the way he does this, I had thought at first that he was waiting for a companion, but it would seem he wishes merely to greet acquaintances as they pass by.

I am myself ensconced almost at the back wall, but even across the distance of this room, I can see clearly out into the sunlit street, and am able to make out on the pavement opposite a signpost pointing out several nearby destinations. One of these destinations is the village of Mursden. Perhaps 'Mursden' will ring a bell for you, as it did for me upon my first spotting it on the road atlas yesterday. In fact, I must say I was even tempted to make a slight detour from my planned route just to see the village. Mursden, Somerset, was where the firm of Giffen and Co. was once situated, and it was to Mursden one was required to dispatch one's order for a supply of Giffen's dark candles of polish, 'to be flaked, mixed into wax and applied by hand'. For some time, Giffen's was undoubtedly the finest silver polish available, and it was only the appearance of new chemical substances on the market shortly before the war that caused demand for this impressive product to decline.

As I remember, Giffen's appeared at the beginning of the twenties, and I am sure I am not alone in closely associating its emergence with that change of mood within our profession - that change which came to push the polishing of silver to the position of central importance it still by and large maintains today. This shift was, I believe, like so many other major shifts around this period, a generational matter; it was during these years that our generation of butlers 'came of age', and figures like Mr Marshall, in particular, played a crucial part in making silver-polishing so central. This is not to suggest, of course, that the polishing of silver - particularly those items that would appear at table - was not always regarded a serious duty. But it would not be unfair to suggest that many butlers of, say, my father's

generation did not consider the matter such a key one, and this is evidenced by the fact that in those days, the butler of a household rarely supervised the polishing of silver directly, being content to leave it to, say, the under-butler's whims, carrying out inspections only intermittently. It was Mr Marshall, it is generally agreed, who was the first to recognize the full significance of silver - namely, that no other objects in the house were likely to come under such intimate scrutiny from outsiders as was silver during a meal, and as such, it served as a public index of a house's standards. And Mr Marshall it was who first caused stupefaction amongst ladies and gentlemen visiting Charleville House with displays of silver polished to previously unimagined standards. Very soon, naturally, butlers up and down the country, under pressure from their employers, were focusing their minds on the question of silver-polishing. There quickly sprang up, I recall, various butlers, each claiming to have discovered methods by which they could surpass Mr Marshall - methods they made a great show of keeping secret, as though they were French chefs guarding their recipes. But I am confident - as I was then - that the sorts of elaborate and mysterious processes performed by someone like Mr Jack Neighbours had little or no discernible effect on the end result. As far as I was concerned, it was a simple enough matter: one used good polish, and one supervised closely. Giffen's was the polish ordered by all discerning butlers of the time, and if this product was used correctly, one had no fear of one's silver being second best to anybody's.

I am glad to be able to recall numerous occasions when the silver at Darlington Hall had a pleasing impact upon observers. For instance, I recall Lady Astor remarking, not without a certain bitterness, that our silver 'was probably unrivalled'. I recall also watching Mr George Bernard Shaw, the renowned playwright, at dinner one evening, examining closely the dessert spoon before him, holding it up to the light and comparing its surface to that of a nearby platter,

quite oblivious to the company around him. But perhaps the instance I recall with most satisfaction today concerns the night that a certain distinguished personage - a cabinet minister, shortly afterwards to become foreign secretary - paid a very 'off the record' visit to the house. In fact, now that the subsequent fruits of those visits have become well documented, there seems little reason not to reveal that I am talking of Lord Halifax.

As things turned out, that particular visit was simply the first of a whole series of such 'unofficial' meetings between Lord Halifax and the German Ambassador of that time, Herr Ribbentrop. But on that first night, Lord Halifax had arrived in a mood of great wariness; virtually his first words on being shown in were: 'Really, Darlington, I don't know what you've put me up to here. I know I shall be sorry.'

Herr Ribbentrop not being expected for a further hour or so, his lordship had suggested to his guest a tour of Darlington Hall - a strategy which had helped many a nervous visitor to relax. However, as I went about my business, all I could hear for some time was Lord Halifax, in various parts of the building, continuing to express his doubts about the evening ahead, and Lord Darlington trying in vain to reassure him. But then at one point I overheard Lord Halifax exclaiming: 'My goodness, Darlington, the silver in this house is a delight.' I was of course very pleased to hear this at the time, but what was for me the truly satisfying corollary to this episode came two or three days later, when Lord Darlington remarked to me: 'By the way, Stevens, Lord Halifax was jolly impressed with the silver the other night. Put him into a different frame of mind altogether.' These were - I recollect it clearly - his lordship's actual words and so it is not simply my fantasy that the state of the silver had made a small, but significant contribution towards the easing of relations between Lord Halifax and Herr Ribbentrop that evening.

It is probably apt at this point to say a few words concerning Herr Ribbentrop. It is, of course, generally accepted today that Herr Ribbentrop was a trickster: that it was Hitler's plan throughout those years to deceive England for as long as possible concerning his true intentions, and that Herr Ribbentrop's sole mission in our country was to orchestrate this deception. As I say, this is the commonly held view and I do not wish to differ with it here. It is, however, rather irksome to have to hear people talking today as though they were never for a moment taken in by Herr Ribbentrop - as though Lord Darlington was alone in believing Herr Ribbentrop an honourable gentleman and developing a working relationship with him. The truth is that Herr Ribbentrop was, throughout the thirties, a well-regarded figure, even a glamorous one, in the very best houses. Particularly around 1936 and 1937, I can recall all the talk in the servants' hall from visiting staff revolving around 'the German Ambassador', and it was clear from what was said that many of the most distinguished ladies and gentlemen in this country were quite enamoured of him. It is, as I say, irksome to have to hear the way these same people now talk of those times, and in particular, what some have said concerning his lordship. The great hypocrisy of these persons would be instantly obvious to you were you to see just a few of their own guest lists from those days; you would see then not only the extent to which Herr Ribbentrop dined at these same persons' tables, but that he often did so as guest of honour.

And then again, you will hear these same persons talking as though Lord Darlington did something unusual in receiving hospitality from the Nazis on the several trips he made to Germany during those years. I do not suppose they would speak quite so readily if, say, *The Times* were to publish even one of the guest lists of the banquets given by the Germans around the time of the Nuremberg Rally. The fact is, the most established, respected ladies and gentlemen in England were availing themselves of the hospitality of the German leaders,

and I can vouch at first hand that the great majority of these persons were returning with nothing but praise and admiration for their hosts. Anyone who implies that Lord Darlington was liaising covertly with a known enemy is just conveniently forgetting the true climate of those times.

It needs to be said too what salacious nonsense it is to claim that Lord Darlington was anti-Semitic, or that he had close association with organizations like the British Union of Fascists. Such claims can only arise from complete ignorance of the sort of gentleman his lordship was. Lord Darlington came to abhor anti-Semitism; I heard him express his disgust on several separate occasions when confronted with anti-Semitic sentiments. And the allegation that his lordship never allowed Jewish people to enter the house or any Jewish staff to be employed is utterly unfounded - except, perhaps, in respect to one very minor episode in the thirties which has been blown up out of all proportion. And as for the British Union of Fascists, I can only say that any talk linking his lordship to such people is quite ridiculous. Sir Oswald Mosley, the gentleman who led the 'blackshirts', was a visitor at Darlington Hall on, I would say, three occasions at the most, and these visits all took place during the early days of that organization before it had betrayed its true nature. Once the ugliness of the blackshirts' movement became apparent - and let it be said his lordship was quicker than most in noticing it - Lord Darlington had no further association with such people.

In any case, such organizations were a complete irrelevance to the heart of political life in this country. Lord Darlington, you will understand, was the sort of gentleman who cared to occupy himself only with what was at the true centre of things, and the figures he gathered together in his efforts over those years were as far away from such unpleasant fringe groups as one could imagine. Not only were they eminently respectable, these were figures who held real influence in British life: politicians, diplomats,

military men, clergy. Indeed, some of the personages were Jewish, and this fact alone should demonstrate how nonsensical is much of what was said about his lordship.

But I drift. I was in fact discussing the silver, and how Lord Halifax had been suitably impressed on the evening of his meeting with Herr Ribbentrop at Darlington Hall. Let me make clear, I was not for a moment suggesting that what had initially threatened to be a disappointing evening for my employer had turned into a triumphant one solely on account of the silver. But then, as I indicated, Lord Darlington himself suggested that the silver might have been at least a small factor in the change in his guest's mood that evening, and it is perhaps not absurd to think back to such instances with a glow of satisfaction.

There are certain members of our profession who would have it that it ultimately makes little difference what sort of employer one serves; who believe that the sort of idealism prevalent amongst our generation - namely the notion that we butlers should aspire to serve those great gentlemen who further the cause of humanity - is just high-flown talk with no grounding in reality. It is of course noticeable that the individuals who express such scepticism invariably turn out to be the most mediocre of our profession - those who know they lack the ability to progress to any position of note and who aspire only to drag as many down to their own level as possible - and one is hardly tempted to take such opinions seriously. But for all that, it is still satisfying to be able to point to instances in one's career that highlight very clearly how wrong such people are. Of course, one seeks to provide a general, sustained service to one's employer, the value of which could never be reduced to a number of specific instances - such as that concerning Lord Halifax. But what I am saying is that it is these sorts of instances which over time come to symbolize an irrefutable fact; namely that one has had the privilege of practising one's profession at the very fulcrum of great affairs. And one has a right,

perhaps, to feel a satisfaction those content to serve mediocre employers will never know - the satisfaction of being able to say with some reason that one's efforts, in however modest a way, comprise a contribution to the course of history.

But perhaps one should not be looking back to the past so much. After all, I still have before me many more years of service I am required to give. And not only is Mr Farraday a most excellent employer, he is an American gentleman to whom, surely, one has a special duty to show all that is best about service in England. It is essential, then, to keep one's attention focused on the present; to guard against any complacency creeping in on account of what one may have achieved in the past. For it has to be admitted, over these last few months, things have not been all they might at Darlington Hall. A number of small errors have surfaced of late, including that incident last April relating to the silver. Most fortunately, it was not an occasion on which Mr Farraday had guests, but even so, it was a moment of genuine embarrassment to me.

It had occurred at breakfast one morning, and for his part, Mr Farraday - either through kindness, or because being an American he failed to recognize the extent of the shortcoming - did not utter one word of complaint to me throughout the whole episode. He had, upon seating himself, simply picked up a fork, examined it for a brief second, touching the prongs with a fingertip, then turned his attention to the morning headlines. The whole gesture had been carried out in an absent-minded sort of way, but of course, I had spotted the occurrence and had advanced swiftly to remove the offending item. I may in fact have done so a little too swiftly on account of my disturbance, for Mr Farraday gave a small start, muttering: 'Ah, Stevens.'

I had continued to proceed swiftly out of the room, returning without undue delay bearing a satisfactory fork. As I advanced upon the table - and a Mr Farraday now apparently

absorbed in his newspaper - it occurred to me I might slip the fork on to the tablecloth quietly without disturbing my employer's reading. However, the possibility had already occurred to me that Mr Farraday was simply feigning indifference in order to minimize my embarrassment, and such a surreptitious delivery could be interpreted as complacency on my part towards my error - or worse, an attempt to cover it up. This was why, then, I decided it appropriate to put the fork down on to the table with a certain emphasis, causing my employer to start a second time, look up and mutter again: 'Ah, Stevens.'

Errors such as these which have occurred over the last few months have been, naturally enough, injurious to one's self-respect, but then there is no reason to believe them to be the signs of anything more sinister than a staff shortage. Not that a staff shortage is not significant in itself; but if Miss Kenton were indeed to return to Darlington Hall, such little slips, I am sure, would become a thing of the past. Of course, one has to remember there is nothing stated specifically in Miss Kenton's letter - which, incidentally, I reread last night up in my room before putting out the light - to indicate unambiguously her desire to return to her former position. In fact, one has to accept the distinct possibility that one may have previously - perhaps through wishful thinking of a professional kind - exaggerated what evidence there was regarding such a desire on her part. For I must say I was a little surprised last night at how difficult it was actually to point to any passage which clearly demonstrated her wish to return.

But then again, it seems hardly worthwhile to speculate greatly on such matters now when one knows one will, in all likelihood, be talking face to face with Miss Kenton within forty-eight hours. Still, I must say, I did spend some long minutes turning those passages over in my mind last night as I lay there in the darkness, listening to the sounds from below of the landlord and his wife clearing up for the night.

DAY THREE - EVENING

Moscombe, near Tavistock, Devon

I feel I should perhaps return a moment to the question of his lordship's attitude to Jewish persons, since this whole issue of anti-Semitism, I realize, has become a rather sensitive one these days. In particular, let me clear up this matter of a supposed bar against Jewish persons on the staff at Darlington Hall. Since this allegation falls very directly into my own realm, I am able to refute it with absolute authority. There were many Jewish persons on my staff throughout all my years with his lordship, and let me say furthermore that they were never treated in any way differently on account of their race. One really cannot guess the reason for these absurd allegations - unless, quite ludicrously, they originate from that brief, entirely insignificant few weeks in the early thirties when Mrs Carolyn Barnet came to wield an unusual influence over his lordship.

Mrs Barnet, the widow of Mr Charles Barnet, was at that point in her forties - a very handsome, some might say glamorous lady. She had a reputation for being formidably intelligent, and in those days one often tended to hear of how she had humiliated this or that learned gentleman at dinner over some important contemporary issue. For much of the summer of 1932, she was a regular presence at Darlington Hall, she and his lordship often spending hour after hour deep in conversation, typically of a social or political nature. And it was Mrs Barnet, as I recall, who took his lordship on those 'guided inspections' of the poorest areas of London's East End, during which his lordship visited the actual homes of many of the families suffering the desperate plight of those years. That is to say, Mrs Barnet, in all likelihood, made some sort of contribution to Lord

Darlington's developing concern for the poor of our country and as such, her influence cannot be said to have been entirely negative. But she was too, of course, a member of Sir Oswald Mosley's 'blackshirts' organization, and the very little contact his lordship ever had with Sir Oswald occurred during those few weeks of that summer. And it was during those same weeks that those entirely untypical incidents took place at Darlington Hall which must, one supposes, have provided what flimsy basis exists for these absurd allegations.

I call them 'incidents' but some of these were extremely minor. For instance, I recall overhearing at dinner one evening, when a particular newspaper had been mentioned, his lordship remarking: 'Oh, you mean that Jewish propaganda sheet.' And then on another occasion around that time, I remember his instructing me to cease giving donations to a particular local charity which regularly came to the door on the grounds that the management committee was 'more or less homogeneously Jewish'. I have remembered these remarks because they truly surprised me at the time, his lordship never previously having shown any antagonism whatsoever towards the Jewish race.

Then, of course, came that afternoon his lordship called me into his study. Initially, he made rather general conversation, inquiring if all was well around the house and so on. Then he said:

'I've been doing a great deal of thinking, Stevens. A great deal of thinking. And I've reached my conclusion. We cannot have Jews on the staff here at Darlington Hall.'

'Sir?'

'It's for the good of this house, Stevens. In the interests of the guests we have staying here. I've looked into this carefully, Stevens, and I'm letting you know my conclusion.'

‘Very well, sir.’

‘Tell me, Stevens, we have a few on the staff at the moment, don’t we? Jews, I mean.’

‘I believe two of the present staff members would fall into that category, sir.’

‘Ah.’ His lordship paused for a moment, staring out of his window. ‘Of course, you’ll have to let them go.’

‘I beg your pardon, sir?’

‘It’s regrettable, Stevens, but we have no choice. There’s the safety and well-being of my guests to consider. Let me assure you, I’ve looked into this matter and thought it through thoroughly. It’s all in our best interests.’

The two staff members concerned were, in fact, both housemaids. It would hardly have been proper, then, to have taken any action without first informing Miss Kenton of the situation, and I resolved to do just this that same evening when I met her for cocoa in her parlour. I should perhaps say a few words here concerning these meetings in her parlour at the end of each day. These were, let me say, overwhelmingly professional in tone - though naturally we might discuss some informal topics from time to time. Our reason for instituting such meetings was simple: we had found that our respective lives were often so busy, several days could go by without our having an opportunity to exchange even the most basic of information. Such a situation, we recognized, seriously jeopardized the smooth running of operations, and to spend fifteen minutes or so together at the end of the day in the privacy of Miss Kenton’s parlour was the most straightforward remedy. I must reiterate, these meetings were predominantly professional in character; that is to say, for instance, we might talk over the plans for a forthcoming event, or else discuss how a new recruit was settling in.

In any case, to return to my thread, you will appreciate I was not unperturbed at the prospect of telling Miss Kenton

I was about to dismiss two of her maids. Indeed, the maids had been perfectly satisfactory employees and - I may as well say this since the Jewish issue has become so sensitive of late - my every instinct opposed the idea of their dismissal. Nevertheless, my duty in this instance was quite clear, and as I saw it, there was nothing to be gained at all in irresponsibly displaying such personal doubts. It was a difficult task, but as such, one that demanded to be carried out with dignity. And so it was that when I finally raised the matter towards the end of our conversation that evening, I did so in as concise and businesslike a way as possible, concluding with the words:

‘I will speak to the two employees in my pantry tomorrow morning at ten thirty. I would be grateful then, Miss Kenton, if you would send them along. I leave it entirely to yourself whether or not you inform them beforehand as to the nature of what I am going to say to them.’

At this point, Miss Kenton seemed to have nothing to say in response. So I continued: ‘Well, Miss Kenton, thank you for the cocoa. It’s high time I was turning in. Another busy day tomorrow.’

It was then Miss Kenton said: ‘Mr Stevens, I cannot quite believe my ears. Ruth and Sarah have been members of my staff for over six years now. I trust them absolutely and indeed they trust me. They have served this house excellently.’

‘I am sure that is so, Miss Kenton. However, we must not allow sentiment to creep into our judgement. Now really, I must bid you good night ...’

‘Mr Stevens, I am outraged that you can sit there and utter what you have just done as though you were discussing orders for the larder. I simply cannot believe it. You are saying Ruth and Sarah are to be dismissed on the grounds that they are Jewish?’

‘Miss Kenton, I have just this moment explained the situation to you fully. His lordship has made his decision and there is nothing for you and I to debate over.’

‘Does it not occur to you, Mr Stevens, that to dismiss Ruth and Sarah on these grounds would be simply - *wrong?* I will not stand for such things. I will not work in a house in which such things can occur.’

‘Miss Kenton, I will ask you not to excite yourself and to conduct yourself in a manner befitting your position. This is a very straightforward matter. If his lordship wishes these particular contracts to be discontinued, then there is little more to be said.’

‘I am warning you, Mr Stevens, I will not continue to work in such a house. If my girls are dismissed, I will leave also.’

‘Miss Kenton, I am surprised to find you reacting in this manner. Surely I don’t have to remind you that our professional duty is not to our own foibles and sentiments, but to the wishes of our employer.’

‘I am telling you, Mr Stevens, if you dismiss my girls tomorrow, it will be wrong, a sin as any sin ever was one and I will not continue to work in such a house.’

‘Miss Kenton, let me suggest to you that you are hardly well placed to be passing judgements of such a high and mighty nature. The fact is, the world of today is a very complicated and treacherous place. There are many things you and I are simply not in a position to understand concerning, say, the nature of Jewry. Whereas his lordship, I might venture, is somewhat better placed to judge what is for the best. Now, Miss Kenton, I really must retire. I thank you again for the cocoa. Ten thirty tomorrow morning. Send the two employees concerned, please.’

It was evident from the moment the two maids stepped into my pantry the following morning that Miss Kenton had already

spoken to them, for they both came in sobbing. I explained the situation to them as briefly as possible, underlining that their work had been satisfactory and that they would, accordingly, receive good references. As I recall, neither of them said anything of note throughout the whole interview, which lasted perhaps three or four minutes, and they left sobbing just as they had arrived.

Miss Kenton was extremely cold towards me for some days following the dismissal of the employees. Indeed, at times she was quite rude to me, even in the presence of staff. And although we continued our habit of meeting for cocoa in the evening, the sessions tended to be brief and unfriendly. When there had been no sign of her behaviour abating after a fortnight or so, I think you will understand that I started to become a little impatient. I thus said to her during one of our cocoa sessions, in an ironic tone of voice:

‘Miss Kenton, I’d rather expected you to have handed in your notice by now,’ accompanying this with a light laugh. I did, I suppose, hope that she might finally relent a little and make some conciliatory response or other, allowing us once and for all to put the whole episode behind us. Miss Kenton, however, simply looked at me sternly and said:

‘I still have every intention of handing in my notice, Mr Stevens. It is merely that I have been so busy, I have not had time to see to the matter.’

This did, I must admit, make me a little concerned for a time that she was serious about her threat. But then as week followed week, it became clear that there was no question of her leaving Darlington Hall, and as the atmosphere between us gradually thawed, I suppose I tended to tease her every now and again by reminding her of her threatened resignation. For instance, if we were discussing some future large occasion to be held at the house, I might put in: ‘That is, Miss Kenton, assuming you are still with us at that stage.’ Even months after the event, such remarks still tended to make Miss

Kenton go quiet - though by this stage, I fancy, this was due more to embarrassment than anger.

Eventually, of course, the matter came to be, by and large, forgotten. But I remember it coming up one last time well over a year after the dismissal of the two maids.

It was his lordship who initially revived the matter one afternoon when I was serving his tea in the drawing room. By then, Mrs Carolyn Barnet's days of influence over his lordship were well over - indeed, the lady had ceased to be a visitor at Darlington Hall altogether. It is worth pointing out, furthermore, that his lordship had by that time severed all links with the 'blackshirts', having witnessed the true, ugly nature of that organization.

'Oh, Stevens,' he said to me. 'I've been meaning to say to you. About that business last year. About the Jewish maids. You recall the matter?'

'Indeed, sir.'

'I suppose there's no way of tracing them now, is there? It was wrong what happened and one would like to recompense them somehow.'

'I will certainly look into the matter, sir. But I am not at all certain it will be possible to ascertain their whereabouts at this stage.'

'See what you can do. It was wrong, what occurred.'

I assumed this exchange with his lordship would be of some interest to Miss Kenton, and I decided it only proper to mention it to her - even at the risk of getting her angry again. As it turned out, my doing so on that foggy afternoon I encountered her in the summerhouse produced curious results.

I recall a mist starting to set in as I crossed the lawn that afternoon. I was making my way up to the summerhouse for the purpose of clearing away the remains of his lordship's tea

there with some guests a little while earlier. I can recall spotting from some distance - long before reaching the steps where my father had once fallen - Miss Kenton's figure moving about inside the summerhouse. When I entered she had seated herself on one of the wicker chairs scattered around its interior, evidently engaged in some needlework. On closer inspection, I saw she was performing repairs to a cushion. I went about gathering up the various items of crockery from amidst the plants and the cane furniture, and as I did so, I believe we exchanged a few pleasantries, perhaps discussed one or two professional matters. For the truth was, it was extremely refreshing to be out in the summerhouse after many continuous days in the main building and neither of us was inclined to hurry with our tasks. Indeed, although one could not see out far that day on account of the encroaching mist, and the daylight too was rapidly fading by this stage, obliging Miss Kenton to hold her needlework up to the last of it, I remember our often breaking off from our respective activities simply to gaze out at the views around us. In fact, I was looking out over the lawn to where the mist was thickening down around the poplar trees planted along the cart-track, when I finally introduced the topic of the previous year's dismissals. Perhaps a little predictably, I did so by saying:

'I was just thinking earlier, Miss Kenton. It's rather funny to remember now, but you know, only this time a year ago, you were still insisting you were going to resign. It rather amused me to think of it.' I gave a laugh, but behind me Miss Kenton remained silent. When I finally turned to look at her, she was gazing through the glass at the great expanse of fog outside.

'You probably have no idea, Mr Stevens,' she said eventually, 'how seriously I really thought of leaving this house. I felt so strongly about what happened. Had I been anyone worthy of any respect at all, I dare say I would have left Darlington Hall long ago.' She paused for a while, and

I turned my gaze back out to the poplar trees down in the distance. Then she continued in a tired voice: 'It was cowardice, Mr Stevens. Simple cowardice. Where could I have gone? I have no family. Only my aunt. I love her dearly, but I can't live with her for a day without feeling my whole life is wasting away. I did tell myself, of course, I would soon find myself some new situation. But I was so frightened, Mr Stevens. Whenever I thought of leaving, I just saw myself going out there and finding nobody who knew or cared about me. There, that's all my high principles amount to. I feel so ashamed of myself. But I just couldn't leave, Mr Stevens, I just couldn't bring myself to leave.'

Miss Kenton paused again and seemed to be deep in thought. I thus thought it opportune to relate at this point, as precisely as possible, what had taken place earlier between myself and Lord Darlington. I proceeded to do so and concluded by saying:

'What's done can hardly be undone. But it is at least a great comfort to hear his lordship declare so unequivocally that it was all a terrible misunderstanding. I just thought you'd like to know, Miss Kenton, since I recall you were as distressed by the episode as I was.'

'I'm sorry, Mr Stevens,' Miss Kenton said behind me in an entirely new voice, as though she had just been jolted from a dream, 'I don't understand you.' Then as I turned to her, she went on: 'As I recall, you thought it was only right and proper that Ruth and Sarah be sent packing. You were positively cheerful about it.'

'Now really, Miss Kenton, that is quite incorrect and unfair. The whole matter caused me great concern, great concern indeed. It is hardly the sort of thing I like to see happen in this house.'

'Then why, Mr Stevens, did you not tell me so at the time?'

I gave a laugh, but for a moment was rather at a loss for an answer. Before I could formulate one, Miss Kenton put down her sewing and said:

‘Do you realize, Mr Stevens, how much it would have meant to me if you had thought to share your feelings last year? You knew how upset I was when my girls were dismissed. Do you realize how much it would have helped me? Why, Mr Stevens, why, why, why do you always have to *pretend*?’

I gave another laugh at the ridiculous turn the conversation had suddenly taken. ‘Really, Miss Kenton,’ I said, ‘I’m not sure I know what you mean. Pretend? Why, really ...’

‘I suffered so much over Ruth and Sarah leaving us. And I suffered all the more because I believed I was alone.’

‘Really, Miss Kenton ...’ I picked up the tray on which I had gathered together the used crockery. ‘Naturally, one disapproved of the dismissals. One would have thought that quite self-evident.’

She did not say anything, and as I was leaving I glanced back towards her. She was again gazing out at the view, but it had by this point grown so dark inside the summerhouse, all I could see of her was her profile outlined against a pale and empty background. I excused myself and proceeded to make my exit.

Now that I have recalled this episode of the dismissing of the Jewish employees, I am reminded of what could, I suppose, be called a curious corollary to that whole affair: namely, the arrival of the housemaid called Lisa. That is to say, we were obliged to find replacements for the two dismissed Jewish maids, and this Lisa turned out to be one of them.

This young woman had applied for the vacancy with the most dubious of references, which spelt out to any experienced butler that she had left her previous situation

under something of a cloud. Moreover, when Miss Kenton and I questioned her, it became clear that she had never remained in any position for longer than a few weeks. In general, her whole attitude suggested to me that she was quite unsuitable for employment at Darlington Hall. To my surprise, however, once we had finished interviewing the girl, Miss Kenton began to insist we take her on. 'I see much potential in this girl,' she continued to say in the face of my protests.

'She will be directly under my supervision and I will see to it she proves good.'

I recall we became locked in disagreement for some time, and it was perhaps only the fact that the matter of the dismissed maids was so recent in our minds that I did not hold out as strongly as I might against Miss Kenton. In any case, the result was that I finally gave way, albeit by saying:

'Miss Kenton, I hope you realize that the responsibility for taking on this girl rests squarely with yourself. There is no doubt as far as I am concerned that at this present moment she is far from adequate to be a member of our staff. I am only allowing her to join on the understanding that you will personally oversee her development.'

'The girl will turn out well, Mr Stevens. You will see.'

And to my astonishment, during the weeks that followed, the young girl did indeed make progress at a remarkable rate. Her attitude seemed to improve by the day, and even her manner of walking and going about tasks - which during the first days had been so slovenly that one had to avert one's eyes - improved dramatically.

As the weeks went on, and the girl appeared miraculously to have been transformed into a useful member of staff, Miss Kenton's triumph was obvious. She seemed to take particular pleasure in assigning Lisa some task or other that required a little extra responsibility, and if I were watching, she

would be sure to try and catch my eye with her rather mocking expression. And the exchange we had that night in Miss Kenton's parlour over cocoa was fairly typical of the sort of conversation we tended to have on the topic of Lisa.

'No doubt, Mr Stevens,' she said to me, 'you will be extremely disappointed to hear Lisa has still not made any real mistake worth speaking of.'

'I'm not disappointed at all, Miss Kenton. I'm very pleased for you and for all of us. I will admit, you have had some modest success regarding the girl thus far.'

'Modest success! And look at that smile on your face, Mr Stevens. It always appears when I mention Lisa. That tells an interesting story in itself. A very interesting story indeed.'

'Oh, really, Miss Kenton. And may I ask what exactly?'

'It is very interesting, Mr Stevens. Very interesting you should have been so pessimistic about her. Because Lisa is a pretty girl, no doubt about it. And I've noticed you have a curious aversion to pretty girls being on the staff.'

'You know perfectly well you are talking nonsense, Miss Kenton.'

'Ah, but I've noticed it, Mr Stevens. You do not like pretty girls to be on the staff. Might it be that our Mr Stevens fears distraction? Can it be that our Mr Stevens is flesh and blood after all and cannot fully trust himself?'

'Really, Miss Kenton. If I thought there was one modicum of sense in what you are saying I might bother to engage with you in this discussion. As it is, I think I shall simply place my thoughts elsewhere while you chatter away.'

'Ah, but then why is that guilty smile still on your face, Mr Stevens?'

‘It is not a guilty smile at all, Miss Kenton. I am slightly amused by your astonishing capacity to talk nonsense, that is all.’

‘It *is* a guilty little smile you have on, Mr Stevens. And I’ve noticed how you can hardly bear to look at Lisa. Now it is beginning to become very clear why you objected so strongly to her.’

‘My objections were extremely solid, Miss Kenton, as you very well know. The girl was completely unsuitable when she first came to us.’

Now of course, you must understand we would never have carried on in such a vein within the hearing of staff members. But just around that time, our cocoa evenings, while maintaining their essentially professional character, often tended to allow room for a little harmless talk of this sort - which did much, one should say, to relieve the many tensions produced by a hard day.

Lisa had been with us for some eight or nine months - and I had largely forgotten her existence by this point - when she vanished from the house together with the second footman. Now, of course, such things are simply part and parcel of life for any butler of a large household. They are intensely irritating, but one learns to accept them. In fact, as far as these sorts of ‘moonlight’ departures were concerned, this was among the more civilized. Aside from a little food, the couple had taken nothing that belonged to the house, and furthermore, both parties had left letters. The second footman, whose name I no longer recall, left a short note addressed to me, saying something like: ‘Please do not judge us too harshly. We are in love and are going to be married.’ Lisa had written a much longer note addressed to ‘the Housekeeper’, and it was this letter Miss Kenton brought into my pantry on the morning following their disappearance. There were, as I recall, many misspelt, ill-formed sentences about how much in love the couple were, how

wonderful the second footman was, and how marvellous the future was that awaited them both. One line, as I recall it, read something to the effect of: 'We don't have money but who cares we have love and who wants anything else we've got one another that's all anyone can ever want.' Despite the letter being three pages long, there was no mention of any gratitude towards Miss Kenton for the great care she had given the girl, nor was there any note of regret at letting all of us down.

Miss Kenton was noticeably upset. All the while I was running my eye over the young woman's letter, she sat there at the table before me, looking down at her hands. In fact - and this strikes one as rather curious - I cannot really recall seeing her more bereft than on that morning. When I put the letter down on the table, she said:

'So, Mr Stevens, it seems you were right and I was wrong.'

'Miss Kenton, this is nothing to upset yourself over,' I said. 'These things happen. There really is little the likes of us can ever do to prevent these things.'

'I was at fault, Mr Stevens. I accept it. You were right all along, as ever, and I was wrong.'

'Miss Kenton, I really cannot agree with you. You did wonders with that girl. What you managed with her proved many times over that it was in fact I who was in error. Really, Miss Kenton, what has happened now might have happened with any employee. You did remarkably well with her. You may have every reason to feel let down by her, but no reason at all to feel any responsibility on your own part.'

Miss Kenton continued to look very dejected. She said quietly: 'You're very kind to say so, Mr Stevens. I'm very grateful.' Then she sighed tiredly and said: 'She's so foolish. She might have had a real career in front of her.'

She had ability. So many young women like her throw away their chances, and all for what?’

We both looked at the notepaper on the table between us, and then Miss Kenton turned her gaze away with an air of annoyance.

‘Indeed,’ I said. ‘Such a waste, as you say.’

‘So foolish. And the girl is bound to be let down. And she had a good life ahead of her if only she’d persevered. In a year or two, I could have had her ready to take on a housekeeper’s post in some small residence. Perhaps you think that farfetched, Mr Stevens, but then look how far I came with her in a few months. And now she’s thrown it all away. All for nothing.’

‘It really is most foolish of her.’

I had started to gather up the sheets of notepaper before me, thinking I might file them away for reference. But then as I was doing so, I became a little uncertain as to whether Miss Kenton had intended me to keep the letter, or if she herself wished to do so, and I placed the pages back down on the table between the two of us. Miss Kenton, in any case, seemed far away.

‘She’s bound to be let down,’ she said again. ‘So foolish.’

But I see I have become somewhat lost in these old memories. This had never been my intention, but then it is probably no bad thing if in doing so I have at least avoided becoming unduly preoccupied with the events of this evening – which I trust have now finally concluded themselves. For these last few hours, it must be said, have been rather trying ones.

I find myself now in the attic room of this small cottage belonging to Mr and Mrs Taylor. That is to say, this is a private residence; this room, made so kindly available to me tonight by the Taylors, was once occupied by their eldest

son, now long grown and living in Exeter. It is a room dominated by heavy beams and rafters, and the floorboards have no carpet or rug to cover them, and yet the atmosphere is surprisingly cosy. And it is clear Mrs Taylor has not only made up the bed for me, she has also tidied and cleaned; for aside from a few cobwebs near the rafters, there is little to reveal that this room has been unoccupied for many years. As for Mr and Mrs Taylor themselves, I have ascertained that they ran the village green grocery here from the twenties until their retirement three years ago. They are kind people, and though I have on more than one occasion tonight offered remuneration for their hospitality, they will not hear of it.

The fact that I am now here, the fact I came to be to all intents and purposes at the mercy of Mr and Mrs Taylor's generosity on this night, is attributable to one foolish, infuriatingly simple oversight: namely, I allowed the Ford to run out of petrol. What with this and the trouble yesterday concerning the lack of water in the radiator, it would not be unreasonable for an observer to believe such general disorganization endemic to my nature. It may be pointed out, of course, that as far as long-distance motoring is concerned, I am something of a novice, and such simple oversights are only to be expected. And yet, when one remembers that good organization and foresight are qualities that lie at the very heart of one's profession, it is hard to avoid the feeling that one has, somehow, let oneself down again.

But it is true, I had been considerably distracted during the last hour or so of motoring prior to the petrol running out. I had planned to lodge the night in the town of Tavistock, where I arrived a little before eight o'clock. At the town's main inn, however, I was informed all the rooms were occupied on account of a local agricultural fair. Several other establishments were suggested to me, but though I called at each, I was met every time with the same apology. Finally, at a boarding house on the edge of the town, the

landlady suggested I motor on several miles to a roadside inn run by a relative of hers - which, she assured me, was bound to have vacancies, being too far out of Tavistock to be affected by the fair.

She had given me thorough directions, which had seemed clear enough at the time, and it is impossible to say now whose fault it was that I subsequently failed to find any trace of this roadside establishment. Instead, after fifteen minutes or so of motoring, I found myself out on a long road curving across bleak, open moorland. On either side of me were what appeared to be fields of marsh, and a mist was rolling across my path. To my left, I could see the last glow of the sunset. The skyline was broken here and there by the shapes of barns and farmhouses some way away over the fields, but otherwise, I appeared to have left behind all signs of community.

I recall turning the Ford round at about this stage and doubling back some distance in search of a turning I had passed earlier. But when I found it, this new road proved, if anything, more desolate than the one I had left. For a time, I drove in near-darkness between high hedges, then found the road beginning to climb steeply. I had by now given up hope of finding the roadside inn and had set my mind on motoring on till I reached the next town or village and seeking shelter there. It would be easy enough, so I was reasoning to myself, to resume my planned route first thing in the morning. It was at this point, half-way up the hill road, that the engine stuttered and I noticed for the first time that my petrol was gone.

The Ford continued its climb for several more yards, then came to a halt. When I got out to assess my situation, I could see I had only a few more minutes of daylight left to me. I was standing on a steep road bound in by trees and hedgerows; much further up the hill, I could see a break in the hedges where a wide barred gate stood outlined against the sky. I began to make my way up to it, supposing that a

view from this gate would give me some sense of my bearings; perhaps I had even hoped to see a farmhouse near by where I could gain prompt assistance. I was a little disconcerted then by what eventually greeted my eyes. On the other side of the gate a field sloped down very steeply so that it fell out of vision only twenty yards or so in front of me. Beyond the crest of the field, some way off in the distance - perhaps a good mile or so as the crow would fly - was a small village. I could make out through the mist a church steeple, and around about it, clusters of dark-slatted roofs; here and there, wisps of white smoke were rising from chimneys. One has to confess, at that moment, to being overcome by a certain sense of discouragement. Of course, the situation was not by any means hopeless; the Ford was not damaged, simply out of fuel. A walk down to the village could be accomplished in a half-hour or so and there I could surely find accommodation and a can of petrol. And yet it was not a happy feeling to be up there on a lonely hill, looking over a gate at the lights coming on in a distant village, the daylight all but faded, and the mist growing ever thicker.

There was little to be gained in growing despondent, however. In any case, it would have been foolish to waste the few remaining minutes of daylight. I walked back down to the Ford where I packed a briefcase with some essential items. Then, arming myself with a bicycle lamp, which cast a surprisingly good beam, I went in search of a path by which I could descend to the village. But no such path offered itself, though I went some distance up the hill, a good way past my gate. Then when I sensed that the road had ceased to climb, but was beginning to curve slowly down in a direction *away* from the village - the lights of which I could glimpse regularly through the foliage - I was overcome again by a sense of discouragement. In fact, for a moment I wondered if my best strategy would not be to retrace my steps to the Ford and simply sit in it until another motorist came by. By then, however, it was very close to being dark, and I could see that if one were to attempt to hail a passing vehicle in

these circumstances, one might easily be taken for a highwayman or some such. Besides, not a single vehicle had passed since I had got out of the Ford; in fact, I could not really remember having seen another vehicle at all since leaving Tavistock. I resolved then to return as far as the gate, and from there, descend the field, walking in as direct a line as possible towards the lights of the village, regardless of whether or not there was a proper path.

It was not, in the end, too arduous a descent. A series of grazing fields, one after the next, led the way down to the village and by keeping close to the edge of each field as one descended, one could be ensured of reasonable walking. Only once, with the village very close, could I find no obvious way to gain access to the next field down, and I had to shine my bicycle lamp to and fro along the hedgerow obstructing me. Eventually, I discovered a small gap through which I proceeded to squeeze my person, but only at some cost to the shoulder of my jacket and the turn-ups of my trousers. The last few fields, furthermore, became increasingly muddy and I deliberately refrained from shining my lamp on to my shoes and turn-ups for fear of further discouragement.

By and by I found myself on a paved path going down into the village, and it was while descending this path that I met Mr Taylor, my kind host of this evening. He had emerged out of a turning a few yards in front of me, and had courteously waited for me to catch up, whereupon he had touched his cap and asked if he could be of any assistance to me. I had explained my position as succinctly as possible, adding that I would be most gratified to be guided towards a good inn. At this, Mr Taylor had shaken his head, saying: 'I'm afraid there's no inn as such in our village, sir. John Humphreys usually takes in travellers at the Crossed Keys, but he's having work done to the roof at the moment.' Before this distressing piece of information could have its full effect, however, Mr Taylor said: 'If you didn't mind roughing it a little, sir, we could offer you a room and a bed for the

night. It's nothing special, but the wife will see to it everything's clean and comfortable enough in a basic sort of way. '

I believe I uttered some words, perhaps in a rather half-hearted way, to the effect that I could not inconvenience them to such an extent. To which Mr Taylor had said: 'I tell you, sir, it would be an honour to have you. It's not often we get the likes of yourself passing through Moscombe. And quite honestly, sir, I don't know what else you could do at this hour. The wife would never forgive me if I were to let you away into the night. '

Thus it was that I came to accept the kind hospitality of Mr and Mrs Taylor. But when I spoke earlier of this evening's events being 'trying', I was not referring simply to the frustrations of running out of petrol and of having to make such an uncouth journey down into the village. For what occurred subsequently - what unfolded once I sat down to supper with Mr and Mrs Taylor and their neighbours - proved in its own way far more taxing on one's resources than the essentially physical discomforts I had faced earlier. It was, I can assure you, a relief indeed to be able at last to come up to this room and to spend some moments turning over these memories of Darlington Hall from all those years ago.

The fact is, I have tended increasingly of late to indulge myself in such recollections. And ever since the prospect of seeing Miss Kenton again first arose some weeks ago, I suppose I have tended to spend much time pondering just why it was our relationship underwent such a change. For change it certainly did, around 1935 or 1936, after many years in which we had steadily achieved a fine professional understanding. In fact, by the end, we had even abandoned our routine of meeting over a cup of cocoa at the end of each day. But as to what really caused such changes, just what particular chain of events was really responsible, I have never quite been able to decide.

In thinking about this recently, it seems possible that that odd incident the evening Miss Kenton came into my pantry uninvited may have marked a crucial turning point. Why it was she came to my pantry I cannot remember with certainty. I have a feeling she may have come bearing a vase of flowers 'to brighten things up', but then again, I may be getting confused with the time she attempted the same thing years earlier at the start of our acquaintanceship. I know for a fact she tried to introduce flowers to my pantry on at least three occasions over the years, but perhaps I am confused in believing this to have been what brought her that particular evening. I might emphasize, in any case, that notwithstanding our years of good working relations, I had never allowed the situation to slip to one in which the housekeeper was coming and going from my pantry all day. The butler's pantry, as far as I am concerned, is a crucial office, the heart of the house's operations, not unlike a general's headquarters during a battle, and it is imperative that all things in it are ordered - and left ordered - in precisely the way I wish them to be. I have never been that sort of butler who allows all sorts of people to wander in and out with their queries and grumbles. If operations are to be conducted in a smoothly co-ordinated way, it is surely obvious that the butler's pantry must be the one place in the house where privacy and solitude are guaranteed.

As it happened, when she entered my pantry that evening, I was not in fact engaged in professional matters. That is to say, it was towards the end of the day during a quiet week and I had been enjoying a rare hour or so off duty. As I say, I am not certain if Miss Kenton entered with her vase of flowers, but I certainly do recall her saying:

'Mr Stevens, your room looks even less accommodating at night than it does in the day. The electric bulb is too dim, surely, for you to be reading by.'

'It is perfectly adequate, thank you, Miss Kenton.'

‘Really, Mr Stevens, this room resembles a prison cell. All one needs is a small bed in the corner and one could well imagine condemned men spending their last hours here.’

Perhaps I said something to this, I do not know. In any case, I did not look up from my reading, and a few moments passed during which I waited for Miss Kenton to excuse herself and leave. But then I heard her say:

‘Now I wonder what it could be you are reading there, Mr Stevens.’

‘Simply a book, Miss Kenton.’

‘I can see that, Mr Stevens. But what sort of book - that is what interests me.’

I looked up to see Miss Kenton advancing towards me. I shut the book, and clutching it to my person, rose to my feet.

‘Really, Miss Kenton,’ I said, ‘I must ask you to respect my privacy.’

‘But why are you so shy about your book, Mr Stevens? I rather suspect it may be something rather racy.’

‘It is quite out of the question, Miss Kenton, that anything “racy”, as you put it, should be found on his lordship’s shelves.’

‘I have heard it said that many learned books contain the most racy of passages, but I have never had the nerve to look. Now, Mr Stevens, do please allow me to see what it is you are reading.’

‘Miss Kenton, I must ask you to leave me alone. It is quite impossible that you should persist in pursuing me like this during the very few moments of spare time I have to myself.’

But Miss Kenton was continuing to advance and I must say it was a little difficult to assess what my best course of

action would be. I was tempted to thrust the book into the drawer of my desk and lock it, but this seemed absurdly dramatic. I took a few paces back, the book still held to my chest.

‘Please show me the volume you are holding, Mr Stevens,’ Miss Kenton said, continuing her advance, ‘and I will leave you to the pleasures of your reading. What on earth can it be you are so anxious to hide?’

‘Miss Kenton, whether or not you discover the title of this volume is in itself not of the slightest importance to me. But as a matter of principle, I object to your appearing like this and invading my private moments.’

‘I wonder, is it a perfectly respectable volume, Mr Stevens, or are you in fact protecting me from its shocking influences?’

Then she was standing before me, and suddenly the atmosphere underwent a peculiar change - almost as though the two of us had been suddenly thrust on to some other plane of being altogether. I am afraid it is not easy to describe clearly what I mean here. All I can say is that everything around us suddenly became very still; it was my impression that Miss Kenton’s manner also underwent a sudden change; there was a strange seriousness in her expression, and it struck me she seemed almost frightened.

‘Please, Mr Stevens, let me see your book.’

She reached forward and began gently to release the volume from my grasp. I judged it best to look away while she did so, but with her person positioned so closely, this could only be achieved by my twisting my head away at a somewhat unnatural angle. Miss Kenton continued very gently to prise the book away, practically one finger at a time. The process seemed to take a very long time - throughout which I managed to maintain my posture - until I finally heard her say:

‘Good gracious, Mr Stevens, it isn’t anything so scandalous at all. Simply a sentimental love story.’

I believe it was around this point that I decided there was no need to tolerate any more. I cannot recall precisely what I said, but I remember showing Miss Kenton out of my pantry quite firmly and the episode was thus brought to a close.

I suppose I should add a few words here concerning the matter of the actual volume around which this small episode revolved. The book was, true enough, what might be described as a ‘sentimental romance’ - one of a number kept in the library, and also in several of the guest bedrooms, for the entertainment of lady visitors. There was a simple reason for my having taken to perusing such works; it was an extremely efficient way to maintain and develop one’s command of the English language. It is my view - I do not know if you will agree - that in so far as our generation is concerned, there has been too much stress placed on the professional desirability of good accent and command of language; that is to say, these elements have been stressed sometimes at the cost of more important professional qualities. For all that, it has never been my position that good accent and command of language are not attractive attributes, and I always considered it my duty to develop them as best I could. One straightforward means of going about this is simply to read a few pages of a well-written book during odd spare moments one may have. This had been my own policy for some years, and I often tended to choose the sort of volume Miss Kenton had found me reading that evening simply because such works tend to be written in good English, with plenty of elegant dialogue of much practical value to me. A weightier book - a scholarly study, say - while it might have been more generally improving would have tended to be couched in terms likely to be of more limited use in the course of one’s normal intercourse with ladies and gentlemen.

I rarely had the time or the desire to read any of these romances cover to cover, but so far as I could tell, their plots were invariably absurd - indeed, sentimental - and I would not have wasted one moment on them were it not for these aforementioned benefits. Having said that, however, I do not mind confessing today - and I see nothing to be ashamed of in this - that I did at times gain a sort of incidental enjoyment from these stories. I did not perhaps acknowledge this to myself at the time, but as I say, what shame is there in it? Why should one not enjoy in a light-hearted sort of way stories of ladies and gentlemen who fall in love and express their feelings for each other, often in the most elegant phrases?

But when I say this, I do not mean to imply the stance I took over the matter of the book that evening was somehow unwarranted. For you must understand, there was an important principle at issue. The fact was, I had been 'off duty' at that moment Miss Kenton had come marching into my pantry. And of course, any butler who regards his vocation with pride, any butler who aspires at all to a 'dignity in keeping with his position', as the Hayes Society once put it, should never allow himself to be 'off duty' in the presence of others. It really was immaterial whether it was Miss Kenton or a complete stranger who had walked in at that moment. A butler of any quality must be seen to *inhabit* his role, utterly and fully; he cannot be seen casting it aside one moment simply to don it again the next as though it were nothing more than a pantomime costume. There is one situation and one situation only in which a butler who cares about his dignity may feel free to unburden himself of his role; that is to say, when he is entirely alone. You will appreciate then that in the event of Miss Kenton bursting in at a time when I had presumed, not unreasonably, that I was to be alone, it came to be a crucial matter of principle, a matter indeed of dignity, that I did not appear in anything less than my full and proper role.

However, it had not been my intention to analyse here the various facets of this small episode from years ago. The main point about it was that it alerted me to the fact that things between Miss Kenton and myself had reached - no doubt after a gradual process of many months - an inappropriate footing. The fact that she could behave as she had done that evening was rather alarming, and after I had seen her out of my pantry, and had had a chance to gather my thoughts a little, I recall resolving to set about re-establishing our professional relationship on a more proper basis. But as to just how much that incident contributed to the large changes our relationship subsequently underwent, it is very difficult now to say. There may well have been other more fundamental developments to account for what took place. Such as, for instance, the matter of Miss Kenton's days off.

From the time she arrived at Darlington Hall right up until perhaps a month or so before that incident in my pantry, Miss Kenton's days off had followed a predictable pattern. She would, once every six weeks, take two days off to visit her aunt in Southampton; otherwise, following my own example, she would not really take days off as such unless we were going through a particularly quiet time, in which case she might spend a day strolling around the grounds and doing a little reading in her parlour. But then, as I say, the pattern changed. She began suddenly to take full advantage of her contracted time off, disappearing regularly from the house from early in the morning, leaving no information other than the hour she might be expected back that night. Of course, she never took more time than her entitlement, and thus I felt it improper to inquire further concerning these outings of hers. But I suppose this change did perturb me somewhat, for I remember mentioning it to Mr Graham, valet-butler to Sir James Chambers - a good colleague who, incidentally, I seem now to have lost touch with - as we sat talking by the fire one night during one of his regular visits to Darlington Hall.

In fact, all I had said was something to the effect that the housekeeper had been 'a little moody of late' and so had been rather surprised when Mr Graham nodded, leaned towards me and said knowingly:

'I' d been wondering how much longer it would be.'

When I asked him what he meant, Mr Graham went on: 'Your Miss Kenton. I believe she's now what? Thirty-three? Thirty-four? Missed out on the best of her mothering years, but it's not too late yet.'

'Miss Kenton', I assured him, 'is a devoted professional. I happen to know for a fact that she has no wish for a family.'

But Mr Graham had smiled and shook his head, saying: 'Never believe a housekeeper who tells you she doesn't want a family. Indeed, Mr Stevens, I should think you and I could sit here now and count up at least a dozen between us that once said as much, then got married and left the profession.'

I recall I dismissed Mr Graham's theory with some confidence that evening, but thereafter, I must admit, I found it hard to keep out of my mind the possibility that the purpose of these mysterious outings of Miss Kenton was to meet a suitor. This was indeed a disturbing notion, for it was not hard to see that Miss Kenton's departure would constitute a professional loss of some magnitude, a loss Darlington Hall would have some difficulty recovering from. Furthermore, I was obliged to recognize certain other little signs which tended to support Mr Graham's theory. For instance, the collection of mail being one of my duties, I could not help noticing that Miss Kenton had started to get letters on a fairly regular basis - once a week or so - from the same correspondent, and that these letters bore a local postmark. I should perhaps point out here that it would have been well nigh impossible for me not to have noticed

such things, given that throughout all her preceding years at the house, she had received very few letters indeed.

Then there were other more nebulous signs to support Mr Graham's view. For instance, although she continued to discharge her professional duties with all her usual diligence, her general mood tended to undergo swings of a sort I had hitherto never witnessed. In fact the times when she became extremely cheerful for days on end - and for no observable reason - were almost as disturbing to me as her sudden, often prolonged sullen spells. As I say, she remained utterly professional throughout it all, but then again, it was my duty to think about the welfare of the house in the long term, and if indeed these signs tended to support Mr Graham's notion that Miss Kenton was contemplating departing for romantic purposes, I clearly had a responsibility to probe the matter further. I did then venture to ask her one evening during one of our sessions over cocoa:

'And will you be going off again on Thursday, Miss Kenton? On your day off, I mean.'

I had half expected her to be angry at this inquiry, but on the contrary, it was almost as though she had been long awaiting an opportunity to raise the very topic. For she said in something of a relieved way:

'Oh, Mr Stevens, it's just someone I knew once when I was at Granchester Lodge. As a matter of fact, he was the butler there at the time, but now he's left service altogether and is employed by a business near by. He somehow learnt of my being here and started writing to me, suggesting we renew our acquaintance. And that, Mr Stevens, is really the long and short of it.'

'I see, Miss Kenton. No doubt, it is refreshing to leave the house at times.'

'I find it so, Mr Stevens.'

There was a short silence. Then Miss Kenton appeared to make some decision and went on:

‘This acquaintance of mine. I remember when he was butler at Granchester Lodge, he was full of the most marvellous ambitions. In fact, I imagine his ultimate dream would have been to become butler of a house like this one. Oh, but when I think now of some of his methods! Really, Mr Stevens, I can just imagine your face if you were to be confronted by them now. It really is no wonder his ambitions remained unfulfilled.’

I gave a small laugh. ‘In my experience,’ I said, ‘too many people believe themselves capable of working at these higher levels without having the least idea of the exacting demands involved. It is certainly not suited to just anybody.’

‘So true. Really, Mr Stevens, what would you have said if you had observed him in those days!’

‘At these sorts of levels, Miss Kenton, the profession isn’t for everybody. It is easy enough to have lofty ambitions, but without certain qualities, a butler will simply not progress beyond a certain point.’

Miss Kenton seemed to ponder this for a moment, then said:

‘It occurs to me you must be a well-contented man, Mr Stevens. Here you are, after all, at the top of your profession, every aspect of your domain well under control. I really cannot imagine what more you might wish for in life.’

I could think of no immediate response to this. In the slightly awkward silence that ensued, Miss Kenton turned her gaze down into the depths of her cocoa cup as if she had become engrossed by something she had noticed there. In the end, after some consideration, I said:

‘As far as I am concerned, Miss Kenton, my vocation will not be fulfilled until I have done all I can to see his lordship through the great tasks he has set himself. The day his lordship’s work is complete, the day *he* is able to rest on his laurels, content in the knowledge that he has done all anyone could ever reasonably ask of him, only on that day, Miss Kenton, will I be able to call myself, as you put it, a well-contented man.’

She may have been a little puzzled by my words; or perhaps it was that they had for some reason displeased her. In any case, her mood seemed to change at that point, and our conversation rapidly lost the rather personal tone it had begun to adopt.

It was not so long afterwards that these meetings over cocoa in her parlour came to an end. In fact, I recall quite clearly the very last time we met like that; I was wishing to discuss with Miss Kenton a forthcoming event - a weekend gathering of distinguished persons from Scotland. It is true the event was still a month or so away, but then it had always been our habit to talk over such events from an early stage. On this particular evening, I had been discussing various aspects of it for a little while when I realized Miss Kenton was contributing very little; indeed, after a time, it became perfectly obvious her thoughts were somewhere else altogether. I did on a few occasions say things like: ‘Are you with me, Miss Kenton?’ particularly if I had been making a lengthy point, and though whenever I did so she would become a little more alert, within seconds I could see her attention drifting again. After several minutes of my talking and her contributing only statements such as, ‘Of course, Mr Stevens,’ or, ‘I quite agree, Mr Stevens,’ I finally said to her:

‘I am sorry, Miss Kenton, but I see little point in our continuing. You simply do not seem to appreciate the importance of this discussion.’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Stevens,’ she said, sitting up a little. ‘It’s simply that I’m rather tired this evening.’

‘You are increasingly tired now, Miss Kenton. It used not to be an excuse you needed to resort to.’

To my astonishment, Miss Kenton responded to this in a sudden burst:

‘Mr Stevens, I have had a very busy week. I am very tired. In fact, I have been wishing for my bed for the last three or four hours. I am very, very tired, Mr Stevens, can you not appreciate that?’

It is not as though I had expected an apology from her, but the stridency of this reply did, I must say, take me aback a little. However, I decided not to get drawn into an unseemly argument with her and made sure to pause for a telling moment or two before saying quite calmly:

‘If that is how you feel about it, Miss Kenton, there is no need at all for us to continue with these evening meetings. I am sorry that all this time I had no idea of the extent to which they were inconveniencing you.’

‘Mr Stevens, I merely said that I was tired tonight ...’

‘No, no, Miss Kenton, it’s perfectly understandable. You have a busy life, and these meetings are a quite unnecessary addition to your burden. There are many alternative options for achieving the level of professional communication necessary without our meeting on this basis.’

‘Mr Stevens, this is quite unnecessary. I merely said ...’

‘I mean it, Miss Kenton. In fact, I had been wondering for some time if we should not discontinue these meetings, given how they prolong our already very busy days. The fact that we have met here now for years is no reason in itself why we should not seek a more convenient arrangement from here on.’

‘Mr Stevens, please, I believe these meetings are very useful ...’

‘But they are inconvenient for you, Miss Kenton. They tire you out. May I suggest that from now on, we simply make a special point of communicating important information during the course of the normal working day. Should we not be able to find each other readily, I suggest we leave written messages at one another’s doors. That seems to me a perfectly fine solution. Now, Miss Kenton, I apologize for keeping you up so long. Thank you very kindly for the cocoa.’

Naturally - and why should I not admit this? - I have occasionally wondered to myself how things might have turned out in the long run had I not been so determined over the issue of our evening meetings; that is to say, had I relented on those several occasions over the weeks that followed when Miss Kenton suggested we reinstitute them. I only speculate over this now because in the light of subsequent events, it could well be argued that in making my decision to end those evening meetings once and for all, I was perhaps not entirely aware of the full implications of what I was doing. Indeed, it might even be said that this small decision of mine constituted something of a key turning point; that the decision set things on an inevitable course towards what eventually happened.

But then, I suppose, when with the benefit of hindsight one begins to search one’s past for such ‘turning points’, one is apt to start seeing them everywhere. Not only my decision in respect of our evening meetings, but also that episode in my pantry, if one felt so inclined, could be seen as such a ‘turning point’. What would have transpired, one may ask, had one responded slightly differently that evening she came in with her vase of flowers? And perhaps - occurring as it did around the same time as these events - my encounter with Miss Kenton in the dining room the

afternoon she received the news of her aunt's death might be seen as yet another 'turning point' of sorts.

News of the death had arrived some hours earlier; indeed, I had myself knocked on the door of her parlour that morning to hand her the letter. I had stepped inside for a brief moment to discuss some professional matter, and I recall we were seated at her table and in mid-conversation at the moment she opened the letter. She became very still, but to her credit she remained composed, reading the letter through at least twice. Then she put the letter carefully back in its envelope and looked across the table to me.

'It is from Mrs Johnson, a companion of my aunt. She says my aunt died the day before yesterday.' She paused a moment, then said: 'The funeral is to take place tomorrow. I wonder if it might be possible for me to take the day off.'

'I am sure that could be arranged, Miss Kenton.'

'Thank you, Mr Stevens. Forgive me, but perhaps I may now have a few moments alone.'

'Of course, Miss Kenton.'

I made my exit, and it was not until after I had done so that it occurred to me I had not actually offered her my condolences. I could well imagine the blow the news would be to her, her aunt having been, to all intents and purposes, like a mother to her, and I paused out in the corridor, wondering if I should go back, knock and make good my omission. But then it occurred to me that if I were to do so, I might easily intrude upon her private grief. Indeed, it was not impossible that Miss Kenton, at that very moment, and only a few feet from me, was actually crying. The thought provoked a strange feeling to rise within me, causing me to stand there hovering in the corridor for some moments. But eventually I judged it best to await another opportunity to express my sympathy and went on my way.

As it turned out, I did not see her again until the afternoon, when, as I say, I came across her in the dining room, replacing crockery into the sideboard. By this point, I had been preoccupied for some hours with the matter of Miss Kenton's sorrow, having given particular thought to the question of what I might best do or say to ease her burden a little. And when I had heard her footsteps entering the dining room - I was busy with some task out in the hall - I had waited a minute or so, then put down what I was doing and followed her in.

'Ah, Miss Kenton,' I said. 'And how might you be this afternoon?'

'Quite well, thank you, Mr Stevens.'

'Is everything in order?'

'Everything is in order, thank you.'

'I had been meaning to ask you if you were experiencing any particular problems with the new recruits.' I gave a small laugh. 'Various small difficulties are apt to arise when so many new recruits arrive all at once. I dare say the best of us can often profit by a little professional discussion at such times.'

'Thank you, Mr Stevens, but the new girls are very satisfactory to me.'

'You don't consider any changes necessary to the present staff plans on account of the recent arrivals?'

'I don't think any such changes will be necessary, Mr Stevens. However, if I change my view on this, I will let you know immediately.'

She turned her attention back to the sideboard, and for a moment, I thought about leaving the dining room. In fact, I believe I actually took a few steps towards the doorway, but then I turned to her again and said:

‘So, Miss Kenton, the new recruits are getting on well, you say.’

‘They are both doing very well, I assure you.’

‘Ah, that is good to hear.’ I gave another short laugh. ‘I merely wondered, because we had established that neither girl had worked previously in a house of this size.’

‘Indeed, Mr Stevens.’

I watched her filling the sideboard and waited to see if she would say anything further. When after several moments it became clear she would not, I said: ‘As a matter of fact, Miss Kenton, I have to say this. I have noticed one or two things have fallen in standard just recently. I do feel you might be a little less complacent as regards new arrivals.’

‘Whatever do you mean, Mr Stevens?’

‘For my part, Miss Kenton, whenever new recruits arrive, I like to make doubly sure all is well. I check all aspects of their work and try to gauge how they are conducting themselves with other staff members. It is, after all, important to form a clear view of them both technically and in terms of their impact on general morale. I regret to say this, Miss Kenton, but I believe you have been a little remiss in these respects.’

For a second, Miss Kenton looked confused. Then she turned towards me and a certain strain was visible in her face.

‘I beg your pardon, Mr Stevens?’

‘For instance, Miss Kenton, although the crockery is being washed to as high a standard as ever, I have noticed it is being replaced on the kitchen shelves in a manner which, while not obviously dangerous, would nevertheless over time result in more breakages than necessary.’

‘Is that so, Mr Stevens?’

‘Yes, Miss Kenton. Furthermore, that little alcove outside the breakfast room has not been dusted for some time. You will excuse me, but there are one or two other small things I might mention.’

‘You needn’t press your point, Mr Stevens. I will, as you suggest, check the work of the new maids.’

‘It is not like you to have overlooked such obvious things, Miss Kenton.’

Miss Kenton looked away from me, and again an expression crossed her face as though she was trying to puzzle out something that had quite confused her. She did not look upset so much as very weary. Then she closed the sideboard, said: ‘Please excuse me, Mr Stevens,’ and left the room.

But what is the sense in forever speculating what might have happened had such and such a moment turned out differently? One could presumably drive oneself to distraction in this way. In any case, while it is all very well to talk of ‘turning points’, one can surely only recognize such moments in retrospect. Naturally, when one looks back to such instances today, they may indeed take the appearance of being crucial, precious moments in one’s life; but of course, at the time, this was not the impression one had. Rather, it was as though one had available a never-ending number of days, months, years in which to sort out the vagaries of one’s relationship with Miss Kenton; an infinite number of further opportunities in which to remedy the effect of this or that misunderstanding. There was surely nothing to indicate at the time that such evidently small incidents would render whole dreams forever irredeemable.

But I see I am becoming unduly introspective, and in a rather morose sort of way at that. No doubt, this has to do with the late hour, and the trying nature of the events I have had to endure this evening. No doubt, too, my present mood is not unconnected with the fact that tomorrow - provided I am supplied with petrol by the local garage, as

the Taylors assure me I will be - I should arrive in Little Compton by lunch-time and will, presumably, see Miss Kenton again after all these years. There is, of course, no reason at all to suppose our meeting will be anything but cordial. In fact, I would expect our interview - aside from a few informal exchanges quite proper in the circumstances - to be largely professional in character. That is to say, it will be my responsibility to determine whether or not Miss Kenton has any interest, now that her marriage, sadly, appears to have broken down and she is without a home, in returning to her old post at Darlington Hall. I may as well say here that having reread her letter again tonight, I am inclined to believe I may well have read more into certain of her lines than perhaps was wise. But I would still maintain there is more than a hint of nostalgic longing in certain parts of her letter, particularly when she writes such things as: 'I was so fond of that view from the second floor bedrooms overlooking the lawn with the downs visible in the distance.'

But then again, what is the purpose in endlessly speculating as to Miss Kenton's present wishes when I will be able to ascertain these from her own person tomorrow? And in any case, I have drifted considerably from the account I was giving of this evening's events. These last few hours, let me say it, have proved unreasonably taxing ones. One would have thought that having to abandon the Ford on some lonely hill, having to walk down to this village in near-darkness by the unorthodox route one did, would be sufficient inconvenience to befall one for a single evening. And my kind hosts, Mr and Mrs Taylor, would never, I am certain, have knowingly put me through what I have just endured. But the fact is, once I had sat down to supper at their table, once a number of their neighbours had come calling, a most discomfoting set of events began to unfold around me.

The room downstairs at the front of this cottage would appear to serve Mr and Mrs Taylor as both dining room and general

living quarters. It is a rather cosy room, dominated by a large, roughly hewn table of the sort one might expect to see in a farmhouse kitchen, its surface unvarnished and bearing many small marks left by choppers and breadknives. These latter I could see quite clearly despite the fact that we were sitting in a low yellow light cast by an oil lamp on a shelf in one corner.

‘It’s not as though we don’t have electricity out here, sir,’ Mr Taylor remarked to me at one point, nodding towards the lamp. ‘But something went wrong with the circuit and we’ve been without it now for almost two months. To tell you the truth, we don’t miss it so much. There’s a few houses in the village that’s never had electricity at all. Oil gives a warmer light.’

Mrs Taylor had served us with a good broth, which we had eaten with helpings of crusty bread, and at that point, there had been little to suggest the evening held for me anything more daunting than an hour or so of pleasant conversation before retiring to bed. However, just as we had finished supper and Mr Taylor was pouring for me a glass of ale brewed by a neighbour, we heard footsteps approaching on the gravel outside. To my ears, there was something a little sinister in the sound of feet coming ever closer in the darkness up to an isolated cottage, but neither my host nor hostess seemed to anticipate any menace. For it was with curiosity and nothing else in his voice that Mr Taylor said: ‘Hello, now who could this be?’

He had said this more or less to himself, but then we heard, as though in reply, a voice call outside: ‘It’s George Andrews. Just happened to be walking by.’

The next moment, Mrs Taylor was showing in a well-built man, perhaps in his fifties, who judging from his dress had spent the day engaged in agricultural work. With a familiarity which suggested he was a regular visitor, he placed himself on a small stool by the entrance and removed

his Wellington boots with some effort, exchanging a few casual remarks with Mrs Taylor as he did so. Then he came towards the table and stopped, standing to attention before me as though reporting to an officer in the army.

‘The name’s Andrews, sir,’ he said. ‘A very good evening to you. I’m very sorry to hear about your mishap, but I hope you’re not too put out to be spending the night here in Moscombe.’

I was a little puzzled as to how this Mr Andrews had come to hear of my ‘mishap’, as he termed it. In any case, I replied with a smile that far from being ‘put out’, I felt extremely indebted for the hospitality I was receiving. By this I had of course been referring to Mr and Mrs Taylor’s kindness, but Mr Andrews seemed to believe himself included by my expression of gratitude, for he said immediately, holding up defensively his two large hands:

‘Oh no, sir, you’re most welcome. We’re very pleased to have you. It’s not often the likes of yourself comes through here. We’re all very pleased you could stop by.’

The way he said this seemed to suggest the whole village was aware of my ‘mishap’ and subsequent arrival at this cottage. In fact, as I was soon to discover, this was very close to being the case; I can only imagine that in the several minutes after I had first been shown up to this bedroom - while I was washing my hands and doing what I could to make good the damage inflicted upon my jacket and trouser turn-ups - Mr and Mrs Taylor had conveyed news of me to passers-by. In any case, the next few minutes saw the arrival of another visitor, a man with an appearance much like that of Mr Andrews - that is to say, somewhat broad and agricultural, and wearing muddy Wellington boots, which he proceeded to remove in much the way Mr Andrews had just done. Indeed, their similarity was such that I supposed them to be brothers, until the newcomer introduced himself to me as, ‘Morgan, sir, Trevor Morgan.’

Mr Morgan expressed regret concerning my 'misfortune', assuring me all would be well in the morning, before going on to say how welcome I was in the village. Of course, I had already heard similar sentiments a few moments earlier, but Mr Morgan actually said: 'It's a privilege to have a gentleman like yourself here in Moscombe, sir.'

Before I had had any time to think of a reply to this, there came the sound of more footsteps on the path outside. Soon, a middle-aged couple were shown in, who were introduced to me as Mr and Mrs Harry Smith. These people did not look at all agricultural; she was a large, matronly woman who rather reminded me of Mrs Mortimer, the cook at Darlington Hall through much of the twenties and thirties. In contrast, Mr Harry Smith was a small man with a rather intense expression that furrowed his brow. As they took their places around the table, he said to me: 'Your car would be the vintage Ford up there on Thornley Bush Hill, sir?'

'If that is the hill road overlooking this village,' I said. 'But I'm surprised to hear you've seen it.'

'I've not seen it myself, sir. But Dave Thornton passed it on his tractor a short while ago as he was coming home. He was so surprised to see it sitting there, he actually stopped and got out.' At this point, Mr Harry Smith turned to address the others around the table. 'Absolute beauty, it is. Said he'd never seen anything like it. Put the car Mr Lindsay used to drive completely in the shade!'

This caused laughter around the table, which Mr Taylor explained to me by saying: 'That was a gent used to live in the big house not far from here, sir. He did one or two odd things and wasn't appreciated around here.'

This brought a general murmur of assent. Then someone said: 'Your health, sir,' lifting one of the tankards of ale Mrs Taylor had just finished distributing, and the next moment I was being toasted by the whole company.

I smiled and said: 'I assure you the privilege is all mine.'

'You're very kind, sir,' Mrs Smith said. 'That's the way a real gentleman is. That Mr Lindsay was no gentleman. He may have had a lot of money, but he was never a gentleman.'

Again, there was agreement all round. Then Mrs Taylor whispered something in Mrs Smith's ear, causing the latter to reply: 'He said he'd try to be along as soon as he could.' They both turned towards me with a self-conscious air, then Mrs Smith said: 'We told Dr Carlisle you were here, sir. The doctor would be very pleased to make your acquaintance.'

'I expect he has patients to see,' Mrs Taylor added apologetically. 'I'm afraid we can't say for certain he'll be able to call in before you'd be wanting to retire, sir.'

It was then that Mr Harry Smith, the little man with the furrowed brow, leaned forward again and said: 'That Mr Lindsay, he had it all wrong, see? Acting the way he did. Thought he was so much better than us, and he took us all for fools. Well, I can tell you, sir, he soon learnt otherwise. A lot of hard thinking and talking goes on in this place. There's plenty of good strong opinion around and people here aren't shy about expressing it. That's something your Mr Lindsay learnt quickly enough.'

'He was no gentleman,' Mr Taylor said quietly. 'He was no gentleman, that Mr Lindsay.'

'That's right, sir,' Mr Harry Smith said. 'You could tell just watching him he was no gentleman. All right, he had a fine house and good suits, but somehow you just knew. And so it proved in good time.'

There was a murmur of agreement, and for a moment all present seemed to be considering whether or not it would be proper to divulge to me the tale concerning this local personage. Then Mr Taylor broke the silence by saying:

'That's true what Harry says. You can tell a true gentleman from a false one that's just dressed in finery. Take yourself, sir. It's not just the cut of your clothes, nor is it even the fine way you've got of speaking. There's something else that marks you out as a gentleman. Hard to put your finger on it, but it's plain for all to see that's got eyes.'

This brought more sounds of agreement around the table.

'Dr Carlisle shouldn't be long now, sir,' Mrs Taylor put in. 'You'll enjoy talking with him.'

'Dr Carlisle's got it too,' Mr Taylor said. 'He's got it. He's a true gent, that one.'

Mr Morgan, who had said little since his arrival, bent forward and said to me: 'What do you suppose it is, sir? Maybe one that's got it can better say what it is. Here we are all talking about who's got it and who hasn't, and we're none the wiser about what we're talking about. Perhaps you could enlighten us a bit, sir.'

A silence fell around the table and I could sense all the faces turn to me. I gave a small cough and said:

'It is hardly for me to pronounce upon qualities I may or may not possess. However, as far as this particular question is concerned, one would suspect that the quality being referred to might be most usefully termed "dignity".'

I saw little point in attempting to explain this statement further. Indeed, I had merely given voice to the thoughts running through my mind while listening to the preceding talk and it is doubtful I would have said such a thing had the situation not suddenly demanded it of me. My response, however, seemed to cause much satisfaction.

'There's a lot of truth in what you say there, sir,' Mr Andrews said, nodding, and a number of other voices echoed

this.

‘That Mr Lindsay could certainly have done with a little more dignity,’ Mrs Taylor said. ‘The trouble with his sort is they mistake acting high and mighty for dignity.’

‘Mind you,’ put in Mr Harry Smith, ‘with all respect for what you say, sir, it ought to be said. Dignity isn’t just something gentlemen have. Dignity’s something every man and woman in this country can strive for and get. You’ll excuse me, sir, but like I said before, we don’t stand on ceremony here when it comes to expressing opinions. And that’s my opinion for what it’s worth. Dignity’s not just something for gentlemen.’

I perceived, of course, that Mr Harry Smith and I were rather at cross purposes on this matter, and that it would be far too complicated a task for me to explain myself more clearly to these people. I thus judged it best simply to smile and say: ‘Of course, you’re quite correct.’

This had the immediate effect of dispelling the slight tension that had built in the room while Mr Harry Smith had been speaking. And Mr Harry Smith himself seemed to lose all inhibitions, for now he leaned forward and continued:

‘That’s what we fought Hitler for, after all. If Hitler had had things his way, we’d just be slaves now. The whole world would be a few masters and millions upon millions of slaves. And I don’t need to remind anyone here, there’s no dignity to be had in being a slave. That’s what we fought for and that’s what we won. We won the right to be free citizens. And it’s one of the privileges of being born English that no matter who you are, no matter if you’re rich or poor, you’re born free and you’re born so that you can express your opinion freely, and vote in your member of parliament or vote him out. That’s what dignity’s really about, if you’ll excuse me, sir.’

‘Now now, Harry,’ Mr Taylor said. ‘I can see you’re warming up to one of your political speeches.’

This brought laughter. Mr Harry Smith smiled a little shyly, but went on:

‘I’m not talking politics. I’m just saying, that’s all. You can’t have dignity if you’re a slave. But every Englishman can grasp it if only he cares to. Because we fought for that right.’

‘This may seem like a small, out of the way place we have here, sir,’ his wife said. ‘But we gave more than our share in the war. More than our share.’

A solemnness hung in the air after she said this, until eventually Mr Taylor said to me: ‘Harry here does a lot of organizing for our local member. Give him half a chance and he’ll tell you everything that’s wrong with the way the country’s run.’

‘Ah, but I was just saying what was *right* about the country this time.’

‘Have you had much to do with politics yourself, sir?’ Mr Andrews asked.

‘Not directly as such,’ I said, ‘And particularly not these days. More so before the war perhaps.’

‘It’s just that I seem to remember a Mr Stevens who was a member of parliament a year or two ago. Heard him on the wireless once or twice. Had some very sensible things to say about housing. But that wouldn’t be yourself, sir?’

‘Oh no,’ I said with a laugh. Now I am not at all sure what made me utter my next statement; all I can say is that it seemed somehow called for in the circumstances in which I found myself. For I then said: ‘In fact, I tended to concern myself with international affairs more than domestic ones. Foreign policy, that is to say.’

I was a little taken aback by the effect this seemed to have upon my listeners. That is to say, a sense of awe seemed to descend on them. I added quickly: 'I never held any high office, mind you. Any influence I exerted was in a strictly unofficial capacity.' But the hushed silence remained for several more seconds.

'Excuse me, sir,' Mrs Taylor said eventually, 'but have you ever met Mr Churchill?'

'Mr Churchill? He did come to the house on a number of occasions. But to be quite frank, Mrs Taylor, during the time I was most involved in great affairs, Mr Churchill was not such a key figure and was not really expected to become one. The likes of Mr Eden and Lord Halifax were more frequent visitors in those days.'

'But you have actually met Mr Churchill, sir? What an honour to be able to say that.'

'I don't agree with many things Mr Churchill says,' Mr Harry Smith said, 'but there's no doubt about it, he's a great man. It must be quite something, sir, to be discussing matters with his like.'

'Well, I must reiterate,' I said, 'I didn't have a great deal to do with Mr Churchill. But as you rightly point out it's rather gratifying to have consorted with him. In fact, all in all, I suppose I have been very fortunate, I would be the first to admit that. It has been my good fortune, after all, to have consorted not just with Mr Churchill, but with many other great leaders and men of influence - from America and from Europe. And when you think that it was my good fortune to have had their ear on many great issues of the day, yes, when I think back, I do feel a certain gratitude. It's a great privilege, after all, to have been given a part to play, however small, on the world's stage.'

‘Excuse me asking, sir,’ Mr Andrews said, ‘but what sort of man is Mr Eden? I mean, at the personal level. I’ve always had the impression he’s a jolly decent sort. The sort that can talk to anyone high or low, rich or poor. Am I right, sir?’

‘I would say that is, by and large, an accurate picture. But of course I have not seen Mr Eden in recent years, and he may have been much changed by pressures. One thing I have witnessed is that public life can change people unrecognizably in a few short years.’

‘I don’t doubt that, sir,’ said Mr Andrews. ‘Even Harry here. Got himself involved with his politics a few years back and he’s never been the same man since.’

There was laughter again, while Mr Harry Smith shrugged and allowed a smile to cross his face. Then he said:

‘It’s true I’ve put a lot into the campaigning work. It’s only at a local level, and I never meet anyone half as grand as the likes you associate with, sir, but in my own small way I believe I’m doing my part. The way I see it, England’s a democracy, and we in this village have suffered as much as anyone fighting to keep it that way. Now it’s up to us to exercise our rights, every one of us. Some fine young lads from this village gave their lives to give us that privilege, and the way I see it, each one of us here now owes it to them to play our part. We’ve all got strong opinions here, and it’s our responsibility to get them heard. We’re out of the way, all right, a small village, we’re none of us getting younger, and the village is getting smaller. But the way I see it we owe it to the lads we lost from this village. That’s why, sir, I give so much of my time now to making sure our voice gets heard in high places. And if it changes me, or sends me to an early grave, I don’t mind.’

‘I did warn you, sir,’ Mr Taylor said with a smile. ‘There was no way Harry was going to let an influential

gentleman like yourself come through the village without giving you his usual earful. ’

There was laughter again, but I said almost immediately:

‘I think I understand your position very well, Mr Smith. I can well understand that you wish the world to be a better place and that you and your fellow residents here should have an opportunity to contribute to the making of a better world. It is a sentiment to be applauded. I dare say it was a very similar urge which led me to become involved in great affairs before the war. Then, as now, world peace seemed something we had only the most fragile grasp of, and I wished to do my part. ’

‘Excuse me, sir, ’ said Mr Harry Smith, ‘but my point was a slightly different one. For the likes of yourself, it’s always been easy to exert your influence. You can count the most powerful in the land as your friends. But the likes of us here, sir, we can go year in year out and never even lay eyes on a real gentleman - other than maybe Dr Carlisle. He’s a first-class doctor, but with all respect, he doesn’t have *connections* as such. It gets easy for us here to forget our responsibility as citizens. That’s why I work so hard at the campaigning. Whether people agree or disagree - and I know there’s not one soul in this room now who’d agree with *everything* I say - at least I’ll get them thinking. At least I’ll remind them of their duty. This is a democratic country we’re living in. We fought for it. We’ve all got to play our part. ’

‘I wonder what could have happened to Dr Carlisle, ’ Mrs Smith said. ‘I’m sure the gentleman could just about use some *educated* talk now. ’

This provoked more laughter.

‘In fact, ’ I said, ‘although it has been extremely enjoyable to meet you all, I must confess I’m beginning to feel rather exhausted ...’

‘Of course, sir,’ Mrs Taylor said, ‘you must be very tired. Perhaps I’ll fetch another blanket for you. It’s getting much chillier at night now.’

‘No, I assure you, Mrs Taylor, I’ll be most comfortable.’

But before I could rise from the table, Mr Morgan said:

‘I just wondered, sir, there’s a fellow we like to listen to on the wireless, his name’s Leslie Mandrake. I wondered if you’d happened to have met him.’

I replied that I had not, and was about to make another attempt to retire only to find myself detained by further inquiries regarding various persons I may have met. I was, then, still seated at the table when Mrs Smith remarked:

‘Ah, there’s someone coming. I expect that’s the doctor at last.’

‘I really ought to be retiring,’ I said. ‘I feel quite exhausted.’

‘But I’m sure this is the doctor now, sir,’ said Mrs Smith. ‘Do wait a few more minutes.’

Just as she said this, there came a knock and a voice said: ‘It’s just me, Mrs Taylor.’

The gentleman who was shown in was still fairly young - perhaps around forty or so - tall and thin; tall enough, in fact, that he was obliged to stoop to enter the doorway of the cottage. No sooner had he bade us all a good evening than Mrs Taylor said to him:

‘This is our gentleman here, Doctor. His car’s stuck up there on Thornley Bush and he’s having to endure Harry’s speeches as a result.’

The doctor came up to the table and held out his hand to me.

‘Richard Carlisle,’ he said with a cheerful smile as I rose to shake it. ‘Rotten bit of luck about your car. Still, trust you’re being well looked after here. Looked after rather too well, I imagine.’

‘Thank you,’ I replied. ‘Everyone has been most kind.’

‘Well, nice to have you with us.’ Dr Carlisle seated himself almost directly across the table from me. ‘Which part of the country are you from?’

‘Oxfordshire,’ I said, and indeed, it was no easy task to suppress the instinct to add ‘sir’.

‘Fine part of the country. I have an uncle lives just outside Oxford. Fine part of the country.’

‘The gentleman was just telling us, Doctor,’ Mrs Smith said, ‘he knows Mr Churchill.’

‘Is that so? I used to know a nephew of his, but I’ve rather lost touch. Never had the privilege of meeting the great man, though.’

‘And not only Mr Churchill,’ Mrs Smith went on. ‘He knows Mr Eden. And Lord Halifax.’

‘Really?’

I could sense the doctor’s eyes examining me closely. I was about to make some appropriate remark, but before I could do so, Mr Andrews said to the doctor:

‘Gentleman was just telling us he’s had a lot to do with foreign affairs in his time.’

‘Is that so indeed?’

It seemed to me that Dr Carlisle went on looking at me for an inordinate length of time. Then he regained his cheerful manner and asked:

‘Touring around for pleasure?’

‘Principally,’ I said, and gave a small laugh.

‘Plenty of nice country around here. Oh, by the way, Mr Andrews, I’m sorry not to have returned that saw yet.’

‘No hurry at all, Doctor.’

For a little time, the focus of attention left me and I was able to remain silent. Then, seizing what seemed a suitable moment, I rose to my feet, saying: ‘Please excuse me. It has been a most enjoyable evening, but I really must now retire.’

‘Such a pity you have to retire already, sir,’ Mrs Smith said. ‘The doctor’s only just arrived.’

Mr Harry Smith leaned across his wife and said to Dr Carlisle: ‘I was hoping the gentleman would have a few words to say about your ideas on the Empire, Doctor.’ Then turning to me, he went on: ‘Our doctor here’s for all kinds of little countries going independent. I don’t have the learning to prove him wrong, though I know he is. But I’d have been interested to hear what the likes of yourself would have to say to him on the subject, sir.’

Yet again, Dr Carlisle’s gaze seemed to study me. Then he said: ‘A pity, but we must let the gentleman go off to bed. Had a tiring day, I expect.’

‘Indeed,’ I said, and with another small laugh, began to make my way round the table. To my embarrassment, everyone in the room, including Dr Carlisle, rose to their feet.

‘Thank you all very much,’ I said, smiling. ‘Mrs Taylor, I did enjoy a splendid supper. I wish you all a very good night.’

There came a chorus of, ‘Good night, sir,’ in reply. I had almost left the room when the doctor’s voice caused me to halt at the door.

'I say, old chap,' he said, and when I turned, I saw he had remained on his feet. 'I have a visit to make in Stanbury first thing in the morning. I'd be happy to give you a lift up to your car. Save you the walk. And we can pick up a can of petrol from Ted Hardacre's on the way.'

'That is most kind,' I said. 'But I don't wish to put you to any trouble.'

'No trouble at all. Seven thirty all right for you?'

'That would be most helpful indeed.'

'Right then, seven thirty it is. Make sure your guest's up and breakfasted for seven thirty, Mrs Taylor.' Then turning back to me, he added: 'So we can have our talk after all. Though Harry here won't have the satisfaction of witnessing my humiliation.'

There was laughter, and another exchange of good nights before I was at last allowed to ascend to the sanctuary of this room.

I trust I need hardly underline the extent of the discomfort I suffered tonight on account of the unfortunate misunderstanding concerning my person. I can only say now that in all honesty I fail to see how I might reasonably have prevented the situation developing as it did; for by the stage I had become aware of what was occurring, things had gone so far I could not have enlightened these people without creating much embarrassment all round. In any case, regrettable as the whole business was, I do not see that any real harm has been done. I will, after all, take my leave of these people in the morning and presumably never encounter them again. There seems little point in dwelling on the matter.

However, the unfortunate misunderstanding aside, there are perhaps one or two other aspects to this evening's events which warrant a few moments' thought - if only because

otherwise they may come to niggle one throughout the coming days. For instance, there is the matter of Mr Harry Smith's pronouncements on the nature of 'dignity'. There is surely little in his statements that merits serious consideration. Of course, one has to allow that Mr Harry Smith was employing the word 'dignity' in a quite different sense altogether from my own understanding of it. Even so, even taken on their own terms, his statements were, surely, far too idealistic, far too theoretical, to deserve respect. Up to a point, no doubt, there is some truth in what he says: in a country such as ours, people may indeed have a certain duty to think about great affairs and form their opinions. But life being what it is, how can ordinary people truly be expected to have 'strong opinions' on all manner of things - as Mr Harry Smith rather fancifully claims the villagers here do? And not only are these expectations unrealistic, I rather doubt if they are even desirable. There is, after all, a real limit to how much ordinary people can learn and know, and to demand that each and every one of them contribute 'strong opinions' to the great debates of the nation cannot, surely, be wise. It is, in any case, absurd that anyone should presume to define a person's 'dignity' in these terms.

As it happens, there is an instance that comes to mind which I believe illustrates rather well the real limits of whatever truth may be contained in Mr Harry Smith's views. It is, as it happens, an instance from my own experience, an episode that took place before the war, around 1935.

As I recall, I was rung for late one night - it was past midnight - to the drawing room where his lordship had been entertaining three gentlemen since dinner. I had, naturally, been called to the drawing room several times already that night to replenish refreshments, and had observed on these occasions the gentlemen deep in conversation over weighty issues. When I entered the drawing room on this last occasion, however, all the gentlemen stopped talking and looked at me. Then his lordship said:

‘Step this way a moment, will you, Stevens? Mr Spencer here wishes a word with you.’

The gentleman in question went on gazing at me for a moment without changing the somewhat languid posture he had adopted in his armchair. Then he said:

‘My good man, I have a question for you. We need your help on a certain matter we’ve been debating. Tell me, do you suppose the debt situation regarding America is a significant factor in the present low levels of trade? Or do you suppose this is a red herring and that the abandonment of the gold standard is at the root of the matter?’

I was naturally a little surprised by this, but then quickly saw the situation for what it was; that is to say, it was clearly expected that I be baffled by the question. Indeed, in the moment or so that it took for me to perceive this and compose a suitable response, I may even have given the outward impression of struggling with the question, for I saw the gentlemen in the room exchange mirthful smiles.

‘I’m very sorry, sir,’ I said, ‘but I am unable to be of assistance on this matter.’

I was by this point well on top of the situation, but the gentlemen went on laughing covertly. Then Mr Spencer said:

‘Then perhaps you will help us on another matter. Would you say that the currency problem in Europe would be made better or worse if there were to be an arms agreement between the French and the Bolsheviks?’

‘I’m very sorry, sir, but I am unable to be of assistance on this matter.’

‘Oh dear,’ said Mr Spencer. ‘So you can’t help us here either.’

There was more suppressed laughter before his lordship said: ‘Very well, Stevens. That will be all.’

‘Please, Darlington, I have one more question to put to our good man here,’ Mr Spencer said. ‘I very much wanted his help on the question presently vexing many of us, and which we all realize is crucial to how we should shape our foreign policy. My good fellow, please come to our assistance. What was M. Laval really intending, by his recent speech on the situation in North Africa? Are you also of the view that it was simply a ruse to scupper the nationalist fringe of his own domestic party?’

‘I’m sorry, sir, but I am unable to assist in this matter.’

‘You see, gentlemen,’ Mr Spencer said, turning to the others, ‘our man is unable to assist us in these matters.’

This brought fresh laughter, now barely suppressed.

‘And yet,’ Mr Spencer went on, ‘we still persist with the notion that this nation’s decisions be left in the hands of our good man here and to the few million others like him. Is it any wonder, saddled as we are with our present parliamentary system, that we are unable to find any solution to our many difficulties? Why, you may as well ask a committee of the mothers’ union to organize a war campaign.’

There was open, hearty laughter at this remark, during which his lordship muttered: ‘Thank you, Stevens,’ thus enabling me to take my leave.

While of course this was a slightly uncomfortable situation, it was hardly the most difficult, or even an especially unusual one to encounter in the course of one’s duties, and you will no doubt agree that any decent professional should expect to take such events in his stride. I had, then, all but forgotten the episode by the following morning, when Lord Darlington came into the billiard room while I was up on a step-ladder dusting portraits, and said:

‘Look here, Stevens, it was dreadful. The ordeal we put you through last night.’

I paused in what I was doing and said: ‘Not at all, sir. I was only too happy to be of service.’

‘It was quite dreadful. We’d all had rather too good a dinner, I fancy. Please accept my apologies.’

‘Thank you, sir. But I am happy to assure you I was not unduly inconvenienced.’

His lordship walked over rather wearily to a leather armchair, seated himself and sighed. From my vantage point up on my ladder, I could see practically the whole of his long figure caught in the winter sunshine pouring in through the french windows and streaking much of the room. It was, as I recall it, one of those moments that brought home how much the pressures of life had taken their toll on his lordship over a relatively small number of years. His frame, always slender, had become alarmingly thin and somewhat misshapen, his hair prematurely white, his face strained and haggard. For a while, he sat gazing out of the french windows towards the downs, then said again:

‘It really was quite dreadful. But you see, Stevens, Mr Spencer had a point to prove to Sir Leonard. In fact, if it’s any consolation, you did assist in demonstrating a very important point. Sir Leonard had been talking a lot of that old-fashioned nonsense. About the will of the people being the wisest arbitrator and so on. Would you believe it, Stevens?’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘We’re really so slow in this country to recognize when a thing’s outmoded. Other great nations know full well that to meet the challenges of each new age means discarding old, sometimes well-loved methods. Not so here in Britain. There’s still so many talking like Sir Leonard last night. That’s why Mr Spencer felt the need to demonstrate his point. And I tell

you, Stevens, if the likes of Sir Leonard are made to wake up and think a little, then you can take it from me your ordeal last night was not in vain. ’

‘Indeed, sir. ’

Lord Darlington gave another sigh. ‘We’re always the last, Stevens. Always the last to be clinging on to outmoded systems. But sooner or later, we’ll need to face up to the facts. Democracy is something for a bygone era. The world’s far too complicated a place now for universal suffrage and such like. For endless members of parliament debating things to a standstill. All fine a few years ago perhaps, but in today’s world? What was it Mr Spencer said last night? He put it rather well. ’

‘I believe, sir, he compared the present parliamentary system to a committee of the mothers’ union attempting to organize a war campaign. ’

‘Exactly, Stevens. We are, quite frankly, behind the times in this country. And it’s imperative that all forward-looking people impress this on the likes of Sir Leonard. ’

‘Indeed, sir. ’

‘I ask you, Stevens. Here we are in the midst of a continuing crisis. I’ve seen it with my own eyes when I went north with Mr Whittaker. People are suffering. Ordinary, decent working people are suffering terribly. Germany and Italy have set their houses in order by acting. And so have the wretched Bolsheviki in their own way, one supposes. Even President Roosevelt, look at him, he’s not afraid to take a few bold steps on behalf of his people. But look at us here, Stevens. Year after year goes by, and nothing gets better. All we do is argue and debate and procrastinate. Any decent idea is amended to ineffectuality by the time it’s gone half-way through the various committees it’s obliged to pass through. The few people qualified to know what’s what are

talked to a standstill by ignorant people all around them. What do you make of it, Stevens?’

‘The nation does seem to be in a regrettable condition, sir.’

‘I’ll say. Look at Germany and Italy, Stevens. See what strong leadership can do if it’s allowed to act. None of this universal suffrage nonsense there. If your house is on fire, you don’t call the household into the drawing room and debate the various options for escape for an hour, do you? It may have been all very well once, but the world’s a complicated place now. The man in the street can’t be expected to know enough about politics, economics, world commerce and what have you. And why should he? In fact, you made a very good reply last night, Stevens. How did you put it? Something to the effect that it was not in your realm? Well, why should it be?’

It occurs to me in recalling these words that, of course, many of Lord Darlington’s ideas will seem today rather odd – even, at times, unattractive. But surely it cannot be denied that there is an important element of truth in these things he said to me that morning in the billiard room. Of course, it is quite absurd to expect any butler to be in a position to answer authoritatively questions of the sort Mr Spencer had put to me that night, and the claim of people like Mr Harry Smith that one’s ‘dignity’ is conditional on being able to do so can be seen for the nonsense it is. Let us establish this quite clearly: a butler’s duty is to provide good service. It is not to meddle in the great affairs of the nation. The fact is, such great affairs will always be beyond the understanding of those such as you and me, and those of us who wish to make our mark must realize that we best do so by concentrating on what *is* within our realm; that is to say, by devoting our attention to providing the best possible service to those great gentlemen in whose hands the destiny of civilization truly lies. This may seem obvious, but then one can immediately think of too many instances of butlers

who, for a time anyway, thought quite differently. Indeed, Mr Harry Smith's words tonight remind me very much of the sort of misguided idealism which beset significant sections of our generation throughout the twenties and thirties. I refer to that strand of opinion in the profession which suggested that any butler with serious aspirations should make it his business to be forever reappraising his employer - scrutinizing the latter's motives, analysing the implications of his views. Only in this way, so the argument ran, could one be sure one's skills were being employed to a desirable end. Although one sympathizes to some extent with the idealism contained in such an argument, there can be little doubt that it is the result, like Mr Smith's sentiments tonight, of misguided thinking. One need only look at the butlers who attempted to put such an approach into practice, and one will see that their careers - and in some cases they were highly promising careers - came to nothing as a direct consequence. I personally knew at least two professionals, both of some ability, who went from one employer to the next, forever dissatisfied, never settling anywhere, until they drifted from view altogether. That this should happen is not in the least surprising. For it is, in practice, simply not possible to adopt such a critical attitude towards an employer and at the same time provide good service. It is not simply that one is unlikely to be able to meet the many demands of service at the higher levels while one's attention is being diverted by such matters; more fundamentally, a butler who is forever attempting to formulate his own 'strong opinions' on his employer's affairs is bound to lack one quality essential in all good professionals: namely, loyalty. Please do not misunderstand me here; I do not refer to the mindless sort of 'loyalty' that mediocre employers bemoan the lack of when they find themselves unable to retain the services of high-calibre professionals. Indeed, I would be among the last to advocate bestowing one's loyalty carelessly on any lady or gentleman who happens to employ one for a time. However, if a butler is to be of any worth to

anything or anybody in life, there must surely come a time when he ceases his searching; a time when he must say to himself: 'This employer embodies all that I find noble and admirable. I will hereafter devote myself to serving him.' This is loyalty *intelligently* bestowed. What is there 'undignified' in this? One is simply accepting an inescapable truth: that the likes of you and I will never be in a position to comprehend the great affairs of today's world, and our best course will always be to put our trust in an employer we judge to be wise and honourable, and to devote our energies to the task of serving him to the best of our ability. Look at the likes of Mr Marshall, say, or Mr Lane - surely two of the greatest figures in our profession. Can we imagine Mr Marshall arguing with Lord Camberley over the latter's latest dispatch to the Foreign Office? Do we admire Mr Lane any the less because we learn he is not in the habit of challenging Sir Leonard Gray before each speech in the House of Commons? Of course we do not. What is there 'undignified', what is there at all culpable in such an attitude? How can one possibly be held to blame in any sense because, say, the passage of time has shown that Lord Darlington's efforts were misguided, even foolish? Throughout the years I served him, it was he and he alone who weighed up evidence and judged it best to proceed in the way he did, while I simply confined myself, quite properly, to affairs within my own professional realm. And as far as I am concerned, I carried out my duties to the best of my abilities, indeed to a standard which many may consider 'first rate'. It is hardly my fault if his lordship's life and work have turned out today to look, at best, a sad waste - and it is quite illogical that I should feel any regret or shame on my own account.

DAY FOUR - AFTERNOON

Little Compton, Cornwall

I have finally arrived at Little Compton, and at this moment, am sitting in the dining hall of the Rose Garden Hotel having recently finished lunch. Outside, the rain is falling steadily.

The Rose Garden Hotel, while hardly luxurious, is certainly homely and comfortable, and one cannot begrudge the extra expense of accommodating oneself here. It is conveniently situated on one corner of the village square, a rather charming ivy-covered manor house capable of housing, I would suppose, thirty or so guests. This 'dining hall' where I now sit, however, is a modern annexe built to adjoin the main building - a long, flat room characterized by rows of large windows on either side. On one side, the village square is visible; on the other, the rear garden, from which this establishment presumably takes its name. The garden, which seems well sheltered from the wind, has a number of tables arranged about it, and when the weather is fine, I imagine it is a very pleasant place to partake of meals or refreshments. In fact, I know that a little earlier, some guests had actually commenced lunch out there, only to be interrupted by the appearance of ominous storm clouds. When I was first shown in here an hour or so ago, staff were hurriedly stripping down the garden tables - while their recent occupants, including one gentleman with a napkin still tucked into his shirt, were standing about looking rather lost. Then, very soon afterwards, the rain had come down with such ferocity that for a moment all the guests seemed to stop eating just to stare out of the windows.

My own table is on the village square side of the room and I have thus spent much of the past hour watching the rain falling on the square, and upon the Ford and one or two other

vehicles stationed outside. The rain has now steadied somewhat, but it is still sufficiently hard as to discourage one from going out and wandering around the village. Of course, the possibility has occurred to me that I might set off now to meet Miss Kenton; but then in my letter, I informed her I would be calling at three o'clock, and I do not think it wise to surprise her by arriving any earlier. It would seem quite likely then, if the rain does not cease very shortly, that I will remain here drinking tea until the proper time comes for me to set off. I have ascertained from the young woman who served me lunch that the address where Miss Kenton is presently residing is some fifteen minutes' walk away, which implies I have at least another forty minutes to wait.

I should say, incidentally, that I am not so foolish as to be unprepared for disappointment. I am only too aware that I never received a reply from Miss Kenton confirming she would be happy about a meeting. However, knowing Miss Kenton as I do, I am inclined to think that a lack of any letter can be taken as agreement; were a meeting for any reason inconvenient, I feel sure she would not have hesitated to inform me. Moreover, I had stated in my letter the fact that I had made a reservation at this hotel and that any last-minute message could be left for me here; that no such message was awaiting me can, I believe, be taken as further reason to suppose all is well.

This present downpour is something of a surprise, since the day started with the bright morning sunshine I have been blessed with each morning since leaving Darlington Hall. In fact, the day had generally begun well with a breakfast of fresh farm eggs and toast, provided for me by Mrs Taylor, and with Dr Carlisle calling by at seven thirty as promised, I was able to take my leave of the Taylors - who continued not to hear of remuneration - before any further embarrassing conversations had had a chance to develop.

‘I found a can of petrol for you,’ Dr Carlisle announced, as he ushered me into the passenger seat of his Rover. I thanked him for his thoughtfulness, but when I made inquiries as to payment, I found that he, too, would hear none of it.

‘Nonsense, old boy. It’s only a little bit I found at the back of my garage. But it’ll be enough for you to reach Crosby Gate and you can fill up good and proper there.’

The village centre of Moscombe, in the morning sunshine, could be seen to be a number of small shops surrounding a church, the steeple of which I had seen from the hill yesterday evening. I had little chance to study the village, however, for Dr Carlisle turned his car briskly into the driveway of a farmyard.

‘Just a little short cut,’ he said, as we made our way past barns and stationary farm vehicles. There seemed to be no persons present anywhere, and at one point, when we were confronted by a closed gate, the doctor said: ‘Sorry, old chap, but if you wouldn’t mind doing the honours.’

Getting out, I went to the gate, and as soon as I did so, a furious chorus of barking erupted in one of the barns near by, so that it was with some relief that I rejoined Dr Carlisle again in the front of his Rover.

We exchanged a few pleasantries as we climbed a narrow road between tall trees, he inquiring after how I had slept at the Taylors and so forth. Then he said quite abruptly:

‘I say, I hope you don’t think me very rude. But you aren’t a manservant of some sort, are you?’

I must confess, my overwhelming feeling on hearing this was one of relief.

‘I am indeed, sir. In fact, I am the butler of Darlington Hall, near Oxford.’

‘Thought so. All that about having met Winston Churchill and so on. I thought to myself, well, either the chap’s been lying his head off, or – then it occurred to me, there’s one simple explanation.’

Dr Carlisle turned to me with a smile as he continued to steer the car up the steep winding road. I said:

‘It wasn’t my intention to deceive anyone, sir. However ...’

‘Oh, no need to explain, old fellow. I can quite see how it happened. I mean to say, you are a pretty impressive specimen. The likes of the people here, they’re bound to take you for at least a lord or a duke.’ The doctor gave a hearty laugh. ‘It must do one good to be mistaken for a lord every now and then.’

We travelled on in silence for a few moments. Then Dr Carlisle said to me: ‘Well, I hope you enjoyed your little stay with us here.’

‘I did very much, thank you, sir.’

‘And what did you make of the citizens of Moscombe? Not such a bad bunch, are they?’

‘Very engaging, sir. Mr and Mrs Taylor were extremely kind.’

‘I wish you wouldn’t call me “sir” like that all the time, Mr Stevens. No, they’re not such a bad bunch at all around here. As far as I’m concerned, I’d happily spend the rest of my life out here.’

I thought I heard something slightly odd in the way Dr Carlisle said this. There was, too, a curiously deliberate edge to the way he went on to inquire again:

‘So you found them an engaging bunch, eh?’

‘Indeed, Doctor. Extremely congenial.’

‘So what were they all telling you about last night? Hope they didn’t bore you silly with all the village gossip.’

‘Not at all, Doctor. As a matter of fact, the conversation tended to be rather earnest in tone and some very interesting viewpoints were expressed.’

‘Oh, you mean Harry Smith,’ the doctor said with a laugh. ‘You shouldn’t mind him. He’s entertaining enough to listen to for a while, but really, he’s all in a muddle. At times you’d think he was some sort of Communist, then he comes out with something that makes him sound true blue Tory. Truth is, he’s all in a muddle.’

‘Ah, that is very interesting to hear.’

‘What did he lecture you on last night? The Empire? The National Health?’

‘Mr Smith restricted himself to more general topics.’

‘Oh? For instance?’

I gave a cough. ‘Mr Smith had some thoughts on the nature of dignity.’

‘I say. Now that sounds rather philosophical for Harry Smith. How the devil did he get on to that?’

‘I believe Mr Smith was stressing the importance of his campaigning work in the village.’

‘Ah, yes?’

‘He was impressing upon me the point that the residents of Moscombe held strong opinions on all manner of great affairs.’

‘Ah, yes. Sounds like Harry Smith. As you probably guessed, that’s all nonsense, of course. Harry’s always going around trying to work everybody up over issues. But the truth is, people are happier left alone.’

We were silent again for a moment or two. Eventually, I said:

‘Excuse me for asking, sir. But may I take it Mr Smith is considered something of a comic figure?’

‘Hmm. That’s taking it a little too far, I’d say. People do have a political conscience of sorts here. They feel they *ought* to have strong feelings on this and that, just as Harry urges them to. But really, they’re no different from people anywhere. They want a quiet life. Harry has a lot of ideas about changes to this and that, but really, no one in the village wants upheaval, even if it might benefit them. People here want to be left alone to lead their quiet little lives. They don’t want to be bothered with this issue and that issue.’

I was surprised by the tone of disgust that had entered the doctor’s voice. But he recovered himself quickly with a short laugh and remarked:

‘Nice view of the village on your side.’

Indeed, the village had become visible some way below us. Of course, the morning sunshine gave it a very different aspect, but otherwise it looked much the same view as the one I had first encountered in the evening gloom, and I supposed from this that we were now close to the spot where I had left the Ford.

‘Mr Smith seemed to be of the view,’ I said, ‘that a person’s dignity rested on such things. Having strong opinions and such.’

‘Ah, yes, dignity. I was forgetting. Yes, so Harry was trying to tackle philosophical definitions. My word. I take it it was a lot of rot.’

‘His conclusions were not necessarily those that compelled agreement, sir.’

Dr Carlisle nodded, but seemed to have become immersed in his own thoughts. 'You know, Mr Stevens,' he said, eventually, 'when I first came out here, I was a committed socialist. Believed in the best services for all the people and all the rest of it. First came here in ' forty-nine. Socialism would allow people to live with dignity. That's what I believed when I came out here. Sorry, you don't want to hear all this rot.' He turned to me cheerily. 'What about you, old chap?'

'I'm sorry, sir?'

'What do *you* think dignity's all about?'

The directness of this inquiry did, I admit, take me rather by surprise. 'It's rather a hard thing to explain in a few words, sir,' I said. 'But I suspect it comes down to not removing one's clothing in public.'

'Sorry. What does?'

'Dignity, sir.'

'Ah.' The doctor nodded, but looked a little bemused. Then he said: 'Now, this road should be familiar to you. Probably looks rather different in the daylight. Ah, is that it there? My goodness, what a handsome vehicle!'

Dr Carlisle pulled up just behind the Ford, got out and said again: 'My, what a handsome vehicle.' The next moment he had produced a funnel and a can of petrol and was most kindly assisting me in filling the tank of the Ford. Any fears I had that some deeper trouble was afflicting the Ford were laid to rest when I tried the ignition and heard the engine come to life with a healthy murmur. At this point, I thanked Dr Carlisle and we took leave of each other, though I was obliged to follow the back of his Rover along the twisting hill road for a further mile or so before our routes separated.

It was around nine o' clock that I crossed the border into Cornwall. This was at least three hours before the rain began and the clouds were still all of a brilliant white. In fact, many of the sights that greeted me this morning were among the most charming I have so far encountered. It was unfortunate, then, that I could not for much of the time give to them the attention they warranted; for one may as well declare it, one was in a condition of some preoccupation with the thought that - barring some unseen complication - one would be meeting Miss Kenton again before the day's end. So it was, then, that while speeding along between large open fields, no human being or vehicle apparent for miles, or else steering carefully through marvellous little villages, some no more than a cluster of a few stone cottages, I found myself yet again turning over certain recollections from the past. And now, as I sit here in Little Compton, here in the dining room of this pleasant hotel with a little time on my hands, watching the rain splashing on the pavements of the village square outside, I am unable to prevent my mind from continuing to wander along these same tracks.

One memory in particular has preoccupied me all morning - or rather, a fragment of a memory, a moment that has for some reason remained with me vividly through the years. It is a recollection of standing alone in the back corridor before the closed door of Miss Kenton's parlour; I was not actually facing the door, but standing with my person half turned towards it, transfixed by indecision as to whether or not I should knock; for at that moment, as I recall, I had been struck by the conviction that behind that very door, just a few yards from me, Miss Kenton was in fact crying. As I say, this moment has remained firmly embedded in my mind, as has the memory of the peculiar sensation I felt rising within me as I stood there like that. However, I am not at all certain now as to the actual circumstances which had led me to be standing thus in the back corridor. It occurs to me that elsewhere in attempting to gather such recollections, I may well have asserted that this memory derived from the minutes

immediately after Miss Kenton's receiving news of her aunt's death; that is to say, the occasion when, having left her to be alone with her grief, I realized out in the corridor that I had not offered her my condolences. But now, having thought further, I believe I may have been a little confused about this matter; that in fact this fragment of memory derives from events that took place on an evening at least a few months after the death of Miss Kenton's aunt - the evening, in fact, when the young Mr Cardinal turned up at Darlington Hall rather unexpectedly.

Mr Cardinal's father, Sir David Cardinal, had been for many years his lordship's close friend and colleague, but had been tragically killed in a riding accident some three or four years prior to the evening I am now recalling. Meanwhile, the young Mr Cardinal had been building something of a name as a columnist, specializing in witty comments on international affairs. Evidently, these columns were rarely to Lord Darlington's liking, for I can recall numerous instances of his looking up from a journal and saying something like:

'Young Reggie writing such nonsense again. Just as well his father's not alive to read this.' But Mr Cardinal's columns did not prevent him being a frequent visitor at the house; indeed, his lordship never forgot that the young man was his godson and always treated him as kin. At the same time, it had never been Mr Cardinal's habit to turn up to dinner without any prior warning, and I was thus a little surprised when on answering the door that evening I found him standing there, his briefcase cradled in both arms.

'Oh, hello, Stevens, how are you?' he said. 'Just happened to be in a bit of a jam tonight and wondered if Lord Darlington would put me up for the night.'

'It's very nice to see you again, sir. I shall tell his lordship you are here.'

'I'd intended to stay at Mr Roland's place, but there seems to have been some misunderstanding and they've gone

away somewhere. Hope it's not too inconvenient a time to call. I mean, nothing special on tonight, is there?'

'I believe, sir, his lordship is expecting some gentlemen to call after dinner.'

'Oh, that's bad luck. I seem to have chosen a bad night. I'd better keep my head low. I've got some pieces I have to work on tonight anyway.' Mr Cardinal indicated his briefcase.

'I shall tell his lordship you are here, sir. You are, in any case, in good time to join him for dinner.'

'Jolly good, I was hoping I might have been. But I don't expect Mrs Mortimer's going to be very pleased with me.'

I left Mr Cardinal in the drawing room and made my way to the study, where I found his lordship working through some pages with a look of deep concentration. When I told him of Mr Cardinal's arrival, a look of surprised annoyance crossed his face. Then he leaned back in his chair as though puzzling something out.

'Tell Mr Cardinal I'll be down shortly,' he said finally. 'He can amuse himself for a little while.'

When I returned downstairs, I discovered Mr Cardinal moving rather restlessly around the drawing room examining objects he must long ago have become familiar with. I conveyed his lordship's message and asked him what refreshment I might bring him.

'Oh, just some tea for now, Stevens. Who's his lordship expecting tonight?'

'I'm sorry, sir, I'm afraid I am unable to help you.'

'No idea at all?'

'I'm sorry, sir.'

'Hmm, curious. Oh, well. Better keep my head low tonight.'

It was not long after this, I recall, that I went down to Miss Kenton's parlour. She was sitting at her table, though there was nothing before her and her hands were empty; indeed, something in her demeanour suggested she had been sitting there like that for some time prior to my knocking.

'Mr Cardinal is here, Miss Kenton,' I said. 'He'll be requiring his usual room tonight.'

'Very good, Mr Stevens. I shall see to it before I leave.'

'Ah. You are going out this evening, Miss Kenton?'

'I am indeed, Mr Stevens.'

Perhaps I looked a little surprised, for she went on: 'You will recall, Mr Stevens, we discussed this a fortnight ago.'

'Yes, of course, Miss Kenton. I beg your pardon, it had just slipped my mind for the moment.'

'Is something the matter, Mr Stevens?'

'Not at all, Miss Kenton. Some visitors are expected this evening, but there is no reason why your presence will be required.'

'We did agree to my taking this evening off a fortnight ago, Mr Stevens.'

'Of course, Miss Kenton. I do beg your pardon.'

I turned to leave, but then I was halted at the door by Miss Kenton saying:

'Mr Stevens, I have something to tell you.'

'Yes, Miss Kenton?'

'It concerns my acquaintance. Who I am going to meet tonight.'

'Yes, Miss Kenton.'

‘He has asked me to marry him. I thought you had a right to know that.’

‘Indeed, Miss Kenton. That is very interesting.’

‘I am still giving the matter thought.’

‘Indeed.’

She glanced down a second at her hands, but then almost immediately her gaze returned to me. ‘My acquaintance is to start a job in the West Country as of next month.’

‘Indeed.’

‘As I say, Mr Stevens, I am still giving the matter some thought. However, I thought you should be informed of the situation.’

‘I’m very grateful, Miss Kenton. I do hope you have a pleasant evening. Now if you will excuse me.’

It must have been twenty minutes or so later that I encountered Miss Kenton again, this time while I was busy with preparations for dinner. In fact, I was half-way up the back staircase, carrying a fully laden tray, when I heard the sound of angry footsteps rattling the floorboards somewhere below me. Turning, I saw Miss Kenton glaring up at me from the foot of the stairs.

‘Mr Stevens, do I understand that you are wishing me to remain on duty this evening?’

‘Not at all, Miss Kenton. As you pointed out, you did notify me some time ago.’

‘But I can see you are very unhappy about my going out tonight.’

‘On the contrary, Miss Kenton.’

‘Do you imagine that by creating so much commotion in the kitchen and by stamping back and forth like this outside my parlour you will get me to change my mind?’

‘Miss Kenton, the slight excitement in the kitchen is solely on account of Mr Cardinal coming to dinner at the last moment. There is absolutely no reason why you should not go out this evening.’

‘I intend to go with or without your blessing, Mr Stevens, I wish to make this clear. I made arrangements weeks ago.’

‘Indeed, Miss Kenton. And once again, I would wish you a very pleasant evening.’

At dinner, an odd atmosphere seemed to hang in the air between the two gentlemen. For long moments, they ate in silence, his lordship in particular seeming very far away. At one point, Mr Cardinal said:

‘Something special tonight, sir?’

‘Eh?’

‘Your visitors this evening. Special?’

‘Afraid I can’t tell you, my boy. Strictly confidential.’

‘Oh dear. I suppose this means I shouldn’t sit in on it.’

‘Sit in on what, my boy?’

‘Whatever it is that’s going to take place tonight?’

‘Oh, it wouldn’t be of any interest to you. In any case, confidentiality is of the utmost. Can’t have someone like you around. Oh no, that wouldn’t do at all.’

‘Oh, dear. This does sound very special.’

Mr Cardinal was watching his lordship very keenly, but the latter simply went back to his food without saying anything further.

The gentlemen retired to the smoking room for port and cigars. In the course of clearing the dining room, and also

in preparing the drawing room for the arrival of the evening's visitors, I was obliged to walk repeatedly past the smoking-room doors. It was inevitable, then, that I would notice how the gentlemen, in contrast to their quiet mood at dinner, had begun to exchange words with some urgency. A quarter of an hour later, angry voices were being raised. Of course, I did not stop to listen, but I could not avoid hearing his lordship shouting: 'But that's not your business, my boy! That's not your business!'

I was in the dining room when the gentlemen eventually came out. They seemed to have calmed themselves, and the only words exchanged as they walked across the hall were his lordship's: 'Now remember, my boy. I'm trusting you.' To which Mr Cardinal muttered with irritation: 'Yes, yes, you have my word.' Then their footsteps separated, his lordship's going towards his study, Mr Cardinal's towards the library.

At almost precisely eight thirty, there came the sound of motor cars pulling up in the courtyard. I opened the door to a chauffeur, and past his shoulder I could see some police constables dispersing to various points of the grounds. The next moment, I was showing in two very distinguished gentlemen, who were met by his lordship in the hall and ushered quickly into the drawing room. Ten minutes or so later came the sound of another car and I opened the door to Herr Ribbentrop, the German Ambassador, by now no stranger to Darlington Hall. His lordship emerged to meet him and the two gentlemen appeared to exchange complicit glances before disappearing together into the drawing room. When a few minutes later I was called in to provide refreshments, the four gentlemen were discussing the relative merits of different sorts of sausage, and the atmosphere seemed on the surface at least quite convivial.

Thereafter I took up my position out in the hall - the position near the entrance arch that I customarily took up during important meetings - and was not obliged to move from

it again until some two hours later, when the back door bell was rung. On descending, I discovered a police constable standing there with Miss Kenton, requesting that I verify the latter's identity.

'Just security, miss, no offence meant,' the officer muttered as he wandered off again into the night.

As I was bolting the door, I noticed Miss Kenton waiting for me, and said:

'I trust you had a pleasant evening, Miss Kenton.'

She made no reply, so I said again, as we were making our way across the darkened expanse of the kitchen floor: 'I trust you had a pleasant evening, Miss Kenton.'

'I did, thank you, Mr Stevens.'

'I'm pleased to hear that.'

Behind me, Miss Kenton's footsteps came to a sudden halt, and I heard her say:

'Are you not in the least interested in what took place tonight between my acquaintance and I, Mr Stevens?'

'I do not mean to be rude, Miss Kenton, but I really must return upstairs without further delay. The fact is, events of a global significance are taking place in this house at this very moment.'

'When are they not, Mr Stevens? Very well, if you must be rushing off, I shall just tell you that I accepted my acquaintance's proposal.'

'I beg your pardon, Miss Kenton?'

'His proposal of marriage.'

'Ah, is that so, Miss Kenton? Than may I offer you my congratulations.'

'Thank you, Mr Stevens. Of course, I will be happy to serve out my notice. However, should it be that you are able

to release me earlier, we would be very grateful. My acquaintance begins his new job in the West Country in two weeks' time.'

'I will do my best to secure a replacement at the earliest opportunity, Miss Kenton. Now if you will excuse me, I must return upstairs.'

I started to walk away again, but then when I had all but reached the doors out to the corridor, I heard Miss Kenton say: 'Mr Stevens,' and thus turned once more. She had not moved, and consequently she was obliged to raise her voice slightly in addressing me, so that it resonated rather oddly in the cavernous spaces of the dark and empty kitchen.

'Am I to take it,' she said, 'that after the many years of service I have given in this house, you have no more words to greet the news of my possible departure than those you have just uttered?'

'Miss Kenton, you have my warmest congratulations. But I repeat, there are matters of global significance taking place upstairs and I must return to my post.'

'Did you know, Mr Stevens, that you have been a very important figure for my acquaintance and I?'

'Really, Miss Kenton?'

'Yes, Mr Stevens. We often pass the time amusing ourselves with anecdotes about you. For instance, my acquaintance is always wanting me to show him the way you pinch your nostrils together when you put pepper on your food. That always get him laughing.'

'Indeed.'

'He's also rather fond of your staff "pep-talks". I must say, I've become quite expert in re-creating them. I only have to do a few lines to have the pair of us in stitches.'

‘Indeed, Miss Kenton. Now you will please excuse me.’

I ascended to the hall and took up my position again. However, before five minutes had passed, Mr Cardinal appeared in the doorway of the library and beckoned me over.

‘Hate to bother you, Stevens,’ he said. ‘But I couldn’t trouble you to fetch a little more brandy, could I? The bottle you brought in earlier appears to be finished.’

‘You are very welcome to whatever refreshments you care for, sir. However, in view of the fact that you have your column to complete, I wonder if it is entirely wise to partake further.’

‘My column will be fine, Stevens. Do get me a little more brandy, there’s a good fellow.’

‘Very well, sir.’

When I returned to the library a moment later, Mr Cardinal was wandering around the shelves, scrutinizing spines. I could see papers scattered untidily over one of the writing desks nearby. As I approached, Mr Cardinal made an appreciative sound and slumped down into a leather armchair. I went over to him, poured a little brandy and handed it to him.

‘You know, Stevens,’ he said, ‘we’ve been friends for some time now, haven’t we?’

‘Indeed, sir.’

‘I always look forward to a little chat with you whenever I come here.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Won’t you care to join me in a little drink?’

‘That’s very kind of you, sir. But no, thank you, I won’t.’

‘I say, Stevens, are you all right there?’

‘Perfectly all right, thank you, sir,’ I said with a small laugh.

‘Not feeling unwell, are you?’

‘A little tired, perhaps, but I’m perfectly fine, thank you, sir.’

‘Well, then, you should sit down. Anyway, as I was saying. We’ve been friends for some time. So I really ought to be truthful with you. As you no doubt guessed, I didn’t happen by tonight just by accident. I had a tip-off, you see. About what’s going on. Over there across the hall at this very moment.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I do wish you’d sit down, Stevens. I want us to talk as friends, and you’re standing there holding that blasted tray looking like you’re about to wander off any second.’

‘I’m sorry, sir.’

I put down my tray and seated myself - in an appropriate posture - on the armchair Mr Cardinal was indicating.

‘That’s better,’ Mr Cardinal said. ‘Now, Stevens, I don’t suppose the Prime Minister is presently in the drawing room, is he?’

‘The Prime Minister, sir?’

‘Oh, it’s all right, you don’t have to tell me. I understand you’re in a tricky position.’ Mr Cardinal heaved a sigh, and looked wearily towards his papers scattered over the desk. Then he said:

‘I hardly need to tell you, do I, Stevens, what I feel towards his lordship. I mean to say, he’s been like a second father to me. I hardly need to tell you, Stevens.’

‘No, sir.’

‘I care deeply for him.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And I know you do too. Care deeply for him. Don’t you, Stevens?’

‘I do indeed, sir.’

‘Good. So we both know where we stand. But let’s face facts. His lordship is in deep waters. I’ve watched him swimming further and further out and let me tell you, I’m getting very anxious. He’s out of his depth, you see, Stevens.’

‘Is that so, sir?’

‘Stevens, do you know what is happening at this very moment as we sit here talking? What’s happening just several yards from us? Over in that room - and I don’t need you to confirm it - there is gathered at this moment the British Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the German Ambassador. His lordship has worked wonders to bring this meeting about, and he believes - faithfully believes - he’s doing something good and honourable. Do you know why his lordship has brought these gentlemen here tonight? Do you know, Stevens, what is going on here?’

‘I’m afraid not, sir.’

‘You’re afraid not. Tell me, Stevens, don’t you care at all? Aren’t you curious? Good God, man, something very crucial is going on in this house. Aren’t you at all curious?’

‘It is not my place to be curious about such matters, sir.’

‘But you care about his lordship. You care deeply, you just told me that. If you care about his lordship, shouldn’t you be concerned? At least a little curious? The British Prime Minister and the German Ambassador are brought together by your employer for secret talks in the night, and you’re not even curious?’

‘I would not say I am not curious, sir. However, it is not my position to display curiosity about such matters.’

‘It’s not your position? Ah, I suppose you believe that to be loyalty. Do you? Do you think that’s being loyal? To his lordship? Or to the Crown, come to that?’

‘I’m sorry, sir, I fail to see what it is you are proposing.’

Mr Cardinal sighed again and shook his head. ‘I’m not proposing anything, Stevens. Quite frankly, I don’t know what’s to be done. But you might at least be curious.’

He was silent for a moment, during which time he seemed to be gazing emptily at the area of carpet around my feet.

‘Sure you won’t join me in a drink, Stevens?’ he said eventually.

‘No, thank you, sir.’

‘I’ll tell you this, Stevens. His lordship is being made a fool of. I’ve done a lot of investigating, I know the situation in Germany now as well as anyone in this country, and I tell you, his lordship is being made a fool of.’

I gave no reply, and Mr Cardinal went on gazing emptily at the floor. After a while, he continued:

‘His lordship is a dear, dear man. But the fact is, he is out of his depth. He is being manoeuvred. The Nazis are manoeuvring him like a pawn. Have you noticed this, Stevens? Have you noticed this is what has been happening for the last three or four years at least?’

‘I’m sorry, sir, I have failed to notice any such development.’

‘Haven’t you ever had a suspicion? The smallest suspicion that Herr Hitler, through our dear friend Herr Ribbentrop, has been manoeuvring his lordship like a pawn,

just as easily as he manoeuvres any of his other pawns back in Berlin?'

'I'm sorry, sir, I'm afraid I have not noticed any such development.'

'But I suppose you wouldn't, Stevens, because you're not curious. You just let all this go on before you and you never think to look at it for what it is.'

Mr Cardinal adjusted his position in the armchair so that he was a little more upright, and for a moment he seemed to be contemplating his unfinished work on the desk near by. Then he said:

'His lordship is a gentleman. That's what's at the root of it. He's a gentleman, and he fought a war with the Germans, and it's his instinct to offer generosity and friendship to a defeated foe. It's his instinct. Because he's a gentleman, a true old English gentleman. And you must have seen it, Stevens. How could you not have seen it? The way they've used it, manipulated it, turned something fine and noble into something else - something they can use for their own foul ends? You must have seen it, Stevens.'

Mr Cardinal was once again staring at the floor. He remained silent for a few moments, then he said:

'I remember coming here years ago, and there was this American chap here. We were having a big conference, my father was involved in organizing it. I remember this American chap, even drunker than I am now, he got up at the dinner table in front of the whole company. And he pointed at his lordship and called him an amateur. Called him a bungling amateur and said he was out of his depth. Well, I have to say, Stevens, that American chap was quite right. It's a fact of life. Today's world is too foul a place for fine and noble instincts. You've seen it yourself, haven't you, Stevens? The way they've manipulated something fine and noble. You've seen it yourself, haven't you?'

‘I’m sorry, sir, but I can’t say I have.’

‘You can’t say you have. Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m going to do something about it. If Father were alive, he would do something to stop it.’

Mr Cardinal fell silent again and for a moment - perhaps it was to do with his having evoked memories of his late father - he looked extremely melancholy. ‘Are you content, Stevens,’ he said finally, ‘to watch his lordship go over the precipice just like that?’

‘I’m sorry, sir, I don’t fully understand what it is you’re referring to.’

‘You don’t understand, Stevens. Well, we’re friends and so I’ll put it to you frankly. Over the last few years, his lordship has probably been the single most useful pawn Herr Hitler has had in this country for his propaganda tricks. All the better because he’s sincere and honourable and doesn’t recognize the true nature of what he’s doing. During the last three years alone, his lordship has been crucially instrumental in establishing links between Berlin and over sixty of the most influential citizens of this country. It’s worked beautifully for them. Herr Ribbentrop’s been able virtually to bypass our foreign office altogether. And as if their wretched Rally and their wretched Olympic Games weren’t enough, do you know what they’ve got his lordship working on now? Do you have any idea what is being discussed now?’

‘I’m afraid not, sir.’

‘His lordship has been trying to persuade the Prime Minister himself to accept an invitation to visit Herr Hitler. He really believes there’s a terrible misunderstanding on the Prime Minister’s part concerning the present German regime.’

‘I cannot see what there is to object to in that, sir. His lordship has always striven to aid better understanding between nations.’

‘And that’s not all, Stevens. At this very moment, unless I am very much mistaken, at this very moment, his lordship is discussing the idea of His Majesty himself visiting Herr Hitler. It’s hardly a secret our new king has always been an enthusiast for the Nazis. Well, apparently he’s now keen to accept Herr Hitler’s invitation. At this very moment, Stevens, his lordship is doing what he can to remove Foreign Office objections to this appalling idea.’

‘I’m sorry, sir, but I cannot see that his lordship is doing anything other than that which is highest and noblest. He is doing what he can, after all, to ensure that peace will continue to prevail in Europe.’

‘Tell me, Stevens, aren’t you struck by even the remote possibility that I am correct? Are you not, at least, *curious* about what I am saying?’

‘I’m sorry, sir, but I have to say that I have every trust in his lordship’s good judgement.’

‘No one with good judgement could persist in believing anything Herr Hitler says after the Rhineland, Stevens. His lordship is out of his depth. Oh dear, now I’ve really offended you.’

‘Not at all, sir,’ I said, for I had risen on hearing the bell from the drawing room. ‘I appear to be required by the gentlemen. Please excuse me.’

In the drawing room, the air was thick with tobacco smoke. Indeed, the distinguished gentlemen continued to smoke their cigars, solemn expressions on their faces, not uttering a word, while his lordship instructed me to bring up a certain exceptionally fine bottle of port from the cellar.

At such a time of night, one’s footsteps descending the back staircase are bound to be conspicuous and no doubt they were responsible for arousing Miss Kenton. For as I was making my way along the darkness of the corridor, the door to

her parlour opened and she appeared at the threshold, illuminated by the light from within.

‘I am surprised to find you still down here, Miss Kenton,’ I said as I approached.

‘Mr Stevens, I was very foolish earlier on.’

‘Excuse me, Miss Kenton, but I have not time to talk just now.’

‘Mr Stevens, you mustn’t take anything I said earlier to heart. I was simply being foolish.’

‘I have not taken anything you have said to heart, Miss Kenton. In fact, I cannot recall what it is you might be referring to. Events of great importance are unfolding upstairs and I can hardly stop to exchange pleasantries with you. I would suggest you retire for the night.’

With that I hurried on, and it was not until I had all but reached the kitchen doors that the darkness falling again in the corridor told me Miss Kenton had closed her parlour door.

It did not take me long to locate the bottle in question down in the cellar and to make the necessary preparations for its serving. It was, then, only a few minutes after my short encounter with Miss Kenton that I found myself walking down the corridor again on my return journey, this time bearing a tray. As I approached Miss Kenton’s door, I saw from the light seeping around its edges that she was still within. And that was the moment, I am now sure, that has remained so persistently lodged in my memory - that moment as I paused in the dimness of the corridor, the tray in my hands, an ever-growing conviction mounting within me that just a few yards away, on the other side of that door, Miss Kenton was at that moment crying. As I recall, there was no real evidence to account for this conviction - I had certainly not heard any sounds of crying - and yet I remember being quite certain that were I to knock and enter, I would

discover her in tears. I do not know how long I remained standing there; at the time it seemed a significant period, but in reality, I suspect, it was only a matter of a few seconds. For, of course, I was required to hurry upstairs to serve some of the most distinguished gentlemen of the land and I cannot imagine I would have delayed unduly.

When I returned to the drawing room, I saw that the gentlemen were still in a rather serious mood. Beyond this, however, I had little chance to gain any impression of the atmosphere, for no sooner had I entered than his lordship was taking the tray from me, saying: 'Thank you, Stevens, I'll see to it. That'll be all.'

Crossing the hall again, I took up my usual position beneath the arch, and for the next hour or so, until, that is, the gentlemen finally departed, no event occurred which obliged me to move from my spot. Nevertheless, that hour I spent standing there has stayed very vividly in my mind throughout the years. At first, my mood was - I do not mind admitting it - somewhat downcast. But then as I continued to stand there, a curious thing began to take place; that is to say, a deep feeling of triumph started to well up within me. I cannot remember to what extent I analysed this feeling at the time, but today, looking back on it, it does not seem so difficult to account for. I had, after all, just come through an extremely trying evening, throughout which I had managed to preserve a 'dignity in keeping with my position' - and had done so, moreover, in a manner even my father might have been proud of. And there across the hall, behind the very doors upon which my gaze was then resting, within the very room where I had just executed my duties, the most powerful gentlemen of Europe were conferring over the fate of our continent. Who would doubt at that moment that I had indeed come as close to the great hub of things as any butler could wish? I would suppose, then, that as I stood there pondering the events of the evening - those that had unfolded and those still in the process of doing so - they appeared to me

a sort of summary of all that I had come to achieve thus far in my life. I can see few other explanations for that sense of triumph I came to be uplifted by that night.

DAY SIX - EVENING

Weymouth

This seaside town is a place I have thought of coming to for many years. I have heard various people talk of having spent a pleasant holiday here, and Mrs Symons too, in *The Wonder of England*, calls it a 'town that can keep the visitor fully entertained for many days on end'. In fact, she makes special mention of this pier, upon which I have been promenading for the past half-hour, recommending particularly that it be visited in the evening when it becomes lit up with bulbs of various colours. A moment ago, I learnt from an official that the lights would be switched on 'fairly soon', and so I have decided to sit down here on this bench and await the event. I have a good view from here of the sun setting over the sea, and though there is still plenty of daylight left - it has been a splendid day - I can see, here and there, lights starting to come on all along the shore. Meanwhile, the pier remains busy with people; behind me, the drumming of numerous footsteps upon these boards continues without interruption.

I arrived in this town yesterday afternoon, and have decided to remain a second night here so as to allow myself this whole day to spend in a leisurely manner. And I must say, it has been something of a relief not to be motoring; for enjoyable though the activity can be, one can also get a little weary of it after a while. In any case, I can well afford the time to remain this further day here; an early start tomorrow will ensure that I am back at Darlington Hall by teatime.

It is now fully two days since my meeting with Miss Kenton in the tea lounge of the Rose Garden Hotel in Little Compton. For indeed, that was where we met, Miss Kenton surprising me by coming to the hotel. I had been whiling away

some time after finishing my lunch - I was, I believe, simply staring at the rain from the window by my table - when a member of the hotel staff had come to inform me that a lady was wishing to see me at the reception. I rose and went out into the lobby, where I could see no one I recognized. But then the receptionist had said from behind her counter: 'The lady's in the tea lounge, sir.'

Going in through the door indicated, I discovered a room filled with ill-matching armchairs and occasional tables. There was no one else present other than Miss Kenton, who rose as I entered, smiled and held out her hand to me.

'Ah, Mr Stevens. How nice to see you again.'

'Mrs Benn, how lovely.'

The light in the room was extremely gloomy on account of the rain, and so we moved two armchairs up close to the bay window. And that was how Miss Kenton and I talked for the next two hours or so, there in the pool of grey light while the rain continued to fall steadily on the square outside.

She had, naturally, aged somewhat, but to my eyes at least, she seemed to have done so very gracefully. Her figure remained slim, her posture as upright as ever. She had maintained, too, her old way of holding her head in a manner that verged on the defiant. Of course, with the bleak light falling on her face, I could hardly help but notice the lines that had appeared here and there. But by and large the Miss Kenton I saw before me looked surprisingly similar to the person who had inhabited my memory over these years. That is to say, it was, on the whole, extremely pleasing to see her again.

For the first twenty or so minutes, I would say we exchanged the sort of remarks strangers might; she inquired politely about my journey thus far, how I was enjoying my holiday, which towns and landmarks I had visited and so on. As we continued to talk, I must say I thought I began to

notice further, more subtle changes which the years had wrought on her. For instance, Miss Kenton appeared, somehow, *slower*. It is possible this was simply the calmness that comes with age, and I did try hard for some time to see it as such. But I could not escape the feeling that what I was really seeing was a weariness with life; the spark which had once made her such a lively, and at times volatile person seemed now to have gone. In fact, every now and then, when she was not speaking, when her face was in repose, I thought I glimpsed something like sadness in her expression. But then again, I may well have been mistaken about this.

After a little while, what little awkwardness as existed during the initial minutes of our meeting had dissipated completely, and our conversation took a more personal turn. We spent some time reminiscing about various persons from the past, or else exchanging any news we had concerning them, and this was, I must say, most enjoyable. But it was not so much the content of our conversation as the little smiles she gave at the end of utterances, her small ironic inflexions here and there, certain gestures with her shoulders or her hands, which began to recall unmistakably the rhythms and habits of our conversations from all those years ago.

It was around this point, also, that I was able to establish some facts concerning her present circumstances. For instance, I learnt that her marriage was not in quite as parlous a state as might have been supposed from her letter; that although she had indeed left her home for a period of four or five days - during which time the letter I had received had been composed - she had returned home and Mr Benn had been very pleased to have her back. 'It's just as well one of us is sensible about these things,' she said with a smile.

I am aware, of course, that such matters were hardly any of my business, and I should make clear I would not have dreamt of prying into these areas were it not that I did have, you might recall, important professional reasons for

doing so; that is to say, in respect of the present staffing problems at Darlington Hall. In any case, Miss Kenton did not seem to mind at all confiding in me over these matters and I took this as a pleasing testimony to the strength of the close working relationship we had once had.

For a little while after that, I recall, Miss Kenton went on talking more generally about her husband, who is to retire soon, a little early on account of poor health, and of her daughter, who is now married and expecting a child in the autumn. In fact, Miss Kenton gave me her daughter's address in Dorset, and I must say, I was rather flattered to see how keen she was that I call in on my return journey. Although I explained that it was unlikely I would pass through that part of Dorset, Miss Kenton continued to press me, saying: 'Catherine's heard all about you, Mr Stevens. She'd be so thrilled to meet you.'

For my own part, I tried to describe to her as best I could the Darlington Hall of today. I attempted to convey to her what a genial employer Mr Farraday is; and I described the changes to the house itself, the alterations and the dust-sheetings, as well as the present staffing arrangements. Miss Kenton, I thought, became visibly happier when I talked about the house and soon we were recollecting together various old memories, frequently laughing over them.

Only once do I recall our touching upon Lord Darlington. We had been enjoying some recollection or other concerning the young Mr Cardinal, so that I was then obliged to go on to inform Miss Kenton of the gentleman's being killed in Belgium during the war. And I had gone on to say: 'Of course, his lordship was very fond of Mr Cardinal and took it very badly.'

I did not wish to spoil the pleasant atmosphere with unhappy talk, so tried to leave the topic again almost immediately. But as I had feared, Miss Kenton had read of the unsuccessful libel action, and inevitably, took the

opportunity to probe me a little. As I recall, I rather resisted being drawn in, though in the end I did say to her:

‘The fact is, Mrs Benn, throughout the war, some truly terrible things had been said about his lordship - and by *that* newspaper in particular. He bore it all while the country remained in peril, but once the war was over, and the insinuations simply continued, well, his lordship saw no reason to go on suffering in silence. It’s easy enough to see now, perhaps, all the dangers of going to court just at that time, what with the climate as it was. But there you are. His lordship sincerely believed he would get justice. Instead, of course, the newspaper simply increased its circulation. And his lordship’s good name was destroyed for ever. Really, Mrs Benn, afterwards, well, his lordship was virtually an invalid. And the house became so quiet. I would take him tea in the drawing room and, well ... It really was most tragic to see.’

‘I’m very sorry, Mr Stevens. I had no idea things had been so bad.’

‘Oh yes, Mrs Benn. But enough of this. I know you remember Darlington Hall in the days when there were great gatherings, when it was filled with distinguished visitors. Now that’s the way his lordship deserves to be remembered.’

As I say, that was the only time we mentioned Lord Darlington. Predominantly, we concerned ourselves with very happy memories, and those two hours we spent together in the tea lounge were, I would say, extremely pleasant ones. I seem to remember various other guests coming in while we were talking, sitting down for a few moments and leaving again, but they did not distract us in any way at all. Indeed, one could hardly believe two whole hours had elapsed when Miss Kenton looked up at the clock on the mantelshelf and said she would have to be returning home. On establishing that she would have to walk in the rain to the bus stop a little way out of the village, I insisted on running her there in the

Ford, and so it was that after obtaining an umbrella from the reception desk, we stepped outside together.

Large puddles had formed on the ground around where I had left the Ford, obliging me to assist Miss Kenton a little to allow her to reach the passenger door. Soon, however, we were motoring down the village high street, and then the shops had gone and we found ourselves in open country. Miss Kenton, who had been sitting quietly watching the passing view, turned to me at this point, saying:

‘What are you smiling to yourself about like that, Mr Stevens?’

‘Oh ... You must excuse me, Mrs Benn, but I was just recalling certain things you wrote in your letter. I was a little worried when I read them, but I see now I had little reason to be.’

‘Oh? What things in particular do you mean, Mr Stevens?’

‘Oh, nothing in particular, Mrs Benn.’

‘Oh, Mr Stevens, you really must tell me.’

‘Well, for instance, Mrs Benn,’ I said with a laugh, ‘at one point in your letter, you write - now let me see - “the rest of my life stretches out like an emptiness before me”. Some words to that effect.’

‘Really, Mr Stevens,’ she said, also laughing a little. ‘I couldn’t have written any such thing.’

‘Oh, I assure you you did, Mrs Benn. I recall it very clearly.’

‘Oh dear. Well, perhaps there are some days when I feel like that. But they pass quickly enough. Let me assure you, Mr Stevens, my life does *not* stretch out emptily before me. For one thing, we are looking forward to the grandchild. The first of a few perhaps.’

‘Yes, indeed. That will be splendid for you.’

We drove on quietly for a few further moments. Then Miss Kenton said:

‘And what about you, Mr Stevens? What does the future hold for you back at Darlington Hall?’

‘Well, whatever awaits me, Mrs Benn, I know I’m not awaited by emptiness. If only I were. But oh no, there’s work, work and more work.’

We both laughed at this. Then Miss Kenton pointed out a bus shelter visible further up the road. As we approached it, she said:

‘Will you wait with me, Mr Stevens? The bus will only be a few minutes.’

The rain was still falling steadily as we got out of the car and hurried towards the shelter. This latter - a stone construct complete with a tiled roof - looked very sturdy, as indeed it needed to be, standing as it did in a highly exposed position against a background of empty fields. Inside, the paint was peeling everywhere, but the place was clean enough. Miss Kenton seated herself on the bench provided, while I remained on my feet where I could command a view of the approaching bus. On the other side of the road, all I could see were more farm fields; a line of telegraph poles led my eye over them into the far distance.

After we had been waiting in silence for a few minutes, I finally brought myself to say:

‘Excuse me, Mrs Benn. But the fact is we may not meet again for a long time. I wonder if you would perhaps permit me to ask you something of a rather personal order. It is something that has been troubling me for some time.’

‘Certainly, Mr Stevens. We are old friends after all.’

‘Indeed, as you say, we are old friends. I simply wished to ask you, Mrs Benn. Please do not reply if you feel you shouldn’t. But the fact is, the letters I have had from you over the years, and in particular the last letter, have tended to suggest that you are - how might one put it? - rather unhappy. I simply wondered if you were being ill-treated in some way. Forgive me, but as I say, it is something that has worried me for some time. I would feel foolish had I come all this way and seen you and not at least asked you.’

‘Mr Stevens, there’s no need to be so embarrassed. We’re old friends, after all, are we not? In fact, I’m very touched you should be so concerned. And I can put your mind at rest on this matter absolutely. My husband does not mistreat me at all in any way. He is not in the least a cruel or ill-tempered man.’

‘I must say, Mrs Benn, that does take a load from my mind.’

I leaned forward into the rain, looking for signs of the bus.

‘I can see you are not very satisfied, Mr Stevens,’ Miss Kenton said. ‘Do you not believe me?’

‘Oh, it’s not that, Mrs Benn, not that at all. It’s just that the fact remains, you do not seem to have been happy over the years. That is to say - forgive me - you have taken it on yourself to leave your husband on a number of occasions. If he does not mistreat you, then, well ... one is rather mystified as to the cause of your unhappiness.’

I looked out into the drizzle again. Eventually, I heard Miss Kenton say behind me: ‘Mr Stevens, how can I explain? I hardly know myself why I do such things. But it’s true, I’ve left three times now.’ She paused a moment, during which time I continued to gaze out towards the fields on the other

side of the road. Then she said: 'I suppose, Mr Stevens, you're asking whether or not I love my husband.'

'Really, Mrs Benn, I would hardly presume ...'

'I feel I should answer you, Mr Stevens. As you say, we may not meet again for many years. Yes, I do love my husband. I didn't at first. I didn't at first for a long time. When I left Darlington Hall all those years ago, I never realized I was really, truly leaving. I believe I thought of it as simply another ruse, Mr Stevens, to annoy you. It was a shock to come out here and find myself married. For a long time, I was very unhappy, very unhappy indeed. But then year after year went by, there was the war, Catherine grew up, and one day I realized I loved my husband. You spend so much time with someone, you find you get used to him. He's a kind, steady man, and yes, Mr Stevens, I've grown to love him.'

Miss Kenton fell silent again for a moment. Then she went on:

'But that doesn't mean to say, of course, there aren't occasions now and then - extremely desolate occasions - when you think to yourself: "What a terrible mistake I've made with my life." And you get to thinking about a different life, a *better* life you might have had. For instance, I get to thinking about a life I might have had with you, Mr Stevens. And I suppose that's when I get angry over some trivial little thing and leave. But each time I do so, I realize before long - my rightful place is with my husband. After all, there's no turning back the clock now. One can't be forever dwelling on what might have been. One should realize one has as good as most, perhaps better, and be grateful.'

I do not think I responded immediately, for it took me a moment or two to fully digest these words of Miss Kenton. Moreover, as you might appreciate, their implications were such as to provoke a certain degree of sorrow within me. Indeed - why should I not admit it? - at that moment, my

heart was breaking. Before long, however, I turned to her and said with a smile:

‘You’re very correct, Mrs Benn. As you say, it is too late to turn back the clock. Indeed, I would not be able to rest if I thought such ideas were the cause of unhappiness for you and your husband. We must each of us, as you point out, be grateful for what we *do* have. And from what you tell me, Mrs Benn, you have reason to be contented. In fact I would venture, what with Mr Benn retiring, and with grandchildren on the way, that you and Mr Benn have some extremely happy years before you. You really mustn’t let any more foolish ideas come between yourself and the happiness you deserve.’

‘Of course, you’re right, Mr Stevens. You’re so kind.’

‘Ah, Mrs Benn, that appears to be the bus coming now.’

I stepped outside and signalled, while Miss Kenton rose and came to the edge of the shelter. Only as the bus pulled up did I glance at Miss Kenton and perceived that her eyes had filled with tears. I smiled and said:

‘Now, Mrs Benn, you must take good care of yourself. Many say retirement is the best part of life for a married couple. You must do all you can to make these years happy ones for yourself and your husband. We may never meet again, Mrs Benn, so I would ask you to take good heed of what I am saying.’

‘I will, Mr Stevens, thank you. And thank you for the lift. It was so very kind of you. It was so nice to see you again.’

‘It was a great pleasure to see you again, Mrs Benn.’

The pier lights have been switched on and behind me a crowd of people have just given a loud cheer to greet this event. There is still plenty of daylight left - the sky over the sea has turned a pale red - but it would seem that all these

people who have been gathering on this pier for the past half-hour are now willing night to fall. This confirms very aptly, I suppose, the point made by the man who until a little while ago was sitting here beside me on this bench, and with whom I had my curious discussion. His claim was that for a great many people, the evening was the best part of the day, the part they most looked forward to. And as I say, there would appear to be some truth in this assertion, for why else would all these people give a spontaneous cheer simply because the pier lights have come on?

Of course, the man had been speaking figuratively, but it is rather interesting to see his words borne out so immediately at the literal level. I would suppose he had been sitting here next to me for some minutes without my noticing him, so absorbed had I become with my recollections of meeting Miss Kenton two days ago. In fact, I do not think I registered his presence on the bench at all until he declared out loud:

‘Sea air does you a lot of good.’

I looked up and saw a heavily built man, probably in his late sixties, wearing a rather tired tweed jacket, his shirt open at the neck. He was gazing out over the water, perhaps at some seagulls in the far distance, and so it was not at all clear that he had been talking to me. But since no one else responded, and since I could see no other obvious persons close by who might do so, I eventually said:

‘Yes, I’m sure it does.’

‘The doctor says it does you good. So I come up here as much as the weather will let me.’

The man went on to tell me about his various ailments, only very occasionally turning his eyes away from the sunset in order to give me a nod or a grin. I really only started to pay any attention at all when he happened to mention that until his retirement three years ago, he had been a butler of

a nearby house. On inquiring further, I ascertained that the house had been a very small one in which he had been the only full-time employee. When I asked him if he had ever worked with a proper staff under him, perhaps before the war, he replied:

‘Oh, in those days, I was just a footman. I wouldn’t have had the know-how to be a butler in *those* days. You’d be surprised what it involved when you had those big houses you had then.’

At this point, I thought it appropriate to reveal my identity, and although I am not sure ‘Darlington Hall’ meant anything to him, my companion seemed suitably impressed.

‘And here I was trying to explain it all to you,’ he said with a laugh. ‘Good job you told me when you did before I made a right fool of myself. Just shows you never know who you’re addressing when you start talking to a stranger. So you had a big staff, I suppose. Before the war, I mean.’

He was a cheerful fellow and seemed genuinely interested, so I confess I did spend a little time telling him about Darlington Hall in former days. In the main, I tried to convey to him some of the ‘know-how’, as he put it, involved in overseeing large events of the sort we used often to have. Indeed, I believe I even revealed to him several of my professional ‘secrets’ designed to bring that extra bit out of staff, as well as the various ‘sleights-of-hand’ - the equivalent of a conjuror’s - by which a butler could cause a thing to occur at just the right time and place without guests even glimpsing the often large and complicated manoeuvre behind the operation. As I say, my companion seemed genuinely interested, but after a time I felt I had revealed enough and so concluded by saying:

‘Of course, things are quite different today under my present employer. An American gentleman.’

'American, eh? Well, they're the only ones can afford it now. So you stayed on with the house. Part of the package.' He turned and gave me a grin.

'Yes,' I said, laughing a little. 'As you say, part of the package.'

The man turned his gaze back to the sea again, took a deep breath and sighed contentedly. We then proceeded to sit there together quietly for several moments.

'The fact is, of course,' I said after a while, 'I gave my best to Lord Darlington. I gave him the very best I had to give, and now - well - I find I do not have a great deal more left to give.'

The man said nothing, but nodded, so I went on:

'Since my new employer Mr Farraday arrived, I've tried very hard, very hard indeed, to provide the sort of service I would like him to have. I've tried and tried, but whatever I do I find I am far from reaching the standards I once set myself. More and more errors are appearing in my work. Quite trivial in themselves - at least so far. But they're of the sort I would never have made before, and I know what they signify. Goodness knows, I've tried and tried, but it's no use. I've given what I had to give. I gave it all to Lord Darlington.'

'Oh dear, mate. Here, you want a hankie? I've got one somewhere. Here we are. It's fairly clean. Just blew my nose once this morning, that's all. Have a go, mate.'

'Oh dear, no, thank you, it's quite all right. I'm very sorry, I'm afraid the travelling has tired me. I'm very sorry.'

'You must have been very attached to this Lord whatever. And it's three years since he passed away, you say? I can see you were very attached to him, mate.'

‘Lord Darlington wasn’t a bad man. He wasn’t a bad man at all. And at least he had the privilege of being able to say at the end of his life that he made his own mistakes. His lordship was a courageous man. He chose a certain path in life, it proved to be a misguided one, but there, he chose it, he can say that at least. As for myself, I cannot even claim that. You see, I *trusted*. I trusted in his lordship’s wisdom. All those years I served him, I trusted I was doing something worthwhile. I can’t even say I made my own mistakes. Really - one has to ask oneself - what dignity is there in that?’

‘Now, look, mate, I’m not sure I follow everything you’re saying. But if you ask me, your attitude’s all wrong, see? Don’t keep looking back all the time, you’re bound to get depressed. And all right, you can’t do your job as well as you used to. But it’s the same for all of us, see? We’ve all got to put our feet up at some point. Look at me. Been happy as a lark since the day I retired. All right, so neither of us are exactly in our first flush of youth, but you’ve got to keep looking forward.’ And I believe it was then that he said: ‘You’ve got to enjoy yourself. The evening’s the best part of the day. You’ve done your day’s work. Now you can put your feet up and enjoy it. That’s how I look at it. Ask anybody, they’ll all tell you. The evening’s the best part of the day.’

‘I’m sure you’re quite correct,’ I said. ‘I’m so sorry, this is so unseemly. I suspect I’m over-tired. I’ve been travelling rather a lot, you see.’

It is now some twenty minutes since the man left, but I have remained here on this bench to await the event that has just taken place - namely, the switching on of the pier lights. As I say, the happiness with which the pleasure-seekers gathering on this pier greeted this small event would tend to vouch for the correctness of my companion’s words; for a great many people, the evening is the most enjoyable part of the day. Perhaps, then, there is something to his

advice that I should cease looking back so much, that I should adopt a more positive outlook and try to make the best of what remains of my day. After all, what can we ever gain in forever looking back and blaming ourselves if our lives have not turned out quite as we might have wished? The hard reality is, surely, that for the likes of you and me, there is little choice other than to leave our fate, ultimately, in the hands of those great gentlemen at the hub of this world who employ our services. What is the point in worrying oneself too much about what one could or could not have done to control the course one's life took? Surely it is enough that the likes of you and me at least *try* to make a small contribution count for something true and worthy. And if some of us are prepared to sacrifice much in life in order to pursue such aspirations, surely that is in itself, whatever the outcome, cause for pride and contentment.

A few minutes ago, incidentally, shortly after the lights came on, I did turn on my bench a moment to study more closely these throngs of people laughing and chatting behind me. There are people of all ages strolling around this pier: families with children; couples, young and elderly, walking arm in arm. There is a group of six or seven people gathered just a little way behind me who have aroused my curiosity a little. I naturally assumed at first that they were a group of friends out together for the evening. But as I listened to their exchanges, it became apparent they were strangers who had just happened upon one another here on this spot behind me. Evidently, they had all paused a moment for the lights coming on, and then proceeded to fall into conversation with one another. As I watch them now, they are laughing together merrily. It is curious how people can build such warmth among themselves so swiftly. It is possible these particular persons are simply united by the anticipation of the evening ahead. But, then, I rather fancy it has more to do with this skill of bantering. Listening to them now, I can hear them exchanging one bantering remark after another. It is, I would suppose, the way many people like to proceed. In fact, it is

possible my bench companion of a while ago expected me to banter with him - in which case, I suppose I was something of a sorry disappointment. Perhaps it is indeed time I began to look at this whole matter of bantering more enthusiastically. After all, when one thinks about it, it is not such a foolish thing to indulge in - particularly if it is the case that in bantering lies the key to human warmth.

It occurs to me, furthermore, that bantering is hardly an unreasonable duty for an employer to expect a professional to perform. I have of course already devoted much time to developing my bantering skills, but it is possible I have never previously approached the task with the commitment I might have done. Perhaps, then, when I return to Darlington Hall tomorrow - Mr Farraday will not himself be back for a further week - I will begin practising with renewed effort. I should hope, then, that by the time of my employer's return, I shall be in a position to pleasantly surprise him.

双语版石黑一雄作品

莫失莫忘

Never Let Me Go

二〇一七年诺贝尔文学奖获奖作家

Kazuo Ishiguro



〔英〕石黑一雄

著

张坤

译

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莫失莫忘

献给洛娜和内奥米⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ 洛娜和内奥米是作者的妻女。

英格兰，一九九〇年代末期

第一部

第一章

我的名字叫凯西·H，三十一岁，我做护理员已经有十一年了。听起来这时间很长，我知道，但实际上，他们还想让我再干八个月，直到今年年底。到那时我就总共干了差不多正好十二年了。我知道，我做护理员这么久倒不一定是因为他们觉得我做这工作做得太好。有些非常好的护理员，才干了两三年就奉命停止了。我也知道至少有一个护理员，根本就是白占地方，可是足足干满了十四年。因此我不是自我吹嘘。可我知道，事实上他们对我的工作很满意，总的来说，我自己也很满意。我的捐献者总是能比预计要好很多。他们恢复时间相当不错，即便是第四次捐献之前，他们中也极少有人被归到“不安”类别中。好吧，也许我的确是在自我吹嘘。但这对我很重要，能够做好分内的工作，尤其是涉及我的捐献者“平静”这一点。跟捐献者在一起的时候，我已经形成了一种本能反应。我知道何时应该待在他们身边，安抚他们，何时应该退后，让他们自己待着；何时倾听他们所有的心里话，何时仅是耸肩让他们闭嘴。

总之，我不是为自己邀功请赏。我认识一些护理员，现在正在工作的，他们干得跟我一样好，可是没有得到哪怕一半的功劳。如果你就是其中之一，我能理解你为什么会对我的起居室，我的汽车，尤其是我能够挑选和指定护理对象这件事。何况我是黑尔舍姆的学生——有时候仅这一点，就足以让人看不顺眼了。他们说凯西·H可以挑挑拣拣，说她总是挑选跟她一样的人：黑尔舍姆的人，或者别的那些特权机构的人。难怪她的记录特别好。这种话我听得够多了，也许其中不无道理。但我不是第一个获准挑选指定护理对象的人，我怀疑也不会是最后一个。不管怎么说，我照顾过各种地方长大的捐献者，做得够多了。须知道等我完结的时候，我将已经做这件事做满十二年了，只是到了后面六年他们才允许我挑选。

何况他们为什么不让他们呢？护理员又不是机器。你尽力对每个捐献者做到最好，但到头来，这会让你筋疲力尽。你没有无穷无尽的耐心和精力。所以当你有机会挑选的时候，当然你会挑跟自己一样的人。这是自然而然的。如果我不是步步都替我的捐献者着想，我也不可能一直做这么久。总而言之，如果我一直没开始挑选，过了这么多年，我怎么还会有机会再跟露丝和汤米走得这么近呢？

当然，现如今我记得的捐献者越来越少了，因此实际操作中，我也没有太挑挑拣拣。正如我说过的，如果不是你跟捐献者之间有深层的联系，这份工作会难做很多，而且，虽然我会想念做护理人员的生活，但到年底就结束这一切，感觉也挺对。

碰巧露丝就是我得以挑选的第三或者第四名捐献者。当时已经有个护理人员分配给她了，我记得自己需要鼓起勇气才要到她的。但最终我成功了，我再次看到她的时候，在多佛的康复中心，突然间我们所有的分歧——尽管并没有完全消失——跟另外那些事相比起来，仿佛都变得无关紧要：比如我们一起在黑尔舍姆长大，我们知道并且记得一些没有别人知道的事。我猜我就是从那个时候开始，有意寻找过去跟我有关系的捐献者，只要有可能，首选黑尔舍姆的人。

这些年里曾有过许多次，我对自己说，不应该总是盯着过去，我曾试着将黑尔舍姆抛到脑后。后来我终于放弃了抗拒。这跟我做护理人员第三年的时候碰到的一个捐献者有关。当我说到我是黑尔舍姆来的时候，他的反应让我很受触动。他刚刚经过了第三次捐献，情况不太好，他一定知道自己撑不下去了。他几乎无法呼吸，但他望着我说：“黑尔舍姆。我猜那地方一定很美。”后来第二天早上，我有意找些话题将他的念头转开，于是问他是哪里长大的，他提到多塞特的一个什么地方，这时他那长满疹斑的脸上出现了一种从来没流露出的古怪神情。这时我才明白，他是无论如何都不愿意想起那地方。他宁愿想听听黑尔舍姆。

于是接下来的五六天里，他想知道什么我都告诉他了，他就躺在那里，身上接着各种仪器，面上却是温柔的笑容。他事无巨细都问到我。关于我们的导师，我们每个人都有收藏自己物品的箱子，放在床下面，足球，棒球，主楼外面那条环绕一圈的小径，绕过所有那些躲藏的小去处、小缝隙，有鸭子的池塘，那里的食物，有雾的早晨从艺术室向外望，看到田野的景色。有时候他会让我把同样的事说了一遍又一遍；我前一天刚刚跟他讲过的事，他又会像从没听我说起一样，又来问我。“你们有运动馆么？”“哪位导师你最喜欢？”开始的时候我以为这只是药物的作用，但后来我发现，其实他的意识很明白。他想要的不仅仅是听到黑尔舍姆的故事，而是要记住黑尔舍姆，当作他自己的童年一样。他知道自己接近完结，因此这就是他要做的：让我将一切为他描绘出来，让这些沉入他的记忆，也许在那些无眠的夜里，在药物、病痛和疲惫的共同作用之下，我的和他自己的记忆之间，界限会变得模糊。这时我才理解，真正地认识到，我们曾是多么幸运——汤米、露丝、我，所有我们这些人。

现在当我开着车子穿行在乡间时，仍会看到一些情景，令我想起黑尔舍姆。我可能途经一片雾蒙蒙的田野，从边角路过，或是沿着山谷下坡，依稀看到远处一所大房子，甚至当我看到山坡上一片白杨树排列的方式与众不同时，我都会想：“也许就是这里！我找到了！这真的就是黑尔舍姆！”然后我却发现这不可能是，于是我继续驾车前行，思绪又飘散到了别的地方。尤其是那些运动馆。我在全国哪里都能看得到它们，总是建在操场边上比较偏僻的一侧，预制板构造的小白建筑，一排排窗户设计得特别高，几乎就塞在屋檐底下。我猜在五六十年来他们大概盖了很多这样的房子，我们那幢可能就是那时候建的。如果我开车路过一幢，我总是尽量久地凝望，总有一天我会为此遭遇撞车事故，可我还是不能自己。不久之前，我开车路过伍斯特郡一片延绵的空地，发现一侧有个板球场，跟我们在黑尔舍姆的非常相像，我真的就调转车头开了回去，重新再看一遍。

我们喜爱我们的运动馆，也许是因为它让我们想起小时候总在图画书里看到的那些人们居住的农舍小屋。我还记得我们读小学的时候，曾跟导师央求，下一堂课要去运动馆上，而不要在一般的教室。后来，等到我们读中学二年级的时候——十二岁，十三岁不到——运动馆已经变成了你想要避开黑尔舍姆的一切时、跟好朋友一起躲起来的地方。

运动馆很大，足以容纳两个不同的群体，互不干扰——夏天里，还可以有第三群人在阳台上活动。但最理想的情况是，你跟三五好友可以独占运动馆，因此时常会有耍手腕、斗嘴的事情发生。导师总是教我们要文明有雅量，但实际情况是，你所在的团队中必须有人性格强悍，才有机会在休息或者空当时间得到运动馆。我本人虽不算是个孱头，但我想，其实是因为有了露丝，我们才能够经常占据运动馆。

通常我们只是散坐在长椅或座位上——我们一共五个人，如果珍妮·B也来就是六个——痛痛快快讲八卦。有种对话，只有在你们躲起来，在运动馆里的时候才会发生。我们可能讨论一些自己担心的事，可能会以尖声大笑告终，或是愤怒吵闹。总之就是找到一个方式，跟最亲密的朋友一起，释放压力，舒缓片刻。

那个特别的下午，我现在想到，我们都站在凳子上、长椅上，围着高窗挤在一起。那样我们可以清楚地看到北操场上，我们年级和中学三年级共十二个左右的男孩子，正在一起踢球。阳光明亮，但当天早些时候想必下过雨，因为我还记得阳光照在草地泥水上闪闪发亮的样子。

有人说我们不应该这么明目张胆地偷看，可几乎没人往后挪。然后露丝说：“他根本毫无察觉。看看他。真的，他毫无察觉。”

她说这话的时候，我望着她，想找找看对于那些男孩要对汤米做的事，她有没有任何不赞同的表示。但是下一秒露丝就轻轻笑了，她说：“那傻瓜！”

这时我意识到，无论那些男孩子选择做些什么，对于露丝和其他人来说，都是跟我们遥不可及的事；我们是否赞成完全不相干。我们在这个时刻聚集在一个个窗口，并不是因为很期待看到汤米再次受辱，而只是因为我们听说了最新的计划，隐约感到好奇，想亲眼看到这事发生。那些日子里，对于男孩子们彼此之间的事，我的想法也深不到哪里去。对于露丝和其他人来说，事情与己无关，很可能对于我来说也是一样。

再不然，也许我记错了。也许即便在当时，我看到汤米绕场奔跑，毫不掩饰地满脸欣喜，因为终于再次被群体接纳，得以回归，可以玩他非常擅长的游戏，也许我当时就感到一丝心痛。我清楚记得的是，我留意到汤米当时穿着上个月拍卖会上买的一件浅蓝色POLO衫——那件衣服他可得意了。我记得曾心想：“他真傻，居然穿这衣服踢球。衣服肯定要毁了，那时他会是什么感觉？”我说出声来，却没有冲着任何特定对象：“汤米穿着衬衫呢。他最喜欢的POLO衫。”

我觉得谁都没听见我的话，因为他们都在笑话劳拉——我们群体里的搞笑明星——正在模仿汤米一边跑动、挥手、叫喊和铲球时，脸上一边不停变换的表情。其他的男孩子在场内故意懒洋洋地跑动，就像热身活动那样，但汤米很兴奋，仿佛已经准备好全力出击。我开口了，这次比较大声：“如果他弄脏了衬衫一定会大发脾气。”这次露丝听到了我的话，但她一定以为我是在开玩笑，因为她漫不经心地笑了笑，接着又说了句嘲弄的话。

后来男孩子们就不再将球到处踢了，而是大家一起在泥巴地里站着，胸膛轻轻地起伏着，等着开始选队员分组。出来的两个队长都是三年级的，虽然大家都知道汤米比他们年级任何人踢得都要好。他们抽签决定谁先挑人，随后赢的那个朝大家望去。

“看看他呀，”我身后有人说道，“他真以为第一个就会选中他呢。看看他那样子！”

那一刻，汤米的确有点滑稽，有点什么让你觉得，唉，是啊，如果他真这么蠢，那接下来怎么都是他活该。别的男孩子都假装无视挑

人程序，假装他们不介意谁先被选中。有的在轻轻交头接耳，有的在重新系鞋带，其他人只是低头看着自己踩在泥巴里的双脚。但是汤米急切地望着那个三年级的男孩，仿佛已经听到喊他的名字一般。

分组挑人的全程，劳拉都在坚持表演，把汤米脸上展现的表情挨个表现一遍：开始时明媚急切的样子；四轮过后仍然没有人选他时困惑又担忧的样子；等他终于开始明白怎么回事时，受伤和惊恐的样子。可我并没有随时去看劳拉的表演，因为我在看着汤米；我只是听到其他人的笑声和怂恿她继续的声音。后来当其他男孩都开始窃笑，只剩汤米一个人站着的时候，我听到露丝说：

“来了。预备。七秒。七、六、五……”

没等她数完，汤米就爆发出雷鸣般的怒吼，那些男孩子们肆无忌惮地大笑起来，开始朝南操场跑去。汤米跟在他们后面跑了几步——很难说他是凭本能愤怒地追上去，还是因为单独落下而惊恐不安。不管怎么说，他很快就停下了脚步，站在那里，怒火中烧地盯着他们的背影，脸憋得通红。然后他开始尖叫、大喊、吐出一连串没有意义的脏话和辱骂。

这时候我们都已经看够了汤米发脾气样子，于是我们从凳子上下来，在房间里四散开来。我们试图开始讲点别的，说个新话题，但汤米大吵大闹不肯罢休的声音依然在背景中继续，尽管一开始我们只是翻个白眼，尽量无视这声音，但到了后来——可能从我们刚离开算起，足足十分钟之后——我们又爬上了窗口。

其他的男孩子都完全不见了踪影，汤米的怒骂已经没有具体的朝向。他只是在发火，甩着四肢，朝天空、朝风里、朝着最近的篱笆桩子。劳拉说他可能在“排练莎士比亚”。另外一个人说每当他喊出句什么的时候，就会将一只脚抬起来，朝外伸出去，“就像狗狗撒尿一样”。事实上，我也留意到了同样的脚部动作，但我感受最深的却是每次当他重新将脚踩到泥巴上的时候，泥点溅起，都撒在他小腿上。我再次想到他那件宝贝衬衫，但他离得太远，我看不清他是不是粘了很多泥在上面。

“我觉得这有点太狠了，”露丝说，“他们总是这样捉弄他。可这都是他自己的错。如果他学着沉住气，他们就不会抓住他不放了。”

“他们还是会作弄他的，”汉娜说，“格雷厄姆·K的脾气也一样坏，可是他们只是更加小心对待。他们这么针对汤米是因为他太

懒。”

这时所有人都开始七嘴八舌讲了起来，说汤米一点创意都没有，根本不动脑筋，春季交换活动的时候，他什么东西都拿不出来。我猜实际上到了这个时候，我们每个人都悄悄希望能有个导师从屋里出来将他带走。尽管我们没有亲自参与过最近这次激怒汤米的计划，但却兴致勃勃地坐到前排观看，我们开始感到愧疚了。可是一直没有导师出现，于是我们就只能你一言我一语，指出各种理由，解释为什么汤米遭受这一切都是活该。后来，露丝看了一眼她的手表说虽然还有时间，但我们还是应该回到主楼去，没有人反对。

我们从运动馆出来的时候，汤米还在气头上。主楼在我们左侧远处，因为汤米就站在我们正前方的草坪上，我们完全不需要靠近他。更何况他正面朝相反的方向，根本没有意识到我们的存在。尽管如此，当我的朋友们沿着草地边缘出发的时候，我开始慢慢朝他身边靠近。我知道这样做会让其他人觉得奇怪，可我还是继续前行——哪怕我听到露丝急切地悄声喊我快回来。

我猜汤米大概不习惯在发脾气的时候被人打断，因为当我走到他面前的时候，他的第一个反应是瞪着我看了一秒钟，然后又继续发作。他的确很像在排演莎士比亚，而我却在他表演当中走上了舞台。即便我说“汤米，你的漂亮衬衫。你会把衣服弄脏”的时候，也完全没有迹象表明他听到了我的话。

于是我向前去，伸出一只手去摸他的手臂。后来，其他人认为他是故意的，但我很肯定他不是有意的。他的双臂依然在四处乱打，他并不知道我要伸出手去。总之当他挥动手臂的时候，将我的手打到了一边，然后打到了我的侧脸。完全没有打痛我，但我惊叫了一声，我身后大多数的女孩子也都惊得叫出了声。

直到这时，汤米似乎才终于留意到我、其他人、还有他自己，留意到他原来在这里，在这片草坪上，有这样的举止行为，他有点呆傻地望着我。

“汤米，”我颇严厉地说，“你衣服上到处都是泥巴。”

“那又怎样？”他嘟囔道。可是即便他在说这话的时候，还是低头留意到了那些褐色的泥点，惊得差点没忍住喊出声。这时我看到他脸上流露出惊讶的表情，奇怪我居然会知道他对这件POLO衫的感受。

“这没什么好担心的，”趁沉默还没有让他太难堪，我赶紧说，“会洗掉的。如果你自己洗不掉，就拿去交给朱迪小姐。”

他继续检视自己的一身，然后使性子说：“反正跟你没关系。”

最后这句话仿佛刚一出口他就后悔了，他怯生生地看着我，好像期望我回答他一句安慰的话。但这时候我已经受够了他，加上还有好多女孩子看着——据我所知，主楼的窗口还不知有多少人看着呢。于是我耸耸肩调头走开，回到我的朋友们中间去了。

我们走开的时候，露丝伸出手臂揽住了我的肩膀。“至少你让他平静下来了，”她说，“你还好吗？这发疯的畜生。”

第二章

这一切都是很久以前的事了，因此我可能记错某些事；但我对此的记忆就是这样，我主动去接近汤米的那个下午，当时我正处于这样一种心路历程，不断强迫自己应对各种挑战——几天之后，汤米拦住我的时候，我已经多多少少把这事忘掉了。

我不知道你们那儿是个什么情况，但在黑尔舍姆，我们几乎每个星期都得接受健康检查——通常都是在主楼顶楼的十八号教室——是个严厉的护士特丽莎，我们管她叫乌鸦脸的，来检查我们。那是个阳光明媚的早上，我们一群人正沿着中央楼梯上楼去体检，另外一群人刚刚被护士检查完正在下楼。因此楼梯间充满了各种噪音和回声，我跟着前面人的脚后跟，闷头正爬楼呢，突然附近一个声音喊道：“凯丝⁽¹⁾！”

汤米就在下楼的人流中，冷不丁在楼梯上停下了脚步，咧开大嘴笑得特别开心，我一看就来气。也许几年以前，如果我们碰到个很高兴遇见的人，可能会流露出这样的表情。但当时我们已经十三岁了，况且这是个男孩子，在很公开的场合碰上一个姑娘。我很想说：“汤米，你怎么就不能成熟点呢？”可我忍住了，说道：“汤米，你挡住大家的路了。我也是。”

他朝上看了一眼，果然上面的楼梯上人群已经被迫停下了脚步。有那么一秒钟他看起来很慌，随后他挤到我身边，贴着墙站住了脚，勉强刚够其他人擦肩而过。然后他说：

“凯丝，我到处找你。我想跟你道歉。我真的非常非常抱歉。那天我真的不是有意打你的。我做梦都不会想去打女孩子，况且即便我想打，也绝对不会打你。我真的非常非常抱歉。”

“没事。是意外而已啦。”我朝他点点头，就想走开。可是汤米开心地说：

“衬衫已经没事了。都洗掉了。”

“那敢情好。”

“没打疼你吧？疼不疼，我打的？”

“疼着呢。头部骨折，脑震荡，诸如此类。连乌鸦脸都可能会发现的，要是我还能走到顶楼看到她的话。”

“可是说实在的，凯丝。别生我气，好吗？我太对不起了。真的，真心的。”

最终我对他笑了笑，不带讽刺地说：“你瞧，汤米，那是个意外，现在已经百分百忘掉了。我一点都不记恨你。”

他还是看起来很没把握，可是现在有些高年级的学生在身后推他，喊他快点走。他匆匆对我一笑，拍了拍我肩膀，就像对年纪较小的男孩子那样，然后就挤回了人流中。随后，我开始爬楼梯的时候，听到他从下方朝我大喊：“再见，凯丝！”

我觉得整件事稍微有点难为情，可是这事并没有引来其他人的取笑，也没人八卦；可我必须得承认，要不是那次楼梯上的偶遇，接下来的几个星期，我也不会对汤米的问题产生那么大的兴趣。

我自己曾见过几次这些状况。但多数是听别人讲的。听到的时候我总是问人各种问题，直到把事情来龙去脉全搞清楚。很多时候是他发脾气，比如有一次据说汤米在十四号教室掀翻了两张课桌，将里面所有东西都丢到地板上，班里其他人都躲到了楼梯间，堵上了房门，以防他出来。还有一次，克里斯托弗先生不得不把他双臂绑到身后，防止他在足球训练中攻击雷吉·D。还有，人人都看得出，当中学二年级的男生们出去跑步的时候，只有汤米一个人没有同伴。他跑得很快，要不了多久就能跟其他人拉开十到十五码⁽²⁾的距离，也许是觉得这样就可以掩盖没人愿意跟他同跑的事实。还有，几乎每天都有流言，说他又遭受什么捉弄了。很多时候都是那些常见的把戏——床上有怪东西，麦片里有虫——可是有一些就显得特别恶意，毫无道理：比如有一次，不知什么人用他的牙刷刷了厕所，刷毛上粘着屎摆在那里等着他。他的块头和力气——我猜还有他那个脾气——使得没人敢当面去欺负他，但是就我的记忆而言，至少在两三个月中，这些恶作剧层出不穷。我以为迟早会有人站出来说做得太过分了，可是情况依然继续，没有人开口。

有一次我试着自己挑起话头，在宿舍里，熄灯之后。到中学之后，我们每间宿舍的人数减少到了六人，因此只剩下我们这个小群体。我们常常在入睡之前，躺在黑暗中，说一些最最亲密的话题。可能会说起一些做梦都想不到要在其他任何地方讲的事，哪怕在运动馆里也不行。于是有天晚上，我提起了汤米。我没有多说，只是概括讲

了他的这些遭遇，说这其实很不公平。我讲完之后，黑暗中出现了一阵古怪的沉默，我意识到大家都在等着露丝的反应——通常任何有点为难的情况出现时，大家总是这样。我等待着，然后听到房间里露丝那个方向传来一声叹息，她说：

“你说的有道理，凯西。这样不好。可是如果他想要这种事停止，就得改变自己的态度。春季交换活动他什么都没带。下个月的活动他有准备东西么？我觉得肯定也没有。”

这里我应该稍微解释一下我们在黑尔舍姆的交换活动。每年四次——春、夏、秋、冬——我们都会举办一个大型展销会，卖过去的三个月中我们创作的东西。油画、素描、陶器以及随便当天喜欢什么素材，就拿来做的雕塑——可能是砸坏的铁盒，插进硬纸板的酒瓶把儿什么的。你每放一件东西进去，可以得到交换币——由导师判定你的某件杰作价值几何——然后到了交换日当天，你就拿着你的交换币，去“买”自己喜欢的东西。规则是你只能买跟自己同年的学生作品，可是这样我们还是有很多选择，因为我们大多数人三个月内会很高产的。

现在回望从前，我能明白为什么交换活动对我们那么重要。首先，这是我们除了拍卖会之外——拍卖会是另外一桩事，后面我再讲——唯一能够建立个人收藏的机会。比如说你想装饰自己睡床周围的墙壁，或者想要件物品放在包里，不论走到哪个房间，都可以摆出来放在书桌上，那么你就可以在交换活动中找到这些东西。现在我也终于明白，这种交换活动是如何对我们所有人产生了微妙的影响。仔细想想看，你需要依赖彼此，来制造各种有可能成为属于你的宝贝——这注定会对我们相互之间的关系有一定影响。汤米的事就很典型。很多时候，你在黑尔舍姆的名声、得到的尊重和爱戴，都取决于你多么擅长“创作”。

几年前，我在多佛的康复中心照顾露丝的时候，我们俩常常会不由自主地一起回忆起这些事情来。

“就是这样的事，才让黑尔舍姆显得那么特别，”有一次她说，“我们受到鼓励，要珍惜彼此的作品。”

“的确，”我说，“可是有时候，我现在回想起交换活动的话，时常会觉得有些地方很奇怪。比如诗歌。我记得我们是允许交诗歌的，用来代替素描或者油画。奇怪的是我们都觉得这样很好，我们觉得这很合理。”

“为什么不呢？诗歌是很重要的。”

“可我们那都是些九岁小孩的玩意儿，可笑的几行小诗，拼写错误百出，写在练习册上。我们都愿意把宝贵的交换币拿出来，去交换一本写满这种东西的练习册，而不要别的真正好看的东西，可以贴在床边的。如果我们真的很喜欢一个人的诗作，我们干吗不直接去借来，花上随便哪个下午的工夫自己抄写一遍呢？可你记得当时的情形。到了交换活动的时候，我们就呆呆地站在那里，在苏西·K的诗和杰克做的那些长颈鹿之间犹豫不决，拿不定主意。”

“杰克的长颈鹿，”露丝说完不禁大笑，“做得好美。我有过一个的。”

我们这番对话发生在一个夏日傍晚的美好时分，坐在她康复室的小阳台上。那是她第一次捐献之后的几个月，当时最糟糕的阶段已经过去，我总是精心安排傍晚去看望她的时间，就是为了能跟她一起，在外面度过那半个小时，望着层层屋顶之外，夕阳慢慢落下。你可以看到许多天线以及卫星接收器，有时候正前方很远的地方，还能看到闪亮的一条，那是大海。我会带去矿泉水和饼干，我们就坐在那里，想到什么聊什么。当时露丝住的那家中心是我最喜欢的之一，如果我最后要在那里完结，我一点都不会介意。康复室很小，但设计很好，很舒适。一切——墙壁和地板——都铺着亮晶晶的白瓷砖，中心把这里打扫得很干净，因此你刚进去的时候，几乎像是进了一间装满镜子的大厅。当然很多时候你并不能真的看到自己的倒影，但你几乎总是感觉能够看到。当你抬起胳膊，或是床上有人坐起的时候，你就能感到这样苍白的、影子似的动作反射在周围的瓷砖上。在那家康复中心里，露丝的房间还有些巨大的玻璃拉门，因此她躺在床上就很容易能够看到外面。哪怕她头倒在枕头上，仍然可以看到一大片天空，而且如果天气够暖，她就可以走出去到阳台上，尽情享受新鲜空气，想要多少有多少。我很喜欢去那里看她，喜欢我们之间那些漫无方向的闲聊，从夏天到初秋，一起坐在那个阳台上，说起黑尔舍姆，后来住过的农舍，以及各种浮上脑海的记忆。

“我想说的是，”我又继续说道，“在我们那个年纪，我们十一岁的时候，其实我们并不是真的对彼此的诗歌有兴趣。可你记得么，像克里斯蒂那样的？克里斯蒂写诗的声望可高了，为此我们都特别敬仰她。甚至是你，露丝，你都不敢随便支派克里斯蒂。就是因为我们都认为她写诗写得很棒。可我们对于诗歌一无所知。我们不懂诗歌。这很奇怪。”

可是露丝没明白我的意思——不然就是她故意逃避。也许她是决心要把我们记成比实际更为成熟的样子。再不然也许她能感觉到我想把谈话带到什么方向，却又不希望我们朝那边聊。总之她长叹一声，又说：

“我们都认为克里斯蒂的诗写得特别好。可我不知道若是拿到现在，我们会觉得如何。真希望现在我还留着一点，我很想知道我们现在会怎么看。”随后她笑了，说：“我倒是还保存着彼得·B的几首诗。但那是后来的事了，我们上中学四年级的时候。我一定是喜欢过他。除此之外我想不出还有什么理由我会买他的诗。那些诗写得愚不可及，太自以为是了。但是克里斯蒂是真好，我记得她的诗很好。有趣的是，她一开始画画就完全放弃了诗歌。可她画画绝对没有写诗那么好。”

可是让我回到汤米的话题。当时在我们的宿舍里，熄灯之后露丝所说的那些，汤米如何自己招来麻烦的话，大概也是当时黑尔舍姆大多数人的想法。但是当她说起自己那些往事的时候，我躺在那里，才想到他这样有意不努力的态度，早在小学时就已经开始不断产生影响了。这时我才带着一丝寒意想明白，汤米遭受着他所遭受的这种待遇，已经不是几周或几个月的事，而是几年来一直如此。

我和汤米不久之前还谈过此事，他讲起自己这些麻烦的开始，也验证了我那天晚上的想法。据他说，事情开始是一个下午，在杰拉尔丁小姐的美术课上。汤米告诉我说，那天之前他还一直很喜欢画画。但那天在杰拉尔丁小姐的课堂上，汤米画了一张水彩画——是一只大象站在很高的草丛里——所有的事都是从这幅画开始的。他声称这幅画是个玩笑。那时候我问他很多问题，我疑心真相跟那个时代的许多事一样：你没有任何明确的理由，就只是这么做了。你这么做好是因为你觉得可能会赢得笑声，或者你想看看能否引起一点骚动。而过后当别人要你解释的时候，事情似乎毫无道理可言。我们都做过这样的事。汤米并没有像这样说，但我敢肯定事情就是这样。

总之，他画了幅大象，这正是一个比我们小三岁的孩子可能会画出来的那种作品。他统共前后只用了二十分钟，当然博得大家一笑，但却不完全是他所期望的那种回应。即便如此，这本来可能不会产生任何影响——这是个大大的讽刺，我觉得——如果当天上课的老师不是杰拉尔丁小姐的话。

在我们那个年纪，杰拉尔丁小姐是所有人都最喜欢的导师。她很温柔，讲话和软，你需要安慰的时候她总能安慰你，哪怕你做了坏

事，或者被其他导师批评了。如果她本人不得不批评你，那么接下来的几天里，她都会对你多加注意，仿佛她欠了你什么。汤米运气不好，那天是杰拉尔丁小姐上艺术课，而不是比如罗伯特先生，或者艾米丽小姐亲自来——她是校长，经常上艺术课。如果上课的老师是这两人中的任何一位，汤米可能会受到一点批评，他可能会报之以鬼脸假笑，其他人最坏也只会把这事当成是个没意思的笑话。甚至可能会有些学生觉得他挺滑稽，像个小丑。可是杰拉尔丁小姐就是杰拉尔丁小姐，事情没有这样发展。相反，她尽可能地怀着善意和理解去观看这幅画。也许她猜测汤米可能会遭到其他同学的责备，她就尽量找补，做得有些过分了，甚至找理由来称赞他，还指给全班看。敌意就是这样开始的。

“我们离开教室之后，”汤米记得，“那时我第一次听到他们讲怪话。他们根本不在乎我听得到。”

我猜想，早在他画那幅大象之前，就已经觉得自己有些跟不上——尤其其他画的画，就像是比他低好几年级的孩子的水平——于是他尽可能地遮掩，故意画一些幼稚的作品。但是在那幅大象画之后，一切都摆到桌面上来了，如今大家都看着他，下一步会怎么做。有一段时间他似乎的确是很努力，但是每当他开始做点什么，周围就会充满讥笑和嘲讽。实际上，他越是努力，做出的成果就越好笑。因此过了不久汤米就退回了最初的抵御策略，画一些故意显得幼稚的画作，这些作品明摆着说他完全不在乎。从那开始，情形越陷越深。

一度他只是在艺术课上需要忍受——可这也够受的，因为我们小学时代艺术课很多。但后来越搞越大。玩游戏的时候他落单，吃晚餐的时候男孩子们拒绝挨着他坐，或者在宿舍里，熄灯之后他讲话的时候，别人假装没听到。开始还没有那么残酷。可能会有几个月都平安无事，他都以为整件事已经完全过去了，然后他做了什么——不然就是他的对头之一，比如亚瑟·H做了什么——又会让一切重新开始。

我不确定他的脾气大发作是从何时开始的。在我自己的记忆中，汤米一直就是出了名的脾气大，从婴幼儿时代就是，但他告诉我说，只是在那些作弄变得很糟糕的时候，他的脾气才开始发作。总之，恰恰是他这种脾气大发作，才真的让人们变本加厉使劲整他，到了我说的这段时间——就是我们中学二年级的夏天，我们十三岁的时候——这种迫害达到了顶峰。

然后一切就停止了，虽不是一夜之间，但也是很快的变换。就像我所说的，这时候我一直认真观察着整个局面，因此我在大多数人发

现之前就看到了迹象。开始是有个阶段的——可能有一个月，也许更久——这些恶作剧仍在持续稳定发生，但汤米没有发脾气。有时候我看得出他马上要发火了，但他还是设法控制住了自己；还有些时候，他只是心平气和地耸耸肩，或是做出一副完全没注意到的样子。一开始他的这些反应让人失望，也许人们甚至心怀怨恨，因为他没让这些入得逞。后来渐渐地人们自己也厌倦了，这些恶作剧都不用心了，直到有一天我突然发现，已经一个多星期没有任何作弄他的活动了。

这事本身可能也没有那么重要，但我还发现了其他的变化。一些小事，比如亚历山大·J和彼得·N跟他一起穿过院子朝操场走去，三个人很自然地聊着天；还有人们提到他名字的时候，声音里那种微妙却又明确的改变。后来有一次，下午的休息时间快结束时，我们一群人坐在离南操场很近的草坪上，男孩子们跟往常一样在踢球。我跟着大家在聊天，但目光一直留意着汤米，我发现他正是赛场上的核心人物。有一次他被别倒了，于是站起身，将球放到地面，他来踢任意球。男孩们散开来准备接球，这时我看到亚瑟·H——是折磨汤米最起劲的人之一——就站在汤米背后几码远，开始模仿他，故意摆出个蠢样子，学汤米脚踩着球，双手扶胯的样子。我认真观察，但其他人完全没有接亚瑟的茬儿。他们一定都看到了，因为所有人的眼睛都望着汤米，等着他开球，而亚瑟就在他正后方——可是没人感兴趣。汤米一脚将球飞过草坪，比赛继续，亚瑟·H也没有再兴风作浪。

这种发展变化让我感到高兴，同时也感到奇妙。汤米的水平并没有真正的变化——他的“创作”声誉一如既往的低。我看得出，他不再发脾气这点确实起了很大作用，但造成这种变化的关键因素到底是什么，似乎很难摸清。跟汤米本人有关系——他行为举止的样子，讲话时望着别人的眼睛，坦然大方、友好善意——都跟从前不一样，这也反过来影响了周围人们对待他的方式。然而所有这些改变是什么造成的，却模糊不清。

我很好奇，决定下次我们有机会私下交谈的时候，要跟他深入了解一下。不久机会就来了，我在排队打午饭的时候，发现他就同一个队列中往前几位站着。

我猜这听起来大概有点古怪，但是在黑尔舍姆，午餐排队恰恰是私下聊天的好时机。这跟大厅的声音效果有关系；周围的各种嘈杂和高高的天花板就意味着只要你压低声音，靠近站立，确保旁边的人也全心投入自己的聊天，你就有很高的机会不被别人偷听。不管怎么说，我们其实没有太多选择。“安静的”地方通常最糟糕，因为总是

可能会有人路过，距离近得刚好能听到。何况，一旦当你看起来像是要溜出去讲悄悄话，几分钟之内全屋的人似乎都能感觉得到，你就没机会了。

因此当我看到汤米在我前面隔着几位的时候，我就挥手招呼他过来——规矩是不能往前插队，主动退后几位则没问题。他面带愉快的笑容过来了，我们在一起站了一会儿，没说什么——倒不是出于尴尬，而是因为我们要等一等，让汤米退后所引起的兴趣消退再说。然后我对他说：

“这些天你好像心情好多了，汤米。你好像情况好多了。”

“你什么都看在眼里，是不是，凯丝？”他说这话完全没有讽刺的意味，“没错，一切都很好。我过得还不错。”

“到底发生了什么事？你是找到上帝了还是怎么了？”

“上帝？”汤米似乎呆了一秒钟。随后他笑道：“噢，我明白了。你是说我没有……那么生气了。”

“不光是这个，汤米。你为自己扭转了局面。我一直在观察。所以我才这样问你。”

汤米耸耸肩。“我长大了一点吧，我猜。也许其他人也是。不能总是搞老一套，会厌烦的。”

我没说什么，只是径直不转眼地望着他，直到他再次轻笑起来，说道：“凯丝，你真是穷追不舍。好吧，我猜的确有点缘故。确实发生了一件事。如果你想知道，我就告诉你。”

“好啊，那你接着说。”

“我会告诉你的，凯丝，但你一定不能说出去，可不可以？几个月之前，我跟露西小姐谈过一次话。那之后我感觉好了很多。这很难解释。但她说了些什么，让我感觉好多了。”

“她到底说了什么？”

“这个……其实说来可能有点怪。开始我觉得有点怪。她当时说，如果我不想去创作，如果我真的不喜欢，那也完全可以。一点问题都没有，她说。”

“她就这样告诉你的？”

汤米点头，但我已经要转身离开了。

“这是胡说，汤米。如果你要跟我玩这种傻花样，我恕不奉陪。”

我真心感到愤怒，因为我觉得他是在跟我撒谎，而我本该值得他信任。我看到身后隔几位有个我认识的姑娘，于是走到她旁边去了，把汤米一个人落在当地。我看得出他很困惑，垂头丧气，可是我为他担心了好几个月之后，这时的感觉是遭到了背叛，我才不管他什么感受呢。我跟朋友聊了一会儿——我想那是玛蒂尔达——尽量表现得兴高采烈，站队等待的剩余时间里，我几乎不再朝他的方向看了。

但是，当我拿着餐盘朝桌旁走去的时候，汤米来到我身后，很快地说：

“凯丝，我不是逗你玩的，如果你是这样想的话。事情就是这样。如果你给我哪怕半点机会，我都会告诉你的。”

“不要胡说，汤米。”

“凯丝，我讲给你听。午餐之后我要去池塘边。如果你来我就告诉你。”

我有些嫌弃地看了他一眼，没有答话就走开了，但我猜几乎立刻我就开始设想，关于露西小姐的那些话也许并不是他瞎编的。等到我跟朋友们一起坐下来的时候，我已经在努力设法，看之后如何能够趁大家不注意，溜到池塘边去。

[\(1\)](#) 凯丝是凯西的名字将尾音吞掉，作为昵称。

[\(2\)](#) 一码约等于零点九一米。

第三章

池塘在主楼的南面。要去那边得先从后门出去，然后沿着蜿蜒小径，从蕨类丛生的灌木丛中穿过，此时虽已是初秋时节，这些植物还是阻挡着道路。或者，如果没有导师在场的话，你还可以抄近道，从种着大黄的菜地里穿过去。总之，一旦你出来到了池塘边，就会发现面前的气氛变得非常宁静，周遭围绕着水鸭、芦苇还有各种水边杂草。可这里不是一个讲私房话的好地方——跟午餐排队的时候根本没得比。首先，从主楼里能清楚看到你。还有声音在水上传播的方式难以预料；倘或有人想要偷听也是最容易不过，只需要从外面小径走过来，蹲在池塘另一边的灌木丛里即可。但是既然在午餐排队的时候是我中止了对话，我想我得尽量弥补。当时已经是十月份，但那天有太阳，于是我决定就假装自己在这里漫无目的地散步，偶遇汤米。

也许是因为我太专心要营造这种形象——虽然我根本不知道是否真有人在盯着我们——当我终于找到他，见他坐在水边不远处一块大平石头上时，我完全没想要坐下来。当时想必是星期五或者周末，因为我记得我们穿的是自己的衣服。我记不清楚汤米当时穿着什么——很可能是件变形了的足球衫，哪怕天冷了他还是总穿这种汗衫——可我一定穿着那件绛红的运动服上衣，拉链一直拉上来的那件，我是中学一年级的时在拍卖会上买的。我绕到他身前，背朝池水站着，面朝着主楼，这样的话一旦大家开始在窗口聚集，我就能看到。随后的几分钟里，我们没有讲什么特别的，仿佛午餐排队时的事情根本没有发生过。我不知是出于为汤米考虑，还是担心旁观者的看法，但特意警惕地保持着不经意路过的样子，一度还作势要继续往前溜达呢。这时我看到汤米脸上浮现出一种恐慌，立刻就感到很抱歉，虽然我不是有心，却也作弄了他。于是我记得自己当时说道：

“这个，你之前怎么说的来着？露西小姐跟你说什么了？”

“哦……”汤米的视线越过我落到池塘里，也在假装这个话题他已经忘到九霄云外了。“露西小姐。哦，那个啊。”

在黑尔舍姆，露西小姐是导师中最擅长运动的一个，可你从她外表不大容易猜到这点。她体型矮胖，几乎像头斗牛犬，一头黑发很古怪，长的方向朝上，因此永远无法覆盖她的耳朵，还有短脖子。但其实她很结实，很健康，即便是我们长大些以后，我们中大多数人——

连男生在内——在操场跑步的时候都跟不上她的速度。她曲棍球打得特别棒，足球场上能跟中学的男生抗衡。我记得有一次看到她带球过人，詹姆斯·B试图铲倒她，可是倒地飞出的却是他本人。我们读小学的时候，她从来不属于杰拉尔丁小姐那种、你情绪低落的时候会去找她的人。实际上，我们小一点的时候，她不大跟我们讲话。真的，只有进了中学之后，我们才开始欣赏她那种轻灵的风格。

“你当时说了什么，”我对汤米说，“关于露西小姐跟你讲，不擅长创作也没关系。”

“她的确是说过这样的话。她说我不用担心，不用介意其他人怎么说。那是大概两个月之前的事了，也许更久。”

在远处的主楼里，几个小学生在楼上的窗边停下了脚步，望着我们。但我这时在汤米前方蹲了下来，完全不再假装什么了。

“汤米，她这么说很滑稽。你确定她真是这样说的？”

“当然我确定。”他的声音突然沉了下去，“她并不是只说了那一次。我们在她的房间里，关于这一点，她跟我说了好多。”

当艺术欣赏课后，她第一次请他去她书房的时候，汤米解释说，他以为又要挨一顿训，教他要更加努力——这种话他应该从不同的导师那里听过多次，包括艾米丽小姐本人。但是当他们在主楼朝导师居住区所在的橘园走去时，汤米开始感到这次聊天会不一样。后来，当他刚刚在露西小姐的安乐椅上坐下——她仍是靠床边站着——她就请汤米将事情的来龙去脉都说出来，实事求是地说，他都经受了些什么事。于是汤米开始从头讲起。但还没等他说到一半时，她突然打断他，自己开始说了起来。她认识很多的学生，她说，很长时间里，他们都很难有创作能力：画画、素描、诗歌，好几年里哪一样都不灵。然后某一天他们翻过一个坎儿，就盛放了。很可能汤米也是这群人中的一个。

所有这些汤米之前就曾听过，但是露西小姐的姿态方式让他继续专心往下听。

“我能看出，”他对我说，“她要讲到些什么，不一样的东西。”

当然，很快她就开始说一些汤米无法理解的话。但她不断重复，直到他终于开始明白。如果汤米真诚地努力过，她当时说，可就是没办法创作出什么，那就完全没问题，他不需要为此担心。无论导师还

是学生，任何人要是为此惩罚他，或是以其他方式向他施加压力，那都是错误的。这根本不是他的错。然后，汤米反驳说露西小姐说的容易，可是其他人都认为是他的错，这时她叹了口气，朝窗外望去。然后她说：

“可能这对你也没有太大帮助。但你只要记住，在黑尔舍姆这里，至少有一个人想法跟他们不同。至少有一个人相信你是个很好的学生，跟她以往碰到的学生一样好，甭管你有没有创意。”

“她不是在钓你上钩吧？”我问汤米，“这是不是要变着法子批评你呢？”

“绝对不是那种意思。总之……”他似乎头一次感到担心有人会偷听，回头朝主楼的方向看了看。窗口的小学生已经失了兴致走开了；我们年级的几个女生正在朝运动馆走来，但她们距离这边还很远。汤米朝我转回身，几乎耳语道：

“反正，她说这些的时候，浑身都在发抖。”

“你什么意思，发抖？”

“是发抖。愤怒的颤抖。我看得见她。她怒火中烧，但是那种埋得很深的怒火。”

“气谁呢？”

“我说不准。总之不是对我，这点最重要！”他笑了起来，随即又严肃起来，“我不知道她生谁的气。但她真的是在生气。”

我再次站起身，因为我小腿肚都酸了。“这很奇怪啊，汤米。”

“有趣的是，这次跟她的谈话确实有帮助。帮助很大。早先你说过的，我现在状态好像好些了。其实都是因为那件事。因为从那以后，想到她所说的那些话，我明白了她说得对，事情的确不是我的错。好吧，我处理得不好。但是归根到底这不是我的错。这点带来了大不同。每当我感到困难的时候，我会看到她走来走去，或者我上她的课，她并不会说起那天的谈话，但我会望着她，有时候她会看到我，朝我轻轻点头。这就是我所需要的一切。你前面问有没有发生过什么。喏，这就是发生的一切。可是凯丝，你听我说，不要跟任何人讲起这件事，好吗？”

我点头，但是问道：“她要你保证不讲吗？”

“不，没有，她没让我做任何保证。但你不许外传。你真的得保证。”

“好吧。”几个朝运动馆走来的女生已经看到了我，正在挥手、喊我。我挥手作答，然后对汤米说：“我得走了。我们迟些再继续聊这件事。”

可是汤米不理睬我的话。“还有别的，”他继续说道，“她还说了别的话，我听不大明白。我想问问你来的。她说我们学得很不够，诸如此类的。”

“学得不够？你是说她认为我们应该更努力学习吗？”

“不，我觉得她不是那个意思。她说的是，你知道的，关于我们。将来我们会怎么样。捐献啊什么的。”

“可是所有这一切我们已经学过了，”我说，“奇怪，她到底什么意思。她是不是认为还有些事情我们不知道？”

汤米想了一会儿，随后摇头。“我想她不是这个意思。她只是认为关于这些，教给我们的很不够。因为她说她很想亲自跟我们讲讲这个。”

“到底讲什么呢？”

“我说不准。也许我完全是会错了意，凯丝，我不知道。也许她说的根本是另外的意思，别的意思，关于我没有创意的事。我真的不明白。”

汤米望着我，仿佛期待我给他一个答案。我认真想了几秒钟，然后说：

“汤米，好好回想一下。你说她生气……”

“对，看上去就是这样。她很安静，但她在发抖。”

“好吧，管他呢。我们就当她是生气。她是生气了才开始说这些另外的事么？说关于捐献等等，我们知道得还不够什么的？”

“我猜是吧……”

“哎，汤米，好好想想。她为什么提起这个？本来是说你，还有你不肯创作。然后突然她就开始说这些另外的事。其中的关联是什么？为什么她会说起捐献？这跟你的创意有什么关系？”

“我不知道。我猜其中一定有缘故。也许一桩事联想到另一桩。凯丝你现在对这事也太起劲了吧。”

我笑了，因为他说得对：我眉头紧皱，陷入沉思。事实上，我的大脑同时在朝好几个不同的方向开动。汤米讲的他跟露西小姐的谈话让我想起了一些事情，可能有一系列的事情，跟露西小姐有关的、过去的事，当时就曾让我感到迷惑。

“只不过是……”我停下来，叹了口气，“我说不好，自己都不明白。但是所有这些，你说的这一切，好像跟别的一些令人迷惑的事接上茬了。我一直在想所有这些事。比如为什么夫人要来拿走我们最好的画。到底是为了什么？”

“是为了艺廊。”

“可她那艺廊到底是干吗的？她总是到这里来，把我们最好的作品拿走。到现在她一定已经攒了一大堆了。我曾经问过杰拉尔丁小姐一次，夫人到这里来有多久了，她说自从有了黑尔舍姆她就来了。这艺廊到底是干吗的？她为什么要搞个艺廊，收我们的作品？”

“也许她拿去卖。外面，就外面，他们什么都卖。”

我摇摇头。“不可能。这和露西小姐跟你说的话有关系。关于我们，总有一天我们要开始捐献。我不知道为什么，但一段时间以来，我都有这种感觉，一切都是相关联的，可我想不清楚是如何关联的。我得走了，汤米。关于我们说的这些，先不要告诉任何人。”

“好的。还有你不要跟任何人讲露西小姐的事。”

“可是如果她再跟你说起任何像这样的话，你都告诉我好吗？”

汤米点点头，随后再次环顾四周。“你说的对，你得走了，凯丝。很快就有人听到我们讲话了。”

我和汤米讨论到的这个艺廊，在我们所有人的成长过程中都一直存在。人人说起来都好像真的有这么个艺廊一样，然而实际上，我们谁也拿不准这艺廊是否真的存在。我无法记清第一次听说艺廊是什么时候、什么情况，但我敢肯定，我这样是很典型的。显然不可能是从导师们那里，因为有个不成文的规矩，我们决不能当着他们的面说起这个话题。

现在我猜想，这可能是黑尔舍姆的学生们一代又一代传下来的。我记得在我才只有五六岁的时候，有一次，我跟阿曼达·C一起坐在矮

桌旁，两人手上都沾满了雕塑黏土。我不记得当时有没有其他小孩跟我们一起，也不记得有没有导师负责。我只记得阿曼达·C——她比我大一岁——看着我在做的东西，惊叫道：“真的很棒，很棒呀，凯西！做得太棒了！我敢说一定会进艺廊！”

那时候我一定已经知道了艺廊的存在，因为我记得她说那话的时候，那种兴奋和自豪感——还有接下来的一刻，我自己心里的念头：“这太荒唐了。我们谁都还没有到能够进艺廊的水平。”

随着我们长大，大家仍然在谈论着艺廊。如果你想要称赞某人的作品，就会说：“都够得上进艺廊了。”等到我们发现了反讽这种修辞手段之后，每当我们看到差劲到好笑的作品，就会说：“对，没错！这件可以直达艺廊了！”

可是我们是不是真的相信艺廊的存在呢？如今我不确定了。正如我前面所说，我们从来不对导师提起艺廊，回顾往事，这不成文的规矩可能是我们自己强加给自己的，同样也可能是导师的决定。我还记得在我们十一岁左右的时候有件事。那是一个冬日上午，阳光明媚，我们在七号教室里。我们刚刚上完了罗杰先生的课，我们少数几个人留下来跟他闲聊。我们都坐在课桌上，我记不清楚当时说了些什么，但罗杰先生跟往常一样，逗得我们笑了又笑。这时卡罗尔·H趁着咯咯笑的间隙说了一句：“可能还能选中你进艺廊呢！”说完她立刻抬手捂住嘴，“哎哟”了一声，气氛依然轻松愉快；但连罗杰先生在内，我们都知道她犯了个错误。倒不是什么弥天大错；程度差不多相当于我们中有谁不小心骂了个脏字儿，或者当着导师的面说到了他的绰号。罗杰先生宠溺地面带笑容，仿佛是说：“说过就算了，我们假装你没说过这话，”随后我们又嬉笑如常。

如果对我们来说，艺廊始终是个含混不清的存在，那么清楚明了的事实是，夫人通常每年两次——有时三到四次，来挑选我们最好的作品。我们称呼她“夫人”因为她是法国人，或者比利时人——具体是哪国有些争议——还有导师们一直都这么称呼她。她是个高个子、身材瘦削的女子，头发很短，也许还很年轻，可当时我们谁也不会往那个方面去想她。她总是穿着一身硬朗的灰色套装，跟园丁和送供给物资来的司机——跟其他所有从外面来的人——都不一样，她不跟我们讲话，冷着一张面孔让我们敬而远之。很多年里，我们都认为她“目中无人”，但后来，在我们大约八岁的时候一天晚上，露丝想出了一个另外的理论。

“她怕我们，”她声称。

我们躺在宿舍里，黑着灯。小学的时候，我们一间宿舍睡十五个人，因此那时候不大有后来我们在中学宿舍里这种漫长亲密的谈话。但后来那些成为我们小“团体”的人，那时候就睡床挨得很近了，我们已经逐渐形成了深夜长谈的习惯。

“你什么意思，怕我们？”有人问，“她怎么可能害怕我们？我们能怎么着她？”

“我不知道，”露丝说，“我不知道，但我肯定她是怕。我原来以为她就是目中无人，但不对，有别的缘故。我现在确信了。夫人是害怕我们。”

我们断断续续就此争论了几天。大多数人都不同意露丝的意见，但这样一来，她更是下定了决心要证明自己正确。于是到最后，我们决定要做个计划，等下次夫人来黑尔舍姆的时候，我们要检验一下她的理论。

虽然说夫人的来访从来不会公开宣布，但到她该来的时候，迹象总是非常明显。为了她到来的准备工作提前几个星期就开始了，导师们把我们的作品筛选一遍——我们的油画、素描、陶塑，所有的作文和诗歌。这项工作要持续至少两个星期，到最后小学和中学部每个年级都会有四五件作品被选进台球室。这期间台球室是关闭的，但是如果你站在外面露台的矮墙上，就能透过窗户看到选中的作品越堆越多。一旦导师们开始将作品整齐地摆开，摆到桌上、画架上，就像一场小型的我们那种交换活动，这时你就知道夫人一两天内就到。

在我所讲的那个秋天，我们不仅需要知道夫人来的日子，还要知道她出现的准确时间，因为她通常只会待一两个钟头。因此当我们一看到作品在台球室展示出来，就决定轮番守望。

这个任务因为我们这里地形的关系，变得非常容易。黑尔舍姆建在一个平滑的山谷中，周围都是坡地。这就意味着从主楼的几乎任何一间教室的窗口里——甚至从运动馆里——都可以清楚看到那条蜿蜒细长的小路从田地间穿过，直到大门口。大门到校区还有相当一段距离，所有的车辆都得从碎石铺的车道上驶过，穿过灌木和花圃，最终才能达到主楼前面的院子。有时候好几天我们都看不到任何一辆车从那条窄路上开进来，而来的车辆多半是货车或者运输车，送来物资、园丁或者工人。小汽车很罕见，有时候远远看到一辆就足以在课堂上引起一阵骚动。

看到夫人的小车沿着小路穿过田野开来的那天下午，风很大，阳光很好，有几块雨云正在开始聚集。我们在九号教室——就在主楼前方的二层——当我们交头接耳传递消息的时候，可怜的弗兰克先生正在教我们拼写，他搞不懂为什么我们突然之间会变得这么躁动不安。

我们想出的验证露丝理论的计划很简单：我们——一共有六个人——要悄悄埋伏在某处等着夫人，然后“拥出来”一下子围在她身边。我们会举止合度，然后继续往前走，但是如果我们时间掌握得恰好，堵她个猝不及防，我们就能看出——露丝坚持道——她真的是害怕我们。

我们主要的担心在于可能没办法在她待在黑尔舍姆的短暂时间内抓到机会。但是，当弗兰克先生的课程结束之后，我们分明看到夫人就在下面的院子里，正在停车。我们在楼梯间匆忙开了个小会，然后就跟班上其他同学一起走下楼梯，然后在主楼的门廊上晃荡。我们朝外能看到明亮的院子，夫人依然坐在车里，翻她的公文包。终于她从车中出来，朝我们走来，穿着平时那身灰色套装，双手紧紧抱着公文包。露丝发出讯号，我们就慢慢溜达着，径直朝她走去，但就像梦游一样。只是等到她僵直地站住了之后，我们才各自轻声说：“抱歉，小姐。”然后分开了。

我永远无法忘记接下来的刹那我们身上发生的那种奇怪的变化。直到那一刻，关于夫人的这件事虽然算不上笑话，也只是我们私下说说，小圈子解决而已。我们从未想过夫人本人，或是其他人会受到何种影响。我的意思是说，直到那时，这还是件轻松的事儿，包含着一点大冒险游戏的因素在里面。倒不是说夫人做出了什么我们意料之外的反应：她只是定定地站住，等着我们经过。她没有尖叫，甚至没有出声。但我们都在集中精神观察她的反应，也许正因为如此，这事才会对我们有这么大的影响。当她突然停下脚步的时候，我快速扫视她的脸——其他人也一样，我敢肯定。我至今都能栩栩如生地看到，她似乎在拼命压抑住周身的颤抖，那种真正的恐惧，怕我们中的哪一个会不小心碰到她。虽然说我们继续往前走，但我们都感受到了；仿佛我们从阳光中一下子迈进了寒冷的阴处。露丝说得对：夫人确实怕我们。但她害怕我们就像是有的人害怕蜘蛛一样。对此我们毫无准备。我们从来没有想到，我们要怎么想这件事，我们自己会是什么感受，被人那样看待，当成蜘蛛。

等到我们穿过院子，到了草坪上的时候，已经变成了完全不同的一群人，跟当初兴奋地站在那里等待夫人从车里出来的时候换了个

人。甚至露丝都显得大受打击。这时我们中的一个——我想是劳拉——说道：

“如果她不喜欢我们，那为什么要我们的作品？干吗要干涉我们？再说了，有谁请她来这里了？”

没有人答话，我们继续走到了运动馆，一路都再没有讲起刚刚发生的事。

如今回想起来，我看得出在当时那个年纪，我们对自己有所了解——我们是谁，我们跟导师、和外面的人有何不同——但还没有真正理解所有这些的意义。我敢说，在你的童年时代，也曾有过像我们这样的经历；哪怕具体细节未必相似，但究其内里和感受一定有过类似的体会。但是无论你的导师多么认真地帮你做好准备：所有那些谈话、录像、讨论、警告，所有的一切都无法解释到位。当你只有八岁的时候，大家一起在黑尔舍姆这样一个地方，如果你有像我们那样的导师，园丁和送货员跟你们说笑，喊你“甜心”，你就不可能理解。

然而，终究有些事必须得接受进来。必须得进来，因为等到这样一个时刻终于到来的时候，有一部分的你早就在等待了。也许早在你才五六岁的时候，脑袋后面有个轻轻的声音在絮语：“总有一天，也许要不了多久，你就得知道这是个什么滋味。”于是你就等着，哪怕你仍是懵懵懂懂，却已在等待着那一刻的到来，你终于明白自己跟他们真的不同；明白外面有些人就像夫人那样，他们不恨你也不想伤害你，但是一想到你还是会打冷战——想到你是如何、为了什么，才被带到这个世界上——想到你的手可能会跟他们触碰，他们就感到惧怕。当你第一次透过这样一个人的眼睛看到自己的时候，这一刻寒意刺骨。就好像经过一面你这辈子每天都路过的镜子，突然间里面映出了完全不同的东西，古怪，令人不安的东西。

第四章

到今年底我就不再做护理人员了，虽然这中间我收获良多，可是也得承认，我会很高兴有机会能够休息——停下来想想心事，回忆往事。我觉得至少部分与此有关，为了准备改变节奏，所以我一直有冲动，想要将过去的回忆整理妥当。我猜我真正想做的，是将我们长大并且离开黑尔舍姆之后，我和汤米、露丝之间所发生的事想想清楚。但是我现在明白了，后来发生的诸种种都源自我们在黑尔舍姆的时光，因此我才想首先要认真整理这些早期的记忆。比如说对于夫人的这些好奇。某种层面上，这只是我们小孩闹着玩。但另一方面，你也看得出这是一个开始，接下来的许多年里这件事变得越来越大，直到最终占据了我们的生活。

那天之后，夫人虽然没有变成我们中间禁止提及的话题，却也很少说起。这现象很快从我们这个小群体开始，渐渐弥散到了我们整个年级的学生。就像我说的，我们对她依然充满好奇，但都感觉到，如果继续深入探查下去——关于她如何处理我们的作品，是否真的有艺廊——将会把我们引入尚未准备好进入的领域。

可是关于艺廊这个话题，还是会时不时有人提起，因此几年之后，当汤米在池塘边开始告诉我他跟露西小姐之间的古怪谈话时，我想到了脑海中埋藏已久的往事。我将他一个人扔下坐在岩石上，自己朝草坪匆匆跑去跟朋友们汇合，那之后，往事才浮上心头。

那是一次上课的时候，露西小姐对我们说过的话。我之所以一直记得，是因为当时感到迷惑不解，也是因为那是仅有的少数几次当着导师的面，特地提到艺廊这件事。

我们当时遭遇了后来起名为“交换币之争”的问题。几年前我跟汤米讨论过交换币之争，开始我们无法就事情何时发生这一点取得一致意见。我说我们当时十岁；他认为是十岁之后，但最终转过弯来，同意了我的说法。我很有把握没记错：我们当时小学四年级——夫人那件事发生之后又过了一段时间，但过了三年之后，才有了我们在池塘边的那次谈话。

我认为，交换币之争实际上是跟我们渐渐长大，变得越来越贪心有关系。几年以来——我想我前面说过——我们都认为自己的作品入选进入台球室就是个巨大的胜利，更不要说被夫人挑走了。但等我们

十岁的时候，对此事我们的态度有了两面性。交换活动以交换币作为代币的模式，让我们培养了犀利的眼光，一眼就能看出怎样的作品可以换出高价。我们都热衷于换取T恤衫，装饰床边墙，还有个性化书桌。当然，我们还要考虑自己的“收藏”。

我不知道你们那里有没有“收藏”这回事。你要是碰到黑尔舍姆出来的学生，迟早会发现他们会对自己的收藏念念不忘。而在当时，我们把一切都视为理所当然。我们每个人有个木箱子，放在自己床下面，装满了属于自己的东西——你在拍卖会或者交换活动上得到的东西。我记得有一两个学生对自己的收藏品不大用心，但我们大多数人都非常在意，会挑选物品拿出来展示，将其他东西小心收好。

问题在于等到我们十岁左右的时候，“作品被夫人选中是个巨大的荣誉”这种观念跟我们会失去自己最有市场价值的作品的感受发生了冲突。最终这矛盾发展成了交换币之争。

开始是几个学生，主要是男孩，抱怨说对于夫人拿走的作品，我们应该得到交换币作为补偿。许多学生同意这种观点，但另外一些人却对此感到愤慨。争论在我们之间持续了一段时间，直到有一天，罗伊·J——他比我们高一年，已经有多件作品被夫人选走了——决定要去找艾米丽小姐当面说这件事。

艾米丽小姐是我们的校长，比其他导师都年长。她不是特别高，但举止动作器宇不凡，总是头抬得高高的，让人觉得她很高。她满头银发都朝后梳，但是碎头发总是挣脱出来，围着她飘飞不停。换我的话肯定烦得要命，但艾米丽小姐总是无视这点问题，仿佛这点麻烦不值一晒。到傍晚时分，她看起来多半很古怪，因为懒得理会满脸碎发飘舞，伴随着跟人讲话的时候那种平静而刻意的语调。我们都挺怕她的，对她的态度跟其他导师也很不一样。但我们认为她很公道，也尊重她的决定；早在小学阶段，我们就认识到，尽管她的存在令人生畏，却正是我们在黑尔舍姆感到安全的原因所在。

不经传唤主动去见她是需要些勇气的；像罗伊那样带着要求去找她，在我们看来简直跟自杀无二。但罗伊并没有像我们预料的那样惨遭批评，接下来的几天里，还听说导师们在讨论——甚至争论——交换币的问题。最终公布的结果是我们会得到交换币，但不多，因为有作品被夫人选中是“至高无上的荣誉”。这个结果让双边阵营都不太满意，于是争论的声音持续不断。

就是在这样的背景之下，一天上午波丽·T问了露西小姐一个问题。当时我们在图书馆里，围绕着那张大橡木桌子坐了一圈。我记得当时壁炉里有木柴在燃烧，我们当时在读剧本。突然剧本里碰到一句台词引得劳拉说了句俏皮话，讲到了交换币的事，我们都笑了起来，露西小姐也笑了。然后露西小姐说既然在黑尔舍姆大家除了这事什么都不谈了，那么我们不如忘了读剧本的事，把课堂剩下的时间用来讨论下大家对交换币的各种观点。就是在我们讨论的过程中，波丽冷不丁问了一句：“小姐，为什么夫人要把我们的东西拿走呢？”

我们都沉默不语。露西小姐不经常发脾气，但是如果她生气了，你肯定能看得出来，有一刹那，我们都觉得波丽惹露西小姐生气了。但随后我们发现露西小姐没有生气，只是陷入了沉思。我记得自己当时特别生波丽的气，觉得她真蠢，居然违反了大家心照不宣的约定，但同时又很兴奋，想看看露西小姐如何作答。显然并不是只有我一个人怀着这些矛盾念头：几乎每个人都是先恶狠狠地瞪波丽一眼，然后急切地转向露西小姐——这样其实对可怜的波丽挺不公道的，我想。似乎过了很长时间之后，露西小姐才开口：

“今天我可以告诉你们她的目的是好的，我只能说到这里。是为了解了一个非常重要的目的。但是如果我现在跟你们解释，我觉得你们理解不了。我希望有一天可以向你们解释清楚。”

我们没有追问她。围绕着桌边的气氛变得非常令人尴尬，虽然我们很好奇，想了解更多，但更希望赶紧离开这个烫手的话题。于是下一刻我们就很放松地重新围绕着交换币——也许有点虚张声势地——继续争论下去。但露西小姐的话令我迷惑不解，接下来的几天里，我时不时想起她的说法。正因为有过这件事，所以那天下午在池塘边，当汤米跟我讲到他跟露西小姐的谈话，她如何告诉他关于某些方面给我们“教得不够”时，那天在图书馆的记忆才会浮上心头——连同一两件与之相类的小事一起。

既然我们说到了交换币的事，我还想略微讲讲我们的拍卖活动，虽然前面我已经提过几次了。拍卖活动之所以对我们那么重要，是因为只有在这里，我们才能获得外来的东西。比如汤米的POLO衫，就是拍卖会上得来的。我们的衣服、玩具，所有那些并非其他学生手作的特别的玩意儿，都是从这里来的。

每个月一次，一辆白色大货车会沿着长路而来，整座楼里、所有的活动场上，你都能感受到那种兴奋。等车子终于在院子里停下来的

时候，那里已经围了一群人在等——主要是小学生，因为一旦你过了十二三岁的年纪，那样肆无忌惮的兴奋就不大合适了。但其实我们都一样。

现在回想起来，一场拍卖能让我们那样激动，其实挺可笑，因为通常拍卖会都会让人大失所望。稍微特别一点的东西都没有，我们只是花交换币去换掉那些用旧或者用坏的东西，总是大同小异。但我猜关键在于我们每个人都曾在过去的拍卖会上找到过什么，这东西变得很特别：一件外套、一只手表、一把做手工的剪刀，虽然从来不用，却把它骄傲地摆在床头。曾几何时我们都找到过像这样的东西，因此无论我们如何假装不在乎，还是无法摆脱过去那种满怀希望和欢欣雀跃的感觉。

实际上，在货车卸货的时候，在附近转转还是有意义的。你要做的是——如果你是那群小学生之一的話——跟着那两个穿工作服扛着纸箱子在储藏室和车辆之间来回往返的人，问他们里面有什么。通常他们会回答说“很多好东西，甜心”。如果你咬住接着问，“算大丰收吗？”他们迟早会面露微笑，回答说：“嗯，我觉得算，甜心。真正的大丰收。”这会激起一片兴奋的欢呼声。

箱子通常是从上面敞开的，因此你可以瞥见各种东西，有时候，虽然不应该，但工人会纵容你拨开几件东西翻看。正因为如此，等到一周左右过去，真正的拍卖会要开始的时候，会有各种各样的流言，也许有一件特别的运动服，或者音乐磁带，如果发生矛盾，那么多半是有几个学生同时看上了一件东西。

拍卖会跟交换活动上那种严肃的气氛对比鲜明。举办地点是在餐厅，熙熙攘攘很是闹腾。实际上，挤来挤去、大声嚷嚷正是乐趣之一，绝大部分时候都还是友好愉快的。除非正如我说过的，偶尔情况有点失控，学生们开始争抢拉扯，有时候还会打起来。这时班长们就站出来威胁说要把活动全部停掉，然后我们所有人在第二天一早的集会上都要被艾米丽小姐批评一顿。

在黑尔舍姆，一天的开始总是集会，通常很短——宣布公告，也许由一个学生朗读一首诗。艾米丽小姐通常不多说；她常常只是在主席台上坐得笔直，无论说到什么，她都点头认可，偶尔人群中有人交头接耳的，立刻会被她冷峻的目光一眼扫过。但是一场喧闹的拍卖会过后的第二天，一切都不同了。她会命令我们都在地板上坐下——通常集会时我们是站着的——这时既没有公告，也没有表演，只有艾米丽小姐对我们讲话，持续二三十分钟，有时甚至更久。她极少抬高声

音，但在这种场合她会流露出强硬的一面，我们所有人，哪怕是中学五年级的那些学生，也不敢出声。

大家共同的感受是，如果让艾米丽小姐失望，我们会真切地感到难过，可是虽然很努力，我们却也不能真正理解她的教诲。部分是因为她的用词。“不配享受优待”还有“虚掷大好机会”：这两套说辞反复出现，这是我和露丝在多佛的康复中心她的房间里，我们回忆往事的时候想起来的。她总体的讲话主旨很清楚：我们黑尔舍姆的学生每一个都很特别，因此当我们行为失当的时候，就更加令人失望。可是此外的一切就成了一团迷雾。有时候她会讲得很激烈，然后说完一句话突然停下来，比如：“是什么？是什么？到底是什么阻碍了我们？”然后她就站在原地，闭上眼睛，皱起眉头，仿佛在努力破解这个问题的答案。虽然我们感到迷惑不解又尴尬莫名，却依然坐在原地，期待着她继续思考，直到寻找到头脑中她要找的那个不知道什么新发现。也许她会轻叹一声然后重新开始——这意味着她要宽恕我们了——再不然，她同样可能会从沉默中爆发：“但我决不妥协！不，绝不！黑尔舍姆也不会！”

当我们回忆起这些长篇讲话的时候，露丝提到艾米丽小姐讲得这样云山雾罩很古怪，因为在课堂上她讲得可清楚了。当我说到我曾偶尔见到校长像梦游一样在黑尔舍姆四处漫步，一边自言自语时，露丝生气了，她说：

“她从来没有那样！如果负责人这么不中用，黑尔舍姆怎么会是这样？艾米丽小姐的头脑锋利得可以用来切木头。”

我没有反驳。当然，艾米丽小姐有时候的确是目光如炬。如果，比如说你出现在了主楼或者操场某个不该出现的地方，如果听到有导师走近，总可以找地方躲一躲。黑尔舍姆到处都有藏身之处：橱柜里、墙洞里、树丛里、篱笆下。但是如果你看到艾米丽小姐过来，心就会咯噔一下，因为她总能知道你躲着呢。就好像她感觉更多、更敏锐。你可以躲进柜子，紧紧关上门，周身每一块肌肉都静止不动，依然清楚地知道艾米丽小姐的脚步会在外面停下来，她的话音响起：“好了。你出来吧。”

有一次在三楼的楼梯上，希尔薇·C就遭遇了这样的事，那一次艾米丽小姐难得的大发雷霆。你惹她生气的时候，她从来不会像露西小姐等导师那样大喊大叫，可是艾米丽小姐发火只有更可怕。她会眯起眼睛，愤怒地轻声自言自语，仿佛跟一位看不见的同事讨论怎样惩罚你才够严厉。她那种样子让你一方面迫不及待想听到结果，另一方面

又完全不想面对。但是艾米丽小姐通常不会对我们太严厉。她很少让学生课后留下，布置杂务或者免除学生优待。可是你依然会感到特别难受，哪怕是仅仅因为知道她对你的评价有所降低，于是你立刻就想去做点什么，尽力为自己挽回。

可问题是艾米丽小姐是不可预料的。希尔薇那次可能遭到了足量的惩戒，但是当劳拉在大黄田里乱跑被捉到的时候，艾米丽小姐只是说了句：“姑娘，你不该在这里。快走开。”然后就继续往前走了。

后来有一次，我以为我惹毛了艾米丽小姐，要倒霉了。主楼背后的一条小步道是我真心最喜欢的地方。沿路会经过所有的墙洞和附属建筑，你得从灌木丛中挤过，从两个长满常青藤的拱门下经过，还会穿过一扇生锈的大门。整个路途中你都可以从窗口瞥见室内，一间接一间地路过。我猜我那么喜欢这条小路有一部分原因在于我一直拿不准这里到底是不是禁区。当然，有课的时候你不应该从外面经过。但周末还有傍晚的时候——这里一直没有明确是否禁入。大多数学生总归是绕开这里走，也许这种躲开所有人的感觉也是这地方的吸引力之一。

总之，一个斜阳朗照的傍晚，我就走在这条小路上。我想那是中学三年级的事。我跟往常一样，路过的时候目光瞥进一个又一个空房间，突然我看到艾米丽小姐在一间教室里。她一个人正在慢慢地踱步，一面喃喃自语，动作姿态仿佛是对着房间里一位看不见的听众。我猜想她大概是在备课，或者排演她在集会上的讲话内容，我刚想要赶紧过去，可她已经看到了我，但就在这这时她却转过身来，目光直视着我。我呆立着，心想我这下撞到枪口上了，可是随后我注意到，她仪态如常，只不过现在讲话的对象成了我。随后，她又无比自然地转身，将视线转移到了房间其他位置另外某个想象中的学生身上。我沿着小路悄悄溜走了，接下来的几天里都特别怕艾米丽小姐看到我会有话说。可她根本没有提起过。

但这其实不是我刚才想说的事。现在我想做的，是记下几件关于露丝的事，我们如何相遇，交上了朋友，关于我们早年共同度过的那些岁月。因为这些天来，当我在漫长的午后时光里驱车穿过田野，或是在某个公路休息站的大窗户前啜饮咖啡的时候，我发现自己越来越经常地想起她。

她并不是一开始就跟我是朋友。我记得，大约五六岁的时候，我跟汉娜和劳拉在搞什么，但没有露丝。那段我们早期的生活记忆里，

我对露丝只有一点模糊的印象。

我在一个沙坑里玩。里面还有另外三个人跟我在一起，坑里太挤了，我们彼此都有些火气。我们在户外，阳光很温暖，因此很可能那是在幼儿游戏区的沙坑，也有可能是在北操场尽头跳远赛道头上的那堆沙。总之天很热，我觉得口渴，我不高兴沙坑里有那么多人。这时露丝出现了，站在那里，她没有在沙坑里跟我们一起，而是隔着几英尺远。她不知为什么很生我身后两个女孩的气，一定是为了早先发生的什么事。她就站在那里死盯着她们。我猜当时我跟露丝不怎么熟。但她想必已经在我心上留下了某种印象，因为我记得自己当时在沙子里忙着继续自己之前的游戏，非常害怕她会调转目光盯上我。我什么也没说，但我非常想让她明白，我跟背后那两个女孩不是一起的，不管她们怎么得罪了她，我都完全没有参与。

我早年对露丝的记忆就只有这么一点。我们同年，因此我们一定曾碰到过彼此，但除了那次在沙坑里的遭遇，我完全不记得任何跟她有关的事，直到几年之后我们读小学的时候，那时我们七岁，不到八岁。

南操场是小学生用得最多的，就是在那里，在杨树下的角落，有天午饭时间露丝朝我走来，上下打量了我一番，然后说道：

“你想要骑我的马吗？”

我当时正在跟另外两三个孩子玩，但显然露丝只是对我一个人说话。这让我非常开心，但我故意显得思忖了一下她的话之后才作答。

“好呀，你的马叫什么名字？”

露丝上前一步。“我最好的马，”她说，“叫雷电。我不能让你骑他。他太危险了。但你可以骑布蓝堡，只要你不用鞭子打他。再不然你要是喜欢，别的随便哪匹你都可以骑。”她又说了另外几个名字，我现在已经记不起来了。然后她问道：“你自己有马吗？”

我看了看她，认真想了想才回答：“不，我没有马。”

“一匹马都没有么？”

“没有。”

“那好。你可以骑布蓝堡，如果你喜欢，就送给你好了。但你不能用鞭子抽他。你现在就得来。”

反正我那几个朋友已经转身离开，继续他们之前在做的事了。于是我耸耸肩，跟着露丝走了。

操场上满是玩耍的小孩，有些比我们大很多，但露丝理直气壮地从中间穿过，总是领先我一两步。当我们马上要走到跟花园相连的铁丝网边界上时，她转过身说：

“好吧，我们就在这里骑马。你来牵布蓝堡。”

我接过了她手里握着的一根看不见的缰绳，于是我们就开始沿着篱笆来回骑行，有时漫步，有时跳跃。我告诉露丝我没有马这个决定很正确，因为我骑了一会儿布蓝堡之后，她让我一匹接一匹试骑她其他的马，还喊出各种指示，教我如何应对每只动物的小弱点。

“我不是告诉你了嘛！你骑水仙得靠后坐直！再靠后！除非你靠后坐，不然她不喜欢！”

我想必是做得不错，因为最后她让我骑一下雷电，她最喜欢的一匹马。我不知道那天我们玩她的马玩了多久；感觉时间相当长，我想当时我们俩都完全地沉浸在游戏之中。可是突然，我完全看不出什么缘故，露丝就结束了整个游戏，她指责我是故意跑累她的马，我得把每一匹马都带回马厩去。她指着篱笆的某一片，于是我开始将马牵过去，与此同时，露丝越看我越不爽，说我每件事都做得不对。然后她问：

“你喜欢杰拉尔丁小姐吗？”

很可能这是第一次我想这个问题，我喜不喜欢某位导师。最终我说：“当然，我喜欢她。”

“但你是真心喜欢她吗？感觉她很特别？你最喜欢的？”

“是，没错。她是我最喜欢的导师。”

露丝继续盯着我看了好一会儿。最后她终于说道：“那好。既然如此这样，我就让你成为她秘密警卫的一员。”

这时我们开始朝主楼走去，我等着她解释这是什么意思，可她没有。在接下来的几天里，我才弄明白。

第五章

我不确定“秘密警卫”这件事总共持续了多久。当我在多佛照顾她的时候，我跟露丝讨论过这事，她号称前后不过才两三周时间——但这几乎一定是错的。很可能她感到不好意思，因此整件事在她的记忆中就缩减了。我的猜测是持续了大概九个月，甚至有一年之久，当时我们大约七岁，八岁不到。

我始终拿不准到底是不是露丝本人发明了这个秘密警卫团，但无疑她是其中的领导人物。我们有六到十人，当露丝放新人进来，或是驱逐某人的时候，人数就会有变化。我们相信杰拉尔丁小姐是黑尔舍姆最好的导师，我们要一起准备送她的礼物——我想到的是一张大纸，上面粘着干花标本。但当然，我们存在的主要原因是为了保护她。

到我加入到警卫团中的时候，露丝和其他成员老早就已经知道了要绑架杰拉尔丁小姐的阴谋。我们始终不确定背后主使是谁。有时候我们怀疑是某几个中学的男生，有时是我们同年的几个。有一个导师我们都不大喜欢——有位艾琳小姐——我们一度认为她可能是幕后黑手。我们不知道绑架何时会发生，但有一点我们都确信，那就是树林一定会与此有关。

那片树林远在黑尔舍姆建筑后方的山顶上。我们所能看到的其实只是一片深色的树木的剪影，但在我那个年纪，绝对不止我一个人日夜都在感受着它们的存在。糟糕的时候，仿佛它们将整个黑尔舍姆都笼罩在阴影之中；你只需转过头或是朝窗口靠近，它们就在那里，若隐若现在远处。主楼的前面是最安全的，因为从任何一个窗口都看不到它们。即便如此，实际上你始终无法真正摆脱它们。

关于树林有各种可怕的故事。一次，就在我们这些人进到黑尔舍姆之前不久，一个男孩子跟朋友们大吵一架之后，就跑出了黑尔舍姆的边界。两天之后有人发现他的尸体在树林里被绑在了树上，手脚都被砍掉了。另外还有传言说有个女孩子的鬼魂始终在树林中徘徊。她曾是黑尔舍姆的学生，后来有一天她翻过一道围墙，只是为了看看外面什么样。这是在我们之前很久的事了，那时候导师们远比现在要严厉，甚至残忍，当她想要回来的时候，他们不允许。她就一直在围墙附近游荡，哀求着放她进来，但是没有人应允。最终她在外面逃到了

什么地方，出了什么事，然后她就死掉了。但她的鬼魂一直在树林间徘徊，注视着黑尔舍姆，渴望着被接纳进来。

导师们总是坚称这些故事都是无稽之谈。可是那些年长的学生会跟我们说，当初他们小的时候，导师们正是这样告诉他们的，很快我们就会得知可怕的真相，正如他们所经历的一样。

树林激发我们想象最多的，是入夜以后，在我们宿舍里大家试图入睡的时候。这时候你仿佛感到能听到风穿过枝叶的沙沙声，而讲出来只会让情况更糟糕。我记得有一天夜里，我们都非常生玛琪·K的气，白天她做了件什么事，让我们深感尴尬——我们选择的惩罚方式就是将她从床上拖下来，把她的脸贴在窗玻璃上，命令她抬头看着树林。开始她死命闭着眼睛，但我们拧住她的胳膊，硬将她眼睑扒开，逼她看着远处月光照亮的夜空里树林的剪影，这就足以保证让她整夜在恐惧中啜泣。

我倒不是说在那个年龄，我们所有的时间都用于对树林担惊受怕。比如我自己，就可能有好几个星期完全不去想到它，甚至有时候一阵叛逆的勇气袭上心头，我会心想：“我们怎么会相信这种胡说八道？”然而只需要一点小事——有人复述某一个故事，某本书里一个吓人的章节，甚至只是偶然的一句话，让你想到树林——就意味着又有一段时间要笼罩在阴影之中。因此，我们认为树林在绑架杰拉尔丁小姐的阴谋中占据核心位置，一点都不奇怪。

可是具体到这事本身，我却记不起太多保卫杰拉尔丁小姐的实际措施；我们的活动总是围绕着收集越来越多的跟阴谋相关的证据。不知为何，我们都满意地认为这样可以阻止任何迫在眉睫的危险发生。

我们的“证据”大多来自见证密谋者的工作。比如有天上午，我们从一间三楼的教室窗口看到，艾琳小姐和罗杰先生在下面的院子里跟杰拉尔丁小姐讲话。过了一会儿杰拉尔丁小姐道别朝橘园走去，但我们继续观察，发现艾琳小姐和罗杰先生头靠得很近，鬼鬼祟祟地讨论着什么，同时目光凝视着杰拉尔丁小姐逐渐远去的背影。

“罗杰先生，”这时候露丝叹息着，摇着头，“谁能猜得到他也是其中之一？”

就这样，我们建立了一个我们认定的阴谋者名单——有导师，也有学生，我们宣誓这些人跟我们势不两立，是我们的死敌。然而整个过程中，我猜，这个幻想的故事之基础如此不堪一击，这一点我们其实是有概念的，因为我们总是避免对质冲突。在激烈的讨论之后，我

们可以认定某一个学生是阴谋者之一，但这时，我们总是能找到理由，暂时不去当面质问他——要等到“我们拿到全部证据”。同样，我们一致认为我们查出来的情况，杰拉尔丁小姐本人一句也不该听到，因为那只会让她担惊受怕，没有益处。

在我们的成长自然超越了这个阶段之后，要说是露丝凭一己之力将秘密警卫的故事延续了很久，也不那么容易。当然，警卫故事对她而言很重要。她知道那个阴谋远远早于我们其他人，这给了她巨大的权威；只需暗示说真正的证据都来自我这样的人加入之前——有些情况哪怕是对我们她也还没有透露——她就可以为所有那些代表我们群体所做的决定辩解。比如说，如果她决定要开除某个人，又感到有反对意见，她只需要拐弯抹角地隐约透露一点她“从前”知道的情况。毫无疑问露丝很努力要让整件事一直持续下去，但实际上，我们几个跟她也变得越来越密切，每个人都尽了自己一份力，保护着这个幻想游戏，尽量长久地让它继续下去。那次国际象棋所引发的争吵之后发生的事，充分证明了我的观点。

我一直认为露丝是个国际象棋的高手，她可以教我下棋。这也不是什么荒唐的念头：在靠窗的座位上，或是草坡上，我们曾偶遇高年级的学生埋头对弈，露丝经常会停下来，研究一会儿棋局。当我们重新开步走掉之后，她会告诉我一些她发现对弈双方都没看出来的走法。“笨得不可思议，”她总是摇着头絮语道。这些都让我很着迷，很快我就渴望着自己也能沉浸在这些漂亮的棋子游戏中。于是，当我在拍卖会上发现了一套国际象棋的时候，就决定买下来——虽然这花了我很多的交换币——我拿得准露丝会帮我。

可是接下来的几天里，我一说到这个话题她就叹气，要么就假装自己有很急的事必须得马上做。有个下雨的午后，我终于逮到她，我们在台球室摆开了棋盘，她开始给我摆一局棋，她摆的是国际跳棋的一个模糊的变形玩法。据她说国际象棋的特征在于每个棋子都走L形——我猜她是通过观察马的走步得出这个论点的——而不是像国际跳棋那样蛙跳式走棋。我根本不相信，我真的感到非常失望，但我忍住什么也没说，就这样跟她玩了一会儿。我们花了几分钟时间将彼此的棋子撞倒出局，每次都要走L形攻击路线。这样持续了一阵，直到我要吃她的棋子，可她声称这一步不算数，因为我的棋子要走到她那儿，路线太直了。

这时，我站起身收起棋盘走开了。我从未开口指出说她根本不会下棋——虽然我很失望，却也清楚不能做得太过分——但我想，这样

愤而离开对她来说就已经是种表态了。

大概是第二天，我到了顶楼的二十号教室，乔治先生在上诗歌课。我不记得是课前还是课后了，也不记得教室有多少人。我记得手上有书，当我朝露丝和其他人在讲话的地方走去的时候，他们坐的那片课桌盖笼罩在一片很强的日光里。

从他们脑袋凑在一起的那种样子我就看得出，他们是在讨论秘密警卫的事，虽然正如我说的，我跟露丝吵架才过去一天，可是不知为什么，我就心无旁骛地径直朝他们走去。就在我真的马上走到他们面前的时候——也许他们交换了一个眼神——我突然明白了会发生什么事。就像是当你一脚踏进水坑里的那前一秒钟，你发现那儿有个坑了，然而却已经来不及。甚至还不等他们都闭嘴瞪着我，甚至不等露丝开口说“哎，凯西，你好吗？希望你不要介意，我们刚刚有点事要讨论。我们还有一分钟就结束了，抱歉”，我就已经感到很受伤了。

不等她讲完这句话，我就转身夺门而出，我为自己居然迎头走上去而生气，超过了对露丝和其他人的愤怒。我很恼火，毫无疑问，可我不知道自己到底哭没哭。接下来的几天里，每当我看到秘密警卫们在角落里或者田野上一边散步一边商议的时候，都会感到两颊激动得涨红。

二十号教室的冷遇过去了两天之后，我从主楼的楼梯上走下来，发现莫伊拉·B碰巧在我身后。我们聊了起来——没说什么特别的——而后又一起漫步到了楼外。这大概是午休时间，因为当我们步入院子的时候，那边已经有二十多名学生，三三两两在闲逛聊天。我的目光立刻就转向了院子最远的那边，露丝和三个秘密警卫成员站在一起背对着我们，紧紧盯着南操场的方向。我正要设法弄清楚他们到底在盯着什么，这时我突然意识到身旁的莫伊拉也在看着他们。这时我突然想到，仅仅在一个月之前她也曾是秘密警卫中的一员，后来就被开除了。接下来的几秒钟里，我仿佛感到非常狼狈，因为最近遭受了同样的屈辱，我们俩现在竟然这样肩并肩站在了一起，跟过去一样直面拒绝我们的那张脸。也许莫伊拉也有类似的感受，总之是她打破了沉默，说道：

“这太蠢了，什么秘密警卫这一套。他们怎么会还相信这种玩意？好像还是幼儿班的一样。”

当我听到莫伊拉说这话时周身被如此强烈的情感所占据，哪怕今天想起来我也觉得这令人不解。我转身朝着她，简直出离愤怒：

“关于这你知道些什么呢？你根本什么都不知道，因为你现在已经离开太久了！如果你知道了我们发现的所有事，谅你绝对不敢说出这种蠢话！”

“别胡说八道，”莫伊拉从来不是个很容易让步的人，“这只不过是又一个露丝假造出来的把戏，仅此而已。”

“那我怎么会亲耳听到他们说过呢？听到他们讲要怎么用送奶车把杰拉尔丁小姐带到树林里去？我怎么会亲耳听到他们策划这事呢，这跟露丝或者其他任何人都毫无关系？”

莫伊拉看着我，现在她没那么确信了。“你亲耳听到的？怎么回事？在哪里？”

“我听到他们讲的，清清楚楚，每个字都听到了，他们不知道我在那里。就在池塘边，他们不知道我能听见。这下你明白自己知道多少了吧！”

我推开她走了，穿过人群拥挤的庭院时，我回头瞥了一眼露丝和其他人的身影，他们依然朝南操场的方向盯着看呢，对于我跟莫伊拉之间刚刚发生的事一无所知。这时我留意到我对他们一点都不生气了，只是很生莫伊拉的气。

即便如今，当我行驶在漫长灰沉沉的路上，思绪飘忽，无处着落的时候，有时我发觉自己又在从头开始想这件事。为什么那天我会对本该是我天然盟友的莫伊拉·B那么充满敌意？我想当时莫伊拉是希望我跟她一起跨越某个界限，可我还没准备好。我想我当时大概已经感觉到，一旦越过这条线，等待我们的就会有更艰难、更黑暗的东西，而我不想要面对。我不想，也不想我们任何一个人去面对那些东西。

但还有一些时候，我会觉得那是不对的——这单纯只是我跟露丝之间的事儿，那些日子里，她的确激起了我那样强烈的忠诚度。也许正因为如此，有几次虽然我很想说，却一直没有提起过那天我跟莫伊拉之间的事——就在多佛的康复中心我照顾露丝的那些日子里。

所有这些关于杰拉尔丁小姐的往事让我想起大约三年之后发生的一件事，在秘密警卫的游戏淡去很久之后。

我们在主楼后部底楼的五号教室里等着上课。五号教室是最小的一间，尤其在这样一个冬日的早晨，大暖气开起来，所有的窗户都蒙

上一层雾气，教室里真的挺闷。也许我夸张了，但在我的记忆中，要想把全班人都塞进这间教室里，学生真得挤到堆叠起来才可以。

那天早上，露丝坐在一张课桌后的椅子上，我就坐在课桌盖上，身旁还有两三个我们一起的学生或靠或坐。事实上，我想就是在我挤出空间放别人进来坐在我旁边的时候，我才第一次注意到了那个铅笔盒。

我现在还能看到那件文具，仿佛它近在眼前。笔盒亮闪闪的，像一只擦亮的皮鞋；深褐底色上缀满了圆形的红点点。顶上的拉链有个毛毛球拉手。我挪位的时候差一点坐到这个笔盒上，于是露丝马上将它拿走离开我的视线。可我已经看到了，这正是她想要我看的，于是我说：

“哎呀！你从哪里得的？是拍卖会上吗？”

教室里很吵，但几乎所有的女生都听到了，因此立刻就有四五个人羡慕地望着这个铅笔盒。露丝等了几秒钟没说话，仔细地留意着周围的那些脸庞。最后她很刻意地说：

“就这么说好了。咱们都认为我是拍卖会上得的。”说完她对我们所有人露出了一个“你懂得”笑容。

这样的回答可能听起来无伤大雅，但实际上她仿佛是突然起身打了我一巴掌，接下来的一会儿，我同时感到浑身冰冷又滚烫。我清楚地知道她的回答和她的笑容到底是什么意思：她在声称这铅笔盒是来自杰拉尔丁小姐的礼物。

这里绝没有任何误会，因为她已经酝酿积蓄了几个礼拜了。露丝会用一个特定的微笑，一种特别的语调——有时还会伴之以一根手指压在唇上，或是抬起一只手，做出舞台表演式的耳语姿势——来暗示杰拉尔丁小姐对她示好的种种小迹象：杰拉尔丁小姐在非周末的四点之前就允许露丝在台球室播放音乐磁带；杰拉尔丁小姐在田间行走时要求大家安静，但是当露丝走到身边的时候，她却开始跟她讲话了，然后就容许其他人讲话了。都是些诸如此类的小事，从来也不会明白地说出来，她只是用笑容暗示，还有那种“大家心照不宣”的表情。

当然，按照要求导师是不应该对个别学生区别对待的，但在某些范围之内，总是能发现各种微小的偏心表现；露丝所暗示的大部分情况都很符合这些表现。可露丝这种虚张声势还是让我恨得要命。当然，我始终拿不准她到底有没有说实话，但因为她没有实在地“说”

出来，而只是暗示，你就永远不可能直接质问她。因此每当发生这样的事，我都只能由她去，咬住嘴唇希望这一刻快点过去。

有时候根据谈话的走向，我能看得出这一刻就要来临了，于是我就强打精神挺住。即便当时，这种事总是会给我很大的冲击，接下来的几分钟内我都无法对周边发生的任何事集中精神。但那个冬日的早晨，在五号教室，这一击凭空而来，打得我毫无防备。哪怕我看到了铅笔盒，想到一个导师竟然送像这样的一件礼物，这件事绝对是远远过界、毫无道理、完全出乎我的意料。因此，当露丝说完她要说的话之后，我跟往常一样，一时不能平复我狂乱的思绪。我只是瞪着她，一点也没想要掩饰我的愤怒。露丝或许感到了危险，立刻用旁人听得到的音量，作势悄悄对我说：“不许说！”然后再次露出了微笑。可我做不到报之以微笑，而是继续怒视她。这时幸好导师进来，开始上课了。

我从来都不是那种连续好几个钟头没完没了想事情的小孩。如今我有点变成这样了，但那是因为我工作的缘故，还因为我要驱车穿过许多空旷的田野，静静行驶很长的时间。比如说，我跟劳拉就很不一样，她一方面搞笑滑稽，另一方面却会为了某人对她说的一点点小事就担心上好几天，甚至几个星期。但那天五号教室的事过后，我却有段时间都精神恍惚。谈话当中我会走神；有时候上完整整一节课我却不知道课上讲的什么。我认定这次绝不能放过露丝，但很长时间里，我并没有对此采取任何建设性举措，就只是在脑海中放映我的幻景：我要揭露她，逼她承认自己瞎编乱造，我甚至有一个模糊的幻想场景是杰拉尔丁小姐本人听说了这件事，当着所有人的面，狠狠地把露丝批评了一顿。

这样过了几天之后，我开始认真考虑实际行动了。如果铅笔盒不是杰拉尔丁小姐送的，那是从哪来的呢？她有可能是从另一个学生那儿得来的，但这很不可能。如果笔盒先是属于别人的，哪怕是比我们高好几年级的学生，一件像这样漂亮的玩意不可能没人注意。若是知道这笔盒已经在黑尔舍姆出现过，露丝绝不会冒险编出这样的故事。几乎能确定她就是在拍卖会上找到的。然而在这里，露丝同样要冒风险，在她买到手之前，其他人可能已经见过。但是如果——虽然这种情况不允许，却也偶尔发生——她提前听说了有这样一个铅笔盒要进来，在拍卖开放之前，提前跟某一个班长预订下来，那样她就可以有相当大的信心，其他人没有见到过这东西。

然而对于露丝来说不幸的是，拍卖会上所有买到的东西都有登记，同时购入者是谁也有记录。虽然说这些记录不太好找——每次拍卖会一结束，班长们就会将登记册交回艾米丽小姐的办公室——但也绝对算不上绝密材料。只要下一次拍卖会上，我在某个班长身边晃荡一会儿，要想翻翻登记册应该毫无难度。

于是我有了一个大致的计划，我想，我又继续琢磨了几天完善细节什么的，这时我突然想到其实我根本没必要实施所有步骤。只要我想的没错，铅笔盒的确是出自于拍卖会，那么我只需要吓唬她一下就够了。

这就是我和露丝那次屋檐下谈话的来由。那天雾气蒙蒙，下着微雨。我们两人正从宿舍楼往大概是运动馆走，我记不清了。总之，当我们穿过院子的时候，雨突然下大了，因为我们不着急，所以就躲到主楼的屋檐下避雨，就在前门旁边一点的地方。

我们避了一会儿，时不时看到有学生从雾中跑出来，奔进主楼的大门，但雨并没有停歇。我们站在那边的时间越久，我就变得越紧张，因为我觉得，这就是我等待已久的机会。我敢肯定露丝也感觉到了有事要发生。最终，我决定径直讲出来。

“上礼拜二的拍卖会上，”我说，“我碰巧在翻册子。你知道的，就是那本登记的簿子。”

“你干吗要翻登记册？”露丝很快地问道，“你为什么要这样做呢？”

“哦，没什么缘故。克里斯托弗·C是班长之一，我只是碰巧跟他聊了起来。他是中学男生里面人最好的，毫无疑问。我只是随便翻翻登记册的页码，只是想找点事做。”

我能看得出，露丝的头脑在飞速运转，她清楚知道这话是什么意思。可她还是很镇静地说：“这种东西看起来很没意思的。”

“才不呢，其实很有趣的。你能看到别人买的每一样东西。”

我说这话的时候，眼睛望着外面的雨。随后我瞥了一眼露丝，结果大受震惊。我不知道自己希望看到什么反应；上个月来我虽然一直在幻想，但却从未认真考虑过像眼下正在发生的真实场景会是什么样子。如今我亲眼看到露丝有多难过；终于有一次她完全无话可说，差一点就要哭出来，只得转开脸。突然我觉得自己的所作所为完全不可理喻。我计划了这么多，努力了这么久，就只是为了让我亲爱的朋友

难过。关于这个铅笔盒的来历她编了几句瞎话，那又能怎样？我们所有人难道不是都曾经常会梦想着某个导师为我们做点特别的事，或者因为我们开特例，放宽规定？我们谁不曾期待一个突然的拥抱，一封秘密的来信，一件礼物？露丝所做的无非就是将这些无伤大雅的白日梦向前推进了一步；她甚至都没有提过杰拉尔丁小姐的名字。

如今我感觉很糟糕，我也很困惑。可是，我们站在那里，望着雨雾的时候，我想不出什么办法可以弥补自己造成的伤害。我想我大概说了些很没劲的话，好比是“没事，我也没看到什么”，直到今日这傻话简直言犹在耳。又沉默了几秒钟，露丝走进雨中离开了。

第六章

我想，如果露丝明显跟我过不去，可能我对那天发生的事还会感觉好些。但这一次她似乎就认输了。似乎这件事让她很羞愧——大受打击——甚至发不起火，也无力反击我。那次屋檐下的谈话之后，我头几次见到她的时候，是做好准备她要冲我发脾气的，可是没有，她客客气气，甚至有点泄气。我突然想到她可能是怕我揭露她——当然，那只铅笔盒就此消失不见了——于是我想告诉她不必怕我会说出去。问题在于，因为所有这些事都没有公开地谈论过，所以我也没办法跟她提起。

同时我尽力抓住所有机会，向露丝暗示说，她在杰拉尔丁小姐心目中地位不凡。比如有一次，我们一帮人都很想在课间休息时间出去练习打棒球，因为有帮比我们高一年级的人向我们挑衅。问题是天在下雨，看起来导师们不大可能允许我们外出活动。可我留意到值班的导师之一是杰拉尔丁小姐，于是我说：

“如果露丝去问杰拉尔丁小姐，那我们还有点机会。”

就我记得，这个建议没有得到采纳；也许几乎没人听到，因为我们许多人同时都在讲话。但关键是，我说话的时候就站在露丝身后，我能够看得出她挺高兴。

还有一次，我们几个人跟杰拉尔丁小姐一起离开一间教室，我发现自己凑巧就在杰拉尔丁小姐身后出门，于是我就特地慢了几步，让身后的露丝跟在杰拉尔丁小姐身后出了门。我做得悄无声息，仿佛这样做很自然，很正确，符合杰拉尔丁小姐的愿望——如果我凑巧站到了两个好朋友中间，我就会这么做。那一次我记得有一个刹那露丝看起来有点迷惑，也很意外，随后朝我很快点了点头，然后就过去了。

像这样的小事可能会让露丝高兴，但还是远远无法弥补那个雾天里屋檐下我们俩发生的事，渐渐地我越来越强烈地感觉自己再也无法处理好这事儿了。我尤其记得有一天晚上，我在运动馆外的一张长椅上坐着，一遍又一遍地想找个出路，同时心中充满了悔恨和挫败感，几乎要落下泪来。如果情况一直这样下去，我不确定会发生什么。也许一切最终会被忘记；再不然，也许我和露丝会逐渐疏远。可这时，突然有机会从天而降，让我得以挽回这件事。

我们当时是在罗杰先生的艺术课上，课上到一半不记得什么原因他出去了。于是我们就在画架之间游荡，聊聊天，欣赏下彼此的作品。这时有个叫米芝·A的女孩子走到我们这边，毫无恶意地问道：

“你的铅笔盒哪去了？多漂亮啊。”

露丝紧张起来，快速巡视四周，看看都有谁在场。当时就是我们平常那帮人，还有两三个外人在附近晃。我跟任何人都没提过拍卖会登记册的事，可我猜露丝大概不知道这点。她用比往常更柔和的声音回答米芝道：

“没在我这里。我放在收藏箱里了。”

“太漂亮了。你哪里得的？”

米芝问得心无芥蒂，现在看来这很明显。但露丝在五号教室第一次拿出那个铅笔盒时在场的我们此时也几乎全都在这里，在观望着。我看到露丝犹豫了。后来，当我在脑海中重演当时的情景时，才真正领会对我而言当时是一个多么完美的机会。而当时我根本想都没想。我只是趁米芝或是其他任何人有机会注意到露丝古怪地面露难色之前，站了出来。

“我们不能说笔盒是哪里来的。”

露丝、米芝、其余的人，他们都望着我，也许略微还有点意外。可我面不改色地继续说，只对着米芝一个人说。

“有很特别的原因，我们不能告诉你笔盒是哪里来的。”

米芝耸耸肩。“所以就是说保密咯。”

“是个大秘密，”我说完，对她微笑，以表明我不是故意对她使坏。

其他人都在点头认可我的说法，可是露丝本人的表情却很含混，仿佛她突然心思转到了完全不相关的事上。米芝又耸耸肩，就我记得事情就这样结束了。要么她走开了，要么她开始聊别的话题。

你瞧，我没办法跟露丝开诚布公地谈拍卖会登记册那件我对不住她的事，出于同样理由，当然她也没办法因为米芝那事我及时站出来向我致谢。但从她对我的态度，不但接下来的几天里，甚至几个礼拜都明显看得出，她很喜欢我。因为近期我也曾处在同样的境地，所以很容易根据各种迹象看出，她在到处找机会，想为我做点事，做点特别贴心的好事。这感觉很好，我记得甚至有一两次曾心想，要是她多

年都找不到机会才好呢，这样我们之间美好的感情就可以一直延续下去。然而米芝那件事过了大约一个月之后，她的机会终于来了，那次，我丢失了最喜欢的一盘磁带。

直到最近我还有一盘这个磁带，微雨的天气里，当我开着车行驶在开阔的乡间时，偶尔还是会听听。但如今我车里放卡带的设备太不好用，我都不敢用它播放那盘磁带了。而当我回到睡觉的地方时，却仿佛总也没有时间去放音乐。即便如此，这依然是我最珍贵的财产之一。也许到今年年底，我不做护理员了之后，就可以更经常听听这盒磁带了。

这张专辑叫做《夜曲》，是朱迪·布里奇沃特唱的。我如今手上的这盘磁带并不是当年那盘，我在黑尔舍姆时候的那盘被我弄丢了。这盘是几年之后我和汤米在诺福克找到的一一但那是另一个故事了，我稍后再讲。我想讲的是第一盘磁带，就是消失不见的那个。

在继续讲下去之前，我应该先解释一下我们当初对诺福克的那些想象。我们一直维持着这种想象，过了好多年一一到最后，我觉得这都成了我们之间的一个笑话一一一切的开始只是我们很小的时候上过的某一节课。

关于英国各郡的地理是艾米丽小姐亲自教授。她会将一张很大的地图钉在黑板上，在旁边支起画架。如果她今天讲的是牛津郡，她就在画架上摆一张当地风光的挂历图片。她有很多这种风景画挂历图，大多数郡县我们都是这样认识的。她会用教鞭指到地图上的某个点，然后转向画架，再展开下一幅画面。上面有溪流经过的小村庄，山坡上的白色纪念碑，田野边的老教堂；如果她讲的是一个海边的地方，那画面就是挤满人的海滩，或是海鸥飞起的峭壁。我想她是希望我们了解外面的环境是怎样的，神奇的是，即便是今天，我作为护理员行遍全国各地，脑海中对各个郡县的印象还是来自艾米丽小姐画板上看到的图片。比如当我开车路过德比郡，就会发现自己在刻意寻找某片村中绿野，那里有间仿都铎式的小酒馆，还有座战争纪念碑一一这时我才意识到那就是我第一次听说德比郡时，艾米丽小姐展示给我们的图片。

总之关键问题是艾米丽小姐的挂历收藏有个缺口：所有的图册中竟没有一张诺福克的照片。这些课我们重复上了几次，我始终在想，不知道这次她有没有找到诺福克的画面，可是每次都一样。她总是将

教鞭挥到地图上的某个地点，仿佛过后才想起来找补一句似的说：“这里就是诺福克，很不错的地方。”

于是有那么一次，我记得她停下来陷入了沉思，也许是因为她没有计划好，没了图片下一步应该怎么办。最后，她如梦方醒，又一次敲打着地图。

“你们看，因为此地向东延伸，位于深入大海的一个拱角，所以去哪里都不会路过这边。不论走南闯北，”——她将教鞭上下挥动——“人们都会绕开这里。因此，这是英格兰一个安静的角落，非常不错。但同时这也是失落的一角。”

失落的一角。她是这样说的，故事就是这样开始的。因为在黑尔舍姆，在四楼我们有个自己的“失物角”，所有丢失的物品都会存放在这里；如果你丢了什么，或者捡到什么，都会到这里来。有人——我不记得到底是谁——在课后宣称，艾米丽小姐说诺福克是英格兰“失落的一角”，意思是全国的遗失物品都会送到这里。不知为何这说法流传开来，很快就在我们整个年级被当成了广泛接受的事实。

不久之前，我和汤米曾回忆起这一切，他认为我们从来没有认真相信过这种说法，这从一开始就只是个笑话。可我很确定他说的不对。当然，等到我们十二三岁的时候，关于诺福克的这种说法就成了个大笑话。但我记得——露丝跟我记忆是一样的——开始的时候，我们都相信诺福克真的就是这样，就像卡车会定期开到黑尔舍姆，给我们送来食物和拍卖的物品，也有一个类似的工作机制，只不过要大得多，将所有人们落在田野里、丢在火车上的东西都送到这个叫诺福克的地方。我们从来没有见过这地方的画面，倒是徒增其神秘感。

这可能听起来挺傻，但你得记住对我们而言，在人生的这个阶段，黑尔舍姆之外的任何地方都像是幻境一般；对于外面的世界什么样，什么可能什么不可能，我们都只有极为模糊的认识。再说我们从来也没有费心去分析这个诺福克理论的细节问题。正如当初我们在多佛那个铺满瓷砖的房间里，有天傍晚望着外面的夕阳时，露丝说的那样，对我们而言重要的是“当我们弄丢了一样宝贝东西，到处找啊找，可还是找不到，那也用不着太过伤心。我们还有最后一点安慰，想着有一天等我们长大以后，就可以在全国自由旅行，总可以去诺福克把它找回来”。

我确信露丝说的对。诺福克的存在对我们来说是一种安慰，安慰的程度之高，可能远远超过我们当时愿意承认的水平。所以等到我们

长得蛮大以后，依然还在谈起诺福克——哪怕只是当作笑话来说。这也是为什么，许许多多过去以后，那天我和汤米在诺福克的海边小镇上又找到了一盘我丢失的那盒磁带时，我们感觉不只是好笑而已；我们都感到心底深处依然有所触动，那是古早时候的愿望在觉醒，想要再次相信那些曾经贴近我们内心的东西。

可我想说的是那盒磁带，朱迪·布里奇沃特的《夜曲》。我猜最早应该是出的黑胶唱片——录制时间是一九五六年——可我拿到的是卡带，封面图片想必是初版唱片封套的缩小版。朱迪·布里奇沃特身穿一件紫色缎子礼服，是当时流行的露肩款，你可以看到她腰部以上的画面，因为她坐在一个吧台高凳上。我觉得设计的场景应该是南美，因为她身后有棕榈树，还有皮肤黝黑的服务生，穿着白色燕尾服。你看朱迪的角度，恰恰跟酒保为她倒酒时望着她的角度完全一样。她带着一种友好、不会太过性感的神情回望身后，仿佛只是些微有意调笑，三分含情，而你是她很早就认识的老朋友。关于这幅封面图还有一点就是朱迪两个手肘撑在吧台上，手上有根点燃的香烟。就是因为这根香烟，所以让我对磁带小心翼翼，从拍卖会上找到它的那一刻开始，就特别留意保密。

我不知道你们那里是怎么样的，但在黑尔舍姆，导师们对于吸烟非常严厉。我敢肯定，如果能保证我们根本不知道吸烟这种事的存在，他们肯定更高兴；但是既然这不可能，他们就确保每次提及香烟的时候，都要教育我们一遍。哪怕是我们看到一幅著名作家或者世界领袖的人像时，只要此人碰巧手上有根香烟，那整节课就不得不停下来。甚至有流言说有些经典作品——比如福尔摩斯探案——我们的图书馆里都找不到，就是因为其中的主要角色吸烟太多，有时你会碰到某本书或者杂志的插图有缺页，是被撕掉的，那也是因为原来的画面上有人抽烟。还有我们实际上过的那些课程，展示给我们吸烟对人体内部造成的可怕后果。因此那次玛琪·K问露西小姐问题的时候，我们才会那么震惊。

当时我们刚刚结束了一场小型棒球赛，大家坐在草地上，露西小姐刚刚又给我们讲了一遍关于吸烟的教训，这时玛琪突然问露西小姐她本人有没有抽过烟。露西小姐沉默了几秒钟，然后才说：

“我希望自己可以说没有。但坦白讲，我是抽过一段时间的。大约两年，我年纪比较轻的时候。”

你可以想象得出，这让我们多震惊。在露西小姐答话之前，我们都瞪着玛琪，发自内心地感到愤慨，她竟然会问出这样无礼的问题——在我们看来，她这样的发问，不啻于问露西小姐有没有用斧头攻击过他人。我记得在此后的几天里，我们把玛琪折磨得生不如死；事实上，我之前提过的那件事，那天晚上我们将玛琪的脸贴在宿舍窗户上，逼她看树林，那都是之后发生的事。但在当时，露西小姐一说出她曾做过的事，我们所有人都感到很困惑，根本想不到玛琪了。我猜我们大家就只是怀着无限的惊恐盯着露西小姐，等着看她还会说什么。

等她终于再开口的时候，露西小姐似乎每个字都仔细斟酌过。“我抽过烟，这不是件好事。这对我不好，所以我戒掉了。但你们必须得明白，对于你们每个人来说，吸烟的害处要远远大于对我的害处。”

然后她就停住，再也不说什么了。后来有人说她是白日做梦，神游天外了，但我很确信，露西小姐也认为，她是在努力想接下来怎么说。最终她说：

“已经有人教过你们这些。你们是学生。你们……很特别。所以你们得保持健康，确保内脏都完全健康，对于你们每个人，这都比对我要更为重要。”

她再次停下，用一种奇怪的眼光看着我们。后来我们讨论此事的时候，我们中有人很确定地说，她当时非常希望有人能问：“为什么？为什么对我们来说更糟糕？”可是没有人开口。我常常想起那天，经过了后来的许多事，再回头看时，现在我想清楚了，当时但凡我们开口问，露西小姐一定会知无不言言无不尽。当时所需要的只是再有一个关于吸烟的问题。

那么为什么当天我们都保持了沉默？我猜是因为即便是在当时的年纪——我们九岁，或者十岁——我们已经知道得够多，对这个领域的一切非常敏感。现在很难记清楚我们当时到底知道多少。我们显然知道——尽管并非从深层意义上了解——我们跟导师们是不一样的，跟外面那些正常人也不一样；甚至我们可能知道在遥远的未来，有捐献在等待着我们。可我们并不真正理解这意味着什么。如果我们有意避开某些话题，更有可能是因为我们觉得不好意思。我们特别讨厌的是，一向掌控自如的导师们，每当靠近这个领域时，总会变得非常笨拙，词不达意。我们看到他们这种变化会感到不安。我想这就是为什

么我们没有继续追问的缘故，也是为什么我们会那样严厉地惩戒玛琪·K，因为她在那天棒球比赛之后，挑起了这个话题。

总之，这就是为什么我对那盒磁带如此小心保密。我甚至把封面里朝外反过来，这样只有打开外面的塑料盒子才能看到朱迪和那根香烟。但这盒磁带对我来说意义重大，其缘故却跟香烟毫无关系，甚至跟朱迪·布里奇沃特唱歌的方法没有关系——她是属于她那个时代的歌手，鸡尾酒会什么的，跟我们黑尔舍姆的人喜欢的东西格格不入。我之所以觉得这盒磁带具有特殊意义，只是因为其中一首歌：专辑第三首歌，《莫失莫忘》。

这歌很慢，充满深夜的韵味，很美国，有一小段反复出现，朱迪唱道：“莫失莫忘……哦，宝贝，宝贝……莫失莫忘……”我当时十一岁，没有听过多少音乐，但这一首歌真的打动了我。我总是尽量让磁带转到这首歌，一旦有机会我就可以播放。

别忘了我没有太多机会，过了若干年随身听才开始出现在我们的拍卖会上，台球室里有一台大机器，但我很少在那里播放这盘磁带，因为里面总是人很多。艺术教室里也有一台放音机，但里面同样也总是很吵闹。我唯一可以听音乐的地方很可能就只有在宿舍里。

这时候我们已经搬到了另外的房子里，有六张床的小房间，在我们的房间里，暖气片上面的架子上摆着一台手提式卡带播放机。所以白天一般没有人在的时候，我就会去那里，一遍又一遍地播放我这首歌。

这首歌到底有什么特别之处？其实是这样的，我当时没有好好听明白歌词；我只是等着听那一小段：“宝贝，宝贝，莫失莫忘……”在我的想象中，这是一个女人，别人告诉她她不能生孩子，可她一生都真的非常非常想要孩子。后来发生了某种奇迹，她有了一个小宝宝，于是她把宝宝紧紧抱在身边，一边漫步一边唱道：“宝贝，莫失莫忘……”一方面是因为她非常喜悦，但另一方面，她又很害怕会发生什么事，宝宝会生病，或者被人带走。即便在当时我也明白这不合理，这种解读跟其余部分的歌词对不上。但我觉得这都不是问题。这歌唱的就是我说的故事，我一个人的时候只要有机会，就会一遍又一遍地听。

大约就是这段时间里，发生了一件奇怪的事，我这就来讲给你听。这事真的令我很不安，虽然直到多年之后我才明白它真正的意义，可即便是在当时，我也能感到事情背后另有深意。

那是一个阳光很好的午后，我回寝室去拿东西。我记得光线非常充足，因为我们房间的窗帘没有拉整齐，可以看到大束的阳光倾泻进来，尘土在空气中飘飞。我本不想放音乐，但因为只有我一个人在，一时冲动之下，我就从收藏品箱子里取出了磁带，放进了播放机。

我不知道最后一个使用放音机的是谁，但可能就是他把音量调高了。播放的声音比我通常用的要响很多，也许这正是我没有及时听到她声音的缘故。再不然也许我当时只是太沉迷。总之，我当时正随着歌声轻摇慢摆，怀中还抱着一个想象中的婴儿。事实更令人尴尬，我当时抱着一个枕头，来代替小宝宝，那也不是我第一次这样做，当时我舞步缓慢，闭着眼睛，每当这几句歌词出现的时候，都会跟着轻声唱：

“哦，宝贝，宝贝，莫失莫忘……”

歌曲快完结的时候，我不知怎的突然发现当时并非只有我一个人，我睁开眼睛，发现夫人就在面前，她的身影正好框在门洞里。

我惊得呆在原地。接下来的一两秒钟，我开始感到一种新的惊恐，因为我看得出，情况有古怪。房门几乎是半开着——我们有这样的规则，除非睡觉，否则宿舍房门不可以关闭——可是夫人并没有走到门口。她在外面走廊上，非常安静地站在那里，头侧到一边，为了看到我在里面的动作。奇怪的是她在哭泣。甚至有可能是她抽泣的声音盖过了歌声，才将我从白日梦中惊醒。

现在当我回想起来，虽然说她不是我们的导师，却也是个成年人，她应该做点什么、说点什么，哪怕是批评我几句呢。那样我就会知道该怎么做了。可她只是呆立在原地，哭个不停，穿过门洞望着我，眼睛里的表情跟平常看我们的时候一样，好像看到什么让她害怕的东西似的。只不过这一次有所不同，她眼神里还有别的东西，我看不懂。

我不知道该怎么做，该说什么，或者接下来会发生什么事。也许她会进到房间里，对我大喊大叫，甚至打我。我毫无概念。可她只是转过身，接下来我只听到她离开宿舍楼的脚步声。我这才发现磁带已经转到了下一首歌，于是我去关掉了播放机，在离我最近的床边坐了下来。这时，透过我眼前的窗户，我看到她的身影匆匆朝主楼走去。她并没有回头，但从她弓着背的样子我能看得出，她还在哭。

几分钟之后我回到朋友们身边，对于刚刚发生的事一个字也没说。有人留意到我不对劲，说了句什么，可我只是耸耸肩，没说什

么。我并非感到羞耻：但这次的感受跟之前有所相似，就是夫人从汽车里出来，遭到我们集体伏击的那一次。我最希望的无非是这整件事都没有发生过，我觉得，不再提起这件事，就等于是帮了我自己和其他人一个忙。

可是几年之后，我却跟汤米讲过这件事。那次在池塘边，他第一次跟我吐露心事，讲到露西小姐的那次谈话之后的一段时间里，那段时间——现在在我看来——是我们开始思考，提出各种关于自身的问题的时候。我们在这样的状态中度过了几年。当我告诉了汤米在宿舍里跟夫人遭遇的那件事之后，他提出了一个非常简单的解释。当然，到那时我们都知道了一些当时不知道的事，即我们这些人都不可能生小孩。有可能在我年纪还小的时候，虽然没有完全明白，却不知怎么有了这个印象，所以听这首歌的时候才会对歌词有这样的认识。但当时我完全不可能懂得这些。正如我说的，等到我跟汤米讨论此事的时候，我们都已经了解得相当清楚了。其实我们没有一个人对此特别耿耿于怀，事实上，我还记得有人很高兴，因为我们在性生活中完全不需要担心这些事——虽然在那个阶段，真正意义上的性爱对于我们大多数人还是遥不可及。总之，当我把发生的事告诉汤米之后，他说：

“夫人很可能不是坏人，虽然她神经兮兮的。所以当看到她那样跳舞的时候，抱着小宝宝的样子，她觉得很难过，因为你不能生小孩。所以她就哭了。”

“可是，汤米，”我指出来，“她怎么会知道这首歌跟生小孩有关系的？她怎么可能知道我抱着的枕头是代表小宝宝？这只是我脑子里的念头啊。”

汤米想了又想，然后半开玩笑地说：“也许夫人会读心术。她很古怪的。也许她能一眼看透你的内心。我觉得那也不奇怪。”

这让我们俩都觉得有点怕，虽然一笑置之，却再也没有多说。

跟夫人遭遇的事过了两个月之后，磁带不见了。当时我完全没有将这两件事联系起来，现在也没有任何理由关联这两件事。一天晚上我在宿舍，就在熄灯之前，我在翻自己收藏品的箱子，来消磨等其他人从浴室出来的那段时间。奇怪的是，当我刚刚意识到磁带没在里面的时候，我主要的念头是一定不能让自己内心的惊恐暴露出来。我还记得自己一边继续找，一边故作镇静地哼着歌，装得心不在焉。我想了又想，直到今天依然无法解释这件事：房间里都是我最亲密的好朋友，可我还是不想让她们知道，磁带不见了让我多难过。

我猜有可能是因为这是个秘密，这盘磁带对我来说意义重大。也许黑尔舍姆的每一个人都有这样的小秘密——一些凭空想象出来的小空间，容我们带着自己的恐惧和渴望，一个人躲藏其中。但当时，我们有这种需求本身，我们就认为是不对的——好像我们辜负了自己的朋友。

总之，一旦我确定磁带是不见了，就挨个问宿舍里的每一个人，很随便地问她们有没有看到过。我当时还没有完全慌神，因为还有可能我把它落在台球室了；不然的话，我还希望是有人借走，早上就会还回来。

可是第二天磁带也没有出现，我至今也不知道它的下落。我猜，事实上，黑尔舍姆的盗窃案比我们——或者导师——愿意承认的要多得多。但我现在之所以要说这些，是为了解释露丝和她的反应。你要记得，我丢失磁带是在米芝在艺术课上问起露丝铅笔盒、我挺身相救那件事过了一个月之后。正如我前面说过的，打那之后露丝就一直想方设法要还我的情分，我的磁带消失不见，对她而言简直是机不可失。你甚至可以这么说，直到我的磁带消失不见，我们两人的关系才恢复正常——也许自从那个下雨的早上，在主楼的屋檐下，我向她提及拍卖会登记表以来，这才是第一次我们正常交流。

我第一次留意到磁带不见了的那个晚上，我确保每个人都问到了，当然也包括露丝。回顾往事，我才看出她当时就已经意识到，丢失这盘磁带对我意味着什么，还有低调处理对我而言同样重要。因此那天晚上，她漫不经心地耸肩作答，然后就继续忙自己的事了。但是第二天早上，当我从浴室回来的时候，我听到她——用很随便地口吻，仿佛这不是什么大事——在问汉娜，是不是确定没有见过我的磁带。

然后过了大约两周，我早已接受了现实，知道自己真的弄丢了磁带，她午餐之后休息时间来找我。那是春天里最舒服的好天气刚开始出现的一天，我正坐在草坪上，跟两个年龄较大的女孩子聊天。当露丝走过来问我是否愿意去散个步的时候，很明显她有特别的事要讲。于是我离开了那两个大点的女生，跟着她到了北操场，然后又上了北山，直到我们站在了木栅栏边，俯瞰着下面点缀着三五成群学生的绿地。山顶上风很大，我记得自己很吃惊，因为在下面草地上我没有留意到有风。我们站在那里，看了一会儿下面的操场，随后她拿出一个小包给我。我接过来，能看得出里面是盘磁带，我的心都跳起来了。可是露丝立刻说：

“凯西，不是你那盘。你丢的那盘。我想给你找回来，但真的不见了。”

“是啊，”我说，“去了诺福克。”

我们都笑了。随后我怀着失望的心情把磁带从包里取了出来。我拿不准自己在查看磁带的时候，那失望之情是否还挂在脸上。

我手上是一盘叫做《经典舞曲二十首》的磁带。后来当我播放的时候，发现那是用于舞厅的器乐演奏。当然，她递给我的那个刹那，我并不知道上面是哪种音乐，但我知道绝对无法跟朱迪·布里奇沃特相提并论。可是这时，几乎马上，我就看出来露丝不明白——露丝对音乐一无所知，在她看来这盘磁带很可能足以取代我丢掉的那盘。突然我感到失望之情消退了，取代其位的是一种发自内心的幸福。在黑尔舍姆，我们不作兴搂搂抱抱。可我用双手握住她的手，向她道谢。她说：“我上次拍卖会上找到的。我觉得这种东西你会喜欢。”我说没错，我喜欢的就是这种。

这盘磁带仍然在我身边。我不太播放，因为其中的乐曲无关紧要。这是个物件，好比一个胸针或是戒指，尤其是如今露丝已经不在，这成了我最宝贵的东西之一。

第七章

现在我想往前赶赶，讲讲我们在黑尔舍姆最后一年的事。我说的是我们从十三岁到十六岁离开的这个阶段。在我的记忆中，我在黑尔舍姆的生活分成很明确的两块：后面这个阶段，以及此前所有的一切。早先的那些年——就是我已经跟你讲过的那些——常常会混在一起，共同构成某种黄金时代，当我想到那些年的时候，即便是那些不太美好的记忆，我也不禁感到其光彩和暖意。但最后那几年就不同了。准确说并非是不快——其中我也收获了许多弥足珍贵的记忆——但这段时间更严肃，某些方面而言，也更黑暗。也许是我在头脑中夸大了事实，但我有个印象，在这个阶段事情变化很快，就像白日沉入黑夜。

那次跟汤米在池塘边的谈话：现在我回想起来会将此作为两个阶段的分界点。倒不是说在那之后立刻就开始发生一些重要的事情，但至少对于我来说，那次谈话是个转折点。绝对是从那次开始，我看待一切的方式都不同了。从前那些我认为尴尬要躲开的问题，现在我越来越倾向于提问，哪怕不是问出声，至少自己问自己。

特别是那次的谈话使我换了种眼光来看待露西小姐。只要有机会我就认真观察她，并不是出于好奇，而是我现在将她作为重要线索的最大来源。正因为如此，在接下来的一两年里，我开始留意到她说过或者做过的一些古怪小事，而我的朋友们却都没有注意到。

比如有一次，也许是在池塘边谈话过了几周之后，露西小姐带我们上英语课，我们在学习诗歌，但不知怎么话题走偏了，谈到了二战期间战俘营里的士兵。一个男生问战俘营周围的防护栏是不是通电的，有人接着说生活在这样的地方多奇怪啊，你什么时候要是想自杀，只需碰一下防护栏即可。也许他本来是想认真讨论问题的，可是我们其他人都觉得这很滑稽。大家同时爆发出大笑，开始讲话，这时劳拉——她总是这样——从座位上站了起来，动作夸张地表演了一段伸出手去触电身亡的场景。刹那间大家喧闹无比，所有人都在大喊大叫，模仿着摸电网的样子。

期间我一直在观察露西小姐，我能看出有一秒钟她在望着面前的一班人时，脸上浮现出幽灵般的表情。随后——我继续认真观察——

她整理心情，微笑道：“幸亏黑尔舍姆的护栏没有通电。有时候会发生很可怕的意外事故。”

她讲得很平静，因为大家还在大喊大叫，她的话音几乎是淹没在其中。可我清清楚楚听到了她的话。“有时候会发生很可怕的意外事故。”什么事故？在哪里？可是没有人接她的话，我们又回头去讨论诗歌了。

类似的小事还有其他，不久我就开始感到露西小姐跟其他导师的种种不同。有可能早在那个时候起，对于她的担忧和难过的根本缘故，我就有所了解。但也许还不至于，很可能在那个时候，我留意到了这一切，却还不知道应该怎么理解。如果说现在看来这些小事都很重要，连缀起来看有共通的意义，那也许是因为我如今看待往事，已经有了后来经验的启示——尤其是那天我们在运动馆躲避那场瓢泼大雨的时候发生的事。

那时我们十五岁，已经是在黑尔舍姆的最后一年。我们在运动馆为一场小型棒球比赛做准备。这个阶段男生们很“享受”棒球赛，因为可以跟我们调情，所以那天下午我们总共有三十多人在场。我们换衣服的时候大雨开始下起来，我们慢慢都聚在门廊上——在运动馆的屋顶遮蔽之下——等着雨停。可是雨一直下，大家都齐聚在这里的时候，门廊上显得有些拥挤，人人都有点不耐烦地走来走去。我记得劳拉当时向我展示了一种特别恶心的擤鼻涕办法，用于真心想推掉哪个男生的时候。

露西小姐是唯一在场的导师。她在前面，靠在栏杆上，仿佛想要穿透雨幕看到操场尽头一样，朝外望去。那些日子我都是尽量认真地观察她，虽然说我在跟劳拉哈哈大笑，却时不时偷偷瞄一眼露西小姐的背影。我记得自己心想，她这姿势是否有些古怪，脑袋垂得太低，看起来就像一只蹲伏的野兽，等待着发起攻击。而且她那样伏身趴在栏杆上，头顶上的排水管滴下来的水差一点就淋到她了——可她仿佛全不在意。我记得曾在心里说服自己这没什么不正常——她只是着急希望雨快点停——然后将注意力重新转回去听劳拉讲话。后来，几分钟之后，当我已经将露西小姐抛在脑后，为了不知道什么笑得前仰后合时，突然发现周遭变得安静下来，露西小姐开始讲话了。

她还站在同样的地方，但现在转过身来朝向我们，所以她是后背对着栏杆，身后是下着雨的天空。

“不，不对，很对不起，我必须得打断你们，”她说道，我看到她是在对正前方一张长椅上坐着的两个男生讲话。她的语音倒也没什么奇怪，但她讲得很响亮，就像有事情要对我们大家宣布的那种音量，正因为如此我们才安静了下来。“不行，彼得，我不得不打断你的话。我不能继续保持沉默，听着你讲下去。”

随后她抬起目光，望向我们大家，然后深吸了一口气。“好吧，大家都可以听，我是说给你们所有人的。是时候有人把真相说出来了。”

我们等待着，她仍然望着我们。后来有人说他们以为露西小姐要狠批我们一顿；还有人以为她要宣布一套新的小型棒球规则。但是还没等她再说一个字，我就知道是其他更重要的事。

“小伙子们，请务必原谅我偷听。但是你们就在我后面，所以我没办法听不到。彼得，你何不跟大家讲讲，你刚才跟戈登说的话呢？”

彼得·J看起来很困惑，我看得出他脸上渐渐浮现出无辜受伤的表情。但这时露西小姐又说了一遍，这次温柔了许多：

“彼得，你说呀。请你跟大家讲讲你刚才所说的话。”

彼得耸耸肩。“我们刚刚在说，如果我们当上演员会是什么感受。那种生活是怎么回事。”

“对，”露西小姐说，“你还跟戈登讲，说得去美国，才最有机会。”

彼得·J又耸了耸肩，低声嘟囔道：“是的，露西小姐。”

可是现在露西小姐将目光转向了我们大家。“我知道你没有坏心。但是这种空话说得太多了。我常常听到，没有人阻止，这样是不对的。”我看到更多的雨水从排水管滴下来，落在她肩上，但她根本没有留意。“如果其他人不跟你们讲，”她继续说道，“那我来讲。老师告诉过你们，但你们没有人真正理解，我敢说，有些人还很愿意听之任之。但我不。如果你们想要过上体面正当的生活，那就得知道，什么都得知道。你们谁也去不了美国，谁也成不了电影明星。那天我还听到你们有人打算去超市工作，你们谁也去不了。你们的生活都已经安排好了。你们会长大成人，然后不等你们衰老，甚至不到中年，就将开始捐献身体的各个器官。你们每一个人被创造出来就是为了这个目的。你们跟录像里看到的那些演员都不一样，甚至跟我都不

一样。你们是为了特定目的才被带到这个世界上来的，你们的将来，所有的一切，都已经安排好了。因此你们不要再这样说了。你们不久就将离开黑尔舍姆，过不了多久，这天就会到来，你们要准备第一次捐献了。你们需要记住这一点。如果你们想过上正派体面的生活，就得知道自己是誰，未来会怎样，你们每个人都是。”

然后她就不再说话了，但在我的印象里，她脑子里大概还是继续在自言自语，因为有很长一段时间里，她的目光从我们身上飘过，一张一张脸望过去，仿佛她还在继续跟我们讲话。当她终于转身重新朝着操场方向望去的时候，我们都感到如释重负。

“现在雨没那么大了，”她说，其实雨还是跟先前一样匀匀下落，没有变小。“我们出去吧。可能太阳也就出来了。”

我想，她所说的就只有这些了。几年之前在多佛的康复中心，我跟露丝讨论起来的时候，她坚持说露西小姐跟我们讲得比这多很多；她解释说在捐献之前，我们首先会有一段时间担任护理员，还讲了捐献的一般流程；康复中心等等——可我很确信她没有说这么多。好吧，也许她开始讲话的时候，的确曾打算讲到这些。但我猜她一旦开始之后，看到面前那些困惑不解、浑身不自在的面容时，她就认识到，根本不可能做完自己挑起的这件事。

很难讲清楚露西小姐在运动馆的这次情绪爆发到底造成了什么深远影响。话传得很快，但流言大多围绕着露西小姐本人，而不是她试图告诉我们的那些事。有的学生觉得她一时失去了理智；其他人则认为是艾米丽小姐和其他的导师请她告诉我们那些事的；甚至有人当时在现场，却认为露西小姐只是嫌我们在门廊上太喧闹，批评了我们一顿而已。但正如我所说的，极少有人讨论她说的内容。如果有人提起这话题，那么人们也多半会说：“那又怎样呢？我们早就已经知道了呀。”

但这恰恰正是露西小姐讲的核心意义。就像她说的，我们“又知道，又不知道”。几年之前，我和汤米再次回顾这一切的时候，我跟他讲到露西小姐这种“又知道，又不知道”的说法时，他提出了一套理论。

汤米认为有可能在我们居住在黑尔舍姆的许多年里，导师们小心翼翼地设计好何时该告诉我们什么；这样的话，我们总是还小，最新得到的信息不能完全理解。但当然某种程度上我们会接受进来，这样

一来不久之后一切就都装进我们脑子里了，尽管我们都没有仔细检视过这些信息。

对我而言，这太像是一种阴谋论——我觉得我们那些导师没有这么阴险狡猾——但是很可能其中有些道理。当然，好像我一直都模糊知道捐献这回事，甚至早在六七岁的时候。等到我们长大了一点，导师们跟我们讲起这些事的时候，说到什么都不会让我们大出意料之外，这点很奇怪。就好像我们早在什么时候已经听过这些事了。

这会儿我突然想到一件事，那是导师们刚刚开始给我们正式讲性教育的话题时，他们总是把这些事跟捐献混在一起来说。在那个年纪——再说一遍，我现在说的是大约十三岁的时候——对于性我们大家都很担忧，同时也很兴奋，自然也就会将其他的信息推到背景中，不大上心。换句话说，有可能导师们往我们脑子里夹带私货，讲了关于我们未来的一些基本事实。

然而说句公道话，可能将这两个话题放到一起来讲是很自然的事。比如说，他们教我们在性行为中要非常小心避免染病，这对于我们比外面的普通人而言，要重要得多，如果不提及这点，就会很古怪。当然，说到此处，自然就会讲到捐献的事。

此外还有所有那些关于不能生小孩的说辞。艾米丽小姐曾经亲自给我们上过许多性方面的课，我记得有一次她从生物教室搬了一套真人规格的骨架来演示性行为过程。我们目瞪口呆惊诧无比地望着她将骨架扭成许多姿态，毫不尴尬地用教鞭指指点点。她一板一眼地将整个过程讲出来，什么器官进到什么地方，有怎样的变化，就像讲地理课一样。这时，当骨架依然以猥亵姿态趴在课桌上的时候，她突然转换话题，开始给我们讲要非常小心，跟谁性交。倒不仅仅是因为各种疾病的关系，而是因为，她说：“性会以各种你无法预料的方式影响人的情绪。”在外面的世界里，我们对于性行为必须得非常小心，尤其当对象不是其他学生的时候，因为在外面的世界，性包涵各种各样的意义。在外面人们甚至会因为谁跟谁性交而打架，甚至杀人。之所以有这么多的意义——比跳舞、打乒乓要多得多的意义——那是因为外面的人跟我们这些学生不同：他们性交会生出孩子来。所以说谁跟谁性交，这个问题对他们非常重要。尽管说我们都知道，我们中所有人都完全没有可能生小孩，但是在外面的我们得像他们那样行事。我们得尊重他们的规则，将性看做是一件很特别的事。

艾米丽小姐那天讲的课很典型，就是我前面说的那种情况。我们都把焦点集中在性爱上，突然就会有其他的内容混进来。我想这都属

于那些“又知道，又不知道”的内容之一。

我认为到头来我们想必还是吸收进了许多的信息，因为我记得就在大约那个年纪，我们对于涉及捐献的一切，态度都有了很大的转变。就像我前面所说的，在那之前，我们曾千方百计绕开这个话题；一旦有迹象表明要进入这个领域，我们就立刻后退，那些不当心的傻瓜——比如玛琪那次——还会遭到严厉的惩罚。但就像我说的，自从我们十三岁的时候，情况开始发生改变。我们仍然不去讨论捐献以及相关的一切；我们仍然觉得这方面的一切都令人尴尬。但我们开始拿这事开玩笑，就像我们也会拿性来开玩笑一样。现在回顾往事，我得承认，那条不能公开讨论捐献的规则依然存在，跟从前一样严格。但是现在，时不时用玩笑的方式，暗示我们的未来，这不仅仅没关系，几乎成了一种需要。

一个典型例子是那次汤米划伤了胳膊肘之后发生的事。那大概恰好是在我跟他池塘边散步的事之前；我猜那时汤米还在努力挣脱被人捉弄取笑的阶段。

他的伤不严重，但还是被送到乌鸦脸那边去处置，然后给他胳膊肘上贴了一块方形橡皮膏，差不多立刻就放他回来了。谁也没多想这事，直到过了两天之后，汤米取下橡皮膏，暴露出的伤口还处于将愈未愈的状态。你看得出皮肤刚刚开始愈合，下面柔软的红色组织略微有点外露。我们当时在吃午饭，因此大家都围了过来，发出惊叹，或表示恶心。这时比我们高一级的克里斯托弗·H板着脸说：“很遗憾伤在胳膊肘这里。本来伤在别的随便什么地方都没关系。”

汤米看起来很担忧——那时候，克里斯托弗是他敬仰的人物呢——赶紧问他是什么意思。克里斯托弗一边继续吃饭，一边若无其事地说：

“你不知道么？如果像这样正好伤在胳膊肘，就会脱线。你只要弯胳膊肘的动作快点就会。不是只有这一点点，而是整个肘部，都会像包裹一样完全打开。我还以为你知道呢。”

我听到汤米抱怨，说乌鸦脸怎么没有警告过他这些事，但克里斯托弗耸耸肩说：“她以为你早就知道了呢，当然了。大家都知道。”

近旁的几个人喏喏表示赞同。“你得把手臂保持绝对伸直，”另外一个人说，“弯一弯其实就有危险。”

第二天我看到汤米将胳膊笔直地伸着走来走去，面带愁容。大家都在笑他，这让我很生气，但我得承认，这确实有可笑的一面。后来下午快结束的时候，我们正要离开艺术教室，他在走廊里拦住我说：“凯丝，能跟你说句话吗？”

这时，距离在操场我走上去提醒他POLO衫要弄脏的那次大概刚刚过了两星期，所以大家都觉得我们俩交情不一般。尽管如此，他这样走上前来要跟我单独谈话，却还是有点尴尬，让我刹那有点不知所措。也许这算是我没有更帮他忙的部分解释吧。

“倒不是我瞎担心什么的，”他一把我拉到旁边就开口说道，“可我想安全第一，仅此而已。对于健康我们绝对不能心存侥幸。我需要帮忙，凯丝。”他解释说，他担心自己睡着时乱动。夜间随便就会弯手臂。“我总是做这种梦，在梦里跟很多罗马士兵作战。”

我稍微问了他几句，很显然各种各样的人——那天午餐时不在场的人——都曾到他面前，重复了克里斯托弗·H的警告。事实上，其中几个人还把笑话向前推进了：有人告诉汤米，曾有个学生，跟他一样手肘受伤，睡了一觉醒来时发现自己的整个上臂和手部骨骼都暴露在外，皮肤翻出来就在旁边，“就像《窈窕淑女》里面那些长手套一样”。

现在汤米要求我帮他在胳膊上绑个夹板，好让他夜间手臂保持伸直。

“其他人我都信不过，”他说着，举起了一根想用做夹板的宽尺子，“他们可能会故意搞坏，夜里让它掉下来。”

他望着我，满脸的无辜，我一时不知该说什么才好。一方面我很想告诉他到底发生了什么，我想我知道，如果我不这么做，那么无论我怎么做，都是背叛了自从我提醒他POLO衫的那一刻起我们之间建立的信任感。如果我真的把他的手臂绑在夹板上，那就意味着我就变成了这个笑话的主谋之一了。我至今感到惭愧当时没有告诉他。但你得记住，我当时年纪还小，而且当时只有几秒钟可以做决定。再说，当别人这样恳切求你帮忙做事的时候，无论如何不能拒绝人家。

我想最主要的原因是不想让他生气。因为我看得出，他之所以对手肘的伤这么担心，是因为对于所有那些来自周围的说辞，他都信以为真，放在心上。当然我知道他迟早会发现真相，但在那个时刻，我真的没法说出口。我最多只能问一句：

“乌鸦脸让你这么做吗？”

“没有，可你想象下，如果我胳膊肘真的脱出来了，她得多生气。”

我至今仍然觉得不好受，但我当时保证要帮他把手臂绑好——夜间打铃前半小时，到十四号教室去——然后望着他心怀感激如释重负地离开了。

结果我并不需要经历这一切，因为汤米先发现了真相。那是晚上八点左右，我从主楼梯下楼来，听到底楼的楼梯间爆发出大笑，笑声一直传到楼上。我心里一沉，马上就知道一定跟汤米有关。我在二楼楼梯口停了一下，探头从扶手往下看，正看到汤米从台球室跌跌撞撞冲出来。我记得自己心想：“至少他没喊。”他确实没有，他只是跑去衣帽间，拿了自己的东西，然后离开了主楼。在此期间开着的台球室门口一直都有爆笑声传来，有人在大叫，喊的是诸如：“你要是发脾气，胳膊肘肯定会爆出来！”

我想了想要不要跟上他，走进夜色中，趁他没到宿舍之前跟他说句话，可随后我想起了自己许诺要帮他手臂绑上夹板过夜的事，就没有动。我只是自己心想：“至少他没发火。至少他控制住了火气。”

可我有点跑题了。我之所以提起所有这些都是因为这个从汤米的手肘引发出来的身体会“脱线”的梗流传开来，成了我们大家提及捐献时的一个常用段子。说法是这样的，等时机一到，你身体的一小部分就会脱线，比如一个肾脏就会溜出来，你就把它交出去。倒不是我们觉得这事儿本身有多好笑，更多的是用这个段子来败坏对方吃饭的胃口。比如说，你把肝解下来，丢到别人吃饭的盘子里，诸如此类。我记得有个不可思议大胃王同学加里·B，连吃了三份布丁，后来几乎整张桌旁所有人都“解下”了一点自己的器官，统统堆到加里的碗里，可他不为所动，坚持继续吃到饱。

后来这“脱线”梗流传开来之后，汤米一直不大喜欢，可这时候他老被人捉弄的阶段已经过去，大家也不再把这段子跟他联系到一起了。这只是为了博彼此一笑，败坏别人吃东西的兴致——以及我觉得，是对我们将要面对的未来做出一种认可。这才是我的本意。我们的人生到了这个阶段，大家不再像一两年前那样，对捐献这个话题讳莫如深；可我们也没有对此有过非常严肃认真的考量或者讨论。所有这些关于“脱线”的闹剧，都很典型地反映出，在我们十三岁的时候，这个话题对我们造成了怎样的冲击。

因此我觉得两年之后露西小姐说我们“又知道，又不知道”，这话讲得很对。更重要的是，现在思考起来，我觉得那天下午露西小姐对我们说的一番话，让我们的态度发生了真正的转变。就在那天之后，关于捐献的笑话渐渐消散了，我们开始认真考虑这些事。表面的变化就是，捐献重新又变成了一个讳莫如深的话题，但跟我们小时候的避讳不一样。这次不再是因为尴尬或是不好意思，而是因为太严肃，太沉重。

“挺有趣的是，”几年之前我和汤米再次回忆往事的时候，他说，“我们谁都没有停下来想一想她是什么感受，露西小姐她本人。我们从来不担心她因为跟我们说了那些事，会不会碰到麻烦。我们那时候真自私啊。”

“可你不能怪我们，”我说，“我们得到的教育就是要互相为同学考虑，但从来没有替导师考虑。至于导师他们彼此之间也会有不同意见，这点我们从来没想过。”

“可我们已经很大了，”汤米说，“到了那个年龄，我们应该想得到。可我们没有。我们根本没有为可怜的露西小姐着想。即便是那次之后也没有，你知道，就是你看到她的那次。”

我立刻就明白了他的意思。他说的是我们在黑尔舍姆最后那一年的初夏，有天上午，我在二十二号教室撞上她的那次。现在回想起来，我得承认汤米说的有理。经过了那次之后，即便是我们，也应该看得出露西小姐有多烦恼。但是诚如他所说的，我们从来没有从她的角度去考虑，从来也没有想过要做什么，或者说些什么，来帮帮她。

第八章

那时我们中的许多人已经满了十六周岁。那是一个阳光明媚的上午，我们刚刚在主楼里上完一堂课出来，正往院子里走，这时我突然想起有东西忘在了教室里。于是我重新回到四楼上，就这样才发生了跟露西小姐的那件事。

那时候，我有个秘密的小游戏。当我发现自己一个人待着的时候，就会停下脚步，找找视角——比如说，朝窗外看，或是穿过一段走廊，望向某个教室——任何一个视角，只要视线范围内没有人就行。我这么做是因为至少在几秒钟的时间里，我可以创造出一种幻觉，仿佛这里并不是到处都是学生，相反，黑尔舍姆是一幢幽静安宁的宅院，只有我和五六个好友住在这里。要想让幻景逼真，你只需将自己沉入某种梦境，将无关的声音和噪音都屏蔽在外。通常还需要格外耐心：比如说，如果你正从某个窗口，凝神望着操场上的某一片地方，可能需要等很久很久，才能让你的取景框中没有人，你才可以等到那样几秒钟的幻象。总之，那天上午我拿回了落在教室的那件东西之后，回到四楼的楼梯平台上时，就在玩这个幻想游戏。

我保持静止不动，站在窗边，望着院子里的某一片区域，就是几分钟之前我刚刚在那边站立过的地方。我的朋友们已经走掉了，院子里人越来越少，因此我就静静等着我的幻想发挥魔力，这时我听到身后传来一种像是蒸汽或者煤气泄漏的紧迫声响。

那是一种嘶嘶声，会一连持续十秒钟左右，暂停一下，然后继续。我倒没有惊慌，只是既然附近只有我一个人，那么我觉得最好去查看一下。

我穿过楼梯间，朝着声音的方向走去，沿着走廊经过了我刚刚进去过的教室，来到了二十二号教室，那是走廊尽头倒数第二间。房门半开着，就在我走上前去的时候，那嘶嘶声又响了起来，比先前更为急迫。当我小心翼翼推开门的时候，我不知道会发现些什么，可是一看到露西小姐在里面，我还是大吃一惊。

二十二号教室很少用来上课，因为那个房间太小，即便是像那样的天气，也难得有光线照进来。导师们有时候会去那里批改我们的作业，或是读会儿书。那天上午房间里比往常更暗，因为百叶窗几乎全都拉了下来。里面有两张桌子拖到一起，好让同学们围坐一圈，可是

只有露西小姐一个人坐在紧后面的位置。我看到她面前的桌子上散落着几页纸，页面上很暗，闪着幽光。她本人斜着身体，神情专注，前额压得非常低，双臂铺开在纸面上，正用铅笔往纸页上狂怒地画线。我看到那些浓黑的线条下面，写有整洁的蓝色字迹。就在我的注视之下，她继续用铅笔的笔尖在纸页上反复地画，仿佛完全不在乎会不会将纸穿透。这时，我同时想明白了，这就是那古怪声响的来源，我刚刚看到的桌面上那些幽黑发亮的纸，不久前还是些书写整齐的纸页。

她正全神贯注于自己的事，过了一会儿才发现我在那里。当她受到惊扰抬头望时，我看到她脸红了，但并没有泪水的痕迹。她瞪着我，随即放下了手中的铅笔。

“你好，年轻的女士，”她说，深吸了一口气，“需要我帮忙吗？”

我想我立刻就转身走开了，那样就不必望着她，或是看着桌上那些纸。我不记得自己有没有说什么——是否解释过那声响的出现，以及我担心那是煤气泄漏。不管怎么说，事情无可弥补：她不希望我在场，我也不想在场。我想我只是道了个歉就出去了，还多少有些期待她会喊我回去。可她没有，现在我只记得自己走下楼梯的时候，心中充满了羞愤。当时我最希望的莫过于没有看到刚才发生的一切，然而倘或你要我实在说说到底为什么生气，我也无法解释。正如我所说的，可能跟羞耻感有很大的关系，还有愤怒，可这怒火所针对的倒不完全是露西小姐本人。我感到非常迷惑，也许正因为如此，一直到过去了很久以后，我才对朋友们提起此事。

那个上午之后，我开始觉得，不知道露西小姐有什么糟糕的事要发生，于是我擦亮眼睛竖起耳朵留意着。但是过了几天，我什么也没听到，也没看到。然而当时我所不知道的却是，就在我在二十二号教室碰到她的那次之前几天，的确有件相当重要的事发生——事关露西小姐和汤米，此事过后汤米变得沮丧而不知所措。就在不久之前，倘或发生了这样的事，我和汤米还会立刻向对方报告；但就在那个夏天，发生了许多事，结果就是我们不能再像从前那么自在地谈天了。

所以我才很长时间里都没有听到过此事。过后我简直想踢自己几脚，竟然没有去猜猜看，也没有去找汤米问个明白。但是正如我前面所说的，当时发生了很多事，汤米和露西的事，还有许许多多其他的事，因此我就把自己留意到他身上发生的那些变化，全都归因于这些了。

如果说那年夏天汤米整个人都方寸大乱，可能有点言过其实，但有几次我是真的有些担心，怕他再次变成几年前那个笨拙尴尬，被人作弄的样子。比如有一次，我们几个人正走在运动馆回宿舍楼的路上，却发现汤米和其他几个男生在我们前方。他们跟我们仅有几步的距离，大家——连汤米在内——看起来都挺开心，有说有笑，推推搡搡闹着玩。事实上，我觉得走在我身边的劳拉，就是被男生们嬉嬉闹闹的劲儿给带起了兴头。其实呢，汤米大概原本坐在地上来着，因为他的橄榄球衫的下背部有块明显的灰泥。显然他完全不知道背后有这块污渍，我想他那几个朋友肯定也没看到，不然他们肯定会拿来打趣。不管怎么说，劳拉就是劳拉，她喊了一声：“汤米，你背上有粑粑！你干什么去了？”

她完全是出于善意开玩笑，如果说我们其他人也闹出点动静，也绝不会超出学生们平日开玩笑的尺度。因此，当汤米骤然僵住，猛地转身，目光如炬地盯着劳拉时，我们都很吃惊。我们全都停了下来——男生们看上去跟我们一样，显得迷惑不解——在那几秒钟内，我都以为汤米就要像几年前那样，脾气大发作。可他只是愤而离场，剩下我们面面相觑，无奈耸肩。

我给他看帕特里夏·C的月历那一次，情况也差不多。帕特里夏比我们低两级，但大家都很佩服她画画的本事，在艺术交换活动上，她的作品总是很抢手。我特别喜欢她画的月历，在最后一次交换活动上，我总算抢到了，因为早在几个礼拜之前，就有流言说会有这件作品上拍。她的月历与众不同，跟艾米丽小姐那些轻飘飘的描绘英国各郡县风光的彩色挂历不同，帕特里夏的月历很小巧厚实，每个月都配了一幅令人赞叹的小型铅笔素描，描绘黑尔舍姆的生活场景。真希望这月历现在还在我身边，尤其是因为其中有几幅画——比如六月和九月的两幅——上面的人物能清楚认得出是哪几个同学和导师。我离开农舍的时候丢失了些东西，这是其中之一，当时我心不在焉，并没有太留意自己带走了什么——等我讲到这段时，再另做细谈。我提起这事是想说明帕特里夏的月历真的很受欢迎，我很自豪能拥有，因此就拿给汤米显摆。

我看到他在南操场近旁一棵美国梧桐树边上，站在下午的日光里，那本月历碰巧在我包里——前一节音乐课上，我拿出来显摆过——于是我朝他走了过去。

他正专心看着旁边的球场上的一帮低年级的男生的足球比赛，这时他看起来情绪尚可，甚至算得上颇为宁静。见我上前，他露出了微

笑，我们先是随意闲聊了几句。然后我说：“汤米你瞧我弄到了什么。”我并没有试图掩饰自己话音里面的得意，把月历拿出来递给他时，甚至可能还曾口呼“哒哒”以表炫耀。当他接过月历的时候，脸上还带着一丝笑意，可是当他翻看每一幅画面的时候，我看得出，他内心的某个部分，渐渐关闭了起来。

“那个帕特里夏哦，”我开口说着，仿佛也感到自己的话音都变了，“她真是聪明……”

可是汤米已经将月历递回给我了。随后他一言不发，径直离开我身边，朝主楼走去。

最后这件事应该让我有所警醒。哪怕我用上半边脑子想一想，也该猜到汤米近期的情绪问题，跟露西小姐和他当初“没有创意”的老问题有关。但那时发生了很多事，就像我说的，我始终没有往这方面想。我猜，我一定认为那些从前的老问题都如同我们青春早期的那些年一样，被抛到身后去了。如今只有那些严重的大事才有可能让我们这些人真正上心。

那么到底发生了什么？首先，露丝和汤米关系严重破裂。那时他们已经出双入对有半年了，至少两人公开交往有这么久——出入总是手挽着手，诸如此类。他们俩一对儿能够得到大家的尊重，是因为他们没有招摇。别的人，比如西尔维娅·B和罗杰·D，会搞得人倒胃口，须得大伙儿齐声做呕吐状，才能让他们老实规矩。可是露丝和汤米从来不会当着人做出恶心举动。如果说有时候他们会亲热什么的，旁人也会觉得他们是发自内心，为了彼此，而不是为了引人关注，哗众取宠。

如今回看，我能明白当时对于跟性相关的一切，大家都很困惑。我猜这没什么出人意料，毕竟我们才刚刚十六岁。可是导师他们本身也很困惑——如今我看得比较清楚——这点更加重了我们的困扰。一方面我们接收到像艾米丽小姐那样一套说辞，跟我们讲如何不要为自己的身体感到羞耻，要“尊重我们的身体需求”，说只要双方都是真正想要，那么性爱就是“一件美丽的礼物”。可实际上，导师们做了许多设计和规定，我们很难做爱而不违规。九点之后我们不能去男生宿舍探望，他们不能来我们这边。晚间教室按规定都是禁入区，棚屋后和运动馆也是一样。而且，即便是天气足够温暖，你也不会愿意在野外做爱，因为过后你一定会发现有观众在主楼里传着望远镜看你们。换句话说，虽然他们嘴上说性如何美好，我们却有明确印象，认定如果真被导师抓到我们在做爱，那我们就有麻烦了。

我话虽这样说，但我个人所了解的真实事例只有一件，珍妮·C和罗伯·D在十四号教室被人撞破了。他们午饭之后做的，就在那里一张课桌上，杰克先生碰巧进来取东西。据珍妮说，杰克先生脸红了，立刻就退了出去，但他们还是受到妨碍停了下来。等他们差不多穿好衣服，杰克先生又进来了，似乎他才刚刚进来，假装被他们吓了一跳，吃了一惊。

“我很清楚你们在做什么，这种行为很不恰当，”他说完就让他们俩去见艾米丽小姐。但是等他们到了艾米丽小姐的办公室，她却跟他们说自己要赶去参加一个重要会议，没有时间跟他们谈话。

“但你们要明白，无论你们做了什么，都是不该做的。我希望你们不要再犯了，”她说完便拿着文件夹匆匆出门去了。

而同性性行为就更加让我们困惑不解了。不知道为什么我们称之为“伞性”，如果你喜欢同性，你就是“一把伞”。我不知道你们那里是怎样的，但在黑尔舍姆，我们对任何同性恋的迹象可是一点都不客气。尤其是男生，他们会干出各种残酷的事来。据露丝说，那是因为他们年龄较小，还不懂事的时候，有的同学彼此曾做过些什么。所以现在他们对这事就不可理喻得紧张。我不知道她说的是不是对，但的确，如果说某人“完全是一把伞”，那结果很可能就会打起来。

当我们讨论这一切的时候——那时候我们没完没了地说这些——我们无法认定，到底导师想不想我们有性生活。有的人认为他们同意，只不过我们总是想在错误的时间做爱。汉娜有个理论，说导师有责任让我们进行性行为，因为要不然的话，我们过后就无法成为好的捐献者。据她说，除非你一直做爱，否则肾和胰腺之类的器官就无法正常使用。还有人说，我们得记住，导师都是“正常人”。所以他们对性爱才这样态度古怪；对他们而言，是为了要生小孩才做爱的，即便他们理性地了解我们是不能生育的，可情感上，对于我们的性行为仍然感到不安，因为他们从内心深处很难相信我们不会搞出宝宝来。

安妮特·B有个不同的理论：我们彼此之间的性爱让导师感到不自在那是因为他们想跟我们做爱。她说，尤其是克里斯先生，他看女生的样子，就是包含了那个意思。劳拉说安妮特的本意是她想要跟克里斯先生做爱。一听到这里我们都笑喷了，因为跟克里斯先生做爱这样的想法实在是太荒唐，而且令人倒胃口。

我认为最靠谱的理论是露丝提出来的。“他们跟我们讲的这些关于性爱的内容，是为了我们离开黑尔舍姆之后，”她说，“他们希望

我们能够正确享受性爱，跟自己喜欢的对象，不要染上疾病。但他们真正的意思是要我们离开之后再做爱。他们不想让我们在这里做，因为对他们来说，那样会惹来太多麻烦。”

总之我猜，实际上我们周围发生的性行为没有大家想象的那么多。也许有许多亲热、爱抚；很多情侣暗示他们有正常的性生活。但回望从前，我疑心到底真实的性行为有多少。如果每个号称做过的人都真的有在做，那么你在黑尔舍姆漫步的时候一定会看到——前后左右都有情侣在做爱。

我记得大家都曾心照不宣，互相之间不会详细追问我们所号称做过的事。比如，当你们在谈论其他女生的时候，汉娜翻个白眼，嘟囔一句：“处女吧”一言下之意是：“当然我们都不是了，可她还是个雏儿，你能指望她怎样呢？”——这种时候你绝对不应该问她：“你跟谁做的？什么时候？在哪里？”不，你只能心领神会地点点头。就好像还有一个平行宇宙，我们可以消失在其中，在那里尽情做爱。

那时候我就已经看出来，周围人们号称的那些性生活根本做不得数。尽管如此，随着那年的夏天逐渐靠近，我开始越来越感到格格不入。从某种意义上说，性爱已经跟几年前的“创造性”不无相似。如果你还没有过性经验，那你应该去做，并且尽快。因为有两个跟我最亲近的女生绝对是曾经做过，所以就我而言，整件事更为复杂。劳拉和罗伯·D做过，虽然他们从来不是正式的一对儿。还有露丝和汤米。

所以，我拖延此事已经很久，一直对自己重复艾米丽小姐的教诲——“如果不能找到一个你真心愿意与之分享这一经历的伴侣，那就不要做！”但是到了我现在所讲到那年春天的时候，我开始觉得，我不介意跟男生做爱了。倒不单单是为了明白这到底是怎么回事，也是因为我突然想到，自己需要熟知性爱，最好能够跟一个不太喜欢的男生先练习一下。这样等到后来，如果我跟某个特别的人在一起，就更有可能把每个步骤都做对。我的意思是，如果艾米丽小姐说得对，性爱对人们之间的联系有这么重大的意义，那么等到性爱的成败至关重要的时刻到来之时，我可不希望自己那是第一次做。

因此我看上了哈利·C。我选中他有几个理由。首先，我知道他肯定已经有过性经验，是跟莎朗·D做的。其次，我没有太喜欢他，但也绝对不觉得他倒胃口。还有，他安静而且正派，所以如果这事一败涂地，他也不会到处乱讲。而且他曾暗示过几次，表示想跟我做爱。OK，那时候很多男生都在尽力挑逗，但到了那个时候，男生们惯常的那套把戏跟真正的求爱已经有所分别。

因此我选中了哈利，我之所以拖延了几个月是因为我想确认自己身体状况适合。艾米丽小姐曾经教我们说，如果你还不够湿润，那么性爱可能会很痛，会失败，这是我真正担忧的事之一。并不是下面被撕裂开来，虽然我们经常开这样的玩笑，好多女生私下里也害怕会这样。我一直想，只要我能很快湿润，就不会有问题，因此我一个人做了很多次，以确保无虞。

我明白这样说来可能显得我很偏执，可我记得自己曾花了很多时间反复读书里提到人们做爱的章节，一遍又一遍地反复看那些段落，试着找到窍门。问题是，我们在黑尔舍姆的那些书都没什么用。我们有很多十九世纪的书，比如托马斯·哈代之类的作品，基本上毫无帮助。有些现代的书，比如埃德娜·奥布赖恩和玛格丽特·德拉布勒的著作，里面倒是有些性描写，但具体到实际发生的时候就不太清楚了，因为作者总是认为读者早就有过丰富的性经验，没有必要描写细节。因此我那段时间看书觉得很困扰，而录像也好不到哪里去。几年前我们台球室里有台录像放映机，到那年春天为止，已经攒了一个相当不错的影片库。许多片子里面都有性爱场面，但大多数镜头是性爱才刚刚开始就结束了，再不然就是只让你看到他们的脸和后背。如果真有一段有用的镜头，多半也只能一闪而过，因为通常房间里还有二十个人跟你一起看。我们形成了一种制度，用以重放某些深受欢迎的桥段——比如《大逃亡》里那个美国人骑着自行车跃过铁丝网的那一幕。大家会齐声大喊：“倒带！倒带！”直到有人拿过遥控器，然后我们就重新再看一遍那个片段，有时候会连看三四遍。但只是为了重新回头去看性爱场景的话，我很难亲自站出来开始喊话。

所以我推迟了一周又一周，同时自己继续准备，一直到夏天来了，我才下定决心，认为我已经准备得很充分了。到那时，我甚至对这事有了相当程度的自信，开始对哈利发出暗示和信号。一切都很顺利，按部就班，可这时露丝和汤米分手了，一切都乱了套。

第九章

事情是这样的，他们分手过了几天之后，我跟另外几个女生一起在画室里画静物。我记得那天很闷，虽然风扇在身后吹着，依然无济于事。我们是用炭笔画的，因为有人把所有的画架都占了，所以我们只好把画板架在大腿上画。我旁边坐的是辛西娅·E，我们刚刚聊了几句，抱怨天气太热。这时有人把话题转到了男生，然后她头也没抬地说：

“还有汤米。我就知道他跟露丝长不了。哎，我猜下一个自然就是你咯。”

她说得好像漫不经心。但辛西娅是个感觉很敏锐的人，因为她不是我们小圈子的一员，所以她的话尤其显得有分量。我不禁想，是否她代表了所有与此事有一定距离的人都会有的看法。毕竟我跟汤米做朋友也有好多年了，谁跟谁一对儿这种事是后来才出现的。完全有可能，在局外人看来，我就像是露丝“自然的继任者”。可我没说什么，反正辛西娅只是随口一说，也没有继续再多说。

后来又过了一两天之后，我跟汉娜一起从运动馆出来，她突然碰碰我，朝北操场上一群男生点了点头。

“看，”她悄声说，“汤米，他一个人坐着。”

我耸耸肩，仿佛说：“那又怎样？”于是事情就过去了。但后来我发现自己翻来覆去地在想这件事。也许汉娜只是想指出汤米跟露丝分手之后，看起来有点形单影只。但我觉得这有点说不通；我太了解汉娜了。她碰我的那种方式，还有压低了声音讲话，都很明显地表示出，她也是在表达某种臆测，可能还要到处征询别人的看法，问我是不是“自然而然的继任者”。

正如我所说，所有这些将我带入了一个有些困惑的境地，因为在此之前，我都是一门心思放在跟哈利的计划上。事实上，现在回顾起来，我确信，若是没有这所谓“自然继任”的事儿，我一定会跟哈利做爱的。我都想清楚了，准备工作也进行顺利。现在我仍然认为在我当时的人生阶段，哈利是个好的对象选择。我觉得他一定会体贴温柔，能够理解我从他那里希望得到什么。

几年前，在威尔特郡的一座康复中心，我曾跟哈利有过一面之缘。他是捐献之后被送进来的。我当时情绪不佳，因为我负责的捐献者前一天夜里刚刚完结了。没有人为此指责我什么——手术进行得非常不利索——可我仍然感觉很糟糕。夜里我一直没睡，理清思绪，思考整个过程，当我到前台去准备离开的时候，看到哈利进来。他坐在轮椅上——后来我才知道，那是因为他太虚弱，而不是他不能行走——我上前去跟他打招呼，也搞不清他到底有没有认出我是谁。我猜我没道理在他的记忆中占据一席之地。除了那一次的事之外，我们两人再也没有什么联系。如果他还记得我，那么对他而言，我只是一个神经病女生，来找过他一次，问他要不要做爱，然后又撤回了。他大概属于同龄人里比较成熟的，因为他既没有恼火，也没有到处跟人讲我如何撩拨完了就跑之类的。因此那天当我看到他被人送进来的时候，我依然对他心怀感激，希望自己能做他的护理员。我看了一圈，但不论他的护理员是哪位，反正当时根本不在场。护工们很不耐烦，要尽快送他进房间，因此我没跟他多谈。我只是问声好，祝他尽快好转，他报以疲倦的笑容。当我提到黑尔舍姆的时候，他做了个举双手拇指的动作，可我知道他并没有认出我。也许过后，等他没有那么疲倦的时候，或者药效的强力作用消散了之后，他也许会想想看我是谁，也许会记起。

总之，我说的从前那些事：露丝和汤米分手之后，我所有的计划都乱了套。现在回顾起来，我仍然对哈利感到歉意。前面一周我向他传达了那么多暗示，现在却突然跑来跟他耳语表示拒绝。我猜我大概是认定他迫不及待想做爱，所以我才会特地停下手中在做的事，就为了拖延他的行动。因为不论我什么时候看到他，总是会匆忙说上一句，然后不等他有机会答话，就快快走掉。过了很久之后我再回想此事，才想到他可能根本并不是满脑子想的都是性爱。谁知道呢，他可能乐于将整件事都忘掉不提才好呢，然而每次他看到我，无论在走廊还是操场上，我总要走上前去，低声讲出个什么借口，解释为什么我不能立刻跟他做爱。从他的角度来看，这肯定显得跟神经病一样，要不是他为人这么正派，我老早就成了大家的笑柄。总之，拖延哈利的这段时期大概持续了两个礼拜，接着就是露丝的请求。

那年夏天，直到温暖的天气都过完之前，我们形成了一种在户外听音乐的奇怪方式。自从前一年开始，随身听出现在黑尔舍姆的拍卖会上，到那年夏天为止，至少有六个随身听流传在校园里。当时热门的方式是几个人在草坪上，围绕着一个随身听坐一圈，耳机挨个传递。好吧，听起来这种欣赏音乐的方式很傻，但却创造了一种非常好

的感受。你听上大概二十秒，然后摘下耳机，递给下一个人。过上一会儿，只要你们反复播放同一盘磁带，你会惊讶地发现几乎跟自己一个人听完全部曲目一样。正如我说的，那年夏天这种方式非常盛行，午休的时候，你就会看到学生们一群一群地围绕着随身听，躺在草地上。导师们对此不太喜欢，怕我们会传染耳疾，可他们也没有阻止我们。每当回忆起最后的那年夏天，我总是会想起围着随身听的那些午后时光。总会有人晃过来，问一句：“听的什么？”如果听到的答案他也喜欢，那么他就也在草地上坐下来，等到耳机传过来。这种活动气氛总是很好，我记忆中从来没有人被拒绝，不把耳机递给他的。

总之，就在我跟另外几个女生正在这样听音乐的时候，露丝走上前来，问能否跟我谈谈。我看得出是挺重要的事，于是我就离开那几个朋友，跟露丝两个人一路漫步，直走到宿舍楼。等到了我们的房间，我坐在窗边露丝的床上——太阳烘得毯子暖暖的——而她就在靠墙边我的床上坐了下来。房间里有只绿头苍蝇嗡嗡在飞，我们俩花了一分钟工夫轮番拍着玩“苍蝇网球”，将这只傻飞虫在两人之间传来传去。后来苍蝇找到了窗口飞走了，露丝说道：

“我想跟汤米重归于好。凯西，你能帮我么？”然后她又问：“怎么了？”

“没事，我只是有点吃惊，毕竟发生了那么多事。当然我会帮忙的。”

“我还没跟任何人提过想跟汤米和好的事。跟汉娜也没有。我只信任你一个。”

“你希望我做什么？”

“跟他谈谈。你对付他总是很有办法。他会听你的。他会知道你不是乱说，我是当真的。”

有一会儿我们就那么坐着，双脚在床下晃荡。

“你肯跟我说这些，真的非常好，”最终我说，“很可能我是最佳人选。去跟汤米谈话什么的。”

“我希望我们俩能从头开始。现在我们俩差不多扯平了，两人都曾办过蠢事，只是为了互相伤害，但我们都受够了。玛莎·他妈的H，我跟你讲！也许他这么干纯粹是为了给我找乐子。好吧，你跟他说他成功了，现在两人完全扯平了。是时候长大成人，从头开始了。我知

道你能跟他讲得通道理，凯西。你能用最佳方案处理这件事。如果他还是不愿意讲道理，那我就知道没必要再跟他继续下去了。”

我耸耸肩。“就像你说的，我跟汤米，我们确实一直能谈得来。”

“对，他真心很敬重你。我知道，是因为他常常说起你，说你有胆有识，说到做到。他有次跟我说，如果陷入困境，他宁肯指望你，而不是任何一个男生来帮他。”她匆匆一笑。“这下你得承认，这是真心诚意的恭维。所以你瞧，只有靠你来救我们。我和汤米注定是一对，他会听你的。你会为我们做这事的，对不对，凯西？”

有一会儿我什么也没说。后来我问道：“露丝，你对汤米是认真的吗？我是说，如果我劝说成了，你们俩复合了，你不会再次伤害他吧？”

露丝不耐烦地叹口气。“当然我是认真的。我们现在都是成年人了。很快我们就要离开黑尔舍姆。不再是儿戏了。”

“OK，我去跟他谈。就像你说的，我们很快要离开这里了。我们来不及浪费时间。”

那之后，我记得我们坐在床边上，又聊了一会儿。露丝想要把每件事说上一遍又一遍：他是有多傻，为什么说他们俩是天生一对，他们从头来过要如何改正错误，如何要更加保护隐私，要在更好的地方，更好的时间做爱。我们谈了所有这些，她样样都要听我的意见。后来，当我正望着窗外，瞭望远处群山的时候，突然被露丝惊了一下，她不知何时到了我身边，捏住了我的肩膀。

“凯西，我就知道我们得靠你，”她说，“汤米说得对。要是落入困境就得靠你帮忙。”

事情一桩接一桩，结果接下来的几天里我都没有机会去跟汤米谈话。后来，一天午休的时候，我发现他正在南操场边上练足球。先前他跟另外两个男生在练传球，如今只剩了他一个人，在练颠球。我走过去，坐到他身后的草地上，将后背靠在一根护栏的柱子上。当时距我给他看帕特里夏·C的月历画，他愤而跑掉的那次应该没过多久，因为我记得两人都还有点无所适从。他仍是继续颠球，专注地皱着眉头——膝，脚，头，脚——而我只是坐在当地，随手摘掉地上长出的苜蓿，眼睛望着远方当初曾经怕得要命的那片树林。最终，我决定打破僵局，我说：

“汤米，我们谈谈吧。有件事我想跟你说说。”

我这话一出口，他就任由球落到一边，走过来在我身边坐了下来。汤米总是这样，每当他知道我愿意跟他聊聊，立刻他所有那些小脾气不开心就踪迹全无；只是满怀感激，一脸恳切，让我想起小学时候，当刚刚批评过我们的导师重又回到正常状态的时候，我们的反应。他略微有点喘息，尽管我知道是因为他刚刚在踢球的缘故，可这又增添了几分他的恳切之态。换句话说，还不等我开口，他已经让我莫名烦躁了。而当我对他说：“汤米，我看得出来。你最近不大开心。”他却说：“你什么意思？我高兴着呢。真的。”说完他粲然一笑，随后索性开怀大笑起来。这下我真着恼了。几年之后，当往事的一星半点时不时浮上脑海，我总归是面露微笑。可在当时，他这样我真的很恼火。如果汤米碰巧对你说“这事真的让我很难过”，他会特地拉长了脸，当场做出垂头丧气的表情，来证明自己的话。我不是说他有意嘲讽。他是真心认为自己这样更有说服力。因此现在，为了证明他很高兴，他又来了，使尽浑身解数证明他心情美好。正如我所说的，将来我回顾往事，会觉得他这样很可爱；但那年夏天，我只看到这证明他还是很幼稚，很容易被人利用。当时，对于黑尔舍姆之外，等待着我们的大千世界，我所知寥寥，但我猜想我们将需要步步留心，所有聪明才智都用上，当汤米像这样行事的时候，我几乎感到恐慌。直到那天下午之前，我总是由他去——好像总是太难跟他解释——但这次我发作了，我说：

“汤米，你看起来很傻，笑成这副样子！如果你要假装开心，那也不要这样！跟我学学好不好，不是像你这样做的！绝对不是！你瞧，你该长大了。你得回到正路上来。最近你表现很失常，我们都知道这是为什么。”

汤米满脸迷惑。当他确信我已经说完之后，才开口说：“你说得对。我确实是很失常。可我不明白你什么意思。凯丝。你说我们都知道，这是什么意思？我不懂，你是怎么知道的。我跟谁都没讲过。”

“显然我并不掌握细节。但我们都知道你跟露丝分手了。”

汤米还是看起来满脸困惑。最终他又稍微一笑，但这次是真的。“我明白你意思了，”他嘟囔了一句，随后停了一会儿，想清楚某件事。“坦白讲，凯丝，”他终于说，“这真的不是我烦恼的原因。其实是因为完全不同的事。我时时刻刻都在想。关于露西小姐。”

我这才听说这件事，关于那年初夏，露西小姐和汤米之间发生的事。后来，当我终于有时间去想清楚的时候，我分析认为，事情发生的时间大概距离我在二十二号教室看到露西小姐在纸上乱画的那天上午过了没几天。正如我所说，我恨不能踢自己一脚，竟然没有早点去找他问清楚。

那是下午，靠近“死钟点”的时候——所有课程都已结束，但要再过一会儿才会开始晚饭。汤米看到露西小姐从主楼里出来，她手里满满地抱着挂图和文件盒，好像随时可能会掉东西的样子，于是汤米就跑上前去帮忙。

“于是她让我帮忙拿几样东西，说我们要把东西都拿回她的书房。虽然我们两人拿，东西还是太多，我路上就掉了两样。后来，当我们走到橘园的时候，她突然停下了脚步，我还以为她也掉了东西。可她却望着我，就像这样，直愣愣地盯着我的脸，非常严肃。随后她说，我们得谈谈，好好谈谈。我说好吧，于是我们走进橘园，到了她的书房，把所有东西都放下。这时她让我坐下，于是我就在上次的地方坐了下来，你知道的，就是三年前那次。我看得出，她也记起了几年前的事，因为她一开口就说那件事，仿佛事情只是发生在昨天。没有解释，什么都没有，她只是没头没尾地说：‘汤米，我犯了个错误，上次我跟你谈话的时候。我早就该找你纠正过来的。’随后她又说，我应该把她从前跟我讲的那些话全部忘掉。说她告诉我，无需担忧缺乏创造力这种事，其实是帮了我很大一个倒忙。说终究还是其他导师说得对，我的艺术创作这么垃圾，无论如何说不过去……”

“等一下，汤米。她真的是说你的艺术创作很垃圾吗？”

“即便不是‘垃圾’这个词儿，也是差不多意思。不值一提。可能是这么说的。再不就是能力不足。倒还不如直接说垃圾的为好。她说她很抱歉上次跟我说了那样的话，因为如果不是她，我可能到现在早就把问题都解决了。”

“这期间你都说了些什么？”

“我不知道说什么好。最终她开口问我了。她说：‘汤米，你在想什么呢？’于是我就说，我也说不准，但不管怎么说她无需为我担心，因为我现在就挺好。她就说，不，我这样不好。我的艺术创作是垃圾，部分原因就是因为她跟我讲的那些话。我对她说，可那又有什么关系呢？我现在挺好，也没有人继续为这事取笑我了。可她还是大摇其头，还说：‘有关系的。我不该跟你说那些话。’这时我才想

到，她说的是以后，你知道，就是我们离开这里之后的事。于是我说：‘可我不会有事的，老师。我真的做好了准备，我知道怎么照顾自己。等到了捐献的时候，我肯定能做好的。’我说这些话的时候，她开始猛地摇头，她摇得太厉害，我都担心她会头晕。然后她说，‘听我说，汤米，你的创作，这很重要。不仅仅因为这都是证据，更是为了你们自身的缘故。你们会从中获益很多，你们自己获益。’”

“等一下。她是什么意思，‘证据’？”

“我不知道。但她绝对是这么说的。她说我们的创作很重要，说‘不仅仅因为这都是证据’。天知道她是什么意思。我真的还问过她，就在她说那句话的时候。我说我不明白她跟我说的这些话是什么意思，这跟夫人和夫人的艺廊有关系吗？她长叹一口气，然后说：‘夫人的艺廊，是啊，那很重要。比我从前认为的远远更为重要。我现在算是明白了。’然后她又说：‘你瞧，你不懂的事还有很多很多。汤米，我也不能讲给你听。关于黑尔舍姆，关于广大世界中你们所处的位置，各种各样的事。但是也许有一天，你会去努力搞清楚一切。他们不会让你很容易成功的，但如果你真想要，你可能明白。’她说完，又开始摇头，可没有刚才那么猛烈了。她还说：‘可是凭什么你要有所不同呢？那些从这里离开的学生，他们从来也没弄懂太多。为什么你就不同呢？’我不明白她在说些什么，因此我只是重复说：‘我不会有事的，老师。’她安静了一会儿，然后她突然站起身，弯身靠近我，拥抱了我。不是性感的那种拥抱。更像是我们小的时候他们抱我们的感觉。我只是尽可能地静止不动。然后她退了几步，又说了一遍，很抱歉从前跟我说过那些话。还说现在也不晚，我应该立刻就开始，要弥补从前失去的时光。我想我大概什么都没说，她望着我，我还以为她要再次拥抱我呢，可是没有，她只是说：‘就为了我去努力试试吧，汤米。’我对她说我会尽力，因为在那个时候，我一心只想要离开。我很可能已经涨得满脸通红了，又是被她抱，什么的。我是说，一切都不一样了，现在我们毕竟长大了。”

直到此刻我都深陷在汤米的讲述之中，完全忘记了我要找他谈话的理由。但他一说到我们都“长大了”的话，立刻就提醒我回到了最初的使命。

“你瞧，汤米，”我说，“我们很快再回头好好谈谈这事儿。这很有趣，我能明白为什么这会让你痛苦。但不管怎么说，你还是需要努力把力打起精神来。我们今年夏天就要离开这里了。你得重新提振精

神，理清思绪，有一件事你立刻就能够理顺。露丝跟我说她想停止争吵，要你回到她身边。我认为这对你是个好机会。不要搞砸了。”

他沉默了几秒钟，然后说：“我不知道，凯丝。太多其他的事我需要想明白。”

“汤米，你只管听我说。你真的很幸运。这里这么多人，露丝却单单喜欢你。等我们离开之后，如果你跟她在一起，我们就无需担心。她是最棒的，你只要跟她在一起就没问题。她说她希望能重新开始。机不可失啊。”

我等待着，但汤米并没有做出反应，又一次，类似惊恐的感觉笼上心头。我倾身向前，说道：“瞧，你这个傻瓜，你不可能有更多机会了。你难道不明白，我们在这里，在一起的时光没剩多少了？”

让我意外的是，当汤米终于有反应的时候，他的回答既冷静，又深思熟虑——在未来的那些年里，汤米的这一面将会越来越多地显现出来。

“这点我知道，凯丝。正因为如此，我才不愿意匆忙跟露丝复合。我们真的必须得认真考虑下一步了。”说完他叹了口气，直视我说，“诚如你所说的，凯丝。我们很快就要离开这里。一切不会继续犹如儿戏。我们得认真考虑。”

突然之间我无言以对，就只是坐在当地，一根接一根地拔地上长的苜蓿草。我能感到他的目光落在我身上，可我没有抬头回望他。我俩像这样本来可能还要持续更久，但被旁人打断了。我猜是先前跟他踢球的几个男生回来，再不然就是有闲逛的学生跟我们坐在了一起。总之，我俩这推心置腹的片刻时光就只得结束，离开的时候我感到自己并没有完成想达到的目的，仿佛我让露丝失望了。

我始终没机会去评估下我跟汤米的谈话到底发生了怎样的作用，因为第二天就爆出了新闻事件。当时是上午活动过半，我们重新回到课堂，再上一节文化简报课。在这些课堂上，我们要扮演外面会遇到的各色人等——咖啡馆里的服务生，警察，诸如此类。这门课总是让我们很兴奋，同时又充满担忧，所以不管怎么说，大家总是很亢奋。就在课程结束，我们鱼贯而出的时候，夏洛特·F冲进了教室，于是露西小姐离开黑尔舍姆的消息立刻就在我们中间流传开来。这堂课的任课老师克里斯先生想必早已知情，还不等我们来得及问他，就满脸愧色匆忙逃跑了。开始我们拿不准，夏洛特是否只是汇报坊间传言，但

她越说越多，我们越发明白此事是真的了。上午早些时候，另外一个中学部班级曾经进了十二号教室，等着露西小姐来上音乐欣赏课。可上课的却是艾米丽小姐，她说露西小姐暂时不能来，因此由她来代课。接下来的二十分钟里，情况都很正常。突然——一句话说到半截——艾米丽小姐从贝多芬的话题骤然转离，宣布说露西小姐已经离开黑尔舍姆，不会回来了。那堂课提前几分钟下课——艾米丽小姐若有所思地皱着眉匆匆离去——学生们一出教室，这话就传开了。

我立刻出去找汤米，因为我迫切希望他能第一个从我这里听到这件事。但当我走到院里的时候，我发现已经太晚了。汤米在离我较远的一侧，一帮男生围了一圈，他就在边上，不知他听到旁人说什么，只是频频点头。其余的那群男生都很激动，甚至有点兴奋，但汤米的目光看起来很空洞。就在那天晚上，汤米和露丝复合了，我记得几天之后露丝找到我，特地表示感谢，说我“处理得非常好”。我告诉她很可能我没帮上什么忙，但她根本听不进。这下我算是上了她的贵人榜。情况就像这样持续着，度过了我们在黑尔舍姆的剩余日子。

第二部

第十章

有时我会驱车驶过漫长曲折的公路，经过沼泽地带，或是一畦一畦犁过的田地，天空灰暗而浩大，一英里又一英里过去，丝毫没有变化，我发觉自己在想我的论文，当初住在农舍的时候，我本该写的那篇论文。最后那年的夏天，导师们时不时跟我们谈论文的事，尽力帮我们每个人挑选一个题目，让我们在长达两年的时间内，可以有正事可做。可是不知怎么——也许从导师的仪态中我们能看出些端倪——完全没有人相信论文有任何重要作用，而我们自己也极少讨论这事儿。我记得当我去她办公室，告诉艾米丽小姐我选中的课题是维多利亚时代的小说，可当时关于这方面我并没有太多想法，我也看得出她知道。可她只是像平常那样投给我一个犀利的眼神，并没有再说什么。

可是一旦我们到了农舍，论文就突然被赋予了新的重要意义。我们刚到那天的日子里，对我们中的有些人而言，这段时间持续得还要更久一些，那时我们都紧抱住写论文这件事不放，这是黑尔舍姆布置给我们的最后一份作业，就像是导师送给我们的临别礼物一样。随着时间过去，论文这件事会渐渐淡出我们的脑海，但一段时间内，写论文的工作帮助我们在新的环境里直到适应下来。

今天当我想到自己的论文时，我会从细节着手，回顾一遍：我可能会想出一种全新的切入角度，或者选择完全不同的作家和作品来集中论述。当我在服务站喝着咖啡，透过大窗口看着外面的车道，这时我的论文就会毫无因由地浮上心头。然后我就很享受地坐在那里，再把论文从头过一遍。就最近，我甚至还想过要不要从头再来，重拾论文写作，只要等我不再担任护理员的工作，一有时间我就做。但是最终，我猜其实自己并不是当真想写论文。只是有点怀旧，借此消磨时日。我想到论文的时候，跟想念自己在黑尔舍姆打得特别趁手的一场棒球赛，心情并无二异，或者很久前的一场辩论，我现在倒是想出各种聪明话来反驳了，可惜当时没做到。都是这种白日梦一样的念头。但是正如我前面所说，我们刚刚到农舍的时候，情况完全不同。

那年夏天离开黑尔舍姆之后，我们一共八个人到了农舍。其他人去了威尔士山区的大白楼，或者多塞特的白杨农场。我们当时不知道，所有这些地方跟黑尔舍姆都只有一星半点的关联而已。我们刚刚到农舍的时候，满以为这种地方跟黑尔舍姆差不多，只不过学生的年

龄更大一些，我想，一段时间里，我们还是这样认为的。我们极少去想农舍之外的世界跟我们有什么关系，或这地方是谁管理，农舍跟外面更大的世界又是怎样的关系。那时候，我们都不想这些事。

农舍是几年前破产的一个农场遗留下来的。有座旧庄院，周围有谷仓、牲畜棚、外围屋舍，等等，都被改造成了我们住的地方。还有一些建筑，通常位置偏远的，都快要倒塌了，我们也用不上，可是却感到仿佛负有一定责任——主要是为了凯佛斯的缘故。凯佛斯是个牢骚满腹的老头儿，他每星期开着一辆沾满泥巴的小货车，来两到三趟，查看查看。他不大喜欢跟我们讲话，他到处溜达，一边叹气摇头很倒胃口的样子，仿佛表示我们做得远远不够，没把这地方搞好。可他从来也没说清楚，到底要我们怎么做。我们刚刚到的时候，他曾经给我们列过一张表，注明了我们要做的杂事，而那些早已在这里的学生——汉娜管他们叫“老生”——已经早就形成了一套值日体系，我们一丝不苟地继续执行值日。其余真的没什么我们可以做的，只是报告下水道漏水，再就是水泛上来要拖干净。

那座旧庄院——就是农舍的核心部位——有几个壁炉，我们可以从外面的谷仓里搬劈好的木柴进来烧了取暖。除此之外，我们就得将就着用那种巨大笨重的取暖器。取暖器的问题是需要烧煤气罐，但除非天气实在太冷，要不然凯佛斯不会多送煤气来。我们一再请求他多给我们留些煤气，但他总是阴郁地摇头，仿佛我们一定会滥用，或者会引发爆炸。因此我记得很多时候都感觉很冷，只有夏季那几个月例外。我们得身穿两件甚至三件套衫才能待得住，牛仔裤冰凉僵硬。有时候我们整天都穿着雨靴，所经之处在房间里留下一道道泥泞和潮湿的足迹。凯佛斯看到这些又会大摇其头，但当我们问他还有什么要我们做的没有，虽然地板脏成那副样子，他却也不说。

我现在说起来仿佛情况挺糟糕，但我们大家都一点也不介意这些不便——这都属于农舍生活的乐趣之一。可是如果我们实话实说，我们中的大多数人，尤其是在刚开始的时候，心底里都得承认曾经很想念那些导师。我们中有几位，甚至有段时间曾经想把凯佛斯当成是某种导师，可他根本不吃我们这一套。当他开着小货车来的时候，你上前去跟他问好，他却像看神经病一样瞪着你。但关于这种事，导师们曾经一遍又一遍跟我们讲过：说一出黑尔舍姆，就再也没有导师了，我们得互相照顾。总的来说，我得承认黑尔舍姆在这方面让我们做好了充分的准备。

我在黑尔舍姆交往密切的大多数学生那年夏天都到了农舍。辛西娅·E——就是当初在艺术课教室里说我是露丝“自然而然的继任”的那个——我跟她不好也不坏，但她跟要好的一群人一起去了多塞特。还有哈利，我差点跟他做爱的那个男生，我听说他去了威尔士。但我们这帮人都待在一道。一旦我们想念谁，大可以告诉自己，没有什么阻止我们去看望他们。我们跟艾米丽小姐上了那么多地图课，然而直到如今我们对于某地距离多远、去那里到底易还是难，根本没有真正的概念。我们说要请老生出门旅行的时候让我们顺路搭车，再不然我们就得赶紧学会开车，那样的话，我们什么时候高兴就可以什么时候去看他们了。

当然，实际上，尤其在最初那几个月里，我们甚至极少跨出农舍的范围。我们甚至不会去周边的乡间散步，也不到附近的村庄去溜达。我认为准确地说我们并不是害怕。我们都知道，如果我们溜走，也没人会阻止，只要我们当天能返回，在凯佛斯的管理簿上登记一下就成了。我们到达的那年夏天，时常看到老生整理背包行囊，出门一待就是两三天，在我们看来他们那种无所谓的样子简直吓人。我们满怀震惊地观察他们，心里暗想不知到了明年夏天，我们会不会也变成这样。当然，我们也是一样，但在最初的那些日子里，这看起来几乎不可能。你得记得，到这时为止我们根本都没有迈出过黑尔舍姆地界范围之外过，我们纯粹是不知所措。如果你跟我说一年之后，我将养成一个人长久漫步的习惯，甚至还要开始学开车，我肯定会觉得你是疯了。

那个阳光很好的日子，小客车将我们放在庄院门前，然后绕过池塘，消失在上坡路上的时候，连露丝都显得怯生生的。我们看到远处的山影，会想起黑尔舍姆远处那些延绵的小山，但我们觉得这些山有古怪，不对劲，就好像你给朋友画像，画得颇像样，但又不大像，纸上那张脸让你觉得有点毛骨悚然。但不管怎么说，那时是夏天，还不是几个月后农舍的那副样子，到处是结冰的水洼，坎坷的地面冻得生硬。当时这里看起来美丽舒适，到处都是疯长的荒草——我们没见过这种样子。我们挤在一起站着，一共八个人，看着凯佛斯在庄院里进进出出，时时等待着他来对我们说话。可他并没有，我们只能听到他心烦意乱地嘟囔，抱怨早已住进来的学生。有一次，当他去车里拿东西的时候，眼神阴郁地瞥了我们一眼，然后就回到庄院里去了，并且关上了房门。

可是没过多久，那些看着我们无助的样子暗中取乐的老生——第二年我们也会表现得跟他们一样——就走了出来，将我们领了进去。事实上，回顾往事，我发现他们真的竭尽所能帮我们安顿下来。即便如此，最初的几个星期还是很陌生，我们很高兴能有彼此做伴。我们总是同进退，似乎大部分时间都尴尬地站在庄院屋外，不知所措。

现在回顾起刚开始的那种样子，显得很滑稽，因为当我想到在农舍住的那两年时，开始的那些困惑和惊恐似乎跟其余的生活记忆格格不入。如果今天有人提起农舍，我会想起那些悠闲自在互相串门的日子，午后慢慢转到傍晚，然后入夜的慵懒步伐。我会想起我的那堆旧简装书，书页都皱趴趴的，仿佛曾经在海上漂荡过。我会想起自己读这些书的样子，在温暖的午后，我趴在草地上，头发——这时我把头发留长了——总是会滑落挡住视线。我会想起早上在自己位于黑谷仓顶上的房间里醒来，听见外面田野里学生们的话音，在争辩诗歌或是哲学问题；或是漫长的冬季，在热气腾腾的厨房里吃早饭，围着餐桌漫谈漫议，关于卡夫卡或是毕加索。早餐的时候我们聊的总是这类话题；从来不谈前一天晚上你跟谁做爱了或者拉里和海伦为什么不说话了之类。

可是话说回来，当我想起我们刚到的第一天，在庄院门口挤在一起的那幅画面，并没有那么格格不入，这其中自有深意。因为也许从某种意义上来说，我们并没有像自己曾经以为的那样，将心底的芥蒂抛到脑后，我们有一部分依然如故：害怕周围的世界，而且——无论这让我们多么自惭形秽——无法完全放下对彼此的牵念。

老生们对汤米和露丝恋情的历史一无所知，自然就将他们当作一对相处已久的伴侣，这简直让露丝高兴得没边儿了。我们刚刚到的那几个礼拜，她尤其特意表现，随时要伸手去抱汤米，有其他人在的时候，还会在角落里跟他亲热一番。其实她这样做如果在黑尔舍姆可能还没什么问题，但在农舍，就看起来很不成熟。老生情侣们绝对不会当众有任何亲昵的表现，总是摆出很理性平常的姿态，就像正常家庭里父亲母亲的样子。

这只是我偶然在农舍中老生们中间留意到的——露丝那么认真研究他们的一举一动，竟然没有注意到这点——我还发现他们许多的做派都是跟电视上学来的。我在观察一对老生，苏西和格雷格——他俩可能是农舍里年纪最大的学生了，通常大家认为这里他们“说了算”。每当格雷格开始一番议论，关于普鲁斯特或者别的什么人，她就会朝我们大家微笑，翻个白眼，用很轻微但是又很强调的声音说：

“上帝救命啊。”在黑尔舍姆看电视是有严格限定的，在农舍也是一样——可实际上如果想要整天看，也没什么能够阻止我们——因为没人对此特别有兴趣。但是庄院里有一台旧电视，黑谷仓里还有一台，我时不时会看点电视。所以我才发现，原来这套“上帝救命”的把戏是从一部美国连续剧里学来的，就是那种无论里面的人说什么，或者做了什么，现场观众都会发出笑声的剧。里面有个角色——一个大子女人，住在主角的隔壁——她的做法跟苏西一模一样，每当她丈夫开始长篇大套地讲话时，观众们就期待着她翻白眼，说“上帝救命”，这时他们就爆发出一阵大笑。一旦我发现了这一点，就开始发现年长的学生从电视节目里学来的许多东西：他们彼此做的手势动作，一起坐在沙发上的姿态，甚至吵架然后冲出房门的样子。

总之，我想说的是，不久之后露丝就发现她跟汤米交往的方式，在农舍的环境里完全是错的，于是她要特地改变在人前行事的方式。露丝从老生那里学来了一个小手势。在黑尔舍姆的时候，如果一对情侣要分开，哪怕只有几分钟时间，也会被当作借口，当众拥抱亲吻。但是在农舍，当一对情侣道别的时候，他们几乎不用说话，更不用说拥抱亲吻了。相反，你只需在情人的手臂靠近肘部的地方拍一下，用手指关节外侧轻轻碰一碰，有点像要引起别人注意的样子。通常都是女孩子对男生做这个动作，就在两人要分开的时候。这个习惯到冬天就渐渐消失了，但是在我们刚刚到的时候，这动作正流行，露丝很快就开始对汤米使用这个手势。首先我得提醒你，汤米是一头雾水，什么都不明白，他会骤然转向露丝，问道：“干吗？”然后她就会怒气冲冲地瞪着汤米，仿佛两人在演戏，可他却忘了台词。我猜她最终还是跟汤米谈过了，因为过了一个星期左右，他俩总算是做对了，几乎完全模仿了老生情侣的做法。

我倒没有在电视上实际看到过这个拍拍胳膊肘的动作，但我很确定这个点子想必是那里来的，同样我也拿得准露丝没有发现这回事。因此那天下午，我在草地上读《丹尼尔·德龙达》^[1]的时候，露丝很烦人，于是我决定是时候要帮她指出这一点。

天近初秋，开始有些凉意。老生们更多时间都留在室内，回归了夏季开始之前他们的惯常日程。但我们几个刚从黑尔舍姆来的学生还是坐在外面没割过的草地上——只想尽可能地延续我们唯一熟悉的日程作息。即便如此，具体到那天的下午，除我之外，也只剩了三四个人还待在草地上。因为我特地选了个僻静角落自己待着，所以很确信我跟露丝之间的事不会被旁人听到。

我躺在一块旧油毡布上看书，正如我前面提过，读的是《丹尼尔·德龙达》，这时露丝漫步而来坐到了我身边。她仔细看了看我书的封面，然后自说自话地点了点头。又过了大约一分钟，不出我所料，她果然开始跟我讲《丹尼尔·德龙达》的故事大概。直到这一刻之前我还处在诸事顺遂的好心情里，见到露丝还挺高兴，但现在我烦了。这样的事她以前曾经对我干过两三次，我也曾见到过她这样对待其他人。一方面是她那副腔调：好像无关紧要，又诚心实意的，仿佛期望人们真心感激她的帮助。其实即便是当时，我也能隐约觉察出她背后的意图。在最初的那几个月里，我们不知为什么形成了这样一种观点，你在农舍能够多么好地安顿下来——过得怎么样——多少反映在你读了多少书上。这听起来古怪，可我们就是这样，是我们这群黑尔舍姆来的人中间自然形成的观念。这套看法我们刻意搞得含混不清——事实上，这跟我们在黑尔舍姆时代对待性的方式不无相似。你可以到处暗示，好像曾读过各种书籍，每当有人提及某本书的时候，比如《战争与和平》，你就做心知肚明状深深点头，反正也没有人会认真去查验你的说辞。你得记得，因为打从一到农舍，我们就一直相依相伴，所以我们中任凭是谁都不可能在其他人的没有发现的情况下，读完《战争与和平》。但是，正如黑尔舍姆对性的说辞一样，大家心照不宣，仿佛真有这样神秘的空间，我们都会躲进去读书。

正如我所说，这是一个我们有几分沉溺的小游戏。即便如此，露丝也比别人玩得更加过分。她总是假装已经读过别人碰巧正在读的那本书；只有她一个人认为，要显示自己过人的阅读量，就应该到处给别人讲他们读到半截的书里面的情节故事。正因为如此，当她开始讲《丹尼尔·德龙达》的时候，尽管我很喜欢，还是合上了书本，坐直身子，冷不丁地对她说：

“露丝，我一直想问问你。你为什么总是要在道别的时候打一下汤米的胳膊呢？你知道我是什么意思。”

当然她号称自己并没有，于是我耐心地解释了自己的说法。露丝听完我的说辞，然后耸耸肩。

“我没意识到。我肯定是跟哪儿学来的。”

若是几个月之前，我可能会就此放过她——也可能根本不会提起此事。但那天下午，我又继续施压，向她解释说这是电视剧里的动作。“这种东西不值得学，”我对她说，“外面的人正常生活中并不真的这样行事，如果你是以为的话。”

我看得出露丝生气了，但又不知道应该怎样反击。她转开目光，又耸耸肩。“那又如何？”她说，“没什么大不了。我们很多人都这么做。”

“你的意思是克里茜和罗德尼这么做。”

我这话一出口就明白自己犯了个错误，在提到这两人之前，我本来已经将露丝逼到了死角，但现在她脱身了。这就像是下棋的时候，你走了一步，就在你手指离开棋子的那一刹那，就发现了自己的错误，立刻感到非常惊恐，因为还不知道这错误会给自己带来多大的灾难。无疑，我发现露丝目光亮了起来，当她重新开口讲话的时候，声音都完全不同了。

“原来如此，原来这就是可怜的小凯西难过的原因啊。露丝没有给她足够的关注。露丝有了新的大朋友，没那么多时间陪小妹妹玩了……”

“住嘴。反正真实的家庭里不是这样的。你根本什么都不知道。”

“哎呀凯西，你可是真实家庭的伟大专家呢。太抱歉了。其实就是这么一回事，对不对？你还是抱着这样的念头。我们黑尔舍姆的人，我们得团结在一起抱成团，永远不能结交新朋友。”

“我从没说过这种话。我只是说克里茜和罗德尼。这样很傻，他们干什么你都照葫芦画瓢有样学样。”

“可我说的没错，对不对？”露丝继续说，“你不高兴是因为我已经向前翻篇了，交上新朋友了。有些老生几乎都记不住你叫什么名字，谁又能责怪他们呢？除了黑尔舍姆的人之外你跟谁都不讲话。可你不能指望我一天到晚牵着你的手。我们到这里都快俩月了。”

我没有咬钩，而是说道：“别管我，别管什么黑尔舍姆。可你总是晾着汤米。我一直观察着你，就这一星期你已经这么干了好几回。你把他晾在一边，就像多余的人一样。这不公平。你跟汤米应该是一对。这就是说你得照应他。”

“太对了，凯西，就像你说的，我们是一对。如果你非得插一脚，那我告诉你。我们谈过这事，我们意见一致。如果他有时候不愿意跟克里茜和罗德尼一起活动，他可以选择不去。我不会勉强他做任何他不愿意的事。但是我们都同意，他不应该阻拦我。谢谢你关

心。”随后，她又换了另一种音调，说道：“话说回来，我看你也没有那么慢热，至少跟某些老生交上朋友了。”

她认真地盯着我看，然后笑了起来，仿佛是说：“我们还是朋友，对不对？”可我觉得她最后这句话没什么可笑。我只是拿起书本，一言不发地走开了。

[\(1\)](#) 《丹尼尔·德龙达》是英国女作家乔治·艾略特最后一部完成的长篇小说，发表于一八七六年，是一部讽刺现实，寻求道德提升的作品，其中对于犹太复国主义和神秘主义观点带有同情色彩的描写，曾引发争议。

第十一章

我应该解释一下，为什么露丝的话让我那么恼火。在我们交好的那几年里，初到农舍的几个月是一段很奇怪的时间。我们为了各种小事争吵不休，但同时我们又比以往任何时候都更向彼此袒露心迹。具体来说，我们俩经常会谈心，通常总是在临睡前，黑谷仓顶上我的房间里。你可以认为这是我们当年宿舍熄灯后长谈所遗留的影响。不管怎么说，关键在于不论白天 we 有过怎样的争执，一到了上床睡觉时间，我和露丝就会发现两人肩并肩坐在我的床垫上，啜着热饮，推心置腹地交流我们对新生活的感受，仿佛什么都不曾发生过一样。而这种坦诚相见之所以能够发生——甚至可以说，这段时间我们的友谊之所以能够存续——都是因为彼此都相信，这时我们相互倾诉的任何事都会得到尊重、小心对待：我们会珍重双方的信任，不论吵得多凶，都不会利用这时候的谈话内容来攻击对方。当然，这倒不是什么明确制定的规则，但是正如我所说的，是彼此心照不宣的信任，直到《丹尼尔·德龙达》这桩事发生的那天午后，我们两人都没做过越线逾矩的事。因此，当露丝提到我跟某些老生交朋友倒是不慢的时候，我不仅仅是恼火。对我而言，这就是一种背叛。因为她的话毫无疑问指的就是我某天晚上向她倾诉的事，关于我的性冲动。

你大概想得到，性爱问题在农舍跟在黑尔舍姆很不一样。这里一切都更加直截了当——更“成人”。你不会到处跟别人咬耳朵吃吃傻笑，传谁又跟谁做了。如果你知道两个学生做过爱了，也不会立刻开始猜测他们会不会正式成为情侣。如果哪天真有一对新情侣出现，你也不会当成了不起的大事，到处去讲。你只是静静地接受这件事，从此之后，当你提到其中一个人的时候，也会讲到另外一个，就像是“克里茜和罗德尼”，或是“露丝和汤米”。如果有人想跟你做爱，也会更加直截了当。男孩子会走到你面前，问你愿意不愿意到他房间去过夜，“换个环境”，或类似的说辞，这没什么大不了的。有时候他是想跟你做情侣，其余的时候，就只是为了一夜的相伴。

正如我所说的，现在的气氛更像是成年人。但是当我回顾往事，却发现农舍时期的性爱更多是出于实际需要。也许恰恰是因为那些流言和秘密都没有了，再不然就是因为冷的缘故。

当我记起农舍时代的性爱时，会想起在冰冷的房间里，漆黑一片中亲热，通常身上总是压着成吨重的毛毯。所谓毯子甚至不是真正的

毛毯，而是各种古怪物事——旧窗帘，甚至地毯。有时候天气实在太冷，你只能找到什么都往身上盖，在这堆东西下面做爱，感觉好像山一样的被子在撞击着你，一半的时间你都拿不准到底是跟男生在做呢，还是跟那堆东西。

总之，我想说的是，我到了农舍之后不久，有了几次一夜情的经历。我原本计划不是这样的。我本来想要慢慢来，也许可以跟某个精心挑选的对象结成情侣。我从没有过情侣关系，特别是观察露丝和汤米两人一段时间之后，我很好奇，想自己也试试。正如我说，这是我原本计划的，所以当一夜情多次发生的时候，我感到有些困扰。所以我决定那天晚上跟露丝倾诉心事。

从许多方面而言，那都是我俩一次典型的夜会。我们捧着各自的茶杯，在我的房间里，肩并肩坐在床垫上，因为椽子碍事的关系，两人的脑袋都要稍微侧一下。我们谈起农舍里不同的男生，是否有谁跟我适合。露丝展露出了她最好的一面：支持你、有趣、老练、有智慧。因此我才决定告诉她那些一夜情的事。我跟她讲，尽管我打心底里不想这样，但事情还是发生了；还有，虽然说我们不会因此而造出孩子，但性爱还是对我的情感产生了奇怪的影响，正如艾米丽小姐当初警告的那样。然后我对她说：

“露丝，我想问问你。你有没有感觉不得不做的时候？甚至跟谁都可以？”

露丝耸耸肩，然后说：“我有伴儿。所以如果我想做，只要跟汤米做就好了。”

“我想是这么回事。也许只是我的问题。可能我下面有点什么地方不大正常。因为有时候我真的非常非常需要做爱。”

“这很奇怪呢，凯西。”她关切地望着我，这让我更加担心了。

“所以你就从来没有像这样过。”

她又耸耸肩。“没有到跟谁都可以的程度。听你说的好像是有点奇怪呢，凯西。不过也许过段时间就会平静下来的。”

“有的时候很久都没什么。然后突然一下子就上来了。第一次就是像这样发生的。他开始亲我，我只想让他走开。可是突然那股劲儿就上来了，毫无来由的。我感觉非做不可。”

露丝摇摇头。“确实听起来有点怪。但是很可能会过去的。很可能是我们在这里吃的食物造成的。”

她并没有帮多大的忙，但她表示了同情，过后我感觉好了一些。因此那天下午在草地上我们争吵的中间，露丝突然提起此事，让我大受打击。好吧，也许没有其他人会偷听我们讲话，但即便如此，她这样做也有不对的地方。在农舍的最初几个月里，我们的友谊之所以能够完好无恙是因为，至少在我这边，我有种观念，认为存在着两个不同的露丝。有一个露丝总在费力讨好老生们，会毫不犹豫地无视我、汤米，或是其他任何人，只要她觉得我们妨碍了她拿姿作态。这个露丝我不喜欢，我每天看到她装腔作势、摆谱儿——就是这个露丝，会用拍下胳膊肘的手势动作。但一天结束的时候，在我狭小的阁楼房间里，跟我并肩坐在一起，双腿伸出来，荡到我床垫外面的那个露丝，双手捧着热气腾腾的茶杯，那是来自黑尔舍姆的露丝，无论当天白日里发生了什么，我跟她，我们都可以像这样，上次坐在一起的时候谈到哪里，立刻拾起来接着聊。直到那天下午草地上那件事之前，我都一直深信不疑，这两个露丝绝不会混为一谈；我临睡前向她倾吐心声的那个露丝，我可以绝对信任。所以当她说出那句话，说我“至少跟某些老生交朋友没那么慢”的时候，我特别生气。所以我拿起书走掉了。

但是现在当我回想往事，会更多地从露丝的角度去看问题。比如我看得出，她可能会感觉我才是首先违背约定的那个人，而她这句揭短的话只是一种反击。当时我从没想到这一点，但现在我觉得有这样的可能，这样解释所发生的事能说得通。毕竟在她说这句话之前，我都在讲什么拍打胳膊肘的事。现在说来有点难以解释，但是对于露丝在老生面前的表现，我们两人之间绝对有种心照不宣的共识。诚然，她经常会吹牛，暗指各种我确知根本没有的事。正如我所说，有的时候她会出卖我们去讨好那些老生。但在我看来，露丝似乎认为，她做这些事，都是为了我们大家。而我作为她的好朋友，担任的角色就应该默默地给她支持，就好像她在舞台上表演，我就坐在观众席的第一排。她奋力表现，想做一个不同的自己，也许她比我们其他人感到更大的压力，因为正如我所说，她好像担负起了我们大家的责任。在这种前提下，我说她拍拍胳膊肘什么的这事儿，就可能被看作是一种背叛，也许她当时感到自己这样的反击行为是正当的。正如我所说，这种解释是我最近才想到的。当时我并没有放眼全局，或是认真审视自己在其中的角色。总的来说那段时间，我猜我大概从来没有关注到露丝单纯为了长大，为了将黑尔舍姆抛在脑后、迈向新生活所做的努

力。现在回想起这些，我想起了她曾跟我说过的一些话，那是在多佛的康复中心我陪护她的时候。我们曾坐在她的房间里，看着夕阳，我们总是这样，一起享用我带来的矿泉水和饼干，我当时跟她讲，说我还留着当初在黑尔舍姆我的旧收藏盒子里面的大多数宝贝，都好好地放在我的松木箱子里，在我的住处。这时——我倒不是特意想引导话题，或带出自己的观点——只是碰巧对她说道：

“离开黑尔舍姆之后，你就再没有收藏过东西，对不对？”

露丝当时坐在床上，她沉默了许久，阳光照在她身后的瓷砖墙面上。后来她说：

“记得我们走之前，导师们反复提醒我们说，可以将自己的收藏带走。因此我就把盒子里所有的东西拿出来，放进了旅行袋。我计划一到农舍就找个很好的木箱子放这些东西。但是当我们到了那里以后，我发现那些老生都没有自己的藏品。只有我们这些人才有，这不正常。想必我们大家都意识到了这一点，不是只有我一个人，可我们从来没有认真谈过这事，对不对？于是我就没有去找木箱。我的那些东西就在旅行袋里放了好几个月，最后，我就都扔掉了。”

我瞪着她。“你把自己的藏品当作垃圾丢掉了？”

露丝摇摇头，接下来的一段时间，她仿佛在脑海中将每件藏品都细细回忆了一遍。最终她说：

“我把它们都放进了垃圾袋，但我实在不忍心把它们当垃圾丢出去。于是有一次老凯佛斯正准备要开车离开的时候，我就拜托他，把这袋东西送到个商店里去。我知道慈善商店的存在，我都查清楚了。凯佛斯略翻了翻袋里的东西，因为他不知道里面有什么——他怎么会知道呢？——然后他哈哈笑了，说据他所知没有一家商店会要这样的东西。我就说，可是这都是好东西，真正的好东西。他看得出我有点动情，于是就转变了态度。他说了类似这样的话：‘好吧，小姐。我带去给乐施会的人。’然后他又很努力地安慰了我一番，说：‘现在我看清楚了，你说得对，里面都是好东西！’可他并不怎么令人信服。我猜他只是把东西拿走，丢到了什么地方的垃圾箱里。但是至少我不需要了解那些。”然后她微笑着说：“可你不同。我记得。你从来不会因为自己的藏品而不好意思，你都留着。现在我希望当初也跟你一样就好了。”

我想说的是，当时我们所有人都在尽力适应新的生活，我猜大家都做过后来后悔的事。当时露丝的话让我很难过，但现在为了当初刚

到农舍的最初时间她或其他人的所作所为，要去评判她或者任何人，都毫无意义。

随着秋色渐浓，我对于大家的周遭环境越来越熟悉，开始留意到一些早先忽视的情况。比如说，学生们对于最近离开的人那种奇怪的态度。老生们在去大白楼或是白杨农场的旅途中遇到的人物，他们会毫不迟疑地分享他们的趣事；可他们几乎从来不会提及那些直到我们到来之前还跟他们很密切的朋友。

我还注意到一件事——我看得出两者之间有关联——当某个老生出门去“做任务”的时候，大家对此都小心翼翼，三缄其口——即便是我们，也能明白他们是做护理员去了。他们可能一去四五天，但在此期间极少被提及；而他们回来的时候，也没人真的去问他们些什么。我猜他们大概跟最亲密的朋友会私下交谈。但大家心照不宣，都不在公开场合谈论这些外出旅行的事。我记得有天上午，通过厨房雾气腾腾的窗户，看到两个老生离开去“做任务”，心里不禁想，到明年春天或者夏天，他们会不会就彻底消失了，轮到我们小心翼翼，避免提到他们。

但是如果说离开的学生是完全禁止谈论的，那又有点夸张。要提到也就提到了。最常见的是，你会听到别人间接提到他们，通常是说到什么活计或是物件相关的时候。比如，如果落水管需要修理，大家就会七嘴八舌地讨论，说“当初麦克是怎么修的”。黑谷仓外面有个树墩子，大家都称之为“戴夫的树桩”，因为足足三年，直到我们来的几个星期之前，他总是坐在上面读书写作，有时下雨或者天冷都不改其行。也许最令人记忆深刻的是史蒂夫。我们始终也没弄明白史蒂夫到底是怎样一个人——只除了一点，他喜欢色情杂志。

时不时你会在农舍里发现一本色情杂志，或是丢在沙发后，或是埋在一堆旧报纸中。这是那种所谓的“软性色情”，可我们当时不懂得如何区分。我们以前没碰到过这种事，也不知该作何感想。当有杂志冒出来的时候，老生们通常会一笑置之，飞快翻阅，仿佛熟视无睹，然后就丢到一边，于是我们也照此办理。几年之前，当我和露丝一起回忆这些往事的时候，她坚持说当时在农舍里有几十本这种杂志在流传。“没有人承认自己喜欢，”她说，“可是到底怎么回事你是记得的。如果某个房间里冒出一本，大家都假装见怪不怪，没什么好看。可是你过半小时再回来，准会发现杂志不见了。”

总之，我想说的是，每当有这种杂志出现，大家就号称这是“史蒂夫的藏品”中剩下来的。换句话说，任何时候有色情杂志冒出来，史蒂夫都要对此负责。正如我所说，我们始终也没有明白史蒂夫到底是个怎样的人。可即便在当时我们也能看出此事的滑稽之处，当有人指指点点，说“看哪，又一本史蒂夫的杂志”时，听出话中些许的讥讽之意。

然而这些杂志让老凯佛斯不胜恼火。有传言说他信教，不仅仅坚决反对色情内容，根本跟性爱都势不两立。有时候他会大发脾气——你能看到他那花白的胡须之下，面皮因为暴怒而鼓胀起一块块红斑——他会满屋子乒乒乓乓地搜查，不敲门就冲进人家房间里，决心要把每一本“史蒂夫的杂志”都翻出来。这时，我们总是尽力去感受他滑稽可笑的一面，但他这样发脾气的时候，其实真的有很吓人的一面。比如，他通常的咕咕哝哝不停抱怨的话突然都没有了，这种沉默赋予他一种令人警惕的气场。

我记得有那么一次，凯佛斯收了六七本所谓“史蒂夫的杂志”，一起拿着冲出门去，到自己车上。我和劳拉碰巧一起待在我的房间里，劳拉的话刚刚逗得我哈哈大笑。这时我看到凯佛斯打开车门，也许是因为他需要用双手来搬别的东西，因此将杂志放在了锅炉房外堆叠的一些砖块上——几个月前有几个老生曾试图搭炉子烤肉。凯佛斯身体前倾，头肩都藏进了车内，在里面翻找了老半天，不知为什么我觉得，虽然说他一会儿之前还那么火冒三丈，他这会儿已经忘记了那堆杂志。果不其然，几分钟后我看到他站直了身子，爬进驾驶座，砰一声关上车门开走了。

我跟劳拉指出，说凯佛斯把杂志落下了，她说：“反正杂志放那边也待不了多久。他又得再敛一遍，下次决定大清洗的时候。”

但是大约半小时之后，当我不知不觉散步经过锅炉房的时候，发现杂志并没有人动过。我想了一下，要不要拿回自己房间去，但又想到，如果杂志在我房间里被人发现，那我就要承受没完没了的嘲弄；而且人们绝不可能理解我为什么要做这样的事。所以我就拿起杂志，带进了锅炉房。

这锅炉房其实就是另外一间谷仓而已，建在庄院的尽头，里面堆满了旧割草机、草叉子之类——都是凯佛斯认为不太容易着火的东西，万一哪天锅炉突然爆炸也不致酿成大祸。凯佛斯还在里面放了一张干活用的工作台，于是我将杂志放在了这上面，将一些旧地毯推到

一边，自己使劲撑起，坐到了桌面上。光线并不太好，但我身后某处有面脏兮兮的窗户，当我翻开第一本杂志时，我发现能看得清楚。

里面有很多女孩子高举双腿张开，或是翘起屁股的照片。我得承认，曾几何时我也曾看到这样的画面会感到兴奋，虽然我从来没有幻想过跟女生做爱。但那天下午，这不是我要找的内容。我快速地翻页，不想被书页中的性爱分心。事实上，我几乎没有看到那些扭曲的肉体，因为我专心看的是脸部。即便是录像带广告页，或是那些折页中，我也要仔细检查模特的面容，然后才往下翻。

直到我快将所有杂志翻完，才确信有人站在谷仓外面，就在门口旁边。我将门开着，因为平常门就开着，还因为我需要光线；已经有两次我不由自主抬眼望，觉得听到了微小的声音。但那里没有人，于是我就继续做自己的事了。可是现在我确信有人，于是放下杂志，发出一声沉重的叹息，足以让人听得清楚。

我以为会听到咯咯傻笑的声音，也许会有两三个学生冲进谷仓，好容易抓到我抱着一堆色情杂志研究，可不能轻易放过。但是什么也没有发生。于是我叫了一声，我尽力让话音显得很警惕：

“很高兴你跟我一起。干吗这么不好意思？”

外面传来一声轻笑，然后汤米出现在门口。“嗨，凯丝，”他怯生生地说。

“来嘛，汤米。一起来找乐子。”

他有几分警惕地朝我走来，在几步之外又停了下来。随后他望着后面的锅炉，说道：“我不知道你喜欢这种东西。”

“女生也有权看的，不是么？”

我继续翻看书页，接下来的几秒钟里，他默不作声。然后我听到他说：

“我不是特意跟踪你。可是我从自己房间里看到你了。我看到你出来到这里，拿走了凯佛斯留下的杂志。”

“很欢迎你都拿走，等我看完之后哦。”

他有些尴尬地笑了起来。“只不过是些性爱内容。我想我都已经看过了。”他又笑了一声，但当我抬眼望的时候，发现他表情很严肃地望着我。然后他说：

“你在找什么东西，凯丝？”

“你什么意思？我只是在看下流图片。”

“只是图刺激吗？”

“大概可以这么说。”我放下一本杂志，开始翻另一本。

这时我听到汤米的脚步越来越近，直到在我跟前站住。当我再次抬头时，见他双手焦躁地悬在空中，仿佛我在干什么复杂的手工活儿，他特别想帮忙。

“凯丝，你不是……反正，如果是图刺激，你就不能这么看。你得更仔细地观察画面才可以。像你看这么快是没用的。”

“你怎么知道女生怎么用？哦，也许你跟露丝一起看过这些。对不起，我没想到。”

“凯丝，你在找什么？”

我无视他的问话。我已经快把一沓杂志都翻到底了，正急于看完。这时他又说：

“我以前看到你这样过的。”

这次我停了下来，看着他。“怎么了，汤米？凯佛斯招募你当色情巡视员了吗？”

“我不是要跟踪你。但我的确看到过你，上周那次，我们都到查理房间去之后。那里有一本这种杂志，你以为我们都离开了，不在场。可我回去拿衣服，克莱尔的房间都开着，所以我一眼就能看到查理的房间。所以我才看到你在里面，在翻那本杂志。”

“那又怎样？我们都得用各自的方式爽到啊。”

“你根本不是为了刺激。我看得出，我现在也能看出来。是你的脸，凯丝。上次在查理的房间里，你脸上表情就很奇怪。好像你很难过，也许还有点害怕。”

我从台面上跳了下来，收拢所有杂志，丢到他手上。“给你，拿去给露丝。看看对她有没有作用。”

我走过他身旁，出了谷仓。我知道他会感到失望，因为我什么也没跟他讲。可当时我自己也没有想清楚，没准备好告诉任何人。但我并不介意他跟在我后面到锅炉房去。我一点也不介意。相反我感到很

安慰，几乎是得到了保护。后来我还是告诉他了，但那是几个月之后了，在我们去诺福克的那次旅行中。

第十二章

我想谈谈那次去诺福克的旅行，以及那天发生的所有事件，但首先让我把时间后退一点，交代下背景，以及我们为什么去那里。

那时候，我们的第一个冬天已经快过去了，我们也感到比较习惯了。虽然我跟露丝有些小争执，可我们还是将老习惯保持了下来，一起在我的房间里享受一天最后的几个钟头，伴着热饮谈天说地，就是在这样的谈天时刻，当我们在闲扯的时候，她突然说道：

“我猜你大概听到克里茜和罗德尼说的话了吧。”

当我回答说没有的时候，她笑了，继续说：“他们可能只是吊我胃口。他们当笑话捉弄我的。就当我说好了。”

可我看得出，她希望我打破砂锅问到底，于是我就穷追不舍，最后她压低了声音说：

“你记不记得上礼拜克里茜和罗德尼出门去了？他们去了一个叫克罗莫的小镇，在诺福克海滩北边。”

“他们去那里干吗？”

“哦，我想他们是有个朋友在那边，曾经住在这里的一个人。这不是关键。问题是，他们声称说看到了这么一个……人。在一个大开间办公室上班。还有，哎你知道的。他们号称这人是个可能的原型。我的原型。”

虽然说我们大多数人早在黑尔舍姆就曾对“可能的原型”这个概念有所了解，但我们感到好像不应该，所以就没有讨论这个问题——然而当然了，这问题让我们既好奇，又深受困扰。即便是在农舍，这也不是一个随便提起的话题。涉及原型可能人选问题，比聊到任何其他话题——比如性爱——都更加尴尬。然而同时，你能看出大家都很热衷——有些人甚至对此很着迷——通常总是在谈起那些距离我们的世界非常遥远的话题，比如詹姆斯·乔伊斯这样严肃的争论中间，这件事会不断被提起。

可能的原型理论背后的基本思路很简单，对此没有什么异议。大致是这样的。因为我们每一个人都是从一个正常人复制而来，因此我们每一个人，都会有一个原型生活在外面的世界里。这就意味着，至

少在理论上，你可以找到自己的原型人物。所以当你亲自来到外面的时候——在镇子上、购物中心、车站咖啡馆里——你总是留意着寻找“可能的原型”——那些你和你朋友的原版真身。

但除了这些基本理论之外，大家就很难有一致意见了。当我们在外面找寻可能的原型时，到底要找什么样的人，这点都没有人看法相同。有些学生认为你应该去找比自己年长大约二三十岁的人——就是正常父母的年龄。但其他人声称这样纯粹是感情用事。为什么我们跟我们的原型之间，要有“自然的”代际关系呢？他们可能用婴儿、老人做复制，又有什么不同呢？其他人反驳说他们会选择健康状况处于巅峰阶段的人，所以他们和你可能是“正常父母”的年龄关系。但到了这里，我们就都感觉到逼近了一个我们不想进入的边界，争论就会渐渐停息。

还有一些问题是围绕着我们为什么想要寻找原型。寻找自己原型的背后一个主要的观点是认为，如果找到了，你就得以窥见自己的未来。可我的意思并不是说比如有人发现他的原型是个在火车站工作的人，那么他将来也会去做同样的事。我们都认识到事情绝非这样单纯。然而我们所有人，或多或少都相信如果你见到了自己的原型，就会获得某些洞见，关于自己的深层真相，你就能看到生活未来的一点可能。

我们中有些人，认为考虑可能的原型是种愚蠢的选择。我们的原型跟我们毫无关系，只是我们来到人世的技术需求，此外无他。我们每个人要尽自己所能去实现自己的人生。露丝一直声称是持这样的立场，很可能我也一样。然而一旦我们听到有关于可能原型的消息——不论是谁的原型——我们还是禁不住会好奇。

据我的记忆，见到可能的原型这种事，经常是批量出现。很可能好几个星期里没有人提到这个话题，然后若有一个可能的原型浮现，就会引发接二连三的新发现。显然其中绝大多数都不值得深究：驶过的车里看到的人影，诸如此类。但偶尔会有些可能的原型似乎有凭有据——就像那天晚上露丝跟我说起的那例。

据露丝说，克里茜和罗德尼正忙着探索他们去到的这个海边小镇，两人分开走了一会儿。当他们再次碰头的时候，罗德尼很激动地跟克里茜说起他从大街岔到小路上，路过了一间开放式大办公室，临街面是大块的玻璃。里面有许多人，有的在办公桌前，有的走来走去在聊天。他就在这里看到了可能是露丝的原型。

“他们一回来，克里茜就跑来告诉了我。她让罗德尼把一切都描述给我听，他也尽力而为，但其实没可能什么都说清楚。现在他们总说要开车带我去那里，可我不知道。我不知道是否应该对此做些什么。”

我不记得那天晚上我具体跟她说了些什么，但是当时我很怀疑。事实上，坦白讲，我猜想整件事都是克里茜和罗德尼编出来的。其实我并不想让人以为克里茜和罗德尼是坏人——那样讲不公平。在很多方面，我真挺喜欢他们的。可事实上，他们对待我们这些新人，尤其是露丝，可一点都不坦白直率。

克里茜是个高个子姑娘，她站直了身子的话其实很美，但她似乎意识不到这一点，总是驼着背，跟我们保持在一样的高度。正因为如此，她看起来更像是个坏女巫，而不是电影明星——她要跟你说话的时候，未曾开口先伸出手指戳你一下，这恼人的习惯更令人加深了这种印象。她总是穿着长裙子，而不是牛仔裤，一副小眼镜戴得几乎要贴到面上去。夏天我们刚到的时候，她是热情欢迎我们的老生之一，我一开始深深被她吸引，曾特地向她寻求指点。但时间一周一周过去，我开始有所保留。她总是要特地说到，我们是来自黑尔舍姆，仿佛这点足以解释我们的一切，这让人觉得奇怪。而且她总是问我们关于黑尔舍姆的问题——关于那些小细节，现在我照顾的捐献者也常常这么问——而且，虽然她故意假装只是随便问问，我却看得出她的兴趣背后另有缘故。还有一件事让我心怀芥蒂，就是她似乎一直想分化我们：我们一起在做什么事的时候，把其中一个人叫到一边去，再不然就是邀请我们中的两人去加入个什么活动，把另外两个人晾在边上——诸如此类的事。

你极少会看到克里茜没跟她男朋友罗德尼在一起。他整天将头发扎成马尾束在脑后，就像七十年代的摇滚乐手，总是谈论些转世投胎之类的事。我其实挺喜欢他，但他深受克里茜的影响。不论是讨论什么，你都知道他一定会站在克里茜的那一边，如果克里茜说了哪怕稍微有点可笑的话，他都会哈哈大笑，仿佛滑稽得不可置信似的摇头晃脑。

好吧，也许我对这两个人有点太苛刻了。不久之前，我和汤米一起回忆起这两个人时候，他认为他们挺正派的。可我现在跟你讲这些是为了解释为什么他们声称看到露丝可能的原型这事让我觉得特别可疑。正如我说的，我最初的本能反应是不相信，并且猜想克里茜另有目的。

我对于这事儿持怀疑态度还跟克里茜和罗德尼具体的描述有关系：他们描绘的画面是一个女人在玻璃外墙的高档办公室工作。在我看来，这跟我们大家都了解的，露丝的“梦想未来”太相像了。

我想那年冬天主要是我们这些新来的人在谈论什么“梦想未来”，当然有些老生也参与进来。每当这种话题开始讨论，有些更年长的——尤其是那些已经开始培训的——都会默默叹息，离开房间，很长时间里我们甚至意识不到他们的反应。我也说不准在这些讨论中我们脑子里都在想些什么。很可能我们知道这不能当真，然而反过来讲，我敢肯定大家也不全把这当成是幻想。也许，当我们一旦将黑尔舍姆抛在身后，在那半年左右的时间里，在所有那些关于成为护理员的谈话开始之前，在驾驶课，以及其他许多事情发生之前，在相当长的一段时间里，我们得以忘记了自己的真实身份；忘记了导师教给我们的一切，忘记了那个下雨的午后露西小姐的情感爆发，以及多年以来我们自己形成的各种理论。当然，这无法持续，可是正如我所说，仅仅在那几个月里，我们竟得以生活在一种舒适的悬浮状态中，可以思考人生，而无须担忧那些平常高度警惕的界限。现在回首往事，就好像我们在那个雾气腾腾的厨房里，度过了很多很多早餐后的时光，或是后半夜里，我们围坐在半熄的炉火旁，忘情地谈论着大家对未来的计划。

可我要提醒的是，我们谁也没有异想天开。我记得没有谁曾说要当个电影明星之类的。那时我们谈的，多半像是当个邮差，或是到农场上干活。有好几个学生想当这种或是那种驾驶员，很多时候，当谈话开始转向这方面的时候，有些老生就开始比较他们曾去过的旅游线路之异同，他们喜欢的路边咖啡馆，很难走的交叉路，诸如此类。当然现如今要是比赛讲这些，我能把他们很多人都说到桌子底下去。然而在那时候，我都是静静倾听，什么也不说，将他们的话全都吸收进来。有时候，如果很晚了，我就闭上眼睛，倒在沙发扶手上——或是某个男生的臂弯里，如果碰巧当时我处于“正式”跟谁交往的短暂期间——睡一阵，醒一阵，任由那些道路的形象在脑海里流动。

总之回到我的观点，当这种谈话发生的时候，露丝总是会比别人更投入——尤其是当有老生在在场的时候。她从那年一入冬就开始讲办公室，但这想象何时获得了生命，何时变成了她的“梦想未来”，是在我和她走进村子的那天早上之后的事了。

那是一场特别冷的寒潮期间，我们的大煤气供暖设备一直不好用。我们花了很多时间想点起暖炉，但一键之遥，却就是打不着火，

我们只得放弃了一个又一个暖炉——随之也只得放弃暖不起来的房间。凯佛斯拒绝处理问题，声称这是我们的责任，但最终实在是太冷了，他就给了我们个信封，里面装着钱，还有我们需要买的点火燃料名称。于是我和露丝自告奋勇走到村里去买燃料，所以在那个有霜的早晨，才会经过那条小巷。我们经过了一个地方，两边的篱笆都很高，地面上满是冻牛粪堆，这时露丝突然在我身后几步停下了脚步。

我过了一会儿才意识到，因此当我退回到她身边时，正看到她举手捂住嘴巴在呵气，眼睛朝下望着，注意力完全被脚边的东西所吸引。我以为也许是只可怜的动物在霜冻中冻死的尸体，但当我走上前，却看到一本彩色杂志——不是“史蒂夫的杂志”那种，而是那种明艳诱人、跟着报纸免费派发的杂志。落在地上的杂志碰巧打开在对开的广告页面，尽管纸页已经浸湿，一角上还有泥，你仍能够看得很清楚。书页上有个漂亮高档的开放式办公室，里面有三四个工作人员好像在谈天说笑。这地方看起来明媚无比，里面的人也一样。露丝盯着这幅画面，当她发现我在身边时，说道：“这才算是个像样的上班的地方。”

这时她又变得不好意思起来——也许因为我看到她这样，还有点生我的气——于是重新启程，比先前走得更快了。

但是几天后的晚上，当我们几个在庄院大屋里，围坐在炉火旁的时候，露丝开始跟我们讲她理想中的办公室，我立刻就听出来了。她讲到了所有的细节——绿植，亮闪闪的设备，带脚轮的转椅——说得栩栩如生，大家谁也不忍心打断，听她说了很久。我仔细观察她，但她仿佛始终没想到我可能会联想起前几天的事——也许她自己都忘了，这些意象是从何而来。她甚至还曾说到办公室里的同事都是那种“充满活力、勇往直前的类型”，我清楚记得这就是那张广告图上方大字体印出来的内容：“你是不是属于充满活力、勇往直前的类型？”或者类似的用词。当然我什么也没说。事实上，我听着她的话，不禁心想，也许这都是可行的：是否有一天我们大家都可以搬到一个像这样的地方，继续生活下去。

当然，克里茜和罗德尼那天晚上都在，每个字都听进去了。接下来的几天里，克里茜一直怂恿露丝多讲一点。我曾经偶尔经过，碰到他们一起坐在房间的角落里，克里茜问：“你确信大家一起在一个像这样的地方工作，不会打扰对方吗？”就这样，让露丝再次开始讲这件事。

克里茜这个问题在于——很多的老生也是一样——虽然我们刚刚到的时候，她对我们的态度略微有点屈尊俯就的意思，但实际上她对我们来自黑尔舍姆这件事，内心深感敬畏。我过了很久才认识到这一点。以露丝的办公室为例：克里茜本人在任何情况下，都绝对不会谈论在任何一个办公室工作，更不要提像这样的办公环境了。但因为露丝来自黑尔舍姆，不知为何这整套想法就变成了可能的范畴。克里茜就是这样看问题的，我猜露丝时不时也确实会说点什么，来鼓励这样的想法：好像我们这些黑尔舍姆的学生，理所当然适用于另外一套规则标准。我从没听到露丝实际对老生们撒谎；她只是没有否认一些说法，又暗示其他的可能。有几次我本可以当众反驳她，戳穿她的说法。但有时露丝故事讲到一半，偶尔目光跟我的碰上，如果说她有点心虚的话，也似乎很有信心认为我不会出卖她。当然我没有。

因此这就是克里茜和罗德尼号称曾见到露丝“可能的原型”事件的背景，也许你现在能明白为什么我对这件事这么警惕。我不大赞同露丝跟他们去诺福克，可也说不出到底为什么。一旦她明确表示拿定了主意要去，我就跟她说我也要。起初她似乎不大开心，甚至还曾表示，也不希望汤米陪她同去。可是最终我们都去了，我们五个人：克里茜，罗德尼，露丝，汤米，还有我。

第十三章

罗德尼有驾照，他跟沿路下去几英里之外的麦琪利的农场工人说好，当天借一部车给我们用。以前他总是用这方法找车用，但这一回，就在我们计划出发的前一天，约定有变，那辆车不能借了。尽管说事情解决得还算轻松——罗德尼亲自去了那个农场，人家承诺再给他另一部车用——在那悬而未决、整个行程可能被取消的几个钟头里，露丝的反应很有趣。

直到那之前，她始终表现得仿佛整件事无非是个笑话，她要参与的唯一原因只是为了让克里茜高兴。她总是说我们离开黑尔舍姆以来，完全没有充分利用自由探索的机会；说她反正也一直想去诺福克，“找回我们丢掉的一切”。换句话说，她是不遗余力要让我们相信，对于找到她的“可能的原型”这件事，她不是很认真。

就在我们出发的前一天，我和露丝曾出门散步，进了庄院的大厨房，菲奥娜和几个老生正在里面做一大锅炖菜。事情是菲奥娜本人告诉我们的，她正在干活，头都没抬告诉我们说，农场的小男孩刚刚来过，说了这事儿。露丝就站在我前方，因此我看不到她的脸，但她整个姿态都僵掉了。然后她没说话，只是转身推开我，跑出了庄院。那时我瞥到一眼她的脸，才意识到她有多难过。菲奥娜开始说“唉，我不知道……”之类，但我马上说：“露丝难过不是因为这个。是因为别的事，早先的事儿。”这遮掩很无力，但情急之下，我只能做到这样了。

最终，正如我说的，车辆的危机得以解决，第二天一大早，天还一片漆黑我们五个就钻进了这辆有撞痕却依然很不错的罗孚汽车上。上车以后，克里茜和罗德尼并排坐在前面，我们三个坐后排。这样感觉很自然，我们想也没想就这样坐了进去。但几分钟之后，当罗德尼开车带着我们开出黑暗的小路，上了大路之后，坐在中间的露丝就俯身朝前，双手放在前面座椅上，开始跟两个老生讲话。这样一来坐在她两边的我跟汤米就听不到他们讲话的内容，而且因为她坐在我俩中间，我们也没办法互相聊天，甚至看不到对方。很偶然的时候，她会靠到后面，于是我就试着找点话题三个人聊，可露丝根本不接茬，要不了多久她就会再次倾身朝着前面，把脸扎在两个前座中间了。

大约一小时后，天色开始放亮，我们停车下来伸伸腿，让罗德尼去撒尿。停车的地方在一大块空地旁边，于是我们跃过壕沟，花了几分钟时间搓搓手，眼看着口中呼出的热气升上去。一度我留意到露丝跟我们其他人散开了，朝着空地的方向望着日出。于是我走上前，提议说反正她只想跟老生们聊天，那不如跟我换换位置。那样她至少可以继续跟克里茜聊天，我和汤米也可以说说话，解解路途乏闷。还没等我说完，露丝就低声说：

“你怎么这么难弄？尤其是现在！我就不懂了。你为什么要惹事呢？”说完她拉了我一把，这样我们俩都背对着其他人，别人看不出我们在争吵。她这个动作，而不是她所说的话，突然让我看到了她的视角；我明白露丝花这么大的气力不仅仅是为了在克里茜和罗德尼面前表现自己，而是为了我们大家；而我却在这里，威胁要给她搞破坏，出洋相让她难堪。我看明白了这些，因此就摸了摸她的肩膀，又回到了其他人身边。当我们回到车上的时候，我特意确保我们三人还跟之前一样的次序就座。可是接下来的行程里，露丝或多或少显得有些沉默，靠后挺直坐着，即便克里茜和罗德尼从前座朝我们后面大声喊叫，她也只是闷闷不乐地以单字作答。

可是当我们一来到这座海边小镇，气氛就提振了不少。我们大约是午饭时间到达，然后将罗孚汽车停在了一个满是小旗飘舞的小型高尔夫球场边上的停车场。天气阳光明媚，响晴的天。在我的记忆中，刚开始的那个钟头大家都因为出门在外而感到非常兴奋，并没有多想我们来这里是为什么。一度罗德尼还曾经大喊了几声，挥着双臂带头领大家沿路平稳爬坡，经过一排排的房屋和零星店铺。天空一片无垠，毫无遮掩，于是你能感觉出这是在朝大海边走。

实际上等我们真的来到海边时，发现自己所在的这条公路似乎径直伸到悬崖边。乍一看仿佛从公路边陡峭下降就是沙滩，但一旦翻过了路边的围栏，就发现有些曲折的脚印，带领你从陡峭的悬崖壁一直走到海边。

这时我们已经饥肠辘辘，于是进了一间小咖啡馆，小店坐落在悬崖边，就在那脚印踩出来的小路起始的地方。我们进去的时候，里面只有两个戴围裙的胖女人，是店里的员工。她们在一张桌边抽烟，但很快就起身，消失在了厨房里，因此整间店堂里就只剩下我们。

我们选了最后面的一张桌子落座——这就意味着我们坐在最靠近悬崖边缘的探出部分——我们坐下来，感觉真的好像悬在大海上方一样。当时我没有什么比较，但现在我知道，那家店非常小，只有三四

张小桌子。他们开着窗——可能是为了避免店里炸东西的油烟味太重——因此时常有阵风穿过房间，吹得各种优惠活动广告四处乱飘。账台上有个别针固定的纸板招牌，是用签字笔写的广告词，顶端有个“看”字，“look”的两个O里面，分别画了一只瞪大的眼睛。现在这样的东西我看得多了，甚至都不留意了，但当时，我从没见过这种花样。因此我很赞赏地看个不停，正好撞上了露丝的目光，发现她也对此赞叹不已，我们齐声哈哈大笑。那是个温暖的时刻，感觉在车里时两人之间的不愉快仿佛已经抛在身后了。可是后来的事表明，那次出门的其余时间里，那是我跟露丝之间最后的亲密时刻了。

自从到了小镇以来，我们都没提过“可能的原型”，我猜想等大家坐下来就终于可以认真谈谈这件事了。可是，当我们刚开始吃三明治的时候，罗德尼就开始讲他们的老朋友马丁，他是前年离开农舍的，现就住在镇上某处。克里茜忙不迭地接上他的话题，很快两个老生就开始一个接一个地讲马丁做过的那些搞笑的事。大多数段子我们都听得不甚了了，但克里茜和罗德尼真的是乐在其中。他们不停地交换目光，相视而笑，虽然他们假装是为我们讲的，其实很明显他们是在为了彼此回忆故人。现在想起来，我才意识到，在农舍里大家几乎完全不提起已经离开的人，这样的禁忌可能也让他们甚至彼此之间都无法谈论共同的朋友，只有当我们出来之后，他们才感到可以这样纵容自己。

他们笑的时候，我出于礼貌也会跟着笑笑。但汤米似乎比我还搞不清状况，时常慢半拍，犹疑该不该笑。可是露丝却笑了又笑，不论人家说到马丁什么事，她都跟着使劲点头，仿佛她也记得这些事。有一次，克里茜特别含混地说起一件事——大概是这样说的：“啊，没错，就是他拿牛仔裤出去的那次！”——露丝爆发出大笑，并且朝我们示意，仿佛是对克里茜说：“继续啊，快给他们解释下，让他们也乐乐。”我装作没看见，但克里茜和罗德尼就开始讨论，大家是否应该去马丁的公寓。这时我才开口，也许有点太冷漠地说：

“他到底在这里做什么？他为什么会有套公寓呢？”

回答我的只有一片沉默，然后我听到露丝不耐烦地叹了口气。克里茜隔着桌子朝我靠近，小声地说话，仿佛是解释给小孩听：“他在当护理员。不然你以为他在这里做什么？他现在是正式的护理员了。”

经过一会儿调整，我说：“我正是这个意思。我们不能去找他、去看他。”

克里茜长叹一声说：“好吧。我们不应该去拜访护理员。严格来说是这样。当然不鼓励这种做法。”

罗德尼轻笑着补充道：“绝对不鼓励。去看他是很淘气、不像话的行为。”

“太淘气了，”克里茜说完，嘴里发出不耐烦的啧啧声。

这时露丝加入进来，说道：“凯西讨厌淘气。那我们最好还是不要去拜访他了。”

汤米一直望着露丝，显然感到很困惑，不明白她是支持哪一方，其实我也拿不准。在我看来，她不希望这次出行改变路线，因此虽然不情愿，却还是站我这边，因此我朝她微笑，但她并没有回应我的目光。这时汤米突然问道：

“你到底在哪里看到露丝可能的原型的，罗德尼？”

“噢……”如今我们已经到了镇上，罗德尼仿佛对找原型这件事完全丧失了兴趣，我看到露丝脸上浮现出焦急的神色。最终罗德尼说：“就在主街拐角的地方，那头再往前一段。当然，今天她可能休息。”没有人插话，他又接着说：“他们有休息日的，你知道。他们不总是待在办公室里。”

当他讲话的时候，我一度以为我们错误地判断了形势；就我们所知，老生们经常谈论可能的原型只是为了找理由出门旅行，并没有真心想深究这些原型。很可能露丝也是持同样的想法，因为她现在看起来忧心忡忡，但最后她还是挤出一丝笑容，仿佛罗德尼刚刚说了个笑话。

这时克里茜换了副不同的腔调说：“你知道的，露丝，过几年我们就可能到这里来拜访你。在一间漂亮办公室里工作。到那时我倒不信谁能拦住我们不让来看你。”

“没错，”露丝立刻回答说，“你们都能来看我。”

“我看行，”罗德尼说，“没有规矩说不能去拜访在办公室上班的人。”他突然大笑起来。“我们不知道。我们从前都没经历过这种事。”

“没事的，”露丝说，“他们允许的。你们都能来看我。就只除了汤米之外。”

汤米满脸震惊。“为什么我不能来？”

“因为你已经跟我在一起了，傻蛋，”露丝说，“我要留住你。”

我们都笑了，汤米似乎还是落在别人后面，有点反应不过来。

“我听说威尔士有个姑娘，”克里茜说，“她是黑尔舍姆的，可能比你们高几级。据说她现在在一家服装店工作。她真的很聪明。”

有人嘟囔着表示赞同，片刻间，大家都如坠梦中一般抬头望着天上的云彩。

“你们黑尔舍姆就是这样啊，”最后，罗德尼开口道，说着，不可置信一般摇了摇头。

“还有另外一个人，”克里茜转头朝着露丝——“你那天跟我们讲过的那个男生。那个比你高两年，现在当公园管理员的。”

露丝若有所思地点头。这时我想到应该给汤米递个眼色，警告他一下，但不等我转过身去，他已经开口讲话了。

“那是谁啊？”他迷惑不解地问道。

“汤米，你知道的呀，”我马上说。我想踢他一脚，但那样做风险太大了，甚至可能让我的话音不稳，克里茜能立刻觉出不对来。因此我就径直反驳，带着点厌烦的腔调，仿佛我们都受够了汤米总是忘事情。但这就意味着汤米还是没搞清状况。

“我们认识的人吗？”

“汤米，我们不要再来这一套了好不好，”我说，“你得去查查大脑。”

终于汤米似乎转过弯来，乖乖闭上了嘴。

克里茜说：“我知道自己很幸运，能够到农舍来。但你们黑尔舍姆的，你们才真叫幸运。要知道……”她压低了声音，又朝前倾斜过身体。“有件事我一直想跟你们讲。可是在农舍那边根本不可能。总会有人听得到。”

她环视桌边众人，最后将目光凝聚在露丝脸上。罗德尼突然紧张起来，也将身体朝前倾。我感觉，克里茜和罗德尼终于要暴露他们此行的核心目的了。

“我和罗德尼当初在威尔士的时候，”她说，“就是我们听说那个在服装店工作女生的时候。我们还听说了别的事，是关于黑尔舍姆学生的。据他们说，过去曾有些黑尔舍姆的学生，在特殊情况下曾得到过延期。如果你是黑尔舍姆的学生，就可以做到。你可以申请将捐献时间推迟三年，甚至四年。这不容易做到，但有时候他们会许可。只要你能够说服他们。只要你满足条件。”

克里茜稍作停顿，抬眼看看我们每一个人，也许是为了强调戏剧效果，也许是查看我们是否露出了解的表情。我和汤米很可能露出了迷惑的表情，但露丝的脸上看不出任何心理活动。

“他们的说法是这样的，”克里茜继续说，“如果男生女生是一对情侣，两个人相爱，真心正式地相爱，如果能证明这一点，那么黑尔舍姆的负责人就会帮你搞定。他们帮忙安排好，让这两个人可以共同生活几年，然后才开始捐献。”

这时桌边萦绕着一种陌生的气氛，仿佛周围有轻微的波动。

“我们在威尔士的时候，”克里茜接着说，“是大白楼的学生，他们听说黑尔舍姆有这么一对，男的只剩最后几周的时间，就要去做护理人员了。然后他们去找了人，把安排延后了三年。他们获准继续共同生活在那里，就在大白楼里，整整三年不需要继续训练，或者做别的事。三年完全属于他们自己，因为他们证明自己是真心相爱。”

就在这时，我留意到露丝很有权威地点头表示认可。克里茜和罗德尼也留意到了，几秒钟内他们呆呆地望着她，就像被催眠了一样。我仿佛看到克里茜和罗德尼两人，早在这之前几个月里，在农舍里，两人就悄悄在调查和刺探这个问题。我仿佛看到他们两人刚开始小心翼翼地提到这件事，耸耸肩，放到一边去，然后再次提起，完全无法做到把这事抛下不管。我仿佛看到他们设想着要如何跟我们谈这件事，看到他们认真策划要怎么做，到底要怎么说。我再次看到面前盯着露丝的克里茜和罗德尼，试图读懂他们脸上的表情。克里茜看起来既害怕，又满怀希望。罗德尼看起来紧张不安，仿佛信不过自己，怕自己会不小心说出不该说的话来。

这并非我第一次听到有关延期安排的流言。在过去的几周内，我在农舍越来越多地听到人谈起。总是老生们自己在聊这个话题，如果有

我们中的人出现，他们就会显得有些尴尬，并且闭嘴。我听了太多，足以理清要点；也知道这事跟我们这些黑尔舍姆的学生尤其关系密切。可是尽管如此，只是在那天，在那个海边的咖啡馆里，我才终于明白，原来对于某些老生而言，这整套理论究竟有多重要。

“我猜想，”克里茜继续说，她声音有点颤动，“你们几个知道这事，知道规则什么的。”

她和罗德尼挨个看着我们，然后目光又锁定在露丝身上。

露丝叹了口气，说道：“很显然，他们跟我们讲过一点。但是，”——她耸了耸肩——“关于这事我们知道的有限。其实我们从不谈论这事。话说我们得赶紧走了。”

“应该去找谁？”罗德尼突然发问，“如果你想要，你懂的，想申请的话，他们说你该去找谁？”

露丝再次耸肩。“唉，我跟你说过了。我们从来不多谈这件事的。”她几乎是本能地望着我和汤米，寻求支持，这很可能是个错误，因为汤米说：

“坦白讲，我不知道你们在说些什么。这些是什么规则？”

露丝狠狠瞪了他几眼。我赶紧说：“你知道的，汤米。当初在黑尔舍姆流传的那些说法。”

汤米摇了摇头。“我不记得，”他毫无表情地说。这次我看出来了——露丝也看出来——他并不是反应慢。“我完全不记得黑尔舍姆有这样的事。”

露丝转过脸去不看他。“你得明白，”她对克里茜说，“虽然汤米人在黑尔舍姆，他其实不像是真正的黑尔舍姆学生。凡事他都不参加，人家总是笑话他。所以这种事情问他是没有意义的。现在，我想去找找罗德尼看到的那个人了。”

汤米眼睛里浮现出一种神色，让我屏住了呼吸。这种神情我已经很久没见过，它属于当初那个踢倒课桌、被阻挡在教室里面的汤米。然后那神色消失了，他转头望着外面的天空，沉重地叹息。

老生们并没有留意到这一切，因为露丝这时已经站起身，在拿外套了。随后我们大家起身，同时将椅子推离小桌边，带来了片刻的混乱。我是负责管账的，于是我站起来去付钱。其他人跟在我后面鱼贯

而出，我在等找零的时候，从一个雾蒙蒙的大窗户里，看到他们在阳光下来回踱步，都不讲话，望着下方的大海。

第十四章

出来之后，我留意到大家初到达时的兴奋之情显然已经消散一空。我们默默朝前走，罗德尼走在最前面，穿过几条阳光难得晒进来的偏僻小街，人行道太过狭窄，经常只能容我们单人成列，笨拙前行。一走到主街上，大家都松了口气，各种噪音将我们的坏情绪遮掩下去，变得没那么明显。我们走手控红绿灯的斑马线过了马路，到了阳光更充足的一边，这时我看到罗德尼和克里茜在商谈什么事情，我不禁疑心，这糟糕的气氛到底几分是因为他们认定我们隐瞒了黑尔舍姆的大秘密，又有几分是因为露丝冲汤米发火的缘故。

然后当我们一穿过主街，克里茜就宣布，说她和罗德尼要去买生日卡片。露丝听到这话震惊不已，可克里茜自管自说道：

“我们喜欢一下子买一大批卡片。长远来看这样总是更省钱。碰到有人过生日你随手就能拿出来。”她指着一家沃尔沃斯商场，“这里有些好看的卡片价钱真的很便宜。”

罗德尼点头称是，我觉得他含笑的嘴角仿佛透露出些许讥讽之意。“当然了，”他说，“难免会买好多一样的卡片，但你可以自己在上面加插图。你懂的，增添些个人色彩。”

两名老生都挡在人行道正中，害得推购物车的人只能绕过，他们就这样站着，等我们表示反对。我看得出露丝很生气，但如果罗德尼不肯合作的话，反正我们也没什么可做。

于是我们就进了沃尔沃斯，一进去我就感觉很开心。即便现在，我还是很喜欢像这样的地方：一家大商场，里面有很多货架，陈列着色彩鲜艳的塑料玩具、贺卡、各种化妆品，甚至还有照相亭。如今如果我来到一座城镇，偶有闲暇，总会溜达到这样的地方消磨时光。在这里你可以随便逛，自得其乐，什么也不买店员也毫不在意。

总之，我们进了门，不久就四散开来，各自去看不同的货架了。罗德尼留在门口附近，站在一个放卡片的大架子边上，再往里，我看到汤米站在一个巨大的流行乐队海报下面，正在翻拣录音磁带。过了十分钟左右，当我逛到接近超市后方的时候，好像听到了露丝的声音，于是循声走了过去。我都走到那条过道上了一——两边货架上摆满了毛绒玩具和大盒拼图——这才发现露丝和克里茜站在另一头，正在

讲悄悄话。我拿不准该怎么做：我不想打断她们，但时间不早我们该走了，我也不想调头走掉。于是我就站在原地假装细看一盒拼图，等待着她们留意到我。

就在这时，我发现她们又回到了传言的话题。克里茜压低了声音说话，意思大概是：

“可是你一直都在啊。你竟然都没想过这种事要怎么做，要去找谁申请之类的，我觉得很奇怪。”

“你不会明白的，”露丝说道，“如果你是黑尔舍姆出来的，就能理解。这对我们来说没什么大不了的。我猜想大家一直都知道，如果想要弄清楚，只需带话回黑尔舍姆即可……”

露丝看到我，立刻住了嘴。当我放下那盒拼图，朝她们转过身去的时候，两人同时都怒气冲冲地望着我。那感觉就像我捉到她们在做什么不该做的事一样，于是她们很不自在地分开了。

“我们该走了，”我说着，假装什么也没听到。

可是露丝才不上当。她们从我身边走过的时候，露丝特别恶狠狠地看了我一眼。

我们再次出发，跟着罗德尼去寻找他上个月曾看到露丝可能的原型所在的那间办公室，此时我们之间的气氛比先前更糟了。罗德尼一次又一次地带我们走错路，搞得气氛越发不快。至少有四次，他信心十足地带领我们从主街上转出来，却发现商业办公楼都逐渐减少乃至没有了，我们只得转身走回去。不久罗德尼就很被动，几乎要放弃了。但就在这时，我们找到了。

又一次我们转身朝主街的方向走回头路，这时罗德尼突然停下了脚步。然后他默默地指着街对面的一间办公室。

果然，就在那里。并不完全像我们那天在地上捡的杂志广告，但也差不多。临街这层是巨大的玻璃幕墙，任何人都可以一览无余看到里面：这是一间开放式的大办公室，里面有十二张左右的办公桌，大致以L形排列。里面有盆栽的棕榈树，闪亮的办公设备，每个办公桌上还有弯头的台灯。人们在桌子周围来来去去，或斜靠在隔板上，聊天讲笑话，还有人把转椅拖到彼此靠近，一起喝咖啡，吃三明治。

“看哪，”汤米说，“这是他们的午休时间，可他们都不出去。换做是我也舍不得出去。”

我们不转眼地盯着，里面看起来就像一个聪明、舒适、自足的小世界。我看了露丝一眼，留意到她的目光正急切地扫过玻璃后面一张又一张的面容。

“好吧，罗德，”克里茜说，“到底可能的是哪个？”

她几乎是语出讥讽，仿佛她认定整件事最终会以罗德尼闹了个大乌龙为结局。可他却强压兴奋的颤抖，悄声说道：

“那里。就在那个角落。穿蓝衣服那个。就是她，正在跟那个胖胖的红衣女人讲话的。”

乍看并不明显，但我们盯得越久，就越觉得他有道理。那女人大约五十岁，体型保持得很不错。她发色比露丝要深些——但人家可能是染的——她将头发往后梳成简单的马尾——露丝通常就是这样的发型。她穿红衣服的朋友不知道说了什么，逗得她哈哈大笑，尤其是她笑完一甩头的样子，跟露丝相像的程度，绝不止一星半点。

我们都盯着她看，谁也不说话。后来才发现，办公室的另外一边，另外两个女人注意到了我们。其中一个扬起手朝我们的方向挥了一挥。这才终于打破了魔咒，我们受到惊吓，咯咯笑着逃跑了。

我们沿街跑了一段，再次停下，激动地同时开始讲话。只除了露丝，在一片兴奋中保持着安静。一下子很难读懂她脸上的表情：那当然不能说失望，可也说不上兴高采烈。她脸上似笑非笑，就像普通人家的母亲，当孩子们围在身边又跳又叫，恳求她许可去做什么的时候，认真考虑的样子。于是我们就这样各抒己见，我很高兴自己可以开诚布公地同意大家的看法，认为我们刚刚看到的这个女人毫无疑问的确就是。事实上我们都如释重负，虽然大家不肯承认，但心里都认为会遭遇失望。但是现如今我们就可以回到农舍，看到的一切会让露丝得到鼓舞，我们其他人可以提供佐证支持。看起来那个女人的办公室生活环境跟露丝为自己所描绘的梦想生活相差无多。不论那天我们之间发生过什么事，从内心深处来看，大家谁都不希望露丝失望而归，那一刻我们感觉已经安全了。我很有把握认为，如果事情到这里结束，我们本可以心满意足，平安回去。

可是露丝却说：“我们到那边去坐坐，那边的矮墙上，就待几分钟。等他们一旦忘掉我们，咱们可以再去看一眼。”

大家同意了，但是当我们朝露丝所指的小停车场周围的矮墙那边走去的时候，克里茜略微有点过分急切地说：

“可是哪怕我们不再回去看，大家也都认为她的确很可能是。办公室也很漂亮。真的。”

“我们再等几分钟吧，”露丝说，“然后就回去。”

我没有在那边坐下，因为墙面潮湿，还有碎石子，还因为我觉得随时可能有人出现，喊我们，不让我们坐在这里。但露丝却坐了下来，膝盖分在墙两边，仿佛骑在马上一般。我们在那里等待的十到十五分钟的场景，今天我还历历在目，犹在眼前。谁也没有再继续讨论原型的问题。大家都假装这是一次无忧无虑的出游，在某个景点多余了几分钟时间要消耗。罗德尼做了几个舞蹈动作，以表示他感觉多么好。他站到矮墙上，找到平衡，然后故意跌落下来。汤米拿路过的人开玩笑，虽然并不好笑，大家还是乐得很开心。在这其中，只有露丝跨坐在墙上，一言不发。她脸上保持着微笑，但却几乎一动不动。微风轻轻拂乱了她的头发，明亮的冬日暖阳晒得她眯缝起眼睛，因此你说不准她到底是笑我们嬉闹，还是被太阳晒得表情古怪。我们在停车场旁边等待的那段时间，这些就是我记忆中留下的画面。我猜大家是在等露丝来决定，什么时候回去再看一次。可她始终没有机会做出决定，因为发生了后面的事。

汤米本来跟罗德尼一起在墙上闲逛，突然跳下来，静止不动了。然后他说：“那就是她。同一个人。”

我们都停下了各自的事，望着那个身影从办公室方向走过来。她现在身穿一件乳白色外套，边走边费力地将公文包关起来。包的搭扣有点难弄，她只得一次次慢下脚步重新来过。我们犹如着迷一般，不转眼地盯着她，直看着她穿过街道。当她转角走上主街的时候，露丝突然跳起身来说道：“我们看看她去哪儿。”

我们大梦初醒一般，起身跟着她走。事实上，克里茜不得不提醒大家放慢脚步，不然别人会以为我们是一群劫匪，这女人是我们要攻击的目标。我们保持合理距离跟着她走在主街上，一边咯咯笑着让开擦肩而过的人，时而分散，时而重聚。当时大约是午后两点钟，人行道上满是购物的人们。一度我们差点跟丢了，可我们还是赶了上去，眼看她进了一家店铺，我们就在橱窗外面闲逛，一看她出来，又慌忙推开婴儿车和老人，紧跟上去。

这时那女人转角离开了主街，进入了海滩附近一条小路。克里茜很担心离开人群之后她会留意到我们，但露丝只管跟上去，于是我们就跟在她后面。

终于我们走上了一条狭窄的小胡同，沿途只是零星有些店铺，主要都是些普通房屋。我们再次只能单列前进，一度有辆小货车迎面开过来，我们只得贴近房屋让车先过去。没走多久整条小路上就只剩下那女人和我们几个人。但凡她一回头，就绝不可能注意不到我们。可她只是往前走，距离我们十来步的距离，直到进了一间房门——进了“波特韦艺廊”。

自此之后，我又回过几次波特韦艺廊。几年前这里换了主人，现在卖的是各种创意产品：锅子、盘子、陶塑动物。但当时那里只有两个大白房间，只卖画——布展很美，画与画之间有充足的间距。现在门上方挂的木头招牌倒是没变。总之，我们决定走进去，因为罗德尼说我们站在这安静的小路上显得非常可疑。至少在店里，我们可以假装有在看画。

我们进去之后，发现之前跟踪的那个女人在跟一个年纪大很多的银发女子交谈，后者好像是这里的主管。她们两人分别坐在靠近门口的一张桌子两边，除了她俩之外，艺廊里再无别人。我们鱼贯而入，然后分散在店内，尽力做出被画作深深吸引的样子，两个女人都没有太在意。

事实上，虽然说我一直在关注着露丝那位可能的原型，却也开始享受那些画作，以及这里澄澈宁静的气氛，感觉仿佛我们离开主街已经有百里之遥。墙壁和房顶是薄荷绿的颜色，檐口这里那里偶有渔网或是旧船只上拆下来的腐木部件插挂起来作为装饰。还有那些画作——多半是深蓝绿色调为主的油画——都是海洋主题。也许是突如其来的疲惫袭上心头——毕竟我们天不亮就出门旅行了——反正不止我一个人在那里陷入了短暂的梦境。我们各自游荡到了不同的角落，一幅接一幅画地盯着看，间或压低了嗓门发出一声惊叹，像这样：“快来看啊！”在此期间我们都听到可能是露丝原型的那个女人和银发女子一直在讲话。她们交谈的声音并不大，但在那里，她们的话音仿佛填满了所有的空间。她们在讨论两人共同认识的一个男人，说他对照管孩子毫无头绪。我们始终听着她们的对话，偶尔偷偷朝她们的方向瞥一眼，渐渐地，情况发生了变化。我感觉到了，也看出来其他人有同样的感受。如果我们隔着她办公室的玻璃看到那个女人，然后就放手离开，甚至哪怕我们跟着穿过小城的时候跟丢了，也还可以欢欣鼓舞，怀着凯旋的心情回到农舍。然而现在，在这间艺廊里，这女人离我们太近，比我们任何时候想的都要更近。我们越多看到她、听到她，就越发现她一点都不像露丝。这种感觉在我们之间越来越强烈，几乎伸手可触，露丝虽然在房间的另一头专心看画，我却看得出她跟

其他人有同样强烈的感受。也许正因为如此，我们才在艺廊里游荡了那么久；我们在延迟不得不讨论这件事的那一刻到来。

突然那女人离开了，我们还是分散着站在艺廊里，避免相互间眼神遭遇。但谁也没有想要跟上那女人，随着时间分分秒秒过去，我们仿佛无需言语，就已经对眼下的情况得出了一致的看法。

终于那位银发的女士从办公桌后面走了出来，对离她最近的汤米开口说道：“这幅作品特别美，是我最喜欢的之一。”

汤米朝她转过身去，出声地笑了。这时我赶紧走过去救场，那女士问道：“你们是学艺术的吗？”

“其实不算，”我不等汤米答话就说道，“我们只是，呃，很感兴趣。”

银发女士面露微笑，然后开始解说我们看的这些画的作者跟她有怎样的亲戚关系，还跟我们讲了艺术家的创作生平。她的话至少起到了一个作用，让我们从入迷一般的状态中醒了过来，大家围在她身边听讲，就像我们在黑尔舍姆的时候，导师们开始讲话的时候我们的反应一样。这让银发女士讲得更起劲了，她一边讲这些画的创作地点，艺术家喜欢什么时间工作，以及哪些作品没有素描就直接画了出来，她一边讲，我们一边不住地点头赞叹。后来她的讲解自然而然到了终点，我们不约而同地叹息，向她道谢，然后走了出来。

外面的街道那么狭窄，我们一段时间内无法好好谈话，我觉得大家都非常庆幸。我们一个接一个地从那家艺廊走远，我看到罗德尼走在前面，很夸张地张开双臂，仿佛他就像我们刚刚到达这座小城的时候那样感到很兴奋。可他的表现并不足信，一旦大家到了更宽敞的街道，我们就停下了脚步。

我们又一次来到了悬崖边上。跟之前一样，如果朝护栏外望去，可以看到曲折小路通往海滩，只是这次你可以看到底部的长廊，两边有木板分隔的货摊。

我们花了一点时间四处张望，任由冷风吹到身上。罗德尼还是努力打起精神，仿佛他下定决心不要让这件事破坏了一次美好的出行。他指着海上的一点，远在地平线上的地方，让克里茜看。但克里茜转身不理睬，她说：

“好吧，我想大家意见一致，对不对？那人不是露丝。”她轻轻一笑，将一只手搭在露丝肩上。“我很难过。大家都很难过。可我们

真的不能责怪罗德尼。本来确实有几分相似。你们得承认，我们透过窗户看到她的时候，看上去确实……”她声音渐弱，直至消失，然后再次碰了碰露丝的肩膀。

露丝什么也没说，只是耸耸肩，仿佛要拂去她的触碰。她眯着眼望着远方，望着天空而不是海水。我知道她很难过，但不了解她的人大概会以为她只是陷入了沉思。

“对不起，露丝，”罗德尼说着，也去拍露丝的肩膀。但他脸上带着微笑，仿佛一刻也不曾认为自己应该受到任何指责。当别人试图帮你一个忙，但没有成功的时候，他们才会这样表示歉意。

我记得当时望着克里茜和罗德尼，心想没错，他们人还行。他们按自己的路数来，心不坏，而且还尽量想让露丝高兴起来。可是同时，我还记得另一种感觉——尽管当时只有他们在说话，我和汤米都沉默没出声——我替露丝感到讨厌他们俩。因为不论他们多么富于同情，我看得出他们从心底里感到如释重负。事情变成这样让他们感到安心，高兴自己可以去安慰露丝，而反之，如果结果她满怀希望，目眩神迷，他们会受到冷落。他们感到释然，因为无需比往常任何时候更加残酷地面对那种他们着迷又苦恼，且感到恐惧的想法：他们认为有各种各样的可能性为我们这些黑尔舍姆的学生开放，而他们却没份。我记得当时想，他们两个人，克里茜和罗德尼，跟我们三个是多么不同。

这时汤米说：“我觉得这没什么分别。这只不过是寻开心罢了。”

“也许在你是寻开心，汤米，”露丝冷冷地说，目光依然直直望着前方，“如果我们在找的这个人是你可能的原型，你就不会这样想了。”

“我觉得我想法不会变的，”汤米说，“我觉得这没什么要紧。哪怕你找到了自己的原型，制造你的那个实际模板。即便如此，我也不明白会有任何不同。”

“多谢你深刻的论见，汤米，”露丝说。

“可我认为汤米说得对，”我说，“以为自己会像原型一样生活，这种想法挺傻的。我同意汤米的观点。这只是寻开心。我们不应该搞得太严肃。”

我也伸出手去，碰触露丝的肩膀。我希望她能感受到跟罗德尼和克里茜碰触的不同，因此特地选择了同样的部位。我期待她有所反应，给我某种信号，表示她知道那些老生所不能理解的，我和汤米能理解她。可她什么反应也没有，甚至连她给克里茜的耸肩也没给我。

我看到罗德尼在身后不远处踱步，一边发出怪声，表示风太大，他很冷。“我们现在去看马丁如何？”他说，“他的公寓就在这边，那排房子后面。”

露丝突然叹了口气，朝我们转过身来。“坦白讲，”她说，“我一直就知道这样很蠢。”

“对，”汤米急切地说，“只是寻开心。”

露丝很不耐烦地看了他一眼。“汤米，求你闭嘴别再提什么‘寻开心’了。没人想听。”说完她转向罗德尼和克里茜，接着说：“你们第一次跟我说的时侯，我不愿意讲。但是你瞧，根本不是那么回事。他们从来都不会，绝对不会用那个女人那样的人。你想想。她为什么会愿意做这种事？我们都知道，所以为什么我们不能面对现实。我们不是从这种人复制……”

“露丝，”我坚决地打断了她，“露丝，别说了。”

可她还是坚持说下去：“我们都知道。我们是从废柴复制来的。吸毒的、卖淫的、酗酒的、流浪汉、也许还有罪犯，只要不是变态就行。这才是我们的来源。我们都知道，为什么不明说出来？像这样的女人？得了吧，对，没错，汤米。寻开心。大家不妨寻开心来假装一番。里面另外那个女的，她的朋友，艺廊里那个年纪大的。学艺术的，她以为我们是艺术生。她如果知道我们的真实身份，你认为她还会愿意跟我们讲话吗？如果我们去问她，你猜猜看她会怎么说？‘对不起，可是你认为你的朋友有没有做过克隆人的模板？’她肯定会把我们赶出去。我们心知肚明，不如直接说出来。如果你想去找原型，如果你认真想去找，就得去那些龌龊地方找。你得去垃圾堆里翻。去阴沟里找，那才是我们这些人的出身之地。”

“露丝，”罗德尼语音平稳，带着一丝警告——“我们忘了这件事吧，去看看马丁。他今天下午休息。你会喜欢他的，他很搞笑。”

克里茜伸出手臂抱住露丝。“来吧，露丝。我们照罗德尼说的做。”

露丝站起身来，罗德尼开步走了起来。

“你们一起去好了，”我平静地说，“我不去了。”

露丝转过头，认真望着我。“哟，这谁料得到？瞧瞧现在是谁不开心了？”

“我没有不开心。不过你有时候净说蠢话，露丝。”

“哎哟，瞧瞧现在是谁不开心。可怜的凯西。她就不喜欢听大实话。”

“跟这没关系。我不想去拜访护理员。我们不应该去，我也不认识这个人。”

露丝耸耸肩，跟克里茜交换了个眼神。“那好，”她说，“也没道理说我们所有时间都得一起行动。如果这位大小姐不想跟我们一起，她不必非得去。让她自己去好了。”说完她朝克里茜倾身，故意压低了声音说：“凯西发脾气的时候，最好这样处理。让她一个人待会儿，火气慢慢就消散了。”

“四点钟之前回到车子这里来，”罗德尼对我说，“否则你就得搭便车回去了。”说完他笑了一声。“好了，凯西，不要不开心。跟我们去吧。”

“不了，你们去吧。我不想去。”

罗德尼耸耸肩，再次开步走。露丝和克里茜跟在后面，但是汤米没有动。露丝瞪着他，只有到了这时候，他才开口说：

“我跟凯丝一起。如果我们分开行动，那我就跟凯丝一起。”

露丝满含怒意地瞪着他，然后转身大步走开了。克里茜和罗德尼尴尬地看了看汤米，随后他们也再次出发了。

第十五章

我和汤米倚着围栏看风景，直到其他几个人走出了视线范围。

“都是些气话罢了，”他最终开口道。然后稍微一顿，又说：“人心里难过的时候就会口不择言。只是些气话罢了。导师们从来没跟我们这样讲过。”

我迈开步子走起来——朝着其他人去的相反方向——汤米随后也跟了上来，走在我旁边。

“为这个难过不值得，”汤米继续说道，“露丝现在总是这样，她用这种方式把火气撒出来。反正，就像咱们才刚跟她说的的那样，即便真是如此，哪怕有一点点真实，我还是认为不会有任何不同。我们的原型不论是什么人，都跟我们毫无关系，凯丝。为这事难过实在是不值得。”

“好吧，”我说着，故意用肩膀去撞他的肩膀，“好吧，好吧。”

我仿佛有印象两人走的方向是往城区中心走，可又拿不准。我正要想办法换个话题呢，这时汤米先开口了：

“你记得我们之前去过的那家沃尔沃斯商场吧，当时你在后面跟其他人一起？我在里面找东西。想要送给你。”

“是礼物咯？”我惊讶地望着他，“我想露丝肯定不会同意的。除非你送她一件更大的礼物。”

“算是礼物吧。可我找不到。我本来没打算告诉你，可是现在，我又得到一次机会去找找看。但是你得帮我才行。我买东西不在行。”

“汤米，你说什么呢？你想给我买礼物，但你想让我帮你选……”

“不是这样。我知道要送什么。只不过……”他笑了，耸耸肩，“算了，我还是告诉你吧。之前我们去的那家商场里，有个架子上放着好多唱片和卡带。所以我就在里面找你当初丢的那盘。你记得吗，凯丝？可是我记不起那是盒什么磁带了。”

“我的磁带吗？我都不知道你知道这件事呢，汤米。”

“知道。露丝让大家帮着找，说你丢了磁带很难过。所以我到处找。那时候我一直没跟你讲过，但我真的是到处都找过。我想总有些地方我能去，你们去不了。比如男生宿舍之类。我记得找了很久，可还是找不到。”

我望了他一眼，感到坏心情烟消云散。“我从来都不知道呢，汤米。你真是太贴心了。”

“可是没帮上什么忙。但是我真的很想帮你找回来。到后来看情况那盒磁带无论如何不会再出现了，我当时心想，总有一天我要去诺福克，到那里去给她找回来。”

“英格兰失落的一角，”我说完，四处张望了一圈，“我们就在这里！”

汤米也四处张望一番，我们停下了脚步。我们此时站在另一条小街道上，比艺廊所在的那条街略宽些。片刻间我俩就这样夸张地东张西望，随后相对而笑。

“所以说这主意还不算傻，”汤米说，“早先去的那家沃尔沃斯商场，里面有各种各样的磁带，所以我当时认为里面一定有你那盒。可现在我觉得应该没有。”

“你觉得没有？哎呀，汤米，所以你根本没有好好找？”

“我找了，凯丝。可是，唉，这真烦人，可我实在是记不起磁带叫什么了。在黑尔舍姆的时候，我开了那么多男生的藏品箱什么的，可现在却记不起了。是朱莉·布里奇斯或者别的……”

“朱迪·布里奇沃特。《夜曲》。”

汤米认真地摇头。“他们绝对没有这盘磁带。”

我哈哈大笑，捶他的胳膊。他看起来很困惑，于是我说：“汤米，沃尔沃斯商场里不卖这种。他们卖的都是最新的流行金曲。朱迪·布里奇沃特，她是很久以前的人物。她的磁带只是偶然出现在我们的拍卖会上。现在沃尔沃斯里面不会有的，你个傻瓜！”

“总之，我早说过，这方面我不在行。可是他们有很多磁带……”

“他们是有一些，汤米。哦，没关系。这想法很贴心。我很感动。这主意棒极了。毕竟这是在诺福克嘛。”

我们再次走动起来，汤米迟疑地说：“所以我才不得不跟你讲。我想给你个惊喜，可是没有用。即便我知道了磁带的名字，也不知道该去哪儿找。现在我跟你讲了，你就可以帮我。我们可以一起找。”

“汤米，你说什么呢？”我想做出责备的样子，却忍不住笑。

“我们有一个多小时的时间。真的机会难得。”

“汤米你这个傻瓜。你真信这个，是不是？失落的一角这套说辞？”

“我倒不是全信。但是既然已经来了，那我们就找找呗。我说，你还是希望能再找到它的，对不对？我们没什么好损失的。”

“好吧，你真是个大傻瓜，但是那就去吧。”

他无助地张开了双臂。“那么，凯丝，我们去哪里啊。我说过的，我买东西很不在行。”

“我们得去二手商店找，”我想了一会儿之后，说道，“卖旧衣服、旧书的那种地方。有时候店里会摆个盒子，里面放满了磁带和唱片。”

“好吧，可是这种店在哪里呢？”

现在当我回想起跟汤米一起站在那条小街上，就要开始搜寻的那一刻，还会感到一股暖意涌上全身。突然间一切都变得完美无比：一个小时的时间摆在我们面前，简直没有更好的方式度过。我尽量控制才能制止自己咯咯傻笑，或是像小孩一样在人行道上跳来跳去。不久之前，我在照看汤米的时候，跟他提起了我们一起去诺福克的那次旅行，他告诉我说他的感受跟我一模一样。我们决定要去寻找我丢失的那盘磁带那一刻，突然间仿佛所有的乌云都瞬间消散，我们面前就只有欢笑和快乐。

一开始，我们总是走到错误的地方去：要么是二手书店，要么全是卖老旧吸尘器的，可是完全没有音乐。过了一会儿汤米认为我也不比他更懂行，于是他宣布要由他来带路。可巧，真的是幸运，他立刻就发现了一条街，街上一连排着四家我们要找的这种店。店前橱窗里都是衣裙、手袋、小孩的年度纪念册之类，走进去能闻到一种甜丝丝的陈旧气息。店里有大堆大堆皱巴巴的简装书，落满灰尘的盒子里装

满了明信片或是小饰品。有家店专营嬉皮风格的东西，还有一家卖战争纪念章，还有沙漠中士兵的照片。可每家店都有一两个大纸箱子，里面摆满了黑胶唱片或是卡带。我们在这些店里翻看，坦白讲，除了最初的几分钟，其余时间里我觉得两人都没想到朱迪·布里奇沃特。我们单纯只是享受两人一起翻看这些东西的过程，一会儿分开，一会儿重又肩并肩站到了一起，一缕阳光照耀下，灰尘飞扬的角落里，也许两人还暗暗比赛，看谁能抢占那盒旧玩意。

后来当然，我找到了。我正在翻拣一排卡带，脑子里想着别的事，突然间它就出现了，就在我手指下方，跟许多年前一模一样：朱迪，她的香烟，望向酒保的挑逗眼神，还有背景中那些含混的棕榈树。

我没有像平常碰到略微令我激动的东西那样叫出声，只是默默站在原地，望着那个塑料盒子，说不准自己是高兴还是不高兴。刹那间我甚至觉得这是个错误。磁带只是这片刻欢愉的一个最好的借口，可如今磁带找到了，我们就得停下来。也许就因为如此，连我自己都感到吃惊的是，一开始我竟然沉默无语，竟然还想要不要假装没有发现。现在这盒磁带就在我面前，莫名有些令人尴尬，仿佛我早过了应该喜欢它的年纪。我甚而让这盒磁带歪倒，让旁边的盒子压了过来。可卡带脊部赫然在目，径直与我对望，最终我还是喊汤米过来了。

“是这个吗？”他好像真心感到难以置信，也许是因为我并没有显得很激动。我将磁带拿了出来，双手捧起来。这时，突然间我感到巨大的快乐——还有别的东西，更复杂的情感，让我几乎要迸出眼泪来。但我克制住情绪，只是扯了一下汤米的胳膊。

“没错，就是它，”我说完，第一次激动地笑了，“你能相信吗？竟然真被我们找到了。”

“你想这会不会是那同一盒？我是说，原来那盒。你丢的那盒？”

我将磁带放在指间摩挲，发现背面的设计细节我也记得很清楚，每一首歌的名字，一切的一切。

“在我看来，真有可能，”我说，“可我得告诉你，汤米，可能市面上这磁带几千盒呢。”

这次轮到我发现汤米没有意料中那么激动了。

“汤米，你好像并没有很为我感到高兴啊，”我话虽这样讲，语气却明显是调侃。

“我真的替你高兴，凯丝。只不过，唉，真希望是我找到的，”说完他轻轻一笑，又接着说，“那时候，你丢了磁带之后，我曾经认真想过的，在脑子里想象，如果我找到了拿给你，会是什么场景。你会怎么说，你脸上的表情，所有这一切。”

他的语音比平常要轻柔，目光停留在我手中的塑料盒上。我一下子感觉到店里只有我俩，除此之外就只有前面柜台后专心处理书面工作的老伙计。我们在店后方一块高于地面的平台上，这里更为幽暗僻静，仿佛那老伙计不想理会我们这边的货品，有意识地将信息屏蔽了。几秒钟的时间里，汤米好像入迷一般，据我所知他是在脑海中回顾从前的幻想，要把我丢失的磁带还给我。突然他从我手上将盒子抢了过去。

“至少我可以买给你，”他笑道，说完不等我阻止他，就开始下楼梯朝前面走去。

我仍旧留在店堂后部随意翻看，等着老店员把盒子封面相配的磁带找出来。我还能感到胸中有遗憾在涌动，遗憾我们这么快就找到了，只有过了一段时间之后，等我们回到农舍，我一个人待在房间里的时候，才真心为重新得到这盒磁带——那首歌——而感激不已。即便在当时，那也主要是一件怀旧的东西，而今天，如果碰巧磁带拿出来被我看到，就会一下子将我带回在诺福克的那个下午，同样我们当初在黑尔舍姆的时光也历历在目。

我们从店里出来之后，我一心想要找回两人先前那种无忧无虑，甚至有点傻乎乎的情绪状态。可是当我说了几个小段子之后，却见汤米沉浸在自己的思想中，没有做出反应。

我们开始爬一段很陡的坡路，可以看得到——前方也许一百码开外——有一块紧挨着悬崖的观景台，有长凳朝着大海的方向摆放着。夏天的时候这里会是一个普通家庭坐下来野餐的好地方。现在尽管是冷风吹面，我们依然朝着这边走去，可是还没等走到的时候，汤米磨磨蹭蹭慢下了脚步，他对我说：

“克里茜和罗德尼他们，真的很相信这种说法。你知道的，就是说如果有人真心相爱，就可以将捐献时间延后。他们认为我们知道内情，可是在黑尔舍姆的时候，从来没有人说过这种话。至少我从来没

听到过这样的说法。你有吗，凯丝？没有，这只是最近老生们中间流传开的一些说法。还有露丝这样的。他们添油加醋。”

我认真地看着他，但很难判断他到底是恶作剧地说笑，还是对此深恶痛绝。但不管怎样，我看得出他心里还有别的事，跟露丝毫无关系，因此我什么也没说，只是等待着。最终，他完全停住了脚步，开始用脚乱踢地上一个被踩扁的纸杯。

“其实呢，凯丝，”他说，“我考虑这件事已经有段时间了。我相信我们是对的，当初我们在黑尔舍姆的时候，并没有这样的说法。但那时候很多事都没什么道理。我一直在想，如果这传言是真的，那倒可以解释很多事。很多我们从前不明白的事。”

“你什么意思？什么不明白的事？”

“比如说艺廊的事，”汤米压低了声音，我也上前一步，仿佛我们还在黑尔舍姆，在餐厅的队列或是池塘边交谈，“我们从来没有追问到底，艺廊到底是为了什么。为什么夫人要把最好的作品都拿走。可是现在我想我知道了，凯丝。你记不记得有一次大家在争吵交换币的事？到底被夫人拿走作品的那些人，是否应该得到交换币？罗伊·J还特地去找艾米丽小姐谈过这件事？当时艾米丽小姐有个说法，但又放下不提了，现在我才开始细想。”

两个遛狗的女人从旁路过，虽然这样做很傻，但我们还是不约而同停下了讲话，直到她们走远上了坡听不到我们讲话。这时我说：

“怎么个说法，汤米？艾米丽小姐放下不提什么？”

“罗伊·J问夫人为什么要拿走我们的作品时，你记不记得她说过些什么？”

“我记得她说这是种荣誉，我们应该为此自豪……”

“可是不止这些。”这时汤米的话音微弱，如同耳语，“她告诉罗伊，她随口说出的，也许她本不该说出来的，你还记得吗，凯丝？她对罗伊说，像画作、诗歌等等这些东西，她说它们会展示你的内心。她说它们会揭示你的灵魂。”

他说到这里，我突然记起劳拉有次画了一幅自己的内脏图，还为之大笑。但我开始记起一些事了。

“没错，”我说，“我记得。你是想说什么呢？”

“我的想法，”汤米慢慢地说道，“是这样的。假设他们说的对，那些老生的说法。假设黑尔舍姆的学生的确有特别的安排。假设如果两个人说他们真心相爱，想要更多时间厮守。那样的话，凯丝，就要有方法来评判他们说的是不是真话。他们说相爱是否只是为了延迟捐献。你能明白这有多难评判吧？再或者一对情侣认为自己真心相爱，但其实只是情欲作祟，不然只是一时的冲动。你明白我意思吧，凯丝？这真的很难判断，而且几乎不可能做到每次都准确。问题关键是由谁来评判。不论是夫人，或者其他什么人，他们需要某种凭据。”

我慢慢点头。“所以他们才拿走我们的艺术作品……”

“有可能。夫人在某处有间艺廊，里面全都是学生从很小时候开始创作的东西。假如有两个人跑来说他们相爱。她就可以找出他们许许多多年前创作的作品。她就可以判断这两人是否值得。他们般配不般配。别忘了，凯丝，她那些东西会揭示我们的灵魂。她自己就可以评判谁跟谁天生一对，谁跟谁只是犯傻一时冲动。”

我再次开动脚步，慢慢走动起来，却几乎没有看前面的路。汤米落在了后面，等待我的回应。

“我说不准，”最后，我说，“你说的这些当然可以解释艾米丽小姐对罗伊说的那些话。我想，同样也可以解释我们的导师为什么一直认为能够画画或者搞其他创作，对我们而言如此重要。”

“正是。所以……”汤米叹了口气，带着几分挣扎说，“所以露西小姐不得不承认，她当初告诉我说这其实不重要，是她错了。她那样说是因为当时为我感到难过。但从内心深处她知道，这其实很重要。来自黑尔舍姆的特别之处就在于你有这样一个独特的机会。如果你没有作品入选夫人的艺廊，那你简直就是白白放弃了这个机会。”

只有他说完这话之后，我才如冷水浇头一般，真正明白他要说的意思。我停下来向他转过身去，可是不等我开口，汤米却笑了。

“如果我理解的都对，那么，唉，看来我是把机会都搞砸了。”

“汤米，你有没有任何东西入选过艺廊？也许你很小的时候呢？”

他已经开始大摇其头了。“你知道我这个人多没用。再说还有露西小姐什么的那些事。我知道她是好意。她为我感到难过，想帮我。我肯定她是这样想的。但是如果我的理论正确，那么……”

“这只是理论而已，汤米，”我说，“你知道你的理论是怎么回事。”

我本想调节下气氛，但语气没有控制好，我还在使劲想着他刚刚说过的话，这点想必显而易见。“也许他们有各种各样的方式去评判，”过了一会儿我说，“也许那些作品只是许多不同方式中的一个。”

汤米再次摇了摇头。“比如什么方式？夫人从来也不了解我们。她绝对不会记得我们每一个人。再说，很可能不止夫人一个人做决定。很可能上面有比她职位更高的人，那些人从来没到过黑尔舍姆。我想这些想了很久，凯丝。一切都对得上。所以艺廊才这样重要，所以导师们才这样强烈要求我们一定要努力创作艺术和诗歌作品。凯丝，你怎么想？”

无疑我是走神了一会儿。事实上，我想到了独自一人在宿舍房间里，播放我们刚刚找到的那盘磁带的事；想起我是如何摆动身体，将枕头抱在胸前，夫人如何从过道里看着我，双眼含泪。甚至连这个我一直没能找出一个合理解释的场景，似乎也符合汤米的理论。在我的脑海中，我想象的是自己抱着一个婴儿，但当然，夫人无从知道这些。她很可能会认为我是幻想与爱人相拥。如果汤米的理论没错，如果夫人跟我们的联系唯一的目的是为了此后当我们相爱的时候，来决定我们是否可以延迟捐献，那么这就合理了——虽然她通常对我们都极尽冷漠——但当她碰上这样一个场景的时候，还会真心为之感动。这一切从我脑海中闪过，我差点就要冲口对汤米讲述这一切。但我抑制住了这种冲动，因为我现在想压一压他的理论。

“我刚刚在想你说的，仅此而已，”我说，“我们得开始往回走了。我们得花点工夫才能找到停车场。”

我们开始调转步伐下坡，但我们都知道时间还够，无需着急。

“汤米，”我们走了一段之后，我问道，“这些事你跟露丝讲过没有？”

他摇摇头，继续往前走。最后他说：“问题在于露丝相信这一切，老生们所说的一切她都相信。没错，她喜欢不懂装懂，故作高明。但是她真心相信这些话。或迟或早，她一定会想采取下一步行动。”

“你是说，她会想……”

“没错，她会想申请。可她还没有想清楚。不像我们刚刚谈的这样。”

“你从没讲过你关于艺廊的理论？”

他再次摇头，却什么也没说。

“如果你告诉她你的理论，”我说，“而她相信的话……那就，哎，她肯定要气坏了。”

汤米若有所思的样子，但却什么也没说。直到我们重新走向那些狭窄小街上之后，他才再次开口，这时，他的话音突然变得有些局促不安。

“事实上，凯丝，”他说，“我一直在做些东西。只怕万一嘛。我跟谁都没讲过，露丝也没有。只是刚刚开始。”

这是我第一次听他提起那些想象中的动物。当他开始描述他正在做的东西的时候——直到几个星期之后我才看到那些画——我发现很难表现得兴趣浓厚。事实上我得承认，这让我想起了黑尔舍姆时代，汤米所有问题的起始点，最初那幅草地上大象的画。他解释说，灵感来自一本封底缺失、老旧的儿童绘本，是他在农舍的沙发后面找到的。后来他就说服凯佛斯给了他一本黑色小本子，他就开始在上面画动物，自那以后，汤米已经画完了至少十二幅他想象中的动物。

“关键是，我把它们画得非常小。很小很小。在黑尔舍姆的时候我从没想过这样做。我想也许当初我就是在这上面出了岔子。如果你把它们画得很小，因为你画画的纸总共也就这么小，那么一切就都变了。就好像它们自己就活了。这时你就得给它们画上各种细节。得考虑它们如何保护自己，如何够到东西。坦白讲，凯丝，这跟我在黑尔舍姆画过的东西完全不一样。”

他开始描述最喜欢的动物，但我很难集中注意力；他越是起劲地给我讲他的那些动物，我就越不自在。“汤米，”我想对他说，“你会再次让自己成为别人取笑的对象。幻想动物？你怎么回事啊？”可我没有。我只是警惕地望着他，不停地说：“听起来真不错，汤米。”

讲到某处，他说道：“正如我所说的，凯丝，露丝不知道我在画动物。”他说这话的时候，仿佛记起了其他所有的事，为什么我们会开始聊他创作的动物，这时激情从他脸上渐渐消逝了。于是我们再一次沉默前行，当我们走出小道，来到主街上的时候，我说：

“汤米，哪怕你的理论确有几分道理，我们还是有很多事要搞明白。比如，一对情侣应该怎么申请？他们应该怎么做？又不是说随处有表格可以拿来填写。”

“我也一直在想这些，”他的话音重新变得平静而严肃，“据我看来，只有一条路可以走。那就是找到夫人。”

我想了一下，然后说道：“这可能不容易。我们其实对她一无所知。我们连她姓甚名谁都不知道。况且你记得她的举止吗？她甚至不喜欢我们靠近她。即便是我们真的找到了她的下落，我觉得她也不会太帮忙。”

汤米叹了口气。“我知道，”他说，“反正，我猜我们有的是时间。谁也没有忙着要去做什么。”

等到我们回到停车场的时候，下午的天气已经转阴，气温变得很低。其他人还没有出现的迹象，于是我和汤米就靠在我们的车上，望着那个迷你高尔夫球场。没有人在打球，只有小旗在风中飘飞。我不想再继续讲夫人、艺廊等等这些事，于是就将包装好的朱迪·布里奇沃特的磁带拿了出来，仔细欣赏。

“谢谢你买给我，”我说。

汤米微微一笑。“如果我先看到那堆磁带，你先看唱片的话，就该由我先发现了。可怜的老汤米运气不佳呀。”

“这没什么区别。我们能找到它纯粹是因为你说要去找。我早就忘记什么遗失的角落这些说法了。露丝说了那些话之后，我情绪那么差。朱迪·布里奇沃特。我的老朋友。就好像她从来没有离开过一样。不知道当初是谁偷走的？”

有一会儿，我们转身朝向街道，搜寻其他人的身影。

“你知道，”汤米说，“刚才露丝说那些话的时候，我看到你有多难过……”

“别说了，汤米。我现在没事了。等她回来我也不想再提这些话。”

“不，我不是想说这事。”他转身从车旁站直，又将一只脚撑在前轮胎上，仿佛测试压力。“我意思是，那时候我才明白，当露丝说出那番话的时候，我才明白你为什么总在翻色情杂志。不过其实我还

是没明白。只是一种理论。又是我的理论。可是当露丝说她前面那番话的时候，好像事情就对上了。”

我知道他正在看着我，但我目光直视前方，没有做出反应。

“可我其实还是不明白，凯丝，”他最后说，“即便露丝说的对，虽然我认为不是这么回事，可你为什么会在旧色情杂志里面找自己的原型呢？为什么你的原型会是这些女孩之一呢？”

我耸耸肩，依然不看他。“我没说过这么做有道理。只是我自己的做法而已。”这时我眼中已经满是泪水，可我还想不让汤米看到。但我说话的声音还是有些哽咽：“如果你觉得烦，我以后不这么做了就是。”

我不知道汤米是否看到了我的眼泪。不管怎么说，等到他走近我，用力按按我肩膀的时候，我总算是止住了泪水。之前的时候，他时不时会这样做，这没什么特别，也没什么新鲜。可是不知怎的，我的确感觉好了一些，轻轻笑了笑。这时他才放开我，可我们还是距离很近，重又回到背靠着车子肩并肩的位置，几乎触到彼此。

“的确，这没什么道理可言，”我说道，“可是我们都会这么做，不是吗？我们都好奇自己的原型。毕竟我们今天就是为了这个才来到了这里。我们都这么做。”

“凯丝，你知道，对不对，我跟谁都没说过。关于那次在锅炉房的事。跟露丝没有，其他人也没有。可我就是不明白。我不明白那是为什么。”

“好吧，汤米。我告诉你。你听了可能也觉得毫无道理，但告诉你也没什么。只是有的时候，我时不时会有特别强烈的欲望，想要做爱。有时候这种冲动上来会持续一两个小时，很可怕。据我所知，就算跟老凯佛斯做我也在所不辞，就有这么糟糕。所以……我之所以跟休伊做，也只是因为这一个理由，还有奥利弗。没有任何深层的意义。我甚至不怎么喜欢他们。我不知道这是怎么回事，而且过后，事后感觉很可怕。所以我才开始想，也许，这总得有个出处，想必跟我的出身有关系。”我停了下来，可汤米什么都没说，于是我继续说：“所以我就想，如果我能找到她的照片，在这些杂志里面，那么至少可以对此有个解释。我倒不是想去找她什么的。我只是，你明白的，想搞清楚为什么我会是这个样子。”

“我有时候也这样，”汤米说道，“有时候我真的很想做。我敢说人人都会这样，如果他们肯坦白的話。我认为你并没有任何不同之处，凯丝。事实上，我经常这样……”他停了下来，笑起来，可我并没有跟着一起笑。

“我说的事不一样，”我说，“我观察过其他人。他们会有这种冲动，但不足以让他们做出实际的行为。他们绝对不会去做我做过的那些事，去跟休伊那种人……”

我可能又开始哭起来了，因为我感觉到汤米的手臂再次揽住我的肩膀。虽然我很难过，但仍然清楚意识到我们所处的环境，心中自省如果露丝和其他人沿着街道走来，如果此刻看到我俩，也不能让他们产生任何的误会。我们仍是肩并肩站着，背靠着车子，他们会看出我很难过，而汤米只是在安慰我。这时我听到他说：

“我认为这倒未见得是件坏事。一旦你找到那个人，凯丝，那个你真的很想跟他在一起的人，那会非常美好。你还记得导师们跟我们讲过的话吗？如果是跟正确的人，那感觉真的会很美好。”

我肩膀稍动了一下，把汤米的胳膊挪开，然后深深吸了一口气。“忘了这事吧。反正现在冲动上来我也学会了控制情绪。所以我们就把这事忘掉吧。”

“反正，凯丝，在那些杂志里翻找，这挺傻的。”

“是挺傻的，好吧，汤米。咱别提这茬了。我没事了。”

我不记得其他人回来之前，我们两人又说了些什么。我们没有继续讨论这种严肃话题，如果其他人感觉到气氛中有些什么，也没有讲出来。他们情绪很高，尤其是露丝，似乎下定决心要弥补早先的坏脾气。她走上前摸摸我的脸，说了个笑话什么的，等我们回到车上，她仍然努力确保让欢欣的气氛继续保持。她和克里茜觉得马丁样样都很好笑，机会难得要尽情享受，一离开他的公寓房子就使劲笑他。罗德尼好像很不赞成，我发现露丝和克里茜为此还编了一段歌舞，主要是笑话他。一切都友好无伤。可我还是留意到，他们说的那些笑话和典故，之前露丝会特地不理睬我和汤米，而回去的路上，她却时常转身过来，认真给我解释他们谈的每一件事。然而实际上，没多一会儿这就有点累人了，因为搞来搞去就好像他们在车上讲的一切都是为了照顾我们——至少是我个人——的感受。可我很高兴露丝对此这样在意。我理解——汤米也一样——她认识到自己之前行为的错误，用这种方式来认错。我们坐在后座，分别在她两边，跟我们出发时一样，

但现在，她全部时间都在跟我讲话，偶尔转身去摸一下汤米，或给他轻轻一吻。气氛很好，没有人再提起露丝可能的原型或是诸如此类的话题。我也没有提起汤米帮我买到的朱迪·布里奇沃特的磁带。我知道露丝迟早会发现的，但我现在还不想让她知道。那段回家的路程中，暮色渐笼，漫长而空荡的大路越来越暗，感觉我们三个人仿佛再次亲密无间，我希望不要有任何事出现，来破坏这种气氛。

第十六章

关于那次诺福克之行有点古怪的是，我们一回来就对此缄口不言。这样持续了一段时间，开始有各种各样的传言讲我们是去干吗的。即便如此我们还是缄默不语，直到大家失去了兴趣。

我至今也不确定到底发生了什么事。也许我们认为应该由露丝来决定，到底该说多少，我们都在等她的提示。而露丝呢，出于种种原因——也许她的原型事件最后的结局让她觉得难堪，也许她享受这种神秘感——对这件事是只字不提。即便是我们彼此之间，也避免谈起这次旅行。

这种保密气氛让我更方便，可以不必将汤米为我买了朱迪·布里奇沃特磁带的事告诉露丝。我倒没有特地隐瞒。磁带始终都在，放在我的藏品之中，放在墙角线边上，我的一小堆东西中间。可我总是小心不让磁带放在这堆东西最上面。有几次我很想告诉她，很想跟她一起，在这盘磁带播放的背景音乐中回顾黑尔舍姆的生活。但随着诺福克之行过去得越来越久，我始终也没有告诉她，这事感觉越来越像一件令人愧疚的秘密。当然，她最终还是发现了那盒磁带，那是很久以后了，而且也许发现的时机更是大为不当，可有时候人就是这么不走运。

春意渐浓，越来越多的老生离开了，开始接受培训，虽然他们像往常一样走得悄无声息，但人数越来越多，令人无法视而不见。我现在依然说不准，当时亲眼见证了那么多的分别，到底是种怎样的感受。我猜，一定程度上我们对那些离开的人有些妒忌。的确感觉他们是去了一个更广阔、更有趣的世界。但是当然，毫无疑问他们的离去让我们的不安又增加了几分。

后来，我想大约是四月份的时候，爱丽丝·F成了我们黑尔舍姆这帮人里第一个离开的，之后不久戈登·C也走了。他们都得到邀约，立刻开始培训，带着欢欣鼓舞的笑容离开了，但是在那之后，至少对我们这群人来说，农舍的氛围彻底改变了。

许多老生同样也似乎受到了这一连串告别的影响，也许直接的影响就是，克里茜和罗德尼在诺福克时谈到的那番流言又起来了。传言说国内其他地方有学生获得了延期，因为他们证明彼此很相爱——而这次，有的时候，流言所说的学生跟黑尔舍姆完全没有关系。又一

次，我们同去诺福克的五个人对这些话题避而不谈：甚至克里茜和罗德尼也如此，当初他们是这种流言的核心人物，现在听到这些说辞却只是尴尬地转开眼神。

这种“诺福克效应”甚至也影响了我和汤米。我以为，等我们一回来，就会利用各种微小的机会，趁两人单独见面的时候，多交流他对于艺廊的那些理论。可是不知为什么——有他的原因，也有我的原因——我们始终没有这样做过。唯一一次例外，我想，就是鹅棚里那次，他给我看他那些想象中的动物的那天早上。

那间谷仓我们叫做鹅棚，位于农舍外侧边上，因为屋顶漏雨严重，门也彻底跟铰链断开，所以一直派不上用场，只有情侣们趁天气暖和的几个月份会躲到里面去。到那时，我养成了一个人散步的习惯，我想那次我也是在散步，正好路过鹅棚的时候，听到汤米喊我。我转身看到他光着脚，姿势笨拙地蹲在一个大水洼中间小块干燥的地面上，一只手扶着屋墙保持平衡。

“你的雨靴呢，汤米？”我问道。除了赤着脚之外，他身上穿的是平常的厚外衣和牛仔裤。

“我在，你知道，画画呢……”他笑着，举起了一个小小的黑色笔记本，就像凯佛斯整天带着走来走去的那种本子。距离那次诺福克之行已经过去两个多月，可我一看到那个本子，就明白怎么回事了。可我还是等着他先开口：

“如果你愿意，凯丝，我就给你看看。”

他带我走进了鹅棚，跳过坑洼不平的地面。我原以为里面会很暗，然而阳光却从天窗直撒进来。墙边上堆着各种旧家具，都是过去一年左右扔出来的——破桌子，坏冰箱，诸如此类。汤米好像将一张两人位旧沙发拖到了地板正中，破沙发的填料迸出了黑塑表面，我猜我刚才路过的时候，他就坐在这里画画。他的长筒雨靴就倒在旁边，足球袜从靴口露出来。

汤米一屁股坐回到沙发上，抚摸着自已的大脚趾。“对不起，我的脚有点臭。我不知不觉就把鞋袜都脱掉了。我好像还划伤了。凯丝，你想看么？上周露丝看了，所以打那时候起我就一直想给你看看。除了露丝还没有人看过呢。看一眼吧，凯丝。”

这是我第一次见到他画的动物。在诺福克他跟我说起的时候，我脑海中浮现的是我们小时候画的那些画的缩小版。因此看到他画的那

些密集的细节，我不禁吃了一惊。实际上，要过一会儿才能看得出它们是些动物。乍看之下，他的画好像你打开收音机的后盖之后暴露出的景象：微小的凹槽，交织的肌腱，微缩的螺丝齿轮等，都凭着一种偏执，画得无比精准，只有当你把纸张拿远一点的时候，还能看出画的是某种狃狃，或是一只鸟。

“这是我画的第二本，”汤米说，“第一本绝对不能让任何人看到！我花了好长时间才摸到门道。”

现在他靠在沙发上，往一只脚上套袜子，尽量显得很随意，可我知道他在期待我的反应。尽管如此，我还是沉吟半晌，没有对他的画全力赞扬。也许部分是因为我担心，不论他画什么都会再次招来麻烦。然而我看到的这些画跟在黑尔舍姆任何一位导师教过的都截然不同，我不知道如何评判。最后我大致是这样说的：

“天哪，汤米，这得多耗神啊。在这种光线下你能看得这么清楚，画得这么细致，我太吃惊了。”然后，当我一页又一页地翻看时，也许是因为我还在思想斗争，到底怎么说才对，结果说出口的却是这样一句：“我很好奇如果夫人看到这些画会怎么说。”

我是带着玩笑的口吻说的，汤米窃笑以对，可这时气氛中有点悬而未决的意味凭空出现。我继续一页接一页地往下翻——笔记本画满了四分之一左右——我并没有抬头看他，心里想要是我没提起夫人就好了。终于，我听到他说：

“我想我得比这画得好很多她才能看得上。”

我拿不准这话是不是暗示我应该开口表扬他画得有多好，可是这次我是真心被眼前这些神奇动物的画面所深深地吸引了。它们金属质感，布满细节，然而每一只却同时具有某种甜美甚至脆弱的意味。我记得在诺福克他曾对我说，甚至在创作过程中，他就担心这些动物该如何自卫，或是怎么够到东西，如今看到它们，我也萌发了同样的担忧。即便如此，出于某种我自己都无法破解的缘故，我依然如鲠在喉，无法开口表达赞美。这时汤米说：

“总之，我画这些动物不光是因为这个。我就是喜欢画它们。我在想，凯丝，我到底该不该继续保密。我想，也许让别人知道我在这里干什么，并不会有什么坏处。汉娜现在还画水彩，很多老生也还在搞创作。我倒不是说要到处拿给人家看我的画。可是我想，也没道理说我就得一直保密。”

我终于鼓起勇气抬头望着他，真心诚意地说道：“汤米，的确没理由，完全没理由保密。画得很好。真的真的很好。事实上，如果你就是因为这才藏在这里，那还挺傻的。”

他什么也没答话，但脸上慢慢浮现出某种狡黠的笑容，仿佛在回味只有自己知道的笑话，于是我知道自己的话让他多么高兴。我想，那之后我们就没有再多说什么。不久之后他就穿上了雨靴，我们俩离开了鹅棚。正如我所说，那就是那年春天我和汤米唯一一次直接谈及他的理论。

然后就到了夏天，距离我们刚到这里已经过了一年。一批新的学生乘着小巴车到来，跟我们当时很像，然而没有一个人是来自黑尔舍姆。从某方面来说，这令人欣慰：我想大家都有点担心，新来一批黑尔舍姆的学生会让问题更复杂。但至少对我而言，没有黑尔舍姆的学生这一现象只是增添了我的感受，觉得黑尔舍姆已经成了远远的过往，那些从前将我们这些老朋友紧紧系在一起的纽带也变得松散。不仅仅是因为汉娜等人都在谈论要学习爱丽丝的榜样开始培训；其他人，比如劳拉，交了个不是黑尔舍姆的男朋友，现在我们都快忘了他们跟我们有什么关系。

还有就是露丝总是假装忘记黑尔舍姆的往事。诚然，基本上都是些鸡毛蒜皮的小事，但还是让我越来越恼火她。比如有一次，我、露丝和几个老生一起围坐在厨房的大桌子旁，吃了一顿漫长的早餐，然后一个老生开始说起深夜吃奶酪总是会害得人睡不好，我转头对露丝说了句什么，大意是：“你记不记得杰拉尔丁小姐也总是这么跟我们说的？”我只是随口打个岔，露丝需要的回应无非是笑一笑，或是点个头即可。然而她却满脸茫然地盯着我，好像她完全不知道我说的是什么样。我只好对老生们解释说：“是我们的一个导师，”这时露丝才皱着眉头点点头，仿佛她这一刻才记起来。

那次我放过了她。但还有一次我就没有，就是那天傍晚，我俩一起坐在废弃的公交站亭里。那时我生气了，因为当着老生装模作样是一回事，只有我们俩的时候，在严肃谈话的中间再来这套，那就是另外一回事了。我一时偏开了话题，说起在黑尔舍姆，去池塘要抄近路穿过种大黄的那块田，其实是禁止入内的。当她摆出一副困惑脸的时候，我放弃了自己本来要说的观点，冲口说道：“露丝，你不可能忘记的。别跟我来这套。”

也许如果我没有这样直接斥责她——也许如果我编个段子嘲她一句然后继续讲——她就会发现这事有多荒唐，一笑置之。但是因为我冲她发了火，露丝怒视着我说：

“这到底有什么重要？那片大黄田跟这一切有什么关系？你说到哪儿继续就是了。”

天色渐晚，夏日夕照正在消退，那老旧的汽车站经过了最近的暴风雨，透着潮湿和霉气。因此我没有兴致深究这到底有何重要。虽然我放下这话题，继续讨论我们之前的内容，但气氛已经变得冰冷，无法帮助我们解决手头的难题。

然而要想解释我们那天傍晚所谈的内容，我还需要再往前回溯一点。实际上，我得回溯好几个礼拜，回到那年夏天早一些的时候。我跟其中一个老生有了一段情，那男孩名叫莱尼，坦白讲，那主要是性的吸引。但是后来，他突然选择开始培训，然后就离开了。这让我有点不安，露丝处理得非常好，她小心照看着我，又当心不显得大惊小怪，如果我看起来不高兴，她总会帮我打起精神。她还总是帮我些小忙，比如给我做三明治，或是替我做卫生值日等。

后来，大约在莱尼离开两个星期之后的一天午夜，我们两人一起坐在我的阁楼房间里，捧着热茶聊天，露丝说的关于莱尼的段子逗得我哈哈大笑。他人其实不坏，但是我一旦开始跟露丝讲那些关于他的私密小事，就好像跟他有关的一切都滑稽可笑起来，于是我们就哈哈大笑不已。后来不知怎的露丝就伸出一个手指，挨个捋我沿着护壁板排开的一小排磁带。她一边笑着一边漫不经心地一盒盒捋过来，但是后来我突然心生怀疑，认为这可能并非偶然；也许她几天之前就发现了那盒磁带，可能还仔细检查以确定无误，而后耐心等待恰当的时机“发现”它。几年之后，我委婉试探着问露丝，可她似乎不明白我说的是什么，因此可能是我错了。总之当时就是那样，每当我说出关于可怜的莱尼一丁点的小事，我们两人就哈哈大笑，笑个不停，突然之间就像有个插头被冷不丁拔下来一样。露丝侧躺在我的地毯上，在幽暗的灯光里侧眼观看那些磁带的盒脊，不知怎的朱迪·布里奇沃特的那盒就到了她的手里。过了不知道多久之后，她才说：

“你重新拿到这个有多久了？”

我告诉了她，尽量不动声色地说，那天她跟其他人一起走开了之后，我和汤米如何偶然找到的。她又继续翻看，然后说：

“所以是汤米替你找到的咯。”

“不，是我找到的。我先看到的。”

“你们俩谁都没跟我说。”她耸耸肩，“反正，就算你说过，我也没听到。”

“关于诺福克的传说是真的，”我说，“你知道，这是英格兰失落的一角。”

我脑海中确曾闪过一个念头，不知露丝会不会假装不记得这个典故，但她若有所思地点了点头。

“那次我该记得的，”她说，“可能那时候我的红围巾能找回来。”

我们都笑了起来，那个不安的瞬间似乎就这样过去了。但露丝再无多言，将磁带放回去的样子，让我觉得这事儿还没完。

我不知道接下来的谈话是否是露丝根据刚才的发现有意引导的，还是说我们无论如何会聊到这里，露丝只是后来才意识到可以这样利用我们的谈话内容。我们又回过头去继续谈论莱尼，尤其说了很多他的性行为，我们又一次笑得乐不可支。一度我觉得自己如释重负，她终于发现了那盒磁带，并没有大惊小怪，因此我并没有步步小心，其实我本可以更小心的。因为没过多久，我们就从笑话莱尼，转到了笑话汤米，刚开始一切都没什么恶意，好像我们都很宠爱他的样子。但后来，我们就开始笑话他的那些动物了。

正如我所说，我始终没能确定，到底露丝是否故意将话题扭转到了这里。说句公道话，我甚至不确定是不是她先提起那些动物的。可是一旦开了头，我就跟她一样乐不可支——某只动物看上去像穿着内裤，另外一只灵感肯定来自被压扁的刺猬。我想过程中我本该提一句说这些动物画得很好，他能把动物画到这种程度，水平真的很高。可我没有这么说。一部分是因为那盒磁带；另外，如果我坦白的话，也是因为我发现露丝没有严肃对待这些动物以及背后的一切含义，这让我感到很开心。那天晚上我们结束的时候，我觉得我们依然像以往那样亲密无间。她出门时摸了摸我的脸，说：“你总是兴致很高，这样真好，凯西。”

因此几天之后，在教堂墓地发生的事让我毫无防备。那年夏天露丝在距离农舍大约半英里的地方发现了一个很可爱的老教堂，教堂杂乱无章的庭院后面，有些古老的墓碑在草丛中倾斜倒伏。一切都被杂草覆盖，但那里真的很幽静，露丝总是到这里来看书，就在后墙栏杆

附近，一棵大柳树下的长椅上。刚开始我对她的阅读热情有点不以为然，去年夏天大家都在农舍外面围坐在草地上看书的样子还历历在目。尽管如此，如果我散步时朝那个方向走，就料定露丝很可能在那里，我会不知不觉穿过那座低矮的木门，沿着杂草丛生的小路穿过那些墓碑。那天下午，天气暖和，周围很静，我犹如梦游一般走上了这条小路，看着墓碑上一个个名字，突然发现不只是露丝，汤米也在柳树下的长椅上。

露丝是坐在长椅上，而汤米却是一只脚踩在生锈的椅子扶手上站着，两人一边说话，他一边在做某种伸展运动。看起来他们没有在谈什么要紧事，于是我毫不犹豫地走上前去。也许从他们打招呼的态度上，我应该可以有所察觉，但我可以肯定并没有任何显著迹象。有个八卦我迫不及待想告诉他们——是关于新来的人之一——因此一开始只是我一个人巴拉巴拉说个不停，他们时而点头，时而冒出个古怪的问题。过了一阵我才觉察出气氛不对劲。即便这时，我停下来问他们：“我是不是打断了你们的正事？”我也还是有几分玩笑的口气。

可是这时，露丝却说：“汤米正在跟我讲他的宏大理论。他说他已经跟你讲过了。很久以前。可是现在，蒙他好心，也愿意分享给我知道呢。”

汤米叹了口气，刚想要说什么，露丝却语带讥讽地轻声说：“汤米宏大的艺廊理论！”

这时他们俩都望着我，仿佛现在由我主持局面，我得为接下来的事负责。

“这理论也不坏，”我说，“有可能是对的。我不知道。你觉得呢，露丝？”

“我可是费了番功夫才把这位甜蜜小哥的嘴巴撬开。人家可一点都不想让我知道呢，是不是，小甜甜？我不断追问他，搞这么多艺术创作的背后，到底有什么深意，这才套出来的。”

“我创作不光是为了这个，”汤米很不开心地说。他一只脚仍然踩在扶手上，继续做伸展运动。“我只是说，如果我对于艺廊的理论没错，那我总可以试试看，把这些动物交过去……”

“汤米，亲爱的，别当着好朋友的面犯傻。跟我说是一回事，但是当着我们亲爱的凯西，那就另当别论了。”

“我就不明白这有什么可笑，” 汤米说，“这理论并不比其他人的差到哪里去。”

“别人不是认为你的理论傻，小甜甜。他们甚至可能觉得你说得很对，有几分道理。但是你想拿自己这些小动物去找夫人，靠这个翻盘……” 露丝面带微笑，摇了摇头。

汤米没说话，继续做他的伸展。我很想替他申辩，很想说点什么能让他感觉好些，又不想让露丝火气更大。但就在这时，露丝发出了致命一击。那话当时就让人很难受，但我完全没想到，那天教堂的事会引起那么久远的反响。她是这样说的：

“不只是我，亲爱的，我们凯西也认为你画的动物完全是瞎胡闹。”

我的第一本能是要否认，然后一笑置之。然而露丝这话说得真的很有分量，我们三个人都太了解彼此，知道她话里有话。因此最终我选择了沉默，然而脑海中却在奋力搜索，回忆往事，终于怀着寒意和惊恐，想起了那天深夜，在我房间里我们的杯茶恳谈。这时露丝说：

“只要别人认为你画这些小动物是当做玩笑，那没问题。但是千万别让人发现你是认真的。求你了。”

汤米停下了伸展的动作，眼带疑问地望着我。突然之间他再次变得像孩童时那样，完全没了头绪，我能看出，他眼神背后某种黑暗危险的东西正在凝聚。

“你瞧，汤米，你得理解，” 露丝继续说，“我和凯西再怎么笑话你都没有问题。因为我们是自己人。但是拜托你，千万别把其他人再搅和进来了。”

后来，我一次又一次地回想那个场景。我真该想出些话来说。我本可以否认她的说法，尽管汤米很可能会不相信我。要想如实地将事情解释清楚又会太过复杂。但我本可以做些什么。我可以质疑露丝的说法，说她扭曲了我们的谈话，说虽然我笑话过汤米，但却不是她所暗示的那种意思。我甚至可以走到汤米跟前，去拥抱他，就当露丝的面。这是我过了几年之后才想到的做法，也许当时并不真的存在这样的选择，因为我这样的个性，再加上我们三个人之间的那种关系。可是那样做也许就能解决问题了，而言语只会让我们在困境中越陷越深。

可我什么也没说，什么也没做。我猜部分原因是我完全没料到露丝会耍这样的诡计，当即被她一击倒地。我记得当时浑身疲惫不堪，面对眼前这纠缠不清的混乱充满无力之感。就好像你大脑已经很疲倦的时候还要你做数学题一样，你隐约知道答案，却连试一试的力气都没有。我打内心里已经放弃了。有个声音劝我：“随便吧。任由他往最坏处去想吧。由他去，由他去想吧。”我想，自己大概就是怀着这样投降的心情望着他。我的表情仿佛说：“没错，是这么回事，不然你想怎样？”我依然能够记起，汤米的面容犹在眼前，愤怒瞬时消散，换成了一种几乎是惊讶的表情，仿佛我是一只他无意中看到的罕见蝴蝶，停在篱笆上。

我倒不是担心自己会突然掉下眼泪、发脾气，或者做出类似的举动。我只是决定转身离开。就在当天晚些时候，我就意识到这是个错误的决定。我只能说，当时我最最怕他们两人中有一个会先跑掉，剩下我跟另外一个面面相觑。我不知道为什么，但当时我感觉，不可能有一个以上的人愤而离场，我想要确定走的那个人是我。于是我就转身大步流星地沿着来路走了回去，穿过那些墓碑，走向那扇木门，有几分钟我感觉仿佛自己获得了胜利；现在他们只剩下彼此互为陪伴，他们所遭受的一切完全是自己活该。

第十七章

正如我所说，只有在过了很久之后——我离开农舍很长时间之后——我才认识到我们在教堂墓地的这次小遭遇有多重要。我当时很沮丧，没错。但我当时无法相信，此事跟我们之前的那些争吵有任何不同。到那时为止，我们的生活都密切交织在一起，我从未想过，我们的关系会因为这样一件事而分崩离析。

但实际上，我想，将我们分开的态势已经十分强大，只需像这样的一件小事来完成任务。如果我们那时候能够理解这点——谁知道呢？——也许我们会更加用力地抓住彼此。

一方面，越来越多的学生离开了，去当护理员，我们这群黑尔舍姆的老人越来越强烈地感觉到要遵循这自然的进程。我们还有论文要完成，但大家都知道，如果我们选择开始培训，其实就无需完成论文。在我们刚刚到农舍的那段日子里，完不成论文这种想法，于我们简直是不可想象的。但是，随着黑尔舍姆渐退渐远，论文也就越来越显得不那么重要了。当时我有个想法——很可能我的想法没错——如果我们认为论文重要的念头可以渐渐消退，那么将我们黑尔舍姆的学生绑在一起的那种纽带，也同样会慢慢消失。因此有一段时间里，我尽力让大家保持阅读和做笔记的热情。但大家没有任何理由相信还能见到我们的导师，况且那么多学生都已经进入了新的生活，很快这些努力就显得毫无意义了。

总之，教堂墓地的那场谈话之后的那些天，我尽力将这事抛到脑后。我对露丝和汤米两人都依然如故，仿佛并没有发生过什么特别的事，他们也大致同样以对。但是现在总感觉有隔阂，而且不仅仅是我和他俩之间。虽然他们表面上还是一对情侣——两人分开的时候，还是会打一下手臂什么的——但我对他们太了解，看得出他们已经逐渐疏远了。

当然这一切让我感到难过，尤其是汤米画的动物。但事情没那么简单，我不能像从前那样径直走到他面前说对不起，然后把事情的真相解释给他听。早几年的话，甚至就在半年前，这样做可能还行得通。我和汤米可以好好谈谈，把话说透。然而不知怎的，到了那第二年的夏天，情况就不同了。也许是因为我跟莱尼的关系，我不知道。总之，跟汤米谈话变得不再像从前那样容易了。至少从表面看来，一

切跟从前没什么不同，但我们再也没有提起那些动物，以及教堂墓园里发生的事。

所以，这就是我和露丝在旧公交站台的谈话之前，所发生的一切。那次我因为她假装忘记了黑尔舍姆那块大黄田而大为光火。正如我所说的，如果不是发生在那样严肃的一场对话中间，很可能我不会那么生气。诚然，到那时我们已经聊过了很多实质内容，可是即便如此，哪怕我们当时只是在缓和气氛，闲聊几句，那也还是我们尽力解决分歧的过程，其中容不得一星半点的伪饰虚假之类。

事情是这样的。虽然我和汤米之间的交流有了一些问题，我和露丝之间没这样的问题——至少我是那样想的——我决定现在是时候跟她谈谈教堂墓地发生的事了。我们刚刚度过了夏天常见的雷电交加的一天，虽然很潮湿，还是被迫待在房间里。因此到傍晚天气放晴，出现粉色落日的时候，我跟露丝提议，两人出去呼吸点新鲜空气。我发现了一条陡峭的小路，沿着山谷的边缘一直上坡，就在连接大路的地方有个废弃的公交车站。公交车好多年前就停了，公交站牌早就被撤走了，车棚背后的墙上只剩下一个空框子，原先镶在玻璃框里的行车时刻表早已无处可寻。但是候车亭本身——那是个用心建造的木亭子，外侧敞开，朝着一片下坡的田野——依然树立着，连里面的长椅都安然无恙。于是我和露丝就在那里坐了下来，喘口气，望着椽子上的蜘蛛网，还有外面的夏日夕阳。然后我开口说，大意如此：

“你知道的，露丝，咱们得试试看解决问题，关于那天的事。”

我特意说得很和缓，而露丝也做出了回应。她立刻说这太傻了，我们三个人总是为了这种愚不可及的原因闹矛盾。她说起我们之间其他的争执，我们就此说笑了一番。可我真心不希望露丝就此将这件事按下再也不提，于是我用最不具有挑衅性的语气，继续说道：

“露丝，你知道，我认为，有时候你在恋爱中，有些事不如置身事外的人看得清楚。当然只是有时候。”

她点头。“很可能是这样。”

“我不想多事。但是有时候，只是最近，我发现汤米很不开心。你知道。因为你的某些说法或者做法。”

我担心露丝会生气，可她点了点头，叹了口气。“我觉得你说得对，”最终她说，“我也想了很多。”

“那么也许我不该提起这茬儿。我该知道你明白发生了什么。其实这不关我事。”

“但是这跟你有关系的，凯西。其实你是我们的一分子，所以始终跟你有关。你说得对。最近确实不太好。我明白你意思。那天的事，关于他画的动物。那样不好。我跟他道歉，说过对不起了。”

“我很高兴你们谈过了。我不知道你们有没有。”

露丝在椅子上她那一侧把一些发霉的木片剥下来，有那么一会儿她仿佛全心全意在忙这个活儿。过了一会儿她说：

“你瞧，凯西，很高兴我们谈到了汤米。我有事想告诉你，但我一直不知道应该怎么开口，或者什么时候说，真的，凯西，你保证不要太生我气。”

我望着她说：“只要不是还跟那些T恤衫有关就好。”

“不是，说真的。你保证不要太生气。因为我必须得告诉你。要是我再坚持不说，我就没办法原谅自己。”

“好吧。到底是什么？”

“凯西，这件事我想了很久。你又不笨，你看得出，也许我跟汤米，我们不可能永远在一起。那不是悲剧。我们曾经很般配。至于会不会未来也一直这样般配，那就谁也说不准了。现在说法很多，说情侣如果能证明，你知道的，证明他们真的般配，他们就可以获准推迟。得，你瞧，我想说的，凯西，是这样的。如果你猜想，比如说，如果我和汤米决定不在一起了，那是很自然的事。我们没打算分手，你别误会。可我觉得，至少你有这样的想法是很正常的。其实呢，凯西，你应该明白，汤米不是那样看你的。他真的真的很喜欢你，他觉得你很棒。可我知道他对待你不是那样，你知道，可以当女朋友那种。再说……”露丝停顿了一下，然后叹了口气，“再说，你知道汤米这个人。他有时候很挑剔。”

我瞪着她。“你什么意思？”

“你一定知道我的意思。汤米不喜欢那种女生……哎，你知道，跟这个人，又跟那个人的。他就是这样计较。对不起，凯西，但是瞒着你是不对的。”

我想了一想，然后说：“知道这些事总是好的。”

我感到露丝碰了碰我胳膊。“我就知道你不会想偏了。可是你得明白，他非常看重你。他真是这样。”

我想换个话题，但一时间我脑子一片空白。我猜露丝一定察觉出了这一点，因为她张开双臂，打了个哈欠，说道：

“要是我学会了开车，一定会带大家去荒野。比如达特摩尔荒原。我们三个，也许还有劳拉和汉娜。我很想看看沼泽什么的。”

接下来的几分钟里，我们说的都是些如果假设这样的旅行真的实现了，我们会做些什么。我问大家要住在哪里，露丝说我们可以借一个大帐篷。我指出像那样的地方风会很大，我们的帐篷夜里很容易就会被吹走了。都没有什么要紧话，但就是说到这里的时候，我记起了在黑尔舍姆的事。那时候我们还在小学部，大家跟杰拉尔丁小姐一起，在池塘边野餐。詹姆士·B被派去主楼取早先大家一起烤好的蛋糕，但是当他拿着蛋糕回来的时候，一阵狂风吹过，最上面的一层海绵蛋糕整个被吹走了，全落到了大黄田里的叶子上。露丝说这件事她只是隐约有点印象，为了挖掘她更多的记忆，我又说：

“问题是他惹了麻烦，因为这就证明他是从大黄田里走过来的。”

就在这时露丝望着我说：“为什么？那有什么问题？”

突然之间，她讲这话的方式显得如此虚伪，如果有旁观者的话，也会一眼看得穿她。我不耐烦地叹了口气，说道：

“露丝，少跟我来这套。你不可能忘掉。你知道大黄田是不许进入的。”

也许我说得有点太冲了。总之露丝没有让步。她仍然假装什么都不记得，于是我越发恼火。就在这时她说：

“这又有什么重要？那片大黄田跟这一切有什么关系？你说到哪儿继续就是了。”

我想，那之后我们或多或少又回到了原先的友好谈话之中，不久之后我们就沿着小路，在明暗交接的暮色中走回了农舍。但那种气氛始终没有变好，我们在黑谷仓前道别的时候，分手时并没有像往常一样，碰触彼此的手臂和肩膀。

那之后不久，我做了决定，一旦我做出了决定，就再也没有犹豫。一天早上我起床之后，就告诉凯波斯，说我想开始培训，做护理

员。事情出于意料得容易。他正从院子里走过，雨靴上沾满泥巴，一边自言自语，手里拿着一根管子。我走上前去对他说，他只是看着我，好像我又是来麻烦他要木柴似的。然后他嘟囔了一句，说让我下午再去找他填表格。就这么简单。

当然，在那之后又等了一些时候，但事情已经开始运行了，突然我看待一切——农舍，里面的所有人——都换了不同的眼光。现在我成了要离开的人之一，很快大家都知道了。也许露丝以为我们会很多的时间一起谈论我的未来，也许她以为自己能有很大影响，决定我是否改变主意。但我可以跟她保持距离，同样也跟汤米保持距离。我们在农舍再也没有详细交谈过，没等明白过来，我已经在跟大家说再见了。

第三部

第十八章

总的来说，护理人员的工作很适合我。你甚至可以说，它带出了我最好的一面。但有些人天生不是这块料，对他们来说，整件事完全就是煎熬。可能他们开始的时候也很积极，但随之而来却是长时间与痛苦和忧虑相伴的生活。或迟或早，总会有捐献者撑不过来，哪怕是，比如说这只是第二次捐献，没人料到会有并发症。当捐献者就像这样毫无征兆地完结时，无论事后护士怎么说，或是收到一封写得多么好的信，说他们确信你已经能做的都做了，要继续好好工作云云，都不会让你感觉任何不同。至少一段时间里，你会意志消沉。我们中有些人很快能学会如何应对。但其他人——比如就像劳拉——他们始终学不会。

还有孤独。你成长的过程中，身边始终有人群围绕，你只懂得这样生活，突然之间你成了护理人员。一个钟头又一个钟头，你一个人开车驶过全国，一个又一个康复中心，一家又一家医院，匆匆在旅途中找地方过夜，没有人可以向他诉说你的担忧，也没有人跟你一同欢笑。偶尔你会碰上熟识的学生——一个护理人员或是捐献者，你认出是从前的旧相识——可是永远都没时间。你总是来去匆匆，再不然就是筋疲力尽，没办法好好谈话。要不了多久，这些漫长的工作时间、旅行、断断续续的睡眠，都会侵入你的身心，变成你的一部分，从你的体态、你的眼神、你的言谈举止，人们都能看得出。

我并不是声称自己对这一切完全免疫，但是我已经学会了应对这些情况。可是有些护理人员，他们全部的仪态都显得自暴自弃。你看得出其中很多人只是机械地应付，等待着某一天，有人告诉他们可以停下，去当捐献者吧。同样，很多人一步入医院就会明显地瑟缩，这也让我很受不了。他们不知道该如何对白大褂说话，他们没办法鼓起勇气替他们的捐献者说话。这就难怪出问题的时候他们会感觉受挫，充满自责。我尽量不让自己讨人嫌，但我也想出办法，在需要的时候让人能听得进我说的意思。情况不好的时候，当然我会难过，但至少我可以感觉自己已经尽了全力，往长远考虑。

就连那份孤独，我其实也已经渐渐开始喜欢上了。这倒不是说不期待到年底我做完这一切之后，能够多得到一些陪伴。可我真的很喜欢那种感觉，钻进我的小汽车，知道在接下来的几个钟头，我就只有长路、灰色的天空和自己的白日梦为伴。如果我在某个小镇上，有

几分钟空余时间，我很喜欢四处闲逛，看看商店的橱窗。在这里我的起居室里，我有四盏台灯，每个颜色都不相同，但款式一样——都有棱纹灯臂，可以任意折弯。所以我可以找间商店，看看橱窗里还有没有像这样的灯——倒未必买，只是跟我自家的比较一番。

有时候我太过沉浸在自己的世界里，如果意外碰到我认识的人，反而会吃一惊，需要一点时间调整。那天早上就是这样，我在服务区走过风口里的停车场看到劳拉在一辆停着的车里，坐驾驶位，眼神空洞地望着前面的车道。我离她还有一点距离，尽管我们自从农舍分开以来，已经七年没见，但刹那间我有种冲动想无视她，继续朝前走。我知道这反应很奇怪，因为她曾是我最近的朋友之一。正如我所说，可能部分原因在于我不喜欢被人撞破我的白日梦。但同时我猜想，当我看到劳拉像那样瘫倒在车里的时候，我立刻就看出，她已经变成了我刚刚描述过的那种护理员，一部分的我只是不想知道更多烦恼。

但是当然，我还是朝她走了过去。一阵冷风迎面吹过来，我朝她走去，她把车停得距离其他车辆很远。劳拉穿着一件没形没状的蓝色风雨衣，她的头发——比从前短了很多——都粘在额头上。我敲了敲她的车窗，她并没有惊诧，过了这么多年又见到我，她甚至没有一点意外的神色。就好像她一直坐在那里等待着，如果等的具体不是我，那么也是一个多少与我相似的旧日相识。现在我出现了，她第一个念头仿佛是说：“终于来了！”因为我看到她的肩膀动了一下，仿佛叹了口气，随后她毫不犹豫地立即探身为我打开了车门。

我们谈了大约二十分钟：直到不得不走了我才离开。谈的多半是她的事，她多么疲惫，某一个捐献者多难搞，她多么讨厌哪个护士或是医生。我期待着那个总是带着恶作剧的笑容，机灵话忍不住往外迸的旧日劳拉能够偶尔闪现，但却一点也没有。她讲话比从前更快了，虽然她好像见到我很高兴，但我有时候觉得，如果碰到的不是我，而是别的人，也没什么不同，只要她能够说说话就成。

也许我们俩都觉得提起旧日会带来一些危险，因为很长时间我们都避免提到从前。可是最终，我们却不由自主地谈起了露丝，几年前劳拉在一间诊所碰到过她，那时候露丝还在做护理员。我开始问她关于露丝的情况，但她总是不肯讲，最后我对她说：

“你瞧，你们肯定谈过几句什么吧。”

劳拉长叹一声。“你明白的，”她说，“我们俩都赶时间。”然后她又说：“反正，我们在农舍最后分手的时候已经算不得好朋友了。所以说也许我们并没有很高兴见到对方。”

“我不知道原来你也跟她闹翻了，”我说。

她耸耸肩。“没什么大不了。你记得当时她那副样子。你走了之后，要说她有变化，就只是更过分了。你知道的，对谁都颐指气使。所以我一直躲着她，仅此而已。我们从来没有吵过架什么的。这么说来你从那以后再没见过她？”

“没有。真奇怪。我一眼都没有瞥到过她。”

“没错，真奇怪。都以为我们这些人肯定经常能碰到呢。我看到过汉娜几次。还有迈克尔·H。”然后她又说：“我听到有传言，说露丝第一次捐献很不好。只是传言而已，但我听过不止一次。”

“我也听说过，”我说。

“可怜的露丝。”

有一会儿两人都没讲话。然后劳拉问：“这是真的吗，凯西？他们现在让你自己选捐献者了？”

她问的时候并没有像其他人有时候那样，带有指责的语气，所以我点头说道：“不是每次都行。但有几个捐献者我照顾得很好，所以没错，我时不时可以自己挑选护理对象。”

“如果你能自己选的话，”劳拉说，“那你干吗不给露丝当护理员呢？”

我耸了耸肩。“我想过的。但我说不准这是不是个好主意。”

劳拉看起来有点迷惑。“可你跟露丝，你们俩当初多好呀。”

“是呀，我想是的。但是跟你一样，劳拉。我和她到最后也算不上好朋友。”

“噢，可那是当初的事了。她过得可不好了。我听说她跟护理员也总是处不好。他们不得不给她换了好几个护理员。”

“一点不奇怪，真的，”我说，“你想得出吗？给露丝做护理员？”

劳拉笑了，有一秒钟她眼神中浮现出一丝生气，我以为她终于要开口讲俏皮话了。可是随后那闪光就熄灭了，她仍是坐在原地，满脸疲惫。

我们又谈了一小会儿，关于露丝的问题——具体就是某个女护士好像总是跟她过不去。后来到了我该走的时候，我伸手去开门，一面对她说下次再碰到我们要多聊聊。但这时两人谁都不曾提起的一件事却如鲠在喉，我想，两人都觉得这样就分手很不对劲。事实上，现在我很确信，在当时，两人脑海中想到的词句都几乎是完全一样的。然后她说：

“太奇怪了。想想看，一切都不在了。”

我从座位上转身，重新回头面对着她。“是啊，真的太奇怪了，”我说，“真不敢相信就再也没有了。”

“多奇怪啊，”劳拉说，“我以为现在我不会觉得有什么不同。然而并不是这么回事。”

“我明白你的意思。”

就是这番对话，终于谈到了黑尔舍姆关闭的事，才突然让我们重新贴近了彼此，我们自然地拥抱，与其说是相互安慰，不如说是用这个动作印证黑尔舍姆，证明它依然存在于我们两人的记忆中。然后我就只得匆匆跑到自己的车上去了。

我最初听到流言说黑尔舍姆关闭，是跟劳拉在停车场相遇的一年前。我跟捐献者或是护理员讲话的时候，他们总会无意中提起，仿佛认为我什么都应该知道。“你是黑尔舍姆出来的，对吧？那是不是真的？”诸如此类。后来有一天，我刚刚从萨福克的一家诊所出来，碰上了罗杰·C，他比我低一个年级，他有十足把握地告诉我说确实如此。黑尔舍姆随时可能关闭，还有计划将房屋和地产卖给一家连锁酒店。我记得他跟我说完之后我最初的反应。我说：“可是学生怎么办？”罗杰显然是以为我指的是还在校的学生，那些需要依靠导师的小不点儿，他面露难色，开始猜测学生将如何被转到全国各地的其他校舍，哪怕有些跟黑尔舍姆简直天差地别。可当然，我不是那个意思。我指的是我们，所有那些跟我一起长大，现在分散在全国各地的学生，那些护理员和捐献者，现在虽然风行雨散，却依然被我们共同的出处联结在一起。

就是当天夜里，我在小旅馆辗转难眠，几天前发生的一件事不停地浮上脑海。那时我在北威尔士一个海边小镇上。当天上午都在下大雨，但午饭之后雨停了，出了一会儿太阳。我正沿着海边漫长延伸的笔直小路，朝自己停车的地方走去。周围没有什么人，因此我可以看到面前潮湿的石板路毫无阻断地直线向前展开。后来过了一会一辆面包车开了过来，在我面前大约三十码开外停了下来，一个打扮成小丑的男人走了下来。他打开了车厢后盖，取出了一把充满氦气的气球，大约有一打。他花了一小会儿工夫弯着腰，一手拿着气球，另一手在车里翻找什么东西。我走近了之后，发现气球上绘有面容，还有耳朵的形状，看起来就像一个小族群，在主人上方的半空中蹦蹦跳跳，等待着他。

后来小丑直起身体，关上车厢，开始行走，他跟我方向一致，就在我前方几步远，一手拿着文件包，另一手牵着气球。海边的路一直延伸，又长又直，我在他身后走了仿佛有很久很久。有时候我觉得挺尴尬，甚至想小丑会不会回过头来对我说些什么。但是我只能走这条路，也没别的办法。于是我们就这样继续往前走，我和小丑一前一后走在这条没人的小路上，上午下过雨，地上潮湿依旧。与此同时气球就一直碰碰撞撞，低头朝我展开笑容。我时不时可以看到那人的拳头，所有的气球线绳都在这里聚拢。我看得见它们牢牢绑在一起，系成紧紧一握。可是即便如此，我还是时常担心，会有一根线绳松脱，就会有一个气球飞起来，消失到阴云密布的天空中。

罗杰跟我说了那些话之后，那天晚上我躺在床上睡不着，那些气球不断浮现在我脑海中。我想到黑尔舍姆关闭了，这就好比有人走上前来，拿出一把剪子，就从那男人拳头上面气球的线绳刚刚开始打结的地方，一剪子剪下去。一旦如此，这些气球曾经同属一个族群的这种关联就完全不复存在了。当罗杰跟我讲黑尔舍姆的新闻时，他说了这么一句话，他说他以为黑尔舍姆关闭与否，对于我们这些人，应该没什么不同。从某些角度来看，也许他说得对。可是一想到那里不再一切如常，比如说，再没有杰拉尔丁小姐那样的人，带着小学部的小朋友在北操场活动，就令人很不放心。

在跟罗杰交谈之后的几个月里，我总是会想起这件事，关于黑尔舍姆的关闭，以及背后的含义。我猜，就是这时候我才渐渐想清楚，我一直以为有的是时间，很多事早晚可以做，可是现在我最好尽快行动，不然不如永远放弃算了。确切地说，我倒不是开始惊恐。但黑尔舍姆关闭的确让我们周围的一切发生了偏移。所以那天劳拉跟我说，不如我给露丝当护理人员的时候，尽管我当时没答应，但她的话对我还

是有很深的影响。仿佛有一部分的我早已做出了决定，而劳拉的话只是揭开了一直覆盖在上面的一层面纱。

我第一次出现在多佛露丝的康复中心时——那是一座现代建筑，墙上铺着白瓷砖——我跟劳拉的对话才过去没几个星期。露丝的第一次捐献已经过了两个月——正如劳拉所说，情况很不好。当我走进她房间的时候，她正穿着睡裙坐在床边，对我报以大大的笑容。她站起来拥抱我，但几乎立刻就又坐了回去。她对我说我看上去比从前精神，说我的发型真的很适合我。我也说了些好话夸她，接下来的大约半小时里，我觉得我们都发自内心地为能够聚首感到高兴。我们谈到了各种事——黑尔舍姆、农舍、那以后我们都做了什么——感觉好像我们一直有讲不完的话。换句话说，这是个令人鼓舞的开端，比我斗胆预料的要好。

即便如此，那第一次重会，我们都没有谈到分手时的情形。也许，如果我们一开始就谈到这些话，事情会有不一样的发展，谁知道呢？实际上，我们只是避而不提此事，两人聊了一会儿之后，仿佛取得了共识，就假装这一切都没有发生过。

仅就第一次的会面而言，一切可能完全没有问题。但是，一旦我正式做了她的护理员，开始定期看望她之后，这种有什么不对劲的感觉变得越来越强烈。我形成了一种规律，每周去三四次，总是傍晚时分，带着矿泉水和一包她喜欢的饼干。这本该是件很开心的事，但刚开始的时候却完全不是这样。我们开始交谈，聊些无关的闲话，不知为了什么缘故，聊天就会骤然停下。不然就是两人虽然尽力将谈话继续下去，但谈得越久，就变得越不自然，彼此越戒备。

有一天下午，我沿着她住处的走廊走去看她，听到她的房门对面淋浴房里有人。我猜是露丝在里面，于是就自己进了她的房间，站在里面等她，一边透过她的窗户，俯瞰下方的屋顶。大约五分钟之后，她围着浴巾走了进来。说句公道话，她以为我要一个小时之后才会到，我猜任何人刚刚冲过澡，身上只裹着一条浴巾的时候，都会感觉有点脆弱缺乏保护。即便如此，她脸上闪过的那种警惕神情还是让我大为震惊。这里我得稍作解释。当然，她有点受惊我是预料到的。但问题是等她回过神来，认出是我之后，有一秒钟，也许更久的时间里，她仍然带着一种即便不是恐惧，也是真正警觉的眼神望着我。就好像她一直在等啊等，等待我把她怎么样，她以为终于是时候我要动手了。

刹那之后那种表情消失了，我们谈笑如常，但那个片刻让我们俩都深感受挫。这让我明白露丝并不信任我，就我所知，可能她自己直到那一刻也才真正意识到这一点。不管怎么说，那天之后，气氛愈发糟糕了。就好像我们将什么东西暴露了出来，但这样做并没有消除误会，却让我们比任何时候更加清楚地意识到两人之间发生过的一切。情况到了这样的地步，我进去看望她之前，先要在自己的车里坐一会儿，才能鼓起勇气去经受这番考验。某次探望的时候，我们在冰冷的沉默中为她做完了所有的检查，然后就坐在那里，继续沉默，我差点就要跟他们报告，说这样的安排不成功，我不应当继续给露丝当护理人员了。但是后来一切又变了，是因为那条船的缘故。

天晓得这些都是怎么回事。有时候是一个段子，有时候是某种谣言，从一家康复中心传到另一家，几天之内就传遍全国，突然之间，所有的捐献者都在说这件事儿。这次是关于一条船。我先是北威尔士两个我护理的捐献者那儿听说的。然后过了几天，露丝也开始跟我讲。仅仅为了我们终于找到话题可以聊，我就感到如释重负了，于是就鼓励她继续讲。

“隔壁楼层有个男孩儿，”她说，“他的护理人员真的去看过。他说就在离大路不远的地方，随便什么人，不用太费劲都可以去看。这条船就蹲在那里，搁浅在沼泽里。”

“船怎么到那儿去的？”我问。

“我怎么知道？不管船是谁的，也许他们想扔掉它。再不然就是什么时候发过大水，船漂过来，然后搁浅了。谁知道呢？据说是条旧渔船。有个小船舱，雷雨天的话两三个渔民可以挤在里面。”

那之后几次我去探望她的时候，她总是会再次提起那条船。于是有天下午，她开始告诉我说这家中心有一个捐献者被她的护理人员带去看了这条船，这时我对她说：

“你瞧，这地方也不是很近，你知道的。可能开车要一个小时，甚至一个半小时才能到。”

“我没有别的意思。我知道你还有别的捐献者要担心呢。”

“可你是想去看的。你是去看这条船的，对不对，露丝？”

“我想是的。我是想去。一天又一天地待在这个地方。没错，能去看看这样的东西挺好。”

“你是不是认为，”——我温柔地说，避免任何讥讽的意味——“如果我们开车大老远过去，是不是可以顺便看看汤米？反正他的康复中心就在停船的那条路下去不远的地方？”

开始露丝的脸上没有透露出任何表情。“我觉得可以考虑，”她说。随后她笑了，又说：“坦白讲，凯西，我一直讲这条船的事，不单是为了这个缘故。我是真的想去看看，看这条船。这段时间总在医院进进出出。然后又关在这里。对这种事比以往更在意了。但是没错。我的确是知道。我知道汤米就在金斯费尔德中心。”

“你确定想去见他吗？”

“对，”她毫不迟疑地说，眼神直视着我，“没错，我想。”然后她又平静地说：“我很久没见过这男孩儿了。自从农舍之后就没见过。”

这时，我们终于谈起了汤米。我们并没有聊得很深很多，我也没有获悉多少从前不知道的事。但我想两人都觉得还好，我们终于说到了他。露丝告诉我说，那年秋天她在我之后离开农舍的时候，她与汤米两个人已经相当疏远了。

“因为反正我们要去不同的地方开始培训，”她说，“正式分手很不值的。所以我们就还是待在一起，直到我离开。”

到这里为止，我们再没有对此多说些什么了。

至于出去看那条船的行程，我们第一次讨论的时候，我既没有同意也没有反对。但接下来的几周里，露丝反复提起，渐渐我们的计划变得越来越切实可行，直到最后，我通过一个熟人给汤米的护理员发了消息，说除非收到汤米的消息，叫我们不要去，不然我们就在下周某天下午出现在金斯费尔德。

第十九章

那时候我极少去金斯费尔德，所以我和露丝一路上只得多次查阅地图，最终还是迟到了几分钟。这家康复中心没有很清楚的标注，要不是因为后来我跟这地方有了千丝万缕的关系，这里也不是一个我会期望造访的地方。它地处偏僻，不便到达，可是当你到了之后，这里又不具备真正意义上的平静安详。你总能听到围墙外大路上的车声，总体上感觉他们好像始终没有全部完成这地方的改造工程。许多捐献者的房间轮椅无法出入，不然就是不通风，或者太漏风。浴室总是不够，仅有的几间很难保持清洁，冬天冷得要命，还总是距离捐献者的房间太远。换句话说，金斯费尔德跟露丝在多佛的康复中心简直有天壤之别，那边瓷砖耀目，双层玻璃，只需轻轻一拧窗户把手，就可以关得严丝合缝。

后来，当金斯费尔德变成了那个我熟悉而宝贵的地方之后，我在其中一座办公楼里看到了一张这地方改造之前的黑白照片，镶在镜框里。那时候这里还是一座普通家庭的度假营地。照片拍摄的时间可能是五十年代后期，或者六十年代早期，上面有个很大的长方形游泳池，许多快乐的人们——孩子和父母亲——在四处泼水，尽情玩乐。池边都是水泥，但人们架起了折叠椅和日光浴躺椅，还有很大的遮阳伞，将他们罩在阴凉里。我刚看到这画面的时候，花了一点时间才弄明白，我看到的就是现在捐献者们称为“广场”的地方——你开车到这座中心的时候，先要开到这里来。当然，现在游泳池已经填起来了，但轮廓依然在，而且在泳池一端还依然树立着——改造未完成的例证之一——跳水高台的金属架。直到我看到照片才明白那框架是什么，为什么会在那里，而今天，每次我看到它的时候，都会不由自主地想象出游泳者从顶部一跃而下，却只能撞在水泥地面上的画面。

要不是画面上背景中分布在游泳池周围三面的那些碉堡似的白色两层建筑，我本来没那么容易能辨认出照片里广场的位置。这些想必就是当年那些家庭的度假公寓，虽然我猜想房屋内部一定改变很大，但外立面基本保持原样。我想，就某些方面而言，今天的广场跟当初的游泳池也没有那么大的不同。这里是当地的社交中心，捐献者们从房间里出来透透气、聊天的地方。广场周围有几个木制野餐长椅，但——尤其是阳光太热，或者下雨的时候——捐献者们还是喜欢到远处那头老旧跳水台架子后面，在娱乐室向外延伸的平屋顶下面聚会。

我和露丝到达金斯费尔德的那天下午，天气多云，略有寒意，当我们车子开到广场上的时候，那里没有什么人，只有一小群六七个人，影影绰绰在那边屋檐下方。当我将车停在旧泳池上某处时——当然那时我并不知道——一个身影离开了人群朝我们走来，我认出那正是汤米。他身穿一件褪色的绿色运动服上衣，看起来比我最后见他的时候，重了大约一英石⁽¹⁾左右。

坐在我身边的露丝似乎开始慌了神。“我们怎么办？”她说，“我们下车吗？不，不。我们不要下车。别动，别动。”

我不知道自己本来打算怎么做，但当露丝这样说的时候，不知为何，我想也没想就下了车。露丝仍是坐在原地，所以当汤米朝我们走来的时候，他的目光就落在了我身上，也因为如此，他首先拥抱的是我。我能闻到他身上隐约有某种医药的气息，但我不确定是什么。随后，尽管我们彼此什么都没有说，却都感到露丝在车里看着我们，于是分开了。

车窗玻璃上映出很大一片天空的倒影，所以我无法看清她的模样，但在我印象中，露丝的表情很严肃，几乎凝固一般，仿佛我和汤米是她在看的剧中人物。她的表情有些古怪，让我感到不自在。然后汤米绕过我，到了车旁。他打开后门，坐到了后排座椅上，这时轮到我来观察他们在车里交谈，礼貌地轻吻脸颊。

广场那边，屋檐下的捐献者们也在观看，虽然我觉得他们并没有恶意，突然间却很想尽快离开这里。但我尽量让自己放慢脚步走回车上，好让汤米和露丝多一点时间单独相处。

我们先是开车经过了几条狭窄曲折的小路，然后豁然开朗，进入了千篇一律的乡间大道，行驶在几乎没有车辆的路上。关于我们去看搁浅渔船的那次旅行，我所记得的就是，很长时间的阴霾之后，终于有了一点微弱的阳光穿透了灰暗的天色，每次当我转眼去看坐在旁边的露丝时，她脸上总是浮现出淡淡的平静的微笑。至于我们都谈了些什么，反正我记得我们都表现得仿佛大家都常常见面一般，好像没必要聊别的，只是眼前这点事儿就够我们说的。我问汤米他是不是已经去看过那条船了，他说没有。他曾经有几次机会，但都没去成。

“倒不是我不想去，”他说着，从后座朝前倾身，“我懒得费那个心。有一次我打算去的，跟另外两个人，还有他们的护理员，但后来我有点出血，就没办法再去。那是很久以前的事了。现在我早没有这种问题了。”

又过了一会儿，我们继续穿行在空旷的乡间，露丝从座位上向右转身，直到她面朝汤米，就那样一直看着他。她脸上依然带着淡淡的微笑，但什么也没说，我从后视镜中看到汤米本能地看起来很不自在。他不断地朝旁边的窗户往外看，然后转眼看看她，然后再转眼看看窗外。过了一会儿，露丝还是没有将视线从他身上转开，她开始聊别人的八卦轶事，她那个康复中心的某个捐献者，一个我们从未听说过的人，期间她始终都在望着汤米，淡淡的笑容也始终没有离开过脸庞。也许因为她的这些八卦让我觉得无聊，也许因为我想帮汤米解围，大约一分钟之后，我打断了她，我说：

“好啦，好啦，我们用不着知道关于她的所有事。”

我说这话完全没有恶意，说真的也没有任何其他意思。但是还没等露丝住嘴，甚至我话音还没落的时候，就听汤米突然爆发出一阵大笑，爆炸般的笑声，我以前从未听到他发出这样的声音。然后他说：

“我正想说同样的话。我刚刚有点走神了。”

我的眼睛望着路面，因此拿不准他是冲我说的还是露丝。无论如何，露丝不再说了，她慢慢地转回身体，直到重新面朝前方。她看起来并没有特别沮丧，但那笑容不见了，她眼神飘得很远，看着我们前方某处的天空。可我得坦白讲：那一刻我根本没想到露丝。我的心轻轻跳了一拍，因为这一来，这微不足道的表示赞同的一笑，感觉仿佛这么多年之后，我和汤米再次走到了一起。

从金斯费尔德出来之后过了大约二十分钟，我找到了需要拐弯的路口。我们沿着一条被树篱遮蔽的蜿蜒窄路朝前开，然后在一丛西克莫槭树旁停了下来。我在前面带路，走到树林边，但这时，我们面前有三条小路朝着林间不同方向，我只好停下来研究随身带的指路说明。当我站在那里，努力辨认那人手写的字迹时，突然意识到露丝和汤米站在我身边，两人都没说话，只是像孩子一样，等着我来告诉他们该往哪边走。

我们走进了树林，虽然路还算好走，但我注意到露丝呼吸越来越沉重了。相比之下，汤米却看不出任何难受的迹象，只是脚步隐约有点跛。后来我们走到了一面铁丝网栅栏前，栅栏倾斜生锈，网子被掀开，东倒西歪。露丝一看到，立刻就停下了脚步。

“哎呀，不行，”她焦虑地说。随后又朝我转过身。“你没说过会有这个。你没说过我们得过铁丝网呀！”

“不难走的，”我说，“我们可以从下面过。只要互相帮忙撑一下铁丝就行。”

可是露丝看起来真的很难过，她动也没动。就在这时，当她站在那里，肩膀随着呼吸上下起伏的时候，汤米仿佛才第一次发现她原来这么虚弱。也许他之前也留意过，但不愿意接受这一点。可是现在他瞪着露丝认真看了几秒钟。接下来发生的——当然我无法确知就是如此——就是我们俩，我和汤米，两人都想起了刚刚车里发生的事，我们多少算是合伙对抗她了。两人几乎是本能地同时向她走去。我搀住她一只胳膊，汤米从另一侧扶住她的肘部，我们开始慢慢地引着她朝栅栏走去。

只有当我需要自己先过栅栏那边的时候，才放开了露丝。然后我就尽力将铁丝网举高，我和汤米共同帮她走了过来。最终这对她也没有那么难：这更多是个信心的问题，因为我们有我们扶助，她似乎抛下了对栅栏的恐惧。到了另一侧，她还出了把力，跟我一起把铁丝网举高，让汤米过来。他过得很轻松，露丝对他说：

“原来只要这样弯下身就可以。这种事我有时候真是不在行。”

汤米看起来有点怯意，我疑心他是不是因为刚才的事不好意思，还是又想起了我们俩在车上合伙对付露丝的事。他朝我们面前的树点了点头，说道：

“我猜是往这个方向。对不对，凯丝？”

我瞥了一眼那张纸，再次开始头前带路。越往树林深处走越是幽暗，地面也越来越潮湿。

“希望我们不要迷路，”我听到露丝笑着对汤米说，但我看到前面不远处就有一片空地。经过片刻回味，我终于明白，为什么刚才车里发生的事让我这么耿耿于怀。不单单是因为我们合伙对付露丝：关键在于她的反应。从前的时候，根本无法想象她会听凭这样的事发生，而不予以反击。想明白这点之后，我在小径上停下了脚步，等着露丝和汤米跟上来，然后伸出胳膊环住了露丝的肩膀。

这并不会显得太煽情；这只是护理员的日常工作，因为现在她的脚步真的有些不稳，我疑心是不是我先前对她虚弱的程度严重缺乏预料。她的呼吸越来越沉重，我们走在一起的时候，她脚步趑趄，时不时靠到我身上。但随后我们就走出了树林，到了空地上，我们看得到那条船了。

实际上，我们并不是真的走到了一片空地：而是我们刚刚穿过的那片树木稀疏的林地在这里到了尽头，我们面前触目所及都是一片沼泽地。天空苍白辽阔，一片一片倒映在沼泽中嵌着的水洼里。不久之前，树木想必还曾经延伸得更远，因为时不时还可以看到泥土中冒出来幽灵一般的枯树干，大多数都在离地几英尺高的地方断掉了。这些枯死的树干再远处，大约六十码开外，就见那条船，映着微弱的阳光，陷在沼泽里。

“哎呀，跟我朋友说的一样，”露丝说，“真的很美。”

我们周遭一片寂静，当我们朝那条船走近的时候，能听到脚下鞋子在吱嘎作响。没过多久我就留意到踩在草丛上的脚开始下陷，于是喊道：“好了，我们只能走到这里了。”

另外两个人在我身后，都没有表示反对，当我回头朝后看时，见汤米再次搀着露丝的胳膊。但显然这只是为了扶住她。我迈着大步走到距离最近的枯树干旁，这里的泥土比较结实，然后靠着树干平衡身体。汤米和露丝也学我的样子走到另一棵树旁，那棵树都空了，比我这棵更枯瘦，在我后方左边。他们分别靠在树的两边，似乎安顿下来。然后我们望着搁浅的船只。现在我看得船上漆都剥落了，小船舱的木板框架都开裂了。船舱原来是漆成天蓝色的，但现在映着天空看起来几乎是白色的。

“不知道船是怎么到这里来的，”我说。我提高了声音，想让其他人听到我说的话，我以为还会有回音。可是发出的声音非常切近，令人意外，仿佛我是在一个铺着地毯的房间里。

这时我听到汤米在我身后说：“也许现在黑尔舍姆就是这样。你们觉得呢？”

“为什么黑尔舍姆会是这样？”露丝听起来是真心感到不解，“就因为关门了也不会变成沼泽地啊。”

“我想不会。我没动脑子。但我现在总是觉得黑尔舍姆变成了这样。完全没逻辑。实际上，这跟我脑子里的画面很相像。只不过那里没有船，当然了。那倒不是太坏，如果变成现在这样的话。”

“这倒滑稽，”露丝说，“因为有一天早上我做了个梦。我梦见我在楼上十四号教室。我知道整个校园都被关闭了，可我就在十四号教室，我朝窗外看，看到外面发大水了。就像一大片湖水一样。我能看到各种垃圾从我窗户下面漂过去，空的饮料盒什么的。但我完全没

有惊恐什么的感觉。一切静好，就像现在这样。我知道我没有任何危险，变成那样只是因为学校关门了。”

“你知道，”汤米说，“梅格·B在我们中心待过一段时间。她现在走了，去北方什么地方做第三次捐献。我再没听说过她的消息。你们俩有听过吗？”

我摇了摇头，因为没有听到露丝说话，于是回头去看她。开始我还以为她仍然在望着那条船，但后来我发现，她是凝望着远处空中一架慢慢爬升的飞机留下的尾迹云。然后她说：

“告诉你们一件我听说的吧。我听说了克里茜的消息。我听说她在第二次捐献中就完了。”

“我也听到过，”汤米说，“想必这是真的。我听到的跟你一模一样。太遗憾了。才第二次而已。很幸运我没发生这样的事。”

“我觉得这种事发生得肯定很多，只是他们不告诉我们，”露丝说，“我那边的护理员。她可能知道真相。但她不肯说。”

“这里头没有什么大阴谋，”我说着，转回身朝向那条船，“有时会发生这种事。克里茜的事很令人难过。但这种事并不常见。现在他们真的都很小心。”

“我敢肯定这种事发生的远远多于他们透露给我们的数量，”露丝再次说道，“每次捐献之间他们总是把我们搬来搬去，原因之一就是于此。”

“我碰到过罗德尼一次，”我说，“就在克里茜完结之后没多久。我在北威尔士的一家诊所里碰到他的。他还不错。”

“但我敢肯定克里茜的事让他伤透了心。”露丝说完，又对汤米说：“他们半点都不会告诉你的，明白吗？”

“实际上，”我说，“他没有太难过。很明显他很伤心。但他应付得还算可以。再说他们已经两三年没见面了。他说他认为克里茜不会太在意。我认为他说的应该有道理。”

“凭什么他说的就有道理？”露丝说，“他怎么可能知道克里茜的感受？知道她想要什么？躺在台子上，拼命挣扎着活下去的又不是他。他怎么会知道？”

这迸发的怒火更像是旧日的露丝，闻言我不禁再次朝她转过身去。也许只是她眼中满含怒火，但她回望我的目光带有一种严厉苛责

的表情。

“这不可能好受，” 汤米说，“第二次捐献人就完了。不可能好受。”

“我就不相信罗德尼对此感觉还可以，” 露丝说，“你只是跟他聊了几分钟而已。几分钟你能知道什么？”

“没错，” 汤米说，“但是正如凯丝说的，他们已经分手了……”

“那也不会有任何不同，” 露丝打断了他的话，“一定程度上来看，那样反而更难受。”

“我见过许多人处在罗德尼这种情况，” 我说，“他们的确能够接受现实。”

“你怎么会知道？” 露丝说，“你怎么可能知道？你才是个护理员。”

“我作为护理员见过很多人。真的很多。”

“她不会懂的，对不对，汤米？她不知道到底是怎么回事。”

有一会儿我们俩都望着汤米，可他仍是凝视着那条船。后来他说：

“我所在的中心有个人。他总是担心自己撑不过第二次捐献。总是说他骨子里都能感觉到。但后来证明根本没事。他刚刚做完第三次捐献，现在一点事都没有了。” 他抬起一只手遮住眼睛，“我做护理员不大行。连开车都没学会。我认为正因为如此我的通知才来得这么快。我知道按道理不是这么操作，但我相信其实就是这么回事。不过其实我也不在乎。我作为捐献者很不错，但我是个很差劲的护理员。”

大家沉默了一会儿。然后露丝开口讲话了，她的语气这次平静了许多：

“我觉得我做护理员还算称职。但五年我觉得也足够了。我跟你一样，汤米。我成为捐献者的时候已经基本上做好了准备。觉得挺好。毕竟我们就是应该干这个的，对不对？”

我拿不准她是否期望我对这话做出回应。她讲的没有任何明显的导向意思，很有可能这只是习惯成自然随口一说——你总是听到捐献

者们互相之间说这种话。我再次转身去看他们，见汤米依然举着手遮住眼睛。

“可惜我们不能离船再近一点，”他说，“等到再干燥点的天气，也许我们可以再回来。”

“来看过这条船我已经很高兴了，”露丝轻柔地说，“真的很好。可是我觉得我想回去了。风还挺冷的。”

“至少我们现在看过了，”汤米说。

走回车子的路上，我们比来时更加随意地聊了起来。露丝和汤米在比较他们的康复中心——食物如何，毛巾，诸如此类——我总是参与进来，因为他们不断地问我其他康复中心条件如何，或者这种那种现象是否正常。露丝现在脚步稳得多了，等我们走到栅栏那边的时候，我举着铁丝网，她几乎没犹豫就过去了。

我们上了车，还是汤米坐后面，有一会儿我们感觉都很好。回想起来，也许有点欲言又止有口难言的气氛，但有可能我现在这么想只是因为后来发生的事。

开始的时候，有点像先前情形的重复。我们重又回到了空旷的长路上，露丝说起了我们先前路过的一幅大海报。现在我都不记得那张海报什么样了，只不过是路边树立的那种大广告画。她几乎是自言自语地说：“我的天呐，看那个。你以为他们至少得试图搞点新花样吧。”

但是汤米在后面说：“其实我还蛮喜欢那张画的。报纸上也登过。我觉得有点意思。”

也许我想再次得到那种感受，我和汤米再次团结在一起的感觉。因为虽然说走去看船的那段路本身没什么，可我开始觉得，除了一开始我们俩的拥抱，以及早先在车里的那一刻，此外我和汤米没有任何真正的交流。总之，我不由得开口道：

“其实我也蛮喜欢的。制作这种海报要比你想象得更费劲。”

“没错，”汤米说，“有人跟我说要花很多个礼拜才能把这样一幅画面弄好。甚至好几个月。人们甚至要彻夜开工搞这个，一遍又一遍，直到满意为止。”

“开车路过的时候随口批评一下，”我说，“倒是很容易。”

“世界上最容易的事，” 汤米说。

露丝没说话，眼睛盯着我们前方空旷的路面。然后我说：

“既然说到海报。出来的时候我看到过一幅。很快又要出现了。这次是在我们这一侧。现在随时可能会出现。”

“关于什么的？” 汤米问。

“你会看到的。很快就会出现了。”

我瞥了一眼身旁的露丝。她的眼神里没有愤怒，只是有些戒备。我想甚至有几分希望，希望海报出现的时候，会是幅无伤大雅的画面——让我们联想到黑尔舍姆。我从她脸上读出了所有这些念头，她脸上表情飘忽不定，莫衷一是。期间目光始终直视前方。

我减慢了车速，靠边，然后一脚油门开上了长着杂草很不平整的路边。

“我们为什么停下了，凯丝？” 汤米问。

“因为从这里看得最清楚。要是再近我们就得使劲抬头才能看清了。”

我听到汤米在后面挪动身体试图看得更清楚。露丝没有动，我甚至拿不准她到底有没有在看海报。

“好吧，并不是完全一样，” 过了一会，我说，“但是这幅海报让我想起从前。开放式办公室，优雅、面带微笑的人们。”

露丝一声不吭，但汤米从后面说道：“我明白了。你是说，就像我们那次去过的地方。”

“不止如此，” 我说，“跟那张广告很像。我们在地上发现的。你记得吗，露丝？”

“我记不太清楚了，” 她平静地说。

“哎，得了吧。你肯定记得。我们在一条小路上发现的，一本杂志上。一个水洼旁边。你深受吸引。别假装你不记得了。”

“我想我记得，” 现在露丝话音十分微弱，如同耳语。一辆大货车经过，震得我们的小车摇晃一阵，几秒钟里遮挡了我们看海报的视线。露丝低垂了头，仿佛希望货车将这幅画面永远带走，当我们再次清楚看到画面的时候，她也没有抬起目光。

“很好笑呢，”我说，“现在想起来哦。记不记得你总是怎么说的？说有一天你也要在像这样的办公室里上班？”

“哦，对了，所以那天我们才会去的，”汤米说，仿佛他这一秒才记起来，“我们去诺福克的那次。我们是去找你可能的原型人物。她在一间办公室工作。”

“你有时会不会想，”我对露丝说，“应该继续查下去的？说来你可能是第一个。我们所有人听说过的第一个做这种事的人。但你本来可能做得到的。你会不会有时候也想，要是努力尝试过，会怎么样？”

“我怎么去尝试？”露丝的声音低得几乎听不到了，“这只是我曾经的梦想。仅此而已。”

“但是如果你至少做过调查的话。你怎么知道就不行？也许他们会批准呢。”

“没错，露丝，”汤米说，“也许你至少应该去试试。你絮絮叨叨说过那么多。我觉得凯丝说得有道理。”

“我没有说很多，汤米。至少我不记得絮絮叨叨过。”

“可是汤米说的没错。你至少应该去试试。那样的话，什么时候你看到像那样的海报，就会记起那是你曾经想要的生活，至少你曾经尝试调查过……”

“我怎么可能去调查？”露丝的话音第一次变得强硬，但随后她却叹了口气，又垂下了眼帘。后来汤米说：

“你总是说得好像自己应该享受特殊待遇似的。反正在你看来，你可能能做到。你至少应该去申请一下。”

“那好，”露丝说，“你们说我应该去调查一下是不是可行。怎么查？我去哪里查？根本没有渠道可以去查这事。”

“可是汤米说得对，”我说，“如果你真的相信自己不一般，你至少应该去申请。你应该去找夫人申请。”

我这话一出口——一提到夫人——我就意识到自己犯了错。露丝抬头看着我，我看到她脸上有类似胜利的表情闪过。有时你在电影里会看到这种镜头，一个人举枪对着另外一个，拿枪的人逼着另外那个人做各种各样的事。突然之间出现了一个错误，或是扭打起来，枪就到了第二个人手里。于是这第二个人就朝第一个人得意地笑，露出一

种“我竟会运气这么好，简直不可置信”的表情，预示着他的各种报复行动。露丝就是这样突然地望着我，虽然我没有提到延期的事，但我的确提到了夫人，我知道这下我们一起跌进了某个新的领域。

露丝看出我的惊恐，在座位上转了个身面朝着我。因此我做好准备承受她的打击；同时忙不迭地心想不论她说出什么话来对付我，现在情况不同了，她不能像从前那样为所欲为。我正在心里想着这些，所以她说出来的话让我毫无准备。

“凯西，”她说，“我真的永远不能指望你会原谅我。我甚至觉得你凭什么会原谅我。但我还是要请求你原谅。”

她说得我震惊不已，不知如何作答，最后很无力地反问道：“原谅你什么？”

“原谅我什么？好吧，首先第一件，关于你的性冲动，我一直都在撒谎。那时候你跟我说有时候冲动太强烈，你随便跟谁都可以做。”

坐后排的汤米再次动了动身体，可现在露丝身体前倾，直视着我，仿佛这一刻汤米根本没有在车上跟我们一起。

“我知道这事让你很担心，”她说，“我本该如实告诉你的。我本该跟你说我也是一样，跟你描述的一模一样。我知道，这些你现在都明白了。我本该告诉你，虽然当时我跟汤米在一起，但还是控制不住有时候要跟其他人做。我们在农舍的时候我至少还跟另外三个人做过。”

她说这些的时候，仍然没有朝汤米的方向看。但她并非故意无视汤米的存在，而是强烈地专注于把她的意思表达给我，对其他的一切都视而不见。

“有几次我差点就告诉你了，”她接着说，“可我没有。即便是当时，我也知道总有一天你会明白过来，为此责怪我。可我还是什么都没对你说。这件事你没有理由原谅我，但我现在想求你，因为……”她突然停了下来。

“因为什么？”我问道。

她笑了，说道：“不为什么。我希望你能原谅我，但我不指望你会。总之，这才连一半都没有，实际上，连一丁点都算不上。最主要

的是，我把你跟汤米分开了。”她的话音再次降低，几乎成了耳语。
“那是我干过最坏的事。”

她稍微转身，第一次将汤米纳入了视线之中。但随即，她立刻重新将视线集中在我一个人身上，但感觉她现在是对我们两个人说话了。

“那是我干过最坏的事。”她又说了一遍，“这件事我根本不能求你原谅我。上帝啊，这些话我自己在心里说过太多遍了。真不敢相信我真的说出来了。应该是你们俩在一起。我不是假装过去始终没看清楚这点。我当然知道，打从记事开始我就看得清清楚楚。可我逼你们分开。我不是求你们两个原谅我这件事。现在我不是为了这个。我想要你们改正这个错误。改正我对你们做错的事。”

“你什么意思，露丝？”汤米问道，“你什么意思，怎么改正？”他的话音温和，充满了孩子似的好奇心，我想就是这话弄得我哭泣起来。

“凯西，你听我说，”露丝说，“你和汤米。你们得去试着申请延期。如果是你们俩，一定会有机会的。真的有胜算。”

她伸出一只手，放在我肩膀上，但我粗暴地甩开了她，透过泪水怒视着她。

“现在说这些太迟了。真的太迟了。”

“还不晚，凯西。你听着。还没有太迟。就算是汤米已经做了两次捐献，可是谁规定这样就不可以了？”

“现在说这些太迟了。”我又开始哭泣，“有这种想法就很蠢。跟想在上面这种办公室里上班一样蠢。这些都离我们太远太远了。”

露丝大摇其头。“还不晚。汤米，你跟她说。”

我靠在方向盘上，根本看不到汤米。他发出了一种迷惑的哼哼声，却什么话也没说出来。

“听着，”露丝说，“你们俩都听我说。我想要咱们一起出这趟门，就是因为我想说我刚才说的这些话。但我想做这件事还因为我想给你们件东西。”她伸手在外衣口袋里翻找，很快拿出了一张皱巴巴的纸条。“汤米，你最好收好。拿好。等凯西改主意的时候，你就拿出来。”

汤米向前探身，蹭到我们两个座位中间，接过了那张纸。“谢谢你，露丝，”他说，仿佛她递过来的是块巧克力。过了几秒钟之后，他说：“这是什么？我看不懂。”

“这是夫人的地址。就像你们刚刚对我说的那样。你们至少得去尝试一下。”

“你怎么弄到的？”汤米问。

“不容易的。我花了很长时间，也冒了些风险。但我最终弄到了手，我是为你们俩弄来的。现在该你们去找她了，试试看。”

这时我已经停止了哭泣，发动了引擎。“够了，”我说，“我们得送汤米回去了。然后我们自己还得回去。”

“但你们要考虑这件事，你们俩都要，好不好？”

“我现在只想回去，”我说。

“汤米，你来保管好这个地址，可以吗？万一凯西回心转意。”

“我来收好，”汤米说。然后他比前次更为郑重地又说了一次，“谢谢你，露丝。”

“我们看过那条船了，”我说，“但现在我们得回去了。可能要两个钟头才能回到多佛。”

我再次开车上路，在我的记忆中，在回金斯费尔德的行程中，我们没有再多说什么。我们来到广场的时候，那边屋檐下依然聚集着一小群捐献者。我先将车调头，然后才放汤米下车。我们俩谁都没有拥抱或亲吻他，但当他朝那些捐献者同伴走过去的时候，停了一下，朝我们粲然一笑，挥了挥手。

这可能有点奇怪，但在回露丝康复中心的路途中，我们也没有认真讨论过刚刚发生的事。部分可能是因为露丝筋疲力尽——刚才在路边的那段对话似乎耗尽了她的气力。但同时，我想两人都觉得一天里严肃谈话已经够多了，若还要多说，可能话题就要走偏了。我不知道开车回家的路上，露丝感觉如何，至于我，一旦所有那些剧烈的情感平复下去之后，随着夜幕渐渐笼上来，沿途两边的路灯一一点亮，我就感觉没事了。就好像某种悬在我头顶很久的东西终于消失不见了，虽然事情远未理清，但现在的感觉就好像至少是开了一扇门，通往更美好的地方。我倒不是说自己情绪高昂或者怎么样。任何涉及我们三

个人关系的事都很微妙，我觉得很紧张，但总的来说这种紧张并不坏。

我们甚至没有多谈汤米，只是说他看起来不错，不知道他体重增加了多少。随后大段的行程中我们都默默地看着前方的路面。

只有到了几天之后，我才明白这次旅行带来了怎样的变化。我和露丝之间所有那些防备、怀疑都烟消云散了，我们似乎记起了对彼此都是怎样重要的存在。这就是新的开始，那个新的阶段，随着夏天到来，露丝的健康至少是平稳恢复，我总是傍晚时分带着饼干和矿泉水来看她，我们并肩坐在她的窗边，看着夕阳从所有屋顶上落下去，两人谈起黑尔舍姆、农舍，想到什么聊什么。现在当我想起露丝的时候，当然我很难过她不在了；但能有最后那段时光，我真的很感恩。

即便如此，有一个话题我们始终也没有好好讨论过，就是关于那天在路边她对我说的那些话。只不过偶尔露丝会将话题隐约带到这里。她会这样说：

“你有没有再想过去给汤米当护理员的事？你知道的，只要你想，就能办成这件事。”

很快，这个说法——我去给汤米做护理员——就变成了整件事的代表。我就跟她说明我在考虑，说这事没那么简单，哪怕是我，也没那么容易办得成。然后我们通常就把这话题搁下了。可我能看得出，露丝从来没有真正放弃过这个念头，正因为如此，我最后一次见到她的时候，虽然她没办法讲话，我还是明白这就是她想对我说的话。

那是她第二次捐献之后的第三天凌晨时分，他们终于放我进去看她。她一个人在房间里，看起来他们能做的都已经为她做了。事到如今，我根据医生、协调员和护士的举止，明显看出他们都认为她撑不下去了。这时，我看了一眼昏暗的灯光下躺在医院治疗床上的她，立刻就辨认出她脸上的那种表情，这表情我在捐献者脸上看到太多次了。就好像她命令自己的眼睛去看透自己，才可以更好地巡视和引导身体各个部位的疼痛——就像是一个焦虑的护理员跑遍全国，来回穿梭照顾着三四个病痛中的捐献者那样。严格来说，她还有意识，但我站在她躺的金属床边时，已经没办法让她明白我的存在了。可我还是拉过一把椅子坐了下来，双手握住她的一只手，每当阵痛袭来，她扭动身体的时候，我就轻轻握一下她的手。

只要他们允许，我就一直像这样守在她身边，待了三个小时，也许更久。正如我说的，大多数时间里，她都深深沉浸在自己的世界

里。但只有一次，她痉挛得厉害，身体扭曲到了很不自然的可怕姿态，我即刻就要叫护士给她增加镇痛药了，这时，仅有不多的几秒钟时间，她直直地望着我，确切地认出了我。在捐献者们骇人的挣扎过程中，偶尔会达到这样汪洋大海中小岛一样的短暂清醒，她看着我，就在那一刻，虽然她讲不出话，我却明白她眼神里的含义。因此我对她说：“好的，我会去的，露丝，我会尽快去当汤米的护理员。”我压低了声音轻轻说了这话，因为我知道，哪怕我大声喊出来，她也听不到实际的话音。但我希望在我们目光交汇锁定的几秒钟内，她能准确读懂我的表情，正如我读懂她一样。随后那个时刻就过去了，她的意识再次飘远。当然我永远无法确知，但我认为她知道了。即便她没有明白我的话，我现在才想到，可能她始终就知道，先我之前就知道，我会成为汤米的护理员，我们会“去尝试一下”，正如那天在车里她对我们说的一样。

[\(1\)](#) 英制重量单位，一英石大约等于十四磅，合六点三五公斤。

第二十章

去看船的那次旅行过了不到一年之后，我成了汤米的护理员。那时汤米第三次捐献才过去不久，虽然他恢复得不错，但仍然需要大量时间休息，结果证明这未尝不是种很好的方式开始我们在一起的新阶段。不久之后，我就习惯了金斯费尔德，甚至越来越喜欢这里了。

金斯费尔德的大多数捐献者在第三次捐献之后，都会住单人房，汤米得到了整个中心最大的一个房间。后来有人猜是我帮他要到的，但其实不是这样；只是幸运而已，再说那房间也没什么了不起。我觉得早先这里还是度假营地的时候这可能是间浴室，因为唯一的窗户上镶的是毛玻璃，而且窗户位置真的很高，都快到天花板了，你得站到椅子上，掀开窗户，才能看到外面，而且只能朝下看到浓密的灌木。房间是L形状，这就意味着他们除了通常的床、椅子和衣柜之外，还可以放进一张小小的书桌，就是学校用的那种掀盖课桌——这件家具后来证明真的是个意外之喜，后面我会解释。

关于我们在金斯费尔德的这段时间我不想给人留下错误的印象。许多时候非常放松，几乎像田园诗一般。我通常是午饭之后到达，上来之后常常发现汤米瘫倒在窄窄的床上——衣服总是穿得很齐整，因为他不想“像个病人”。我就坐在椅子上，给他读我带来的各种平装书，比如《奥德赛》、《天方夜谭》之类。再不然我们就聊天，有时候聊过去的日子，有时候聊别的事。傍晚的时候他常常会打瞌睡，这时我就在他那张课桌上赶我的报告。这真的很美妙，好像多少年的光阴都消散无踪，我们相处地非常自在。

当然很明显并不是一切都跟从前一样。首先就是我和汤米开始做爱了。我不知道在我们开始之前，关于我们两人做爱，汤米想过多少。毕竟他还在康复阶段，也许这不是他脑海中的头等大事。我并不想勉强他做爱，但另一方面，我又想到，如果两个人刚开始在一起的时候，我们耽搁太久没有做，那么性爱就越来越难成为我们关系中自然而然的一部分。我还有个考虑，我想，就是如果我们计划按照露丝的想法去操作，真的去申请延期的话，倘或我们从未有过性爱，那真的将会是一个很不利的条件。我的意思不是说我以为他们一定会问起这件事。但我担心的是，这事总会暴露出来，因为一定程度上，那样的话，两人会缺乏亲密感。

于是有一天下午，在那个房间里，我决定先主动开始，然后让他选择进退行动。他跟往常一样躺在床上，瞪着天花板，我在给他读书。读完之后，我走过去，坐到床边，将一只手伸到了他的T恤衫里面。很快我就摸到下面他的那个家伙了，虽然他过了好一会儿才硬起来，但我立刻就看出他很喜欢。那第一次的时候，我们还要担心他伤口的缝线，再说我们认识了那么多年没有做过爱，感觉好像我们需要一个过渡阶段才能够全线放开去做。因此过了一会儿，我就只是用手帮他做，而他就躺在原地，没有试图抚摸我给我回应，甚至没有发出任何声音，只是一派平静如水。

但即便在那第一次，与“这是一个开始，我们就此跨进一个新阶段”的体会同步出现的还有一种东西，一种感觉。很长一段时间我不愿意承认，即便最后我承认了它的存在，还试图说服自己这感觉会随着他各种各样的病痛一起消失。我的意思是说，从第一次开始，汤米举止间就透露出一丝伤感，仿佛是说：“没错，我们现在在做爱，我很高兴我们现在在做。但多么遗憾，我们竟虚掷光阴，等到这么晚。”

在接下来的几天里，当我们可以正常做爱，并且真的享受其中的时候，即便这时，这种令人烦恼的感觉依然还在。我想尽办法驱散它。我让两人全线开火，全身心都沉浸在狂欢的迷醉之中，不留任何空间给其他。如果他在上，我就将双膝举高，到他适宜的位置；不论我们用别的什么姿势，只要能让感觉更好，更热情，我什么都会讲，什么都会做，但这感觉依然没有完全消失。

也许跟这个房间有关系，阳光从毛玻璃的窗口照进来，即便是初夏，感觉也像是秋天的光线。再不然就是我们躺在那里的时候偶尔传来的零星杂音，都是捐献者们来回乱转，忙各自事情的声音，而不是学生们坐在草地上，讨论小说与诗歌的话音。再不然，就是因为有的时候我们非常痛快地做完之后，倒在彼此臂弯里，刚刚的鱼水之欢还在点滴回味之中，这时汤米会说这样的话：“我从前很轻易就能一连做两次。可现在我做不到了。”这时那种感觉立刻就会浮现出来，我只能每次听到他说这种话，就伸手捂住他的嘴，只为了两人可以平平静静地躺在一起。我确定汤米也有同样的感觉，因为经过这样的时刻，我们总会紧紧搂抱在一起，仿佛这样就能将这种感觉赶走似的。

我到了之后的最初几个星期里，我们极少谈及夫人或是那天在车里跟露丝的谈话。但我成为他的护理员这一事实本身就时时在提醒我们，不能原地踏步，拖延时间。当然，还有汤米的动物画作。

多年以来，我常常想起汤米画的那些动物，甚至我们去看搁浅船只的那天，我也很想跟他问起它们。他还在画动物吗？他在农舍画的那些还留着吗？但围绕这些动物的种种往事让我很难开口。

后来有一天下午，也许是我开始护理汤米之后大约一个月左右，我上到他的房间，发现他正埋头在课桌前专心画画，脸几乎都要挨到纸页上了。我敲门的时候他喊我进来的，但一眼望去我就看出他是在画那些想象中的动物。我在门口停下来，拿不准是否应该进去，可最终他抬起了头，合上了笔记本——我留意到本子跟多年前他跟凯佛斯要来的那些一模一样。我走了进去，我们开始谈论与此完全不相干的事，过了一会儿他将笔记本收了起来，我们谁也没说什么。但那次之后，我经常来了之后发现本子留在书桌上，或是丢在他枕头旁边。

后来有一天我们在他的房间里，有几分钟闲余时间要消磨掉，然后我们要出门给他做检查，这时我留意到他举止有点古怪：有些刻意，又有几分羞涩，让我以为他想做爱。但这时他说：

“凯丝，我想让你告诉我。坦白跟我讲。”

随即那本黑色的笔记本从课桌里拿了出来，他给我看了三幅不同的素描，描绘的是同一种蛙类——只是这蛙长着一条长尾巴，仿佛蝌蚪部分没有演变过来。至少，当你将本子举得比较远的时候，画面看起来是这样的。近看每幅素描都充满了微小的细节，跟我多年前见过的那些动物很像。

“这两只我画的时候觉得是金属做的，”他说，“你瞧，所有部位的表面都亮闪闪的。但这边这只，我觉得我想把它画成橡胶的。你看得出来么？几乎是黏稠状的。我现在想画个正式的版本，认真地好好画，但我拿不定主意。凯丝，你实话实说，到底觉得怎么样？”

我不记得自己怎么回答他了。我只记得那一刻百感交集各种浓烈的情感涌上心头将我吞噬。我立刻就明白汤米是用这样的方式，将当初在农舍围绕他的画所发生的一切抛诸身后，我感到如释重负，满心感激，纯粹的欣喜。但同时我也意识到为什么这些动物会再次出现，汤米这看似随便的询问背后蕴藏着各种可能，有各种层次的含义。至少我看得出，他是让我知道，尽管我们从未开诚布公地讨论过这件事，但他没有忘记；他让我知道他没有妥协，而是忙于进行他那方面的准备工作。

但那天看到那些古怪的青蛙画作时我的感受还不仅止于这些。因为有个念头反复出现，刚开始只是模糊地远远出现在背景中，但越来

越强烈，后来我不停地想到这一点。当我望着那些画面时，尽管我竭力想抓住它，丢开它，但那想法还是不可抑制地出现在我脑海中。我想汤米的画作现在已经没有那么生动了。虽然从很多方面来看，这些蛙跟我当年在农舍所见的画作很相似，但有些东西绝对已经消失不见了。现在的画面看起来煞费心力，简直像是临摹的。因此那种感觉再次袭上心头，拂之不去：我们现在才做这一切太晚了；曾经有时间让我们去做这些，但我们错过了，而我们现在这样精心考虑，充分准备，未免有些荒唐，甚至应该受到谴责。

现在让我再回顾一遍，我想到我们俩之所以过了那么久之后才开诚布公地谈我们的计划，可能还有一个原因。很确定的一点是金斯费尔德的捐献者里面，根本没人听说过延期之类的说法，我们也许隐约觉得尴尬，仿佛两人共守着一个不光彩的秘密。我们甚至可能害怕，万一这话传到其他人那里，会发生什么事。

但正如我说的，我不想将金斯费尔德那段时期描绘得过于灰暗。大多数时间，尤其是他向我问起他画的动物那天之后，仿佛过去的阴影终于全都不复存在，我们的关系终于稳固下来。虽然他再也没有问过我对于他画作的建议，但他会乐于当着我的面画画，于是我们经常这样共度下午的时光：我躺在床上，也许在读书，汤米则伏在书桌旁画画。

也许，如果情况像这样持续更久一些，我们会更幸福，如果我们用更多的午后时光来聊天、做爱、读书、画画的话。但是随着夏天渐渐过去，汤米越来越壮实，通知他去做第四次捐献的可能性越来越迫近，我们知道不能再无限期地拖延下去了。

那段时间我超乎寻常得忙，几乎有一个星期没有去金斯费尔德。那天我是早上到的，我记得当时下着瓢泼大雨。汤米的房间几乎一片漆黑，窗户附近有条下水管道传来哗哗的流水声。他跟其他捐献者一起下楼去大厅吃好早饭，重新回到楼上，这会儿正坐在床上，目光空洞，什么也没做。我一进门就筋疲力尽——我已经很多天没有睡过一个整觉了——直接瘫倒在他的窄床上，将他推到墙边。我就那样躺了一阵，要不是汤米老伸出大脚趾戳我膝盖，我可能一下子就睡着了。最后我终于起身跟他并排坐，我说：

“我昨天看到夫人了，汤米。我没跟她说话，什么也没做。可我见到她了。”

他望着我，缄默不语。

“我看到她顺着街走过来，进了家门。露丝没搞错。地址是对的，门牌号，什么都准确无误。”

随后我向他讲述了前一天发生的事。我因为有事去到南部海边，于是下午顺路去了利特尔汉普顿，跟前两次去一样，我依旧沿着海边的长街漫步，沿途经过了一排排有露台的房子，大多还标有“波峰”、“海景”之类的名号。后来我走到了一个电话亭旁的公共长椅这里。我坐下来等候——仍然像我前两次所做的一样——眼睛紧紧盯着马路对面的房子。

“就像侦探故事一样。前两次我都是每次一待就是半小时以上，却一无所获，什么都没有。但这次有种感觉，我觉得要走运了。”

我实在太疲倦，坐在长椅上几乎要打瞌睡。但这时我抬头却看到她就在那里，正沿着街道迎面朝我这边走来。

“真的很吓人，”我说，“因为她看上去一点都没变。也许脸稍微老了一点点。但除此之外真的没有任何不同。连衣服都一模一样。还是那身漂亮的灰色套装。”

“不可能真的是当初那身套装吧。”

“我不知道。看起来就是那套。”

“所以你并没有主动上去跟她讲话是吗？”

“当然没有。我又不傻。要循序渐进。她对我们从来也算不上和善，你记得吧。”

我告诉他夫人怎么从马路对面径直走过我面前，却完全没有看到我；有那么一秒钟我还以为她要从我盯着的那个门口走过去——以为露丝弄错了她的地址。但夫人在大门口骤然转身，三步并作两步走过门口小径，然后就消失在门内。

我讲完之后，汤米沉默了一会儿，然后他说：

“你确定这样不会惹上麻烦吗？多次开车去你不该去的地方？”

“要不然你以为我怎么会这么累？我为了搞定这些事，没日没夜地加班工作。不过至少我们现在算是找到她了。”

外面还是大雨如注。汤米侧过身来，将头靠在我肩膀上。

“露丝帮我们做了件好事，”他柔声说，“她找的地址没错。”

“是，她做得很好。但现在要靠我们自己了。”

“那咱们计划怎么做，凯丝？你有打算吗？”

“我们直接上门。我们就直接去问她。就下星期，我带你去做检查的时候。我帮你搞到一整天的外出许可。这样我们就可以在回来的路上去利特尔汉普顿。”

汤米叹了口气，将头更深地埋到我肩上。如果旁人看到，可能会以为他不大起劲，但我知道他的感受。很久以来，我们一直在设想延迟捐献，关于艺廊的理论，等等这一切，而现在，突然之间，我们取得了重大进展。这绝对是有点吓人。

“如果我们申请到了，”最终他说，“假设我们申请到了。假设她准许我们三年，比如说，完全属于我们的时间。我们到底要怎么做呢？明白我意思吗，凯丝？我们去哪儿？我们不能待在这里，这里是康复中心。”

“我不知道，汤米。也许她会让我们回到农舍去。但最好是去别的什么地方。也许大白楼。再不然也许他们还有其他地方。单独的一个地方，给我们这种人的。我们得听听她怎么说。”

我们静静地躺在床上听雨，又过了几分钟。不知怎的，我开始用脚戳他，就像他早先戳我那样。最终他开始反击，干脆将我两只脚推到床外面去了。

“如果我们真的要去，”他说，“我们得选定那些动物。你懂的，得挑选一下带哪些去。也许选六七幅。我们得认真点，好好选。”

“那好吧，”我说。随后我站起来，伸展开双臂。“也许我们可以多带几幅。十五甚至二十幅。好的，我们就去找她。她能把我们怎么样呢？我们就去找她谈谈。”

第二十一章

我们出发前几天，我的脑海中就浮现出这样的画面，我和汤米站在那扇门前，鼓起勇气去按门铃，然后两颗心狂跳着等在原地。可事到临头我们很幸运，免于遭受这番折磨。

到这时，我们也该当有点好运，因为这天过得实在是不顺。我们出门的路上车子出了点问题，我们给汤米做检查迟到了一个小时。然后在诊所又出了岔子，搞错了试验样本，结果汤米需要重做其中的三项检查。这弄得他有点虚弱，因此当我们下午的事结束之后，终于出发前往利特尔汉普顿的时候，他开始晕车，我们只好多次停车，让他走一会消散一下舒服些。

最终我们差一点点六点钟到了那里。我们将车停在宾果游戏厅后面，从车子后备厢里取出了装有汤米笔记本的运动包，然后就朝镇中心走去。那天天气很好，虽然商店都已经关门，但还是有很多人在酒吧门外流连，谈天饮酒。我们越走，汤米感觉越发好些了，终于他才想起来，自己因为要做检查，中午饭都没吃，于是宣布他要吃点东西才能应对接下来的事。于是我们开始找能买外带三明治的小店，这时他突然抓住了我的胳膊，他抓得很紧，我还以为他身体出问题了。但随即，他轻轻在我耳边说：

“就是她，凯丝。刚从理发店门口过去。”

没错就是她，走在对面的人行道上，身穿漂亮的灰套装，跟从前穿的一模一样。

我们跟在夫人身后，隔着一段合理的距离，先走了一段步行街，然后走到了几乎没什么人的主街。我想，两人大概都想到了当初我们在另外一个市镇，跟踪露丝可能的原型的那天。但这一次，事情简单得多了，因为很快她就带着我们走到了那条海边的长街。

因为路完全是直的，夕阳斜照，将整条路从头至尾映在日光里，于是我们可以放心让夫人走在我们前面很远的地方——一直到她几乎缩成了一个小小的点——我们依然无需担心会跟丢她。事实上，我们连她鞋跟的回音都始终听得到，而汤米的包有节奏地敲打着他的腿，听起来几乎是种回应。

我们一直这样走了很久，路过了一排又一排完全一样的房子。到后来对面人行道上再没有了房屋，代之以大片的草坪，你可以看到草坪之外更远处，海滩棚屋的房顶点缀在海岸线上。虽然看不见海水，但仅凭开阔的天空和海鸥的叫声，也知道海就在那里。

但在我们这边，一栋栋房屋依然毫无二致地延伸下去，过了一会儿我对汤米说：

“现在不远了。看到那边的长椅没有？我就是坐在这上面。她家就在前面一点点。”

到我说这话之前，汤米都还保持着镇静。但现在他似乎有所触动，开始加快了脚步，仿佛想赶上夫人似的。但现在我们和夫人之间没有任何人遮挡，随着汤米越来越靠近她，我不得不抓住他的胳膊，拖住让他慢一点。我始终害怕她会回头发现我们，但她没有，随后她就到了进门的地方。她在门口稍作停留，在手袋里找钥匙，我们就在那里，站在她家门口，望着她。她仍然没有转身，我有种感觉，她其实一直意识到我们在跟随，但却故意无视我们。我还觉得汤米要冲她大喊大叫，那就会犯下大错。所以我在门口就飞快地，毫不犹豫地喊了她一声。

那只是一句礼貌的“对不起”，但她却骤然转身，仿佛我朝她扔了什么东西一样。随着她的目光落到我们身上，我感到周身一阵寒意，很像多年之前，在主楼里我们伏击她的那次。她的眼神依然冰冷，脸色可能比我记忆中还要严厉。我不知道她是否当下就认出了我们；但毫无疑问的是，她看了一眼，立刻就认定我们是什么人，因为我们看得出她一下子变得僵硬起来——仿佛两只很大的蜘蛛就要朝她爬过来。

随后她表情里什么东西变了。倒不是说变得和缓，但那种厌恶之感被压了下去，收敛起来，落日余晖之中，她眯起了眼睛，认真看着我俩。

“夫人，”我说着，靠到了门上，“我们不想吓您一跳，也没有别的目的。但我们是黑尔舍姆的学生。我是凯西·H，也许您还记得。这是汤米·D。我们不是来给您找麻烦的。”

她后退几步，朝我们靠近了一些。“黑尔舍姆来的，”她说，脸上竟然浮现出一丝笑意，“哎，这可是个意外。如果你们来不是给我找麻烦，那你们是为来的呢？”

汤米突然开口：“我们得跟您谈谈。我带了点东西，”——他举了一下那个包——“也许您的艺廊愿意收下这几件东西。我们来找您谈谈的。”

夫人仍然站在原地，落日余晖之中，她几乎一动不动，头歪着，仿佛努力想听清海滩上传来的某种声音。随后她又露出了微笑，但这笑容似乎不是为了我们，而只是给她自己的。

“那好吧。请进来。然后我们看看你们想谈些什么。”

我们走了进去，我留意到前门镶着彩色玻璃，所以当汤米回身关上门之后，一切就显得很暗。我们站在一个很窄的过道里，感觉仿佛只需张开手肘，就能碰到两边的墙。夫人在我们前方停了下来，一动不动地站着，背对着我们，仿佛在倾听。我从她身旁瞥一眼看过去，发现过道虽然很窄，前面还分成了两条：左边是上楼的楼梯，右边一条更窄的过道通往房屋里更深的地方。

我学着夫人的样子，也侧耳倾听，但房里只有一片寂静。随后也许是从楼上，传来一声隐约的撞击声。这微弱的声音仿佛让她明白了什么，于是她转向我们，指着过道深处幽暗的方向，说：

“到里面去等我。我很快就下来。”

她开始爬楼梯，随后看到我们犹疑不决的样子，又从楼梯扶手边倾身，再次指着黑暗的深处。

“里面，”她说，上楼不见了。

我和汤米慢慢朝前走，发现自己到了想必是这套房子前厅的一个空间。看起来好像有仆役之类布置过房间，供主人晚间使用，然后自己离开了：窗帘都关起来，台灯拧亮，发着微光。我能闻到旧家具的气息，很可能是维多利亚时代的古董。壁炉被一块板封闭起来，本该点火的部位有一幅画，是像挂毯一样织出来的，画面上有只古怪的猫头鹰似的鸟儿向外盯着你看。汤米碰了碰我的胳膊，然后指了指一小张圆茶几上方角落里挂的相框中的一幅画。

“那是黑尔舍姆，”他轻声说。

我们走到跟前，但细看我却说不准了。我看得出那是一幅很好的水彩画作，但下方的台灯上灯罩有些歪，上面还隐约有蛛网，因此灯光并没有将画作照亮，只是将模糊的玻璃罩映得发亮，因此很难看得清画面。

“这是鸭塘后面那块小地方，”汤米说道。

“你什么意思？”我也轻声回答他，“没有什么池塘。这只是一幅乡间风景。”

“不，池塘在你身后。”我没料到这会让汤米那么恼火，“你肯定能想起来。你绕到后面，站到池塘前面，看着北操场的方向……”

我们再次沉默不讲话了，因为听到房里某处传来话音。听起来像个男人的声音，也许是楼上传来的。随后我们又听到无疑是夫人的声音沿着楼梯下来，她说：“没错。你说的很对，很对。”

我们等待着夫人进来，但她的脚步声从门口经过，又往房子后部走去了。我脑海中闪过一个念头，莫不是她要去准备茶点烤饼，然后用小推车一起送进来，但随即我就认定这是胡思乱想，她可能只是忘记了我们的存在，现在她可能突然想起来，马上就进来赶我们走。随后楼上传来一个粗野的男声，喊了一句什么，但话音太模糊，很可能隔着两个楼层。夫人的脚步声重又回到了过道上，随后她朝着楼上喊道：“我告诉过你怎么做。就照我说的做。”

我和汤米又等了几分钟，随后房间深处的墙面开始移动。我几乎立刻就明白这其实不是一面真正的墙，而是一对拉门，可以从中间隔断这个本来很长的房间。夫人将门拉开了一点，就站在那边瞪着我们。我试图看看她的身后，但那里只有一片黑暗。我想也许她在等待我们开口解释为什么来这里，但最终，她开口道：

“你跟我说你俩是凯西·H和汤米·D。对不对？你们是什么时候在黑尔舍姆的？”

我告诉了她，但完全看不出她是否记得我们。她只是仍旧站在门口，仿佛在犹豫是否要进来。但这时汤米又开口了：

“我们不想耽误您太久。但有件事我们必须得跟您谈谈。”

“那你说。好吧。你们最好放松一点。”

她朝前伸出双手，放到了面前两张相对称的扶手椅背上。她举止有些古怪，仿佛并非真心要请我们坐下。我感觉，倘或我们真的像她所示意的那样，真的在这两张椅子上坐下来的话，她还会继续站在我们身后，甚至手都不会从椅背上挪开。但当我们朝她走近一点的时候，她也朝前进了一点，而且——也许这只是我的想象——她从我俩中间穿过的时候，还用力缩起双肩。当我们转身坐下的时候，她走到

了窗边，站在沉重的紫色窗帘前面，正面盯着我们看，仿佛我们是在课堂上，而她是老师一样。至少当时我是那么看的。后来汤米说他以为夫人要开口唱歌，她身后的帘幕会打开，但浮现出的景象不是街道以及一直延伸到海边的平坦草地，而是一个巨大的舞台场景，就像我们当初在黑尔舍姆那种，甚至还会有一排合唱歌手给她配唱。滑稽的是，后来他说起这些的时候，我眼前再次浮现出夫人的样子，她双手交握，手肘外撑，真的很像是准备唱歌。但我疑心汤米当时想到的不会真是这些。我记得曾留意到他当时非常紧张，很担心他会说出什么傻话。所以当她并无恶意地问我们想要什么的时候，我立刻开始插话。

开始可能意思混乱，说得很不明白，但过了一会儿，我越来越有信心我的话她能听得进去，于是我镇静下来，讲得清楚多了。许多星期以来，我不断在脑海里设想，要怎么对她说。在那些漫长的行车路上，在服务站的咖啡馆里，安静地坐在桌旁时，我也都曾反复温习。当时事情显得无比艰难，我最终想到了这么个办法：我打算一字一句地背牢几句关键的话，然后在脑子里画个路线图，怎么从一个要点进行到下一个。但现在她就站在我面前，我所准备的内容大多毫无必要，再不然就完全不对。奇怪的是——后来我们讨论的时候，我和汤米一致认为——虽然在黑尔舍姆的时候她看起来完全像是一个外面来的心怀恶意的陌生人，现在当我们再次面对她的时候，虽然她并没有说什么，或者做过任何事，来表达哪怕一丁点对我们友好和善，但此刻在我看来，夫人却十分可亲，比我们近年来遇到的任何人都要亲近得多。正因为如此，我脑子里准备好的那些话突然都不见了，我就简单如实地对她讲，就像多年前，我对导师说事情那样。我告诉了她我们听说的一切，关于黑尔舍姆学生有特权的流言，和延期捐献的事；说我们如何明白流言未必准确，我们并没有一定指望些什么。

“况且即便真有这回事，”我说，“我们也明白，您想必对这些事不胜其烦，这么多情侣来找您，声称他们真心相爱。我和汤米，我们俩若不是对这份感情确信无疑，决不会到这里来打扰您。”

“确信无疑？”很长一段日子里，这是她第一次开口，我们都深感诧异，吓了一跳。“你说你们确信无疑？确信你俩真心相爱？你们怎么知道？你们以为爱情就这么简单吗？所以说你们很相爱。深深相爱。你是这样跟我说的吗？”

她几乎是冷嘲热讽的语气，但这时我却有点震惊地发现，当她目光从我俩中的一个转到另一个人的时候，眼中有小颗的泪水在闪。

“你们相信这个？相信你们深深相爱？所以你们就来找我申请这个……延缓？为什么？为什么你们来找我？”

如果她问话的方式流露出仿佛这念头压根就是荒诞不经的意思，那么我肯定会感到伤心失望。然而她不是那样说的。她问话的方式几乎像是测验提问一样，而问题答案她是知道的；甚至她还曾多次引领其他情侣经历过完全一样的这套程序。正因为如此，我才一直没有失去希望。可是汤米想必有些急躁，因为他突然插进话来说道：

“我们来见您是因为您的艺廊。我们认为我们知道艺廊是为什么存在的。”

“我的艺廊？”她朝后倾身，靠在窗台上，弄得身后的窗帘有些摆动，随后她慢慢舒了口气。“我的艺廊。你一定是说我的收藏。所有那些画作，诗歌，我多年以来收集的你们的那些东西。做这工作在我很不容易，可我有信念，那时候我们都很坚定。所以你认为你知道是为了什么，我们为什么做收藏。这倒是很有趣，值得一听。因为我必须得说，我自己也时常扪心自问同样的问题呢。”她突然将目光从汤米转到了我身上。“我扯太远了么？”她问道。

我不知道该如何回答，只得答道：“不，不。”

“我扯得太远了，”她说，“很抱歉。一说到这个话题我就收不住。忘了我刚刚说的话吧。年轻人，你是要跟我讲讲我的艺廊。请继续，说来我听。”

“是为了让你辨别，”汤米说，“让你有所凭据。不然的话，如果有学生来找你，声称他们相爱，那你怎么知道是不是真的？”

夫人的目光再次滑到我身上，但我有种感觉，仿佛她在盯着我胳膊上的什么东西。我甚至低头去看是不是袖子上落了鸟粪或者别的什么。随后我听到她说：

“你认为我收藏了你们那么多东西就是为了这个原因。你们一直管这叫做我的艺廊。我第一次听你们这么叫它时，我笑了。可是渐渐地，我也开始觉得就是这么回事。我的艺廊。现在，年轻人，你来跟我解释解释，为什么我的艺廊能够帮助判断你们中有谁是真心相爱的？”

“因为它能帮助你看清楚我们真正的本色，”汤米说，“因为……”

“当然，因为，”——夫人突然打断了他的话——“你的作品会暴露你内在的自我！是这个缘故，对不对？因为你的作品会揭示你的灵魂！”突然她再次转向我，说道：“我扯太远了么？”

她之前也曾说过这话，我又一次产生了这样的感觉，仿佛她在盯着我袖子上某一点。从她第一次问“我扯太远了么”，我就隐约有点怀疑，现在这种感觉越发明显了。我仔细盯着夫人，但她似乎察觉到了我的审视，重新转脸朝着汤米。

“那好，”她说，“我们继续。你们想跟我说什么？”

“问题在于，”汤米说，“那时候我有点糊涂。”

“你刚刚说到你们的艺术创作。说创作会暴露出艺术家的灵魂。”

“没错，我想说的就是这个，”汤米继续坚持往下说，“那时候我有些糊涂。我没有认真创作。我什么都没做出来。我现在知道应该好好创作的，但我当时脑子不清楚。因此您的艺廊里没有一件我的作品。我知道这是我自己的错，也知道现在很可能已经太晚了，但我还是带来了几幅作品。”他举起背包，开始解包的拉链。“有些是最近画的，但有一些是相当长时间以前的。凯丝的东西您应该已经有了。她有很多作品入选艺廊的。对不对，凯丝？”

刹那间他们都朝我看过来。这时夫人开口，话音轻得几乎听不到：

“可怜的小东西。我们对你们都干了些什么啊？用我们那些谋划和策略？”她任由这话悬在半空，不加解释，我觉得仿佛再次从她眼中看到了泪水。这时她转向我问道：“我们还要继续谈下去么？你希望我们继续么？”

当她说到这里的时候，我先前模糊的念头终于落到了实处。我有几分心寒地意识到，“我扯太远了么”以及现在这句“我们还要继续么”并不是说给我或者汤米听的，听者另有其人——有人一直在我们身后，黑暗的那一半房间里听着。

我慢慢转过身，朝黑暗深处望去。我什么也看不见，但我听到一个声音，一种机械的声音，远得令人惊讶——这房子比我所猜测的要深很多，黑暗延伸得远很多。然后我看到一个身影朝我们移动，然后一个女人的声音说道：“好，玛丽——克劳德。让我来继续吧。”

我仍是朝着黑暗中凝望，这时听到夫人发出一声讥诮的哼声，随即她大踏步从我们旁边经过，走进了黑暗之中。然后传来更多的机械声音，夫人推着一个坐轮椅的人出来了。她再次从我们旁边经过，有一瞬间，因为夫人的后背挡住了视线，我没法看清轮椅上坐的是谁。但这时，夫人将轮椅转过来朝着我们，说道：

“你跟他们讲。他们是来找你的。”

“我想是这样。”

轮椅中的身体孱弱并且扭曲，是那个声音，比其他的一切都更清楚地让我认出了她。

“艾米丽小姐，”汤米轻轻地说。

“你跟他们讲，”夫人说，仿佛就此甩手，什么都不管了。可她仍是站在轮椅后面，眼睛紧紧盯着我们。

第二十二章

“玛丽—克劳德说的没错，”艾米丽小姐说，“我才是你们应该找的人。玛丽—克劳德为了我们的计划辛苦工作。最后落得这样一个结果让她感到很失望。至于我本人，无论遭遇什么打击，我都不会感觉太难过。我认为我们还是取得了一些值得尊重的成就。看看你们两个。你们都出落得很不错。我能肯定你们有很多事可以讲给我听，值得我为你们自豪。刚才你们说都叫什么名字来着？不，不，等等。我想我能记起来。你是那个坏脾气的男孩子。坏脾气，但心却宽厚。汤米，对不对？还有你，当然了，你是凯西·H。你做护理员做得很不错。我们都听过很多关于你的事。我记得的，你瞧。我敢说我能记得你们所有人。”

“这对你或者对他们又有什么好处呢？”夫人问道，随后大步离开了轮椅旁边，经过我们俩，步入黑暗之中，我只知道她占据了先前艾米丽小姐所在的空间。

“艾米丽小姐，”我说，“真高兴再次见到您。”

“听到你这么说真好。我认出了你，但你却未必认出我。事实上，凯西·H，不久之前，我还碰到你坐在外面的长椅上，你那时候显然并没有认出我。你看了一眼乔治，那个大个子尼日利亚人推着我。噢，没错，你可是看了他好一会儿，他也把你看了个够。我什么都没说，你也不知道那就是我。但今天晚上，有前面的谈话，我们就能相认了。你们两个看到我都很震惊。我最近身体不太好，但我希望不用长久靠这玩意才能行动。但是很不巧，亲爱的，虽然我很想多陪你们待一会，但没办法，因为过一会儿就会有人来取我的床头柜。那是件好东西。乔治给周遭都加上了保护垫，但我还是坚持要亲自监督。这些人永远靠不住。他们粗暴搬运，把东西随便往车上乱摔乱扔，然后他们的老板还宣称东西最开始就是这样。以前我们碰到过这种事，所以这次我坚持要全程陪同。这件家具很漂亮，我在黑尔舍姆的时候就有了，所以我决心要卖个好价钱。因此等他们来的时候，我恐怕就得离开你们了。可我看得出，亲爱的，你们是诚心诚意带着使命来的。我必须得说，看到你们真的让我很高兴。玛丽—克劳德也很高兴，虽然你们看她，一点都显不出来。对不对，亲爱的？哎，她假装不在意，但其实不是那么回事。你们来找到我们，她其实很感动。噢，她生气呢，别理她，同学们，别理她。现在我来尽量试着回答你们的问

题。这种传言我听到过无数次。当初我们黑尔舍姆还在的时候，每年都会有两对情侣，试着找我们来谈这事。甚至有一对还曾写过信给我们。我猜如果你真想违反规定的話，这么大一座宅院总是不难找到的。所以你瞧，这种传言一直都有，你们之前很早就有了。”

她停了下来，因此我说：“我们现在想知道的是，艾米丽小姐，这种传言到底是不是真的。”

她继续盯着我们看了一会儿，随后深吸一口气。“在黑尔舍姆范围内，每当这种传言开始散播，我都会立刻确保及时彻底地扑灭它。然而至于学生在离开我们之后的说法，我们是无能为力的。最终，我开始相信——玛丽—克劳德也相信是这样，对不对，亲爱的？——我开始相信这种流言，它不仅仅是一个单一的谣言。我的意思是说，我认为流言是反复生长出来的。你找到源头，扑灭它，但你无法阻止它从其他地方再次开始生长。我得出了这个结论，就不再担心这件事了。玛丽—克劳德从来也没为此感到担忧过。她的看法是：‘如果他们这么傻，那就让他们相信好了。’噢，得了，别跟我摆出这样一副苦瓜脸。你打从一开始就持这样的观点。这事闹了很多年之后，我虽然没有得出跟她完全一样的结论，却也开始认为，也许我无须担心。说到底这不是我的问题。再说少数几对情侣来碰了钉子之后，反正其他人也就不会再继续尝试了。这就当作是他们梦想的东西，一个小幻想。又有什么害处呢？但对你们两个，我看得出，不属于我说的这种情况。你们是认真的。你们已经仔细考虑过。你们认真地希望过。对于像你们这样的学生，我真心感到遗憾。让你们失望我一点都不会感到高兴。但情况就是这样。”

我不想去看汤米。我意外地保持着镇静，虽然艾米丽小姐的话本该将我俩彻底打垮，但某方面来看，她似乎话中有话，还有所隐瞒，仿佛我们还没有打破砂锅问到底。甚至有可能她讲的话并不是真的。因此我问道：

“这么说来，那延迟捐献的事就根本不存在？你怎么都不能帮到我们，是吗？”

她慢慢将头从一边摇到另一边。“这种谣言毫无依据。我很抱歉。我真的很抱歉。”

汤米突然问道：“那曾经有过吗？黑尔舍姆没关门之前的时候？”

艾米丽小姐继续摇着头。“从来都不是真的。甚至在茂宁代尔丑闻爆发之前，哪怕在黑尔舍姆还被当成是指路明灯的时代，那时我们被看做是朝着更人道、更美好的方向前进的范例，即便在那时候，这说法也不是真的。这一点最好讲清楚。这只是一种美好愿望的谣言。仅此而已。噢，亲爱的，是不是取柜子的人来了？”

门铃响了，楼上有脚步声下来去应门。外面狭长的过道里传来男人的谈话声，夫人从我们身后的黑影中走了出来，穿过房间出去了。艾米丽小姐坐在轮椅上，身体前倾，认真地听着。然后她说：

“不是他们。还是那个装修公司的讨厌的人。玛丽—克劳德会应付的。所以，亲爱的们，我们还有多几分钟。还有什么你们想跟我谈的吗？当然这是完全不符合规矩的，玛丽—克劳德本就不该放你们进来。自然，我一知道你们是谁，就应该把你们赶出去。但现如今玛丽—克劳德不大理会他们那套规矩了，我必须得承认，我也是一样。所以如果你们还想多待一会儿，我很欢迎。”

“如果这传言从来都不是真的，”汤米说，“那么为什么你要拿走我们的艺术作品？还有艺廊到底存在吗？”

“艺廊？嗯，这传言确有几分真实。的确曾有过一个艺廊。虽然换了一种形式，艺廊依然存在。现如今艺廊就在这里，在这幢房子里。我不得不精减藏品，这让我很遗憾。但这里的空间不够。然而我们为什么要拿走你们的作品？这才是你的问题，对不对？”

“不仅如此，”我平静地说，“首先为什么我们要做那么多作品？为什么要教育我们，鼓励我们，要求我们创作那些东西？如果我们反正只是为了捐献，然后死去，那么上那些课是为什么？读那么多书，做那些讨论，又有什么意义？”

“为什么要有黑尔舍姆呢？”过道里传来夫人的话音。她再次经过我们旁边，回到了房间里黑暗的那一半。“你这个问题问得好。”

艾米丽小姐的眼光追随着她的身影，有片刻时间她凝视着我们身后。我很想回头去看看，她俩交换着怎样的眼神，但我感觉就好像当初在黑尔舍姆那样，我们必须得面朝前方，保持专注。这时艾米丽小姐说：

“是啊，为什么要有黑尔舍姆呢？现如今玛丽—克劳德总是这样问。但不久之前，就在茂宁代尔丑闻爆发之前，她做梦也不会想到要提出这样的问题。这种念头根本进不去她的脑子。你知道的，就是这

么回事，别这副样子看我！那时候只有一个人会问这样的问题，那就是我。在茂宁代尔之前很久，从一开始我就在问。这样一来，其他人的日子比较容易过，玛丽-克劳德，所有他们那些人，都可以不假思索地继续工作。还有你们所有这些学生。我替你们所有人承担了那些担忧和疑问。只要我坚定不移，那么你们心头就不会有片刻的怀疑，你们所有的人。但既然你有了疑问，亲爱的孩子。那我们就回答其中最简单的一个，然后希望其余的问题也能因此得解。我们为什么要收集你们的艺术作品？为什么我们要做这件事？汤米，你前面说过一句很有趣的话。刚才你跟玛丽-克劳德讨论这个话题的时候说的。你说是因为创作会透露作者的本色。你真实的内在。你是这么说的，对不对？是啊，你这话说得没错。我们收走你们的创作是因为我们认为它能揭示你们的灵魂。或者更准确地说，我们这么做是为了证明你们有灵魂。”

她停了一下，我和汤米这么长时间以来，终于交换了一下眼神。然后我问：

“为什么你需要证明这种事呢，艾米丽小姐？莫非有人认为我们没有灵魂吗？”

她脸上浮现出淡淡的笑容。“看到你这样吃惊，凯西，我很受触动。从某方面来看，这显示出我们的工作做得很好。正如你所说，为什么会有人怀疑你们没有灵魂呢？可是我得告诉你，亲爱的，许多年以前，在我们刚刚开始的时候，这种认识还不为大众所接受。虽然从那时到现在，我们已经走了很远，但即便是今天，仍然不是所有人都相信这回事。你们这些黑尔舍姆的学生，哪怕是离校之后，到了这样一个世界里，仍然对此半点认识都没有。就在此刻，全国各地都有学生在非常悲惨的环境中长大，那种生活条件你们这些黑尔舍姆的学生简直无法想象。现在我们不在了，情况只会更糟糕。”

她再次停了下来，有一会儿她仿佛眯起眼睛仔细观察我们。后来，她继续讲：

“无论如何，我们至少确保我们负责照顾的你们所有人，都能在美好的环境中成长。我们还确保你们离开我们之后，仍然可以避免那些最恐怖的遭遇。至少我们有能力帮你们做到这些。然而你的这种梦想，能够延迟的这种梦想，像这种事，就始终不是我们所能决定的了，哪怕是我们影响力最高的时候也不行。我很抱歉，我看得出，我说的这些话，你们不大愿意接受。但你们一定不能灰心。我希望你们能够理解我们为你们争取到的一切。看看你们俩！你们出息得多

好！你们都受过教育，有文化。我很抱歉没能帮你们做到更多，但你们必须得明白，过去的情况曾有多糟糕。当初我和玛丽—克劳德刚开始的时候，像黑尔舍姆这样的地方根本不存在。我们和格伦摩根之家是最先办起来的。几年之后，又有了桑德斯托管中心。我们几家机构一起掀起了一场规模不大但却很有影响力的运动，我们对当时通行的整个捐献程序提出了挑战。最重要的是，我们向全世界表明，如果学生们在人道、文明的环境中长大，他们就有可能像任何普通人类成员一样，长成会体贴、有智慧的人。在那之前，所有的克隆人——或者称之为学生，我们喜欢这样称呼你们——存在仅仅是为了供应医学所需。早期的时候，战后那些年，大多数人对你们的了解就仅止于此，是试管中样貌模糊的物质。难道你不同意吗，玛丽—克劳德？她这会儿很安静。我亲爱的学生们，你们在场，似乎她舌头就打结了。那好吧。我这就回答你的问题，汤米。这就是我们为什么要收集你们的作品。我们挑选其中最好的作品举办特展。七十年代末期，我们影响力最强大的时候，我们曾在全国举办大型活动。内阁大臣、主教，各种名人都来参加。有演讲，征集到大笔的资金。‘看这里！’我们说，‘看看这件艺术作品！你怎么敢声称这些孩子不完全是人类呢？’噢，没错，那时候我们的运动得到了很多的支持，潮流是向着我们的。”

接下来的几分钟里，艾米丽小姐继续回顾那时候的各种活动，提到了许多人，可他们的名字我们听都没听说过。事实上，有一会儿感觉像是我们又在听她晨会上的讲话，她常常说着说着就离题扯远了，我们谁都听不懂她说的话。可她似乎乐在其中，眼睛周围洋溢着温柔的笑意。然后她突然跳脱出来，换了一种新的口吻说道：

“可我们从未失去跟现实的接触，对不对，玛丽—克劳德？这跟我们桑德斯托管中心的同仁不一样。即便是在最好的时代，我们也始终明白，我们是在打一场多么艰难的战役。果不其然，茂宁代尔事件爆发，紧接着又有一两桩别的事，随后还不等我们明白过来，所有那些辛勤工作的成果就都付诸流水，化为乌有了。”

“可我不明白的是，”我说，“最开始人们为什么想让学生们遭受这么坏的待遇。”

“凯西，以你今天的观点来看，这种想法是完全合理的。但你必须得尝试着历史地看待问题。战争之后，五十年代初科学界很快取得了一个接一个的重大突破，人们没有时间去判断、评估，理性地提出问题。突然之间各种可能性摆到了我们面前，有各种方法能治好许多

从前认为无法医治的绝症。这就是世人最关注的问题，最想要的东西。于是很长时间里，人们宁可相信这些器官是凭空出现的，或者最多是在某种真空中种植出来的。没错，曾有过争论。但到了人们终于开始关心……关心这些学生的时候，等到人们开始考虑你们是怎么培育出来的，你们是否应该被带来，存在于这个世界上，到那时已经太迟了。根本无法回头。世人已经开始相信癌症可以治愈，你怎能期望这样一个世界，去收回这种治疗方法，重回黑暗时代？已经没有回头路了。无论人们对于你们的生存状况感到多么不安，他们主要关心的仍是自己的孩子、自己的配偶、自己的父母、自己的朋友不要死于癌症、运动神经元疾病、心脏病。因此很长一段时间里，你们都被隐藏在阴影中，人们尽量不去想到你们。如果他们想到了，也会尽量说服自己，你们其实跟我们不一样。说你们算不上真正的人类，因此怎么都没关系。这种情况一直持续着，直到我们开始掀起这场小小的运动。然而你是否看到我们所对抗的是什么？我们犹如蚍蜉撼树。现实就是这样，要求学生做捐献。在这个前提下，拒绝将你们看作是普通人类的这种阻碍永远都会存在。可我们坚持战斗了很多年，至少我们为你们赢得了许多的改进，可是当然，你们只是幸运的极少数。然而这时发生了茂宁代尔丑闻，以及其他的事，然后不等我们反应过来，气候已经完全变了。没有人愿意再被人看到支持我们的事业，我们这场小小的运动，黑尔舍姆，格伦摩根，还有桑德斯托管中心，我们全都被一扫而空。”

“您反复说起的这个茂宁代尔丑闻到底是怎么回事啊，艾米丽小姐？”我问道，“您得告诉我们，因为我们不知道这事。”

“唉，想来你们也没理由知道。对于外面的大世界而言，这始终也不是件了不起的大事。事情起因是一个科学家，名叫詹姆斯·茂宁代尔，这人某些方面天分颇高。他在苏格兰某个偏僻地区开展工作，我想他大概认为那里比较不招人注意。他想要带给人们一种新的可能，让他们生出具有某些加强特质的小孩。超强智慧，超强体能，诸如此类。当然，其他人也曾有过类似的雄心企图，但这位茂宁代尔，他的研究将前辈远远甩在了身后，也甩开了法律的约束。总之，他被人发现之后，研究工作就此终止，事情就此结束了。只不过，当然对我们而言，这还没完。正如我所说，这事从来没有引起轩然大波，但的确引发了某种气氛，你明白的。这事提醒了人们，让他们关注到了一直抱有的一种恐惧。为了捐献工程，制造像你们这样的学生是一回事。但整整一代人，被设计创造出来的孩子，将取代他们在社会上的

位置？更何况这些孩子将显著超过我们其他人？噢，那可不行。人们都吓坏了。他们就此退缩了。”

“可是艾米丽小姐，”我说，“所有这些跟我们有什么关系呢？为什么因为这种事黑尔舍姆就得关门呢？”

“我们也找不出任何显著联系啊，凯西。最初没有。现在我常常想，我们没能发现问题，所以该当受到惩罚。如果我们当初更警惕一些，而不是只顾闷头做自己的事，如果在茂宁代尔的新闻刚刚爆发的时候，在那个阶段我们就尽力做工作，也许事态还有挽回的余地。哎，玛丽-克劳德不同意了。她认为不论我们怎么做，该来的还是会来，也许她的想法有道理。毕竟不只是茂宁代尔这一件事。当时还有其他的事。比如那套糟糕的电视系列片。这些事都起到了推波助澜的作用，合力改变了潮流方向。但我想，说到底，核心的问题是这样的。我们的运动太微小，我们一直都非常脆弱，一直过分依赖赞助人兴之所至的念头。只要大气候对我们是好的，只要某个大公司或者某位政客认为支持我们对他有利，那么我们就能维持下去。但我们始终都是举步维艰，茂宁代尔之后，气候变了以后，我们就彻底没戏了。世人不想看到捐献工程到底是怎么进行的。他们不想去考虑你们这些学生，或者你们生长所处的环境。换句话说，我亲爱的，他们想要你们回到阴影之中，回到我和玛丽-克劳德这样的人出现之前，你们那种模糊阴暗的存在。所有那些有权有势的人物，那些曾经那么热衷于帮助我们的人，当然，他们都消失不见了。仅仅一年多的时间里，我们失去了一个又一个赞助人。我们竭尽全力继续维持，比格伦摩根还多撑了两年。但最终，正如你所知道的，我们不得不关门，今天我们当初的工作已经几乎毫无踪迹可寻。现在全国哪里都找不到像黑尔舍姆这样的地方了。你所能找到的，跟从前一样，就只有那些巨大的政府‘家园’，如果说这些地方比从前有所好转，我告诉你们吧，亲爱的，如果你们看到这些地方现在仍在发生的一些情况，你们会连续几天都睡不好觉。至于说我和玛丽-克劳德，就这样，我们退到了这幢房子里，在楼上，我们有堆成山的你们的作品。我们只有这些，来证明我们曾经做过的事。还有堆成山的债务，当然债务没有艺术那么讨喜。还有就是记忆，对于你们所有人的记忆。以及知道我们曾经给了你们比原先更好的生活。”

“别想让他们感激你，”夫人的话音从我们身后传来，“凭什么他们要感恩戴德？他们来这里，是有更多更高的要求。这么多年以来，我们所给与他们的，所有我们为他们所做的那些斗争，他们知道些什么？他们认为一切都是上帝的赐予。直到他们来这里之前，他们

对一切都一无所知。现在他们只会感到失望，因为我们没有给与他们可能的一切。”

有一会儿谁也没有说话。后来外面传来噪声，门铃再次响了起来。夫人从黑暗中走过来，出去到了大厅。

“这回一定是那些人了，”艾米丽小姐说，“我得做好准备了。但你们可以再多待一会儿。那些人得把东西搬下两段楼梯。玛丽—克劳德会监督他们，不能损坏家具。”

我和汤米都很难相信这就结束了。我们俩谁都没有起身，也没有任何人出现，要帮艾米丽小姐离开轮椅。有一刹那我疑心她会不会尝试着自己站起来，可她完全没动，仍像从前一样朝前倾身，仔细倾听。这时汤米说：

“所以根本什么都没有。没有延迟，没有这种事。”

“汤米，”我悄声喊道，一边盯着他。但是艾米丽小姐柔声答道：

“没有，汤米。完全没有这种事。你们的生活必须得按照既定的轨道走下去。”

“所以照您所说的，小姐，”汤米说，“我们所做的一切，所有那些课程，一切的一切，都只是为了您刚刚跟我们说的这些？除此之外没有任何意义？”

“我能理解，”艾米丽小姐说，“你们一定会认为自己只是棋盘上的棋子。当然你可以这样来看待。但想想看，你们是些幸运的棋子。曾有过某种气候，但现在没了。你们得接受，有时候世界上的事就是这样。人们的看法，他们的感受，一会儿朝这边，一会儿又改那边。只是你们碰巧在这个过程中的某一点长大了。”

“可能这只是一时的潮流，来来去去，”我说，“但是对于我们，这就是一辈子。”

“是，这话没错。但是想想看。你们比之前的很多人都过得好很多。谁知道你们之后的人要面对什么样的情况。我很抱歉，学生们，但我必须得离开你们了。乔治！乔治！”

外面过道里声音很嘈杂，也许乔治没有听到，因为没有人答应。汤米突然问道：

“露西小姐就是因为这才离开的么？”

有一瞬间我以为艾米丽小姐没听到他的问话，因为她的注意力都在关注着过道那边。她背靠回轮椅上，开始慢慢朝门口挪动轮椅。房间里有太多小茶几和椅子，似乎轮椅无从通过。我刚刚想站起身帮她开辟通道，突然她停了下来。

“露西·沃恩莱特！”她说，“啊，没错。我们跟她是曾有过一点小分歧。”她顿了一顿，调整了轮椅，重新朝向汤米。“没错。我们是跟她有一点小分歧。看法不同。但我要这样回答你的问题，汤米。跟露西·沃恩莱特的不同意见跟我刚刚告诉你的这些事没有关系。至少没有直接关联。不，应该说那更是一种内部矛盾。”

我以为她说到这里就算了，于是问道：“艾米丽小姐，如果可以的话，我们想了解情况，知道露西小姐出了什么事。”

艾米丽小姐扬起了眉毛。“露西·沃恩莱特？她对你们这么重要吗？原谅我，亲爱的同学们，我又忘事了。露西跟我们工作的时间不久，因此对我们而言，她只是我们的黑尔舍姆回忆中一个无关紧要的角色。而且总的来说也不是一个快乐的人物。但我能理解，毕竟你们正好那几年时间在校……”她自说自话地笑了起来，仿佛记起了什么事。大厅里，夫人正在大声训斥那些人，但现在艾米丽小姐仿佛对他们失去了兴趣。她满脸聚精会神的表情，在回忆往事。最后她说：“她是个挺好心的姑娘，露西·沃恩莱特。但是她跟我们共事了一段时间之后，就开始有了一些想法。她认为应该让你们学生更了解情况。对你们的未来有更清醒的认识，知道自己是谁，你们为什么存在。她认为应该尽量充分地让你们了解情况。除非能做到这一切，否则一定程度上就是欺骗你们。我们考虑过她的观点，最后认定她是错误的。”

“为什么？”汤米问，“你们为什么会那样认为？”

“为什么？她用意是好的。这点我可以肯定。我看得出你很喜欢她。她有成为一个出色导师的天赋。但是她所做的事，太理想化了。我们已经运营黑尔舍姆很多年了，对于怎样有效，在他们离开黑尔舍姆之后，长远看来怎样才是对学生最好，这些我们都有数。露西·沃恩莱特太理想主义，这没什么错。但她对于现实问题毫无概念。你瞧，我们的确给与了你们一些东西，一些即便现在也没人能够夺走的东西，我们就是凭借着为你们提供庇护，来做到了这点。如果我们没有这么做，黑尔舍姆也就不成其为黑尔舍姆了。当然，有时候这就意味着有些事我们得瞒着你们，对你们撒谎。没错，很多方面而言，我们愚弄了你们。我想，你甚至可以这么说。但那些年里，我们庇护

了你们。我们给了你们一个童年。露西当然是出于善意。但如果她的想法得到实施，那你们在黑尔舍姆的幸福就会荡然无存了。看看你们俩！我看到你们真是感到非常的自豪。你们凭借着我们教给你们的东西，构建了自己的人生。如果我们没有保护你们，你们就不会成为今天这样的自己。你们当初不会埋头上课，不会迷醉于艺术和写作。你们干吗要做这些事呢，如果知道未来每个人面对的是什麼？你们一定会告诉我们这毫无意义，我们又拿什麼话来反驳你们呢？所以她必须得走。”

现在我们听得到夫人在朝那些人大喊大叫。准确说她倒不是发脾气，但她的声音非常严厉，令人生畏，先前还有一些男人的话音传来，跟她争论几句，现在都一声不吭了。

“也许我跟你们一起待在这里反而更好，”艾米丽小姐说，“玛丽—克劳德处理这种事效率要高得多。”

我不知道自己为什么要这样说。也许是因为我知道这次拜访很快要结束了；也许是我很好奇，到底艾米丽小姐和夫人对彼此是什麼感情。总之我压低了声音，朝门廊过道点了点头，说道：

“夫人从来都不喜欢我们。她一直都很怕我们。就像有人害怕蜘蛛什麼的那样。”

我等着想看艾米丽小姐会不会发火，反正现在她发火我也不会介意。果然，她猛地朝我转过脸，仿佛我朝她扔了一个纸团，她目光灼灼，让我想起她在黑尔舍姆的日子。但当她开口答话的时候，话音却平和温柔：

“玛丽—克劳德把一切都给了你们。她拼了命地工作、工作、工作。别搞错，我的孩子，玛丽—克劳德是站在你们一边的，并且将永远站在你们一边。她害怕你们吗？我们都怕你们。我本人就不得不每天跟自己对你们的恐惧做斗争，我在黑尔舍姆的每一天几乎都是如此。有时候我从办公室窗口望着你们，我会感到那么强烈的厌恶……”她停了下来，这时她眼睛里重又开始闪光，“可我下决心不让这种情绪阻止我去做正确的事。我跟这些情绪作战，并且战胜了。现在，如果你们肯好心帮我离开这里，乔治应该拿着我的拐杖等着呢。”

我俩一人扶着她一边的胳膊肘，她就这样小心翼翼地走到了大厅里，一个穿护士制服的大个子男人看到我们吓了一跳，很快拿出了一副拐杖。

对着街道的正门开着，我很吃惊地看到天色还没有变暗。夫人的声音从外面传来，对那些人讲话的音调比先前平静。这时我跟汤米好像应该悄悄溜走，但这会儿那个乔治在帮艾米丽小姐穿外套，她就稳稳地扶着拐杖站在那里，挡住我们的去路。我们没办法，因此就等在那里。我猜想，我们也是等着要跟艾米丽小姐道别，也许经过这么多事之后，我们想对她说声谢谢。我说不准。但现在她全部心思都在她那个床头柜上了。她忙不迭地给外面那几个男人下指令，然后就跟乔治一起离开了，并没有回头看我们。

我和汤米又在大厅里待了一会儿，拿不准该怎么办才好。等到我们终于溜达到外面的时候，我留意到虽然天色还没有完全暗下来，但长街上路灯都已经亮了起来。一辆白色货车正在发动引擎。后面紧跟着一辆大型的老款式沃尔沃轿车，艾米丽小姐就坐在副驾驶位上。夫人正趴在车窗上，不知艾米丽小姐说了什么，夫人听了直点头，这时乔治关上了后备厢，转到驾驶座的门口。随后那辆白车发动起来，艾米丽小姐的车跟了上去。

夫人望着离去的车辆，看了好一会儿。后来她转过身，仿佛要回屋子里去，见到我们站在人行道上，突然停了下来，仿佛朝后退缩了一点。

“我们要走了，”我说，“谢谢你跟我们讲话。请代我们跟艾米丽小姐道别。”

我看到她在渐渐暗去的光线里仔细观察我。然后她说：

“凯西·H，我记得你。对，我记得。”她说完就不作声了，但仍是盯着我看。

“我想我知道你在想什么，”最后，我说，“我想我能猜得出。”

“那很好。”她的声音犹如梦呓，眼神仿佛有些失焦，“很好。你能看透别人的心思。那你来告诉我吧。”

“曾经有一次你见到过我，一天下午，在宿舍里。旁边没有别人，我在放磁带，放音乐。我闭着眼睛好像在跳舞，你看到了我。”

“说得很好。你真的懂读心术。你应该站到舞台上表演。我这才刚刚认出是你。可是没错，我记得那一次。我现在还时不时想起来。”

“真有趣。我也是。”

“是嘛。”

我们本可以就此结束谈话。我们本可以说声再见，然后离开。可她朝前一步靠近我们，同时紧紧盯着我的脸。

“你那时候年纪要小得多，”她说，“但是没错，就是你。”

“如果你不愿意可以不回答，”我说，“可这总是让我很困惑。我可以问你个问题吗？”

“你能读懂我的心思。可我看不透你的。”

“这个，你那天……很难过。你在看我，然后我感觉到了，睁开了眼睛，看到你在看着我，我想你当时哭了。事实上，我确信你是在哭。你看着我，在哭泣。那是为什么？”

夫人的表情毫无变化，她仍是盯着我的脸。“我在哭泣，”最终她非常低声地开口说道，仿佛怕邻居会听到似的，“因为当我进来的时候听到了你的音乐。我以为是哪个笨蛋学生忘记把音乐关掉了。但当我来到你的宿舍，我看到你一个人，孤单单一个小女孩在跳舞。正如你所说，眼睛闭着，心怀向往，神游远方。你舞得充满悲悯之情。还有音乐，那首歌。歌词里面有些什么。充满了伤感。”

“那首歌，”我说，“名叫《莫失莫忘》。”随后我轻轻压低了声音唱了几句给她听。“莫失莫忘。噢，宝贝，宝贝。莫失莫忘……”

她仿佛表示赞同一般，点了点头。“没错，就是这首歌。打那之后，我又听到过一两次。电台里、电视上。这歌总会将我带回那个小女孩孤单单一个人跳舞的画面。”

“你说你不懂读心术，”我说，“但是也许那天你读懂了我的心思。也许因此你看到我才会哭了起来。也许不论那首歌到底唱的是什么，当我跳舞的时候，我脑子里有我自己理解的意思。你知道吗，我想象这歌唱的是一个女人，她知道自己不能有小孩。但后来她有了一个宝宝，她非常高兴，把宝宝紧紧抱在胸口，很怕有什么会把他们分开，于是她就轻轻地唱，宝贝，宝贝，莫失莫忘。这根本不是歌词原来的意思，但那时候，我心里想的就是这幅画面。也许你读懂了我的心思，所以你才觉得这歌令人伤心。我当时并没觉得这歌有那么让人难过，但现在回想起来，确实让人有点伤感。”

我是对着夫人讲这些话的，但我感觉到汤米在我身边动来动去，意识到他衣服的质地，以及他的一切。后来夫人说：

“这很有趣。可我当初也不比现在更懂得看透别人的想法。我流眼泪是因为完全不同的原因。那天当我看你跳舞的时候，我有不同的感受。我看到一个新世界迅速地到来。更加科学，更有效率，没错。多年的顽疾有救了。很好。但这是一个更冷酷、更无情的世界。我看到一个小姑娘，她双眼紧闭，将旧的世界紧紧搂在胸口，她打心底里知道，这个旧世界将不复存在，于是将它抱紧，哀求着，莫失莫忘。那就是我所看到的画面。我知道，真的并不是因为你或者你在做的事。但我看到了你，这场景令我心碎。我从此永志不忘。”

这时她朝前走了两步，直到距离我俩只有一两步远才停下。“今天傍晚你说的故事，也很打动我。”她转眼看看汤米，又转回来看看我。“可怜的小家伙。真希望我能帮你们。但现在你们得靠自己了。”

她伸出一只手，始终盯着我的脸，同时将手摸到了我的脸颊上。我感到她全身一阵颤抖，可她并没将手拿开，我又一次看到她眼中涌出了泪水。

“你们这些可怜的小家伙，”她又说了一遍，声音轻得如同耳语。然后她就转过身，回到了自己家。

回程中我们几乎没有讨论跟艾米丽小姐和夫人的会面。即便是说到，我们也只是聊聊那些不重要的事，比如我们都觉得她们看上去老了很多，或是关于她们家里的东西。

我一直尽量让两人乘坐的车子行驶在偏僻的小路上，沿途只有我们的车灯打破黑暗。我们偶尔会跟其他车灯遭遇，这时我会感觉，车上坐的也是护理员，也许他一个人开车回家，再不然就像我一样，身旁坐着他负责的捐献者。当然我明白其他的人也会开车走在路上；但那天晚上，我仿佛感觉全国所有这些小路的存在，都是为了我们这样的人，而那些亮堂堂的、有巨大指示牌和大型咖啡厅的大路是给其他人用的。我不知道汤米是不是有类似的想法。也许他也跟我一样，因为有一次他说：

“凯丝，你真的认识很多奇怪的小路呢。”

他说这话的时候轻轻笑了一声，但随后他仿佛陷入了沉思。后来，当我们在不知什么地方的偏僻后街，沿着一条特别黑的小路行驶

的时候，他突然说：

“我觉得露西小姐是对的，艾米丽小姐错了。”

我不记得自己有没有回答他。如果我说了什么，也绝不是有什么有深度的答案。但这时我才第一次留意到，他的声音，或者是仪态，隐约流露出值得警惕的讯息。我记得自己将眼光离开曲折的路面转去看他，可他就只是默默地坐在原地，双眼直视着前方的夜幕。

几分钟之后，他突然说：“凯丝，我们停一下好吗？很抱歉，我得下车。”

我以为他又不舒服了，几乎立刻就将车开到路边，紧贴着树篱停了下来。那地方完全没有灯光，即便车灯亮着，我还是担心会有其他车转弯过来撞上我们。因此当汤米下了车，消失在黑暗中的时候，我并没有跟上去。况且，他下车的样子显得目的明确，哪怕他的确是不舒服了，看他的意思也是想一个人应付。总之，我因此就留在了车上，心里想着不知是否应该再把车往上坡再开一段，这时我听到了第一声尖叫。

开始我根本没想到那会是他，我以为有个疯子躲在灌木丛里。等我下了车，第二声、第三声尖叫传来的时候，我这时才知道那是汤米，但知道了之后我更加着急了。实际上，有一个片刻，我完全不知道他在哪里，惊恐之下几乎乱了方寸。我什么都看不见，当我试图朝尖叫的声音走去时，却遭遇了一片拦路的灌木丛。后来终于找到一个缺口，然后迈过一条沟，我才踏到了软绵绵的泥巴地上。

这时我终于可以更明白地看清楚周围的环境。我站在一片田里，我面前不远处，地面就是一片陡峭的下坡，我能看到下面山谷里某个村庄里亮起的灯火。风真的很大，一阵风打到我身上，人几乎要倒下，我只得去扶篱笆柱。月亮还不太圆，但却很亮，我能分辨出汤米的身影出现在前面不太远，就在田地开始下坡的地方，他愤怒、嘶吼、甩着拳头，到处乱踢。

我想朝他跑过去，但泥巴粘住了我的脚。泥巴同样也阻碍着他，因为一次，他一脚踢出去人就滑倒，摔倒在黑暗中消失不见了。可他那含混的咒骂声没被打断，仍在继续。他刚一重新站起来，我终于来到了他身边。月光中我看到了他的脸，沾满了厚厚的泥巴，愤怒得扭曲变形，然后我拉住他甩动的胳膊，紧紧搂住不放。他试图甩开我，但我坚持不放手，一直到他停止喊叫，我感觉他身体不再抗争。这时我意识到，他的双臂也在拥抱着我。于是我们就像这样站在一起，在

那片田野的最高处，待了仿佛很久很久，什么话都没有说，就只是彼此紧紧抱在一起，狂风一直往我们身上刮过来，扯动我们的衣服，有一会儿感觉就好像只有我们抱在一起，才可以避免被吹到茫茫黑夜中去。

最终当我们分开来的时候，他嗫嚅道：“真对不起，凯丝。”随后他勉强地笑了一下，又说：“幸亏地里没有牛。要是牲口肯定要被吓坏了。”

我看得出他是在竭力安慰我，现在一切都没事了，但他的胸口仍在剧烈起伏，双腿也在发抖。我们一起走回到车旁，小心着不要滑倒。

“你一身的牛粪味儿，”最后我说。

“哎呀，天哪，凯丝，这我回去怎么解释？我们得想办法从后门溜进去。”

“可你还得签到呢。”

“哎呀，天哪，”他说完，又笑了起来。

我在车上找到几块抹布，两人尽量把最明显的泥渍擦掉了。但我在后备厢找抹布的时候，也把装有他那些动物画作的运动包取了出来，当我们再次开车的时候，我留意到汤米把包拿了进去，放在自己身边。

我们开了一段，没说什么，那包就放在他腿上。我等待着他开口说几句关于那些画儿的事；一度我甚至怕他会情绪再次失控，将所有的画扔到车窗外去。可他小心用双手护着包，眼睛怔怔地望着我们面前不断延展的黑暗长路。沉默许久之后，他说：

“刚才的事我很抱歉，凯丝。真的，我真是白痴。”然后他又补了一句：“你在想什么呢，凯丝？”

“我在想，”我说，“那时候在黑尔舍姆，有时候你会像刚才这样大发脾气，当初我们不能理解。我们不能理解你怎么会变成那样。我刚才突然想到，其实只是这样一转念。我想也许你当初之所以会变成那样是因为在某种程度上，你始终都知道。”

汤米想了一会儿，然后摇摇头。“我觉得不是这样，凯丝。不，我这个人就是这样。我犯浑。仅此而已。”然后又过了一会儿，他轻

笑一声，说道：“但这想法很有趣啊。也许我真的知道，深深的潜意识里。知道一些你们其他人不懂的事。”

第二十三章

那次出行之后过了一个多礼拜，一切似乎都没什么变化。可我知道情况不会这样持续下去，果不其然，一进十月，我就开始注意到一些微小的变化。比如，虽然汤米仍然在画那些动物，却对我看到他画画表现出一些警惕。两人并没有回到我刚刚给他做护理员时的那种状态，而农舍时代的旧事阴影仍然笼罩在我们之间。但他仿佛已经考虑清楚，并且做出了决定：他会随兴而作，继续画他的动物，如果我进来，他就停下来，把画收起来。我并没有因此感到受伤。事实上，从我的角度来看，这倒让我松了口气：两个人在一起的时候，那些动物盯着我们的脸，只会让情况更尴尬。

但还有一些变化我就无法感觉那么轻松了。倒不是说我们从此再没有在楼上他的房间里享受过好时光。我们甚至仍然时不时会做爱。可现在我总是忍不住留意到，汤米越来越多地跟康复中心其他捐献者获得认同。比如，倘或我们俩一起在聊起黑尔舍姆的故人，或迟或早，他总会将话题转到他现在的捐献者朋友，也许说过或者做过什么跟我们回忆相似的事。具体有一次，我开了很长时间的車，终于到了金斯费尔德，从车上下來。广场看起来跟我陪露丝去看船的那天，來到这家康复中心的样子很像。那是一个阴云密布的秋日午后，周围没什么人，只有娱乐室的屋檐底下聚集着一群捐献者。我看到汤米就在他们之中——他站在那边，一边肩膀靠在柱子上——在听一个蹲坐在门口台阶上的捐献者说话。我朝他们走了几步，然后停下来站在露天里，那片灰暗的天空下等着。可是尽管汤米已经看到了我，却仍是在听他朋友讲话，终于他和其他人一起哈哈大笑起来。即便这时，他还是继续在倾听，面带微笑。后来他自己说曾经示意我过去找他，但如果他表示过，那也完全不明显。我只看到他含混地朝我所在方向露出微笑，然后就转头去听他朋友讲段子了。好吧，就算是他当时听到一半，好在过了一分钟左右，他总算走了过来，于是我们俩一起上去，到了他的房间。但如果是从前，情况会完全不同。不仅仅是他让我在广场上白白等了他一阵。单是如此的话我不会太往心里去。更重要的是，那天我第一次感觉到他因为要跟我一起走开，表现出一种类似怨恨的情绪。当我们上楼到了他的房间之后，两人之间的气氛也不太融洽。

说句公道话，很大程度上这可能既是他的问题，我这方面也有责任。因为当我站在那里，看着他们说说笑笑的时候，我意料之外地感到一种小小的触动；因为那些捐献者自然而然围成一个大致的半圆形，他们几乎刻意地摆出放松的姿态，或立或坐，仿佛向世界宣布他们每一个都是多么享受彼此的陪伴，这让我想起来我们一群小伙伴从前的样子，总是在运动馆几个人围坐一起。正如我所说，这种类比触发了我内心的一些感受，因此也许，等我们上楼到了他的房间之后，我心里同样也有怨恨之意，与他对我的感觉并无二致。

同样，每次他对我说因为我还不是捐献者，所以某些事我理解不了的时候，我也会感到丝丝的刺痛和怨恨。但是只有一次例外，具体事件我马上讲到，除此之外问题就只是这样丝丝的刺痛而已。通常他会半开玩笑，几乎是带着爱意地对我说起这些事。即便有的时候事情更严重一点，比如有一次他对我说，不让我再把他的脏衣服拿去洗衣房了，因为他自己能去，但这些小口角也没有变成争吵。那次我问他：

“这有什么区别呢，我们俩谁把毛巾拿下楼去？我反正要下去的嘛。”

对此他摇头回答道：“你瞧，凯丝，我自己的事自己能处理。如果你是捐献者，你就明白了。”

的确，这确实感觉有点烦人，但这种事我可以轻易忘掉。但正如我所说，有一次他说起这样的话，我不是捐献者云云，就真的惹火了我。

那是在他第四次捐献的通知送达大约一周之后。我们都知道这通知要来，关于这个已经深入地谈了不少。事实上，自从那次去利特尔汉普顿回来，我们谈了很多心底至深至密的话。我早已了解捐献者对于他们第四次捐献的反应各有不同。有些人会随时想谈这件事，无休无止，毫无方向地谈。有人只会玩笑中提及，还有人根本拒绝谈论此事。再者捐献者中间有这样一种古怪的风尚，会将第四次捐献当成是一件值得庆祝的成就。有捐献者要“四进宫”了，那么即便他迄今为止都不大受人待见，如今也会受到特别尊重的对待。连医生护士都会来这套：当第四次捐献的人进来做检查的时候，白大褂们会微笑相迎，上前握手。而我和汤米曾谈起过所有这些事，有时是玩笑，有时是严肃认真地交流。我们讨论过大家处理这件事所尝试的各种方式，到底哪种方式最为合理。有一次，我们并排躺在床上，等待暮色降临，他说：

“你知道为什么吗，凯丝，为什么每个人都那么担心第四次？那是因为谁都说不准这是不是真正的完结。如果你确信这次就完了，那就会比较容易。但他们从来不会明确给我们讲。”

有段时间我已经在考虑，我们会不会聊到这件事。我也曾考虑过应该如何应答。可是事到临头，我却找不到什么话可说。于是我只说：“这都是些废话，汤米。都是空谈，胡说八道而已。不值得认真考虑。”

但汤米应该会知道，我没有任何东西来证实我的这些话。他也应该知道，他提出的问题，就连医生也没有确切的答案。你也会听到同样的谈话。也许在第四次捐献之后，哪怕从技术上讲，你已经完结了，但某种程度上你依然保有意识；这时你会发现还有更多的捐献，很多很多捐献，在这条分界线的另一边；再也没有康复中心，没有护理人员，没有朋友；你只能眼睁睁看着自己捐出剩余的一切，什么也做不了，直到他们将你关掉。这是恐怖电影里才有的东西，大多数时候人们不愿意去想这些。白大褂们不愿意，护理人员不愿意——通常捐献者们也不愿意。但时不时会有捐献者提起这些，就像汤米那天晚上一样，现在我真希望我们曾谈过这些。可是实际上，当我斥之为胡说八道之后，我们俩都退缩了，对这个领域完全避而不谈。至少，我知道在那之后，汤米依然想着这些，我很高兴至少他曾跟我谈到这样深藏的心事。我想说的是，总的来说在我的印象中，我们共同面对第四次捐献的到来，处理得还不错，因此那天我们俩在田野里散步的时候，他说的话让我大吃一惊，不知所措。

金斯费尔德没有太多空地面积。很明显广场就是个集合点，还有就是大楼后面有一点零星地面，看起来犹如废墟。其中最大的一块，捐献者们称之为“田野”，是一片用铁丝网围起来的长方形空地，上面长满了杂草和刺蓟。一直有说法，要把这块地方改造成草坪，供捐献者使用，但直到今天，他们也还没实施。然而即便他们真的改造了，这块地方也不会太安静，因为附近就是大路。可是当捐献者心神不宁，需要散心的时候，他们常常会到这里来，从那些荨麻和野蔷薇中间穿过。我提到的那一天早上，雾很大，我知道田野里肯定湿透了，但汤米坚持要我们去那里散步。不出预料，那里就只有我们两个人——这可能正好合了汤米的心意。两人披荆斩棘在灌木丛中走了几分钟之后，他在防护栏旁边停了下来，盯着另外一边茫茫的大雾。然后他说：

“凯丝，我希望你不要误会。但我想了很久。凯丝，我想我应该换一个护理员。”

他说完这句话的几秒钟内，我就发现自己完全不感到意外；好像不知不觉中我已经在等着这一刻的到来。但我依然感到很生气，于是什么也没说。

“不光是因为第四次捐献就要到了，”他接着说，“不光是因为这个。而是因为像上星期那样的事。我们碰到肾出问题的那些麻烦。接下来这样的事会越来越多。”

“所以我才来找到你，”我说，“我正是因此才来帮助你的。为了现在即将开始的一切。这也是露丝所希望的。”

“露丝希望我们一起是为了别的事，”汤米说，“她倒未必想要你给我做护理员一直到最后。”

“汤米，”我说，我觉得到这时我已经怒火中烧了，但还是尽量压低声音，控制自己，“我就是来帮你的。我就是为此才来，再次找到你的。”

“露丝希望我们一起是为了别的事，”汤米重复道，“不是现在这些。凯丝我不想在你面前那样。”

他低头望着地面，一只手掌压在铁丝网栅栏上，有一会儿他看起来仿佛在留心听大雾中某处传来的车声。就在这时他一边轻轻摇着头，一边说出了那句话：

“露丝会明白的。她是个捐献者，所以她应该能明白。我倒不是说她一定会希望自己也这样。如果她有选择，也许她会想要你给她做护理员直到最后。但她能够明白，理解我想要不同的做法。凯丝，有时候你就是不明白。你不明白因为你不是个捐献者。”

就在他说出这话之后，我掉头就走了。正如我所说的，对于他不再让我给他做护理员这件事，我几乎已经有了准备。先前的众多小事不足论，比如在广场上他让我站着等的那次，但那时他说的话真正刺痛了我。他就这样再一次将我排除在外，不仅仅是其他捐献者之外，更是他和露丝之外。

但这从未演变成一场大的冲突。我走掉之后，也没别的事可以做，只好重新上楼回到他的房间，后来过了几分钟他也上来了。那时我已经冷静下来，他也一样，我们终于可以更好地谈谈这件事。场面

有点僵，但我们保持了平和，甚至谈到了一些换护理员的实际问题。然后，我们坐在昏暗的灯光里，肩并肩坐在他的床边，他对我说：

“我不希望我们再争吵了，凯丝。但我一直想问你这个问题。我说，一直当护理员难道你没有厌倦吗？我们其余所有人，我们很久以前就成了捐献者。你做这个已经很多年了。难道有时候你不会希望么，凯丝，让他们快点给你送通知？”

我耸耸肩。“我无所谓。再说，有好的护理员很重要。我是个很好的护理员。”

“可是真的有那么重要吗？没错，有个好护理员的确很不错。但最终，这真的有那么重要吗？捐献者总要去捐献，都一样，然后就完结了。”

“当然很重要。一个好护理员能给捐献者的实际生活带来很大不同。”

“可是你整天来回奔波。总是疲惫不堪，孤身一人。我一直观察着你。你已经筋疲力尽。你一定想的，凯丝，有时候你一定会希望他们来对你说你可以停下来了。我不知道你为什么不去找他们说说，问问他们为什么耽搁这么久。”我依然沉默不语，他接着说：“我姑且一说，仅此而已。我们不要再争吵了。”

我将头靠在他肩上，说道：“是啊，那好。也许反正要不了多久了。但眼下我还得继续。哪怕你不希望我在身边，还会有其他人需要。”

“我猜你说得对，凯丝。你真的是个很好的护理员。如果你不是你，那么对于我你就是个完美的护理员。”他笑了一声，伸出胳膊搂住我，可我们仍是那样并排坐着。后来他说：“我总是想到，不知哪里有这么条河，水流很快很急。水里有两个人，试图抓住彼此，他们尽量紧紧地抱在一起，但最终还是承受不住。水流真的太湍急。他们不得不松开手，就此分散。我觉得我们就像这样。太可惜了，凯丝，因为我们一辈子都爱着彼此。但最终我们却不能永远在一起。”

他说这些话的时候，我记起了那天夜里，从利特尔汉普顿回来的路上，在狂风大作的田野里，我跟他紧紧相拥的样子。我不知道他是否也想到了同样的事，抑或他仍在想象着河流和湍急的水流。总之我们就那样继续坐在床边过了很久，沉浸在各自的思绪中。最终我对他说：

“我很抱歉先前对你发火了。我去跟他们讲。我会尽量确保让你有个真正好的护理员。”

“太可惜了，凯丝，”他又说了一遍。然后我想那天上午我们就没有再谈过这事。

我记得那之后的几个礼拜——新护理员来交接之前的最后几周——风平浪静得令人吃惊。也许我和汤米都格外努力，要好好相待，但时间仿佛不知不觉就这样无忧无虑地滑走了。你也许以为我们这样在一起的状态，会有种不现实的气氛，但当时一点也不觉得奇怪。我忙于照顾北威尔士两个捐献者，没办法如愿在金斯费尔德待较长时间，可我依然做到了每周来三到四次。天气变冷了，但仍然干燥，常常阳光明媚，我们在他的房间里消磨时光，有时候做爱，更多的时候就只是谈天，或是汤米听我读书。有一两次我在床上读书，汤米甚至取出了他的笔记本，开始涂鸦构思新的动物。

后来有一天我进来，那是最后的一次。我是十二月一个晴爽天气的午后，一点钟刚过的时候到的。我上楼到了他的房间，隐约期望看到某种变化——我也不知道会是什么。也许我认为他会在房间里挂起饰品之类。但是当然一切如常，总的来说，我松了一口气。汤米看起来也没有什么不同，但是当我们开始谈话之后，就很难假装这只是又一次探望而已。然而先前的几周里我们已经翻来覆去谈了那么多，没有什么特别的事，此刻我们必须得讲清楚的。我觉得两人都不想开始新的谈话，开始那种无法好好谈完，过后留下遗憾的谈话。因此我们那天的交谈显得有些空洞。

只有一件事，当我漫无目的地在他房间里走了一阵之后，我问他：

“汤米，露丝没等到弄清楚我们后来知道的那些事就完结了，你觉得这样好吗？”

他躺在床上，仍是盯着天花板，过了一会儿才说：“有意思，因为那天我也在想这件事。关于露丝你得记住，说到这些事情的时候，她总是跟咱们不一样。你和我从一开始，甚至我们还小的时候，就一直试图搞清楚各种事情的真相。凯丝，你记不记得我们那些秘密的谈话？可露丝不是这样。她总是想要相信什么。露丝就是那样。所以没错，某方面来看，我觉得这样的安排最好。”然后他又接了一句：

“当然我们所发现的那些事，艾米丽小姐，等等所有一切，对露丝都毫无影响。最终她是希望我们过得好。她真的希望我们好。”

到这个阶段，我不想再大张旗鼓地讨论露丝的是非，因此只是表示了赞同。但现在我有更多的时间去考虑这些，却拿不准自己到底是什么感受。一部分的我始终希望我俩能够把发现的一切跟露丝分享。诚然，她可能会感到难过；让她明白她对我们造成的伤害不能够像她所期待的那么容易弥补。也许容我坦白的话，我希望她在完结之前知道这一切，小部分原因就在于此。但最终我认为不是这样，真正的原因绝不止于我的报复心和恶意。因为正如汤米说的，最终她希望我们过得好，虽然那天在车里她说我永远都不会原谅她，但这点她说错了。我现在对她已经不抱有丝毫的怒意。当我说我希望她能够了解全部真相的时候，更多是因为我想到她的结局跟我和汤米不同，这让我觉得难过。像现在这样，仿佛有一条线，我们在这边，而露丝在另一边，等到话都说完，一切了结之后，这让我感到难过，我想如果她看得到，也会有同样的感受。

我和汤米那天并没有做特别大的告别的表示。时候到了，他就跟我一起下楼，平常他不这样，这次我们一起穿过广场，走到车旁。因为冬天日头短，这时太阳已经落到了楼房后面。跟平常一样，延伸出的屋顶下影影绰绰有几个人，但广场上空落落的。一路走到车边汤米都默不作声。后来他轻轻一笑，说道：

“你知道吗，凯丝，当初在黑尔舍姆，我踢球的时候有个小秘密。我进球之后，就会像这样转过来”——他高高举起双臂，庆祝胜利——“然后我就跑回队友身边。我从来不会发狂或是怎样，就只是像这样，举起双臂跑回去。”他顿了一下，双臂依然举在空中。然后他放下胳膊，微笑起来。“在我的脑海里，凯丝，跑回去的时候我总是想象着我是踩在水里，水花四溅。水不深，最多只到脚踝。这就是我那时的想象，每次都是。水花四溅，到处泼洒，到处都是。”他再次举起双臂。“感觉真的很棒。你刚刚进了球，转身，然后就水花四溅，到处泼洒，到处泼洒。”他望着我，又轻轻笑了一声。“这么长时间以来，我跟一个人都没讲过。”

我笑了，说道：“你这个疯小孩，汤米。”

然后，我们亲吻——只是轻轻一吻——随后我上了车。汤米仍是站在原地，看我将车调头。随后当我开车离开的时候，他微笑，挥手。我在后视镜中望着他，他一直站在那里，几乎到最后。最后我看到他含混地抬了下手，就转头朝那片延伸的屋顶下方走去。然后广场就从镜中消失不见了。

几天之前，我跟一个捐献者谈天，他抱怨说记忆这东西，哪怕是你最珍贵的回忆，也会飞快地淡忘，出人意外。但我不同意这种看法。我最珍贵的回忆，我发现我从未淡忘。我失去了露丝，然后我又失去了汤米，但我决不会失去关于他们的记忆。

我想我大约也失去了黑尔舍姆。你还能听到这样的故事，某个前黑尔舍姆的学生试图去找它，或者不如说是去找他当初所在的地方。有时还会有零星的流言，说如今黑尔舍姆变成了什么——一家酒店，一所学校，一片废墟。而我，虽然总是开着车到处走，却从未试图去找它。我真的没什么兴趣去看它，不论它现在变成了什么样子。

可我要说的是，虽然我说我从未去找寻黑尔舍姆，但却发现有的时候，当我开车到处走在路上，我会突然觉得发现了黑尔舍姆的零星点滴。我远远地看到一座运动馆，就确信那是我们那幢。或是天边出现一排白杨树，紧挨着一棵大橡树，瞬间我就会认为自己是从小到了我们的南操场。有一次，一个灰蒙蒙的早上，我行驶在格洛斯特郡一条漫漫长路上，路过了停车带上一辆抛锚的汽车，我很有把握地认为，站在车前的那个目光空洞望着来往车辆的女孩子，就是苏珊娜·C，她高我们几个年级，是拍卖会的值班班长之一。这些片刻的发现总会在我猝不及防的时候击中我，往往我开车行驶在路上，脑子里想着完全不相干的事。因此也许在某种层面上，我的确也在寻找黑尔舍姆。

然而正如我所说的，我并没有特地去找它，再说，到了年底我就不需要继续像这样开车跑来跑去了。因此很可能我将来也没有机会路过，再三考虑之后，我觉得这样很好。就像是我对汤米和露丝的回忆。一旦我能够过上比较平静的生活，不论他们把我送到哪间康复中心，黑尔舍姆都会始终跟我在一起，安全地保留在我脑海中，这是任何人都无法拿走的。

我只做过一件任性的事，只有一次，那是在我听说汤米完结的两个礼拜之后，虽然没有实际需要，可我还是开车到了诺福克。我并没有特地去寻找什么，也没有走那么远到海边去。也许我只是想看看那些平整空旷、一望无际的田野，还有灰蒙蒙的辽阔天空。一度我发觉自己开在一条从未走过的路上，大约半小时的工夫，我不知道自己身处何地，也不理会。我路过了一片又一片平整而毫无特色的田野，风景几乎完全没有变化，除了偶尔有鸟群被我车子引擎的声音惊起，从犁沟里跳出来，飞上天去。最后我终于看到远处有几棵树，离路边不太远，于是我开到跟前，停车走了出去。

我发现好几英亩被犁过的土地在我面前铺展开来。面前有两条铁丝网构成的围栏阻挡，我无法进入那片田地，我看到绵延几英里的范围内，只有这条围栏和我头顶三四棵挨在一起的树阻挡着浩荡山风。围栏一路上，尤其是下面那条铁丝上，有各种各样的垃圾挂住，纠缠在上面，就像是海滩上看到的那些废弃物：其中像许多东西想必被风刮了好远，飞了不知多少英里，终于到了这些树和围栏这里才停下。高处的树枝上也是一样，我看到胡乱翻飞的破塑料包装，还有旧的袋子。就只有那一次，我站在那里，望着那些莫名其妙的垃圾，感到来自那片旷野的风吹在我身上，我开始幻想一个小小的梦境，毕竟这里是诺福克，我失去他才只有两星期而已。我想着那些垃圾，树枝上翻飞的塑料袋，围栏沿线如同海岸线一样挂住的各种东西，于是我半闭上眼睛，想象着就是在这个地方，我从童年时代起所有失去的一切都会被海水冲刷上岸，现在我就迎面站在这里，如果我等待得足够久，一个小小的身影就会出现在田野对面的天边，渐渐地越来越大，直到我认得出那是汤米，他会朝我挥手，也许甚至会喊我。这幻想仅止于此——我不允许——尽管泪水从我脸上滚落，但我没有哭泣，也没有失控。我只是等了一会儿，然后就转身回到车上，驱车朝我该去的地方驶去。

译后记

相信亲爱的读者看到这篇译后记的时候，已经读完了这本小说。这样我们可以不必担心剧透的麻烦，贴心贴肉地谈谈作品带给彼此的感受。

故事在凯西的回忆中一点点展开。石黑笔下辽阔的英格兰一片青绿，长路漫漫，主人公隔着十几年的光阴回望黑尔舍姆，仿佛为叙述加了一层柔光或者雾气。这种蕴藉冲淡的调子让我们自诩同是东方血统的中国读者感到亲切。他对于黑尔舍姆这样一所封闭式寄宿学校的描述、学生对于集体生活的感受，我们也会感到非常熟悉。他从容地描写学生群体和校园生态，每个人的成长和个性发展：露丝的霸道和自以为是，凯西的自省和汤米不合时宜的坏脾气……看起来一切都像田园牧歌一样，美好恬淡，健康而普通。

作者在二〇〇六年这本小说甫一问世不久，曾在接受日本《文学界》杂志采访中表示，他想让笔下的黑尔舍姆成为一个气泡一样的封闭、安全而小心翼翼的培育环境，“我想让这个世界成为人类的孩童时代的隐喻”。

他花那么多笔墨去描写那些日常的校园生活，孩子对导师的迷恋和信赖，拍卖会的骚动，学生之间有点疑似霸凌行为的矛盾冲突。这些描述因为来自孩子的视角，一方面显得普通、日常，另一方面又很受局限，因为一切信息都是经过严格过滤之后，经过成年管理者的授权才能透露进来。作者在《文学界》的采访中说，他希望呈现的是我们的童年时代所共有的体会：对于基本生活空间之外的大世界，我们只是听到一些言语的呈现，对于其实际的意义，其实并没有真正的理解。

而这部小说的真正意图，也并不在于揭露“为高度发达的医疗需要提供人体器官的克隆人群体的悲惨命运”，这一超现实的黑暗背景和恐怖现实像怪兽一样被掩埋在讲述中，偶尔雾气消散，才会显露一二。初次阅读的过程中，这种随着孩童的认知渐渐揭露的现实设置，成为了一种揪心的悬念，但这种悬疑气氛并不是作者所特意制造的，他所更在意的是随着孩子的成长，世界的真相一点点展开这个过程，而这也是我们所有人长大的过程中都曾亲身经历过，足以感同身受的。

小说中汤米所画的那些怪异的动物，那些他想象中的神奇生物，有着金属或者橡胶质感的超现实外形，他为它们精心绘制各种细节，想象它们如何取物、进食、自我防御。汤米讲述自己创作的时候，我不禁想这里暴露了作家本人的创作思路。他就像汤米画他的动物一样，在构思和创作《莫失莫忘》这个充满真实情感、人物血肉丰盈、气息俨然的超现实世界。

二〇一七年石黑获得诺贝尔文学奖，用他本人的话说，这几乎是“荒诞”的至高荣誉为他带来了更多好奇的读者。我们这些悄悄喜欢、追随他多年的老读者，习惯了他慢节奏的写作，题材跨度之大，以及无论写什么，都力透纸背的“丧”气。《莫失莫忘》这本小说问世于二〇〇五年，二〇〇七年我第一次读到，阅读的美感和痛感一样强烈，久久萦绕。近十年之后，当译文社的编辑冯涛先生提出让我来重译这本小说的时候，最先袭上心头的记忆是作品中无可慰藉的苦痛，苦到我曾想推掉这差事。幸亏编辑先生坚持认为我是合适的译者人选，于是我才有幸逐字逐句地细读，并且通过自己的译笔跟读者分享这部落笔细碎，却具有强大情感冲击力的小说作品。

曾经我以为这种深刻的悲哀和宿命之感是因为石黑的东方背景——我曾肤浅地以为，中国与日本这些儒家为主导的文化中，有这样一种逆势思潮时不时会卷上来，认为一切都是徒劳，就像西藏僧侣们做的沙画：所有精心的设计，终生的经营，最终风过无踪，了无痕迹。

作家用以对抗这种徒劳、宿命和消亡的，是看似微弱渺小而不可靠的普通人的记忆和讲述。无论是最近新作《被掩埋的巨人》中在记忆的迷雾中艰难跋涉的那对远古时代的老夫妇，《莫失莫忘》中刚成年就会被当成器官收割的克隆人族群，以及《长日将尽》中巨族豪宅的老管家，都是人群中的异类，时代的弃儿。与千禧一代天生特权的认知正相反，他笔下的人物，都身处边缘，地位卑微。《莫失莫忘》最为极端，你甚至无法确定这些人物算不算是真正意义上的人类，更谈不上天赋人权。然而克隆人也罢，像小说中夫人所称的“可怜的小东西”也罢，凯西、汤米和露丝长久纠缠的情感之深厚和真切，却写满了人之为人、文明之所以延续的核心意义。

二〇一〇年，《莫失莫忘》被美国导演马克·罗曼尼克拍成电影，要在九十分钟内全方位呈现一个十几万字的故事，就要有许多删减，而视觉的讲述跟文字自然会有不同取舍。小说中我印象非常深刻的一段，影片的处理方式让我感觉有些潦草和失望。这也是小说中我

认为的高潮部分，即凯西和汤米带着画作，按照露丝留下的地址，去找夫人申请延期捐献——甚至不是免于捐献，他们反复计划，斗胆谋求的无非是真爱的两人能有两三年的时间共处，专心相爱而已。

小说中透过凯西的视角，我们看到这座海滨住宅幽暗神秘，人们仿佛话里有话，每个动作都意义指向不明。这就是凯西和汤米认识中的人类生活：神秘莫测，难以理解。当艾米丽小姐坐着轮椅从阴影中出来的时候，读者不禁期望她会有更多的情感流露。她为之奋斗终生的黑尔舍姆事业已经告终，但这两个孩子是她事业的成果，他们的成就值得她自豪。然而她一心都放在要卖掉的柜子上，甚至基本的待客礼仪都欠奉，终究“我们”和“他们”的壁垒如此森严，毕竟她要从轮椅上站起来、恢复健康，多半还要指望从“他们”身上收获的器官。

影片把“捐献”实在地呈现在你面前时，让捐献者鱼肉在案一般倒在手术台上任人宰割的时候，那种残酷的视觉冲击让观众不得不逼问：“他们为什么不反抗，为什么不逃跑，逃离这种悲惨的宿命？”因此影片增加了一个手腕打卡的设施，为克隆人管控机制做了相应的设定。

石黑先生并不是科幻作家，他不去解释“培育克隆人用于器官移植，首先要解决抗拒现象，抹除一切攻击性气质”。但读书的时候你还是会发现，凯西是一个出色的护理员，汤米很为自己是一个不错的捐献者感到自豪，即便是最不服输的露丝，也尽职尽责地完成了捐献者的宿命，虽然曾梦想在干净明亮的办公室里工作，到头来也只是承认自己年少无知，犯傻而已。他们不质疑被剥夺的人生，不反抗生来的宿命。

作者曾在采访中表示：“从我的世界观来看，我认为人们无论承受怎样的痛苦，无论遭遇怎样的悲惨经历，无论如何不自由，都会在命运的夹缝中求生，接受命运给予的一切。人们不懈奋斗，努力在如此狭小的生存空间内寻找梦想和希望。这类人始终比那些破坏体制、实施叛乱的人更令我感兴趣。”

这种东方式——或者说英国式——的隐忍和“认命”，也在石黑一雄作品里贯穿始终，反复讲述。而当我们跟着凯西的步伐走过三十一岁的年纪，也会觉得够了，一生已经够长。当你跟随凯西站在田野里，面对着缀满垃圾塑料袋的铁丝网，想象着人生中失去的一切都随着海水冲刷上来，涌过来。无论三十岁也罢，八十岁也罢，人生注定

要经历的那些失落，一盒磁带或是一辈子的挚爱，终究一样会像这样一去不回，又在记忆中辗转翻滚，直到生命终结。

石黑一雄一九五四年出生于日本长崎，父亲是位研究海洋的学者。一雄五岁的时候，因为父亲受邀到萨里郡的英国国家海洋学研究院工作的机缘，全家搬到了英国。他在英国读书、长大，读大学之前还去美国和加拿大度过了一个“间隔年”，他曾有志于从事音乐行业，曾将自己录制的样带寄往唱片公司，后来他也曾认真写过几首爵士乐歌曲，多半是为美国女歌手史黛西·肯特所作。不知本书的点题歌曲《莫失莫忘》是不是来自作者本人实际的音乐创作。

石黑从肯特郡大学读完英文和哲学专业本科，当他决定从事文学创作之后，又去东英吉利大学继续读创意写作。这所大学地处诺福克郡（英格兰失落的一角）的诺威奇市，虽然校史较短，尚不足六十年，却出了许多重要学者。在石黑一雄获得诺奖之前，该校创意写作专业最著名的毕业生当属布克奖得主伊恩·麦克尤恩。

石黑一雄直到一九八九年才重新回到日本。他说自己的日文水平犹如五岁孩童，而倘或一直在日本长大的话，他多半不会成为作家：

“我能成为作家，和我是一个来自日本的‘逃亡者’有着密切的关系。另一个原因是，我一般通过日本人父母的双眼观察英国，这导致我在长大的过程中与周围的社会之间始终隔着一定距离。一些我所有朋友都单纯地从是非曲直的角度考虑的事情，我会认为那是英国社会里存在的负面的、怪异的风俗习惯。这是隔着一段距离看待英国造成的，也成为了我当上作家的推动力。”

这种隔膜感常常是出色作家的有力武器，而石黑一雄这部小说的厉害之处在于，细密的笔触背后，现实的人类社会只是阴影一般的存在，而作者凭空构建出来的克隆人族群，却血肉真切，一动牵情。农舍里读书的凯西被清风拂动头发，她跟汤米依偎在一起，叹息那些错过的时光；躺在手术台上痛苦等待终结，却牵挂着伙伴的露丝；这长夜驱车、取小路经过人世的一生，这样短暂而微不足道的存在，一盒磁带的得失……亲爱的读者，希望我能把阅读中深刻的震动感传达给你，分享给你。

译者
二〇一八年四月八日

KAZUO ISHIGURO

Never Let Me Go

To Lorna and Naomi

England, late 1990s

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year. That'll make it almost exactly twelve years. Now I know my being a carer so long isn't necessarily because they think I'm fantastic at what I do. There are some really good carers who've been told to stop after just two or three years. And I can think of one carer at least who went on for all of fourteen years despite being a complete waste of space. So I'm not trying to boast. But then I do know for a fact they've been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have too. My donors have always tended to do much better than expected. Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as 'agitated', even before fourth donation. Okay, maybe I *am* boasting now. But it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well, especially that bit about my donors staying 'calm'. I've developed a kind of instinct around donors. I know when to hang around and comfort them, when to leave them to themselves; when to listen to everything they have to say, and when just to shrug and tell them to snap out of it.

Anyway, I'm not making any big claims for myself. I know carers, working now, who are just as good and don't get half the credit. If you're one of them, I can understand how you might get resentful - about my bedsit, my car, above all, the way I get to pick and choose who I look after. And I'm a Hailsham student - which is enough by itself sometimes to get people's backs up. Kathy H., they say, she gets to pick and choose, and she always chooses her own kind: people from Hailsham, or one of the other privileged estates. No wonder she has a great record. I've heard it said enough, so I'm

sure you've heard it plenty more, and maybe there's something in it. But I'm not the first to be allowed to pick and choose, and I doubt if I'll be the last. And anyway, I've done my share of looking after donors brought up in every kind of place. By the time I finish, remember, I'll have done twelve years of this, and it's only for the last six they've let me choose.

And why shouldn't they? Carers aren't machines. You try and do your best for every donor, but in the end, it wears you down. You don't have unlimited patience and energy. So when you get a chance to choose, of course, you choose your own kind. That's natural. There's no way I could have gone on for as long as I have if I'd stopped feeling for my donors every step of the way. And anyway, if I'd never started choosing, how would I ever have got close again to Ruth and Tommy after all those years?

But these days, of course, there are fewer and fewer donors left who I remember, and so in practice, I haven't been choosing that much. As I say, the work gets a lot harder when you don't have that deeper link with the donor, and though I'll miss being a carer, it feels just about right to be finishing at last come the end of the year.

Ruth, incidentally, was only the third or fourth donor I got to choose. She already had a carer assigned to her at the time, and I remember it taking a bit of nerve on my part. But in the end I managed it, and the instant I saw her again, at that recovery centre in Dover, all our differences - while they didn't exactly vanish - seemed not nearly as important as all the other things: like the fact that we'd grown up together at Hailsham, the fact that we knew and remembered things no one else did. It's ever since then, I suppose, I started seeking out for my donors people from the past, and whenever I could, people from Hailsham.

There have been times over the years when I've tried to leave Hailsham behind, when I've told myself I shouldn't look

back so much. But then there came a point when I just stopped resisting. It had to do with this particular donor I had once, in my third year as a carer; it was his reaction when I mentioned I was from Hailsham. He'd just come through his third donation, it hadn't gone well, and he must have known he wasn't going to make it. He could hardly breathe, but he looked towards me and said: 'Hailsham. I bet that was a beautiful place.' Then the next morning, when I was making conversation to keep his mind off it all, and I asked where *he'd* grown up, he mentioned some place in Dorset and his face beneath the blotches went into a completely new kind of grimace. And I realised then how desperately he didn't want to be reminded. Instead, he wanted to hear about Hailsham.

So over the next five or six days, I told him whatever he wanted to know, and he'd lie there, all hooked up, a gentle smile breaking through. He'd ask me about the big things and the little things. About our guardians, about how we each had our own collection chests under our beds, the football, the rounders, the little path that took you all round the outside of the main house, round all its nooks and crannies, the duck pond, the food, the view from the Art Room over the fields on a foggy morning. Sometimes he'd make me say things over and over; things I'd told him only the day before, he'd ask about like I'd never told him. 'Did you have a sports pavilion?'

'Which guardian was your special favourite?' At first I thought this was just the drugs, but then I realised his mind was clear enough. What he wanted was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham, just like it had been his own childhood. He knew he was close to completing and so that's what he was doing: getting me to describe things to him, so they'd really sink in, so that maybe during those sleepless nights, with the drugs and the pain and the exhaustion, the line would blur between what were my memories and what were his. That was when I first understood, really understood, just how lucky we'd been - Tommy, Ruth, me, all the rest of us.

Driving around the country now, I still see things that will remind me of Hailsham. I might pass the corner of a misty field, or see part of a large house in the distance as I come down the side of a valley, even a particular arrangement of poplar trees up on a hillside, and I'll think: 'Maybe that's it! I've found it! This actually is Hailsham!' Then I see it's impossible and I go on driving, my thoughts drifting on elsewhere. In particular, there are those pavilions. I spot them all over the country, standing on the far side of playing fields, little white prefab buildings with a row of windows unnaturally high up, tucked almost under the eaves. I think they built a whole lot like that in the fifties and sixties, which is probably when ours was put up. If I drive past one I keep looking over to it for as long as possible, and one day I'll crash the car like that, but I keep doing it. Not long ago I was driving through an empty stretch of Worcestershire and saw one beside a cricket ground so like ours at Hailsham I actually turned the car and went back for a second look.

We loved our sports pavilion, maybe because it reminded us of those sweet little cottages people always had in picture books when we were young. I can remember us back in the Juniors, pleading with guardians to hold the next lesson in the pavilion instead of the usual room. Then by the time we were in Senior 2 - when we were twelve, going on thirteen - the pavilion had become the place to hide out with your best friends when you wanted to get away from the rest of Hailsham.

The pavilion was big enough to take two separate groups without them bothering each other - in the summer, a third group could hang about out on the veranda. But ideally you and your friends wanted the place just to yourselves, so there was often jockeying and arguing. The guardians were always telling us to be civilised about it, but in practice, you needed to have some strong personalities in your group to stand a chance of getting the pavilion during a break or free

period. I wasn't exactly the wilting type myself, but I suppose it was really because of Ruth we got in there as often as we did.

Usually we just spread ourselves around the chairs and benches - there'd be five of us, six if Jenny B. came along - and had a good gossip. There was a kind of conversation that could only happen when you were hidden away in the pavilion; we might discuss something that was worrying us, or we might end up screaming with laughter, or in a furious row. Mostly, it was a way to unwind for a while with your closest friends.

On the particular afternoon I'm now thinking of, we were standing up on stools and benches, crowding around the high windows. That gave us a clear view of the North Playing Field where about a dozen boys from our year and Senior 3 had gathered to play football. There was bright sunshine, but it must have been raining earlier that day because I can remember how the sun was glinting on the muddy surface of the grass.

Someone said we shouldn't be so obvious about watching, but we hardly moved back at all. Then Ruth said: 'He doesn't suspect a thing. Look at him. He really doesn't suspect a thing.'

When she said this, I looked at her and searched for signs of disapproval about what the boys were going to do to Tommy. But the next second Ruth gave a little laugh and said: 'The idiot!'

And I realised that for Ruth and the others, whatever the boys chose to do was pretty remote from us; whether we approved or not didn't come into it. We were gathered around the windows at that moment not because we relished the prospect of seeing Tommy get humiliated yet again, but just because we'd heard about this latest plot and were vaguely curious to watch it unfold. In those days, I don't think what the boys did amongst themselves went much deeper than that.

For Ruth, for the others, it was that detached, and the chances are that's how it was for me too.

Or maybe I'm remembering it wrong. Maybe even then, when I saw Tommy rushing about that field, undisguised delight on his face to be accepted back in the fold again, about to play the game at which he so excelled, maybe I did feel a little stab of pain. What I do remember is that I noticed Tommy was wearing the light blue polo shirt he'd got in the Sales the previous month - the one he was so proud of. I remember thinking: 'He's really stupid, playing football in that. It'll get ruined, then how's he going to feel?' Out loud, I said, to no one in particular: 'Tommy's got his shirt on. His favourite polo shirt.'

I don't think anyone heard me, because they were all laughing at Laura - the big clown in our group - mimicking one after the other the expressions that appeared on Tommy's face as he ran, waved, called, tackled. The other boys were all moving around the field in that deliberately languorous way they have when they're warming up, but Tommy, in his excitement, seemed already to be going full pelt. I said, louder this time: 'He's going to be so sick if he ruins that shirt.' This time Ruth heard me, but she must have thought I'd meant it as some kind of joke, because she laughed half-heartedly, then made some quip of her own.

Then the boys had stopped kicking the ball about, and were standing in a pack in the mud, their chests gently rising and falling as they waited for the team picking to start. The two captains who emerged were from Senior 3, though everyone knew Tommy was a better player than any of that year. They tossed for first pick, then the one who'd won stared at the group.

'Look at him,' someone behind me said. 'He's completely convinced he's going to be first pick. Just look at him!'

There *was* something comical about Tommy at that moment, something that made you think, well, yes, if he's going to be that daft, he deserves what's coming. The other boys were all pretending to ignore the picking process, pretending they didn't care where they came in the order. Some were talking quietly to each other, some re-tying their laces, others just staring down at their feet as they trammelled the mud. But Tommy was looking eagerly at the Senior 3 boy, as though his name had already been called.

Laura kept up her performance all through the teampicking, doing all the different expressions that went across Tommy's face: the bright eager one at the start; the puzzled concern when four picks had gone by and he still hadn't been chosen; the hurt and panic as it began to dawn on him what was really going on. I didn't keep glancing round at Laura, though, because I was watching Tommy; I only knew what she was doing because the others kept laughing and egging her on. Then when Tommy was left standing alone, and the boys all began sniggering, I heard Ruth say:

'It's coming. Hold it. Seven seconds. Seven, six, five ...'

She never got there. Tommy burst into thunderous bellowing, and the boys, now laughing openly, started to run off towards the South Playing Field. Tommy took a few strides after them - it was hard to say whether his instinct was to give angry chase or if he was panicked at being left behind. In any case he soon stopped and stood there, glaring after them, his face scarlet. Then he began to scream and shout, a nonsensical jumble of swear words and insults.

We'd all seen plenty of Tommy's tantrums by then, so we came down off our stools and spread ourselves around the room. We tried to start up a conversation about something else, but there was Tommy going on and on in the background, and although at first we just rolled our eyes and tried to

ignore it, in the end - probably a full ten minutes after we'd first moved away - we were back up at the windows again.

The other boys were now completely out of view, and Tommy was no longer trying to direct his comments in any particular direction. He was just raving, flinging his limbs about, at the sky, at the wind, at the nearest fence post. Laura said he was maybe 'rehearsing his Shakespeare'. Someone else pointed out how each time he screamed something he'd raise one foot off the ground, pointing it outwards, 'like a dog doing a pee'. Actually, I'd noticed the same foot movement myself, but what had struck me was that each time he stamped the foot back down again, flecks of mud flew up around his shins. I thought again about his precious shirt, but he was too far away for me to see if he'd got much mud on it.

'I suppose it is a bit cruel,' Ruth said, 'the way they always work him up like that. But it's his own fault. If he learnt to keep his cool, they'd leave him alone.'

'They'd still keep on at him,' Hannah said. 'Graham K.'s temper's just as bad, but that only makes them all the more careful with him. The reason they go for Tommy's because he's a layabout.'

Then everyone was talking at once, about how Tommy never even tried to be creative, about how he hadn't even put anything in for the Spring Exchange. I suppose the truth was, by that stage, each of us was secretly wishing a guardian would come from the house and take him away. And although we hadn't had any part in this latest plan to rile Tommy, we *had* taken out ringside seats, and we were starting to feel guilty. But there was no sign of a guardian, so we just kept swapping reasons why Tommy deserved everything he got. Then when Ruth looked at her watch and said even though we still had time, we should get back to the main house, nobody argued.

Tommy was still going strong as we came out of the pavilion. The house was over to our left, and since Tommy was

standing in the field straight ahead of us, there was no need to go anywhere near him. In any case, he was facing the other way and didn't seem to register us at all. All the same, as my friends set off along the edge of the field, I started to drift over towards him. I knew this would puzzle the others, but I kept going - even when I heard Ruth's urgent whisper to me to come back.

I suppose Tommy wasn't used to being disturbed during his rages, because his first response when I came up to him was to stare at me for a second, then carry on as before. It *was* like he was doing Shakespeare and I'd come up onto the stage in the middle of his performance. Even when I said: 'Tommy, your nice shirt. You'll get it all messed up,' there was no sign of him having heard me.

So I reached forward and put a hand on his arm. Afterwards, the others thought he'd meant to do it, but I was pretty sure it was unintentional. His arms were still flailing about, and he wasn't to know I was about to put out my hand. Anyway, as he threw up his arm, he knocked my hand aside and hit the side of my face. It didn't hurt at all, but I let out a gasp, and so did most of the girls behind me.

That's when at last Tommy seemed to become aware of me, of the others, of himself, of the fact that he was there in that field, behaving the way he had been, and stared at me a bit stupidly.

'Tommy,' I said, quite sternly. 'There's mud all over your shirt.'

'So what?' he mumbled. But even as he said this, he looked down and noticed the brown specks, and only just stopped himself crying out in alarm. Then I saw the surprise register on his face that I should know about his feelings for the polo shirt.

'It's nothing to worry about,' I said, before the silence got humiliating for him. 'It'll come off. If you

can't get it off yourself, just take it to Miss Jody.'

He went on examining his shirt, then said grumpily: 'It's nothing to do with you anyway.'

He seemed to regret immediately this last remark and looked at me sheepishly, as though expecting me to say something comforting back to him. But I'd had enough of him by now, particularly with the girls watching - and for all I knew, any number of others from the windows of the main house. So I turned away with a shrug and rejoined my friends.

Ruth put an arm around my shoulders as we walked away. 'At least you got him to pipe down,' she said. 'Are you okay? Mad animal.'

CHAPTER TWO

This was all a long time ago so I might have some of it wrong; but my memory of it is that my approaching Tommy that afternoon was part of a phase I was going through around that time - something to do with compulsively setting myself challenges - and I'd more or less forgotten all about it when Tommy stopped me a few days later.

I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we had to have some form of medical almost every week - usually up in Room 18 at the very top of the house - with stern Nurse Trisha, or Crow Face, as we called her. That sunny morning a crowd of us was going up the central staircase to be examined by her, while another lot she'd just finished with was on its way down. So the stairwell was filled with echoing noise, and I was climbing the steps head down, just following the heels of the person in front, when a voice near me went: 'Kath!'

Tommy, who was in the stream coming down, had stopped dead on the stairs with a big open smile that immediately irritated me. A few years earlier maybe, if we ran into someone we were pleased to see, we'd put on that sort of look. But we were thirteen by then, and this was a boy running into a girl in a really public situation. I felt like saying: 'Tommy, why don't you grow up?' But I stopped myself, and said instead: 'Tommy, you're holding everyone up. And so am I.'

He glanced upwards and sure enough the flight above was already grinding to a halt. For a second he looked panicked, then he squeezed himself right into the wall next to me, so it was just about possible for people to push past. Then he said:

‘Kath, I’ve been looking all over for you. I meant to say sorry. I mean, I’m really, really sorry. I honestly didn’t mean to hit you the other day. I wouldn’t dream of hitting a girl, and even if I did, I’d never want to hit *you*. I’m really, really sorry.’

‘It’s okay. An accident, that’s all.’ I gave him a nod and made to move away. But Tommy said brightly:

‘The shirt’s all right now. It all washed out.’

‘That’s good.’

‘It didn’t hurt, did it? When I hit you?’

‘Sure. Fractured skull. Concussion, the lot. Even Crow Face might notice it. That’s if I ever get up there.’

‘But seriously, Kath. No hard feelings, right? I’m awfully sorry. I am, honestly.’

At last I gave him a smile and said with no irony:

‘Look, Tommy, it was an accident and it’s now one hundred per cent forgotten. I don’t hold it against you one tiny bit.’

He still looked unsure, but now some older students were pushing behind him, telling him to move. He gave me a quick smile and patted my shoulder, like he might do to a younger boy, and pushed his way into the flow. Then, as I began to climb, I heard him shout from below: ‘See you, Kath!’

I’d found the whole thing mildly embarrassing, but it didn’t lead to any teasing or gossip; and I must admit, if it hadn’t been for that encounter on the stairs, I probably wouldn’t have taken the interest I did in Tommy’s problems over the next several weeks.

I saw a few of the incidents myself. But mostly I heard about them, and when I did, I quizzed people until I’d got a more or less full account. There were more temper tantrums, like the time Tommy was supposed to have heaved over two

desks in Room 14, spilling all the contents on the floor, while the rest of the class, having escaped on to the landing, barricaded the door to stop him coming out. There was the time Mr Christopher had had to pin back his arms to stop him attacking Reggie D. during football practice. Everyone could see, too, when the Senior 2 boys went on their fields run, Tommy was the only one without a running partner. He was a good runner, and would quickly open up ten, fifteen yards between him and the rest, maybe thinking this would disguise the fact that no one wanted to run with him. Then there were rumours almost every day of pranks that had been played on him. A lot of these were the usual stuff - weird things in his bed, a worm in his cereal - but some of it sounded pointlessly nasty: like the time someone cleaned a toilet with his toothbrush so it was waiting for him with shit all over the bristles. His size and strength - and I suppose that temper - meant no one tried actual physical bullying, but from what I remember, for a couple of months at least, these incidents kept coming. I thought sooner or later someone would start saying it had gone too far, but it just kept on, and no one said anything.

I tried to bring it up once myself, in the dorm after lights-out. In the Seniors, we were down to six per dorm, so it was just our little group, and we often had our most intimate conversations lying in the dark before we fell asleep. You could talk about things there you wouldn't dream of talking about any other place, not even in the pavilion. So one night I brought up Tommy. I didn't say much; I just summed up what had been happening to him and said it wasn't really very fair. When I'd finished, there was a funny sort of silence hanging in the dark, and I realised everyone was waiting for Ruth's response - which was usually what happened whenever something a bit awkward came up. I kept waiting, then I heard a sigh from Ruth's side of the room, and she said:

‘You’ve got a point, Kathy. It’s not nice. But if he wants it to stop, he’s got to change his own attitude. He didn’t have a thing for the Spring Exchange. And has he got anything for next month? I bet he hasn’t.’

I should explain a bit here about the Exchanges we had at Hailsham. Four times a year – spring, summer, autumn, winter – we had a kind of big exhibition-cum-sale of all the things we’d been creating in the three months since the last Exchange. Paintings, drawings, pottery; all sorts of ‘sculptures’ made from whatever was the craze of the day – bashed-up cans, maybe, or bottle tops stuck onto cardboard. For each thing you put in, you were paid in Exchange Tokens – the guardians decided how many your particular masterpiece merited – and then on the day of the Exchange you went along with your tokens and ‘bought’ the stuff you liked. The rule was you could only buy work done by students in your own year, but that still gave us plenty to choose from, since most of us could get pretty prolific over a three-month period.

Looking back now, I can see why the Exchanges became so important to us. For a start, they were our only means, aside from the Sales – the Sales were something else, which I’ll come to later – of building up a collection of personal possessions. If, say, you wanted to decorate the walls around your bed, or wanted something to carry around in your bag and place on your desk from room to room, then you could find it at the Exchange. I can see now, too, how the Exchanges had a more subtle effect on us all. If you think about it, being dependent on each other to produce the stuff that might become your private treasures – that’s bound to do things to your relationships. The Tommy business was typical. A lot of the time, how you were regarded at Hailsham, how much you were liked and respected, had to do with how good you were at ‘creating’.

Ruth and I often found ourselves remembering these things a few years ago, when I was caring for her down at the

recovery centre in Dover.

‘It’s all part of what made Hailsham so special,’ she said once. ‘The way we were encouraged to value each other’s work.’

‘True,’ I said. ‘But sometimes, when I think about the Exchanges now, a lot of it seems a bit odd. The poetry, for instance. I remember we were allowed to hand in poems, instead of a drawing or a painting. And the strange thing was, we all thought that was fine, we thought that made sense.’

‘Why shouldn’t it? Poetry’s important.’

‘But we’re talking about nine-year-old stuff, funny little lines, all misspelt, in exercise books. We’d spend our precious tokens on an exercise book full of that stuff rather than on something really nice for around our beds. If we were so keen on a person’s poetry, why didn’t we just borrow it and copy it down ourselves any old afternoon? But you remember how it was. An Exchange would come along and we’d be standing there torn between Susie K.’s poems and those giraffes Jackie used to make.’

‘Jackie’s giraffes,’ Ruth said with a laugh. ‘They were so beautiful. I used to have one.’

We were having this conversation on a fine summer evening, sitting out on the little balcony of her recovery room. It was a few months after her first donation, and now she was over the worst of it, I’d always time my evening visits so that we’d be able to spend a half hour or so out there, watching the sun go down over the rooftops. You could see lots of aerials and satellite dishes, and sometimes, right over in the distance, a glistening line that was the sea. I’d bring mineral water and biscuits, and we’d sit there talking about anything that came into our heads. The centre Ruth was in that time, it’s one of my favourites, and I wouldn’t mind at all if that’s where I ended up. The recovery

rooms are small, but they're well-designed and comfortable. Everything - the walls, the floor - has been done in gleaming white tiles, which the centre keeps so clean when you first go in it's almost like entering a hall of mirrors. Of course, you don't exactly see yourself reflected back loads of times, but you almost think you do. When you lift an arm, or when someone sits up in bed, you can feel this pale, shadowy movement all around you in the tiles. Anyway, Ruth's room at that centre, it also had these big glass sliding panels, so she could easily see the outside from her bed. Even with her head on the pillow she'd see a big lot of sky, and if it was warm enough, she could get all the fresh air she wanted by stepping out onto the balcony. I loved visiting her there, loved those meandering talks we had, through the summer to the early autumn, sitting on that balcony together, talking about Hailsham, the Cottages, whatever else drifted into our thoughts.

'What I'm saying,' I went on, 'is that when we were that age, when we were eleven, say, we really weren't interested in each other's poems at all. But remember, someone like Christy? Christy had this great reputation for poetry, and we all looked up to her for it. Even you, Ruth, you didn't dare boss Christy around. All because we thought she was great at poetry. But we didn't know a thing about poetry. We didn't care about it. It's strange.'

But Ruth didn't get my point - or maybe she was deliberately avoiding it. Maybe she was determined to remember us all as more sophisticated than we were. Or maybe she could sense where my talk was leading, and didn't want us to go that way. Anyway, she let out a long sigh and said:

'We all thought Christy's poems were so good. But I wonder how they'd look to us now. I wish we had some here, I'd love to see what we'd think.' Then she laughed and said: 'I *have* still got some poems by Peter B. But that was much later, when we were in Senior 4. I must have fancied him. I can't think why else I'd have bought his poems. They're just

hysterically daft. Takes himself so seriously. But Christy, she was good, I remember she was. It's funny, she went right off poems when she started her painting. And she was nowhere near as good at that.'

But let me get back to Tommy. What Ruth said that time in our dorm after lights-out, about how Tommy had brought all his problems on himself, probably summed up what most people at Hailsham thought at that time. But it was when she said what she did that it occurred to me, as I lay there, that this whole notion of his deliberately not trying was one that had been doing the rounds from as far back as the Juniors. And it came home to me, with a kind of chill, that Tommy had been going through what he'd been going through not just for weeks or months, but for years.

Tommy and I talked about all this not so long ago, and his own account of how his troubles began confirmed what I was thinking that night. According to him, it had all started one afternoon in one of Miss Geraldine's art classes. Until that day, Tommy told me, he'd always quite enjoyed painting. But then that day in Miss Geraldine's class, Tommy had done this particular watercolour - of an elephant standing in some tall grass - and that was what started it all off. He'd done it, he claimed, as a kind of joke. I quizzed him a lot on this point and I suspect the truth was that it was like a lot of things at that age: you don't have any clear reason, you just do it. You do it because you think it might get a laugh, or because you want to see if it'll cause a stir. And when you're asked to explain it afterwards, it doesn't seem to make any sense. We've all done things like that. Tommy didn't quite put it this way, but I'm sure that's how it happened.

Anyway, he did his elephant, which was exactly the sort of picture a kid three years younger might have done. It took him no more than twenty minutes and it got a laugh, sure enough, though not quite the sort he'd expected. Even so, it might not have led to anything - and this is a big irony, I

suppose - if Miss Geraldine hadn't been taking the class that day.

Miss Geraldine was everyone's favourite guardian when we were that age. She was gentle, soft-spoken, and always comforted you when you needed it, even when you'd done something bad, or been told off by another guardian. If she ever had to tell you off herself, then for days afterwards she'd give you lots of extra attention, like she owed you something. It was unlucky for Tommy that it was Miss Geraldine taking art that day and not, say, Mr Robert or Miss Emily herself - the head guardian - who often took art. Had it been either of those two, Tommy would have got a bit of a telling off, he could have done his smirk, and the worst the others would have thought was that it was a feeble joke. He might even have had some students think him a right clown. But Miss Geraldine being Miss Geraldine, it didn't go that way. Instead, she did her best to look at the picture with kindness and understanding. And probably guessing Tommy was in danger of getting stick from the others, she went too far the other way, actually finding things to praise, pointing them out to the class. That was how the resentment started.

'After we left the room,' Tommy remembered, 'that's when I first heard them talking. And they didn't care I could hear.'

My guess is that from some time before he did that elephant, Tommy had had the feeling he wasn't keeping up - that his painting in particular was like that of students much younger than him - and he'd been covering up the best he could by doing deliberately childish pictures. But after the elephant painting, the whole thing had been brought into the open, and now everyone was watching to see what he did next. It seems he did make an effort for a while, but he'd no sooner have started on something, there'd be sneers and giggles all around him. In fact, the harder he tried, the more laughable his efforts turned out. So before long Tommy had gone back to his original defence, producing work that

seemed deliberately childish, work that said he couldn't care less. From there, the thing had got deeper and deeper.

For a while he'd only had to suffer during art lessons - though that was often enough, because we did a lot of art in the Juniors. But then it grew bigger. He got left out of games, boys refused to sit next to him at dinner, or pretended not to hear if he said anything in his dorm after lights-out. At first it wasn't so relentless. Months could go by without incident, he'd think the whole thing was behind him, then something he did - or one of his enemies, like Arthur H. - would get it all going again.

I'm not sure when the big temper tantrums started. My own memory of it is that Tommy was always known for his temper, even in the Infants, but he claimed to me they only began after the teasing got bad. Anyway, it was those temper tantrums that really got people going, escalating everything, and around the time I'm talking about - the summer of our Senior 2, when we were thirteen - that was when the persecution reached its peak.

Then it all stopped, not overnight, but rapidly enough. I was, as I say, watching the situation closely around then, so I saw the signs before most of the others. It started with a period - it might have been a month, maybe longer - when the pranks went on pretty steadily, but Tommy failed to lose his temper. Sometimes I could see he was close to it, but he somehow controlled himself; other times, he'd quietly shrug, or react like he hadn't noticed a thing. At first these responses caused disappointment; maybe people were resentful, even, like he'd let them down. Then gradually, people got bored and the pranks became more half-hearted, until one day it struck me there hadn't been any for over a week.

This wouldn't necessarily have been so significant by itself, but I'd spotted other changes. Little things, like Alexander J. and Peter N. walking across the courtyard with him towards the fields, the three of them chatting quite

naturally; a subtle but clear difference in people's voices when his name got mentioned. Then once, towards the end of an afternoon break, a group of us were sitting on the grass quite close to the South Playing Field where the boys, as usual, were playing their football. I was joining in our conversation, but keeping an eye on Tommy, who I noticed was right at the heart of the game. At one point he got tripped, and picking himself up, placed the ball on the ground to take the free kick himself. As the boys spread out in anticipation, I saw Arthur H. - one of his biggest tormentors - a few yards behind Tommy's back, begin mimicking him, doing a daft version of the way Tommy was standing over the ball, hands on hips. I watched carefully, but none of the others took up Arthur's cue. They must all have seen, because all eyes were looking towards Tommy, waiting for his kick, and Arthur was right behind him - but no one was interested. Tommy floated the ball across the grass, the game went on, and Arthur H. didn't try anything else.

I was pleased about all these developments, but also mystified. There'd been no real change in Tommy's work - his reputation for 'creativity' was as low as ever. I could see that an end to the tantrums was a big help, but what seemed to be the key factor was harder to put your finger on. There was something about Tommy himself - the way he carried himself, the way he looked people in the face and talked in his open, good-natured way - that was different from before, and which had in turn changed the attitudes of those around him. But what had brought all this on wasn't clear.

I was mystified, and decided to probe him a bit the next time we could talk in private. The chance came along before long, when I was lining up for lunch and spotted him a few places ahead in the queue.

I suppose this might sound odd, but at Hailsham, the lunch queue *was* one of the better places to have a private talk. It was something to do with the acoustics in the Great Hall; all the hubbub and the high ceilings meant that so long

as you lowered your voices, stood quite close, and made sure your neighbours were deep in their own chat, you had a fair chance of not being overheard. In any case, we weren't exactly spoilt for choice. 'Quiet' places were often the worst, because there was always someone likely to be passing within earshot. And as soon as you looked like you were trying to sneak off for a secret talk, the whole place seemed to sense it within minutes, and you'd have no chance.

So when I saw Tommy a few places ahead of me, I waved him over - the rule being that though you couldn't jump the queue going forwards it was fine to go back. He came over with a delighted smile, and we stood together for a moment without saying much - not out of awkwardness, but because we were waiting for any interest aroused by Tommy's moving back to fade. Then I said to him:

'You seem much happier these days, Tommy. Things seem to be going much better for you.'

'You notice everything, don't you, Kath?' He said this completely without sarcasm. 'Yeah, everything's all right. I'm getting on all right.'

'So what's happened? Did you find God or something?'

'God?' Tommy was lost for a second. Then he laughed and said: 'Oh, I see. You're talking about me not ... getting so angry.'

'Not just that, Tommy. You've turned things around for yourself. I've been watching. So that's why I was asking.'

Tommy shrugged. 'I've grown up a bit, I suppose. And maybe everyone else has too. Can't keep on with the same stuff all the time. Gets boring.'

I said nothing, but just kept looking right at him, until he gave another little laugh and said: 'Kath, you're so nosy. Okay, I suppose there is something. Something that happened. If you want, I'll tell you.'

‘Well, go on then.’

‘I’ll tell you, Kath, but you mustn’t spread it, all right? A couple of months back, I had this talk with Miss Lucy. And I felt much better afterwards. It’s hard to explain. But she said something, and it all felt much better.’

‘So what did she say?’

‘Well … The thing is, it might sound strange. It did to me at first. What she said was that if I didn’t want to be creative, if I really didn’t feel like it, that was perfectly all right. Nothing wrong with it, she said.’

‘That’s what she told you?’

Tommy nodded, but I was already turning away.

‘That’s just rubbish, Tommy. If you’re going to play stupid games, I can’t be bothered.’

I was genuinely angry, because I thought he was lying to me, just when I deserved to be taken into his confidence. Spotting a girl I knew a few places back, I went over to her, leaving Tommy standing. I could see he was bewildered and crestfallen, but after the months I’d spent worrying about him, I felt betrayed, and didn’t care how he felt. I chatted with my friend – I think it was Matilda – as cheerfully as possible, and hardly looked his way for the rest of the time we were in the queue.

But as I was carrying my plate to the tables, Tommy came up behind me and said quickly:

‘Kath, I wasn’t trying to pull your leg, if that’s what you think. It’s what happened. I’ll tell you about it if you give me half a chance.’

‘Don’t talk rubbish, Tommy.’

‘Kath, I’ll tell you about it. I’ll be down at the pond after lunch. If you come down there, I’ll tell you.’

I gave him a reproachful look and walked off without responding, but already, I suppose, I'd begun to entertain the possibility that he wasn't, after all, making it up about Miss Lucy. And by the time I sat down with my friends, I was trying to figure out how I could sneak off afterwards down to the pond without getting everyone curious.

CHAPTER THREE

The pond lay to the south of the house. To get there you went out the back entrance, and down the narrow twisting path, pushing past the overgrown bracken that, in the early autumn, would still be blocking your way. Or if there were no guardians around, you could take a short cut through the rhubarb patch. Anyway, once you came out to the pond, you'd find a tranquil atmosphere waiting, with ducks and bulrushes and pond-weed. It wasn't, though, a good place for a discreet conversation - not nearly as good as the lunch queue. For a start you could be clearly seen from the house. And the way the sound travelled across the water was hard to predict; if people wanted to eavesdrop, it was the easiest thing to walk down the outer path and crouch in the bushes on the other side of the pond. But since it had been me that had cut him off in the lunch queue, I supposed I had to make the best of it. It was well into October by then, but the sun was out that day and I decided I could just about make out I'd gone strolling aimlessly down there and happened to come across Tommy.

Maybe because I was keen to keep up this impression - though I'd no idea if anyone was actually watching - I didn't try and sit down when I eventually found him seated on a large flat rock not far from the water's edge. It must have been a Friday or a weekend, because I remember we had on our own clothes. I don't remember exactly what Tommy was wearing - probably one of the raggy football shirts he wore even when the weather was chilly - but I definitely had on the maroon track suit top that zipped up the front, which I'd got at a Sale in Senior 1. I walked round him and stood with my back to the water, facing the house, so that I'd see if people started gathering at the windows. Then for a few minutes we talked about nothing in particular, just like the lunch-queue

business hadn't happened. I'm not sure if it was for Tommy's benefit, or for any onlookers', but I'd kept my posture looking very provisional, and at one point made a move to carry on with my stroll. I saw a kind of panic cross Tommy's face then, and I immediately felt sorry to have teased him, even though I hadn't meant to. So I said, like I'd just remembered:

'By the way, what was that you were saying earlier on? About Miss Lucy telling you something?'

'Oh ...' Tommy gazed past me to the pond, pretending too this was a topic he'd forgotten all about. 'Miss Lucy. Oh that.'

Miss Lucy was the most sporting of the guardians at Hailsham, though you might not have guessed it from her appearance. She had a squat, almost bulldoggy figure, and her odd black hair, when it grew, grew upwards so it never covered her ears or chunky neck. But she was really strong and fit, and even when we were older, most of us - even the boys - couldn't keep up with her on a fields run. She was superb at hockey, and could even hold her own with the Senior boys on the football pitch. I remember watching once when James B. tried to trip her as she went past him with the ball, and he was the one sent flying instead. When we'd been in the Juniors, she'd never been someone like Miss Geraldine who you turned to when you were upset. In fact, she didn't tend to speak much to us when we were younger. It was only in the Seniors, really, we'd started to appreciate her brisk style.

'You were saying something,' I said to Tommy. 'Something about Miss Lucy telling you it was all right not to be creative.'

'She did say something like that. She said I shouldn't worry. Not mind what other people were saying. A couple of months ago now. Maybe longer.'

Over at the house, a few Juniors had stopped at one of the upstairs windows and were watching us. But I now crouched down in front of Tommy, no longer pretending anything.

‘Tommy, that’s a funny thing for her to say. Are you sure you got it right?’

‘Of course I got it right.’ His voice lowered suddenly.

‘She didn’t just say it once. We were in her room and she gave me a whole talk about it.’

When she’d first asked him to come to her study after Art Appreciation, Tommy explained, he’d expected yet another lecture about how he should try harder – the sort of thing he’d had already from various guardians, including Miss Emily herself. But as they were walking from the house towards the Orangery – where the guardians had their living quarters – Tommy began to get an inkling this was something different. Then, once he was seated in Miss Lucy’s easy chair – she’d remained standing by the window – she asked him to tell her the whole story, as he saw it, of what had been happening to him. So Tommy had begun going through it all. But before he was even half way she’d suddenly broken in and started to talk herself. She’d known a lot of students, she’d said, who’d for a long time found it very difficult to be creative: painting, drawing, poetry, none of it going right for years. Then one day they’d turned a corner and blossomed. It was quite possible Tommy was one of these.

Tommy had heard all of this before, but there was something about Miss Lucy’s manner that made him keep listening hard.

‘I could tell,’ he told me, ‘she was leading up to something. Something different.’

Sure enough, she was soon saying things Tommy found difficult to follow. But she kept repeating it until eventually he began to understand. If Tommy had genuinely tried, she was saying, but he just couldn’t be very creative,

then that was quite all right, he wasn't to worry about it. It was wrong for anyone, whether they were students or guardians, to punish him for it, or put pressure on him in any way. It simply wasn't his fault. And when Tommy had protested it was all very well Miss Lucy saying this, but everyone *did* think it was his fault, she'd given a sigh and looked out of her window. Then she'd said:

'It may not help you much. But just you remember this. There's at least one person here at Hailsham who believes otherwise. At least one person who believes you're a very good student, as good as any she's ever come across, never mind how creative you are.'

'She wasn't having you on, was she?' I asked Tommy. 'It wasn't some clever way of telling you off?'

'It definitely wasn't anything like that. Anyway ...' For the first time he seemed worried about being overheard and glanced over his shoulder towards the house. The Juniors at the window had lost interest and gone; some girls from our year were walking towards the pavilion, but they were still a good way off. Tommy turned back to me and said almost in a whisper:

'Anyway, when she said all this, she was *shaking*.'

'What do you mean, shaking?'

'Shaking. With rage. I could see her. She was furious. But furious deep inside.'

'Who at?'

'I wasn't sure. Not at me anyway, that was the most important thing!' He gave a laugh, then became serious again. 'I don't know who she was angry with. But she was angry all right.'

I stood up again because my calves were aching. 'It's pretty weird, Tommy.'

‘Funny thing is, this talk with her, it did help. Helped a lot. When you were saying earlier on, about how things seemed better for me now. Well, it’s because of that. Because afterwards, thinking about what she’d said, I realised she was right, that it wasn’t my fault. Okay, I hadn’t handled it well. But deep down, it wasn’t my fault. That’s what made the difference. And whenever I felt rocky about it, I’d catch sight of her walking about, or I’d be in one of her lessons, and she wouldn’t say anything about our talk, but I’d look at her, and she’d sometimes see me and give me a little nod. And that’s all I needed. You were asking earlier if something had happened. Well, that’s what happened. But Kath, listen, don’t breathe a word to anyone about this, right?’

I nodded, but asked: ‘Did she make you promise that?’

‘No, no, she didn’t make me promise anything. But you’re not to breathe a word. You’ve got to really promise.’

‘All right.’ The girls heading for the pavilion had spotted me and were waving and calling. I waved back and said to Tommy: ‘I’d better go. We can talk more about it soon.’

But Tommy ignored this. ‘There’s something else,’ he went on. ‘Something else she said I can’t quite figure out. I was going to ask you about it. She said we weren’t being taught enough, something like that.’

‘Taught enough? You mean she thinks we should be studying even harder than we are?’

‘No, I don’t think she meant that. What she was talking about was, you know, about *us*. What’s going to happen to us one day. Donations and all that.’

‘But we *have* been taught about all that,’ I said. ‘I wonder what she meant. Does she think there are things we haven’t been told yet?’

Tommy thought for a moment, then shook his head. ‘I don’t think she meant it like that. She just thinks we aren’t

taught about it enough. Because she said she'd a good mind to talk to us about it herself.'

'About what exactly?'

'I'm not sure. Maybe I got it all wrong, Kath, I don't know. Maybe she was meaning something else completely, something else to do with me not being creative. I don't really understand it.'

Tommy was looking at me as though he expected me to come up with an answer. I went on thinking for a few seconds, then said:

'Tommy, think back carefully. You said she got angry ...'

'Well, that's what it looked like. She was quiet, but she was shaking.'

'All right, whatever. Let's say she got angry. Was it when she got angry she started to say this other stuff? About how we weren't taught enough about donations and the rest of it?'

'I suppose so ...'

'Now, Tommy, think. Why did she bring it up? She's talking about you and you not creating. Then suddenly she starts up about this other stuff. What's the link? Why did she bring up donations? What's that got to do with you being creative?'

'I don't know. There must have been some reason, I suppose. Maybe one thing reminded her of the other. Kath, you're getting really worked up about this yourself now.'

I laughed, because he was right: I'd been frowning, completely lost in my thoughts. The fact was, my mind was going in various directions at once. And Tommy's account of his talk with Miss Lucy had reminded me of something, perhaps

a whole series of things, little incidents from the past to do with Miss Lucy that had puzzled me at the time.

‘It’s just that …’ I stopped and sighed. ‘I can’t quite put it right, not even to myself. But all this, what you’re saying, it sort of fits with a lot of other things that are puzzling. I keep thinking about all these things. Like why Madame comes and takes away our best pictures. What’s that for exactly?’

‘It’s for the Gallery.’

‘But what is her gallery? She keeps coming here and taking away our best work. She must have stacks of it by now. I asked Miss Geraldine once how long Madame’s been coming here, and she said for as long as Hailsham’s been here. What is this gallery? Why should she have a gallery of things done by us?’

‘Maybe she sells them. Outside, out there, they sell everything.’

I shook my head. ‘That can’t be it. It’s got something to do with what Miss Lucy said to you. About us, about how one day we’ll start giving donations. I don’t know why, but I’ve had this feeling for some time now, that it’s all linked in, though I can’t figure out how. I’ll have to go now, Tommy. Let’s not tell anyone yet, about what we’ve been saying.’

‘No. And don’t tell anyone about Miss Lucy.’

‘But will you tell me if she says anything else to you like that?’

Tommy nodded, then glanced around him again. ‘Like you say, you’d better go, Kath. Someone’s going to hear us soon.’

The gallery Tommy and I were discussing was something we’d all of us grown up with. Everyone talked about it as though it existed, though in truth none of us knew for sure

that it did. I'm sure I was pretty typical in not being able to remember how or when I'd first heard about it. Certainly, it hadn't been from the guardians: they never mentioned the Gallery, and there was an unspoken rule that we should never even raise the subject in their presence.

I'd suppose now it was something passed down through the different generations of Hailsham students. I remember a time when I could only have been five or six, sitting at a low table beside Amanda C., our hands clammy with modelling clay. I can't remember if there were other children with us, or which guardian was in charge. All I remember is Amanda C. - who was a year older than me - looking at what I was making and exclaiming: 'That's really, really good, Kathy! That's *so* good! I bet that'll get in the Gallery!'

I must by then have already known about the Gallery, because I remember the excitement and pride when she said that - and then the next moment, thinking to myself: 'That's ridiculous. None of us are good enough for the Gallery yet.'

As we got older, we went on talking about the Gallery. If you wanted to praise someone's work, you'd say: 'That's good enough for the Gallery.' And after we discovered irony, when-ever we came across any laughably bad work, we'd go: 'Oh yes! Straight to the Gallery with that one!'

But did we really believe in the Gallery? Today, I'm not sure. As I've said, we never mentioned it to the guardians and looking back, it seems to me this was a rule we imposed on ourselves, as much as anything the guardians had decided. There's an instance I can remember from when we were about eleven. We were in Room 7 on a sunny winter's morning. We'd just finished Mr Roger's class, and a few of us had stayed on to chat with him. We were sitting up on our desks, and I can't remember exactly what we were talking about, but Mr Roger, as usual, was making us laugh and laugh. Then Carole H. had said, through her giggles: 'You might even get it picked for the Gallery!' She immediately put her hand over

her mouth with an ‘oops!’ and the atmosphere remained light-hearted; but we all knew, Mr Roger included, that she’d made a mistake. Not a disaster, exactly: it would have been much the same had one of us let slip a rude word, or used a guardian’s nickname to his or her face. Mr Roger smiled indulgently, as though to say: ‘Let it pass, we’ll pretend you never said that,’ and we carried on as before.

If for us the Gallery remained in a hazy realm, what was solid enough fact was Madame’s turning up usually twice – sometimes three or four times – each year to select from our best work. We called her ‘Madame’ because she was French or Belgian – there was a dispute as to which – and that was what the guardians always called her. She was a tall, narrow woman with short hair, probably quite young still, though at the time we wouldn’t have thought of her as such. She always wore a sharp grey suit, and unlike the gardeners, unlike the drivers who brought in our supplies – unlike virtually anyone else who came in from outside – she wouldn’t talk to us and kept us at a distance with her chilly look. For years we thought of her as ‘snooty’, but then one night, around when we were eight, Ruth came up with another theory.

‘She’s scared of us,’ she declared.

We were lying in the dark in our dorm. In the Juniors, we were fifteen to a dorm, so didn’t tend to have the sort of long intimate conversations we did once we got to the Senior dorms. But most of what became our ‘group’ had beds close together by then, and we were already getting the habit of talking into the night.

‘What do you mean, scared of us?’ someone asked. ‘How can she be scared of us? What could we do to her?’

‘I don’t know,’ Ruth said. ‘I don’t know, but I’m sure she is. I used to think she was just snooty, but it’s something else, I’m sure of it now. Madame’s scared of us.’

We argued about this on and off for the next few days. Most of us didn't agree with Ruth, but then that just made her all the more determined to prove she was right. So in the end we settled on a plan to put her theory to the test the next time Madame came to Hailsham.

Although Madame's visits were never announced, it was always pretty obvious when she was due. The lead-up to her arrival began weeks before, with the guardians sifting through all our work - our paintings, sketches, pottery, all our essays and poems. This usually went on for at least a fortnight, by the end of which four or five items from each Junior and Senior year would have ended up in the billiards room. The billiards room would get closed during this period, but if you stood on the low wall of the terrace outside, you'd be able to see through the windows the haul of stuff getting larger and larger. Once the guardians started laying it out neatly, on tables and easels, like a miniature version of one of our Exchanges, then you knew Madame would be coming within a day or two.

That autumn I'm now talking about, we needed to know not just the day, but the precise moment Madame turned up, since she often stayed no longer than an hour or two. So as soon as we saw the stuff getting displayed in the billiards room, we decided to take turns keeping look-out.

This was a task made much easier by the way the grounds were laid out. Hailsham stood in a smooth hollow with fields rising on all sides. That meant that from almost any of the classroom windows in the main house - and even from the pavilion - you had a good view of the long narrow road that came down across the fields and arrived at the main gate. The gate itself was still a fair distance off, and any vehicle would then have to take the gravelled drive, going past shrubs and flowerbeds, before at last reaching the courtyard in front of the main house. Days could sometimes go by without us seeing a vehicle coming down that narrow road, and the ones that did were usually vans or lorries bringing

supplies, gardeners or workmen. A car was a rarity, and the sight of one in the distance was sometimes enough to cause bedlam during a class.

The afternoon Madame's car was spotted coming across the fields, it was windy and sunny, with a few storm clouds starting to gather. We were in Room 9 - on the first floor at the front of the house - and when the whisper went around, poor Mr Frank, who was trying to teach us spelling, couldn't understand why we'd suddenly got so restless.

The plan we'd come up with to test Ruth's theory was very simple: we - the six of us in on it - would lie in wait for Madame somewhere, then 'swarm out' all around her, all at once. We'd all remain perfectly civilised and just go on our way, but if we timed it right, and she was taken off-guard, we'd see - Ruth insisted - that she really was afraid of us.

Our main worry was that we just wouldn't get an opportunity during the short time she was at Hailsham. But as Mr Frank's class drew to an end, we could see Madame, directly below in the courtyard, parking her car. We had a hurried conference out on the landing, then followed the rest of the class down the stairs and loitered just inside the main doorway. We could see out into the bright courtyard, where Madame was still sitting behind the wheel, rummaging in her briefcase. Eventually she emerged from the car and came towards us, dressed in her usual grey suit, her briefcase held tightly to herself in both arms. At a signal from Ruth we all sauntered out, moving straight for her, but like we were all in a dream. Only when she came to a stiff halt did we each murmur: 'Excuse me, Miss,' and separate.

I'll never forget the strange change that came over us the next instant. Until that point, this whole thing about Madame had been, if not a joke exactly, very much a private thing we'd wanted to settle among ourselves. We hadn't thought much about how Madame herself, or anyone else, would come into it. What I mean is, until then, it had been a

pretty light-hearted matter, with a bit of a dare element to it. And it wasn't even as though Madame did anything other than what we predicted she'd do: she just froze and waited for us to pass by. She didn't shriek, or even let out a gasp. But we were all so keenly tuned in to picking up her response, and that's probably why it had such an effect on us. As she came to a halt, I glanced quickly at her face - as did the others, I'm sure. And I can still see it now, the shudder she seemed to be suppressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her. And though we just kept on walking, we all felt it; it was like we'd walked from the sun right into chilly shade. Ruth had been right: Madame *was* afraid of us. But she was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders. We hadn't been ready for that. It had never occurred to us to wonder how *we* would feel, being seen like that, being the spiders.

By the time we'd crossed the courtyard and reached the grass, we were a very different group from the one that had stood about excitedly waiting for Madame to get out of her car. Hannah looked ready to burst into tears. Even Ruth looked really shaken. Then one of us - I think it was Laura - said:

'If she doesn't like us, why does she want our work? Why doesn't she just leave us alone? Who asks her to come here anyway?'

No one answered, and we carried on over to the pavilion, not saying anything more about what had happened.

Thinking back now, I can see we were just at that age when we knew a few things about ourselves - about who we were, how we were different from our guardians, from the people outside - but hadn't yet understood what any of it meant. I'm sure somewhere in your childhood, you too had an experience like ours that day; similar if not in the actual details, then inside, in the feelings. Because it doesn't really matter how well your guardians try to prepare you: all

the talks, videos, discussions, warnings, none of that can really bring it home. Not when you're eight years old, and you're all together in a place like Hailsham; when you've got guardians like the ones we had; when the gardeners and the delivery men joke and laugh with you and call you 'sweetheart' .

All the same, some of it must go in somewhere. It must go in, because by the time a moment like that comes along, there's a part of you that's been waiting. Maybe from as early as when you're five or six, there's been a whisper going at the back of your head, saying: 'One day, maybe not so long from now, you'll get to know how it feels.' So you're waiting, even if you don't quite know it, waiting for the moment when you realise that you really are different to them; that there are people out there, like Madame, who don't hate you or wish you any harm, but who nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you - of how you were brought into this world and why - and who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs. The first time you glimpse yourself through the eyes of a person like that, it's a cold moment. It's like walking past a mirror you've walked past every day of your life, and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange.

CHAPTER FOUR

I won't be a carer any more come the end of the year, and though I've got a lot out of it, I have to admit I'll welcome the chance to rest - to stop and think and remember. I'm sure it's at least partly to do with that, to do with preparing for the change of pace, that I've been getting this urge to order all these old memories. What I really wanted, I suppose, was to get straight all the things that happened between me and Tommy and Ruth after we grew up and left Hailsham. But I realise now just how much of what occurred later came out of our time at Hailsham, and that's why I want first to go over these earlier memories quite carefully. Take all this curiosity about Madame, for instance. At one level, it was just us kids larking about. But at another, as you'll see, it was the start of a process that kept growing and growing over the years until it came to dominate our lives.

After that day, mention of Madame became, while not taboo exactly, pretty rare among us. And this was something that soon spread beyond our little group to just about all the students in our year. We were, I'd say, as curious as ever about her, but we all sensed that to probe any further - about what she did with our work, whether there really was a gallery - would get us into territory we weren't ready for yet.

The topic of the Gallery, though, still cropped up every once in a while, so that when a few years later Tommy started telling me beside the pond about his odd talk with Miss Lucy, I found something tugging away at my memory. It was only afterwards, when I'd left him sitting on his rock and was hurrying towards the fields to catch up with my friends, that it came back to me.

It was something Miss Lucy had once said to us during a class. I'd remembered it because it had puzzled me at the time, and also because it was one of the few occasions when the Gallery had been mentioned so deliberately in front of a guardian.

We'd been in the middle of what we later came to call the 'tokens controversy'. Tommy and I discussed the tokens controversy a few years ago, and we couldn't at first agree when it had happened. I said we'd been ten at the time; he thought it was later, but in the end came round to agreeing with me. I'm pretty sure I got it right: we were in Junior 4 - a while after that incident with Madame, but still three years before our talk by the pond.

The tokens controversy was, I suppose, all part of our getting more acquisitive as we grew older. For years - I think I've said already - we'd thought that having work chosen for the billiards room, never mind taken away by Madame, was a huge triumph. But by the time we were ten, we'd grown more ambivalent about it. The Exchanges, with their system of tokens as currency, had given us a keen eye for pricing up anything we produced. We'd become preoccupied with T-shirts, with decorating around our beds, with personalising our desks. And of course, we had our 'collections' to think of.

I don't know if you had 'collections' where you were. When you come across old students from Hailsham, you always find them, sooner or later, getting nostalgic about their collections. At the time, of course, we took it all for granted. You each had a wooden chest with your name on it, which you kept under your bed and filled with your possessions - the stuff you acquired from the Sales or the Exchanges. I can remember one or two students not bothering much with their collections, but most of us took enormous care, bringing things out to display, putting other things away carefully.

The point is, by the time we were ten, this whole notion that it was a great honour to have something taken by Madame collided with a feeling that we were losing our most marketable stuff. This all came to a head in the tokens controversy.

It began with a number of students, mainly boys, muttering that we should get tokens to compensate when Madame took something away. A lot of students agreed with this, but others were outraged by the idea. Arguments went on between us for some time, and then one day Roy J. - who was a year above us, and had had a number of things taken by Madame - decided to go and see Miss Emily about it.

Miss Emily, our head guardian, was older than the others. She wasn't especially tall, but something about the way she carried herself, always very straight with her head right up, made you think she was. She wore her silvery hair tied back, but strands were always coming loose and floating around her. They would have driven me mad, but Miss Emily always ignored them, like they were beneath her contempt. By the evening, she was a pretty strange sight, with bits of loose hair everywhere which she wouldn't bother to push away off her face when she talked to you in her quiet, deliberate voice. We were all pretty scared of her and didn't think of her in the way we did the other guardians. But we considered her to be fair and respected her decisions; and even in the Juniors, we probably recognised that it was her presence, intimidating though it was, that made us all feel so safe at Hailsham.

It took some nerve to go and see her without being summoned; to go with the sort of demands Roy was making seemed suicidal. But Roy didn't get the terrible telling-off we were expecting, and in the days that followed, there were reports of guardians talking - even arguing - about the tokens question. In the end, it was announced that we *would* get tokens, but not many because it was a 'most distinguished honour' to have work selected by Madame. This

didn't really go down well with either camp, and the arguments rumbled on.

It was against this background that Polly T. asked Miss Lucy her question that morning. We were in the library, sitting around the big oak table. I remember there was a log burning in the fireplace, and that we were doing a playreading. At some point, a line in the play had led to Laura making some wisecrack about the tokens business, and we'd all laughed, Miss Lucy included. Then Miss Lucy had said that since everyone at Hailsham was talking about little else, we should forget the play-reading and spend the rest of the lesson exchanging our views about the tokens. And that's what we were doing when Polly asked, completely out of the blue: 'Miss, why does Madame take our things anyway?'

We all went silent. Miss Lucy didn't often get cross, but when she did, you certainly knew about it, and we thought for a second Polly was for it. But then we saw Miss Lucy wasn't angry, just deep in thought. I remember feeling furious at Polly for so stupidly breaking the unwritten rule, but at the same time, being terribly excited about what answer Miss Lucy might give. And clearly I wasn't the only one with these mixed emotions: virtually everybody shot daggers at Polly, before turning eagerly to Miss Lucy - which was, I suppose, pretty unfair on poor Polly. After what seemed a very long while, Miss Lucy said:

'All I can tell you today is that it's for a good reason. A very important reason. But if I tried to explain it to you now, I don't think you'd understand. One day, I hope, it'll be explained to you.'

We didn't press her. The atmosphere around the table had become one of deep embarrassment, and curious as we were to hear more, we wanted most for the talk to get away from this dodgy territory. The next moment, then, we were all relieved to be arguing again - a bit artificially perhaps - about the tokens. But Miss Lucy's words had puzzled me and I kept

thinking about them on and off for the next few days. That's why that afternoon by the pond, when Tommy was telling me about his talk with Miss Lucy, about how she'd said to him we weren't being 'taught enough' about some things, the memory of that time in the library - along with maybe one or two other little episodes like that - started tugging at my mind.

While we're on the subject of the tokens, I want just to say a bit about our Sales, which I've mentioned a few times already. The Sales were important to us because that was how we got hold of things from outside. Tommy's polo-shirt, for instance, came from a Sale. That's where we got our clothes, our toys, the special things that hadn't been made by another student.

Once every month, a big white van would come down that long road and you'd feel the excitement all through the house and grounds. By the time it pulled up in the courtyard there'd be a crowd waiting - mainly Juniors, because once you were past twelve or thirteen it wasn't the thing to be getting so obviously excited. But the truth was we all were.

Looking back now, it's funny to think we got so worked up, because usually the Sales were a big disappointment. There'd be nothing remotely special and we'd spend our tokens just renewing stuff that was wearing out or broken with more of the same. But the point was, I suppose, we'd all of us in the past found something at a Sale, something that had become special: a jacket, a watch, a pair of craft scissors never used but kept proudly next to a bed. We'd all found something like that at one time, and so however much we tried to pretend otherwise, we couldn't ever shake off the old feelings of hope and excitement.

Actually there was some point in hanging about the van as it was being unloaded. What you did - if you were one of these Juniors - was to follow back and forth from the storeroom the two men in overalls carrying the big cardboard boxes, asking them what was inside. 'A lot of goodies,

sweetheart,' was the usual reply. Then if you kept asking: 'But is it a *bumper crop*?' they'd sooner or later smile and say: 'Oh, I'd say so, sweetheart. A real bumper crop,' bringing a thrilled cheer.

The boxes were often open at the top, so you'd catch glimpses of all kinds of things, and sometimes, though they weren't really supposed to, the men would let you move a few items about for a better look. And that was why, by the time of the actual Sale a week or so later, all sorts of rumours would be going around, maybe about a particular track-suit or a music cassette, and if there was trouble, it was almost always because a few students had set their hearts on the same item.

The Sales were a complete contrast to the hushed atmosphere of the Exchanges. They were held in the Dining Hall, and were crowded and noisy. In fact the pushing and shouting was all part of the fun, and they stayed for the most part pretty good-humoured. Except, as I say, every now and then, things would get out of hand, with students grabbing and tugging, sometimes fighting. Then the monitors would threaten to close the whole thing down, and we'd all of us have to face a talking to from Miss Emily at assembly the next morning.

Our day at Hailsham always began with an assembly, which was usually pretty brief - a few announcements, maybe a poem read out by a student. Miss Emily didn't often say much; she'd just sit very straight on the stage, nodding at whatever was being said, occasionally turning a frosty eye towards any whispering in the crowd. But on a morning after a rowdy Sale, everything was different. She'd order us to sit down on the floor - we usually stood at assemblies - and there'd be no announcements or performances, just Miss Emily talking to us for twenty, thirty minutes, sometimes even longer. She'd rarely raise her voice, but there was something steely about her on these occasions and none of us, not even the Senior 5s, dared make a sound.

There was a real sense of feeling bad that we had, in some collective way, let down Miss Emily, but try as we might, we couldn't really follow these lectures. It was partly her language. 'Unworthy of privilege' and 'misuse of opportunity': these were two regular phrases Ruth and I came up with when we were reminiscing in her room at the centre in Dover. Her general drift was clear enough: we were all very special, being Hailsham students, and so it was all the more disappointing when we behaved badly. Beyond that, though, things became a fog. Sometimes she'd be going on very intensely then come to a sudden stop with something like: 'What is it? What is it? What can it be that thwarts us?' Then she'd stand there, eyes closed, a frown on her face like she was trying to puzzle out the answer. And although we felt bewildered and awkward, we'd sit there willing her on to make whatever discovery was needed in her head. She might then resume with a gentle sigh - a signal that we were going to be forgiven - or just as easily explode out of her silence with: 'But I will not be coerced! Oh no! And neither will Hailsham!'

When we were remembering these long speeches, Ruth remarked how odd it was they should have been so unfathomable, since Miss Emily, in a classroom, could be as clear as anything. When I mentioned how I'd sometimes seen the head wandering around Hailsham in a dream, talking to herself, Ruth took offence, saying:

'She was never like that! How could Hailsham have been the way it was if the person in charge had been potty? Miss Emily had an intellect you could slice logs with.'

I didn't argue. Certainly, Miss Emily could be uncannily sharp. If, say, you were somewhere you shouldn't be in the main house or the grounds, and you heard a guardian coming, you could often hide somewhere. Hailsham was full of hiding places, indoors and out: cupboards, nooks, bushes, hedges. But if you saw Miss Emily coming, your heart sank because she'd always know you were there hiding. It was like she had

some extra sense. You could go into a cupboard, close the door tight and not move a muscle, you just knew Miss Emily's footsteps would stop outside and her voice would say: 'All right. Out you come.'

That was what had happened to Sylvie C. once on the second-floor landing, and on that occasion Miss Emily had gone into one of her rages. She never shouted like, say, Miss Lucy did when she got mad at you, but if anything Miss Emily getting angry was scarier. Her eyes narrowed and she'd whisper furiously to herself, like she was discussing with an invisible colleague what punishment was awful enough for you. The way she did it meant half of you was dying to hear and the other half completely not wanting to. But usually with Miss Emily nothing too awful would come out of it. She hardly ever put you in detention, made you do chores or withdrew privileges. All the same, you felt dreadful, just knowing you'd fallen in her estimation, and you wanted to do something straight away to redeem yourself.

But the thing was, there was no predicting with Miss Emily. Sylvie may have got a full portion that time, but when Laura got caught running through the rhubarb patch, Miss Emily just snapped: 'Shouldn't be here, girl. Off you go,' and walked on.

And then there was the time I thought I was in hot water with her. The little footpath that went all round the back of the main house was a real favourite of mine. It followed all the nooks, all the extensions; you had to squeeze past shrubs, you went under two ivy-covered arches and through a rusted gate. And all the time you could peer in through the windows, one after the other. I suppose part of the reason I liked the path so much was because I was never sure if it was out of bounds. Certainly, when classes were going on, you weren't supposed to walk past. But at the weekends or in the evenings - that was never clear. Most students avoided it anyway, and maybe the feeling of getting away from everyone else was another part of the appeal.

In any case, I was doing this little walk one sunny evening. I think I was in Senior 3. As usual I was glancing into the empty rooms as I went past, and then suddenly I was looking into a classroom with Miss Emily in it. She was alone, pacing slowly, talking under her breath, pointing and directing remarks to an invisible audience in the room. I assumed she was rehearsing a lesson or maybe one of her assembly talks, and I was about to hurry past before she spotted me, but just then she turned and looked straight at me. I froze, thinking I was for it, but then noticed she was carrying on as before, except now she was mouthing her address at me. Then, natural as you like, she turned away to fix her gaze on some other imaginary student in another part of the room. I crept away along the path, and for the next day or so kept dreading what Miss Emily would say when she saw me. But she never mentioned it at all.

But that's not really what I want to talk about just now. What I want to do now is get a few things down about Ruth, about how we met and became friends, about our early days together. Because more and more these days, I'll be driving past fields on a long afternoon, or maybe drinking my coffee in front of a huge window in a motorway service station, and I'll catch myself thinking about her again.

She wasn't someone I was friends with from the start. I can remember, at five or six, doing things with Hannah and with Laura, but not with Ruth. I only have the one vague memory of Ruth from that early part of our lives.

I'm playing in a sandpit. There are a number of others in the sand with me, it's too crowded and we're getting irritated with each other. We're in the open, under a warm sun, so it's probably the sandpit in the Infants' play area, just possibly it's the sand at the end of the long jump in the North Playing Field. Anyway it's hot and I'm feeling thirsty and I'm not pleased there are so many of us in the sandpit. Then Ruth is standing there, not in the sand with

the rest of us, but a few feet away. She's very angry with two of the girls somewhere behind me, about something that must have happened before, and she's standing there glaring at them. My guess is that I knew Ruth only very slightly at that point. But she must already have made some impression on me, because I remember carrying on busily with whatever I was doing in the sand, absolutely dreading the idea of her turning her gaze on me. I didn't say a word, but I was desperate for her to realise I wasn't with the girls behind me, and had had no part in whatever it was that had made her cross.

And that's all I remember of Ruth from that early time. We were the same year so we must have run into each other enough, but aside from the sandpit incident, I don't remember having anything to do with her until the Juniors a couple of years later, when we were seven, going on eight.

The South Playing Field was the one used most by the Juniors and it was there, in the corner by the poplars, that Ruth came up to me one lunchtime, looked me up and down, then asked:

'Do you want to ride my horse?'

I was in the midst of playing with two or three others at that point, but it was clear Ruth was addressing only me. This absolutely delighted me, but I made a show of weighing her up before giving a reply.

'Well, what's your horse's name?'

Ruth came a step closer. 'My *best* horse,' she said, 'is Thunder. I can't let you ride on *him*. He's much too dangerous. But you can ride Bramble, as long as you don't use your crop on him. Or if you like, you could have any of the others.' She reeled off several more names I don't now remember. Then she asked: 'Have you got any horses of your own?'

I looked at her and thought carefully before replying:
'No. I don't have any horses.'

'Not even one?'

'No.'

'All right. You can ride Bramble, and if you like him, you can have him to keep. But you're not to use your crop on him. And you've got to come *now*.'

My friends had, in any case, turned away and were carrying on with what they'd been doing. So I gave a shrug and went off with Ruth.

The field was filled with playing children, some a lot bigger than us, but Ruth led the way through them very purposefully, always a pace or two in front. When we were almost at the wire mesh boundary with the garden, she turned and said:

'Okay, we'll ride them here. You take Bramble.'

I accepted the invisible rein she was holding out, and then we were off, riding up and down the fence, sometimes cantering, sometimes at a gallop. I'd been correct in my decision to tell Ruth I didn't have any horses of my own, because after a while with Bramble, she let me try her various other horses one by one, shouting all sorts of instructions about how to handle each animal's foibles.

'I told you! You've got to really lean back on Daffodil! Much more than that! She doesn't like it unless you're *right back!*'

I must have done well enough, because eventually she let me have a go on Thunder, her favourite. I don't know how long we spent with her horses that day: it felt a substantial time, and I think we both lost ourselves completely in our game. But then suddenly, for no reason I could see, Ruth brought it all to an end, claiming I was deliberately tiring out her horses, and that I'd have to put each of them back in

its stable. She pointed to a section of the fence, and I began leading the horses to it, while Ruth seemed to get crosser and crosser with me, saying I was doing everything wrong. Then she asked:

‘Do you like Miss Geraldine?’

It might have been the first time I’d actually thought about whether I liked a guardian. In the end I said: ‘Of course I like her.’

‘But do you *really* like her? Like she’s special? Like she’s your favourite?’

‘Yes, I do. She’s my favourite.’

Ruth went on looking at me for a long time. Then finally she said: ‘All right. In that case, I’ll let you be one of her secret guards.’

We started to walk back towards the main house then and I waited for her to explain what she meant, but she didn’t. I found out though over the next several days.

CHAPTER FIVE

I'm not sure for how long the 'secret guard' business carried on. When Ruth and I discussed it while I was caring for her down in Dover, she claimed it had been just a matter of two or three weeks - but that was almost certainly wrong. She was probably embarrassed about it and so the whole thing had shrunk in her memory. My guess is that it went on for about nine months, a year even, around when we were seven, going on eight.

I was never sure if Ruth had actually invented the secret guard herself, but there was no doubt she was the leader. There were between six and ten of us, the figure changing whenever Ruth allowed in a new member or expelled someone. We believed Miss Geraldine was the best guardian in Hailsham, and we worked on presents to give her - a large sheet with pressed flowers glued over it comes to mind. But our main reason for existing, of course, was to protect her.

By the time I joined the guard, Ruth and the others had already known for ages about the plot to kidnap Miss Geraldine. We were never quite sure who was behind it. We sometimes suspected certain of the Senior boys, sometimes boys in our own year. There was a guardian we didn't like much - a Miss Eileen - who we thought for a while might be the brains behind it. We didn't know when the abduction would take place, but one thing we felt convinced about was that the woods would come into it.

The woods were at the top of the hill that rose behind Hailsham House. All we could see really was a dark fringe of trees, but I certainly wasn't the only one of my age to feel their presence day and night. When it got bad, it was like they cast a shadow over the whole of Hailsham; all you had to do was turn your head or move towards a window and there

they'd be, looming in the distance. Safest was the front of the main house, because you couldn't see them from any of the windows. Even so, you never really got away from them.

There were all kinds of horrible stories about the woods. Once, not so long before we all got to Hailsham, a boy had had a big row with his friends and run off beyond the Hailsham boundaries. His body had been found two days later, up in those woods, tied to a tree with the hands and feet chopped off. Another rumour had it that a girl's ghost wandered through those trees. She'd been a Hailsham student until one day she'd climbed over a fence just to see what it was like outside. This was a long time before us, when the guardians were much stricter, cruel even, and when she tried to get back in, she wasn't allowed. She kept hanging around outside the fences, pleading to be let back in, but no one let her. Eventually, she'd gone off somewhere out there, something had happened and she'd died. But her ghost was always wandering about the woods, gazing over Hailsham, pining to be let back in.

The guardians always insisted these stories were nonsense. But then the older students would tell us that was exactly what the guardians had told *them* when they were younger, and that we'd be told the ghastly truth soon enough, just as they were.

The woods played on our imaginations the most after dark, in our dorms as we were trying to fall asleep. You almost thought then you could hear the wind rustling the branches, and talking about it seemed to only make things worse. I remember one night, when we were furious with Marge K. - she'd done something really embarrassing to us during the day - we chose to punish her by hauling her out of bed, holding her face against the window pane and ordering her to look up at the woods. At first she kept her eyes screwed shut, but we twisted her arms and forced open her eyelids until she saw the distant outline against the moonlit sky, and that was enough to ensure for her a sobbing night of terror.

I'm not saying we necessarily went around the whole time at that age worrying about the woods. I for one could go weeks hardly thinking about them, and there were even days when a defiant surge of courage would make me think: 'How could we believe rubbish like that?' But then all it took would be one little thing - someone retelling one of those stories, a scary passage in a book, even just a chance remark reminding you of the woods - and that would mean another period of being under that shadow. It was hardly surprising then that we assumed the woods would be central in the plot to abduct Miss Geraldine.

When it came down to it, though, I don't recall our taking many practical steps towards defending Miss Geraldine; our activities always revolved around gathering more and more evidence concerning the plot itself. For some reason, we were satisfied this would keep any immediate danger at bay.

Most of our 'evidence' came from witnessing the conspirators at work. One morning, for instance, we watched from a second-floor classroom Miss Eileen and Mr Roger talking to Miss Geraldine down in the courtyard. After a while Miss Geraldine said goodbye and went off towards the Orangery, but we kept on watching, and saw Miss Eileen and Mr Roger put their heads closer together to confer furtively, their gazes fixed on Miss Geraldine's receding figure.

'Mr Roger,' Ruth sighed on that occasion, shaking her head. 'Who'd have guessed he was in it too?'

In this way we built up a list of people we knew to be in on the plot - guardians and students whom we declared our sworn enemies. And yet, all the time, I think we must have had an idea of how precarious the foundations of our fantasy were, because we always avoided any confrontation. We could decide, after intense discussions, that a particular student was a plotter, but then we'd always find a reason not to challenge him just yet - to wait until 'we had in all the evidence'. Similarly, we always agreed Miss Geraldine

herself shouldn't hear a word of what we'd found out, since she'd get alarmed to no good purpose.

It would be too easy to claim it was just Ruth who kept the secret guard going long after we'd naturally outgrown it. Sure enough, the guard was important to her. She'd known about the plot for much longer than the rest of us, and this gave her enormous authority; by hinting that the *real* evidence came from a time before people like me had joined - that there were things she'd yet to reveal even to us - she could justify almost any decision she made on behalf of the group. If she decided someone should be expelled, for example, and she sensed opposition, she'd just allude darkly to stuff she knew 'from before'. There's no question Ruth was keen to keep the whole thing going. But the truth was, those of us who'd grown close to her, we each played our part in preserving the fantasy and making it last for as long as possible. What happened after that row over the chess illustrates pretty well the point I'm making.

I'd assumed Ruth was something of a chess expert and that she'd be able to teach me the game. This wasn't so crazy: we'd pass older students bent over chess sets, in window seats or on the grassy slopes, and Ruth would often pause to study a game. And as we walked off again, she'd tell me about some move she'd spotted that neither player had seen.

'Amazingly dim,' she'd murmur, shaking her head. This had all helped get me fascinated, and I was soon longing to become engrossed myself in those ornate pieces. So when I'd found a chess set at a Sale and decided to buy it - despite it costing an awful lot of tokens - I was counting on Ruth's help.

For the next several days, though, she sighed whenever I brought the subject up, or pretended she had something else really urgent to do. When I finally cornered her one rainy afternoon, and we set out the board in the billiards room, she proceeded to show me a game that was a vague variant on

draughts. The distinguishing feature of chess, according to her, was that each piece moved in an L-shape - I suppose she'd got this from watching the knight - rather than in the leap-frogging way of draughts. I didn't believe this, and I was really disappointed, but I made sure to say nothing and went along with her for a while. We spent several minutes knocking each other's pieces off the board, always sliding the attacking piece in an 'L'. This continued until the time I tried to take her and she claimed it wouldn't count because I'd slid my piece up to hers in too straight a line.

At this, I stood up, packed up the set and walked off. I never said out loud that she didn't know how to play - disappointed as I was, I knew not to go that far - but my storming off was, I suppose, statement enough for her.

It was maybe a day later, I came into Room 20 at the top of the house, where Mr George had his poetry class. I don't remember if it was before or after the class, or how full the room was. I remember having books in my hands, and that as I moved towards where Ruth and the others were talking, there was a strong patch of sun across the desk-lids they were sitting on.

I could see from the way they had their heads together they were discussing secret guard stuff, and although, as I say, the row with Ruth had been only the day before, for some reason I went up to them without a second thought. It was only when I was virtually right up to them - maybe there was a look exchanged between them - that it suddenly hit me what was about to happen. It was like the split second before you step into a puddle, you realise it's there, but there's nothing you can do about it. I felt the hurt even before they went silent and stared at me, even before Ruth said: 'Oh, Kathy, how are you? If you don't mind, we've got something to discuss just now. We'll be finished in just a minute. Sorry.'

She'd hardly finished her sentence before I'd turned and was on my way out, angry more at myself for having walked into it than at Ruth and the others. I was upset, no doubt about it, though I don't know if I actually cried. And for the next few days, whenever I saw the secret guard conferring in a corner or as they walked across a field, I'd feel a flush rising to my cheeks.

Then about two days after this snub in Room 20, I was coming down the stairs of the main house when I found Moira B. just behind me. We started talking - about nothing special - and wandered out of the house together. It must have been the lunch break because as we stepped into the courtyard there were about twenty students loitering around chatting in little groups. My eyes went immediately to the far side of the courtyard, where Ruth and three of the secret guard were standing together, their backs to us, gazing intently towards the South Playing Field. I was trying to see what it was they were so interested in, when I became aware of Moira beside me also watching them. And then it occurred to me that only a month before she too had been a member of the secret guard, and had been expelled. For the next few seconds I felt something like acute embarrassment that the two of us should now be standing side by side, linked by our recent humiliations, actually staring our rejection in the face, as it were. Maybe Moira was experiencing something similar; anyway, she was the one who broke the silence, saying:

'It's so stupid, this whole secret guard thing. How can they still believe in something like that? It's like they're still in the Infants.'

Even today, I'm puzzled by the sheer force of the emotion that overtook me when I heard Moira say this. I turned to her, completely furious:

'What do *you* know about it? You just don't know anything, because you've been out of it for ages now! If you

knew everything we'd found out, you wouldn't dare say anything so daft!'

'Don't talk rubbish.' Moira was never one to back down easily. 'It's just another of Ruth's made-up things, that's all.'

'Then how come I've *personally* heard them talking about it? Talking about how they're going to take Miss Geraldine to the woods in the milk van? How come I heard them planning it myself, nothing to do with Ruth or anyone else?'

Moira looked at me, unsure now. 'You heard it yourself? How? Where?'

'I heard them talking, clear as anything, heard every word, they didn't know I was there. Down by the pond, they didn't know I could hear. So that just shows how much you know!'

I pushed past her and as I made my way across the crowded courtyard, I glanced back to the figures of Ruth and the others, still gazing out towards the South Playing Field, unaware of what had just happened between me and Moira. And I noticed I didn't feel angry at all with them any more; just hugely irritated with Moira.

Even now, if I'm driving on a long grey road and my thoughts have nowhere special to go, I might find myself turning all of this over. Why was I so hostile to Moira B. that day when she was, really, a natural ally? What it was, I suppose, is that Moira was suggesting she and I cross some line together, and I wasn't prepared for that yet. I think I sensed how beyond that line, there was something harder and darker and I didn't want that. Not for me, not for any of us.

But at other times, I think that's wrong - that it was just to do with me and Ruth, and the sort of loyalty she inspired in me in those days. And maybe that's why, even though I really wanted to on several occasions, I never brought it up - about what had happened that day with Moira -

the whole time I was caring for Ruth down at the centre in Dover.

All of this about Miss Geraldine reminds me of something that happened about three years later, long after the secret guard idea had faded away.

We were in Room 5 on the ground floor at the back of the house, waiting for a class to start. Room 5 was the smallest room, and especially on a winter morning like that one, when the big radiators came on and steamed up the windows, it would get really stuffy. Maybe I'm exaggerating it, but my memory is that for a whole class to fit into that room, students literally had to pile on top of each other.

That morning Ruth had got a chair behind a desk, and I was sitting up on its lid, with two or three others of our group perched or leaning in nearby. In fact, I think it was when I was squeezing up to let someone else in beside me that I first noticed the pencil case.

I can see the thing now like it's here in front of me. It was shiny, like a polished shoe; a deep tan colour with circled red dots drifting all over it. The zip across the top edge had a furry pom-pom to pull it. I'd almost sat on the pencil case when I'd shifted and Ruth quickly moved it out of my way. But I'd seen it, as she'd intended me to, and I said:

'Oh! Where did you get that? Was it in the Sale?'

It was noisy in the room, but the girls nearby had heard, so there were soon four or five of us staring admiringly at the pencil case. Ruth said nothing for a few seconds while she checked carefully the faces around her. Finally she said very deliberately:

'Let's just agree. Let's *agree* I got it in the Sale.' Then she gave us all a knowing smile.

This might sound a pretty innocuous sort of response, but actually it was like she'd suddenly got up and hit me, and

for the next few moments I felt hot and chilly at the same time. I knew exactly what she'd meant by her answer and smile: she was claiming the pencil case was a gift from Miss Geraldine.

There could be no mistake about this because it had been building up for weeks. There was a certain smile, a certain voice Ruth would use - sometimes accompanied by a finger to the lips or a hand raised stage-whisper style - whenever she wanted to hint about some little mark of favour Miss Geraldine had shown her: Miss Geraldine had allowed Ruth to play a music tape in the billiards room before four o'clock on a weekday; Miss Geraldine had ordered silence on a fields walk, but when Ruth had drawn up beside her, she'd started to talk to her, then let the rest of the group talk. It was always stuff like that, and never explicitly claimed, just implied by her smile and 'let's say no more' expression.

Of course, officially, guardians weren't supposed to show favouritism, but there were little displays of affection all the time within certain parameters; and most of what Ruth suggested fell easily within them. Still, I hated it when Ruth hinted in this way. I was never sure, of course, if she was telling the truth, but since she wasn't actually 'telling' it, only hinting, it was never possible to challenge her. So each time it happened, I'd have to let it go, biting my lip and hoping the moment would pass quickly.

Sometimes I'd see from the way a conversation was moving that one of these moments was coming, and I'd brace myself. Even then, it would always hit me with some force, so that for several minutes I wouldn't be able to concentrate on anything going on around me. But on that winter morning in Room 5, it had come at me straight out of the blue. Even after I'd seen the pencil case, the idea of a guardian giving a present like that was so beyond the bounds, I hadn't seen it coming at all. So once Ruth had said what she'd said, I wasn't able, in my usual way, to let the emotional flurry just pass. I just stared at her, making no attempt to

disguise my anger. Ruth, perhaps seeing danger, said to me quickly in a stage whisper: 'Not a word!' and smiled again. But I couldn't return the smile and went on glaring at her. Then luckily the guardian arrived and the class started.

I was never the sort of kid who brooded over things for hours on end. I've got that way a bit these days, but that's the work I do and the long hours of quiet when I'm driving across these empty fields. I wasn't like, say, Laura, who for all her clowning around could worry for days, weeks even, about some little thing someone said to her. But after that morning in Room 5, I did go around in a bit of a trance. I'd drift off in the middle of conversations; whole lessons went by with me not knowing what was going on. I was determined Ruth shouldn't get away with it this time, but for a long while I wasn't doing anything constructive about it; just playing fantastic scenes in my head where I'd expose her and force her to admit she'd made it up. I even had one hazy fantasy where Miss Geraldine herself heard about it and gave Ruth a complete dressing-down in front of everyone.

After days of this I started to think more solidly. If the pencil case hadn't come from Miss Geraldine, where had it come from? She might have got it from another student, but that was unlikely. If it had belonged to anyone else first, even someone years above us, a gorgeous item like that wouldn't have gone unnoticed. Ruth would never risk a story like hers knowing the pencil case had already knocked around Hailsham. Almost certainly she'd found it at a Sale. Here, too, Ruth ran the risk of others having seen it before she'd bought it. But if - as sometimes happened, though it wasn't really allowed - she'd heard about the pencil case coming in and reserved it with one of the monitors before the Sale opened, she could then be reasonably confident hardly anyone had seen it.

Unfortunately for Ruth, though, there were registers kept of everything bought at the Sales, along with a record of who'd done the buying. While these registers weren't easily

obtainable - the monitors took them back to Miss Emily's office after each Sale - they weren't top secret either. If I hung around a monitor at the next Sale, it wouldn't be difficult to browse through the pages.

So I had the outlines of a plan, and I think I went on refining it for several days before it occurred to me it wasn't actually necessary to carry out all the steps. Provided I was right about the pencil case coming from a Sale, all I had to do was bluff.

That was how Ruth and I came to have our conversation under the eaves. There was fog and drizzle that day. The two of us were walking from the dorm huts perhaps towards the pavilion, I'm not sure. Anyway, as we were crossing the courtyard, the rain suddenly got heavier and since we were in no hurry, we tucked ourselves in under the eaves of the main house, a little to one side of the front entrance.

We sheltered there for a while, and every so often a student would come running out of the fog and in through the doors of the house, but the rain didn't ease. And the longer we continued to stand there, the more tense I grew because I could see this was the opportunity I'd been waiting for. Ruth too, I'm sure, sensed something was coming up. In the end, I decided to come straight out with it.

'At the Sale last Tuesday,' I said. 'I was just looking through the book. You know, the register thing.'

'Why were you looking at the register?' Ruth asked quickly. 'Why were you doing something like that?'

'Oh, no reason. Christopher C. was one of the monitors, so I was just talking to him. He's the best Senior boy, definitely. And I was just turning over the pages of the register, just for something to do.'

Ruth's mind, I could tell, had raced on, and she now knew exactly what this was about. But she said calmly: 'Boring sort of thing to look at.'

‘No, it was quite interesting really. You can see all the things people have bought.’

I’d said this staring out at the rain. Then I glanced at Ruth and got a real shock. I don’t know what I’d expected; for all my fantasies of the past month, I’d never really considered what it would be like in a real situation like the one unfolding at that moment. Now I saw how upset Ruth was; how for once she was at a complete loss for words, and had turned away on the verge of tears. And suddenly my behaviour seemed to me utterly baffling. All this effort, all this planning, just to upset my dearest friend. So what if she’d fibbed a little about her pencil case? Didn’t we all dream from time to time about one guardian or other bending the rules and doing something special for us? A spontaneous hug, a secret letter, a gift? All Ruth had done was to take one of these harmless daydreams a step further; she hadn’t even mentioned Miss Geraldine by name.

I now felt awful, and I was confused. But as we stood there together staring at the fog and rain, I could think of no way now to repair the damage I’d done. I think I said something pathetic like: ‘It’s all right, I didn’t see anything much,’ which hung stupidly in the air. Then after a few further seconds of silence, Ruth walked off into the rain.

CHAPTER SIX

I think I'd have felt better about what had happened if Ruth had held it against me in some obvious way. But this was one instance when she seemed just to cave in. It was like she was too ashamed of the matter - too *crushed* by it - even to be angry or to want to get me back. The first few times I saw her after the conversation under the eaves, I was ready for at least a bit of huffiness, but no, she was completely civil, if a little flat. It occurred to me she was scared I'd expose her - the pencil case, sure enough, vanished from view - and I wanted to tell her she'd nothing to fear from me. The trouble was, because none of this had actually been talked about in the open, I couldn't find a way of bringing it all up with her.

I did my best, meanwhile, to take any opportunity to imply to Ruth she had a special place in Miss Geraldine's heart. There was the time, for example, when a bunch of us were desperate to go out and practise rounders during break, because we'd been challenged by a group from the year above. Our problem was that it was raining, and it looked unlikely we'd be allowed outside. I noticed though that Miss Geraldine was one of the guardians on duty, and so I said:

'If *Ruth* goes and asks Miss Geraldine, then we'd stand a chance.'

As far as I remember, this suggestion wasn't taken up; maybe hardly anyone heard it, because a lot of us were talking all at once. But the point is, I said it standing right behind Ruth, and I could see she was pleased.

Then another time a few of us were leaving a classroom with Miss Geraldine, and I happened to find myself about to go out the door right after Miss Geraldine herself. What I did was to slow right down so that Ruth, coming behind me,

could instead pass through the door beside Miss Geraldine. I did this without any fuss, as though this were the natural and proper thing and what Miss Geraldine would like - just the way I'd have done if, say, I'd accidentally got myself between two best friends. On that occasion, as far as I remember, Ruth looked puzzled and surprised for a split second, then gave me a quick nod and went past.

Little things like these might well have pleased Ruth, but they were still far removed from what had actually happened between us under the eaves that foggy day, and the sense that I'd never be able to sort things just continued to grow. There's a particular memory I have of sitting by myself one evening on one of the benches outside the pavilion, trying over and over to think of some way out, while a heavy mix of remorse and frustration brought me virtually to tears. If things had stayed that way, I'm not sure what would have happened. Maybe it would all have got forgotten eventually; or maybe Ruth and I would have drifted apart. As it was, right out of the blue, a chance came along for me to put things right.

We were in the middle of one of Mr Roger's art lessons, except for some reason he'd gone out half way. So we were all just drifting about among the easels, chatting and looking at each other's work. Then at one point a girl called Midge A. came over to where we were and said to Ruth, in a perfectly friendly way:

'Where's your pencil case? It's so luscious.'

Ruth tensed and glanced quickly about to see who was present. It was our usual gang with perhaps a couple of outsiders loitering nearby. I hadn't mentioned to a soul anything about the Sales Register business, but I suppose Ruth wasn't to know that. Her voice was softer than usual when she replied to Midge:

'I haven't got it here. I keep it in my collection chest.'

‘It’s so luscious. Where did you get it?’

Midge was quizzing her completely innocently, that was now obvious. But almost all of us who’d been in Room 5 the time Ruth had first brought out the pencil case were here now, looking on, and I saw Ruth hesitate. It was only later, when I replayed it all, that I appreciated how perfectly shaped a chance it was for me. At the time I didn’t really think. I just came in before Midge or anyone else had the chance to notice Ruth was in a curious quandary.

‘We can’t say where it came from.’

Ruth, Midge, the rest of them, they all looked at me, maybe a little surprised. But I kept my cool and went on, addressing only Midge.

‘There are some very good reasons why we can’t tell you where it came from.’

Midge shrugged. ‘So it’s a mystery.’

‘A *big* mystery,’ I said, then gave her a smile to show her I wasn’t trying to be nasty to her.

The others were nodding to back me up, though Ruth herself had on a vague expression, like she’d suddenly become preoccupied with something else entirely. Midge shrugged again, and as far as I remember that was the end of it. Either she walked off, or else she started talking about something different.

Now, for much the same reasons I’d not been able to talk openly to Ruth about what I’d done to her over the Sales Register business, she of course wasn’t able to thank me for the way I’d intervened with Midge. But it was obvious from her manner towards me, not just over the next few days, but over the weeks that followed, how pleased she was with me. And having recently been in much the same position, it was easy to recognise the signs of her looking around for some opportunity to do something nice, something really special

for me. It was a good feeling, and I remember even thinking once or twice how it would be better if she didn't get a chance for ages, just so the good feeling between us could go on and on. As it was, an opportunity did come along for her, about a month after the Midge episode, the time I lost my favourite tape.

I still have a copy of that tape and until recently I'd listen to it occasionally driving out in the open country on a drizzly day. But now the tape machine in my car's got so dodgy, I don't dare play it in that. And there never seems enough time to play it when I'm back in my bedsit. Even so, it's one of my most precious possessions. Maybe come the end of the year, when I'm no longer a carer, I'll be able to listen to it more often.

The album's called *Songs After Dark* and it's by Judy Bridgewater. What I've got today isn't the actual cassette, the one I had back then at Hailsham, the one I lost. It's the one Tommy and I found in Norfolk years afterwards - but that's another story I'll come to later. What I want to talk about is the first tape, the one that disappeared.

I should explain before I go any further this whole thing we had in those days about Norfolk. We kept it going for years and years - it became a sort of in-joke, I suppose - and it all started from one particular lesson we had when we were pretty young.

It was Miss Emily herself who taught us about the different counties of England. She'd pin up a big map over the blackboard, and next to it, set up an easel. And if she was talking about, say, Oxfordshire, she'd place on the easel a large calendar with photos of the county. She had quite a collection of these picture calendars, and we got through most of the counties this way. She'd tap a spot on the map with her pointer, turn to the easel and reveal another picture. There'd be little villages with streams going through them, white monuments on hillsides, old churches

beside fields; if she was telling us about a coastal place, there'd be beaches crowded with people, cliffs with seagulls. I suppose she wanted us to have a grasp of what was out there surrounding us, and it's amazing, even now, after all these miles I've covered as a carer, the extent to which my idea of the various counties is still set by these pictures Miss Emily put up on her easel. I'd be driving through Derbyshire, say, and catch myself looking for a particular village green with a mock-Tudor pub and a war memorial - and realise it's the image Miss Emily showed us the first time I ever heard of Derbyshire.

Anyway, the point is, there was a gap in Miss Emily's calendar collection: none of them had a single picture of Norfolk. We had these same lectures repeated a number of times, and I'd always wonder if this time she'd found a picture of Norfolk, but it was always the same. She'd wave her pointer over the map and say, as a sort of afterthought: 'And over here, we've got Norfolk. Very nice there.'

Then, that particular time, I remember how she paused and drifted off into thought, maybe because she hadn't planned what should happen next instead of a picture. Eventually she came out of her dream and tapped the map again.

'You see, because it's stuck out here on the east, on this hump jutting into the sea, it's not on the way to anywhere. People going north and south' - she moved the pointer up and down - 'they bypass it altogether. For that reason, it's a peaceful corner of England, rather nice. But it's also something of a lost corner.'

A *lost corner*. That's what she called it, and that was what started it. Because at Hailsham, we had our own 'Lost Corner' up on the third floor, where the lost property was kept; if you lost or found anything, that's where you went. Someone - I can't remember who it was - claimed after the lesson that what Miss Emily had said was that Norfolk was England's 'lost corner', where all the lost property found

in the country ended up. Somehow this idea caught on and soon had become accepted fact virtually throughout our entire year.

Not long ago, when Tommy and I were reminiscing about all of this, he thought we'd never really believed in the notion, that it was a joke right from the start. But I'm pretty certain he was wrong there. Sure enough, by the time we were twelve or thirteen, the Norfolk thing *had* become a big joke. But my memory of it - and Ruth remembered it the same way - is that at the beginning, we believed in Norfolk in the most literal way; that just as lorries came to Hailsham with our food and stuff for our Sales, there was some similar operation going on, except on a grander scale, with vehicles moving all over England, delivering anything left behind in fields and trains to this place called Norfolk. The fact that we'd never seen a picture of the place only added to its mystique.

This might all sound daft, but you have to remember that to us, at that stage in our lives, any place beyond Hailsham was like a fantasy land; we had only the haziest notions of the world outside and about what was and wasn't possible there. Besides, we never bothered to examine our Norfolk theory in any detail. What was important to us, as Ruth said one evening when we were sitting in that tiled room in Dover, looking out at the sunset, was that 'when we lost something precious, and we'd looked and looked and still couldn't find it, then we didn't have to be completely heartbroken. We still had that last bit of comfort, thinking one day, when we were grown up, and we were free to travel around the country, we could always go and find it again in Norfolk.'

I'm sure Ruth was right about that. Norfolk came to be a real source of comfort for us, probably much more than we admitted at the time, and that was why we were still talking about it - albeit as a sort of joke - when we were much older. And that's why, years and years later, that day Tommy and I found another copy of that lost tape of mine in a town

on the Norfolk coast, we didn't just think it pretty funny; we both felt deep down some tug, some old wish to believe again in something that was once close to our hearts.

But I wanted to talk about my tape, *Songs After Dark* by Judy Bridgewater. I suppose it was originally an LP - the recording date's 1956 - but what I had was the cassette, and the cover picture was what must have been a scaled-down version of the record sleeve. Judy Bridgewater is wearing a purple satin dress, one of those off-the-shoulder ones popular in those days, and you can see her from just above the waist because she's sitting on a bar-stool. I think it's supposed to be South America, because there are palms behind her and swarthy waiters in white tuxedos. You're looking at Judy from exactly where the barman would be when he's serving her drinks. She's looking back in a friendly, not too sexy way, like she might be flirting just a tiny bit, but you're someone she knows from way back. Now the other thing about this cover is that Judy's got her elbows up on the bar and there's a cigarette burning in her hand. And it was because of this cigarette that I got so secretive about the tape, right from the moment I found it at the Sale.

I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham the guardians were really strict about smoking. I'm sure they'd have preferred it if we never found out smoking even existed; but since this wasn't possible, they made sure to give us some sort of lecture each time any reference to cigarettes came along. Even if we were being shown a picture of a famous writer or world leader, and they happened to have a cigarette in their hand, then the whole lesson would grind to a halt. There was even a rumour that some classic books - like the Sherlock Holmes ones - weren't in our library because the main characters smoked too much, and when you came across a page torn out of an illustrated book or magazine, this was because there'd been a picture on it of someone smoking. And then there were the actual lessons where they showed us horrible pictures of what smoking did to the

insides of your body. That's why it was such a shock that time Marge K. asked Miss Lucy her question.

We were sitting on the grass after a rounders match and Miss Lucy had been giving us a typical talk on smoking when Marge suddenly asked if Miss Lucy had herself ever had a cigarette. Miss Lucy went quiet for a few seconds. Then she said:

'I'd like to be able to say no. But to be honest, I did smoke for a little while. For about two years, when I was younger.'

You can imagine what a shock this was. Before Miss Lucy's reply, we'd all been glaring at Marge, really furious she'd asked such a rude question - to us, she might as well have asked if Miss Lucy had ever attacked anyone with an axe. And for days afterwards I remember how we made Marge's life an utter misery; in fact, that incident I mentioned before, the night we held Marge's face to the dorm window to make her look at the woods, that was all part of what came afterwards. But at the time, the moment Miss Lucy said what she did, we were too confused to think any more about Marge. I think we all just stared at Miss Lucy in horror, waiting for what she'd say next.

When she did speak, Miss Lucy seemed to be weighing up each word carefully. 'It's not good that I smoked. It wasn't good for me so I stopped it. But what you must understand is that for you, all of you, it's much, much worse to smoke than it ever was for me.'

Then she paused and went quiet. Someone said later she'd gone off into a daydream, but I was pretty sure, as was Ruth, that she was thinking hard about what to say next. Finally she said:

'You've been told about it. You're students. You're ... *special*. So keeping yourselves well, keeping yourselves very

healthy inside, that's much more important for each of you than it is for me.'

She stopped again and looked at us in a strange way. Afterwards, when we discussed it, some of us were sure she was dying for someone to ask: 'Why? Why is it so much worse for us?' But no one did. I've often thought about that day, and I'm sure now, in the light of what happened later, that we only needed to ask and Miss Lucy would have told us all kinds of things. All it would have taken was just one more question about smoking.

So why had we stayed silent that day? I suppose it was because even at that age - we were nine or ten - we knew just enough to make us wary of that whole territory. It's hard now to remember just how much we knew by then. We certainly knew - though not in any deep sense - that we were different from our guardians, and also from the normal people outside; we perhaps even knew that a long way down the line there were donations waiting for us. But we didn't really know what that meant. If we were keen to avoid certain topics, it was probably more because it *embarrassed* us. We hated the way our guardians, usually so on top of everything, became so awkward whenever we came near this territory. It unnerved us to see them change like that. I think that's why we never asked that one further question, and why we punished Marge K. so cruelly for bringing it all up that day after the rounders match.

Anyway, that's why I was so secretive about my tape. I even turned the cover inside out so you'd only see Judy and her cigarette if you opened up the plastic case. But the reason the tape meant so much to me had nothing to do with the cigarette, or even with the way Judy Bridgewater sang - she's one of those singers from her time, cocktail-bar stuff, not the sort of thing any of us at Hailsham liked. What made the tape so special for me was this one particular song: track number three, 'Never Let Me Go'.

It's slow and late night and American, and there's a bit that keeps coming round when Judy sings: 'Never let me go ... Oh baby, baby ... Never let me go ...' I was eleven then, and hadn't listened to much music, but this one song, it really got to me. I always tried to keep the tape wound to just that spot so I could play the song whenever a chance came by.

I didn't have so many opportunities, mind you, this being a few years before Walkmans started appearing at the Sales. There was a big machine in the billiards room, but I hardly ever played the tape in there because it was always full of people. The Art Room also had a player, but that was usually just as noisy. The only place I could listen properly was in our dorm.

By then we'd gone into the small six-bed dorms over in the separate huts, and in ours we had a portable cassette player up on the shelf above the radiator. So that's where I used to go, in the day when no one else was likely to be about, to play my song over and over.

What was so special about this song? Well, the thing was, I didn't used to listen properly to the words; I just waited for that bit that went: 'Baby, baby, never let me go ...' And what I'd imagine was a woman who'd been told she couldn't have babies, who'd really, really wanted them all her life. Then there's a sort of miracle and she has a baby, and she holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing: 'Baby, never let me go ...' partly because she's so happy, but also because she's so afraid something will happen, that the baby will get ill or be taken away from her. Even at the time, I realised this couldn't be right, that this interpretation didn't fit with the rest of the lyrics. But that wasn't an issue with me. The song was about what I said, and I used to listen to it again and again, on my own, whenever I got the chance.

There was one strange incident around this time I should tell you about here. It really unsettled me, and although I

wasn't to find out its real meaning until years later, I think I sensed, even then, some deeper significance to it.

It was a sunny afternoon and I'd gone to our dorm to get something. I remember how bright it was because the curtains in our room hadn't been pulled back properly, and you could see the sun coming in in big shafts and see all the dust in the air. I hadn't meant to play the tape, but since I was there all by myself, an impulse made me get the cassette out of my collection box and put it into the player.

Maybe the volume had been turned right up by whoever had been using it last, I don't know. But it was much louder than I usually had it and that was probably why I didn't hear her before I did. Or maybe I'd just got complacent by then. Anyway, what I was doing was swaying about slowly in time to the song, holding an imaginary baby to my breast. In fact, to make it all the more embarrassing, it was one of those times I'd grabbed a pillow to stand in for the baby, and I was doing this slow dance, my eyes closed, singing along softly each time those lines came around again:

'Oh baby, *baby*, never let me go ...'

The song was almost over when something made me realise I wasn't alone, and I opened my eyes to find myself staring at Madame framed in the doorway.

I froze in shock. Then within a second or two, I began to feel a new kind of alarm, because I could see there was something strange about the situation. The door was almost half open - it was a sort of rule we couldn't close dorm doors completely except for when we were sleeping - but Madame hadn't nearly come up to the threshold. She was out in the corridor, standing very still, her head angled to one side to give her a view of what I was doing inside. And the odd thing was she was crying. It might even have been one of her sobs that had come through the song to jerk me out of my dream.

When I think about this now, it seems to me, even if she wasn't a guardian, she was the adult, and she should have said or done something, even if it was just to tell me off. Then I'd have known how to behave. But she just went on standing out there, sobbing and sobbing, staring at me through the doorway with that same look in her eyes she always had when she looked at us, like she was seeing something that gave her the creeps. Except this time there was something else, something extra in that look I couldn't fathom.

I didn't know what to do or say, or what to expect next. Perhaps she would come into the room, shout at me, hit me even, I didn't have a clue. As it was, she turned and the next moment I could hear her footsteps leaving the hut. I realised the tape had gone onto the next track, and I turned it off and sat down on the nearest bed. And as I did so, I saw through the window in front of me her figure hurrying off towards the main house. She didn't glance back, but I could tell from the way her back was hunched up she was still sobbing.

When I got back to my friends a few minutes later, I didn't tell them anything about what had happened. Someone noticed I wasn't right and said something, but I just shrugged and kept quiet. I wasn't ashamed exactly: but it was a bit like that earlier time, when we'd all waylaid Madame in the courtyard as she got out of her car. What I wished more than anything was that the thing hadn't happened at all, and I thought that by not mentioning it I'd be doing myself and everyone else a favour.

I did, though, talk to Tommy about it a couple of years later. This was in those days following our conversation by the pond when he'd first confided in me about Miss Lucy; the days during which - as I see it - we started off our whole thing of wondering and asking questions about ourselves that we kept going between us through the years. When I told Tommy about what had happened with Madame in the dorm, he came up

with a fairly simple explanation. By then, of course, we all knew something I hadn't known back then, which was that none of us could have babies. It's just possible I'd somehow picked up the idea when I was younger without fully registering it, and that's why I heard what I did when I listened to that song. But there was no way I'd known properly back then. As I say, by the time Tommy and I were discussing it, we'd all been told clearly enough. None of us, incidentally, was particularly bothered about it; in fact, I remember some people being pleased we could have sex without worrying about all of that - though proper sex was still some way off for most of us at that stage. Anyway, when I told Tommy about what had happened, he said:

'Madame's probably not a bad person, even though she's creepy. So when she saw you dancing like that, holding your baby, she thought it was really tragic, how you couldn't have babies. That's why she started crying.'

'But Tommy,' I pointed out, 'how could she have known the song had anything to do with people having babies? How could she have known the pillow I was holding was supposed to be a baby? That was only in my head.'

Tommy thought about this, then said only half jokingly: 'Maybe Madame can read minds. She's strange. Maybe she can see right inside you. It wouldn't surprise me.'

This gave us both a little chill, and though we giggled, we didn't say any more about it.

The tape disappeared a couple of months after the incident with Madame. I never linked the two events at the time and I've no reason to link them now. I was in the dorm one night, just before lights-out, and was rummaging through my collection chest to pass the time until the others came back from the bathroom. It's odd but when it first dawned on me the tape wasn't there any more, my main thought was that I mustn't give away how panicked I was. I can remember actually

making a point of humming absent-mindedly while I went on searching. I've thought about it a lot and I still don't know how to explain it: these were my closest friends in that room with me and yet I didn't want them to know how upset I was about my tape going missing.

I suppose it had something to do with it being a secret, just how much it had meant to me. Maybe all of us at Hailsham had little secrets like that - little private nooks created out of thin air where we could go off alone with our fears and longings. But the very fact that we had such needs would have felt wrong to us at the time - like somehow we were letting the side down.

Anyway, once I was quite sure the tape was gone, I asked each of the others in the dorm, very casually, if they'd seen it. I wasn't yet completely distraught because there was just the chance I'd left it in the billiards room; otherwise my hope was that someone had borrowed it and would give it back in the morning.

Well, the tape didn't turn up the next day and I've still no idea what happened to it. The truth is, I suppose, there was far more thieving going on at Hailsham than we - or the guardians - ever wanted to admit. But the reason I'm going into all this now is to explain about Ruth and how she reacted. What you have to remember is that I lost my tape less than a month after that time Midge had quizzed Ruth in the Art Room about her pencil case and I'd come to the rescue. Ever since, as I told you, Ruth had been looking out for something nice to do for me in return, and the tape disappearing gave her a real opportunity. You could even say it wasn't until after my tape vanished that things got back to normal with us - maybe for the first time since that rainy morning I'd mentioned the Sales Register to her under the eaves of the main house.

The night I first noticed the tape had gone, I'd made sure to ask everyone about it, and that of course had

included Ruth. Looking back, I can see how she must have realised, then and there, exactly what losing the tape meant to me, and at the same time, how important it was for me there was no fuss. So she'd replied that night with a distracted shrug and gone on with what she was doing. But the next morning, when I was coming back from the bathroom, I could hear her - in a casual voice like it wasn't anything much - asking Hannah if she was sure she hadn't seen my tape.

Then maybe a fortnight later, when I'd long reconciled myself to having truly lost my tape, she came and found me during the lunch break. It was one of the first really good days of spring that year, and I'd been sitting on the grass talking with a couple of the older girls. When Ruth came up and asked if I wanted to go for a little stroll, it was obvious she had something particular on her mind. So I left the older girls and followed her to the edge of the North Playing Field, then up the north hill, until we were standing there by the wooden fence looking down on the sweep of green dotted with clusters of students. There was a strong breeze at the top of the hill, and I remember being surprised by it because I hadn't noticed it down on the grass. We stood there looking over the grounds for a while, then she held out a little bag to me. When I took it, I could tell there was a cassette tape inside and my heart leapt. But Ruth said immediately:

'Kathy, it's not your one. The one you lost. I tried to find it for you, but it's really gone.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Gone to Norfolk.'

We both laughed. Then I took the tape out of the bag with a disappointed air, and I'm not sure the disappointment wasn't still there on my face while I examined it.

I was holding something called *Twenty Classic Dance Tunes*. When I played it later, I discovered it was orchestra stuff for ballroom dancing. Of course, the moment she was giving it to me, I didn't know what sort of music it was, but

I did know it wasn't anything like Judy Bridgewater. Then again, almost immediately, I saw how Ruth wasn't to know that - how to Ruth, who didn't know the first thing about music, this tape might easily make up for the one I'd lost. And suddenly I felt the disappointment ebbing away and being replaced by a real happiness. We didn't do things like hug each other much at Hailsham. But I squeezed one of her hands in both mine when I thanked her. She said: 'I found it at the last Sale. I just thought it's the sort of thing you'd like.' And I said that, yes, it was exactly the sort of thing.

I still have it now. I don't play it much because the music has nothing to do with anything. It's an object, like a brooch or a ring, and especially now Ruth has gone, it's become one of my most precious possessions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

I want to move on now to our last years at Hailsham. I'm talking about the period from when we were thirteen to when we left at sixteen. In my memory my life at Hailsham falls into two distinct chunks: this last era, and everything that came before. The earlier years - the ones I've just been telling you about - they tend to blur into each other as a kind of golden time, and when I think about them at all, even the not-so-great things, I can't help feeling a sort of glow. But those last years feel different. They weren't unhappy exactly - I've got plenty of memories I treasure from them - but they were more serious, and in some ways darker. Maybe I've exaggerated it in my mind, but I've got an impression of things changing rapidly around then, like day moving into night.

That talk with Tommy beside the pond: I think of it now as a kind of marker between the two eras. Not that anything significant started to happen immediately afterwards; but for me at least, that conversation was a turning point. I definitely started to look at everything differently. Where before I'd have backed away from awkward stuff, I began instead, more and more, to ask questions, if not out loud, at least within myself.

In particular, that conversation got me looking at Miss Lucy in a new light. I watched her carefully whenever I could, not just from curiosity, but because I now saw her as the most likely source of important clues. And that's how it was, over the next year or two, I came to notice various odd little things she said or did that my friends missed altogether.

There was the time, for example, maybe a few weeks after the talk by the pond, when Miss Lucy was taking us for

English. We'd been looking at some poetry, but had somehow drifted onto talking about soldiers in World War Two being kept in prison camps. One of the boys asked if the fences around the camps had been electrified, and then someone else had said how strange it must have been, living in a place like that, where you could commit suicide any time you liked just by touching a fence. This might have been intended as a serious point, but the rest of us thought it pretty funny. We were all laughing and talking at once, and then Laura - typical of her - got up on her seat and did a hysterical impersonation of someone reaching out and getting electrocuted. For a moment things got riotous, with everyone shouting and mimicking touching electric fences.

I went on watching Miss Lucy through all this and I could see, just for a second, a ghostly expression come over her face as she watched the class in front of her. Then - I kept watching carefully - she pulled herself together, smiled and said: 'It's just as well the fences at Hailsham aren't electrified. You get terrible accidents sometimes.'

She said this quite softly, and because people were still shouting, she was more or less drowned out. But I heard her clearly enough. 'You get terrible accidents sometimes.' What accidents? Where? But no one picked her up on it, and we went back to discussing our poem.

There were other little incidents like that, and before long I came to see Miss Lucy as being not quite like the other guardians. It's even possible I began to realise, right back then, the nature of her worries and frustrations. But that's probably going too far; chances are, at the time, I noticed all these things without knowing what on earth to make of them. And if these incidents now seem full of significance and all of a piece, it's probably because I'm looking at them in the light of what came later - particularly what happened that day at the pavilion while we were sheltering from the downpour.

We were fifteen by then, already into our last year at Hailsham. We'd been in the pavilion getting ready for a game of rounders. The boys were going through a phase of 'enjoying' rounders in order to flirt with us, so there were over thirty of us that afternoon. The downpour had started while we were changing, and we found ourselves gathering on the veranda - which was sheltered by the pavilion roof - while we waited for it to stop. But the rain kept going, and when the last of us had emerged, the veranda was pretty crowded, with everyone milling around restlessly. I remember Laura was demonstrating to me an especially disgusting way of blowing your nose for when you really wanted to put off a boy.

Miss Lucy was the only guardian present. She was leaning over the rail at the front, peering into the rain like she was trying to see right across the playing field. I was watching her as carefully as ever in those days, and even as I was laughing at Laura, I was stealing glances at Miss Lucy's back. I remember wondering if there wasn't something a bit odd about her posture, the way her head was bent down just a little too far so she looked like a crouching animal waiting to pounce. And the way she was leaning forward over the rail meant drops from the overhanging gutter were only just missing her - but she seemed to show no sign of caring. I remember actually convincing myself there was nothing unusual in all this - that she was simply anxious for the rain to stop - and turning my attention back to what Laura was saying. Then a few minutes later, when I'd forgotten all about Miss Lucy and was laughing my head off at something, I suddenly realised things had gone quiet around us, and that Miss Lucy was speaking.

She was standing at the same spot as before, but she'd turned to face us now, so her back was against the rail, and the rainy sky behind her.

'No, no, I'm sorry, I'm going to have to interrupt you,' she was saying, and I could see she was talking to two

boys sitting on the benches immediately in front of her. Her voice wasn't exactly strange, but she was speaking very loudly, in the sort of voice she'd use to announce something to the lot of us, and that was why we'd all gone quiet. 'No, Peter, I'm going to have to stop you. I can't listen to you any more and keep silent.'

Then she raised her gaze to include the rest of us and took a deep breath. 'All right, you can hear this, it's for all of you. It's time someone spelt it out.'

We waited while she kept staring at us. Later, some people said they'd thought she was going to give us a big telling-off; others that she was about to announce a new rule on how we played rounders. But I knew before she said another word it would be something more.

'Boys, you must forgive me for listening. But you were right behind me, so I couldn't help it. Peter, why don't you tell the others what you were saying to Gordon just now?'

Peter J. looked bewildered and I could see him getting ready his injured innocence face. But then Miss Lucy said again, this time much more gently:

'Peter, go on. Please tell the others what you were just saying.'

Peter shrugged. 'We were just talking about what it would feel like if we became actors. What sort of life it would be.'

'Yes,' Miss Lucy said, 'and you were saying to Gordon you'd have to go to America to stand the best chance.'

Peter J. shrugged again and muttered quietly: 'Yes, Miss Lucy.'

But Miss Lucy was now moving her gaze over the lot of us. 'I know you don't mean any harm. But there's just too much talk like this. I hear it all the time, it's been allowed to go on, and it's not right.' I could see more drops coming

off the gutter and landing on her shoulder, but she didn't seem to notice. 'If no one else will talk to you,' she continued, 'then I will. The problem, as I see it, is that you've been told and not told. You've been told, but none of you really understand, and I dare say, some people are quite happy to leave it that way. But I'm not. If you're going to have decent lives, then you've got to know and know properly. None of you will go to America, none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day. Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do. You're not like the actors you watch on your videos, you're not even like me. You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures, all of them, have been decided. So you're not to talk that way any more. You'll be leaving Hailsham before long, and it's not so far off, the day you'll be preparing for your first donations. You need to remember that. If you're to have decent lives, you have to know who you are and what lies ahead of you, every one of you.'

Then she went silent, but my impression was that she was continuing to say things inside her head, because for some time her gaze kept roving over us, going from face to face just as if she were still speaking to us. We were all pretty relieved when she turned to look out over the playing field again.

'It's not so bad now,' she said, even though the rain was as steady as ever. 'Let's just go out there. Then maybe the sun will come out too.'

I think that was all she said. When I was discussing it with Ruth a few years ago at the centre in Dover, she claimed Miss Lucy had told us a lot more; that she'd explained how before donations we'd all spend some time first as carers, about the usual sequence of the donations, the recovery centres and so on - but I'm pretty sure she didn't. Okay, she

probably intended to when she began talking. But my guess is once she'd set off, once she'd seen the puzzled, uncomfortable faces in front of her, she realised the impossibility of completing what she'd started.

It's hard to say clearly what sort of impact Miss Lucy's outburst at the pavilion made. Word got round fast enough, but the talk mostly focused on Miss Lucy herself rather than on what she'd been trying to tell us. Some students thought she'd lost her marbles for a moment; others that she'd been asked to say what she had by Miss Emily and the other guardians; there were even some who'd actually been there and who thought Miss Lucy had been telling us off for being too rowdy on the veranda. But as I say there was surprisingly little discussion about what she'd said. If it did come up, people tended to say: 'Well so what? We already knew all that.'

But that had been Miss Lucy's point exactly. We'd been 'told and not told', as she'd put it. A few years ago, when Tommy and I were going over it all again, and I reminded him of Miss Lucy's 'told and not told' idea, he came up with a theory.

Tommy thought it possible the guardians had, throughout all our years at Hailsham, timed very carefully and deliberately everything they told us, so that we were always just too young to understand properly the latest piece of information. But of course we'd take it in at some level, so that before long all this stuff was there in our heads without us ever having examined it properly.

It's a bit too much like a conspiracy theory for me - I don't think our guardians were that crafty - but there's probably something in it. Certainly, it feels like I *always* knew about donations in some vague way, even as early as six or seven. And it's curious, when we were older and the guardians were giving us those talks, nothing came as a

complete surprise. It *was* like we'd heard everything somewhere before.

One thing that occurs to me now is that when the guardians first started giving us proper lectures about sex, they tended to run them together with talk about the donations. At that age - again, I'm talking of around thirteen - we were all pretty worried and excited about sex, and naturally would have pushed the other stuff into the background. In other words, it's possible the guardians managed to smuggle into our heads a lot of the basic facts about our futures.

Now to be fair, it was probably natural to run these two subjects together. If, say, they were telling us how we'd have to be very careful to avoid diseases when we had sex, it would have been odd not to mention how much more important this was for us than for normal people outside. And that, of course, would bring us onto the donations.

Then there was the whole business about our not being able to have babies. Miss Emily used to give a lot of the sex lectures herself, and I remember once, she brought in a life-size skeleton from the biology class to demonstrate how it was done. We watched in complete astonishment as she put the skeleton through various contortions, thrusting her pointer around without the slightest self-consciousness. She was going through all the nuts and bolts of how you did it, what went in where, the different variations, like this was still Geography. Then suddenly, with the skeleton in an obscene heap on the desktop, she turned away and began telling us how we had to be careful *who* we had sex with. Not just because of the diseases, but because, she said, 'sex affects emotions in ways you'd never expect'. We had to be extremely careful about having sex in the outside world, especially with people who weren't students, because out there sex meant all sorts of things. Out there people were even fighting and killing each other over who had sex with whom. And the reason it meant so much - so much more than, say, dancing or table-

tennis - was because the people out there were different from us students: they could have babies from sex. That was why it was so important to them, this question of who did it with whom. And even though, as we knew, it was completely impossible for any of us to have babies, out there, we had to behave like them. We had to respect the rules and treat sex as something pretty special.

Miss Emily's lecture that day was typical of what I'm talking about. We'd be focusing on sex, and then the other stuff would creep in. I suppose that was all part of how we came to be 'told and not told'.

I think in the end we must have absorbed quite a lot of information, because I remember, around that age, a marked change in the way we approached the whole territory surrounding the donations. Until then, as I've said, we'd done everything to avoid the subject; we'd backed off at the first sign we were entering that ground, and there'd been severe punishment for any idiot - like Marge that time - who got careless. But from when we were thirteen, like I say, things started to change. We still didn't discuss the donations and all that went with them; we still found the whole area awkward enough. But it became something we made jokes about, in much the way we joked about sex. Looking back now, I'd say the rule about not discussing the donations openly was still there, as strong as ever. But now it was okay, almost required, every now and then, to make some jokey allusion to these things that lay in front of us.

A good example is what happened the time Tommy got the gash on his elbow. It must have been just before my talk with him by the pond; a time, I suppose, when Tommy was still coming out of that phase of being teased and taunted.

It wasn't such a bad gash, and though he was sent to Crow Face to have it seen to, he was back almost straight away with a square of dressing plastered to his elbow. No one thought much about it until a couple of days later, when

Tommy took off the dressing to reveal something at just that stage between sealing and still being an open wound. You could see bits of skin starting to bond, and soft red bits peeping up from underneath. We were in the middle of lunch, so everyone crowded round to go 'urgh!'. Then Christopher H., from the year above, said with a dead straight face: 'Pity it's on that bit of the elbow. Just about anywhere else, it wouldn't matter.'

Tommy looked worried - Christopher being someone he looked up to in those days - and asked what he meant. Christopher went on eating, then said nonchalantly:

'Don't you know? If it's right on the elbow like that, it can *unzip*. All you have to do is bend your arm quickly. Not just that actual bit, the whole elbow, it can all unzip like a bag opening up. Thought you'd know that.'

I could hear Tommy complaining that Crow Face hadn't warned him of anything of that sort, but Christopher shrugged and said: 'She thought you knew, of course. Everyone knows.'

A number of people nearby murmured agreement. 'You've got to keep your arm dead straight,' someone else said. 'Bending it at all's really dangerous.'

The next day I could see Tommy going about with his arm held out very rigidly and looking worried. Everybody was laughing at him, and I was cross about that, but I had to admit, there was a funny side to it. Then towards the end of the afternoon as we were leaving the Art Room, he came up to me in the corridor and said: 'Kath, can I just have a quick word?'

This was maybe a couple of weeks after the time I'd gone up to him in the playing field to remind him about his polo shirt, so it had got about we were special friends of some sort. All the same, his coming up like that asking for a private talk was pretty embarrassing and threw me off

balance. Maybe that partly explains why I wasn't more helpful than I was.

'I'm not too worried or anything,' he began, once he'd got me aside. 'But I wanted to play safe, that's all. We should never take chances with our health. I need someone to help, Kath.' He was, he explained, concerned about what he'd do in his sleep. He might easily bend his elbow in the night.

'I have these dreams all the time where I'm fighting loads of Roman soldiers.'

When I quizzed him a bit, it became obvious all kinds of people - people who hadn't been there that lunch-time - had been coming up to him to repeat Christopher H.'s warning. In fact, it seemed a few had carried the joke further: Tommy had been told of a student who'd gone to sleep with a cut on the elbow just like his and woken up to find his whole upper arm and hand skeletally exposed, the skin flopping about next to him 'like one of those long gloves in *My Fair Lady*' .

What Tommy was asking me now was to help tie a splint on the arm to keep it rigid through the night.

'I don't trust any of the others,' he said, holding up a thick ruler he wanted to use. 'They might deliberately do it so it comes undone in the night.'

He was looking at me in complete innocence and I didn't know what to say. A part of me wanted badly to tell him what was going on, and I suppose I knew that to do anything else would be to betray the trust we'd built up since the moment I'd reminded him about his polo shirt. And for me to strap up his arm in a splint would have meant my becoming one of the main perpetrators of the joke. I still feel ashamed I didn't tell him then. But you've got to remember I was still young, and that I only had a few seconds to decide. And when someone's asking you to do something in such a pleading way, everything goes against saying no.

I suppose the main thing was that I didn't want to upset him. Because I could see, for all his anxiety about his elbow, Tommy was touched by all the concern he believed had been shown him. Of course, I knew he'd find out the truth sooner or later, but at that moment I just couldn't tell him. The best I could do was to ask:

'Did Crow Face tell you you had to do this?'

'No. But imagine how angry she'd be if my elbow slipped out.'

I still feel bad about it, but I promised to strap his arm for him - in Room 14 half an hour before the night bell - and watched him go off grateful and reassured.

As it happened, I didn't have to go through with it because Tommy found out first. It was around eight in the evening, I was coming down the main staircase, and heard a burst of laughter rising up the stairwell from the ground floor. My heart sank because I knew immediately it was to do with Tommy. I paused on the first-floor landing and looked over the rail just as Tommy came out of the billiards room with thunderous footsteps. I remember thinking: 'At least he's not shouting.' And he didn't, the whole time he went to the cloakroom, got his things and left the main house. And all that time, laughter kept coming from the open doorway of the billiards room, and voices yelling things like: 'If you lose your temper, your elbow will *definitely* pop out!'

I thought about following him out into the evening and catching up with him before he got to his dorm hut, but then I remembered how I'd promised to put his arm in a splint for the night, and didn't move. I just kept saying to myself:

'At least he didn't have a tantrum. At least he kept hold of that temper.'

But I've gone off a bit. The reason I was talking about all this was because the idea of things 'unzipping' carried over from Tommy's elbow to become a running joke among us

about the donations. The idea was that when the time came, you'd be able just to unzip a bit of yourself, a kidney or something would slide out, and you'd hand it over. It wasn't something we found so funny in itself; it was more a way of putting each other off our food. You unzipped your liver, say, and dumped it on someone's plate, that sort of thing. I remember once Gary B., who had this unbelievable appetite, coming back with a third helping of pudding, and virtually the whole table 'unzipping' bits of themselves and piling it all over Gary's bowl, while he went on determinedly stuffing himself.

Tommy never liked it much when the unzipping stuff came up again, but by then the days of his being teased were past and no one connected the joke with him any more. It was just done to get a laugh, to put someone off their dinner - and, I suppose, as some way of acknowledging what was in front of us. And this was my original point. By that time in our lives, we no longer shrank from the subject of donations as we'd have done a year or two earlier; but neither did we think about it very seriously, or discuss it. All that business about 'unzipping', that was typical of the way the whole subject impinged on us when we were thirteen.

So I'd say Miss Lucy had it about right when she said, a couple of years later, that we'd been 'told and not told'. And what's more, now I think about it, I'd say what Miss Lucy said to us that afternoon led to a real shift in our attitudes. It was after that day, jokes about donations faded away, and we started to think properly about things. If anything, the donations went back to being a subject to be avoided, but not in the way it had been when we were younger. This time round it wasn't awkward or embarrassing any more; just sombre and serious.

'It's funny,' Tommy said to me when we were remembering it all again a few years ago. 'None of us stopped to think about how *she* felt, Miss Lucy herself. We never worried if

she'd got into trouble, saying what she did to us. We were so selfish back then. '

'But you can't blame us,' I said. 'We'd been taught to think about each other, but never about the guardians. The idea the guardians had differences between them, that never occurred to us. '

'But we were old enough,' Tommy said. 'By that age, it *should* have occurred to us. But it didn't. We didn't think about poor Miss Lucy at all. Not even after that time, you know, when you saw her. '

I knew straight away what he meant. He was talking about the morning early in our last summer at Hailsham, when I'd stumbled across her up in Room 22. Thinking about it now, I'd say Tommy had a point. After that moment it should have been clear, even to us, how troubled Miss Lucy had become. But as he said, we never considered anything from her viewpoint, and it never occurred to us to say or do anything to support her.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Many of us had turned sixteen by then. It was a morning of brilliant sunshine and we'd all just come down to the courtyard after a lesson in the main house, when I remembered something I'd left in the classroom. So I went back up to the third floor and that's how the thing with Miss Lucy happened.

In those days I had this secret game. When I found myself alone, I'd stop and look for a view - out of a window, say, or through a doorway into a room - any view so long as there were no people in it. I did this so that I could, for a few seconds at least, create the illusion the place wasn't crawling with students, but that instead Hailsham was this quiet, tranquil house where I lived with just five or six others. To make this work, you had to get yourself into a sort of dream, and shut off all the stray noises and voices. Usually you had to be pretty patient too: if, say, you were focusing from a window on one particular bit of the playing field, you could wait ages for those couple of seconds when there wasn't anyone at all in your frame. Anyway, that was what I was doing that morning after I'd fetched whatever it was I'd left in the classroom and come back out onto the third-floor landing.

I was keeping very still near a window looking down onto a section of the courtyard where I'd been standing only moments before. My friends had gone, and the courtyard was steadily emptying, so I was waiting for my trick to work, when I heard behind me what sounded like gas or steam escaping in sharp bursts.

It was a hissing noise that would go on for about ten seconds, pause, then come again. I wasn't alarmed exactly, but since I seemed to be the only person around, I thought I'd better go and investigate.

I went across the landing towards the sound, along the corridor past the room I'd just been in, and down to Room 22, second from the end. The door was partly open, and just as I came up to it, the hissing started up again with a new intensity. I don't know what I expected to discover as I cautiously pushed the door, but I was properly surprised to find Miss Lucy.

Room 22 was hardly used for classes because it was so small and, even on a day like that one, hardly any light got in. The guardians sometimes went in there to mark our work or get on with reading. That morning the room was darker than ever because the blinds had been pulled almost all the way down. There were two tables pushed together for a group to sit around, but Miss Lucy was there alone near the back. I could see several loose sheets of dark, shiny paper scattered over the table in front of her. She herself was leaning over in concentration, forehead very low, arms up on the surface, scrawling furious lines over a page with a pencil. Underneath the heavy black lines I could see neat blue handwriting. As I watched, she went on scrubbing the pencil point over the paper, almost in the way we did shading in Art, except her movements were much more angry, as if she didn't mind gouging right through the sheet. Then I realised, in the same instant, that this was the source of the odd noise, and that what I'd taken for dark shiny paper on the table had also, not long before, been pages of neat handwriting.

She was so lost in what she was doing, it took a while for her to realise I was there. When she looked up with a start, I could see her face was flushed, but there were no traces of tears. She stared at me, then put down her pencil.

'Hello, young lady,' she said, then took a deep breath. 'What can I do for you?'

I think I turned away so I didn't have to look at her or at the papers over the desk. I can't remember if I said very much - if I explained about the noise and how I'd worried

about it being gas. In any case, there was no proper conversation: she didn't want me there and neither did I. I think I made some apology and went out, half expecting her to call me back. But she didn't, and what I remember now is that I went down the staircase burning with shame and resentment. At that moment I wished more than anything that I hadn't seen what I'd just seen, though if you'd asked me to define just what I was so upset about, I wouldn't have been able to explain. Shame, as I say, had a lot to do with it, and also fury, though not exactly at Miss Lucy herself. I was very confused, and that's probably why I didn't say anything about it to my friends until much later.

After that morning I became convinced something else - perhaps something awful - lay around the corner to do with Miss Lucy, and I kept my eyes and ears open for it. But the days passed and I heard nothing. What I didn't know at the time was that something pretty significant *had* happened only a few days after I'd seen her in Room 22 - something between Miss Lucy and Tommy that had left him upset and disorientated. There would have been a time not so much earlier when Tommy and I would have immediately reported to each other any news of this sort; but just around that summer, various things were going on which meant we weren't talking so freely.

That's why I didn't hear about it for so long. Afterwards I could have kicked myself for not guessing, for not seeking Tommy out and getting it out of him. But as I've said, there was a lot going on around then, between Tommy and Ruth, a whole host of other stuff, and I'd put all the changes I'd noticed in him down to that.

It's probably going too far to say Tommy's whole act fell apart that summer, but there were times when I got seriously worried he was turning back into the awkward and changeable figure from several years before. Once, for instance, a few of us were going back from the pavilion towards the dorm huts and found ourselves walking behind Tommy and a couple of

other boys. They were just a few paces ahead, and all of them - Tommy included - looked to be in good form, laughing and shoving each other. In fact, I'd say Laura, who was walking beside me, took her cue from the way the boys were larking about. The thing was, Tommy must have been sitting on the ground earlier, because there was a sizeable chunk of mud stuck on his rugby shirt near the small of his back. He was obviously unaware of it, and I don't think his friends had seen it either or they'd surely have made something of it. Anyway, Laura being Laura shouted out something like: 'Tommy! You got poo-poo on your back! What have you been doing?'

She'd done this in a completely friendly way, and if some of the rest of us made a few noises too, it wasn't anything more than the sort of thing students did the whole time. So it was a complete shock when Tommy came to a dead halt, wheeled round and stared at Laura with a face like thunder. We all stopped too - the boys looking as bewildered as we were - and for a few seconds I thought Tommy was going to blow for the first time in years. But then he abruptly stalked off, leaving us all swapping looks and shrugging.

Nearly as bad was the time I showed him Patricia C.'s calendar. Patricia was two years below us but everyone was in awe of her drawing skills, and her stuff was always sought after at the Art Exchanges. I'd been particularly pleased with the calendar, which I'd managed to get at the last Exchange, because word had been going round about it from weeks before. It wasn't anything like, say, Miss Emily's flappy colour calendars of the English counties. Patricia's calendar was tiny and dumpy, and for each month there was a stunning little pencil sketch of a scene from Hailsham life. I wish I still had it now, especially since in some of the pictures - like the ones for June and for September - you can make out the faces of particular students and guardians. It's one of the things I lost when I left the Cottages, when my mind was elsewhere and I wasn't being so careful what I took

with me - but I'll come to all that in its place. My point now is that Patricia's calendar was a real catch, I was proud of it, and that's why I wanted to show it to Tommy.

I'd spotted him standing in the late afternoon sunshine beside the big sycamore near the South Playing Field, and since my calendar was there in my bag - I'd been showing it off during our music lesson - I'd gone over to him.

He was absorbed in a football match involving some younger boys over in the next field and at this stage his mood seemed just fine, tranquil even. He smiled when I came up to him and we chatted for a minute about nothing in particular. Then I said: 'Tommy, look what I managed to get.' I didn't try to keep the triumph out of my voice, and I may even have gone 'dah-dah!' as I brought it out and handed it to him. When he took the calendar, there was still a smile on his features, but as he flicked through I could see something closing off inside him.

'That Patricia,' I began to say, but I could hear my own voice changing. 'She's so clever ...'

But Tommy was already handing it back to me. Then without another word he marched past me off towards the main house.

This last incident should have given me a clue. If I'd thought about it with half a brain, I should have guessed Tommy's recent moods had something to do with Miss Lucy and his old problems about 'being creative'. But with everything else going on just at that time, I didn't, as I say, think in these terms at all. I suppose I must have assumed those old problems had been left behind with our early teen years, and that only the big issues that now loomed so large could possibly preoccupy any of us.

So what had been going on? Well, for a start, Ruth and Tommy had had a serious bust-up. They'd been a couple for about six months by then; at least, that's how long they'd been 'public' about it - walking around with arms around

each other, that kind of thing. They were respected as a couple because they weren't show-offs. Some others, Sylvia B. and Roger D., for example, could get stomach-churning, and you had to give them a chorus of vomiting noises just to keep them in order. But Ruth and Tommy never did anything gross in front of people, and if sometimes they cuddled or whatever, it felt like they were genuinely doing it for each other, not for an audience.

Looking back now, I can see we were pretty confused about this whole area around sex. That's hardly surprising, I suppose, given we were barely sixteen. But what added to the confusion - I can see it more clearly now - was the fact that the guardians were themselves confused. On the one hand we had, say, Miss Emily's talks, when she'd tell us how important it was not to be ashamed of our bodies, to 'respect our physical needs', how sex was 'a very beautiful gift' as long as both people really wanted it. But when it came down to it, the guardians made it more or less impossible for any of us actually to do much without breaking rules. We couldn't visit the boys' dorms after nine o'clock, they couldn't visit ours. The classrooms were all officially 'out of bounds' in the evenings, as were the areas behind the sheds and the pavilion. And you didn't want to do it in the fields even when it was warm enough, because you'd almost certainly discover afterwards you'd had an audience watching from the house passing around binoculars. In other words, for all the talk of sex being beautiful, we had the distinct impression we'd be in trouble if the guardians caught us at it.

I say this, but the only real case I personally knew of like that was when Jenny C. and Rob D. got interrupted in Room 14. They were doing it after lunch, right there over one of the desks, and Mr Jack had come in to get something. According to Jenny, Mr Jack had turned red and gone right out again, but they'd been put off and had stopped. They'd more or less dressed themselves when Mr Jack came back, just as

though for the first time, and pretended to be surprised and shocked.

'It's very clear to me what you've been doing and it's not appropriate,' he'd said, and told them both to go and see Miss Emily. But once they'd got to Miss Emily's office, she'd told them she was on her way to an important meeting and didn't have time to talk to them.

'But you know you shouldn't have been doing whatever you were doing, and I don't expect you'll do it again,' she'd said, before rushing out with her folders.

Gay sex, incidentally, was something we were even more confused about. For some reason, we called it 'umbrella sex'; if you fancied someone your own sex, you were 'an umbrella'. I don't know how it was where you were, but at Hailsham we definitely weren't at all kind towards any signs of gay stuff. The boys especially could do the cruellest things. According to Ruth this was because quite a few of them had done things with each other when they'd been younger, before they'd realised what they were doing. So now they were ridiculously tense about it. I don't know if she was right, but for sure, accusing someone of 'getting all umbrella' could easily end in a fight.

When we discussed all these things - as we did endlessly back then - we couldn't decide whether or not the guardians wanted us to have sex or not. Some people thought they did, but that we kept trying to do it at all the wrong times. Hannah had the theory that it was their duty to make us have sex because otherwise we wouldn't be good donors later on. According to her, things like your kidneys and pancreas didn't work properly unless you kept having sex. Someone else said what we had to remember was that the guardians were 'normals'. That's why they were so odd about it; for them, sex was for when you wanted babies, and even though they knew, intellectually, that *we* couldn't have babies, they

still felt uneasy about us doing it because deep down they couldn't quite believe we wouldn't end up with babies.

Annette B. had another theory: that the guardians were uncomfortable about us having sex with each other because *they'd* then want to have sex with us. Mr Chris in particular, she said, looked at us girls in that way. Laura said that what Annette really meant was *she* wanted to have sex with Mr Chris. We all cracked up at this because the idea of having sex with Mr Chris seemed absurd, as well as completely sick-making.

The theory I think came closest was the one put forward by Ruth. 'They're telling us about sex for after we leave Hailsham,' she said. 'They want us to do it properly, with someone we like and without getting diseases. But they really mean it for after we leave. They don't want us doing it here, because it's too much hassle for them.'

My guess, anyway, is that there wasn't nearly as much sex going on as people made out. A lot of snogging and touching up, maybe; and couples *hinting* they were having proper sex. But looking back, I wonder how much of it there really was. If everyone who claimed to be doing it really had been, then that's all you'd have seen when you walked about Hailsham - couples going at it left, right and centre.

What I remember is that there was this discreet agreement among us all not to quiz each other too much about our claims. If, say, Hannah rolled her eyes when you were discussing another girl and murmured: 'Virgin' - meaning 'Of course *we're* not, but she is, so what can you expect?' - then it definitely wasn't on to ask her: 'Who did you do it with? When? Where?' No, you just nodded knowingly. It was like there was some parallel universe we all vanished off to where we had all this sex.

I must have seen at the time how all these claims being made around me didn't add up. All the same, as that summer approached, I began to feel more and more the odd one out. In

a way, sex had got like 'being creative' had been a few years earlier. It felt like if you hadn't done it yet, you ought to, and quickly. And in my case, the whole thing was made more complicated by the fact that two of the girls I was closest to definitely *had* done it. Laura with Rob D., even though they'd never been a proper couple. And Ruth with Tommy.

For all that, I'd been holding it off for ages, repeating to myself Miss Emily's advice - 'If you can't find someone with whom you truly wish to share this experience, then *don't!*' But around the spring of the year I'm talking about now, I started to think I wouldn't mind having sex with a boy. Not just to see what it was like, but also because it occurred to me I needed to get familiar with sex, and it would be just as well to practise first with a boy I didn't care about too much. Then later on, if I was with someone special, I'd have more chance of doing everything right. What I mean is, if Miss Emily was correct and sex was this really big deal between people, then I didn't want to be doing it for the first time when it was really important how well it went.

So I had my eye on Harry C. I chose him for a number of reasons. First, I knew he'd definitely done it before, with Sharon D. Next, I didn't fancy him that much, but I certainly didn't find him sick-making. Also, he was quiet and decent, so unlikely to go round gossiping afterwards if it was a complete disaster. And he'd hinted a few times he'd like to have sex with me. Okay, a lot of the boys were making flirty noises in those days, but it was clear by then what was a real proposition and what was the usual boys' stuff.

So I'd chosen Harry, and I only delayed those couple of months because I wanted to make sure I'd be all right physically. Miss Emily had told us it could be painful and a big failure if you didn't get wet enough and this was my one real worry. It wasn't being ripped apart down there, which we often joked about, and was the secret fear of quite a few

girls. I kept thinking, as long as I got wet quick enough, there'd be no problem, and I did it a lot on my own just to make sure.

I realise this may sound like I was getting obsessive, but I remember I also spent a lot of time re-reading passages from books where people had sex, going over the lines again and again, trying to tease out clues. The trouble was, the books we had at Hailsham weren't at all helpful. We had a lot of nineteenth-century stuff by Thomas Hardy and people like that, which was more or less useless. Some modern books, by people like Edna O'Brien and Margaret Drabble, had some sex in them, but it wasn't ever very clear what was happening because the authors always assumed you'd already had a lot of sex before and there was no need to go into details. So I was having a frustrating time with the books, and the videos weren't much better. We'd got a video player in the billiards room a couple of years earlier, and by that spring had built up quite a good collection of movies. A lot of them had sex in them, but most scenes would end just as the sex was starting up, or else you'd only see their faces and their backs. And when there *was* a useful scene, it was difficult to see it more than fleetingly because there were usually twenty others in the room watching with you. We'd evolved this system where we called for particular favourite scenes to be played again - like, for instance, the moment the American jumps over the barbed wire on his bike in *The Great Escape*. There'd be a chant of: 'Rewind! Rewind!' until someone got the remote and we'd see the portion again, sometimes three, four times. But I could hardly, by myself, start shouting for rewinds just to see sex scenes again.

So I kept delaying week by week, while I went on preparing, until the summer came and I decided I was as ready as I'd ever be. By then, I was even feeling reasonably confident about it, and began dropping hints to Harry. Everything was going fine and according to plan, when Ruth and Tommy split up and it all got confused.

CHAPTER NINE

What happened was that a few days after they split, I was in the Art Room with some other girls, working on a still life. I remember it being stifling that day, even though we had the fan rattling behind us. We were using charcoal, and because someone had commandeered all the easels, we were having to work with our boards propped up on our laps. I was sitting beside Cynthia E., and we'd just been chatting and complaining about the heat. Then somehow we'd got onto the subject of boys, and she'd said, not looking up from her work:

'And Tommy. I knew it wouldn't last with Ruth. Well, I suppose you're the natural successor.'

She'd said it in a throwaway manner. But Cynthia was a perceptive person, and the fact that she wasn't part of our group just gave her remark more weight. What I mean is, I couldn't help thinking she represented what anyone with any distance on the subject would think. After all, I'd been Tommy's friend for years until all this couples stuff had come up. It was perfectly possible that to someone on the outside, I'd look like Ruth's 'natural successor'. I just let it go, though, and Cynthia, who wasn't trying to make any big point, said nothing else about it.

Then maybe a day or two later, I was coming out of the pavilion with Hannah when she suddenly nudged me and nodded towards a group of boys over on the North Playing Field.

'Look,' she said quietly. 'Tommy. Sitting by himself.'

I shrugged, as though to say: 'So what?'. And that's all there was to it. But afterwards I found myself thinking a lot about it. Maybe all Hannah had meant to do was point out

how Tommy, since splitting with Ruth, looked a bit of a spare part. But I couldn't quite buy this; I knew Hannah too well. The way she'd nudged me and lowered her voice had made it all too obvious she too was expressing some assumption, probably doing the rounds, about me being the 'natural successor'.

All this did, as I say, put me in a bit of a confusion, because until then I'd been all set on my Harry plan. In fact, looking back now, I'm sure I *would* have had sex with Harry if it hadn't been for this 'natural successor' business. I'd had it all sorted, and my preparations had gone well. And I still think Harry was a good choice for that stage in my life. I think he would have been considerate and gentle, and have understood what I was wanting from him.

I saw Harry fleetingly a couple of years ago at the recovery centre in Wiltshire. He was being brought in after a donation. I wasn't in the best of moods because my own donor had just completed the night before. No one was blaming me for that - it had been a particularly untidy operation - but I wasn't feeling great all the same. I'd been up most of the night, sorting all the arrangements, and I was in the front reception getting ready to leave when I saw Harry coming in. He was in a wheelchair - because he was so weak, I found out later, not because he couldn't actually walk - and I'm not sure he recognised me when I went up and said hello. I suppose there's no reason I should have any special place in his memory. We'd never had much to do with each other apart from that one time. To him, if he remembered me at all, I'd just be this daft girl who came up to him once, asked if he wanted sex, then backed off. He must have been pretty mature for his age, because he didn't get annoyed or go round telling people I was a tease, or any of that. So when I saw him being brought in that day, I felt grateful to him and wished I was his carer. I looked about, but whoever *was* his carer wasn't even around. The orderlies were impatient to get him to his room, so I didn't talk with him long. I just said hello, that I hoped he'd feel better soon, and he smiled

tiredly. When I mentioned Hailsham he did a thumbs-up, but I could tell he didn't recognise me. Maybe later, when he wasn't so tired, or when the medication wasn't so strong, he'd have tried to place me and remembered.

Anyway, I was talking about back then: about how after Ruth and Tommy split, all my plans got confused. Looking at it now, I feel a bit sorry for Harry. After all the hints I'd been dropping the previous week, there I was, suddenly whispering stuff to put him off. I suppose I must have assumed he was raring to go, that I had my work cut out just to hold him off. Because whenever I saw him, I'd always get something in quick, then rush off before he could say anything back. It was only much later, when I thought about it, it occurred to me he might not have had sex on his mind at all. For all I know, he might have been happy to forget the whole thing, except that every time he saw me, along a corridor or in the grounds, I'd come up and whisper some excuse why I didn't want sex with him just then. It must have looked pretty daft from his side, and if he hadn't been such a decent type, I'd have been a laughing stock in no time. Well, anyway, this era of putting Harry off lasted maybe a couple of weeks, and then came Ruth's request.

That summer, right up until the warm weather faded, we developed this odd way of listening to music together in the fields. Walkmans had started appearing at Hailsham since the previous year's Sales and by that summer there were at least six of them in circulation. The craze was for several people to sit on the grass around a single Walkman, passing the headset around. Okay, it sounds a stupid way to listen to music, but it created a really good feeling. You listened for maybe twenty seconds, took off the headset, passed it on. After a while, provided you kept the same tape going over and over, it was surprising how close it was to having heard all of it by yourself. As I say, the craze really took off that summer, and during the lunch breaks you'd see all these clusters of students lying about the grass around the

Walkmans. The guardians weren't too keen, saying we'd spread ear infections, but they let us carry on. I can't remember that last summer without thinking about those afternoons around the Walkmans. Someone would wander up and ask: 'What's the sound?' and if they liked the answer, they'd sit down on the grass and wait their turn. There was almost always a good atmosphere around these sessions and I don't remember anyone being refused a share of the headset.

Anyway, that's what I was up to with a few other girls when Ruth came up to ask if we could have a talk. I could tell it was something important, so I left my other friends and the two of us walked off, all the way to our dorm hut. When we got to our room, I sat down on Ruth's bed, close to the window - the sun had warmed the blanket - and she sat on mine over by the back wall. There was a bluebottle buzzing around, and for a minute we had a laugh playing 'bluebottle tennis', throwing our hands about to make the demented creature go from one to the other of us. Then it found its way out of the window, and Ruth said:

'I want me and Tommy to get back together again. Kathy, will you help?' Then she asked: 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing. I was just a bit surprised, after what's happened. Of course I'll help.'

'I haven't told anybody else about wanting to get back with Tommy. Not even Hannah. You're the only one I trust.'

'What do you want me to do?'

'Just talk to him. You've always had this way with him. He'll listen to you. And he'll know you're not bullshitting about me.'

For a moment we sat there swinging our feet under our beds.

'It's really good you're telling me this,' I said eventually. 'I probably am the best person. Talking to Tommy

and all that. '

'What I want is for us to make a fresh start. We're about evens now, we've both done daft things just to hurt each other, but it's enough now. Martha bloody H., I ask you! Maybe he did it just to give me a good laugh. Well you can tell him he succeeded, and the scores are all even again. It's time we grew up and started afresh. I know you can reason with him, Kathy. You'll deal with it the best way possible. Then if he's still not prepared to be sensible, I'll know there's no point carrying on with him. '

I shrugged. 'As you say, Tommy and I, we've always been able to talk. '

'Yeah, and he really respects you. I know because he's often talked about it. How you've got guts and how you always do what you say you're going to do. He told me once if he was in a corner, he'd rather have you backing him than any of the boys.' She did a quick laugh. 'Now you've got to admit, that's a *real* compliment. So you see, it's got to be you to our rescue. Tommy and I were made for each other and he'll listen to you. You'll do it for us, won't you, Kathy? '

I didn't say anything for a moment. Then I asked: 'Ruth, are you serious about Tommy? I mean, if I do persuade him, and you get back together, you won't hurt him again? '

Ruth gave an impatient sigh. 'Of course I'm serious. We're adults now. Soon we'll be leaving Hailsham. It's not a game any more. '

'Okay. I'll talk to him. Like you say, we'll be leaving here soon. We can't afford to waste time. '

After that, I remember us sitting on those beds, talking for some time. Ruth wanted to go over everything again and again: how stupid he was being, why they were really suited to each other, how differently they'd do things next time round, how they'd keep much more private, how they'd have sex in better places at better times. We talked about it all and

she wanted my advice on everything. Then at one point, I was looking out of the window towards the hills in the distance, when I was startled to feel Ruth, suddenly beside me, squeeze my shoulders.

‘Kathy, I knew we could depend on you,’ she said. ‘Tommy’s right. You’re just the person to have when you’re in a corner.’

What with one thing and another, I didn’t get a chance to talk to Tommy for the next few days. Then one lunch-time I spotted him on the edge of the South Playing Field practising with his football. He’d been having a kickabout earlier with two other boys, but now he was alone, juggling the ball about in the air. I went over and sat down on the grass behind him, putting my back against a fence post. This couldn’t have been long after that time I’d shown him Patricia C.’s calendar and he’d marched off, because I remember we weren’t sure how we stood with each other. He went on with his ball-juggling, scowling with concentration - knee, foot, head, foot - while I sat there picking away at clovers and gazing at the woods in the distance that we’d once been so frightened of. In the end I decided to break the deadlock and said:

‘Tommy, let’s talk now. There’s something I want to talk to you about.’

As soon as I said this, he let the ball roll away and came to sit down beside me. It was typical of Tommy that once he knew I was willing to talk, there was suddenly no trace left of any sulkiness; just a kind of grateful eagerness that reminded me of the way we were back in the Juniors when a guardian who’d been telling us off went back to being normal. He was panting a bit, and though I knew this was from the football, it added to his overall impression of eagerness. In other words, before we’d said anything, he’d already got my back up. Then when I said to him: ‘Tommy, I can tell. You haven’t been too happy lately,’ he said: ‘What do you mean? I’m perfectly happy. I really am.’ And he did a big beam,

followed by this hearty laugh. That was what did it. Years later, when I saw a shadow of it every now and then, I'd just smile. But back then, it really used to get to me. If Tommy happened to say to you: 'I'm really upset about it,' he'd have to put on a long, downcast face, then and there, to back up his words. I don't mean he did this ironically. He actually thought he'd be more convincing. So now, to prove he was happy, here he was, trying to sparkle with bonhomie. As I say, there would come a time when I'd think this was sweet; but that summer all I could see was that it advertised what a child he still was, and how easily you could take advantage of him. I didn't know much then about the world that awaited us beyond Hailsham, but I'd guessed we'd need all our wits about us, and when Tommy did anything like this, I felt something close to panic. Until that afternoon I'd always let it go - it always seemed too difficult to explain - but this time I burst out, saying:

'Tommy, you look so *stupid*, laughing like that! If you want to pretend you're happy, you don't do it that way! Just take it from me, you don't do it that way! You definitely don't! Look, you've got to grow up. And you've got to get yourself back on track. Everything's been falling apart for you just lately, and we both know why.'

Tommy was looking puzzled. When he was sure I'd finished, he said: 'You're right. Things have been falling apart for me. But I don't see what you mean, Kath. What do you mean, we both know? I don't see how you could know. I haven't told anyone.'

'Obviously I don't have all the details. But we all know about you splitting with Ruth.'

Tommy still looked puzzled. Finally he did another little laugh, but this time it was a real one. 'I see what you mean,' he mumbled, then paused a moment to think something over. 'To be honest, Kath,' he said eventually, 'that's not really what's bothering me. It's really something else

altogether. I just keep thinking about it all the time. About Miss Lucy. ’

And that was how I came to hear about it, about what had happened between Tommy and Miss Lucy at the start of that summer. Later, when I’d had time to think it over, I worked out it must have happened no more than a few days after the morning I’d seen Miss Lucy up in Room 22 scrawling over her paperwork. And like I said, I felt like kicking myself I hadn’t found out from him earlier.

It had been in the afternoon near the ‘dead hour’ – when the lessons were finished but there was still some time to go until supper. Tommy had seen Miss Lucy coming out of the main house, her arms loaded with flipcharts and box files, and because it looked like she’d drop something any moment, he’d run over and offered to help.

‘Well, she gave me a few things to carry and said we were headed back to her study with it all. Even between the two of us there was too much and I dropped a couple of things on the way. Then when we were coming up to the Orangery, she suddenly stopped, and I thought she’d dropped something else. But she was looking at me, like *this*, straight in the face, all serious. Then she says we’ve got to have a talk, a good talk. I say fine, and so we go into the Orangery, into her study, put all the stuff down. And she tells me to sit down, and I end up exactly where I was the last time, you know, that time years ago. And I can tell she’s remembering that time as well, because she starts talking about it like it was only the day before. No explanations, nothing, she just starts off saying something like: “Tommy, I made a mistake, when I said what I did to you. And I should have put you right about it long before now.” Then she’s saying I should forget everything she told me before. That she’d done me a big disservice telling me not to worry about being creative. That the other guardians had been right all along, and there was no excuse for my art being so rubbish ...’

‘Hold on, Tommy. Did she actually say your art was “rubbish”?’

‘If it wasn’t “rubbish” it was something like it. Negligible. That might have been it. Or incompetent. She might as well have said rubbish. She said she was sorry she’d told me what she had the last time because if she hadn’t, I might have sorted it all by now.’

‘What were you saying through all this?’

‘I didn’t know *what* to say. In the end, she actually asked. She said: “Tommy, what are you thinking?” So I said I wasn’t sure but that she shouldn’t worry either way because I was all right now. And she said, no, I wasn’t all right. My art was rubbish, and that was partly her fault for telling me what she had. And I said to her, but what does it matter? I’m all right now, no one laughs at me about that any more. But she keeps shaking her head saying: “It does matter. I shouldn’t have said what I did.” So it occurs to me she’s talking about later, you know, about after we leave here. So I say: “But I’ll be all right, Miss. I’m really fit, I know how to look after myself. When it’s time for donations, I’ll be able to do it really well.” When I said this, she starts shaking her head, shaking it really hard so I’m worried she’ll get dizzy. Then she says: “Listen, Tommy, your art, it *is* important. And not just because it’s evidence. But for your own sake. You’ll get a lot from it, just for yourself.”’

‘Hold on. What did she mean, “evidence”?’

‘I don’t know. But she definitely said that. She said our art was important, and “not just because it’s evidence”. God knows what she meant. I did actually ask her, when she said that. I said I didn’t understand what she was telling me, and was it something to do with Madame and her gallery? And she did a big sigh and said: “Madame’s gallery, yes, that’s important. Much more important than I once thought. I see that now.” Then she said: “Look, there are

all kinds of things you don't understand, Tommy, and I can't tell you about them. Things about Hailsham, about your place in the wider world, all kinds of things. But perhaps one day, you'll try and find out. They won't make it easy for you, but if you want to, really want to, you might find out." She started shaking her head again after that, though not as bad as before, and she says: "But why should you be any different? The students who leave here, they never find out much. Why should you be any different?" I didn't know what she was talking about, so I just said again: "I'll be all right, Miss." She was quiet for a time, then she suddenly stood up and kind of bent over me and hugged me. Not in a sexy way. More like they used to do when we were little. I just kept as still as possible. Then she stood back and said again she was sorry for what she'd told me before. And that it wasn't too late, I should start straight away, making up the lost time. I don't think I said anything, and she looked at me and I thought she'd hug me again. But instead she said: "Just do it for my sake, Tommy." I told her I'd do my best, because by then I just wanted out of there. I was probably bright scarlet, what with her hugging me and everything. I mean, it's not the same, is it, now we've got bigger.'

Until this point I'd been so engrossed in Tommy's story, I'd forgotten my reason for having this talk with him. But this reference to our getting 'bigger' reminded me of my original mission.

'Look, Tommy,' I said, 'we'll have to talk this over carefully soon. It's really interesting and I can see how it must have made you miserable. But either way, you're going to have to pull yourself together a bit more. We're going to be leaving here this summer. You've got to get yourself sorted again, and there's one thing you can straighten out right now. Ruth told me she's prepared to call it quits and have you get back with her again. I think that's a good chance for you. Don't mess it up.'

He was quiet for a few seconds, then said: 'I don't know, Kath. There are all these other things to think about.'

'Tommy, just listen. You're really lucky. Of all the people here, you've got Ruth fancying you. After we leave, if you're with her, you won't have to worry. She's the best, you'll be fine so long as you're with her. She's saying she wants a fresh start. So don't blow it.'

I waited but Tommy gave no response, and again I felt something like panic coming over me. I leaned forward and said: 'Look, you fool, you're not going to get many more chances. Don't you realise, we won't be here together like this much longer?'

To my surprise Tommy's response, when it came, was calm and considered - the side of Tommy that was to emerge more and more in the years ahead.

'I do realise that, Kath. That's exactly why I can't rush back into it with Ruth. We've got to think about the next move really carefully.' Then he sighed and looked right at me. 'Like you say, Kath. We're going to be leaving here soon. It's not like a game any more. We've got to think carefully.'

I was suddenly lost for what to say and just sat there tugging away at the clovers. I could feel his eyes on me, but I didn't look up. We might have gone on that way for a while longer, except we were interrupted. I think the boys he'd been playing football with earlier came back, or maybe it was some students strolling by who came and sat down with us. Anyway, our little heart-to-heart was at an end and I came away feeling I hadn't done what I'd set out to do - that I'd somehow let Ruth down.

I never got to assess what kind of impact my talk with Tommy had had, because it was the very next day the news broke. It was midway through the morning and we'd been in yet another

Culture Briefing. These were classes where we had to role play various people we'd find out there - waiters in cafés, policemen and so on. The sessions always got us excited and worried all at the same time, so we were pretty keyed up anyway. Then at the end of the lesson, as we were filing out, Charlotte F. came rushing into the room and the news about Miss Lucy leaving Hailsham spread through us in an instant. Mr Chris, who'd been taking the class and who must have known all along, shuffled off guiltily before we could ask him anything. At first we weren't sure if Charlotte was just reporting a rumour, but the more she told us, the clearer it became this was for real. Earlier in the morning, one of the other Senior classes had gone into Room 12 expecting Music Appreciation with Miss Lucy. But Miss Emily had been there instead and she'd told them Miss Lucy couldn't come just at that moment, so she would take the class. For the next twenty minutes or so everything had gone quite normally. Then suddenly - right in mid-sentence, apparently - Miss Emily had broken off from talking about Beethoven and announced that Miss Lucy had left Hailsham and wouldn't be returning. That class had finished several minutes early - Miss Emily had rushed off with a preoccupied frown - and the word had started to go round as soon as the students had come out.

I immediately set off to look for Tommy, because I desperately wanted him to hear it first from me. But when I stepped into the courtyard, I saw I was too late. There was Tommy, over on the far side, on the edge of a circle of boys, nodding to what was being said. The other boys were animated, maybe excited even, but Tommy's eyes looked empty. That very evening, Tommy and Ruth got back together again, and I remember Ruth finding me a few days later to thank me for 'sorting it all out so well'. I told her I probably hadn't helped much, but she was having none of that. I was most definitely in her good books. And that was more or less the way things stayed throughout our last days at Hailsham.

PART TWO

CHAPTER TEN

Sometimes I'll be driving on a long weaving road across marshland, or maybe past rows of furrowed fields, the sky big and grey and never changing mile after mile, and I find I'm thinking about my essay, the one I was supposed to be writing back then, when we were at the Cottages. The guardians had talked to us about our essays on and off throughout that last summer, trying to help each of us choose a topic that would absorb us properly for anything up to two years. But somehow - maybe we could see something in the guardians' manner - no one really believed the essays were that important, and among ourselves we hardly discussed the matter. I remember when I went in to tell Miss Emily my chosen topic was Victorian novels, I hadn't really thought about it much and I could see she knew it. But she just gave me one of her searching stares and said nothing more.

Once we got to the Cottages, though, the essays took on a new importance. In our first days there, and for some of us a lot longer, it was like we were each clinging to our essay, this last task from Hailsham, like it was a farewell gift from the guardians. Over time, they would fade from our minds, but for a while those essays helped keep us afloat in our new surroundings.

When I think about my essay today, what I do is go over it in some detail: I may think of a completely new approach I could have taken, or about different writers and books I could have focused on. I might be having coffee in a service station, staring at the motorway through the big windows, and my essay will pop into my head for no reason. Then I quite enjoy sitting there, going through it all again. Just lately, I've even toyed with the idea of going back and working on it, once I'm not a carer any more and I've got the time. But in the end, I suppose I'm not really serious about it. It's

just a bit of nostalgia to pass the time. I think about the essay the same way I might a rounders match at Hailsham I did particularly well in, or else an argument from long ago where I can now think of all the clever things I should have said. It's at that sort of level - daydream stuff. But as I say, that's not how it was when we first got to the Cottages.

Eight of us who left Hailsham that summer ended up at the Cottages. Others went to the White Mansion in the Welsh hills, or to Poplar Farm in Dorset. We didn't know then that all these places had only the most tenuous links with Hailsham. We arrived at the Cottages expecting a version of Hailsham for older students, and I suppose that was the way we continued to see them for some time. We certainly didn't think much about our lives beyond the Cottages, or about who ran them, or how they fitted into the larger world. None of us thought like that in those days.

The Cottages were the remains of a farm that had gone out of business years before. There was an old farmhouse, and around it, barns, outhouses, stables all converted for us to live in. There were other buildings, usually the outlying ones, that were virtually falling down, which we couldn't use for much, but for which we felt in some vague way responsible - mainly on account of Keffer's. He was this grumpy old guy who turned up two or three times a week in his muddy van to look the place over. He didn't like to talk to us much, and the way he went round sighing and shaking his head disgustingly implied we weren't doing nearly enough to keep the place up. But it was never clear what more he wanted us to do. He'd shown us a list of chores when we'd first arrived, and the students who were already there - 'the veterans', as Hannah called them - had long since worked out a rota which we kept to conscientiously. There really wasn't much else we could do other than report leaking gutters and mop up after floods.

The old farmhouse - the heart of the Cottages - had a number of fireplaces where we could burn the split logs

stacked in the outer barns. Otherwise we had to make do with big boxy heaters. The problem with these was they worked on gas canisters, and unless it was really cold, Keffers wouldn't bring many in. We kept asking him to leave a big supply with us, but he'd shake his head gloomily, like we were bound to use them up frivolously or else cause an explosion. So I remember a lot of the time, outside the summer months, being chilly. You went around with two, even three jumpers on, and your jeans felt cold and stiff. We sometimes kept our Wellingtons on the whole day, leaving trails of mud and damp through the rooms. Keffers, observing this, would again shake his head, but when we asked him what else we were supposed to do, the floors being in the state they were, he'd make no reply.

I'm making it sound pretty bad, but none of us minded the discomforts one bit - it was all part of the excitement of being at the Cottages. If we were honest, though, particularly near the beginning, most of us would have admitted missing the guardians. A few of us, for a time, even tried to think of Keffers as a sort of guardian, but he was having none of it. You went up to greet him when he arrived in his van and he'd stare at you like you were mad. But this was one thing we'd been told over and over: that after Hailsham there'd be no more guardians, so we'd have to look after each other. And by and large, I'd say Hailsham prepared us well on that score.

Most of the students I was close to at Hailsham ended up at the Cottages that summer. Cynthia E. - the girl who'd said about me being Ruth's 'natural successor' that time in the Art Room - I wouldn't have minded her, but she went to Dorset with the rest of her crowd. And Harry, the boy I'd nearly had sex with, I heard he went to Wales. But all our gang had stayed together. And if we ever missed the others, we could tell ourselves there was nothing stopping us going to visit them. For all our map lessons with Miss Emily, we had no real idea at that point about distances and how easy or hard it

was to visit a particular place. We'd talk about getting lifts from the veterans when they were going on their trips, or else how in time we'd learn to drive ourselves and then we'd be able to see them whenever we pleased.

Of course, in practice, especially during the first months, we rarely stepped beyond the confines of the Cottages. We didn't even walk about the surrounding countryside or wander into the nearby village. I don't think we were afraid exactly. We all knew no one would stop us if we wandered off, provided we were back by the day and the time we entered into Keffers's ledgerbook. That summer we arrived, we were constantly seeing veterans packing their bags and rucksacks and going off for two or three days at a time with what seemed to us scary nonchalance. We'd watched them with astonishment, wondering if by the following summer we'd be doing the same. Of course, we were, but in those early days, it didn't seem possible. You have to remember that until that point we'd never been beyond the grounds of Hailsham, and we were just bewildered. If you'd told me then that within a year, I'd not only develop a habit of taking long solitary walks, but that I'd start learning to drive a car, I'd have thought you were mad.

Even Ruth looked daunted that sunny day the minibus dropped us in front of the farmhouse, circled round the little pond and disappeared up the slope. We could see hills in the distance that reminded us of the ones in the distance at Hailsham, but they seemed to us oddly crooked, like when you draw a picture of a friend and it's almost right but not quite, and the face on the sheet gives you the creeps. But at least it was the summer, not the way the Cottages would get a few months on, with all the puddles frozen over and the rough ground frosted bone hard. The place looked beautiful and cosy, with overgrown grass everywhere - a novelty to us. We stood together in a huddle, the eight of us, and watched Keffers go in and out of the farmhouse, expecting him to address us at any moment. But he didn't, and all we could

catch was the odd irritated mutter about the students who already lived there. Once, as he went to get something from his van, he gave us a moody glance, then returned to the farmhouse and closed the door behind him.

Before too long, though, the veterans, who'd been having a bit of fun watching us being pathetic - we were to do much the same the following summer - came out and took us in hand. In fact, looking back, I see they really went out of their way helping us settle in. Even so, those first weeks were strange and we were glad we had each other. We'd always move about together and seemed to spend large parts of the day awkwardly standing outside the farmhouse, not knowing what else to do.

It's funny now recalling the way it was at the beginning, because when I think of those two years at the Cottages, that scared, bewildered start doesn't seem to go with any of the rest of it. If someone mentions the Cottages today, I think of easy-going days drifting in and out of each other's rooms, the languid way the afternoon would fold into evening then into night. I think of my pile of old paperbacks, their pages gone wobbly, like they'd once belonged to the sea. I think about how I read them, lying on my front in the grass on warm afternoons, my hair - which I was growing long then - always falling across my vision. I think about the mornings waking up in my room at the top of the Black Barn to the voices of students outside in the field, arguing about poetry or philosophy; or the long winters, the breakfasts in steamed-up kitchens, meandering discussions around the table about Kafka or Picasso. It was always stuff like that at breakfast; never who you'd had sex with the night before, or why Larry and Helen weren't talking to each other any more.

But then again, when I think about it, there's a sense in which that picture of us on that first day, huddled together in front of the farmhouse, isn't so incongruous after all. Because maybe, in a way, we didn't leave it behind nearly as much as we might once have thought. Because somewhere

underneath, a part of us stayed like that: fearful of the world around us, and - no matter how much we despised ourselves for it - unable quite to let each other go.

The veterans, who of course knew nothing about the history of Tommy and Ruth's relationship, treated them as a long-established couple, and this seemed to please Ruth no end. For the first weeks after we arrived, she made a big deal of it, always putting her arm around Tommy, sometimes snogging him in the corner of a room while other people were still about. Well, this kind of thing might have been fine at Hailsham, but looked immature at the Cottages. The veteran couples never did anything showy in public, going about in a sensible sort of way, like a mother and father might do in a normal family.

There was, incidentally, something I noticed about these veteran couples at the Cottages - something Ruth, for all her close study of them, failed to spot - and this was how so many of their mannerisms were copied from the television. It first came to me watching this couple, Susie and Greg - probably the oldest students at the Cottages and generally thought to be 'in charge' of the place. There was this particular thing Susie did whenever Greg set off on one of his speeches about Proust or whoever: she'd smile at the rest of us, roll her eyes, and mouth very emphatically, but only just audibly: 'Gawd help us.' Television at Hailsham had been pretty restricted, and at the Cottages too - though there was nothing to stop us watching all day - no one was very keen on it. But there was an old set in the farmhouse and another in the Black Barn, and I'd watch every now and then. That's how I realised that this 'Gawd help us' stuff came from an American series, one of those with an audience laughing along at everything anyone said or did. There was a character - a large woman who lived next door to the main characters - who did exactly what Susie did, so when her husband went off on a big spiel, the audience would be waiting for her to roll her eyes and say 'Gawd help us' so

they could burst out with this huge laugh. Once I'd spotted this, I began to notice all kinds of other things the veteran couples had taken from TV programmes: the way they gestured to each other, sat together on sofas, even the way they argued and stormed out of rooms.

Anyway, my point is, it wasn't long before Ruth realised the way she'd been carrying on with Tommy was all wrong for the Cottages, and she set about changing how they did things in front of people. And there was in particular this one gesture Ruth picked up from the veterans. Back at Hailsham, if a couple were parting, even for a few minutes, it had been an excuse for big embraces and snogging. At the Cottages, though, when a couple were saying goodbye to each other, there'd be hardly any words, never mind embraces or kisses. Instead, you slapped your partner's arm near the elbow, lightly with the back of your knuckles, the way you might do to attract someone's attention. Usually the girl did it to the boy, just as they were moving apart. This custom had faded out by the winter, but when we arrived, it was what was going on and Ruth was soon doing it to Tommy. Mind you, at first, Tommy didn't have a clue what was going on, and would turn abruptly to Ruth and go: 'What?', so that she'd have to glare furiously at him, like they were in a play and he'd forgotten his lines. I suppose she eventually had a word with him, because after a week or so they were managing to do it right, more or less exactly like the veteran couples.

I'd not actually seen the slap on the elbow on the television, but I was pretty sure that's where the idea had come from, and just as sure Ruth hadn't realised it. That was why, that afternoon I was reading *Daniel Deronda* on the grass and Ruth was being irritating, I decided it was time someone pointed it out to her.

It was nearly autumn and starting to get chilly. The veterans were spending more time indoors and generally going back to whatever routines they'd had before the summer. But those of

us who'd arrived from Hailsham kept sitting outside on the uncut grass - wanting to keep going for as long as possible the only routine we'd got used to. Even so, by that particular afternoon, there were maybe only three or four apart from me reading in the field, and since I'd gone out of my way to find a quiet corner to myself, I'm pretty sure what happened between me and Ruth wasn't overheard.

I was lying on a piece of old tarpaulin reading, as I say, *Daniel Deronda*, when Ruth came wandering over and sat down beside me. She studied the cover of my book and nodded to herself. Then after about a minute, just as I knew she would, she began to outline to me the plot of *Daniel Deronda*. Until that point, I'd been in a perfectly okay mood, and had been pleased to see Ruth, but now I was irritated. She'd done this to me a couple of times before, and I'd seen her doing it to others. For one thing, there was the manner she put on: a kind of nonchalant but sincere one as though she expected people to be really grateful for her assistance. Okay, even at the time, I was vaguely aware what was behind it. In those early months, we'd somehow developed this idea that how well you were settling in at the Cottages - how well you were *coping* - was somehow reflected by how many books you'd read. It sounds odd, but there you are, it was just something that developed between us, the ones who'd arrived from Hailsham. The whole notion was kept deliberately hazy - in fact, it was pretty reminiscent of the way we'd dealt with sex at Hailsham. You could go around implying you'd read all kinds of things, nodding knowingly when someone mentioned, say, *War and Peace*, and the understanding was that no one would scrutinise your claim too rationally. You have to remember, since we'd been in each other's company constantly since arriving at the Cottages, it wasn't possible for any of us to have read *War and Peace* without the rest noticing. But just like with the sex at Hailsham, there was an unspoken agreement to allow for a mysterious dimension where we went off and did all this reading.

It was, as I say, a little game we all indulged in to some extent. Even so, it was Ruth who took it further than anyone else. She was the one always pretending to have finished anything anyone happened to be reading; and she was the only one with this notion that the way to demonstrate your superior reading was to go around telling people the plots of novels they were in the middle of. That's why, when she started on *Daniel Deronda*, even though I'd not been enjoying it much, I closed the book, sat up and said to her, completely out of the blue:

'Ruth, I've been meaning to ask you. Why do you always hit Tommy on the arm like that when you're saying goodbye? You know what I mean.'

Of course she claimed not to, so I patiently explained what I was talking about. Ruth heard me out then shrugged.

'I didn't realise I was doing it. I must have just picked it up.'

A few months before I might have let it go at that - or probably wouldn't have brought it up in the first place. But that afternoon I just pressed on, explaining to her how it was something from a television series. 'It's not something worth copying,' I told her. 'It's not what people really do out there, in normal life, if that's what you were thinking.'

Ruth, I could see, was now angry but unsure how to fight back. She looked away and did another shrug. 'So what?' she said. 'It's no big deal. A lot of us do it.'

'What you mean is Chrissie and Rodney do it.'

As soon as I said this I realised I'd made a mistake; that until I'd mentioned these two, I'd had Ruth in a corner, but now she was out. It was like when you make a move in chess and just as you take your finger off the piece, you see the mistake you've made, and there's this panic because you don't know yet the scale of disaster you've left yourself

open to. Sure enough, I saw a gleam come into Ruth's eyes and when she spoke again it was in an entirely new voice.

'So that's it, that's what's upsetting poor little Kathy. Ruth isn't paying enough attention to her. Ruth's got big new friends and baby sister isn't getting played with so often ...'

'Stop all that. Anyway that's not how it works in real families. You don't know anything about it.'

'Oh Kathy, the great expert on real families. So sorry. But that's what this is, isn't it? You've still got this idea. Us Hailsham lot, we have to stay together, a tight little bunch, must never make any new friends.'

'I've never said that. I'm just talking about Chrissie and Rodney. It looks daft, the way you copy everything they do.'

'But I'm right, aren't I?' Ruth went on. 'You're upset because I've managed to move on, make new friends. Some of the veterans hardly remember your name, and who can blame them? You never talk to anyone unless they're Hailsham. But you can't expect me to hold your hand the whole time. We've been here nearly two months now.'

I didn't take the bait, but said instead: 'Never mind me, never mind Hailsham. But you keep leaving Tommy in the lurch. I've watched you, you've done it a few times just this week. You leave him stranded, looking like a spare part. That's not fair. You and Tommy are supposed to be a couple. That means you look out for him.'

'Quite right, Kathy, we're a couple, like you say. And if you must intrude, I'll tell you. We've talked about this, and we've agreed. If he sometimes doesn't feel like doing things with Chrissie and Rodney, that's his choice. I'm not going to make him do anything he's not yet ready for. But we've agreed, he shouldn't hold me back. Nice of you to be concerned though.' Then she added, in a quite different

voice: 'Come to think of it, I suppose you haven't been *that* slow making friends with at least *some* of the veterans.'

She watched me carefully, then did a laugh, as though to say: 'We're still friends, aren't we?' But I didn't find anything to laugh about in this last remark of hers. I just picked up my book and walked off without another word.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I should explain why I got so bothered by Ruth saying what she did. Those early months at the Cottages had been a strange time in our friendship. We were quarrelling over all kinds of little things, but at the same time we were confiding in each other more than ever. In particular, we used to have these talks, the two of us, usually up in my room at the top of the Black Barn just before going to bed. You could say they were a sort of hangover from those talks in our dorm after lights out. Anyway, the thing was, however much we might have fallen out during the day, come bed-time, Ruth and I would still find ourselves sitting side by side on my mattress, sipping our hot drinks, exchanging our deepest feelings about our new life like nothing had ever come between us. And what made these heart-to-hearts possible - you might even say what made the whole friendship possible during that time - was this understanding we had that anything we told each other during these moments would be treated with careful respect: that we'd honour confidences, and that no matter how much we rowed, we wouldn't use against each other anything we'd talked about during those sessions. Okay, this had never been spelt out exactly, but it was definitely, as I say, an understanding, and until the afternoon of the *Daniel Deronda* business, neither of us had come anywhere near breaching it. That was why, when Ruth said what she did about my not being slow making friends with certain veterans, I wasn't just cross. To me, it was a betrayal. Because there wasn't any doubt what she'd meant by it; she was referring to something I'd confided in her one night about me and sex.

As you'd expect, sex was different at the Cottages from how it had been at Hailsham. It was a lot more straightforward - more 'grown up'. You didn't go around

gossiping and giggling about who'd been doing it with whom. If you knew two students had had sex, you didn't immediately start speculating about whether they'd become a proper couple. And if a new couple did emerge one day, you didn't go around talking about it like it was a big event. You just accepted it quietly, and from then on, when you referred to one, you also referred to the other, as in 'Chrissie and Rodney' or 'Ruth and Tommy'. When someone wanted sex with you, that too was much more straightforward. A boy would come up and ask if you wanted to spend the night in his room 'for a change', something like that, it was no big deal. Sometimes it was because he was interested in becoming a couple with you; other times it was just for a one-nighter.

The atmosphere, like I say, was much more grown up. But when I look back, the sex at the Cottages seems a bit functional. Maybe it was precisely because all the gossip and secrecy had gone. Or maybe it was because of the cold.

When I remember sex at the Cottages, I think about doing it in freezing rooms in the pitch dark, usually under a ton of blankets. And the blankets often weren't even blankets, but a really odd assortment - old curtains, even bits of carpet. Sometimes it got so cold you just had to pile anything you could over you, and if you were having sex at the bottom of it, it felt like a mountain of bedding was pounding at you, so that half the time you weren't sure if you were doing it with the boy or all that stuff.

Anyway, the point is, I'd had a few one-nighters shortly after getting to the Cottages. I hadn't planned it that way. My plan had been to take my time, maybe become part of a couple with someone I chose carefully. I'd never been in a couple before, and especially after watching Ruth and Tommy for a while, I was quite curious to give it a try for myself. As I say, that had been my plan, and when the one-nighters kept happening, it unsettled me a bit. That was why I'd decided to confide in Ruth that night.

It was in many ways a typical evening session for us. We'd brought up our mugs of tea, and we were sitting in my room, side by side on the mattress, our heads slightly stooped because of the rafters. We talked about the different boys at the Cottages, and whether any of them might be right for me. And Ruth had been at her best: encouraging, funny, tactful, wise. That's why I decided to tell her about the one-nighters. I told her how they'd happened without my really wanting them to; and how, even though we couldn't have babies from doing it, the sex had done funny things to my feelings, just as Miss Emily had warned. Then I said to her:

'Ruth, I wanted to ask you. Do you ever get so you just really have to do it? With anybody almost?'

Ruth shrugged, then said: 'I'm in a couple. So if I want to do it, I just do it with Tommy.'

'I suppose so. Maybe it's just me anyway. There might be something not quite right with me, down there. Because sometimes I just really, really need to do it.'

'That's strange, Kathy.' She fixed me with a concerned look, which made me feel all the more worried.

'So you don't ever get like that.'

She shrugged again. 'Not so as I'd do it with just anybody. What you're saying does sound a bit weird, Kathy. But maybe it'll calm down after a while.'

'Sometimes it won't be there for ages. Then it suddenly comes on. It was like that, the first time it happened. He started snogging me and I just wanted him to get off. Then suddenly it just came on, out of nowhere. I just really had to do it.'

Ruth shook her head. 'It does sound a bit weird. But it'll probably go away. It's probably just to do with the different food we're eating here.'

She hadn't been a huge help, but she'd been sympathetic and I'd felt a little better about it all afterwards. That's why it was such a jolt to have Ruth suddenly bring it up the way she did in the middle of the argument we were having that afternoon in the field. Okay, there was probably no one to overhear us, but even so, there was something not at all right about what she'd done. In those first months at the Cottages, our friendship had stayed intact because, on my side at least, I'd had this notion there were two quite separate Ruths. There was one Ruth who was always trying to impress the veterans, who wouldn't hesitate to ignore me, Tommy, any of the others, if she thought we'd cramp her style. This was the Ruth I wasn't pleased with, the one I could see every day putting on airs and pretending - the Ruth who did the slap-on-the-elbow gesture. But the Ruth who sat beside me in my little attic room at the day's close, legs outstretched over the edge of my mattress, her steaming mug held in both her hands, that was the Ruth from Hailsham, and whatever had been happening during the day, I could just pick up with her where we'd left off the last time we'd sat together like that. And until that afternoon in the field, there'd been a definite understanding these two Ruths wouldn't merge; that the one I confided in before bed was one I could absolutely trust. That's why when she said that, about my 'not being slow making friends with at least some of the veterans', I got so upset. That's why I just picked up my book and walked off.

But when I think about it now, I can see things more from Ruth's viewpoint. I can see, for instance, how she might have felt *I* had been the one to first violate an understanding, and that her little dig had just been a retaliation. This never occurred to me at the time, but I see now it's a possibility, and an explanation for what happened. After all, immediately before she made that remark, I'd been talking about the arm-slapping business. Now it's a bit hard to explain this, but some sort of understanding had definitely developed between the two of us about the way Ruth behaved in

front of the veterans. Okay, she often bluffed and implied all sorts of things I knew weren't true. Sometimes, as I said, she did things to impress the veterans at our expense. But it seems to me Ruth believed, at some level, she was doing all this *on behalf of us all*. And my role, as her closest friend, was to give her silent support, as if I was in the front row of the audience when she was performing on stage. She was struggling to become someone else, and maybe felt the pressure more than the rest of us because, as I say, she'd somehow taken on the responsibility for all of us. In that case, then, the way I'd talked about her slap on the elbow thing could be seen as a betrayal, and she might well then have felt justified retaliating as she had. As I say, this explanation only occurred to me recently. At the time I didn't look at the larger picture or at my own part in it. I suppose, in general, I never appreciated in those days the sheer effort Ruth was making to move on, to grow up and leave Hailsham behind. Thinking about this now, I'm reminded of something she told me once, when I was caring for her in the recovery centre at Dover. We'd been sitting in her room, watching the sunset, as we so often did, enjoying the mineral water and biscuits I'd brought, and I'd been telling her how I still had most of my old Hailsham collection box safely stowed inside my pine chest in my bedsit. Then - I wasn't trying to lead onto anything, or make any kind of point - I just happened to say to her:

'You never had a collection after Hailsham, did you?'

Ruth, who was sitting up in bed, was quiet for a long time, the sunset falling over the tiled wall behind her. Then she said:

'Remember the guardians, before we left, how they kept reminding us we could take our collections with us. So I'd taken everything out of my box and put it into this holdall bag. My plan was I'd find a really good wooden box for it all once I got to the Cottages. But when we got there, I could see none of the veterans had collections. It was only us, it

wasn't normal. We must all have realised it, I wasn't the only one, but we didn't really talk about it, did we? So I didn't go looking for a new box. My things all stayed in the holdall bag for months, then in the end I threw them away.'

I stared at her. 'You put your collection out with the rubbish?'

Ruth shook her head, and for the next few moments seemed to be going through in her mind all the different items in her collection. Finally she said:

'I put them all in a bin bag, but I couldn't stand the idea of putting them out with the rubbish. So I asked old Keffers, once when he was about to drive off, if he'd take the bin bag to a shop. I knew about charity shops, I'd found it all out. Keffers rummaged in the bag a bit, he didn't know what any of it was - why should he? - and he did this laugh and said no shop he knew would want stuff like that. And I said, but it's good stuff, really good stuff. And he could see I was getting a bit emotional, and he changed his tune then. He said something like: "All right, missy, I'll take it along to the Oxfam people." Then he made a real effort and said: "Now I've had a closer look, you're right, it *is* pretty good stuff!" He wasn't very convincing though. I suppose he just took it away and put it in some bin somewhere. But at least I didn't have to know that.' Then she smiled and said: 'You were different. I remember. You were never embarrassed about your collection and you kept it. I wish now I'd done that too.'

What I'm saying is that we were all of us struggling to adjust to our new life, and I suppose we all did things back then we later regretted. I was really upset by Ruth's remark at the time, but it's pointless now trying to judge her or anyone else for the way they behaved during those early days at the Cottages.

As the autumn came on, and I got more familiar with our surroundings, I began noticing things I'd missed earlier. There was, for instance, the odd attitude to students who'd recently left. The veterans were never slow coming out with funny anecdotes about characters they'd met on trips to the White Mansion or to Poplar Farm; but they hardly ever mentioned students who, right up until just before we'd arrived, must have been their intimate friends.

Another thing I noticed - and I could see it tied in - was the big hush that would descend around certain veterans when they went off on 'courses' - which even we knew had to do with becoming carers. They could be gone for four or five days, but were hardly mentioned in that time; and when they came back, no one really asked them anything. I suppose they might have talked to their closest friends in private. But there was definitely an understanding that you didn't mention these trips out in the open. I can remember one morning watching, through the misted-up windows of our kitchen, two veterans leaving for a course, and wondering if by the next spring or summer, they'd have gone altogether, and we'd be taking care not to mention them.

But it's perhaps stretching it to claim students who'd left were an actual taboo. If they had to be mentioned, they got mentioned. Most commonly, you'd hear them referred to indirectly, in connection with an object or a chore. For example, if repairs were needed to a downpipe, there'd be a lot of discussion about 'the way Mike used to do it'. And there was a tree stump outside the Black Barn everyone called 'Dave's stump' because for over three years, until a few weeks before our arrival, he'd sat on it to read and write, sometimes even when it was raining or cold. Then, maybe most memorably, there was Steve. None of us ever discovered anything much about the sort of person Steve had been - except that he'd liked porn magazines.

Every now and again, you'd come across a porn mag at the Cottages, thrown behind a sofa or amidst a pile of old

newspapers. They were what you'd call 'soft' porn, though we didn't know about such distinctions then. We'd never come across anything like that before and didn't know what to think. The veterans usually laughed when one showed up and flicked through it quickly in a blasé way before throwing it aside, so we did the same. When Ruth and I were remembering all this a few years ago, she claimed there were dozens of these magazines circulating around the Cottages. 'No one admitted to liking them,' she said. 'But you remember how it was. If one turned up in a room, everyone pretended to find it dead boring. Then you came back half an hour later and it would always be gone.'

Anyway, my point is that whenever one of these magazines turned up, people would claim it was a left-over from 'Steve's collection'. Steve, in other words, was responsible for every porn mag that ever showed up. As I say, we never found out much else about Steve. We did, though, see the funny side of it even then, so that when someone pointed and said: 'Oh look, one of Steve's magazines,' they did it with a bit of irony.

These magazines, incidentally, used to drive old Keffer mad. There was a rumour that he was religious and dead against not just porn, but sex in general. Sometimes he'd work himself into a complete state - you could see his face under his grey whiskers blotchy with fury - and he'd go thudding around the place, barging into people's rooms without knocking, determined to round up every one of 'Steve's magazines'. We did our best to find him amusing on these occasions, but there was something truly scary about him in these moods. For one thing, the grumbling he usually kept up suddenly stopped and this silence alone gave him an alarming aura.

I remember one particular time when Keffer had collected up six or seven of 'Steve's mags' and stormed out with them to his van. Laura and I were watching him from up in my room, and I'd been laughing at something Laura had just said. Then

I saw Keffers opening his van door, and maybe because he needed both hands to move some stuff about, he put the mags down on top of some bricks stacked outside the boiler hut - some veterans had tried to build a barbecue there a few months earlier. Keffers's figure, bent forwards, his head and shoulders hidden in the van, went on rummaging about for ages, and something told me that, for all his fury of a moment ago, he'd now forgotten about the magazines. Sure enough, a few minutes later, I saw him straighten, climb in behind the wheel, slam the door and drive off.

When I pointed out to Laura that Keffers had left the magazines behind, she said: 'Well, they won't stay put for long. He'll just have to collect them all up again, next time he decides on a purge.'

But when I found myself strolling past the boiler hut about half an hour later, I saw the magazines hadn't been touched. I thought for a moment about taking them up to my room, but then I could see if they were ever found there, I'd get no end of teasing; and how there was no way people would understand my reasons for doing such a thing. That was why I picked up the magazines and went inside the boiler hut with them.

The boiler hut was really just another barn, built onto the end of the farmhouse, filled with old mowers and pitchforks - stuff Keffers reckoned wouldn't catch alight too easily if one day the boiler decided to blow up. Keffers also kept a workbench in there, and so I put the magazines down on it, pushed aside some old rags and heaved myself up to sit on the tabletop. The light wasn't too good, but there was a grimy window somewhere behind me, and when I opened the first magazine I found I could see well enough.

There were lots of pictures of girls holding their legs open or sticking their bottoms out. I'll admit, there have been times when I've looked at pictures like that and felt excited, though I've never fancied doing it with a girl. But

that's not what I was after that afternoon. I moved through the pages quickly, not wanting to be distracted by any buzz of sex coming off those pages. In fact, I hardly saw the contorted bodies, because I was focusing on the faces. Even in the little adverts for videos or whatever tucked away to the side, I checked each model's face before moving on.

It wasn't until I was nearing the end of the pile that I became certain there was somebody standing outside the barn, just beside the doorway. I'd left the door open because that's how it was normally, and because I wanted the light; and twice already I'd found myself glancing up, thinking I'd heard some small noise. But there'd been no one there, and I'd just gone on with what I was doing. Now I was certain, though, and lowering my magazine I made a heavy sighing sound that would be clearly audible.

I waited for giggling, or maybe for two or three students to come bursting into the barn, eager to make the best of having caught me with a pile of porn mags. But nothing happened. So I called out, in what I tried to make a weary tone:

'Delighted you could join me. Why be so shy?'

There was a little chuckle, then Tommy appeared at the threshold. 'Hi, Kath,' he said sheepishly.

'Come on in, Tommy. Join in the fun.'

He came towards me cautiously, then stopped a few steps away. Then he looked over to the boiler, and said: 'I didn't know you liked that sort of stuff.'

'Girls are allowed too, aren't we?'

I kept going through the pages, and for the next few seconds he stayed silent. Then I heard him say:

'I wasn't trying to spy on you. But I saw you from my room. I saw you come out here and pick up that pile Keffer's left.'

‘You’re very welcome to them when I’ve finished.’

He laughed awkwardly. ‘It’s just sex stuff. I expect I’ve seen them all already.’ He did another laugh, but then when I glanced up, I saw he was watching me with a serious expression. Then he asked:

‘Are you looking for something, Kath?’

‘What do you mean? I’m just looking at dirty pictures.’

‘Just for kicks?’

‘I suppose you could say that.’ I put down one mag and started on the next one.

Then I heard Tommy’s steps coming nearer until he was right up to me. When I looked up again, his hands were hovering fretfully in the air, like I was doing a complicated manual task and he was itching to help.

‘Kath, you don’t … Well, if it’s for kicks, you don’t do it like that. You’ve got to look at the pictures much more carefully. It doesn’t really work if you go that fast.’

‘How do you know what works for girls? Or maybe you’ve looked these over with Ruth. Sorry, not thinking.’

‘Kath, what are you looking for?’

I ignored him. I was nearly at the end of the pile and I was now keen to finish. Then he said:

‘I saw you doing this once before.’

This time I did stop and look at him. ‘What’s going on here, Tommy? Has Keffers recruited you for his porn patrol?’

‘I wasn’t trying to spy on you. But I did see you, that time last week, after we’d all been up in Charley’s room. There was one of these mags there, and you thought we’d all left and gone. But I came back to get my jumper, and Claire’s doors were open so I could see straight through to Charley’s

room. That's how I saw you in there, going through the magazine. '

'Well, so what? We all have to get our kicks some way. '

'You weren't doing it for kicks. I could tell, just like I can now. It's your face, Kath. That time in Charley's room, you had a strange face. Like you were sad, maybe. And a bit scared. '

I jumped off the workbench, gathered up the mags and dumped them in his arms. 'Here. Give these to Ruth. See if they do anything for her. '

I walked past him and out of the barn. I knew he'd be disappointed I hadn't told him anything, but at that point I hadn't thought things through properly myself and wasn't ready to tell anyone. But I hadn't minded him coming into the boiler hut after me. I hadn't minded at all. I'd felt comforted, protected almost. I did tell him eventually, but that wasn't until a few months later, when we went on our Norfolk trip.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I want to talk about the Norfolk trip, and all the things that happened that day, but I'll first have to go back a bit, to give you the background and explain why it was we went.

Our first winter was just about over by then and we were all feeling much more settled. For all our little hiccups, Ruth and I had kept up our habit of rounding off the day in my room, talking over our hot drinks, and it was during one of those sessions, when we were larking around about something, that she suddenly said:

'I suppose you've heard what Chrissie and Rodney have been saying.'

When I said I hadn't, she did a laugh and continued: 'They're probably just having me on. Their idea of a joke. Forget I mentioned it.'

But I could see she wanted me to drag it out of her, so I kept pressing until in the end she said in a lowered voice:

'You remember last week, when Chrissie and Rodney were away? They'd been up to this town called Cromer, up on the north Norfolk coast.'

'What were they doing there?'

'Oh, I think they've got a friend there, someone who used to live here. That's not the point. The point is, they claim they saw this ... person. Working there in this open-plan office. And, well, you know. They reckon this person's a *possible*. For me.'

Though most of us had first come across the idea of 'possibles' back at Hailsham, we'd sensed we weren't supposed to discuss it, and so we hadn't - though for sure, it had both intrigued and disturbed us. And even at the

Cottages, it wasn't a topic you could bring up casually. There was definitely more awkwardness around any talk of possibles than there was around, say, sex. At the same time, you could tell people were fascinated - obsessed, in some cases - and so it kept coming up, usually in solemn arguments, a world away from our ones about, say, James Joyce.

The basic idea behind the possibles theory was simple, and didn't provoke much dispute. It went something like this. Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life. This meant, at least in theory, you'd be able to find the person you were modelled from. That's why, when you were out there yourself - in the towns, shopping centres, transport cafés - you kept an eye out for 'possibles' - the people who might have been the models for you and your friends.

Beyond these basics, though, there wasn't much consensus. For a start, no one could agree what we were looking for when we looked for possibles. Some students thought you should be looking for a person twenty to thirty years older than yourself - the sort of age a normal parent would be. But others claimed this was sentimental. Why would there be a 'natural' generation between us and our models? They could have used babies, old people, what difference would it have made? Others argued back that they'd use for models people at the peak of their health, and that's why they were likely to be 'normal parent' age. But around here, we'd all sense we were near territory we didn't want to enter, and the arguments would fizzle out.

Then there were those questions about why we wanted to track down our models at all. One big idea behind finding your model was that when you did, you'd glimpse your future. Now I don't mean anyone really thought that if your model turned out to be, say, a guy working at a railway station, that's what you'd end up doing too. We all realised it wasn't

that simple. Nevertheless, we all of us, to varying degrees, believed that when you saw the person you were copied from, you'd get *some* insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you'd see something of what your life held in store.

There were some who thought it stupid to be concerned about possibles at all. Our models were an irrelevance, a technical necessity for bringing us into the world, nothing more than that. It was up to each of us to make of our lives what we could. This was the camp Ruth always claimed to side with, and I probably did too. All the same, whenever we heard reports of a possible - whoever it was for - we couldn't help getting curious.

The way I remember it, sightings of possibles tended to come in batches. Weeks could go by with no one mentioning the subject, then one reported sighting would trigger off a whole spate of others. Most of them were obviously not worth pursuing: someone seen in a car going by, stuff like that. But every now and then, a sighting seemed to have substance to it - like the one Ruth told me about that night.

According to Ruth, Chrissie and Rodney had been busy exploring this seaside town they'd gone to and had split up for a while. When they'd met up again, Rodney was all excited and had told Chrissie how he'd been wandering the side-streets off the High Street, and had gone past an office with a large glass front. Inside had been a lot of people, some of them at their desks, some walking about and chatting. And that's where he'd spotted Ruth's possible.

'Chrissie came and told me as soon as they got back. She made Rodney describe everything, and he did his best, but it was impossible to tell anything. Now they keep talking about driving me up there, but I don't know. I don't know if I ought to do anything about it.'

I can't remember exactly what I said to her that night, but I was at that point pretty sceptical. In fact, to be

honest, my guess was that Chrissie and Rodney had made the whole thing up. I don't really want to suggest Chrissie and Rodney were bad people - that would be unfair. In many ways, I actually liked them. But the fact was, the way they regarded us newcomers, and Ruth in particular, was far from straightforward.

Chrissie was a tall girl who was quite beautiful when she stood up to her full height, but she didn't seem to realise this and spent her time crouching to be the same as the rest of us. That's why she often looked more like the Wicked Witch than a movie star - an impression reinforced by her irritating way of jabbing you with a finger the second before she said something to you. She always wore long skirts rather than jeans, and little glasses pressed too far into her face. She'd been one of the veterans who'd really welcomed us when we'd first arrived in the summer, and I'd at first been really taken by her and looked to her for guidance. But as the weeks had passed, I'd begun to have reservations. There was something odd about the way she was always mentioning the fact that we'd come from Hailsham, like that could explain almost anything to do with us. And she was always asking us questions about Hailsham - about little details, much like my donors do now - and although she tried to make out these were very casual, I could see there was a whole other dimension to her interest. Another thing that got to me was the way she always seemed to want to separate us: taking one of us aside when a few of us were doing something together, or else inviting two of us to join in something while leaving another two stranded - that sort of thing.

You'd hardly ever see Chrissie without her boyfriend, Rodney. He went around with his hair tied back in a ponytail, like a rock musician from the seventies, and talked a lot about things like reincarnation. I actually got to quite like him, but he was pretty much under Chrissie's influence. In any discussion, you knew he'd back up Chrissie's angle, and if Chrissie ever said anything mildly amusing, he'd be

chortling and shaking his head like he couldn't believe how funny it was.

Okay, I'm maybe being a bit hard on these two. When I was remembering them with Tommy not so long ago, he thought they were pretty decent people. But I'm telling you all this now to explain why I was so sceptical about their reported sighting of Ruth's possible. As I say, my first instinct was not to believe it, and to suppose Chrissie was up to something.

The other thing that made me doubtful about all this had to do with the actual description given by Chrissie and Rodney: their picture of a woman working in a nice glass-fronted office. To me, at the time, this seemed just too close a match to what we then knew to be Ruth's 'dream future'.

I suppose it was mainly us newcomers who talked about 'dream futures' that winter, though a number of veterans did too. Some older ones - especially those who'd started their training - would sigh quietly and leave the room when this sort of talk began, but for a long time we didn't even notice this happening. I'm not sure what was going on in our heads during those discussions. We probably knew they couldn't be serious, but then again, I'm sure we didn't regard them as fantasy either. Maybe once Hailsham was behind us, it was possible, just for that half year or so, before all the talk of becoming carers, before the driving lessons, all those other things, it was possible to forget for whole stretches of time who we really were; to forget what the guardians had told us; to forget Miss Lucy's outburst that rainy afternoon at the pavilion, as well as all those theories we'd developed amongst ourselves over the years. It couldn't last, of course, but like I say, just for those few months, we somehow managed to live in this cosy state of suspension in which we could ponder our lives without the usual boundaries. Looking back now, it feels like we spent ages in that steamed-up kitchen after breakfast, or huddled

around half-dead fires in the small hours, lost in conversation about our plans for the future.

Mind you, none of us pushed it *too* far. I don't remember anyone saying they were going to be a movie star or anything like that. The talk was more likely to be about becoming a postman or working on a farm. Quite a few students wanted to be drivers of one sort or other, and often, when the conversation went this way, some veterans would begin comparing particular scenic routes they'd travelled, favourite roadside cafés, difficult roundabouts, that sort of thing. Today, of course, I'd be able to talk the lot of them under the table on those topics. Back then, though, I used to just listen, not saying a thing, drinking in their talk. Sometimes, if it was late, I'd close my eyes and nestle against the arm of a sofa - or of a boy, if it was during one of those brief phases I was officially 'with' someone - and drift in and out of sleep, letting images of the roads move through my head.

Anyway, to get back to my point, when this sort of talk was going on, it was often Ruth who took it further than anybody - especially when there were veterans around. She'd been talking about offices right from the start of the winter, but when it really took on life, when it became her 'dream future', was after that morning she and I walked into the village.

It was during a bitterly cold spell, and our boxy gas heaters had been giving us trouble. We'd spend ages trying to get them to light, clicking away with no result, and we'd had to give up on more and more - and along with them, the rooms they were supposed to heat. Keffer refused to deal with it, claiming it was our responsibility, but in the end, when things were getting really cold, he'd handed us an envelope with money and a note of some igniter fuel we had to buy. So Ruth and I had volunteered to walk to the village to get it, and that's why we were going down the lane that frosty morning. We'd reached a spot where the hedges were high on

both sides, and the ground was covered in frozen cowpats, when Ruth suddenly stopped a few steps behind me.

It took me a moment to realise, so that by the time I turned back to her she was breathing over her fingers and looking down, engrossed by something beside her feet. I thought maybe it was some poor creature dead in the frost, but when I came up, I saw it was a colour magazine - not one of 'Steve's magazines', but one of those bright cheerful things that come free with newspapers. It had fallen open at this glossy double page advert, and though the paper had gone soggy and there was mud at one corner, you could see it well enough. It showed this beautifully modern open-plan office with three or four people who worked in it having some kind of joke with each other. The place looked sparkling and so did the people. Ruth was staring at this picture and, when she noticed me beside her, said: 'Now *that* would be a *proper* place to work.'

Then she got self-conscious - maybe even cross that I'd caught her like that - and set off again much faster than before.

But a few evenings later, when several of us were sitting around a fire in the farmhouse, Ruth began telling us about the sort of office she'd ideally work in, and I immediately recognised it. She went into all the details - the plants, the gleaming equipment, the chairs with their swivels and castors - and it was so vivid everyone let her talk uninterrupted for ages. I was watching her closely, but it never seemed to occur to her I might make the connection - maybe she'd even forgotten herself where the image had come from. She even talked at one point about how the people in her office would all be 'dynamic, go-ahead types', and I remembered clearly those same words written in big letters across the top of the advert: 'Are you the dynamic, go-ahead type?' - something like that. Of course, I didn't say anything. In fact, listening to her, I even started wondering

if maybe it was all feasible: if one day we might all of us move into a place like that and carry on our lives together.

Chrissie and Rodney were there that night, of course, hanging onto every word. And then for days afterwards, Chrissie kept trying to get Ruth to talk some more about it. I'd pass them sitting together in the corner of a room and Chrissie would be asking: 'Are you sure you wouldn't put each other off, working all together in a place like that?' just to get Ruth going on it again.

The point about Chrissie - and this applied to a lot of the veterans - was that for all her slightly patronising manner towards us when we'd first arrived, she was awestruck about our being from Hailsham. It took me a long time to realise this. Take the business about Ruth's office: Chrissie would never herself have talked about working in *any* office, never mind one like that. But because Ruth was from Hailsham, somehow the whole notion came within the realms of the possible. That's how Chrissie saw it, and I suppose Ruth did say a few things every now and then to encourage the idea that, sure enough, in some mysterious way, a separate set of rules applied to us Hailsham students. I never heard Ruth actually lie to veterans; it was more to do with not denying certain things, implying others. There were occasions when I could have brought the whole thing down over her head. But if Ruth was sometimes embarrassed, catching my eye in the middle of some story or other, she seemed confident I wouldn't give her away. And of course, I didn't.

So that was the background to Chrissie and Rodney's claim to have seen Ruth's 'possible', and you can maybe see now why I was wary about it. I wasn't keen on Ruth going with them to Norfolk, though I couldn't really say why. And once it became clear she was completely set on going, I told her I'd come too. At first, she didn't seem too delighted, and there was even a hint that she wouldn't let Tommy come with her either. In the end, though, we all went, the five of us: Chrissie, Rodney, Ruth, Tommy and me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rodney, who had a driver's licence, had made an arrangement to borrow a car for the day from the farm-workers at Metchley a couple of miles down the road. He'd regularly got cars this way in the past, but this particular time, the arrangement broke down the day before we were due to set off. Though things got sorted out fairly easily - Rodney walked over to the farm and got a promise on another car - the interesting thing was the way Ruth responded during those few hours when it looked like the trip might have to be called off.

Until then, she'd been making out the whole thing was a bit of a joke, that if anything she was going along with it to please Chrissie. And she'd talked a lot about how we weren't exploring our freedom nearly enough since leaving Hailsham; how anyway she'd always wanted to go to Norfolk to 'find all our lost things'. In other words, she'd gone out of her way to let us know she wasn't very serious about the prospect of finding her 'possible'.

That day before we went, I remember Ruth and I had been out for a stroll, and we came into the farmhouse kitchen where Fiona and a few veterans were making a huge stew. And it was Fiona herself, not looking up from what she was doing, who told us how the farm boy had come in earlier with the message. Ruth was standing just in front of me, so I couldn't see her face, but her whole posture froze up. Then without a word, she turned and pushed past me out of the cottage. I got a glimpse of her face then, and that's when I realised how upset she was. Fiona started to say something like: 'Oh, I didn't know ...' But I said quickly: 'That's not what Ruth's upset about. It's about something else, something that happened earlier on.' It wasn't very good, but it was the best I could do on the spur of the moment.

In the end, as I said, the vehicle crisis got resolved, and early the next morning, in the pitch dark, the five of us got inside a bashed but perfectly decent Rover car. The way we sat was with Chrissie up front next to Rodney, and the three of us in the back. That was what had felt natural, and we'd got in like that without thinking about it. But after only a few minutes, once Rodney had brought us out of the dark winding lanes onto the proper roads, Ruth, who was in the middle, leaned forward, put her hands on the front seats, and began talking to the two veterans. She did this in a way that meant Tommy and I, on either side of her, couldn't hear anything they were saying, and because she was between us, couldn't talk to or even see each other. Sometimes, on the rare occasions she did lean back, I tried to get something going between the three of us, but Ruth wouldn't pick up on it, and before long, she'd be crouched forwards again, her face stuck between the two front seats.

After about an hour, with day starting to break, we stopped to stretch our legs and let Rodney go for a pee. We'd pulled over beside a big empty field, so we jumped over the ditch and spent a few minutes rubbing our hands together and watching our breaths rise. At one point, I noticed Ruth had drifted away from the rest of us and was gazing across the field at the sunrise. So I went over to her and made the suggestion that, since she only wanted to talk to the veterans, she swap seats with me. That way she could go on talking at least with Chrissie, and Tommy and I could have some sort of conversation to while away the journey. I'd hardly finished before Ruth said in a whisper:

'Why do you have to be difficult? Now of all times! I don't get it. Why do you want to make trouble?' Then she yanked me round so both our backs were to the others and they wouldn't see if we started to argue. It was the way she did this, rather than her words, that suddenly made me see things her way; I could see that Ruth was making a big effort to present not just herself, but all of us, in the right way to

Chrissie and Rodney; and here I was, threatening to undermine her and start an embarrassing scene. I saw all this, and so I touched her on the shoulder and went off back to the others. And when we returned to the car, I made sure the three of us sat exactly as before. But now, as we drove on, Ruth stayed more or less silent, sitting right back in her seat, and even when Chrissie or Rodney shouted things to us from the front, responded only in sulky monosyllables.

Things cheered up considerably, though, once we arrived in our seaside town. We got there around lunch-time and left the Rover in a car park beside a mini-golf course full of fluttering flags. It had turned into a crisp, sunny day, and my memory of it is that for the first hour we all felt so exhilarated to be out and about we didn't give much thought to what had brought us there. At one point Rodney actually let out a few whoops, waving his arms around as he led the way up a road climbing steadily past rows of houses and the occasional shop, and you could sense just from the huge sky, that you were walking towards the sea.

Actually, when we did reach the sea, we found we were standing on a road carved into a cliff edge. It seemed at first there was a sheer drop down to the sands, but once you leant over the rail, you could see zigzagging footpaths leading you down the cliff-face to the seafront.

We were starving by now and went into a little café perched on the cliff just where one of the footpaths began. When we went in, the only people inside were the two chubby women in aprons who worked there. They were smoking cigarettes at one of the tables, but they quickly got up and disappeared into the kitchen, so then we had the place to ourselves.

We took the table right at the back - which meant the one stuck out closest to the cliff edge - and when we sat down it felt like we were virtually suspended over the sea. I didn't have anything to compare it with at the time, but I realise

now the café was tiny, with just three or four little tables. They'd left a window open - probably to stop the place filling up with frying smells - so that every now and then a gust would pass through the room making all the signs advertising their good deals flutter about. There was one cardboard notice pinned over the counter that had been done in coloured felt-tips, and at the top of it was the word 'look' with a staring eye drawn inside each 'o'. I see the same thing so often these days I don't even register it, but back then I hadn't seen it before. So I was looking at it admiringly, then caught Ruth's eye, and realised she too was looking at it amazed, and we both burst out laughing. That was a cosy little moment, when it felt like we'd left behind the bad feeling that had grown between us in the car. As it turned out, though, it was just about the last moment like that between me and Ruth for the rest of that outing.

We hadn't mentioned the 'possible' at all since arriving in the town, and I'd assumed when we sat down we'd finally discuss the matter properly. But once we'd started on our sandwiches, Rodney began talking about their old friend, Martin, who'd left the Cottages the year before and was now living somewhere in the town. Chrissie eagerly took up the subject and soon both veterans were coming out with anecdotes about all the hilarious things Martin had got up to. We couldn't follow much of it, but Chrissie and Rodney were really enjoying themselves. They kept exchanging glances and laughing, and although they pretended it was for our benefit, it was clear they were remembering for each other. Thinking about it now, it occurs to me the near-taboo at the Cottages surrounding people who'd left might well have stopped them talking about their friend even to each other, and it was only once we'd come away they'd felt able to indulge themselves in this way.

Whenever they laughed, I laughed too just to be polite. Tommy seemed to be understanding things even less than me and was letting out hesitant little half-laughs that lagged some

way behind. Ruth, though, was laughing and laughing, and kept nodding to everything being said about Martin just like she too was remembering them. Then once, when Chrissie made a really obscure reference - she'd said something like: 'Oh, yes, the time he put out his jeans!' - Ruth gave a big laugh and signalled in our direction, as though to say to Chrissie: 'Go on, explain it to them so they can enjoy it too.' I let this all go, but when Chrissie and Rodney started discussing whether we should go round to Martin's flat, I finally said, maybe a bit coldly:

'What exactly is he doing here? Why's he got a flat?'

There was a silence, then I heard Ruth let out an exasperated sigh. Chrissie leaned over the table towards me and said quietly, like she was explaining to a child: 'He's being a carer. What else do you think he'd be doing here? He's a proper carer now.'

There was a bit of shifting, and I said: 'That's what I mean. We can't just go and visit him.'

Chrissie sighed. 'Okay. We're not *supposed* to visit carers. Absolutely strictly speaking. Certainly not encouraged.'

Rodney chuckled and added: 'Definitely not encouraged. Naughty naughty to go and visit him.'

'Very naughty,' Chrissie said and made a tutting noise.

Then Ruth joined in, saying: 'Kathy *hates* to be naughty. So we'd better not go and visit him.'

Tommy was looking at Ruth, clearly puzzled about whose side she'd taken, and I wasn't sure either. It occurred to me she didn't want the expedition side-tracked and was reluctantly siding with me, so I smiled at her, but she didn't return my look. Then Tommy asked suddenly:

'Whereabouts was it you saw Ruth's possible, Rodney?'

‘Oh ...’ Rodney didn’t seem nearly so interested in the possible now we were in the town, and I could see anxiety cross Ruth’s face. Finally Rodney said: ‘It was a turning off the High Street, somewhere up the other end. Of course, it might be her day off.’ Then when no one said anything, he added: ‘They do have days off, you know. They’re not always at their work.’

For a moment, as he said this, the fear passed through me that we’d misjudged things badly; that for all we knew, veterans often used talk of possibles just as a pretext to go on trips, and didn’t really expect to take it any further. Ruth might well have been thinking along the same lines, because she was now looking definitely worried, but in the end she did a little laugh, like Rodney had made a joke.

Then Chrissie said in a new voice: ‘You know, Ruth, we might be coming here in a few years’ time to visit *you*. Working in a nice office. I don’t see how anyone could stop us visiting you then.’

‘That’s right,’ Ruth said quickly. ‘You can all come and see me.’

‘I suppose,’ Rodney said, ‘there aren’t any rules about visiting people if they’re working in an office.’ He laughed suddenly. ‘We don’t know. It hasn’t really happened with us before.’

‘It’ll be all right,’ Ruth said. ‘They let you do it. You can all come and visit me. Except Tommy, that is.’

Tommy looked shocked. ‘Why can’t I come?’

‘Because you’ll already be with me, stupid,’ Ruth said. ‘I’m keeping you.’

We all laughed, Tommy again a little behind the rest of us.

‘I heard about this girl up in Wales,’ Chrissie said. ‘She was Hailsham, maybe a few years before you lot.’

Apparently she's working in this clothes shop right now. A really smart one.'

There were murmurs of approval and for a while we all looked dreamily out at the clouds.

'That's Hailsham for you,' Rodney said eventually, and shook his head as though in amazement.

'And then there was that other person' - Chrissie had turned to Ruth - 'that boy you were telling us about the other day. The one a couple of years above you who's a park keeper now.'

Ruth was nodding thoughtfully. It occurred to me that I should shoot Tommy a warning glance, but by the time I'd turned to him, he'd already started to speak.

'Who was that?' he asked in a bewildered voice.

'You know who it is, Tommy,' I said quickly. It was too risky to kick him, or even to make my voice wink-wink: Chrissie would have picked it up in a flash. So I said it dead straight, with a bit of weariness, like we were all fed up with Tommy forgetting all the time. But this just meant Tommy still didn't twig.

'Someone *we* knew?'

'Tommy, let's not go through this again,' I said. 'You'll have to have your brains tested.'

At last the penny seemed to drop, and Tommy shut up.

Chrissie said: 'I know how lucky I am, getting to be at the Cottages. But you Hailsham lot, you're *really* lucky. You know ...' She lowered her voice and leaned forward again.

'There's something I've been wanting to talk to you lot about. It's just that back there, at the Cottages, it's impossible. Everyone always listening in.'

She looked around the table, then fixed her gaze on Ruth. Rodney suddenly tensed and he too leaned forward. And

something told me we were coming to what was, for Chrissie and Rodney, the central purpose of this whole expedition.

‘When Rodney and I, we were up in Wales,’ she said.

‘The same time we heard about this girl in the clothes shop. We heard something else, something about Hailsham students. What they were saying was that some Hailsham students in the past, in special circumstances, had managed to get a deferral. That this was something you could do if you were a Hailsham student. You could ask for your donations to be put back by three, even four years. It wasn’t easy, but just sometimes they’d let you do it. So long as you could convince them. So long as you *qualified*.’

Chrissie paused and looked at each of us, maybe for dramatic effect, maybe to check us for signs of recognition. Tommy and I probably had puzzled looks, but Ruth had on one of her faces where you couldn’t tell what was going on.

‘What they said,’ Chrissie continued, ‘was that if you were a boy and a girl, and you were in love with each other, really, properly in love, and if you could show it, then the people who run Hailsham, they sorted it out for you. They sorted it out so you could have a few years together before you began your donations.’

There was now a strange atmosphere around the table, a kind of tingle going round.

‘When we were in Wales,’ Chrissie went on, ‘the students at the White Mansion. They’d heard of this Hailsham couple, the guy had only a few weeks left before he became a carer. And they went to see someone and got everything put back three years. They were allowed to go on living there together, up at the White Mansion, three years straight, didn’t have to go on with their training or anything. Three years just to themselves, because they could prove they were properly in love.’

It was at this point I noticed Ruth nodding with a lot of authority. Chrissie and Rodney noticed too and for a few seconds they watched her like they were hypnotised. And I had a kind of vision of Chrissie and Rodney, back at the Cottages, in the months leading up to this moment, probing and prodding this subject between them. I could see them bringing it up, at first very tentatively, shrugging, putting it to one side, bringing it up again, never able quite to leave it alone. I could see them toying with the idea of talking to us about it, see them refining how they'd do it, what exactly they'd say. I looked again at Chrissie and Rodney in front of me, gazing at Ruth, and tried to read their faces. Chrissie looked both afraid and hopeful. Rodney looked on edge, like he didn't trust himself not to blurt out something he wasn't supposed to.

This wasn't the first time I'd come across the rumour about deferrals. Over the past several weeks, I'd caught more and more snatches of it at the Cottages. It was always veterans talking among themselves, and when any of us showed up, they'd look awkward and go quiet. But I'd heard enough to get the gist of it; and I knew it had specifically to do with us Hailsham students. Even so, it was only that day, in that seafront café, that it really came home to me how important this whole notion had become for some veterans.

'I suppose,' Chrissie went on, her voice wobbling slightly, 'you lot would know about it. The rules, all that sort of thing.'

She and Rodney looked at each of us in turn, then their gazes settled back on Ruth.

Ruth sighed and said: 'Well, they told us a few things, obviously. But' - she gave a shrug - 'it's not something we know much about. We never talked about it really. Anyway, we should get going soon.'

'Who is it you go to?' Rodney suddenly asked. 'Who did they say you had to go to if you wanted, you know, to

apply? ’

Ruth shrugged again. ‘Well, I told you. It wasn’t something we talked about much.’ Almost instinctively she looked to me and Tommy for support, which was probably a mistake, because Tommy said:

‘To be honest, I don’t know what you’re all talking about. What rules are these?’

Ruth stared daggers at him, and I said quickly: ‘You know, Tommy. All that talk that used to go round at Hailsham.’

Tommy shook his head. ‘I don’t remember it,’ he said flatly. And this time I could see – and Ruth could too – that he wasn’t being slow. ‘I don’t remember anything like that at Hailsham.’

Ruth turned away from him. ‘What you’ve got to realise,’ she said to Chrissie, ‘is that even though Tommy was at Hailsham, he isn’t like a real Hailsham student. He was left out of everything and people were always laughing at him. So there’s no point in asking him about anything like this. Now, I want to go and find this person Rodney saw.’

A look had appeared in Tommy’s eyes that made me catch my breath. It was one I hadn’t seen for a long time and that belonged to the Tommy who’d had to be barricaded inside a classroom while he kicked over desks. Then the look faded, he turned to the sky outside and let out a heavy breath.

The veterans hadn’t noticed anything because Ruth, at the same moment, had risen to her feet and was fiddling with her coat. Then there was a bit of confusion as the rest of us all moved back our chairs from the little table all at once. I’d been put in charge of the spending money, so I went up to pay. The others filed out behind me, and while I was waiting for the change, I watched them through one of the big misty windows, shuffling about in the sunshine, not talking, looking down at the sea.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

When I got outside, it was obvious the excitement from when we'd first arrived had evaporated completely. We walked in silence, Rodney leading the way, through little backstreets hardly penetrated by the sun, the pavements so narrow we often had to shuffle along in single file. It was a relief to come out onto the High Street where the noise made our rotten mood less obvious. As we crossed at a pelican to the sunnier side, I could see Rodney and Chrissie conferring about something and I wondered how much of the bad atmosphere had to do with their believing we were holding back on some big Hailsham secret, and how much was just to do with Ruth's having a go at Tommy.

Then once we'd crossed the High Street, Chrissie announced she and Rodney wanted to go shopping for birthday cards. Ruth was stunned by this, but Chrissie just went on:

'We like buying them in big batches. It's always cheaper in the long run. And you've always got one handy when it's someone's birthday.' She pointed to the entrance of a Woolworth's shop. 'You can get pretty good cards in there really cheap.'

Rodney was nodding, and I thought there was something a little bit mocking around the edges of his smile. 'Of course,' he said, 'you end up with a lot of cards the same, but you can put your own illustrations on them. You know, personalise them.'

Both veterans were now standing in the middle of the pavement, letting people with pushchairs move round them, waiting for us to put up a challenge. I could tell Ruth was furious, but without Rodney's co-operation there wasn't much that could be done anyway.

So we went into the Woolworth's, and immediately I felt much more cheerful. Even now, I like places like that: a large store with lots of aisles displaying bright plastic toys, greeting cards, loads of cosmetics, maybe even a photo booth. Today, if I'm in a town and find myself with some time to kill, I'll stroll into somewhere just like that, where you can hang around and enjoy yourself, not buying a thing, and the assistants don't mind at all.

Anyway, we went in and before long we'd wandered apart to look at different aisles. Rodney had stayed near the entrance beside a big rack of cards, and further inside, I spotted Tommy under a big pop-group poster, rummaging through the music cassettes. After about ten minutes, when I was somewhere near the back of the store, I thought I heard Ruth's voice and wandered towards it. I'd already turned into the aisle - one with fluffy animals and big boxed jigsaws - before I realised Ruth and Chrissie were standing together at the end of it, having some sort of tête-à-tête. I wasn't sure what to do: I didn't want to interrupt, but it was time we were leaving and I didn't want to turn and walk off again. So I just stopped where I was, pretended to examine a jigsaw and waited for them to notice me.

That was when I realised they were back on the subject of this rumour. Chrissie was saying, in a lowered voice, something like:

'But all that time you were there, I'm amazed you didn't think more about how you'd do it. About who you'd go to, all of that.'

'You don't understand,' Ruth was saying. 'If you were from Hailsham, then you'd see. It's never been such a big deal for us. I suppose we've always known if we ever wanted to look into it, all we'd have to do is get word back to Hailsham ...'

Ruth saw me and broke off. When I lowered the jigsaw and turned to them, they were both looking at me angrily. At the

same time, it was like I'd caught them doing something they shouldn't, and they moved apart self-consciously.

'It's time we were off,' I said, pretending to have heard nothing.

But Ruth wasn't fooled. As they came past, she gave me a really dirty look.

So by the time we set off again, following Rodney in search of the office where he'd seen Ruth's possible the month before, the atmosphere between us was worse than ever. Things weren't helped either by Rodney repeatedly taking us down the wrong streets. At least four times, he led us confidently down a turning off the High Street, only for the shops and offices to run out, and we'd have to turn and come back. Before long, Rodney was looking defensive and on the verge of giving up. But then we found it.

Again, we'd turned and were heading back towards the High Street, when Rodney had stopped suddenly. Then he'd indicated silently an office on the other side of the street.

There it was, sure enough. It wasn't exactly like the magazine advert we'd found on the ground that day, but then it wasn't so far off either. There was a big glass front at street-level, so anyone going by could see right into it: a large open-plan room with maybe a dozen desks arranged in irregular L-patterns. There were the potted palms, the shiny machines and swooping desk lamps. People were moving about between desks, or leaning on a partition, chatting and sharing jokes, while others had pulled their swivel chairs close to each other and were enjoying a coffee and sandwich.

'Look,' Tommy said. 'It's their lunch break, but they don't go out. Don't blame them either.'

We kept on staring, and it looked like a smart, cosy, self-contained world. I glanced at Ruth and noticed her eyes moving anxiously around the faces behind the glass.

‘Okay, Rod,’ Chrissie said. ‘So which one’s the possible?’

She said this almost sarcastically, like she was sure the whole thing would turn out to be a big mistake on his part. But Rodney said quietly, with a tremor of excitement:

‘There. Over in that corner. In the blue outfit. Her, talking now to the big red woman.’

It wasn’t obvious, but the longer we kept looking, the more it seemed he had something. The woman was around fifty, and had kept her figure pretty well. Her hair was darker than Ruth’s – though it could have been dyed – and she had it tied back in a simple pony-tail the way Ruth usually did. She was laughing at something her friend in the red outfit was saying, and her face, especially when she was finishing her laugh with a shake of her head, had more than a hint of Ruth about it.

We all kept on watching her, not saying a word. Then we became aware that in another part of the office, a couple of the other women had noticed us. One raised a hand and gave us an uncertain wave. This broke the spell and we took to our heels in giggly panic.

We stopped again further down the street, talking excitedly all at once. Except for Ruth, that is, who remained silent in the middle of it. It was hard to read her face at that moment: she certainly wasn’t disappointed, but then she wasn’t elated either. She had on a half-smile, the sort a mother might have in an ordinary family, weighing things up while the children jumped and screamed around her asking her to say, yes, they could do whatever. So there we were, all coming out with our views, and I was glad I could say honestly, along with the others, that the woman we’d seen was by no means out of the question. The truth was, we were all relieved: without quite realising it, we’d been bracing ourselves for a let-down. But now we could go back to the

Cottages, Ruth could take encouragement from what she'd seen, and the rest of us could back her up. And the office life the woman appeared to be leading was about as close as you could hope to the one Ruth had often described for herself. Regardless of what had been going on between us that day, deep down, none of us wanted Ruth to return home despondent, and at that moment we thought we were safe. And so we would have been, I'm pretty sure, had we put an end to the matter at that point.

But then Ruth said: 'Let's sit over there, over on that wall. Just for a few minutes. Once they've forgotten about us, we can go and have another look.'

We agreed to this, but as we walked towards the low wall around the small car park Ruth had indicated, Chrissie said, perhaps a little too eagerly:

'But even if we don't get to see her again, we're all agreed she's a possible. And it's a lovely office. It really is.'

'Let's just wait a few minutes,' Ruth said. 'Then we'll go back.'

I didn't sit on the wall myself because it was damp and crumbling, and because I thought someone might appear any minute and shout at us for sitting there. But Ruth did sit on it, knees on either side like she was astride a horse. And today I have these vivid images of the ten, fifteen minutes we waited there. No one's talking about the possible any more. We're pretending instead that we're just killing a bit of time, maybe at a scenic spot during a carefree day-trip. Rodney's doing a little dance to demonstrate what a good feeling there is. He gets up on the wall, balances along it then deliberately falls off. Tommy's making jokes about some passers-by, and though they're not very funny, we're all laughing. Just Ruth, in the middle, astride the wall, remains silent. She keeps the smile on her face, but hardly moves. There's a breeze messing up her hair, and the bright winter

sun's making her crinkle up her eyes, so you're not sure if she's smiling at our antics, or just grimacing in the light. These are the pictures I've kept of those moments we waited by that car park. I suppose we were waiting for Ruth to decide when it was time to go back for a second look. Well, she never got to make that decision because of what happened next.

Tommy, who had been mucking about on the wall with Rodney, suddenly jumped down and went still. Then he said: 'That's her. That's the same one.'

We all stopped what we were doing and watched the figure coming from the direction of the office. She was now wearing a cream-coloured overcoat, and struggling to fasten her briefcase as she walked. The buckle was giving her trouble, so she kept slowing down and starting again. We went on watching her in a kind of trance as she went past on the other side. Then as she was turning into the High Street, Ruth leapt up and said: 'Let's see where she goes.'

We came out of our trance and were off after her. In fact, Chrissie had to remind us to slow down or someone would think we were a gang of muggers going after the woman. We followed along the High Street at a reasonable distance, giggling, dodging past people, separating and coming together again. It must have been around two o'clock by then, and the pavement was busy with shoppers. At times we nearly lost sight of her, but we kept up, loitering in front of window displays when she went into a shop, squeezing past pushchairs and old people when she came out again.

Then the woman turned off the High Street into the little lanes near the seafront. Chrissie was worried she'd notice us away from the crowds, but Ruth just kept going, and we followed behind her.

Eventually we came into a narrow side-street that had the occasional shop, but was mainly just ordinary houses. We had to walk again in single file, and once when a van came the

other way, we had to press ourselves into the houses to let it pass. Before long there was only the woman and us in the entire street, and if she'd glanced back, there was no way she wouldn't have noticed us. But she just kept walking, a dozen or so steps ahead, then went in through a door - into 'The Portway Studios' .

I've been back to the Portway Studios a number of times since then. It changed owners a few years ago and now sells all kinds of arty things: pots, plates, clay animals. Back then, it was two big white rooms just with paintings - beautifully displayed with plenty of spaces between them. The wooden sign hanging over the door is still the same one though. Anyway, we decided to go in after Rodney pointed out how suspicious we looked in that quiet little street. Inside the shop, we could at least pretend we were looking at the pictures.

We came in to find the woman we'd been following talking to a much older woman with silver hair, who seemed to be in charge of the place. They were sitting on either side of a small desk near the door, and apart from them, the gallery was empty. Neither woman paid much attention as we filed past, spread out and tried to look fascinated by the pictures.

Actually, preoccupied though I was with Ruth's possible, I did begin to enjoy the paintings and the sheer peacefulness of the place. It felt like we'd come a hundred miles from the High Street. The walls and ceilings were peppermint, and here and there, you'd see a bit of fishing net, or a rotted piece from a boat stuck up high near the cornicing. The paintings too - mostly oils in deep blues and greens - had sea themes. Maybe it was the tiredness suddenly catching up with us - after all, we'd been travelling since before dawn - but I wasn't the only one who went off into a bit of a dream in there. We'd all wandered into different corners, and were staring at one picture after another, only occasionally making the odd hushed remark like: 'Come and look at this!'

All the time, we could hear Ruth's possible and the silver-haired lady talking on and on. They weren't especially loud, but in that place, their voices seemed to fill the entire space. They were discussing some man they both knew, how he didn't have a clue with his children. And as we kept listening to them, stealing the odd glance in their direction, bit by bit, something started to change. It did for me, and I could tell it was happening for the others. If we'd left it at seeing the woman through the glass of her office, even if we'd followed her through the town then lost her, we could still have gone back to the Cottages excited and triumphant. But now, in that gallery, the woman was too close, much closer than we'd ever really wanted. And the more we heard her and looked at her, the less she seemed like Ruth. It was a feeling that grew among us almost tangibly, and I could tell that Ruth, absorbed in a picture on the other side of the room, was feeling it as much as anyone. That was probably why we went on shuffling around that gallery for so long; we were delaying the moment when we'd have to confer.

Then suddenly the woman had left, and we all kept standing about, avoiding each other's eyes. But none of us had thought to follow the woman, and as the seconds kept ticking on, it became like we were agreeing, without speaking, about how we now saw the situation.

Eventually the silver-haired lady came out from behind her desk and said to Tommy, who was the nearest to her: 'That's a *particularly* lovely work. That one's a favourite of mine.'

Tommy turned to her and let out a laugh. Then as I was hurrying over to help him out, the lady asked: 'Are you art students?'

'Not exactly,' I said before Tommy could respond. 'We're just, well, keen.'

The silver-haired lady beamed, then started to tell us how the artist whose work we were looking at was related to her, and all about the artist's career thus far. This had the effect, at least, of breaking the trance-like state we'd been in, and we gathered round her to listen, the way we might have done at Hailsham when a guardian started to speak. This really got the silver-haired lady going, and we kept nodding and exclaiming while she talked about where the paintings had been done, the times of day the artist liked to work, how some had been done without sketches. Then there came a kind of natural end to her lecture, and we all gave a sigh, thanked her and went out.

The street outside being so narrow, we couldn't talk properly for a while longer, and I think we were all grateful for that. As we walked away from the gallery in single file, I could see Rodney, up at the front, theatrically stretching out his arms, like he was exhilarated the way he'd been when we'd first arrived in the town. But it wasn't convincing, and once we came out onto a wider street, we all shuffled to a halt.

We were once again near a cliff edge. And like before, if you peered over the rail, you could see the paths zigzagging down to the seafront, except this time you could see the promenade at the bottom with rows of boarded-up stalls.

We spent a few moments just looking out, letting the wind hit us. Rodney was still trying to be cheerful, like he'd decided not to let any of this business spoil a good outing. He was pointing out to Chrissie something in the sea, way off on the horizon. But Chrissie turned away from him and said:

'Well, I think we're agreed, aren't we? That *isn't* Ruth.' She gave a small laugh and laid a hand on Ruth's shoulder. 'I'm sorry. We're all sorry. But we can't blame Rodney really. It wasn't that wild a try. You've got to admit, when we saw her through those windows, it did look

...’ She trailed off, then touched Ruth on the shoulder again.

Ruth said nothing, but gave a little shrug, almost as if to shrug off the touch. She was squinting into the distance, at the sky rather than the water. I could tell she was upset, but someone who didn’t know her well might well have supposed she was being thoughtful.

‘Sorry, Ruth,’ Rodney said, and he too gave Ruth a pat on the shoulder. But he had a smile on his face like he didn’t expect for one moment to be blamed for anything. It was the way someone apologised when they’d tried to do you a favour, but it hadn’t worked out.

Watching Chrissie and Rodney at that moment, I remember thinking, yes, they were okay. They were kind in their way and were trying to cheer Ruth up. At the same time, though, I remember feeling – even though they were the ones doing the talking, and Tommy and I were silent – a sort of resentment towards them on Ruth’s behalf. Because however sympathetic they were, I could see that deep down they were relieved. They were relieved things had turned out the way they had; that they were in a position to comfort Ruth, instead of being left behind in the wake of a dizzying boost to her hopes. They were relieved they wouldn’t have to face, more starkly than ever, the notion which fascinated and nagged and scared them: this notion of theirs that there were all kinds of possibilities open to us Hailsham students that weren’t open to them. I remember thinking then how different they actually were, Chrissie and Rodney, from the three of us.

Then Tommy said: ‘I don’t see what difference it makes. It was just a bit of fun we were having.’

‘A bit of fun for you maybe, Tommy,’ Ruth said coldly, still gazing straight ahead of her. ‘You wouldn’t think so if it was *your* possible we’d been looking for.’

‘I think I would,’ Tommy said. ‘I don’t see how it matters. Even if you found your possible, the actual model they got you from. Even then, I don’t see what difference it makes to anything.’

‘Thank you for your profound contribution, Tommy,’ said Ruth.

‘But I think Tommy’s right,’ I said. ‘It’s daft to assume you’ll have the same sort of life as your model. I agree with Tommy. It’s just a bit of fun. We shouldn’t get so serious about it.’

I too reached out and touched Ruth on the shoulder. I wanted her to feel the contrast to when Chrissie and Rodney had touched her, and I deliberately chose exactly the same spot. I expected some response, some signal that she accepted understanding from me and Tommy in a way she didn’t from the veterans. But she gave me nothing, not even the shrug she’d given Chrissie.

Somewhere behind me I could hear Rodney pacing about, making noises to suggest he was getting chilly in the strong wind. ‘How about going to visit Martin now?’ he said. ‘His flat’s just over there, behind those houses.’

Ruth suddenly sighed and turned to us. ‘To be honest,’ she said, ‘I knew all along it was stupid.’

‘Yeah,’ said Tommy, eagerly. ‘Just a bit of fun.’

Ruth gave him an irritated look. ‘Tommy, please shut up with all this “bit of fun” stuff. No one’s listening.’ Then turning to Chrissie and Rodney she went on: ‘I didn’t want to say when you first told me about this. But look, it was never on. They don’t ever, *ever*, use people like that woman. Think about it. Why would she want to? We all know it, so why don’t we all face it. We’re not modelled from that sort ...’

‘Ruth,’ I cut in firmly. ‘Ruth, don’t.’

But she just carried on: 'We all know it. We're modelled from *trash*. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren't psychos. That's what we come from. We all know it, so why don't we say it? A woman like that? Come on. Yeah, right, Tommy. A bit of fun. Let's have a bit of fun pretending. That other woman in there, her friend, the old one in the gallery. *Art* students, that's what she thought we were. Do you think she'd have talked to us like that if she'd known what we really were? What do you think she'd have said if we'd asked her? "Excuse me, but do you think your friend was ever a clone model?" She'd have thrown us out. We know it, so we might as well just say it. If you want to look for possibles, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all came from.'

'Ruth' - Rodney's voice was steady and had a warning in it - 'let's forget about it and go and see Martin. He's off this afternoon. You'll like him, he's a real laugh.'

Chrissie put an arm around Ruth. 'Come on, Ruth. Let's do what Rodney says.'

Ruth got to her feet and Rodney started to walk.

'Well, you lot can go,' I said quietly. 'I'm not going.'

Ruth turned and looked at me carefully. 'Well, what do you know? Who's the upset one now?'

'I'm not upset. But sometimes you speak garbage, Ruth.'

'Oh, look who's upset now. Poor Kathy. She never likes straight talking.'

'It's nothing to do with that. I don't want to visit a carer. We're not supposed to and I don't even know this guy.'

Ruth shrugged and exchanged glances with Chrissie. 'Well,' she said, 'there's no reason we've got to go round together the whole time. If little Miss here doesn't want to join us, she doesn't have to. Let her go off by herself.' Then she leaned over to Chrissie and said in a stage whisper: 'That's always the best way when Kathy's in a mood. Leave her alone and she'll walk it off.'

'Be back at the car by four o'clock,' Rodney said to me. 'Otherwise you'll have to hitch-hike.' Then he did a laugh. 'Come on, Kathy, don't get in a sulk. Come with us.'

'No. You go on. I don't feel like it.'

Rodney shrugged and started to move off again. Ruth and Chrissie followed, but Tommy didn't move. Only when Ruth stared at him did he say:

'I'll stay with Kath. If we're splitting, then I'll stay with Kath.'

Ruth glared at him in fury, then turned and strode off. Chrissie and Rodney looked at Tommy awkwardly, then they too began walking again.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tommy and I leaned on the rail and stared at the view until the others had gone out of sight.

‘It’s just talk,’ he said eventually. Then after a pause: ‘It’s just what people say when they’re feeling sorry for themselves. It’s just talk. The guardians never told us anything like that.’

I started to walk – the opposite way to the others – and let Tommy fall in step beside me.

‘It’s not worth getting upset about,’ Tommy went on. ‘Ruth’s always doing things like that now. It’s just her letting off steam. Anyway, like we were telling her, even if it’s true, even a little bit true, I don’t see how it makes any difference. Our models, what they were like, that’s nothing to do with us, Kath. It’s just not worth getting upset about.’

‘Okay,’ I said, and deliberately bumped my shoulder into his. ‘Okay, okay.’

I had the impression we were walking towards the town centre, though I couldn’t be sure. I was trying to think of a way to change the subject, when Tommy said first:

‘You know when we were in that Woolworth’s place earlier? When you were down at the back with the others? I was trying to find something. Something for you.’

‘A present?’ I looked at him in surprise. ‘I’m not sure Ruth would approve of that. Not unless you got her a bigger one.’

‘A sort of present. But I couldn’t find it. I wasn’t going to tell you, but now, well, I’ve got another chance to

find it. Except you might have to help me. I'm not very good at shopping.'

'Tommy, what are you talking about? You want to get me a present, but you want me to help you choose it ...'

'No, I know what it is. It's just that ...' He laughed and shrugged. 'Oh, I might as well tell you. In that shop we were in, they had this shelf with loads of records and tapes. So I was looking for the one you lost that time. Do you remember, Kath? Except I couldn't remember what it was any more.'

'My tape? I didn't realise you ever knew about it, Tommy.'

'Oh yeah. Ruth was getting people to look for it and saying you were really upset about losing it. So I tried to find it. I never told you at the time, but I did try really hard. I thought there'd be places I could look where you couldn't. In boys' dorms, stuff like that. I remember looking for ages, but I couldn't find it.'

I glanced at him and felt my rotten mood evaporating. 'I never knew that, Tommy. That was really sweet of you.'

'Well, it didn't help much. But I really wanted to find it for you. And when it looked in the end like it wasn't going to turn up, I just said to myself, one day I'll go to Norfolk and I'll find it there for her.'

'The lost corner of England,' I said, and looked around me. 'And here we are!'

Tommy too looked around him, and we came to a halt. We were in another side-street, not as narrow as the one with the gallery. For a moment we both kept glancing around theatrically, then giggled.

'So it wasn't such a daft idea,' Tommy said. 'That Woolworth's shop earlier, it had all these tapes, so I

thought they were bound to have yours. But I don't think they did. '

'You don't *think* they did? Oh, Tommy, you mean you didn't even look properly! '

'I did, Kath. It's just that, well, it's really annoying but I couldn't remember what it was called. All that time at Hailsham, I was opening boys' collection chests and everything, and now I can't remember. It was Julie Bridges or something ...'

'Judy Bridgewater. *Songs After Dark*. '

Tommy shook his head solemnly. 'They definitely didn't have that. '

I laughed and punched his arm. He looked puzzled so I said: 'Tommy, they wouldn't have something like that in Woolworth's. They have the latest hits. Judy Bridgewater, she's someone from ages ago. It just happened to turn up, at one of our Sales. It's not going to be in Woolworth's now, you idiot! '

'Well, like I said, I don't know about things like that. But they had so many tapes ...'

'They had *some*, Tommy. Oh, never mind. It was a sweet idea. I'm really touched. It was a great idea. This is Norfolk, after all. '

We started walking again and Tommy said hesitantly: 'Well, that's why I had to tell you. I wanted to surprise you, but it's useless. I don't know where to look, even if I do know the name of the record. Now I've told you, you can help me. We can look for it together. '

'Tommy, what are you talking about?' I was trying to sound reproachful, but I couldn't help laughing.

'Well, we've got over an hour. This is a real chance. '

‘Tommy, you idiot. You really believe it, don’t you? All this lost-corner stuff.’

‘I don’t necessarily believe it. But we might as well look now we’re here. I mean, you’d like to find it again, wouldn’t you? What have we got to lose?’

‘All right. You’re a complete idiot, but all right.’

He opened his arms out helplessly. ‘Well, Kath, where do we go? Like I say, I’m no good at shopping.’

‘We have to look in second-hand places,’ I said, after a moment’s thought. ‘Places full of old clothes, old books. They’ll sometimes have a box full of records and tapes.’

‘Okay. But where are these shops?’

When I think of that moment now, standing with Tommy in the little side-street about to begin our search, I feel a warmth welling up through me. Everything suddenly felt perfect: an hour set aside, stretching ahead of us, and there wasn’t a better way to spend it. I had to really hold myself back from giggling stupidly, or jumping up and down on the pavement like a little kid. Not long ago, when I was caring for Tommy, and I brought up our Norfolk trip, he told me he’d felt exactly the same. That moment when we decided to go searching for my lost tape, it was like suddenly every cloud had blown away, and we had nothing but fun and laughter before us.

At the start, we kept going into the wrong sort of places: second-hand bookshops, or shops full of old vacuum cleaners, but no music at all. After a while Tommy decided I didn’t know any better than he did and announced he would lead the way. As it happened, by sheer luck really, he discovered straight away a street with four shops of just the kind we were after, standing virtually in a row. Their front windows were full of dresses, handbags, children’s annuals, and when you went inside, a sweet stale smell. There were piles of creased paperbacks, dusty boxes full of postcards or

trinkets. One shop specialised in hippie stuff, while another had war medals and photos of soldiers in the desert. But they all had somewhere a big cardboard box or two with LPs and cassette tapes. We rummaged around those shops, and in all honesty, after the first few minutes, I think Judy Bridgewater had more or less slipped from our minds. We were just enjoying looking through all those things together; drifting apart then finding ourselves side by side again, maybe competing for the same box of bric-a-brac in a dusty corner lit up by a shaft of sun.

Then of course I found it. I'd been flicking through a row of cassette cases, my mind on other things, when suddenly there it was, under my fingers, looking just the way it had all those years ago: Judy, her cigarette, the coquettish look for the barman, the blurred palms in the background.

I didn't exclaim, the way I'd been doing when I'd come across other items that had mildly excited me. I stood there quite still, looking at the plastic case, unsure whether or not I was delighted. For a second, it even felt like a mistake. The tape had been the perfect excuse for all this fun, and now it had turned up, we'd have to stop. Maybe that was why, to my own surprise, I kept silent at first; why I thought about pretending never to have seen it. And now it was there in front of me, there was something vaguely embarrassing about the tape, like it was something I should have grown out of. I actually went as far as flicking the cassette on and letting its neighbour fall on it. But there was the spine, looking up at me, and in the end I called Tommy over.

'Is that it?' He seemed genuinely sceptical, perhaps because I wasn't making more fuss. I pulled it out and held it in both hands. Then suddenly I felt a huge pleasure - and something else, something more complicated that threatened to make me burst into tears. But I got a hold of the emotion, and just gave Tommy's arm a tug.

‘Yes, this is it,’ I said, and for the first time smiled excitedly. ‘Can you believe it? We’ve really found it!’

‘Do you think it could be the same one? I mean, the *actual* one. The one you lost?’

As I turned it in my fingers, I found I could remember all the design details on the back, the titles of the tracks, everything.

‘For all I know, it might be,’ I said. ‘But I have to tell you, Tommy, there might be thousands of these knocking about.’

Then it was my turn to notice Tommy wasn’t as triumphant as he might be.

‘Tommy, you don’t seem very pleased for me,’ I said, though in an obviously jokey voice.

‘I *am* pleased for you, Kath. It’s just that, well, I wish I’d found it.’ Then he did a small laugh and went on: ‘Back then, when you lost it, I used to think about it, in my head, what it would be like, if I found it and brought it to you. What you’d say, your face, all of that.’

His voice was softer than usual and he kept his eyes on the plastic case in my hand. And I suddenly became very conscious of the fact that we were the only people in the shop, except for the old guy behind the counter at the front engrossed in his paperwork. We were right at the back of the shop, on a raised platform where it was darker and more secluded, like the old guy didn’t want to think about the stuff in our area and had mentally curtained it off. For several seconds, Tommy stayed in a sort of trance, for all I know playing over in his mind one of these old fantasies of giving me back my lost tape. Then suddenly he snatched the case out of my hand.

‘Well at least I can *buy* it for you,’ he said with a grin, and before I could stop him, he’d started down the floor towards the front.

I went on browsing around the back of the shop while the old guy searched around for the tape to go with the case. I was still feeling a pang of regret that we’d found it so quickly, and it was only later, when we were back at the Cottages and I was alone in my room, that I really appreciated having the tape – and that song – back again. Even then, it was mainly a nostalgia thing, and today, if I happen to get the tape out and look at it, it brings back memories of that afternoon in Norfolk every bit as much as it does our Hailsham days.

As we came out of the shop, I was keen to regain the carefree, almost silly mood we’d been in before. But when I made a few little jokes, Tommy was lost in his thoughts and didn’t respond.

We began going up a steeply climbing path, and we could see – maybe a hundred yards further up – a kind of viewing area right on the cliff edge with benches facing out to sea. It would have made a nice spot in the summer for an ordinary family to sit and eat a picnic. Now, despite the chilly wind, we found ourselves walking up towards it, but when there was still some way left to go, Tommy slowed to a dawdle and said to me:

‘Chrissie and Rodney, they’re really obsessed with this idea. You know, the one about people having their donations deferred if they’re really in love. They’re convinced we know all about it, but no one said anything like that at Hailsham. At least, I never heard anything like that, did you, Kath? No, it’s just something going around recently among the veterans. And people like Ruth, they’ve been stoking it up.’

I looked at him carefully, but it was hard to tell if he’d just spoken with mischievous affection or else a kind of

disgust. I could see anyway there was something else on his mind, nothing to do with Ruth, so I didn't say anything and waited. Eventually he came to a complete halt and started to poke around with his foot a squashed paper cup on the ground.

'Actually, Kath,' he said, 'I've been thinking about it for a while. I'm sure we're right, there was no talk like that when we were at Hailsham. But there were a lot of things that didn't make sense back then. And I've been thinking, if it's true, this rumour, then it could explain quite a lot. Stuff we used to puzzle over.'

'What do you mean? What sort of stuff?'

'The Gallery, for instance.' Tommy had lowered his voice and I stepped in closer, just as though we were still at Hailsham, talking in the dinner queue or beside the pond.

'We never got to the bottom of it, what the Gallery was for. Why Madame took away all the best work. But now I think I know. Kath, you remember that time everyone was arguing about tokens? Whether they should get them or not to make up for stuff they'd had taken away by Madame? And Roy J. went in to see Miss Emily about it? Well, there was something Miss Emily said then, something she let drop, and that's what's been making me think.'

Two women were passing by with dogs on leads, and although it was completely stupid, we both stopped talking until they'd gone further up the slope and out of earshot. Then I said:

'What thing, Tommy? What thing Miss Emily let drop?'

'When Roy J. asked her why Madame took our stuff away. Do you remember what she's supposed to have said?'

'I remember her saying it was a privilege, and we should be proud ...'

'But that wasn't all.' Tommy's voice was now down to a whisper. 'What she told Roy, what she let slip, which she

probably didn't mean to let slip, do you remember, Kath? She told Roy that things like pictures, poetry, all that kind of stuff, she said they *revealed what you were like inside*. She said *they revealed your soul.*'

When he said this, I suddenly remembered a drawing Laura had done once of her intestines and laughed. But something was coming back to me.

'That's right,' I said. 'I remember. So what are you getting at?'

'What I think,' said Tommy slowly, 'is this. Suppose it's true, what the veterans are saying. Suppose some special arrangement *has* been made for Hailsham students. Suppose two people say they're truly in love, and they want extra time to be together. Then you see, Kath, there has to be a way to judge if they're really telling the truth. That they aren't just saying they're in love, just to defer their donations. You see how difficult it could be to decide? Or a couple might really believe they're in love, but it's just a sex thing. Or just a crush. You see what I mean, Kath? It'll be really hard to judge, and it's probably impossible to get it right every time. But the point is, whoever decides, Madame or whoever it is, *they need something to go on.*'

I nodded slowly. 'So that's why they took away our art ...'

'It could be. Madame's got a gallery somewhere filled with stuff by students from when they were tiny. Suppose two people come up and say they're in love. She can find the art they've done over years and years. She can see if they go. If they match. Don't forget, Kath, what she's got reveals our souls. She could decide for herself what's a good match and what's just a stupid crush.'

I started to walk slowly again, hardly looking in front of me. Tommy fell in step, waiting for my response.

‘I’m not sure,’ I said in the end. ‘What you’re saying could certainly explain Miss Emily, what she said to Roy. And I suppose it explains too why the guardians always thought it was so important for us, to be able to paint and all of that.’

‘Exactly. And that’s why …’ Tommy sighed and went on with some effort. ‘That’s why Miss Lucy had to admit she’d been wrong, telling me it didn’t really matter. She’d said that because she was sorry for me at the time. But she knew deep down it *did* matter. The thing about being from Hailsham was that you had this special chance. And if you didn’t get stuff into Madame’s gallery, then you were as good as throwing that chance away.’

It was after he said this that it suddenly dawned on me, with a real chill, where this was leading. I stopped and turned to him, but before I could speak, Tommy let out a laugh.

‘If I’ve got this right, then, well, it looks like I might have blown my chance.’

‘Tommy, did you *ever* get anything into the Gallery? When you were much younger maybe?’

He was already shaking his head. ‘You know how useless I was. And then there was that stuff with Miss Lucy. I know she meant well. She was sorry for me and she wanted to help me. I’m sure she did. But if my theory’s right, well …’

‘It’s only a theory, Tommy,’ I said. ‘You know what your theories are like.’

I’d wanted to lighten things a bit, but I couldn’t get the tone right, and it must have been obvious I was still thinking hard about what he’d just said. ‘Maybe they’ve got all sorts of ways to judge,’ I said after a moment. ‘Maybe the art’s just one out of all kinds of different ways.’

Tommy shook his head again. 'Like what? Madame never got to know us. She wouldn't remember us individually. Besides, it's probably not just Madame that decides. There's probably people higher up than her, people who never set foot in Hailsham. I've thought about this a lot, Kath. It all fits. That's why the Gallery was so important, and why the guardians wanted us to work so hard on our art and our poetry. Kath, what are you thinking?'

Sure enough, I'd drifted off a bit. Actually, I was thinking about that afternoon I'd been alone in our dorm, playing the tape we'd just found; how I'd been swaying around, clutching a pillow to my breast, and how Madame had been watching me from the doorway, tears in her eyes. Even this episode, for which I'd never yet found a convincing explanation, seemed to fit Tommy's theory. In my head, I'd been imagining I was holding a baby, but of course, there'd have been no way for Madame to know that. She'd have supposed I was holding a lover in my arms. If Tommy's theory was right, if Madame was connected to us for the sole purpose of deferring our donations when, later on, we fell in love, then it made sense - for all her usual coldness towards us - she'd be really moved stumbling on a scene like that. All this flashed through my mind, and I was on the point of blurting it all out to Tommy. But I held back because I wanted now to play down his theory.

'I was just thinking over what you said, that's all,' I said. 'We should start going back now. It might take us a while to find the car park.'

We began to retrace our steps down the slope, but we knew we still had time and didn't hurry.

'Tommy,' I asked, after we'd been walking for a while. 'Have you said any of this to Ruth?'

He shook his head and went on walking. Eventually he said: 'The thing is, Ruth believes it all, everything the veterans are saying. Okay, she likes to pretend she knows

much more than she does. But she does believe it. And sooner or later, she's going to want to take it further.'

'You mean, she'll want to ...'

'Yeah. She'll want to apply. But she hasn't thought it through yet. Not the way we just did.'

'You've never told her your theory about the Gallery?'

He shook his head again, but said nothing.

'If you tell her your theory,' I said, 'and she buys it ... Well, she's going to be furious.'

Tommy seemed thoughtful, but still didn't say anything. It wasn't until we were back down in the narrow side-streets that he spoke again, and then his voice was suddenly sheepish.

'Actually, Kath,' he said, 'I *have* been doing some stuff. Just in case. I haven't told anyone, not even Ruth. It's just a start.'

That was when I first heard about his imaginary animals. When he started to describe what he'd been doing - I didn't actually see anything until a few weeks later - I found it hard to show much enthusiasm. In fact, I have to admit, I was reminded of the original elephant-in-the-grass picture that had started off all Tommy's problems at Hailsham. The inspiration, he explained, had come from an old children's book with the back cover missing which he'd found behind one of the sofas at the Cottages. He'd then persuaded Keffer's to give him one of the little black notebooks he scribbled his figures in, and since then, Tommy had finished at least a dozen of his fantastic creatures.

'The thing is, I'm doing them really small. Tiny. I'd never thought of that at Hailsham. I think maybe that's where I went wrong. If you make them tiny, and you have to because the pages are only about this big, then everything changes. It's like they come to life by themselves. Then you have to

draw in all these different details for them. You have to think about how they'd protect themselves, how they'd reach things. Honest, Kath, it's nothing like anything I ever did at Hailsham.'

He started describing his favourites, but I couldn't really concentrate; the more excited he got telling me about his animals, the more uneasy I was growing. 'Tommy,' I wanted to say to him, 'you're going to make yourself a laughing stock all over again. Imaginary animals? What's up with you?' But I didn't. I just looked at him cautiously and kept saying: 'That sounds really good, Tommy.'

Then he said at one point: 'Like I said, Kath, Ruth doesn't know about the animals.' And when he said this, he seemed to remember everything else, and why we'd been talking about his animals in the first place, and the energy faded from his face. Then we were walking in silence again, and as we came out onto the High Street, I said:

'Well, even if there's something to your theory, Tommy, there's a lot more we'll have to find out. For one thing, how's a couple supposed to apply? What are they supposed to do? There aren't exactly forms lying about.'

'I've been wondering about all of that too.' His voice was quiet and solemn again. 'As far as I can see, there's only one obvious way forward. And that's to find Madame.'

I gave this a think, then said: 'That might not be so easy. We don't really know a thing about her. We don't even know her name. And you remember how she was? She didn't like us even coming near her. Even if we did ever track her down, I don't see her helping much.'

Tommy sighed. 'I know,' he said. 'Well, I suppose we've got time. None of us are in any particular hurry.'

By the time we got back to the car park, the afternoon had clouded over and was growing pretty chilly. There was no sign

of the others yet, so Tommy and I leaned against our car and looked towards the mini-golf course. No one was playing and the flags were fluttering away in the wind. I didn't want to talk any more about Madame, the Gallery or any of the rest of it, so I got the Judy Bridgewater tape out from its little bag and gave it a good look-over.

'Thanks for buying this for me,' I said.

Tommy smiled. 'If I'd got to that tape box and you were on the LPs, I'd have found it first. It was bad luck for poor old Tommy.'

'It doesn't make any difference. We only found it because you said to look for it. I'd forgotten about all this lost-corner stuff. After Ruth going on like that, I was in such a mood. Judy Bridgewater. My old friend. It's like she's never been away. I wonder who stole it back then?'

For a moment, we turned towards the street, looking for the others.

'You know,' Tommy said, 'when Ruth said what she did earlier on, and I saw how upset you looked ...'

'Leave it, Tommy. I'm all right about it now. And I'm not going to bring it up with her when she comes back.'

'No, that's not what I was getting at.' He took his weight off the car, turned and pressed a foot against the front tyre as though to test it. 'What I meant was, I realised then, when Ruth came out with all that, I realised why you keep looking through those porn mags. Okay, I haven't *realised*. It's just a theory. Another of my theories. But when Ruth said what she did earlier on, it kind of clicked.'

I knew he was looking at me, but I kept my eyes straight ahead and made no response.

'But I still don't really get it, Kath,' he said eventually. 'Even if what Ruth says is right, and I don't think it is, why are you looking through old porn mags for

your possibles? Why would your model have to be one of those girls?'

I shrugged, still not looking at him. 'I don't claim it makes sense. It's just something I do.' There were tears filling my eyes now and I tried to hide them from Tommy. But my voice wobbled as I said: 'If it annoys you so much, I won't do it any more.'

I don't know if Tommy saw the tears. In any case, I'd got them under control by the time he came close to me and gave my shoulders a squeeze. This was something he'd done before from time to time, it wasn't anything special or new. But somehow I did feel better and gave a little laugh. He let go of me then, but we stayed almost touching, side by side again, our backs to the car.

'Okay, there's no sense in it,' I said. 'But we all do it, don't we? We all wonder about our model. After all, that's why we came out here today. We all do it.'

'Kath, you know, don't you, I haven't told anyone. About that time in the boiler hut. Not Ruth, not anyone. But I just don't get it. I don't get what it's about.'

'All right, Tommy. I'll tell you. It may not make any more sense after you've heard it, but you can hear it anyway. It's just that sometimes, every now and again, I get these really strong feelings when I want to have sex. Sometimes it just comes over me and for an hour or two it's scary. For all I know, I could end up doing it with old Keffer, it's that bad. That's why ... that's the only reason I did it with Hughie. And with Oliver. It didn't mean anything deep down. I don't even like them much. I don't know what it is, and afterwards, when it's passed over, it's just scary. That's why I started thinking, well, it has to come from somewhere. It must be to do with the way I am.' I stopped, but when Tommy didn't say anything, I went on: 'So I thought if I find her picture, in one of those magazines, it'll at least explain it. I wouldn't want to go and find her or anything.'

It would just, you know, kind of explain why I am the way I am. '

'I get it too sometimes,' said Tommy. 'When I really feel like doing it. I reckon everyone does, if they're honest. I don't think there's anything different about you, Kath. In fact, I get like that quite a lot ...' He broke off and laughed, but I didn't laugh with him.

'What I'm talking about's different,' I said. 'I've watched other people. They get in the mood for it, but that doesn't make them do things. They never do things like I've done, going with people like that Hughie ...'

I might have started crying again, because I felt Tommy's arm going back around my shoulders. Upset as I was, I remained conscious of where we were, and I made a kind of check in my mind that if Ruth and the others came up the street, even if they saw us at that moment, there'd be no room for misunderstanding. We were still side by side, leaning against the car, and they'd see I was upset about something and Tommy was just comforting me. Then I heard him say:

'I don't think it's necessarily a bad thing. Once you find someone, Kath, someone you really want to be with, then it could be really good. Remember what the guardians used to tell us? If it's with the right person, it makes you feel really good. '

I made a movement with my shoulder to get Tommy's arm off me, then took a deep breath. 'Let's forget it. Anyway, I've got much better at controlling these moods when they come on. So let's just forget it. '

'All the same, Kath, it's stupid looking through those magazines. '

'It's stupid, okay. Tommy, let's leave it. I'm all right now. '

I don't remember what else we talked about until the others showed up. We didn't discuss any more of those serious things, and if the others sensed something still in the air, they didn't remark on it. They were in good spirits, and Ruth in particular seemed determined to make up for the bad scene earlier on. She came up and touched my cheek, making some joke or other, and once we got in the car, she made sure the jovial mood kept going. She and Chrissie had found everything about Martin comical and were relishing the chance to laugh openly about him now they'd left his flat. Rodney looked disapproving, and I realised Ruth and Chrissie were making a song and dance of it mainly to tease him. It all seemed good-natured enough. But what I noticed was that whereas before Ruth would have taken the opportunity to keep me and Tommy in the dark about all the jokes and references, throughout the journey back, she kept turning to me and explaining carefully everything they were talking about. In fact it got a bit tiring after a while because it was like everything being said in the car was for our - or at least my - special benefit. But I was pleased Ruth was making such a fuss. I understood - as did Tommy - that she'd recognised she'd behaved badly before, and this was her way of admitting it. We were sitting with her in the middle, just as we'd done on the journey out, but now she spent all her time talking to me, turning occasionally to her other side to give Tommy a little squeeze or the odd kiss. It was a good atmosphere, and no one brought up Ruth's possible or anything like that. And I didn't mention the Judy Bridgewater tape Tommy had bought me. I knew Ruth would find out about it sooner or later, but I didn't want her to find out just yet. On that journey home, with the darkness setting in over those long empty roads, it felt like the three of us were close again and I didn't want anything to come along and break that mood.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The odd thing about our Norfolk trip was that once we got back, we hardly talked about it. So much so that for a while all kinds of rumours went around about what we'd been up to. Even then, we kept pretty quiet, until eventually people lost interest.

I'm still not sure why this happened. Perhaps we felt it was up to Ruth, that it was her call how much got told, and we were waiting to take our cue from her. And Ruth, for one reason or another - maybe she was embarrassed how things had turned out with her possible, maybe she was enjoying the mystery - had remained completely closed on the subject. Even among ourselves, we avoided talking about the trip.

This air of secrecy made it easier for me to keep from telling Ruth about Tommy buying me the Judy Bridgewater tape. I didn't go as far as actually hiding the thing. It was always there in my collection, in one of my little piles next to the skirting board. But I always made sure not to leave it out or on top of a pile. There were times when I wanted badly to tell her, when I wanted us to reminisce about Hailsham with the tape playing in the background. But the further away we got from the Norfolk trip, and I still hadn't told her, the more it came to feel like a guilty secret. Of course, she did spot the tape in the end, much later, and it was probably a much worse time for her to find it, but that's the way your luck sometimes goes.

As spring came on, there seemed to be more and more veterans leaving to start their training, and though they left without fuss in the usual way, the increased numbers made them impossible to ignore. I'm not sure what our feelings were, witnessing these departures. I suppose to some extent we envied the people leaving. It did feel like they

were headed for a bigger, more exciting world. But of course, without a doubt, their going made us increasingly uneasy.

Then, I think it was around April, Alice F. became the first of our Hailsham bunch to leave, and not long after that Gordon C. did too. They'd both asked to start their training, and went off with cheerful smiles, but after that, for our lot anyway, the atmosphere at the Cottages changed forever.

Many veterans, too, seemed affected by the flurry of departures, and maybe as a direct result, there was a fresh spate of rumours of the sort Chrissie and Rodney had spoken about in Norfolk. Talk went around of students, somewhere else in the country, getting deferrals because they'd shown they were in love - and now, just sometimes, the talk was of students with no connections to Hailsham. Here again, the five of us who'd been to Norfolk backed away from these topics: even Chrissie and Rodney, who'd once been at the centre of just this sort of talk, now looked awkwardly away when these rumours got going.

The 'Norfolk effect' even got to me and Tommy. I'd been assuming, once we were back, we'd be taking little opportunities, whenever we were alone, to exchange more thoughts on his theory about the Gallery. But for some reason - and it wasn't any more him than me - this never really happened. The one exception, I suppose, was that time in the goosehouse, the morning when he showed me his imaginary animals.

The barn we called the goosehouse was on the outer fringes of the Cottages, and because the roof leaked badly and the door was permanently off its hinges, it wasn't used for anything much other than as a place for couples to sneak off to in the warmer months. By then I'd taken to going for long solitary walks, and I think I was setting out on one of these, and had just gone past the goosehouse, when I heard Tommy calling me. I turned to see him in his bare feet, perched awkwardly on a

bit of dry ground surrounded by huge puddles, one hand on the side of the barn to keep his balance.

‘What happened to your Wellies, Tommy?’ I asked. Aside from his bare feet, he was dressed in his usual thick jumper and jeans.

‘I was, you know, *drawing* ...’ He laughed, and held up a little black notebook similar to the ones Keffer’s always went around with. It was by then over two months since the Norfolk trip, but I realised as soon as I saw the notebook what this was about. But I waited for him to say:

‘If you like, Kath, I’ll show you.’

He led the way into the goosehouse, hopping over the jaggy ground. I’d expected it to be dark inside, but the sunlight was pouring through the skylights. Pushed against one wall were various bits of furniture heaved out over the past year or so – broken tables, old fridges, that kind of thing. Tommy appeared to have dragged into the middle of the floor a two-seater settee with stuffing poking out of its black plastic, and I guessed he’d been sitting in it doing his drawing when I’d gone past. Just nearby, his Wellingtons were lying fallen on their sides, his football socks peeking out of the tops.

Tommy jumped back onto the settee, nursing his big toe.

‘Sorry my feet poo a bit. I took everything off without realising. I think I’ve cut myself now. Kath, do you want to see these? Ruth looked at them last week, so I’ve been meaning to show you ever since. No one’s seen them apart from Ruth. Have a look, Kath.’

That was when I first saw his animals. When he’d told me about them in Norfolk, I’d seen in my mind scaled-down versions of the sort of pictures we’d done when we were small. So I was taken aback at how densely detailed each one was. In fact, it took a moment to see they were animals at all. The first impression was like one you’d get if you took

the back off a radio set: tiny canals, weaving tendons, miniature screws and wheels were all drawn with obsessive precision, and only when you held the page away could you see it was some kind of armadillo, say, or a bird.

‘It’s my second book,’ Tommy said. ‘There’s no way anyone’s seeing the first one! It took me a while to get going.’

He was lying back on the settee now, tugging a sock over his foot and trying to sound casual, but I knew he was anxious for my reaction. Even so, for some time, I didn’t come up with wholehearted praise. Maybe it was partly my worry that any artwork was liable to get him into trouble all over again. But also, what I was looking at was so different from anything the guardians had taught us to do at Hailsham, I didn’t know how to judge it. I did say something like:

‘God, Tommy, these must take so much concentration. I’m surprised you can see well enough in here to do all this tiny stuff.’ And then, as I flicked through the pages, perhaps because I was still struggling to find the right thing to say, I came out with: ‘I wonder what Madame would say if she saw these.’

I’d said it in a jokey tone, and Tommy responded with a little snigger, but then there was something hanging in the air that hadn’t been there before. I went on turning the pages of the notebook – it was about a quarter full – not looking up at him, wishing I’d never brought up Madame. Finally I heard him say:

‘I suppose I’ll have to get a lot better before *she* gets to see any of it.’

I wasn’t sure if this was a cue for me to say how good the drawings were, but by this time, I was becoming genuinely drawn to these fantastical creatures in front of me. For all their busy, metallic features, there was something sweet, even vulnerable about each of them. I remembered him telling

me, in Norfolk, that he worried, even as he created them, how they'd protect themselves or be able to reach and fetch things, and looking at them now, I could feel the same sort of concerns. Even so, for some reason I couldn't fathom, something continued to stop me coming out with praise. Then Tommy said:

'Anyway, it's not only because of all that I'm doing the animals. I just like doing them. I was wondering, Kath, if I should go on keeping it secret. I was thinking, maybe there's no harm in people knowing I do these. Hannah still does her watercolours, a lot of the veterans do stuff. I don't mean I'm going to go round *showing* everyone exactly. But I was thinking, well, there's no reason why I should keep it all secret any more.'

At last I was able to look up at him and say with some conviction: 'Tommy, there's no reason, no reason at all. These are good. Really, really good. In fact, if that's why you're hiding in here now, it's really daft.'

He didn't say anything in response, but a kind of smirk appeared over his face, like he was enjoying a joke with himself, and I knew how happy I'd made him. I don't think we spoke much more to each other after that. I think before long he got his Wellingtons on, and we both left the goosehouse. As I say, that was about the only time Tommy and I touched directly on his theory that spring.

Then the summer came, and the one year point from when we'd first arrived. A batch of new students turned up in a minibus, much as we'd done, but none of them were from Hailsham. This was in some ways a relief: I think we'd all been getting anxious about how a fresh lot of Hailsham students might complicate things. But for me at least, this non-appearance of Hailsham students just added to a feeling that Hailsham was now far away in the past, and that the ties binding our old crowd were fraying. It wasn't just that people like Hannah were always talking about following

Alice's example and starting their training; others, like Laura, had found boyfriends who weren't Hailsham and you could almost forget they'd ever had much to do with us.

And then there was the way Ruth kept pretending to forget things about Hailsham. Okay, these were mostly trivial things, but I got more and more irritated with her. There was the time, for instance, we were sitting around the kitchen table after a long breakfast, Ruth, me and a few veterans. One of the veterans had been talking about how eating cheese late at night always disturbed your sleep, and I'd turned to Ruth to say something like: 'You remember how Miss Geraldine always used to tell us that?' It was just a casual aside, and all it needed was for Ruth to smile or nod. But she made a point of staring back at me blankly, like she didn't have the faintest what I was talking about. Only when I said to the veterans, by way of explanation: 'One of our guardians,' did Ruth give a frowning nod, as though she'd just that moment remembered.

I let her get away with it that time. But there was another occasion when I didn't, that evening we were sitting out in the ruined bus shelter. I got angry then because it was one thing to play this game in front of veterans; quite another when it was just the two of us, in the middle of a serious talk. I'd referred, just in passing, to the fact that at Hailsham, the short-cut down to the pond through the rhubarb patch was out of bounds. When she put on her puzzled look, I abandoned whatever point I'd been trying to make and said: 'Ruth, there's no way you've forgotten. So don't give me that.'

Perhaps if I hadn't pulled her up so sharply - perhaps if I'd just made a joke of it and carried on - she'd have seen how absurd it was and laughed. But because I'd snapped at her, Ruth glared back and said:

'What does it matter anyway? What's the rhubarb patch got to do with any of this? Just get on with what you were

saying. '

It was getting late, the summer evening was fading, and the old bus shelter felt musty and damp after a recent thunderstorm. So I didn't have the head to go into why it mattered so much. And though I did just drop it and carry on with the discussion we'd been having, the atmosphere had gone chilly, and could hardly have helped us get through the difficult matter in hand.

But to explain what we were talking about that evening, I'll have to go back a little bit. In fact, I'll have to go back several weeks, to the earlier part of the summer. I'd been having a relationship with one of the veterans, a boy called Lenny, which, to be honest, had been mainly about the sex. But then he'd suddenly opted to start his training and left. This unsettled me a little, and Ruth had been great about it, watching over me without seeming to make a fuss, always ready to cheer me up if I seemed gloomy. She also kept doing little favours for me, like making me sandwiches, or taking on parts of my cleaning rota.

Then about a fortnight after Lenny had gone, the two of us were sitting in my attic room some time after midnight chatting over mugs of tea, and Ruth got me really laughing about Lenny. He hadn't been such a bad guy, but once I'd started telling Ruth some of the more intimate things about him, it did seem like everything to do with him was hilarious, and we just kept laughing and laughing. Then at one point Ruth was running a finger up and down the cassettes stacked in little piles along my skirting board. She was doing this in an absent-minded sort of way while she kept laughing, but afterwards, I went through a spell of suspecting it hadn't been by chance at all; that she'd noticed it there maybe days before, perhaps even examined it to make sure, then had waited for the best time to 'find' it. Years later, I gently hinted this to Ruth, and she didn't seem to know what I was talking about, so maybe I was wrong. Anyway, there we were, laughing and laughing each time I came

out with another detail about poor Lenny, and then suddenly it was like a plug had been pulled out. There was Ruth, lying on her side across my rug, peering at the spines of the cassettes in the low light, and then the Judy Bridgewater tape was in her hands. After what seemed an eternity, she said:

‘So how long have you had this again?’

I told her, as neutrally as I could, about how Tommy and I had come across it that day while she’d been gone with the others. She went on examining it, then said:

‘So Tommy found it for you.’

‘No. I found it. I saw it first.’

‘Neither of you told me.’ She shrugged. ‘At least, if you did, I never heard.’

‘The Norfolk thing was true,’ I said. ‘You know, about it being the lost corner of England.’

It did flash through my mind Ruth would pretend not to remember this reference, but she nodded thoughtfully.

‘I should have remembered at the time,’ she said. ‘I might have found my red scarf then.’

We both laughed and the uneasiness seemed to pass. But there was something about the way Ruth put the tape back without discussing it any further that made me think it wasn’t finished with yet.

I don’t know if the way the conversation went after that was something controlled by Ruth in the light of her discovery, or if we were headed that way anyway, and that it was only afterwards Ruth realised she could do with it what she did. We went back to discussing Lenny, in particular a lot of stuff about how he had sex, and we were laughing away again. At that point, I think I was just relieved she’d finally found the tape and not made a huge scene about it,

and so maybe I wasn't being as careful as I might have been. Because before long, we'd drifted from laughing about Lenny to laughing about Tommy. At first it had all felt good-natured enough, like we were just being affectionate towards him. But then we were laughing about his animals.

As I say, I've never been sure whether or not Ruth deliberately moved things round to this. To be fair, I can't even say for certain she was the one who first mentioned the animals. And once we started, I was laughing just as much as she was - about how one of them looked like it was wearing underpants, how another had to have been inspired by a squashed hedgehog. I suppose I should have said in there somewhere that the animals were good, that he'd done really well to have got where he had with them. But I didn't. That was partly because of the tape; and maybe, if I have to be honest, because I was pleased by the notion that Ruth wasn't taking the animals seriously, and everything that implied. I think when we eventually broke up for the night, we felt as close as we'd ever done. She touched my cheek on her way out, saying: 'It's really good the way you always keep your spirits up, Kathy.'

So I wasn't prepared at all for what happened at the churchyard several days later. Ruth had discovered that summer a lovely old church about half a mile from the Cottages, which had behind it rambling grounds with very old gravestones leaning in the grass. Everything was overgrown, but it was really peaceful and Ruth had taken to doing a lot of her reading there, near the back railings, on a bench under a big willow. I hadn't at first been too keen on this development, remembering how the previous summer we'd all sat around together in the grass right outside the Cottages. All the same, if I was headed that way on one of my walks, and I knew Ruth was likely to be there, I'd find myself going through the low wooden gate and along the overgrown path past the gravestones. On that afternoon, it was warm and still, and I'd come down the path in a dreamy mood, reading off

names on the stones, when I saw not only Ruth, but Tommy on the bench under the willow.

Ruth was actually sitting on the bench, while Tommy was standing with one foot up on its rusty armrest, doing a kind of stretching exercise as they talked. It didn't look like they were having any big conversation and I didn't hesitate to go up to them. Maybe I should have picked up something in the way they greeted me, but I'm sure there wasn't anything obvious. I had some gossip I was dying to tell them - something about one of the newcomers - and so for a while it was just me blabbing on while they nodded and asked the odd question. It was some time before it occurred to me something wasn't right, and even then, when I paused and asked: 'Did I interrupt something here?' it was in a jokey sort of way.

But then Ruth said: 'Tommy's been telling me about his big theory. He says he's already told you. Ages ago. But now, very kindly, he's allowing me to share in it too.'

Tommy gave a sigh and was about to say something, but Ruth said in a mock whisper: 'Tommy's big Gallery theory!'

Then they were both looking at me, like I was now in charge of everything and it was up to me what happened next.

'It's not a bad theory,' I said. 'It might be right, I don't know. What do you think, Ruth?'

'I had to really dig it out of Sweet Boy here. Not very keen at all on letting me in on it, were you, sweetie gums? It was only when I kept pressing him to tell me what was behind all this *art*.'

'I'm not doing it just for that,' Tommy said sulkily. His foot was still up on the armrest and he kept on with his stretching. 'All I said was, if it *was* right, about the Gallery, then I could always try and put in the animals ...'

'Tommy, sweetie, don't make a fool of yourself in front of our friend. Do it to me, that's all right. But not in

front of our dear Kathy. ’

‘I don’t see why it’s such a joke,’ Tommy said. ‘It’s as good a theory as anyone else’s.’

‘It’s not the *theory* people will find funny, sweetie gums. They might well buy the theory, right enough. But the idea that you’ll swing it by showing Madame your little animals ...’ Ruth smiled and shook her head.

Tommy said nothing and continued with his stretching. I wanted to come to his defence and was trying to think of just the right thing that would make him feel better without making Ruth even more angry. But that was when Ruth said what she did. It felt bad enough at the time, but I had no idea in the churchyard that day how far-reaching the repercussions would be. What she said was:

‘It’s not just me, sweetie. Kathy here finds your animals a complete hoot.’

My first instinct was to deny it, then just to laugh. But there was a real authority about the way Ruth had spoken, and the three of us knew each other well enough to know there had to be something behind her words. So in the end I stayed silent, while my mind searched back frantically, and with a cold horror, settled on that night up in my room with our mugs of tea. Then Ruth said:

‘As long as people think you’re doing those little creatures as a kind of joke, fine. But don’t give out you’re serious about it. Please.’

Tommy had stopped his stretching and was looking questioningly at me. Suddenly he was really child-like again, with no front whatsoever, and I could see too something dark and troubling gathering behind his eyes.

‘Look, Tommy, you’ve got to understand,’ Ruth went on. ‘If Kathy and I have a good laugh about you, it doesn’t

really matter. Because that's just us. But please, let's not bring everyone else in on it.'

I've thought about those moments over and over. I should have found something to say. I could have just denied it, though Tommy probably wouldn't have believed me. And to try to explain the thing truthfully would have been too complicated. But I could have done something. I could have challenged Ruth, told her she was twisting things, that even if I might have laughed, it wasn't in the way she was implying. I could even have gone up to Tommy and hugged him, right there in front of Ruth. That's something that came to me years later, and probably wasn't a real option at the time, given the person I was, and the way the three of us were with each other. But that might have done it, where words would only have got us in deeper.

But I didn't say or do anything. It was partly, I suppose, that I was so floored by the fact that Ruth would come out with such a trick. I remember a huge tiredness coming over me, a kind of lethargy in the face of the tangled mess before me. It was like being given a maths problem when your brain's exhausted, and you know there's some far-off solution, but you can't work up the energy even to give it a go. Something in me just gave up. A voice went: 'All right, let him think the absolute worst. Let him think it, let him think it.' And I suppose I looked at him with resignation, with a face that said: 'Yes, it's true, what else did you expect?' And I can recall now, as fresh as anything, Tommy's own face, the anger receding for the moment, being replaced by an expression almost of wonder, like I was a rare butterfly he'd come across on a fence-post.

It wasn't that I thought I'd burst into tears or lose my temper or anything like that. But I decided just to turn and go. Even later that day, I realised this was a bad mistake. All I can say is that at the time what I feared more than anything was that one or the other of them would stalk off first, and I'd be left with the remaining one. I don't know

why, but it didn't seem an option for more than one of us to storm off, and I wanted to make sure that one was me. So I turned and marched back the way I'd come, past the gravestones towards the low wooden gate, and for several minutes, I felt as though I'd triumphed; that now they'd been left in each other's company, they were suffering a fate they thoroughly deserved.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

As I've said, it wasn't until a long time afterwards - long after I'd left the Cottages - that I realised just how significant our little encounter in the churchyard had been. I was upset at the time, yes. But I didn't believe it to be anything so different from other tiffs we'd had. It never occurred to me that our lives, until then so closely interwoven, could unravel and separate over a thing like that.

But the fact was, I suppose, there were powerful tides tugging us apart by then, and it only needed something like that to finish the task. If we'd understood that back then - who knows? - maybe we'd have kept a tighter hold of one another.

For one thing, more and more students were going off to be carers, and among our old Hailsham crowd, there was a growing feeling this was the natural course to follow. We still had our essays to finish, but it was well known we didn't really have to finish them if we chose to start our training. In our early days at the Cottages, the idea of not finishing our essays would have been unthinkable. But the more distant Hailsham grew, the less important the essays seemed. I had this idea at the time - and I was probably right - that if our sense of the essays being important was allowed to seep away, then so too would whatever bound us together as Hailsham students. That's why I tried for a while to keep going our enthusiasm for all the reading and note-taking. But with no reason to suppose we'd ever see our guardians again, and with so many students moving on, it soon began to feel like a lost cause.

Anyway, in the days after that talk in the churchyard, I did what I could to put it behind us. I behaved towards both

Tommy and Ruth as though nothing special had occurred, and they did much the same. But there was always something there now, and it wasn't just between me and them. Though they still made a show of being a couple - they still did the punching-on-the-arm thing when they parted - I knew them well enough to see they'd grown quite distant from each other.

Of course I felt bad about it all, especially about Tommy's animals. But it wasn't as simple any more as going to him and saying sorry and explaining how things really were. A few years earlier, even six months earlier, it might have worked out that way. Tommy and I would have talked it over and sorted it out. But somehow, by that second summer, things were different. Maybe it was because of this relationship with Lenny, I don't know. Anyway, talking to Tommy wasn't so easy any more. On the surface, at least, it was much like before, but we never mentioned the animals or what had happened in the churchyard.

So that was what had been happening just before I had that conversation with Ruth in the old bus shelter, when I got so annoyed with her for pretending to forget about the rhubarb patch at Hailsham. Like I said, I'd probably not have got nearly so cross if it hadn't come up in the middle of such a serious conversation. Okay, we'd got through a lot of the meat of it by then, but even so, even if we were just easing off and chatting by that point, that was still all part of our trying to sort things with each other, and there was no room for any pretend stuff like that.

What had happened was this. Although something had come between me and Tommy, it hadn't quite got like that with Ruth - or at least that's what I'd thought - and I'd decided it was time I talked with her about what had happened in the churchyard. We'd just had one of those summer days of rain and thunderstorms, and we'd been cooped up indoors despite the humidity. So when it appeared to clear for the evening, with a nice pink sunset, I suggested to Ruth we get a bit of air. There was a steep footpath I'd discovered leading up

along the edge of the valley and just where it came out onto the road was an old bus shelter. The buses had stopped coming ages ago, the bus stop sign had been taken away, and on the wall at the back of the shelter, there was left only the frame of what must have once been a glassed-in notice displaying all the bus times. But the shelter itself - which was like a lovingly constructed wooden hut with one side open to the fields going down the valley side - was still standing, and even had its bench intact. So that's where Ruth and I were sitting to get our breath back, looking at the cobwebs up on the rafters and the summer evening outside. Then I said something like:

'You know, Ruth, we should try and sort it out, what happened the other day.'

I'd made my voice conciliatory, and Ruth responded. She said immediately how daft it was, the three of us having rows over the most stupid things. She brought up other times we'd rowed and we laughed a bit about them. But I didn't really want Ruth just to bury the thing like that, so I said, still in the least challenging voice I could:

'Ruth, you know, I think sometimes, when you're in a couple, you don't see things as clearly as maybe someone can from the outside. Just sometimes.'

She nodded. 'That's probably right.'

'I don't want to interfere. But sometimes, just lately, I think Tommy's been quite upset. You know. About certain things you've said or done.'

I was worried Ruth would get angry, but she nodded and sighed. 'I think you're right,' she said in the end. 'I've been thinking about it a lot too.'

'Then maybe I shouldn't have brought it up. I should have known you'd see what was happening. It's not my business really.'

‘But it is, Kathy. You’re really one of us, and so it’s always your business. You’re right, it hasn’t been good. I know what you mean. That stuff the other day, about his animals. That wasn’t good. I told him I was sorry about that.’

‘I’m glad you talked it over. I didn’t know if you had.’

Ruth had been picking at some moulding flakes of wood on the bench beside her, and for a moment she seemed completely absorbed in this task. Then she said:

‘Look, Kathy, it’s good we’re talking now about Tommy. I’ve been wanting to tell you something, but I’ve never quite known how to say it, or when, really. Kathy, promise you won’t be too cross with me.’

I looked at her and said: ‘As long as it’s not about those T-shirts again.’

‘No, seriously. Promise you won’t get too cross. Because I’ve got to tell you this. I wouldn’t forgive myself if I kept quiet much longer.’

‘Okay, what is it?’

‘Kathy, I’ve been thinking this for some time. You’re no fool, and you can see that maybe me and Tommy, we might not be a couple for ever. That’s no tragedy. We were right for each other once. Whether we always will be, that’s anyone’s guess. And now there’s all this talk, about couples getting deferrals if they can prove, you know, that they’re really right. Okay, look, what I wanted to say, Kathy, is this. It’d be completely natural if you’d thought about, you know, what would happen if me and Tommy decided we shouldn’t be together any more. We’re not about to split, don’t get me wrong. But I’d think it was completely normal if you at least wondered about it. Well, Kathy, what you have to realise is that Tommy doesn’t see you like that. He really, really likes you, he thinks you’re really great. But I know he doesn’t see you

like, you know, a proper girlfriend. Besides ...' Ruth paused, then sighed. 'Besides, you know how Tommy is. He can be fussy.'

I stared at her. 'What do you mean?'

'You must know what I mean. Tommy doesn't like girls who've been with ... well, you know, with this person and that. It's just a thing he has. I'm sorry, Kathy, but it wouldn't be right not to have told you.'

I thought about it, then said: 'It's always good to know these things.'

I felt Ruth touch my arm. 'I knew you'd take it the right way. What you've got to understand, though, is that he thinks the world of you. He really does.'

I wanted to change the subject, but for the moment my mind was a blank. I suppose Ruth must have picked up on this, because she stretched out her arms and did a kind of yawn, saying:

'If I ever learn to drive a car, I'd take us all on a trip to some wild place. Dartmoor, say. The three of us, maybe Laura and Hannah too. I'd love to see all the bogs and stuff.'

We spent the next several minutes talking about what we'd do on a trip like that if we ever went on one. I asked where we'd stay, and Ruth said we could borrow a big tent. I pointed out the wind could get really fierce in places like that and our tent could easily blow away in the night. None of this was that serious. But it was around here I remembered the time back at Hailsham, when we'd still been Juniors and we were having a picnic by the pond with Miss Geraldine. James B. had been sent to the main house to fetch the cake we'd all baked earlier, but as he was carrying it back, a strong gust of wind had taken off the whole top layer of sponge, tossing it into the rhubarb leaves. Ruth said she

could only vaguely remember the incident, and I'd said, trying to clinch it for her memory:

'The thing was, he got into trouble because that proved he'd been coming down through the rhubarb patch.'

And that was when Ruth looked at me and said: 'Why? What was wrong with that?'

It was just the way she said it, suddenly so false even an onlooker, if there'd been one, would have seen through it. I sighed with irritation and said:

'Ruth, don't give me that. There's no way you've forgotten. You know that route was out of bounds.'

Maybe it was a bit sharp, the way I said it. Anyway, Ruth didn't back down. She continued pretending to remember nothing, and I got all the more irritated. And that was when she said:

'What does it matter anyway? What's the rhubarb patch got to do with anything? Just get on with what you were saying.'

After that I think we went back to talking in a more or less friendly way, and then before long we were making our way down the footpath in the half-light back to the Cottages. But the atmosphere never quite righted itself, and when we said our goodnights in front of the Black Barn, we parted without our usual little touches on the arms and shoulders.

It wasn't long after that I made my decision, and once I'd made it, I never wavered. I just got up one morning and told Keffer I wanted to start my training to become a carer. It was surprisingly easy. He was walking across the yard, his Wellingtons covered in mud, grumbling to himself and holding a piece of piping. I went up and told him, and he just looked at me like I'd bothered him about more firewood. Then he mumbled something about coming to see him later that afternoon to go through the forms. It was that easy.

It took a little while after that, of course, but the whole thing had been set in motion, and I was suddenly looking at everything - the Cottages, everybody there - in a different light. I was now one of the ones leaving, and soon enough, everyone knew it. Maybe Ruth thought we'd be spending hours talking about my future; maybe she thought she'd have a big influence on whether or not I changed my mind. But I kept a certain distance from her, just as I did from Tommy. We didn't really talk properly again at the Cottages, and before I knew it, I was saying my goodbyes.

PART THREE

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

For the most part being a carer's suited me fine. You could even say it's brought the best out of me. But some people just aren't cut out for it, and for them the whole thing becomes a real struggle. They might start off positively enough, but then comes all that time spent so close to the pain and the worry. And sooner or later a donor doesn't make it, even though, say, it's only the second donation and no one anticipated complications. When a donor completes like that, out of the blue, it doesn't make much difference what the nurses say to you afterwards, and neither does that letter saying how they're sure you did all you could and to keep up the good work. For a while at least, you're demoralised. Some of us learn pretty quick how to deal with it. But others - like Laura, say - they never do.

Then there's the solitude. You grow up surrounded by crowds of people, that's all you've ever known, and suddenly you're a carer. You spend hour after hour, on your own, driving across the country, centre to centre, hospital to hospital, sleeping in overnights, no one to talk to about your worries, no one to have a laugh with. Just now and again you run into a student you know - a carer or donor you recognise from the old days - but there's never much time. You're always in a rush, or else you're too exhausted to have a proper conversation. Soon enough, the long hours, the travelling, the broken sleep have all crept into your being and become part of you, so everyone can see it, in your posture, your gaze, the way you move and talk.

I don't claim I've been immune to all of this, but I've learnt to live with it. Some carers, though, their whole attitude lets them down. A lot of them, you can tell, are just going through the motions, waiting for the day they're told they can stop and become donors. It really gets me, too,

the way so many of them 'shrink' the moment they step inside a hospital. They don't know what to say to the whitecoats, they can't make themselves speak up on behalf of their donor. No wonder they end up feeling frustrated and blaming themselves when things go wrong. I try not to make a nuisance of myself, but I've figured out how to get my voice heard when I have to. And when things go badly, of course I'm upset, but at least I can feel I've done all I could and keep things in perspective.

Even the solitude, I've actually grown to quite like. That's not to say I'm not looking forward to a bit more companionship come the end of the year when I'm finished with all of this. But I do like the feeling of getting into my little car, knowing for the next couple of hours I'll have only the roads, the big grey sky and my daydreams for company. And if I'm in a town somewhere with several minutes to kill, I'll enjoy myself wandering about looking in the shop windows. Here in my bedsit, I've got these four desk-lamps, each a different colour, but all the same design - they have these ribbed necks you can bend whichever way you want. So I might go looking for a shop with another lamp like that in its window - not to buy, but just to compare with my ones at home.

Sometimes I get so immersed in my own company, if I unexpectedly run into someone I know, it's a bit of a shock and takes me a while to adjust. That's the way it was the morning I was walking across the windswept car park of the service station and spotted Laura, sitting behind the wheel of one of the parked cars, looking vacantly towards the motorway. I was still some way away, and just for a second, even though we hadn't met since the Cottages seven years before, I was tempted to ignore her and keep walking. An odd reaction, I know, considering she'd been one of my closest friends. As I say, it may have been partly because I didn't like being bumped out of my daydreams. But also, I suppose, when I saw Laura slumped in her car like that, I saw

immediately she'd become one of these carers I've just been describing, and a part of me just didn't want to find out much more about it.

But of course I did go to her. There was a chilly wind blowing against me as I walked over to her hatchback, parked away from the other vehicles. Laura was wearing a shapeless blue anorak, and her hair - a lot shorter than before - was sticking to her forehead. When I tapped on her window, she didn't start, or even look surprised to see me after all that time. It was almost like she'd been sitting there waiting, if not for me precisely, then for someone more or less like me from the old days. And now I'd shown up, her first thought seemed to be: 'At last!' Because I could see her shoulders move in a kind of sigh, then without further ado, she reached over to open the door for me.

We talked for about twenty minutes: I didn't leave until the last possible moment. A lot of it was about her, how exhausted she'd been, how difficult one of her donors was, how much she loathed this nurse or that doctor. I waited to see a flash of the old Laura, with the mischievous grin and inevitable wisecrack, but none of that came. She talked faster than she used to, and although she seemed pleased to see me, I sometimes got the impression it wouldn't have mattered much if it wasn't me, but someone else, so long as she got to talk.

Maybe we both felt there was something dangerous about bringing up the old days, because for ages we avoided any mention of them. In the end, though, we found ourselves talking about Ruth, who Laura had run into at a clinic a few years earlier, when Ruth was still a carer. I began quizzing her about how Ruth had been, but she was so unforthcoming, in the end I said to her:

'Look, you must have talked about *something*.'

Laura let out a long sigh. 'You know how it gets,' she said. 'We were both in a hurry.' Then she added: 'Anyway,

we hadn't parted the best of friends, back at the Cottages. So maybe we weren't so delighted to see one another.'

'I didn't realise you'd fallen out with her too,' I said.

She shrugged. 'It wasn't any big deal. You remember the way she was back then. If anything, after you left, she got worse. You know, always telling everyone what to do. So I was keeping out of her way, that was all. We never had a big fight or anything. So you haven't seen her since then?'

'No. Funny, but I've never even glimpsed her.'

'Yeah, it's funny. You'd think we'd all run into each other much more. I've seen Hannah a few times. And Michael H. too.' Then she said: 'I heard this rumour, that Ruth had a really bad first donation. Just a rumour, but I heard it more than once.'

'I heard that too,' I said.

'Poor Ruth.'

We were quiet for a moment. Then Laura asked: 'Is it right, Kathy? That they let you choose your donors now?'

She'd not asked in the accusing way people do sometimes, so I nodded and said: 'Not every time. But I did well with a few donors, so yeah, I get to have a say every now and then.'

'If you can choose,' Laura said, 'why don't you become Ruth's carer?'

I shrugged. 'I've thought about it. But I'm not sure it's such a great idea.'

Laura looked puzzled. 'But you and Ruth, you were so close.'

'Yeah, I suppose so. But like with you, Laura. She and I weren't such great friends by the end.'

‘Oh, but that was back then. She’s had a bad time. And I’ve heard she’s had trouble with her carers too. They’ve had to change them around a lot for her.’

‘Not surprising really,’ I said. ‘Can you imagine? Being Ruth’s carer?’

Laura laughed, and for a second a look came into her eyes that made me think she was finally going to come out with a crack. But then the light died, and she just went on sitting there looking tired.

We talked a little more about Laura’s problems – in particular about a certain nursing sister who seemed to have it in for her. Then it was time for me to go, and I reached for the door and was telling her we’d have to talk more the next time we met. But we were both of us by then acutely aware of something we’d not yet mentioned, and I think we both sensed there’d be something wrong about us parting like that. In fact, I’m pretty sure now, at that moment, our minds were running along exactly the same lines. Then she said:

‘It’s weird. Thinking it’s all gone now.’

I turned in my seat to face her again. ‘Yeah, it’s really strange,’ I said. ‘I can’t really believe it’s not there any more.’

‘It’s so weird,’ Laura said. ‘I suppose it shouldn’t make any difference to me now. But somehow it does.’

‘I know what you mean.’

It was that exchange, when we finally mentioned the closing of Hailsham, that suddenly brought us close again, and we hugged, quite spontaneously, not so much to comfort one another, but as a way of affirming Hailsham, the fact that it was still there in both our memories. Then I had to hurry off to my own car.

I’d first started hearing rumours about Hailsham closing a year or so before that meeting with Laura in the car park.

I'd be talking to a donor or a carer and they'd bring it up in passing, like they expected me to know all about it. 'You were at Hailsham, weren't you? So is it really true?' That sort of thing. Then one day I was coming out of a clinic in Suffolk and ran into Roger C., who'd been in the year below, and he told me with complete certainty it was about to happen. Hailsham was going to close any day and there were plans to sell the house and grounds to a hotel chain. I remember my first response when he told me this. I said: 'But what'll happen to all the students?' Roger obviously thought I'd meant the ones still there, the little ones dependent on their guardians, and he put on a troubled face and began speculating how they'd have to be transferred to other houses around the country, even though some of these would be a far cry from Hailsham. But of course, that wasn't what I'd meant. I'd meant *us*, all the students who'd grown up with me and were now spread across the country, carers and donors, all separated now but still somehow linked by the place we'd come from.

That same night, trying to get to sleep in an overnight, I kept thinking about something that had happened to me a few days earlier. I'd been in a seaside town in North Wales. It had been raining hard all morning, but after lunch, it had stopped and the sun had come out a bit. I was walking back to where I'd left my car, along one of those long straight seafront roads. There was hardly anyone else about, so I could see an unbroken line of wet paving stones stretching on in front of me. Then after a while a van pulled up, maybe thirty yards ahead of me, and a man got out dressed as a clown. He opened the back of the van and took out a bunch of helium balloons, about a dozen of them, and for a moment, he was holding the balloons in one hand, while he bent down and rummaged about in his vehicle with the other. As I came closer, I could see the balloons had faces and shaped ears, and they looked like a little tribe, bobbing in the air above their owner, waiting for him.

Then the clown straightened, closed up his van and started walking, in the same direction I was walking, several paces ahead of me, a small suitcase in one hand, the balloons in the other. The seafront continued long and straight, and I was walking behind him for what seemed like ages. Sometimes I felt awkward about it, and I even thought the clown might turn and say something. But since that was the way I had to go, there wasn't much else I could do. So we just kept walking, the clown and me, on and on along the deserted pavement still wet from the morning, and all the time the balloons were bumping and grinning down at me. Every so often, I could see the man's fist, where all the balloon strings converged, and I could see he had them securely twisted together and in a tight grip. Even so, I kept worrying that one of the strings would come unravelled and a single balloon would sail off up into that cloudy sky.

Lying awake that night after what Roger had told me, I kept seeing those balloons again. I thought about Hailsham closing, and how it was like someone coming along with a pair of shears and snipping the balloon strings just where they entwined above the man's fist. Once that happened, there'd be no real sense in which those balloons belonged with each other any more. When he was telling me the news about Hailsham, Roger had made a remark, saying he supposed it wouldn't make so much difference to the likes of us any more. And in certain ways, he might have been right. But it was unnerving, to think things weren't still going on back there, just as always; that people like Miss Geraldine, say, weren't leading groups of Juniors around the North Playing Field.

In the months after that talk with Roger, I kept thinking about it a lot, about Hailsham closing and all the implications. And it started to dawn on me, I suppose, that a lot of things I'd always assumed I'd plenty of time to get round to doing, I might now have to act on pretty soon or else let them go forever. It's not that I started to panic, exactly. But it definitely felt like Hailsham's going away

had shifted everything around us. That's why what Laura said to me that day, about my becoming Ruth's carer, had such an impact on me, even though I'd stone-walled her at the time. It was almost like a part of me had already made that decision, and Laura's words had simply pulled away a veil that had been covering it over.

I first turned up at Ruth's recovery centre in Dover - the modern one with the white tiled walls - just a few weeks after that talk with Laura. It had been around two months since Ruth's first donation - which, as Laura had said, hadn't gone at all well. When I came into her room, she was sitting on the edge of her bed in her night-dress and gave me a big smile. She got up to give me a hug, but almost immediately sat down again. She told me I was looking better than ever, and that my hair suited me really well. I said nice things about her too, and for the next half hour or so, I think we were genuinely delighted to be with each other. We talked about all kinds of things - Hailsham, the Cottages, what we'd been doing since then - and it felt like we could talk and talk forever. In other words, it was a really encouraging start - better than I'd dared expect.

Even so, that first time, we didn't say anything about the way we'd parted. Maybe if we'd tackled it at the start, things would have played out differently, who knows? As it was, we just skipped over it, and once we'd been talking for a while, it was as if we'd agreed to pretend none of that had ever happened.

That may have been fine as far as that first meeting was concerned. But once I officially became her carer, and I began to see her regularly, the sense of something not being right grew stronger and stronger. I developed a routine of coming in three or four times a week in the late afternoon, with mineral water and a packet of her favourite biscuits, and it should have been wonderful, but at the beginning it was anything but that. We'd start talking about something,

something completely innocent, and for no obvious reason we'd come to a halt. Or if we did manage to keep up a conversation, the longer we went on, the more stilted and guarded it became.

Then one afternoon, I was coming down her corridor to see her and heard someone in the shower room opposite her door. I guessed it was Ruth in there, so I let myself into her room, and was standing waiting for her, looking at the view from her window over all the rooftops. About five minutes passed, then she came in wrapped in a towel. Now to be fair, she wasn't expecting me for another hour, and I suppose we all feel a bit vulnerable after a shower with just a towel on. Even so, the look of alarm that went across her face took me aback. I have to explain this a bit. Of course, I was expecting her to be a little surprised. But the thing was, after she'd taken it in and seen it was me, there was a clear second, maybe more, when she went on looking at me if not with fear, then with a real wariness. It was like she'd been waiting and waiting for me to do something to her, and she thought the time had now come.

The look was gone the next instant and we just carried on as usual, but that incident gave us both a jolt. It made me realise Ruth didn't trust me, and for all I know, maybe she herself hadn't fully realised it until that moment. In any case, after that day, the atmosphere got even worse. It was like we'd let something out into the open, and far from clearing the air, it had made us more aware than ever of everything that had come between us. It got to the stage where before I went in to see her, I'd sit in my car for several minutes working myself up for the ordeal. After one particular session, when we did all the checks on her in stony silence, then afterwards just sat there in more silence, I was about ready to report to them that it hadn't worked out, that I should stop being Ruth's carer. But then everything changed again, and that was because of the boat.

God knows how these things work. Sometimes it's a particular joke, sometimes a rumour. It travels from centre to centre, right the way across the country in a matter of days, and suddenly every donor's talking about it. Well, this time it was to do with this boat. I'd first heard about it from a couple of my donors up in North Wales. Then a few days later, Ruth too started telling me about it. I was just relieved we'd found something to talk about, and encouraged her to go on.

'This boy on the next floor,' she said. 'His carer's actually been to see it. He says it's not far from the road, so anyone can get to it without much bother. This boat, it's just sitting there, stranded in the marshes.'

'How did it get there?' I asked.

'How do I know? Maybe they wanted to dump it, whoever owned it. Or maybe sometime, when everything was flooded, it just drifted in and got itself beached. Who knows? It's supposed to be this old fishing boat. With a little cabin for a couple of fishermen to squeeze into when it's stormy.'

The next few times I came to see her, she always managed to bring up the boat again. Then one afternoon, when she began telling me how one of the other donors at the centre had been taken by her carer to see it, I said to her:

'Look, it's not particularly near, you know. It would take an hour, maybe an hour and a half to drive.'

'I wasn't suggesting anything. I know you've got other donors to worry about.'

'But you'd like to see it. You'd like to see this boat, wouldn't you, Ruth?'

'I suppose so. I suppose I would. You spend day after day in this place. Yeah, it'd be good to see something like that.'

‘And do you suppose’ - I said this gently, without a hint of sarcasm - ‘if we’re driving all that way, we should think about calling in on Tommy? Seeing his centre’s just down the road from where this boat’s meant to be?’

Ruth’s face didn’t show anything at first. ‘I suppose we could think about it,’ she said. Then she laughed and added: ‘Honest, Kathy, that wasn’t the only reason I’ve been going on about the boat. I do want to see it, for its own sake. All this time in and out of hospital. Then cooped up here. Things like that matter more than they once did. But all right, I did know. I knew Tommy was at the Kingsfield centre.’

‘Are you sure you want to see him?’

‘Yes,’ she said, no hesitation, looking straight at me. ‘Yes, I do.’ Then she said quietly: ‘I haven’t seen that boy for a long time. Not since the Cottages.’

Then, at last, we talked about Tommy. We didn’t go into things in a big way and I didn’t learn much I didn’t know already. But I think we both felt better we’d finally brought him up. Ruth told me how, by the time she left the Cottages the autumn after me, she and Tommy had more or less drifted apart.

‘Since we were going different places to do our training anyway,’ she said, ‘it didn’t seem worth it, to split up properly. So we just stayed together until I left.’

And at that stage, we didn’t say much more about it than that.

As for the trip out to see the boat, I neither agreed nor disagreed to it, that first time we discussed it. But over the next couple of weeks, Ruth kept bringing it up, and our plans somehow grew firmer, until in the end, I sent a message to Tommy’s carer through a contact, saying that unless we heard from Tommy telling us not to, we’d show up at the Kingsfield on a particular afternoon the following week.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I'd hardly ever been to the Kingsfield in those days, so Ruth and I had to consult the map a number of times on the way and we still arrived several minutes late. It's not very well-appointed as recovery centres go, and if it wasn't for the associations it now has for me, it's not somewhere I'd look forward to visiting. It's out of the way and awkward to get to, and yet when you're there, there's no real sense of peace and quiet. You can always hear traffic on the big roads beyond the fencing, and there's a general feeling they never properly finished converting the place. A lot of the donors' rooms you can't get to with a wheelchair, or else they're too stuffy or too draughty. There aren't nearly enough bathrooms and the ones there are are hard to keep clean, get freezing in winter and are generally too far from the donors' rooms. The Kingsfield, in other words, falls way short of a place like Ruth's centre in Dover, with its gleaming tiles and double-glazed windows that seal at the twist of a handle.

Later on, after the Kingsfield became the familiar and precious place it did, I was in one of the admin buildings and came across a framed black-and-white photo of the place the way it was before it was converted, when it was still a holiday camp for ordinary families. The picture was probably taken in the late fifties or early sixties, and shows a big rectangular swimming pool with all these happy people - children, parents - splashing about having a great time. It's concrete all around the pool, but people have set up deck chairs and sun loungers, and they've got large parasols to keep them in the shade. When I first saw this, it took me a while to realise I was looking at what the donors now call 'the Square' - the place where you drive in when you first arrive at the centre. Of course, the pool's filled in now, but the outline's still there, and they've left standing at

one end - an example of this unfinished atmosphere - the metal frame for the high diving board. It was only when I saw the photo it occurred to me what the frame was and why it was there, and today, each time I see it, I can't help picturing a swimmer taking a dive off the top only to crash into the cement.

I might not have easily recognised the Square in the photo, except for the white bunker-like two-storey buildings in the background, on all three visible sides of the pool area. That must have been where the families had their holiday apartments, and though I'd guess the interiors have changed a lot, the outsides look much the same. In some ways, I suppose, the Square today isn't so different to what the pool was back then. It's the social hub of the place, where donors come out of their rooms for a bit of air and a chat. There are a few wooden picnic benches around the Square, but - especially when the sun's too hot, or it's raining - the donors prefer to gather under the overhanging flat roof of the recreation hall at the far end behind the old diving board frame.

That afternoon Ruth and I went to the Kingsfield, it was overcast and a bit chilly, and as we drove into the Square it was deserted except for a group of six or seven shadowy figures underneath that roof. As I brought the car to a stop somewhere over the old pool - which of course I didn't know about then - one figure detached itself from the group and came towards us, and I saw it was Tommy. He had on a faded green track-suit top and looked about a stone heavier than when I'd last seen him.

Beside me Ruth, for a second, seemed to panic. 'What do we do?' she went. 'Do we get out? No, no, let's not get out. Don't move, don't move.'

I don't know what I'd been intending to do, but when Ruth said this, for some reason, without really thinking about it, I just stepped out of the car. Ruth stayed where she was, and

that was why, when Tommy came up to us, his gaze fell on me and why it was me he hugged first. I could smell a faint odour of something medical on him which I couldn't identify. Then, though we hadn't yet said anything to each other, we both sensed Ruth watching us from the car and pulled away.

There was a lot of sky reflected in the windscreen, so I couldn't make her out very well. But I got the impression Ruth had on a serious, almost frozen look, like Tommy and I were people in a play she was watching. There was something odd about the look and it made me uneasy. Then Tommy was walking past me to the car. He opened a rear door, got into the back seat, and then it was my turn to watch them, inside the car, exchanging words, then polite little kisses on the cheeks.

Across the Square, the donors under the roof were also watching, and though I felt nothing hostile about them, I suddenly wanted to get out of there quickly. But I made myself take my time getting back into the car, so that Tommy and Ruth could have a little longer to themselves.

We began by driving through narrow, twisting lanes. Then we came out into open, featureless countryside and travelled on along a near-empty road. What I remember about that part of our trip to the boat was that for the first time in ages the sun started to shine weakly through the greyness; and whenever I glanced at Ruth beside me, she had on a quiet little smile. As for what we talked about, well, my memory is that we behaved much as if we'd been seeing each other regularly, and there was no need to talk about anything other than what we had immediately in front of us. I asked Tommy if he'd been to see the boat already, and he said no, he hadn't, but a lot of the other donors at the centre had. He'd had a few opportunities, but hadn't taken them.

'I wasn't *not* wanting to go,' he said, leaning forward from the back. 'I couldn't be bothered really. I was going to go once, with a couple of others and their carers, but

then I got a bit of bleeding and couldn't go any more. That was ages ago now. I don't get any trouble like that any more.'

Then a little further on, as we continued across the empty countryside, Ruth turned right round in her seat until she was facing Tommy, and just kept looking at him. She still had on her little smile, but said nothing, and I could see in my mirror Tommy looking distinctly uncomfortable. He kept looking out of the window beside him, then back at her, then back out of the window again. After a while, without taking her gaze off him, Ruth started on a rambling anecdote about someone or other, a donor at her centre, someone we'd never heard of, and all the time she kept looking at Tommy, the gentle smile never leaving her face. Perhaps because I was getting bored by her anecdote, perhaps because I wanted to help Tommy out, I interrupted after a minute or so, saying:

'Yeah, okay, we don't need to hear every last thing about her.'

I said this without any malice, and really hadn't intended anything by it. But even before Ruth paused, almost as I was still speaking, Tommy made a sudden laughing noise, a kind of explosion, a noise I'd never heard him make before. And he said:

'That's exactly what I was about to say. I lost track of it a while ago.'

My eyes were on the road, so I wasn't sure if he'd addressed me or Ruth. In any case, Ruth stopped talking and slowly turned back in her seat until she was facing the front again. She didn't seem particularly upset, but the smile had gone, and her eyes looked far away, fixed somewhere on the sky ahead of us. But I have to be honest: at that instant I wasn't really thinking about Ruth. My heart had done a little leap, because in a single stroke, with that little laugh of agreement, it felt as though Tommy and I had come close together again after all the years.

I found the turning we needed around twenty minutes after we'd set off from the Kingsfield. We went down a narrow curving road shrouded by hedges, and parked beside a clump of sycamores. I led the way to where the woods began, but then, faced with three distinct paths through the trees, had to stop to consult the sheet of directions I'd brought with me. While I stood there trying to decipher the person's handwriting, I was suddenly conscious of Ruth and Tommy standing behind me, not talking, waiting almost like children to be told which way to go.

We entered the woods, and though it was pretty easy walking, I noticed Ruth's breath coming less and less easily. Tommy, by contrast, didn't seem to be experiencing any difficulty, though there was a hint of a limp in his gait. Then we came to a barbed wire fence, which was tilted and rusted, the wire itself yanked all over the place. When Ruth saw it, she came to an abrupt halt.

'Oh no,' she said, anxiously. Then she turned to me: 'You didn't say anything about this. You didn't say we had to get past barbed wire!'

'It's not going to be difficult,' I said. 'We can go under it. We just have to hold it for each other.'

But Ruth looked really upset and didn't move. And it was then, as she stood there, her shoulders rising and falling with her breathing, that Tommy seemed to become aware for the first time just how frail she was. Maybe he'd noticed before, and hadn't wanted to take it in. But now he stared at her for a good few seconds. Then I think what happened next - though of course I can't know for certain - was that the both of us, Tommy and I, we remembered what had happened in the car, when we'd more or less ganged up on her. And almost as an instinct, we both went to her. I took an arm, Tommy supported her elbow on the other side, and we began gently guiding her towards the fence.

I let go of Ruth only to pass through the fence myself. Then I held up the wire as high as I could, and Tommy and I both helped her through. It wasn't so difficult for her in the end: it was more a confidence thing, and with us there for support, she seemed to lose her fear of the fence. On the other side, she actually made a go of helping me hold up the wire for Tommy. He came through without any bother, and Ruth said to him:

'It's only bending down like that. I'm sometimes not so clever at it.'

Tommy was looking sheepish, and I wondered if he was embarrassed by what had just happened, or if he was remembering again our ganging up on Ruth in the car. He nodded towards the trees in front of us and said:

'I suppose it's through that way. Is that right, Kath?'

I glanced at my sheet and began to lead the way again. Further into the trees, it grew quite dark and the ground became more and more marshy.

'Hope we don't get lost,' I heard Ruth say to Tommy with a laugh, but I could see a clearing not far away. And now with time to reflect, I realised why I was so bothered by what had happened in the car. It wasn't simply that we'd ganged up on Ruth: it was the way she'd just taken it. In the old days, it was inconceivable she'd have let something like that happen without striking back. As this point sunk in, I paused on the path, waited for Ruth and Tommy to catch up, and put my arm around Ruth's shoulders.

This didn't seem so soppy; it just looked like carer stuff, because by now there *was* something uncertain about her walk, and I wondered if I'd badly underestimated how weak she still was. Her breathing was getting quite laboured, and as we walked together, she'd now and then lurch into me. But then we were through the trees and into the clearing, and we could see the boat.

Actually, we hadn't really stepped into a clearing: it was more that the thin woods we'd come through had ended, and now in front of us there was open marshland as far as we could see. The pale sky looked vast and you could see it reflected every so often in the patches of water breaking up the land. Not so long ago, the woods must have extended further, because you could see here and there ghostly dead trunks poking out of the soil, most of them broken off only a few feet up. And beyond the dead trunks, maybe sixty yards away, was the boat, sitting beached in the marshes under the weak sun.

'Oh, it's just like my friend said it was,' Ruth said. 'It's really beautiful.'

We were surrounded by silence and when we started to move towards the boat, you could hear the squelch under our shoes. Before long I noticed my feet sinking beneath the tufts of grass, and called out: 'Okay, this is as far as we can go.'

The other two, who were behind me, raised no objection, and when I glanced over my shoulder, I saw Tommy was again holding Ruth by the arm. It was clear, though, this was just to steady her. I took long strides to the nearest dead tree trunk, where the soil was firmer, and held onto it for balance. Following my example, Tommy and Ruth made their way to another tree trunk, hollow and more emaciated than mine, a short way behind to my left. They perched on either side of it and seemed to settle. Then we gazed at the beached boat. I could now see how its paint was cracking, and how the timber frames of the little cabin were crumbling away. It had once been painted a sky blue, but now looked almost white under the sky.

'I wonder how it got here,' I said. I'd raised my voice to let it get to the others and had expected an echo. But the sound was surprisingly close, like I was in a carpeted room.

Then I heard Tommy say behind me: 'Maybe this is what Hailsham looks like now. Do you think?'

‘Why would it look like this?’ Ruth sounded genuinely puzzled. ‘It wouldn’t turn into marshland just because it’s closed.’

‘I suppose not. Wasn’t thinking. But I always see Hailsham being like this now. No logic to it. In fact, this is pretty close to the picture in my head. Except there’s no boat, of course. It wouldn’t be so bad, if it’s like this now.’

‘That’s funny,’ Ruth said, ‘because I was having this dream the other morning. I was dreaming I was up in Room 14. I knew the whole place had been shut down, but there I was, in Room 14, and I was looking out of the window and everything outside was flooded. Just like a giant lake. And I could see rubbish floating by under my window, empty drinks cartons, everything. But there wasn’t any sense of panic or anything like that. It was nice and tranquil, just like it is here. I knew I wasn’t in any danger, that it was only like that because it had closed down.’

‘You know,’ Tommy said, ‘Meg B. was at our centre for a while. She’s left now, gone up north somewhere for her third donation. I never heard how she got on. Have either of you heard?’

I shook my head, and when I didn’t hear Ruth say anything, turned to look at her. At first I thought she was still staring at the boat, but then I saw her gaze was on the vapour trail of a plane in the far distance, climbing slowly into the sky. Then she said:

‘I’ll tell you something I heard. I heard about Chrissie. I heard she completed during her second donation.’

‘I heard that as well,’ said Tommy. ‘It must be right. I heard exactly the same. A shame. Only her second as well. Glad that didn’t happen to me.’

‘I think it happens much more than they ever tell us,’ Ruth said. ‘My carer over there. She probably knows that’s

right. But she won't say.'

'There's no big conspiracy about it,' I said, turning back to the boat. 'Sometimes it happens. It was really sad about Chrissie. But that's not common. They're really careful these days.'

'I bet it happens much more than they tell us,' Ruth said again. 'That's one reason why they keep moving us around between donations.'

'I ran into Rodney once,' I said. 'It wasn't so long after Chrissie completed. I saw him in this clinic, up in North Wales. He was doing okay.'

'I bet he was cut up about Chrissie though,' said Ruth. Then to Tommy: 'They don't tell you the half of it, you see?'

'Actually,' I said, 'he wasn't too bad about it. He was sad, obviously. But he was okay. They hadn't seen each other for a couple of years anyway. He said he thought Chrissie wouldn't have minded too much. And I suppose he should know.'

'Why would he know?' Ruth said. 'How could he possibly know what Chrissie would have felt? What she would have wanted? It wasn't him on that table, trying to cling onto life. How would he know?'

This flash of anger was more like the old Ruth, and made me turn to her again. Maybe it was just the glare in her eyes, but she seemed to be looking back at me with a hard, stern expression.

'It can't be good,' Tommy said. 'Completing at the second donation. Can't be good.'

'I can't believe Rodney was okay about it,' Ruth said. 'You only spoke to him for a few minutes. How can you tell anything from that?'

‘Yeah,’ said Tommy, ‘but if like Kath says, they’d already split up ...’

‘That wouldn’t make any difference,’ Ruth cut in. ‘In some ways that might have made it worse.’

‘I’ve seen a lot of people in Rodney’s position,’ I said. ‘They do come to terms with it.’

‘How would you know?’ said Ruth. ‘How could you possibly know? You’re still a carer.’

‘I get to see a lot as a carer. An awful lot.’

‘She wouldn’t know, would she, Tommy? Not what it’s really like.’

For a moment we were both looking at Tommy, but he just went on gazing at the boat. Then he said:

‘There was this guy, at my centre. Always worried he wouldn’t make it past his second. Used to say he could feel it in his bones. But it all turned out fine. He’s just come through his third now, and he’s completely all right.’ He put up a hand to shield his eyes. ‘I wasn’t much good as a carer. Never learnt to drive even. I think that’s why the notice for my first came so early. I know it’s not supposed to work that way, but I reckon that’s what it was. Didn’t mind really. I’m a pretty good donor, but I was a lousy carer.’

No one spoke for a while. Then Ruth said, her voice quieter now:

‘I think I was a pretty decent carer. But five years felt about enough for me. I was like you, Tommy. I was pretty much ready when I became a donor. It felt right. After all, it’s what we’re *supposed* to be doing, isn’t it?’

I wasn’t sure if she expected me to respond to this. She hadn’t said it in any obviously leading way, and it’s perfectly possible this was a statement she’d come out with

just out of habit - it was the sort of thing you hear donors say to each other all the time. When I turned to them again, Tommy still had his hand up to shade his eyes.

‘Pity we can’t go closer to the boat,’ he said. ‘One day when it’s drier, maybe we could come back.’

‘I’m glad to have seen it,’ Ruth said, softly. ‘It’s really nice. But I think I want to go back now. This wind’s quite chilly.’

‘At least we’ve seen it now,’ Tommy said.

We chatted much more freely on our walk back to the car than on the way out. Ruth and Tommy were comparing notes on their centres - the food, the towels, that kind of thing - and I was always part of the conversation because they kept asking me about other centres, if this or that was normal. Ruth’s walk was much steadier now and when we came to the fence, and I held up the wire, she hardly hesitated.

We got in the car, again with Tommy in the back, and for a while there was a perfectly okay feeling between us. Maybe, looking back, there was an atmosphere of something being held back, but it’s possible I’m only thinking that now because of what happened next.

The way it began, it was a bit like a repeat of earlier. We’d got back onto the long near-empty road, and Ruth made some remark about a poster we were passing. I don’t even remember the poster now, it was just one of those huge advertising images on the roadside. She made the remark almost to herself, obviously not meaning much by it. She said something like: ‘Oh my God, look at that one. You’d think they’d at least *try* to come up with something new.’

But Tommy said from the back: ‘Actually I quite like that one. It’s been in the newspapers as well. I think it’s got something.’

Maybe I was wanting that feeling again, of me and Tommy being brought close together. Because although the walk to the boat had been fine in itself, I was starting to feel that apart from our first embrace, and that moment in the car earlier on, Tommy and I hadn't really had much to do with each other. Anyway, I found myself saying:

'Actually, I like it too. It takes a lot more effort than you'd think, making up these posters.'

'That's right,' Tommy said. 'Someone told me it takes weeks and weeks putting something like that together. Months even. People sometimes work all night on them, over and over, until they're just right.'

'It's too easy,' I said, 'to criticise when you're just driving by.'

'Easiest thing in the world,' Tommy said.

Ruth said nothing, and kept looking at the empty road in front of us. Then I said:

'Since we're on the subject of posters. There was one I noticed on the way out. It should be coming up again pretty soon. It'll be on our side this time. It should come up any time now.'

'What's it of?' Tommy asked.

'You'll see. It'll be coming up soon.'

I glanced at Ruth beside me. There was no anger in her eyes, just a kind of wariness. There was even a sort of hope, I thought, that when the poster appeared, it would be perfectly innocuous - something that reminded us of Hailsham, something like that. I could see all of this in her face, the way it didn't quite settle on any one expression, but hovered tentatively. All the time, her gaze remained fixed in front of her.

I slowed down the car and pulled over, bumping up onto the rough grass verge.

‘Why are we stopping, Kath?’ Tommy asked.

‘Because you can see it best from here. Any nearer, we have to look up at it too much.’

I could hear Tommy shifting behind us, trying to get a better view. Ruth didn’t move, and I wasn’t even sure she was looking at the poster at all.

‘Okay, it’s not exactly the same,’ I said after a moment. ‘But it reminded me. Open-plan office, smart smiling people.’

Ruth stayed silent, but Tommy said from the back: ‘I get it. You mean, like that place we went to that time.’

‘Not only that,’ I said. ‘It’s a lot like that ad. The one we found on the ground. You remember, Ruth?’

‘I’m not sure I do,’ she said quietly.

‘Oh, come on. You remember. We found it in a magazine in some lane. Near a puddle. You were really taken by it. Don’t pretend you don’t remember.’

‘I think I do.’ Ruth’s voice was now almost a whisper. A lorry went past, making our car wobble and, for a few seconds, obscuring our view of the hoarding. Ruth bowed her head, as though she hoped the lorry had removed the image forever, and when we could see it clearly again, she didn’t raise her gaze.

‘It’s funny,’ I said, ‘remembering it all now. Remember how you used to go on about it? How you’d one day work in an office like that one?’

‘Oh yeah, that was why we went that day,’ Tommy said, like he’d only that second remembered. ‘When we went to Norfolk. We went to find your possible. Working in an office.’

‘Don’t you sometimes think,’ I said to Ruth, ‘you should have looked into it more? All right, you’d have been the first. The first one any of us would have heard of getting to do something like that. But you might have done it. Don’t you wonder sometimes, what might have happened if you’d tried?’

‘How could I have tried?’ Ruth’s voice was hardly audible. ‘It’s just something I once dreamt about. That’s all.’

‘But if you’d at least looked into it. How do you know? They might have let you.’

‘Yeah, Ruth,’ Tommy said. ‘Maybe you should at least have tried. After going on about it so much. I think Kath’s got a point.’

‘I didn’t *go on* about it, Tommy. At least, I don’t remember going on about it.’

‘But Tommy’s right. You should at least have tried. Then you could see a poster like that one, and remember that’s what you wanted once, and that you at least looked into it ...’

‘How could I have looked into it?’ For the first time, Ruth’s voice had hardened, but then she let out a sigh and looked down again. Then Tommy said:

‘You kept talking like you might qualify for special treatment. And for all you know, you might have done. You should have asked at least.’

‘Okay,’ Ruth said. ‘You say I should have looked into it. How? Where would I have gone? There wasn’t a way to look into it.’

‘Tommy’s right though,’ I said. ‘If you believed yourself special, you should at least have asked. You should have gone to Madame and asked.’

As soon as I said this - as soon as I mentioned Madame - I realised I'd made a mistake. Ruth looked up at me and I saw something like triumph flash across her face. You see it in films sometimes, when one person's pointing a gun at another person, and the one with the gun's making the other one do all kinds of things. Then suddenly there's a mistake, a tussle, and the gun's with the second person. And the second person looks at the first person with a gleam, a kind of can't-believe-my-luck expression that promises all kinds of vengeance. Well, that was how suddenly Ruth was looking at me, and though I'd said nothing about deferrals, I'd mentioned Madame, and I knew we'd stumbled into some new territory altogether.

Ruth saw my panic and shifted round in her seat to face me. So I was preparing myself for her attack; busy telling myself that no matter what she came at me with, things were different now, she wouldn't get her way like she'd done in the past. I was telling myself all of this, and that's why I wasn't at all ready for what she did come out with.

'Kathy,' she said, 'I don't really expect you to forgive me ever. I can't even see why you should. But I'm going to ask you to all the same.'

I was so thrown by this, all I could find to say was a rather limp: 'Forgive you for what?'

'Forgive me for what? Well, for starters, there's the way I always lied to you about your urges. When you used to tell me, back then, how sometimes it got so you wanted to do it with virtually anyone.'

Tommy shifted again behind us, but Ruth was leaning forward now, looking straight at me, like for the moment Tommy wasn't with us in the car at all.

'I knew how it worried you,' she said. 'I should have told you. I should have said how it was the same for me too, just the way you described it. You realise all of this now, I

know. But you didn't back then, and I should have said. I should have told you how even though I was with Tommy, I couldn't resist doing it with other people sometimes. At least three others when we were at the Cottages.'

She said this still without looking Tommy's way. But it wasn't so much like she was ignoring him, than that she was trying so intensely to get through to me everything else had been blurred out.

'I almost did tell you a few times,' she went on. 'But I didn't. Even then, at the time, I realised you'd look back one day and realise and blame me for it. But I still didn't say anything to you. There's no reason you should ever forgive me for that, but I want to ask now because ...' She stopped suddenly.

'Because what?' I asked.

She laughed and said: 'Because nothing. I'd like you to forgive me, but I don't expect you to. Anyway, that's not the half of it, not even a small bit of it, actually. The main thing is, I kept you and Tommy apart.' Her voice had dropped again, almost to a whisper. 'That was the worst thing I did.'

She turned a little, taking Tommy in her gaze for the first time. Then almost immediately, she was looking just at me again, but now it was like she was talking to the both of us.

'That was the worst thing I did,' she said again. 'I'm not even asking you to forgive me about that. God, I've said all this in my head so many times, I can't believe I'm really doing it. It should have been you two. I'm not pretending I didn't always see that. Of course I did, as far back as I can remember. But I kept you apart. I'm not asking you to forgive me for that. That's not what I'm after just now. What I want is for you to put it right. Put right what I messed up for you.'

‘How d’ you mean, Ruth?’ Tommy asked. ‘How d’ you mean, put it right?’ His voice was gentle, full of child-like curiosity, and I think that was what started me sobbing.

‘Kathy, listen,’ Ruth said. ‘You and Tommy, you’ve got to try and get a deferral. If it’s you two, there’s got to be a chance. A real chance.’

She’d reached out a hand and put it on my shoulder, but I shook her off roughly and glared at her through the tears.

‘It’s too late for that. Way too late.’

‘It’s not too late. Kathy, listen, it’s not too late. Okay, so Tommy’s done two donations. Who says that has to make any difference?’

‘It’s too late for all that now.’ I’d started to sob again. ‘It’s stupid even thinking about it. As stupid as wanting to work in that office up there. We’re all way beyond that now.’

Ruth was shaking her head. ‘It’s not too late. Tommy, you tell her.’

I was leaning on the steering wheel, so couldn’t see Tommy at all. He made a kind of puzzled humming sound, but didn’t say anything.

‘Look,’ Ruth said, ‘both of you, listen. I wanted us all to do this trip, because I wanted to say what I just said. But I also wanted it because I wanted to give you something.’ She’d been rummaging in the pockets of her anorak, and now she held out a crumpled piece of paper.

‘Tommy, you’d better take this. Look after it. Then when Kathy changes her mind, you’ll have it.’

Tommy reached forward between the seats and took the paper. ‘Thanks, Ruth,’ he said, like she’d given him a chocolate bar. Then after a few seconds, he said: ‘What is it? I don’t get it.’

‘It’s Madame’s address. It’s like you were saying to me just now. You’ve at least got to try.’

‘How d’ you find it?’ Tommy asked.

‘It wasn’t easy. It took me a long time, and I ran a few risks. But I got it in the end, and I got it for you two. Now it’s up to you to find her and try.’

I’d stopped sobbing by now and started the engine. ‘That’s enough of all this,’ I said. ‘We’ve got to get Tommy back. Then we need to be getting back ourselves.’

‘But you will think about it, both of you, won’t you?’

‘I just want to get back now,’ I said.

‘Tommy, you’ll keep that address safe? In case Kathy comes round.’

‘I’ll keep it,’ Tommy said. Then, much more solemnly than the last time: ‘Thanks, Ruth.’

‘We’ve seen the boat,’ I said, ‘but now we’ve got to get back. It might be over two hours back to Dover.’

I put the car on the road again, and my memory of it is that we didn’t talk much more on the way back to the Kingsfield. There was still a small group of donors huddled under the roof as we came into the Square. I turned the car before letting Tommy out. Neither of us hugged or kissed him, but as he walked away towards his fellow donors, he paused and gave us a big smile and wave.

It might seem odd, but on the journey back to Ruth’s centre, we didn’t really discuss any of what had just happened. It was partly because Ruth was exhausted – that last conversation on the roadside seemed to have drained her. But also, I think we both sensed we’d done enough serious talking for one day, and that if we tried any more of it, things would start going wrong. I’m not sure how Ruth was feeling on that drive home, but as for me, once all the strong emotions

had settled, once the night began to set in and all the lights came on along the roadside, I was feeling okay. It was like something that had been hanging over me for a long time had gone, and even if things were still far from sorted, it felt like there was now at least a door open to somewhere better. I'm not saying I was elated or anything like that. Everything between the three of us seemed really delicate and I felt tense, but it wasn't altogether a bad tension.

We didn't even discuss Tommy beyond saying how he looked okay, and wondering how much weight he'd put on. Then we spent large stretches of the journey watching the road together in silence.

It wasn't until a few days later I came to see what a difference that trip had made. All the guardedness, all the suspicions between me and Ruth evaporated, and we seemed to remember everything we'd once meant to each other. And that was the start of it, that era, with the summer coming on, and Ruth's health at least on an even keel, when I'd come in the evenings with biscuits and mineral water, and we'd sit side by side at her window, watching the sun go down over the roofs, talking about Hailsham, the Cottages, anything that drifted into our minds. When I think about Ruth now, of course, I feel sad she's gone; but I also feel really grateful for that period we had at the end.

There was, even so, one topic we never discussed properly, and that was about what she'd said to us on the roadside that day. Just every now and then, Ruth would allude to it. She'd come out with something like:

'Have you thought any more about becoming Tommy's carer? You know you could arrange it, if you wanted to.'

Soon, it was this idea - of my becoming Tommy's carer - that came to stand in for all the rest of it. I'd tell her I was thinking about it, that anyway it wasn't so simple, even for me, to arrange such a thing. Then we'd usually let the topic drop. But I could tell it was never far from Ruth's

mind, and that's why, that very last time I saw her, even though she wasn't able to speak, I knew what it was she wanted to say to me.

That was three days after her second donation, when they finally let me in to see her in the small hours of the morning. She was in a room by herself, and it looked like they'd done everything they could for her. It had become obvious to me by then, from the way the doctors, the coordinator, the nurses were behaving, that they didn't think she was going to make it. Now I took one glance at her in that hospital bed under the dull light and recognised the look on her face, which I'd seen on donors often enough before. It was like she was willing her eyes to see right inside herself, so she could patrol and marshal all the better the separate areas of pain in her body - the way, maybe, an anxious carer might rush between three or four ailing donors in different parts of the country. She was, strictly speaking, still conscious, but she wasn't accessible to me as I stood there beside her metal bed. All the same, I pulled up a chair and sat with her hand in both of mine, squeezing whenever another flood of pain made her twist away from me.

I stayed beside her like that for as long as they let me, three hours, maybe longer. And as I say, for almost all of that time, she was far away inside herself. But just once, as she was twisting herself in a way that seemed scarily unnatural, and I was on the verge of calling the nurses for more painkillers, just for a few seconds, no more, she looked straight at me and she knew exactly who I was. It was one of those little islands of lucidity donors sometimes get to in the midst of their ghastly battles, and she looked at me, just for that moment, and although she didn't speak, I knew what her look meant. So I said to her: 'It's okay, I'm going to do it, Ruth. I'm going to become Tommy's carer as soon as I can.' I said it under my breath, because I didn't think she'd hear the words anyway, even if I shouted them. But my

hope was that with our gazes locked as they were for those few seconds, she'd read my expression exactly as I'd read hers. Then the moment was over, and she was away again. Of course, I'll never know for sure, but I think she did understand. And even if she didn't, what occurs to me now is that she probably knew all along, even before I did, that I'd become Tommy's carer, and that we'd 'give it a try', just as she'd told us to in the car that day.

CHAPTER TWENTY

I became Tommy's carer almost a year to the day after that trip to see the boat. It wasn't long after Tommy's third donation, and though he was recovering well, he was still needing a lot of time to rest, and as it turned out, that wasn't a bad way at all for us to start this new phase together. Before long, I was getting used to the Kingsfield, growing to like it even.

Most donors at the Kingsfield get their own room after third donation, and Tommy was given one of the largest singles in the centre. Some people assumed afterwards I'd fixed it for him, but that wasn't the case; it was just luck, and anyway, it wasn't that great a room. I think it had been a bathroom back in the holiday camp days, because the only window had frosted glass and was really high up near the ceiling. You could only look out by standing on a chair and holding open the pane, and then you only got a view down onto the dense shrubbery. The room was L-shaped, which meant they could get in, as well as the usual bed, chair and wardrobe, a little school desk with a lift-up lid - an item that proved a real bonus, as I'll explain.

I don't want to give the wrong idea about that period at the Kingsfield. A lot of it was really relaxed, almost idyllic. My usual time to arrive was after lunch, and I'd come up to find Tommy stretched out on the narrow bed - always fully clothed because he didn't want to 'be like a patient'. I'd sit in the chair and read to him from various paperbacks I'd bring in, stuff like *The Odyssey* or *One Thousand and One Nights*. Otherwise we'd just talk, sometimes about the old days, sometimes about other things. He'd often doze off in the late afternoon, when I'd catch up on my reports over at his school desk. It was amazing really, the

way the years seemed to melt away, and we were so easy with each other.

Obviously, though, not everything was like before. For a start, Tommy and I finally started having sex. I don't know how much Tommy had thought about us having sex before we started. He was still recovering, after all, and maybe it wasn't the first thing on his mind. I wasn't wanting to force it on him, but on the other hand it had occurred to me if we left it too long, just when we were starting out together again, it would just get harder and harder to make it a natural part of us. And my other thought, I suppose, was that if our plans went along the lines Ruth had wanted, and we did find ourselves going for a deferral, it might prove a real drawback if we'd never had sex. I don't mean I thought this was necessarily something they'd ask us about. But my worry was that it would show somehow, in a kind of lack of intimacy.

So I decided to start it off one afternoon up in that room, in a way he could take or leave. He'd been lying on the bed as usual, staring at the ceiling while I read to him. When I finished, I went over, sat on the edge of the bed, and slid a hand under his T-shirt. Pretty soon I was down around his stuff, and though it took a while for him to get hard, I could tell straight away he was happy about it. That first time, we still had stitches to worry about, and anyway, after all the years of knowing each other and not having sex, it was like we needed some intermediary stage before we could get into it in a full-blown way. So after a while I just did it for him with my hands, and he just lay there not making any attempt to feel me up in return, not even making any noises, but just looking peaceful.

But even that first time, there was something there, a feeling, right there alongside our sense that this was a beginning, a gateway we were passing through. I didn't want to acknowledge it for a long time, and even when I did, I tried to persuade myself it was something that would go away

along with his various aches and pains. What I mean is, right from that first time, there was something in Tommy's manner that was tinged with sadness, that seemed to say: 'Yes, we're doing this now and I'm glad we're doing it now. But what a pity we left it so late.'

And in the days that followed, when we had proper sex and we were really happy about it, even then, this same nagging feeling would always be there. I did everything to keep it away. I had us going at it all stops out, so that everything would become a delirious blur, and there'd be no room for anything else. If he was on top, I'd put my knees right up for him; whatever other position we used, I'd say anything, do anything I thought would make it better, more passionate, but it still never quite went away.

Maybe it was to do with that room, the way the sun came in through the frosted glass so that even in early summer, it felt like autumn light. Or maybe it was because the stray sounds that would occasionally reach us as we lay there were of donors milling about, going about their business around the grounds, and not of students sitting in a grassy field, arguing about novels and poetry. Or maybe it had to do with how sometimes, even after we'd done it really well and were lying in each other's arms, bits of what we'd just done still drifting through our heads, Tommy would say something like:

'I used to be able to do it twice in a row easy. But I can't any more.' Then that feeling would come right to the fore and I'd have to put my hand over his mouth, whenever he said things like that, just so we could go on lying there in peace. I'm sure Tommy felt it too, because we'd always hold each other very tight after times like that, as though that way we'd manage to keep the feeling away.

For the first few weeks after I arrived, we hardly brought up Madame or that conversation with Ruth in the car that day. But the very fact of my having become his carer served as a

reminder that we weren't there to mark time. And so too, of course, did Tommy's animal drawings.

I'd often wondered about Tommy's animals over the years, and even that day we'd gone to see the boat, I'd been tempted to ask him about them. Was he still drawing them? Had he kept the ones from the Cottages? But the whole history around them had made it difficult for me to ask.

Then one afternoon, maybe about a month after I'd started, I came up to his room and found him at his school desk, carefully going over a drawing, his face nearly touching the paper. He'd called for me to come in when I'd knocked, but now he didn't raise his head or stop what he was doing, and just a glance told me he was working on one of his imaginary creatures. I stopped in the doorway, uncertain whether I should come in, but eventually he looked up and closed his notebook - which I noticed looked identical to the black books he'd got from Keffer's all those years ago. I came in then and we began talking about something else entirely, and after a while he put away his notebook without us mentioning it. But after that, I'd often come in and see it left on the desk or tossed beside his pillow.

Then one day we were up in his room with several minutes to kill before we set off for some checks, and I noticed something odd coming into his manner: something coy and deliberate which made me think he was after some sex. But then he said:

'Kath, I just want you to tell me. Tell me honestly.'

Then the black notebook came out of his desk, and he showed me three separate sketches of a kind of frog - except with a long tail as though a part of it had stayed a tadpole. At least, that's what it looked like when you held it away from you. Close up, each sketch was a mass of minute detail, much like the creatures I'd seen years before.

‘These two I did thinking they were made of metal,’ he said. ‘See, everything’s got shiny surfaces. But this one here, I thought I’d try making him rubbery. You see? Almost blobby. I want to do a proper version now, a really good one, but I can’t decide. Kath, be honest, what do you think?’

I can’t remember what I answered. What I do remember is the strong mix of emotions that engulfed me at that moment. I realised immediately this was Tommy’s way of putting behind us everything that had happened around his drawings back at the Cottages, and I felt relief, gratitude, sheer delight. But I was aware too why the animals had emerged again, and of all the possible layers behind Tommy’s apparently casual query. At the least, I could see, he was showing me he hadn’t forgotten, even though we’d hardly discussed anything openly; he was telling me he wasn’t complacent, and that he was busy getting on with his part of the preparations.

But that wasn’t all I felt looking at those peculiar frogs that day. Because it was there again, only faint and in the background at first, but growing all the while, so that afterwards it was what I kept thinking about. I couldn’t help it, as I looked at those pages, the thought went through my mind, even as I tried to grab it and put it away. It came to me that Tommy’s drawings weren’t as fresh now. Okay, in many ways these frogs were a lot like what I’d seen back at the Cottages. But something was definitely gone, and they looked laboured, almost like they’d been copied. So that feeling came again, even though I tried to keep it out: that we were doing all of this too late; that there’d once been a time for it, but we’d let that go by, and there was something ridiculous, reprehensible even, about the way we were now thinking and planning.

Now I’m going over this again, it occurs to me that might have been another reason we were so slow to talk openly to each other about our plans. It was certainly the case that none of the other donors at the Kingsfield were ever heard talking about deferrals or anything like that, and we were

probably vaguely embarrassed, almost like we shared a shameful secret. We might even have been scared of what might happen if word got out to the others.

But as I say, I don't want to paint too gloomy a view of that time at the Kingsfield. For a lot of it, especially after that day he asked me about his animals, there seemed to be no more shadows left from the past, and we really settled into each other's company. And though he never asked me again for advice about his pictures, he was happy to work on them in front of me, and we'd often spend our afternoons like that: me on the bed, maybe reading aloud; Tommy at the desk, drawing.

Perhaps we'd have been happy if things had stayed that way for a lot longer; if we could have whiled away more afternoons chatting, having sex, reading aloud and drawing. But with the summer drawing to an end, with Tommy getting stronger, and the possibility of notice for his fourth donation growing ever more distinct, we knew we couldn't keep putting things off indefinitely.

It had been an unusually busy period for me, and I'd not been to the Kingsfield for almost a week. I arrived in the morning that day, and I remember it was bucketing down. Tommy's room was almost dark, and you could hear a gutter splashing away near his window. He'd been down to the main hall for breakfast with his fellow donors, but had come back up again and was now sitting on his bed, looking vacant, not doing anything. I came in exhausted - I'd not had a proper night's sleep for ages - and just collapsed onto his narrow bed, pushing him against the wall. I lay like that for a few moments, and might easily have fallen asleep if Tommy hadn't kept prodding my knees with a toe. Then finally I sat up beside him and said:

'I saw Madame yesterday, Tommy. I never spoke to her or anything. But I saw her.'

He looked at me, but stayed quiet.

‘I saw her come up the street and go into her house. Ruth got it right. The right address, right door, everything.’

Then I described to him how the previous day, since I was down on the south coast anyway, I’d gone to Littlehampton in the late afternoon, and just as I’d done the last two times, walked down that long street near the seafront, past rows of terraced houses with names like ‘Wavecrest’ and ‘Sea View’, until I’d come to the public bench beside the phone box. And I’d sat down and waited – again, the way I’d done before – with my eyes fixed on the house over the street.

‘It was just like detective stuff. The previous times, I’d sat there for over half an hour each go, and nothing, absolutely nothing. But something told me I’d be lucky this time.’

I’d been so tired, I’d nearly nodded off right there on the bench. But then I’d looked up and she was there, coming down the street towards me.

‘It was really spooky,’ I said, ‘because she looked exactly the same. Maybe her face was slightly older. But otherwise, there was no real difference. Same clothes even. That smart grey suit.’

‘It couldn’t *literally* have been the same suit.’

‘I don’t know. It looked like it was.’

‘So you didn’t try and speak to her?’

‘Of course not, stupid. Just one step at a time. She was never exactly nice to us, remember.’

I told him how she’d walked right past me on the opposite side, never glancing over to me; how for a second I thought she would also go past the door I’d been watching – that Ruth had got the wrong address. But Madame had turned sharply at

the gate, covered the tiny front path in two or three steps and vanished inside.

After I'd finished, Tommy stayed quiet for some time. Then he said:

'You sure you won't get into trouble? Always driving out to places you're not supposed to be?'

'Why do you think I'm so tired? I've been working all kinds of hours to get everything in. But at least we've found her now.'

The rain kept splashing outside. Tommy turned onto his side and put his head on my shoulder.

'Ruth did well for us,' he said, softly. 'She got it right.'

'Yeah, she did well. But now it's up to us.'

'So what's the plan, Kath? Have we got one?'

'We just go there. We just go there and ask her. Next week, when I take you for the lab tests. I'll get you signed out for the whole day. Then we can go to Littlehampton on the way back.'

Tommy gave a sigh and put his head deeper into my shoulder. Someone watching might have thought he was being unenthusiastic, but I knew what he was feeling. We'd been thinking about the deferrals, the theory about the Gallery, all of it, for so long - and now, suddenly, here we were. It was definitely a bit scary.

'If we get this,' he said, eventually. 'Just suppose we do. Suppose she lets us have three years, say, just to ourselves. What do we do exactly? See what I mean, Kath? Where do we go? We can't stay here, this is a centre.'

'I don't know, Tommy. Maybe she'll tell us to go back to the Cottages. But it'd be better somewhere else. The White Mansion, maybe. Or perhaps they've got some other place.'

Somewhere separate for people like us. We'll just have to see what she says. '

We lay quietly on the bed for a few more minutes, listening to the rain. At some stage, I began prodding him with a foot, the way he'd been doing to me earlier. Eventually he retaliated and pushed my feet off the bed altogether.

'If we're really going,' he said, 'we'll have to decide about the animals. You know, choose the best ones to take along. Maybe six or seven. We'll have to do it quite carefully.'

'Okay,' I said. Then I stood up and stretched out my arms. 'Maybe we'll take more. Fifteen, twenty even. Yeah, we'll go and see her. What can she do to us? We'll go and talk to her.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

From days before we went, I'd had in my mind this picture of me and Tommy standing in front of that door, working up the nerve to press the bell, then having to wait there with hearts thumping. The way it turned out, though, we got lucky and were spared that particular ordeal.

We deserved a bit of luck by then, because the day hadn't been going at all well. The car had played up on the journey out and we were an hour late for Tommy's tests. Then a mix-up at the clinic had meant Tommy having to re-do three of the tests. This had left him feeling pretty woozy, so when we finally set off for Littlehampton towards the end of the afternoon, he began to feel carsick and we had to keep stopping to let him walk it off.

We finally arrived just before six o'clock. We parked the car behind the bingo hall, took out from the boot the sports bag containing Tommy's notebooks, then set off towards the town centre. It had been a fine day and though the shops were all closing, a lot of people were hanging about outside the pubs, talking and drinking. Tommy began to feel better the more we walked, until eventually he remembered how he'd had to miss lunch because of the tests, and declared he'd have to eat before facing what was in front of us. So we were searching for some place to buy a takeaway sandwich, when he suddenly grabbed my arm, so hard I thought he was having some sort of attack. But then he said quietly into my ear:

'That's her, Kath. Look. Going past the hairdressers.'

And sure enough there she was, moving along the opposite pavement, dressed in her neat grey suit, just like the ones she'd always worn.

We set off after Madame at a reasonable distance, first through the pedestrian precinct, then along the near-deserted High Street. I think we were both reminded of that day we'd followed Ruth's possible through another town. But this time things proved far simpler, because pretty soon she'd led us onto that long seafront street.

Because the road was completely straight, and because the setting sun was falling on it all the way down to the end, we found we could let Madame get quite a way ahead - till she wasn't much more than a dot - and there'd still be no danger of losing her. In fact, we never even stopped hearing the echo of her heels, and the rhythmic thudding of Tommy's bag against his leg seemed to be a kind of answer.

We went on like that for a long time, past the rows of identical houses. Then the houses on the opposite pavement ran out, areas of flat lawn appeared in their place, and you could see, beyond the lawns, the tops of the beach huts lining the seafront. The water itself wasn't visible, but you could tell it was there, just from the big sky and the seagull noises.

But the houses on our side continued without a change, and after a while I said to Tommy:

'It's not long now. See that bench over there? That's the one I sit on. The house is just over from it.'

Until I said this, Tommy had been pretty calm. But now something seemed to get into him, and he began to walk much faster, like he wanted to catch up with her. But now there was no one between Madame and us, and as Tommy kept closing the gap, I had to grab his arm to slow him down. I was all the time afraid she'd turn and look at us, but she didn't, and then she was going in through her little gateway. She paused at her door to find her keys in her handbag, and then there we were, standing by her gate, watching her. She still didn't turn, and I had an idea that she'd been aware of us all along and was deliberately ignoring us. I thought too

that Tommy was about to shout something to her, and that it would be the wrong thing. That was why I called from the gate, so quickly and without hesitation.

It was only a polite 'Excuse me!' but she spun round like I'd thrown something at her. And as her gaze fell on us, a chill passed through me, much like the one I'd felt years ago that time we'd waylaid her outside the main house. Her eyes were as cold, and her face maybe even more severe than I remembered. I don't know if she recognised us at that point; but without doubt, she saw and decided in a second *what we were*, because you could see her stiffen - as if a pair of large spiders was set to crawl towards her.

Then something changed in her expression. It didn't become warmer exactly. But that revulsion got put away somewhere, and she studied us carefully, squinting in the setting sun.

'Madame,' I said, leaning over the gate. 'We don't want to shock you or anything. But we were at Hailsham. I'm Kathy H., maybe you remember. And this is Tommy D. We haven't come to give you any trouble.'

She came a few steps back towards us. 'From Hailsham,' she said, and a small smile actually went across her face. 'Well, this is a surprise. If you aren't here to give me trouble, then why are you here?'

Suddenly Tommy said: 'We have to talk with you. I've brought some things' - he raised his bag - 'some things you might want for your gallery. We've got to talk with you.'

Madame went on standing there, hardly moving in the low sun, her head tilted as though listening for some sound from the seafront. Then she smiled again, though the smile didn't seem to be for us, but just herself.

'Very well then. Come inside. Then we'll see what it is you wish to talk about.'

As we went in, I noticed the front door had coloured glass panels, and once Tommy closed it behind us, everything got pretty dark. We were in a hallway so narrow you felt you'd be able to touch the walls on either side just by stretching out your elbows. Madame had stopped in front of us, and was standing still, her back to us, again like she was listening. Peering past her, I saw that the hallway, narrow as it was, divided further: to the left was a staircase going upstairs; to the right, an even narrower passage leading deeper into the house.

Following Madame's example, I listened too, but there was only silence in the house. Then, maybe from somewhere upstairs, there was a faint thump. That small noise seemed to signify something to her, because she now turned to us and pointing into the darkness of the passage, said:

'Go in there and wait for me. I'll be down shortly.'

She began to climb the stairs, then seeing our hesitation, leaned over the banister and pointed again into the dark.

'In there,' she said, then vanished upstairs.

Tommy and I wandered forward and found ourselves in what must have been the front room of the house. It was like a servant of some sort had got the place ready for the nighttime, then left: the curtains were closed and there were dim table lamps switched on. I could smell the old furniture, which was probably Victorian. The fireplace had been sealed off with a board, and where the fire would have been, there was a picture, woven like a tapestry, of a strange owl-like bird staring out at you. Tommy touched my arm and pointed to a framed picture hanging in a corner over a little round table.

'It's Hailsham,' he whispered.

We went up to it, but then I wasn't so sure. I could see it was a pretty nice watercolour, but the table lamp beneath

it had a crooked shade covered with cobweb traces, and instead of lighting up the picture, it just put a shine over the murky glass, so you could hardly make it out at all.

‘It’s the bit round the back of the duck pond,’ Tommy said.

‘What do you mean?’ I whispered back. ‘There’s no pond. It’s just a bit of countryside.’

‘No, the pond’s behind you.’ Tommy seemed surprisingly irritated. ‘You must be able to remember. If you’re round the back with the pond behind you, and you’re looking over towards the North Playing Field ...’

We went silent again because we could hear voices somewhere in the house. It sounded like a man’s voice, maybe coming from upstairs. Then we heard what was definitely Madame’s voice coming down the stairs, saying: ‘Yes, you’re quite right. Quite right.’

We waited for Madame to come in, but her footsteps went past the door and to the back of the house. It flashed through my mind she was going to prepare tea and scones and bring it all in on a trolley, but then I decided that was rubbish, that she’d just as likely forgotten about us, and now she’d suddenly remember, come in and tell us to leave. Then a gruff male voice called something from upstairs, so muffled it might have been two floors up. Madame’s footsteps came back into the hallway, then she called up: ‘I’ve told you what to do. Just do as I explained.’

Tommy and I waited several more minutes. Then the wall at the back of the room began to move. I saw almost immediately it wasn’t really a wall, but a pair of sliding doors which you could use to section off the front half of what was otherwise one long room. Madame had rolled back the doors just part of the way, and she was now standing there staring at us. I tried to see past her, but it was just darkness. I

thought maybe she was waiting for us to explain why we were there, but in the end, she said:

‘You told me you were Kathy H. and Tommy D. Am I correct? And you were at Hailsham how long ago?’

I told her, but there was no way of telling if she remembered us or not. She just went on standing there at the threshold, as though hesitating to come in. But now Tommy spoke again:

‘We don’t want to keep you long. But there’s something we have to talk to you about.’

‘So you say. Well then. You’d better make yourselves comfortable.’

She reached out and put her hands on the backs of two matching armchairs just in front of her. There was something odd about her manner, like she hadn’t really invited us to sit down. I felt that if we did as she was suggesting and sat on those chairs, she’d just go on standing behind us, not even taking her hands away from the backs. But when we made a move towards her, she too came forwards, and – perhaps I imagined it – tucked her shoulders in tightly as she passed between us. When we turned to sit down, she was over by the windows, in front of the heavy velvet curtains, holding us in a glare, like we were in a class and she was a teacher. At least, that’s the way it looked to me at that moment. Tommy, afterwards, said he thought she was about to burst into song, and that those curtains behind her would open, and instead of the street and the flat grassy expanse leading to the seafront, there’d be this big stage set, like the ones we’d had at Hailsham, with even a chorus line to back her up. It was funny, when he said that afterwards, and I could see her again then, hands clasped, elbows out, sure enough like she was getting ready to sing. But I doubt if Tommy was really thinking anything like that at the time. I remember noticing how tense he’d got, and worrying he’d blurt out something

completely daft. That was why, when she asked us, not unkindly, what it was we wanted, I stepped in quickly.

It probably came out pretty muddled at first, but after a while, as I became more confident she'd hear me out, I calmed down and got a lot clearer. I'd been turning over in my mind for weeks and weeks just what I'd say to her. I'd gone over it during those long car journeys, and while sitting at quiet tables in service-station cafés. It had seemed so difficult then, and I'd eventually resorted to a plan: I'd memorised word for word a few key lines, then drawn a mental map of how I'd go from one point to the next. But now she was there in front of me, most of what I'd prepared seemed either unnecessary or completely wrong. The strange thing was – and Tommy agreed when we discussed it afterwards – although at Hailsham she'd been like this hostile stranger from the outside, now that we were facing her again, even though she hadn't said or done anything to suggest any warmth towards us, Madame now appeared to me like an intimate, someone much closer to us than anyone new we'd met over the recent years. That's why suddenly all the things I'd been preparing in my head just went, and I spoke to her honestly and simply, almost as I might have done years ago to a guardian. I told her what we'd heard, the rumours about Hailsham students and deferrals; how we realised the rumours might not be accurate, and that we weren't banking on anything.

'And even if it *is* true,' I said, 'we know you must get tired of it, all these couples coming to you, claiming to be in love. Tommy and me, we never would have come and bothered you if we weren't really sure.'

'Sure?' It was the first time she'd spoken for ages and we both jolted back a bit in surprise. 'You say you're *sure*? Sure that you're in love? How can you know it? You think love is so simple? So you are in love. Deeply in love. Is that what you're saying to me?'

Her voice sounded almost sarcastic, but then I saw, with a kind of shock, little tears in her eyes as she looked from one to the other of us.

‘You believe this? That you’re deeply in love? And therefore you’ve come to me for this … this deferral? Why? Why did you come to me?’

If she’d asked this in a certain way, like the whole idea was completely crazy, then I’m sure I’d have felt pretty devastated. But she hadn’t quite said it like that. She’d asked it almost like it was a test question she knew the answer to; as if, even, she’d taken other couples through an identical routine many times before. That was what kept me hopeful. But Tommy must have got anxious, because he suddenly burst in:

‘We came to see you because of your gallery. We think we know what your gallery’s for.’

‘My gallery?’ She leaned back on the window ledge, causing the curtains to sway behind her, and took a slow breath. ‘My gallery. You must mean my collection. All those paintings, poems, all those things of yours I gathered over the years. It was hard work for me, but I believed in it, we all did in those days. So you think you know what it was for, why we did it. Well, that would be most interesting to hear. Because I have to say, it’s a question I ask myself all the time.’ She suddenly switched her gaze from Tommy to me. ‘Do I go too far?’ she asked.

I didn’t know what to say, so just replied: ‘No, no.’

‘I go too far,’ she said. ‘I’m sorry. I often go too far on this subject. Forget what I just said. Young man, you were going to tell me about my gallery. Please, let me hear.’

‘It’s so you could tell,’ Tommy said. ‘So you’d have something to go on. Otherwise how would you know when students came to you and said they were in love?’

Madame's gaze had drifted over to me again, but I had the feeling she was staring at something on my arm. I actually looked down to see if there was birdshit or something on my sleeve. Then I heard her say:

'And this is why you think I gathered all those things of yours. My *gallery*, as all of you always called it. I laughed when I first heard that's what you were calling it. But in time, I too came to think of it as that. My gallery. Now why, young man, explain it to me. Why would my gallery help in telling which of you were really in love?'

'Because it would help show you what we were like,' Tommy said. 'Because ...'

'Because of course' - Madame cut in suddenly - 'your art will reveal your inner selves! That's it, isn't it? Because your art will display your *souls*!' Then suddenly she turned to me again and said: 'I go too far?'

She'd said this before, and I again had the impression she was staring at a spot on my sleeve. But by this point a faint suspicion I'd had ever since the first time she'd asked 'I go too far?' had started to grow. I looked at Madame carefully, but she seemed to sense my scrutiny and she turned back to Tommy.

'All right,' she said. 'Let us continue. What was it you were telling me?'

'The trouble is,' Tommy said, 'I was a bit mixed up in those days.'

'You were saying something about your art. How art bares the soul of the artist.'

'Well, what I'm trying to say,' Tommy persisted, 'is that I was so mixed up in those days, I didn't really do any art. I didn't do anything. I know now I should have done, but I was mixed up. So you haven't got anything of mine in your gallery. I know that's my fault, and I know it's probably way

too late, but I've brought some things with me now.' He raised his bag, then began to unzip it. 'Some of it was done recently, but some of it's from quite a long time ago. You should have Kath's stuff already. She got plenty into the Gallery. Didn't you, Kath?'

For a moment they were both looking at me. Then Madame said, barely audibly:

'Poor creatures. What did we do to you? With all our schemes and plans?' She let that hang, and I thought I could see tears in her eyes again. Then she turned to me and asked: 'Do we continue with this talk? You wish to go on?'

It was when she said this that the vague idea I'd had before became something more substantial. 'Do I go too far?' And now: 'Do we continue?' I realised, with a little chill, that these questions had never been for me, or for Tommy, but for someone else - someone listening behind us in the darkened half of the room.

I turned round quite slowly and looked into the darkness. I couldn't see anything, but I heard a sound, a mechanical one, surprisingly far away - the house seemed to go much further back into the dark than I'd guessed. Then I could make out a shape moving towards us, and a woman's voice said: 'Yes, Marie-Claude. Let us carry on.'

I was still looking into the darkness when I heard Madame let out a kind of snort, and she came striding past us and on into the dark. Then there were more mechanical sounds, and Madame emerged pushing a figure in a wheelchair. She passed between us again, and for a moment longer, because Madame's back was blocking the view, I couldn't see the person in the wheelchair. But then Madame steered it around to face us and said:

'You speak to them. It's you they've come to speak to.'

'I suppose it is.'

The figure in the wheelchair was frail and contorted, and it was the voice more than anything that helped me recognise her.

‘Miss Emily,’ Tommy said, quite softly.

‘You speak to them,’ Madame said, as though washing her hands of everything. But she remained standing behind the wheelchair, her eyes blazing towards us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

‘Marie-Claude is correct,’ Miss Emily said. ‘I’m the one to whom you should be speaking. Marie-Claude worked hard for our project. And the way it all ended has left her feeling somewhat disillusioned. As for myself, whatever the disappointments, I don’t feel so badly about it. I think what we achieved merits some respect. Look at the two of you. You’ve turned out well. I’m sure you have much you could tell me to make me proud. What did you say your names were? No, no, wait. I think I shall remember. You’re the boy with the bad temper. A bad temper, but a big heart. Tommy. Am I right? And you, of course, are Kathy H. You’ve done well as a carer. We’ve heard a lot about you. I remember, you see. I dare say I can remember you all.’

‘What good does it do you or them?’ Madame asked, then strode away from the wheelchair, past the two of us and into the darkness, for all I know to occupy the space Miss Emily had been in before.

‘Miss Emily,’ I said, ‘it’s very nice to see you again.’

‘How kind of you to say so. I recognised you, but you may well not have recognised me. In fact, Kathy H., once not so long ago, I passed you sitting on that bench out there, and you certainly didn’t recognise me then. You glanced at George, the big Nigerian man pushing me. Oh yes, you had quite a good look at him, and he at you. I didn’t say a word, and you didn’t know it was me. But tonight, in context, as it were, we know each other. You both look rather shocked at the sight of me. I’ve not been well recently, but I’m hoping this contraption isn’t a permanent fixture. Unfortunately, my dears, I won’t be able to entertain you for as long as I’d like just now, because in a short while some men are coming

to take away my bedside cabinet. It's a quite wonderful object. George has put protective padding around it, but I've insisted I'll accompany it myself all the same. You never know with these men. They handle it roughly, hurl it around their vehicle, then their employer claims it was like that from the start. It happened to us before, so this time, I've insisted on going along with it. It's a beautiful object, I had it with me at Hailsham, so I'm determined to get a fair price. So when they come, I'm afraid that's when I shall have to leave you. But I can see, my dears, you've come on a mission close to your hearts. I must say, it does cheer me to see you. And it cheers Marie-Claude too, even though you'd never know it to look at her. Isn't that so, darling? Oh, she pretends it's not so, but it is. She's touched that you've come to find us. Oh, she's in a sulk, ignore her, students, ignore her. Now, I'll try and answer your questions the best I can. I've heard this rumour countless times. When we still had Hailsham, we'd get two or three couples each year, trying to get in to talk to us. One even wrote to us. I suppose it's not so hard to find a large estate like that if you mean to break the rules. So you see, it's been there, this rumour, from long before your time.'

She stopped, so I said: 'What we want to know now, Miss Emily, is if the rumour's true or not.'

She went on gazing at us for a moment, then took a deep breath. 'Within Hailsham itself, whenever this talk started up, I made sure to stamp it out good and proper. But as for what students said after they'd left us, what could I do? In the end, I came to believe - and Marie-Claude believes this too, don't you, darling? - I came to believe that this rumour, it's not just a single rumour. What I mean is, I think it's one that gets created from scratch over and over. You go to the source, stamp it out, you'll not stop it starting again elsewhere. I came to this conclusion and ceased to worry about it. Marie-Claude never did worry about it. Her view was: "If they're so foolish, let them believe

it." Oh yes, don't show me that sour face of yours. That's been your view of it from the beginning. After many years of it, I came not exactly to the same viewpoint. But I began to think, well, perhaps I shouldn't worry. It's not my doing, after all. And for the few couples who get disappointed, the rest will never put it to the test anyway. It's something for them to dream about, a little fantasy. What harm is there? But for the two of you, I can see this doesn't apply. You are serious. You've thought carefully. You've *hoped* carefully. For students like you, I do feel regret. It gives me no pleasure at all to disappoint you. But there it is.'

I didn't want to look at Tommy. I felt surprisingly calm, and even though Miss Emily's words should have crushed us, there was an aspect to them that implied something further, something being held back, that suggested we hadn't yet got to the bottom of things. There was even the possibility she wasn't telling the truth. So I asked:

'Is it the case, then, that deferrals don't exist? There's nothing you can do?'

She shook her head slowly from side to side. 'There's no truth in the rumour. I'm sorry. I truly am.'

Suddenly Tommy asked: 'Was it true once though? Before Hailsham closed?'

Miss Emily went on shaking her head. 'It was never true. Even before the Morningdale scandal, even back when Hailsham was considered a shining beacon, an example of how we might move to a more humane and better way of doing things, even then, it wasn't true. It's best to be clear about this. A wishful rumour. That's all it ever was. Oh dear, is that the men come for the cabinet?'

The doorbell had gone, and footsteps came down the stairs to answer it. There were men's voices out in the narrow hall, and Madame came out of the darkness behind us, crossed the

room and went out. Miss Emily leaned forward in the wheelchair, listening intently. Then she said:

‘It’s not them. It’s that awful man from the decorating company again. Marie-Claude will see to it. So, my dears, we have a few minutes more. Was there something else you wished to talk to me about? This is all strictly against regulations, of course, and Marie-Claude should never have asked you in. And naturally, I should have turned you out the second I knew you were here. But Marie-Claude doesn’t care much for their regulations these days, and I must say, neither do I. So if you wish to stay a little longer, you’re very welcome.’

‘If the rumour was never true,’ Tommy said, ‘then why did you take all our art stuff away? Didn’t the Gallery exist either?’

‘The Gallery? Well, that rumour *did* have some truth to it. There *was* a gallery. And after a fashion, there still is. These days it’s here, in this house. I had to prune it down, which I regret. But there wasn’t room for all of it in here. But why did we take your work away? That’s what you’re asking, isn’t it?’

‘Not just that,’ I said quietly. ‘Why did we do all of that work in the first place? Why train us, encourage us, make us produce all of that? If we’re just going to give donations anyway, then die, why all those lessons? Why all those books and discussions?’

‘Why Hailsham at all?’ Madame had said this from the hallway. She came past us again and back into the darkened section of the room. ‘It’s a good question for you to ask.’

Miss Emily’s gaze followed her, and for a moment, remained fixed behind us. I felt like turning to see what looks were being exchanged, but it was almost like we were back at Hailsham, and we had to keep facing the front with complete attention. Then Miss Emily said:

‘Yes, why Hailsham at all? Marie-Claude likes to ask that a lot these days. But not so long ago, before the Morningdale scandal, she wouldn’t have dreamt of asking a question like that. It wouldn’t have entered her head. You know that’s right, don’t look at me like that! There was only one person in those days who would ask a question like that, and that was me. Long before Morningdale, right from the very beginning, I asked that. And that made it easy for the rest of them, Marie-Claude, all the rest of them, they could all carry on without a care. All you students too. I did all the worrying and questioning for the lot of you. And as long as I was steadfast, then no doubts ever crossed your minds, any of you. But you asked your questions, dear boy. Let’s answer the simplest one, and perhaps it will answer all the rest. Why did we take your artwork? Why did we do that? You said an interesting thing earlier, Tommy. When you were discussing this with Marie-Claude. You said it was because your art would reveal what you were like. What you were like inside. That’s what you said, wasn’t it? Well, you weren’t far wrong about that. We took away your art because we thought it would reveal your souls. Or to put it more finely, we did it to *prove you had souls at all.*’

She paused, and Tommy and I exchanged glances for the first time in ages. Then I asked:

‘Why did you have to prove a thing like that, Miss Emily? Did someone think we didn’t have souls?’

A thin smile appeared on her face. ‘It’s touching, Kathy, to see you so taken aback. It demonstrates, in a way, that we did our job well. As you say, why would anyone doubt you had a soul? But I have to tell you, my dear, it wasn’t something commonly held when we first set out all those years ago. And though we’ve come a long way since then, it’s still not a notion universally held, even today. You Hailsham students, even after you’ve been out in the world like this, you still don’t know the half of it. All around the country, at this very moment, there are students being reared in

deplorable conditions, conditions you Hailsham students could hardly imagine. And now we're no more, things will only get worse.'

She paused again, and for a moment she seemed to be inspecting us carefully through narrowed eyes. Finally she went on:

'Whatever else, we at least saw to it that all of you in our care, you grew up in wonderful surroundings. And we saw to it too, after you left us, you were kept away from the worst of those horrors. We were able to do that much for you at least. But this dream of yours, this dream of being able to *defer*. Such a thing would always have been beyond us to grant, even at the height of our influence. I'm sorry, I can see what I'm saying won't be welcome to you. But you mustn't be dejected. I hope you can appreciate how much we *were* able to secure for you. Look at you both now! You've had good lives, you're educated and cultured. I'm sorry we couldn't secure more for you than we did, but you must realise how much worse things once were. When Marie-Claude and I started out, there were no places like Hailsham in existence. We were the first, along with Glenmorgan House. Then a few years later came the Saunders Trust. Together, we became a small but very vocal movement, and we challenged the entire way the donations programme was being run. Most importantly, we demonstrated to the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being. Before that, all clones - or *students*, as we preferred to call you - existed only to supply medical science. In the early days, after the war, that's largely all you were to most people. Shadowy objects in test tubes. Wouldn't you agree, Marie-Claude? She's being very quiet. Usually you can't get her to shut up on this subject. Your presence, my dears, appears to have tied her tongue. Very well. So to answer your question, Tommy. That was why we collected your art. We selected the best of it and put on special

exhibitions. In the late seventies, at the height of our influence, we were organising large events all around the country. There'd be cabinet ministers, bishops, all sorts of famous people coming to attend. There were speeches, large funds pledged. "There, look!" we could say. "Look at this art! How dare you claim these children are anything less than fully human?" Oh yes, there was a lot of support for our movement back then, the tide was with us.'

For the next few minutes, Miss Emily went on reminiscing about different events from those days, mentioning a lot of people whose names meant nothing to us. In fact, for a moment, it was almost like we were listening to her again at one of her morning assemblies as she drifted off on tangents none of us could follow. She seemed to enjoy herself, though, and a gentle smile settled around her eyes. Then suddenly she came out of it and said in a new tone:

'But we never quite lost touch with reality, did we, Marie-Claude? Not like our colleagues at the Saunders Trust. Even during the best of times, we always knew what a difficult battle we were engaged in. And sure enough, the Morningdale business came along, then one or two other things, and before we knew it all our hard work had come undone.'

'But what I don't understand,' I said, 'is why people would want students treated so badly in the first place.'

'From your perspective today, Kathy, your bemusement is perfectly reasonable. But you must try and see it historically. After the war, in the early fifties, when the great breakthroughs in science followed one after the other so rapidly, there wasn't time to take stock, to ask the sensible questions. Suddenly there were all these new possibilities laid before us, all these ways to cure so many previously incurable conditions. This was what the world noticed the most, wanted the most. And for a long time, people preferred to believe these organs appeared from

nowhere, or at most that they grew in a kind of vacuum. Yes, there *were* arguments. But by the time people became concerned about ... about *students*, by the time they came to consider just how you were reared, whether you should have been brought into existence at all, well by then it was too late. There was no way to reverse the process. How can you ask a world that has come to regard cancer as curable, how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days? There was no going back. However uncomfortable people were about your existence, their overwhelming concern was that their own children, their spouses, their parents, their friends, did not die from cancer, motor neurone disease, heart disease. So for a long time you were kept in the shadows, and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter. And that was how things stood until our little movement came along. But do you see what we were up against? We were virtually attempting to square the circle. Here was the world, requiring students to donate. While that remained the case, there would always be a barrier against seeing you as properly human. Well, we fought that battle for many years, and what we won for you, at least, were many improvements, though of course, you were only a select few. But then came the Morningdale scandal, then other things, and before we knew it, the climate had quite changed. No one wanted to be seen supporting us any more, and our little movement, Hailsham, Glenmorgan, the Saunders Trust, we were all of us swept away.'

'What was this Morningdale scandal you keep mentioning, Miss Emily?' I asked. 'You'll have to tell us, because we don't know about it.'

'Well, I suppose there's no reason why you should. It was never such a large matter in the wider world. It concerned a scientist called James Morningdale, quite talented in his way. He carried on his work in a remote part

of Scotland, where I suppose he thought he'd attract less attention. What he wanted was to offer people the possibility of having children with enhanced characteristics. Superior intelligence, superior athleticism, that sort of thing. Of course, there'd been others with similar ambitions, but this Morningdale fellow, he'd taken his research much further than anyone before him, far beyond legal boundaries. Well, he was discovered, they put an end to his work and that seemed to be that. Except, of course, it wasn't, not for us. As I say, it never became an enormous matter. But it did create a certain atmosphere, you see. It reminded people, reminded them of a fear they'd always had. It's one thing to create students, such as yourselves, for the donation programme. But a generation of created children who'd take their place in society? Children demonstrably *superior* to the rest of us? Oh no. That frightened people. They recoiled from that.'

'But Miss Emily,' I said, 'what did any of that have to do with us? Why did Hailsham have to close because of something like that?'

'We didn't see an obvious connection either, Kathy. Not at first. And I often think now, we were culpable not to do so. Had we been more alert, less absorbed with ourselves, if we'd worked very hard at that stage when the news about Morningdale first broke, we might have been able to avert it. Oh, Marie-Claude disagrees. She thinks it would have happened no matter what we did, and she might have a point. After all, it wasn't just Morningdale. There were other things at that time. That awful television series, for instance. All these things contributed, contributed to the turning of the tide. But I suppose when it comes down to it, the central flaw was this. Our little movement, we were always too fragile, always too dependent on the whims of our supporters. So long as the climate was in our favour, so long as a corporation or a politician could see a benefit in supporting us, then we were able to keep afloat. But it had always been a struggle, and after Morningdale, after the climate changed, we had no

chance. The world didn't want to be reminded how the donation programme really worked. They didn't want to think about you students, or about the conditions you were brought up in. In other words, my dears, they wanted you back in the shadows. Back in the shadows where you'd been before the likes of Marie-Claude and myself ever came along. And all those influential people who'd once been so keen to help us, well of course, they all vanished. We lost our sponsors, one after the other, in a matter of just over a year. We kept going for as long as we could, we went on for two years more than Glenmorgan. But in the end, as you know, we were obliged to close, and today there's hardly a trace left of the work we did. You won't find anything like Hailsham anywhere in the country now. All you'll find, as ever, are those vast government "homes", and even if they're somewhat better than they once were, let me tell you, my dears, you'd not sleep for days if you saw what still goes on in some of those places. And as for Marie-Claude and me, here we are, we've retreated to this house, and upstairs we have a mountain of your work. That's what we have to remind us of what we did. And a mountain of debt too, though that's not nearly so welcome. And the memories, I suppose, of all of you. And the knowledge that we've given you better lives than you would have had otherwise.'

'Don't try and ask them to thank you,' Madame's voice said from behind us. 'Why should they be grateful? They came here looking for something much more. What we gave them, all the years, all the fighting we did on their behalf, what do they know of that? They think it's God-given. Until they came here, they knew nothing of it. All they feel now is disappointment, because we haven't given them everything possible.'

Nobody spoke for a while. Then there was a noise outside and the doorbell rang again. Madame came out of the darkness and went out into the hall.

‘This time it *must* be the men,’ Miss Emily said. ‘I shall have to get ready. But you can stay a little longer. The men have to bring the thing down two flights of stairs. Marie-Claude will see they don’t damage it.’

Tommy and I couldn’t quite believe that was the end of it. We neither of us stood up, and anyway, there was no sign of anyone helping Miss Emily out of her wheelchair. I wondered for a moment if she was going to try and get up by herself, but she remained still, leaning forward as before, listening intently. Then Tommy said:

‘So there’s definitely nothing. No deferral, nothing like that.’

‘Tommy,’ I murmured, and glared at him. But Miss Emily said gently:

‘No, Tommy. There’s nothing like that. Your life must now run the course that’s been set for it.’

‘So, what you’re saying, Miss,’ Tommy said, ‘is that everything we did, all the lessons, everything. It was all about what you just told us? There was nothing more to it than that?’

‘I can see,’ Miss Emily said, ‘that it might look as though you were simply pawns in a game. It can certainly be looked at like that. But think of it. You were lucky pawns. There was a certain climate and now it’s gone. You have to accept that sometimes that’s how things happen in this world. People’s opinions, their feelings, they go one way, then the other. It just so happens you grew up at a certain point in this process.’

‘It might be just some trend that came and went,’ I said. ‘But for us, it’s our life.’

‘Yes, that’s true. But think of it. You were better off than many who came before you. And who knows what those who

come after you will have to face. I'm sorry, students, but I must leave you now. George! George!'

There had been a lot of noise out in the hallway, and perhaps this had stopped George from hearing, because there was no response. Tommy asked suddenly:

'Is that why Miss Lucy left?'

For a while I thought Miss Emily, whose attention was on what was going on in the hallway, hadn't heard him. She leaned back in her wheelchair and began moving it gradually towards the door. There were so many little coffee tables and chairs there didn't seem a way through. I was about to get up and clear a path, when she stopped suddenly.

'Lucy Wainright,' she said. 'Ah yes. We had a little trouble with her.' She paused, then adjusted her wheelchair back to face Tommy. 'Yes, we had a little trouble with her. A disagreement. But to answer your question, Tommy. The disagreement with Lucy Wainright wasn't to do with what I've just been telling you. Not directly, anyway. No, that was more, shall we say, an internal matter.'

I thought she was going to leave it at that, so I asked: 'Miss Emily, if it's all right, we'd like to know about it, about what happened with Miss Lucy.'

Miss Emily raised her eyebrows. 'Lucy Wainright? She was important to you? Forgive me, dear students, I'm forgetting again. Lucy wasn't with us for long, so for us she's just a peripheral figure in our memory of Hailsham. And not an altogether happy one. But I appreciate, if you were there during just those years ...' She laughed to herself and seemed to be remembering something. In the hall, Madame was telling the men off really loudly, but Miss Emily now seemed to have lost interest. She was going through her memories with a look of concentration. Finally she said: 'She was a nice enough girl, Lucy Wainright. But after she'd been with us for a while, she began to have these ideas. She thought

you students had to be made more aware. More aware of what lay ahead of you, who you were, what you were for. She believed you should be given as full a picture as possible. That to do anything less would be somehow to cheat you. We considered her view and concluded she was mistaken. ’

‘Why?’ Tommy asked. ‘Why did you think that?’

‘Why? She meant well, I’m sure of that. I can see you were fond of her. She had the makings of an excellent guardian. But what she was wanting to do, it was too *theoretical*. We had run Hailsham for many years, we had a sense of what could work, what was best for the students in the long run, beyond Hailsham. Lucy Wainright was idealistic, nothing wrong with that. But she had no grasp of practicalities. You see, we were able to give you something, something which even now no one will ever take from you, and we were able to do that principally by *sheltering* you. Hailsham would not have been Hailsham if we hadn’t. Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. Yes, in many ways we *fooled* you. I suppose you could even call it that. But we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods. Lucy was well-meaning enough. But if she’d had her way, your happiness at Hailsham would have been shattered. Look at you both now! I’m so proud to see you both. You built your lives on what we gave you. You wouldn’t be who you are today if we’d not protected you. You wouldn’t have become absorbed in your lessons, you wouldn’t have lost yourselves in your art and your writing. Why should you have done, knowing what lay in store for each of you? You would have told us it was all pointless, and how could we have argued with you? So she had to go. ’

We could hear Madame now shouting at the men. She hadn’t lost her temper exactly, but her voice was frighteningly stern, and the men’s voices, which until this point had been arguing with her, fell silent.

‘Perhaps it’s just as well I’ve remained in here with you,’ Miss Emily said. ‘Marie-Claude does this sort of thing so much more efficiently.’

I don’t know what made me say it. Maybe it was because I knew the visit would have to finish pretty soon; maybe I was getting curious to know how exactly Miss Emily and Madame felt about each other. Anyway, I said to her, lowering my voice and nodding towards the doorway:

‘Madame never liked us. She’s always been afraid of us. In the way people are afraid of spiders and things.’

I waited to see if Miss Emily would get angry, no longer caring much if she did. Sure enough, she turned to me sharply, as if I’d thrown a ball of paper at her, and her eyes flashed in a way that reminded me of her Hailsham days. But her voice was even and soft when she replied:

‘Marie-Claude has given *everything* for you. She has worked and worked and worked. Make no mistake about it, my child, Marie-Claude is on your side and will always be on your side. Is she afraid of you? We’re *all* afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you all almost every day I was at Hailsham. There were times I’d look down at you all from my study window and I’d feel such revulsion ...’ She stopped, then something in her eyes flashed again. ‘But I was determined not to let such feelings stop me doing what was right. I fought those feelings and I won. Now, if you’d be so good as to help me out of here, George should be waiting with my crutches.’

With us at each elbow, she walked carefully into the hall, where a large man in a nursing uniform started with alarm and quickly produced a pair of crutches.

The front door was open to the street and I was surprised to see there was still daylight left. Madame’s voice was coming from outside, talking more calmly now to the men. It felt like time for Tommy and me to slip away, but the George

man was helping Miss Emily with her coat, while she stood steadily between her crutches; there was no way we could get past, so we just waited. I suppose, too, we were waiting to say goodbye to Miss Emily; maybe, after everything else, we wanted to thank her, I'm not sure. But she was now preoccupied with her cabinet. She began to make some urgent point to the men outside, then left with George, not looking back at us.

Tommy and I stayed in the hall for a while longer, not sure what to do. When we did eventually wander outside, I noticed the lamps had come on all the way down the long street, even though the sky wasn't yet dark. A white van was starting up its engine. Right behind was a big old Volvo with Miss Emily in the passenger seat. Madame was crouching by the window, nodding to something Miss Emily was saying, while George closed up the boot and moved round to the driver's door. Then the white van moved off, and Miss Emily's car followed.

Madame watched the departing vehicles for a long time. Then she turned as though to go back into the house, and seeing us there on the pavement, stopped abruptly, almost shrinking back.

'We're going now,' I said. 'Thank you for talking to us. Please say goodbye to Miss Emily for us.'

I could see her studying me in the fading light. Then she said:

'Kathy H. I remember you. Yes, I remember.' She fell silent, but went on looking at me.

'I think I know what you're thinking about,' I said, in the end. 'I think I can guess.'

'Very well.' Her voice was dreamy and her gaze had slightly lost focus. 'Very well. You are a mind-reader. Tell me.'

‘There was a time you saw me once, one afternoon, in the dormitories. There was no one else around, and I was playing this tape, this music. I was sort of dancing with my eyes closed and you saw me.’

‘That’s very good. A mind-reader. You should be on the stage. I only recognised you just now. But yes, I remember that occasion. I still think about it from time to time.’

‘That’s funny. So do I.’

‘I see.’

We could have ended the conversation there. We could have said goodbye and left. But she stepped closer to us, looking into my face all the time.

‘You were much younger then,’ she said. ‘But yes, it’s you.’

‘You don’t have to answer this if you don’t want to,’ I said. ‘But it’s always puzzled me. May I ask you?’

‘You read my mind. But I cannot read yours.’

‘Well, you were … upset that day. You were watching me, and when I realised, and I opened my eyes, you were watching me and I think you were crying. In fact, I know you were. You were watching me and crying. Why was that?’

Madame’s expression didn’t change and she kept staring into my face. ‘I was weeping,’ she said eventually, very quietly, as though afraid the neighbours were listening, ‘because when I came in, I heard your music. I thought some foolish student had left the music on. But when I came into your dormitory, I saw you, by yourself, a little girl, dancing. As you say, eyes closed, far away, a look of yearning. You were dancing so very sympathetically. And the music, the song. There was something in the words. It was full of sadness.’

‘The song,’ I said, ‘it was called “Never Let Me Go”.’ Then I sang a couple of lines quietly under my breath for her. *‘Never let me go. Oh, baby, baby. Never let me go ...’*

She nodded as though in agreement. ‘Yes, it was that song. I’ve heard it once or twice since then. On the radio, on the television. And it’s taken me back to that little girl, dancing by herself.’

‘You say you’re not a mind-reader,’ I said. ‘But maybe you were that day. Maybe that’s why you started to cry when you saw me. Because whatever the song was really about, in my head, when I was dancing, I had my own version. You see, I imagined it was about this woman who’d been told she couldn’t have babies. But then she’d had one, and she was so pleased, and she was holding it ever so tightly to her breast, really afraid something might separate them, and she’s going baby, baby, never let me go. That’s not what the song’s about at all, but that’s what I had in my head that time. Maybe you read my mind, and that’s why you found it so sad. I didn’t think it was so sad at the time, but now, when I think back, it does feel a bit sad.’

I’d spoken to Madame, but I could sense Tommy shifting next to me, and was aware of the texture of his clothes, of everything about him. Then Madame said:

‘That’s most interesting. But I was no more a mind-reader then than today. I was weeping for an altogether different reason. When I watched you dancing that day, I saw something else. I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go. That is what I saw. It wasn’t really you, what you were

doing, I know that. But I saw you and it broke my heart. And I've never forgotten.'

Then she came forward until she was only a step or two from us. 'Your stories this evening, they touched me too.' She looked now to Tommy, then back at me. 'Poor creatures. I wish I could help you. But now you're by yourselves.'

She reached out her hand, all the while staring into my face, and placed it on my cheek. I could feel a trembling go all through her body, but she kept her hand where it was, and I could see again tears appearing in her eyes.

'You poor creatures,' she repeated, almost in a whisper. Then she turned and went back into her house.

We hardly discussed our meeting with Miss Emily and Madame on the journey back. Or if we did, we talked only about the less important things, like how much we thought they'd aged, or the stuff in their house.

I kept us on the most obscure back roads I knew, where only our headlights disturbed the darkness. We'd occasionally encounter other headlights, and then I'd get the feeling they belonged to other carers, driving home alone, or maybe like me, with a donor beside them. I realised, of course, that other people used these roads; but that night, it seemed to me these dark byways of the country existed just for the likes of us, while the big glittering motorways with their huge signs and super cafés were for everyone else. I don't know if Tommy was thinking something similar. Maybe he was, because at one point, he remarked:

'Kath, you really know some weird roads.'

He did a little laugh as he said this, but then he seemed to fall deep into thought. Then as we were going down a particularly dark lane in the back of nowhere, he said suddenly:

'I think Miss Lucy was right. Not Miss Emily.'

I can't remember if I said anything to that. If I did, it certainly wasn't anything very profound. But that was the moment I first noticed it, something in his voice, or maybe his manner, that set off distant alarm bells. I remember taking my eyes off the twisting road to glance at him, but he was just sitting there quietly, gazing straight ahead into the night.

A few minutes later, he said suddenly: 'Kath, can we stop? I'm sorry, I need to get out a minute.'

Thinking he was feeling sick again, I pulled up almost immediately, hard against a hedge. The spot was completely unlit, and even with the car lights on, I was nervous another vehicle might come round the curve and run into us. That's why, when Tommy got out and disappeared into the blackness, I didn't go with him. Also, there'd been something purposeful about the way he'd got out that suggested even if he was feeling ill, he'd prefer to cope with it on his own. Anyway, that's why I was still in the car, wondering whether to move it a little further up the hill, when I heard the first scream.

At first I didn't even think it was him, but some maniac who'd been lurking in the bushes. I was already out of the car when the second and third screams came, and by then I knew it was Tommy, though that hardly lessened my urgency. In fact, for a moment, I was probably close to panic, not having a clue where he was. I couldn't really see anything, and when I tried to go towards the screams, I was stopped by an impenetrable thicket. Then I found an opening, and stepping through a ditch, came up to a fence. I managed to climb over it and I landed in soft mud.

I could now see my surroundings much better. I was in a field that sloped down steeply not far in front of me, and I could see the lights of some village way below in the valley. The wind here was really powerful, and a gust pulled at me so hard, I had to reach for the fence post. The moon wasn't

quite full, but it was bright enough, and I could make out in the mid-distance, near where the field began to fall away, Tommy's figure, raging, shouting, flinging his fists and kicking out.

I tried to run to him, but the mud sucked my feet down. The mud was impeding him too, because one time, when he kicked out, he slipped and fell out of view into the blackness. But his jumbled swear-words continued uninterrupted, and I was able to reach him just as he was getting to his feet again. I caught a glimpse of his face in the moonlight, caked in mud and distorted with fury, then I reached for his flailing arms and held on tight. He tried to shake me off, but I kept holding on, until he stopped shouting and I felt the fight go out of him. Then I realised he too had his arms around me. And so we stood together like that, at the top of that field, for what seemed like ages, not saying anything, just holding each other, while the wind kept blowing and blowing at us, tugging our clothes, and for a moment, it seemed like we were holding onto each other because that was the only way to stop us being swept away into the night.

When at last we pulled apart, he muttered: 'I'm really sorry, Kath.' Then he gave a shaky laugh and added: 'Good job there weren't cows in the field. They'd have got a fright.'

I could see he was doing his best to reassure me it was all okay now, but his chest was still heaving and his legs shaking. We walked together back towards the car, trying not to slip.

'You stink of cow poo,' I said, finally.

'Oh God, Kath. How do I explain this? We'll have to sneak in round the back.'

'You'll still have to sign in.'

'Oh God,' he said, and laughed again.

I found some rags in the car and we got the worst of the muck off. But I'd taken out of the boot, just while I was searching for the rags, the sports bag containing his animal pictures, and when we set off again, I noticed Tommy brought it inside with him.

We travelled some way, not saying much, the bag on his lap. I was waiting for him to say something about the pictures; it even occurred to me he was working up to another rage, when he'd throw all the pictures out of the window. But he held the bag protectively with both hands and kept staring at the dark road unfolding before us. After a long period of silence, he said:

'I'm sorry about just now, Kath. I really am. I'm a real idiot.' Then he added: 'What are you thinking, Kath?'

'I was thinking,' I said, 'about back then, at Hailsham, when you used to go bonkers like that, and we couldn't understand it. We couldn't understand how you could ever get like that. And I was just having this idea, just a thought really. I was thinking maybe the reason you used to get like that was because at some level you always *knew*.'

Tommy thought about this, then shook his head. 'Don't think so, Kath. No, it was always just me. Me being an idiot. That's all it ever was.' Then after a moment, he did a small laugh and said: 'But that's a funny idea. Maybe I did know, somewhere deep down. Something the rest of you didn't.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Nothing seemed to change much in the week or so after that trip. I didn't expect it to stay that way though, and sure enough, by the start of October, I started noticing little differences. For one thing, though Tommy carried on with his animal pictures, he became cagey about doing them in my presence. We weren't quite back to how it was when I'd first become his carer and all the Cottages stuff was still hanging over us. But it was like he'd thought about it and come to a decision: that he'd continue with the animals as the mood took him, but if I came in, he'd stop and put them away. I wasn't that hurt by this. In fact, in many ways, it was a relief: those animals staring us in the face when we were together would have only made things more awkward.

But there were other changes I found less easy. I don't mean we weren't still having some good times up in his room. We were even having sex every now and then. But what I couldn't help noticing was how, more and more, Tommy tended to identify himself with the other donors at the centre. If, for instance, the two of us were reminiscing about old Hailsham people, he'd sooner or later move the conversation round to one of his current donor friends who'd maybe said or done something similar to what we were recalling. There was one time in particular, when I drove into the Kingsfield after a long journey and stepped out of the car. The Square was looking a bit like that time I'd come to the centre with Ruth the day we'd gone to see the boat. It was an overcast autumn afternoon, and there was no one about except for a group of donors clustered under the overhanging roof of the recreation building. I saw Tommy was with them - he was standing with a shoulder against a post - and was listening to a donor who was sitting crouched on the entrance steps. I came towards them a little way, then stopped and waited,

there in the open, under the grey sky. But Tommy, though he'd seen me, went on listening to his friend, and eventually he and all the others burst out laughing. Even then, he carried on listening and smiling. He claimed afterwards he'd signalled to me to come over, but if he had, it hadn't been at all obvious. All I registered was him smiling vaguely in my direction, then going back to what his friend was saying. Okay, he was in the middle of something, and after a minute or so, he did come away, and the two of us went up to his room. But it was quite different to the way things would have happened before. And it wasn't just that he'd kept me waiting out in the Square. I wouldn't have minded that so much. It was more that I sensed for the first time that day something close to resentment on his part at having to come away with me, and once we were up in his room, the atmosphere between us wasn't so great.

To be fair, a lot of it might have been down to me as much as him. Because as I'd stood there watching them all talking and laughing, I'd felt an unexpected little tug; because there was something about the way these donors had arranged themselves in a rough semi-circle, something about their poses, almost studiously relaxed, whether standing or sitting, as though to announce to the world how much each one of them was savouring the company, that reminded me of the way our little gang used to sit around our pavilion together. That comparison, as I say, tugged something inside me, and so maybe, once we were up in his room, it was as much me feeling resentful as the other way round.

I'd feel a similar little prickle of resentment each time he told me I didn't understand something or other because I wasn't yet a donor. But apart from one particular time, which I'll come to in a moment, a little prickle was all it was. Usually he'd say these things to me half-jokingly, almost affectionately. And even when there was something more to it, like the time he told me to stop taking his dirty washing to

the laundry because he could do it himself, it hardly amounted to a row. That time, I'd asked him:

'What difference does it make, which one of us takes the towels down? I'm going out that way anyway.'

To which he'd shaken his head and said: 'Look, Kath, I'll sort out my own things. If you were a donor, you'd see.'

Okay, it did niggle, but it was something I could forget easily enough. But as I say, there was this one time he brought it up, about my not being a donor, that really riled me.

It happened about a week after the notice came for his fourth donation. We'd been expecting it and had already talked it through a lot. In fact, we'd had some of our most intimate conversations since the Littlehampton trip discussing the fourth donation. I've known donors to react in all sorts of ways to their fourth donation. Some want to talk about it all the time, endlessly and pointlessly. Others will only joke about it, while others refuse to discuss it at all. And then there's this odd tendency among donors to treat a fourth donation as something worthy of congratulations. A donor 'on a fourth', even one who's been pretty unpopular up till then, is treated with special respect. Even the doctors and nurses play up to this: a donor on a fourth will go in for a check and be greeted by whitecoats smiling and shaking their hand. Well, Tommy and I, we talked about all of this, sometimes jokingly, other times seriously and carefully. We discussed all the different ways people tried to handle it, and which ways made the best sense. Once, lying side by side on the bed with the dark coming on, he said:

'You know why it is, Kath, why everyone worries so much about the fourth? It's because they're not sure they'll really complete. If you knew for certain you'd complete, it would be easier. But they never tell us for sure.'

I'd been wondering for a while if this would come up, and I'd been thinking about how I'd respond. But when it did, I couldn't find much to say. So I just said: 'It's just a lot of rubbish, Tommy. Just talk, wild talk. It's not even worth thinking about.'

But Tommy would have known I had nothing to back up my words. He'd have known, too, he was raising questions to which even the doctors had no certain answers. You'll have heard the same talk. How maybe, after the fourth donation, even if you've technically completed, you're still conscious in some sort of way; how then you find there are more donations, plenty of them, on the other side of that line; how there are no more recovery centres, no carers, no friends; how there's nothing to do except watch your remaining donations until they switch you off. It's horror movie stuff, and most of the time people don't want to think about it. Not the whitecoats, not the carers - and usually not the donors. But now and again, a donor will bring it up, as Tommy did that evening, and I wish now we'd talked about it. As it was, after I dismissed it as rubbish, we both shrank back from the whole territory. At least, though, I knew it was on Tommy's mind after that, and I was glad he'd at least confided in me that far. What I'm saying is that all in all I was under the impression we were dealing with the fourth donation pretty well together, and that's why I was so knocked off balance by what he came out with that day we walked around the field.

The Kingsfield doesn't have much in the way of grounds. The Square's the obvious congregating point and the few bits behind the buildings look more like wasteland. The largest chunk, which the donors call 'the field', is a rectangle of overgrown weeds and thistles held in by wire-mesh fences. There's always been talk of turning it into a proper lawn for the donors, but they haven't done it yet, even now. It might not be so peaceful even if they did get round to it, because of the big road nearby. All the same, when donors get

restless and need to walk it off, that's where they tend to go, scraping through all the nettles and brambles. The particular morning I'm talking about, it was really foggy, and I knew the field would be soaking, but Tommy had been insistent we go there for a walk. Not surprisingly, we were the only ones there - which probably suited Tommy fine. After crashing about the thickets for a few minutes, he stopped next to the fence and stared at the blank fog on the other side. Then he said:

'Kath, I don't want you to take this the wrong way. But I've been thinking it over a lot. Kath, I think I ought to get a different carer.'

In the few seconds after he said this, I realised I wasn't surprised by it at all; that in some funny way I'd been waiting for it. But I was angry all the same and didn't say anything.

'It's not just because the fourth donation's coming up,' he went on. 'It's not just about that. It's because of stuff like what happened last week. When I had all that kidney trouble. There's going to be much more stuff like that coming.'

'That's why I came and found you,' I said. 'That's exactly why I came to help you. For what's starting now. And it's what Ruth wanted too.'

'Ruth wanted that other thing for us,' Tommy said. 'She wouldn't necessarily have wanted you to be my carer through this last bit.'

'Tommy,' I said, and I suppose by now I was furious, but I kept my voice quiet and under control, 'I'm the one to help you. That's why I came and found you again.'

'Ruth wanted the other thing for us,' Tommy repeated. 'All this is something else. Kath, I don't want to be that way in front of you.'

He was looking down at the ground, a palm pressed against the wire-mesh fence, and for a moment he looked like he was listening intently to the sound of the traffic somewhere beyond the fog. And that was when he said it, shaking his head slightly:

‘Ruth would have understood. She was a donor, so she would have understood. I’m not saying she’d necessarily have wanted the same thing for herself. If she’d been able to, maybe she’d have wanted you as her carer right to the end. But she’d have understood, about me wanting to do it differently. Kath, sometimes you just don’t see it. You don’t see it because you’re not a donor.’

It was when he came out with this that I turned and walked off. As I said, I’d been almost prepared for the bit about not wanting me any more as his carer. But what had really stung, coming after all those other little things, like when he’d kept me standing in the Square, was what he’d said then, the way he’d divided me off yet again, not just from all the other donors, but from him and Ruth.

This never turned into a huge fight though. When I stalked off, there wasn’t much else I could do other than go back up to his room, and then he came up himself several minutes later. I’d cooled down by then and so had he, and we were able to have a better conversation about it. It was a bit stiff, but we made peace, and even got into some of the practicalities of changing carers. Then, as we were sitting in the dull light, side by side on the edge of his bed, he said to me:

‘I don’t want us to fight again, Kath. But I’ve been wanting to ask you this a lot. I mean, don’t you get tired of being a carer? All the rest of us, we became donors ages ago. You’ve been doing it for years. Don’t you sometimes wish, Kath, they’d hurry up and send you your notice?’

I shrugged. ‘I don’t mind. Anyway, it’s important there are good carers. And I’m a good carer.’

‘But is it really that important? Okay, it’s really nice to have a good carer. But in the end, is it really so important? The donors will all donate, just the same, and then they’ll complete.’

‘Of course it’s important. A good carer makes a big difference to what a donor’s life’s actually like.’

‘But all this rushing about you do. All this getting exhausted and being by yourself. I’ve been watching you. It’s wearing you out. You must do, Kath, you must sometimes wish they’d tell you you can stop. I don’t know why you don’t have a word with them, ask them why it’s been so long.’ Then when I kept quiet, he said: ‘I’m just saying, that’s all. Let’s not fight again.’

I put my head on his shoulder and said: ‘Yeah, well. Maybe it won’t be for much longer anyway. But for now, I have to keep going. Even if you don’t want me around, there are others who do.’

‘I suppose you’re right, Kath. You *are* a really good carer. You’d be the perfect one for me too if you weren’t you.’ He did a laugh and put his arm round me, though we kept sitting side by side. Then he said: ‘I keep thinking about this river somewhere, with the water moving really fast. And these two people in the water, trying to hold onto each other, holding on as hard as they can, but in the end it’s just too much. The current’s too strong. They’ve got to let go, drift apart. That’s how I think it is with us. It’s a shame, Kath, because we’ve loved each other all our lives. But in the end, we can’t stay together forever.’

When he said this, I remembered the way I’d held onto him that night in the wind-swept field on the way back from Littlehampton. I don’t know if he was thinking about that too, or if he was still thinking about his rivers and strong currents. In any case, we went on sitting like that on the side of the bed for a long time, lost in our thoughts. Then in the end I said to him:

‘I’m sorry I blew up at you earlier. I’ll talk to them. I’ll try and see to it you get someone really good.’

‘It’s a shame, Kath,’ he said again. And I don’t think we talked any more about it that morning.

I remember the few weeks that came after that – the last few weeks before the new carer took over – as being surprisingly tranquil. Maybe Tommy and I were making a special effort to be nice to each other, but the time seemed to slip by in an almost carefree way. You might think there would have been an air of unreality about us being like that, but it didn’t seem strange at the time. I was quite busy with a couple of my other donors in North Wales and that kept me from the Kingsfield more than I’d have wanted, but I still managed to come in three or four times a week. The weather grew colder, but stayed dry and often sunny, and we whiled away the hours in his room, sometimes having sex, more often just talking, or with Tommy listening to me read. Once or twice, Tommy even brought out his notebook and doodled away for new animal ideas while I read from the bed.

Then I came in one day and it was the last time. I arrived just after one o’clock on a crisp December afternoon. I went up to his room, half expecting some change – I don’t know what. Maybe I thought he’d have put up decorations in his room or something. But of course, everything was as normal, and all in all, that was a relief. Tommy didn’t look any different either, but when we started talking, it was hard to pretend this was just another visit. Then again, we’d talked over so much in the previous weeks, it wasn’t as though we had anything in particular we *had* to get through. And I think we were reluctant to start any new conversation we’d regret not being able to finish properly. That’s why there was a kind of emptiness to our talk that day.

Just once, though, after I’d been wandering aimlessly around his room for a while, I did ask him:

‘Tommy, are you glad Ruth completed before finding out everything we did in the end?’

He was lying on the bed, and went on staring at the ceiling for a while before saying: ‘Funny, because I was thinking about the same thing the other day. What you’ve got to remember about Ruth, when it came to things like that, she was always different to us. You and me, right from the start, even when we were little, we were always trying to find things out. Remember, Kath, all those secret talks we used to have? But Ruth wasn’t like that. She always wanted to believe in things. That was Ruth. So yeah, in a way, I think it’s best the way it happened.’ Then he added: ‘Of course, what we found out, Miss Emily, all of that, it doesn’t change anything about Ruth. She wanted the best for us at the end. She really wanted the best for us.’

I didn’t want to get into a big discussion about Ruth at that stage, so I just agreed with him. But now I’ve had more time to think about it, I’m not so sure how I feel. A part of me keeps wishing we’d somehow been able to share everything we discovered with Ruth. Okay, maybe it would have made her feel bad; made her see whatever damage she’d once done to us couldn’t be repaired as easily as she’d hoped. And maybe, if I’m honest, that’s a small part of my wishing she knew it all before she completed. But in the end, I think it’s about something else, something much more than my feeling vengeful and mean-spirited. Because as Tommy said, she wanted the best for us at the end, and though she said that day in the car I’d never forgive her, she was wrong about that. I’ve got no anger left for her now. When I say I wish she’d found out the whole score, it’s more because I feel sad at the idea of her finishing up different from me and Tommy. The way it is, it’s like there’s a line with us on one side and Ruth on the other, and when all’s said and done, I feel sad about that, and I think she would too if she could see it.

Tommy and I, we didn’t do any big farewell number that day. When it was time, he came down the stairs with me, which

he didn't usually do, and we walked across the Square together to the car. Because of the time of year, the sun was already setting behind the buildings. There were a few shadowy figures, as usual, under the overhanging roof, but the Square itself was empty. Tommy was silent all the way to the car. Then he did a little laugh and said:

'You know, Kath, when I used to play football back at Hailsham. I had this secret thing I did. When I scored a goal, I'd turn round like this' - he raised both arms up in triumph - 'and I'd run back to my mates. I never went mad or anything, just ran back with my arms up, like this.' He paused for a moment, his arms still in the air. Then he lowered them and smiled. 'In my head, Kath, when I was running back, I always imagined I was splashing through water. Nothing deep, just up to the ankles at the most. That's what I used to imagine, every time. Splash, splash, splash.' He put his arms up again. 'It felt really good. You've just scored, you turn, and then, splash, splash, splash.' He looked at me and did another little laugh. 'All this time, I never told a single soul.'

I laughed too and said: 'You crazy kid, Tommy.'

After that, we kissed - just a small kiss - then I got into the car. Tommy kept standing there while I turned the thing round. Then as I pulled away, he smiled and waved. I watched him in my rear-view, and he was standing there almost till the last moment. Right at the end, I saw him raise his hand again vaguely and turn away towards the overhanging roof. Then the Square had gone from the mirror.

I was talking to one of my donors a few days ago who was complaining about how memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But I don't go along with that. The memories I value most, I don't see them ever fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them.

I suppose I lost Hailsham too. You still hear stories about some ex-Hailsham student trying to find it, or rather the place where it used to be. And the odd rumour will go round sometimes about what Hailsham's become these days - a hotel, a school, a ruin. Myself, for all the driving I do, I've never tried to find it. I'm not really interested in seeing it, whatever way it is now.

Mind you, though I say I never go looking for Hailsham, what I find is that sometimes, when I'm driving around, I suddenly think I've spotted some bit of it. I see a sports pavilion in the distance and I'm sure it's ours. Or a row of poplars on the horizon next to a big woolly oak, and I'm convinced for a second I'm coming up to the South Playing Field from the other side. Once, on a grey morning, on a long stretch of road in Gloucestershire, I passed a broken-down car in a lay-by, and I was sure the girl standing in front of it, gazing emptily out towards the on-coming vehicles, was Susanna C., who'd been a couple of years above us and one of the Sales monitors. These moments hit me when I'm least expecting it, when I'm driving with something else entirely in my mind. So maybe at some level, I *am* on the lookout for Hailsham.

But as I say, I don't go searching for it, and anyway, by the end of the year, I won't be driving around like this any more. So the chances are I won't ever come across it now, and on reflection, I'm glad that's the way it'll be. It's like with my memories of Tommy and of Ruth. Once I'm able to have a quieter life, in whichever centre they send me to, I'll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that'll be something no one can take away.

The only indulgent thing I did, just once, was a couple of weeks after I heard Tommy had completed, when I drove up to Norfolk, even though I had no real need to. I wasn't after anything in particular and I didn't go up as far as the coast. Maybe I just felt like looking at all those flat fields of nothing and the huge grey skies. At one stage I

found myself on a road I'd never been on, and for about half an hour I didn't know where I was and didn't care. I went past field after flat, featureless field, with virtually no change except when occasionally a flock of birds, hearing my engine, flew up out of the furrows. Then at last I spotted a few trees in the distance, not far from the roadside, so I drove up to them, stopped and got out.

I found I was standing before acres of ploughed earth. There was a fence keeping me from stepping into the field, with two lines of barbed wire, and I could see how this fence and the cluster of three or four trees above me were the only things breaking the wind for miles. All along the fence, especially along the lower line of wire, all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled. It was like the debris you get on a seashore: the wind must have carried some of it for miles and miles before finally coming up against these trees and these two lines of wire. Up in the branches of the trees, too, I could see, flapping about, torn plastic sheeting and bits of old carrier bags. That was the only time, as I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across those empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing, because this was Norfolk after all, and it was only a couple of weeks since I'd lost him. I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that - I didn't let it - and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be.

双语版石黑一雄作品

我辈孤雏

When We Were Orphans

二〇一七年诺贝尔文学奖获奖作家

Kazuo Ishiguro



〔英〕石黑一雄

著

林为正

译

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我辈孤雏

第一部

一九三〇年七月二十四日・伦敦

第一章

那是一九二三年夏天的事了。那年夏天，我不顾姑妈要我返回什罗普郡的期望，离开剑桥南下，决定未来在首都发展，于是租下肯辛顿区贝德福德花园街十四号b室这间小公寓。如今回想起来，夏天就属那年的最美好。在寄宿学校，在剑桥读大学的时代，我长年生活在人群里，到了伦敦可以独来独往，真是惬意。我喜欢伦敦的公园，还有大英博物馆宁静的阅览室；兴致来了，就在肯辛顿区的街道逛一整个下午，天马行空想着未来的计划，走久了便把脚步稍歇，赞叹在英国这个国家，连这样的大都会区，也看得到爬山虎、常春藤攀爬在雅宅门面上的秀姿。

就在某一次这样的信步漫游里，我与老同窗詹姆斯·奥斯本不期而遇，发现他就住在附近，便邀他下回路过不妨上来小坐。尽管在此之前，我不曾邀谁到过我的住处，我却有信心他会接受邀请，因为这住所可是精心挑选的。房租虽然不贵，房东太太的装潢却十分不俗，散发着维多利亚前朝的悠闲；白天时分，客厅里阳光充足，陈设着一座年代久远的长沙发，还有两张舒适的单人扶手沙发椅、一个古董杯盘柜，以及一屏橡木书橱，里头满满地摆着一套老旧欲碎的百科全书——我相信这些东西正合这位客人的品味。除此之外，刚接下这栋公寓的时候，我就步行到骑士桥买了一套安妮女王风格的茶具、几包上好的茶和一大罐饼干。几天后，奥斯本真的突然在早晨时分来访，我便能以茶点招待，并且有十足把握——他绝对想不到，在此之前从来没有别的访客。

在头一刻钟里，奥斯本在客厅里四处走动，又赞美我公寓好，又东看看、西摸摸，还不时探头往窗外望，夸这里的街景新鲜。看了好一会儿，他终于在长沙发上安坐下来，我们这才开始叙旧——聊我们的近况与昔日校园友人最近发生的事。我记得我们谈了一会儿各个工会的活动，话题就转向了德国哲学，这场辩论漫长而愉快，展现出我们在不同学府里各自修成的功力。接着奥斯本又起来走动，一边高谈阔论他未来的各种计划。

“我打算到出版界，没错。报社、杂志社，这类机关。不瞒你说，我想辟个专栏，谈论政治、社会议题。当然啦，我的意思是，如果我决定不从政的话。我说班克斯，你真的还没想过自己未来要干什

么吗？瞧，前程就在那儿。”他指向窗外。“你总有些什么计划吧？”

“也算有，”我报以微笑。“是有那么一两件在心里，到时候你自然明白。”

“你葫芦里卖什么药？别卖关子，就说何妨！不说看我怎么拷问你。”

我还是没露半点口风，过了一会儿，我就把话题引开，跟他辩一些哲学、诗歌之类的闲事。约莫中午的时候，奥斯本忽然想起他在皮卡迪利有个午餐约会要赶赴，便收拾起随身的东西。人走到门边却又转身说：

“对了，老兄，有件事差点忘了。今天晚上我要参加一个宴会。主客是伦纳德·艾弗夏，就是那位商场大亨，主人是我家族的某位长辈。现在才讲有点仓促，不过，不知道你肯不肯赏光？我可是诚心诚意。老早就想跟你提，不巧都没谈到这上头。地点是在查林沃思。”

他看我一时没有答话，靠近一步对我说：

“我邀你是因为我想起来了。我记得你以前总是拿我的‘家世不凡’来审我。少来了，现在可别跟我装傻撇清。你当年严词拷问起我来可是一点儿也不饶人。‘家世不凡？你给我说清楚一点，是怎么个不凡法？’好吧，现在机会来了，就让班克斯老兄自己亲眼来看看‘家世不凡’是怎么回事吧。”他接着还摇了摇头，仿佛在回想往事。“可不是？以前在学校里，你可真是怪胎一个哟。”我相信我是到这个节骨眼上，才接受了那晚的邀约——那一晚对我的影响，比我想像的还深远许多，这点往后自然会说明——奥斯本最后这句话听来刺耳，我且藏起愠色，送他出门。

事后我坐了下来，烦闷竟又浮上心头。事情是这样子，我心下忽然灵光一闪，明白了奥斯本那句话指的是什么。其实，整个学生时代里，我一直听人说奥斯本如何“家世不凡”。只要提到他，总是会听到这个说法，我相信，就连我提到他的时候，也会适时地用上几次。我经常暗自思忖，他这个人尽管长相、举止跟我们其他人殊无二致，却与王公贵族、各派权贵有讳莫如深的关系。然而他指控我“严词拷问”他，我可是怎么想也没那回事。他的背景确实让我在十四五岁时纳闷不已，不过奥斯本跟我在学生时代并不算亲，在记忆里，我们两人凑在一块儿，也就只有那么一次。

那是一个有雾的秋晨，我们两人并坐在一家乡间客栈外的矮墙上。我猜想我们应该上中学五年级了。我们在一场越野赛跑里，负责指示路线，就等选手破雾而来，经过附近的田野，我们便把正确的方向指出来，前面有条泥泞小径等着他们。我们看看时间还早，选手还不会到，就随便聊了起来。我肯定就是这一次，我问奥斯本究竟他家里有哪些“有头有脸”的人物。奥斯本尽管言行浮夸，本性倒还算谦虚，只顾左右而言他。我追问再三，他拗不过才说：

“班克斯，你就饶了我行不行。全是胡说八道，哪有什么有头有脸的。谁没认识几个人嘛，大家总是有爹娘、亲戚、世交等等。我不知道这有什么好让别人弄得神秘兮兮的。”他忽然发现自己言语唐突了，转身碰碰我的手臂。“真不好意思，老哥。我这张嘴就是会闯祸。”

这个“失言”似乎让奥斯本比我还难过。若要说这件事这么多年来一直留在他心头，那也未必不可能，因此他邀请我当晚陪他去查林沃思俱乐部，也算是弥补当年失言之过。其实，那个有雾的早晨，虽然他言语的确失当，可是我真的一点都不在意。我那些贫嘴的同学，对于别人的种种不幸，有哪桩不是大家抢着调侃的，偏偏每个人一提到我父母不在，都肃穆哀戚起来，老实说，后来我还真是看不下去呢。其实别人也许觉得奇怪，但我自己对于无父无母这件事——甚至没有什么近亲在英国（除了什罗普郡那位姑妈以外）——一早就觉得没有什么不便之处。我还常跟同学说，读我们这种寄宿学校，大家都得学会过没父没母的日子，我的情况并没有特殊到哪里。总之，如今回顾这段往事，我对奥斯本“家世不凡”的着迷，部分原因可能是因为我记得当时自己的人际关系，完全止于圣邓斯坦中学的围墙之内。而我一点也不怀疑，有朝一日，我也会为自己建立这样的人脉，出人头地。然而，或许我相信从奥斯本那里可以学到个中奥妙，学到这种事情的原理。

不过，我刚才说奥斯本离开前说的话让我听了刺耳，并不是指他说我多年前嘴上不饶人。其实我不以为然的部分，是他那句脱口而出的评语，说我以前在学校里，可真是怪胎一个。

事实上，奥斯本那天早上为何如此形容我，我至今依然不解，因为我记得我已加入英国的学校生活，跟大家水乳交融。就算是刚到圣邓斯坦的头几个星期，我也没做出什么让自己出糗的事。就拿我到校的第一天为例，我记得我就发现了许多学生站着交谈时，有一套肢体语言——一把右手插进背心口袋，说到什么重点，左肩便如耸肩般上下晃

动，作为强调。我清清楚楚记得，就在这到校的头一天，我已经把这套肢体语言运用得相当纯熟，没有哪个同学察觉什么异样或者想趁机取笑我。

我就这样胆大心细，迅速吸收其他肢体动作、语句转折、同侪惯常使用的大呼小叫等，至于掌握这个新环境里更深层的主流道德观与礼节，自然不在话下。我当然立刻就明白，我最好不要公开畅谈自己对于犯罪行为与侦查手段的看法——这个在我住在上海的日子里是家常便饭。这个部分我做得十分彻底，即便到了我在圣邓斯坦的第三年，校园里失窃事件频传，全校掀起一阵侦探热，我还是小心翼翼地不沾任何是非，必要时仅虚应一下。无疑也正是心中还残留的这种处世态度，让我在奥斯本来访的那个早晨，不肯多谈自己的“计划”。

然而尽管我想办法藏得滴水不漏，但是在印象中，我在学生时代还是至少有两件事显示我放松了警戒，让别人瞥见我心中的大志。就算在当时，我也无法解释自己为什么会这样做，到了今天当然就更不可能这么做了。

较早的那次，发生在我十四岁生日那天。我当时的两个好友，罗伯特·索顿—布朗与拉塞尔·斯坦顿，带我到镇上的茶点铺，享用烤饼与奶油蛋糕。那是个下雨的周六午后，店里座无虚席。于是每过一会儿，就会有满身雨水的镇民走进店里，四处看看，然后对我们投以不满的眼光，仿佛认为我们应该立刻把桌位让给他们。还好老板娘乔丹太太向来对我们照顾有加，在我生日那天下午，我们更觉得有十足的权利占用店里最好的桌位，就在飘窗旁边，窗外还有小镇的广场可以欣赏。那天我们聊什么，我大半忘了；不过等东西吃完，我的两个同伴相互使了几个眼色，索顿—布朗把手伸进背包里，拿出一个包装成礼物的包裹给我。

我动手撕开包装，才发现这个包裹不知道裹了几层，每当我揭去一层，却发现里头还有另一层，我的朋友就会哈哈大笑。这一切都显示，包裹拆到最后，里头的东西恐怕是要开我玩笑的。最后，从包裹里头冒出来的，是一只覆着皮革的盒子，我把小巧的扣片打开，掀起盒盖，里头是一把放大镜。

此时它就在我手上。它的模样这么多年来并没有什么改变；在那天下午之前，那把放大镜早已历尽沧桑。我记得我当时就看出这点，还发现它的放大效果绝佳，而且出奇地沉重，还有，那象牙镜柄有一边完全剥落。有一点则是后来才发现的一上头的镌文要拿另一把放大镜才看得清楚——它是一八八七年于苏黎世制造的。

收到这件礼物，我的第一个反应是欢天喜地。我抓起放大镜，把桌上成堆的包装纸扫到一边——我猜我正在兴头上，也不管包装纸有没有掉到地上——立刻用它来端详桌布上的奶油渍。我聚精会神地看，只是隐约听到我两个朋友捧腹狂笑——这个礼物显然就是要调侃我一番。等我抬头，总算感觉到有点尴尬，他们也不好意思地静了下来。这时候索顿——布朗挤出个戏谑的表情说：

“我们觉得，既然你立志要做侦探，你会需要这种东西。”

到了这个节骨眼，我灵机一动，虚应了一下，假装他们这个玩笑开得戏而不谑。不过，我猜想我那两个朋友觉得自己的玩笑开得莫名其妙，于是茶点铺里的气氛再也无法恢复先前那般融洽。

如我所说，此刻那把放大镜就在我眼前。调查“曼纳林案”时我用到它；最近在“特雷弗·理察森事件”里，我又用到了它。放大镜也许不是通俗悬疑故事里必要的装备，不过它用于搜集某一类证据时依然好用，因此我猜想这件罗伯特·索顿——布朗与拉塞尔·斯坦顿送我的生日礼物，我大概还会随身携带好一阵子。注视着它，我心头有个想法：假如我的朋友本意就是要嘲弄我，如今看来，他们嘲弄的是他们自己。只可惜我不可能确定他们心里想的是什么，更无法确定，我心中暗许的志向，在我重重隐藏之下，他们如何窥得一斑。斯坦顿谎报年龄志愿参军，在第三次伊普尔战役⁽¹⁾里阵亡。索顿——布朗据说在两年前死于肺结核。总之，两人在我到圣邓斯坦的第五年离开了学校，等我听到他们的死讯，我们早已失联多时。我还记得索顿——布朗离开学校时我有多失望——他是我来英国以后，唯一真正的朋友；在圣邓斯坦后来的日子里，我非常想念他。

我想到的第二件类似情况，发生在几年之后——在六年级下学期——不过这事我反而记得没那么详细。说真的，这件事的前情与后续，我忘得一干二净。我只是有个印象：我走进教室——“旧隐修院”第十五教室——一道道阳光正好从狭窄的修道院窗户泻下，照亮了悬浮在空中的灰尘。老师虽然还没到，不过我一定到得比其他人稍迟，因为我记得同学已经三五成群坐在书桌、长椅、窗台等处。我走近五六个同学围成的一群，他们忽然全都转过头来看我，我当下明白他们正在谈我。我还来不及说什么，其中一位叫做罗杰·布伦瑟斯特的同学指着我说：

“他想当福尔摩斯，未免矮了点吧。”

有几个同学笑了出来，笑声里倒没什么恶意，这就是我所能记得的一切了。我再也没听到有人谈到我想成为“福尔摩斯”的壮志，但过后不久，却觉得心头有根拔不掉的芒刺，担心我的秘密已经曝光，成为我不在场时的话题。

顺带一提，在我进圣邓斯坦之前，周遭的情势就已经让我觉得，我得小心避免碰触到我做侦探的志向这个话题。因为我到英国的头几个星期里，大部分的时间都待在姑妈什罗普郡的木屋附近，在那片公有的绿地上闲逛，在潮湿的蕨丛之间排演秋良跟我在上海一起编造出来的侦探故事。如今只剩我一人，我自然也得扮演他的戏份；此外，由于我感觉到从木屋可以看见我的一举一动，因此我怀着戒心把剧情动作缩小，台词则咕哝在嘴里，压着嗓子念——这跟过去我与秋良奔放不羁的惯用方式完全不同。

如此小心翼翼，终究还是徒劳。一天早晨，我在我阁楼的小房间里，无意间听到楼下客厅里姑妈跟客人在说话。原本我并不在意，可是他们忽然把声音压低，让我心生好奇，不由自主地蹑起脚步，溜到楼梯转角处，靠在扶栏上。

“他一去就是好几个钟头，”我听到她这样说，“才这么大的孩子，就这样整天自己一个，不理别人，简直有问题。他好歹也该看开了。”

“其实也难为他了，不是吗？”客人说，“才多大，就经历了那些事。”

“他这样闷着也没有好处，”我姑妈说，“他不愁吃、不愁穿，退一步想想，还算好命的了。这么久，也该看开了。我是说，不要再这样钻牛角尖。”

从那天起，我就不再去那块公有的绿地闲逛了，而且渐渐在各方面把“钻牛角尖”的样子收藏起来。不过，当时我只是个小毛头，夜阑人静躺在阁楼的房间里，听着地板吱吱作响——那是姑妈在木屋里走动，给时钟上发条，还有喂猫——我常常就在脑子里把所有的戏码排练一番，就像秋良跟我从前做的那样。

还是回头谈谈奥斯本光临我肯辛顿寓所的那个夏日吧。我不希望让人以为我念念不忘他说我是“怪胎”，这事只怕没一会儿就被我抛诸脑后了。其实，奥斯本走后一会儿，我自己也跟着出门，心情还算不错，没多久就到了圣詹姆斯公园，在花坛间溜达，心中愈来愈期待当晚的聚会。

回想起那个下午，我的印象是，照理说我该觉得有点紧张才对，可是我一点也不，正是这种愚昧的傲慢，带着我度过了早年的伦敦岁月。我自然明白那天晚上我将见到的场面，那层次绝不是我在大学里见识过的；此外，也可能碰到我还不熟悉的应对礼节。不过，我觉得以我向来的精明，总有办法化解这类难题，大体上可以让自己举止合宜。我在公园闲逛时，心中关注的是别的事。当奥斯本提及某些“家世不凡”的客人时，我立刻假想其中至少包括几位当时顶尖的侦探。我猜想那天下午，我花了许多时间练习要怎么把自己介绍给马特洛克·斯蒂文森，或者甚至是乔维尔教授。我一而再、再而三地练习，要怎么在谦虚中带着几分自重，陈述自己的雄心壮志；我想像其中会有人怜惜我这个后生晚辈，提供我种种建议，坚持要我将来若有什么不懂的一定要去问他。

当晚自然是令我大失所望—尽管现在回顾起来，却因为不相干的理由，使得那晚别具意义。我当时尚不知情的是，在英国，侦探通常不参与社交聚会。倒不是没人邀请；我自己最近的经验证实了这一点，时髦的社交圈子向来想要把当时出名的侦探拉进自己的圈子里，只不过这些侦探常常也是诚恳而离群索居的个人，他们投入工作，一点也不愿跟别人交往，更别提参加什么上流社会的社交活动了。

如我所说，那天晚上到达查林沃思俱乐部时，我并不了解这点。我有样学样跟着奥斯本向制服体面的门房愉快地打个招呼。可是才走进二楼拥挤的厅堂，没几分钟我就大失所望。我不知道事情发生的确切情况如何—因为我没时间确定在场的是哪些人物—只不过我凭直觉恍然悟到自己下午的兴奋期待真是愚蠢之至。忽然间，我不敢相信自己竟然会以为马特洛克·斯蒂文森或者乔维尔教授会在这里，跟眼前这些金融要人或政界高官生张熟魏地交际。说真的，整个下午我想得天花乱坠，而实际情况竟是如此，其间的巨大落差让我在诧异之余手足无措，至少一时之间无法回神，结果有半个多钟头，即使我心中不愿，却也不敢离开奥斯本身边。

我敢说，就是这种不愉快的心理因素让我如今忆起当晚的许多景象，都显得有点夸大或者不自然。例如，现在回想起那个房间，我就觉得好暗；尽管墙上有壁灯，桌上有烛火，头顶上还有一盏大吊灯—却无一挥得去笼罩全室的昏暗。地毯则是过厚，大家走动时不得不拖着步伐，而环顾室内各处，一些头发泛白、穿着黑色上装的人全都这么做，有些还把肩膀向前倾，仿佛顶着强风走路。托着银盘的侍者也一样得向前倾个角度才能跟客人交谈。在场的女士没有几位，却又出奇地内敛，几乎一眨眼就溶化在黑色晚礼服的森林里，失去踪影。

我刚才说了，我很确定这些印象并不准确，不过那个晚上在我心里留下的就是这幅光景。我记得我像个木头人似的，别扭地站在奥斯本身边，反复啜着杯中的饮料，奥斯本客气地与客人交谈，一个换过一个，客人们大都长我们足足三十岁有余。有那么一两次我想加入交谈，不过我的声音很显然稚气未脱，更何况他们谈论的人或事，我都一无所知。

后来，我愈想愈气一气我自己，气奥斯本，气这一切。我觉得我有十足资格鄙视身边的这些人；他们大部分都贪婪而自私自利，心中没有半点理想抱负或是对大众的责任感。仗着胸口的怒火，我终于离开奥斯本身边，在昏暗中到房里的别处走走。

我来到一处微弱光环笼罩的角落，光源是一盏小壁灯。这里人没那么挤，我发现有位年约七旬的银发先生背对着房间抽烟。我看了一会儿才明白，他凝视着一面镜子，那时他也察觉了我在看他。我正想走开，他却向镜中的我说：

“玩得愉快吗？”

“还不错，”我报以浅笑，“托您的福。这场面可不小。”

“有点混乱哦？”

我迟疑了一下，又笑了笑。“也许有一点吧。是有那么点儿，先生。”

银发先生转过身来，仔细把我打量一番。接着才说：“这里头谁是谁，我略有所知，你想知道的话，我可以告诉你。假如其中有哪位你特别想认识，我可以代为引见。你觉得如何？”

“果真如此，晚辈真是感激不尽。”

“好说。”

他向我靠近一步，环顾屋里有哪些人在我们眼前。接着就在我耳边说，这位是某某，那位是某某，并且把人指给我看。即使是鼎鼎有名的人物，他也好心地为我补上“这位是银行家”或“那位是作曲家”等等。名气没那么大的，他会把这个人的事业做个摘要说明，并告诉我这个人为什么重要。我想，就是在他谈到离我们极近的一位牧师时，他冷不防地岔开话题说：

“哪，我看你没在听哦……”

“真是对不起……”

“无妨，无妨。窈窕淑女，君子好逑嘛。像你这样的年轻小伙子。”

“我保证我……”

“欸，你何罪之有，”他笑一笑，用肘部顶一顶我的手臂。“你觉得她美吗？”

我不知道该怎么反应才妥。我委实无法否认，我分心去看了左侧约莫十步之外的一位少妇，她正在和两位中年男士聊天。不过实情是，刚看第一眼，我并不觉得她有什么姿色可言。情况甚至可能是这样子的：在那个时刻与地点，我第一次看到她，便不知怎么地感受到她的一些重要特质，那是我后来才得到验证的。我看到的是位娇小得像个小精灵的少妇，留着及肩的黑发。尽管当时她显然想讨好与她交谈的男士，但我看得出来，她的笑容随时都可以立刻变成嘲笑。她的肩膀微耸，有如鹰隼，她的姿态泄露了心中的城府。最重要的是，我在她眼睛周围注意到一种特质——可说是严厉而苛刻到无情的眼神——如今我回想起来，那天晚上，主要就是为了这点，我才如此醉心地注视她。

正当我们还在对她品头论足的时候，她向我们望过来，认出我身边的同伴，对他冷冷一笑。银发先生也回礼，并且郑重地鞠躬。

“迷人的女孩，”他口中喃喃念着，同时把我带开，“不过，像你这样的年轻小伙子，倒不必浪费时间去追她。恕我直言，你实在像个乖小孩儿。人家可是亨明斯小姐。莎拉·亨明斯小姐。”

那个名字对我没有任何意义可言。我这位向导，虽然在此之前都用心良苦地为我解说他点到名的客人的背景资料，这回却只说了姓名，显然认为我也闻名已久。因此我就顺势点头说：

“说的也是。原来那就是亨明斯小姐。”

老先生又停了下来，找了个新的山头开始瞭望。

“让我看一看。我猜你正在寻找可以提拔你的贵人。猜对了吧？别担心。我自己年轻的时候也玩这套。还有谁在这儿。让我看一看，今天有谁来了？”接着，他忽然转身问我：“你刚才说，你的人生抱负是什么？”

在此之前，我根本什么都还没谈到。不过既然如此，我迟疑了一下，便明白地告诉他：

“侦探，先生。”

“侦探？这个嘛……”他的目光继续在室内搜寻，“你不会是指……警探吧？”

“我指的是私人的咨询服务。”

他点点头。“那当然，那当然。”他继续抽了口雪茄，心思重重。接着他说：“你不会碰巧对博物馆有兴趣吧？那边那个家伙，认识他好多年了。博物馆。骨头、古物，那类东西。没兴趣？我想也是。”他继续环视屋内各处，有时伸长脖子好把人看个清楚。“当然啦，”他最后开口说道，“许多年轻人梦想要当侦探。我敢说，在我年少轻狂时也做过这种梦。你这个年纪的人，心中充满理想抱负，一心想做名震一代的大侦探，单枪匹马就除尽世上所有恶人。值得嘉许。不过，说真的，小伙子，不妨这么说吧，你好歹也有别的退路。因为过个一两年，恕我直言，反正过不了多久，你对世事会有完全不同的看法。有没有兴趣从事家具业？我会问，是因为那边那位先生不是别人，正是哈米什·罗伯逊本人。”

“我并无冒犯之意，先生。不过方才晚辈陈述的志向，绝不是一时奇想，是我一生都感受到的召唤。”

“一生？你能有多大年纪？二十一？二十二？我想我是不该泼你冷水。毕竟，假如连年轻人都没有半点理想主义式的想法，谁还会有呢？那么，小伙子，你必然认为今日世风，比起三十年前要败坏啰？而文明已在崩溃边缘，诸如此类的？”

“老实说，先生，”我直言不讳，“我正是这么认为。”

“记得当年，我也是这么想。”忽然间，他讥讽的口吻变得厚道许多，我甚至觉得我看到他泪水盈眶，“怎么会这样子呢？小伙子，你觉得呢？世风真的一日不如一日吗？难道智人正一步步地堕落成动物？”

“这点我也不明白，先生。”我回答，语气温和多了，“我只能说，从客观的角度来看，现代的罪犯变得愈来愈聪明。他们的胃口变大，胆量也更大，科学更是为他们准备了全套崭新的先进作案工具，供他们使用。”

“原来如此。要是没有你这种才华高的有为青年站在我们这边，未来就不堪设想了，是这样吗？”他悲哀地摇摇头，“看来你也许真

的有心。我这样的老家伙太喜欢说风凉话了。小伙子，也许你说的没错。或许是我们放任事情恶化。唉！”

莎拉·亨明斯从我们身边走过，银发先生再度向她点头致意。她以高傲的优雅穿过人群，目光左右搜寻还有谁配站在她身边——我这么觉得。她注意到我的同伴，脸上闪过一抹微笑回礼，就跟刚才一样，不过脚步半点也没减缓。有那么一刹那，她的目光落在我身上，但转瞬间就把我抛诸脑后，我还来不及对她微笑，她早已穿过人群，走向房中另一个新发现的目标。

晚宴结束后，我和奥斯本共乘一辆计程车急驰回肯辛顿区，我试着从他那里多套点关于莎拉·亨明斯的事。奥斯本虽然满口说那晚的聚会真无聊，其实他满意得很，急着要仔仔细细地跟我说，他跟哪些达官贵人谈了多少事情。看来我不装出求知若渴的样子，是不可能让他把话题转到亨明斯小姐身上的。好不容易我才把他的话头引到亨明斯小姐的身上：

“亨明斯小姐吗？这个嘛，我想起来了。曾经跟海列特——刘易斯订婚。你知道的，那位指挥家。接着，海列特——刘易斯就在艾伯特亲王纪念厅举行舒伯特作品的音乐会，就去年秋天。记不记得，那简直是一场灾难。”

我向他承认，不曾听说这件事，奥斯本继续说：

“他们差点要把椅子砸过去，还好椅子都钉死在地上。《泰晤士报》有个记者还形容那次演出是‘胡搞乱来’呢。还是用‘污辱乐迷’这个字眼？反正他也不在乎。”

“而亨明斯小姐呢……”

“她把他甩了，像个烫山芋似的。显然她把订婚戒指退回去了，从此躲他躲得远远的。”

“就为了那场音乐会？”

“这个嘛，反正事情闹得很大。引起不小的骚动呢。我是说，她解除婚约这件事。不过，班克斯，今晚那些人真是无聊透了。你觉得等我们上了那个年纪，会不会也变成那样？”

离开剑桥后的头一年里，大半拜奥斯本的交情所赐，我发现我每隔一阵子就有时髦的社交宴会可以参与。那段人生，现在蓦然想起，觉得当时真是不务正业。我周游于晚宴、午餐聚会、鸡尾酒会之间，

通常都在布卢姆斯伯里区以及霍尔本区的公寓里举行。我下定决心要改掉那夜我在查林沃思表现的别扭，我在这类场合的表现也日益稳健。一点也不假，有那么一阵子，我甚至可以说，我在时髦的伦敦社交圈里也占有一席之地。

亨明斯小姐不属于我那个圈子，不过每当我跟朋友提起她时，任谁都知道有这个人。此外，在晚宴聚会里，或者在一些豪华饭店的午茶厅里，也经常能瞥见她的身影。总之，关于她在伦敦社交圈的事迹，我总算累积了不少资料。

关于她，当时我所知的一切，不过是些模糊的二手印象，回想这样的日子，真是别有趣味！不用多久我就确定，许多人对她并无好感。即使与安东尼·海列特—刘易斯解除婚约之前，她早就因为许多人形容她的“直性子”而得罪了不少人。海列特—刘易斯的朋友—他们的看法恐怕无法客观，实在不足为信—说她先前曾经不择手段倒追这位指挥家。有人则指控她玩弄海列特—刘易斯的朋友，好接近他。她后来又把这位指挥家给甩了，有人觉得不解，有人则认为这恰好证实当初她就不安好心。反观我听见的，很多都是说亨明斯小姐好话的。我常听到人家说她“慧黠”、“迷人”、“有深度”。女性尤其支持她有解除婚约的权利，不论她的理由为何。然而，即使是为她说话的人，也同意她是“新品种的势利鬼”；同意她是认名不认人，倘若没有个显赫的姓氏，她连正眼也不瞧你。我也得承认，尽管那一年我只是在远处观察她，也实在找不到什么可以推翻这些说法。一点也不假，有时候她让我觉得，只有顶尖杰出人才周围的空气，她才呼吸得惯。有一阵子她与一位名叫亨利·奎因的律师交往，只因为“查尔斯·勃朗宁案”失利败诉，她就跟这位律师疏远。接着有流言说她与詹姆斯·比肯愈走愈近，当时他是政坛上旭日东升的新人。总之，到了这时候，我总算完全明白那位银发先生告诉我的话，像我这种“小伙子”别妄想追求亨明斯小姐了。我当时自然没有真正体会他话里的真意。现在明白了，反而让我别有兴致，在那一年里到处追踪亨明斯小姐的各种活动。即便如此，我第一次与她本人交谈，却是在查林沃思俱乐部初见后近两年的某个下午。

我与友人在华尔道夫饭店的午茶厅喝茶，他忽然有事先走一步。于是我独自坐在棕榈厅那里，享用我的果酱烤饼，这时我瞥见亨明斯小姐也是独自一人，坐在外头阳台上的桌位。我也说过了，我不是第一次在这种地方看到她，不过那天下午情况有所不同。当时“曼纳林案”结案才刚满一个月，我兴奋之情犹在心头。那是我首次功成名

就，接下来有一阵子春风醉人的日子：许多新的机会忽然都浮现眼前；邀请函从新的领域如雪片飞来；原先顶多对我点头微笑的人，现在看到我出现，都欢欣地对我大呼小叫。也难怪我会有点忘形。

总之，在华尔道夫饭店的那个下午，我竟然起身向阳台走去。我不确定我期待的是什么。在那段志得意满的日子里，我经常这样，也不想亨明斯小姐有没有这个兴致与我结识。也许在我晃过钢琴师身边，走近她看书的桌位时，心中曾闪过一丝疑虑。不过我记得，我还算满意自己开口说话的声音，礼貌中不失轻松：

“容我冒昧向您自我介绍。我们有许多共同的朋友呢。在下克里斯托弗·班克斯。”

说到姓名时，我还想办法说得有些花哨，不过在此之前，我的把握已然松动。因为亨明斯小姐抬头看我的眼神冷漠而严厉。她什么话也不答，立刻又低头瞥了一眼她的书，仿佛那本书不悦地哼了一声。过了半晌，她才用全然不明就里的语气回答：

“是吗？幸会。”

“‘曼纳林案’，”我提起此事，实属不智，“也许您知道这个案子。”

“当然，是您经手办的啰。”

这句话说得平淡无味，让我再也沒辦法装得神情自若。因为，她的语气不带半点拨云见日的意味；那句话没有任何意义，只表示她一开始就相当清楚我的身份地位，而且仍然想不出我有什么理由配站在她桌边。过去几周那种飘飘然的感觉，忽然消失无踪。我干笑了几声，相信是从那一刻开始，我心底明白了，尽管在“曼纳林案”里，我的调查毋庸置疑是十分杰出的，尽管我的朋友也对我赞美有加，但是对于圈外的世界来说，我并不如我自以为的那么重要。

我们极可能中规中矩地寒暄了几句，我便打了退堂鼓回到自己的桌位。今日再回顾此事，我觉得亨明斯小姐那样待我，已经是太客气了；像是“曼纳林案”这种小事，竟奢望亨明斯小姐听过，我真是可笑得不像话了！不过，我记得我又回自己桌边坐下，心中又生气又沮丧。我忽然觉得，我不只是在亨明斯小姐面前自取其辱，也许过去一个月以来，不知道自己出过多少丑态；我的朋友尽管在面前恭喜我，背后却嘲笑我。

到了第二天，我完全自知这个钉子我碰得活该。不过在华尔道夫饭店的这件事，恐怕着实在我心里埋下对于亨明斯小姐的恨意，至今都不曾全然消失—无疑也引发了昨晚那些不愉快的事。不过在当年，我却认为，我算是幸运才会遇到这整件事。毕竟它让我醒悟，我们是如何容易分心，而偏离自己珍爱的目标。我的志向是要打击邪恶—特别是暗中滋长、隐而不显的那种邪恶—这样的志向，跟在社交圈里沽名钓誉根本无甚关系。

从那时起，我大幅减少社交活动，并且更深入沉浸在我的工作里。我研究过去的著名案件，吸收新领域的知识，以备日后使用。也是约略在这个时期，我开始钻研各路名侦探的一生事业，发现我可以分辨出有些人的名声是建立在真实的贡献之上，有些则纯粹靠他在社交圈子的地位而浪得虚名；从中我了解了侦探成名的方法也有虚实之分。简言之，尽管我十分兴奋在“曼纳林案”之后，许多人都来攀连接交，但经过华尔道夫饭店一事，我想起父母立下的典范，并且下定决心不让琐事杂务再让我变心易志。

[\(1\)](#)一战时的一场血腥战役，发生于1917年。

第二章

既然我现在想起了“曼纳林案”后的那段人生，或许也该顺带谈谈与张伯伦上校的不期而遇。说来也许让人感到意外，尽管他在我孩提时代扮演了相当关键的角色，后来我们却鲜少联络。不管是出于什么原因，我们就是没再联络，而我再次遇见他——那是在华尔道夫饭店遇见亨明斯小姐的一两个月后——一则纯属巧合。

有个下雨的午后，我站在查令十字路上一家书店里，细看一本有插画的《艾凡赫》。我感觉有人在我背后徘徊了好一阵子，我以为他想要看我这边书架上的东西，于是就让开了。可是后来，这个人还是在我身旁流连，我忍不住转身看看。

我一眼就认出上校，因为他的体态几乎没变。只是以成人的眼光看来，他已比我儿时的印象要羞怯而寒酸。他身着雨衣站在那儿，害羞地注视着我，直到我喊了一声：“是你，上校！”他才露出笑容，伸出手来。

“近况如何，孩子？我就知道是你。真是！近况如何，孩子？”

尽管他眼中含泪，举止却依旧尴尬，仿佛怕我听到他提起过去会心生不悦。我尽力表达再次看到他的欣喜之情，此时外头下起滂沱大雨，我们便在拥挤的书店里站着聊了起来。我发现他还住在伍斯特郡，还有他来伦敦是为了参加一场葬礼，顺便“放几天假”。我问他住什么地方，他支吾其词，我推测恐怕是某家便宜旅社。分手前，我邀他隔天晚上与我吃个晚饭，他欣然接受，不过听我提议去多尔切斯特饭店⁽¹⁾，他似乎吓了一跳——“你以前待我那么好，这也是应该的。”我央求再三——求到他不得不点头答应。

如今回想起来，选择多尔切斯特饭店真是极不体贴。毕竟我已经猜到上校经济拮据；我也该想到，若不让他至少付他自己那份账单，岂不太伤他自尊了？不过在那段日子里，我哪有这么细心；我想，我只是太急着要让这位老先生清清楚楚地知道，自从他上次见过我以后，我早已不是昔日吴下阿蒙了。

这个企图，我想是达到了。其实在此之前，因为两次机缘，别人带我到过多尔切斯特饭店，因此与张伯伦上校相约的那个晚上，侍者

问候我说：“真高兴又见到您，先生。”后来他又见识到我跟餐厅总管谈笑，等汤上桌以后，他突然笑了起来。

“真想不到，”他说，“这就是船上在我身边哭个不停的那个小鬼！”

他又笑了几声，忽然闭口不语，也许后悔自己不该再把话题引到这个方向。不过我用平静的笑容对他说：

“那趟路上，我一定烦死你了，上校。”

有那么一会儿，老先生的脸色凝重。接着他严肃地说：“以当时的情况来看，我觉得你实在是极为勇敢，孩子，极为勇敢。”

我记得这时候，两人都没再说话，气氛有点尴尬，等我们两人齐夸那汤味道鲜美，僵局就冰消烟散了。隔壁桌，有位珠光宝气的胖夫人开怀大笑，上校不太客气地看了她一眼。然后他似乎做了什么决定。

“你知道吗，有一件事真奇怪。”他说，“今天出门以前，我回想我们初次见面的情况，不知道你还记不记得，孩子，我想你大概忘了。毕竟，当时你心头要烦的事情太多。”

“才不呢，”我说，“那天我记得一清二楚。”

这并非谎言。即使是现在，只消阖眼片刻，我就可以让心神回到上海那个晴朗的早晨，还有哈罗德·安德森先生的办公室，他是家父在摩根洋行这家大贸易公司的上司。我正坐在一张覆着皮革的橡木座椅上，椅子打过蜡的气味依稀可闻，这种椅子通常只会出现在堂皇的大办公桌后，不过那一次，却放置在房间中央。我感觉得出这张椅子只保留给最重要的人，不过那次可能因为情况严重，或者为了表达慰问之意，那张椅子竟让给我坐。我还记得，不管我用什么坐姿，坐相就是不庄重；特别是我找不到任何姿势，可以让双肘同时放在雕工细致的扶手上。此外，那天早上我穿了一件全新的外套，是用粗糙的灰色布料缝制的一那件衣服怎么来的，我不知道——还有那排扣子，一路往上扣到下颌，让我丑得浑身不自在。

那个房间有个高挑又富丽堂皇的天花板，墙上有张大地图，安德森先生书桌后的大窗户阳光熠熠，微风徐徐透了进来。我想天花板上应该有电扇在转动，不过这点我记不清楚了。我记得的是，我坐在房间中央的椅子上，置身于严肃的关怀与讨论的焦点。我四周全是大人，都在讨论事情，大半都站着；有时候有几位会漫步到窗边，有争

论的时候便把声音压低。我记得安德森先生本人对我的举止让我诧异。他身材高大，白发皤皤，嘴上还有一排大胡子，他待我仿佛多年老友似的一好得让我有那么一会儿猜想我更小的时候就认识他，只是我忘了。过了好一阵子我才确定，在那个早晨之前，我们绝不可能见过面。总之，他扮演父执辈的角色，不时对我微笑，拍拍我的肩膀，用肘部碰碰我，眨眨眼。他还问了我一次要不要茶，他说：“哪，克里斯托弗，这个可以让你舒服一点。”他还弯下身子，盯着我喝茶。后来，房内又是一阵交头接耳与讨论，接着安德森先生再度走到我面前，对我说：

“就这样吧，克里斯托弗。一切都安排好了。这位是张伯伦上校。他愿意不辞辛劳，护送你回英国。”

我记得就在这一刻，室内静了下来。事实上，我的印象是所有的大人都往后退去，全靠到墙边作壁上观。安德森先生最后给了我鼓励的一笑，接着也往后退去。到了这个时候，我才首度看见张伯伦上校。他向我缓缓走来，俯身望着我，接着伸出手。我觉得我该站起来与他握手；不过他手伸得极快，而我一时又站不起来，便坐着握住他的手。我记得他接着说：

“可怜的孩子，先是你父亲，现在是你母亲，你一定觉得周遭的世界就在你身边崩溃了。还好我们明天就回英国去。你姑妈正等着你，所以鼓起勇气吧，不久你就会恢复正常了。”

我一时之间竟说不出话，后来总算把话吐出来：“您真是太仁慈了，先生。您的协助，我感激不尽，而且我也不希望您以为我不懂事。不过有一点请您谅解，我觉得我不该在这个时候返回英国。”上校一时之间并没有反应，于是我接着说：

“是这样子的，先生，侦探们都尽全力在寻找家父家母，他们全都是上海最厉害的侦探。我想他们应该很快就会找到。”

上校点点头。“我确定有关当局会尽全力侦办。”

“那就是了，先生，尽管我十分感激您的好意，但我觉得回英国这件事，或许可以作罢。”

我记得这时候房内又是一阵交头接耳。上校则继续点头，仿佛仔仔细细地把诸事重新斟酌了一番。

“也许你说得对，孩子，”他最后回答说，“我真心希望你说的 是对的。不过为防万一，你不妨还是跟我回去。反正一旦找到令尊令

堂，他们也许会接你回来。谁也说不准的。说不定他们自己也想回英国呢。所以，你觉得如何？咱们俩明天就回英国，然后再看看事情怎么发展。”

“可是您知道吗，先生，恕我多嘴。您知道吗，侦探们都在找我父母，他们可都是最最顶尖的侦探。”

我不太确定上校怎么回答我这句话，也许他只是继续点头。总之，接下来他把身子沉得更靠近我，一只手搭在我肩上。

“听我说。我能体会你此刻的心情。全世界都在你眼前崩溃了。不过你得鼓起勇气。再说，你还有个姑妈在英国，她在等着你，明白吗？你总不能在这个节骨眼上让她失望，对不对？”

对着桌上的汤，我对他陈述我记忆里当时他所说的一字一句，我还以为这些往事能逗他笑一下。谁知道他反而严肃地回答：

“我真为你难过，孩子，非常难过。”接着，也许他察觉他误会了我的用意，凑趣地笑了笑，然后以轻松多了的语气说，“我还记得跟你在港边等船。我一直说：‘跟你说，搭船出海一定很有趣，我们可得要好好玩一玩。’而你只能不停回答我：‘没错，先生。没错，先生。没错，先生。’”

接下来几分钟，我就随他回想那天早上在安德森先生的办公室里，在场的人之中有多少人是他的旧识。他提到的人名，没有一个对我有任何意义。后来，上校停了一下，眉头皱了起来。

“至于安德森本人，”他半晌才开口，“那家伙总是让我不安。他就是有点不对劲。老实告诉你，那件事就是有点不对劲。”

一说完这句话，他抬头看着我，身子忽然一震。我还来不及反应，他就赶紧开始谈些别的，把话题引到那趟返英之旅，显然他认为这个部分比较安全。没多久，他就谈起船上同行的旅客、船长及船员、有趣的小事，有些事有些我已经遗忘，有些则根本不曾留意，他说到有趣之处便兀自发笑。他说得愉快，我也在一旁附和，常常假装我也记得他说的事情，好助他的兴。然而随着他这般漫谈往事，我心底却开始有些不悦。他在一件又一件温馨的陈年轶事里，渐渐把我形容得有点不堪。他不断影射我不管在船上哪里，都是畏畏缩缩而闷闷不乐，一丁点的小事就能让我掉眼泪。无疑上校曾经自视为护卫孤儿的英雄，如果事隔这么多年还要撕破这层幻想，我觉得不但不厚道，也没有意义。可是，如我所说，我心中的不悦愈来愈强烈。根据我清

晰的记忆，我一下子便安然适应了环境的改变。我清楚记得，我在旅途中非但没有悲伤之情，那海上生活还过得十分兴奋，同时也期待上岸以后的未来。我当然有时会想念父母，不过我还记得我告诉自己，总是还有别的大人可以让我付出爱与信任。事实上，在旅程中就有一千妇人，耳闻我的遭遇，便到我身边赶着安慰致怜，胡缠了我好一阵子，我还记得她们给我的感受，就像在多尔切斯特饭店那夜对上校的不悦。其实我并非如我周遭大人以为的那么沮丧，就我记忆所及，在整个漫长的航程里，独独只有一件事，让我配得上“哭个不停的小鬼”这个头衔，而那还是发生在启程当天。

那天早晨阴霾漫天，四周的水域混浊。我站在轮船甲板上回望港口，回望杂乱的港边景物，船只、步桥、泥屋、暗色的木制船坞、远处上海滩的高楼，一切都在此时淡去，化成一抹灰影。

“还好吧，小伙子？”上校的声音就在耳边，“你觉得你会再回来吗？”

“会的，先生，我觉得我会。”

“难说哦。你一旦在英国安定下来，我敢说你很快就会把这里的一切忘掉。上海是不差，不过，我觉得八年我就受够了，我猜想，你也没必要再多留恋，再多待一阵子，你就会变成中国佬。”

“是的，先生。”

“说真的，好孩子，你真该高兴才对。毕竟你要返回英国了，要回家了。”

就是最后这句话，提到我“要回家了”，让我的情绪一时失控——我记得千真万确——是第一次也是最后一次。即便如此，我的泪水里也是气愤多于悲伤，因为我对上校的话厌恶至极。在我看来，我前往的国度，并无一人相识，而渐行渐远的那座城市却蕴含了我所知道的一切。最重要的是我父母还在那里，在港口的另一端，在上海滩高耸的楼影山脉之外某处，我对着海岸做最后的凝望，心想，说不定就在此时会看到母亲——甚至父亲——冲到港边，挥手高呼叫我回去。不过即使是当年，我心底也知道，这种愿望只不过是幼稚的胡思乱想。眼看着那座曾是家园的城市渐渐淡去，我记得我转身面向上校，带着欣喜之色说：“我们应该马上就要进入大海了，对吧，先生？”

那天晚上，我把对上校的不悦之情，藏得滴水不漏。一点不假，直到他在南奥利街搭上计程车，我们互道再会，他始终满怀愉快的心

情。一直要等到正好一年之后，他的死讯传来，我才有些愧疚，后悔那夜在多尔切斯特饭店没对他好些。他毕竟曾经有恩于我，而且在我看来，他是位正人君子。不过我也只能说，他在我人生里所扮演的角色——我无法否认他与当时发生的事情密不可分——会永远在我的记忆里定型为一个褒贬互见的人物。

华尔道夫饭店一事过后，有三至四年之久，莎拉·亨明斯与我没有任何接触。我记得这段日子里，有一次我在梅费尔区的某个鸡尾酒会上看到她。那次聚会上人很多，可是我没认识几个，所以决定先离开。我朝大门挤过去，发现莎拉·亨明斯正在与别人聊天，就挡在我往大门的路上。我的直觉反应是绕道而行。不过那一阵子，我又因“罗杰·帕克案”而名声大噪，我好奇之心油然而生，心想亨明斯小姐是否还敢像在华尔道夫饭店一样目中无人。于是我继续往人群里开路，对准方向，想从她面前挤过去。经过她身旁，我看到她的目光转过来认我的五官。她先是脸上一阵茫然，显然在回想我这个人到底是谁，后来我看出她认出来了，但她既不笑一下，也不点个头，又把目光转回跟她聊天的人身上。

其实，这种事情我才懒得去烦，因为那阵子，我手头上正忙着几件难解的案子。尽管当时距我建立今日这般的名声地位，还有好长一段时间，不过那时我已初尝任何稍有名气的侦探所承受的甜美负担。我向来了解，要根除那些行迹最隐秘的邪恶，而且要在恶行即将逃过法眼之际将之清除，固然是重大而严肃的事业，然而我一直要到经历了“罗杰·帕克谋杀案”这类案子之后，才切身体会，能把这类潜伏的坏事清除，对别人有什么样的意义——这不只是指那些直接与案情牵连的人，也指一般大众。于是我变得更加坚决，不让伦敦生活的浮华琐事害我分心。我也渐渐了解，也许我父母就是靠这点才能拥有他们的名声。总之，像亨明斯小姐这类人物，在我那个时期的心思里不会留下什么痕迹，若非那天在肯辛顿花园遇到约瑟夫·特纳，恐怕我早把她忘得一干二净了。

当时我在诺福克调查一个案子，正好回伦敦几天，打算研究一下我做过的各类笔记。其中一个阴天的早晨，我正在肯辛顿花园漫步，沉思与受害者失踪相关的诸多耐人寻味的细节。有人从远处喊住我，我立刻就认出是特纳，他是一位社交场合里的点头之交。他赶上来问我这阵子怎么这么难得见到踪影，随即邀我参加当晚他与友人在某家餐厅举行的晚宴。我礼貌地婉拒，推说我现在为手上的案子忙得无法分身，也不容分心，他回答说：

“真可惜。莎拉·亨明斯也要来，人家想跟你聊聊可想死了。”

“亨明斯小姐？”

“还记得是谁吧？人家可记得你哦。还说你们几年前就认识。她老是抱怨怎么到哪儿都没你的影子。”

我忍着不予置评，仅淡淡地回答：“仅代我问候她一声。”

我几乎话一说完就转身走了，不过回到书桌前，我承认听说亨明斯小姐想见我，让我有些分神。想了一会儿，我告诉自己，很可能是特纳会错了意；或者，他是夸大其词，想诱我参加那次聚会。不过从那次以后的几个月里，我耳闻好几件类似的事：有人听到莎拉·亨明斯向人抱怨，我跟她也曾经朋友一场，怎么现在她想见我一面却难如登天。我还从好几个地方听说，她扬言非把我“揪出来”不可。直到上个礼拜，我留在牛津郡夏克顿镇调查“斯塔德利农庄案”，亨明斯小姐终于本尊现身，显然是刻意安排的。

我找到那座围墙里的花园—查尔斯·埃默里的尸体就在花园的池塘里被人发现—在大宅子下方的草地一带。走下四层石阶，我便进入一处阳光难以触及的长方形区域，即使是晴朗的早晨，周遭一切依然笼罩在阴影之中。墙上虽爬满了藤蔓，可是人在其中总觉得像是走进一间没有天花板的牢房。

池塘占去这个区域的大半空间。尽管好几个人跟我说过里头养了金鱼，但我并没有看见里头有什么活物；事实上，池水如此阴寒，实在难以想像有什么生物能在这里生存—不过倒是顶适合在里头发现尸体就是了。池塘边上围了一圈覆满青苔的方形石板，底部全嵌在泥土里。我猜想我在那里勘查了约莫二十分钟—我趴在地上，用放大镜细看一块突出水面的石板—感觉到有人在观察我。起先我以为是这户人家的成员，想过来问东问西。由于稍早我已坚持不准有人打扰我，所以决定谁也不理，就算让他们觉得我无礼也在所不惜。

最后我听到园子的入口处有鞋子踏在石板上的声音。到这个时候，要是我还老是趴在地上不动，就有点不自然了；再说，我用这个姿势能查到的线索，正好也找得差不多了。此外，我还记得我趴的位置，几乎就是凶杀案发生的地点，而凶手还在逍遥法外呢。我爬了起来，拍掉身上的尘土，转身看到来者是谁，一阵寒意袭上我心头。

看见莎拉·亨明斯当然让我有些意外，不过我相信我脸上没有露出异色。我装出被打扰的表情，我猜想那也是她所见到的，因为她开

口就说：

“噢，我可没有偷看您。不过这种机会实在难得。我是说，能看到大人物在工作。”

我仔细看她的表情，没有找到讥讽的痕迹。尽管如此，我尽量冷淡地回答：“亨明斯小姐，我可是怎么也没料到会是您。”

“我听说您在这里。我来磐梅俐拜访朋友，从那条路走过去就到了。”

她停了一下，无疑是等我回答。我并未答腔，她全然不露愠色，反而向我走近。

“我跟埃默里一家是好朋友，您知道吗？”她继续说：“这桩凶杀案，真可怕。”

“没错，可怕得很。”

“啊，所以您也觉得是他杀。那大概就错不了。有结论了吗，班克斯先生？”

我耸耸肩。“是有些发现罢了。”

“我觉得埃默里的家人也真是不该，四月事情发生的当时就该找您才对。我说真是的，这种事情，怎么会交给赛尔温·亨德森来办？他们以为那样能如何？那种货色，早该叫他回家养老去。您瞧，住在这种乡下地方，就会变得什么事都脱节。在伦敦随便问谁，保证人人都会跟他们谈起您的所有事迹。”

我必须承认，最后这句话吊起了我的胃口，因此，我迟疑了一会儿，还是禁不住问了她一句：“容我多问，我有什么事情好让人家这样谈呢？说真的。”

“您也真是的，您可是全英国最杰出的侦探，可不是。去年春天，我们早跟他们力荐您不就没事了？可是埃默里的家人一就是要这么久才能开窍。也许迟些也总比没有好，不过我猜想，这时候线索恐怕都模糊了。”

“其实，有时候等案子发生一阵子再来调查也有好处。”

“真的吗？好高深哟。我总以为最好尽早赶到现场，好找些蛛丝马迹，您懂我的意思吧。”

“正好相反，要找您所谓的蛛丝马迹，永远不嫌晚。”

“可是这件案子，闹得大家心神不宁，真不是一个惨字能形容。还不只是苦主家属而已，整个夏克顿镇都快毁了。以前这里是个欢乐的市集小镇，现在您瞧瞧大家，谁也不敢正眼看谁了。这整个事件，让所有的镇民彼此猜忌。我向您保证，班克斯先生，破了这个案子，镇民会永远记得您。”

“您真的这么认为吗？那可是有趣得很。”

“一点不假，他们会感激不尽，世世代代都会提起您。”

我浅笑一声。“看来您蛮熟悉这个小镇的嘛，亨明斯小姐。我还以为您从不离开伦敦呢。”

“哦，伦敦也不过如此，每当我受够了，总得跳出来才行。我要说明白，在我心里，我可不是个城市女子。”

“您让我感到意外。我一直以为您向往都市生活。”

“您说得一点都不错，班克斯先生。”她语气里带有一丝气愤，仿佛被我将了一军，“都市确实有吸引我的地方，都市对我有一种……一种吸引力。”她这时候总算把脸转开，不再面对着我，四处看看墙内的花园。“这让我想起一件事，”她说，“好吧，我就招认，我才不是现在才想起什么。我装什么装呢？我们聊了半天，我心里一直在挂着这件事。我想求您帮我一个忙。”

“敢问何事？亨明斯小姐。”

“有个可靠的消息来源告诉我，您获邀参加今年梅瑞迪斯基基金的晚宴。可有此事？”

我略停了一下才回答：“没错，是有这么回事。”

“以您的年纪能受邀，可真不简单。听说今年的主客是塞西尔·梅德赫斯特。”

“没错，我想是的。”

“我也听说查尔斯·乌尔夫会出席这场盛会。”

“那位小提琴家吗？”

她开怀地笑了。“难不成他还会别的？还有托马斯·拜伦，这不难料到。”

她兴奋之情溢于言表，不过这时候，她又再度转身注视四周，身子微微一颤。

“您刚才是说，”我等了半天才问她，“您希望我帮您一个忙吗？”

“哦，没错，没错。我想请您……我想请您邀我做您的女伴，参加梅瑞迪斯基基金的晚宴。”

她此时以热烈的目光盯着我。我花了一会儿才想出对策，不过我开口时，语气如井水无波。

“我很想从命，亨明斯小姐。只可惜我几天之前已经回复过主事者。只怕现在才要通知他们我要携伴出席，为时已晚……”

“才怪！”她冒起火来打断我的话，“您的大名，谁人不知？何人不晓？您要带个伴儿，他们答应都来不及了。班克斯先生，您不会让我失望吧？这可不像您的为人哟。再说，我们这么熟也不是一两天了。”

最后这句话一让我想起我们“成为朋友”的历史一让我清醒过来。

“亨明斯小姐，”我语气坚决地说，“这个忙，实非在下能力所及。”

然而此时，亨明斯小姐眼露心意已决的神色。

“我知道一切细节，班克斯先生。地点是克拉里奇饭店，时间是下星期三晚上。我决心要去，我期盼当晚的盛会，我会在大厅等您。”

“克拉里奇饭店的大厅，就我所知，绅士淑女人人去得。假如您下周三晚上想光临该地，在下自然无法干涉，亨明斯小姐。”

她小心翼翼地看着我的脸色，不确定我的用意何在。最后她说：“那么您下周三肯定会见到我，班克斯先生。”

“在下已经说过，这是您的事，亨明斯小姐。现在请容在下告退。”

[1](#)多尔切斯特饭店，位于伦敦的一家豪奢酒店，1931年开张。

第三章

我花了好几天才解开查尔斯·埃默里之死的谜团。这个案子并没有像其他案子那样让我名噪一时，不过埃默里一家——甚至是整个夏克顿镇的镇民——深刻的感激，让我觉得这个案子跟至今所破的其他案子同样令我满意。我在幸福的气氛里返回伦敦，因此未曾多花心思去挂念调查的第一天，在围墙里的花园与亨明斯小姐邂逅一事。我倒不是说，我完全忘记她曾扬言要在梅瑞迪斯基基金会的晚宴当天做什么事，不过如我所述，我当时正沉浸在得意的心情里，这种事才懒得多想。也许我心底深处相信，当时她的“威胁”不过是虚张声势罢了。

总之，当晚我在克拉里奇饭店外下计程车时，心里想的是别的事情。一则，我提醒自己，最近的成功何止给我带来参加宴会的资格；他们不但不会质疑我有没有分量出席这种聚会，其他客人恐怕还会缠着我追问最近办的这些案件的内情。我还提醒自己，绝不提早退场，即使一个人在角落枯立也要坚持。走进富丽堂皇的大厅，此刻，我全然没料到会看到亨明斯小姐面带笑容在那里等我。

她打扮得明艳动人，一身深色丝绸晚礼服，几件简单而高雅的首饰。她自信满满地向我走来，甚至还理所当然地用笑容跟走过我们身边的一对夫妻打招呼。

“啊，亨明斯小姐。”我口头先应付，心里则尽快回想那天在办“斯塔德利农庄案”的时候，我们之间谈了什么。此时此刻，我必须承认，我忽然觉得她似乎有充分的权利理直气壮地期望我邀她入席。她无疑看得出我心虚，于是就更加笃定。

“亲爱的克里斯托弗，”她说，“你看起来真是神采奕奕，把我完全迷住了！对了，我还没有机会恭喜你。你为埃默里一家人所做的事，真是太好了。你一向就是这么厉害。”

“过奖。其实那个案子也没那么复杂。”

她此时已经挽着我的手臂，要是此刻她就走向那位领客上楼的侍者，我确定自己是无计可施，只能任她摆布。不过，如今想来，她在这里走错了一着棋。也许她想要继续享受这得手的快感；也许她一时胆大妄为起来。总之，她并未往楼梯的方向移动，反而注视着鱼贯入厅的宾客，并且对我说：

“塞西尔·梅德赫斯特爵士还没到。我真希望能有机会跟他本人聊聊。今年梅瑞迪斯基基金会向他致敬也算实至名归了，你觉得如何？”

“没错。”

“你可知道，克里斯托弗，我想不用几年，他们要致敬的人就会是你哟！”

我笑了出来。“哪里，哪里……”

“不必客气。这点我毫不怀疑。没错，也许还要等个三年五载，但是那天总是会到，等着瞧吧。”

“您太抬举在下了，亨明斯小姐。”

我们交谈时，她一直挽着我的手臂。过往的宾客不时有人向我或者向她微笑或打招呼。我得承认，我发现自己还蛮喜欢让大家一其中不乏知名人物一看到我和亨明斯小姐挽着手臂站在这里。我似乎看到他们与我们打招呼时，眼神里说着：“哦，瞧她缠上谁了，是他。这再自然不过。”这种想法一点也不让我觉得愚蠢，或者有任何屈辱的感觉，我甚至还觉得有几分得意。不过，忽然之间一我不确定出于什么原因一完全没有感觉到任何前兆，我对她燃起炽烈的怒火。我确定在那一刻，我的举止看不出任何改变，于是我们又气氛融洽地谈了几分钟，有时向路过的宾客点头致意。不过，当我放开她的手臂，转身面向她时，我的态度坚决似铁。

“那么，亨明斯小姐，真高兴再见到您。但此刻我得上楼入席了。”

我对她微微鞠躬，向后退去。这一着棋显然她没算到，就算她留了一手以应付我拒绝合作，这时候也难以施展了。我才走了几步，不巧有对年长夫妇拦下我向我问候，她逮住机会飞赶了上来。

“克里斯托弗！”她低声急切地说，“你敢！你答应过我的！”

“你知道没这回事。”

“你敢！克里斯托弗，你敢！”

“晚安，再会了，亨明斯小姐。”

我离她而去一顺带也丢下了那对老夫妇，他们尽全力装做什么都没听见一我快步穿过正厅阶梯上的人群登上楼去。

一到楼上，就有人带领我到一间灯火辉煌的接待厅。我依序跟着其他宾客排成一路走过一张桌子，桌后坐着一位身着制服、面如冰霜的先生，拿着名单核对来宾姓名。轮到我的时候，那位先生也在我的名字旁边打个钩，我看到他冰封雪覆的脸上闪过一抹兴奋之情，让我觉得很高兴。在留名册上签过名，我走向通往另一个大厅的玄关，可以看到厅中已有不少来宾在场。一跨过门槛，谈笑声立时围了上来，有位身材高大、胡子又浓又黑的先生向我致意，并跟我握手。我猜想他是今晚的主办人之一，不过我听不进他讲的话——老实说，那时候我还满脑子想着刚才在楼下发生的事，别的事情还进不来。我觉得心中有种没来由的莫名兴奋，我提醒自己，我没有算计亨明斯小姐；她要是蒙受了什么委屈，全是自取其辱。

我离开胡子先生，往厅里逛去，但莎拉·亨明斯还是在我心头挥之不去。我约略记得有位侍者端了一盘开胃酒迎向前来；还有各路宾客向我问候。有一会儿，我加入三四位先生围成的小圈子跟着聊天——他们都是科学家，也似乎都听说过我。在厅中过了约一刻钟，我察觉到气氛微微改变，四下环顾，发现所有的张望与耳语，都围绕着玄关那里的骚动，也就是此厅的入口。

我一注意到这点，心里便觉得事态严重，一时有股冲动想躲到厅内深处，不过有股神秘的力量把我推向玄关，不一会我又回到胡子先生身边，他背对着接待处，面露痛苦的表情，看着接待厅里上演的好戏。

我隔着他观望，确定闹事者确实就是亨明斯小姐。她让接待桌边等着签名入场的队伍停顿了下来。她虽然没有大呼小叫，不过似乎也完全不管别人有没有听见。我看见她推开一位上前劝阻的年长侍者；接着，她紧立在桌边，两眼直瞅着依然稳若泰山坐在桌后的冰霜面孔，然后以近乎啜泣的口吻说：

“你根本不懂！我非进去不可，明白吗？我里头有好多朋友，我属于那里，一点也不假！你得讲讲理呀！”

“我无能为力，小姐……”面如冰霜的先生接口。不过莎拉·亨明斯不让他说完，也不顾有一边的头发已经散落在脸上。

“一定是你们漏掉了，明白吗？就是这样，你们漏掉了！就因为这样，让你这样糟蹋我，真是岂有此理！岂有此理！……”

众人目睹这场闹剧，都一同僵在尴尬之中。这时候胡子先生打定了主意，威严地大步走进接待厅。

“发生什么事了？”他以安抚的口吻说，“小姐，有什么问题吗？没事，没事，我们会帮您处理，没问题，在下听候您使唤。”接着他身子一震，讶异地说，“哟，这不是亨明斯小姐吗？”

“不是我是谁！是我呀！你不明白吗？这个人简直太过分了……”

“可是亨明斯小姐，我的好小姐，您没必要为这个生气。来，我们先到这边来……”

“才不！你休想叫我走开！我不吃这套！我告诉你，我一定得进去，无论如何，我非进去不可，我梦想这刻好久了……”

“你们总可以为这位小姐通融一下吧？”旁观者里头有人讲话了。“何必这么小气？她都不辞辛劳来了，何不就让她进去？”众人也跟着在旁轻声表示赞同，不过我也看到有人露出反对的神情。胡子先生迟疑了一会，接着，他似乎决定当务之急是先平息骚动。

“那么，也许就破个例吧……”他转向桌后面若冰霜的先生，继续说，“我确定我们总有办法再挪个位子给亨明斯小姐吧，爱德华先生？”

我原本可以再多留一会儿，不过在他们对话的过程中，我忽然害怕起来：万一亨明斯小姐瞄到我在场，把过错赖到我头上，那可不妙。事实上，我正要去退去的时候，她有那么一秒钟正眼盯着我看，但是她不动声色，下一刻，她焦虑的眼神又转回胡子先生身上。我于是趁机开溜。

接下来的二十几分钟里，我尽量逗留在厅中离入口最远的角落。过分看重这个场合的来宾实在多得出奇，以至于大部分的谈话——我身边所闻以及与人交谈的内容——都是在彼此恭维。等夸奖对方的话都说光了，大家就开始称颂今天的主要贵宾。后来，大家还把塞西尔·梅德赫斯特的丰功伟业巨细靡遗地算了一回，我向一位刚这样细数家珍的老先生问道：

“不知道塞西尔爵士到了没？”

老先生用杯子指给我看，我看到这位伟大政治家的高大身影就在不远处，略弓着身子，正在与两位中年女士交谈。接着，正当我还在望着他的时候，我看到莎拉·亨明斯从人群里冒出来，直接朝他走去。

刚才接待厅里的苦旦演出，此刻在她身上已找不到痕迹。她果然容光焕发。我看着她大步向前，毫不犹豫地把手搭上他的臂膀。

我身边的老先生开始把我介绍给别人，我只得回头应付一下。等我再回头看塞西尔爵士这边，我看见两位中年女士已经挪到一侧，脸上挂着尴尬的笑容，而亨明斯小姐则完全占据了她的注意力。我甚至看见塞西尔爵士不知听她说了什么，还仰头大笑。

时候到了，领座的侍者便带领大家进入晚宴厅，在辉煌的吊灯下，在一列既宽且长的餐桌边就座。所幸亨明斯小姐的位子离我有一段距离，有那么一刻，我觉得这个聚会还算愉快。我轮流与两侧的女士闲聊，觉得她们各有各的风韵，菜色还算可口丰盛。不过，随着菜一道道上桌，我发现我一再探出身子，瞄着长桌另一头的亨明斯小姐，然而我也一再告诉自己，刚才那么做绝无理亏之处。

也许就是因为这件事萦绕心头，现在我反而不太记得晚宴本身的事了。聚会末了是致辞；各方人物起身歌颂塞西尔爵士在国际事务上的贡献，特别是他在建立“国际联盟”中所扮演的角色。最后，是塞西尔爵士自己起身致辞。

我记得他的演讲，自谦而乐观。在他的观点里，人类从自己的错误中学习，现在已经稳固建立起一套体制结构，足以保证不会有世界大战那样的全球灾难发生。战争虽然可怕，但也不过是“人类演化过程里不方便的缺口”，每过几年，我们的科技进步超前了我们组织的能力，战争就会发生。我们全然想不到人类在工程学方面的发展有多快，并且以我们所获得的能力，运用现代化武器发动战争，但现在我们把这个缺口弥补上了。既然知道可怕的事情有可能在世界上爆发，文明的力量便抢占上风，并且立法加以规范。他的演讲谈的就是这些论点，我们也都热情地鼓掌。

餐后男女宾客并未分开，大会力邀所有人都到舞厅。在那里已有一组弦乐四重奏在演奏，而侍者则托着银盘，四处分送酒、雪茄、咖啡。宾客立刻流动起来，气氛远比餐前轻松。有那么一刻，我瞥见亨明斯小姐在厅内另一处看着我，我没料到的是，她竟对我微笑。我第一个感觉是，那是敌人的笑容，笑容底下计划着什么阴狠的报复；不过当晚我不时观察她，我觉得这点我错了。原来莎拉·亨明斯是打从心里快乐。她也许花了数月甚至数年的计划，才打进这个圈子，完成她的心愿，她就好像一套一句我们常听到的说法——刚生产完的妇女，把这一路上所吃的苦头，全部抛诸脑后。我看着她在小圈子之间穿梭，如鱼得水。我一时觉得不妨趁她心情好的时候过去跟她重修旧

好，不过随即想到她也可能立刻翻脸再大闹一场，结果我还是躲得远远的。

大约晚餐后半个小时，终于有人为我向塞西尔·梅德赫斯特引见。我并未刻意要会他，不过，我觉得要是来到这个场合，却未能与这位名声显赫的政治家谈上几句，难免会有些遗憾。实际的情况是，有人带他来看我——是亚当斯夫人，几个月前我们在一次调查中认识。塞西尔爵士亲切地握住我的手，并说：“啊，年轻人，原来你在这里！”

有几分钟，我们身边没有别人，在我们四周，谈笑声喧闹如市，我们寒暄时必须倾向对方或提高声量。他还推推我说：

“我刚才在晚宴上说的每一句话——关于世界会更和平、更文明。我真的相信，真的。至少……”他抓起我的手，对我做个滑稽的眼神。“至少我宁可这样相信。没错，我好想相信这点。不过我不知道，我的朋友。我不知道到最后，我们是否能维持局面。我们尽人事就是了。组织、讨论。把大国的大人物凑在一块儿，要他们去谈。可是邪恶总是躲在暗处等着逮住我们。噢，没错，就算此时此刻，我们在这里谈什么大道理，它们也忙着密谋要让文明付之一炬。它们聪明得很，穷凶极恶地聪明。好人可以尽力而为，用一生把它们围堵在角落，不过，我觉得这样恐怕不够，朋友。这样恐怕不够。坏人太狡猾，不是你们平凡的正直百姓可以对付的。他们会在一般人的身边徘徊，腐化他，让他不利于自己的同胞。我看到这种事，我一直看到这种事，而情况只会变得更糟。这也就是为什么我们比过去更需要仰赖你这种人，朋友，我们好人阵营里，能跟他们较量脑力的人实在不多。像你这样的人，可立刻看穿他们的把戏，消灭邪恶之源，让它没有机会生根、蔓延。”

或许是他喝多了；或许这个场合让他忘我。总之他就这样在兴头上好一阵子，边说还边激动地握着我的手。也许是因为这位大人物如此真情流露——或者，是因为我心里整晚就想问他一件事——等他终于讲完，我便对他说：

“塞西尔爵士，我相信您最近去过上海。”

“上海？没错，我的朋友。来来去去嘛。中国的局势，事关重大呀。你知道的，我们不能再只管欧洲如何，现在必须把眼光放远。”

“我问这事，是因为我在上海出生。”

“真的吗？原来如此。”

“我只是好奇，先生，不知道您会不会碰巧遇到过我在那里的一位老友。当然，我这样问您实在有点没头没脑。不过，他姓‘山下’。山下秋良。”

“山下？这个嘛。我懂了，是日本人。上海日本人自然不少。他们在那里的影响力愈来愈强。山下，是吧。”

“山下秋良。”

“我不敢说有没有遇见过他。他是外交人员还是什么？”

“老实说，先生，我也不知道。他是我儿时的朋友。”

“哦，原来如此。如果是这样，你确定他人还在上海吗？也许你的朋友回日本去了。”

“不会的，我确定他还在那里。秋良非常喜欢上海。再说，他早下定决心永远不回日本，所以，我确定他还在那里。”

“可惜我没遇见过他。我跟一个叫‘斋藤’的很熟，还有几个军官，不过没人叫那个名字。”

“那当然……”我笑了笑，好掩藏我的失望，“本来就机会渺茫。不过我真的只是碰碰运气。”

这时候有件事让我略微一惊——莎拉·亨明斯竟已站在我身边。

“好啊，您可终于逮住我们的大侦探了，塞西尔爵士。”她欢愉地说。

“没错，亲爱的，”老先生回答，对她展露笑容，“我才在跟他讲，往后这些年，我们不知道要多么仰赖他们这些人呢。”

莎拉·亨明斯对我微笑。“我得说句话，塞西尔爵士，就我个人的经验，班克斯先生也未必一定可靠，不过我们要再找到更好的人也不容易了。”

我决定到了这个节骨眼上，不如尽早脱身来得妙，于是假装看到别处有个旧识，便先行告退。

过了好一会儿，我才再看到亨明斯小姐。那时候许多宾客已经准备打道回府，舞厅里也没那么拥挤。此外，侍者打开好几扇连着阳台的落地窗，让清新的晚风吹进舞厅。尽管如此，我还是觉得有点暖，

为了透透气，我逛到其中一个阳台。我一踏进阳台才发现莎拉·亨明斯早已站在那里，背对舞厅，长烟嘴上点了根烟，凝望着夜空。我退了一步，不过虽然她动也不动，我却感觉得到，她知道我在那里。因此我便走上前去：

“亨明斯小姐，今晚您到底没有白跑一回。”

“今晚真是美极了，”她说，并没有转头看我。她满足地叹了口气，抽口烟，然后侧过脸对我淡淡一笑，随即仰首凝望夜空。“一切都如我所想。全是了不起的人物。无处不值得流连。了不起的人物。还有那塞西尔爵士，人真是好，你说是不？我跟埃里克·米切尔谈他的画展谈得最愉快不过。他邀我下个月参加私人展示会。”

我没说什么。有一会儿，我们只是一同靠在栏杆上站着。说来奇怪——也许是那弦乐四重奏的关系吧，一首柔美的华尔兹从那里飘来——如此无言并立，并不如常理以为的那样尴尬。最后她说了：

“我猜，你没想到我会这样。”

“会怎样？”

“决心这么强烈。今晚非来不可。”

“我的确没想到。”接着说，“你怎么会这么想，亨明斯小姐，非得要到像今夜这样的场合来找伴？”

“非得？你真的以为我非这么做不可？”

“我也只能这么猜啰。早一点的时候，在接待厅发生的事，可是支持这个说法的。”

我没想到她只是一笑置之，然后带着笑容对我说：“有何不可，克里斯托弗？有什么理由我不该希望自己能参加这种聚会。这里简直是……天堂！”

我并没有作答，她的笑容暗去。

“我想你并不同意。”她说，语调完全不同。

“我只是想说……”

“你尽管说。你说得对。刚才那件事你全知道，你觉得丢脸，所以你不同意。可是，我还有什么办法呢？我不希望等我老了，回顾人生才发现一场空虚。我要有所成就，足以自豪的那种成就。你知道吗，克里斯托弗，我有我的抱负。”

“我不确定我完全了解你的意思。你是否以为，只要跟名人搭上关系，人生就值得了？”

“你真的当我是这种人？”

她转过头去，也许真的伤了心，然后又抽了一口烟。我看着她注视楼下无人的街道，以及对街楼房灰泥粉刷的门面。她平静地说：

“我了解你为什么这样觉得。如果你要以嘲弄的冷眼看待我，这再自然不过。”

“我希望我没有这样看待你。如果有，我会很难过。”

“那么你就应该用点心体谅。”她转向我，眼中露出专注的眼神，然后又转回去。“假如我父母今天还在世，”她说，“那么他们一定会跟我说，我该嫁人了。他们也许没错。不过我不要跟我眼前许多女孩一样。我不愿把我所有的爱、所有的精力、所有的才智——尽管没多少——浪费在只会打打高尔夫球，或是在伦敦商业区卖债券的窝囊废身上。我要嫁，就要嫁给真正有所贡献的人。我是指对世人、对于改善世界有贡献的人。这样的抱负有什么不对？我不是来这种地方找名人，克里斯托弗。我是来这里找杰出的人。偶尔遇到一点尴尬场面，我才不在乎！”——她挥手指向厅内——“我就是不愿认命把人生浪费在某个愉快、礼貌、循规蹈矩的废物身上。”

“听你这么说，”我回答，“我看得出，你把自己看作，呃，一个狂热分子。”

“克里斯托弗，这样说也没错。哦，他们在演奏什么？这个我听过。是莫扎特吗？”

“我想是海顿。”

“啊，你说得对，是海顿。”有好几秒钟，她望着天空，仿佛在聆听乐声。

“亨明斯小姐，”我终究还是说了，“傍晚我对待你的态度，我感到十分不妥。老实说，我十分后悔，也满心愧疚，希望你能原谅我。”

她继续望着天空，轻轻用长烟嘴抚过脸颊。“你真是个正人君子，克里斯托弗。”她幽然道出，“不过该道歉的是我，毕竟我只是想利用你。毋庸否认。刚才闹得鸡犬不宁，我才不在乎。我却在乎我没有善待你，你也许不信，但是那一点也不假。”

我笑了出来。“那好，我们不妨就一起原谅对方。”

“好，就这么办。”她转向我，脸上忽然绽放笑容，简直有如孩童般开怀。接着，一股倦意似乎再度袭来，她又转身看夜空去了。

“我一定糟蹋过别人，”她说，“我想，那是我的抱负心使然。而我剩下的时间也不多了。”

“你很久以前就失去了父母吗？”我问。

“就像永远那么久。不过话说回来，他们也永远与我同在。”

“嗯，我很高兴你今晚过得愉快。我只能再说一次，我后悔我待你的行为。”

“你瞧，大家都要走了。真可惜！我还想跟你聊好多事情呢，譬如说，聊你的朋友。”

“我的朋友？”

“你向塞西尔爵士打听的那位。上海的那位。”

“秋良吗？他只是个儿时玩伴。”

“可是我感觉得到他对你非常重要。”

我站直身子，回头看了看。“你说得对，大家都要走了。”

“那么我最好也走罢，免得我的离场跟我的进场一样轰动。”

不过她并未动身离去，最后还是我先告退，回到厅里。此时我回顾阳台，觉得她的身影在阳台上显得孤单，她兀自抽烟，把烟吹入夜空，任身后屋内的宾客如水流逝。我甚至想到我该回头，伸出手臂邀她一同离场。不过她提到秋良的事情又让我生起戒心，于是我决定暂且打住——今晚我已经尽了全力，改善我跟莎拉·亨明斯的关系。

第二部

一九三一年五月十五日·伦敦

第四章

在我上海家中的花园尽头，有座草丘，上头有棵槭树就长在丘顶。秋良与我约六岁大时，常喜欢在草丘周围和上头玩耍。如今，每当我想起这位儿时玩伴，脑海里常出现我们俩在草坡跑上跑下的景象，有时我们干脆就从最陡的地方跳下来。

每次我们玩累了，就会坐在丘顶，背靠着树干喘口气。从这个高处，我们可以清楚地俯瞰我家的花园与耸立在花园尽头的白色大宅。我只要阖眼片刻，就可以唤起那幅景象，如同身历其境：细心打理的“英国式”草皮，分隔我家与秋良家花园的那排榆树在午后所投下的阴影，还有房子本身一硕大的白色建筑物，有无数个厢房与花格栏杆阳台。我想，这段关于房子的记忆，不过是孩童的想像，实际上恐怕没那么富丽堂皇。当然，即使在那个时候，我也已经知道这栋房子怎么也比不上涌泉路那一带的住宅。不过，这房子给我们一家人住是绰绰有余，家里不过我父母、我、梅俐；再有一些仆人。

那是摩根洋行的房产，这表示屋中有许多装饰品与画是我不准碰的，这也表示我家不时会有“房客”——公司里刚到上海，还“立足未稳”的职员。我不知道我父母是否反对这样的安排。我一点也不在乎，因为房客通常是年轻人，带来英国小巷与草地的气息，那是在童书《柳林风声》里读到的内容，或是柯南·道尔悬疑小说里多雾街道的气氛。这些年轻的英国人无疑都急于制造好印象，都肯耐着性子任我问个没完，或者答应我无理的要求。现在想想，他们大部分都比此刻的我还年轻，而且全都远离了自己的家园。不过，当时对我而言，他们每一个都是我仔细研究与模仿的对象。

还是回头谈秋良吧：我现在想起某个下午发生的一件事，当时我们俩一直在草丘那儿，像无头苍蝇似的冲上跑下，排演我们一起编的戏。我们靠着槭树坐下来喘口气，我凝望着草地另一头的房子，等着胸口的起伏平息，这时秋良在我背后说：

“小心，老格。有蜈蚣。在你脚边。”

我清清楚楚听到他说“老格”，不过那时并没有多想。只是秋良用过一次以后，似乎爱上了这个小名，在接下来的几分钟里，我们又玩起我们的游戏，他不断用这个名字叫我：“这边，老格！快一点，老格！”

“反正不是老格就是了，”有一次我们争论游戏该怎么进行的时候，我终于告诉他，“是老哥好不好？”

正如我所料，秋良强烈抗议。“才怪，才怪。布朗太太，她要我说一次又一次。老格。老格。正确的发音，就是这样。她念老格。她可是老师哦！”

想说服他根本没有意义；自从他开始上英文课，他就极为自豪在家中他是英语专家。我每次总是不肯让步；吵到无法收拾，秋良气得干脆拂袖而去，丢下游戏不管，从我们的“秘密通道”离开一分隔两个花园的围篱上有一道缺口。

往后几次一起玩耍，他没有叫我“老格”，也没有提起我们在草丘上的争论。几周后的某个早晨，我早已忘记这件事，我们从涌泉路回家，路经一排富丽堂皇的房子与美丽的草坪。我不太记得我到底跟他说了什么，总之，他的回答是：

“你真好，老哥。”

我记得我忍住不提他也同意了我的念法。因为我已经太了解秋良了，他这样说“老哥”并非以间接的方式承认他先前念错，而是一不知怎么地，我也懂他的意思——而是他要表示，他可是一一直都认为该念“老哥”的；现在他只是重申了他的论点，我没发出异议，更让他确信自己是对的。确实，当天下午，他更加得意忘形地跟我“老哥”来“老哥”去的，仿佛说：“所以你决定不再无理取闹啰，我很高兴你变得明理了一点。”

这种行为，在秋良身上并不罕见，尽管总是让我火冒三丈，但我很少会花工夫去反驳。事实上一虽然今天我觉得这件事难以解释——我当时觉得有必要为秋良保留这样的错觉，要是有哪个大人想裁定这场“老格”之争谁是谁非，我八成会为秋良说话。

我可没有意思要暗示，我完全受制于秋良的气势，或者我们的关系是段不平衡的友谊。在游戏里，常常是由我走第一步，而且大半关键决策都由我作出。事实上，我在心智方面比他强，他大概也接受这点。从另一个角度来看，我觉得其他各种事情，却让我的日本朋友拥有强大的权威。举个例子，像是他的擒拿术——每次我说了他不喜欢听的话，或是演戏的时候，我拒绝接受他很想采用的剧情转折，他就会用擒拿术来对付我。尽管他才大我一个月，但在一般事情上，我觉得他比我世故多了。他似乎知道许多我不知道的事情。最重要的是，他声称有数次，他曾经冒险走出租界的范围。

如今回顾起来，有件事倒让我有点意外，当时，像我们这样的小男孩，竟然可以在那些地方自由来去也没人管。当然，这些地方都还是在相对比较安全的公共租界内。就我而言，大人绝对不准我进入上海市区里的中国人区域，据我所知，秋良的父母对于此事，态度也一样严格。大人告诉我们，在那些区域，有说不尽的可怕疾病、污秽、坏人。有一次我几乎要走出租界：我与母亲所搭的马车意外走到苏州河靠闸北区的一条路；运河对岸拥挤的低矮屋顶就在眼前，我紧紧屏住呼吸，害怕瘟疫会越过那弯细流飘过来。难怪那时我的朋友声称他曾经数度秘密侵入这样的地区，会让我钦佩不已。

我记得我不断追问秋良的探险事迹。他告诉我，中国人的地区其实比传闻还要糟糕。那里没有像样的房子，只有茅屋木棚紧紧地塞在一起。照他的说法，那光景看起来顶像蓬路⁽¹⁾的市集，差别在于每个“摊位”都住了一整户人家。此外，死尸就随处堆积，苍蝇嗡嗡萦绕，大家都视而不见。有一次，秋良逛到某条拥挤的巷道，看到一个人坐在轿子上——他觉得是某个有权有势的军阀——身旁有个带剑的巨人。军阀随意指个人，那个巨人就立刻过去把那个人的头砍掉。毋庸置疑，大家躲的躲，逃的逃。秋良则是站着不动，挑衅地瞪着那个军阀。那个军阀花了一会儿工夫考虑要不要砍秋良的头，不过显然被他的勇气打动，最后哈哈大笑，还从轿上伸手拍拍他的头。接着军阀一伙人继续前行，所经之处，又有许多人头落地。

我不记得我曾经质疑过秋良的任何这类大话。有一次我跟母亲提到我朋友在租界外的冒险之旅，我记得她笑着说了些什么，让我开始怀疑这些事迹。我好生她的气，我想就是从那时起，一切和秋良有关的任何私密事件，我都小心不跟她提。

顺带一提，母亲是秋良唯一特别敬畏的人。假如他用擒拿术把我制伏，我还是不愿接受他的论点，我就会把母亲抬出来，警告他我要去母亲那里告状。当然，我也不会动不动就这么做——在那个年纪，要拿母亲的权威当靠山，还是觉得丢脸。不过在不得不这么做的情况下，我总是惊讶于这招引起的变化——一个张牙舞爪的残忍妖魔霎时变成惊慌的小孩。我永远也搞不懂母亲对秋良怎么会有这样的影响；尽管他一向非常有礼貌，但他一点也不怕大人。而印象中，我不记得母亲对他说话，有哪次语气不是温和而友善的。我还记得当时我就思索过这个谜，心中想到有几种可能。

有那么一阵子，我觉得秋良会这样看待母亲，是因为她“美丽”。我有位“美丽”的母亲，这是我在成长过程中接受的一件事

实，不带任何情绪因素。大家向来都这么形容她，我相信当时这个“美丽”不过是用来标示母亲的一个标签，跟“高挑”、“娇小”、“年轻”一样，没有褒贬之意。然而，关于她的“美貌”对别人的影响，我也并非浑然未觉。当然，我当时还小，不甚明了女性魅力较深层的含义。不过跟着她走遍各种场合地点，有些事情我已视为当然，例如漫步在公花园⁽²⁾时，陌生人所投射的欣赏目光，或者又如星期六早上，我们想吃蛋糕便到南京路上的意大利咖啡店去，侍者总是额外招待我们东西。现在每当我欣赏她的照片时——我这里总共有七张，存放在我从上海带回来的相簿里——她的美，在我看来都属于较旧式、维多利亚时期的风格。今天，大家也许会认为她“端庄”；当然，不会说她“漂亮”。比方说，我就无法想像她会像今天的少妇那样，有各种惯常运用的小动作，像是卖弄风情地耸肩或甩头等。在那些照片里——拍摄的时间都在我出生以前，四张在上海、两张在香港、一张在瑞士——她看起来的确高雅、矜持甚至高傲，不过我清楚记得在她眉宇之间，还是有一抹温柔。总而言之，我这里要说的是，起初，我自然而然会怀疑秋良对我母亲的另眼相看，就像许多其他事情那样，是因为她的美貌。不过等我把事情再仔细想过，我记得我找到了一个更合理的解释，也就是秋良曾经目睹一件不寻常的事，发生在公司的卫生督察访问我家的那天早上。

我早就接受了生活里的这种事：每一阵子就会有一位公司派来的高级干部，在家中逛上一个钟头，在笔记本上记东记西，看到问题便唠叨。我记得母亲有一次告诉我，我很小的时候，喜欢“当”公司的卫生督察，每次我拿起铅笔研究我们家的厕所，她常常得设法把我哄开，免得我玩个没完没了。情况也许是如此，不过就我记忆所及，这些察访大半都平静无事，有好几年，我连想都没想起过。然而，如今我明白了，这些督察除了检查卫生情况，也来检查家中成员有无疾病或寄生虫的迹象，这类行动可能极为难堪，无疑公司选派执行人员时，也会挑选办事技巧与分寸拿捏都高明的人。我当然记得好些温和而善于察言观色的人——通常是英国人，有时是法国人——他们不但对母亲总是恭恭敬敬，连对梅俐也不敢造次。不过那天早上来的督察——当时我一定已经八岁了一却完全不是这种人。

今天我还清楚记得关于他的两件事：其一，他留着下垂的胡子；其二，他的帽子后面有块棕色的渍——也许是茶渍——延伸到环帽缎带底下。我在屋前马车道围成的草坪上玩耍。我记得那天天气阴沉。那个人出现在大门口，向屋里走来，我正全神贯注玩我的游戏。他从我身旁经过，喃喃说着：“你好，小伙子。妈妈在家吗？”接着便往前

走，也不等我回答。就在我注视他背影的时候，发现了他帽上的污渍。

我只记得，接下来的事大约发生在一个钟头以后。这时候秋良已经过来了，我们在游戏间玩得正起劲。他们说话的声音——虽然没有人拉高嗓门，却充满升高的紧张气氛——让我们停下游戏抬头细听，后来还溜到走廊里，缩在游戏间外面的橡木大柜旁偷听。

我家的楼梯比寻常住家要更堂皇些，从这个有利的位置，我们可以看到闪亮的护栏，顺着楼梯的弧度降到开阔的玄关。母亲与督察就在那里，面对面，两人都又直又僵，站在房间中央，看起来有如留在西洋棋盘上的两只敌对棋子。我发现那位督察把有污渍的帽子抓在胸口，而我母亲则两手相握，置于上腹前方，那样子就像某几个晚上，美国助理牧师娘刘易斯太太弹着钢琴，而母亲正要引吭高歌一般。

接下来的争执，尽管本身不怎么重要，但我相信对母亲却别具意义，也代表道德获胜的关键时刻。我记得，后来随着我成长，她也一再提起这件事，仿佛要我铭记在心；我记得客人来访时，经常听她从头到尾把整件事说给客人听，结束之前，母亲通常先笑一声，然后说那位督察在此事发生后，不久就被撤职。结果，我已经无法确定我对那天早上的记忆，有多少是我从走廊边上亲眼目睹的情况，有多少是来自母亲的叙述。总之，印象里，秋良和我在橡木柜后窥探时，督察大约是这样说的：

“我完全尊重您的感受，班克斯太太。但是我们来到海外，还是小心为上。公司对所有职员的福利负有责任，对于资深优秀的职员就更不用说了，像是您本人与班克斯先生。”

“对不起，赖特先生，”母亲回答，“可是我依然不明白您反对的是什么？您提到的这些仆人，这些年来都表现得极为良好。我可以为他们的卫生标准做担保。而您也才承认，他们看不出任何传染病的迹象。”

“就算这样，夫人，他们也是从山东来的。而公司有义务建议公司所有的职员，不要把那个省份的居民雇到家中使唤。虽然失之严苛，却是惨痛经验所换来的教训。”

“您不会当真吧？您希望我辞退我这些朋友——没错，我们早就当他们是朋友了！——就仅仅因为他们来自山东？”

这时候，督察的态度变得愈加冠冕堂皇，他继续向母亲解释，公司反对山东来的帮佣，无疑不但基于卫生与健康的理由，也是因为他们的诚信堪疑。由于屋内有许多物品属于公司财产——督察边说边指——他有责任以最坚决的态度一再重申他的建议。家母此时再度打断他的话，要他说明这个骇人听闻的论点有何依据，督察疲惫地叹了口气才说：

“夫人，事情很简单，就是抽鸦片。山东境内的鸦片瘾，已经到了十分悲惨的地步，甚至整个村子的人都离不开烧鸦片的烟枪。因此，班克斯太太，山东的卫生水准下降，传染病的发生率却高涨。而且，那些从山东来上海工作的人，就算他们自身本性诚实，不用多久也会开始偷窃，因为他们家乡的父母、兄弟、亲戚、族人，还有许许多多，都指望他们来满足毒瘾……噢，夫人！我只是想说……”

不只是督察此时不敢再说下去；我身边的秋良也倒抽了一口气。我瞥了他一眼，发现他张着嘴，凝视楼下的母亲。正是他此刻的神情，让我推测他后来对母亲毕恭毕敬，一定是从这个早上开始的。

不过，虽说督察与秋良两人，因为母亲在此刻所做之事而吓了一跳，我自己却看不出有什么反常的部分。在我看来，她只是重新摆个站姿，准备发表自己的意见罢了。话说回来，她的举止我早已熟悉；也许对于不熟悉的人，母亲在这种情况下惯常表现的表情与姿势，的确会让人觉得心惊。

这不是说我完全没警觉到山雨欲来的气氛，其实打从督察提到“鸦片”开始，我就知道这个可怜虫完蛋了。

他忽然闭口不语，无疑知道对方会打断他的话。不过，我记得母亲也沉默不语，营造出一种暴风雨前的宁静——虽然无言，两眼却炯炯盯着督察不放——一对阵了半日，才用冷静下藏着怒火、一触即发的口吻说道：

“督察先生，敢情您是要代表这家公司，来和我谈鸦片喽？”

接下来是针针见血的猛烈抨击，她对督察所用的这一招，我早已熟悉，而日后也还要听她陈述其中概要好多次：她先泛泛地批评英国政府，再把火力集中到私人企业，特别是摩根洋行身上，说他们不该从印度，输入这么庞大数量的鸦片到中国，然后冷眼旁观这整个民族陷入悲惨与堕落。说的时候，母亲的声音常常高张欲裂，不过都尖而未破。她双眼始终不曾放松，最后问他：

“您不觉得羞耻吗？您还是基督徒、英国人、循规蹈矩的人吗？为这样的公司服务，您不觉得羞耻吗？告诉我，赚这种亵渎上帝的钱财来过活，您的良心能安吗？”

要是这位仁兄多点胆量，他也许可以指出，母亲之于他，也不过是公司同仁的眷属，并没有身份立场以这样的口吻、这样的言语斥责他。不过此时他知道再辩下去势必无法收拾，于是咕哝几句不痛不痒的话来保留自己的面子，就告退了。

在那些日子里，每次看到有大人一像是这位督察一还不知道母亲是“鹰派”的反鸦片健将，我都颇感意外。在整个成长的过程里，我一直认为母亲名闻遐迩，受人景仰，是中国鸦片毒龙的头号大敌。我得说明一下，关于鸦片的话题，在上海的大人并不会顾忌有无儿童在场，然而我年幼时，对这种事当然所知不多。每天乘车上学，我习惯看到南京路上有中国人摊成大字，躺在门口晒太阳，有一阵子，每当我听到母亲抨击鸦片，我总以为她帮的就是这种人。只不过后来，我长大了一点，就有更多机会一窥这个错综复杂的主题。像是后来母亲举办午餐会时，也会要我在场。

这些聚会在我家举行，利用平常日子父亲在上班的时间。通常会来四五位女士，仆人引领她们到花房，里头已经有张桌子陈设在藤蔓与棕榈树之间。我会在旁帮忙递茶杯、茶碟，还有盘子，然后等待我已知那一刻的来临：母亲会开始问客人，要是她们“凭着良心回答”，她们会怎么看待公司的政策。从这一刻起，愉快的谈话结束，所有的女士都静静聆听母亲继续表达她对“我们公司的行为”的深恶痛绝，她认为那“不是基督徒与英国人该做的事”。就我所记得，这些午餐聚会总是从这时候开始，变得安静而尴尬，没多久这些女士就会冷冰冰地道别，然后漫步走向等候的马车或汽车。不过我从母亲告诉我的事情里得知，她也在公司同仁的眷属里，赢得一些太太的赞同，于是志同道合的人就会受邀参加她的聚会。

这第二种聚会就严肃多了，我是不准参加的。他们会关在饭厅里进行，要是聚会进行的时候我在家，我走路时就不准发出声响。偶尔母亲带我去见见她特别景仰的人物——也许是一位牧师，或是某位外交官——不过一有客人要到，她总会叫梅俐把我带到最不碍事的角落。菲利普叔叔当然是每次必到的一员，而我总是想尽办法在散会的时候出现，好让他看到我。只要他瞥见我，每次都会带着笑容来到我身边，我们会聊聊。有时候，他要是没有急事，我就会把他拉到一旁，看我那个星期画的图画，或者到后院的露台去坐坐。

一旦所有客人都走了，家里的气氛就会变得完全不同。母亲每次心情都会快乐起来，仿佛聚会把她所有的忧虑都一扫而空。我听见她在屋子里一边收拾东西，一边还哼着歌，一听到她的歌，我就会跑到花园里等候。因为我知道，她整理完毕之后，一出来就会看到我，不管离午餐时间还有多久，她都会陪我玩。

等我再长大些，在这样的时刻，也就是聚会结束之后，母亲会跟我一起去极司菲尔公园⁽³⁾散步。不过到我六七岁时，我们就比较常待在家里下棋，有时也玩我的玩具士兵。我还记得，我们在这些日子里发展出一套游戏的程序。那个时候，离露台不远的草坪上有架秋千，母亲会从屋子里哼着歌走出来，踏过草地，在秋千上坐下。我会在后花园里，在我的草丘上等候，然后向她奔跑过去，假装发脾气。

“下来啦，妈！你会把它压坏！”我会在秋千前胡蹦乱跳，挥舞手臂。“你太重了！你会把它压坏！”

而母亲则假装既没看见也没听见，反而把秋千愈荡愈高，同时放声高唱这样的歌曲：“黛丝，黛丝，请你跟我说你愿意。”等我的请求无效，我就会在草地上一直学倒立——其中缘由已不可考。她的歌声里就会穿插阵阵笑声，最后她会从秋千上下来，我们两人便去玩我准备好的游戏。就算是今天，每次想起母亲的那些聚会，我总会跟着想到会后随之而来的殷切期盼。

几年前，我在大英博物馆的阅览室花了几天的时间，研究那个时代关于把鸦片输入中国的种种争论。我仔细阅读了许多当年的报纸文章、信件、文献，有一些儿时百思不解的议题，如今明朗了许多。然而——我也得承认——我做这样的研究，主要动机是希望能翻到有关母亲的报导。如我前面所述，毕竟儿时的经验让我相信，她是反鸦片运动的关键人物。结果她的名字连一次都没出现，我有些失望。以前我不断听到别人引用她的话、赞美她、批评她，怎么在我搜集的资料里却一次也没有出现。我倒是碰到好几则提到菲利普叔叔。有一则是在一封瑞典传教士给《字林西报》的投书里，他在谴责数家欧洲公司的同时，称菲利普叔叔是“可敬可佩的道德明灯”。找不到母亲的名字让我失望透了，失望之情实在沉痛，于是我从此放弃这方面的研究。

我其实无意在此立刻谈到菲利普叔叔。今天傍晚，我以为下午我曾在公车上对莎拉·亨明斯提起菲利普叔叔的名字——还告诉她一些基本生平。不过我把事情从头到尾仔细想了一回，我有理由确定菲利普叔叔根本不在我们的谈话之中——我得说我松了一口气。有个想法也许

愚蠢，不过我向来觉得不该让菲利普叔叔的存在太具体，这样他就会留在我一个人的记忆里。

那天下午，我倒是跟她谈了一点秋良的事，如今我有机会再想想这件事，觉得这样做也好。反正我也没有透露太多，而她也并非真的有兴趣。我完全不知道为什么我会忽然跟她说了那么多事情；其实，在草秣市场站上公车时，我原本无意跟她说这些。

我受大卫·科贝特的邀请，参加他与一些朋友在摄政王南街的餐厅聚餐——此人与我只是泛泛之交。那是个时髦的餐会地点，他为我们这十几位客人在餐厅深处，预订了一张长餐桌。我很高兴看到莎拉也在客人里头——也有点意外，因为我一直不知道她也是科贝特的朋友——由于我到晚了，没办法坐在可以与她谈话的地方。

那时天色转阴，侍者为我们的餐桌点了一架烛台。我们这伙人里头有个名叫海格利的，喜欢把蜡烛吹熄再叫侍者来点上，他觉得这样闹着玩挺有意思。他在二十分钟之内做了三次——每次他认为热闹的气氛开始冷却就来上这么一回——而其他人似乎也觉得这个恶作剧很好玩。在我看来，莎拉这时候玩得还算愉快，跟着其他人起哄。我们在那里也许待了一个钟头——有几位男士先行告退回办公室去——这时候，大家的注意力转到了艾玛·卡梅伦身上，一位热力四射的女性，坐在莎拉那头。我只知道她已经与身边的人谈了一会儿她的难题；然而此刻，餐桌上似乎静了下来，一下子让她成为聚会的焦点。接下来大家半正经、半嘲讽地讨论艾玛·卡梅伦与她母亲的问题——显然最近这对母女之间的关系，因为艾玛与一位法国人订婚而进入另一个新的危机。什么建议都有人提。例如那位名叫海格利的家伙，就提议在蛇河边盖一栋类似动物园的机构，把每个人的母亲——“当然还包括那些三姑六婆”——通通关进去。其他人则依自己的经验，提出更有用的建议，而艾玛·卡梅伦巴不得所有人的注意力都集中在她身上，她也把话题炒得热乎乎，陈述一则又一则洒狗血的轶事，以显示她这位至亲教人忍无可忍的个性。讨论进行了十五分钟左右，我看见莎拉在聚会主人耳边说了句话就离开房间。女士的化妆室位于餐厅大门的接待厅附近，因此别人——若有人看到她离去——无疑都以为她是去化妆室。不过我发现她表情有异，于是几分钟后就离席去找她。

我发现她站在餐厅入口，望着窗外的摄政王南街。她没有注意到我走近，我便上前碰碰她的手臂，问她：

“怎么了，没事吧？”

她吓了一跳，而且我注意到她眼中有些许泪痕，她立刻用笑容掩盖过去。

“是啊，我没事。只是觉得有点闷，就这样。现在好多了。”她笑了笑，又朝街上凝望，像在找什么似的，“真不好意思，我看起来一定很没礼貌。我真该进去了。”

“如果你不想这么做，我实在不觉得有什么该不该的。”

她仔细端详着我，然后问道：“他们还在谈刚才谈的那些吗？”

“我出来的时候还是，”我又补充，“我想，在讨论问题母亲的研究会上，我们两个无法做出任何贡献。”

她忽然笑出了声，拭去泪水，不再对我隐藏心情。“是啊，”她说，“我猜我们两个确实都没资格与会。”接着她又笑着说：“我真傻。他们也不过是给午餐助兴罢了。”

“你在等车吗？”我问，因为她殷切地观望街上的往来车辆。

“什么？没有，没有。我只是看看风景。”接着她又说，“不知道公车会不会来。你瞧，就在对街，那里有个站牌。我以前与母亲在公车上度过许多时光。我们只是坐着玩。我是说我小时候。要是我们坐不到双层公车的上层第一排，我们便直接下车等下一班。有时候我们会花几个钟头在伦敦市区里绕。看看风景，聊聊天，指着有趣的东西要对方看。我以前常常坐公车玩。难道你没上过公车，克里斯托弗？你该试试。从公车上层可以看到好多东西哦。”

“我得承认，通常我若不是步行就是叫计程车。我有点害怕伦敦的公车。我总觉得如果我上了公车，它就会带我到我不想去的地方，然后我得花一整天的时间找路回来。”

“有件事不知该不该告诉你，克里斯托弗？”她的声音变得非常冷静，“其实是我笨，我一直到最近才想通，以前从来没有明白过。母亲那时候一定已经非常痛苦，她没办法跟我一起做别的事，那也是为什么我们会在公车上待那么久，只有这件事我们还能一起做。”

“你现在想不想搭公车？”我问。

她又往窗外望去。“难道你不忙吗？”

“这可是我的荣幸。我也说了，我害怕自己搭公车。要是有你这样的老手带领，这可是我的福气。”

“很好。”她忽然眼神一亮，“就让我来教你怎么搭伦敦公车。”

后来我们没在摄政王南街上公车——我们可不希望他们午餐散会出来，看见我们在等车——而是到不远处的草秣市场站等车。我们登上公车上层，她发现前面第一排空着，竟表现出一种幼稚的喜悦。公车蹒跚驶往特拉法尔加广场，我们就坐在那里一起摇晃。伦敦今天看起来灰沉沉的，一路上人行道上的行人都人手一把雨伞或穿着雨衣。我估计我们在公车上大约待了半个钟头，或更久一点，路经斯特兰德大街、官署街、克勒肯维尔路。有时候我们静静地欣赏车下的街景；有时则聊聊，讲的都是些无关紧要的事。她的心情比午餐时要轻松多了，也不再提她母亲。我不确定那个话题是如何开启的，不过却是在许多乘客于上霍尔本路下车之后，那时，车子沿着格雷旅店路继续行驶，我竟然谈起了秋良。我相信一开始只是顺口提到，形容他是我的“儿时玩伴”。不过她一定试着想多了解我，我记得没过多久我就笑着跟她说：

“我总是忘不了，那时候我们还一起偷东西呢。”

“真的！”她惊呼，“真是这样吗！大侦探也有段不为人知的犯罪史！我就知道这个日本男孩会有文章。拜托，告诉我，你们偷了什么？”

“其实也算不上偷。我们那时才十岁。”

“可是你良心不安，对吧？直到现在，”

“才不。那只是小事一桩，我们从用人房里偷了点东西。”

“真有趣。那是在上海吧？”

我想我一定还跟她说了几件往事，当然都是些没什么意义的事，可是下午与她分手时——后来我们在新牛津街下车——我感到有些意外，也有些不安，我竟然什么事都跟她说了。毕竟到了这个国家以后，我从来不曾跟任何人提起过去，而且，如我所说，我也绝对没有打算要从今日开始破戒。

不过这也许只是迟早的事。老实说，在过去这一年里，我愈来愈专注地回想往事；这样的专注背后有个动力，那就是我发现我的记忆——儿时的、父母的一近来开始变得模糊。最近有好几次，我发现两三年前我相信会永铭心头的事情，现在却要想半天。换言之，我不得不接受我在上海的人生随着岁月流逝，将愈来愈模糊，最后只剩几抹残

影。就在今夜，我坐下来把我还记得的事，大略依照顺序重新温习，我又再次警觉到，这些记忆竟然变得更为朦胧。就像我刚才述说的母亲与卫生督察这件轶事——尽管我对自己精确记得此事的梗概十分有把握，不过在心头重温一遍之后，对于细节已经没有那么肯定了。到头来，我不再确定她对督察所说的话，到底用了哪些字句：“赚这种亵渎上帝的钱财来过活，您的良心能安吗？”现在我觉得，即使在母亲激动的时候，她一样会注意到这话说得牵强，而且可能会害她让人笑话。我不相信母亲会这么失态。换个角度来看，我把这些话跟她连在一起，可能正是因为这样的问题是我们住上海的时候，她常常问自己的问题。不争的事实是，我们“赖以维生”的这家公司所做的是，正是她认为该打入地狱的坏事，这一定成为她挥之不去的良心折磨。

说真的，也许我连她说那些话的前情后事都记不清楚；说不定这个问题不是对卫生督察说的，而是对父亲，而且是另一天早上，他们在餐厅里争吵的时候说的。

[\(1\)](#)即如今的塘沽路。

[\(2\)](#)即黄浦公园。

[\(3\)](#)即如今的中山公园。

第五章

我不记得那次在餐厅里的争吵发生在卫生督察来访之前还是之后。我只记得那天下午雨下得好大，屋子里到处阴沉沉的，我还记得我在图书室里温习我的算术功课，梅俐则在旁陪伴。

我们称之为图书室，其实也不过是个前厅，而墙上碰巧摆了几排书罢了。中间的空地刚好只够放下一张红木书桌，那里向来是我做功课的地方，我的背就靠在通往餐厅的双开门上。梅俐，我的阿妈，认为我的学业是件严肃的大事，即使我做了一个钟头的功课，她也就一个钟头不苟言笑地站在我身边看着，从没想要往身后的书架上靠一靠，或者到我对面的椅子上坐一坐。用人们早就知道读书时间不可以闯进来，连我父母也这么认为，除非有什么重大事情，不然他们也不会来打扰我们。

那天下午，父亲竟然大步走过前厅，无视我们的存在，进入饭后把门牢牢关上。几分钟后，又有人闯入，是母亲，她也一样大步通过，迅速地走进饭厅。接下来的几分钟，即使隔着厚重的门，仍不时听到只字片语透过来，可见他们吵得多么不可开交。不过真正教人沮丧的是，只要我多听了一会儿，只要我手中的铅笔迟迟写不出算数题目的答案，就会招来梅俐的责骂。

可是就在这时候——我不知道怎么会这样——有人来唤梅俐过去，书桌边忽然只剩我一人。起先我还继续在做功课，好怕梅俐回来会发现我离开了椅子。不过她离开愈久，我就愈想要听清楚闷在那扇重门后头的争执到底在吵什么。终究我还是站了起来，走到门边——即便到了这个节骨眼，我还是每隔几秒就跑回书桌，以为听见了阿妈的脚步声。后来，我想到一个可以理直气壮地留在门边的办法：我把尺握在手里，就算梅俐逮到我，我也可以说我正在测量房间的大小。

尽管如此，也只有在我父母按捺不住，音量失控的时候，我才听得见整句话。我约略可以从母亲愤怒的声音里，听到义正词严的语气，就像那天早上她对卫生督察说的话一样。我听见她反复说了好几次：“可耻！”还一直用“罪恶的生意”来指称她批评的事。她说：“你把我们都变成了共犯！无一幸免！真是可耻！”父亲听起来也很生气，不过他的语气是辩解与无奈。他一直说着这类的话：“事情没那么简单。一点也不像你说的那么简单！”忽然间，他扯着嗓门说：

“可惜啊！我不是菲利普！我天生就不是。可惜啊！真是可惜啊！”

他的咆哮里别有深意，像是某种锥心刺骨的无奈，我忽然好气梅俐在这种情况下留我一个人在那里。也许就是这时候，我站在门边，手里握着尺，既想再听下去，又想逃回我的游戏间，到玩具士兵身旁寻找庇护，忽然间，我听到母亲说出这些话：

“为这样的公司服务，您不觉得羞耻吗？告诉我，赚这种亵渎上帝的钱财来过活，您的良心能安吗？”

我不记得后来梅俐是否回来了，或者父母出来的时候我是否还在图书室。我倒是记得随之而来的，是我父母之间一段相当长期的冷战——也就是说，持续了好几个星期，而非数日而已。我不是说他们之间连只字片语都没有，只不过所有的交谈都仅限于现实事务。

这种冷战我早就司空见惯，也从来不会多问。反正这也不太会给我的生活带来什么影响。例如，父亲来吃早餐的时候还是会先说一声：“早安！”再把双手合在一块，只不过母亲的回应是冰冷的眼神。遇到这种情况，父亲为了掩饰他的尴尬，便转向我，用同样欢愉的语气问道：

“那么你呢，小海雀？昨晚有没有什么好玩的梦？”

根据我的经验，我该含糊应声然后继续吃东西。除此之外，如我所说，我的生活一切照旧。不过我想我一定对这件事多少有过什么想法，因为我确实记得，有一次我在秋良家玩耍，跟他有过一次特别的谈话。

在我记忆里，秋良的家从建筑本身来看，与我家十分类似；事实上，我记得父亲告诉过我，两栋房子是二十年前由同一家英国公司建造的。不过他家内部就另当别论了，那也是让我着迷之处。倒不是因为里头放眼皆是东方的画或装饰品——在上海，在我人生的那个阶段，我对这些东西必定是司空见惯——而是因为他家人在应用西式家具的方法上，有十分奇特的想法。我觉得该在地板上出现的小地毯，他们挂到墙上去；椅子的高度总是与桌子不搭；桌灯则顶着硕大欲坠的灯罩。最值得一游的，是他父母在屋子顶层布置的那两个和式房间。这两个房间小巧却不显得拥挤，地上铺了榻榻米，墙上则安上了纸板，如此一来，一旦进入房里——至少根据秋良的看法——就感觉不出自己其实不在木头与纸建造的纯正日式房子里。我记得这两个房间的门格外

有意思：从外面看，“西式”的这面，是橡木门板配上磨亮的铜制手把；从里面看，“和式”的那面，是细致的纸配上漆木格框。

总之，有一次，天气酷热如蒸，秋良与我在其中一个和式房间里玩耍。他教我玩一种游戏，用的是一叠写了日本字的纸牌。我尽力学会了基本规则，玩了几分钟，我忽然问他：

“你母亲会不会有时候不再跟你父亲讲话？”

他茫然地看着我，可能是因为他没听懂我的话；每次我像这样另起一个话题，他的英文程度往往就应付不了。于是我又问了一次，他耸耸肩说：

“母亲不跟父亲讲话，当父亲在办公室；母亲不跟父亲讲话，当父亲在厕所！”

话一说完，他抱着肚子狂笑，翻身仰卧在地上，两脚朝空中乱踢。我只好暂时丢下这事不提。不过既然都提了，我决心要问出他的看法，过了几分钟，我又问了一次。

这次他似乎感觉到我是真心要问，便把纸牌摆一边，问了我几个问题，就这样我或多或少让他明白了我心中的忧虑所为何来。他接着又翻身仰卧在地，不过这次他若有所思地盯着天花板上旋转的风扇。过了一会，他说：

“我知道为什么他们不。我知道。”接着他转向我说，“克里斯托弗，你，不够英国人。”

我请他解释，他又望着天花板，沉默不语。我也翻身仰卧，跟他一样盯着风扇。他躺在房内的另一角，后来他开口了，我记得他的声音哽咽几不成声。

“我家，一样，”他说，“母亲和父亲，他们不说话。因为，我，不够日本人。”

也许正如我提过的，我常把秋良当作人情世故的权威，因此那天我非常仔细地听他说话。我父母不跟对方说话，依他之见，是因为他们对我的行为感到痛心——也就是说，因为我的言行举止不够像英国人。他说，假如我朝这个方向去想，我就可以找出每次父母不说话跟自己在这方面的疏失间的关联。就他自己而言，他总是知道每次自己对不起日本血统，他果然就发现父母不再跟对方说话。我问他，那为什么他们不能像我们不乖的时候那样，用一般的方式责骂我们就好

了，秋良对我解释，情况不同；他谈的犯错，迥异于平时会让我们受责罚的行为不检。他指的是，我们让父母失望到连想责骂我们都没办法。

“母亲和父亲，非常非常，很失望，”他幽幽道出，“所以他们不说话。”

接着他坐了起来，指着当时窗户上半掩的百叶遮阳帘。我们这些小孩，他说，就像把帘叶系住的绳子。以前有位日本僧侣这么告诉他。我们常常不了解这点，不过正是我们这些小孩，不但把家系在一起，也把全世界系在一起。假如我们不尽自己的责任，帘叶就会散落一地。

我不记得那天我们还谈了些什么，再说，这种事情我不会老挂在心头。无论如何，我记得，我不止一次好想跟母亲求证我朋友说的理论，结果我一次也没问成，倒是有一次我跟菲利普叔叔谈起了这个话题。

菲利普叔叔并不是我的亲叔叔。他刚到上海时，曾跟我父母同住，在我家“做客”，当时我还没出生，他还受雇于摩根洋行。后来，我还很小的时候，他基于“自身与雇主对于中国该如何成长的想法，有极深鸿沟”的理由，辞掉了公司的职务，这是母亲每次描述的用词。等我年纪渐长，知道了这号人物的存在时，他已经在经营一家名为“圣木”的慈善机构了，宗旨是要改善上海中国人区域的生活条件。他是我父母长年的朋友，不过，我也提过，在母亲热衷反鸦片运动的那几年，他更成为家里的常客。

我还记得常常跟母亲一起去菲利普叔叔的办公室，地点就在市中心某教会的花园里—如今我猜测，应该是苏州路上的“联合教会”。我们的马车会直接驶进花园，停在一片果树成荫的大草坪边。在这里，尽管四周传来大都市的噪音，气氛却相当宁静，母亲下了马车会停下脚步，抬起头说一句：“空气，这里纯净多了。”看得出她的心情变得轻松，而且有时候一假如来早了些—我们就到草地上玩游戏，打发个几分钟。如果我们玩的是捉人游戏，在果树之间穿梭，母亲常常会跟我一样兴奋地欢笑尖叫。记得有一次我们玩到一半，她看见有牧师从教堂里出来，便立刻打住。我们文静地站在草坪边，他从我们身边走过的时候，我们还跟他寒暄一番。可是一看他走掉，母亲马上转身朝我蹲下来，与我共谋似的噗嗤一笑。这种事可能不止一次。总之，我记得一想到母亲也会跟我一样，参与一些会被“教训”的事

情，心里就觉得好奇妙。那些在教堂墓园里无忧无虑玩耍的时光，也许就是因为这个层面，才让我永远有些特别的感觉。

在我记忆中，菲利普叔叔的办公室总是乱七八糟，到处摆放着大大小小的箱子、一堆堆的报纸，甚至还有零散的抽屉匣，里头仍装有东西，摇摇晃晃地叠成小塔。我猜想母亲不会准许房间搞成这副德性，不过每次形容菲利普叔叔的办公室，她都只用“温馨”、“忙碌”之类的形容词。

每次来看他，他总不忘好好招呼我，热情地与我握手，请我坐下，然后跟我聊上好几分钟，母亲则带着笑容在一旁静候。通常他还会送我一份礼物，还佯称是早就准备好，等着我来拿的——其实没几次我就看出来，他是当下眼前有什么东西就拿来给我。“猜，我给你准备了什么，小海雀？”他会这么说，而眼神则在房内寻找一件合适的东西。就这样，我得到许多办公室的用具，全都保存在游戏室的一个旧柜子里：一只烟灰缸、一个象牙笔架、一块铅制的镇纸。有一次，菲利普叔叔说要送我礼物，话说完了，却还没看到什么合适的东西。他先是尴尬地停了一下，接着跳了起来，在办公室里走来走去，口中喃喃念着：“我放哪里去了？我到底丢哪儿去了？”找了半天，也许是情急之举，他走到墙边，把长江流域的地图扯下，还弄破了一角，他把地图卷起来就捧到我面前。

我向他吐露心声的那次，办公室里只有菲利普叔叔与我独处，母亲因事出去，我们正在等她回来。他邀我坐上他办公桌后的椅子，而他自己则在办公室里走动。他像平常一样，跟我闲聊些趣事，换作平时，不用多久就可以逗得我开怀大笑，不过那次不同——就在我与秋良讨论过后没几天——我没心情玩笑。菲利普叔叔马上就看出异样，于是他说：

“怎么啦，小海雀，今天怎么不开心了？”

我觉得时机恰当，便顺势说了：“菲利普叔叔，我有个疑问。你觉得要怎样才能更像英国人？”

“更像英国人？”他放下手边的事情，看着我。接着，他脸上带着关心的表情朝我走来，顺手拉了一张椅子到桌边坐下。

“你怎么会想要比你现在更像英国人呢，小海雀？”

“我只是在想……我，我只是在想，也许可以嘛。”

“谁说过你不够像英国人了？”

“也没有啦。”过了一秒我又补充，“不过，我觉得也许我爸妈这样觉得。”

“那么你自己觉得如何呢，小海雀？你觉得你自己应该更英国一点吗？”

“我也说不上来，叔叔。”

“我想也是。哪，没错，你在这里长大，周遭什么人都有。中国人、法国人、德国人、美国人，什么人都有。你要是长得有点像个混血，一点也不奇怪哟。”他略微笑了一笑。接着又说：“不过那绝不是坏事。你知道我怎么想吗？小海雀，我认为像你这样的孩子，要是长大成人后，都能博采各家之长，那可绝不是坏事。到了那时，也许我们会更加善待彼此。至少，战争会比现在少得多。没错。也许有一天，一切冲突都会结束，但绝不是因为有什么伟大的政治家或教会或我们这样的机构，而是因为人们改变了。他们会像你一样，小海雀，更像是一种综合体。所以变成混血儿有什么不好？好处多多呢。”

“可要是我真的变成了那样，世界可能会……”我没说下去。

“世界会怎样，小海雀？”

“就像挂在那里的遮阳帘一样，”——我指了指——“假如绳子断了。世界可能会四分五裂。”

菲利普叔叔凝视我所指的百叶帘。接着他站起来走到窗边，轻轻碰了碰帘子。

“世界可能会四分五裂。也许你说得对。我想，这种事要置身事外，恐怕不容易。人总是要有归属的感觉，要属于某个国家、某个种族。否则，谁知道会发生什么事。我们这个文明，也许就要崩溃。然后世界就会四分五裂，如你所说的。”他叹了口气，仿佛我辩倒了他，“所以你想要更像英国人。这个嘛，小海雀。那么我们该怎么做呢？”

“不知道，有一件事不知道好不好，叔叔，不知道你介不介意。不知道我可不可以有时候就模仿你。”

“模仿我？”

“没错，叔叔。有时候而已。就这样，我学学英国人的做事方法。”

“你真是太抬举我了，老弟。可是你不觉得，令尊才是该享受这项殊荣的人？他再英国人不过了，我敢这么说。”

我把脸转开，菲利普叔叔一定立刻就察觉自己说了什么不该说的话。他坐回到椅子上，又正对着我。

“你听我说，”他平静地说，“那么我们就这样做好了：只要你觉得有件事情，不管什么事，你担心做得不好，你就来我这儿，我们再好好讨论讨论。我们就讨论到你完全清楚要怎么做为止。哪，这样有没有好一点？”

“是的，叔叔。我觉得好多了。”我勉强笑笑，“谢谢你，叔叔。”

“我说小海雀，你有时也是个可怕的淘气鬼。不过以淘气鬼来说，你算是最可爱乖巧的一种了。我相信你爸妈都为你感到非常非常骄傲。”

“你真的这么觉得吗？”

“我是真的这么觉得，真的。好啦，你感觉好过些了吗？”

说完这句话，他跳了起来，继续在办公室里走来走去。他说话的语调又回复原先的轻松随兴，开始说隔壁办公室那位女士的奇闻怪谭，让我笑个不停。

我多么喜欢菲利普叔叔啊！然而，我有没有任何有根据的理由怀疑，他并非真心喜欢我？在那个阶段，也许他确实只想为了我好，然而他也跟我一样，对于世事会如何发展茫然无知。

第六章

同样在那段时间里—那个夏天—秋良的行为里有某些表现让我不安，特别是没完没了地吹嘘他们日本人的成就。这是他的老毛病，不过那个夏天简直到了无法自拔的地步。一次又一次，他中断我们正在玩的游戏，就为了对我宣布日本最近在商业区又盖了什么大楼，或者又有另一艘日本战舰即将进港。他强迫我听他说最微小的细枝末节，而且每隔几分钟，他就说一次日本会成为“非常、非常伟大的国家，就像英国”。最让人讨厌的是，他又开始比较哪国人比较爱哭，是日本人还是英国人。要是我替英国人讲话，我的朋友马上要求立刻测验，也就是说，他就动手用他可怕的擒拿术把我压制住，直到我屈服或哭出来。

在那个时候，我把秋良迷恋他们种族的神勇，归因于他在当年秋天就要回日本读书。他父母安排他住在长崎的亲戚家，尽管学校放假他就会回上海，我们都明白往后能相见的日子并不多。起初，这个消息对我们有如晴天霹雳，不过随着夏日流逝，秋良显然相信他在日本的生活，各方面都会比在上海强，于是对于新学校的期盼也就愈来愈殷切。我则是渐渐受不了他一而再、再而三地夸耀日本的一切一事实上，到了夏末，我还巴不得他走。说真的，等分手那天的早晨来临，我站在他家外面，对着载他到港口的汽车挥别，我相信我当时一点都不难过。

然而，没过多久，我就开始想念他了。不是因为我没有其他朋友。要说朋友，我家附近就住了一对英国兄弟，我常常跟他们玩，自从秋良走了以后就更常见面。我跟他们交情愈来愈好，特别是只有我们三个人的时候。不过有时候会有其他学童加入—其他就读上海公学的学生—他们对待我的方式就会改变，我有时会成为他们开玩笑的对象。当然，这个我一点也不在意，因为我看得出他们基本上是良家子弟，对我没有恶意。即便在那个时候，我也明白，五六个小孩组成的团体里，其中若有一人与其他人读不同学校，这个圈外人注定要让大伙开些无伤大雅的玩笑。我的意思是，我并不会因此就认为我的英国朋友不好，然而，不管怎样，这种事的确让我无法与他们发展出我与秋良之间那种亲密的感情，而随着时光流逝，我想我愈加怀念有秋良陪伴的日子。

其实秋良不在的那个秋天，怎么说也不算是特别悲伤。在我记忆中，那段日子经常闲散无事，空虚的午后一个接一个过去，当时的事大半已从我心中褪去。然而有几件小事发生在那些日子里，后来我却认为别具深意。

例如，我们跟菲利普叔叔去看赛马的事——我有理由确定这事发生在某个周六早晨，母亲安排的聚会之后。也许我已经提过，尽管母亲会鼓励我到客厅去跟她志同道合的人认识一下，可是等他们在客厅碰面后，进入餐厅开始聚会，我却被拒于门外。我记得有一次问她，可不可以让我参加一次聚会，没想到她考虑半天，最后才说：

“对不起，小海雀。安德鲁斯夫人与卡洛太太都不喜欢有小孩子在场。真可惜，如果你来的话，就可以学到一些重要的事情。”

父亲当然不在被拒之列，不过大家似乎有种默契，也就是他应该自行回避这些聚会。现在我已难以确定，究竟是什么原因造成这样的情况，不过每个有聚会的星期六，早餐的气氛总是不对。母亲不会对父亲明白提起聚会的事，吃早餐时却始终以近乎厌恶的眼神看着他。父亲这边则是强颜欢笑，而且愈装愈过火，直到母亲的客人一个个抵达为止。菲利普叔叔总是非常早到，他会跟父亲在客厅里聊个几分钟，两人笑声不断。等客人来得多了，母亲就会过来把菲利普叔叔带到角落，严肃地讨论当天聚会的内容。总是在这个时候，父亲就会告退，通常是到他书房里去。

那天，在我今日的印象里，我听到聚会结束，客人开始散去，就到花园等候母亲——我以为她会如平常一样，过一会儿就会出来霸占我的秋千，用她清扬美妙的嗓音歌唱。等了一会儿，看不到她，我进屋里看个究竟，走到图书室，看见餐厅的双开门已经打开了；我知道聚会已经散场了，可是菲利普叔叔与母亲仍在里头，在桌边专注地讨论事情，桌上摆满了文件。接着，父亲出现在我身后，无疑也以为早上的聚会已经结束。他听见餐厅里有人声，拉住我并对我说：

“哦，他们还在里头。”

“只剩菲利普叔叔。”

父亲面露笑容，接着绕过我走进餐厅。透过门缝，我看到菲利普叔叔站起来，接着我听见两位男士一起大笑的声音。过了一会儿，母亲走出来，脸上有不悦之色，怀里抱了一堆文件。

那时候已过正午，菲利普叔叔留下来吃午饭，同时又有更多开怀的笑声。午饭快吃完的时候，菲利普叔叔提议：下午何不一起到赛马场去逛逛？母亲想了想，认为这是个好主意。父亲也说他觉得这个主意不错，不过实在无法奉陪，因为书房里还有许多公事等着他办。

“不过那也无妨，亲爱的，”他转身对母亲说，“不妨就跟菲利普去。下午天气好极了。”

“老实说，我也是这么想，”母亲说，“去散散心，也许对大家都不无好处。克里斯托弗也来吧。”

这时候他们全对着我看。尽管我才九岁大，但我相信此刻的情势，我还是略知一二。我知道他们让我选择：一者跟着去赛马场，一者在家里陪父亲。不过我相信我也懂得背后隐藏的含意：假如我决定留在家里，那么母亲就会因为不便单独与菲利普叔叔同游赛马场而婉拒邀请。换言之，要不要出游，全看我要不要跟。此外我也知道——我有十足把握——在那一刻，父亲极度希望我们别去，我们要是去了，会让他痛苦万分。之所以看出这一点，并不是因为他的举止里有什么异样，而是因为我在那一阵子——或许是不得不——所体会到的一切。当然，在那段日子里，有许多事情我完全不了解，不过，至少这个层面我看得一清二楚：在那一刻，父亲全赖我解围。

不过，或许我的了解还不够多，因为母亲催我说：“来吧，小海雀。赶快把鞋子穿上。”我穿上鞋，一副兴高采烈的样子，其中兴奋之情是我装给他们看的。直到今天，我都还记得父亲把我们送到前门，跟菲利普叔叔握握手，马车载着母亲、菲利普叔叔跟我离去，他笑着挥手，目送我们在午后出游。

那年秋天，关于父亲的事，只有另一件还清楚留在我的记忆里，那就是几次耐人寻味的“自吹自擂”。父亲总是态度谦冲，觉得别人的自夸令人难堪。正因如此，那阵子在好几次不同的场合中，听到他那样子讲话，让我觉得很诧异。那都是一些小事，仅让我略感纳罕，不过这么多年来却一直留在心底。

举个例子来说，有一次在晚餐桌上，他冷不防对母亲冒出一句：“亲爱的，我告诉过你了吗？那个家伙，那个码头工人代表，他又跑来见我了。他要感谢我为他们所做的一切。他英语好得很。当然啦，这些中国人说话总是一副欢天喜地的样子，这种话的内容都得打个折扣才行。不过你知道吗，亲爱的，我清清楚楚觉得，他讲这话是诚心

诚意的。他说我是他们‘德高望重的英雄’。不赖吧！德高望重的英雄。”

父亲笑了起来，接着细看母亲的反应。她继续吃了一会儿才回答：

“是啊，亲爱的，你跟我说过了。”

父亲看起来有点泄气，可是才一下子他又满脸欣喜之色，笑了笑说：“原来我说过！”接着他转向我，对我说，“不过，小海雀可没有听过哦！有没有，儿子？德高望重的英雄。他们是这样称呼你爹的。”

我已经记不得这一切究竟怎么回事，可能当时也不在乎。会记得这段轶事纯粹是因为，如我说过的，这么谈论自己，实在不像我父亲的所作所为。

另一次类似的情况发生在某个下午，父母带我去公花园听铜管演奏会。我们刚在外滩北端的尽头走下马车，我与母亲遥望宽阔的马路对面的公园入口。那是个星期天的下午，我记得马路两边的人行道上，处处都是衣着讲究的人在散步，享受港口吹拂的微风。外滩的港堤上穿流着马车、汽车、黄包车，我与母亲正准备过马路，父亲付了车资随后赶上，没来由地大声说：

“所以，亲爱的，公司的人现在明白了。他们现在明白，我不会让步。像是本特利，他就明白这点。没错，他清楚得很。”

正如那次在晚餐桌上的情况一样，母亲最初的反应像是没有听到。她牵起我的手，穿越过往的车辆往花园走去。到了对街，她才在嘴里念了一句：“他当真明白？”

不过事情并没有就这样结束。我们走进公花园，有一阵子我们就像其他在周日午后游园的家庭一样，在草地花圃间闲逛，与朋友熟人寒暄，有时候停下来小谈片刻。有时我会碰到我认识的男孩子——有些是学校同学，有些是在刘易斯太太家上钢琴课认识的——不过他们也跟我一样，在父母身边表现最文静的一面，我们最多只是羞怯地打个招呼。铜管乐队会准时在五点半开始演奏，虽然游客们都知道这点，但大部分的人都要等到乐声飘过绿地才肯向演奏亭移动。

我们总是迟迟才出发，因此到的时候，座位都坐满了。我不是太在乎有没有座位，因为只有演奏亭附近，父母才会让孩子走远一点，而我有时候也会跟其他男孩玩在一块儿。就在那天下午——一定是

深秋，因为我记得夕阳已经低垂，在演奏亭后的水面一母亲走开了几步，跟站在附近的朋友说话，我听了几分钟的演奏，问父亲可不可以到听众区外围那里找我认识的一些美国男孩玩。他继续盯着演奏亭没有回答，我才要再问他，他却平静地说：

“所有在这里的人，小海雀，每一个人。如果你去问他们，他们都会表明自己有一套标准。不过等你长大一些，你会明白其实没几个人真的言行合一。不过你母亲，她不同。她从来不会违背自己的想法。还有，你知道吗，小海雀，也因为这样，最后她成功了，她让你父亲变成了更好的人。变得好多了。没错，她好严格，我不需要跟你提这点，哈哈！可以说，她对你有多严格，对我就有多严格。结果呢，谁知道，我竟然因此变成了更好的人。这可花了不少工夫，不过她办到了。我希望你知道，小海雀，爸爸今天已经不是你上次看到的那个人，你知道的，你跟妈妈闯到我房里的那次。你记得那件事吧，你当然记得。在我书房。很抱歉你得看到自己父亲的那副德性。反正那都过去了。今天，多亏你妈妈，我变得更坚强。让你有朝一日，我敢说，小海雀，会以我为荣。”

我一点也不了解他在讲什么，而且我觉得要是母亲一才几步远而已一听到了只字片语，一定会不高兴，所以我并没有回答父亲什么。我觉得我干脆再问他一次就是了。过了一会儿，我问他可不可以去跟美国小孩玩，整件事就到此为止。

不过接下来几天，我没事就会想起父亲这段耐人寻味的话，特别是他提起我跟母亲“闯进他书房”的那件事。过了好久我都想不出他到底指什么，思考多时，还是无法把任何往事跟他的话联系起来。最后我觉得有一件事最具可能，那事发生在我很小的时候，恐怕还不到四五岁—即使在我九岁的时候，那件往事在我心中也早已模糊。

父亲的书房位于房子顶层，可以清楚地俯瞰后花园。我难得获准入内，一般而言，连在附近玩耍都有可能被骂。从楼梯口到书房有一条狭长的走廊，廊上挂了一排画，镶在厚重的金色画框里。每一幅都是工笔风景画，画的是从浦东回望外滩的景色；也就是说，前有港中无数船舰，背景里则有上海滩头的高楼大厦。这些画最早可追溯到一八八〇年代，我猜跟屋子里许多摆饰与图画一样，都属于公司的财产。有件事我自己不记得，倒是母亲常跟我提起：我很小的时候，她跟我常站在画前，一起给港里的船只取各种奇名怪号当游戏玩。根据母亲的说法，我才玩一下就笑个不停，有时候不把眼前每艘船都取个名字还不肯走开。如果是这样—如果我们在玩这个游戏时，真的习惯

玩得如此笑闹不忌——那么我差不多可以确定，父亲若在书房工作，我们绝不会上去那里放肆。不过等我再次思考那天父亲在演奏亭边所说的话，我开始想起有一次，母亲与我的确一起站在阁楼上一——如果我没记错的话——玩我们这个游戏，忽然她停下来，完全静止不动。

我第一个念头是要被骂了，也许刚才说了什么话惹她不高兴。我不是没见过母亲忽然翻脸的样子，前一刻还和和气气地说着话，下一刻想起当天早些时候我犯了什么错，她就会开始骂人。不过等我静下来等着她爆发，却发现她其实是在倾听什么。接着，她突如其来地转身推开父亲书房的门。

我隔着母亲的身影瞥见书房里的状况。心中还存留的印象是，父亲撑着办公桌，脸上全是汗水，表情因为沮丧而扭曲。或许他正在啜泣，正是这声音引起母亲的注意。在他前面，文件、账册，撒得满桌都是。我顺着母亲的目光望去，发现地上也有很多文件与记事本，仿佛是他一怒之下扔的。他抬头看到我们，吓了一跳，接着他说话的语调让我有点吃惊：

“我们不能做这种事！我们会永远回不去！我们不能做这种事！你的要求太过分了，黛安娜。太过分了！”

母亲压低嗓子对他说了些话，无疑是在责备他，要他冷静下来。父亲这时稍微镇定了一些，目光越过母亲才发现我也在场。可是他的脸孔几乎立刻又绝望地皱了起来，转向母亲，无助地摇头，对着她说：

“我们不能做这种事，黛安娜。这会毁了我們。我从头到尾都想过了。我们会永远回不了英国。我们弄不到足够的钱。只要没有公司，我们就会被困在这里。”

接着他似乎又失去了控制，母亲开始说别的事——用平静却愤怒的语气说别的事——父亲则吼了起来，虽是对她，不过更像是对着墙壁发泄：

“黛安娜，我不干！老天爷，你当我是什麼，我做不到，你听到没有？我做不到！我不干！”

也许就在这时候，母亲不再理会他，把门关上，把我带开。我不记得这件事后来怎么了。我当然也无法确定父亲那天到底是什么样的情绪，更别说他到底用的是哪些字眼。不过我承认，这里我确实用了点后见之明重建这段往事。

当时，这件事对我来说，只是一个让我困惑的经验，尽管我或许觉得父亲跟我一样有时也会哭闹是件有趣的事，但我却没有深究到底是怎么回事。此外，等我再见到父亲，他已恢复正常，母亲则从来不曾提起这件事。要是多年后，父亲没有在演奏亭边跟我说了那些耐人寻味的话，我大概永远不会重拾那件往事。

但如我所说，除了这几段耐人寻味的小插曲，那年秋天与随之而来的无聊冬天里，几乎没什么值得重新回味的事。那段日子我大半无精打采，后来有个下午，梅俐以近乎随口说说的语气告诉我，秋良刚刚从日本回来，隔壁门口的车道上，正卸着他的行李。

第七章

知道秋良回上海不只是暂访而是要长住，我心中为之欣喜。他打算从夏季班开始，回到四川北路他上过的学校复学。我不记得我们俩有没有以什么特别的方式庆祝他回来。印象中，我们只是重拾前一个秋天中断的友情，一切都低调处理。我十分想听秋良谈谈他在日本的事情，不过他让我觉得，幼稚的人才谈这种事——我们应该成熟些了吧——因此我们刻意继续做过去例行的事，仿佛不曾中断过一般。我当然猜想他在日本的情况并不顺利，不过直到那个温暖的春日，他把和服的袖子弄破之前，我完全没想过情况曾经糟到什么地步。

每当我们到屋外玩耍，秋良的衣着总与我大致相同——衬衫配短裤，盛暑之际则加顶遮阳帽。不过那天早上，我们在花园的草丘上玩耍时，他穿着和服——也没什么特别的，不过是他在家常穿的衣着。我们在草丘跑上跑下，搬演我们自编的剧情，他忽然在丘顶附近停住，皱着眉头坐下。我以为他哪里受了伤，等我过去看他，却发现他在检查和服袖子上的一处裂口。他的神情十分焦急，我相信我说了类似这样的话：

“怎么了？你家女仆或谁，马上就可以缝好。”

他没回答——似乎一时根本忘了我在身边——我明白他当着我的面，陷入了深沉的焦虑。他继续检查裂口一会儿，接着垂下手臂，瞪着他眼前的地面，仿佛刚才发生了什么重大的悲剧。

“这是第三次，”他喃喃念着，“第三次这个星期我做坏事。”

我继续盯着他看，他一脸茫然地说：“第三件坏事。现在妈妈跟爸爸，他们要我回日本。”

我自然不以为和服上的一个小裂口，会造成这么严重的后果，不过我当时也被这个可能性吓到，于是蹲在他身边，急切地要求他把话说清楚。但是那天早上，我怎么求他，他都不说话——他愈来愈懊恼、封闭——我隐约记得那天分手时的气氛不是很好。然而往后几个星期，我却渐渐发现他怪异举止背后的秘密。

从秋良回到日本的第一天起，他就过着悲惨的日子。尽管他从未明白承认这点，但我猜他为了他的“异国风格”而受到排挤；他的举止、态度、言语、数不尽的事情，让他与其他人相异，不只是他的同

学逗弄他，连师长，甚至让他寄住的亲戚——他不止一次暗示这点——也不放过他。结果他痛苦至极，于是他父母只好在学期当中把他接回家。

有可能再次回到日本——这成为我朋友心中挥不去的阴影。事实上，他的父母极为思念日本，常常谈到举家返国的事。连秋良的姊姊悦子也毫不反对回到日本定居，于是秋良成为家中唯一想留在上海的一员；全因他全力反对才让他父母打消念头，不再准备收拾行李搭船回长崎，然而他一点也不确定，他的意愿跟他姊姊与父母的愿望拮据之下，还能有多久的优势。两者可谓势均力敌，他只要走错一步——任何不规矩的事、功课稍微退步——都可能让情势不利于他。于是他觉得和服上的小裂口，极可能带来严重的后果。

结果，和服上的裂口一点也没有像我们所害怕的那样，让他父母大发雷霆，当然也就没什么严重后果伴随而来。不过在刚回来的几个月里，却接二连三发生了一些小小的不幸，让我的朋友又坠入忧虑与沮丧的深渊。影响最大的一件，我觉得是跟凌田和我们的“窃盗行为”有关的那件事，也就是那天下午在我们的公车之旅上，让亨明斯小姐好奇不已的那件“我过去的犯罪行为”。

秋良他们家到上海多久，凌田在他家大约也就待了多久。我到隔壁他家玩耍的记忆里，最初的几个印象之中，有一个便是这位老仆人拿着扫帚忙东忙西。他看起来非常老迈，穿着厚重的深色长袍，就算夏天也一样，头上一顶小帽，后脑勺一条辫子。他不像这一带的中国仆人，他很少以笑容对待儿童，然而他也不会对我们生气或吼叫，要不是秋良对他的态度有异，我恐怕也不会认为他有什么好怕的。没错，我记得当初确实纳闷不已：为什么每当这个仆人——在我们身边出现，秋良就会变得紧张兮兮。比方说，假使凌田从走廊路过，不管我们在做什么，我的朋友都会立刻停下来，僵立在房内的某个角落，不让外面那位老先生看到，等危险过去之后才开始动作。在我们刚成为朋友的那段日子里，我还没感染到秋良的恐惧，还以为那是因为他跟凌田之间曾经发生过什么事。如我所说，我纳闷不已，可是每次要秋良解释他为何如此，他就是不理睬我的问题。后来我渐渐体会，他因为自己无法控制面对凌田的恐惧而尴尬困窘不已，于是学会了在每次游戏因此中断时，不发一语。

然而等我们长大些，我猜想秋良渐渐觉得有必要交代他的恐惧。到了我们七八岁左右，我的朋友看到凌田的时候，不会再凝住不动；他会停下他手边正在做的事，对我挤出一张诡异的笑脸，然后把嘴巴

靠到我耳边，用古怪呆板的声​​音——有点像是蓬路市场常听到的和尚诵经声——告诉我这个老仆人不为人知的骇人真相。

我这才知道凌田对于手竟有如此可怕的爱好。有一次，秋良朝用人房的走廊那头望去，正好碰上凌田难得忘了把房门关妥，秋良竟然看见地上堆着一堆切下的手，有男人的、女人的、小孩的、猿猴的。还有一次，夜色深沉，秋良瞄见这位老仆人拎着篮子走进屋里，里头装满从猴子身上砍下来的小手臂。我们得时时盯牢他，秋良这么警告我。假如我们给他丝毫的机会，凌田就会毫不犹豫地砍走我们的手。

这种耳语听了几次以后，我就质问为什么凌田对手情有独钟。秋良很谨慎地看着我，然后问我能否守住他家族最不可告人的秘密。我向他保证没问题，他考虑良久，最后才对我说：

“那么我告诉你，老哥！可怕的理由！为什么凌田砍手。我告诉你！”

凌田显然发现了某种方法，可以把砍下的手变成蜘蛛。他房间里有许多大碗，各装了不同的汁液，用来把他搜集的手泡上几个月。手指慢慢会动起来——起初只是微微抽搐，接着会卷缩起来，最后还会长出黑色的毛发，这时凌田就会把它们从浸泡的汁液里头取出来，任它们像蜘蛛一样在附近乱跑。秋良时常在三更半夜听见这个老仆人溜出去，就为了做这件事。甚至还有一次，我的朋友在花园里看到花丛下有一只变形的手在爬，一定是凌田太早把它从浸泡的汁液里拿出来，因此还没完全化成蜘蛛，一眼就让人看出是砍断的手。

尽管当时还小，我也不全然相信这些故事，然而它们确实让我心里发毛，而且有一阵子，只要一瞥见凌田，就会让我恐惧不已。说真的，我们虽然年岁渐长，却也甩不掉心里对凌田的惧怕。这点总是困扰着秋良的自尊，到了我们八岁的时候，他似乎发展出不时挑战这些陈年恐惧的需要。我常常想起他拉着我到他家的某个角落，窥视凌田做事或打扫走廊。我并不那么在乎窥视这种事，只不过我害怕的是，秋良有时候会坚持要看我有没有胆量走近凌田的房间。

在此之前，我们都离那房间远远的，特别是因为秋良总是坚称，凌田那些汁液所飘出的烟雾会把​​我们迷晕，然后把​​我们勾引到他房间里去。但现在，走近那个房间反而成为我朋友满脑子想着的事情。或许我们正聊着完全不相干的事，但他脸上却冷不防地出现那抹诡异的笑容，然后轻声问我：“你怕了吗？克里斯托弗，你怕了吗？”

接着他会强拉着我跟他一起走过屋子，穿过装潢怪异的房间，来到巨梁拱门下，再过去就是仆人住的地方。走过拱门，我们便置身于一条阴暗的走廊里，墙面是抛光的素面木板，走廊尽头，正对着我们的，就是凌田的房间。

起先我只需站在拱门下，看着秋良强逼自己一步一步地沿着走廊前进，一直走到离那间可怕的房间一半远的地方。我依然看得见我的朋友，他矮壮的身影紧张得僵硬起来，每当他回头向我张望的时候，脸庞都闪烁着汗水。他勉强自己往前多走了几步，然后就转身跑回来，脸上带着胜利的笑容。接着他对我冷嘲热讽一番，闹得我最后也生出勇气来与他争个高下。有好一阵子，如我所说，这种用凌田房间来测验勇气的游戏让秋良很着迷，到他家玩耍的乐趣因此大大折损。

然而有好一阵子，我们两人都不敢走到房门口，更别说进房了。等我们终于溜进凌田房间的时候，我俩已经十岁了，而且一当时无法预知——已经是我在上海的最后一年。正是当时我和秋良干了那件小小的偷窃勾当——那是心血来潮之举，我们只顾着兴奋，至于此事会有什么后果，我们完全没有去想。

我们早知道凌田在八月初会回老家，到杭州附近探亲六天，我们常说这是我们的机会，终于可以进他的房间。我记得很清楚，就在凌田离开以后的第一天下午，我到秋良家里，发现我的朋友满脑子都是这件事。到了这个时候，我该说，整体而言我比一年前的我更有自信，即使我还有一点害怕凌田，我也很确定我没有表现出来。事实上，我相信我对闯进用人房这件事，表现得相当镇定——这点我确定我的朋友也注意到了，而且把这当作对他的又一层挑战。

结果那天下午，秋良的母亲整个下午都在缝制一件衣服，而为了某些原因，她必须在各个房间不停地走动，秋良于是宣称，就连想着我们的冒险都太危险。我当然一点也不会不高兴，不过我确定秋良更庆幸有这个借口。

接下来这天是星期六，我大约上午十点左右到他家，他的父母都出门了。秋良并不像我一样有个阿妈看着，我们更小的时候，常常为此争论谁比较幸运。他总是采取这样的论点，认为日本小孩比西方小孩要“勇敢”，所以不需要阿妈。有一回我们又在争论此事，我问他，万一他母亲不在的时候，他碰巧想喝冰水，或者割伤了自己，谁来照顾他。我记得他告诉我，日本母亲绝不会外出，除非她的子女明确地准许她们外出——我实在难以相信他的说法，因为我明明白白知道

日本太太也有她们自己的社交圈子，就像欧洲太太一样——日本太太们常在四川路的礼查饭店或马歇尔茶点铺聚会。不过他又说，他有女仆照料他的一切需求，而且他爱做什么就可以做什么，完全无人管束，我这才开始相信我比较命苦。说来奇怪，我就一直抱持着这种想法，尽管实际上每次我去他家玩而他母亲不在的时候，总是有位仆人奉命自始至终看顾我们的一举一动。真的，特别是在我们更小的时候，这些人总是板着脸孔，无疑是害怕我们有个万一，他们可承担不起，于是紧紧跟在我们身边，而我们则想尽办法要玩得尽兴。

随着年岁渐长，到了那年夏天，大人还是给了我们更大的活动自由，不必让人看管。溜进凌田房间的那天早上，我们原本一直在三楼，待在秋良空旷的榻榻米房间里，有位年长的女仆——除了我们之外，当时唯一在家的人——就在正下方的房里忙她的针线活儿。我记得，秋良突然打断我们玩到一半的游戏，蹑手蹑脚地走到阳台上，上半身探出护栏伸得远远的，我真怕他会翻落下去。后来他急急忙忙地缩了回来，我注意到他脸上浮现一抹诡异的笑容。他轻声告诉我，那位女仆果然如他所料睡着了。

“现在我们就得进去！你怕了吗，克里斯托弗？你怕了吗？”

秋良忽然变得十分亢奋，一时之间，我对凌田的恐惧又涌上心头。到了这个节骨眼，我们两人谁也不可能临阵脱逃，于是我们尽可能放轻脚步溜到用人房那个角落，再一次一起站在那道素面木板墙的幽暗走廊中。

我记得我们毫不犹豫地迈步走向凌田房间，就在剩下四五码的时候，不知怎么我们就停了下来，有那么一会儿，我们两个都无法继续前进；要是那一刻秋良转身就跑，我一定也跟着跑。不过我的朋友似乎又生出了一线决心，便向我伸出手臂说：“来吧，老哥！一起，我们走。”

我们挽着手臂，就那样走完最后几步。接着秋良把门拉开，我们一起往里头瞄。

我们看见房间不大，没什么家具，收拾得整整齐齐，木头地板也扫得干干净净。窗户放下了遮阳帘，不过灿烂的阳光仍从边缘泻下。空气中微微飘着线香焚烧的味道，房间另一头有座神龛，床则又低又窄，还有一个大得出奇的百屉柜，柜子的漆饰十分美丽，每个小抽屉上都饰着一个雕花拉环。

我们走进房间，有好几秒钟我们一动也不动，连大气都不敢出。后来秋良轻轻呼了一口气，笑容满面地转向我，显然很高兴终于克服他多年来的恐惧。可是不一会儿，胜利的喜悦就变成了某种担心，因为这个房间似乎看不出有什么邪恶之处，这么一来，秋良岂不是显得庸人自扰？我还来不及说什么，他立刻指着百屉柜，压低急切的声音说：

“那里！在那里头！小心，小心了，老哥！那些蜘蛛，它们，在那里头！”

我一点也没被他吓到，他一定也看出了这点。然而有那么一两秒，我心中浮现了一个影像：那些小抽屉在我眼前打开，那些怪物——它们正处于从断手化成蜘蛛的各个变幻阶段——伸脚出来试探。不过这时候，秋良兴奋地指着凌田床头的矮桌上立着的小瓶子。

“药水！”他低声说，“他用的魔药！就在那里！”

我不禁想嘲笑他这么无所不用其极地想要保留一个我们早该留在幼年的幻想，可就在那一刻，我心中又浮现了抽屉打开的影像，心底残留的恐惧让我什么也没说。再者，我开始担心一个更可能发生的下场，就是我们被女仆或者哪个碰巧路过的大人逮个正着。我无法想像那会有多丢脸，会有什么惩罚，我父母跟秋良的父母对此会有怎样的长谈等等。我甚至不敢想像我们要怎么解释自己的行为。

就在这时，秋良快步向前，抓起瓶子抱在胸口。

“走！走！”他嘶声下令，忽然间我们俩慌成一团。我们憋住笑声，冲出房间，穿过走廊。

等我们安然回到楼上的房间——女仆还在楼下打盹——秋良坚称那些抽屉里装满了断手。我现在看得出来，他十分担心我会嘲笑我们多年来的这个幻想。事实上，我也暗自觉得有必要保存这个幻想，因此我没说什么话来戳穿他，也没有暗示凌田的房间真教人失望，或者我们的勇气只是自欺欺人。我们把瓶子搁在一只盘子上，放在地板的正中央，然后坐下来仔细研究。

秋良小心地拔起瓶塞。瓶里头装着浅色的液体，有淡淡的洋茴香味道。直到今日，我还是完全不明白那位老仆人用这个药做什么；我猜是他买来治什么宿疾的成药吧。反正也看不出个所以然，正好随我们去猜。我们小心翼翼地把树枝插到瓶中，然后让液体滴在纸上。秋良提出警告，这液体一滴都碰不得，否则明早起床就会发现手臂连着

蜘蛛。没有人真的相信，可是话说回来，似乎又有必要帮秋良留点面子，假装相信，所以我们做这些事的时候，都小心得不得了。

最后，秋良塞回瓶塞，把瓶子放到他保存特殊物件的盒子里，说他还要对那药水进行一些实验再回归原处。总之，那天早上我离去的时候，我们两人都心满意足。

不过第二天下午秋良到我家的時候，我立刻看出有点不对劲；他心事重重，什么事都无法专心。我怕是他父母已经发现我们昨天做的事，有一会儿我还忍着不问他发生了什么。但到头来我还是憋不住，便要他把事情告诉我，再糟也得说。然而秋良说他父母并没有发现什么，可是神情却变得更加凝重，经我再三追问，他才告诉我事情的始末。

原来是秋良憋不住心头的得意，便向他姊姊悦子透露了我们的壮举。他没想到悦子竟会惊恐万状。我说他没想到，是因为悦子一大我们四岁一从来不附和我们认为凌田有什么邪恶一面的说法。不过听了秋良的故事，她瞪大眼睛看着他，仿佛他会在她眼前扭成一团死掉。接着她告诉秋良，我们能逃出来已属万幸；她还说，以前家里雇的用人，有几位是她亲身认识的，这些人做了我们所做的事，后来就消失不见了一他们的尸骸几周后才在租界边上的巷子里找到。秋良对他姊姊说，她只不过是吓唬他，他一秒钟也没信过她的话。不过显然他已经吓坏了，而我听到有人“证实”了我们先前对凌田的恐惧一悦子已堪称权威一也觉得一股寒气窜过全身。

这时候我才了解秋良烦恼的事：有人得在凌田回来之前，也就是在三天内，把瓶子放回原处。然而毋庸再提，我们先前的勇气早已消失殆尽，要我们再回到那个房间，根本不可能。

我们没办法再定下心来玩平日的游戏，于是决定走到我们在运河边的老地方。一路上我们从各个角度来讨论这个问题。假如我们不把瓶子放回去，结果会怎样？也许药水非常珍贵，他们会报警处理。或者，也许凌田对谁也不提瓶子失窃，但是决定亲手对我们施以毒计暗中报复。我记得我们完全搞不清楚，我们究竟有多么想保留对凌田的幻想，又多希望理性地想出法子，尽量避免不可收拾的后果。我记得，举个例子来说，我们也曾想过那药水可能是凌田存了几个月的钱才买的药剂，而且少了它病情就会恶化；可是下一秒，心里还抱持这个想法，却也想着其他假设：也许那药水的用处，是我们一直以为的那样。

我们在运河边上的老地方，离我们家步行约十五分钟，就在怡和洋行所属的仓库后面。我们一直不确定这样算不算非法侵入；要到我们的老地方，得经过一扇从来不关的大门，然后走过一片水泥空地，经过几名中国工人，他们会狐疑地注视我们，但从不阻止。接着我们绕过一个摇摇欲坠的船坞，走过一段防波堤，然后沿着阶梯下到运河岸边那块深色的硬土地。那块地只够我们两人望着河水并肩坐下，不过即使是酷热的天气，背后的船坞也保证那里有块凉荫，而每当有船或舢板经过，水波便会轻抚我们的双脚。河对岸还有更多仓库，不过我记得，差不多就在我们正对面，两栋仓库之间有段空隙，透过去可以看到一条马路，夹道种满树木。虽然我和秋良常常到那里去，但我们还是尽量守紧口风，绝不让父母知道，免得他们不放心我们那么靠近水边玩耍。

那天下午在岸边坐定以后，有那么一阵子我们试着要忘掉一切烦恼。我记得就像每次到这里来的时候一样，秋良又开始问我，要是有什么紧急状况，我会游到当时停泊在附近水域的哪条船上。但他说着说着，忽然哭了起来，让我吃了一惊。

我难得看到我这个朋友哭。老实说，我印象中看到他哭，也只有今天这么一次。就算是上回我们在美国教会后面玩耍，有一大块混凝土砸在他腿上，尽管他面白如纸，还是没哭。可是那天下午在运河边，秋良显然已经乱了方寸。

我记得他两手拿着一块泡过水的朽木，一面啜泣，一面把木头剥成一片片扔进水里。我好想安慰他，只是心中的言语不知都躲到何处去了。我记得我起身去找了更多这样的朽木，帮他剥成小片递给他，仿佛这是急救良方。后来再找不到木头让他丢，秋良也渐渐止住泪水。

“如果父母亲查出来，”过了半晌他才说，“他们这么生气。到时候他们不让我留在这里。到时候我们全部回日本。”

我还是不知道要说什么。接着，有条船驶过，他喃喃说：“我永远也不要住在日本。”

“我也永远不要去英国。”我以这句话回应，这是每次他提到这件事，我都会接口说的话。

说完这些，我们沉默了一阵子。可当我们凝视着水面时，我愈想就愈觉得，只要我们做了某件事，这一切可怕的惩罚就全都可以避免

了，最后我很简单地告诉他，只要我们及时把瓶子放回去，就什么问题都没有了。

秋良好像没听见，所以我又说了一次。他还是不予理会。我这才明白，他对凌田的恐惧，从我们上次冒险之后，已经更加真实；没错，我看得出，他现在的恐惧跟我们小时候一样巨大，只不过现在碍着面子不能承认。我看得出他的难处，他正绞尽脑汁想着如何脱困。最后，我平静地说：

“秋良。我们一起再进去一次。就跟上次一样。我们手勾着手，再进去一次，把瓶子放回原处。如果我们像这样一起行动，我们就会很安全，不会有任何坏事发生在我们身上。什么事也不会有。神不知鬼不觉的，谁也不会知道我们干了什么好事。”

秋良想了想，转身看着我，我在他脸上看出深刻凝重的感激之情。

“明天，在下午，三点钟，”他说，“母亲会出门去公园。假如女仆又睡着，那么我们有机会。”

我向他保证女仆铁定会睡着，然后再提一次：如果我们一起进房间，就什么也不用怕。

“我们一起行动，老哥！”他这么说，脸上突然绽放出笑容，并且站了起来。

回程路上，我们把计划敲定。我答应第二天在他母亲出门之前，就早早到他家伺机而动，只要她一出门，我们就到楼上，一起等候，把凌田的瓶子准备好，就等女仆睡着。秋良的心情明显轻松了许多，不过我记得那天下午分手时，他勉强摆出一副满不在乎的样子，转身提醒我第二天可别迟到。

第二天又是同样炎热而潮湿的一天。多年来，我把记忆里那天发生的每一件事，反复想了许多遍，试着把各种不同的细节依序排列。那天早上的前半段我记得不多。我脑海里有那么一幕，是我送父亲出门上班的影像。我先到了外头，在马车道附近晃来晃去等他出来。他出来的时候，身着白衣白帽，手上拿着公事包与手杖。他眯起眼睛，往大门望一眼。接着，正当我等着他朝我走近的时候，母亲出现在他背后的门阶上，并跟他说话。父亲往回走了几步，跟她谈了几句，笑了笑，轻吻她的脸颊，接着就大步走向我等候的地方。那天他怎么离家的，我就只记得这些了。现在我不记得我们有没有握握手，他有没

有拍拍我的肩膀，他到了大门有没有转身再临别挥手。我所记得的一切，都显示那天早上他出门上班的方式，跟任何一天的早晨没有两样。

那天早晨的后半段，我只记得我都在我卧室的小地毯上玩玩具士兵，心思则一直想着那天稍晚些等着我们的艰巨任务。我记得母亲后来出门去了，我便和梅俐在厨房吃午餐。午餐过后直到三点，还有一些时间要打发，我走了一小段路，到了两棵大橡树矗立的地方，树虽然不是种在路边，却正好在邻近花园围墙的正前方。

也许是因为我早已在心头鼓足了勇气，那天我在其中一棵橡树上，爬到了以前不曾到达的高度。我满怀欣喜地趴在大树岔出的分枝上，看到附近所有住户的围篱草坪全在我的视野之内。记得我在那里待了一会儿，风吹拂着脸，但我心里却为下午的任务不胜焦急。我忽然想到，我虽然心中害怕，可是秋良此时对凌田房间的恐惧则更强烈，这次得由我来当“头头”。我明白此举将带来的责任，于是下定决心到他家的时候，要把最有自信的一面表现出来。不过在树上坐久了，心头不禁浮现几种可能让我们无法得逞的结局：女仆也许没睡着；她也许正好选择今天来打扫凌田房间外面的走廊；要不然就是秋良的母亲改变想法，当天没有如预定计划出门。当然，我心中那些旧日不理性的恐惧还是萦绕不去，怎么也忘不干净。

过了许久，我爬下橡树，想回家喝杯水，顺便看看几点钟了。走进大门，我看见车道上停了两辆汽车。我心中有点好奇，不过这时候我自己心事重重，没有太理会。接着我走进玄关，透过客厅打开的门，我看见三位男士，手持帽子站立，跟母亲说话。这也没什么好奇怪的，因为他们也许在跟母亲讨论她推动的那些事——不过这气氛却让我在走廊上驻足。我一站住，谈话也跟着停止，他们全看着我。我认出其中一位是辛普森先生，父亲在摩根洋行的同事；其他两位则没见过。接着母亲冒了出来，她探头看到我在那儿。我想，我也许感觉到了其中有什么不寻常的事在进行。总之，我立刻往厨房跑去。

一进厨房，我就听见脚步声，母亲随即走了进来。我常常想要回忆她当时的面孔——脸上到底是什么样的表情——不过怎么也想不起来。也许某种本能要我别看她的脸。我记得的是她的身影，如泰山压顶，仿佛我又回到了幼儿时期，还有她那天穿的浅色夏装。她以压低却极其冷静的声音说：

“克里斯托弗，辛普森先生旁边的两位先生是警察。我得先跟他们谈完。请你先到图书室等我好吗？”

我才想说不，不过母亲凝视的目光让我不敢多说。

“那就到图书室等我。”她说完转身就走，“我跟他们一谈完就会去找你。”

“爸怎么了么？”我问。

母亲转过来对着我。“你爸爸今天早上根本没进办公室。不过我相信，事情一定很单纯。到图书室等我。我马上来。”

我跟着她走出厨房，往图书室走去。我在我做功课的书桌边坐下等着，心里想的不是父亲，而是秋良，还有我一定会迟到。不知道他有没有勇气自己把瓶子放回去，就算放了，他还是会非常生我的气。当时我也想到秋良的情况实属火急，我认真考虑了要不要违抗母亲的指示，溜了再说。在此同时，客厅里的讨论似乎没完没了。图书室里有个钟，我盯着指针看。有一刻，我跑到走廊上，希望引起母亲注意，这样我就可以请她准我离开，不过我发现这时候客厅的门已经关上。接着我便在走廊上踱来踱去，再度想到开溜，此时梅俐出现了，严肃地指着图书室。我一进去， she 就把门关上，我可以听到她在门外踱步的声音。我又坐了下来，继续盯着时钟。指针一过三点，我的心情沉到了谷底，满腔怒火地怨着母亲与梅俐。

接着，我终于听见送客的声音。我听见有位男士说：

“我们会全力协助，班克斯太太。吉人自有天相。”

我听不见母亲回答什么。

客人一走，我冲出去请母亲准我去秋良家。可是母亲无视我的怒气，完全不理睬我的请求，只说：“我们进图书室去。”

尽管我好沮丧，但还是听话跟了进去，到了图书室里，她要我坐下，然后蹲在我面前，以极为平静的语气告诉我，父亲从早上就失踪了。警方接获办公室报案，正在进行搜寻，可是到目前为止仍一无所获。

“不过他可能到了晚餐时间就会出现。”她带着笑容说。

“他当然会。”我这么说，希望她听出我已经为这样小题大作感到十分不悦。接着我从椅子上站起来，再问她我可不可以离开。不过这次我没有那么热切，因为我看了时间，这时候去秋良家为时已晚。他母亲可能已经回家；他家的晚餐再过不久就要开动了。我心中对母亲极为不满：把我留半天，为的就是要告诉我一个半钟头前，我在厨

房里多少就猜到的事情。她好不容易才说声准，我却直接回我房间，把玩具士兵排在小地毯上，尽量不去猜想秋良此时对我的感受。不过我却不断记起我们在运河边所说的话，还有他对我充满感激的眼神。更何况，不只是他不想回日本，我又何尝希望他离开？

我到了晚上还在闷闷不乐，不过大家当然都以为这是我对父亲出事的自然反应。母亲整晚都跟我说这样的话：“我们先别担心。我相信一定会没事。”梅俐帮我洗澡时，简直温柔得不像她。不过我也记得随着夜色渐深，母亲有几次表现出“恍惚”的神情，那是接下来几个星期里司空见惯的。事实上，我相信就是在那天的夜里，我躺在床上，烦恼下次碰到秋良的时候要说什么，母亲喃喃自语，眼神茫然望着房内某处：

“不管发生什么事，你都能以他为荣，小海雀。你永远都能以他所做的事为荣。”

第八章

紧接着父亲失踪后的几天，我记得的事不多，只记得常常担心秋良——特别是担心我下次见到他的时候该说什么——于是做什么事都定不下心。然而我发现我一直在拖延，不上隔壁找他，有时候甚至还想到，我可能永远都不必再见他——他的父母因为我们做的错事而大发雷霆，此刻正在打包回日本。在那几天里，只要屋外有个风吹草动，我都会立刻冲到楼上的窗前，从那里仔细观察隔壁的前院有没有堆放行李的迹象。

三四天过去了。有个阴沉的早晨，我独自在我家前面的圆形草坪上玩耍，我听到有声音从秋良家那边的围篱传来。我立刻听出是秋良在他家的马车道上骑着他姊姊的脚踏车；他学骑这辆脚踏车的样子我非常熟悉，车子稍嫌太高，我认得他拼命保持平衡让轮子发出的噪音。有时候我听到摔倒的声音，连带着他摔下来的叫声。有种可能是：他从楼上窗户看到我在外头玩，所以下来骑脚踏车，还故意骑得这样惊天动地，好引起我的注意。经过几番内心交战——秋良则在围篱另一侧摔了又摔——我终于大步走出我家大门，转到隔壁，往他家前院里望。

秋良确实正在骑悦子的车，他专心尝试着马戏般的特技，双手不握车把绕着小圈子打转。他显然全神贯注，没注意到我，甚至我走上前去，他也好像没看见我一样。最后我干脆开口说：

“对不起，那天我没办法过来。”

秋良忿恨地瞪了我一眼，继续玩他的特技。我正想向他解释为什么我让他失望，可是不知怎的，话却说不出口。我站在那里看了一会儿。接着再往前走近一步，我压低声音近乎耳语：

“怎么样？你放回去了吗？”

我的朋友瞪了我一眼，回拒了我语气里表现的亲密，四处骑他的车。我感觉到泪水已经盈眶，不过想起我们长久以来争辩是英国人还是日本人更爱哭，我只得勉强忍住。我再次想要告诉他父亲失踪的事，忽然间，我发现这似乎是个天大的好理由，不但可以解释我为什么会失约，也可以解释我为何如此自怜。我想像秋良的表情会先是震

惊，继而羞愧，只要我说出：“我那天不能来是因为……因为我父亲被人绑架了！”——然而，我就是没说。我记得我只是转身跑回家去。

接下来几天我都没看到秋良。后来，有天下午，他来我家后门，如往常一样，向梅俐问我在不在。我正好在做什么事，但还是丢下事情出来见他。他以笑容相迎，拉着我到他家花园时，还关爱地拍拍我的背。我自然急于知道凌田那件事到底怎么样了，不过却更害怕会重揭伤口，于是压下提出任何问题的冲动。

我们到他家花园后头——到我们称为“丛林”的灌木丛那里——不一会儿就说起我们编造的剧本对白。我觉得我们演的应该是《艾凡赫》，那是我当时正在看的书——也说不定我们演的其实是秋良读的武士冒险故事。总之，过了一个钟头左右，我的朋友忽然停了下来，用一种奇怪的方式看着我。接着他说：

“如果你要的话，我们玩新游戏。”

“新游戏？”

“新游戏。有关克里斯托弗父亲。如果你要的话。”

我吓了一跳，我不记得我回答了什么。他从高高的草丛里向我走近几步，我看见他以近乎温柔的眼神看着我。

“对，”他说，“如果你要的话，我们玩侦探游戏。我们寻找父亲。我们拯救父亲。”

我这才想到，秋良应该是从哪儿听到了父亲的事——无疑这件事已经在附近传开——才回头来找我。我也明白现在这桩提议，是他表现关心与帮助意愿的方式，我心中对他的感情油然而生。然而我还是装作若无其事地回答说：

“好啊。如果你想玩，我们就来玩啊。”

事情就是这样开始，今天回想起来，好像经历了一整个时代——其实，实际上可能只有两三个月——我们日复一日地以拯救我父亲为主题，编造并演出变化无穷的情节。

在此同时，警方也在进行我父亲失踪案的调查工作。这点我知道，是因为家里常有一些男士来访，他们把帽子拿在胸前，严肃地跟母亲谈话；加上有一天傍晚时分，母亲表情凝重地过来跟梅俐说话，两人都压低声音；更重要的是母亲在楼梯口对我说的那番话。

我不太记得那一刻之前我们在做什么。我正好要跑上楼去，急着到房间里拿东西，看到母亲从楼上正好要下阶梯。她一定是正要出门，因为她穿了那套特别的米色礼服，会散发特殊的腐朽树叶味道的那件。我想我一定感觉到她的举止里有异样，便停在第三或第四阶楼梯上等她下来。她带着笑容走近，向我伸出一只手。她这时距我还有几阶楼梯，因此我以为她要我扶她走完剩下的阶梯，就像父亲在楼梯口等她的时候，有时会做的那样。不过她只是用手臂揽着我的肩，和我一起走下阶梯。接着她放开我，走向玄关另一头的帽架。就在这个过程中，她对我说：

“小海雀，我知道过去这几天，你不好过。你一定觉得整个世界都要塌陷了。其实，我也不好过。不过，你一定要跟我一样。你一定要向上帝祷告，要存着希望。我希望你还记得你的祷告词，你没忘了吧，小海雀？”

“还记得。”我随口回答。

“这真是不幸，”她继续说，“在这样的城市里，不时有人遭到绑架。事实上这种事常常发生。在许多案子里，我只能说在大部分的案子里，被绑架的人都能平安回来。所以我们得有耐心。小海雀，你有没有在听？”

“有，我在听呢。”这时候我背对着她，双臂攀挂在梯栏的柱头上。

“我们必须庆幸，”母亲停了一会儿之后说道，“城里最杰出的几个侦探接了这个案子。我跟他们谈过，他们很乐观，认为不久就会有结果。”

“可是那要多久呢？”我怏怏地说。

“我们得抱持希望。我们得信任这些侦探。也许要花上一段时日，不过我们必须有耐心。最后事情一定会雨过天晴，一切又可以恢复到从前那样。我们必须继续向上帝祷告，永远抱着希望。小海雀，你在干什么？你听我说话没有？”

我没有立即回答，因为我在试一步可以跨过几阶，双臂还攀在护栏上。接着我才问：

“万一那些侦探都太忙了怎么办？他们有一大堆别的事要解决。杀人案、抢劫案。他们又不是万能的。”

我听见母亲朝我走近几步，她再开口时，声音里多了谨慎与小心翼翼的语气。

“小海雀，侦探们‘太忙’，这点是事实。上海的每一个人，我们租界里最重要的人物，每一位都非常担心你爸爸，也都急着找出事情的真相。我是说，像福斯特先生、卡麦柯先生等等，甚至总领事本人也一样。我知道他们都亲口交代过，要把你爸爸尽快安全救回。所以你瞧，小海雀，那些侦探都必须尽全力去办案。他们也在这么做，就在此时此刻。你知道吗，小海雀，孔探长受指派负责这件案子？是的，没错：孔探长。所以我们怎么说都该抱持希望。”

这段对话无疑有些分量，因为我记得接下来几天，我几乎不再担心什么。即使到了晚上，忧虑往往重回心头，上床睡觉时，我也常想着上海的侦探满城在搜寻，愈来愈逼近绑匪。有时候，在黑暗中躺着，我发现自己编织了一出错综复杂的戏才渐渐睡去，其中有很多便成为第二天我与秋良所用的材料。

顺带一提，我并不是说在这段日子里，我跟秋良不玩与父亲案情完全无关的游戏；有时候我们会沉浸在比较传统的幻想里，好几个小时。不过每当我的朋友发现我别有心事，或者我的心思不在我们玩的游戏上头，他就会说：“老哥，我们玩拯救父亲游戏。”

我们给这些关于父亲的游戏所编的内容，如我所说，有无穷的变化，但不久便建立了一个重复出现的基本架构。我父亲被关在租界外的一栋房子里。绑匪打算索取一笔庞大的赎金。许多较小的细节也跟着迅速发展，渐渐成为定案。情节永远是这样，尽管房子的周围是惨不忍睹的中国人区域，父亲所在之处却舒适干净。事实上我还记得这一项特殊的安排是怎么建立的。也许是我们第二或第三次玩这个游戏的时候，秋良与我一直轮流扮演传奇人物孔探长——他英俊的容貌与那顶戴得潇洒不羁的帽子，我们从报纸照片上早已熟悉。我们正投入幻想中，玩得起劲，忽然玩到了故事里父亲上场的部分，秋良指着我一意思是该由我来演他——并说：“你，绑在椅子上。”

我们原本玩得很顺，这时候我停了下来。

“不要，”我说，“我爸爸才没被绑住。他怎么可能一直被绑住？”

秋良在发展故事时，从来就不喜欢人家反驳，他不耐烦地重复我父亲被绑在椅子上，我应该立刻到树干底下演出被绑的样子。我吼回去：“不要！”接着转身就走。不过，我没有离开秋良家的花园就是

了。我记得我站在草坪边上一也就是走到我们的“丛林”外缘一茫然地望着一只蜥蜴爬上榆树。过了一会儿，我听见身后传来秋良的脚步声，我准备好要跟他大吵一架。没想到等我转身，我看见我朋友以安慰的眼神凝视我。他走上前来，款语说道：

“你对。父亲没被绑起来。他非常舒服。绑匪的房子舒服。非常舒服。”

从此以后，秋良总是百般用心，好确保父亲在所有的戏码里得到舒适与尊严。绑匪总是让父亲衣着体面，他们自己却像是仆役，只要父亲开口要求，就为他送上食物、饮料、报纸。于是绑匪的性格也软化了；原来他们也不是坏人，只是家里有些嗷嗷待哺的亲人罢了。他们真心遗憾非铤而走险不可，他们会跟父亲解释，但他们又不能坐看自己的子女饿死。他们知道这样做不对，但他们还能怎样？他们选择班克斯先生，正是因为大家都知道他对中国穷人抱持着慈悲心，因此他比较可能体谅他们给他带来的不便。对于这点，父亲一每次都由我来演出一会同情地叹气，不过接着说，生活再艰难，犯下的罪行也不能就此赦免。再说，孔探长迟早会带人来把他们全部逮捕，他们会锒铛入狱，甚至押赴刑场处决。那么他们的家人又该如何？绑匪一由秋良饰演一就会回答，一旦警方查获他们的藏身处，他们就会束手就擒，并祝福班克斯先生与家人安然团聚。不过没到这步田地之前，他们还是得想办法让计划成功。他们接着会询问父亲晚餐想吃什么，我就会为他点一顿大餐，都是他爱吃的菜肴一里头总是包括烤牛里脊肉、奶油欧洲萝卜、清蒸黑斑鳕鱼。如我所说，秋良常常比我更坚持菜色要丰盛，而且常常是他加入许多很小却很重要的细节：父亲的房间必须比周遭屋顶还高，可以遥望河景，床则是绑匪为他从汇中饭店偷来的，因此睡起来舒服得不得了。接下来秋良跟我会扮演侦探一不过有时候也演我们自己一直到故事尾声，其间还会在中国人区域的弯街窄巷里追逐、打斗、枪战，不管剧情如何曲折、如何变化，结局必然是极司菲尔公园里的盛大典礼，在典礼中，大家依序登上特别搭建的平台一母亲、父亲、秋良、孔探长，还有我一接受群众欢呼。这个部分，如我所说，是故事的基本架构，顺带一提，我想这也是我返回英国初期，在那些阴雨日子里反复搬演的情节，那时候我漫步于姑妈家附近的绿地打发空虚的光阴，嘴里喃喃念着秋良的台词。

大约在父亲失踪一个月以后，我才好不容易鼓起勇气问秋良，凌田的瓶子后来怎么了。我们玩到一半停下来休息，在我们的草丘顶

上，坐在槭树荫下喝着梅俐用两只茶碗送来的冰水。秋良不再有任何怪罪之情，让我松了一口气。

“悦子拿回去瓶子。”他说。

刚开始的时候，他姊姊真是救命恩人。不过现在每回她要强迫秋良做什么事，就以要向父母报告此事来要挟。秋良为此可谓吃足苦头。

“她也去房间。所以她跟我们一样坏。她不说。”

“所以没有问题。”我说。

“没问题，老哥。”

“因此你不用回日本定居。”

“不要日本。”他转向我笑笑，“我永远留上海。”接着他沉重地看着我问道，“如果父亲不找到，你必须去英国？”

这个令人震惊的想法，不知道为何我从来不曾想过。我想了想才说：

“不回。就算找不到父亲，我们也永远住在这里。母亲永远不会想回英国。再说梅俐也不会想去。她是中国人。”

有那么一会儿，秋良兀自沉思，盯着浮在茶碗里的冰块。接着他抬头看我，粲然而笑。

“老哥！”他说，“我们一起住这里，永远！”

“没错，”我说，“我们永远都要住在上海！”

“老哥！永远！”

父亲失踪后的头几个星期里，还有另一件小事，我如今认为影响深远。我以前并不这么认为；老实说，我差不多已经把此事抛诸脑后，直到几年前，机缘巧合发生了一些事，不但让我想起这件往事，更让我首次明白，那天我目睹的事，其实别具深义。

那是“曼纳林案”结束后不久的日子，我着手研究我住上海那几年的背景资料。我相信我前面已经提过，我是在大英博物馆里进行的这项研究。我想，我的企图中至少有一部分是想以成人的角度，理解我幼年时期根本不可能明了的那些力量的本质。还有一部分则是想先打好基础，准备有朝一日要全心投入，调查有关我父母失踪的整个事

件—尽管上海警方仍持续侦查，可是案子至今未破。顺便提一句，我一直打算在不久的将来，着手这方面的调查。其实，若不是我忙得不可开交，我敢说我就早就动手了。

总之，如我所说，几年前我花了许多时间在大英博物馆搜集鸦片贸易在中国的史料，还有摩根洋行的历史，以及当时上海复杂政治生态的资料。我还多次写信到中国，请他们提供我在伦敦无法取得的情报。结果有一天我收到一张发黄的《华北日报》剪报，发报日期大约是我离开上海后三年。我的特派员寄给我有关租界港埠贸易法规变迁的报道—无疑是我要求的资料—不过，立刻引起我注意的，却是碰巧在剪报背面顺带剪进来的照片。

我把这张发黄报纸上的照片装进一只锡制的雪茄盒，放在书桌的抽屉里，不时拿出来端详一番。相片里头拍了三个男人在林荫大道上，三个都是中国人。外侧的两位着硬领西服，拿着帽子与手杖。中间那个胖男士则着传统中国服装：深色长袍、瓜皮帽、辫子。正如当时大半的新闻照片，多少有点矫情做作的味道，而我的特派员几乎把左边四分之一的部分都剪掉了。总之，从我看到这张照片的那一刻起，这张照片一说得更精确些，中间那个人—就格外令我感兴趣。

我把这张照片，跟我那位特派员回复我的信件—他约莫在一个月后又答复了我更进一步的问题—一同放进抽屉里的锡制雪茄盒。信中他告诉我，那位着长袍、戴瓜皮帽的胖男士是王顾，一个军阀头子，拍那张照片的时候，在湖南有不小的势力，手下养了一支三百人左右的杂牌军。与他的大部分同类一样，他在蒋介石掌权后势力大减，但据说身体依然安康，目前在南京城内某处还算舒适的冷宫中蹉跎岁月。我的特派员针对我明确的问题，答说他无法确定王顾是否曾经与摩根洋行有任何公开的关系。然而依他所见，我们不无理由怀疑，他在某个时期与该公司曾有往来。在那个年代，我的特派员指出，任何走长江水域穿过湖南运送的鸦片—或者其他值钱的货物—都可能遭受盘踞当地的强盗土匪抢夺。只有借助割据当地的军阀，才能确保货物平安，而像摩根洋行这种商行，自然极可能花了工夫跟这种人建立关系。在我儿时的上海，以王顾手头握有的兵力，他应该会成为特别受青睐的盟友。我的特派员在信末道歉未能提供更进一步的具体资料。

如我说过，我在发现那张照片之后五六个星期，才请求我的特派员提供这些信息。延迟的原因是，尽管我明明确定我在过去某地见过那位胖男士，可想了半天却一点也想不起来是在何时何地，为了何事。那人让我觉得跟某件尴尬、不快的事有关，不过除此之外，什么

别的也记不起来。直到有天早晨，我在肯辛顿高街上漫步找计程车，往事在全无预兆的情况下，忽然涌上心头。

那位胖男士刚到我家的时候，我并没有花什么心思注意他。毕竟当时距离父亲失踪才两三个星期，陌生人不时来来去去：警察、英国领事馆的人、摩根洋行的人，还有一些女士一进我家看见母亲，便会伸出双臂并发出一声痛苦的惊呼。对于这些女士，我记得母亲以冷静的一笑回应，然后走向她们，直截了当地谢绝拥抱，并以她最有自信的口吻说出这样的话：“艾格妮丝，真高兴见到你。”接着她会牵着客人的手——也许还僵在空中——带领她们到客厅去。

总之，如我所说，胖男士那天刚到家门口，并没有引起我多少兴趣。我记得我从游戏室的窗户往下瞄了一眼，看见他走下汽车。他当时的样子，我相信跟那张剪报上的照片差不多：深色长袍、瓜皮帽、辫子。我注意到车子硕大闪亮，他不但有司机还有另两位随扈，不过就算这样，这排场也不算什么；父亲失踪后的那段日子，许多有头有脸的大人物早已来访过。倒是菲利普叔叔迎上前去寒暄的样子，让我有些意外，他当时已在家中待了约一个钟头。他们一副相见甚欢的样子——仿佛至交——接着菲利普叔叔引领客人进屋子里来。

我不记得接下来的一时半刻里我做了什么。我还留在屋子里——不过不是为了那位胖男士，我说了，我对他没什么兴趣。事实上，当我第一次听到楼下的骚动时，我记得我还很诧异客人竟然还没走。我赶到游戏室窗前，看见汽车还在马车道上，三位留在车上的随扈——他们也听到了争吵声——急忙下车，表情紧张。接着我看到胖男士平心静气地走向汽车，挥手向手下示意不要担心。司机已开好车门等着胖男士上车，他上车的时候母亲出现了。事实上，刚才是她的声音让我赶到窗口观望。我一直告诉自己，这种语气只有对我或对用人生气的时候才有，不过等母亲的身影在楼下出现，她说的每个字都清楚可辨，我就算想骗自己也没办法了。有些东西她再也压抑不住了，我从未见她如此，但我立刻意识到，从父亲失踪之后，我早该接受这样的事了。

她对胖男士吼叫，多亏有菲利普叔叔拉住她。母亲指责胖男士背叛自己的同胞，指责他是恶魔的帮凶，她才不要他那种协助，要是他再回到我家，她会当他是禽兽不如的东西唾他的面。

胖男士听了一点也不动怒。他指示随扈们上车，司机发车时，他从车窗对母亲微笑，几乎颌首向她表示赞许一般，仿佛母亲在那儿礼数周到地向他告别。车子走了以后，菲利普叔叔劝母亲进屋子里来。

等他们走到大厅，母亲已不再说话。我听见菲利普叔叔说：“可是我们什么方法都得试一试，你难道不明白吗？”他的脚步声跟着母亲的进入客厅，门随即关上，我就什么也没再听见了。

看见母亲这种举止，当然让我不安。不过，假如她发现对访客怒吼解放了她几个星期以来严密压抑的情绪，那么我内心也有类似的变化。正是因为目睹她情绪爆发，不管过去这两三个星期以来我怎么想，今天我终于能够接受这件事情已经有了最坏的可能，而随之而来的感受，则是心中的巨石落地。

顺带一提，我得承认，我不敢完全肯定那天所见的中国人，就是剪报照片上的那位——照片中的人已查出是军阀王顾。我只能说，从我看到照片的第一眼开始，我就毫不怀疑，那张脸孔——而不是每位中国乡绅都极可能拥有的长袍、瓜皮帽、辫子——就是父亲才失踪几天后我所看见的那个人。这件事，我每在心中多回想一次，就愈相信照片中的人正是那天来我家的那位男士。这项发现的影响深远——它有助于提供我父母如今身在何处的线索，并且在我想做的诸多调查之中，居于中心地位——如我所述，这些事我想要尽快动手。

[\(1\)](#)即后来的和平饭店南楼。

第九章

我刚才描述的这件事还有更深的一个层面，在此不知该不该提，我也不确定这件事有没有任何实质意义。此事跟菲利普叔叔那天在我家前面拉住我母亲的方式有关；还有，就是他进了屋子里对母亲说的话，声音有点不对劲：“可是我们什么方法都得试一试，你难道不明白吗？”我提不出任何具体证据，只不过小孩有时往往更能察觉那些比较不明确的事物。总之，我就是觉得那天菲利普叔叔绝对有问题。我不知道为什么，可是我清清楚楚感觉到菲利普叔叔这次并不是“站在我们这边”；感觉到他跟那个肥胖的中国人，比跟我们还要亲密；甚至还感觉到——这极可能纯粹是我的幻想——胖男士坐车走的时候，菲利普叔叔还跟他交换了个眼神。如我所说，我无法指出任何具体线索来佐证这些感觉，也许是因为菲利普叔叔最后终究还是现出原形，才让我有这些后见之明罢。

即使到了今天，想到我跟菲利普叔叔的关系会那样收场，我心中仍隐隐作痛。我可能已经清楚地提过，他在那些年里已成为我崇拜的对象，我对他如此崇拜，甚至在我父亲刚失踪的那几天，我记得我甚至还觉得毋需太介意，因为菲利普叔叔总是可以递补他的空位。我无法否认，这个想法到后来连我自己都觉得说不过去，不过我要说的是，我对菲利普叔叔有一份特别的感情，也难怪那天我会放松警戒跟他出去。

我说“放松警戒”，是因为在那最后一天来临前的一阵子，我愈来愈为母亲的安危担忧，不时看着她。就连她说想独处，我都会留心她走进哪个房间，并且留心有哪扇门、哪扇窗是绑匪可能闯入的。晚上我躺着不睡，听她在屋内走动，我总是把我的武器放在手边——那是一根末端削尖的棍子，是秋良给我的。

然而深入回想这一切，我觉得，事情发展到那个时候，我内心深处并不太相信我的恐惧会成为现实。就拿我认为一根尖棍儿就足以吓阻绑匪一事来说——我常在睡梦中幻想自己与数十名闯进楼上的绑匪恶斗，他们一个个被我打倒——这或许也说明了当时我的恐惧，依然停留在一个多么脱离现实、荒诞不经的层级上。

尽管如此，我为母亲的安危心焦不已是毋庸置疑的。我当时实在不懂，其他大人怎么都没有采取任何保护她的措施。那段时间，我不

喜欢让母亲离开我的视线，而如我所说，倘若那天邀我的人不是菲利普叔叔，我绝不会放松警戒。

那是个晴朗多风的早晨。我记得我从游戏室的窗口，看着树叶在前院的马车道上飞舞。早餐后不久，菲利普叔叔就和母亲一起待在楼下，我于是可以放松一下，相信只要菲利普叔叔在她身边，她就不会有事。

上午过了一半，我听见菲利普叔叔叫我。我走到楼梯口，从护栏往下望，看见母亲与菲利普叔叔站在玄关抬头看我。这是几个星期以来，我第一次感觉到他们有欣喜之色，仿佛听了一则笑话才刚笑完一样。大门没关上，有一道细长的阳光泻进玄关。菲利普叔叔说：

“我说小海雀，你不是一直说你要手风琴吗？哪，我要买一架送你。昨天我在汉口路的橱窗里看到一架精美的法式手风琴。店主显然不知道价格开得太低呢。我说不如我们俩过去看看。你要是看了喜欢，就是你的了。这主意不赖吧？”

这件事让我冲下楼梯，最后四阶还并作一步，还在大人周围打转，鼓动双臂模仿老鹰。我在耍宝时，很高兴能听到母亲的笑声——好一阵子没有听到她这样笑了。老实说，有可能这种气氛——以为情况或许就要开始回到从前——正是导致我“放松警戒”的重大因素。我问菲利普叔叔我们什么时候可以去，他耸耸肩说：

“何不现在就走？如果放着，说不定就让别人看上了。说不定此时此刻，我们还在谈，它就被别人买走了呢！”

我冲向门口，母亲又笑了。接着她告诉我，我得把外套、鞋子穿好。我记得我想说我不穿外套，结果没提，以免大人改变心意，不只是害怕买不成手风琴，也怕整个轻松的气氛跟着改变。

菲利普叔叔跟我走过前院出发时，我漫不经心地向母亲挥别。接着我又走了几步，赶向等候的马车。菲利普叔叔拉住我的肩膀说：“哪，跟母亲挥挥手。”也不管我才挥过。不过我当时并没有多想，只是依他吩咐转身向母亲再次挥手，她的身影优雅端庄，亭亭立于门口。

大半的路，马车走的是我与母亲平日到市中心的路线。一路上菲利普叔叔沉默不语，这让我有点意外，不过我从来没有单独跟他共乘过马车，所以猜想这也许是他平常的习惯。每当我指着路旁的东西给他看，他的确会愉快地回应；不过没一会儿，他就又沉默地凝视窗

外。林荫大道渐渐变成拥挤的街道，我们的车夫对着挡路的黄包车与路人吼叫。我们经过南京路那间小小的古玩店，我记得我伸长了脖子，想看看广西路转角的那间玩具店。马车接近蔬菜市场，我才想着该掩鼻阻挡腐菜味的时候，菲利普叔叔忽然用手杖轻敲，指示车夫把马车停下来。

“我们从这里开始走路，”他对我说，“我知道一条捷径。走那里快得多。”

这个变通之道完全合理。我从过去的经验知道，南京路附近的街道人潮汹涌，马车或汽车往往一被堵住就是五分钟，甚至十分钟不能动弹。于是我什么也没说就让他扶我下车。不过就在那时候，我开始有了某种不祥的预感。也许是菲利普叔叔扶我下车碰我的方式有点不对劲；也许是他的态度哪里不对。不过他接着对我笑笑，又说了些话，可惜周遭太嘈杂听不到。他指向邻近的巷子，我紧跟在他后面，挤过洋溢着欢乐气氛的人潮。我们从阳光走进阴影，接着他停下来转身向我，就在推推搡搡的人群当中。他把一只手放到我肩上，然后问我：

“克里斯托弗，你知道我们在哪里吗？你猜得到吗？”

我向四周看看，然后指着一座石头拱门，门下的菜贩四周围满人群，我答说：“知道，那里过去是九江路。”

“好，那么你完全清楚我们现在在哪里。”他诡异地一笑，“这一带的路你很熟啰。”

我点点头，静待其变，但心底深处却涌起一种感觉：非常可怕的事情就要发生了。也许菲利普叔叔要说别的事——也许他本来的计划完全不是这样——可是在那一刻，我们站在熙来攘往的人群里，我相信他从我表情里看出事迹已然败露。他脸上一阵错愕，接着他尽可能压过周围的噪音对我说：

“好孩子。”

他再度抓住我的肩膀，眼神则四下观望。然后他仿佛做好了决定——这个我早有心理准备。

“好孩子！”他说，这次声量更大，声音因激动而颤抖。他继续说：“我没有要伤害你的意思，你明白吗？我没有要伤害你的意思。”

说完他便转身消失在人群里。我只抱着些许希望跟了上去，过了一会儿，瞥见他的白色外套急忙穿过人群离去。他穿过拱门之后就再也看不见了。

接下来有一会儿，我就呆立在人群之中，尽量不去回想刚才的事情到底有什么道理。接着，我忽然开始移动脚步，往来时的方向走回去，回到我们下马车的地方。我再也顾不得礼节，在群众里看到缝隙就强挤，有空间就硬钻，惹得好多路人在我背后或大笑或叫骂。我到了那条街上，自然发现马车早已驶离。有那么几秒钟，我不知所措地站在马路中央，试着在脑子里想好回家的路线，接着就使尽全力快跑。

我沿着九江路跑，横越了石子高低不平的云南路，到了南京路则再次挤过人群。跑到涌泉路，我已经气喘如牛，不过我激励自己，就剩这一段又长又直的路了，路上的人还算少。

也许是因为觉得自己的恐惧纯属个人感受——也或许因为我的看法已经有了深沉的转变——我竟没有想到向路过的大人求救，或者拦下路上的马车或汽车。我开步就跑，尽管已经上气不接下气，尽管我的步伐一定很引人侧目，尽管懊热与疲倦让我有时只能半走半跑，但我相信我一路都没停过。最后我经过美国领事的住所，接着是罗伯逊先生的家。离开涌泉路便进入了我家所在的道路，再喘口气，我便一路跑到我家的大门口。

走过车道——尽管没有什么明显迹象——我知道已经太迟了，事情早已结束。我发现正门被闩上了。我跑到后门，一推就开，跑过屋内，不知怎么，我并没有呼唤母亲，反而是呼唤梅俐——也许都到了这个地步，我还不愿接受呼唤母亲所意味的事情。

家里好像空无一人。我站在玄关，奇怪，怎么会听到咯咯傻笑的声音。声音从图书室传来，我转身走过去，房门半开，我看见梅俐坐在我的书桌旁。她坐得直挺挺，我在玄关出现时，她朝我看看，又发出一声傻笑，仿佛听了一则有关别人私事的笑话，想要憋住不笑出来。那时候我才忽然意识到她是在啜泣，而我已然明白，我在那段痛苦的长跑之中就心知肚明，母亲已经不在那儿了。我心中对梅俐生起一股冷冷的愤怒——这么多年来，她让我敬畏有加，可现在我明白这一切全是装腔作势：她丝毫无法控制这个逐渐将我们吞没的混乱世界；她只是个可悲的小女人，全靠伪装在我眼中建立她的形象，当巨大势力相互冲突斗争之际，她根本贱于蝼蚁。我站在走廊上瞪着她，眼神鄙夷至极。

现在已是深夜—写下最后那句话，又过了一个多钟头—然而我还在这里，在书桌边。我想我一直坐在那儿，反复回想这些往事，其中有些已经多年不曾从心底唤起。然而我也展望未来，期盼有一天我终于可以重回上海；期盼我可以跟秋良一起做的所有事情。那城市当然会经历一些变化。不过我也知道，秋良只会想带着我到处逛，向我炫耀他将这城市不为人知的角落摸得多么熟。他会知道吃该到哪儿吃，喝要到哪儿喝，逛又得到哪儿逛；也知道有哪个绝佳的场所，可以让我们在辛苦了一整天以后，坐下来聊到深夜，叙叙自从上回一别，我们各自经历了多少沧海桑田。

可是此刻我得先睡觉。明天早上还有许多事要忙，而且下午跟莎拉搭公车漫游伦敦花了些时间，我得把进度赶上。

第三部

一九三七年四月十二日·伦敦

第十章

昨天，小詹妮弗与吉文斯小姐购物回来时，我的书房已经一片昏暗。这栋窄而高的楼房，是用姑妈去世后留下的遗产购置的，从里头可以俯瞰一片广场，房子尽管还算体面，采光却比左邻右舍差。我从书房的窗户俯瞰广场上的她在计程车与屋子之间来来回回，把取下的购物袋靠着栏杆排好，吉文斯小姐则拿着钱包在掏车资。忙了半晌她们才走进屋里，我听见她们在斗嘴，虽然我也到楼梯口喊了一声向她们打招呼，但想想还是别下去的好。她们正在吵些鸡毛蒜皮的事——怎么买了这个，怎么没买那个——更何况我还在为早上到的信兴奋着——我可不想糟蹋了这份心情。

等我下楼，她们早已吵完了，我看到詹妮弗蒙着眼睛在客厅里走来走去，两手伸在身子前面。

“嗨，詹妮弗，”我说，假装没看到什么异于平常的事，“新学期需要的所有东西，有没有买齐？”

她眼见就要撞上珍玩柜，我忍住没喊她。她及时停步，双手摸着柜子时还咯咯傻笑。

“哎哟，克里斯托弗叔叔！你怎么不警告我？”

“警告？警告什么？”

“我瞎了呀！你看不出来吗？我瞎了！你看嘛！”

“哦，没错。你是瞎了。”

我随她在家具之间摸索，自己走到厨房，吉文斯小姐把桌上袋子里的东西拿出来，礼貌地向我打了个招呼，却清楚地让我看到她向桌子另一头瞥了一眼，我吃剩的午餐还摆在那里。自从上星期我们的女仆波莉走了，每次有迹象暗示她得勉为其难暂代其职，她都一副鄙夷的样子。

“吉文斯小姐，”我对她说，“有件事得跟您商量。”我侧脸向她低声地说，“是跟詹妮弗有关的事。”

“请说，班克斯先生。”

“老实说，吉文斯小姐，我在想，我们可不可以到温室里去谈。我是说，这件事，可不是小事。”

就在这个时候，客厅传来东西砸到地上的声音。吉文斯小姐从我身边赶了过去，在门口就喊了：

“詹妮弗，够了！我早告诉你会这样！”

“可是我瞎啦，”她回答，“我也没办法。”

吉文斯小姐想起我还在跟她说话，一时之间一心不能二用。愣了一会儿，她回到我这里，平静地问我：“抱歉，班克斯先生。您刚才说的是……？”

“其实，吉文斯小姐，我想不如等晚一点詹妮弗上床了，我们再谈比较方便。”

“没问题，到时候我再过来。”

不知她对于我要谈的事有没有什么不祥的预感，反正她当时并没有表现出来。她对我例行地一笑，便走进客厅尽她的职责去了。

自从第一次遇见詹妮弗，到今天已经快三年了。我的老同窗奥斯本邀我参加一场晚宴，我好一阵子没见到他了。他当时还住在格洛斯特街，那夜我初遇后来成为他妻子的那位少妇。他的客人中还有比顿夫人，她是一位著名慈善家的遗孀。也许是因为客人我都不认识——他们整晚净说些笑话，取笑我一无所知的一些陌生人——我发现我老是跟比顿夫人讲话，有好几次我甚至担心我会不会烦扰到她。总之，就在热汤上桌时，她开始跟我谈起一件她最近遇到的悲惨个案，她负责某慈善机构的财务，所以有机会得知这种事情。有对夫妇两年前在康沃尔的船难中罹难，他们的独生女如今已十岁，目前在加拿大与祖母同住。老太太显然健康不佳，难得出门或有访客。

“上个月我去多伦多，”比顿夫人告诉我，“我决定亲自登门拜访。那个可怜的小东西，想死英国了。而老太太，连自己都照顾不来，哪里顾得了那个小女孩。”

“贵机构有办法帮她？”

“我尽量想办法就是了。可是我们要帮助的对象太多了，你明白吧。严格说来，她还不算优先关注对象。毕竟她还有住的地方，她父母留下的钱也够她温饱了。做我们这种事，有个大原则，不可以太感

情用事。可是见了那女孩儿，不动感情都难。尽管她显然过得不快乐，却散发着某种气质，常人难比。”

晚宴里，她应该还跟我提了几件詹妮弗的事。我记得我很有礼貌地倾听，并未说什么。等到更晚一些，客人渐渐告辞，奥斯本款留大家，我才把比顿夫人请到一旁。

“我希望您不嫌我冒昧，”我说，“您刚才跟我提起的那个女孩。那位詹妮弗。我想为她尽点绵薄之力。老实说，比顿夫人，我打定主意要领养她。”

也许我不该怪她听了之后满脸狐疑地退了一步。反正在我看来是如此。过了半晌她才回答：

“您真好心，班克斯先生。那么容我另日再跟您详谈。”

“我可是真心真意，比顿夫人。我最近继承了一笔遗产，我相信我有能力让她过好日子。”

“那还用说，班克斯先生。那么我们约时间再细谈。”说完，她转身跟其他客人喧闹地道别。

比顿夫人的确不到一周就与我联络。有可能她先去查问了我的为人，也许她只是充分考虑过了；总之，她的态度改变了许多。在皇家咖啡厅共进的午餐以及接下来的几次会晤里，她对我简直再亲切不过，于是在奥斯本寓所的晚宴过后四个月，詹妮弗就顺利抵达了我的新居。

随行的是一位加拿大护士亨特小姐，待了一周就走了，临别时欣喜地吻了女孩的脸颊，提醒她要写信给祖母。詹妮弗仔细地比较我让她挑选的三个房间，最后选中最小的一间，因为她说墙上那排木架子，正好可以摆放她的“收藏品”。不久我便明白那是一些精挑细选过的贝壳、坚果、干树叶、小卵石以及几件她多年来收集的东西。她把这些东西在架子上仔细摆设妥当。然后有一天，她请我进去参观。

“每一个我都取了名字，”她解释道，“我知道这样做有点傻，可是谁教我这么爱它们呢。等哪一天，克里斯托弗叔叔，等我没那么忙的时候，我再把它们每一个的故事说给你听。可不可以请你转告波莉，打扫我房间的时候，要格外小心哦。”

比顿夫人过来协助我面试保姆，不过在隔壁偷听的詹妮弗才是真正做决定的人。每回应征者谈完一走，她就会过来判她出局。“糟透

了，”她这样否决了其中一位，“她说上一位小姐死于肺炎，骗谁呀！根本是被她下毒害死的。”有一次她这么说了应征者：“她怎么行？没见过这么会紧张的。”

面谈的时候，我觉得吉文斯小姐有点呆板甚至冷漠，可是不知道为什么，她却立刻赢得了詹妮弗的认同，而我也必须承认，她过去两年半以来的表现，也算不负詹妮弗的眼光。

别人听完我介绍詹妮弗，几乎一致赞叹，她虽然经历那么悲惨的不幸遭遇，却能如此镇定。没错，她的定力的确非常好，一些会让她这个年纪的女孩潜然落泪的挫折，她尤其能泰然处之。她的行李遗失一事，就是个好例子。

她到达以后有好几个星期，一再提及她那口从加拿大走海路来的皮箱。例如，我记得她有一次仔细地向我描述她有个木雕的旋转木马，某人特地为她做的，就在那口皮箱里。还有一次，我赞美她与吉文斯在榭芙丽百货公司买的某一件衣服，她冷眼看着我说：“我有条发带跟这件衣服真是绝配。就在我皮箱里，快寄到了。”

然而有一天我收到船运公司的信，信中对方为了皮箱遗失而致歉，并且说明愿意照价赔偿。我告诉詹妮弗时，她先是愣了一愣，然后浅浅一笑说：

“既然如此，吉文斯小姐跟我恐怕还得再去好好采购一番了。”

过了两三天，她还是没有因为掉了皮箱而露出半点沮丧的迹象，我觉得我必须跟她谈谈，于是有天吃完早餐，瞥见她在花园里散步，我便过去找她。

那是个凉爽晴朗的早晨。我的花园并不大，就城里的花园来说也算是小的一块长方形的绿地，被四周邻居包围环伺。然而花园的陈设精巧，无论如何，有种与世隔绝的静谧。当我走下台阶到草地上时，詹妮弗手上正拿着一只玩具马在到处漫步，让马儿如梦似幻地放蹄于围篱与树丛顶端。我记得我倒是担心玩具会被叶上的露水浸坏，想要提醒她。不过等我走到她身边，却只是说：

“关于行李的事，我们运气实在很糟。虽然你看起来毫不在意，但我想这事一定让你难过极了。”

“哦……”她心不在焉地玩她的马，“是有点烦啦。反正我总是可以用赔偿金买更多东西。吉文斯小姐说我们星期二可以去购物。”

“总之，我觉得你真是勇敢。不过你可不需要强忍心中的感受，如果你懂我的意思。如果你想发泄一下，尽管发泄就是。我不会告诉任何人，我敢说吉文斯小姐也不会。”

“没事的。我并不难过。毕竟也只是一些东西嘛。我连父亲和母亲都已经失去了，丢掉一点东西算什么，你说是不是？”说完她笑了一下。

我不记得她提过几次父母，这是其中一次。我也笑了笑说：“的确不算什么。”我开始往屋子走，但又转身向她说：

“你知道吗，詹妮，我不敢确定我这样说对不对。你也许跟许多人说过这类的话，他们也相信。不过，我个人的经验告诉我，事情不是这样。我从上海回来的时候，有些东西，我特别装在我自己的皮箱里，那些东西对我来说可是非比寻常。至今也依然重要如昔。”

“我可以看看吗？”

“给你看看？只怕大部分东西对你都没什么意义就是了。”

“我喜欢中国的东西。我想看看。”

“大部分都不是中国的东西，”我说，“哪，我要说的是，对我而言，我的皮箱对我别具意义。如果丢了我会难过。”

她耸耸肩，让马儿跑上她的脸颊。“那天我也难过啊。可是现在不了。人生总得往前看嘛。”

“没错。不管这是谁教你的，教得好。反正你好就好。现在，把你的皮箱忘掉吧，不过你要记住……”我一时无语，忘了本来想说什么。

“记住什么？”

“没事。别忘了，你要是有什么事想对我说，有什么事困扰你，我永远在这儿。”

“没问题。”她开朗地回答。

我走回屋子的路上，回头瞄了一眼，看见她又在园里漫步，让她的马儿在空中奔腾，画出一个接一个梦幻的圆弧。

对詹妮弗如此承诺，我并非轻许。当时我真心想实践承诺，而且在接下来的日子里，我对詹妮弗的爱怜有增无减。然而时至今日，我

已经打算离开她；会离开多久，我根本不知道。当然，我有可能夸大了她对我的依赖。再说，如果一切顺利，下次学校放假之前，我早已回到伦敦，她根本不会察觉我离开。然而，我不得不承认，我可能会去得更久一点，就像昨夜吉文斯小姐开门见山问我，我就承认了。正是这归期不定泄漏了在我心中究竟孰轻孰重，我相信詹妮弗马上会有自己的结论。不管她脸上表现得如何不在乎，我知道她会视我的决定为背叛。

事情怎么会走到这一步田地，并不容易解释。我只能说是从几年前开始——远在詹妮弗来以前——一起先是一种隐约的感觉，不时浮上心头：我感觉有人不认可我，而且掩饰得相当勉强。说来奇怪，只要跟我认为最能欣赏我成就的人在一起，这种感觉往往就会浮现。比方在晚宴上，我跟某位政治人物或警界人物，甚至只是跟我的客户谈话，我总会突然觉得对方的握手怎么变冷漠了，相谈甚欢之际，对方怎么会唐突了几句，有时我以为对方会感激不尽，结果对方竟然只是礼貌地把我打发。起初这类情况发生的时候，我会回想自己是否曾无意得罪这个人；到后来我只能得出这样的结论：问题出在一般人看待我的方式。

我这里谈的事朦胧不清，极不容易举出例子，作为清楚的说明。不过我想，去年秋天我与埃克塞特来的警探有过一段奇怪的对谈，或许就是一例，地点是萨默塞特郡柯林村外一处幽暗的巷口。

那是我经手的调查里，最教人痛心的案件之一。我到达的时候，案发已经四天，他们在一条巷子里找到那些孩子的尸体，由于经常下雨，窄巷变成了泥河——想搜集相关证据变得难上加难。尽管如此，在我听见一位警探走近的脚步声之前，我已经对事发经过有了相当清楚的概念。

“这种事最让人不安。”我对走上前来的警探说。

“这让我反胃，班克斯先生，”警探说，“真是让我反胃。”

我本来蹲着细细察看围篱，现在站了起来，跟他面对面站着，小雨一直没停过。接着他说：

“您知道吗，先生，此时此刻我真希望自己是木匠。我父亲就希望我做木匠。我真希望做个木匠，先生。经历了今天这个案子，我真希望如此。”

“真是惨，没错。不过我们也别气馁。我们得让正义得以伸张。”

他哀怨地摇摇头，接着说：“我是过来问问，您对案情有没有什么看法。因为，您知道的……”他抬头看看头上滴着水的树枝，然后勉为其难地继续说道：“您知道，我自己的调查让我得出了某个结论。我很厌恶这样的结论，不太想去碰它。”

我沉重地看着他点点头。“您的结论恐怕没错，”我严肃地说，“四天前，案情看起来已经惨绝人寰。不过再看过一回，真相只怕更加骇人听闻。”

“怎么会这样呢，先生？”警探脸色苍白如纸，“怎么会有这种事？尽管我做了这么多年的探员，我还是无法理解这种……”他说不下去，转身背对着我。

“很不幸的是，我看不出有别的可能，”我平静地说，“事情的确令人震惊。我们似乎正俯瞰着黑暗的深渊。”

“如果是什么路过的疯子，我还能接受。不过，这……我想到都觉得恶心。”

“您不得不接受，”我说，“我们必须接受事实。因为事情就是这样发生的。”

“您确定，先生？”

“我确定。”

他凝望的眼神越过邻近田野，落在远处的一排村舍。

“在这种情况下，”我说，“我可以体会您会因此气馁。不过容我直言，还好您没有听从令尊的建议。因为像您这样的人才，警探先生，这样的人才实在难得。像我们这样的人，我们的职责就是打击坏人，我们……该怎么说好呢？我们就像系住百叶窗叶片的细绳。一旦我们系得不牢靠，一切都会分崩离析。您背负的责任可是相当重大啊，警探先生。”

他沉默了一会儿，然后又开了口，语气里的坚决让我吃了一惊。

“我只是个普通人，先生。我会留下来尽我所能。我会留在这个位子上尽全力打击毒蛇。不过这回的对手可是个九头怪兽。你砍掉一个头，它却又长出三个。我觉得情况就是这样，先生。情况变糟了。每一天都在恶化。这里发生的事，这些可怜的小孩……”他转回来面

对着我，我此时可以看到他脸上的怒火，“我只是个小人物。假如我有身份地位”——此刻，毫无疑问，他以控诉的眼神直视我双眼——“假如我有身份地位的话，老实告诉您，先生，我决不迟疑。我会直攻它的要害。”

“要害？”

“毒蛇的要害。我会去做。何苦跟这斩之不尽的头搏斗呢？我今天就到毒蛇的要害所在，斩草除根，免得……免得……”

他显然词穷了，只能站在那儿瞪着我。我不记得我回答了什么。也许喃喃说了这类的话：

“您能这么做的话，真是再好不过了。”然后转身离去。

还有去年夏天的一件事，那次我前往皇家地理学会听H·L·莫蒂默演讲。那个晚上相当温暖。一百多个听众，都是各个领域的一时之选；我看到听众里有一位自由派人士，还有一位来自牛津大学的知名历史学家。莫蒂默教授才讲了一个多小时，厅里已渐渐闷热起来。他的论文题目是：“纳粹主义是否会威胁基督教？”内容充满争议，认为全民普选会减弱英国对国际事务的控制力量。演讲后的发问时间，厅内讨论气氛炽热，不过都无关莫蒂默教授的想法，而是关于德军进入莱茵河以西非军事区的动作。宽容与谴责德国这项行动的声音一样热烈，不过那夜，我才刚度过忙碌不堪的几周，没花力气跟着起哄。

讨论得差不多了，来宾被引领到隔壁厅里用点心。那一边空间实在不够，等我进去的时候——我后面还有一串人呢——里头早已摩肩接踵。那夜留给我的印象，有一幕是身材高大、穿着围裙的女士，端着装有樱桃的托盘，挤过人群；还有一幕是头发泛白、体形如鸟的教授们，两两在那里交谈，大家的头部都往后仰，以保持礼貌的谈话距离。我觉得这种环境我实在待不下去，于是往出口挤了过去，此时有人轻拍我肩膀。我回头看见坎农·莫利对我微笑。他是位牧师，最近有个案子多亏他鼎力协助，不知他是否有话要跟我说，于是我停下来打个招呼。

“今夜真是棒极了，”他说，“启发了我好多思考空间。”

“的确有趣极了。”

“不过恕我直言，班克斯先生，我看到您也在会场，就等着听您发表高见呢。”

“可惜今晚我有点体力不济。再说，厅内每位来宾对这个议题的了解，似乎都比我多得多。”

“哪，您太客气，太客气了。”他笑了笑，轻轻碰了我胸口一下。接着他靠了过来——也许背后有人推挤——他的脸离我仅数寸。“我老老实实对您说，”他开口道，“我有点意外，您怎么忍得住不发言。大家都在谈论欧洲的危机。您说您累了；也许只是礼貌性的托辞罢了。无论如何，我没想到您会任由他们胡诌。”

“胡诌？”

“我要说的是，请您包涵——今晚出席的这些绅士们，自然会认为欧洲是当前世界动乱的暴风眼。不过，班克斯先生您，您当然知道真相。您知道我们目前危机的中心，其实距离我们非常遥远。”

我认真地看了他一会儿，然后说：“对不起，先生。我不太懂您指的是什么。”

“噢，怎么可能呢。”他笑笑，一副心照不宣的样子，“您怎么可能不懂。”

“我说的是真的，先生，我真的不明白为什么您会认为我对这种事有什么独到的见解。没错，这些年我调查过一些刑案，也许我已描绘出某些邪恶的形式如何显形的基本图像。可是，对于强权之间如何保持平衡，我们如何遏制欧洲境内激烈的欲望冲突，对于这类事情，我得承认我没什么大理论可言。”

“没有理论？也许没有。”坎农·莫利继续对我微笑，“不过您有的，这么说好了，那是一种特殊的背景，当前我们一切焦虑的核心其实就跟这个背景有关。噢，别这么说吧，好老兄！您完全清楚我指的是什么！您比谁都清楚，暴风眼根本不在欧洲，而在远东。说准确一点，是在上海。”

“上海，”我语气疲软，“没错，我也觉得……觉得那个城市里，的确有些问题。”

“的确有问题。原本只是当地的问题，却任由它蔓延坐大，这几年来，把毒素散布到世界各处，浸透了我的文明。这个哪里需要我来跟您提。”

“我想，先生，您会明白，”我说，决定不再隐藏我的不悦，“我这些年致力于阻止犯罪与邪恶的扩张，不管它们在何处现身。但

是，我当然也只能在我有限的领域里发挥所长。至于那些发生在海角天涯的事，说真的，先生，您总不能期望我也……”

“噢，别这么说吧！真是的！”

我原本几乎要失去耐性了，可巧有位牧师挤过人群来跟他寒暄。坎农·莫利将我们介绍给对方认识，我也趁机告退。

这种事还有好几桩，就算没这么明白直截，也渐渐累积成一股推动力，让我渐渐往某个方向走去。当然，这也包括那次在德雷科茨的婚礼上与莎拉·亨明斯的相遇。

第十一章

这件事至今已一年。当时我坐在教堂后排的座位上一新娘还有几分钟才会出现——这时我看见莎拉·亨明斯与塞西尔·梅德赫斯特爵士从教堂中殿的另一侧进来。塞西尔·梅德赫斯特爵士固然没有比上次在梅瑞迪斯基基金会向他致敬的晚宴上更显老迈；不过多方传闻他与莎拉的婚事让他返老回春，恐怕也只是夸大之词。不管怎么说，从他跟相识的人挥手的欢欣模样看来，他确实相当幸福。

我要到婚礼结束后才有机会跟莎拉说话。我在教堂的花园里闲逛，穿梭于聊天的宾客之间。我停下来欣赏一处花圃时，她忽然来到我身边。

“欸，克里斯托弗，”她说，“在场的真的就只剩你还没夸我的帽子好看哦！这是西莉亚·马西森亲手为我制作的。”

“美极了。确实与众不同。你近况如何？”

我们有好一阵子没见面了。我记得，我们在人群外围缓缓走着，客套地聊了片刻。接着我们停了下来，我问道：

“塞西尔爵士近来好吗？他看起来气色确实不错。”

“哦，他健康得很。克里斯托弗，你老实告诉我。我嫁给他，有没有遭人议论？”

“议论？哦，没有，没有。有什么好议论的？”

“我是说他比我年长许多。当然，没有人会当着我们的面说。不过你得告诉我。大家议论纷纷，对吧？”

“就我所知，大家都说好。当然啦，大家都很意外。决定得那么突然。但是，我相信大家都说好。”

“这样的话，也只证实了我担心的事。我在他们眼中一定是个老处女。所以他们才不议论。要是早个几年，他们不议论纷纷才怪。”

“怎么会……”

莎拉看我尴尬的样子，笑了起来，还碰碰我的手臂。“克里斯托弗，你真好。别担心。你一点都不用担心。”接着她补充，“哪，你

一定要来看我们。塞西尔还记得上次晚宴见过你哦。他想再看看你。”

“随唤随到。”

“呃，只怕也来不及了。是这样子的，我们要远行。再过八天，我们就要坐船到远东去。”

“是吗。你们要去很久吗？”

“也许几个月。也许几年。不过等我们回来，你可要来看我们。”

我想，听到这个消息，我不知道该说什么才好。不过就在那时候，新娘与新郎走过草地出现在我们眼前，莎拉说：

“真是璧人一对，可不是吗？还真是相配。”有一会儿，她若有所思地望着他们。接着她说：“我刚刚才问他们，未来有什么愿望。艾丽森说他们只想在多塞特有栋小屋子，好让他们年复一年待在里头不用出来。要等到子女成群、鬓发斑白。多么美好，对不对？我也祝他们如愿。还有，他们认识的过程真是神奇，完全靠缘分。”

她继续凝视他们，仿佛被催眠了。后来她不再神游，我想我们又谈了几分钟，聊聊共同朋友的近况。接着有人加入了我们，过一会儿我就走开了。

那天稍晚，我又碰到莎拉一次，就在南丘边上举行婚宴的乡村旅馆。当时已近傍晚，夕阳低垂天际。那时大家都喝了不少酒，我记得我走过旅馆，穿过一群群衣冠不整的客人，有的三三两两斜坐在沙发上，有的摇摇晃晃地倚在墙凹里，我走上了多风的露台才看见莎拉在那儿倚着栏杆俯望草地。我正走向她时，听见背后有人说话，回头一看，是个粗壮红脸的男士，他冲过阳台追上我，抓住我的手臂，然后站定喘气，以严肃的眼神看着我。接着他说：

“你知道的，我一直看着。我看到了刚才的事，早些时候也看到同样的情况。真是丢脸，我身为新郎的兄弟，我要再次向你致歉。那些醉汉，我不晓得他们是谁。真对不起，老兄，刚才你一定很不愉快。”

“哦，别在意，”我笑着说，“我真的没事。大家多喝了点，闹着好玩而已。”

“那可是野蛮的行为。他们是客人，你也是客人，要是他们不礼貌，他们就得滚。”

“说真的，是你多心了。他们没恶意的。更何况我也没受委屈。有时候让人开开玩笑，也是人之常情嘛。”

“可是他们已经闹了一整个下午了。我早些时候就看到了，甚至在教堂里也是这样。这可是我弟弟的婚礼。我不容许这样的行为。说真的，我现在就要在这里把这笔账算清楚。跟我来，老兄。我倒要看看他们还敢不敢取笑你。”

“别这么做，嘿，你搞错了。再怎么讲，那些玩笑，我跟他们一样觉得有趣。”

“我就是不准！这年头这种事情就是太多了。他们一次次逃过制裁，今天可不。在我弟弟的婚礼上绝对不行。来，你跟我来。”

他扯着我的手臂，我看见他脸上满是汗珠。我不确定我原本会如何应变，不过就在那一刻，莎拉袅娜走来，手里还拿着一杯鸡尾酒，对红脸男士说：

“欸，罗德里克，刚才是你搞错啰。那些是克里斯托弗的朋友。再说，克里斯托弗用得着你保护吗？”

红脸男士看看我又看看她。最后他问莎拉：“你确定？因为我看了一整天了。每次这位仁兄走近他们……”

“你操太多心了，罗德里克。他们是克里斯托弗的朋友。要是他有那么一点不高兴，你不会不知道的。克里斯托弗自己就有办法把他们痛骂一顿。说真的，克里斯托弗要的话，可以叫他们跪地求饶，或任他摆布，他爱怎样就可以怎么样，只要一个眼神就够了。所以不用操心，罗德里克。你尽管自便，这里没事的。”

红脸男士对我的态度里有了新的敬意，不知所措地伸出手来。“我是杰姆的哥哥，”与我握手时他自我介绍，“很高兴认识你。有什么可以效劳的地方，过来找我别客气。有什么误会都怪我不好。祝你玩得开心。”我们看着他蹒跚走回屋子。接着莎拉说：

“来吧，克里斯托弗。过来这里，我们聊聊吧。”

她啜了一口酒，袅娜离去。我跟着她走过阳台，走到栏杆旁俯瞰草地。

“谢谢你帮我解围。”我过了一会才说。

“没什么，这是应该的。克里斯托弗，你整个下午在忙什么？”

“哦，没什么。老实说，我一直在想。想几年前的那个晚上，为塞西尔爵士举行的那场晚宴。不知道那天晚上你与他会见时，有没有想到有一天……”

“拜托，克里斯托弗”——她打断我的话，我发现她已经很醉了——“我会告诉你的，告诉你也无妨。我们初次相见的那天晚上，我就觉得他好迷人哦。但真的仅此而已。事情是在更晚些时候发生的，呃，一年以后吧，或者更久一点。哦，没错，我会告诉你，你跟我交情那么好。有一次我们正在吃晚餐，有人谈起墨索里尼，有人就说，情况已经非同儿戏，可能有另一场大战要爆发，甚至是世界末日。就在这时候，有人提起塞西尔的名字。说什么这种时候，我们比任何时候都需要他这种人，还有，他实在不该退休，他总该还有不少活力罢。接着有人说，他正是承担大任的人选，有的人则说，不，要他承担不公平，他太老了，同侪没几个在世，他到现在连个老婆都还没娶。这句话惊醒了我这个梦中人。我想，怎么说，连他那样的大人物，功勋卓著，还是需要有一个她，一个不一样的女人。在他事业的尾声，有人能帮助他，最后一次老当益壮，好好立个大功，给一生的事业写下辉煌的结局。”

她一时话都说完了，所以我就说：“这么看来，塞西尔爵士显然也有同感。”

“我想说服人的时候都会成功，克里斯托弗。再说，他说他第一眼见到我就爱上了我，就在那次宴会上。”

“真好。”

在我们下方，在草地上，离我们有段距离的地方，有几位客人在池塘边嬉戏。我们看到有位男士，领子在颈后翻起，他在那儿追赶鸭子。最后我说：

“塞西尔爵士最后再好好立个大功这回事，他的巅峰之作。你心里到底替他想到了什么？远行数月，就是为了这个吗？”

莎拉深深吸了一口气，凝视的眼神变得认真而沉着。“克里斯托弗。你一定知道答案。”

“要是我知道答案……”

“欸，真是的。我们当然是去上海。”

刚听她说出这句话，我心中的感受实在无法描述。也许心里多少还有点惊讶。不过最主要的是，我记得那是某种解脱；心中有种诡异的感觉：自从多年前在查林沃思俱乐部第一眼见到她，我心中就有个期待，等候这样的一刻来临；我也可以这么说：我跟莎拉的整段友谊，一直朝着这一点前进，如今终于走到了。接下来说的这些话，有种似曾相识的感觉，仿佛我们早在哪儿演练过许多回。

“塞西尔在那里是老地头了，”她继续说，“他觉得他也许有能力把那里的事情理出头绪，他觉得他该去。因此我们非去不可。下星期。我们的行李都已经打包好了。”

“那么，我诚挚地祝福塞西尔爵士，祝福你们两人，顺利完成在上海的任务。你是不是盼着要去？我觉得你一直盼着。”

“当然了。我当然期望。这种事情，我已经等了好久。我实在非常厌倦伦敦了，还有……还有这一切的一切”——她的手往旅馆的方向一挥。“我也不再年轻，有时候我觉得我的机会不会再来。不过现在不同了，我们要去上海。怎么了，克里斯托弗，有什么不对吗？”

“我想这件事，或许你会觉得没有什么，”我说，“不过我还是说说好了。你知道，我自己一直想要回上海一趟。我是说，去……去解决那里的问题。我一直这么想。”

有一会儿，她凝视着夕阳。接着她转向我，面露笑容，我想她的笑容里充满悲伤，还带了一丝指责。她伸出一只手，温柔地碰碰我的脸颊，然后又回头去看风景。

“也许塞西尔有办法很快就把上海的事情解决，”她说，“也许没办法。总之，我们会留在那里很久。所以，如果你刚才说的话当真，克里斯托弗，我们很可能会在那里碰面。对不对？”

“没错，”我说，“确实如此。”

到莎拉出发之前，我都没再见到她。她原本就可以指责我这么多年迟迟没有行动，那么现在，如果我再不有所作为，她就更有理由对我失望了。有件事不言自明：不管过去的几个月间塞西尔爵士在上海有了什么进展，解决方案依然遥不可见。全球的紧张情势持续升温；饱学之士把我们的文明比喻作干草堆上扔了点燃的火柴。此刻，我还在这儿，依然在伦敦闲着。不过，随着昨天那封信件的到来，情况大不相同了；我可以这样说，那最后一块拼图到齐了。一点不假，我亲自回

去的时机终于来临，回到上海一事隔多年一回去“斩除毒蛇”，如同那位埃克塞特来的正派警探所说。

不过这事也有代价。上午稍早的时候，詹妮弗跟昨天一样外出购物一再添购最后几件她声称新学期必备的东西。出门时她显得既兴奋又快乐；她还完全不知道我的计划以及我昨夜与吉文斯小姐讨论的事。

我请吉文斯小姐到客厅，邀了三次她才肯坐下。也许她多少猜到我要谈的事，觉得跟我坐下来谈，等于是共谋。我尽可能把事情对她解释清楚；尽量让她了解事情的重大；还有，这件事我已涉入许多许多年了。她听我说话未做反应，只到了我稍停一会儿时，她才问我一个简单的问题：我要去多久？我想我接着又说了一会儿，想办法对她解释，为什么我要处理的这种事，没法给一个确定的时间进度。我隐约记得后来是她问了什么打断我的话，接着我们讨论了几分钟，设想我不在的时候会发生种种状况。我们费尽力气谈了这些事情，她起身正要离去时，我对她说：

“吉文斯小姐，我很清楚，短期之内，虽然有您竭尽心力照顾詹妮弗，但我不在家，她心里恐怕还是会不好受。可是，如果您就长期的影响来看，我走上刚才向您解释的那条路，不论对詹妮弗还是对我，恐怕才会是最好的事。更何况，要是哪天她知道了，她的监护人竟然在他最神圣的使命发出召唤之际转身逃去，她如何能爱他，尊敬他？不管她现在想要的是什么，等她长大以后只会鄙视我。那样对我或对她又有什么好处？”

吉文斯小姐目不转睛凝视着我，然后说：“这点您说得有理，班克斯先生。”接着又补上一句，“不过她会好想您，班克斯先生，她会好想您。”

“没错，没错，我相信会是如此。可是吉文斯小姐，难道您不明白？”这时我的声量也许提高了些，“难道您不明白现在的局势有多急迫？您不知道世界的动乱不断在加剧吗？我不能不去！”

“当然，班克斯先生。”

“对不起。我向您道歉。今晚我有点激动。总之，今天发生了好多事。”

“要不要由我来告诉她？”吉文斯小姐问我。

我想了想才摇摇头。“我看不要，还是我来说好了。我会找个适当的时机再告诉她。在此之前，可否请您先别对她说什么。”

昨晚我本想今天找个时间告诉她。不过再三考虑之后，我觉得时机还未成熟；再说，她目前对于即将开始的新学期还兴致勃勃，没必要破坏这种心情。无论如何，此刻最好是先把事情搁着，等我把一切安排妥当，再到学校找她。詹妮弗这女孩坚强得很，没理由担心她会因为我远行而伤心过度。

然而，我此时不禁想起两年前的那个冬日，那天是我第一次到圣玛格丽特中学去见她。我正好在离校不远处办案，她也刚住校不久，因此我决定去找她，看看她过得好不好。

学校包括一栋大宅，再加上周围的草地。大宅后面是一片草坡，坡底有片湖。也许因为有湖，我去的那四次，那一带都有薄雾笼罩。鹅儿四处漫步，闷闷不乐的园丁则整理着水边的草坪。大体上环境有些清冷，尽管那里的老师，每次我见到都表情亲切。那一天，我记得有位纳丁小姐一五十多岁的和善女士一领着我走过寒冷的走廊。走到一半，她停在一处墙凹边，压低声音对我说：

“大体上来说，班克斯先生，她适应得已经算是顶不错了。毕竟一开始总是会遇到一些困难，有些同学还当她是新生。其中有一两个，有时候难免失了分寸。不过到下个学期，这一切都不会有问题的，我确定。”

詹妮弗在一间装了橡木壁板的房间等我，壁炉里还有木块在燃烧。纳丁小姐离去后，詹妮弗站在炉架前，略带羞涩地对我笑笑。

“他们怎么不把屋子弄暖和些。”我边说边搓着双手走向壁炉。

“你应该去我们宿舍，看看那里有多冷。被单上都生出冰柱了！”她咯咯笑了。

我在壁炉边的椅子坐下，她还站着。我原本还担心她在不同的情境下见我会觉得尴尬，不过她马上就聊开了，谈她的羽毛球，谈她喜欢的女孩，谈到食物，她说什么都是“炖、炖、炖”的。

“有时候，新到一个地方，”我中间插嘴，“总是有些难处。她们没有一起……欺负你吧？”

“没有，没有，”她说，“有时候会逗逗我，不过她们没恶意。这里都是好女孩。”

我们谈了大约二十分钟，我站起来把我放在公事包里的纸盒取出交给她。

“哦？这是什么？”她兴奋地叫起来。

“詹妮弗，这不是……不是礼物之类的东西。”

她听出我声音里的警告语气，望着手上捧的盒子，显示出有戒心的样子。“那么这是什么？”她问。

“打开来，自己看看。”

我望着她除去盒盖一大约鞋盒大小的一个纸盒一往里头一看。她原本已经一副小心翼翼的表情，看了之后还是一点也没变。接着她伸手摸摸里头的东西。

“恐怕，”我温和地说，“我就只能找回这些东西了。你的皮箱，我查出来了，它并没有掉到海里，而是在伦敦的仓库里跟其他几件行李一起被偷走的。我尽了全力。很遗憾的是，不好卖的东西小偷干脆都砸坏了。我找不到衣服之类的东西。只找回来这些小玩意。”

她取出一条手链，仔细检视一番，仿佛在查看有没有瑕疵。她把它放回去，接着又取出一对小银铃以同样的方式检查。接着她盖回盒盖，抬头看我。

“你真好，克里斯托弗叔叔，”她平静地说，“你都那么忙了。”

“一点儿也不麻烦。我只是遗憾不能多找回一些东西。”

“你真好。”

“我想我得让你回去上地理课了。我来的时候真不巧。”

她没动，只是继续静静地站在原地，凝视手上捧的盒子。然后她说：

“在学校里，有时候什么都忘了。就是有时候。跟别的女孩一样算着日子等假期，那时候，我会以为自己还会见到爸妈。”

即便在这样的情境里，听她提起父母还是让我感到意外。我等她继续说下去，可是她没再开口；她只是抬头凝视着我，仿佛她刚才问了我一个问题。最后我说：

“有时候日子非常不好过，我知道。好像你的整个世界都垮了。不过我还是要告诉你，詹妮。你表现得非常好，你把自己的世界又重建了起来。你真的很了不起。我知道你的世界已经不可能和过去完全一样了，不过我也知道你已经重新出发，为自己建筑了一个幸福快乐的未来。还有，我会永远在一旁帮你，我要你知道这点。”

“谢谢你，”她说，“还有，谢谢你带来这些东西。”

就我记忆所及，那天会面就到此为止。我们离开较暖和的火边，走出那个多风的房间到走廊上，我便目送她回教室。

两年前的那个冬日午后，我当时完全没想到，我对她说的话全然不牢靠。等我下次到圣玛格丽特中学见她，向她告别，我们也许会在同一个多风的房间相见，在同一个壁炉旁边。果真如此，就教我更加为难了，因为詹妮弗铁定会清清楚楚记起我们在那里的上一次会面。不过她是个聪明的女孩，不管她当下的感受是什么，她都能完全了解我要跟她说的话。或许她甚至能领悟得更快，比她保姆昨晚还要快：等她年纪大了一等这件事成为辉煌的记忆—她会真心庆幸我不畏艰难，挺身迎向我的使命。

第四部

一九三七年九月二十日·上海·华懋饭店⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾华懋饭店（Cathay Hotel），今和平饭店北楼，是当时上海滩最高的建筑，也是最豪华、最高级的饭店。

第十二章

到阿拉伯国家旅行的人，常常会抱怨当地人跟你讲话把脸靠得很近，让人不知所措。当然这不过是因为当地的习俗与我们不同罢了，任何思想开放的访客，不久便能见怪不怪。我也想过，我应该设法以类似的观点来看待这三个星期以来，我在上海碰到的某个状况，也就是：大家一有机会就挡住别人的视线。每当你刚进入某个房间或者才下车，马上就有人面带笑容挡住你的视线，让你连最基本的环境观察都无法进行。多半挡你的人，就是邀你来的那个人或是带路的人；但是，就算被围堵的视线一时有了缺口，那儿也永远不乏旁人急着填补这个空缺。就我所知，这个社区里的各国成员——英国人、中国人、法国人、美国人、日本人、俄国人——都同样热中此道，于是我们不得不做出结论：这是上海公共租界发展出来的独特习俗，超越所有种族与阶级的藩篱。

我花了好几天才看清楚这项本地的奇风异俗，并理解这就是我刚到的那阵子屡屡迷失方向手足无措的乱源。如今，尽管偶尔又为之气恼，我却不会再过度在意此事。再说，我发现上海有另一种可与之互补的习俗，这让我的生活好过些：在这里，对于挡路的人，就算你把他一脚踢开，似乎大家都还能容许。虽然我自己还没那个胆量亲身试试这种特许权，但我早在几次社交聚会上见识过名媛淑女扫除路障是何等霸气，而且不会惹来半声怨言。

到这里的第二天晚上，我走进汇中饭店顶楼舞厅的时候，还没搞清楚这两种耐人寻味的习俗，结果晚上大半时间都过得很不愉快，当时以为公共租界就是这般混乱拥挤。走出电梯，才瞥见铺向舞厅的豪华地毯——上面站了一整排的中国侍者——今晚的主人之一，英国领事馆的麦克唐纳先生，就把他的庞大身躯挡在我身前。我注意到我们经过时，这些侍者就会鞠躬，戴着白手套的手在身前抱拳，感觉挺新鲜的。不过我们才经过第三位——总共有六七位侍者——这一侧的视线也被晚宴的另一位主人挡住了。那是一位叫做格雷森先生，代表上海工部局⁽¹⁾。他赶到我身边，继续他刚才在电梯里讲到一半的话。根据我两位东道主的说法，“这是城里最时髦的夜总会，来的都是上海的精英”。才一进舞厅，我就觉得我掉进了人潮的洪流。高耸的天花板挂了华丽的吊灯，我依此猜测房间应该相当宽阔，虽然一时之间还无法证实。我跟着两位主人走过人群，看到厅内一侧全是大窗子，此刻夕

阳斜照。我瞥见远处有座大舞台，台上有几位身着白色燕尾服的乐师在那儿闲晃聊天。他们跟大家一样，好像在等待什么——也许只是等待夜幕低垂。总之，会场的气氛浮动，大家互相推挤着，没有明显的目的。

我几乎跟丢了主人，不过我随即看到麦克唐纳先生向我招手，于是我走到一张小桌边坐下，桌上铺着浆熨过的白色桌巾，我的伙伴们也跟着挤了过来。从这个较低的位置，我可以看到一大片地板现在已经空了出来——待会儿应该会有歌舞表演——所有在场的人都挤到厅里靠玻璃窗这一侧的狭长地带。我坐的这张桌子跟一长排的桌子放在一起，我想看看这排桌子的尽头有多远，却被人挡住了。邻桌并没有人坐，可能是因为人潮拥挤不好坐。一点也不假，没多久我这张桌子仿佛变成了一叶小舟，任上海名流的浪潮从四面八方冲击。再者，我的到场也并非没人注意；我听到耳语在身边传递，告诉大家我来了，愈来愈多的目光投射过来。

后来的情况实在教人如坐针毡，尽管如此，我记得在我还能忍受的时候，我还是努力继续刚才坐车来饭店的时候，在车上与两位主人谈论的话题。我记得曾对麦克唐纳先生说：

“我深深感激您的建议，先生。不过，老实说，我宁可独自进行调查。我习惯这样工作。”

“那就依你了，老兄，”麦克唐纳先生说，“我只是想提提无妨。我建议的那些人当然对上海了如指掌。最厉害的几位可以媲美苏格兰场的高手。我只是觉得他们或许可以帮你省去些许宝贵的时间罢了。”

“不过，您应该记得我告诉过您，麦克唐纳先生。我是对案情有了清楚的了解，才从英国出发的。换言之，抵达此地并非起点，而是多年研究的顶峰。”

“换句话说，”格雷森忽然插嘴，“您来我们这里，就是要把这事做个了结。真了不起！真令人高兴！”

麦克唐纳对这位工部局的代表投以鄙夷的眼神，然后当格雷森没说过这些话似的，继续他的话题。

“我绝没有怀疑你的能力，老兄。你的记录可是相当辉煌。我的意思是，多一点人手支援你。当然是完全听命于你。不过，你知道的，就是要让事情尽快了结。你刚到这里，可能还不完全明白情况已

经紧迫到了什么地步。表面上看起来风平浪静，我知道；可是，我只怕我们没那么多太平日子了。”

“我完全了解情况紧急，麦克唐纳先生。不过我只能重申一事：我有十足把握相信事情在相当短的时间之内，就可以得出令人满意的结论。条件即是，我必须要在没有阻碍的情况下进行调查。”

“那真是太棒了！”格雷森欢呼，又让麦克唐纳冷冷瞪了一眼。

那天大半的时间，麦克唐纳先生都陪在我身边，我愈来愈受不了他假装只是一位身兼接待事务的领事。让他露出狐狸尾巴的，不只是他对我的计划好奇得超乎常情——或者他急着强塞“助手”给我；还有他说谎时脸不红气不喘的样子，再加上雍容优雅的礼节，一眼就看得出他是高阶情报人员。当天晚上到了那个节骨眼，我大概已经厌倦于应付他言辞闪烁的把戏，于是我提出了一项请求，仿佛真相我们早已彼此心照不宣。

“既然您提起协助一事，我倒是对警方所谓的‘黄蛇凶杀案’特别感兴趣。”

“哦，是吗？”我看得出麦克唐纳的表情里出现戒心。反观格雷森，他似乎不知道我所指为何，看看我又看看他。

“老实说”——我说下去，仔细盯着麦克唐纳——“我正是搜集了充足的‘黄蛇凶杀案’的资料，才决定走这一趟。”

“原来如此。所以你对‘黄蛇’的案子有兴趣。”麦克唐纳假装若无其事，往厅里望了一眼，“那案子很棘手哟，不过没那么重要吧，若以大局而论，我倒不会想到这桩案子。”

“那可不然。我相信这案子事关重大。”

“容我打个岔，”格雷森终于找到空当插嘴，“敢问你们谈的‘黄蛇凶杀案’是怎么回事？我从来没听过。”

“那就是大家所说的共产党报复行动。”麦克唐纳告诉他，“红军对待背叛自己人的告密者，便是杀光他的全部同党。”接着他转过来说， “这种事情时有所闻。红军干起这种事毫不留情。不过那是中国人的家务事。红军已完全在蒋介石的股掌之上，蒋介石也打算继续把他们捏在掌心里，不管日本人侵不侵略。我们只想作壁上观，你知道的。真没想到你对这个案子这么有兴趣，老兄。”

“不过这些特定的报复行动，”我说，“这些‘黄蛇凶杀案’，已经持续许多年。过去四年来每隔一阵子就会发生，至今已有十三人遇害。”

“你细节知道得比我还多，老兄。不过就我所听到的消息，这些报复行动之所以会延续这么多时日，是因为红军不知道谁是叛徒。每当他们认为这位‘黄蛇’老兄另有其人了，他们就再找个目标下手。”

“麦克唐纳先生，有件事对我的工作会有很大帮助，就是让我跟这位告密者谈谈。这位大家所说的‘黄蛇’。”

麦克唐纳耸耸肩。“这全都是中国人的家务事，老兄。我们谁也不知道‘黄蛇’是谁。在我看来，要是中国政府肯公布此人身份，也算是好事一桩，免得又有无辜百姓被误认为和他有瓜葛。可说实在的，老兄，这全都是中国人的家务事啊，我们最好别插手。”

“我得跟这个告密者谈，这事关重大。”

“好吧，既然你的意愿这么强，我会帮你跟一些人说说看。不过，我可不能跟你保证什么。这家伙似乎对中国政府极有用处。蒋介石的人马把他的身份藏得滴水不漏，我猜想。”

我开始察觉，这时候有许多人从四面八方挤过来，不但想看看我本人，更想顺便听听我们在谈什么。在这样的情况下，我不必期望麦克唐纳会说真话，所以我决定暂时搁下这个话题。事实上，我当时有个冲动，想要站起来喘口气，不过我还来不及动作，格雷森就面带笑容倾身向我说：“班克斯先生，我有件事想简单向您报告。是这样子，先生，我好荣幸能负责举办那个宴会。就是那个欢迎仪式。”

“格雷森先生，我实在不愿显得不知好歹，不过就像麦克唐纳先生刚刚说的，时间实在相当紧迫。而且我已经感受到太多热情的接待了，实在承担不起……”

“不，不，先生”——格雷森先生紧张地笑了笑——“我指的是另一个欢迎的仪式。我的意思是，欢迎令尊令堂历劫多年归来的那个。”

这点，我得承认，来得有点突然，也许有那么一秒我愣在那里瞪着他。他又紧张地笑笑，对我说：

“当然，现在还言之过早，这个我明白。还得等您破案呢。当然，我也不想先空欢喜一场。可是无论如何，您知道的，我们还是

义务准备。只要您一宣布破案，大家的目光都会投向我们工部局，期望我们举办一个场面配得上这事的典礼。他们会希望典礼能别出心裁，他们会希望愈快愈好。不过您知道的，先生，举办这种场面的活动，实在不简单。因此是这样子的，不知道可不可以先提几个概略的方案让您选择。我想先请教，先生，不知道您满不满意极司菲尔公园这个地点？是这样子，我们恐怕需要一个相当大的场地……”

格雷森说话的当儿，我渐渐听到某种声音——从宾客谈笑声后面的某处传来——那是远方的枪炮声。这时格雷森的话被一记撼动舞厅的轰然巨响打断。我紧张地抬起头来，却见四周宾客谈笑依旧，甚至欢笑，鸡尾酒杯还拿在手上。过了一会儿，我可以察觉人群往窗边移动，就好像是外头有一场板球赛又开局了似的。我决定逮住这个机会脱身，于是起身跟着大家移动。我前面挡了太多人，什么也看不到，我想办法往前钻，这时我听到身边有位鬓发斑白的老太太对我说话。

“班克斯先生，”她说，“您知不知道，您来了上海，大家都觉得救兵来了？当然，我们并不喜欢形之于色，可是我们实在好担心，哪”——她指向枪炮声的来处——“我丈夫，他坚称日本人不敢攻打公共租界。可是您知道吗，他一天至少要提个二十次，那一点也不会教人安心。告诉您，班克斯先生，您即将抵达的消息才传来，那可是我们这里几个月以来的第一个好消息。我丈夫甚至不再念经似的反复提说日本人呢，至少停了好几天。天哪！”

另一声雷霆般的巨响撼动舞厅，激起了几声倒彩。接着我发现离我不远处有几扇落地窗已经打开，大家挤到阳台上。

“别担心，班克斯先生，”有位年轻人说，抓住我的手肘，“那不可能炸到我们这里来。双方自从‘血腥星期一’之后，都极度小心。”

“不过这声音是从哪里来的？”我问他。

“哦，是从港湾里的日本战舰来的。实际上炮弹越过我们头顶上空，落在那条河的对岸。入夜以后，就壮观了。有点像流星雨。”

“万一落得近了呢？”

我这个想法，不仅让跟我说话的年轻人笑了，连我身边其他几个人也笑了——我实在不该把心里的话说出来。接着有人说：“我们也只能信任日本人的射击技术啰。毕竟炸偏了，也可能炸到他们自己人。”

“班克斯先生，也许您需要这个。”

有人递上一只看歌剧的望远镜。我才接下，这动作就仿佛是一道指令，众人立刻让出一条路给我，我发现大家竟簇拥着我走向落地窗。

我踏上一座小阳台。一阵温暖的微风吹来，满天晚霞嫣红。我这里位置相当高，看得到另一排楼房外的运河。河的对岸是一大片低矮破旧的房子，有道灰色的烟柱从那儿升向夜空。

我把望远镜放到眼前，不过焦距不对，什么都看不见。我转了转调焦钮，发现我对准的是运河，看到的景象让我略感意外：河上各种船只竟然无视邻近的战斗，继续忙着日常事务。我对准某一艘船一类似舢板的小舟，上头只有船夫一人一船上堆满木箱与包裹，似乎钻不过我眼下这个低矮的运河桥洞。我看的时候，那条小船急速接近桥洞，我敢说至少堆在顶层的一两件一定会掉到水里。接下来的几秒，我透过望远镜盯着船，完全忘了战事。我注意到船夫跟我一样，全心关注着他货物的安危，完全无视他右方不到六十码处就有战斗在进行。接着船钻入桥底，等它顺畅地从另一头滑出，那些摇摇欲坠的货物一件也不少，我轻叹一声放下望远镜。

我发现我看船的时候，背后聚集了一大群人。我把望远镜递给旁人，没特别对谁说：“原来那就是战争。值得一看。伤亡情况不知道怎样，你们觉得呢？”

这个问题引发了许多回答。有人说：“闸北区死了一大堆人。不过日本佬再过几天就会把那儿攻下来，到时又会安静了。”

“还不一定呢，”另一个人又说，“国民党到目前为止的表现都很让人惊讶，我敢说他们会坚持下去。我敢说他们还可以撑上好一阵子。”

接着，我周遭每个人似乎都同时争论了起来。几天、几周，这有何不同呢？中国人迟早要投降，为什么不趁早呢？有几个人反对这看法，事情不可能这么简单干脆。情况天天在变，有许多因素都相互关联，牵一发动全局。

“再说，”有人大声问道，“班克斯先生不是来了吗？”

说这话的人显然自以为很有说服力，可这话却僵在半空中，让大家鸦雀无声，再度将所有的目光投向我。事实上，我发现不只是阳台附近的人群，而是整个舞厅里的人都静了下来，等着我回应。我灵机

一动，正好利用这个机会发表声明——也许在我踏进舞厅的那一刻，就有必要这么做——我清清喉咙，大声宣布：

“各位女士先生们，我看得出这里的情况陷入了困局。我也无意在这种时机带来虚假的期望。但是容我这么说：假如我没有信心能在不久的未来圆满地了结此案，我也不会来这里。事实上，女士们先生们，我觉得我不只是有信心而已。因此，容我请求各位在往后的一两个星期里耐心等待。之后再来看看我们做了多少事。”

我说完最后这些话，爵士乐队忽然在舞厅里演奏起来。我不确定这是否只是巧合，无论如何，倒给了我的演讲一个漂亮的结尾。我觉得舞厅内的目光渐渐从我身上移开，也看到大家都开始往厅内移动。我也往里头走，想办法找回原来那个桌位——有一会儿我有点迷失方向——发现一群舞娘已在舞池里载歌载舞。

舞娘也许多达二十名，许多都是欧亚混血，鸟形的服装极尽暴露之能事。舞娘翩翩起舞，尽管这片歌舞升平景象的背后杂音清晰可闻，然而大家似乎不再对一水之隔的战事感兴趣了。对这些人而言，这有如结束了一个节目，另一个又接着上场。我心里产生一股反感，自从抵达上海以后，这样的感觉已经不是第一次了。不只是因为这些年来他们只会坐困愁城，面对难题束手无策，放任情况恶化到今天这种令人发指的地步，还衍生出许多盘根错节的难题。从我抵达的那一刻起，真正教我心里暗暗吃惊的是，这里每一个人都拒绝承认他们罪有应得。待在这里约两周的时间里，在我所接触的所有这些英国人当中，不论地位高低，我都还没遇到——一次也没有——有谁真心感到羞愧。换言之，在这里，在这个可能吞噬整个文明世界的大漩涡的涡眼里，大家在心照不宣中无耻可悲地集体否认现实，否认自身的责任，而这种行为转为自我封闭，变本加厉，以冠冕堂皇的自我保护表现于外，这是我经常碰到的情况。而现在眼前的这一群所谓上海的精英，如此不屑一顾地凝望他们的中国邻居在运河对岸受苦受难。

我沿着围观歌舞的人群背后走动，尽量把厌恶之情收藏起来，这时有人扯扯我的手臂，我转身一看，是莎拉。

“克里斯托弗，”她说，“我整晚想尽办法要挤到你身边。难道你没时间跟家乡来的朋友打个招呼吗？瞧，塞西尔在那里，他正在向你挥手呢。”

我花了一会儿工夫才在人群中找到塞西尔爵士；他独自坐在厅内远处角落里的桌位，果然在向我挥手。我也向他挥挥手，然后转向莎

拉。

这是我抵达后首次和她碰面。那天晚上她给我的印象是她过得非常不错；上海的阳光驱走了她惯有的苍白，让她显得脸色红润。而且，当我们问候交谈的时候，她的态度依然轻松自信。一直要到此刻，经历了昨晚的事件，我才又想起那夜首次碰面的情况，真不知道我怎么瞎了眼似的，没看出端倪。当然或许只是后见之明，才让我吹毛求疵地回想她的笑容有无异样，特别是提起塞西尔爵士的时候。而且，即使我们交谈的内容仅止于寒暄问候，经过昨夜的事，那天晚上她说了一句话——就算是当时，也已经让我略微一怔一直到今天还在我心头镇日萦绕。

我当时问她跟塞西尔爵士在这里的一年过得可愉快。她向我保证，尽管塞西尔爵士并未达成他预期的突破，但他的诸多努力依然赢得了上海各界的感激。就在这时候，我问了她一个问题，没什么特别用意：

“这么说，你们没有立即离开上海的打算啰？”

莎拉听了以后笑了出来，又往塞西尔爵士的方向凝望一眼，然后才说：“没有，我们现在安定得很。新城饭店非常舒适。我想我们近期内哪儿也不会去。除非有人来拯救我们，那就另当别论了。”

她说这些话的语气——包括最后说的拯救云云——尽管像是说笑，尽管我不清楚她话中是否有话，我还是浅笑了两声表示附和。那时候，就我记忆所及，我们转而聊起在英国共同的朋友，后来格雷森走过来，三言两语就打断了这场看似单纯的谈话。

如我所说，直到此刻，经历了昨夜的一切，我好像才开始追溯这三个星期跟莎拉几次碰面的情况，而每次回溯，最后都归结到莎拉的这句话，一句仿佛事后才在她愉快的回答里加上的话。

[\(1\)](#)上海工部局 (Shanghai Municipal Council)，上海公共租界内的最高行政机构。

第十三章

昨天下午，我大半时间待在那艘昏暗、吱吱作响的船屋上，那三具尸体就是在那里发现的。警方十分尊重我希望不受打扰的调查方式，而这竟然让我忘了时间，几乎没注意到船外已然夕阳低垂。等我走过码头，沿着南京路逛去，灯火都已点亮，人行道上挤满晚间出游的人。经过沉闷的一整天，我觉得我得放松一下，于是走向南京路与江西路转角的一个小俱乐部——我刚到的那几天，有人带我去过。那里没有什么特别之处，只是一所清静的地下室，通常晚上会有一位法国籍的钢琴师在那儿忧郁地诠释比才或者格什温。不过这恰好符合我的需要，几个星期以来我去了好几次。昨夜我在角落的桌位待了约一个钟头，吃了一点法国菜，把船屋里的发现做成笔记，那时有几位职业舞女跟着客人随乐起舞。

我爬上楼梯回到街上，准备回旅馆，却跟俄籍的门房聊了起来。他是某某伯爵，英语非常流利，据他说，是革命以前家庭女教师教的。我已习惯每次到这家俱乐部就跟他聊个几句，昨夜只是照旧——我不记得我们在讨论什么——他随口提到塞西尔爵士与他夫人当晚早些才来过。

“我猜想，”我说，“今晚他们不会在家啰。”

关于这点，伯爵想了一会儿才说：“‘鸿运宫’。没错，我相信塞西尔爵士提到这个地方，他们就是去那儿。”

那地方我并不知道，不过，伯爵不等我问就自动把地点告诉了我，由于不远，我就往那里走去。

他把路说得十分清楚，不过我对南京路附近的街巷还是很生疏，结果在路上有点迷失。对此我并不太在意。这一带市区的气氛还不算糟，即使入夜也还好，尽管有个怪模怪样的乞丐上前向我讨食，走到另一处，还有个醉酒的水手与我撞个正着，但我还是轻松平静地跟着夜游的人群闲逛。在船屋上辛苦了一天，能加入不同种族、阶级寻欢作乐的人潮，能在经过每一个灯火通明的门口时，闻到菜肴与焚香的气味，我的心情也轻松了起来。

昨夜，我相信我跟平常一样四下张望，如同我近日逐渐习惯的那样，用目光梭巡往来行人的脸孔，希望能发现秋良的踪影。事实上，

我几乎确定我才抵达上海不久就看到过他—大约是到这里的第二或第三天晚上。正是那夜，怡和洋行的凯瑟克先生与其他几位城里的显赫人物力邀我“尝试夜生活”。我当时还在调适期间，觉得舞厅俱乐部一间间逛下来好不累人。我们到了法国租界的风化区—这时我看得出来，我这几位东道主带我来这些灯红酒绿的地方，就是想看我大惊小怪的样子—正当我们走出一家酒店时，我看到秋良的脸孔在人群里闪过。

他夹杂在一群衣着时髦的日本人当中，显然是到城里去玩。当然，如此惊鸿一瞥—他的身影事实上是一排门廊上的灯光所衬托出来的剪影—我无法完全肯定那就是秋良。也许为了这个原因，也许为了别的，我没有做任何举动来引起老友的注意。这也许难以理解，但我只能说，事情就是这样。我猜想，我当时以为这种机会还多的是；也许我觉得那样子见面，纯靠巧合，两人都各自跟友人在一起，并不适当—更配不上我对这场久别重逢的多年期盼。总之，我让时机溜走，只跟着凯瑟克先生和其他人走向等候的轿车。

然而，在过去这几周里，我有许多理由教我后悔那夜未能及时行动。尽管在最忙碌的时候，我也不停在人群中、在街上或各个旅馆的大厅里搜寻他的身影，但仍然不见他的踪迹。我明白我可以采取更积极的步骤把他找出来；可惜此刻案情才是第一要务。再说上海也没多大；迟早会再次邂逅吧。

言归正传，谈谈昨夜发生的事。我依门房所说的路，最后走到一个广场，是几条街巷的交汇处，这里的人潮再拥挤不过了。有人在这儿卖东西，有人乞讨，也有人只是站着聊天、张望。有辆落单的黄包车刚才钻进人潮，现在困在其中动弹不得，我经过的时候，车夫正在跟路人愤怒地争吵。我看见鸿运宫就在远处转角上，不久便有人引领我走上铺了猩红色长毛地毯的狭窄楼梯。

我先进入一个房间，大小跟一般旅馆的房间差不多，里头有十几个中国人围着一张赌桌。我询问塞西尔爵士是否在此处，两个在那儿做事的人迅速地讨论了一会儿，其中一位招手要我跟着他走。

我上了另一层楼，走过一条幽暗的走廊，接着进入一个烟雾弥漫的房间，里头有一群法国人在打牌。我摇了摇头，那人却耸耸肩，又跟我示意要我跟上。如此，我很快就看出这是家不小的赌场，里头有无数个小房间，不时进行各种赌局。可是我渐渐受不了每次我重提莎拉或塞西尔爵士，我的向导就点点头，一副懂我意思的样子，却又带我到另一个烟雾弥漫的房间，里头只有陌生人抬头对我投以狐疑的眼

神。总之，我把这里摸得愈熟，我就愈觉得塞西尔爵士不可能带莎拉来这种地方；正当我要放弃的时候，我走进了一个房间，看到塞西尔爵士坐在桌边，瞪着一座轮盘。

在场约有二十个人，大半是男士。这里的烟没有别的房间浓，只是更热些。塞西尔爵士一心全在赌局上，只对我胡乱挥个手，两只眼睛就又转回去盯着轮盘。排列在房内四边的是包覆红色布料的扶手椅，其中一张座椅上有位中国老先生一穿着西装，满身是汗一在那儿打鼾熟睡。上头也坐着人的椅子，只有另外一张，放在距离赌桌最远的阴暗角落，上面坐的正是莎拉，她以掌心支颐，双眸半阖。

我在她身边坐下时，她吓了一跳。“噢，克里斯托弗。你在这儿干什么？”

“我只是路过。实在抱歉。我无意惊吓你。”

“只是路过？这种地方？我才不信。你尾随我们？”

我们压低声音讲话，免得惊动桌上赌客。楼房里不知何处传来练习喇叭的乐声。

“我必须承认，”我说，“我碰巧听说你来这里。而且我也路过……”

“唉，克里斯托弗，没人陪你。”

“不是这样。不过我今天有点闷，我想放松一下，如此而已。不过我得承认，假如我知道你在这种地方，我就拿不定主意要不要跟来了。”

“别刻薄了。塞西尔跟我喜欢过这种放荡的生活。有趣得很。这也是上海魅力的一部分。瞧你泄气的样子。看来你的案子没有什么进展。”

“进展是没有，我倒没泄气。案情正逐渐明朗。”

我开始跟她谈我趴在破旧的船屋里，耗了两个多钟头做了什么事，身旁还躺了三具腐烂的尸体，她皱起眉头，要我别说。

“真是恐怖极了。今天打网球的时候，有人说死者的手臂跟腿都被砍掉了，是真的吗？”

“恐怕是如此。”

她又皱起眉头。“真是恐怖得无法用言语形容。可是那都是些工厂的中国工人，对吧？说真的，他们不太可能跟你……你父母有关联吧？”

“事实上，我相信这件凶案跟我父母的失踪案有极大的牵连。”

“真的？在网球俱乐部那里，人家都说这些凶案是什么‘黄鼠行动’的一部分。他们说受害者是跟‘黄鼠’最亲、最近的人。”

“‘黄蛇’。”

“什么？”

“是共产党中的告密者。是蛇，不是鼠。”

“哦，没错。不管是哪个，都可怕极了。中国人在干什么，大敌当前，还这样杀得你死我活？你总以为红军跟国民政府好歹会联合起来对抗日本人，至少也可以多争取一点时间。”

“我猜想共产党跟国民党之间的仇恨非常深。”

“塞西尔也是这么说。唉，瞧他，赌成那副德性。”

我顺着她的目光看去，只见塞西尔爵士——他背对着我们——瘫向一侧，身体几乎全靠桌子撑着，看起来似乎随时会从椅子上滑下来。

莎拉看看我，脸上有些尴尬。她接着便站起来走过去，双手各扶一肩，轻声在他耳边说话。塞西尔爵士醒来，向身旁看了看。也许那时候我碰巧把视线转开了，因为我一点也不确定接下来发生了什么事。我只看到莎拉往后踉跄了几步，仿佛有人打她，有那么一秒仿佛就要摔倒在地，不过她又及时站稳。等我细看塞西尔爵士，他又坐正了，专注于赌局，我不敢确定是他让莎拉险些跌倒。

她看见我注视着她，笑了笑，又回到我身边坐下。

“他累了，”她说，“他精力真是吓人。可是在这个年纪，他实在应该多休息才是。”

“你们俩常来这里吗？”

她点头。“还有其他几个类似的地方。塞西尔不喜欢那些金碧辉煌的场所。他觉得在那种地方别想赢钱。”

“他出入这些场所，你都跟着吗？”

“总要有人照顾他吧。他不年轻啰。再说，我觉得还好。而且还有点刺激呢。这不就是上海该有的样子吗？”

赌桌那里大家齐声叹息，赌客们三三两两聚在一起讲话。我看见塞西尔爵士想站起来，这时候我才明白他醉得多厉害。他垮回椅子上，但他又试了一次，挣扎着站了起来，蹒跚走向我们。我起身准备与他握手，不过他把手扶在我肩膀上，大概只是怕站不稳跌倒而已，他说：

“小兄弟，小兄弟，很高兴见到你。”

“刚才手气怎么样？”

“手气？唉，背死了。今晚运气糟透了。这要命的一整个星期都背，背，背透了。不过谁知道呢？说不定我还可以东山再起，哈！哈！从灰烬里重生。”

莎拉也站了起来，伸手要扶他，不过他没瞧她一眼，就把她的手拨开，然后又对着我说：

“怎么样，喝杯鸡尾酒去？楼下有个酒吧。”

“您实在太客气了，先生。不过我真的得回旅馆了。明天还有得忙。”

“能看到你努力工作真好。当然，我来上海就是要有所作为。不过，你明白——”他倾身把脸凑近，直到离我只有一两寸的距离——“这实在太难了，我没办法，小兄弟，太难了。”

“塞西尔，亲爱的，我们回家吧。”

“家？你把那鼠窝般的旅馆房间叫家？有一点你比我强，老婆，你是个乞丐婆。所以你不在于乎。”

“我们走吧，亲爱的，我累了。”

“你累了。我的小乞丐婆累了。班克斯，你外头有车吗？”

“恐怕没有。不过我可以帮您叫计程车。”

“计程车？你以为这里是皮卡迪利广场吗？你想叫车就有车吗？马上就有人把你宰了哟，这些中国人。”

“塞西尔，亲爱的，请你先坐坐，让克里斯托弗帮我们把鲍里斯找来。”接着她对我说：“我们的司机应该就在附近。真是太麻烦你

了。可怜的塞西尔，磨了一整晚，有点累坏了。”

我尽量保持愉快的样子走出楼房，暗记怎么回到这个房间。外头的广场依旧人潮汹涌，可是再过去一点，有条街上有成排的黄包车与汽车在等候。我挤了过去，沿路对汽车里各种国籍都有的司机说塞西尔爵士的名字，最后终于有一位有反应。

等我回到赌场，莎拉跟塞西尔爵士已经站在门口，她双手搀扶着他，不过他高大倾斜的身躯看起来好像随时都会压垮她。我连忙赶上去，听到他说：

“他们不喜欢的是你呀，老婆。我以前自己来的时候，他们总是待我如皇亲国戚。没错，像皇亲国戚。他们不喜欢你这种女人。他们只要真正的淑女，没有淑女妓女也行。你两者皆非。所以你明白吧，他们一点也不喜欢你。我在这里从来没碰过麻烦，直到你硬要跟着我来。”

“走吧，亲爱的。克里斯托弗来了。辛苦你了，克里斯托弗。亲爱的，你看，他帮我们找来了。”

那里离新城饭店没多远，可是汽车在人潮与黄包车阵中，往往移动得比走路还慢。在路上，莎拉一直挽着塞西尔爵士的手臂，他则时睡时醒。每次他醒来，就想把莎拉甩开，而她则笑脸相迎，在忽动忽停的汽车里把他牢牢挽住。

穿过饭店的旋转门时，换我上场来扶他，莎拉跟旅馆大厅里的侍者高兴地寒暄，我便搀扶着他走到电梯。我们终于到了梅德赫斯特夫妇的套房，我这才放开塞西尔爵士，让他在扶手椅上坐下。

我原以为他会昏睡过去，谁知道他突然醒了，问我一些没头没脑的问题，听来实在不知所云。这时候莎拉从浴室走出来，拿着一块法兰绒巾，替他擦拭前额，他对我说：

“班克斯，小兄弟，你坦白跟我说无妨。这个小妞。你也看得出来，比我年轻许多。但她也不是什么青春玉女，你不介意吧？哈、哈！总之，她就是小我好多岁数。你坦白告诉我，小兄弟，你觉得，在今晚那种地方，你找到我们的地方，像那种地方，你觉得不认识的人看到我们两个在一起……哪，我们打开天窗说亮话！我问你的是，别人会不会以为我太太是什么风尘女子？”

就我所见，莎拉的表情并没有改变，尽管她服侍塞西尔爵士的动作里多了一丝急迫，仿佛她希望她的照料能改变他的情绪。塞西尔爵

士摇着头，好像在躲苍蝇似的，然后又说：

“怎么，小兄弟。坦白告诉我吧。”

“别这样，亲爱的，”莎拉平静地说，“你可要惹人嫌啰。”

“让我告诉你一个秘密，小兄弟。让我告诉你一个秘密。我有点喜欢这样呢。我喜欢别人以为我太太是风尘女子。所以我才喜欢常去今晚我们去的那种地方。别碰我！别烦我们行吗！”他把莎拉推开，然后继续说，“我去的其他理由，当然你猜着了，是我欠了点钱。背了一点债，就这样。没有什么我赢不回来，这不用说。”

“亲爱的，人家克里斯托弗真是好心，你可别烦了人家。”

“荡妇说话了？听到她说什么了没，小兄弟？哪，你别听。别听她的话。别听这小淫妇说什么，这是我的看法。她们会让你迷失。特别是在战争与动乱的年头。战争的年头千万别听小淫妇的话。”

他自己站了起来，有一会儿当着我们的面，在房里摇摇晃晃，解开的衣领从脖子边翘了起来。接着他走进卧室，把门关上。

莎拉对我一笑，便跟了过去。若不是因为这一笑一或者该说我察觉了笑容背后似乎隐藏着某种请求一我必然当时就告辞了。于是我留在房内，心不在焉地欣赏入口处矮几上的一只中国瓷碗。有一会儿，我听见塞西尔爵士在叫骂，接着就没了声音。

大约又过了五分钟莎拉才出来，看到我没走，脸上有意外之色。

“他还好吗？”我问。

“现在睡着了。明天就没事了。真是麻烦你了，克里斯托弗。晚上你来找我们，大概绝没想到会是这般光景。我们得想个办法来补偿你。我们请你到哪儿吃顿晚饭吧。礼查饭店的菜不错哦。”

她送我出门，可是到了门边，我回头问她说：

“这种事，常发生吗？”

她叹了口气。“再常不过了。不过你别以为我会介意。我只是有时候会担心罢了。他的心脏不好，你知道吗。所以我现在才寸步不离。”

“你把他照顾得很好。”

“你可别误会了。塞西尔人很好。我们得尽快请你这顿饭。等你不忙喽。不过我想你总是很忙。”

“塞西尔爵士晚上都这么过吗？”

“大部分晚上。有时候白天也是。”

“有没有什么我可以帮得上忙的地方？”

“帮得上忙？”她轻轻笑了一声，“你听我说，克里斯托弗，我没事。真的，你可别错看了塞西尔。他人很好。而我……我好爱他。”

“那么，我就先告辞了。”

她向我走近几步，似有若无地伸出手。我发现我握住她的手，一时还弄不清楚下一步该怎么做，便吻了她的手背，接着口中咕哝了声再会，就走到外头的走廊上去了。

“你不用为我担心，克里斯托弗，”她在门边轻声低诉，“我什么事也没有。”

那是昨晚她对我说的话。可是今天，萦绕心头挥之不去的，却是她更久以前说过的话，那是三个星期以前，我初次在汇中饭店舞厅里听她说的。“我想我们近期内哪儿也不会去，”她当时说，“除非有人来拯救我们，那就另当别论了。”她那天晚上跟我说这句话到底有什么用意？我也说了，当下一听，我就已经觉得不对劲，我本来还可以再多问出一些东西，都怪在那一刻，格雷森从人群里冒出来找我。

第五部

一九三七年九月二十九日·上海·华懋饭店

第十四章

早上我在英国领事馆与麦克唐纳先生的会面，我并没有处理得宜，今晚回想起来只让我充满挫折感。事实上他早已成竹在胸，而我却还没准备好。一次又一次，我让他引导我走寻假目标，浪费精力于争论一些他最初就决定透露给我的情报。甚至可以说，四周前在汇中饭店的那晚，我第一次提出要跟“黄蛇”会面的想法，那时我反倒把他看得更透彻。我袭其不备，至少让他明明白白地透露了他在上海真正扮演的角色。然而今天早上，我甚至没法逼他脱去那身假称自己只是一个礼宾司官员的蹩脚伪装。

我想我低估了他。我只想到要上他的办公室，责备他为何我要求安排的事情进度如此缓慢，我以为这样就好了。到现在我才看清他如何设下陷阱，我才明白自己一旦急躁，他就可以轻易占到上风。我那样表现自己的不悦，实属不智；不过这连续几天的繁重工作也确实让我疲惫不堪。当然，我上楼找麦克唐纳时，跟那个工部局代表格雷森不期而遇，这件事也有关系。事实上，我觉得这件事影响之大更甚于其他事情，让我在那个早上失控，害我接下来跟麦克唐纳讨论的时候，心思却系在别处。

他们请我到领事馆二楼的小休息室，让我等了好几分钟，秘书才来通知我麦克唐纳先生准备好了，于是我走过铺着大理石地砖的楼梯口，到了电梯门边，格雷森这时却急急忙忙从楼梯跑下来唤住我。

“早安，班克斯先生！实在抱歉，也许我来得不是时候。”

“早安，格雷森先生。老实说，是不理想。我才要上楼看我们的朋友麦克唐纳先生。”

“既然如此，我就不耽误您的时间。我只是碰巧在这里，而我又听说您刚好也在这里。”他开心的笑声在大楼里回荡。

“真高兴再见到您，只是现在……”

“只要一下子就好了，先生。容我直言，您最近实在很难找。”

“好吧，格雷森先生，如果能尽快的话。”

“很快，很快。是这样子，先生，我明白现在提有点言之过早，不过这种事总是要提早着手进行才好。万一这么重大的活动安排上有

了闪失，万一办得寒酸了或是办差了……”

“格雷森先生……”

“对不起。我只是恳请您考虑关于欢迎仪式的一些细节。我们已经说好拿极司菲尔公园做会场。我们会搭个有舞台的大帐篷，并且装设扩音系统……对不起，我会尽量讲重点。班克斯先生，我真的想跟您讨论您在整个仪式的过程里扮演的角色。我们觉得整个仪式应该从简。我的设想是，也许您可以简单谈一下您是怎么破案的。是哪些关键线索让您好不容易找到令尊令堂等等这类事情。几句话就好了，底下的人会想听的。再来，您演讲完了，我想他们可能会想上台来。”

“他们？格雷森先生？”

“令尊令堂呀，先生。我的主意是不妨让他们站到台上，向群众挥手，接受群众欢呼，然后退场。不过，这当然只是我个人的拙见。我想说您一定有更高明的建议……”

“没有，没有，格雷森先生”——我忽然觉得一股倦意袭上身来——“您说的都很好，很好。现在如果没别的事，我真的得……”

“只剩一件，先生。有件小事，不过却可以带来极大的效果，假如配合得恰到好处。我的想法是令尊令堂走上讲台的那一刻，管乐队就开始演奏。也许可以演奏《希望与荣耀的土地》这类曲目。我有些同事并不喜欢这个想法，可是在我看来……”

“格雷森先生，您的想法听起来真不错。而且我也很荣幸您对我能破案有绝对的信心。不过实在很不好意思，我让麦克唐纳先生等太久了。”

“当然。那么谢谢您花这么多宝贵的时间跟我说话。”

我按了电梯钮，等候时格雷森依旧在我身后徘徊。我已经转身背对着他，面向电梯的门，却听到他说：

“只剩一件事我想请教，班克斯先生。典礼那天令尊令堂的住处，不知道您有没有什么高见？是这样，我们得确定往返会场的途中，他们可以尽量不要受到群众的干扰。”

我记不得我回答了什么。也许电梯门这时候正好打开，我恰好逮住机会，随口礼貌地应声话便告退了。不过正是最后这个问题，在会见麦克唐纳的时候从头到尾萦绕在我的心头，也可能是这个问题，如

我所说，更甚于其他因素，让我无法把当时面对的事情想清楚。而今晚，当白天的事务都过去了，我发现这个问题又浮上心头。

我并非没想过我父母究竟要安置在何处。只不过这点对我而言，总是显得言之过早——甚至是“空欢喜一场”——案情还杂乱如麻，尚待厘清，何必在这时就做成功的假想。我想，在过去这几个星期里，只有那么一次，我好好思考了这个问题，那就是我巧遇老同窗安东尼·摩根的那天晚上。

当时我到此地还没多久——第三夜或第四夜吧。之前好一阵子我就已经听说摩根住在上海，不过由于我在圣邓斯坦跟他从来没有特别的交情——除了我们一直是同班同学——所以我没有特别花工夫找他碰面。不过第三天早上，我接到他打来的电话。我听得出他有点不高兴我没找他，谈到最后，我答应当晚到法租界一家旅馆跟他见面。

我在灯光昏暗的旅馆会客厅看到他的时候，天已经黑了。毕业以后我就再没见过他的人，看他变得苍老肥胖让我吃了一惊。不过我们亲切寒暄时，我尽量不在说话的声音里泄漏这个看法。

“真奇怪，”他说，拍拍我的背，“好像才没多久。不过从某些方面看来，却又恍如隔世。”

“确实如此。”

“你知道吗，”他继续说，“前一阵子，我收到了丹麦佬埃默里克的信。记得他吧？丹麦佬埃默里克！多少年没他消息了！看起来，他现在是在住在维也纳。老埃。你记得他吧？”

“当然记得，”我说，尽管我心中只能唤起某个男孩的模糊印象，“老埃这家伙！”

接下来约莫半个钟头，摩根的嘴巴几乎没阖过。牛津毕业后，他直接到香港，然后十一年前在怡和洋行谋得一职便搬到上海。后来他搁下自己的故事，提起别的事：

“自从这里不太平了，你不会相信，我为司机的事伤透了脑筋。原来当班的在日本人轰炸的时候炸死了。再找了一个，竟然是个混混。不时就说帮派里有事就跑掉，每次要出门都找不到人。有一次他到美国人的俱乐部接我，满身都是血，别人的血。连句抱歉也没说，中国人都是这样。我受够了。可是接下来的两个，根本不会开车。有

一个还撞上黄包车，把车夫撞成重伤。我现在雇的这个也好不到哪里去，所以让我们先祷告我们能平安到达。”

我完全不明白他指的是什么，因为我记得那天晚上我并没有说要跟他去别的地方。不过我并不想挑他话里的毛病，他马上又转到别的事上头，告诉我旅馆所受的物资短缺之苦。他透露说，我们见面的那个大厅原先灯光没那么暗：战争让闸北区的工厂没法送灯泡过来，旅馆里有些地方，客人还得摸黑。他还指着厅里另一头为舞客演奏的乐队里，至少有三位乐师只是在装模作样。

“他们其实是门房。真正的乐师有的早已逃离上海，有的被战斗波及而丧命。尽管如此，他们装得还满不赖的，对不对？”

经他一挑出来，我看了看，装得实在一点都不像。有一位满脸写着无聊，连琴弓都没靠在小提琴上；有一位只是茫茫然握着竖笛，张着嘴巴，瞪着周遭正牌的乐师，心里不知道在想什么。等我夸他知道这么多内幕消息，他才告诉我，其实他在那里已经住了一个月，因为他在虹桥区的寓所太靠近战区，住不安稳。我为他必须放弃住所表达了同情之意，他的情绪忽然一变，我第一次看到他流露出忧伤的神情，让我想起昔日同班那个抑郁孤单的男孩。

“那里也算不上家就是了，”他说，眼睛看着手上的鸡尾酒，“里头只有我，还有来来去去的用人。老实说，不过是个又破又窄的屋子。怕被战火波及——那只是个借口，让我有个好理由把它丢开。这个又破又窄的屋子。家具全是中国式的。坐哪里都不舒服。养过一只画眉，可是后来死了。我住这里比较好。离交际场所近多了。”他接着看看表，把饮料喝光，又说，“哪，别让他们等。车子就在外头。”

摩根的态度里有个微妙的地方——他催得理所当然，让人不知道要怎么拒绝。再说，那时候我才来不久，习惯让不同活动的东道主接来带去。因此我跟着摩根走出屋子，不久就跟他并排坐在他的汽车后座，驶过法租界热闹的夜生活区。

才开车，司机就以毫发之差，闪过迎面驶来的电车，我以为这又要让摩根唠叨找不到好司机的问题。可是他现在忙着想心事，静静凝视车窗外飞过的霓虹灯和中文招牌。路上我问他一个问题，想套出他要带我去的地方：“你不觉得我们会迟到？”他看了看表，漫不经心地回答：“他们都等这么久了，不会介意再多等几分钟的。”接着他又补上一句，“你一定觉得很奇怪。”

之后车子又走了一阵子，我们几乎没有交谈。车子一度转向一条小街，两侧的人行道上挤满窝在一起的身影。在街灯下，我看到他们或坐或蹲或睡倒在地，相互挤靠在一起，街心只留下足以通行车辆的空间。这些人老少都有一我看到婴儿在母亲怀里睡觉——他们的财产全放在身边：破烂的布包、鸟笼，有的还有推车，上头堆满了家当。这样的景象我已经看惯了，不过那天晚上我看得心里很沮丧。那些脸孔大半是中国人，不过到了街尾，我看到成群的欧洲小孩——我猜是俄国人。

“从运河北岸来的难民。”摩根面无表情地说，然后面向他处。他自己也算是半个难民，对于情况更凄惨的同类，竟然一点也未能感同身受。有一次我们甚至辗过一个像是睡在地上的身形，我紧张地回头张望，我的伙伴随口说了一声：“别担心。可能只是件旧行李罢了。”

我们又沉默了几分钟，他笑了一声，吓了我一跳。“同窗岁月，”他说，“全涌上心头。那段日子还不赖，我想。”

我瞄了他一眼，发现他已泪水盈眶。接着他说：

“你知道吗，我们俩该团结起来。两只可怜的孤鸟。就这么说定了。你和我，我们该团结在一起。真不懂那时候怎么不呢？早团结在一起，我们就不会沦落至此。”

我吃惊地转向他。他的脸上光影流动，心思不知已飘到哪个遥远的地方。

如我前面所说，我清楚记得安东尼·摩根在学校时代就是一副“孤僻可怜虫”的模样。大家倒也没有特别去欺负他或寻他开心；其实，就我所知，是摩根自己很早以前就把这样的角色模式往自己身上套。他总是宁可独行，落在大伙一群人后面几码远；晴朗的夏日也不出来跟大家玩耍，却独自躲在屋里，在笔记本上涂鸦解闷。这些往事清晰如昨。事实上，那天晚上，我在昏暗的旅馆大厅一看到他，心中立刻想起大家穿过那个方形的院子，从美术教室走到回廊时，他闷闷不乐，在众人后方独行的身影。不过，他也把我认做可以跟他结交拜把的“孤僻可怜虫”，这倒是让我吃了一惊，我愣了一会儿才明白，这不过是摩根在自欺欺人罢了——一极可能是多年前他创造的东西，好让那段黯淡的岁月多少还值得回忆。我也说了，我并没有马上想到这上头，现在回想起来，我觉得我当时的反应恐怕有点迟钝。因为我记得我说了类似这样的话：

“你一定把我想成别人了，老兄。我敢说你想的是毕格瓦这家伙。艾德里安·毕格瓦。他确实不太跟别人往来。”

“毕格瓦？”摩根想了想，接着摇摇头，“我记得这家伙。有点肥胖，还有一对招风耳？好个毕格瓦。真是。可是我想的不是他。”

“反正也不是我，老哥。”

“这就奇怪了。”他又摇摇头，接着转头望着车窗。

我也把头转开，凝视夜晚的街景好一会儿。我们又回到繁华的风化区，我双眼梭巡来往路人的面孔，希望能看到秋良。接着我们到了住宅区，到处都是围篱与树木，不久，司机把车子开进一栋大宅的院子里。

摩根匆忙下了车。我也跟着下车——司机一点也没有想帮我拉开车门的样子——跟着他走上一条绕到屋后的砾石小径。我以为会有一个盛大的欢迎会，但看来似乎没有这回事；房子大半没有点灯，而且院子里除了我们的车子，只停了另外一辆。

摩根显然很熟悉这里的环境，引我走到一处边门，门的两侧是高大的灌木。他门铃也没摁就把门打开，带我走了进去。

门一开，里头是一道宽敞的走廊，烛光照着廊道。我往前凝视，约略看得出陈旧的画卷、高大的瓷花瓶、漆饰百屉柜。空气闻起来一焚香的气味混着排泄物的味道——有一种奇特温馨的感觉。

仆人没出现，屋子的主人也没出现。我的伙伴一直站在我身边，一言不发。过了一会儿，我想到一点，他是不是在等我对这里的环境发表看法。于是我说：

“我对中国艺术品所知有限。但就算在我这个外行人看来，也看得出我们身边这些东西应该都是精品。”

摩根睁大了眼吃惊地看我。接着他耸耸肩说：“你说的应该没错。我们进去吧。”

他带我往屋子更深处走去。有几步路我们完全摸黑，接着我听到有人说华语，看到某个遮有珠帘的门廊上有灯光。我们穿过珠帘，又推开布帘，才进入一处宫灯、烛火通明的温暖房间。

那个晚上接下来的事我还记得多少呢？往事在心里已经有点模糊，且让我试着把事情拼凑出最完整的面貌。进了房间，我第一个想法是，我们打搅了别人家的喜事。我瞥见一张摆满菜肴的大桌子，桌

边围坐了八九个人。房里全是中国人，最年轻的两位一二十多岁的年轻人一着西式服装，其他则着传统服装。有位老太太坐在桌子的一端，吃饭的时候有仆人服侍。有位年长的绅士一以东方人的体格来看，算是出奇的高大宽胖一我想是一家之长，我们一到他就立刻站起来，此时在场的其他男性成员也都跟着起立。不过在这时候，这里的人给我的印象仍旧朦胧，因为房间本身很快就抢走了我所有的注意力。

天花板高悬在横梁上。越过用餐的人望去，就在他们的正后方，有个仿佛戏台的东西，护栏上还挂了一串纸灯笼。房内吸引我目光的，就是这个地方。此时我越过桌面凝视着那个戏台模样的东西，几乎没听到主人欢迎的话。因为，我忽然明白了：我在这个房间的整个后半截，其实正是我上海故居的门厅。

显然这么多年来，这地方已经改装得面目全非。别的不说，我就怎么也厘不清楚，刚才摩根带我走进屋子的路，跟我家以前的旧厅堂有什么关系。不过后头的那个戏台倒是跟从前那座大圆弧阶梯顶上的平台若合符节。

我往前晃了几步，然后可能在那里站了好一会儿，凝视着那个戏台，用目光回溯那些阶梯以前依循的弧线。一阶阶的楼梯在心中找回，往事也回到眼前：小时候曾经有段日子，我喜欢高速冲下这座大圆弧梯，在最后两三阶的地方飞跃起来一通常还拍动双臂一降落在不远处的长沙发深处。父亲每次看到都笑了出来；母亲与梅俐则不能苟同。没错，母亲虽然从来不曾清楚地解释这样做哪里不对，但她总是警告我如果恶习不改，就要把那张长沙发搬走。有一次，我已八岁大，歇停了几个月以后，我再度重施故技，发现那长沙发再也承受不了我的体重。沙发的一头完全垮下，害我滚到地板上，吓坏了我。我记得就在下一刻，母亲从阶梯走下来，出现在我身后，我正准备让她狠狠痛骂一顿。母亲的身影缓缓逼近，最后她竟然笑了出来。“看看你自己的脸，小海雀！”她大笑，“该拿面镜子给你照照！”

我一点伤也没有，母亲却大笑不止一也许我害怕责骂还在后头一于是把脚踝的不适尽量夸大。母亲这才没再大笑，温柔地拉我起来。我记得她扶着我慢慢在门厅里绕着走，一只手臂搭在我肩上，说着：“现在好一点了没有？走一走就会好。瞧，没事了。”

我从来没有为这件事挨过骂；几天之后，我发现长沙发已经修好；尽管我还是略过底部的两三阶一跃而下，却再也没试过直接跳进那沙发窝里去了。

我在厅里绕了几步，想推算出那张沙发原先放置的确切位置。如此推算着，我才发现这里原来的样子我只能唤起极为模糊的印象——尽管那丝质沙发布的触感还历历如昨。

绕了半晌，我才想起厅内还有其他人，也发现他们都面带笑容看着我。摩根与年长的中国人悄悄交谈。摩根见我转回身来，便往前跨了一步，清了清喉咙开始帮大家介绍。

他显然熟识这家人，每个人的姓名都如数家珍。介绍到谁，谁便点头微笑。桌子尽头的老太太，摩根介绍时格外尊敬，只有她依旧淡淡地凝视着我。这家姓林——除此之外，名字我一个也没记得——这时候，便由林老先生上场了，也就是年长的那位身材肥壮的绅士。

“我相信，先生您重回旧地，”林老先生的英语里，只有些微的中国腔，“一定觉得十分温馨。”

“没错，确实如此。”我浅浅一笑，“没错。但也觉得有点陌生呢。”

“那当然，”林老先生说，“就当做是自己家罢。摩根先生说您已用过餐。不过您也看得出我们为您备了点粗茶淡饭。我们不知道您喜不喜欢中国菜，因此向我们的英国邻居借了他的厨师。”

“可是班克斯先生说不定不饿。”

这是其中一个穿西式服装的年轻人说的话。他转向我继续说：“祖父还是挺古板的。要是客人不领情，他会很生气。”年轻人对长者粲然而笑，“您可别任他摆布，班克斯先生。”

“我孙子认为我是个古板的中国人。”林老先生说，向我走近，脸上始终挂着笑容，“事实上，我在上海出生长大，就在公共租界里。家父家母被迫逃离慈禧太后的魔掌，在这里寻求庇护，躲在这个外国人的城市里，我可以说不彻头彻尾都是上海人。我这个孙子根本不知道，在真正的中国，生活是什么样子。说我古板！咱们别理他，先生。在这屋子里，不必担心那些繁文缛节。如果您不饿，但说无妨。我不会逼您吃的。”

“您真是太客气了。”我说，也许有点心不在焉，因为我其实还在打量这屋子到底有什么改变。

忽然老太太以中文说了些什么。刚才跟我说话的年轻人听了之后对我说：

“祖母说她以为您永远不会来了。她等了好久。现在见到了您的人，她很高兴您来到这里。”

他还没翻译完，老太太又开始说话。这次，她说完的时候，年轻人却沉默了一会儿。他望着祖父，仿佛寻求什么指示，接着似乎心下有了主意。

“请您多包涵我祖母，”他说，“她有时候有点古怪。”

老太太也许懂得这两句英语，她不耐烦地指指她的孙子要他翻译出来。年轻人推托不了，叹了口气说：“她说今晚您还没到之前，她怨您。也就是说，她气您要我们的家，从我们手上夺回去。”

我望着年轻人，心里觉得很困惑，不过老太太又开口了。

“她说，有好长一段日子，”她孙子继续翻译，“也希望您永远不要回来。她相信这个家现在属于我家族。不过，今晚她见到您本人，看到您眼中的情感，她可以理解了。她现在衷心认为那桩协议是对的。”

“协议？这，想必……”

这句话我留在嘴里没说完。我当时虽不明就里，但是当年轻人翻译他祖母的话时，我渐渐想起一些模糊的往事，好像有这么一桩关于这栋老宅子还有我重返家园的协议。不过如我所说，这件事在我记忆里非常模糊，我暗忖此时若讨论这个问题，只会自讨没趣。总之，就在这时候，林老先生说：

“我们真是不体贴班克斯先生。瞧我们这样拉着人家讲话，其实他一定很想再看看这栋房子呢。”接着他转向我，以亲切的笑容对我说：“跟我来，先生。待会儿要跟大伙聊天的话，时间还很多呢。这边请，容我带路。”

第十五章

接下来的几分钟，我跟着林老先生在屋里到处走。尽管主人年事已高，却一点都不显衰老；肥壮的身躯动作起来还十分稳健，有时虽然会慢下来，却也不曾停步喘气。我跟随着他的黑色长袍与窸窣作声的便鞋声，在狭窄的楼梯登上爬下，屋子深处的走廊，往往只点着一盏宫灯。他带我穿过一些没有家具只见蛛网四布的地方，行经无数排列整齐、装在木箱里的米酿酒。其他地方却又极尽奢华之能事——处处美丽的屏风与壁上的挂饰，一面面嵌在墙上的什锦格里展示着各色的瓷器古玩。通常，他一开门就让开请我先走。我看了各式各样的房间，也花了好一会儿的工夫——不过就是没看到我熟悉的东西。

好不容易我来到一处勾起我回忆的地方。我多待了几秒钟，随即满怀感伤地想起这是我从前的“图书室”。这里已经大刀阔斧改建过了：天花板比以前高，有面墙被敲掉，好让房间变成曲肘形；曾经是通往餐厅的双开门处，现在则封以隔板，板子前面堆了更多箱酒。不过这里的的确确曾经是我小时候做完大部分功课的地方。

我往房间深处逛去，环顾四周。过了一会儿，发现林老先生看着我，我尴尬地笑了笑。这时候他说：

“显然有很多地方都改过了。请接受我的道歉。不过也请您谅解，我们在这儿也住了十八年了，为了家人和生意上的需要，一点改变是免不了的。我也明白在我们之前住在这儿的人，还有更早的，他们都大兴土木。这很不幸，但我们谁也没料到您与令尊令堂，有一天会……”

他就此把话收住，也许以为我没在听，也许他就像大部分中国人一样，不惯于道歉。我继续往四周多凝望了一会儿，接着才问他：

“因此这栋房子不再属于摩根洋行了吧？”

他一脸讶异，然后笑了笑。“先生，屋主正是在下呀。”

我看得出我伤了他的自尊，赶紧说：“我真是的。请原谅我一时失言。”

“别在意，先生”——他友善的笑容迅速回到脸上——“您问的也有道理。毕竟您与令尊令堂住在这里的时候，情况确实是如此。只是我

相信如今早已人事全非了。先生，您只要想想上海这么多年来变了多少。一切，这一切都变了又变，改了又改。所有这些”——他叹口气，环指四周——“相较之下，这里的改变只是小巫见大巫。上海有些地区，我曾经了若指掌，有些地方我每天都会走过，现在我再去那里，连该转哪个方向都不知道。改变，无时无刻不在改变。现在是日本人，他们要加入他们的变化。更可怕的变化只怕还在后头。可是大家不应该悲观。”

我们默默地站了一会儿，两人都向四周看了看。接着他又平静地说：

“我的家族，自然舍不得离开这屋子。先父就是在这里过世的。两个孙子也在这里出世。不过刚才内人所说的话——您得包涵她心直口快，班克斯先生——她确实帮我们把话说出来了。当然我们还是认为物归原主，把屋子还给您与令尊令堂，是我们无上的荣幸。嗯，先生，请继续随我来吧。”

我想不久我们就登上一道铺了地毯的阶梯——这楼梯在我小时候绝对不存在——走进一间金碧辉煌的寝室。布幔华丽，宫灯映红。

“这是内人的房间。”林先生说。

看得出这是个避难所，老太太大概一天大半的时光都消磨在这间舒适的闺房里。在宫灯温暖的光辉里，我看到有张牌桌，上头似乎有各式赌局在进行；有张书桌，桌侧一排缀着金穗流苏的抽屉；一张宽大的四柱床，挂了层层帐幔。目光所及都是精雕细琢的装饰品，还有一些我猜不出用途的古玩。

“夫人必定很喜欢这个房间，”我说了，“我在这里可以看到她的世界。”

“这里适合她。不过您可不要为她操心，先生。我们会为她找处住所，她一样会这么喜爱的。”

他说这些是要让我安心，可是他的声音里却有些心虚。此刻他走到房间远处，到梳妆台那里，有件小东西让他看得入神，也许是个胸针。过了好一会儿，他才平静地说：

“她以前真是个大美人。倾城佳人哪，先生。您无法想像的。就婚姻而言，我的心比较像西方人。除了她，我从来不曾想过要娶别的女人。妻子一位就够了。当然，我还是娶了几房妾。尽管我一辈子都住在这个外国人的城市里，但毕竟还是中国人。我有我不得已的地

方。不过我真正关心的只有她。其他几位都不在了，她还好好的。我也想念其他几位，不过我心中庆幸，到了晚年，能再度只有我们俩长相厮守。”有好几秒钟，他似乎忘了我的存在。接着他转向我说：

“这个房间。不知道您会如何使用？恕我无礼。不知道您会不会把这个房间留给您的夫人？当然，我注意到许多外国人，不管多么富有，夫妻总是同睡一房。不知道，您与夫人是否会使用这个房间。我知道我这样好奇，唐突得很。可是这房间对我别具意义。我个人也希望您能拿它做特别的用途。”

“没错……”我再次仔细环顾四周，然后说，“也许不会给内人吧。内人，是这样，老实说……”我发现，一谈到夫妻，我心中立刻浮现莎拉的身影。我连忙说下去，以掩饰尴尬之情：“我是说，先生，我还没结婚呢。所以没有内人。不过我想这个房间给家母正好。”

“说得是。毕竟令堂吃了那么多苦，这个房间给令堂再适合不过了。那么令尊呢？不知道他们会不会同房，像一般西方人那样？我这样问实在冒昧得很。”

“一点也不，林先生。毕竟您让我有幸踏进这个房间，您这么不见外，不管怎么说，您都可以问这些问题。只不过事情来得太突然，我还没有时间好好想过……”

我没再说话，信步绕着屋子，四处端详。过了一会儿，我对他说：“我说这话恐怕会得罪您，林先生。您待我如此真诚慷慨，我实在受宠若惊，我觉得您是可以坦率相见的。您自己才说过，每次屋子易主，变动在所难免。那么，先生，尽管这个房间对您胜似珍宝，但是等我家人住进来，恐怕我们也会进行我们的改建。这个房间，只怕也会改得面目全非。”

林先生阖上眼睛，周遭一时充满凝重的沉默。我不知道他是否正怒火中烧，有那么一瞬间，我后悔不该直言不讳。但他却睁开眼睛，温和地望着我。

“那当然，”他说，“这是人之常情嘛。你会希望这房子回到您孩提时的光景。这确实是人之常情。先生，我完全理解。”

他的话，我想了一会儿才回答：“嗯，老实说，林先生，我们大概不会完全恢复旧观。拿一件事来说好了。就我印象所及，从前我们就有许多不满意的地方。譬如家母从来就没有自己的书房。她那些政

治活动，卧室里的小书桌根本不够用。父亲则想要一个小工坊来做些木工。我的意思是，恢复过去，本身没有太大意义。”

“这真是睿智，班克斯先生。而且尽管您还未成亲，也许不久就得为妻小做安排呢。”

“那是当然。不过，就目前看来，这娶亲成家的事，就算在西方习俗里……”我发现自己不知所云，因此把话打住。不过老先生倒是若有高见地点点头说：

“当然，感情的事，谁也说不准的。”他接着又问，“您想要孩子吗，先生？不知道您打算生几个呢。”

“老实说，我已经有一个孩子了。一个女孩。尽管不是我亲生的。她是个孤儿，现在由我监护。我视她如亲生女儿。”

我有一阵子没想起詹妮弗，忽然这样子提到她，不禁百感交集。她的身影一帧帧浮现在我眼前；我想到她在住校，不知过得如何，现在不晓得在做些什么。

也许我把脸撇开了，以隐藏我的感情。总之，等我再回头看着林先生，他又点了点头。

“我们中国人也常有这样的安排，”他说，“血缘固然亲，家人也一样亲。先父曾经领养一名孤女，她就像我亲妹妹一样跟我们一起长大。尽管我知道她是领养的，但我还是视她如亲手足。她病殁于某次霍乱肆虐，那时我还年轻，我难过得像是走了一位亲妹妹一样。”

“容我直言，林先生，能与您谈心真是我的荣幸。我难得遇到有人如此知心。”

他浅浅鞠个躬，双手的指尖在胸前相触。“活到我这把岁数的人，又经历这么多年的动乱，什么悲欢离合没尝过。我希望您的义女在这里能住得愉快。不知您会把哪个房间派给她。瞧，我又来了！请见谅，如您所说，这里还会改建。”

“老实说，刚才我们看过的房间里，有一间给詹妮弗真是配。就是墙上有一整排木壁架的那间。”

“她喜欢这种壁架？”

“没错。好放她的那些家当。其实，我还得给另一个人安排住所。名义上，她算是用人，不过在我家里，她总是不止于此。她叫梅俐。”

“她是您的阿妈，先生？”

我点点头。“她现在年龄更大了，我敢说她会想休息养老。照顾小孩子顶耗神的。我一直认为她老了以后，应该继续跟我们同住。”

“您真是菩萨心肠。我们常听到外国家庭在孩子长大以后，就把阿妈遣散。这样的妇女，最后往往沦落街头行乞，以了残生。”

我笑了笑。“我想这恐怕不会发生在我家梅俐身上。老实说，连动了这种念头都算荒唐。总之，如我所说，她会跟我们同住。一旦我的任务完成，我就有心思好好找她。我想，要找到她，应该不难。”

“那么请告诉我，您给她的房间，会在用人那厢还是在家人这厢？”

“自然是在家人这边了。家父家母也许会不以为然。不过话说回来，现在一家之主是我。”

林先生露出笑容。“依你们的习俗，自然是如此。就中国人而言，还好，我们允许我这样的老头，不管多衰老无能都可以继续当家。”

老先生兀自笑了笑，转身向门走去。我正要跟上，就在那一刹那突如其来却历历在目一心头浮现了另一段往事。后来我回想起来，却完全不明白为什么浮上心头的是那件往事而不是别件。那件事发生在我六七岁的时候，母亲与我在一块长长的草坪上赛跑。我不知道确切的地点究竟在哪里；我推想应该是在某个公园里吧——也许是极司菲尔公园——因为我记得跑的地方，旁边有一片格子状的围篱，上头爬满花朵与藤蔓。那是个温暖的日子，阳光倒不强。我忍不住向母亲挑战，看谁先跑到前方不远处的某个地方，我要向她炫耀我跑步的能力进步了。我满心以为我可以赢她，然后她就会用她惯有的方式表达她的惊喜，赞叹我的本事又长进了。然而事与愿违，她一路都没落后，还边跑边笑，我则是使尽了全力。我不记得实际上到底谁“赢了”，不过我还记得我好气她，觉得自己受了天大的委屈。那夜我站在林老夫人寝室那温馨安乐、风雨不侵的氛围里，这件事又回到心头。或者说该说这件事的残篇断简：一个全力迎风而跑的我、一个在我身边欢笑的母亲、一阵她裙褶磨擦的窸窣声、一股涌上心头的挫折感。

“林先生，”我对主人说，“可否冒昧请教一事。您说您一生都住在租界。那么，不知您当年是否见过家母？”

“只可惜我从来没这个运气见到她本人，”林先生说，“不过，我当然听说过她，还有她推动的伟大运动。我景仰她，有正直心肠的人都景仰她。我相信她人一定很好。而且我听说她非常美丽。”

“我想她应该是很美。只是谁也不会在乎自己母亲到底美不美就是了。”

“噢，我还听说她是上海最美丽的英国女性。”

“我想应该是吧。当然啦，她现在也有些年纪了。”

“有些美貌，是不会褪色的。内人”——他伸手指向房间——“跟我当年娶她的时候一样美丽。”

当他说出这句话的时候，我忽然觉得自己擅闯了禁地，这回是我抢在前头走出房间。

我不太记得那天晚上重返故居还有什么别的事情。也许我们又待了一个钟头，与那一家人围在桌边聊天用餐。总之，我知道我离开林家时，气氛相当融洽。反倒是在回程上，摩根与我有些摩擦。

错可能在我。那个时候我很疲倦，甚至有些兴奋过度。车子行驶在一片夜色中，我们两人沉默了好一阵子，我的心思也许飘回了还在眼前的那项艰巨任务。因为我记得我冷不防地对摩根说：

“嘿，你说你在这里也待了几年了。告诉我，你有没有遇见过一位孔探长？”

“孔探长？是警探还是什么？”

“我小时候，孔探长简直是传奇人物。老实告诉你，我父母的案子，最初承办的警官就是他。”

没想到摩根竟在旁大笑了一阵。接着他说：

“孔？孔老头吗？没错，当然了，他以前是警探。那么，也难怪当年查不出什么结果了。”

他的语调让我吃惊，我冷冷回答：“姑且不提他在全中国的声望如何，至少在上海，孔探长可是当年最受敬重的警探。”

“这个嘛，他现在还有一点名气就是了，我不妨告诉你。孔老头啊。真没想到。”

“我很高兴至少他人还在上海。你知不知道该到哪里去找他？”

“最简单的方法，就是入夜后到法租界去逛。你迟早会遇到他。你通常会看到他倒卧在人行道上。要是有一家破酒吧准他进去，他也会被嘘到昏暗的角落里去。”

“你的意思是，孔探长变成酒鬼了？”

“酒、鸦片都来。中国佬常有的玩意。不过他可是个宝。他会说他当年如何神勇的故事，然后等人家赏他几毛钱。”

“我觉得你说的是别人，老兄。”

“才不呢，老哥。孔老头。所以他真的干过警察啰。我总是猜想他那些故事是瞎掰的。他的故事大部分都荒诞不经。怎么了，老兄？”

“你的毛病，摩根，就是老把事情给搞混了。你先把我跟毕格瓦弄混。现在你又把孔探长跟哪个一文不名的破乞丐扯在一起。你外放久了，脑筋也放糊了吗，大哥？”

“你听好，火气别这么大。我告诉你的，你尽管去问别人，看看说的可有两样？你的高见我可不苟同。我的脑筋一点也没糊涂。”

他把我送抵华懋饭店时，我们彼此可能又是客客气气的了，不过分手时显然毫无眷恋，我从此没再见过摩根。至于孔探长，从那夜起，我心里就急着要尽快把他找到，不过不知为了什么原因——也许害怕摩根说的是实话——这事从来就没排在第一要务里——至少到昨夜之前没有。昨夜我翻查警局的档案，无巧不成书，里头竟冒出他的名字。

顺带一提，这天早上我跟麦克唐纳略提起孔探长，他的反应跟那夜摩根的反应类似，我怀疑这是另一个原因，导致我面对他的时候失去耐性——在他那间高踞领事馆草坪之上、又小又闷的办公室里。总之，要是我稍稍克制一点，我知道我可以表现得好些。那天早上我根本的错误，在于我让他激得我动了肝火。只怕有那么一刻，我简直是在对他咆哮。

“麦克唐纳先生，事情就是没办法靠您所谓的我的‘力量’来解决！我没有这个‘力量’！我只是凡人，如果没人提供基本的协助，我根本办不了事。我也没要您帮多大的忙，先生。根本连件小事都算不上！我要求的事，我早说得清清楚楚了。我希望跟这位共产党的告密者谈一谈。跟他谈谈而已，就说几句话也成。我以最明白的方式提出了请求。我无法了解为什么还安排不了？怎么会这样，先生？怎么会这样？究竟有什么事耽搁您了？”

“你听好，老兄，这种事根本不在我权限之内啊。如果你接受，我可以请警政厅厅长跟你谈谈。恕我直言，你知道吗，我根本不确定这样有什么用。‘黄蛇’又不在他们手上……”

“我完全了解，庇护‘黄蛇’的是中国政府。所以我才来找您，而没去找警方。我知道这么重大的事，只怕警察还没资格管。”

“我尽力就是了，老哥。但是你得谅解，这里可不是英属殖民地。我们无权命令中国人。不过我会跟适当的主事者谈谈。你可别以为事情很快就会有结果。蒋介石以前也有别的内线，可是从来就没有一个可以把红军的底细摸得这么透。蒋介石宁可再吃日本人几场败仗，也不肯让‘黄蛇’出什么差错。对蒋介石而言，真正的敌人不是日本人，而是红军。”

我重重叹了一口气。“麦克唐纳先生，蒋介石或者他的第一要务，与我何干？此时此刻，我有案子要破，请您无论如何安排一下，让我跟这个内线谈谈。这是我亲自向您提出的，要是我一切的努力，全因为缺了这么件小事而化为乌有，我会立刻让大家知道，当初我去找的人是您……”

“不会吧，老兄，拜托！没必要这么说嘛！完全没必要！这里大伙都是朋友。大家都希望你能成功。相信我，我们由衷希望呢。听我说，我说过，我会尽力而为。我会找人谈谈，你知道的，那个圈子里的人。我会找他们谈谈，告诉他们你的意愿有多强烈。不过请你一定要谅解，我们可以使在中国人身上的力气，也就这么点而已。”接着他倾身向前，与我分享秘密，“其实，你不妨找找法国人。他们手上总是握有许多蒋介石的小辫子。你知道的，见不得光的事情。我们不碰的那种东西。法国人这条线，就算奉送啰。”

或许麦克唐纳的建议另有玄机。也或许我真的可以从法国当局那里得到一些有用的协助。不过，老实说，从那天早上起，我就没把这则建议太当一回事。我已看清，麦克唐纳为了某些不明的原因，一直搪塞推诿，可一旦他确知满足我的要求事关重大，刻不容缓，那他一定会尽力协助的。可惜那天早上我恐怕把那次会面搞砸了，我还得找个时机再去与他周旋。这可不是什么我想做的好差事，但至少下次我的手段会有所不同，届时他会发现，想教我空手而回，并没有那么容易。

第六部

一九三七年十月二十日·上海·华懋饭店

第十六章

我知道我们在法租界某处，离港口不远，其他则一无所知。有那么一会儿司机把车开进窄巷，那里实在不宜行车，只听他喇叭摁个不停以驱开行人，我渐渐觉得这实在荒唐，就像有人把马骑进屋子里一样。不过车子终究是停靠了下来，司机为我打开车门，手指着“晨欣旅社”的大门。

有位瘦削的独眼中国人带我进去。今天回想起来的笼统印象，是低垂的天花板、深色潮湿的木头与寻常闻见的阴沟味道。不过那地方看起来倒还算干净；走到一处，我们得绕过三位趴在地上的妇女，她们辛勤地刷着木头地板。到了这栋建筑物的后段，我们来到一条走廊，一长排都是门。这让我联想起马厩，甚至是牢房，其实这些小房间，竟然都是客房。独眼人敲敲其中一扇门，不等回应就把门打开。

房间小而狭长。室内没有窗户，不过隔墙并未连上天花板一最上面留了一英尺左右的空间，装有铁网一作为采光与空气流通之用。尽管如此，小隔墙里还是又闷又暗，就连外头午后高照的艳阳，也只在地上映出铁网诡异的图案。床上躺着的人似乎还在睡觉，不过等我站到床与墙之间，他动了动腿。独眼人咕哝了几句话就走了，并把门关上。

这位前孔探长骨瘦如柴，脸部和颈部的皮肤皱缩还带着斑；他的嘴巴松弛半开；一条光腿细瘦如棍棒，伸在粗糙的毯子之外，可是我看到他上身穿的内衣却白得出奇。他起先没打算坐起来，只是约略表示知道我的造访。然而他不像是抽了鸦片或喝了酒还没醒，于是我表明身份与来意，说着说着，他慢慢懂了，渐渐表现出一些应有的礼貌。

“对不住，先生”——他的英语，听起来还算流利——“我这儿没有茶水可以招待。”他咕哝了几句中文，在毯子底下动了动他的双腿。接着他似乎觉得自己失礼了，又说：“对不起。我身体不舒服。不过我很快就可以恢复健康。”

“我诚挚希望如此，”我说，“毕竟您曾是上海警界的顶尖警探。”

“真的？您实在太抬举我了，先生。我那时还算称职就是了。”他忽然用力一撑，坐了起来，把一双赤脚小心翼翼放到地上。或许是为了遮羞，或许是因为怕冷，他还是将毯子围在腰腹一带。“可是到头来，”他继续说，“这个城市会打败你。每个人都背叛朋友。你信任别人，最后才知道他原来一直在收帮派的钱。政府也是个帮派。警探在这种地方，如何善尽自己的职责？我这儿说不定还有烟。您要不要抽支烟？”

“多谢，不用了。探长，我这么说吧，我还是孩子的时候，您的英勇事迹就让我十分景仰。”

“您还是个孩子的时候？”

“没错，探长。邻家的男孩和我”——我浅浅一笑——“我们常常扮演您。您是……您是我们的英雄。”

“真有其事？”老人含笑摇摇头，“果真如此吗。那么，我就更不好意思了，我什么也没能招待您。您不要茶，也不抽烟？”

“老实说，探长，您可以给我更有用的东西。我今天来找您，是因为我相信您能提供我一条关键线索。一九一五年春天，您承办了一个案子，是福州路上一家名叫‘五城楼’的餐厅里发生的枪击事件。三人丧命，多人受伤。您逮捕了两名涉案人。在警局的记录里，这件事称作‘五城楼枪击事件’。这案子也许事隔多年，这个我也明白，不过孔探长，不知您是否还记得此事？”

在我身后，也许在两三间房外，有人咳嗽咳个没完。孔探长陷入沉思，接着说：“‘五城楼’的案子我记得很清楚。当时我还算风光。即使像现在这样卧病在床，我有时还是会想起这个案子。”

“那么，您也许记得您审问过一位嫌犯，后来您断定他并未涉及枪击案情。根据记录，那个人叫韦强。您问他‘五城楼’的案情，他却供出其他完全不相干的事。”

尽管老探长的身体已如一只松垮的皮囊包着散骨，此刻他的双眼却充满生气。“一点也没错，”他说，“他跟枪击案无关。不过他一害怕就说个不停。他什么都招。我记得，他招认他几年前参加过一个绑架集团。”

“太好了，探长。这正是档案里记载的。您听我说，孔探长，有件事非常重要。这个人给了您一些地址。那是他们绑架集团用来藏肉票的地方。”

孔探长原先盯着天花板下的铁网边嗡嗡萦绕的苍蝇，现在慢慢把目光移降到我站的地方。“确实如此，”他平静地说，“可是班克斯先生，我们已经把那些房子彻查过了。他提到的那些绑架案，都是许多年前的事了。我们在那些房子里没查出什么可疑线索。”

“我知道，孔探长，您分内该做的事，一定丝毫不含糊，这毋庸置疑。只不过您当时的目标是枪击事件。倘若您没把精力花在横生的枝节上，这也是理所当然。我想说的是，如果当时有某些有力人士，出手阻挠您搜索其中一处，或许您也不会太坚持。”

老警探再度陷入沉思，过了半晌才开口说：“是有那么一栋。我现在想起来了。我的手下会向我呈报结果。所有别的房子，总共七栋，我都收到回报。我记得当时确实有点不对劲。这最后一处没有报告。我的手下受到了干预。没错，我记得当时就觉得其中必有蹊跷。就是警探的直觉罢。您懂我的意思吧，先生？”

“那最后一栋，您从来就没有看到过调查报告。”

“正是，先生。不过如您所说，那实在不是什么要紧的事。您懂吧，‘五城楼’的事情可大了。闹得满城风雨。搜捕杀手的行动持续了好几周。”

“我记得没错的话，这案子难倒了两位比您资深的同仁。”

孔探长面露笑容。“如我所说，那是我事业上最风光的日子。别人办不出来，我才来接手。全城的人都在谈这件事。我才花了几天时间就逮捕了那些杀手。”

“我读过那些资料，真是佩服，佩服。”

不过这时候老人专注地盯着我看。最后他缓缓说：“那栋房子。我的手下没有搜查的那栋。那栋房子。您是说……？”

“没错。我个人以为，那正是家父家母被挟持的地方。”

“原来如此。”他沉默了好一会儿，试着消化这个庞杂的想法。

“您绝无疏忽之处，”我说，“容我重申，我读过报告，对您真是佩服之至。您的手下没有到那里搜查，是因为受到警界里更高层人士的阻拦。那些人，我们现在已经查明，他们收了犯罪集团的贿赂。”

咳嗽声再度传来。孔探长沉默了一会儿，才再抬头看我，缓缓说：“您是来找我帮忙。您来是要我帮忙找到这栋房子。”

“很不幸，档案给弄得一团糟。市政搞成这副德性，真是可耻。报告有的归错档，有的根本遗失了。最后，我还是决定直接来找您，这样会比较有用。我知道这简直不可思议，但我想请教您，是否还记得关于那栋房子的一点资料或是什么。”

“那栋房子。让我想想。”老人专注地阖上眼睛，但是过了一会儿，他摇摇头，“‘五城楼枪击事件’。都二十多年前的事了。真对不住。那房子我什么也想不起来。”

“探长，请您再仔细想一想。甚至只要想出在哪一区也行。比方说，是不是在公共租界里头。”

他又想了一会儿，接着再度摇头。“那真是好久以前的事了。我这脑筋，它不是很正常。有时候我什么都不记得，连前一天的事都记不住。不过，我还是会再想想，看能不能想得起来。也许明天，也许后天，我一觉醒来就想起什么也说不定。班克斯先生，实在很抱歉。但此时此刻，我什么事也记不得。”

等我回到公共租界，已是傍晚。我相信我在房里花了一个钟头左右，重温我做的笔记，想把跟老警探会面的失望抛诸脑后。八点过后我才下楼吃晚餐，在那华丽的餐厅里，坐在我常坐的角落。我记得那天晚上我胃口不太好，我才想丢下主菜不吃，回楼上工作去，这时候侍者却送来沙拉的纸条。

此刻我把纸条拿在手上。不过是张没有格线的白纸，上头潦潦草草写着几行字，上半张已经撕去。她写下这些话，恐怕未经斟酌；上头只写着要我立刻到三四楼楼梯间的平台去见她。如今回头看这件事，跟一周前在托尼·凯瑟克先生家发生的那桩小事，两者之间的关系显而易见；也就是说，要不是我们之间发生了那件事，她可能根本不会写这张纸条。说来奇怪，侍者刚递上纸条时，我并没有多想；我在那儿多坐了一会儿，完全不明白她为什么要那样召唤我。

我得在这里说明一下，自从在鸿运宫的那个晚上之后，我又遇到她三次。其中两次有旁人在场，我们只打了个照面，几乎没说什么话。第三次也一样——在怡和洋行董事长凯瑟克先生家的晚宴——我想我们又是在公共场合，所以几乎没有交谈；然而，事后看来，我们在那里的相遇，可说是某种相当重要的转折点。

那天晚上，我到得迟了些，等我被领进凯瑟克先生宽广的花房，六十多位宾客早已在树荫下与藤蔓间的几张桌子边坐定。我看到莎拉

在房中远处一塞西尔爵士没来—不过我看得出她还在找自己的座位，因此我并不打算走过去。

这种场合里，宾客们似乎都遵守上海另一个特有的习俗，那就是甜点一上一甚至还等不及好好吃完—就离开原先排定的座位，四处找人交际。毫无疑问，我心想等这一刻到了，我就可以过去跟莎拉聊聊。然而等到甜点终于上桌，我却给坐在我身边的女士缠住了，她想跟我解释中南半岛政局的细节。我才甩掉她，主人却又站出来宣布“余兴节目”的时间到了。他接着介绍第一位演出者—有位弱不禁风的女士从身后的桌位走出来，到众人面前朗诵一首有趣的诗，显然写诗的人就是她自己。

她后面又有位先生清唱了几段吉尔伯特与沙利文的轻歌剧，我推断我周遭的人，大半都是有备而来。客人一个接一个上场，有时三两成群；还有情歌清唱与讲笑话。风格总是戏谑轻浮，有时甚至还开黄腔。

接着有位高大的红脸男士—我后来得知他是汇丰银行的董事—走到众人前面，他晚宴的短外套外面还套了一件短袍。他展开手上的卷轴，读一篇从各个层面讽刺上海生活的长篇大论。几乎文章里提到的所有人事物—某些人、某些夜总会洗手间的摆设、某些官场上文山会海的轶事—我都完全没有概念，可是房里的每一个角落很快就充满了笑声。到这时候，我四处寻找莎拉的踪影，结果看到她在另一个角落里，和一群女士坐在一起，跟大家笑得一样开心。她身边的女士，显然喝了不少，放声狂笑，几近失态。

红脸先生演出差不多五分钟的时候—那时大家的兴奋似乎有增无减—他连续说了三四个极其有趣的笑话，整个房里的人几乎都放声大笑起来。正巧在这时候，我又瞥见莎拉。起初这一幕似乎与之前别无二致：莎拉在人群中，笑得快要没有力气的样子。我之所以再多看她几眼，是因为我有点意外：她来上海也不过一年，怎么就已经对上海的社交圈这般烂熟，连这些极其晦涩的笑话也能让她乐成那样。正是这个时候，正当我凝视着她思索这个问题时，我才赫然发现，她根本不是在笑；她并不是在拭着笑出来的眼泪，是我看错了，她其实是在啜泣。我又盯着她看了一会儿，简直不敢相信眼前所见。后来，众人还在大笑，我悄悄起身，穿过人群。我略微闪躲，走到她的身后，此刻我已不再有疑问。在一片欢乐中，莎拉悲不可抑地独自哭泣。

由于我是从她身后靠近的，因此我递上手帕给她时，她吓了一跳。接着她抬头望着我，凝视着我—看了我约莫四五秒—目光中除了

感激，还有类似疑问的眼神。我倾身向前，以便把她的眼神看清楚些，可是她接过手帕，却转身面向红脸先生那边。又是一阵欢笑声遍房里，莎拉也跟着笑了一声，尽管她拿手帕压在眼角，还是看得出她在强颜欢笑。

我想到我可能会害她遭人指点，随即退回原座，而且当晚确实没再靠近她，直到宾客彼此告别，渐渐散去，我才在花房的玄关，当着许多离去宾客的面，跟她行了个相当正式的告别礼。

不过几天之后，我心中隐隐期望她能就那天晚上的事给我一点回应。只是这段时间，我又把全副精神投注在调查工作上，直到我在华懋饭店的餐厅里收到了那张纸条，我还是完全没有联想到先前那天晚上的事情，登上大阶梯时，心中还在纳闷，怎么会是她想要见我。

莎拉所指的楼梯间的平台，其实相当宽阔，上面疏落有致地排放着扶手椅、茶几以及棕榈盆栽。尤其在早晨，一扇扇的大窗户敞开，吊扇呼呼地转着，可以想像那里会是客人看看报纸、喝杯咖啡的好地方。然而到了晚上，这地方却冷冷清清；也许跟物资短缺有关，这里没有点灯，只能借楼梯的灯光，还有从底下的外滩透过窗户照上来的光线。那一夜，除了莎拉，这个地方空无一人，我看见她人在大片的窗玻璃前有如一幅剪影，向外凝视着夜空。我走向她，在椅子上坐了下来，她听到声音转过身来。

“我以为有月亮可看，”她说，“可惜没有。今晚连炮火都没得看。”

“是啊。这几个晚上都平平静静的。”

“塞西尔说双方的士兵都打累了。”

“我想也是。”

“克里斯托弗，过来这里。无妨的。我不会对你怎样。不过，我希望我们的话只有我们俩听得见。”

我渐渐移近，最后到了她身边。我现在看得见楼下的外滩，一整排路灯标示出了港边步道的位置。

“我一切都安排好了，”她悄悄说，“这可不简单，不过再难的事也都解决了。”

“你到底做了什么安排？”

“一切。证件、船票，一切。我没办法在这里再待下去了。我尽全力了，现在我身心俱疲。我要离开了。”

“原来如此。塞西尔呢？他知道你的想法吗？”

“这事不会完全在他意料之外。不过我想他还是会震惊吧。你听了会吃惊吗，克里斯托弗？”

“没有，还好。就我看到的这一切，我多少猜到会有这样的可能。不过在走这步险棋之前，你确定没有别的……？”

“唉，该想的我都想过了。没有用的。就算塞西尔明天就愿意回英国也一样。再说，他在这里输了不少钱。他决定翻了本才回国。”

“我看得出来，这趟上海之旅并未完全如你所愿。我也替你难过。”

“上海之行本身还不算什么。”她笑了一声便沉默不语。过了一会儿她才说：“我试着去爱塞西尔。我费尽了力气。他人不坏。你看到他在这里的德性，恐怕不会同意我的说法。可是他原先不是这个样子。我也有自知之明，变成这个局面，我要负大半责任。他人生走到这个阶段，需要的是休息。可是我的出现让他觉得自己还得有所作为。这是我的错。我们刚到的时候，他确实努力过，卖命地苦干。但这实在不是他能力所及，我想事情就是这样，他就是这样垮了。也许我一走，他就有办法振作起来。”

“可是你要去哪儿？你要回英国吗？”

“就目前而言，我的钱还走不了那么远。我打算先去澳门。到了那里，以后的事以后再说。什么情况都有可能发生。老实说，就是这样，我才必须跟你谈谈。克里斯托弗，我承认，我有点害怕。我不要一个人去那儿单打独斗。我想知道你愿不愿意跟我一起走。”

“你的意思是，跟你去澳门？明天就跟你一起走？”

“对。明天就跟我去澳门。到了澳门再决定下一步怎么走。如果你想的话，我们还可以在南中国海上逍遥一阵子。或许我们可以去南美洲，像黑夜里遁走的小偷。那不是很有趣吗？”

我想，听到她说这些话，我吃了一惊；不过我现在还记得，那时最强烈的感受，是一种几乎触手可及的慰藉感。一点也不假，有那么一两秒，我仿佛一个久陷暗室的人，忽然走到阳光之下，走进和风之

中，一时之间头晕目眩。仿佛她这些提议——我知道她只是一时冲动——包含了巨大的权威，带给我从来不敢奢望的特权。

然而正当这种感受袭上身来，我想我同时也心生警觉，会不会她对我说这些话，目的是要试探我。我记得我最后的回答如下：

“问题是我在这里的任务未了。我得先把这里的事情处理好。毕竟全世界正走到大难的边缘，假如我这个时候一走了之，世人会怎么看待我？既然说到了这个，到时候你又会怎么看待我？”

“噢，克里斯托弗，我们两个真是一样可悲。我们不能再这样子想事情了。否则我们将会一无所有，最后我们有的，就是再多尝一些过去这几年的经历。多尝几年寂寞，多过几天空洞的人生，永远只知道自己做得还不够。我们现在必须把这些全都抛开。放下你的工作，克里斯托弗。你已经耗费够多生命在这上头了。我们明天就走，别再浪费任何一天，再耗下去可就来不及了。”

“究竟什么事情会来不及呢？”

“来不及……呃，我不知道嘛。我只知道我已经浪费了许多年寻寻觅觅，寻找我必须费尽心血才配得到的奖品。可是现在我不稀罕了，现在我要别的东西，我要能给我温暖与庇护的东西，无论我做了什么事，变成什么样的人，都能接纳我的东西。永远都存在的东西，永远，像是明天的天空。这就是我现在要的，而且我认为你应该也想要。可是再拖下去，马上就要来不及了。我们会因为太僵硬而无法改变。如果现在不把握，你我以后永远也不会再有机会了。克里斯托弗，你跟那棵可怜的树有仇吗？”

我这才发现，我不知不觉把身旁棕榈树的叶子一片片撕扯下来，丢在地毯上。

“真不好意思，”——我笑了一声——“算是让我给毁了。”我接着说，“就算你刚才说的那番话没有错，即使如此，事情对我也没那么容易。因为，你知道的，还有詹妮弗。”

说到这里，我心里鲜明地想起上次我们交谈的情景，当时我们在校园后区某间温馨的小会客室道别，一个温柔的英国春日午后，阳光照在橡木墙板上。我忽然想起了她的表情——她先听我把话说完，想了想之后，体贴地点点头，接着又说了一番完全出乎我意料的话。

“你知道的，还有詹妮弗呢。”我又说了一次，觉得自己就快要陷入一场绮思梦想之中了，“即使此时此刻，她都还在等我呢。”

“可是这个我想过。我已经仔仔细细地想过了。我知道她跟我一定可以做朋友。不只是朋友呢。我们三个，我们可以，呃，组成一个小家庭，就像一般的家庭。我想过这个，克里斯托弗，这对我们来说都很幸福美满。我们一安排妥当，就把她接来。我们甚至可以回欧洲，像是意大利，她可以在那里跟我们会合。我知道我会是个称职的母亲，克里斯托弗，我有把握做到。”

我暗自思忖了一会儿，然后回答：“很好，就这样吧。”

“就怎样呢，克里斯托弗？”

“我是说，好，我跟你走。我跟你走，一切依你。没错，你说的也许是对的，詹妮弗、我们、一切的一切，或许有成功的机会。”

一说完这句话，我觉得心中一块重石落地，我几乎要大大叹一口气。此时，莎拉上前一步，深深盯着我的脸看了一下。我甚至以为她要吻我，可她似乎在最后一刻克制住了自己，然后说：

“你听我说。仔细地听我说，我们一步都不能出差错。行李至多一只手提箱。不要托运任何皮箱。我在澳门已经有一些钱，需要什么可以到那边再买。我会派人来接你，一个司机，明天下午三点半。我会找个信得过的人，不过还是小心点好，没必要说的话，一句都别说。他会带你到我等候的地方。克里斯托弗，你看起来好像被什么东西重重地敲到了头。你不会让我失望吧？告诉我。”

“不，不会。我会准备好。明天三点半。别担心，我会……我会跟你到天涯海角，不管你要到世上什么地方，我都跟你一起去。”

也许只是一时冲动；也许是回想起我们把塞西尔爵士从赌场带回的那夜分手的情景；总之，我忽然伸出手，双手握紧她的一只手，亲吻了她的手背。之后，我记得我抬头看着她，仍然抓着她的手，不确定接下来该怎么做；我很可能傻笑了一声。最后，她轻轻地把手抽走，抚摸我的脸颊。

“谢谢你，克里斯托弗，”她轻声说，“谢谢你答应我。我感觉一切都忽然改观了。不过你现在得走了，别让人看到我们在这里。走吧，赶快走。”

第十七章

昨晚上床时，我没什么睡觉的心情，今早一觉醒来，却发现有一种平静的感觉传遍全身，仿佛从身上移走了一个重担。穿衣服的时候，我再度思考我新的处境，发现自己有些兴奋。

那天早晨的情况，如今只剩朦胧的印象。我现在所能记得的是，我忽然有个念头，觉得自己应该以仅剩的时间，把原本计划在往后几天达成的任务，尽量加以完成；若不如此便没有职业道德了。这种态度显然有些荒谬，然而我并不觉得不妥。早餐过后，我急切地展开工作，在楼梯里匆匆忙忙地登上爬下，催促司机穿越城里拥挤的马路。到了下午刚过两点我坐下来吃午餐时，我已大略完成了自己原先预定要做的事情，尽管这一点今日对我而言已无甚意义，但我必须承认当时对此可是相当自豪。

然而与此同时，当我回顾那天发生的事时，我有个极其强烈的印象：我跟我做的事情之间有某种奇特的疏离感。当我在公共租界里穿梭，跟许多城里最有名望的人谈话时，我的一部分内心却几乎是在嘲笑这些人回答我问题时的殷殷切切，嘲笑他们一副想要帮忙的可悲模样。老实说，我在上海待得愈久，就愈鄙视这些所谓租界的领导人物。几乎我每进行一天的调查，就会多揭露一些他们这些年来的疏漏、腐败，或者更等而下之的事。打从到了上海的那天起，我从来不曾遇见过谁真诚地为自己感到羞耻，也没人承认若非那些掌权的人优柔寡断、短视近利，甚至别有居心，这里的情况根本不会走到这般风雨飘摇的地步。那天早上我去了上海俱乐部，会见三位非常杰出的“精英”。再次面对这些人的浮夸狂妄，面对他们一再拒绝承认这整件悲剧全是他们的无能所造成的，一想到自己就要把这些人从人生里甩掉，我就觉得十分愉快。确实，在这样的情况下，我非常确信自己做了正确的决定；确定这群人几乎共有的想法不仅毫无道理可言，而且根本就应该彻底唾弃——他们竟然认为，化解危机是我一人该独扛的责任。我可以想见，不久之后，这些人听到我离去的消息会有多么震惊——接下来是接踵而至的震怒与惊慌——我承认，想到这些真让我胸中的闷气一扫而空。

吃着午餐，我发现自己回想起那个阳光明媚的午后，跟詹妮弗在学校最后一次见面的情景；想到我们两人在那间小会客室里，各自尴尬地坐在扶手椅上，阳光在橡木墙板上舞动，从她身后的窗子还可以

看见延伸到湖边的草地。她静静听我解释，我费尽唇舌告诉她为什么我非去不可，告诉她在上海等着我完成的任务有多么重大。有好几处我停了下来，期望她问我一些问题，或至少说说她的看法。不过每次她都只是认真地点点头，等我继续说下去。最后，我发现自己开始重复了，于是我把话打住，对她说：

“那么，詹妮弗。你有没有什么话要对我说？”

我不知道我想听到什么。不过她又凝视了我一会儿，脸上并无愤怒之情。她回答：

“克里斯托弗叔叔，我明白我自己什么事都做不好。不过那是因为我还年轻。等我年纪再大一点，或许不用太久，我就会有办法帮你。我就可以帮你，我保证我会帮你。所以，我不在你身边的时候，请一定要记得好吗？记得我在这里，在英国，你回来以后我会帮你。”

这实在很出乎我的预料，尽管人到了上海，我还是常常回想她说的这些话，我还是不太确定，她当日想传达给我的是什么讯息。她的意思是，尽管听我说了半天，她还是认为我不太可能达成我在上海的使命吗？我还是得回到英国，再耗很多年继续从事我的工作吗？同样地，这也可能只是个不知所措的孩子说的话，她在话里尽力掩藏心中的不满，我实在没有必要如此反复推敲。尽管如此，那天下午我坐在旅馆的花房里吃午餐时，我发现自己又再次陷入沉思，想着我们最后一次的会面。

咖啡快喝完的时候，旅馆服务台的职员过来告诉我，有通电话急着找我。他带我到外头楼梯平台上的电话亭，接线生忙乱了一会儿之后，我听到一个不知在哪儿听过的声音。

“班克斯先生吗？班克斯先生吗？班克斯先生，我终于想起来了。”

我没说话，生怕只要我一出声音，就会危及我们的计划。不过，那个人又说了：

“班克斯先生？您听得见吗？我想起了重要的事情。有关我们无法搜查的那栋房子。”

我才知道那原来是孔探长；他的声音虽然粗而沉，听来却是精神饱满。

“探长，对不起。没想到是您。请说您想起了什么。”

“班克斯先生。有时候，您知道的，我专心抽烟斗的时候比较想得起事情。许多遗忘多年的事都会浮现在眼前。所以我就想，再试一次，我该去抽个烟斗看看。于是我想起那个嫌犯跟我们说了什么。我们无法搜查的那栋房子。就在一户房主叫叶辰的人家的正对面。”

“叶辰？那是谁？”

“我不认识。许多比较穷的人说地址都不用街名。他们用显著的地标。那栋我们不能搜查的房子，就在叶辰他家对面。”

“叶辰。您确定就是这个名字？”

“我确定。现在我记得很清楚。”

“这是不是个常见的名字？上海有多少人会叫这个名字？”

“幸好那个嫌犯还给了我们另一条线索。这个叶辰是个瞎子。您要找的房子，就在一个名叫叶辰的瞎子家对面。当然，他可能搬家了，也可能过世了。不过，只要能查出我们当年办案的时候，这个人住在哪里……”

“那当然，探长。您真是帮了大忙。”

“那我就开心了。我也猜您会这么觉得。”

“探长，真是感激不尽。”

我发现时间不早了，挂上电话之后，我没回去把午餐吃完，而是直接上楼回房间打包。

我正想着该带走什么，却有某种诡异的不真实感袭上心头。有一度我在床上坐下，望着窗外的天空。我蓦然感到不可思议：刚才得到的这条线索，若是早一天出现，就会成为我人生最重要的东西。不过此时此刻，我在脑子里随意想想，却觉得这东西已经像是湮没在逝去的岁月里，如果我不愿想起就可以将它忘记。

打包完毕之后显然还有时间，因为三点半有人准时敲门的时候，我已经坐在椅子上等了好一会儿了。我把门打开，外头站了一个年轻的中国人，也许还不到二十岁，穿着长袍，帽子拿在手上。

“我是您的司机，先生，”他轻声说明，“若有行李，容我来提。”

年轻人把车驶离华懋饭店，我望着南京路上的忙碌人群走在午后的阳光里，觉得自己像是从远处眺望着他们。我在车里坐定，把什么事都交给司机去料理——尽管年纪轻轻，但他貌似十分沉稳干练。我想问他跟莎拉有什么关系，但我随即想起她提醒过，要我别说非必要的话。因此我没有开口，不久，我的心思就转向了澳门，还有多年前我在大英博物馆看到的澳门相片。

车子开了约十分钟，我忽然把身子靠向年轻人，说道：“嗯，对不起。这样问你不知道有没有用。不过，不知道你会不会碰巧认识一个叫做叶辰的人？”

年轻人的目光并没有从眼前的路上移开，我才要再问他一次，他就说了：

“叶辰。那个失明的演员吗？”

“没错。呃，我知道他是瞎了，却不知道他是演员。”

“他不是什么知名的演员。叶辰。他以前是演员，好多年前，那时我还是个小孩。”

“你是说……你认识他？”

“不认识。不过我知道这个人。您对叶辰有兴趣吗，先生？”

“没，没有。没什么。正好有人对我提起他。没什么要紧的。”

路上我没再说什么。我们在窄街小巷里转来转去，等他在一条静谧的后街停下车子，我已经完全不知道我们到哪里了。

年轻人把车门打开，把手提箱递给我。

“那家商店，”他说，用手一指，“有留声机的那家。”

对街有个小店铺，肮脏的窗子里确实展示着一架留声机。我还看见一个英文写的招牌：“留声机唱片、自动钢琴曲卷、手稿”。我往街道左右望了望，街上除了两个黄包车夫蹲在他们的车边说说笑笑，就只剩我跟年轻人两个人。我提起行李，正要过街，忽然有个冲动，于是对年轻人说：

“不知道可不可以请你等一会儿？”

年轻人露出不解之色。“梅德赫斯特夫人只说要把您送来这里。”

“没错，没错。不过，这是我个人的请求，你明白吗。我希望你能多等我一会儿，也许等一下还有用得着你的时候。当然，也许用不着。不过你知道的，以防万一。你瞧”——我把手伸进口袋掏出钞票——“瞧，不会让你白等的。”

年轻人气得涨红了脸，转身避开钞票，仿佛我手中拿的是什么污秽不堪的东西。他气呼呼地回到车上，砰的一声关上车门。

我知道自己错估了什么，不过在那一刻，也没心情去烦这件事。此外，年轻人气虽气，却并未发动引擎。我把钞票塞回口袋，提起行李过街。

小店里十分拥挤。午后的阳光倾泻进来，然而只有几块灰尘满布的地方照得到阳光。店的一侧，有架琴键褪色的立式钢琴，还有几张没装在套子里的留声机唱片，排放在谱架上。唱片上不但有灰尘还有蜘蛛网。其他地方还有几块奇形怪状的厚绒布——看起来像从戏院舞台的帘幕上裁下来的一跟一些歌剧演唱家与舞蹈家的照片一起钉在墙上。我或许期望莎拉就站在那里等我，可是在场的只有另外一个人，一个瘦弱的欧洲人，蓄着尖尖的黑胡子，坐在柜台后面。

“午安，”他操着德国口音说话，从摊在他面前的账册里抬头瞄了我一眼。接着他上上下下把我仔细打量一遍，问道：“你是英国人吗？”

“我是。午安。”

“我们有一些英国来的唱片。例如，我们有张咪咪·强森演唱《我眼中只有你》的唱片。有兴趣吗？”

他小心翼翼的说话方式里有种东西，让我觉得这是事先安排的暗语的开场。可我在脑子里回想莎拉是否交代过什么口令或句子，却什么也想不起来。最后我说：

“我在上海没有留声机。不过我很喜欢咪咪·强森。其实几年前我还听过她的演唱会呢。”

“真的？咪咪·强森，没错。”

我清楚地感觉我错误的回答把他搞糊涂了。于是我说：“嘿，我姓班克斯。克里斯托弗·班克斯。”

“班克斯。班克斯先生。”那个人面无表情地念了我的名字，接着说，“假如你喜欢咪咪·强森的《我眼中只有你》，我就为你播

放。稍候。”

他的身子伏到柜台底下，我趁此机会看了看窗外街上的状况。两位黄包车夫还在那儿谈笑，看到那位年轻人还在车上，我的心也就安了。正当我怀疑事情是否出了大差错时，一曲温馨慵懒的爵士乐在店里荡漾开来。咪咪·强森的歌声出场，我想起这首歌在几年前让伦敦所有的夜总会都为之疯狂。

过了一会儿，我注意到那个瘦弱的店员指着店内后方挂着深色厚重布幔的一个角落。我刚才没注意到那里有道门，可我一推，却发现里头还有一个房间。

莎拉正坐在一只木制行李箱上，一身便装加上一顶女帽。烟嘴上点了根香烟，储物柜般的小房间里早已烟雾弥漫。我们四周堆满了一叠叠的唱片还有一页页分门别类装在纸箱和茶叶箱里的乐谱。房内并无窗户，不过我看到一扇通到屋外的后门，此时并未阖拢。

“好啦，我来了，”我说，“我只带了一件行李，如你所坚持。不过显然你带了三件。”

“这个袋子装的是埃塞尔伯特。我的玩具熊。他跟了我好久了，一辈子了。很可笑，对不对？”

“可笑？才不，一点也不。”

“跟塞西尔来这里的时候，我错不该把他塞在一大堆东西里头。等我打开手提箱，他的手臂已经断了。我在箱子的角落里找到了那只断臂，卡在一只便鞋里头。所以这次，除了几条围巾，整只袋子里就只有他了。实在很可笑。”

“不会，不会。我完全能理解。埃塞尔伯特值得。”

她小心地放下烟嘴，站了起来。接着我们互相拥吻——我想，就像银幕上的情侣一样。这几乎跟我向来想像的一样，只不过我们的拥抱却有某种奇怪的别扭，我好几次想调整我的姿势；可是我的右脚已经紧紧靠在一只沉重的箱子上，真想转身的话，一定会失去平衡。接着她退后一步，深深吸了一口气，目光不曾离开我的脸。

“都准备妥当了吗？”我问她。

她起先没有回答，我以为她还要再吻我一次。但最后，她只是简单地说：

“一切都安排妥当了。只要再等几分钟。然后我们就从那里出去”——她指着后门——“走到码头边，那里有条舢舨会带我们走水路到两英里外，再上蒸汽船，接着就到澳门了。”

“塞西尔呢，他知不知道？”

“我整天都没见到他。早餐一吃完就到他常去的地方赌去了，我想他还在那里。”

“真是遗憾。说真的，总得有人教他振作振作。”

“这件事嘛，我们想管也管不着了。”

“我想也是。”我忽然笑了一声，“一切都随他去吧，我们只管走我们选择的路。”

“你说的对。克里斯托弗，有什么不对吗？”

“没事，没事。我只是想……我只是希望……”

我向她伸出双臂，想再抱抱她，她却抬起手说：

“克里斯托弗，我想你该坐下来。别担心，不管什么事以后再做都不迟，任何事情都一样。”

“没错，没错。对不起。”

“我们只要到了澳门，就可以好好想想我们的未来。认真考虑待在什么地方对我们最好。还有，什么地方对詹妮弗最好。我们把地图全摊在床上，望着房间外的大海，争执该去哪里。噢，我们一定会争执。我甚至好期待这些争执。你到底要不要先坐下来？嘿，坐下来嘛。”

“是这样的……嗯，如果我们得再等个几分钟，那我先去做一件事。”

“做一件事？到底是什么事？”

“就是……一件事嘛。真的，不会花多少时间，就几分钟。事情是这样子的，我刚才问了某人一件事。”

“问谁？克里斯托弗，我觉得这个时候我们不该跟任何人说话。”

“我不是那个意思，真的。我完全明白在这个节骨眼上，一切的一切都要小心。不是那样，别担心。是那个年轻人。你派来的那位，

开车载我来的那位。有件事情我得问他。”

“可是他应该走了吧。”

“没有，他没走。他还在外头。听我说，我马上回来。”

我急忙穿过布幔回到店里，那位蓄着胡子的瘦弱男子抬头看我，一脸意外。

“你喜欢咪咪·强森吗？”他问。

“是啊，是啊。棒极了。我只出去一下子。”

“容我把话说清楚，先生，我是瑞士人。你的国家和我的国家，近期内应该不会陷于敌对状态。”

“啊，没错。那太好了。我马上回来。”

我赶过街道，来到车旁。那个年轻人看到我，把窗玻璃摇下，礼貌地微笑；他先前的火气似乎消了。我倾身悄悄问他：

“听我说。这位叶辰。你知不知道在哪儿可以找到他？”

“叶辰？他就住在附近。”

“叶辰。我说的是眼睛失明的那位叶辰哦。”

“对啊。再过去一点就到了。”

“他家就这么近？”

“没错。”

“听我说，你好像没听懂我说的话。你是说叶辰，眼睛失明的那位叶辰，他家就在附近？”

“没错，先生。您可以走过去，如果您想坐车，我就载您过去。”

“请听清楚，此事关系重大。你知不知叶辰在他现在这栋房子里住多久了？”

年轻人想了想，然后说：“他一直住那儿，先生。从我小时候就住那儿了。”

“你确定？你听好，这可是事关重大。你确定这位就是那个眼睛失明的叶辰，而且他住在那里很久了？”

“我才说了啊，先生。我还是个小孩的时候，他就住那里了。我猜想他在那里已经住了很多很多年啰。”

我挺起身子，深深吸了口气，想想我刚才听到的事背后的各种可能。接着我再度弯下身子对他说：“我想该由你带我过去。我是说，坐车。我们必须小心地接近那里。请你载我过去，不过车子稍微停远些。只要让我能清楚看到叶辰家对面那栋房子就好了。你了解吗？”

我上了车，年轻人发动引擎。他把车掉头，然后开进另一条狭窄的街道。在路上，我想了满脑子事情。我不知道要不要告诉年轻人，这趟路有多么重大的意义，甚至想到要不要问他车上有没有枪——不过还是决定别问，问这种事也许只会让他惊慌。

我们又转了个弯，进入一条更窄的街道。接着又转了一次便把车停下。有一刻我还以为到了目的地，不过接着便看到发生了什么事。在我们前头的巷道上，有群小孩子想拉住一头晕头转向的水牛。孩童间似乎在争吵什么，我看的时候，有个孩子用棍子在牛鼻子上头打了一下。我觉得浑身紧张，想起母亲在我小时候不时警告我，这种牛发起火来，可是跟任何蛮牛一样危险。那头牲畜还好没有反应，男孩们继续争吵。年轻人徒然按了几声喇叭，最后叹了口气，只好把车子倒回原来的街道。

我们走旁边的一条巷子，不过换了条路似乎让我的司机有点迷失方向，他转了几个弯以后，又停下来倒车，可是这次路并没有被挡住。其间，我们来到一条较宽阔却凹凸不平的黄土路上，有一侧全是破旧的木棚屋。

“请开快一点，我时间不多。”

这时候一声巨响震动了车子行进的地面。年轻人不为所动继续开他的车，不过却紧张地遥望远处。

“开打了，”他说，“双方又开打了。”

“听起来好近。”我说。

接下来的几分钟，我们又绕过更多的狭窄巷口与矮小的木头房子，不停地响着喇叭，以驱开路上的孩童与狗。接着汽车又猛然刹住，我听到年轻人懊恼地叫了一声。我越过他肩头一望，发现马路已经被沙包墙与铁丝网给堵住了。

“我们得绕个远路才行，”他说，“没别的路了。”

“等等，那个地方就在眼前了吧。”

“非常近，没错。不过路堵了，所以我们得绕远路过去。不用急，先生。我们很快就可以到那里。”

可是年轻人的态度里，有了明显的变化。他先前沉稳的样子已经消失，现在他看起来却这么小，也许不过十五六岁，让他开车根本就是件荒唐的事。有一会儿，我们开过泥泞、发臭的街道，钻过许多小巷，我时时刻刻都以为车轮就要陷进未加盖的水沟里了——还好年轻人每次总有办法以毫发之距闪过。一路上我们听到枪炮在远处响起，看到人群纷纷躲到房子或遮蔽物下。不过路上还是有孩童跟狗，似乎都无家可归，在车子前方四处乱跑，浑然不知危险。有一刻，我们颠簸地开过一家小工厂的院子，我说：

“等等，你怎么不停下来问个路？”

“不用急，先生。”

“不用急？其实你现在跟我一样，已经不知道怎么走了。”

“我们马上就到，先生。”

“胡说。你为什么一定要这样装模作样呢？中国人都是这样。你迷了路又不承认。我们至少开了……我看，开了一整天了。”

他没有回应，把车开上一条陡峭的路，路旁是堆积如山的工厂废料。接着又是一声巨响，近得吓人，年轻人把车速减到近乎步行的速度。

“先生，我看我们现在回去吧。”

“回去？回去哪里？”

“战斗就在附近。这里不安全。”

“你是什么意思，战斗就在附近？”一个念头突然闪过，“我们是不是在闸北区附近？”

“先生，这里就是闸北区。我们已经在这区里一会儿了。”

“什么？你是说我们已经离开租界了？”

“我们已经在闸北区了。”

“可是……天啊！我们真的离开租界了！在闸北区？好啊，你是个笨蛋，你知道吗？笨蛋！你跟我说房子就在附近。现在我们迷路

了。我们可能就在交战区的边上，随时都会有危险。我们竟然离开租界了！你真是个标准的笨蛋。知道为什么吗？让我告诉你。你不懂又要装懂。你自大又不肯承认自己的缺点。这正是我对笨蛋的定义。典型的笨蛋！听到没有？彻头彻尾的笨蛋！”

他把车停下，然后打开车门，头也不回地走了。

我花了一会儿工夫才冷静下来评估情势。我们已经开上一座小丘，车子现在孤零零地停在黄土路上，四周是成堆破碎的砖块、扭曲的铁条还有一些看似脚踏车残留的破烂车轮。我看见年轻人的身影走在山丘上的一条小径。

我下车追他。他一定听到了我的声音，但他既不加快脚步也不回头。我追了上去，拉住他的肩膀。

“等等，是我不对。”我说，有点喘，“我道歉。我不该发脾气。可是，事情是……你不明白这件事有多重要。现在，拜托”——我指着车子——“我们继续吧。”

年轻人不肯看我。“不开车了。”他说。

“别这样，我已经道歉了。现在，拜托，请你讲讲道理。”

“不开车了。这里太危险。战斗很近。”

“请听我说，找到这栋房子对我来说非常重要。真的很重要。现在请你老实告诉我。你迷路了吗，或者你真的知道房子在哪里？”

“我知道。我知道房子在哪儿。不过现在不安全。战斗非常近。”

机关枪声忽然在我们四周回响，仿佛佐证着他的看法。枪声听起来还算远，不过根本听不出来处，我们两人同时环顾四周，觉得自己忽然暴露在山头上。

“就这么办好了，”我说，从口袋里取出记事本与铅笔。“我看得出你不想再扯进这件事里，我可以理解你的想法。刚才冒犯了你，是我不对。不过你走之前，我想请你再为我做两件事。第一，我想请你在这一页写下叶辰的地址。”

“没有地址，先生。那里没有地址。”

“没关系，可不可以画个地图。写下走法。什么都好。请为我做这件事。接着，请你送我到最近的警察局。当然，我一开始就该这么

做。我需要受过训练的武装人员。拜托。”

我把笔记本与铅笔拿给他。前几页写满了当天早上我所做的调查。他翻过小巧的书页，直到有空白的地方。接着他说：

“不用英文。我不会写英文，先生。”

“你会写什么就写什么罢。画张地图。什么都好，请快点。”

这时，他似乎领会了我要求的事情非同小可。他仔细地想了几秒，接着提笔疾书。他写满一页，又写一页。写了四五页以后，他把笔插进书脊里一起还给我。我翻翻他写的东西，看不懂那些中文字有什么意义。尽管如此，我还是对他说：

“谢谢你。真的非常感谢你。现在，请送我到警察局。你就可以回家了。”

“警察局在这边，先生。”他又往原先前进的方向走了几步。他从山脊上，往下指着坡底。约两三百码远的地方，有一片灰色的房子。

“那里就是警察局，先生。”

“哪里？哪一栋？”

“那栋，有旗子的。”

“看到了，好。你确定那是警察局？”

“确定，先生。那是警察局。”

从我们所在的地方望去，那看起来确实像是警察局。此外我也明白了根本不必去开车了；车子停在山丘的另一侧，而我们刚才过来的路太窄，车子开不过来；我也知道若要找路绕过山丘，很容易就会迷路。我把笔记本放回口袋，考虑要给他几张钞票，接着就想到先前他对此深恶痛绝。于是我只是说：“谢谢你。你真是帮了大忙。从现在开始我可以自己来。”

年轻人迅速地点了个头——似乎还在生我的气——接着转身朝汽车的方向走下山坡。

第十八章

那所警察局似乎已经荒废。我爬下山坡就看到了一些破窗子，有扇大门的门板还斜挂在铰链上。不过在我小心走过碎玻璃，进入警局接待处的时候，我碰到了三个中国人，其中两人持步枪对着我，第三位则舞弄着一把园艺用的圆锹助长声势。其中一人一穿着中国陆军军装的那位一用结巴的英语问我要干什么。我好不容易才让他们了解我是谁，告诉他们我想跟这里的主官说话，这些人开始辩了起来。过了半晌，拿圆锹的那位走进后面的房里去，等着他回来的这段时间，另外两个人依旧拿枪对着我。我趁机看看四周，心想恐怕不会有任何警察留在这里了。尽管还有几张海报和几条标语，可是这地方看起来已经荒废一阵子了。电线从墙上垂挂下来，房间后半截已经遭火焚毁。

大约五分钟之后，拿圆锹的人回来了。他们又交谈了几句，我猜那是上海话，最后那位士兵比比手势叫我跟拿圆锹的人走。

我跟着他穿过后面的房间，发现那里也有武装人员守卫。不过他们让路给我们，不久我走下一道摇摇欲坠的楼梯，到了警察局的地下室。

我们怎么走到那地窖里去，现在的记忆有点模糊；我记得我们走过类似地道的地方，还得低头避开横梁；这里一样有卫兵，每次有卫兵的身影迫近，我就得贴在粗糙的墙壁上才挤得过去。

最后我被带进一个没有窗户的房间，那里像是临时搭设的军事指挥所。里头的光源是两颗灯泡，并排垂挂在中央的横梁上。墙壁的砖头外露，我右边的墙上打了个刚好够一人爬过的洞。对面的角落里放了一台破旧的无线电，房间的正中央则放了一张办公桌——我看了一眼，发现桌子曾经从中被锯成两半，现在又用钉子、绳子等物勉强凑了起来。几口翻过来的木箱被拿来当椅子，唯一一把真正的椅子上，绑了一个昏迷不醒的人。他身着日本海军陆战队军服，脸的一侧有一大块瘀伤。

其他在场的只有两位中国陆军军官，都站在那儿低头看着摊在桌上的地形图。我进来的时候他们抬头看我，其中一人上前跟我握手。

“我是周中尉。这位是马上尉。班克斯先生能莅临本地，我们感到十分荣幸。您是来给我们打气的吗？”

“呃，老实说，中尉，我来这里是有事相求。然而，我相信只要我的事情办成，就可以大大提振士气。不管是这里的士气还是其他地方的士气。可是我需要一点协助，这也是我来此的原因。”

中尉向上尉说了几句话，显然后者不懂英语；接着两人同时看着我。那个昏迷的日本人忽然吐了满胸口的东西。我们全转身看他；接着中尉说：

“您说您需要协助，班克斯先生。究竟是怎样的协助呢？”

“我这里有份说明，是某栋房子的地点说明。我必须立刻赶赴此地，刻不容缓。这份说明是以中文写的，我不懂中文。不过，您也知道，即使我读得懂中文，我还是需要人带路，一个熟悉那一带的人。”

“所以您需要一个带路的。”

“不光是这样，中尉。我还需要四五个人，能再多些更好。最好是训练有素的，因为这件事有点棘手。”

中尉轻轻一笑；接着又板起脸孔说：“先生，我们此刻兵力不足。这个基地是我们防御线的要点。可是您也看得出我们的防御多么薄弱。老实说，您刚才看到的人，非病即伤，要不就是没有经验的志愿军。每个有战斗力的士兵，都送到前线去了。”

“我可以理解，中尉，你们现在的处境艰难。可是您必须了解，我要做的并不是一般的访查而已。刚才我说必须立刻到那栋房子……其实，中尉，我不妨坦白告诉您，没必要对您保密。您与这位马上尉可以是最先知道的人。我要找的这栋房子，我知道离这里不远了，正是我父母被囚禁的地方。没错，中尉！我正是要把这多年的悬案破解。因此，您现在可以理解，为什么我觉得，即使你们正忙得不可开交，我却认为我的要求合情合理。”

中尉的脸仍然对着我，上尉以中文问了他几句话，不过他没回答。接着他对我说：

“我们正在等几个出任务的人回来。出去的时候是七个人。不知道有没有办法全数回来。我原来的意思是立刻派他们到另一个据点。不过现在……在这样的情况下，我来扛这个责任。这些人，不管回来几个，就负责保护您完成您的任务。”

我不耐烦地叹了口气。“真是感谢，中尉。可是这些人我们得等多久？可不可能就派站在这里的这几位，就离开几分钟？反正那栋房子非常近。还有，事情是这样子，还有人在等我……”我忽然想起莎拉，心中忽然惊慌起来。我又向前走近一步说：“对了，中尉，不知道可不可以借电话一用。我真的得跟她说话。”

“这里恐怕没有电话，班克斯先生。那台是无线电，只能跟我们总部还有各个基地相通。”

“既然如此，那事情就更不能拖了！是这样子的，有位女士此时此刻正在等我！容我建议，我就从眼前这些卫兵挑个三四位……”

“班克斯先生，请冷静下来。我们会尽己所能帮您。但我刚才说过了，外头看到的那些人，不适合这样的任务。他们只会坏您的事。我知道您为了破这个案子等了好多年。容我建议您，别在这个节骨眼上轻率行动。”

中尉的话不无道理。我叹了口气，坐在其中一只翻过来的茶叶箱上。

“那些人应该马上就会回来，”中尉说，“班克斯先生，可否让我看看您手上的地点说明？”

我实在不愿让我的笔记本离手，几秒都不愿意。可是最后我还是把本子翻到那页，交给那位军官。他读了一会儿，便把笔记本还我。

“班克斯先生，我得告诉您。这栋房子。恐怕没那么容易接近。”

“可是我碰巧知道，先生，那房子就在附近。”

“近是近，没错。然而，想靠近却不容易。真的，班克斯先生，这房子现在可能已经在日军的防线后面了。”

“日军的防线？好，我想我总是可以跟日本人交涉。我跟他们可没有冲突。”

“先生，请跟我来，趁着等人回来的时候，让我来告诉您，我们确切的位置。”

中尉跟上尉很简短地说了一下话。接着他走向角落的扫帚柜，把柜门掀开走了进去。我愣了一会才明白他要我跟上，可我才走进扫帚柜，却险些撞到中尉皮靴的鞋跟——此时就在我脸的正前方。我听到他的声音在黑暗中从上方传来：

“请跟我来，班克斯先生。这梯子有四十八级。您最好低我至少五级比较方便。”

他的脚上去不见了。我往柜里走去，伸手向前，摸到身前砖墙上有几级铁制的梯阶。在头顶的一片黑暗里，我看到有一小片天空。我猜我们是在烟囱或者警察局的瞭望台底部。

前面几级梯子我爬得不顺手；不只是因为害怕在黑暗中没抓稳而紧张不已，我也怕中尉万一失足压在我头上。还好那片天空愈来愈大，后来我看到了中尉在上方攀爬的身影。又过了一两分钟，我们会合了。

我们站在高高的屋顶平台上，四周数里密密麻麻地挤着其他房子的屋顶。遥遥的远处，约往东半英里，我看到一柱黑烟在午后的天空升起。

“真奇怪，”我说，同时环顾着四野，“下面的人该怎么走动呢？那儿好像没有街道。”

“从这里看，当然是这样。不过也许您会想用这个来看。”

他递给我一副双筒望远镜。我把望远镜放在眼前，花了一点工夫调整到看得清楚，才发现我只对准了数码之外的烟囱。好不容易我才对准了远方的烟柱，并且调好焦距。我听到中尉在我旁边说：

“您现在看到的是一片大杂院，班克斯先生。工厂的工人们住在这里。我敢说您小时候，绝对不曾到这片大杂院去过。”

“大杂院？我想没有。”

“几乎可以确定您不曾去过。外国人难得在这里出现，除非是传教士。或者是共产党。我是中国人，但也一样，我们这一辈的人，也都不准走近那些地方。直到上次三二年跟日本人开战之前，我对那里几乎还是一无所知。您不会相信人类也可以那样过活。就像是蚂蚁窝似的。那些房子，是盖给一穷二白的人们住的。那些屋子，房间狭小，一排接一排，屋背靠着屋背。就像养鸡场。看仔细一点，您就能看到巷子。那些小巷子，窄得仅能让人走到屋里。屋子后墙根本没窗户。后面的房间就像个黑坑，靠着再后面的房屋。容我多言，我提这个不是没有原因，您自然会明白。那些房间都很窄小，因为是给穷人住的。有一阵子，这样的房间要住七八个人。日子久了，即使房间已经小成那样，有的家庭还是不得不再做隔间，好跟别户人家分摊房租。如果还是付不起房租，他们就隔得更细。我记得我看过那个一丁

点大、像个暗柜似的房子，还隔成四份，每份各住一户人家。班克斯先生，您不会相信，人类也能住成那样吧？”

“听来确实不可思议，不过既然是您亲眼所见，中尉……”

“等打退日本人，班克斯先生，我会考虑为共产党效力。您觉得说这话有危险么？好多军官希望让共产党来领导抗日，而不愿让蒋介石领导。”

我把望远镜朝那片密密麻麻的破屋顶望去。可以看出有些已经塌陷。我还辨识出中尉提及的巷道，那是一些狭窄的通道，四出蜿蜒至各家各户。

“不过这些可不是木棚茅舍哦。”中尉继续在一旁解说，“尽管住户自己的隔间十分脆弱，但房子的主要结构，也就是大杂院本身，却是砖造的。这点在三二年日本人入侵的时候就是相当关键性的一环，至今也依然如此。”

“我懂您的意思，”我说，“大杂院如此坚固，又有士兵驻守。日本人即使有现代化的武器，恐怕也没那么容易攻下。”

“您说的没错。日军的武器，甚至他们的训练，在这里全派不上用场。这里的战斗变成只能靠步枪、刺刀、短刀、手枪、圆锹、菜刀等等。日军的防线，在过去的这个星期，甚至还被逼退了一些。您看到那阵浓烟吧？才不过是上周的事，那个地方还让敌方占领着。不过现在我们把他们打退了。”

“里头还有平民居住吗？”

“确实还有。您也许不相信，即使是那些逼近前线的房子，里头还是有人住。这让日军更加施展不开。他们不能随处轰炸。他们知道西方势力在观察，他们顾忌到任何不人道的行为都得付出代价。”

“你们的部队能撑多久？”

“天知道？蒋介石也许会派部队来增援。或许日本人决定放弃，重新调度，把重点放到南京或重庆。现在胜负都还在未定之天。不过最近的几次战斗让我们损失惨重。请您用望远镜往左方望去，班克斯先生。现在，您是否看到一条马路？看到了吗？那条路当地人叫它‘猪巷’。那条路看来不起眼，不过现在对于战情却十分重要。如您所见，那条路沿着大杂院的边缘延伸。目前我军将它封闭，想办法不让日本人进入。假如他们有办法进入那条路，这片大杂院就有可能

从整个侧面被攻破。那样子我们再守下去也没有意义了。我们将会两面受敌。您要求我派人陪同您去关押您父母的那栋房子。要跟着您去的人，原本是派去防守设在‘猪巷’尽头的路障的。过去几天，那里的战况十分惨烈。同时，我们当然还是得守住那片大杂院的防线。”

“从这高处，倒看不出底下有什么动静。”

“没错。可是我可以向您保证，在大杂院里头，情况相当恶劣。我告诉您这点，班克斯先生，是因为您要进入那个区域。”

有那么一会儿，我继续用望远镜瞭望，没有说话。后来我开口说：“中尉，那栋房子，我父母被拘禁的那栋，我从这里看得到吗？”

他用手在我肩上轻轻碰了一下，只是我的眼睛并没有离开望远镜。

“您看到左边那座残塔吗，班克斯先生？就像复活岛上的那种神像。对，对，就是那个。如果您从那里画一条直线到右边那栋庞大黑色建筑物的废墟——那里原本是一家老纺织厂，这就是早上我军击退日军后的战线。拘禁令尊令堂的房子，大约就在与您左手边那座高烟囱同一个水平线的地方。假如您画条线，非常水平的线，横跨这片大杂院，一直到我们左边一点点的地方。对，对……”

“您是说靠近那片屋顶，那个屋檐翘起，呈拱形的……”

“没错，就是那栋。当然，我也不敢确定。不过根据您给我的地点说明，大约就是那栋房子的所在。”

我透过望远镜，凝视那一片屋顶。有一阵子，我忍不住看个不停，虽然我也知道我耽误了中尉分内的任务。过了一阵子，中尉开口说话了：

“这种感觉一定十分奇特。想想，您看到的那栋房子，里头可能正拘禁着令尊令堂。”

“的确。这感觉确实有点奇特。”

“当然也有可能不是那栋。这纯粹是我个人的猜测。不过就算不是也不会太远。我指给您看的那座高烟囱，班克斯先生，当地人称之为‘东炉’。眼前比较靠近我们的这座烟囱，几乎跟‘东炉’成一直线，这座叫做‘西炉’。开战前，本地的居民常在这两个地方焚烧他们的垃圾。我建议您，一旦进入这片大杂院，就以这两座大炉作为地

标。否则外地人根本搞不清方向。请您再看清楚远处那座烟囱，先生。切记，您要找的房子，就往那儿再过去一点点，在往正南方的这条直线上。”

我终于放下望远镜。“中尉，您真是太好心了。我无法表达我的感激。事实上，有一事不知您是否在意，或许您可以容我将来在极司菲尔公园举行庆祝家父家母获释的典礼时，提起您的姓名。”

“哪里，我的协助实在微不足道。再说，班克斯先生，您别以为任务已接近尾声。站在这上头看，那地方看起来好像不远。可是在这片大杂院里，还有许多战斗在进行。尽管您不是作战人员，但要从一栋房子走到另一栋还是不容易。而且除了两座大炉以外，就没有其他清楚的地标了。然后，您还得把令尊令堂安然带出来。换言之，您还有相当艰巨的任务在前头。不过此刻，班克斯先生，我建议我们先下去。那些人员可能已经回来，正在等我的命令。至于您，务必设法在入夜之前回来。天还亮着的时候，大杂院那儿就已经像人间地狱了。到了晚上，那可比您最糟的噩梦还要糟。如果天黑了还回不来，那么我建议您就找个安全的地方，跟我的人一起等天亮了再回来。不过就在昨天，我的两名手下才彼此误杀了对方，天一黑，他们连东南西北都认不清了。”

“您所說的，我全牢记在心，中尉。那么我们就下去吧。”

楼底下，马上尉正在对一名军服破破烂烂的士兵说话。士兵看来没受伤，可是似乎受到惊吓而情绪不稳。椅子上的日军则在打鼾，仿佛正在享受安稳的小憩，不过我注意到他又多吐了些东西到前襟上。

中尉与上尉很快地讨论了一会儿，接着询问衣衫褴褛的士兵。接着他转身对我说：

“坏消息。其他人没回来。有两位确定阵亡。其余被困住了，不过也相当有可能脱困逃回来。敌军已经往前推进，就算只是暂时如此，那栋拘禁令尊令堂的房子，极可能已经在他们的占领区里头了。”

“就算这样，中尉，我还是必须继续下去，我不能再等了。请听我说，如果您答应派给我的人没回来，那么也许——我知道我这要求实在太过分——也许您可以好人做到底，陪我走一趟。老实说，中尉，我想此时此刻也没有更适当的人选可以帮我了。”

中尉脸色凝重地考虑了一下。“好吧，班克斯先生，”他过了半晌才说，“我就依您的意思。不过我们得快一点。我本来一刻都不该离开这个岗位的。离开岗位，无论多久，都可能造成极为严重的后果。”

他很快地跟上尉交代了一些事情，然后打开办公桌的抽屉，开始把一些东西放到口袋里与腰带上。

“您最好不要带步枪，班克斯先生。不过您有手枪吗？没有？那就带这把好了。德国制的，很好用。您得把它藏好，如果遇到敌军，您必须立刻清楚表明中立的立场，千万别迟疑。现在请随我来。”

他拿起靠在桌边的步枪，走向对面墙上打的洞，利落地爬了过去。我把手枪别进腰带—在外套下这把枪并不显眼—然后赶紧跟在他后头爬了过去。

第十九章

只有到了事后来看，才知道我前半段的行程其实比较简单。只是在当时，我跌跌撞撞跟着中尉快步前进的身影，可不会这么想。满布砾石的地面不久便踩得脚痛了起来，每次要钻过墙上的洞，都得把身体扭曲成极不优雅的姿势。

至于后半段，简直是个永无止境的任务，所有的墙洞，多多少少都跟地下室指挥所墙上的那个洞类似。有的小一点，有的则还有足够空间让两个人同时挤过，不过每个洞的边缘都被凿得粗糙不堪，攀过去的时候还得跳一下。没多久，我觉得自己快累垮了；好不容易才爬过一个洞，却看到前头的中尉已经轻松钻过另一面墙了。

并不是每面墙壁都还好端端地立在那儿；有时候我们得从一大堆瓦砾里穿过去，走过三四栋房子的残砖破瓦，才会碰到另一面墙。屋顶几乎全数都破了，往往连片瓦都不剩，因此光线十分充足——尽管不时还是有些昏暗的影子会让人踉跄失足。好几次我踩到两片裂开的石板中间，或是陷入深及脚踝的砾石堆里，脚步一滑，接下来就是痛楚，后来才慢慢熟悉这里的地形。

置身这样的环境里，你很容易就忘了几个星期前，这里还是好几百人的家园。事实上，我常常觉得自己走过的不是贫民窟，而是一栋千房万室的大宅废墟。尽管如此，我不时便会想起，在我们脚下的断垣残壁里，埋着人们珍藏的传家宝、孩童的玩具、大家喜爱的简单家用品；每想至此，我心中就会再度燃起怒火，恨那些让这么多无辜生灵涂炭的人。我又想起租界那些自大狂妄的家伙，想起他们推诿搪塞了这么多年，逃避他们该负的责任。此时此刻，我觉得自己满腔的怒火几乎无法抑制，差点没把中尉叫住，让他听我发泄。

这时中尉碰巧停了下来，我赶上去的时候，他说：

“班克斯先生，请好好看看这里。”他指着左边稍微过去一点的地方，有个类似锅炉结构的东西，虽然覆满了尘土，大致上还完整无缺，“这就是‘西炉’。您从这儿望上去，看到的就是我们在屋顶上看到的那两根烟囱里头比较近的一根。‘东炉’看起来跟这个炉很像，那是我们另一个清楚的地标。到了那里，我们就知道离那栋房子很近了。”

我仔细研究了那座锅炉。有根相当粗的烟囱从锅炉的肩部升起，我走近几步抬头看，可以看到一根巨大的烟囱直入云霄。我还在仰望时，我的同伴说：

“请吧，班克斯先生，我们得走了。我们必须赶在日落之前完成这件事。”过了“西炉”之后几分钟，中尉的态度明显变得更为谨慎。他的脚步变得小心翼翼，而且每到一处洞口，他总会先窥探一下，端起枪，专注地倾听，接着才会爬过去。我也开始看到洞口附近有愈来愈多的沙包堆或是一圈圈的铁丝网。当我第一次听到机枪声时，我立刻静止不动，还以为有人正朝我们开火。不过我看到中尉还在我前面走着，便深吸一口气赶了上去。

后来我爬过一个洞，来到一处颇为宽阔的地方。事实上，我已身心俱疲，看着这地方，还以为是人带我去过的哪家租界里的大舞厅，只是被炸毁了而已。后来我才明白，这里原来是好几个房间，隔间的墙壁已经差不多都不见了，因此两面完好的墙壁相隔整整有二十五码之远。接着我看到七八个士兵面对砖墙排成一列。起先我以为是战俘，不过接着便看到每个人都站在一个小洞前面，洞里架着步枪的枪管。中尉走过砾石堆，跟一个蹲在机枪三脚架后头的士兵说话。这挺机枪架在最大的洞口前面——我们正是要经由这个洞口继续我们的行程。走近一看，那个洞已经被一圈圈的铁丝网封住，只留下枪管可以活动的空间。

我起先以为中尉会命令他们把挡在我们路上的东西拆掉，但我立刻发现在场的人都变得十分紧张。中尉对机枪后面的士兵说话时，那士兵一刻也没有把眼睛从那个洞口移开。其他排列在墙边的士兵也一样，全都静止不动，摆好射击姿势，全神贯注地盯着对面的动静。

一旦了解了此处的战情可能一触即发，我觉得我似乎得从原来的洞爬回去了。但我随即看到中尉朝我走来，于是便留在原地。

“我们遇到了一些麻烦，”他说，“几个钟头前，日军又向前推进了一些。我军现在又把他们击退，对峙线就停在早上原来的地方。然而似乎有一些日本士兵没有跟着撤退，现在困在我们的防线内。我的士兵相信他们这会儿就在这堵墙的对面。”

“中尉，您的意思不会是说，要等这个状况解决了，我们才能继续吧？”

“没错，恐怕我们不得不等了。”

“可是得等多久呢？”

“实在无法预料。这些散兵被困住了，最后若不能俘虏就必须将他们格毙。更何况他们有武器，十分危险。”

“您是说我们可能等上几个钟头，甚至几天？”

“都有可能。这个时候如果继续前进，会相当危险。”

“中尉，您真教我意外。我还以为您也是读书人，很清楚我们目前这件事有多紧急。总会有哪条路可以绕过这些散兵游勇吧？”

“是有别的路。不过情况还是差不多，不管走哪条路，都十分危险。先生，很不幸，我们只有等待，别无他法。这状况有可能不久就可以化解。容我失陪一下。”

墙边有位士兵急切地做着手势，此时中尉走过砾石堆跑到他身边。就在那一刻，机枪震天响起，枪声停止以后，对面传来连续不断的惨叫。那惨叫一开始是扯足了嗓子的嘶吼，接着减弱为一种奇怪的尖声呜咽。那声音如此诡异，我听得入神。后来中尉冲过来把我拉到一片断壁的后头，我才知道有颗子弹正打在我身后的墙上。对面那堵墙后头的那些散兵也开始还击，机枪手也展开另一波的射击。机枪手的武器火力强大，似乎让其他武器都噤声不语，接下来，又是一段近乎永无止境的时间，耳畔唯一的声音就是对面伤兵的哀嚎。他的尖声呜咽又持续了一阵子，接着开始以日语叫喊某句话，一遍又一遍；每隔一会儿，那声调就会升高为疯狂的尖叫，接着又减弱为呜咽。这个虚幻不实的声音在废墟里回荡，教人心底发毛，不过我面前这些中国士兵依然静止不动，他们的注意力始终专注于对面的情况。机枪手忽然转过来往身旁呕吐，接着马上转回面前满布铁丝网的洞口。从他呕吐的方式里，实在不容易断定他作呕是因为紧张，还是因为垂死士兵的声音，或者纯粹因为肠胃不适。

最后，虽然士兵们的姿势几乎没变，但还是看得出来，他们全都放松了。我听见中尉在身旁对我说：

“您现在明白，班克斯先生，从这里开始，路就不好走了。”

我们一直蹲跪在地上，我注意到我一身轻便的法兰绒西装上全是尘土与污渍。我理了一下头绪，接着才说：

“我明白其中的风险。但我还是得继续前进。特别是因为这些战斗还在进行，我父母必须尽快撤离那栋房子。我可否建议带着这些人

跟我们走呢？假如有日军攻击我们，我们的火力也比较强些。”

“身为此地的指挥军官，这一点实在无法照办，班克斯先生。假如这些人离开此地，总部便完全失去了屏障。此外，我也不能让这些士兵冒无谓的危险。”

我懊恼地叹了口气。“我不得不这么说，中尉，若不是你们的士兵防御做得太过草率，怎么会让日军跑到你们的防线里。要是你们的士兵人人尽忠职守，我敢说这种事绝不会发生。”

“我们的士兵已经表现得英勇可嘉，班克斯先生。您的任务一时受到耽搁，实在不是他们的错。”

“您这话什么意思，中尉？您在暗示什么？”

“请冷静下来，班克斯先生。我只是想要指出，这并不是我部下的错，如果……”

“那是谁的错呢，请问？我知道您在暗示什么！没错！我知道从刚才您就开始这么想了。我一直在想，您究竟什么时候才会说出口。”

“先生，您到底在说什么……”

“我非常清楚这一路上您心里在想什么，中尉！我从您的眼神就看得出来。您认为这一切都是我的错，这一切的一切，这一切苦难，这一切破坏，从刚才过来的路上，我可以从您脸上看出来。不过这全是因为您对这件事的来龙去脉一无所知，确实是一无所知，先生。打仗的事或许您略知二一，不过让我告诉您，想解决这种复杂的案子，却完全不是那么回事。这里头的牵连有多广，您显然一点概念也没有。这种案子要花时间才能解决，先生！像这样的问题，要运用许多手腕、技巧才行。我猜想，您以为只要荷枪带刀猛冲上去就行了，对吧？我们已经花了不少时间，这我承认，但对于这类案子而言这根本不足为奇。我不知道我花工夫跟您讲这些做什么。您能了解多少呢？您不过是个军人罢了。”

“班克斯先生，我们实在没必要争吵。我只是诚心诚意地希望您能成功。我只想告诉您什么事是可行的……”

“我对您认为什么事可行、什么事不可行的想法，愈来愈没有兴趣了，中尉。容我直言，您实在不配做中国陆军的表率。我想，您现在是不是打算食言？您不愿再陪我继续走下去了？我想是这样的。我

得一个人独自完成这项艰巨的任务。很好，我就自己来！我就独力攻进那栋房子里！”

“我认为，先生，您应该先冷静下来，别急着说话……”

“还有一件事，先生！有件事您可以放心，在极司菲尔公园的庆祝典礼上，我不会再提起您的名字。就算我提了，也不会有表扬的意思……”

“班克斯先生，请您听我说。如果您执意前行，不顾危险，我也阻止不了。但您一人独行，无疑是比较安全。跟着我，您肯定会成为枪口瞄准的对象。换个角度来看，您是身着平民服装的白种人。只要您尽量小心，遇到任何人先清楚表明身份，您可能就不会遭到伤害。当然，我还是得重申我的建议：留在此处等危局解除了再走比较好。但话又说回来，我自己也有年迈的双亲，我完全能体会您心中的焦急。”

我站了起来，试着掸尽身上的尘土。“既然如此，我要出发了。”我冷淡地说。

“如果是这样，班克斯先生，请您带着这个。”他递来一把小手电筒，“我的建议跟刚才一样：天黑前若还没到达目的地，就先停下来。不过从您目前的决心看来，您大概还是会继续前进。如果是这样，您一定会用得到手电筒。这电池已经不新了，所以若非必要，就先别使用。”

我把手电筒放进口袋，有点勉强地道了声谢，开始后悔方才对他发火。那个垂死的士兵不再说话，只是干嚎着。我开始朝那声音走去，这时中尉说道：

“您不能走那里，班克斯先生。您得先往北走一会儿，然后再设法转回您的方向。这边请，先生。”

有好几分钟，他带我走一条与先前那条路垂直的小径，不久便来到另一面墙前，上面已经凿了洞。

“这条路您至少得走个半英里才能再朝东前进。您还是有可能会遇到双方的士兵。记得我说过的话。把枪藏好，别忘了表明您中立的身份。如果遇到居民，就请他们告诉您‘东炉’怎么走。祝您好运，先生，我很遗憾不能再提供您任何协助了。”

我朝北走了几分钟，注意到这里的房舍损坏得没那么严重。但这个发现并没有让我的路好走些；屋顶受损得愈少，表示路上的光线愈黯淡——我决定等入夜以后再用手电筒——于是常要摸着墙壁走上一段路才找得到下一个通道。不知道为什么，这一带碎玻璃特别多，而且地上还会有大片的死水。我常听到老鼠成群流窜的碎步声，有一次还踏到一条死狗，不过却没听到任何战斗的声响。

行程走到了这个阶段，我却一次又一次想起了詹妮弗，想起我们分手的那天下午，她坐在那间小会客室里——特别是她的脸，当她起了那个耐人寻味、发自肺腑的誓言，说等她年纪再大一些定要“帮助我”时。我摸索前进时，脑中一度浮现了一幅荒谬的画面：这可怜的孩子决心要实践她的誓言，跟在我后面，攀爬过崎岖的地形。我心情忽然激动起来，一时泪水盈眶。

后来我摸到墙上有个洞，里头一片漆黑，却传来强烈难当的粪臭味。我知道若要走到原定的方向，得爬过那个房间，不过我实在无法横下心来这么干，于是继续走了下去。这样的洁癖让我付出了重大的代价，我好一阵子都再没摸到任何通道，因此我觉得我偏离既定的路线愈来愈远。

等天色完全变黑，我就开始使用手电筒。我看到愈来愈多有人居住的迹象。我常常撞到几乎完好无缺的五斗柜或神龛，甚至还有全室的家具都还放在原处，让你觉得那一家人只是刚好那天不在而已。然而再往下走，我又遇到更多全毁或积水的房间。

此外，流浪狗也愈来愈多——这些瘦巴巴的动物，我害怕它们会攻击我，不过我才用光照了一下，它们全都悻悻着退开了。有一次我碰到三条狗，不知正凶狠地把什么东西撕开，我拔出手枪，觉得它们会向我扑来；不过，连这群狗也都软弱地望着我走过，仿佛它们已经知道要敬畏人类所能施为的大屠杀。

碰到第一户人家的时候，我倒不怎么意外。我的手电筒照到他们蜷缩在黑暗的角落里——几个小孩、三个女人和一个老头。他们身边放着一些包袱与生活用具。他们恐惧地望着我，挥舞着临时凑合的武器，等我开口表示无伤害之意，他们才稍稍放下。我想办法问他们“东炉”怎么走，不过他们只用不解的眼神回答。我在附近屋子里碰到三四个这样的人家——渐渐地，我也学会使用真正的门，而不钻墙上的洞——不过他们还是一样没反应。

接着我来到一处较宽敞的地方，较远的那一头被一盏灯笼的红光所浸染。有许多人站在阴影里一大部分依然是妇女与孩子，再加上几位年长的人。我同样说了一些安抚的话，随即感觉到这里的气氛异样，便闭口并伸手去取手枪。

在灯笼的微光里，所有的脸都转向我，可是几乎立刻又转回远处的角落，那里有十几个孩子围着地上的什么东西。有的孩子用棍子戳那不知为何物的东西，接着我发现许多大人拿着磨利的圆锹、菜刀以及其他临时充场面的武器。我仿佛打断了什么邪恶的仪式，我的第一个反应是赶紧通过。不过，或许我听到了什么声音，或者是因为第六感；我发现我竟然走向那些围成一圈的孩子，枪还拿在手上。孩子们似乎不太愿意让我看他们围着的东西，不过他们的身影还是渐渐让开了来。我在昏暗的红光里，看到一个日本士兵的身影一动也不动侧卧在地上。他的双手被反绑在背后；双脚也被缚住。他双眼紧闭，我还看到他腋窝下的军服上有块深色的湿渍透出，渗到地面。他的脸与头发沾满了灰尘与血迹。尽管如此，我还是一眼就认出他就是秋良。

孩童又再度围拢上来，有个男孩用一根木棒戳了戳秋良的身体。我挥舞着手枪，叫他们走开，好不容易孩子们往后退了几步，但还是在那儿盯着我们。

我细细地看着秋良，他的眼睛依然闭着。制服的背部已经全部扯裂，露出蹭破的皮肉，显然他之前曾被人在地上拖行。腋窝附近的伤口可能是炮弹碎片所致。他后脑勺有道肿起的伤口。可是他满身厚厚的尘土，而手电筒的光又弱，实在难以确定这些伤有多严重。我把手电筒对着他照，但到处都是漆黑的影子，让我更看不清楚。

我细看了他一会儿之后，他睁开了眼睛。

“秋良！”我说，脸凑上前去，“是我。克里斯托弗！”

我忽然想到灯光在我后方，在他看来，我可能只像个可怕的黑影。于是我又叫了他的名字，这次，我把手电筒的光移到我脸上。这个动作有可能只是让我看起来像个冤魂厉鬼罢了，因为秋良的五官扭曲起来，然后鄙夷地对我啐了一口。由于他没什么力气，只见唾沫慢慢淌下脸颊。

“秋良！是我！能这样遇到你，真是运气。我现在可以帮你。”

他看着我，接着说：“让我死吧。”

“你不会死的，老哥。你流了一点血，这段时间你一定不是很好受。不过我们会帮你好好处理，你会没事的，不要担心。”

“猪猡。猪猡。”

“猪猡？”

“你。猪猡。”他又啐了我一口，唾沫又无力地从嘴角流下。

“秋良。显然你还没认出我是谁。”

“让我死吧。死，像士兵那样。”

“秋良，是我，克里斯托弗。”

“我不认识。你猪。”

“听好，让我把这些绳子除掉。这样你会舒服得多。然后你很快就会清醒过来。”

我扭头回望，想叫他们给我什么工具好切断绳子，却看到房中所有的人，都在我后方不远处聚在一起——许多人手中都握着可以当作武器的东西——仿佛摆好了姿势要拍张魔鬼群像的照片。我有点吃惊——有一会儿我忘了他们的存在——伸手取枪。不过就在这个时候，秋良又提起了精神说：

“如果你割线，我杀你。警告你，懂不懂，英国人？”

“你在说什么呀？听好，你这个蠢蛋，是我，是你的朋友。我正要帮你。”

“你猪。割线。我杀你。”

“听好，这些人会先杀了你。总之，你的伤口很快就会感染。你必须让我帮你。”

忽然有两个中国女人叫了起来。其中一个仿佛在对我说，另一个则对着那群人。有一会儿大家乱成一团，接着有个约十岁的男孩握着一把镰刀走了出来。他走近光线时，我看到一块皮毛——也许是老鼠的残骸——挂在镰刀尖上。我只觉那男孩小心翼翼地握着镰刀，免得这刀尖上的祭品掉落，不过对着我叫喊的那个女人却一把抓住镰刀，那块天知道是什么的东西掉到了地上。

“大家听好，”我站起来，对着这群人厉声高呼，“你们搞错了。这位是好人。他是我的朋友。朋友。”

那个女人又叫喊起来，要我让开。

“他真的不是你们的敌人，”我继续说，“他是朋友。他马上就要帮助我，帮助我破案。”

我举起手枪，那个女人便退后。众人一时议论纷纷，有个小孩哭了起来。接着有位老人被推了出来，有个小女孩牵着他的手。

“我会说英语。”他说。

“那真是太好了，”我说，“请好言告诉大家，这个人是我的朋友。他马上就要帮我的忙。”

“他。日本兵。他杀害芸姨。”

“我肯定他没做这种事。人不是他杀的。”

“他杀人、偷窃。”

“不会是这个人的。这个人名叫秋良。有人看到他杀人偷窃吗，确定是这里的这个人吗？去啊，问问他们。”

老人不太情愿地咕哝了几句话。这更让群情哗然，众人拿了个武器传来传去，那是把磨利的圆锹，最后被前排另一位妇人拿住了。

“怎样？”我问老人，“我没说错吧？没有人看到秋良本人做过任何不对的事情。”

老人摇摇头，也许是不同意，也许是不了解。秋良在我身后发出了声音，于是我转身向他。

“瞧，你看到了吧？还好我来了。他们把你跟别人搞混了，他们想杀你。看在老天的分上，难道你还没认出我吗？秋良！是我，克里斯托弗！”

我不再看着那群人，正面转向他，再把手电筒的光打在脸上。后来，当我把手电筒关掉时，他的脸上总算露出相识的表情。

“克里斯托弗，”他说，那样子近乎牙牙学语。“克里斯托弗。”

“没错，是我。真的。虽然这么多年了，却又仿佛昨日。”

“克里斯托弗，我的朋友。”

我站起来，目光扫过众人，然后招手要一个手持菜刀的男孩靠过来。我从他手上接过刀子时，持镰刀的女人面露凶光走过来，我举起手枪对她吼叫，让她不敢靠近。接着我再度跪在秋良身边，开始帮他割断绳子。我原以为秋良说“线”，是因为他懂的英文字不多，不过此刻我看到绑在他身上的，确实只是旧麻线，刀子一划就断了。

“告诉他们，”我对老人说，这时候秋良的双手已经解开，“告诉他们，他是我的朋友。而且我们要一起去破案。告诉他们，他们弄错了。去啊，告诉他们！”

我转身扶秋良站起来，听到老人咕哝了几句话，那群人又开始议论纷纷。接着秋良小心地坐直身体，看着我。

“我的朋友，克里斯托弗，”他说，“是你，我的朋友。”

我察觉人群围拢上来，于是跳了起来。也许是替朋友着急，我一开口语气便过于强硬：“别再靠近！我会开枪！真的会！”接着转向老人，我大叫：“叫他们退开！跟他们说，不想死的就退开。”

我不知道老人翻译成什么意思。总之，他们让我这么一吼一其实他们的凶狠样子只是纸老虎一便一哄而散。有一半的人以为我要他们靠到左边那面墙边去，其余的人以为我命令他们就地坐下。他们显然都被我的样子吓坏了，大家急着照我的话做，竟乱成一团，你撞我，我踩你，惊呼失声。

秋良知道他得抓住这个机会，想办法要爬起来。我挽住他的臂把他拉起来，我们站了一会儿不动，两人都摇摇晃晃。我不得已把手枪别回腰带，好空出手来，然后我们试着一起往前走一两步。他的伤口散发出一股腐臭味，可是我暂且不去想，侧着头对后面的人群大喊，不管其中有多少人能懂：

“你们很快就会明白！你们很快就会明白你们搞错了！”

“克里斯托弗，”秋良在我耳际喃喃着，“我的朋友。克里斯托弗。”

“听好，”我平静地对他说，“我们得远离这群人。门就在那个角落里。你觉得你走得过去吗？”

秋良重重压在我身上，看看那个暗处。“可以，走吧。”

他的腿似乎没有受伤，脚步还算稳。可是才走了六七步，他就跌倒了，为了别让两人一起摔倒在地，我们相互拉扯，不知情的人看到

了，还以为我们两个在角力。幸好我们摸索出一个方法，又开始走了起来。一度，有个小男孩冲过来朝我们掷泥巴，不过立刻就被拉了回去。接着，秋良跟我走到门边一门板已经不在了一蹒跚地走进隔壁的屋子里去。

第二十章

我们又过了两道墙，还是没有人后头追赶的迹象，我这才感觉到与老友久别重逢的狂喜。我发现我们蹒跚而行的时候，我会自己笑起来；接着秋良也跟着笑，分离的岁月就这么消失无踪了。

“多少年了，秋良？真是好久好久了。”

他在我身边痛苦地跟着，不过也忍着痛说：“好久了，是啊。”

“你知道吗，我回老家去过。我猜你还住隔壁。”

“是啊，隔壁。”

“哦，你也回去了吗？当然啰，你一直留在这里。你不会觉得有什么特别的变化。”

“是啊，”他又费劲地说了一次，“好久，隔壁。”

我停下来让他坐在一片断墙上。接着我小心地除去破烂的军服外套，借着手电筒和放大镜，我再次查看他的伤口。我还是不太确定；我怕他手臂下的伤口会疽烂，不过我忽然想到，或许那股恶臭来自沾在衣服上的东西，或许是他躺过的地上有什么。此外，我发现他身体烧得很厉害，浑身都是汗。

我脱下我的外套，撕下几条衬里权充包扎伤口的纱布。接着我用手帕尽量把伤口拭净。尽管我已经尽量轻柔地把血块拭去，但他偶尔会猛抽一口气，显然我还是弄痛了他。

“对不起，秋良。我会尽量不太粗鲁。”

“粗鲁，”他说，仿佛正在玩味这个词。接着他忽然一笑，然后说：“你帮我。谢谢你。”

“我当然是在帮你。待会儿，我们就帮你找个适当的医护。你马上就没事了。不过在那之前，你必须帮我。我们眼前有件十分紧急的任务，而你比谁都了解为什么这么紧急。是这样子，秋良，我终于找到了。拘禁我父母的房子。此刻，我们就在那附近。你知道吗，老哥，刚才我还在想，我只好单枪匹马冲进去救人了。我也当真会这么做，不过那风险可就大了。天知道里面有多少绑匪。我起先以为我可以跟中国军方要几个人来帮我，结果根本不可能。我甚至还想过要找

日本人帮我。不过，现在我们两个又在一起了，我们一起来，一定可以办到。”

这一路上，我一直想办法把那条临时的绷带好好绕在他身体与脖子间，结结实实地绑好，压住他的伤口。秋良凝神望着我，待我话语稍歇，带着微笑对我说：

“是啊。我帮你。你帮我。好。”

“不过，秋良，我得跟你说实话。我有点迷路。遇到你之前一会儿，我还走得好好的。不过现在，我真的不知道该往哪个方向走了。我们得注意找一个叫‘东炉’的玩意儿。一个有大烟囱的东西。不知道，老哥，你知道哪里可以找到这东西吗？”

秋良继续望着我，胸口剧烈起伏。我一看到他这模样，昔日情景忽然回到眼前：我们那时常常一起坐在我们花园里的草丘下喘气休息。我正要跟他提这往事，他却对我说：

“我知道。我知道这个地方。”

“你知道怎么去‘东炉’？从这里？”

他点点头。“我在这里打仗，好多星期。这里，我知道，就像”——他忽然做了个笑脸——“像我的家乡村子。”

我也笑了，不过这句话我不明白。“你指的是哪个家乡村子？”我问。

“家乡村子，我出生那里。”

“你是说租界？”

秋良静了一会儿，接着说：“嗯。是啊。租界。公共租界。我的家乡村子。”

“的确，”我说，“我想这也算我的家乡村子吧。”

我们两个都笑了起来，有好一阵子还一起大笑傻笑，也许有点停不下来。等我们都比较平静了，我说：

“我跟你讲件奇怪的事情，秋良。这个只有你会懂。我住英国的这些年来，从来没有家的感觉。而公共租界，那里永远是我的家。”

“不过公共租界……”秋良摇摇头，“非常脆弱。明天，后天……”他举手一挥。

“我知道你的意思，”我说，“而我们小的时候，感觉它是如此坚固。不过就像你说的。那是我们的家乡村子。绝无仅有的一个。”

我开始帮他穿上军服，尽量小心不把他弄痛。

“感觉好一点了吗，秋良？抱歉，现在我只能做到这个地步。不久我们就可以让你得到良好的照顾。不过现在，我还有重要的事情要做。你来告诉我怎么走。”

我们前进得很缓慢。我想把手电筒对着前方照射，但这并不容易，我们常常在黑暗中摔倒，秋良吃尽了苦头。一点不假，他不止一次在中途休息时晕了过去，他的身体在我肩上愈压愈沉。我也不是没有受伤；最麻烦的，就是我右脚的鞋口开了，脚上有道深长的伤口，每走一步的疼痛都甚于刀割。有时候我们累得不行了，每走个十几步就得停下来。不过最后我们决定，这种情况不要坐下来，就摇摇晃晃地站着，大口喘气，调整倚靠的姿势，以小痛来代替大痛。他伤口传出的腐臭味愈来愈浓，周围不停传来鼠群奔跑的声音，教人不安。不过在这段时间里，我们没听到战斗声。

我尽可能地为 ourselves 打气，只要我喘得过气，就说些轻松的事。其实对于我们的重逢，在这段时间里，我可谓百感交集。不用说，我非常庆幸命运让我们及时相遇，一起完成这件大事。不过我同时又忍不住为这样的重逢感到难过——我期盼了这么久的事情竟然发生在这般恶劣的环境里。这跟我一直想像的方式，自然有如云泥之别——我总想像我们俩可以坐在舒适的旅馆会客厅里，或者在秋良家的露台上，俯瞰一片静谧的花园，聊天叙旧谈上好几个钟头。

秋良虽然举步维艰，方向感却始终很清楚。他选的路，我常觉得恐怕是条死巷，可是走到底却会出现通道或门。我们不时会遇到居民，有些只是在黑暗中感知到的身影；有些则围在灯笼或火堆的光线里，他们眼中对秋良充满怨恨，这怨恨让我担心我们会受到围攻。不过我们大半都顺利通过了，没被为难，一度我还用口袋里的最后一张钞票，说服一位老妇给了我们一些饮水。

接着地貌显著地改变了。再也没有人家居住的迹象，就算遇到了人，也都是独自一个，孤魂野鬼似的，眼中只有绝望，或自言自语，或兀自啜泣。而且再也没有完整的门，只有中尉跟我在前半段行程钻过的那种墙洞。每一次过洞都困难重重，秋良每次攀爬——即使他的一举一动都有我协助也一样——都痛彻心肺。

我们早就没说话了，只是每走一步便喘息一声，忽然秋良停下脚步，抬起头来。那时我听到一种声音，有人在发号施令。声音难以听出远近一或许只与我们隔着几栋房子。

“日军吗？”我轻声问他。

秋良又听了一会儿，才摇摇头。

“国民党。克里斯托弗，我们现在非常靠近……靠近……”

“前线？”

“对，前线。我们现在非常靠近前线。克里斯托弗，这非常危险。”

“要到那栋房子，是不是非得经过这一带不可呢？”

“非得不可，对。”

忽然一阵枪响，接着另一处又响起枪声，是一挺机枪在反击。我们的手本能地紧握起来，不过秋良把手松开，坐了下来。

“克里斯托弗，”他平静地说，“我们现在休息。”

“可是我们必须到那栋房子去。”

“我们现在休息。黑暗中走到交战区太危险。我们被杀。必须等早晨。”

我觉得他说得有理，反正我们两个都累得一步都走不动了。于是我也坐下来，把手电筒关掉。

我们在黑暗中坐了一会儿，只有呼吸声打断寂静。忽然枪声又响起，猛烈地持续了一两分钟。声音停得也突然；接着，安静了一会儿之后，有个奇怪的声音穿墙而来。细长的声音有如荒野里动物的长嚎，不过后来却转为声嘶力竭的吼叫，接着是一串短促的尖叫与啜泣声，然后伤者开始喊出成句的话听起来像极了先前我听到的那个垂死的日本兵，当时我累得神志不清，以为一定是同一个人；我正想跟秋良说这个人真是倒楣到家的时候，却赫然发现他喊的是中文，而非日文。听出是不同的人，让我心冷了一截。他们可怜的哀嚎如此相似一先是惨叫，然后绝望地求救，接着又惨叫，我忽然有个念头，觉得这是我们每个人走向死亡的必经过程一这些凄惨的噪音，是人类共通的语言，就像新生婴儿的哭嚎一样。

过了一会儿，我渐渐开始担心：若是战斗波及我们这个房间，那么我们坐的位置其实是毫无掩蔽的。我正想建议秋良一起挪到比较隐蔽的角落里，却发现他已经睡着了。我又打开手电筒，仔细地照照四周。

就算以这一带的标准来看，这里的破坏也算是严重的。我看得到手榴弹的炸痕，弹孔处处可见，还有残砖、破瓦和断梁。有头死掉的水牛就侧躺在房里，离我们不到七八码远；身上覆满了尘土与瓦砾，一只牛角指向屋顶。我继续四处搜寻，把屋子每一处有可能被交战双方侵入的地方都看了一遍。最要紧的是，我在屋里的另一个角落，在死水牛身后，发现有个砖造的壁龛，也许曾经是火炉或是壁炉。那里看起来是个最安全的角落，可以让我们安然度过夜晚。我把秋良摇醒，把他的手臂绕到我颈后，我们又痛苦地站了起来。

走到了那个壁龛，我把地上的砾石扫开，清出一块平整的木头地板，足够我们两人躺下。我把外套铺好给秋良睡，小心让他用没受伤的那侧躺下。接着我也躺了下来，等着自己睡着。

尽管我已疲惫不堪，但一方面因为那个垂死士兵幽幽不绝的哀嚎，一方面又害怕自己卷入战事，再加上想到还有重大的任务未了，在在都让我无法入睡。我感觉得到秋良也没睡着，后来听到他坐起来的声音，我问他：

“伤口怎么样？”

“我的伤口。没事，没事。”

“让我再看一看……”

“不，不，没事。不过谢谢你。你，好朋友。”

尽管我们才相距几寸，却完全看不到对方。停了好一会儿，我听见他说：

“克里斯托弗。你必须学日语。”

“对，我必须学。”

“不，我是说现在。你现在就学日语。”

“这个嘛，老实说，老兄，这可真不是时候……”

“不，你必须学。假如日本兵进来，我睡觉了，你必须告诉他们。告诉他们我们是朋友。你必须告诉他们，不然他们在黑暗里开

枪。”

“好，我懂你的意思。”

“所以你学。万一我睡觉了。或者我死掉。”

“你听好，我不要你这样胡说。你不用几天就可以活蹦乱跳了。”

接下来又静了一会儿，我记得多年以前，每当我的言语里，多了一些惯用语的东西，他就会跟不上。因此我又相当缓慢地说：

“你会完全康复。你明白吗，秋良？有我在这儿呢。你会康复的。”

“真好。”他说，“不过小心是最好的。你必须学会说。用日文。假如日本兵来。我教你字。你记住。”

于是他用他的母语说了什么，不过因为句子太长，我要他停下来。

“不，不要了，这个我永远学不会。短一点句子罢。只要能让人知道我们不是敌人就好了。”

他想了一会儿，接着又念了一个句子，只比刚才那句略短一些。我试了试，不过他立刻说：

“不对，克里斯托弗。错误。”

又试了几次之后，我说：“嘿，这样是没有用的。就教我一个字吧。‘朋友’这个字好了。再长的，今晚我是应付不来了。”

“托莫达契，”他说，“你就说，托一莫一达一契。”

我复诵这个字几次，以为念得完美无瑕，才发现秋良在黑暗中偷笑。我发现自己也笑了起来，接着，旧戏又重演，我们两个又笑得想停也停不住。我们也许又笑了整整一分钟，后来，我想我就突然睡着了。

我醒来的时候，破晓的曙光照进了房内。那光线苍白泛蓝，仿佛整个黑暗只被掀起了一层。垂死的那个人已无声息，却有只鸟儿不知道在哪里歌唱。此刻我可以看出屋顶的大半已经不见了，我双肩紧顶着砖墙，从我躺卧之处，可以看到清晨的天空里还有星星。

我发现有东西在动，于是紧张地坐了起来。接着我看到三四只老鼠在死水牛附近钻动，有一会儿，我就坐在那儿盯着它们看。直到此刻，我才转身看着秋良，害怕他会有什么三长两短。他静静地躺在我身边，脸色非常苍白，看到他呼吸平稳我才松了一口气。我找出放大镜，仔细检查他的伤口，不过却把他惊醒了。

“是我。”我轻声说，他慢慢坐起来，四处看了看。他一脸惊恐与迷惑，接着似乎想起了一切，眼中浮现麻木的坚定眼神。

“你做梦了吗？”我问。

他点点头。“对，做梦。”

“希望你梦到的地方比这里好。”我笑着说。

“没错。”他叹了口气，补充道，“我梦见我是小男孩的时候。”

我们静了一会儿。接着我说：

“那你一定受到了强烈的震撼。从你梦中的世界，掉到现在这个世界。”

他盯着从瓦砾堆里突出来的死水牛头看。

“没错，”他半晌后才说，“我梦见我还是小男孩的时候。我母亲、我父亲。小男孩。”

“你记得，秋良。你记得所有我们以前玩的游戏吧？在那座草丘上，在我们的花园里？你记得吧，秋良？”

“是的，我记得。”

“那是美好的回忆。”

“没错，非常美好的回忆。”

“那些日子真幸福，”我说，“只不过当时我们人在福中不知福。孩子又能知道什么，不是吗？”

“我有孩子，”秋良忽然说，“男孩。五岁大。”

“真的？我想见见他。”

“我掉照片。昨天。前天。我受伤时。我掉照片。儿子的。”

“听好，老哥，别气馁。你不久就可以再见到你儿子了。”

他盯着水牛，望了一阵子。忽然有只老鼠一窜，密密麻麻的一群苍蝇飞了起来，接着又全部落回死牛身上。

“我儿子。他在日本。”

“哦，你把他送回日本，这倒是让我很意外。”

“我儿子。在日本。假如我死，你告诉他，拜托。”

“告诉他你死了？对不起，这个我办不到。因为你不会死。至少现在还不会。”

“你告诉他，我为国家死。告诉他，要孝顺母亲。保护。并且建造美好世界。”此刻他的声音细若游丝，努力地寻找恰当的英文，同时强忍着眼泪。“建造美好世界，”他又说了，手往空中一挥，仿佛泥水匠正在把墙抹平。他的眼神跟着手晃，仿佛看到了一片美景。

“对，建造美好世界。”

“我们还小的时候，”我说，“我们住在一个美好的世界里。这些孩子，路上遇到的这些孩子，这么小就看到人世间真实的丑陋面貌，何其不幸。”

“我儿子，”秋良说，“五岁大。在日本。他都不知道，都不知道。他认为世界是美好的地方。好人。他的玩具。他的母亲、父亲。”

“我想我们也曾经那样。不过我想事情也不会永远那么糟。”我现在尽全力要打消笼罩在我朋友心头的不安与消沉，“毕竟我们小的时候，当事情变糟时，我们也无力拨正。不过现在我们是大人了，现在我们有办法了。这就是重点。看看我们自己，秋良。这么多年来，我们终于可以把事情匡正过来了。记得吗，老哥，以前我们都玩些什么游戏？一遍又一遍？我们怎么假装我们是警探，寻找我的父亲？现在我们长大了，我们可以把事情匡正过来。”

秋良好久都没说话。后来他说：“等我儿子。他发现世界不好。我希望……”他停了，也许因为痛苦，也许因为找不到适当的英文。他说了句日文，接着才又说道：“我希望我和他一起。帮助他。当他发现。”

“你听我说，大傻瓜，”我说，“说这么丧气的话干什么。你本来就会再见到你儿子。有我在这儿呢。还有，说什么我们小时候世界

多美好，你也可以说那是一派胡言。那只是大人制造的假象。我们不该对童年这么念念不忘。”

“念一念一不遗忘，”秋良说着，仿佛这是他拼命想要找出来的词。接着他又说了一个日本字，也许是日语的“念念不忘”。“念一念一不遗忘。念念不忘是好事。非常重要。”

“真的吗？老朋友？”

“重要啊。非常重要。念念不忘。当我们念念不忘，我们记得。一个更好的世界，好过我们长大后发现的这个世界。我们记得，而且希望美好的世界再回来。所以非常重要。刚才，我做了梦。我是小孩。母亲、父亲，在我身边。在我们家。”

他沉默下来，一直望着瓦砾堆的另一边。

“秋良，”我说，觉得这样的谈话持续得愈久，我们就愈危险，但我实在不想讲明，“我们该走了。我们还有好多事要做。”

一阵机枪声响起，仿佛在回应我这句话。枪响的距离比昨晚的远，不过我们俩都吓了一跳。

“秋良，”我说，“现在离那房子远吗？我们必须想办法在战斗再度白热化以前赶到那里。到底还有多远？”

“不远。不过我们小心走。中国士兵非常近。”

我们的睡眠不但没让我们恢复体力，反而让我们更加虚弱。我们站起来的时候，秋良压在我肩上，酸痛传遍我的颈部与肩膀，我忍不住开口呻吟。刚开始，身体尚未习惯，每一步都痛苦不堪。

不仅我们的身体状况不佳，那天早上走过的那一带，困难更甚于从前。破坏的范围如此广泛，我们常常停下来，连绕过瓦砾的路都找不到。尽管看得清脚下该踩哪里确实有所帮助，可是原先隐藏在黑暗里的恐怖景象，现在都呈现在眼前，这让我们精神大受震惊。在断垣残壁间，我们看到血迹——有的还鲜红欲滴，有的则风干多时——地上、墙上都有，也有些溅在破家具上。更糟糕的是一而且鼻子比眼睛更早发出警告——我们会遇到一堆又一堆人的肠子，遇到的次数多得惊人，腐败的程度各不相同。有一次我们停下来，我就对秋良提起这点，他只是淡淡地说：

“刺刀。士兵都把刺刀刺进肚子。假如刺这里”——他指着肋间——“刺刀拔不出来。所以士兵学会。一定刺肚子。”

“至少他们把尸体清走了。至少他们做了这个。”

我们不时还听到枪声，每次听到，我就觉得我们离战斗又近了些。这让我担心，不过秋良现在似乎更加确定我们的方向了，每一次我质疑他选的路，他都不耐烦地摇头。

我们来到两个中国士兵陈尸的地方时，一束束早晨的阳光已经赤炎炎地从屋顶缺口射下。我们离尸体有段距离，没办法仔细查看，不过我猜想他们可能才死了不到几个钟头。一个俯卧在瓦砾堆里；另一个跪着死去，前额靠在砖墙上，仿佛伤痛欲绝。

有一度，我心中强烈预感我们就要误入火网，便拉住秋良说：

“听我说。你到底想做什么？你要带我去哪？”

他没回答，只是倚着我站着，垂着头调整呼吸。

“你真的知道我们要往哪儿去吗？秋良，回答我！你知道我们要往哪儿去吗？”

他疲惫地抬起头，然后朝我背后一指。

我转身——我只能慢慢移动，因为他还倚在我身上——从断墙的缺口望出去，才十几步远的地方，无疑就是“东炉”。

我没说话，只是带着他走过去。“东炉”和“西炉”都逃过了战火摧残。外表虽然尘土满布，不过看起来还能正常运作。我把秋良放开——他立刻在瓦砾堆上坐下——直接走到炉边。就像在“西炉”一样，我看到直入云霄的烟囱。我回到秋良坐下的地方，轻轻地碰了碰他的肩膀。

“秋良，对不起，我刚才用那种语气。我想告诉你，我很感激你。光靠我自己绝对到不了这里。真的，秋良，我好感激。”

“好。”他的呼吸顺畅了一点，“你帮助我。我帮助你。好。”

“可是秋良，那栋房子一定就在这附近了。让我看看。从这里开始”——我指过去——“巷子通到那边去。我们必须走那条巷子。”

秋良看起来不愿动身，不过我把他拉了起来，于是我们又出发了。我走的这条巷子，显然就是中尉从屋顶指给我看的那条，不过没走几步，我们就发现巷道全给掉落的瓦砾砖块堵住了。我们爬过一堵墙，进入邻近的房子，再走进我觉得应该是平行的一条路，在遍地瓦砾的房间里找路。

我们现在经过的这些房子，受损没那么严重，而且明显比先前经过的区域要体面些。屋里有椅子、梳妆台，有的镜子和花瓶甚至还完整无缺地留在断垣残壁之间。我急着要继续前进，不过秋良的身体开始支撑不住了，我们只好再停下来。我们坐在一根断落地面的横梁上，两人正试着把气喘过来时，我瞥见一块手绘的门牌，躺在我们面前的瓦砾之中。

这门牌已顺着本身的纹路，整齐地断裂开来，不过两片木头却并排掉落在地上；我还看得出过去将这块门牌固定在前门上的格框。这绝非我们头一次遇见这样一件物什，但不知怎的，我一时心血来潮，特别注意到这块门牌。我走过去，从残砖破瓦中取出这两片木头，把它们拿到我们坐下的地方。

“秋良，”我说，“你看得懂这写什么吗？”我把两片木头凑起来，送到他面前。

他盯着上头的字看了一会儿，才说：“我的中文，不好。一个名字。什么人的名字。”

“秋良，你仔细听好。看看这些字。你一定知道它们是什么字。拜托，仔细看一看。这个非常重要。”

他又看了看，然后摇头。

“秋良，听好，”我说，“这个中文会不会就是‘叶辰’两个字？上头写的，有没有可能就是这个名字？”

“叶辰……”秋良露出思考的表情，“叶辰。没错，有可能。这里这个字……没错，有点像。这写的是叶辰。”

“真的？你确定？”

“不确定。不过……有可能。非常有可能。没错”——他点了一下头——“叶辰。我想就是。”

我放下那两片木头，小心绕过瓦砾堆到我们所在的屋子前面。原先是大门的地方有个缺口，从那里望出去，可以看见外头的窄巷。我看着正对面的房子。它左邻右舍的门面全都被炸成了断壁残垣，惟独我眼前的这栋房子不可思议地逃过了战火的摧残。看不出任何明显的损坏痕迹：窗户上的窗板、简陋的木制窗格，甚至挂在走廊上的符咒，全都毫无损伤。看过一路上的惨况，这栋房子反而像是从另一个

比较文明的世界来的幽灵。我站在那里凝望了一会儿。接着我朝秋良打了个手势。

“嘿，过来。”我尽量压低声音，“一定就是这栋房子了。不会是别栋。”

秋良没动，不过深深叹了口气。“克里斯托弗。你，朋友。我，非常喜欢。”

“小声一点好吗。秋良，我们到了。就是这栋屋子。我打从骨子里肯定就是这里。”

“克里斯托弗……”他挣扎着站起来，慢慢绕过来。等他走到我身边，我把那栋房子指给他看。早晨的阳光照进巷子，形成几道明亮的光柱打在那屋子的门面上。

“那里，秋良，那栋房子就在那里。”

他在我脚边坐下，又叹了一口气。“克里斯托弗。我的朋友。你必须想清楚。都好多年了。到现在好多、好多年了……”

“很奇怪，不是吗？”我说，“战斗竟然一点都没有波及这栋房子。竟然没有波及我父母所在的这栋房子。”

说这些话的同时，我突然觉得整个人快要崩溃了。不过我马上镇定下来并说：“现在，秋良，我们得进去。我们要一起进去，手挽着手。就像当年一起进凌田的房间那样。你还记得吗，秋良？”

“克里斯托弗。我亲爱的朋友。你必须想得非常清楚。都好多、好多年了。我的朋友，请你听我说。也许父亲和母亲。到现在好多、好多年了……”

“我们现在要一起进去。然后，等我们把该做的事做好了，我们就帮你找适当的医护，相信我。其实，说不定那里头就有些东西，有急救箱，就在那栋房子里。至少有清水，也许还有绷带。我母亲可以帮你看看伤口，也许还可以给你换上干净的绷带。不要担心，你马上就会没事的。”

“克里斯托弗。你必须想得非常清楚。这么多年过去……”

他没说下去，因为对面的门嘎的一声滑开了。我还来不及拔出手枪，就见到一个中国小女孩走出来。

她约莫六岁，脸上有种宁静的表情，有几分俏丽。她的头发仔细地扎成一束一束的。她身上的外套与宽松的长裤稍微大了些。

她环顾四周，眯着眼睛看看日光，然后又朝我们望过来。她一眼就看到我们——我们俩谁也没动——然后朝我们走来，竟然一点害怕的样子也没有。她停在巷子当中，距离我们几码远，用中文说了几句话，手指着屋子。

“秋良，她说什么？”

“不懂。也许邀请我们进去。”

“不过她怎么会跟这事有关？你觉得她跟绑匪有关联吗？她说什么？”

“我想她要我们帮助她。”

“我们得叫她走开，”我说，一边拔出手枪，“我们得提防有人反抗。”

“没错，她要我们帮助。她说她的狗受伤了。我想她说狗。我的中文，不好。”

我们看着她的时候，从她梳理整齐的发束下缘某处，有一道细细的血流过她的前额淌到脸颊上。小女孩似乎浑然不觉，又开口跟我们说话，手又朝屋子指了一指。

“没错，”秋良说，“她说狗。狗受伤了。”

“她的狗？是她受伤了吧！也许还伤得不轻。”

我朝她靠近一步，想要检查她的伤势。可是她以为我要跟她走，便转身边跑边跳，越过巷道回到她家门口。她又把门推开，回头用眼神哀求我们，接着便进屋子里去了。

我站在那里，犹豫了一会儿。接着我把手伸给地上的朋友。

“秋良，时候到了，”我说，“我们得进去。我们现在一起进去吧。”

第二十一章

走过巷子的时候，我设法把枪举在前方。不过秋良的手臂绕在我颈子上，我必须支持他大半的重量，我想我们一起走向那栋房子的步履蹒跚，一点威武的样子也没有。我隐约瞥见玄关旁边立了一只装饰用的花瓶，我相信门梁上挂的装饰物在我们从旁拂过时，发出了细微的叮咚声。接着我听到小女孩说话的声音，于是抬头看看四周。

尽管房子的门面几乎丝毫无损，但这一户的后半部却已夷为平地。今日回想起来，我猜想应该是有颗炮弹从屋顶穿过，砸垮了上层楼房，并且炸毁了房子的后半部，以及后面比邻的房舍。不过当时我最想找的是我父母，我不确定我到底注意到了什么。我先是高兴了一下，一绑匪弃守逃走了。接着我看到尸体，又很害怕那会是我父母——绑匪看到我们过来就把他们杀害了。我必须坦承，当我看到室内的三具尸体都是中国人时，我的感觉是松了一大口气。

靠近屋后，在墙那边，有具女人的尸体，大概是女孩的母亲。可能是爆炸让她飞过去，人就躺在落地之处。她的脸上带着震惊的表情，一只手臂齐肘折断。此时她以断臂指着天空，也许是要指示炮弹飞来的方向。几码外的瓦砾堆里，有位老太太也同样张口睁眼，对着天花板上的大洞。她脸的一侧已经焦黑，不过我没看到血或是其他明显的伤口。最后，就在最靠近我们站立之处的地方——压在倒下的架子底下，我们起先没看到——有个男孩，只比那个带我们进来的女孩大一点。他的一条腿从臀部炸断，伤口处拖着肠子，长得出奇，有如装饰在风筝后面的长尾巴。

“狗。”秋良在我身边说。

我看着他，然后顺着他凝视的方向望去。在废墟中央，离男童尸体不远处，小女孩跪在一只受伤侧卧的狗旁边，温柔地抚摸着它的毛。狗尾巴虚弱地摇动回应。我们站在那儿看着她，她抬头看我们，说了几句话，声音依然相当镇定而平稳。

“她在说什么，秋良？”

“我想她说我们帮助狗，”秋良说，“没错，她说我们帮助狗。”接着，他忽然无助地傻笑起来。

小女孩又说了一次，这次只对着我说，也许她当秋良是疯子而不理他。接着她把脸俯到狗身边，继续温柔地抚摸它的毛。

我放开我朋友的手臂，朝她走近了一步，我手一松，秋良就垮到一旁的破家具上。我吓了一跳，回头看看，他却继续傻笑；另一边，女孩的请求也没停。我把手枪放在一旁，走到她身边，碰碰她的肩膀。

“听我说……这一切”——我指着这片屠杀的现场，而她似乎视而不见——“这真是噩运。不过你瞧，你逃过一劫，真的，你可以表现得很好，只要你……只要你继续保持你的勇气……”我不悦地转向秋良，对他吼叫，“秋良！别吵了！看在老天的分上，没什么好笑的！这可怜的女孩……”

不过女孩这时抓住我的袖子。她又说了一次，仔细而缓慢，正视着我的眼睛。

“听我说，真的，”我说，“你好勇敢。我对你发誓，不管是谁造成了这一切，不管是谁做了这些可怕的事情，他们会得到报应的。你也许不知道我是谁，不过我正好……呃，我正好是你需要的人。我保证这些人逃不掉的。你不用担心。我会……我会……”我从刚才就开始在外套里摸东西，直到现在才掏出一把放大镜，拿给她看，“瞧，你明白吗？”

我踢开挡在我前面的鸟笼，走到那位母亲倒卧之处。接着，或许只是出于习惯，没什么特别的原因，我弯下去用放大镜检查她。她的断臂看起来断得好整齐；突在肌肉外面的那截骨头白得发亮，几乎像磨光打亮过似的。

我记忆里的这些时刻已不再清晰。不过我觉得应该就在这时候，刚刚用放大镜看完那女人的断臂，我忽然挺直身子，开始寻找我父母。我只能说——这部分解释了随后发生的事——秋良还在他跌坐下来的地方傻笑，女孩则继续在那儿哀求，语气依旧平稳而坚定。换言之，气氛变得无法控制，或许这就是为什么我后来会那样行事，把小屋里所剩的每件东西全都翻了个遍。

后头还有一个很小的房间，完全被炸毁了，我从那里开始寻找，把木头地板掀起来，用一根桌脚把倒地的储物柜门打破。后来我又回到最大的那个房间，开始把瓦砾堆推到一侧，遇到任何踢不开、推不动的，我就用那根桌脚锤打。后来，我发现秋良不再傻笑，而是跟在我后面走，拉着我的肩膀，在我耳边说话。我没管他，继续我的搜

寻，甚至一个不留神把一具尸体掀翻都没停下来。秋良继续拉我的肩膀，过了一阵子，我实在不明白为什么我指望能帮我的这个人，竟然不停地阻挠我，我转身向他，大喊类似这样的话：

“你滚开！滚开！如果你不想帮我，就走开！滚回你的角落里傻笑去！”

“士兵！”他嘘声对我说，“士兵来了！”

“你滚开！我母亲，我父亲！他们在哪里？他们没在这里！他们在哪里？他们在哪里？”

“士兵！克里斯托弗，停下，你必须冷静！你必须冷静，不然我们被杀！克里斯托弗！”

他抓着我用力晃，把脸贴近我的脸。这时我才明白，确实有人声从附近传来。

秋良把我拉到房间最深处。那个小女孩，我发现她不再说话，正温柔地抱着狗的头轻摇。狗尾巴仍然有一搭没一搭微弱地摆着。

“克里斯托弗，”秋良急切地在我耳边说，“假如，士兵，中国人，我必须躲。”他指指角落，“中国士兵，必须不找到。但是假如日本人，你必须说我教的字。”

“我什么也不会说，听好，老兄，如果你不愿意帮我……”

“克里斯托弗！士兵来了！”

他摇摇晃晃走过房间，躲进角落里的储物柜。柜子的门破损得很厉害，因此他整截小腿与靴子都可以透过门板看到。这样的躲法实在可笑，我笑了出来，正当我要叫说我还能看到他时，士兵就从大门进来了。

第一个进来的士兵，用步枪对我射击，不过子弹打在我身后的墙上。他随即发现我举起双手，又是个外国平民，便对同伴喊了句话，他们随即在他身后围上来。这些士兵是日军，接下来我只记得其中三四个开始争论该怎么处置我，整个过程里，大家的枪口都对着我。后来又进来了更多的士兵，还开始搜查屋内。我听到秋良从藏身处喊了句日文，士兵便团团围住他的柜子，我看见他爬了出来。我注意到他们双方相见，似乎没有显得特别高兴。其他人围着小女孩，也在争论该怎么做。接着有位军官进来，所有的士兵都在一旁立正，室内静了下来。

这位军官——一位年轻的上尉——环顾室内。他的目光先落在小女孩身上，接着在我身上，然后盯着此时由两名日本兵架着的秋良。接下来他们开始用日语交谈，秋良却没有开口的余地。他眼中无奈的眼神里，出现了一抹恐惧。他一度想跟上尉说话，可是上尉马上要他闭嘴。接着他们又简短地谈了几句，士兵们便把秋良带走了。此时他脸上的恐惧明显可见，但他没有反抗。

“秋良！”我朝他的身影呼喊，“秋良，他们要带你去哪儿？出了什么问题？”

秋良回头一望，对我温柔地笑了一下。接着他就走进巷子里去，被围在他身边的士兵挡住看不见了。

年轻的上尉正望着小女孩。接着他对我说：

“你，英国人？”

“是的。”

“请问，你在这里做什么？”

“我在……”我看看四周。“我在寻找我父母。我姓班克斯，名叫克里斯托弗·班克斯。我是著名的侦探。也许你……”

我不知道我该怎么说下去，而且，我发现我已经啜泣好一会儿了，这给上尉留下了坏印象。我揩揩脸，继续说：“我来这里找我父母。不过他们已经不在这里了。我来晚了。”

上尉再度环顾这些断垣残壁、尸体、抱着垂死的狗的小女孩。接着他对身边的士兵吩咐了一些事，眼睛一直盯着我。最后他对我说：“先生，请随我来。”

他以礼貌却坚定的手势，指示我应当跟他走到巷子里。他没把手枪收回枪套，却也没再将枪口对着我。

“小女孩呢？”我说，“你会不会把她带到安全的地方？”

他回头静静盯着我。接着他说：“先生，请你现在就走。”

日本人对我的照顾，大致上还算得体。他们把我安置在指挥所后面的小房间——这里原先是消防队——供应我食物，还有一位医生治疗我的几处伤口，那些伤什么时候弄的，我几乎都不知道。我的脚裹了绷带，他们还给我一双大号的皮靴方便我穿进去。看管我的士兵不会说英语，似乎不确定我是囚是客，不过我也累得管不了那么多；我躺在

他们置于这间密室的行军床上，一连好几个钟头时醒时睡。房门并没有上锁；事实上，与隔壁办公室相通的门还关不拢，因此每当我恢复意识，就会听到有人用日语争论或者对着电话筒吼叫，我猜是跟我有关吧。如今我怀疑，那段时间里，我大半时候一定有点发烧；总之，在半睡半醒之间，脑子里盘旋萦绕的，不只是过去几个小时发生的事，还有过去几周的事。接着，那些杂念逐一沉淀消散，到了向晚时分，长谷川上校把我叫醒，我发现我对整个案情向来困扰我的部分，有了全新的观点。

长谷川上校——一位外表干净利落的男士，年约四十一礼貌地自我介绍，然后说：“我很高兴您已经好多了，班克斯先生。我相信他们把您照顾得很好。我很高兴告诉您，上层指示我护送您回英国领事馆。容我建议我们立即出发。”

“那当然，上校，”我说，一边小心翼翼地站起来，“我倒是想起一个地方，不知可否通融一下，先带我去那里。是这样子，这事有点急。我不太清楚那里确切的地址，不过离南京路不远。也许您知道那里。是一家唱片行。”

“您急着买唱片吗？”

我实在没力气解释，只是说：“这事很要紧。愈快到那里愈好。”

“可惜上层指示我带您到英国领事馆，先生。若带您到别处，恐怕十分不便。”

我叹了口气。“我想您说的是，上校。反正，我现在赶去，我猜，也已经太晚了。”

上校看看腕表。“是啊，恐怕是有点晚。但容我提议，假如我们立刻动身，您的音乐欣赏之旅，受到的延误就会最少。”

我们搭乘敞篷军车，由上校的侍从开车。那是个晴朗的下午，阳光照耀着闸北区的废墟。我们缓缓前进，因为，尽管路当中的瓦砾大半都已清除——在路边堆积如山——路面却已经炸得坑坑洼洼。我们偶尔会经过几乎没有损坏的街道；但是一转过街角，就全是断垣残壁，一片狼藉，仅存的电线杆也都东倒西歪，电缆乱缠。当我们驶过这样的地区，我一度发现视线可以越过一大片夷平的废墟，瞥见那两座锅炉的烟囱。

“英国是个伟大的国家，”长谷川上校说，“平静、尊贵。美丽的绿色原野。她依然是我的梦想。还有英国文学。狄更斯、萨克雷。《呼啸山庄》。我尤其偏爱贵国的狄更斯。”

“上校，恕我提起一事。昨天贵国士兵找到我的时候，还有别人在场。一名日本士兵。您会不会碰巧知道他现在怎么了？”

“那名士兵。我不确定他的下场如何。”

“不知道要怎样才能再见到他？”

“您想再见到他？”上校表情严肃起来，“班克斯先生，容我建议您，别与那名士兵有任何牵扯。”

“上校，您是否认为他犯了什么错？”

“犯了错？”他望着路旁的废墟，面带温和的笑容，“我们几乎可以断定他泄漏军情给敌方。他可能就是用这个作为脱困的条件。我知道您自己也说，是在国民党的防线附近遇到他的。这明白显示他懦弱与通敌。”

我正想反驳，然而我明白，与上校起冲突，对我、对秋良都没有好处。我好一会儿没有答话，他又说：

“感情用事并不理智。”

他的发音原本相当纯正，倒是在“感情用事”这词上有点结巴——他念得太重，听起来倒像日语。这句话我听来刺耳，便转头不予理会。过了一会儿，他却以同情的口吻说：

“这名士兵。您与他曾经认识？”

“我以为认识。我以为他是我儿时的旧友。不过现在我不太确定了。我开始明白，许多事情，都不像我所以为的那样。”

上校点点头。“我们的儿时似乎已经远去。这一切”——他挥手指向车外——“这一切苦难。我们日本有位诗人，一位古代的仕女，抒发过这种感伤。她写道，我们一旦长大成人，儿时就变得像另一个国度。”

“对我来说，上校，那可一点都不是另一个国度。从许多方面来看，我的一生都是在那里度过的。直到现在，我才开始踏出那里，展开我的旅程。”

我们通过日军检查哨进入虹桥，这里位于租界的北区。这一区除了有紧张的备战状态，也和其他地方一样，有战火摧残的痕迹。我看到许多沙包堆，以及载满士兵的卡车。接近运河时，上校说：

“班克斯先生，我也像您一样，喜欢音乐。尤其是贝多芬、门德尔松、勃拉姆斯。还有肖邦。第三号奏鸣曲真是优美。”

“像您这样有文化素养的人，上校，”我说，“必然会为这一切感到遗憾。我是说贵国侵略中国，造成尸横遍野的惨况。”

我害怕他会生气，然而他面带平静的笑容说：

“这的确教人遗憾，我同意。不过日本如果要成为伟大的国家，像贵国一样，班克斯先生，这就无法避免了。就像英国的过去一样。”

我们有一会儿没有交谈。接着他问道：

“我敢说，您昨天在闸北区一定看到什么不愉快的景象吧？”

“是的。确实如此。”

他忽然诡异地笑了一声，令人为之一颤。“班克斯先生，”他说，“您明白吗？您有没有任何概念，往后还有什么样不愉快的景象要发生？”

“如果贵国继续侵略中国，我敢说……”

“容我说明，先生”——他这时候说得眉飞色舞——“我不只是指中国而已。我指的是全世界，班克斯先生，全世界都要卷入战火。您昨日在闸北区之所见，不过是大火燎原之前的一个小小火花而已！”这些话他说得趾高气扬，接着却又哀伤地摇摇头，“那将何等可怕，”他平静地说，“何等可怕。您想像不到的，先生。”

我不太记得回来以后的最初几个钟头如何了。不过我猜想，我变得跟流浪汉相去不远，让日军的军车送我回到英国领事馆前的草坪，这点对于租界焦急的居民来说，恐怕振奋不了什么人心。我隐约记得领事馆的人冲出来接我，把我带进大楼，我也隐约记得英国总领事从楼梯上赶下来时脸上的那副表情。我忘了他对我说的第一句话是什么，不过我倒是记得我好像还没跟他寒暄问候，就先说：

“乔治先生，我必须要求您，让我立刻见您的属下麦克唐纳。”

“麦克唐纳？您是指约翰·麦克唐纳吗？怎么，你找他做什么呢，老弟？听好，你需要的是好好休息。我们有医生可以照顾你……”

“我承认我看起来蓬头垢面。别担心，我这就去洗把脸。不过拜托您，立刻请麦克唐纳先生下来。此事关系重大。”

我被带到领事馆里的客房，我想办法好好刮了胡子，洗个热水澡，尽管一直有人来敲我的门。其中有一位是个一本正经的苏格兰外科医生，他把我检查了半个钟头，认为我还对他隐瞒了什么重大伤势没说。其他人则是来关心我还有没有什么需要服务的地方，我至少对其中三位不耐烦地询问麦克唐纳到底准备好了没有。我得到的只是含糊的答复，说什么麦克唐纳还没找到；接着，随着夜幕低垂，我一身的疲惫——也许是因为那个医生开给我的药里有什么特殊成分——让我沉沉入睡。

我一直睡到第二天早上才醒来。我要他们把早餐送到房里，换上了干净的衣服，那是昨晚我睡觉的时候，他们从华懋饭店取来的。我精神好多了，决定当下就要自己去把麦克唐纳给揪出来。

我以为上次走过一次，就找得到麦克唐纳的办公室，不过领事馆大楼盖得有点像迷宫，我不得不向几位碰巧擦肩而过的人问路。我还是有点弄不清方向，正打算走下一道楼梯，就碰巧瞥见塞西尔·梅德赫斯特爵士的身影出现在我底下的楼梯平台。

早晨的阳光从平台上的落地窗泻下，照亮他身后一大片的灰石墙。平台上没有别人，塞西尔爵士略微躬身向前，双手叠握在身后，俯瞰楼下领事馆前的草地。我本想退回楼上，可是大楼的那部分十分清静，我的脚步声随时都有可能吸引他抬头。我索性走下楼去，来到他身边，他转过身来，仿佛早就察觉我的一举一动。

“早啊，老弟，”他说，“听说你回来了。不妨告诉你，你的失踪引起不小的恐慌哟。觉得好些了吗？”

“没事了，多谢关心。就是这只脚还有点肿。鞋子套不太进去。”

阳光照在他脸上，让他看起来年迈而疲倦。他又转向窗户，凝视着外面；我移到他身旁，也望着外头。在我们底下，三个印度籍的警察在草地上忙进忙出，把沙包堆成一排。

“你可听说她走了？”塞西尔爵士问。

“听说了。”

“当然啦，当你跟她同时失踪的时候，我自然以为是那么回事。我猜，还有些人也有同样的想法。所以我早上才会在这里。我要向你道歉。不过他们说你还没醒，所以我就……我就先逛到这里来。”

“实在没有什么好抱歉的，塞西尔爵士。”

“当然有。我想那天晚上我四处说了些话。你知道的，妄下结论。当然啦，现在大家都知道是我错了。但是无论如何，我觉得我还是亲自来向你解释比较好。”

底下来了个拉着轮车的中国苦力，运来更多的沙包。印度籍的警察开始卸货。

“她有留信吗？”我问，尽量装得毫不知情的样子。

“没有。不过我早上收到一封电报。哪，她人在澳门。说她平安无事。她自己一人，不久还会写信等等。”接着他转身抓住我的手臂，“班克斯，我知道你也会想念她。从某方面来看，哪，我倒宁愿她是跟你走了。我知道她……她对你可是大有好感。”

“您一定十分震惊。”我这么说，不知道还能说什么。

塞西尔爵士转过身去，有一阵子凝视着楼下的警察。接着他说：“倒也没有，老实告诉你。我一点都不意外。”接着他又说下去，“我一直告诉她，她该离开，我叫她离开我，去寻找爱情，我是说，真爱。这是她应得的，对不对？她应该是去追寻了。去寻找真爱。也许她就找到了。在南中国海上，谁知道？她变得浪漫了，我得让她自由。”此时他泪水盈眶。

“您现在有什么打算？”我语气和缓地问他。

“我有什么打算？天知道。我想也该回家了吧。我想就这么办。回家。等我把几笔债还清了就走，没错。”

打从刚才我就听到有脚步声在我身后走下楼梯，此时脚步声慢了下来，并且完全停住，我们两个一起转过身来，看到的竟是格雷森，那个工部局的代表，我有点慌。

“早安，班克斯先生。早安，塞西尔爵士。班克斯先生，真高兴见到您安然无恙回来。”

“谢谢您，格雷森先生。”他就站在那阶楼梯上不走，一味傻笑着，我补充道，“我相信那极司菲尔公园欢迎典礼的筹备事宜，进度一定符合您的要求啰？”

“哦，当然，当然。”他含糊地笑了一声，“不过此刻，班克斯先生，我来找您，是因为我听说您想跟麦克唐纳先生说话。”

“没错，是有这么回事。老实说，我正要上去找他呢。”

“唉，可是他不会在他平时的办公室里。如果您肯跟我走，我现在就可以带您去找他。”

我在塞西尔爵士肩上轻轻地握一握——他转向窗户藏住眼泪——然后我就踩着急切的脚步跟格雷森走了。

他带我走过大楼里无人的一区，接着我们走到一道走廊，一整排都是办公室。我听到讲电话的声音，后来有人从其中一间走出来，向格雷森点点头。格雷森打开另一间的门，挥手示意让我先行入室。

我走进一间狭小但布置得宜的办公室，里头塞了一张大办公桌。我在门槛边上就停住了，因为办公室里空无一人，可是格雷森用肘触了我一下，把我推进去，然后把门关上。他接着绕过办公桌坐下，作势指着一个空座位。

“格雷森先生，”我说，“我没时间跟您玩这些愚蠢的把戏。”

“对不起，”格雷森说，“我知道您想见麦克唐纳。不过，您知道的，麦克唐纳的职责属于礼宾司。他的确十分称职，不过他的职权恐怕非常有限。”

我不耐烦地叹了口气，不过我还来不及说话，格雷森就继续说：

“是这样，老兄，您刚才说您想见麦克唐纳，我就猜您想见的人是我。我才是您该找的人啊。”

我这才发现格雷森起了一点变化。他逢迎奉承的态度已然消失，他隔着办公桌盯着我看。等他看到我露出明白状况的眼神，又再次指着那个座位。

“请自便，老兄。我得道歉，从您来到此地，我就四处尾随。不过是这样子，我得确定您不会出什么纰漏，把其他势力给惹毛了。哪，让我猜猜，您想跟‘黄蛇’碰面。”

“没错，格雷森先生。不知道您可否安排此事？”

“可巧了，就在您离开的时候，我们终于得到回音。各方似乎都乐意答应您的要求。”接着他倾身向前对我说，“所以，班克斯先生。您觉得您快破案了吗？”

“是的，格雷森先生。好不容易，我相信快了。”

因此昨夜刚过十一点，我就乘车驶过优雅的法租界住宅区，随行的是两位中国秘密警察。我们开过一条林荫大道，经过一些豪宅，其中有几栋完全隐藏在高墙与围篱之后。接着我们驶入重重大门，每道都有许多身着长袍头戴帽子的人把守，最后我们停在一处以碎石铺地的庭院中。一栋幽暗的建筑，约四五层楼高，矗立在眼前。

屋内灯光昏黄，四下的阴影里都躲着一些守卫。我跟着护送我来的人走上中央的大楼梯，我隐约觉得这屋子曾经属于一位欧洲富翁所有，不过如今已落入中国政权的手中；我看到简略的记事条与日程表，钉在一些精致的中西艺术品旁边的墙上。

他们领我进入三楼的一个房间，从这个房间的配置来看，前阵子应该还有一座桌球台。现在房间中央多出了一块空地，我等的时候在上面走来踱去。等了二十分钟，我听到楼下庭院里来了更多汽车，不过我走到窗边想看个究竟，却发现窗子面对的是屋子另一侧的花园，看不到正门前发生了什么事。

大约又过了半个钟头，他们才终于来带我。他们护送我走上另一道楼梯，然后转到一处走廊，两旁又有更多的守卫。后来，护送我的人停了下来，其中一位指着前方几码远的一扇门。我独自走过最后这段路，进入一处看来像个大书房的地方。地上铺着厚地毯，墙上几乎排满了书籍。在房间的尽头，重重布幔掩住一座凸窗，窗前有张书桌，前后两侧都有一张椅子。桌上的阅读灯下有一圈温暖的光线，可是房中其他部分都一片幽暗。正当我站在那里观察周遭的情况，有个身影从书桌边站了起来，小心地绕过书桌，回头指着桌后他空出来的座位。

“怎么不过去坐那儿，小海雀？”菲利普叔叔对我说，“你还记得吧？你以前最喜欢坐我书桌后面的位子了。”

第二十二章

若非我心里早已有数，我很可能认不出菲利普叔叔来。这些年来他发福不少，尽管算不上肥胖，脖子还是变粗了，双颊也下垂了。他的头发灰白稀疏。不过他的眼神仍像我记忆里那样平静而幽默。

我朝他走去时，脸上并无笑容；我也没有过去坐他让我坐的位子。“我坐这里就好。”我说，走到另一把椅子旁边。

菲利普叔叔耸耸肩。“反正这书桌也不是我的。事实上，我从没来过这房子。与你有关吗，这地方？”

“我也从没来过这里。我们坐下来聊，如何？”

等我们都坐了下来，才靠着桌上台灯的光线，清楚看到对方，我们花了好一会儿工夫仔细观察对方的容貌。

“你没变多少，你知道吗，小海雀，”他说，“即便是现在，也不难从你身上看出当年的那个孩子。”

“请你不要再用那个名字叫我。”

“对不起。我承认这么叫你太无礼了。所以，就这么回事：你想尽办法追查我的下落，而我一直避不见面。不过到后来，我渐渐想要再见你一面。我有义务给你一些解释，我想。不过我不确定，你知道的，我不确定你如何看待我。我是说，把我当朋友还是敌人。可是这年头，我自己对大部分人该放哪一边都不确定了。你知道吗？他们竟然要我带着这个以防万一。”他取出一把银色的小手枪，拿到灯光下晃了一晃，“你能相信吗？他们以为你会攻击我。”

“不过，我看你也当真把它带在身上了。”

“欸，我到哪儿都带着呀。这年头，好多人想在背后整我。我带枪其实不全是为了要见你。说不定外头那些人里，有人被买通了，会冲进来捅我一刀。谁知道？我过的，恐怕就是这种日子。打从‘黄蛇’这个把戏开始玩，就是这个样子了。”

“没错。看来你常常出卖人。”

“如果你话中的话，真是我听出来的意思，那就有点刻薄了。要说共产党的事，好罢，我承认我是叛徒。就算这样，我也从来不是故

意的，你知道的。蒋介石的手下有一天把我抓去，威胁说要严刑侍候我。我承认我并不想挨打，一点也不想。不过后来他们做了一件非常狡猾的事。他们设圈套让我出卖了一个同志。于是，这下子就没完没了了。你也看到了，天底下惩罚叛徒最残忍的，就是我从前的那些同志。我没有别的办法可以存活。我只有依赖政府保护，不让那些同志杀害我。”

“根据我的调查，”我说，“许多人因你而丧命。不只是被你出卖的人。有一次，大约一年前，你让共产党以为‘黄蛇’是另一个人。他的许多关联人因此都在第一波的报复行动中被杀。”

“我可不认为我自己有什么了不起的。我是个懦夫，而且我早就知道了。可是红军的残忍，不能怪到我头上来。我早就对他们不存敬意了。不过，我不认为你来找我，是为了要聊这些吧。”

“的确不是。”

“那么，小海雀。对不起。克里斯托弗。那么，我该告诉你什么呢？咱们从哪里开始？”

“我父母。他们在哪儿？”

“你父亲恐怕已经过世了。都过这么多年了。我很遗憾。”

我没回答，等他说下去。过了半晌，他才说：

“告诉我，克里斯托弗。你认为你父亲发生了什么事？”

“我怎么想，跟你有什么关系吗？我来，就是要听你怎么说。”

“好吧。不过我很好奇，你自己得出的答案是怎样的。毕竟你在这方面已经大有名气了。”

这话教我生气，不过我忽然想到，得顺着他的话，他才会说。于是我说：“我的猜测是，父亲挺身而出，勇敢反对自己的雇主，反对当年他们靠进口鸦片获利。这一来就挡了许多人的财路，于是就被人除掉。”

菲利普叔叔点点头。“我也猜你是这么以为。你母亲与我仔细地讨论过，到底该让你相信什么。我们讨论出的大约就是你刚才说的那么回事。这么说来，我们成功了。真相，小海雀，真相只怕没有那么伟大。你父亲当年是与情妇私奔的。他跟情妇在香港住了一年，女的叫作伊丽莎白·康瓦利斯。可是香港，哪，极沉闷又保守得紧，哪容得下这对奸夫淫妇，于是他们只好转奔马六甲或什么类似的地方。后

来他染上伤寒死了，在新加坡。那是他离开你们两年以后的事。对不起啰，老伙计，听了这一切，你并不好受，我知道。可是你还是要要有心理准备。今天晚上我还有好多事要跟你讲呢。”

“你是说，我母亲知情？她当时就知道了吗？”

“没错。她起先不知道。大约蒙在鼓里一个多月吧。你父亲把行踪藏得相当隐秘。你母亲会知道，是因为你父亲写信给她。这真相，从来只有我们两个人知道。”

“可是那些侦探呢？那些侦探怎么可能查不出父亲做了什么事？”

“那些侦探？”菲利普叔叔笑了一声，“那些薪资低廉、工作过量的笨蛋？把一头大象丢在南京路上，只怕他们都还找不到呢。”我依然没答腔，他便说，“她本来想找个机会告诉你。不过我们想保护你。所以才让你以为是你想的那回事。”

坐得这么靠近桌灯，我渐渐觉得不自在，不过椅背直挺挺的，不容我往后靠。由于我还是没答话，菲利普叔叔又说：

“让我也替你父亲说句话罢。他日子可不好过。他一直爱着你母亲，深爱着她。我十分确定，到死前都不曾停止爱她。有时候，小海雀，问题就出在这儿了。他太爱她，把她理想化。于是他觉得自己根本无法达到她要求的标准。他试过了。一点也不错，他试了，这几乎让他崩溃。他大可说：‘你听好，我顶多只能做到这个地步，如此而已，我就是我。’可是他崇拜她。拼命想让自己能够得着她的标准，后来他发现自己实在办不到，就逃走了。跟一个不在乎他好坏的女人跑了。我个人以为他只是要休息。他长年来拼命苦干，他只是想休息而已。你可别把他想得太多坏，小海雀。我相信他不曾停止爱你母亲。”

“那么我母亲呢？她发生了什么事？”

菲利普叔叔向前探身，双肘撑着桌子，头部微微往后仰。“你对于她的事，现在知道的有多少？”他问。

他先前在声音里所表现的轻松已经完全消失。他现在看起来有如心事重重的老人，饱受自我悔恨的折磨。尽管他把头往后仰，却还是仔细盯着我看，桌灯的黄光照拂下，看得到他白色的鼻毛突出鼻孔。我听到楼下某处，唱片正播放着中国军歌。

“我没有要烦扰你的意思，”看我没有回答，他说道，“我不想再听到自己提起此事，能躲就躲。说吧。你查出多少了？”

“直到最近，我都还以为我父母被囚禁在闸北区。所以，你瞧，我没那么厉害。”

我等着他开口。他维持那个耐人寻味的姿势好一会儿，然后坐下来才说：

“有件事你不会记得。你父亲离家之后不久，我来你家看你母亲。有一个人那天也来了。一位中国绅士。”

“你是指军阀王顾吗？”

“啊，那你还算不错嘛。”

“我是查出了他的姓名。可是，后来我下工夫追查的，恐怕是条不实的线索。”

他叹了口气，竖起耳朵倾听。“你听，”他说，“国民党的国歌。他们播这个来戏弄我。每次不管他们把我带到哪儿，都会听到这个。屡试不爽，不可能是巧合。”我并没有搭腔，他便站起来，走入重重布幔边的暗影里。

“你母亲，”他最后说，“十分投入我们的运动。阻止鸦片卖到中国。许多欧洲国家，包括你父亲所属的公司，都从印度进口鸦片到中国牟取暴利，让无数中国人成为有毒瘾的废人。那段日子里，我是这个运动的核心人物之一。有好长一段日子，我们的策略显得天真。我们以为让他们觉得羞耻，就可以让他们放弃从鸦片得到的利益。我们写信，对他们提出证据显示鸦片对中国人民造成什么伤害。没错，你会觉得可笑，我们非常天真。你看，我们以为我们面对的，是同样信仰基督教的一群人。结果呢，我们发现我们毫无进展。我们发现，这些人不只是贪图其中暴利，他们其实是真的希望中国人变成废人。他们喜欢让中国人混乱，耽溺于毒瘾，无法妥善治理自己的国家。如此一来，这个国家就可以拿来当作殖民地剥削，还不必为这个国家负起殖民母国的一般义务。于是我们改变策略。我们手腕变得复杂了。在那些日子里，现在也还是如此，鸦片顺着长江运送。船只溯江而上，货物行经盗匪遍布的区域。没有相当的保护，货物还没到长江三峡恐怕就要遭到劫掠。因此所有的公司——摩根洋行、怡和洋行等等——全部都与运送路径上的军阀有协定。这些军阀，其实就是有头有脸的盗匪罢了，不过他们拥有军队，有力量保护货物安全通过。于是我们

有了新策略。我们不再求这些贸易商。我们转而求这些军阀。诉诸他们的民族自尊心。我们指出，想要终结以鸦片牟取暴利的事，想要除去阻止中国人掌握自己命运与国土的主要障碍，全看他们的决定。当然，有一些军阀还是贪图他们所得到的重金报偿。不过，也有一些被我们说动了。王顾在当时是这些强盗军阀里势力比较大的一位。他的地盘涵盖湖南省北部数百平方英里的面积。一个相当残暴的家伙，不过深受敬畏，因此对于那些贸易商大有用处。王顾相当赞同我们的诉求。他常来上海，喜欢这里的高级生活，他来上海的时候，我们就成功地说服了他。小海雀，你还好吧？”

“没事，还好。我在听。”

“也许就到此为止吧，小海雀。你没必要听我接下来要说的事情。”

“你就说吧。我在听。”

“好吧。我觉得你是该知道的，如果你受得了的话。因为……嗯，因为你必须要找到她。你还有机会找到她。”

“这么说，我母亲还活着？”

“我没理由相信她不在了。”

“那就说吧。继续刚才说的。”

他回到桌边，又在我对面坐下。“那天王顾到你们家，”他说，“也怪不得你还记得。你怀疑那是个关键时刻，你是对的。正是那天，你母亲发现王顾的动机非常不单纯。简单地说，他打算私吞那些船运的鸦片。当然啦，他巧施玲珑手段，让货物先经过三四股其他势力，这真是典型的中国人的手段，不过最后呢，没错，还是通通落到他手里。我们大部分人都知道这点了，不过你母亲却被蒙在鼓里。我们瞒着她，或许这么做实属不智，那是因为我们觉得她不会接受。我们其他的人，心里当然会有些不安，不过我们还是决定跟王顾合作。没错，他还是把鸦片卖给那些贸易商卖的同一批人。但重点是终止进口。让进口鸦片无利可图。可惜那天王顾来你家，他说了些话，让你母亲发现了他跟我们的真正关系。我想，她觉得自己被骗了。也许她早就怀疑了，不过她不愿面对事实，她气她自己也气我，就如同她气王顾一样。总之，她大发雷霆，还甩了王顾一个耳光。只是轻轻一记，你明白吧，不过她的手确实已碰到王顾的脸颊。当然，她能当他的面骂的话，全都脱口而出了。我当时就知道，为此，她恐怕要付出

可怕的代价。我想办法当场把事情抚平。我向王顾解释，你父亲才刚遗弃她，她只是心情不好，王顾走出去的时候，我一路跟在旁边表达这个意思。他面带微笑，说不用担心，可是我担心，没错，不担心才怪。我知道你母亲所做的事，要想化解并不容易。不妨告诉你，要是王顾一气之下不跟我们合作也就罢了，我还觉得松了口气。可是他要鸦片，他已经花了好多工夫安排。再说，他被一个外国女人羞辱，他要报一箭之仇。”

我探身向他，进入桌灯炫目的光亮之中，我有种奇怪的感觉，身后的黑暗愈变愈大，此时在那里摊成一大片幽暗无光的空间。菲利普叔叔用掌心拭去前额的汗珠。不过他现在专注地看着我，继续说：

“那天后来我去新城饭店见王顾。我尽我所能化解可能降临的灾难。不过为时已晚。他那天下午对我说的话，一点都没有生气的样子。他发现你母亲的精神——他就是这么说的，她的‘精神’——非常迷人。他已经为之倾倒，因此打算娶她为妾，带她回湖南。他说要‘驯服’她，如同对待一匹野生的母马一样。这个你得理解，小海雀，你得理解那时候在上海、在中国是什么样的局势，像王顾这样的人，若是决定要做这类的事，谁也阻止不了他。这点你必须理解。向警方或任何人要求保护你母亲，根本不会有结果。也许能暂时缓一缓，不过终究是无用。没有任何人能保护她，不让这种人得逞。不过你明白吗，我真正担心的是你，小海雀。我不确定他打算怎么处置你，这才是我求他的事。结果我们达成协议。我想办法让她落单，无人守护，而同时我又把你带离现场。我只求他这件事。我不希望他连你也带走。你母亲，只能说是在劫难逃。至于你，还有商量的余地。我就是做了这样的事。”

我们相对无言，沉默了好一会儿。后来我开口说：

“你当完这个顺水媒人，不知道王顾后来是不是还继续跟你们合作，对你们言听计从？”

“别这么尖酸，小海雀。”

“那他到底有没有？”

“情势使然，他有。他得到你母亲，心满意足。于是他依着我们的计划行事，而且，容我这么说，他的介入，是各公司最后决定不再进口鸦片的因素之一。”

“依照你的说法，母亲算是为了崇高的目标，牺牲小我啰。”

“听好，小海雀，世事不是样样都由得我们自己来决定的。你一定得理解这点。”

“你后来有再见到我母亲吗？在她被这个男人掳走之后？”

我看得出他的犹豫。不过他接着说：

“有。不妨告诉你，我见过她。一次，在事情发生七年以后。我碰巧路经湖南，接受王顾邀请到他那里做客。在那里，在他的堡垒里，没错，我看到了你母亲，那是最后一次。”

他的声音此时近乎耳语。楼下的唱机已经不再播放，我们两人之间凝结着一片沉寂。

“那……那她后来怎么了？”

“她身体很好。妾自然不只她一位。在那种情况下，我猜想，她在新生活里，适应得还不错。”

“她过得还好吗？”

菲利普叔叔把脸转开，然后平静地说：“我见到她的时候，她自然就问我你的事。我把我知道的事都告诉她。她听了也很高兴。你知道的，在她见到我之前，她完全与外界隔绝。在那七年当中，她只能听到王顾让她知道的事。我是说，她不确定那桩财务的安排，是否正常执行。因此当我见到她时，那件事自然是她最想知道的，我也向她保证此事正常执行。经过七年悬肠挂肚的担心，我终于让她安心了。我实在无法形容她得到了多大的解脱。‘我只想知道这个。’这句话她说个不停，‘我只想知道这个。’”

此刻，菲利普叔叔非常仔细地盯着我看。过了一会儿，我问了他期待我问的问题。

“菲利普叔叔，什么财务安排？”

他低头看着手背，端详了半晌。“要不是为了你，她对你的爱，小海雀，我相信你母亲会毫不迟疑结束自己的生命，不会让那个恶棍碰她一下。她总会有办法，也一定会做到。可是她还担心你。因此，到了最后，她看情势比人强，便做了安排。你将会得到财务上的供应，以换取……换取她的顺从。我亲自监督了大半的程序，经由公司来安排。公司里有个对这件事全无概念的人，还以为这是在为鸦片的安全运送做安排呢！哈！哈！真是个傻子，那个人！”菲利普叔叔

摇摇头，面露笑容。接着他的表情又阴沉起来，仿佛他要回到我们原先要谈的主题。

“我的生活费，”我平静地说，“我继承的财产……”

“你在英国的姑妈。她从来就没富有过。真正资助你的人，这么多年来，一直是王顾。”

“这么说，这么多年来，我一直靠……我一直靠……”我说不下去，于是住口。

菲利普叔叔点点头。“你的教育。你在伦敦社会上的地位。你所有的一切一切。全都是靠王顾。或者该说，靠你母亲的牺牲。”

他又站了起来，对着我看，脸上有了新的表情，几乎像是怨恨。但随即他转身走入暗处，我再看不到他的脸了。

“我最后见到你母亲的那一次，”他说，“在那座堡垒里。她已经完全不在乎反鸦片的运动了。她只为你而活，只担心你。当时，进口鸦片已是非法行为。但即使是这件事，对她也已经毫无意义。我当然气这点，其他人也一样，毕竟我们努力这么多年了。我们终于达成目标了，我们是这么想的。鸦片贸易被废止了。但是只过了一两年，我们就知道，这废止其实另有文章。进口贸易不过是换个人做罢了，如此而已。现在换由蒋介石的政府来执行。上瘾的人比以前更多，只不过现在卖鸦片的所得，是用来支付给蒋介石的军队，支付给他的政权。也就是因为这样，我才加入了红军，小海雀。你母亲，我原本以为，她要是知道我们的运动竟如此收场，一定难过至极，可是她已经不在乎了。她要的，只是你受到照顾。她要的，只是你的消息。你知道吗？小海雀”——他的声音忽然有了不寻常的语调——“我见到她的当时，她看起来似乎过得相当不错。不过我留在那里的几天，我问了家里的其他成员，知道内情的成员。我要知道实情，她受到什么样的待遇，因为……因为我知道有一天，这一刻，我们现在这样的对话，必然会来临。而我发现了。是的，我发现了。一切。”

“你故意这样，是在折磨我吗？”

“那不只是在……不只是在床第之间屈服而已。他常常在晚宴的客人面前鞭打她。驯服白种女性，他这么说。而且还不只是这样。你知道吗……”

我早已掩上耳朵，不过此刻却大叫：“够了！为什么要这样折磨我？”

“为什么？”他的声音现在有了火气，“为什么？因为我要你知道真相！这些年来，你一直认为我是卑鄙小人。也许我是，不过要怪，就要怪这个世界。我从来没有要变成这个样子。我也对这个世界有所贡献。我曾经以我自己的方式，做过勇敢的决定。结果看看我的下场。你鄙视我。你这些年来一直鄙视我，小海雀，你简直就像是我的儿子，而你依然鄙视我。不过，现在你看清世界的真实面貌了吗？你看清楚让你在英国养尊处优，靠的是什么呢？你看清楚自己是靠什么成为知名大侦探了吗？大侦探！这对谁有好处啊！寻获失窃的珠宝，查出贵族们为了继承权而杀人？你觉得这样就足够了吗？你母亲，她要你永远活在你的童话世界里。不过那是不可能的事。这个梦想终究要破灭。能维持到今天，已经是个奇迹。哪，小海雀，拿去。我给你这个机会。拿去。”

他又把手枪掏了出来。他走出阴影朝我而来，等我抬头看他，他的身影已赫然浮现在我头顶上方，就像儿时他站在我面前一样。他把外套扔开，把枪抵在背心的心脏部位。“拿着，”他弯下身子轻声说，好让我闻到他气息陈腐的呼吸，“拿着，孩子。你可以杀我。你不是一直都想杀我吗？正因如此，我才想办法活到现在。谁也不配杀我。我这条命，我只留给你，明白吗？只留给你。扣扳机啊。这样好了，我们可以把场面弄得好像我攻击你，枪拿在我手上，我会压到你身上。等他们冲进来，他们会看到我的尸体压在你身上，你看起来就像是自卫。瞧，这里，我已经握好了。你扣扳机啊，小海雀。”

他的背心贴在我脸上，随着他胸口起伏而上下移动。我感到一股厌恶，想要逃开，不过他空着的手一皮肤粗糙得无法形容一抓住我的手臂，想把我往他身上拉。我忽然想到，只要我的手碰到手枪，他有可能自己动手扣扳机。我猛然抽身，推倒了椅子，往后踉跄几步。

有那么一秒钟，我们两个都心虚地望着门口，看看这里的骚动有没有引来警卫。不过什么也没发生，最后菲利普叔叔笑了出来，把椅子扶正，仔细地摆回书桌前。接着他自己往上头一坐，把手枪放在桌上，花了一会儿工夫喘过气来。我又退了几步，远离书桌，不过这个洞穴般的房间里没有其他东西，我干脆停下来，依然背对着他。接着我听到他说：

“好罢。这样也好。”他又喘了几口气，“我就告诉你罢。把我心底最黑暗的秘密告诉你罢。”

不过接下来的几分钟，我只听到我身后传来他沉重的呼吸声。半晌后他终于开口：

“好罢，我就向你坦白真相。为什么我那天让王顾绑走你母亲。我刚才所说的话，没错，一点都不假。我必须保护你。没错，没错，我先前说的话，或多或少都可以成立。不过，只要我真的想要，只要我真的想要救她，我知道我一定找得出办法。我现在要告诉你一件事，小海雀。这件事许多年来，我连对自己都无法坦白。我帮助王顾绑走你母亲，是因为我心里确实想让你母亲成为他的奴隶，受到百般凌虐，夜复一夜。因为，你知道，打从到你们家做房客的那段日子起，我就一直想得到她。没错，我想得到她，后来你父亲就那样跟别人跑了，我相信我的机会来了，我是当然的继位者。可是……可是你母亲，她从来不会那样看待我，你父亲走了以后我才醒悟。她只是敬重我是个正直的人……不，不，根本没希望。就算再过千年万代，我也没办法让她要我，那样子根本没可能。于是我火了。我真的火了。等事情发生了，她惹毛了王顾，我却为之兴奋。你听见没有，小海雀？我为之兴奋！他把你母亲掳走以后，每到夜深人静的时刻我就为之兴奋。那几年里，我把王顾当做替身。仿佛我也征服她了。不知多少次，我想像她的遭遇，心底兴奋快活极了。哪，快，杀了我吧！你为什么不动手？你都听见了！拿去，一枪毙了我吧！”

我在房里黑暗的地方站了好久，背对着他，听着他的呼吸。接着我再度转身向他，相当平静地说：

“你先前说你相信我母亲还活着。她还在王顾身边吗？”

“王顾四年前死了。他的军队，总之，被蒋介石解散了。我不知道她现在在哪儿。我真的不知道。”

“那样，我还是会找到她。我不会放弃。”

“这可不是容易的事，孩子。战火已经延烧全中国。马上就要吞噬一切。”

“没错，”我说，“我敢说战火马上就要吞噬全世界了。不过那不是我的错。事实上，我已经不在乎了。我要重新开始，这次，我要找到她。你还有没有什么事可以告诉我，让我可以找得顺利些？”

“恐怕没有了，小海雀。我什么都告诉你了。”

“那么再会了，菲利普叔叔。原谅我，你的要求我无法照办。”

“没关系。还怕没人想杀我这条‘黄蛇’吗？”他哼地一笑。接着他以疲惫的声音说：“再见了，小海雀。希望你找到她。”

第七部

一九五八年十一月十四日·伦敦

第二十三章

那是我多年来第一次远行，抵达香港后过了两天，我还是相当疲倦。搭飞机固然快得惊人，可是机舱内拥挤又摸不清东西南北。我的腰痛又狠狠发作起来，而头疼在我停留的这段时间又久久不退，这无疑影响了我对这块殖民地的看法。我听说有人到那儿旅游回来以后赞不绝口。“一个有前瞻性的地方。”每个人都这么说，“美得摄人。”然而那个星期的天气大半都阴沉沉，街道又拥挤不堪。我想我有时还是蛮喜欢这里隐隐呼唤的上海味——商店外的中文招牌或者只是看着中国人在市场里忙进忙出。只不过这样的呼唤，有时又教我不快。那就像在肯辛顿或贝斯沃特的无聊晚宴上，遇到曾经相爱的远房表妹，她的手势、表情、轻轻耸肩的小动作等，依然唤醒回忆，但她整个人与心中珍藏的印象相比，却像个不搭调，甚至丑陋的拙劣模仿。

我后来还是很高兴有詹妮弗陪着我来。起初她在一旁暗示，要我让她跟来，我还故意装不懂。因为即使到了最近这个阶段——我谈的是过去这五年——她依然觉得我像是个卧病在床的人，特别是当我人生里又出现了有关过去，也就是关于远东地区的事。我想，我心里早已不喜欢她这般过度关心，但后来，我念头一转，想到她是真的想离开现状一阵子——想到她也有她的烦恼，想到这样一趟旅程对她也有好处——我才同意让她与我同行。

詹妮弗还提议，我们不妨把行程延伸到上海，我认为这也未必不可行。我可以跟几位旧识谈谈，他们依然对外交部有些影响力，我确定要获准进入中国大陆，应该不会有太大的困难。我知道有人就这么做过。然而，据说今日的上海，犹如昔日的上海借尸还魂一般。共产党最终没有破坏实体建筑，因此当年的租界，今日大体上仍维持旧观。尽管街道已经重新命名，街景却是一眼就认得出来，听说熟悉旧上海的人，回到那儿不必担心会迷路。可是，外国人自然完全不准进入，昔日奢华的酒店与夜总会，今日则成为毛主席政权的政府机关。换言之，今天的上海恐怕会糟蹋昔日上海的印象，这个更加拙劣的模仿给人带来的痛苦，比起香港是有过之而无不及。

附带一提，我已听说大半的贫穷问题——以及母亲曾经奋力苦战的鸦片毒瘾——在共产党统治下已大幅消减。这些邪恶的事情根除到什么地步，仍有待观察，不过，显而易见的是，共产党在几年之间所达到

的成果，是那些慈善机构和热诚的运动几十年也没达到的。我们在香港度过的第一个晚上，我在怡东酒店的房间里踱步，调养我的腰酸，让自己心情平静下来，我记得我当时心里想着，母亲对这样的结果会有什么看法。

到了第三天，我才去“萝丝黛庄园”。我们早就说好我独自前往，詹妮弗尽管整个早上都看着我的一举一动，午餐后送别我时却没再要把我捧在手心里不放了。

那天下午，阳光破云而出，我的计程车爬上山坡路时，道路两旁修剪整齐的草坪上有成群仅着背心的园丁在浇水、推平。最后计程车爬到了坡顶的平地，停在一栋大白屋前面，建筑风格属英国殖民地的大宅，有一长排的百叶窗，还有一厢楼房从另一侧延伸出来。这里必定一度是绝佳的居住环境，可以俯瞰海洋以及小岛西侧的大部。当我迎着微风站立，遥望码头，我可以直眺远方，看见有辆缆车正爬上一座遥远的山丘。转身面对大宅，看得出人们任它凋敝；尤其是窗台与门框上的漆都龟裂剥落了。

屋内，走廊里，隐隐闻得到煮鱼的闷腥味，不过却是一尘不染。有位中国籍的修女领我走过足音蹑蹑的走廊，到修女比琳达·希尼的办公室，她大约四十五六岁，脸上表情严肃，略显阴沉。是在那里，在那间拥挤的小办公室里，她们说有位名叫“黛安娜·罗伯茨”的女人，经由一个帮助滞留在红色中国的外国人的交涉机构，转送到她们这里。中国主管当局对她所知的一切就是，她自从战争结束以后，就住在重庆的精神病院。

“有可能战时大半期间，她也待在那里，”比琳达修女说。“我们实在难以想像，班克斯先生，那是什么样的地方。任何人一旦关进那种地方，极可能就从此消失。找得到她，全靠她是白种人。中国人不知道该怎么处理她。毕竟他们希望所有的外国人都离开中国。因此后来，她就被送到我们这里，而且待在这里两年了。她刚来的时候，脾气好暴躁。不过，才一两个月，所有‘萝丝黛庄园’常有的好处，像是平静、秩序、祷告等，就发挥了作用。您现在可看不出她刚到时的那副可怜模样了。她平静多了。您刚说，您是她亲戚吗？”

“是的，很可能是。”我说，“既然我人在香港，我想我应该来探望一下才是。我至少可以做到这点。”

“是啊，有任何亲人、好友或者在英国的亲戚朋友的消息，我们都很乐意知道。而且，我们的大门永远为访客敞开。”

“她有访客吗？”

“她有定期访客。圣约瑟学院的学生会来我们这里当义工。”

“原来如此。那么，她和其他人处得怎么样？”

“还不错。她没有带给我们任何麻烦。别人要是能像她就好了！”

比琳达修女带我走过另一条走廊，来到一个阳光充足的大房间——这里也许以前是餐厅——里面有二十来位女性，全穿着罩衫式的米色长袍，有的静坐，有的拖着步伐走来走去。敞开的落地窗外是草地，阳光从窗子照进来，落在镶木地板上。要不是到处都放置了养在瓶里的鲜花，我还以为这里是育儿室；墙上到处都钉满了鲜艳的水彩画，在不同角落里，摆设着小桌子，桌上有跳棋的棋盘、纸牌、画纸与粉蜡笔。比琳达修女把我留在门口，自己走向坐在一架立式钢琴旁的修女，有几个女人停下手边的事情瞪着我看。有几位觉得不自在，想躲起来。几乎全是西方人，其中我也看到一两位欧亚混血的。接着，从我身后宅内不知何处，传来有人放声哭嚎的声音，说也奇怪，这声音反而让她们放松下来。我身旁一个满头粗丝乱发的女人对我挤个笑容然后说：

“别担心，甜心，只不过是玛莎而已。她又发作啰！”

我听她有约克郡的口音，不知道什么样的命运把她带到这步田地，这时候比琳达修女回到我身边。

“黛安娜应该就在外头，”她说，“请跟我来，班克斯先生。”

我们走出落地窗，到一片细心打理的草地上，地面起起伏伏，让我想起此处距离山丘顶不远。我跟着比琳达修女走过开满天竺葵与郁金香的花圃，目光越过修剪整齐的灌木篱，可以瞥见这里的全景。四处都有身着罩衫式米色长袍的年长女性坐着晒太阳，有的织毛衣，有的一起聊天，有的则平静地自言自语。比琳达修女一度停下来环顾四周，接着又带我走下草坡，穿过一道白色的门，来到一座围在墙里的小花园。

花园里仅有的一个人，是一位独坐在稀疏草地另一头晒太阳的老太太，她正在一张花园铁骨桌边玩牌。她专心地玩她的纸牌，我们走近也没抬头。比琳达修女碰碰她的肩膀说：

“黛安娜。这位先生来看你哟。他是从英国来的。”

母亲抬头对我们两人微笑，接着又低头玩她的纸牌。

“有时候黛安娜听不懂别人跟她讲什么，”比琳达修女说，“想叫她做什么事，都得一说再说。”

“不知道我们可不可以独处聊聊？”

比琳达修女并不喜欢这个主意，有那么一会儿，她似乎在心里找理由拒绝，不过后来还是说：“班克斯先生，如果您想这样，应该无妨。我人会在值班室里。”

比琳达修女一走，我便仔细观察母亲怎么玩牌。她比我预期的要瘦小许多，两肩严重耸起。她的头发雪白，紧紧盘成一个髻。我在一旁观看时，她有时候会抬头瞄我一眼，对我笑笑，不过我可以看到里头有一丝恐惧，是刚才修女还在时没有的。她脸上的皱纹并不太多，不过两眼下方却有厚重的眼袋，使得袋下的褶皱深如刀割。她的颈子也许受过什么伤害或病痛，深深缩进躯体，以至于她转头看两边的纸牌时，连肩膀也必须跟着转动。她鼻尖上挂了一滴鼻涕，我拿出手帕想把它拭干净，却忽然想到这么做可能让她过度惊吓。最后，我平静地说：

“对不起，我未能事先给你一点心理准备。我明白这可能会让你吓一跳。”我停了下来，因为她显然没在听我说话。接着我说：“妈，是我。克里斯托弗。”

她抬头看看，露出与刚才类似的笑容，接着又低头玩牌。我猜想她是在玩单人牌局，只不过她独门的玩法很怪异。有一度，微风把几张纸牌从桌上吹落，但是她似乎不在意。我把纸牌从草地上拾起，拿过去还她，她笑一笑然后说：

“真谢谢你。不过实在没必要，你知道吗。我呢，我就扔着不管，等草地上撒满了纸牌再说。只有在那时候我才会去收拾，一次捡完，你明白吗。反正它们总不会飞下山去吧，对不对？”

接下来一阵子，我继续看着她。这时母亲唱起歌来。她兀自轻声吟唱，几乎没张口，手则继续取牌排放在桌面。她的歌声微弱——我听不出她在唱什么——不过旋律悠然自在。我边看边听，心头浮起一段往事：有个多风的夏天，在我家花园里，母亲荡着秋千，高声欢笑歌唱，我则在她面前直跳脚要她停下来。

我伸手轻轻碰她的手。她立刻把手缩回，并且愤怒地瞪着我。

“请你手脚放规矩点，先生！”她说，声音微弱却带着惊吓，“规规矩矩放好！”

“对不起。”我退了两步让她安心。她继续玩牌，等她再度抬头瞄瞄我，她又露出笑容，仿佛刚才什么事也没发生。

“妈，”我缓缓说，“是我。我已经从英国来了。真的很抱歉让你等了这么久。我知道我让你好失望。好失望。我尽了全力，不过，你知道，这实在不是我能力所及。我明白这一切都已经太迟了。”

我一定是哭了起来，因为母亲抬头盯着我看。然后她说：

“你牙齿疼吗，小伙子？牙齿疼，最好告诉艾格尼丝修女哦。”

“不，我还好。不过，你知道我在说什么吗？是我呀，克里斯托弗。”

她点点头，然后说：“再拖也没有用，小伙子。艾格尼丝修女会帮你填表格。”

此时我心头灵光一现。“妈，”我说，“我是小海雀。小海雀啊。”

“小海雀。”她忽然凝住不动，“小海雀。”

母亲过了好久都一语不发，不过她脸上的表情已完全改变。她又抬起头来，但是眼睛却凝视我身后某处，温柔的微笑在她脸上扩散开来。

“小海雀，”她平静地喃喃着，有一会儿似乎沉醉在幸福之中。接着她摇摇头说：“那个男孩。他真教我操心。”

“请听我说，”我说，“请听我说。假定你这个儿子，你的小海雀。假设你发现他已经竭尽所能，用尽一切方法来找你，可是最后还是没找到你。如果你知道这点，你会觉得……会觉得你能原谅他吗？”

母亲凝视的目光依旧越过我的肩膀，不过脸上出现了迷惑的表情。

“原谅小海雀？你是说原谅小海雀？他又没犯错！”接着她又幸福地粲然而笑，“那个男孩。他们说他过得不错哦。可是，这个我倒没那么有把握。唉，他老是教我操心。你不会懂的啦。”

“你也许会觉得我好笑，”我说，上个月我又再度与詹妮弗谈起那趟旅程，“不过，要等到她说了这句话，我才开始明白一件事。我的意思是，我才明白她从来不曾停止爱我，不管经历了多少苦难。她所要的，只有一件事，就是让我过好日子。而其余一切，包括我设法找她、想要拯救世界等等，有没有成功都没有什么差别。她对的感情，永远存在，不需仰赖任何事物。我想这也没什么好意外的。可是却花了我大半辈子才明白。”

“你真的认为，”詹妮弗问我，“她完完全全不知道你是谁吗？”

“我确定她不知道。她说的都是真心话，而且她知道自己在说什么。她说没有犯错，何来原谅，而且她真的搞不懂，我说的究竟是什么事。你要是在我第一次说出那个名字的时候，看到她脸上的表情，你就不会有任何疑问了。她不曾停止爱我，一刻也不曾。”

“克里斯托弗叔叔，你觉得，你没告诉修女们你是谁，是为了什么？”

“我不确定。这看起来似乎很奇怪，我知道，反正到最终，我就是没表明身份。再说，也没有理由把她从那里带走。她似乎还算满足。倒说不上是快乐。不过仿佛痛苦已经过去。回英国的家也未必会过得更好。我想，倒是她过世以后，才会有这个问题。她走了以后，我考虑过让她安葬在英国。可是话说回来，我又想了想，还是决定不要这么做。她一辈子都住在东方。我认为她宁可留在那里。”

那是个冷冽的十月早晨，詹妮弗与我正穿过格洛斯特郡的一条蜿蜒小巷。前晚我住在离她寄宿处不远的旅社，早餐过后不久来找她。我看到她这一阵子的住处实在简陋，也许我忘了把心疼的样子藏好，难怪她不顾寒冷，立刻坚持带我去附近教堂的墓园，去俯瞰温德拉什山谷。走近巷底，我看见巷底是座农庄的大门；不过还没到那里，她就带我离开小巷，钻过围篱的一处缺口。

“克里斯托弗叔叔，来看看这个。”

我们穿过浓密的荨麻丛，来到一处栏杆边上。这时候，我才看到一直延伸到谷底的原野。

“这里风景真美。”我说。

“从墓园那里可以看得更远。你从来没想过要搬到这里来住吗？伦敦现在比以前拥挤多了。”

“的确不再是从前那样，你说得没错。”

我们在那里站了一会，肩并肩，凝视底下的风景。

“对不起，”我对她说，“最近不常来看你。我猜已经好几个月了。不知道我在忙什么。”

“欸，不要为我操心。”

“可是我会操心啊。我当然操心。”

“那件事已经过去了，”她说，“去年的那一切。我绝不会再做那种傻事了。我已经答应过你了啊。那一阵子，情况碰巧糟透了，不过如此而已。再说，我也没有真心要那么干。我特意留了扇窗子不关。”

“可是你还年轻，詹妮弗。还有大好将来等着你。就算你只是想到那个念头，都够让我难过了。”

“我还年轻？三十一岁，没有子女，没有结婚。我想我的确还很年轻呢。可是也要有动力才行，你知道吗，这样才能再从头来过。现在我身心俱疲，有时候我就想干脆自己一个人安安静静过一辈子算了。我可以找个店员的工作，一个礼拜去看一次电影，也不去碍着谁。这样的人生也没什么不好。”

“可是你不会安于那样的生活。那听起来不像我认识的詹妮弗。”

她笑了一笑。“可是你根本不明白我的苦衷。像我这个年龄的女人，在这种地方寻找爱情。每次一出房门，房东太太跟其他房客就开始交头接耳。我到底该怎么办嘛？登广告吗？这样更让他们有得说了，倒不是我在不在乎的问题。”

“可是你非常迷人啊，詹妮弗。我是说，人们只要看着你，就可以看到你的心里，看到你的善良、你的温柔。我敢说缘分还在某处等着你。”

“你认为别人看得到我的心里？克里斯托弗叔叔，那只是因为你眼中看到的，还是多年前的那个小女孩呀。”

我转向她，仔细瞧瞧。“哦，还在呢，”我说，“我看得到。那个小女孩还在你身上某处，等人发现。世界带给你的改变并不如你以为的那么多，好孩子。世界只会让你一时震惊罢了。除此之外，这个

世界上正人君子也不少，我会帮你看着。只要你别一味躲着他们就好了。”

“好吧，克里斯托弗叔叔。下次我尽力而为。如果还有下次。”

有一会儿，我们望着底下，欣赏风景，有阵轻风拂过我们的脸庞。过了半晌我才说：

“我应该多关心你一点才是，詹妮弗。是我的疏忽。”

“可是你也无能为力啊。谁教我一时想不开……”

“不是，我是说……我是说更早一些。你还在成长的过程里。我该多陪陪你。可是我太忙了，想要解决世界的问题。我为你付出的关心太少，应该更多才对。是我不对。唉，老早就想告诉你。”

“千万别向我道歉，克里斯托弗叔叔！没有你，我今天会在哪儿？我原来是个无依无靠的孤儿。你万万不可以向我道歉。我欠你太多了。”

我伸手触摸张在栏杆上的湿蜘蛛网。网子破了，在我指端晃来晃去。

“呸，好恶心哦！”她大叫，“我受不了！”

“我以前就喜欢玩这个。小时候，我脱下手套就为了玩这个。”

“哟，你怎么会这样！”她放声大笑，我忽然看到了昔日的詹妮弗。“那你自己呢，克里斯托弗叔叔？你结不结婚？难道都没想过吗？”

“我才是真的太晚呢。”

“哦，我可不敢说哟。你把单身生活打点得很好。可是这种生活却不太适合你。你还有遗憾。所以你郁郁寡欢。你也该想想。你老是提起你的那些女性朋友。难道她们没半个要你？”

“她们只想跟我吃吃午餐。恐怕仅此而已。”我接着又补充，“我曾经爱过一个人。很久以前。不过那件事情跟一切都已经成为过去。”我笑了一下，“我的伟大使命，老是从中作梗，就是这样。”

我大概是把脸转开了，因为我感觉到她碰碰我的肩膀，我回头看她，发现她温柔地凝视着我的脸庞。

“你不要老是怪罪你的事业嘛，克里斯托弗叔叔。我向来欣赏你所做过的努力。”

“努力是有，最后却没有什麼成果。再说，这些都与我无关了。眼下我最大的野心，就是控制我的风湿。”

詹妮弗忽然露出笑容，用她的手臂挽着我。“我知道我们该怎么办了，”她说，“我有个计划。我决定了。我要找个好男人嫁了，然后我要生三个，不，四个小孩。我们会住在这附近，这样就可以随时来眺望这座山谷。而你也可以离开伦敦那栋拥挤的小公寓，来跟我们同住。既然你的女性朋友不要你，你不如来做我未来子女的叔叔。”

我对她微笑。“这主意听起来很不错。虽然我不知道你未来的丈夫有没有这个雅量，让我整天在他家晃来晃去。”

“哦，到时候我们会帮你搭个旧木棚之类的东西。”

“嗯，这个计划听起来很吸引人。这个提议请你先保留着，我会考虑考虑。”

“这是我的承诺，你得多留心啰。因为我保证会兑现的。到时候你一定要来住木棚子哦。”

过去这个月里，我任由伦敦的阴冷日子流逝，独自在肯辛顿花园闲逛，身旁还有秋季的观光客与中午出来吃午餐的上班族，有时还会遇到旧识，便跟着去吃顿午餐或喝茶，我常常发现我心里想着那天早上跟詹妮弗的一番话。我不能否认这带给我安慰。情况在显示，她已经度过她人生中最黑暗的时期，来到另一个新的开始。她的未来还得拭目以待，不过她这个人天生就不会轻易认输。的确，她很可能会积极实现她那天俯瞰山谷时对我说的计划——虽然只是半开玩笑的口吻。而且只要几年光景，也许事情真如她所愿地发生，那么我倒不无可能下乡去与她同住。当然，我不敢奢望她的木棚子，反正她家附近也总是找得到房子。我感激詹妮弗的心意。我们打从心底了解对方，那个冷冽早晨里那样的谈话，正是我多年来得以慰藉的泉源。

但话说回来，乡间生活可能太安静，最近我变得舍不得伦敦的生活。再说，我有时候还是会遇到有人打从大战前就听过我的名声，上前向我请教某事该怎么办。老实说，才上个礼拜，我跟奥斯本一家人吃晚餐，他们向我介绍一位女士，她立刻抓起我的手，大叫道：“你说你就是那位克里斯托弗·班克斯吗？那位大侦探？”

原来她大半人生都待在新加坡，是莎拉极亲密的朋友。“以前她常常谈起你，”她告诉我，“我真的觉得我们已经认识了。”

奥斯本一家还邀请了其他几位客人，不过一旦坐下来进餐，我发现我刚好坐在这位女士身边，话题难免又转回莎拉身上。

“你是她的好朋友，不是吗？”她问我，“她提到你的时候，总是不断地赞美你。”

“我们当然是好朋友。只是她去了东方以后，我们就形同失散了。”

“她常常谈到你。她有好多你这位名侦探的故事。每次桥牌打得烦了，她这些故事总是带给我们好多乐趣。她每次都对你推崇有加。”

“没想到她还这么惦记着我，我真感动。如我所说，我们形同失散，不过我曾接到她一封信，大约在战后两年。直到那个时候，我才知道大战期间她过的是什么样的日子。她对那段俘虏营里的日子轻描淡写，不过我相信绝非好日子。”

“哦，我确定那不是人过的日子。我丈夫跟我，我们险些遭受同样的命运。我们想办法及时逃到澳洲去了。可是莎拉跟蒙·德·维弗先生，他们总是太相信命运。他们那种夫妻，常常晚上没计划就出游，遇到什么就接受什么。在大半的情况下，随遇而安是不错的生活哲学，不过等日本人都来到了门前，这种态度就不行了。你认识他吗？”

“我从来没这个荣幸认识伯爵。我知道他在莎拉过世后就回到欧洲，可惜我们不曾相遇。”

“咦，听她谈你的那个样子，还以为你跟他们俩都很熟呢。”

“没有。你知道的，我认识莎拉，是她还非常年轻的时候。恕我多问，也许你也无法回答这个问题，不过，他们的婚姻在你看来，是否快乐，莎拉跟这位法国老兄？”

“婚姻快不快乐？”我身旁的女士想了一会儿，“当然，这种事确实很难讲，不过我说真心话，也很难想像他们不快乐。他们看起来都深爱着对方。他们一向不富有，也就是说，他们绝不能像他们想要的那样无忧无虑。不过伯爵似乎总是如此，呃，如此浪漫。你笑了，班克斯先生，不过就是这个词，浪漫。她的死让伯爵身心交瘁。全都

是俘虏营造成的。她跟许多人一样，身体没有完全复原。我好想念她。这么迷人的朋友。”

自从上周的这场邂逅后，我又把莎拉的信拿出来读了几次——那是我们自多年前上海一别之后，她写给我的唯一一封来信。日期是一九四七年五月十八日，从马来半岛某个小山的车站寄来的。也许我是希望跟她的朋友聊过以后，能从那些很是拘谨的，甚至毫无生气的愉快叙述里，找出一些藏在字里行间的东西。不过那封信只提供了她离开上海后的行程概要。她谈到澳门、香港、新加坡，都说“景色怡人”、“多彩多姿”、“引人入胜”这类的话，提到数次她的法籍伴侣，不过每次都一笔带过，仿佛我该知道的就那些而已。她还轻松地提及日军的俘虏营，她说她的健康问题“是个无聊的话题”。她以礼貌的方式问候我，并称她在重获自由的新加坡“生活愉快，一切正常”云云。这封信，是你人在异国的某个下午，隐约想起某位旧识，心血来潮时会写的那种信。只有在信接近尾声的时候，有那么一次，她的语调才隐隐透露我们昔日曾经共享的亲密。

“我不介意告诉你，克里斯托弗，”她写道，“那一次，我可是真的失望透了，尤其是我们彼此都已经知道了对方的心意。不过别担心，我早已不生你的气了。更何况命运又再度眷顾我，我怎么能继续怨你？再说，我现在也由衷相信，那天你没跟我走，是正确的决定。你向来觉得你有使命要达成，我敢说你若没有先完成你的使命，你也永远无法把心献给任何人。我只希望那件任务早已完成，而你现在可以找到我近来几乎视为当然的幸福与呵护。”

她信里的这些段落——尤其是最后那几行——总有些不真实的感觉。字里行间隐约有种气氛——老实说，她会在那一刻写信给我的这件事本身——跟她口口声声说日子充满“幸福与呵护”，就是教我觉得不太对劲。她与那位法国伯爵的生活，是否真与她走出上海那家小店，登上码头时立志追求的相同？我多少持疑。我觉得她提到使命感的时候，她心里想到的不仅是我，更是她自己，以及想要逃避使命的徒然。也许有人可以继续过他的人生，完全不受这种心情的羁绊。不过，对于我们这种人而言，我们的命运是以孤儿的眼光看待世界，长年追逐着父母消逝的暗影。我们只有尽全力把使命完成，别无解脱之途，在此之前，心中无法得到片刻的平静。

我不想显得洋洋自得；可是在伦敦过的这些闲散日子，大体上确实还算惬意。我喜欢在公园漫步，或是逛逛画廊，最近更是愈来愈常到大英博物馆的阅览室里，翻查报纸档案里有关我杰出事迹的报导，

愚蠢地觉得自己好了不起。换言之，这座城市已然成为我的家，就算我必须在此度过余生，我也不会介意。然而，有些时候，日子还是会充满莫名的空虚，所以我还是会慎重考虑詹妮弗的邀请。

编者后记

2017，瑞典文学院在将诺贝尔文学奖授予石黑一雄时，在颁奖词中曾对他的创作主题做过一个精妙的提炼，那就是：“记忆、时间与自我欺骗……以其巨大的情感力量，发掘了隐藏在我们与世界的虚幻联系之下的深渊。”无论他笔下的作品发生在怎样的时空背景，借用怎样的故事外壳，其核心是一以贯之的。

《我辈孤雏》是石黑一雄的第五部长篇小说，首次出版于2000年，入围当代英语小说界最高奖项布克奖短名单。与他的成名作《长日将尽》或两度改编为影视作品的《莫失莫忘》相比，《我辈孤雏》相对而言并不知名。但这同样也是一部非常典型的石黑式小说，而且更具文学野心。也正因为此，这部作品对于读者提出了相当高的阅读要求。而从本书在国内翻译出版后的一些读者反馈来看，许多人对于这本书的技法与主旨也确实存在着相当的困惑与误解。

读者们的困惑主要集中在两方面。第一，《我辈孤雏》表面上看是一部采用第一人称叙事的侦探小说：故事开篇，主人公克里斯托弗·班克斯就自称福尔摩斯再世，立志要惩奸除恶。读者们当然期望看到一个名侦探用缜密的思辨与逻辑破解重重谜团的故事。但随着叙事的推进，他们看到的却是主人公越来越失真、凌乱、不可信，最终趋于荒谬的回忆。这完全不是他们期望的那个精彩的侦探故事。第二，本书中一个最重要的时空背景设置在1937年淞沪会战爆发后的上海。对于中国读者而言，这是一段我们怀有深刻历史与民族情感的记忆，容不得半点扭曲失真。可恰恰是在这里，主人公的回忆达到了荒谬的顶点。读者很容易将这样的失真归因于作者对于中国现代史的不了解。

读者们的困惑是可以理解的，而他们不满的源头就在于主人公所叙述的不是一个可信的侦探故事。然而，《我辈孤雏》并不是一部真正的侦探小说，故事本身的不可信恰恰是作者有意为之的。无法理解这一点，也就无法走近这部作品真正的主旨。但在做进一步的剖析之前，我们先来了解一个概念：“不可靠的叙述者”（Unreliable Narrator）。

这是一个历史不算久远的文学学术语，由美国文艺批评家韦恩·布斯（Wayne Booth）于1961年首创，指的是文学作品中那些可信性存疑

的故事叙述者。在许多传统的第一人称叙事作品中，叙事者忠实地记录，转述所见、所闻、所想的一切，他们就是读者的眼睛和耳朵，通过他们读者得以了解书中的所有事件与人物。一个典型的例子就是狄更斯的名著《大卫·科波菲尔》中，那位无比绅士、无比诚实的同名主人公。但在另一些作品，尤其是现当代作品中，作者却打破传统，刻意选择一些不那么诚实可靠的叙事者，而通过他们扭曲的视野与内心，读者们看到的是一个完全变了样的世界。许多时候，这些“不可靠的叙述者”是骗子、恶棍、凶手，讲述的是颠倒黑白的谎言。他们中最臭名昭著的代表人物，就是纳博科夫的《洛丽塔》中那位狡诈狠毒，操纵人心，用诗意的语言误导读者，粉饰自己邪恶内心的“怪叔叔”亨伯特了。但另一些“不可靠的叙述者”并非是在蓄意撒谎。他们的记忆失真源自可怕的心灵创伤，源自某些他们难以直面的现实，源自自我欺骗。《少年派的奇幻漂流》就是这一类型的一个范例。少年派起初讲述的是一个不可思议的奇幻故事，但这个故事背后隐藏的却是一段黑暗恐怖的地狱之旅。与恶棍骗子相比，这一类不可靠的叙述者更难识别，因为不同于蓄意的欺人者，自欺者往往并不自知。而《我辈孤雏》中的主人公班克斯，就是属于这一类不自知的自欺者。

一个侦探，不能引领读者接近真相，反倒连自己的记忆都真假难辨，这究竟是怎么一回事呢？但《我辈孤雏》要讲述的不是神勇侦探破解谜题的老套故事。石黑一雄只是借用了侦探小说的外壳，探讨的却是“自我欺骗”究竟可以在何种程度上改写人的记忆，模糊幻想与现实的边界。故事的主人公—克里斯托弗·班克斯—是一个永远活在童年梦境中的男人，这个梦境不断涂改着记忆，扭曲着理智，一步步突破幻想与现实的边界，最终成为一个吞噬一切的黑洞。而读者要做的，就是从班克斯的这个记忆黑洞中，筛出真相的蛛丝马迹。虽然小说的主人公是名义上的侦探，但真正的侦探却是读者自己。

* * *

1930年，伦敦。故事开篇，主人公克里斯托弗·班克斯自我展示的是一个前途无量、自信热切的青年才俊形象。在应同窗旧友之邀参加的一场上流聚会中，班克斯道出了此生的志向：要做一名铲除奸恶、扶正扬善的大侦探。也正是在这场聚会中，班克斯见到了一位令他着迷的奇女子—莎拉·亨明斯。

自以为已在侦探界小有名气的班克斯自信满满地想与莎拉结识，却不料在冷若冰霜的莎拉面前碰了一个大大的软钉子。主人公那光鲜

的自我形象从一开始就现出了破绽。尽管班克斯自称对此不以为意，但随后的故事发展很快会证明，他绝不是一个能够袒露内心波澜的人，即便是在自我回忆之中。

一场与旧相识的邂逅，勾起了主人公的童年回忆。班克斯讲述了幼时由一位“张伯伦上校”自上海护送回英国的旧事，由此引出了多年前父母双双失踪，自己沦为孤儿的事实。在与上校重逢叙旧的过程中，主人公的自我记忆却与上校对他的回忆大相径庭：班克斯坚称当年的自己坚强、镇定，处乱不惊；上校却记得登船那日的他只是个“哭个不停的小鬼”。主人公记忆的不可靠性在此始露端倪。

与此同时，班克斯的侦探生涯蒸蒸日上，莎拉终于向他抛出绣球，希望班克斯邀她作为女伴，共同出席一场盛大的上流社交晚会。班克斯婉拒，莎拉则明言定会准时现身晚会现场。

晚会当天发生了戏剧性的一幕：班克斯先是出于旧嫌，坚决不邀莎拉入席，莎拉大闹礼宾处，最终两人长谈一番，误会冰消瓦解。班克斯这才得知，原来莎拉也是孤儿。

班克斯终于开始回忆父母失踪前，他在上海公共租界度过的童年：英国商行派驻上海的高管父亲；严厉但慈爱的母亲，“全上海最美丽的英国女人”；儿时玩伴，邻家日本男孩秋良；还有一位父母的密友，也深得班克斯信任与尊重的“菲利普叔叔”。但金色的童年从一开始就蒙上了一层阴云：班克斯父亲所服务的英国公司从事着母亲最深恶痛绝的鸦片贸易，母亲甚至为此义愤填膺地当面怒斥前来督察的公司要员：“为这样的公司服务，您不觉得羞耻吗？赚这种亵渎上帝的钱财，您的良心能安吗？”

这场风波过后不久，父母的冲突爆发了。面对母亲的道德怒火，父亲进退两难。从母亲口中，先前斥责督察的那番话，居然一字不差地重现了。这不禁会让作为旁观者的我们疑惑：母亲这般怒斥的究竟是谁？那位公司督察，真的不是班克斯在记忆中替父亲寻找的一个替罪羊吗？而这时，“菲利普叔叔”则坚定地站在母亲的阵营中。尽管他此刻与班克斯情同叔侄，但某个弦外之音却暗示着另一番光景的未来。

菲利普渐渐在母亲的“反鸦片”团体中成为主心骨。父亲、母亲与菲利普叔叔三者间发展出一种微妙的关系。而在班克斯的几个记忆片段中，父亲似乎逐渐被母亲所感化。多亏你妈妈，我变得更坚强，让你有朝一日，会以我为荣。他记忆中的父亲如此对他说道。然而，

这并非班克斯九岁时的日记，而是班克斯成人后的自叙；选择性的记忆，选择性的解读，为的是支持一个自我构建的故事。

不久后的一天，父亲突然失踪。警方接报搜寻，但直到当天晚上仍一无所获。又一次，成年班克斯在自叙中轻描淡写地否认自己童年时的不安与焦虑，仿佛“他”当晚所担心的是未能履约去秋良家，而非父亲的失踪：“我已经为这样的小题大做感到十分不悦。”他如此宣称道。但无论是从人之常情，还是从接下来的情节发展，我们都不难看出，这绝非实情。最终，班克斯“相信”，母亲当夜对他如此说道：“不管发生什么事，你都能以（你父亲）为荣。”相信一记忆的不可靠性，正是通过这样细微而别具深意的用词，不动声色地显露纸间的。这就是石黑一雄细腻内敛的写作手法。

在邻家伙伴秋良的提议下，班克斯开始与他一道编排起上海滩第一神探孔探长出马，绑匪束手就擒，父亲终于获救的侦探剧。幻想与现实的边界上出现了第一道裂缝。随着剧本的不断改写，父亲渐渐从一个被五花大绑的人质变成了备受礼遇的座上宾；绑匪们甚至从汇中饭店偷了一张舒适的软床，专供父亲享用。

也正是在父亲失踪后不久，小班克斯目睹了另一场风波：母亲当着众人的面，痛斥一名菲利普叔叔引荐上门的中国士绅。多年以后，班克斯相信，此人正是湖南军阀王顾，且与父母失踪有着重大关系。而就在这场风波之后不久，“菲利普叔叔”设计诱骗小班克斯一同乘车去买手风琴，却在半途下车，将他抛下。等到小班克斯跑回家中，母亲已经不见踪迹。

时间跳转回当下，淞沪会战爆发前夕的1937年。班克斯收养了同样是孤儿的小女孩詹妮弗，对她爱怜有加。尽管不忍心在此刻抛下爱女独自留守伦敦，就像当年父母抛下他那样，但一种强烈的使命感却推动着他动身重返上海，去完成那个他毕生的任务。而在班克斯的自叙中，似乎周围的整个世界都在敦促他踏上这趟旅程。就连埃克塞特的警探和牛津大学的历史教授都在责怪他迟迟没有动身去世界动乱的中心铲除邪恶。幻想与现实的边界愈发动摇了。警探和历史教授怎么会指望一名英国侦探去扑灭世界大战的火苗，就算班克斯真如他自述的那样是福尔摩斯再世？而他寻找父母的个人使命又是怎么和宏大的历史使命合二为一的？班克斯没有给出任何解释。唯一的可能就是，他的潜意识在为被压抑的童年幻想寻找一个正当而堂皇的理由。而他重返上海的另一个理由则是莎拉。

班克斯在一位朋友的婚礼上与莎拉再度相遇。此时的莎拉已经嫁给了一位年迈的知名外交官——塞西尔·梅德赫斯特爵士，此人正是莎拉在数年前那场风波晚会上结识的一位名流。塞西尔爵士临危受命，即将奔赴上海斡旋危局，“为一生的事业写下一个辉煌的结局”。而莎拉决计陪伴在夫君左右，协助他成就伟业——这似乎是她心中毕生的使命：与一个真正不凡的男人共度此生。班克斯终于下定了最后的决心。

5个月后，班克斯如约抵达上海，出席租界当局在汇中饭店举办的盛大晚宴。晚宴中，班克斯要求英国领事馆官员麦克唐纳提供协助，尽快安排他与一名受到蒋介石庇护的中共叛徒“黄蛇”会面。班克斯相信，这名“黄蛇”是解开父母失踪之谜的关键。但麦克唐纳似乎并不情愿涉足复杂的中国内政。

晚宴大厅内歌舞升平，觥筹交错，而就在对岸，侵华日军的几声炮响打破了一切安好的幻象。在班克斯的自叙中，租界内的各路名流都众星捧月般簇拥在他的身边，殷切期盼着他的到来能够平息战乱，化险为夷。而在作为旁观者的读者眼中，班克斯记忆的不可靠性变得愈发显眼了。一位侦探寻找父母的冒险与淞沪战局何干？又与租界的安危何干？幻想与现实的边界进一步模糊了。

晚宴临近尾声时，莎拉出现了。一番寒暄后，班克斯似乎听到了莎拉话外有话的一句暗示：“我想我们哪儿也不会去。除非有人来拯救我们……”然而，这句他记忆中不同寻常的话语，是否真有其事后层层附加的那些深意？

班克斯在追踪“黄蛇”之余，也开始追踪莎拉的行迹。在上海滩一家声名狼藉的赌场内，他发现斡旋受挫、心灰意冷的塞西尔爵士正赌性大发，而莎拉则寸步不离地陪侍一旁。酩酊大醉的塞西尔对妻子出言不逊，极尽侮辱，莎拉却显得不以为意，一再让班克斯不用为自己担心。临分别时，班克斯再度想起了前些天晚宴上莎拉的那句话，以及这句话背后他所认为的深意。

几天后，在一间寒酸的廉价客房中，班克斯见到了他儿时心中的英雄，如今老迈憔悴的孔探长。孔探长向班克斯透露了一条重要线索：多年前，在调查一桩枪击要案时，他从一名嫌犯口中审出了另一桩与此案无关的绑架案。嫌犯透露了七处可能用来窝藏肉票的地址，孔探长的手下随即搜查了其中六处，但最后一处的搜查却因为警界高层的阻挠而不了了之。孔探长怀疑此中必有蹊跷，但因为时隔太久，无法提供给班克斯关于那处地址的任何线索。

回到下榻的华懋饭店后，班克斯接到莎拉差人送来的一张字条，约他到饭店的某处楼梯间私会。在楼梯间里，莎拉告诉班克斯，自己已安排好了一切，决意离开塞西尔，要与他一同私奔去澳门，明天就动身。尽管难以舍弃自己的使命，但在莎拉的力劝下，班克斯最终答应与她第二天下午碰头，共赴天涯海角。哦，克里斯托弗，我们不能再这样子想事情了。否则我们将一无所有。多尝几年寂寞，多过几天空洞的人生，永远只知道自己做得还不够。放下你的工作，克里斯托弗。我们现在必须把这些全都抛开。我们明天就走，别再浪费任何一天……这番话究竟是出自莎拉之口，还是班克斯一厢情愿的内心？

第二天中午，班克斯在酒店中接到了孔探长打来的一通电话。老探长终于想起了最后一处未搜查的房屋就在一户叫“叶辰”的人家正对面。挂断电话后，莎拉差来的一名年轻的司机也如约现身，接上班克斯，驱车来到一家唱片店门口。路上，班克斯向司机打听叶辰的下落，发现对方果然听说过此人。

班克斯走进小小的店面，一曲慵懒的爵士乐——《我的眼中只有你》——蓦然响起，店主一指屋后角落，只见厚厚的布幔下现出一道暗门。推门进去，班克斯看到莎拉正坐在一只行李箱上，已经等候他多时了。

“她小心地放下烟嘴，站了起来。接着我们互相拥吻——我想，就像银幕上的情侣一样。这几乎跟我向来想象的一模一样，只不过我们的拥吻却有某种奇怪的别扭。”两人拥吻过后，莎拉告诉班克斯，她已雇好一条舢板，很快就会在附近的码头上靠岸，等着将他们送到一艘驶往澳门的汽轮上。班克斯却又想起了方才向年轻人打听的那位“叶辰”。此时此刻，他做出了一个没有回头路的抉择：他请求莎拉稍候片刻，自己去去便回。

然而，他这一去，便是永远。

班克斯出了店门，找到依然等候在外面的年轻司机，请他开车送自己到叶辰家。汽车在一道道狭街窄巷间迂回穿梭，远处隐隐响起了隆隆的枪炮声；尽管年轻人一遍遍向焦急的班克斯承诺叶辰家近在眼前，但一次次，前进的道路被瓦砾、人群和街垒所阻隔，那栋房子就像海市蜃楼一样可望不可即。而这正是梦境的特征：焦急地寻找一个永远无法抵达的地方。

终于，在闸北区的一片废墟之中，年轻人停下了车。这里靠近中日军队对峙的火线，年轻人不愿冒着危险继续前进。班克斯只能下

车，请年轻人画下地图，独自徒步跋涉。而他踏上的则是一段真正的噩梦之旅。

在一名中国军官的指引下，班克斯开始艰难地穿越一片惨遭战火蹂躏的闸北工厂区，依靠两座屹立在炮火中的高大烟囱辨明方位。在迷宫一般的厂区废墟间，中日军队正在进行惨烈的巷战，逐屋争夺，白刃相接。四周不时传来伤兵濒死的哀嚎声，也分不清是中国人还是日本兵。在一间破屋的角落里，班克斯救下了一个负伤的男人。尽管这个披着日军军服的伤兵满脸血污，半人半鬼，还吐出一连串咬牙切齿的咒骂，但班克斯仍然一眼认定，这就是他的童年好友，邻家伙伴秋良。终于，男人的脸上也隐约有了故人相识的表情。于是，两人相互倚靠，朝着班克斯坚信关押着父母的那栋房子蹒跚而去……

班克斯的故事讲到了这里，作为旁观者的我们终于可以确信，这一切只可能发生在他的梦境中，因为分隔幻想与现实的逻辑边界已经彻底崩溃了。就算班克斯苦苦寻觅的那栋房子真的一度是绑匪关押人质的窝点，也只有一个孩子才会相信，在过去了整整二十年之后，他依然能够在同一个地方寻得父母。而这恰恰就是班克斯此刻的心智状态：一个永远活在童年迷梦中的男人。更离奇的是，他所遇见的每一个人——受莎拉雇用的年轻司机，与日军拼死鏖战的中国军官，还有身负重伤的那位“秋良”——都在默认，纵容，甚至协助他追逐这个荒诞的“使命”，没有一个人对他提出半点质疑。而只有在一个孩子的迷梦中，整个世界才会围绕着他的心愿旋转。莎拉——他此生的至爱——在他的梦境中越飘越远，最后彻底消失了，剩下的只有那个吞噬一切情感与理智的执念，那个童年创伤留下的黑洞——他毕生的“使命”。

班克斯的梦境继续着。最终，在一片断壁残垣之间，他找到了他苦苦寻觅的那栋房子：尽管左邻右舍都已在炮火中化为乌有，唯有这栋神奇的建筑毫发无伤，像是一个从另一个世界来的幽灵。忽然，房门吱呀一声开了。门里走出的不是班克斯的父母，而是一个孤零零的小女孩。而在她身后的屋子里，躺着三具鲜血淋漓、支离破碎的尸体——她的家人。又一个不幸的孤儿——还是说，这个梦境中的孤儿本来就是班克斯自己？班克斯走进屋里，焦急地寻找着父母的踪迹，翻箱倒柜，掘地三尺，越来越疯狂，越来越绝望。就在这时，一群日本兵夺门而入，俘虏了班克斯和他的“朋友”。

班克斯在这一场梦魇中，究竟真正经历了什么？他遇到的那个日本士兵果真是秋良吗？他真的接到过孔探长的电话吗？他真的找到了那位“叶辰”的家吗？——还是说，他只是像一个地狱里的梦游者那

样，漫无目的地在中日军队的交火线上游走？甚至，他真的在那家唱片店里见到了要与他共度此生的莎拉吗？幻想与现实已经水乳交融，难分彼此了。我们唯一能够肯定的是，他所以为的记忆与真相相去甚远。他与其说是在寻找真相，倒不如说是在逃避现实。但不论他如何逃避，真相终究是要水落石出的。

日军的军车将班克斯押送回了租界内的英国领事馆。而在那里，英国总领事为精疲力竭的班克斯准备了一份意想不到的礼物：他追踪了多时的那条“黄蛇”终于现身了。揭晓谜底的时刻到来了。

会面安排在了了一栋由国民党特务严密把守的法租界洋楼内。在一间大书房的尽头，班克斯看着一个人影绕过书桌，朝自己走来。他认出了这个人正是他曾经的“菲利普叔叔”，今日的“黄蛇”。

在菲利普吐露真相之前，班克斯抢先道出了那个他在心中默默编织了二十年的童话故事，那个他如此渴望求证的幻梦：父亲和母亲因为反对鸦片贸易，致力于帮助中国人民根除毒瘾而开罪于父亲所服务的商行，结果先后遭人绑架暗算。他们是为正义的事业而献身的。

“我猜你也是这么以为。”菲利普点点头。只是真相——“真相只怕没有那么伟大。”班克斯的父亲没有被人绑架。他只是和一个情妇私奔去了马六甲，后来染病死在了新加坡。母亲对他过高的道德要求最终压垮了他，而他的选择就是彻底沉沦。母亲的命运则更为悲惨。她因为羞辱了那名湖南军阀王顾而给自己招来了厄运。就在菲利普将小班克斯骗开的当天，王顾派人将母亲掳走，押往他的湘西山寨为妾。就这样，班克斯的母亲沦为了一个残暴军阀的玩物，而她之所以甘心忍受这样的屈辱，没有一死了之，唯一的原因就是她的儿子：班克斯在英国享有的一切优渥生活与公学教育，背后的真正金主不是他的富有姑妈，而是军阀王顾；而换来这一切的，则是母亲的血泪。这，就是他的“菲利普叔叔”当年为了他与王顾达成的协议。

许多年过去了。在养女詹妮弗的陪伴下，班克斯乘班机来到了香港。终于，在故事临近尾声的时候，班克斯的自叙中出现了第一个，也是唯一一个云淡风轻的自证，暗示他之前的回忆有多少是一个病人的妄想。“即使到了最近，詹妮弗依然觉得我像是个卧病在床的人，特别是当我人生里又出现了有关过去的事时。”而他过去的病显然是心病。最终，在香港的一家精神病人疗养院中，他找到了自己的母亲。多年的磨难与屈辱摧毁了她的心智，但没有摧毁她对儿子的爱，尽管她已认不出眼前的这个男人了。当班克斯流着泪问母亲能否原谅儿子时，母亲迷惑地反问，原谅他的什么呢？他又没犯错！

至于莎拉，班克斯与她此生再未相见。去往澳门后，她一路辗转来到新加坡，在那里嫁给了一位浪漫的法国“伯爵”。战争结束两年后，班克斯收到了莎拉寄来的唯一一封信，信中莎拉用“拘谨，甚至毫无生气”的愉快语调讲述了她幸福的婚后生活。只是到了最后，莎拉才隐隐透露了她埋藏在心底的真情：“我现在由衷地相信，那天你没跟我走，是正确的决定。你向来觉得你有使命要达成，我敢说你若没有先完成你的使命，你也永远无法把心献给任何人。我只希望那件任务早已完成，而你现在可以找到我近来几乎视为当然的幸福与呵护。”

* * *

班克斯的故事结束了，但他留给我们的思考却余音绕梁。在一次访谈节目中，石黑一雄曾如此评论他的这位主人公：“我并不是在文学技巧的意义上构思一名‘不可靠的叙事者’的。我的写作发生在一个无法确定现实在何处的领域。从某种程度上讲，我想，这就是我们所有人生活的世界——在一片迷雾之中。”而这片迷雾之中的所在，恰恰就是“隐藏在我们与世界的虚幻联系之下的深渊”。也许，这就是为什么班克斯记忆的虚妄这么难以洞察吧，因为他的视角与声音就是我们每一个人的视角与声音。又有多少人穷其一生都对伪装成真实回忆的自我欺骗视而不见呢？

战争，是石黑一雄作品中一个反复出现的背景。但他并非是在用宏大的历史事件烘托个人的渺小；相反，用他自己的话说，“动荡之中的上海城是班克斯内心世界崩坏的一个外在体现”。石黑所关注的，并非巨人的碰撞与理念的对决，而是深不可测的人类情感。在这个宏大的舞台上，真正的主角无疑是人心。在“宏大”与“深度”之间，石黑选择的是后者。

石黑的大部分作品主题都是灰暗的。同《长日将尽》一样，《我辈孤雏》所讲述的也是一段被荒废的人生，一场被错过的幸福。但在一次访谈节目中，他却声称自己的作品是乐观的、积极的。听众们都笑了，但石黑并不是在开玩笑。在他看来，人终有一死；因此，以何种方式离开这个世界也许并不重要。名利终为身外之物。而一个人是否曾经拥有过对于人心而言最为宝贵的东西，才是我们应该关注的。而对于班克斯来说，那就是母亲爱的证言与莎拉的真情流露。

宋 金

KAZUO ISHIGURO

When We Were Orphans

to Lorna and Naomi

PART ONE

London, 24th July 1930

Chapter One

It was the summer of 1923, the summer I came down from Cambridge, when despite my aunt's wishes that I return to Shropshire, I decided my future lay in the capital and took up a small flat at Number 14b Bedford Gardens in Kensington. I remember it now as the most wonderful of summers. After years of being surrounded by fellows, both at school and at Cambridge, I took great pleasure in my own company. I enjoyed the London parks, the quiet of the Reading Room at the British Museum; I indulged entire afternoons strolling the streets of Kensington, outlining to myself plans for my future, pausing once in a while to admire how here in England, even in the midst of such a great city, creepers and ivy are to be found clinging to the fronts of fine houses.

It was on one such leisurely walk that I encountered quite by chance an old schoolfriend, James Osbourne, and discovering him to be a neighbour, suggested he call on me when he was next passing. Although at that point I had yet to receive a single visitor in my rooms, I issued my invitation with confidence, having chosen the premises with some care. The rent was not high, but my landlady had furnished the place in a tasteful manner that evoked an unhurried Victorian past; the drawing room, which received plenty of sun throughout the first half of the day, contained an ageing sofa as well as two snug armchairs, an antique sideboard and an oak bookcase filled with crumbling encyclopaedias - all of which I was convinced would win the approval of any visitor. Moreover, almost immediately upon taking the rooms, I had walked over to Knightsbridge and acquired there a Queen Anne tea service, several packets of fine teas, and a large tin of biscuits. So when Osbourne did happen along one morning a few days later, I was able to serve out the refreshments with an assurance that never once permitted him to suppose he was my first guest.

For the first fifteen minutes or so, Osbourne moved restlessly around my drawing room, complimenting me on the premises, examining this and that, looking regularly out of the windows to exclaim at whatever was going on below. Eventually he flopped down into the sofa, and we were able to exchange news - our own and that of old schoolfriends. I remember we spent a little time discussing the activities of the workers' unions, before embarking on a long and enjoyable debate on German philosophy, which enabled us to display to one another the intellectual prowess we each had gained at our respective universities. Then Osbourne rose and began his pacing again, pronouncing as he did so upon his various plans for the future.

'I've a mind to go into publishing, you know. Newspapers, magazines, that sort of thing. In fact, I fancy writing a column myself. About politics, social issues. That is, as I say, if I decide not to go into politics myself. I say, Banks, do you *really* have no idea what you want to do? Look, it's all out there for us' - he indicated the window - 'Surely you have *some* plans.'

'I suppose so,' I said, smiling. 'I have one or two things in mind. I'll let you know in good time.'

'What have you got up your sleeve? Come on, out with it! I'll get it out of you yet!'

But I revealed nothing to him, and before long got him arguing again about philosophy or poetry or some such thing. Then around noon, Osbourne suddenly remembered a lunch appointment in Piccadilly and began to gather up his belongings. It was as he was leaving, he turned at the door, saying:

'Look, old chap, I meant to say to you. I'm going along tonight to a bash. It's in honour of Leonard Evershott. The tycoon, you know. An uncle of mine's giving it. Rather short notice, but I wondered if you'd care to come along. I'm quite

serious. I'd been meaning to pop over to you long ago, just never got round to it. It'll be at the Charingworth.'

When I did not reply immediately, he took a step towards me and said:

'I thought of you because I was remembering. I was remembering how you always used to quiz me about my being "well connected". Oh, come on! Don't pretend you've forgotten! You used to interrogate me mercilessly. "Well connected? Just what does that mean, well connected?" Well, I thought, here's a chance for old Banks to see "well connected" for himself.' Then he shook his head, as though at a memory, saying: 'My goodness, you were such an odd bird at school.'

I believe it was at this point I finally assented to his suggestion for the evening - an evening which, as I shall explain, was to prove far more significant than I could then have imagined - and showed him out without betraying in any part the resentment I was feeling at these last words of his.

My annoyance only grew once I had sat down again. I had, as it happened, guessed immediately what Osbourne had been referring to. The fact was, throughout school, I had heard it said repeatedly of Osbourne that he was 'well connected'. It was a phrase that came up unfailingly when people talked of him, and I believe I too used it about him whenever it seemed called for. It was indeed a concept that fascinated me, this notion that he was in some mysterious way connected to various of the higher walks of life, even though he looked and behaved no differently from the rest of us. However, I cannot imagine I 'mercilessly interrogated' him as he had claimed. It is true the subject was something I thought about a lot when I was fourteen or fifteen, but Osbourne and I had not been especially close at school and, as far as I remember, I only once brought it up with him personally.

It was on a foggy autumn morning, and the two of us had been sitting on a low wall outside a country inn. My guess is

that we would have been in the Fifth by then. We had been appointed as markers for a cross-country run, and were waiting for the runners to emerge from the fog across a nearby field so that we could point them in the correct direction down a muddy lane. We were not expecting the runners for some time yet, and so had been idly chatting. It was on this occasion, I am sure, that I asked Osbourne about his 'well connectedness'. Osbourne, who for all his exuberance, had a modest nature, tried to change the subject. But I persisted until he said eventually:

'Oh, do knock it off, Banks. It's all just nonsense, there's nothing to analyse. One simply knows people. One has parents, uncles, family friends. I don't know what there is to be so puzzled about.' Then quickly realising what he had said, he had turned and touched my arm. 'Dreadfully sorry, old fellow. That was awfully tactless of me.'

This *faux pas* seemed to cause Osbourne much more anguish than it had me. Indeed, it is not impossible it had remained on his conscience for all those years, so that in asking me to accompany him to the Charingworth Club that evening, he was in some way trying to make amends. In any case, as I say, I had not been at all upset that foggy morning by his admittedly careless remark. In fact, it had become a matter of some irritation to me that my schoolfriends, for all their readiness to fall into banter concerning virtually any other of one's misfortunes, would observe a great solemnness at the first mention of my parents' absence. Actually, odd as it may sound, my lack of parents - indeed, of any close kin in England except my aunt in Shropshire - had by then long ceased to be of any great inconvenience to me. As I would often point out to my companions, at a boarding school like ours, we had *all* learned to get on without parents, and my position was not as unique as all that. Nevertheless, now I look back on it, it seems probable that at least some of my fascination with Osbourne's 'well connectedness' had to do with what I then perceived to be my complete lack of

connection with the world beyond St Dunstan's. That I would, when the time came, forge such connections for myself and make my way, I had no doubts. But it is possible I believed I would learn from Osbourne something crucial, something of the way such things worked.

But when I said before that Osbourne's words as he left my flat had somewhat offended me, I was not referring to his raising the matter of my 'interrogating' him all those years before. Rather, what I had taken exception to was his casual judgement that I had been 'such an odd bird at school'.

In fact, it has always been a puzzle to me that Osbourne should have said such a thing of me that morning, since my own memory is that I blended perfectly into English school life. During even my earliest weeks at St Dunstan's, I do not believe I did anything to cause myself embarrassment. On my very first day, for instance, I recall observing a mannerism many of the boys adopted when standing and talking - of tucking the right hand into a waistcoat pocket and moving the left shoulder up and down in a kind of shrug to underline certain of their remarks. I distinctly remember reproducing this mannerism on that same first day with sufficient expertise that not a single of my fellows noticed anything odd or thought to make fun.

In much the same bold spirit, I rapidly absorbed the other gestures, turns of phrase and exclamations popular among my peers, as well as grasping the deeper mores and etiquettes prevailing in my new surroundings. I certainly realised quickly enough that it would not do for me to indulge openly - as I had been doing routinely in Shanghai - my ideas on crime and its detection. So much so that even when during my third year there was a series of thefts, and the entire school was enjoying playing at detectives, I carefully refrained from joining in in all but a nominal way. And it was, no doubt, some remnant of this same policy that

caused me to reveal so little of my 'plans' to Osbourne that morning he called on me.

However, for all my caution, I can bring to mind at least two instances from school that suggest I must, at least occasionally, have lowered my guard sufficiently to give some idea of my ambitions. I was unable even at the time to account for these incidents, and am no closer to doing so today.

The earlier of these occurred on the occasion of my fourteenth birthday. My two good friends of that time, Robert Thornton-Browne and Russell Stanton, had taken me to a teashop in the village and we had been enjoying ourselves over scones and cream cakes. It was a rainy Saturday afternoon and all the other tables were occupied. This meant that every few minutes more rain-soaked villagers would come in, look around, and throw disapproving looks in our direction as though we should immediately vacate our table for them. But Mrs Jordan, the proprietress, had always been welcoming towards us, and on that afternoon of my birthday, we felt we had every right to be occupying the choice table beside the bay window with its view of the village square. I do not recall much of what we talked about that day; but once we had eaten our fill, my two companions exchanged looks, then Thornton-Browne reached down into his satchel and presented to me a gift-wrapped package.

As I set about opening it, I quickly realised the package had been wrapped in numerous sheets, and my friends would laugh noisily each time I removed one layer, only to be confronted by another. All the signs, then, were that I would find some joke item at the end of it all. What I did eventually uncover was a weathered leather case, and when I undid the tiny catch and raised the lid, a magnifying glass.

I have it here now before me. Its appearance has changed little over the years; it was on that afternoon already well travelled. I remember noting this, along with the fact that

it was very powerful, surprisingly weighty, and that the ivory handle was chipped all down one side. I did not notice until later - one needs a second magnifying glass to read the engraving - that it was manufactured in Zurich in 1887.

My first reaction to this gift was one of huge excitement. I snatched it up, brushing aside the bundles of wrapping covering the table surface - I suspect in my enthusiasm I caused a few sheets to flutter to the floor - and began immediately to test it on some specks of butter smeared on the tablecloth. I became so absorbed that I was only vaguely aware of my friends laughing in that exaggerated way that signifies a joke at one's expense. By the time I looked up, finally self-conscious, they had both fallen into an uncertain silence. It was then that Thornton-Browne gave a half-hearted snigger, saying:

'We thought since you're going to be a detective, you'd be needing one of these.'

At this point, I quickly recovered my wits and made a show of pretending the whole thing had been an amusing jest. But by then, I fancy, my two friends were themselves confused about their intentions, and for the remainder of our time at the teashop, we never quite regained our former comfortable mood.

As I say, I have the magnifying glass here now in front of me. I used it when investigating the Mannering case; I used it again, most recently, during the Trevor Richardson affair. A magnifying glass may not be quite the crucial piece of equipment of popular myth, but it remains a useful tool for the gathering of certain sorts of evidence, and I fancy I will, for some time yet, carry about with me my birthday gift from Robert Thornton-Browne and Russell Stanton. Gazing at it now, this thought occurs to me: if my companions' intention was indeed to tease me, well then, the joke is now very much on them. But sadly, I have no way now of ascertaining what they had in mind, nor indeed how, for all my precautions,

they had ever gleaned my secret ambition. Stanton, who had lied about his age in order to volunteer, was killed in the third battle of Ypres. Thornton-Browne, I heard, died of tuberculosis two years ago. In any case, both boys left St Dunstan's in the fifth year and I had long since lost touch with them by the time I heard of their deaths. I still remember, though, how disappointed I was when Thornton-Browne left the school; he had been the one real friend I had made since arriving in England, and I missed him much throughout the latter part of my career at St Dunstan's.

The second of these two instances that comes to mind occurred a few years later - in the Lower Sixth - but my recollection of it is not as detailed. In fact, I cannot remember at all what came before and after this particular moment. What I have is a memory of walking into a classroom - Room 15 in the Old Priory - where the sun was pouring through the narrow cloister windows in shafts, revealing the dust hanging in the air. The master had yet to arrive, but I must have come in slightly late, for I remember finding my classmates already sitting about in clusters on the desks, benches and window ledges. I was about to join one such group of five or six boys, when their faces all turned to me and I saw immediately that they had been discussing me. Then, before I could say anything, one of the group, Roger Brenthurst, pointed towards me and remarked:

‘But surely he's rather too short to be a Sherlock.’

A few of them laughed, not particularly unkindly, and that, as far as I recall, was all there was to it. I never heard any further talk concerning my aspirations to be a ‘Sherlock’, but for some time afterwards I had a niggling concern that my secret had got out and become a topic for discussion behind my back.

Incidentally, the need to exercise caution around this whole topic of my ambitions had been impressed upon me before I ever arrived at St Dunstan's. For I had spent much of my

first few weeks in England wandering about the common near my aunt's cottage in Shropshire, performing amidst the damp ferns the various detective scenarios Akira and I had evolved together in Shanghai. Of course, now that I was alone, I was obliged to take on all his roles as well; moreover, aware as I was that I could be seen from the cottage, I had had the sense to enact these dramas with restrained movements, muttering our lines under my breath - in marked contrast to the uninhibited manner in which Akira and I had been accustomed to carry on.

Such precautions, however, had proved inadequate. For one morning I had overheard from the little attic room I had been given, my aunt talking with some friends down in the drawing room. It was the sudden lowering of their voices that had first aroused my curiosity, and I soon found myself creeping out on to the landing and leaning over the rail.

'He's gone for hours,' I could hear her saying. 'It's hardly healthy, a boy his age, sunk in his own world like that. He has to start looking ahead.'

'But it's only to be expected, surely,' someone said. 'After everything that's happened to him.'

'He has nothing at all to gain by brooding,' my aunt said. 'He's been well provided for, and in that sense he's been lucky. It's time he looked forward. I mean to put a stop to all this introspection.'

From that day on I ceased to go to the common, and in general, took steps to avoid any further displays of 'introspection'. But I was then still very young, and at nights, lying in that attic room, listening to the creak of the boards as my aunt moved about the cottage winding her clocks and seeing to her cats, I would often enact again, in my imagination, all our old detective dramas in just the way Akira and I had always done.

But let me return to that summer's day Osbourne called at my Kensington flat. I do not wish to imply that this remark of his, about my being 'an odd bird', preoccupied me for more than a few moments. In fact, I went out myself, not long after Osbourne, in rather good spirits, and was soon to be found in St James's Park, strolling about the flower beds, growing ever more eager for the evening ahead.

Thinking again of that afternoon, it strikes me I had every right to feel a little nervous, and it is entirely typical of the foolish arrogance that carried me through those early London days that I did not. I was aware, of course, that this particular evening would be on a different level from anything I had ever attended at university; that I might well, moreover, encounter points of custom as yet unfamiliar to me. But I felt sure I would, with my usual vigilance, negotiate any such difficulties, and in general acquit myself well. My concerns as I drifted around the park were of a quite different order. When Osbourne had talked of 'well-connected' guests, I had immediately assumed these to include at least a few of the leading detectives of the day. I fancy, then, that I spent a lot of my time that afternoon working out just what I would say should I be introduced to Matlock Stevenson, or perhaps even to Professor Charleville. I rehearsed over and over how I would - modestly, but with a certain dignity - outline my ambitions; and I pictured to myself one or the other of them taking a fatherly interest in me, offering all kinds of advice and insisting I come to him for guidance in the future.

Of course, the evening turned out to be a major disappointment - even if, as you will presently see, it was to prove particularly significant for quite other reasons. What I did not know at this point was that in this country, detectives tend not to participate in society gatherings. This is not through any lack of invitations; my own recent experience will testify to the fact that fashionable circles are forever trying to recruit the celebrated detectives of

the day. It is just that these same persons tend to be earnest, often reclusive individuals who are dedicated to their work and have little inclination to mingle with one another, let alone with 'society' at large.

As I say, this was not something I appreciated as I arrived at the Charingworth Club that evening and followed Osbourne's example of cheerily greeting the grandly uniformed doorman. But I was quickly disabused within minutes of our entering the crowded room on the first floor. I do not know how exactly this occurred - for I had not had the time to ascertain the identities of anyone present - but a kind of intuitive revelation swept over me which made me feel utterly foolish about my earlier excitement. Suddenly it seemed unbelievable that I had ever expected to find Matlock Stevenson or Professor Charleville hob-nobbing with the financiers and government ministers I knew were around me. Indeed, I was so thrown by this discrepancy between the event I had arrived at and the one I had been thinking about throughout the afternoon, that all my poise, at least temporarily, deserted me, and for half an hour or so, much to my annoyance, I could not bring myself to leave Osbourne's side.

I am sure this same agitated frame of mind accounts for the fact that when I now think back to that evening, so many aspects seem somewhat exaggerated or unnatural. For instance, when I now try to picture the room, it is uncommonly dark; this despite the wall lamps, the candles on the tables, the chandeliers above us - none of which seem to make any impression on the pervading darkness. The carpet is very thick, so that to move about the room, one is obliged to drag one's feet, and all around, greying men in black jackets are doing just this, some even pressing forward their shoulders as if walking into a gale. The waiters, too, with their silver trays, lean into conversations at peculiar angles. There are hardly any ladies present, and those one can see

seem oddly self-effacing, almost immediately melting from one's view behind the forest of black evening suits.

As I say, I am sure these impressions are not accurate, but that is how the evening remains in my mind. I remember standing about frozen with awkwardness, repeatedly sipping from my glass, as Osbourne chatted amiably with one guest after another, most of them a good thirty years older than us. I did once or twice try to join in, but my voice sounded conspicuously child-like, and in any case, most conversations centred on people or issues about which I knew nothing.

After a while, I grew angry - at myself, at Osbourne, at the whole proceedings. I felt I had every right to despise the people around me; that they were for the most part greedy and self-seeking, lacking any idealism or sense of public duty. Fuelled by this anger, I was at last able to tear myself away from Osbourne and move off through the darkness into another part of the room.

I came to an area illuminated by a dull pool of light cast by a small wall lantern. The crowd was thinner here, and I noticed a silver-haired man of perhaps seventy smoking with his back to the room. It took a moment for me to realise he was gazing into a mirror, and by then he had noticed me looking at him. I was about to hurry on, when he said without turning:

‘Enjoying yourself?’

‘Oh yes,’ I said with a light laugh. ‘Thank you. Yes, a splendid occasion.’

‘But a little lost, eh?’

I hesitated, then gave another laugh. ‘Perhaps a little. Yes, sir.’

The silver-haired man turned and studied me carefully. He then said: ‘If you wish, I’ll tell you who some of these people are. Then if there’s anyone you want especially to

talk to, I'll take you over and introduce you. What do you say to that?'

'That would be most kind. Most kind indeed.'

'Good.'

He came a step closer and surveyed what was visible to us of the room. Then leaning towards me, he proceeded to point out this personage and that. Even when the name was an illustrious one, he would remember to add for my benefit 'the financier', 'the composer', or whatever. With the less well known, he would summarise in some detail the person's career and the reason for his importance. I believe he was in the midst of telling me about a clergyman standing quite near us, when he broke off suddenly and said:

'Ah. I see the attention has drifted.'

'I'm terribly sorry ...'

'Quite all right. Perfectly natural, after all. Young fellow like you.'

'I assure you, sir ...'

'No apology required.' He gave a laugh and nudged my arm. 'Find her pretty, eh?'

I did not know quite how to respond. I could hardly deny I had been diverted by the young woman several yards to our left, at that moment in conversation with two middle-aged men. But as it happened, that first time I saw her, I did not think her at all pretty. It is even possible I somehow sensed, there and then, at my first sight of her, those qualities which I have since discovered to be so significantly a part of her. What I saw was a small, rather elf-like young woman with dark, shoulder-length hair. Even though at that moment she was clearly wishing to charm the men she was talking to, I could see something about her smile that might in an instant turn it into a sneer. A slight crouch around her shoulders, like that of a bird of prey,

gave her posture a suggestion of scheming. Above all, I noticed a certain quality around her eyes - a kind of severity, something ungenerously exacting - which I see now, in retrospect, was what more than anything else caused me to stare at her with such fascination that evening.

Then, as we were both still gazing at her, she looked our way, and recognising my companion, sent him a quick, cold smile. The silver-haired man gave a salute and a respectful bow of the head.

‘A charming young lady,’ he murmured, as he began leading me away. ‘But no sense in a chap like you wasting time pursuing her. I don’t mean to be offensive, you look a jolly decent type. But you see, that’s Miss Hemmings. Miss *Sarah* Hemmings.’

The name meant nothing to me. But whereas my guide had earlier been so conscientious in supplying me with the backgrounds of those he had pointed out, he uttered the name of this woman clearly expecting me to be familiar with it. So it was that I nodded and said:

‘Oh yes. So that’s Miss Hemmings.’

The gentleman paused again and surveyed the room from our new vantage point.

‘Now let me see. I take it you’re looking for someone to give you a leg up in life. Correct? Don’t worry. Played much the same game myself when I was young. Now let me see. Who do we have here?’ Then he turned back to me suddenly to ask:

‘Now what was it again you said you wanted to do with your life?’

Of course, I had not at that point told him anything. But now, after a slight hesitation, I answered simply:

‘Detective, sir.’

‘Detective? Hmm.’ He continued to gaze around the room. ‘You mean ... a policeman?’

‘More a private consultant.’

He nodded. ‘Naturally, naturally.’ He continued to draw on his cigar, deep in thought. Then he said: ‘Not interested in museums, by any chance? Chap over there, known him for years. Museums. Skulls, relics, that kind of thing. Not interested? Didn’t think so.’ He went on gazing around the room, sometimes craning his neck to see someone. ‘Of course,’ he said eventually, ‘a lot of young men dream of becoming detectives. I dare say I did once, in my more fanciful moments. One feels so idealistic at your age. Longs to be the great detective of the day. To root out single-handedly all the evil in the world. Commendable. But really, my boy, it’s just as well to have, let us say, a few other strings to your bow. Because a year or two from now - I don’t mean to be offensive - but pretty soon you’ll feel quite differently about things. Are you interested in furniture? I ask because over there stands none other than Hamish Robertson himself.’

‘With all respect, sir. The ambition which I just confided to you is hardly the whim of a moment. It’s a calling I’ve felt my whole life.’

‘Your whole life? But what are you? Twenty-one? Twenty-two? Well, I suppose I shouldn’t discourage you. After all, if our young men won’t entertain idealistic notions of this sort, who is there to do so? And no doubt, my boy, you believe today’s world to be a far more evil place than the one of thirty years ago, is that it? That civilisation’s on the brink and all that?’

‘As a matter of fact, sir,’ I said curtly, ‘I do believe that to be the case.’

‘I remember when I thought so too.’ Suddenly his sarcasm had been replaced by a more kindly tone, and I even thought I saw tears fill his eyes. ‘Why is it, do you suppose, my boy? Is the world really getting more evil? Is *Homo sapiens* degenerating as a species?’

‘I don’t know about that, sir,’ I replied, this time more gently. ‘All I can say is that to the objective observer, the modern criminal is growing increasingly clever. He has grown more ambitious, more daring, and science has placed a whole new array of sophisticated tools at his disposal.’

‘I see. And without gifted chaps like you on our side, the future’s bleak, is that it?’ He shook his head sadly. ‘You might have something there. Too easy for an old chap to scoff. Perhaps you’re right, my boy. Perhaps we’ve allowed things to slide for too long. Ah.’

The silver-haired man bowed his head again as Sarah Hemmings came drifting past us. She was moving through the crowd with a haughty grace, her gaze moving from left to right in search - so it seemed to me - of someone she deemed worthy of her presence. Noting my companion, she gave him the same quick smile as before, but did not break her stride. For just a second, her gaze fell on me, but almost instantly - before I could so much as smile - she had dismissed me from her mind and was making her way towards someone she had spotted on the other side of the room.

Later that night, as Osbourne and I sat together in a taxicab speeding us back towards Kensington, I tried to find out something more concerning Sarah Hemmings. Osbourne, for all his pretending that he had found the evening a bore, was well pleased with himself, and eager to recount to me in detail the many conversations he had had with influential persons. It was not easy then to get him on to the subject of Miss Hemmings without my appearing unduly curious. Eventually, however, I did get him to say:

‘Miss Hemmings? Oh yes, her. Used to be engaged to Herriot-Lewis. You know, the conductor fellow. Then he went and gave that Schubert concert at the Albert Hall last autumn. Remember that debacle?’

When I confessed my ignorance of it, Osbourne went on:

‘They didn’t quite throw chairs about, but I dare say they would have done if the things hadn’t been fixed to the floor. The fellow from *The Times* described the performance as a “complete travesty”. Or did he say, “a violation”? Anyway, he didn’t much care for it.’

‘And Miss Hemmings ...’

‘Dropped him like a hot potato. Threw the engagement ring back at him, apparently. And she’s kept a huge distance from the chap ever since.’

‘All because of this concert?’

‘Well, it *was* pretty ghastly, by all accounts. Caused quite a stir. Her breaking off the engagement, I mean. But what a lot of bores they were tonight, Banks. Do you suppose when we’re that age, we’ll be carrying on like that?’

*

During that first year after Cambridge, largely through my friendship with Osbourne, I found myself attending other smart social events on a fairly regular basis. Thinking back to that period of my life, it now strikes me as a singularly frivolous one. There were supper parties, luncheons, cocktail parties held usually in apartments around Bloomsbury and Holborn. I was determined to put behind me the awkwardness I had displayed that evening at the Charingworth, and my manner at these events grew steadily more assured. Indeed, for a time, it is reasonable to say I came to occupy a place within one of the fashionable London ‘sets’.

Miss Hemmings was not part of my particular set, but I found that whenever I mentioned her to friends, they would know of her. Moreover, I would glimpse her from time to time at functions, or else, often, in the tea-rooms of the grander hotels. In any case, in one way or another, I ended up accumulating a fair amount of information concerning her career in London society.

How curious to recall a time when such vague second-hand impressions were all I knew of her! It did not take long to establish that there were many who did not regard her with approval. Even before the business of the broken engagement to Anthony Herriot-Lewis, it seemed she had made enemies on account of what many referred to as her 'forthrightness'. Friends of Herriot-Lewis - whose objectivity, to be fair, could hardly be counted on by this point - described how ruthlessly she had pursued the conductor. Others accused her of manipulating Herriot-Lewis's friends in order to get close to him. Her subsequent dropping of the conductor, after all her determined efforts, was viewed by some as puzzling, by others simply as conclusive evidence of her cynical motives. On the other hand, I came across plenty who spoke rather well of Miss Hemmings. She was frequently described as 'clever', 'fascinating', 'complicated'. Women in particular defended her right to break off an engagement, whatever her reasons. Even her defenders, however, agreed that she was a 'terrible snob of a new sort'; that she did not consider a person worthy of respect unless he or she possessed a celebrated name. And I must say, observing her from afar as I did that year, I came across little to counter such claims. Indeed, I sometimes got the impression she was unable properly to breathe anything other than the air surrounding the most distinguished persons. For a time she became linked with Henry Quinn, the barrister, only to distance herself again after his failure in the Charles Browning case. Then there came rumours of her growing friendship with James Beacon, who at that time was a rising young government minister. In any case, by this point, it had become abundantly clear to me what the silver-haired man had meant when he had declared there was little point in a 'chap like me' pursuing Miss Hemmings. Of course, I had not really understood his words at the time. Now that I did so, I found myself following Miss Hemmings's activities with a peculiar interest that year. For all that, I did not actually speak to

her until one afternoon almost two years after I first saw her at the Charingworth Club.

I had been taking tea at the Waldorf Hotel with an acquaintance when some business had suddenly called him away. I was thus sitting there by myself on the floor of the Palm Court, indulging in the scones and jam, when I noticed Miss Hemmings, also sitting alone, up at one of the balcony tables. As I have said, this was by no means the first time I had glimpsed her at such places, but that afternoon things were different. For this was barely a month after the conclusion of the Mannering case, and I was still on something of a cloud. Certainly, that period after my first public triumph was a heady one: many new doors suddenly opened to me; invitations poured in from entirely new sources; those who previously had been no more than pleasant to me exclaimed with great enthusiasm when I entered a room. It is no wonder I lost my bearings a little.

In any case, on that afternoon at the Waldorf, I found myself rising and making my way up to the balcony. I am not sure what I expected. It is again typical of my smugness of those days that I did not stop to consider if Miss Hemmings would really be so delighted to make my acquaintance. Perhaps a flicker of doubt did cross my mind as I strolled past the pianist and approached the table where she sat reading her book. But I remember feeling rather pleased with the way my voice came out, urbane and jocular, as I said:

‘Excuse me, but I thought it time I introduced myself to you. We have so many mutual friends. I’m Christopher Banks.’

I managed to pronounce my name with a flourish, but already by this point, my assurance had started to fade. For Miss Hemmings was looking up at me with a cold, searching gaze. And in the silence that followed, she gave a quick glance back to her book, as though it had let out a groan of complaint. Finally she said, in a voice filled with bafflement:

‘Oh yes? How do you do?’

‘The Mannering case,’ I said, foolishly. ‘You might have read about it.’

‘Yes. You investigated it.’

It was this utterance, made so matter-of-factly, which quite threw me off my balance. For she had spoken with no note whatsoever of realisation; it was simply a flat statement implying that she had been quite aware of my identity all along, and that she was still far from being enlightened as to why I was standing beside her table. Suddenly I felt the giddy elation of the past weeks evaporating. And I believe it was then, as I let out a nervous laugh, it occurred to me that the Mannering case, for all the self-evident brilliance of my investigation, for all the praise of my friends, somehow did not carry as much importance in the wider world as I had assumed.

It is quite possible we had a perfectly civil exchange before I began my retreat back down to my own table. And it seems to me today that Miss Hemmings was more than entitled to respond as she did; how absurd to have imagined something like the Mannering case would be sufficient to impress her! But I remember, once I had sat down again, feeling both angry and dejected. The thought came to me that I had not only just made an ass of myself with Miss Hemmings, but that I had perhaps been doing so continuously throughout the previous month; that my friends, for all their congratulations, had been laughing at me.

By the following day, I had come to accept that I fully deserved the jolt I had received. But this episode at the Waldorf probably did arouse in me feelings of resentment towards Miss Hemmings which I never fully shook off - and which undoubtedly contributed to yesterday evening's unfortunate events. At the time though, I tried to see the whole incident as providential. It had, after all, brought home to me how easy it was to become distracted from one's

most cherished goals. My intention was to combat evil - in particular, evil of the insidious, furtive kind - and as such had little to do with courting popularity within society circles.

I began thereafter to socialise far less and became more deeply immersed in my work. I studied notable cases from the past, and absorbed new areas of knowledge that might one day prove useful. Around this time, too, I began scrutinising the careers of various detectives who had established their names, and found I could discern a line between those reputations that rested on solid achievement, and those that derived essentially from a position within some influential set; there was, I came to see, a true and a false way for a detective to gain renown. In short, much as I had been excited by the offers of friendship extended to me following the Mannering affair, I did, after that encounter at the Waldorf, remember again the example set by my parents, and I resolved not to allow frivolous preoccupations to deflect me.

Chapter Two

Since I am now recalling that period in my life following the Mannering case, it is perhaps worth mentioning here my unexpected reunion with Colonel Chamberlain after all those years. It is perhaps surprising, given the role he played at such a pivotal juncture in my childhood, that we had not kept in closer contact. But for whatever reason, we had failed to do so, and when I did meet him again - a month or two after that encounter with Miss Hemmings at the Waldorf - it was quite by chance.

I was standing in a bookshop on the Charing Cross Road one rainy afternoon, examining an illustrated edition of *Ivanhoe*. I had been aware for some time of someone hovering close behind me, and assuming he was wishing access to that part of the shelf, had moved aside. But then when the person continued to loiter around me, I finally turned.

I recognised the colonel immediately, for his physical features had hardly changed. However, through adult eyes, he appeared to me meeker and shabbier than the figure from my boyhood. He was standing there in a mackintosh, regarding me shyly, and only when I exclaimed: 'Ah, Colonel!' did he smile and hold out his hand.

'How are you, my boy? I was sure it was you. My goodness! How are you, my boy?'

Although tears had appeared in his eyes, his manner remained awkward, as though he were afraid I might be annoyed at this reminder of the past. I did my best to convey delight at seeing him again, and as a downpour commenced outside, we stood there exchanging conversation in the cramped bookshop. I discovered that he was still living in Worcestershire, that he had come to London to attend a funeral and had decided 'to make a few days of it'. When I asked where he was

staying, he answered vaguely, leading me to suspect he had taken modest lodgings. Before parting, I invited him to dine with me the following evening, a suggestion he took up with enthusiasm, though he seemed taken aback when I mentioned the Dorchester. But I continued to insist - 'It's the least I can do after all your past kindness,' I had pleaded - until finally he gave in.

Looking back now, my choice of the Dorchester strikes me as the height of inconsideration. I had, after all, already surmised that the colonel was short of funds; I should have seen too how wounding it would be for him not to pay at least his half of the bill. But in those days such things never occurred to me; I was much too concerned, I suspect, about impressing the old man with the full extent of my transformation since he had last seen me.

In this latter aim, I was probably rather successful. For as it happened, I had just around that point been taken to the Dorchester on two occasions, so that on the evening I met Colonel Chamberlain there, the *sommelier* greeted me with a 'nice to see you again, sir'. Then, after he had witnessed me exchanging witticisms with the *maître d'* as we started on our soup, the colonel broke into sudden laughter.

'And to think,' he said, 'this is the same little squirt I had snivelling at my side on that boat!'

He gave a few more laughs, then broke off abruptly, perhaps fearing he should never have alluded to the subject. But I smiled calmly and said:

'I must have been a trial to you on that trip, Colonel.'

The old man's face clouded for a moment. Then he said solemnly: 'Considering the circumstances, I thought you were extremely brave, my boy. Extremely brave.'

At this stage, I recall, there was a slightly awkward silence, which was broken when we both commented on the fine flavour of our soup. At the next table, a large lady with much jewellery was laughing gaily, and the colonel glanced rather indiscreetly towards her. Then he appeared to come to a decision.

‘You know, it’s funny,’ he said. ‘I was thinking about it, before I came out tonight. That time you and I first met. I wonder if you remember, my boy. I don’t suppose you do. After all, you had so much else on your mind then.’

‘On the contrary,’ I said, ‘I have the most vivid memory of the occasion.’

This was no lie. Even now, if I were for a moment to close my eyes, I could with ease transport myself back to that bright morning in Shanghai and the office of Mr Harold Anderson, my father’s superior in the great trading company of Morganbrook and Byatt. I was sitting in a chair that smelt of polished leather and oak, the sort of chair normally found behind some impressive desk, but which, on this occasion, had been pulled out into the centre of the room. I could sense it was a chair reserved for only the most important of personages, but on this occasion, owing to the gravity of the circumstances, or perhaps as a sort of consolation, it had been given to me. I can remember that, no matter how I tried, I could not find a dignified way to sit in it; in particular, I could discover no posture which would enable me to keep both elbows at once upon its finely carved arms. Moreover, I had on that morning a brand new jacket made from some coarse grey material - where it had come from, I do not know - and I was most self-conscious about the ugly way I had been made to button it almost to my chin.

The room itself had tall grand ceilings, a large map on one wall, and behind Mr Anderson’s desk, great windows through which the sun was beating and a breeze blowing. I should think there were ceiling fans moving above me, though

I do not actually remember this. What I do remember is that I was sitting in that chair in the middle of the room, the centre of solemn concern and discussion. All around me, adults were conferring, most of them on their feet; sometimes a few would drift over to the windows, their voices lowering as they argued a point. I remember too being surprised by the way Mr Anderson himself, a tall greying man with a large moustache, behaved towards me as though we were old friends - so much so that for a while I assumed we had known each other when I was younger and that I had forgotten him. Only much later did I ascertain that we could not possibly have met until that morning. In any case, he had assumed for himself the role of uncle, continually smiling at me, patting my shoulder, nudging me and winking. Once he offered me a cup of tea, saying: 'Now, Christopher, this will cheer you up,' and had bent right down to peer at me as I had taken it. After that came more murmuring and conferring around the room. Then Mr Anderson appeared in front of me again and said:

'So then, Christopher. It's all decided. This is Colonel Chamberlain. He's most kindly agreed to see you safe to England.'

I remember at this point a hush descending over the room. In fact, my impression was that all the adults shrank back until they were lining the walls like spectators. Mr Anderson too withdrew with a final encouraging smile. It was then that I first laid eyes on Colonel Chamberlain. He came up to me slowly, bent down to look into my face, then held out his hand. I had a feeling I should stand up to shake it, but he had thrust it out so quickly, and I had felt so fixed to that chair, that I had grasped his hand still sitting. Then I remember him saying:

'My poor lad. First your father. Now your mother. Must feel like the whole world's collapsed around your ears. But we'll go to England tomorrow, the two of us. Your aunt's

waiting for you there. So be brave. You'll soon pick up the pieces again.'

For a moment I was quite unable to find my voice. When I finally did so, I said: 'It's awfully kind of you, sir. I'm very grateful for your offer, and I hope you don't think me very rude. But if you don't mind, sir, I think I oughtn't to go to England just now.' Then, when the colonel did not respond immediately, I went on:

'Because you see, sir, the detectives are working extremely hard to find my mother and father. And they're the very best detectives in Shanghai. I think they're bound to find them very soon.'

The colonel was nodding. 'I'm sure the authorities are doing everything possible.'

'So you see, sir, though I very much appreciate your kindness, I think my going to England, it won't be necessary after all.'

I remember a murmur passing around the room at this point. The colonel went on nodding, as though weighing things up carefully.

'You may well be right, my boy,' he said eventually.

'I sincerely hope you are. But just in case, why don't you come with me anyway? Then once your parents are found, they can send for you. Or who knows? Perhaps they'll decide to come to England too. So what do you say? Let's you and me go to England tomorrow. Then we can wait and see what happens.'

'But you see, sir, excuse me. But you see, the detectives looking for my parents. They're the *very best* detectives.'

I am not sure what exactly the colonel said to this. Perhaps he just went on nodding. In any case, the next moment, he leaned in even closer to me and placed a hand on my shoulder.

‘Look here. I realise how it must feel. Entire world’s collapsed about your ears. But you’ve got to be brave. Besides, your aunt in England. She’s expecting you, don’t you see? Can’t very well let the lady down at this stage, can we?’

When, sitting over our soup that evening, I related to him my memory of these last words of his, I rather expected him to laugh. Instead, he said solemnly:

‘I felt so sorry for you, my boy. So terribly sorry.’ Then perhaps sensing he had misjudged my mood, he gave a short laugh and said more lightly: ‘I remember waiting at the harbour with you. I kept saying: “Look here, we’re going to have a lot of fun on that ship, aren’t we? We’re going to have a jolly good time.” And you just kept saying: “Yes, sir. Yes, sir. Yes, sir.” ’

I allowed him, for the next several minutes, to drift through reminiscences concerning various of his old acquaintances who had been present in Mr Anderson’s office that morning. Without exception, their names meant nothing to me. Then the colonel paused and a frown crossed his face.

‘As for that Anderson himself,’ he said eventually, ‘that chap always gave me an uneasy feeling. Something fishy about him. There was something fishy about the whole damn business, if you ask me.’

No sooner had he said this than he looked up at me with a start. Then before I could respond, he began to talk again rapidly, moving us on to what he no doubt considered the safer territory of our voyage to England. Before long, he was chuckling to himself as he recounted memories of our fellow passengers, the ship’s officers, amusing little incidents I had long forgotten or had not registered in the first place. He was enjoying himself and I encouraged him to do so, often pretending to remember something just to please him. However, as he continued with these reminiscences, I found myself becoming somewhat irritated. For gradually, from behind his

cheerful anecdotes, there was emerging a picture of myself on that voyage to which I took exception. His repeated insinuation was that I had gone about the ship withdrawn and moody, liable to burst into tears at the slightest thing. No doubt the colonel had an investment in giving himself the role of an heroic guardian, and after all this time, I saw it was as pointless as it was unkind to contradict him. But as I say, I began to grow steadily more irritated. For according to my own, quite clear memory, I adapted very ably to the changed realities of my circumstances. I remember very well that, far from being miserable on that voyage, I was positively excited about life aboard the ship, as well as by the prospect of the future that lay before me. Of course, I did miss my parents at times, but I can remember telling myself there would always be other adults I would come to love and trust. In fact, there were a number of ladies on the voyage who had heard what had happened to me and who, for a time, came fussing around me with pitying expressions, and I can recall feeling much the same irritation with them as I did towards the colonel that evening at the Dorchester. The fact was, I was not nearly as distressed as the adults around me seemed to suppose. As far as I can recall, there was only a single instance during the whole of that long voyage when I might conceivably have merited that title of 'snivelling little squirt', and even that occurred on the very first day of our journey.

The sky that morning was overcast, the waters around us very muddy. I was standing on the deck of the steamer gazing back towards the harbour, towards the messy shoreline of boats, gangplanks, mud huts, dark wood jetties, behind them the large buildings of the Shanghai Bund, all now fading together into a single blur.

'Well, lad?' the colonel's voice had said near me. 'Think you'll be back again one day?'

'Yes, sir. I expect I'll come back.'

‘We’ll see. Once you’re settled in England, I dare say you’ll forget all this quickly enough. Shanghai’s not a bad place. But eight years is about as much as I can take of it, and I expect *you*’ve had about as much as you need. Much more, you’ll be turning into a Chinaman.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Look here, old fellow. You really ought to cheer up. After all, you’re going to England. You’re going home.’

It was this last remark, this notion that I was ‘going home’, which caused my emotions to get the better of me for – I am certain of this – the first and last time on that voyage. Even then, my tears were more of anger than sorrow. For I had deeply resented the colonel’s words. As I saw it, I was bound for a strange land where I did not know a soul, while the city steadily receding before me contained all I knew. Above all, my parents were still there, somewhere beyond that harbour, beyond that imposing skyline of the Bund, and wiping my eyes, I had cast my gaze towards the shore one last time, wondering if even now I might catch sight of my mother – or even my father – running on to the quay, waving and shouting for me to return. But I was conscious even then that such a hope was no more than a childish indulgence. And as I watched the city that had been my home grow less and less distinct, I remember turning to the colonel with a cheerful look and saying: ‘We should be reaching the sea fairly soon, don’t you think so, sir?’

But I believe I managed to betray none of my irritation with the colonel that evening. Certainly, by the time he boarded a taxicab in South Audley Street, and we said our farewells, he was in a splendid mood. It was only when I heard of his death just over a year later that I felt somewhat guilty I had not been warmer towards him that evening at the Dorchester. He had, after all, once done me a good turn, and from all I had observed, had been a very decent man. But I suppose the role he had played in my life – the fact of his being so

overwhelmingly associated with what happened at that point - will ensure he remains for ever an ambivalent figure in my memory.

For at least three or four years after that Waldorf episode, Sarah Hemmings and I had little to do with one another. I remember seeing her once during this period at a cocktail party in a flat in Mayfair. The event was very crowded, but I did not know many of those there and had decided to leave early. I was making my way towards the door, when I spotted Sarah Hemmings talking with someone, standing directly in my path. My first instinct was to turn and go another way. But this was around the time of my success with the Roger Parker case, and it did occur to me to wonder if Miss Hemmings would still dare to be quite so high-handed as she had been at the Waldorf a few years earlier. I thus continued to squeeze my way past the guests and made sure to pass right in front of her. As I did so, I saw her gaze move to check over my features. A look of bemusement crossed her face as she struggled to remember who I was. Then I saw recognition dawn, and without a smile, without a nod, she turned her gaze back to the person to whom she was talking.

But I hardly gave such an incident any thought. For it came during a period when I was deeply engrossed in many challenging cases. And although this was still a good year before my name acquired anything of the standing it has today, I was already beginning to appreciate for the first time the scale of responsibility that befalls a detective with any sort of renown. I had always understood, of course, that the task of rooting out evil in its most devious forms, often just when it is about to go unchecked, is a crucial and solemn undertaking. But it was not until my experience of such cases as the Roger Parker murder that it came home to me just how much it means to people - and not only those directly concerned, but the public at large - to be cleansed of such encroaching wickedness. As a result, I became more determined than ever not to be diverted by the more

superficial priorities of London life. And I began to understand, perhaps, something of what had made it possible for my parents to take the stand they had. In any case, the likes of Sarah Hemmings did not much impinge on my thoughts during that time, and it is even possible I would have forgotten of her existence altogether had I not run into Joseph Turner that day in Kensington Gardens.

I was at that time investigating a case in Norfolk and had returned to London for a few days with the intention of studying the extensive notes I had made. It was while I was strolling around Kensington Gardens one grey morning, pondering the many curious details surrounding the victim's disappearance, that I was hailed from afar by a figure I quickly recognised to be Turner, a man I had come to know vaguely from my social rounds. He came hurrying up to me, and after asking why I was so rarely 'seen about the place these days', invited me to a dinner he and a friend were giving in a restaurant that evening. When I politely declined on the grounds that my present case was demanding all my time and attention, he said:

'Shame. Sarah Hemmings is coming along, and she's so wanting to have a good chat with you.'

'Miss Hemmings?'

'Remember her, don't you? She certainly remembers you. Said you got to know each other a bit a few years ago. She's always complaining how you're no longer to be found.'

Resisting the urge to make some comment, I said simply: 'Well, please do give her my good wishes.'

I left Turner fairly promptly after that, but on returning to my desk I confess I found myself somewhat distracted by this report of Miss Hemmings's wishing to see me. In the end, I told myself that in all likelihood Turner had made some mistake; or at the least, was exaggerating his point in an effort to entice me to his dinner. But then over

the following months a number of similar reports reached my ears. Sarah Hemmings had been heard expressing annoyance at how, despite our once having been friends, I had now become impossible for her to find. I heard from several sources, moreover, how she was threatening to 'ferret me out'. Then finally, last week, while I was staying in the village of Shackton, in Oxfordshire, to investigate the Studley Grange business, Miss Hemmings turned up in person, presumably with the intention of doing just that.

I had found the walled garden - containing the pond where Charles Emery's body had been discovered - in the lower grounds of the house. Four stone steps had brought me down into a rectangular space so perversely sheltered from the sun that even on that bright morning everything around me was in shadow. The walls themselves were covered with ivy, but somehow one could not avoid the impression of having stepped into a roofless prison cell.

The pond dominated this enclosure. Though several people had told me it contained goldfish, I could see no sign of life; in fact, it was hard to imagine how anything could thrive in such dank water - a fitting place indeed to discover a corpse. Surrounding the pond was a circle of square mossy slabs embedded into the mud. I would suppose I had been examining this area for about twenty minutes - I was on my front, scrutinising with my magnifying glass one of the slabs that projected over the water - when I became conscious of someone observing me. At first I assumed this to be some family member wishing yet again to pester me with questions. Since earlier I had insisted on uninterrupted time, I decided, at the cost of appearing rude, to pretend not to have noticed anything.

Then eventually I heard the sound of a shoe scraping on stone somewhere near the entrance to the garden. By then it was starting to seem unnatural that I should remain on my belly for such a long time, and in any case, I had exhausted

the investigations I could usefully carry out in such a posture. Moreover, I had not entirely forgotten I was lying at almost the exact spot where a murder had been committed, and that the murderer was still at large. A chilly sensation passed through me as I clambered to my feet, and dusting my clothes, turned to face the intruder.

The sight of Sarah Hemmings did of course rather surprise me, but I am sure nothing unusual showed on my face. I had set my features to convey annoyance, and I would suppose that is what she saw, for her opening words to me were:

‘Oh! Didn’t mean to spy on you. But it seemed too good an opportunity. To watch the great man at his work, I mean.’

I searched her face carefully, but could detect no sarcasm. Nevertheless, I kept my voice cold as I said: ‘Miss Hemmings. This is most unexpected.’

‘I heard you were here. I’m spending a few days with my friend in Pemleigh. It’s only just up the road.’

She paused, no doubt expecting me to respond. When I remained silent, she showed no sign of being perturbed, but instead came walking towards me.

‘I’m quite a good friend of the Emerys, did you know?’ she continued. ‘Awful business, this murder.’

‘Yes, awful.’

‘Ah. So you too believe it to be murder. Well, I suppose that sort of clinches it. Do you have a theory, Mr Banks?’

I gave a shrug. ‘I’ve formed a few ideas, yes.’

‘It’s too bad for the Emerys they didn’t think to ask you for help when it all first happened last April. I mean to say, bringing Celwyn Henderson on to a case like this! What did they expect? That man should have been put out to pasture long ago. Just shows you how out of touch people get living

out here. Anyone in London could have told them all about you, of course. ’

This last remark did, I have to confess, intrigue me somewhat, so that after a moment’s hesitation, I found myself asking her: ‘Excuse me, but told them what, exactly?’

‘Why, that you’re the most brilliant investigative mind in England, of course. We could all have told them that last spring, but the Emerys - it’s taken them this long to cotton on. Better late than never, perhaps, but I suppose the trail’s gone rather cold for you by now. ’

‘As it happens, there are some advantages in coming to a case after some time has elapsed. ’

‘Really? How fascinating. I always thought it was essential to get there quick, to pick up the scent, you know. ’

‘On the contrary, it’s never too late to, as you put it, pick up the scent. ’

‘But isn’t it so depressing, how this crime’s eaten away at people’s spirits here? And not just the household. It’s the whole of Shackton that’s started to rot. This used to be a happy and thriving market town. Now look at them, they barely meet each other’s eyes. This whole business has dragged them down into a mire of suspicion. I tell you, Mr Banks, if you can solve this thing, they’ll remember you here for ever. ’

‘Do you really think so? That would be curious. ’

‘No doubt about it. They’d be so grateful. Yes, they’ll be talking about you here for *generations*. ’

I let out a short laugh. ‘You seem to know the village well, Miss Hemmings. And I thought you spent all your time in London. ’

‘Oh, I can only take so much of London, then I’ve just got to come away. I’m not a city girl at heart, you know.’

‘You surprise me. I always thought you were much drawn to city life.’

‘You’re quite right, Mr Banks.’ A note of resentment had come into her voice, as though I had tricked her into a corner. ‘Something does draw me to the city. It does have its … its attractions for me.’ For the first time, she turned away from me and glanced around the walled garden.

‘Which reminds me,’ she said. ‘Well, to be honest, it doesn’t remind me at all. Why should I pretend? I’ve been thinking of it all the time we’ve been talking. I wanted to ask a favour of you.’

‘And what’s that, Miss Hemmings?’

‘Reliable sources tell me you’ve been invited to this year’s Meredith Foundation dinner. Is that right?’

I paused slightly before replying: ‘Yes. That’s correct.’

‘Quite a thing, to be invited at your age. I’ve heard this year it’s in honour of Sir Cecil Medhurst.’

‘Yes, I believe so.’

‘I’ve heard too that Charles Wolfe is expected to attend.’

‘The violinist?’

She laughed brightly. ‘Does he do something else? And Thomas Byron too, apparently.’

She had become visibly excited, but now she once again turned away and gazed at our surroundings with a slight shudder.

‘Did you say,’ I asked eventually, ‘you wished me to grant you a favour?’

‘Oh yes, yes. I wanted you to ... I wished you to ask me to accompany you. To the Meredith Foundation dinner.’

She was now holding me with an intense look. It took me a moment to find a response, but when I did so, I spoke quite calmly.

‘I’d like to oblige you, Miss Hemmings. But unfortunately I’ve already replied to the organisers some days ago. I fear it’ll be rather late to inform them of my wish to bring a guest ...’

‘Nonsense!’ she broke in angrily. ‘Yours is the name on everyone’s lips just now. If you wish to bring a companion, they’d be only too pleased. Mr Banks, you aren’t about to let me down, are you? That would be quite unworthy of you. After all, we’ve been good friends for some time now.’

It was this last remark - reminding me as it did of the actual history of our ‘friendship’ - that brought me back to myself.

‘Miss Hemmings,’ I said with finality, ‘this is hardly a favour within my power to grant.’

But there was now a determined look in Sarah Hemmings’s eyes.

‘I know all the details, Mr Banks. At Claridge’s Hotel. Next Wednesday evening. I mean to be there. I shall look forward to the evening, and I shall be waiting for you in the lobby.’

‘The lobby of Claridge’s is, as far as I’m aware, open to respectable members of the public. If you choose to stand there next Wednesday evening, there is nothing I can do to prevent you, Miss Hemmings.’

She looked at me very carefully, now uncertain about my intentions. Finally she said: ‘Then you shall most certainly see me there next Wednesday, Mr Banks.’

‘As I’ve said, that is your affair, Miss Hemmings. Now, if you’ll excuse me.’

Chapter Three

It took no more than a few days to unravel the mystery of Charles Emery's death. The matter did not attract publicity on the scale of some of my other investigations, but the deep gratitude of the Emery family - indeed, of the whole community of Shackton - made the case as satisfying as any thus far in my career. I returned to London in a glow of well-being and consequently failed to give much thought to my encounter with Sarah Hemmings in the walled garden on that first day of the investigation. I would not say I forgot entirely her declared intentions regarding the Meredith Foundation dinner, but as I say, I was in a triumphant frame of mind and I suppose I chose not to dwell on such things. Perhaps deep down I believed her 'threat' to have been no more than a ploy of the moment.

In any case, when I stepped out of my taxicab outside Clar-idge's yesterday evening, my thoughts were elsewhere. I was, for one thing, reminding myself that my recent triumphs had more than entitled me to my invitation; that far from questioning my presence at such a gathering, other guests were likely to press me eagerly for inside information regarding my cases. I was reminding myself too of my resolution not to leave the proceedings prematurely, even if it meant putting up with the odd period of standing about alone. As I entered that grand lobby, then, I was quite unprepared for the sight of Sarah Hemmings waiting there with a smile.

She was dressed rather impressively in a dark silk dress and discreet but elegant jewellery. Her manner as she came towards me was utterly assured, so much so that she even found time to smile a greeting to a couple walking past us.

'Ah, Miss Hemmings,' I said, while in my mind I tried hurriedly to retrieve all that had passed between us that day

at Studley Grange. At that moment, I must confess, it seemed to me perfectly possible she had every right to expect me to offer my arm and lead her inside. No doubt, she sensed my uncertainty and appeared to grow even more confident.

‘Dear Christopher,’ she said, ‘you’re looking quite dashing. I’ve overcome! Oh, and I haven’t had a chance to congratulate you. That was so marvellous, what you did for the Emerys. It was ever so clever of you.’

‘Thank you. It was hardly such a complicated matter.’

She had now taken my arm and had she at that instant moved towards the footman directing dinner guests towards the staircase, I am sure I would have been powerless to do anything other than her bidding. But here, I see now, she made an error. Perhaps she wished to savour the moment; perhaps her audacity had for a second given out. In any case, she made no move to proceed upstairs, but instead, gazing at the other guests filing into the lobby, said to me:

‘Sir Cecil hasn’t arrived yet. I do hope I shall get a chance to speak to him. So fitting he’s the one being honoured this year, don’t you think?’

‘Indeed.’

‘You know, Christopher, I don’t suppose it will be so many years until we’ll all be here to honour *you*.’

I laughed. ‘I hardly think ...’

‘No, no. I feel sure of it. All right, we might have to give it a few more years. But the day will come, you’ll see.’

‘It’s kind of you to say so, Miss Hemmings.’

She continued to hold my arm as we stood there talking. Not infrequently, someone passing would smile or utter a greeting to one or the other of us. And I have to say, I found I was rather enjoying the notion of all these people -

many of them very distinguished - seeing me arm in arm with Sarah Hemmings. I fancied I saw in their eyes, even as they greeted us, the idea: 'Oh, she's caught *him* now, has she? Well, that's natural enough.' Far from making me feel foolish or in any way humiliated, this notion rather filled me with pride. But then suddenly - and I am not sure what caused this - quite without warning I began to feel a great fury towards her. I am sure there was no detectable change in my manner at that moment and for a few minutes more we went on chatting amiably, nodding the occasional greeting to a passing guest. But when I unlinked her arm from mine and turned to her, I did so with a steely resolve.

'Well, Miss Hemmings, it was very good to see you again. But now I must leave you and go up to this function.'

I gave a slight bow and began to move away. This clearly took her by surprise, and if she had ready some strategy for my failing to co-operate, she was for the moment unable to act on it. Only when I had gone several paces from her, and had in fact fallen in step with an elderly couple who had greeted me, did she suddenly come rushing up.

'Christopher!' she said in a frantic whisper. 'You wouldn't dare! You promised me!'

'You know I did nothing of the sort.'

'You wouldn't dare! Christopher, you wouldn't!'

'I wish you a pleasant evening, Miss Hemmings.'

Turning away from her - and also, incidentally, from my elderly companions, who were doing their best to hear nothing - I began to make my way rapidly up the great staircase.

On reaching the upper level, I was ushered into a brightly lit anteroom. There I duly joined a line of guests filing past a desk, behind which sat a uniformed man with a frosty face, checking people's names against a register. When it came to my turn, I was gratified to see a flicker of

excitement cross the frosty man's face as he ticked off my name. I signed the guest book, then moved on towards a doorway leading into a large room, within which, I could see, there was already a sizeable crowd of guests. As I crossed the threshold and the hubbub engulfed me, a tall man with a thick dark beard greeted me and shook my hand. I supposed he was one of the evening's hosts, but I failed to register much of what he said to me because, to be frank, I was at that moment finding it hard to think about anything other than what had just occurred downstairs. I was experiencing a curiously hollow sensation, and I had to remind myself that I had not in any way ensnared Miss Hemmings; that any humiliation that had befallen her was entirely of her own making.

But as I parted from the bearded man and drifted further into the room, Sarah Hemmings continued to dominate my thoughts. I was vaguely aware of a waiter approaching me with a tray of aperitifs; of various people turning to greet me. At some point I fell into conversation with a group of three or four men - all of whom turned out to be scientists, and who seemed to know who I was. Then, when I had been in the room for perhaps fifteen minutes, I sensed a slight change in the atmosphere, and looking about me, perceived from the glances and murmurs all around that some sort of commotion was occurring near the doorway through which we had entered.

No sooner had I noted this than a sense of grave foreboding came over me and my first impulse was to escape deeper into the room. But it was as though some mysterious force were pulling me back to the doorway, and I soon found myself once more beside the bearded man - who at that moment was standing with his back to the reception, watching with a pained expression the drama unfolding in the anteroom.

Peering past him, I ascertained that Miss Hemmings was indeed at the heart of the disturbance. She had brought to a halt the procession of guests signing in their names at the desk. She was not shouting exactly, but seemed quite beyond

caring who heard her. I watched her shake off an elderly hotel employee trying to restrain her; then, leaning right over the desk so as to glare all the more intently at the frosty-faced man still sitting there as before, she said in a voice close to a sob:

‘But you simply have no idea! I simply *must* go in, don’t you see? I have so many friends in there, I *belong* in there, I really do! Oh, do be reasonable!’

‘I really am sorry, Miss ...’ the frosty-faced man began. But Sarah Hemmings, whose hair had tumbled over one side of her face, did not let him finish.

‘It’s all the most silly mix-up anyway, don’t you see? That’s all it is, the most silly old mix-up! And just because of that, you’re being beastly, I can’t believe it! I just can’t believe it ...’

All of us witnessing this scene seemed for a moment united in frozen embarrassment. Then the bearded man regained his wits and strode into the anteroom with authority.

‘What has occurred?’ he said soothingly. ‘My dear young lady, has there been some error? There, there, we’ll sort it out, I’m sure. I’m at your disposal.’ Then he gave a start and exclaimed: ‘Why, it’s Miss Hemmings, isn’t it?’

‘Of course it is! It’s me! Don’t you see? This man’s being so beastly to me ...’

‘But Miss Hemmings, my dear young lady, there’s no need to upset yourself like this. Come, let’s go over here a moment ...’

‘No! No! You won’t turn me away! I won’t have it! I tell you I must, I absolutely *must* go in! I’ve dreamt of it for so long ...’

‘Surely, something can be done for the young lady,’ a man’s voice said from among the bystanders. ‘Why be so

petty? If she's taken the trouble to come here, why can't she be allowed in?'

This produced a general murmur of assent, though I noticed too some faces set in disapproval. The bearded man hesitated, then appeared to decide that his priority was to bring the scene to an end.

'Well perhaps, in this particular case ...' Then turning to the frosty-faced man behind the desk, he went on: 'I'm sure we can find a way to accommodate Miss Hemmings, don't you think, Mr Edwards?'

I would have lingered further, but throughout this exchange I had been seized by the fear that, at any stage, Miss Hemmings might notice me and draw me into this unseemly spectacle with an accusation. In fact, just as I began to retreat, she did for one second gaze straight at me. But she did nothing, and the next moment her anguished eyes were back on the bearded man. I took the opportunity to hurry away.

For the next twenty minutes or so, I confined myself to those areas of the ballroom furthest from the doorway. A surprising number of those present appeared needlessly overawed by the occasion, so much so that most of the conversations - those I could hear around me as well as those I took part in - consisted almost entirely of mutual compliments. Once the compliments had been exhausted, people would resort to eulogising the guest of honour. At one stage, after one such speech listing exhaustively Sir Cecil Medhurst's achievements, I said to the elderly man who had just made it:

'I wonder if Sir Cecil has arrived yet?'

My companion indicated with his glass, and I saw a little way across the room the tall figure of the great statesman stooped in conversation with two middle-aged ladies. Then, just as I was looking over at him, I saw Sarah Hemmings emerge through the crowd, making straight for him.

There was now no trace left of the pitiful creature from the anteroom. She looked positively radiant. As I watched, she strode up to Sir Cecil with not a hint of hesitation and laid a hand on his arm.

The elderly man began to introduce me to someone, so that I was obliged for the moment to turn away. When I next looked towards Sir Cecil, I saw that the two middle-aged ladies were standing to one side, looking on with awkward smiles, and that Miss Hemmings had succeeded in engaging his complete attention. Even as I watched, Sir Cecil leant back his head to laugh loudly at something she was saying.

In time we were ushered into the banqueting hall and seated around a vast, long table under bright chandeliers. I was relieved to find that Miss Hemmings had been seated some way away from me, and for a while, I did rather enjoy the occasion. I chatted in turn to the ladies sitting on either side of me - both of whom, in their different ways, were quite charming - and the food was pleasantly sumptuous. But as the meal went on, I found myself leaning forward time and again to catch sight of Miss Hemmings further down the table, and I began yet again to rehearse in my head all the reasons why I had been entitled to behave as I had.

It is perhaps owing to such preoccupations that I cannot now remember much more concerning the dinner itself. Somewhere towards the end there were speeches; various personages stood up to heap praise on Sir Cecil for his contribution to world affairs, and in particular, for his role in building the League of Nations. Then finally, Sir Cecil himself rose to his feet.

His speech, as I recall it, was self-deprecating and optimistic. In his view, mankind had learnt from its mistakes, the structures were now firmly in place to ensure we would never again see on this globe a calamity on the scale of the Great War. The war, ghastly as it was, represented no more than 'an awkward window in Man's

evolution' when for a few years our technical progress had run ahead of our organisational capacities. We had all surprised ourselves with the rapid development of our engineering might, and the consequent ability to wage war with modern weaponry, but now we had made good the gap. Having been reminded of the horrors that could be let loose among us, the forces of civilisation had prevailed and legislated. His speech was along some such lines, and we all applauded it heartily.

After dinner, the ladies did not leave us, but instead we were all asked to proceed through into the ballroom. There we found a string quartet playing, and waiters moving about with trays of liqueurs, cigars and coffee. The guests began immediately to circulate, and the atmosphere was far more relaxed than before dinner. At one point, I happened to catch Miss Hemmings' eye across the room, and was surprised to see her smile at me. My initial thought was that this was the smile of an enemy plotting some awful revenge; but then I continued to observe her as the evening went on, and decided I was wrong about this. I realised that Sarah Hemmings was utterly happy. After months, perhaps years of planning, she had succeeded in being at this place at this time, and having achieved her goal, she had - much like, so we are told, a woman who has just given birth - consigned to oblivion all memories of the pain she had endured along the way. I watched her drifting from group to group, chatting amiably. It occurred to me I should go over and make my peace with her while her mood lasted, but then the possibility of her suddenly turning and creating another scene kept me a good distance from her.

It was perhaps half an hour into this portion of the evening when I was finally introduced to Sir Cecil Medhurst. I had been making no special efforts to meet him, but I suppose I might have been a little disappointed had I left the occasion without having exchanged any words at all with the illustrious statesman. As it was, it was he who was led

up to me - by Lady Adams, whom I had met several months ago during an investigation. Sir Cecil grasped my hand warmly, saying: 'Ah, my young friend! So here you are!'

For a few minutes, we were left alone together in the middle of the room. All around us, by this time, there was a very lively hubbub, and when we exchanged the usual pleasantries, we were obliged to lean towards one another and raise our voices. At one point, he nudged me and said:

'All of that I was saying earlier at dinner. About this world being made a safer, more civilised place. I do believe it, you know. At least' - here he grasped my hand and gave me a droll look - 'at least, I'd *like* to believe it. Oh yes, I'd dearly love to believe it. But I don't know, my young friend. I don't know if in the end we'll be able to hold the line. We'll do what we can. Organise, confer. Get the greatest men from the greatest nations to put their heads together and talk. But there'll always be evil lurking around the corner for us. Oh yes! They're busy, even now, even as we speak, busy conspiring to put civilisation to the torch. And they're clever, oh, devilishly clever. Good men and women can do what they can, devote their lives to keeping them at bay, but I fear it won't be enough, my friend. I fear it won't be enough. The evil ones are much too cunning for your ordinary decent citizen. They'll run rings around him, corrupt him, turn him against his fellows. I see it, I see it all the time now and it will grow worse. That's why we'll need to rely more than ever on the likes of you, my young friend. The few on our side every bit as clever as they are. Who'll spot their game quickly, destroy the fungus before it takes hold and spreads.'

Possibly he was more than a little drunk; possibly the occasion had overwhelmed him. In any case, he went on in this vein for some time, clasping my arm emotionally as he spoke. And perhaps simply because this distinguished man was being so effusive - or perhaps it was that I had had it in my mind

all evening to ask him some such thing - when at last he came to a halt, I said to him:

‘Sir Cecil, I believe you’ve spent time recently in Shanghai.’

‘Shanghai? Certainly, my friend. Been back and forth. What happens in China is crucial. We can no longer look just at Europe, you see. If we wish to contain chaos in Europe, we now have to look further afield.’

‘I ask, sir, because I was born in Shanghai.’

‘Is that so? Well, well.’

‘I did just wonder, sir, if you came across an old friend of mine there. Of course, there’s no real reason why you would have done. But his name is Yamashita. Akira Yamashita.’

‘Yamashita? Hmm. Japanese, I take it. A lot of Japanese in Shanghai, of course. They have more influence there by the day. Yamashita, you say.’

‘Akira Yamashita.’

‘Can’t say I came across him. Diplomatist or something?’

‘Actually, sir, I wouldn’t know. He was a childhood friend.’

‘Oh, I see. In that case, do you know for sure he’s still in Shanghai? Perhaps your man’s left and gone back to Japan.’

‘Oh no, I’m sure he’s still there. Akira was very fond of Shanghai. Besides, he was determined never to return to Japan. No, I’m sure he’ll still be there.’

‘Well, I didn’t come across him. Saw quite a lot of that chap Saito. And a few of the military fellows. But no one by that name.’

‘Well ...’ I gave a laugh to cover my disappointment. ‘It was always unlikely. But I did just wonder.’

Just at this moment, somewhat to my alarm, I realised that Sarah Hemmings was standing beside me.

‘So you’ve finally cornered the great detective, Sir Cecil,’ she said cheerily.

‘Indeed, my dear,’ the old gentleman replied, beaming at her. ‘I was just telling him how we’ll all have to depend on him in the years to come.’

Sarah Hemmings smiled at me. ‘I have to say, Sir Cecil, I haven’t always found Mr Banks to be *utterly* dependable. But perhaps he’s the best we can do.’

I decided at this juncture that I should leave as quickly as possible, and pretending to notice someone across the room, I made my apologies and moved away.

I did not set eyes on Miss Hemmings again until some time later. By then, many of the guests had started to leave and the ballroom was less stuffy. Moreover, the waiters had opened a number of doors on to the balconies, so that a refreshing night breeze was blowing across the room. For all that, the evening had remained warm, and wishing for a little air, I drifted over to one of the balconies. I had all but stepped out on to it before I realised that Sarah Hemmings was already standing there, her back to the room, a cigarette in her holder, gazing out at the night sky. I started back, but then something told me, despite her not having stirred, that she had become aware of my presence. I thus made my way on to the balcony and said:

‘So, Miss Hemmings. You’ve had your evening after all.’

‘It’s been the most marvellous evening,’ she said without turning. She gave a contented sigh, drew on her cigarette, then gave me one quick smile over her shoulder before turning her gaze back to the night sky. ‘It’s exactly

as I imagined it would be. All these marvellous people. Everywhere you care to glance. Marvellous people. And Sir Cecil, he's such a darling, don't you think? I had the most wonderful talk with Eric Mitchell about his exhibition. He's going to invite me to the private view next month.'

I said nothing to this, and for a few moments we continued simply to stand there side by side against the balcony rail. Curiously - perhaps it was to do with the string quartet, whose gentle waltz was drifting out to us - the silence was not as uncomfortable as one might have expected. Eventually she said:

'I suppose you're surprised at me.'

'Surprised?'

'At how determined I was. To get in here tonight.'

'I was surprised, yes.' Then I said: 'Why do you suppose it is, Miss Hemmings? That you should find it so imperative to seek out company such as this, tonight.'

'Imperative? You believe I find it imperative?'

'I would say so. And what I witnessed at the door earlier on might tend to support that view.'

Rather to my surprise, she responded with a light laugh, then gave me a smile. 'But why shouldn't I, Christopher? Why shouldn't I wish to be in company like this. Isn't it simply ... heaven?'

When I remained silent, her smile faded.

'I suppose you rather disapprove of me,' she said, in a quite different voice.

'I merely remarked ...'

'It's all right. You've every right. You find all of that, earlier on, you find it embarrassing, and you disapprove. But what else am I to do? I don't wish to look back at my life when I'm old and see something empty. I want

to see something I can be proud of. You see, Christopher, I'm *ambitious*.'

'I'm not sure I quite understand you. You're under the impression you'll lead a more worthwhile life if you consort with famous people?'

'Is that really how you see me?'

She turned away, perhaps genuinely hurt, and drew again on her cigarette. I watched her staring down at the deserted street below, and at the white stucco-fronted buildings opposite. Then she said quietly:

'I can see it might look that way. At least to someone observing me with a cynical eye.'

'I hope I don't observe you in that way. It would upset me to think I did so.'

'Then you should try to be more understanding.' She turned to me with an intent expression, before looking away again. 'If my parents were alive today,' she said, 'they'd be telling me it's high time I was married. And perhaps it is. But I won't do what I've seen so many girls do. I won't waste all my love, all my energy, all my intellect - modest as that is - on some useless man who devotes himself to golf or to selling bonds in the City. When I marry, it will be to someone who'll really *contribute*. I mean to humanity, to a better world. Is that such an awful ambition? I don't come to places like this in search of famous men, Christopher. I come in search of distinguished ones. What do I care about a little embarrassment here and there?' - she waved towards the room - 'But I won't accept it's my fate to waste my life on some pleasant, polite, morally worthless man.'

'When you put it like that,' I said, 'I can see how you might see yourself as, well, almost a zealot.'

'In a way, Christopher, I do. Oh, what's that piece they're playing now? It's something I know. Is it Mozart?'

‘I believe it’s Haydn.’

‘Oh yes, you’re right. Yes, Haydn.’ For several seconds, she looked at the sky and appeared to be listening.

‘Miss Hemmings,’ I said, eventually, ‘I’m not proud of the way I behaved towards you earlier. In fact, I now very much regret it. I’m sorry. I hope you’ll forgive me.’

She went on looking out into the night, stroking her cheek lightly with her cigarette holder. ‘That’s very decent of you, Christopher,’ she said quietly. ‘But I should be the one to apologise. I was just trying to use you, after all. Of course I was. I’m sure I made myself look dreadful earlier on, but I don’t care about that. I do care, though, I treated you badly. You perhaps won’t believe me, but it’s true.’

I laughed. ‘Well, then, let’s both try and forgive each other.’

‘Yes, let’s.’ She turned to me and her face suddenly broke into a smile that was almost childlike in its glee. Then a weariness fell over it once more and she turned back to the night. ‘I often treat people badly,’ she said. ‘I suppose that comes with being ambitious. And not having so much time left.’

‘Did you lose your parents long ago?’ I asked.

‘It seems like for ever. But in another way, they’re always with me.’

‘Well, I’m glad you enjoyed the evening, after all. I can only say again I’m sorry for my own part in it.’

‘Oh look, everyone’s leaving. What a pity! And I wanted to talk to you about all kinds of things. About your friend, for instance.’

‘My friend?’

‘The one you were asking Sir Cecil about. The one in Shanghai.’

‘Akira? He was just a childhood friend.’

‘But I could tell he was someone very important to you.’

I straightened and looked behind us. ‘You’re right. Everyone *is* leaving.’

‘Then I suppose I should leave too,’ she said. ‘Otherwise my departure will be as much noticed as my entrance.’

But she made no move to go and in the end it was I who excused myself and went back into the room. At one point, when I glanced back, I thought she cut a lonely figure there on the balcony, smoking her cigarette into the night air, the room behind her fast emptying. It even ran through my mind I should go back and offer to escort her out of the proceedings. But then her mentioning Akira had slightly alarmed me, and I decided I had done sufficient for one evening towards improving relations between myself and Sarah Hemmings.

PART TWO

London, 15th May 1931

Chapter Four

At the rear of our garden in Shanghai, there was a grass mound with a single maple tree rising out of its summit. From the time Akira and I were around six years old, we enjoyed playing on and around that mound, and whenever I now think of my boyhood companion, I tend to remember the two of us running up and down its slopes, sometimes jumping right off where the sides were at their steepest.

From time to time, when we had worn ourselves out, we would sit panting at the top of the mound with our backs against the trunk of the maple tree. From this vantage point, we had a clear view over my garden and of the big white house standing at the end of it. If I close my eyes a moment, I am able to bring back that picture very vividly: the carefully tended 'English' lawn, the afternoon shadows cast by the row of elms separating my garden and Akira's; and the house itself, a huge white edifice with numerous wings and trellised balconies. I suspect this memory of the house is very much a child's vision, and that in reality, it was nothing so grand. Certainly, even at the time, I was conscious that it hardly matched the splendour of the residences round the corner in Bubbling Well Road. But the house was certainly more than adequate for a household comprising simply my parents, myself, Mei Li and our servants.

It was the property of Morganbrook and Byatt, which meant there were many ornaments and pictures around the place I was forbidden to touch. It meant also that from time to time, we would have boarding with us a 'house guest' - some employee newly arrived in Shanghai who had yet to 'find his feet'. I do not know if my parents objected to this arrangement. I did not mind at all, since usually a house guest would be some young man who brought with him the air of

the English lanes and meadows I knew from *The Wind in the Willows*, or else the foggy streets of the Conan Doyle mysteries. These young Englishmen, no doubt eager to create a good impression, were inclined to indulge my lengthy questions and sometimes unreasonable requests. Most of them, it occurs to me, were probably younger than I am today, and were probably all at sea so far from their home. But to me at the time, they were all of them figures to study closely and emulate.

But to return to Akira: there is a particular instance that now comes to mind from one such afternoon, after the two of us had been running frantically up and down that mound to enact one of our extended dramas. We were for a moment sitting down against the maple tree to recover our breath, and I was gazing across the lawn towards the house, waiting for my chest to stop heaving, when Akira said behind me:

‘Be careful, old chip. Centipede. By your foot.’

I had clearly heard him say ‘old chip’, but did not at this point think anything of it. But having once used the phrase, Akira seemed rather pleased with it, and over the following several minutes, once we resumed our game, proceeded to address me so over and over: ‘This way, old chip!’ ‘More fast, old chip!’

‘Anyway, it’s not old chip,’ I told him in the end, during one of our disputes over how our game should proceed. ‘It’s old *chap*.’

Akira, as I knew he would, protested vigorously. ‘Not at all. Not at all. Mrs Brown. She make me say again and again. Old chip. Old chip. Correct pronunciation, everything. She say old chip. She *teacher!*’

It was pointless to try to convince him; since starting his English lessons, he was immensely proud of his position within his family as the expert English speaker. All the same, I was unwilling to concede the point, and in the end

the quarrel grew to such proportions, Akira simply stalked off in a fury, our game abandoned, through our 'secret door' - a gap in the hedge separating the two gardens.

On the next few occasions we played together, he did not call me 'old chip', or make any reference to this altercation on the mound. I had all but forgotten the matter when one morning a few weeks later, it came up again suddenly as we were walking back together along Bubbling Well Road past the grand houses and beautiful lawns. I cannot remember quite what I had just said to him. In any case, he responded by saying:

'Very kind of you, old chap.'

I remember resisting the temptation to point out that he had come round to my view. For by then I knew Akira well enough to realise he was not saying 'old chap' by way of a subtle admission that he had previously been wrong; rather, in some odd way we both understood, he was implying that *he* had always been the one to claim it was 'old chap'; that he was now merely reasserting his argument, and my lack of protest simply confirmed his conclusive victory. Indeed, for the rest of the afternoon, he continued to 'old chap' me with an ever more smug expression, as though to say: 'So you're no longer determined to be ridiculous. I'm glad you're seeing more sense.'

This kind of behaviour was not at all untypical of Akira, and though I always found it infuriating, for some reason I rarely made the effort to protest. In fact - and today I find this hard to explain - I felt a certain need to preserve such fantasies on Akira's behalf, and had, say, an adult tried to arbitrate in the 'old chip' dispute, I would just as likely have taken Akira's side.

I do not wish to imply by this that Akira dominated me, or that ours was in any sense an unbalanced friendship. I took as much initiative in our games, and if anything, made more of the crucial decisions. The fact was, I believed

myself his intellectual superior, and at some level, Akira probably accepted this. On the other hand, there were various things that gave my Japanese friend great authority in my eyes. There were, for instance, his arm-locks - which he would often administer if I made statements that displeased him, or if during one of our dramas, I became resistant to adopting a particular plot-turn he was keen on. More generally, even though he was actually only a month my senior, I did have a sense that he was the more worldly. He did seem to know about many things I did not. There was, above all, his claim to having ventured on several occasions beyond the boundaries of the Settlement.

It is slightly surprising to me, looking back today, to think how as young boys we were allowed to come and go unsupervised to the extent that we were. But this was, of course, all within the relative safety of the International Settlement. I for one was absolutely forbidden to enter the Chinese areas of the city, and as far as I know, Akira's parents were no less strict on the matter. Out there, we were told, lay all manner of ghastly diseases, filth and evil men. The closest I had ever come to going out of the Settlement was once when a carriage carrying my mother and me took an unexpected route along that part of the Soochow creek bordering the Chapei district; I could see the huddled low rooftops across the canal, and had held my breath for as long as I could for fear the pestilence would come airborne across the narrow strip of water. No wonder then that my friend's claim to have undertaken a number of secret forays into such areas made an impression on me.

I remember quizzing Akira repeatedly about these exploits. The truth concerning the Chinese districts, he told me, was far worse even than the rumours. There were no proper buildings, just shack upon shack built in great proximity to one another. It all looked, he claimed, much like the marketplace in Boone Road, except that whole families were to be found living in each 'stall'. There were, moreover, dead

bodies piled up everywhere, flies buzzing all over them, and no one there thought anything of it. On one occasion, Akira had been strolling down a crowded alley and had seen a man - some powerful warlord, he supposed - being transported on a sedan chair, accompanied by a giant carrying a sword. The warlord was pointing to whomever he pleased and the giant would then proceed to lop his or her head off. Naturally, people were trying to hide themselves the best they could. Akira, though, had simply stood there, staring defiantly back at the warlord. The latter had spent a moment considering whether to have Akira beheaded, but then obviously struck by my friend's courage, had finally laughed and, reaching down, patted him on the head. Then the warlord's party had continued on its way, leaving many more severed heads in its wake.

I cannot remember ever attempting to challenge Akira on any of these claims. Once I mentioned casually to my mother something about my friend's adventures beyond the Settlement, and I remember her smiling and saying something to cast doubt on the matter. I was furious at her, and thereafter I believe I carefully avoided revealing to her anything at all intimate concerning Akira.

My mother, incidentally, was one person Akira regarded with a peculiar awe. If, say, despite his having got me in an arm-lock, I was still loath to concede a point to him, I could always resort to declaring that he would have my mother to answer to. Of course, this was not something I liked to do readily; it rather hurt my pride to have to invoke my mother's authority at such an age. But on those occasions I was obliged to do so, I was always amazed by the transformation brought about - how the merciless fiend with the vice-like grip could turn in a second into a panic-stricken child. I was never sure why my mother should have such an effect on Akira; for although he was always exceedingly polite, he was on the whole unintimidated by adults. I could not, moreover, recall my mother ever having

spoken to him in anything but a gentle and friendly way. I can remember pondering this question at the time, and various possibilities occurring to me.

I did, for a while, consider the notion that Akira regarded my mother as he did because she was 'beautiful'. That my mother was 'beautiful' was something I accepted, quite dispassionately, as fact throughout my growing up. It was always being said of her, and I believe I regarded this 'beautiful' as simply a label that attached itself to my mother, no more significant than 'tall' or 'small' or 'young'. At the same time, I was not unaware of the effect her 'beauty' had on others. Of course, at that age, I had no real sense of the deeper implications of feminine allure. But accompanying her from place to place as I did, I came to take for granted, for instance, the admiring glances of strangers as we strolled through the Public Gardens, or the preferential treatment from the waiters at the Italian Café in Nanking Road where we would go for cakes on Saturday mornings. Whenever I look now at my photographs of her - I have seven in all, in the album that accompanied me here from Shanghai - she strikes me as a beauty in an older, Victorian tradition. Today, she might perhaps be regarded as 'handsome'; certainly, she is not 'pretty'. I cannot imagine her, for instance, ever having had the repertoire of coquettish little shrugs and tosses of the head that we expect of our young women today. In the photographs - all of them taken before my birth, four in Shanghai, two in Hong Kong, one in Switzerland - she is certainly elegant, stiff-backed, perhaps even haughty, but not without the gentleness around her eyes I remember well. In any case, the point I am making is that it was quite natural for me to suspect, initially at least, that Akira's odd attitude towards my mother derived, like so many other things, from her beauty. But when I thought the thing over more carefully, I recall settling on a more likely explanation: namely, that Akira had been unusually impressed by what he had witnessed the morning the company's health inspector visited our house.

It was an accepted feature of our lives to be visited from time to time by an official from Morganbrook and Byatt, some man who would spend an hour or so wandering about the house, noting things in his notebook, mumbling the occasional question. I remember my mother once telling me that when I was very young, I liked to play at 'being' a Byatt's health inspector, and that she often had to dissuade me from spending prolonged periods studying our lavatory arrangements with a pencil in my hand. This may well have been so, but as far as I can recall, these visits were mostly entirely eventless, and for years I did not think anything of them. I can see now, though, that these inspections, checking as they did not only on hygiene matters, but also for signs of disease or parasites among household members, were potentially very embarrassing, and no doubt the individuals selected by the company to conduct them tended to be those with a gift for tact and delicacy. Certainly, I remember a series of meek, shuffling men - usually English, though occasionally French - who were always carefully deferential not just to my mother, but also to Mei Li - a point which always went down well with me. But the inspector who turned up on that morning - I must then have been eight - was not at all typical.

Today, I can remember in particular two things about him: that he had a drooping moustache, and that there was a brown mark - perhaps a tea stain - at the back of his hat disappearing into its band. I was playing alone at the front of the house, on the round island of lawn encircled by our carriage track. I remember it being overcast that day. I had been absorbed in my game when the man appeared at the gate and came walking towards the house. As he passed me, he muttered: 'Hello, young man. Mother in?' then carried on without waiting for my reply. It was as I was staring at his back view that I noticed the stain on his hat.

What I remember next must have occurred around an hour later. By that time Akira had arrived and we were busy up in

my playroom. It was the sound of their voices - not raised exactly, but filled with a growing tension - that caused us both to look up from our game, then eventually, to move stealthily out on to the landing and crouch beside the heavy oak cabinet outside the playroom door.

Our house had a rather grand staircase, and from our vantage point beside the oak cabinet, we could see the gleaming banister rail following the curve of the stairs down to the spacious entrance hall. There, my mother and the inspector were standing facing each other, both very stiff and straight, near the centre of the floor, so that they looked rather like two opposing chess pieces left on the board. The inspector, I noticed, was clutching to his chest his hat with the stain. For her part, my mother had her hands clasped just below her bosom, the way she did before she burst into song on those evenings Mrs Lewis, the American curate's wife, came to play the piano.

The altercation that followed, though of no apparent significance in itself, I believe came to mean something special to my mother, representing perhaps a key moment of moral triumph. I remember she would refer to it regularly as I grew older, as though it were something she wished me to take to my heart; and I remember often listening to her recount the whole story to visitors, usually concluding with a little laugh and the observation that the inspector had been removed from his post shortly after the encounter. Consequently, I cannot be sure today how much of my memory of that morning derives from what I actually witnessed from the landing, and to what extent it has merged over time with my mother's accounts of the episode. In any case, my impression is that as Akira and I peered round the edge of the oak cabinet, the inspector was saying something like:

'I have every respect for your sentiments, Mrs Banks. Nevertheless, out here, one can't be too careful. And the company does have a responsibility for all employees'

welfare, even the more seasoned, such as yourself and Mr Banks. ’

‘I am sorry, Mr Wright,’ my mother responded, ‘but your objections have yet to make themselves clear to me. These servants you talk of have given excellent service over the years. I can vouch utterly for their standards of hygiene. And you have yourself admitted they show no signs of any contagious illness.’

‘Nevertheless, madam, they are from Shantung. And the company is obliged to counsel all our employees against taking natives of that province into their houses. A stricture, may I say, derived from bitter experience.’

‘Can you be serious? You wish me to drive out these friends of ours - yes, we’ve long considered them *friends!* - for no other reason than that they hail from Shantung?’

At this, the inspector’s manner grew rather pompous. He proceeded to explain to my mother that the company’s objections to servants from Shantung were based on doubts about not just their hygiene and health, but also their honesty. And with so many items of value in the house belonging to the company - the inspector gestured around him - he was obliged to reiterate most strongly his recommendation. When my mother broke in again to ask on what basis such astonishing generalisations had been made, the inspector gave a weary sigh, then said:

‘In a word, madam, opium. Opium addiction in Shantung has now advanced to such deplorable levels that entire villages are to be found enslaved to the pipe. Hence, Mrs Banks, the low standards of hygiene, the high incidence of contagion. And inevitably, those who come from Shantung to work in Shanghai, even if essentially of an honest disposition, tend sooner or later to resort to thieving, for the sake of their parents, brothers, cousins, uncles, what have you, all of whose cravings must somehow be pacified ... Good gracious, madam! I’m simply trying to make my point ...’

Not only was it the inspector who recoiled at this point; beside me, Akira gave a sharp intake of breath, and when I glanced at him he was staring down at my mother openmouthed. It is this picture of him at that moment which led me later to believe his subsequent awestruck view of my mother originated from that morning.

But if the inspector and Akira both started at something my mother did at that point, I did not myself see anything out of the ordinary. To me, she appeared to do no more than brace herself a little in preparation for what she was about to assert. But then, I suppose I was well used to her ways; possibly to those less familiar with them, certain of my mother's customary looks and postures in such situations might indeed have come over as somewhat alarming.

This is not to say that I was not fully alert to the explosion that was to follow. In fact, from the instant the inspector had uttered the word 'opium', I had known that the unfortunate man was done for.

He had come to an abrupt halt, no doubt expecting to be cut off. But I recall my mother letting hang a trembling silence - throughout which her glare never moved off the inspector - before finally asking in a quiet voice that nevertheless threatened to brim over with fury:

'You presume, sir, to talk to *me*, on behalf of *this* of all firms, about *opium*?'

There followed a tirade of controlled ferocity in which she put to the inspector the case with which I was by then already familiar and which I was to hear outlined again many more times: that the British in general, and the company of Morganbrook and Byatt especially, by importing Indian opium into China in such massive quantities had brought untold misery and degradation to a whole nation. As she spoke, my mother's voice often grew taut, but never quite lost its measured quality. Finally, still fixing her foe with her glare, she asked him:

‘Are you not ashamed, sir? As a Christian, as an Englishman, as a man with scruples? Are you not ashamed to be in the service of such a company? Tell me, how is your conscience able to rest while you owe your existence to such ungodly wealth?’

Had he had the temerity to do so, the inspector might have pointed out the inappropriateness of my mother’s admonishing him in such terms, of such words issuing from the wife of a fellow company employee, residing in a company house. But by this point he had realised he was out beyond his depth, and muttering a few stock phrases to preserve his dignity, retreated from the house.

In those days, it was still a surprise to me when any adult displayed - as had the inspector - ignorance of my mother’s campaigns against opium. Throughout much of my growing up, I held the belief that my mother was known and admired far and wide as the principal enemy of the Great Opium Dragon of China. The opium phenomenon, I should say, was not something adults in Shanghai made much effort to hide from children, but of course, when I was very young, I understood little concerning the matter. I was accustomed to seeing each day, from the carriage that took me to school, the Chinese men in doorways along Nanking Road, sprawled in the morning sun, and for some time, whenever I heard of my mother’s campaigns, I imagined her to be assisting this specific group of men. Later though, as I grew older, I had more opportunities to glimpse something of the complexity surrounding the issue. I was, for instance, required to present myself at my mother’s luncheons.

These would take place at our house, usually during the week when my father was at the office. Typically, four or five ladies would arrive and be led into the conservatory, where a table would have been laid amidst the creepers and palms. I would assist by passing around cups, saucers and plates, and wait for the moment I knew would come: that is, when my mother asked her guests how, when they ‘searched

their hearts and consciences', they viewed their companies' policies. At this point the pleasant chatter would cease and the ladies would listen silently as my mother went on to express her own deep unhappiness with 'our company's actions', which she regarded as 'un-Christian and un-British'. As I remember it, these luncheons always became quiet and awkward from this stage on, until the moment, not so long afterwards, when the ladies would utter their frosty farewells and drift out to the waiting carriages and motor cars. But I knew from what my mother told me that she did 'win through' to a number of these company wives, and the converts were then invited to her meetings.

These latter were much more serious affairs and I was not permitted to attend them. They would take place in the dining room behind closed doors, and if by chance I was still in the house while a meeting was in progress, I would be required to tip-toe around silently. Occasionally I would be introduced to a personage my mother held in special esteem - a clergyman, say, or a diplomatist - but by and large Mei Li was instructed to have me well out of the way before the first guests arrived. Of course, Uncle Philip was one of those always present, and I often endeavoured to be visible as the participants departed so as to catch his eye. If he spotted me, then invariably he would come over with a smile and we would have a little talk. Sometimes, if he had no pressing engagement, I would take him aside to show him the drawings I had done that week, or else we might go and sit together for a while out on the back terrace.

Once everyone had left, the atmosphere in the house would undergo a complete change. My mother's mood would invariably lighten, as though the meeting had swept away every one of her cares. I would hear her singing to herself as she went around the house putting things back in order, and as soon as I did so, I would hurry out into the garden to wait. For I knew that once she had finished tidying, she would come out

to find me, and whatever time was left before lunch she would devote entirely to me.

Once I was older, it was during these periods, just after a meeting, that my mother and I went for our walks in Jessfield Park. But when I was six or seven, we tended to stay at home and play a board game, or sometimes even with my toy soldiers. I can still remember a certain routine we developed around this time. In those days, there had been a swing on our lawn not far from the terrace. My mother would emerge from the house, still singing, step on to the grass and sit on the swing. I would be waiting up on my mound at the back of the garden, and come running up to her, pretending to be furious.

‘Get off, Mother! You’ll break it!’ I would jump up and down before the swing, waving my arms about. ‘You’re much too big! You’ll break it!’

And my mother, pretending she could neither see nor hear me, would swing herself higher and higher, all the time continuing to sing at the top of her voice some song like:

‘Daisy, Daisy, Give Me Your Answer Do.’ When all my pleading had failed, I would - the logic of this now eludes me - attempt a succession of headstands on the grass in front of her. Her singing would then become punctuated by gales of laughter, until eventually she would come down from the swing, and we would go off to play with whatever I had prepared for us. Even today, I cannot think about my mother’s meetings without remembering those eagerly anticipated moments that would always follow.

A few years ago, I did spend some days in the Reading Room of the British Museum researching into the arguments that raged over the opium trade in China during those times. As I sifted through many newspaper articles, letters and documents of the day, a number of issues that had mystified me as a child became much clearer. However - and I might as well admit this - my main motive in undertaking such

research was the hope that I would come across reports of my mother. After all, as I have said, I had been given to believe as a child that she was a key figure in the anti-opium campaigns. It was something of a disappointment then that I did not once find her name. There were others repeatedly quoted, praised, denigrated, but in all that material I collated, I did not once find my mother. I did though stumble upon several mentions of Uncle Philip. Once, in a letter to the *North China Daily News*, a Swedish missionary, in the process of condemning a number of European companies, referred to Uncle Philip as 'that admirable beacon of rectitude'. The absence of my mother's name was disappointment enough, but this was a cruel twist indeed, and I abandoned my researches thereafter.

But I have no wish to recall Uncle Philip here just now. There was a time, earlier this evening, when I was convinced I had mentioned his name to Sarah Hemmings during our bus ride this afternoon - even told her one or two basic things about him. But going over yet again all that took place, I am now reasonably sure Uncle Philip did not come up at all - and I must say I am relieved. It may be a foolish way to think, but it has always been my feeling that Uncle Philip will remain a less tangible entity while he exists only in my memory.

I did though tell her a little about Akira this afternoon, and now that I have had a chance to think it over, I do not really regret having done so. I did not, in any case, tell her very much, and she did appear genuinely interested. I have no idea what it was that caused me suddenly to start talking to her of such matters; I certainly had no such intention when I first boarded that bus with her in the Haymarket.

I had been invited by David Corbett, a man I have come vaguely to know, to lunch with him and 'a few friends' at a restaurant in Lower Regent Street. It is a fashionable lunch

spot, and Corbett had booked a long table at the rear of the room for a dozen of us. I was pleased to see Sarah among the party - and a little surprised, since I had not been aware she was a friend of Corbett's - but arriving rather late, I was not able to sit within speaking range of her.

It had clouded over by that time, and the waiter had lit for us a brace of candles on our table. One of our party, a fellow called Hegley, thought it a good joke to blow the candles out, and then to summon the waiter back to relight them. He did this at least three times in the space of twenty minutes - whenever he judged the boisterous atmosphere to be sagging - and the others did seem to find this very amusing. From what I could see, Sarah was at this stage enjoying herself, laughing with the rest of them. We had been there for perhaps an hour - a couple of the men had excused themselves to return to their offices - when attention turned to Emma Cameron, a rather intense girl, sitting at Sarah's end of the table. For all I knew, she had already been talking for some time to those nearest her about her problems; but it was at this stage that a lull falling over the rest of the table suddenly made her the focus of the whole party. There followed a half-serious, half-ironic discussion of Emma Cameron's troubled relationship with her mother - which was evidently reaching a new crisis on account of Emma's recent engagement to a Frenchman. All kinds of advice were offered to her. The man called Hegley, for instance, proposed that all mothers - 'and aunts too, naturally' - be kept in a large zoo-like institution to be constructed beside the Serpentine. Others made more helpful comments based on their own experiences, and Emma Cameron, relishing all the attention, kept the topic well stoked with ever more theatrical anecdotes to illustrate the thoroughly exasperating nature of this particular parent. The discussion had been going on for perhaps fifteen minutes when I saw Sarah rise and, mumbling a word into the host's ear, leave the room. The ladies' powder room was located in the lobby area of the restaurant, and the others - those who noticed

her exit at all - no doubt assumed that was where she was bound. But I had caught something in her face as she had left, and after a few minutes, I too rose and went out after her.

I found her standing at the entrance of the restaurant, looking out of the windows into Lower Regent Street. She did not notice me come up to her until I touched her arm and asked:

‘Is everything all right?’

She gave a start, and I noticed little traces of tears in her eyes, which she quickly tried to mask with a smile.

‘Oh yes, I’m fine. I felt a little stuffy, that’s all. I’m fine now.’ She gave a little laugh and gazed out searchingly into the street. ‘I’m sorry, it must have looked awfully rude. I really should go back in.’

‘I see no reason why you should if you don’t want to.’

She studied me carefully, then asked: ‘Are they still talking about what they were talking about?’

‘They were when I left.’ Then I added: ‘I suppose neither of us is able to contribute much to a symposium on troublesome mothers.’

She suddenly laughed and wiped away the tears, now no longer trying to hide them from me. ‘No,’ she said, ‘I suppose we’re disqualified.’ Then she smiled again and said: ‘It’s so silly of me. After all, they’re just having a nice lunch.’

‘Are you expecting a car?’ I asked, for she was still looking out earnestly at the traffic.

‘What? Oh no, no. I was just looking.’ Then she said: ‘I was wondering if a bus would come. You see, look, over the street. There’s a stop. My mother and I, we used to spend a lot of time on buses. Just for the pleasure of it. I’m

talking about when I was small. If we couldn't get the front seat on the top deck, then we'd just come straight down and wait for another one. And we'd spend hours sometimes, going around London, looking at everything, and talking, and pointing things out to each other. I so used to enjoy it. Don't you ever go on buses, Christopher? You should. You can see so much from the top.'

'I must confess I tend to walk or get a cab. I'm rather afraid of London buses. I'm convinced if I get on one, it'll take me somewhere I don't want to go, and I'll spend the rest of the day trying to find my way back.'

'Shall I tell you something, Christopher?' Her voice had become very quiet. 'It's very silly, but I only realised it recently. It had never occurred to me before. But Mother must already have been in a lot of pain. She wasn't strong enough to do other things with me. That's why we spent so much time on buses. It was something we could still do together.'

'Would you care to ride on a bus now?' I asked.

She looked out again into the street. 'But aren't you very busy?'

'It would be a pleasure. As I say, I'm rather frightened to go on buses alone. Since you're something of a veteran, then this is my opportunity.'

'Very well.' She suddenly beamed. 'I'll show you how you ride on a London bus.'

We eventually boarded not in Lower Regent Street - we did not wish the lunch party to emerge and see us waiting - but in nearby Haymarket. When we climbed to the upper deck, she showed a childish delight in finding her front seat vacant, and we sat there swaying together as the vehicle lumbered its way towards Trafalgar Square.

London looked very grey today, and down on the pavements, the crowds were well prepared with their mackintoshes and umbrellas. I would suppose we spent a half-hour on that bus, perhaps longer. We took in the Strand, Chancery Lane, Clerkenwell. Sometimes we sat looking at the view below us in silence; at other times, we talked, usually of innocuous things. Her mood had lightened considerably since the lunch, and she did not mention her mother again. I am not sure how we got on to the subject, but it was just after a lot of passengers had got off at High Holborn, and we were moving down Gray's Inn Road, that I found myself talking about Akira. I believe at first I did no more than mention him in passing, describing him as a 'childhood friend'. But she must have probed me, for I remember not long afterwards saying to her with a laugh:

'I always think about the time we stole something together.'

'Oh!' she exclaimed. 'So that's it! The great detective has a secret criminal past! I knew this Japanese boy was significant. Do tell me about your robbery.'

'Hardly a robbery. We were ten years old.'

'But it torments your conscience, even still?'

'Not at all. It was just a small thing. We stole something from a servant's room.'

'But how fascinating. And this was in Shanghai?'

I suppose I must then have told her a few further things from the past. I did not reveal anything of any real significance, but after parting with her this afternoon - we eventually got off in New Oxford Street - I was surprised and slightly alarmed that I had told her anything at all. After all, I have not spoken to anyone about the past in all the time I have been in this country, and as I say, I had certainly never intended to start doing so today.

But perhaps something of this sort has been on the cards for some time. For the truth is, over this past year, I have become increasingly preoccupied with my memories, a preoccupation encouraged by the discovery that these memories - of my childhood, of my parents - have lately begun to blur. A number of times recently I have found myself struggling to recall something that only two or three years ago I believed was ingrained in my mind for ever. I have been obliged to accept, in other words, that with each passing year, my life in Shanghai will grow less distinct, until one day all that will remain will be a few muddled images. Even tonight, when I sat down here and tried to gather in some sort of order these things I still remember, I have been struck anew by how hazy so much has grown. To take, for instance, this episode I have just recounted concerning my mother and the health inspector: while I am fairly sure I have remembered its essence accurately enough, turning it over in my mind again, I find myself less certain about some of the details. For one thing, I am no longer sure she actually put to the inspector the actual words: 'How is your conscience able to rest while you owe your existence to such ungodly wealth?' It now seems to me that even in her impassioned state, she would have been aware of the awkwardness of these words, of the fact that they left her quite open to ridicule. I do not believe my mother would ever have lost control of the situation to such a degree. On the other hand, it is possible I attributed these words to her precisely because such a question was one she must have put to herself constantly during our life in Shanghai. The fact that we 'owed our existence' to a company whose activities she had identified as an evil to be scourged must have been a source of true torment for her.

In fact, it is even possible I have remembered incorrectly the context in which she uttered those words; that it was not to the health inspector she put this question, but to my father, on another morning altogether, during that argument in the dining room.

Chapter Five

I do not remember now if the dining-room episode occurred before or after the health inspector's visit. What I recall is that it was raining hard that afternoon, making it gloomy throughout the house, and that I had been sitting in the library, watched over by Mei Li as I went through my arithmetic books.

We called it the 'library', but I suppose it was really just an anteroom whose walls happened to be lined with books. There was just enough space in the middle of the floor for a mahogany table, and it was there I always did my schoolwork, my back to the double doors leading into the dining room. Mei Li, my *amah*, saw my education as a matter of solemn importance, and even when I had been working for an hour, it never occurred to her, as she stood sternly over me, to lean her weight on the shelf behind her, or else to sit down in the upright chair opposite mine. The servants had long since learnt not to blunder in during these moments of study, and even my parents had accepted they should not disturb us unless absolutely necessary.

It was, then, something of a surprise when my father came striding through the library that afternoon, oblivious of our presence, and went into the dining room, closing the doors firmly behind him. This intrusion was followed within minutes by another from my mother, who also strode past briskly and disappeared into the dining room. During the minutes that followed I could catch, even through the heavy doors, the occasional word or phrase that told me my parents were locked in argument. But frustratingly, whenever I tried to hear a little more, whenever my pencil hovered too long over my sums, there would come Mei Li's inevitable reprimand.

But then - I do not remember quite how this came about - Mei Li was called away, and I was suddenly left alone at

the library table. At first I just continued to work, too fearful of what would happen if Mei Li returned and found me out of my chair. But the longer she was gone, the greater grew my urge to hear more clearly the muffled exchanges in the next room. I did finally rise and go to the doors, but even then, I would hurry back to the table every few seconds, convinced I could hear my *amah's* footsteps. In the end, I managed to remain at the door only by keeping a ruler in my hand, so that if surprised by Mei Li, I could claim to be in the process of measuring the dimensions of the room.

Even so, I managed to hear whole phrases only when my parents forgot themselves and raised their voices. I could make out in my mother's angry voice the same righteous tone she had used that morning to the health inspector. I heard her repeat: 'A disgrace!' a number of times, and she referred often to what she called 'the sinful trade'. At one point she said: 'You're making us all party to it! All of us! It's a disgrace!' My father too sounded angry, though in a defensive, despairing sort of way. He kept saying things like: 'It's not so simple. It's not nearly so simple.' And at one point he shouted:

'It's too bad! I'm *not* Philip. I'm not made that way. It's too bad, it's just too bad!'

There was something in his voice as he shouted this, a kind of terrible resignation, and I suddenly became furious at Mei Li for having abandoned me in such a situation. And it was perhaps then, as I was standing by those doors, my ruler in my hand, caught between the urge to continue listening and the desire to flee to the sanctuary of my playroom and my toy soldiers, that I heard my mother utter those words:

'Are you not ashamed to be in the service of such a company? How can your conscience rest while you owe your existence to such ungodly wealth?'

I do not remember what occurred after that: whether Mei Li came back; if I was still there in the library when my parents emerged. I do recall, though, that the episode heralded one of the longer periods of silence between my parents - that is to say, one that was maintained for weeks, rather than days. I do not mean, of course, that my parents did not communicate at all during this time, just that all exchanges were kept to the strictly functional.

I was well used to such periods and never concerned myself unduly with them. In any case, it was only in the smallest ways that they ever impinged upon my life. For instance, my father might appear at breakfast with a cheerful: 'Good morning, everyone!' and slap his hands together, only to be met by my mother's frosty glare. On such occasions, my father might try to cover his embarrassment by turning to me and, still in the same cheery tone, asking:

'And what about you, Puffin? Any interesting dreams last night?'

To which I knew from experience I should respond by giving a vague sound and continuing to eat. Otherwise, as I say, I was able to go about my business more or less as usual. But I suppose I must, at least sometimes, have given thought to these matters, for I do have a memory of a particular conversation I had with Akira once when we were playing in his house.

My memory of Akira's house is that, from an architectural standpoint, it was very similar to ours; in fact, I remember my father telling me both houses had been built by the same British firm some twenty years earlier. But the inside of my friend's house was a quite different affair, and the source of some fascination for me. It was not so much the preponderance of Oriental pictures and ornaments - in Shanghai, at that stage in my life, I would have seen nothing unusual in this - but rather his family's eccentric notions regarding the usage of many items of Western furniture. Rugs

I would have expected to see on floors were hung on walls; chairs would be at odd heights to tables; lamps would totter under overly large shades. Most remarkable were the pair of 'replica' Japanese rooms Akira's parents had created at the top of the house. These were small but uncluttered rooms with Japanese tatami mats fitted over the floors, and paper panels fixed to the walls, so that once inside - at least according to Akira - one could not tell one was not in an authentic Japanese house made of wood and paper. I can remember the doors to these rooms being especially curious; on the outer, 'Western' side, they were oak-panelled with shining brass knobs; on the inner, 'Japanese' side, delicate paper with lacquer inlays.

In any case, one sweltering day, Akira and I had been playing in one of these Japanese rooms. He had been trying to teach me a game involving piles of cards with Japanese characters on them. I had managed to pick up the rudiments and we had been playing for several minutes when I suddenly asked him:

'Does your mother sometimes stop talking to your father?'

He looked at me blankly, probably because he had failed to understand me; his English often let him down if I spoke out of context like this. Then, when I repeated my question, he shrugged and said:

'Mother not talk to Father when he at office. Mother not talk to Father when he in toilet!'

With that, he roared with theatrical laughter, rolled on to his back and began kicking his feet in the air. I was thus obliged for the moment to drop the matter. But having raised it, I was determined to get his view, and a few minutes later, brought it up again.

This time he seemed to sense my earnestness, and leaving aside the card game, asked me a number of questions until I

had more or less told him the nature of my worries. He then rolled on to his back again, but this time gazed thoughtfully up at the ceiling fan rotating above us. After a few moments he said:

‘I know why they stop. I know why.’ Then turning to me, he said: ‘Christopher. You not enough Englishman.’

When I asked him to explain this, he once more looked at the ceiling and went quiet. I too rolled on to my back and followed his example of staring at the fan. He was lying a little way across the room from me, and when he spoke again, I remember his voice sounded oddly disembodied.

‘It same for me,’ he said. ‘Mother and Father, they stop talk. Because I not enough Japanese.’

As I may have said already, I tended to regard Akira as a worldly authority on many aspects of life, and so I listened to him that day with great care. My parents stopped talking to one another, he told me, whenever they became deeply unhappy with my behaviour - and in my case, this was on account of my not behaving sufficiently like an Englishman. If I thought about it, he said, I would be able to link each of my parents’ silences to some instance of my failing in this way. For his part, he always knew when he had let down his Japanese blood, and it never came as a surprise to him to discover that his parents had ceased talking to one another. When I asked him why they did not scold us in the usual manner when we misbehaved in this way, Akira explained to me that it was not like that; he was talking of offences quite different from the usual misdemeanours for which we might be punished. He was referring to moments that disappointed our parents so deeply they were unable even to scold us.

‘Mother and Father so very very disappoint,’ he said quietly. ‘So they stop talk.’

Then he sat up and pointed to one of the slatted sun-blinds at that moment hanging partially down over a window.

We children, he said, were like the twine that kept the slats held together. A Japanese monk had once told him this. We often failed to realise it, but it was we children who bound not only a family, but the whole world together. If we did not do our part, the slats would fall and scatter over the floor.

I do not remember anything more of our conversation that day, and besides, as I say, I did not spend much time dwelling on such matters. All the same, I remember more than once being tempted to ask my mother about what my friend had said. In the end, I never did so, though I did broach the subject once with Uncle Philip.

Uncle Philip was not a real uncle. He had stayed with my parents as a 'house guest' upon his arrival in Shanghai sometime before my birth, in the days when he was still in the employ of Morganbrook and Byatt. Then, while I was still very young, he had resigned from the company owing to what my mother always described as 'a profound disagreement with his employers over how China should mature'. By the time I was old enough to be aware of him, he was running a philanthropic organisation called The Sacred Tree dedicated to improving conditions in the Chinese areas of the city. He had always been a family friend, but as I have said, became a particularly frequent visitor during the years of my mother's anti-opium campaigns.

I can remember often going with my mother to Philip's office. This was located within the grounds of one of the churches in the city centre - my guess now is that it was the Union Church in Soochow Road. Our carriage would drive right into the grounds and stop beside a large lawn shaded by fruit trees. Here, despite the noises from the city around us, the atmosphere was tranquil, and my mother, stepping out of the carriage, would pause, raise her head and remark: 'The air. It's so much purer here.' Her mood would lighten visibly, and sometimes - if we were a little early - my

mother and I would while away some minutes playing games on the grass. If we played tag, chasing one another all around the fruit trees, my mother would often laugh and squeal as excitedly as I did. I remember once, in the middle of one such game, she stopped suddenly on seeing a clergyman emerge from the church. We had then stood quietly on the edge of the lawn and exchanged greetings with him as he had passed. But no sooner had he gone out of our sight than my mother had turned, and stooping right down to me, given a conspiratorial giggle. It is even possible this kind of thing occurred more than once. In any case, I remember being fascinated by the notion of my mother participating in something for which, just like me, she could be 'told off'. And it was perhaps this dimension to these moments of careless play around the churchyard that made them seem always a little special for me.

My memory of Uncle Philip's office is that it was very ramshackle. There were everywhere boxes of all sizes, heaps of papers, even loose drawers, still with their contents, stacked precariously one on another. I would have expected my mother to disapprove of such untidiness, but she only ever talked of Uncle Philip's office being 'cosy' or 'busy'.

He never failed to make a fuss of me on these visits, shaking my hand heartily, sitting me down then engaging me in conversation for several minutes while my mother looked on smiling. Often he would give me a gift, something he would pretend he had had ready and waiting - though I soon came to realise he was presenting me with whatever caught his eye at the time. 'Guess what I've got for you, Puffin!' he would declare, while his gaze travelled the room in search of something suitable. In this way I acquired an extensive collection of office items, which I kept in an old chest in my playroom: an ashtray, an ivory pen stand, a lead weight. There was one occasion when, after announcing he had a present for me, his eye failed to alight on anything at all. There followed an awkward pause, before he sprang up and

began wandering about his office, muttering: 'And where did I put it? What on earth have I done with it?' - until finally, perhaps in desperation, he went over to the wall, pulled down a map of the Yangtze region, tearing a corner as he did so, rolled it up and presented it to me.

That time I confided in him, Uncle Philip and I were sitting together in his office, waiting for my mother to come back from somewhere. He had persuaded me to take his own chair behind his desk, while he himself roamed aimlessly around the place. He was making his usual amusing small-talk, and normally he would have had me laughing in no time, but on that occasion - only days after my discussion with Akira - I was not in that sort of mood. Uncle Philip soon saw this and said:

'So, Puffin. We're rather glum today.'

I saw my chance and said: 'Uncle Philip, I was just wondering. How do you suppose one might become more English?'

'More English?' He stopped whatever it was he was doing and looked at me. Then, with a thoughtful expression, he came nearer, pulled a chair up to the desk and sat down.

'Now why would you want to be more English than you are, Puffin?'

'I just thought ... well, I just thought I might.'

'Who says you're not sufficiently English already?'

'No one really.' Then after a second I added: 'But I think perhaps my parents think so.'

'And what do *you* think, Puffin? Do you think you ought to be more English?'

'I can't tell really, sir.'

'No, I suppose you can't. Well, it's true, out here, you're growing up with a lot of different sorts around you.'

Chinese, French, Germans, Americans, what have you. It'd be no wonder if you grew up a bit of a mongrel.' He gave a short laugh. Then he went on: 'But that's no bad thing. You know what I think, Puffin? I think it would be no bad thing if boys like you *all* grew up with a bit of everything. We might all treat each other a good deal better then. Be less of these wars for one thing. Oh yes. Perhaps one day, all these conflicts will end, and it won't be because of great statesmen or churches or organisations like this one. It'll be because people have changed. They'll be like you, Puffin. More a mixture. So why not become a mongrel? It's healthy.'

'But if I did, everything might ...' I stopped.

'Everything might what, Puffin?'

'Like that blind there' - I pointed - 'if the twine broke. Everything might scatter.'

Uncle Philip stared at the blind I had indicated. Then he rose, went to the window and touched it gently.

'Everything might scatter. You might be right. I suppose it's something we can't easily get away from. People need to feel they belong. To a nation, to a race. Otherwise, who knows what might happen? This civilisation of ours, perhaps it'll just collapse. And everything scatter, as you put it.' He sighed, as though I had just defeated him in an argument.

'So you want to be more English. Well, well, Puffin. So what are we to do about it?'

'I wondered, if it's all right, sir, if you didn't awfully mind. I wondered if I might copy you sometimes.'

'Copy me?'

'Yes, sir. Just sometimes. Just so that I learn to do things the English way.'

'That's very flattering, old fellow. But don't you think your father's the one to have this great privilege? About as English as they come, I'd say.'

I looked away, and Uncle Philip must immediately have sensed he had said the wrong thing. He came back to his chair and sat down again in front of me.

‘Look,’ he said quietly. ‘I’ll tell you what we’ll do. If you’re ever worried how you should go about things, anything, if you’re worried about the proper way to go about it, then just you come to me and we’ll have a good talk about it. We’ll talk it all through until you know exactly what’s what. Now. Feel better?’

‘Yes, sir. I think I do.’ I managed a smile. ‘Thank you, sir.’

‘Look here, Puffin. You’re a right little horror. You know that, of course. But as little horrors go, you’re a pretty decent specimen. I’m sure your mother and father are very, very proud of you.’

‘Do you really think so, sir?’

‘I do. I really do. So, you feel better?’

With that, he sprang to his feet to resume his wanderings around his office. Reverting to his light-hearted tone, he began some nonsensical story about the lady in the office next door, which soon had me in stitches.

How fond I was of Uncle Philip! And is there any real reason to suppose he was not genuinely fond of me? It is perfectly possible that at that stage, he wished nothing but good for me, that he had no more inkling than I did of the course things would take.

Chapter Six

It was around that same time - that same summer - when certain aspects of Akira's behaviour began seriously to irk me. In particular, there was his endless harping on the achievements of the Japanese. He had always tended to do this, but that summer things seemed to reach obsessive levels. Time and again my friend would bring to a stop some game we were playing just to lecture me on the latest Japanese building being erected in the business district, or the imminent arrival of another Japanese gunboat in the harbour. He would then oblige me to listen to the most minute details and, every few minutes, his claim that Japan had become a 'great, great country just like England'. Most irritating of all were those occasions on which he would try to start arguments about who cried the easiest, the Japanese or the English. If I spoke up at all on behalf of the English, my friend would immediately demand we put things to the test, which meant in practice his putting me in one of his dreadful arm-locks until I either capitulated or gave in to tears.

At the time, I put Akira's obsession with the prowess of his race down to the fact that he was due to start school in Japan that coming autumn. His parents had arranged for him to stay with relatives in Nagasaki, and although he would return to Shanghai during school holidays, we realised we would see a lot less of each other and initially the news had made us both despondent. But as the summer drew on, Akira appeared to convince himself about the superiority of every aspect of life in Japan and became increasingly excited about the prospect of his new school. I in turn grew so weary of his persistent boasting about all things Japanese that by the late summer I was actually looking forward to being rid of him. Indeed, when the day eventually came, and I stood

outside his house waving off the motor car taking him to the harbour, I believe I was not at all sorrowful.

Very soon, however, I began to miss him. It was not that I did not have other friends. There were for instance the two English brothers living nearby with whom I played regularly, and of whom I saw much more after Akira's departure. I got on well with them, especially when it was just the three of us. But sometimes we would be joined by their schoolfriends - other boys from Shanghai Public School - and then their behaviour towards me would change, and I would sometimes become the target of certain pranks. I did not mind this at all, of course, since I could see they were all essentially decent sorts intending no real malice. Even at the time, I could see that if within a group of five or six boys, all but one attended the same school, the outsider was bound now and then to become the butt of some harmless banter. What I mean is that I did not think badly of my English friends; but then, all the same, such things did prevent me developing with them the same level of intimacy I had had with Akira, and as the months went on, I suppose I began to miss his company more and more.

But that autumn of Akira's absence was not a particularly unhappy one by any means. I remember it rather as a period when I was often at a loose end, of empty afternoons following one another, much of which has now faded from my mind. Nevertheless, a few small events did occur during that period which I have subsequently come to regard as being of particular significance.

There was, for example, the incident surrounding our trip to the racecourse with Uncle Philip, which I am reasonably sure occurred after one of my mother's Saturday morning meetings. As I may have said already, for all my mother's encouraging me to mingle with her fellow campaigners in the drawing room where they first gathered, I was not permitted into the dining room for the meetings themselves. I remember once

asking her if I could attend a meeting, and to my surprise she had given it long consideration. Finally she had said:

‘I’m sorry, Puffin. Neither Lady Andrews nor Mrs Callow appreciates the company of children. It’s a pity. You might well have learnt some important things.’

My father, of course, was not barred from the meetings, but there seemed to exist an understanding that he too should refrain from attending them. It is hard for me now to say which, if either of them, was responsible for this state of affairs; but certainly, there was always an odd atmosphere at breakfast on those Saturdays a meeting was to take place. My mother would not actually mention the meeting itself to my father, but would regard him throughout the meal with an air almost of disgust. For his part, my father would become infected by a forced joviality which would grow throughout the morning right up until when my mother’s guests began to arrive. Uncle Philip was always among the first, and he and my father would chat for a few minutes in the drawing room, laughing a lot. Then as more guests arrived, my mother would come and take Uncle Philip away into a corner, where they would confer solemnly about the coming meeting. It was always at around this point that my father would absent himself, usually by going up to his study.

On that day I am recalling, I remember I heard the visitors starting to leave at the end of the meeting, and went out into the garden to await my mother - who I assumed would, as usual, emerge before long to commandeer my swing, singing all the while in her wonderfully carrying tones. When after a time there was no sign of her, I went into the house to investigate, and coming into the library saw that the doors of the dining room were now ajar; that the meeting had indeed broken up, but that Uncle Philip and my mother were still there, deep in discussion at the table, papers strewn before them. And then my father appeared behind me, no doubt also believing the morning’s business to be over. On hearing the voices from the dining room, he stopped and said to me:

‘Oh, they’re still here.’

‘Just Uncle Philip.’

My father smiled, then drifted past me into the dining room. Through the doors I could see Uncle Philip rising to his feet, and then I could hear the two men laughing loudly together. A moment later my mother emerged looking somewhat annoyed, her documents gathered in her arms.

By then it was past noon. Uncle Philip stayed for lunch and there was more good-humoured laughter. Then, as we were finishing our meal, Uncle Philip made his suggestion: why did we not all go down to the racecourse for the afternoon? My mother thought about this and declared it an excellent idea. My father too said he thought it a fine idea, but he would have to be excused on account of the work awaiting him in his study.

‘But by all means, darling,’ he said, turning to my mother, ‘why don’t you go along with Philip? It’s turning into the most splendid afternoon.’

‘Well, you know, I rather think I might,’ my mother said. ‘A little excitement might do us all some good. Christopher too.’

And at that moment they all looked at me. Although I was then only nine years old, I believe I read the situation with some accuracy. I knew of course that I was being offered a choice: to go out to the racecourse or to stay at home with my father. But I believe I grasped also the deeper implications: if I chose to stay in, then my mother would decline to go to the racecourse solely in Uncle Philip’s company. In other words, the outing depended on my going with them. Moreover I knew – and I did so with a calm certainty – that at that moment my father was desperately wishing us not to go, that for us to do so would cause him huge pain. It was not anything in his manner that suggested this to me, but rather what I had – perhaps unwillingly – absorbed over the

preceding weeks and months. Of course, there were many things I did not understand at all in those days, but this much I saw with great clarity: at that instant, my father was entirely depending on me to save the situation.

But perhaps I did not understand enough. For when my mother said: 'Come on, Puffin. Hurry and get your shoes on,' I did so with conspicuous enthusiasm, an enthusiasm I manufactured for show. And I can remember to this day my father seeing us to the front door, shaking hands with Philip, laughing and waving us off as the carriage took my mother, Uncle Philip and me away on our afternoon's outing.

The only other memories to have remained distinct from that autumn also concern my father: namely, those curious instances of his 'boasting'. My father was always modest in his manners and found boastfulness in others embarrassing. This is why it struck me at the time as so odd to hear him talk in the way he did on a number of separate occasions around that time. These were all small instances which caused me only mild surprise, but they have none the less remained in my memory over the years.

There was the moment, for example, when at the dinner table he said quite suddenly to my mother:

'Did I tell you, darling? That fellow came back to see me, that representative from the dock workers. Wanted to thank me for all I'd done for them. Spoke jolly good English too. Of course these Chinese always speak very effusively, these speeches of theirs have all to be taken with a pinch of salt. But you know, dear, I had the distinct impression he meant it. Said I was their "honoured hero". How do you like that? Honoured hero!'

My father laughed, then watched my mother carefully. She went on eating for a moment, then said:

'Yes, darling. You've told me already.'

My father looked a little deflated, but then the next second he smiled cheerfully again and said with another laugh: 'So I have!' Then turning to me, he said: 'But Puffin here hasn't heard it yet. Have you, Puffin? Honoured hero. That's what they're calling your father.'

I cannot remember what any of this was about, and I probably did not much care even at the time. I have remembered the episode only because, as I have said, it was so uncharacteristic of my father to talk of himself in this way.

Another incident of this sort occurred one afternoon my parents and I were going to the Public Gardens to listen to the brass band. We had just stepped out of our carriage at the upper end of the Bund, and my mother and I were gazing across the wide boulevard towards the gateway into the gardens. It was a Sunday afternoon and I remember the pavements on both sides being filled with finely dressed promenaders enjoying the breeze from the harbour. The Bund itself was busy with carriages, motor cars and rickshaws, and my mother and I were preparing to cross it, when my father, having paid our driver, came up behind us and said suddenly and quite loudly:

'You see, darling, they know now at the firm. They know now I'm not one to back down. Bentley knows it, for one. Oh yes, he jolly well knows it now!'

As on that occasion at the dinner table, my mother initially gave no sign of having heard. She took my hand and we made our way across the traffic towards the gardens.

'Does he really?' was all she murmured under her breath as we reached the other side.

But that was not quite the end of the matter. We went into the Public Gardens and for a while, like every other family who went to the gardens on a Sunday afternoon, we strolled around the lawns and flower beds greeting friends and acquaintances, stopping occasionally for a short chat. I

would sometimes see boys I knew - from school or from my piano lessons at Mrs Lewis's - but they were, like me, walking beside their parents on their best behaviour, and we would acknowledge one another only shyly, if at all. The brass band would start to play at half past five on the dot, and although everyone knew this, most people would wait until the horns came drifting across the grounds before making a move towards the bandstand.

We were always late to set off, so that the seats would all be taken by the time we arrived. I did not mind this so much, since it was around the bandstand that we children were allowed a looser leash, and I too would sometimes mingle and play there with the other boys. On that particular afternoon - it must have been well into the autumn for I remember the sun already low over the water behind the bandstand - my mother had moved a few paces away to talk with some friends standing nearby, and after several minutes of attending to the music, I asked my father's permission to go over to some American boys I knew playing on the outer fringe of the crowd. He went on gazing at the band and did not answer, so I was about to ask him again, when he said quietly:

'All these people here, Puffin. All these people. Ask them and they'll all profess to have standards. But you'll see as you get older, very few of them really do. Your mother, though, she's different. She never lets herself down. And you know, Puffin, that's why she's finally succeeded. She's made your father a better man. A much better man. Very well, she may be strict, I don't need to tell *you* that, ha ha! Well, she's been every bit as strict with me as she has with you. And the result is, by golly, I'm a better human being for it. Took a long time, but she managed it. I want you to know this, Puffin, your father is no longer today the same person you saw that time, you know, that time you and Mother burst in on me. You remember that, of course you do. That time I was in my study. I'm sorry you ever had to see your own father like that. Well anyway, that was then. Today,

thanks to your mother, I'm someone much much stronger. Someone, I dare say, Puffin, you'll one day be proud of.'

I understood little of what he was saying, and besides, I had the feeling that if my mother - who was only a little way away - caught any of these words, she would be angry. So I did not really respond to my father. I have a feeling I simply asked him again, after a few moments, if I could go over to join my American friends, and that was the end of the matter.

But over the days that followed, I did find myself thinking about this curious speech from my father, and in particular his reference to some occasion when my mother and I had 'burst in' upon him in his study. For a long time, I had no clear idea what he might have been referring to, and I tried in vain to match one recollection or another to his words. Eventually I did settle on one memory from very early in my life, from when I could have been no older than four or five - a memory which even then, when I was nine years old, had already grown hazy in my mind.

My father's study was on the uppermost floor of the house with a commanding view over the rear grounds. I was not usually permitted to enter it, and in general was discouraged from playing anywhere near it. There was, however, a narrow corridor leading from the landing to the study door, along which a row of pictures hung in heavy gilt frames. These were each precise, draughtsman-like paintings of Shanghai harbour seen from the viewpoint of someone standing on the shore at Pootung; that is to say, all the numerous vessels in the harbour were shown with the great buildings of the Bund in the background. The pictures probably dated back at least to the 1880s and my guess is that like many of the ornaments and pictures in the house, they belonged to the company. Now I do not actually remember this myself, but my mother often told me how, when I was very young, she and I would stand in front of these pictures and entertain ourselves giving amusing

names to the various vessels in the water. According to my mother, I would quickly be in fits of laughter and would sometimes refuse to abandon the game until we had named every visible vessel. If this were so - if we were really in the habit of laughing boisterously throughout this game of ours - then almost certainly we would not have come up to amuse ourselves in this way while my father was working in his study. But when I thought further about my father's words at the bandstand that day, I began to remember an occasion my mother and I had indeed been standing together up on that attic floor, for all I know playing this game of ours, when she suddenly stopped and became very still.

My first thought was that I was about to be scolded, perhaps for something I had just said which had displeased her. It was not even unheard of for my mother to switch moods abruptly in the midst of a harmonious exchange and scold me for some suddenly remembered misdemeanour committed earlier in the day. But as I fell silent in readiness for just such an explosion, I realised she was listening. Then the next instant she had turned and pushed open with great suddenness the door to my father's study.

I caught a glimpse past my mother's frame of the inside of the room. My abiding image is of my father slumped forward over his bureau, his face covered in perspiration and contorted with frustration. It is possible he was sobbing and it was this sound that had caught my mother's attention. In front of him, all over his desk, there were papers, ledgers, notebooks. I noticed - I believe I followed my mother's gaze - more papers and notebooks on the floor, as though he had hurled them there in a temper fit. He was looking up at us, startled, and then the next moment he said in a voice that rather shocked me:

'We can't do it! We'll never get back! We can't do it! You're asking too much, Diana. It's too much!'

My mother said something to him under her breath, no doubt some reprimand to make him pull himself together. My father did collect himself a little at this point and, glancing past my mother, looked at me for the first time. But almost instantly his face creased again with despair and, turning to my mother, he said again, shaking his head helplessly:

‘We can’t do it, Diana. It’ll be the ruin of us. I’ve looked at everything. We’ll never get back to England. We can’t raise enough. Without the firm, we’re simply stranded.’

Then he seemed to lose control again, and as my mother began to say something else - something in her quiet, angry voice - my father began to shout, not so much at her as at the walls of his study:

‘I won’t do it, Diana! My God, who do you take me for? It’s beyond me, you hear? Beyond me! I can’t do it!’

Possibly at this point my mother closed the door on him and led me away. I have no further memory of the episode. And of course, I cannot be sure of the exact sentiments, let alone the exact words, my father was uttering that day. But this is how, admittedly with some hindsight, I have come to shape that memory.

At the time, it was simply a bewildering experience for me, and although I probably found it interesting that my father should, like me, have moments of crying and shouting, I did not much ask myself what it had all been about. Besides, when I next saw my father he was his normal self again, and for her part my mother never alluded to the incident. If my father had not, years later, made that curious speech beside the bandstand, I would probably never have dredged up this memory at all.

But as I say, apart from these curious little episodes, there is little that seems worth remembering from that autumn

and the dull winter that followed it. I was listless for much of that period and was delighted when one afternoon Mei Li quite casually gave me the news that Akira had returned from Japan, that at that very moment, in the drive next door, his luggage was being unloaded off the motor car.

Chapter Seven

Akira, I was delighted to learn, had returned to Shanghai not just for a visit, but for the foreseeable future, with plans to resume at his old school in the North Szechwan Road at the start of the summer term. I cannot remember if the two of us celebrated his return in any special way. I have the impression we simply picked up our friendship where we had left off the previous autumn with minimum fuss. I was quite curious to hear about Akira's experiences in Japan, but he persuaded me it would be childish - somehow beneath us - to discuss such matters, and so we made a show of continuing with our old routines as if nothing had ever interrupted them. I guessed of course that all had not gone well for him in Japan, but did not begin to suspect the half of it until that warm spring day he tore the sleeve of his kimono.

When we played outside, Akira usually dressed much as I did - in shirt, shorts and, on the hotter days, sun hat. But on that particular morning we were playing on the mound at the back of our garden, he was wearing a kimono - not anything special, just one of the garments he often wore around his house. We had been running up and down the mound enacting some drama when he suddenly stopped near the summit and sat down with a frown. I thought he had injured himself but, when I came up to him, saw he was examining a tear on the sleeve of the kimono. He was doing so with the utmost concern, and I believe I said to him something like:

'What's wrong? Your maid or someone will sew that in no time.'

He did not respond - he seemed for the moment to have forgotten my presence entirely - and I realised he was sinking into a deep gloom before my eyes. He went on examining the tear for a few more seconds, then letting down

his arm, stared blankly at the earth in front of him as though a great tragedy had just occurred.

‘This is third time,’ he muttered quietly. ‘Third time same week I do bad thing.’

Then as I continued to gaze at him somewhat baffled, he said: ‘Third bad thing. Now mother and father, they make me go back Japan.’

I could not, of course, see how a small tear in an old kimono could bring such consequences, but I was for the moment sufficiently alarmed by this prospect to crouch down beside him and urgently demand an explanation for his words. But I could get little more out of my friend that morning - he grew increasingly sulky and closed - and I seem to remember our parting not on the best of terms. Over the following weeks, however, I gradually discovered what had lain behind his odd behaviour.

From his very first day in Japan, Akira had been thoroughly miserable. Although he never admitted this explicitly, I surmised that he had been mercilessly ostracised for his ‘foreignness’; his manners, his attitudes, his speech, a hundred other things had marked him out as different, and he had been taunted not just by his fellow pupils, but by his teachers and even - he hinted at this more than once - by the relatives in whose house he was staying. In the end, so profound was his unhappiness, his parents had been obliged to bring him home in the middle of a school term.

The thought that he might have to return again to Japan was one that haunted my friend. The fact was his parents missed Japan badly and often talked of the family returning there. With his older sister, Etsuko, not at all averse to living in Japan, Akira realised he was alone in wishing the family to remain in Shanghai; that it was only his strong opposition to the idea that prevented his parents packing their things and sailing for Nagasaki, and he was not at all

sure how much longer his preferences could expect to take precedence over those of his sister and parents. Things were very much in the balance, and any displeasure he incurred - any misdemeanour, any falling off of his schoolwork - could tip the scales against him. Hence his supposition that a small tear in a kimono sleeve might easily produce the gravest of consequences.

As it turned out, the torn kimono did not incur his parents' wrath nearly to the extent feared, and certainly nothing momentous came of the matter. But throughout those months following his return, there would come along one little mishap after another to plunge my friend back into his pit of worry and despondency. The most significant of these, I suppose, was the affair concerning Ling Tien and our 'robbery' - the 'crime from my past' which so aroused Sarah's curiosity during our bus ride this afternoon.

Ling Tien had been with Akira's family for as long as they had been in Shanghai. Among my earliest memories of going next door to play are those of the old servant shuffling about the place with his broom. He looked very old, always wore a heavy dark gown even in the summer, a cap and a pigtail. Unlike the other Chinese servants in the neighbourhood, he rarely smiled at children, but then nor did he scowl or shout at us, and had it not been for Akira's attitude to him, it is unlikely I would ever have regarded him as an object of fear. Indeed, I remember I was initially more puzzled than anything by the alarm that would seize Akira whenever the servant came within our vicinity. If for instance Ling Tien was passing in the corridor, my friend would break off whatever we were doing to stand rigidly in a part of the room not visible to the old man and not move again until the danger had passed. In those early days of our friendship, I had yet to become infected by Akira's sense of dread, assuming that it derived from something specific that had occurred between him and Ling Tien. As I say, I was more puzzled than anything, but whenever I asked Akira to explain

his behaviour, he simply ignored me. In time I came to appreciate how deeply embarrassed he was by his inability to control his dread of Ling Tien and learnt to say nothing whenever our games were disrupted in this manner.

But then as we grew older, I imagine Akira began to feel the need to justify his fear. By the time we were seven or eight, the sight of Ling Tien would no longer cause my friend to freeze; instead, he would break off whatever he was doing and look at me with a strange grin. Then putting his mouth close to my ear, he would recite in a curious monotone - not unlike that of the monks we sometimes heard chanting at the Boone Road market - the most terrifying revelations concerning the old servant.

I thus learnt of Ling Tien's fearful passion for hands. Akira had once happened to glance down the servants' corridor towards Ling Tien's room on a rare occasion when the old man had left his door ajar, and had seen heaped upon the floor the severed hands of men, women, children, apes. Another time, late at night, Akira had spotted the servant carrying a basket into the house piled with the dismembered little arms of monkeys. We had always to be on our guard, Akira warned me. If we gave him the slightest opportunity, Ling Tien would not hesitate to cut off our hands.

When after a number of such briefings, I enquired as to why Ling Tien was so keen on hands, Akira looked at me carefully, then asked if I could be entrusted with his family's darkest secret. When I assured him I could, he thought a little longer before saying finally:

'Then I tell you, old chap! Terrible reason! Why Ling cut off hands. I tell you!'

Ling Tien, evidently, had discovered a method by which he could turn severed hands into spiders. In his room were many bowls filled with various fluids in which he soaked for several months at a time the many hands he had collected. Slowly the fingers would start to move by themselves - just

little twitches at first, then coiling motions; finally dark hairs would grow and Ling Tien would then take them out of the fluids and set them loose, as spiders, all around the neighbourhood. Akira had often heard the old servant creeping out in the dead of night to do just this. My friend had once even seen in the garden, moving through the undergrowth, a mutant Ling had taken prematurely from its solution which did not yet fully resemble a spider and could easily be identified as a severed hand.

Although even at that age I did not entirely believe these stories, they certainly upset me and for some time the mere sight of Ling Tien was enough to set off terrors within me. Indeed, as we grew older, we neither of us quite shook off our horror of Ling Tien. This was something that always nagged at Akira's pride, and around the time we were eight, he seemed to develop a need constantly to challenge these old fears. I often remember him dragging me off to some point in his house where we could spy on Ling Tien sweeping the path or whatever. I did not mind these spying sessions so much, but what I came to dread were those occasions Akira would persistently dare me to go near Ling Tien's room.

Until this point we had kept well clear of that room, especially since Akira had always maintained the fumes from Ling Tien's fluids were liable to hypnotise us and draw us in through the door. But now the notion of going near the room became for my friend something of an obsession. We might be having a conversation about something quite different, and then suddenly that strange grin would appear on his face and he would start to whisper: 'Are you frightened? Christopher, are you frightened?'

He would then oblige me to follow him through his house, through those oddly furnished rooms, to the heavy-beamed arch that marked the start of the servants' quarters. Going under the arch, we would find ourselves standing in a gloomy corridor of bare polished boards, at the far end of which, facing us, was the door of Ling Tien's room.

First, I would only be required to stand at the arch and watch as Akira pushed himself step by step along the corridor until he had covered perhaps half the distance to that awful room. I can still see my friend, his tubby figure stiff with tension, his face, whenever he glanced back at me, shining with perspiration, willing himself a few steps further before turning and running back with his triumphant grin. Then would come all his goading and bullying until I eventually found the nerve to match his feat. For quite a time, as I say, these tests of courage concerning Ling Tien's room came rather to obsess Akira, and took much out of the pleasure of going to play at his house.

For some time yet, though, it was to remain beyond either of us to walk right up to the door, let alone to go through it. By the time we finally entered Ling Tien's room, we were both ten, and it was - although of course I did not know it then - my last year in Shanghai. That was when Akira and I committed our little theft - an impulsive act whose wider repercussions, in our excitement, we failed entirely to anticipate.

We had always known Ling Tien would be going away for six days in early August to visit his home village near Hangchow, and we had talked often about how we would then take the opportunity finally to enter that room. And sure enough, on the first afternoon after Ling Tien's departure, I turned up at Akira's house to find my friend entirely preoccupied with the matter. By this time, I should say, I was in general a much more confident person than even a year earlier, and if I still felt a little of that old dread of Ling Tien, I would certainly not have shown it. In fact, I believe I was much the calmer about the prospect of entering the room - something I am sure my friend noticed and saw as an extra dimension to the challenge.

But as it turned out, throughout that afternoon, Akira's mother was making a dress, which for some reason required her

constantly to move from room to room, and Akira declared it too risky even to contemplate our venture. I was certainly not displeased, but I am sure Akira was the one more grateful for the excuse.

The following day, however, was a Saturday and when I arrived at Akira's house towards mid-morning, both his parents had gone out. Akira did not have an *amah*, as I did, and when we were younger we had often argued over which of us was the more fortunate. He had always taken the position that Japanese children did not need an *amah* because they were 'braver' than Western children. I had once asked him during one such argument who would see to his needs if his mother was out and he wanted, say, some iced water, or if he cut himself. I remember his telling me Japanese mothers *never* went out unless the child specifically permitted them to do so - a claim I found hard to believe, since I knew for a fact Japanese ladies met in their circles, much as the European ladies did, at Astor House or Marcell's Tea Room in Szechwan Road. But when he pointed out that in his mother's absence there was the maid to see to his every need, while at the same time he was free to do whatever he pleased with no restrictions at all, I did begin to believe I was the one hard done by. Oddly, I continued to hold this view even though in practice, on those occasions we played at his house when his mother was out, one or another servant was always delegated to watch over our every move. Indeed, especially when we were younger, this would mean some unsmiling figure, no doubt fearing dire consequences should any misfortune befall us, standing within inhibiting proximity while we did our best to play.

Naturally, though, by that summer, we were allowed to move much more freely without supervision. On that morning we entered Ling Tien's room, we had been playing in one of Akira's sparse tatami-floored rooms up on the third floor while an elderly maid - the only other person in the house - occupied herself with some sewing in the room directly

below. I remember at one point Akira breaking off from what we were doing, tip-toeing to the balcony and leaning right over the rail, so far I feared he might topple over. Then when he came hurrying back, I noticed the strange grin had appeared on his face. The maid, he reported in a whisper, had as expected fallen asleep.

‘Now we must go in! Are you frightened, Christopher? Are you frightened?’

Akira had suddenly become so tense that for a moment all my old fears concerning Ling Tien came flooding back. But by this point a retreat for either of us was out of the question, and we made our way as quietly as possible down to the servants’ quarters until we were once more standing together in that gloomy corridor with its bare polished boards.

What I recall is that we strode down the corridor with little hesitation until we were all but four or five yards from Ling Tien’s door. Then something made us pause, and for a second neither of us appeared capable of continuing; if at that moment Akira had turned and run, I am sure I would have done the same. But then my friend seemed to find some extra resolve, and holding out his arm to me, said: ‘Come on, old chap! We go together!’

We linked arms and took the final few steps like that. Then Akira pulled back the door and we both peered in.

We saw a small, sparse, tidy room with a well-swept boarded floor. The window was covered by a sun-blind, but the light was leaking in brightly at the edges. There was a faint smell of incense in the air, a shrine in the far corner, a low narrow bed, and a surprisingly grand chest of drawers, beautifully lacquered, with ornate handles hanging on each little drawer.

We stepped inside, and for a few seconds remained still, barely breathing. Then Akira let out a sigh and turned to me

with a huge smile, clearly delighted finally to have conquered his old fear. But the next moment his sense of triumph seemed quickly to be replaced by a concern that the room's lack of any obviously sinister features would make him look ridiculous. Before I could say anything, he pointed quickly to the chest of drawers and whispered urgently:

‘There! In there! Careful, careful, old chap! The spiders, they inside there!’

He was hardly convincing and he must have realised it. Nevertheless, for a second or two, an image went through my head of those small drawers opening before our eyes as creatures - at various stages between hand and spider - put out tentative limbs. But now Akira was indicating excitedly a small bottle standing on a low table beside Ling Tien's bed.

‘Lotion!’ he whispered. ‘The magic lotion he uses! There it is!’

I was tempted to pour ridicule over this desperate attempt to preserve a fantasy we had in truth long outgrown, but at that moment I had another sudden vision of the drawers opening, and a residue of my old fear kept me from saying anything. Moreover, I was beginning to grow anxious about a much more likely eventuality: namely, that we would be discovered in that room by the maid or some other unexpected adult. I could not begin to imagine the disgrace that would then follow, the punishments, the long discussions between my parents and Akira's. I could not even think how we might start to explain our behaviour.

Just then Akira quickly stepped forward, grabbed the bottle and clasped it to his chest.

‘Go! Go!’ he hissed, and suddenly we were both gripped by panic. Giggling under our breaths, we rushed out of the room and down the corridor.

Back in the safety of the upstairs room - the maid had remained asleep below - Akira reasserted his claim that the

drawers had been filled with severed hands. I could see now he was seriously worried about my ridiculing our long-standing fantasy and somehow I too felt the need to preserve it. I thus said nothing to undermine his claim, nor gave any suggestion that Ling Tien's room had been a let-down or that our courage had been summoned on false pretences. We placed the bottle on a plate in the middle of the floor, then sat down to examine it.

Akira carefully removed the stopper. There was inside a pale liquid with a vague smell of aniseed. To this day I have no idea for what the old servant used this lotion; my guess is that it was some patent medicine he had purchased to combat some chronic condition. In any case, its nondescript appearance served our purpose well. Very carefully we dipped twigs into the bottle and let them drip on to some paper. Akira warned that we should not let even a drop touch our hands lest we wake up the next day with spiders at the end of our arms. Neither of us really believed this, but again, it seemed important for Akira's feelings that we pretend to do so, and thus we went about our task with exaggerated caution.

Finally, Akira replaced the stopper and put away the bottle in the box he kept for his special things, saying that he wished to conduct a few more experiments with the lotion before returning it. All in all, when we parted that morning, we were both well pleased with ourselves.

But when Akira came to my house the following afternoon, I saw immediately some difficulty had arisen; he was very preoccupied and unable to concentrate on anything. Dreading to hear that his parents had somehow found out about our previous day's deeds, I for some time avoided asking what was troubling him. In the end, though, I could bear it no longer and demanded he tell me the worst. Akira, however, denied that his parents suspected anything, then sank once more into his gloom. Only after much more pressure did he finally give in and tell me what had happened.

Finding it impossible to contain his sense of triumph, Akira had revealed to his sister Etsuko what we had done. To his surprise, Etsuko had reacted with horror. I say surprise because Etsuko - who was four years older than us - had never gone along with our view of Ling Tien's sinister nature. But now, on hearing Akira's story, she had glared at him as though she expected him to curl over and die before her eyes. Then she had told Akira we had had the luckiest of escapes; that she personally had known of servants previously employed in the house who had dared do what we had done, and who as a consequence had vanished - their remains discovered weeks later in some alley beyond the Settlement boundaries. Akira had told his sister she was simply trying to frighten him, that he did not for a moment believe her. But clearly he had been shaken, and I too felt a chill pass through me on hearing this 'confirmation' - and from no less an authority than Etsuko - of all our old fears concerning Ling Tien.

It was then I appreciated what was so troubling Akira: someone had to put back the bottle in Ling Tien's room before the old servant's return in three days' time. Yet it was plain to see our bravado of the previous day had all but evaporated, and the prospect of going into that room again now seemed beyond us.

Unable to settle to any of our usual games, we decided to walk to our special spot beside the canal. All the way there, we talked over our problem from every angle. What would happen if we did not return the bottle? Perhaps the lotion was very precious and the police would be called in to investigate. Or perhaps Ling Tien would tell no one of its disappearance, but decide personally to wreak some terrible vengeance on us. I remember we became quite confused about how much we wished to maintain our fantasy about Ling Tien, and to what extent we wanted to consider logically how best to avoid getting into serious trouble. I remember, for instance, our considering at one point the possibility the

lotion was a medicine Ling Tien had bought after months of saving his money, and that without it he would become horribly ill; but then in the next breath, without abandoning this last notion, we considered other hypotheses which assumed the lotion to be what we had always said it was.

Our spot by the canal, some fifteen minutes' walk from our homes, was behind some storehouses belonging to the Jardine Matheson Company. We were never sure if we were actually trespassing; to reach it we would go through a gate that was always left open, and cross a concrete yard past some Chinese workers, who would watch us suspiciously, but never impede us. We would then go round the side of a rickety boathouse and along a length of jetty, before stepping down on to our patch of dark hard earth right on the bank of the canal. It was a space only large enough for the two of us to sit side by side facing the water, but even on the hottest days the storehouses behind us ensured we were in the shade, and each time a boat or junk went past, the waters would lap soothingly at our feet. On the opposite bank were more storehouses, but there was, I remember, almost directly across from us, a gap between two buildings through which we could see a road lined with trees. Akira and I often came to the spot, though we were careful never to tell our parents of it for fear they would not trust us to play so near the water's edge.

On that afternoon, once we had sat down, we tried for a while to forget our worries. I remember Akira starting to ask me, as he often did when we came to our spot, if in an emergency I would manage to swim to this or that vessel visible further up the water. But he could not keep it up, and suddenly, to my astonishment, he began to cry.

I had hardly ever seen my friend cry. In fact, today, this is the only recollection I have of him crying. Even when a large piece of mortar fell on to his leg when we were playing behind the American Mission, for all his turning a

ghastly white, he did not cry. But that afternoon by the canal, Akira had clearly reached his wits' end.

I remember he had in his hands some piece of damp flaking wood from which, as he sobbed, he broke off bits to hurl into the water. I wanted very much to comfort him, but being at a loss for anything to say, I recall getting up to find more such pieces of wood to break off into pieces and hand to him, as though this were some urgent remedy. Then there was no more wood left for him to throw, and Akira brought his tears under control.

'When parents find out,' he said eventually, 'they be so angry. Then they not let me stay here. Then we all go to Japan.'

I still did not know what to say. Then, staring at a boat going by, he murmured: 'I don't ever want to live in Japan.'

And because this was what I always said when he made this statement, I echoed: 'And I don't ever want to go to England.'

With that, we both fell silent for a few more moments. But as we continued to stare at the water, the one obvious course of action to prevent all these awful repercussions loomed ever larger in my mind, and in the end I simply put it to him that all we had to do was to replace the bottle in time, then all would be well.

Akira did not appear to hear me, so I repeated the point. He continued to ignore me, and it was then I realised how very real his fear of Ling Tien had grown since our adventure the previous day; indeed, I could see it was as great now as it had ever been in our younger days, except of course that Akira was now unable to admit to it. I could see his difficulty and tried hard to think of a way out. In the end, I said quietly:

‘Akira-chan. We’ll do it again together. Just like last time. We’ll join arms again, go in, put the bottle where we found it. If we do it together like that, then we’ll be safe, nothing bad can happen to us. Nothing at all. Then no one will ever find out anything about what we did.’

Akira thought about this. Then he turned and looked at me and I could see deep and solemn gratitude in his face.

‘Tomorrow, in afternoon, three o’clock,’ he said. ‘Mother will go out to park. If maid fall asleep again, then we have chance.’

I assured him the maid was bound to fall asleep again, and repeated that if we went into the room together, there was nothing at all to fear.

‘We do together, old chap!’ he said with a sudden smile and got to his feet.

On the walk back, we finalised our plans. I promised to come to Akira’s house the next day well before his mother’s departure, and as soon as she left, we would go upstairs and wait together, Ling Tien’s bottle ready, for the maid to fall asleep. Akira’s mood lightened considerably, but I remember, as we parted that afternoon, my friend turning to me with an unconvincing nonchalance and warning me not to be late the next day.

The following day was again hot and humid. I have down the years gone over many times everything I can remember of that day, trying to put the various details in some coherent order. I cannot remember a great deal about the first part of the morning. I have a picture of how I said goodbye to my father as he went off to work. I was already outside, loitering around the carriage track waiting for him to emerge. He eventually did so, in a white suit and hat, holding a briefcase and a stick. He squinted and glanced out towards our gateway. Then, as I waited for him to come further towards me, my mother appeared on the doorstep behind

him and said something. My father walked back a few steps, exchanged some words with her, smiled, kissed her lightly on the cheek, then came striding out to where I was waiting. That is all I remember of how he left that day. I do not remember now if we shook hands, if he patted my shoulder, if he turned back at the gate for a last wave. My overall recollection is that there was nothing in the manner of his parting that morning to set it apart from the way he had left for work on every other day.

All I remember of the rest of the morning is that I played with my toy soldiers on the rug in my bedroom, my mind forever drifting to the daunting task awaiting us later in the day. I remember my mother going out at some point and that I ate lunch with Mei Li in the kitchen. After lunch, needing to kill time until three o'clock, I walked the short distance along our road to the spot where two large oak trees stood, set back from the road, yet well in front of the nearest garden wall.

Perhaps it was because I was already stoking up my courage, but I succeeded that day in climbing one of the oaks to a new height. Perched triumphantly in its branches, I found I had a view across the hedges and grounds of all the neighbouring houses. I remember I sat up there for some time, the wind on my face, growing ever more anxious about the task ahead. It occurred to me that, apprehensive as I was, Akira's fear of Ling Tien's room was now much the greater, and I would this time have to be the 'leader'. I saw the responsibility this entailed, and resolved to appear as confident as possible when I presented myself at his house. But as I continued to sit there in the tree, there kept occurring to me any number of eventualities that could thwart us: the maid would fail to fall asleep; she might even choose this of all days to clean the corridor outside Ling Tien's room; or else Akira's mother would change her mind and not go out as expected. And then of course, there were the older,

less rational fears which, try as I might, I could not quite dispel from my mind.

Eventually I climbed down the oak, wishing to go home for a glass of water and to check the time. As I came in through our gate, I saw two motor cars in the drive. I was mildly curious about these, but by this stage was far too preoccupied to give them much attention. Then as I was crossing the hallway I glanced through the open doors of the drawing room and saw the three men, standing with their hats in their hands, talking with my mother. There was nothing so untoward about this - it was perfectly possible they had come to discuss my mother's campaign - but something in the atmosphere made me pause a moment there in the hall. As I did so, the voices broke off and I saw their faces turn to me. I recognised one of the men to be Mr Simpson, my father's colleague at Byatt's; the other two were strangers. Then my mother came into view as she too leant forward and looked at me. I suppose I might have sensed then that something out of the ordinary was unfolding. In any case, the next moment, I was hurrying off in the direction of the kitchen.

No sooner had I reached the kitchen than I heard footsteps, and my mother came in. I have often tried to recall her face - the exact expression she was wearing - at that moment, but with no success. Perhaps some instinct told me not to look at it. What I do remember is her presence, which seemed looming and large, as though suddenly I were very young again, and the texture of the pale summer frock she was wearing. She said to me in a lowered, but perfectly composed voice:

'Christopher, the gentlemen with Mr Simpson are from the police. I must finish talking with them. Then I want to talk to you straight afterwards. Will you wait for me in the library?'

I was about to protest, but my mother fixed me with a stare that silenced me.

‘In the library then,’ she said, turning away. ‘I’ll come as soon as I’ve finished with the gentlemen.’

‘Has something happened to Father?’ I asked.

My mother turned back to me. ‘Your father never arrived at the office this morning. But I’m sure there’s a perfectly simple explanation. Wait for me in the library. I won’t be long.’

I followed her out of the kitchen and made my way to the library. There I sat down at my homework table and waited, thinking not about my father, but of Akira and how I was already going to be late for him. I wondered if he would have the courage to return the bottle on his own; even if he did, he would still be very angry with me. I felt at that moment such an urgency about Akira’s situation, I actually contemplated disobeying my mother and simply going off. Meanwhile the discussion in the drawing room seemed to go on interminably. There was a clock on the library wall and I stared at its hands. At one point, I went out into the hall, hoping to catch my mother’s attention and ask her permission to leave, but I found the doors to the drawing room had now been closed. Then, as I was hovering there in the hall, once more thinking about sneaking off, Mei Li appeared and pointed sternly towards the library. Once I had gone back in, she closed the door on me and I could hear her pacing about outside. I seated myself again and went on watching the clock. As the hands passed half past three, I fell into a gloom, full of anger at both my mother and Mei Li.

Then at last I heard the men being shown out. I heard one of them say:

‘We’ll do everything we can, Mrs Banks. We must hope for the best and trust in God.’

I could not hear my mother’s reply.

As soon as the men had gone, I rushed out and asked for permission to go to Akira’s. But my mother, to my fury,

completely ignored my request, saying: 'Let's go back into the library.'

Frustrated though I was, I did as bidden, and it was there in the library that she sat me down, crouched before me and told me, very calmly, that my father had been missing since the morning. The police, alerted by his office, were carrying out a search, so far to no avail.

'But he may well turn up by supper time,' she said with a smile.

'Of course he will,' I said in a voice I hoped would convey my annoyance at this great fuss. Then I got off the chair and asked again for permission to leave. But this time I did so with less fervour, for I could see from the clock there was no longer any point in going to Akira's. His mother would have returned; his evening meal would be served before long. I felt a huge resentment that my mother should have kept me in simply to tell me something I had more or less gleaned in the kitchen an hour and a half earlier. When at last she told me I could go, I simply went up to my room, laid my soldiers out on my rug and did my best not to think about Akira or his feelings towards me at that moment. But I kept remembering all that had been said beside the canal, and the look of gratitude he had given me. Moreover, I did not wish Akira to return to Japan any more than he did.

My sullenness stayed with me well into the night, but of course this was interpreted as my reaction to the situation regarding my father. Throughout the evening my mother would say to me things like: 'Let's not get gloomy. There's sure to be a very simple explanation.' And Mei Li was uncharacteristically gentle with me when helping with my bath. But I remember too, as the evening went on, my mother having a number of those 'distant' moments I was to come to know well over the weeks that followed. In fact I believe it was that same night, as I lay in my bed still preoccupied

about what to say to Akira when I next saw him, that my mother murmured, looking blankly across the room:

‘Whatever happens, you can be proud of him, Puffin. You can always be proud of what he’s done.’

Chapter Eight

I do not remember much about the days immediately following my father's disappearance, other than that I was often so concerned about Akira - in particular, what I would say when I next saw him - that I could not settle to anything. Nevertheless I found myself continually putting off a visit next door, even contemplating for a while the notion that I might never need face him at all - that his parents, so angered by our misdemeanour, were even at that moment packing their bags for Japan. During these days any sort of loud noise outside would send me rushing upstairs to the front windows, from where I could scrutinise the next-door courtyard for signs of piling luggage.

Then after three or four days had passed, on an overcast morning, I was playing by myself out on the circle of lawn in front of our house when I became conscious of the sounds coming from Akira's side of the fence. I quickly realised that Akira was moving about on his sister's bicycle around his carriage track; I had often enough watched him trying to ride this bicycle, which was far too large for him, and recognised the scraping noises the wheels made as he struggled for balance. At one stage I heard a crash and a yell as he fell off altogether. The possibility occurred to me that Akira had spotted me out playing from his upstairs window and had come out with the bicycle expressly to attract my attention. After several further moments of hesitation - during which Akira continued to crash about on his side - I finally strode out of our gateway, turned and stared into his front garden.

Akira was indeed astride Etsuko's bicycle, absorbed in attempts to execute some circus-like manoeuvre that required taking his hands from the handlebar just as he turned a tight circle. He appeared too absorbed to notice me, and even when

I walked up to him, gave no sign of having seen me. Finally I said simply:

‘I’m sorry I couldn’t come the other day.’

Akira gave me a sulky glance, then went back to his manoeuvres. I was about to give him my explanation for having let him down, but for some reason, found I could say nothing more. I stood there watching him for a little longer. Then taking a further step towards him, I said, lowering my voice to a whisper:

‘What happened? Did you put it back?’

My friend gave me a glare that rejected the intimacy implied by my tone, then spun his bicycle round. I felt tears coming, but remembering in time our long-standing feud about whether the English or Japanese cried easiest, I managed to stifle them. I thought again of telling him about my father’s disappearance, and suddenly it seemed a hugely substantial reason not only for my having let him down, but for great self-pity on my part. I pictured the shock and shame that would transform Akira’s face once I uttered the words: ‘I couldn’t come the other day because … because my father’s been *kidnapped!*’ - but somehow I could not say it. Instead, I believe I simply turned and ran back to my house.

I did not see Akira for the next few days. Then one afternoon he came to our back door, asking Mei Li for me as usual. I was in the middle of something, but dropped it all and went out to my friend. He greeted me smilingly, and as he led me away to his garden, patted me affectionately on the back. I was of course anxious to discover just what had transpired over the Ling Tien matter, but being even more keen not to re-open wounds, resisted the urge to ask anything about it.

We went to the back of his garden - to the thick shrubs we called our ‘jungle’ - and soon became immersed in one of our dramatic narratives. I have a feeling we acted out scenes from *Ivanhoe*, which I was reading at that time - or

perhaps it was one of Akira's Japanese samurai adventures. In any case, after an hour or so, my friend suddenly stopped and looked oddly at me. Then he said:

'If you like, we play new game.'

'A new game?'

'New game. About Christopher father. If you like.'

I was taken aback and I do not recall what I said next. He came a few steps closer in the long grass and I saw he was looking at me almost tenderly.

'Yes,' he said. 'If you like, we play detective. We search for father. We rescue father.'

I then realised that it was hearing the news about my father - which no doubt had started to do the rounds of the neighbourhood - that had brought Akira back to my door. I understood too that this present proposal was his way of showing his concern and wish to help, and I felt my affection for him welling up. But in the end, I said quite nonchalantly:

'All right. If you want to play that, we can.'

And that was how it began, what today in my memory feels like an entire era - though in truth it could only have been a period of two months or less - when day after day we invented and played out endless variations on the theme of my father's rescue.

Meanwhile the real investigations into my father's disappearance were continuing. I knew this from the visits we received from the men who held their hats in their hands and talked solemnly to my mother; from the hushed exchanges between my mother and Mei Li when my mother came in, tight-lipped, at the end of an afternoon; and in particular, there was that conversation I had with her at the foot of the staircase.

I have no real memory of what either of us had been doing prior to that moment. I had started to run up the stairs, eager to fetch something from the playroom, when I realised my mother had appeared at the top and was making her way down. She must have been about to go out, for she had on her special beige dress, the one that gave off a peculiar smell like mouldering leaves. I suppose I must have sensed something in her manner, for I stopped where I was on the third or fourth step and waited for her. As she came towards me, she smiled and reached out a hand. She did this while still a number of steps above me, so that I thought for a moment she was wishing me to assist her down the rest of the stairs, the way my father sometimes did when he waited for her at the foot of the staircase. But as it turned out, she simply put her arm around my shoulder and we descended the last steps together. Then she let go of me and walked over towards the hat-stand on the other side of the hall. It was as she did so that she said:

‘Puffin, I know how difficult these last few days have been for you. It must seem as though the whole world’s caving in. Well, it’s been difficult for me too. But you must do as I have. You must keep praying to God and remain hopeful. I hope you are remembering your prayers, aren’t you, Puffin?’

‘Yes, I am,’ I replied, rather off-handedly.

‘It’s a sad fact,’ she went on, ‘that in a city like this, from time to time, people do get kidnapped. In fact it happens rather often, and a lot of the time, I’d go so far as to say *most* of the time, the people come back perfectly safely. So we have to be patient. Puffin, are you listening to me?’

‘Of course I’m listening.’ I had by this time turned my back to her and was dangling by my arms from the banister post.

‘What we have to appreciate,’ my mother said after a pause, ‘is that the city’s very best detectives have been

assigned to the case. I've spoken with them, and they're very optimistic a solution will be found soon.'

'But how long will that be?' I asked sullenly.

'We have to be hopeful. We have to trust the detectives. And it may take a little time, but we must be patient. Then in the end things may well come right, and everything will be just as it was before. We must continue to pray to God and always keep hopeful. Puffin, what are you doing? Did you hear me?'

I did not respond immediately, because I was trying to see how many steps my feet could climb while I continued to cling to the banister post. Then I asked:

'But what if the detectives are too busy? With all the other things they have to solve? Murders and robberies. They can't do everything.'

I could hear my mother coming back a few steps towards me, and when she next spoke, a careful, deliberate tone had entered her voice.

'Puffin, there is no question whatsoever of the detectives being "too busy". *Everyone* in Shanghai, the most important people in this community are extremely anxious about Father, and very concerned to have the matter cleared up. I mean gentlemen like Mr Forester. And Mr Carmichael. Even the consul-general himself. I know they've made it their personal concern to see Father return safely as soon as possible. So you see, Puffin, there is no chance at all of the detectives giving anything but their utmost. And that's what they're doing, now, at this very moment. Do you realise, Puffin, Inspector Kung himself has been put in charge of this investigation? Yes, that's right: Inspector Kung. So you see, we've every reason to be hopeful.'

This exchange undoubtedly made some impact, for I remember I did not worry nearly so much during the following several days. Even at nights, when my anxieties tended to

return, I would often go to sleep thinking of Shanghai's detectives moving all around the city, closing in ever more tightly on the kidnappers. Sometimes, lying in the dark, I found myself weaving quite elaborate dramas before dropping off to sleep, many of which would then serve as material for Akira and me the next day.

I do not mean to imply, incidentally, that during this period Akira and I did not play games quite unconnected with my father; sometimes we could lose ourselves for hours in one of our more traditional fantasies. But whenever my friend sensed I was preoccupied, or that my heart was not in what we were doing, he would say: 'Old chap. We play father rescue game.'

Our narratives concerning my father had, as I say, endless variations, but fairly quickly we established a basic recurring story-line. My father was held captive in a house somewhere beyond the Settlement boundaries. His captors were a gang intent on extorting a huge ransom. Many smaller details evolved quite rapidly until they too became fixtures. It was always the case, for instance, that despite being surrounded by the horrors of the Chinese district, the house in which my father was held was comfortable and clean. In fact, I can still remember how this particular convention came to be established. It was perhaps our second or third time of trying the game, and Akira and I had been taking it in turns to play the role of the legendary Inspector Kung - whose handsome features and dandily worn hat we both knew well from newspaper photographs. We had been quite absorbed in the excitements of our fantasy, when suddenly, at the point when my father first appeared in our story, Akira gestured to me - indicating that I should play him - and said: 'You tied up in chair.'

We had been in full flow but now I stopped.

'No,' I said. 'My father isn't tied up. How can he be tied up all the time?'

Akira, who never liked to be contradicted when unfolding a narrative, repeated impatiently that my father was tied up in a chair and that I should mimic this at the foot of a tree without further delay. I shouted back: 'No!' and stalked off. I did not, however, leave Akira's garden. I remember standing at the spot where his lawn started - where our 'jungle' ended - and staring blankly at a lizard climbing the trunk of an elm. After a moment I heard Akira's footsteps behind me and braced myself for a full-blown argument. But to my surprise, when I turned to him, I saw my friend gazing at me with a conciliatory look. He came closer and said gently:

'You right. Father not tied up. He very comfortable. Kidnappers' house comfortable. Very comfortable.'

After this it was always Akira who took great care to ensure my father's comfort and dignity in all our dramas. The kidnappers always addressed him as though they were his servants, bringing him food, drink and newspapers as soon as he requested them. Accordingly the characters of the kidnappers softened; it turned out they were not evil after all, simply men with starving families. They truly regretted having to take such drastic action, they would explain to my father, but they could not bear to see their children starve to death. What they were doing was wrong, they knew it, but what else were they to do? They had chosen Mr Banks precisely because his kind views towards the plight of the poorer Chinese were well known, and he was likely to understand the inconvenience to which they were putting him. To this, my father - whom I always represented - would sigh sympathetically, but then go on to say that whatever the hardships of life, crime could not be condoned. Besides, inevitably, Inspector Kung would sooner or later come with his men to arrest them, then they would be thrown into prison, perhaps executed. Where would that leave their families? The kidnappers - represented by Akira - would respond by saying that once the police discovered their hideout, they would give themselves up quietly, and wish Mr

Banks well as he rejoined his family. But until then, they were obliged to do their utmost to make their scheme work. They would then ask my father what he required for his dinner, and I would order on his behalf a vast meal of his favourite dishes - roast sirloin, buttered parsnips and poached haddock always among them. As I say, it was Akira rather than myself who tended to be the more insistent on these luxurious aspects, and it was he who added many of the other small but important details: my father's room would have a fine view over the rooftops to the river; the bed would be one his captors had stolen for him from the Palace Hotel, and thus the ultimate in comfort. In time, Akira and I would become the detectives - though sometimes we played ourselves - until in the end, after the chases, fist-fights and gun-battles around the warren-like alleys of the Chinese districts, whatever our variations and elaborations, our narratives would always conclude with a magnificent ceremony held in Jessfield Park, a ceremony that would see us, one after the other, step out on to a specially erected stage - my mother, my father, Akira, Inspector Kung and I - to greet the vast cheering crowds. This was, as I say, our basic story-line, and I suppose, incidentally, it was more or less the one I enacted over and over during those first drizzly days in England, when I filled my empty hours wandering about the ferns near my aunt's cottage, muttering Akira's lines for him under my breath.

It was not until perhaps a month after my father's disappearance that I finally found the nerve to ask Akira what had happened about Ling Tien's bottle. We had been taking a moment's break from our playing, sitting together in the shade of the maple at the top of our mound, drinking the iced water Mei Li had brought out to us in two tea-bowls. To my relief Akira no longer showed any sign of bitterness.

'Etsuko take back bottle,' he said.

His sister had initially been most obliging. But now, whenever she wanted to force Akira to do something, she would threaten to reveal his secret to their parents. Akira though was not unduly troubled by this ploy.

‘She go to room too. So she just as bad as me. She not tell.’

‘So there wasn’t any trouble,’ I said.

‘No trouble, old chap.’

‘So you won’t have to go and live in Japan.’

‘No Japan.’ He turned to me and smiled. ‘I stay Shanghai for ever.’ Then he looked at me solemnly and asked: ‘If father not found. You must go England?’

This startling notion for some reason had never before occurred to me. I thought it over, then said:

‘No. Even if Father isn’t found, we’ll live here for ever. Mother will never want to go back to England. Besides, Mei Li wouldn’t want to go. She’s a Chinese.’

For a moment, Akira went on thinking, staring at the icecubes floating in his bowl. Then he looked up at me and beamed broadly.

‘Old chap!’ he said. ‘We live here together, always!’

‘That’s right,’ I said. ‘We’ll live in Shanghai for ever.’

‘Old chap! Always!’

There was one other small incident from those weeks following my father’s disappearance which I have now come to believe highly significant. I did not always regard it so; in fact, I had more or less forgotten it altogether when a few years ago, quite by chance, something happened which caused me not only to recall it again, but to appreciate for the first time the deeper implications of what I had witnessed that day.

It was during the period shortly after the Mannering case, when I was undertaking some research into the background of those years I spent in Shanghai. I believe I have mentioned this research before, much of which I conducted in the British Museum. I suppose it was, at least in part, my attempt as an adult to grasp the nature of those forces which as a child I could not have had the chance of comprehending. It was also my intention to prepare my ground for the day I began in earnest my investigations into the whole affair concerning my parents - which despite the continuing efforts of the Shanghai police has remained unresolved to this day. It remains, incidentally, my intention to embark on such an investigation in the not-too-distant future. In fact, I am sure I would have done so already had the demands on my time not been so relentless.

In any case, as I say, I spent a good many hours in the British Museum a few years ago gathering material on the history of the opium trade in China, on the affairs of Morganbrook and Byatt, on the complex political situation in Shanghai at that time. I did also, at various points, write off letters to China seeking information unavailable to me in London. So it was that I received one day a yellowed cutting taken from the *North China Daily News* dated some three years after my departure from Shanghai. My correspondent had sent me an article about changes to trading regulations in the concession ports - which no doubt I had requested - but it was the photograph which happened to be on the reverse side that immediately captured my attention.

I have kept that old newspaper photograph in the drawer of my desk, inside a tin cigar box, and from time to time I take it out and stare at it. It shows three men in a leafy avenue, standing in front of a grand motor car. All three are Chinese. The two on the outside are wearing Western suits with stiff collars, and hold bowler hats and canes. The plump man in the centre is in traditional Chinese dress: a dark gown, cap and pigtail. As with most newspaper photographs of

the time, there is a stagy, posed feeling to it, and my correspondent's scissors have cut off perhaps an entire quarter of it to the left. Nevertheless, from the moment my glance first fell on it, the picture - more precisely, the central figure in the dark gown - has been a source of exceptional interest to me.

Alongside this photograph, in my tin cigar box in the drawer, I keep the letter I received from the same correspondent a month or so afterwards in reply to further enquiries. In it, he informs me that the plump man in the gown and cap is Wang Ku, a warlord who at the time of the photograph wielded much power in the Hunan province, employing a motley army of almost three hundred men. Like most of his sort, he lost much of his power after the ascendancy of Chiang Kai-shek, but was rumoured to be still alive and well, languishing in reasonable comfort somewhere in Nanking. Regarding my specific query, my correspondent states that he has been unable to ascertain whether or not Wang Ku ever had any known connections with Morganbrock and Byatt. In his own opinion, however, there is 'no reason to suppose he would not at some point have had dealings with the aforesaid company'. In those days, my correspondent points out, any shipments of opium - or of any other desirable goods - travelling along the Yangtze through Hunan would have been vulnerable to raids from the bandits and pirates who terrorised the region. Only the warlords through whose territories the shipments travelled could offer any sort of effective protection, and a company like Byatt's almost certainly would have gone some way to securing the friendship of such men. At the time of my childhood in Shanghai, Wang Ku, with the power he then commanded, would have been regarded as a particularly desirable ally. My correspondent's letter closes with his apologies for being unable to provide more concrete details.

As I have said, I did not solicit this information from my correspondent until some five or six weeks after

discovering the newspaper picture. The reason for my delay was that annoy-ingly, though I was certain I had seen the plump man somewhere in my past, I could not for a long time remember anything about the context in which I had done so. The man was associated for me with some scene of embarrassment or unpleasantness, but beyond that my memory would yield nothing. Then one morning, quite unexpectedly, as I was strolling along Kensington High Street in search of a taxicab, it all suddenly came back to me.

I had not paid much attention to the plump man when he had first arrived at our house. It was after all only two or three weeks after my father's disappearance and any number of strangers had been coming and going: policemen, men from the British consulate, men from Byatt's, ladies who on entering the house and catching sight of my mother would hold out their arms with a cry of anguish. To these latter, I recall, my mother always responded with a self-possessed smile, and walking up to the lady, would pointedly avoid the embrace, saying instead in her most assured tones something like: 'Agnes, how delightful.' She would then take her guest's hands - perhaps still proffered awkwardly in the air - and lead the way into the drawing room.

In any case, as I say, the arrival of the plump Chinese man that day did not much excite my interest. I remember glancing down from my playroom window and seeing him getting out of his motor car. His appearance on that occasion was, I believe, much as it is in my newspaper picture: dark gown, cap, pigtail. I noticed the car was a vast gleaming affair, and that he had two men to assist him as well as his chauffeur, but even this was not so remarkable; in those days following my father's disappearance, a number of very grand visitors had already turned up at the house. I was, though, vaguely struck by the way Uncle Philip, who had been in the house for the past hour or so, marched out to greet the plump man. They exchanged the most effusive greetings - as though

they were the dearest friends - then Uncle Philip led the visitor into our house.

I do not remember what I got up to for the next little while. I did remain in the house - though not on account of the plump man, who, as I say, had not much interested me. In fact when I first heard the commotion downstairs, I remember being surprised the visitor was still with us. Rushing back to my playroom window I saw the motor car still on the carriage track, and the three servants who had stayed in the car - who too had heard the disturbance - hastening out of the vehicle with looks of alarm. Then I saw below me the plump man walking quite calmly towards the car, signalling to his men not to worry. The chauffeur held open the door for the plump man and as he was climbing in, my mother came into view. In fact, it had been her voice that had first sent me rushing to the window. I had been trying to convince myself it was just the same voice she used when angry with me or our servants, but by the time my mother's figure appeared below me, her every word now clearly audible, the effort became pointless. There was something about her that had lost control, something I had never seen before, and yet which I at once registered as something I would have to accept in the wake of my father's disappearance.

She was yelling at the plump man, having actually to be restrained by Uncle Philip. My mother was telling the plump man he was a traitor to his own race, that he was an agent of the devil, that she did not want help of his sort, that if he ever returned to our house, she would 'spit on him like the dirty animal he was'.

The plump man took all this very calmly. He signalled to his men to get in the car, and then, as his chauffeur wound the crank, he smiled from his window almost approvingly towards my mother, as though she were uttering the most gracious of farewells. Then the car was gone and Uncle Philip was persuading my mother to come inside.

By the time they came into the hall, my mother had gone silent. I could hear Uncle Philip saying: 'But we have to pursue every possible avenue, don't you see?' His footsteps followed my mother's into the drawing room, the door closed and I heard no more.

Of course, to see my mother behaving in such a way was most disturbing to me. But if she had found shouting at her visitor a liberation after weeks of keeping her feelings on a tight rein, then I too experienced something similar. It was witnessing her outburst that allowed me, after at least two or three weeks, finally to acknowledge the momentous nature of what had happened to us, and this brought with it a tremendous sense of relief.

I will have to admit, incidentally, that I cannot say with complete certainty that the plump Chinese man I saw that day was one and the same as the man in the newspaper photograph - the man now identified as the warlord Wang Ku. All I can say is that from the moment I first set eyes on the photograph, that face - and it was the face, not the gown, cap and pigtail, which of course could have been those of any Chinese gentleman - struck me unmistakably as one I had seen during the days immediately after my father's disappearance. And the more I have turned that particular incident over in my mind, the more convinced I have become that the man in the photograph was the one who visited our house that day. This discovery I believe to be most significant - one that may well help shed light on my parents' present whereabouts, and prove central to those investigations upon which, as I have said, I intend before long to embark.

Chapter Nine

There is a further aspect to this incident I have just described which I hesitate to mention here, uncertain as I am that there is any substance to it. It has to do with Uncle Philip's manner that day as he tried to restrain my mother in front of our house; and again, something in his voice when he said as they came in: 'But we have to pursue every possible avenue, don't you see?' There was nothing at all concrete I could put my finger on, but then a child is sometimes very receptive to these less tangible things. Anyway, my feeling was that there was something definitely odd about Uncle Philip that day. I do not know why, but I got the distinct impression that on this occasion, Uncle Philip was not on 'our side'; that the intimacy he shared with the plump Chinese man was greater than the one he shared with us; even - and quite possibly this *was* merely my fancy - that he and the plump man exchanged looks as the car drove off. As I say, I cannot point to anything solid to support these impressions, and it is more than possible I am projecting back certain perceptions in the light of what ultimately occurred with Uncle Philip.

Even today, I find it brings me some pain to remember the way my relationship with Uncle Philip concluded. As I have probably made clear, he had become over the years a figure to idolise, so much so that in the first days after my father's disappearance, I remember contemplating the notion that I need not mind so much since Uncle Philip could always take my father's place. Admittedly, this was an idea I found in the end curiously unconvincing, but my point is that Uncle Philip was a special person for me, and it is no wonder at all I should have lowered my guard that day and followed him.

I say 'lowered my guard' because for some time before that final day, I had been keeping watch over my mother with

increasing anxiety. Even when she demanded to be left alone, I continued to keep a careful eye over the room she had gone into, and over the doors and windows through which kidnappers might enter. At nights I lay awake listening to her movements around the house, and always kept close to hand my weapon - a stick with a sharpened end Akira had given me.

However, when I think further about this, I have a feeling that deep down, I still did not at that stage truly believe my fears could be realised. Even the fact that I considered a pointed stick an adequate deterrent to kidnappers - that I often fell asleep fantasising I was locked in combat with dozens of intruders coming up our staircase, whom I would fell one by one with my stick - testifies perhaps to the oddly unreal level at which my fears still operated at that time.

For all that, there is no doubting the anxiety I felt for my mother's safety, and my bewilderment that the other adults had taken no steps at all to protect her. I did not like to let my mother out of my sight during this period, and as I say, I would never have lowered my guard on that day had it been anyone other than Uncle Philip.

It was a sunny, windy morning. I remember watching from the playroom windows the leaves blowing in the front yard over the carriage track. Uncle Philip had been downstairs with my mother since shortly after breakfast, and I had been able to relax for a while, believing as I did that nothing could happen to her while he was with her.

Then midway through the morning I heard Uncle Philip calling me. I went out on to the landing and, looking down over the balcony rail, saw my mother and Philip standing in the hall, gazing up at me. For the first time in weeks I sensed something cheerful about them, as though they had just been enjoying a joke. The front door was ajar and a long streak of sunlight was falling across the hall. Uncle Philip said:

‘Look here, Puffin. You’re always saying you want a piano accordion. Well, I intend to buy you one. I spotted an excellent French model in a window in Hankow Road yesterday. Shopkeeper obviously has no idea what it’s worth. I propose the two of us go and look it over. If it takes your fancy, then it’s yours. Good plan?’

This brought me down the staircase at great speed. I jumped the last four steps and circled round the adults, flapping my arms in impersonation of a bird of prey. As I did so, to my delight, I heard my mother laughing - laughing in a way I had not heard her laugh for a while. In fact it is possible it was this very atmosphere - this feeling that things were perhaps starting to return to what they had been - which played a significant part in causing me to ‘lower my guard’. I asked Uncle Philip when we could go, to which he shrugged and said:

‘Why not now? If we leave it, someone else might spot it. Perhaps someone’s buying it at this moment, even as we speak!’

I rushed to the doorway and again my mother laughed. Then she told me I would have to put on proper shoes and a jacket. I remember thinking of protesting about the jacket, but then deciding not to in case the adults changed their minds, not only about the accordion, but also about this whole light-hearted mood we were enjoying.

I waved casually to my mother as Uncle Philip and I set off across the front courtyard. Then several steps on, as I was hurrying towards the waiting carriage, Uncle Philip grasped me by the shoulder, saying: ‘Look! Wave to your mother!’ despite my already having done so. But I thought nothing of it at the time, and turning as bidden, waved once more to my mother’s figure, elegantly upright in the doorway.

For much of the way, the carriage followed the route my mother and I usually took to the city centre. Uncle Philip was quiet on the journey, which surprised me a little, but I

had never before been alone with him in a carriage and assumed this was perhaps his normal custom. Whenever I pointed out to him anything we were passing, he would reply cheerfully enough; but the next moment he would be staring silently once more out at the view. The leafy boulevards gave way to the narrow crowded streets, and our driver began to shout at the rickshaws and pedestrians in our path. We passed the little curio shops in Nanking Road, and I remember craning to see the window of the toy shop on the corner of Kwangse Road. I had just begun to anticipate the smell of rotting produce as we approached the vegetable market, when Uncle Philip suddenly rapped his cane to make the carriage stop.

‘From here, we’ll go on foot,’ he said to me. ‘I know a good short cut. It’ll be much quicker.’

This made perfectly good sense. I knew from experience how the little streets off Nanking Road could become so clogged with people that a carriage or motor car would often not move for five, even ten minutes at a time. I thus allowed him to help me down from the carriage with no argument. But it was then, I recall, that I had my first presentiment that something was wrong. Perhaps it was something in Uncle Philip’s touch as he handed me down; perhaps there was something else in his manner. But then he smiled and made some remark I did not catch in the noise around us. He pointed towards a nearby alley and I stayed close behind him as we pushed our way through the good-humoured throng. We moved from bright sun to shade, and then he stopped and turned to me, right there in the midst of the jostling crowd. Placing a hand on my shoulder, he asked:

‘Christopher, do you know where we are now? Can you guess?’

I looked around me. Then pointing towards a stone arch under which crowds were pressing around the vegetable stalls, I replied: ‘Yes. That’s Kiukiang Road through there.’

‘Ah. So you know exactly where we are.’ He gave an odd laugh. ‘You know your way around here very well.’

I nodded and waited, the feeling rising from the pit of my stomach that something of great horror was about to unfold. Perhaps Uncle Philip was about to say something else - perhaps he had planned the whole thing quite differently - but at that moment, as we stood there jostled on all sides, I believe he saw in my face that the game was up. A terrible confusion passed across his features, then he said, barely audibly in the din:

‘Good boy.’

He grasped my shoulder again and let his gaze wander about him. Then he appeared to come to a decision I had already anticipated.

‘Good boy!’ he said, this time more loudly, his voice trembling with emotion. Then he added: ‘I didn’t want you hurt. You understand that? I didn’t want you hurt.’

With that he spun round and vanished into the crowd. I made a half-hearted effort to follow, and after a moment caught sight of his white jacket hurrying through the people. Then he had passed under the arch and out of my view.

For the next few moments I remained standing there in the crowd, trying not to pursue the logic of what had just occurred. Then suddenly I began to move, back in the direction we had just come, to the street in which we had left the carriage. Abandoning all sense of decorum, I forced my way through the crowds, sometimes pushing violently, sometimes squeezing myself through gaps, so that people laughed or called angrily after me. I reached the street to discover of course that the carriage had long since gone on its way. For a few confused seconds I stood in the middle of the street, trying to form in my head a map of my route back home. I then began to run as fast as I could.

I ran down Kiukiang Road, across the hard uneven stones of Yunnan Road, pushed through more crowds along Nanking Road. When at last I reached Bubbling Well Road, my breath was already coming in gasps, but I was encouraged that I now had left only this one long straight road, relatively free of people.

Perhaps it was because I was conscious of the highly private nature of my fears - or perhaps some profound shift in attitude was already taking place within me - but it did not once occur to me to solicit help from any of the adults I passed, or to try and hail a passing carriage or motor car. I set off at a run down that long road, and even though I soon began to pant pathetically, even though I knew my gait must look appalling to an onlooker, even though the heat and exhaustion reduced me at times to little more than walking pace, I believe I did not stop at all. Then at last I was going past the American consul's residence, and then the Robertsons' house. I turned off Bubbling Well Road into our road and a second wind took me the remaining distance to our gate.

I knew as soon as I turned through our gateway - though there was nothing obvious to tell me so - that I was too late, that the thing had finished long ago. I found the front door bolted. I ran to the back door, which opened for me, and ran through the house shouting for some reason not for my mother, but for Mei Li - perhaps even at that stage, I did not wish to acknowledge the implications of shouting for my mother.

The house appeared to be empty. Then as I was standing bewildered in the entrance hall, I heard a giggling sound. It had come from the library, and as I turned and went towards it, I saw through the half-open door Mei Li sitting at my work table. She was sitting very upright and as I appeared in the doorway, she looked at me and made another giggling sound, as if she were enjoying a private joke and trying to suppress her laughter. It dawned on me then that Mei Li was

weeping, and I knew, as I had known throughout that punishing run home, that my mother was gone. And a cold fury rose within me towards Mei Li, who for all the fear and respect she had commanded from me over the years, I now realised was an impostor: someone not in the least capable of controlling this bewildering world that was unfolding all around me; a pathetic little woman who had built herself up in my eyes entirely on false pretences, who counted for nothing when the great forces clashed and battled. I stood in the doorway and stared at her with the utmost contempt.

It is now late - a good hour has passed since I set down that last sentence - and yet here I am, still at my desk. I suppose I have been turning over these recollections, some of which I had not brought to the fore of my mind for many years. But I have also been looking ahead, to the day when I eventually return to Shanghai; to all the things Akira and I will do there together. Of course, the city will have undergone many changes. But then I know Akira would like nothing more than to take me around, showing off all his great knowledge of the city's more intimate reaches. He will know just the right places to eat, to drink, to take a walk; the best establishments where we might go after a hard day, to sit and talk late into the night, swapping stories about all that has happened to us since our last meeting.

But I must now get some sleep. There is much work to be done in the morning, and I must catch up on the time lost this afternoon going about London with Sarah on the upper deck of that bus.

PART THREE

London, 12th April 1937

Chapter Ten

Yesterday, by the time young Jennifer returned from her shopping trip with Miss Givens, the light in my study was already murky. This tall narrow house, bought with my inheritance following my aunt's death, overlooks a square which, while moderately prestigious, catches less sun than any of its neighbours. I watched her from the study window, down in the square, going back and forth from the taxicab, lining up shopping bags against the railings, while Miss Givens searched in her purse for the fare. When eventually they came in, I could hear them quarrelling, and though I shouted a greeting from the landing, decided not to go down. Their quarrel seemed trivial - something about what they had and had not bought - but at that moment I was still excited by the morning's letter - and the conclusions to which it had led me - and I did not want my triumphant mood broken.

By the time I came downstairs, they had long ceased their argument, and I found Jennifer roaming around the drawing room with a blindfold over her eyes, hands outstretched before her.

'Hello, Jenny,' I said, as though spotting nothing unusual about her. 'Did you get all you needed for the new term?'

She was drifting dangerously towards the display cabinet, but I resisted the temptation to call out. She stopped just in time, felt with her hands and giggled.

'Oh, Uncle Christopher! Why didn't you warn me?'

'Warn you? About what?'

'I've gone blind! Can't you tell? I'm blind! Look!'

'Ah yes. So you are.'

I left her groping around the furniture and went through to the kitchen, where Miss Givens was unpacking a bag on to the table. She greeted me politely, but made sure I noticed her glance towards the remains of my lunch abandoned at the far end of the table. Since the departure last week of Polly, our maid, Miss Givens has despised any implication that she should even temporarily undertake such duties.

‘Miss Givens,’ I said to her, ‘there’s something I must discuss with you.’ Then looking over my shoulder, I lowered my voice: ‘It’s something that has an important bearing on Jennifer.’

‘Of course, Mr Banks.’

‘In fact, Miss Givens, I wonder if we might step into the conservatory. As I say, it’s a matter of some significance.’

But just at this moment a crashing noise came from the drawing room. Miss Givens, brushing past me, shouted from the doorway:

‘Jennifer, stop that! I told you this would happen!’

‘But I’m blind,’ came the reply. ‘I can’t help it.’

Miss Givens, remembering I had been addressing her, seemed caught in two minds. In the end, she came back and said quietly: ‘Excuse me, Mr Banks. You were saying?’

‘Actually, Miss Givens, I think we’ll be able to speak more freely this evening after Jennifer has gone to bed.’

‘Very well. I shall come and see you then.’

If Miss Givens had any forebodings about what I wished to discuss, she did not at that stage show it. She gave me one of her unrevealing smiles, before going through to her charge in the drawing room.

It is now almost three years ago that I first heard of Jennifer. I had been invited to a supper party by my old

schoolfriend, Osbourne, whom I had not seen for a little while. He was still living in those days on the Gloucester Road, and I met for the first time that night the young woman who has since become his wife. Among his other guests that evening was Lady Beaton, the widow of the well-known philanthropist. Perhaps because the guests were all strangers to me - they spent much of the evening telling jokes about people I knew nothing about - I found myself talking rather a lot to Lady Beaton, so much so that I feared at times I was becoming a burden to her. In any case, it was just after the soup had been served that she began to tell me about a sad case she had recently come across in her capacity as treasurer of a charity concerned with the welfare of orphans. A couple had been drowned in a boating accident in Cornwall two years earlier, and their only child, a girl now of ten, was at present living out in Canada with her grandmother. This old lady was evidently in poor health, rarely went out or received callers.

‘When I was over in Toronto last month,’ Lady Beaton told me, ‘I decided to call on them myself. The poor little thing was miserable, she so misses England. And as for the old lady, she can barely look after herself, never mind a young girl.’

‘Will your organisation be able to help her?’

‘I’ll do my best for her. But we have so many cases, you see. And strictly speaking, she isn’t a priority. After all, she does have a roof over her head and her parents have left her reasonably well provided for. The big thing about this sort of work is not to get too personal about it. But having met the poor girl, one can’t help but get involved. She has such a spirit about her, quite unusual, even though she was clearly so unhappy.’

It is possible she told me a few further things about Jennifer as we continued with the meal. I remember listening politely, but saying little. It was only much later, out in

the hall, as the guests were leaving, and Osbourne was appealing to us all to stay a little longer, that I took Lady Beaton to one side.

‘I hope you don’t think this inappropriate,’ I said. ‘But this girl you were telling me of earlier. This Jennifer. I’d like to do something to help. In fact, Lady Beaton, I’d be quite prepared to take her in.’

Perhaps I should not hold it against her that her first reaction was to recoil with a look of suspicion. At least, that is how it appeared to me. Eventually she said:

‘That’s very good of you, Mr Banks. I will, if I may, get in touch with you about the matter.’

‘I’m quite serious, Lady Beaton. I recently came into an inheritance, so I’ll be quite able to provide for her.’

‘I’m sure that’s so, Mr Banks. Well, let us speak further about it.’ With that, she turned to some other guests to exchange boisterous farewells.

But Lady Beaton did indeed get in touch with me less than a week later. Possibly she had been making enquiries about my character; perhaps it was simply that she had had time to think things over; in any case, her attitude had quite changed. Over lunch at the Café Royal, and during our subsequent meetings, she could not have been warmer towards me, and Jennifer duly arrived at my new house just four months after the dinner at Osbourne’s apartment.

She was accompanied by a Canadian nurse named Miss Hunter, who departed again a week later, cheerfully kissing the girl on the cheek and reminding her to write to her grandmother. Jennifer considered carefully the choice of three bedrooms I offered her, and decided on the smallest, because, she said, the little wooden ledge running along one wall would be perfect for her ‘collection’. This, I soon discovered, comprised some carefully selected sea-shells, nuts, dried leaves, pebbles and a few other such items she

had gathered over the years. She positioned the objects carefully along the ledge and called me in one day to inspect.

‘I’ve given each a name,’ she explained. ‘I realise that’s a silly sort of thing to do, but I do so love them. One day, Uncle Christopher, when I’m not so busy, I’ll tell you all about each of them. Please will you tell Polly to be extra careful when she cleans along here.’

Lady Beaton came to assist me in conducting the interviews for a nanny, but it was Jennifer herself, eavesdropping on proceedings from the next room, who proved the most decisive influence. She would emerge after each candidate had left to deliver a damning verdict. ‘A complete horror,’ she pronounced of one woman. ‘That’s obvious nonsense about her last charge dying of pneumonia. She poisoned her.’ Of another, she said: ‘We can’t possibly have her. Far too nervous.’

Miss Givens struck me during her interview as dull and rather cold, but for some reason it was she who immediately won Jennifer’s approval, and it must be said, in the two and a half years since then she has amply justified Jennifer’s belief in her.

Almost everyone to whom I introduced Jennifer remarked on how self-possessed she appeared for one who had experienced such tragedy. Indeed, she did have a remarkably assured manner, and in particular a capacity to make light of setbacks which might have brought other girls her age to tears. A good example of this was her reaction concerning her trunk.

She had for some weeks after her arrival made repeated references to her trunk that would arrive by sea from Canada. I remember, for instance, her describing to me once in some detail a wooden merry-go-round someone had made for her that was coming in the trunk. On another occasion, when I had complimented her on a particular costume she and Miss Givens

had brought back from Selfridge's, she had looked at me solemnly and said: 'And I have a hair-band to match it *perfectly*. It's coming in my trunk.'

However, I received one day a letter from the shipping company apologising for the loss of the trunk at sea and offering compensation. When I told Jennifer of this, she first simply stared. Then she gave a light laugh and said:

'Well in that case, Miss Givens and I will just have to go on an *enormous* spending spree.'

When after two or three days she had still shown no sign of distress over her loss, I felt inclined to have a talk with her, and one morning after breakfast, spotting her wandering about in the garden, went out to join her.

It was a crisp, sunny morning. My garden is not large, even by city standards - a green rectangle overlooked by any number of our neighbours - but it is well laid out and has, despite everything, a pleasing sense of sanctuary. When I stepped down on to the lawn, Jennifer was drifting about the garden with a toy horse in her hand, dreamily walking it along the tops of the hedges and bushes. I remember being rather concerned the toy might be harmed by the dew and was on the verge of pointing this out to her. But in the end, as I came up, I said simply:

'That was rotten luck about your things. You've taken it awfully well, but it must have been a terrible shock.'

'Oh ...' She went on moving her horse carelessly. 'It *was* a bit of a bore. But I can always get more things with the compensation money. Miss Givens said we could go shopping on Tuesday.'

'All the same. Look, I think you're awfully brave. But there's no need, you know, to put up a show, if you see what I mean. If you want to let your guard down a bit, you should do so. I'm not going to let on to anyone, and neither, I'm sure, is Miss Givens.'

‘It’s all right. I’m not upset. After all, they were just *things*. When you’ve lost your mother and your father, you can’t care so much about *things*, can you?’ With that, she gave her little laugh.

This is one of the few instances I can now recall of her mentioning her parents. I laughed too, and saying: ‘I suppose not,’ started to walk back to the house. But then I turned to her again and said:

‘You know, Jenny, I’m not sure that’s true. You might say a thing like that to a lot of people and they’d believe you. But you see, I know it’s not true. When I came from Shanghai, the things that came in *my* trunk, those things, they were important to me. They remain so.’

‘Will you show them to me?’

‘Show them to you? Well, most of it wouldn’t mean anything to you.’

‘But I love Chinese things. I’d like to see them.’

‘Most of it isn’t Chinese as such,’ I said. ‘Well, what I’m trying to say is that for me, my trunk was special. If it had got lost, I’d have been upset.’

She shrugged and put her horse up to her cheek. ‘I was upset. But I’m not any more. You have to look forward in life.’

‘Yes. Whoever told you that is quite right in a way. All right, as you will. Forget your trunk for now. But remember ...’ I trailed off, not knowing what I had intended to say.

‘What?’

‘Oh nothing. Just remember, if there’s anything you want to tell me, or anything that’s troubling you, I’m always here.’

‘All right,’ she said brightly.

As I stepped back up to the house, I glanced behind me and saw she was roaming about the garden once more, moving her horse in dreamy arcs through the air.

I did not make such promises to Jennifer lightly. At that time, it was my intention entirely to fulfil them, and my fondness for Jennifer only grew in the days that followed. And yet here I am today, planning to desert her; for how long, I do not even know. It is, of course, possible I am exaggerating her dependence on me. If all goes well, moreover, I may well be back in London before the next school holidays and she will hardly notice my absence. And yet, I am obliged to admit, as I was to Miss Givens when she asked me flatly last night, that I may be gone a lot longer. It is this very indefiniteness that betrays my priorities, and I have no doubt Jennifer will not be slow to draw her own conclusions. Whatever brave face she puts on it, I know she will see my decision as a betrayal.

It is not easy to explain how things have come to this. What I can say is that it began some years ago - from well before Jennifer's arrival - as a vague feeling I would get from time to time; a feeling that someone or other disapproved of me, and was only just managing to conceal it. Curiously, these moments tended to occur in the company of the very people whom I might have expected to be most appreciative of my achievements. When talking to some statesman at a dinner, say, or to a police officer, or even a client, I would be suddenly surprised by the coldness of a handshake, a curt remark inserted amidst pleasantries, a polite aloofness just where I might have expected gushing gratitude. Initially, whenever such incidents occurred, I would search my memory for some offence I might inadvertently have caused the particular individual; but eventually I was obliged to conclude that such reactions had to do with something more general in people's perceptions of me.

Because what I am talking of here is so nebulous, it is not easy to recall instances to serve as clear illustrations. But I suppose one example is the odd exchange I had last autumn with the police inspector from Exeter in that gloomy lane outside the village of Coring, in Somerset.

It was one of the most dispiriting crimes I have ever investigated. I did not arrive in the village until four days after the bodies of the children had been discovered in the lane, and the constant rainfall had turned the ditch where they had been found into a muddy stream - making the gathering of relevant evidence no simple affair. None the less, by the time I heard the inspector's footsteps approaching, I had formed a fairly clear view of what had occurred.

'A most disturbing business,' I said to him as he came up to me.

'It's sickened me, Mr Banks,' the inspector said. 'Truly sickened me.'

I had been crouching down examining the hedge, but now rose to my feet, and we stood facing one another in the steady drizzle. Then he said:

'You know, sir, just at this moment, I dearly wish I'd become a carpenter. That's what my father wished of me. I really do, sir. Today, after this, I really do.'

'It's awful, I agree. But one mustn't turn away. We have to see to it justice prevails.'

He shook his head forlornly. Then he said: 'I came out here to ask you, sir, if you'd formed a view of this case. Because you see ...' He looked up at the dripping trees above him, then went on with an effort: 'You see, my own investigations do lead me towards a certain conclusion. A conclusion I'm somewhat loath to reach.'

I looked at him gravely and nodded. 'I fear your conclusion is correct,' I said solemnly. 'Four days ago, this looked to be as horrific a crime as one could imagine. But now, it seems the truth is even more ghastly.'

'How can it be, sir?' The inspector had gone very pale.

'How can such a thing be possible? Even after all these years I can't comprehend such ...' He fell silent and turned away from me.

'Unfortunately, I see no other possibility,' I said quietly. 'It is indeed shocking. It's as if we're looking right into the depths of the darkness.'

'Some madman who was passing, something of that order I could have accepted. But this ... I am still loath to believe it.'

'I fear you must,' I said. 'We must accept it. Because it's what happened.'

'You're sure of it, sir?'

'I'm sure of it.'

He was gazing across the neighbouring fields to the row of cottages in the distance.

'At times like these,' I said, 'I can well understand, one gets very discouraged. But if I may say so, it's well you didn't follow your father's advice. Because men of your calibre, inspector, are rare. And those of us whose duty it is to combat evil, we are ... how might I put it? We're like the twine that holds together the slats of a wooden blind. Should we fail to hold strong, then everything will scatter. It's very important, Inspector, that you carry on.'

He remained silent for another moment. Then when he spoke again, I was rather taken aback by the hardness in his voice.

'I'm just a small person, sir. So I'll stay here and do what I can. I'll stay here and do my best to fight the

serpent. But it's a beast with many heads. You cut one head off, three more will grow in its place. That's how it seems to me, sir. It's getting worse. It's getting worse every day. What's happened here, these poor little children ...' He turned around and I could now see fury in his face. 'I'm just a small man. If I was a greater man' - and here, without a doubt, he looked accusingly straight into my eyes - 'if I was a greater man, then I tell you, sir, I'd hesitate no longer. I'd go to its heart.'

'Its heart?'

'The heart of the serpent. I'd go to it. Why waste precious time wrestling with its many heads? I'd go this day to where the heart of the serpent lies and slay the thing once and for all before ... before ...'

He appeared to run out of words and simply stood there glaring at me. I do not remember quite what I said in response. Possibly I muttered something like:

'Well, that would be most commendable of you,' and turned away.

Then there was also that incident from last summer, on the occasion I visited the Royal Geographical Society to hear H. L. Mortimer deliver his lecture. It was a very warm evening. The audience of around a hundred was made up of specially invited figures from all walks of life; I recognised, among others, a Liberal peer and a famous Oxford historian. Professor Mortimer spoke for just over an hour, while the lecture hall grew steadily more stuffy. His paper, entitled: 'Does Nazism pose a threat to Christianity?', was in fact a polemic to argue that universal suffrage had severely weakened Britain's hand in international affairs. When questions were invited at the end, a fairly vigorous argument started up around the room, not about Professor Mortimer's ideas, but concerning the German army's move into the Rhineland. There were passionate voices both condoning and

condemning the German action, but I was exhausted that night after weeks of intense work, and made no real effort to follow.

Eventually we were ushered out of the hall into a neighbouring room, where refreshments were being served. The room was not nearly large enough, so that by the time I entered - and I was by no means among the last - people were already squeezed uncomfortably up against one another. A picture I have of that evening is of large, aproned women elbowing their way ferociously through the crowd with their trays of sherry, and of greying, bird-like professors talking in pairs, their heads tilted right back to maintain a civilised speaking distance. I felt it was impossible to remain in such an environment, and was pushing my way towards the exit when I felt a touch on my shoulder. I turned to find smiling at me Canon Moorly, a cleric who had been of invaluable service to me on a recent case, and saw nothing for it but to stop and greet him.

‘What a most fascinating evening it’s been,’ he said. ‘It’s given me so much to think about.’

‘Yes, most interesting.’

‘But I must say, Mr Banks, when I saw you there across the room, I did rather hope you’d say something.’

‘I’m afraid I was feeling rather tired this evening. Besides, virtually everyone else in the room seemed to know so much more about the topic.’

‘Oh, nonsense, nonsense.’ He laughed and tapped me on the chest. Then he leant in closer - perhaps someone behind him had pushed him - so that his face was only inches from mine, and said: ‘To be quite truthful, I was a little surprised you didn’t feel compelled to make an intervention. All this talk of a crisis in Europe. You say you were tired; perhaps you were being polite. All the same, I’m surprised you let it go.’

‘Let it go?’

‘What I mean to say, forgive me, is that it’s quite natural for some of these gentlemen here tonight to regard Europe as the centre of the present maelstrom. But you, Mr Banks. Of course, *you* know the truth. You know that the real heart of our present crisis lies further afield.’

I looked at him carefully, then said: ‘I’m sorry, sir. But I’m not quite sure what you’re getting at.’

‘Oh come, come.’ He was smiling knowingly. ‘You of all people.’

‘Really, sir, I’ve no idea why you think I should have any special knowledge concerning such things. It’s true, I’ve investigated many crimes over the years, and perhaps I’ve built up a general picture of how certain forms of evil manifest themselves. But on the question of how the balance of power might be maintained, how we can contain the violent conflict of aspirations in Europe, on such things I’m afraid I have no large theory as such.’

‘No theory? Perhaps not.’ Canon Moorly went on smiling at me. ‘But you do have, shall we say, a special relationship to what is, in truth, the source of all our current anxieties. Oh come, my dear fellow! You know perfectly well to what I’m referring! You know better than anyone the eye of the storm is to be found not in Europe at all, but in the Far East. In Shanghai, to be exact.’

‘Shanghai,’ I said lamely. ‘Yes, I suppose ... I suppose there are some problems in that city.’

‘Problems indeed. And what was once just a local problem has been allowed to fester and grow. To spread its poison over the years ever further across the world, right through our civilisation. But I hardly need remind *you* of this.’

‘I think you’ll find, sir,’ I said, no longer trying to hide my irritation, ‘that I’ve worked hard over the years to

check the spread of crime and evil wherever it has manifested itself. But of course I've been able to do so only within my own limited sphere. As for what occurs in faraway places, surely, sir, you can hardly expect me to ...'

'Oh come! Really!'

I might well have lost my patience, but just at this point another clergyman came squeezing through the crowd to greet him. Canon Moorly introduced us, but I quickly took the opportunity to slip away.

There were a number of other such incidents which, if they were not quite so overt, nevertheless built up over a period of time to push me steadily in a certain direction. And then of course, there was the encounter with Sarah Hemmings at the Draycoats' wedding.

Chapter Eleven

It is now already over a year ago. I had been sitting near the back of the church - the bride was not expected for several more minutes - when I saw Sarah come in with Sir Cecil Medhurst on the other side of the nave. Certainly, Sir Cecil did not look appreciably older than when I had last seen him on the evening of the Meredith Foundation banquet in his honour; but the many reports that he had been hugely rejuvenated by his marriage to Sarah appeared to be something of an exaggeration. He looked happy enough, none the less, as he gave jovial waves to people he recognised.

I did not speak to Sarah until after the service. I was strolling around the churchyard amidst the chattering guests, and had paused to admire a flower bed, when suddenly she appeared at my side.

‘Now, Christopher,’ she said. ‘You’re virtually the only one here not to have congratulated me on my hat. Celia Matheson made it for me.’

‘It’s splendid. Really very impressive. And how are you?’

It was the first time we had spoken for some time and I believe we chatted politely for a while as we moved slowly around the fringes of the crowd. Then when we paused again, I asked:

‘And Sir Cecil is well? He’s certainly looking very fit.’

‘Oh, he’s on splendid form. Christopher, you can tell me. Were people utterly horrified I married him?’

‘Horrified? Oh no, no. Why should they be?’

'I mean, about his being so much older. Of course, no one will say so to *us*. But you tell me. People were horrified, weren't they?'

'As far as I was aware, everyone was delighted. Of course, people were surprised. It was all so sudden. But no, I believe everyone was delighted.'

'Well then, that only proves what I feared. They must have seen me as an old maid. That's why they weren't horrified. A few years ago, I'm sure they would have been.'

'Really ...'

Sarah laughed at my discomfort and touched my arm. 'Christopher, you're so sweet. Don't worry. Don't worry about it at all.' Then she added: 'You know, you must come and visit. Cecil remembers meeting you, at that banquet. He'd love to see you again.'

'I'd be delighted.'

'Oh, but it's probably too late now. We're going away, you see. Sailing for the Far East in eight days' time.'

'Really. Will you be gone for long?'

'Might be months. Perhaps even years. Still, you must come and see us when we get back.'

I suspect I was a little lost for words at this news. But just at that moment, the bride and groom came into view across the grass, and Sarah said:

'Don't they look so handsome together? And they're so suited.' For a moment she gazed at them dreamily. Then she said: 'I was asking them just now what they wished of the future. And Alison said they just want a little cottage in Dorset, from which neither of them need emerge for years and years. Not until there are children, and they're getting grey hairs and wrinkles. Don't you think that's so wonderful? I do

so wish it for them. And it's so wonderful, the way they happened to meet just by chance like that.'

She went on gazing at them as though hypnotised. Eventually she came out of her trance, and I believe we spent a few minutes exchanging news of mutual friends. Then others came to join us, and after a while I drifted away.

I was to encounter Sarah once more, later in the day, at the country house hotel overlooking the South Downs where the reception was held. It was towards the end of that afternoon, and the sun was low in the sky. An unusual amount of drink had been consumed by then, and I remember walking through the hotel past groups of dishevelled guests, scattered across sofas and propped uncertainly in alcoves, until coming out on to the windy terrace I spotted Sarah, leaning against the balustrade, looking out over the grounds. I was walking towards her, when I heard a voice behind me, and saw a stout, red-faced man hurrying across the terrace after me. He grasped my arm, then stood there recovering his breath, looking into my face with a serious expression. Then he said:

'Look, I've been watching. I saw what happened, and I saw them earlier too. It's a disgrace, and as the brother of the groom, I want to extend my apologies to you. Those drunken oafs, I don't know who they are. I'm sorry, old chap, it must have been awfully upsetting.'

'Oh, please don't worry,' I said with a laugh. 'I'm not in the least offended. They've had a little to drink and they were just amusing themselves.'

'It's barbaric behaviour. You're a guest, just as they are, and if they can't be civil, they'll have to go.'

'Well really, I think you've got the wrong end of the stick. They didn't mean anything. In any case, I certainly took no offence. A fellow's got to be able to take a little joke sometimes.'

‘But they’ve been at it all afternoon. I saw them earlier, even at the church. This is my brother’s wedding. I won’t have behaviour of this sort. In fact, I’m going to sort the whole thing out here and now. Come with me, old fellow. We’ll see if they still find you so amusing.’

‘No, look, you don’t understand. If anything, I was enjoying the joke just as much as they were.’

‘But I won’t have it! Far too much of this kind of thing goes on these days. They get away with it more and more, but not today. Not at my brother’s wedding. Come on, you come with me.’

He was tugging at my arm and I saw beads of sweat all over his face. I am not sure what I would have done next, but just then, Sarah came strolling up to us, a cocktail in one hand, and said to the red-faced man:

‘Oh, Roderick, you *have* got the wrong end of the stick. Those are *friends* of Christopher’s. Besides, Christopher’s the last person you need to protect.’

The red-faced man looked from one to the other of us. Finally he asked Sarah: ‘Are you sure? Because I’ve seen it go on the whole day. Every time this chap goes anywhere near them ...’

‘You worry too much, Roderick. Those are friends of Christopher’s. If he were in the least bit cross with them, you’d soon know all about it. Christopher’s *quite* capable of dressing them down himself. In fact, Christopher here could have them cowering, or else eating out of his hand, whatever he pleases, in the wink of an eye. So off you go, Roderick. Go off and enjoy yourself.’

The red-faced man regarded me with a new respect, then in his confusion held out his hand. ‘I’m Jamie’s brother,’ he said, as I took it. ‘Pleased to meet you. If I can do anything, well, you come and find me. I’m sorry if there was some misunderstanding. Well, enjoy yourself.’

We watched him lurch back towards the house. Then Sarah said:

‘Come on, Christopher. Why don’t you come and talk to me for a while.’

She took a sip from her glass and strolled off. I followed her across the terrace until we were at the balustrade, looking out over the grounds.

‘Thank you for that,’ I said eventually.

‘Oh, it’s all part of the service. Christopher, what have you been up to all afternoon?’

‘Oh, nothing much. In fact, I was just thinking. About that night a few years ago, that banquet for Sir Cecil. I was wondering if when you met him that night you had any idea you’d one day ...’

‘Oh, Christopher’ - she cut across my words and I realised she was fairly drunk - ‘I’ll tell you, I can tell you. When I met Cecil that night, I found him very charming. But really, I thought nothing more of him. It was only much later, oh, a year later, even more. Oh yes, I’ll tell you, you’re such a dear friend. I was at this supper and people were talking about Mussolini, and some of the men were saying it wasn’t a joke any more, there could well be another war, even worse than the last one. That’s when someone brought up Cecil’s name. Said we needed people like him more than ever at a time like this, and he really shouldn’t have retired, surely he had plenty of steam left yet. Then someone said, he’s the man to undertake the great mission, and someone else said, no, it’s not fair on him, he’s too old, he’s got no close colleagues left, he doesn’t even have a wife now. And that’s when it came to me. I thought, well, even a great man like that, with all his achievements, he needs someone, someone who’ll make the difference. Someone to help him, at the end of his career, to summon up what’s needed for one last great push.’

She fell quiet for a moment, so I said: 'And it would appear Sir Cecil came to see it that way too.'

'I can be persuasive when I wish to be, Christopher. Besides, he says he fell in love with me right from that time he first saw me, at that banquet.'

'How splendid.'

Below us, down on the grass, some way in the distance, several guests were larking about by the pond. I could see one man, his collar sticking out behind his neck, charging at some ducks. Eventually, I said:

'This business of Sir Cecil making a final push. His crowning achievement. What exactly was it you had in mind for him? Is this why you're going away for months?'

Sarah took a deep breath and her gaze became serious and steady. 'Christopher. You must know the answer.'

'If I knew the answer ...'

'Oh, for goodness' sake. We're going to Shanghai, of course.'

It is hard to describe just what I felt when I heard her say this. Perhaps there was still some element of surprise. But more than anything else, I recall a kind of relief; an odd feeling that from the time I had first laid eyes on her all those years ago at the Charingworth Club, a part of me had been waiting for this moment; that in some sense, my whole friendship with Sarah had always been moving towards this one point, and now at last it had arrived. The few words we then went on to exchange had about them a strangely familiar ring, as though we had rehearsed them somewhere many times already.

'Cecil knows the place well,' she was saying. 'He feels he might be able to help sort things out over there and he felt he should go. So go we shall. Next week. Our bags are virtually packed.'

‘Well, then, I wish Sir Cecil, I wish you *both*, the very best in accomplishing your mission in Shanghai. Are you looking forward to it? I get the impression you are.’

‘Of course I am. Of course I’m looking forward to it. I’ve waited a long time for something like this. I’m so tired of London and ... and all of this’ - she waved back towards the hotel. ‘I wasn’t getting any younger, and sometimes I thought my chance would never come. But here we are, we’re going to Shanghai. Now, Christopher, what’s the matter?’

‘I suppose this might sound rather feeble to you,’ I said. ‘But I’ll say it anyway. You see, it’s always been my intention to return to Shanghai myself. I mean, to ... to solve the problems there. That’s always been my intention.’

For a moment, she went on gazing out at the sunset. Then she turned and smiled at me, and I thought her smile was full of sadness, and tinged with rebuke. She reached out a hand and touched me gently on the cheek, then turned back to the view again.

‘Perhaps Cecil will solve things quickly in Shanghai,’ she said. ‘Perhaps he won’t. In any case, we might be there a long time. So if what you just said is true, Christopher, then it’s quite possible we shall see you out there. Isn’t it?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Indeed.’

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I was not to see Sarah Hemmings again before she set sail. If she had every right to rebuke me for my procrastination over the years, then how much more deserving of her disappointment would I be should I now fail to act? For it is self-evident, whatever progress Sir Cecil has made out in Shanghai during the intervening months, a solution is still nowhere in sight. Tensions continue to mount the world over; knowledgeable people liken our civilisation to a haystack at which lighted

matches are being hurled. Meanwhile, here I am, still languishing in London. But with the advent of yesterday's letter, it might be said that the last pieces of the jigsaw have come together. Surely the time has finally arrived for me to go out there myself, to Shanghai, to go there and - after all these years - 'slay the serpent', as that decent West Country inspector put it.

But it will be at some cost. Earlier this morning, as yesterday, Jennifer went out shopping - for a few last items she claims are imperative for the new school term. When she left, she appeared excited and happy; she knows nothing yet of my plans, or of the things Miss Givens and I discussed last night.

I asked Miss Givens into the drawing room and had to invite her to sit down three times before she did so. Perhaps she had an inkling of what I wished to say, and felt that to sit with me would amount to some form of collusion. I laid the situation out to her as best I could; tried to make her understand the vast importance of the case; that it was, moreover, one I had been involved with for many, many years. She listened impassively, and then when I paused, asked her simple question: how long would I be gone? I believe then I talked for some time, trying to explain to her why it was impossible to place a clear time frame on a case of this sort. I have a feeling it was she who interrupted me eventually to raise some query, and after that we spent several minutes on the various practical implications of my going away. It was only after we had discussed these matters fairly exhaustively, and she had risen to leave, that I said to her:

'Miss Givens, I'm fully aware that in the short term, even with your best efforts, my absence will bring difficulties for Jennifer. But I wonder if you've considered that in the longer term, it's almost certainly in our best interests, Jenny's and mine, that I pursue the course I've just outlined to you. After all, how will Jennifer ever be

able to love and respect a guardian who she knew had turned away from his most solemn duty when the call finally came? Whatever she may wish for now, she'll come to have only contempt for me when she's older. And what good would that do either of us?'

Miss Givens gazed at me steadily, then said: 'You have a point, Mr Banks.' Then she added: 'But she will miss you, Mr Banks, none the less.'

'Yes. Yes, I dare say so. But Miss Givens, don't you see?' I might have raised my voice at this point. 'Don't you see how very urgent things have got? The growing turmoil all over the world? I have to go!'

'Of course, Mr Banks.'

'I'm sorry. I do apologise. I'm somewhat overwrought tonight. All in all, it's been quite a day.'

'Would you like me to tell her?' Miss Givens asked.

I thought about this, then shook my head. 'No, I'll speak to her. I'll speak to her in good time. I'd appreciate it if you said nothing to her until I've seen her.'

I had intended last night to talk to Jennifer some time today. But on further thought, I feel to do so might be premature; it might, moreover, quite unnecessarily sully her current very positive mood concerning her forthcoming school term. It will be better, all in all, to leave the matter for now, and I will be able to go and see her at her school once I have finalised my arrangements. Jennifer is a child of remarkable spirit, and there is no reason to suppose she would be so devastated just on account of my departure.

I cannot help, though, recalling now that winter's day two years ago when I first visited her at St Margaret's. I had been conducting an investigation not far away, and this still being early in her career at the school, I had decided to call to check that all was well.

The school comprises a large manor house surrounded by several acres of grounds. Behind the house, the lawn slopes down to a lake. Perhaps on account of this latter, on each of the four occasions I have visited the school, I have found mist enveloping the place. Geese wander freely, while sullen gardeners tend to the marshy grounds. It is, by and large, a rather austere atmosphere, though the mistresses, in so far as I have seen them, present a warmer face. On that particular day, I remember a certain Miss Nutting, a kindly woman in her fifties, leading me through the chilly corridors. At one point, she paused by an alcove and, lowering her voice, said to me:

‘All things considered, Mr Banks, she’s settling in as well as can be expected. After all, there are bound to be a few difficulties for her at the start, while the other girls still see her as a newcomer. And one or two of them *can* be a little cruel sometimes. But by next term, that will all be behind her, I’m sure.’

Jennifer was waiting for me in a large, oak-panelled room where a log was smouldering in the fireplace. The mistress left us, and Jennifer smiled rather shyly from where she was standing in front of the mantelpiece.

‘They don’t keep things very warm here,’ I said, rubbing my hands and moving towards the fire.

‘Oh, you should feel how cold it is in our dorm. Icicles on your sheets!’ She giggled.

I sat down in a chair close to the fire, but she remained standing. I had feared she might feel awkward seeing me in this different context, but she soon began to chat quite freely, about her badminton, the girls she liked, the food, which she said was ‘stew, stew, stew’.

‘It’s sometimes difficult,’ I put in at one point, ‘when you’re new. They’re not ... ganging up on you or anything?’

‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘Well, there’s a bit of teasing sometimes, but they mean nothing by it. They’re all nice girls here.’

We had been talking for twenty minutes or so when I rose to my feet and handed her the cardboard box I had brought in my briefcase.

‘Oh, what’s this?’ she exclaimed excitedly.

‘Jenny, it’s not … it’s not a present as such.’

She caught the warning in my voice, and looked at the box in her hands with a sudden wariness. ‘Then what is it?’ she asked.

‘Open it. See for yourself.’

I watched her remove the lid of the box - roughly the size of a shoe box - and stare inside. Her expression, already cautious, did not change at all. Then she reached in a hand and touched something.

‘I’m afraid,’ I said gently, ‘that’s all I could recover. Your trunk, I discovered, wasn’t lost at sea at all, but stolen along with four others from a London depot. I did what I could, but I fear the thieves simply destroyed what they couldn’t sell easily. I could find no trace of the clothes and such. Just these little things.’

She had brought out a bracelet, and was examining it carefully as though checking for blemishes. She put it back, then took out a pair of tiny silver bells and examined them in the same way. Then she put the lid back on the box and looked at me.

‘It was very kind of you, Uncle Christopher,’ she said quietly. ‘And you must be so busy.’

‘It wasn’t any trouble. I’m just sorry I couldn’t recover any more.’

‘It was very kind of you.’

‘Well, I’d better let you get back to your geography lesson. I didn’t come at a very convenient time.’

She did not move, but continued to stand there quietly, gazing at the box in her hands. Then she said:

‘When you’re at school, sometimes, you forget. Just sometimes. You count the days until the holidays like the other girls do, and then you think you’ll see Mother and Papa again.’

Even in these circumstances, it still came as a surprise to hear her mention her parents. I waited for her to say more but she did not; she simply gazed up at me as though she had just put to me a question. In the end, I said:

‘It’s very difficult sometimes, I know. It’s as though your whole world’s collapsed around you. But I’ll say this for you, Jenny. You’re making a marvellous job of putting the pieces together again. You really are. I know it can never be quite the same, but I know you have it in you to go on now and build a happy future for yourself. And I’ll always be here to help you, I want you to know that.’

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘And thank you for these.’

As far as I recall, that is how our meeting ended that day. We moved beyond the relative warmth of the fire, across the draughty room and out into the corridor, where I watched her walk away back to her class.

That winter’s afternoon two years ago, I had no idea that my words to her were anything other than well founded. When I next visit St Margaret’s, to say goodbye, we may well meet again in that same draughty room, by that same fire. If so, things will be all the harder for me, for there is little chance Jennifer will fail to remember very clearly our last encounter there. But she is an intelligent girl, and whatever her immediate emotions, she may well understand all that I will say to her. She may even grasp, more quickly than did her nanny last night, that when she is older - when this

case has become a triumphant memory - she will be truly glad
I rose to the challenge of my responsibilities.

PART FOUR

*Cathay Hotel, Shanghai,
20th September 1937*

Chapter Twelve

Travellers in the Arab countries have often remarked on the way a native will position his face disconcertingly close during conversation. This, of course, is simply a local custom that happens to differ from our own, and any open-minded visitor will before long come to think nothing of it. It has occurred to me that I should try and view in a similar spirit something which, over these three weeks I have been here in Shanghai, has come to be a perennial source of irritation: namely, the way people here seem determined at every opportunity to block one's view. No sooner has one entered a room or stepped out from a car than someone or other will have smilingly placed himself right within one's line of vision, preventing the most basic perusal of one's surroundings. Often as not, the offending person is one's very host or guide of that moment; but should there be any lapse in this quarter, there is never a shortage of bystanders eager to make good the shortcoming. As far as I can ascertain, all the national groups that make up the community here - English, Chinese, French, American, Japanese, Russian - subscribe to this practice with equal zeal, and the inescapable conclusion is that this custom is one that has grown up uniquely here within Shanghai's International Settlement, cutting across all barriers of race and class.

It took me a good few days to put my finger on this local eccentricity, and to appreciate that it was what lay at the root of the disorientation which threatened to overwhelm me for a time upon first arriving here. Now, although I still find myself occasionally annoyed by it, it is not a thing of undue concern. Besides, I have discovered a second, complementary Shanghai practice to make life a little easier: it appears to be quite permissible here to employ surprisingly rough shoves to get people out of one's way.

Though I have not yet found the nerve to take advantage of this licence myself, I have already witnessed on a number of occasions refined ladies at society gatherings giving the most peremptory pushes without provoking as much as a murmur.

When on my second night here I entered the ballroom on the penthouse floor of the Palace Hotel, I had yet to identify either of these curious practices, and consequently found much of that evening undermined by my frustration with what I then took to be the inordinately crowded nature of the International Settlement. Stepping out of the lift, I had barely glimpsed the plush carpet leading into the ballroom - a row of Chinese doormen lined all along it - when one of my hosts for the evening, Mr MacDonald from the British consulate, put his broad frame before me. As we strode on towards the doorway, I noticed the rather charming way each doorman, as we passed, would bow and bring his white-gloved hands up together. But we were hardly past the third man - there were probably six or seven in all - when even this view was obstructed by my other host, a certain Mr Grayson, representing the Shanghai Municipal Council, who stepped up beside me to continue whatever he had been saying during our ascent in the lift. And I had no sooner entered the room in which, according to my two hosts, we were to witness 'the city's smartest cabaret and a gathering of Shanghai's elite' than I found myself in the midst of a drifting crowd. The tall ceilings above me, with their elaborate chandeliers, led me to suppose the dimensions of the room were pretty vast, though for some time I had no way to corroborate this. As I followed my hosts through the throng, I saw large windows all along one side of the room through which, at that moment, the sunset was streaming in. I glimpsed too a stage at the far end, upon which several musicians in white tuxedos were wandering about talking. They, like everyone else, appeared to be waiting for something - perhaps simply for night to fall. In general there was a restlessness, with people pushing and circling one another to no clear purpose.

I almost lost sight of my hosts, but then saw MacDonald beckoning to me, and I eventually found myself sitting down at a small table with a starchy white cover to which my companions had pushed their way. From this lower vantage point I could see that in fact a large expanse of floor had been left vacant - presumably for the cabaret - and that almost all present had squeezed themselves into a relatively narrow strip along the glazed side of the room. The table we were sitting at was part of a long row, though when I tried to see how far the row extended, I was once again thwarted. No one was sitting at the tables immediately neighbouring ours, probably because the jostling crowd made it impractical to do so. Indeed, before long, our table came to feel like a tiny boat assailed on all sides by the tides of Shanghai high society. My arrival, moreover, had not gone unnoticed; I could hear murmurs spreading around me conveying the news, and more and more gazes turned our way.

In spite of all this, until things grew quite impossible, I recall trying to continue the conversation I had started with my hosts in the car bringing us to the Palace Hotel. At one point I remember I was saying to MacDonald:

‘I very much appreciate your suggestion, sir. But in truth, I’m happy to pursue my lines of enquiry alone. It’s how I’m accustomed to working.’

‘As you will, old fellow,’ MacDonald said. ‘Just thought I’d mention it. Some of these fellows I’m talking of, they certainly know their way about this city. And the best of them are as good as anything you’ll find at Scotland Yard. Just thought they might save you, all of us, some valuable time.’

‘But you’ll recall my telling you, Mr MacDonald. I left England only once I’d formed a clear view of this case. In other words, my arrival here isn’t a starting point, but the culmination of many years’ work.’

‘In other words,’ Grayson suddenly put in, ‘you’ve come here to us in order to tie up the case once and for all. How marvellous! It’s wonderful news!’

MacDonald gave the Municipal Council man a disdainful glance, then continued as though the latter had not spoken.

‘I don’t mean to cast any doubt upon your abilities, old fellow. Your record speaks for itself, after all. I was only suggesting a little back-up in the way of personnel. Strictly under your command, naturally. Just, you know, to quicken things up. Having only just got here, it mightn’t be so clear how urgent our situation’s become now. It all looks pretty relaxed here, I know. But I rather fear we don’t have a great deal of time left.’

‘I fully appreciate the urgency, Mr MacDonald. But I can only say again, I’ve every reason to believe things will be brought to a satisfactory conclusion in a relatively short time. Provided, that is, I’m allowed to go about my enquiries unhindered.’

‘That’s splendid news!’ Grayson exclaimed, earning another cold look from MacDonald.

For much of the time I had been in his company that day, I had been growing increasingly impatient with MacDonald’s pretence at being nothing more than a consulate official charged with protocol matters. It was not just his inordinate curiosity concerning my plans - or his eagerness to foist ‘assistants’ on me - that gave him away; it was the air of refined duplicity he carried along with his languid, well-bred manners that marked him out so readily as a senior intelligence man. By that point in the evening, I must have grown weary of humouring him in his charade, for I put my request to him as though the truth had been acknowledged between us long before.

‘Since we’re on the question of assistance, Mr MacDonald,’ I said to him, ‘there is in fact something you

might be able to do for me that would be of immense help.'

'Try me, old fellow.'

'As I mentioned before, I have a particular interest in what I believe the police forces here are calling the Yellow Snake killings.'

'Oh yes?' I could see a guardedness falling over MacDonald's face. Grayson, on the other hand, seemed not to know to what I was referring, and looked from one to the other of us.

'In fact' - I went on, looking carefully at MacDonald - 'it was when I'd gathered sufficient evidence on these so-called Yellow Snake killings that I made the decision finally to come here.'

'I see. So you're interested in the Yellow Snake business.' MacDonald glanced about the room nonchalantly.

'Nasty affair. But not all that significant, I wouldn't have thought, in terms of the larger picture.'

'On the contrary. I believe it to be highly relevant.'

'I'm so sorry,' Grayson managed finally to put in. 'But just what are these Yellow Snake killings? I've never heard of them.'

'It's what people are calling these communist reprisals,' MacDonald told him. 'Reds murdering relatives of one of their number who's turned informer on them.' Then he said to me: 'We get this happening from time to time. The Reds are savages in such matters. But it's a matter between the Chinese. Chiang Kai-shek's well on top of the Reds and plans to stay that way, Japanese or no Japanese. We try to keep above it, you know. Surprised you're so interested in all that, old fellow.'

'But this particular set of reprisals,' I said, 'these Yellow Snake killings. They've been continuing for a long

time. Off and on for the last four years. During which time thirteen people have to date been murdered. ’

‘You’ll know the details better than me, old fellow. But from what I’ve heard, the reason the reprisals are protracted is that the Reds don’t know who their traitor is. They began by slaughtering the wrong people. A little approximate, you see, this Bolshevik vision of justice. Every time they change their ideas about who this Yellow Snake chap might be, they go out and slaughter another family. ’

‘It would help things greatly, Mr MacDonald, if I were able to speak to this informer. The man referred to as the Yellow Snake. ’

MacDonald shrugged. ‘That’s all between the Chinese, old fellow. None of us even know who this Yellow Snake is. In my view, the Chinese government would do well to announce his identity before more innocent people get mistaken for his relatives. But honestly, old fellow. It’s all between the Chinese. Best leave it that way. ’

‘It’s important I get to speak to the informer. ’

‘Well, since you feel so strongly about it, I’ll have a word with a few people. But I can’t promise much. This chap seems pretty useful to the government. Chiang’s men keep him pretty well under wraps, I’d imagine. ’

I had become aware by this point of ever more people pressing in on all sides, eager not just to glimpse me in the flesh, but to overhear something of our conversation. In such circumstances, I could hardly expect MacDonald to talk frankly, and I decided I should abandon the matter for the time being. In fact, I was overcome at that moment by a strong urge to rise and get a little air, but before I could move, Grayson had leant forward with a cheerful smile, saying:

‘Mr Banks, I appreciate this might not be the best time. But I wanted just to have a quick word. You see, sir, I’ve

been charged with the happy task of organising the ceremony. That's to say, the welcoming ceremony.'

'Mr Grayson, I don't wish to seem ungrateful, but as Mr MacDonald here just put it, time is rather pressing. And I feel I've been welcomed already with so much lavish hospitality ...'

'No, no, sir' - Grayson laughed nervously - 'I was referring to *the* welcoming ceremony. I mean, the one welcoming back your parents after their years of captivity.'

This, I admit, rather took me by surprise and perhaps for a second I just stared at him. He let out another nervous laugh and said:

'Of course, it's somewhat jumping ahead, I realise. You've first to do your work. And of course, I don't wish to tempt fate. All the same, you see, we *are* obliged to prepare. As soon as you announce the solving of the case, everyone will look to us, the Municipal Council, to provide an occasion worthy of such a moment. They'll want a pretty special event, and they'll want it promptly. But you see, sir, to organise something on the scale we're talking of, it's no simple matter. So you see, I wondered if I could put a few very basic options before you. My first question, sir, before anything else, is if you're happy with the choice of Jessfield Park for the ceremony? We will, you see, require substantial space ...'

While Grayson had been speaking, I had become steadily aware of the sound - from somewhere behind the hubbub of the crowd - of distant gunfire. But now Grayson's words were suddenly cut off by a loud boom which shook the room. I looked up in alarm, only to see all around me people smiling, even laughing, their cocktail glasses still in their hands. After a moment, I could discern a movement in the crowd towards the windows, rather as though a cricket match had resumed outside. I decided to seize the opportunity to leave the table, and rising, joined the drift. There were too many

people in front of me to see anything, and I was trying to edge my way forward when I became aware that a grey-haired lady by my shoulder was talking to me.

‘Mr Banks,’ she was saying, ‘do you have any idea at all how relieved we all feel now that you’re finally with us? Of course, we didn’t like to show it, but we were getting extremely concerned about, well’ - she gestured towards the sound of gunfire - ‘my husband, he insists the Japanese will never dare attack the International Settlement. But then you know, he says it at least twenty times a day, and that’s hardly reassuring. I tell you, Mr Banks, when news of your impending arrival reached us, that was the first good news we’d had here in months. My husband even stopped repeating that little mantra of his about the Japanese, stopped for at least a few days. Good heavens!’

Another thunderous explosion had rocked the room, provoking a few ironic cheers. I then noticed that a little way in front of me, some French windows had been opened, and people had pushed out on to a balcony.

‘Don’t worry, Mr Banks,’ a young man said, grasping my elbow. ‘There’s no chance of any of that coming over here. Both sides are *extremely* careful now after Bloody Monday.’

‘But where’s it coming from?’ I asked him.

‘Oh, it’s the Jap warship in the harbour. The shells actually arc over us and land over there across the creek. After dark, it’s quite a sight. Rather like watching shooting stars.’

‘And what if a shell falls short?’

Not only the young man I was talking to, but several others around me laughed at this idea - I thought rather too loudly. Then another voice said:

‘We’ll have to trust the Japs to get it right. After all, if they get sloppy, they’re just as likely to drop one

behind their own lines. ’

‘Mr Banks, would you care for these?’

Someone was holding out a pair of opera glasses. When I took hold of them, it was as if I had given a signal. The crowd parted before me, and I found myself virtually conveyed towards the open French windows.

I stepped out on to a small balcony. I could feel a warm breeze and the sky was a deep pink. I was looking down from a considerable height, and the canal was visible past the next row of buildings. Beyond the water was a mass of shacks and rubble out of which a column of grey smoke was rising into the evening sky.

I put the glasses to my eyes, but the focus was entirely wrong for me and I could see nothing. When I fiddled with the wheel, I found myself gazing on to the canal, where I was faintly surprised to see various boats still going about their normal business right next to the fighting. I picked out one particular boat - a barge-like vessel with a lone oarsman - that was so piled up with crates and bundles it seemed impossible for it to pass under the low canal bridge just beneath me. As I watched, the vessel approached the bridge rapidly, and I was sure I would see at least a crate or two fall from the top of the pile into the water. For the next few seconds, I went on staring through the glasses at the boat, having quite forgotten the fighting. I noted with interest the boatman, who like me was utterly absorbed by the fate of his cargo and oblivious of the war not sixty yards to his right. Then the boat had vanished under the bridge, and when I saw it glide gracefully out the other side, the precarious bundles still intact, I lowered the glasses with a sigh.

I realised a large crowd had been gathering at my back while I had been looking on to the canal. I handed the glasses to someone nearby and said to no one in particular:

‘So that’s the war. Most interesting. Are there many casualties, do you suppose?’

This set off a lot of talking. A voice said: ‘Plenty of death over there in Chapei. But the Japs will have it in a few more days and it’ll go quiet again.’

‘Wouldn’t be so sure,’ someone else said. ‘The Kuomintang’s surprised everyone so far, and my bet is they’ll keep doing so. I’d bet on them holding out a good while yet.’

Then everyone around me seemed to start arguing at once. A few days, a few weeks, what difference did it make? The Chinese would have to surrender sooner or later, so why did they not do so now? To which several voices objected that the conclusion was not nearly so cut and dried. Things were changing by the day, and there were many factors each impinging on the others.

‘And besides,’ someone asked loudly, ‘hasn’t Mr Banks turned up?’

This question, obviously intended to be rhetorical, nevertheless hung oddly in the air, causing a hush to fall and all eyes to turn to me once more. In fact, I got the idea that it was not only the immediate group around the balcony, but the entire ballroom that had fallen into silence and was awaiting my response. It struck me that this was as good a time as any to make an announcement - one that perhaps had been called for from the moment I had entered the room - and clearing my throat, I declared loudly:

‘Ladies and gentlemen. I can well see the situation here has grown rather trying. And I have no wish to raise false expectations at such a time. But let me say that I would not be here now if I were not optimistic about my chances of bringing this case, in the very near future, to a happy conclusion. In fact, ladies and gentlemen, I would say I am *more* than optimistic. I beg then for your patience over this

coming week or so. After that, well, let us see what we have achieved. '

As I uttered these last words, the jazz orchestra suddenly started up within the ballroom. I have no idea if this was simply a coincidence, but in any case the effect was to round off my statement rather nicely. I felt the focus of the room shifting away from me, and saw people starting to return inside. I too made my way back into the room, and as I tried to find our table again - I had for a moment lost my bearings somewhat - I noticed that a troupe of dancing girls had taken the floor.

There were perhaps as many as twenty dancers, many of them 'Eurasians', dressed skimpily in matching outfits with a bird motif. As the dancers proceeded with their floor show, the room seemed to lose all interest in the battle across the water, though the noises were still clearly audible behind the cheery music. It was as though for these people, one entertainment had finished and another had begun. I felt, not for the first time since arriving in Shanghai, a wave of revulsion towards them. It was not simply the fact of their having failed so dismally over the years to rise to the challenge of the case, of their having allowed matters to slip to the present appalling level with all its huge ramifications. What has quietly shocked me, from the moment of my arrival, is the refusal of everyone here to acknowledge their drastic culpability. During this fortnight I have been here, throughout all my dealings with these citizens, high or low, I have not witnessed - not once - anything that could pass for honest shame. Here, in other words, at the heart of the maelstrom threatening to suck in the whole of the civilised world, is a pathetic conspiracy of denial; a denial of responsibility which has turned in on itself and gone sour, manifesting itself in the sort of pompous defensiveness I have encountered so often. And here they now were, the so-called elite of Shanghai, treating with such contempt the suffering of their Chinese neighbours across the canal.

I was moving along the line of backs that had formed to watch the cabaret, trying to contain my sense of disgust, when I realised someone was tugging on my arm and turned to find Sarah.

‘Christopher,’ she said, ‘I’ve been trying to get over to you all evening. Have you no time to say hello to your old friends from home? Look, Cecil’s over there, he’s waving to you.’

It took me a little while to get a view of Sir Cecil through the crowd; he was seated alone at a table in a far corner of the room, and indeed was waving to me. I waved back, then looked at Sarah.

It was our first encounter since my arrival. The impression I received of her that evening was that she seemed very well; the Shanghai sun had removed her customary pallor to some advantage. Moreover, as we exchanged a few friendly words, her manner remained light-hearted and assured. It is only now, after the events of last night, that I find myself thinking over again that first encounter, in an attempt to discover how I could have been so deceived. Perhaps it is only hindsight that makes me recall something overly deliberate in her smile, particularly whenever she mentioned Sir Cecil. And although we exchanged little more than pleasantries, after last night, one phrase she uttered that evening - which even at the time rather puzzled me - has continued to return to me all day.

I had been enquiring how she and Sir Cecil had enjoyed the year they had spent here. She had been assuring me that although Sir Cecil had not achieved the breakthrough he had hoped for, he had none the less done much to earn the gratitude of the community. It was then that I had asked, with nothing much in mind:

‘So then you’ve no immediate plans to leave Shanghai?’

At which Sarah had laughed, cast another gaze towards Sir Cecil's corner, and said: 'No, we're quite settled for now. The Metropole's very comfortable. I don't expect we'll be going anywhere in a hurry. Not unless someone comes to the rescue, that is.'

She had said all this - including this last remark about being rescued - as though telling a joke, and although I did not know exactly what she meant, I had responded with a small laugh to go with hers. We had then, as far as I recall, talked about mutual friends in England until Grayson's arrival effectively put an end to a seemingly uncomplicated conversation.

It is only now, as I say, after last night, that I find myself searching back through my various encounters with Sarah over these three weeks, and it is this one phrase, added as a kind of afterthought to her breezy reply, to which I continue to return.

Chapter Thirteen

I spent most of the afternoon yesterday inside the dark, creaking boathouse where the three bodies had been discovered. The police respected my wish to carry out my investigations undisturbed to the extent that I lost all track of time and hardly noticed the sun setting outside. By the time I crossed the Bund and strolled down Nanking Road, the bright lights had come on and the pavements were filled with the evening crowds. After the long, dispiriting day, I felt the need to unwind a little and made my way to the corner of Nanking and Kiangse Road, to a small club I had been taken to in the days soon after my arrival. There is nothing so special about the place; it is just a quiet basement where most nights a lone French pianist will give melancholy renditions of Bizet or Gershwin. But it meets my needs well enough and I have returned there several times over these weeks. Last night, I spent perhaps an hour at a corner table, eating a little French food and making notes on what I had discovered in the boathouse, while the taxi-dancers swayed with their clients to the music.

I had climbed the staircase back up to the street intending to return to the hotel, when I happened to fall into conversation with the Russian doorman. He is some sort of count, and speaks excellent English learnt, he tells me, from his governess before the Revolution. I have got into the habit of passing a few words with him whenever I visit the club, and was doing so again last night when - I no longer remember what we were discussing - he happened to mention that Sir Cecil and Lady Medhurst had passed by earlier in the evening.

‘I suppose,’ I remarked, ‘they were off home for the night.’

At this, the count thought for a moment, then said: 'Lucky Chance House. Yes, I believe Sir Cecil mentioned they were on their way there.'

It was not an establishment I knew, but the count proceeded without prompting to give me directions, and since it was not far, I set off towards it.

His instructions were clear enough, but I am still uncertain of my way around the side-streets off Nanking Road, and managed to get a little lost. This was not something I minded so much. The atmosphere in that part of the city is not intimidating, even after dark, and although I was accosted by the odd beggar, and at one point a drunken sailor collided with me, I found myself drifting with the night-time crowd in a mood not far from tranquillity. After the depressing work in the boathouse, it was a relief to be amidst these pleasure-seekers of every race and class; to have the smells of food and incense come wafting towards me as I passed each brightly lit doorway.

Last night, too, as I have come increasingly to do of late, I believe I looked about me, scanning the faces in the passing crowd, hoping to spot Akira. For the fact is, I had almost certainly seen my old friend shortly after my arrival in Shanghai - on my second or third night here. It was the night Mr Keswick of Jardine Matheson and some other prominent citizens had decided I should 'taste the night-life'. I was still at that stage in something of a disorientated condition, and was finding the tour of dance-bars and clubs tiresome. We were in the entertainment area of the French Concession - I can see now my hosts were rather enjoying shocking me with some of the more lurid establishments - and we were just emerging from a club when I had seen his face go by in the crowd.

He was one of a group of Japanese men dressed in sharp suits, evidently out on the town. Of course, glimpsed so fleet-ingly - the figures had been virtually silhouettes

against a row of lanterns hanging in a doorway - I could not be completely sure it was Akira. Perhaps for this reason, perhaps for some other, I did nothing to attract the attention of my old friend. This might be hard to understand, but I can only say it was so. I suppose I was assuming then there would be many more such opportunities; perhaps I felt that to meet in such a way, by chance, when we each had other companions, was inappropriate - unworthy, even, of the reunion I had anticipated for so long. In any case, I had let the moment pass, and had simply followed Mr Keswick and the others to the awaiting limousine.

Over these past weeks, however, I have had much cause to regret my inaction that evening. For although, even at the busiest times, I have persisted in searching the crowd, in streets or in hotel lobbies, as I have gone about my business, I have yet to spot him again. I am aware I could take active steps to try and locate him; but really, the case must for now take priority. And Shanghai is not such a vast place; we are sure to happen upon one another sooner or later.

But to return to the events of last night. The doorman's directions eventually brought me to a kind of square where a number of little streets intersected and the crowd was thicker than ever. There were people trying to sell things, others trying to beg, while yet others were just standing about talking and watching. A lone rickshaw that had ventured into the throng had become stuck in its midst, and as I passed, the rickshawman was arguing furiously with a bystander. I could see Lucky Chance House on the far corner, and before long was being conducted up a narrow stairway covered in scarlet plush.

I first entered a room the size of an average hotel room, where a dozen Chinese were crowded around a gaming table. When I enquired if Sir Cecil was in the building, two of the staff conferred quickly, then one of them signalled for me to follow.

I was led up another flight of stairs, along a dim corridor, then into a room filled with smoke in which a group of Frenchmen were playing cards. When I shook my head, the man shrugged and beckoned me again. In this way I soon established that the building was a gambling emporium of some size, comprising many smallish rooms, each with some game or other in progress. But I grew exasperated at the way my guide would nod knowingly each time I repeated Sarah or Sir Cecil's name, just to lead me into yet another smoky room where only the wary eyes of strangers would look up at me. In any case, the more I saw of the establishment, the more unlikely it seemed Sir Cecil would bring Sarah into such a place, and I was on the point of giving up when I stepped through a door to find Sir Cecil sitting at a table, staring at a roulette wheel.

There were as many as twenty people present, mostly men. The room was not so smoky as some others, but felt hotter. Sir Cecil was utterly absorbed and gave me only the most cursory of waves before fixing his eyes back on the wheel.

Placed around the periphery of the room were some worn armchairs covered in a reddish material. In one of these, an old Chinese man - in a Western suit and drenched in sweat - was snoring away. The only other chair occupied was in the shadowy corner furthest from the gaming table, where Sarah was resting her head on the heel of a hand, her eyes half-closed.

She gave a start when I sat down beside her. 'Oh, Christopher. What are you doing here?'

'I was just passing by. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you.'

'Just passing by? This place? I don't believe it. You've been pursuing us.'

We were speaking in lowered tones so as not to distract the players at the table. From somewhere in the building, I

could hear faintly someone practising a trumpet.

‘I have to confess,’ I said, ‘I did happen to hear you’d come here. And since I was walking past …’

‘Oh, Christopher, you were lonely.’

‘Hardly. But I’ve had rather a gloomy day, and I felt like unwinding a little, that’s all. Though I must admit, I’d have hesitated if I’d known you were in a place like this.’

‘Don’t be cruel. Cecil and I, we enjoy being low-life. It’s fun. It’s all part of what Shanghai’s about. Now tell me about your gloomy day. You’re looking despondent. No breakthrough yet on your case, I suppose.’

‘No breakthrough, but I’m not despondent. Things are starting to take shape.’

When I then began to describe to her how I had spent over two hours on my hands and knees in a rotting boat in which three decaying corpses had been found, she pulled a face and stopped me.

‘It’s all so ghastly. Someone was saying at the tennis club today, the bodies all had their arms and legs cut off. Is that true?’

‘I’m afraid so.’

She pulled another face. ‘It’s too ghastly for words. But these were Chinese factory workers, weren’t they? Surely, they can’t have much to do with … with your parents.’

‘Actually, I believe this crime has a very significant bearing on my parents’ case.’

‘Really? They were saying at the tennis club these murders are all part of this Yellow Rat business. They’re saying the victims were the Yellow Rat’s nearest and dearest.’

‘Yellow Snake.’

‘Pardon?’

‘The communist informer. *Yellow Snake*.’

‘Oh yes. Well anyway, it’s so ghastly. What are the Chinese doing, tearing at each other’s throats at a time like this? You’d think the Reds and the government might put up a united front against the Japanese just for a little while at least.’

‘I suppose hatred between communists and nationalists runs pretty deep.’

‘That’s what Cecil says. Oh, look at him, how can he play like that?’

I followed her gaze and saw that Sir Cecil - who had his back to us - had slumped over to one side, so that most of his weight was on the table. There seemed every possibility of his sliding off the chair altogether.

Sarah looked at me a little awkwardly. Then rising, she went over to him, placed a hand on each of his shoulders, and spoke gently into his ear. Sir Cecil came awake and glanced about him. It is possible that at this point I took my gaze off them for a second, for I am not at all certain about what exactly happened next. I saw Sarah reel back, as though she had been struck, and for a second she seemed about to lose her balance, but then recovered. Sir Cecil, when I scrutinised his back, was sitting upright again, concentrating on the game, and I could not say it was he who had caused Sarah to stumble.

She saw me staring at her, and smiling, came back and sat down beside me again.

‘He’s tired,’ she said. ‘He has so much energy. But at his age, he really needs to rest more.’

‘Do the two of you often come to this place?’

She nodded. 'And a few others very similar. Cecil doesn't much like those big glittering places. He doesn't think it's possible to come out a winner in those places.'

'Do you always accompany him on these expeditions?'

'Someone has to look after him. He's not a young man, you see. Oh, I don't mind it. It's rather exciting. It's what this city's all about really.'

A collective sigh went around the gaming table and the players broke into conversation. I saw Sir Cecil attempt to rise, and only then did I realise how inebriated he was. He slumped back down in the chair, but on a second attempt, managed to rise and come unsteadily towards us. I stood up, expecting to shake hands, but he rested his hand on my shoulder, as much for balance as anything else, saying:

'My dear boy, my dear boy. Delighted to see you.'

'Did you have any luck just now, sir?'

'Luck? Oh no, no. Tonight's been a foul night. Whole wretched week, it's been bad, bad, bad. But you never know. I'll rise up again, ha ha! Rise from the ashes.'

Sarah too was on her feet and put out a hand to support him, but he brushed her off without looking at her. Then he said to me:

'I say. Care for a cocktail? There's a bar downstairs.'

'That's very kind, sir. But I really should be getting back to my hotel. Another hard day tomorrow.'

'Good to see you're working hard. Of course, I came out here to this city wanting to sort things a little myself. But you see' - he bent his face right down to me until it was only an inch or two away - 'too deep for me, my boy. Too deep by far.'

'Cecil, darling, let's go home now.'

‘Home? You call that rat-hole of a hotel home? You have an advantage on me, my dear, being the vagabond that you are. That’s why you don’t mind it.’

‘Let’s go now, darling. I’m tired.’

‘You’re tired. My little vagabond’s tired. Banks, do you have a car outside?’

‘I’m afraid not. But if you like I’ll try and find a taxi.’

‘Taxi? Think you’re in Piccadilly? Suppose you can hail a cab out there? Just as soon cut your throat, these Chinamen.’

‘Cecil, darling, please sit down here while Christopher finds Boris.’ Then she said to me: ‘Our driver should be somewhere not far. Would you mind terribly? Poor Cecil’s a little the worse for wear tonight.’

Doing my best to look good-humoured, I made my way out of the building, making a mental note of how to return to the room. The square outside was as dense as ever with people, but a little further on I could see a street in which rickshaws and motor cars were waiting in rows. I made my way over, and after a while of going from car to car uttering Sir Cecil’s name at chauffeurs of varying nationalities, I eventually got a response.

When I returned to the gambling house, Sarah and Sir Cecil were already outside. She was supporting him with both her hands, but his tall, bent form looked likely to overwhelm her at any second. As I came hurrying up, I could hear him saying:

‘It’s you they don’t like in there, my dear. When I used to frequent this place by myself, they always treated me like royalty. Oh yes, like royalty. Don’t like women of your sort. They only want real ladies or else whores. And you’re

neither. So you see, they don't like you one bit. Never had any trouble here until you insisted on tagging along.'

'Come along, darling. Here's Christopher. Well done, Christopher. Look, darling, he's found Boris for us.'

It was not a great distance to the Metropole, but the car could often move at no more than a crawl through the pedestrians and rickshaws. Throughout the journey, Sarah continued to hold Sir Cecil by the arm and shoulder while he drifted in and out of sleep. Whenever he came round, he would try to shake Sarah off, but she would laugh and continue to hold him steady in the lurching vehicle.

It was my turn to assist him as we negotiated the revolving doors of the Metropole, and then the lift, while Sarah exchanged cheerful greetings with the lobby staff. Then we were finally up in the Medhursts' suite and I was able to lower Sir Cecil into an armchair.

I thought he would doze off, but instead he grew suddenly alert again and began asking me some meaningless questions of which I could make neither head nor tail. Then when Sarah emerged from the bathroom with a flannel and began to mop his forehead, he said to me:

'Banks, my boy, you can speak frankly. This wench here. As you see, she's a good few years younger than me. No spring chicken herself, mind you, ha ha! But still, a good few years my junior. Tell me frankly, my boy, do you suppose, in a place like tonight's, where you found us tonight, a place like that, do you suppose a stranger looking at the two of us together ... Well, let's speak frankly! What I'm asking you is, do you suppose people take my wife for a harlot?'

Sarah's expression, as far as I could see it, did not change, though a slight urgency entered her ministrations, as though she hoped the treatment would bring a change of mood. Sir Cecil waved his head in irritation as though avoiding a fly, then said:

‘Come on, my boy. Do speak frankly now.’

‘Now, now, darling,’ Sarah said quietly. ‘You’re being unpleasant.’

‘I’ll tell you a secret, my boy. I’ll tell you a secret. I rather enjoy it. I like people to mistake my wife for a harlot. That’s why I like to frequent places like that one tonight. Get off me! Leave me alone!’ He pushed Sarah aside, then continued: ‘Other reason I go, of course, no doubt you guessed it, I owe a little money. Run up bit of a debt, you know. Nothing I won’t win back, of course.’

‘Darling, Christopher’s been very kind. You mustn’t bore him.’

‘What’s the harlot saying? Hear what she said, my boy? Well, don’t. Don’t listen to her. Don’t listen to trollops, that’s what I say. They’ll lead you astray. Particularly in times of war and conflict. Never listen to a trollop in times of war.’

He climbed to his feet unaided, and for a moment stood swaying before us in the middle of the room, his unfastened collar sticking out from his neck. Then he moved off into the bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Sarah gave me a smile, then went in after him. Had it not been for that smile – or rather, something like an appeal I detected behind it – I would certainly have withdrawn at that point. As it was, I remained in the room, examining absent-mindedly a Chinese bowl on a stand near the entrance. For a time, I could hear Sir Cecil shouting something; then there was silence.

Sarah emerged after perhaps five minutes and looked surprised to find me still there.

‘Is he all right?’ I asked.

‘He’s asleep now. He’ll be fine. I’m sorry you were inconvenienced, Christopher. Hardly what you were seeking

when you came looking for us this evening. We'll arrange something to make up. We'll take you out to dinner somewhere. Astor House has good food still.'

She was guiding me out of the room, but I turned at the door and said:

'This sort of thing. Does it happen a lot?'

She gave a sigh. 'Often enough. But you mustn't think I mind. It's just that I do worry sometimes. About his heart, you know. That's why I always go with him now.'

'You look after him well.'

'You mustn't get the wrong impression. Cecil's a dear man. We must take you out to dinner very soon. When you're not busy. But I suppose you're always busy.'

'Is this how Sir Cecil tends to pass all his evenings?'

'Most of them. Some of his days too.'

'Is there anything at all I can do?'

'Anything you can do?' She gave a light laugh. 'Look, Christopher, I'm fine. Really, you mustn't get the wrong impression about Cecil. He's a dear. I ... I do love him so.'

'Well, then, I'll say goodnight.'

She took another step towards me and raised a hand vaguely. I found myself grasping it, but not quite knowing what to do next, kissed the back of it. Then, mumbling another goodnight, I stepped into the corridor.

'You're not to worry about me, Christopher,' she whispered from the door. 'I'm perfectly all right.'

Those were her words to me last night. But today, it is those earlier words of hers, uttered three weeks ago when I first saw her at the ballroom of the Palace Hotel, that return to me with particular pertinence. 'I don't expect we'll be going anywhere in a hurry,' she had said. 'Unless

someone comes to the rescue.' What could she have intended by making such a remark to me that evening? As I say, even at the time it puzzled me, and I may well have quizzed her further about it had not Grayson, just at that moment, emerged out of the crowd, looking for me.

PART FIVE

*Cathay Hotel, Shanghai,
29th September 1937*

Chapter Fourteen

I mishandled my meeting this morning with MacDonald at the British consulate, and recalling it tonight only fills me with frustration. The fact is, he had prepared himself well and I had not. Time and again, I allowed him to lead me down false avenues, to waste my energy arguing over things he had decided to concede to me from the start. If anything, I was further forward with him four weeks ago, that evening at the ballroom of the Palace Hotel, when I first put to him this notion of an interview with the Yellow Snake. I had caught MacDonald unawares then, and had at least got him to admit, in so many words, his true role here in Shanghai. This morning, however, I had not obliged him even to relinquish his charade of being simply an official charged with protocol matters.

I suppose I underestimated him. I had thought it simply a matter of going in and reprimanding him for his slow progress in arranging what I had requested. Only now do I see how he laid his traps, realising that once I became annoyed, he would easily get the better of me. It was foolish to show my irritation in the way I did; but these continuous days of intense work have left me tired. And of course, there was the unexpected encounter with Grayson, the Municipal Council man, as I was going up to MacDonald's office. In fact, I would say it was this more than anything else which threw me off balance this morning, to the extent that for much of my subsequent discussion with MacDonald, my mind was actually elsewhere.

I had been kept waiting for several minutes in the little lounge on the second floor of the consulate building. The secretary finally came to inform me MacDonald was ready, and I had crossed the marbled landing and was standing before the

lift doors when Grayson came hurrying down the staircase, calling to me.

‘Good morning, Mr Banks! I’m so sorry, perhaps this isn’t the best time.’

‘Good morning, Mr Grayson. As a matter of fact, it isn’t ideal. I was just on my way up to see our friend Mr MacDonald.’

‘Oh well then, I won’t keep you. It’s just that here I was in the building and I heard you were here too.’ His cheerful laugh echoed around the walls.

‘It’s splendid to see you again, Mr Grayson. But just now ...’

‘I won’t keep you a second, sir. But if I may, you see, you’ve been a little difficult to track down recently.’

‘Well, Mr Grayson, if it can be dealt with very briefly.’

‘Oh very briefly. You see, sir, I realise this may seem like jumping ahead, but a certain amount of forward planning is required in these matters. If things aren’t up to scratch at such an important event, if things look even a little shoddy or amateurish ...’

‘Mr Grayson ...’

‘I’m so sorry. I just wished to have your thoughts on a few details concerning the welcome reception. We’ve now settled on Jessfield Park as the venue. We shall erect a marquee with a stage and public address system ... I’m so sorry, I’ll come to the point. Mr Banks, I really wished to discuss with you your own role in the proceedings. Our feeling is that the ceremony should be kept simple. What I had in mind was that perhaps you would say a few words concerning how you went about solving the case. Which vital clues finally led you to your parents, that sort of thing. Just a few words, the crowd would be so delighted. And then

at the end of your speech, I thought they might care to come out on to the stage. ’

‘They, Mr Grayson?’

‘Your parents, sir. My idea was that they might come on to the platform, wave, acknowledge the cheers, then withdraw. But of course, this is no more than an idea. I’m sure you’ll have some other excellent suggestions …’

‘No, no, Mr Grayson’ - I suddenly felt a great weariness coming over me - ‘it all sounds splendid, splendid. Now, if that’s all. I really must …’

‘Just one other thing, sir. A small matter, but one that might lend a most effective touch if pulled off just so. My idea was that at the moment your parents come out on to the platform, the brass band should strike up. Perhaps something like “Land of Hope and Glory”. Some of my colleagues are less keen on this idea, but to my mind …’

‘Mr Grayson, your idea sounds a marvellous one. What’s more, I’m exceedingly flattered by your utter confidence in my ability to solve this case. But now, please, I’m keeping Mr MacDonald waiting.’

‘Of course. Well, thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me.’

I pressed the button for the lift, and while I stood waiting, Grayson continued to hover. I had actually turned away from him to face the doors, when I heard him say:

‘The only other thing I wondered about, Mr Banks. Have you any idea where your parents will be staying on the day of the ceremony? You see, we shall need to ensure they’re conveyed to and from the park with minimum bother from the crowds.’

I cannot remember what I said to him in reply. Perhaps the lift doors opened at that moment, and I was able to take my leave of him with nothing more than a cursory response.

But it was this last question which hung in my mind throughout my meeting with MacDonald, and which, as I say, probably did more than anything else to prevent me thinking clearly about the matter in hand. And tonight, again, now that the demands of the day are behind me, I find this same question returning to my mind.

It is not that I have given no thought at all to the matter of where my parents should eventually be accommodated. It is just that it has always seemed to me premature - perhaps even 'tempting fate' - to contemplate such questions while the great complexities of the case have still to be unravelled. I suppose the only occasion over these past weeks when I gave the matter any real thought was on that evening I met up with my old schoolfriend, Anthony Morgan.

It was not long after my arrival here - my third or fourth night. I had known for some time that Morgan was living in Shanghai, but since we had never been especially friendly at St Dunstan's - despite our being in the same class throughout - I had made no special arrangements to meet up with him. But then I received from him a telephone call on the morning of that third day. I could tell he was rather hurt at my failure to get in touch, and eventually found myself agreeing to a rendezvous that evening in a hotel in the French Concession.

It was well after dark when I found him waiting in the dimly lit hotel lounge. I had not laid eyes on him since school and was shocked by how worn and heavy-set he had become. But I tried to keep any such impression out of my voice as we exchanged warm greetings.

'Funny,' he said, patting me on the back. 'Doesn't seem so long ago. And yet in some ways, it feels like another age.'

'It certainly does.'

‘Do you know,’ he went on, ‘I got a letter the other day from Emeric the Dane? Remember him? Emeric the Dane! Hadn’t heard from him in years! Living in Vienna now, it seems. Old Emeric. You remember him?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I said, though I could summon only the vaguest memory of such a boy. ‘Good old Emeric.’

For the next half-hour or so, Morgan chattered on with hardly a break. He had come out to Hong Kong straight after Oxford, then moved to Shanghai eleven years ago after securing a position at Jardine Matheson. Then at one point he broke off his story to say:

‘You wouldn’t believe the God-awful trouble I’ve been having with chauffeurs since all this trouble started. Regular one got killed the first day the Japs started shelling. Found another man, turned out to be a bandit of some sort. Kept having to rush off to perform his gang duties, could never be found when you wanted to go somewhere. Picked me up once at the American Club with blood all over his shirt. Not his own, I soon gathered. Didn’t say a word in apology, typical Chinaman. That was the last straw for me. Then I had two others, couldn’t drive at all. One actually hit a rickshawman, hurt the poor fellow quite badly. Driver I’ve got now’s not much better, so let’s keep fingers crossed he gets us there all right.’

I had no idea what he meant by this last statement, since as far as I could recall we had not agreed to go anywhere else that night. But I did not feel like picking him up on it, and then he had quickly moved on to telling me about the shortages afflicting the hotel. The lounge we were sitting in, he confided, was not always so dimly lit: the war had stopped the supply of light bulbs from the Chapei factories; in some other parts of the hotel, guests were having to wander about through darkness. He pointed out also that at least three members of the dance-band at the far end of the room were not playing their instruments.

‘That’s because they’re really porters. The real musicians have either fled Shanghai or been killed in the fighting. Still, they do a fair impersonation, don’t you think?’

Now that he had pointed it out, I saw that their impersonations were, in fact, poor in the extreme. One man looked utterly bored and was hardly bothering to hold his violin bow near his instrument; another was standing with a clarinet virtually forgotten in his hands, staring in open-mouthed wonder at the real musicians playing around him. It was only when I congratulated Morgan on his intimate knowledge of the hotel that he told me he had in fact been living there for over a month, having judged his apartment in Hongkew ‘too close for comfort’ to the fighting. When I muttered some words of sympathy that he had had to abandon his home, his mood suddenly changed, and for the first time I saw about him a melancholy that brought to mind the unhappy and lonely boy I had known at school.

‘Wasn’t much of a home anyway,’ he said, looking into his cocktail. ‘Just me, a few servants that came and went. Miserable little place really. In some ways, it was just an excuse, the fighting. Gave me a good reason to walk out. It was a miserable little place. All my furniture was Chinese. Couldn’t sit comfortably anywhere. Had a songbird once, but it died. It’s better for me here. Much quicker to my watering holes.’ Then he looked at his watch, drained his glass and said: ‘Well, better not keep them waiting. Car’s outside.’

There was something about Morgan’s manner - a kind of nonchalant urgency - that made it hard to raise any objections. Besides, these were still my early days in the city, when I was in the habit of being taken from function to function by various hosts. I thus followed Morgan out of the building and before long was sitting with him in the back of his car, moving through the lively night-time streets of the French Concession.

Almost immediately, the driver only just avoided an oncoming tram, and I thought this would start Morgan off again on his chauffeur problems. But now he had fallen into an introspective mood, staring silently out of his window at the passing neon and Chinese banners. At one point, when I remarked to him, in an attempt to glean something about the event to which we were going: 'Do you suppose we'll be late?' he glanced at his watch again and replied distractedly: 'They've been waiting for you this long, they won't mind a few more minutes.' Then he added: 'This must feel so odd for you.'

For a while after that we travelled on, speaking little. Once we went down a side-street on both sides of which the pavements were filled with huddled figures. I could see them in the lamplight, sitting, squatting, some curled up asleep on the ground, squeezed one upon the other, so that there was only just enough space down the middle of the street for traffic to pass. They were of every age - I could see babies asleep in mothers' arms - and their belongings were all around them; ragged bundles, bird-cages, the occasional wheelbarrow piled high with possessions. I have now grown used to such sights, but on that evening I stared out of the car in dismay. The faces were mostly Chinese, but as we came towards the end of the street, I saw clusters of European children - Russians, I supposed.

'Refugees from north of the canal,' Morgan said blandly, and turned away. For all his being a refugee himself, he appeared to feel no special empathy with his poorer counterparts. Even when once I thought we had run over a sleeping form, and glanced back in alarm, my companion merely murmured: 'Don't worry. Probably just some old bundle.'

Then after several minutes of silence, he startled me with a laugh. 'Schooldays,' he said. 'All comes back to you. They weren't so bad, I suppose.'

I glanced at him and noticed tears welling in his eyes. Then he said:

‘You know, we should have teamed up. The two miserable loners. That was the thing to do. You and me, we should have teamed up together. Don’t know why we didn’t. We wouldn’t have felt so left out of things if we’d done that.’

I turned to him in astonishment. But his face, caught in the changing light, told me he was somewhere far away.

As I have said, I could remember well enough Anthony Morgan’s being something of a ‘miserable loner’ at school. It was not that he was particularly bullied or teased by the rest of us; rather, as I recall it, it was Morgan himself who from an early stage cast himself in that role. He it was who always chose to walk by himself, lagging several yards behind the main group; who on bright summer days refused to join in the fun, and was to be found instead alone in a room, filling a notebook with doodles. All this I can remember clearly enough. In fact, as soon as I had spotted him that night in the gloomy hotel lounge, what had come instantly to mind was an image of his sulky, solitary walk behind the rest of us as we crossed the quadrangle between the art room and the cloisters. But his assertion that I had likewise been a ‘miserable loner’, one with whom he might have made a matching pair, was such an astounding one, it took me a little while to realise it was simply a piece of self-delusion on Morgan’s part - in all likelihood something he had invented years ago to make more palatable memories of an unhappy period. As I say, this did not occur to me instantly, and thinking about it now I see I may have been a little insensitive in my response. For I remember saying something like:

‘You must have me mixed up with someone else, old fellow. I was always one for mucking in. I dare say you’re thinking of that fellow Bigglesworth. Adrian Bigglesworth. He was certainly a bit of a loner.’

‘Bigglesworth?’ Morgan thought about this, then shook his head. ‘I remember the chap. Rather heavy-set, jug ears? Old Bigglesworth. My, my. But no, I wasn’t thinking of him.’

‘Well, it wasn’t me, old man.’

‘Extraordinary.’ He shook his head again, then turned back to his window.

I too turned away, and for the next little while gazed out at the night-time streets. We were once again moving through a busy entertainment area, and I glanced through the faces in the crowds, hoping to glimpse Akira’s. Then we were in a residential district full of hedges and trees, and before long the driver brought the car to a halt inside the grounds of a large house.

Morgan left the vehicle hurriedly. I too got out - the chauffeur made no effort to assist - and followed him along a gravelled path leading around the side of the house. I suppose I had been expecting a big reception of some sort, but I could now see this was not what awaited us; the house was for the most part dark, and aside from our own car, there was only one other in the courtyard.

Morgan, who was clearly familiar with the house, brought us to a side door flanked by tall shrubs. He opened it without ringing and ushered me inside.

We found ourselves in a spacious hallway lit by candles. Peering before me, I could make out musty-looking scrolls, huge porcelain vases, a lacquered chest of drawers. The smell in the air - of incense mingled with that of excrement - was oddly comforting.

No servant or host appeared. My companion continued to stand beside me, not saying a word. After a time, it occurred to me he was waiting for me to make some comment on our surroundings. So I said:

'I know little about Chinese artwork. But even to my eye, it's clear we're surrounded by some rather fine things.'

Morgan stared at me in astonishment. Then he shrugged and said: 'I suppose you're right. Well, let's go in.'

He led the way further into the house. We were in darkness for several steps, and then I heard voices talking in Mandarin, and saw light coming from a doorway hung with beaded threads. We passed through the beads, then a further set of drapes, into a large warm room lit with candles and lanterns.

What do I remember now of the rest of that evening? It has already grown a little hazy in my mind, but let me try and piece it together as clearly as I can. My first thought on entering that room was that we had disturbed some family celebration. I glimpsed a big table laden with food, and seated around it, eight or nine people. All were Chinese; the youngest - two men in their twenties - were dressed in Western suits, but the rest were in traditional dress. An old lady, seated at one end of the table, was being assisted in her eating by a servant. An elderly gentleman - surprisingly tall and broad for an Oriental - whom I took to be the head of the household, had immediately risen upon our arrival, and now the other males in the company followed his example. But at this stage, my impression of these people remained vague, for very rapidly it was the room itself that had begun to command all my attention.

The ceiling was high and beamed. Beyond the diners, right at the back, was a kind of minstrels' gallery, from the rail of which hung a brace of paper lanterns. It was this section of the room that had drawn my gaze, and I now continued to stare past the table towards it, hardly hearing my host's words of welcome. For what was dawning upon me was that the entire rear half of the room in which I was now standing was

in fact what used to be the entrance hall of our old Shanghai house.

Obviously some vast restructuring had taken place over the years. I could not, for instance, work out at all how the areas through which Morgan and I had just entered related to our old hall. But the minstrels' gallery at the back clearly corresponded to the balcony at the top of our grand curving staircase.

I drifted forward, and probably remained standing there for some time, gazing up at the gallery, tracing with my eye the route our stairs had once taken. And as I did so, I found an old memory coming back to me, of a period in my childhood when I had made a habit of coming down the long curve of the stairs at huge speed and taking off two or three steps from the bottom - usually while flapping my arms - to land in the depths of a couch positioned just a little way away. My father, whenever he witnessed this, would laugh; but both my mother and Mei Li disapproved. Indeed, my mother, who could never quite explain why this particular practice was wrong, would always threaten to have the couch removed if I persisted with the habit. Then once, when I was around eight, I attempted this feat for the first time in months to discover the couch could no longer take the impact of my increased weight. One end of the frame completely collapsed, and I tumbled on to the floor, utterly shocked. The next instant, though, I had remembered my mother was coming down the stairs behind me, and had braced myself for the most terrible dressing down. But my mother, looming over me, had burst out laughing. 'Look at your face, Puffin!' she had exclaimed. 'If you could only see your face!'

I had not been hurt at all, but when my mother had continued to laugh - and perhaps because I was still afraid of a scolding - I had begun to make the most of a pain I could feel in my ankle. My mother had then stopped her laughing and had helped me up gently. I remember her then walking me slowly round and round the hall, an arm around my

shoulder, saying: 'There now, that's better, isn't it? We'll just walk it off. There now, it's nothing.'

I never was scolded over the incident and a few days later I came in to find the couch had been mended; but although I continued often to jump from the second or third step, I never again attempted a dive into the couch.

I took a few paces around the room, trying to work out the exact spot where the couch would have been. As I did so, I found I could conjure up only the haziest picture of what it had actually looked like - though I could recall quite vividly the feel of its silky fabric.

Then eventually I became conscious of the others in the room, and the fact that they were all watching me with gentle smiles. Morgan and the elderly Chinese man had been conferring quietly. Seeing me turn, Morgan took a step forward, cleared his throat and began the introductions.

He was obviously friendly with the family and reeled off the names without hesitation. As he did so, each of them gave a little bow and smile, touching hands together. Only the old lady at the end of the table, whom Morgan introduced with extra deference, went on gazing at me impassively. The family was called Lin - beyond this, I do not now remember any names - and it was Mr Lin himself, the elderly, bulky gentleman, who from this point took charge.

'I trust, my good sir,' he said in an English only slightly accented, 'that it gives a warm feeling to return here again.'

'Yes, it does.' I gave a little laugh. 'Yes. And it's a little strange also.'

'But that is natural,' Mr Lin said. 'Now please make yourself comfortable. Mr Morgan tells me you have already dined. But as you see, we have prepared food for you. We did not know if you cared for Chinese cuisine. So we borrowed the cook of our English neighbour.'

‘But perhaps Mr Banks isn’t hungry.’

This was said by one of the young men in suits. Then turning to me the latter continued: ‘My grandfather is rather the old-fashioned type. He gets very offended if a guest doesn’t accept every piece of hospitality.’ The young man smiled broadly at the old man. ‘Please don’t let him bully you, Mr Banks.’

‘My grandson believes me to be an old-fashioned Chinese,’ Mr Lin said, coming closer to me, the smile never leaving his face. ‘But the truth is, I am born and bred in Shanghai, here in the International Settlement. My parents were obliged to flee the Empress Dowager’s forces, and take sanctuary here, in the foreigner’s city, and I have grown up a Shanghailanders through and through. My grandson here has no idea what life is like in the real China. He considers *me* old-fashioned! Ignore him, my dear sir. There is no need to worry about protocol in this house. If you do not wish to eat, then never mind. I will certainly not bully you.’

‘But you’re all so kind,’ I said, perhaps a little distractedly, for in truth I was still trying to work out how the building had been altered.

Then suddenly the old lady said something in Mandarin. The young man who had addressed me before, then said:

‘My grandmother says she thought you would never come. It was such a long wait. But now she’s seen you, she’s very happy you are here.’

Even before he had finished translating, the old lady was talking again. This time, when she finished, the young man remained silent for a moment. He looked at his grandfather as though for guidance, then appeared to come to a decision.

‘You must excuse Grandmother,’ he said. ‘She is sometimes a little eccentric.’

The old lady, perhaps understanding the English, gestured impatiently for a translation. Finally the young man sighed and said:

‘Grandmother says that until you came in this evening, she resented you. That is to say, she was angry that you are to take our home from us.’

I looked at the young man, quite baffled, but now the old lady was talking again.

‘She says that for a long time.’ her grandson translated, ‘she hoped you would stay away. She believed this home belonged to our family now. But tonight, seeing you in person, seeing the emotion in your eyes, she is able to understand. She now feels in her heart that the agreement is correct.’

‘The agreement? But surely ...’

I allowed the words to fade in my mouth. For puzzled as I was, while the young man had been translating his grandmother’s words, I had started to locate some vague recollection concerning some such arrangement regarding the old house and my eventual return to it. But as I say, my memory of it was only a very hazy one, and I sensed that by opening a discussion on the matter I would only embarrass myself. In any case, just at that moment Mr Lin said:

‘I fear we are all being most inconsiderate to Mr Banks. Here we are, making him chatter to us, when in fact he must be longing to look about this house once more.’ Then turning to me with a kindly smile, he said: ‘Come with me, good sir. There will be time enough to talk to everyone later. Come this way and I will show you the house.’

Chapter Fifteen

For the next several minutes, I followed Mr Lin all around the building. Despite his age, my host showed little sign of infirmity; he carried his bulk steadily, if slowly, hardly ever pausing for breath. I pursued his dark gown and whispering slippers up and down narrow stairs, and along back corridors lit often only by a single lantern. He led me through areas that were bare and cobwebbed, past numerous neatly stacked wooden crates of rice wine. Elsewhere the house became sumptuous; there were beautiful screens and wall hangings, clusters of porcelain displayed within alcoves. Every so often, he would open a door, then stand back to let me pass. I entered various kinds of room, but - for some time at least - saw nothing at all familiar to me.

Then finally I stepped through a door and felt something tugging at my memory. It took a few seconds more, but I then recognised with a wave of emotion our old 'library'. It had been greatly altered: the ceiling was much higher, a wall had been knocked through to make the space L-shaped; and where there had once been double doors through into our dining room, there was now a partition against which were stacked more crates of rice wine. But it was unmistakably the same room where as a child I had done much of my homework.

I drifted further into the room, looking all around me. After a while I became aware of Mr Lin regarding me and gave him a self-conscious smile. At which point, he said:

'No doubt much has been changed. Please accept my apologies. But you must understand, over eighteen years, which is how long we have lived here, a few alterations have been inevitable to meet the needs of my household and of my business. And I understand the occupants before us, and those before them, carried out extensive alterations. Most

unfortunate, my good sir, but I suppose few could have foreseen that one day you and your parents ...’

He trailed off, perhaps because he thought I was not listening, perhaps because like most Chinese, he was uncomfortable with apologies. I went on gazing about me for a while longer, then asked him:

‘So this house, it’s no longer owned by Morganbrook and Byatt?’

He looked astonished, then laughed. ‘Sir, I am the owner of this house.’

I saw I had insulted him, and said hurriedly: ‘Yes, of course. I do beg your pardon.’

‘Don’t worry, my good sir’ - his genial smile had quickly returned - ‘it was not an unreasonable question. After all, when you and your dear parents lived here, that was no doubt the situation. But I believe that has long ceased to be. My good sir, if you will only consider how much Shanghai has changed over the years. Everything, everything has changed and changed again. All this’ - he sighed and gestured about us - ‘by comparison these are small changes. There are parts of this city I once knew so well, places I would walk every day, I now go there and I know not which way to turn. Change, change all the time. And now the Japanese, they wish to make *their* changes here. The most terrible changes may yet overtake us. But one must not be pessimistic.’

For a moment, we both stood there in silence, continuing to look about us. Then he said quietly:

‘My family, of course, will be saddened to leave this house. My father died here. Two grandchildren were born here. But when my wife spoke earlier - and you must forgive her frankness, Mr Banks - she did speak for us all. We will consider it a great honour and privilege to return this house

to you and your parents. Now, my good sir, let us continue if we may. ’

I believe it was not long after that we climbed a carpeted staircase - one which certainly did not exist in my time - and stepped into a luxuriously furnished bedroom. There were rich fabrics, and lanterns casting a reddish glow.

‘My wife’s room,’ Mr Lin said.

I could see it was a sanctuary, a cosy boudoir where the old lady probably whiled away most of her day. In the warm lantern light, I could make out a card table upon which a number of different sorts of game appeared to be in progress; a writing desk with a column of tiny gold-tasselled drawers running down one side; a large four-poster bed with layers of veil-like drapes. Elsewhere my gaze caught various fine ornaments, and items of amusement whose exact natures I could not guess.

‘Madame must like this room,’ I said eventually. ‘I can see her world here.’

‘It suits her. But you mustn’t concern yourself on her behalf, my good sir. We will find her another room she will come to love equally.’

He had spoken to reassure me, but something fragile had entered his voice. He now drifted further into the room, over to a dressing table, and became absorbed by some small object there - perhaps a brooch. After several moments, he said quietly:

‘She was very beautiful when she was younger. The most beautiful flower, my good sir. You cannot imagine. In this respect, I am like a Westerner in my heart. I have never wanted any wife but her. One wife, quite enough. Of course, I took others. I am Chinese, after all, even if I have lived all my life here in the foreigners’ city. I felt obliged to take other wives. But she is the one I truly cared for. The others have all gone now, and she is left. I miss the others,

but I'm glad, in my heart I'm glad that in our old age, it is just the two of us again.' For a few seconds, he seemed to forget my presence. Then he turned to me and said: 'This room. I wonder how you will come to use it. Pardon me, this is very impertinent. But do you think this room will be for your own good wife? Of course, I am aware that for many foreigners, however wealthy, husband and wife will share the same room. I wonder then if this room will go to yourself and your good wife. My curiosity, I realise, is most impertinent. But this room is very special for me. It is my hope that you will put it to special use.'

'Yes ...' I looked around it again carefully. Then I said: 'Perhaps not my wife. My wife, you see, to speak frankly ...' I realised that in this talk of a wife, I had had a picture of Sarah in my mind. Covering my embarrassment, I went on quickly: 'What I mean, sir, is I'm not yet married. I have no wife. But I think this room will suit my mother.'

'Ah yes. After all the inconveniences she has had to suffer, this room will be ideal for her. And your father? I wonder, will he share it with her in the Western manner? Please forgive my great intrusion.'

'It's no intrusion, Mr Lin. After all, by letting me in here, it is you who have allowed me great intimacy. You have every right to ask these questions. It's just that this is all rather sudden, and I've not yet had time fully to make my plans ...'

I drifted into silence and went on gazing at the room. Then after a moment, I said to him: 'Mr Lin, I'm afraid this may upset you. But you've been more open and generous than I could ever have expected, and I feel you deserve my honesty. You said yourself just now, how inevitable it is that a house undergoes alteration whenever its occupants change. Well, sir, dear as these rooms are to you, I'm afraid that once my family are again living here, we will carry out our own

alterations. This room too, I fear, will change beyond recognition. ’

Mr Lin closed his eyes, and there was a heavy silence. I wondered if he would become angry, and for a second regretted being so honest with him. But then when he opened his eyes again, he was regarding me gently.

‘Of course,’ he said, ‘it is quite natural. You will wish to restore this house to just the way it was when you were a boy. That is quite natural. My good sir, I understand it perfectly. ’

I thought about this for a moment, then said: ‘Well, actually, Mr Lin, we would probably not turn it back exactly to what it was then. For one thing, as I remember it, there were many things we were unhappy about. My mother, for instance, never had her own study. With all her campaign work, a little bureau in the bedroom was never adequate. My father too wanted a little workshop for his woodwork. What I’m saying is that there’s no need to turn back the clock just for the sake of it. ’

‘That is most wise, Mr Banks. And although you have not yet taken a wife, perhaps soon there will come the day when you have the needs of a wife and children to consider. ’

‘That’s certainly possible. Unfortunately, just at present, this question of a wife, in my case, Western customs notwithstanding ...’ I became very confused and stopped. But the old man nodded sagely, saying:

‘Of course, in matters of the heart, things are never simple. ’ Then he asked: ‘You wish for children, good sir? I wonder how many you will have. ’

‘As a matter of fact, I already have a child. A young girl. Though she isn’t really my daughter as such. She was an orphan and now she’s in my care. I do look on her as a daughter. ’

I had not thought about Jennifer for some time, and mentioning her like this so unexpectedly caused a powerful feeling to well up within me. Images of her ran through my mind; I thought of her at her school, and wondered how she was, and what she had been doing that day.

I perhaps turned away to hide my emotions. In any case, when I next looked at him, Mr Lin was nodding again.

‘We Chinese are well used to such arrangements,’ he said. ‘Blood is important. But so is household. My father took in an orphan girl and she grew up with us as though she were my sister. I regarded her as such, though I knew always of her origins. When she died, in the cholera epidemic when I was still a young man, I felt as much grief as when my blood sisters passed away.’

‘If I may say so, Mr Lin, it’s a great pleasure to talk to you. It’s rare to find someone so immediately understanding.’

He gave a small bow, bringing his fingertips together before him. ‘When one has lived as long as I have, and through the turmoil of these years, one knows many joys and sadnesses. I hope your adopted daughter will be happy here. I wonder which room you will give her. But of course, forgive me! As you say, you will alter.’

‘In fact, one of the rooms we saw earlier would be ideal for Jennifer. It had a little wooden ledge running along the wall.’

‘She likes such a ledge?’

‘Yes. For her things. And in fact there’s one further person I shall be accommodating here in this house. I suppose she was officially a sort of servant, but in our household she was always much more. Her name is Mei Li.’

‘She was your *amah*, good sir?’

I nodded. 'She would be older now and I'm sure she'd appreciate a rest from her work. Children can be very taxing. It was always my intention that when she was old, she'd go on living with us here.'

'That is most kind-hearted of you. One so often hears of foreign families who throw out the *amah* once her charges are grown. Such women are often to be seen ending their days as street beggars.'

I gave a laugh. 'I hardly think that could ever happen to Mei Li. In fact, the very thought is quite absurd. In any case, as I say, she'll be living here with us. As soon as my task is accomplished, I'll turn my mind to locating her. I don't imagine it will be so difficult.'

'And tell me, good sir, will you give her a room in the servants' quarters or with the family?'

'With the family, certainly. My parents might take a dim view of that. But then really, I'm the head of the household now.'

Mr Lin smiled. 'According to your custom, that will certainly be so. For us Chinese, fortunately for me, the old are permitted to go on ruling the house well into their foolish years.'

The old man laughed to himself and turned towards the door. I was about to follow, but just at that moment - quite suddenly and very vividly - I found another memory returning to me. I have thought about it since, and I have no idea why it was that particular recollection rather than any other. It was of an occasion when I was six or seven, when my mother and I had raced each other along a stretch of lawn. I do not know where exactly this was; I would suppose now we were in one of the parks - perhaps Jessfield Park - for I can remember a trellised fence beside where we ran, covered in climbing flowers and creepers. It was a warm day, but not especially sunny. I had impulsively challenged my mother to

the race, to some marker a short distance before us, as a way of showing off to her my improved running ability. I had assumed completely that I would outpace her, and that she would then express, in her usual way, her delighted surprise at this latest manifestation of my maturing prowess. But to my annoyance she had kept up with me all the way, laughing as she went, although I was running with all my strength. I do not remember which of us actually 'won', but I still recall my fury at her, and my sense that I had suffered a grave injustice. It was this incident that came back to me that night as I stood in the snugly sheltered atmosphere of Madam Lin's bedroom. Or rather, a fragment of it: a memory of me pushing into the wind with all my might; my mother's laughing presence beside me; the rustling of her skirt, and my rising frustration.

'Sir,' I said to my host, 'I wonder if I may ask you. You say you've lived all your life here in the Settlement. I wonder then if during that time you ever met my mother.'

'I never had the good fortune to meet her in person,' Mr Lin said. 'But of course, I knew of her, and of her great campaign. I admired her, like all decent-minded people. I am sure she is a fine lady. And I've heard it said she is very beautiful.'

'I suppose she might be. One never thinks about whether one's mother is beautiful.'

'Oh, I've heard it said she is the most beautiful Englishwoman in Shanghai.'

'I suppose she might be. But of course, she'll be older now.'

'Certain kinds of beauty never fade. My wife' - he gestured at the room - 'she is as beautiful to me now as the day I married her.'

When he said this, I suddenly felt as though I were intruding, and this time it was I who made the first move to

leave.

I do not remember a great deal more about my visit to the house that evening. Perhaps we stayed another hour, talking and eating with the family around the table. In any case, I know I parted from the Lin family on the best of terms. It was during the journey back, however, that Morgan and I rather fell out.

It was probably my fault. I was by that stage tired and somewhat overwrought. We had been travelling through the night for a while in silence, and my mind had perhaps begun to drift back to the immense task before me. For I remember I said to Morgan, quite out of the blue:

‘Look, you’ve been here a few years now. Tell me, have you come across a certain Inspector Kung?’

‘Inspector Kung? Policeman or something?’

‘When I was a child here, Inspector Kung was something of a legend. As a matter of fact, he was the officer originally in charge of my parents’ case.’

To my surprise, I heard Morgan beside me give a guffaw. Then he said:

‘Kung? *Old Man* Kung? Yes, of course, he used to be a police inspector. Well then, it’s no wonder nothing got sorted out at the time.’

His tone took me aback, and I said rather coldly: ‘In those days, Inspector Kung was the most revered detective in Shanghai, if not the whole of China.’

‘Well, he still has something of a name for himself, I can tell you. *Old Man* Kung. Well I never.’

‘I’m glad at least to hear he’s still in the city. Do you have any idea where I’d find him?’

‘Simplest way’s just to wander around Frenchtown any night after dark. Bound to come across him sooner or later.’

You usually see him in a heap on the pavement. Or if he's been let into some hole of a bar, he'll be snoring away in a dark corner.'

'Are you implying Inspector Kung's become a drunk?'

'Drink. Opium. Usual Chinaman stuff. But he's a character. Tells stories about his glory days and people give him coins.'

'I think you're thinking of the wrong man, old fellow.'

'Don't think so, old chap. Old Man Kung. So he really was a policeman. I always fancied he was making all that up. Most of his stories *are* preposterous. What's the matter, old fellow?'

'The trouble with you, Morgan, is you keep muddling things. First you muddle up me and Bigglesworth. Now you get Inspector Kung muddled with some worthless ragamuffin. Being out here's got your head all soft, old man.'

'Now look here, pipe down a bit. What I'm telling you, you'll hear from anyone else you care to ask. And I rather take exception to your comments. Nothing soft about my head.'

We may have returned to slightly more civil terms by the time he dropped me off at the Cathay, but our parting was distinctly cold and I have not seen Morgan again since. As for Inspector Kung, it had been my intention after that evening to seek him out without delay, but for whatever reason - perhaps I feared Morgan might have been telling the truth - I have never made it a priority - at least, not until yesterday, when my search through the police archives threw up the inspector's name again in the most dramatic fashion.

This morning, incidentally, when I mentioned Inspector Kung in passing to MacDonald, his reaction was not dissimilar to Morgan's that night, and I suspect here was yet another

reason for my impatience with MacDonald as we faced each other in his airless little office overlooking the consulate grounds. All the same, with a little more effort, I know I could have made a much better job of it. My central error this morning was to allow him to goad me into losing my temper. At one point, I fear, I was practically shouting at him.

‘Mr MacDonald, it simply isn’t enough to leave things to what you insist on calling my “powers”! I have no such “powers”! I am a mere mortal, and I can only achieve my goals if I am given the sort of basic assistance that allows me to go about my work. I’ve not asked much of you, sir. Hardly anything at all! And what I’ve asked, I’ve put to you very clearly. I wish to speak to this communist informer. Just speak with him, a short interview will suffice. I made this request to you in the clearest terms. I fail to understand why arrangements still have not been made. Why is that, sir? Why is that? What can possibly be impeding you?’

‘But look here, old fellow, this is hardly a matter for my office. If you wish, I’ll get the police commissioner over to see you. Mind you, even then, you see, I’m not at all sure you’ll get anywhere useful. It’s not they who have the Yellow Snake ...’

‘I fully appreciate it’s the Chinese government who are keeping the Yellow Snake under their protection. That is why I have come to you and not to the police. I’m aware that in a matter of this magnitude, the police are an irrelevance.’

‘I’ll see what I can do, old chap. But you must understand, this isn’t a British colony. We can’t go ordering the Chinese about. But I’ll talk to someone in the appropriate office. Don’t bet on anything happening too quickly though. Chiang Kai-shek’s had informers before, but never one with quite such extensive knowledge of the Reds’ network. Chiang would lose a good few battles with the Japs before allowing anything to happen to this Yellow Snake chap.

As far as Chiang is concerned, you see, the real enemy's not the Japs but the Reds. '

I gave a loud sigh. 'Mr MacDonald, I do not care about Chiang Kai-shek or his priorities. Just now, I have a case to solve, and I would like you to do whatever you can to secure an interview for me with this informer. I am putting it to you personally, and if all my efforts come to nothing because this simple request is not granted, I shan't hesitate to let it be known that it was you I came to ...'

'Now really, old fellow, please! There's no need to take this sort of line! No need at all! We're all friends here. We all wish you to succeed. Take my word for it, we really do. Look here, I've said I'll do all I can. I'll talk to a few people, you know, people in that line of work. I'll talk to them, tell them how strongly you feel. But you have to understand, there's only so much we can do with the Chinese.' Then he leant forward and said confidently: 'You know, you might try the French. They have a lot of little understandings with Chiang. You know, of the off-the-record sort. The kind of thing we wouldn't touch. That's the French for you.'

Perhaps there is something in MacDonald's suggestion. Perhaps I might indeed get some useful help from the French authorities. But frankly, since this morning, I have not given this option much thought. It is clear to me that MacDonald, for reasons which as yet remain unclear, is prevaricating, and that once he has recognised the overwhelming importance of granting my request, he will do whatever is necessary. Unfortunately, it is probable I handled this morning's meeting so incompetently I will have to tackle him one further time. It is not a prospect to which I particularly look forward, but at least the next time my approach will be different, and he will not find it so easy to send me away empty-handed.

PART SIX

*Cathay Hotel, Shanghai,
20th October 1937*

Chapter Sixteen

I knew we were somewhere in the French Concession, not far from the harbour, but otherwise I had lost my bearings. The chauffeur had for some time been steering us through tiny alleys quite unsuitable for a car, sounding his horn repeatedly to get pedestrians out of our way, and I had begun to feel ridiculous, like a man who has brought a horse into a house. But eventually the car stopped, and the driver, opening my door, pointed out the entrance to the Inn of Morning Happiness.

I was led inside by a thin Chinese man with one eye. What comes back to me today is an overall impression of low ceilings, dark damp wood and the usual smell of sewage. But the establishment seemed clean enough; at one point we stepped around three old women on their knees, diligently scrubbing the floorboards. Somewhere near the rear of the building, we came to a corridor with a long row of doors. I was reminded of stables, or even a prison, but these cubicles, it turned out, contained the inn's guests. The one-eyed man knocked on one of the doors, then opened it before any reply had been given.

I stepped into a small narrow space. There was no window, but the partitions did not go right up to the ceiling - the last foot or so being wire mesh - thus allowing light and air to circulate. For all that, the cubicle was stuffy and dark, and even when the afternoon sun broke brightly outside, it resulted only in the mesh throwing odd patterns over the floor. The figure lying on the bed appeared to be asleep, but then moved his legs when I took up a position in the gap between the bed and the wall. The one-eyed man mumbled something and vanished, the door closing behind him.

Former Inspector Kung looked to be little more than bones. The skin on his face and neck was shrivelled and

spotted; his mouth hung open slackly; a bare, stick-like leg was protruding from the coarse blanket, though on his top half I saw he had on a surprisingly white undershirt. He did not at first make any attempt to sit up, and appeared only vaguely to register my presence. And yet he did not seem directly under the sway of opium or alcohol, and eventually, as I continued to state who I was and my purpose in coming to see him, he became more coherent, and began to show signs of courtesy.

‘I’m sorry, sir’ - his English, when it came, was fluent enough - ‘I have no tea.’ He began to mumble something in Mandarin, shuffling his legs about beneath his blanket. Then he appeared to remember himself again and said: ‘Please forgive me. I’m not well. But soon, I will recover my good health.’

‘I sincerely hope so,’ I said. ‘After all, you were one of the finest detectives ever to serve in the SMP.’

‘Really? How kind of you to say so, sir. Yes, perhaps I was a good officer once.’ With a sudden effort, he raised himself, and placed his bare feet gingerly down on to the floor. Perhaps out of modesty, perhaps because he was cold, he kept his blanket gathered around his middle. ‘But in the end,’ he went on, ‘this city defeats you. Every man betrays his friend. You trust someone, and he turns out to be in the pay of a gangster. The government are gangsters too. How is a detective to do his duty in a place like this? I might have a cigarette for you. Would you care for a cigarette?’

‘No, thank you. Sir, let me just say this. When I was a boy, I followed your exploits with great admiration.’

‘When you were a boy?’

‘Yes, sir. The boy next door and I’ - I gave a little laugh - ‘we used to play at being you. You were ... you were our hero.’

‘Is that so?’ The old man shook his head and smiled.

‘Is that so indeed. Well then, I am all the more sorry I cannot offer you anything. No tea. No cigarette.’

‘Actually, sir, you may be able to offer me something much more important. I came to you today because I believe you may be able to provide a vital clue. In the spring of 1915, there was a case you investigated, a shooting incident in a restaurant called Wu Cheng Lou in Foochow Road. Three people died and several more were injured. You arrested the two men responsible. In the police records, the matter is referred to as the Wu Cheng Lou Shooting Incident. It’s many years ago now, I realise, but Inspector Kung, I wonder if you remember this case?’

Behind me, from perhaps two or three rooms away, there came the sound of frantic coughing. Inspector Kung remained deep in thought, then said: ‘I remember the Wu Cheng Lou case very well. It was one of my more satisfying moments. I sometimes think about that case, even these days, lying here in this bed.’

‘Then perhaps you’ll remember that you interrogated a suspect whom you subsequently established was unconnected with the shooting. According to the records, the man’s name was Chiang Wei. You interrogated him concerning the Wu Cheng Lou, but he instead made some other quite unrelated confessions.’

Though his body remained a sagging sack of bones, the old detective’s eyes were now full of life. ‘That’s correct,’ he said. ‘He had nothing to do with the shooting. But he was afraid and he began to talk. He confessed everything. He confessed, I remember, to having been a member of a kidnapping gang some years earlier.’

‘Excellent, sir! That’s just as it’s recorded in the files. Now, Inspector Kung, this is very important. This man gave you some addresses. Addresses of houses the gang had used to hold their captives.’

Inspector Kung had been gazing at the flies buzzing around the wire mesh near the ceiling, but now his eyes turned slowly to where I was standing. 'That is so,' he said quietly. 'But Mr Banks, we had all those houses checked thoroughly. The kidnappings he talked of were years in the past. We found nothing suspicious in those houses.'

'I know, Inspector Kung, you would have done everything duty required of you most thoroughly. But of course, you were investigating the shooting. It would be perfectly natural if you didn't expend your energy on such a side issue. What I'm suggesting is that if powerful people had gone to some lengths to prevent you searching one of those houses, you would perhaps not have persisted.'

The old detective was deep in thought again. He said finally: 'There was one house. I remember now. My men brought me reports. All the other houses, seven of them, I received reports. I remember it troubled me at the time. One last house, no report. My men were being prevented in some way. Yes, I remember wondering about it. A detective's nose. You will know what I mean, sir.'

'And that remaining house. You never did see a report on it.'

'Correct, sir. But as you say, it was not a great priority. You understand, the Wu Cheng Lou was a large matter. It had caused much outrage. The hunt for the killers had gone on for weeks.'

'And I believe it had defeated two of your more senior colleagues.'

Inspector Kung smiled. 'As I have said, it was a most satisfying moment in my career. I came on to the case when others had failed. The city was talking of nothing else. I was able after a few days to apprehend the killers.'

'I read the records. I was filled with admiration.'

But now the old man was staring at me intently. Eventually he said slowly: 'That house. The house my men failed to go to. That house. You are saying ...?'

'Yes. It's my belief that is where my parents are being held.'

'I see.' He fell silent for a time, digesting this colossal idea.

'There's no question of negligence on your part,' I said. 'Let me say again, I read the reports with great admiration. Your men didn't get to the house because they were obstructed by persons in the higher echelons of the police force. People we now know were in the pay of criminal organisations.'

The coughing had started up again. Inspector Kung remained silent for a moment longer, then looked up at me again and said slowly: 'You've come to ask me. You've come to ask if I can help you find this house.'

'Unfortunately, the archives are in chaos. It's a disgrace how things have been run in this city. Papers have been misfiled, others lost altogether. In the end, I decided I'd do better if I came here to you. To ask you, unlikely though it is, if you remember. Something, anything about that house.'

'That house. Let me try to remember.' The old man closed his eyes in concentration, but then after a time, he shook his head. 'The Wu Cheng Lou shooting. It is over twenty years ago. I am sorry. I can remember nothing about this house.'

'Please try and remember something, sir. Do you recall even which district it was in? Whether for instance it was in the International Settlement?'

He thought for another moment, then shook his head again. 'It is a long time ago. And my head, it doesn't work in a

normal way. Sometimes I remember nothing, not even of the day before. But I shall try and remember. Perhaps tomorrow, perhaps the next day, I shall wake up and remember something. Mr Banks, I am so sorry. But just now, no, I remember nothing.'

It was evening by the time I returned to the International Settlement. I believe I spent an hour or so in my room, going through my notes once again, trying to put behind me the disappointment of my meeting with the old inspector. I did not go down to supper until after eight, when I took my usual corner table in that splendid dining room. I remember I did not have much of an appetite that evening, and was about to abandon my main course and return to my work when the waiter brought in Sarah's note.

I have it here now. It is no more than a scribble on unlined paper, the upper edge torn off. It is doubtful whether she gave the words much thought; it simply asks me to meet her at once on the half-landing between the third and fourth floors of the hotel. Looking at it again now, its connection with that small incident at Mr Tony Keswick's house a week previously seems all too obvious; that is to say, Sarah probably would not have written the note at all had it not been for what took place between us then. Oddly enough, though, when the waiter first presented it to me, I failed to make any such association, and I sat there for some moments, quite mystified as to why she should summon me in such a way.

I should say here that by this point I had run into her a further three times since the night at Lucky Chance House. On two of these occasions, we had seen each other only fleetingly in the presence of others, and little had passed between us. On the third occasion too - the night of the dinner at the home of Mr Keswick, the chairman of Jardine Matheson - I suppose we were again in a public place, and exchanged barely a word; yet, with hindsight, our encounter

there could well be viewed as some sort of important turning point.

I had turned up a little late that evening, and by the time I was shown into Mr Keswick's vast conservatory, upwards of sixty guests were already taking their places at the several tables situated among the foliage and trailing vines. I spotted Sarah on the far side of the room - Sir Cecil was not present - but I could see she too was searching for her seat, and so made no attempt to approach her.

It appears to be a Shanghai custom at such events for guests, as soon as dessert has been served - even before they have had time properly to eat it - to abandon the original seating plan and mingle freely. No doubt then, it was in my mind that once this point came along, I might go over and exchange a few words with Sarah. However, when dessert finally appeared, I was unable to get away from the woman seated beside me, who wished to explain in some detail the political position in Indo-China. Then no sooner had I extricated myself from her than our host stood up to announce that the time had come for 'the turns'. He proceeded to introduce the first performer - a willowy lady who, emerging from a table behind me, went to the front and began to recite an amusing poem, evidently composed by herself.

She was followed by a man who sang unaccompanied a few verses of Gilbert and Sullivan, and I surmised that the majority of those around me had come ready to perform. Guests went up one after another, sometimes in twos and threes; there were madrigals, comic routines. The tone was invariably frivolous, sometimes even bawdy.

Then a large red-faced man - a director of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, I learnt later - made his way to the front wearing a kind of tunic over his dinner jacket, and began to read from a scroll a monologue satirising various aspects of Shanghai life. Almost all the references - to individuals, to the bathroom arrangements at particular

clubs, to incidents that had occurred on recent paper chases - were entirely lost on me, but very quickly every section of the room became filled with laughter. At this point I looked around for Sarah, and saw her sitting over in a corner amidst a group of ladies, laughing as heartily as any of them. The woman beside her, who clearly had had a fair amount to drink, was roaring with almost indecent abandon.

The red-faced man's performance had been going for perhaps five minutes - during which time the level of hilarity seemed only to rise - when he delivered a particularly effective volley of three or four lines which set the room virtually howling. It was at this point that I happened to glance over once more to Sarah. At first the scene appeared much as it had before: there was Sarah, laughing helplessly amidst her companions. If I went on watching her for several more seconds, it was simply because I was rather surprised that after barely a year, she was already so intimate with Shanghai society to the extent that these obscure jokes could reduce her to such a state. And it was then, as I was gazing at her, pondering this point, that I suddenly realised she was not laughing at all; that she was not, as I had supposed, wiping away tears of laughter, but was in fact weeping. For a moment I went on staring at her, unable quite to credit my eyes. Then, as the uproar continued, I rose quietly and moved through the crowd. After a little manoeuvring, I found myself standing behind her, and now there was no further doubt. Amidst all the gaiety, Sarah was crying uncontrollably.

I had approached from behind, so that when I offered her my handkerchief, she gave a start. Then looking up at me, she fixed me - for perhaps as long as four or five seconds - with a searching gaze in which gratitude was mixed with something like a question. I inclined my head to read better her look, but then she had taken my handkerchief and turned back towards the red-faced man. And when the next burst of laughter seized the room, Sarah, too, with an impressive show

of will, let out a laugh, even as she pressed the handkerchief to her eyes.

Conscious that I might draw unwanted attention to her, I then made my way back to my seat, and indeed, did not go near her again that evening other than to exchange rather formal goodnights with her in the entrance hall alongside the many other guests taking their leave of one another.

But I suppose, for a few days afterwards, I entertained a vague expectation of hearing something from her concerning what had occurred. It is, then, a measure of how much I had become engrossed in my investigations that by the time that note was brought to me in the dining room of the Cathay Hotel, I failed to make any connection with the earlier incident, and made my way up the grand staircase, wondering why it was she wished to see me.

What Sarah described as the 'half-landing' is in fact a substantial area strewn with armchairs, occasional tables and potted palms. In the morning particularly, with the great windows open and the ceiling fans whirring, I imagine it is a pleasant enough place for a guest to read a newspaper and take some coffee. At night, though, it has a rather abandoned atmosphere; perhaps owing to the shortages, there is no lighting other than that coming from the staircase, and whatever leaks in through the windows from the Bund down below. On that particular evening, the area was deserted aside from Sarah, whose figure I could see silhouetted against the huge panes, gazing out at the night sky. As I made my way towards her, I knocked into a chair, and the sound made her turn.

'I thought there'd be a moon,' she said. 'But there isn't. There aren't even any shells being fired tonight.'

'Yes. It's been quiet the last few nights.'

'Cecil says the soldiers on both sides are exhausted for now.'

‘I dare say.’

‘Christopher, come over here. It’s all right, I’m not going to do anything to you. But we have to talk more quietly.’

I moved closer till I was beside her. I could now see the Bund below, and the line of lights marking the waterfront promenade.

‘I’ve arranged everything,’ she said quietly. ‘It wasn’t easy, but it’s all done now.’

‘You’ve done what exactly?’

‘Everything. Papers, boats, everything. I can’t stay here any more. I tried my best, and I’m so tired now. I’m going away.’

‘I see. And Cecil. Does he know of your intentions?’

‘It won’t come entirely as a surprise to him. But I suppose it’ll be a shock, all the same. Are *you* shocked, Christopher?’

‘No, not really. From what I’d observed, I could see something like this might be on the cards. But before you take such a drastic step, are you sure there aren’t …?’

‘Oh, I’ve thought of everything there is to think about it. It’s no good. Even if Cecil were willing to go back to England tomorrow. Besides, he’s lost so much money here. He’s determined not to leave until he’s won it all back.’

‘I can see this trip out here’s rather fallen short of your hopes. I’m sorry.’

‘It’s hardly just the trip out here.’ She gave a laugh, then went quiet. After a moment she said: ‘I tried to love Cecil. I tried very hard. He’s not a bad man. You probably think he is, the way you’ve seen him here. But that’s not how he always was. And I realise a lot of it’s to do with me. What he needed at this stage of his life was a good rest. But

then I came along and he felt he had to do a little more. That was my fault. When we came out here, he did try at first, tried awfully hard. But it was beyond him, and I think that's what it was, that's what broke him. Perhaps once I've gone, he'll be able to pull himself together again.'

'But where will you go? Will you return to England?'

'Just now, there's not enough money to return. I'm going to Macao. Then after that, I shall have to see. Anything might happen then. In fact, that's why I wanted to talk with you. Christopher, I'll confess, I'm rather frightened. I don't want to go out there all by myself. I did wonder if you'd go with me.'

'Do you mean go with you to Macao? Go with you tomorrow?'

'Yes. Go with me to Macao tomorrow. We can decide after that where to go next. If you wanted to, we could just drift around the South China Sea for a while. Or we could go to South America, run away like thieves in the night. Wouldn't that be fun?'

I suppose I was surprised when I heard her utter these words; but what I remember now, overwhelming anything else, was an almost tangible sense of relief. Indeed, for a second or two I experienced the sort of giddiness one might when coming suddenly out into the light and fresh air after being trapped a long time in some dark chamber. It was as though this suggestion of hers - which for all I knew she had thrown out on an impulse - carried with it a huge authority, something that brought me a kind of dispensation I had never dared hope for.

Hardly had this feeling swept over me, however, than I suppose another part of me grew quickly alert to the possibility of this being some test she had set for me. For I remember that when I at last responded, it was to say:

‘The difficulty is my work here. I’ll have to finish here first. After all, the whole world’s on the brink of catastrophe. What would people think of me if I abandoned them all at this stage? Come to that, what would *you* think of me?’

‘Oh, Christopher, we’re both as bad as each other. We’ve got to stop thinking like that. Otherwise there’ll be nothing for either of us, just more of what we’ve had all these years. Just more loneliness, more days with nothing in our lives except some whatever-it-is telling us we haven’t done enough yet. We have to put that all behind us now. Leave your work, Christopher. You’ve spent enough of your life already on all of that. Let’s go away tomorrow, let’s not waste a single day more, let’s go before it’s too late for us.’

‘Too late for what, exactly?’

‘Too late for … oh, I don’t know. All I know is that I’ve wasted all these years looking for something, a sort of trophy I’d get only if I really, really did enough to deserve it. But I don’t want it any more, I want something else now, something warm and sheltering, something I can turn to, regardless of what I do, regardless of who I become. Something that will just be *there*, always, like tomorrow’s sky. That’s what I want now, and I think it’s what you should want too. But it *will* be too late soon. We’ll become too set to change. If we don’t take our chance now, another may never come for either of us. Christopher, what are you doing to that poor plant?’

Indeed, I realised I had been absent-mindedly stripping leaves off a palm standing next to us and depositing them on to the carpet.

‘I’m sorry’ - I let out a laugh - ‘rather destructive.’ Then I said: ‘Even if you’re right, what you were saying just now, even then, it’s not so easy for me. Because, you see, there’s Jennifer.’

When I said this, a vivid image came back to me of the last time she and I had spoken, the time we had said our goodbyes in the pleasant little sitting room at the rear of her school, the sunshine of a gentle English spring afternoon falling across the oak-panelled walls. I suddenly remembered again her face as she first took in what I was saying, the thoughtful nod she gave as she thought it over, and then those quite unexpected words she came out with.

‘You see, there’s Jennifer,’ I said again, aware that I was in danger of drifting off into a daydream. ‘Even now, she’ll be waiting for me.’

‘But I’ve thought of that. I’ve thought about it all very carefully. I just know she and I can be friends. More than friends. The three of us, we could be, well, a little family, just like any other family. I’ve thought about it, Christopher, it could be wonderful for us all. We could send for her, as soon as we’ve settled on a plan. We might even go back to Europe, to Italy, say, and she could join us there. I know I could be a mother to her, Christopher, I’m sure I could.’

I went on thinking quietly for a moment, then said: ‘Very well.’

‘What do you mean, Christopher, “very well”?’

‘I mean, yes, I’ll go with you. I’ll go with you, we’ll do as you say. Yes, you might be right. Jennifer, us, everything, it might turn out well.’

As soon as I said this, I could feel a massive weight lifting off me, so much so that I may well have let out a loud sigh. Sarah, meanwhile, had come another step closer, and for a second gazed deep into my face. I even thought she would kiss me, but she seemed to check herself at the last moment, and said instead:

‘Then listen. Listen carefully, we must do this correctly. Pack no more than one suitcase. And don’t send on

any trunks. There'll be some money waiting for us in Macao, so we can buy what we need there. I'll send someone to come and get you, a driver, tomorrow afternoon at half past three. I'll see to it he's someone to be trusted, but all the same, don't tell him anything you don't need to. He'll bring you to where I'll be waiting. Christopher, you look as if something heavy just hit you on the head. You're not going to let me down, are you?'

'No, no. I'll be ready. Half past three tomorrow. Don't worry, I'll ... I'll follow you anywhere, wherever you want to go in the world.'

Perhaps it was simply an impulse; perhaps it was the memory of how we had parted that night we had brought Sir Cecil back from the gaming house; in any case, I suddenly reached forward, grasped one of her hands in both of mine, and kissed it. After that, I believe I looked up, still clutching her hand, uncertain what to do next; it is even possible I let out an awkward giggle. In the end, she freed the hand gently and touched my cheek.

'Thank you, Christopher,' she said quietly. 'Thank you for agreeing. Everything suddenly feels so different. But you'd better go now, before someone sees us here. Go on, off you go.'

Chapter Seventeen

I went to bed that night somewhat preoccupied, but awoke the next morning to find a kind of tranquillity had come over me. It was as though a heavy burden had been removed, and when, as I dressed, I thought again of my new situation, I realised I was rather excited.

Much of that morning has now become a haze to me. What I recall is that I became seized by the idea that I should complete, in the time remaining to me, as many as possible of the tasks I had planned for the next few days; that to do otherwise would be less than conscientious. The obvious illogic of this position somehow failed to trouble me, and after breakfast, I set about my work with much urgency, rushing up and down staircases, and urging my drivers on through the crowded city streets. And although today it makes little sense to me, I have to say I took considerable pride in being able to sit down to lunch a little after two o'clock having more or less fulfilled all I had set out to do.

And yet at the same time, when I look back on that day, I have the overwhelming impression I remained peculiarly detached from my activities. As I hurried around the International Settlement talking with many of the city's most prominent citizens, there was a part of me virtually laughing at the earnest way they tried to answer my questions, at the pathetic way they tried to be of help. For the truth is, the longer I had been in Shanghai, the more I had come to despise the so-called leaders of this community. Almost every day my investigations had revealed yet another piece of negligence, corruption or worse on their part down the years. And yet in all the days since my arrival, I had not come across one instance of honest shame, a single acknowledgement that were it not for the prevarications, the short-sightedness, often the downright dishonesty of those left in charge, the

situation would never have reached its present level of crisis. At one point that morning, I found myself at the Shanghai Club, meeting with three eminent members of the 'elite'. And faced anew with their hollow pomposity, their continued denial of their own culpability in the whole sorry affair, I felt an exhilaration at the prospect of ridding my life of such people once and for all. Indeed, at such moments, I felt an utter certainty that I had come to the right decision; that the assumption shared by virtually everyone here - that it was somehow my sole responsibility to resolve the crisis - was not only unfounded, but worthy of the highest contempt. I pictured the astonishment that would soon appear on these same faces at the news of my departure - the outrage and panic that would rapidly follow - and I will admit such thoughts brought me much satisfaction.

Then, as I continued my lunch, I found myself thinking of my last meeting with Jennifer that sunny afternoon at her school: of the two of us, in the prefects' room, sitting awkwardly in our armchairs, the sun playing on the oak panelling, the grass leading down to the lake visible in the windows behind her. She had listened in silence as I had explained, to the best of my ability, the necessity of my going away, the overwhelming importance of the task awaiting me in Shanghai. I had paused at several points, expecting her to ask questions, or at least to make some comment. But each time, she had given a serious nod, and waited for me to continue. In the end, when I realised I had started to repeat myself, I had come to a halt and said to her:

'So, Jenny. What do you have to say?'

I do not know what I had expected. But after gazing at me for another moment with a look devoid of any anger, she had replied:

'Uncle Christopher, I realise I'm not very good at anything. But that's because I'm rather young still. Once I'm

older, and it might not be so long now, I'll be able to help you. I'll be able to help you, I promise you I will. So while you're away, would you please remember? Remember that I'm here, in England, and that I'll help you when you come back?'

It was not quite what I had expected, and though often since arriving here I have thought over these words of hers, I am still not sure what she meant to convey to me that day. Was she implying that, for all I had just been saying to her, I was unlikely to succeed in my mission in Shanghai? That I would have to return to England and continue my work for yet many more years? Just as likely, these were simply the words of a confused child, trying hard not to display her upset, and it is pointless to subject them to any sort of scrutiny. For all that, I found myself yet again pondering our last meeting as I sat over my lunch that afternoon in the hotel conservatory.

It was while I was finishing my coffee that the concierge came to tell me I was wanted urgently on the telephone. I was directed to a booth on the landing just outside, and after a little confusion with the operator, heard a voice which was vaguely familiar to me.

'Mr Banks? Mr Banks? Mr Banks, at last I have remembered.'

I remained silent, fearing if I said anything at all I would jeopardise our plans. But then the voice said:

'Mr Banks? Can you hear me? I have remembered something important. About the house we could not search.'

I realised it was Inspector Kung; his voice, though croaky, sounded startlingly rejuvenated.

'Inspector, excuse me. You took me by surprise. Please, tell me what you've remembered.'

‘Mr Banks. Sometimes, you know, when I indulge in a pipe, it helps me remember. Many things I have long forgotten drift before my eyes. So I thought very well, one last time, I shall go back to the pipe. And I remembered something the suspect told us. *The house we could not search. It is directly opposite the house of a man called Yeh Chen.*’

‘Yeh Chen? Who is that?’

‘I do not know. Many of the poorer people, they do not use street addresses. They talk of landmarks. The house we could not search. It is opposite Yeh Chen’s house.’

‘Yeh Chen. Are you sure that was the name?’

‘Yes, I’m sure. It came back very clearly.’

‘Is that a common name? How many people in Shanghai are likely to have that name?’

‘Fortunately there is one further detail the suspect gave us. This Yeh Chen is a blind man. The house you seek is opposite that of Yeh Chen the blind man. Of course, he may have moved house, or passed away. But if you could discover where this man lived at the time of our investigation ...’

‘Of course, Inspector. Why, this is immensely useful.’

‘I am glad. I thought you would find it so.’

‘Inspector, I cannot thank you enough.’

I had become aware of the time, and when I put down the phone, I did not return to my lunch, but went straight upstairs to my room to pack.

I recall a strange sense of unreality coming over me as I contemplated which items to take away. At one stage, I sat down on the bed and stared out at the sky visible through my window. It struck me as most curious how, only a day earlier, the piece of information I had just received would have constituted something utterly central to my life. But here I was, turning it over casually in my head, and already it felt

like something consigned to a past era, something I need not remember if I did not wish to.

I must have completed my packing with time to spare, for when the knock came on my door at half past three precisely, I had been sitting in my chair waiting for a good while. I opened the door to a young Chinese man, perhaps not even twenty, dressed in a gown, his hat in his hand.

‘I am your driver, sir,’ he announced softly. ‘If you have suitcase, I will carry.’

As the young man steered the motor car away from the Cathay Hotel, I stared out at the busy crowds of Nanking Road in the afternoon sunshine, and felt I was watching them from a vast distance. I then settled myself in my seat, content to leave everything in the hands of my driver, who despite his youth appeared assured and competent. I was tempted to ask what his connection was with Sarah, but then remembered her caution about speaking any more than necessary. I thus remained silent, and soon found my thoughts turning to Macao and some photographs I had seen of the place many years ago in the British Museum.

Then after we had been travelling for perhaps ten minutes, I suddenly leant forward to the young man and said:

‘I say, excuse me. This is something of a long shot. But do you happen to know of anyone called Yeh Chen?’

The young man did not take his gaze from the traffic before him and I was about to repeat my question when he said:

‘Yeh Chen. Blind actor?’

‘Yes. Well, I know he’s blind, though I didn’t know he was an actor.’

‘Not famous actor. Yeh Chen. He was actor once, many years ago, when I was boy.’

‘Do you mean ... you know him?’

‘Not know him. But I know who he is. You interest in Yeh Chen, sir?’

‘No, no. Not especially. Someone just happened to mention him to me. It really doesn’t matter.’

I did not say anything else to the young man for the remainder of our journey. We travelled down a baffling series of little alleys and I had quite lost any sense of where we were by the time he pulled up in a quiet back street.

The young man opened my door and gave me my suitcase.

‘That shop,’ he said, pointing. ‘With phonograph.’

Across the street was a small shop with a grimy window, within which indeed a phonograph was displayed. I could see too a sign in English reading: ‘Gramophone Records. Piano Rolls. Manuscripts.’ Glancing up and down the street, I saw that apart from two rickshawmen squatting beside their vehicles and exchanging banter, the young man and I were alone. I picked up the suitcase and was about to cross the street, when something made me say to him:

‘I wonder, could you wait here a little?’

The young man looked puzzled. ‘Lady Medhurst say only to bring you here.’

‘Yes, yes. But *I’m* asking you now, you see. I’d like you to wait just a little longer, just in case I need your services further. Of course, I may not need you. But you know, just in case. Look here’ - I reached into my jacket and took out some bills - ‘look, I’ll make it worth your while.’

The young man’s face flushed with anger, and he spun away from the money as though I were proffering something quite repulsive. He sullenly got back into the car and slammed his door.

I saw I had made a miscalculation of some sort, but at that moment could not be bothered to worry about it. Besides, for all his anger, the young man had not started up the engine. I stuffed my money back into my jacket, picked up the suitcase again and crossed the street.

Inside, the shop was very cramped. The afternoon sun was streaming in, but somehow only a few dusty patches were lit by it. To one side was an upright piano with discoloured keys, and several gramophone records displayed without their sleeves along the music stand. I could see not only dust but cobwebs on the records. Elsewhere there were odd pieces of thick velvet - they appeared to be off-cuts from theatre curtains - nailed up on the walls, together with photographs of opera singers and dancers. I had perhaps expected Sarah to be standing there, but the only person present was a spindly European with a dark pointed beard sitting behind the counter.

‘Good afternoon,’ he said in a Germanic accent, glancing up from a ledgerbook spread before him. Then looking me up and down carefully, he asked: ‘You are English?’

‘Yes, I am. Good afternoon.’

‘We have some records from England. For example, we have a recording of Mimi Johnson singing “I Only Have Eyes for You”. Would you appreciate?’

Something in the cautious way he had spoken suggested this was the first part of an agreed code. But though I searched my memory for some password or phrase Sarah might have told me, I could remember nothing. In the end, I said:

‘I have no phonograph with me here in Shanghai. But I’m very fond of Mimi Johnson. In fact, I attended a recital of hers in London a few years ago.’

‘Really? Mimi Johnson, yes.’

I got the distinct impression I had puzzled him with the wrong response. So I said: 'Look here, my name is Banks. Christopher Banks.'

'Banks. Mr Banks.' The man said my name neutrally, then said: 'If you appreciate Mimi Johnson, "I Only Have Eyes for You", I shall play it for you. Please.'

He ducked under the counter, and I took the opportunity to look out of the shop window back into the street. The two rickshawmen were still laughing and talking, and I was reassured to see my young man still there in the car. Then just as I was wondering if there had not been some huge misunderstanding, the warm languid sound of a jazz orchestra filled the room. Mimi Johnson began to sing and I remembered how the song had been all the rage in London clubs a few years before.

After a while, I became aware of the spindly man indicating a spot on the rear wall hung with heavy dark drapes. I had not noticed before that there was a doorway there, but when I pushed, I indeed found myself stepping through into an inner room.

Sarah was sitting on a wooden trunk wearing a light coat and hat. A cigarette was burning in her holder and the cupboard-like room was already thick with her smoke. All around us were piles of gramophone records and sheet music stored in an assortment of cardboard boxes and tea-chests. There was no window, but I could see a back door, at that moment slightly ajar, which led outside.

'Well, here I am,' I said. 'I brought just the one suitcase as you insisted. But I see you've three yourself.'

'This bag here's just for Ethelbert. My teddy bear. He's been with me since, well, for ever really. Silly, isn't it?'

'Silly? No, not at all.'

‘When Cecil and I first came here, I made the mistake of putting Ethelbert in with a whole lot of other things. Then when I opened the case, his arm had fallen off. I found it right in a corner, stuck inside a slipper. So this time, give or take a few shawls, he’s got a whole bag all to himself. It *is* silly.’

‘No, no. I understand perfectly. Ethelbert, yes.’

She carefully put down her cigarette holder and stood up. Then we were kissing - just like, I suppose, a couple on the cinema screen. It was almost exactly as I had always imagined it would be, except there was something oddly inelegant about our embrace, and I tried more than once to adjust my posture; but my right foot was hard against a heavy box and I could not quite negotiate the necessary turn without risking my balance. Then she had taken a step back, breathing deeply, all the time looking into my face.

‘Is everything ready?’ I asked her.

She did not at first reply, and I thought she was about to kiss me again. But in the end, she said simply:

‘Everything’s fine. We just have several more minutes to wait. Then we’ll go out there’ - she indicated the back door - ‘walk down to the jetty and a sampan will take us out to our steamer two miles down the river. After that it’s Macao.’

‘And Cecil, does he have any idea at all?’

‘I didn’t see him all day. He set off for one of his little places straight after breakfast, and I expect he’s still there.’

‘It’s a great shame. Really, someone should tell him to pull himself together.’

‘Well, it’s no longer up to us to do so.’

‘No, I suppose not.’ I let out a sudden laugh. ‘I suppose it’s not up to us to do anything other than what we choose.’

‘That’s right. Christopher, is something wrong?’

‘No, no. I was just trying to … I just wished …’

I reached out to her, thinking to initiate another embrace, but she raised a hand, saying:

‘Christopher, I think you should sit down. Don’t worry, there’ll be time to do everything, *everything*, later.’

‘Yes, yes. I’m sorry.’

‘Once we’re in Macao, we can have a good think about our future. A good think about where would be good for us. And where would be good for Jennifer. We’ll spread all our maps out over the bed, look out of our room on to the sea and argue about it all. Oh, I’m sure we *will* argue. I’m looking forward even to our arguments. Are you going to sit down? Look, sit here.’

‘I say … Look, if we have to wait a few minutes, let me just go and do something.’

‘Do something? What exactly?’

‘Just … just something. Look really, I won’t be gone long, just a few minutes. You see, I just have to ask someone something.’

‘Who? Christopher, I don’t think we should talk to anyone at this point.’

‘That’s not what I mean, exactly. I fully realise the need for caution and so on. No, no, don’t worry. It’s just that young man. The one who you sent, the one who drove me here. I just need to ask him something.’

‘But surely he’s gone.’

'No, he's not. He's still out there. Look, I'll be straight back.'

I hurried out through the curtain back into the shop, where the spindly man with the beard looked up at me in surprise.

'You appreciated Mimi Johnson?' he asked.

'Yes, yes. Wonderful. I just have to pop out for a second.'

'May I make it clear, sir, that I am Swiss. There is no impending hostility between your country and mine.'

'Ah yes. Splendid. I'll be back in a moment.'

I hurried across the road towards the car. The young man, who had seen me, rolled down his window and smiled politely; there seemed no trace of his earlier temper. Stooping down to him, I said quietly:

'Look here. This Yeh Chen. Do you have any idea where I might find him?'

'Yeh Chen? He lives very near here.'

'Yeh Chen. I'm talking about the *blind* Yeh Chen.'

'Yes. Just over there.'

'His house is over there?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Look here, you don't seem to understand. Are you saying Yeh Chen, the *blind* Yeh Chen, that his house is *just over there*?'

'Yes, sir. You may walk there, but if you wish, I take in car.'

'Listen to me, this is very important. Do you know how long Yeh Chen has lived in his present house?'

The young man thought, then said: 'He always live there, sir. When I was boy, he live there.'

'Are you sure? Now look, this is most important. Are you sure this is the *blind* Yeh Chen, and that he's been living there for a long time?'

'I told you, sir. He there when I was small boy. My guess, he live there many, many years.'

I straightened, took a deep breath and thought about the full implications of what I had just heard. Then I leant down again and said: 'I think you should take me there. In the car, I mean. We have to approach this carefully. I'd like you to take me there, but to stop the car a little way away. Somewhere where we can see clearly *the house opposite* Yeh Chen's house. Do you understand?'

I got into the car and the young man started the engine. He turned the vehicle a full circle, then we took another narrow side-street. As we did so, many thoughts crowded into my mind at once. I wondered if I should tell the young man the significance of the journey we were making, and even considered asking if he was carrying a gun in the car - though in the end I decided such an enquiry might only panic him.

We turned a corner into an alley even narrower than the one before. Then we turned again and came to a halt. I thought for a second we had reached our destination, but then realised what had made us stop. In the alleyway before us was a crowd of young boys trying to control a bewildered water-buffalo. There was some sort of altercation going on between the boys, and as I watched, one of them gave the buffalo a clout on the nose with his stick. I felt a wave of alarm, remembering my mother's warnings throughout my childhood that these animals were as dangerous as any bull when riled. The creature did nothing, however, and the boys continued to argue. The young man sounded the horn several times to no

avail, and finally, with a sigh, he began to reverse the vehicle back the way we had come.

We took another alley nearby, but this diversion appeared to confuse my driver, for after a few more turns, he stopped and reversed again, though this time there was no obstruction. At one point, we came out on to a broader rutted mud track with dilapidated wooden shacks all along one side.

‘Please hurry,’ I said. ‘I have very little time.’

Just then a huge crashing sound shook the ground we were travelling along. The young man continued to drive steadily, but looked nervously into the distance.

‘Fighting,’ he said. ‘Fighting started again.’

‘It sounded awfully close,’ I said.

For the next few minutes, we steered around more narrow corners and little wooden houses, blasting the horn to scatter children and dogs. Then the car came to another abrupt halt, and I heard the young man let out an exasperated sound. Looking past him, I saw the way ahead was blocked by a barricade of sandbags and barbed wire.

‘We must go all the way round,’ he said. ‘No other way.’

‘But look, we must be very close now.’

‘Very close, yes. But road blocked, so we must go all the way round. Be patient, sir. We get there soon.’

But a distinct change had entered the young man’s manner. His earlier assurance had faded, and now he struck me as ridiculously young to be driving a car, perhaps no more than fifteen or sixteen. For some time, we travelled through muddy, stinking streets, down more alleys where I thought we would at any moment plunge into the open gutters - but somehow the young man always managed to keep our wheels just clear of the edges. All the while, we could hear the sound of

gunfire in the distance, and see people hurrying back to the safety of their houses and shelters. But there were still the children and dogs, seemingly belonging to no one, running everywhere before us, oblivious to any sense of danger. At one point, as we bumped our way across the yard of some small factory, I said:

‘Now look, why don’t you just stop and ask the way?’

‘Be patient, sir.’

‘Be patient? But you’ve no more idea where we’re going than I have.’

‘We get there soon, sir.’

‘What nonsense. Why do you persist in this charade? It’s typical of you Chinese. You’re lost, but you won’t admit it. We’ve been driving now for … well, it seems like an eternity.’

He said nothing, and brought us out on to a mud road that climbed steeply between large heaps of factory refuse. Then came another thunderous crash somewhere alarmingly near, and the young man dropped his speed to a crawl.

‘Sir. I think we go back now.’

‘Go back? Go back where?’

‘Fighting very near. Not safe here.’

‘What do you mean, the fighting’s near?’ Then an idea dawned on me. ‘Are we anywhere near Chapei?’

‘Sir. We in Chapei. We in Chapei some time.’

‘What? You mean we’ve left the Settlement?’

‘We in Chapei now.’

‘But … Good God! We’re actually outside the Settlement? *In Chapei?* Look here, you’re a fool, you know that? A fool! You told me the house was very near. Now we’re lost. We’re possibly dangerously close to the war zone. *And we’ve left*

the Settlement! You're what I call a proper fool. Do you know why? I'll tell you. You pretend to know far more than you do. You're too proud to admit to your shortcomings. That's my definition of a fool exactly. A right fool! Do you hear me? A right and proper fool! '

He stopped the car. Then he opened his door and without glancing back, walked off.

It took me a moment to calm myself and assess the situation. We were most of the way up a hill, and the car was now in an isolated spot on a mud track surrounded by mounds of broken masonry, twisted wire and what looked like the mangled remains of old bicycle wheels. I could see the young man's figure marching up a footpath over the rim of the hill.

I got out and ran after him. He must have heard me coming, but he neither quickened his pace nor looked back. I caught up and stopped him by grasping his shoulder.

'Look, I'm sorry,' I said, panting a little. 'I apologise. I shouldn't have lost my temper. I apologise, I really do. No excuse for it. But you see, you've no idea what all this means. Now please' - I indicated back to the car - 'let's continue.'

The young man would not look at me. 'No more driving,' he said.

'But look, I've said I'm sorry. Now please, be reasonable.'

'No more driving. Too dangerous here. Fighting very near.'

'But listen, it's very important I get to this house. Very important indeed. Now tell me truthfully, please. Are you lost or do you really know where the house is?'

'I know. I know house. But too dangerous now. Fighting very near.'

As though to support his point, machine-gun fire suddenly echoed around us. It felt reasonably distant, but it was impossible to tell from which direction it was coming, and we both looked about us, feeling suddenly exposed on the hill.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ I said, and took from my pocket my notebook and pencil. ‘I can see you want no further part in all this, and I can understand your viewpoint. And I’m sorry again I was rude to you earlier. But I’d like you to do two more things for me before you go home. First, I’d like you please to write down here the address of Yeh Chen’s house.’

‘No address, sir. There is no address.’

‘Very well, then draw a map. Write down directions. Whatever. Please do it for me. Then after that, I’d like you to drive me to the nearest police station. Of course, that’s what I should have done from the start. I’ll need trained, armed men. Please.’

I gave him the notebook and pencil. Several pages were covered with notes from my enquiries earlier in the day. He turned the tiny pages until he came to a blank one. Then he said:

‘No English. Cannot write English, sir.’

‘Then write in whatever you can. Draw a map. Whatever. Please hurry.’

He appeared now to grasp the importance of what I was asking him to do. He thought carefully for a few seconds, then began to write rapidly. He filled one page, then another. After four or five pages he slotted the pencil back into the spine of the notebook and handed it to me. I glanced through what he had done, but could make no sense of the Chinese script. Nevertheless I said:

‘Thank you. Thank you very much indeed. Now please. Take me to a police station. Then you can go home.’

‘Police station this way, sir.’ He took several further steps in the direction he had been walking. Then from the crest of the hill, he pointed down to the bottom of the slope where, perhaps two hundred yards away, a mass of grey buildings began.

‘Police station there, sir.’

‘There? Which building?’

‘There. With flag.’

‘I see, yes. You’re sure that’s a police station?’

‘Sure, sir. Police station.’

From where we were standing, it certainly looked like a police station. I could see, moreover, that there was little point in trying to drive to it; the car had been left on the other side of the hill, and the track we had just come up was not wide enough for the vehicle; I could see we might easily get lost again trying to find a way around the hill. I put the notebook back into my pocket, and thought about presenting him with some banknotes, before remembering how offended he had been earlier. I therefore said simply:

‘Thank you. You’ve been of great help. I’ll manage by myself from here.’

The young man gave a quick nod of the head - he seemed still to be angry with me - then, turning, went off back down the slope in the direction of the car.

Chapter Eighteen

The police station looked to be abandoned. As I came down the slope, I could see broken windows and one of the entrance doors hanging off its hinges. But when I picked my way through the broken glass and went inside into the station's reception area, I was met by three Chinese men, two of whom pointed rifles at me, while the third brandished a garden spade. One of them - who was wearing a Chinese Army uniform - asked in halting English what I wanted. When I managed to convey who I was, and that I wished to speak with whomever was in charge, the men began to argue among themselves. Eventually the one holding the spade disappeared through into a back room, and the others kept their guns on me while we waited for his return. I took the opportunity to glance about me, and concluded it was unlikely there were any policemen left in the station. Although a few posters and notices remained up, the place looked to have been abandoned some time ago. Cables were dangling off one wall and the back section of the room had been gutted by fire.

After perhaps five minutes, the man with the spade came back. A few more exchanges followed in what I guessed was Shanghai dialect, before finally the soldier gestured that I should go with the man with the spade.

I followed the latter through into a back room, which turned out also to be guarded by armed men. But these stood aside for us, and soon I was going down some rickety stairs into the cellars of the police station.

My recollection is a little hazy now as to how we got down to the bunker. There were perhaps a few more rooms; I remember we walked along a kind of tunnel, stooping to avoid low beams; here too were sentries, and each time we encountered one of their looming black shapes, I was obliged

to press myself right into the rough wall in order to squeeze past.

Eventually I was shown inside a windowless room that had been turned into some sort of makeshift military headquarters. It was lit by two bulbs dangling side by side from a central beam. The walls were of exposed brick, and in the wall to my right, there was gouged out a hole large enough for a man to climb through. There was a battered wireless set mounted in the opposite corner, while in the middle of the floor sat a big office desk - which I could see at a glance had been sawn in half, then crudely put back together again with rope and nails. Several upturned wooden boxes constituted the available seating, the only actual chair being occupied by an unconscious man who was tied up to it. He was in a Japanese marines' uniform, and one side of his face was a mass of bruising.

The only other people present were two Chinese Army officers, both on their feet, bent over some chart spread across the desk. They looked up as I entered, then one of them came forward and offered his hand.

'I am Lieutenant Chow. This is Captain Ma. We are both very honoured to have you visit us like this, Mr Banks. Have you come to lend us your moral support?'

'Well, in actual fact, Lieutenant, I came here with a specific request. However, I would hope that once my task is completed, morale will be boosted no end. Yours and everyone else's. But I'll need a little assistance, and this is why I've come to you.'

The lieutenant said something to the captain, who evidently did not understand English; then they both looked at me. Suddenly the unconscious Japanese in the chair vomited down the front of his uniform. We all turned to stare at him; then the lieutenant said:

‘You say you need assistance, Mr Banks. In what form exactly?’

‘I have here some directions, directions to a particular house. It’s imperative I reach this house without any further delay.

The directions are written in Chinese, which I’m unable to read. But you see, even if I could read them, I’d need a guide, someone familiar with this locality.’

‘So you wish for a guide.’

‘Not only that, Lieutenant. I will need four or five good men, more if possible. They will need to be trained and experienced, since this will be a delicate task.’

The lieutenant gave a little laugh; then making his features solemn once more, said: ‘Sir, we are at this moment very short of such men. This base is a crucial part of our defence force. And yet you saw for yourself how thinly it is guarded. In fact, the men you saw on the way in are either wounded, sick or inexperienced volunteers. Every man capable of sustained fighting we have pushed to the front.’

‘I appreciate, Lieutenant, that you’re in a demanding situation. But you have to understand, I’m not talking about just some casual enquiry I wish to make. When I say it’s imperative I reach this house … Well, Lieutenant, I’ll tell you, there’s no need to keep it a secret. You and Captain Ma here can be the first to know. The house I wish to find, which I know is very near us now, is none other than the one in which my parents are being held. That’s right, Lieutenant! I’m talking about nothing less than the solving of this case after all these years. You see now why I felt my request, even at this busy moment for you, quite warranted.’

The lieutenant’s face remained fixed on mine. The captain asked him something in Mandarin, but the lieutenant did not reply. Then he said to me:

‘We are waiting for some men to return from a mission. Seven went out. We do not know if they will all return. It was my intention that they be sent to another location immediately. But now ... In this instance, I shall take personal responsibility. These men, however many of them may return, will accompany you on your mission.’

I sighed impatiently. ‘I thank you, Lieutenant. But how long will we have to wait for these men? Isn’t it possible for me to take a few of the men standing out there, just for several minutes? After all, the house is somewhere very near here. And you see, I have someone waiting ...’ I suddenly remembered Sarah, and a kind of panic seized me. I took another step forward and said: ‘In fact, Lieutenant, I wonder if I may use your telephone. I really should speak to her.’

‘I’m afraid there is no telephone here, Mr Banks. That is a radio, connected only with our headquarters and our other bases.’

‘Well then, it’s all the more imperative I clear this matter up without delay! You see, sir, there is a lady waiting, even as we speak! May I suggest I take three or four of the men out there guarding this base ...’

‘Mr Banks, please calm yourself. We will do all we can to assist you. But as I have said already, the men outside are not fit for such a mission. They will only jeopardise it. I understand you have waited many years to solve this case. I would counsel you not to act hastily at this juncture.’

There was good sense in the lieutenant’s words. With a sigh, I sat down on one of the upturned tea-chests.

‘The men should not be much longer now.’ said the lieutenant. ‘Mr Banks, may I see these directions you have?’

I was reluctant to let go of my notebook even for a few seconds. But in the end I handed it to the officer, opened at

the appropriate pages. He studied the directions for a while, then returned the notebook to me.

‘Mr Banks, I should tell you. This house. It will not be so easy to reach.’

‘But I happen to know, sir, it’s very near here.’

‘It is near, that is true. Nevertheless, it will not be easy. Indeed, Mr Banks, it may even be behind Japanese lines by now.’

‘Japanese lines? Well, I suppose I could always reason with the Japanese. I have no quarrel with them myself.’

‘Sir, if you will come with me. I will show you, while we wait for the men, our exact position.’

For a moment, he spoke rapidly to the captain. He then walked towards a broom cupboard in the corner, flung open its door and stepped inside. It took me a moment to realise I was expected to follow, but then when I tried also to enter the cupboard, I almost walked into the heels of the lieutenant’s boots - which were now directly in front of my face. I heard his voice say from the darkness above:

‘If you will please follow me, Mr Banks. There are forty-eight rungs. It is better you keep at least five rungs below me.’

His feet disappeared. Stepping further into the cupboard, I reached out my hands and found some metal rungs on the brick before me. Far above in the darkness, I could see a little pond of sky. I guessed that we were at the bottom of a chimney, or an observation tower used by the police.

For the first few rungs, I found the going awkward; not only was I nervous of missing my grip in the dark, there was also the worry of the lieutenant slipping and falling down on to me. But eventually the patch of sky grew larger, and then I saw the lieutenant’s figure clambering out above me. In another minute or so, I had joined him.

We were standing up on a high flat roof surrounded on all sides by miles of densely packed rooftops. Away in the distance, perhaps a half-mile to the east, I could see a column of dark smoke rising into the late-afternoon sky.

‘It’s odd,’ I said, looking around me. ‘How do people get about down there? There appear to be no streets.’

‘That is certainly how it looks from up here. But perhaps you will care to look through these.’

He was holding out a pair of binoculars. I raised them to my eyes and spent some time adjusting them until I could see clearly, only to find I was gazing at a chimney stack a few yards in front of me. Eventually, though, I managed to focus on the column of smoke in the distance. The lieutenant’s voice said somewhere close beside me:

‘You are now looking at the warren, Mr Banks. The factory workers live there. I am sure in all the time you were a child here, you never visited the warren.’

‘The warren? No, I don’t think so.’

‘Almost certainly not. Foreigners rarely see such places unless they are missionaries. Or perhaps communists. I am Chinese, but I too, like many of my peers, was never permitted to go near such places. I knew almost nothing about the warren until ’32, the last time we fought the Japanese. You would not believe human beings could live like that. It is like an ants’ nest. Those houses, they were intended for the poorest people. Houses with tiny rooms, row after row, back to back. A warren. If you look carefully, you may see the lanes. Little alleys just wide enough to allow the people to get into their homes. At the back, the houses have no windows at all. The rear rooms are black holes, backing on to the houses behind. Forgive me, I am telling you this for a good reason, as you will see. The rooms were made small, because they were for the poor. There was a time when seven or eight people shared such a room. Then as the years went

on, families were forced to make partitions, even within these small rooms, to share the rent with another family. And if they still couldn't pay the landlords, they would partition the room further. I remember seeing tiny black closets divided four times, each with a family in it. You do not believe this, Mr Banks, that human beings can live like this?'

'It does seem unbelievable, but if you've seen these conditions yourself, Lieutenant ...'

'When the fight against the Japanese is over, Mr Banks, I will consider giving my services to the communists. You think that is a dangerous thing to say? There are many officers who would rather fight under the communists than under Chiang.'

I moved the binoculars over the dense mass of shabby roofs. I could see now that many of them were broken through. I could decipher, moreover, the lanes the lieutenant had mentioned, narrow passageways threading here and there into the tenements.

'But this is no shanty town,' the lieutenant's voice was continuing. 'Even if the partitions erected by the tenants are flimsy, the essential structure, the warren itself, is brick. This proved crucial in '32 when the Japanese attacked, and it is proving so to us now.'

'I can see that,' I said. 'A solid warren defended by soldiers. No easy prospect for the Japanese, even with their modern weapons.'

'You are right. The Japanese weaponry, even their training, counts for almost nothing down there. Fighting is reduced to rifles, bayonets, knives, pistols, spades, meat cleavers. The Japanese line, in the past week, has actually been pushed back. You see that smoke, Mr Banks? That point was held by the enemy only last week. But now we have pushed them back.'

‘Are there civilians still living down there?’

‘There are indeed. You may not believe it, but even close to the front, some of the houses in the warren are still occupied. This makes it even harder for the Japanese. They cannot shell indiscriminately. They know the Western powers are watching and they fear ruthlessness will have a cost.’

‘How long can your troops hold out?’

‘Who knows? Chiang Kai-shek may send us reinforcements. Or the Japanese might decide to give up and redeploy, concentrate instead on Nanking or Chunking. It is by no means certain we will not still be victorious. But the fighting recently has cost us dearly. If you will move your field glasses to the left, Mr Banks. Now, do you see that road? Yes? That road is known locally as Pigs’ Alley. It doesn’t look an impressive road, but now it is very important to the outcome. As you see, that is the one road that runs along the edge of the warren. At the moment, our troops have sealed it off, and have managed to keep the Japanese out. If they are able to come down that road, the warren can be penetrated all along the side. There will be no point in our attempting to hold out. We will have been flanked. You asked for men to accompany you to the house where your parents are. The men who will accompany you would otherwise have been deployed defending the barricade at the top of Pigs’ Alley. The last few days, the fighting there has become desperate. Meanwhile, of course, we are having also to hold our line across the warren.’

‘From up here, you wouldn’t think there was so much going on down there.’

‘Indeed. But I can assure you, inside the warren, things are now very bad. I tell you this, Mr Banks, since you are intending to go in there.’

For a moment or two, I went on gazing through the glasses in silence. Then I said: 'Lieutenant, that house, the house where my parents are being held. Will I be able to see it from up here?'

His hand touched my shoulder briefly, though I did not take my eyes from the binoculars.

'Do you see, Mr Banks, the remains of that tower standing to the left? It looks like one of those Easter Island figures. Yes, yes, that's it. If you draw a line from that over to the remains of that large black building to the right, the old textile warehouse, that was, this morning, the line to which our men had beaten back the Japanese. The house where your parents are being held is roughly level with that tall chimney on your left. If you draw a line, very level with it across the warren, until you come to just a little left of where we are now standing. Yes, yes ...'

'You mean near that roof, the one with the eaves pointing up into a kind of arch ...'

'Yes, that's it. Of course, I cannot say with certainty. But according to those directions you showed me, that is roughly where the house is.'

I stared through the field glasses at that particular roof. For some time I could not stop staring, even though I was conscious of keeping the lieutenant from his duties. After a while, it was the lieutenant who said:

'It must feel strange. To think you might be looking at the very house containing your parents.'

'Yes. Yes, it does feel a little strange.'

'Of course, it might not be that house. That was simply a guess on my part. But it will be somewhere very near it. That tall chimney I showed you, Mr Banks. The locals refer to it as the East Furnace. The chimney you can see much closer to us, almost directly in line with the other one, belongs to

the West Furnace. Before the fighting, the inhabitants used to burn their refuse at one or other of these places. I would advise you, sir, to use the furnaces as your landmarks once you are within the warren. Otherwise it is hard for a stranger to keep his bearings. Look again carefully at that far chimney, sir. Remember, the house you seek is only a little way away from it, in a direct line due south.'

I finally lowered the binoculars. 'Lieutenant, you've been most kind. I can't tell you how grateful I am to you. In fact, if it won't embarrass you, you will perhaps permit me to mention you by name during the ceremony that will take place at Jessfield Park to commemorate the freeing of my parents.'

'Really, my help has not been so significant. Besides, Mr Banks, you must not assume your task is accomplished. Standing up here, it does not look far away. But inside the warren there is a lot of fighting. Although you are not a combatant, it will still be difficult to move from house to house. And aside from the two furnaces, there are few clear landmarks surviving. Then you must bring your parents out safely. In other words, you still have a daunting task ahead of you. But now, Mr Banks, I suggest we go back down. The men may well have returned by now and be awaiting my orders. And as for you, Mr Banks, you must try and come back before nightfall. It is hellish enough moving about the warren in daylight. At night, it will be like drifting through one's worst nightmares. If you are overtaken by darkness, I would advise you to find some safe place and wait with the men until morning. Only yesterday, two of my men killed each other, they were so disorientated in the dark.'

'I've taken to heart everything you've said, Lieutenant. Well then, let's be going back down.'

Downstairs, Captain Ma was talking to a soldier in a badly torn uniform. The latter did not appear to be wounded, but seemed shocked and upset. The Japanese in the chair was now

snoring, as though enjoying a peaceful nap, though I noticed he had vomited some more down the front of his clothes.

The lieutenant conferred quickly with the captain, then questioned the soldier in the torn uniform. Then he turned to me and said:

‘It is bad news. The others have not returned. Two have certainly been killed. The remainder are trapped, although there is a good chance they will yet escape. The enemy has, if only temporarily, made an advance, and it may well be that the house your parents are in is now behind their lines.’

‘Regardless of that, Lieutenant, I still need to proceed, and without any further delay. Look here, if the men you promised me haven’t returned, then perhaps, though I realise it’s a lot to ask, perhaps you’d be good enough to escort me yourself. Honestly, sir, I can’t think of a more suitable person to assist me at this point.’

The lieutenant thought this over with a grave expression.

‘Very well, Mr Banks,’ he said finally. ‘I shall do as you ask. But we must hurry. I should not really leave this post at all. To do so for any length of time could have the most awful consequences.’

He issued rapid instructions to the captain, then opening a drawer in the desk, began placing a number of items into his pockets and belt.

‘It is better you do not carry a rifle, Mr Banks. But do you have a pistol? No? Then take this. It is German and very reliable. You should keep it concealed and if we encounter the enemy, you must not hesitate to declare your neutrality immediately and clearly. Now, if you will follow me.’

Taking a rifle that was leaning against the desk, he strode over to the hole gouged into the opposite wall and nimbly climbed through. I pushed the pistol into my belt, where it was more or less concealed by my jacket, then hurried after him.

Chapter Nineteen

It is only hindsight that makes the first part of that journey appear relatively easy. At the time, as I stumbled after the lieutenant's striding figure, it certainly did not feel that way. My feet quickly began to smart from the rubble-strewn ground, and I found terribly awkward the contortions required to negotiate the holes in each wall.

Of the latter, there seemed an unending number, all of them more or less similar to the one in the cellar command base. Some were smaller, some large enough for two men to squeeze through at the same time; but they had all been gouged out with rough edges, and required a little jump to climb through. Before long I found myself close to exhaustion; no sooner had I clambered through one such hole than I would spot the lieutenant ahead of me, smartly easing his way through the next wall.

Not all the walls were still standing; sometimes we would pick our way through the debris of what must have been three or four houses before encountering another wall. The roofs were almost all smashed, often absent altogether, so that we had plenty of daylight from the sky - though here and there, heavy shadows made it easy to lose one's step. More than once, until I grew more accustomed to the terrain, my foot slipped painfully between two jagged slabs or sank ankle-deep into fragmented rubble.

It was all too easy in such circumstances to forget we were passing through what only several weeks before had been the homes of hundreds of people. In fact, I often had the impression we were moving through not a slum district, but some vast, ruined mansion with endless rooms. Even so, every now and then it would occur to me that in among the wreckage beneath our feet lay cherished heirlooms, children's toys, simple but much-loved items of family life, and I would find

myself suddenly overcome with renewed anger towards those who had allowed such a fate to befall so many innocent people. I thought again of those pompous men of the International Settlement, of all the prevarications they must have employed to evade their responsibilities down so many years, and at such moments I felt my fury mount with so much intensity I was on the verge of calling out to the lieutenant to halt, just so I could give vent to it.

The lieutenant did, though, pause at one point of his own accord, and as I caught up with him, said:

‘Mr Banks, please take a good look at this.’ He was indicating a little over to our left, towards a large boiler-like construction which, though covered in masonry dust, had remained more or less intact. ‘This is the West Furnace. If you look up there, you will see the nearer of the two tall chimneys we saw earlier from the roof. The East Furnace is similar in appearance to this, and it will be our next clear landmark. When we reach it, we shall know we are very close to the house.’

I studied the furnace carefully. A chimney of some girth emerged from above its shoulders, and when I took a few steps closer and looked up, I could see the huge chimney going off way up into the sky. I was still staring up at it when I heard my companion say:

‘Please, Mr Banks. We must continue. It is important we complete our task before the sun sets.’

It was several minutes after the West Furnace that the lieutenant’s manner became noticeably more cautious. His tread became deliberate, and at each hole, he would first peer through, his rifle poised, listening intently, before climbing up. I also began to spot more and more stacks of sandbags, or coils of barbed wire, left within reach of the holes. When I first heard the machine-gun, I abruptly froze, believing we were under fire. But then I saw the lieutenant

before me still walking, and with a deep breath, went on after him.

Eventually I came through a hole to find myself in a much larger space. In fact, in my exhausted condition, I thought I had entered the bombed remains of one of those grand ballrooms I had been taken to in the Settlement. I then realised we were standing in an area once occupied by several rooms; the partition walls had almost entirely vanished, so that the next good wall was all of twenty-five yards away. There I could see seven or eight soldiers lined up, their faces to the brick. I at first took them for prisoners, but then saw how each man was standing before a small hole through which he had inserted the barrel of his rifle. The lieutenant had already crossed the rubble and was talking to a man crouched behind a machine-gun mounted on a tripod. This machine-gun arrangement was positioned before the largest hole - the one through which we would have to climb to continue our journey. Coming closer, moreover, I saw the perimeters of the hole had been decked with barbed wire, allowing only enough space for the gun barrel to manoeuvre.

I supposed at first the lieutenant was asking the man to remove this obstacle out of our way, but then I saw how tense all those present had become. The man behind the machine-gun, all the time the lieutenant spoke to him, never took his gaze from the hole before him. The other soldiers too, all along the wall, remained still and poised, their attention utterly focused on whatever was on the other side.

Once the alarming implications of this scene had sunk in, I felt inclined to climb back through the previous hole. But then I saw the lieutenant returning towards me and remained where I was.

‘We have some trouble,’ he said. ‘A few hours ago the Japanese managed to push forward a little way. We have now beaten them back again and the line has been re-established where it was this morning. However, it would seem several

Japanese soldiers did not retreat with the others, and are now caught behind our line. They are completely cut off and thus very dangerous. My men believe they are at this moment on the other side of that wall.'

'Lieutenant, you're not suggesting, are you, that we delay while this matter sorts itself out?'

'I am afraid we will have to wait, certainly.'

'But for how long?'

'It is hard to predict. These soldiers are trapped, and they will be either captured or killed in the end. But meanwhile they have weapons and are very dangerous.'

'You mean we could wait for hours? Days even?'

'That is possible. It would be very dangerous at this point for the two of us to continue.'

'Lieutenant, I'm surprised at you. I was under the impression that you, an educated man, were fully aware of the urgency of our present undertaking. Surely there's some other route we could take to by-pass these soldiers.'

'There are other routes. But it remains the case that however we proceed, we will be in considerable danger. Unfortunately, sir, I see no alternative but to wait. It is possible the situation will be resolved before long. Excuse me.'

One of the soldiers by the wall had been signalling urgently, and now the lieutenant began to go across the rubble towards him. But just then the machine-gunner let loose a deafening burst of fire, and when he ceased there was an extended scream coming from beyond the wall. The scream began full-throated, then tapered off into a strange high-pitched whimper. It was an eerie sound and I became quite transfixed listening to it. It was only when the lieutenant came rushing back and pulled me down behind some fallen masonry that I realised there were bullets hitting the wall

behind me. The men at the next wall were now firing too, and then the machine-gunner let off another burst. The authority of his weapon seemed to silence all the others, and thereafter, for what felt like an inordinate time, the only sound to be heard came from the wounded man beyond the wall. His high-pitched whimpers continued for several moments, then he began to shout something in Japanese over and over; every now and again the voice would rise to a frantic shriek, then die away again to a whimper. This disembodied voice echoed unnervingly around the ruins, but the Chinese soldiers in front of me remained utterly still, their concentration not wavering from what they could see through the wall. Suddenly the machine-gunner turned and vomited on the ground beside him, before immediately turning back to the wire-decked hole in front. From the way he did this, it was not easy to tell if his sickness had to do with nerves, the sounds of the dying man, or simply some stomach complaint.

Then eventually, though their postures hardly changed, the soldiers all perceptibly relaxed. I heard the lieutenant say beside me:

‘So you see now, Mr Banks, that it is no easy matter to proceed from here.’

We had been crouching down on our knees, and I noticed my light flannel suit was now almost entirely covered in dust and grime. I took a few seconds to collect my thoughts before saying:

‘I appreciate the risks. But we must nevertheless continue. Particularly with all this fighting going on, my parents shouldn’t be left in that house a moment longer than necessary. May I suggest we take these men here with us? Then if these Japanese soldiers set upon us, we’d be much the stronger.’

‘As the commanding officer here, I cannot possibly sanction such an idea, Mr Banks. If these men leave their position, the headquarters would become entirely vulnerable.

Besides, I will be putting the men's lives at needless risk.'

I gave a sigh of exasperation. 'I must say, Lieutenant, it was pretty sloppy work on the part of your men to have allowed these Japanese in behind your line. If all your people had been doing their jobs properly, I'm sure such a thing would never have arisen.'

'My men have fought with commendable bravery, Mr Banks. It is hardly their fault that your mission is, for the time being, inconvenienced.'

'What do you mean by that, Lieutenant? What are you implying?'

'Please calm yourself, Mr Banks. I am merely pointing out it is not the fault of my men if ...'

'Then whose fault is it, sir? I realise what you're implying! Oh yes! I know you've been thinking it for some time now. I was wondering when you'd finally come out with it.'

'Sir, I have no idea what ...'

'I know full well what you've been thinking all this time, Lieutenant! I could see it in your eyes. You believe this is all my fault, all this, all of it, all this terrible suffering, this destruction here, I could see it in your face when we were walking through it all just now. But that's because you know nothing, practically nothing, sir, concerning this matter. You may well know a thing or two about fighting, but let me tell you it's quite another thing to solve a complicated case of this kind. You obviously haven't the slightest idea what's involved. Such things take time, sir! A case like this one, it requires great delicacy. I suppose you imagine you can just rush at it with bayonets and rifles, do you? It's taken time, I accept that, but that's in the very nature of a case like this. But I don't

know why I bother to say all this. What would you understand about it, a simple soldier?’

‘Mr Banks, there is no need for us to quarrel. I have only the most sincere good wishes for your success. I am simply telling you what is possible ...’

‘I’m getting less and less interested in your idea of what is and isn’t possible, Lieutenant. If I may say so, you’re hardly a good advertisement for the Chinese Army. Do I take it you’re now going back on your word? That you’re unwilling to accompany me beyond this point? I take it that’s so. I’m to be left to carry out this difficult task by myself. Very well, I shall do so! I shall raid the house single-handed!’

‘I think, sir, you should calm yourself before saying anything more ...’

‘And one other thing, sir! You can safely assume I will no longer be mentioning you by name at the Jessfield Park celebration. At least if I do, it will not be in a complimentary light ...’

‘Mr Banks, please, listen to me. If you are determined to continue, despite the danger, then I cannot stop you. But you will undoubtedly be safer alone. With me, you certainly run the risk of being fired upon. You, on the other hand, are a white man in civilian clothes. As long as you are very careful, and announce yourself clearly before any encounter, it is possible you will come to no harm. Of course, I repeat my recommendation that you wait until the situation here is resolved. But then again, as someone myself with ageing parents, I can well understand your feelings of urgency.’

I rose to my feet and brushed off as much dust as I could. ‘Well then, I shall be on my way,’ I said coldly.

‘In that case, Mr Banks, please take this with you.’ He was holding out a small torch. ‘My advice, as before, is to stop and wait if you do not reach your destination by dark.’

But I can see from your present attitude you might well be inclined to push on. In which case, you will certainly need the torch. The batteries are not new, so do not use it any more than you need to.'

I dropped the torch into my jacket pocket, then thanked him somewhat grudgingly, already rather regretting my outburst. The dying man had now stopped trying to talk and was just screaming again. I had begun to walk towards the sound, when the lieutenant said:

'You can't go that way, Mr Banks. You will have to move north for a while, then try to navigate yourself back on course later. Come this way, sir.'

For a few minutes, he led me on a path perpendicular to the one we had been taking. In time we came to another wall with a hole gouged out of it.

'You should go this way for at least half a mile before turning east again. You may still meet soldiers, from either side. Remember what I told you. Keep your revolver hidden, and always announce your neutrality. If you encounter any of the inhabitants, ask them to direct you to the East Furnace. I wish you luck, sir, and I regret I cannot assist you further.'

*

After I had been moving north for several minutes, I noticed the houses becoming less damaged. This did not, however, make my journey any the easier; the roofs being more intact meant I had to make do with a much murkier light - I had decided to save the torch till nightfall - and I would often have to feel my way along a wall for some distance before coming across an opening. There was, for some reason, far more broken glass in this vicinity, and also large areas submerged in stagnant water. I frequently heard the scuttling of large

groups of rats, and once trod on a dead dog, but could not hear any sounds of fighting.

It was at around this stage of the journey that I found myself thinking again and again of Jennifer, sitting in the prefects' room on that sunny afternoon we had parted - and in particular, of her face as she had made that curious vow, uttered so earnestly, to 'help me' when she was older. Once, as I groped my way forward, an absurd picture came into my head of the poor child struggling after me through this ghastly terrain, determined to make good her promise, and I suddenly felt a rush of emotion that all but brought tears to my eyes.

Then I came upon a hole in a wall through which I could see only pitch blackness, but from which came the most overwhelming stink of excrement. I knew that to keep on course I should climb through into that room, but I simply could not bear the idea and kept walking. This fastidiousness cost me dear, for I did not find another opening for some time, and thereafter, I had the impression of drifting further and further off my route.

By the time it grew completely dark and I began to use the torch, I was coming across many more signs of habitation. I would often stumble into a barely damaged chest of drawers or shrine, even whole rooms in which the furnishings were hardly disturbed, giving the impression the family had just gone out for the day. But then right next to such places I would discover more rooms utterly destroyed or flooded.

There were, too, more and more stray dogs - scrawny beasts I feared might attack me, but which invariably shrank away growling when I shone my beam at them. Once I came upon three dogs savagely tearing something apart, and drew my pistol, so convinced was I they would come for me; but even these animals meekly watched me pass, as though they had come to respect the carnage a man was capable of wreaking.

I was not so surprised, then, when I came across the first family. I found them in my torch beam, cowering back into a dark corner: several children, three women, an elderly man. Around them were the bundles and utensils of their existence. They stared at me in fear, brandishing makeshift weapons, which they lowered only slightly at my words of reassurance. I tried to enquire if I was anywhere near the East Furnace, but they returned only uncomprehending stares. I came across three or four more such families in the nearby houses - increasingly, I was able to use actual doorways rather than openings in walls - but found them no more responsive.

Then I entered a larger space, the far side of which was bathed in the reddish glow of a lantern. There were a lot of people standing about in the shadows - again, predominantly women and children with a few elderly men among them. I had begun to utter my usual words of reassurance, when I sensed something odd in the atmosphere, and stopping, reached instead for my revolver.

Faces turned to me in the lantern glow. But then almost immediately the gazes returned to the far corner where a dozen or so children had crowded around something down on the ground. Some of the children were poking with sticks at whatever it was, and then I noticed that many of the adults were holding at the ready sharpened spades, choppers and other improvised weapons. It was as though I had disturbed some dark ritual, and my first inclination was to walk on past. Perhaps it was because I heard a noise, or perhaps it was some sixth sense; but I then found myself, revolver still drawn, moving towards the circle of children. The latter seemed reluctant to reveal what they had, but gradually their shadows parted. I then saw in the dim red glow the figure of a Japanese soldier lying quite still on his side. His hands were tied behind his back; his feet too had been bound. His eyes were closed, and I could see a dark patch soaking its way through his uniform under the armpit further from the

ground. His face and hair were covered in dust and speckled with blood. For all that, I recognised Akira with no difficulty.

The children had started to gather round again, and one boy prodded Akira's body with a stick. I commanded them to get back, waving my revolver, and eventually the children retreated a little way, all watching carefully.

Akira's eyes remained closed while I looked him over. His uniform was torn away at the back, right down to his raw skin, suggesting he had been dragged along the ground. The wound near his armpit was probably caused by shrapnel. There was a swelling and cut on the back of his head. But he was so covered in grime, and the light was so poor, it was hard to ascertain how serious these injuries were. When I shone the torch on him, heavy shadows fell everywhere, making it even harder to see clearly.

Then, after I had been examining him for a few moments, he opened his eyes.

'Akira!' I said, bringing my face close. 'It's me. Christopher!'

It occurred to me that with the light behind my head, I would appear to him no more than an intimidating silhouette. I thus called his name again, this time turning the torch beam on to my face. It is possible this action only served to make me look like some hideous apparition, for Akira grimaced, then spat contemptuously at me. He could not summon much force and the saliva dribbled down his cheek.

'Akira! It's me! How fortunate to find you like this. Now I can help you.'

He looked at me, then said: 'Let me die.'

'You're not dying, old chap. You've lost some blood, and you've had something of a rough time of it lately. But we'll get you to some proper help and you'll be fine, you'll see.'

'Pig. Pig. '

'Pig?'

'You. Pig.' Again he spat at me, and again the spittle dribbled out of his mouth without force.

'Akira. Clearly you still don't realise who I am. '

'Let me die. Die like soldier. '

'Akira, it's me. Christopher. '

'I not know. You pig. '

'Listen, let me get these ropes off you. Then you'll feel much better. Then you'll soon come to your senses. '

I glanced over my shoulder, thinking to demand some tool with which to cut his bonds. I then saw that all the people in the room had gathered in a crowd just a little way behind me - many holding weapons of one sort or another - as though posing for a sinister group photograph. I was somewhat taken aback - I had for the moment forgotten about them - and felt for my revolver. But just at that moment, Akira said with a new energy:

'If you cut string, I kill you. You warn, okay, English?'

'What are you talking about? Look, you blockhead, it's me, your friend. I'm going to help you. '

'You pig. Cut string, I kill you. '

'Look, these people here will kill *you* just as quickly. In any case, your wounds will become infected soon. You have to let me help you. '

Suddenly two of the Chinese women began to shout. One appeared to be addressing me, while the other was shouting to the back of the crowd. For a moment confusion reigned, then a boy of around ten emerged holding a sickle. As he came into the light, I could see a piece of fur - perhaps the remains

of a rodent - dangling from the point of the blade. It struck me the boy was holding the sickle with such care so as not to let this offering drop, but then the woman who had shouted at me grabbed the sickle and whatever it was fell to the ground.

'Now look,' I stood up and cried at the crowd. 'You've made a mistake. This is a good man. My friend. *Friend*.'

The woman shouted again, indicating I should step aside.

'But he's not your enemy,' I went on. 'He's a friend. He's going to help me. *Help me to solve the case*.'

I raised the revolver and the woman stepped back. Meanwhile, everyone else was talking at once and a child began to cry. Then an old man was pushed to the front, a young girl holding his hand.

'I speak English,' he said.

'Well, thank goodness for that,' I said. 'Kindly tell everyone present that this man here is my friend. That he's going to help me.'

'Him. Japanese soldier. He kill Aunt Yun.'

'I'm sure he didn't. Not him personally.'

'He kill and steal.'

'But not this man. This is Akira. Did anyone see him, this *particular* man, kill or steal? Go on, ask them.'

Rather reluctantly, the old man turned and muttered something. This provoked more arguing, and another weapon, a sharpened spade, was handed round and grasped by one of the other women at the front.

'Well?' I asked the old man. 'Aren't I right? No one saw Akira personally do any wrong.'

The old man shook his head, perhaps to disagree, perhaps to indicate he had not understood. Behind me, Akira made a

noise and I turned to him.

‘Look, you see? It’s just as well I came by. They’ve got you mixed up with some other fellow, and they want to kill you. For God’s sake, do you still not know who I am? Akira! It’s me, Christopher!’

I took my eyes off the crowd, and turning fully to him, shone the torch into my face again. Then when I clicked it off, I saw for the first time the beginnings of recognition on his face.

‘Christopher,’ he said, almost experimentally.
‘Christopher.’

‘Yes, it’s me. Really. It’s been a long time. And not a moment too soon, it would seem.’

‘Christopher. My friend.’

Rising, I looked through the crowd, then gestured to a young boy holding a kitchen knife to come closer. When I took the knife from him, the woman with the sickle moved threateningly towards me, but I raised the revolver and shouted to her to keep her distance. Then kneeling down again beside Akira, I went about cutting his bonds. I had imagined Akira had said ‘string’ because of his limited English, but I now saw he was indeed tied with old twine that yielded easily under the blade.

‘Tell them,’ I said to the old man, as Akira’s hands came free, ‘tell them he’s my friend. And that we’re going to solve the case together. Tell them they’ve made a big mistake. Go on, tell them!’

As I turned my attention to Akira’s feet, I could hear the old man muttering something and arguments starting again in the crowd. Then Akira sat up cautiously and looked at me.

‘My friend Christopher,’ he said. ‘Yes, we friends.’

I sensed the crowd moving in and sprang to my feet. Perhaps in my anxiety for my friend, I shouted in an unnecessarily strident tone: 'Don't any of you come any nearer! I'll shoot, I really will!' Then turning to the old man, I cried: 'Tell them to get back! Tell them to get back if they know what's good for them!'

I do not know what the old man translated. In any case, the effect on the crowd - whose belligerence, I now realised, I had much overestimated - was utter confusion. Half of them appeared to believe I wished them over by the wall to our left, while the remainder assumed I had commanded them to sit down on the ground. They were all of them clearly alarmed by my demeanour, and in their anxiety to comply, were stumbling over one another and shouting in panic.

Akira, realising he had to seize his chance, made an attempt to climb to his feet. I hoisted him up by his arm, and for a moment we stood swaying together unsteadily. I was obliged to tuck the revolver back in my belt to free my other hand, and we then tried a step or two together. A putrid smell was coming from his wound, but pushing this out of my mind, I shouted over my shoulder, no longer caring how many of them understood:

'You'll see soon enough! You'll see you made a mistake!'

'Christopher,' Akira murmured in my ear. 'My friend. Christopher.'

'Look here,' I said to him quietly. 'We have to get away from these people. That doorway in the corner over there. Do you think you can manage it?'

Akira, leaning heavily on my shoulder, looked into the dimness. 'Okay. We go.'

His legs appeared unhurt and he walked reasonably well. But then after six or seven steps together, he stumbled, and for a moment, in our efforts to keep from collapsing in a

heap, we must have looked to the onlookers as though we were wrestling one another. But we managed to find a new arrangement, and recommenced our walk. Once, a small boy ran forward to hurl some mud at us, but was immediately hauled back. Then Akira and I were at the doorway - the door itself had disappeared - and staggered through into the next house.

Chapter Twenty

Once we had come through two further walls and there was still no sign of our being pursued, I felt for the first time a kind of exhilaration at being finally reunited with my old friend. I found myself laughing a few times as we staggered on together; then Akira too gave a laugh, and the years seemed to melt away between us.

‘How long has it been, Akira? It’s been such a long time.’

He was moving painfully by my side, but he managed to say: ‘A long time, yes.’

‘You know, I went back. To the old house. I suppose yours is still next door.’

‘Yes. Next door.’

‘Oh, have you been back too? But of course, you’ve been here all the time. You wouldn’t see it as anything so special.’

‘Yes,’ he said again, with some effort. ‘Long time. Next door.’

I brought us to a halt and sat him on the remnants of a wall. Then carefully removing the ragged jacket of his uniform, I examined his wounds again, using the torch and my magnifying glass. I was still unable to ascertain a great deal; I had been afraid that the wound under his arm was gangrenous, but it now struck me the foul smell might be coming from something smeared on his clothes, perhaps from where he had been lying on the ground. On the other hand, I noted that he was alarmingly hot and utterly drenched in sweat.

Removing my jacket, I tore several strips off the lining to use as dressings. Then I did my best to clean the wound with my handkerchief. Though I tried to wipe the pus off as gently as possible, his sharp intakes of breath told me I was causing him pain.

‘I’m sorry, Akira. I’ll try to be less clumsy.’

‘Clumsy,’ he said, as though turning the word over. Then he gave a sudden laugh and said: ‘You help me. Thank you.’

‘Of course I’m helping you. And very soon, we’ll get you proper medical help. Then you’ll be fine in no time. But before we do that, you’ll have to help *me*. There’s a very urgent task for us first, and you’ll understand better than anyone why it’s so urgent. You see, Akira, I’ve located it at last. The house where my parents are being held. We’re very near it at this moment. You know, old chap, for a time, I was thinking I’d have to go into that house alone. I’d have done it, but really, it would have been an awful risk. Goodness knows how many kidnapers are in there. I’d originally reckoned on getting a few Chinese soldiers to help, but that’s proved impossible. I was even thinking of asking the Japanese to help me. But now, the two of us together, we’ll do it, we’ll manage the thing for sure.’

I was all this time attempting to tie the improvised bandage around his torso and neck in such a way as to maintain some pressure on the wound. Akira watched me carefully, and when I stopped speaking, smiled and said:

‘Yes. I help you. You help me. Good.’

‘But Akira, I have to confess to you. I’ve got myself rather lost. I was doing quite well till shortly before I came across you. But now, I really don’t know which way to go. We have to look out for something called the East Furnace. A large thing with a chimney. I wonder, old chap, do you have any idea where we might find this furnace?’

Akira was continuing to look at me, his chest heaving. When I caught sight of him like that, I was suddenly reminded of those times when we had so often sat together at the top of the mound in our garden, recovering our breath. I was about to mention this to him when he said:

‘I know. I know this place.’

‘You know how to get to the East Furnace? From here?’

He nodded. ‘I fight here, many weeks. Here, I know just like’ - he suddenly grinned - ‘like my home village.’

I smiled too, but the remark had puzzled me. ‘Which home village is this?’ I asked.

‘Home village. Where I born.’

‘You mean the Settlement?’

Akira was quiet for a moment, then said: ‘Okay. Yes. Settlement. International Settlement. My home village.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I suppose it’s my home village too.’

We both began to laugh, and for a few moments we went on giggling and laughing together, perhaps a little uncontrollably. When we had calmed down somewhat, I said:

‘I’ll tell you an odd thing, Akira. I can say this to you. All these years I’ve lived in England, I’ve never really felt at home there. The International Settlement. That will always be my home.’

‘But International Settlement ...’ Akira shook his head. ‘Very fragile. Tomorrow, next day ...’ He waved a hand in the air.

‘I know what you mean,’ I said. ‘And when we were children, it seemed so solid to us. But as you put it just now. It’s our home village. The only one we have.’

I began to put his uniform back on him, taking every care not to hurt him unnecessarily.

‘Is that any better, Akira? I’m sorry I can’t do more for you just now. We’ll get you properly seen to very soon. But now, we’ve important work to do. You tell me where we go.’

Our progress was slow. It was hard for me to keep the torch pointed before us, and we often stumbled in the dark, at great cost to Akira. Indeed, he more than once came close to losing consciousness on that lap of our journey, and his weight around my shoulders grew immense. Nor was I without my own injuries; most annoyingly, my right shoe had split apart, and my foot was badly gashed, causing a searing pain to rise with each step. Sometimes we were so exhausted we could go no more than a dozen steps without stopping again. But we resolved on these occasions not to sit down, and would stand swaying together, gasping for breath, re-adjusting our weights in an attempt to relieve one pain at the expense of another. The rancid smell from his wound grew worse, and the constant scuffling of the rats around us was unnerving, but we did not, at this stage, hear any sounds of fighting.

I did what I could to keep our spirits up, making light-hearted remarks whenever I had the breath. In truth, though, my feelings concerning this reunion were, during those moments, of a complex hue. There was no doubting my huge gratitude at fate’s bringing us together just in time for our great undertaking. But at the same time, a part of me was saddened that our reunion - which I had thought about for so long - should be taking place in such grim circumstances. It was certainly a long way from the scenes I had always conjured up - of the two of us sitting in some comfortable hotel lounge, or perhaps on the veranda of Akira’s house, overlooking a quiet garden, talking and reminiscing for hours on end.

Akira, meanwhile, for all his difficulties, maintained a clear sense of our direction. Frequently he would lead us along some route I feared would finish in a dead end, only for a doorway or opening to appear. From time to time, we

came across more inhabitants, some no more than presences we sensed in the darkness; others, gathered around the glow of a lantern or a fire, would stare at Akira with such hostility I feared we would be set upon again. But for the most part we were allowed to pass unmolested, and I once even managed to persuade an old woman to give us drinking water in return for the last banknotes in my pocket.

Then the terrain changed perceptibly. There were no more pockets of domesticity, and the only people we encountered were isolated individuals with abandoned looks in their eyes, muttering or weeping to themselves. Nor were there any more surviving doorways, but only the gouged-out holes of the sort the lieutenant and I had negotiated at the journey's start. Each of these presented us with much difficulty, Akira being unable to climb through - even with me assisting his every move - without inflicting dreadful agonies upon himself.

We had long since given up conversation, and were simply emitting grunts in time to our steps, when suddenly Akira brought us to a halt and raised his head. Then I too could hear a voice, someone shouting orders. It was difficult to say how near it was - perhaps two or three houses away.

‘Japanese?’ I asked in a whisper.

Akira went on listening, then shook his head.

‘Kuomintang. Christopher, we now very close to ... to ...’

‘The front?’

‘Yes, front. We now very close to front. Christopher, this very dangerous.’

‘Is it absolutely necessary to go through this area to reach the house?’

‘Necessary, yes.’

There was a sudden burst of rifle fire, then from further away, the reply of a machine-gun. We instinctively tightened our grasp on one another, but then Akira freed himself and sat down.

‘Christopher,’ he said quietly. ‘We rest now.’

‘But we have to reach the house.’

‘We rest now. Too dangerous to go in fighting zone in darkness. We be killed. Must wait morning.’

I saw the sense in this, and in any case, we were now both too exhausted to go on much further. I also sat down and switched off the torch.

We sat in the dark for some time, the silence broken only by our breathing. Then suddenly the gunfire started again, and for perhaps a minute or two continued ferociously. It ended abruptly; then after another moment of quiet, a strange noise rose through the walls. It was a long, thin sound, like an animal’s call in the wild, but ended in a full-throated cry. Next came shrieking and sobbing, and then the wounded man began to shout out actual phrases. He sounded remarkably like the dying Japanese soldier I had listened to earlier, and in my exhausted state, I assumed this must be the same man; I was on the point of remarking to Akira what a singularly unfortunate time this individual was having, when I realised he was shouting in Mandarin, not Japanese. The realisation that these were two different men rather chilled me. So identical were their pitiful whimpers, the way their screams gave way to desperate entreaties, then returned to screams, that the notion came to me this was what each of us would go through on our way to death - that these terrible noises were as universal as the crying of new-born babies.

After a time, I grew conscious of the fact that should the fighting spill into our room, we were sitting in a completely exposed position. I was about to suggest to Akira we move somewhere more hidden, but then noticed he had fallen

asleep. I switched on the torch again and shone it about cautiously.

Even by recent standards, the destruction around us was severe. I could see grenade damage, bullet holes everywhere, smashed brick and timber. There was a dead water-buffalo lying on its side in the middle of the room no more than seven or eight yards from us; it was covered in dust and debris, a horn pointing up to the roof. I went on casting the beam about until I had established all the possible points from which combatants could enter our enclosure. Most importantly, I discovered, on the far side of the room, beyond the buffalo, a little brick alcove, which perhaps had once served as a stove or fireplace. This struck me as being the safest place for us to spend the night. Shaking Akira awake, I put his arm around my neck, and we both rose painfully to our feet.

When we reached the brick alcove, I pushed away some rubble and cleared an area of smooth wooden boards sufficient to allow us both to lie down. I spread out my jacket for Akira and carefully laid him down on his good side. Then I too lay down and waited for sleep.

But exhausted as I was, the continuing cries of the dying man, my fears of being caught in the fighting, and my thoughts of the crucial task before us all kept me from drifting off. Akira too, I could tell, remained awake, and when finally I heard him sitting up, I asked him:

‘How is your wound?’

‘My wound. No trouble, no trouble.’

‘Let me see it again ...’

‘No, no. No trouble. But thank you. You good friend.’

Although we were only inches apart, we could not see each other at all. After a long pause, I heard him say:

‘Christopher. You must learn to speak Japanese.’

‘Yes, I must.’

‘No, I mean now. You learn Japanese now.’

‘Well, quite honestly, old fellow, this is hardly the ideal time to ...’

‘No. You must learn. If Japanese soldier come in while I asleep, you must tell them. Tell them we are friend. You must tell them or they shoot in dark.’

‘Yes. I see your point.’

‘So you learn. In case I asleep. Or I dead.’

‘Now look here, I don’t want any of that nonsense. You’re going to be as fit as a fiddle in no time.’

There was another pause, and I remembered from years ago how Akira would fail to follow me if I used colloquialisms. So I said, quite slowly:

‘You’re going to be perfectly well. Do you understand, Akira? I’ll see to it. You’re going to be well.’

‘Very kind,’ he said. ‘But precaution is best. You must learn to say. In Japanese. If Japanese soldier come. I teach word. You remember.’

He began to say something in his own tongue, but it was much too extended and I stopped him.

‘No, no, I’ll never learn that. Something much shorter. Just to make clear we’re not the enemy.’

He thought a moment, then uttered a phrase only slightly shorter than the previous one. I made an attempt, but almost immediately he said:

‘No, Christopher. Mistake.’

After a few more attempts, I said: ‘Look, it’s no good. Just give me one word. The word for “friend”. I can’t manage anything more tonight.’

'Tomodachi,' he said. *'You say. To-mo-da-chi.'*

I repeated this word several times, I thought perfectly accurately, but then realised he was laughing in the darkness. I found myself laughing also, and then, much as we had done earlier, we both began to laugh uncontrollably. We went on laughing for perhaps as long as a full minute, after which I believe I fell asleep quite suddenly.

When I awoke, the earliest dawn light was coming into the room. It was a pale, bluish light, as though just one layer of darkness had been removed. The dying man had now gone silent, and from somewhere came the singing of a bird. I could now see that the roof above us had largely vanished, so that from where I lay, my shoulder hard against the brickwork, there were stars visible in the dawn sky.

A movement caught my eye and I sat up in alarm. I then saw three or four rats moving around the dead water-buffalo, and for a few moments I sat gazing at them. Only then did I turn to look at Akira, dreading what I might find. He was lying beside me quite still, and his colour was very pale, but I saw with relief that he was breathing evenly. I found my magnifying glass and began gently to examine his wound, but succeeded only in waking him.

'It's just me,' I whispered as he sat up slowly and glanced about him. He looked frightened and bewildered, but then he seemed to remember everything, and a look of numb toughness came into his eyes.

'You were dreaming?' I asked.

He nodded. *'Yes. Dreaming.'*

'Of a better place than this, I should hope,' I said with a laugh.

'Yes.' He gave a sigh, then added: *'I dream of when I am small boy.'*

We were silent for a moment. Then I said:

‘It must have been a rude shock. To come from the world you were dreaming of into this one here.’

He was staring at the buffalo’s head protruding out of the rubble.

‘Yes,’ he said eventually. ‘I dream of when I am young boy. My mother, my father. Young boy.’

‘You remember, Akira. All the games we used to play? On the mound, in our garden? You remember, Akira?’

‘Yes. I remember.’

‘Those are good memories.’

‘Yes. Very good memories.’

‘Those were splendid days,’ I said. ‘We didn’t know it then, of course, just how splendid they were. Children never do, I suppose.’

‘I have child,’ Akira said suddenly. ‘Boy. Five years old.’

‘Really? I’d like to meet him.’

‘I lose photo. Yesterday. Day before. When I wound. I lose photo. Of son.’

‘Now look, old chap, don’t get despondent. You’ll be seeing your son again in no time.’

He continued to stare for some time at the buffalo. A rat made a sudden movement and a cloud of flies rose up, then settled again on the beast.

‘My son. He in Japan.’

‘Oh, you sent him to Japan? That surprises me.’

‘My son. In Japan. If I die, you tell him, please.’

‘Tell him that you died? Sorry, can’t do that. Because you’re not going to die. Not yet anyway.’

‘You tell him. I die for country. Tell him, be good to mother. Protect. And build good world.’ He was now almost whispering, struggling to find his words in English, struggling not to weep. ‘Build good world,’ he said again, moving his hand through the air like a plasterer smoothing a wall. His gaze followed the hand as though in wonder. ‘Yes. Build good world.’

‘When we were boys,’ I said, ‘we lived in a good world. These children, these children we’ve been coming across, what a terrible thing for them to learn so early how ghastly things really are.’

‘My son,’ Akira said. ‘Five years old. In Japan. He know nothing, nothing. He think world is good place. Kind people. His toys. His mother, father.’

‘I suppose we were like that too. But it’s not all downhill, I suppose.’ I was trying hard now to combat the dangerous despondency settling over my friend. ‘After all, when we were children, when things went wrong, there wasn’t much we could do to help put it right. But now we’re adults, now we can. That’s the thing, you see? Look at us, Akira. After all this time, we can finally put things right. Remember, old chap, how we used to play those games? Over and over? How we used to pretend we were detectives searching for my father? Now we’re grown, we can at last put things right.’

Akira did not speak for a long time. Then he said: ‘When my boy. He discover world is not good. I wish ...’ He stopped, either in pain or because he could not find the English. He said something in Japanese, then went on: ‘I wish I with him. To help him. When he discover.’

‘Listen, you great ape,’ I said, ‘this is all far too morose. You’ll see your son again, I’ll see to that. And all

this about how good the world looked when we were boys. Well, it's a lot of nonsense in a way. It's just that the adults led us on. One mustn't get too nostalgic for childhood.'

'Nos-tal-gic,' Akira said, as though it were a word he had been struggling to find. Then he said a word in Japanese, perhaps the Japanese for 'nostalgic'. 'Nos-tal-gic. It is good to be nos-tal-gic. Very important.'

'Really, old fellow?'

'Important. Very important. Nostalgic. When we nostalgic, we remember. A world better than this world we discover when we grow. We remember and wish good world come back again. So very important. Just now, I had dream. I was boy. Mother, Father, close to me. In our house.'

He fell silent and continued to gaze across the rubble.

'Akira,' I said, sensing that the longer this talk went on, the greater was some danger I did not wish fully to articulate. 'We should move on. We have much to do.'

As though in reply, there came a burst of machine-gun fire. It was further away than the night before, but we both started.

'Akira,' I said. 'Is it far now to the house? We must try and reach it before the fighting starts again in earnest. How far is it now?'

'Not far. But we go carefully. Chinese soldier very near.'

Our sleep, far from refreshing us, appeared to have made us even more depleted. When we stood up and Akira put his weight on me, the pain which went across my neck and shoulders obliged me to let out a moan. For some time, until our bodies grew accustomed again, walking together proved a torturous ordeal.

Our physical conditions aside, the terrain we traversed that morning was by far the most difficult yet. The damage was so extensive, we would frequently have to halt, unable to find a way through the debris. And while it was undeniably a help to see where we were setting down our feet, all the ghastliness that had been hidden by the darkness was now visible to us, taking a profound toll on our spirits. Amidst the wreckage, we could see blood - sometimes fresh, sometimes weeks old - on the ground, on the walls, splashed across broken furniture. Worse still - and our noses would warn us of their presence long before our eyes - we would come across, with disconcerting regularity, piles of human intestines in various stages of decay. Once when we stopped, I remarked to Akira about this, and he said simply:

‘Bayonet. Soldier always put bayonet in stomach. If you put here’ - he indicated his ribs - ‘bayonet not come out again. So soldier learn. Always stomach.’

‘At least the bodies are gone. At least they do that much.’

We continued to hear occasional gunfire, and each time we did so, I had the feeling we had come a little closer to it. This concerned me, but Akira now seemed surer than ever of our route, and whenever I questioned his decisions, he shook his head impatiently.

By the time we came across the bodies of the two Chinese soldiers, the morning sun was coming down in strong shafts through the broken roofs. We did not pass close enough to examine them properly, but my guess was that they had not been dead for more than a few hours. One was face-down in the rubble; the other had died on his knees, his forehead resting on the brick wall, as though he had been overcome by melancholy.

At one point, my conviction that we were about to walk right into crossfire grew so strong that I stopped Akira, saying:

‘Now look here. What’s your game? Where are you leading us?’

He said nothing, but stood leaning against me, his head bowed, recovering his breath.

‘Do you really know where we’re going? Akira, answer me! Do you know where we’re going?’

He raised his head wearily, then indicated over my shoulder.

I turned - I had to do so slowly, for he was still leaning on me - and saw through a broken section of a wall, no more than a dozen steps away, what was undoubtedly the East Furnace.

I said nothing, but led us over to it. Like its twin, the East Furnace had survived the assaults well. It was covered in dust, but looked virtually in working order. Letting go of Akira - he immediately sat down on some rubble - I went right up to the furnace. As on the last occasion, I could see the chimney above me pointing towards the clouds. I went back to where Akira was sitting and gently touched his good shoulder.

‘Akira, I’m sorry about my tone just now. I want you to know I’m very grateful to you. I could never have found this by myself. Really, Akira, I’m so grateful.’

‘Okay.’ His breath was now a little easier. ‘You help me. I help you. Okay.’

‘But Akira, we must be very near the house now. Let me see. Along there’ - I indicated - ‘the alley runs that way. We have to follow the alley.’

Akira appeared reluctant to get to his feet, but I hoisted him up and we set off again. I began by following what was clearly the narrow alley the lieutenant had pointed out from the rooftop, but in almost no time we found our way completely barred by fallen debris. We climbed through a wall

into a nearby house, then proceeded on what I imagined was a parallel course, picking our way through rubble-strewn rooms.

These houses we now found ourselves in were less damaged, and had clearly been more salubrious than those we had lately come through. There were chairs, dressing tables, even some mirrors and vases still intact amidst the wreckage. I was eager to keep going, but Akira's body began to sag badly, and we were obliged to stop again. We sat down on a fallen beam, and it was as we were recovering our breath that my gaze fell upon the hand-painted name-board lying there in the rubble before us.

It had split cleanly along the grain of the wood, but the two pieces were lying there side by side; I could see also part of the lattice-work by which it had once been fixed to the front entrance. It was not by any means the first time we had come across such a thing, but some instinct drew my attention to this particular item. I went over to it and, extricating the two pieces of wood from the masonry, brought them back to where we were sitting.

'Akira,' I said, 'can you read this?' I held the pieces together before him.

He gazed at the script for a while, then said: 'My Chinese, not good. A name. Someone's name.'

'Akira, listen carefully. Look at these characters. You must know something about them. Please, try and read them. It's very important.'

He continued to regard the board, then shook his head.

'Akira, listen,' I said. 'Is it possible this says Yeh Chen? Could that be the name written here?'

'Yeh Chen ...' Akira looked thoughtful. 'Yeh Chen. Yes, possible. This character here ... Yes, possible. This say Yeh Chen.'

'It does? Are you sure?'

‘Not sure. But ... possible. Very possible. Yes’ - he gave a nod - ‘Yeh Chen. I think so.’

I put down the two pieces of the board and made my way carefully over the rubble towards the front of the house we were in. There was a broken gap where the doorway had once been, and looking through it, I could see into the narrow alley running outside. I looked across to the house directly facing me. The frontages to the adjoining properties were badly smashed, but the house I was looking at had survived strangely intact. There were hardly any obvious signs of damage: the shutters on the window, the crude sliding wooden lattice door, even the charm dangling above the doorway, had all remained unscathed. After what we had travelled through, it looked like an apparition from another more civilised world. I stood there staring at it for some time. Then I gestured to Akira.

‘Look, come here,’ I said in a near-whisper. ‘This has to be the house. It can’t be any other.’

Akira did not move, but gave a deep sigh. ‘Christopher. You friend. I like very much.’

‘Keep your voice down. Akira, we’ve arrived. It’s this house. I can feel it now in my bones.’

‘Christopher ...’ With an effort he rose to his feet and came slowly over the ground. When he was beside me, I pointed out the house. The morning sun shining down into the alley was causing bright streaks to fall across its front.

‘There, Akira. There it is.’

He sat down by my feet and gave another sigh. ‘Christopher. My friend. You must think very carefully. It is many years. Many, many years now ...’

‘Isn’t it odd,’ I remarked, ‘how the fighting’s hardly touched that house? The house with my parents inside.’

Uttering these words, I suddenly felt almost overwhelmed. But I collected myself and said: 'Now, Akira, we have to go in. We'll do it together, arm in arm. Just like that other time, going into Ling Tien's room. You remember, Akira?'

'Christopher. My dear friend. You must think very carefully. It is many, many years. My friend, please, you listen. Perhaps mother and father. It is now so many years ...'

'We'll go in now together. Then as soon as we've done what we have to do, we'll get you to proper medical help, I promise. In fact, it's possible there'll be something, some first aid, in that house. At least some clean water, perhaps bandages. My mother will be able to look at your injury, perhaps put on a fresh dressing for you. Don't you worry, you'll be fine in no time.'

'Christopher. You must think very carefully. So many years go by ...'

He fell silent as the door across the alley slid open with a rattle. I had hardly started to fumble for the revolver when the small Chinese girl emerged.

She was perhaps six years old. Her face had a still expression, and was rather pretty. Her hair had been tied carefully into little bunches. Her simple jacket and wide trousers were slightly too large for her.

She looked about her, blinking in the sunlight, then looked our way. Spotting us easily - neither of us had moved - she came towards us with surprising fearlessness. She stopped in the alley just a few yards away, and said something in Mandarin, gesturing back to the house.

'Akira, what's she saying?'

'Not understand. Perhaps she invite us inside.'

'But how can she be involved? Do you suppose she has something to do with the kidnappers? What's she saying?'

‘I think she ask us to help her.’

‘We’ll have to tell her to stand away,’ I said, drawing my revolver. ‘We have to anticipate resistance.’

‘Yes, she ask us to help. She say dog is injured. I think she say dog. My Chinese not good.’

Then as we watched, from somewhere near where her carefully tied hair began, a thin line of blood ran down, over her forehead and down her cheek. The little girl appeared to notice nothing and spoke to us again, gesturing once more back to her house.

‘Yes,’ Akira said. ‘She say dog. Dog is hurt.’

‘Her dog? *She’s* hurt. Perhaps seriously.’

I took a step towards her, intending to examine her wound. But she interpreted my movement as compliance, and turning, skipped back across the alley towards her door. She slid it open again, looked towards us appealingly, then disappeared inside.

I stood there for a moment hesitating. Then I reached a hand down to my friend.

‘Akira, this is it,’ I said. ‘We must go in. Let’s go in now together.’

Chapter Twenty-one

I tried to keep the revolver poised as we crossed the alley. But Akira's arm was around my neck, and I was having to support so much of his weight, that I imagine our gait as we staggered together into the house was far from authoritative. I was vaguely aware of an ornamental vase standing in the entrance way, and I believe the decoration I had seen dangling from the door frame gave a little chiming sound as we brushed past it. Then I heard the girl's voice speaking and looked about us.

Although the front of the house had remained virtually untouched, the whole of the back half of the room we were in lay in ruin. Thinking about it today, I would suppose a shell had come through the roof, bringing down the upper storey, and destroying the rear of the house, together with the property adjoining it behind. But at that moment I was looking first and foremost for my parents, and I am not sure what exactly I registered. My first giddy thought was that the kidnappers had fled. Then, when I saw the bodies, my terrible fear was that they were those of my mother and father - that the kidnappers had slaughtered them on account of our approach. I have to confess that my next emotion was one of great relief when I saw that the three corpses thrown about the room were all Chinese.

Near the back, over by a wall, was the body of a woman who might have been the young girl's mother. Possibly the blast had thrown her there and she was lying where she had landed. There was a shocked expression on her face. One arm had been torn off at the elbow, and she was now pointing the stump up to the sky, perhaps to indicate the direction from which the shell had come. A few yards away in the debris, an old lady was also gaping up at the hole in the ceiling. One side of her face was charred, but I could see no blood or any

obvious mutilation. Finally, closest to where we were standing - he had been obscured at first by a fallen shelf - lay a boy slightly older than the little girl we had followed in. One of his legs had been blown off at the hip, from where surprisingly long entrails, like the decorative tails of a kite, had unfurled over the matting.

‘Dog,’ Akira said beside me.

I stared at him, then followed his gaze. In the centre of the wreckage, not far from the dead boy, the little girl had knelt down beside an injured dog lying on its side and was gently caressing its fur. The dog’s tail moved weakly in response. As we stood watching her, she glanced up and said something, her voice remaining quite calm and steady.

‘What’s she saying, Akira?’

‘I think she say we help dog,’ said Akira. ‘Yes, she say we help dog.’ Then suddenly, he began to giggle helplessly.

The young girl spoke again, this time addressing only me, perhaps having dismissed Akira as a lunatic. Then she brought her face down close to the dog’s and continued to pass her hand gently over its fur.

I took a step towards her, untangling myself from my friend’s arm, and as I did so, Akira crashed over into some broken furniture. I looked back at him in alarm, but he had continued to giggle, and besides, the girl’s pleading had gone on unbroken. Laying my revolver down on something, I went over to her and touched her shoulder.

‘Look here ... All of this’ - I gestured at the carnage, of which she seemed completely oblivious - ‘it’s awfully bad luck. But look, you’ve survived, and really, you’ll see, you’ll make a pretty decent show of it if you just ... if you just keep up your courage ...’ I turned to Akira in irritation and shouted: ‘Akira! Stop that noise! For God’s sake, there’s nothing to laugh about! This poor girl ...’

But the girl had now grasped my sleeve. She spoke again, carefully and slowly, looking into my eyes.

‘Look, really,’ I said, ‘you’re being awfully brave. I swear to you, whoever did all this, whoever did this ghastly thing, they won’t escape justice. You may not know who I am, but as it happens, I’m … well, I’m just the person you want. I’ll see to it they don’t get away. Don’t you worry, I’ll … I’ll …’ I had been fumbling about in my jacket, but I now found my magnifying glass and showed it to her. ‘Look, you see?’

I kicked aside a bird-cage in my path and went over to the mother. Then, perhaps out of habit as much as anything else, I bent down and began to examine her through the glass. Her stump looked peculiarly clean; the bone protruding out of the flesh was a shiny white, almost as though someone had been polishing it.

My memory of these moments is no longer very clear. But I have a feeling it was at this point, just after I stared through the glass at the woman’s stump, that I suddenly straightened and began to search for my parents. I can only say, by way of partial explanation for what ensued, that Akira was still giggling where he had fallen, and that the girl was continuing to make her pleas in the same even, persistent tones. In other words, the atmosphere had become fairly overwrought, and this might account to some extent for the manner in which I went about turning what was left of that little house upside down.

There was a tiny room at the back, completely destroyed by the shelling, and it was here I began my search, pulling up broken floorboards, smashing open with a table leg the doors of an upturned cupboard. I then returned to the main room and began to heave aside the piles of wreckage, smashing with my table leg at anything that failed readily to yield to my kicks and manoeuvres. Eventually, I became aware that Akira had stopped his giggling and was following me about,

pulling at my shoulder and saying something in my ear. I ignored him and carried on with my search, not pausing even when I accidentally threw over one of the bodies. Akira continued to pull at my shoulder, and after a time, unable to comprehend why the very person I had counted on to assist me was instead bent on hindering me, I turned to him, shouting something like:

‘Get off me! Get off! If you won’t help, then just go away! Go off into your corner and giggle!’

‘Soldiers!’ he was hissing at me. ‘Soldiers coming!’

‘Get off me! My mother, my father! Where are they? They’re not here! Where are they? Where are they?’

‘Soldiers! Christopher, stop, you must calm! You must calm or we killed! Christopher!’

He was shaking me, his face close to mine. I then realised that indeed there were voices coming from somewhere close by.

I allowed Akira to pull me to the back of the room. The little girl, I noticed, had now fallen silent, and was gently cradling the dog’s head. The animal’s tail was still making the occasional faint movement.

‘Christopher,’ Akira said in an urgent whisper. ‘If soldier Chinese, I must hide.’ He pointed to the corner.

‘Chinese soldier must not find. But if Japanese, you must say word I teach.’

‘I can’t say anything. Look, old fellow, if you’re not willing to help me ...’

‘Christopher! Soldier coming!’

He tottered across the room and disappeared into a cupboard standing at an angle in the corner. The door was sufficiently damaged so that the whole of his shin and a boot were clearly visible through the panel. It was such a

pathetic attempt to hide that I began to laugh, and was about to call out that I could still see him, when the soldiers appeared in the doorway.

The first soldier to come in fired his rifle at me, but the bullet hit the wall behind me. He then noticed my raised hands, and the fact that I was a foreign civilian, and shouted something to his comrades, who crowded in behind him. They were Japanese, and the next thing I remember, three or four of them began to argue about me, all the time covering me with their rifles. More soldiers came in and began to search the place. I heard Akira call out from his hiding place something in Japanese, then as soldiers crowded around his cupboard, I saw him emerge. I noticed he did not seem particularly pleased to see them, nor they him. Other men had gathered around the little girl, also arguing what to do. Then an officer entered, the men all stood to attention, and a silence fell over the room.

The officer - a young captain - glanced about the room. His gaze fell on the child, then on me, then settled on Akira, now supported by two soldiers. A conversation ensued in Japanese, in which Akira himself took no part. A resigned expression, with elements of fear, had come into his eyes. He once tried to say something to the captain, but the latter immediately cut him off. There was another quick exchange, then the soldiers began to lead Akira away. The fear was now very evident in his face, but he did not resist.

‘Akira!’ I called after him. ‘Akira, where are they taking you? What’s wrong?’

Akira glanced back and gave me a quick, affectionate smile. Then he was gone, out into the alley, crowded from my view by the soldiers accompanying him.

The young captain was looking at the child. Then he turned to me and said:

‘You Englishman?’

‘Yes.’

‘Pray, sir, what do you do here?’

‘I was ...’ I looked around. ‘I was looking for my parents. My name is Banks, Christopher Banks. I’m a well-known detective. Perhaps you’ve ...’

I did not quite know how to continue, and besides, I realised I had been sobbing for some time, and that this was making a poor impression on the captain. I wiped my face and continued: ‘I came here to find my parents. But they’re not here any more. I’m too late.’

The captain looked around once more at the debris, the corpses, the little girl with the dying dog. Then he said something to the soldier nearest him, never taking his eyes from me. Finally he said to me: ‘Pray, sir, you come with me.’

He made a polite but firm gesture that I should precede him out into the alley. He had not holstered his pistol, but then nor was it aimed at me.

‘This little girl,’ I said. ‘Will you take her somewhere safe?’

He gazed back at me in silence. Then he said: ‘Pray, sir. You leave now.’

I was on the whole looked after decently by the Japanese. They kept me in a little back room within their headquarters - a former fire station - where I was fed and a doctor treated me for several injuries I had barely noticed receiving. My foot was bandaged and I was even provided with a large boot to accommodate it. The soldiers in charge of me spoke no English, and appeared uncertain whether I was a prisoner or a guest, but I was too exhausted to care; I lay on the camp bed they had put up in my back room, and for several hours, drifted in and out of sleep. I was not locked in; in fact, the door to the adjoining office would not close

properly, so that whenever I came back to consciousness, I could hear Japanese voices arguing, or else shouting down a telephone, presumably about me. I now suspect I was suffering from a mild fever for much of that period; whatever, as I went in and out of sleep, the events not only of the past few hours, but of the last several weeks, circled around my head. Then gradually, one by one, the cobwebs began to clear, so that by the time I was awoken, towards the late afternoon, by the arrival of Colonel Hasegawa, I found I had an entirely fresh view on all that had been troubling me about the case.

Colonel Hasegawa - a dapper man in his forties - introduced himself politely, saying: 'I am glad to see you are feeling so much better, Mr Banks. I trust these men here have looked after you well. I am pleased to tell you I have come with instructions to escort you to the British consulate. May I suggest we set off at once?'

'Actually, Colonel,' I said, rising gingerly to my feet, 'I would prefer it if you could take me somewhere else. You see, it's rather urgent. I'm not sure of the exact address, but it's not so far from Nanking Road. Perhaps you know it. It's a shop selling gramophone records.'

'You are so eager to purchase gramophone records?'

I could not be bothered to explain, so just said: 'It's important I get there as quickly as possible.'

'Unfortunately, sir, I have instructions to deliver you to the British consulate. I fear we shall cause great inconvenience if I do otherwise.'

I gave a sigh. 'I suppose you're right, Colonel. In any case, now I think about it, I fancy I shall be too late.'

The colonel looked at his wristwatch. 'Yes, I fear you might. But if I may suggest. If we set off straight away, then you will be enjoying your music again with minimum delay.'

We travelled in an open military vehicle driven by the colonel's batman. It was a fine afternoon and the sun was beating down on the ruins of Chapei. We moved slowly, for though much of the debris had been cleared out of our path - there were huge piles of it on the roadside - the road was pitted with craters. Occasionally we would pass down a street with almost no sign of damage; but then we would turn the corner and the houses would be little more than piles of rubble, and every surviving telegraph pole would be standing at an odd angle between tangled cables. Once, as we moved through such an area, I found I could see a fair distance across the flattened ruins, and caught sight of the chimneys from the two furnaces.

'England is a splendid country,' Colonel Hasegawa was saying. 'Calm, dignified. Beautiful green fields. I still dream of it. And your literature. Dickens, Thackeray. Wuthering Heights. I am especially fond of your Dickens.'

'Colonel, excuse me for bringing this up. But when your men found me yesterday, I was with someone. A Japanese soldier. Do you happen to know what became of him?'

'That soldier. I am not certain what became of him.'

'I do wonder where I might find him again.'

'You wish to find him again?' The colonel's face became serious. 'Mr Banks, I would advise you not to concern yourself any more with that soldier.'

'Colonel, has he in your eyes committed some offence?'

'Offence?' He looked at the passing ruins with a gentle smile. 'Almost certainly that soldier gave information to the enemy. It is likely that is how he negotiated his release from captivity. I understand you yourself said in your statement you found him near the Kuomintang lines. That is most suggestive of cowardice and betrayal.'

I was about to protest, but realised it was in neither Akira's nor my interests to fall out with the colonel. After I had been silent for a time, he said:

'It is wise not to become too sentimental.'

His accent, which was otherwise impressive, faltered on this last word, so that it came out as 'sen-chee-men-tol'. It rather grated on me and I turned away without responding. But a moment later he asked in a sympathetic tone:

'This soldier. You had met him somewhere previously?'

'I thought I had. I thought he was a friend of mine from my childhood. But now, I'm not so certain. I'm beginning to see now, many things aren't as I supposed.'

The colonel nodded. 'Our childhood seems so far away now. All this' - he gestured out of the vehicle - 'so much suffering. One of our Japanese poets, a court lady many years ago, wrote of how sad this was. She wrote of how our childhood becomes like a foreign land once we have grown.'

'Well, Colonel, it's hardly a foreign land to me. In many ways, it's where I've continued to live all my life. It's only now I've started to make my journey from it.'

We passed through Japanese checkpoints into Hongkew, the northern district of the Settlement. In this region too there were signs of war damage, as well as those of anxious military preparation. I saw many piles of sandbags, and trucks filled with soldiers. As we approached the canal, the colonel said:

'Like yourself, Mr Banks, I am very fond of music. In particular, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Brahms. Chopin also. The third sonata is marvellous.'

'A cultured man like you, Colonel,' I remarked, 'must regret all this. I mean all this carnage caused by your country's invasion of China.'

I feared he would become angry, but he smiled calmly and said:

‘It is regrettable, I agree. But if Japan is to become a great nation, like yours, Mr Banks, it is necessary. Just as it once was for England.’

We were silent for a few moments. Then he asked:

‘I am sure, yesterday, in Chapei, you saw unpleasant things?’

‘Yes. I certainly did.’

Suddenly he let out a strange laugh, which made me start.

‘Mr Banks,’ he said, ‘do you realise, do you have any idea, of the unpleasantness yet to come?’

‘If you continue to invade China, I am sure ...’

‘Excuse me, sir’ - he was now quite animated - ‘I am not talking merely of China. *The entire globe*, Mr Banks, the entire globe will before long be engaged in war. What you just saw in Chapei, it is but a small speck of dust compared to what the world must soon witness!’ He said this in a triumphant tone, but then he shook his head sadly. ‘It will be terrible,’ he said quietly. ‘Terrible. You have no idea, sir.’

I do not remember clearly those first hours following my return. But I would suppose my arrival in the grounds of the British consulate, conveyed by a Japanese military vehicle, and looking more or less like a tramp, did little for the morale of an anxious community. I remember vaguely the officials rushing out to meet us, and then, as I was taken into the building, the look on the face of the consul-general as he came hurrying down the stairs. I do not know what his first words to me were, but I do recall my saying to him, perhaps even before any greeting had passed my lips:

‘Mr George, I must ask you to let me see your man MacDonald without delay.’

‘MacDonald? *John* MacDonald? But why do you wish to talk to *him*, old fellow? Look, what you need is to rest up. We’ll have a doctor look you over ...’

‘I accept I’m looking a little the worse for wear. Don’t worry, I’ll go and freshen up a bit. But please, have MacDonald ready for me. It’s very important.’

I was shown to a guest room in the consulate building, where I managed a shave and a hot bath despite a whole series of people knocking on my door. One of these was a dour Scottish surgeon who examined me for a good half-hour, convinced I was concealing some serious injury from him. Others came to ask after one or another aspect of my welfare, and I sent at least three of them back with an impatient query concerning MacDonald. I received only vague replies about his not yet having been located; and then, as the evening drew on, exhaustion - or perhaps something the surgeon had given me - sent me off into a deep sleep.

I did not awake until well into the following morning. I had breakfast brought to my room, and changed into some fresh clothes delivered from the Cathay while I had been asleep. I then felt a lot better, and decided I would go and seek out MacDonald then and there.

I thought I could remember the way to MacDonald’s office from our last meeting, but the consulate building was rather deceptive and I was obliged to ask directions from a number of people I encountered. I was still a little lost, making my way down a flight of stairs, when I spotted the figure of Sir Cecil Medhurst standing on the landing below me.

The morning sun was streaming through the tall landing windows, lighting up a large area of grey stone around him. There was no one else on the landing, and Sir Cecil was stooping forward slightly, hands clasped behind his back,

gazing down on to the consulate grounds below. I was tempted to retreat back up the stairs, but it was a quiet part of the building, and there was a chance my footsteps would make him look up at any moment. I thus continued my descent, and as I came up to him, he turned as though he had been aware all along of my approach.

‘Hello, old fellow,’ he said. ‘Heard you were back. A bit of a panic when you went missing, I’ll tell you. Feeling better?’

‘Yes. I’m fine, thanks. Just this foot’s a little awkward. Won’t quite fit into my shoe.’

The sun in his face made him look old and tired. He turned back to the window again and peered out; moving alongside him, I too looked out. Below us, three Sikh policemen were hurrying back and forth across the lawn, stacking sandbags into piles.

‘You heard she’s gone?’ Sir Cecil asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Of course, when you went missing at the same time, I jumped to conclusions. So did a few other people, I fancy. That’s why I came along this morning. To offer you my apologies. But they told me you were sleeping. So I was just ... well, just kicking my heels here.’

‘There’s hardly any need for apologies, Sir Cecil.’

‘Oh yes there is. I fancy I went around saying a few things the other evening. You know. Jumping to conclusions. Of course, everyone knows now I was making a fool of myself. But all the same, thought I’d better come along and explain myself.’

Down on the lawn, a Chinese coolie arrived with a wheelbarrow containing more sandbags. The Sikh policemen began unloading them.

‘Did she leave a letter?’ I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

‘No. But I did receive a cable this morning. She’s in Macao, you know. Says she’s safe and well. Says she’s by herself, and that she’ll be writing soon.’ Then he turned to me and grasped my elbow. ‘Banks, I know you’ll miss her too. In some ways, you know, I’d have preferred it if she’d gone off with you. I know she … she thought jolly well of you.’

‘It must have come as a big shock,’ I remarked, for want of something to say.

Sir Cecil turned away and for a time went on gazing down at the policemen. Then he said: ‘Wasn’t really, to tell you the truth. No shock at all.’ Then he went on: ‘I always told her she should go, told her she should go and find love, you know, true love. She deserves it, don’t you think? That’s where she’s gone now. Off to find true love. Perhaps she’ll find it too. Out there, on the South China Sea, who knows? Perhaps she’ll meet a traveller, in a port, in a hotel, who knows? She’s become a romantic, you see? I had to let her go.’ There were now tears welling in his eyes.

‘What will you do now, sir?’ I asked gently.

‘What will I do? Who knows? Ought to go home, I expect. I suppose that’s what I’ll do. Go home. Just as soon as I’ve paid off a few debts here, that is.’

I had been conscious of footsteps coming down the stairs behind us, but now they slowed to a halt and we both of us turned. I was rather dismayed to see Grayson, the official from the Municipal Council.

‘Good morning, Mr Banks. Good morning, Sir Cecil. Mr Banks, we’re all so pleased to see you back and safe.’

‘Thank you, Mr Grayson.’ And when he continued simply to stand there on the bottom stair smiling foolishly, I

added: 'I trust all the arrangements for the Jessfield Park ceremony are progressing to your satisfaction.'

'Oh yes, yes.' He gave a vague laugh. 'But just now, Mr Banks, I came to find you because I heard you were wishing to speak with Mr MacDonald.'

'Yes, that's right. In fact, I was just on my way to find him.'

'Ah. Well, he won't be in his usual office. If you'd follow me, sir, I'll take you to him now.'

I gave Sir Cecil a gentle squeeze on the shoulder - he had turned back to the window to hide his tears - then followed Grayson with an eager step.

He led me through a deserted section of the building, and then we came to a corridor containing a row of offices. I could hear someone talking on the telephone, and a man who emerged from one of the doors nodded to Grayson. Grayson opened another door and waved for me to go in ahead of him.

I stepped into a small but well-appointed office dominated by a large desk. I stopped at the threshold because there was no one in the room, but Grayson nudged me further in and closed the door. He then walked around the desk, sat down, and gestured towards the empty seat.

'Mr Grayson,' I said, 'I have no time for these foolish pranks.'

'I'm sorry,' Grayson said, 'I know you wished to see MacDonald. But you see, MacDonald's domain is protocol. He discharges his duties very well, but his territory doesn't really extend much further.'

I sighed with impatience, but before I could speak, Grayson went on:

'You see, old chap, when you said you wanted MacDonald, I assumed you wanted me. I'm the fellow you need to speak

to.'

I then noticed there was something different about Grayson. His ingratiating air had vanished, and he was watching me steadily over the desk. When he saw understanding dawn in my face, he gestured once more at the chair.

'Please make yourself comfortable, old chap. And I do apologise for having rather dogged you since your arrival here. But you see, I had to make sure you didn't do anything to cause a big stink with the other Powers. Now, let me see, I take it you want a meeting with the Yellow Snake.'

'Yes, Mr Grayson. I wonder if you can arrange such a thing.'

'As it happens, we finally got word while you were away. All parties seem happy now to grant your request.' Then leaning forward, he said to me: 'So, Mr Banks. Do you feel you're closing in?'

'Yes, Mr Grayson. At last, I believe I am.'

So it was that just after eleven o'clock last night, I found myself travelling by car through the elegant residential areas of the French Concession in the company of two officers from the Chinese secret police. We went down avenues lined with trees, past large houses, some entirely hidden behind high walls and hedges. Then we came through gates heavily guarded by men in gowns and hats, and halted in a gravelled courtyard. A dark house, four or five storeys high, stood before us.

Inside, the lights were low, and more guards lurked everywhere in the shadows. As I followed my escorts up the central staircase, I gained the impression the house had until recently belonged to a wealthy European, but had now, for some reason, fallen into the hands of the Chinese authorities; I could see crude notices and schedules pinned

up on the walls right alongside exquisite works of Western and Chinese art.

To judge from its decor, the room I was shown into up on the second floor had until recently contained a billiard table. There was now a yawning space in the middle of the room, around which I paced while I waited. After twenty minutes or so, I heard the sound of more cars arriving down in the courtyard, but when I tried to see out of the windows, I found these gave on to the gardens to the side of the house, and I could see nothing at all of the front.

It was perhaps another half-hour before I was finally fetched. I was escorted up another flight of stairs, then along a corridor past more guards. Then my escorts stopped, and one of them pointed to a door several yards before us. I went the last lap alone, and entered what appeared to be a large study. There was thick carpet beneath my feet, and the walls were almost entirely lined with books. At the far end, where heavy drapes had been drawn across the bay windows, was a desk with a chair on either side of it. A reading lamp on the desk created a warm pool of light, but otherwise much of the room was in shadow. As I stood surveying my surroundings, a figure rose from behind the desk and, stepping carefully around it, gestured back to the chair he had vacated.

‘Why don’t you take this seat, Puffin?’ Uncle Philip said to me. ‘You remember, don’t you? You always loved to sit in my chair behind my desk.’

Chapter Twenty-two

Had I not been expecting to see him, it is perfectly possible I would have failed to recognise Uncle Philip. He had put on weight over the years, so that though he was not stout, his neck had thickened and his cheeks were sagging. His hair was wispy and white. But his eyes were calm and humorous in much the way I remembered.

I did not smile as I came towards him; nor did I go behind the desk to the chair he had offered. 'I'll sit here.' I said, stopping beside the other chair.

Uncle Philip shrugged. 'Well, it's not my desk anyway. In fact, I've never set foot in this house before. Something to do with you, this place?'

'I've never been here before either. May I suggest we sit down?'

When we did so, we could see each other clearly for the first time in the light from the desk lamp, and we spent a moment carefully studying one another's features.

'You haven't changed so much, you know, Puffin,' he said. 'Easy to see the boy in you, even now.'

'I'd appreciate you not calling me by that name.'

'Sorry. Rather cheeky, I admit. So here we are, you managed to track me down. I kept refusing to meet you before. But in the end, I suppose I began to want to see you again. Owe you an explanation or two, I expect. But I wasn't sure, you see, how you regarded me. Friend or foe, that sort of thing. But then these days I'm not sure about most people on that score. Do you know, they told me to keep this with me just in case?' He produced a little silver pistol and held it up to the light. 'Can you believe it? They thought you might wish to attack me.'

‘But I see you brought it along just the same.’

‘Oh, but I carry it everywhere. So many people wanting to do me mischief these days. I didn’t really bring it on your account. One of those men standing out there. Perhaps he’s been bribed to burst in here and stab me. Who can tell? That’s the way it’s been for me, I’m afraid. Ever since this Yellow Snake lark started.’

‘Yes. It would seem you’re much given to treachery.’

‘That’s a bit harsh, if you’re implying what I think you’re implying. As far as the communists are concerned, very well, yes, I’ve turned traitor. Even there, it was never my intention, you know. Chiang’s men got hold of me one day and threatened to torture me. I admit, I didn’t fancy that much, didn’t fancy it one bit. But in the end, they did a far cleverer thing. They *tricked* me into betraying one of my number. And then, you see, that was that. Because as you’ve seen, no one punishes turncoats more savagely than my old comrades. There was no other way for me to stay alive. I had to depend on the government to protect me from my comrades.’

‘According to my investigations,’ I said, ‘a lot of people have lost their lives through you. And not just those you betrayed. There was a time, a year ago, when you allowed the communists to believe the Yellow Snake was another man. Many of his family members, including three children, were killed in the first wave of reprisals.’

‘I don’t consider myself admirable. I’m a coward, and I’ve known it a long time. But I can hardly be held to account for the Reds’ savagery. They’ve proved themselves every bit as vicious as Chiang Kai-shek ever was, and I’ve no respect left for them. But look here, I don’t expect you came to talk about all this.’

‘No, I didn’t.’

‘So, Puffin. I’m sorry. Christopher. So. What shall I tell you? Where shall we begin?’

‘My parents. Where are they?’

‘Your father I’m afraid is dead. Has been for many years. I’m sorry.’

I said nothing and waited. Eventually he said:

‘Tell me, Christopher. What do you believe happened to your father?’

‘Is it any business of yours what I believe? I came here to hear it from you.’

‘Very well. But I was curious to know what you’d worked out for yourself. After all, you’ve made quite a name for yourself for such things.’

This irritated me, but it occurred to me he would be forthcoming only on his own terms. So in the end, I said:

‘My conjecture has been that my father made a stand, a courageous stand, against his own employers concerning the profits from the opium trade of those years. In doing so, I supposed he set himself against enormous interests, and was thus removed.’

Uncle Philip nodded. ‘I’d supposed you believed something like that. Your mother and I discussed carefully what to have you believe. And it was more or less what you’ve just said. So we were successful. The truth, I’m afraid, Puffin, was much more prosaic. Your father ran off one day with his mistress. He lived with her in Hong Kong for a year, a woman called Elizabeth Cornwallis. But Hong Kong is awfully stuffy and British, you know. They were a scandal, and in the end they had to rush off to Malacca or some such place. Then he got typhoid and died, in Singapore. That was two years after he left you. I’m sorry, old fellow, it’s hard to hear all this, I know. But brace yourself. Because I’ve a lot more to tell you before the evening’s out.’

‘You say my mother knew? At the time?’

‘Yes. Not at first, mind you. Not for a good month or so. Your father covered his tracks rather well. Your mother only found out because he wrote to her. She and I were the only ones who ever knew the truth.’

‘But the detectives. How on earth did the detectives fail to discover what he’d done?’

‘The detectives?’ Uncle Philip let out a laugh. ‘Those underpaid, overworked flat-feet? They wouldn’t have found an elephant gone missing in Nanking Road.’ Then when I remained silent, he said: ‘She would have told you eventually. But we wanted to protect you. That’s why we had you believe what you did.’

I had started to feel uncomfortable sitting so close to the desk lamp, but the upright chair did not allow me to sit back. Then after I had maintained my silence another few moments, Uncle Philip said:

‘Let me be fair to your father. It was difficult for him. He always loved your mother, loved her intensely. I’m jolly sure he never stopped loving her right to the end. In some ways, Puffin, that was the trouble. He loved her too much, idealised her. And it was just too much for him, trying to come up to what he saw as her mark. He tried. Oh yes, he tried, and it nearly broke him. He might have just said: “Look here, I can only do so much and that’s it, I’m who I am.” But he adored her. Wanted desperately to make himself good enough for her, and when he found he didn’t have it in him, well, he went off. With someone who didn’t mind him as he was. It’s my belief he just wanted *rest*. He’d tried so hard for so many years, he just wanted rest. Don’t think so badly of him, Puffin. I don’t believe he ever stopped loving you or your mother.’

‘And my mother? What has become of her?’

Uncle Philip leant forward on his elbows and tilted back his head slightly. ‘How much do you know already about

her?' he asked.

The lightness he had earlier contrived to place in his voice had evaporated altogether. He now looked a haunted old man, consumed with self-hatred. He was gazing at me carefully despite his tilted head, and the yellow light from the desk lamp showed white whiskers growing out of his nostrils. From somewhere downstairs, I could hear a phonograph playing Chinese martial music.

'I'm not trying to annoy you,' he said, when I did not answer. 'I don't want to hear myself talking any more about it than I have to. Come on. How much have you found out?'

'I was until recently under the impression both my parents were being held captive in Chapei. So you see, I have not been so clever.'

I waited for him to speak. He remained in his curious posture for a time, then sat back and said:

'You won't remember this. But shortly after your father went away, I came to your house to see your mother. And a certain man came also that day. A Chinese gentleman.'

'You're referring to the warlord, Wang Ku.'

'Ah. Then you haven't been so foolish.'

'I found out his name. But thereafter, I suspect I've been too busy following a false trail.'

He gave a sigh and cocked his ear. 'Listen,' he said. 'Kuomintang anthems. They play them to tease me. Wherever they take me, it's like this. Happens too often to be a coincidence.' Then when I said nothing, he rose to his feet and wandered into the shadows towards the heavy curtains.

'Your mother,' he said eventually, 'was devoted to our campaign. To stop the opium trade into China. Many European companies, including your father's, were making vast profits importing Indian opium into China and turning millions of

Chinese into helpless addicts. In those days, I was one of those central to the campaign. For a long time, our strategy was rather naive. We thought we could shame these companies into giving up their opium profits. We wrote letters, presented them with evidence showing the damage opium was causing to the Chinese people. Yes, you may laugh, we were very naive. But you see, we thought we were dealing with fellow-Christians. Well, eventually we saw we were getting nowhere. We discovered that these people, they not only liked the profits very much, they actually *wanted* the Chinese to be useless. They liked them to be in chaos, drug-addicted, unable to govern themselves properly. That way, the country could be run virtually like a colony, but with none of the usual obligations. So we changed our tactics. We grew more sophisticated. In those days, just as they do still, the opium shipments came along the Yangtze. Boats had to bring them upriver through bandit country. Without adequate protection, the shipments wouldn't get much beyond the Yangtze gorges without being marauded. So all these companies, Morganbrook and Byatt, Jardine Matheson, all of them, they used to make deals with the local warlords through whose territories the shipments passed. These warlords were just glorified bandits really, but they had armies, they had the power to see the shipments through. So here was our new strategy. No longer did we plead with the trading companies. We pleaded with the warlords. Appealed to their racial pride. We pointed out it was in their hands to end the profitability of the opium trade, to reverse the one major obstacle to the Chinese taking command of their own fate, their own land. Of course, some were too keen on the payments they received. But we had some converts. Wang Ku was at that time one of the more powerful of these bandit lords. His territory covered several hundred square miles in the north of Hunan. A pretty brutal chap, but sufficiently feared and respected to make him valuable indeed to the trading companies. Now Wang Ku became very sympathetic to our cause. He often came to

Shanghai, liked the high life here, and we were able to prevail on him during these visits. Puffin, are you well?’

‘Yes, I’m fine. I’m listening.’

‘Perhaps you should go now, Puffin. You don’t have to hear what I’m about to tell you.’

‘Tell me. I’m listening.’

‘Very well. My feeling is that you should hear it, if you can bear to. Because ... well, because you must find her. There’s still a chance you can find her.’

‘So my mother is alive?’

‘I’ve no reason to suppose otherwise.’

‘Then tell me. Go on with what you’re saying.’

He came back to the desk and sat down once more in front of me. ‘That day Wang Ku came to your house,’ he said.

‘It’s fitting you should remember that day. You’re quite right to suspect it was important. It was the day your mother discovered that Wang Ku’s motives were far from pure. Put simply, he planned to seize the opium shipments himself. Of course, he’d made complicated arrangements, so that it went through three or four other parties, very Chinese that, but in the end, yes, that’s what it amounted to. Most of us already knew this, but your mother didn’t. We’d kept her in the dark, perhaps foolishly, because we sensed she’d not accept it. The rest of us, naturally we had qualms, but we decided to work with Wang nevertheless. Yes, he’d sell the opium to the same people the trading companies did. But the important thing was to stop the imports. To make the trade unprofitable. Unfortunately, that day Wang Ku came to your house he said something that for the first time made clear to your mother the reality of his relationship with us. My guess is she felt foolish. Perhaps she’d suspected it all along, but hadn’t wished to look at it, and was as angry with herself and with me as she was with Wang. In any case, she

quite lost her temper, actually struck him. Only lightly, you understand, but her hand did touch his cheek. And of course, she said everything she had to say to his face. I knew then some terrible price would have to be paid. I tried to sort the thing out then and there. I explained to him how your father had just left, that your mother was really upset, I tried to convey all this to him as he left. He smiled and said not to worry, but I worried, oh yes, I worried all right. I knew that what your mother had done couldn't be undone so easily. I'd have been relieved, I tell you, if all Wang had done in response was stop participating in our plan. But he wanted the opium, he'd already made plenty of arrangements. Besides, he'd been insulted by a foreign woman, and he wanted to put things right.'

As I leant towards him into the glare of the lamp, an odd feeling came over me that behind my back the darkness had grown and grown, so that now a vast black space had opened up there. Uncle Philip had paused to wipe some sweat from his forehead with the heel of a hand. But now he looked at me intently and continued:

'I went to see Wang Ku later that day at the Metropole. I did what I could to try and stop the calamity I knew would come. But it was no use. What he told me that afternoon was that far from being angered by your mother, he'd found her spirit - that's what he called it, her "spirit" - highly attractive. So much so that he wished to take her back with him as a concubine, back to Hunan. He proposed to "tame" your mother, as he would a wild mare. Now you must understand, Puffin, the way things were then, in Shanghai, in China, if a man like Wang Ku decided on a course like that, there was little anyone could do to stop him. That's what you must understand. Nothing at all would have been achieved by asking the police or whoever to guard your mother. That might have slowed things down a little, but that's all. There was no one who could protect your mother from the intentions of a man like that. But you see, Puffin, my great fear was for

you. I wasn't sure what he intended to do with you, and that's what I was really pleading for. In the end, we came to an agreement. I would arrange things so that your mother was alone, unguarded, if at that same time I could take you right away from the scene. That's all I wanted to do. I didn't want him to take you too. Your mother, that was an inevitability. But for you, there was something to plead for. And that's what I did.'

There was a substantial pause. Then I said:

'After this convenient arrangement, do I take it Wang Ku continued to co-operate with your scheme?'

'Don't be cynical, Puffin.'

'But did he?'

'As it happened, he did. Taking your mother satisfied him. He did as we wished him to do, and I dare say, his contribution was a factor in the companies' eventual decision to end the trade.'

'So my mother was, you might say, sacrificed for a greater cause.'

'Look, Puffin, it wasn't anything any of us had a choice about. You must understand that.'

'Did you ever see my mother again? After she was abducted by this man?'

I saw him hesitate. But then he said:

'Yes. As a matter of fact, I did. Once, seven years later. I happened to be travelling through Hunan and accepted Wang's invitation to be his guest. And there, in his fortress, yes, I did see your mother one last time.'

His voice was now almost a whisper. The phonograph downstairs was no longer playing, so that a stillness hung between us.

'And ... and what had become of her?'

‘She was in good health. She was, of course, one of several concubines. Under the circumstances, I’d say she’d adapted well to her new life.’

‘How had she been treated?’

Uncle Philip looked away. Then he said quietly: ‘When I saw her, she asked about you, naturally. I told her what news I had. She was pleased. You see, until I saw her that time, she’d been utterly cut off from the outside world. For seven years, she’d only heard what Wang chose to have her hear. What I mean is, she didn’t know for certain that the financial arrangement was working. So when I saw her, that’s what she wanted to know, and I was able to reassure her that it was. After seven years of torturous doubt, her mind was put at rest. I can’t tell you how relieved she was. “That’s all I wanted to know,” she kept saying. “That’s all I wanted to know.”’

He was watching me now very carefully. After another moment, I gave him the question for which he was waiting.

‘Uncle Philip, what financial arrangement?’

He looked down at the back of his hands and studied them for a time. ‘Had it not been for you, her love for you, Puffin, your mother, I know, would have taken her own life without a moment’s hesitation before allowing that scoundrel to lay a finger on her. She would have found a way, and she would have done it. But there was you to consider. So in the end, when she saw the situation for what it was, she made an arrangement. You would be financially provided for in return for ... for her compliance. I saw too much of it myself, arranged it through the company. There was a man there at Byatt’s, didn’t have a clue what it was all about. Thought he was securing safe passage for his opium. Ha ha! He was a fool, that man!’ Uncle Philip shook his head and smiled. Then his face darkened again, as though he were now resigned to the course our conversation would take.

‘My allowance,’ I said quietly. ‘My inheritance ...’

‘Your aunt in England. She was never wealthy. Your real benefactor, all these years, has been Wang Ku.’

‘So all this time, I’ve been living ... I’ve been living off ...’ I could not go on and simply stopped.

Uncle Philip nodded. ‘Your schooling. Your place in London society. The fact that you made of yourself what you have. You owe it to Wang Ku. Or rather, to your mother’s sacrifice.’

He stood up again, and when he looked at me I saw something new in his face, something almost like hatred. But then he turned and moved away into the shadows, and I could see it no more.

‘That time I last saw your mother,’ he said. ‘In that fortress. She’d lost all concern for the opium campaign. She only lived for you, worried for you. By that time, the trade had been made illegal. But even that news meant nothing to her any more. Of course I was bitter about it, as were the others of us who’d given years to the campaign. We’d finally achieved our goal, we thought. Opium trade abolished. It only took a year or two to see what abolition really meant. The trade had simply changed hands, that was all. It was now run by Chiang’s government. More addicts than ever, but now it was being peddled to pay for Chiang Kai-shek’s army, to pay for his power. That’s when I joined the Reds, Puffin. Your mother, I thought she’d be devastated to know what our campaign had amounted to, but she no longer cared. All she wanted was for you to be looked after. She only wanted news of you. Do you know, Puffin’ - his voice suddenly took on a strange edge - ‘when I saw her that time, she seemed well enough. But while I was there, I asked others in the household, people who would know. I wanted to find out the truth, find out how she’d really been treated, because ... because I knew that one day this moment, this meeting we’re

having now, was bound to come. And I found out. Oh yes, I found out. Everything. ’

‘Are you deliberately trying to torment me?’

‘It wasn’t just … just a matter of surrendering to him in bed. He regularly whipped her in front of his dinner guests. Taming the white woman, he called it. And that wasn’t all. Do you know …’

I had already covered my ears, but now shouted out: ‘Enough! Why torture me like this?’

‘Why?’ His voice was now angry. ‘Why? Because I want you to know the truth! All these years, you’ve thought of me as a despicable creature. Perhaps I am, but it’s what this world does to you. I never meant to be like this. I meant to do good in this world. In my way, I once made courageous decisions. And look at me now. You despise me. You’ve despised me all these years, Puffin, the closest thing I ever had to a son, and you despise me still. But now do you see how the world really is? You see what made possible your comfortable life in England? How you were able to become a celebrated detective? A detective! What good is that to anyone? Stolen jewels, aristocrats murdered for their inheritance. Do you suppose that’s all there is to contend with? Your mother, she wanted you to live in your enchanted world for ever. But it’s impossible. In the end it has to shatter. It’s a miracle it survived so long for you. Now, Puffin, here. I’ll give you this chance. Here.’

He had taken out his pistol again. He came from the shadows towards me, and when I looked up, he was looming above me, much as he had done in my childhood. He flung back his jacket and pressed the pistol into his waistcoat near his heart.

‘Here,’ he said, bending down and whispering so I could smell his stale breath. ‘Here, boy. You can kill me. As you’ve always wanted to. That’s why I’ve stayed alive so

long. No one else should have that privilege. I've saved myself, you see, for you. Pull the trigger. Here, look. We'll make it appear as if I attacked you. I'll be holding the gun, I'll fall over you. When they come in, they'll see my body collapsed over you, it'll look like self-defence. See, here, I'm holding it. You pull the trigger, Puffin.'

His waistcoat was pushing against my face, moving up and down with his heaving chest. I felt a revulsion, and tried to move away, but his free hand - the skin felt indescribably parched - had grasped my arm in an effort to draw me to him. It occurred to me he would pull the trigger himself if my hand so much as touched the pistol. I pulled back violently, unbalancing my chair, and staggered away from him.

For a second we both glanced guiltily towards the door to see if the commotion would bring in the guards. But nothing happened, and eventually Uncle Philip laughed, and picking up the chair, positioned it carefully in front of the desk. Then he sat on it himself, put the pistol down on the desk, and spent some time recovering his breath. I took a few more steps away from the desk, but there was nothing else in that cavernous room, and I simply came to a stop, my back still turned to him. Then I heard him say:

'All right. Very well.' He took a few more gulps of air. 'Then I'll tell you. I'll make to you my darkest confession.'

But for the next minute, all I could hear behind me was his heaving breath. Then finally he said:

'Very well. I'll confess to you the truth. About why I allowed Wang Ku to kidnap your mother that day. What I said before, yes, it's true enough. I had to safeguard you. Yes, yes, everything I said earlier more or less stands. But if I'd really wanted to, if I'd really wanted to save your mother, I know I'd have found a way to do so. I'll tell you something now, Puffin. Something I wasn't able to confess even to myself for many years. I helped Wang take your mother

because a part of me wanted her to become his slave. To be used like that, night after night. Because you see, I always lusted after her, right from the days when I came to be a lodger in your house. Oh yes, I desired her, and when your father went off like that, I believed it was my chance, that I was his natural successor. But ... but your mother, she'd never looked at me like that, I realised it after your father went away. She respected me as someone decent ... No, no, it was impossible. Not in a thousand years could I put myself forward to her, not in that sort of way. And I was angry. I was so angry. And when it all happened, with Wang Ku, it excited me. Do you hear me, Puffin? *It excited me!* After he took her away, in the darkest hours of the night, it excited me. All those years, I lived vicariously through Wang. It was almost as though I'd conquered her too. I gave myself pleasure, many many times, imagining for myself what was happening to her. Now, now, kill me! Why spare me? You've heard it! Here, shoot me like a rat!'

For a long time, I went on standing in the darkened part of the room, my back to him, listening to his breathing. Then I turned to him again and said, quite quietly:

'You said earlier you believed my mother was still alive. Is she still with Wang Ku?'

'Wang died four years ago. His army, in any case, was disbanded by Chiang. I don't know where she is now, Puffin. I honestly don't.'

'Well. I shall find her. I shan't give up.'

'It won't be easy, my boy. There's war raging through the country. It'll soon engulf the whole of it.'

'Yes,' I said. 'I dare say it will soon engulf the whole world. But that's not my fault. In fact, it's no longer my concern. I mean to start again, and this time to find her. Is there anything else you can tell me to help with my search?'

‘I’m afraid not, Puffin. I’ve told you everything.’

‘Then goodbye, Uncle Philip. I’m sorry I’m not able to oblige you.’

‘Don’t worry. No shortage of people willing to oblige the Yellow Snake.’ He gave a quick laugh. Then he said in a weary voice: ‘Goodbye, Puffin. I hope you find her.’

PART SEVEN

London, 14th November 1958

Chapter Twenty-three

It was my first long trip in many years, and for two days after our arrival in Hong Kong I remained quite fatigued. Air travel is impressively fast, but the conditions are cramped and disorientating. My hip pains returned with a vengeance and a headache lingered for much of my stay, which no doubt jaundiced my view of that colony. I know of those who have made the trip out there and returned full of praise. 'A forward-looking place,' they always say. 'And astonishingly beautiful.' Yet for much of that week, the skies were overcast, the streets oppressively crowded. I suppose I did appreciate here and there - in the Chinese signs outside the shops, or just in the sight of the Chinese going about their business in the markets - some vague echo of Shanghai. But then again, such echoes were more often than not discomfoting. It was as though I had come upon, at one of those dullish supper parties I attend in Kensington or Bayswater, a distant cousin of a woman I once loved; whose gestures, facial expressions, little shrugs nudge the memory, but who remains, overall, an awkward, even grotesque parody of a much-cherished image.

I was in the end glad of Jennifer's company. When she had first hinted she should come with me, I had deliberately ignored her. For even by that late stage - I am speaking of only five years ago - she was still tending to regard me as some sort of invalid, especially whenever the past, or else the Far East, re-emerged in my life. I suppose a part of me had long resented this oversolicitousness, and it was only when it occurred to me she genuinely wished to get away from things for a while - that she had her own worries, and that such a trip might do her good - that I agreed we should travel together.

It had been Jennifer's suggestion that we try and extend our journey to Shanghai, and I suppose this would not have been impossible. I could have spoken to a few old acquaintances, men who still have influence at the Foreign Office, and I am sure we could have gained entry into mainland China without undue difficulty. I know of others who have done just that. But then by all accounts, Shanghai today is a ghostly shadow of the city it once was. The communists have refrained from physically tearing the place down, so that much of what was once the International Settlement remains intact. The streets, though renamed, are perfectly recognisable, and it is said that anyone familiar with the Shanghai of old would know his way about there. But the foreigners, of course, have all been banished, and what were once lavish hotels and night-clubs are now the bureaucratic offices of Chairman Mao's government. In other words, the Shanghai of today is likely to prove no less painful a parody of the old city than did Hong Kong.

I have heard, incidentally, that much of the poverty - and also the opium addiction against which my mother once battled so hard - has receded significantly under the communists. How deeply these evils have been eradicated remains to be seen, but it would certainly appear that communism has been able to achieve in a handful of years what philanthropy and ardent campaigning could not in decades. I remember wondering to myself what my mother would have made of such a reflection that first night we spent in Hong Kong, as I paced around my room at the Excelsior Hotel, nursing my hip and trying in general to regain my equilibrium.

I did not go to Rosedale Manor until our third day. It had long been understood that I would make the trip alone, and Jennifer, though she watched my every move throughout the morning, saw me off after lunch with no undue fuss.

That afternoon the sun had actually broken through, and as I climbed the hill-slopes in my taxi, the well-manicured lawns on each side were being watered and mown by teams of

gardeners stripped to their vests. Eventually the ground levelled off and the taxi pulled up in front of a large white house built in a British colonial style with long rows of shuttered windows and an additional wing sprawling from its side. It must once have been a splendid residence, overlooking as it did the water and much of the west side of the island. When I stood in the breeze and looked across the harbour, I could see right into the distance to where a cable-car was climbing a faraway hill. Turning to the house itself, however, I saw it had been allowed to grow shabby; the paint on the window ledges and door frames in particular had cracked and peeled.

Inside, in the hallway, there was a faint smell of boiled fish, but the place looked spotlessly clean. A Chinese nun led me down an echoing corridor to the office of Sister Belinda Heaney, a woman in her mid-forties with a serious, slightly dour expression. And it was there, in that cramped little office, that I was told of how the woman they knew as 'Diana Roberts' had come to them through a liaison organisation working with foreigners stranded in communist China. All the Chinese authorities had known of her when handing her over was that she had been living in an institution for the mentally ill in Chunking since the end of the war.

'It's possible she'd spent most of the war there too,' Sister Belinda said. 'It hardly bears thinking about, Mr Banks, what sort of place that was. A person, once incarcerated in such a place, could easily never be heard of again. It was only because she was a white woman she was singled out at all. The Chinese didn't know what to do with her. After all, they want all foreigners out of China. So eventually she was referred here, and she's been with us now for nearly two years. When she first came to us, she was very agitated. But within a month or two, all the usual benefits of Rosedale Manor, the peace, the order, the prayers, began to do their work. You wouldn't recognise her now as the poor

creature who arrived here. She's so much calmer. You're a relative, did you say?'

'Yes, it's certainly possible,' I said. 'And since I was in Hong Kong, I thought it only right I paid a visit. It's the least I could do.'

'Well, any news of kin, close friends, any link with England, we'd be very glad to hear about. Meanwhile, a visitor is always welcome.'

'Does she have many?'

'She has visitors regularly. We run a scheme with the pupils of St Joseph's College.'

'I see. And does she get on well with the other residents?'

'Oh yes. And she's no trouble to us at all. If only we could say the same about some of the others!'

Sister Belinda led me down another corridor to a large sunny room - it had perhaps once been the dining room - where twenty or so females all dressed in beige smocks were sitting or shuffling about. French doors were open to the grounds outside, and the sunlight was falling through the windows across the parquet flooring. Had it not been for the large number of vases filled with fresh flowers, I might have mistaken the room for a children's nursery; there were bright watercolours pinned all over the walls, and at various points, little tables with draughts, playing cards, paper and crayons. Sister Belinda left me standing by the entrance while she went over to another nun sitting at an upright piano, and a number of the women stopped what they were doing to stare at me. Others appeared to become self-conscious and tried to hide themselves. Almost all were Westerners, though I could see one or two Eurasians. Then someone started to wail loudly somewhere in the building behind me, and curiously, this had the effect of putting the women at their ease. One wiry-headed lady nearby grinned at me and said:

‘Don’t you worry, love, it’s only Martha. She’s bloomin’ well off again!’

I could hear Yorkshire in her accent and was wondering what tides of fate had brought her to this place, when Sister Belinda returned.

‘Diana should be outside,’ she said. ‘If you’d follow me, Mr Banks.’

We went out through the French doors into well-tended grounds which climbed and dipped in all directions, reminding us we were near the crest of a hill. As I followed Sister Belinda past flower beds abloom with geraniums and tulips, I glimpsed panoramic views over the neatly cut hedges. Here and there, old ladies in beige smocks were sitting in the sunshine, knitting, chatting together or muttering harmlessly to themselves. At one point, Sister Belinda paused to look about her, then led me down a sloping lawn through a white gate into a little walled garden.

The only figure to be seen here was an elderly lady sitting in the sun on the far side of the thinning grass, playing cards at a wrought-iron table. She was absorbed in her game and did not look up as we approached. Sister Belinda touched her shoulder gently and said:

‘Diana. Here’s a gentleman come to visit you. He’s from England.’

My mother smiled up at us both, then returned to her playing cards.

‘Diana doesn’t always understand what’s said to her,’ Sister Belinda said. ‘If you need her to do something, you just have to keep repeating it over and over.’

‘I wonder if I may speak with her alone.’

Sister Belinda was not keen on this idea and for a moment seemed to be trying to think of a reason why this was not possible. But in the end, she said: ‘If you’d prefer it, Mr

Banks, I'm sure that's all right. I shall be in the dayroom.'

Once Sister Belinda had gone, I looked carefully at my mother as she dealt out her cards. She was much smaller than I had expected and her shoulders had a severe hunch. Her hair was silver and had been tied tightly in a bun. Occasionally, as I continued to watch her, she would glance up and smile, but I could see a trace of fear that had not been there in Sister Belinda's presence. Her face was not so greatly lined, but there were two thick folds beneath her eyes that were so deep they looked almost like incisions. Her neck, perhaps owing to some injury or condition, had receded deep into her body so that when she gazed from side to side at her cards, she was obliged also to move her shoulders. There was a droplet clinging to the tip of her nose, and I had taken out my handkerchief to remove it before realising that by doing so I might unduly alarm her. Finally I said quietly:

'I'm sorry I couldn't give you any sort of warning. I realise this might be something of a shock for you.' I stopped, since it was clear she was not listening. Then I said: 'Mother, it's me. Christopher.'

She looked up, smiled much as before, then turned back to her cards. I had assumed she was playing solitaire, but as I watched, saw she was following some odd system of her own. At one point the breeze lifted a few cards off the table, but she appeared not to care. When I collected the cards from the grass and brought them back to her, she smiled, saying:

'Thank you so much. But there's no need to do that, you know. Myself, I like to leave it until many more cards have accumulated on the lawn. Only then do I go to gather them, all in one go, you see. After all, they can't fly away off the hill altogether, can they?'

For the next few moments I continued to watch her. Then my mother began to sing. She sang quietly to herself, almost under her breath, as her hands went on picking up and placing

down the cards. The voice was faint - I could not make out the song she was singing - but it was effortlessly melodious. And as I went on watching and listening, a fragment of memory came back to me: of a windy summer's day in our garden, my mother on the swing, laughing and singing at the top of her voice, and me jumping up and down before her, telling her to stop.

I reached forward and gently touched her hand. Instantly she pulled it away and stared at me furiously.

'Keep your hands to yourself, sir!' she said in a shocked whisper. 'Keep them *right* to yourself!'

'I'm sorry.' I moved back a little to reassure her. She returned to her cards and when she next glanced up, she gave a smile as though nothing had happened.

'Mother,' I said slowly, 'it's me. I've come from England. I'm really very sorry it's taken so long. I realise I've let you down badly. Very badly. I tried my utmost, but you see, in the end, it proved beyond me. I realise this is hopelessly late.'

I must have started to cry, because my mother looked up and stared at me. Then she said:

'Do you have toothache, my man? If so, you'd better talk to Sister Agnes.'

'No, I'm fine. But I wonder if you've understood what I'm saying? It's me. Christopher.'

She nodded and said: 'No use delaying it, my man. Sister Agnes will fill in your form.'

Then an idea came to me. 'Mother,' I said, 'it's Puffin. *Puffin*.'

'Puffin.' She suddenly became very still. 'Puffin.'

For a long time my mother said nothing, but the expression on her face had now changed entirely. She was

looking up again, but her eyes were focused on something over my shoulder, and a gentle smile was creasing her face.

‘Puffin,’ she repeated quietly to herself, and for a moment seemed lost in happiness. Then she shook her head and said: ‘That boy. He’s such a worry to me.’

‘Excuse me,’ I said. ‘Excuse me. Supposing this boy of yours, this Puffin. Supposing you discovered he’d tried his best, tried with everything he had to find you, even if in the end he couldn’t. If you knew that, do you suppose ... do you suppose you’d be able to forgive him?’

My mother continued to gaze past my shoulder, but now a puzzled look came into her face.

‘Forgive Puffin? Did you say forgive Puffin? Whatever for?’ Then she beamed again happily. ‘That boy. They say he’s doing well. But you can never be sure with that one. Oh, he’s such a worry to me. You’ve no idea.’

‘It might seem foolish to you,’ I said to Jennifer when we were discussing the trip again last month, ‘but it was only when she said that, it was only then I realised. What I mean is, I realised she’d never ceased to love me, not through any of it. All she’d ever wanted was for me to have a good life. And all the rest of it, all my trying to find her, trying to save the world from ruin, that wouldn’t have made any difference either way. Her feelings for me, they were always just *there*, they didn’t depend on anything. I suppose that might not seem so very surprising. But it took me all that time to realise it.’

‘Do you really suppose,’ Jennifer asked, ‘she had no inkling at all who you were?’

‘I’m sure she didn’t. But she meant what she said, and she knew what she was saying. She said there was nothing to forgive, and she was genuinely puzzled at the suggestion there might be. If you’d seen her face, when I first said

that name, you'd have no doubt about it either. She'd never ceased to love me, not for a single moment.'

'Uncle Christopher, why do you suppose you never told the nuns who you really were?'

'I'm not sure. It seems odd, I know, but in the end I just didn't. Besides, I saw no reason to take her away from there. She did seem, somehow, contented. Not happy exactly. But as though the pain had passed. She'd have been no better off in a home in England. I suppose it was much like this question of where she should lie. After she died, I thought about having her reburied here. But there again, when I thought it over, I decided against it. She'd lived all her life in the East. I think she'd prefer to rest out there.'

It was a frosty October morning, and Jennifer and I were walking down a winding lane in Gloucestershire. I had stayed the night at an inn not far from the boarding house where she is currently living, and I had called on her shortly after breakfast. Perhaps I did not conceal well enough my sadness on seeing the shabbiness of her latest lodgings, for she had quickly insisted, despite the chill, on showing me the view from a nearby churchyard over the Windrush valley. As we came further down the lane, I could see at the bottom the gates of a farm; but before we reached them, she led me off the path through a gap in the hedge.

'Uncle Christopher, come and look.'

We picked our way through a thick patch of nettles until we were standing by some railings. I could then see the fields sweeping down the valley side.

'It's a wonderful view,' I said.

'From the churchyard, you can see even further. Don't you ever think of moving out here too? London's much too crowded now.'

'It's not like it used to be, that's true.'

We stood there for a moment, side by side, gazing down at the view.

'I'm sorry,' I said to her, 'I've not been up here much recently. I suppose it's been a good few months now. Can't think what I've been up to.'

'Oh, you shouldn't worry so much about me.'

'But I do worry. Of course, I worry.'

'It's all behind me now.' she said, 'all of that last year. I won't try anything foolish like that ever again. I've already promised you that. It was just an especially bad time, that's all. Besides, I never really meant to do it. I made sure that window was left open.'

'But you're still a young woman, Jenny. With so much ahead of you. It depresses me that you should even have contemplated such a thing.'

'A young woman? Thirty-one, no children, no marriage. I suppose there is time still. But I'll have to find the will, you know, to go through all of that again. I'm so tired now, I sometimes think I'll gladly settle for a quiet life on my own. I could work in a shop somewhere, go to the cinema once a week and not do anyone any harm. Nothing wrong with a life like that.'

'But you won't settle for that. Doesn't sound like the Jennifer I know.'

She gave a small laugh. 'But you've no idea what it's like. A woman of my age, trying to find romance in a place like this. Landladies and lodgers whispering about you every time you step outside your room. What am I actually supposed to do? Advertise? Now that *would* set them all talking, not that I care at all about them.'

'But you're a very attractive woman, Jenny. What I mean is, when people look at you, they can see your spirit, your

kindness, your gentleness. I'm sure something will happen for you. '

'You think people see my spirit? Uncle Christopher, that's only because you look at me and still see the little girl you once knew. '

I turned and looked carefully at her. 'Oh, but it's still there,' I said. 'I can see it. It's still there, underneath, waiting. The world hasn't changed you as much as you think, my dear. It just gave you something of a shock, that's all. And by the way, there *are* a few decent men in this world, I'll have you know. You just have to stop doing your utmost to avoid them. '

'All right, Uncle Christopher. I'll try and do better next time. If there is a next time. '

For a moment we went on gazing at the view, a light wind blowing across our faces. Eventually I said:

'I should have done more for you, Jenny. I'm sorry. '

'But what could *you* have done? If I take it into my silly head to ...'

'No, I meant ... I meant earlier on. When you were growing up. I should have been there with you more. But I was too busy, trying to solve the world's problems. I should have done a lot more for you than I did. I'm sorry. There. Always meant to say it. '

'How can you apologise, Uncle Christopher? Where would I be now without you? I was an orphan, with no one. You mustn't ever apologise. I owe you everything. '

I reached forward and touched the wet cobweb suspended across the railings. It broke and dangled from my fingers.

'Oh, I hate that feeling!' she exclaimed. 'Can't bear it! '

'I've always rather liked it. When I was a boy, I used to take off my gloves just to do it.'

'Oh, how could you?' She laughed loudly, and I could see suddenly the Jennifer of old. 'And what about you, Uncle Christopher? How about *you* getting married? Don't you ever think about it?'

'Definitely too late for that.'

'Oh, I don't know. You manage well enough living on your own. But it doesn't suit you much either. Not really. It makes you morose. You should think about it. You're always mentioning your lady-friends. Won't one of them have you?'

'They'll have me for lunch. But not for much more, I fear.' Then I added: 'There was someone once. Back then. But that went the way of everything else.' I gave a quick laugh. 'My great vocation got in the way of quite a lot, all in all.'

I must have turned away from her. I felt her touch my shoulder, and when I looked around, she was peering gently into my face.

'You shouldn't always talk so bitterly about your career, Uncle Christopher. I've always so admired you for what you tried to do.'

'Tried is right. It all amounted to very little in the end. Anyway, that's all behind me now. My major ambition in life these days is to keep this rheumatism at bay.'

Jennifer suddenly smiled and slipped her arm through mine. 'I know what we'll do,' she said. 'I have a plan. I've decided. I'll find a fine decent man whom I'll marry, and I'll have three, no, four children. And we'll live somewhere near here, where we can always come and look over this valley. And you can leave your stuffy little flat in London and come and live with us. Since your lady-friends

won't have you, you can accept the post of uncle to all my future children. '

I smiled back at her. 'That sounds a fine plan. Though I don't know if your husband would so appreciate having me around his house the whole time. '

'Oh, then we'll rig up an old shed or something for you. '

'Now, that does sound tempting. Keep your end of the bargain and I'll think about it. '

'If that's a promise, then you'd better watch out. Because I'll make sure it happens. Then you'll *have* to come and live in your shed. '

Over this last month, as I have drifted through these grey days in London, wandering about Kensington Gardens in the company of autumn tourists and office workers out for their lunch breaks, occasionally running into an old acquaintance and perhaps going off with him for lunch or tea, I have often found myself thinking again of my conversation with Jennifer that morning. There is no denying it has cheered me. There is every reason to believe that she has now come through the dark tunnel of her life and emerged at the other end. What awaits her there remains to be seen, but she is not by nature someone who easily accepts defeat. Indeed, it is more than possible she will go on to fulfil the programme she outlined to me - only half-jokingly - as we looked out over the valley that morning. And if in a few years' time things have indeed gone according to her wishes, then it is not out of the question I will take up her suggestion to go and live with her in the country. Of course, I would not much fancy her shed, but I could always take a cottage not far away. I am grateful for Jennifer. We understand each other's concerns instinctively, and it is exchanges like the one that frosty morning which have proved such a source of consolation for me over the years.

But then again, life in the countryside might prove too quiet, and I have become rather attached to London of late. Besides, from time to time, I am still approached by persons who remember my name from before the war and wish my advice on some matter. Only last week, in fact, when I went to dinner with the Osbournes, I was introduced to a lady who immediately seized my hand, exclaiming: 'You mean you're *the* Christopher Banks? The detective?'

It turned out she had spent much of her life in Singapore, where she had been 'a very great friend' of Sarah's. 'She used to talk of you all the time,' she told me. 'I really do feel I know you already.'

The Osbournes had invited several other people, but once we sat down to eat, I found myself placed beside this same lady, and inevitably our conversation drifted back to Sarah.

'You were a good friend of hers, were you not?' she asked at one point. 'She always talked so admiringly of you.'

'We were good friends, certainly. Of course, we rather lost touch once she went out to the East.'

'She often talked of you. She had so many stories about the famous detective, kept us quite amused when we grew tired of playing bridge. She always spoke most highly of you.'

'I'm moved to think she remembered me so well. As I say, we rather lost touch, though I did receive a letter from her once, around two years after the war. I wasn't aware until then how she'd spent the war. She made light of the internment, but I'm sure it was no joke.'

'Oh, I'm sure it was no joke at all. My husband and I, we could so easily have suffered the same fate. We managed to get ourselves to Australia just in time. But Sarah and M. de Ville-fort, they always trusted so much to fate. They were the sort of couple who went out in the evening with no plan, quite happy to see who they bumped into. A charming attitude

most of the time, but not when the Japanese are on your doorstep. Did you know him also?'

'I never had the pleasure of meeting the count. I understand he returned to Europe after Sarah's death, but our paths have never crossed.'

'Oh, I thought from the way she talked of you, you were good friends with them both.'

'No. You see, I really only knew Sarah during an earlier part of her life. I beg your pardon, there's perhaps no way for you to answer this. But did they strike you as a happy couple, Sarah and this French chap?'

'A happy couple?' My companion thought for a moment.

'Of course, one can never know for sure, but quite honestly, it would be hard to believe otherwise. They did seem utterly devoted to one another. They never had much money, so that meant they could never be quite as carefree as they might have wished. But the count always seemed so, well, so *romantic*. You laugh, Mr Banks, but that's just the word for it. He was so devastated by her death. It was the internment that did it, you know. Like so many others, she never fully recovered her health. I do miss her. Such a charming companion.'

Since this encounter last week, I have brought out and read again several times Sarah's letter - the only one I ever received since our parting in Shanghai all those years ago. It is dated 18th May 1947, and has been written from a hill station in Malaya. Perhaps it was my hope that after my conversation with her friend, I would discover in those rather formal, almost blandly pleasant lines, some hitherto hidden dimension. But in fact the letter continues to yield up little more than the bare bones of her life since her departure from Shanghai. She talks of Macao, Hong Kong, Singapore as being 'delightful', 'colourful', 'fascinating'. Her French companion is mentioned several times, but always in passing as though I already knew all

there was to know about him. There is a breezy mention of the internment under the Japanese, and she pronounces her health problems 'a bit of a bore'. She asks after me in a polite way and calls her own life in liberated Singapore 'a pretty decent thing to be getting on with'. It is the sort of letter one might write, in a foreign land, on an impulse one afternoon to a vaguely remembered friend. Only once, towards the end, does its tone imply the intimacy we once shared.

'I don't mind telling you, dearest Christopher,' she writes, 'that at the time, I *was* disappointed, to say the least, at the way things transpired between us. But don't worry, I have long ceased to be cross with you. How could I remain cross when Fate in the end chose to smile so kindly on me? Besides, it is now my belief that for you, it was the correct decision not to come with me that day. You always felt you had a mission to complete, and I dare say you would never have been able to give your heart to anyone or anything until you had done so. I can only hope that by now your tasks are behind you, and that you too have been able to find the sort of happiness and companionship which I have come lately almost to take for granted.'

There is something about these sections of her letter - and those last lines in particular - that never quite ring true. Some subtle note that runs throughout the letter - indeed, her very act of writing to me at that moment - feels at odds with her report of days filled with 'happiness and companionship'. Was her life with her French count really what she set off to find that day she stepped out on to the jetty in Shanghai? I somehow doubt it. My feeling is that she is thinking of herself as much as of me when she talks of a sense of mission, and the futility of attempting to evade it. Perhaps there are those who are able to go about their lives unfettered by such concerns. But for those like us, our fate is to face the world as orphans, chasing through long years the shadows of vanished parents. There is nothing for it but

to try and see through our missions to the end, as best we can, for until we do so, we will be permitted no calm.

I do not wish to appear smug; but drifting through my days here in London, I believe I can indeed own up to a certain contentment. I enjoy my walks in the parks, I visit the galleries; and increasingly of late, I have come to take a foolish pride in sifting through old newspaper reports of my cases in the Reading Room at the British Museum. This city, in other words, has come to be my home, and I should not mind if I had to live out the rest of my days here. Nevertheless, there are those times when a sort of emptiness fills my hours, and I shall continue to give Jennifer's invitation serious thought.

双语版石黑一雄作品

无可慰藉

The Unconsoled

二〇一七年诺贝尔文学奖获奖作家

Kazuo Ishiguro



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—— 著

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无可慰藉

献给洛娜和内奥米⁽¹⁾

⁽¹⁾ 洛娜和内奥米是作者的妻女。

第一部

第一章

发现没有任何人——甚至服务台后也没有一个职员——在迎候我，出租车司机似乎有些尴尬。他穿过空无一人的大厅，或许是以以为能在高大的植物或扶手椅后面找到一位员工。最后，他只得把我的行李箱放在电梯门口，咕哝着找了个借口，转身离开。

大厅着实宽敞，几张咖啡桌散置摆放，并不显拥挤。天花板很低，还有点凹陷，感觉有些幽闭恐怖。外面虽然阳光明媚，里面却阴沉得很。只有一缕阳光照射在服务台桌子附近的墙壁上，照亮了一块深色木质壁板及一摞德文、法文和英文杂志。我看到服务台上有个小银铃，正想过去摇一下，就在这时，身后的门开了，一个身穿制服的男人走了进来。

“下午好，先生。”他说，一副很累的样子，走到服务台桌子后面，开始登记手续。他小声道了歉，但态度显然仍甚为简慢。然而，一听到我的名字，他大吃一惊，马上挺直了身子。

“瑞德先生，抱歉没认出是您。霍夫曼经理本想亲自来迎接您，但很不凑巧，他得去参加一个很重要的会议。”

“没关系，我期待日后与他见面。”

这位接待员一边快速填好登记表，一边轻声嘀咕经理没能来迎接我会多么懊恼。他两次提到准备“周四之夜”让经理倍感压力，使得他没法儿抽更多时间处理酒店事宜。我只是点头，无力多问“周四之夜”究竟是什么。

“哦，布罗茨基先生今天表现得相当不错。”接待员来了精神，说道。“真的很好，今早他和交响乐队排练了整整四个小时，一刻都没停过。听！他现在自个儿还在用功练呢。”

他指了指大厅的后面，这时，我才听到一阵钢琴演奏声在整幢楼里回荡，刚好盖过外面嘈杂的车流声。我仰起头仔细听，有人在反复弹奏一小段乐句——那是穆勒里《垂直》第二乐章里的片段——悠缓而专注。

“当然，若经理在，”他说，“很可能就会带布罗茨基先生出来见您，但我不确定……”他笑了笑，“我不知道该不该打断他，毕竟

他正全神贯注……”

“当然，当然，还是另找时间吧。”

“如果经理在就好了……”他声音渐渐低下去，又笑了笑，然后身体前倾，压低声音说：“您知道吗，先生？我们每到布罗茨基要求钢琴独奏的时候就像这样关闭休息室，而有些客人竟敢投诉！某些人的想法还真是匪夷所思！昨天还有两个人分别向经理投诉呢。不用说，很快就有人叫他们识相点。”

“我想他们会有的。你说的那个布罗茨基，”我想着这个名字，脑中却一片空白。我瞥见接待员诧异地盯着我，就很快说道：“嗯，嗯，我非常期待不日能与布罗茨基先生见面。”

“若经理在就好了，先生。”

“请别担心。如果没别的事，我会非常感谢……”

“当然，先生。长途跋涉，您一定累了。这是房门钥匙。那边的古斯塔夫会带您到房间去。”

我扭头一瞧，看到一位上了年纪的迎宾员在大厅一侧等候着。他站在敞开的电梯门口，专注地看着电梯里面。我走向他时，他吓了一跳，然后拎起我的行李，紧跟我进了电梯。

电梯起升，年迈的迎宾员仍旧提着两只行李箱，看得出，他因为用力脸涨得通红。两只行李箱非常重，我担心他会在我面前晕倒，便说道：

“您真该把行李放下。”

“感谢您的提醒，先生。”他说，声音出奇的平静，丝毫没有透出他的体力不支。“多年前，我刚开始干这行的时候，我会把行李放在地上，只是绝对必要的时候才拎起来。说白了，就是走路的时候。其实，在这里干的头十五年，我得说我就一直那样。如今，这座城市里的很多年轻迎宾员仍然这样做，但我却不了。再说，先生，我们很快就到了。”

我们沉默，电梯继续上行。突然，我问道：

“这么说，您在这酒店工作很长时间了。”

“已经二十七年了，先生。这二十七年中，我在这儿算是见得多了。当然啰，这酒店在我来之前早就有了。据说，十八世纪的时候，

腓特烈大帝曾在这里住了一夜。那时人们就说这是个久负盛名的酒店了。哦，对了，这些年来，这儿发生了许多历史性的事件。等您不太累的时候，先生，我很乐意为您介绍几件。”

“可是您还没跟我讲，”我说，“为什么您觉得把行李放在地上的行为不妥呢。”

“哦，是的，”迎宾员说，“这个说来就有趣了。您看，先生，您可以想见，像这种城镇有很多酒店，所以城里有很多人都曾干过迎宾员这活儿。这儿很多人似乎觉得只要穿上制服就行，就能胜任了。这种臆想在我们市镇尤其流行。姑且就叫地方传说吧。坦白说，从前我自己也曾盲目地相信这种说法。直到有一次——那是很多年前的事了——我和妻子一起休了几天假。我们去了瑞士，到了卢塞恩。如今，我妻子已经过世了，先生，但只要一想到她，我就会想到那次短暂的休假。那里临湖，景色优美。您肯定知道那儿。我们一吃完早饭就划船散心。哦，言归正传。在那次度假中，我发现那个地方的人们对迎宾员的看法和我们这儿完全不同。我怎么说呢，先生？他们非常尊重迎宾员。大酒店还为了争抢小有名气的顶尖迎宾员而大打出手呢。我得说，我真是大开眼界。但在我们这里，人们却对迎宾行业有根深蒂固的误解。实际上，有时候我真怀疑这种误解能不能消除呢。我不是说这里的人们对我们行李员都很粗鲁无礼。恰恰相反，这里的人对我都很礼貌，很体贴。但是，先生，这里的人都认为，只要你愿意，只要你想，谁都可以做这份工作。我猜是因为这儿的人多少都有拿着行李走来走去的经历。有了这个经验，他们就觉得酒店迎宾员的工作不过就是类似这样的一种延伸而已。这些年，就在这部电梯里，不断有人对我说：‘哪天等我辞了现在的工作，也去当迎宾员。’哦，是的。呃，先生，有一天，就在我们从卢塞恩度假回来后不久，一位颇有名望的市议员也对我讲过类似的话。‘哪天我也想干干这个，’他指着行李对我说，‘这才是我想要的生活，两耳不闻窗外事。’我猜想他是善意的，想暗示多么羡慕我。先生，我那时还年轻，还没有手提行李的习惯，只是把行李放地上，就在这架电梯里，回想那时还真是像那位绅士所说的，无忧无虑啊。但是，跟您说吧，先生，那绅士的话对我真是当头棒喝。并不是说我很气他那么说，可是，他的话确实令我幡然醒悟，令我想起一直藏于心底、耿耿于怀的那个念头。我刚才讲过，先生，我那时刚刚从卢塞恩度假回来，那次度假确实对我启发不小。我自己就在想，嗨，本地的迎宾员们是不是该行动起来改变一下人们的错误观念了。您看，先生，我在卢塞恩看到了新事物，我觉得，唉，这里的人做得真的不够好。于是，我就拼

命想出一些身体力行的方法。当然，那时我就知道‘改变’是件多么艰难的事，而且，在许多年前我就意识到，从我这代才做出改变，恐怕已经太晚了。观念已经深入人心了啦。但是我想，唉，哪怕我只能尽绵薄之力做出小小改变也好，至少可以方便后来人嘛。于是，自那日市议员对我说了那番话之后，我就用自己的方法坚持了下去。而且，令我感到很自豪的是，本市有其他几个迎宾员也开始效仿我的做法了，倒不是说他们完全照搬了我的方法，但是他们自己的法子，呃，也还算可行吧。”

“我明白了。您其中一个办法就一直提着行李不放下。”

“正是，先生。您已经非常明白我的意思了。当然，我必须承认，我刚开始实施这些新办法的时候年轻力壮，真没料想到年纪越大身体越差。很可笑，先生，但真的没料想到。其他的迎宾员也都这样说过。不管怎样，我们都决定履行我们的誓言。这么多年下来，我们已经结成了一个相当牢固的团体，一共12个人，这些年来一直坚持下来的，就我们这些人了。如果我现在反悔的话，先生，我会觉得辜负了他人。如果他们任何一人偏要走向回头路，我同样会觉得失望。论其原因，毫无疑问，是多年的努力才有了小小的成绩。但路还很长，没错。我们时常交流——每周日下午，在老城区的匈牙利咖啡馆聚会，您可以来参加，您一定是最受欢迎的客人，先生——呃，我们经常讨论这些事情，大家一致认为，这城里的人对待我们的态度，无疑已经有了极大的改观。当然，年轻一辈自然都觉得本该如此，理所当然，但是我们这帮在匈牙利咖啡馆聚会的人，都觉得自己做出了成绩，即便不是很显著。非常欢迎您来加入我们，先生。希望我能荣幸地把您介绍给他们。现在已经不似以前那么正式了，我们都明白，在特殊情况下，允许介绍新人加入我们，这也有段日子了。每年这个时节，沐浴在午后的阳光下令人心旷神怡。我们坐在露天凉篷下，看着对面的老广场。非常美，先生。您肯定会喜欢的。呃，刚才我说到哪儿了？我们在咖啡馆一直讨论的都是这个问题，讨论我们这些年来所做的决定。您看，我们从没想过老了之后会怎么样，大概是因为我们过于专注于工作，考虑问题都是过一天是一天吧。也有可能我们低估了改变这些根深蒂固的看法需要花费的时间。您知道，先生，我现在这个年纪，要坚持下去是一年比一年难了。”

迎宾员停顿了一下，虽然身体负担很重，但他仍然陷入了沉思，然后继续说道：

“老实说，先生，只有这样才公平。那时年轻，起先给自己定下规矩，不管多大多沉，都要拎着三件行李。如果客人有第四件行李，才放地上。但是三件是一定能保证的。呃，但事实上，四年前我病了一段时间，发现体力不支了，我们就在匈牙利咖啡馆商量怎么解决。呃，最后呢，同事们一致认为我没必要对自己那么严格。他们说，毕竟呐，我们原意是要给顾客留下好印象，让他们了解我们工作真实的一面。两件行李也好，三件行李也罢，效果都是一样的。我应该把我的能力范围缩减到两件行李，这没什么大碍。我同意他们的说法，先生，但我知道实际情况并非如此。我知道那会给顾客留下不同的印象。必须得承认，哪怕在最不老练的人看来，拿着两件行李和拿着三件行李效果也是大大不同的。这我都知道。先生，不怕告诉您，要我接受这个事实真是痛苦啊。接着刚才的说，我意思就是，希望您能明白我为什么不放下您的行李。您只有两件，至少未来几年，两件都是我力所能及的。”

“这样啊，真是值得称许，”我说。“您绝对给我留下了您所期望的印象。”

“我想让您了解，先生，我不是唯一一个非改变不可的人。我们总在匈牙利咖啡馆讨论这事。我们每个人都得做出某些改变，可我不想让您觉得，我们允许彼此改变的标准有所降低。一旦降低，我们这些年所付出的努力就全部付诸东流了。我们很快就会成为笑柄。路人看见我们每周日下午聚在咖啡馆就都会嘲笑我们。哦，不，先生，我们历来对自己要求非常严格，希尔德小姐肯定可以为我们作证，整个社区对我们的周日聚会都很尊重。先生，刚才我也说了，您来参加，肯定最受欢迎。不管是咖啡馆还是广场，周日下午都热闹非常。咖啡馆老板有时还会安排吉卜赛小提琴手在广场演奏。先生，老板本人最尊重我们啦。咖啡馆不大，但他总有办法保证我们一桌人舒舒服服地坐下。哪怕店里异常繁忙，老板也能确保我们不觉拥挤或被打扰。即使在最忙的下午，我们一桌人坐齐，同时伸直胳膊旋转，也不会相互碰到。您看店老板多么尊重我们，先生。我肯定希尔德小姐能证明我说的一切。”

“不好意思，”我说，“请问您一直说的那位希尔德小姐是谁？”

刚说到这儿，我发现迎宾员的视线正越过我肩膀，看向我身后。我转过身，吃惊地发现原来电梯里还有人。一位个头矮小、身着整洁

职业装的女子正站在我身后靠近角落的地方。知道我终于看到了她，她笑了笑，上前一步。

“很抱歉，”她说，“希望您别误会我在偷听，可你们说的话不停地钻进我耳朵里。我听到了古斯塔夫的话，但我必须指出，他这么说我们市镇上的人可一点都不公平。他说我们不尊重酒店的迎宾员，事实上，我们很尊重他们，尤其最尊重古斯塔夫。人人都爱他。您也看得出他说的话其实前后矛盾。如果我们不尊重他们，那他怎么解释他们在匈牙利咖啡馆受到的礼待？真的，古斯塔夫，你让瑞德先生误解我们可不好。”

她说这话的时候，语气明显和善温柔，但古斯塔夫看起来却很懊悔。他摆正了姿势，稍稍挪步远离我们，沉重的行李箱撞到他腿上，他窘迫地移开了自己的目光。

“看看，不好意思了。”这位年轻女子笑着说。“他可是最棒的，我们都爱他。他特别谦虚，所以不会告诉别人，市里的其他迎宾员都以他为榜样呢。其实，说他们敬畏他都不为过。有时候可以看到，他们周日下午围坐一桌，只要是古斯塔夫还没来，他们就不肯开口说话。您瞧，他们感觉如果不等他就开始商谈甚是无礼。经常看到他们，十个或者十一个人，静静地坐在那喝咖啡，等着他。最多小声耳语几句，就像在教堂那样。只有等古斯塔夫来了，他们才会放松，才会开始大声交谈。亲自前去匈牙利咖啡馆，但只是看看古斯塔夫到来的盛况也是非常值得的。我得说，他到来前后的情景对比，真的令人印象深刻。前一刻大家还满脸沉闷，无声地喝着咖啡，古斯塔夫一出现，马上就开始欢呼大笑。高兴地拳来拳往，互拍后背。有时甚至还跳舞，是的，站在桌子上！他们还会跳一种别具一格的‘迎宾员舞’，是不是，古斯塔夫？哦，真的，他们真的很开心。但只有古斯塔夫来了才会这样。当然，他本人可不会告诉您这些，他很谦虚。这里每个人都爱他。”

年轻女子说话的时候，古斯塔夫肯定已扭转身体背对我们，因为下一刻我再看他时，他正面对着电梯另一侧角落，背对着我们。沉重的行李让他不堪重负，双腿弯曲，双肩微颤。他埋首颈间，有意躲着站在后面的我们，但至于是因为羞怯还是因为体力不支就很难说了。

“很抱歉，瑞德先生，”年轻女子说。“还没自我介绍呢，我叫希尔德·斯达特曼。我负责您逗留期间的一切活动事宜，还要保证一切顺利，万无一失。很高兴您终于成行，如约莅临。我们之前都有点担心会事出有变。今早本来大家都在悉心等待，但很多人因为有重要

约会，不得不一个个都走了。所以才轮到我这个市艺术馆的低级职员来告诉您，您的到来令我们倍感荣幸。”

“我很乐意来，不过提起今早，您刚才说……”

“哦，别担心，瑞德先生，没人感到一丝不快，重要的是您来了。瑞德先生，我同意古斯塔夫说的一点，就是老城区。真的是很迷人，我一向建议游客们去那儿看看。环境优美，到处都是露天咖啡馆、工艺品商店和饭店。从这步行一小段就到，如果行程安排允许，您应该抽空去看看。”

“我非常想去看看。正好，斯达特曼小姐，说到行程表……”我故意停顿了一下，期望这位年轻小姐惊呼一声，说她怎么就忘了呢，或者随手伸到她携带的公文包里，拿出一张纸或者一个文件夹。可是，虽然她的确很快插了嘴，但脱口而出的却是：

“行程确实是很紧，没错。但我衷心希望这样安排没有不妥之处。我们尽量严格围绕主要活动做出安排。无可避免的是，很多社团，本地媒体，几乎人人都联系我们做安排。这里您的琴迷可真多啊，瑞德先生。很多人都认为，您不仅是在世的国际最顶尖的钢琴家，而且是本世纪最伟大的钢琴家。我们最后成功缩减到了只安排主要活动，相信您应该不会对我们的安排有什么特别不满意的地方。”

此时，电梯门开了。年迈的迎宾员走出电梯，进了走廊。行李很重，他不得不拖着脚在地毯上走。我和斯达特曼小姐紧随其后，小心踱着步子，生怕超过他。

“我希望不会冒犯到谁。”我边走边说。“我意思是，按照行程表，有些人我可能没法见了。”

“哦，不，您不用担心。我们都了解您此行的目的，没人会想担上干扰您行程的罪责。事实上，瑞德先生，除了两个相当重要的社会活动，其他一切活动都或多或少与‘周四之夜’有关。当然，您事先已经熟悉过行程表了吧。”

她说最后这句话的语气让我很难如实相告。我只能说：“是的。”

“行程的确很满，我们的安排都以尽量满足您的要求为先。可以说是相当体贴用心的安排。”

迎宾员已经在我们前头站在了房门前。他终于放下行李箱，打开了门锁。我们刚走上前，古斯塔夫又重新拿起行李，步履蹒跚地走进房间，说道：“请跟我来，先生。”我正要进门，斯达特曼小姐轻轻拉住了我。

“我不会打扰您太久，”她说。“但是我目前想了解您对行程表是否有不满意的地方。”

门径自关上了。我们仍站在走廊里。

“呃，斯达特曼小姐，”我说，“总体来讲，我感觉……行程安排非常周到。”

“正是按照您的要求，我们才安排了您与市民互助组的会面。互助组成员都是来自各行各业的普通人，当前危机的困扰让他们走到了一起。您会得到他们对各种生活困境描述的第一手资料。”

“哦，好的。肯定会非常有用。”

“您一定也留意到，我们同样尊重您想见克里斯托弗先生本人的愿望。鉴于目前的情况，我们非常理解您要求这次会面的原因。您肯定想象得到，克里斯托弗先生也很高兴。他自然也有充分的理由想与您见面。我是说，他和他的朋友会尽全力解答您想了解的问题。自然，他们都是胡说八道，但是我肯定这对您了解我们这里的大致情况会很有帮助。瑞德先生，您看起来很累，我就不打扰您了。这是我的名片。有任何问题或要求，请尽管直接打电话给我。”

一番感谢之后，我看着她转身离开，消失在走廊尽头。我进了门，仍在消化这段谈话中涉及的信息，过了一会才注意到古斯塔夫正站在床头。

“哦，到了，先生。”

看惯了这幢楼里清一色的深色木质壁板，我很惊奇地发现：这个房间的装饰如此“微现代”。我对面的那面墙从天花板到地板几乎都是玻璃，阳光从垂直悬挂的百叶窗暖暖地照射进来。我的行李箱齐齐地放在壁橱边。

“现在，先生，请给我一点时间，”古斯塔夫说，“我带您参观一下房间各处。这样，能确保您的入住无比舒适。”

我跟着古斯塔夫在房间里转悠，看着他将开关电器一一指示给我。过了一会儿，他领我进了卫生间，继续讲解着。我很想打断他，

以前其他引领员介绍酒店房间的时候，我常做这事。但或许是他对自己工作勤奋的态度，或许是他为了让每天重复的工作更富个性所做的努力，使我被他感动了，便没有打断他。于是，他继续介绍着，挥手指着房间各处。我突然发觉，尽管他非常专业，尽管他真诚地希望我住得舒适，但一整天来困扰他的那件事还是不由自主地又浮现在了他脑中。也就是说，他又一次担心起了他的女儿和小外孙。

几个月前，得知如此安排，古斯塔夫认为这不过是件简单快乐的任务，不会带来什么困扰。每周抽出一个下午，和小外孙一起在老城区散步一两个小时，这样女儿索菲就可以出去享受美好的私人时光。而且，这安排相当成功。几周来，外公和外孙已经摸索出一条两人都惬意无比的路线。晴朗午后，他们就从秋千公园开始走，鲍里斯在那儿可以展示他新学的锻炼胆量的技艺。雨日午后，他们就从船舶博物馆开始走。一路漫步，走过老城区的条条小路，逛逛礼品店，或许到老广场停停，看看哑剧表演或者杂技表演。这位年迈的迎宾员在本区很有名，走不了多远就会有人打招呼，古斯塔夫能听到无数对外孙的赞美之辞。然后，他们走上老桥，看看船只从桥下驶过。最后，他们前往最中意的咖啡馆，点个蛋糕或冰淇淋，等着索菲回来。

起初，这小小的户外游给古斯塔夫带来了极大的满足感。但越是频繁地与女儿和外孙接触，他就越发注意到过去不曾留心的问题，再也不能装作一切安好了。首先是女儿索菲的整体情绪问题。早几个星期，她会高高兴兴地跟他们道别，然后匆忙赶往市中心购物或者约见朋友。但最近她老是无精打采，好像无所事事。更有甚者，先不论索菲遇到的是何等麻烦，这些麻烦已明显开始影响到了鲍里斯。诚然，外孙大多时候仍兴致勃勃，自娱自乐。可是，古斯塔夫留意到，时不时地，尤其是提到其家庭生活时，小孩子的脸上会掠过一丝愁云。而两周前发生的事在年迈的迎宾员脑袋里着实挥之不去。

他和鲍里斯路过老城区众多咖啡馆中的一间，突然看到女儿坐在里面。门口的凉篷遮挡了玻璃的反光，从外面可以清楚地一直看到室内后排座位，看到索菲孤单地坐在那儿，身前的桌上摆着杯咖啡，一脸沮丧。她无意离开老城区，更遑论她脸上落寞的表情，这个事实让古斯塔夫着实吃惊——老半天，他才反应过来想要引开鲍里斯的注意力。可是太晚了：鲍里斯顺着他的目光真真切切地瞧见了她母亲。孩子立即挪开眼，两人继续散步，谁也没提起这事。没多久，鲍里斯就恢复了兴致。但这一幕还是令迎宾员大为困扰，此后他多次在脑中盘算。其实，正是回忆起这件事才让古斯塔夫刚才在大厅里现出一副专

注的神情。而此刻，他领我参观房间，这事儿又再次勾起了他的惶惑。

我很是喜欢这老人，又有些同情他。显然，他忧虑这件事已经有一段时日了，现在这忧虑又有失控的危险。我想就此话题与他好好谈谈，但此时古斯塔夫已例行完公事，而且，自下飞机之后断断续续的疲惫感再次向我袭来。我决定，还是以后找机会和他谈吧，于是便给了他不少小费，让他离开了。

看到他将身后的门带上后，我和衣瘫倒在床上，直望着天花板发呆。起初，我脑袋里一直想着古斯塔夫和他遇到的各种烦恼。后来又想到和斯达特曼小姐的对话。很明显，这座城市对我的预期要求不仅仅限于一场演奏会。我试图回忆有关这次行程安排的细节，但什么也没想起来。我意识到自己没有和斯达特曼小姐坦白是多么愚蠢。假如我没收到过行程表的副本，那是她的责任，而不是我的过错，否则我的自辩就会显得非常不合情理。

我又想起了布罗茨基这名字，这次，我肯定自己听说过或者读到过这个名字，而且就在不久前。然后我又突然想起这次长途飞行。我坐在黑暗的客舱里，周围的乘客都已入睡，我借着昏暗的灯光浏览这次的行程表。旁边的男人曾一度醒过来，几分钟后说了句戏谑的话。事实上，我记得他曾倾身问了我一个测试题，好像是关于足球世界杯的。我不想中断研读我的行程表，就冷冷地打发了他。现在我清晰地记得当时的情景。没错，我能想起印有行程安排的厚厚灰色纸张的质地，头灯映射在纸上暗黄色的光斑，飞机引擎的嗡鸣声——但是无论我怎么努力，就是想不起纸上写了什么。

过了一会儿，我觉得疲劳吞噬了我，便决定与其无意义地再想下去，不如先小睡片刻。况且，经验告诉我，休息过后，一切都会清晰得多。然后，我就可去找斯达特曼小姐，向她解释中间的误会，再拿一张行程表，请她对行程安排做必要的解释。

刚要睡着，我突然想起了一件事情。我睁开眼睛，盯着天花板，细细地打量着，然后坐起身，环顾四周。熟悉感越来越强，我意识到，现在的这个房间正是当时家人和我借宿姨妈家时的卧室。姨妈家住在英格兰与威尔士边境，我们曾借住了两年。我再一次环顾房间，重新躺下，又一次盯着天花板。墙壁最近新刷过漆，空间扩大了，房檐移动过，灯具周围的装饰全部变了。但天花板还是当年那个我常在咯吱作响的小床上盯着看的天花板。

翻身侧躺，俯视着床边的地板。酒店在下床落脚的地方放了块深色地毯。我仍记得这个地方曾放了块破旧的绿色垫子。我曾一周数次在这垫子上玩行兵布阵的游戏，都是些塑料玩具士兵——一共有一百个呢——都保存在两个饼干桶里。我伸手摸了摸酒店铺的垫子，这当儿，我又忆起了某日下午的情景：当时，我正沉浸在塑料玩具士兵的世界中，激烈的争吵声突然从楼下传来。那愤怒的声音，即便是一个六七岁的小孩子，也知道这不是场普通的争吵。我安慰自己说这没什么，把脸埋在绿垫子上，继续玩打仗游戏。绿垫子靠中心的地方有块破损，时常引起我的怏怏不快。可是，那天下午，听到楼下愤怒的争吵声，我突然第一次想到：这块破损可以作为丛林障碍地形让士兵们越过。这一发现——一直威胁着要破坏我幻想世界的这块瑕疵，其实是可以融入其中的——令我兴奋不已，而这一“丛林障碍”则随之成为我之后所策划的众多战斗中的一大要素。

我继续盯着天花板回忆着。我当然非常清楚房间整个动过或者说翻新过，尽管如此，久别之后，重返儿时的记忆圣堂，还是给我一种深邃的宁静感。我闭上眼，不一会仿佛又置身于那些旧家具中。右边远远的角落里，是那个门把手已坏掉的高高的白色壁橱。我姨妈画的那幅索尔兹伯里教堂挂在我床头墙上。床边橱柜的两个小抽屉里塞满我的小宝贝和小秘密。一天下来的全部紧张——长途飞行的疲惫，行程安排的困惑，古斯塔夫的问题——仿佛都抛在了脑后。我感觉筋疲力尽，渐渐沉沉地睡着了。

第二章

我被床边的电话铃吵醒，感觉响了很久。我拿起听筒，对方说道：

“喂？瑞德先生吗？”

“是的，您好。”

“您好，瑞德先生。我是霍夫曼。酒店经理。”

“哦，您好。”

“瑞德先生，很高兴您终于到了。非常欢迎您的到来。”

“谢谢。”

“真的欢迎您，先生。飞机晚点的事请别介意。斯达特曼小姐应该都告诉您了吧，我们现场的所有人都完全理解。毕竟，您要赶赴世界各地的预约，还要跋山涉水地飞到这儿，哈哈，这种事情很难避免。”

“但是……”

“真的没关系，先生。您不需要做任何解释。我刚也说了，所有人都很理解。这事就算过去了，重要的是您来了。单单这一点，瑞德先生，我们就无比感激。”

“哦，谢谢，霍夫曼先生。”

“呃，先生，您现在要是不忙的话，我很想跟您见个面，当面表达我的敬意，对您到本市下榻我们的酒店表示个人感谢。”

“您真是太客气了，”我说，“但我刚刚小憩了一下……”

“小憩？”声音里瞬间闪过一丝恼怒，但马上恢复了和蔼亲切，听不出丝毫差别。“是吗，当然，当然，您一定很累了，路途遥远。那这样吧，不管什么时候，我随时恭候。”

“我非常期待与您见面，霍夫曼先生。我马上就下来。”

“一定等您方便了再下来。我呢，我就一直在这儿等着，就在楼下大厅里，不管多久。请您一定不要着急。”

我思量了一阵，然后说道：“但是，霍夫曼先生，您一定还有许多其他的事情要忙乎吧。”

“没错，这会儿是一天里最忙的时候，但为了您，瑞德先生，要我等多久都行，毫无怨言。”

“霍夫曼先生，请别因为我浪费您宝贵的时间。我马上下来找您。”

“瑞德先生，一点都不麻烦。其实，能在这儿等您，我很荣幸。按我说的，一定慢慢来。我保证，我会一直在这儿等您来。”

我再次谢了他，放下电话，起身环顾一周，看看光景，猜测大概快傍晚了。先前的疲惫感有增无减，但好像没得选，只有下楼去大厅。我起身，走到行李箱边拿出一件不太皱的外套，至少比我身上这件平整。换衣服的时候，我突然特别想喝咖啡。穿好衣服后，我疾步离开房间。

从电梯出来，我发现大厅里比先前热闹了许多。四周的客人们或懒懒地倚坐在椅子上，或翻着报纸，或点杯咖啡闲聊。接待柜台边，几位日本客人正愉快地相互寒暄。我对这种变化感到些许困惑，并没有注意到酒店经理已经走了过来。

他大概五十多岁，形象比我从电话里听声音想象的要高大威猛许多。他伸出手，笑容可掬，这时我发现他上气不接下气，额头微微冒汗。

我们握了握手，他不停地重复我的到来多么令这个城镇生辉，尤其是下榻他们酒店。然后他倚近我，推心置腹地说：“我向您保证，先生，‘周四之夜’所有安排都已就绪，真没什么好担心的。”

我等他接着说，但他只是笑了笑。于是我说：“嗯，那很好。”

“不，先生，真的没什么好担心的。”

一阵尴尬无语。过了一会儿，霍夫曼好像想要说些别的什么，却又突然打住，大笑一声，轻轻拍了拍我的肩膀——这一举动让我感觉过于冒失。终于，他说道：“瑞德先生，为了您此行舒适愉快，有什么需要我效劳的地方，请您即刻告诉我。”

“您太客气了。”

又是一阵无语。之后他又大笑一声，轻轻摇头，再一次拍了拍我肩膀。

“霍夫曼先生，”我说，“您是不是有什么特别的事要对我说？”

“哦，没什么特别的，瑞德先生。我只是想跟您打个招呼，看您对一切安排是否满意。”然后他忽然一声感叹。“当然，既然您提起，是的，我是有事要对您说，不过只是件小事。”然后，他又摇了摇头，大笑起来。接着他说：“这跟我妻子制作的剪报册有关。”

“您妻子的剪报册？”

“瑞德先生，我妻子是个非常有文化的女性。她自然也是您的琴迷。其实，她一直饶有兴致地追随您的钢琴生涯，这些年四处收集您的剪报。”

“真的吗？她可真是太好了。”

“实际上，她编了两本剪报册，全都是关于您的。条目都按照时间顺序编排，而且可以追溯到很多年前。言归正传，我妻子非常期望有一天您能亲自翻读这些剪报册。您到来的消息无疑重新燃起了她的期望。然而，她知道您此行必定无暇，所以坚持不应因为她而打搅到您。但我看得出她在偷偷地期盼着，所以答应她至少跟您提及此事。您如果能抽出即便一分钟瞧瞧这两本册子，您都想象不到这对她有多么重要。”

“请您一定转达我对您妻子的感谢。霍夫曼先生，我非常乐意看看她的剪报册。”

“瑞德先生，您真是太好了！真是个大好人！事实上，我把剪报册带来酒店了，随时准备供您翻阅。但我能猜到您一定非常忙。”

“我行程的确很满。但是，我肯定能抽出时间看看您妻子的剪报册。”

“您真是太好了，瑞德先生！但我还是要说，我最不愿给你增添额外的负担。我提个建议吧，您什么时间有空翻看剪报册就告知我一下，我等着您。在此之前，我不会打扰您。不管什么时候，白天还是晚上，只要您觉得时间合适，请来找我。一般很容易就能找到我，我很晚才会离开酒店。我会立即停下手边的事情，去取剪报册。这样安

排我是再乐意不过了。真的，一想到给您的行程增添额外的负担，我简直受不了啊。”

“您真是太体贴了，霍夫曼先生。”

“瑞德先生，我刚想到，过几天我可能会异常忙碌，但我想跟您说，做这件事我永远不会没空，所以即便我看起来很忙，请您也一定不要推延。”

“好的，我会记着的。”

“或许我们该定个暗号什么的。我这样说是因为您来找我的时候，可能会看到我正在拥挤房间的另一头，您要穿过闹哄哄的人群过来恐怕很困难。而且，还有可能就是，等您到达第一眼看到我的地方时，我自己又走到别处去了。所以有个暗号就很明智。一个简单易辨、高过人群头顶就能看到的暗号。”

“确实，这个主意倒不错。”

“很好。瑞德先生，您这么友好和善真是让我很感激。我们这儿接待过不少名人，像您这么平易近人的可真没几个。那么，就只要定个暗号就行了。我先说一个……呃，比如像这样。”

他举起手，手掌向外，五指分开，比划了个像是擦玻璃的动作。

“就打个比方，”他说，把手快速放到背后。“当然，也许您更喜欢其他的暗号。”

“不，这个暗号就不错。等我准备好看您夫人的剪报册的时候，我会给您暗号的。她能费力做这些东西真是太客气了。”

“我知道做这个给了她极大的满足感。当然，如果日后您想出其他您中意的暗号，请用房间电话打给我，或者让其他员工转告我。”

“您真是太客气了，您提议的这个暗号非常巧妙。但现在，霍夫曼先生，请问您能否告诉我，哪里可以喝到香醇的咖啡？我感觉现在能喝下好几杯呢。”

经理夸张地大笑。“我非常了解这感觉。我带您去中庭。请跟我来。”

他带我走到大厅一角，穿过几道厚重的旋转门，走进一条昏暗的长廊，两边墙上都是深色木质壁板。走廊里自然光很少，甚至在白天这个时间，一排幽暗的壁灯还亮着。霍夫曼继续在我前头轻快地走

着，走几步就转头对我笑笑。大概走了一半，我们路过了一扇巨大的房门，霍夫曼一定是留意到我在看，就说：

“啊，是的。休息室一般都供应咖啡。那休息室非常棒，瑞德先生，非常舒适，最近又配上了手工打的桌子，是我最近一次到意大利佛罗伦萨旅行时发现并购置的。我相信您一定会赞不绝口。不过，您应该也知道，我们刚刚关闭了休息室给布罗茨基用。”

“哦，是的。我到之前他就已经在那儿了。”

“他现在还在，先生。我本应带您进去，相互介绍您二位，但是，呃，我觉得现在时机不太合适。布罗茨基先生可能……呃，这样说吧，现在还没到时候。哈哈！但别担心，您二位先生见面了解的机会多着呢。”

“布罗茨基先生现在在里面？”

我回头望了一眼门口，可能走得稍慢了。不知怎地，经理抓着我的胳膊，坚持带我离开。

“他确实在，先生。没错，他此时静静地坐在那儿，但我肯定，他随时可能开始。今天早上，您知道，他跟乐团排练了整整四个小时。大家都说，一切都进行得非常顺利。所以，请别担心，没什么好担心的。”

终于到了走廊拐弯处，然后光线就亮了许多。其实，这部分建筑的一侧全是窗户，所以才有大片阳光倾洒满地。又沿着这边走了一会儿，霍夫曼才放开了我。我们放慢脚步，悠闲地走着，经理大笑了一声，以掩盖刚才的尴尬。

“中庭到了，先生。实际上这是个酒吧，但这里很舒服，您可以点咖啡或者其他想要的饮品。请这边走。”

我们从长廊拐出来，到了一个拱门下面。

“这座别馆，”霍夫曼边说着边领我进去，“是三年前竣工的，我们管它叫中庭，我们对这里相当自豪满意，它是由安东尼奥·查那多为我们设计的。”

我们走进了一间宽敞明亮的大厅，由于头顶上的玻璃天花板，感觉像进了庭院。地面用许多大块白色瓷砖铺成。中间最突出的是一座喷泉——几个纠缠在一起的仙女大理石雕喷出水来。让我吃惊的是，喷泉的水压极大，不透过空中弥漫的水雾，几乎就看不到中庭的

其他部分。即便如此，我还是很快就搞清楚了中庭的每个角都有个酒吧，周围是散开放置的高脚椅、安乐椅和桌子。身穿白色制服的服务生来来往往，不少客人散坐四周——虽说这里的空间感让人很难察觉到他们的存在。

我看到经理得意地看着我，等我赞美这里的环境。可是那会儿，对咖啡的渴望占据了上风，我转身走进最近的酒吧。

我刚坐上一只高脚椅，将胳膊放在吧台上，经理便赶了过来。他冲酒吧间招待打了个响指示意，其实即使不这样，酒吧间招待本来也是要过来招呼我的。他说道：“瑞德先生想点壶咖啡，肯尼亚！”然后转身对我说，“我本想在这儿陪您，没有比这更开心的了，瑞德先生。和您一起闲聊音乐艺术。不巧的是，很多事情必须等我处理，不能再拖了。我想，先生，您不介意我离开吧？”

虽然我坚持他用不着这么客气，他仍逗留了几分钟跟我道别。最后，他看了眼手表，惊呼一声，匆匆离去。

剩下我一人，很快便意识游离，陷入沉思，连酒吧间招待回来过我都没意识到。然而，他必定是回来过的，因为很快，我便喝上了咖啡，盯着吧台后的镜壁——我不仅看到了自己的影子，还看到了我身后房间的大部分。过了一会儿，不知什么原因，我发现自己脑海中在重放我早年看过的一场足球赛的几个关键时刻——当时是德国队与荷兰队对决。高脚椅上，我调整了坐姿——看到了自己使劲弓着身子——试着回忆当时荷兰队球员的名字。瑞普、库罗、哈恩、尼斯坚斯。几分钟之后，除了两人，其他所有人的名字都记起来了，但最后这两个名字就是想不起来，就差一点点。在我刻意回忆的时候，身后喷泉的潺潺之声——起初我觉得挺舒服悦人的——开始令我心烦意乱。好像只要那声音停下，我的记忆之锁就能解开，我就能最终想起他们的名字。

我仍在努力回忆，这时身后一个声音响起：

“打扰了，是瑞德先生，对吗？”

我转过身，看到一个稚气未脱的年轻人，大概二十来岁。我打了声招呼，他急切地走到了吧台。

“希望没有打扰到您，”他说，“但我刚才看到您，就只想过来跟您说，在这看到您让我倍感激动。您看，我也是个钢琴演奏者。我

的意思是，就仅仅是业余水平而已。还有，呃，我一直以来都特别仰慕您。父亲告诉我您要来的时候，我真是兴奋极了。”

“父亲？”

“抱歉。我叫斯蒂芬·霍夫曼。经理的儿子。”

“哦，这样啊，我知道了。你好。”

“您不介意我坐几分钟吧？”年轻人坐上了我旁边的高脚椅。

“您知道，先生，父亲就算没有比我更兴奋，至少也跟我一样。我知道父亲一定不会告诉您他有多兴奋。但请相信我，这对他的意义非同一般。”

“真的吗？”

“是的，真的，我一点没有夸张。我记得那时父亲还在等待您的回复，一提到您的名字，父亲就会异常宁静一阵。后来，压力真的太大时，他就开始成天低声咕哝：‘还要等多久？还得多久他才回复？他要回绝我们了。我能感觉到。’然后我就得想办法让他开心起来。不管怎么说，先生，您应该能想象到您的到来对他意味着什么。他就是个完美主义者！他组织安排‘周四之夜’这样的活动，一切，一切的一切，必须万无一失。他在脑袋里思考过每个细节，一遍又一遍地想。他这股一根筋的专注劲儿，有时候会有点太过了。但我又想，要是没这股劲儿的话，那就不是父亲了，他也不会有今天一半的成就了。”

“没错。他看起来像是个令人钦佩的人。”

“说实话，瑞德先生，”年轻人说，“我确实有些事情想跟您讲，实际上是个请求。如果没可能的话，请您直接告诉我，我不会生气的。”

斯蒂芬·霍夫曼停顿了一下，好像在给自己鼓劲儿。我又喝了点咖啡，看着我们两个并肩而坐的身影。

“其实，也是关于‘周四之夜’的事，”他接着说，“您看，父亲要我在这次活动上演奏钢琴。我一直在练习，已经做好准备，倒不是说我担心这个或别的什么……”说到这儿，他那自信的语气霎时顿了一下，我瞧见了一位心神不安的少年。但是他立即恢复了自信，若无其事地耸了耸肩。“只是‘周四之夜’太重要了，我不想让他失望。开门见山地说吧，我在想，您能否抽出几分钟时间听听我弹整首

曲子。我决定弹奏让·路易斯·拉罗什的《大丽花》。我只是业余水平，您一定得多多包涵。但我想弹一遍，请您给我些建议，润色改进一下。”

我想了一会儿。“这么说，”我停了一会儿说，“你准备在‘周四之夜’演出。”

“当然了，跟那晚其他活动相比，呃，”他笑了笑。“这只是个很小的部分。尽管如此，我仍希望我弹奏的部分尽可能完美。”

“好的。我很理解。呃，我非常乐意帮忙。”

年轻人的脸瞬间亮了起来。“瑞德先生，我真不知道该说什么了！这正是我需要的……”

“但现在确有一个问题。你应该能猜到，我在这儿的时间非常有限，我必须找时间看看能不能抽出几分钟。”

“当然，您方便的时候，随时都行，瑞德先生。天哪，我太受宠若惊了。老实讲，我原以为您会断然拒绝我呢。”

传呼机的声音在年轻人身上的衣服里响起，斯蒂芬愣了一下，把手伸进夹克口袋。

“很抱歉，”他说，“这是个急呼。我本应老早就到一个地方的，但是我看见您坐在这儿，就忍不住走过来。希望不久之后能继续我们的谈话。但现在，不好意思我得失陪一下。”

他下了高脚椅，然后有一秒钟，像是要重开话题。然后传呼机又响了，他尴尬地微笑了一下，匆匆离开。

我转过身，继续看着吧台后自己的倒影，又开始轻呷了一口咖啡。然而，我已无法重新捕捉那位年轻人来之前的轻松享受的思绪。恰恰相反，想起这里的人对我的满心期待，而目前的情况却远非令人满意，困扰的感觉就再次袭上心头。实际上，除了找到斯达特曼小姐，彻底澄清某些疑点，好像再没其他方法，我决定喝完这杯咖啡就去找她。见面也没必要觉得尴尬，只要解释清楚上次的事情就好了。

“斯达特曼小姐，”我或许会说，“我之前很累，所以您问我关于行程安排的时候，我有点误会了。我以为您在问我，假如您当场提供给我一份行程表复印件，我是否有时间马上看看。”或者我可以冒犯一点，甚至以责备的口吻说：“斯达特曼小姐，我得说我有担心，是

的，甚至有些失望。考虑到您和您的市民朋友想要施加在我肩上的责任，我认为我有权利要求一定标准的后勤支持。”

我听到身边有动静，抬头看到了古斯塔夫，那个年长的迎宾员站在我的高脚椅旁边。我转身朝向他，他微微一笑，说道：

“您好，先生。正好在这儿碰见您。我真心希望您此行愉快。”

“哦，我挺愉快的。不过遗憾的是，我还没机会参观您推荐的老城区。”

“那真可惜，先生。那是我们市里非常美的一个地方，而且很近。现在的天儿也不错。空气中有些许凉意，但阳光明媚。温度刚好适合户外活动，不过我得说您得穿个夹克或薄外套。这种天气最适合逛逛老城区。”

“您知道，”我说，“我也许正需要点新鲜空气呢。”

“我真的推荐您去，先生。要是到您离开之时，还没哪怕粗略地逛一逛老城区，那就太可惜了。”

“好的，我想我会的。我现在就去。”

“您要是有时间到老广场的匈牙利咖啡馆坐坐，我保证您肯定不会后悔。我建议您点壶咖啡，点个苹果馅酥饼。顺便问您一句，我刚刚在想……”迎宾员停顿了一下，然后继续道，“我刚刚在想您能否帮我个小忙。我一般不向客人要求帮忙，但是您的话，我觉得我们已经非常熟了。”

“如果可能的话，我非常乐意帮您的忙。”我说。

过了一阵，老迎宾员仍然静静地站在那儿。

“是件小事情，”他终于说道，“您看，我知道我女儿这会儿在匈牙利咖啡馆。她会带小鲍里斯一起去。她是个非常友善的女人，先生。你们俩肯定合得来，很多人都跟她合得来。她算不上漂亮，但外表却很吸引人。她心地非常善良。但我觉得她一直以来都有一个小弱点。或许她从小接受的教育即是如此，谁知道呢？她可一直是这样的。也就是说，她有时候会因有些事而不知所措，即便这些事情都在她能力范围内。小问题出现了，她不会采取一些必要而简单的方法加以解决，而是自己憋在心里考虑。这样的话，您知道的，先生，小问题就会酿成大问题。用不了多久，她就会心思重重，陷入绝望。真的没必要这样。我不知道眼下到底是什么事情在困扰她，但我肯定，并

不是什么跨不过的坎。我之前很多次都看到她这样。但现在，您看，鲍里斯已经开始注意到她的情绪了。事实上，先生，索菲如果不能很快把持事态，恐怕孩子会非常焦虑的。他现在还很开心，心胸开阔，信心满满。我知道他不可能一生都保持这样，而且这样甚至都不一定对他好，但现在这个年纪，我想他应该再多过几年相信世界充满阳光和欢笑的日子。”他又沉默了，好像陷入了一阵沉思，然后抬头接着说：“只要索菲能看清楚发生了什么，我相信她是能掌控局势的。她有一颗非常负责任的心，非常渴望为她最关心的人付出最大的努力。可是，索菲呢，呃，一旦她陷入这样的状态，她的确需要一些帮助以恢复她的洞察力。倾诉交谈，这是她真正需要的。需要有人坐下来和她聊上一会儿，让她看清楚事情，帮她找出真正的问题，告诉她应该采取什么方法克服。这就是她所需要的，先生，好好谈谈，让她的洞察力恢复起来。剩下的她自己就能解决。只要她想，她就可以非常理智。这就要说到我的重点了，先生。您要是正巧现在去老城区，不知您是否介意和索菲谈几句。当然，我知道这可能给您带来不便，但既然您反正都要去，我想我还是得来问问您。您不用和她谈很久，短短地聊几句就行，找出什么问题在困扰她，帮她恢复理性。”

老迎宾员停下来，哀求地看着我。过了一会儿，我叹了口气，说：

“我挺想帮您的，真的挺想。但是听您所说，我觉得索菲的担忧，不管是什么，很可能事关家庭问题。你知道，这种问题好像都纠结很深。像我这种外人，可能经过一番恳谈，追根究底挖掘一个问题的原委之后，发现又牵扯到另一个问题上去，然后又一个问题，循环不断。坦白讲，我的意见是，要谈清楚整个家庭复杂纠缠的各种问题，我认为您才是最适合的人选。毕竟，您是索菲的父亲，孩子的外祖父，您有我不具备的与生俱来的权威。”

老迎宾员好似立刻感受到了我这话的分量，我差点后悔说了这些话。显然我说到了他的痛处。他稍稍转身，目光空洞，越过中庭久久地看向喷泉。最后说：

“很感激您告诉我，先生。从权利上讲，是的，确实应该我去跟她谈，我知道。但是，老实说——我真不知道该怎么跟您讲——跟您说实话吧，真实的情况是，我和索菲已经好几年未曾讲话了。从她还是孩子起，就不怎么讲了。所以您能理解，对我来说，完成所讲的这件事有点困难。”

老迎宾员低下头看自己的脚，等着我的回应，好似在等宣判一样。

“很抱歉，”我随后说，“我不太明白您的意思。您是说这段时间您一直没见过您女儿？”

“不，不。您知道，每次去带鲍里斯的时候，我经常看到她。我的意思是，我们不说话。我给您举个例子，也许您就能理解了。比如我和鲍里斯在老城区散完步之后等她，比如说我们坐在克兰科尔先生的咖啡店里。鲍里斯兴致昂扬，大声说话，什么事情都笑呵呵的。但一看到母亲进门，他马上就安静了。这倒不是说他看到母亲有什么不开心的，他只是会控制自己。他尊重这规矩，您明白吗？然后索菲会走到我们桌边直接问他：我们过得愉快吗？我们去了哪儿？外祖父会不会太冷？哦，是的，她总是询问我的健康状况，担心我在这地方四处闲逛会生病。但就像我说的，我们，我和索菲，不直接说话。‘和外公说再见。’她在道别时会这样对鲍里斯说，然后他们就径直离开了。这就是我们之间多年以来相处的方式，似乎暂时真的无须改变呢。可是，您看，遇到这种情况，我就发觉自己有些迷茫了，我确实认为有必要好好谈谈，觉得像您这样的人是理想的人选。就几句，先生，就帮她确定问题到底在哪里就行。如果您能这样做，接下来就全靠她自己了，我向您保证。”

“好吧，”我考虑了一下说。“好吧，我看看我能做些什么。但我必须强调我之前讲过的话。这些事情对外人来说往往是很复杂的。但我会看看我能做些什么。”

“我欠您个人情，先生。她这个时候会在匈牙利咖啡馆。您很容易就能认出她。她长着一头长长的黑发，模样挺像我的。您要是拿不准，尽管问老板，或叫店员指给您。”

“好吧，我现在就去。”

“真是太感谢您了，先生。即便出于某些原因您没法跟她谈，我知道在那地方散散步您也会很开心的。”

我弯腰下了高脚椅。“那么，好吧，”我说，“我会告知您进展如何的。”

“非常感谢您，先生。”

第三章

从酒店走到老城区——大概十五分钟的路程——简直无聊至极。此时正值傍晚，街道嘈杂，交通繁忙，一路上玻璃办公大楼笼罩头顶。但走到河边，开始穿过通向老城区的拱桥时，我就感觉到将要进入一个迥然不同的世界。河对岸彩色的凉篷和咖啡馆的太阳伞清晰可见，我瞧见来回穿梭的服务员，还有绕着圈跑动的孩童。一只小狗大概是发现了我的到来，在码头边兴奋地吠着。

几分钟后，我走进了老城区。窄窄的鹅卵石街道上到处是人，都在闲庭信步。我漫无目的地走了一会儿，经过了多家纪念品店、糖果店、面包店，还有几家咖啡店。我还在想，不知道老迎宾员说的那家咖啡馆是否难寻。但是一走到这区中心的一个大广场，匈牙利咖啡馆就近在眼前了。散乱摆放的桌子占领了广场远角的整块地方，桌子一路延伸，通向一个条纹凉篷下的小门。

我稍稍停顿，喘了口气，观察了一下周围环境。广场上空太阳西沉。正如古斯塔夫之前提醒过的，凉风阵阵，咖啡馆四周的太阳伞不时随风颤动。尽管如此，大部分的桌子后都有人在座。很多顾客看起来像是游客，但看得出来，还是有相当一部分像是本地人，早早下班后，到这儿喝杯咖啡，读会儿报纸偷闲。确实，我穿过广场的时候，走过了很多办公室职员身边，他们站在一起，都拎着公文包，相谈甚欢。

我走近散置的桌台，花了会儿工夫在中间逛了一圈，找着哪个可能是老迎宾员的女儿。两个学生在争论一部电影；一位游客正在读《新闻周刊》；一位老太太边撒着面包屑边喂着脚边围聚过来的鸽子。但我没看到有深色长发、带着个小男孩的年轻女人。我走进咖啡馆，发现这里又小又暗，只有五六张桌子。我明白了，老迎宾员提到的过度拥挤的问题，在天冷的时候倒是确有其事。但这会儿，只有一个头戴贝雷帽的老人，坐在靠近后排的位置。我决定放弃，回到外面，准备找个服务员点杯咖啡，这时，我忽然听到有人叫我的名字。

我转过身，看到一个女人和一个小男孩坐在附近的桌子边，正向我挥手。两人明显符合老迎宾员描述的特征，我不明白刚刚怎么就没

有注意到他们。而且更让我惊讶的是，他们竟然是在等我。迟疑了几秒钟后，我才向他们挥了挥手，朝他们走了过去。

虽说老迎宾员称她是“年轻女子”，然而索菲已近中年，估摸四十岁上下吧。尽管如此，不知怎么，她还是比我想象中迷人些。她个子高挑，身材苗条，长长的黑头发让她看起来有几分吉卜赛女郎的韵味。她身边的男孩个头小小，矮矮胖胖，这会儿正气呼呼地注视着母亲。

“怎么？”索菲抬头微笑着对我说，“您不打算坐下吗？”

“当然，当然。”我说，才意识到自己一直犹豫地站在那儿，“那个，如果你们不介意的话。”我冲男孩笑了笑，但是他回绝地瞪着我。

“我们当然不介意。是吗，鲍里斯？鲍里斯，跟瑞德先生问声好。”

“你好，鲍里斯。”我边坐下边说。

男孩继续不以为然地瞪着我，然后对妈妈说：“你干吗让他坐下？我正在跟你说话呢。”

“这是瑞德先生，鲍里斯。”索菲说，“他是个特殊的朋友。只要他愿意，当然就可以和我们坐在一起。”

“但我正跟你解释旅行者号是怎么飞行的。我就知道你刚才没在听，你应该学学怎么集中注意力。”

“很抱歉，鲍里斯，”索菲说，她和我迅速交换了个笑容。“我刚刚非常努力地听，但科学这东西我理解不了。跟瑞德先生问个好吧？”

鲍里斯看了我一会儿，生气地说：“你好。”边说着，目光边从我身上移开。

“可别因为我闹得你们不愉快。”我说。“鲍里斯，继续你刚才说的吧。事实上，我本人非常有兴趣听听这架飞机的事儿。”

“不是飞机，”鲍里斯厌烦地说。“是穿越星系的载人飞船。你也不比我母亲懂多少。”

“哦？你怎么知道我不懂？我可能很有科学头脑呢。你不应该这么快对一个人下结论，鲍里斯。”

他重重地叹了口气，目光继续背着我。“你就像我母亲一样，”他说。“缺乏注意力。”

“喂，鲍里斯，”索菲说，“你应该随和一点。瑞德先生是个非常特殊的朋友。”

“不只那样，”我说，“我还是你外公的朋友呢。”

一听这话，鲍里斯才头一次兴致勃勃地看着我。

“哦，是的，”我说，“我们是好朋友，我和你外公。我住在他工作的酒店。”

鲍里斯继续仔细地看着我。

“鲍里斯，”索菲说，“为什么不友好地跟瑞德先生问好呢？你还没有对他表现你的礼貌呢。你不想让他走了之后觉得你是个没礼貌的年轻人吧，对吗？”

鲍里斯继续盯着我好一会儿。然后突然扑到桌子上，双臂抱着头。与此同时，双脚在桌子下来回摇晃，我能听到他的鞋撞击金属桌腿的声音。

“很抱歉，”索菲说，“他今天心情很不好。”

“实际上，”我悄悄地对她说，“我想和您谈点事。但是，呃……”我双眼示意了一下鲍里斯，索菲看了看我，扭头对小男孩说：“鲍里斯，我要和瑞德先生聊会儿。你去瞧瞧天鹅吧，就一会儿。”

鲍里斯继续埋着头，好像睡着了，但双脚还是有节奏地叩击着。索菲轻轻摇了摇他的肩膀。

“喂，别这样，”她说，“那边还有只黑天鹅呢。去站在扶手边上，就是那些修女站的地方。你肯定能看见的，过会儿你回来告诉我们你都看到了什么。”

有那么几秒钟，鲍里斯还是没反应。然后他起身，疲惫地叹息一声，滑下椅子。不知何故（也许只有他自己最清楚），他假装一副喝得烂醉的模样，摇摇晃晃地离开了。

等男孩儿走得足够远了，我扭头面对索菲。心中闪过一丝不确定感，不知如何开口，坐在那儿犹豫了一阵。然而，索菲笑了笑，先开口说道：

“好消息。迈尔先生之前打过电话，提到一幢房子。今天刚刚挂牌的，听起来真的非常不错。我一整天都在想这事，感觉可能就是这个了，一直以来我们找寻的。我告诉他明天一早就去那儿好好看看。真的，听上去好得不得了。离村子大概半小时的路程，独自坐落在山脊上，有三层。迈尔先生说从那儿看出去，整片森林的景色是他这些年看过最好的。我知道你现在很忙，假如真的像他说的那么好的话，我打电话给你，你或许能去看看。鲍里斯也去。这可能正是我们一直寻找的房子，我知道已经花了不少时间，但最后可能还是找到了。”

“哦，是的。好啊。”

“我会坐明早第一班车去。我们动作得快点，房子不会在市场上留很久的。”

她开始给我介绍更多房子的详细情况。我一直沉默无语，部分原因是我不知道该怎么回答她。然而，事实是，我们一直坐在一起，索菲的脸好像感觉越来越熟悉，直到这会儿，我才模糊地想起，早先什么时候讨论过在树林里买房子的事。这时，我的表情可能看起来越来越忧虑，最后她停下来，口气与先前不同，更犹疑地说道：

“上次电话，我很抱歉。希望你没在生气了。”

“生气？哦，没有。”

“我一直在想，我不该那样说。希望你别往心里去。毕竟，这时候怎么能期望你呆在家里？那算个什么家？厨房还那个样子！我找了这么长时间，为我们找个合适的地方。我现在对明天看的房子充满希望。”

她又开始说房子。这当儿，我试图回忆她刚才提到的关于电话里的对话。过了一会儿，我感觉好像有些隐隐的记忆重回脑海，仿佛听到了就在不远的过去，同样的声音——或者说是这个声音的生气强硬版——在电话的那头。最后我想起自己对着电话筒喊：“你生活的世界太狭窄！”她继续辩驳，我就一直轻蔑地重复：“狭窄的世界！你生活的世界太狭窄！”然而，令人沮丧的是，不管如何努力，就是想不起这句话以外的事。

可能是盯着她试图召回回忆之故，她非常局促不安地问我：

“你是不是觉得我胖了？”

“不，不。”我扭过头笑道。“你看上去好得很呐。”

我意识到还没提起她父亲交代的事，又试着找个合适的方法说及那个话题。这时，什么东西从背后敲了一下我的椅子，我意识到鲍里斯回来了。

其实，小男孩一直在不远处绕圈跑，像踢足球一样踢着一个废弃的纸盒。发现我正盯着他看，他便杂耍般把纸盒从一只脚传到另一只，然后从我椅子下面狠狠地踢过去。

“九号！”他喊着，高举双臂。“九号，超级好球。”

“鲍里斯，”我说。“你不能把那纸盒扔进垃圾桶吗？”

“我们什么时候走？”他扭头问我。“我们要迟到了。天很快就黑了。”

我看向他身后，发现太阳确实开始西下，没入广场上方。很多桌子已经空了。

“很抱歉，鲍里斯。你想干什么去？”

“快点！”小男孩用力拉了拉我的胳膊。“要不就到不了了！”

“鲍里斯想去哪儿？”我悄悄地问他母亲。

“当然是秋千公园了。”索菲叹了口气，起身。“他想给你看看他最近的进步。”

我好像没有选择，只能也起身，然后我们三个就动身穿过广场。

“那，”我对鲍里斯说，我们并排走着。“你是想给我展示点什么喽。”

“我们之前去的时候，”他说，一边拉着我的胳膊。“有个男孩，比我个头大，还不会玩鱼雷式单杠翻筋斗！妈妈说他至少比我大两岁。我示范了五次给他看，但他太害怕了。他只是不停地爬到高处，就是不敢做。”

“是吗？当然了，你不害怕做这个鱼雷式单杠翻筋斗。”

“我当然不怕！太简单了！非常简单！”

“很好。”

“他太害怕了！真好笑！”

我们离开广场，穿过本街区里的狭窄鹅卵石街道。鲍里斯好像非常熟悉路线，总是不耐烦地跑在我们前面几步，然后又停下来，跟我并肩走，问：

“你认识外公？”

“是的，我已经告诉你了。我们是好朋友。”

“外公很厉害，他是我们这儿最厉害的人之一。”

“是吗？”

“他是个好战士，曾经当过兵。现在虽然老了，但还是比大多数人都勇猛。有时候，街上的流氓不知道他的厉害，结果就得到了个狠狠的教训。”鲍里斯走着，突然做了个前刺的动作。“还没反应过来，外公就把他们打倒在地了。”

“真的吗？太有意思了，鲍里斯。”

我们继续走在鹅卵石小路上。就在那时候，我想起了和索菲争吵的更多内容。大概是一周之前吧，我在某个地方的酒店房间，听到电话那头她在大喊：

“他们还希望你这样继续多久？我们两个已经不再年轻了！你已经做了应该做的！现在应该让别人去做了！”

“听着，”我对她说，声音依然很冷静，“事实上，人们需要我。我一到某个地方，就会发现很多严重的问题，根深蒂固的、看似很难对付的问题。人们非常感激我的到来。”

“你要这样为人们继续做多久？想想我们，我，你，还有鲍里斯，时光如流水啊。不知不觉，鲍里斯就长大了。没人有权期望你继续这样。这些人，为什么他们不能自己解决自己的问题？这样也许对他们自己有好处！”

“你不懂！”我生气地打断她。“你都不知道自己说些什么！我到过的这些地方，人们很无知。他们对现代音乐一问三不知。如果放任不管，很明显，他们的问题会越来越严重。你怎么就不明白？他们需要我！他们那里需要我！你都不知道自己说些什么！”这回是我对她大叫：“狭窄的世界！你生活的世界太狭窄！”

我们走到了一个栏杆围成的小游乐场。里面空无一人，我感觉这里的气氛有点忧伤。但鲍里斯兴奋地领着我们穿过小门。

“瞧，很简单！”他说，朝着攀爬架跑开去。

好一阵子，我和索菲站在愈渐昏暗的光线下，看着那小小的身影越爬越高。然后，她轻轻说：

“你知道，可笑的是，我在听迈尔先生讲那所房子的客厅的时候，脑海中一直浮现出小时候住过的公寓的画面。他说了多久，我就想了多久。我们以前的客厅。母亲，爸爸，他们那时候的样子。也许毫无相似之处，我倒也不是真的希望有。明天一看就知道完全不同了。但它让我充满希望，你知道的，就像一种预兆。”她小声笑了笑，然后碰了碰我的肩膀。“你看起来闷闷不乐。”

“是吗？很抱歉，可能是因为旅途劳顿吧。”

鲍里斯已经爬到了攀爬架的顶端，但是光线太暗，只能看到他映衬在空中的轮廓。他冲我们大喊，然后抓住最高的一根梯蹬，翻起了筋斗。

“能做那个，他很自豪，”索菲说。然后她大叫：“鲍里斯，天太黑了，快下来。”

“很简单。天黑更简单。”

“现在就下来。”

“都是旅行之故，”我说。“一间酒店又一间酒店，见不到认识的人，太累人了。甚至现在，就在这座城市，我也感到了很多压力。这儿的人们，他们显然对我的期望很高。我的意思是，很明显……”

“听着，”索菲轻轻打断我，一只手放在我的胳膊上。“我们何不暂时忘记一切？以后还有很多时间可以好好谈谈。我们都累了。跟我们一起回公寓吧。离这儿就几分钟的路，过了那个中世纪小教堂就是。我们可以吃顿丰盛的晚餐，也有机会歇歇脚。”

她温柔地说着，嘴巴靠近我的耳边，我甚至能感觉到她的呼吸。先前的疲惫感再次袭来，能在她暖和的房间里休息——或者跟鲍里斯一起躺在地毯上，索菲去帮我们准备晚餐——这主意忽然变得极其诱人，我甚至一度闭上了双眼，站在那儿微笑地做起梦来。然而，鲍里斯一回来，我的美梦就醒了。

“晚上做这个很简单。”他说。

鲍里斯看起来很冷，还有些发抖。之前的活力消失殆尽。我想可能是刚刚的表演耗费了他不少体力。

“我们现在都回公寓，”我说。“回去吃点好东西。”

“走吧，”索菲说着，开始动身。“时间不早了。”

天空开始下起了毛毛细雨，太阳已经完全落下，空气更清冷了。鲍里斯又牵起我的手，我们跟着索菲走出秋千公园，走进了一条人烟稀少的后街。

第四章

显然，我们已经离开了老城区。路两边高高垒起的砖墙一片污浊，没有窗户，看起来像是仓库的后面。我们沿街前行，索菲刻意保持一定速度，不一会儿，我看出鲍里斯行走吃力，很难跟上。可是当我问他：“我们是不是走得太快了？”他却怒气冲冲地看着我。

“我可以走得更快！”他大喊，拽着我的手，一路小跑。但速度不一会就又快慢了下来，脸上一副受伤的表情。过了一会，我故意缓步前进，然而仍能听到他不停地喘着粗气。然后就开始自言自语。起初，我并没在意，以为他只是给自己鼓劲儿。后来就听到他小声嘟囔：

“九号……就是九号……”

我好奇地看了他一眼。他浑身湿漉漉的，而且全身发抖。我觉得应该继续和他说话。

“这个九号，”我说，“是足球运动员吗？”

“是世界上最棒的球员。”

“九号。是的，当然了。”

我们前头，索菲的身影在拐角处消失了，鲍里斯紧紧地抓着我的手。我这会儿才意识到让他母亲走得太快太远了，然而，尽管我们加快脚步，要走到拐角处却仍好像遥遥无期。好不容易到了转弯处，讨厌的是，索菲已经走得更远了。

我们走过更多污黑的砖墙，有些还有大块的霉斑。脚下的路面并不平坦，能看见前面的水坑在路灯下闪闪烁烁。

“别担心，”我对鲍里斯说，“我们已经快到了。”

鲍里斯继续自言自语，上气不接下气地重复着：“九号……九号……”

鲍里斯头一次提到“九号”时，我遥远的记忆之钟就敲响了。现在听到他小声嘀咕，我想起“九号”其实并不是真人球员，而是他桌面足球游戏的一个微型模型球员。这些球员由雪花膏石做成，重心位

于底部，轻弹指尖就可以控制他们带球、过球或者射门，而足球是个很小的塑料球。这游戏原本设计由两人各控制一个球队，但鲍里斯都是自己一个人玩。他能花上好几个小时沉浸在自己精心设计的比赛阵线当中，比赛里充满了激动人心的反击溃败和束手无策的卷土重来。他拥有整整六支球队，有迷你的球门和真正的球网，还有块绿色毛毡布，铺开就是球场。生产商觉得假装那些是真实球队，比如阿贾克斯·阿姆斯特丹队或是AC米兰队会更好玩，对此，鲍里斯嗤之以鼻，所以他自己命名了这些球队。而每个球队队员——尽管私下里他非常清楚他们的优缺点——他从不起名，更愿意按照球衣的编号称呼他们。可能因为他还不清楚球衣号在球队的意义——或者可能是他想象力中又一任性的怪癖——球员号跟其在鲍里斯设计的球队阵形的场上位置毫无关系。因此，一队的十号可能是著名的中后卫，二号可能是前途无限的年轻边锋。

“九号”隶属鲍里斯最喜爱的球队，而且是目前为止最有天赋的球员。然而，尽管球技非凡，九号却是个极度情绪化的人物。他在球队的位置是中场，但他常常会长时间在赛场某处自怨自艾，显然忘记了自己球队正面临惨败的事实。有时候，九号这种没精打采的样子能持续一个多小时，球队因此落后四个、五个、六个球，解说员——确实有个解说员——就会困惑地说：“九号还没进入状态，我真不知道他怎么了。”而后，可能只剩下二十分钟的时候，九号终于发挥出了自己的真实水平，以高超的球技为自己队扳回一球。“这才像话嘛！”解说员惊呼，“他终于出手了！”此后，九号就一路高歌，不一会儿，进了一球又一球，对方只能倾尽全力不惜一切防守，谨防九号接到球。然而，不管他和球门之间有多少对手，他都有办法进球，赢是迟早的事。对结局如此笃定，他一拿到球，解说员就会大喊：“进球！”一副顺应天命和无限崇拜的腔调，这并不是发生在球真真切切落入球网的那一刻，而是在九号掌握主动权的那一刻——尽管他还远远地驰骋在自己球队的那个半场。观众——确实有观众——也开始雀跃欢呼，他们一看到九号拿球，欢呼声就一波盖过一波，直到九号优雅地绕过对手，避开守门员射门进球，转身接受感激涕零的队员的奉承。

想起这些，一道模糊的记忆在脑中闪现，好像这个九号最近出了点问题，我打断鲍里斯的喃喃自语，问他：

“最近九号怎么样？状态还好吗？”

鲍里斯默不作声地走了几步，说：“我们忘记拿盒子了。”

“盒子？”

“九号底座坏了，分家了，还有几个也是。原本很容易就能修好。我把九号放在一个特别的盒子里，等母亲弄到合适的胶水，就把他修好。我把他放在盒子里，一个特别的盒子，这样我就不会忘记他在哪儿了。但我们还是把他给忘了。”

“我明白了。你是说，你们把他忘在你们原来住的地方了。”

“母亲打包的时候忘了带上他。但她说她很快就会回去拿。去旧公寓那里，他在那里。我能修好他，我们已经搞到合适的胶水了，我存了一点儿。”

“明白了。”

“母亲说没关系，她会处理好一切。保证新搬来的人不会无意中把他给扔了。她说我们会尽快回去拿。”

我清楚地感觉到鲍里斯在暗示什么。等他说完了，我说：

“鲍里斯，如果你愿意，我可以带你回去拿。是的，我们可以一起去拿回来，我们两个。回到旧公寓，拿回九号。我们很快就可以，我要是能抽出时间，要不就明天吧。还有呢，你说的，你已搞到了胶水。他很快就会恢复以往的雄风。别担心。我们很快就去拿。”

索菲的身影再次从我们视线中消失了，这次有些突然，我以为她定是走进大门了。鲍里斯拖着我的手，我们急急忙忙向她消失的地方赶去。

我们很快发现索菲实际上是拐进了一条小巷，入口处不比墙上的裂缝大多少。小巷陡然下坡，而且非常窄，双臂想不蹭到两边粗糙的墙壁都不可能。黑暗中只有两盏路灯，一盏在半中间，一盏在远远的尽头。

鲍里斯紧紧抓着我的手，我们开始下坡，他的呼吸很快又急促起来。一会儿，我发现索菲已经走到了小巷尽头。她好像终于明白我们的窘境，站在较矮的路灯下面，回头仰望着我们，脸上隐隐挂着关切的神情。我们最后赶上了她，我生气地说：

“瞧瞧，你看不见我们跟你跟得很吃力吗？都累了一天了，我和鲍里斯都是。”

索菲幽幽地一笑。然后，她圈上鲍里斯的肩膀，把小男孩拉近自己。“别担心，”她轻柔地对他说，“我知道这地方让人有点不舒

服，又冷，还下雨。但没关系，我们很快就到公寓了。会暖和起来的，都会好的，到时候，只要你想，只穿T恤都行。还有几张又新又大的扶手椅，你可以蜷在里面，就是那种，你这么大的孩子坐上去都会陷在里面的。而且，你可以看书，或看录像。你要是喜欢，我们还可以拿出柜子里的棋盘游戏玩；我可以为你把它们通通都拿出来，你和瑞德先生想玩哪个就可以玩哪个。你们可以把红靠垫放在地毯上，把游戏棋盘铺在地上。而我呢，就去准备晚餐，在角落的餐桌上摆好餐具。其实我在想，与其准备大餐，不如来点小食。小肉丸，小芝士馅饼，几块小蛋糕。别担心，我记得你爱吃的，我会都摆在桌上。然后我们可以坐下享用。之后，我们三个一起玩棋盘游戏。当然，你要是不想玩了，我们就不玩。也许你想跟瑞德先生聊聊足球。然后，等你真的疲累了，就可以上床睡觉了。我知道你的新房间很小，但你自己也说了，房间非常舒适。今晚保证你会一夜好觉，到时你就会把这段又冷又难受的路程忘个精光。说实在的，一踏进屋门，感受到美好温暖的气息，你就会把这一切全忘了。所以别泄气，就剩一点路了。”

她边抱着鲍里斯边说着。但这会儿，她又忽然放开他，转过身，继续赶路。这忽变令我感到无比诧异——我自己也被她刚才的话语一点点地蛊惑了，还一度闭上了双眼。鲍里斯看起来也一脸困惑，等我再牵起他的手时，他母亲已经再次先我们几步走了。

我有意不想让她再走得太远，但就在那时，我注意到身后走近的脚步声，不由地停留了片刻，回头凝望小巷。与此同时，那人走进了较矮的街灯所投下的光线中，我看清了此人，是个我认识的人。他叫杰弗里·桑德斯，是我在英格兰上学时的同学。离开学校后我就没再见过他，现在看到他这么苍老，我不禁为之一惊。就算考虑到灯光和冷雨的效果，他看起来还是极度穷困潦倒。他穿着件雨衣，不过好像系不上扣了，他边走边紧抓着前胸。我不确定想不想认他，随后，鲍里斯和我再次迈开步子时，杰弗里·桑德斯已经和我们并肩齐行了。

“你好，老朋友，”他说，“想着就是你。今晚天气太糟糕了。”

“是的，可糟透了，”我说，“之前还晴朗怡人呢。”

走出小巷，我们拐进了一条又黑又荒凉的小路。强风阵阵，城市好像离我们已经很远了。

“你的孩子？”杰弗里·桑德斯问，朝鲍里斯点点头。我还没回答，他就继续说：“乖孩子。你真行。看起来挺聪明的。我自己没结

婚。总以为会结的，但时光飞逝啊，现在看来应该是不可能了。老实说，这根本不算什么，但我不想说这些年的倒霉事来烦你。我也有些好事呢。不过，你真行。孩子不错。”

杰弗里·桑德斯身体前倾，向鲍里斯敬了个礼。鲍里斯呢，不知是太焦虑还是太专注，没有任何反应。

走着走着，开始下坡。我们在一片漆黑中走着，我想起杰弗里·桑德斯小时候在学校是个天之骄子，不管是学业上还是运动场上都是那么耀眼。人们总是以他为榜样，指责我们其余这些小孩不用功，大家一致认为他不久就会当选校队队长。但我记得，由于某些危机变故，他五年级的时候不得不突然辍学，队长也就没当成。

“我在报纸上看到你要来，”他对我说。“就一直期待听到你的消息。你知道的，期待你告诉我什么时候过来坐坐。我去蛋糕店买了糕点，等你来的时候好配着茶一起招待你。毕竟，因为一直单身，我家有点乱糟糟的，我仍希望有人偶尔能来看看我，而且我觉得自己也能招待好客人。所以听说你要来，我立刻冲出去买了些茶点。那是前天的事了。昨天，我觉得那东西还算拿得出手，但糖皮已经有点硬了。而今天呢，你也没来电话，我就全给扔了。因为自尊吧，我想。我是说，你那么成功，我不想让你离开时觉得我现在过得这么凄惨，住在一间出租房里，只能拿出点变味儿的糕点招待客人。于是，我又去了蛋糕店，买了新鲜糕点。我还整理了下房间。但你没来电话。呃，我想，这也不能怪你。”他又前倾身体，看着鲍里斯。“你还好吧？你听起来像快要背过气儿去了。”

鲍里斯好像什么也没听见，他这会儿确实又喘不上气来了。

“还是慢慢走，迁就迁就这个小慢人吧。”杰弗里·桑德斯说，“我只是一度情事不太顺罢了。只因为我一个人住在出租小屋里，这儿很多人就觉得我是同性恋。我起初很介意，但后来不了。好吧，他们误当我是同性恋，那又怎样？有时候，我找女人发泄欲望。你知道的，付钱的那种。对我来说足够了，我得说有几个人还挺不错的。尽管如此，过不了多久，你就会开始鄙视她们，她们也开始鄙视你。没办法啊。这儿的大部分妓女我都认识。我不是说我和她们都睡过。绝对不是！但她们知道我，我也知道她们。大部分都是点头之交。你可能认为我过得很惨。其实不是的，这只是一个你怎样看待事情的问题。朋友偶尔来看看我，招呼他们一杯茶，这个我很在行。我这方面做得相当不错，之后他们总说来拜访我多么愉快。”

下了一阵陡坡，我们现在走在平路上，走到了一处废弃的农家宅院。月光下，我们在四周的黑暗中隐约能看到仓房和外屋的影子。索菲继续在前面带路，她现在离我们有一段距离了，我每每刚能瞥见她的身影，她就消失在了某栋破败建筑物的边缘后面。

还好杰弗里·桑德斯好像路很熟，不假思索地在黑暗中引路。我紧紧地跟着他，儿时学校的记忆浮现在脑海中：英格兰干冷的冬日清晨，天空多云，地面凝霜。那时候我只有十四五岁，和杰弗里·桑德斯站在伍斯特郡乡下某地的酒吧外面，一起搭档为越野跑标记，我们的任务就是给那些冲出晨雾的参赛者指路，告诉他们穿越附近乡野的正确方向。我那天早上特别烦，和他一起在那儿站了大概十五分钟，静静地凝望着大雾，不管我如何努力控制，突然开始大哭起来。我那时还不很了解杰弗里·桑德斯，然而，像其他人一样，我非常想给他留个好印象。我羞愧难当，等我终于控制好了情绪，第一感觉就是他肯定极度轻鄙我的存在。但没过多久，杰弗里·桑德斯开始说话，起初没看着我，最后转向我。我现在想不起那个雾蒙蒙的早晨他都说了什么，但我清楚记得他的话对我的影响。一则，我虽正自顾自怜，但仍能感受到他对我格外的宽容，因而对他很是感激。也就是那个时候，我才第一次认识到，这个学校的天之骄子还有其另一面——极度脆弱的一面，也正是这一面决定了他没法儿完成大家的期望，这个认识还让我打了个冷战。我们继续在黑暗里走着，我再次尝试回忆他那天早晨说了些什么，但还是没想起来。

地面变得平坦起来，鲍里斯好像恢复了些气力，又开始喃喃自语。这会儿，可能感觉到快到目的地了，他精神大振，竟然有力气踢起路上的石子，边踢边大声喊：“九号！”石子蹦跳着，落进黑暗中某处水坑里。

“这样才对嘛，”杰弗里·桑德斯对鲍里斯说，“是你的位置吗？九号？”

鲍里斯还没回答，我很快接上：“哦，不，是他最喜欢的球员。”

“哦，是吗？我看过不少球赛。在电视里。”他前倾身体对着鲍里斯说，“九号是谁？”

“哦，就是他最喜欢的球员。”我又说。

“就目前的中锋来讲，”杰弗里·桑德斯继续道，“我比较喜欢那个荷兰人，效力米兰队的。他踢得不错。”

我打算继续解释九号，但那会儿，我们停了下来。我发现我们站在一片广阔草地的边缘。我没法确定这片草地到底有多广阔，但我猜它远远延伸过月光能照亮的地方。我们站在那儿，一阵疾风扫过草地，没入黑暗。

“我们好像迷路了。”我对杰弗里·桑德斯说，“你认识这儿的
路吗？”

“哦，是的，我住的离这儿不远。不巧的是，我现在不能邀请你去，我很累，想睡觉了。但明天我会准备好，欢迎你来。九点以后都行。”

我看向草地，只瞧见一望无际的黑暗。

“坦白讲，我们现在有点麻烦，”我说，“你看，我们之前一路跟着那个女人到她公寓去，但现在迷路了，我不知道她的地址。她说过住在中世纪小教堂附近。”

“中世纪小教堂？在市中心啊。”

“哈。我们穿过这儿能到吗？”我指着这片草地。

“哦，不行，那边什么都没有，什么都没。住在那边的人只有那个叫布罗茨基的家伙。”

“布罗茨基，”我说，“嗯，我今天在酒店听到他排练。这儿的人好像都知道这个布罗茨基。”

杰弗里·桑德斯瞥了我一眼，不禁令我怀疑我是不是说了什么愚蠢的话。

“他已经在这儿住了很多很多年了，我们认识他不是很正常吗？”

“是的，是的，当然。”

“很难相信那个疯老头竟然会指挥交响乐队。我准备等着瞧。再坏也坏不到哪儿去了吧。假如你非要说布罗茨基了不起，那么，我算哪根葱跟人家辩驳呢？”

这话我不知道该怎么接下去。这时，杰弗里·桑德斯突然从草地方向转过身来，说：

“不，不，市中心在那个方向。如果你们愿意的话，我可以给你们指指路。”

“太感谢你了。”我说。一阵寒风吹来。

“那么现在，”杰弗里·桑德斯沉思了一会儿，说道，“老实讲，你们最好搭巴士过去。从这儿走到那儿起码要半个小时左右。可能那个女人叫你相信她就住在附近，她们常这么干。这是她们的一个小伎俩，永远不要相信她们。不过，搭巴士的话就没问题了。我带你过去看看，哪里可以乘车。”

“太感谢你了。”我重复道，“鲍里斯很冷，希望公交站不远。”

“哦，很近。跟我来吧，老伙计。”

杰弗里·桑德斯转身，领着我们又朝着废弃农庄的方向走回去。可是，我感觉我们并没有沿着来时的路返回；果然，没过多久，我们走上一条狭窄的街道，周围看起来像是不太富足的郊区。一座座小排屋矗立在街道两旁。时不时可以看到窗户里亮光点点，但大多数住户好像都已经关灯睡觉了。

“没事的，”我悄悄对鲍里斯说，感到他几近精疲力竭。“我们很快就会回到公寓了。等我们到了，你母亲就什么都准备好了。”

我们走了一会儿，过了更多排房子。然后鲍里斯又开始低语：

“九号……是九号……”

“那个，你说的这个九号是哪个？”杰弗里·桑德斯转身对他说，“你是说那个荷兰人，对吗？”

“九号是目前史上最优秀的球员。”鲍里斯说。

“是的，但你说的是哪个九号？”杰弗里·桑德斯的声音开始显得有些不耐烦了。“他叫什么？哪个队的？”

“鲍里斯就是喜欢叫他……”

“有一次他在最后十分钟进了十七个球！”鲍里斯说。

“嗨，胡说。”杰弗里·桑德斯似乎真的发火了。“我还以为你是认真的呢，你在胡说八道。”

“他就是进了！”鲍里斯大喊。“是世界纪录！”

“就是嘛！”我也加入进来。“世界纪录！”然后，我恢复了点冷静，大笑一声。“也就是说，定会是世界纪录，是吧。”我恳切地

微笑着看着杰弗里·桑德斯，但他连看都没看我。

“但你们在说谁？是那个荷兰人吗？无论如何，年轻人，你得明白，进球得分不是一切。后卫也很重要。真正好的球员常常是后卫。”

“九号是目前史上最优秀的球员！”鲍里斯重复道，“他状态好的时候，没人能拦住他！”

“没错，”我说，“九号无疑是世上最棒的。中场，前锋，什么都行。他什么都行。真的。”

“你在胡说，老伙计。你们两个都不知道自己在说什么。”

“我们清楚得很。”这会儿，我对杰弗里·桑德斯已经有些气恼了。“实际上，我们在说的是世界公认的事情。九号状态好的时候，真好的时候，他一拿到球，评论员就会大喊‘进球’，不管他在球场的哪个位置……”

“哦，老天。”杰弗里·桑德斯厌恶地背过脸去。“这就是你给你的孩子灌输的垃圾，老天可怜可怜他吧。”

“听着……”我凑近他耳朵，愤怒地小声说道。“听着，难道你不明白……”

“垃圾，老伙计。你这是在给小孩子灌输垃圾……”

“他还小，还是个小孩子。你难道不明白……”

“小也不是你给他灌输这些垃圾的借口。而且他看起来可不像你说的那么小。依我看，他这个年纪的小男孩，是时候干点正经事了。开始要出点力了。比如说，他应该学习贴墙纸，或者贴瓷砖，而不是胡思乱想这些荒谬的足球运动员……”

“听着，你个笨蛋！小点声！小点声！”

“他这个年纪，正是出力的时候……”

“他是我的孩子，由我决定他什么时候……”

“贴墙纸，贴瓷砖，这样的活计。我认为，这样的事情才……”

“得了，你知道什么？你个可怜、孤独的单身汉，你懂什么呀？你知道什么？”

我粗暴地推搡他的肩膀。杰弗里·桑德斯突然间垂头丧气起来，拖着步子走在了我们前面，微微垂首，手仍然紧紧抓着身前的雨衣。

“没事的，”我轻轻对鲍里斯说。“我们马上就到了。”

鲍里斯没回答，我看到他盯着前面杰弗里·桑德斯恍惚的身影发呆。

我们继续走着，我对这个老同学的愤怒渐渐退去。况且，我没忘记还要指望他带我们到公交站呢。过了一会儿，我靠近他，想看他是否愿意跟我说话。令我吃惊的是，我听到杰弗里·桑德斯在轻轻地自言自语：

“没错，没错，等你来喝茶的时候我们再谈。谈谈所有事情，花上一两个小时怀念我们在学校的日子，还有那些老同学。我会打扫好房间，我们可以坐在扶手椅上，坐在壁炉两边。没错，的确很像英国人常租的那种房间。至少早几年前是这样。这就是我租下这里的原因，可以让我想起家乡。总之，我们可以坐在壁炉两边，好好聊聊。老师们，同学们，交流一下我们仍在联络的朋友的近况。啊，我们到了。”

我们走进了一个貌似小村广场的地方。有几间小小的商店——可能是这区居民购买杂货的地方——已入夜，全部关门上锁了。广场中心是一片绿地，不比交通转盘大多少。杰弗里·桑德斯指着商店前面一盏孤寂的路灯。

“你跟孩子在那里等就行了。我知道没有标记，但是别担心，这里是公认的公交站。现在，不好意思我得走了。”

我和鲍里斯瞪着对面他指的地方。雨已经停了，但是薄雾还在灯柱底座缭绕。我们周遭悄无声息。

“你确定公交车会来？”我问。

“哦，是的。晚上这个时候自然要多等一会儿，但最后肯定会来的。你们耐心点就行了。你们站那儿可能会有点冷，但相信我，值得的。黑夜中它的到来会点亮一切。等你一上车，就知道会很暖和舒适。车上总有一群最开心快活的乘客。他们打诨插科，分发热饮和点心。他们会非常欢迎你跟孩子。告诉司机你们在中世纪小教堂站下车。乘公交的话，路程很短。”

杰弗里·桑德斯向我们道了声晚安，转身离去。我和鲍里斯看着他消失在两幢房子中间的小巷中，然后朝着公交站的方向走去。

第五章

我们站在路灯下等了几分钟，周围寂静一片。后来我搂着鲍里斯说：“你一定很冷了吧。”

他紧紧地靠着我，什么也没说，我低头看他，发现他若有所思地盯着漆黑的街道。很远的地方，有只狗在叫，然后没声了。我们就一直那样站着，等了一会儿，我说：

“鲍里斯，很抱歉。我本该安排得好一些。很抱歉。”

小男孩沉默了一阵。然后说：“没事，公交车很快就来了。”

我能看到雨后薄雾仍萦绕在小广场对面那一小排商店门前。

“我不知道车会不会来，鲍里斯。”我终于说了出来。

“没事，你得耐心点。”

我们继续等了一会儿。我接着又说道：

“鲍里斯，我一点儿也不确定车会来。”

小男孩扭头看着我，疲惫地叹了口气。“别担心，”他说，“你没听到那个人说的吗？我们等着就行了。”

“鲍里斯。有时候事情不总是按照你想的那样。即便有人告诉你会那样。”

鲍里斯又叹了口气。“听着，那人说了，是不是？无论如何，母亲会等我们的。”

我正努力想着接下来该说什么，突然间的咳嗽声吓了我们一跳。我转过身，看到路灯光影外，有个人从一辆停着的车里探出身来。

“晚上好，瑞德先生。很抱歉，我路过正好看见您。一切还好吧？”

我上前几步走到车前，认出是斯蒂芬，酒店经理的儿子。

“哦，是的，”我说，“一切都好，谢谢。我们……呃，我们在等公交车。”

“我或许能载你们一程。我正要去个地方。父亲信任我，交代我一件相当棘手的任务。我说啊，外面很冷。要不你们上车来吧？”

年轻人下车，打开前后车门。我道过谢，安置鲍里斯坐上后座，自己坐在副驾驶座。然后，车开动了。

“这个是您的孩子吧，”斯蒂芬说着，车子疾驰在荒凉的街道上。“非常高兴见到他，不过他现在看起来有点累啊。哦，让他休息一下吧。下次再跟他握手。”

我向后瞥了一眼，看见鲍里斯头靠在扶手的垫子上，正打瞌睡。

“瑞德先生，”斯蒂芬继续说道，“我猜你们是想回酒店吧。”

“实际上，我和鲍里斯正要去某人的公寓。在市中心，中世纪小教堂附近。”

“中世纪小教堂？嗯。”

“有问题吗？”

“哦，没有。没问题。”斯蒂芬转了个急弯，驶进另一条狭小黑暗的街道。“只是，那个，我之前说过，我正要去个地方，赴约，让我想想……”

“约会很紧急吗？”

“是的，瑞德先生，相当紧急。是关于布罗茨基先生的，您知道吧。实际上，是很重要的一个会面。嗯，我在想，您和鲍里斯能否宽容一下，等我几分钟，等我处理好之后，就送你们到任何你们想去的地方。”

“你当然应该先处理好自己的事情。但是希望你不要太迟，我会非常感激的。你也看到了，鲍里斯还没吃晚饭呢。”

“我尽量快点，瑞德先生。我真希望能立刻送你们过去，但您看，我不敢迟到。我说过的，这个任务相当棘手……”

“当然，你应该先处理这个。我们非常乐意等你。”

“我尽量快点吧。但坦白说，我感觉自己也走不了多少捷径。其实，这种事本由父亲亲自处理的，或者其他什么先生来处理，只是柯林斯小姐总是对我温柔以待……”年轻人话音一顿，突然尴尬起来。接着他说道：“我会尽量快点。”

我们现在行驶在一个环境更宜人的街区，我猜这里离市中心该更近些。路灯光线亮了许多，我看到有轨电车轨道与我们并列伸延。偶尔看到有咖啡馆，餐馆都已关门打烊，但这区最多的还是富丽堂皇的公寓建筑。一扇扇窗户笼罩在沉沉的漆黑中，方圆数英里，似乎只有我们这辆车在打破这一片静谧。斯蒂芬·霍夫曼默默地开了一会儿。然后仿佛内心挣扎了很久似的突然说道：

“您瞧，这样说可能很无礼，但您确定您不想回宾馆吗？我是说，有很多记者在那儿等着您什么的。”

“记者？”我望着窗外的黑夜。“啊，是的。记者。”

“天哪，希望您别觉得我很放肆。只是我离开的时候恰巧看到他们。都坐在大厅，膝盖上放着文件夹、公文包，想到能见到您，看起来都很激动。不过我刚才也说了，这都不关我的事，您肯定都处理好了。”

“是啊，是啊。”我小声地说，继续看着窗外。

斯蒂芬沉默了。不用说，他决定不再继续这个让人倍感压力的话题，而我自己却在想记者的事。过了一会儿，我觉得自己好像想起了有这么个预约。无疑，年轻人提到的这一图景——人们坐着，膝上放着文件夹和公文包——提醒了我。然而，我最终还是无法明确忆起行程表上有这么一项，便决定忽略此事。

“啊，我们到了。”坐在旁边的斯蒂芬说，“不好意思我离开一会儿。请您自便，舒服就好。我会尽快回来。”

我们停在一幢伟岸的白色公寓楼前，楼有几层高，每层上的黑色锻铁管露台给其平添了几分西班牙风味。

斯蒂芬下了车，我看着他走向大门入口。他站在一排公寓门铃按钮前，按下下一个，等着，从他的站姿看得出，他很紧张。过了一会儿，入口大厅亮起一道光线。

一个上了年纪、满头银发的老太太打开门，她看起来又瘦又弱，但举止间却有种优雅，她微笑着引斯蒂芬进门。他进门后，门关上了。我坐在座位上向后靠，发现仍能清楚地看见他们俩的身影映照在前门窄小的窗格玻璃上。斯蒂芬双脚蹭着门垫，说：

“很抱歉这次仓促来访。”

“我告诉过你多少次了，斯蒂芬，”老太太说道，“你什么时候需要聊聊，我都会在这儿的。”

“嗯，实际上，柯林斯小姐，并不是……呃，这次跟平时不一样。我想和您谈谈别的事情，一件很重要的事情。父亲本应自己前来，但是，呃，他太忙……”

“啊，”老太太微笑着打断，“是你父亲吩咐的事，苦差他还是留给你啊。”

她的言语间有些调侃，但斯蒂芬好像并没有留意。

“不是的，”他认真地反驳道，“相反，这项任务特别棘手难办。父亲信任我，我也乐意接受……”

“那么我现在成了任务！还是一个棘手难办的任务！”

“呃，不是的。我是说……”斯蒂芬困惑地住了口。

可能觉得已经调侃够了斯蒂芬，老太太说道：“好吧，”她说，“我们最好进去，喝杯雪利酒，好好谈谈这件事。”

“您太好了，柯林斯小姐。但其实，我不能呆太久。有人在车里等我。”他指了指我们的方向，但老太太已经打开了自己公寓的大门。

我看到她领着斯蒂芬穿过一间小小的整洁的前厅，走过第二道房门，沿着一条幽暗的过道走下去，过道两侧挂满了裱好的水彩画。过道尽头是柯林斯小姐的起居室——后面是一个巨大的L形附室。这儿的光线柔和舒适，第一眼看，似奢华精致，而且很复古。但仔细审视一番，我却发现很多家具都已经极度破旧，第一眼认为是古董的东西其实比垃圾没好多少。曾经奢华的沙发和椅子已年久失修，散落在房间各处，长及地面的天鹅绒窗帘斑斑点点，破破烂烂。斯蒂芬随意地坐下，说明他很熟悉周围的摆设，但看起来仍然很紧张，而柯林斯小姐正在茶水间忙活。过了一会，她递给他一杯饮料，就近坐在他旁边，这时候，年轻人突然大声说：“是关于布罗茨基先生的。”

“噢，”柯林斯小姐说，“和我猜的差不多。”

“柯林斯小姐，其实，我们想问问您能否考虑帮帮我们。或者说，帮帮他……”斯蒂芬突然大笑一声，看向一旁。

柯林斯小姐若有所思地斜了斜头。然后她问：“你们让我帮里奥？”

“哦，我们不是要您做您觉得恶心的事……呃，或者说痛苦的事。父亲完全理解您的感受。”他又大笑了一小会儿。“只是您的帮助在这个阶段至关重要，对布罗茨基先生的……恢复。”

“啊。”柯林斯小姐点头，好像在思考这件事，然后说：“我不能这样理解，斯蒂芬，你父亲在里奥身上只取得了有限的成功？”

她语气里的调侃在我看来比之先前更甚，但斯蒂芬还是没能留意到。

“不是的！”他生气道，“相反，父亲简直是化腐朽为神奇，取得了巨大的进步！这并不容易，但父亲的坚持让人惊叹非凡，甚至对我们这些习惯父亲处事方法的人来说也是。”

“或许他还是坚持得不够。”

“您不知道啊，柯林斯小姐！您不知道！有时他结束酒店紧张繁忙的一天，疲惫地回到家，累得直接就上楼睡觉了。母亲下楼来抱怨，我自己也上楼去他们房间看过，看到父亲平躺在那儿，横瘫在床上，鼾声如雷。您知道，多年来，他们之间有个很重要的约定，就是他一直侧身睡觉，从不平躺，否则，他会鼾声如雷。所以您能想象母亲发现他这个样子有多厌恶。通常，在我看来，叫醒他是上帝的职责，但这时，我却不得不叫他，否则的话，我之前也说过，否则的话，母亲拒绝回房睡觉。她会一直在走廊里走来走去，怒气冲冲，直到我叫醒他，帮他宽衣，帮他换上睡衣，领他去洗漱间，她才会进房。但我想说的是，唉，即使那么疲惫，但有时电话一响，某个员工对他说布罗茨基先生快崩溃了，一个劲地非要喝一杯，然后，您知道吗，父亲就会不知又从哪儿来了气力，重新振作，眼神犀利，整装出发，没入夜色，一去就是好几个小时。他说他会帮布罗茨基先生重拾健康，他会付出一切，毫无保留地帮他，以完成他许诺要达到的目标。”

“他的行为非常令人钦佩，但到底他进行得怎么样了？”

“我向您保证，柯林斯小姐，他的进展令人震惊。最近见到布罗茨基先生的所有人都这么说。那些眼睛的背后是许多不为人知的付出。还有他的话，一天比一天有意义。但最重要的是，他的才华，布罗茨基先生伟大的才华，毫无疑问正在渐渐恢复。大家都说，排练非常乐观。整个交响乐团都完全被他折服了。他不在演奏大厅排练的时候，就忙着自己练习。现在在酒店里，经常能碰巧听到一两段他演奏

的钢琴。父亲一听到他弹琴，就振奋非常，你就能明白他已经准备好牺牲一切睡眠。”

年轻人停下来，看着柯林斯小姐。好一阵儿，她的思绪好似飘向远方，头靠着—边，好像也能捕捉到远方钢琴弹奏的丝丝音符。然后，脸上漾了一抹轻柔的微笑，又看向斯蒂芬。

“可我听到的是，”她说，“你父亲让他端坐在酒店休息室里，像模型一样端坐在钢琴前，而里奥呆在那儿几个小时，只是在凳子上轻摇，碰都不碰一下琴键。”

“柯林斯小姐，这样说太不公平了！可能早些天有时候会这样，但现在已经完全不同了。不管怎样，即便他有时确实只是安静地坐在那儿，您一定知道，那并不意味着什么进展都没有。沉默很可能意味着最深远思想的形成，最深处能量的召唤。实际上，不久前，一阵特别长的沉默之后，父亲确实进了休息室，而布罗茨基先生正低头盯着琴键。过了一会，他抬头看着父亲说：‘小提琴声应该强烈点。声音应该强烈点。’这是他说。他可能沉默，但在他脑袋里，一直有一个音乐的世界。想想他‘周四之夜’将展示给我们的是多么令人激动啊。只要他现在不崩溃。”

“但斯蒂芬，你刚才说想让我帮帮他。”

这个年轻人，刚刚还愈发喜形于色，这会儿回过神来了。

“呃，是的，”他说，“我今晚来就是跟您商量这个的。我说过，布罗茨基先生正神速般恢复他昔日的力量。而且，呃，随着他伟大才华的恢复，其他各种特征也在重现。对我们这些之前不太了解他的人来说，算是一种爆料。最近几日，他常常口齿清晰，彬彬有礼。总之，我的意思是，除了这些之外，他开始回忆起过去。呃，坦白讲，他提起了您。一直不停地想念您，谈到您。给您举个例子吧，昨晚——有点尴尬，但我要告诉您——昨晚他开始恸哭流涕，而且欲罢不能。他不停地哭，把对您的感情全部宣泄出来。他已经是第三还是第四次这样了，然而，昨晚是最厉害的一次。大概快午夜了，布罗茨基先生还没从休息室出来，父亲就趴在门上听了听，听到他在抽泣。然后父亲进去，发现室内一片漆黑，布罗茨基先生俯在钢琴上恸哭。呃，楼上有间空的套房，父亲就扶他上楼，还让厨房送来布罗茨基先生最爱的汤——他一般只喝汤——还拿了些橙汁和饮料给他，但老实说，昨晚真是情势危急，一触即发啊。很显然，几加仑果汁，他三下五除二就灌下去了。要不是父亲在的话，他很可能当场就崩溃了，就

算已经到了这最后的阶段。而且这期间他一直在念叨您。呃，我想说——哦，天哪，我不应该呆这么久，还有人在车上等我呢——我的意思是，考虑到整个城市的未来都系在他身上，我们必须竭尽所能保证他闯过这最后一关。考夫曼医生和父亲意见一致，认为我们现在接近最后一栏了。但您知道，结果如何，仍然成败难辨，悬而未定。”

柯林斯小姐继续看着斯蒂芬，仍恍惚地似笑非笑着，还是什么都没说。过了一会儿，年轻人说道：

“柯林斯小姐，我知道我说的事情可能揭开了您过去的伤疤。我也理解您和布罗茨基先生已经多年未讲话……”

“哦，这样说可不太准确。今年早些时候，我在人民公园散步的时候，他还冲我喊过脏话呢。”

斯蒂芬尴尬地笑了笑，不知道怎样捕捉柯林斯小姐话里的意思。然后，他继续恳切地说道：“柯林斯小姐，我们并没说要您和他有过多的联系。天哪，不。您想放下过去。父亲，每个人，他们都理解。我们请您做的，就一件小事，可能会对他会有所不同，可能会鼓励到他，对他来讲意义重大。希望您至少不要介意我们直言相告。”

“我已经同意参加宴会了。”

“是的，是的，当然。父亲告诉我了，我们非常感激……”

“当然前提是绝对不会有直接接触……”

“当然，我们完全理解。是的，宴会。但其实，柯林斯小姐，我们还有件事想请您帮忙，您能不能考虑考虑。您看，一群先生——冯·温特斯坦先生也在其中——明天要带布罗茨基先生去动物园。他显然已经多年未去过了。他的狗自然是不允许入内的，但布罗茨基先生最后还是同意找个可靠的人帮他照顾几个小时。大家都觉得这种出门散心活动能帮助他平静下来。尤其是长颈鹿，我们认为能让他放松。呃，我还是说重点吧。诸位先生想问您有没有可能愿意参加这次动物园之行。哪怕只对他讲一两句话就好。您不需要和大家一起出发，您可以在那儿跟他们会合，几分钟就够，跟他愉快地寒暄几句，或许说几句鼓励的话，一切就会完全不同。求您了，柯林斯小姐，请您考虑一下。事关重大啊。”

斯蒂芬在说着，柯林斯小姐起身，慢慢移步至壁炉边。她静静地站立了几秒钟，一只手搭在壁炉台上，好似在让自己站稳。然而终究，她还是回身对着斯蒂芬，我看到她双眼已经湿润。

“你知道我的难处，斯蒂芬，”她说，“我以前是嫁过他一次，但那都是很久以前的事了，这么多次见到他，他都是不停地冲我辱骂大叫。所以你看，很难猜到他到底想聊什么。”

“柯林斯小姐，我向您发誓他现在已经完全不同了。这些天他都彬彬有礼，温文尔雅……您肯定还记得。请您至少考虑一下。这事关系重大。”

柯林斯小姐抿了口雪利酒，若有所思。她正想回答，就在这时，我听到鲍里斯在车后面挪到了我身后。我扭头看去，觉得小男孩肯定已经醒了好一会儿了。他正望着窗外静谧空荡的街道发呆，我能感觉到他的忧伤。我正要说话，他应该是意识到我在注意他，没动身就悄悄地问我：

“你会贴卫生间的瓷砖吗？”

“我会贴卫生间的瓷砖吗？”

鲍里斯重重地叹了口气，继续盯着窗外的黑夜。然后他说：“我以前一片也没贴过。所以老是做错。如果有人教我，我就会了。”

“是的，我肯定你会的。是你们新公寓的卫生间吗？”

“如果有人教我，我就会做得很好。那母亲就会对卫生间很满意。她就会很喜欢卫生间的。”

“啊，那她现在不满意喽？”

鲍里斯看着我，好像我说了什么非常愚蠢的话。然后他狠狠地对我嘲讽道：“她要是喜欢卫生间的话为什么哭呢？”

“真的，为什么呢？这么说她因为卫生间而哭，我也好奇她为什么这样。”

鲍里斯转身对着他那面窗，借着透过车窗混合的光线，我能看到他强忍着眼泪。最后，他打了个哈欠伪装，握拳揉了揉脸。

“我们会办好这些事的。”我说，“你看着吧。”

“如果有人教我，我就会做得很好，这样母亲就不会哭了。”

“是的，我肯定你会干得非常好。我们很快就会办好的。”

我在座位上直了直身，透过挡风玻璃向外望。街上几乎看不到亮着的窗户。过了一会儿，我说：“鲍里斯，我们现在得好好想想，你

在听吗？”

车后座一片沉默。

“鲍里斯，”我继续，“我们得做个决定。我知道我们原本是要跟你母亲汇合的。但现在已经很晚了。鲍里斯，你在听吗？”

我侧过肩膀看了他一眼，发现他仍然眼神空洞地望着窗外的黑夜。我们继续默默地坐着，过了好一阵，然后我说：

“事实是，现在很晚了。如果我们回酒店，就能见到你外公。他见到你会很开心的。你可以自己一间房，或者，你愿意的话，我们可以叫他们在我房间给你多加张床。我们可以叫他们送些好吃的，然后你就可以睡觉了。明早我们起床一起吃早点，然后决定接下来做什么。”

身后仍然是沉默。

“我应该安排得更好的，”我说，“我很抱歉。我……我只是今晚没有考虑清楚。之前太忙了。但，听着，我保证明天补偿你。我们明天可以做想做的所有事情。你喜欢的话，我们回旧公寓，取回九号。怎么样？”

鲍里斯还是什么都没说。

“我们这几天都很累。鲍里斯，你觉得呢？”

“我们还是去酒店吧。”

“我觉得这主意再好不过了。那就这么定了。等那位先生回来，我们就告诉他我们的新决定。”

第六章

正在这时，那边的动静吸引了我的注意。我朝公寓楼回望过去，看到前门开了，柯林斯小姐正引着斯蒂芬出来，尽管他们彼此友好地道别，但从双方的仪态上能看出，他们的会面并未有愉快的结果。过会儿，门关上了，斯蒂芬急忙回到车里。

“很抱歉耽误了这么久，”他说着，爬上座位。“鲍里斯还好吧。”他双手放在方向盘上，发出一声不安的叹息，然后挤出点微笑，说：“那么，我们走吧。”

“其实，”我说，“我和鲍里斯在你离开的时候好好谈了谈。我们觉得还是回酒店吧。”

“瑞德先生，请允许我这样说，这个决定颇好。那么是回酒店了。太好了。”他看了一眼手表。“我们很快就到。记者们就不会有理由抱怨了。一点理由都没。”

斯蒂芬发动引擎，我们再次出发。我们开过荒凉的街道时，雨又开始下了，斯蒂芬打开了雨刷。过了一会儿，他说：

“瑞德先生，我想问问您是否还记得我们之前谈过的事，希望您不要介意我的无礼。您知道的，就是今天下午在中庭跟您谈的事情。”

“啊，是的，”我说，“是的，我们讨论了您‘周四之夜’的独奏。”

“您真好，说可能会抽时间听听。听我弹奏拉罗什的曲子。当然，也许这完全不可能，但，呃，我想您不会介意我问问的。那个，今天晚上，等我们回到酒店，我会练习一会儿。我在想，等您和这些记者见完面，我知道很是叨扰，但请问您能否来听听我弹奏，哪怕就几分钟，告诉我您的意见……”他的声音越来越小，最后笑了一声。

我明白这事对这个年轻人意义重大，有意想随了他的请求。但是，经过一番思量后，我说：

“抱歉，今晚我太累了，迫切需要尽快上床睡觉。但别担心，以后一定有机会。听着，要不这样吧，我不确定我什么时候能抽出时

间，但只要我有几分钟可以忙里偷闲，我就打电话到前台，让他们去找你。你要是不在酒店，我就等有时间的时候再试试，如此往复。这样，用不了多久我们肯定能找到彼此都方便的时间。但今晚，真的，你要不介意的话，我真的必须好好地睡上一觉。”

“当然，瑞德先生，我非常理解。我们一定按照您的办法做。您真是太好了。那我就等着您的消息了。”

斯蒂芬说得很客气，但看起来却十分失望，甚至可能误会我的回答是婉言拒绝。显然他对即将到来的演出很是焦虑，一点点挫折，不管多小，可能都会引起他一身的惊慌冷颤。我觉得有些同情他，又安慰他说：

“别担心，我们定会很快找到机会的。”

我们行驶在夜间的街道上，雨继续下着，没有停的意思。年轻人好久都没说话，我怀疑他是不是生我气了。但在变幻的灯光下，我瞧见了他的侧面，意识到他脑子里正思索着几年前的一次特别事件。那个小插曲他已经反复思量过多次了——经常是醒着躺在床上或独自开车的时候——这会儿因为怕我拒绝帮他，他再次想起了这件事。

那天是他母亲的生日。那晚，他把车停在熟悉的车道——那会儿他还在德国上大学——他刚刚撑过痛苦的几个小时。父亲开门迎接他时，兴奋地低语：“她心情很好，非常好。”然后转身，朝屋里大喊：“斯蒂芬回来了，亲爱的。有点迟，但还是回来了。”然后又是低语：“心情很好。很久都没这么好了。”

年轻人走进客厅，发现他母亲斜靠在沙发上，手里拿着一只鸡尾酒杯，身着一一条新裙。斯蒂芬眼前一亮，再一次感觉到母亲是个多么优雅的女性。她没起身迎接他，所以他只能弯腰亲吻她的脸颊，然而，母亲热情地邀请他坐在对面，让他颇为吃惊。身后，他父亲看到此夜开局良好，不觉轻声低笑，然后指指身上的围裙，急忙赶回厨房。

只剩下母亲和他两人，斯蒂芬第一感觉纯粹是惧怕——怕他的言行兴许会破坏母亲的好心情，因而毁了几个小时以来，或者几天来，父亲煞费苦心的努力。于是，他就开始简短又生硬地回答她关于他大学生活的询问，但发现她的态度依然和蔼，就开始答得越来越长。还曾一度形容他的一位大学教授像“我们外交部长的正常心智版”——他对这个比方颇为得意，已经在同学面前使用了无数次，而且相当成功。如若不是早先与母亲的交谈极为顺利，他也不敢冒险在她面前再

重复一次。但他如此做了，而且看到此番逗乐后，母亲的脸上瞬间绽放出笑容，他的心怦怦直跳。尽管如此，父亲回来宣布开饭还是让他着实松了口气。

他们走进餐厅，酒店经理已经摆上了第一道菜。静静地开饭，然后，让斯蒂芬有点意外的是，他父亲开始讲述一群意大利客人在酒店的搞笑趣事。讲完之后，酒店经理敦促斯蒂芬也讲述一个自己经历的故事，斯蒂芬有些迟疑地开讲，他父亲继续夸张地大笑着配合他。如此循环往复，斯蒂芬和父亲轮流讲搞笑的故事，并全心全意地相互配合回应。这招似乎很管用，因为最后，他母亲也开始大笑了很长一段时间，这简直让斯蒂芬觉得难以置信。还有，这顿晚餐，这顿令人刮目、赞不绝口的美味佳肴，可是酒店经理费尽心思准备的，照顾到了每个细节，这倒也符合他的风格。酒显然也很特别，他们主菜吃到一半时——一道鹅肉与野草莓酱美妙绝伦的搭配——当晚的气氛已经真的非常愉快。然后，酒店经理，因为酒的缘故，加上笑声不断，面色微红，侧着身子说道：

“斯蒂芬，再跟我们说说你住过的那个青年旅馆。你知道的，在勃艮第树林的那个。”

一时间，斯蒂芬被吓到了。他父亲怎么能——目前为止一切都处理得毫无差错——做出这么明显错误的判断？他所说的那个故事要频频涉及旅馆厕所的安排，显然不适合在母亲面前提起啊。但他犹疑的时候，父亲冲他眨了眨眼，好像在说：“是的，是的，相信我，没问题的。她会喜欢这个故事的，肯定会成功的。”尽管极度怀疑，但因为信任父亲，斯蒂芬开始讲这件趣闻。然而，还没讲多少，他脑海中便闪过一个念头：到目前为止都奇迹般成功的夜晚，将会被打碎成一片一片。但是，在父亲狂笑的怂恿下，他继续讲了下去，令他吃惊的是，他听到了母亲的开怀大笑。抬眼看过桌子的另一边，他看到她不停地摇头大笑。然后，故事快到结尾的时候，在阵阵大笑当中，斯蒂芬无意中瞧见母亲爱慕地看了父亲一眼。只是短短的一眼，但不会错。酒店经理，尽管笑得双眼流泪，也将这一眼尽收眼底，转头又冲儿子眨了眨眼，这次，带了几分胜利的喜悦之情。那时候，年轻人觉得一股强大的力量自胸中油然而生。但还没等他确定那是什么感觉，他父亲就说：

“现在，斯蒂芬，上甜品之前我们必须休息一下。要不你趁母亲生日弹奏点什么吧？”酒店经理边说着，边挥手指着墙边立着的钢琴。

那个动作——竖起手指朝餐厅随意挥摆的动作——斯蒂芬这些年来不止一次地回忆起。每次想起，当时那种冷飕飕的恶心感觉就会再度袭来。起初，他难以置信地看着父亲，但后者只是继续满足地微笑着，伸出手指着钢琴。

“来吧，斯蒂芬。弹点你母亲喜欢的。要不弹点巴赫的曲子，或者当代的。比如卡赞，或者穆莱利的。”

年轻人强迫自己环顾一周，同时看看母亲，看见她的脸大笑着，随着一道道不常见的皱纹柔和下来，她微笑着看着他。然后，她又转向酒店经理，说：“是的，亲爱的，我觉得穆莱利不错，应该会很棒。”

“来吧，斯蒂芬，”酒店经理开心地说道，“毕竟今天是你母亲生日，别让她失望。”

一个念头闪过斯蒂芬的脑海——但下一刻就否决了——他觉得父母在合伙整他。当然，从他们看他的眼光中——充满骄傲的期望——好像他们完全不记得围绕着他钢琴弹奏的痛苦过去。不知怎地，他开始酝酿的抗议也没说出口。他起身，就好像站起来的是别人一样。

钢琴靠着墙摆放着，斯蒂芬坐下的时候，能透过眼角的余光看到父母的身影。他们双肘都放在桌上，彼此稍稍靠近。过了一会，他转身直直地望向他们，意识到他这样做是想最后一次看看他们这样——坐在一起，仿佛被一种单纯的幸福绑在一起。然后，他回身对着钢琴，肯定今夜就要这样被毁掉了，这感觉让他窒息。但奇怪的是，他意识到，自己不再因事情的最新变化而感到一点的惊奇，其实他一直以来都在等着这一刻，这想法让他顿觉轻松。

有那么几秒钟，斯蒂芬就这样坐在那儿，没有弹琴，拼命想摆脱酒精的影响，在脑中过一遍他要弹的曲子。在那令人眩晕的一瞬间，他看到了一种可能性——这毕竟是个不平凡之夜——他也许不知怎么可以超常发挥，演奏结束能看到父母微笑，鼓掌，彼此的目光交换着深深的爱意。但一开始演奏穆莱利《外摆线》第一小节时，他就意识到想象的情景根本不可能发生。

然而，他还是继续弹着。有相当长的一段时间——持续整个第一乐章——眼角的余光看到父母二人都静静不动。然后他看到母亲轻轻地靠在椅背上，一只手托着下巴。几小节之后，他父亲的眼光从斯蒂芬身上挪开，双手放在膝盖上，向前垂首，看起来像是在端详面前桌上的一个小点。

与此同时，他继续不停地弹奏着。年轻人好几次都想放弃了，但不知怎地，完全放弃好像是最令人惧怕的选择。所以他继续弹奏，最后曲子终了，斯蒂芬坐在那儿，盯着琴键好一会儿才鼓起勇气面对等待他的场景。

父母两人都没看他。父亲低着头，前额已经快贴着桌面了。母亲则看着房间另一侧，脸上冷若冰霜，这副表情斯蒂芬再熟悉不过了。但令他惊讶的是，那晚直至那一刻，她脸上才挂上了这副神情。

斯蒂芬只需一秒钟就能估想到这场景意味着什么。他起身，快速回到餐桌旁，仿佛这样做的话，他离开后的那几分钟就能被抹杀掉。有那么一会儿，他们三个就这样静静地坐着。最后他母亲起身，说：

“今晚非常愉快。谢谢你们两个。但我现在感觉非常累，我该上床休息了。”

起先，酒店经理好像没有听见。但当斯蒂芬母亲向门口走去时，他抬起头，轻声地说：“蛋糕，亲爱的。蛋糕。是……是非常特别的蛋糕。”

“你太好了，但真的，我已经吃很多了，现在得睡会了。”

“当然，当然。”酒店经理目光重新落在桌子上面，一副无可奈何的样子。但之后，当斯蒂芬母亲正要穿过房门的时候，酒店经理突然直起身子，大声说道：“亲爱的，至少过来看看吧，就看看。我说过的，这个蛋糕非常特别。”

他母亲犹豫了，然后说：“好吧，快点给我看看。然后我得睡觉了。可能是喝了酒的缘故，现在感觉特别累。”

闻此，酒店经理站起身，随即便引着妻子走出餐厅。

年轻人听到父母的脚步声走向厨房，然后，不到一分钟，沿着走廊返回，上了楼。之后，斯蒂芬仍然在桌边坐了很久。各种细小的杂声从楼上传来，但听不见他们讲话的声音。最后，他突然想到最好的办法就是连夜开车回寓所。毫无疑问，就算他在早餐时出现，对父亲完成帮母亲重拾好心情这项缓慢而艰巨的任务也于事无补。

他离开餐厅，意欲悄悄离开家。但一走到过道，正撞见父亲下楼。酒店经理手指放在嘴唇上，说：

“我们得小声说话。你母亲刚刚睡下。”

斯蒂芬告诉父亲，他想回海德堡。父亲听完就说：“太可惜了。我和你母亲以为你会呆得久一点。但你说你早上还有课。我会跟你母亲解释的。她肯定会理解。”

“还有，”斯蒂芬说，“希望母亲今晚过得非常愉快。”

父亲笑了笑，但在笑之前短短的一瞬间，斯蒂芬看到他脸上掠过一道深深的惨淡表情。

“哦，是的。我知道她很愉快。哦，是的。你学习那么忙，还能抽空回来，她挺开心的。我知道她希望你能多呆几天，但别担心。我会跟她解释的。”

那晚，行驶在荒寂的高速路上，斯蒂芬把当晚所有的事情、每个细节都前思后想了几遍——正如他之后这几年反反复复做的一样。每次回忆起那日那时的情景，所带来的伤痛，本已随着时间渐渐消逝，但如今“周四之夜”日日临近，昔日的惊惧再次浮上心头。此刻雨夜疾驶，仿佛重新带他回到了几年前那痛苦的夜晚。

我为这个年轻人感到难过，便打破沉静，说道：

“我知道这不关我的事，希望这样说不会太无礼，但我确实认为在你弹钢琴这件事上，你父母这样对待你很不公平。我的建议是，尽量享受弹钢琴的乐趣吧，只要你能从中得到满足和真谛，就不必管他们嘛。”

年轻人沉思片刻。然后说道：

“非常感谢您，瑞德先生，能站在我的角度考虑。但其实——呃，坦率地讲——我觉得您其实还是不明白。我理解，对一个外人来讲，我母亲那晚的行为可能有些，呃，有些不顾及他人的感受。但这样说对她就有失公正了，我真的非常不愿看着您带着这样的印象离开。您看，您得了解这背后的整件事才行啊。首先，您看，我四岁时，我的钢琴老师是提科夫斯基夫人。我料想您肯定不觉得这有什么，但是，瑞德先生，您得明白，提科夫斯基夫人在城里是个非常受人崇敬的人，可不是个普普通通的钢琴教师。她的劳务不是以常规的方式出售的——当然，像其他人一样，她也收取学费。也就是说，对自己做的事情，她非常严肃认真，只接收城里有艺术和知识修养的精英的孩子。比如，保罗·罗泽瑞尔，超现实主义画家，在这儿住过一段时间，提科夫斯基夫人教过他的两个女儿。迪盖尔曼教授的孩子，还有伯爵夫人的侄女们。她会非常谨慎地选择学生，所以能当她

的学生，我是很幸运的，特别是那时候父亲还没有今日的社会地位。但我猜父母那时对艺术的热衷不亚于今日。整个童年时光，我记得他们都在谈论艺术家和音乐家，还有得到大家的支持对这些人来讲多么重要。母亲现在大多时候都呆在家里，但那时候却很喜欢外出。比如说，有个音乐家，或者一个交响乐团来到城里，她都坚持给予支持。她不仅去看演出，而且总要在演出后到化妆间亲自送上她的嘉言。即便某位表演者表现很差，她仍然会去化妆间给他小小鼓励和一些善意的提示。事实上，她还经常邀请音乐家到我们家来，或者提议带他们去市区周边游览。一般来说，他们行程很满，无法接受她的邀请，但毫无疑问，这样的邀请对任何表演者来说都是令人振奋的，您自己肯定也深有体会。至于我父亲，他非常忙，但我记得他也经常努力做得尽善尽美。当然，为了向某位来访的名流表示敬意，只要有招待会，不管多忙，他都坚持陪母亲参加，这样他就能亲自对来访者表示欢迎。所以您看，瑞德先生，从我记事起，父母就是非常有修养的人，而且非常理解艺术在我们这个社会的重要性，我肯定这就是提科夫斯基夫人最后选上我做她学生的原因。我现在明白父母那时一定真的非常欣喜，尤其是我母亲，因为这事儿全是她安排的。我呢，就跟着罗泽瑞尔先生还有迪盖尔曼教授的孩子们一起上提科夫斯基夫人的课！他们一定很骄傲。开头几年，我练得还真不错，真的，非常好，所以提科夫斯基夫人曾称我是她教过的最有前途的学生之一。一切都非常顺利，直到……呃，直到我十岁的时候。”

年轻人突然沉默了，可能是后悔这么畅所欲言。但我清楚，他心中另外一面迫切想继续倾诉，所以我问道：

“十岁的时候发生了什么？”

“呃，瑞德先生，偏偏向您承认这点，我真是羞愧难当。但我十岁时，呃，我就停止不练了。我去提科夫斯基夫人那里，但根本就不练习曲子。她问我为什么不练，我就不说话。真是太尴尬了，就像在说另一个人一样，我真希望有奇迹发生能变成另一个人。但是真的，就是这样，当初我就是这样干的。这样几周之后，提科夫斯基夫人别无选择，只好告诉我父母，我要是没有改观，她就不再教我了。我后来发现母亲发了点脾气，冲提科夫斯基夫人大喊大叫。总之，结局非常糟糕。”

“之后你又跟了另一个老师？”

“是的，一个叫亨齐的老师，她其实一点也不差。但还是远远不及提科夫斯基夫人。我仍旧不练习，但亨齐小姐没那么严格。然后我

十二岁的时候，一切都改变了。很难解释到底发生了什么，听起来也许有点奇怪。一天下午，天气晴朗，我坐在家中的客厅里；我记得我正读着足球杂志，父亲踱步进了房间。我记得他穿了件灰色西装背心，衬衣袖子卷起，站在房间中心，盯着窗外的花园。我知道母亲在外面，坐在过去我们家那棵果树下的长椅上，我等着父亲出去，和她坐在一起。但他只是一味地站在那儿。他背对着我，我看不见他的脸，但我每次抬头，都能看到他正紧盯着窗外花园母亲坐着的地方。呃，当我第三或第四次抬头时，父亲还是没有出去，我突然意识到了什么。我是说，我突然意识到母亲和父亲已经好几个月没说过什么话了。很奇怪，我那会儿才意识到他们根本就没怎么说过话。很奇怪我先前怎么没有留意到，但直到那一刻，我是真没有。但我看得非常清楚。仓皇间，我想起了一大堆例子——先前，父母彼此会说些什么，但其实却什么也没说的时候。我不是说他们完全沉默。但，您知道，他们之间变得冷漠，我直到那一刻才注意到。跟您说吧，瑞德先生，突然意识到这一点，那种感觉非常奇怪。几乎同时，我想起了另外一件可怕的事情——这变化是从我失去提科夫斯基夫人那时开始的。我不敢肯定，毕竟已过去这么久了，但仔细一回想，我肯定就是那时开始的。我现在不记得父亲是否去了花园。我什么都没说，只是装作在读足球杂志，然后过了一会儿，我起身回房，躺在床上，仔细反复地想了想。从那之后，我又开始努力练琴。我真的开始非常勤奋地练习，我一定有了很大的进步，因为几个月之后，母亲去找提科夫斯基夫人，问她是否考虑重新接收我。现在我明白了，回去求人家对母亲来说，肯定是个不小的羞辱，尤其是她上次对人家那么大喊大叫，而且她一定在提科夫斯基夫人身上下了不少工夫。总之，结果是，提科夫斯基夫人同意重新接收我，这次我就一直刻苦练习，练习，再练习。但您看，我浪费了关键的两年。十岁到十二岁这两年有多么关键，您肯定再清楚不过了。相信我，瑞德先生，我试图弥补浪费的那两年，能做的我都做了，但真的是太晚了。甚至现在，我经常停下来问自己：‘我到底在想什么？’哦，只要能补回那两年，叫我做什么都行！但您看，我觉得我父母并没有真的理解失去的那两年造成了多大的损失。我觉得他们认为只要提科夫斯基夫人重新接收我，只要我勤奋练习，这两年就没什么关系。我知道提科夫斯基夫人曾不止一次想向他们解释，但我想他们对我充满了爱和骄傲，根本不接受现实。好几年，他们一直觉得我有了不错的进步，觉得我确实有天赋。就在我十七岁那年，现实给了他们沉重一击。那时有个钢琴比赛，尤尔根·弗莱明大奖，是由市艺术馆组织筹办的，旨在发掘城里有潜力的年轻人。那时候这个奖项颇有名气，但现在因为缺少资金已经停办

了。我十七岁时，父母有了让我参赛的想法，而我母亲真的四处奔走，筹备所有的报名、初赛事宜。就在那个时候，他们第一次认识到我有多么差劲。他们认真地听我演奏——可能是第一次真正听我演奏——他们意识到，我参加比赛简直是在羞辱自己，羞辱整个家族。其实无论如何，我本还想试试，但父母认为这会严重打击我的自信。我说过的，那是他们第一次注意到我演奏得多么差劲。那以前，他们对我过高的期望，而且估计还有他们对我的爱，妨碍了他们客观地倾听。那是他们第一次承认那浪费了的两年对我造成了难以弥补的损失。呃，之后呢，自然啰，父母对我相当失望。尤其是我母亲，好像一副听天由命的样子，觉得一切都是徒劳，她所做的所有努力，这些年在提科夫斯基夫人身上下的全部工夫，还有那时去哀求她重新接收我，这一切的一切，她似乎觉得这一切辛劳统统付诸东流了。于是，她变得非常泄气，不大再出门，也不去参加音乐会和社交活动。不过，父亲呢，他总是对我抱有些许希望，他这人就是这样，总是会坚持抱着希望直到最后一刻。时不时地，每隔一两年，他就要听我弹奏，每次他这样做，我都明白他对我充满希望。我明白他在想：‘这次，这次一定不同。’然而，到目前为止，每次弹奏完抬头，我都能看到 he 再一次垂头丧气。当然，他想竭力隐藏，但我看得清清楚楚。可他从未放弃希望，那对我意义重大啊。”

我们疾速行驶在一条宽敞的大街上，街道两旁矗立着高高的办公大楼。虽然不时地经过一排排整齐停泊的车辆，但数英里之内好像就只有我们这一辆车在动。

“你得在‘周四之夜’表演，”我问，“这是你父亲的主意吗？”

“是的。千真万确！他第一次提出，是在六个月以前。他几乎已经两年没听我弹奏了，但他真的非常信任我。当然他给了我机会拒绝，但我非常感动，觉得经过这么多次失望之后，他还对我信任有加。所以我说好的，我会表演的。”

“你真有勇气。我真希望这个决定最后证明是正确的。”

“其实，瑞德先生，我之所以答应，是因为，呃，虽然我是对自己这样说，我觉得自己最近有了些突破。或许您会明白我说的意思，真的很难解释。就好像有东西在我脑袋里，有东西一直阻碍我前进，像个水坝或者什么东西，好像一下子爆裂开来，一股全新的灵魂流淌出来。我也解释不清楚，但事实是，我觉得比起上次父亲听我弹奏，我现在有了重大进步。所以您看，当他问我是否想在‘周四之夜’表

演，尽管很紧张，我还是答应了。如果我不答应，对他就不公平，毕竟他多年来对我施以信任。但这并不是说我不担心‘周四之夜’。我一直刻苦练习曲子，我得承认，我确实有点担心。但我知道这是给我父母惊喜的好机会。不管怎样，您看，我一直都有这么个幻想。即便是在我的演奏极度令人沮丧之时。我总是幻想着花几个月时间，把自己锁在什么地方，练习，练习，再练习。我父母几个月几个月地看不见我。然后，有一天我突然回家。可能是个周日下午。反正是父亲也在家的某个时间。我进门，一句话不说，直接走到钢琴边，掀开盖子，开始弹奏。我甚至外套都不脱，只是不停地弹呀弹。巴赫、肖邦、贝多芬。然后是现代乐曲，格雷贝尔、卡赞、穆莱利。只是不停地弹。我父母跟着我走进餐厅，吃惊地看着我。他们做梦都想不到这种场景。但之后，让他们震惊的是，他们意识到就在我弹奏的过程中，我的水平越来越高超。壮丽的、细腻的慢板。惊人的、强烈的华美乐段。演奏技艺越来越高。他们就站在屋子中间，父亲依然一脸茫然地拿着正在看的报纸，两个人都完全惊呆了。我会以出色的终曲结束，最后转身对着他们……呃，我也不确定之后会发生什么。但从我十三四岁开始就一直有这样的幻想。‘周四之夜’可能不会出现这样的结果，但可能会很接近。我说过，情况改变了，我肯定现在差不多达到那个水平了。啊，瑞德先生，我们到了。我肯定，对您的那些记者来说时间刚刚好。”

市中心是如此的静谧。没有繁忙交通的干扰。我很难认出这就是市中心。但是，果不其然，我们正驶向酒店大门入口。

“如果您不介意，”斯蒂芬继续道，“我在这里放下您和鲍里斯。我得绕到后面去停车。”

后座上，鲍里斯看起来很累了，但还醒着。我们下车，我让小男孩道了谢之后，领着他走进酒店。

第七章

大厅里光线昏暗，整座酒店仿佛都陷入了沉寂。我刚到时见到的那位接待员又当班了，他这会儿在接待台后面的座位上，看上去睡得正香。我们走近时，他抬起头，认出了我，努力让自己清醒过来。

“晚上好，先生。”他开心地说，但紧接着疲倦似乎再次袭来。

“晚上好。我需要再开一间房。给鲍里斯。”我手放在小男孩肩膀上。“离我尽量近些。”

“我帮您看看，瑞德先生。”

“其实，您的迎宾员古斯塔夫，他正好是鲍里斯的外公。我在想他是否碰巧还在酒店。”

“哦，是的。古斯塔夫住在这儿。他在阁楼上有个小房间。但这会儿，我想他睡了吧。”

“或许他不介意被叫醒呢，我知道他会立刻想见到鲍里斯的。”

接待员不安地看了眼手表。“呃，只要您吩咐的，先生，”他迟疑地说道，拿起电话。停了一小会儿，我听到他接通了。

“古斯塔夫？古斯塔夫，很抱歉。我是瓦特。是的，是的，很抱歉叫醒你。是的，我知道，非常抱歉。但请听着，瑞德先生刚刚回来，他带着你的外孙。”

随后，接待员听着，点了几次头。然后他放下听筒，微笑地看着我。

“他马上就来。他说他会安排好一切的。”

“太好了。”

“瑞德先生，您现在一定很累了。”

“是的，很累。今天真是筋疲力尽。但我还有一个约会，应该有些记者在这儿等我吧。”

“啊，后来，大概一个小时前他们走了。他们说会另行安排时间。当时我提议他们直接联系斯达特曼小姐，这样您就不会被他们打

扰了。真的，先生，您看起来很累。您别担心这种事情了，上床休息吧。”

“好的。我也这么想。嗯。这么说他们走了。他们先是早到，现在又走了。”

“是的，先生，很烦人呐。但我得说，瑞德先生，您现在得上床睡会儿。您真的别担心。我肯定一切都会处理好的。”

我很感激年轻的接待员说了这番安慰的话，几个小时以来第一次感到一阵轻松。我把胳膊肘放在接待台上，没多大会儿，就站着开始打起瞌睡来了。不过，我并没有真的睡着，一直都清醒着，感觉到鲍里斯把头重重地靠在我身上，还能听到我面前接待员的声音，继续安慰地说着。

“古斯塔夫不会太久的，”他说道，“他会把您的小孩照顾得很舒服的。真的，先生，没什么好担心的。还有斯达特曼小姐，我们酒店的人认识她很久了。她做事可麻利啦。她以前处理过很多重要访客的事情，对她的印象百分之百的好。她从不出错。所以您那些记者就交给她去操心吧，不会有问题的。至于鲍里斯，我们会在您对面给他安排一间房。早上的风景很好，他一定会喜欢。所以，瑞德先生，我真的觉得您应该上床休息了。可以想象，今天也干不了什么事了。事实上，请允许我大胆建议，您一上楼就把鲍里斯交给他外公。古斯塔夫马上就到，他这会儿正在穿制服，会耽误他一会儿。他会很快下来，穿戴整齐，这就是古斯塔夫，整洁无瑕的制服，没有一点不得体的地方。他一来，您就把所有事情交给他处理。他随时都有可能下来。这会儿，他正坐在床边，绑系鞋带呢。马上就会准备好，会一跳而起，但他得注意，不要撞到屋椽上。迅速梳下头，然后出门走上过道。是的，他随时都可能过来，您可以直接上楼回房，放松一下，然后睡个好觉。我建议您来一杯睡前酒，您的小冰柜里有一种已经调好的特别的鸡尾酒，非常不错。或者您更中意送点热饮上来？您可以听点收音机里舒缓的音乐。广播里有个频道，晚上这个时间正在播放斯德哥尔摩之声，安静的午夜爵士乐，非常舒缓，我经常听它来放松。或者若您需要真正放松的话，我可以建议您去看场电影？我们很多客人这会儿都在看电影呢。”

他最后的话——说起电影——让我睡意全无。我直起身，说道：

“抱歉，你刚刚说什么？很多客人都去看电影了？”

“是的，街角有家电影院在放夜场电影。很多客人觉得辛苦一天之后，去那里看场电影能帮他们放松。您可以不喝鸡尾酒或者热饮，完全可以换一种方式嘛。”

接待员手边的电话响起，他说了声不好意思，拿起话筒。我注意到他一边听一边尴尬地朝我看了好几次。然后他说：“他在这儿，女士。”然后把听筒给了我。

“您好。”我说。

对方好一阵沉默。然后一个声音响起：“是我。”

过了好一会儿，我才听出是索菲。但我一听出是她，一种对她强烈的愤怒感就向我袭来，只是碍于鲍里斯在场，我才没对着电话狂怒大叫。最后我冷冷地说道：“是你啊。”

又一阵短暂的沉默，她说：“我在外面给你打电话。在街上。我看到你和鲍里斯进去了。他现在看不到我可能更好些。现在已经远远过了他的就寝时间。千万不要让他知道你在和我说话。”

我低头看了眼鲍里斯，他正靠着我站着打瞌睡。

“那你到底想干什么？”我问。

我听到她重重地叹了口气，然后她说：

“你生我气也是应该的。我……我不知道怎么回事。我明白自己现在有多愚蠢……”

“听着，”我打断她，担心自己可能没法压住火气，“你到底在哪儿？”

“在街的另一头。拱门下面，一排古董店门前。”

“我马上过来。呆在那儿别动。”

我把话筒递回给接待员，看到鲍里斯整个通话过程都睡着，我松了一口气。而这时，电梯门开了，古斯塔夫走了出来，踏上地毯。

他的制服看起来确实整洁无瑕。他稀疏的白发湿漉漉的，而且梳理整齐。双眼红肿，步伐有点僵硬，这可以说是唯一证明他几分钟前还在熟睡的迹象了。

“啊，晚上好，先生。”他边说边走近。

“晚上好。”

“您带着鲍里斯呢，这样麻烦您真过意不去。您真太好了。”古斯塔夫走近了几步，轻柔地微笑着看着他的外孙。“天哪，先生，看看他。睡得这么沉。”

“是的，他很累了。”我说。

“他这样睡着，看起来仍很小。”迎宾员继续温柔地看着他好一会儿。然后他抬头看着我，说：“我在想，先生，不知您有没有跟索菲谈过。我下午一直在想你们谈得怎么样。”

“呃，我确实跟她说话了，是的。”

“啊，您有没有发现什么端倪？”

“端倪？”

“什么困扰着她？”

“啊。呃，她倒是说了一些事情……老实讲，我之前跟你说过的，像我这样的外人很难明辨就里。自然啰，对于可能困扰她的事情我倒也略知一二，但真的，我真觉得你亲自跟她谈谈最好。”

“但您看，先生，我相信我之前跟您解释过……”

“是的，是的，你和索菲不直接交谈，我记得。”我突然不耐烦地说道，“但是，可以肯定的是，如果这对你重要的话……”

“这事对我来说至关重要。哦，是的，先生，至关重要。您知道的，是为了鲍里斯。如果我们不快点把这件事弄清楚，他心里会很焦虑的，我知道他现在已经这样了。已经有明显的迹象了。您只要看看他，他现在的样子，先生，就知道他真的还很小。我们欠他的，应让他的世界远离这些烦恼，哪怕只能短短地再维持一段时间，您不这样想吗，先生？其实，说这件事对我来说至关重要算是轻描淡写了。最近，我日日夜夜都在担心啊。但您看……”他停了下来，眼神空洞地望着面前的地板，然后轻轻摇了摇头，叹了口气。“您说我该自己和索菲谈谈。不是那么简单的，先生。您得了解这背后的故事。您看，我们有这个……这个默契多年了。从她小时候起。当然，她非常非常小的时候，事情不是现在这样的。大概到了她八九岁时，哦，我和索菲，我们经常聊天。我给她讲故事，我们绕着老城区散步，手牵手，就我们两个，不停地讲，不停地说。您千万别误会，先生。我那时非常爱索菲，到现在还是。哦，是的，先生。她小的时候，我们很亲近。这默契是从她八岁起开始的。是的，那时她八岁。顺便说一句，

先生，我们之间的这一默契，我原本以为不会持续太长时间。我当时觉得也就是个几天的事。就是这样，先生，我就是这样想的。第一天，我记得我下班，想给我妻子在厨房搭个搁板。索菲一直跟着我转，问问这，主动要求取这取那，一心想帮我。我一直沉默着，先生，我完全沉默。当然，她很快就惶惑不宁了，我看得出的。但我决心已定，必须坚守。对我来说，这可不容易啊，先生。哦，天哪，一点不容易。我爱我的小姑娘胜过世上的一切，但我告诉自己非坚强不可。三天，我对自己说，三天就够了，三天就结束了。就三天，然后我就能下班进门，再抱起她，紧紧搂着她，告诉彼此一切。也就是说，把这几天没说的话全补上。那时候，我在阿尔巴酒店工作，到第三天快结束的时候，您能想象，我渴望着当班结束，再回到家，看看我的小索菲。所以您也就能理解那天我回到公寓，叫索菲，她却拒绝来迎接我的时候，我有多失望。而且我过去找她时，她故意撇开我，一句话都没说就离开了屋子。您能想象，我很受伤，而且还有点生气——我刚刚也说过了，我度过了艰难的一天，特别希望见到她。我对自己说，她要想这样，我就要看看结果会怎样。于是，我和妻子吃完晚饭，没对索菲说一句话就上床睡觉了。我猜就是那时候开始的。一天天过去了，不知不觉地，这就成了我们两人之间的默契了。我不想您误会我，先生，我们不经常吵架，我们之间很快就没有敌意了。实际上，不管是那时候还是现在，我和索菲彼此一直都互相体谅。我们只是不说话。我承认，先生，我那时可没料到事情会持续这么久。我想，我的本意应该是在某个适当的时间——一个特殊的日子，比如她生日——我们摒弃前嫌，回到往日的时光。但之后她生日来临，然后圣诞节过去，一来一去，先生，我们就是再也回不到从前去了。然后，她十一岁的时候，发生了一件难过的小事。那时候，索菲养了一只白色小仓鼠，起名叫乌利希，她非常喜欢它。她能连续几个小时不停地跟它讲话，放在手心里带着它在公寓里转悠。然后有一天这小东西不见了。索菲把所有地方都找遍了。她母亲和我也找遍了整个公寓，我们还问了邻居，但都没有结果。我妻子尽力安慰索菲说乌利希很安全——它只不过过去度个小假，用不了多久就会回来。然后，一天晚上，我妻子出去了，剩下我和索菲在家。我在卧室听收音机，声音开得很大——正在广播一场演奏会——这时，我听到索菲在客厅里难以自抑地哭泣。我马上就猜到她已经找到了乌利希，或者说它的尸体——它已经失踪了几周了。唉，卧室和客厅之间的门关着，而且，我说过，收音机声音很大，所以完全能想到我可能听不到她的声音。所以我一直呆在卧室，耳朵贴着门，身后继续放着音乐。我当然好几次想过出去看看她，但我站在门边时间越长，突然冲出去就会显得越发

奇怪。因为，先生，她其实没有大声抽泣。过了一会儿，我甚至又坐下了，想要假装从没听见。但是，当然了，听到她那样哭泣我感觉自己心都快被撕裂了；我很快发现自己又站在了门边，趴在门上，想透过音乐听听索菲的声音。我告诉自己，如果她叫我，如果她敲门或者叫我，那我就出去。我当初是这样决定的。如果她喊：‘爸爸！’我就冲进去。我会解释说因为音乐声太大了，刚才没听到她哭。我等啊等，但她没有叫我也没有敲门。心神狂乱地哭了一阵后，她做的唯一一件事——先生，跟您说，那哭声可是直达心底啊——她仿佛自言自语地大叫道——我强调一下，先生，自言自语——她大叫：‘我把乌利希忘在盒子里了！是我的错！我忘记了！是我的错！’我后来知道，原来索菲把乌利希放在一个小礼品盒里了。她本想带它去什么地方，她总是带它出去，给它看各种各样的东西。她把它放在这个小礼品盒里，正准备出去，但发生了点事情，她就分神了，根本就没出去，同时忘了乌利希还在小礼品盒里。我刚刚说的那天晚上是几周后了。她在公寓里做什么事情，然后突然想起来了。您能想象那一刻对我的小女儿来说多么可怕吗！突然想起这样的事，或许抱有一线希望，希望自己记错了，冲到盒子那里。当然，乌利希还在那里，静静地躺在里面。侧耳倾听，我那时当然不确定发生了什么，但她大叫的那一刻，我差不多猜得出来了。‘我把乌利希忘在盒子里了！是我的错！’但我想让您明白，先生，她似乎是在自言自语。如果她说：‘爸爸！求你出来……’但没有。即便这样，我其实想着：‘如果她再那样大叫，我就出去。’但她没有。她只是继续哭泣。我能想象出她双手捧着乌利希的样子，或许希望它还有救……哦，这对我不容易啊，先生，我一直呆在卧室，身后的音乐继续响着。好一会儿之后，我听到我妻子进门，两人在说话，索菲又哭了。然后，我妻子走进卧室，告诉我发生了什么。‘你什么都没听见吗？’她问，而我说：‘哦，天哪，没有听见呀，我在听音乐会。’第二天早上，早餐的时候，索菲什么都没对我说，我也什么都没对她说。换句话说，我们只是坚守着我们的默契。但我意识到，毫无疑问索菲知道我听到了。而且，她没有因此而记恨我。像平常一样，她递给我奶罐、黄油，她甚至帮我收拾了盘子——一点额外的小服务。我说的是，先生，索菲明白我们的约定，而且尊重这一约定。之后，您能想象，整个事情就这样了。您看，我们既然没有因为乌利希的事情而结束这一默契，如果没有什么，至少说意义同等重大的事情发生的话，结束这一默契仿佛就不合时宜了。真的，先生，如果没有特殊原因，某天突然就打破了这个默契，这不仅怪怪的，而且还贬低了整个乌利希事件给我女儿带来的悲剧。我真的希望您能明白，先生。不管怎样，我说

过，这之后，我们的默契变得，呃，十分牢固，而即便在现在的情况下，我突然打破这长久以来的约定好像也不合适。我敢说，索菲也深有同感。这就是我请您帮我这个特殊小忙的原因，尤其是因为今天下午您碰巧走那条路……”

“是的，是的，是的，”我打断他，又感到一阵不耐烦。然后我更加柔声地说：“我理解您和女儿之间的立场。但我在想，难道没有可能，这件事——你们的默契——难道这件事本身就不可能在她心底困扰她吗？您上次看到她沮丧地坐在咖啡馆，难道就没有可能是她在想你们的默契这个事情呢？”

这一问好似吓了古斯塔夫一跳。许久，他都保持沉默。最后他说：“我从没这样想过，先生，您刚跟我说的，我得好好想想。我得说，我之前从没想过。”他又沉默了一会儿，脸上一副迷惑的表情。然后他抬头，说道：“但为什么她现在这么关心默契的问题？都过了这么久了？”他慢慢摇了摇头。“我能问问您吗，先生，您是在和她谈过之后想到这个问题的吗？”

我突然感觉很累，希望了断整件事。“我不知道，我不知道，”我说，“我说过很多次了，这种家庭事务……我只是个外人。我怎么能判断？我只是说有这种可能性。”

“这事我肯定得好好考虑考虑。为了鲍里斯好，我得考察每一个可能性。是的，我要好好想想。”他又沉默了，脸上的表情越来越困惑。“我在想，先生，”他最后说，“我想再请您帮个忙。下次见到索菲，或许您不妨特别注意一下这个可能性。我知道您会很巧妙地处理此事。我一般不会提这样的要求，但是，您看，我是在为鲍里斯着想。我会非常感谢您的。”

他哀求地看着我。最后我叹了口气，说：“好吧。我会尽力帮助鲍里斯的。但我只能在此声明，像我这么个外人……”

可能是提到了他的名字的缘故，鲍里斯那时醒了过来。

“外公！”他惊呼一声，松开我，兴奋地奔向古斯塔夫，显然意欲拥抱他。但最后一刻，小男孩好似想起了什么，只是伸出了手。

“晚上好，外公。”他平静而持重地说。

“晚上好，鲍里斯。”古斯塔夫轻轻地拍了拍他的头。“很高兴再见到你。今天过得怎么样？”

鲍里斯随意地耸了耸肩。“有点累。很平常的一天。”

“等一下，”古斯塔夫说，“我会处理好一切。”

迎宾员走向接待台，搂着外孙的双肩。接下来一会儿，他和接待员低声用酒店行话交流了几句。然后两人点头，表示一致同意什么事情，接待员递过一把钥匙。

“请跟我来，先生。”古斯塔夫说，“我带您到鲍里斯的房间。”

“实际上，我还有个约会。”

“这个时辰？您真是太忙碌啦，先生。呃，那样的话，能允许我自己带鲍里斯上楼安顿好他吗？”

“能那样太好了，太感谢了。”

我和他们一起走到电梯前，临关门最后一次挥手道别。然后，顷刻间，之前的沮丧和愤怒再也控制不住汹涌而出。我没对接待员再说一句话，径直穿过大厅，再次投入茫茫夜色。

第八章

街道荒凉又寂静。过了好一阵子，我才找到——就在街对面不远处——索菲电话里提到的石头拱门。我向石拱门走去的时候，有那么一刹那，我猜想她是不是惊慌失措逃掉了。可是，过了会，看到她的身形从阴影中冒出，我分明感到愤怒再次升腾。

她的表情并没有我想象中的那么温顺。她仔细地瞧着我，我走上前，她几近镇定地对我说道：

“你完全有权利生气。我也不知道我是怎么了，大概是糊涂了。你完全有权利生气，我知道。”

我无动于衷地看着她。“生气？哦，我明白了。你是在说今晚早些时候的事。嗯，是的，我得说，我真替鲍里斯失望。显然，他很烦乱。但就我自己来说，坦白讲，我可没花多大工夫想这事，我忙着呢。”

“我不知道为什么会这样。我知道你多依赖我……”

“我从没依赖过你。我觉得你应该冷静点。”我不在意地笑了笑，开始慢慢走起来。“就我而言，这不过是个小问题。不管有没有你的支持，我都能处理我的工作。我只是替鲍里斯失望，仅此而已。”

“我是很愚蠢，我现在明白了。”索菲和我并肩走着。“我不知道，我是以为你和鲍里斯——你得从我的角度看——你和鲍里斯慢吞吞地跟在后面，我以为也许你并不热衷于我计划的夜晚，我猜想可能你无论如何都会抽身离去……听着，如果你愿意，我会告诉你一切。你想知道的一切。每个细节……”

我停下脚步，转身面对她。“显然，我没表达清楚。对你说的，我一点也不感兴趣。我来这儿，只是想呼吸下新鲜空气，放松放松。今天很辛苦，实际上，我来这儿只是想睡前看场电影。”

“电影？哪部电影？”

“我怎么知道哪部电影？午夜场电影吧。这儿下去有个电影院。我想去那儿随便看场电影。今天真的很累。”

我又开始走，这次更是故意为之。过了一会儿，令我心满意足的是，我听到她的脚步追上来。

“你真的不生气？”她赶上来问。

“我当然不生气。干吗要生气？”

“我能去吗？跟你一起看电影？”

我耸了耸肩，继续平稳地走着。“随便。非常欢迎。”

索菲抓着我的胳膊。“你想的话，我会和盘托出一切。我会告诉你一切。你想知道的所有事情……”

“听着，还要我说多少次？我一点也不感兴趣。我现在就是想放松放松。未来几天会压力重重啊。”

她继续抓着我胳膊，我们一起默默地走了一会儿。然后她悄悄地说：“你可真好，这么善解人意。”

我没搭话。过了一会儿，我们渐渐远离人行道，继续走在荒凉的街道中间。

“只要我找到合适我们的家，”她最后终于说，“一切就会好起来。一定会的。早上我要看的地方，我真的很期待。听起来是我们一直梦想的。”

“是的，希望如此。”

“你就不能更兴奋点吗？这可能是我们的转折点哟。”

我耸了耸肩，继续走着。电影院还有点距离，但作为照耀黑暗街道的唯一一点亮光，我们双眼一直紧盯着它。然后，我们走近时，索菲叹了口气，我们停了下来。

“或许，我还是不进去的好。”她说，松开了她的手。“我明天要花很多时间看房。得早起。我还是回去为好。”

不知何故，她的话让我颇为吃惊，一时间我无法决断如何回应。我朝电影院那边望了一眼，然后转头对着索菲。

“你刚才不是说你想……”我开始说，然后停下来，比较平和地说：“听着，这部电影不错。我肯定你会喜欢。”

“但你还不知道是哪部电影呀。”

我脑中闪过一个念头，觉得她是在玩什么花样。即便如此，一阵奇怪的惊慌感还是席卷而来，我禁不住开口求她：

“你知道我的意思。是那个接待员，他建议我来看。我知道他人很可靠。再说呢，这酒店也得考虑其名声吧。总不至于会推荐……”我的声音越来越小，索菲开始离我而去，这让我愈加惊惶恐慌。“听着，”我提高嗓门说，不再在意谁听见，“我知道这部电影不错。况且我们很久没一起看电影了。这是事实，对吗？我们上次一起看电影是什么时候的事了？”

索菲好像在思考这个问题，然后终于笑了笑，回身朝我走来。

“好吧，”她说，轻轻拉着我的胳膊。“好吧。很晚了，但我还是会和你一起看的。你说过的，我们已经好久好久没一起这样子了。我们真该好好玩玩。”

我重重地舒了一口气，进电影院的时候，我所能做的就是尽量不要紧紧地拉着她靠近我。索菲好像感觉到了什么，把头靠在我肩上。

“你真好，”她温柔地说，“不生我的气。”

“有什么可生气的？”我低声说，一边四下张望着大厅。

我们前面不远处，最后一队人拥挤着进入剧场。我四处查看什么地方买票，但售票处已经关闭了，我突然想到电影院和酒店之间可能存在什么特别的约定。不管怎样，我和索菲走到队尾，一个穿绿色套装的男人站在门口，冲我们笑了笑，引着我们和其他人一起进去了。

当真是座无虚席。灯光还没有暗下来，很多人四处走动寻找座位。我还在找寻，看看我们能坐哪儿，这时，索菲兴奋地使劲掐我胳膊。

“哦，我们买点什么吧，”她说，“冰激凌，或者爆米花，或者别的什么。”

她指着远处，剧场前方。一个穿制服、拿着一托盘小吃的女人面前排起了小队。

“当然，”我说，“但我们得快点，不然就没位子了。这儿很挤。”

我们一路挤到前方，排着队。过了一会儿，我站在那儿，心中怒气又开始升腾，直到最后，被迫转身背对着索菲。然后我听到她在背后说：

“我得坦白。其实我今晚到酒店不是来找你的。我甚至不知道你们两个会出现在那儿。”

“哦？”我身体前倾，望着那一托盘小吃。

“经历了这些事之后，”索菲继续说，“我意思是，我一想到自己多傻，呃，我就不知道该怎么办了。然后我突然想起爸爸的冬大衣，想起我还没给他。”

我听到一阵窸窣窸窣的杂音，转过身，才头一次发现索菲一只胳膊下夹着一个软不拉几的棕色纸包。她把它举到半空，又很快放了下来，显然那东西很重。

“太傻了，”她说，“没必要惊慌。但你看，我突然感觉到空气中冬天的味道。我想起这件大衣，想立刻拿给他。所以我包起来，就出门了。然后，我来到酒店，夜晚却很温暖。我明白自己在为无谓的事情惊慌，就不确定该不该进去，今晚就给他。所以我站在那儿，越来越晚，最后我意识到爸爸可能上床休息了。我想过把东西放在接待处，但又想亲自给他。我在想，呃，也可以几周后给他嘛，天气还很暖和呢。这时候，一辆车停下来，你和鲍里斯下车了。事情就是这样。”

“我知道了。”

“否则，我都不知道还有没有勇气面对你。但我就在那儿，就在你对面的街上，所以我深吸了口气，打了电话。”

“呃，很开心你这样做了。”我示意周围。“毕竟，我们很久没像这样，一起来看电影了。”

她没回答，我看她的时候，她正深情地盯着胳膊下的包裹，另一只手拍了拍它。

“还要好一阵儿才换季呢，”她低语，与其说是对着我，还不如说是对着大衣。“所以没必要这么着急。我可以几周后再给他。”

我们现在已经排到了队伍前方，索菲走到我前头，急切地瞄着穿制服的女人端着的托盘。

“您要点什么？”她问。“我想要一杯冰激凌。不，巧克力雪糕。一个这个。”

越过她肩膀，我看到托盘里有普通冰激凌和巧克力块。但奇怪的是，这些都被凌乱地推到托盘边上，而中间留了很大地方给一大本破

烂书。我倾身翻看了一下。

“这是本很有用的手册，先生。”制服女人急切地说，“我诚心推荐。我知道我不该在这儿兜售这个。但经理不介意我们卖零散的个人物品，只要我们不经常那样就行了。”

封面上是一张照片，一个男人穿着工装裤微笑着，站在步梯的半中间，一只手拿着漆刷，胳膊下夹着一卷墙纸。我拿起它，感觉装订要散架了。

“实际上，这是我大儿子的，”制服女人继续说道，“但现在他长大了，去了瑞典，我上个星期终于开始整理他的物品。觉得有点意义的都留下来，剩下的都扔了。但有一两样东西不好归类。这本旧手册，先生，我不能说它多有意义，但很有用，告诉你怎么整房子，装修，贴瓷砖，什么都有，一步一步的，还配有很清晰的示意图。我记得，我儿子在成长的过程中觉得这些很有用。我知道它有点破旧了，但它真的是最有用的书了。我不会要太多的，先生。”

“说不定鲍里斯会喜欢。”我对索菲说，随手翻着。

“哦，先生，您家要是有小男孩的话，真的就太好了。从我们自己的经验来说，我敢担保。我儿子那么大的时候，从这书里学到了不少。刷漆，贴瓷砖，什么都有。”

灯光开始暗下来了，我想起我们还没找到位子呢。

“很好，谢谢。”我说。

我付了钱，女人很感谢我。我们拿着书和冰激凌走开了。

“你能这样想着鲍里斯，真是太好了。”我们走在过道上时，索菲说。然后，她又举起包裹，抱在胸前，一阵沙沙作响。

“想到爸爸去年一冬天没有件像样的外套，感觉很奇怪。”她说，“但他就是自尊心太强，不肯穿那件旧的。去年很暖和，所以没什么关系。但他不能那样再过一冬了。”

“嗯，他当然不该。”

“我真是没眼力见儿。我知道爸爸年事渐高了，一直在考虑这些事。比如说，退休的事。他越来越老，迟早要面对。”然后她悄悄地补充说：“我过几周再给他，应该没什么问题。”

灯光又暗了，观众安静了下来，殷切地期盼着。我意识到剧场比先前更拥挤了，在想是不是座位找得太晚了。我们眼前全黑时，引座员走下了过道，手里拿着手电筒，示意了一下近前方的两个座位。我和索菲沿这排慢慢走进去，低声道着歉，坐下，广告正好开始。

大部分广告都是宣传当地企业，似乎没完没了。最后主片终于开始时，我们已经坐了至少半个小时了，看到是部科幻经典，我松了口气，名字叫《2001：太空漫游》——我最中意的一部，百看不厌。那引人注目的史前世界的开头一出现在大银幕上，我就感到自己放松了，很快舒服地欣赏起电影。电影叙述快到一半——克林特·伊斯特伍德和尤·伯连纳登上太空飞船，驶往木星的时候——我听到索菲在我旁边说：

“但天气会变。就像那样。”

我以为她是指电影，小声回应她，表示同意。但几分钟后，她说：

“去年，秋天阳光明媚，跟今年一样，持续了很久。人们坐在户外喝着咖啡，一直到十一月。然后突然，几乎一夜间，变得很冷。今年很可能又是那样。这些事都说不准的，是不是？”

“是的，没错。”这时，我当然已经意识到她又在说外套的事了。

“但倒也没那么着急。”她小声说。

下一刻我再看她的时候，她好像又看起了电影。我也回头看着大银幕，但不一会儿，记忆的碎片蜂拥而至，在漆黑一片的电影院里，我的注意力再次从电影上转移开去。

我想起一个场面，非常生动。我坐在一张不舒服的、好像还脏兮兮的椅子上。可能是早上，阴天，灰沉沉的，我面前举着张报纸。鲍里斯趴在近旁的地毯上，用蜡笔在素描本上画着。从小男孩的年纪来看——他还很小——我猜这是六七年前的事了，但哪间屋、哪幢房，我记不起来了。隔壁房间的门半开着，能听到几个女人在聊天。

我坐在一张很不舒服的扶手椅上，继续读着报纸，好一会儿，直到鲍里斯的举止或者说姿势发生了点细微的变化，我才低头看了一眼。然后，我立即明白了眼前的状况。鲍里斯在本子上成功地画出了清晰可辨的“超人”形象。他已经试了几个星期了，但不论我们如何鼓励，他都画不出一个哪怕有一点点相似的形象。然而这会儿，可能

是侥幸，再加上儿童时期常有的真正突破，他突然成功了。草稿还没画完——嘴巴和眼睛有待完善——但尽管如此，我立刻就能看出这幅画对他来说意味着巨大成功。其实，假如那一刻我没有注意到他正紧张地探着身子，蜡笔仍停留在纸的上方，我倒是要对他说点什么的。我意识到，他在犹豫是不是要再改进一下，但又怕会毁掉这幅杰作。我能强烈地感觉到他的两难处境，经不起心中的诱惑，差点就要脱口而出：“鲍里斯，住手吧。行了。停下来吧，给大家看看你的杰作。给我看看，给你母亲看看，还有在隔壁屋聊天的所有人。就算没完成又怎么样？人人都会吃惊，为你骄傲的。停下来，不然就全毁了。”但我什么都没说，而是继续透过报纸的缝隙看着他。最后鲍里斯下定决心，开始小心翼翼地添上几笔，然后，他弓着身子，信心大增，开始还有些鲁莽地用起蜡笔。过了一会儿，他突然停下，静静地看着那张纸。然后——甚至现在我还能想起他当时心中翻涌的凄楚——我眼睁睁地看着他试图抢救他的画作，添了一笔又一笔。最后，他脸沉了下来，把蜡笔往纸上一扔，起身，一声没出就离开了房间。

整个事件对我影响之深，我自己都感到不可思议，我还在调整自己的情绪，这时候索菲的声音在身边骤然响起：

“你就是不明白，是吧？”

我惊异于她语气中的怨恨，便放下报纸，发现她站在房间里，瞪着我。然后她说：

“你都不知道，看着发生的一切，我心里什么感觉，而对你来说却永远不会有那种感觉。你看看你，就只会看报纸。”然后她压低声音，声音反而更有力量了。“这就是差别！他不是你生的。不管你怎么说，就是不同。你永远不会觉得自己是他亲生父亲。看看你！你根本不了解我刚刚的感受。”

说罢，她转身离开房间，消失了。

我想过跟着她进隔壁房间，不管有没有客人，都把她带出来好好谈谈。但最后，我决定最好坐在那儿等她自己回来。果然，几分钟后，索菲又回来了，但她的态度让我说不出口，然后她又出去了。实际上，在随后的半个小时中，虽然索菲又多次出入房间，虽说我决计要让她明白我的感受，但我愣是一直没说话。终于，过了某一时点，我意识到，要提起这个话题而不显得可笑的机会已一去不返了。带着强烈的受伤感和挫败感，我继续读我的报纸。

“抱歉。”我听到身后有个声音，有只手碰了碰我肩膀。我扭过头，看到后排的一个男人前倾着身子，仔细地打量着我。

“是瑞德先生，对吧？天哪，还真是。请原谅，我一直在这儿坐着，光线太暗，没认出您。我叫卡尔·佩德森。原本非常期待在今早的招待会上见到您。但当然，因意外的情况您没能出席。在这儿见到您多么凑巧啊。”

那男人头发花白，戴着眼镜，面相和善。我稍稍调整了下姿势。

“啊，是的，佩德森先生。很高兴认识您。如您所说，今早太可惜了。我本人也非常期待，呃，见到大家。”

“碰巧，瑞德先生，还有几位议员现在也在电影院，他们都很遗憾今早没见到您。”他在黑暗中环顾了一下。“如果能确定他们坐在哪儿，我想带您去见见他们，至少其中的一两位吧。”他转过身，伸长脖子搜寻着身后几排。“不巧的是，现在一个也看不到……”

“我当然很高兴能见见您的同仁们。但现在太晚了，而且他们正在欣赏电影，要不再另找个时间吧。想必还有很多机会的。”

“我现在一个也看不到，”那人扭头对着我，说道，“太可惜了，我知道他们在电影院的某个地方。不管怎样，先生，作为市会议员，请允许我对您的来访表示无限的欢迎和无上的荣幸！”

“您太客气了。”

“大家都说，布罗茨基先生今天下午在音乐厅表现得非常好，三四个小时不间断地排练。”

“是的，我听说了。很不错。”

“我想知道，先生，您今天是否去了音乐厅？”

“音乐厅？呃，没有。很不巧，我今天还没有机会……”

“当然。您长途跋涉来到这儿。呃，还有很多时间。我肯定您会对我们的音乐厅印象深刻的，瑞德先生。那真的是座美丽的古建筑，无论我们如何败坏这座城市，可没人敢说我们忽视了音乐大厅。很美的老建筑，而且坐落在景色怡人的地方。我是说，在利布曼公园。瑞德先生，您到时候就明白我什么意思了。步行穿过树林（这可是段愉快的路程），然后就会来到一小片空地，就是那儿！音乐厅！到时候，您自己看看就知道了，先生。那是个公众聚会的理想场所，远离街道的喧嚣。我记得小时候，这里还有个城市交响乐队，每月的第一

个周日人们都会聚集在音乐厅门口的空地上。我还记得，每家都来，每个人穿得都很整齐漂亮，越来越多的人穿过树林来到这里，相互问候。我们这些小孩到处奔跑撒欢。秋天的时候，我们会做游戏，特别的游戏。我们东奔西跑，收集满目的落叶，送至园丁的屋棚，堆在一旁。在屋棚的墙上，有块特别的木板，大概这么高，上面有个污点。我们彼此相传，说我们得尽量收集树叶，堆积起来，达到那个污点的高度的时候，大人们就开始鱼贯而入进入音乐厅。如果没达到，整个城市就会炸成碎片，诸如此类的。于是我们就在那儿，来回奔跑，满怀抱的都是湿答答的树叶！我这个年纪的人很容易怀旧，瑞德先生，但曾几何时，这儿的人无疑都很开心，好似一家人，还有真正长久的友谊。人们互相温暖，温柔以待。这儿曾经是个美好的社区。好多好多年都是这样啊。我马上就76岁了，所以我以人格担保我所说的。”

佩德森沉默了一会儿。他仍前倾着，胳膊放在我座位的靠背上，我看他的时候，发现他的眼睛没盯着银幕，而是看向远方。同时，电影快演到了宇航员们第一次怀疑计算机哈尔的动机，这台计算机对太空飞船上生活的方方面面都至关重要。克林特·伊斯特伍德正潜行在幽闭恐怖的过道上，神情机警，手握长管枪。我正准备开始全神贯注看电影，佩德森又开始说话了：

“跟您说实话吧，我忍不住为他感到些许可惜。我是说，克里斯托弗先生。是的，您可能会觉得奇怪，但我真的为他感到可惜。我也这样对一些同仁讲过，他们只是觉得，哦，这老家伙心软了，谁会为那样一个骗子感到一丁点可惜？但您看，比起大多数人，我记得的事情多一点。我还记得克里斯托弗先生第一次到这座城市的情形。当然，我也和其他同仁一样愤怒。但是，您看，我非常清楚，一开始，刚刚开始的时候，不是克里斯托弗先生本人要极力表现的。不，不，是……呃，是我们。也就是说，像我这样的人，我不否认，我还是有点影响力的。是我们鼓励他的，我们赞颂他，奉承他，很明显，我们指望他给我们以启发和动力。至少，对发生的事情，有部分责任在我们。我年轻些的同仁们，早几年他们可能还没有参与太多。他们只知道克里斯托弗先生是个大人物，全世界都围着他转。他们忘了，他本人从没要求被放在这么一个位置上。哦，是的，我记得非常清楚，克里斯托弗先生刚到这座城市的情景，他那时相当年轻，自己一个人，没一点儿架子，甚至很谦虚。如果没人鼓励他，我肯定他会很愉快地融入环境，在某个私人聚会上表演他那怪异的独奏，别的就没什么了。但这都是时机问题，瑞德先生，时机不凑巧啊。克里斯托弗先生出现在我们城市那会儿，我们正经历着，呃，一个空档期。画家伯恩

德先生，还有沃尔莫乐先生，一个非常出色的作曲家，长久以来两人都是我们这里文化生活的领军人物，他们在一个月内相继去世，于是这儿弥漫着某种情绪……呃，一种惴惴不安的情绪。两位如此出色的人物过世了，我们都很悲伤，但是我猜想，大家也都觉得现在终于有了变革的机会，一个接受新鲜事物的机会。虽说我们过去一直都很快乐，但是，在这两位先生坐镇中心把持一切这么多年后，人们的某些沮丧情绪有所积累也是难免的。所以您能想象，当人们相传那个寄居在罗斯夫人家的陌生人是个提琴演奏家，曾经和哥德堡交响乐队一起表演过，而且还有几次是在卡齐米日·杜绍基的指挥下，呃，人们的激动可不是一点半点啊。我记得亲自参加过克里斯托弗先生的欢迎会。您看，我记得当时的情形，还记得他起初多么不拿架子。现在，事后想想，甚至可以说他是缺乏自信。很可能是来这儿之前遇到了一些挫折。但我们事事都围着他转，非要他纵论一切，是的，这就是一切的开始。我记得亲自出马劝他举办那首场独奏会。他真的是不愿意。不管怎样，那首场独奏会原本只是个小型活动，就在伯爵夫人家里举办。可就在约定日子的前两天，确定参加人数后，伯爵夫人不得不将地点换到了霍特曼美术馆。自那之后，克里斯托弗先生的独奏会——我们要求至少六个月一次——就在音乐厅举行，而这些独奏会年复一年地便成了我们的谈论热点。但他起初并不愿意，并不光是那第一次。开头几年，还得我们劝他。然后，很自然地，喝彩声、掌声和拍马声起作用了，很快克里斯托弗先生就忘乎所以了。‘我在这儿成功了，’那时候很多人听到他这样说。‘我一到这儿就成功了。’您看，先生，我的意思是说，是我们逼迫他的。我现在的确为他感到可惜——虽说我敢说，我也许是这城里唯一为他感到可惜的人。您也注意到了吧，现在很多人都挺生他气的。我是很现实的，瑞德先生。你得心狠手辣才行啊。我们的城市危在旦夕，凄惨一片。反正总得从某个地方开始拨乱反正，从中心开始也未尝不可。我们必须心狠手辣，尽管我为他感到可惜，但我明白舍此别无他途。他以及他所代表的一切，现在必须被抛入我们历史的某个黑暗角落。”

我仍稍侧着身子面对他而坐，这样就清楚表明我仍旧在听，但我的注意力已被电影引了回去。此刻，克林特·伊斯特伍德正对着微型电话与他在地球的妻子通话，眼泪顺着脸颊流淌下来。我知道快到最著名的场景了：尤·伯连纳进屋，在克林特·伊斯特伍德面前拍了拍手，测试他出手拔枪的速度。

“抱歉，”我说，“但克里斯托弗先生是多久前来到这城里的？”

我没多想就问出口，但至少一半的注意力还停留在大银幕上。事实上，我又继续盯着大银幕两三分钟后，才留意到身后的佩德森耷拉着脑袋，陷入深深的羞愧当中。感到我的目光重新停留在他身上后，他抬起头，说：

“您问得好极了，瑞德先生。对我们正好是个训诫。十七年又七个月。时间不短啊。这种错误估计也会发生在别的地方，但这么长时间都没有去纠正，这种情况估计就不多了。我明白我们必须得指望一个外人，一个像您这样的人，先生，请允许我这样说，我感到羞愧难当。我不会找借口的。光是承认错误，就要花很多时间。更别提，我敢说，真正明白错在哪里。但要承认它，甚至只是对自己，都很难，而且要花很久。您也知道，我们和克里斯托弗先生牵涉颇深。几乎每个议员都曾经邀请过他去家里。在每年的市宴会上，每次都安排他坐在冯·温特斯坦先生旁边。他的照片都登上了我们市年鉴的封面。他还为罗根坎普展览会项目作序。还有其他的牵涉，渊源太深了。比如，不幸的利伯里希先生的例子。啊，抱歉，我想我刚刚看到在那边的葛尔曼先生了”——他又伸长脖子，向电影院的后排望去——“是的，是葛尔曼先生，如果没错的话，这样的灯光下很难看清，和他在一起的是沙佛先生。这两位先生都参加了今早的欢迎招待会，我知道他们二位见到您会很高兴的。另外，我们刚刚谈论的这件事，我肯定这两位先生会有很多要说的。不知您是否介意去那边见见他们。”

“非常荣幸。但您刚刚正要告诉我……”

“啊，是的，当然。不幸的利伯里希先生的例子。您看，先生，在克里斯托弗先生到来之前的很多年中，利伯里希先生一直是这儿最受人敬重的小提琴教师之一。他教授来自最好家境的小孩，非常受人崇敬。话说克里斯托弗先生在第一次独奏后不久，被问及对利伯里希先生的看法，他告诉大家他根本没把利伯里希先生放在眼里，不管是他的演奏还是他的教授方法。几年前，利伯里希先生弥留之际，他几乎失去了一切。学生、朋友、社会地位。这仅仅是我脑袋里蹦出的一个例子。要承认一直以来我们都错看了克里斯托弗先生——您能想象是多么残酷吗，先生？是的，我们曾经很软弱，我承认。不过话又说回来，我们当时也不知道事情会变成现在这样，会变成一种危机。总的来说，人们看起来仍然很开心。一年年过去了，就算有人有所质疑，也会守口如瓶。但我不是在为我们的疏忽而辩解，先生，一点都不是。以我那时在议会的地位，我知道，跟其他人一样，我也应该受到谴责。最后——承认这点，让我感到羞愧难当——最后是这城里的居民，是普普通通的老百姓，才迫使我们直面我们的责任。这些

普普通通的老百姓，至少领先了我们一大步，那时候他们的生活已日渐凄惨。我还记得我头一次意识到这个事实的那一刻。那是三年前了，听完克里斯托弗先生最近一次独奏后，我走回家——我记得，当时他演奏的是卡赞的《大提琴和三支笛的怪诞》。我在漆黑的利布曼公园中急匆匆往家走，那天还挺冷的，我看见药师科勒先生走在我前面一点。我知道他也去了音乐会，于是我赶上他，我们开始聊天。起初，我还刻意将想法闷在心里，但后来，我终于问他是否喜欢克里斯托弗先生的独奏。是的，很喜欢，科勒先生说。但他说这话的样子肯定有点不对劲。我记得片刻之后我就再次问起他是否喜欢这场音乐会。这次，科勒先生说 he 很喜欢，但克里斯托弗先生的表演有点功利。是的，他用的是‘功利’这个词。您能想象吧。我在接下来开口之前仔细斟酌了一番。最后，我决定豁出去了，说道：‘科勒先生，我同意您的看法。有点单调无力。’科勒先生回答说 he 脑袋里蹦出的单词是‘冷漠’。那时，我们已到了公园大门口。我们互道晚安，就分开了。我记得那晚我几乎一夜未眠，瑞德先生。像科勒先生这样普普通通的老百姓、正派的市民都持这样的看法了。很明显，不能再继续装下去了。是时候该我们——我们这些有影响力的人——坦白我们的错误了，不管牵涉多深，影响多远。啊，请原谅，坐在葛尔曼先生旁边的确确实实是沙佛先生。我知道他们两位对发生的一切有些有趣的见解。他们比我小一辈，看问题肯定会稍稍不同。此外，我知道他们今早多么渴望见到您。我们过去吧，请。”

佩德森站起身，我看着 he 弯腰靠边穿过他那排座位，小声咕哝着抱歉。走到过道，他才直起身，向我示意。尽管很累，但没办法，只能随 he 去了，我也站起身，开始向过道挪去。这当儿，我发现电影院里几乎洋溢着喜庆的气氛。这里那里人们都在边看电影边相互逗乐，小声交谈，似乎根本没人介意我从中挤过。相反，人们都把双腿折向一边，或者急切地跳起身来。有几位甚至蜷缩靠在座位上，双脚腾空，一边开心地尖叫。

我一走到过道，佩德森就领着我走上铺着地毯的斜坡，走到后排座位的什么地方。他停下来，做了一个请的动作，说：

“您先请，瑞德先生。”

第九章

我再一次从一排人前面挤过去，这次，佩德森紧跟在我后面，代我小声道歉。不一会儿，我们看到有群人凑在一起，我花了好一会儿时间才确定他们在打牌，后排的向前倾着身体，前排的向后扭着身体。我们走近，他们抬头。佩德森向他们介绍了我，他们全部起身成半站立姿势。等我舒服地坐在他们中间之后，他们才又重新坐下。我发现自己握了无数只从黑暗中伸出的手。

离我最近的男人穿着一身商务西装，领扣大开，领带松散，满身威士忌的味道，而且我还发现他没办法集中注意力看我。从他肩头望过去，他的同伴瘦瘦的，长着一张古怪的满是雀斑的脸，看起来较清醒，但领带也是松散着。我还没来得及看清楚其他人，那个醉汉再次握了握我的手，说：

“希望你喜欢这部电影，先生。”

“很喜欢，其实，这碰巧是我一直以来都很喜欢的一部。”

“哦，幸好今晚放的是这部。是的。我也喜欢这部电影。经典之作啊。瑞德先生，您要不要接我这手牌？”他把手里的牌举到我面前。

“不，谢谢。请别因为我打断你们。”

“我刚刚告诉瑞德先生，”佩德森在我后面说，“这儿的生活大不如前，甚至对你们这些比我年轻的绅士来说也是，我肯定你们能证实……”

“啊，是的，过去的美好时光，”那醉汉迷迷糊糊地说，“啊，是的，过去美好的日子，一切都很美好。”

“西奥在想罗莎·卡莱纳了。”他身后的雀斑男人说，引起周围一阵哄笑。

“胡说，”醉汉抗议道，“别在我们尊贵的客人面前让我难堪了。”

“哦，好的，好的。”他朋友继续道，“西奥过去曾深深地爱上了罗莎·卡莱纳，就是现在的克里斯托弗夫人。”

“我从没爱过她。再说，我那个时候已经结婚了。”

“那就更可惜了，西奥。实在太可惜了。”

“胡说八道。”

“我记得，西奥，”后排传来一个陌生声音，“你过去没完没了，老是谈论罗莎·卡莱纳，简直烦死我们了。”

“我那时候不知道她的本性。”

“吸引你的正是她的真本性吧，”那个声音继续道，“你老是覬覦那些不肯多看你三秒的女人。”

“这话没错。”雀斑男人说。

“什么没错……”

“不，让我来解释给瑞德先生听。”雀斑男人把手放在他醉汉朋友肩上，斜着身子对我说，“现在的克里斯托弗夫人——我们还是愿意叫她罗莎·卡莱纳——她是本地姑娘，和我们一样，跟我们一起长大。她依旧是个美人胚，而那时候，呃，她迷住了我们所有人。她很美，也很难接近。她曾经在时力高画廊工作，现在已经关门了。她过去常常坐在桌子后面，其实不过就是个服务员。她经常周二和周四在那儿……”

“周二和周五。”醉汉打断他。

“周二和周五。抱歉。当然了，西奥记得。总之，他常去那画廊——就是间白色小屋子——他总是去，假装看展览。”

“胡说……”

“不只你一个，是不是，西奥？你还有很多情敌。尤尔根·哈泽。艾里奇·布鲁尔。甚至还有海因茨·沃达克。他们都是常客。”

“还有奥托·罗舍尔。”西奥怀念地说，“他常去。”

“真的吗？是的，罗莎有很多倾慕者。”

“我从没跟她说过话，”西奥说，“除了一次，我问她要本目录。”

“对罗莎来说，事情再明显不过了，”雀斑男人继续道，“自从十几岁开始，她就认为所有本地男子都配不上她。渐渐地，她因以几近无情的方式拒绝他人的追求而闻名。所以，像西奥这样的可怜虫，

没怎么跟她说过话，还真是明智啊。但只要有什么名人、艺术家、音乐家、作家这样的人来往这里，她就会不顾廉耻追随他们。她总是加入这样那样的委员会，也就是说能接近几乎所有造访这里的名流。她会去赶所有的招待会，活动开始后的半个小时内，就把客人弄到一个角落，聊啊聊，聊啊聊，而且直勾勾地盯着他的双眼。当然，这引起了很多的揣测——我是说，关于她的性行为——但没人能证明什么。她总是很聪明。但你看看她那讨好来访名流的样子，不禁怀疑她至少和其中一些人有什么瓜葛。她非常迷人，肯定迷倒一大片。但对本地男人，她连看都不看一眼。”

“汉斯·荣鲍德老是声称和她有过一腿。”叫西奥的男子插话道，引起了很多笑声。不远处几个声音嘲讽地重复道：“汉斯·荣鲍德！”然而，佩德森不安地激动起来。

“先生们，”他开始说，“我和瑞德先生刚刚在讨论……”

“我从没跟她说过话。除了那一次问她要目录。”

“啊，西奥，没关系。”雀斑男人拍了拍朋友的后背，后者向前趴了趴。“没关系，瞧瞧她现在的窘境。”

西奥仿佛陷入了沉思。“她对待一切都是那样，”他说，“不仅仅是爱情。只有对艺术圈的人，只有对真正的名流，她才有时间。否则从她那儿得不到一点尊重。这儿人人都不喜欢她。她嫁给克里斯托弗很久之前，就没人喜欢她了。”

“要不是长得漂亮，”雀斑男人对我说，“人人都会厌恶她。但结果却是，总有像西奥这样的男人甘愿堕入她的魔咒。总之，后来克里斯托弗来到这里，他是个职业提琴演奏家，而且有着非凡的经历！罗莎死命追求他，一点也不害臊，好像根本不在乎我们任何人的想法。她知道自己想要什么，并毫不留情地追求得到。这倒也让人钦佩，不过就是有些骇人罢了。克里斯托弗被她迷住了，他到这儿之后的第一年，他们就结婚了。克里斯托弗正是她梦寐以求的人。呃，希望她的钱投资得有价值。做他老婆做了十六年，本来也没那么糟糕。但现在怎么样？他完蛋了。她现在该怎么办？”

“她现在甚至在画廊里也谋不到一份差事。”西奥说，“过去那么多年，她深深伤害了我们，伤害了我们的自尊。跟克里斯托弗一样，她跟这座城市已经彻底决裂了。”

“有一派人认为，”雀斑男人说，“罗莎会跟克里斯托弗离开这里，直到在其他什么地方安顿好了之后就甩了他。但德雷姆勒先生——”他示意了一下前排就座的某个人，“却坚信她会继续呆在这儿。”

刚提到他名字，前排的男人就扭过头来。显然，他一直都在听我们的谈话，现在开始权威式地发言：“要知道罗莎·卡莱纳还有胆怯的一面。我和她是同学，同一年级。她一直都有这一面，对她可是诅咒。对她来说，这座城市不够好，可是她太胆怯了，不敢离开。你们注意到了吗，尽管野心很大，她却从来没有想要离开。许多人没有注意到，但她这胆怯的一面，确实存在。所以我赌她留下。她会留下再碰碰运气。她可能会期望再钓一个过路的名流。毕竟，她这个年纪，风韵犹存啊。”

附近传来一个细尖的高嗓门：“她或许会追求布罗茨基。”

这话引起了一阵前所未有的哄笑。

“完全有可能。”那嗓音继续道，带了一种假装受伤的语气。“没错，他是老了，但她也不年轻了呀。这儿还有谁能入她的眼？”笑声更大，鼓励着他继续。“其实，布罗茨基对她来说是最合适的对象。我得向她推荐推荐。全城现在对克里斯托弗的憎恨还有其他一切都会祸及到她。但如果她成了布罗茨基的情妇，或者甚至是布罗茨基太太，啊，这可是撇清和克里斯托弗一切关系的最好办法了。而且这意味着她还可以继续保持她……她目前的地位。”

这会儿，周围已经是笑声一片了，甚至前面三排的人都扭过头来，开心大笑。而我身边，佩德森清了清嗓子。

“先生们，拜托，”他说，“我太失望了。瑞德先生现在对这一切会怎么想呢？你们还是把布罗茨基先生——布罗茨基先生，请这样称呼——你们还是拿老眼光看他。你们这样显得自己很蠢。布罗茨基先生已不再是说笑的对象了。不管人们怎么想施密特先生针对克里斯托弗太太的提议，布罗茨基先生无论如何绝不是逗乐的对象……”

“真高兴您能来到这儿，瑞德先生。”西奥插话进来，“但现在太晚了。事已至此，太晚了……”

“胡说八道，西奥。”佩德森说，“我们正处在转折点，一个很重要的转折点。瑞德先生就是来告诉我们这一点的，是不是，先生？”

“是的……”

“太晚了。我们已经失去它了。为什么我们不听天由命，就随它变成另一个冰冷的、孤独的城市呢？其他城市已经是这样了。至少我们还会顺应潮流。这座城市的灵魂，不是病了，瑞德先生，而是死了。现在太迟了。十年前，或许有可能。那时候还有机会。但现在不行了。佩德森先生，”醉汉无精打采地指着我的同伴，“你，先生。你，汤姆森先生，还有斯蒂卡先生。你们这些善良的先生。你们一个个都推诿搪塞……”

“又来了，西奥。”雀斑男人插嘴道，“佩德森先生说得对。现在还不到这样自暴自弃的时候呢。我们已经有了布罗茨基——布罗茨基先生——而且，说不定他或许……”

“布罗茨基，布罗茨基。太迟了。我们现在已经完蛋了。就让它成为一个冷漠的现代城市吧，就这样了结算了。”

我感觉佩德森把手放在我胳膊上。“瑞德先生，很抱歉……”

“你推诿搪塞，先生！十七年了。十七年了，就任凭克里斯托弗为所欲为，没有受到任何挑战。现在你们又要给我们什么？布罗茨基！瑞德先生，太迟了。”

“我真的很抱歉，”佩德森对我说，“让您听到这些言论。”

我们身后有个人说：“西奥，你喝醉了，而且情绪消沉。明天一早你就得去找瑞德先生，向他道歉。”

“呃，”我说，“我很有兴趣听听各方面的意见……”

“但这根本不代表任何一方！”佩德森抗议道，“我向您保证，瑞德先生，西奥的观点根本不代表这儿人们的普遍想法。无论在哪儿，大街上还是电车里，我都有一种强烈的感觉，一种乐观向上的感觉。”

这一席话引来了一片赞同的低语声。

“别信他说的，瑞德先生，”西奥说，抓着我的衣袖。“您来这儿干的是傻子的差事。我们做个快速民意测试吧，就在这儿，电影院里。我们问问这里的一些人……”

“瑞德先生，”佩德森连忙说道，“我要回家睡觉了，电影是不错，但我已经看了很多次了。而您，先生，您一定很累了。”

“说实在的，我真的很累了。可以的话，我就跟您一起走吧。”然后，我转身对其他人说：“抱歉，先生们，我想我现在该回酒店了。”

“但瑞德先生，”雀斑男人说，声音里透着担心，“请先别走。您得留下，最起码等宇航员拆除掉哈尔。”

“瑞德先生，”这排远处传来一个声音，“要不您接我的牌吧，今天晚上这游戏玩太多了。这光线，老是看不清楚牌。我视力大不如前了。”

“您太客气了，但我真的要走了。”

我正要跟他们互道晚安，佩德森已经起身，开始往外挪了。我在后面跟着，边走边向后面的那群人挥了挥手。

佩德森对刚刚发生的事显然很焦虑，我们挪到过道时，他仍默默地走着，头低低的。离开放映厅的时候，我最后扫了一眼大银幕，看见克林特·伊斯特伍德准备拆除哈尔，正在仔细检查他那把巨大的螺丝刀。

外面的夜——一片死寂，寒风瑟瑟，迷雾重重——与温暖嘈杂的电影院构成如此强烈的对比，我们在人行道边停下，好似在重新找回各自的方向。

“瑞德先生，我不知道说什么，”佩德森说，“西奥一直是个很不错的人，但有时候，大餐之后……”他沮丧地摇了摇头。

“别担心。劳碌辛苦的人需要放松放松。今晚过得非常愉快。”

“我感到非常羞愧……”

“请不要这样。我们都忘了吧。真的，我很愉快。”

我们开始步行，脚步声在空荡荡的街道回响。好一会儿，佩德森继续缄默着。然后，他说：

“您得相信我，先生。我们从未低估向这儿的人推销这一主意的困难。我是说，关于布罗茨基先生的主意。我向您保证一切都处理得相当谨慎。”

“是的，我相信是的。”

“起初，我们非常小心选择向谁提起这个主意。在早期阶段，只有那些最可能有同情心的人才能听，这点至关重要。然后，通过这些 人，我们才允许慢慢地向全部公众透露实情。那样，我们才能确保整个想法是以正面的形象呈现。同时，我们还采取了其他办法。比如，我们以布罗茨基先生的名义举办了一系列晚宴，从上层名流中间邀请了一些千挑万选的宾客。起先，宴会都是小型的，而且几乎是秘密进行的，但渐渐地，我们将挑选网络越扩越大，我们的情况也得到越来越多的支持。还有，所有重要的公众活动，我们都保证布罗茨基先生一定出现在显贵当中。比如说，北京芭蕾舞团来访的时候，我们安排他坐在魏斯夫妇的包厢。当然，在私人层面上，我们都强调提起他的时候，要用最崇敬的语气。到现在，我们已经努力了两年了，总体而言，我们都非常满意。他的总体形象有了明显的改观。所以我们判断是时候走出这关键的一步了。所以刚才才会那么令人扫兴。我是说里面的那些先生，本来他们应该树立榜样的。如果每次稍稍放松放松之后，连他们都老调重弹，我们又如何期望所有的人……”他声音越来越轻，又摇了摇头。“我太失望了。代表我自己，还有您，瑞德先生。”

他又陷入沉默。我们二人都没说话，过了一会儿，我叹了口气，说：

“公众观念难改变啊。”

佩德森走了几步，继续沉默，然后说：“您得想想我们的起点。您得这么想，考虑到我们的起点，您就会明白我们已经有了很大的进步。您得理解，先生，布罗茨基先生跟我们住在这里很长时间了，而这些年来，从未有人听他谈起，更不要说弹奏任何音乐了。是的，我们都隐约知道他在自己的祖国曾担任过乐队指挥。可是您看，由于我们从未见到他的那一面，我们也就从未认为他是那样的了。其实，坦率而言，直到最近，布罗茨基先生只有在喝得酩酊大醉，在城里踉踉跄跄，大喊大叫的时候才真正被大家留意。其余的时间，他就和他的狗住在北边的公路边上，过着隐居的生活。呃，也不完全正确，大家经常看到他出入图书馆。一个星期有两三个上午，他会去图书馆，坐在常坐的窗边位置，把狗拴在桌脚边。按规定是不许带狗进去的。但很早以前，管理员就认定了最简单的解决之道，莫过于让他带狗进去，这可远比跟布罗茨基先生大干上一架简单哩。所以，有时候能看到他在那儿，狗拴在脚边，翻阅着一摞摞的书——不外乎就是那一卷卷臃肿冗长的历史书。而且，只要有人在室内开始发出些许声响，哪怕是最简短的相互低语，甚至只是打个招呼，他就会忽地起

身，冲那‘罪犯’大声咆哮。理论上，当然，他是对的。但我们从未严格坚持图书馆保持安静的规定。大家相遇的时候，都喜欢聊上一阵，毕竟，在其他公共场合都是这样的。而且，再想想，布罗茨基先生自己带狗进去也是违反规定的，这也难怪大家都会认为他不可理喻。但时不时地，某几日上午，一种莫名的情绪会笼罩着他。他会坐在桌边阅读，脸上一副凄惨无助的表情。你会发现他坐在那儿，神游太虚，泪眼汪汪。每当这个时候，人们就知道是时候可以说话了。通常会有人先试探一下。如果布罗茨基先生没反应的话，很快地，满屋子的人就会开始讲话了。有时候——人们故意对着干！——整个图书馆会比布罗茨基先生不在的任何时候都吵。我记得有天早晨我去还书，整个地方听起来就像个火车站。我几乎得扯开嗓门大喊，还书处才能听清我讲的是什么。而布罗茨基先生呢，置身其中却无动于衷，完全沉迷于自己的世界。我得说，他那样子还真是令人伤感。清晨的光线让他看起来那样虚弱无力。鼻尖上有一滴泪，眼神飘渺，他已经忘记自己翻到了哪一页。我突然意识到整个气氛有点残酷！好似他们在占他便宜，但也说不上来到底怎么占他便宜了。但您看，不日清晨，他就又能立刻让他们安静。唉，无论如何，瑞德先生，我想说的是，多年来，这就是布罗茨基先生给我们的印象。我想，在相对来说如此短的时间内，期望大家完全改变对他的看法是有点过了。我们已经取得相当大的进步了，但您刚刚看到了……”恼怒的情绪再一次占据了上风。“但他们应该更清楚的，”他自言自语道。

我们在十字路口停了下来。雾更浓了，我都找不到方向了。佩德森环视四周，然后又继续走，领着我沿着一条狭窄的街道前行，人行道上泊满了一排排的汽车。

“我会送您到酒店，瑞德先生。我走这条路也能回家。我相信酒店您还满意吧？”

“哦，是的，挺好的。”

“霍夫曼先生打理得很好。他是位出色的经理，也是个大好人。当然，如您所知，布罗茨基先生能恢复，全都得仰仗霍夫曼先生啊。”

“哦，是的，当然。”

有好一阵，人行道上的车辆迫使我们一前一后行走。之后，我们慢慢走出人行道，走到大街中间，我赶上佩德森和他并排走，发现他的心情轻松起来。他微笑着对我说：

“我知道您明天要去伯爵夫人家里听唱片。我们市长，冯·温特斯坦先生，我知道他也打算去。他非常想邀您到一边，和您谈些事情。当然，主要还是唱片的事。棒极了！”

“是的。我非常期待。”

“伯爵夫人是位非凡的女士。她一次又一次地证明了她的思维让我们其他人汗颜。我曾经不止一次问她，究竟是什么让她第一次有这样的想法。‘直觉。’她总是说，‘某一天，我醒来，就有了这直觉。’这是怎样的一位女士啊！弄到那么多留声机唱片可不是件容易的事，但她动用了一位在柏林的行家采购商，把这事儿办成了。当然我们其他人那时对此都一无所知，而且我敢说就算我们知道了，我们也只会笑话这整个想法。然后，一天晚上，她把我们召到她住处。就在两年前的上个月，一个非常愉快、晴朗的夜晚。我们全都到了，十一个人，在她的起居室集合，没人知道是什么事情。她招待我们用茶点，然后几乎立刻就开始对我们讲话。我们怨天尤人已经够久了，她说，是时候采取行动了。是时候承认我们曾经多么地误入歧途，是时候采取积极的措施，尽最大的努力弥补损失了。否则，我们的孙子，我们的曾孙，就永远不会原谅我们了。哎，这可不是什么新鲜事了，我们几个月来一直都在不停地彼此重复着如斯的态度想法，直至今刻，我们所有人只是点头附和，跟平时一样，制造点噪音。但接着伯爵夫人继续道，就克里斯托弗先生而言，她说，已经没必要跟他再耗下去了，他现在已被整个城市各行各业的人所唾弃。但此事本身不足以扭转整个社会中心的痛苦似螺旋上升愈渐愈猛的势头，我们得设法营造一种新的情绪，一个新的时代。对她说的这些，我们均点头称是，但瑞德先生，这些想法，我们之前已经相互交流过很多次了。我相信冯·温特斯坦先生甚至也这样说过，只不过他是用了最为谦恭有礼的方式罢了。这时候，伯爵夫人开始吐露她心中的想法。解决办法，她宣布，很可能一直都存在于我们中间。她继续解释道，但，呃，乍一听，自然地，我们都不能相信自己的耳朵。布罗茨基先生？那个图书馆的怪老头，醉醺醺步态蹒跚的老头？她真的是在说布罗茨基先生吗？要是换了其他任何人，我们肯定会放声大笑的。但伯爵夫人，我记得，依然自信满满。她建议我们大家放松自己，她要给我们放点音乐听听。要仔细听。然后她开始播放那些唱片，一张又一张。我们就坐在那儿听着，屋外，太阳渐渐西沉。音质很差，伯爵夫人的立体声音响设备，您明天就能看见，也有些陈旧了，但这一切都没关系。没几分钟，那音乐就开始对我们大施魔力，悠悠地将我们送入宁静清幽之中。有些人还眼含热泪。我们意识到，我们听到的正是这些

年大家殷殷所盼的。我们居然赞颂像克里斯托弗这样的人，突然间，这显得更加不可理解了。此时此刻，我们又在聆听真正的音乐。这位指挥家不仅才华横溢，而且认同我们的价值观。然后，音乐停止了，我们起身，伸了伸腿——我们已经足足听了三个小时——然而，呃，想到布罗茨基先生——布罗茨基先生！——还是荒唐透顶。我们指出这些唱片很老了。而布罗茨基先生——只有他自己知道何故——已经在很久前就放弃音乐了。而且呢，他还有自己的……自己的问题。他已经跟从前判若两人了。我们很快纷纷摇起头来。可是，然后呢，伯爵夫人又说道，我们已到了危机边缘，我们要解放思想，我们必须找到布罗茨基先生，和他谈谈，确定他目前的能力。毫无疑问，不用提醒，我们也知道目前情况的紧迫性。我们每人都能详述十来个悲伤的案例：孤独寂寞的生活；好多家庭对曾经视为理所当然的幸福深感绝望。就在这时，霍夫曼先生，即您所在酒店的经理，突然间清了清喉咙，宣布他愿意负责布罗茨基先生的事。他会义无反顾——他一脸庄重地说着这话，而且他当时还站起来了呢——他会义无反顾地评估情势，而且，如果还有一点希望令布罗茨基先生重振雄风，那么，他，霍夫曼先生，就会亲自负责处理。如果我们信任他承担这项任务，他发誓绝不会让整个社会失望。我说过的，那是两年前的事了。自那以后，我们吃惊地看到霍夫曼先生为了实践他的诺言而付出的努力。虽说进展不总是那么顺利，但总体说来，已经非常显著了。现在布罗茨基先生，呃，已经恢复到目前的状况了。进步如此之大，让我们感到过不了多久就可以迈出关键性的一步了。毕竟，我们能走到现在，不过是把布罗茨基先生好好包装推销了一番而已。总有一天，城里的人得用自己的眼睛看，用自己的耳朵听，才能做出判断。呃，到目前为止，种种迹象表明，我们没有过于雄心勃勃。布罗茨基先生一直都按常规排练。而且据大家说，已经完全赢得了整个乐团的尊重。虽说可能距他上次公演已有好多个年头了，但他貌似宝刀不老。那热情，那晚在伯爵夫人起居室意外经历的那美好的幻境，都在他心灵深处伺机候着，现在正在逐步苏醒过来呢。是的，我们非常有信心，在即将到来的‘周四之夜’他会让所有人为之骄傲。同时，对我们来说，我们已经尽我们所能确保那晚成功。斯图加特·内格尔基金交响乐团，您知道，即便算不上最为顶级的交响乐团，也算非常受人尊敬的乐团啦。他们的演出费用可不便宜呢。尽管如此，对于我们雇佣他们参与这次最为重要的活动，人们几乎没有任何质疑之声，对排练时间也没什么异议。起初，我们拟定的是两周的排练时间，但最后，由于财政委员会的全力支持，我们延长到了三个星期。对于短暂来访的交响乐团，三个星期的盛情款待，再加上各种费用，您能想到，先

生，是个不小的负担啊。但鲜有异议之声。每位议员现在都明白‘周四之夜’的重要性。大家都明白应该给布罗茨基先生机会。尽管如此——”佩德森突然重重地叹了口气，“尽管如此，您今晚看到了，陈旧的根深蒂固的观念难改啊。这也正是您对我们的帮助，瑞德先生，您同意到鄙市，对我们来说至关重要。人们听您的话不会像听我们的话那样。实际上，先生，跟您说吧，一听说您要来，这座城市的情绪就完全改变了。人们对于您在‘周四之夜’要说的话充满最高的期待。电车上，咖啡馆里，人们几乎不谈别的。当然，我一点也不知道您为我们准备了什么。或许您会刻意不将未来刻画得太瑰丽美好，或许您会告诫我们每一个人，若想重拾以往的欢乐就必须付出辛苦努力。您这样的告诫是顺理成章的。但我也了解，在呼吁调动听众的积极性和公益心这方面，你的技巧是多么纯熟。不管怎样，有一点是肯定的。那就是等您发完言，这城市里没人会再像以前那样看待布罗茨基先生，继续把他当成衣衫褴褛的老酒鬼了。啊，看得出您很担心，瑞德先生。请别担心。我们这里也许看起来很闭塞，但在某些场合的表现还是很卓越的。特别是霍夫曼先生，一直在努力营造一个真正美好华丽的夜晚。请放心吧，先生，各个阶层的市民都会参加。至于布罗茨基先生本人，我说过，我肯定他不会让我们失望。我肯定他会大大出乎每个人的意料。”

其实，佩德森提到的我脸上的表情和“担心”没有一点关系，我是对自己感到越来越懊恼。真实的情况是，我不仅远远没有准备好即将到来的、针对这个城市的演讲，甚至连背景研究都没做好。回顾所有的经历，我不明白自己怎么会任事态发展到现在这种情势。我记得就在那天下午，在酒店精致的中庭，我一口口呷着浓烈的苦咖啡，反复提醒自己，精心筹划当日剩下的时光，充分利用有限的时间，这事是何等重要。我坐在那儿看着身后雾气腾腾的喷泉在镜中的倒影时，甚至想象着自己会遇到的情况，跟今天在电影院碰到的差不多，但我对本地一系列问题应对自如，给同伴留下深刻印象，轻轻松松，权威自然来，同时自然而然利用克里斯托弗至少制造一个笑料，简单易记，第二天就能传遍整个城市，随口道来。但我却让自己被其他事情左右，结果，在电影院的整个期间，我没能做出哪怕是一个卓尔不凡的评价，甚至有可能给人留下了不够彬彬有礼的印象。突然我又对索菲引起的混乱感到一阵强烈的不满，还因为她，我不得不彻底牺牲自己的行事标准。

我们又停了下来。我意识到我们正站在酒店门口。

“呃，今晚很开心，”佩德森说，他与我握手告别。“非常期待未来几日能再见到您。但现在您必须得休息了。”

我谢过他，道了晚安，走进大厅，他的脚步声也渐渐消失在夜色当中。

年轻的接待员还在当班。“希望您电影看得愉快，先生。”他边说着，边递给我钥匙。

“是的，非常愉快。谢谢你的建议。让我轻松不少。”

“是的，很多客人都觉得这是个圆满结束一天的好方法。哦，古斯塔夫说鲍里斯对他的房间很满意，很快就睡着了。”

“啊，很好。”

我向他道了晚安，急匆匆地穿过大厅走进电梯。

到房间以后，我感觉长长的一天下来，自己浑身脏兮兮的，便换上浴袍，准备洗澡。但就在我正研究浴室摆设的时候，一阵强烈的疲惫感袭来，所以我能做的就真的只是摇摇晃晃地走回床边，瘫倒在床上，立刻沉沉入睡了。

第十章

我还没睡多久，电话铃就在耳边响起。我由着它响了一会儿，然后终于坐起身，接起电话。

“哦，瑞德先生。是我，霍夫曼。”

我等着他解释为何扰我清梦，但酒店经理没有继续说下去。一阵尴尬的沉默之后，他又说道：

“是我，先生。霍夫曼。” 又一阵停顿，然后他说：“我在下面大厅。”

“哦，是吗。”

“很抱歉，瑞德先生，或许您在忙乎什么吧。”

“事实上，我正在睡觉。”

这话好像让霍夫曼吃了一惊，因为之后又是一阵沉默。我很快笑了笑，说：

“我的意思是，刚刚躺下，可以说。自然不会睡得很沉，直到……直到今天的工作全部结束之前。”

“没错，没错。” 霍夫曼听起来松了口气。“就是喘口气，这样而已。非常理解。呃，无论如何，我会在楼下大厅等您，先生。”

放下电话，我坐在床上想怎么办。我仍旧疲惫——才睡了那么几分钟——非常想忘记刚才这一切，继续睡觉。但最后我知道这是不可能的，就起了身。

我发现自己穿着浴袍就睡着了，正欲脱下更衣，突然觉得干脆就穿着它下楼去见霍夫曼吧。毕竟，晚上这个时候，除了霍夫曼和接待员，不可能再遇见别的人了，而且穿着这身装束下楼可以婉转而又明确地告诉他：时辰已太晚了，他在妨碍我睡觉。我出门进了走廊，向电梯走去，心里特别恼怒。

至少起初，浴袍好似发挥了预期的作用，因为我一进大厅，就听到了霍夫曼的开场白：“很抱歉打扰您休息了，瑞德先生。这一路奔波，您一定很累了。”

我丝毫不想隐藏我的疲惫，一只手捋过头发，说道：“没关系，霍夫曼先生。但我相信这不会太久吧。其实我现在挺累的。”

“哦，不会太久，绝不会。”

“好。”

我留意到霍夫曼穿着一件雨衣，雨衣下，一身晚装，系着宽腰带，打着蝴蝶领结。

“当然，您应该听说了，那个坏消息。”他说。

“坏消息？”

“是坏消息，不过请允许我这样说，先生，我有信心，非常有信心，这坏消息不会引起严重后果。我相信，到天亮之前，您同样会如此确信的，瑞德先生。”

“我肯定会有的。”我说，安慰地点了点头。过了一会儿，我断定此番情形严重且无望，所以直截了当地问道：“很抱歉，霍夫曼先生，您说的坏消息是指什么？最近有这么多坏消息。”

他警觉地看着我。“这么多坏消息？”

我大笑了一声。“我是说非洲的动乱，等等。到处都有坏消息。”我又大笑。

“哦，我明白了。我说的坏消息当然是指布罗茨基先生的那条狗。”

“啊，是吗。布罗茨基先生的狗。”

“您一定会赞同，先生，这可真是不幸。时机不好啊。我处处小心谨慎，却出了这么一档子事儿！”他恼怒地叹了口气。

“是的，太糟糕了。太糟糕了。”

“但我说过，我很有信心。是的，有信心这事不会引起任何重大挫折。但这会儿，要不我们立刻出发？其实，我现在想，您是非常正确的，瑞德先生。这会儿出发时机最好不过了。意味着我们不会到得太早或者太晚。非常正确，应该冷静地处理这些事。千万不要惊慌。先生，那么我们出发吧。”

“呃……霍夫曼先生。我好像判断失误了，这种场合我却穿了这身衣裳。您不介意给我几分钟上楼换件衣服吧。”

“哦。”霍夫曼飞快地扫了我一眼。“您看上去好极了，瑞德先生。请别担心。呃，”他焦急地看了看手表，“我们还是出发吧。是的，这会儿时机刚好。请。”

外面漆黑一片，雨水连绵。我跟着霍夫曼绕过酒店大楼，沿着一条小径，走进了室外的一个小停车场，那里停着五六辆汽车。一盏孤寂的路灯紧紧地固定在一个栅栏柱上面，借着灯光，我能分辨出路前面地面上的一个个大水坑。

霍夫曼朝着一辆黑色的大轿车跑过去，打开了客门。我一路走过去的时候，能感觉到雨水不停地渗进拖鞋。我正要上车，一只脚却踩进了一个深深的水坑，完全湿透了。我惊呼了一声，但霍夫曼已经急急忙忙绕到驾驶座一侧了。

霍夫曼载着我开出停车场，我则使劲地在柔软的车地板上弄干双脚。我抬起头，发现车已经开出了停车场，行驶在主干道上，我吃惊地看到交通变得异常繁忙。此外，许多商店和饭店现在都苏醒过来，成群的顾客在亮闪闪的窗户里面转悠。我们继续开着，交通逐渐拥挤起来，直到市中心附近某处，我们夹在三车道的车辆中间，完全停滞了下来。霍夫曼看了看手表，绝望地猛捶方向盘。

“太倒霉了。”我同情地说道，“不久前我刚出来的时候，整座城市好像睡着了一样。”

他正出神，心不在焉地说道：“这座城市的交通越来越糟糕了。我不知道有什么解决办法。”他又猛捶了一下方向盘。

接下来几分钟，车慢慢往前挪动，我们默默地坐在车里。然后霍夫曼轻轻地说道：

“瑞德先生一直在奔波。”

我以为我听错了，但他接着又说了一遍——这次有礼貌地轻轻地挥了挥手——我意识到，他是在排练，到目的地之后如何解释我们迟到的原因。

“瑞德先生一直在奔波。瑞德先生——一直在奔波。”

我们继续行驶，穿梭在夜间繁忙的交通中，霍夫曼继续时不时地低声嘟囔着什么，大部分我都没听清。他已然进入自己的世界，看起来越来越紧张。中间有一次，我们没能及时赶上绿灯，我听到他嘟囔道：“不，不，布罗茨基先生！他是个极好的、极好的一个人！”

最后转了个弯，我们驶出了城市。不久，高楼大厦消失了，我们行驶在一条长长的小路上，周围是一片漆黑的开阔地——可能是农场——两边都是。交通稀疏，可以让这辆大马力汽车加速行驶。我看到霍夫曼明显地放松下来，接下来他对我说话时，已基本恢复了以往的彬彬有礼。

“告诉我，瑞德先生。您对酒店的一切还满意吗？”

“哦，是的。一切都很好。谢谢。”

“您还满意您的房间？”

“哦，是的，是的。”

“床，舒服吗？”

“非常舒服。”

“我之所以这样问，是因为我们确以我们酒店的床而自豪。我们定期更换新床垫。这城里其他酒店没有一家像我们这样频繁地更换床垫。这一点我是了解的。据我们许多所谓的竞争对手说，我们淘汰掉的床垫，还能再多用上几年。您知道吗，瑞德先生，假如我们把五个财政年度中淘汰掉的所有旧床垫一个个立起来，头对头地纵向排列，我们就能沿着主干道，从市议会开始，顺着喷泉一路下去，绕过斯泰恩盖斯街街角，直达韦格尔先生药房，构成一条长线呢。”

“真的吗？真是了不起。”

“瑞德先生，请允许我直言相告。对您房间的安排我考虑了很多。在等您来的那些日子，自然地，我花了很长时间考虑为您安排哪个房间。大部分酒店会很简单地回答这个问题：‘店里哪个房间最好？’但在我的酒店却不是这样，瑞德先生。这些年来，这么多房间我都给予了足够的关注。有些时候我变得——哈哈！——像人们说的，着迷了，是的，对这个或者那个房间着迷了。一旦我看到某个房间的潜质，就会花几天时间深思熟虑，然后，我会细致地加以翻新，使之尽量符合我的想象。也不是每次都能成功，但很多情况下，经过一番努力之后，结果会很接近我脑中的想象；当然，这样是非常令人满足的。可是——或许是我性格上的某种缺陷使然吧——我一旦完成了一个房间的翻新，令我心满意足之后，我就会被另一个房间的潜质所吸引。不知不觉地，我发现自己把大量的时间和心思花费在了新的工程上。是的，有人称之为强迫症，但我觉得这没什么不妥。没什么比酒店按照一成不变的理念装饰一个个房间更沉闷不堪了。就我而

言，每个房间都应按照其各自的特点加以考虑。总之，瑞德先生，我的意思是酒店里没有哪间房是我最喜欢的。所以考虑再三之后，我断定现在您使用的这个房间一定最令您满意。但见到您之后，我就不那么确定了。”

“哦，不，霍夫曼先生，”我插嘴道，“现在这房间很好。”

“但自从见到您之后，从早到晚我一直断断续续在考虑这个问题，先生。我觉得，在我脑海中，您在气质上更适合另一间房。要不早我带您去看看吧。您肯定会更喜欢的。”

“不用了，霍夫曼先生，真的。现在的房间……”

“请允许我坦白相告，瑞德先生。您的莅临，可是让您现在的这个房间首次面临真正的考验。您看，自四年前对它进行概念重建后，这个房间第一次迎来了真正尊贵的客人入住。当然，我先前无法预计到有一天您会驾临我们这里。但事实是，设计那个房间的时候，我脑海中想象的是一个与您很相似的形象。我想说的是，您看，只有现在，只有您的到来，才正好让其发挥了其本身的意义。而且，呃，我能清晰地看出四年前做了几个关键性的错误判断。太难了，以我的经验判断。不，毋庸置疑，我非常不满意。您跟这房间不合。我有个提议，先生，我们想让您搬到343，我感觉那里更适合您。在那儿，您会感到更宁静，睡得更香甜。至于您现在的房间嘛，呃，我从早到晚时断时续地在考虑，按目前的情形看，我觉得把它拆掉得了。”

“霍夫曼先生，真的，不！”

我喊出这话的时候，霍夫曼眼睛从路上挪开，诧异地盯着我。我大笑，很快地又恢复原状，说道：

“我的意思是，不用因为我这么麻烦破费。”

“我是为了自己心安啊，我向您保证，瑞德先生。酒店是我毕生的心血。但在那个房间上，却犯了一个糟糕的错误。我觉得没有其他方法，只得把它拆了。”

“霍夫曼先生，那个房间……实际上，对它，我非常有感情。我真的很满意。”

“我不明白，先生。”他看起来真的很疑惑。“那房间明显不适合您。现在我见到您本人了，就更确定了。您不用这么客气。发现您特别迷恋它，我很吃惊。”

我突然大声笑了笑，可能是夸张地大声了点。“根本没有的事。特别迷恋？”我又大笑，“只是个房间而已，仅此而已。如果需要拆掉，那就得拆掉吧！我会开开心心地搬到另一个房间的。”

“啊。很高兴您这样看。对我来说，瑞德先生，不只是在接下来您逗留的期间，而且在未来的几年里，只要一想起您曾在我酒店下榻，却要被迫忍受如此不适的房间，我就会懊丧无比。我真的不知道四年前，当时脑子里是怎么想的。完全估计错误！”

我们在黑暗里已经疾驰了一段时间了，却没有遇到其他车辆。远处，我隐约看到几间房子，可能是农舍吧，但除此之外，没什么东西穿透道路两侧空旷的漆黑。我们继续默默开了一会儿，然后霍夫曼说道：

“真是背啊，瑞德先生。那只狗，呃，虽说不小了，但再活个两三年还是容易的。准备工作一直都很顺利。”他摇了摇头。“时机太糟糕了。”然后，他扭头对我微微一笑，继续说道：“但我有信心。是的。我有信心。他现在不会受影响的，甚至这样的事情也不会影响到他。”

“或许应该再送给布罗茨基先生一只狗，权当一件礼物呗。或许给他只小狗仔。”

说这话的时候，我没多加思索，但霍夫曼却做出一副慎重考虑的样子。

“这个不好说，瑞德先生。您一定注意到了，他特别喜欢布鲁诺，几乎就这么一个伴儿，他应该仍在哀悼。但也许您是对的，既然布鲁诺走了，我们必须缓解他的孤寂。或许可以养其他的动物，能慰藉人的。比方说，一只笼中小鸟。然后，到时候，等他准备好了，再给他引荐一只狗。我也说不准。”

随后他沉默了几分钟，我猜他在想其他的事情。但突然，他盯着在我们面前延展的黑漆漆的小路时，大声嘟囔道：

“一头公牛！是的，一头公牛，一头公牛，一头公牛！”

但此时，我对布罗茨基先生的狗这整件事已心生厌烦，于是我一言未发，在座位上往后一靠，决定在行程剩下的时间里好好放松一下。过了一会儿，为了了解我们这次前去处理的一些事情，我对他说：“希望我们不会太晚。”

“不，不，正好。”霍夫曼回答，但他好像心不在焉。过了几分钟后，我听到他再次尖声嘟囔道：“一头公牛！一头公牛！”

过了一会儿，我们驶离了宽阔的马路，进入了一个舒适的住宅区。黑暗中我能看到一幢幢有独立庭院的大房子，四周往往围着高墙或者篱笆。霍夫曼小心翼翼地在林荫道上绕行着，我听到他又一次小声排练着他的台词。

我们穿过几道高高的铁门，驶入一个大公馆的庭院。已有很多车停在了庭院周围，酒店经理花了好一会儿才找到车位。然后他下车，急急忙忙地朝前门入口处奔去。

我又在座位上了待了一会儿，打量着这栋大房子，想找出一些我们将要出席的场合的线索。房子正面是长长一排几乎落地的大窗户。大部分拉着窗帘，都亮着灯，我看到屋子里的情况。

霍夫曼按响了门铃，示意我过去。我下车，大雨已经变成了毛毛细雨。我紧紧地裹着浴衣，向大房子走去，小心躲开水坑。

一位女仆打开大门，引导我们走进宽阔的门廊。门廊两边装饰着巨幅肖像。女仆似乎认识霍夫曼，她接过他的雨衣，他们快速交谈了几句。霍夫曼驻足片刻，对着镜子拉直领带，然后才带路向房子深处走去。

我们来到一个大房间，里面灯光熠熠，招待酒会正在如火如荼地进行。现场至少有一百人，个个身着时髦晚礼服，站着，举杯，相互交谈。我们站在门口，霍夫曼在我面前举起胳膊，好像要保护我，目光凝视，扫寻了一遍屋子。

“他还没到。”他终于低声道，然后扭头对我微微一笑，说：“布罗茨基先生还没到呢。但我坚信，坚信他马上就到。”

霍夫曼转身背对着房间，一时间好似不知所措。然后他说：“请您在这儿等一会儿，瑞德先生，我去找伯爵夫人过来。哦，如果您不介意，请靠后站一点——哈哈！——让别人看不到您。您还记得吧，您应是我们的大惊喜啊。请，我不会离开太久的。”

他走进房间，好一会儿，我看着他的身影在宾客中穿梭，他焦急的步态和周围欢乐的人群形成鲜明对比。我看到有几个人想跟他攀谈，但每次霍夫曼都是心不在焉地微笑一下，然后继续急忙前行。最后，他离开了我的视线，或许是想再次找到他，我向前移了几步。这

时候我定是引起了人们的注意，因为我听到身边一个声音对我说：“啊，瑞德先生，您到了。您终于来了，我们多么开心啊。”

一位约莫六十岁的胖女人把手放在我胳膊上。我笑了笑，低声客套着，她回答道：“这儿每个人都急切地想见到您。”说着，她开始坚定地领着我往人群的中心走去。

我跟着她，挤过一个个宾客，胖女人开始问我问题。起先，是些有关我健康和行程的常规问题。但之后，我们绕着房间继续前行时，她极其详细地盘问起酒店的情况。没错，她问到如斯细节——我是否对肥皂满意？我对大厅里的地毯有什么看法？——我甚至开始怀疑她是不是霍夫曼的职业竞争对手，非常恼火我住在霍夫曼的酒店里。然而，她经过人群时频频点头微笑，当中表现出的态度和礼仪让人毫不怀疑她就是主持这些活动的女主人，我断定她就是伯爵夫人。

我以为她要么会带我去屋里某个特别的地方，要么是见某个特别的人，但不一会儿，我明白了我们正在慢慢绕圈。事实上有好几次，屋里某个地方，我肯定之前我们已经走过至少两次了。让我很好奇的另一件事是，尽管很多人扭头向女主人打招呼，但她却根本无意介绍我。此外，虽然一些人不时礼貌地冲我微笑，却似乎没人对我特别感兴趣。可以确定的是，没人因我从旁经过而中止交谈。这让我有点困惑，我本来都已经下决心好好应付那些寻常却又憋闷的问题和恭维了。

又过了一会儿，我发现这整个屋里的气氛有些怪——整个欢乐的气氛有一种被迫，甚至是戏剧性的感觉——虽然我也说不上来到底是什么。之后，我们终于停了下来——伯爵夫人与两个珠光宝气的女人攀谈了起来——而我也终于有机会环顾四周，了解情况。那时，我才意识到这场合根本不是鸡尾酒会，其实这些人正在等着入席；晚宴本该至少两小时前就开始的，但伯爵夫人和她的同仁们却不得不推迟开席时间，因为不只布罗茨基先生还没到场——他是官方贵宾——还有我亦未到——晚宴上的大惊喜。我继续环顾四周，渐渐明白了我们到之前发生了什么。

眼前是迄今为止为了向布罗茨基先生表达敬意而举办的规模最大的一次晚宴，亦是至关重要的‘周四之夜’前的最后一次，这本来就不可能是件轻松的事，而布罗茨基的姗姗来迟更是让紧张气氛步步升级。不过，起初，宾客们——自诩社会精英，自视甚高——都还保持镇定，每个人都小心翼翼地避免发表一些会被理解为怀疑布罗茨基诚

信度的言论。事实上，大部分人都根本不提布罗茨基，只是没完没了地猜测着何时开席，以缓解焦虑。

接着传来了有关布罗茨基先生那只狗的消息。这消息是怎样以偶然的方式散布的并不清楚。也许是一通电话打来，某位市里的官员不明智地想缓和一下气氛，所以将此事对某些客人脱口而出。不管怎样，因焦虑和饥饿，气氛本来就够紧张的了，此消息在宾客中口口相传，结果可想而知。很快，各种流言开始在整个房间传播。布罗茨基被人发现，喝得酩酊大醉，怀抱狗的尸体。布罗茨基被人发现正躺在外面街上的水坑里，满嘴胡言乱语。布罗茨基不敌悲痛，喝煤油想要自杀。最后一条有据可循，起因是几年前的一场事故，那次布罗茨基狂饮一通后，确实因喝下过量煤油被住在附近的一位农民发现，被急匆匆地送往医院——但他是自杀未遂，还是因酒醉不醒而无意为之的，从未定论。没多久，紧随谣言而来，泄气的言语四处而起。

“对他来说，那狗就是一切。他再也不会振作了。我们得面对现实，我们现在又回到原点了。”

“我们得取消‘周四之夜’。立即取消。现在，那只会是一场灾难。如果我们继续放任下去，这城里的民众就再也不会给我们机会了。”

“那家伙一直以来都不靠谱。我们就不该让事情发展到如此地步。可我们现在该怎么办？我们输了，输了个精光，毫无希望。”

此时，正当伯爵夫人和她的同僚们企图重新掌控场面的时候，屋子中心附近的地方爆发出一阵喊叫声。

许多人冲过去看，也有一些人惊慌地躲避。原来是一位年轻的议员把一个矮胖的秃顶压倒在地，过了一会儿，大家认出，被按在地上的是兽医凯勒。人们将年轻的议员拉起身，但他仍死死地抓着凯勒的衣领不放，所以兽医也顺带着被拉了起来。

“我尽力了！”凯勒大喊，面红耳赤：“我尽力了！我还能做什么？那畜生两天前还好好的。”

“骗子！”年轻议员咆哮着，想再次发起攻击。他又一次被人拉开，但这当儿，另外一帮人发现兽医刚好是个替罪羊，便也开始向他大声嚷嚷起来。一时间，各方指责纷至沓来，指责兽医的疏忽失职，危及到了整个社会的未来。这时，一声呼喊顺势而起：“那布鲁尔的

小猫呢？你时间都花在玩桥牌上了，是你眼睁睁地让那些小猫一只只死去……”

“我每周只玩一次桥牌，即便如此……”兽医开始嘶吼着抗议，但顷刻间又被更多的声音淹没。突然间，房子里的每个人似乎都将长期忍受着的，有关他们至爱动物或其他什么委屈牢骚向凯勒发泄。之后有个人喊凯勒欠他钱，另一个说凯勒六年前借的园艺叉一直都没还。很快，这种集体声讨兽医的情绪达到了顶点，自然而然地，拉着年轻议员的那些人松开了手。之后，他即刻又一次冲身上前，但这次似是代表在场的大多数人。场面濒临失控，这时，房间另一头传来一个声音，最终将众人拉回理智。

整个房间迅速安静，似是更惊讶于说话者的身份，而非其自身的权威。众人回身注目，看到台子上那人，俯瞰一众，正是雅各布·克奈茨，他可是城里出了名的胆小鬼。雅各布·克奈茨已经四十七八岁了，在人们的记忆中，他一直在市政大厅做着呆板枯燥的文职工作。他鲜有冒险提出某种观点的做法，更别提反驳或者争辩了。他没有亲密的朋友，几年前就搬出了与其妻子和三个孩子合住的小房子，在同一条街稍远的地方租了一间阁楼。不论何时何人提起这话题，他都表示很快就会和家人团聚，但是几年过去了，情况还是没什么变化。同时，他常常自愿为一些文化活动做很多单调的组织工作，他已是城里艺术圈的一员，虽说这多多少少有点给他面子、可怜他的意思。

众人还没来得及从惊讶中反应过来，雅各布·克奈茨——也许意识到自己的勇气只能坚持这么久——就开始讲话了。

“其他城市！我指的不只是巴黎！或者斯图加特！我说的是小一点的城市，不比我们大多少的其他城市。把他们的精英公民聚集在一起，面对这样的危机，他们会怎么办？我保证他们会很冷静，他们知道做什么，怎么做。我想说的是，在座的都是我们这个城市的精英，事情还没到我们解决不了的地步。只要我们团结一心，就一定能度过这个危机。在斯图加特他们会互相争斗吗？！现在还不必惊慌失措呢。没必要放弃，或者内讧。没错，那只狗是个问题，但这并不意味着完蛋了，这还不能代表什么。不管布罗茨基先生此刻处于怎样的状况，我们都能再次将他拉回正道。只要今晚我们都扮演好自己的角色，我们就能做到。我肯定我们一定行，我们必须行。必须将他拉回正道。因为如果我们不行，如果我们不团结，今晚不能纠正一切，我告诉你们，除了痛苦我们别无所求。没错，深深的、孤独的痛苦。除了布罗茨基先生，我们没有其他人能指望，现如今舍他其谁？也许这

会儿他正在前来的路上呢。我们得保持镇静。而我们现在在干什么，起内讧？在斯图加特他们会你争我斗吗？我们得想想清楚。如果我们是他，会是何感受？我们必须表现出与他共悲伤，整个城市与他共悲痛。除此之外，朋友们，好好想想，我们必须让他振作。哦，是的！我们不能整晚都沉浸在忧愁中，不能让他走的时候觉得什么都没了，他可能又回到……不，不！要权衡得恰到好处！我们还得振作高兴起来，让他明白生活大有希望，我们还要指望他，依靠他。是的，接下来这几个小时里，我们得拨乱反正。他现在可能在路上，上帝才知道他什么状况。这接下来几个小时，非常关键，关键。我们得好好把握。否则就只剩下痛苦了。我们必须……我们必须……”

这时，雅各布·克奈茨陷入一片迷茫中。他仍站在台上，又过了几秒，他一直沉默着，无比的尴尬渐渐将他吞噬。先前情绪的余威让他最后一次对人群怒目而视，而后羞答答地走下了台。

但这番蹩脚拙劣的吁求立刻有了效果。雅各布·克奈茨话还没说完，就开始有了一些低声的赞同之音，不止一人，略带责难似的推了推那年轻议员的肩膀——这会儿，他面带愧色，站立难安。紧随雅各布·克奈茨的离台而来的是一阵尴尬的沉默。之后，渐渐地，议论声陆续在屋子里传开，人们严肃而冷静地讨论着布罗茨基先生到了该怎么办。没过多久，大家达成了共识，大概是说，雅各布·克奈茨讲的或多或少有点道理。他们的任务就是在悲伤和快乐之间求得正确的平衡。在场的每一个人都要小心地密切关注现场氛围。一种坚定意志的情绪在房间里弥漫开来，然后，适时地，人们渐渐开始放松，直到最后开始微笑，聊天，亲切地、彬彬有礼地相互问安，仿佛半个小时前那不合时宜的一幕并未发生。大约就在这时候——就在雅各布·克奈茨讲完话不到二十分钟——我和霍夫曼到了。难怪那会儿我感觉这文雅的欢声笑语下藏着一丝怪异。

我还在辗转思量来之前到底发生了什么的时，看到了屋子另一边的斯蒂芬，他正与一位年长的女士交谈。身边，伯爵夫人似乎仍专注地与两位珠光宝气的女士对话，所以，我轻声说了声失陪，就慢慢离开了。我朝他那边走的时候，斯蒂芬看到了我，朝我微微一笑。

“啊，瑞德先生。您已经到了。我在想能否把您介绍给柯林斯小姐呢。”

我随后认出了那个瘦瘦的年长女士，我们晚上早些时候还开车去过她公寓呢。她穿着朴素而高雅的黑色长裙。她微笑着伸出手，我们

互相问好。我正打算继续与她礼貌地交谈，斯蒂芬倾身过来，轻轻地说：

“我真是个笨蛋，瑞德先生。坦白说，我不知道怎么做才好。柯林斯小姐还一如往常地和蔼，但我想听听您是怎么想的。”

“你是指……布罗茨基先生的狗？”

“哦，不，不，我知道，这事儿是挺糟的。但我们一直在讨论一些别的事。我真的会很感激您的建议。事实上，柯林斯小姐刚刚还建议我问问您呢，对吧，柯林斯小姐？您瞧，我真不想拿这事儿烦您，但情况有点节外生枝。我是指我‘周四之夜’的表演。天呐，我真是笨蛋！我说过，瑞德先生，我一直在准备让·路易斯·拉罗什的《大丽花》，但没告诉父亲。当然，现在他知道了。我一直不想告诉他，就想给他个惊喜，因为他非常喜欢拉罗什。况且，父亲做梦也想不到我能驾驭这么难的曲子，所以，我以为，从这两方面讲，对他一定会是莫大的惊喜。然而，就在最近，随着这盛大日子日益临近，我在想，再保密下去已不再现实。一方面，正式的节目单上会全部印出来，每条餐巾旁都会搁一张节目单。父亲一直在纠结节目单的设计，还要决定浮雕花样以及背面的插图等。几天前，我觉得必须得告诉他，但仍想给他个惊喜，所以一直等着合适的时机。呃，早些时候，就在我送您和鲍里斯下车后，我去了他办公室还车钥匙，他正趴在地板上看一堆文件。他跪在地上，周围地毯上都是文件，这没什么大惊小怪的，父亲常常这么工作。他的办公室很小，单是书桌就占了很大的空间，所以我得踮脚绕过去归还钥匙。他问我一切进展如何，可还没等我回答，又开始全神贯注于他的文件了。呃，不知怎的，我要离开的时候，看了一眼跪在地毯上的他，突然觉得这是个告诉他的好时机。就是一时冲动而已。于是，我很随意地告诉他：‘顺便说一下，父亲，我打算在‘周四之夜’弹奏拉罗什的《大丽花》，我想您可能想知道吧。’我并没用什么特别的口气，只是那么一说，然后等着看他的反应。嗯，他把正在阅读的文件往边上一放，但眼睛却一直盯着面前的地毯，然后一丝微笑在脸上荡漾开来，说了类似于‘啊，是啊，《大丽花》’这样的话。一时间，他看起来非常开心。他没抬头，手膝着地，但看起来非常开心。然后他闭上眼，开始哼唱这慢板的开篇，就那样在地板上开始哼唱，随着音乐摆动。他看上去是那么快乐，那么平静，瑞德先生，那当儿，我都开始恭喜自己了。然后他睁开眼睛，做梦似的抬头朝我微笑着说：‘是啊，真美。我真是不明白你母亲怎么那么讨厌它。’我刚刚还跟柯林斯小姐说呢，一开始我以为自己听错了。但之后他又重复了一遍。‘你母亲特别讨厌它。是

啊，你知道的，最近她强烈蔑视拉罗什后期的作品。她都不让我在家里放他的唱片，就算戴着耳机也不行。’这时，他一定是察觉到了我的惊愕与不安。因为——父亲历来如此！——他马上开始想让我好受些。‘我早该问你的，’他接着说道。‘全是我的错。’然后他突然拍了下脑门，好像记起了别的什么事，说：‘真的，斯蒂芬，我让你们两个都失望了。那时候我以为不干涉是对的，但现在我明白了，让你们两个都失望了。’我问他是什么意思，他解释道，母亲一直以来多么渴望听我弹奏卡赞的《玻璃激情》。很明显，她早前就向父亲透露过她想听这个，还有，呃，母亲以为父亲会全部安排妥当。但是您瞧，父亲明白我的立场。他对这些事很敏感。他明白对于一位音乐家——甚至是像我这样业余的——也想自己决定该在如此重要演出中演奏什么。所以他什么都没对我说，完完全全打算等有机会再向母亲解释一切。然而，当然——呃，我最好解释一下，瑞德先生。您瞧，我刚才说，母亲让父亲知道她想听卡赞时，我并不是说她真的亲口告诉他了。向外人解释有点困难。事情是这样的，母亲会以某种方式，您知道，以某种方式，不用直接提及，而让父亲自然而然地知道。她会暗示他，但对父亲来说却显而易见。我不确定她这次用了什么方法。也许他回到家时发现她正在听立体声音响里播放的《玻璃激情》。呃，因为她很少使用立体声音响，那么这个暗示就十分明显了。也可能是父亲洗完澡上床睡觉时，发现她正躺在床上读着一本有关卡赞的书。我不清楚，他们之间总是这样。呃，您应该也明白，父亲不会突然说：‘不，斯蒂芬应该有自己的选择。’他在等待，想找一个合适的方法回应。他当然不知道，那么多选段，我偏偏选择准备拉罗什的《大丽花》。天啊，我真是愚蠢！我之前竟然不知道母亲那么讨厌它！嗯，父亲告诉我事情原委后，我问他该怎么办，他考虑了一下说，我应该继续练习我准备的曲子，现在换已经太迟了。‘母亲不会怪你的，’他一个劲地说，‘她一点也不会怪你的。她会怪我，怪得对啊。’可怜的父亲啊，他那么努力地安慰我，但我看得出他对此是多么难过。过了一会，他盯着地毯上的一个污点——他还在地上，不过这会儿是蜷伏着，好像在做俯卧撑——他盯着地毯，我能听到他自言自语。‘我受得住，受得住。比这更糟的我都经历过。我受得住的。’他似乎已经忘了我在场，所以最后我就离开了，轻轻地关上门。自那以后——呃，瑞德先生，我整个晚上都没想什么其他事了。坦白讲，我有点困惑。没剩多少时间了。况且《玻璃激情》那么难，我怎么可能准备好？说实在的，我得说就算花一整年的时间去准备，这首曲子还是有些超出我的能力范围啊。”

年轻人停下嘴，烦恼地叹了口气。他和柯林斯小姐都没说话，过了一会儿，我料想他可能是在等我的意见。于是我说：

“当然，这不关我的事，你必须自己决定。但依我之见，目前阶段已经太迟了，你应该坚持自己准备的……”

“是啊，我猜您就会这么说，瑞德先生。”

倒是柯林斯小姐插了进来。她的语气中带了一种出乎意料的讥诮，让我不得不住口，不得不转向她。这位年长的女士正以一种了然于心、略带优越感的神情看着我。“毫无疑问，”她说，“您会把这叫做——什么来着？——啊，对了，‘艺术的完整性’。”

“也不尽然，柯林斯小姐，”我说，“只不过从实际角度出发，我倒觉得目前阶段已经太晚了……”

“但您怎么知道太晚了呢，瑞德先生？”她再一次打断我。“您对斯蒂芬的能力知之甚少，更别说了解他目前困境的更深层的意义了。您为什么这样贸然断言，就好像您得天独厚，拥有我们其他人所欠缺的第六感呢？”

从柯林斯小姐最初打断我开始，我就觉得越来越不舒服。她说这番话的时候，我发现自己转过身去，试图逃避她的目光。我想不出任何反驳她的话，过了一会儿，我觉得还是走为上策。于是我微微一笑，慢慢离开，走进人群中。

接下来的几分钟，我漫无目的地在屋子里转悠。跟之前一样，我经过的时候，人们有时会扭头，但好像没人认出我。突然间，我看到了佩德森，就是我在电影院见过的那个人，他正与其他客人谈笑着，于是我打算上前找他。正当我准备上前时，感到什么东西碰了下我的手肘，我一扭头，发现霍夫曼站在旁边。

“很抱歉，刚才我不得不离开了一会。他们没怠慢您吧。瞧瞧这都是什么事儿啊！”

酒店经理气喘吁吁，满脸是汗。

“啊，当然，我很愉快。”

“真是抱歉，刚才不得不离开去接个电话。不过他们已经在路上了，一点没错，他们已经在路上了。布罗茨基先生随时会到。谢天谢地！”他四下看了看，向我靠近了一些，压低了嗓门。“这份宾客名

单考虑不周，有欠妥当，我告诫过他们。这儿的某些人不该到场！”他摇摇头。“瞧瞧这都什么事儿啊！”

“不过，至少布罗茨基先生已经在路上了……”

“噢，是的，是的。我得说，瑞德先生，您今晚能在这儿，真是让我如释重负。正是我们需要您的时候。总体上，鉴于，呃，目前的事态，我觉得您没必要更改发言内容。可能简单提一两句这悲剧也不会出什么岔子，不过我们会安排其他人来说说这条狗的，所以呢，真的，您没必要偏离原先准备的内容。只是——哈哈——你的致辞不要太长。但是，当然啰，您是最后一位……”他笑了笑，然后没了声音。他又四下看了看屋子。“这里的某些人，”他又说道。“考虑不周，有欠妥当。我告诫过他们的。”

霍夫曼继续在屋里四下张望，而我刚好能暂时将思绪转到酒店经理提到的发言上。过了一会儿，我说道：

“霍夫曼先生，考虑到我们目前的处境，我不太确定到底该在什么时候站起来并……”

“啊，的确，的确。您太善解人意啦。一如您说的，如果在一个平常的时刻起身，人们无法知道会是什么……是啊，是啊，多么有远见啊。我会坐在布罗茨基先生旁边，所以要不您就让我来判断什么时候是最好的时机，等我的暗号。哎呀，瑞德先生，在这样的时刻，有您这样的人在我们身边真是令人欣慰啊。”

“能帮上忙我真的很高兴。”

房间另一头突然传来一阵噪声，霍夫曼转过脸去。他伸长脖子看向房间那头，但显然并没什么大不了的事。我轻轻地咳嗽了一声，以唤回他的注意力。

“霍夫曼先生，还有另一个小问题。我刚刚在想，”我指了指身上穿着的浴袍，“我想换身稍正式些的衣服。不知道能不能借一套，普普通通就行。”

霍夫曼心烦意乱地瞥了眼我的衣服，又立即转开眼神，心不在焉地说：“噢，不要担心，瑞德先生。我们这儿的人没那么呆板。”

他又一次伸长脖子看向屋子那端，我很清楚他根本没有把我的问题放在心上，正打算再次说起这个问题时，入口处附近一阵骚动。霍

夫曼跳起身，转过来，脸色苍白，冲我微笑了一下。“他来了！”他悄声说道，拍了拍我肩膀，就匆匆离开了。

房间里一下子安静了下来，有那么几秒钟，每个人都看向门口。我也想知道究竟发生了什么，但我的视线完全被挡住了。突然间，好似记起了刚刚的约定，四周的人重新继续交谈，声音带着欢乐，却也透着压抑。

我挤出人群，终于看到了布罗茨基被人引着穿过房间。伯爵夫人扶着他的一条胳膊，霍夫曼扶着另一边，还有四五个人焦急地在附近走来走去。布罗茨基显然没注意到他的随行人员，阴沉地抬头盯着华丽的屋顶。他比我想象的要高，身形要更笔直，但这会儿他动作却异常僵硬——且以一个奇怪的角度倾斜着——远远看去，他的随行人员就像转着小脚轮推着他向前。他胡子拉碴，没有刮理，但也没那么离谱，而且他的晚礼服有点歪歪扭扭，像是别人给他穿上的。他的相貌，虽粗糙而老迈，却仍残留着一丝温文尔雅的痕迹。

有那么一刻，我以为他们正把他领向我，但接着就意识到他们正走向隔壁的餐厅。一个服务员站在门边，引领他和他的随行人员进门，他们消失在视线中时，屋里一下子又安静了下来。没多久，宾客们又继续交谈，但我能感到空气中弥散着一丝新的紧张感。

这时，我注意到靠着墙，有一张椅子孤零零地立在那里。我突然觉得那是个不错的视角，或许能帮我更好地判断目前的整体气氛，然后决定晚餐时何种讲演最为合适。因而我走了过去，欣然落座，观察着这屋子。

宾客们依然在谈笑风生，但毫无疑问，潜在的紧张感继续升温。鉴于此，同时考虑到另外有人会具体讲述那条狗，我的发言保持轻快似乎是明智的，只要不轻快得离谱就行了。最终，我决定最好是讲一些妙趣横生的幕后奇闻，讲一讲我上次意大利之行中的一系列不幸插曲。这些故事我在公众场合已经讲过很多次了，我深信它们能消除紧张气氛，同时，我也肯定在眼下这样的情形中必定会博得大家赞赏。

我还在试验几句可能的开场白呢，突然注意到人已经变得稀少。这时，我这才意识到大家正鱼贯走进餐厅，于是我也站起身来。

我加入到走进餐厅的队伍时，依稀有人对我一笑，但没人跟我说话。我对此其实并不介意，因为这当儿我仍在绞尽脑汁思索一个真正引人入胜的开场白。走近餐厅门口时，我在两种开场白之间犹疑不定。第一种是：“这些年来，我的名字往往同某些品格联系在了一

起：孜孜关注细节，对表演精益求精，严格控制力度。”这一近乎自负的开头也许迅即就会被在罗马真实发生的让人哭笑不得的闹剧抢了风头。另一种选择是，一开始就抛出更为荒诞不经的话：“幕帘滑轨坍塌。老鼠被下毒。乐谱被印错。我相信，你们几乎没人会将我的大名与这些现象挂钩。”这两种开场白各有利弊，最后我决定先好好地感受一下晚宴的气氛，然后再做最终选择。

我走进餐厅，周围的人们都在兴高采烈地交谈。我立刻就被餐厅的巨大震撼了。即便现在有这么多人——有一百多号人呢——我也能明白为什么只需点亮屋中一角。众多的圆桌上铺着白色桌布，摆着餐具，但好像还有很多桌子并没有摆设，也没有配座椅，一排排地隐没在远处的黑暗里。许多宾客已经入座，整个场景——女士们珠光宝气，侍应生的夹克白白净净，清清爽爽，黑色晚礼服映衬的背景，远处的漆黑——可谓富丽堂皇。我在门口观察着这一景象，趁机平整了一下我的浴袍，就在这时，伯爵夫人出现在了身边。她拉着我的手臂引领我，就像她之前那样，边走边说道：

“瑞德先生，我们将您安排在了这桌，这样您就不会太引人注目。我们不想让人们发现您，毁了惊喜！不过别担心，一旦我们宣布您大驾光临，而您应声起立，大家就都能真真切切地看到您，听到您。”

虽然她领我去的桌子是在一个角落里，但我就是不明白，那一桌为何比别的席位尤为不惹眼招风。她安排我坐下，然后，又笑着说了些什么——在吵闹声中我听不清——然后就匆匆走开了。

我发现同桌的还有四人——一对中年夫妇，另一对略微年轻点——他们都循例冲我笑了笑，又继续交谈。年长一对的丈夫在解释他们的儿子为什么要继续呆在美国，然后话题逐渐转移到这对夫妻的其他孩子上。时不时地，他们中的一对会象征性地记得把我纳入其中——朝我这儿看看，或者，要是讲了个笑话，就冲我微笑。但没人直接对我讲话，而我呢，也就很快放弃了跟随他们的谈话。

然后，就在侍者开始上汤时，我注意到他们话头少了起来，而且有些漫不经心。最后，在上主菜的什么时候，他们好像放下所有伪装，开始讨论真正关注的问题。他们毫不掩饰地瞥向布罗茨基就座的方向，压低声音，就这位老人的现状各抒己见。这时候，较为年轻的那个女人说道：

“当然，该有人过去告诉他我们感到多么遗憾。我们大家都该过去。好像还没有人跟他讲过一句话呢。瞧，他身边的人，几乎不和他说话。或许我们该过去，我们该来开这个头。然后其他人就会跟着去了。或许大家都像我们一样在等待呢。”

其他人忙不迭地安慰她，说主办人一切尽在掌握，说不管怎样，布罗茨基看起来很不错，但下一刻他们也忐忑不安地看向屋子那头。

我自然也趁机仔细地观察着布罗茨基。他那桌比其他桌子稍大。霍夫曼坐在他的一侧，伯爵夫人坐在另一侧。围坐着的一桌人都头发灰白，神情庄重。这帮人似乎一个劲地屏息商谈的样子，让一整桌都弥漫着一股阴谋的气息，对整体的气氛几乎毫无助益。至于布罗茨基，他并没有显露出酒醉迹象，而是不紧不慢地——还算没到狼吞虎咽的地步——吃着东西。然而，他好像是缩进了自己的世界中。在用主菜的大部分时间里，霍夫曼都把手搭在布罗茨基的背后，似乎时不时在他耳边嘀咕着什么，但老人依然阴郁地盯着空气，没有回应。伯爵夫人碰了碰他的胳膊，跟他说了些什么，他还是没有回应。

甜点快吃完时——食物虽算不上有多美味，但也还算令人满意——我看到霍夫曼走了过来，穿过忙碌的侍者，我意识到他正朝我而来。他走到我身边，弯下腰，对着我的耳朵说：

“布罗茨基先生似乎想说几句，不过坦率讲——哈哈！——我们在劝他不要这么做。我们觉得今晚不该再让他承受额外压力了。所以，瑞德先生，可能得劳烦您仔细观察我的暗号，我一给出暗号您就马上站起来。然后，您一结束讲话，伯爵夫人立即就会结束晚宴的正式部分。是的，真的，我们觉得最好不要再让布罗茨基先生承受额外的压力了。可怜的人，哈哈！这个宾客名单，真是——”他摇了摇头，叹了口气，“谢天谢地，亏您在这儿，瑞德先生。”

我还没能开口，他就又一路躲闪着侍者们，匆匆忙忙地赶回他那桌去了。

接下来的几分钟，我观察着整个房间，思量着那两个可能的开场白哪个更合适。我还在支吾其辞，这时房间里的嘈杂声突然平息下来。我这才留意到，坐在伯爵夫人身边一个表情严肃的男人站起来。

这位先生年事垂老，满头银发。他隐隐透出一股威严，房间里顿时鸦雀无声。好一会儿，这位一脸严峻的长者只是谴责般地看着这群宾客。接着他用既压抑又洪亮的声音说道：

“先生，这样一个美好、高尚的同伴离我们而去，任何，任何言语都会显得苍白。然而，我们不可能让今夜就此过去，而不代表这屋里的每个人正式对布罗茨基先生您说些什么，表达我们最深切的慰问。”房间里响起一阵低沉的附和之声，他停顿了一会儿，然后继续说道：“您的布鲁诺，先生，不仅仅被那些目睹它在我们城里兢兢业业完成自己职责的人所深爱。它所获得的地位在人类中都属罕有，更不用说在四足动物之中了。也就是说，它成了一种象征。是的，先生，它向我们垂范了某些至关重要的美德：忠心耿耿；对生活热情有加，无惧无畏；绝不被人睨视；坚持以自己特有的方式行事，哪管在高高在上的旁观者眼中这是多么怪异偏颇。也就是说，这么多年来，构筑我们这个独具一格而又引以为豪的社会的，正是这些美德。这些美德，先生，恕我冒昧地说，”他意味深长地放缓语速，“我们希望很快能在各行各业重放光彩。”

他打住话头，又朝四周看了看，继续冷冰冰地盯了观众半晌，最后终于说道：

“现在，让我们一起默哀一分钟，以悼念我们已逝的朋友。”

他垂下双眼，人们纷纷低头，沉默又一次莅临。刹那间，我抬起头，发现布罗茨基那桌的几位市里的官员——大概是急于做出表率——摆出了一种十分滑稽夸张的致哀姿态。譬如，其中有一位用双手扣住了额头。至于布罗茨基——整个演讲过程中他都一动不动，没有抬头看一眼演讲者或者整个房间——依然一动不动地坐着，而且跟之前一样，他整个姿势角度看起来都很别扭。他甚至有可能坐在椅子上睡着了，而霍夫曼放在他背后的手臂主要起着物理上的支撑作用。

一分钟结束的时候，那个满脸严肃的先生没再说什么就坐下了，导致活动安排的进程出现了尴尬的脱节。一些人又开始小心翼翼地攀谈起来，然而，另一桌有了动静，我看到一个皮肤上有斑的大个子光头男人站了起来。

“女士们，先生们，”他铿锵有力地说道。然后，他转向布罗茨基，微微弯下身轻声道：“先生。”他低头盯着自己的手看了一会儿，然后环视房间。“很多人也都知道了，是我在今晚的早些时候发现了我们亲爱的朋友的尸体。因而我希望你们能给我几分钟时间说……说说事情的来龙去脉。您看，先生，”他又看了一眼布罗茨基，“事实是，我必须请求您的原谅。请让我解释一下。”大个子男人停下来，咽了口唾沫。“今晚，一如往常，我在投递。那时我几乎快送完了，还剩两三家没送，我抄近道从铁轨和斯尔德斯特斯街之间

的蜿蜒小巷走下去。我平时是不抄近道的，特别是天黑后，但今天比往日要早一些，而且您知道，还有美丽的日落，所以我就抄了近道。就在那儿，差不多走到巷子一半的地方，我看到了它。我们亲爱的朋友。它躲在一个不怎么显眼的地方，几乎隐藏在路灯柱和木篱笆之间。我在它身边跪下，确定它是真的去世了。这当儿，我脑中闪过了许许多多念头。我当然想到了您，先生。想到了它对您来说是多么好的一个朋友，它的去世是个多么沉痛的损失。我也想到了我们整个城市将多么想念布鲁诺，这个城市将和您一起共悲伤。请允许我这样说，先生，我感觉，在这令人悲伤的时刻，命运交给了我一项特权。是的，先生，一项特权。命中注定是我将我们亲爱朋友的尸体送到了兽医诊所。接着，先生，接下来发生的事，我……我没有任何借口。就在刚才冯·温特斯坦先生讲话的时候，我坐在这儿，内心在纠结该不该站起来说点什么？最终，您也看到了，我下定了决心说点什么。布罗茨基先生从我口中听到总比明早听到谣言要好得多。先生，我对接下来发生的事感到极其羞愧。我只能说我不是有意的，即使再过百年也绝不会……我现在只能祈求您的原谅。过去几小时里，我脑中思索过千百遍，现在我明白了我当时应该怎么做。我应该放下我的包裹。您知道的，我还拿着两个呢，最后两个。我应该放下它们啊。它们拢在篱笆边上，在小巷里应该很安全。而且，就算有人顺手牵羊，那又怎样？但是，出于某些愚蠢的原因，或许是由于某种白痴的职业本能，我没有这么做。我当时想都没想。也就是说，我抬起布鲁诺的尸体时，依然紧紧拿着包裹。我不知道我在期待什么。但事实是——您明天就会得知，因此我现在亲口告诉您——事实是，您的布鲁诺在那儿一定是有些时辰了，因为它的身体，虽然死了却仍不失俊伟，这时已变得冰冷冰冷，而且，呃，已经僵硬了。是的，先生，僵硬了。原谅我，我现在这么说可能会让您痛苦，但是……但是请让我继续。为了能拿住我的包裹——我是多么后悔，我已经为此后悔上千次了——为了能继续拿着我的包裹，我把布鲁诺高高地扛在肩上，完全没有考虑到它已经僵硬这一状况。直到我这样快走到小巷尽头时，我才听到不知从哪里传来了小孩的呼喊声，于是便停了下来。当然，这时我才发现自己犯了个多大的错误。女士们，先生们，布罗茨基先生，我是不是需要向您全盘托出？但我非说不可。事实就是这样的。由于我们的朋友身体僵硬，由于我愚蠢地选择将它扛在肩上走，也就是说，差不多是以直立的姿势……嗯，关键是，先生，从斯尔德斯特斯街上的任意一所房子里都能透过篱笆顶端看到它的上半身。事实上，更残忍的是，那会儿正是大部分人家聚在后屋里一起吃晚饭的时候。他们可能会一边吃饭一边盯着自家的花园，也许看到我们尊贵的朋友

悄然而过，其双爪直插胸前——啊，对它来说真是羞辱啊！一户又一户人家！先生，这个场景一直在我脑中萦绕，想象着那是怎样的一幅情景。原谅我，先生，原谅我，不卸除这一……这一证明我这愚笨天性的包袱，我一刻也没法继续坐在这里啊。这样令人悲伤的特权降临到如我这种笨蛋身上是多么的不幸啊！布罗茨基先生，我为您那尊贵的伙伴在离世后不久即遭受侮辱而致歉。求您啦，求您接受我徒劳无望、不足挂齿的歉意。还有斯尔德斯特斯善良的人们，或许他们中有些人现在就在这儿，他们像其他人一样深深地喜爱布鲁诺。他们最后一次见布鲁诺，竟然是以这样一种方式……我请求您，先生，在座的每一个人，我请求您，请求您的原谅。”

大块头坐了下来，哀伤地摇着头。接着他旁边那桌的一位女士站了起来，用手帕擦拭着眼睛。

“毫无疑问，”她说。“它是这个时代最伟大的狗，毫无疑问。”

房间里响起了一片赞同之声。布罗茨基那一桌的市官员起劲地点头，但布罗茨基仍然没有抬头。

我们等着这位女士继续说下去，但她虽然还站着，却什么都没说，只是继续抽泣，轻轻地擦着眼睛。过了一会儿，她旁边一个穿着天鹅绒晚礼服的男士站起来，轻轻地把她扶回座位，而他自己则继续站着，用指责的眼神扫视了一下房间，然后说道：

“一尊塑像，一尊铜塑像。我提议为布鲁诺竖一尊铜塑像以永远纪念它。一尊巨大而庄重的塑像。要不就立在沃赛尔特拉斯吧。冯·温特斯坦先生。”他对那个一脸严肃的先生说，“我们现在就下定决心，就在今晚，为布鲁诺建造一尊塑像吧！”

有人在大叫“说得好极了，说得好极了”，喧哗声四下而起，表示赞同。不仅仅是那位一脸严峻的先生，还有坐在布罗茨基那一桌的所有市官员，都顿时显出困惑的神情。交换了几个慌乱的眼神后，满脸严肃的男人坐着说道：

“当然了，哈勒先生，这件事我们会慎重考虑的，当然还会考虑其他主意，看看怎样最好地纪念……”

“这实在太离谱了！”一个男人的声音突然从房间的另一头插了进来。“多么荒唐的主意。为那条狗建一座塑像？要是那畜生配立一座铜塑像，那我们的乌龟，佩特拉，她就配建一个五倍之大的塑像。”

她死得那么惨。这太荒唐了。而且那只狗今年早些时候还攻击过拉恩夫人……”

他其余的话被房间里四下响起的嚷嚷声淹没了。一时间，好像所有人都在同时大声喊叫。刚才说话的那个男人，还站在那儿，现在转过身对着自己桌上的某人，开始激烈地争论。在这不断升级的混乱中，我意识到霍夫曼正在朝我挥手。或者更确切地说，他正用手比划着一个奇怪的画圈动作——就好像在擦一块隐形玻璃——我隐约想起这是他喜欢的某种打信号的方式。我站了起来，用力清了清嗓子。

房间几乎立刻安静了下来，所有眼睛都盯视着我。刚才反对立塑像的那个男人停止争吵，匆匆坐下。我重新清了嗓子，正准备开讲，就在这时，我突然注意到我的浴袍大开，我裸露的前身一览无遗。我脑袋一片混乱，略一犹豫就又坐了回去。几乎同时，屋子另一边的一位女士站起身来，尖声说道：

“如果建个塑像不现实的话，那何不以它的名字来命名一条街呢？我们经常改街名来纪念逝者。毫无疑问，冯·温特斯坦先生，这要求并不过分。或许可以改改迈因哈德斯特拉斯街，或者甚至雅恩斯特拉斯街也行。”

赞同声骤然响起，顿时人们异口同声叫喊起其他可以改名的街道。诸位市官员又一次面露难色。

我邻桌一个身材高大、满脸胡须的男人站了起来，用他雷鸣般的声音说道：“我同意霍兰德先生的意见。这太离谱了。我们大家当然为布罗茨基感到难过。但老实说吧，那只狗是个祸害，殃及其他狗，同样也威胁人类。不过，要是布罗茨基先生当初想到经常给它梳理毛发，为它治疗它显然已患了多年的皮肤感染……”

这人的话被暴风般袭来的愤怒抗议之声吞没了。“可耻！”“羞辱！”此等叫喊声此起彼伏；有几位离开了座位，要来教训这个冒犯者。霍夫曼又在对我打信号了，他狂怒地在空中比划着，脸上带着可怖的狞笑。我听到胡子男人的声音在一片混乱中隆隆响起：“我说的是事实。这畜生招事生非，可恶极了。”

我检查了一下我的浴袍，确定它牢牢系紧了，正准备再次站起来，这时看到布罗茨基突然动了动，然后站了起来。

他站起来的时候桌子发出了一声响，所有人都扭头转向了他。顷刻间，已离座的人们纷纷坐了回去。沉默又一次驾临。

刹那间我以为布罗茨基会摔倒在桌上。但他保持住了平衡，四下观察了一阵。他开口时嗓音有点嘶哑。

“瞧瞧，这算怎么回事？”他说。“你们以为那条狗对我这么重要？它死了就死了嘛。我想要个女人，有时候会觉得孤单。我想要个女人。”他打住话头，有那么一会儿他好像沉醉在自己的思绪中。接着他梦呓般地说道：“我们的水手们。我们醉醺醺的水手们。他们现在怎么样了？她那时候还年轻，那么年轻，那么漂亮。”他随即又飘回到了自己的思绪中，抬起双眼盯着高高的天花板上垂悬的电灯，我又一次觉得他要向前摔倒在桌子上。霍夫曼一定也在担心同样的事，他站了起来，轻轻地把手放在布罗茨基背后，在他耳边轻声说了些什么。布罗茨基没有马上回应。接着他低声喃喃道：“她曾经爱过我。爱我胜过一切。我们醉醺醺的水手们。他们现在何方？”

霍夫曼开怀大笑，仿佛布罗茨基说了什么睿语妙言。他朝房间咧嘴一笑，然后又对布罗茨基耳语了一番。布罗茨基好像终于想起自己现在置身何处，恍惚中转向酒店经理，任由他连哄带骗着坐回了座位。

接下来是一阵安静，没人动弹。伯爵夫人笑容可掬地站了起来。

“女士们，先生们，今晚此时此刻，我们有一个美好的惊喜！他今天下午才到，想必很累了，然而他还是答应了做我们的特别嘉宾！是的，大家欢迎！瑞德先生就在我们之中！”

房间里爆发出阵阵激动的喝彩声，此时伯爵夫人一个盛情邀请的手势指向了我。我还没来得及反应，我这桌的人已迅速地将我团团包围，都想和我握手。霎时，我意识到了周围全都是人，兴奋地喘息着，伸出双手和我打招呼。对这些亲密表示，我尽可能礼貌地回应，可是扭头一望——我还没机会从椅子上站起来呢——我看到身后聚集了一大群人，踮脚站着，推搡着。我明白必须控制这场面，以免它崩溃混乱。既然已经有那么多人站立着，我觉得最好的办法就是站在某个台座上面，以占领制高点。很快地确认了下我的衣服已牢牢系紧，我爬上了椅子。

喧闹声立刻平息下来，人们僵在那儿定睛看着我。从这一新的有利视角望去，我看到此刻过半宾客已离开桌子，于是我决定毫不迟疑立刻开讲。

“幕帘滑轨坍塌！老鼠被下毒！乐谱被印错！”

我注意到一个人穿过静止簇拥的人群向我走来。走到我身边时，柯林斯小姐从邻桌拉过一把椅子，坐了下来，盯着我。她这副样子足以让我分神，一时间，我竟想不出接下来该说什么。瞧着我犹豫的样子，她将一条腿跷在另一条上，关切地问道：

“瑞德先生，您感觉不舒服吗？”

“我挺好的，谢谢，柯林斯小姐。”

“我衷心希望，”她继续说，“您不要将我之前说的话太放在心上。我是想来找您道歉的，但到处都找不到您。我可能说了什么伤人感情的话。我真心希望您能原谅我。只是就算过去这么多年了，每次遇到您这个职业的人，往事就突然涌上心头，自己不知不觉就那种腔调了。”

“没关系，柯林斯小姐，”我轻声道，居高临下冲她微微一笑。“请别担心。说实在的，刚才我根本没在意。如果我离开得很唐突，那只是因为，我想您或许想和斯蒂芬单独说说话。”

“您这样善解人意真是太好了，”柯林斯小姐说道，“真的抱歉我先前有些生气了。但您得相信我，瑞德先生，对我来说，并不只是生气。我确实真心希望能帮您什么。看到您一次又一次地犯同样的错误我会很难过的。现在既然看见您了，我想对您说很欢迎您哪天下午来我家喝下午茶。我会非常乐意和您聊聊，随便什么问题都可以。我会洗耳恭听的，我向您保证。”

“您太客气了，柯林斯小姐。我相信您是好意。但请允许我这样说，好像您过去的经历使得您——正如您自己所言——对于我这种职业的人并未留下什么好印象。我不知道您对我的造访是否会感到开心。”

闻此，柯林斯小姐似乎若有所思。然后她说道：“我能理解您的担忧。但是我觉得我们完全能够客客气气地相处。您要是不想呆太长时间，短短的一次来访也成。如果您觉得会面不错，以后您可以随时过来嘛。或许我们甚至还可以一起散散步呢。斯登堡花园离我公寓很近。瑞德先生，多年来我不断回忆过去，现在真的已经准备好将其抛至身后了。我多么想向您这样的人再次伸出援手。当然了，我不能保证能回答您所有问题。但我会洗耳恭听。而且您可放心，我绝不会像某些缺乏经验的人那一样将您理想化或使您感伤连连。”

“我会慎重考虑您的邀请的，柯林斯小姐，”我对她说，“不过我不由地想，您显然已把我误认为别的什么人了。我之所以这么说，是因为，这个世界上似乎有太多自称为这样或那样天才的人，可其实呢，这些人只不过以生活毫无条理而引人瞩目。但不知何故，总有一批像您这样的人，柯林斯小姐——非常善意的人——乐于挺身而出救助这些人。这么说可能有点大言不惭，但我可以告诉您，我并不是那样的人。事实上，我可以自信地说，此时此刻我不需要任何救助。”

柯林斯小姐不住地摇头。闻此，她说：“瑞德先生，如果您屡屡犯错，我真的会非常难过。而且，想到我一直在这儿，只是眼睁睁地看着您却毫无作为，我难过啊。我真的认为以您目前的处境，我能给您一些帮助。当然了，我和里奥在一起时，”她隐隐地向布罗茨基挥了挥手，“我还太年轻，知道得并不多，我真的看不透当时发生了什么。但如今，许多年过去了，我可以思量一切了。听说您要来我们这儿时，我就告诉自己，这正是我学会容忍苦楚的时机。我已经老了，但我的生命还远没有结束。人生中的是是非非，我已经有了透彻的了解，十分透彻的了解，而这并不太晚，我应当尽我所能将其付诸所用。正是本着这样的精神，我才邀请您来访的，瑞德先生。我为我们之前见面时的粗暴无礼再次向您道歉。我保证，这样的事不会再发生了。拜托，答应我您会来的。”

在她说话的当儿，她家中起居室的景象——温馨柔和的灯光，破旧的天鹅绒窗帘，破破烂烂的家具——在我面前晃动，刹那间，我多么想斜倚在她的沙发上，远离生活的种种压力，这一念头仿佛特别诱人。我深呼吸，叹了口气。

“我会记得您善意的邀请，柯林斯小姐，”我说道，“但此时，我得先上床休息一会儿。您得理解，几个月来，我一直在旅行。到了这儿后，几乎没有片刻停顿。我实在太累了。”

我说这些时，所有疲惫感都回来了。我眼下的皮肤感到很痒，我用手掌揉了揉脸。我还在揉脸时，突然感觉有人碰了下我的手肘，一个声音轻声说道：

“我和您一起走回去，瑞德先生。”

斯蒂芬伸出手来帮我从椅子上下来。我一只手斜倚在他肩上，爬了下来。

“我现在也很累，”斯蒂芬说，“我和您一起走回去。”

“走回去？”

“是的，我打算在这儿睡一晚。我要值早班的时候常这么做。”

一时间，他的话让我百思不得其解。然而，当我的视线穿过那一簇簇或站或坐的晚宴宾客，掠过一个个侍者和一张张桌子，看向这巨室的隐藏黑暗之处时，我突然意识到我们正在酒店的中庭。我早前之所以没认出来，是因为白天早些时候我是从另一头进来观察这地方的。远处黑暗中的某个地方，应该是我先前喝咖啡并且筹划这一天安排的吧台。

然而，我没来得及细想我的发现，斯蒂芬便领着我离开，出奇地坚持己见。

“我们回去吧，瑞德先生。而且，我有些事想跟您说。”

“晚安，瑞德先生。”柯林斯小姐在我们走过她身旁时说道。

我回头向她道晚安，若非斯蒂芬继续领着我离开，也不至如此仓促无礼。确实，我们走过时，我听到各个方向都有人跟我道晚安，我虽尽力向他们含笑挥手，但知道自己并没有优雅得体地退场。而斯蒂芬呢，显然忧心忡忡，我还在回头跟大家道晚安，他拽着我的胳膊，说：

“瑞德先生，我一直在想。或许现在我自视过高了，但我真的认为我该尝试一下卡赞。我记得您之前给我的建议，坚持自己已经准备好的。但真的，我一直在想，我觉得我或许能征服《玻璃激情》。我真的相信，现如今，这是我力所能及的。真正的问题是时间。但是如果我真的着手去做，努力去做，夜以继日地练，我想我是可以做好的。”

我们走进了中庭的暗处。斯蒂芬的鞋跟嗒嗒作响，在一片空旷中回荡，与我拖鞋的“啪嗒啪嗒”声对应相和。在昏暗中，我能分辨出，我们右边某处，是灰白的大理石大喷泉，此刻它一片沉寂。

“我知道这跟我无关，”我说，“但是，如果我是你，我会继续坚持原先准备的曲目。这是你自己选择的啊，不至于差到哪里去。无论如何，在我看来，在最后一刻改变曲目总是不大好的……”

“但是瑞德先生，您不完全明白。是我母亲。她……”

“我了解你以前跟我说的一切。就像我说的，我不想干涉。但是，恕我冒昧，我认为人的一生中总会有某个时刻，需要坚守自己的

决定。一个说“这就是我，这就是我的选择”的时刻。”

“瑞德先生，我很感激您所说的。但是我认为也许您只是这样说而已——我知道您对我的建议是出于好意——但我认为您只是这样说罢了，因为您不相信像我这样的业余人士能很好地演绎卡赞，尤其是现在时间这么赶。可是，您看，我整顿晚饭都在苦苦思量，我真的相信……”

“真的，你误解我了。”我说，对他感到一丝不耐烦。“你真的误解我的意思了。我刚才说的是你应该有自己的主张。”

但是年轻人似乎并没有在听。“瑞德先生，”他继续说，“我知道现在已非常晚了，您也很累了。但是我在想，您是否能给我几分钟时间，比如，哪怕十五分钟。我们现在可去休息室，我来给您演奏一段卡赞，不是全部，只是一段。然后您就可以给我提提建议，看看我有没有一点可能赶在‘周四之夜’前准备好。哦，不好意思。”

我们走到了中庭远处的尽头，在黑暗中停了下来，斯蒂芬打开了通往走廊的门。我回头一看，发现我们晚宴的地方看起来不过是黑暗中的一泓闪闪点点的小水池。宾客们好像又坐了下来，我看见侍者们端着托盘来回穿梭的身影。

走廊的光线十分昏暗，斯蒂芬锁上我们背后通往中庭的门，我们并肩走着，默默无语。过了一会儿，年轻人望了我几次之后，我突然想到他是在等我的决定。我叹了口气，说：

“我当然愿意帮你，很同情你目前的处境。只是现在太晚了，而且……”

“瑞德先生，我知道您很累了。我能提个建议吗？不如我自己进休息室而您站在门外听着。而后您听够了，足以给出意见，您就可以悄悄地去睡了。当然，我不会知道您是否还站在那里，所以我会鼓足干劲，尽力演奏，直至结束——这正是我需要的。您可以在明天清晨告诉我，我在‘周四之夜’是否有一点儿机会。”

我想了想。“好吧，”我终于说道，“我觉得你的提议非常合情合理。很方便地满足了我们双方的需要。非常好，我们就按照你说的做。”

“瑞德先生，您太好了。您都不知道这对我是何等的帮助。我可是因为这个一直饱受煎熬啊。”

年轻人很激动，加快了步伐。走廊转角变得很幽暗，我们匆匆前行，我不止一次伸出手去，生怕自己一头撞向两边的墙。走廊尽头有一丝光线，从通向酒店大堂的玻璃门透过来，除此之外，好像没有丝毫光亮。我正盘算着下次见到霍夫曼要向他提提这个问题，这时，斯蒂芬说：“哈，我们到了。”我停了下来，这时才觉察到我们正站在休息室门口。

斯蒂芬拿出更多的钥匙拨弄了一阵，门终于开了；门那头，一片漆黑，伸手不见五指。而年轻人却急切地走进房间，然后探出头来。

“您不介意给我一小会时间找乐谱吧，”他说，“应该在钢琴凳附近，不过这里太乱了。”

“别担心，没构思好清晰的意见之前，我是不会走的。”

“瑞德先生，您太好了。呃，我会很快。”

门嘎嘎地关上了，沉寂了几分钟。我仍站在黑暗中，不时地看看走廊尽头和来自大堂的光线。

终于，斯蒂芬开始弹奏《玻璃激情》的开篇乐章。听完头几个小节之后，我发现自己听得越来越用心。很明显，年轻人对这首曲子的熟悉度远远不够，然而，在迟疑和刻板之下，我能觉察出其融汇独创性与微妙情感的想象力，这让我很是吃惊。即便以目前粗糙的形式，年轻人对卡赞的解读似乎也开启了一些新的方向，这是绝大多数演绎所欠缺的。

我倾身向前，贴近房门，竖起耳朵捕捉他每一个踌躇的细微差别。但随后，接近乐章的尾声，疲惫突然席卷了我，我才记起现在很晚了。我忽然发觉没有必要再听下去了——只要时间充裕，演奏卡赞明显是他力所能及的——我开始慢慢地朝大堂的方向走去。

第二部

第十一章

床头柜上的电话响了，我被铃声吵醒，第一反应就是，我只睡了几分钟就又有谁来打扰。但随后，我看到天空已亮，便知道现在已是清晨。我拿起听筒，突然没由来的担心自己是否睡过头了。

“啊，瑞德先生，”霍夫曼的声音传了过来，“希望您睡了个好觉。”

“谢谢您，霍夫曼先生，我睡得很好。当然了，我正要起床。今天会是非常忙碌的一天。”我笑了笑，“是时候开始啦。”

“没错，先生，今天您面对的，将会是非常忙碌的一天啊！我非常理解在今晨此刻，您想要尽量养精蓄锐。非常明智，请允许我这么说。尤其昨晚您是如此卖力。啊，多么美妙诙谐的演讲呀！今早举城上下谈论的全都是您！不管怎么说，瑞德先生，我知道这时候您大约该起床了，觉得还是给您挂个电话，告诉您这个情况为好。我很高兴通知您343号房已经完全准备好了。我建议您立刻入住，好吗？如果您不反对的话，您的物品会在您用早餐时由我们搬送至343号房。我确定343号房间会比您现在的房间更令人满意。我再次郑重地为这次失误道歉。犯下这样的失误，我很痛心啊。但我想我昨晚已做过解释了，有时这些事情是很难拿捏的。”

“是的，是的，我非常理解。”我环视房间，感到一阵绝望的悲伤开始吞噬我。“但霍夫曼先生，”我努力控制着声音，“有一小麻烦。我孩子，鲍里斯，他现在跟我一起在这酒店，而且……”

“哦，好的，也非常欢迎这小伙子。我已经了解过情况，并且已经把他换到了您隔壁的342号房。事实上，古斯塔夫今晨早些时候给他换过房间了，所以您一点也不用担心。那么，用完早餐后请您回343号房。您会发现所有物品全都在那儿了。就在您现在房间的正上方，我相信那房间会更合您口味。但当然，如果您不满意，请即刻告诉我。”

我谢过他，放下听筒，然后爬下床，再次环顾四周，深吸了一口气。我的房间沐浴在晨光中，并没什么特别之处——不过是个普通的酒店房间而已——我突然意识到我对这里的确表现出了不合时宜的依恋。然而，我洗澡，穿衣，又发现自己情绪渐渐激动起来。突然间，

我想到，下楼吃早饭前，在开始所有事之前，我该先去看看鲍里斯是否一切安好。说不定他此刻正一脸迷茫地坐在新房间里呢。我迅速穿好衣服，最后回身看了一眼，出了房间。

我沿着三楼的走廊搜寻342号房，这时，我听到了一阵声响，看到鲍里斯从远远的一头向我跑来。他奔跑的动作很奇怪，我一看到他就立刻停下了脚步。看到他双手摆出驾驶的动作，我猜他是在扮演飙车的人。他粗暴地向右边的隐形乘客低声咕哝着，“呼”地疾驰而过，根本没有留意到我。走廊的远处有扇门半开着，鲍里斯跑向那儿，喊道：“小心！”然后急转弯进了那间房。从里面传来鲍里斯模仿撞到什么东西上的声音。我走向那扇门，经查验确认是342号房，走了进去。

我发现鲍里斯正仰面躺在床上，双脚跷在空中。

“鲍里斯，”我说，“你不应该那样嚷嚷着到处跑。这里是酒店。大家说不定还在睡觉呢。”

“睡觉！都这时候了！”

我关上身后的门。“你不该制造噪音。会有人投诉的。”

“谁要是投诉，那他就倒大霉了。我让外公去对付他们。”

他双脚仍跷在空中，这时候，他开始懒洋洋地互拍着他的两只鞋。我坐了下来，看了他一会儿。

“鲍里斯，我得跟你聊聊。我的意思是，我们必须得谈谈了，我们两个。这对我们彼此都好。你肯定有不少疑问。关于这一切。为什么我们会在这酒店。”

我打住话头，看看他是否想说些什么。鲍里斯继续互拍着悬在空中的双脚。

“鲍里斯，目前为止你都很有耐心，”我继续道，“但我知道你有各种各样的问题要问。很抱歉我总是太忙，不能坐下来跟你好好谈谈这些问题。昨晚的事很抱歉，对你对我而言都挺让人失望的。鲍里斯，你肯定有非常多的问题，有些问题的答案不会简单，但是我一定尽力回答。”

不知何故，我说这话的时候——也许是与之前的房间有关，也许想到了我如今可能要与它永别了——一股强烈的失落感油然而生，使得我不得不停下来。鲍里斯继续拍打着他的双脚好一会儿。然后他

好像是累了，将双腿“扑通”一声砸落在床上。我清了清嗓子，接着说道：

“那么鲍里斯，我们从哪儿开始呢？”

“太阳战士！”鲍里斯突然尖叫，然后大声唱起某个主题曲的开头几段。他边唱边滚落在地上，消失在床和墙壁间的空隙中。

“鲍里斯，我可是认真的，看在上帝的分上，我们得谈谈这些事。鲍里斯，求你了，从那儿出来吧。”

没有回应。我叹了口气，站起身来。

“鲍里斯，希望你记得，无论何时你想问我任何事，你都可以问。不管我在做什么都会停下来，跟你谈。即便我正和非常重要的人在一起，我想要你明白，他们对我来说都不能与你相提并论。鲍里斯，你听到了吗？鲍里斯，从那里出来吧。”

“不行，我动不了。”

“鲍里斯，求你了。”

“我动不了。我断了三根椎骨。”

“好吧，鲍里斯。要不等你感觉好些了我们再谈。我现在要下楼吃点早饭了。鲍里斯，听着，如果你愿意，吃过早饭后，我们可以回旧公寓。你要想去，我们就去。那样，我们可以去拿那盒子。那个装有九号的盒子。”

仍旧没有回应。我又等了一会儿，然后说：“好吧，考虑考虑，鲍里斯。我现在下楼去吃早饭了。”

说着，我离开了房间，轻轻带上门。

我被带进了大堂隔壁一个阳光满溢的狭长房间。大大的窗户似乎直面街道，与人行道齐平，但为了留些私人空间，下部的窗格上装了磨砂玻璃，窗外的车流之声也只是隐约可闻。高大的棕榈树和天花板上的风扇给这个地方增添了一种淡淡的异国情调。桌子排成了两长排，侍者带我走过中间的过道，我发现大部分桌子都收拾干净了。

侍者安排我坐在靠后的座位，给我倒了些咖啡。他走后，我看到宾客寥寥无几，只有一对坐在门口说着西班牙语的夫妇，以及一位与我几桌之隔、正在读报的老人。我猜想我大概是最后一个下来吃早饭

的客人吧，但继而一想，自己刚刚度过了一个格外费力的夜晚，没有任何理由感到内疚。

恰恰相反，我坐着，看到棕榈树在旋转的电风扇下轻轻摇动，一种满足感涌上心头。毕竟，我有足够的理由感到满足，我来之后，如此短时间内就有如此收获。自然，对于当地的这场危机来说，还有很多不明朗，甚至神秘的地方。可是，我到这里还不到二十四小时呀，问题的答案必将在不久以后显现。比方说，今天晚些时候，我会去拜访伯爵夫人，届时我不止有机会听布罗茨基的留声机唱片，重温他的作品，还要与伯爵夫人以及市长一起详细探讨这场危机。随后就是与市民会面，他们是受目前问题影响最直接的人——其重要性在前一天我就已经跟斯达特曼小姐强调过了——还有就是和克里斯托弗本人的见面。换句话说，有几个很重要的约会还等着我呢，所以，在这一阶段试图得出实质性的结论，或者甚至开始考虑给我的演讲词定稿，都是毫无意义的。眼下，我有权对自己已获取的信息量感到满足，当然可以在吃早餐时纵情享受几分钟的身心舒畅。

侍者端回来一些冷盘肉、奶酪和一篮新鲜的面包卷。我一边不紧不慢地吃着，一边往杯子里倒着浓咖啡，一次只倒一点。斯蒂芬·霍夫曼终于出现的时候，我正沉浸在近乎平静的情绪中。

“早上好，瑞德先生，”年轻人说，微笑着向我走来。“我听说您刚下来。我不想打扰您用早餐，所以不会待太久。”

他在我桌边徘徊，脸上依旧挂着微笑，显然是在等我发话。此时，我才想起我们前一晚的约定。

“哦，是的，”我说，“卡赞，啊，是的。”我放下黄油刀看着他。“当然是钢琴曲中最难的曲目之一。由于你刚刚开始练习，听到些粗糙之处也是意料之中的事。其他没什么问题，就是有些粗糙的地方。那曲子，除了花时间练习也没什么其他办法了。要花很多时间啊。”

我又停下来。斯蒂芬脸上的微笑褪去了。

“但总体上讲，”我继续道，“这话我并不是随便说说的，我认为你昨晚的演奏显示出了非凡的潜力。只要时间充足，即便那么难的曲子，我确信你都可以演绎得很好。当然问题是……”

但是年轻人没再听下去。他向我走近了一步说：

“瑞德先生，说白了吧。您是说只要练习就够了吗？这曲子我能掌控？”突然间，斯蒂芬的脸扭曲了，他弯下腰，一拳捶在抬起的膝盖上。随后他站直，深吸了口气，眉开眼笑。“瑞德先生，您都不知道，不会知道这对我来说意味着什么。我知道这听起来不太谦虚，但跟您说吧，我一直都知道，在内心深处，我一直都觉得我能演奏好。但是听到您这么说，尤其是您，我的上帝，这是无价之言啊！昨晚，瑞德先生，我一遍又一遍地弹。每当疲倦席卷而来时，每当我意欲停下时，内心总有个声音说：‘等等，瑞德先生可能还在外面。他可能还要多听一点才能做出评断。’然后我就会更加投入，投入所有，继续不停。大概两小时前，我弹完时，不瞒你说，我真的走到了门口向外偷看。当然，我发现您已经去睡了——完全可以理解。但您能待那么久，真是太好了。我只希望您不要因我牺牲太多睡眠。”

“哦，没有，没有。我在门口待了……一阵儿。足够做出评断了。”

“您真是太好了，瑞德先生。今早我感觉自己换了个人似的。我生命中的乌云已烟消云散了！”

“听着，你千万不要误会。我是说这曲子在你能力范围内。但是你是否剩有足够的时间来……”

“我一定会确保自己有充足的时间。我一定会抓紧每一个机会练琴。我会废寝忘食。您别担心，瑞德先生。明晚我父母会为我骄傲的。”

“明晚？哦，是的……”

“哦，我一直自顾自地说自己，太自私了，我甚至还没说起您昨晚多么引起轰动。我是说在晚宴时。每个人都在谈论昨晚，全城皆是。真是精彩绝伦的演讲。”

“谢谢你。我很高兴大家喜欢。”

“我敢肯定，这对营造随后的气氛大为有益呀。是的，很显然——这真的是好消息，我本该即刻向您汇报的——正如您所见，柯林斯小姐昨晚露面了。呃，很显然，她在告辞时，他们——她和布罗茨基先生——相视一笑。是的，真的！很多人都看到了。父亲亲眼目睹了。他一直都没有刻意要让他们直接接触，他一直都很谨慎，不想进展太快，尤其是柯林斯小姐还在考虑动物园的事。但恰恰就是在她要告辞的时候。显然布罗茨基先生注意到了她要离开，于是站起身

来。他一整晚都坐在桌旁，即便到那会儿大家都像往常一样自在地转悠。但布罗茨基先生站起身来，视线越过房间望向门口，只见柯林斯小姐正和几位客人道晚安。其中有位先生，我想是韦伯先生吧，正护送她出去，但此时可能是某种直觉吧，总之，她回头望了望房间，当然就看到了布罗茨基先生站在那儿注视着她。这一切父亲尽收眼底，其他好几位也都看到了，房间顿时安静了不少；父亲说，他当时着实以为，她会还他一个冷酷、怨恨的眼神，因为她的脸已准备就绪，仿佛即刻就开弓。但最后一刻，她莞尔一笑。是的，她给了布罗茨基先生一个微笑！然后就出去了。布罗茨基先生呢，呃，您可以想象到，这对他来说意味着什么。想象一下吧，都过了这么多年了！我刚刚见过父亲，据他说，布罗茨基先生今早精神抖擞，活力焕发。他已经在钢琴旁演练了一小时啦！正好我弹完了钢琴空了出来！父亲说他今早有些不同，当然不是说有任何迹象显示他要喝一杯。这对父亲以及所有人来说都是一个胜利的消息，但我肯定您的演讲对这一切居功至伟。我们还在等柯林斯小姐的回音，我是说去动物园的事，但是经过昨晚的事，我们没法不乐观。今早是一个多么美好的清晨啊！好吧，瑞德先生，我不再耽误您的时间了，您肯定想用完早餐。我只是想再次跟您道谢，感谢您所做的一切。我相信白天我们还能碰到，我会向您汇报卡赞一曲的进展。”

我祝他好运，目送他坚定地大步离开了房间。

与这位年轻人的碰面让我倍感满足。接下来几分钟，我继续悠闲地吃着早饭，尤其享受当地黄油的新鲜口感。这时，侍者又端着一壶咖啡出现，然后又离开了。过了一会儿，不知为何，我发现自己回想起在飞机上坐我旁边的人曾经问我的一个问题的答案。三对兄弟曾一起踢入世界杯决赛，他说。我能记起他们是谁吗？我编了个借口继续看书，不想被拉入谈话中。但自那以后，每到像现在这样的场合，当我发现自己可以独自呆上少有的几分钟时，我就发觉那人的问题又会在脑中萦绕。恼人的是，这些年来，我有时能清楚地记得那三对兄弟的名字，但有时会发现，自己不是忘了这一对就是那一对的名字。今早也是这样。我记得查尔顿兄弟在1966年的决赛中为英格兰效力，凡·达科考夫兄弟在1978年为荷兰效力。但我无论怎样想，就是记不起第三对的名字。过了一会儿，我开始异常烦躁起来，有那么一刻，我甚至横下心：不记起那第三对兄弟的名字，我就决不离开早餐桌，也决不开始践行今天的诺约。

我从白日梦中清醒过来，发现鲍里斯进了房间，向我走来。他走得很慢，冷漠地挪步走过一张张空桌子，好像靠近我只是偶然而已。

他回避看我，甚至走到我临桌时，还在那里磨蹭，手指拨弄着桌布，背对着我。

“鲍里斯，吃过早饭了吗？”我问。

他继续拨弄着桌布，然后以一种“吃不吃都无所谓”的腔调问我：

“我们要去旧公寓吗？”

“如果你想的话。我保证，只要你想去，我们就去。你想去吗，鲍里斯？”

“你没有工作要做吗？”

“有的，但我可以晚些做呀。如果你想，我们就去老房子。但是如果要去的话，我们就得马上出发。正如你所说，我今天会忙得不可开交。”

鲍里斯好像在考虑。他继续背对我，拨弄着桌布。

“那么，鲍里斯？可以出发了吗？”

“九号会在那里吗？”

“我想应该是的，”想着我该采取主动，我站起身来，把餐巾扔在盘子边。“鲍里斯，我们立刻出发吧。外面好像是个艳阳天。我们都不用上去拿外套了，立刻出发。”

鲍里斯仍然一脸犹豫，我圈起他的肩膀，然后带他离开了早餐室。

我和鲍里斯穿过大堂时，注意到前台接待员在向我招手。

“瑞德先生，”他说，“那些记者之前又来了。我觉得最好暂时先让他们离开，建议他们一小时之后再来看看。别担心，他们非常配合。”

我沉思片刻，然后说：“太不凑巧了，我现在有件很重要的事。或许你可以请那帮先生通过斯达特曼小姐安排一个合适的时间。现在不好意思，我们得走了。”

我们走出酒店，站在阳光明媚的人行道上，这时，我才发现自己不记得去旧公寓的路了。我看了一会儿面前缓慢行驶的车辆，然后鲍

里斯好像感觉到了我的难处，说道：“我们可以坐有轨电车。就在消防站外面。”

“那太好了。好吧，鲍里斯，你来带路。”

车辆轰然而过，随后的几分钟，我们几乎没有说话。走在狭窄拥挤的人行道上，我们躲闪着，穿过两条繁忙的小街，然后走上一条宽阔的大道，那儿有电车轨道和几条慢车道。这里人行道更为宽阔，我们更自由地穿梭于行人中，走过了一家银行、办公室和餐馆。然后我听到身后跑上来的脚步声，感觉到有只手碰了碰我肩膀。

“瑞德先生！哎呀，终于找到您了！”

我一个转身，发现这人长得颇像一位上了年纪的摇滚歌手。他有着一张饱经风霜的脸，中分杂乱的长头发。他的衬衫和裤子松松垮垮，均呈米色。

“您好，”我小心翼翼地说，注意到鲍里斯满腹狐疑地看着他。

“真是一连串最不幸的误会啊！”那人笑道，“给我们预约了那么多不同的时间。唉，昨晚我们等了很久，两个多小时呢，但是没关系！这样的事也难免。我敢说这些都不是您的错，先生。说实在的，肯定不是。”

“啊，是的。您今早又在等了吧。是的，是的，前台接待员提起过。”

“今早，又有些误会了。”长发男人耸耸肩。“他们说一个小时后再来。所以我们，我和摄影师，就在那家咖啡馆打发时间了。但既然您刚好路过，我在想我们是否可以立刻开始采访拍照。这样的话，我们就不必再次打扰您了。当然，我们明白，像您这样的贵宾，接受我们这种本地小报的访问恐怕不会是您优先考虑的事情……”

“恰恰相反，”我立刻说道，“你们这样的报纸恰恰是我向来最看重的。你们能号准当地人情感的脉搏。像您这样的人，我认为是这城里最珍贵的人脉之一。”

“您如此美言真是太客气了，瑞德先生。请允许我这样说，相当有见地啊。”

“可我要说的是，机缘太不巧了，这会儿，我另有他事。”

“当然，当然。正因如此，我冒昧建议，现在就把整件事给了结了，免得我们以后从早到晚老是打扰您。我们的摄影师，皮德罗，他

现在就在那边的咖啡馆里。我问您两三个问题，他可以拍几张快照。随后，您和这位年轻先生，就可以立马赶往您的目的地。整个过程不过就是四五分钟的光景。目前看来这是最简单的解决之道了。”

“嗯，只几分钟，你说的。”

“哦，有几分钟我们就已经开心不已了。我们完全明白，必定有许多其他重要事情需要您去费心。我说过的，我们就在那边那家咖啡馆。”

他指了指稍远的一个地方，那儿几张桌椅都摆到了人行道上。看起来并不是我理想中接受采访的地方，但我意识到这可能是打发记者最简单的方法了。

“那好吧，”我说，“但我必须强调，今天上午我行程特别紧。”

“瑞德先生，您真是太好了。而且还是我们这种卑微的小报！好吧，我们尽量快些完成。请，这边走。”

长发记者开始带我们沿着人行道往回走，他急切地想赶回咖啡馆，差点撞到另一个行人。眨眼间他就领先了几步，我趁机跟鲍里斯说：

“别担心，这不会太久的。我保证。”

鲍里斯继续挂着一副不满的表情，我补充道：

“听着，等我时，你可以坐下来吃点好吃的。冰淇淋或者芝士蛋糕。然后，我们立即出发。”

我们走到一个满是阳伞的小院子边停下。

“我们到了，”记者说道，示意其中一张桌子。“我们就在那里。”

“如果你不介意的话，”我对他说，“我首先得把鲍里斯安顿在里面。我会很快出来，跟你会合的。”

“太好了。”

虽然外面的院子里很多桌子都有人坐，但里面却一个客人也没有。内室装潢简约现代，房间洒满阳光。一名体态丰满、长得颇像北欧人的年轻女侍者站在玻璃柜后面，柜内陈列着各种蛋糕和点心。鲍里斯在角落里的一张桌子边落座，年轻姑娘微笑着朝我们走来。

“想点些什么？”她问鲍里斯，“今早，我们有全城最新鲜的蛋糕。十分钟前刚运到。全都新鲜出炉。”

鲍里斯开始向她详详细细地盘问起各种蛋糕，最后选中了杏仁巧克力乳酪蛋糕。

“好吧，我不会很久的，”我对他说，“我只是去见见这些人，然后立刻回来。你要是需要什么，我就在外面。”

鲍里斯耸了耸肩，注意力一直停留在那名女侍者身上，此刻她正从陈列柜里取一份精致的甜点。

第十二章

我回到院子，可哪儿都找不到那位长发记者。我在阳伞中间溜达了一会儿，仔细凝视一张张坐在桌边人的面孔。在院子里转了一圈后，我停下脚步，心想也许那记者改变主意，顾自走了。可这好像太不可思议了，我又四下看了看。形形色色的人边喝着咖啡边读着报纸。一位老人正和围在他脚边的鸽子谈天。突然，我听到有人提到了我的名字，我一转身，看到那记者就坐在我正后方的桌边。他非常投入，正和一个矮胖、黝黑的男人相谈甚欢，我猜此人应该是摄影师吧。我惊呼一声，走上前去，但蹊跷的是，这两人继续交谈，看都不看我一眼。甚至我拉开那张剩余的空椅子坐下时，那记者——刚说了半句——只是匆匆地瞥了我一眼，然后又扭头面对那黝黑的摄影师，继续道：

“所以呢，有关这座建筑的重要意义，千万别给他任何提示。你只要编些附庸风雅的理由，解释他为什么非得一直在它前面。”

“没问题，”摄影师点头称是，“没问题。”

“但也不要逼他太紧。上个月舒尔茨在维也纳就是这样搞砸的。而且，记住，像所有其他这号人一样，他非常自负。所以，你得假装是他的一位狂热粉丝。告诉他报社派你去的时候并不知道，而你碰巧是他的一位狂热粉丝。这样就一定能打动他。但在我们建立起融洽关系之前，千万别提萨特勒纪念碑。”

“好的，好的。”摄影师仍频频点头，“但我还以为这事儿现在已经定下来了呢，我以为你已经征得他同意了。”

“我本想打电话把这事敲定下来，可是后来舒尔茨警告我，说这个家伙他妈的真难搞定哩。”那记者说这话的时候，扭头冲我礼貌地一笑。那位摄影师呢，顺着他同伴注视的目光，心不在焉地朝我点了个头，然后他们二人又继续讨论起来。

“舒尔茨的问题，”记者说道，“在于他马屁拍得还不够。而且他那副态度，好像真的不耐烦似的，即便没有不耐烦，他也这副德性。对付这种人，你只需不停拍马屁就行。所以你在拍照的过程中，只消不停地喊‘太棒了’。不停地赞叹。千万不要停止满足他的虚荣心哦。”

“好的，好的。没问题。”

“那么我就开始……”记者疲倦地叹了口气。“我就开始谈谈他在维也纳的表演，或者诸如此类的事情吧。我这儿搞了些资料，我会一路夸张，虚张声势。但我们别浪费太多时间。几分钟之后，你就假装有了灵感，说要去萨特勒纪念碑拍照。而我会先假装有些生气，但最后承认这是个绝佳的主意。”

“好的，好的。”

“你现在明白了。别出岔子。记住，他是个难搞的混蛋。”

“我明白。”

“一旦有任何不对，就说些恭维的话。”

“好吧，好吧。”

两个人相互点了点头。然后记者深吸了一口气，拍拍双手，转过身来，面对着我，突然眼光灼灼起来。

“啊，瑞德先生，您来啦！您能抽出您宝贵的一点时间给我们，真是太好了。我想那年轻人在里面还开心吧？”

“是的，是的。他点了一大块乳酪蛋糕。”

那两人开心地大笑，矮胖摄影师咧嘴笑道：

“乳酪蛋糕。太好了，我的最爱。我自小就最喜欢乳酪蛋糕。”

“哦，瑞德先生，这是皮德罗。”

摄影师微微一笑，急切地伸出手。“真高兴见到您，先生。告诉您吧，对我来说这真的是天赐良机。我今早才接到这个任务。起床的时候，我还在想今天又得去拍议事厅。我是在洗澡的时候接到电话的。你想做吗？他们问。自打孩提时，他就是我心目中的偶像，我告诉他们。我想不想做？天啊，没有报酬都行，只要让我做，我愿倒贴给你们，我告诉他们。只需告诉我去哪儿就行。我发誓我从未因一个任务如此兴奋过。”

“坦白说，瑞德先生，”记者说，“昨晚跟我一起在酒店的摄影师，呃，等了几个小时后他开始有些不耐烦了。自然，我对他相当生气。‘你似乎还不明白，’我对他说，‘假如瑞德先生因故耽搁了，那肯定是他得去赴最重要的约会。假如他发了善心同意给我们些时间，而需要我们等上一会儿，那么我们就等呗。’先生，跟您说吧，

我对他非常生气。我回去之后，就告诉主编说这可不行啊。‘早上再给我找个摄影师，’我要求道，‘我想要一个理解瑞德先生的立场并对他示以合宜谢意的人。’是的，对这事我挺激动的。总之，我们现在有皮德罗了，他正好和我一样，也是您的琴迷，我们几乎一样狂热。”

“更狂热，更狂热呢，”皮德罗抗议道，“我今早接到电话时，简直不敢相信。我的偶像到了城里，而我要给他拍照去。天哪，我一定要做得尽善尽美，我洗澡的时候对自己这么说。那样一位大人物，必须做得尽善尽美才行呐。我会让他站在萨特勒大楼前拍照。我这样设想着。我洗澡的时候，脑海中构思出了整个作品。”

“现在，皮德罗，”记者说，严肃地看着他，“我非常怀疑瑞德先生是否愿意仅仅为了拍个照跑到萨特勒大楼那边。好吧，开车最多几分钟就到，但是对于一个行程紧张的人来说，几分钟可不是无足轻重的事喔。不，皮德罗，你就在这儿尽你最大努力做好吧，我们坐在这桌边谈话，你拍几张瑞德先生的照片。好吧，人行道露天咖啡馆，是太老套了，瑞德先生全身上下的独特魅力甚至都很难很好地展示出来。但不行也得行了。我承认，你想让瑞德先生站在萨特勒纪念碑前这一主意，确实是神来之想。但他根本没时间啊。能为他拍一张哪怕只是普普通通的照片，我们就该满足了。”

皮德罗一边用拳头捶打手掌，一边摇头。“你说的没错。可是，上帝啊，这太难受了。这是一个为伟大的瑞德先生拍照的机会，这种机会一辈子也就一次啊，而我却只能将就，在一个咖啡馆拍。真是造物弄人啊。”他又悲伤地摇了摇头。一时间，他们两人坐在那儿望着我。

“呃，”我终于说道，“你们说的这座建筑，真的是开车几分钟就到吗？”

皮德罗突然坐直身子，因激动而脸上发光。

“您是认真的吗？您会在萨特勒纪念碑前摆姿势拍照吗？上帝啊，史无前例啊！我就知道您是个大好人！”

“等一下……”

“您确定吗，瑞德先生？”记者抓着我的胳膊说，“您真的确定吗？我知道您的行程很满。哎呀，您真的是太伟大了！真的，打车过

去不过三分钟。其实，您只消在这里等会儿，先生，我现在就去拦一辆过来。皮德罗，反正瑞德先生在这里等，不如你先为他拍几张。”

记者匆匆离开。随即我看到他站在人行道边上，前倾着身体，冲着来往车辆，一只手臂举在半空中。

“瑞德先生，请吧。”

皮德罗单膝跪地，透过相机眯眼看着我。我在椅子上坐好——摆了一个放松但不过于懒散的姿势——一副亲切微笑的面容。

皮德罗按了几下快门。然后他后退几步，再一次单膝蹲下，这次是在一张空桌子边，惊飞了一群正在啄食面包屑的鸽子。我正准备再调整一下姿势，记者跑了回来。

“瑞德先生，我现在拦不到出租车，但正好有一辆有轨电车来了。请快些，我们可以跳上去。皮德罗，快，那辆电车。”

“但那会和出租车一样快吗？”我问道。

“是的，是的。其实，这种交通状况下，电车会更快些。真的，瑞德先生，您不必担心。萨特勒纪念碑非常近。事实上——”他抬起手遮着双眼看向远方，“事实上，您从这儿差不多能看到。要不是那灰色的塔楼挡在那儿，我们这会儿就能看见萨特勒纪念碑了。就是这么近，真的。事实上，一个正常身高的人——不比你我高多少——如果爬到萨特勒大楼的房顶，站直，举着类似杆子的物体——比方说，家用拖把——像今天这样的清晨，我们很容易就能越过那座灰色塔楼看到。所以您看，我们马上就能到。请吧，那辆电车，我们得快点了。”

皮德罗已经站在路缘上了。我看到他背着重重的一袋设备，正试图说服电车司机等我们。我跟着记者走出院子上车了。

我们三人刚走上中心过道，电车再次启动了。车厢里很拥挤，我们没办法挨着坐。我挤进车厢靠后的一个座位，坐在一个小个儿老头和一个主妇母亲中间，她膝上还坐着个牙牙学语的小孩。座位出奇的舒服，过了一会儿，我开始有些享受起这次旅程。我对面，坐着三个年长的男人，他们共同读着一张报纸，由中间那人打开举着。电车的颠簸好似给他们阅读造成了困难，不时地，他们会为要求读特别的哪一页而争执。

我们走了好一会儿，我才察觉到四周的活动，看到一位女检票员沿过道走过来。我才想到我同伴一定为我买好了票——我上车时，肯定没有买过。我再次扭头看过去，看到了那检票员。一个娇小女人，丑陋的黑色制服没有完全掩盖她迷人的身材。她已经检查过其他地方，正朝我们这块儿走来。我四周，人们纷纷掏出车票和通行证。我强压住心中的恐慌，酝酿准备说点什么，听起来既有尊严又有说服力。

这时，检票员逼近我们，所有邻座人都拿出了自己的车票。她正给他们打孔时，我定定地说道：

“我没有票，但我有特殊情况，你要是允许的话，我会向你解释。”

检票员看着我，然后她说：“没票是一回事。但你知道，你昨晚真让我失望。”

她一说这话，我立刻认出她是菲奥娜·罗伯茨。她是在伍斯特郡我们村的小学同学，我大约九岁时，和她发展了一段特殊的友谊。当初，她住得离我们很近，沿着小路走不远就到了她家的农舍，跟我家的没多大区别，我常常溜出去和她玩上一下午，特别是在我们离开家乡去曼彻斯特之前那段艰难的日子里。自那以后我再也没见过她，所以着实为她责难的态度吃了一惊。

“啊，是的，”我说，“昨晚。是的。”

菲奥娜·罗伯茨仍看着我。或许和她这会儿摆出的责备的神情有关，我突然间发现自己想起了儿时的一个下午，我们两个正一起坐在她家餐桌下。我们跟往常一样，将五彩缤纷的毛毯、窗帘从餐桌边垂挂下来，筑起了我们的“藏身窝”。那日午后，温暖晴朗，我们硬是坐在“藏身窝”里，里面几近漆黑，闷热难当。我一直对菲奥娜说着些什么，必定是唠唠叨叨，让人心烦意乱。她不止一次想打断我，但我继续唠叨。最后，我说完了，她说道：

“太傻了。那意味着你得靠自己了。你会很孤单的。”

“我不介意，”我说，“我喜欢孤单。”

“你又在犯傻了。没人喜欢孤单。我会有个大家庭，至少五个孩子，每晚给他们做一顿美味的晚餐。”然后，我没有回答，她又说道：“你太傻了。没人喜欢独自一人。”

“我就是。我喜欢。”

“你怎么能喜欢孤单呢？”

“我喜欢，就是喜欢。”

事实上，下这断言，我还是有几分坚定的。到那日下午，我开始我的“训练期”已经有几个月了；其实，那份特殊的迷恋大约是在那会儿达到了顶峰。

我的“训练期”开始得相当意外。一日灰蒙蒙的午后，我独自在小巷里玩耍——沉浸在某种幻想中，在一排杨树和田野中间的干涸沟渠里爬进爬出——我突然感到一阵惊慌，需要父母的陪伴。我们的农舍并不远，越过田间，我能看到农舍的背面。惊恐感迅速蔓延，我几乎被一阵冲动所压倒，只想穿过杂草全速跑回家。然而，不知何故——可能我很快将这感觉同不成熟联系起来——我强迫自己迟些离开。毫无疑问，我脑子里想的还是很快穿越田间，开始奔跑，只是用意志力推迟那一刻的到来，多坚持了几秒。我呆若木鸡地站在那干涸的沟渠里，经历了恐惧与兴奋交织的奇怪感觉，这感觉我在接下来的几周里渐渐熟悉。不到几天工夫，我的“训练期”变成了我生活中一个惯常且重要的部分。日久天长，就形成了一种固定的仪式，所以，一感到想回家的念头冒出头，我就会沿着小路走到一个特别的地方，一棵巨大的橡树下，我会在那儿站上几分钟，击退内心的情感。时常，我会觉得呆得已经够长了，现在可以出发回家了，结果却是再一次将自己拉回来，强迫自己继续在树下多站上几秒钟。毫无疑问，那伴随着不断增长的恐惧与惊恐的奇特兴奋感，或许就是我保留自己那略带强迫性质的“训练期”的原因吧。

“但你知道的，是不是？”那日菲奥娜对我说。黑暗中，她的脸挨着我的。“你结婚后不必像你父母那样。根本不会像那样的。丈夫和妻子不会总是吵架。他们只是在……在特殊的事情发生的时候才那样吵架。”

“什么特殊的事情？”

菲奥娜沉默了一会儿。我正准备更咄咄逼人地重复一遍自己的问题，这时，她语重心长地说：

“你父母呀，他们不是因为合不来才那样吵架的。你难道不知道吗？难道你不知道他们为什么总是吵架吗？”

突然间，我们的“藏身窝”外面传来一声怒气冲冲的叫喊，菲奥娜就消失了。我继续独自坐在桌下的黑暗里，捕捉到了从厨房传来的菲奥娜和她母亲低声争执的声音。我听到菲奥娜一度用受伤的语气重复道：“可是为什么不行？为什么我不能告诉他？其他人都知道了。”她母亲说，嗓音仍很低：“他比你年纪小。他太小了。你不能告诉他。”

菲奥娜·罗伯茨走近了几步停下，把我的回忆打断了，她对我说：

“我一直等到十点半，然后让大家去吃饭了。大家那时候都饿了。”

“当然，正常。”我无力地一笑，四下看了看车厢。“十点半。到那时候，是的，人们肯定饿了……”

“而到那时候，你显然是不会来了。没人会再相信了。”

“是的，我想，到那时候，不可避免地……”

“刚开始一切都还不错，”菲奥娜·罗伯茨说，“以前，我从未举办过那样的聚会，但一切都还不错。她们都来了，英奇，楚德，她们全都来我公寓了。我有些紧张，但一切顺利，我真的也很兴奋。她们有几位还为那晚作了充分准备，带了好多文件夹，里面好多信息，还有照片。直到大概九点，人们开始心神不定、坐立不安了，那时候，我头一次突然意识到你可能不来了。我不停地进进出出，加咖啡，添点心，一心要让一切顺利进行。她们全都开始窃窃私语，但我仍然想，呃，你可能还是会来的，可能在什么地方塞车了吧。后来，越来越晚了，最后，她们就公开地议论起来。你知道的，甚至毫不顾及我还在房间呢。就在我自家的公寓里！就在那时，我告诉她们开始吃吧。我那会儿只希望早点结束早了事。于是，大家开始吃，我准备了好多的小煎蛋卷，而即便在吃的时候，其中几位，像乌利克那号人，仍旧不停地私语窃笑。但其实吧，某种程度上，我倒觉得那些窃笑的还好。相比楚德之类，我更能接受她们。楚德她们装出一副为我惋惜的模样，自始至终都虚情假意地显示友好，哦，我多么讨厌那个女人！我能看出她在临走时，暗自思量：‘可怜的家伙，生活在幻想的世界里。我们真的早该猜到的。’哦，我恨透了她们这伙人，我真的鄙视自己竟然跟她们搞在一起。可是，你瞧，我在这小区住了四年，没交到一个好朋友，我很孤独啊。长久以来，那些女人，就是昨晚来我公寓的那些人，她们不愿和我有任何关系。你知道的，她们认

为自己是这儿的精英，自称是‘妇女艺术文化基金会’成员。这太愚蠢了，那根本不是什么真正意义上的基金会，但她们觉得那名字听起来很气派。每当城里组织什么活动，她们就忙活起来。比方说，北京芭蕾舞团来访的时候，她们做了所有欢迎招待会的彩带。总之，她们认为自己无比高贵，直到最近，都不想跟我这样的人有来往。那个英奇，在小区附近看到我时，甚至不愿打声招呼。但是，当然，自传言散播开来，一切都变了。我是说我认识你这件事。我不知道这事是怎么传出去的，可我没有到处鼓吹呀。我猜我肯定向某人提起过。但不管怎样，你想象得到，一切都变了。今年早些时候，某一天，英奇叫住了我，我那时正上楼，她邀请我参加她们的一次聚会。我真的不想和她们有牵连，但还是去了，我猜想当时觉得总能交上几个朋友吧，我也不知道。呃，一开始，她们一些人，包括英奇和楚德，她们不知道该不该相信传言，你知道，就是我是你老朋友的事。但她们最后认可了，我想可能这让她们感觉相当不错。照料你父母的整个主意不是我出的，但很明显，我认识你这一事实与其有莫大关系。你要来访的消息传出后，英奇过去告诉冯·布劳恩先生，她说，继北京芭蕾舞团之后，基金会现已准备就绪，准备承办某项真正重要的活动，而且，基金会中有一位还是你的老朋友呢。诸如此类的话。就这样，基金会争取到了这项工作，即在你父母逗留期间照顾他们；当然，大家都很兴奋，虽然其中几位觉得这事责任重大，很是紧张。但英奇一个劲地给大家鼓气，说这不过是我们应得的认可。我们连连开会，为招待好你父母出点子，想办法。英奇告诉我们——我听到了这点很难过——你父母二人现在身体都不大好，所以呢，很多顺理成章的事，如游览城市之类的，就不太合适了。但是，其他主意可多着呢，大家都很兴奋。随后，在最后一次会议上，有人说，呃，我们干吗不请你来，亲自见见我们呢？谈谈你父母会喜欢什么。刹那间，大家鸦雀无声，然后英奇说：‘干吗不呢？毕竟，我们有万中无一的资格邀请他。’然后她们全都盯着我，于是最后我说：‘呃，我想他会很忙，但如果你们愿意，我可以问问他的。’我看得出我说那话的时候她们是多么激动。后来一得到你的答复，嗨，我就一跃成了公主，她们都对我另眼相待，无论什么时候遇见我，都冲我微笑，对我很亲热，给孩子们送礼物，主动为我做这干那。因此，你完全能想象昨晚你没出现的后果了吧。”

她重重地叹了口气，沉默了一会儿，透过窗户茫然地看着窗外掠过的建筑物。终于，她继续道：

“我想我其实不该怪你。毕竟，我们已经有很久没见面了。但是，我当时以为你会看在你父母的分上过来的。对于我们能为他们在此逗留期间做些什么，每个人都想法多多。今早，她们一定会七嘴八舌地议论我。她们几乎都不出去上班，丈夫个个能赚大钱，她们一定会互煲电话或相互串门，肯定会异口同声地说：‘可怜的女人，生活在自己的世界里。我们早就该看出来的。我倒愿意尽点力帮助她，不过呢，她实在是太令人厌烦了。’我现在就能听见她们说这话，她们一定个个陶醉其中。就说英奇吧，一方面，她会非常生气。‘这个小贱人骗了我们。’她会这么想。而另一方面，她会很开心，她会如释重负。你瞧，英奇这人呐，她既中意我认识你，可又总觉得这是个威胁。我看得出来。过去的这几周中，自从你答复之后，其他人对待我的方式，可能让她有了什么想法。她真的是痛苦万分，她们全都是。总之，她们今早一定会很开心，我知道她们一定会的。”

听着菲奥娜的话，我不自觉地认为自己该对前一晚发生的事感到无比懊悔。然而，尽管她绘声绘色地描述她公寓中的情景，尽管我为她深感难过，但我发现自己只是模模糊糊地记得日程表上有这样一项活动。此外，她的话让我颇为吃惊地意识到，父母快要来到这座城市了，可到目前为止自己却对这个问题考虑甚少。正如菲奥娜提到的，他们二人身体欠安，生活几乎不能自理。没错，看着外面繁忙的交通，还有窗外掠过的一座座光亮的建筑物，我对年迈的父母，不由生发出一股强烈的保护欲。理想的办法其实就是委托当地的一群妇女照料他们，我真是个大笨蛋，居然没能抓住机会见见她们，和她们谈谈。父母怎么办？想到这，一阵惊慌攫住了我的心——我无法想象，对于这次出访的这方面问题，我居然没怎么考虑。一时间，我的脑海里思潮翻滚。我突然看到了我母亲和父亲，两人身材矮小，头发花白，年老驼背，站在火车站外面，周围都是行李，自己根本没法搬。我能看见他们看着身旁这个陌生的城市，然后，最终，我父亲的自尊战胜了理智，拿起两个，然后三个箱子，而我母亲试图阻拦无果，她用那瘦弱的手拉住他的胳膊，说：“不行，不行，你搬不动的。太多、太多了。”而我父亲，表情坚定决绝，甩开我母亲，说：“我不搬，那由谁来搬？要不我们怎么到酒店？这种地方，自己不帮自己，还有谁会帮我们？”而在这当儿，轿车和卡车从他们身边呼啸而过，上下班的人匆匆路过。我母亲虽然难过，却也只好作罢，无可奈何地看着父亲负着沉重的行李蹒跚而行，走出四五步，最终支撑不住，放下行李箱，肩膀垂下，呼吸沉重。然后，过了一会儿，我母亲，走向他，轻柔地把手放在他胳膊上。“没关系，我们会找到人帮忙吧。”而我父亲，此时已经放弃，但或许已感满足，因为至少他精神可嘉，

他平静地看着眼前的人流，寻找可能是来接他们的人，帮他们搬送行李，寒暄欢迎，坐着舒适的轿车带他们到酒店。

菲奥娜说话的时候，我大脑里充斥着这些景象，因此一时间未能考虑到她不幸的处境。但随后我意识到了她在说：

“她们会议论纷纷，说什么从今以后可得更谨慎了。我现在就能听见她们这么说。‘我们现在声望更高了，一定会遇到形形色色的人，他们千方百计想使诈混进来。我们必须小心为好，尤其是现在我们担负着如此重大的责任。那个小贱人对我们来说是个教训。’诸如此类的话。天知道这下我在那小区日子还怎么过。而我的孩子们，他们可得在那里长大……”

“听着，”我打断她，说道，“对此我真的很抱歉，语言都难以形容。但事实是，昨晚发生了件无可预见的事情，具体什么事就不说出来烦你了。我当然因为让你失望而十分懊恼，但确实甚至连打通电话都不太可能。我希望没有给你带来太多麻烦。”

“麻烦可多呢。对我来说不容易啊，你知道，一个单身母亲带着两个长身体的孩子……”

“你听我说，我真是非常抱歉。要不这样吧，我现在和那边的两个记者有点事，但不会太久的。我会尽快摆脱他们，跳上出租车，直奔你公寓。我会大概，半个小时吧，至多四十五分钟到那儿。然后我们就这么做。我们一起绕着小区走上一圈，那么所有这些人，你的邻居呀、什么英奇、什么楚德呀，她们全部会亲眼见到我们的确是老朋友。然后我们就去拜访一些较具影响力的人，比如这个英奇之类的。你可以介绍我，我呢则对昨晚的事道个歉，解释一下何以在最后不得不耽误行程。我们一个一个地把她们争取过来，弥补昨晚对你造成的伤害。其实呀，顺利的话，你在朋友中的人缘说不定甚至比从前更好呢。你觉得怎么样？”

菲奥娜继续盯着过往的风景看了好一会儿。最后她说：“我的第一直觉会说：‘忘记整件事吧。’声称是你的一个老朋友，对我一点帮助都没有。总之，或许我并不需要成为英奇那个圈子的人。我只是之前在那小区里太孤单了，但是尝过她们的行事风格之后，我觉得，说不定只有我的孩子们做伴我会更开心呢。晚上，我可以读一本好书，或者看电视。然而，我要考虑的不只是我自己，我还得考虑孩子们。他们得在这小区里长大，他们得被他人接纳。看在孩子的分上，我应当接受你的提议。你也说了，假如我们按照你建议的做，我的境

况说不定比聚会成功还好呢。但你得保证，你得以你所珍视的一切发誓，你不能让我再度失望了。因为，你看，如果实施你的计划，那就意味着我一结束这次轮班，就得开始挨家挨户打电话安排我们的拜访。我们可不能随随便便去敲人家的门，这儿可不是那种小区。所以你应该明白，如果我预约了而你没出现会怎样吧。那样的话，我就只能自己再走一圈，再次解释你没来的原因。所以你必须保证你不会再让我失望了。”

“我保证，”我说，“我说过，只要完成这儿的这件小事，我就即刻跳上出租车，与你会合。别担心，菲奥娜，船到桥头自然直。”

正说着，我感觉有人碰了碰我胳膊。我转过身，看见皮德罗站了起来，再次把大包扛在肩膀上。

“瑞德先生，请吧。”他指着通向下车门的过道说。

记者正站在前面准备下车。

“我们到站了，瑞德先生。”他朝我大叫，挥了挥手，“如果你不介意的话，先生。”

我感觉到电车缓缓停下。我站起身，往外一挤，向着车厢的另一头走去。

第十三章

电车轰鸣而去，留下我们三人站在开阔的乡间，四周尽是迎风的田野。我感到微风阵阵，神清气爽。我站着看了一会儿，看着电车渐渐驶出田野，消失在视线外。

“瑞德先生，这边请。”

记者和皮德罗在几步开外等着。我走上前追上他们，开始穿越绿草茵茵的田野。阵阵强风不时扯拽着我们的衣衫，吹得绿草上下起伏。终于，我们到了一个小山脚下，停下脚，喘口气。

“就在这上面不远处。”记者指着山上说。

我们一路徒步穿越茂盛的绿草地，经过这一番奔波后，看到有一条土路直通山上，我心中大喜。

“好吧，”我说，“我时间不多，我们最好现在就过去。”

“当然，瑞德先生。”

记者在前面带路，走上一条陡峭曲折的小径。我勉强跟上，与他仅保持一两步的距离。皮德罗可能是被身上的包所拖累，一下子落在后面。爬山的时候，我发现自己一直在想菲奥娜，想前一晚我如何令她失望。我猛地意识到，尽管迄今为止我对此次来访信心十足，尽管迄今为止我已有所斩获，但在某些事情的处理上——至少以我自己的标准衡量——仍留下了些许遗憾。我父母即将到达这座城市，且不论我给菲奥娜带来的尴尬，令人极其恼火的是，我竟错过了一次机会，一次与托付照料他们的人讨论他们诸多复杂需求的机会。我的呼吸声越来越沉重，一想到索菲给我的事儿造成的混乱，我就对她气恼不已，一股强烈的无名之火再次向我涌来。毋庸置疑，要求她在我人生的这一无比关键时刻，管好自己如麻的纷乱，这要求并不过分呀。突然想要对她说的各种各样的话，一下子充满了我的脑袋，如若不是气喘吁吁的话，我没准就大声自语起来了。

沿着小径转了三四个弯后，我们停下来歇了歇脚。抬头望去，发现此刻周围的乡间风景历历在目。片片田野连绵不绝，蜿蜒至远方。只有在视线的很远处，才能隐隐看到一片农舍之类的东西。

“风景真美。”记者说，边喘着气，边用手将头发别到脑后。
“上这儿来，真是令人心旷神怡。清新的空气定会让我们一整天都精神抖擞。呃，虽说风景确实不错，可我们还是别浪费时间了。”他爽朗一笑，又走了起来。

与之前一样，我继续紧跟着他，皮德罗落在后面。有那么一会儿，正当我们艰难地攀登一个特别陡峭的地方时，皮德罗在下面喊了一声。我以为他是叫我们放慢速度，但记者并没有停下脚步，而是顶着一阵强风扭头喊道：“你说什么？”

我听见皮德罗挣扎着又走了几步。然后听到他喊道：

“我说，貌似我们已经说服了那狗屁家伙。我觉得他会配合的。”

“呃，”记者回喊道，“到目前为止他还算配合，但对这类人可不能想当然。所以继续拍马屁吧。他已经来到这么上面了，看起来还挺开心的。不过我觉得这傻子甚至都不知道这建筑的意义。”

“他问的话，我们怎么跟他说？”皮德罗喊道，“他一定会问的。”

“那就换个话题。叫他换下姿势。只要谈他的演出就一定能转移他的注意力。如果他问个不停，我们最后就得告诉他了，但那时我们已经拍了很多照片，这混球一点办法也没了。”

“这里完事儿了我就开心了。”皮德罗说，这会儿他喘得更厉害了。“老天啊，他老是摩搓双手的样子让我浑身都起鸡皮疙瘩。”

“我们就快到了。一切都挺顺利的，可别在最后一刻搞砸了。”

“很抱歉，”我打断他们，说道，“我需要休息一会儿。”

“当然了，瑞德先生，我真是考虑欠周啊，”记者说道，我们停了下来。“我本人是马拉松运动员，”他继续道，“所以有特别的优势。但我得说，先生，您看起来确实非常健康。以您这个年纪——噢，我是从资料里得知您年龄的，否则我绝猜不出一一真的，您把可怜的皮德罗远远地甩在了后面呢。”等皮德罗赶上来的时候，他冲他大喊：“快点儿，你这个慢吞吞的家伙。瑞德先生在笑你呢。”

“这可不公平啊，”皮德罗微笑道，“瑞德先生才华横溢，而且呢，又幸运地拥有运动天赋。我们有些人可没这么幸运呵。”

我们站在那儿俯瞰风景，恢复气力。然后，记者说：

“我们离目的地很近了。继续走吧。毕竟，瑞德先生今天很忙。”

最后一段路最费力。小径越来越陡，还有很多泥泞的水坑。记者继续稳稳地走在我前面，但我看得出他这会儿正费力地向前倾着身子。我摇摇晃晃地跟在后面，脑中又满是想对索菲讲的话。“你知道吗？”我发现自己咬紧牙随着步子喃喃自语。“你知道吗？”不知怎地，这话从未继续下去，但每走一步，要么在我脑中，要么低声念出，我一遍又一遍地重复这句话，直到这话本身都开始让我愤怒了。

小径终于平坦了，我看到山顶处有一幢白色建筑。我和记者跌跌撞撞地走了过去，过了一会儿，我们斜倚着墙壁喘气。稍后，皮德罗也过来了，大口大口地喘着粗气。他靠着墙壁一下瘫倒，身体下垂，只靠双膝支撑，我一度担心他是不是要痉挛了。他仍然“呼哧呼哧”地喘着气，开始拉开包，取出了一架相机还有镜头。这时候，刚才这一系列动作好像让他招架不住了，他一只手撑着墙，头埋到墙沟处，继续大口地呼吸。

终于，我感觉自己恢复了些许，走开几步，想看看这座建筑，结果一阵狂风将我吹了回去，差点紧贴在墙上。最终我走到了一个位置，看到一栋高高的圆柱形白色砖房，没有窗户，独独近顶端的地方有一道垂直的裂缝。好似从一座中世纪城堡上搬下了一个塔楼，移植到了这山顶上。

“瑞德先生，只要您准备好了，我们就可以开始了，先生。”

记者和皮德罗站到了离建筑物十米开外的地方。皮德罗这会儿显然恢复过来了，摆好三脚架，透过取景镜向外看。

“请您靠墙站直，瑞德先生。”记者喊道。

我走向这栋建筑。“先生们，”我说，提高声音，盖过风声，“开始之前，我想问问您能否解释一下我们选这个背景的确切意义？”

“瑞德先生，”皮德罗大喊道，一边挥手，“请向后站，紧挨着墙，或者一只胳膊撑着墙吧。就像这样。”他逆着风伸出了胳膊肘。

我靠墙走近了几步，按照要求做了。皮德罗照了若干张照片，时不时地移动三脚架或更换镜头。这期间，记者一直站在近旁，透过皮德罗的肩头看着，与他商量着。

“先生们，”过了一会儿，我说，“我这么问应该并不冒昧……”

“瑞德先生，”皮德罗说，从相机后面跳将起来。“您的领带！”

我的领带被吹到肩膀上去了。我正了正领带，又趁机重新理了一下头发。

“瑞德先生，”皮德罗喊道，“能不能拍几张您抬起手的，就像这样。是的，是的！好像您引着某人走近房子。对了，非常好，非常好。但是，呃，请自豪地微笑。非常自豪，就好像这房子是您的孩子似的。好的，太完美了。是的，您看起来太棒了！”

我尽力按着他的指示做，但是风力强劲，很难保持一个既合适又亲切的表情。

过了一会儿，我意识到左边站着一个人。印象中，那男人身穿深色外套，紧贴着墙蜷缩着，但我当时得摆个姿势，只能用余光看他。皮德罗继续迎着风，大声喊着指令——让我把下巴向一边侧一点，笑容更灿烂一些——过了好一会儿之后，我才有空转身，打量那人。最后我开始打量他的时候，那男人——高高的，像根竹竿，秃顶，脸上瘦骨嶙峋——立即向我走来。他紧紧夹着雨衣，走近时，他伸出了手。

“瑞德先生，您好。很荣幸见到您。”

“啊，是的，”我答道，打量着他，“很高兴见到您，您是……呃……”

那个竹竿男子显出一脸惊愕的神色。然后说：“克里斯托弗。我是克里斯托弗。”

“啊，克里斯托弗先生。”一阵劲风扑面而来，我们只得奋力支撑片刻，这也给了我一个机会恢复了些。“啊，对，克里斯托弗先生。当然。久仰您大名啊。”

“瑞德先生，”克里斯托弗说着，倾身靠近我，“请允许我直接向您表达我的谢意，感谢您拨冗出席此次午宴。我知道您是个多么有修养的人，所以，您做出肯定回复时，我毫不意外。您看，我知道您是那种至少会给我们一个公平申诉机会的人，是那种会切切实实想要听听我们立场的人。不，我一点儿不意外。但我还是非常感激您。

呃，现在——”他看了看表，“我们有点晚了，但没关系。交通应该不太糟糕。请，这边走。”

我跟着克里斯托弗绕到这白色建筑的后面。这里的风没有那么强劲，砖房外安装的大量管道发出了一阵低沉的嗡鸣声。克里斯托弗继续领路，朝着山缘处一个两根木头柱子标记的地方走去。我脑中想象着柱子那边下坡路应该很陡峭，但到了之后，我向下看去，看到一截长长的不太牢固的石阶，通向山腰处，让人头晕眼花。下面台阶的尽头远远的是一条铺好的路，我隐约辨别出一辆黑色轿车在那里等候着。应该是在等我们吧。

“瑞德先生，您先请。”克里斯托弗说，“请吧，下去时步伐请随意。不必着急。”

然而，我留意到他又焦急地扫了一眼手表。

“很抱歉我们晚了。”我说，“拍照片花的时间比我想象的要长些。”

“请别担心，瑞德先生。我们肯定能及时赶到。请吧，您先走。”

头几步，我感到有些眩晕。两边都没有栏杆，惊惧中，我被迫高度集中注意力，生怕一步踏空，一路滚下山去。但幸而，风没有像先前那么闹事捣鬼，过了一会儿，我发现自己越来越有自信——和其他的台阶没有太大区别嘛——甚至双眼不时地离开双脚，一览眼前的全景。

天仍然阴沉，但太阳已经开始冲破云层。现在能看到，车停着的那条路建在一座高丘上。透过层层叠叠的树顶，高丘那边的山麓继续呈下降之势。再往下，我能看到田野向远处各方延展开去。地平线处，城市的轮廓隐约可见。

克里斯托弗一直紧跟在我身后。开头几分钟，可能是留意到了我下山时的紧张，他没有开口交谈。但我步伐有了节奏之后，他叹了一口气，说：

“那片树林，瑞德先生，您右下方那片，叫沃尔登伯格树林。城里许多较为富裕的人，都喜欢在那儿弄个小木屋。沃尔登伯格树林非常怡人。开车一会就到城里了，但又让人感觉远离一切喧嚣。等我们上车，沿山坡开下去，您就会看到那些小木屋了。有些正好就坐落在峭壁边缘，景观肯定美不胜收。罗莎肯定会喜欢这样的小屋。其实，

我们心里特别中意其中的一间，等我们车子开下去的时候我会指给您看。简朴是简朴点，但一样的夺目。现在的房主几乎不用，一年也不过就用两三个星期。如果我价钱开得好，他肯定会认真考虑的。但现在没必要考虑了。全完了。”

他沉默片刻。然后他的声音又在我身后响起。

“谈不上宏伟壮观。我和罗莎从未看过里面什么样。但是我们开车路过许多次，想都能想象出里面是什么样的。它坐落在一个隆起的小山岬上，有个陡坡，让人感觉悬在半空似的。走过一个个房间时，每个窗户都能看到云层。罗莎肯定会喜欢的。我们从前开车经过，都会减速，有时候甚至停下车来，坐在那儿尽情想象，里面是什么样子，一个房间一个房间地遐想。呃，刚才我也说了，这些现在全都是过眼云烟了，想也没用了。不管怎么说，瑞德先生，您同意让我们占用您宝贵的时间，为的可不是听这些。请原谅。我们说正事吧。您知道，先生，您答应过来和我们谈谈，我们全都无比感激啊。您与这帮人形成多么明显的对照啊，这伙人还自称领导这个社会！前前后后共有三次，我们邀请他们出席午宴，来谈谈这些问题，就像您要做的这样。但他们一口回绝。就连一秒钟也不肯来啊！太傲慢了，一个个全是。冯·温特斯坦，伯爵夫人，冯·布劳恩，全都这德性。您看，他们之所以这样，是因为他们没把握啊。他们心中都明白自己什么都不懂，所以拒绝过来与我们好好商谈。我们邀请了他们三次啊，可他们每次都是断然拒绝。不过，话说回来，即使他们来了也无济于事。我们现在讲的话，他们连一半都听不懂。”

我又一次陷入沉默。我觉得应该讲上几句，但突然意识到我只能扭头大声喊才能让他听见，我可不想冒险视线离开台阶。于是，随后的几分钟，我们继续默默地往下走。我身后，克里斯托弗的呼吸越发沉重。然后我听见他说：

“说句公道话，这倒也不能怪他们。这些现代音乐太复杂了，什么卡赞，穆莱利，吉本直贵。即便像我这样受过训练的乐师，现在都感觉很难，非常难。冯·温特斯坦、伯爵夫人之流，又怎么可能会懂？完全超出他们的层次了嘛。对他们来说，那简直就是噪音，离奇古怪的节奏，一团糟啊。或许这些年自己骗自己说能听出些名堂来，什么情感啊、意义啊。但事实上，他们一无所得。完全超出了他们的层次，他们根本不懂现代音乐的原理。曾几何时，只有莫扎特、巴赫、柴可夫斯基。那种音乐，大街上随便拉个人都能猜个八九不离十。但是，这是现代音乐啊！他们这样的人，一帮乡巴佬，没经过任

何训练，怎么可能——不管他们觉得对社会怀有一种何等强烈的责任感——他们怎么可能理解这些东西呢？无可救药啊，瑞德先生。他们搞不清破碎的节奏与令人震撼的主题间的区别，也不懂断裂的拍号和一系列指孔休止之间停顿的不同。而如今还误判了整个形势！想让事情往相反的方向发展！瑞德先生，您要是累了，我们何不休息一会儿？”

事实上，我刚才停步片刻，有一只鸟突然惊慌失措地飞近我面前，差点害我失足踩空。

“不用，不用，我没事。”我大声回答道，又重新开始下台阶。

“这些台阶太脏了没法坐，但如果您愿意的话，我们随时可以停下，站着歇歇脚。”

“不用，真的，谢谢。我很好。”

我们继续走着，接下来几分钟，彼此沉默。然后，克里斯托弗说：

“在我最超然的时候，我其实深为他们遗憾。我不怪他们。虽然他们干了那些事，说我的坏话，我有时仍能客观看待形势。我对自己说，不，真的不是他们的错。音乐变得这么复杂难懂，这不是他们的错。这种小地方的人，期待他们理解现代音乐是不合情理的。然而，这些人，这些市官员们，他们还非得装出一副一切尽在掌握之中的样子。他们不断对自己重复某些事，久而久之，就开始相信自己的权威了。您知道，像这样的地方，是会有人反驳他们的。瑞德先生，请格外留意下面几级台阶。外沿有点破损了。”

我慢慢地走下了后面的几级台阶，然后抬眼，发现没剩多少路了。

“那也是无济于事的。”克里斯托弗的声音在我身后响起，“即便他们接受了我们的邀请，也无济于事。他们连一半都听不懂。瑞德先生您至少会明白我们的观点。即便我们不能说服您，我确信，您走的时候也一定会尊重我们的立场。不过呢，当然啰，我们希望能说服您。不管我个人的命运如何，都要说服您，必须不惜一切地坚持目前的方向。诚然，您是一位卓越的音乐家，现今全世界仍在工作的、最有天赋的音乐家之一。然而，尽管如此，即便是您这水平的专家也需要将其知识运用于当地一系列的特殊情况。每个社会都有其自己的历史和独特的需求。瑞德先生，我等会儿将要向您介绍的人，可以说是

这城里极少数称得上是知识分子的人。他们不辞劳苦地分析当地现行的特殊状况，而且更重要的是，他们——与冯·温特斯坦之流迥然不同——他们对现代音乐原理确有真知灼见。在他们的帮助下，瑞德先生，我希望能劝服您改变您现在的立场，当然是以最礼貌最恭敬的方式了。当然，他们每个人都对您和您代表的一切怀有至高的崇敬之情。但我们觉得，即便以您非凡的洞察力，这儿的某些情势您恐怕也未能充分了解。我们到了。”

事实上，还有大概二十多步才到小路。克里斯托弗在最后这段下坡路上一直沉默。这让我松了一口气，因为他后来说的话让我很恼怒。他在暗示我或多或少忽略了当地的情况，暗示我是那种懒得考虑这些因素就得出结论的人，这也太侮辱人了吧。我回忆起自从到这个城市之后如何进行——尽管行程很紧，尽管很疲倦——熟悉当地环境的任务。譬如，我记得昨天下午我本可以轻轻松松地在酒店的中庭理所应当地、舒舒服服地休息一阵，我却去了市中心了解情况，加深印象。说实在的，越想克里斯托弗的这番话，我就越是心烦意乱，因此，到最后，我们来到车跟前，克里斯托弗帮我开了车的客门后，我没说一句话就钻进了车里。

“我们也不是太迟，”他说着，走进来坐在驾驶座上。“只要路况不错，我们很快就能到。”

他说这话的时候，我一下子想起了我今天允诺的其他约会。比如说，菲奥娜的事——毋庸置疑，她在公寓里随时等候我的到来。看这情况，我明白自己必须坚定果断一点。

他发动了车子，很快我们便沿着又陡又弯的小路下行。克里斯托弗好像很熟悉路况，每个急弯都很有把握。往下开了一段，路没有那么多弯了，他之前提到的小木屋渐渐出现在我们两边，这些房子大多都矗立在险峻的地方。我终于转向他，说道：

“克里斯托弗先生，我非常期待与您和您的朋友共进午餐。听听你们这边的立场。然而，今早出现了一些意想不到的事情，所以我今天接下来会很忙。事实上，即便在我们说……”

“瑞德先生，您不必解释。我们一开始就知道您会有多忙，在场的每个人，我保证，都会非常理解的。如果您要在一个半小时后离开，甚至一个小时后就走，我向您保证，没人会生一丁点儿气的。他们都是一群好人，这城里唯一一群有能力在这个层次上思考和感觉的人。不管这顿午餐结果如何，瑞德先生，我保证您会很开心认识他们

的。我还记得当中很多人年轻热情时的样子。很好的一群人呐，我可以为他们每个人做担保。我想他们曾经觉得自己是我的追随者，现在他们仍然敬仰我。但这些年以来，我们都是同事，朋友，或许甚至是更深的关系。最近这几年只是把我们拉得更近了。当然，有些人离开了我，这也是难免的。但是留下来的那些人，噢，他们一直很坚定。我为他们骄傲，我非常爱他们。他们是本城最大的希望，虽然我知道一时半会儿他们还没法儿在这里得势生威。啊，瑞德先生，我们很快就要经过之前跟您说起的那个小屋了。就在下个转角处，会出现在您那侧。”

他沉默了，我看了看他，发现他都快落泪了。我对他动了恻隐之心，于是轻轻地说道：

“谁都不知将来会怎样哩，克里斯托弗先生。或许您和您的太太哪天就能找到一间颇为类似的木屋呢。即便不在这儿，也会在别的某个城市吧。”

克里斯托弗摇了摇头。“我知道您是在安慰我，瑞德先生。但真的没意义了。我和罗莎已经彻底了结了。她就要离开我了。我知道已经有段日子了。其实，全城都知道了，想必您已经听到他们说三道四了吧。”

“呃，我确实是听到了一点……”

“肯定有很多闲言碎语的。我现在已不太在意了。重要的是罗莎很快就要离开我了。她不能容忍和我继续保持婚姻关系了，发生了这些事以后，她无法容忍了。您千万不要误会。这些年来，我们越来越相亲相爱，越来越相亲相爱。但您看，我们之间，从一开始，就有个共识。啊，就是那个，瑞德先生。在您右边。罗莎常坐在您现在的位置上，我们慢慢开过去。有一次慢慢开车经过，我们都特别陶醉，差点跟一辆上山的车撞上。但没错，我们之间有一个共识。我在本地独享其尊之时，她能爱我。哦，是的，她爱我，她真心爱我，对这一点我坚信不疑，瑞德先生。因为您看，对当时的罗莎来说，生命中没有什么比嫁给像我这样地位的人更重要的了。或许，这么说显得她有些肤浅。但您千万不要误会。她用自己的方式，她熟知的方式，深深地爱着我。无论如何，相信人们不管发生什么都会继续相爱，那是胡说八道。只是就罗莎的情况而言，呃，她就是这样的人，她只有在特定的条件下才能爱我，但这并不意味着她对我的爱有丝毫失真。”

克里斯托弗又沉默了片刻，显然陷入了沉思。路慢慢地转了一个弯，这边的景色突然跃入眼帘。我俯望下面的山谷，依稀辨别出看似富足郊区的大宅，每幢都有一英亩左右的面积。

“我刚才还在想，”克里斯托弗说，“我初到这个城市时的情景。他们一个个是多么激动啊。还有罗莎第一次在艺术楼是如何接近我的。”他又沉默了一会儿。然后说道：“您可知道，那时候，我对自己没抱什么幻想。在我人生的那一阶段，我已渐渐接受自己毫无天赋可言，也没半点有天资的迹象。诚然，那时我勉强强算是有了份事业，可是其间发生了很多事，迫使我看清了自己的局限。我初来这座城市的时候，本计划平平静静过日子——拿点微薄的工资，或许可以教教书，诸如此类的。但后来呢，这儿的人们，他们颇为欣赏我那一点点才华。我来到这儿，他们可高兴呢！过了一段时间，我开始觉得，毕竟，我一向勤奋工作，非常勤奋，努力追寻现代音乐方法。我确实也懂得了一些。我环顾四周，想着，呃，是啊，我可以在这儿做点贡献。在这样一个城市，在这样的环境下，我明白自己该怎么做了。我明白自己该怎么做了，说不定能真正做点好事呢。嗯，瑞德先生，过了这么多年，我坚信我确实做了些有价值的事情。我真的相信。不只是我的追随者——我的同事们，我应该说，我的朋友们，您很快就会见到他们——不仅仅是他们让我这么想。不，我也坚信如此，非常肯定。我在这儿做了些有价值的事。但您也知道，像这样的城市，人们的生活迟早要出岔儿。他们渐渐有了不满，还有难耐的寂寞。这里的这些人呐，对音乐几乎一无所知。他们自说自话，唉，我们一定把一切都弄错了，我们完全对着干吧。他们居然这样指责我！他们说我的方法推崇机械呆板，说我是在扼杀自然的情愫。他们懂什么！我们马上就会向您展示，瑞德先生，我只是介绍了一种方法，一种体系，能让这里的人通过某种方式懂点卡赞和穆莱利他们的音乐，某种在作品中发现意义和价值的方法。先生，跟您说吧，我刚到这儿时，他们哭着喊着要这个呢。他们需要某种秩序，某种他们能理解的体系。这儿的人们，他们没达到那个层次，一切都行将崩溃。人们心有余悸，感觉事情在渐渐失控。我带了些文件，您很快就会明白一切。我肯定，您会明白目前的舆论多么误导人。好吧，我是平庸之辈，我不否认。但您会看到我的方向总是对的。我获得的那一点点成功只是个开始，一个有用的贡献。目前需要的是——希望您能明白，瑞德先生，您要能明白该多好啊，那这座城市就不会迷失了——目前需要的是一个人，好吧，一个比我更有才华的人，一个能够继续，能够在我所做的基础上继续建功立业的人。我是做出了贡献的，瑞德先生。我能证明，等我们到了您就能看到了。”

我们开出山路，到了一条主干道上。路又宽又直，广阔的苍穹展现在眼前。远处，我能看到两辆重型卡车行驶在内道上，但除此之外，前方的道路几近空空。

“瑞德先生，希望您不要觉得，”克里斯托弗过了一会儿说道，“觉得我今日带您出席此次午宴是我孤注一掷，谋划着在这儿重获往日的辉煌。我完全明白我的地位不可能恢复以往了。此外，我也没剩什么可以贡献的了。我已贡献了全部，我所有的一切，已经全部都献给这座城市了。我现在只想离开，离得远远的，到一个安静的地方，就我自己，再不和音乐有任何牵扯。自然而然地，我的追随者们在我离开时会一蹶不振。他们还不能接受这个想法。他们要我反戈一击。只要我一句话，他们就立马行动，使出浑身解数，甚至挨家挨户走个遍。我已经跟他们说了现在的情况，我很坦诚地作了解释，但他们仍然不能接受。对他们来说这太难了。他们素来敬仰我，通过我发现自己的人生意义。他们会崩溃的。但这些都无用，现在该结束了。我想让它了结了。甚至罗莎也是。我们婚姻的分分秒秒对我来说都很珍贵，瑞德先生。但是我知道这段婚姻终究要结束，只是还不知道到底在何时——这太可怕了。我现在就想了断一切。我祝罗莎一切安好。希望她能找到别人，找个地位合适的人。我只希望她将目光投向城外。这座城市可没人能配得上她。这里没人真正懂音乐。啊，瑞德先生，要是我能有您这样的天赋该多好啊！那么我和罗莎，我们就能白头偕老了。”

天色已暗。路上车辆仍然稀少，我们随随便便就稳超长途卡车，然后开始加速。两边是茂密的森林，随后终于被大片平坦的农田所取代。前几天累积的疲劳感开始向我袭来，我看着眼前的公路延展，发现不打瞌睡都难。正在此时，我听到克里斯托弗的声音：“哦，我们到了。”于是我又睁开了眼睛。

第十四章

我们减速慢行，靠近一间小咖啡馆。这是一幢白色的小平房，孤零零地坐落在路旁，就是那种让人以为是货车司机半路停下吃个三明治的地方。当克里斯托弗驾车驶过满是砾石的前院并停好车时，我们并没看到其他车辆。

“我们要在这里用午餐吗？”我问道。

“没错。我们有个小圈子，在这里聚会已经好多年了。一切都很随意。”

我们下车，径直走向咖啡馆。靠近后，我看到几块鲜亮的硬纸板从雨篷上垂挂下来，上面标着各种特价优惠。

“一切都很随意，”克里斯托弗又一边说道，一边为我开门，“就当是在您自己家里一样。”

里面的装潢很简单。满屋尽是巨大的观景窗。到处都是用透明胶带粘贴的海报，上面登着各色饮料与花生的广告。有些因光照已经褪色了，其中有一张已经变成浅蓝色长方形纸片了。即便这会儿，天空多云，却还是有刺眼的日光照进屋里。

屋里已经有八九个人了，全部安坐在房间靠后的桌边。每人面前都有个热气腾腾的碗，盛的好像是土豆泥。他们正用长长的木匙狼吞虎咽地吃着，但这会儿全部都停了下来，盯着我。开始有一两个人站起来，克里斯托弗则开心地跟他们一一打招呼，挥手示意他们继续坐着。接着，克里斯托弗转身对着我，说道：

“您看到了吧，我们还没到，午饭就已经开始了。但因为我们迟到了，相信您也会理解他们的。至于其他人嘛，呃，我肯定他们不会太久的。总之，我们不该再浪费时间了。请往这边走，瑞德先生，我向您介绍我这儿的好朋友。”

我正要跟上他，突然发现，附近服务台后面，一个身着条纹围裙、体格粗壮的大胡子男人正偷偷地给我们打暗号。

“好吧，格哈德，”克里斯托弗说道，转身朝他耸耸肩。“就从你开始吧。这是瑞德先生。”

大胡子男人和我握了握手，说道：“先生，您的午饭马上就好。您一定很饿了吧。”然后他飞快地低声对克里斯托弗说了些什么，边说边朝咖啡馆后面瞥了一眼。

我与克里斯托弗二人顺着大胡子的目光看去，一名男子独自坐在远处角落，好似一直在等着我们将注意力投向他，这会儿他站起身来。他身材健壮，头发灰白，可能五十多岁，穿着一件亮丽的白色夹克和T恤。他开始朝我们走过来，然后，在屋子近当中的位置停下，冲克里斯托弗微笑。

“亨利。”他说道，伸出双臂致意。

克里斯托弗冷冷地盯着那男子，然后别过脸去。“这儿不欢迎你，”他说道。

白色夹克男子没听见似的。“我刚才一直在观察你呢，亨利，”他继续和蔼地说道，手指着窗外。“看着你下车走了过来。你还是那样弓腰曲背地走路。以前那是装腔作势，但如今看来是成真了。亨利，你没必要这样子。事情也许由不得你，没必要弓肩缩背啊。”

克里斯托弗继续背对着他。

“别这样，亨利。太孩子气了。”

“我跟你说过了，”克里斯托弗说道，“我们之间没什么好说的。”

白色夹克男子耸了耸肩，又朝我们走了几步。

“瑞德先生，”他说，“既然亨利决计不想引见我们，那我就自我介绍咯。我是鲁班斯基医生。您要知道，我和亨利曾经非常亲密。但现在，您看，他甚至不愿与我讲话。”

“这里不欢迎你。”克里斯托弗仍然没看他。“这儿不欢迎你。”

“看到了吧，瑞德先生？亨利一直都有孩子气的这一面。太傻了。我本人呐，老早就认了，我们俩已分道扬镳。以前，我们常坐下谈天，一聊就是好几个小时。是不是，亨利？在斯哥芬霍斯的时候，我们常常边喝啤酒边深聊，条分缕析地探讨这部或者那部作品，从每个角度据理力争。有时候，我甚至希望自己根本没那么好的判断力与他唱反调。我多么希望今晚我们又可以坐下来，再花上几个小时讨论讨论音乐，讲讲你是如何准备这首或那首曲子的。瑞德先生，我自己

一个人生活，您想象得到，”他轻轻一笑，“有时难免会有些孤独，于是就开始怀念过去的那段时光。我暗自思忖，如果能和亨利再次坐下来，一起聊聊他准备的乐谱，那该有多好啊。曾几何时，他做任何事之前都会先来征询我的意见。是不是这样，亨利？好了，亨利，别孩子气了。至少，让我们彼此客气些吧。”

“为什么偏偏选今天呢？”克里斯托弗突然喝道，“没人要你来。他们全都还在生你的气！看看！你自己看看！”

鲁班斯基医生无视他的这一阵暴怒，开始回忆起他和克里斯托弗的其他往事。很快我便没再听了，转动眼珠，越过他看向坐在后排桌边紧张注目的人们。

他们看上去没有一位超过四十岁的。共有三位女士，其中有一位，我特别注意到，正高度紧张地看着我。她三十出头，穿着长长的黑衫，戴着一副镶有小小厚厚镜片的眼镜。我本想更加仔细地打量一下其他几个人，但就在这时，我又想起自己还要应对接下来忙碌的一天，而且，如果我不想在这儿耗太久的话，当下最为迫切的就是和主人坚定表明立场。

鲁班斯基医生打住话头，我碰了碰克里斯托弗的手臂，轻声说道：“我在想其他人还需要多久才到。”

“呃……”克里斯托弗四下看了看，然后说道：“今天可能就这么多些人了。”

我感觉他希望有人反驳他。但没人说话，这时，他转过身来，对我咧嘴笑了笑。

“是个小聚会，”他说，“尽管如此，我们……我们镇上的精英都在这儿，我向您保证。现在，瑞德先生，请。”

他开始向我介绍他的朋友。每个人都紧张地微笑着，每当介绍到名字时，他们都会向我问好致意。这当儿，我注意到鲁班斯基医生慢慢地朝房间后面走去，目光始终未从我们的整个活动中挪开。然后，就在克里斯托弗快要结束引见时，鲁班斯基医生发出一阵大笑，打断了克里斯托弗，后者向他投去愤怒的冷冷一瞥。此时，鲁班斯基医生坐在角落的桌边，又大笑了一声，说道：

“好吧，亨利，这些年不管你失去了其他什么东西，你的勇气还是不减当年哪。你要向瑞德先生重复整个奥芬巴赫故事吗？向瑞德先生？”他摇了摇头。

克里斯托弗继续盯着他曾经的朋友，一些伤人的反驳之话似要脱口而出，但是最后关头，他不置一词，别过脸去。

“你要是想，可以把我扔出去啊，”鲁班斯基医生说道，开始吃起土豆泥来。“但看上去好像——”他拿着汤勺在屋子里挥动了一圈，“好像这儿并不是每个人都不想我来。要不我们来投个票吧。如果我真的不受欢迎，那我很乐意离开。举手表决，怎么样？”

“你要是死赖着不走，我才不在乎呢，”克里斯托弗说，“你在不在都没什么区别。我有事实证据，全在这儿。”他不知从哪儿拿出一个蓝色文件夹，举起来，拍了拍。“我坚信我的立场。你爱做什么做什么。”

鲁班斯基医生转向其他人，耸了耸肩，仿佛在说：“对这样的人，你还能有啥法子呢？”戴着厚厚眼镜的年轻女子立刻移开目光，而她的同伴们看上去一头雾水，其中一两人甚至还回以羞怯的微笑。

“瑞德先生，”克里斯托弗说道，“请坐下，别拘束。等格哈德一回来，他就会端上您的午餐。现在——”他拍了拍双手，腔调仿佛是在大礼堂演讲一般，“女士们，先生们，首先，我谨代表今日在座的各位，对瑞德先生在这几日百忙之中欣然前来和我们一起辩论，深表谢意……”

“你真是有胆量啊，”鲁班斯基医生在后面大叫道，“没有被我吓到，甚至没有被瑞德先生吓到。真是有胆量啊，亨利。”

“我没有被吓到，”克里斯托弗反驳道，“因为我有事实证据！事实就是事实！都在这儿！证据！是的，即便是瑞德先生。是的，先生，”他转向我说，“即使是您这样的名流，即便是您也得尊重事实啊！”

“好吧，好戏要开场了，”鲁班斯基医生对其他人说道，“一个乡巴佬提琴手教训起瑞德先生来了。好吧，我们姑妄听之，我们姑妄听之。”

有那么一两秒钟，克里斯托弗犹豫了。接着，他毅然打开文件，说道：“请允许我从一个案例说起，我认为这案例会让我们了解环形和声争议的核心。”

接下来的几分钟，克里斯托弗概述了这个案例的背景（某个当地商业家族），同时迅速浏览了一下他的文件夹，偶尔读出一些引言和数据。他看似对展示此案例胜任有余，但语调中却带着些什么——不

必要地放慢陈述，反反复复地解释——这点顿时令我心生厌烦。没错，我突然觉得鲁班斯基医生有一点确实说对了，这个落魄潦倒的本地乐者竟自大妄为地教训我，的确有些荒唐可笑。

“就这你也好意思叫它事实？”克里斯托弗正读到市议会会议记录时，鲁班斯基医生突然插话进来，“哈！亨利的‘事实证据’总是那么有趣，是不是啊？”

“让他说！让亨利把案例展示给瑞德先生！”

说话的年轻男子脸圆圆的，穿着一件短皮夹克。克里斯托弗赞许地向他微笑示意。鲁班斯基医生抬起双手，说道：“好吧，好吧。”

“让他说！”圆脸年轻男子又说，“然后我们再看。听听瑞德先生怎么说，然后一切就水落石出了。”

过了许久，克里斯托弗似乎才领会了这最后一句话的含义。起初，他僵在了那里，双臂高举文件夹。然后，他四下看了看周围的面孔，仿佛是第一次见到似的。整个房间的人都直直地向他投去探寻的目光。一下子，克里斯托弗全身颤颤巍巍的。他移开目光，几乎是自言自语地喃喃道：

“这些的确就是事实证据。我这儿收集了证据。你们任何人都可以看，可以细读一下。”他凝视着文件夹。“我只是简短地对这证据做了个总结。仅此而已。”接着，一番努力后，他好似恢复了自信。

“瑞德先生，”他道，“请再给我一点时间。我相信事情很快就会水落石出的。”

克里斯托弗继续他的辩解，语气有些紧张，但除此之外，和之前大同小异。他起劲地说着，我不禁想起了昨晚，为了深入调查本地的情况，我放弃了宝贵的睡眠时间；尽管疲惫不堪，我坐在电影院，和该市的头面人物纵议大事。克里斯托弗一而再、再而三地说我孤陋寡闻——甚至这会儿，他东扯西拉，赘言连连，拼命解释一个我完全明了的问题——令我满腔恼怒，无以复加。

貌似不耐烦的并不止我一个。房间里很多其他人也局促不安起来。我注意到那位戴厚厚眼镜的女士目光来回转动，先是盯着克里斯托弗的脸，而后又盯着我，有好几次差点就要打断他了。但最后，是一位坐在我身后、头发剪得参差不齐的男子插了话。

“先等一下，等一下。我们继续之前，先确定一件事。一次性解决。”

鲁班斯基医生的笑声又一次从咖啡馆后面传了过来。“克劳德和他的混色三和弦！那个问题你还没解决啊？”

“克劳德，”克里斯托弗说道，“现在不是时候……”

“不！既然瑞德先生在这儿，我想一次解决掉！”

“克劳德，现在可不是重提那事的时候。我正展示论据证明……”

“也许这事微不足道。但让我们先解决吧。瑞德先生，瑞德先生，混色三和弦不论在何种背景下都有内在情感价值，是真的吗？您这样认为吗？”

我感觉众人的目光齐刷刷地落在了我身上。克里斯托弗飞快地瞟了我一眼，乞求中夹杂着惊恐。然而，鉴于此询问真挚而热切——暂不提克里斯托弗目前为止的放肆行径——我觉得没理由不给他一个最坦诚的回答。于是我说道：

“混色三和弦没有内在情感属性。其实，它的情感色彩不仅可以根据情景，而且也可以随着其音量显著改变。这是我的一家之言。”

无人开口，但我这一番话的影响明确显见。一道又一道严厉的目光转向克里斯托弗——这会儿他正假装全神贯注于他的文件夹。过了一会，那个叫克劳德的男子轻轻地说道：

“我就知道。我一直都知道。”

“但他却说服你，让你认为自己是错的。”鲁班斯基医生说道，“他威逼你相信自己是错误的。”

“这和其他事情有什么关系？”克里斯托弗叫喊道，“克劳德，你看，你把我们全带跑题了。瑞德先生的时间非常有限。我们得回到奥芬巴赫案例上来。”

但克劳德好似陷入了沉思。最后，他转过身，看向鲁班斯基医生，鲁班斯基医生点了点头，严肃地冲他一笑。

“瑞德先生的时间非常有限，”克里斯托弗又说，“所以，请诸位允许我对自己的论断作一总结。”

克里斯托弗开始概述他所谓的奥芬巴赫家族悲剧的几大关键因素。他摆出一副无所谓的样子，虽说到了这会儿，所有人都清楚他心

中极度不安。总之，这会儿我再也没继续专心听他讲话，他关于我时间有限的话，让我突然记起鲍里斯还坐在那个咖啡馆里等我呢。

我意识到我丢下他已经有段时间了，脑海中浮现出一个画面：一个小男孩，在我离开后不久，坐在角落里，吃着乳酪蛋糕，喝着饮料，依然满心期待地等着即将到来的远足。我能看到他喜气洋洋地盯着窗外阳光明媚的庭院里的其他客人，不时地越过他们，看着街上繁忙的交通，心想着用不了多久他也能出去郊游。他又一次回想起旧公寓，想起客厅角落里的壁橱，他越来越肯定，装有九号的盒子是落在壁橱里了。然后，随着时间一分一秒地过去，他那潜伏心底的疑虑，他至今一直掩藏完好的疑虑，就会渐渐浮上心头。然而，一时半会，鲍里斯仍能保持高昂的兴致。我只是因意外而耽搁了。或者，也许我去了什么地方采购旅行野餐物品了。不管怎么说，时间还早着呢。接着，那个女侍者，那个丰满的斯堪的纳维亚姑娘，会问他是否还需要什么，这当中透出一丝担忧，而鲍里斯肯定也能察觉。鲍里斯则会装出一副一点不担心的样子，或许逞能地再点一杯奶昔。但时间一分一秒过去。鲍里斯会注意到，外面院子里，他之后很久才来的客人都合上了报纸，起身离开。他会看到天空阴云密布，时间已经到了下午。他又会想起他曾深爱的旧公寓，客厅里的橱柜，九号，而且慢慢地，他一边兴致寡然地啃着剩下的乳酪蛋糕，一边听天由命地想，这一次自己又要失望了，这一次我们终究是没法成行。

耳边响起了几声叫嚷。一个身穿绿色西装的年轻男子起身，试图向克里斯托弗解释什么，同时，至少还有三人正挥动着手指，在强调什么。

“但那毫不相干，”克里斯托弗对他们喊道，“而且不管怎么说，那只是瑞德先生的个人观点……”

听了这话，大家对他群起而攻之，房间里几乎所有人都想同声开口回击他。但最后，克里斯托弗大喊着，又一次压住了他们。

“是的！是的！我完完全全清楚瑞德先生是谁！可是，要具体问题具体对待啊，具体问题，那是另外一回事！他还不了解我们的特殊情况！而我……我这儿……”

余下的话被人声淹没了，但克里斯托弗将蓝色文件夹高高举过头顶，奋力挥动。

“有胆啊！有胆啊！”鲁班斯基医生大笑着从后面叫喊道。

“恕我直言，先生，”克里斯托弗这会儿直接对我说道，“恕我直言，看您毫无兴趣倾听我们这里的情况，我无比诧异。事实上，我无比诧异，尽管您有专业知识，但您竟如此妄下结论，我无比诧异……”

众人再次齐声抗议，较之先前更加激烈。

“例如……”克里斯托弗声嘶力竭道，“例如，您竟然同意记者为您在萨特勒纪念碑前拍照，我无比诧异！”

令我错愕的是，这下大家突然沉默了。

“没错！”克里斯托弗显然对自己所营造的效应乐滋滋的。“没错！我亲眼看见了！就在我早先接他的时候，他就站在萨特勒纪念碑的正前面，面带微笑，朝它摆姿势呢！”

惊愕的人们依然沉默着。有几位显得越来越尴尬，而其他人——包括那位戴着厚厚眼镜的女士——则一脸疑惑地看着我。我微微一笑，正准备说些什么，就在这时，鲁班斯基医生的声音——此时既克制又威严——从后面传来：

“假如瑞德先生选择做出如此举动，那只能表明一点。那就是，我们误入歧途的程度甚至远比我们想的更深。”

所有人的目光都转向了他，他起身，向大家走近了几步。鲁班斯基医生停下来，头侧向一边，好像在倾听远处高速公路传来的声音。然后，他继续道：

“他所讲的这个信息，我们每个人都必须仔细审视，铭记于心。萨特勒纪念碑！当然，他是对的！没有对此事夸大其词，一刻也没有！看看你们吧，仍然想死死守着亨利那愚蠢的观念不放！甚至我们这些识破了其真实面目的人，甚至是我们啊，说实在的，我们一直都在自鸣得意。萨特勒纪念碑！是的，没错。这座城市已经危在旦夕了。危在旦夕！”

令人高兴的是，鲁班斯基医生立即强调了克里斯托弗论调的荒诞可笑，同时还强调了我希望传达给整座城市的强烈信息。尽管如此，这会儿，我对克里斯托弗已经相当愤怒，觉得此刻正是告诉他自己几斤几两的时候了。但整个房间再次立刻叫嚣起来。那个叫克劳德的男子一次次地挥拳猛击桌面，对着一个头发斑白、穿着背带裤和一双满是污泥的靴子的男子强调着某个观点。至少有四个人正从房间的不同方位朝着克里斯托弗大喊大叫。场面濒临混乱，我突然想到此刻正是

我抽身离开的好时机。但我刚站起来，戴着厚厚眼镜的年轻女子突地出现在我面前。

“瑞德先生，请告诉我们，”她说道，“让我们弄个水落石出。亨利认为，我们无论如何都不能抛弃卡赞的动态循环，这对吗？”

她说话的声音不大，但嗓音却极具穿透力。整个房间都听到了她的问题，大家立刻安静下来。她的几个同伴向她投去探查的目光，但她满不在乎地盯了回去。

“不，我要问，”她道，“这机会千载难逢，不能浪费了。我要问。瑞德先生，求求您。告诉我们。”

“但我有事实为证，”克里斯托弗可怜地低声道，“这里。全在这儿。”

没人在意他，每个人的目光都再一次集中在我身上。我意识到，接下来我得仔细斟酌自己的措辞。我顿了一顿，然后说道：

“我个人的观点是，卡赞从未获益于形式化的约束，亦未从动态循环或者甚至是双纵线结构中获益。只是，他的作品有太多层面，太多情感，特别是他晚期的作品。”

一股崇敬之情澎湃而至，我几乎能感同身受。圆脸男子近乎敬畏地看着我。一位穿着深红色皮夹克的女子喃喃自语道：“就是这样，就是这样。”仿佛我刚才一举道出了她多年来一直苦苦想表达的心声。那名叫克劳德的先生业已起身，此时朝我走近了几步，一个劲地点着头。鲁班斯基医生也在颌首点头，但速度缓慢，双眼紧闭，仿佛在说：“所言极是，所言极是，终于来了个行家。”不过，那位戴着厚厚眼镜的女子仍一动未动，继续仔细地看着我。

“我能理解，”我继续道，“为什么有人想利用这些策略。生怕这音乐淹没了音乐家的才智，这是可以理解的。但是，回应之道应当是奋起直面这一挑战，而不是去捆人手脚。当然，挑战可能会十分巨大，那样的话，解决之途就是干脆撇开卡赞。不管怎样，我们不应作茧自缚，故步自封。”

听了这一席话，房间里许多人似乎再也无法抑制自己的情感。头发斑白、穿着斑驳污泥靴子的男子突然使劲地鼓起掌来，同时向克里斯托弗投去十分厌烦的目光。其他几个人又开始冲克里斯托弗大声叫嚷，身穿深红色皮夹克的女子又在啧啧重复，这一次声音更为洪亮：

“就是这样，就是这样，就是这样。”我感到一阵莫名的激动，于是提高嗓门，声音盖过愈发兴奋的人声，继续道：

“依我的经验看来，这些勇气上的缺失，通常是和其他令人生厌的特征联系在一起的。对内省音调的敌意，大多表现为过度使用破碎节奏，偏好支离破碎乐段间的毫无意义的配对。而且，从我个人层面上讲，谦虚友善的态度背后是狂妄自大的伪装……”

这会儿房间里每个人都开始冲克里斯托弗大喊大叫，我只好中断。而他却反过来高举蓝色文件夹，拇指在半空中翻着夹页，哭喊道：“事实证据就在这儿！这儿！”

“当然，”盖过噪音，我大声喊道，“这是另一种很常见的失败。相信把东西放在文件夹里就会变成事实！”

这话惹来一阵雷鸣般的大笑，当中是毫无掩饰的愤怒。接着，那位戴着厚厚眼镜的年轻女子起身，走到克里斯托弗身边。她镇定自若，穿过了至今仍保留在提琴家周围的那一小片空间区域。

“你这个老傻瓜，”她说道，声音又一次清晰地穿透喧闹声。“你把我们全和你一起拖下水了。”接着，带着某种从容淡定，她反手打了克里斯托弗一巴掌。

众人皆愕，一阵沉默。然后，突然间，人们从椅子上起身，互相推搡着，试图靠近克里斯托弗，显然他们迫不及待地想效仿那位年轻女子。我发觉有只手摇了摇我肩膀，但此刻，我正专注于对付眼前要发生的事情，无暇他顾。

“不，别这样，够了！”不知怎的，鲁班斯基医生第一个靠近克里斯托弗身边，高举双手。“不行，放过亨利！你们这是在干吗？够了！”

或许正是鲁班斯基医生的介入才将克里斯托弗从人们的群起攻击中解救出来。我瞥了一眼克里斯托弗迷茫、惊恐的面庞，愤怒之气在他周围升腾，之后就看不见他了。那手又摇了摇我肩膀，我扭头一看，发现那个穿着围裙的大胡子男人——我想起他的名字叫格哈德——正端着一碗热气腾腾的土豆泥。

“您想不想来点午餐，瑞德先生？”他问道，“我很抱歉，有点晚了。但您看，我们得重新做一桶。”

“您真是太好了，”我说，“但其实，我真的得走了。我的小孩还在等我呢。”然后，我引着他远离嘈杂声，对他说道：“您能不能告诉我如何走到前门。”没错，那一刻，我想起这间咖啡馆与我留下鲍里斯的那间实际上隶属于同一座大楼，这座大楼设有各色房间，通向不同的街道，以迎合不同种类顾客的需要。

我拒绝了享用午餐，大胡子男子显然很失望，但他很快恢复神色，说道：“当然，瑞德先生。这边请。”

我跟着他走到房间的前面，绕过服务台。他打开一扇小门，示意我走进去。我边走边最后朝身后瞥了一眼，只见圆脸男子站在桌子上，在空中挥动克里斯托弗的蓝色文件夹。这会儿，愤怒的叫喊声中夹杂着几声讪笑，同时，能听见鲁班斯基医生饱含感情地恳求道：“别，别，亨利已受够了！拜托，拜托！够了！”

我来到一间宽敞的厨房，里面贴满白色瓷砖。一阵浓烈的醋酸味扑面而来，我看见一个结实粗壮的女人弯腰蹲在滋滋作响的火炉前，而大胡子男子已经穿过房间，打开了厨房远处角落的另一扇门。

“这边请，先生。”他说着，引着我走。

这扇门特别高，又特别窄。确实啊，太窄了，我觉得只能侧身通过。而且，我透过它往里瞧时，只能看到一片漆黑；所有迹象都表明，此时此刻我窥视的应该是扫帚柜。但大胡子男子又做出了引领的动作，说道：

“请小心台阶，瑞德先生。”

这时我才看到有三级台阶——看上去像是用木头箱子头顶头地钉起来的——紧贴着门槛处升起。我缓慢穿过门廊，小心翼翼地踩着每一级台阶。走到最高一阶时，我看到前面有一小股矩形的光亮。再往前走两步，透过玻璃嵌板，我看到一个洒满阳光的房间，看到了桌椅，而后，我认出这正是我先前留下鲍里斯的那个房间。那个丰满的年轻女侍者——我正从她柜台后面观察整个房间——还有，那边角落，鲍里斯正盯着空气发呆，脸上一副不满的表情。乳酪蛋糕已经吃完了，这会儿正心不在焉地把玩着叉子，在桌布上举起落下。除却一对年轻情侣坐在靠窗的位置上外，咖啡馆里其他地方都是空荡荡的。

我感到有东西在身侧顶了顶，发现大胡子男子挤到了我身后，这会儿在黑暗中蹲下身来，一串钥匙叮当作响。过了片刻，身前的整个隔板门打开了，我一脚踏进了咖啡馆。

那位女侍者转身对我莞尔一笑，然后朝另一边的鲍里斯喊道：“看谁来了！”

鲍里斯扭头看我，脸拉得老长。“你去哪了？”他厌倦地问道。“怎么那么久啊。”

“很抱歉，鲍里斯。”我说道。然后我问女侍者：“他乖吗？”

“哦，他可完全是个迷人精。他一五一十地跟我描述你们过去生活的地方。人工湖旁边的住宅区。”

“啊，是的，”我说，“人工湖。是的，我们正准备去呢。”

“可你一去就呆了那么久！”鲍里斯说，“现在我们要迟到了！”

“真的很抱歉，鲍里斯。但别担心，我们还有很多时间呢。旧公寓在那儿又跑不了，是不是？不过，你说得对，我们得立刻出发了。现在得让我考虑考虑。”我转身面对那女侍者，她正跟大胡子男子说着什么。“抱歉，请问你能否告诉我们怎么最快到达人工湖？”

“人工湖？”女侍者指着窗外，“外面等着的那辆公交车，它可以载你们去那儿。”

我看了看她指的地方，透过庭院里的一顶顶阳伞，可以看到一辆公交车停在繁忙的街道上，差不多就在我们正前方。

“它在那儿已经等了很久了，”女侍者继续说，“所以你们最好赶紧上车。估计应该随时会走。”

我谢过她，然后向鲍里斯示意，带头走出大楼，走进了阳光中。

第十五章

司机发动引擎的时候，我们上了车。我向他买票时，看到车里满满当当，于是焦虑地说：

“我希望能和孩子坐一起。”

“哦，不用担心。”司机说，“车上的这群人都很友好。包在我身上吧。”

说完，司机便扭过头，大声说了些什么。整个车厢本是一派快乐异常的喧嚣景象，此刻顿时安静了下来。接着，整个车厢的乘客都从座位上站了起来，挥手比划着，商量如何最好地安顿我们。一位身材高大的女子侧身至中间过道，大叫道：“这儿！你们可以坐这儿！”但另一个声音从车厢的另一个方向传来：“你带着个小男孩，最好到这儿来，孩子就不会晕车。我可以坐到哈特曼先生旁边。”然后，又开始了一阵关于我们该坐哪儿的讨论。

“你看吧，他们是群好人。”司机开心地说道，“新上车的人总是特别受欢迎。好吧，你们要是坐好了，我就要出发喽。”

我和鲍里斯连忙沿过道疾步走到两名站着的乘客那儿，他们都指着座位让我们坐。我把鲍里斯安置在离窗户最近的位置，刚坐下，汽车就发动了。

紧接着，我感觉有人拍了拍我肩膀，坐在身后的一个人伸手递过来一包糖果。

“小孩或许会喜欢这个吧。”一个男声说道。

“谢谢。”我说。然后，我对着整个车厢大声说道：“谢谢。谢谢大家。你们太客气了。”

“瞧！”鲍里斯兴奋地抓着我的胳膊。“我们快要上北高速了。”

我还没来得及回答，一位中年妇女就来到我身旁的过道。她紧紧抓着我座位的头托保持平衡，拿出了一块蛋糕，用纸巾垫着的。

“后排的一位先生剩下的，”她说，“他想没准儿这个小伙子会喜欢呢。”

我感激地接下了蛋糕，再次向全车人道谢。然后，那女人不见了，我听到一个声音从几个座位开外传来：“看到父子相处得这么好，太好了。瞧瞧他们，一起来个一日游。这年月类似的事几乎不多见了。”

听到这话，一阵强烈的自豪感油然而生，我转头看着鲍里斯。或许他也听见了，所以冲我微微一笑，这一笑可是心照不宣，一切尽在不言中。

“鲍里斯，”我说着把蛋糕递给他，“这辆车是不是棒极了？我们没有白等，你不觉得吗？”

鲍里斯又微笑了一下，但这会儿他正仔细地检查着蛋糕，什么都没说。

“鲍里斯，”我继续道，“我一直想跟你说的。因为有时你可能会纳闷。你看，鲍里斯，我再没什么奢求的了……”我突然间大笑起来。“听起来很傻吧。我的意思是，我很开心。因为你。我们在一起，我很开心。”我又大笑了一阵。“你也很享受这段巴士之旅，是不是？”

鲍里斯点点头，嘴里塞满了蛋糕。“不错。”他说。

“我当然也很享受这段旅程。这些人多么友好！”

车厢后排的几位乘客开始唱歌。我放松心情，深窝在座位上。车外，天空又阴沉沉的了。我们仍然行进在城市林立的高楼中，我仔细看了看，发现路过了两个路标，一个跟着一个，上面写着：“北高速”。

“不好意思，打扰一下，”不知后面何处传来了一位男子的声音，“我刚才听到你对司机说想去人工湖，但愿你们俩在那儿不会觉得太冷。如果你们只是想找个好地方玩上一下午的话，我建议你们提前几站下车，在玛丽亚·克莉丝提娜花园下车。那儿有个泛舟池，这个小伙子可能会喜欢。”

说话的人就坐在我们正后面。我们座椅的靠背很高，即便伸长了脖子转了转，我也看不清楚那男子的样貌。但不管怎样，我还是感谢他的建议——显然他是出于一片好意——并开始解释我们此番去人工

湖的特别含义。我原本不想细说的，但我一打开话匣子，就发现周围欢快的气氛使得我不由自主地滔滔不绝起来。其实，我对自己的口吻甚是满意，那是严肃与诙谐之间完美的平衡。再者，从身后善解人意的低语声中可以判断，那男子听得很是认真，而且感同身受。总之，不一会儿，我就解释起九号以及他为何如此特别的缘由来。我刚要重新细述鲍里斯如何将之落在盒子里时，那位乘客礼貌地咳嗽了一声打断了我。

“抱歉，打断一下，”他说，“不过这种行程，让人感觉有点担心，也是在所难免的。这很正常。但说真的，在我看来，你完全有理由保持乐观。”想必他坐在座位上，正倾身向前，而他的声音，既镇静又抚慰人，从鲍里斯肩膀的正后方传来，鲍里斯的肩紧挨着我的。

“我肯定你们会找到九号的。当然，你们这会儿很担心。你们会觉得世事难料，很多事都可能出岔子。这很正常。但从刚刚你告诉我的来看，我肯定一切都会安好无恙。当然，你们刚开始敲门的时候，新入住的人可能不知道你们是谁，会有些疑虑。但是，你们一解释来意后，他们一定会欢迎你们进去。假如是妻子来应门，她会说：‘哦，终于来了！我们一直在想你们什么时候会来呢。’是的，我肯定她会这么说。她会转身对丈夫喊：‘是原先住这里的小男孩！’随后丈夫会出来，他是个很和善的人，或许他正忙着重新装修公寓呢。他会说：‘啊，终于来了。快进来喝杯茶吧。’他领你们走进主间，而他妻子则会溜进厨房准备茶点。你们会立刻发现那地方自你们离开后改变有多大，丈夫会察觉到，并首先表示歉意。然后，你们一旦说明你们一点不讨厌他们做出的改变，他必定会带你们参观整个公寓，一一指出这变化，那变化，大部分都是他亲自动手改造的，并引以为豪呢。之后，妻子会端上她准备的茶点来到客厅，你们几个坐了下来，喝茶，品尝点心，听着这对夫妇谈论他们如何喜欢这公寓和小区。当然，整个过程中，你们俩会始终挂念着九号，等待合适的时机说明此行来意。但我觉得他们会先提出来。聊天喝茶好一会儿之后，我估计妻子会说：‘你们回来有什么事吗？有什么东西落下了吗？’这时，你们就可以提到九号和那个盒子了。然后，她一定会说：‘哦，对了，我们把那盒子保存在一个特别的地方。看得出来，它很重要。’说这话的时候，她会给丈夫一个小暗号。或者甚至不用暗号，因为夫妻俩开开心心地共同生活了许多年，几乎有心灵感应了。当然，不是说他们不吵架。哦，不，他们甚至可能经常拌嘴，甚至或许在这些年共挨艰辛时，真的闹翻了。可是，你见到这样一对夫妻时，你就会明白这些事情最终将他们磨合，他们终究幸福地生活在一起。呃，那个丈夫，他会从放重要物品的地方去取那个盒子，把它拿进

来，说不定还用棉纸包着呢。当然，你们会立刻打开盒子，而这个九号，他就在里面，还是你们落下他时的样子，仍然等待着你们将他粘回底座。然后你们就可以盖上盒子，友善的夫妻会再给你们续茶。然后，过了一会儿，你们会说，你们得走了，你们不希望给他们添太多麻烦。但那妻子非要你们再吃一块她做的蛋糕，而丈夫想带你们两个最后一次看一看公寓，欣赏一下他装修的杰作。最后，他们站在门阶上向你们挥手道别，说你们无论何时经过，都一定要来坐坐。当然，不一定要像这一模一样，但从你刚才告诉我的看，我肯定，差不离儿，会是这个结果。所以没必要担心，根本没必要……”

巴士在高速路上继续行进，那男子的声音随着巴士轻微的摇摆回响在我耳边，让我感到惬意无比。他刚开始讲话没多久，我就已经闭上了眼睛，而现在这会儿，我更是深深地窝在座椅里，心满意足地打起盹来。

我察觉到鲍里斯正在摇我肩膀。“我们得下车了。”他说道。

完全清醒后，我发现巴士已经靠站，车厢里只剩下我们了。前面，司机已经站起身，耐心等待我们下车。我们走出过道时，司机说：

“多加保重。外面特冷。依我看，那湖早该填了。它简直就是害人精，每年总有几个人淹死在里面。诚然，有几位是自寻短见，而且，我认为即便没有那湖，他们说不定会选择其他更为不堪的方式。但在我看来，真应该把那湖给填了。”

“是的，”我说，“显然，那湖争议很大。我本人是局外人，所以还是想远离这些纷争。”

“非常明智，先生。呃，祝您愉快。”然后，他向鲍里斯道别：“玩得开心点，小伙子！”

我和鲍里斯下了车，车开走时，我们环顾了一下四周。我们正站在一个巨大的混凝土水池的边缘。不远处，人工湖就坐落在盆地中央，呈腰子状，看上去就像好莱坞明星的大泳池的翻版。我对这湖——其实是整个小区——的人造痕迹不胜惊讶：它表现得如此淋漓尽致，却还引以为豪。没有半点绿草的踪迹。甚至混凝土斜坡上点缀的几棵瘦小的树木都被移植在小铁罐里，削剪后恰好插入石砖路。俯瞰整个景观，周围全是千篇一律的高层住宅小区的窗户。我发现每幢楼前都有一条巧妙的弯道相连，因而成了密封的环状，让人想起了体育

馆。尽管四周公寓林立——少说也有四百间——但几乎看不见任何人。我能依稀辨出湖那边有几个人影在轻快地走着——一位男士牵着一只狗，一位女士推着一辆婴儿车——但空气中显然弥漫着什么东西，使得人们闭门不出。当然，正像巴士司机之前提醒的那样，天公可不算作美。就在我和鲍里斯站在那边这么一会儿，湖面便有恶风迎面吹来。

“好了，鲍里斯，”我说，“我们还是出发吧。”

小男孩似乎已经失去了兴致，他眼神空洞地盯着湖面，一动不动。我转身面向身后的建筑群，想上足发条，迈开步子，但马上就意识到自己根本不清楚在这一片广袤中，我们的那所公寓到底在哪儿。

“鲍里斯，要不你来带路呢？来吧，怎么了？”

鲍里斯叹了口气，然后开始走。我跟着他上了几级水泥台阶。我们正要转弯攀爬下一段台阶时，他发出一阵尖叫，身子一僵，摆出一个武术造型。我吓了一跳，但立刻明白他根本没有遇到攻击，只不过是小男孩的想象罢了。我淡然说道：

“很好，鲍里斯。”

此后，他不停尖叫，每每转弯要攀爬新的一段台阶时，都会摆出姿势。之后，就在我渐渐喘不过气时，鲍里斯领着我们下了台阶，走上了人行道，这可真让我松了一口气。从这制高点望去，腰子形状的人工湖更清晰了。天空苍白，尽管人行道被遮挡起来——正上方肯定还有两三个跑风口——但遮挡不足，道道劲风吹着我们。我们左手边是公寓楼，一连串短小的水泥台阶将人行道与主建筑连接起来，好似护城河上的小桥。一些台阶向上延伸至公寓门口，而另一些则向下延伸。我们一边走着，我就一边研究这些门，但几分钟过去了，没有一扇能引发我哪怕最模糊的记忆，于是我便放弃了，瞥开眼看着湖面的景色。

这期间，鲍里斯故意走在我前面几步，显然对我们这趟冒险之旅又有了兴致。他自言自语着，我们走得越远，他的自言自语声就越激烈。之后，他开始边走边跳，凭空耍出几下空手道动作，双脚落地的“咔哒”声回响在四周。但好在他没像刚才在台阶上时那样尖叫，而我们还没在人行道上遇见一个人，所以我也就感觉没道理制止他。

过了一会儿，我恰好向下瞥了一眼人工湖，惊奇地发现自己正从一个完全不同的角度观察。直到这时，我才意识到人行道正好围绕这

块住宅区形成一个渐圆形。很可能我们在无限绕圈。我看着鲍里斯在我前方急匆匆地走着，忙着表演各种滑稽动作，不禁怀疑他是不是跟我一样，也不记得去公寓的路了。的确，我意识到自己根本没有计划妥善。我至少应该事先辛苦一下，去联系一下公寓的新住客。毕竟，细细想想，他们没有理由特别想招待我们。我的心头顿时涌上了对整个行程的悲观情绪。

“鲍里斯，”我叫了他一声，“留意着点，可别走过了都不知道。”

他回头看了看我，嘴里仍然狂怒地念念有词，接着继续向前跑了几步，开始耍起空手道动作。

最后，我突然发觉已经走了相当长的时间，再往下看看那人工湖，看得出，我们至少已经围着它绕了一整圈。鲍里斯仍然在我前头念念有词。

“听着，等一下，”我叫他，“鲍里斯，等等。”

他停了下来，看我走了过去，就朝我摆出一副闷闷不乐的模样。

“鲍里斯，”我轻柔地说，“你确定你记得去旧公寓的路吗？”

他耸了耸肩，瞥开眼睛，漫不经心地说：“我当然知道。”

“但我们刚刚好像走了一整圈。”

鲍里斯又耸了耸肩，一个劲地鼓捣自己的一只鞋子，一会儿摆向这边，一会儿又移到那边。终于，他说：“他们会安全保存九号的，是不是？”

“我想应该是的，鲍里斯。他就在盒子里，一个看起来很重要的盒子里。他们会把那样的东西放在一边。比如说架子的高处，那样的地方。”

鲍里斯继续打量着鞋子好一会儿。然后他说：“我们走过了。我们已经走过两次了。”

“什么？你是说我们一直在这上面，寒风瑟瑟，白白绕了一圈又一圈吗？为什么你不说出来，鲍里斯？我真搞不懂你。”

他继续沉默，一只脚不停地挪向一边，然后另一边。

“好吧，你意思是我们往回走？”我问道，“或是再绕着湖走一圈？”

鲍里斯叹了口气，一时间好像陷入了沉思。接着他抬起头，说：“好吧。在后面，就在那儿。”

我们回头沿着人行道走了一小段距离。没多久，鲍里斯停在一节楼梯边，飞快地抬头，瞥了一眼公寓大门。然后他几乎立即转过身，再一次研究起鞋子来了。

“啊，对啦。”我说，仔细地打量着这扇门。事实上，这门——漆成了蓝色，几乎与其他门难以分辨——根本没有唤醒我的任何记忆。

鲍里斯回头看看公寓，然后立刻瞥开眼，脚趾头点着地。我待在楼梯底端好一会儿了，有些不确定接下来该怎么做。最后，我说道：

“鲍里斯，你在这儿等一会儿。我上去看看是否有人。”

小男孩仍旧一只脚点着地。我上去台阶，敲了敲门。没有回应。第二次敲门无果后，我将脸凑上小玻璃嵌板往里看。但因为是毛玻璃，什么也看不见。

“窗户，”鲍里斯在我身后喊道，“从窗户看看。”

我看见左边有一个露台模样的东西——其实不过是建筑物前方延伸的一段平台，十分狭窄，甚至放不下一张竖椅。我伸出一只手扶着栏杆，身体靠着台阶的墙前倾，刚好能从最近的窗户瞧见里面。我看到一个开放式客厅，餐桌顶着一头的墙壁，家具相当陈旧。

“看见了吗？”鲍里斯喊道，“看见那盒子了吗？”

“等一下。”

我尽量靠着墙壁，身体再倾斜点，意识到下面有个张着口的大洞。

“看见了吗？”

“等一下，鲍里斯。”

这会儿房间变得渐渐熟悉起来。墙壁上的三角钟，淡黄色海绵沙发，三层的高保真音响贮存柜；我看到了一件又一件物体，每当我的目光落在上面，心里就不觉泛起酸楚的相识之感。尽管如此，我继续端详房间，脑中产生了一种很深的印象，房间的整个后部——与主体部分连接形成一个“L”形——之前根本没有，是最近新增添的。然而，我继续观察，正是这房间相似的后部仿佛强烈地勾起了我的回

忆，过了一会儿，我才意识到，它像极了我和父母在曼彻斯特住了几个月的房子的客厅后半部。那房子是套城市排屋，又窄又小，终年潮湿，迫切需要重新整修，但我们都忍过来了，因为我们只需要呆到父亲的工作赚钱，能让全家搬到条件更好的地方就可以了。对于我，一个九岁的孩子，房子很快不仅仅代表着一个令人兴奋的改变，而且代表着一个希望，那就是对我们所有人来说，都将翻开一个崭新的、更快乐的篇章。

“那家没人住的。”我身后传来了一个男子的声音。我站直身体，看到他是从隔壁公寓里出来的。他站在房门口，在一段台阶顶上，与我所站之处平行。那男子大约五十上下，样貌沉闷，像条哈巴狗似的，头发蓬乱，T恤胸前湿了一大块。

“啊，”我说，“这么说，这间公寓是空的？”

这男人耸耸肩。“或许他们会回来。我和妻子，我们不喜欢隔壁不住人，但毕竟那麻烦之后，我跟你讲，我们就释然了。我们不是冷漠的人。但那之后，呃，我们就宁愿它像现在这样空着了。”

“啊。这么说它已经空了有段日子了？几周？几个月？”

“哦，至少一个月了吧。他们可能会回来，但如果他们不回，我们也不介意。听着，我有时挺替他们惋惜的。我们不是冷漠的人。我们自己也曾度过艰难时光。但像那样的话，呃，你也会想让他们离开的。我们宁愿它空着。”

“我明白了。很多麻烦。”

“哦，是的。说句公道话，我觉得应该没有身体上的暴力行为。但是，他们深夜大喊大叫，你又不得不听，就比较烦人了。”

“抱歉，但你看……”我向他靠近了一步，眼神示意他鲍里斯听得见我们讲话。

“不，我妻子一点不喜欢这样，”那男子没理会我，继续道，“无论什么时候，她都会将头埋在枕头里。甚至有一次在厨房，我进去一看，她头上围着个枕头在烧菜。太不舒服了。无论何时我们见到他，他都很清醒，非常得体。他走在路上，会飞快地向我们致意。但我妻子确信背后另有隐情。你知道，酗酒……”

“听着，”我愤怒地低语道，斜靠着分隔我二人的水泥墙，“你难道没看见有个孩子跟着我吗？该在他面前讲这种话吗？”

那男子低头看向鲍里斯，露出一副惊讶的表情。接着，他说道：“但他不小了，是不是？你不能保护他不受任何伤害。还有，你要是不喜欢说这个，好吧，我们就说点别的。假如可以，你想个话题吧。我只是告诉你事实是怎样的。但如果你不想谈的话……”

“不，我当然不想！我当然不想听……”

“好吧，这不重要。只是，我倾向支持他，而非她，当然这也很自然。假如他真的施暴，呃，那就是另外一回事了，但从未有证据显示如此。所以我倾向于怪她。好吧，他经常外出，但从我们了解到的，他必须得这样，全是他工作的一部分。我的意思是，对她来说，那并不是理由，那根本不是她如此行径的理由……”

“听着，别说了行吗？你有没有常识？孩子！他能听见……”

“好吧，他可能是在听。那又怎样？小孩子迟早会听到这些事情的。我只是在解释为何我会站在他那边，正因如此我妻子提到酗酒问题。外出是一回事，我妻子会说，酗酒又是另外……”

“听着，假如你继续的话，我现在就不得不即刻中止这谈话。我警告你，我会的！”

“你不能希望永远保护你的孩子，你知道的。他多大了？他看起来可不小了。过分庇护对他们不好。他得适应这个世界、缺点以及所有……”

“他还没到那个时候呢！还没到时候！还有，我不在乎你怎么想。你到底是怎么回事？他是我儿子，我说了算，我不会让这种谈话……”

“真搞不懂你干吗这么生气。我只是在闲聊。我只是告诉你我们对此事的看法。他们不是坏人，不是我们讨厌他们，但有时候太过了。听着，我想，声音穿墙而过，听起来总是更糟糕。听着，试图瞒这么大的男孩是没用的。你在打一场注定失败的仗。而且重点是……”

“我不在乎你怎么想！还要几年呢！我绝不让他，绝不让他听到这种事情……”

“你真蠢。我说的这些事情，就发生在生活当中。即使我和妻子，也有起起伏伏的时候。这就是我同情他的原因。我知道那是什么感觉，那一刻，你突然意识到……”

“我警告你！我会中止此次交谈！我警告你！”

“但话又说回来了，我从未喝醉过。酗酒确实会有影响。外出是一回事，但那样酗酒……”

“这是最后一次警告！你再说，我立即离开！”

“他喝醉的时候很是粗暴，但不是身体上的。好吧，我们能听见很多，他确实很粗暴。我们听不清楚全部的话，但是我们过去常常摸黑坐着，认真仔细地听……”

“够了！够了！我警告过你！我现在要走了！我要走了！”

我转身背对那男子，跑下台阶，到鲍里斯站的地方。我抓起他胳膊，就要急冲冲地离开，但此时，那男子开始在背后喊道：

“你在打一场注定失败的仗！你得清楚事实如何！这才是人生！没错！这才是真正的人生！”

鲍里斯带着些许好奇回头看，我不得不使劲地拽着他胳膊。有好一阵子，我们保持步调一致。但我不止一次地感觉到鲍里斯试图放慢速度，而我却继续前行，急着摆脱那男子可能追上我们的危险。直至我们慢慢停下时，我才发现自己已经严重虚脱了。我蹒跚着走到墙边——墙出奇的矮，刚刚齐腰——抬起手肘，斜倚在上面。我向外眺望看着湖面，看着那边的高层建筑，看着苍白无际的天空，等待胸口的起伏平静下来。

过了一会儿，我才意识到鲍里斯就站在我身边。他背对着我，拨弄着墙头的一块松松的砖石碎片。对刚刚发生的事，我感到些许尴尬，并意识到应该给他个解释。我还在努力思忖着说些什么，这时候鲍里斯仍背对着我，嘟哝道：

“那男人是个疯子，是不是？”

“是的，鲍里斯，十足的疯子。可能是精神错乱了。”

鲍里斯继续拨弄着那砖墙。接着他说：“已经无所谓了。我们不用去取九号了。”

“要不是那个男的，鲍里斯……”

“没关系。已经不重要了。”而后鲍里斯转过身来面对我，微笑道：“迄今为止我过得非常不错。”他轻快地说道。

“你很开心？”

“非常开心。巴士之行，所有一切，好极了。”

我不禁一时冲动想伸出手拥抱他，但我突然想到他可能会不知所措，或许会被这一举动吓到。最后我轻轻拨弄了一下他的头发，然后背过身去看风景。

风不再那么惹人心烦意乱，我们并排静静地站在那儿好一会儿，眺望着那边的住宅区。然后，我说道：

“鲍里斯，我知道你一定很疑惑。我的意思是，为什么我们不能安定下来，平静地生活，我们三个。你一定，我知道你会的，你一定在想为什么我总是得外出，尽管你母亲为此恼怒不安。呃，你得明白，我一直旅行奔波的原因，不是因为我不爱你们而极不想和你们在一起。某种程度上讲，再没有比和你们一起呆在家里让我更乐意的事情了，和你，还有你母亲，住在一个像那边那样的公寓里，或者其他任何地方。但你看，事情没那么简单。我得继续奔波，因为，你看，你永远无法预知它什么时候会到来。我的意思是非常特别的一次，非常重要的一次旅行，非常非常重要的一次旅行，不是为我，而是为所有人，世界上的每一个人。我该怎么向你解释呢，鲍里斯，你还这么小。你看，一不小心就错过了。比方说一次，不，我不去，我休息。而过后，我会发现就是那一次，是非常非常重要的一次。你看，一旦你错过了，就没有转还了，就太迟了。不论我之后如何努力，没用了，太迟了，而我之前的这些年就都白费了。我亲眼见到类似之事在其他人身上发生过，鲍里斯。他们年复一年地旅行，渐渐开始疲惫了，可能还有些懈怠。在那一次来临的时候，他们却错过了，这种情况经常有。而且，你知道，他们余生会后悔，越来越痛苦、悲伤，到弥留之时，会变得筋疲力尽，衰弱不堪。所以你看，鲍里斯，那就是为什么。那就是我为何得坚持到此刻，一直不停地旅行。我也知道这会让我们境况变得比较艰难，但我得坚强，忍耐，我们三个都是。不会太久了，我肯定。很快就会来的，非常重要的那次，然后就结束了，我之后就可以放松，可以休息，可以如愿地呆在家里，没关系了，我们就可以过得开开心心了，就我们三个。我们可以做所有我们之前没能做的事情。不会太久了呵，我肯定，但我们必须耐心等待。鲍里斯，我希望你能明白我在说什么。”

鲍里斯沉默了许久。然后他突然直起身，厉声说道：“安静离开。你们所有人。”说着，他跑开几步，又开始他的空手道动作了。

接下来几分钟，我继续靠着墙，眺望着风景，听着鲍里斯狂暴的自言自语声。然后，我再看他的时候，发现他正在想象中表演他幻想

剧的一个最新版本，过去几周以来他已经演了一遍又一遍。毫无疑问，现在我们如此接近实际的背景，再演一遍自然也就不可避免了。因为剧本里涉及鲍里斯还有他外祖父，共同击退一帮街头混混，就在这人行道上，旧公寓的外面。

我看着他忙活，这会儿他已经远离我几码开外了，我猜快演到他和外祖父的那部分了，他们肩并肩地站着，全身戒备，准备好迎接再一次猛攻。地上已经有一大片不省人事的暴徒了，但一些最负隅顽抗的此时正重新排列队形，准备再一次攻击。鲍里斯和外公并排，平静地等待着，漆黑一片的人行道上，暴徒们却在耳语交流着攻击策略。这次，跟其他所有剧本一样，鲍里斯不知怎地年长了许多。并非全然成年——那样就太牵强了，而至于外公的年龄也会变得复杂——但却也足以使得必要的身体技能真实可信。

鲍里斯和古斯塔夫自始至终都给了暴徒们足够的时间，让他们组成有利阵形。然后，一旦下一波攻击到来，当行凶者从各方飞身袭来时，祖孙二人，一个合作流畅的团队，就会高效率地，几乎是悲痛地出手解决。最终，攻击结束——但，不，最后一个暴徒会从黑夜中跳出，手操一把凶狠的短刀。古斯塔夫站得最近，会使出一记快拳，直击其颈部，然后，这场打斗终于完结。

沉寂片刻，鲍里斯和外公会表情严肃地审视一番四周横七竖八躺倒的躯体。然后古斯塔夫精明老练的目光最后一次扫了一眼这场景，点了点头，见到此动作，二人会别过脸去，一副摊上了苦差事躲不掉的样子。他们会登上一段短短的台阶，来到旧公寓门前，在进门之前最后看一眼斗败的街头混混，有些这会儿已经开始呻吟或是爬着离开。

“现在好了，”古斯塔夫会站在门口大声宣布道，“他们走了。”

然后，我和索菲会紧张地出现在门廊上。鲍里斯紧随外公进门，会补充道：“但没有真正结束。他们会再来袭击一次，说不定就在明早之前。”

如此评断当时的情景，祖孙二人都清楚得很，甚至根本不用费力商谈，对此我和索菲却是悲痛欲绝。

“不行，我受不了了！”索菲会哀号，继而变为抽泣。我会搂她入怀，试图安抚她，但我本人的表情亦会扭曲成团。面对这番凄惨的景象，鲍里斯和古斯塔夫不会显出丝毫的轻蔑之情。古斯塔夫会安慰

地一只手搭在我肩膀上，说道：“别担心。有我和鲍里斯在呢。最后一次攻袭之后，就全都结束了。”

“没错，”鲍里斯会确认道，“他们最多再打斗一次。”接着面向古斯塔夫，他会说道：“外公，要不下次，我再试着跟他们说说，给他们最后一次退出的机会。”

“他们不会听的，”古斯塔夫会说，严肃地摇摇头。“但你说得对，我们应该给他们最后一次机会。”

我和索菲恐惧得不知所措，会消失在公寓深处，相拥而泣。鲍里斯和古斯塔夫则会四目相对，疲倦地叹了口气，然后，打开前门门，走回到外面。

他们会发觉人行道一片漆黑寂静，空无一人。

“我们也休息会儿。”古斯塔夫会说，“你先睡吧，鲍里斯。我听到他们来，就叫醒你。”

鲍里斯会点点头，坐在楼梯的最高一级台阶上，背靠着前门，很快睡着了。

一段时间之后，有人碰了碰他胳膊，他会双脚一跃，立刻清醒。而他外祖父这会儿早已经盯着前面人行道上聚起来的那帮街头暴徒了。跟以往相比，他们人多势众，他们不得不从城市里每个黑暗幽闭的深处召集成员，以作最后一搏。现在，他们全都在那儿，穿着破旧的皮衣和陆军作战服，系着粗犷的腰带，手持金属棒或是自行车链——他们自身的荣誉感不允许他们带枪。鲍里斯和古斯塔夫会慢慢下楼，接近他们，可能在第二个或者第三个台阶处停下。随后鲍里斯看到外公的暗号，会提高嗓音，开始说话，声音在水泥柱子间回响：

“我们与你们打斗多次了。看得出这次你们人更多了。但你们每个人内心深处一定知道你们不会赢。这次，外公和我不能保证，你们中有人不会受重伤。这场打斗已经毫无意义了。你们所有人曾经一定都有过家庭、父母或者兄弟姐妹。我想让你们明白发生了什么。你们一次次的攻袭，不断恐吓我们公寓的行为，弄得我母亲一直不停地哭泣。她总是紧张焦虑，搞得她经常毫无理由地斥责我。也逼得我爸爸不得不长期外出，有时还得出国，而这让我母亲讨厌。如此种种全是你们恐吓公寓的结果。也许你们这样做仅仅是因为你们精神亢奋，因为你们来自破碎的家庭，根本就不明白幸福家庭是怎样的。而这正是我想让你们了解真正发生了什么的原因，你们不顾后果的行为的真正

影响。结果迟早会是，爸爸再也不回家，说不定我们甚至得完全搬出公寓。这就是为何我得带外公到这儿，耽误他在一家大型酒店的重要工作的原因。我们不能允许你们继续如此行径。而这也是我们一再与你们战斗的原因。既然我跟你们解释清楚了，你们有机会好好考虑考虑退去。假如你们不走，那么外公和我别无选择只能再次与你们战斗。我们会尽全力打晕你们，而不造成持久性的伤害，但在大规模战斗中，即便我们这个级别的技术水平，也不能保证你们当中某些人最后不会鼻青脸肿，甚至伤筋断骨。所以抓住机会，后退吧。”

对这一番话，古斯塔夫会赞赏地微微一笑，然后二人会重新审视面前如野兽般的面孔。相当一部分人会不确定地互相对视，是恐惧而非理智迫使他们重新考虑。但之后，他们的头目——可怖、阴郁的角色们——会发出作战的嚎叫声，渐渐传遍队伍。然后他们会冲向前。很快地，鲍里斯和他外公会各司其职，背对背，灵巧地移动阵形，运用他们自己精心发明的空手道和其他搏斗技巧混合的战术。街头暴徒会从各个方向攻击，结果只会被旋转着、踉跄着打飞，口中发出阵阵恐惧的、惊讶的呜咽声，直至地面再次躺满不省人事的躯体。接下来许久，鲍里斯和古斯塔夫会一起站立等待，仔细观察，直到暴徒们开始混乱，一些人呻吟着，其余的摇着头想看看身在何处。这时候，古斯塔夫会上前一步，喝道：

“现在走吧，结束吧。别再骚扰这公寓了。你们开始恐吓之前，这曾是个开心的家。假如你们再回来，我和外孙别无他法，只能打断你们的骨头。”

这席话几乎没必要。街头暴徒们会明白这次他们是彻底输了，庆幸的是他们没有受更严重的伤。慢慢地，他们会开始手脚并用，一瘸一拐地离开，三三两两互相搀扶，许多人会痛苦地呻吟。

等最后一个暴徒一瘸一拐地离开，鲍里斯和古斯塔夫才会平静地看看对方，一脸心满意足的表情，转身回到公寓。一进门，我和索菲——我们已经从窗口目睹了整个场景——会喜气洋洋地欢迎他们凯旋。“谢天谢地，都结束了，”我会兴奋地说，“谢天谢地。”

“我已经开始准备一顿欢庆宴了。”索菲会大声宣布，开心之至，眉开眼笑，这会儿，脸上已卸下了所有的紧张。“我们太感激你和外公了，鲍里斯。我们今晚何不一起玩棋牌游戏呢？”

“我要走了，”古斯塔夫会说，“我在酒店还有很多事。要是还有什么麻烦，通知我就行了。但我肯定，一切都结束了。”

古斯塔夫下楼时，我们向他挥手道别。接着，关上门后，鲍里斯、索菲和我们会坐好，准备安度一夜。索菲会在厨房忙里忙外，准备晚餐，轻声哼唱，而我和鲍里斯则懒散地坐在客厅地板上，全神贯注地玩着棋牌游戏。然后，大概过了一小时，索菲在屋外，我会突然抬头，一脸严肃地看着鲍里斯，悄悄地说：“谢谢你所做的一切，鲍里斯。现在一切都恢复正常了。像从前一样了。”

“瞧！”鲍里斯大喊，我看到他又站在我旁边，指着墙那边。
“瞧！是金姆阿姨！”

千真万确，我们下方的地面上站着一个人，正疯狂地挥手吸引我们注意。她穿着一件绿色的开襟羊毛衫，却紧紧地拽着，裹着全身，头发被吹得乱糟糟的。发现我们最终看到了她，她大喊了些什么，却被风声淹没了。

“金姆阿姨！”鲍里斯向下叫喊道。

那女人用手比划着，又喊了些什么。

“我们下去吧。”鲍里斯说着，开始带路，一瞬间，又兴致勃勃。

我跟着鲍里斯跑下几级水泥台阶。我们到达地面的时候，劲风的巨大力道立刻打在我们身上，但鲍里斯为了那女人依然能做出蹒跚而行的动作，好似刚刚跳伞着陆。

“金姆阿姨”是个矮壮的女人，年约四十，那有些严厉的面庞确实眼熟。

“你们两个聋了吗？”我们向她走过去，她说道，“我们看到你们下了那辆巴士，我们就大喊、大喊，你们听到了吗？然后我到这儿来找你们，却哪里也寻不见你们。”

“哦，天哪，”我说，“我们什么都没听到，是不是，鲍里斯？一定是因为刮风。那么——”我四处扫了一眼，“你在自己公寓里一直看着我们俩？”

这个矮壮的女人模糊地指着远处，那些俯瞰着我们的无数窗户当中的一个，“我们不停地叫喊、叫喊。”接着，她转向鲍里斯，说：“小伙子，你妈妈就在上面。她特别想见你。”

“我妈妈？”

“你最好直接上去，她特别想见你呢。而且你知道吗？她做了一下午饭，准备了最棒的一顿盛宴，就等着你今晚回家呢。你做梦都想不到，她说她已经准备了一切，所有你最喜欢的，所有你能想到的。刚刚她正跟我说着呢，然后我们看向窗外，就看到你们俩刚下车。听着，我花了半个小时找你们两个家伙，都快冻僵了。我们非得一直站在外面吗？”

她伸出一只手。鲍里斯将其拉住，然后我们三人开始朝着她指的公寓大楼那走去。走近后，鲍里斯带头向前跑去，推开了一扇防火门，消失在里面。我和那矮壮的女人走近，那门忽闪着关上了。她边开着门让我，边说道：“瑞德，难道你不该在其他什么地方吗？索菲刚刚还在跟我说她电话怎么响了一下午。好多人都在找你呢。”

“真的吗？啊。呃，你看到了，我就在这儿。”我大笑了一声。“我带鲍里斯来了啊。”

那女人耸了耸肩。“我想你自己的事你心里应该有数吧。”

我们站在楼梯间底端，这里灯光昏暗。我身边的墙壁上是一堆信箱，还有防火设备。我们开始上第一节楼梯——上面至少还有五节——头顶上传来鲍里斯奔跑时的咔哒声，我听到他大声喊道：“妈妈！”然后传来开心的惊呼声，更多的咔哒声，接着索菲的声音说道：“哦，我亲爱的，我亲爱的！”从她声音的模糊度判断，他们在拥抱。等到矮壮女人和我走到了楼梯的平台，他们却消失在公寓房间里。

“不好意思，屋里有点乱。”那女人说着，领我进屋。

我从一个狭小的门厅进到一个开放式的房间，里面配备的是简约的现代家具。一扇巨大的观景窗是房间的主角，我进去时，看到索菲和鲍里斯一起站在窗子前面，灰色的天空映衬出他们的身形轮廓。索菲飞快地对我微笑了一下，然后继续和鲍里斯聊天。他们好像因某事而异常激动，索菲一直紧拥着鲍里斯的双肩。从他们指着窗外的动作来看，我猜想可能索菲正重新详述她和那矮壮女人早先如何发现我们的。但等我靠近些后，听到索菲说：

“真的。都准备得差不多了。只要把一些菜热一下，比如肉派。”

鲍里斯说了些什么我没听清，但索菲却回答道：

“当然可以了。你想玩哪个我们就玩哪个。等我们一吃完，你就可以考虑玩什么。”

鲍里斯怀疑地看着他母亲，我发觉他的态度有了些许警觉，没能让他或如索菲想的那般兴奋。接着，他跑到房间的另一角，索菲向我走近几步，悲伤地摇着头。

“抱歉，”她静静地说道。“那房子一点都不好。甚至可能比上月看到的那个还糟。景色很美，但刚好建在峭壁沿上，不够结实。迈尔先生最后也同意这看法。他认为如果强风刮过，房顶会掉下来，甚至可能接下来的几年内就会发生。我直接回来了，十一点到的家。很抱歉。你很失望喔，我看得出来。”她朝鲍里斯瞥了一眼，而他正仔细摆弄架子上放着的便携式卡带播放器。

“不要气馁，”我叹了口气说，“我肯定我们很快会找到的。”

“但我一直在想，”索菲说道，“在回来的汽车上。不管有没有房子，我们现在都可以一起做各种各样的事情。我一进门，就开始做饭。我想今晚我们可以吃顿丰富的，就我们三个。我还记得小时候，在母亲重病前，她常常这样。她常常做很多不同的菜，全拿出来，让我们挑选。那是多么美好的夜晚啊，我想，呃，没理由今晚我们不能像那样，就我们三个。我之前从没真正考虑过这件事，觉得厨房那个样子没法做，但我仔细看了一圈，意识到，我一直以来太傻了。好吧，跟理想状况相比确实差距甚远，但大部分都能用。所以我开始做。整整做了一下午。而且差不多所有的我都做了。所有鲍里斯喜欢的。就放在那儿等着我们呢，只需要热一下。我们今晚将会有餐盛宴啊。”

“太好了，我非常期待。”

“我们没理由不能做，即便在那公寓里。而且你一直如此通情达理，对……对所有事情。我仔细回想了一切。在回来的汽车上。我们现在得把过去抛之脑后。我们要一起开始重新做好的事情。”

“是的。你说得很对。”

索菲朝窗外看了一会儿。接着她说道：“哦，我差点忘了。那个女人一直打电话。我做饭的时候一直打，斯达特曼小姐。问我知不知道你在哪里，她找到你了吗？”

“斯达特曼小姐？呃，没有，她找我什么事？”

“她好像觉得你今天的一些约会弄乱了。她非常客气，一直道歉说打扰我了。她说她肯定你一切都游刃有余，只是打来核对一下，没别的，她一点都不担心。但接着十五分钟之后，电话又响了，又是她。”

“呃，没什么好担心的。呃……她原以为我应该在其他地方，你刚刚说？”

“我不确定她想说什么。她很友善，只是不停地打。我还因此烧焦了一盘鸡肉饼。接着，她最后一次打来时，问我是否期待今晚在卡文斯基画廊的招待会。你都没跟我说过，但她说的好像他们都很期待我去。所以我说，是的，我非常期待过去。然后她问鲍里斯是不是一样，我说是的，他也是，你亦如此，你真的非常期待。听到这个，她好像放心了些。她说她不担心，只是随口一提，仅此而已。我放下电话，起初有些失望。以为这招待会会妨碍我们的大餐。但然后，我发现我还有时间先准备好一切，那样的话，我们都可以一起去，然后回来，只要我们不呆太久，我们仍可以一起共度夜晚。接着我就想，呃，真是件不错的事。对我和鲍里斯来说是件好事，去像这样的招待会。”这会儿鲍里斯正朝我们这边走过来，她突然把手伸向他，一把把他拽过来抱了抱。“鲍里斯，你肯定会艳惊四座的，是不是？别在意其他人。随意些，你会很开心的。你会艳惊四座。然后，不知不觉地，就到回家的时间了，接着我们会共度一个真正美好的夜晚，就我们三个。我已经准备好了一切，所有你最喜欢的。”

鲍里斯疲惫地挣脱开母亲的拥抱，又走开了。索菲微笑地看着他，然后转向我说道：

“我们最好立刻出发，不是吗？卡文斯基画廊，从这儿走可能要花一段时间呢。”

“是啊，”我边说边看了眼手表。“是的，你说得有道理。”我转身对着那矮壮的女人，她刚回到屋子。“要不你给点建议，”我对她说道，“我不确定哪辆公交车去画廊。你知不知道那车是不是马上到？”

“到卡文斯基画廊？”那矮壮的女人轻蔑地看了我一眼，也只因鲍里斯在场，她才没有添油加醋地讽刺一番。然后她说道：“从这儿没有到卡文斯基画廊的公交车。你们得先乘车回到市中心。之后，得在图书馆外面等一辆有轨电车。准时到是不可能了。”

“啊。太可惜了。我还指望有公交车直接到呢。”

那矮壮的女人又嘲讽地看了我一眼，接着说道：“开我的车吧，我今晚用不着。”

“你可真是太好了，”我说道，“但你确定我们不会……”

“哦，少废话了，瑞德。你们需要车。否则没有其他办法能让你们准时到达卡文斯基画廊。即使有车，你们也得现在立刻出发。”

“是的，”我说道，“我正是这么想的。但你看，我们不是不想麻烦你嘛。”

“你们正好可以带几箱书。如果我明天得乘公交去的话，我拿不了。”

“好的，当然。乐意效劳。”

“明早把书载到赫尔曼·罗斯的店里，十点前随时可以。”

“别担心，金姆，”我还什么都没说，索菲就说道，“我一定办到。你真是太好了。”

“好吧，你们几个最好现在就出发吧。嗨，年轻人——”那矮壮的女人向鲍里斯打了个手势，“你帮我把这些书装箱吧？”

接下来的几分钟，我自己独自站在窗边看着外面的风景。他们几个已经离开，去了卧室，我能听到他们在我身后谈笑风生。我突然觉得应该进去帮他们，但接着我认为重要的是应趁机整理思绪，想一下接下来的夜晚。我继续盯着下面的人工湖。有些小孩开始对着水潭远处那侧的篱笆踢球，然而，除此之外，周围其他地区仍是荒芜一片。

我终于听到那矮壮的女人叫我，发现他们正等着离开。我走进门厅去找索菲和鲍里斯，发现每人都搬着个纸板箱，已经出去到走廊上了。他们动身下楼的时候开始争执起什么。

那矮壮的女人替我开着前门。“索菲有信心，今晚一切顺利，”她说，低下声音道。“所以别再让她失望，瑞德。”

“别担心，”我说，“我会确保一切顺利的。”

她冷冷地看了看我，接着转身下台阶，钥匙叮当作响。

我跟在她后面。刚下到第二节楼梯，我看到一个女人正迈着疲倦的步伐上楼。那人挤过矮壮的女人身边，咕哝了声“抱歉”，都已经擦肩而过了，我才突然发现那人是菲奥娜·罗伯茨，还穿着检票员的

制服。她好像也没有认出我，直至刚刚——楼梯上光线不好——她疲惫地转身，一只手扶着金属栏杆，说道：

“哦，你来啦。你能准时，真是太好了。很抱歉我来晚了。东环的有轨电车改线了，所以我当班的时间长了点。你没等太久吧。”

“没有，没有。”我慢慢地又往回上了一两级台阶。“根本不久。但很不凑巧，我的日程安排非常紧……”

“没关系，除非必需，我不会占用你太多时间的。事实上，我得告诉你，我给女孩子们打了一圈电话，我之前说过的，我休息时从车站食堂打的。我告诉她们等着我带个朋友来，但没告诉她们其实是你。起先本打算说的，一如我们之前一致商议的那样，但我最先打电话给楚德，一听到她那样说着：‘哦，是啊，是你，亲爱的。’我就能从这口气里听出她是多么的高傲乖戾。我知道她们如何整日谈论我，一个电话接着一个电话，还有英奇，还有其他所有人，讨论昨晚发生的事。所有人都假装为我惋惜，说她们得如何同情地对待我，毕竟，我像是个病人，而她们的责任就是友善助人。但当然，她们不会留下我的，像我这样的人怎么能成为她们基金会的一员？哦，她们今天一定很开心，我全听得出来，就是我一打电话，她说话的那副样子。‘哦，是的，是你，亲爱的。’于是我想，那好吧，我就不给你任何预警了。看看不相信我，你的下场如何。我当时心里就那么想。我真希望看到你开门，看到谁站在我身边，彻底失魂落魄的样子。真希望看到你穿着最糟糕的衣衫，或许是运动服，卸掉所有妆容，鼻子边的疙瘩完全清晰可见，头发就像有时候夹在脑后那样，看起来至少老了十五岁的样子。真希望看到你的公寓一团糟，到处都是那些无聊杂志，下流的黄色小报，家具里乱七八糟地塞满了言情小说，你会大吃一惊，不知道该说什么，什么都让你觉得尴尬，而你又一件接着一件地说些无聊至极的事情，让事情变得更糟。你想上些茶点，却发现家里什么都没，你会觉得之前没信我是多么的愚蠢。我们就那样做吧，我想。所以我没告诉她，也没告诉其他任何人。我只是说我会带一个朋友过来。”她停下来，自己平静了一会儿，接着说道：“很抱歉。希望这听起来不会让你觉得我是恶意报复。但我一直渴望着这一天。这是我继续前行的动力，是让我查完所有那些票、让我继续前行的动力。乘客们一定都会奇怪，我为什么像那样走来走去，你知道的，眼中放光。你要是赶时间，我想我们就得马上出发了。我们可以从楚德家开始。英奇应该和她在一起，通常，每天这个时间都是，那么我们首先马上就能搞定她们两个。我不怎么在意其他人。我就是想看看那两个人脸上的表情。好吧，我们走吧。”

她开始上楼梯，先前所有的疲惫一扫而光。楼梯仿佛走不到尽头，一节跟着一节，直至我拼命喘气。然而，菲奥娜却看上去丝毫没有费力。我们爬楼梯的时候，她继续说着，音量放低，仿佛周围的人会听到似的。

我们终于上完楼梯，我已经上气不接下气——胸腔发出了“呼哧呼哧”的喘气声——使得我没法留心周遭环境如何。我发现自己被领进一个昏暗的过道，经过几排大门，而菲奥娜却未曾发觉我的难处，继续带头向前行进。然后，她突然停下来，敲了敲门。我跟上她，被迫一只手倚在门框上，低着头，努力恢复呼吸。门打开的时候，我肯定一副弓腰驼背的模样，而身边却是得意洋洋的菲奥娜。

“楚德，”菲奥娜说，“我带了个朋友来。”

我费力站直身体，愉快地微笑起来。

第十六章

来开门的女人五十岁上下，身材丰满，一头花白短发。她穿着一件宽松的粉红色无袖套头衫，一条袋状条纹裤。楚德朝我飞快地扫了一眼，并没发现任何异常，于是转身对菲奥娜说道：“哦，你来了，那就进来吧。”

一副傲慢俯就的口吻，但没想结果竟提升了菲奥娜的预期，她鬼鬼祟祟地向我投来一笑，我们跟着楚德进了门。

“英奇和你在一起吗？”我们走进一个狭小的门厅时，菲奥娜问道。

“嗯，我们刚回来，”楚德说，“凑巧了，我们有很多料要爆。既然你刚好来了，那你就近水楼台了。你真是幸运哪。”

最后那句话好似全无讽刺之意。楚德穿过一扇门消失了，丢下我们站在小小的门厅里，我们可以听到她的声音从里面传来：“英奇，是菲奥娜。还有她的一个朋友。我想我们应该告诉她今天下午的事情。”

“菲奥娜？”英奇的声音听起来略带愤怒。接着，她压住情绪说道：“好吧，我看就让她进来吧。”

听到此番对话，菲奥娜再次兴奋地冲我一笑。这时，楚德的脑袋探出房门，示意我们走进客厅。

房间的大小和形状与那矮壮女人的家没什么不同，不过家具却过于花里胡哨，基本以花卉图案为主。或许是这间公寓的朝向不同，或许是屋外的天空明澈了些许——总之，午后的阳光透过大窗户倾洒而入。一踏进光线里，我就满以为这两个女人能认出我呢。很明显，菲奥娜也有此期待，因为我注意到她小心翼翼地站在一旁，生怕她在旁边减弱了气场。然而，无论是楚德或是英奇，看似对我都没有任何印象。她们二人匆匆而又漠然地朝我扫了一眼，接着，楚德冷冷地邀请我们入座。我们并肩坐在一张窄窄的沙发上。尽管菲奥娜起初很茫然，但她心中似乎已有定见：这一系列事件的意外转机，只会在一旦揭示谜底时增强效果，于是又冲我咧嘴微微一笑。

“你说还是我说？”英奇问道。

楚德显然听从于这位较年轻的女子，说道：“不，你说吧，英奇。应该你来讲。但菲奥娜，”她转向我们，“不许你告诉其他人。我们想为今晚的会面保留个惊喜，那才公平。哦，我们有没有告诉你关于今晚的会面？呃，我们这不是刚告诉你嘛。如果有时间，一定要来哟。不过既然你还有朋友和你在一起——”她朝我们点了点头，“如果你来不了，我们也完全理解。那，英奇，你说吧，应该你说的，真的。”

“好吧，菲奥娜，我保证你肯定爱听，我们度过了非常激动人心的一天。你知道的，今天冯·布劳恩先生邀请我们去他办公室，与他亲自商讨我们照顾瑞德先生父母的计划。哦，你不知道呀？我还以为你全知道了呢。好吧，我们今晚详细通报会面的进展，我现在只告诉你，进行得确实非常顺利，虽说被迫缩短了一点时间。哦，冯·布劳恩先生对此深表歉意，真是无比抱歉，是不是，楚德？他对自己得早点离场十分内疚，但我们得知缘由后，呃，我们就完全理解了。你看，他有一项非常重要的行程安排，是去动物园。啊，你可能会笑，亲爱的菲奥娜，但这可不是一次普通的行程，是一个官方团体，当然包括冯·布劳恩先生本人在内，要带布罗茨基先生去那儿。你知道布罗茨基先生从未去过动物园吗？但问题是，他们也劝柯林斯小姐去那儿。是的，去动物园！你能想象吗？都这么多年了！而那不过是布罗茨基先生应得的待遇，我们俩立刻都这样说。是的，他们到达时，柯林斯小姐也会到场，她会在一个约好的地方等待，官方团体会与她见面，她会跟布罗茨基先生交谈。全都安排好了。你能想象吗？过了这么久，他们要见面了，而且要实实在在地交谈呢！我们说，我们完全理解缩短我们会面时间的原因，但冯·布劳恩先生对我们太客气了，他显然很不好意思，对我们说：‘你们二位女士何不也一起去动物园？虽然我无法邀请你们加入官方团体，但或许你们可以从远处观望吧。’我们说我们真的太激动了。就在这时，他对我们说：‘当然，如果你们按我的建议行事，你们不仅可以一睹布罗茨基这么久以来第一次与他妻子会面的情景，还可以——’他顿了一下，是不是，楚德？他停顿片刻，然后酷酷地继续道：‘你们还可以近距离看到瑞德先生，他欣然答应加入官方团体。虽然我不能完全保证，但如果有合适的时机，我就给你们二位女士打暗号，把你们二位引荐给他。’我们绝对惊呆了！可是，当然喽，后来我们在回家的路上回想时——刚才我们还在互相说着呢——再仔细想想，就不会真的那么吃惊了。毕竟，我们过去几年有了长足的进步，为北京来客制作彩旗，还有为亨利·勒杜费尽心思制作午餐三明治……”

“北京芭蕾舞团，那才是真正的转折点。”楚德插嘴道。

“没错，那是转折点。但我觉得我们从未真正停下来思考过这个问题，我们只是兢兢业业，努力做事，可能从未意识到，一直以来我们越来越受到大家的尊重。坦率地讲，现今，我们事实上已经成为这座城市生活非常重要的一部分。我们早该意识到这一点了。事实摆在眼前，这就是为何冯·布劳恩先生亲自邀请我们去他办公室，为何最后他会在今天提出他的建议。‘如果有合适时机，我就把你们二位引荐给他。’那是他亲口说的，是不是，楚德？‘我知道瑞德先生见到你们二位会很开心，尤其是因为你们到时要照顾他的双亲，那是他最关切的一件事。’当然，我们一直这么说，是不是，一旦我们分配到此项任务，我们就有望被引见给瑞德先生了。但我们没料到这一切发生得这么快，所以我们非常激动。菲奥娜，怎么了，亲爱的？”

我身旁的菲奥娜一直不耐烦地扭动身体，想打断英奇连珠炮似的话语。英奇此刻终于停了下来，菲奥娜就用手肘轻轻碰了一下我的胳膊，投来一个眼神，好似在说：“快！此时不说，更待何时！”不幸的是，刚爬完楼梯的我依然上气不接下气，踌躇了片刻。总之，有那么尴尬的一瞬，三个女人都盯着我。然后，看我什么都不说，英奇继续道：

“好了，菲奥娜，你要不介意，我刚才话还没讲完呢。亲爱的，我相信你有许多非常有趣的故事要告诉我们，我们也很想听。毫无疑问，我们在市中心干这干那，做着我现在告诉你的这些事的时候，你在电车上又度过了非常有趣的一天，可是，如果你愿意稍等片刻，有些事儿可能会激起你一时的兴致。毕竟——”讲到这儿，她话音中颇含讥讽，已跨越了文明行为的界线，让我颇为吃惊。“这事关你的老朋友，你的老朋友瑞德先生……”

“英奇，拜托！”楚德插嘴道，但她唇边却挂着一抹微笑，二人彼此飞快交换了一下得意的笑容。

菲奥娜再次用手肘轻轻推了我一下。我瞥了她一眼，看得出她的耐心已消耗殆尽，迫不及待想让摧残她的人得到应有的惩罚，而无片刻延宕。我倾身向前，清了清嗓子，但没等我真的开口，英奇又开始讲了。

“呃，我想说的是，你细细想想，你就明白这种级别的待遇不过是我们理所应得的。显然，冯·布劳恩先生无论如何也是这么认为的。他一直都非常友善，对我们彬彬有礼，是不是？当他不得不离开

去市政厅会合官方团体的时候，他非常抱歉。‘我们会在大概三十分后到达动物园。’他继续道，‘我非常希望你们二位女士会去。’他告诉我们，如果我们能跟他们一行人保持五六米远的距离，就完全没关系。毕竟，我们的身份不仅仅是公众成员！哦，非常抱歉，菲奥娜，我们可没有忘了你，我们本打算向冯·布劳恩先生提起我们小组成员中有一位，也就是你，亲爱的，我们中有一位是瑞德先生的挚友，有多年友谊的、非常亲爱的朋友。我们已经下定决心要提起，但不知何故，我们就是没机会说这个，是不是，楚德？”

这两个女人再一次彼此交换得意的笑容。菲奥娜冷冷地盯着她们，强忍怒火。我意识到，这会儿事情已经太离谱了，于是决定介入。然而，此种做法的两种可行方案立刻呈现在我面前。一个选择就是礼貌优雅地介入英奇碰巧说出的连串话语当中，以吸引其留意我的身份。比如，我会突然间平静地插话道：“呃，既然我们无缘在动物园相见，那么我们欣然地在你自己的家中相见，又有何关系呢？”或者类似的话。另一选择就只是突然起身，或许边起身边甩出两只胳膊，直言不讳地宣布道：“我就是瑞德！”我自然希望选择一种会带来最大打击的方法，但犹豫不决的我再次错过了机会，因为英奇又开始讲话了。

“我们到了动物园，开始等，哦，大概等了二十分钟，是吧，楚德？我们在一个小小路边摊等待，可以在那儿喝杯咖啡，大概二十分钟之后，我们看到这些车辆直接开到大门口，这群尊贵的人下了车。大约有十或者十一个人，全是男士，冯·温特斯坦先生在，还有费希尔先生和霍夫曼先生。当然还有冯·布劳恩先生。布罗茨基先生走在这些人中间，看起来确实非常高贵，是不是，楚德？一点不像过去的样子。我们当然立刻寻找瑞德先生，但他不在当中。我和楚德一张脸一张脸看过去，但都是些老面孔，议员什么的，你知道的。有一瞬间，我们以为莱特梅尔先生就是瑞德先生呢，就在他刚从车里出来的时候。总之，他没有跟他们一起，我们还彼此说着，因为他繁忙的行程，可能稍迟一些会来。所有这些绅士都在，他们走上一条小径，全穿着黑色外套，除了布罗茨基先生，他穿了一件灰色外套，非常高贵的扮相，还有一顶与之相配的帽子。他们走过枫树林，全都迈着不紧不慢的步子，走到了第一个笼子处。冯·温特斯坦先生好像是主事人，不停指着东西跟布罗茨基先生介绍，指着每个笼子里的动物介绍。但看得出来，没人太多注意动物，他们都在为布罗茨基先生与柯林斯小姐的碰面紧张。我们也没法不紧张，是不是，楚德？我们继续走，转过弯走到中央广场，果真，柯林斯小姐在那儿，自己一人，站

在长颈鹿面前，看着它们。还有其他一些人来回踱着步子，但他们当然不知道，当官方团的人转过拐角，人们才意识到有事发生，恭敬地移开了，而柯林斯小姐还站在长颈鹿面前，看上去较先前更孤单了。官方团的人走近了些，她朝他们看了过去。她显得如此平静，你根本不知道她心里在想些什么。而布罗茨基先生，我们能看到他的表情，非常僵硬，偷偷地瞄向柯林斯小姐，虽说当时他们俩之间还隔了老远，中间还有猴子浣熊的笼圈。冯·温特斯坦先生好像在给布罗茨基先生介绍所有动物，好似这些动物全是一场盛宴的官方嘉宾一般，是不是，楚德？我们不知道这些先生为何不直接走到长颈鹿和柯林斯小姐那里，但很显然，他们已经决定采用这种方式了。真是太令人激动了，太感动了，有那么一刻，我们甚至忘记了瑞德先生出现的可能。能看到布罗茨基呼出的气息，薄雾蒙蒙，其他所有绅士也是一样，紧接着，只剩下几个笼子的时候，布罗茨基先生好像对动物失去了兴趣，他摘下了帽子。动作非常老式，却毕恭毕敬，菲奥娜。我们感到非常荣幸有幸目睹这一切。”

“行动胜千言，”楚德插话道，“从他行动的方式能看出许多，然后他就只是将帽子举在胸前，好似同时在宣告爱意和歉意。非常感人。”

“是我在讲故事好吧，谢谢你，楚德。柯林斯小姐，她非常优雅，从远处看根本猜不出她已经这把年纪了。如此青春的身材。她非常冷淡，若无其事地转身面对他，两人之间大约隔了一个笼子的距离。在场的公众人员这时候都立刻后退，我和楚德，我们记得冯·布劳恩先生说过的，保持五米远，我们尽量放胆俯身向前，但此刻好像是个私人时刻，我们不敢靠得太近。他们先是互相点了点头，互道了些平常不过的问候。接着，布罗茨基先生，他突然上前几步，伸出手，非常迅速地，好像事先计划好了，楚德认为……”

“没错，好像他私下里已经练习了好些天一样……”

“是的，就是那样。我同意楚德的看法。就像那样。他伸出手，握住她的手，轻轻地礼貌地吻了一下，然后放开。而柯林斯小姐，她只是优雅地鞠了个躬，接着立刻将注意力转向其他男士，和他们打招呼，微笑，我们离得太远，听不清他们说了些什么。而他们所有人都在，有那么一小会儿，好像没人知道接下来做什么。然后，冯·温特斯坦先生采取主动，开始向布罗茨基先生和柯林斯小姐讲解长颈鹿的习性，言语中仿佛他们是一对——是不是，楚德？仿佛他们是一对很好的老夫妻，从一开始就一起来到这里。而他们二人，布罗茨基先生

和柯林斯小姐，这么多年之后，肩并肩地站着，没有触碰，只是肩并肩地站着，两人盯着长颈鹿，听着冯·温特斯坦先生的介绍。如此持续了一段时间，就看见其他男士互相窃窃私语接下来怎么办。跟着，渐渐地，不自觉地，男士们统统往后汇拢去，做得非常好，非常文明，他们全都假装在互相交谈，一次慢慢移开一点，所以最后只剩下布罗茨基先生和柯林斯小姐在长颈鹿前。当然，我们这会儿能非常近距离地观察，而其他每个人亦定是如此，但当然，每个人都假装没有瞧见。我们看到布罗茨基先生优雅地转身面对柯林斯小姐，举起一只手指着长颈鹿的笼子，说着些什么。好像是些发自内心诚挚的话，柯林斯小姐稍稍低下了头，这会儿连她也不能继续无动于衷了，接着，布罗茨基先生继续说着，不时地，能看见他又举起一只手，像这样，非常轻柔地，指着长颈鹿。我们无法确定他是在说长颈鹿还是其他别的事情，但他不断举起手指着笼子。柯林斯小姐看似确实被征服了，但她是如此优雅的女士，她直了直身体，微笑着，然后二人慢慢踱步至其他男士聊天的地方。能看见她和男士们互道了些什么，非常礼貌且愉快，她好像跟费希尔先生谈了颇久，接着轮流和他们每个人道别。她朝布罗茨基先生微微躬身点头，看得出来，布罗茨基先生对此很是开心满意。他站在那儿，恍如游梦，帽子还举在胸前。接着，她走上小径离开，一路径直走向茶点小屋，过了喷泉，绕过北极熊围圈，消失在视线中了。而等她一离开，男士们似是抛弃了先前的伪装，围聚在布罗茨基先生身边，看得出来，每个人都开心异常，兴奋异常，他们好像在恭喜他。哦，我们当时多想知道布罗茨基先生跟柯林斯小姐说了些什么啊！或许我们应该大胆些，再走近几步，可能会捕捉到至少一些零零碎碎的话语。不过，现在我们身份不一样了，得更加谨慎。不管怎么说，一切都太美好了。动物园里的那些树，每年的这个时候都那么美。我确实想知道他们彼此说了些什么。楚德认为他们现在真的又重在一起了。你知道吗，他们从未离婚？是不是很有意思？那么些年了，尽管柯林斯小姐坚持自己被称作柯林斯小姐，他们从未离婚。布罗茨基先生赢回她是理所应当的。哦，非常抱歉，我们被兴奋冲昏头了，甚至还没开始给你讲到重点！关于瑞德先生！你看，既然瑞德先生没有跟官方团的人在一起，我们也就不能真的上前，即便是在柯林斯小姐离开之后。毕竟，冯·布劳恩先生建议过我们上前只是为了见见瑞德先生。总之，尽管我们小心地看着冯·布劳恩先生，尽管有时候与他非常近了，他却从未朝我们看过一眼，可能他过于关注布罗茨基先生了。所以我们没有上前。但之后，他们要离开时，我们看着他们就要穿过大门时，他们全部停了下来，又有一个人加入了他们，一个男人，但他们走得太远了，我们看不清楚。但楚

德肯定与他们会合的人就是瑞德先生——她的远视视力好过我，我还没戴眼镜。她肯定——是不是，楚德？——她肯定那就是他，他非常圆滑机智，置身事外，所以不会添麻烦，这事对布罗茨基先生与柯林斯小姐来说本来就已经够难办的了。他这会儿在大门口会合官方团体的人。起先，我以为那不过是冯·布劳恩先生罢了，但我没有戴眼镜，而楚德非常肯定那就是瑞德先生。事后，我仔细想了想，也觉得可能当时那人就是瑞德先生。所以说我们就错过了被引见给他的机会！这时候，他们走得很远了，你看，已经在大门口了，司机们已经打开了车门。即便我们冲跑过去，也来不及到那儿的。所以从最严格的意义上讲，我们没有见到瑞德先生。但我和楚德刚刚还在讨论，我们说，几乎从所有其他意义上讲，我的意思是从其他任何真正重要的意义上讲，可以公平地说我们今天见到他了。毕竟，假如他一直跟官方团的人在一起的话，那么确定无疑的，在长颈鹿笼子跟前那会儿，就在柯林斯小姐离开之后，冯·布劳恩先生一定会为我们引见的。那不是我们的错，我们没有意识到瑞德先生会那么狡猾，一直呆在大门口。总之，重点是，毫无疑问，将我们引见给他，是合乎时宜的。那就是重点。冯·布劳恩先生显然也是这么认为的，既然我们处在现在这个位置上，那明显就是合乎时宜的。而且你知道吗，楚德，”她扭头对着她的朋友，“现在我再进一步地想想，我同意你的看法。今晚的聚会上我们也可以向她们宣布我们真的见到了他。就像你说的，那比说我们没有见到更为接近真相。而且今晚那么多事，我们真的没时间将一切再重新解释一遍。毕竟，我们没能正式被引见给他，只是造化弄人，就是这样。出于所有的目的和意图，我们已经见过他了。他一定会听说我们所有的事，如果他还没，那他一定会非常详细地询问起我们是如何照料他父母的。所以我们实际上等于见过他了，像你说的，如果别人并非如此认为，那对我们会很不公平。哦，我错了——”英奇突然转向菲奥娜，“我都忘记了，我正在和瑞德先生的一位老朋友谈话。对这样一个老朋友来说，这一切看起来不过是大惊小怪罢了……”

“英奇，”楚德说，“可怜菲奥娜，她已经很糊涂了，别再捉弄她了。”接着，她冲菲奥娜微笑着，说道：“没关系，亲爱的，不必担心。”

英奇说这话的时候，我脑中重现了小时候我和菲奥娜之间那温馨的友谊。我想起了她曾经住过的白色小农庄，就在伍斯特郡泥泞的小路上，只有几步之遥，我们两个人躲在她父母的餐桌下面玩了几个小时。我想起那时候我徘徊着走到她家农庄，心里烦恼不安，而她特别

会安慰我，让我很快忘记了我刚刚经历的场景。我意识到，正是这同样珍贵的友谊在我的眼前被生生嘲弄，一腔怒火才在胸中灼燃而起，而英奇又开始讲话，我觉得不能再不管不顾，任此情形继续下去了。我决心不再重犯我先前支吾其辞的错误，便果断地倾身向前。我的本意是打断英奇，大胆宣布我是何方人士，然后，等其影响尘埃落定，再靠回身子。不幸的是，尽管我对此干预行为施加了诸多力量，发出的仍是一阵像喉咙被轻轻勒住似的咕噜声，然而音量却够大，让英奇停了下来，三个女人都转身盯着我。那一刻很是尴尬，这时候，菲奥娜，无疑是想掩饰我的尴尬——或许她过去的某种对我的保护意识暂时觉醒了——脱口而出：

“你们两个，你们还不知道自己看起来有多蠢吗！知道为什么吗？不，你们不会猜到的，你们两个，你们绝对猜不出刚刚有多蠢，用言语无法形容你们两个此刻看起来多可笑。你们真的不会知道，历来如此，你们两个历来如此！哦，这么久以来，自从我们认识以来，我一直就想告诉你们，好吧，你们自己会明白的，你们现在自己可以判断一下你们是傻子还是什么。看看吧！”

菲奥娜将头猛地转向我。英奇和楚德，两人非常迷惑，又一次盯着我。我又做了一番努力，想公开自己的身份，但令我气馁的是，我只能再次发出一阵咕啾声，比之前的铿锵有力，却不甚连贯。这会儿我感到一阵恐慌，于是深吸了一口气，又尝试了一下，可这次发出了更冗长、走调的声音。

“她究竟在对我们说什么，楚德？”英奇说道，“这个小泼妇凭什么对我们这么说话？她怎么敢？吃了豹子胆了？”

“是我的错，”楚德说道，“是我的失误。邀请她加入我们小组是我的主意。幸好在瑞德先生的父母到来之前，她就暴露了本性。她嫉妒，就是这样。她嫉妒我们今天见到了瑞德先生。而她就只有这些可悲的小故事……”

“你们说今天见到了他是什么意思？”菲奥娜怒喝道，“你们自己刚刚说你们没有……”

“你明明知道那其实相当于见到了他！难道不是吗，楚德？我们现在完全有权说我们见到了。你不想承认也得承认，菲奥娜……”

“好吧，那样的话”——菲奥娜此时近乎在尖叫了——“让我们来看看你们怎么承认这个！”她猛地向我伸出胳膊，好似在宣告最戏剧性的一幕即将上演。我再一次尽力奉陪。这次，在逐渐攀升的怒火

和沮丧的推波助澜下，走调了的声音变本加厉，我感觉到沙发在晃动。

“你这朋友是怎么了？”英奇问，她突然注意到了我。但楚德毫不在意。

“我压根儿就不应该听你的。”她狠狠地对菲奥娜说道，“从一开始你分明就是个小骗子。而我们竟然让我们的孩子与你那些闹蛋玩耍！他们可能也是小骗子了，现在他们可能在教我们的孩子如何撒谎。昨晚你办的聚会多么可笑。还有你那样装饰公寓！多荒唐！我们今早都在笑话这件事情……”

“为什么你不帮我！”菲奥娜第一次突然直接对我这么说话。“你是怎么了，你不会做点什么吗？”

事实上，自始至终我一直紧绷着神经。这会儿，就在菲奥娜转向我的时候，我从挂在对面墙上的镜子里瞥见了自已。我看见自已满脸通红，五官挤压，现出像猪一样的表情，而我的拳头在胸前握紧，与整个身躯一起颤抖。瞥见自已这样的状态，我就像没了风力的帆船，一下子泄了气，瘫回到沙发一角，重重地喘着气。

“我想，菲奥娜亲爱的，”英奇说道，“是时候你和这个……你的这个朋友离开了。我觉得今晚的聚会你们不用来了。”

“这还用说，”楚德大声吼道，“我们现在肩负重任。我们可担不起纵容像她这样断翼的小鸟。我们已不再仅仅是一个志愿小组了。我们有非常重要的事情要做，任何不符合要求的人都必须离开。”

我看到菲奥娜的眼睛里噙着泪水。她又看了看我，但眼神中却是越来越多的辛酸悲痛，我想再次亮明我的身份，但一想到我望到的自己在镜中的模样，就决定作罢了。相反，我摇摇晃晃地站了起来，寻找出口离开。因为紧张，我仍然气喘吁吁，走到门口时不得不停下来，靠着门框。我能听见身后那两个女人继续说着话，一副兴奋的口气。有那么一刻，我听到英奇说：“看你把多么恶心的人带进公寓来。”经过一番努力，我匆忙走过了小门廊，在大门门锁上疯狂地摸索了一阵，最后终于走出了房间，来到了走廊。几乎顷刻间，我感觉好了许多，便更加镇定地继续向楼梯走去。

第十七章

我连续走下几级楼梯，一边看了看手表，发现此刻启程前往卡文斯基画廊正是时候。自然，我对自己不得不丢下的烂摊子感到无比懊悔，但显然，此时首先要考虑的是确保准时出席今晚的重要活动。不管怎样，我决定，不久之后再适时专心处理菲奥娜的问题。

我终于到达了底层，迎面见到墙上“停车场”的标记，还有一个箭头指示方向。我走过几个储物柜，接着从出口处出去了。

我从公寓大楼的后部走了出去，来到人工湖的另一侧。此刻夕阳西下。我面前是一片广阔的绿地，沿斜坡伸展下去，渐至远方。停车场立刻出现在我眼前，不过是片被篱笆围圈起来的矩形草地，就像美国牧场的牲畜栏一样。地面没用水泥铺砌，来来往往的车辆已将其磨损得几乎泥土外露。这里差不多可以容纳五十辆车，但这会儿只停了七八辆，车与车之间都有些距离。日落的余晖擦过车身。在停车场接近后部的位置，我看到那矮壮女人和鲍里斯正在往一辆旅行客车的后备厢里装行李。我移步过去，发现索菲正坐在前排副驾驶座上，眼神空洞，透过挡风玻璃盯着落日。

我走上前去，那矮壮女人正在关后备厢。

“抱歉，”我对她说，“我不知道你有这么多东西要装车，我本应搭把手的，可是……”

“没关系，有他在这儿帮我就足够了。”矮壮女人揉了揉鲍里斯的头发，然后对他说：“那么，别担心了，好吗？你们几个都会度过一个很棒的夜晚。真的，她做了所有你喜欢吃的。”

她俯下身来，安慰似的紧紧地拥抱了一下鲍里斯，但小男孩好似在梦中一般，直勾勾地盯着远方。矮壮女人伸手递给我车钥匙。

“汽油应该够，小心开车。”

我谢过她，看着她离开，向公寓大楼走去。我转身看着鲍里斯，他仍旧盯着夕阳。我扶着他的肩膀，带他绕过汽车。他一句话没说就爬上了后座。

显然，夕阳有种催眠的功效，因为我坐到方向盘后面时，索菲仍盯着远方。她似乎没有发觉我的到来，但接着，就在我熟悉车辆操纵系统的时候，她静静地说道：

“我们绝不能让这房子的事儿拖累了我们。我们拖不起啊。你下次回来跟我们一起还不知道啥时候呢。不管有房子还是没房子，我们都该开始做点事了，一起做点好事了。我是今早突然意识到的，在回来的公交车上。即便在那样的公寓，那样的厨房里。”

“是的，是的。”我说着，把钥匙插进引擎启动器。“那么，你知道去画廊的路吗？”

这个问题把索菲拉出了恍惚的状态。“哦，”她说道，双手捂着嘴，好似刚刚记起了什么。接着，她说道：“从市中心过去的话，或许能找到路。但从这儿，我不知道。”

我重重地叹了口气，感到事情再次渐渐濒临失控，那种强烈的厌恶感又卷土重来，这感觉在白天早些时候经历过，就是对索菲给我的生活带来混乱的厌恶之情。然而接下来，我听到她在身边欢快地说道：

“我们何不去问问停车场的值班人员？他可能会知道。”

她指着停车场进口处，的确，那儿有座小木屋，里面有一个身着制服的人，能看到他腰部以上的半身。

“好吧，”我说，“我去问问。”

我下了车，走向木屋。一辆汽车停靠在木屋边，正准备驶离这处围圈，我走近时看到那值班人员——一个胖胖的秃顶男人——倾身越过门栏，快活地微笑着，向司机打手势示意。他们说了会儿话，我正准备插将进去，汽车便移动离开了。即便那样，值班人员的目光仍然跟着那辆车，看它顺着住宅区周围的蜿蜒小路驶离。没错，他也似乎被夕阳蛊惑，呆呆地定住了。我在门栏下咳嗽了一声，他仍继续梦游般地凝视着，眼光追随着那辆车，最后我只能大喊一声：“晚上好。”

胖胖的男子开始俯看着我，回答道：“哦，晚上好，先生。”

“很抱歉打扰您，”我说道，“但我们不巧要赶时间。我们要去卡文斯基画廊，但您看，我在贵市初来乍到，完全不清楚从这儿到那儿最快的路。”

“卡文斯基画廊。”那人想了一会儿，接着说道：“呃，老实说，根本没有直达的路，先生。依我看，对您来说最简单的方法就是跟着那位刚刚离开的先生。那辆红色汽车。”他指着远方，“那位先生，碰巧的很，就住在离卡文斯基画廊非常近的地方。我当然也可以尝试给你指路，但我得先坐下来，把所有那些不同的转弯口全部理出来，特别是到你行程快结束的时候。我的意思是，你从高速路上下来，得找那些绕过农场的小路。目前看来最简单的方法，先生，就是跟着那位红车里的先生。假如我没弄错的话，他就住在离卡文斯基画廊只有两三个转弯口那么远的地方。那是块非常宜人的区域，那位先生，他和妻子非常喜欢那儿。那边是郊外，先生。他告诉我他有一间漂亮的农舍，后院养着母鸡，还种着一棵苹果树。尽管有点偏僻，对一个艺术画廊来说，那可是个好地方。非常值得开车去兜兜，先生。那开红车的先生，他说他从未想过搬家，即便每天来这片住宅区对他来说颇有些路程。哦，是的，他在这儿工作，在行政大楼——”那男子突然将身体探出门栏，指着身后的几扇窗户，“就是那幢大楼，先生。哦，不，不管怎么说，这里不全是住宅公寓。要管理这样规模的社区，哦，需要很多日常行政工作。那开红车的先生，从水务公司在这里开始建设的第一天起，就一直在这儿上班。现如今，他监管着这片区域所有的维护工作。那可是个大工程啊，先生，他每天上下班要走好长一段路，但他说他从未想过搬得近些。我完全能理解他，那地方确实非常美。我在这儿一直喋喋不休，您一定着急了吧。非常抱歉，先生。我说过，你就跟着那辆红车，这是目前看来最简单的办法了。我敢肯定，您会非常喜欢卡文斯基画廊的。那是郊区一块非常美的地方，至于画廊本身，我听说里面有些非常美的展品。”

我简单谢过他，走回车子，钻进了驾驶座。索菲和鲍里斯又在盯着落日了。我什么都没说，启动了引擎。驶过木屋时，我朝那停车场值班员飞快地挥了挥手，然后继续颠簸前行，这时索菲才问道：“这么说你找到路了？”

“嗯，我们只要跟着刚刚离开的那辆红色汽车就行了。”

话刚出口，我才意识到自己对她仍然很生气。但我没再说什么，只是开着车，行驶在住宅区外围的小路上。

我们驶过一幢又一幢公寓楼，夕阳的余晖映射在无数块窗玻璃上。紧接着，住宅区消失了，小路变成了高速路，两边都是杉树林。公路上几乎一片空寂，视线清晰，没过多久，我就发现了前面那辆红色汽车，还是远处的一个小点，在不慌不忙匀速行驶。由于车辆稀

疏，我觉得没必要紧跟在他后面，便也放慢车速，不慌不忙地跟着，我们之间仍礼貌地保持一定车距。这期间，索菲和鲍里斯两人仍然继续梦游般地沉默着，终于，我也开始渐渐放松下来，思绪宁静，看着太阳从荒芜人际的高速公路上徐徐下落。

过了一小会儿，我发现自己的脑海中正重放着多年前的世界杯半决赛上荷兰对意大利第二个进球得分时的场景。那是一记令人叹为观止的远射，也是我最喜欢的体坛回忆之一。但现在，我发现自己竟忘记了得分队员是谁，这让我很是恼火。伦森布伦克的名字飘进我的脑海，毫无疑问他踢了那场比赛，但最后，我确定他并不是进球得分的队员。我又看到阳光中飘动的球，越过意大利防守队员（奇怪的是，他们个个呆若木鸡），飘移，再飘移，越过守门员伸长的手。忘记这样一个细节令我倍感沮丧，我正系统地回顾自己所能记起的那个时代所有荷兰队员的名字，这时，鲍里斯突然在我身后说道：

“我们离路中心太近了。我们要撞车啦。”

“胡说，”我说道，“我们很好。”

“不，不是的！”我能感觉到他猛力敲击着我座椅的后背。“我们离路中心太近了。如果从另一边过来个什么，我们就会撞车！”

我什么也没说，只是把车向路边移了移。这似乎让鲍里斯安了心，他又安静下来。接着索菲说道：

“你知道，我得承认，我第一次听说时，一点都不开心。我的意思是，关于这次招待会。我觉得那会毁了我们相聚的夜晚。但我又仔细想了想，特别是当我意识到那并不会妨碍我们今晚共进晚餐的时候，我就想，好吧，这是件好事。从某些方面来说，那正是我们需要的。我知道我可以做得很好，鲍里斯也是。我们两个都会表现得很好，然后我们回去，就会有些东西值得庆祝。整个夜晚对我们来说就会真正有些意义。”

我还没来得及回应，鲍里斯又叫嚷起来：

“我们离路中心太近了！”

“我不会再往那边移了，”我说，“我们现在好得很。”

“他或许是害怕了。”索菲平静地对我说道。

“他本来不害怕的。”

“我害怕了！我们就要有一场重大事故啦！”

“鲍里斯，求你了，安静。我在开车，非常安全。”

此话出口，语气相当严厉，鲍里斯沉默了。但接着，我继续开车，意识到索菲正不安地看着我。不时的，她会回头瞥一眼鲍里斯，然后目光又回到我身上。终于，她静静地说道：

“我们为何不找个地方停下呢？”

“找个地方停下？为什么？”

“我们会提前到画廊的。哪怕耽误几分钟也不算迟到。”

“我觉得我们应该先找到地方。”

接下来几分钟，索菲又陷入了沉默。接着，她又转向我说：“我觉得我们该停下来。我们几个可以喝点东西，吃些点心。这会有助于你冷静下来。”

“你什么意思，冷静？”

“我想要停下！”鲍里斯在后面大叫道。

“你什么意思，冷静？”

“你们两个今晚不能再争吵了，这很重要。”索菲说道，“我看得出你们俩又要开吵了。但今晚不行。我不会让它发生的。我们几个应该去放松一下，调整好心情。”

“你什么意思，调整好心情？我们任何人都没有问题。”

“我想停下！我害怕！我要吐了！”

“看——”一块标示牌从眼前经过，索菲指着它说：“很快就会有个服务站。在那边停下吧，求你了。”

“完全没这必要……”

“你真的动怒了，而今晚又这么重要。今晚不该如此这般的。”

“我要停下！我要上厕所！”

“就在那儿了。停下吧，求你了。在事情变得更糟糕之前，让我们纠正过来吧。”

“纠正什么？”

索菲没有回答，而是透过挡风玻璃，继续焦虑地向外望去。我们正穿过山区。杉树林已经消失，取而代之的是陡峭的山坡，矗立在两旁。服务站在视野中清晰可见，其结构像极了高高建造在悬崖上的宇宙飞船。对索菲的满腔怒气一时间席卷重来，分外强烈，但尽管如此，我还是几乎不由自主地放慢车速，开进了内车道。

“没事了，我们马上就停下了。”索菲对鲍里斯说道，“别担心。”

“他本来就不担心，”我冷冷地说，但索菲像是没听见似的。

“我们来点快餐小吃，”她对小男孩说道，“然后我们都会感觉好些的。”

我按照指示牌下了高速公路，上了一条又陡又窄的小路，爬行着绕过了些许急弯，然后路平坦起来，车开进了一个露天停车场。几辆卡车并排停放着，还有大概十多辆轿车。

我爬出汽车，伸了伸胳膊，然后回头一看，索菲正在扶鲍里斯下车。我看着他在柏油路上走了几步，似乎十分困倦。接着，仿佛是要唤醒自己一般，他抬脸望着天空，边用力拍打着自己的胸脯，边发出了一声泰山似的嚎叫。

“鲍里斯，别那样！”我朝他喊道。

“他又没有打扰到任何人，”索菲说道，“没人会听见。”

没错，我们确实站在高高的悬崖顶端，距离那玻璃似的建筑几步开外，那便是服务站。落日已变成了深红色，统统反射在那建筑物的表面。我一言不发，大步从他们二人身边走过，径直走向入口处。

“我没打扰任何人！”鲍里斯在我身后吼着。接下来是第二声泰山似的嚎叫，这次声音逐渐弱下来，变得像约德尔歌谣一般。我没回头，继续走着，直到入口处才停下来等待，并为他们打开了厚重的玻璃门。

我们穿过设有一排公用电话的前厅，又穿过第二扇玻璃门，进入了咖啡厅。一股烤肉的香味扑面而来。房间十分宽敞，摆着长长的一排椭圆形桌子。两边都是巨大的玻璃窗，透过它们可以一眼望见广阔无垠的天空。从我们下方远处的某地传来了高速公路上的声音。

鲍里斯急忙走到自助柜台前，拿起了一个盘子。我让索菲帮我买瓶矿泉水，然后自己走开去，选了张餐桌。顾客不是很多——只有四

五张餐桌上有人——但我还是沿着长长的一排桌子径直走到了底，背对着层层云雾坐了下来。

几分钟后，鲍里斯和索菲拿着盘子从过道走来。他们在我前面坐下，将点心摊开来摆放，两人出奇的沉默。接着，我发现索菲给鲍里斯使了几下眼色，想必在自助柜台的时候，她一直力劝小男孩对我说些什么，让他说些话以弥补我们之间因刚才的争吵造成的不快。直至此刻我才意识到，我和鲍里斯之间不论以何种方式和解，都是十分必要的，而看到索菲在这种情况下如此笨拙地进行干预，我感到心里恼火。为了缓和情绪，我对四周未来派风格的装饰做了一番幽默的调侃，索菲却心不在焉地回答着，又冲鲍里斯投去一个眼色。这么做实在有失巧妙，她还不如用胳膊肘推他一下呢。鲍里斯仿佛不愿顺从（这倒也可以理解），暴躁地继续将他买的一包坚果缠绕在手指上。最后，他抬起头，咕哝着说：

“我在读一本法文书。”

我耸了耸肩，向外望着夕阳。我发现索菲敦促鲍里斯继续说些什么。最后，他愠怒地说道：

“我读了一整部法文书。”

我转向索菲说道：“我自己从未学好法语。比起学习日语，在学法语上我仍有很多问题。真的。我在东京生存会比在巴黎更好些。”

索菲大概并不满意我的回答，狠狠地盯着我。我被她强制性的目光搞得非常恼火，于是转过脸去，别过肩膀，再次望着夕阳。过了一会儿，我听到索菲说：

“现在鲍里斯在语言学习方面好了很多。”

我和鲍里斯都没回答，这时，她弯下身去，对着小男孩说道：

“鲍里斯，你现在要多努力些。我们很快就会到画廊。那儿会有很多人。其中有些可能看起来十分尊贵，但是你不会害怕的，对吗？妈妈不会怕他们的，你也不会怕。我们会让所有人看到，我们如何应对自如。我们会非常成功的，对吗？”

然而，鲍里斯继续将那小包坚果一圈圈缠在手上。过了好一会儿，他抬起头来，叹了口气。

“别担心，”他说道，“我知道该怎么做。”然后他坐起身来继续说：“你得把一只手放在口袋里，像这样。然后举着饮料，像这

样。”

他保持了这个姿势一小会儿，脸上摆出一副无比傲慢的样子。索菲忍不住放声大笑起来。我也情不自禁地微笑了一下。

“还有，人们朝你走来，”鲍里斯接着说，“你只要一次又一次地说：‘太棒了！太棒了！’假如你愿意，你可以说：‘无价之宝！无价之宝！’还有，服务员端着盛有东西的托盘走来时，你就对他这么做。”鲍里斯摆出一副愁眉苦脸的模样，手指一摆一摆的。

索菲还在大笑。“鲍里斯，你今晚会一鸣惊人的。”

鲍里斯面露喜色，得意洋洋起来。然后，突然间，他站起来说道：“我现在要去上厕所。我忘记自己想要去了。一会儿就回来。”

他最后一次又向我们表演了一番轻蔑地摆动手指的动作，然后急急忙忙地离开了。

“他有时很有趣。”我说道。

索菲侧过肩膀，望着鲍里斯走上过道离去。“他长得真快。”她说，然后叹了口气，表情越发若有所思。“他很快就会长大，我们的时间不多了。”

我什么也没说，等着她继续说下去。她侧着肩膀继续端详了一会儿。然后回转身来对着我，静静地说道：“这就是他的童年，正在飞逝而去。他很快便会长大，永远没机会体会更美好的日子了。”

“你这话说得他好像现在生活得很糟糕似的。他的生活相当美好。”

“好吧，我知道，他的人生不算太坏，但这是他的童年，我知道童年本来应该是个什么样。你看，因为我记得它原本应该的样子。我小的时候，母亲生病之前，那时一切都很美好。”她转过来面向我，但她的目光好像集中在我背后的云层上面。“我想给他那样的生活。”

“呃，别担心。我们很快就会把事情解决好。同时，鲍里斯做得相当好。没有必要担心。”

“你和其他人一样。”这会儿，她的声音里流露出一丝怒意，“你继续这样，好像我们时间多得很似的。你就是意识不到，是不是？爸爸可能还有好几年日子，但他已不再年轻了。有一天他会离开，然后只剩下我们。你、我和鲍里斯。这就是我们必须继续前行的

原因。尽快建立起属于我们自己的东西。”她深呼吸了一口气，摇了摇头，眼光落在她面前的那杯咖啡上。“你不明白。你就是不明白要是事情处理不好，这世界会变成一个多么孤独的地方。”

我觉得反驳她没有任何意义。“那么，我们接下来要做的就是这件事。”我说，“我们很快就会找到房子的。”

“你都不明白，时间已经所剩无几了。看看我们，我们几乎还没开始呢。”

她语气里的谴责意味越来越浓。与此同时，她似乎已经全然忘记了她自己在妨碍我们“开始处理事情”上所做的“巨大贡献”。我一阵冲动，极想向她指明所有的一切，但最后还是保持了沉默。我们两个相对无语地过了一會兒，接着我起身道：

“抱歉。我想我还是拿点东西吃吧。”

索菲又开始盯着天空，好像几乎没有留意到我的离开。我走到自助柜台前，拿了个盘子。正当我在研究选哪种点心时，我突然记起：我并不知道去卡文斯基画廊的路，而我们当时完全依赖于那辆红色轿车。我想起那辆红车此刻正行驶在高速公路上，离我们越来越远，我意识到，我们不能在服务站逗留，浪费更多时间了。事实上，我突然想到我们不能再耽误，应该即刻重新上路，我正要还回托盘，急忙赶回我们的餐桌，这时我突然注意到，附近坐着的两人正在谈论我。

我四下一望，看到两位中年妇女，都衣着光鲜。她们相互倾着身子，越过餐桌，低声交谈，直至我听清楚时，都没有意识到我那时站得离她们有多近。她们鲜少提及我的名字，所以我起先并不能肯定她们讨论的对象就是我，但没过多久，对她们正谈论其他什么人的猜想便不攻自破了。

“噢，是的，”其中一个女人说道，“他们已经联系了那个叫斯达特曼的女人许多次。她一直保证他会出现去视察的，但到目前为止，他没有。迪耶特说他们不太介意，因为他们自己工作还一大堆呢，但他们所有人这会儿都紧张兮兮的，以为他随时会出现。当然，施密特先生时常进来，大声喊叫，让他们把地方打扫干净——如果他现在来了，发现市音乐厅这个样子怎么办？迪耶特说他们都很紧张，甚至那个埃德蒙德也是。而你永远不了解这些个天才，不定就会挑出个什么毛病批评起来。他们还记得伊戈尔·科比莱恩斯基来视察的时候：他仔细地检查了每一样东西，还四肢匍匐在地，趴着敲打了每块地板，用耳朵贴上去听——他们全都在台子上围着他站了一个圈，

所有人都看着他。过去这两天，迪耶特像是换了个人似的，一上班就烦躁不安。他们所有人都很糟糕。每次他在约定时间没有出现的时候，他们就会等上一个小时左右，然后再打电话给这个叫斯达特曼的女人。她总是很惭愧地表示歉意，她总有借口，和他们另约时间。”

听到这儿，过去几个小时里我脑海中几次冒出的一个想法重新涌现出来，那就是：我应该明智些，与我目前为止做到的相比，我应该更频繁地联系斯达特曼小姐。其实，我甚至可以瞅准时刻，用外面大厅里的公共电话给她打个电话。但还没等我再仔细考虑这个想法，那女人就接着说：

“而这全是因为这个叫斯达特曼的女人几周来一直坚持说，他有多么渴望完成此次视察，他关心的不只是音响效果和所有的常规事务，还有他的父母，他们那晚在大厅是如何被安置的。显然，他们二老身体都不大好，所以他们要求特殊座位，特殊设备，要求训练有素的人员随侍左右，以防哪个突发疾病或者什么的。所需安排相当复杂，而且，据这个斯达特曼说，他非常渴望检查所有东西的每一处细节。嗯，那部分还是相当感人的，对他年迈的双亲表现出如此多的关心。但接着，你知道吗，他没出现！当然，可能和这个斯达特曼有关，而非他的原因。迪耶特是那么想的。据说，他名声极佳，听起来根本不是这种一直像这样给人添麻烦的人。”

听到那女人说的话，我烦恼不安起来，而听完最后这句话，我自然就舒了一口气。但正是她们所说的关于我父母的那段话——满足他们各种特殊要求的需要——使我觉得一刻都不应耽搁，该给斯达特曼小姐打个电话了。我把托盘扔在柜台上，急急忙忙走出了大厅。

我走进一个电话亭，翻遍口袋搜寻斯达特曼小姐的名片。过了一会儿，我找到了，拨通号码。电话立即通了，正是斯达特曼小姐本人。

“瑞德先生，您来电话真是太好了。很开心一切都进行得这么顺利。”

“啊。这么说，你认为一切都进行得很顺利。”

“哦，棒极了！您所到之地，都是那么成功。人们是那么激动。而您昨晚晚宴后的演讲，哦，人人都在谈论，多么机智幽默的演讲啊。我如此荣幸，请允许我这么说，能和像您这样的人一起工作。”

“呃，谢谢你，斯达特曼小姐。你这样说太客气了。很高兴能得到如此好的照料。我刚打电话是因为，呃，因为我想核实有关我行程安排的某些事情。当然，今天有一些无法避免的耽搁，导致了一两个不甚乐观的后果。”

我停下来，期待斯达特曼小姐说些什么，但是电话那头一片沉默。我轻声笑了笑，继续道：“但当然，我们这会儿正在去卡文斯基画廊的路上。我的意思是，我们此刻已经走了一半路程了。自然地，我们想有充足的时间到那儿，而我必须得说，我们全都非常期待前去。我听说卡文斯基画廊周围的乡村景色非常棒。是的，我们很开心，已经在路上了。”

“我很高兴，瑞德先生。”斯达特曼小姐的口气听起来犹疑不定，“我真心希望您会喜欢此次活动。”然后她突然道：“瑞德先生，我真的希望我们没有冒犯到您。”

“冒犯我？”

“我们真的无意暗示什么。我是说，建议您今早去伯爵夫人家的事。我们都知道您非常熟悉布罗茨基先生的作品，没人曾另作它想。只是那些唱片中有些十分珍贵，而伯爵夫人和冯·温特斯坦先生都认为……噢，天啊，我真的希望没有冒犯到您，瑞德先生！我们真的不是有意暗示任何事。”

“我一点没感到被冒犯，斯达特曼小姐。相反，我非常担心自己是否冒犯了伯爵夫人和冯·温特斯坦先生，因为我没能出席……”

“哦，关于这点请您不必担心，瑞德先生。”

“我非常想见他们，和他们谈谈，但是情况不允许我按照原计划行事，我想他们会理解的，特别是，既然，如你所说，让我听布罗茨基先生的唱片没有切实的必要……”

“瑞德先生，我确信伯爵夫人和冯·温特斯坦先生都会非常理解。确实，无论如何，我现在也觉得做这样的安排是一种妄为，特别是您的时间如此有限。我真心希望没有冒犯您。”

“我向你保证，我根本没有感到被冒犯。但其实，斯达特曼小姐，如果可以的话，我这会儿给你打电话是想讨论某些问题，就是，我在这儿的行程安排的某些其他方面的问题。”

“是吗，瑞德先生？”

“比如说，我视察音乐厅的行程。”

“啊，这件事啊。”

我等待着，想听听她是否会多说些什么，但她什么都没说。我继续道：“是的，我只是想确定一下，为我到来所做的一切准备是否都安排就绪了。”

我语气中的不安让斯达特曼小姐终于有所回应。“哦，我明白了，”她道，“我明白您的意思了。我没有为您安排太多时间进行视察。但您看——”她停顿下来，我能听到一片纸张沙沙作响的声音，“您看，此次音乐厅行程的前后，有两个非常重要的约会。所以我想，假如要从什么地方挤出点时间的话，就应该是在音乐厅的安排上。您可以在其他时间随时回到那儿，假如您真的需要的话。然而，您看，我们真的没办法压缩其他两个约会中任何一个的时间。比如说，与市民互助小组的会面，我知道，和受您影响的普通人会面这件事在您心里有多重要……”

“是的，当然，你说得没错。我完全同意。正如你所指出的，我晚一点总还能挤出时间第二次去音乐厅。是的，是的。只是我有些担心这……呃，这些安排。我是说，关于我父母的安排。”

电话那头又是一阵沉默。我清了清喉咙，继续道：

“就是说，你知道的，我父母亲年纪都大了，在音乐厅里为他们准备特殊器材非常有必要。”

“是的，是的，当然。”斯达特曼小姐听起来有些困惑，“还要就近准备医疗救助以防不测发生。是的，一切尽在掌握，您进行视察的时候会看到。”

听到这话，我思忖了一会儿，然后说：“我们现在谈的是我父母的事。我想应该没什么误会吧。”

“当然没有，瑞德先生，请不用担心。”

我谢过她，从电话亭走出来，走向咖啡厅。走进门口时，我停了一会儿。落日的余晖拖着长长的影子洒满房间。那两位中年妇女仍旧热烈地交谈着，但我猜不出她们是否还在谈论我。远处尽头，我看到鲍里斯正向索菲解释着什么，他们两人开心地大笑着。我在那儿站了一会儿，脑中翻来覆去地想着刚刚和斯达特曼小姐的对话。再仔细想想，我发现这想法确实是妄为了一一让伯爵夫人为我播放布罗茨基的

老唱片，还指望我能从中得益呢。毫无疑问，她与冯·温特斯坦先生一直期待通过音乐逐步指引我。这想法让我不安起来，能够“被失约”让我感到庆幸。

然后我看了一眼手表，发现尽管我向斯达特曼小姐再三保证过，但我们仍有赴约迟到的危险。我一路走到我们的餐桌前，没坐下，说道：

“我们现在得走了。在这儿已经待了好一段时间了。”

说这话时，我的语气里透露出某种急迫，但索菲只是抬起头来，说道：

“鲍里斯觉得这些炸面包圈是他吃过最棒的。你是这样说的，不是吗，鲍里斯？”

我看了一眼鲍里斯，看到他对我置之不理。接着我想起我们刚刚的小争吵——我一时间全忘记了——意识到最好说些安抚的话。

“那么，你说炸面包圈很好吃喽，是吧？”我对他说道，“能让我尝一块吗？”

鲍里斯仍旧望着另一边。我等了一小会儿，然后耸了耸肩。

“好吧，”我说，“你要是不想说话，也没关系。”

索菲碰碰鲍里斯的肩膀，准备恳求他，但我却转过身道：“来吧，我们得上路了。”

索菲又用手肘推了推鲍里斯。接着她对我说话，声音里带着些许绝望：“我们再待一会儿吧。你几乎根本没和我们一起坐坐呢。鲍里斯非常喜欢这儿，是吧，鲍里斯？”

鲍里斯又一次充耳不闻。

“听着，我们现在得动身了，”我说道，“我们就要迟到了。”

索菲又看了看鲍里斯，然后看了看我，她的表情逐渐愠怒起来。接着，她终于开始起身。我转过身，径直走出了咖啡馆，没有回头看他们一眼。

第十八章

我将车开下陡峭蜿蜒的小路，回到高速公路上，这时太阳已低垂在天边，快要落山。路上的车辆依旧稀少，我开足马力驾驶了一会儿，在视线内搜寻那辆红车的影子。几分钟后，我们离开了山区，穿越无垠的农田。高速路两边的稻田不断延伸至远方。我沿着小路驶过一个长长的平缓转弯，横越一块平坦的田地，这才重新锁定了那辆红色汽车的踪影。它仍然行驶在前方，与我有段距离，但我看得出，驾驶员还是像之前那样悠闲地驾驶着。我减缓车速，开始欣赏起面前展开的一道风景：傍晚的田野，在远方的树林后闪烁着暮光的低垂斜阳，不时出现的一群群乡间建筑——而与此同时，每次慢慢开过路上的转弯，我们前面的红色汽车都会时隐时现。我听到索菲在旁边说：

“你觉得会有多少人？”

“招待会上？”我耸了耸肩，“这我怎么知道？我说，你好像对这件事过分紧张了吧。不过是又一个招待会而已。”

索菲继续盯着窗外的风景。然后她说道：“今晚会有很多那些人。出席过卢斯科尼宴会的同一群人还会来，所以我才紧张。我以为你明白呢。”

我努力回忆她所说的那场宴会，但那个名字对我来说毫无意义。

“我现在应付那些事情，比以前自如多了。”索菲继续说道，“那些人对我的态度太差了。我还没有真正恢复过来。今晚一定会有很多同样的人。”

我仍旧努力回忆此事，却什么也没想起来。“你的意思是，那些人对你真的到了很粗鲁的程度吗？”我问道。

“粗鲁？好吧，你姑且可以那样说。他们当真让我觉得自己相当渺小，还非常可怜。我真希望他们今晚不会又全部在场！”

“今晚如果有人对你粗鲁，你就过来告诉我。依我看，你可以随你喜欢，同样粗鲁地回敬过去。”

索菲扭头看看坐在后座的鲍里斯。过了一会，我才发现小男孩已经睡着了。索菲继续望着他一小会儿，然后转回头来对着我。

“你怎么又来了？”她问道，语气相当奇怪，“你知道那会让他多么不安。你又来了。这次你打算持续多久？”

“持续什么？”我疲倦地问道，“你在胡说些什么呀？”

索菲瞪了我一会儿，然后别开头。“你不明白，”她几乎是自言自语道，“我们没时间这样了。你就是不明白，是不是？”

我觉得我的忍耐到了极限。一整天来经受的所有混乱卷土重来，于是，我大声说道：

“听着，你凭什么认为你有权利一直这样批评我？或许你还没发现，我刚刚承受了巨大压力。你不但不支持我，反而一个劲地数落、批评。而现在，你好像做好了全部准备要在这次招待会上让我失望。至少，看来你已经准备得相当充分了……”

“好吧！那我们就先进去了！我和鲍里斯会在车里等。你自己去参加这招待会吧！”

“没必要那样，我只是说……”

“我是当真的！你自己去吧！那样的话我们就不会让你失望了！”

我们继续行驶了几分钟，没有说话。最终，我开口说：

“听着，对不起。这次招待会你应该没问题的。事实上，我肯定你没问题。”

她没有回答。我们继续行进着，彼此沉默，每次我看她时，都发现她眼神空洞地望着远处的那辆红色汽车。一阵奇怪的恐惧感开始在我心中滋生，最后我说：

“听着，即便今晚事情不顺利，呃，那也没关系。我的意思是，那不会对任何重要的事有什么影响。我们没必要这么傻。”

索菲仍望着那辆红车。然后她说：“说实话，我是不是显得很胖？”

“不，一点都没有。你看上去美极了。”

“但确实胖了，体重重了一点。”

“没关系。不管今晚发生什么，事情都不会改变。听着，没必要担心。我们很快就会准备好一切。一个家，所有的一切。所以没必要

担心。

我说这话的时候，她之前提到的那次宴会，特别是索菲的形象，开始在我脑中浮现。她当时身穿深红色晚礼服，独自尴尬地站在拥挤的屋子中间，在她周围，人们三五成群地站着，大笑着，交谈着。她当时肯定是受到了羞辱，想到这里，我最后轻轻地碰了碰她的胳膊。让我感到欣慰的是，她将头靠在我肩上以示回应。

“你等着瞧吧，”她说道，声音低得几乎听不见。“我会表现给你看的，还有鲍里斯也是。不管今天谁在那儿，我们都会表现给你看的。”

“是的，是的，我确定你们会的。你们两个都会没问题的。”

几分钟后，我发现前面那辆红色汽车打出信号，准备离开高速公路。我缩短了我们之间的距离，很快跟着向导，开上了一条在草地间顺势起伏的宁静小路。我们继续向上爬行，高速公路的噪音渐渐远去，接着，我们便行驶在了泥土小路上，那路根本不适合现代交通工具。一时间，一道厚重的篱笆刮擦着我们汽车的一侧，片刻之后，我们颠簸着穿过了一片泥泞的空地，里面尽是破旧的农田交通工具。接着，我们出来，驶上了路况较好、在田野间交错纵横的乡间小道，加速行驶起来。终于，我听索菲大喊了一声：“哦，在那儿！”然后看到前面的一棵树上挂着块木板，上面写着“卡文斯基画廊”。

我减慢车速，缓缓向下开到大门口。两根锈迹斑斑的门柱还矗立在那儿，但大门已经不见了。那辆红色汽车继续沿小路开下去，最后消失在我们的视野中。我驾车从门柱中间穿过，进入一片广袤却杂草丛生的田野。

田野间有条泥泞的小路蜿蜒而上，我们缓慢移动上行。接近山顶，美好的景色便在我们面前展开。田野向下延伸到一个浅浅的山谷，谷底有一座带着法式城堡风格的庄严房屋巍然耸立。太阳在屋后的树林中落下，即便与之相隔甚远，我仍能看出那建筑充满了颓废的魅力，唤醒了某个梦幻般的地主家庭日渐衰落的记忆。

我换了低速挡，小心下山。我从后视镜中能看到鲍里斯，这会儿他已经完全醒了，正在左右张望着，但杂草实在太高，把侧窗的所有景色完全遮住了。

开近后，我看到房子附近的一大片场地上已经停满了汽车。我们下坡开至尽头，驶向这些车，看到差不多总共有百来辆车，其中许多

汽车为此场合被特地清洗得锃光闪亮。我在周围稍微兜了一圈，试着找一个合适的地点停车，在离剥落的庭院墙壁不远处停了下来。

我下了车，伸展了一下四肢，回头看到索菲和鲍里斯也已经下了车，索菲正在为鲍里斯的表现而担心。

“千万记住，”我能听到她对他说，“那屋里没人比你更重要。你就不停地对自己那样说。反正，我们不会呆太久的。”

我正要动身去那房子，这时，我被眼角余光瞥到的东西吸引住了。我转过身，看到一辆报废的旧车，被丢弃在离我很近的草丛中。其他的客人全都绕开它，和它保持一定距离，仿佛生怕它的锈迹和破败会传染到他们自己的车子。

我上前几步，走向那残骸。它已经部分陷进了泥土中，四周杂草丛生，要不是太阳的余晖照射在那顶盖上，我可能根本不会留意到它。没有车轮，左前门已从铰链处被扯掉了。漆面被重新刷过多次，最后一次上漆时油漆工似乎用了建筑油漆，但中途放弃了。两块后挡板被从其他汽车上取下的不配套的替代品换掉了。尽管如此，不消更仔细地审视一番，我便已知道，这正是我父亲开了多年的那辆家用老轿车的残骸。

当然，我上一次看到它已经是很久以前了。再次见到它如此破败的模样，让我想起了我们和它一起度过的最后那段时光，那时它已经很破旧了，而我父母还得开着它到处跑，让我感到极其尴尬。现在想想，到最后，我开始精心编造各种借口花招以躲避乘坐它出行，生怕被学校朋友或者老师发现。但那仅限于最后那段日子。多年来，我一直坚定地认为我们的车——尽管非常便宜——竟然不知怎地大大优于路上几乎其他所有车辆，这也是我父亲选择不换车的原因。我还记得它停放在伍斯特郡我们那座小农舍的车道上的样子，那漆面，那金属光泽，每次我都要盯着它看上很久，感到无比骄傲。许多个午后——特别是周日——我会花上好几个小时，或在里面玩耍，或绕着它玩耍。时不时地，我还会带着玩具——或许甚至是我收集的塑料士兵——在后排座位上摆开。但更多时候，我只是无休无止地在其周围勾画假想的场景——从车窗里朝外开枪，或者飙车上演高速追捕。我母亲经常从房子里出来，告诉我别再摔车门了，那噪音让她发狂，我要再来一次的话，她会“活剥了我”。此刻我又看到了她，那么鲜活生动地站在农舍的后门，冲着车子大喊。那农舍很小，却在乡村深处，坐落在半亩草地之中。一条小路从门前穿过，直达当地农场，一群奶牛从门前经过，一日两次，被农家男孩用泥泞的棍子赶着。父亲总是

把车放在车道上，车尾对着这条小路，而我常常会停下正做着的事情，透过后挡风玻璃看牛群经过。

我们所谓的“车道”，不过就是房子侧边的一片草地，从未用水泥浇筑过，一旦下大雨，车子就会深深地淹在水里——这情况无助于解决其生锈的问题，还可能加速其变成了现在这幅光景。但是作为一个孩子，我却觉得雨天是一件特别的乐事。不仅仅是因为雨天创造了车内尤其舒适的环境，而且它还给我提供了一个挑战，那就是，我每次上下车时都得跳过污泥河道。起初，我父母并不赞成我的行为，声称我会弄坏车内的各处装饰，但随着那辆车越来越旧，他们也就不再担心这点了。然而，在我们拥有那辆车的全部时光里，“砰砰”的关门声持续烦扰着我母亲，而不幸的是，这“砰砰”声对我的场景演出至关重要，总能突出那扣人心弦的紧张而关键的时刻。有时，母亲几周甚至几个月都不会对此抱怨，这让事情变得复杂起来，直到我一并忘记了它可能正是冲突的根源。然后有一天，我正完全沉浸在某出想象剧中的时候，她会突然出现，露出一副特别烦恼的样子，告诉我只消再来一次，她就会“活剥了我”。有时候，这一威胁言论恰好在车门正半开时被抛出，让我左右为难，不知在我玩闹过后是该让它开着——要是那样可能会让它整夜都开着——还是我应该冒险尽可能悄悄地把它关上。这一窘境在与车玩闹的余下时间里一直折磨着我，彻底破坏了我愉悦的心情。

“你在干吗？”索菲在我背后问道，“我们该进去了。”

我意识到她在跟我说话，但我却因发现了我家的旧车而失了神，所以没做认真思考便嘟囔了些什么。然后我听到她说：

“你发什么呆？你好像爱上了那东西。”

这时我才意识到，我实际上正牢牢拥抱着那辆车，脸颊搁在车顶上，而双手则画出平滑的圆圈，拂过锈迹斑斑的表面。我站直身子，咧嘴笑了一下，转身见到索菲和鲍里斯盯着我。

“爱上这个？你在开玩笑吧。”我又笑了笑，“人们把残骸这样遗弃乱放是犯罪啊。”

他们仍盯着我，我便喊道：“多恶心的破车！”然后狠狠地朝它踹了几脚。这个举动似乎让他们心满意足了，两人转身离开。接着我看到索菲，尽管她刚刚还在催促我，现在又全神贯注于鲍里斯的表现，这会儿又为他梳了梳头。

我的注意力又回转到那辆车上，心中不免越发担心起来，刚刚那几脚可能造成了点破坏。我凑近细细查看一番，发现不过是蹭掉了几块锈片，但我心中却已尽是懊悔，后悔表现得如此无情。我穿过草地绕到车的另一侧，透过后侧窗向里望去。不知什么飞行物撞上过窗户，但玻璃却完好无损，我透过蜘蛛网的裂缝处看到车后座，在那儿我度过了许多惬意的时光。我看到后座的大部分布满了霉菌。雨水从车的一角倒灌进来，坐垫浮到了扶手处。我猛拉了下拉门，毫不费力就打开了，但开了一半就卡在了厚厚的草丛中。空隙正好够大，可以让我挤进去，一番小小挣扎后，我成功地爬到了座位上。

进去一看，很明显，座位一头已经陷进了汽车的底板，我发现自己不同寻常的矮。透过离我头顶最近的窗户，我能看到片片草叶和傍晚粉红色的天空。我重新调整了一下姿势，猛拉车门，直至它差不多又关上——有东西卡着，不能完全关严——过了一会儿，我发现自己的姿势相当舒服。

没过多久，宁静的气息笼罩全身，有那么一会儿，我闭上了双眼。这时候，我发现记忆回到了一次快乐无比的家庭驾车远足，那次，我们驾车逛遍了当地乡间，为我找寻一辆二手自行车。那是一个晴朗的周日午后，我们已经走了一个又一个村落，检查了一辆又一辆自行车，父母坐在前面热烈地商议着，而我就坐在他们后面，这个座位上，看着伍斯特郡的风景从眼前掠过。那时候，电话在英格兰还没有成为常规家庭用品，我母亲膝盖上放着一份当地报纸，上面印着出售物品的广告，配有全部地址。没必要预约，像我们这样的家庭可以直接上门，说：“我们来买小男孩的自行车。”而后会被领着到后棚看车。友好些的人家会倒茶——每次我父亲都会用同样幽默的言语拒绝。但有一个老太太——后来我们发现她根本不是售卖一辆“儿童自行车”，而是死去丈夫的自行车——坚持让我们进去。“我总是很高兴，”她对我们说，“迎接像你们这样的人。”接着，我们端着茶杯，坐在她小小的、洒满阳光的客厅时，她又一次把我们称作“像你们这样的人”。我正聆听父亲讲着什么样的自行车最合适我这个年纪的男孩，突然我认识到，对这个老太太来讲，父母还有我代表着理想幸福的家庭。跟随这一认识而来的是巨大的紧张感，并在我们逗留的大约半个小时中持续加剧。并不是我害怕父母不能保持他们一贯的表现——不可思议的是，他们甚至开始了一场争吵，这可能是他们所有争吵里面最文明健康的一个版本了。但我却坚信，只消一个手势，或许甚至是一个味道，就能随时让这位老太太认识到，她犯了个巨大的

错误。我心惊胆战地看着，生怕会出现她在我们面前突然被吓得不能动弹的那一刻。

我坐在这辆旧车的后座上，试着回忆那天下午如何结束，然而，我发现思绪飘到了另一个下午，一个大雨滂沱的下午，我走出房门钻进车里，坐上这庇护所似的后座，而屋内却是问题肆虐不断。那天下午，我躺在后座上，头挤进扶手下面。在这个位置上，我从窗户就只能看到雨水顺着玻璃瓢泼而下。那时候，我殷切希望，我可以只是躺在那儿，不受打扰，就那样过一小时又一小时。但经验告诉我，父亲会在某个时刻从房子里出来，他会走过汽车，走到门口，走到外面的门前小径上，所以我在那儿躺了很久，透过雨声专注地倾听后门闷的嘎嘎声。终于这声音响起时，我跳起身来，开始玩了起来。我模仿了一场激动人心的、为争夺一把失落的手枪而展开的打斗，这样就清楚表明，我深深地投入到了游戏当中，而没有留意到任何事情。我听到他双脚踩着湿漉漉的地面，径直走到车道尽头，才敢停下。接着，我很快跪坐在座椅上，小心翼翼地适时地从后挡风玻璃向外偷偷望去，看到父亲穿着雨衣的身影，站在大门边，打开雨伞时稍稍弓身。接着，他有意踏着步子走上那条小径，消失在了视野外。

我一定是睡着了，因为一阵晃动将我惊醒，我发现自己坐在破败的汽车后部，伸手不见五指。我稍稍有些惊慌，推了推离我最近的门。起先，车门仍旧被卡住，但接着，它一次移动一点儿，直到我终于能够挤身出去。

我掸了掸衣服，四下看了看。那房子灯火通明——我能看到高高的窗户里面闪闪发光的吊灯——车旁边，索菲仍旧在打理鲍里斯的头发。我站在房内投射出来的一汪灯光之外，索菲和鲍里斯却几乎被灯火照得通亮。在我看着他们的同时，索菲弯下身来，对着后视镜补了补妆。

我走进灯光中，鲍里斯转身对着我。“怎么那么久啊。”他说。

“是的，对不起。我们现在该进去了。”

“等一下。”索菲心烦意乱地嘀咕着，仍旧弯腰对着后视镜。

“我饿了。”鲍里斯对我说道，“我们什么时候回家？”

“别担心，我们不会呆太久的。所有这些人，他们都等着见我们呢，所以我们最好快进去打声招呼。但我们很快就会离开，然后就回家享受一个愉快的夜晚。就我们几个。”

“我们能玩打仗游戏吗？”

“当然了。”我说道，同时觉得很开心，小男孩这会儿好像已经忘记了我们先前的争吵。“或者玩其他你喜欢的游戏。即便我们开始玩了一个，而到一半你想停下，换另一个都行，不管是因为你玩腻了还是输了，都没关系，鲍里斯。今晚我们可以改玩任意一个你想玩的游戏。而如果你统统不想玩，只是聊会儿天，比如说，关于足球，那么我们就聊天。今晚会是一个极棒的夜晚，只有我们三个。但是我们首先得进去，把这件事搞定，没那么糟糕的。”

“好吧，我现在准备好了。”索菲宣布，随后她最后一次弯腰照了照后视镜。

我们穿过一座石拱门走进院子。走向前门入口的时候，索菲说：“我现在非常期待这次招待会了！感觉很不错。”

“好吧，”我说，“放松点，自然些。一切都会好的。”

第十九章

一个胖女佣打开了大门。我们走进宽敞的大厅入口时，她低声说：

“很高兴再次见到您，先生。”

听到她这样说，我才意识到，之前我曾经来过这里——实际上，这正是霍夫曼前一晚带我来的那个地方。

“啊，是的，”我环顾着四周带橡木镶板的墙壁，说道，“很高兴又回到这里。这次，你看，我把全家都带来了。”

可能是出于敬重，那女佣只是绷着脸站在门旁，没有答话，我飞快地瞟了一眼这个女人，不禁感到一丝敌意。这时我才留意到，在雨伞架旁边的圆木桌上，在一堆摊开的杂志和报纸中间隐隐现出我的脸。我走到桌前，抽出一份报纸（我想应该是当地报纸的晚间版），看到整个头版登着一张我的照片——显然是在风吹草低的田间拍摄的。我认出了照片背景上的白色建筑，记起这是今早在山顶上照的。我拿过报纸，对着灯，将照片凑到黄色的灯光下端详。

强劲的风把我的头发向后吹起，我的领带僵直地飞向一只耳朵后，外套也在身后飞扬，看起来我好像穿了一件披风。更匪夷所思的是，我做出了一个凶狠放纵的表情，将拳头迎风举起，好像正发出一声斗士般的咆哮。我无论如何也不能理解，自己怎么会摆出这么个姿势。整个头版除了标题根本没有其他文字，上面赫然写着：“瑞德的集结号”。

我有些紧张，打开了报纸，六七张分开排列的小照片映入眼帘，它们都与头版那张略有不同。在所有这些照片里，我好斗的态度一览无遗，只有两张除外，在那两张照片中，我看起来正在洋洋得意地推介身后的白房子，同时露出了奇怪的微笑，将下排牙齿悉数暴露出来，而丝毫不见上牙。我扫了一眼下面的专栏，看到一个叫马克斯·萨特勒的人被反复提及。

我本想继续仔细翻看这张报纸，但这时候，我怀疑起女佣的敌意可能正是和这些照片有关系，开始明显地感到不舒服起来。于是我放下报纸，离开了桌子，决定以后有机会再仔细研究这篇报道。

“我们该进去了。”我对索菲和鲍里斯说，他们俩正在大厅中间徘徊。我说话的声音很响，足以让那女佣听见。我心里十分期待着她能引我们进入招待会场，但她一动不动，尴尬的几秒钟过后，我朝她微微一笑，说：“当然，我记得昨晚的路。”说完，我带头走进了房子。

实际上，这房子完全不是我记忆中的那样。很快，我们发现自己走在一条很陌生的镶板长廊上。然而，我不久就发现，这其实也无所谓，因为我们刚走进去一小段路，就听到了嘈杂的说话声，不久，我们就站在一个狭窄的房间门口，屋里挤满了穿着晚礼服、拿着鸡尾酒杯的人。

乍一看，这屋子的规模比起昨晚宾客云集、巨大华丽的舞厅好像小了许多。但实际上，经过一番仔细审视，我才发现：它原来可能根本就不是间屋子，而是一条长廊，或者说，顶多是间长长的、有道转弯的前厅。那道转弯曲至如斯，让我感觉或许到了半圆的程度，但从门口向里间这么一瞥，我还不能十分确定。我从外面的巨大窗户上可以窥见一斑，这些窗户这会儿都挂上了窗帘，沿着那道转弯依次排列，室内的墙壁上布满了门。地板是大理石的，吊灯从天花板上悬挂下来，房间各处都陈列着艺术品，或装在底座上，或摆在精致的玻璃橱里。

我们停在门口，看着这一场景。我四处张望，希望有人能过来招呼我们进去，甚至大声宣布我们的到来，然而，我们站着观望了一会儿，没人过来。偶尔会有人急匆匆地大步朝我们的方向走来，但直至最后，我们才发现他是为了迎接其他客人。

我看了看索菲。她用一只胳膊搂着鲍里斯，两人都紧张地盯着人群。

“来吧，我们进去吧。”我淡定地说道。我们走了几步，进了房间，但没走几步又停了下来。

我四下观望，想找到霍夫曼或者斯达特曼小姐，或者其他我认识的人，却一个都看不到。接着，我继续站在那儿，搜寻着一张张陌生的脸，突然意识到，这里许多人同样可能参加过那晚的宴会，就是索菲受到无礼对待的那晚。突然间，我可以越发鲜明地看到索菲曾经不得不忍受的遭遇，便感到胸中升腾起一股危险的怒火。确实，我继续环视房间时，至少认出了一帮宾客——他们站在一起，在转弯处，几乎在我们的视线之外——几乎可以肯定，他们就是其中的几个罪魁祸首。

首。我透过人群观察他们：男人们挂着沾沾自喜的微笑，双手在裤子口袋里插入抽出，那种浮夸的样子好像在向所有人昭示，他们在这样的聚会上是多么轻松自如；而女人们则穿着滑稽的服装，在大笑的时候还无助地摇着头。真是难以置信——这种人居然胆敢讥笑蔑视任何人，更别说是像索菲这样的人，这简直太荒谬了。事实上，我找不出任何理由不即刻上前，在众目睽睽之下，狠狠地教训他们一下。我在索菲耳边飞快地悄悄说了些安慰的话，就起步走了过去。

穿过人群的时候，我发现这房间确实是慢慢弯成了一个半圆形。我这会儿又能看到侍者们都贴着内侧墙壁，好像哨兵似的站开，手上端着盛有饮料和甜品的托盘。偶尔有人会撞到我，而后友善地道歉，或者有人试图推搡着前往相反的方向，我会与之相视微笑，但奇怪的是，好像真的没人认出我来。有那么一会儿，我发现自己正从三个中年男子中间挤过去，而他们好像正为什么沮丧地摇着头，我注意到其中一人的腋下夹着一份晚报。我看到自己迎风的脸在他胳膊肘下探出，不觉隐隐猜想，目前我们无端受到忽视，是不是在一定程度上跟那张照片有关。然而，我这会儿差不多已到了意欲接近的那些人的身边，所以没有细想下去。

其中两个人发现我靠过来，往旁边移了移步，好似欢迎我加入他们的圈子。我发现他们正在讨论周围的艺术品，我来到他们中间时，所有人正对刚刚那人说的话频频点头称是。其中一个女人开口道：

“是啊，情况明摆着嘛，你都可以在这屋子中间画条线，就在那尊范·西罗雕像后面。”她指着不远处座台上的白色雕塑，“小奥斯卡的眼力从未好过。公平地讲，这一点他自己也明白，但他感到了一种责任，一种对家庭的责任。”

“抱歉，但我不得不说，我同意安德雷斯说的，”其中一个男人说道，“奥斯卡太骄傲了。他应该委派给其他人。那些更懂的人。”

这时，另一个男人和善地微笑着对我说道：“您对这件艺术品有何高见，先生？关于奥斯卡对此藏品展的贡献？”

我一时被问住了，但我并无心情转移话题。

“各位女士和先生站在这儿讨论奥斯卡的缺陷，非常好，”我开始说，“但更重要的是……”

“称小奥斯卡有缺陷，”一个女人打断我，“就有点太过了。他的品位和他兄弟截然不同，的确，他犯了这个令人费解的错误，但总

的说来，我认为他使这次藏品展受到了大家欢迎。它打破了朴素简约之风。没有那个，呃，这场展览就像是一顿没有甜点的晚餐。那边的连体花瓶——”她透过人群指了指，“确实相当讨人喜欢。”

“那都很好……”我又激动地开始说，但还没等我继续，一个男人坚定地說道：

“也就那么一个连体花瓶而已，那是他所选的展品之中唯一能在这儿有一席之地的。他的问题是，他对整个藏品展毫无概念，对事物间的平衡毫无认识。”

我感到自己的耐心快要消磨殆尽了。

“听着，”我喊道，“你们适可而止吧！停下这……这愚蠢无比的闲聊，哪怕就一会儿！就停一小会儿，让其他人，让外面世界来的其他人说说话，你们在这个封闭的小世界里全都住得太快活了！”

我停下来，瞪着他们。我的坚持还是有用的，因为他们所有人——四男三女——全都吃惊地盯着我。终于赢得了他们的注意之后，我感觉心中的怒气得得到了控制，好似某种我能随心所欲操控的武器，这让我感觉很不错。我压低嗓音——刚才喊得比我预想的响了些——继续说：

“在你们这座小城里，你们有这么多问题，或者用你们某些人的话说，有这场‘危机’，这稀奇吗？稀奇吗？你们当中有这么多人如此悲惨，如此沮丧，这稀奇吗？这会不会让任何人，让任何外来的人感到困惑？这会让人吃惊吗？而我们，作为从一个更大更广阔的世界来的旁观者，我们会不会搔首困惑呢？我们会不会对自己说，这样一座小城市怎么会是这么个样子？”我感到有人猛地拉了拉我的胳膊，但我决心要一吐为快。“像这样一座小城，这样一个社会，居然会有这样迫在眉睫的危机？我们会不会感到困惑吃惊呢？不！一点也不！一个人来到这儿，他看看四周，会立刻发现什么？女士们先生们，你们这些人就是这座城市的典范，没错，就是这里，就是你们！你们代表着——如果我有失公允，如果在这座城市的瓦砾与路石下还有比这更恶心、更可怕例子，那么请见谅——依我所见，你，先生，还有你，女士，是的，我同样遗憾地告诉你们，是的，你们就是这里一切错误的典型代表！”我意识到，猛拉我衣袖的是我正训斥的一个女人，不知何故，她正退向我旁边的男人的身后。我朝她的方向瞥了一眼，接着继续道：“首先，你们缺乏基本礼仪。看看你们对待彼此的方式。看看你们对待我家里人的方式。即便是我——一位名人，你们

请来的贵宾——来到这里，你们却更关心奥斯卡的艺术收藏。换句话说，你们都太过沉迷了，沉迷在你们这个内部混乱的社会中，甚至没能向我们展示哪怕最基本的礼貌。”

那个拉扯我胳膊的女人这会儿绕了个圈，到了我的正后方，我意识到她在向我说着些什么，试图把我拉开。我没有理睬她，继续道：

“那么多地方，偏偏是这儿，多么残酷的讽刺啊！是的，就是这儿，我的父母不得不到这个地方。那么多地方，偏偏是到这儿，来接受你们所谓的好客之道。多么讽刺，多么残酷！那么多地方，过了这么些年，却在这么个地方，和像你们这样的人在一起！还有我可怜的父母，他们大老远地跑来，第一次来听我的演奏！你们以为我不得不把他们留给像你，你，还有你——像你们这样的人照顾，我的任务就会轻松些么？”

“瑞德先生，瑞德先生……”我肘边的女人坚持拉了好一会儿，我才发现此人不是别人，正是柯林斯小姐。这个发现让我一下子泄了气，我还没转过神，她就成功地将我从人群中拉到了后面。

“啊，柯林斯小姐，”我有些困惑地对她说，“晚上好。”

“您知道，瑞德先生，”柯林斯小姐说，她继续带着我离开。“我得说，我真的很吃惊。我的意思是人们对于这件事的着迷程度。刚刚一个朋友告诉我，全市都在议论这事呢。她安慰我说，大家都是尽可能以最友好的方式议论的！但我真的不明白，这都有什么好大惊小怪的。只是因为我今天去了动物园！我真的不懂。我之所以答应，只是因为他们说服了我，说这对每个人都有好处，您知道的，就是为了让里奥能够在明晚表现出色。所以我才答应去那儿，仅此而已。而我想，老实讲，我希望对里奥说些鼓励的话，因为他这么久都没有沾酒了。只有我以某种方式承认了才显公平。我向您保证，瑞德先生，过去二十年来，在其他任何时候，要是他这么长时间都没沾酒的话，我也会同样这么做的。只是碰巧这种情况之前都没发生过。我今天出现在动物园真的没什么值得大惊小怪的。”

她这会儿已经没再拉着我了，但她仍旧挽着我的胳膊，开始带我慢慢穿过人群。

“我相信这确实没什么值得大惊小怪的，柯林斯小姐，”我说道，“我也向您保证，刚刚走到您那里的时候，我一点儿也没有想向您提起布罗茨基先生的意思。和这里的大多数人不同，我无意打探你们的隐私。”

“您真是个正派人，瑞德先生。但无论如何，我说过，我们今天下午的会面不意味着任何事。人们知道了会很失望。所有发生的一切不过是，里奥向我走来，对我说：‘你今天看起来真漂亮。’他过了二十年的酗酒生活，现在说起这番话，叫人想也想得到。差不多也就这样了。当然，我感谢了他，还说比起前段时间见面时，他现在看起来好多了。于是，他低下头，看着鞋，他年轻的时候可没这样过。那时候，他从未做过这么羞怯的事。是的，他的火焰已经燃尽了，这我看得出来。但有新东西取而代之，有些许分量的东西。呃，他就在那儿，低头看着鞋，冯·温特斯坦先生和其他先生都在后面一点的地方徘徊，看着另一个方向，假装他们忘记了我们一样。我对里奥说了几句有关天气的话，他抬头，说道，是的，树木看起来那么美。接着，他开始告诉我，在刚刚见过的动物里他喜欢哪些。很明显，他根本没用心，因为他说：‘我喜欢所有这些动物，大象、鳄鱼还有大猩猩。’呃，猴子笼就在附近，他们肯定刚从那边过来，但他们肯定没有经过大象和鳄鱼的笼子，这个我也跟里奥讲了。但里奥却对此置之不理，好像我提起了完全不相干的事情。接着，他好像陷入了轻微的惊慌之中。可能跟那时冯·温特斯坦先生靠得近了些有关。您看，我原本同意的只是跟里奥说几句话，真的就简单的几句而已。冯·温特斯坦先生向我保证，他会大概一分钟之后打断进来。呃，那是我的条件，可是接着，我们一开始讲话，连我自己都感觉时间确实太短了，令人绝望。我自己竟开始害怕看到冯·温特斯坦先生在附近徘徊。总之，里奥知道我们时间无多，接着他直奔正题。他说：‘或许我们可以再试试。一起生活。不算太迟。’您得承认，瑞德先生，都这么些年了，说这个有些太直截了当了，即便是因为考虑到今天下午时间有限。我只是说：‘我们一起又能做什么呢？我们现在几乎没有共同点了。’过了一两秒钟，他迷茫地四下观望了一下，好像我提出了一个他以前从未思考过的问题。接着，他指着我们前方的铁笼子说道：‘我们可以养个动物。我们可以一起爱护它、照顾它。那或许就是我们以前没做过的。’我不知道该如何回答，就只是和他站在那里，我看到冯·温特斯坦先生走了过来，但接着，他一定是觉察到了什么，察觉到我和里奥那样站着不太对劲，于是他改变了想法，又走开去，开始和冯·布劳恩先生聊了起来。接着，里奥在空中举起一只手指，那是他从前的标志性动作，他举起手说道：‘我养了一只狗，但你不知道的，他昨天死了。养狗不好。我们可以选一种长寿的动物。能活二十年、二十五年的那种。那样的话，只要我们照顾得很好，我们就会先死去，我们就不必为它悲伤。我们没有孩子，所以我们就这样做吧。’听完他的话，我答道：‘你还是没想明白。我们心爱的动

物可能会比我们两个活得更久，但我们两个不可能同时死去。你可能不必为动物悲伤，但如果，假如说，我比你先死去，你得为我悲伤啊。’他马上答道：‘这总比你死后没有人为你悲伤强啊。’‘这个我倒不担心，’我对他说道。我指明说这些年来，我帮助过这城市里的许多人，我死去时，根本不缺为我悼念的人。他答道：‘这个可不好说。从现在起，对我来说事情可能会一帆风顺。我死去时，可能也有许多悼念者。说不定会有上百号人。’接着他说：‘但如果他们中没有一个人真正关心我，那又有什么用？我宁可把他们全换掉。换成我爱着的，也爱着我的人。’我不得不承认，瑞德先生，这次谈话让我感到有些难过，我再想不出任何其他话要对他说。接着，里奥说道：‘如果当初我们有孩子，他们应该多大了？他们长到现在会很漂亮啦。’好像他们花了很多年变漂亮似的！接着他又说：‘我们没有孩子。那么我们就做这个来代替吧。’他又说起这事的时候，呃，我想我是相当混乱了，我越过他的肩膀，看了看冯·温特斯坦先生，冯·温特斯坦先生马上就朝我们走了过来，说了些玩笑话，就是这样。我们的谈话就结束了。”

我们继续绕着屋子慢慢地走着，她仍旧挽着我的胳膊。我花了些时间消化她的话，然后说：

“我刚刚想起，柯林斯小姐，我们上次见面时，您特别好心，邀请我去您的公寓，讨论一下我的问题。讽刺的是，现在看起来，我们更多的是在讨论生活当中您不得不做的决定。我着实很好奇，您会怎么做。请允许我这样说，您站在了一个十字路口上。”

柯林斯小姐大笑。“哦，天哪，瑞德先生，我太老了，已过了在十字路口做选择的年纪了。里奥这样说也真的太迟了些。如果这一切发生在哪怕七八年前……”她叹了口气，脸上霎那间掠过一丝深深的悲伤，接着又换上了她那轻柔的微笑。“不可能了，现在这时候怀着全新的一系列希望、害怕、梦想去重新开始，不可能了。是的，是的，您会急着告诉我说我还没有那么老，我的生活还远没有结束，我真的十分感激。但事实是，确实太晚了，那会……呃，这么说吧，现在把事情弄复杂，那只会更混乱。啊，马佐斯基！永远都能吸引我的注意力！”她用手指着一只镶嵌在底座上的红色泥塑猫咪，我们刚刚从它旁边经过。“不，里奥给我的生活制造的麻烦已经够多了。我打造属于自己的、不同的生活已经很久了，你问问这城里的人，我想大部分人都会告诉您我表现得相当不错。我帮这儿的许多人度过了一段日益困难的时光。当然，还远未能及您的那种成就，瑞德先生。但那并不意味着，当我回顾过往，看看我都做了些什么时，不能因某种满

足之感而愉悦。是的，总的来说，我对自己离开里奥之后的生活相当满意，也很乐意继续这样维持下去。”

“但毫无疑问，柯林斯小姐，您至少应该认认真真考虑一下现在的情况。我不明白您为什么不能将之看作是个好的回报：做完所有善举之后，能够与那男子——抱歉——假设某种程度上你还爱着那男子，共享生命中的每个夜晚。我这样说是因为，呃，要不这么多年来您为什么还要继续留在这城市？为何您从未想过再婚呢？”

“哦，我的确考虑过再婚，瑞德先生。过去这些年，至少有三个男人，我可以与之轻而易举地确定关系。但他们……他们都不是我要的人。可能你说的确有道理。里奥就在近旁，让我不能对那些产生足够的感觉。好吧，不管怎样，这都是很久以前的事情了。您就是想问我现在何不与里奥一起共度余生，这么问倒也可以理解。好吧，让我们想一下。里奥现在头脑清醒冷静。他是否会这样保持很久呢？可能。我承认，还是有可能的。特别是假如他现在在这里赢得了认同，又成为了一个担有巨大责任的名人。但如果我同意和他重归于好，那么，那就会是另外一回事了。不久后，他便会决心毁掉他所取得的一切，就像他之前做的那样。那会让大家立于何地？那会让这个城市立于何地？实际上，瑞德先生，我宁可认为自己负有一种公众责任，不能接受他的这些提议。”

“原谅我，柯林斯小姐，但我不禁觉得，您并非真如自己所想的那样，被您自己的理由说服。在您内心深处的某个角落里，您还是在等待着，等待着您以前的生活，您与布罗茨基先生一起的生活，重新再续前缘。我并不怀疑，您所做的全部善举，会让这座城市里的人们一直对您心怀感激，然而，在本质上，您把那看作是在等待途中为打发时间而做的事情。”

柯林斯小姐斜歪着头，脸上挂着愉快的笑容，细细思量着我的话。

“或许您说的有些道理，瑞德先生，”她终于开口说道，“或许我还没有意识到时间过得如此之快。直到最近，实际上是去年，我才真的猛然意识到时光飞逝。我们两个人慢慢变老，或许考虑挽回曾经拥有的东西已经太迟了。也许您说得对。我起初离开他，并没有预料到会是这样长久的分离。但情况是否像您刚才断言的那样，是我一直在等待吗？我真的不知道。我考虑问题都是过一天是一天。可如今，我发现时间都已经消逝了。但我现在回顾我的生活，回顾自己是怎么走过来的，看起来也并不是那么糟。我想这样结束，就像我现在这

样。为什么我必须得和里奥还有他的动物纠缠？那一定会非常混乱的。”

她是否真的相信自己所说的这一切呢？我正准备用最温柔的方式继续表达自己的怀疑，这时，我发现鲍里斯站在我的肘边。

“我们得马上回家了，”他说，“妈妈越来越着急了。”

我朝他指的方向看过去。索菲就站在我原本离开她的地方几步开外，非常孤单，没有和任何人说话。她脸上挂着无力的微笑，然而，却无人欣赏。她肩膀耸起，目光定格在离她最近的那帮宾客的鞋子上面。

这情况显然绝望至极。我克制住自己对满屋人的愤怒，对鲍里斯说：“是的，你说得对。我们最好走吧。把你妈带过来。我们想办法趁人们不注意的时候溜出去。反正我们出席过了，就没人能埋怨了。”

我想起前一晚的经历，想到这房子与酒店毗邻。鲍里斯消失在人群中时，我转身看着墙壁上排列的门，试图回忆起哪一扇是我和斯蒂芬·霍夫曼穿过的通向旅馆走廊的门。但就在这时，仍旧挽着我胳膊的柯林斯小姐又开始说：

“如果让我说实话，完全开诚布公地讲，那么我就得承认——是的，在我头脑不大清醒的时候，那确实曾经是我的梦。”

“哦，什么梦，柯林斯小姐？”

“呃，一切。现在发生的这一切。里奥能重新振作，在城里找到一个合适的位置，情况全都会重新好起来，糟糕的日子永远一去不返。是的，我得承认，瑞德先生。一方面，白天的时候，我的头脑很明智很理性，可到了晚上，它就变得不一样了。这些年来，我经常凌晨时分在黑暗中醒来，醒着躺在床上，憧憬着像这样的事情发生。而如今，它真的开始发生了，我却又相当困惑。然而，您看，其实也没有真的开始发生。哦，里奥可能确实可以在这里大功告成，他过去的确才华横溢，不可能全部消失殆尽。还有，我们在一起的时候，他从未有过机会，过去他从未有过真正的机会，这是真的。但对于我们两人来说，太晚了。不管他说什么，现在肯定都太晚了。”

“柯林斯小姐，我非常想和您更详细地讨论这整件事。但遗憾的是，我现在得走了。”

没错，说这话的时候，我看到索菲和鲍里斯正穿过房间朝我走来。摆脱了柯林斯小姐之后，我又思量起该选择哪扇门来，同时往后挪了挪步，查看那些隐藏在转弯处的门。我挨个审视，觉得每扇门看上去都似曾相识，却连一扇都不敢确认。我突然想到可以问问别人，但我害怕引起别人对我们提早离开的关注，又决计不能这样做。

我领着索菲和鲍里斯走向那一扇扇门，心里仍然茫然不知所措。不知怎的，我的脑海中浮现出无数电影里的场景：某个角色在退出房间时想给人留下深刻印象，便推开一扇错误的门，走进一个壁橱里。虽然正是出于相反的原因——我希望我们能在不知不觉中离开，事后大家讨论时，无人确定我们究竟是什么时间离开的——但避免这场灾难显得同样至关重要。

最后，我选定了最中间的那扇门，仅仅因为它看起来最壮丽。珍珠深深地镶嵌在门板上，两边石柱侧立。此时此刻，每根石柱前都站着一位身着制服的服务员，像哨兵一样一动不动。我判断，这么气派的大门即便未必能带我们直接穿到酒店，也肯定会引领我们到某个重要的地方，从那儿我们可以找到路线，摆脱公众的目光。

我示意索菲和鲍里斯跟上，慢慢朝那扇门走过去，还向其中一个服务员简单点了点头，好像在说“不必麻烦，我知道自己在做什么”，然后拉开了门。结果，让我惊恐的是，我最害怕的事情恰恰发生了：我打开的是一个笤帚柜，柜子里装的东西超出了容量。几只家用拖把翻落出来，“哗啦”一声掉在了大理石地板上，蓬松的深色拖把头四处散落。我瞧了瞧壁橱里面，看到一堆凌乱的水桶、油腻的破布和气雾罐。

“抱歉。”我低声向那个离我最近的服务员咕哝道，他正急忙收拾拖把，这会儿向我们投来责怪的一瞥，我匆忙向隔壁的门走过去。

我开始小心地打开第二扇门，决心不再犯同样的错误。我的动作非常缓慢，尽管我能感到背后有很多只眼睛在注视着我，能听到嘈杂的说话声渐渐变大，有声音在附近说道：“我的天哪，那是瑞德先生，是不是？”我还是强忍住惊慌，将房门朝自己一点一点地小心拉动，同时从门缝向里看去，以确保没什么东西掉出来。看到这扇门通向一条长廊，我松了口气，然后快速踏进去，用手势急切地示意索菲和鲍里斯跟上。

第二十章

我关上了他们身后的门，我们三人四下张望。欣喜的是，我发现自己这第二次尝试恰恰选对了门，这会儿我们正站在一条又长又黑的过道中，而这条过道恰好经过酒店休息室通往大厅。起初，我们一动不动，刚经历了画廊里的人声嘈杂，此刻的寂静让我们有些恍惚。后来鲍里斯打了个哈欠，说道：“那宴会真无聊。”

“恶劣至极。”我说。对招待会上的每一个人，我又一次感到愤怒难当。“一群可怜虫，根本不知何谓文明教养。”然后，我补充道：“妈妈是目前为止那里最漂亮的女士。对吗，鲍里斯？”

黑暗中传来索菲“咯咯”的笑声。

“她是，”我说，“目前为止最漂亮的。”

鲍里斯似乎想要说些什么，但就在这时，我们发觉，在周围的黑暗中，不知从何处传来一阵轻微的滑动声。接着，我的双眼适应了黑暗，勉强看清在走廊深处一个有野兽般轮廓的庞然大物正朝我们缓缓走来，每动一步就发出一阵噪音。索菲和鲍里斯也同时发现了它的存在，一时间，我们似乎都呆住了。接着，鲍里斯低声惊呼道：

“是外公！”

接着，我发现那野兽般的身形的确是古斯塔夫，他背部隆起，胳膊下夹着一只旅行箱，手里提着另一只箱子的把手，身后还拖着第三只——那正是滑动声的来源。有那么一刻，他看起来根本是寸步难行，只是和着缓慢的节奏摇晃着身体。

鲍里斯急切地扑向外公，而我和索菲则犹豫着跟了上去。我们靠近时，古斯塔夫终于发现了我们，停了下来，稍稍直了直身体。我们在黑暗中看不见他的表情，但他的声音听起来很开心，他说：

“鲍里斯，这么巧啊！”

“是外公！”鲍里斯再次惊呼道。接着，他问：“您在忙吗？”

“是啊，有很多工作呢。”

“您肯定非常忙，”鲍里斯的声音里有一丝奇怪的紧张，“非常，非常忙。”

“是的，”古斯塔夫喘了口气，说道，“是很忙。”

我走到古斯塔夫面前说：“很抱歉，在工作时间打扰到你。我们刚才在参加一个招待会，但这会儿准备回家了。去吃一顿大餐。”

“啊，”迎宾员看着我们说，“啊，是吗，真是太好了。看到你们几个这样在一起，我真开心。”接着，他问鲍里斯：“你怎么样啊，鲍里斯？你妈妈怎么样啊？”

“妈妈有点累了，”鲍里斯说，“我们都很期待这顿晚饭。吃完饭，我们还要玩打仗游戏。”

“听起来棒极了，你们肯定会玩得很开心的。那么……”他停顿了一下，然后说：“我最好还是继续工作吧。这会儿我们非常忙。”

“好的。”鲍里斯静静地答道。

古斯塔夫揉了揉鲍里斯的头发，然后又弓起背，继续拉着行李。我用一只手拉着鲍里斯，领着他为古斯塔夫让出了路。也许是因为我们看着，也许是因为刚刚的停歇让他恢复了些许力气，迎宾员这次行进的脚步似乎稳当了许多，他从我们身边走过，走进了黑暗中。我开始带路走向大堂，但鲍里斯不愿跟上，仍回视着走廊，那里，他外公佝偻的身影仍依稀可辨。

“来吧，快点。”说着，我伸出一只胳膊搂住他的肩膀，“大家都饿了。”

我又开始走起来，这时，我听到索菲在身后说：“不对，是这边。”我转过身，发现她在一扇小门前弯下了腰。先前我没有留意这扇小门，事实上，就算我留意到了，也会以为那只不过是一道壁橱门，因为它几乎还不到我的肩膀高。尽管如此，索菲这会儿已经打开了门，而鲍里斯呢，他做出一副之前做过无数次的样子，一脚踏了进去。索菲继续扶着敞开的门，我犹豫片刻，也弯下身，跟着鲍里斯钻了进去。

我原以为自己会在一条隧道中，得双膝跪地爬行前进，但事实上，我却站在另一条过道上，它比我们刚刚离开的那条过道可能还宽些，但显然只是员工通道，地板上没有铺地毯，裸露的管道顺墙体延伸。尽管远处有一束灯光照在地板上，但我们周围仍是一片昏暗，近

乎漆黑。我们朝那光束走了一小段，接着，索菲又停下脚步，拉着门把手，推开了一扇消防门。门一开我们就出来了，站在一条安静的小巷里。

这是一个晴朗的夜晚，天空中群星闪烁可见。一眼望去，这条小巷空寂无人，所有商店都关门了。我们出发时，索菲轻轻地说：

“真是个惊喜啊，在那种情况下遇到外公。是不是，鲍里斯？”

鲍里斯没有回答。他大踏步地走在我们前面，自顾自地轻声咕哝着。

“你肯定也饿坏了吧，”索菲对我说，“希望准备的够吃。之前我光顾着做这些点心，忘记准备一道真正的主食了。今天下午，我以为足够吃了，但现在想想……”

“别傻了，没关系的。”我说道，“不管怎样，那正是我想要的。丰盛的点心，一个接着一个。我很清楚鲍里斯为什么喜欢像那样吃。”

“我小时候妈妈常这样做，为了我们那些特别的夜晚。不是生日或者圣诞节——这些节日我们和其他人家一样过——而是一些我们想让它特别的夜晚，就我们三个，妈妈常这样做。丰盛的点心，一样接着一样。但接着，我们搬了家，妈妈身体不好了，那之后我们就再也不常做了。希望准备得够。你们两个肯定都饿坏了。”接着，她突然补充道：“很抱歉。今晚我表现不够出众，对吗？”

我仿佛又看到她孤独无助地站在人群中间，便伸出胳膊，搂住了她。她将身体紧紧地靠着我作为回应。接下来一会儿，我们就那样走着，没有交谈，走过了一条条荒寂无人的小巷。有那么一刻，鲍里斯合着我们的步子走在身边，问道：

“今晚我可以坐在沙发上吃东西吗？”

索菲想了一会儿，然后说道：“嗯，可以。这顿饭可以，没问题。”

鲍里斯又和我们并排多走了几步，接着问：“我能躺在地板上吃吗？”

索菲笑了：“只有今天晚上行哦，鲍里斯。明天早上吃早饭的时候，你就又得坐回餐桌边吃了。”

这似乎让鲍里斯很开心，他激动地向前跑了几步。

终于，我们停在了一扇门前，两边是理发店和面包店。这条街道很窄，又有许多车停靠在人行道上，显得更加拥挤了。索菲翻找钥匙的时候，我抬头看了看，发现商店上面还有四层。有些窗户还亮着灯，能隐约听到电视的声音。

我跟着他们俩上了两段楼梯。索菲打开前门的时候，我突然想到：他们或许觉得，我应该表现得对这公寓很熟悉，另一方面，他们也同样可能觉得，我应该表现得像个客人。我们走进去后，我决定仔细观察索菲的态度，以便从中得到暗示。结果，索菲一关上我们身后的门就宣布，她得去开烤箱，然后便消失在公寓深处。至于鲍里斯，他匆匆脱掉外套跑开了，嘴里还发着类似警笛的声音。

只剩我一个人站在了门厅里。我抓住机会，好好看了看周围的环境。毫无疑问，索菲和鲍里斯都觉得我应该熟悉这里。我盯着面对自己半开的房门，印有花形图案的褪色的、污浊的黄色墙纸，衣架后顺着地面爬至天花板的裸露管道——可以肯定的是，我在这里站得越久，就越能感到关于这间门厅的点滴回忆渐渐浮出水面。

几分钟后，我走进了客厅。屋内有許多特征我未能认出——在废弃的壁炉两边，有两张椅面凹陷的陈旧扶手椅，它们无疑是新近添置之物——尽管如此，我的印象是，比起门厅，我对这间屋子的记忆更加清晰些：那张顶在墙边的椭圆形大餐桌，通向厨房的第二扇门，不成形的黑色沙发，陈旧的橘色地毯——这一切都无比清晰熟悉。悬在空中的吊灯（它只有一个灯泡，外面覆着一只印花棉布灯罩）在房间各处投下片片阴影，所以我无法确定，墙纸是不是到处都有潮乎乎的渍痕。鲍里斯正躺在房屋中间的地板上，我走近的时候，他翻了翻身，平躺着。

“我决定做一个实验，”他对着我和天花板宣布，“我打算像这样让脖子保持不动。”

我低头一看，发现他缩着脖子，下巴挤进了锁骨里。

“好吧。你打算像那样保持多久？”

“至少二十四个小时。”

“很好，鲍里斯。”

我从他的身边跨过，走进了厨房。厨房长而狭窄，又一次显得分外熟悉。污秽的墙壁，屋檐角附近满是蜘蛛网的痕迹，残破的洗衣设备，一切的一切在我的记忆中拉扯纠缠。索菲已经系了条围裙，正跪

着把一些东西放进烤箱。我进来的时候，她抬起头，说了些关于食物的话，然后指向烤箱里，开心地笑着。我也笑了笑，又环顾了一眼厨房，转身走向客厅。

鲍里斯仍然躺在地板上，我进去的时候，他又立刻缩起脖子。我没有留心他，在沙发上坐下。旁边的地毯上放着份报纸，我拾了起来，以为可能是登着我照片的那份报纸。事实上，这是几天前的旧报纸，但我还是决定无论如何都要细细品读一下。我在头版看到那个叫冯·温特斯坦的男人接受采访，介绍他保护老城区的计划。鲍里斯仍躺在地毯上，一言不发，不时发出一声机器人似的噪音。我不时地偷偷瞟他几眼，发现他始终缩着脖子，于是我决定，除非他停止这幼稚可笑的游戏，否则我就不和他说一句。至于他是每次猜到我要看他时就缩着脖子，还是持久不动地保持着那种姿势，我不得而知，而且很快也就懒得管了。“就让他躺在那儿吧。”我这么想着，继续看报。

最后，大概过了二十分钟，索菲端着一个装满食物的大盘子走了进来。我看到有酥皮合子、咸味包和馅饼，全部都是手掌大小，大多做工复杂而精细。索菲把盘子放在了餐桌上。

“你们很安静啊。”她四下看了看屋子说，“来吧，我们现在开始享用吧。鲍里斯，看！还有这样一盘好吃的要端上来。全都是你最爱吃的！现在，你干吗不去选一个棋牌游戏，让我们一起玩，我去拿剩下那些吃的。”

索菲走回了厨房，她刚消失，鲍里斯就一跃而起，跑到桌子跟前，往嘴里塞了块馅饼。我不禁想要指出他的脖子已经恢复正常了，但最后还是继续看报，没说话。鲍里斯又发出了警笛似的噪音，并且快速穿过房间，在远处角落里一个高高的橱柜前停了下来。我记得所有棋牌游戏都放在这里，宽宽扁平的盒子被小心翼翼地堆在其他玩具和家什上面。鲍里斯继续盯着橱柜看了一会儿，然后突然甩开了柜门。

“我们要玩哪一个？”他问道。

我假装没听见，继续读着报纸，只用眼角的余光偷偷地瞥他。他先是转向了我，接着，意识到我不会回答后，他又转回了柜子。有好一阵工夫，他站在那里，思量着那堆棋牌游戏，时不时伸出手，用手指碰碰这个或者那个盒子的边缘。

索菲端着更多点心回来了。她准备布置餐桌的时候，鲍里斯走到她身边，我能听到他们两个在悄悄地争论着。

“你说过我可以躺在地板上吃的。”鲍里斯坚持道。

接着，过了一会，在我面前，他又滑坐在地毯上，把一个满当当的盘子放在身边。

我站起身走向餐桌，拿起一个盘子，考虑吃些什么，索菲则焦虑地在我周围徘徊。

“看起来棒极了！”我边说边把食物放到盘子里。

回到沙发那儿，我发现，把盘子放在身边的坐垫上，我就可以边吃边继续读报纸了。我早先决定要细细审读一遍这份报纸，甚至本地企业的广告也要细读，这会儿，我继续读着，不时地伸手到盘子里拿取食物，双眼一直未离开报纸。

同时，索菲坐在鲍里斯旁边的地板上，时不时地问他个问题——问他觉得某种特别的肉馅饼怎么样，或者某个学校的朋友怎么样。但不管她什么时候想开始这个话题，鲍里斯嘴里总塞满了食物，只能哼哼着作答。接着，索菲问：“好吧，鲍里斯，你决定好想玩哪个游戏了吗？”

我能感到，鲍里斯把目光转向了我，然后他轻轻地说：

“我不介意随便玩哪一个。”

“你不介意？”索菲的声音听起来有些难以置信。长长一段停顿之后，她说道：“那好吧。你要不介意，我就选啦。”我听到她站起身，“我现在要选这个了。”

这策略似乎立即就赢得了鲍里斯的赞同。他激动地站起来，跟着母亲走到橱柜前，我能听到两人在一堆盒子前面商议着，他们压低了嗓音，好像是考虑到我在阅读的缘故。最终，他们回来又坐在了地板上。

“来吧，我们现在开始吧。”索菲说道，“我们可以边吃边玩。”

等我下一刻看他们的时候，棋盘已经打开，鲍里斯正在兴致勃勃地摆放游戏牌和塑料筹码。过了一会儿，我听到索菲开口了，她的话让我有些惊讶：

“怎么了？你说过你想玩这个的。”

“我是说过。”

“那又是怎么了，鲍里斯？”

他顿了一会才说道：“我太累了。像爸爸一样。”

索菲叹了口气。接着，她突然用明快些的语气说道：

“鲍里斯，爸爸给你买了一样东西哦！”

我禁不住越过报纸边缘偷偷看过去，这时候，索菲投给我一记早有预谋似的微笑。

“我能现在就给他吗？”她问道。

我并不知道她说的是什麼，于是回以困惑的表情，但她站起身离开了房间，然后马上就回来了，举着昨天晚上我在电影院买的那本破旧的杂务手册。鲍里斯忘记了应有的疲惫，双脚蹦了起来，但索菲逗弄似的举着书，就是不让他够着。

“昨天晚上，我和爸爸一起出去了，”她说，“那是个特别棒的夜晚，中途他想起了你，给你买了这个。你以前从没有过这样的东西，对不对，鲍里斯？”

“别跟他说这东西多棒。”我在报纸后面说道，“只不过是本旧手册。”

“爸爸很好，是不是？”

我又偷偷看了一眼。索菲这会儿已经让鲍里斯拿到了书，他跪坐在地上，仔细地看。

“太棒了！”他边翻看着边小声嘟囔，“这个真的很棒，”他停在一页上，盯着看。“这上面什么都有。”

他又翻了几页，但是翻书的时候，书发出一声尖锐的“啪啦”声，分成了两半。鲍里斯继续翻着书，跟没事人一样。索菲本已经要坐下，看着鲍里斯的反应，她又站起身来。

“这上面什么都有，”鲍里斯说道，“真不错。”

我明显感觉到他在试图对我讲话。我继续看报，过了一小会儿，我听到索菲温柔地说：“我去取些胶带来。只要一卷胶带就搞定了。”

我听到索菲离开了房间，便继续阅读。从眼角的余光中，我可以瞥见鲍里斯仍在翻着书页。过了一小会儿，他抬头对我说：

“有一种特别的刷子，可以用来贴墙纸。”

我继续看报。终于，索菲溜达着走了回来。

“奇怪了，我哪儿也找不到胶带。”她嘀咕着。

“这本书真好，”鲍里斯对她说，“上面什么都有。”

“奇怪了。也许我们用完了。”索菲又走进了厨房。

我隐约记得，放棋牌游戏的橱柜里同样放有各种黏性胶带，就在右手边的角落中，在靠近橱柜底部的一个小抽屉里。我正想放下报纸，走过去找找，然而，索菲又回到屋里来了。

“没关系，”她说，“明早我去买一卷，然后我们把它补好。现在来吧，鲍里斯，我们开始玩游戏，不然睡觉前就结束不了了。”

鲍里斯没有回答，我听到他坐在了地毯上，仍然翻着书。

“好吧，如果你不玩的话，”索菲说，“那我就一个人玩了。”

接着传来了骰子在杯子里“咯咯”作响的声音。我继续读着报纸，心里不禁为索菲感到些许遗憾——今晚弄成了这个样子。可是话说回来，她也没有想到，自己竟会招来如此程度的混乱，却要我们付出代价。更有甚者，她今晚的厨艺也没有超常发挥。有些东西她从未想到要准备——比如，在小三角吐司上添几条罐装沙丁鱼，或者准备些奶酪和烤香肠串。她没有做任何煎蛋卷、奶酪夹心土豆或者鱼饼，也没有做填瓢辣椒，更别提那些抹有鳀鱼酱的小面包块和纵向切片的黄瓜了，甚至连剥成几瓣、边缘凹凸不平的煮鸡蛋都没有。至于后面的甜点，她没做葡萄干切片蛋糕，没做奶油手指饼干，甚至没有做草莓蛋糕卷。

我渐渐意识到，索菲已经摇骰子摇了很长时间。事实上，从她开始摇骰子起，那“咯咯”的声响就已经变了味道。这会儿，她缓慢无力地摇着骰子，仿佛是和着脑中盘旋的某种旋律。我警觉地放低报纸。

地板上，索菲正倚着一只僵硬的胳膊，那姿势让她的长发向下倾泻，披在肩膀上，完全遮住了她的脸。她看起来完全沉迷在了这场游戏中，全身的重心奇怪地前倾着，正好悬停在棋牌上方。她的整个身

体轻轻地摇摆着。鲍里斯悻悻然地看着她，双手盖在了书的裂缝之上。

索菲一直摇着骰子，三十秒，四十秒，最后终于让它在面前滚了出去。她迷迷糊糊地研究了一下，在棋盘上移动了些纸牌，然后又开始摇骰子。我能察觉出气氛中有种危险的味道，便决定是时候由自己来把控局面了。我把报纸扔到一边，拍拍双手站起身来。

“我得回酒店去了，”我宣布道，“而且我强烈建议你们两个去睡觉。我们度过了漫长的一天。”

我大步朝门厅走去，从眼角瞥到了索菲吃惊的表情。再下一刻，她就出现在我身后了。

“这就要走了吗？你吃饱了吗？”

“很抱歉，我知道你准备这顿饭很辛苦。但现在时间太晚了，我明早会很忙的。”

索菲叹了口气，看起来沮丧至极。“对不起，”她终于说道，“今晚不是非常成功。对不起。”

“别担心。不是你的错。我们几个都太累了。现在，我真得走了。”

索菲闷闷不乐地送我出去，说她明早会打电话给我。

接下来的几分钟，我一直在寂静无人的街道上转悠，努力回想着回酒店的路。终于，我走到了一条认识的路上，开始尽情享受起这个宁静的夜晚，享受起这个仅与思想和脚步声独处的机会。然而没多久，我又为今晚这样的结果感到有点遗憾。事实上，伴着那么多杂事，索菲已经成功地将我精心设计的时间表弄得混乱不堪。现在，我在这座城市里度过的第二天已行将结束，对我要评估考量的危机，我只获得了最表面的认识。我想起自己甚至中途遇阻，没能赶赴今早与伯爵夫人和市长的会面，原本我有机会亲耳听听布罗茨基的音乐。当然，我仍有充分的时间来收复失地，若干重要的会面仍等着我——比如，与公民互助小组——肯定能让我对这里的情况有一个更全面的了解。然而，不可否认的是，我身上压力重重，要是我没能以最轻松的心情结束这一天，索菲亦不能对此有何怨言。

我在一座石桥上徘徊良久，心里思考着这些事。我停下脚步，望着桥下的流水与河边的一排路灯，这时我突然想到，我还有一个选

择：我可以接受柯林斯小姐的邀请，去拜访她。没错，她暗示过自己地位特殊，能帮上忙，而现在，我在这里逗留的时间越发所剩无几，与她好好畅谈一番，极有可能为我提供许多信息，增进我对事态发展的了解。其实，要不是索菲任性胡为，这些信息我自己早搜集到了。我又想起了柯林斯小姐的起居室、天鹅绒窗帘和破旧的家具，突然希望自己此刻就身在那里。我又走了起来，走过石桥，没入黑沉沉的街道，决定明早一有机会便尽快去拜访她。

第三部

第二十一章

我一觉醒来，发现一缕明媚的阳光透过垂直的百叶窗倾泻进来，心中一惊，感觉晨日时光似乎已溜走大半。随后，我忽然记起昨晚的决定，要去拜访柯林斯小姐，于是起床，心中不觉平静了许多。

这个房间更小些，而且明显比之前的那间更闷热，我不禁对霍夫曼强迫我换房再次感到恼火。不过整个换房事件似乎已不再像昨天清早那样重要了，我在洗漱、换装时，发现自己可以毫不费力地将心思牢牢地放在与柯林斯小姐的重要会面上，而我现在是如此仰仗此次会面。我离开房间的时候，已经完全不再担心睡过了头——这一觉，我知道，终究会证明是无比宝贵的——而期待着好好吃顿早餐，其间，我可以整理一下思绪，想想将要和柯林斯小姐聊聊的那些话题。

可是，我来到楼下早餐间时，大吃了一惊：迎接我的却是吸尘器的声音。早餐间的门全关着，我推开一点，看到两个身着工作服的女人正在清洁地毯，桌椅已被推至墙边。不吃早餐就要面对如此重要的会面，这可不爽啊，我闷闷不乐地返回大厅。我从一群美国游客身边走过，来到接待台。接待员正坐在那儿看杂志，但一见到我，他就站起了身。

“早上好，瑞德先生。”

“早上好。早餐停止供应，这让我有些失望啊。”

一时间，那接待员看起来很迷茫。接着，他说道：“一般情况下，先生，即便这个时候，也会有人为您供应早餐的。但当然啰，今天很不巧，我们许多员工都到音乐厅去帮忙准备了。霍夫曼先生一大早就亲自过去了。恐怕我们只剩下一半的人手在工作。不幸的是，中庭也得关闭，直至午饭时间。当然，如果只是咖啡和面包卷的话……”

“没关系，”我冷冷地说道，“我只是没时间等事情全部安排完毕。今天我只好不吃早餐了。”

接待员又开始道歉，但我挥手打断他，转身走开了。

我走出酒店，步入阳光。路上交通拥挤，我随着人流走了一段路，然后才意识到，自己根本不清楚柯林斯小姐所住的公寓到底在哪儿。那天晚上，斯蒂芬载我们去的时候，我没有仔细观察，况且，这时候街道上挤满了行人，车辆川流不息，一切无从辨别。我在人行道上驻足片刻，想找一位路人打听方向。可想而知，柯林斯小姐在这城里十分出名，我不妨如此一问。事实上，我正要拦住一位穿着职业西装、大步向我走来的男子，突然感到有人从后面碰了下我的肩膀。

“早上好，先生。”

我转过身，发现是古斯塔夫，他抱着一只巨大的纸板箱，箱子几乎挡住了上半身。他喘着粗气，我不知道这仅仅是因为他身负重物，还是因为他跟着我一路追赶而来。不管怎样，在我向他打过招呼、询问他去哪里之后，过了好一会儿他才回答：

“哦，我把这个拿到音乐厅去，先生，”他终于说道，“大一些的物件昨晚就由货车运过去了，但还是需要很多很多东西。我一大早就开始往返于酒店和音乐厅之间了。我可以告诉您，先生，那儿的每个人都已激动得不得了了。气氛可热烈了。”

“那太好了，”我说，“我也非常期待此次活动。但不知您能否帮我一下。您看，我今早在柯林斯小姐的公寓有个约会，但我这会儿却有点迷路了。”

“柯林斯小姐？呃，一点也不远。这边，先生。如果可以的话，我陪您过去。哦，不，别担心，先生，我正好顺路。”

他那只箱子可能不像看起来那么重，因为我们动身时，古斯塔夫在我身边步履稳健。

“很高兴我们这样不期而遇，先生，”他继续道，“因为，坦白地讲，我一直想和您说件事。其实，自我们见面后，我就一直想提出来，但不知怎的，事情一件接着一件，没能抽出时间说。而现在，今晚马上就要到了，我还没问您呢。那是在几周前发生的事，在匈牙利咖啡馆的一场周日聚会上，就在我们听说您要到我们这儿来的消息后不久。当然啰，和大家一样，我们也在谈论这件事。有个人，我想是吉安尼吧，他说他从报刊上读到您是个很正派的人，与那些妄自尊大、恃才傲物的人不同，您极为关心普通市民，深得人心，他说着诸如此类的话，先生。我们围坐在桌边，八九个人，约瑟夫那晚不在，我们看着太阳西沉，没入广场那边，我觉得我们每个人立刻有了个共同的想法。起先，我们全都默默地坐在那儿，没人敢大声说出来。最

后，是卡尔，他历来如此，卡尔说出了我们所有人的心思。‘我们何不问问他？’他说，‘问问又会有什么损失呢？我们至少该问问他。他听起来完全不同于那号人。他说不定会同意呢，很难说啊。我们何不问问他，这可能是我们最后的机会了。’然后，突然间，我们大伙儿都讨论起来，自那以后，先生，老实说吧，不管我们坐在一起多久，没有不提起这话题的时候。我们也谈论其他事情，每个人都会大笑，然后，我们会沉默一阵，我们知道，大家又都在想那件事了。这就是我为何开始为自己感到难过的原因，先生。我想，我见过您几次，我有幸和您交谈，但我还没能鼓起勇气问您。现在这会儿，距离这场盛事就几个小时了，我还没有问出口。那么我如何在周日向伙计们交代呢？事实上，我今早起床的时候，先生，我对自己说，我必须找到他，我必须至少跟瑞德先生说说，大伙儿都指望着呢。但一切都这么忙乱，您一定有很多事情要做，于是我想，唉，我很可能失去机会了。所以您瞧，我非常高兴我们这样不期而遇，希望您不要介意我向您提起这事，可是，当然，如果你觉得我们在要求不可能的事，那么自然的，我们不会再提，大伙儿一定会接受的，哦，是的。”

我们已经转弯，拐进了一条繁忙的林荫大道。走过一组红绿灯时，古斯塔夫沉默了，直至我们走到了另一边、路过一排意大利咖啡馆时，他才说：

“我肯定您猜到了我要问什么，先生。我们只要求一个小小的提及。仅此而已，先生。”

“一个小小的提及？”

“只是一个小小的提及，先生。您知道的，我们，我们许多人，这些年辛勤劳作，试图改变这座城市对我们职业的态度。我们可能有了些小小的效果，但总的来说，我们还没能形成全面影响，而且，呃，完全可以理解的是，我们开始有了沮丧情绪。我们谁都不年轻了，大家都有种感觉，也许事情永远都不会真的改变了。但只要您今晚一句话，先生，就可以改变一切。这可能会成为我们这一职业的一个历史转折点。那就是大伙儿的想法。其实，先生，一些人认为这是我们最后的机会了，至少对我们这一代人是如此。我们何时才能又有这样的机会？他们一个劲地在问。所以，我呢，向您提了出来，先生。当然，假如您觉得这不是什么大事，我会非常理解您那样的想法，毕竟您来这儿是为了处理一些非常重要的问题的，我所说的只是件小事。对我们来说却是大事，但从总体上来看，我理解，是件小

事。假如您觉得不可能的话，先生，请您直说，我以后绝不会再提。”

我沉思片刻，同时意识到他正从箱子的边缘处盯视着我。

“您的意思是，”过了一会儿我说道，“让我在……在向本市市民发表演讲的时候稍微提起你们一下。”

“至多几句话就可以了，先生。”

当然，以这种方式帮助年迈的迎宾员和他的同事们，确实颇有吸引力。我想了一会儿，然后说道：“好吧。我非常乐意代表你们说几句。”

这回答字字入耳，起到了效果，我听到古斯塔夫深吸了一口气。接着他相当平静地说道：

“我们对您永远感激不尽，先生。”

他正要接着说些什么，但不知怎的，我一时兴起，想要挫败他向我表达感激之情的企图。

“好吧，让我们想想，我们怎么做呢？”我快速说道，摆出一副专注的神情。“是的，走上演讲台，我可以这样说：‘在我开始之前，有件很小却又相当重要的事情要说明。’诸如此类的话。是的，那容易得很。”

突然间，我看到了一幅生动的画面：当古斯塔夫向他们宣布这一消息的时候，一群健壮的老人围坐在一张咖啡桌边，他们脸上挂着难以置信、无比喜悦的表情。我看到自己静静地来到他们中间，他们的脸顿时转向了我。这当儿，我意识到古斯塔夫走在我身旁，无疑是已经谢了一阵，差不多要结束了，但我还是继续刚才的话。

“是的，是的。‘很小却又相当重要的事情，’我可以对他们这样说。‘有些事我在世界其他城市都见到过，却发现这里的情况有些特异……’或许用‘特异’一词太过强烈。或者我可以用‘奇异’。”

“啊，是的，先生，”古斯塔夫插嘴道，“‘奇异’这个词不错。我们没人想煽动敌对情绪。真是如此，对我们来说，您才是唯一的机会。您看，即便几年后另外一位名人同意来我们城市，而且即便我们成功地说服他为我们说几句，但谁能保证他能有您这样的才智呢？‘奇异’一词非常好，先生。”

“是的，是的，”我继续道，“我或许会停顿一下，用略显责备的表情看着他们，那样，整个大厅里的所有人就会静声屏息，默默等候。接着，终于，我会这样说，呃，让我想想，我会说：‘女士们，先生们，对你们来说，在这里住了这么多年之后，某些事情或许看起来很平常，但在外人眼里，立刻就会显得不同寻常，引人注目……’”

突然，古斯塔夫停住脚步。起先，我以为他这么做或许是因为他急于表达自己的感激之情。然而，我看了看他，这才意识到情况并非如此。他僵在了人行道上，头被箱子挤着，歪到了一边，所以他的脸颊紧贴着箱子一侧。他双眼紧闭，稍稍蹙额，好像是在脑中做一个艰难的计算。接着，我看到他的喉结慢慢地、慢慢地、慢慢地上下移动——一下，两下，三下。

“您还好吧？”我问道，用一只胳膊扶在他身后。“天哪，您最好在哪儿坐下。”

我开始动手接过他身上的箱子，但古斯塔夫的双手却牢牢抓住不放。

“不，不，先生，”他说道，双目仍然紧闭。“我没事。”

“真的吗？”

“是的，是的。我没事。”

又过了一会儿，他仍站立不动。接着，他张开双眼，环顾四周，微微一笑，又走了起来。

“您不知道这对我们意味着什么，先生，”我们一起走了几步之后，他说道，“过了这么些年哪。”他微笑着摇了摇头。“我会在第一时间向大伙儿传达这消息。今早还有好多活儿，但只要给约瑟夫打个电话就行了。他会告诉其他人的。您能想象吗，先生，那对他们意味着什么？啊，您得转弯了。我得再往前走一会儿。哦，别担心，我没事儿。柯林斯小姐的公寓，您知道，就在您的右前方。好吧，先生，我无法向您表达我有多么感激您。大伙儿一生中没等待过别的什么，但他们会等待今晚的。我知道的，先生。”

我挥手向他道别，转过他所指的那个弯。走了几步之后，我回头张望，发现古斯塔夫仍站在拐角，从那个箱子的边缘看着我。看到我转身，他用力地点了点头——箱子没法让他挥手——接着继续前行。

我发现自己所在的这个街区主要是一片住宅区。走过几个街区，周围变得越来越安静，头顶上出现了带着西班牙式阳台的公寓住宅，我认出那天晚上我曾坐着斯蒂芬的车经过它们。街区连着街区，绵延伸展，我继续走着，开始担心自己可能认不出我和鲍里斯那晚在门前等待的那所公寓。但接着，我发现自己停在了一个十分熟悉的门口处，过了一会儿，我走上前去，透过玻璃嵌板向门内两侧窥视。

门厅布置得整洁素净，让我几乎无从确定是否来对了地方。接着，我想起了那天晚上的见闻始末：我看到斯蒂芬和柯林斯小姐在前厅里谈了一会儿，然后才走进大楼深处。冒着被错当成闯入者的风险，我用一条腿勾住矮墙，侧过身子，从最近的那扇窗户向里望去。阳光明媚，我很难看清里面的景象，只能依稀辨认出一个矮壮男人的身影，他穿着白衬衫，系着领带，独自坐在一张扶手椅上，几乎正对着窗户。他的目光好像定格在我身上，但表情却很空洞，完全不清楚他究竟是注意到了我，或者只是望着窗外，陷入沉思。这些对我来说都没用，我从墙上抽回腿，再次看了看大门，等确信是这扇门后，便按了按一楼公寓的门铃。

等了一小会儿，透过闪光的玻璃嵌板，我欣喜地看到：柯林斯小姐的身影正向我走来。

“啊，瑞德先生，”她边说边打开大门，“我还在想不知我今早是否会见到您呢。”

“您好，柯林斯小姐。经过思量，我决定采纳您善意的建议，来到这里拜访您。但我知道您今早已经有位客人了。”我指了指她的前厅。“或者您想让我另择时间再来。”

“我可不想让您走，瑞德先生。实际上，尽管您说我很忙，但和平时清晨相比，今天这儿是相当安静了。您看，只有一个人在等。我刚刚和一对年轻夫妇在一起。我已经与他们谈了一个小时，可是他们的问题如此根深蒂固，他们有那么多事情要谈，直到今天才说出来，我无心催促他们呀。请别介意在前厅等会儿，真的不用等太久。”接着，她忽然间压低了嗓音，说道：“这会儿在等的这位先生是个可怜人，他很悲惨，很孤独，只想要几分钟能有人听他倾诉，仅此而已。他不会待太久的，我会很快打发他走。他几乎天天早上都来，不介意偶尔被催促一下，他已经占用了我很多时间。”接着她的嗓音又恢复到了正常音调，继续道：“好吧，请进，瑞德先生，别像那样站在外面了，我看今天天气不错。若您愿意，而假若那时又没人在等，我们

可以去斯腾伯格花园走走。很近，我肯定，我们有很多事情要聊。实际上，我已经为您的处境想了很多了。”

“太好了，柯林斯小姐。其实，我知道您今早或许很忙，如果不是牵涉到一些特别紧急的事情，我不会这样贸然来访。您看，事实上——”我重重地叹了口气，摇了摇头，“事实上，由于各种各样的原因，我没能按照原计划行事，到现在，我们才有缘相见，时间急迫，而……呃，一方面，您知道，我今晚得向这儿的人们演讲，向您完全坦白吧，柯林斯小姐……”我几乎要打住话头，但看到她用一副和蔼的表情看着我，就艰难地继续道：“坦白说，有很多问题，这儿本地的问题，我想请您给我提些建议，然后……然后我才能——”我停下来，试着不让嗓音颤抖，“然后我才能为演讲词定稿。毕竟，所有这些都这么依赖我……”

“瑞德先生，瑞德先生，”柯林斯小姐一只手放在我肩上，“请镇静。请进吧。那会好些，进来吧。现在请不要担心。您现阶段有小小不安是完全可以理解的，那是非常自然的。其实，您如此在意，倒是十分值得赞赏。我们可以谈谈所有这些事，这些本地问题，别担心，我们很快就可以开始。但请允许我现在这么说吧，瑞德先生。我认为您是过分担心了。是的，没错，你今晚重任在肩，可是，你以前多次身处相似境地，而据大家说，您十分圆满地完成了任务。为何这次会有所不同呢？”

“可我要告诉您的是，柯林斯小姐，”我打断了她，“这次的确不同。这次我没能了解事实原委……”我又重重地叹了口气，“事实上，我没有机会按照寻常惯例准备我的讲话……”

“我们马上就谈所有这些问题。不过瑞德先生，我敢肯定您这是杞人忧天了。您何必如此担心呢？您有无与伦比的专长，是一位国际知名的天才大师，真的，您有什么好怕的呢？事实上——”她再次压低嗓音，“像这种小城市里的人，不管什么，只要是您说的，他们都会感激不尽。只管告诉他们您的总体印象就行了，他们是绝不会抱怨的。根本没什么好怕的。”

我点了点头，觉得她说得的确在理，紧张感几乎立刻烟消云散。

“等会儿，我们好好谈谈所有问题。”柯林斯小姐领着我走入前厅，一只手仍搭在我肩上。“我保证不会太久的。请坐，随意些。”

我走进一间小小的方形房间，里面阳光普照，鲜花朵朵。一把把迥然各异的扶手椅表明，这是一间牙医或者医生的候诊室，而咖啡桌

上的杂志同样也印证了这一点。一看到柯林斯小姐，矮壮男人立刻起身，或许是出于礼貌，或许是因为他期盼她这会儿能请他进起居室。我本期待着柯林斯小姐能介绍我们认识，但从当下的规约来看，这里确实像在候诊室那样有先来后到的顺序，因为柯林斯小姐只是冲那男人微微一笑，然后就径直隐入里间，边走边满怀歉意地对我们两个人低语道：“我不会太久的。”

那矮壮男人又坐了下来，盯着地板。刹那间，我想他会说些什么，可他却一直沉默，我便转过身，坐在藤沙发上，这沙发直面阳光满溢的凸窗，正是我先前张望的那扇。一坐进那藤沙发，它便嘎嘎作响，倒也令人宽心。一大片阳光洒落在我膝盖上；在我脸旁，有一只插着郁金香的大花瓶。仅仅几分钟前，我在按响门铃时还担心着眼下之事，现在我已经神清气爽，心境与刚才大不相同。当然，刚才柯林斯小姐说得很对。在这样一座城市，人们对我所说的任何话语都会感激不尽，很难想象人们会深究我的观点，或者吹毛求疵。况且，柯林斯小姐再次指出，此类情形我之前已经历过无数次了。即便我未能好好准备讲话，但必定仍能做一场有声有色的演讲。我继续坐在阳光中，发现自己愈发心平气和，惊诧于先前自己竟陷入如此焦虑的状态之中。

“刚才我在想，”矮壮男人突然对我说，“你跟那帮老朋友是否还有联系？像汤姆·爱德华兹？或者克里斯·法利？或者那两位曾住在泽国农庄的女孩？”

这时我才意识到，这位壮汉是乔纳森·帕克赫斯特，我们俩在英国上学时相当要好。

“没有，”我告诉他，“不幸的是，我差不多与那时的所有人都失去了联系。我周游列国，哪有可能保持联系呀。”

他点了点头，没有笑。“我想肯定是很困难的，”他说，“呃，不过他们全都记得你。哦，是的。我去年回英国的时候，遇见了他们几个。显然，他们一帮人大约一年聚一次。有时我会羡慕他们，但大多数时候，我很高兴没让自己困在那样一个圈子里。那就是我为何会远居此地的原因，在这儿我可以随心所欲，人们不会要我一直做小丑。但你知道，我回去时，我在那间酒吧见到他们时，他们立刻又开始了。‘嘿，是老帕克斯！’他们全都大喊道。他们还是那样叫我，仿佛时光根本没有消逝。‘帕克斯！是老帕克斯！’我刚进去的时候，他们甚至还发出驴叫似的喊声来欢迎我，哦，天哪，我无法形容那是多么可怕。我能感到自己又变回了那个可怜的小丑，我来这儿就是不

想做小丑呀，是的，就从他们像驴叫唤的那一刻开始。那是个非常不错酒吧，我告诉你，是个典型的老式英国乡村酒吧，生着炉火，砖墙上满是那些小小的黄铜饰品，壁炉台上方挂着一把古剑，诚恳的店主说着开心的事儿，那一切引人怀旧——在这里住了这么长时间，我可真怀念那儿啊。但余下的经历呢，老天爷，叫我一想起来就不寒而栗。他们发出那驴叫似的喊声，满心希望我跳到桌上扮演小丑。那一整个晚上，他们不停地提起一个又一个名字，他们甚至并非是在谈论这些人，而只是发出更多的喧闹声，或者只要提起另一个名字，他们就会立刻哈哈大笑。你知道，他们提到了萨曼莎，全都大笑、高呼、欢叫。接着他们叫出另一个人的名字，比方说，罗杰·皮科克，他们所有人就会发出像看足球时一样的呐喊声。太可怕了。但最糟糕的是，他们所有人都希望我再扮演小丑，我就是不能那样做啊。但令人难以置信的是，我当时仿佛变成了另一个人，然后又统统开始了——滑稽的嗓音，怪怪的鬼脸，哦，是的，我发现自己竟还可以扮演得这么惟妙惟肖。我猜他们完全有理由相信我在国外还是干这行的。事实上，他们中有一个人正是这么说的。我想应该是汤姆·爱德华兹吧，在当晚的某个时刻，他们全都喝醉了，他重重地拍了拍我的背，说道：‘帕克斯！他们那儿一定爱死你了！帕克斯！’我想，这肯定是因为在刚刚为他们表演一番后，我告诉了他们在这里的一些生活，又扮了会儿小丑，谁知道呢，总之，他就是那么说的，其他人就一个劲地笑个不停。哦，是啊，我确实很轰动呢。他们一直不停地说他们多想我，我总是这么个好笑料，哦，已经那么久了，我又听到有人这么说了，那么久了，我又受到那样的欢迎，那么温暖、热情。然而，我那样做又是为了什么呢？我曾经发誓再也不那样做了，那正是我来到此地的原因。甚至在我去酒吧的路上、我一路沿着那条小巷走下去的时候，我还一直对自己这样说。那个晚上寒飕飕、雾蒙蒙的，天非常冷，我一路走在小巷上，告诉自己：那是多年前的事了，我再也不那样了，我要给他们看看现在的我。我一遍又一遍地重复着，试图让自己强硬起来，但我一进去，看到那暖洋洋的炉火，听到他们发出驴叫似的喊声来欢迎我，哦，我就感觉到这儿太孤单了。好吧，在这儿，我不必做鬼脸，不必发怪声，但至少那些都很管用。或许那些让人无法忍受，但管用，他们全都爱我，我的大学老同学，可怜的笨蛋们，他们一定认为我现在还是那样。他们根本猜不到，我的邻居们认为我是个非常严肃、相当无趣的英国人。他们觉得我彬彬有礼却又呆头呆脑，非常孤独，非常沉闷。呃，至少那也比当小丑帕克斯要好吧。那驴叫似的喧闹声，哦，多可怜哪——一群中年男人发出那种声响，而我呢，拉长着脸，发出那些傻乎乎的声音——哦，天哪，真是太恶心

了。但我控制不住自己，我已经很久很久没有被朋友们像那样围着了。你呢，瑞德，难道你不渴望那时的时光吗？即便你已经这么成功？哦，是的，那正是我要告诉你的。你如今可能不太记得他们了，但他们却还是记得你。无论他们什么时候搞这样的小聚会，好像一晚上总会挤出一些时间专门谈论你。哦，是的，我亲眼见过。他们先是回忆许多其他人的名字，他们不喜欢直接说到你，你要知道，他们喜欢来个好的前奏。实际上，他们会有小小的停顿，假装想不起任何那时候其他人的名字了，接着，一个人终于说道：‘瑞德怎么样了？有人最近听到过他的消息吗？’随即他们闹翻了天，发出了最恶心的声音，介于讥讽与干呕之间的那种声音。他们不约而同地反复吼叫，真的，在提到你名字之后的头一分钟里，那就是他们所做的一切。接着，他们开始哈哈大笑，然后，他们全都模仿起钢琴演奏，你知道的，就像这样——”帕克赫斯特摆出一副傲慢神情，在一排想象出来的隐形琴键上矫揉造作地弹奏起来。“他们全都这样，然后发出更多的干呕声。接着，他们开始七嘴八舌地议论你，讲他们记忆中有关你的一个个小故事，听得出他们已经互相说了好多遍了，因为他们全都 know，他们全都 know 何时再开始鼓噪，何时说：‘什么？你开玩笑吧！’如此等等。哦，他们真的很开心啊。我在那儿的时候，一个人回忆道，期末考试结束的那晚，他们几个正准备出去撒晚上最后一泡尿，看到你从路那边过来，满脸严肃。他们对你说：‘来吧，瑞德，过来和我们一起把你的大脑撒出去！’显然，你回了话，然后，不管是谁在讲这件事，他们都会摆出这副表情，显然你当时说，”帕克赫斯特又换上了傲慢的表情，显出一副荒谬自大的口吻，“‘我忙得不得了。今晚我可不敢不练琴呐。因为这些讨厌的考试，我已经两天没练了！’刹那间，他们异口同声地发出一阵干呕声，摆出在空中弹奏钢琴的样子，这时他们开始……呃，我就不告诉你他们其他的胡闹了，真的很可怖，真是一帮恶心鬼，他们大部分人都很苦闷，很失意，很愤怒。”

帕克赫斯特说话的时候，学生时代的记忆片段涌入我脑中，一时间，我倍感平静，无暇顾及帕克赫斯特在说些什么。我想起一个明媚的早晨，正如今日这样，阳光溢满窗，我坐在旁边的沙发上休息，我和其他四个学生一起住在一所旧农舍，那时我正待在我的小房间里，膝上放着一本协奏曲乐谱。之前一个小时，我一直在无精打采地研读乐谱，这会儿正考虑放下它，转而从脚边木地板上的一堆十九世纪小说里挑出一本来读。窗户敞开着，一阵微风吹了进来。窗外，几个学生坐在没有修剪过的草地上，正讨论着哲学，或者诗歌，或者诸如此类的东西。我的小房间里除了有张沙发，其他东西很少——只有一条

褥垫铺在地上，另外，角落里还有一张小小的书桌和一把直背椅——但我非常喜欢这沙发。地上通常摊满书籍和杂志，午后那段长长的时光里，我时常翻阅它们，而且我有个习惯，常常半开着门，这样，不论谁经过都可以晃进来聊会儿天。我闭上双眼，一时间，我迫切渴望回到那周围都是开阔农田的小农舍，伙伴们都懒懒地躺在高高的草丛中，但没多久，我开始真正理解帕克赫斯特所说的那些事实了。那时候，我才意识到，他说的正是同样这一群人，此刻他们的脸与记忆中的脸一一重合。他们在我门口张望时，我曾懒洋洋地招呼过他们，还和他们随意待了大概一两个小时，讨论某位小说家或者西班牙吉他手，而帕克赫斯特这会儿说着的，正是这些人中的某几位。即便如此，在这溢满阳光的房中一隅，我斜倚在柯林斯小姐的那张藤沙发上，对帕克赫斯特所说的话只感到隐约有些不悦——这种平和的状态让我几乎觉得高兴起来。

帕克赫斯特继续说着，我却早已没有留心听了。这时，有人敲响了我身后的窗板，把我吓了一跳。帕克赫斯特好像不想理睬这声音，继续说着话，我也试图不理那响声，就好像一个人在美梦中被闹钟吵醒时那样。但那敲击声持久不断，帕克赫斯特终于停了下来，说道：“哦，天哪，是那个叫布罗茨基的家伙。”

我睁开双眼，扭头看去。果然是布罗茨基，他正热切地往房里窥探呢。不知是因为外面的光亮，抑或是他自己视力的问题，似乎让他往里看得很费力。他的脸紧贴着玻璃，双手挡在眼睛上方，但他好像还是没有看见我们。我这才意识到：他以为是柯林斯小姐自己在这所房间里，所以才在外面敲玻璃。

终于，帕克赫斯特站起身，说道：“我最好去看看他想干什么。”

第二十二章

我能听到帕克赫斯特打开了门，接着，门厅处传来了争执的声音。最后，帕克赫斯特回到屋里，冲我翻了个白眼，叹了口气。

布罗茨基跟着他进来。他看上去比我上次越过拥挤的房间见到他时要高些，我又留意到他奇怪的站姿——角度微微倾斜，好像要倒下似的——但同时也发现他已完全清醒。他系着一个猩红色的蝴蝶领结，穿着一套看起来全新且颇为时髦的黑色西装。白衬衫的领子向外竖着——是设计如此，还是上浆过多而太硬，我无从得知。他手捧一束鲜花，眼里满是疲惫与悲伤。布罗茨基停在门槛处，试探性地在门框周围张望一番，或许是期待在屋里发现柯林斯小姐。

“她很忙，我告诉过你了，”帕克赫斯特说道，“瞧，我恰好是柯林斯小姐的一位密友，我可以肯定地告诉你，她不想见你。”帕克赫斯特瞥了我一眼，期待我确认此话，但我已决定不想卷入其中，于是只是冲布罗茨基微微一笑。就在这时，布罗茨基认出了我。

“瑞德先生。”他说道，庄重地低下了头。然后，他再次转向帕克赫斯特。“如果她在的话，求你去叫一下她。”他示意了一下手里举着的那束花，好像那花本身便能解释他为何非见她不可。“求你了。”

“我告诉过你了，我帮不了你。她不会见你的。更何况，她现在正在和客人交谈呢。”

“好吧，”布罗茨基嘀咕道，“好吧。你不愿帮我。好吧。”

他一边嘀咕，一边朝着柯林斯小姐之前消失的内门走去。帕克赫斯特迅速挡住了他的去路。一时间，布罗茨基高大瘦削的身躯与矮小粗壮的帕克赫斯特冲撞起来。帕克赫斯特用双手抵住布罗茨基的胸膛，企图阻止他继续前进。与此同时，布罗茨基一手按住帕克赫斯特的肩膀，目光越过肩膀望向内门，好像他置身于人群中，颇有礼貌地越过面前的人凝望着。这当儿，他双脚仍旧稳稳地做出拖步前行的动作，口中断断续续地说着“求你了”。

“好吧！”帕克赫斯特最终大喊道，“好吧，我去跟她说。我知道她会说什么，不过，好吧，好吧！”

他们两人分开了。帕克赫斯特举起手指，说道：

“但你得在这儿等着！你得保证在这儿等着！”

帕克赫斯特最后瞪了一眼布罗茨基，转过身，走进门去，随后牢牢地关上了门。

起先，布罗茨基站在那儿盯着门，我以为他要跟着帕克赫斯特一起进去。但最后他转过身，坐了下来。

好一阵子，布罗茨基好像在脑中排演着什么，嘴里嘟囔着一个奇怪的字眼，这时候跟他说什么都显得不甚合宜。他不时地仔细看看手中的花束，好像一切都仰仗于它似的，哪怕最微小的瑕疵都会酿成大错。接着，我们继续坐着，都没说话，过了一会儿，他终于看着我说道：

“瑞德先生。我很荣幸终于能结识您了。”

“您好，布罗茨基先生，”我答道，“希望您还好。”

“呃……”他含糊地挥了挥手，“我不能说感觉很好。您看，我很疼。”

“哦？疼？”见他什么都没说，我便继续问道：“您指的是情感上的疼吗？”

“不，不。是伤痛。多年前落下的，总是折磨我。非常疼。或许这就是我当初酗酒的原因吧。喝醉了，就感觉不到了。”

我期待他吐露更多，但他沉默了。过了一会儿，我问道：

“您是指内心的伤痛吗，布罗茨基先生？”

“内心？我的心没那么糟吧。不，不，这跟……”突然他大笑起来。“我明白了，瑞德先生。您认为我在借诗比喻吧。不，不，我的意思很简单，就是个伤口。我受过伤，非常严重，那是很多年前了。在俄罗斯。医生医术不高，他们没能治好。疼得很厉害。一直未能彻底治好。这么长时间以来一直发作，仍然很痛。”

“听到您这么说，我很难受。那一定很讨厌吧。”

“讨厌？”闻此，他想了想，又大笑起来。“您可以这么说，瑞德先生，我的朋友。讨厌。对我来说，真是太他妈的讨厌了。”突然，他似乎记起自己还举着花。他闻了闻，深吸了一口气。“我们还是别谈这个了。刚才您问我感觉如何，我就告诉了您，但其实我无意

谈那个。我想勇敢地面对伤痛。多年来我从未提起它，但现在我老了，也不喝酒了，这伤很痛啊。根本就没有真正治愈过。”

“肯定有办法治的。您去看医生了吗？或许专家之类的？”

布罗茨基又看了看花，微微一笑。“我想再向她示爱，”他几乎是自言自语道，“在这伤口恶化之前。我想再向她示爱。”

一阵诡异的沉默。接着我说：

“要是您这伤已这么久了，布罗茨基先生，我倒认为它不可能再恶化了。”

“这些旧伤，”他耸了耸肩。“多年来一直是老样子。你以为你有办法对付了。然后等你老了，它们又开始长了。但现在还没有那么糟。或许我还能行男女之事。我现在老了，但有时候……”他神秘兮兮地向前倾了倾身子。“我试过。您知道的，我自己解决。我还行。我能忘记痛。我喝醉的时候，我那玩意儿，您知道的，根本没用，没用。我从未往那方面想过。只是上厕所时用。仅此而已。但现在我可以了，即便很痛。我试过了，就在前晚。但我肯定不能，您知道的，一直都行，呃，全都行。我那玩意儿已经老了，这么多年了，只是，呃，上厕所才用。啊！”他靠回椅子，越过我的肩膀凝望阳光，双眼充满了渴望。“所以我想再次向她示爱。但我们不会住在这儿了。不在这个地方。我一直讨厌这地方。我以前来过这儿，是的，我承认，我曾经在深夜没人看见时走过这儿。她从不知道，但我过去常来，站在外面，看着这幢大楼。我一向讨厌这条街，这幢公寓。我们不会住在这儿了。您知道，这是第一次，第一次我走进这讨厌的地方。她为什么选择这样一个地方？不像她中意的啊。我们会住在城外。如果她不想回农舍，没关系。我们会再另找个地方，或许另一间农舍吧。绿草树木环绕，我们的小动物可以尽情嬉耍。我们的动物不会喜欢这儿的。”他仔细环顾四周，看了看墙壁和天花板，或许是在重估这幢公寓的优点吧。然后，他下了断论：“不，我们的动物怎么能在这儿玩耍？我们要住在有草、有树、有田野的地方。您知道，用不了一年，六个月吧，假如伤痛加剧，我那玩意就不听我使唤了，我们就不能再行男女之事了，我不在乎。只要我能和她哪怕再做一次。不，一次不够，我们得回到从前那样，您知道，我们从前那样。六次，是的，六次，我们就会记起所有事情，那就是我想要的一切。那之后呢，好吧，好吧。假若有人，一个医生，天哪，假如他说你只能再和她做六次，然后就完了，你太老了，你的伤口会太痛的，那之后就全完了，就只能上厕所用了，我统统不介意。我会说，好吧，我没关系。只要

我能重新拥她入怀，六次就足够了，那么我们就会像以前那样，回到当初，我不在乎，不在乎之后怎样。不管怎样，我们会有自己的宠物的。我们就不需要行房了。那是年轻情侣需要的，因为他们没能足够了解对方，他们不曾恨过对方，然后又重新相爱。您知道，我还能做。我试过，我自慰过，就在前晚。不是一直都行，但我能让它坚挺起来。”

他顿了顿，严肃地冲我点了点头。

“真是的，”我笑道，“那太棒了。”

布罗茨基靠回椅子，再次凝望窗外。接着他说：“一切都不同了，不像年轻的时候了。年轻时，你老想着妓女，您知道，跟妓女干些肮脏下流的事情。如今，对那些事情我一点也不上心了，我只想让我那玩意儿干一件事，我想和她再像从前那般行事，再续前缘，仅此而已。然后，假如她想休息，那好啊，我也不再做要求。但我想再来一回，干它个六次，那就足矣，就像我们从前那样。年轻时，我们不是很好的情侣。我们不像现在的年轻人那样或许哪儿都能干，我不知道。但我们，呃，有很好的默契。是的，真的，我年轻时，有时，厌倦了，因为每次都是老调重弹。但她就想那样，她……她不想用别的方式，我对此很是生气，她却不知这其中的缘故。但现在，我想重复那老惯例，按部就班，就像我们从前那样。前天晚上，您知道，当我……当我在尝试的时候，我想起了妓女，意念上的妓女，绝棒的妓女，飘飘欲仙地做着，但却没用，没用，没用。然后我就想，唉，那也无可厚非。我这杆老枪，只剩下最后一个任务了，为何要用妓女来羞辱它呢？那跟我现如今的这个老家伙又有何关系呢？只剩最后一个任务了，我应该好好思量。于是我开始思索。我躺在黑暗中，回忆，回忆，回忆。我想起我们曾经是如何干的，一步一步地。对，我们就要再那样干。当然，如今我们的身体都老了，但我已想通了。我们就一切照旧。而她一定还记得的，她不会忘记的，一步一步地。只要我们身处黑暗，钻进被窝。我们从未大胆过，您看，因为她，她很卑谦，她就想那样。我那时很介意，我总是想对她说：‘你为何就不能像妓女那样？在灯光下展现自己？’但现在，我不介意了，我只想像过去那样，假装准备睡觉了，静静地躺着，十分钟，十五分钟。然后，我猛不丁地开口，在黑暗中放肆地说些下流话。‘我想让他们看见你一丝不挂的样子，’我会说，‘酒吧里喝得烂醉的水手们。在一个港口小酒馆里，一群烂醉如泥、淫荡齷齪的人，我想让他们看见你一丝不挂地躺在地板上。’是的，瑞德先生，过去我常常在我们躺下假装入睡的时候突然说这样的话，是的，突然打破沉默，那很重要，

突然间打破。当然啰，她那时很年轻，很漂亮，现在的话，就会听起来很怪，一个老女人赤身裸体地躺在酒馆地板上，但我还是会说，因为我们过去就是这样开始的。她什么都不说的，所以我就多嘴几句。‘我想让他们全部都盯着你。四脚着地，躺在地板上。’但您能想象吗？一个孱弱的老女人那样子做？那些醉醺醺的水手如今会说什么呢？可是，或许他们也和我们一起变老了。或许，那些港口酒馆里的水手，在他们心目中，她还是过去的样子，他们才不介意呢。‘是的，他们都会盯着你看的！全部都会！’我会抚摸她，抚摸她的臀部，我记得的，她喜欢让我抚摸她的臀腰部，我会像从前那样抚摸她，然后我会靠近她，低声说：‘我要让你做个娼妓。夜复一夜。’您能想象吗？但我会那样说的，因为从前就是这样的。我会掀掉被单，俯在她身上，劈开她的双腿，也许大腿根连接处会发出“咔哒”一声，会发出“啪啪”的声响，有人说她伤到了臀部，或许她如今没法叉开双腿了。唉，我们会尽力做好的，因为接下来正需要那样。接着，我会俯身亲吻她的私处，我并不期待那儿的味道还如从前那样，不，我已经想通了，可能味道很难闻，就像臭鱼一样，她整个身体可能都很难闻，我已经仔细想过了。而我，我的身体呢，现在看来也不是那么好了。而我的皮肤，有这些鳞屑，不断剥落，我也不知道那是什么。去年，刚开始时，只是头皮上有。我梳头的时候，这些巨大的鳞片，就像透明的鱼鳞一样纷纷掉落下来。原本只是头皮，但现在全身都是，手肘上，膝盖上，连前胸都这样。这些鳞片，闻起来也像是鱼腥味。唉，不断剥落，我没法止住，她必须得忍受，所以我不会抱怨她私处闻起来也那样，或是她双腿不发出咔哒声就张不开，我不会生气，您不会看到我像对待坏掉的东西一样非要分开它们不可，不，不。我们会完全按照以前那样做的。而我那老家伙，或许只是半挺着，高潮来临时，她会伸手抓住，低声说道：‘是的，我会让他们看！我会让水手们统统都看我！我会逗弄他们，直到他们再也忍不住！’您能想象吗？以她如今这副样子？但我们不会介意。不管怎么说，我讲过的，或许水手们会和我们一起变老。她会伸手抓住它，我那老家伙，从前，到了这个时候，它就会变得非常坚硬了，世界上没有任何东西能让它萎缩，除了……唉，但如今，或许只能是半硬了，那是我在前晚达到的最佳状态了，谁知道呢，或许能坚持到底，我会使劲放进去，但她可能会像贝壳一样紧，但我们会努力的。在恰当时机，我们会记起是何时，即便那下面什么都没发生，我们也知道如何完成这些步骤，因为到那时，我们都会清晰地回忆起一切，什么都阻挡不了我们，即便那下面什么都没发生，即便我们所做的一切只是紧紧地拥着对方，那也没关系，我们仍会适时地说：‘他们会要

你！他们会要你，你逗弄他们太久了！’而她会说：‘是的，他们会要我，所有的水手，他们会要我！’即便那下面什么都没发生，我们仍能紧紧相拥，我们会紧紧相拥，像从前那样说出口，那无关紧要的。或许我那老家伙会很痛，您知道的，因为我有伤，但没关系，她会记得我们从前是如何干的。已过了这么多年，但她仍会记得的，记得每一个步骤。瑞德先生，您没受过伤吧？”

他突然间看着我。

“伤？”

“我这个是旧伤。也许那就是我酗酒的原因吧。很疼啊。”

“太不幸了。”接着，短暂沉默之后，我补充道：“我曾在一场足球赛中狠狠地伤到了一根脚趾。我当时十九岁。但那也没什么大不了的。”

“在波兰时，瑞德先生，我是个乐队指挥，那时候，我都未曾想过这伤会痊愈。我指挥乐队的时候，总是摸我的伤口，轻抚它。有段时间，我会抓弄伤口边缘，甚至狠狠地用手指按压伤口。但我很快便意识到，伤口不会痊愈了。音乐，即便我当时是个指挥，也明白只是一种安慰罢了，这也是它全部的含义。它帮了我一阵子。我曾喜欢那感觉，按压伤口的感觉，它让我着迷。一个真正的伤口，就有那样的作用，会让人着迷。每天看起来都会有些不同。你便会想，变了吗？或许最终会痊愈吧。你望着镜中的它，好像是不同了。但是，当你触碰它时，你知道还是副老样子，还是你的老朋友。年复一年都是如此，然后你知道，它不会痊愈了，最后你就厌倦了。厌倦透了。”他陷入沉默，又望了一眼手里的花束。然后他又说道：“厌倦透了。您还没有厌倦透吧，瑞德先生？厌倦透了。”

“或许，”我试探性地说道，“柯林斯小姐可以治愈您的伤。”

“她？”他突然大笑一声，接着又沉默不语。过了一会儿，他静静地说道：“她就像音乐一样。一种安慰。美妙的安慰。那就是我如今唯一的盼求。一种安慰。但要治愈伤口？”他摇了摇头。“假如我现在给您看看，我的朋友——我可以给您看一下——您就会发现那是不可能的。药是不灵的啊。我想要的，现在我唯一想要的，就是安慰。即便就像我所说的那样，只能达到半挺的程度，我们只不过是舞动而已，那么再来六次就足够了。那之后，伤口爱怎么样就怎么样吧。到时候我们有自己的动物，有青草，田野。她为何选了这样一个地方？”

他又一次环视四周，摇了摇头。这次他沉默了许久，大概有两三分钟。我正要说些什么，突然他倾身向前。

“瑞德先生，我有一条狗，叫布鲁诺，他死了。我……我还没有埋葬他呢。他装在一只箱子里，算是棺材吧。他是个好朋友。虽然只是一条狗，但却是好朋友。我筹划了一个小型葬礼，只为了与他道别。没特别的意思。布鲁诺，他如今是过去式了，但这是一个小型葬礼，只为道别而已，那何错之有？瑞德先生，我想问问您。只是个小忙，为了我还有布鲁诺。”

就在这时，门突然开了，柯林斯小姐走进房间。我和布罗茨基随即站起身，帕克赫斯特跟着她进来，关上了门。

“非常抱歉，柯林斯小姐，”帕克赫斯特说道，面带愠色地看着布罗茨基。“他就是不懂得尊重您的隐私。”

布罗茨基僵硬地站在屋子中间。柯林斯小姐走近了些，他朝她鞠了一躬，从中我看到了一丝优雅，从前他必定风度翩翩。他把花束递给她，说道：“只是个小礼物。我自己亲手摘的。”

柯林斯小姐接过花，但完全没把它当回事。“也许我猜到了你会这样子来这儿，布罗茨基先生，”她说，“我昨天去了动物园，你便以为可以肆无忌惮了。”

布罗茨基垂下双目。“可是时日不多了，”他说，“现在我们浪费不起时间啊。”

“浪费时间干什么，布罗茨基先生？太可笑了，你就这样来了。你知道我早上是很忙的。”

“求你了，”他举起手掌，“求你了。我们现在都老了，用不着像从前那样争吵了。我只是过来给你送花的，还有提个小建议。仅此而已。”

“建议？什么样的建议，布罗茨基先生？”

“就是，今天下午到圣彼得公墓和我见个面吧。就半个小时而已。就我们两个，谈点事情。”

“没什么好谈的。昨天去动物园明显是个错误。你是说公墓吗？你怎么会找这么个地方约我？你是脑袋进水了？不约在饭店、咖啡馆或某个花园或者湖滨什么的，却偏偏提议去公墓！”

“抱歉。”布罗茨基看起来真的无比沮丧。“我没想到。我忘记了。我忘记圣彼得公墓是块墓地了。”

“别装蒜了。”

“我的意思是，我经常去那儿，我们觉得那儿十分幽静，我还有布鲁诺。即便在最糟糕的时候，到了那儿我的心情就不那么糟了，那儿很静谧，很幽美，我们喜欢那儿。所以我就提议这个地方了。真的，我忘了。那儿埋着死人呢。”

“我们去那儿干吗？坐在墓碑上，回忆往日时光？布罗茨基先生，你真的要好好想想你的建议了。”

“但我们很喜欢那儿，我还有布鲁诺。我以为你也会喜欢。”

“哦，我明白了。你的狗死了，你就希望我代替它的位置。”

“我不是那个意思。”布罗茨基那矜持的表情忽然消失，脸上掠过一丝焦躁不安。“我根本不是那意思，你知道的。你总是这样。我想啊想，想要找到对我们都好的事情，而你呢，又是冷嘲，又是热讽，觉得那样很可笑。而别人的呢，你却说那是多美妙的主意啊。你老是这样。就像那次吧，我安排我们坐在科比连斯基演奏会的前排……”

“那是三十多年前的事了。你怎么还在唠叨这些事情？”

“但一样的啊，一样的。我想出了一些……一些好事情，因为我知道，在你内心深处，你喜欢让事情有点与众不同。然后呢，你却又加以嘲笑。或许是因为那是我的主意，比如公墓这事吧，在内心深处，其实很吸引你，而你呢，你也明白我懂你的心思，所以你假装……”

“胡说。我为何要跟你谈这些事情，根本没有理由。太晚了，我们没什么好谈的，布罗茨基先生。无论吸引与否，我都不会与你在公墓见面的，因为我和你没什么好谈的……”

“我只是想解释一下。这一切的一切，为何会发生，我从前为何那样……”

“一切都太晚了，布罗茨基先生。至少晚了二十年。更何况，我已无法忍受再听到你这么道歉了。即便现在，一听到你满嘴的道歉，我就不禁浑身发抖。这么多年来，你的道歉并不意味着结束，而是开始。又一轮痛苦与羞辱的开始。哦，你为何要来骚扰我？一切都太晚

了。况且，自你清醒后，又喜欢穿得怪里怪气的。你穿的都是些什么衣服呀？”

布罗茨基犹豫了一下，然后说：“是有人建议我这么穿的。那些帮我的人。我又要去指挥了。我得穿得像个指挥家，这样人们才会那样看待我。”

“昨天在动物园我就差点跟你说了。那件可笑的灰外套！谁要你穿那件衣服的呀？霍夫曼先生吗？真的，你得对自己的形象稍稍多用点心思。这些人把你打扮得像个木偶，而你竟然随他们那么做。你现在看看自己！这身可笑的行头。看看你！你以为穿成这样，就有艺术家的派头啦？”

布罗茨基垂眼瞥了瞥自己的装束，眼中露出一副受伤的神情。然后，他抬起头，说道：“你这个老太婆，根本不懂当今的时尚。”

“老人才有特权对年轻人的服饰指指点点。但你竟然穿成这样，真是太可笑了。真的，没用的，真不是你的风格。老实讲吧，我倒觉得这城市更喜欢你几个月前的穿着。就是说，那些优雅的破衣烂衫。”

“别嘲笑我了。我不会再像那样了。也许我马上又可以当指挥家了。这些是我现在的服饰。我觉得自己看上去很得体呀。你忘记了，在华沙，我也穿这样的衣服呀。打这样一个蝴蝶领结。你如今忘记了。”

刹那间，柯林斯小姐眼中掠过一丝惆怅，然后她说：

“我当然忘了。我为什么要记得这些事情？这些年来，我还有很多更有意义的事情要记呢。”

“你的裙子，”他突然说道，“真的很漂亮。非常雅致。可你的鞋子跟从前一样难看，简直糟透了。你永远不承认你的脚踝很粗。一个这么纤细的女人，脚踝却总是这么粗壮。看，现在还是这样。”他指了指柯林斯小姐的双脚。

“别耍孩子气了。你以为还像当年在华沙的时候，说一句那样的话，就能让我在出门前的几分钟更换我的全副装束吗？你还活在过去啊，布罗茨基先生！你以为我会在意你对我鞋子的看法吗？你以为我现在还不知道，那只不过是玩的小把戏，故意等最后临门一脚时批评我吗？当然，我那时改换了所有衣装，极度匆忙间也顾不上穿了什么就出去了。然后，我们一坐上车，或者是在音乐大厅，我才想起眼

影与衣衫颜色不搭，或者项链跟鞋子不配。那时候，这一切对我来说太重要了。我是指挥家的太太啊！太重要了，而你也是知道的呀。你以为我现在还不知道你那时在干吗吗？等到刚好差几分钟就要出发时，你就会说：‘很好，很好，很漂亮。’接着，是的，就会如此这般说道：‘你的鞋子太难看了！’好像你知道这回事似的！你对现在的时尚潮流知道多少？过去二十年，你一直都是醉醺醺的。”

“但是，”布罗茨基说，这会儿脸上带了些傲慢的表情，“但是，我说的是真的。那鞋子让你的下半身看起来很可笑。真的。”

“看看这身滑稽的西装吧！肯定是意大利制造的。年轻的芭蕾舞演员才可能穿这种衣服。你以为这能帮助你赢得市民的信任？”

“可笑的鞋子。你看起来就像个玩具士兵，有个底座，不会摔倒似的。”

“你该走了！你怎么敢来这儿，打搅我上午的安排！那里面有对年轻的夫妇，他们很悲伤，他们今早比以往更需要我的指导，而你却来这儿捣乱。这是我们最后一次谈话。昨天在动物园见你简直是个错误。”

“公墓。”他的声音突然带上了一丝绝望的语气。“今天下午你必须去见我。好吧，我没想到死人，我是没想到。但我解释过了。在……在今晚之前我们必须谈谈。要不然我怎么办？我怎么办？难道你不知道今晚有多重要吗？我们得谈谈，你必须去见我……”

“行了。”帕克赫斯特上前一步，怒视着布罗茨基。“你都听到柯林斯小姐的话了。她要求你离开她的寓所。从她的视线中消失，远离她的生活。她太客气了，不好意思说出来，所以我代替她说。干了这一切勾当后，你就没有权利，没有一丝一毫的权利提刚才这样的要求。你还有脸站在那儿要求见面，仿佛这一切都没发生过似的？或许你在装醉卖傻，什么都不记得了。那么我来提醒提醒你。就在不久前，你站在外面那条街上，冲着这幢大楼的墙壁撒尿，冲着这扇窗户喊着下流话。最后警察把你带走了，把你拖走，而你还对柯林斯小姐恶言恶语。这事发生还不到一年。无疑你希望柯林斯小姐现在已经忘了。但我可以明确地对你说，那只是诸如此类许多事件中的一件而已。至于你在着装方面的声明，难道不是因为在两年多前，有人在人民公园发现你不省人事，身上穿着一件被你呕吐了无数遍的衣服，被带到圣三一教堂，发现你身上生满了虱子？难道你期望柯林斯小姐会在意你这样一个男人评价她的衣着吗？面对现实吧，布罗茨基先生，

一个人一旦到了你那样的地步，就无可救药了。你永远、永远也赢不回一个女人的爱了，我可以郑重地告诉你。你甚至永远赢不回她的尊重。或许她会怜悯你，但没别的了。指挥家！你以为这个城镇还会再看你一眼？他们看到的不过就是个恶心的倒霉蛋。我提醒你吧，布罗茨基先生，四年前，或者五年前，你动手打了柯林斯小姐，就在那火车站边上，要不是两个学生经过，你一定致她重伤了。而且，你一边打她，还一边喊着不堪入耳的……”

“没有！没有！没有！”布罗茨基忽然大叫起来，他摇着头，捂住耳朵。

“你喊着最不堪入耳的脏话。既下流又变态。大家都议论说你该被关进监狱。然后，当然，还有在提尔盖斯公用电话亭的那一出……”

“不！不！”

布罗茨基一把抓住帕克赫斯特的领子，后者慌张地后退几步。不过，布罗茨基没有进一步攻击，只是紧抓住帕克赫斯特的领子不放，仿佛那是根救命稻草似的。随后的几秒钟，帕克赫斯特想奋力掰开布罗茨基的手指。待他终于成功后，布罗茨基的全身好像都松垮了下来。老人闭上双眼，叹了口气，转身默默地走出屋子。

起先，我们三人仍是默默地站着，不知道如何是好。就在这时，布罗茨基“砰”的一声关上前门，我们一下子回过神来，我和帕克赫斯特两人走到窗前。

“他走了，”帕克赫斯特说，前额顶着玻璃。“别担心，柯林斯小姐，他不会回来了。”

柯林斯小姐好像没听见。她踱步至门前，接着又转过身来。

“请原谅，我得……我得……”她迷迷糊糊地走到窗前，看向外面，“请原谅，我得……瞧，我希望您能理解……”

她没有特别对着我们哪一个说话。接着，她的惶惑好像消失了，她说道：“帕克赫斯特先生，您没有权利对里奥那样说话。过去一年里，他已经展现出巨大的勇气。”她向他投去锐利的一瞥，然后匆匆走出屋子。我们立刻听到房门又“砰”的响了一声。

我依旧在窗边，可以看见柯林斯小姐匆忙地沿街走去。她看到布罗茨基走在前面，离她已经好一段路了。过了一会儿，她突然小跑起

来，或许是想避免叫他等一下她的窘境。而布罗茨基歪歪扭扭地走着，奇怪的步履显得惊人的轻盈。他显然心绪烦乱，好像真的没有想到她会出来追他。

柯林斯小姐的呼吸越来越重，她追着他经过几排公寓大楼，然后又经过了街口的几家商店，却仍没有追近。布罗茨基继续健步走着，这会儿转过了我先前与古斯塔夫分手的那个拐角，走过宽阔的林荫大道上家家意大利咖啡馆。那条人行道比我跟古斯塔夫一起走过时更加拥挤，但布罗茨基低着头一路前行，时常差点撞上行人。

当布罗茨基快到人行横道时，柯林斯小姐似乎意识到她已不能赶上他了。她停住脚步，双手捂着嘴巴，好像最后陷入了某种尴尬之中，或许是在想到底该喊他“里奥”呢，还是她在之前的对话中一直在称呼他的“布罗茨基先生”。无疑，本能告诫她，他们现在情势紧急，于是她大声喊道：“里奥！里奥！里奥！请等等！”

布罗茨基转过身，看到柯林斯小姐急急忙忙向他走来，露出了惊愕的神情。她依然捧着那束鲜花。困惑中，布罗茨基伸出双手，好像是主动要为她减轻负担似的。但柯林斯小姐仍然紧紧捧着花，此时尽管上气不接下气，但她还是十分镇静地说道：“布罗茨基先生，请等一下。请等一下。”

他们站在一起，颇感尴尬，两人顿然意识到周围都是行人，许多人纷纷看向他们这边，有些显然已经按捺不住好奇。这时，柯林斯小姐回头指了指她公寓的方向，轻柔地说：“每年的这个时候，斯腾伯格花园可美了。我们何不去那儿聊聊呢？”

他们动身离开，越来越多的人看向他们那边，柯林斯小姐走在布罗茨基前头一两步，显然他们要等到达目的地之后再开始谈话，为此两人都感到庆幸。他们转过拐角，回到她所在的那条街道，没多久就再次经过了公寓大楼的前方。然后，只走了大概一个街区，柯林斯小姐在一扇背靠人行道、隐蔽完好的小铁门边停了下来。

她将手伸向门闩，在打开门闩前，她下意识地迟疑了一下。那时，我突然意识到，于她而言，他们刚刚一起走完的那段短短的路程，以及他们这会儿并肩站在斯腾伯格花园入口处的这一景象，其意义远远超越了布罗茨基当时的想象。其实，这些年来，在她的想象中，她已经无数次走完了这一段短短的路程，穿过熙熙攘攘的林荫大道，停在这扇小铁门前——那个仲夏的午后，他们邂逅在这林荫大道上的珠宝店门前，从此这一幕便在柯林斯小姐脑海中时时浮现。这么

多年以来，她一直没有忘记：那天他转身背对她，假装被商店橱窗里的东西吸引了去，脸上故意摆出一副冷漠的表情。

那是他开始酗酒和对她恶言相向之前的最后一个好年月，这副冷漠的神情仍是他们之间接触的主要特征。尽管在那日午后，她已屡次决心要把和解的想法付诸行动，可她也移开目光，顾自走开了。她沿着大道继续走了一会儿，走过了意大利咖啡馆，直至这时她才好奇地向后看了一眼。她这才意识到他一直尾随着她。他又装作在看一家商店的橱窗，虽然如此，他离她只有短短的一小段路而已。

她故意放慢了脚步，以为他迟早会追上来。走到拐角的时候，仍没见到他追上来，她便又回头望了一眼。那天，与今日一样，阳光明媚的宽阔人行道上挤满了人，她却满心欢喜，只因清清楚楚地看到了他，看到他迈了小半步，停了下来，眼睛看着路旁的花摊。她的嘴角荡漾开了一丝微笑，转过拐角，惊喜地发现自己的心情竟如此轻松。这会儿她也开始闲逛起来，也不时地窥视商店橱窗。她目光依次扫过蛋糕店、玩具店、时装店——那时候那儿还没有书店——而脑海中一直在思索，等他终于赶上她时，她要如何开口。“里奥，我们多么孩子气啊。”她想这么说。但那似乎太通情达理了，于是她又想了个更刻薄的：“我发现我们好像是顺路啊”或者类似的话。接着，他的身影出现在拐角处，她看到他捧着一束鲜艳的花。她飞快地转过身，又开始走了，步伐适中。然后，快到她公寓时，那天头一次，心中不觉对他感到一阵厌烦。原本她整个下午都安排得好好的。早不选，晚不选，为何偏偏这个时候来找她谈呢？走到门前时，她又飞快地偷偷地瞥了一眼街道，发现他依然在二十码开外处。

她进屋关了门，按捺住了向窗外望的冲动，急急走到屋子后部的卧房。她对着镜子审视了一番自己，想稳定情绪，然后走出卧室，吃惊地停在走廊上。远远尽头处的门半开着，她能直直地望出去，越过阳光满溢的门厅，透过凸窗，看见外面人行道上的他。他背对着屋子，在那儿徘徊着，好像约好了在那里与什么人见面。顷刻间，她一动不动地站着，生怕他会转过身来透过玻璃看到她。渐渐地，他的身影从视野中消失了，她发现自己凝视着街对面房子的前门，等待着聆听响起的门铃声。

过了一分钟，他还没有按门铃，她又对他感到一阵愤怒。她意识到，他是在等着她请他进来。她又一次淡定下来，仔细回想了整个情景，决定什么都不做，一直等到他按响门铃为止。

接下来几分钟，她继续等待着。她了无目的地回到了卧室，然后又慢慢地回到走廊。最后，她终于发现他已经走了，于是慢慢走出门廊。

她打开门，左顾右盼，却再也看不见他的踪迹，颇为惊讶。也许他躲在了几扇门之外的地方——或者至少台阶上该放有花。但这只是柯林斯小姐的一厢情愿罢了。尽管如此，那一刻，她未感到丝毫的悔意，却有些许宽慰，夹杂着阵阵激动涌上心头，和解进程终于开始了，而她根本未感到后悔。事实上，她坐在前厅，感受到一阵胜利的喜悦在心中蔓延，因为她坚持住了自己的立场。她告诉自己，这些小小的胜利非常重要，会帮助他们避免重蹈覆辙。

但仅仅几个月后，她就意识到那天她犯了个错误。起初那个想法非常模糊，她并没有细细思量。然后，几个月过去了，那夏日午后的事渐渐占据了她的整个思维。她认为自己最大的错误就是进了自家公寓，这样做就有点太为难他了。带着他一路走过街头巷尾，经过无数店铺后，她应该在那扇小铁门前等他，确定他清清楚楚地看见了她之后再走进斯腾伯格花园。接着，毫无疑问，他会跟着她。即便他们默默地在灌木丛中闲逛一会儿，但迟早总会开口的吧。迟早，他会把花给她的。那之后，过了诡谲的二十年后，每当柯林斯小姐望向那铁门时，心中无不漾起一阵小小的悸动。于是，今天早晨，当她终于把布罗茨基领入了这花园，一种仪式感油然而生。

尽管在柯林斯小姐想象中斯腾伯格花园举足轻重，但它确实不是个特别吸引人的地方，基本上只是个水泥地广场，还没有超市停车场大，好像它的存在主要就是为了园艺栽培，而非为周围四邻提供美感与舒适。没有草坪，没有树，只有几排花坛，一天中这时候，广场上日头赤赤，明显无荫蔽之处。而柯林斯小姐四下看看花朵，还有蕨草，欢快地拍起手来。布罗茨基小心地关上身后的铁门，看着花园，没有半点兴致，但好像又满意地发现，除了头顶的公寓窗户外，这里只有他们两人。

“我有时带他们来这儿，那些来看我的人，”柯林斯小姐说道，“这儿太迷人了。你可看到欧洲其他地方都没有的品种。”

她继续闲庭信步，羡慕地四下看着，布罗茨基恭敬地跟在她身后，与她保持几步的距离。几分钟前两人刚见面时表现出的尴尬这会儿已经消失殆尽，所以从门口瞥见他们的人，很容易就会误认为他们是一对在阳光下散步的老夫老妻，这种散步的习惯已经保持了好多年。

“不过，当然啰，”柯林斯小姐说道，在一灌木丛边停下，“你从不喜欢这样的花园，是不是，布罗茨基先生？你蔑视如此自然的约束。”

“你不叫我里奥啦？”

“好吧。里奥。不，你更喜欢狂野些的东西。但你看到了，只有小心地控制培育，有些品种才能存活。”

布罗茨基肃穆地看着柯林斯小姐正在抚摸的叶片。然后他说：“你还记得吗？每个周日早晨，我们一起在普拉加喝过咖啡之后，常常去那家书店。那么多旧书，不管转到哪里，都那么狭窄，满是灰尘。你还记得吗？你老是不耐烦。但我们还是常去，每个周日，在普拉加喝过咖啡之后。”

柯林斯小姐沉默片刻。然后她轻轻笑了笑，又开始慢慢地走了起来。“那个蝌蚪人。”她说。

布罗茨基也笑了。“蝌蚪人。”他重复道，点了点头。“没错。假如我们现在回去，他或许仍旧在那儿，桌子后面。蝌蚪人。我们有没有问过他的名字？我们从未买过他的书，但他总是对我们彬彬有礼。”

“除了那天早晨，他冲我们大喊大叫。”

“他冲我们大喊大叫过吗？我不记得了。那蝌蚪人一直彬彬有礼。不过我们从未买过他的书。”

“哦，是的。有一次我们进去，那天下着雨，我们很小心不让水滴在书上，我们在门口甩了下外套，但他那天早上脾气很不好，就大声责骂了我们。你不记得了吗？他冲我大喊，说我是英国人。哦，是的，他非常粗鲁，但就只是那天早晨。接下来的周日，他好像忘记这事了。”

“有意思，”布罗茨基说，“我不记得了。蝌蚪人。我一直记得他很害羞，还很有礼貌。我不记得你说的这件事了。”

“或许我记错了吧，”柯林斯小姐说，“或许我把他和其他人弄混了。”

“应该是的。蝌蚪人，他总是那么恭敬，不会做这样的事的。只是因为你是英国人就责骂你？”布罗茨基摇了摇头，“不，他总是很尊敬人的。”

柯林斯小姐又停了下来，一时间，她被一簇蕨草吸引住了。

“那时候许多人，”她终于开口说，“他们都是那样。很礼貌，很坚忍。他们总是千方百计与人为善，牺牲所有，然后，突然有一天，毫无缘由地，天气呀，或是其他什么的，都会让他们勃然大怒。然后又恢复正常。许多人都那样。比如安德热，他就是那样。”

“安德热是个疯子。你知道的，我在什么地方看到过，说他死于一场车祸。是的，我看到过，在一份波兰报纸上，就在五六年前，死于一场车祸。”

“太惨了。我猜那时代的许多人现在可能都过世了吧。”

“我喜欢安德热，”布罗茨基说道，“我在一份波兰报纸上看到的，只是一笔带过，说他死了，是一起公路事故。太悲惨了。我回想起了那一个个夜晚，我们坐在旧公寓里，用毯子裹起全身，一起喝着咖啡，四周到处都是书和报纸。我们谈天说地，聊音乐，侃文学，一个小时接着一个小时地聊，看着天花板，不停地聊啊聊。”

“我常常都想去睡了，但安德热却从不肯回家。有时候他会待到天亮。”

“没错。假如他辩不过我，输了的话，那他就不肯走，直到他认为自己赢了为止。那就是他为何会待到天亮的原因。”

柯林斯小姐笑了笑，然后叹了口气。“听到他死了，多难过啊。”她感叹道。

“不是那个蝌蚪人，”布罗茨基说，“是那个美术馆的人，是他在喊。一个怪人，总是假装不认识我们。你还记得吗？即使在《拉夫卡迪奥》演出之后的日子里也是。服务员和出租车司机都想跟我握手，但我们去美术馆的时候，却什么都没有发生。他看着我们，表情像块石头，一直都是那样。然后，到后来，境况越来越糟糕的时候，我们进去，那天还下着雨，他冲我们大喊。他说，我们弄湿了他的地板。我们以前总那样的啊，只要下雨，多年来一直那样啊，弄湿他的地板，过了这么些年，他厌倦了。就是他大喊，说你是个英国人，是他，不是那个蝌蚪人。那蝌蚪人总是很尊敬人的，自始至终都是。那蝌蚪人和我握过手，我记得的，就在我们离开之前。你还记得吗？我们去了书店，他知道那是最后一次了，他从桌后走了出来，和我握了握手。那时候，还没有多少人想和我握手，但他却握了。他很尊敬人，那个蝌蚪人，总是那样。”

柯林斯小姐用一只手挡住双眼，看向花园的远方的一角，然后她又开始慢慢走起来，说道：“能拥有这些回忆真好。但我们不能活在过去。”

“但你还记得，”布罗茨基说道，“你还记得那个蝌蚪人和书店。还记得那橱柜吗？门坏掉的那个？你全部记得，跟我一样。”

“有些事情我还记得。其他的那些，我已经忘记了，遗忘总是不可避免的。”此时她的声音警觉起来。“有些事，尽管也是在那时发生的，最好还是忘记吧。”

布罗茨基若有所思。最后，他说：“或许你是对的。过去，发生的事儿太多了。我很惭愧，你知道我很内疚，就让我们结束吧。让我们结束过去。我们挑选个宠物吧。”

柯林斯小姐继续走着，这会儿已经先几步走在布罗茨基前面了。过了一会，她又停了下来，转身对着他。“今天下午我会在公墓和你见面，假如那是你希望的话。但你不能把它当作什么。那并不意味着我同意养宠物或者其他任何事情。不过我看得出你在为今晚担心，希望和其他人谈谈你内心的焦虑。”

“过去这几个月。我看到了那些蠢贼，但我坚持，再坚持，做好了准备。假如你不回来，一切都毫无意义。”

“我只答应今天下午见你一小会儿。或许半个小时吧。”

“但你会考虑的。在我们见面之前，你会考虑的。你会考虑的。宠物，一切。”

柯林斯小姐转过身去，对着另一株灌木端详了许久。最后，她说道：“好吧。我会考虑的。”

“你明白那对我意味着什么吧。多么艰难啊。有时候，太痛苦了，我真想一死了之，但我这次坚持了下来，因为我看到了出路。还当乐队指挥。你得回来。会像从前一样的，甚至可能更好。有时候很痛苦，那些蠢贼，我再做不了什么去证明了。我们从未有过孩子。所以我们养宠物吧。”

柯林斯小姐又开始往前走，这次布罗茨基走在她身边，严肃地凝视她的脸。柯林斯小姐好像又要说什么，但就在这时，帕克赫斯特突然在我身后说道：

“我从未跟他们掺和在一起，你知道。我是说，他们用那样的方式开始谈论你的时候。我甚至没笑，连微笑一下都没有。我根本不掺和。你也许以为我只是说说而已，但这是真的。我讨厌他们，讨厌他们那样子。还有那驴叫似的声音！我一进门，就又会听到那驴叫声！他们甚至连一分钟都不肯施舍，连六十秒都不给我，让他们瞧瞧我已变了。‘帕克斯！帕克斯！’哦，我讨厌他们……”

“瞧，”我说道，突然对他感到一阵不耐烦，“假如他们这么惹你厌烦，你为何不直接把自己的想法说出来呢？下次，你何不当面质问他们？告诉他们住嘴，别再发出那种驴叫声。问问他们为何……为何这么讨厌我，为何我的成功这么冒犯了他们。是的，问问他们！其实，为了达到最好的效果，你何不在表演小丑的当儿直接问他们呢？是的，就在你用搞笑的声音与表情逗乐大家的时候，就在他们全都笑呵呵地拍你后背，为你一点没变而乐不可支时，你就问他们，冷不丁地问他们：‘为什么？为什么瑞德的成功让你们如此寝食难安？’就这么办。那不仅帮了我，而且可以潇洒地向那些蠢货展示，无论是过去还是现在，在你那搞笑的外表背后，一直隐藏着一个更为深邃的人，一个不容易被操纵或妥协的人。这就是我的建议。”

“听上去好极了！”帕克赫斯特愤然喊道，“你说得倒是轻巧！你没什么损失，他们还是照样恨你！但这些都是我的老朋友。我游走在外的时候，周围都是这些欧陆人，大部分时间我都是好好的。但不时地，难免会有事情发生，一些不愉快的事情，这时我就对自己说：‘那又如何？我在意什么？他们只是外国佬。在祖国，我也有好朋友，只要我回去，他们一定会在那儿等我。’好啊，你给我提那样聪明的建议。可事实上，动脑子好好想想，或许对你一点都不好。我不明白你为何如此沾沾自喜。你不比我，再也经不起忘掉老朋友了。要知道，他们有些话说得还是对的。你太洋洋自得了，总有一天会付出代价。只是因为你太出名了！他们是对的，这你知道。‘你何不当面质问他们？’多么傲慢啊！”

帕克赫斯特继续如此这般地唠叨着，但我已经充耳不闻了。他提到我“沾沾自喜”，这倒触发了我的思绪，我突然记起我父母应该很快就会到这城市了。就在柯林斯小姐的前厅，一阵恐慌似寒流袭上心头，几乎触手可及，我猛然发现自己还没准备今晚要表演的曲子。确实，一连几天，或许甚至是几个星期，我都没有碰过钢琴了。此时此刻，离这场最重要的演出就剩几个小时了，可我都来不及安排预演。我越想越揪心。我发现自己太在意要发表的演说，而不知怎么地，莫名其妙地忽视了表演这一更重要的事。实际上，我一时间甚至想不起

已决定弹奏哪首曲子了。是山中的《全结构：选择II》呢？还是穆勒里的《石棉与纤维》？当我试图回忆这两支曲子时，脑子一片纷乱和模糊。我记得，每一曲都包含了极其复杂的乐段，可当我向记忆深处发掘时，却发现几乎一无所忆。与此同时，我知道我父母已经到这城市了。我觉得一分钟都不该再浪费了，不管谁来请求占用我的时间，我首先得至少抽出两个小时安静独处，好好练琴。

帕克赫斯特仍在兴致勃勃地说着。

“哦，真不好意思，”我边说边向门口走去。“我得马上走了。”

帕克赫斯特一跃而起，用乞求的口吻说道：

“我没掺和，你知道的。哦，不，我根本没掺和！”他追随着我，好像想要抓住我的胳膊。“我甚至都没微笑。他们那样没完没了地说你，太恶心了……”

“没关系，非常感谢你，”我说道，摆脱了他伸出的手。“但我现在真的必须走了。”

我走出柯林斯小姐的公寓，急忙走上大街，这会儿一门心思就想回到酒店，到休息室去练琴。事实上，我太专注了，不仅忘记了朝经过的小铁门瞥上一眼，也没看到布罗茨基就站在我前面的人行道上，我差点跟他撞了个满怀。布罗茨基平静地向我鞠躬致意，那样子表明，他刚才一直在看着我向他走去。

“瑞德先生。我们又见面了。”

“啊，布罗茨基先生，”我应答道，没有停下迈出的流星大步。“请原谅，我有急事在身。”

布罗茨基和我一起并肩走着，好一阵子，我们都没有说话。尽管我意识到这中间有些奇怪，但我一心只想着晚上的演出，没顾得上说话。

我们一起转过拐角，走上宽阔的林荫大道。这儿的人行道比之前更挤了——白领们都出来吃午饭了——我们被迫放慢速度。这时，布罗茨基在我身边开口道：

“人们都在谈论那天晚上。一场盛典。一座塑像呐。不，不，我们不谈这些。布鲁诺讨厌这些人。我想一个人静静地埋葬他，那又怎么了？今早我找了一个地方，一块埋葬他的小地方，只有我一个人，

他不想让其他任何人来，他讨厌他们。瑞德先生，我想为他演奏音乐，最好的音乐。一块安静的小地方，我今早发现的，我知道布鲁诺会喜欢那儿的。我得掘土，但不必挖太深，然后我会坐在墓边怀念他，回想我们度过的点滴时光，最后与他道别，就这样吧。我想要一首曲子，能在我想他的时候奏起，一首最好的乐曲。您能帮我演奏吗，瑞德先生？为我和布鲁诺演奏？帮帮我吧，瑞德先生。我求您了。”

“布罗茨基先生，”我说道，又轻快地走了起来，“我不清楚您到底要我帮你什么。但我得告诉您，我时间有限，不能考虑帮更多的忙了。”

“瑞德先生……”

“布罗茨基先生，您的狗死了，我很难过。但事实是，我已经被大家使来唤去，帮了太多的忙，结果我自己反倒压力重重，没法儿完成我来这儿最重要的任务……”刹那间，一阵不耐烦袭上心头，我猛然住嘴。“老实讲，布罗茨基先生，”我几乎吼叫道，“我必须得求您还有其他人不要再叫我帮忙了。你们该歇歇了！必须到此为止！”

顷刻间，布罗茨基略带困惑地看着我。然后，他挪开目光，看上去一脸丧气。我顿时为自己大动肝火而懊悔，同时也意识到，自从到这城市以来，我得处理无数心烦意乱的事情，而为此对布罗茨基撒气未免不讲道理。我叹了口气，更温和地说：

“您看，我们要不这样吧。我刚要回酒店排练。我会要求在两个小时内完完全全不受干扰。但那之后，如果一切顺利，我也许可以跟您进一步讨论一下您的狗的事情。但我必须强调，我不能做出任何承诺，不过……”

“他只是条狗，”布罗茨基突然说道，“但我想跟他道别。我想用最好的音乐。”

“好的，布罗茨基先生，但我现在必须要快点了。时间真的不多了。”

我再次走了起来，满心以为布罗茨基会像之前一样步步紧跟着我，但他却没有动。我犹豫片刻，好像有些不舍得把他一个人留在人行道上，但立刻记起，我现在根本不能分心。我急速走过意大利咖啡馆，没有回头望，直至到达十字路口，等待绿灯亮起时才回头。一时间，我没法透过熙熙攘攘的行人看到他，但过了一会儿，布罗茨基的

身影出现了，他依然站在我离开他的地方，身体稍稍前倾，眼睛凝视着迎面而来的车辆。这时我突然想到，我之前停留的地方其实是个电车停靠站，而布罗茨基一直站在那儿，只是在等电车罢了。接着，绿灯亮了，我横穿林荫大道，思绪又回到了今晚的表演这件更为紧迫的事情上来。

第二十三章

我走进酒店，发觉大厅内熙熙攘攘，但这会儿我一心想着安排练琴的事宜，无暇环顾周围。事实上，我甚至可能还推开了面前的几位宾客，凑近接待台去询问接待员。

“劳驾，这会儿会客室里有人吗？”

“会客室？嗯，是的，瑞德先生。宾客们午饭后喜欢上那儿去，所以我觉得应该……”

“我得马上与霍夫曼先生谈谈。有件事十分紧急。”

“当然可以，瑞德先生。”

前台接待员拿起电话，对讲了几句，然后放下话筒，对我说：“霍夫曼先生过会儿才能见您，瑞德先生。”

“谢谢，但这件事迫在眉睫。”

我正说着，突然感到好像有人碰了一下我的肩膀，我回头一看，原来是索菲在身边。

“哦，你好，”我向她打招呼，“你在这儿干什么？”

“我正要送点东西。你知道，给我爸爸。”索菲有些难为情地笑了笑，“但他很忙，他现在在音乐厅那里。”

“噢，是这件外套。”我注意到了她胳膊上挎着的包，说道。

“天气渐渐转冷了，我就把它带了来，但他去了音乐厅没回来。我们已经等了将近半个小时了。假如再过几分钟他不回来的话，我们今天就先回去了。”

我发现鲍里斯坐在大厅另一头的沙发上。一群游客站在大厅中央，挡住了一大半视野，但我还是能看见，他正在出神地读着我在电影院里买的那本破破烂烂的杂务工手册。索菲顺着我的目光看去，又笑了笑。

“他对那本书如此痴迷。”她说，“昨晚你走后，他立马就翻看了起来，一直看到睡着。今天一早起床后，他就又开始看。”她又笑

了笑，再次朝他望了望。“给他买这本小册子真是个好主意。”

“我很高兴他乐在其中。”我说，又转向接待台。我抬手询问接待员，霍夫曼先生何时能见我，此时，索菲靠近一步，用一种异样的声音说道：

“你还打算在这件事情上矫情多久？这让他心烦意乱，你知道的。”

我疑惑地看了她一眼，但她仍旧表情严肃地盯视着我，目不转睛。

“我知道眼下事情对你来说很棘手，”她继续说道，“我也意识到我没怎么帮上你。但事实上，他已经很烦恼了，而且为此也很担心。这样下去还要多久？”

“我不明白你在说什么。”

“瞧，我是说，我知道我也有错。可是，假装这件事没发生，这有意义吗？”

“是什么事情假装没发生啊？我猜这是那个金姆的建议，对吧？来向我发这一大堆责难？”

“其实，金姆总是说，要我最好对你坦诚一些。但这次，与她无关。我提起这件事是因为……因为我无法忍受看到鲍里斯如此担忧。”

我一头雾水，转身对着接待员。但还未等我引起他的注意，索菲便说道：

“瞧，我并没有责难你什么。你对任何事都很包容。我不能要求你再通情达理些了。你甚至没有对我大呼小叫。但我一直知道，你心里有股火气，非要这样冒出来不可。”

我笑了笑。“我猜这就是你跟那个金姆交流的所谓大众心理学吧，是不是？”

“我一直都知道。”索菲没搭理我，继续说，“对于任何事你总是很通情达理，超出所有人的想象，甚至连金姆都承认这一点。但这根本不现实。我们不能再这样下去了，仿佛什么也没有发生。你生气了。谁能怪你呢？我一直觉得早晚会爆发，只是我从未想过会是这样。可怜的鲍里斯，他不知道自己干了什么。”

我又望了望坐在那里的鲍里斯。他似乎依旧全然沉浸在那本手册里。

“瞧，”我说，“我还是一点也不明白你在说什么。或许你是在说我和鲍里斯在互相迁就对方。但肯定的是，在特定情况下，那是唯一合适的做法。如果说我最近对他稍有疏远，那仅仅是因为我不想使他对我们的生活在一起的本质产生什么误解。我们都应该更加谨慎。时过境迁，谁知道我们三个的未来会是什么样子？鲍里斯得学习，要更加能屈能伸，更加独立。我确信，他会跟我一样，以自己的方式明白个中道理。”

索菲移开目光，一时间仿佛在思索着什么。当我再次要吸引前台接待员的注意力时，她突然说道：

“求你了，过去吧，就现在，跟他说几句。”

“过去？可问题是，我现在有十分紧要的事情要处理，只要霍夫曼先生一出现……”

“求你了，就几句话。这对他可大不一样啊，求你了。”

她热切地望着我。我耸了耸肩，她转身引路，穿过大厅。

我们走近时，鲍里斯抬头飞快地瞟了我们几眼，然后又正色低头继续读他的书。我本以为索菲会说点什么，但让我恼火的是，她竟然只是意味深长地朝我看了一眼，便径直走过鲍里斯坐着的沙发，到窗边的杂志架前去了。于是，我发现自己孤零零地站在鲍里斯旁边，而小男孩儿则继续看书。最后，我拉过一把扶椅，在他对面坐了下来。

鲍里斯仍旧埋头阅读，仿佛一点儿也没注意到我。接着，他头也没抬，自己喃喃道：

“这本书真棒。包罗万象。”

我正想着该如何回答，但接着就瞥见索菲背朝我们，装作在仔细阅读刚从架子上拿下来的杂志。突然，我顿时感到胸中升腾起一股火气，后悔刚才不该跟她穿过大厅过来。我意识到，她，居然成功地操控了这一切，无论我现在对鲍里斯说什么，她都能将其看做是种胜利与推诿。我又望了望她的背影，她双肩微弓，稍稍俯身，说明她读杂志入了迷，而我却更加愤怒了。

鲍里斯翻了一页，继续读着。过了一会儿，他又一次头也没抬地喃喃道：“给浴室贴瓷砖。我现在轻而易举就能做了。”

附近的咖啡桌上放有好几份报纸，我觉得实在没理由不跟大家一样读些什么。我挑了一份，在面前打开。一时间，我们陷入了沉默。接着，我正在浏览一篇有关德国汽车工业的文章，这时我听见鲍里斯突然说：

“对不起。”

他这话说得有些突兀，我起初还以为，是不是趁我在读报的当儿，索菲暗里督促或暗示了他什么。但是，我偷偷瞄了索菲一眼，发现她还是背朝着我们，仿佛一动未动过。接着，鲍里斯说道：

“对不起，我很自私。我再也不会这样了。我再也不会说九号了。我现在可不小了，不能再玩那个了。有这本书，就会很轻松了。它真棒。我很快就什么都会做了。我要再弄下浴室。我之前不知道。但这本书讲了，它无所不包啊。我再也不会提起九号了。”

他仿佛在念背诵排演过的台词。尽管如此，他的声音仍带有感情，我一阵冲动，想伸出双手安慰安慰他。但此时，我看到索菲的肩膀上下起伏，忽而记起了对她的反感。而且，我可以预见，如果索菲再像这样操纵一切的话，那最终谁也不会得益。

我合上报纸，站起身，瞧了瞧背后，想看看有没有霍夫曼的影子。我正张望着，鲍里斯又一次开口了，他的声音明显有一丝惊慌。

“我保证。我保证学会做所有的事情。一切都会很容易的。”

他的声音有些颤抖，但我转眼看他的时候，他仍目不转睛地盯着书页。我发现，他的脸庞有些莫名其妙地红了。此时，我看到大门那边有点动静，只见霍夫曼在接待台向我挥手。

“我得走了，”我朝索菲喊了一声，“我有非常重要的事情要处理。我另找时间再见你们。”

鲍里斯翻了一页，没有抬头。

“很快，”我对索菲说，她这会儿已转过了身。“很快，我们再好好谈谈。但现在我得走了。”

霍夫曼挤到大厅中央等我，神色焦急。

“很抱歉让您久等了，瑞德先生。”他说，“我早该预料到，您会在此类会见之前出现。我刚从会议室里出来，我可以告诉您，先生，这些人，这些普普通通的女士和先生，他们特别感激，特别感激

您同意亲自见他们。感激您，瑞德先生，深知听他们亲口诉说其经历的重要性。”

我神情严肃地看着他。“霍夫曼先生，好像有点误会了。我要求即刻给我两小时的练琴时间。两个小时，绝不受干扰。我希望您能尽快清理一下会客室。”

“啊，是的，会客室。”他笑了笑，“抱歉，瑞德先生，我不是很明白您的意思。您知道，市民互助组的委员们此刻正在楼上会议室等着呢……”

“霍夫曼先生，您好像还不知道情势紧急。鉴于一桩桩意外事件接连发生，到现在，我已经接连几天没有碰过钢琴了。我坚持要求尽快为我提供一架钢琴。”

“啊，是的，瑞德先生。当然，我完全理解。我愿竭尽所能为您效劳。但是，如果是在会客室的话，恐怕这里一时半会儿根本腾不出来。您瞧，这满堂的客人……”

“但您好像非常乐意为布罗茨基先生清理这间房呢。”

“呃，是的，没错。但是，先生，如果您那么坚持不愿用本酒店里的其他钢琴，而非要用会客室里的那架，那当然，好的，我会欣然为您安排。我现在就进去，亲自请所有的客人离开，不管他们是不是才喝了一半咖啡，或者在忙些别的什么。是的，我最终会那样做的。但在采用这样极端的做法前，我恳请您再考虑一下别的选择。您看，先生，会客室里的那架钢琴绝不是酒店中最好的。事实上，有几个低音键的音明显不准。”

“霍夫曼先生，如果在会客室不行，那么，请您务必告诉我，您能提供其他什么地方。我对会客室并非情有独钟。我要的仅仅是一架好钢琴和独处空间罢了。”

“练琴房吧。那里一定会让您更满意的。”

“好的，那就去练琴房吧。”

“太好了。”

他开始带我离开，可没走几步，他又停下来，神秘兮兮地前倾身体。

“我明白了，瑞德先生，您的意思是，您开完会后需要立刻使用练琴房？”

“霍夫曼先生，恐怕我没有必要再次强调事情的紧迫性了吧……”

“噢，是，是，瑞德先生。当然，当然。我非常理解。那么……您是要求在会见之前就练琴。好的，好的，我完全明白。没问题，让这些人等一会儿，他们会非常乐意的。嗯，不管怎样，这边请。”

先前我没有注意到电梯左侧有扇门，现在我们穿过这扇门离开了大厅，很快走进了一条过道，那显然是服务员专用的走廊。墙壁上毫无装饰，头顶的荧光灯让周围的一切显得冷寂刺眼。我们走过一排巨大的滑动门，门后传来厨房的各种嘈杂声。有扇门开着，我瞥见一间亮得扎眼的房间，屋内的木质长凳上，金属罐头堆成了柱状的小山。

“我们得在酒店这儿准备好今晚的大部分食材。”霍夫曼说，“您可以想象，音乐厅里的烹饪器具数量很有限哪。”

我们走过走廊的拐角处，经过了几间房子，想必是洗衣房。有那么一阵，我走过几扇门时，其后传来了两个女人恶言相向、警笛般尖声对骂的声音。霍夫曼仿佛无动于衷，默默不语地继续向前走着。接着，我听到他低声道：

“不，不，这些市民啊，不管怎样，他们仍然会感激不尽的。稍稍耽搁一会儿，他们会毫不介意的。”

他最终停在了一扇没有任何标记的门前。我以为他会为我打开门，可是他目光一转，连整个身体也挪开了去。

“在那里面，瑞德先生。”他咕哝了一句，飞快地在肩膀上方做了个诡异的手势。

“谢谢您，霍夫曼先生。”我推开房门。

霍夫曼依然僵硬地站在原地，目光转向别处。“我会在这里等您。”他低语道。

“没有必要等我，霍夫曼先生。我能找到回去的路。”

“我在这里等您，先生。您别担心。”

我不胜其烦，不再辩驳，匆匆走进了门廊。

我走进了一个狭长的房间，地板是灰色的石头，墙壁直到天花板都用白色瓷砖铺就。我感觉左边好像有一排水槽，但因为我急着想找到钢琴，就没有注意这些细节。然而，我的目光立刻被右手边的木质

耳室吸引住了。耳室共有三间，都被漆成了令人讨厌的青蛙绿，一间连一间。外侧两间耳室的大门关着，而中间那个看起来似乎宽敞一些，门半开着，我可以瞧见里面有架钢琴，琴盖敞着，琴键裸露。没有片刻耽搁，我试图进去，却发现困难至极。那扇门向耳室内旋转打开，因被钢琴挡着，不能全开。为了进去再把门随身关上，我不得不先挤到一个角落里，然后拽住门边，慢慢地将门旋转着擦过前胸，终于把它关上锁好，接着，在这狭小的空间里，我又费了很大力气，成功地把琴凳从钢琴下拉了出来。我一坐下来，就觉得相当舒服，指尖在色泽斑驳、油漆剥落的琴键上下弹动时，音质细腻柔和，曲调准确，完美无瑕。另外，木质耳室里的音响效果也不似想象的那般幽闭恐怖。

这一发现让我如释重负，也让我突然意识到，在过去的一个小时里，我的精神是多么紧张。我缓缓地做了几次深呼吸，准备开始这最重要的练琴环节。这时，我才突然记起，我还未决定今晚弹奏哪首曲子呢。我深知，母亲觉得山中的《全结构：选择II》的中心乐章最为感人，而父亲肯定会更喜欢穆勒里的《石棉与纤维》。其实，他甚至可能不太欣赏山中的大部分作品。我坐在那儿，凝视琴键片刻，然后毅然决定选择穆勒里。

定好曲子，我心情舒畅了许多，正要准备开始那极具爆发力的开篇乐章，这时，我感到有个硬邦邦的东西顶在肩后。我扭过头，沮丧地发现小屋的门不知怎的开了，敞着一半。

我起身，将门关上。接着，我注意到门闩机关倒挂在门框上。我又仔细检查了一下，再动用一点小聪明，成功地将门闩摆正，安回了原位。可再次锁上门后，我才发现这只是个最临时的解决方法。门闩随时可能滑落，可能就在我弹奏《石棉与纤维》的中间部分——比如，第三章的一段高潮时——门又会轻而易举地旋转开来，那么此时，要是有人正巧在耳室外转悠，那我就暴露无遗了。当然，如果一个笨手笨脚的人不知道我在里面而想进来，那这门锁就连最起码的抵挡作用都没有了。

我坐回椅子上，这些想法在脑海里一一掠过。但过了一会儿，我下定结论，若我不充分利用这次机会，恐怕以后就再也不会有了。虽然这里的条件不理想，但钢琴本身就完全足够了。我暗自下定决心，不再为门的毛病忧心忡忡，便再次振作起来，准备开始弹奏穆勒里。

我将手指悬在琴键上方，这时，我听到了一丝杂音——很小的一下“吱嘎”声，就好像是一只鞋子或是一件衣服——令我警觉的是，

那声音很近。我在椅子上猛地转了一圈。这时我才发现，门虽然锁着，整个上部却空空如也，颇似马厩的拦门。刚才我的注意力全集中在了那个坏门闩上，竟没有发现这显见的事实。现在我终于看到，这扇门仅及腰高，顶部门缘粗糙不堪。这扇门的上部是被野蛮的破坏者卸掉了，还是正在翻修，我不得而知。不管怎样，即便是坐着，只要稍稍伸长脖子，我就可以清晰地看到外面的白瓷砖和水槽。

我无法相信霍夫曼如此无礼，竟给我提供这样糟糕的条件。可以肯定的是，到现在为止还没有人进来过这里，但完全可以想见，六七个酒店工作人员随时都有可能进来使用水槽。这样的环境令我忍无可忍，我正要生气地离开，猛然看到在靠近上部合叶的门柱上钉着一颗钉子，上面挂着一块破布。

我盯着它们看了一会儿，又突然发现在另一侧的门柱上，在几乎相同高度的地方也有一颗钉子。我当即猜测起破布和钉子的用途来，又起身仔细研究，结果发现，这块破布是条浴巾。我把它展开，横着挂在两颗钉子上，竟成了一块很好的门帘，巧妙地遮住了门缺失的部分。

我感觉好多了，便又坐下，再次准备弹奏开篇小节。我正欲开始，又听到“吱嘎”一声，只好再次打住。接着又传来一声噪音，我发觉它是从左边的那间耳室里传来的。我顿时醒悟过来：旁边的耳室里刚才一直有人，而耳室之间几乎没有隔音层，不知出于什么原因，那个人保持着极度安静，所以我居然直到现在才察觉到他的存在。

盛怒之下，我又站起身，一把拽开门，门闩松了，浴巾掉在地上。我从门缝挤了出去，隔壁耳室里的男子或许是明白自己没必要再克制了，便聒噪地清了清嗓子。我急忙冲出房间，心里厌恶至极。

我发现霍夫曼在走廊上等着我，这让我有些意外，但转念我又想起，他之前确实有过这样的承诺。他背靠墙站着，可是一见我出现在他面前，他立即站直立正。

“啊，瑞德先生，”他微笑道，“请您跟我来。女士们先生们正急切地盼着见您哪。”

我冷冷地看着他。“什么女士们和先生们，霍夫曼先生？”

“哦，委员会的成员哪，瑞德先生。市民互助委员会的……”

“霍夫曼先生，听着……”我火冒三丈，但因我要解释的事情太复杂微妙，我只得打住。霍夫曼终于觉察到我心烦意乱，便在走廊中

间驻步，关切地看着我。

“霍夫曼先生，很抱歉我不能参加这次见面会了。练琴之事刻不容缓。不让我先练琴，其他什么事也干不了。”

霍夫曼一脸疑惑。“对不起，先生，”他小心翼翼地压低声音说，“可您刚才没有练吗？”

“我没有。我……我根本没法练。”

“您没法练？瑞德先生，一切都好吗？我是说，您没有感觉不舒服吧？”

“我很好。瞧，”我叹了一口气，“如果您一定要知道，那么，我刚才没法练是因为……哎，老实说吧，先生，那里的条件不能给我足够的独处空间。不，先生，让我说下去。那儿的独处空间还不够。对某些人来说可能很好，但对我……呃，我告诉您吧，霍夫曼先生，我老实地告诉您。从小我就是这样，除非有个完全彻底的独处空间，否则我没法练习。”

“是这样啊，先生？”霍夫曼严肃地点了点头，“我明白了，明白了。”

“嗯，我希望您明白了。那里面的条件——”我摇了摇头，“几乎没法称得上满意。而现在的重点是，我必须，必须，有良好的练习设施……”

“好的，好的，那当然。”他同情地点点头，“我想，先生，我有办法。别馆的练琴房能为您提供绝对的隐私。钢琴是一流的，至于独处空间，我可以向您保证，先生，那儿非常非常私密。”

“很好。听上去像是个好主意。您说的是，别馆。”

“没错，先生。我亲自带您过去，等你一见完市民互助组……”

“听着，霍夫曼先生！”我突然大吼一声，要不是我极力克制，我差点没揪住他的领子。“你给我听好了！我一点儿也不在乎这些市民！我不管他们等了多久！事实就是，如果我现在不能立马练琴，我就即刻打包走人！马上！没错，霍夫曼先生。不会有演讲，不会有表演，什么都没有！你明白吗，霍夫曼先生？明白吗？”

霍夫曼怔怔地看着我，脸上的血色渐渐褪去。“是的，是的，”他低声咕哝道，“是的，当然，瑞德先生。”

“那么好吧，我得请您——”我极力压低一点自己的声音，“请您现在立刻带我去别馆。”

“好的，瑞德先生。”他尴尬地笑了笑，“我完全理解您的意思。毕竟他们只是一些普通市民，像您这样的人没有必要亲自去……”然后，他打起精神，坚定地说：“这边走，瑞德先生，请跟我来。”

第二十四章

我们沿着长廊又走了一小段路，经过一间洗衣房，里面有好几台机器在隆隆作响。接着霍夫曼领我穿过一个狭窄的出口。我走了出去，发现面前正是会客室的双开门。

“我们从这里抄条近路走。”霍夫曼说。

一进会客室，我就更加明白之前他为什么不情愿为我清理这个房间了。里面挤满了欢笑交谈的人群，有的衣着十分华丽炫目，我的第一反应是，我们误闯进了一场私人聚会。然而，随着我们慢慢穿过人群，我发现他们集群而聚，划分明显。一帮兴高采烈的本地人占据了房间一角。另一帮好像是富有的美国年轻人——其中许多人竟齐声唱起了某所大学的校歌；而在另一块地方，一群日本人把几张桌子拼在一起，也正聊得热火朝天。奇怪的是，这几群人明显各自独立，但好像又有诸多联系。在我四周，人们在桌子间走来走去，拍着彼此的背，互相拍照，递着盛有三明治的盘子。一个身着白色制服、满脸疲惫的侍者，一手一只咖啡壶，在人群中间穿梭。我想过去找钢琴，但由于要挤过人群跟上霍夫曼十分费力，所以无暇顾及。终于，我来到了会客室的另一头，霍夫曼为我打开了另一扇门。

我穿过房门，来到一条走廊上，走廊的一端通向户外。接着，我走了出去，来到了一个阳光充足的小停车场，很快我便认出，这里正是那一晚我们经过的地方，当时霍夫曼正驱车带我赶往布罗茨基的宴会。霍夫曼把我领到一辆巨大的黑色轿车上，不多时，我们就置身于午饭时间常见的拥堵车流中，缓缓向前移动。

“这个城市的交通哪！”霍夫曼叹了口气，“瑞德先生，您要开空调吗？您肯定？天哪，看看这交通！谢天谢地，我们不必忍受太久。我们走南边的路吧。”

在下一个红绿灯处，霍夫曼拐到了另一条路上，那里的交通果真顺畅了许多。没多久，我们便疾驰着穿越了一片开阔的乡间。

“啊，是啊，这就是这座城市的魅力所在。”霍夫曼说，“不用开多远，你就会发现自己置身于优美的环境中。您看，空气已经好多了。”

我附和了几句，然后陷入沉默。我现在不想交谈。一方面，我对早先决定演奏《石棉与纤维》的想法开始心怀疑虑。我越是细想，脑海中涌现的记忆就越多，我想起我母亲曾特别表示过对这首曲子的反感。有那么一瞬间，我考虑着要不要换一首风格完全不同的曲子，譬如卡赞的《风道》，但继而想到，那首曲子要弹两小时十五分钟呢。毫无疑问，精短而激越的《石棉与纤维》是明摆着的选择。长度相当的其他曲子没有一首能展示出这般丰富的情感。而且，可以肯定的是，至少在表面上，我还是极有希望让我母亲对这首曲子欣赏有加的。然而，仍有某种东西——诚然，不过只是一抹回忆——让我对这一选择无法泰然自若。

除了前方远处的一辆卡车，路上好像只有我们。我看着路两边掠过的农田，又试着回想这模糊的记忆片段。

“没多远了，瑞德先生，”霍夫曼在我旁边说，“我相信您会更喜欢别馆里的练琴房。那里很安静，您要练上一两个钟头，那就是最理想的去处。很快，您便会沉浸在自己的音乐中。我真羡慕您呀，先生！您很快就会徜徉在您的音乐灵感中，就像您在某座富丽堂皇的艺术馆内漫步时，奇迹出现了，有人告诉您可以拿一只购物篮，挑选任何喜欢的东西带回家。请原谅，”他爽朗一笑，“我总是抱有这种幻想，自娱自乐吧。我和妻子一起在瑰妙的艺术馆中漫步，里面美丽的艺术品琳琅满目。除了我们俩，那儿空无一人，甚至连个工作人员都没有。是的，我胳膊上挽着购物篮，他们告诉我们想拿什么就拿什么。自然啰，会有某些规矩。拿的东西不能超过篮子的容量。当然也不允许我们之后出售任何东西——就算不说，我们做梦也不会想到滥用这千载难逢的机会。在那里，我和妻子——我们俩一起在这天堂般的大厅里漫步。这座艺术馆是某座更大的乡间别墅的一部分，或许可以俯瞰大片土地。露台上，壮观的景色尽收眼底。每个角落里都立着巨大的狮子雕塑。我和妻子——我们会站在那儿看着这景致，讨论该拿什么。在这幻想中，不知何故总会有一场暴雨将至。天空是石板灰色，而不知怎的，阴云密布，仿佛夏日最明媚的阳光照耀那般遮蔽着我们。爬墙虎，常春藤，它们爬满了台阶。只有我和妻子在讨论要选什么，我们的超市购物篮还空空如也。”他突然笑了笑。“请见谅，瑞德先生。我太忘形了。只是，在我的想象中，比如您，像您这般才华横溢的人，在钢琴前坐了个把钟头，周围一片宁静，肯定是这样。您肯定是这样获得灵感的。您会徜徉在崇高的音乐灵感中。你会看看这个，摇摇头，把它放回去。尽管很美，却不是您要寻找的。哈！您脑袋里的景象肯定美不胜收呀，瑞德先生！在您的手指触碰琴键的那

一刻，我多想能陪同您踏上这段旅程啊。但当然，您要去的方我可能无法跟随。我真羡慕您呀，先生！”

我咕哝了几句不知所云的话，然后我们便沉默了。车行驶了一会儿。接着，霍夫曼说：

“我妻子，早先在我们结婚之前，我想她就是那样设想我们在一起的生活的。类似那样的，瑞德先生。我们手挽着手，拎着购物篮，走进某座美丽空寂的博物馆。不过，当然啰，她可从未像我这样异想天开过。您看，我妻子来自一个才华横溢、人才辈出的家族。她母亲是位非常出色的画家。她外公是他那个年代最伟大的佛兰德语诗人之一。不知何故，他被世人冷落了，但那改变不了什么。哦，那家族里还有些其他人，非常有才华，全是才子。在那样的家庭中长大，她把美和天赋视作理所当然。如若不是，会怎样？我告诉您吧，先生，就会引发种种误会。在我们早先的关系中，就引发了一个非常大的误会。”

他又陷入了沉默，盯着前面蜿蜒的路看了一会儿。

“起初，是音乐最早把我们带到了一起。”他终于开口道，“我们坐在海伦巷的咖啡馆畅谈音乐。抑或是我一个人在讲。我想，是我在一直不停地说。记得有一次，在和她一起逛人民公园时，我向她细致描述了我对穆勒里的《通风》的感受，大概整整讲了一个钟头。当然，我们那时还年轻，有时间沉溺在这种东西里。即便那时候，她也不甚言谈，可她一直在倾听我，我能看出她深受感动。哦，是的。顺便说一下，瑞德先生，我说，我们那时还年轻，但我认为事实并非如此。我们两人都已过了适婚年龄，以当时的年纪，应该已经结婚好一段日子了。或许她感觉有些着急，谁知道呢？总之，我们谈到了结婚，我又是那么爱她，瑞德先生，从一开始我就深深爱上她了。她那时那么美。即便现在，假如您见到她，也能看出当时的她有多美。她美得特别，与众不同。您立刻就能看出她对美好事物非常敏感。我不妨向您坦承，我那时非常爱她。我无法用言语告诉您，她同意嫁给我对我意味着什么。我以为我的人生会充满欢乐，持久不衰的欢乐。但是，仅仅几天后，在答应嫁给我几天之后，她第一次来我住处看望我。那时，我在勃根霍夫酒店工作，在附近的格劳肯斯拉斯租了一间房，就在运河边上。那房间谈不上很合意，但确实不错的了。一面墙上安着很棒的书架，窗口摆着张橡木书桌。如我所说，从窗口看出去就是运河。时值冬季，一个阳光灿烂的冬日清晨，一道美丽的光线射进屋子。当然，我里里外外都打扫了，一切井然有序。她走进来，四

下看了看，环顾一周。然后，她轻轻地问道：‘你在哪儿作曲呢？’我记得非常清楚，那实实在在的一瞬间，瑞德先生，那生动的一幕。我把它视为我人生的转折点。我没有夸大其词，先生。现在看来，在很多方面，我目前的生活是从那一刻开始的。克里斯汀站在窗边，沐浴在一月的阳光中，她一只手放在桌上，好像仅用几个手指支撑着自己。她看上去美极了。她带着一脸的惊讶问我那个问题。您看，先生，她深感迷惑：‘你在哪里作曲呢？没有钢琴呀。’我不知道如何作答。我马上就察觉哪里出了误会，一个残酷的灾难性的曲解。您能怪我吗，先生，我被蛊惑了，想挽回面子？我不该撒这个彻头彻尾的谎的。哦，不，甚至不该想挽回面子。但那一刻真是难熬啊。现在想想，还会感觉一阵战栗，即使是现在，我对您讲这些的时候。‘你在哪里作曲呢？’‘不，没有钢琴。’我开心地说，‘什么都没有。没有手稿，什么也没有。我打算两年内不再作曲了。’我对她那样说的。我反应很快，说的时候外表上没有显出任何悲伤或犹豫。我甚至还说出打算具体哪天开始继续作曲。但是眼下，不，不再作曲。我能说什么呢，先生？您期望我看着这个女人，这个我爱得死去活来的女人，她几天前刚刚答应嫁给我，您期望让我说出实话而令她饱受折磨吗？期望我对她说：‘哦，天哪，这全是场误会。我自然会放你走，你不必承担责任。好吧，我们就此分手吧……’我当然不能，先生。您也许会觉得我不诚实，但那就太苛刻了。不管怎么说，您看，那时候，我的生活，我说的不全是谎言。碰巧，我非常期望有一天能摆弄一件乐器，是的，我想作曲，一试身手。所以，这不完全是个谎言。我是撒谎了，是的，我承认。但是，除此以外我又能做什么呢？我不能放她走。于是我告诉她，我已经决定两年内不再作曲，要清清头脑，理理情感，诸如此类的。我记得，这个问题我谈了好一会儿。她在听，全都听进去了，还点了点她那美丽又聪明的头，对我告诉她的这番废话深怀同情。我还能怎样呢，先生？还有，您可知道，在那个早晨之后，她再也没提起我重新作曲的事，这些年来从未提起。顺便说一句，瑞德先生，我知道您要问什么，我会告诉您的，向您保证。那日清晨之前，在我们交往的任何时候，在我们沿着运河散步的任何时候，我们在海伦巷的咖啡馆见面的任何时候，我从未，从未有意让她觉得我会作曲。我热爱音乐，乐此不疲，那使我每日精力充沛，每日清晨醒来，我都能听到心中的乐声，是的，我暗示过这一切，而且都是真的。但我从未故意误导她，先生。哦，不，从来没有。那只是个糟糕的误会啊。她，出生于那样的家族，不可避免地，她推想……谁知道呢，先生？直至那日清晨，在我房间，我从没说过哪怕一个字暗示过此事。哦，如我所说，瑞德先生，她再也没提过这

件事了，一次都没。我们如期结了婚，买了套俯瞰腓特烈广场的小公寓，我在大使馆里谋了个好差使。我们一起开始了生活，有一段时间，我们过得相当开心。当然，我从未忘记……忘记那个误会。但已不像您想象的那般困扰我了。您看，我之前说过的，那时候，唉，呃，我有意，等时机合适，有机会时，摆弄件乐器。或许是小提琴吧。想当初，我那时是有过些计划，就像您年轻时那样，在您还不知时间是多么有限的时候，您还不知您四周已建起了一个壳的时候，一具硬硬的外壳，您根本出——不——去！”突然，他双手松开方向盘，向上推了推四周无形的穹顶。这个动作蕴含更多的是疲倦，而非愤怒，下一秒，他双手又放回到方向盘上，叹息一声，继续说道：

“不，我那时还不明白这些事情。我仍希望有一天我会变成她心中的那种人。没错，先生，我相信，因她的存在，受她的影响，我一定会成功地、切切实实地变成那种人。我们结婚的头一年，瑞德先生，如我所说，相当开心。我们买下的那套公寓够住的了。有那么段日子我以为：她已经知道那是个误会，可她并不介意。我不知道，在那些日子，各种想法涌现在我的脑中。接着，过了段时间，自然地，到了那个我提过的日子，两年后我重新作曲的日子，那天来了，又过去了。我小心翼翼观察她，但她却什么都没说。她很安静，真的，但她一直如此。她什么都没说，也没做任何出格的事。但我猜想大概正是从那个时候起，大概从两年之期的那天起，我们的生活中出现了一丝紧张感。那种不太强烈的紧张感，好像总是无所不在，不论我们多么愉快地度过了一个夜晚，仍旧可以感觉到它。我会安排小小的惊喜，到她最爱的餐厅用餐，或者给她带些花回家，或者买她最爱的香水。是的，我使出浑身解数想让她开心。但那紧张的气氛一直存在。很多时候，我设法不去在意它。我告诉自己，那全都是我臆想的。其实它存在着，并且与日俱增，但我想我只是不愿意承认。我只知道，在它消失的那天，它还是存在着。是的，它消失了，接着，我明白了那是什么。我们结婚三年后的一天下午，我下班后回家，给她带了份小礼物，一本诗集，我碰巧知道她正求之不得。虽然她没有明确说过，但我猜想到了。我走进公寓，发现她正在俯瞰广场。下午的那个时候，可以看见所有人下班回家。公寓里很吵，但相对于年轻人来说，还不算太糟糕。我把诗集递给她。‘只是件小礼物。’我对她说。她继续看着窗外。她跪在沙发上，胳膊撑在沙发靠背上，支着头眺望外面。接着，她懒洋洋地接过书，一个字都没说，继续看着下面的广场。我一直站在屋子中间，等着她说点什么，称赞我的礼物。也许她身体不舒服吧。我很担心，站在那儿等着。接着，她终于转过身，看着我。不是无情地看我，哦，不，但她看着我，那眼神非常特别，流露出的

是肯定，对她一直思考的问题的肯定。是的，就是那种，那时我才意识到：她终于看透我了。也正是那时候我明白了，明白了到底紧张什么。我一直在等，一直等着这个时刻。您知道，也许那显得很奇怪，但那是莫大的解脱啊！终于，终于，她看穿了我！哦，如释重负啊！我感觉自由了。事实上，我竟大喊了一声：‘哈！’而后笑了起来。她一定感觉很奇怪，但下一秒钟，我即刻振作起来。我马上意识到——哦，是的，自由的感觉太短暂了——我马上意识到我还得经历怎样的艰难险阻，于是顷刻间我高度戒备起来。我知道，如果我想留住她，就必须付出两倍、三倍的努力。但是您看，我那时候还以为，只要我努力，即便她发现了，假如我异常努力，我还可以赢回她。我多傻呀！您知道吗？那天过后的几年中，我一直那样以为，我竟真的相信自己一点点成功了。哦，我小心翼翼，服侍周到，尽全力去取悦她，从不自满。我发现，她的品位和喜好是随时间改变的，因此我观察每一细节，提前准备应对变化。哦，是的，我对自己说，瑞德先生，那些年，我完美地扮演了她丈夫的角色。假如她开始越来越不喜欢一个中意多年的作曲家，几乎就在她自己道出那改变之前，我会立刻察觉。等下次一提到那位作曲家，我便会迅速地说道，甚至在她还在犹豫着要表示质疑时，我会立刻说：‘当然啰，他大不如前了。我们今晚别去他的音乐会了，好不好？很无聊的。’她会报以我一脸释然的表情，不会错的。哦，是的，我处处留心，我说过，先生，我相信这样可行。我是自己在骗自己啊，我这么爱她，竟自欺欺人地相信，我在慢慢把她赢回来。只那几年，我真的自信满满。然后一切都改变了，一夜间全变了。我明白了，该来的一定会来，我多年付出的巨大努力只会全部付诸东流。我一夜之间全明白了，先生。我们应邀去费希尔先生家，他为詹·彼得文斯基组织了一场小型招待会，就在他的音乐会之后。我们那时刚开始应邀参加这样的活动，由于我对艺术的热爱与敏锐鉴赏，我开始在这儿赢得了些尊敬。呃，总之，那天我们在费希尔先生家，在他雅致的客厅里。宾客不多，最多四十个人，是个非常轻松的夜晚。我不知道您是否见过彼得文斯基，先生。他确实是个非常有趣的人，最擅长让每位宾客感觉自在。谈话进行得很顺畅，大家都很开心。接着，有那么一刻，我走到放自助餐的桌子边，准备吃些东西，突然发现彼得文斯基先生正好站在我身边。我那时候还很年轻，还没多少和名流打交道的经验，而且我承认，是的，我有点紧张。但彼得文斯基先生和蔼地一笑，问我今晚是否开心，很快就使我放松了下来。然后，他说：‘我刚刚和您妻子交谈过，她真是迷人至极啊。她说，她极中意波德莱尔。我却不得不向她坦言，我对波德莱尔的作品知之寥寥。她十分得体地训诫了我，说我这状况着

实可悲。噢，她让我惭愧之至啊。我打算立刻改正。尊夫人对那诗人的热爱太有感染力了！’我点了点头，回应道：‘没错，那当然。她一直热爱波德莱尔。’‘而且激情澎湃啊，’彼得文斯基说，‘她让我惭愧之至啊。’整个事情就是这样，我们之间就说了这些。但是您看，瑞德先生，我是这样认为的。我从来不知道她喜欢波德莱尔！甚至从未想到过！您明白我在说什么吧。她从未向我表露过这种激情！当彼得文斯基告诉我这些时，我有了些头绪。突然间，我看清了多年来我一直试图忽略的事情。我的意思是，她一直在向我隐藏她的某些部分，在保护它们，仿佛与我这粗人接触会毁掉它们似的。我说过，先生，或许我一直有所怀疑，觉得她对我隐瞒了自己的另一面。但谁能怪她呢？一个无比敏感的女子，在她那样的家庭中长大。她毫不犹豫地告诉了彼得文斯基，但在我们相处的这些年里，却不曾有一刻暗示过，她如此这般地喜爱波德莱尔。接下来的几分钟里，我徘徊在招待会的人群中，根本不知道自己说了些什么，只是心不在焉地客套着，心乱如麻。然后我看向房间的另一头，与彼得文斯基结束交谈后，肯定有半个小时了吧。我看了看房间那头，看到了她，我的妻子，坐在彼得文斯基身边的沙发上开心地大笑。没有任何调情的成分，您明白的。哦，不，我妻子在礼节上一向一丝不苟。但她却在开怀大笑着，我才意识到，我们一起沿运河边散步时，她常那样，但之后，就再也没有见到过了。也就是说，在她发现之前。沙发很长，上面还坐有两个人，还有些人为了接近彼得文斯基，坐在地板上。但是彼得文斯基只和我妻子说话，她笑得很开心。我听到的，不仅仅是这大笑声，瑞德先生，还有那说话的音量。据我所见，我站在房间的另一头，接下来是这样的。在那一刻之前，彼得文斯基一直坐在沙发边沿上，双手扣膝，就像这样！他大笑着与我妻子说话时，便开始斜身侧靠，是的，好像就只想靠回沙发上一样。他开始斜身侧靠时，我妻子从身后拿出了个靠垫，为彼得文斯基放好，那动作既敏捷又娴熟，这样，他的头触到沙发靠背时，靠垫就已经在那了。这个动作是那样敏捷，几乎不假思索，还非常优雅啊，瑞德先生。我看到时，觉得心碎成了一片一片。那动作何等自然，充满了崇敬，是一种关心的渴望，是一种简单的讨好。那小小的一个动作，透露出她一整颗心都对我一直紧闭着。那一刻我才意识到我被骗得好苦啊。我终于明白了真相，从此不再怀疑了。我的意思是，先生，我意识到她会离我而去。迟早的事啊。只是个时间问题。从那个夜晚开始，我就知道了。”

他陷入沉默，好像又一次沉浸在思绪中。这会儿，小路两侧都是农田，我能看到远远的稻田里，拖拉机缓慢地移动着。我对他说道：

“请原谅，您所说的这个特别的夜晚是多久以前了？”

“多久以前？”霍夫曼似乎对这个问题稍感不快。“噢……我想那是，呃，彼得文斯基的音乐会，是二十二年前了。”

“二十二年。”我说，“我猜，尊夫人一直以来都呆在您身边？”

霍夫曼恼怒地转向我。“您在暗示什么，先生？难道我不明白自己家的状况？难道我不了解自己的妻子？我在这儿跟您推心置腹，与您分享这些秘密，您竟然教训我，对我说这些，好像您远比我了解……”

“如果冒犯了您，我向您道歉，霍夫曼先生。我只是想指出……”

“指不出什么的，先生！您什么都不知道！事实上，我的绝望处境到目前已经有段时间了。那晚在费希尔先生家，我就看出来，清晰如白昼，清晰得如同我面前现在看到的小路一样。好吧，它还没有发生，但那仅仅是因为……仅仅因为我做了努力。是的，先生，我付出了怎样的心血呀！也许您会笑话我：如果我明知道这局必输，我为何还要折磨自己？为何还要这样紧紧地抓住她？对您来说，问这样的问题很简单。但我深爱着她，先生，比从前更甚。对我来说，那简直难以想象，我不能眼睁睁地看着她离开，否则一切都会变得毫无意义。好吧，我知道那没用，迟早有一天，她会离开我，为了某个像彼得文斯基那样、像在她发现之前所想象的我那样的人。但您不能嘲笑一个坚持不懈的人。我已经做到极致了，先生，对我这样的人来说，我已经尽了最大的努力，选择了唯一的出路。我已经倍加努力了，组织活动，参任委员会委员，这些年来，我已经成功地在这城市的音乐艺术圈内成了一个响当当的人物。不过当然了，我一直有那么个希望。那个希望或许能解释我为何能够成功地留她这么久。但那一希望如今已经破灭，破灭好多年了。可是您看，曾几何时，有这么个希望，仅存的希望。我指的，当然是，我们的儿子，斯蒂芬。假若他有所不同，假若他能幸运地拥有至少一丁点她家族所拥有的那般横溢的才华！许多年来，我们都这么希望。虽然各自方法不同，我们两人都关注着斯蒂芬，对他寄予厚望。我们送他去上钢琴课，我们小心观察，怀抱一丝希望。我们希望能听到才华迸发的火花，可是怎么也听不到，我们压力倍增啊。啊，我们听得那么辛苦，各自出于不同的原因，我们多么想听到点什么，却从来没有……”

“对不起打扰下，霍夫曼先生。您说斯蒂芬的这些事，我可以向您保证……”

“我骗了自己这么多年！我说，好呀，也许他是大器晚成，还是会有出息的，就像一粒小小的种子。噢，我自欺欺人，我敢说我妻子亦是如此。我们等呀等呀，过去的这几年，再这样装下去也没用了。斯蒂芬今年已经二十三岁了。我再也无法安慰自己，明天或者后天，他会突然绽放。我得直面现实了。他随我啊。我如今是知道了，她也发现了。当然，作为母亲，她很爱斯蒂芬。但作为救赎我的方法，就远远不够了，他成了个反作用。每次她看到他，就明白了，嫁给我是个多么大的错误……”

“霍夫曼先生，真的，我有幸听过斯蒂芬的演奏，我得告诉您……”

“化身，瑞德先生！他成了她人生中犯下的巨大错误的化身。噢，如果您见过她的家人就明白了！她年轻时肯定一直在幻想自己有一天会有个漂漂亮亮、才华过人的孩子。对美十分敏感，就和她一样。但她却犯了个错误！当然，作为母亲，她全心全意地爱着斯蒂芬，但那并不是说她就没有在他身上看到自己的错误。他太像我了，先生。我无法再否认了。现在不能再否认了，他差不多已经长大成年了……”

“霍夫曼先生，斯蒂芬是个很有天赋的年轻人……”

“您不必这么说，先生！请不要用那些乏味的客套话来侮辱你我之间坦诚的亲密关系！我不是傻子，看得出斯蒂芬是块什么料。有一段时间，他是我唯一的希望，是的，但自从那以后，自从我明白一切都是徒劳之后，坦白说来，我想至少六七年前就看出来了，我努力过了一——谁能怪我呢？——几乎每天一次，我拼命地想抓住她。我对她说，瞧，至少等到我下次组织的活动吧。至少等那场活动结束后，你也许就会对我刮目相看了。而等到活动开始又结束后，我便会立刻对她说，不，等一等吧，还有一个，还有另一场很棒的活动，我正努力呢。请为那场活动等待吧。那就是我所付出的努力，先生。过去六七年里都是如此。今晚，我知道，是我最后的机会。我全压在上面了。去年我第一次告诉她今晚的计划，向她概述了所有的细节，譬如桌子的摆法，当晚的节目，甚至——请原谅我——我预见到，您或者其他相当的人物会接受邀请，成为当晚的焦点。是的，那时我第一次向她解释了这一切：我这个束缚了她这么久的庸才，多亏了我的努力，布罗茨基先生才在这个非凡之夜飞跃巅峰，赢得这座城市居民的爱心与

信心，掀起全场高潮——哈哈！我告诉您吧，先生，她看着我，仿佛在说：‘又来了。’但我看到了她眼中的闪光。那意思是说：‘或许你真的会成功。那就不同了。’是的，她的眼睛只闪烁了一下，但恰恰是眼中的这道闪光让我坚持了这么久，先生。啊，我们到了，瑞德先生。”

我们靠边停在了路边停车区，旁边是一块田野，里面生长着高高的牧草。

“瑞德先生，”霍夫曼说，“其实，我有点晚了。请别介意我的无礼，请问您能自己上去到别馆吗？”

顺着他的目光，我看到了爬满野蔷薇的陡峭山坡，一间小木屋坐落在山顶上。霍夫曼翻了翻仪表板上的小柜，找出了把钥匙。

“小木屋的门上有把挂锁，里面的设施虽不豪华，但应您要求，里面有足够的独处空间。钢琴是那种二十年代生产的贝希斯坦牌立式钢琴，堪称完美的典范。”

我又抬头看了看山坡，然后说：“是上面那座小屋？”

“两个小时以后我会回来接您，瑞德先生。或者，您要求早些开车过来？”

“两个小时就可以了。”

“好的，先生，我希望一切都令您满意。”霍夫曼冲小屋摆了摆手，好像是在礼貌地为我引路，但举手间透露着一丝不耐烦。我谢过他，下了车。

第二十五章

我拉开木栅门，循迹走上了一条小径，小径向上延伸，直达小木屋。起先，地面泥泞不堪，颇为难走，不过越往上去，地面也就越发坚实平稳。爬至半坡，我望了望身后，只见一条长长的小路在田间蜿蜒，一辆汽车（很可能是霍夫曼的）只露出车顶，渐渐消失在远方。

到达小屋后，我打开锈迹斑斑的门锁，这时我已是气喘吁吁了。这间小木屋从外面看和普通的花园小屋没什么不同，里面却毫无装饰，这个发现仍然让我吃了一惊。墙壁与地板只是些粗糙的木板条，有些地方已经隆起，我看见木板间的裂缝中有虫子在爬动，而我头顶的木椽上还悬挂着残余的蜘蛛网。一架外表有些脏兮兮的立式钢琴占据了绝大部分空间，我把琴凳拉开坐下时，发觉背部几乎贴在了墙上。

背后这堵墙上有着小屋里唯一的一扇窗户。我在凳子上转了下身，伸长脖子望去，外面的风景一览无遗，田野陡降至底，与小路相连。小屋内的地板似乎有些倾斜，等我转身再次面对钢琴时，我感到心中不安，仿佛自己要朝后倒滑下山似的。我打开琴盖，弹了几小段，发现它的音色极好，尤其是低音，雄浑饱满，悦耳动听。击弦机并不太轻，钢琴的音准调得非常到位。我突发灵感：也许，周围粗糙的木料也是经过精心挑选，为的是达到最佳的吸收和反射效果。除了松弛的踏板每次被我踩到时会有点吱吱作响外，这架钢琴让我没什么可挑剔的。

我整理了会儿思绪，然后开始弹奏《石棉与纤维》那令人激荡眩晕的开篇小节。随着第一乐章渐入沉思佳境，我的身心也越发放松，最后，我弹完了这第一乐章，其中一大部分是我在闭目凝神之中弹奏完成的。

我重新睁开眼睛，开始弹奏第二乐章。午后的阳光透过我背后的窗户倾洒而入，将我的身影清晰地投射在琴键上。即便是第二乐章要求所致，我却仍然无法转变内心的沉静。的确，我发现这首曲子的方方面面尽在我的掌控之中。我忆起自己今天竟然那么焦虑和担心，现在看来，真是愚蠢至极。此外，现在我已弹到这首曲子的中间部分，

倘若我母亲不被其感动，那显然不可思议。事实很简单，我对今晚的表演信心十足，没有丝毫理由去担心焦虑。

我开始弹奏第三乐章，进入庄严忧伤的旋律，这时我才听到，背景中传来一阵噪声。起初我以为是那只软绵绵的踏板在响，接着又以为是和地板有关。那噪声很轻，带着节奏，时有时无。有那么会儿工夫，我尝试着不去理会它，但它却不绝于耳。接着，在我弹完一半乐章、弹到弱音小节部分时，我意识到：有人正在外面不远的地方挖土。

一发现这噪音与我无关，我反倒更能对它置之不理了。我继续顾自弹奏第三乐章，享受着这份轻松自如的感觉，纠结的情感恹恹地浮上心头，然后又各自散落一方。我又一次闭上双眼，没多久，脑海中便勾勒出了我父母的面庞。他们并排坐着，一脸肃穆，专注地聆听。奇怪的是，在我的想象中，我的父母并没有坐在音乐大厅里——尽管我知道，今晚我就会见到他们——而是坐在我们在伍斯特郡的一位邻居家的客厅里，那位邻居是个寡妇，姓克拉克森，跟我母亲有段时间很要好。或许是小木屋外高高的绿草让我想起了克拉克森太太家吧。和我们家一样，她的农舍建在一小块田野中央，因为她独自寡居，她自然根本无法修理纵横蔓延的杂草。相反，她家里面却整洁异常。在她家客厅的一个角落里曾摆着一架钢琴，我不记得自己曾看见那琴盖打开过。据我所知，它很可能是走调或是坏了。这时，在我脑中浮现出了一幅特别的记忆场景：我静静地坐在房间里，茶杯放在膝盖上，聆听着父母与克拉克森太太聊音乐。或许我父亲刚刚在问克拉克森太太是否弹过这架钢琴，因为音乐显然不是她常和人谈起的话题。总之，我坐在小木屋里继续弹奏《石棉与纤维》的第三乐章，想象着自己回到了克拉克森太太的那间农舍小屋，我父亲、我母亲还有克拉克森太太一脸严肃地听我坐在角落里弹奏钢琴，夏日微风徐徐，蕾丝窗帘随时会拂过我的脸庞——这种想象与当下毫无因果逻辑可言，但从中我仍然获得了莫大的满足。

弹至第三乐章的后半段时，我又留意起那挖土的噪音来。我不确定这声音是停过一阵后再次响起，还是一直持续不断地响着，不过无论如何，这声音现在好像比之前更清晰可辨了。我突然想到，制造这噪音的不是别人，正是布罗茨基，他在埋葬他的狗。没错，他今早已经不只一次宣布过，意欲在今天晚些时候埋葬他的狗，我甚至隐约记起，自己曾与他达成协议，他举行下葬仪式时，由我来弹奏钢琴。

这时，我开始想象在我到达小屋之前这里发生过的事情。据我推测，布罗茨基已来多时，一直在山顶某处等着，离小木屋只有扔出一颗石子那么远的距离。那儿有一簇灌木，地面上还有浅坑。他静静地站在那儿，铁锹靠在一棵树上，他死去的狗用床单包裹着，躺在一边的地上，几乎完全被四周的草淹没了。就像他早上对我说的那样，他打算举行一个简单的葬礼，希望我的钢琴声可以作为唯一的伴奏。他希望我到达后再开始举行仪式，这是情有可原的。因此，他就等着，等了也许有个把小时，其间一直凝望着天空和山下的风景。

很自然，刚开始等我的时候，布罗茨基脑中会浮现出他去世的爱狗，想起它陪伴他一同度过的时光。不过随着时间分秒流逝，我的身影迟迟未现，他的思绪就转向了柯林斯小姐，还有他们即将在公墓相见的情景。不久后，布罗茨基又想起了多年前那个特别的春日清晨，他搬了两把藤椅到农舍后的田野中。那时，他们到这个城市还不过两周，尽管积蓄几乎已经耗尽，柯林斯小姐还是将大量精力投入到装修他们的新家上。在那个春天的早晨，她下来吃早饭时对他说，自己很想坐在阳光中休息一小会儿，呼吸一点新鲜空气。

回想起那日清晨，他发现自己还清楚地记得那湿漉漉的黄色草坪和头顶上的朝阳，他把藤椅并排放好。没过了一会儿，她出现了，两人一起坐了一阵，彼此交流着不经常说起的轻松话题。那天早晨，有那么一小会儿，几个月来头一次，他们感觉到，未来还是有希望的。布罗茨基正欲将这一想法脱口说出，但他马上又想到，那将会触及到他近来的失败这一敏感话题，于是改变了主意。

然后她说起了厨房的事。虽然他好几天前就保证过要将那几块硬纸板移走，却仍未兑现，所以她厨房的装修工作只能遥遥无期地搁置。他沉默片刻，然后心平气和地回答说，工棚里还有好多活正等着他呢。既然他们没法愉快地坐在一起，哪怕就几分钟，那他还是开始干活吧。他站起身，穿过屋子，走进前院的一个小棚屋。他们俩自始至终都没有叫嚣相对，整个口角也只持续了不过几秒钟。当时，他并没有把那当回事，而是马上自顾自地干起了木工活。那天早晨好几次，他抬头透过满是灰尘的工棚窗户看到，她漫无目的地在前院晃来晃去。他继续低头干活，隐隐期望她突然出现在门口，但每次她都走回了屋内。午饭的时候他进了屋——诚然，那时已经很晚了——却发现她早已吃完了午饭上楼去了。稍等片刻后，他回到工棚，又忙活了一整个下午。天色渐晚，屋里的灯亮了起来。他就那样看着夜幕降临，直到快半夜时才进了屋。

农舍楼下一片漆黑。他走进客厅，在一把木椅上坐下，望着月光照射在他们破旧的家具上，思来想去地回忆今天这奇怪的一天。他想起曾有哪一整天是像他们今天这样度过的，便决心示好，结束这一切，于是他起身走上楼梯。

他走上楼，看到卧室的灯仍亮着。他走过去，脚下的地板咯吱作响，声音很大，清晰无比，宣告着他的靠近，仿佛他在大声叫她。走到房门口，他停下脚步，低头看了看从门缝中透出的一束灯光，想要让自己镇定下来。接着，他正要去抓门把手，这时从门的另一边传来了她的咳嗽声。只是轻微的一声咳嗽，几乎可以肯定是下意识的，然而当中有些什么东西让他却步了，他慢慢地抽回了手。这轻微的咳嗽声中包含了一种提醒，让他想起了他最近设法忽视的她的一性格特点，一个在欢乐时光中他颇为欣赏的特点，但自从最近摆脱的那次仓皇的失败后，他突然意识到，他渐渐坚定了决心，试图忽略那特点。不知什么原因，不知怎地，这咳嗽声中包含了她所有的完美主义信条、高尚的情操以及她总是要求自己尽可能以最有用的方式投入全部精力的特点。突然间，他对她大为生气，对她的这声咳嗽，对这一整天都很窝火。他转身走开了，浑然不顾地板在他脚下发出多大的吱嘎声。接着，他回到月光斑驳的客厅，横躺在旧沙发上，盖了一件大衣就睡着了。

翌日清晨，他早早就醒了，为他们俩准备早餐。她也跟平常一样，按时起床，两人打了招呼，看似无甚不快。他开始讲述，对发生的一切很后悔，可她打断了他，说他们两个都太孩子气了，这着实令人吃惊。然后，他们就继续吃早餐，二人显然都松了口气，将那场口角抛诸脑后。不过，在那天剩下的时间里，还有随后的几天，他们的生活中仍旧存有一丝冷漠。随后的几个月中，他们之间沉默的时间越来越长，且越来越频繁，他便不再去苦苦思考其中归根究底的原因。现在，他觉得自己又回到了那个春日，回到了那个他们并排坐在湿漉漉的草地上、预示着美好一天的早晨。

布罗茨基正沉浸在这些回忆中时，我来到了小木屋，开始弹奏钢琴。刚开始几个小节里，布罗茨基继续眼神空洞地盯着远方。接着他叹了口气，将思绪拉回手中的活计上，拿起铁锹，用它的边缘试了试地面的硬度，但之后又停了下来，也许是觉着音乐的基调跟他的要求有点出入吧。直到我开始弹奏第三乐章那缓慢忧郁的小节时，他才开始挖掘。土地很软，他没费多大力气。然后，他把狗的尸体从高高的草丛那边拖过来，不慌不忙地将其置入墓穴中，甚至根本没想要翻开床单看最后一眼。事实上，他已经开始将泥土填回坑中，这时候，某

种东西，或许是音乐的悲伤，通过空气传递给了他，终于，他停了下来。接着他直起身子，低垂着头，静静地注视着填埋了过半的坟墓。直到我快弹到第三乐章尾声时，布罗茨基才又拿起铁锹，继续往墓里填土。

弹完第三乐章时，我听到布罗茨基仍在奋力忙活。我想了想，决定还是不弹最后的乐章——这一乐章跟这整个进程的气氛很不相符——于是便又重新弹奏起了第三乐章。我觉得，为了弥补布罗茨基的等待，这是我唯一能做的了。铲土声又持续了一会儿，在第三乐章弹到一半左右时停了下来。我想，这颇合布罗茨基的境地，再给他一点时间，让他站在墓穴边上回忆。我发现自己在音乐中较之前更加重了哀伤之情。

我再一次结束了第三乐章，又静静地在钢琴边坐了几分钟，然后起身，在狭窄的空间里伸展了下手脚。这时，午后的阳光洒满了整个小屋，我听到附近草丛里传出蟋蟀的鸣叫声。过了一会儿，我意识到自己应该出去，至少跟布罗茨基先生说几句话。

我推开门望出去，惊奇地发现太阳已经沉至山下的小路那边。我走了几步，穿过草地，重新走上了那条小径，爬完剩下那点路，到达山顶。接着，我看到在山的另一侧，地面缓缓向下延伸至一处美丽的山谷。布罗茨基就站在我下面不远处，一簇稀疏的灌木丛下就是墓穴。

我朝他走去，他没有转身，只是盯着墓穴静静地说道：“谢谢您，瑞德先生。您的琴声很美。我很感激。非常感谢您。”

我喃喃言语了几句，然后就在草地上驻步，与墓穴保持一定距离，以示尊重。布罗茨基仍然低头看着坟墓，过了一会儿，他说道：

“只是条老狗。但我想要最好的音乐。我非常感激。”

“不客气，布罗茨基先生。我很高兴能够帮您。”

他叹了口气，头一次看向了我。“您知道吗，我没法为布鲁诺哭泣。我试过了，但我哭不出来。我的脑子里装的全是未来。但有时候，却又全是过去的影子。您知道，我怀念我们过去的的生活。我们走吧，瑞德先生。我们离开布鲁诺吧。”他转过身，开始慢慢走下山谷。“我们离开吧。再见了，布鲁诺，再见。你曾是个好伙伴，虽然只是条狗。我们离开他吧，瑞德先生。来吧，跟我一起走。我们离开

他吧。您为他弹奏钢琴，真是太好了。那是最好的音乐。但我现在不能哭。她很快就会来了。不会太久的。请吧，我们走吧。”

我又向面前的山谷望了一眼，这才发现那里林林总总全是墓碑。我这才意识到，我们正走向布罗茨基安排约见柯林斯小姐的那座公墓。没错，我刚与布罗茨基并肩齐行，就听他说道：

“皮尔·古斯塔森墓地。我们约好在那里见面。没有什么特殊原因。只是她说她知道那座坟墓，仅此而已。我会在那里等。我不介意等上一会儿。”

我们刚才一直在高低不平的杂草丛中前行，这会儿却来到了一条小径上。我们沿着山坡继续下行，我发现公墓越来越清晰可辨。那是个安静、隐蔽的所在。墓碑井然有序，排列在山谷平坦之处，有些则立在山坡两边的草地上。甚至在这会儿，我发现，那里正举行着一个葬礼；我依稀可见那群丧亲之人的黑衣身影，大概共有三十人，全站在我们左边的向阳地带。

“我非常希望一切顺利，”我说道，“当然，我指的是您和柯林斯小姐的会面。”

布罗茨基摇了摇头。“今天早上我感觉还挺好。我以为只要我们好好谈谈，一切就又会好起来的。但现在，我不知道了。或许，今天早上在她公寓的那个男人，您的朋友，或许他是对的。也许她现在再也不能原谅我了。也许我之前做得太过头，她永远都不会原谅我了。”

“我想您没必要这么悲观。”我说，“不管发生了什么，全都过去了。只要您两个能够……”

“这些年来，瑞德先生，”他说道，“在内心深处，我从未真正接受他们对那个时候的我的看法。我从未相信我只是个……是个无名之辈。是的，也许在我脑中，我接受他们的说法。可是在我心里——不，我绝不相信。这么多年来，我一刻也不相信。我总能听到，总能听到音乐声。所以，我知道自己比他们所说的要好，更好。在我们来这儿后的那段短暂时间里，她也知道，我知道她知道。不过后来，唉，她却开始怀疑了。谁能责怪她呢？我不怪她离开我。不，我不怪她那个。但我的确怪她——的确怪她没有做得更好。哦，是的，她理应做得更好！我让她恨我，您能想象我为此付出了多大代价吗？我给了她自由，而她干了什么呢？什么都没有，甚至都没离开这座城市，而只是在浪费时间。在这些人身上，她整天跟这些没用的软骨头瞎

聊。如果我早知道她只能做这些话，我就不会让她离开了！把自己心爱的人推开，瑞德先生，这太令人痛苦了。您以为我想那样做吗？假如我知道她那般打算的话，您以为我还会让自己变成这副德性吗？她居然跟这帮愚钝、不幸的人闲聊！曾几何时，她志向高远。她是打算要干一番大事业呀！那才对嘛。可瞧瞧现在，她把机会全浪费啦。甚至都没离开这座城市。我时不时地对她大吼大叫，您是不是很惊讶呢？假如她就只打算做这些话，为何那个时候她不这样说？她是不是认为当一个醉酒乞丐是个笑话，一个大笑话呢？人们想，好吧，他喝醉了，他什么都不在乎了。那不是真的。有时候，一切都那么清晰，非常清晰，而且那时候……您知道那时情况有多么糟吗，瑞德先生？她从没抓住我给她的机会，甚至都没有离开这个城市。她只是跟这些愚钝的人聊啊，聊啊，聊。我对她大吼，您能怪我吗？她活该，我说的每句话，每句肮脏的谩骂，她都活该……”

“布罗茨基先生，请别这样，请别这样。这可不是为这次重要的相聚做准备的办法……”

“她以为我很享受？我只为好玩？我根本不需要这样做。瞧，您看，我想戒酒的时候，我就能戒。难道她以为我是因为好玩才这样做的吗？”

“布罗茨基先生，我并不想冒犯您。但可以肯定的是，您现在是应该把这些想法都抛到脑后了。当然，这些分歧，这些误会，都应该忘记了。您必须得尝试，好好利用生命的余光。请试着让自己平静下来。您万万不可这样去见柯林斯小姐，不然以后您肯定会后悔的。其实，布罗茨基先生，请允许我这样说，到目前为止，您一再向她强调未来，这是非常正确的。我以为，养动物这个主意非常好。我真的认为您应当继续贯彻那个想法，还有其他类似的主意。真的没必要再缅怀过去了。当然，未来大有希望。对我来说，我今晚一定会尽我所能，让您能被这座城市的人民所接受……”

“啊，是的，瑞德先生！”他的心情仿佛突然为之一变，“是的，是的，是的。今晚，是啊，今晚我要……我要一鸣惊人！”

“这种精气神才对嘛，布罗茨基先生。”

“今晚，我不会妥协，绝对不会。好吧，他们是纠缠过我，我放弃了，我们逃跑了，来到了这个地方。但在我心里，我从未完全放弃。我知道我从未有过合适的机会。而现在，终于在今晚……这一天我已经等了很久，我绝不会妥协。我会好好地指挥这支乐队，让他们

大吃一惊。瑞德先生，非常感激您，您给了我极大的鼓舞。时至今早我还在害怕，害怕今晚，害怕即将发生的事。之前我还在想，自己最好还是小心点。要小心点，悠着点——霍夫曼，还有其他所有人，他们都是这样对我说的。开始的时候得慢慢来，他们说。一点一点去赢得他们的心。但在今天早晨，我在报纸上看到了您在萨特勒纪念碑旁拍的那张照片。我对自己说，就是这样，就是这样！一路坚持，坚持到底！什么都阻挡不了！这支乐队，他们肯定会大吃一惊！还有这些人，这座城市，他们也会大吃一惊。是啊，要一路坚持到底啊！她会看到的。她会再见到我，再见到我一直以来的真实面貌！萨特勒纪念碑，就是那样！”

此时，地面平坦了起来，我们沿着公墓中央一条绿草茵茵的小路一直往前走。我突然发现身后有动静，扭头一看，只见有个送葬者从葬礼现场朝我们跑来，举止间有些迫切。等他走近，我才看清，他是个黑黑的、矮胖的男人，年约五旬。

“瑞德先生，真是太荣幸了。”我转身对着他，他上气不接下气地说道。“我是那位孀妇的兄弟。若您肯加入我们，她肯定会非常高兴的。”

我看着他所指的地方，发现我们已经距离送葬队伍很近了。没错，我甚至还能在微风中捕捉到绝望抽泣的哭声。

“这边请。”那人说道。

“可是，在这么私人的场合……”

“不，不，拜托了。我妹妹，每一个人，他们都会深感荣幸。请往这边走。”

虽然有些不情愿，我还是跟着那人走了。穿过一排排墓碑时，我们脚下的地面更加泥泞不堪。起先，在一排排弓着背的黑色身影中，我并未看到那位孀妇，等我们走近，我发现她站在前面，对着尚未掩埋的墓穴鞠躬。她看起来绝望至极，好像完全有可能跳到棺材上去。也许正是因为这样，一位白发苍苍的老先生紧紧搀扶着她的胳膊和肩膀。在她身后，大队的人群低头啜泣。看起来这些人的悲恸都发自内心，但即便如此，那位孀妇的痛苦哀号仍旧清晰可辨——那声声哭泣缓慢、疲惫，发自整个胸腔，让人闻之惊愕，仿佛是出于一个长期饱受折磨的人之口。听到这种哭声，我真想转身走开，但那矮胖男人已经示意我走到前面去。我没动弹，他就颇为大声地对我说：

“瑞德先生，拜托了。”

这话使得一些哀悼者扭头看着我们。

“瑞德先生，这边请。”

那矮胖男人拉着我的胳膊穿过人群，这时，有些人转脸对着我，我至少听到有两个人咕哝了声：“是瑞德先生。”我们出现在前排时，哭泣声小了许多。我能感觉到有很多双眼睛正盯着我的后背。我摆出一副肃穆恭敬的姿势，同时痛苦地意识到自己的穿着很是随意，只有一件浅绿色的休闲夹克衫，甚至都没有打领带。更有甚者，我的衬衫上带有橘黄相间、明快轻松的图案。趁着那矮胖男人正试着引起他妹妹的注意，我迅速扣上了夹克衫的扣子。

“伊娃，”他轻喊道，“伊娃。”

白发老先生扭头看了看我们，但孀妇却似乎丝毫没听见。她仍旧沉浸在痛苦之中。她的哭声一停一顿地在墓地上方有节奏地回荡。她哥哥回头看了看我，表情明显有些尴尬。

“那么，”我小声说，一边开始后退。“我还是稍后再过来吊唁吧。”

“不，不，瑞德先生，拜托了。就一会儿。”矮胖男人将一只手放在他妹妹的肩膀上，又说了一遍，这次明显有点不耐烦：“伊娃。伊娃。”

孀妇站直身子，止住抽泣，终于转身面对我们。

“伊娃，”她兄弟对她说，“瑞德先生来了。”

“瑞德先生？”

“女士，我对您致以最深切的同情。”我边说边肃穆地低下头。

孀妇继续盯着我。

“伊娃！”她兄弟噓声道。

孀妇吓了一跳，看了她哥哥一眼，然后又盯着我。

“瑞德先生，”她开口了，声音很是镇静，颇令人吃惊，“这真是荣幸啊。赫尔曼——”她指了指坟墓，“一直非常仰慕您。”说罢，她突然又抽泣了起来。

“伊娃！”

“女士，”我飞快地说道，“我来此只是想表达我最深切的慰问。我真的很为您难过。不过，女士，还有在场的各位，请允许我现在离开，为你们的哀悼留出……”

“瑞德先生，”孀妇说，我看到她又一次镇定了下来，“的确是三生有幸啊。我相信在场的每个人与我一样都会说，您的到来让我们受宠若惊啊。”

齐声赞同的低语声在我背后响起。

“瑞德先生，”孀妇接着说，“在我们城镇逗留期间，您感觉还好吧？我真心希望您能发现至少有一两件事情能让您着迷。”

“我过得很开心。这里的人个个都很友善。这是个怡人的地方。我真的十分难过，为……为您丈夫的过世。”

“也许您不介意来些点心。茶还是咖啡？”

“不用，不用，真的，请……”

“请留下来，至少喝点茶什么的。哦，天哪，没人带茶或者咖啡吗？什么都没带？”孀妇盯着人群，细细搜寻着。

“真的不用，请别客气。我无意这样叨扰。请继续……您的仪式。”

“但您得用些什么啊。有没有人，有没有人带瓶咖啡来，没有人吗？”

在我身后，许多个声音在彼此询问，我扭头瞥到人们在翻找着他们的包，还有口袋。矮胖男人正向后排的人群挥着手，接着有人递过一样东西。他正站在那里仔细查看，这时我看到，那是一块用玻璃纸包着的蛋糕。

“这就是我们的待客之道吗？”矮胖男人大声喊道，“这是什么东西？”

这会儿，我身后响起了一阵骚动，其中有人愤怒地发问：“奥图，那块奶酪哪儿去了？”最后，一包薄荷糖递到了那矮胖男人手上，后者对着人群怒目而视，然后转身把蛋糕和薄荷糖交给了他妹妹。

“真的，您太客气了，”我说道，“但我过来只是因为……”

“瑞德先生，” 孀妇说道，她的声音因情绪而紧张起来，“看来，我们只能这样招待您了。我不知道赫尔曼会怎么说，偏偏在今天竟然这般丢脸。但是我们只能这样了，我只有向您道歉。瞧，这是所有的，这就是我们能提供的所有，所有的待客之礼。”

孀妇开始说话时，我身后的声音都已安静了下来，但这会儿却又爆出了叽叽喳喳的争执声。我听到有人喊道：“我没有！我可没有说过这样的话！”

这时，那位先前站在墓穴边上扶着寡妇的白发先生走上前，向我鞠了一躬。

“瑞德先生，” 他说，“请原谅我们以这样寒碜的方式回敬您。您能看到，我们毫无准备啊，真是太遗憾了。可是，我向您保证，在场的每个人都对您感激不尽。请接受这份茶点，尽管寒碜了些。”

“瑞德先生，来，请坐在这儿。” 孀妇正用手绢擦拭着一块平坦的大理石坟墓，就在她丈夫墓穴的旁边。“请吧。”

此时，我意识到抽身而退是不可能了。我歉疚地走向那块为我清理干净坟头的，说道：“呃，你们全都太客气了。”

我在那块灰白的大理石上刚刚坐下，哀悼者们就纷纷上前，将我团团围住。

“请用吧。” 我听到孀妇又说了一声。她凌驾在我面前，撕剥着蛋糕外层的玻璃纸，等终于撕开后，她便把蛋糕连包装纸一起递给了我。我向她道了谢，然后就开始吃了起来。那像是块水果蛋糕，我得格外小心才不会捏碎它。另外，这块蛋糕还蛮大的，一下子几口吞不掉。我继续吃着，感觉这些哀悼者在慢慢地向我靠拢，可是当我抬头看他们时，却见他们竟都安静地站着，双眼恭敬地低垂着。一阵沉默过后，那个矮胖男人咳了一声，说道：

“今天天气真好。”

“是啊，非常好，” 我答道，嘴里塞满了蛋糕。“确实非常好。”

接着，年迈的白发先生上前一步，说道：“瑞德先生，我们城里有几个风景优美的步行区。就在离城区不远的地方，还有一些很美的乡间步行区。如果您有空，我非常愿意带您去其中走一走。”

“瑞德先生，您不想来块薄荷糖吗？”

孀妇举着打开包装的薄荷糖递到我面前。我谢过她，拿了一块放进嘴里，尽管我知道和蛋糕混在一起味道会很怪。

“至于城市本身，”白发先生说道。“如果您对中世纪建筑感兴趣，这里有许多房子倒是非常迷人的。尤其是在老城区。我很乐意带您去逛一逛。”

“真的，”我说道，“您太客气了。”

我继续吃着，希望能尽快吃完。又是一阵沉默。接着，孀妇叹了口气，说：

“天气很不错啊。”

“是啊，”我说道，“自从我到这里后，天气一直挺好。”

这话得到了周围一致赞同的低语声，有些人甚至还礼貌地笑了笑，好像我说了什么俏皮话似的。我把最后一点蛋糕塞进嘴里，掸了掸手上的碎屑。

“瞧，”我说道，“你们一直都这么客气。但现在，请你们让葬礼继续吧。”

“再来一块吧，瑞德先生。我们只有这些能招待您了。”孀妇又将那包糖推到我面前。

就在这时，我突然意识到：就在这一刻，那孀妇对我充满了最强烈的痛恨感。没错，我意识到，尽管他们都很客气，但几乎所有在场的人——包括矮胖男人——都痛恨我的出现。说来也怪，在我脑中掠过这一念头的刹那间，一个声音从我身后响起，那声音不大洪亮，却十分清晰：

“他有什么了不起的？这是属于赫尔曼的时间哪。”

一阵不安的吵嚷声骤然响起，至少有两个惊讶的声音问道：“谁说的？”那位白发先生咳了咳，接着说道：

“在运河边上走走也很美呢。”

“他有什么了不起的？把一切都打乱了。”

“闭嘴，你这个笨蛋！”有人反驳道，“你可真会挑时候给我们丢脸。”

一些人发出低沉的声音，赞同此人说的最后那句话，但就在这个时候，第二个声音开始喊出带有攻击性的话语。

“瑞德先生，请吧。” 孀妇又将那包薄荷糖推向我。

“不用了，真的……”

“请吧，再吃一颗。”

人群后面，有四五个人开始了一场激烈的交谈，其中一个声音喊道：“他对我们太过分了。萨特勒纪念碑，太过分了。”

随后，越来越多的人开始互相叫嚷，我感觉一场大规模的争吵即将爆发。

“瑞德先生，” 矮胖男人弯下腰来对我说，“请别理他们。他们总是丢家族的脸。总是这样。我们为他们感到惭愧。哦，是的，我们很惭愧。请不要在意他们，否则我们会更加羞愧。”

“可是，肯定……” 我想站起身，却感觉有人又把我压了下去。接着，我看到孀妇用一只手抓着我的肩膀。

“请放松，瑞德先生。” 她尖声说道，“请用完您的点心。”

此刻，愤怒的争吵声此起彼伏，人群后面有些人似乎在相互推搡。那孀妇继续按着我的肩头，一脸高傲地蔑视着人群。

“我不在乎，我可不在乎，” 有一个声音喊道，“我们最好改变现在的生活！”

更多人开始推搡，一个胖胖的年轻人挤到了前面。他的脸很圆，此时显然十分激动。他盯着我，然后开口喊道：

“你就这样来了，好啊。站在萨特勒纪念碑前面！笑成那样！然后你就一走了之。但对我们这些生活在这儿的人来说，却没那么简单啊。萨特勒纪念碑！”

圆脸年轻人看起来不像是个惯于大胆言语的人，而他的真挚情感看起来也不容置疑。我稍感吃惊，一时竟无法作答。接着，圆脸小伙子又开始了新一轮的指责，我发现内心中有些东西妥协了。我意识到，无论如何，不可辩驳的是，我确实错误地估计了昨天选择在萨特勒纪念碑前面拍照的影响。然而在当时，它看起来无疑是给这座城市的居民发出恰当暗示的最有效的方法。当然，我对这其中的利弊一直太在意了——我还记得那天早晨吃早餐时，自己如何坐在那里，小心

翼翼地衡量这些利弊——但现在我明白了，萨特勒纪念碑事件不会不了了之，事态的发展很可能超出了我原先的猜测。

在那个圆脸年轻人的鼓动下，更多的人开始朝我喊叫。其他人试图制止他们，但并没有预料中的那么迫切。接着，在这一片叫喊声中，我听到了一个新的声音，轻柔地在我肩膀后面响起。那是个男人的声音，既温文尔雅又沉着冷静，我隐约觉得这声音似曾相识。

“瑞德先生，”那声音说道，“瑞德先生。音乐大厅。您真的该走了。他们都在那里等着您呐。真的，您得留出足够的时间检查设备，还有环境……”

随后，又一阵异常嘈杂的争吵声在我面前爆发，一下子盖过了这个声音。圆脸年轻人指着，反复不停地说着什么。

接着，突然间，人群寂然无声。起初，我以为哀悼者们终于平静了下来，等待我开口说话。然而，我发现圆脸的年轻男子——没错，还有每个人——都盯视着我头顶上方的某处。过了几秒钟，我才想到转过身，看见布罗茨基站在我头顶正上方的一座坟墓上。

或许是因为我抬头看着他的缘故——他微微前倾，在广阔天空的映衬下，我看到了他颌下的大部分——从他身上透出某种令人惊愕的威严。他站在我们上方，双手在空中张开，如同一尊巨大的雕塑赫然耸现。事实上，他俯视着面前的人群，就像在开始指挥前的几秒钟里审视乐队那样，和我想象中的样子几无二致。面对刚才在他面前失控的情绪，他身上散发出了一股奇异的威严，仿佛他可以随意令其爆发或者平息。沉默持续了一会儿。接着，一个孤零零的声音喊道：

“你想干吗？你个老酒鬼！”

也许此人是想凭这一喊引发新一轮的叫嚣。然而，无人对此做出反应，仿佛都没听见。

“你个老酒鬼！”那人又试了一次，但声音中的坚定已经荡然无存了。

接着，所有人都静静地盯着高高在上的布罗茨基。仿佛又过了几个世纪的时间之后，布罗茨基说道：

“如果你们想那样称呼我，没关系。我们就等着瞧。等着瞧，看清楚我是谁。在未来的这些天，这几周，这几个月里。我们等着瞧，看清楚我是否就只能是这样了。”

他不紧不慢地说着，冷静却又不失最初的威严。哀悼者们继续凝视着他，仿佛被下了咒似的。接着，布罗茨基温和地说：

“你们所爱的人去世了。这是个宝贵的时刻。”

我感觉他雨衣的下摆拂过我的后脑，我意识到，他朝那位孀妇伸出了手。

“这是个宝贵的时刻。来吧。抚慰你的伤口吧。它将永远留在你的生命里。来抚慰它吧，尽管很痛，血流不止。来吧。”

布罗茨基走下坟墓，手仍向孀妇伸着。她恍恍惚惚地抓住了他，然后布罗茨基将他的另一只手放在她身后，慢慢地开始将她领回敞开的墓穴边。

“来吧，”我听到他轻轻地说，“现在，来吧。”

他们慢慢地走过落叶，遗孀再次走到墓穴边，低头看着棺材，抽泣起来，布罗茨基小心地抽身退开一步。这时，其他许多人也哭了起来，我发现，一切很快就如同我到来之前时的样子了。那一刻，不管怎么说，所有人的注意力都从我身上转移开了，我决定趁此机会溜走。

我悄悄起身前行，还没走过几座坟墓，这时我听到有人走近身后。一个声音说道：

“没错，瑞德先生，现在正是您去音乐厅的大好时机。谁都无法预测还会有什么样的情况需要调整。”

我一扭头，认出那个人是佩德森，就是我第一天晚上在电影院遇到的那位年长的议员。另外我也听出，刚才我从肩膀后面听到的那个轻柔的声音就是出自他口。

“啊，佩德森先生，”他与我并肩齐走，我便说道，“我非常高兴您提醒了我去音乐厅的事情。我得承认，刚才那儿的情绪如此高亢，我已经忘记时间了。”

“没错，我亦如此，”佩德森轻轻笑道，“我也要去参加会议。不算太重要，但不管怎样，它和今晚有关。”

我们走到公墓中央一条蜿蜒的绿草小径上，在这里停下脚步。

“或许您能帮我，佩德森先生，”我环顾四周说道，“我安排了一辆车送我去音乐厅，它应该已经在等我了，但我却不知道该如何回

到那条小路上。”

“我很荣幸能为您引路，瑞德先生。请跟我来。”

我们又走了起来，距离下方我与布罗茨基一同前去的那个山坡越来越远。此时，太阳已经低垂在山谷上，墓碑投射出的影子明显已经变长了。我们继续走着，我感觉至少有两次佩德森想对我说些什么，但他随后又改变了主意。最后，我实事求是地对他说：

“刚才那群人里，有些人好像特别激动，我是指对我在报纸上的那些照片。”

“呃，您瞧，先生，”佩德森叹了口气，“那是萨特勒纪念碑。如今，马克斯·萨特勒在人们心中的影响仍然像从前那样根深蒂固。”

“我想，您也有些意见吧。我的意思是，对我在萨特勒纪念碑前拍的那些照片。”

佩德森尴尬地笑了笑，避开我的目光。“我该怎么解释好呢？”最后他说道，“外人很难理解啊，即便是像您这样的行家。马克斯·萨特勒——为什么这个人，还有他在这座城市的历史中那一整段的故事，对这里的人们具有如此重要的意义，实在叫人搞不清楚。理论上，它不足以成为意义重大的事啊。是的，没错，那差不多已经是一个世纪前的事情了。但是您瞧，瑞德先生，您无疑已经发现，萨特勒在本地居民的想象中已经占据了一席之地。可以说，他的影响力已经变得神乎其神了。有时他令人害怕，有时他令人厌恶。而在其他时候，有关他的记忆又受人崇拜。我该怎么解释好呢？让我这样说吧。我认识的一个人，一个好朋友，现在已经上了年纪，但生活得还不算赖。他在这儿深受人们的崇敬，仍旧在市政活动中发挥着积极的作用。生活得根本不算赖。但这个人时不时地就会回首往昔生活，琢磨自己有没有可能让某些东西溜走了。他会想，如果自己，呃，少一些懦弱的话，会怎样。少一些懦弱，多一些激情？”

佩德森轻声一笑。前面的小径蜿蜒曲折，我看到了前上方公墓的黑色铁门。

“接着，他可能会——您知道的——开始回忆，”佩德森继续说道，“回忆起年轻时的某些关键时刻，在现在的生活方式固定之前。他可能会想起，比方说，某个女人试图勾引他的时刻。当然，他不会允许那种事情发生，他太循规蹈矩了。或者说是胆小。或许他那时太

年轻，谁知道呢？他想，如果当初他选择了另一条路，如果他对……对爱和激情能够更自信一些，生活又会怎样。您知道那回事的，瑞德先生。您知道老人有时做梦的方式，他们心想，假如自己在某些关键时刻选择了另一条路，生活又会怎样。呃，一个城市，一个社会，也会如此啊——不时地回望过去，回想历史，扪心自问：‘会怎样呢？我们会变成什么样子呢？假如我们当初只要……’啊，假如我们当初只要怎样，瑞德先生？让马克斯·萨特勒带我们抵达他的希望之邦？那我们现在会不会完全是另外一副模样了呢？会不会成为一座像安特卫普那样的城市？或是像斯图加特？我真的不这么认为，瑞德先生。您看，这座城市有某些东西，某些根深蒂固的东西。它们永远也不会改变，再过几代都不会改变。切实地说，萨特勒无关紧要。他只是个怀有狂野梦想的人，改变不了什么实质性的东西。我那位朋友也是如此。他已经定型了。任何经历——不管有多么重要——都无法再改变他了。瑞德先生，我们到了。您走下这些台阶，就会回到小路上去了。”

穿过公墓高高的铁门，我们站在一座精心布置的大花园里。佩德森指向我左手边篱笆的方向，我看到篱笆后面有些石头台阶蜿蜒向下。我犹豫了一会儿，接着说道：

“佩德森先生，您一直都非常客气。但请允许我向您保证，不论何时，但凡我可能做出了错误的判断，我都不会刻意逃避。不管怎样，先生，这是我这样身份的人必须要妥协的。也就是说，不管在哪一天，都会有人要求我做出许多重大的决定，而事实上，我最好的应对方法就是尽可能衡量当时现有条件的利弊，而后采取行动。是的，有时我会做出错误的估计，并因此内疚万分，这是不可避免的。如若不然又会怎样呢？长久以来，我一直这样妥协着。正如您可见，这种情况一旦发生，我唯一关注的事就是如何才能在第一时间里尽快弥补错误。所以，请您千万坦白相告。如果您觉得我在萨特勒纪念碑前摆姿势拍照是个错误，请您坦言。”

佩德森看起来很是不适。他回头注视着远方的一处陵墓，然后说道：“呃，瑞德先生，这只是我的个人看法。”

“我非常乐意聆听，先生。”

“呃，既然您这样问了，那我就说了。是的，先生。说实话，今天早上看到报纸时，我感到相当失望。在我看来，先生，正如我刚才解释过的，这座城市其实在本质上并不能包容萨特勒的极端行径。正是因为他如此的遥不可及，才吸引了某些人，成为了本地的一个神

话。若是再次把他塑造成为真正的希望……先生，说句实话，这里的人们会恐慌的。他们会退缩。他们会突然发现：自己一直抱着那些已知的事物死死不放，就连它们已经带来了深深的痛苦也毫不介意。您刚才征询我的看法，先生。我觉得，将马克斯·萨特勒引入讨论，已经严重危害到了进步的可能性。不过，当然啰，还有今天晚上。最后，一切将取决于今晚，取决于您所要说的话，还取决于布罗茨基先生的表现。正如您所指出的那样，没人比您更擅长收复失地了。”一时间，他好似在默默自忖。接着，他神情严肃地摇了摇头。“瑞德先生，您现在所能做的最好的事情，先生，就是去音乐厅。今晚，一切都必须按计划进行。”

“是的，没错，您所言极是。”我说，“我肯定，这会儿汽车正等着载我过去呢。佩德森先生，非常感谢您的肺腑之言。”

第二十六章

台阶很陡，向下穿过高高的树篱和灌木。我走下台阶，站在路旁，望着夕阳徐徐沉入对面的田间。走下阶梯时，我正好来到了一处急转弯，顺着转角走了一会儿后，发现视野一下子开阔了起来。我看到，前上方刚刚爬过的山上，在天空的映衬下，依稀可见小木屋的轮廓，而霍夫曼的车就在之前放下我的停车带里等着。

我朝汽车走去，满脑子装着刚才和佩德森的对话。我想起第一次在电影院见到他时，他的一言一行无不透出对我的敬重。如今，他虽仍很礼貌，但显然已对我失望至极。这念头让我异常苦恼。我继续走着，凝视着落日，开始越来越懊恼没有更谨慎地对待萨特勒纪念碑这件事。诚然，正如我向佩德森指出的那样，我当时做出的决定似乎是最明智的处理办法了，可我还是不免隐隐纠结，虽然我时间有限，还顶着巨大压力，但那时我理应更充分地了解个中缘由。而即便到了这最后的节骨眼上，晚会几乎都要靠我压场，这些当地问题仍有些方面不甚清楚。现在我明白了，错过今早与市民互助支持小组的见面实在是个重大失误——而这一切只为了一个无甚必要的排练而已。

我来到霍夫曼的车旁，感觉既疲惫又沮丧。他坐在驾驶座里，忙着在笔记本上写些什么。我打开客座车门，他才注意到我。

“啊，瑞德先生，”他惊呼道，一边飞快地收起笔记本。“我相信，您的排练很顺利吧？”

“哦，是的。”

“设施怎么样？”他急忙发动汽车。“您满意吗？”

“非常好，霍夫曼先生，谢谢。不过我得尽快赶到音乐厅。谁也不知道会有些什么调整。”

“当然。其实，我也正急着要赶去音乐厅。”他瞥了眼手表。“我得去核查一下餐饮设施。一小时前我在那儿的时候，可以满意地说一切都进行得非常顺利。但是，当然啰，随时都可能出纰漏。”

霍夫曼驾车回到小路上，我们在沉默中行驶了几分钟。小路虽比出城时忙一些，但仍没那么拥挤。很快，霍夫曼便驾车疾驰起来，我

凝望窗外的田野，尝试放松，却发现思绪又不自主地转回到了即将来临的夜晚。这时我听到霍夫曼说：

“瑞德先生，希望您别介意我提起此事。是一件小事。也难怪您忘记了。”他轻声笑了笑，摇了摇头。

“是什么事啊，霍夫曼先生？”

“我是说，我妻子的剪报册。也许您还记得我们初次见面时我曾提过的。我妻子，她多年来一直是您忠实的仰慕者……”

“是的，当然，我记得很清楚。她准备了一些有关我职业生涯的剪报册。对，对，我没忘。事实上，这么些繁忙的活动之后，我仍非常期待看到您太太的剪报册。”

“她为这事倾注了大量心血，先生。已经好多年了。有时，为了搞到那些刊登了有关您的重要报道的过期刊物或报纸，她可颇费了周折。真的，先生，她的赤诚之心日月可鉴。对她来说，意义真的非同一般……”

“霍夫曼先生，我很想在不久之后一睹那些剪报册。正如我说，我充满了期待。但是，假若这会儿我们能趁此机会谈谈，呃，有关今晚的一些事宜，我会不胜感激的。”

“随您，先生。不过我可以向您保证，一切都在掌控之中。您没什么好担心的。”

“是的，是的，我相信。但是，既然晚会将至，将心思稍稍放在这上面，定是明智之举。比如说，霍夫曼先生，我父母的事情。我坚信这儿的市民会很好地照顾他们，但他们俩身体都很虚弱，所以我非常感激……”

“啊，当然，我完全理解。确实，请允许我这样说，您如此关心父母，让我无比感动。我十分高兴地向您保证，我们已经做了周详安排，以确保二老全程安心舒适。我们已经派遣了一群非常迷人能干的女士，在二老逗留期间全程照顾他们。至于今晚的活动，我们为二老准备了一些特别节目，我相信这点锦上添花的小插曲也会吸引您的。您肯定知道，我们当地的西勒兄弟公司两个世纪以来以制造马车而享誉世界，曾经为许多远方的贵客，比如说法国和英国的客人，提供服务。我们城里仍保留有西勒兄弟手工制造的精致马车，我想二老一定乐意乘坐这辆无比精致的尊贵马车抵达音乐厅，况且我们已为马车配备了两匹梳洗干净的纯种骏马。瑞德先生，或许您可以想象一下那副

场景。届时，音乐厅前的那块空地灯火辉煌，各路名流欢聚一堂，互致问候，大家盛装打扮，一片喜气洋洋。当然，汽车是不允许开进那块空地的，所以人们都会徒步穿过树林。那时，大厅外人潮涌动——先生，您能想象出那画面吗？——从幽暗的树丛里传来渐近的马蹄声。男女贵宾们停止交谈，扭转头来。马蹄声渐渐清晰，越来越接近那璀璨的灯光。接着，他们会突然出现在人们的视线当中，俊美的马匹，身着燕尾服、头戴礼帽的车夫，西勒兄弟制造、闪闪发光的马车，上面坐着您最洒脱的父母！您能想象那一时刻人们翘首以待的兴奋心情吗？当然，我们不会要求您父母长时间坐马车，只是在穿过树林的中央大道时才乘坐。我向您保证，那马车绝对是奢侈品中的杰作。他们会发现那马车就如同豪华轿车，是全遮蔽式的，十分惬意舒适。自然地，会有些轻微的颠簸，但在一流的马车上，那定会变成一种积极的安抚。我希望您能想象出，先生。我必须承认，原本我是想为您本人到来时做如此安排的，但之后意识到，整个活动过程中，那时候，你会更中意安坐在后台。而且，毕竟人们不希望削弱您登台亮相的影响力。就在那时，我们得到了一个振奋人心的消息，说您的父母也将莅临这座城市。我立刻就想到了：‘啊，理想的解决方案！’是的，先生，您父母的到来会将气氛烘托得恰到好处。我们当然不会让二老随后一直站着。他们会被直接引入礼堂的嘉宾座，这就示意其他所有人，他们也可以开始入座。不久之后，晚会正式开始。它会以我儿子斯蒂芬的钢琴独奏开场。哈哈！我是有些滥用职务了。可斯蒂芬如此渴望舞台，那时候我或许愚蠢地认为……唉，现在说那个没意义了。斯蒂芬会来一段轻松的钢琴独奏，只是为了营造一下气氛。在此期间，灯光依然亮着，人们可以寻找座位，互相致意，在过道上闲聊，等等。然后，待所有人落座后，灯光会暗下来。接下来是正式的欢迎致辞。然后，管弦乐队适时出场，乐手们入座，调试乐器。再然后，短暂的停顿之后，布罗茨基先生登场。他会……他会开始表演。他表演一结束，会有——我们希望，假设——会有雷鸣般的掌声，布罗茨基先生连连鞠躬，随后是短暂的休息。确切地说，不是中场休息，我们不会允许观众离席。大约五分钟后，灯又会全部亮起，人们可以借机整理思绪。然后，当人们还在忙着交换看法时，冯·温特斯坦先生出现在舞台的帷幕前。他会做个简短的介绍。就几分钟——毕竟，哪有那么多必要做介绍呢？然后他就退回侧台。整个礼堂顿时一片漆黑。然后，就到了那一刻，先生，就是您出场的时刻。其实，我一直打算跟您讨论这事儿呢，从某种程度上说，您的配合至关重要。您看，先生，虽说我们的音乐厅十分漂亮，可它毕竟已年代久远，自然少了现代建筑里面理所当然的种种设施。像餐饮设施，我

想之前我已提到过，还远远不够，这使得我们严重依赖酒店。但是，先生，我的想法是这样的：我已经从我们的体育中心——的确是现代且装备精良——借到了电子记分板，就是通常挂在室内体育馆里的那种。体育馆只在这种时候才自觉丢人呐！原本悬挂记分板的地方会摇来晃去地悬着一根根丑陋的黑电线。呃，先生，话说回来。在一番简要的介绍之后，冯·温特斯坦先生会退到侧台。顷刻间，整个礼堂一片漆黑，这当儿帷幕拉开。接着，单射灯亮起，光线聚焦于站在舞台中央讲台上的您。此时此刻，听众们显然会报以热烈的鼓掌。随后，掌声慢慢退去，在您开口之前——当然，只要您同意——一个低沉的声音会响彻礼堂，宣读第一个问题。声音是由本市最资深的男演员霍斯特·詹宁斯发出的，他在楼上音响室，通过公共演讲系统讲话。霍斯特拥有一副漂亮、浑厚的男中音，他会缓缓地读出每个问题。他一边读——这是我的小主意，先生！——文字便会同步出现在您头顶正上方钉着的电子记分板上。您看，到这一刻为止，因为四周一片漆黑，没人会留意到记分板。这些文字就好像在您头顶凌空出现一般。哈哈！望见谅，但我认为这不仅有利于这一场合的戏剧效应，同时也增加了明晰度。我敢说，记分板上的文字可帮助在场的部分听众记住您所阐述问题的严肃性以及重要性。毕竟，在群情激动时，有些人很容易注意力不集中。呃，您看，先生，有了我这个小主意，就不太会出现那种情况。每个问题都会呈现在他们眼前，用巨大的字体——拼写出来。所以，先生，若是您同意，我们就这么安排。先是宣读第一个问题，记分板上同步拼写出来，您站在讲台旁作答，然后，等您回答完毕，霍斯特会接着念下一个问题，依此类推。我们只有一个请求，瑞德先生，那就是：每答完一个问题，您就得离开讲台，走到舞台边鞠个躬。作此请求，原因有二。首先，由于电子记分板的短时性，不可避免会存在某些技术难题。技术人员得花好几秒钟将每道题录入记分板，这样，在记分板的文字出现之前会多出十五到二十秒钟的间隙。因此，您看，先生，如果您能走到舞台边行鞠躬礼，听众必然会鼓掌，那我们就能避免一系列打断整个活动进程的尴尬停顿了。接着，在每轮掌声渐息之时，霍斯特和记分板就会宣布下一个问题，此间您就有充足的时间回到讲台。此外，先生，还有一个深层原因，若此方案一旦实施，便可自行解决。您来到舞台边鞠躬，是非常隐晦地告诉技术员，您已经回答完毕了。毕竟，我们希望不惜一切避免意外情况，比如，您还在讲的时候，记分板就开始显示下一个问题。但您看，正如我所解释的，由于时间差的问题，这种状况很容易发生。毕竟，会出现此种情况：您好像说完了，停顿了一下，其实只为了酝酿最后中肯的结语，而当您继续道出结语时，技术员却已开始……

啊！这简直是灾难！不堪设想啊！所以，先生，请允许我提议使用这个简单却有效的办法，您每每回答完毕，就来到舞台边。其实，先生，就是为了给技术员多几秒钟录入下一个问题，倘若您在快回答完毕时再给点暗示，或许比方说，微微耸一下肩，那可就帮了大忙了。当然，瑞德先生，所有这些安排有待您的认可。假如您对这其中任何一个想法不满意，请尽管直说。”

霍夫曼在滔滔不绝时，我脑海中浮现出一幅栩栩如生的晚会图景。我似乎听到了掌声和头顶上电子记分板的“嚶嚶”声。我看到自己微微耸了耸肩，然后在炫目的灯光中走向舞台边。一种奇异朦胧的虚幻感袭上心头，这时我才意识到，自己根本就没有准备好。我发现霍夫曼正等着我回答，于是懒洋洋地喃喃说：

“听上去很好啊，霍夫曼先生。整件事，您考虑得非常周全。”

“啊。这么说您同意了。所有的细节，全都……”

“是的，是的，”我说道，不耐烦地挥了挥手。“电子记分板，走到舞台边，耸肩，是的，是的，是的，是的。一切都设想周到。”

“啊。”一时间，霍夫曼好像仍旧不甚肯定，但随后便断定这是我的肺腑之言。“太好了，太好了。那一切就这么定了。”他自顾自地点点头，沉默了片刻。接着，我听到他又在自言自语，眼睛目不转睛地看着小路：“是的，是的。一切都定了。”

而后的几分钟，霍夫曼没再对我说什么，而是继续小声地自言自语。这时，天空抹上了一层粉红色，转过这条小路，穿过农田，太阳映在我们的挡风玻璃上，车内满是绚烂的阳光，我们不得不眯起眼睛。接着，有那么一刻，我盯着窗外时，突然听到霍夫曼喘着气说道：

“一头牛！牛，牛，牛！”

虽然他说得很轻，但我仍是吃惊不小，扭转头看了看他。我发现他依然沉浸在自己的世界里，眼盯着前方，自顾自地点头。我环视了一下我们经过的田地，看到了许多田间的绵羊，但没看到牛的踪迹。我隐隐记起，之前一次与我同车旅行时，他也有过类似的举动，接着，我很快便对此失去了兴趣。

没过多久，我们就回到了城市街道上，很快，车流减速，慢得像在爬行。人行道上挤满了下班回家的人，许多商店橱窗的灯已经亮起，准备晚上的营业。这下我回到了城里，感觉自己又恢复了些许信

心。我觉得只要一到音乐厅，只要有办法登上舞台审视周围环境，许多事情便会有头绪了。

“没错，先生，”霍夫曼突然说，“一切都会井然有序。您完全不必担心。您将看到，本城会为您增光的。至于布罗茨基先生，我依然对他很有信心。”

我觉得至少应该展示一下我乐观的态度。“是的，”我开心地说道，“我敢说今晚布罗茨基先生肯定会很出彩。他刚才看上去状态非常不错。”

“哦？”霍夫曼一脸疑惑。“您最近见过他？”

“刚刚在上面的公墓那儿。正如我所说，他看上去信心十足……”

“布罗茨基先生在公墓？那，我很好奇，他在那里干什么。”

霍夫曼向我投来探究的目光。我沉吟片刻，想详述整个葬礼的情形，以及布罗茨基那令人印象深刻的介入。但最后，我竟打不起一丝精神，只是简单地说道：

“我想，他过会儿在那儿有个约会。与柯林斯小姐。”

“和柯林斯小姐？哦，天哪。究竟是怎么回事？”

我看着他，有点惊诧于他的反应。“看来他们真的有可能要和解了，”我说，“如果结果真能圆满的话，那么霍夫曼先生，这将会是您真正功德无量的又一件事啊。”

“是呀，是呀。”霍夫曼若有所思，眉头皱了起来。“布罗茨基先生这会儿在公墓？在等柯林斯小姐？稀奇。太稀奇了。”

我们继续行驶，向市中心进发，交通更加拥挤，最后我们在一条狭窄的后街某处停下了。霍夫曼越发不安起来，他再次扭头转向我。

“瑞德先生，有件事情我必须处理。就是说，我还是会按照既定行程在音乐厅与您会合，只是现在……”他看了看表，露出一副惊慌失措的模样。“您看，我必须得处理……处理件事情……”接着，他握紧方向盘，直直地盯着我。“瑞德先生，是这样的。鉴于这讨厌的单行道，还有这糟糕的交通晚高峰，开车到音乐厅还得花上不少时间。而步行……”他突然指着身后的窗外。“就是那儿了。就在您眼前。走几分钟就到了。对，先生，就是那儿的那座屋顶。”

我看到不远处一座巨大的穹形屋顶隐现在其他建筑之上。毫无疑问，它看起来好像不过三四个街区的距离那么远。

“霍夫曼先生，”我说，“如果您有急事，我很乐意自己走过去。”

“真的？您会原谅我吗？”

车流向前挪了几英尺，又停住了。

“其实，我挺喜欢步行的，”我说道，“看起来，傍晚天气还不错。而您说过的，步行只要很短一段路。”

“这单行道烦透了！我们可能会在这车里再等上一个小时！瑞德先生，您能原谅我，我万分感激哪。但您看，有件事儿，我必须……必须处理……”

“是的，是的，那当然。我就在这儿下。其实，您太客气了，在这么繁忙的时候，这样载着我到处跑。我很感激。”

“您从后面走，就会到音乐大厅。就朝着那房顶一直走就行了。让那房顶一直保持在您视线中，就不会错过。”

“请不要担心。没问题的。”我打断他的致歉，又再次谢了谢他，下车来到人行道上。

很快，我便漫步在了一条狭窄的街道上，经过一排专业书店，接着走过了几座外形美观的观光酒店。要直视着那穹顶走，根本不难，我有机会边呼吸新鲜空气边散步，还庆幸了一小会儿呢。

但是，走过两三个街区之后，一连串恼人的想法钻进我脑中，挥之不去。一者，我觉得问答环节可能会不只一次遭遇阻力。的确，假如依照公墓经历，若群情激动，那么出现尴尬场面的可能性就在所难免。再者，如若问答环节洋相百出，那么可以想见，我的父母在见证了这一场面之后，心中的惊恐与尴尬有增无减，会强烈要求被带离礼堂。换句话说，在我还未有机会碰到钢琴，他们就已经离场了；接着，人们就会猜测，他们何时还会再回来听我演奏。更糟的是，如果诸事真的非常不顺，他们两个都会病发。我仍旧坚信，只要我开始弹琴，不出几秒，我母亲，还有我父亲，都会惊讶不已，但同时，问答环节大大阻碍了我。

我发现自己太投入了，不知不觉中，几幢建筑物遮住了穹顶。起先我还不太在意，以为过不了多久，就会重新看到它。然而，走着走

着，我发现街道变得越来越窄，而我周围的房子看上去都有六七层楼高，让我几乎看不到天空，更不用说那穹形屋顶了。我决定找一条与此平行的街，但每当我拐一个弯儿，我就从一条小街绕进另一条小街，很可能是在绕圈，而音乐大厅却怎么也看不见。

就这样过了几分钟，我心里开始感到恐慌起来。我考虑要不要拦住某人问问路，但转念一想，这样做有欠考虑。这一路走来，经过的路人都扭头看我，有时甚至突然停在人行道上，尽管刚才我只顾着找路，对此没有多想，但我已经有所察觉。这会儿我明白了：今晚的盛事已然逼近，还有那么多事情悬而未决，这时让人看见我在街上徘徊，明显迷了路，踌躇不定，那怎么行呢。我使劲挺直腰板，摆出一副万事胸有成竹的模样，绕着城镇闲庭信步起来。我强迫自己放慢脚步，向每个盯着我的人愉快地微笑。

我又拐了个弯，终于看见了音乐厅，就在我眼前，较之前更近。我现在所处的街道比较宽阔，街两边全是灯火明亮的咖啡吧和商店。那座穹形屋顶也只要一两个街区那么远，就在街道的转弯处那边。

我松了口气，不仅如此，对即将到来的夜晚，我的感觉也突然间好了许多。只要我到了会场，站在舞台上，许多事情就会变得有条不紊起来——我先前的这种感觉又回来了，我几近热情地继续走了下去。

然而，我弯过转角，一幅奇怪的景象映入眼帘。前方不远处横卧着一面砖墙，堵住了我走的小路——实际上，是横穿过整条街。我首先想到的是，墙后面有条铁轨，但我留意到，街道两边建筑物的楼层要高得多，延绵不绝，伸至墙的另一侧，直至远方。这面墙引起了我的好奇，但我并没有立即看出这是个问题，心想等我走近，便会发现一扇拱门或一条地道，引着我走到另一边。无论如何，那穹形屋顶此刻已经非常近了，暗空中它被聚光灯照得雪亮。

直到我走到近前，我才意识到，这里并无道路相通。两边的人行道只到砖墙处就没路了。我十分错愕，四下看了看，然后沿着长长的砖墙走上对面的人行道，心里仍旧不太能接受这一事实：四下竟连一扇门或者连一个可以趴着钻过去的小洞都没有。我在墙跟前无助地站了一会，最后只得向一位过路人——一个刚从附近礼品店里出来的中年妇女——招了招手，问道：

“打扰了，我想去音乐厅。请问该怎么通过这面墙？”

那女人看似被我的问题吓了一跳。“哦，不行，”她说，“那堵墙您过不去。当然不能。这条街封死了。”

“这可太恼人了，”我说，“我得去音乐厅。”

“我觉得，是挺恼人的，”那妇人说，好像之前她从未想过此事。“刚才我看见先生您盯着墙看，还以为您只是游客呢。您可看到了，这堵墙是个蛮有名的旅游景点。”

她指着礼品店前面的明信片旋转架。借着门口的灯光，我真看到了一张张高调的、以墙为主题的明信片。

“但是在这种地方砌面墙究竟是何用意？”我问道，不由地提高了嗓门。“太怪异了。这墙能干什么用呢？”

“我真的感同身受。对于外地人，特别是对一个想匆忙赶往某地的人，这的确很恼人。我想那就是所谓的荒唐。这是上世纪末某个怪人建的。当然，它很古怪，但自那时起它就很有名了。夏天，就在我们现在站的这块区域挤满了游客。有美国人，日本人，都纷纷拍照呢。”

“简直不可理喻，”我愤懑地说，“请告诉我最快到音乐大厅的路。”

“音乐厅吗，先生？嗯，如果您是打算步行的话，还有相当一段路呢。当然，我们现在是离它很近，”她抬头望了望那屋顶，“但实际上，因为这堵墙，距离近也没多大意义。”

“真是太可笑了！”我耐心全失。“我自己会找到路的。您显然不能理解，一个人可能很忙，行程紧张，根本耗不起在城里瞎转上几个小时。其实，恕我直言，这堵墙就是这座城市相当典型的代表。到处都是荒诞异常的障碍。你们干什么去了？你们就没烦过它吗？你们没有要求立即拆掉它，让大家能够各忙其事？没有，你们忍气吞声了一个世纪。你们把它制作成明信片，还以为它景致优美。就这么堵砖墙有那么美吗？简直是个怪物！我可以好好利用这堵墙打个比方，我已经决定了，就在今晚的演讲中！本来我已经构思好了演讲的大部分内容，也不想在最后关头做大幅修改。幸亏遇到您啊。晚安！”

离开那个妇人后，我赶紧循原路折回，决心不让这荒唐的耽搁毁掉我重建好的自信心。然而，我一边走一边老是在想，自己离音乐厅越来越远，先前的沮丧便卷土重来。这条街好像比我记忆中的要长得多，终于，我走到底，发现自己又在纵横交错的小巷中迷路了。

我继续徒劳地转悠了几分钟，突然觉得无法再走，于是停下脚步，刚好停在了人行道上的一家咖啡店旁。我瘫坐在最近那张桌旁的椅子上，顿时感觉连残存的一丝力气也耗尽了。我模糊地意识到，在我四周，天色越来越黑，而在我头顶后面，有盏电灯正照耀着。这盏灯也照亮了我，过路人还有其他顾客都看到了，但不知怎地，我实在不想起身，甚至都不想稍稍掩饰一下自己沮丧的神情。过了一会儿，来了一位侍者，我点了一杯咖啡，然后继续低头盯着我的脑袋投射在金属餐桌表面上的倒影。先前困扰我的关于今晚活动的所有可能性统统开始涌入脑中。尤其是，我郁闷地不停回想起，决定在萨特勒纪念碑前拍照已经无可挽回地损坏了我在这座城市里的威信，留给我一堆数量惊人的问题需要弥补；还有，在问答环节，哪怕稍有任何不甚权威的表现，就会引发一场全面的、灾难性的后果。事实上，眼下一想到这些，我的眼泪差点夺眶而出。但就在这时，我感到有只手拍了拍我的后背，有人在我头顶轻柔地重复道：“瑞德先生，瑞德先生。”

我以为是侍者端着咖啡回来了，就用手势示意他把咖啡放在我面前。但那人依然叫着我的名字，于是我抬起头，发现原来是古斯塔夫，他正关切地看着我。

“哦，您好。”我说。

“晚上好，先生。您好吗？我想应该是您，但不能确定，所以就过来看一下。您没事吧，先生？我们全都在那儿，所有的小伙子，您要不要过来加入我们呢？他们一定会欣喜若狂的。”

我环顾四周，发现自己坐在一座广场的边缘。广场中央只有一盏路灯，基本上笼罩在黑暗之中，所以人们穿梭的身形看上去不过是点点暗影罢了。古斯塔夫指了指对面，我看到了另一家咖啡馆，比我现在光顾的这家要大，从它敞开的店门和窗户里透出温暖的光线看。即便相隔这么一段距离，我也能辨别出，那里面正举行着许多欢快的活动，小提琴音乐的片段，还有欢笑声，穿过夜空徐徐传来。那时，我才意识到，我其实正坐在老城区的主广场边上，对面就是匈牙利咖啡馆。我继续四下看着，听到古斯塔夫说：

“小伙子们，先生，他们让我不停地说了一遍又一遍，关于——您知道的，先生——您说了些什么，关于您如何同意的。我已经讲了五六遍了，但他们总想从头再听一遍。从上次听过后，他们就止不住地大笑，互相击掌，但他们又来了，说：‘来吧，古斯塔夫，我们知道你还没告诉我们一切呢。究竟瑞德先生说了些什么？’‘我告诉你们了啊！’我对他们这样说，‘我告诉你们了。你们都了解得非常清

楚。’但他们就是还想再听，我敢说今晚结束以前，他们还想再从头多听几遍呢。当然，先生，每次他们问起，我都是装出这么一副腻烦的口吻，这自然是为了配合效果。说真的，当然，我跟他们一样，从头至尾都很激动，从今早开始，就开心地一遍又一遍重复我们的交谈。看到他们的脸上又露出那样的表情，真是太好了。您的承诺，先生，带来了新的希望，使他们的脸上焕发出新的朝气。就连伊戈尔都在微笑，为某些笑话而开怀大笑！我都记不得上次看到他们这样笑是什么时候了。哦，是的，先生，这样再多说几遍，我是很乐意的。无论何时我说到您说‘好吧，我很乐意代表你们说些什么’的时候，无论何时我说到那个地方，您真应该看看他们，先生！他们欢呼雀跃，互相击掌，我已经很久没看到他们像这个样子了。所以我们在那儿，先生，边喝着啤酒，边谈论着您无限的慷慨，谈论着过了这么多年，迎宾业将会从今晚之后永远改变，是的，我们正说着这些的时候，我碰巧朝外望了一眼，看到了您，先生。那店主，您看得出来吧，他开着大门。让那个地方的气氛更好些，夜幕来临时可以看到对面的广场。呃，就这样，我望着对面，心想：‘那可怜的人是谁啊，怎么独自坐在那边。’可是，您瞧，我眼神不太好，所以我没意识到原来是您。后来，卡尔悄声对我说，他一定感觉到大声说出来，不是个好主意，他对我说道：‘我可能看错了，但那不是瑞德先生本人吗？就在那边？’于是我又看了看，心想，是的，可能是的。大冷天的，他究竟为何坐在那外面，而且这么悲伤？我要去看看是不是真的是他。我说吧，先生，卡尔真是非常细心。没有其他人听到他说的话，所以除了他，没人知道我为何溜了出来，不过我敢说，这会儿有几位可能正看着这边呢，纳闷我来这儿干什么。但真的，先生，您没事吧？您看上去心事重重。”

“呃……”我叹了口气，擦了把脸。“没什么。只是所有这些旅行，还有所有这些责任。偶尔，就会……”我微微一笑，声音渐渐低了下去。

“可您为何独自一人坐在这外面呢，先生？夜晚很冷，您只穿了件外套。我对您说过，无论何时您想来匈牙利咖啡馆，我们都无限欢迎，但您却这样。您难道认为，假如过来我们这边，我们就不会那么热情地欢迎您吗？独自一人坐在这外面！真的，先生！请不要再迟疑了，过来加入我们吧。然后您可以放松一下，开心一会儿。把您所有的担心都抛在脑后吧。小伙子们会欣喜若狂的。请吧。”

广场的另一边，咖啡馆门口灯光闪烁，乐音悠悠，笑声阵阵，确实令人神往。我站起身，再次擦了擦脸。

“这就对了，先生。您很快就会感觉好起来的。”

“谢谢。谢谢。真的，谢谢。”我努力控制住了自己的情绪。
“十分感激。真的。我只希望不会太叨扰。”

古斯塔夫哈哈一笑。“您很快就会见识到是不是叨扰了，先生。”

我们动身穿过广场，这时我想到，自己最好还是先调整一下心情，然后再去见那些迎宾员，他们见到我必定会激动不已，满怀感激。现在每走一步，我就对自己更有把握，我正要古斯塔夫说些愉快的话，这时，他却突然停住脚步。自我们开始动身穿过广场，他的一只手就一直轻轻地搭在我的背上，可那一刹那，我感觉到他的手指紧紧抓住了我的外套。我转过身，在昏暗的路灯下看到：古斯塔夫静静地站着，低头看着地面，一只手抬起，抚着眉毛，好像突然想起什么重要的事。然后，还没等我开口，他便摇了摇头，局促不安地微笑了一下。

“对不起，先生。我只是……只是……”他微微一笑，又开始走了起来。

“没事吧？”

“哦，是的，是的。您知道，先生，您一踏入那扇门，小伙子们就一定会激动不已的。”

他走在我前面，隔着一两步远，坚定地带着我走过了广场上剩下的路程。

第二十七章

直到我步入咖啡馆，感受到房间另一头的原木火焰散发出的阵阵温暖，我才意识到夜晚已有多么寒冷。咖啡馆的内部已重新布置过了，和我上次进来时截然不同。大部分桌子被推到后面顶墙放置，留出了房间中主要的中间部分，一张巨大的圆桌摆在那里。圆桌边大概围坐着十二个男人，喝着啤酒，一片喧闹。这些人看上去比古斯塔夫稍显年轻，但大多数也已过中年。离他们不远处，在靠近咖啡柜台的那边，两个吉卜赛人穿戴的瘦削男人正拉着小提琴，在演奏轻快的华尔兹。还有些其他客人，但他们好像都对自己坐在不显眼的位置上感到很满意，通常是房间的昏暗隐蔽处，仿佛自知是在出席他人的活动。

我和古斯塔夫走了进去，迎宾员们全部扭头看着我们，不确定是否该相信自己的眼睛。古斯塔夫说道：“是的，小伙子们，真的是他。他亲自过来问候我们了。”

咖啡馆里突然静默下来，所有人——迎宾员，服务员，乐师，顾客——都盯视着我。紧接着整个屋子爆发出一阵热烈的掌声。不知何故，这欢迎会着实让我吃了一惊，几乎让我再次落泪。我微笑道：“谢谢，谢谢！”然而热情的掌声依旧，几乎淹没了我的声音。迎宾员们统统起身，吉卜赛乐师也将小提琴夹在臂膀下，一同鼓起掌来。古斯塔夫引导我走向中央的圆桌，我顺势坐定，掌声终于平息下来。乐师们继续演奏，我发现自己周围都是些激动的面庞。坐在我身旁的古斯塔夫开口道：

“伙计们，承蒙瑞德先生的好意……”

话还未完，一个红鼻子的矮胖迎宾员就探过身子，举起了啤酒杯。“瑞德先生，您可救了我们，”他宣布道，“如今，我们的故事将会大不相同了。我的孙辈们，他们会用不同的方式记住我。对我们来说，这可是个非凡的夜晚。”

我仍旧微笑着回望他，这时我感觉有只手抓住了我的臂膀，发现一张瘦削、看似紧张的脸正盯视着我。

“求您了，瑞德先生，”那男人说。“求您了，您真的要那样做，对吗？大伙儿都在您的面前，您心中装着别的非常重要的事情，

到那时，您不会改变主意的吧，还有……”

“别这么无礼，”另一个人说道。那个一脸紧张的人消失了，仿佛有人把他拉了回去。接着，我听到一个声音在背后说：“他当然不会改变主意。你以为你在跟谁说话呢？”

我转过身，想安慰安慰那紧张的男子，然而，另一个人摇着我的手说道：

“谢谢，瑞德先生，谢谢。”

“你们太客气了，”我微笑着对众人说，“不过我……我真的得提醒你们……”

就在这时，有人推挤了我一下，差点撞到身旁的人。我听到有人在道歉，另一个人在说：“别那样推！”接着，又有一个声音贴近我说：“我想刚才在外面的就是您吧，先生。我就是向古斯塔夫指出您的那个人。您能这样来看我们，真是太好了。今晚将会是我们永远铭记的夜晚，是城里每个迎宾员的转折点。”

“瞧，我得提醒你们，”我大声说道，“我会竭尽全力，但我得提醒你们，我可能不如以前那样有影响力了。你们看……”

但我的话被一帮迎宾员高呼的一声“万岁”给淹没了。喊第二声“万岁”时，全部迎宾员都加入其中，接着，音乐声暂停，咖啡馆的每个人都加入其中，欢呼这最后一声震耳欲聋的“万岁”。末了，更多的掌声骤然响起。

“谢谢，谢谢！”我深受感动，连连说道。随着掌声逐渐消退，隔着桌子，那红鼻子迎宾员说道：

“我们非常欢迎您的到来，先生。您是一个很有名望的人，但我想让您知道，我们在座的这些人，每每看到一个人的时候，就能识别他是不是好人。没错，我们干这行这么久了，对体面修为有很好的嗅觉。您是个真正的体面人，既正派又和善，我们都看得出这一点。您也许觉得我们在这儿欢迎您，只是因为您要帮助我们。当然，我们都很感激您，但我了解这群人，他们是真心喜爱您。如果您不是一位正派的人，他们是不会这样的。假如您太骄傲，或者有一点儿不真诚，他们就会把您给嗅出来的。哦，是的。当然，他们仍会感激您，仍会好好对待您，但绝不会如此喜欢您。我想说的是，先生，即使您不出名，即使您是个偶然闯到这儿的陌生人，但只要我们觉得您很好，只要您解释说您远道而来愿寻求陪伴，我们都会欢迎您的。一旦我们看

出您是一位多么好的先生，我们迎接您的方式不会与刚刚有所不同。哦，是的，我们并不像人们所说的那样几近冷漠无情。从现在开始，您可以把我们每个人都当作朋友。”

“没错，”在我右边的一个人也开口道，“我们现在是您的朋友了。您在这儿遇到任何困难，您都可以指望我们。”

“非常感谢，”我说道，“谢谢。我今晚会为你们尽力的。但真的，我得提醒你们……”

“先生，求您了。”古斯塔夫在我耳边轻声说道，“请不要担心了。一切都会非常顺利。何不尽兴片刻？”

“但我只是想提醒你的这些好友……”

“真的，先生，”古斯塔夫继续低声说，“您的敬业精神令人敬仰。但您实在过于担心了。请放松，尽兴一下吧。就一会儿。看看我们。我们所有在场的人都有担忧之事。我自己同样，即将要再去音乐厅，回去做那些工作。但既然我们这样在这儿相遇了，我们亦很开心能置身朋友当中，忘却一切。我们放松心情，开心一下吧。”说到这里，古斯塔夫提高音量，盖过了嘈杂的人声，说道：“来吧，我们给瑞德先生看看，我们究竟如何尽情开心的！给他看看我们如何做的！”

这一声号召赢得了一致的欢呼与又一轮的掌声，随后掌声慢慢变成了节奏强劲的拍手声，在桌子四周回荡。吉卜赛乐师和着拍手声加快了演奏，一旁的顾客们也跟着拍起手来。我还注意到，房间里其他各处的人们也中断了交谈，转过身，仿佛是要观看一个期待已久的景观。有个人，我猜应该是店主——一个黑黑的、瘦高男人——从后面房间出来，斜倚在门框边，显然很着急，不愿错过接下来的事。

此时，迎宾员们继续拍手，较之前更欢快了，有些人双脚跺地，加强节奏。接着，两个侍者出现了，他们急匆匆地收拾好了餐桌。啤酒杯、咖啡杯、糖罐子和烟灰缸转瞬间就统统不见了。接着，一个迎宾员，一个有浓密络腮胡的男人，爬到桌子上。浓密的胡子下，脸庞红彤彤的，是因尴尬还是因喝酒，我不得而知。一上餐桌，他好像就没了顾忌，咧嘴笑着，开始跳舞。

那是一种古怪的静态舞蹈，双脚几乎不离桌面，着力表现人体雕塑般的姿态，而非敏捷移动的美感。络腮胡男子张开双臂，摆出一副希腊神祇般的姿势，仿佛背负着一个隐形的重物。随着拍手声与鼓励

的叫喊声的继续，他会微微改变臀部的角度，或者慢慢转动身体。我揣测了一会儿，不知这个表演是否应该是喜剧，尽管桌边尽是欢愉的大笑声，但很快我就明白了，表演中没有讽刺的意味。我看着络腮胡迎宾员，有人推了推我，说道：

“就是这个，瑞德先生。我们的舞蹈。迎宾员之舞。我相信，您听说过的吧。”

“是的，”我说，“啊，是的。那么，这个就是迎宾员之舞了。”

“就是它。不过好戏还没上演呢。”对方咧着嘴笑了笑，又推了推我。

我看到一个巨大的棕色纸盒从一个迎宾员手里递到了另一个的手里。那箱子大致上跟手提箱一般大小，不过从空中抛掷的情况来看，很轻，而且是空的。盒子绕着桌子传递了几分钟后，在某个舞蹈间隙被抛向了络腮胡迎宾员，整个过程似是经过精心排练。就在络腮胡迎宾员转换姿势，又抬起胳膊的那一刻，纸盒从空中抛来，巧妙地落在了他手中。

看络腮胡迎宾员的反应，像是接到了一块重重的石头——这引得观众发出一阵担忧的呼叫——有那么一小会儿，他看上去要被这重量压得双腿发软了。然而，他相当坚定地站直了身体，最后，他站得非常直，盒子抱在胸前。这一举迎来了齐声欢呼，络腮胡迎宾员慢慢地将盒子举过头顶，终于将其高举在空中，双臂完全伸直。尽管这在现实中当然毫不费力，然而，表演中自有一股庄严与激情，我也加入到喝彩中去了，就好像他真的举起了千斤重物似的。接着，络腮胡迎宾员继续用某种技巧，创造出了那重物越来越轻的幻觉。不久，他就一只手举着盒子，边举着边做着小小的单脚着地旋转，有时将盒子抛过肩头，在背后接住。重物越轻，他的同伴们越是开心。接着，随着络腮胡迎宾员的表演越来越轻浮，他的同伴们就开始四下互相看看，咧嘴笑着，互相推搡着，直到另一个人，一个留着稀疏小胡子的瘦小男人开始爬上桌子。

桌子随之晃动，一侧翘起。大伙们对之报以哄笑，仿佛这全是表演的一部分。然后他们稳住桌子，瘦小的迎宾员费力地爬了上去。络腮胡迎宾员起先并没有发现他的同伴，继续卖弄着驾驭纸盒的技艺，而瘦小的迎宾员则闷闷不乐地站在他身后，仿佛等待着与一位他梦寐以求的舞伴跳舞。最后，络腮胡迎宾员看到了瘦小男子，把盒子扔给

了他。瘦小迎宾员一接到盒子，就踉跄后退，仿佛会一举翻下餐桌似的。但他立即反应过来，接着，经过一番努力后，他站直了身体，背着盒子。他做这动作的时候，络腮胡迎宾员在众人的搀扶下爬下餐桌，并一起微笑拍手起来。

瘦小的迎宾员做着与他同伴之前相似的表演，只是添加了更多喜剧夸张的动作。他卖弄着滑稽的面部表情，并用出色的闹剧手法表演了跌倒，博得了阵阵哄笑声。我注视着他，那富有节奏的拍击声、吉卜赛乐师的提琴声、欢笑声，吃惊、嘲笑的笑声，充斥着耳朵，也填满了我所有的感官。接着，第三位迎宾员爬上了餐桌，换下了瘦小的男人，我顿时感到阵阵人间暖意渐渐包围了我。我忽然觉得，古斯塔夫的那番感想颇为深邃明智。如此忧心忡忡又有何意义呢？偶尔完全放松一下，开心一下，是非常重要的。

我闭上双眼，任凭欢乐的气氛萦绕身边，只依稀知道自己仍在拍手，不时在地板上跺着脚。我的脑海中浮现出一幅我父母的图景，他们俩坐在四轮马车上，驶向音乐厅前面的空地。我看到许多当地人——身着黑夹克的男人，穿着大衣、围披肩、戴着珠宝的女人——突然中止交谈，扭头看着传来阵阵蹄声的漆黑树林。接着，闪闪发光的马车突然出现在簇簇光线中，俊美的马匹小跑着停了下来，在夜色中喘着气。我母亲，还有我父亲，望向窗外，脸上首先浮现出一丝兴奋的期待，还有一丝防备和矜持，不愿完全妥协于心中的希冀，期望今夜是个光彩夺目的胜利之夜。接着，穿着制服的车夫急忙扶他们下车，权贵们站成一排迎接他们，他们会刻意摆出平静的笑容。我记得童年时期，为数不多的几次，父母邀请客人到家里来用午餐或者晚餐时，他们就会这样。

我睁开双眼，看到此时桌上有两位迎宾员在表演滑稽的老段子。谁举着盒子就会踉跄一下，似要跌倒，眼看就要从桌边摔下，就在最后一刻，不情愿地将盒子交给另一个人。接着，我发现了鲍里斯——这期间他很可能一直就坐在咖啡馆的什么地方——径直来到桌前，乐滋滋地抬头望着这两位迎宾员。他适时地拍手大笑，看那样子，这小男孩显然十分熟悉这些老段子。他坐在两位身形巨大、皮肤黝黑的迎宾员中间，那两人看起来很像，应该是兄弟。我看见他与其中一人说了句话，那人大笑，戏谑似地捏了捏小男孩的脸颊。

这些表演吸引了广场上越来越多的人，咖啡馆里越来越拥挤了。我还留意到，我刚进来的时候，只有两位吉卜赛乐师，但这会儿又有三个人加入其中，小提琴声从四面八方传来，较之前更大，更有活

力。接着，后面一人——在我印象中，他并非其中的一位迎宾员——大喊道：“古斯塔夫！”没多久，我们餐桌前面的人就跟着叫喊起来：“古斯塔夫！古斯塔夫！”迎宾员们喊叫着，渐渐变成了吟颂。很快，就连那个看起来很紧张的迎宾员，他早先跟我说过话，这会儿正轮到他站在桌子上——并不是特别纯熟，却生气勃勃地表演着——也加入了进来。他正从后背由上至下，而后又在臀部周围摆弄着盒子，竟也吟颂起来：“古斯塔夫！古斯塔夫！”

古斯塔夫已不在我身旁了，我四下寻找，发现他已走到鲍里斯那儿，此时正对着小男孩的耳边说着什么。其中一个皮肤黝黑的兄弟一只手搭着古斯塔夫的肩膀，我看得出，他是在乞求这位年迈的迎宾员上台表演。古斯塔夫微笑着，谦逊地摇了摇头，结果却引来了更加高亢的吟颂声。这会儿，屋子里几乎所有人都在吟颂着他的名字，甚至站在外面广场上的人好像也加入了呐喊的行列。最后，古斯塔夫只好无奈地朝鲍里斯笑了笑，站起身来。

作为最年迈的一位迎宾员，古斯塔夫比其他人年长好几岁，要爬上桌子似乎难度更大，但很多人伸出援手帮他。他一上桌子，便直起身子，冲观众微笑。那位模样紧张的迎宾员把盒子递给他，然后迅速下来。

从一开始，古斯塔夫的表演便与先前几位舞者的截然不同。一接到箱子，他并没有佯装它重得不得了，而是毫不费力地将它甩上肩头，还耸了耸肩膀。围观的人群哄堂大笑，我听到人们叫喊着：“好样的，老古斯塔夫！”“相信他！”他继续表演，满不在乎地耍着那盒子。这时，一个侍者穿过人群来到前面，把一只真正的手提箱抛上桌子。从他抛掷的动作和手提箱发出的巨大声响判断，它显然不是空的。箱子恰好落在古斯塔夫的双脚旁，人群中传来了低语声。接着，吟颂声重新响起，比之前更为急促。“古斯塔夫！古斯塔夫！古斯塔夫！”我看到鲍里斯小心翼翼，紧盯着外公的每一个动作，脸上写满了无比的自豪，他欢快地拍着手，也吟颂了起来。古斯塔夫看了看鲍里斯，再次冲他微笑了一下，接着伸手抓住了箱子的手柄。

古斯塔夫弓着腰，将手提箱提到臀部，我知道他并没有假装箱子很重。然后他慢慢直起身，纸箱仍放在肩上，他手中提着手提箱，双眼紧闭，脸上愁云密布。但似乎没人发现有什么不妥——很可能这是古斯塔夫在表演重头戏之前的特色动作——吟颂声、拍手声不绝于耳，震耳欲聋，盖过了尖锐的小提琴声。果然，下一刻，古斯塔夫又一次睁开眼，笑眯眯地面对众人。接着，他又将箱子举高了些，夹在

胳膊下，保持着这个姿势——箱子在胳膊下，盒子在另一只肩膀上——开始舞动起来，双脚做出缓慢拖曳的动作。人群欢呼着，呐喊着，我听到门口有人在问：“他现在干吗呢？我看不到。他在干吗呢？”

接着，古斯塔夫又将箱子举高了些，继续舞着，一只肩膀扛着箱子，另一只扛着盒子。箱子比盒子重得多，所以他的身体被迫使劲地侧向一边，但除此之外，他气定神闲，脚步轻盈。鲍里斯开心不已，欢喜地向他外公喊着什么，我听不清，而古斯塔夫歪扭了一下头以作应答，继而又激起了啧啧声和大笑声。

古斯塔夫继续舞着，这时我留意到身后出了些动静。有好一阵子，有人一直用手肘有节奏地猛戳我的后背，令我非常厌烦，但我本以为这只是因人群在互相推搡，以争取有利视角。但转过身，我却瞥见两位侍者正跪在地板上打包手提箱，尽管人群从各方推搡着。他们已经往箱子里塞了许多像是厨房用的木质砧板。一位侍者将砧板摆放得更密集些，而另一个则不耐烦地向咖啡馆后面示意着，愤怒地指着箱子里剩下的空间。接着，我看到更多的砧板传了过来，每次两三块，在人群中手手相传，递了过来。侍者们动作很快，将砧板塞了进去，直到那箱子看起来像要爆开似的。但更多的砧板——有时只是板子的破损残片——仍旧源源不断地递了过来，训练有素、心灵手巧的侍者们想办法将这些全部塞了进去。如果不是人群的推挤终于磨光了他们的耐性，或许他们还能继续往箱子里塞得更多。他们按下盖子，拉紧皮带，挤过我，将重重的箱子推到了餐桌上。

鲍里斯望了一眼新呈上的箱子，然后抬起头，犹豫地看了看古斯塔夫。他外公正在表演一种慢速曳步舞，与斗牛舞没什么不同。而此时，他正集中力气托着纸箱和手提箱，好像并没有留意到摆在他面前的新挑战。鲍里斯小心地看了看他外公，等待他看见第二只箱子的那一刻。显然，其他人也像他一样等待着，但他的外公装作熟视无睹，继续跳着舞。毫无疑问，这肯定是他的一个伎俩！几乎可以肯定，他外公正在吊观众胃口，但鲍里斯知道，外公随时会抬起那只重箱子，或许是在扔掉那空盒子之后。可是，不知何故，古斯塔夫继续无视那箱子，于是人们又喊又指。最后，古斯塔夫终于看见了，他的脸——夹在纸箱和第一只手提箱之间，仿佛成了夹心三明治——显得有些沮丧。鲍里斯周围的每个人都大笑，拍得更起劲了。古斯塔夫继续缓慢旋转，但双眼紧盯着第二只手提箱，表情仍很为难。鲍里斯立刻意识到，外公的担忧不全是装出来的。然而，周围所有的人都在大笑，这些人先前已经看过外公表演这老段子许多次了。于是，下一

刻，鲍里斯也一同大笑着催促外公继续。男孩的叫声引起了古斯塔夫的关注，祖孙二人再次相视一笑。

接着，古斯塔夫从肩上卸下空箱子，趁着箱子慢慢滑下手臂，他近乎优雅而又轻蔑地将盒子轻轻丢进了人群中。人群再次爆发出一阵欢笑与喝彩声，空箱子越过观众的头顶向后传递，消失在房间深处。接着，古斯塔夫又低头看了看第二只箱子，把肩上的旧箱子托高些。他再次摆出了一副肃穆的表情，这一次毫无疑问全然是揶揄。鲍里斯和人群一起大笑。接着，古斯塔夫开始弯曲双膝。他行动非常缓慢，不知是因为身体欠佳还是出于表演技巧，直至他蹲伏在地，一侧肩膀仍扛着第一只箱子，伸出那只空手去抓脚边手提箱的手柄。稳稳地，慢慢地，随着持续的掌声，他站立起来，提起了那只更重的箱子。

此刻，古斯塔夫做出倾尽全力的样子——跟之前络腮胡迎宾员刚接到纸板箱时的样子差不多。鲍里斯看着他，心中充满了骄傲，眼睛不时地从外公身上移开，扭头看着周围推挤的人群满含钦佩的神情。甚至连吉卜赛乐师也闻风而动，使劲地弓起手肘暗暗地推搡，以便更清楚地一睹这副场景。一位小提琴手借此手段成功地挤到了前面，身子斜倚在桌子上方，腰部紧紧地压着桌沿，拉起了小提琴。

接着，古斯塔夫再次开始拖曳起双脚，他并没有试图将那只更重些的箱子举至肩膀，两只箱子的重量，特别是那只装满砧板的箱子，无疑让他的身体难以承载。这就意味着，他的脚步只是表面上看起来弹跳轻盈而已，尽管如此，他的表演还是引人入胜，逗得观众狂喜。

“好样的，老古斯塔夫！”叫喊声再度响起。鲍里斯还不习惯这样称呼外公，尽管如此，他却也用尽全力叫喊着：“好样的，老古斯塔夫！好样的，老古斯塔夫！”

老迎宾员好像再次从众声中听到了鲍里斯的声音，虽然他这会儿不能扭头回应小男孩——他佯装专注于手提箱而无暇顾及——但他的动作有了一股新的活力。他又开始慢慢旋转，后背上的最后一丝萎靡也不见了。一时间，古斯塔夫看起来棒极了，就像矗立在桌面上的一尊雕像，一只箱子扛在肩膀上，另一只提在臀部，和着掌声还有音乐声缓缓旋转。接着，他好像一个踉跄，似要跌倒，但几乎立刻便恢复过来，人群惊叹一声“呼！”，这小小的变化引来了更多的笑声。

接着，鲍里斯听到身后有骚动声，他看见那两个侍者回来了，又在地上忙活着，他们把周围的人推到后面，以留出空间让他们工作。两人双膝跪地，抓着一只像高尔夫球袋似的巨大袋子，举止显得既暴躁又不耐烦——或许是讨厌周围人群推推挤挤，还总用膝盖顶撞着他

们。鲍里斯回头望了望他外公，接着，他又看看身后，只见其中一人撑开袋口，仿佛要悄悄放进什么庞然大物。果然，另一人从人群里现身，倒退着，粗鲁地将人群推至一边，在地板上还拖着个什么物体。鲍里斯向后朝人群中间挤了挤，看见那是个机器部件。很难看清——人们的腿挡着——但那物体好像是个破旧引擎，像是从摩托车，或是从快艇上取下的。两位侍者正辛苦地将其装进高尔夫球袋，扯了扯已经紧绷的袋子，拉上了拉链。鲍里斯又抬起头，看到外公仍牢牢地控制着那两只箱子，没有意欲停下的迹象，况且，人们也还不想让他停下。这时，周围的人群动了动，两个侍者把高尔夫球袋抬上了桌面。

前面的人说来是个袋子，这消息一传到后面，一时间哗声四起。古斯塔夫并没有立刻注意到高尔夫袋，因为此时他正紧闭双眼，凝神聚气。但很快人群的催促声令他环顾四周。他盯着那高尔夫球袋，刹那间一脸严肃。然后他微笑，继续缓慢地旋转。像先前一样，他稍费了些力，将较轻的手提箱卸下肩膀，滑至手臂。在它缓缓落下之时，古斯塔夫使出浑身力气高举手臂，将手提箱举向人群。那箱子比空盒子要重上许多，弹至桌面，然后才跌落进前排迎宾员的臂中，整个轨迹算不上是条规整的弧线。手提箱如先前的纸箱一样消失在人群中，于是所有的目光又集中在了古斯塔夫身上，人们又开始吟颂他的名字，老人仔细地脚边的高尔夫球袋。此刻他只扛着一件物品，暂感轻松——虽然那箱子里装满了木砧板——仿佛他注入了新的活力。他拉长了脸，犹疑地冲高尔夫球袋摇摇头，却只激起了人群更多的催促声。“来吧，古斯塔夫，给他们看看！”鲍里斯听到身旁的迎宾员喊道。

接着，古斯塔夫将那只重箱子举至肩膀，而刚刚那肩膀上还扛着那只轻些的箱子。他故意闭着眼，单膝跪地，慢慢直起身子。他的腿颤抖了一两下，很快又站稳了，手提箱稳稳地扛在他肩上，他朝那只高尔夫球袋伸出了手。鲍里斯心头蓦地闪过一丝恐慌，大喊道：“不要！”但他的声音却被淹没在了四周人群的呼喊声、感叹声、吟颂声与欢笑声中。

“来吧，古斯塔夫！”挨着他的那个迎宾员大喊道，“让他们见识见识你的本事！给他们看看！”

“不要！不要！外公！外公！”

“好样的，老古斯塔夫！”许多声音喊道，“来吧，给他们瞧瞧你的本事！”

“外公！外公！”鲍里斯这会儿伸长了胳膊够着那桌子，以引起他外公的注意，但古斯塔夫仍神情严峻，聚精会神地紧紧盯着桌上高尔夫球袋的挎带。接着，年迈的迎宾员再度降低重心，沉重的行李箱压得他全身颤抖。他的手离脚下的挎带尚有段距离，就早早地伸了出去。屋内又是一阵紧张，人们感到，或许古斯塔夫是在挑战能力极限，试图完成一项壮举。尽管如此，气氛仍旧欢快，人们开心地吟颂着他的名字。

鲍里斯求助似的搜寻着周围大人们的脸庞，然后用力拉了拉身旁迎宾员的手臂。

“不！不！够了。外公表演得够多了！”

络腮胡迎宾员——就是他——惊讶地看着小男孩，然后大笑道：“别担心，别担心。你外公棒极了。他能做到的，而且还可以提更多。还可以提更多呢。他很棒的。”

“不！外公已经表演得够多了！”

但没有人听，甚至连络腮胡迎宾员也没有，他只是安慰似的用一只胳膊搂着鲍里斯的肩膀。古斯塔夫此时几乎蹲伏在桌面上，指尖离高尔夫球袋的挎带只有一两英寸了。然后他一把抓住了它，身体仍蹲伏着，将挎带绕在空闲的肩膀上。他把挎带拉得近了些，然后再一次起身站立。鲍里斯大声呼喊，敲击桌面，终于使古斯塔夫注意到了他。他外公已开始站直双腿，但他停下了动作，两人对望了片刻。

“不。”鲍里斯摇头道，“不。外公已经表演得够多了。”

在这一片嘈杂声中，也许古斯塔夫听不见外孙的话语，但他好像非常明白外孙的心情。他即刻点了点头，脸上闪过一丝安慰的笑容，但接着又闭上了眼，凝神聚气。

“不！不！外公！”鲍里斯继续拉扯着络腮胡迎宾员的胳膊。

“怎么了？”络腮胡迎宾员问道，眼中已笑出了泪水。不等鲍里斯回答，他就又把注意力转回到古斯塔夫身上，比先前更大声地参与到呐喊声中去了。

古斯塔夫继续缓慢直起身。一次，两次，他的身体颤抖着，像要垮掉一样。他的脸颊异常的红，牙关紧咬，面部扭曲，颈肌突出。即使在这喧闹的嘈杂声中，都仿佛能听见年迈迎宾员的沉重呼吸声。然而，除了鲍里斯，无人察觉到这些。

“别担心，你外公棒极了！”络腮胡迎宾员说道，“这没什么！他每周都做！”

古斯塔夫继续一点一点地直起身，一侧肩膀挂着高尔夫球袋，另一侧扛着手提箱。终于，他完全站直了身子，脸颤抖着，却洋溢着胜利的表情。这会儿，有节奏的拍击声首次变成了疯狂的掌声和欢呼声。小提琴也应景拉出了缓慢、恢弘的终篇旋律。古斯塔夫缓慢旋转，双眼微睁，面部因痛苦与尊严交织而扭曲着。

“够了！外公！停下！停下！”

古斯塔夫继续旋转，执意将他的成就展现给屋里的每一双眼睛。突然，他体内像是有什么东西“啪”地折断了，人猛地停下，转瞬间便轻轻摇晃起来，如在微风中摇摆一般。但随后他又立即恢复过来，继续旋转。待回到最初直立的姿势后，他才开始将箱子从肩膀上卸下。他任其重重地砸落在桌面上——他判断，它太重了，扔到人群中难免会伤到某个观众——接着用脚把它推下桌沿，落入等待着的同事们张开的双臂中。

人群欢呼着，鼓着掌，其中几位唱起了歌——某种摇摆民谣，唱的是匈牙利歌词——吉卜赛乐师和着曲调演奏着。越来越多的人加入，很快整屋人都唱了起来。桌上，古斯塔夫卸下高尔夫球袋。它跌落在桌上，发出金属般的重响。这一次他没有试图将它推进人群，而是高举了一会儿双臂——即便这一动作似乎让他颇为费力——然后急忙从桌上下去了。无数双手伸出来帮他，鲍里斯看着外公安全着地。

这会儿，整屋人似乎都在专心歌唱。那歌谣带有甜蜜的怀旧情愫，人们边唱着边相继挽起手，一同摇摆。其中一名吉卜赛小提琴手爬上桌子，很快，第二位也紧随其后，他们两位一边演奏，一边随音乐适时地摇摆身体，引领着整屋子的人。

鲍里斯挤过人群，到了外公站着喘气的地方。奇怪的是，数秒之前古斯塔夫还是全场的焦点，这会儿却好像没一个人在意他们祖孙二人深情拥抱的场面。他们闭着眼，丝毫不向对方掩饰自己的如释重负。许久之后，古斯塔夫微笑地低头看着鲍里斯，而小男孩则继续紧紧地抱着外公，没有睁开双眼。

“鲍里斯，”古斯塔夫说道，“鲍里斯。有一件事你必须答应我。”

小男孩默不作声，只继续抱着外公。

“鲍里斯，听着。你是个乖孩子。如果有一天，我发生了什么事，如果我有什麼不测，你就得接我的班。你看，你母亲还有父亲，都是好人，但有时他们也有过不去的坎。他们不像你我似的这样坚强。所以你看，假如我发生了什么事，我不在了，你得坚强。你得照顾好你母亲还有父亲，照管好这个家，别让它散了啊。”古斯塔夫从怀中放开鲍里斯，冲他微微一笑。“你得保证，好吗，鲍里斯？”

鲍里斯若有所思，然后郑重地点了点头。不一会儿，他们好像就淹没在人群中，看不见身影了。有人拉了拉我的袖子，请我挽起手，一同唱歌。

我环顾四周，看到另一个小提琴手加入到了桌上的两个人中，整屋子的人都围绕着他们旋转，齐声歌唱。更多的人拥进了咖啡馆，房子里严严实实填满了人。我还看见，大门依旧朝广场敞开着，门外的夜色中，人们也在摇摇摆摆，放声歌唱。我牵起一个壮硕男人的手——我猜想，应该是个迎宾员吧——另一手牵起一个大概从广场上进来的胖女人，发现自己也跟着他们在屋里转了起来。我不熟悉他们唱的这首歌，但很快我意识到，在场的大多数人也都不熟悉歌词，或者说根本不懂匈牙利语，只是唱着心中所想的隐约接近的歌词。比如，我左右的两位男女就在唱着完全不同的内容，但两人却丝毫没有尴尬或者犹豫。的确，只要留心一会儿，就会发现他们都在唱着毫无意义的词汇，但这好像并无大碍。没过多久，我亦沉湎于此情此景之中，开始唱了起来，胡编了些自以为听起来大概像匈牙利语的歌词。不知怎地，这一方法出奇的奏效——我渐渐发现这样的词语喷涌而出，让我倍感轻松愉悦——不久我也相当深情地唱了起来。

最后，大约二十分钟后，我看见人群终于慢慢退去。我还看到侍者们在清扫，把餐桌还至原位。然而，仍有相当多的人手挽着手绕着屋子转动，纵情歌唱着。吉卜赛乐师也依旧站在桌上，毫无停止演奏的迹象。我在同伴的推挤下正绕着屋子转圈，这时感觉有人拍了拍我，我转头一看，发现那人应该是我猜测的咖啡店店主，他正冲我微笑。他身材瘦高，由于我继续随众人摇摆，他便亲切地赶上我转圈的步伐，跳起了呈蹲伏姿势的曳步舞，令人想起格劳乔·马克斯⁽¹⁾。

“瑞德先生，您看上去很累了。”他几乎是在我的耳边吼道，但在这一片歌声中我只能依稀听到他的话语。“您将要度过一个漫长而重要的夜晚。干吗不先休息会儿呢？我们有间舒适的后房，我太太已经在沙发上铺好了毛毯和垫子，还打开了煤气取暖器。您会感觉非常舒适的。您可以蜷身睡上一觉。房间很小，没错，就在正后面，但非

常安静。没人会进来打扰您的，我们都保证。您会感觉非常舒服。真的，先生，您该在晚会真正开始前好好利用这点时间。请吧，这边请。您看起来太累了。”

我尽情唱过了歌，尽情玩乐了一番，也觉得足够了，而且，我意识到，自己确实已经非常疲倦，他的建议颇有道理。实际上，小憩一下的想法越来越吸引我。店主继续满面笑容地在我身后摇曳舞蹈，我开始深深地感激起他来，不只是为了这善意的邀请，也为他提供了这美妙咖啡馆的诸多设施，还感谢他对迎宾员们的慷慨豪爽——他们显然是不大被社会看重的一群人。我松开双臂，微笑着对左右两边的人道别。店主用一只手揽着我，引我向咖啡馆后面的一扇小门走去。

他领着我穿过一间暗室——我隐约看到一堆堆货物顶墙擦起——然后打开另一扇门，温暖的微光从门后透出。

“就是这儿，”店主说道，领我进去。“请在这沙发上休息一会儿吧。门关着，假如太暖和的话，就把取暖器调小一点，调至低档。别担心，这儿十分安全。”

那点炉火是屋里唯一的光亮。橘黄色的微光中，我辨出了沙发，上面有些霉味，却十分舒适，接着，不知不觉中，门关上了，只剩我独自一人。我爬上沙发（它的长度正好够我屈膝躺下），拉过店主妻子为我留下的毛毯，盖在了身上。

[\(1\)](#) 美国电影演员（1890——1977）。

第四部

第二十八章

我惊醒过来，以为自己睡过头很久了。其实，我首先想到的是：现在已是清晨，我错过了整个晚间活动。然而，从沙发上坐起后，我看到了煤气炉的火光，除此之外，四周仍然一片漆黑。

我走到窗边，拉开窗帘，低头看到了一座狭窄的后院，被几只巨大的垃圾箱挤满。某处射出的昏暗光线照亮了小院，但我还是留意到，天空已经不全是黑蒙蒙的了，这让我的心里又打起鼓来，生怕黎明将至。我放开窗帘，走出房间，深深后悔自己接受了店主的邀请。

我走进那个小通间，先前我看到那儿有堆货物顶墙擦着。这会儿，房间中伸手不见五指，我摸索着走向门口，两次撞到了硬物。我终于走了出来，进入了咖啡馆大堂，不久前我们还都在这儿兴高采烈地跳舞唱歌呢。面向广场的窗户透进一些光亮，我隐约看到桌子上乱七八糟地擦着几把椅子。我从旁走过，来到正门前，透过玻璃嵌板向外望了望。

外面没有任何动静。孤独的街灯立在空空的广场中央，原来是它的光线照进了咖啡馆，而我再次留意到，天空中好像透出了清晨的第一缕曙光。我继续盯着外面的广场，心中越来越恼怒。我这才明白，我竟让这么多事情干扰了自己，耽误了我的首要任务，以至我人生中最关键一晚的大部分时光竟在昏睡中度过。接着，愤怒中又夹杂了一丝失望，一瞬间，我的眼泪差点掉了下来。

然而，在我继续注视夜空的同时，我开始怀疑那破晓的征兆也许只是自己的臆想罢了。的确，我细看一番，发现夜色依然深沉，此时有个念头一闪而过：现在时间相对尚早，开始惊恐实无必要。我知道，我仍有可能及时赶到音乐厅，亲眼见证大部分晚会活动，当然，我还要履行自己的责任。

在此期间，我一直心不在焉地摆弄着大门。这会儿我留意到了门闩的构造，于是将其一一松开，漫步走进广场。

从闷热的咖啡馆走出来，我感觉外面的空气格外清新，要不是赶时间，我准想在广场上逛一会儿，清理思绪。但现在，我则开始用心地寻找起音乐厅来。

随后的几分钟里，我匆匆穿过空荡的街道，走过一家家关门的咖啡馆和商店，却一直看不见那穹顶。街灯下的老城区风韵别致，但我走得越久，越难压抑那份恐慌感。我最好能遇到几辆夜间出租车，或者至少碰上几个从夜店里逛出来的人，这样我可以向他们问问路。但是，除了几只迷途的猫咪，我好像是方圆几里内唯一醒着的动物了。

我穿过一条电车轨道，发现自己走在运河堤岸上。水面上吹来一阵冷风，但四周仍无音乐厅的迹象，我不禁怀疑自己已经彻底迷路了。我决定拐进面前的一条狭窄的小路——这条小路转了个弯，弧度优美——这时，我听到了脚步声，看到一个女人从那小路上走来。

刚才我一直以为街上杳无人迹，并深以为然，所以一看到她，我就呆呆地愣在了原地。此外，我发觉她穿着飘逸的晚礼服，不由更加吃惊。那女人也停下脚步，可她好像认出了我，便又微笑着向我走来。她走进灯光中，我发现她已年近五十，或许甚至五十出头，稍显丰满，但仪态优雅。

“晚上好，夫人，”我说，“不知您可否帮我个忙。我在找音乐厅。我走的方向对吗？”

那女人径直朝我走来。她又莞尔一笑，说：

“不对，实际上，是在那边。我刚从那儿过来。我出来走走，想透透气，不过若您不反对，我很乐意带您去那儿，瑞德先生。”

“我非常乐意，夫人。但我不愿打断您散步。”

“不，不。我已经走了快一个小时了。也该回去了。我真应该等等，与其他客人一起到。但我却愚蠢地想，整个准备过程，我应该在那儿，怕万一需要我呢。当然，没什么需要我做的。瑞德先生，请原谅我，我还没有介绍我自己。我是克莉丝汀·霍夫曼。我丈夫是您下榻的酒店的经理。”

“很高兴遇见您，霍夫曼太太。您丈夫跟我讲了不少您的事情。”

这话一出口，我就后悔不迭。我飞快地瞄了霍夫曼太太一眼，但在这昏暗的光线下，根本看不清楚她的脸。

“这边走，瑞德先生，”她说，“路不远。”

我们走了起来，她晚礼服的袖子随风扬起。我咳嗽了一声，说：

“听您刚才所说，霍夫曼太太，音乐厅的活动还没有正式开始吧？客人也还没到齐？”

“客人？哦，不。我想，应该至少还要一个小时才会有宾客到呢。”

“啊。太好了。”

我们继续轻松地沿河岸走着，两人都时不时转头凝视水面上路灯的倒影。

“我想知道，瑞德先生，”她终于开口了，“我丈夫，他说起我的时候，是否给您留下了我……我十分冷漠的印象？我想问，他是否让您对我留有那样的印象呢？”

我轻笑一声。“他留给我最强烈的印象是，霍夫曼太太，他对您是极为倾心啊。”

她继续默默地走着。我不肯定她是否认可我的回答。过了一会，她说：

“我年轻时，瑞德先生，绝没人会想这样形容我。一个冷漠的人。没错，我还是个孩子的时候，一点都不冷漠。即便是现在，我也想不到自己是那样的人。”

我低声含糊地客套了几句。然后，我们离开运河，转入一条窄窄的小街，我终于看到音乐厅的圆顶在夜空中熠熠闪光。

“甚至这些日子以来，”霍夫曼太太在我身旁说道，“大清早，我就会做这些梦，总是在大清早，梦见的总是和……和温情有关。梦里没有太多内容，通常不过就是些零星琐事。比如说，可能我正看着儿子，斯蒂芬，看着他在花园里玩耍。我们曾经很亲近，瑞德先生，他小的时候。我会安慰他，同他一起分享他的小小喜悦。他小时候，我们是那么亲密。或者有时候，我会梦到我的丈夫。前天凌晨，我梦到我和丈夫在打开一个行李箱。我们在一间卧室里，在床上拆包。我们可能是在国外一间酒店的房间里，或者也许是在家里。总之，我们在一起打开这个行李箱……而在我们之间，这种感觉很舒服。我们就在那里，一起完成这件事。他拿出一样东西，然后我拿出一样东西。我们一直在聊天，也没聊什么特别的话题，只是一边拆包一边交谈。就是在前天凌晨，我做了这个梦。后来，我醒了，躺在那儿透过窗帘看着黎明降临，感到非常幸福。我对自己说，也许，很快，真的就会这样。甚至，就在那天早些时候，我们会制造一个像那样的机会。当

然，我们没必要去拆行李，而是其他什么的，那天晚些时候，我们会做些什么，总会有个机会。我这样告诉自己，又进入了梦乡，感到非常幸福。接着，清晨来临。很奇怪，瑞德先生，每次都是这样啊。白天一开始，这另外一种东西，这一股力量，就来掌控一切。不管我做什么，我们之间的一切都会背道而驰，不是我想要的。我奋起抗争过，瑞德先生，但这些年来我却节节失利。这就是……就是我身上发生的事。我丈夫非常努力地尝试，尝试帮助我，但没用。一到下楼用早餐时，所有梦中的一切，就消失得无影无踪了。”

人行道上停着几辆汽车，我们只得前后行走。霍夫曼太太走在我前头几步。等我又赶了上去，与她并肩齐行时，我问：

“您认为那是什么？您所提及的这一力量？”

她突然大笑起来。“我不想让它听起来这么不可思议，瑞德先生。当然，答案很明显，一切都跟克里斯托弗先生有关。我这么认为已经有段时间了。当然，我知道，我丈夫也这么认为。就像这城里的许多人一样，我本以为那只是件简单的事，有个更重要的人代替我们曾热爱的克里斯托弗先生就行了。但后来，我不那么肯定了。我开始认为可能与自己有关。我得了某种病。甚至可能是衰老的一个过程吧。毕竟，我们年事已高，身体的某些部分开始衰亡。也许我们的情感也在慢慢衰亡。您认为那可能吗，瑞德先生？我真的很害怕，很害怕那是真的。我们送别了克里斯托弗先生，结果却发现——至少我就是个特别的例子——什么都没有改变。”

我们又转过一个街角。人行道非常狭窄，我们走到了街中央。我感觉她在等我的回答，于是开口道：

“霍夫曼太太，在我看来，不管年老的过程如何，人都要振作精神，不管它是什么，都不要向它妥协，这是至关重要的。”

霍夫曼太太抬头凝望夜空，继续走了一会儿，没有回答。然后她说：“唉，这些清晨的美梦。白天一开始，却什么也没有发生，我就常常痛苦地自责。但是，我向您保证，我还没有放弃，瑞德先生。如果我放弃了，那我的生命就所剩无几了。我绝不放弃梦想。我仍期待终有一天能有个温馨亲近的家庭。不止那样，瑞德先生。您瞧，可能我这样想很傻，或许您能告诉我这是不是很傻。可是您瞧，我希望总有一天能抓住它，不管这东西是什么。我希望能抓住它，然后就无所谓了，这么多年来它一直困扰着我，现在它们都将被清除干净。我有预感，要抓住它只是一瞬间的事，即便是短短的一瞬间，只要恰逢其

时。就像绳结突然断开，厚重的幕帘掉落在地，然后展现出一个全新的世界，一个充满阳光与温暖的世界。瑞德先生，您看起来很怀疑啊。我相信这些，是不是完全疯了？尽管过了这么多年，只要短短一瞬间，只要恰逢其时，就会改变所有一切？”

她以为我在怀疑她，其实根本不是那么回事。其实，在她说话的时候，我想起斯蒂芬即将表演的独奏，无疑，兴奋之情在我脸上明显地暴露无遗。我说道，口气或许有些急切：

“霍夫曼太太，我不想给您任何不切实际的希望。但是，可能——只是可能——您很快就会体验到某些东西，可能正好是这一刻，正好是您所说的那种。您可能不久就会遇到这一刻。某件事情会令您惊喜，迫使您重新评估一切，去更好更轻松地看待一切。这些阴郁的岁月确实会一扫而光。我不想给您不切实际的希望。我只是说有可能。这一刻甚至可能就在今晚来临，所以您得振作精神。”

我打住话头，猛然意识到我是在铤而走险。毕竟，斯蒂芬弹奏的片段虽然让我印象深刻，但我心里十分清楚，那年轻人在压力下很有可能会演砸。事实上，我越想就越后悔刚才暗示了那番话。不过，我看了一眼霍夫曼太太，却发现我的话既没让她吃惊，也没使她激动。过了一会儿，她说：

“您刚才看见我在街上闲逛，瑞德先生，我并非只是装作出来透透气的。我是在努力做好准备，因为您提及的这种可能性，自然而然我也想到了。像今晚这样的夜晚。是啊，许多事情都有可能发生。所以我在做准备。我不介意向您坦言，这会儿我有点害怕。因为，您瞧，在过去偶尔也有一些这样的时刻，但我却没牢牢地抓住它们，我力量不够啊。但谁又知道以后还会有多少这样的机会呢？所以，您瞧，瑞德先生，我在努力做好准备。啊，我们到了。这是大楼后面。从这个入口进去会到厨房。我带您去演员专用入口。但我还不能进去。我想我需要多透会儿气。”

“很高兴遇见您，霍夫曼太太。这个时候麻烦您带我过来，我十分感谢。我真心希望您今晚一切顺利。”

“谢谢，瑞德先生，您也是，我相信您还要考虑很多事情吧。很高兴遇见您。”

第二十九章

霍夫曼太太的身影消失在夜色中，我转身匆忙走向她所指的那扇大门，边走边对自己说，应该从刚刚经历的错误恐慌中充分吸取教训，重要的是，绝不能再让任何事干扰我完成眼前的重大任务。实际上，就在这一刻，在最终进入音乐厅之时，我突然间觉得一切都好像很简单了。事实就是，终于，过了这么多年，我将再次在父母面前演奏。那么，当务之急便是要保证我力所能及，让自己的表演精彩绝伦，令人叹为观止。相比之下，问答环节倒成了次要之事。前几天所有的挫折和混乱都无关紧要了，只要我在今晚能很快达到这唯一的核心理目标就行。

头顶上，唯一的一盏夜灯照射着宽大的白门，幽暗地发着光。我倾力打开门，踉跄了一下，走进了大楼。

尽管霍夫曼太太很自信，说这就是演员入口，但我的第一感觉是，自己竟是穿过了厨房走进来的。我走进了一条宽敞空荡的走廊，天花板上的荧光灯管发出刺眼的光亮。到处都是叫喊声、金属物体沉重的哐当碰撞声和水汽的嘶嘶声。我的正前方有辆送餐车，旁边站着两个穿制服的人，他们正在激烈争吵着，其中一人拿着一张展开来的长纸单，几乎垂到了脚面，他正不停地用手指戳着它。我想打断他们，问问在哪儿能找到霍夫曼——我现在关心的就是，在观众到来之前检查一下大厅和钢琴——但他们好像顾自争吵着，我便决定继续前行。

走廊缓缓地拐了个弯。我遇到了一大群人，可他们好像都很忙，还有些忧虑。他们大多穿着白色制服，一副惊慌失措的表情，要么急匆匆地走着，要么扛着重重的袋子，或是推着手推车。我不想拦住他们中的任何一个，于是继续沿着走廊走，以为最终会走到大厅的其他地方，找到化妆室——如果顺利的话，霍夫曼或是其他某个人就会带我去看设备。但接着，我意识到有人在背后叫着我的名字，我转过身，发现身后跑来一个男人。他看上去很眼熟，我认出他就是那个络腮胡迎宾员，今晚早些时候在咖啡馆时，就是他带头舞蹈的。

“瑞德先生，”他气喘吁吁地说道，“谢天谢地，我终于找到您了。这是我第三次跑遍整幢大楼了。他还顽强地挺着呢，我们都急着

要送他去医院，而他还是坚持要在和您说过话之后再动身。求您了，这边走，先生。他还顽强地挺着呢，可是，但愿老天保佑哪。”

“谁在顽强地挺着？发生什么事了？”

“这边请，先生。如果您不介意，我们最好快点走。很抱歉，瑞德先生，我没有解释清楚原委。是古斯塔夫。他病了。我本人不在现场，但两个小伙子，威尔汉姆和休伯特，他们跟他一起干活，在帮忙准备，是他们传出来的话。当然，我一听说就赶紧过来了，还有其他所有的小伙子都是。显然，古斯塔夫一直干得好好的，但接着，他去了洗手间，很久都没有出来。这一点儿也不像古斯塔夫，于是威尔汉姆进去瞧了瞧。他进去的时候，先生，古斯塔夫好像正站在水槽边，垂着头。他那时候病得还没那么重，他告诉威尔汉姆他觉得有点头晕，就那一句话，叫他不要小题大做。威尔汉姆就是威尔汉姆，他不知道该怎么办，特别是古斯塔夫说不要小题大做，所以他去找了休伯特。休伯特看了一下，觉得古斯塔夫得躺下。所以他们一边一个扶着他，那时候他们才意识到他已经晕了过去，却仍然站立着，抓着水槽。他抓着水槽边沿，结结实实地抓着啊，威尔汉姆说，他们得把他的指头一个一个掰开。接着，古斯塔夫好像稍稍清醒了些，他们一人扶着他一只胳膊，才从那儿出来。而古斯塔夫，他又说我不想小题大做，说他没事，可以继续工作。但休伯特不听，把他安顿进了一间化妆室，一间没人的化妆室。”

他领着路，沿着走廊走着，步伐相当快，一直扭着头，但为了避让一辆手推车，便停了下来。

“真让人担心哪，”我说道，“这事到底是几时发生的？”

“我想肯定是几个小时之前了。他起先好像还没那么糟，而且坚持只需要几分钟喘口气。但休伯特很担心，就传出了话，我们很快就全赶到了这儿，我们每一个人。我们为他找了一个垫子躺下，还找了条毯子，但随后他好像越来越糟了，我们全都商量着，说他应该得到及时的救治。但古斯塔夫不听，突然铁了心说得跟您谈谈，先生。他非常固执，他说如果我们决定送他去医院他可以马上去，但先要跟您谈谈。我们眼看着他情况越来越糟。但他已经失去理智了，先生，所以我们又出来找您。谢天谢地，我找到您了。就是那间，尽头的那间。”

在我的想象中，这条走廊绵延弯转，走起来没个完，但现在我看见它的尽头是一面米色的墙。墙壁前，最后一扇门半开着，络腮胡迎

宾员停在了门口，小心翼翼地窥探着房间里面。然后向我示意了一下，我便跟着他进去了。

门口大概有十二个人，全部转身看着我们，接着快速让到两边。我猜他们是另外几位迎宾员，但我没有停下细看他们，我的目光被小房间另一侧古斯塔夫的身影吸引了。

他躺在瓷砖地面上，身下铺着一张垫子，身上盖着一条毯子。一位迎宾员蹲在他身边，轻轻地说着些什么，但一看见我便站了起来。接着，房间一下子就空了，门在我身后关上，只留下我和古斯塔夫。

小化妆室里没有家具，连张木头椅子都没有，也没有窗户，天花板附近的通风格栅一直在嗡嗡响，空气很不新鲜。地上又冷又硬，头顶的灯要么关掉了，要么不能用，只剩下化妆镜周围的几只灯泡成了我们唯一的光源。但我看得非常清楚，古斯塔夫的脸已呈现出奇怪的灰白色。他平躺着，非常安静，除了疼痛时不时袭来，让他只得将头向后更深地压进垫子里。我一进去，他就冲我微笑，却什么也没说，无疑是要留待我们独处时才会开口。这会儿，他声音微弱，却出奇镇静地说道：

“非常抱歉，先生，就这样把您拉来了。发生这样的事情，太令人烦恼啦，偏偏是今晚。刚好在您要帮我们大忙的时候啊。”

“是的，是的，”我飞快地说道，“但瞧瞧你。你感觉怎么样了啊？”我蹲在了他身边。

“我觉得不太好。而且很快，我想我得去医院了，做一下检查。”

又一阵疼痛袭来，老迎宾员打住话头，在垫子上静静地挣扎了一会儿，其间闭上了双眼。然后，他又睁开眼睛，开口说：

“我得跟您谈谈，先生。有件事我必须要跟您谈谈。”

“请允许我现在再向你保证一次，”我说道，“我一如既往地笃信于你们的事业。其实，我非常期待今晚能够向大家证明，你和你的同事们这些年一直遭受着不公正的待遇。我迫切要强调有许多误会……”

我意识到他在极力引起我的注意，于是停了下来。

“我一分钟都没有怀疑过，先生，”他停了一会儿，然后说道：“您是一诺千金的人。我非常感激您为我们仗义执言。但我想跟您聊

聊别的事情。”他又顿了一下，毯子下又开始了一场默默的挣扎。

“真的，”我说，“如果你不赶紧去医院，是不是很不明智……”

“不，不。求您了。我一去医院，唉，一切可能就太迟了。您看，现在是时候了，我真的该跟她说说。我是说索菲。我真的必须要跟她说说。我知道您今晚很忙，但您看，没有其他人知道啊。没有人知道我跟索菲之间的情况，关于我们的共识。我知道这个要求很过分，先生，但我想问，您能否去向她解释一切呢。没有其他人可以做这件事了。”

“很抱歉，”我一头雾水，“到底解释什么呢？”

“向她解释，先生。为何我们的共识……为何现在得结束了。说服她不容易，毕竟过了这么多年。但请您试试，让她明白为何我们现在得结束了。我知道这要求对您太过分了，但是，离您该上台的时间还有一会儿。正如我所说，您是唯一的知情人……”

又一阵疼痛吞噬了他，他的声音越来越小。我能感觉到他全身的肌肉在毯子下紧绷了起来，但这次他继续盯视着我，不知怎的，尽管他全身的骨架都在颤抖，他却一直睁着眼。等他的身体再次松弛下来后，我说：

“没错，离需要我出场的时间还有一会儿。好吧。我回去看看我能做些什么。我会想办法让她明白的。不管怎样，我会尽快带她来这儿。我们都希望你尽快痊愈，希望目前的情形不像你担忧的那样生死攸关……”

“拜托您了，先生。如果您能尽快带她来这儿的话，我会十分感激的。同时，我当然会竭尽全力支撑……”

“好的，好的，我这就出发。请耐心等待，我会尽快回来。”

我起身向门口走去。快出门时，我突然想到了一件事，于是转身，回到了地上的那个身影身边。

“鲍里斯，”我再次蹲下来对他说，“那鲍里斯呢？我是不是也应该带他过来？”

古斯塔夫抬头看着我，然后深深地吸了口气，闭上双眼。他许久都沉默不语，我便说：

“或许最好不要让他见到你这种……目前的这种状况。”

我觉得，我看到他轻微地点了点头，但古斯塔夫仍旧保持着沉默，紧闭双眼。

“毕竟，”我继续道，“他对你有种崇拜。或许你会想让他记住那样的你。”

这次，古斯塔夫更加明确地点了点头。

“我只是觉得该问问你，”我说道，又站起身。“好吧。我会只带索菲过来。不会太久的。”

我再次走到了门前——已经在扭门把手了——突然，他在我身后大喊道：

“瑞德先生！”

他的叫声出奇的响亮，而且声音中包含了一种特别的紧张感，我无法相信那出自古斯塔夫之口。然而，我回头看时，他又闭上了双眼，显得非常平静。我担心地急忙又向他跑去。这时古斯塔夫睁开双眼，抬头看着我。

“您必须也带上鲍里斯，”他轻声说道，“他现在不小了。让他看看我现在这个样子。他得学会生活。直面生活。”

他又闭上双眼，表情僵硬了起来，我想他正在经受又一阵疼痛。但这次有些不同，我关切地低头看着，发现老人正在哭泣。我继续看了一会儿，不知如何是好。终于，我轻轻拍了拍他的肩膀。

“我会尽快。”我低声道。

我走出化妆室，挤在门旁的其他迎宾员全都扭头看着我，满脸焦急。我推开他们走过去，果断地说：

“请密切观察他，先生们。我得去完成一个紧急的请求，所以请原谅我离开一会儿。”

有人开始提问题，但我匆匆前行，没有停步。

我的计划是找到霍夫曼，坚持要他开车立刻送我到索菲的公寓。然而，我疾步在走廊上前行时，发现自己根本不知道到哪里去找酒店经理。此外，走廊也与我刚才同络腮胡迎宾员走过时大为不同了：仍有几辆送餐车在推来推去，但这会儿走廊里黑压压地挤满了人，想必他们是来访乐队的成员。我的两侧是长长的几排化妆室，许多门都开着，乐手们三三两两地站在一起，谈笑风生，在走廊对面相互叫喊。

偶尔我会路过一扇关闭的门，门后传来乐器的声音，但整体而言，他们的情绪着实让我吃了一惊，都很轻浮。我正欲停下，问问其中一人我在哪儿能找到霍夫曼，突然，透过一间化妆室半开的门，我瞥见了那位酒店经理。我走上前，再往里推了推门。

霍夫曼正站在一面落地镜前，仔细地审视自己。他一袭晚装打扮，我留意到，他的脸上化着浓妆，一些粉末掉落到了他的肩膀和翻领上。他在喃喃地说着什么，目光一直没有离开镜中的影像。我继续在门口看着，他做了个奇怪的动作，突然间弯腰向前，僵硬地抬起一只手臂，胳膊肘向外突出，用拳重击自己的前额——一下，两下，三下。整个过程中，他的双眼没有离开过镜子，并且一直喃喃自语。接着，他站直身子，默默地看着自己。我突然意识到，他准备再次重复这整个动作，于是我飞快地清了清嗓子，说道：

“霍夫曼先生。”

他吃了一惊，盯视着我。

“打扰您了，”我说，“很抱歉。”

霍夫曼困惑地四下看了看，然后似乎又恢复了镇静。

“瑞德先生，”他微笑道，“您感觉如何？我相信您觉得这儿的一切都合您的意。”

“霍夫曼先生，出了件非常紧急的事情。我现在需要一辆车尽快送我去目的地。不知道能否立刻安排。”

“一辆车，瑞德先生？现在？”

“事情万分紧急。当然，我会及时返回，用充足的时间完成我各项应尽的职责。”

“是的，是的，当然。”霍夫曼隐约有些为难。“车应该没有问题。当然，瑞德先生，通常情况下，我还可以为您提供一位司机，或者，我荣幸之至，会亲自驾车送您。不幸的是，现在我的员工们手头上的工作都很多。至于我呢，还有许多事情要照管，还有几句不太重要的台词要排练。哈哈！您知道的，我今晚要做一个简短的发言。无疑，跟您的演讲相比，它微不足道，甚至还比不上我们的布罗茨基先生的呢。顺便说一句，他会晚些到，但是，我觉得我必须做好最充分的准备。是的，是的，布罗茨基先生会晚些到，没错，但这没什么好担心的。实际上，这是他的化妆间，我正要小心核查呢。这化妆间好

极了。我完全相信，他随时会来的。您知道的，瑞德先生，一直以来，我在亲自抓布罗茨基先生的……呃，恢复情况，能够亲眼见证此事是多么令人欣喜啊。如斯的动力，如斯的庄重！所以今晚，这至关重要的夜晚，我信心十足。哦，是的。信心十足！没错，若这个时候他又故态复萌的话，就简直不可想象了。那对这整座城市将会是个灾难！自然，对我本人亦是。当然，这点担心最无需挂齿了，然而，请原谅，我得说，对我而言，今晚，这至关重要的一夜，若他故态复萌的话，对我来说，就全完了。胜利在望的时刻，恰恰是我完结的时刻。令人羞耻的完结啊！我再无颜面对这城里的任何人。我得躲起来了。哈！我在干什么啊，说这些不可能发生的事情？我对布罗茨基先生信心十足。他会来的。”

“是的，我肯定他会来的，霍夫曼先生，”我说道，“实际上，今晚整个庆典将会相当成功……”

“是的，是的，我知道！”他不耐烦地大喊道，“无需安慰我这一点！我甚至根本就不该提起这件事，毕竟离晚会开始还有充足的时间，要不是因为……因为今晚早些时候发生的事，我根本就不该提起。”

“发生什么事了？”

“是的，是的。啊，您还没听说吧。您怎么可能听说呢？没什么大不了的，先生。今晚早些时候，发生了一系列的事件，结果，几个小时前，我最后离开布罗茨基先生的时候，他呷了一小杯威士忌。不，不，先生！我明白您在想什么。不，不！他充分征询了我的意见。一番思量后，我动了怜悯之心，想想在这种特殊情况下，一小杯酒不会有什么害处。我完全充分地判断过了，先生。或许我错了，等着瞧吧。我个人认为我不会错的。当然，假若我的决定确实错了，那么这整个夜晚——噢呼！——从头至尾将会是场灾难！那样的话，我就得在藏匿中度过余生了。但事实是，先生，今晚的事情十分复杂，我不得不做出决定。不管怎样，结果就是，我留布罗茨基先生在自己家里，喝了一小杯威士忌。我自信他会就此打住的。我现在唯一的想法就是，或许该处理一下那个橱柜。但另一方面，我肯定，我是太过小心了。毕竟，布罗茨基先生已经有了如此的进步，完全可以信任他的，完全信任。”他刚才一直在拨弄着自己的蝴蝶领结，这会儿他转过身，对着镜子调整起来。

“霍夫曼先生，”我说，“到底发生了什么事？假如布罗茨基先生出事情了，或者发生了其他什么事，从而有可能彻底改变整个事态

的话，那么您肯定应该立即告知我。相信您赞同我的话吧，霍夫曼先生。”

酒店经理大笑了一声。“瑞德先生，您完全想错了。您一点儿也不需要担心。瞧瞧，我担心了吗？不。我把全部的声誉都押在了今晚，难道我不够镇静，不够自信吗？告诉您吧，先生，您根本没什么可担心的。”

“霍夫曼先生，您刚才提到橱柜，是指什么？”

“橱柜？哦，就是我今晚在布罗茨基先生家发现的橱柜。您或许知道，他多年来都住在离北高速公路不远的的一个旧农舍里。我之前当然去过很多次，但屋内有些乱——当然，布罗茨基先生有他自己规整东西的方式——我从未仔细看过他的住所。就是说，直到今晚，我才发现竟然还有酒品储备。他向我发誓已经完全忘记这事了。正值今晚临近，那时，我说，好吧，在这种情况下，鉴于与柯林斯小姐之间发生了烦心事等等，在这种特殊情况下，就只在这种情况下，只喝一小杯威士忌对他来说最好，只为稳定他的心神——您看，我是在权衡轻重之后才同意他的，尽管确实有点小冒险，是的。毕竟，先生，他为柯林斯小姐之事非常烦恼。就在那个时候，在我提议从车上取个小酒瓶来的时候，布罗茨基先生才想起，他还有一个橱柜没有清理。于是我们走进他的……呃，厨房，我猜应该是吧。过去几个月来，布罗茨基先生把那块地方修整得相当不错。他取得了稳步的进展，如今，这些物件根本没派上过用场，但当然啰，还缺窗户之类的东西。总之，他打开橱柜——实际上它是一侧倒放的——里面，呃，大概有一打旧瓶装的烈酒。大部分是威士忌。布罗茨基先生跟我一样惊讶。我得承认，我确实意识到了自己应该做些什么。我应该把那些瓶子拿走，或者把酒倾倒在地上。但是，先生，您也明白，那简直是侮辱啊，是对布罗茨基先生表现出的勇气与决心的一个极大侮辱。况且，今晚因为柯林斯小姐，他的自尊心已经承受了一次重大打击……”

“抱歉，霍夫曼先生，您反复说起柯林斯小姐，到底怎么了？”

“啊，柯林斯小姐。是的，呃，那是另外一回事了。那正是我为何凑巧去那儿，去布罗茨基先生农舍的原因。您看，瑞德先生，今晚我发现自己传达了一个最为悲伤的消息。没人会妒忌我担负了这么个任务的。其实，一段时间以来，我越来越感到不安，甚至在他们昨日在动物园相见之前就开始了。可以说，我是在替柯林斯小姐担心。谁会猜到，过了这么些年，他们的事竟然会进展得这么快？是的，是的，我很担心。柯林斯小姐是我最敬重的一位女士。我不忍心看到这

那个时候她的生活再次分崩离析。您看，瑞德先生，柯林斯小姐是个极具智慧的女人，整座城市都可以作证，但尽管如此——假若您住在这儿的话，我肯定您会认同的——她总还有些脆弱的地方。我们所有人都十分敬重她，许多人认为她的教诲弥足珍贵，但同时——我怎么说呢？——我们总是觉得想保护她。几个月来，随着布罗茨基先生变得……越来越正常，许多问题凸现了出来，我之前确实没有好好考虑过这些问题，呃，我说呀，我便开始担心起来。所以，先生，今晚在您排练完毕、我带您回去的路上，您碰巧无心提起柯林斯小姐同意了与布罗茨基先生的约见，甚至还清楚地表示说，布罗茨基先生当时就在圣彼得公墓等候她，您可以想象我当时的心情如何了。天哪，进展如此神速！我们的布罗茨基俨然就是瓦伦蒂诺再世啊！瑞德先生，我意识到我得做些什么。我不能允许柯林斯小姐重新堕入痛苦的生活之中，尤其那是因为我的缘故，不管是多么间接造成的。所以，今晚早些时候，最为仁慈的您准许我在街上放下您之后，我就趁机去柯林斯小姐的公寓看望她。看到我，她当然非常惊讶：过了这么多天，我偏偏在今晚亲自前去拜访她。换句话说，我的出现就能说明一切了。她立刻让我进门，我请她原谅我此次唐突的造访，原谅我不能以通常体贴、圆滑的方式来处理我想跟她谈论的这个难题。她当然非常理解。‘我知道，霍夫曼先生，’她说道，‘您今晚肯定承受着巨大的压力。’我们坐在她的前厅，我直奔主题。我告诉她，我听说了他们约定的会面。柯林斯小姐听到这话，垂下了双眼，就像一个年轻的小女生一样。接着，她怯懦地说道：‘是的，霍夫曼先生。您刚刚登门的时候，我还正在准备呢。已经一个小时了，我尝试了不同的装扮、不同的发式。我这个年纪了，是不是很滑稽啊？是的，霍夫曼先生，是真的。他今早来了，说服了我。我同意跟他见面。’她说了诸如此类的话。她喃喃低语，这位优雅的女士平常根本不这样讲话。于是我继续说下去。当然，我说得非常委婉。我巧妙地指出了可能的隐患。‘非常好，柯林斯小姐。’我用了这样的语句。由于时间有限，我就尽量小心。自然地，假若是在另一个夜晚，假若我们有时间客套幽默一番，寒暄几句，我敢说我可以做得更好，但也可能没什么不同。事实真相对她来说总是很难接受的。总之，我尽可能用最好的方式说了出来，我终于向她说出了真相。我对她说：‘柯林斯小姐，所有这些旧伤疤会再次揭开。它们会痛，会给您带来极大的痛苦，会打垮您，柯林斯小姐，在几星期之内，几天之内。您怎么能忘记呢？您怎么能让自已再重新经历一遍？之前经受的一切，那些羞辱，那巨大的创伤，全都会回来，而且会比之前更强烈。您在这么多年以来为自已建立一个全新的生活所做的一切，又将如何呢？’我对她说出这样

的话——哦，告诉您吧，先生，这可不容易啊——我能看出她的内心在崩溃，即便她极力想维持表面上的镇静，我能看到所有的记忆再次浮上她的心头，过去的痛楚又开始了。不容易啊，先生，我可以告诉您，但我认为我有责任说下去。最后，她终于非常平静地说道：‘可是，霍夫曼先生，我已经答应他了。我已经答应今晚去见他。他指望我去啊。像今晚这样的大场面，他总是非常需要我。’我回答道：‘柯林斯小姐，当然他会失望，但我会尽最大努力亲自向他解释的。不管怎么说，就像您一样，他在内心深处肯定已经明白，这次约见是非常不明智的。过去的最好就让它过去吧。’就如同梦中一般，她看着窗外说道：‘但他肯定已经在那儿了。他会在那儿一直等的。’我回答道：‘我亲自去，柯林斯小姐。是的，我今晚非常忙，但我认为此事头等重要，我只有亲自去办才能放心。实际上，我现在立马就去，去公墓，告诉他这个情况。您可以放心，柯林斯小姐，我会尽一切努力安慰他的。我会劝他想想将来，想想今晚要面对的极其重要的挑战。’我就是这样对她说的，瑞德先生。虽然我得说，她一下子好像伤透了心，但她是位讲道理的女士，内心深处肯定明白我是对的，因为她非常亲切地碰了碰我的胳膊，说道：‘去找他。马上。尽最大努力吧。’于是我起身想离开，但马上意识到还有最后一项痛苦的任务有待完成。‘哦，还有，柯林斯小姐，’我对她说道，‘至于今晚的活动，鉴于目前的情况，我觉得您最好还是待在家中。’她点了点头，我看得出她快要哭了。‘毕竟，’我继续说，‘得顾及到他的感受。在目前的情况下，在这节骨眼上，您出现在音乐厅也许会对他有一定的影响。’她又点了点头，表示她完全理解。我向她致了歉，然后就出去了。尽管我有很多其他紧急的事情要做——比如熏咸肉，送面包——但我明白，当务之急是让布罗茨基先生安然跨过这最后一道出人意料的坎儿。于是我驱车去了公墓。我到达的时候，天已经黑了，我在坟墓间走了好一会儿才找到他，他坐在一座墓碑上，垂头丧气的。看到我走近，他疲惫地抬起头，对我说：‘你是来告诉我的吧。我知道。我知道她不会来的。’这使得我的任务简单多了，您也许会这样想，但告诉您吧，先生，一点也不容易啊，要传递这样的消息。我郑重其事地点了点头，说，是的，他说得没错，她不会来了。她已经想通了，改变主意了，而且她也已决定不出席今晚的音乐会。我知道多说无益。他看上去几欲发狂，顷刻间我移开目光，假装审视他所坐的那块墓碑旁边的一座坟墓。‘哦，老卡尔茨先生，’我对着树林说道，因为我知道布罗茨基先生正悄悄地抹眼泪。‘啊，老卡尔茨先生。他埋在这里多少年了？就仿佛昨日啊，但我知道，已经十四年了。他生前是多么寂寞啊。’我如此这般地说着，就是为了让

布罗茨基先生哭出来啊。接着，我感觉他已抑制住了眼泪，便转身对着他，要他跟我一起回音乐厅做好准备。但他说不，时间还太早。在礼堂里逗留过久，他会太紧张的。我想他说得也没错，于是我提议载他回家。他答应了，于是我们离开公墓，下山到了车上。我们一路车行，上北高速路，这整个期间，他只是盯着窗外，什么都没说，眼中不时泪水盈盈。我那时才意识到，我们还未大功告成啊。一切不像几个小时那样显得笃定了。但我仍然非常有信心，瑞德先生，就如同我现在这样。然后我们到了他的农舍。他翻新得很不错，很多房间都非常舒适。我们走进客厅，打开台灯，四下看了看，轻松地交谈了几句。我提议安排几个人过来，看看墙壁发霉的问题。他好像没听见，只是坐在椅子上，露出一副幽远的表情。接着，他说他想喝点酒，就一小杯。我告诉他这绝对不行。可他非常镇静地说，他需要喝杯酒，但并不像从前那样，不是那样的，那种饮法已一去不复返了，可他刚刚遭受了极度的失望，他的心在碎裂。他用了那样的词汇。他的心在碎裂，他说，但他知道今晚的活动还得仰仗他，他知道轻重。他知道自己得表现出众。他没有要求像从前那样喝酒。难道我真的瞧不出吗？我瞥了他一眼，看得出他说的是实话。我看到了一个伤心、失望却又有责任心的人。他越来越了解自己，比大部分男人曾希望做到的都要好得多。他说，在这场危机中，他需要的无非就是一小杯酒，让他摆脱这情感上的打击。为了满足即将到来的夜晚活动的需求，他需要稳定情绪。瑞德先生，我早些天已经多次听他说过要喝酒，但这次完全不同。我看得出来。我望向他双眼深处，说道：‘布罗茨基先生，我能信任您吗？我车上还有一小瓶威士忌。假如我只给您一小杯，我能相信您会到此为止吗？就一小杯，再不喝了？’他全力对上我的目光，回答道：‘不像从前那样了。我向你发誓。’于是我便出门走到车旁，天很黑，风中的树林发出一阵狂烈的呜咽声，我从车上取了一小瓶酒，拿了进去，这时他已离开了椅子。我走了进去，发现他在厨房里。那其实是间外屋，与农舍主屋相连，布罗茨基先生将其巧妙地改成了厨房。是的，就在那时，我发现他打开了那个侧倒在地的橱柜。他完全忘记了这里还有威士忌，发现我进去时，他这样说道。一瓶瓶的威士忌啊。他只拿出一瓶，打开它，衡量着，往酒杯里倒了一点儿。然后他直视我的眼睛，将剩下的酒倒在了地板上。他厨房的地面，我得说，大多是泥地，所以看似没弄得太乱。呃，他把酒全倒在了地上，随后我们回到主屋，他坐在椅子上，开始一口口地呷着威士忌。我仔细看着他，看得出他喝酒的样子不似从前了。他可以那样一小口一小口地呷……我知道自己做出了正确的决定。我告诉他我已离开太久，得回去了。熏肉还有面包需要有人监管。我站起身，

不用开口，我们两个彼此都知道对方在想些什么。在想那个橱柜。布罗茨基先生直直地盯着我的眼睛，说道：“不像从前那样了。”对我来说，那就够了。若我坚持继续待下去，那就是对他的诋毁，甚至是侮辱。总之，如我所说，我看着他的面庞时胸有成竹。我毫不犹豫地离开了。只在最后几分钟，先生，一丝疑虑才在我脑海中掠过。但我很清醒，我也知道，那只不过是大事前的紧张而已。他很快就会来的，我肯定。我满怀信心，这整个夜晚必定会旗开得胜，会是个巨大的成功……”

“霍夫曼先生，”我说道，一丝不耐烦掠过心头，“假如您乐意让布罗茨基先生喝威士忌，呃，那是您的事。我不知道这是不是好主意，但您比我更了解情况。不管怎么说，请恕我提醒您，我这会儿也需要帮助，对吧？我跟您解释过了，我需要一辆车，越快越好。这事真的非常紧急，霍夫曼先生。”

“啊，是的，车。”霍夫曼若有所思地四下望了望，“最简单的办法，瑞德先生，就是您借用我的车。就停在外面，防火门那儿。”他指了指走廊远处，“唉，钥匙呢？喏，给您。方向盘稍微有点向左偏。我一直想修理，但太忙了。请吧，请您随意使用。我明早才会用。”

第三十章

我驾着霍夫曼的黑色大轿车出了停车场，开上一条蜿蜒的小路，小路两边是茂密的冷杉林。很显然，这条路不常有人走，路面坑坑洼洼，没有路灯，非常狭窄，两车交会时必须减速慢行。我小心翼翼地开着车，凝视着黑漆漆的前方，以防撞到什么障碍物或遇到急转弯。小路笔直起来，借着车头灯光，我发现自己正驶过一片森林。我加快速度，继续在黑暗中穿行了一会儿，接着，我透过树林瞥见左边有些光亮。我再次减速，这才意识到那是音乐厅的前部，富丽堂皇，华灯照亮了夜空。

现在音乐厅离我有些远，我的视角也有点偏斜，但我可以清楚地辨认出它那壮丽的大体外观。几排威严的石柱矗立在中央拱门两旁，高大的窗户直达巨大的圆形穹顶。我不知道宾客是否已经到达，于是干脆彻底熄火，摇低车窗，想看个清楚。但即便我从座位上直起身，还是被树木挡住了视线，丝毫看不到地平面上那建筑的情况。

接着，我继续盯着音乐厅看，脑海中突然闪过一个念头：可能就在这会儿，我父母即将到达。我忽然记起了霍夫曼那惟妙惟肖的描述，他们坐着马车，从黑暗中出现在众人艳羡的目光中。实际上，就在我倾身窗外之时，我仿佛能清楚地听到不远处马车经过的声音。我关掉汽车引擎，又听了听，把头再伸出去一些。接着我干脆下车，站在黑夜中屏息聆听。

风飕飕地在林间穿梭。接着我再次隐隐听到了先前那个微弱的声音：马蹄的嗒嗒声，有节奏的叮当声，木制车厢的嘎嘎声。随后这些声音渐渐隐没在树林的沙沙声中。我又继续听了一会儿，但是已经听不到任何声音了。最后我转身回到车中。

我感到无比平静——几乎是心若止水——站在外面小路上的时候还是这种感觉，但等我一旦重新启动车子，一股强烈的沮丧、恐惧和愤怒感便交织在一起涌上心头。我的父母这时刚刚抵达，而我却在这里，准备工作远未完成，甚至这会儿还要驱车离开音乐厅去办其他事情。我不明白自己怎么会让这样的事情发生。我穿越树林，继续前行，心里愈发感到愤怒，我决计无论如何一等手头的事情办完，就尽快赶回音乐厅。可接着我又突然想到，我其实不知道怎样去索菲的公

寓，甚至不知道走这条森林小路是否方向对头。一阵无力感席卷而来，但我依然加速行驶，看着车灯照耀下的树林在我面前一路延展。

这时，我突然发现两个人影正站在前方招手。他们就直直地站在小路中间，我靠近时，他们虽挪到了一边，但还是继续打着遇急信号。我放慢速度，看到有五六个人聚在一起，在路边支了顶帐篷，围着个小小的便携火炉。我一开始以为他们都是流浪者，但随后我看到了一位穿着时髦的中年妇女，还有一位身着西装的灰发男人，正弯腰靠向我的窗户。在他们身后，其他几个人刚才一直围着火炉，坐在好似翻转过来的木板箱上，这会儿他们都站起身，朝我的车走了过来。我留意到，他们都举着个锡制野营杯。

我摇下窗户，那女人看着车里的我，说道：

“噢，你来了，我们真高兴。你看，我们的争论陷入了僵局，根本不能达成一致。总是很麻烦，对不对？需要行动的时候，我们从未达成过一致。”

“但无疑，”穿西装的灰发男人严肃地说道，“我们得尽快得出个结论。”

他们两人还未来得及说点别的什么，我看到他们身后有个人站了起来，正弯腰看着我，此人是我的老同学杰弗里·桑德斯。他也认出了我，便推开他人来到前面，拍了拍车门。

“啊，我正在想什么时候能再见到你呢，”他说道，“老实讲，我有些生气。你知道，你保证过要来喝杯茶，却又没有过来。不过，我认为现在不是说这个的时候。你还是依然故我啊，有点无礼，老朋友。别介意。你还是出来吧。”说罢，他打开车门站在一旁。我正要抗辩，他继续说道：“最好来喝杯咖啡吧。然后你可以加入我们的讨论。”

“坦白说，桑德斯，”我答道，“现在我不是很方便。”

“噢，来吧，老朋友。”他的声音中透出一丝不耐烦。“你知道，自从我们前晚遇到后，我就一直在回想你的很多事，回想起了我们在学校里的日子，所有种种。就像今天早上，我一醒来就想起了当年，你可能已经不记得了，那个时候，我们俩为低年级男孩子们的越野跑记分。我觉得该是六年级以下吧。你可能不记得了，但是今天早上躺在床上，我一直在想。我们就站在那个旷野对面的酒吧外等着，当时你正为某事而沮丧呢。来吧，出来吧，老朋友，我没法跟你这样

对话。”他继续不耐烦地引我出来。“这就对了，好多了。”他那只空闲的手抓着我的手肘，另一只手端着他的锡制水杯，于是不情愿地下了车。“是呀，我一直在想着那天的事。十月的一个雾蒙蒙的早晨，在英国，天气老是这样。我们站在那儿，闲站着，等待三年级学生喘着气从雾中跑出来，我记得你一个劲地说‘你可好啦，你一切可顺当呢’，真是可怜至极。所以，最后我对你说：‘你看，不光是你，老朋友。你不是世界上唯一有烦恼的人。’我开始跟你讲起我七八岁时的事情，我父母、我的小弟弟和我，我们全家去度假。我们去了英国海滨的一处旅游胜地，就像伯恩茅斯那样的地方。也许是怀特岛。天气晴朗，等等，可是你知道，总有些不对劲，我们就是相处得不好。当然，一家人度假出游，这是司空见惯的事，但当时我可不知道，那时我才七八岁。总之，事情就是不顺。一天下午，父亲气冲冲地走了。我是说突然就走了。我们正在海岸边看着什么，母亲正在向我们指着什么东西，突然间，他就走了。没有叫喊，什么都没，就只是走开了。我们不知道该怎么办，于是我们就跟着他走，母亲、小克里斯托弗和我，我们三人跟着他。跟得不是很近，总保持着三十码的距离，正好还能看到他。父亲继续走着，一路沿着海滨，爬上峭壁的小路，穿过沙滩小屋和所有晒日光浴的人。接着他朝小镇走去，路过网球场，穿过购物区。我们跟了他一个多小时。过了一会儿，我们开起了玩笑。我们说：‘看哪，他不再生气了。他只是在闹着玩！’或者我们说：‘他的头故意那样的，瞧瞧啊！’然后我们笑啊笑。如果你仔细看，就会相信，他是在做一个滑稽的步行表演。克里斯托弗那时还很小，我告诉他，父亲那样走路只是为了滑稽，克里斯托弗笑得合不拢嘴，好像那全然是个游戏。母亲也是，她大笑着说道：‘噢，孩子们，看你们老爸！’然后笑得更厉害了。于是我们继续那样走着，但只有我——你看，虽然当时我只有七八岁，但只有我明白：父亲不是真的在开玩笑。我知道他根本没有恢复过来，而且由于我们一直跟着他，或许他还越来越生气呢。或许他想坐到凳子上，或者去哪里喝杯咖啡，却不能如愿，全因为我们。你还记得这些吗？我那天全告诉你了。我曾一度看着母亲，因为我希望这一切尽快停止，而就在那时我才恍然大悟。我明白母亲已说服自己，让自己彻底地相信父亲做这一切是闹着玩的，而小克里斯托弗，他一直都想跑上前，你知道，直奔到父亲身后。我只得编造各种借口，一直呵呵大笑着说：‘不行，那可不行。那不是游戏的一部分。我们必须保持远远的距离，否则就不行。’但我母亲，你看，她却说：‘哦，是的！你为什么不去拉他的衬衣，看看在他逮到你以前，是否能跑回来！’我只得继续说，因为我是唯一明白的——你知道，我是唯一的明白人——

我只得继续说：‘不，不，我们等着。退后，退后。’我父亲看上去的确滑稽。远远看去，他的步伐很是奇怪。你看，老朋友，你为什么不坐下呢？你看起来疲乏极了，而且非常焦虑。来，坐下吧，帮我们决定。”

杰弗里·桑德斯指了指营帐附近一个倒翻过来的橙色木板箱。我确实感觉很疲惫，心想小憩一下、呷口咖啡之后，不管什么任务摆在面前总能更好地完成。我坐下，发现双膝在颤抖，便颤颤巍巍地坐到箱子上。人们怜悯地围拢过来。有个人端过来一杯咖啡，另有一人将一只手放在我背上，说道：“放松。尽管放松。”

“谢谢，谢谢！”我说道，接过咖啡，尽管很烫，还是贪婪地饮了一大口。

穿西装的灰发男人蹲在我面前，直视着我的脸，非常温和地说道：“我们必须做决定。您得帮帮我们。”

“决定？”

“是的。和布罗茨基先生有关。”

“啊，是的。”我端起锡杯又喝了几口，“噢，我明白了。看来重任现在全压在我身上了。”

“也不至于那么说。”灰发男人说道。

我又看了看他。他态度友好沉静，是个令人安心的人，但在这一刻，我可以看到他非常严肃。

“我也不至于会说责任全压在了你身上。只不过事已至此，我们大家都得负起责任。我个人的意见已明确表达，那就是它该截掉。”

“截掉？”

灰发男人庄重地点了点头。我看到了挂在他脖子上的听诊器，这才意识到他是个医生什么的。

“嗯，是的，”我说道，“得截掉。是的。”

这时我才开始扫视四周，吃惊地发现离车子不远的地面上有一大团金属。一个念头隐隐划过我的脑海，是我造成了这次事故，或许我卷入了某起事故，自己却还不知道。我站起身——立刻有几双手伸出来扶稳我——走向那团金属，发现那是一辆自行车的残骸。金属已扭

曲变形，无可挽救了，而令我惊恐的是，我看到布罗茨基躺在其中。他背贴地面平躺在地上，双眼静静地看着我走近他。

“布罗茨基先生！”我盯着他喃喃道。

“啊。瑞德。”他说道，声音中几乎没有一丝痛苦，颇令我惊讶。

我转过身，对已经站到我身后的灰发男人说：“我肯定这件事和我毫无关系。我不记得有任何事故发生。我只是开车……”

灰发男人会心地点了点头，示意我保持安静。接着，他拉着我走远了一点，低声说道：“几乎可以肯定，他企图自杀。他喝醉了。烂醉如泥。”

“啊。是吗。”

“我肯定他企图自杀。可现在，结果却是双腿被缠了进去。右腿基本上没有受到伤害。只是被卡住了。左腿也被卡住了。正是这条左腿让我很难办。情况很不妙。”

“不！”我说道，回头又看了一眼布罗茨基。他好像注意到了，冲着一片夜色说道：

“瑞德。你好。”

“您来之前我们已经讨论了一会儿，”灰发男人继续说道，“我觉得应该截掉。那样我们或许能救他一命。经过一番争论，在场的大部分人都赞同。不过，那边的两位女士反对，她们要多等一会儿，等救护车来。但我觉得这样做是在冒极大的风险。这是我的专业之见。”

“噢，是的。是的。我理解您的顾虑。”

“在我看来，左腿必须马上截掉。我是个外科医生，但不巧的是，我没带工具。没有止痛药，什么都没有。连阿司匹林都没有。您看，我下了班，只是出来到这儿走走，呼吸一下新鲜空气。就像这里的其他好心人一样。碰巧早些时候口袋里装了副听诊器，但其他什么都没有。但现在您来了，也许情况会有所改变。您车里有什么用品吗？”

“车里？呃，其实我也不清楚。您看，这车是借来的。”

“您是说是雇来的车？”

“不完全正确。是借来的。从熟人那里。”

“我明白了。”他神情严肃地看着地面，在暗自思忖。越过他的肩膀，我可以看到其他人在焦急地看着我们。接着这个外科医生开口道：

“也许您不妨查查后备厢。可能有什么可以帮到我们呢。有把锋利的器具，我就可以做这手术了。”

我想了想，说：“我很乐意去看看，但首先我想去跟布罗茨基先生说句话。您看，某种程度上说，我确实了解他，我真的应该先跟他说，在……在走这极端的一步之前。”

“很好，”外科医生说道，“但我觉得——我的专业意见——就是，我们已经浪费了很多时间。请尽快吧！”

我又走向布罗茨基，低头直视他的脸。

“布罗茨基先生……”我开口道，但他立刻插话进来。

“瑞德，帮帮我。我必须找到她。”

“找柯林斯小姐？我认为现在有其他事情需要考虑。”

“不，不。我必须和她谈谈。我很清楚。我现在非常清楚。我头脑很清醒。至于这场事故，我不知道，我在骑车，什么东西撞了我一下，一辆车吧，一辆轿车，谁知道呢？我肯定喝醉了，我不记得那个了，但是其他的我都记得。我现在明白了，明白了一切。是他！一直以来，他就想破坏！是他，全是他干的！”

“谁？霍夫曼？”

“他是个下三滥！下三滥！我以前不明白，但现在我全明白了。自从车子撞了我，不管是什么，一辆轿车，一辆卡车，自那之后我全明白了。今天晚上他来找我，非常同情我。我在公墓里等，等啊等。我的心跳得厉害。我等了这么多年。你知道吗，瑞德？我等了很久。即使我喝醉了，我也在等。下个星期，我过去常说。下个星期，我就戒酒，去找她。我要约她在圣彼得公墓见面。年复一年，我都这样说。现在，我终于达成愿望了，等在那里。坐在皮尔·古斯塔森的坟墓上等待。过去，我有时会跟布鲁诺一起去坐坐的。我等着。十五分钟，半个小时，一个小时。接着，他来了。他碰了碰我，就在这儿，在我肩膀上。她改变主意了，他说，她不会来了，今晚甚至连音乐厅也不来了。他一如平常那样和善。我听他说，喝点威士忌吧，它会让

你平静下来，这次例外。但我不能喝威士忌，我说，我怎么能喝威士忌呢？你疯了吗？不，喝点威士忌吧，他说，只喝一点，它能使你平静。我以为他是好意，现在我明白了，他从一开始就不想成事。他认为我成不了大器，永远成不了大器，因为我是……我就是一坨屎！他就是那么想的！我现在很清醒。我喝的酒足够醉死一匹马，但在那辆车撞了我之后，我清醒了。我现在非常清楚，一切都明白了。是他！他比我要低贱！我不会让他得逞。我会做到的！帮帮我，瑞德。我不会让他得逞的。我现在要去音乐厅了。我要展示给每个人。音乐已准备就绪，全在这儿，全在我脑子里。我会展示给每个人看。但她得来。我得跟她谈谈。帮帮我，瑞德。她一定得来，就坐在音乐厅里。然后她会记得的。他是个下三滥，但是我现在看清楚了。帮帮我，瑞德。”

“布罗茨基先生，”我打断他，“这里有位外科医生，他得为你做个手术，可能会有点疼。”

“帮帮我，瑞德。只要帮我找到她。你的车呢？你的车呢？带我去，带我去她那儿吧。她就在那个公寓里。我讨厌那地方。我真的讨厌，讨厌透了。我以前常常站在外面。带我去找她，瑞德。现在就带我去！”

“布罗茨基先生，您好像不知道您目前的状况。没有时间耽搁了。事实上，我答应这位外科医生会翻查一下后备厢。我一会儿就回来。”

“她害怕极了。但是还不太晚。我们可以养只动物。但现在没关系了，别介意动物了。只要到音乐厅去。这是我唯一的请求。只要到音乐厅去。我只请求这一件事。”

我离开布罗茨基，走到车边。打开后备厢，发现霍夫曼往里面乱七八糟地塞满了各种东西。有一把坏椅子，一双橡胶靴子，一沓塑料盒子。接着，我又找到一个手电筒，点亮它，照了照后备厢，在角落里发现了一把钢锯，看上去有点油腻腻的。我用一根手指滑过锯片，感觉锯齿还很锋利。我关上后备厢，向围着火炉聊天的其他人走去，走近时听到外科医生说：

“现在产科是一门沉闷的学科，不像我研修时那样了。”

“抱歉，”我说道，“我找到了这个。”

“噢，”外科医生转向我，说道，“谢谢。您已经跟布罗茨基先生谈过了？很好。”

突然间，我对自己无故卷入了整件事感到非常憎恶，于是我环顾这一圈脸庞，兴许有些暴怒地说道：

“难道这座城市就没有合适的应急预案以应对这样的突发事件吗？你们不是说叫了救护车吗？”

“一个小时前我们叫了一辆，”杰弗里·桑德斯开口道，“就在那个电话亭里打的。但不巧的是，今晚救护车短缺，全因为音乐厅的盛事。”

我看了看他指的地方，确实看到，在路对面远一些的地方，几乎是在漆黑的森林边缘，有一个公共电话亭。一看到它，我突然想起了正在处理的紧急事件，想到我不仅可以打电话给索菲，提前给她提个醒，而且还可以从她那里知道怎么去她公寓。

“请原谅，”我边说边离开。“我现在有个重要的电话要打。”

我朝树林走去，进了电话亭。在我搜遍口袋想要找几枚硬币时，我从玻璃嵌板望出去，看到外科医生慢慢朝仰卧的布罗茨基走去，钢锯巧妙地藏在身后。杰弗里·桑德斯和其他人不安地围成一圈，或低头望着锡茶杯，或盯着自己的双脚。接着，外科医生转过身来，跟他们讲了几句，其中两个男人，杰弗里·桑德斯和一个穿着褐色皮夹克的年轻人，硬着头皮走到他身旁。不一会儿，三个人就站在了布罗茨基面前，神情肃穆地低头看着他。

我转过头，拨通了索菲的电话。电话响了一会儿，然后索菲接起了电话，声音有些困乏，还稍稍有点警觉。我深吸了一口气。

“听着，”我说道，“你好像根本不知道我现在的压力有多大。你以为我这样容易吗？我的时间已经所剩无几了，还没能抽出空来审查一下音乐厅，人们却反而希望我去做这些事情。你以为今晚对我来说很容易吗？你意识到今晚的重要性了吗？我的父母，他们今晚 would 来。对！他们终于要来了，就在今晚！也许，他们现在就在那儿了！瞧瞧发生的事儿。他们放我去准备了吗？没有！他们要我干这干那。这个讨厌的问答环节就是一宗。他们竟然还用上了电子记分牌。你能相信吗？我该怎么办？他们这么自以为是，所有这些人都是。过了这么多个晚上，独独在今晚，他们到底要我干什么？但是，其他所有地方也都一样。他们什么都指望我。他们今晚可能会指责我，我不会奇

怪。他们对我的回答不满意，就会唯我是问，那会置我于何地呢？我甚至可能撑不到钢琴演奏的环节。或者，他们开始指责我的时候，我父母可能就离开了……”

“听着，冷静点，”索菲说道，“没事的。他们绝不会指责你。你总说他们会指责你，但这些年来，到目前为止，没有人指责过你，一个都没有……”

“可是，难道你听不懂我在说什么吗？今晚非同寻常。我父母要来啊！如果他们今晚指责我的话，就会……就会……”

“他们不会指责你的，”索菲再次打断话头，“你每次都这样说。无论你在世界的哪个角落，你打电话来说的都是这同一番话。每逢你到了这一刻，就老是说，他们会指责我，会揭发我。而结果呢？几小时后你又打来，心平气和，自鸣得意。我问你怎么样了，而你听上去略显惊讶，嫌我竟旧话重提。‘噢，好得很。’你说。总是像那样，接着你会继续做其他事情，好像根本不值一提似的……”

“等一等。你什么意思？这是些什么电话？你知道我给你打这些电话有多麻烦吗？有时候，我都累疯了，但我仍旧设法在日程表上抽出点时间打电话，只是为了确认你一切都好。况且，多半是你，你把你的一肚子难题统统倒给了我。你暗示，我像你描述的那样说话，是什么意思？”

“这样深究下去毫无意义。我要说的是，今天晚上一切都会好好的……”

“你那样说倒是很轻巧。你就像其他所有人一样，就那么想当然。你以为我所要做的就是现身，然后其他一切就会自然而然地……”我突然记起古斯塔夫此刻正躺在那间没有家具的化妆室里的垫子上，愕然停住了话头。

“怎么了？”索菲问。

又过了一会儿，我稳定了一下自己的情绪，接着说：

“瞧，我本来想告诉你件事的。是个坏消息。我很抱歉。”

电话另一头，索菲沉默着。

“是你父亲，”我说道，“他病了。他现在在音乐厅。你必须马上赶来。”

我又停了一会，但索菲仍旧没有说话。

“他现在还挺得住，”又过了会儿，我继续说，“但你必须尽快赶来。鲍里斯也得一起来。其实，那正是我给你打电话的原因。我有辆车。现在我正在去接你们俩的路上。”

仿佛过了许久，电话那端依旧沉默。突然索菲开口道：

“昨晚的事我很对不起。我是说在卡文斯基画廊。”她顿了顿，我以为她又要沉默，但她接着说：“我很可悲。你不必装模作样。我知道我很可悲。我不知道怎么回事，只是不能控制那样的情况。我得要面对现实了。我永远不会是那种随你游遍一个城市又一个城市的人，陪你出席这所有的活动。我就是做不来。我很抱歉。”

“但那又有什么关系呢？”我轻柔地说道，“昨天画廊的事儿，我已经全忘了。谁在乎你给那样的人留下了什么印象？他们可差劲啦，每个都是。而你到目前为止是当晚在那儿的最美的女人。”

“我不敢相信，”她突然大笑道，“我现在是只老乌鸦了。”

“但你越老越美。”

“说什么呢！”她又笑了起来。“你怎么敢说出口啦！”

“对不起，”我也大笑起来，“我意思是你一点都没老。还没老到能让人看出来。”

“还没老到能让人看出来？！”

“我不知道……”我有些糊涂，又笑了起来。“也许你是看上去又憔悴又丑陋。我现在记不得了。”

索菲又一次爽朗大笑，接着又陷入沉默。再开口时，她的声音重新热切起来。“但是我真可悲。这样的话，我就不能跟你一起携手旅行了。”

“听着，我保证，以后我不会再游荡太久了。今晚，一切是否顺利，你不可能知晓。可能就是那样了。”

“还有，我很抱歉还没有找到合适的房子。我保证会尽快为我们找到。一个真正舒适的地方。”

我无法立刻回应她，于是两人都沉默了一会儿。接着我听见索菲说：

“你真的不介意吗？不介意我昨天那个样子？我总是那个样子？”

“一点都不介意。在那样的场合，你可以随意表现自己。做任何想做的事。不会有任何区别的。整个屋里所有的人加起来，都不及你啊。”

索菲一言未发。过了一会儿我接着说：

“我也有错。我的意思是，找房子这个事。让你一个人去找是不公平的。也许，从现在开始，假如今晚一切顺利，就能有所不同。我们可以一起去找。”

电话那端仍是沉默。一时间，我怀疑索菲是不是已经走开了。但接着她用飘渺朦胧的声音说道：

“我们一定会很快找到的，是不是？”

“那当然。我们一起去找。再加上鲍里斯。我们会找到的。”

“你会很快到的，对吗？来接我们去见爸爸？”

“是的，是的。我会尽快赶到。所以试着稳定一下情绪，你们两个都是。”

“是的，好吧。”她的声音听起来仍然很飘渺，一点不着急。“我马上叫醒鲍里斯。是的，好吧。”

我走出电话亭，竟真切地感觉天空已泛出黎明的迹象。我看到人群聚在布罗茨基周围，我走近了些，发现外科医生双膝跪地，正来回锯着。布罗茨基看上去正默默地接受这痛苦的折磨，但就在我刚走到车边时，他发出一声骇人的尖叫，响彻树林。

“现在我得走了。”我没有对着某个特别的人说，而且，他们的确好像没有听到，可是，当我关上车门发动引擎时，所有的脸庞都转向了我，表情惊恐。我还没关上车窗，杰弗里·桑德斯已经跑了过来。

“瞧瞧，”他生气地说，“瞧瞧。你现在还不能走。救出他后，我们得把他送到某个地方。我们需要你的车，你没看见吗？这是理所当然的常识啊！”

“听着，桑德斯，”我坚定地说，“我理解你们的难处。我很想给予更多的帮助，但我已经尽了全力。我还有自己的事情要操心。”

“你这人可真够典型的啊，老伙计，”他说，“真他妈典型。”

“哎，你一点也不懂。真的，桑德斯，你一点也不了解。我还担负了更多的责任，远远超出你的想象。听着，我只是没有按你的那种方式生活而已！”

我大声吼出了这最后一句话。我注意到，连外科医生都停下了手中的工作在望着我。我知道布罗茨基也暂时忘记了疼痛在盯着我。我感到很不自在，于是以比较缓和的口吻说道：

“对不起，但我有件非常紧急的事情要处理。等你们全弄完了，等布罗茨基的状况合适转往其他地方的时候，我肯定，救护车就会到了。总之，我很抱歉，但我没法再多等一分钟了。”

说罢，我立马摇上车窗，启动汽车，穿越树林重新上路了。

第三十一章

小路穿过树林，继续往前延伸。过了一会儿，树林终于渐渐稀疏，我瞥见远处闪烁着昏暗的晨光。接着，树林终于消失了，我进入了荒寥的城市街道。

在一处十字路口，我停下来等红灯。我静静地坐在那儿等着，视线内没有其他车辆。我环顾四周，慢慢地认出了自己前往的这块地方。我欣慰地发现，我现在离索菲的公寓很近了；没错，我敢肯定，正前方的这条街直达那儿。我还想起，公寓就在一家理发店的上面。红灯变绿后，我穿过了十字路口，沿着这条寂静的街道行驶，仔细辨认途经的一幢幢建筑。过了会，我看到前方远处有两个人影站在路边等候，便踩下了油门。

索菲和鲍里斯只穿着薄外套，在大清早的空气中好像已经冻僵了。他们跑向车，索菲俯下身，生气地叫喊道：

“你怎么花了这么长时间！是什么耽搁你了？花了这么长时间！”

还没等我回答，鲍里斯把一只手放在索菲的胳膊上，说道：

“没事的。我们会及时赶到的。没事的。”

我看了看小男孩。他拿了个大公文包，就像个医疗包，严肃中透出些许滑稽。然而他这样子却出奇的使人宽心，他好像已经成功地安抚住了母亲。

我本期望索菲坐在我身边，但她却和鲍里斯一起坐进了后座。

“真对不起，”我边说边发动车子，“这一带的路我不太熟。”

“现在谁跟他在一起？”索菲问道，声音又紧张起来。“有人在照顾他吗？”

“他和他的伙伴们在一起。他们都在陪着他。每个人。”

“看到了吧？”鲍里斯的声音再次轻轻地在身后响起。“我告诉过你的。别担心。一切都会好的。”

索菲重重地叹了口气，不过鲍里斯好像又一次成功地安抚了她。过了一会儿，我听到他说：

“他们在好好地照顾他。所以别担心。他们在好好地照顾他，是不是？”

这个问题显然是在问我的。我开始有些厌恶他自以为扮演的那个角色——而且我也不喜欢他们两个一起坐在后座，好像我是出租车司机似的——所以我决定不予回应。

接下来几分钟，我们一路沉默。又来到了十字路口，随后，我极力回忆回到林间小路上的路线。我们穿梭在空荡荡的城市街道上，突然索菲轻轻开口，声音勉强盖过引擎噪声：

“这是个警告。”

我不知道她是不是在跟我说话，正欲回头看她，这时，她继续轻柔地说道：

“鲍里斯，你在听吗？我们必须得面对了。这是个警告。你的外公，他老了。他得慢下来了。没必要试图否认。他得慢下来了。”

鲍里斯回答了些什么，但我听不到。

“我一直在考虑这个，已经有段时间了，”索菲继续说道，“我之前没和你说，是因为我知道你是多么……多么想念外公。但我考虑了一段时间。在这很久之前，早就有其他迹象了。现在发生了，我们不能再隐瞒了。他老了，必须得慢下来了。我已经有计划了，我之前从未告诉过你，但我早就在谋划了。我会跟霍夫曼先生谈谈，跟他好好谈谈你外公的将来。我都打听好了。我已经和帝国酒店的塞德梅尔先生说过了，也跟大使酒店的韦斯堡先生谈了谈。我之前从未和你说起，但我看得出你外公已经不像以前那样健壮了。所以我一直在搜寻。那是很平常的事情，某个人像你外公一样在一家酒店工作了这么长时间，到了某个阶段，安排他做一个稍稍不同的工作，很正常。在帝国酒店，有这么一个男人，比你外公还老得多，你一进大堂就可看到他。他以前是个大厨，当他老得再也干不动的时候，他们就做出了那样的决定。他穿着华丽的制服，坐在大堂一角，在摆着笔墨台的桃花心木大桌后面。塞德梅尔先生说这样效果奇好，说他价有所值。客人们，尤其是常客，走进大堂时如果没有看到那位老人坐在桌后，就会大发雷霆。这一安排让酒店独具风采。呃，我想我会和霍夫曼先生谈谈这事儿。你外公也可以干点类似的活呀。当然了，收入会减少，

但他可以继续使用那小屋，他是那么喜欢它，还有可以用餐。也许他们能够给他设一张桌子，就像帝国酒店那样。不过，你外公他可能想站着。穿着特别的制服，站在大堂的某个地方。我的意思并不是这一切应该立刻安排好，但要趁不算太晚的时候。他已经不再年轻了。这次就是一个警告。我们不能隐瞒了。装聋作哑没有任何好处。”

索菲停顿片刻。此时我已把车开回森林边缘。破晓的天空已抹上了紫色。

“别担心，”鲍里斯说，“外公会好好的。”

我能听到索菲长吁了口气。接着，她说：

“到时候，他还会有更多的时间，不会太忙，你还能跟他一起在老城区度过更多的午后时光。或者你可能想跟他去其他任何地方。但他需要一件像样的外套。这不，我就带来了。是时候给他了。我已经留得够久了。”

一阵沙沙声响起，我瞥了一眼镜子，发现索菲手上正拿着那个柔软的棕色包裹，里面装着她父亲的外套。此时，我不得不吸引她的注意力，问了问我们的路线，而她似乎第一次意识到了我的存在。她倾身向前，贴近我耳朵说道：

“对这种事情我早有心理准备。我很快就会和霍夫曼先生谈谈的。”

我低声说了些什么表示赞同，进入黑漆漆的森林时，我打开了前灯。

“别人，”索菲说道，“他们就能继续，好像世上还有大把时间似的。我可怎么也办不到。”

随后几分钟，她一直沉默无语，但我能感觉到她离我很近，而且不知何故，我发现自己竟期盼着能感受到她的手指随时抚摸我面庞的感觉。然后她轻轻地说：

“我还记得，母亲死后，生活变得多么孤寂啊。”

我又从镜中瞥了她一眼。她依旧身体前倾靠近我，但她的眼睛却盯视着车窗外不停后退的森林。

“别担心，”她柔柔地说，外套又弄出了一阵沙沙声。“我保证我们都会好的。我们三个都会好的。我保证。”

我把车停在了一个小停车场上，就在音乐厅的后面。对面就是一扇门，门上面的夜灯仍旧亮着。虽然那不是我之前进去的那扇，但我还是下了车，疾奔过去。我匆匆向后瞥了一眼，只见鲍里斯正扶他妈妈下车。他们轻快地向这栋建筑走去，他坚持用一只手护在她身后，另一只手抓着医生包，那包突兀地撞击着他的双腿。

穿过门，我们走进了一条长长的环形长廊，但几乎马上就得站立一边，给一辆两人推的餐车让路。温度好像比之前上升了好几度，此时有些闷得透不过气来，但接着我发现，附近有两位身着晚礼服的乐师在一道门处亲热地闲聊，便舒了口气，意识到我们和我之前离开古斯塔夫的地方已经不远了。

我带路沿走廊而行，走廊上挤满了越来越多的乐队成员，此时，他们大部分已经换上了演出服，但其间的气氛似乎仍然一派轻薄。较之前，他们越发隔着走廊大喊大笑，有一刻，我差点撞上了一个刚从化妆间出来的男人，那人摆弄着个大提琴，好像那是个吉他似的。接着有人说道：

“哦，是瑞德先生，是不是？我们之前见过的，您还记得我吗？”

四五个沿走廊另一头过来的男人停住脚步，朝我们观望。他们都身着盛装晚礼服，我立刻发现他们全都喝醉了。说话的男人正举着一束玫瑰花，朝我走过来，其间，他漫不经心地将那束花挥来挥去。

“前天晚上在电影院，”他说，“佩德森先生介绍我们认识的。您还好吧，先生？我朋友告诉我说，那天晚上我丢脸了，我该向您深深道歉。”

“噢，是的，”我认出了那人，说道，“您好吗？真高兴能再见到您。但不巧的是，我现在有非常紧急的……”

“我希望没有太无礼，”那醉酒的男人说道，直接走上前，脸几乎碰上了我。“我本意并无冒犯。”

听到这番话，他的同伴们纷纷窃笑起来。

“不，您一点没有冒犯，”我说道，“但现在，您必须得原谅我……”

“我们在寻找，”那醉酒男人说道，“那音乐大师呢。不，不，不是您，先生。我们自己的音乐大师。您看，我们给他送花了呢，以

表我们对他的无上敬意。您知道哪儿能找到他吗，先生？”

“很遗憾，我不知道。我……我不认为这时候，你们会在这大楼里找到布罗茨基先生。”

“不会？难道他还没到？”那醉酒男人转向他的同伴们。“我们的音乐大师还没到呢。你们怎么看？”接着他对我说：“我们要送他花呢。”他又挥了挥那束花，几片花瓣飘落到了地上。“这是市议会对他表达的钟爱和敬意。还有歉意。当然啰。我们误解他太久了。”他的同伴们又发出了阵阵窃笑声。“还没到呢。我们敬爱的音乐大师。好吧，那样的话，我们最好就和这些音乐家再多消磨会儿时间吧。或者，或许我们还是回酒吧去。我们干吗去呢，朋友们？”

我看得出，在旁观望的索菲和鲍里斯越来越不耐烦了。

“不好意思。”我低声说道，走开了。在我们身后，那帮人爆发出更多含糊的大笑声，但我决计不再回头。

终于，周围安静了下来，接着，我们看到前方走廊尽头，迎宾员们都一起挤在化妆室的外面。索菲加快脚步，却在离那儿还有一小段路时停了下来。而那些迎宾员，他们留意到了我们的靠近，迅速让出了一条通道，其中一位——他身材瘦长，留一副八字胡，我在匈牙利咖啡馆见过他——向我们走了过来。他一脸踌躇不定，起先只是对我说。

“他还挺得住，先生。他还挺得住。”然后又转向索菲，垂下眼，低声道：“他还挺得住，索菲小姐。”

索菲没有回答，只是越过迎宾员们盯着化妆间稍稍半开的门。突然，她开了口，好像是为自己的到来辩白：

“我给他带了些东西。这儿，”她举高那个包裹，“我给他带了这个。”

有人通知了化妆室里的人，另外两个原本在里面的迎宾员来到门口。索菲没动，一时间，没人知道接下来该说什么或者做什么。接着，鲍里斯大步走到我们面前，他把那黑包提到了齐胸高的半空中。

“请吧，先生们，”他说，“请让开。这边，请。”

他挥了挥手，示意迎宾员们从门边挪开。站在门口的那两个人仍然没动，一脸茫然。鲍里斯不耐烦地冲他们比划了下。“先生们！这边请。”

鲍里斯清理出了门前相当大的一块地方，回头看了看母亲。索菲往前走了几步，又停了下来。她双眼紧盯着化妆间的门——那两个迎宾员将其半开着——露出一副担忧的表情。还是没人知道接下来做什么，又是鲍里斯打破了沉默。

“妈妈，请在这儿等一下。”说着，他转身走进了化妆室，消失了。

索菲明显松了口气。她又走近几步，倾身向前，冷漠地看了看，看是否能瞧见化妆室的里面。她发现鲍里斯合上了门，便直起身子，站立等候，就像在排队等待巴士，包裹垂挂在她交错的双臂上。

过了几分钟，鲍里斯又出来了，手里仍旧举着医疗包。他小心地关上了身后的门。

“外公说，我们来了他很高兴。”他看着母亲，静静地说，“他非常高兴。”

他继续抬头直视母亲的脸色，我起先对他的这一举动甚感迷惑。接着，我意识到，他是在等待索菲给他句话，传回给古斯塔夫，果然，索菲想了想，说道：

“告诉他，我给他带了东西。一件礼物。我马上就进去给他。我……我只是在准备。”

鲍里斯再次进入化妆室消失了，索菲把大衣搁在一只胳膊上，开始抚平软软的褐色包裹上的褶皱。或许是发现了此举明显毫无意义，我突然想起了我安排的其他紧急事务，比如，我记起来了，我还得查看一下礼堂里的情况，而能办成此事的机会正分秒消逝。

“我马上就回来，”我对索菲说，“我得去处理点事情。”

她继续专注地弄着包裹，没有回答我。我正要大声地重复，接着，一想到这会引来人们对我过多的关注，我便改变了主意，悄悄地匆忙离开，去找霍夫曼了。

第三十二章

我在走廊上走了一会儿，突然看见前面一阵骚动。大约十二个人在互相推搡、喊叫、打着手势，我的第一个念头是，在这愈发紧张的气氛中，厨房员工之间爆发了一场争吵。但我发现整个人群正慢慢朝我靠拢过来，各式人等奇异地混杂其中。有些身着盛装晚礼服，而其他人——穿着厚风衣、雨衣，还有牛仔服——好像是直接从街上进来的。几位乐队成员也紧跟其后。

其中一个嗓门最大的人看上去颇为眼熟，我正要回想之前在哪儿见过他，突然，我听见他大叫道：

“布罗茨基先生，真的，我必须坚持！”

这时我认出，他就是之前在树林里遇见的那个灰发外科医生，而且我发现，没错，就在人群中央，那个正在慢慢前移、表情倔强坚决的人是布罗茨基，没错，是他。他显得十分苍白，脸上和脖子上的皮肤变成了白色，令人吃惊的是，竟都还皱了起来。

“但他说他没事的！你为何就不能让他决定？”一位身穿晚宴西装的中年男子回敬道。若干声音立即附和，却又遭到了齐声抗议回应。

这当儿，布罗茨基继续慢慢前行，无视周围的喧闹声。起先，他看起来好像被人群架在半空，但等他靠近了些，我才看到他拄着一根拐杖在独自行走。这拐杖有些特别，我不由得仔细一瞧，发现布罗茨基拄的其实是块烫衣板，垂直折起，夹在腋下。

我站在那儿看着这景象，人们一个接一个地留意到了我，都恭敬地沉默了下来，结果，人群走得越近，就越是安静。不过那个外科医生却继续喊道：

“布罗茨基先生！您的身体刚经历了一场严重的创伤。我真的必须坚持要您坐下休息！”

布罗茨基低头看着，专注地走着每一步，一时半会儿没看到我。接着，感觉到身边的人有了变化，他终于抬起了头。

“啊，瑞德，”他说，“你来啦。”

“布罗茨基先生。您现在感觉怎么样？”

“我很好。”他平静地说道。

此时人群稍稍站开了些，他更加自如地走完了与我之间剩下的那段距离。我夸奖他竟如此迅速地掌握了拄拐杖走路的本领时，他低头看了看烫衣板，仿佛这段时间来第一次想起了它的存在。

“带我来这儿的那人，”他说道，“碰巧有这个东西，在他货车的后备厢里。还不算太糟糕。很结实，我可以拄着它走得很好。唯一的麻烦，瑞德，就是有时候它会撑开。像这样。”

他摇了摇，果然，烫衣板滑落开来。他伸手一抓，没让微微张开的烫衣板撑得更大，但我看得出，即便如此小幅度的重复张合，也是件极其烦人的事情。

“我需要根细绳绑上这个，”布罗茨基有些难过地说，“或者类似那样的东西。但现在没时间了。”

我低头看了看他指的地方，不由得大吃一惊：他的左裤腿空荡荡的，在大腿下方处打成一个结。

“布罗茨基先生，”我迫使自己重新抬头，说道，“您现在的感觉一定不怎么好吧。您今晚还有力气指挥乐队吗？”

“是的，是的。我感觉好得很。我会指挥的，而且会……会非常棒的。一如我一直以来料想的那样。而且，到时她一定会看到，亲眼目睹，亲耳听到。这么些年了，我可不是个蠢蛋。这么些年来，我有这潜力，在等待时机。今晚她一定会看见我，瑞德。会非常棒的。”

“您指的是柯林斯小姐？可她会来吗？”

“她会来的，她会来。哦，是的，是的。他拼尽全力阻止她，让她害怕，但她会来的，哦，是的。我现在已经看透他的把戏了。瑞德，我去她公寓了，我走了很长一段路，很艰难，但最后这位先生路过，这位好人——”布罗茨基四下看了看人群，隐约朝某个人挥了挥手，“他路过，他有辆货车。我们去了她的公寓，我敲了敲门，敲了又敲。有个人，一个邻居，以为还像以前那样呢。您知道，我以前经常那样做，大晚上不停地敲门，他们最后叫来了警察。但我说，不，你这个笨蛋，我现在已经不再酗酒了。我出了车祸，现在清醒了，我看清了一切。我冲他，那个邻居，一个胖胖的老头，大喊道。我现在看清一切了，看穿了他一向的勾当，是的，我那样大喊了出来。接

着，她来到门前，她，她来了，她听到了我对她邻居所说的话，我透过玻璃看见了她，不知如何是好，于是我抛开了邻居，开始对她说话。她听着，但她起先并没有开门，然后我说，瞧，我出了车祸，接着，她就开门了。那个裁缝在哪儿？他去哪儿了？他应该准备好我的外套了。”布罗茨基四下看了看，一个声音从人群后面传来：

“他马上就来，布罗茨基先生。实际上，他已经来了。”

一个小个男人带着把卷尺走了出来，开始为布罗茨基量身。

“这是什么？这是什么？”布罗茨基不耐烦地低语道。接着，他对我说：“我没有西装。他们准备了一套，送到了我家，他们这么说的。谁知道呢？我出了车祸，我不知道现在西装在哪儿。他们得给我弄套新的。一件西装，一件礼服衬衫，我今晚想要最好的。她会懂得我什么意思的，那么些年了。”

“布罗茨基先生，”我说道，“您一直在跟我说起柯林斯小姐。我是不是可以这样理解：您终究还是成功地说服她今晚过来了？”

“哦，她会来的。她答应了。她不会第二次违约。她没来公墓。我等了又等，但她压根就没来。不过那不是她的错。是他，那个酒店经理，是他让她害怕了。但我告诉她，现在害怕太迟了。我们一生都在害怕，但现在，我们得勇敢起来。起先她不听。你做了什么？她不停地问。她不是你平常见到的那副样子，她快要哭了，双手捂着脸，差点哭了，甚至不在乎邻居们是否全能听见。死寂的夜里，她说着，里奥，里奥——是的，她现在那么叫我了——里奥，你的腿怎么了？有血。我说，没什么，没关系，出了场车祸，但幸好有位医生经过，现在没事了。我告诉她，更重要的是，你今晚得来。不要听信那个酒店混蛋，那个……那个跑腿的！时间已经所剩无几了。今晚她会看到我素来的心意。那么些年了，我可不是她所想的那个蠢蛋。她说她来不了，她还没准备好，此外，她说，所有那些伤口会再次裂开。我说别听那个跑腿的，那个酒店看门的，说那个太晚了。她指着我说，发生什么事了，你的腿，它在流血。我说，没关系，然后我冲她大喊道，没关系，难道你不明白吗，我得让你来！你得来！你得亲自来看看，你必须得来！然后，我看出她知道了我是多么的郑重其事。我看着她双眼，看到了那双眼睛背后的变化，恐惧消失了，某些东西被激活了，我知道，我终于赢了，而那个酒店厕所清洁工输了。我对她说，轻轻地对她说：‘那你会来喽？’她静静地点了点头，我知道我可以相信她。没有一丝怀疑，瑞德。她点了点头，我知道我能相信她，所以我转身离开了。我到了这儿，这位好人——他上哪儿了？

——他用货车带我到了这儿。不过我本来想走来的，现在我没什么事了。”

“但布罗茨基先生，”我说道，“您肯定您状况良好，可以上台吗？毕竟，您刚遭遇了一场严重的车祸……”

我本无此意，但重提这一话题又引发了新一轮的喊叫。外科医生挤到前面，抬高嗓门，盖住其他人声，挥拳击掌，以示强调：

“布罗茨基先生，我坚持！您必须休息！即便只有几分钟。”

“我很好，我很好，别管我！”布罗茨基大喊一声，走了起来。接着，他转身对着我（我刚才一直没动弹）大叫道：“要是你见到那个跑腿的，瑞德，告诉他我来了！告诉他。他以为我坚持不到现在，以为我是一坨狗屎！告诉他我来了。看他是不是中意了！”说着，他沿着走廊离开，争辩纷纷的人群尾随其后。

我继续朝相反的方向走，寻找着霍夫曼的踪影。现在已经没有几个乐队成员还站在走廊上，许多化妆室的门都关上了。我正想折返回去，更加仔细地窥视那些开着的门，这时，我突然瞥见了前方走廊上霍夫曼的身影。

他背对着我，低着头，慢慢踱着步子。虽然我离他很远，听不见他说的话，但显然他正在自顾自地排练着台词。我走近了些，他突然身体往前一倾。我以为他要摔倒了，但马上又意识到，他又在表演那奇怪的动作，我在布罗茨基化妆室的镜前见他表演过。他弯腰躬身，举起一只胳膊，胳膊肘向外突出，用拳头猛击前额。我走上前，站在他身后，咳嗽了一声。霍夫曼猛地一惊，直起身，转向了我。

“啊，瑞德先生。请别担心。我肯定布罗茨基先生随时会来的。”

“没错，霍夫曼先生。实际上，假如您刚刚是在排练向观众致歉的演说，告诉布罗茨基先生不能现身的话，我高兴地通知您不需要了。布罗茨基先生现在已经来了。”我指了指走廊那头。“他刚刚到。”

霍夫曼看上去大吃一惊，一时间完全僵住了。接着他镇静下来，说道：

“啊。好啊。真让人松了口气啊。但是，当然，我一直……一直满怀信心。”他大笑着，迅速地扫视了一下走廊那头，仿佛希望瞥见

布罗茨基。接着，他又笑了笑，说：“呃，我最好去看看他。”

“霍夫曼先生，在那之前，您若能告知我父母最新的消息，我将感激不尽。我相信他们现在已经安全抵达大楼了吧？您那个用马车送他们的主意——我相信，刚才我驾车经过大楼前面时已经听到声音了——我相信它已经达到您所希望的效果了吧？”

“您的父母？”霍夫曼再次显出迷惑的神情。接着，他将一只手放在我的肩膀上，说：“啊，是的。您的父母。让我想想。”

“霍夫曼先生，我一直拜托您和您的同事照顾好我的父母。他们两位身体都不太好……”

“当然，当然。请不必担心。只是，要顾全这么多事情，而布罗茨基先生又有些迟了，尽管您告诉我他已经来了……哈哈……”他声音越来越小，再次向走廊那头瞥了一眼。我冷冰冰地问道：

“霍夫曼先生，我父母此刻身在何处？您知道吗？”

“啊。目前这一刻，老实说，我确实不知……但我向您保证，他们由最能干的人照顾着呢。当然，我非常希望能亲自监管今晚活动的方方面面，但您得理解……哈哈。斯达特曼小姐，她应该确切地知道您父母在哪儿。我指派她密切留意您父母的情况。这倒并不是说他们与我们在一起会有照顾不周之虞。恰恰相反，我倒是得要求斯达特曼小姐小心留意，不要因为各方热情款待而累坏了他们……”

“霍夫曼先生，我理解您不知道这一刻他们在哪儿。那么，斯达特曼小姐在哪儿？”

“哦，我肯定她在这里的什么地方。瑞德先生，我们一起走一走，去看看布罗茨基先生怎么样了。我敢肯定，您很快会在路上遇见斯达特曼小姐的。她甚至可能已经在办公室里了。不管怎样，先生，”他突然摆出了个更威严的姿态，“我们站在这儿也是无济于事。”

我们一起向走廊那头走去。这当儿，霍夫曼似乎完全恢复了镇静，他微笑着说：

“现在我们可以肯定一切都将非常顺利。先生，您好像很清楚自己在做什么。布罗茨基先生也来了，现在一切都确定了。一切都会按计划进行。一个美好的夜晚将展现在我们大家面前。”

接着，他变换了一下脚步，我发现他正盯着我们前方的什么东西。顺着他的目光，我看到斯蒂芬站在走廊中间，一脸担忧。年轻人看到了我们，快速向我们走来。

“晚上好，瑞德先生。”说完，他压低声音对霍夫曼说道：“父亲，或许我们可以谈谈。”

“我们很忙，斯蒂芬。布罗茨基先生刚到。”

“是的，我听说了。但您看，父亲，是跟母亲有关的。”

“啊。你母亲。”

“她还在门厅，而我再过十五分钟就该上场了。我刚刚看到她，她正在门厅徘徊呢，我告诉她我很快就上场了，她却说：‘呃，亲爱的，我得处理些事情。我会尽力赶去的，至少赶上表演结尾，但我得先处理些事情。’她是那么说的，可她看起来没那么忙啊。真的，但是，时间一到，您和母亲就该双双落座了啊。我还有不到十五分钟就上场了。”

“是的，是的，我一会儿就到。而你母亲，我肯定，不管她在做什么，她都会尽快干完的。为什么这么担忧呢？回你的化妆室准备一下吧。”

“可母亲在门厅要干什么啊？她只是站在那儿，谁碰巧经过就跟谁聊天。很快，就会只剩她一人在那儿了。人们现在都就座了。”

“我想，她只是想在坐下来看晚会前活动活动，伸伸腿脚吧。现在，斯蒂芬，冷静下来。你得给整个晚会开个好头。我们全都指望你了。”

年轻人想了想，接着好像突然记起了我。

“您真是太好了，瑞德先生，”他笑道，“您的鼓励无比宝贵。”

“您的鼓励？”霍夫曼吃惊地看着我。

“哦，是的，”斯蒂芬说道，“瑞德先生非常慷慨。他抽时间听我练琴，还给了我多年来最大的鼓励。”

霍夫曼来回打量着我们，一丝惊疑的微笑挂在唇间。然后，他对我说：

“您花时间听斯蒂芬弹琴了？听他？”

“我确实听了。我之前曾经想告诉您，霍夫曼先生。您的儿子相当有天赋，而且，不管今晚发生其他什么事，我相信他的表演肯定会引起轰动。”

“真的，您真的这么认为？但事实是，先生，斯蒂芬呢，他……他……”霍夫曼好像变得很困惑，他轻笑一声，拍了拍他儿子的后背。“那么，斯蒂芬，你可能会一鸣惊人吧。”

“我希望如此，父亲。但母亲还在门厅。或许她在等您呐。我是说，那总是很尴尬的，一个女人在这样的场合一人独坐。或许就是那样的吧。只要您一进去坐定了，她可能就会来与您会合的。只是我现在马上就要上场了。”

“好的，斯蒂芬，我会处理的。别担心。现在你回化妆室，去准备一下。我和瑞德先生还有些事情要先处理下。”

斯蒂芬看起来仍旧不甚开心，我们离开了他，继续前行。

“我该提醒您，霍夫曼先生，”我们又沿着走廊走了一会儿，我说道，“您可能会发现，布罗茨基先生的态度变得带些敌意，对……呃，对您。”

“对我？”霍夫曼一脸惊讶。

“就是说，我刚刚看见他的时候，他正在表达对您的某种恼怒之情呢。他好像有些牢骚。我想我应该让您知道。”

霍夫曼低声说了些什么，我听不清。接着，我们继续沿着走廊慢慢转了个弯，布罗茨基的化妆室——一小群人正在门外徘徊——出现在面前。酒店经理放慢脚步，然后停了下来。

“瑞德先生，我一直在想刚才斯蒂芬说的那番话。转念一想，我觉得最好去看看我妻子。确定她没事儿。毕竟，这样一个夜晚会让人很紧张，您明白吧。”

“当然。”

“那么请您原谅。我想，先生，不知可否请您去看看布罗茨基先生是否一切安好。我自己呢，是的，真的，”他看了看手表，“就座时间到了。斯蒂芬说得很对。”

霍夫曼轻笑一声，匆匆向我们来时的方向走去了。

我等他走出视线之外，然后朝布罗茨基门口周围的人群走去。一些人好像只是好奇地站在那儿，而另一些则压低声音在热切争论。灰发外科医生在房门旁徘徊，向一个乐队成员强调着什么，恼怒地冲化妆室里面反复挥手。我吃惊地发现，那扇门是大开着的，我靠近时，之前见到的那个小个子裁缝探出头来，喊道：“布罗茨基先生想要一把剪刀。一把大剪刀！”一个人急匆匆地离开，裁缝又消失在里面。我挤过人群，看向屋内。

布罗茨基背对着门口坐着，正对着镜子审视自己。他穿着一件小礼服，裁缝正在拉扯着礼服的两个肩膀。他还穿了件礼服衬衫，但还没系领结。

“啊，瑞德，”他看到了我镜中的身影，说，“进来，进来。您要知道，我很久没有穿这样的衣服了。”

他的口气听上去比我刚才遇见他时镇静多了，这时我想起了他在公墓里对哀悼者表现出威严气势的那一刻。

“好了，布罗茨基先生，”裁缝说道，站直身子，他们两人对着镜子端详了礼服一会儿。随后，布罗茨基摇了摇头。

“不，不，还得再紧些。”他说道，“这儿，还有这儿。布料太多了。”

“稍等片刻即可，布罗茨基先生。”裁缝匆匆脱下礼服，经过我身旁时，飞快地鞠了一躬，消失在门外。

布罗茨基继续看着镜中的自己，若有所思地摸着自己的翼形衣领。接着，他拿起一把梳子，梳了梳头发——我发现他的头发已抹上了光泽明亮的定型水。

“您现在感觉如何？”我走近了些，问道。

“很好。”他慢腾腾地说道，继续打理着头发。“我现在感觉很好。”

“您的腿呢？您肯定您能带着这么严重的伤表演吗？”

“我的腿，没事儿。”他放下梳子，打量了一下效果。“不像看起来的那么糟。现在我好得很。”

布罗茨基说这话的时候，我从镜子里看到外科医生——刚才他一直在房门旁——迈步走进房间，一副忍无可忍的表情。但还没等后者开口，布罗茨基就有些狂怒地对着镜子喊道：

“我现在好得很！伤口不算什么！”

外科医生退回到门口，却继续愤怒地盯着布罗茨基的后背。

“但是布罗茨基先生，”我低声说道，“您失去了一条腿。那可绝不是件小事啊。”

“我是失去了一条腿，没错。”布罗茨基又打理起头发来，“但那是多年前的事了，瑞德。许多年前的事了。或许那时我还是个孩子。那么久远的事，我都不太记得了。那个笨蛋医生，他没有发现。我是被卷进了自行车里，但那只是条假腿，卷进去的是那条假腿。那个笨蛋甚至没发现。还称自己是个外科医生！我这一生就是那感觉，瑞德，一直没有那条腿。距现在多久了？等你到这把年纪，就开始忘记了。你甚至根本不会介意了。一个伤口，就变得像个老朋友一样。当然，它时不时会烦你，但我已经与它生活了这么久。一定是在我还是个孩子的时候发生的。可能是一起铁路事故吧。在乌克兰的某个地方。或许是大雪天。谁知道呢？现在没关系了。感觉就像我这一生都是如此。就一条腿。不算太坏。还过得去。那个笨蛋医生，他锯掉了我的木腿。是的，有血，它还在流血，我需要剪刀，瑞德。我已经派人去拿了。不，不，不是为了伤口。裤腿，我的意思是这只裤腿。我怎么能指挥时让这只裤腿像这样空荡荡地甩来甩去呢？但是那个笨蛋医生，那个医院实习生，他锯掉了木腿，那我还能怎么办呢？我得——”他用手指模仿剪刀状，比划着，在膝盖正上方的布料处横剪一刀，“我得做点什么。使它尽量漂亮些。那个笨蛋，他不只毁了我的木腿，还擦伤了我的残肢。我有好多年不曾这样流血了。真是笨蛋，表情还那么严肃。他以为自己是个非常重要的人呢，锯掉了我的木腿，伤到了我的残肢尾端。难怪一直流血。到处都是血。但我多年前就没这条腿了。很久以前了，那就是我现在的感觉。我用了一生的时间去适应它。但现在，那个笨蛋用了锯子，害得它又流血了。”他低头看了看，用鞋子把什么东西抹到了地板上。“我派人去拿剪刀了。我得表现出最佳状态，瑞德。我不是个贪慕虚荣的人。我这样做不是因为虚荣。但一个人在这种时候必须看起来体面才行。她今晚会看到我，在我们的余生，她将会牢记今晚。还有这个乐队，是个好乐队。来，我给你看看。”他伸手向前，对着灯光，举起一根指挥棒。“是根好指挥棒。有种特别的感觉，你能分辨的。它使得一切与众不同，你知道的。对我来说，对我来说，时机一直很重要。时机必须恰到好处。”他盯着指挥棒。“过了这么久，但我不怕。我今晚展示给他们看的。我绝不妥协。我会一直拿着它的。像你说的，瑞

德。马克斯·萨特勒。但那个家伙，他真是个白痴！那个笨蛋！那条医院的看门狗！”

这最后几句话，布罗茨基是略带享受地冲着镜子大喊出来的，我看到那位外科医生——刚才他一直从门外观望着，满脸震惊的表情——窘迫地退出了人们的视线。

外科医生终于走了，布罗茨基第一次表现出了紧张。他闭上双眼，斜倚在椅子一侧，喘着粗气。可是，过了一会儿，一个男人冲进房间，递上一把剪刀。

“啊，终于拿来了。”布罗茨基接过剪刀。随后，等那人一走，他便把剪刀放在镜子前的架子上，想站起来。他扶着椅子背，想把自己撑起来，然后伸出一只手，去够镜子旁靠墙放置的烫衣板。我上前一步想去帮他，但他却在无人辅助下惊人灵敏地够到了烫衣板，往胳膊下面一夹。

“您看，”他说道，忧伤地低头看着空荡荡的裤腿。“我得在这儿动些手脚。”

“想让我叫回裁缝吗？”

“不，不。那家伙，他可不知道该怎么做。我自己来。”

布罗茨基继续低头看着空荡荡的裤腿。我注视着他，突然想起还有其他各种急事等待我去处理，尤其是我得回到索菲和鲍里斯那里，探询古斯塔夫的最新情况。甚至还有这种可能：关于古斯塔夫的某个关键决定，还要拖到等我回去了才能做出。我咳嗽了一声，说道：

“如果您不介意，布罗茨基先生，我得离开了。”

布罗茨基仍旧低头看着裤腿。“今晚一定是个美妙的夜晚，瑞德。”他轻声说道，“她会看到的。她最后会看到的。”

第三十三章

古斯塔夫所在的化妆室外面，景象与我离开之时并无太大变化。迎宾员们或许移步到了离门口更远的地方，这会儿聚在走廊的另一头围成了一圈，小声开着会。然而，索菲还站在差不多我之前看到的位置，盯着微微开着的大门，包裹折合着挂在胳膊上。其中一个迎宾员发现我靠近，便向我走过来，压低声音道：

“他还坚持得住，先生。不过约瑟夫已经去请医生了。我们决定不能再耽搁了。”

我点了点头，接着向索菲投去一瞥，轻声问道：“她还没进去？”

“还没有，先生。但我肯定索菲小姐很快就会进去的。”

我们两个人注视了她一会儿。

“那鲍里斯呢？”我问道。

“哦，他已经进去过好几次了，先生。”

“好几次了？”

“哦，没错。刚刚他又进去了。”

我又点了点头，随后走向索菲。她没发觉我回来了，我轻碰了下她的肩膀，她吓了一跳。随即她大笑道：

“他在里面呢。爸爸。”

“嗯。”

她稍稍调整了一下姿势，倾身一侧，想透过门口看得更清楚些。

“你不打算给他外套了吗？”我问道。

索菲低头看了看外套，说道：“哦，是的。对，没错。我正打算给他呢……”她的声音逐渐小了下去，身子又偏向了一侧。随后，她喊道：

“鲍里斯？鲍里斯！你出来一下。”

过了一会儿，鲍里斯走了出来，面色镇定，小心地关上了身后的门。

“怎么样？”索菲询问道。

鲍里斯匆匆瞥了我一眼，然后转向他的母亲，说道：

“外公说他觉得很抱歉。他说要转告他很抱歉。”

“就这些？他总共就说了这些？”

有那么一会儿，小男孩的脸上掠过了一丝犹豫。随后他安慰地说道：“我再进去。他还会再说些什么的。”

“可是他刚刚跟你说的就只有这些？就只是说他很抱歉？”

“别担心，我会再进去。”

“等一下。”索菲开始撕下大衣外面的包装。“把这个拿去给你外公。给他，看看大小是不是合适。告诉他，我随时可以改的。”

她任由撕下的包装落在地上，高举一件深褐色的外套。鲍里斯毫无怨言地接了过去，重新回到了化妆间。也许是因为这件外套的缘故——它被笨重地放置在小男孩的臂弯中——鲍里斯只半合上了身后的门，低语声随即传到了走廊里。索菲没有挪动地方，但我看得出她正紧张地捕捉一言半语。我们身后，迎宾员们依旧恭敬地与我们保持一段距离，但此刻他们也分明在焦急地注视着房门。

过了好一会儿，鲍里斯又一次走了出来。

“外公说谢谢你，”他对索菲说道，“他现在很开心。他说他非常高兴。”

“他就说了这些？”

“他说他很开心。他以前并不舒服，但现在有了大衣，他说那对他意义非凡。”鲍里斯朝身后望了一眼，然后转回头看着他母亲。

“他说收到这件大衣他非常开心。”

“他就说了这些？没有……没有说是不是合身？没有说他是不是喜欢那颜色？”

由于我此时只顾着盯着索菲看，并没有清楚地看到鲍里斯接下来做了什么。我的感觉是，他没做什么异常的举动，只是停顿了一会儿，思索着如何回答母亲的询问，但索菲突然喊道：

“你为什么那么做？”

小男孩一脸困惑地盯着他母亲。

“你为什么那么做？你知道我什么意思。像这样！就像这样！”她抓住鲍里斯的肩膀，开始猛摇起来。“就像他外公！”她转向我，说道，“他在模仿！”接着，她又朝着正在一旁警觉观望的迎宾员们喊道：“他外公！就是从他身上遗传的。你们看到他肩膀那样了吗？那么自以为是，那么自鸣得意。你们都看见了吧？真像他的外公啊！”她怒视着鲍里斯，继续猛烈地摇晃着。“哦，所以，你就以为你很了不起了，是不是？是不是？”

鲍里斯挣脱开来，踉跄着向后退了几步。

“你看没看见？”索菲问我道，“他总是那样。就像他外公。”

鲍里斯又走远几步，随后蹲下身，从地上捡起那个他随身携带的黑色医疗包，把它抱起护在胸前。我以为他要痛哭流涕了，然而最后他还是控制住了自己。

“别担心……”他开口道，然后又停了下来，把胸前的黑包略微举高了一些。“不用担心。我会……我会……”他放弃了，环顾四周。隔壁房间的门离他很近，小男孩快速转身，钻进去，消失了，砰的一声关上了身后的门。

“你疯了么？”我对索菲说道，“他已经够心烦的了。”

索菲继续沉默了一会儿，随后叹了口气，走到了鲍里斯消失的那扇门前。她敲了敲门，走了进去。

我听到鲍里斯说了些什么，虽然索菲没有关门，但我还是听不清他的话。

“对不起，”我听到索菲说，“我不是有意的。”

鲍里斯又说了些什么，我听不清。

“不，不，没关系，”索菲轻声说，“你做得很好了。”片刻停顿后，她又继续说道：“我现在得去跟你外公谈谈。我得走了。”

鲍里斯又说了些什么。

“是的，好吧，”索菲说，“我会让他进来和你一起等着。”

这次，小男孩说了很长一段话。

“不，他不会的。”没过一会儿，索菲就打断了他的话。“他会对你很好的。不，我保证。他一定会的。我会让他进来。但我现在得去跟你外公谈谈了。在医生来之前。”

索菲走出屋子，关上了门。接着，她走近我，非常小声地说道：

“请进去跟他一起等等吧。他很烦乱。我得去跟爸爸谈谈。”之后，还没等我行动，她就把手放在我的胳膊上，说道：“请再对他和蔼起来吧。就像以前那样。他是多么怀念从前啊。”

“我很抱歉，我不知道你指的是什么。假如他很烦乱的话，那是因为你……”

“求求你了，”索菲说道，“也许都是因为我的错，才发生了这一切，但请到此为止吧，求你进去陪他坐坐吧。”

“我当然会进去陪他，”我冷冷地说道，“有何不可呢？你最好还是去你父亲那儿吧。刚才的话他可能全都听到了。”

我走进鲍里斯隐入的那个房间，惊讶地发现它跟我在走廊里看到的其他化妆室都不一样。事实上，它更像一间教室，里面整齐地摆放着一排排小桌椅，前边还有一块大黑板。这里很宽敞，灯光昏暗，到处都是厚重的黑影。鲍里斯坐在靠近后面的一张桌子旁，我进去的时候，他匆匆抬眼瞥了我一下。我一言未发，环视四周。

黑板上有一团潦草的字迹，我隐约觉得是鲍里斯干的。随后，我继续在空荡荡的桌旁走动，打量着钉在墙上的表格和地图，这时男孩重重地叹了一口气。我瞥了他一眼，发现他把那个黑包放在了膝盖上，正费力地从里面掏什么东西。最终，他拿出了一本巨大的书，放在面前的桌子上。

我转过身，继续在屋子里转悠。当我再次看他的时候，他正在飞快地浏览书页，脸上露出崇敬的神情。我知道他又在看那本杂务手册了。我一点也不觉恼怒，回头看着一张警告溶剂滥用危害的海报。接着，鲍里斯在我身后说道：

“我真的很喜欢这本书。里面什么都有。”

他说这些话时仿佛是在自言自语，但此时我已走到离他坐着的位置很远的地方，他就不得不抬高了嗓门，显得挺不自然。我不打算回答他，继续在屋子里面转悠着。

过了一会儿，鲍里斯再次重重地叹了口气。

“妈妈有时候总是这么焦虑。”他说道。

我还是觉得他对我讲话的口气不甚得体，所以我没回答。况且，当我最终转向他的时候，他假装自己正在专心看书。我又走进屋子的另一个角落，发现墙上钉着一大张纸，上面写着“失物招领”。上边有一长串用各种笔迹书写的条目，一栏日期，一栏丢失物品，一栏物主姓名。不知何故，我发现这单子非常有趣，又继续细细地研究了一会儿。近顶端的条目好像是匆忙中写上去的——一支钢笔，一枚棋子，一个钱包。接着，从下半张开始，条目开始越来越滑稽了。有人号称自己丢了“三百万美元”。还有一个条目竟然是“成吉思汗”丢了“亚洲大陆”。

“我真的很喜欢这本书，”鲍里斯在我身后说道，“它告诉你了所有事情。”

突然间，我一下子失去了耐心，快步走向他，一掌重重地拍在他面前的桌子上。

“瞧，你为什么老是读这个？”我质问道，“你母亲怎么跟你说的？她告诉你这是个很棒的礼物，我猜。其实，不是。她是那样告诉你的？说这是个极棒的礼物？说我精心为你选的？看看吧！看看吧！”我试图把被他紧紧抓住的那本书扯过来，但他死拽着，两只胳膊放在上面护着。“这不过是一本没用的、别人想扔掉的手册。你以为这样的书，这种东西，能教你所有的事？”

我仍试图把书从他身下拉出来，但鲍里斯倾身趴到桌子上，用身体保护着那本书。同时，他一直保持着令人不安的沉默。我又去扯，决心要把那东西从他身边永远地拿走。

“听着，这是个没用的礼物。一丁点儿用都没有。没有思想，没有感情，里面什么都没有。事后回想，就是每页上面写满了字，而你却以为这是我给你的绝棒礼物！给我，给我！”

也许是害怕书会被撕破，鲍里斯突然抬起双臂，我发现自己提着一页封皮，把这本书拎了起来。他还是没吭声，我觉得我的突然爆发有些愚蠢。我看了看那本在我手中悬空垂着的书，接着把它扔进了房间远处的一角。书碰到一张桌子上，落在了暗影中。我马上觉得平静了很多，深吸了口气。接着，我再看他的时候，鲍里斯僵硬地坐着，目光盯着书掉落的地方。他随后站起身，急着想找回它。可他还没走到一半，索菲急切的喊声便从走廊里面传来：

“鲍里斯，过来一下。就来一会儿。”

鲍里斯犹豫了一阵，又看了一眼书掉落的地方，接着出了房间。

“鲍里斯，”我听见索菲在外面说道，“去问问外公他现在感觉怎么样。再问问他外套需不需要改动。底下的扣子可能有问题。如果他经常站在桥上，风一吹它就会飘来飘去。去问一下他，但别待在里面谈太久。就问问他，然后直接出来。”

我回到走廊时，鲍里斯已消失在古斯塔夫的化妆室里，而映入我眼帘的是我所熟悉的景象：索菲紧张地站在那儿，眼睛盯着门；后面不远处，迎宾员们一脸焦虑地观望着。然而，索菲的脸上掠过一丝绝望，这表情是我之前没有注意到的。我心里突然对她涌起一阵怜惜之情。我走向她，用一只胳膊挽着她的肩膀。

“这对我们所有人来说都是个艰难的时刻，”我轻柔地说道，“非常艰难的时刻。”

我将她拉近，但她突然甩开我，继续盯着门口。她的反抗让我大吃一惊，我生气地对她说：

“瞧，这种时候我们所有人都应该互相支持。”

索菲没有回答，这时鲍里斯再次走出了化妆室。

“外公说，外套正合他意，而且因为是妈妈送给他的，所以他尤其喜欢。”

索菲恼怒地喊了一声：“但他到底需不需要我把衣服改一下？他为什么就是不告诉我？医生马上就来了。”

“他说……他说他很喜欢这件外套。非常喜欢。”

“问问他底下的扣子。如果他还继续要迎风站在桥上，就得适当地往上挪挪。”

鲍里斯想了想，点了点头，又回到了化妆室里。

“你瞧，”我对索菲说道，“你好像不明白我现在压力有多大。你没意识到我很快就该上台了吗？我得回答事关这个社会未来走向的复杂问题。还会有块电子记分板。你知道这意味着什么吗？你关心的就只有那些扣子等等之类的事。你就没意识到我现在承受的压力吗？”

索菲转向我，一脸沮丧，似乎想要跟我说些什么，但就在这时候鲍里斯又出现了。这次，鲍里斯表情凝重地看着他妈妈的脸，却什么也没说。

“怎么样，他说什么了？”索菲问道。

“他说他很喜欢这件外套。他说，那让他想起了妈妈您小时候穿的那件外套。差不多的颜色。他说那上面曾有一头熊的图案。妈妈您过去穿过的外套。”

“我到底需不需要改衣服？！他为什么不直接回答呢？医生马上就要到了！”

“你好像不明白，”我打断了她的话，“外面那些人都指望着我呢。会有块记分板，所有那些东西。他们想让我在答完每个问题之后就到舞台边鞠躬。我的压力很大啊！你好像不……”

我停了下来，意识到古斯塔夫正在喊着什么。鲍里斯立即转身进了化妆室，我和索菲站在那里等他出来，感觉时间过了好久。终于，小男孩又走了出来，却没有看我们两人，而是大步走了过去，停在了迎宾员们的面前。

“先生们，请。”他做了个引领的动作。“外公请你们大家都进去。他现在想跟大家在一起。”

鲍里斯开始在前面带路，迎宾员们只犹豫了片刻，随后便紧紧跟上。他们列队走过我们面前，其中有几位还向索菲咕哝着说了一两句尴尬的话。

最后一位迎宾员走进去后，我向房间里窥探，却仍然看不到古斯塔夫，因为迎宾员们都挤在了门口。房中立刻传出三四个人的讲话声，我正想靠近点，这时索菲突然从我身边擦过，进了化妆室。屋内一阵骚动，讲话声戛然而止。

我大步走到门口。迎宾员们已让出一条过道让索菲通过，这下我看清楚了，古斯塔夫躺在垫子上，那件褐色外套盖住他的上半身，外套下边是那条灰色毛毯，我对那条毛毯还有印象。没有枕头，很明显，他连抬起头的力气都没有了，但此时，他看着他的女儿，眼角挂着一丝轻柔的微笑。

索菲停在了距古斯塔夫所躺之处两三步远的地方。她背对着我，所以我无法看到她的表情，但她好像在低头望着他。一阵沉默之后，

索菲说道：

“您还记得您来学校的那天吗？您给我送泳具的那次？我落在家里了，一整个早上都很焦急，想着我该怎么办。后来，您拿着那个蓝色的运动包来了，有细绳背带的那个。您直接进了教室。您还记得么，爸爸？”

“有了这件外套，我就会很暖和了，”古斯塔夫说道，“这正是我一直以来想要的。”

“当时，您只有半个小时的休息时间，所以您从酒店一路跑来。您带着那个蓝色运动包走进了教室。”

“我一直为你骄傲。”

“那天早上，我一直都在担心，不知道自己该怎么办。”

“这件外套很不错。瞧这衣领。再看看这一圈，全是真皮的呢。”

“抱歉，”我身边的一个声音说，我转身发现一个戴着眼镜、背了个医用包的年轻人正想挤过去，紧随其后的是另一个迎宾员，我在匈牙利咖啡厅见过他。他们两人进到房间，那位年轻医生急忙来到古斯塔夫旁边跪了下来，开始检查。

索菲默默地盯着医生。随后，好像觉得现在该轮到其他人让父亲留心了，她向后退了几步。鲍里斯走到她身边，一时间，他们两人几乎紧贴着对方站立着，但索菲似乎没有注意到小男孩，而是继续盯视着医生弓起的背部。

就在这时，我突然又想起，演出之前我还有许多事情要做。我又想到，既然医生已经到了，这正是我溜走的大好时机。我悄悄地退回到走廊里，正打算离开去找霍夫曼，这时听到身后有动静，感觉有人粗暴地抓住了我的胳膊。

“你要去哪儿？”索菲气愤地小声问道。

“对不起，但你显然不明白。我现在还有很多事情要做。会有电子记分板什么的。还有非常多的事情指望着我呢。”我一边说，一边试图将胳膊从她紧握的手中挣脱出来。

“那鲍里斯呢？他需要你在这儿。我们俩都需要你。”

“你听着，你显然不懂！我的父母，你不懂么？我的父母随时会到！我还有一大堆事情要做！你不知道，你显然根本就不懂！”我终于挣脱了她。“听着，我会回来的，”我匆匆离开，一边还回过头安慰她，“我会尽快赶回来的。”

第三十四章

我沿着走廊继续疾步而行，突然发觉有几个人靠着墙站成一排。一眼望过去，我看到他们都穿着厨房工装，在等待轮到自己爬进一个黑色小壁橱。我心下越发奇怪，于是放慢脚步，最后转身朝他们走了过去。

我这会儿看清了，那壁橱又高又窄，像个杂物橱，钉在墙上，离地面约有半米。我碎步上前，从排队人的举止判断，那壁橱里应该有个小便器，或者是一个喷泉式饮水器。但等我靠近才看到，一个男人站在台阶顶端，弯腰向前，屁股撅得老高，好像在壁橱里翻找什么。与此同时，排队的人打着手势，不耐烦地叫喊着，让他快点结束换下一个。终于，那男人从壁橱里出来，小心地看着身后最高一级台阶，这时，队伍中有人发出一声惊呼，朝我指了指。所有人扭过头来，大家纷纷给我让路，队伍自动解散了。那个刚从壁橱中出来的人迅速下来，向我鞠了个躬，然后用手指向壁橱，做了个“请”的动作。

“谢谢，”我说，“但是好像别人都在排队等候啊。”

一阵抗议声骤然响起，几只手几乎将我推上了短短的台阶。

窄窄的壁橱门已自动关上，我推开它——它朝里面打开，而我站在最高一级台阶上，险些因此失去平衡——惊奇地发现，我正站在一处制高点上俯视礼堂。壁橱的整个后部都没有了，我觉得，假若我足够大胆，只要稍稍探出身子伸长手臂，便可碰到音乐厅的天花板。那景象当然壮观，但这整个布置让我觉得既愚蠢又危险。那壁橱居然是向前倾斜的，定然会怂恿粗心的观众向其边缘处翘起而去。同时，在齐腰高度，只系有一根细绳，防止观者一头栽到观众席中。我看不出这壁橱的存在有何显见的理由，除非它或许是某个系统的一部分，可供大厅上空悬挂像旗子之类的东西。

我小心地移动着双脚，直到完全站在了壁橱里，然后紧紧抓着门框，向下望去。

大概四分之三的坐席都已经满了，但是，灯光依旧明亮，人们在聊着天或者相互打着招呼。一些人冲着远排的人挥手，另一些人则挤在过道上谈笑。这当儿，更多的人从两扇主大门入内。乐池里一排排闪亮的乐谱架泛着光芒，舞台上的帷幕已经拉开，一架开着琴盖的三

角钢琴孤零零地在台上等候着。当我看着眼皮底下的这件乐器时——我马上就要用它来完成这场最为重要的演奏——我突然意识到，这可能就是我对演出条件所能做的最近距离的检查了，一想到这个，我对自己到这座城市以来的整个时间安排再次感到失望。

接着，我看到斯蒂芬·霍夫曼从侧厢走上了舞台。没有报幕，甚至连灯光都没有丝毫暗下来。更有甚者，斯蒂芬的举止毫无喜庆之感。他神情专注，快速走到钢琴边，连眼都没朝观众瞥一下。所以，也难怪，音乐厅里大部分人只是稍稍好奇了一下，便继续谈天说地了。当然，他一弹奏起《玻璃激情》那激情四溢的开篇时，人们有些许的惊讶，但即便那样，大部分人马上便断定这位年轻人只是在试琴或是在调试扩音系统。接着，仅几个小节之后，好像有什么东西吸引了斯蒂芬的注意，他的演奏完全失去了激情，就仿佛有人突然拔了插头。他的目光跟随着什么东西在人群中移动，到了最后，他干脆撇开了头，不看钢琴，但手却仍在弹奏。那时我才看到，他在盯视着两个身影离开观众席，我再向前倾了倾身子，恰好看到霍夫曼和妻子走出礼堂，消失在了视线中。

斯蒂芬全然停止了弹奏，坐在高脚凳上，直直转过身来，盯着他父母的背影。这一举止好像消除了人们仅剩的疑虑：斯蒂芬是在调音试调。的确，一时间，他好像是在等待大厅另一侧的技师给他信号，因此，当他从琴凳上站起来并大步走下舞台时，并没有人留意他。

直到走进侧厢，他才任由愤怒吞噬了他。而另一方面，意识到自己只弹奏了几个小节便弃甲而去，一时间他竟有种恍若隔世之感，还没来得及再细想，他便匆匆走下木头台阶，穿过后台的一道道门。

他出现在了走廊上，到处都是忙碌奔跑的舞台工作人员和餐饮员。斯蒂芬朝大厅走去，他希望在那儿能找到他父母，但还没等他走远，便发现自己的父亲正心事重重地独自向他走来。这位酒店经理并没有发现斯蒂芬，于是他们俩差点相撞。接着他停了下来，吃惊地盯着儿子。

“怎么？你没在演奏？”

“父亲，你和母亲为何那样离开？母亲现在在哪儿？她觉得不舒服吗？”

“你母亲。”霍夫曼沉重地叹了口气，“你母亲觉着，她这时离开是对的。当然，我送了送她，而且……呃，我说实话吧，斯蒂芬。这样说吧。我往往同意她的观点。我不排斥那一想法。你那样看我，

斯蒂芬。是的，我知道，我让你失望了。我答应过你，你会有这一机会的，这一在全城面前、在我们的亲朋好友面前弹奏的机会和平台。是的，是的，我答应过你。或许是你自己向我要求的，或许是在我心烦意乱的时候，你恰好逮住了我，谁知道是怎么回事呢？这个不重要。重要的是，我同意了，我答应了，我不想再去说它了，唉，好啦，是我的错。不过，斯蒂芬，你得尽量理解我们做父母的心情。多么难过啊，亲眼目睹……”

“我要跟母亲谈谈。”斯蒂芬说道，抬步想要走开。刹那间，霍夫曼显得很惊恐，但接着他非常粗暴地抓住儿子的胳膊，同时不自然地笑了笑。

“你不能那么做，斯蒂芬。我的意思是，你看，你母亲去了洗手间。哈哈。不管怎么说，我觉得你得让她把自己的事情办完。但斯蒂芬，你都做了什么呢？你现在应该在弹奏啊。啊，但说不定这样反而最好呢。几个难堪的问题而已，不过那样罢了。”

“父亲，我正要回去弹奏呢。请您入座。还有，请劝母亲回来吧。”

“斯蒂芬啊斯蒂芬。”霍夫曼摇了摇头，将一只手搭在儿子肩上，“我想让你知道，我和你母亲都非常看重你。我们都非常为你骄傲啊。但你这想法，你这梦寐一生的想法。我是说……我是说你的音乐之梦。我，还有你母亲，我们都不忍心告诉你。自然地，我们是想让你怀抱梦想。但这个。这——”他指了指礼堂的方向，“这一切统统是个可怕的错误。我们绝不该让事情发展到这等地步。你看，斯蒂芬，你的演奏的确非常引人入胜。自成一体，极其纯熟。一直以来，我们都很喜欢听你在家里弹奏。但音乐，严肃音乐，今晚这种水平的音乐……那可是另外一回事哟。不，不，别打断我，我想跟你说些事情，一些我早就应该告诉你的事情。你看，这是市音乐厅。听众们，音乐会的听众们，他们可不像是坐在客厅里倾心聆听你演奏的亲朋好友。他们是正儿八经的音乐会听众，他们听惯了专业水准的演奏。斯蒂芬，我该怎么说呢？”

“父亲，”斯蒂芬打断道，“您不知道。我已经刻苦练习了。我所要弹奏的曲子，尽管是匆忙之选，然而，我已经用功练习了，您只要来，就会看到……”

“斯蒂芬啊斯蒂芬……”霍夫曼再次摇了摇头。“若这只是用功练习的问题就好了。若只是那样就好了。但我们中的一些人，不是天

生奇才。我们没有那种天分，我们得承认，得妥协。偏偏这时候得跟你说这些，太糟糕了，怂恿了你这么久。希望你能原谅我们，你母亲，还有我，我们心软了这么久。但我们看得出，那给你带来多大的欢乐，我们不忍心哪。但那不是借口，我知道。这太糟了，此时此刻，我的心在为你流血啊，真的。我希望你能原谅我们。让你到今天这步境地，我们犯了个大错。让你上台，面对整个城市的人。我，还有你母亲，我们太爱你了，看不下去呀。眼睁睁地看着我们亲爱的儿子成了大家的笑柄……我们受不了啊。好了，我都说出来了，都跟你和盘托出了。很残忍呐，但我终于告诉你了。我本以为我可以做到，可以安坐在一片傻笑和窃笑之中。但那一刻真的来临时，你母亲却发现她做不到，我也做不到。怎么了？你为什么不听我说？你不知道这让我有多痛苦吗？这么坦白相告不容易啊，即便是对自己的儿子……”

“父亲，求您了，我求您。就来听听吧，哪怕只是几分钟，然后您自己决定要不要继续。还有母亲。求您了，求您了，劝劝母亲吧。到时候你们就知道了，你们一定会……”

“斯蒂芬，你该回到台上去了。你的名字都印在了节目单上。你已经现身过一次。你至少总得有始有终吧。让大家看到你至少已尽力了。好了，那就是我的忠告。千万别在意他们，别管他们的窃笑。即便他们开怀大笑，就好像舞台上演的是一出滑稽哑剧，而非一支庄严深邃的乐曲，即便是那样，你也要记住，至少你母亲跟父亲为你勇敢坚持到底而骄傲啊。是的，你现在得上台去了，要坚持到底啊，斯蒂芬。不过你得原谅我们，我们只是太爱你了，所以无法亲眼目睹你的演奏。其实，斯蒂芬，我觉得这样做会伤透你母亲的心。现在，你得去了，没多少时间了。去吧，去吧，快去吧。”

霍夫曼转过身，一只手扶着额头，好像感到头昏脑涨，天旋地转，他这样走了几步，然后突然挺直了身子，又回头看了看儿子。

“斯蒂芬，”他严厉地说，“你该回到舞台上去了。”

斯蒂芬继续盯了他父亲一会儿，终于认识到自己的请求已然无望，于是转身沿走廊走去。

斯蒂芬又穿过了一连串后台门，心中五味杂陈。他没能劝服父母回到座位上，自然沮丧无比。此外，他能感觉到内心深处那缠人的恐惧苏醒了——即，他父亲所言属实，他确是一场巨大欺骗的受害者。

不过，他一走近侧厢，自信心便很快又回来了，同时，随之而来的是那咄咄逼人的冲动，他要看看自己究竟有多大能耐。

斯蒂芬回到了舞台上，发现灯光稍暗了些。但是，礼堂远没有全黑，而且，许多宾客仍站在那里。他还能看见，在大厅各个角落，当有人弓身走过一排就座时，一波波的人群便站立起来。年轻人在钢琴前坐定，而周围的噪音只稍稍有所降低，在他等待情绪稳定之时，喧闹声依旧持续。忽然，一如之前，他冷峻的双手准确无误地落下，奏起了《玻璃激情》的开篇，唤起了一种介乎震惊与兴奋之间的情愫。

短短的序曲行进到一半时，观众们明显安静了许多。他弹奏完第一乐章后，整个礼堂已经完全安静下来。站在过道上聊天的人仍旧站着，但好像全都僵住了，双眼紧盯着舞台。那些已经落座的人专注地看着，听着。一小群人聚在一个入口处，最后一批缓慢入场的人停在了半路上。斯蒂芬开始弹奏第二乐章时，技师立即关掉了观众席的照明灯，我再也看不清观众席了。但毫无疑问，人们受到的震撼将继续笼罩大厅。无可否认，有此反应的一大原因是，观众们吃惊地发现，正如他们目睹的那般，他们自己的年轻一代中竟有人能达到如此高的水准。除却专业技巧，斯蒂芬的弹奏中还有着某种奇谲的力度，让人无法忽视。此外，我感觉，在场的许多人对今晚这一意外的开场吃惊之余，还将其视为一种预兆。假如这只是前奏的话，那余下的节目将会如何呢？今晚究竟会不会是本市的一个转折点呢？在我下方这许许多多吃惊的面孔背后，这些好像都是不言而喻的疑问。

斯蒂芬用一个怅惘又略具反讽的尾音圆满地结束了他的演奏。完毕后，众人沉默了一两秒钟，然后大厅里爆发出热烈的掌声，年轻人一跃而起，向大家致谢。他显然很高兴，尽管父母没能到场见证这一胜利让他倍感沮丧，但他绝不允许这份情绪表现在脸上。在持续的掌声中，他向观众鞠了几个躬，然后便匆匆退场，或许是突然想到自己的表演仅仅是整台晚会小小的一部分吧。

热烈的掌声噼里啪啦地持续了一会儿，然后慢慢平息，变成了兴奋的低语声。这时，人们还没来得及彼此交换感想，一个满头银发、表情严肃的人就从侧厢里走了出来。他慢慢地、自命不凡地朝前方的演讲台走去，此时我认出，他就是我到达那一晚主持表彰布罗茨基晚宴的那个人。

礼堂里很快便静了下来，但足足有三十秒钟，这位满脸严肃的人一言未发，只是略带厌恶地看着观众们。最后，他终于不耐烦地吸了口气，说：

“我虽然希望你们今晚都过得很开心，但我仍得提醒你们，我们在这儿相聚，并不是来看歌舞表演的。非常重要的问题还在后面等着我们呢。可别搞错了。事关我们未来的问题，事关我们整个城市认同的问题。”

随后的几分钟时间里，满脸严肃的男子继续迂腐地反复重申着这一点，偶尔停顿片刻，怒目皱眉，审视整个大厅。我渐渐失去了兴趣，想起后面排队的人还等着用这个壁橱，于是决定让其他人上来看吧。但是，正当我想退出那狭窄的空间时，我发现那满脸严肃的人已转到了一个新话题上——其实，他此刻正在介绍某人登台亮相。

这位被引介的人士，似乎不仅是“整个城市图书馆系统的柱石”，而且拥有“一叶知秋”的本领。那满脸严肃的男子最后一次鄙夷地盯视着观众，然后咕哝出了一个人的名字，昂首阔步地走开了。礼堂爆发出雷鸣般的掌声，这掌声显然是送给那满脸严肃的男子，而非他所介绍的那个人的。确实，后者大概又过了一分钟才出现，而他一亮相，人们只是犹犹豫豫地向他致意。

那男子个头小小，干净利落，秃着头，留着一副八字须。他带了个文件夹上台，将它放在了讲台上。接着，他取出几页纸，开始摆弄起来，其间从未抬头向观众们致意。大厅内掀起一阵不安。我再次好奇起来，心想排队的人不会介意再多等会儿，于是重新小心翼翼地趴在壁橱近边缘处。

秃头男子终于说话了，由于嘴巴靠话筒太近，他的声音嗡嗡颤动着。

“今晚，我想向大家分别展示我三个时期的代表作品。这些诗歌，我大多已在阿黛尔咖啡馆朗诵过，你们会觉得很有趣，但我相信，你们一定不会反对我在这一庄严场合再诵读一遍。还有，现在我告诉各位，到结束时会有个小小的惊喜。我相信它会给你们带来不小的欢乐。”

接着，他继续翻弄纸张，这时人群中传来窃窃私语声。秃头男子终于下定了决心，对着麦克风大声地咳嗽了几声，众人又安静了下来。

好几首诗都押韵，而且相对较短。有关于市公园鱼儿的诗，暴风雪的诗，回忆童年破窗的诗——全都以奇怪的、高亢咒符似的音调被朗诵出来。我的注意力游离了几分钟，接着，我发现正下方某处一些观众开始交谈了起来，说话声清晰可辨。

此刻，那些声音还比较低沉，然而，当我用心去听时，它们好像越来越放开了胆。最终——当秃头男子在朗诵一首有关他母亲这些年所养的几只猫咪的长诗时——那噪音渐渐传入了我耳中，变成了大型聚会中人们多少带着正常音调的声音。我克服了小心翼翼之感，挪到了壁橱的最边缘，双手紧紧抓着木框，向下望去。

那谈话声的确是由坐在我正下方的一群人发出的，但其中涉及的人数比我料想的要少些。有七八个人已然决定，不再留心聆听诗歌吟诵，这会儿正开心地互相攀谈着，其中几位为了说话已完全转过身去。我正欲细看一下这群人，突然瞥见柯林斯小姐就坐在后面几排的地方。

她身着第一次晚宴上穿的那件精致黑色晚礼服，披肩也仍旧围在肩上。她正同情地看着那秃头男子，头微微歪向一边，一根手指抵着下巴。我又凝望了她一会儿，但她神情一片宁静安详。

我将视线转回到正下方那吵闹的人群上，发现这会儿他们正在传发扑克牌。这时我才意识到，这群人中的核心人物包括了我第一天晚上在电影院遇见的那帮醉汉，而且就在刚才，我还在走廊上撞见过他们。

纸牌游戏越玩越喧闹，他们发出了阵阵欢呼声。人们纷纷投来了不满的目光，然而，渐渐地，大厅里越来越多的人开始说起话来，尽管声音有所克制。

秃头男子好像毫无察觉，继续热切地朗诵着，一首又一首。大约二十分钟后，他停了下来，这是自他登上舞台后的首次停顿。他拢了拢纸张，说道：

“现在开始第二阶段。你们有些人已经知道了，我的第二阶段缘自一场重要的事件。那一事件让我无法再沿用迄今为止使用过的工具创作。也就是说，我发现我的妻子不忠。”

他低下头，仿佛一想起这事仍令他悲痛欲绝。就在这时，我下方的那群人中有个人喊道：

“这么说来，他过去显然一直错用了工具！”

他的同伴们哄然大笑，然后，另一个人喊道：

“拙匠总怪工具差。”

“看来他妻子也是这样。”第一个声音道。

这番对话显然是想让尽可能多的人听到，果然引得众人哧哧窃笑。秃头男子在台上到底听到了多少并不清楚，但他停了下来，并没有看向那些起哄者，而是又摆弄起手中的纸来。他本来打算多说几句，多介绍一下他的第二阶段，但现在放弃了这一念头，又开始背诵起他的作品来。

他的第二阶段与第一阶段并无明显不同，而观众的骚动不安却有增无减。就这样，又过了几分钟，一名醉汉喊了句什么，但我没听清，不过大厅里许多人放声大笑起来。秃头男子仿佛头一次意识到，他正在失去对观众的控制，一句话只背了一半便抬起头来，站在那里冲着灯光眨眼，好像受到了什么惊吓。显然，他可以选择立即放弃舞台，而更体面的选择是，在离开之前再朗诵三四首诗。然而，他却选择了另一条解决之道。他慌慌张张地又朗读起来，也许是想尽快结束这既定的节目吧。结果，他读得支离破碎，七零八落，同时也助长了他死对头的气焰，此刻他们发现他已被逼得慌不择路了。越来越多的人——不再只是我下方的人群——开始七嘴八舌起来，引起了满堂哄笑。

最后，秃头男子试图重新掌控局面。他把文件夹放在一边，一声不吭，用乞求的目光盯着观众席。刚才一直大笑的人们此时安静了下来——或许是出于好奇，或许是出于懊悔吧。秃头男子终于开口了，他的声音中有了些许威严。

“我答应过，要给你们一个小惊喜，”他说，“惊喜来了。一首新诗。我一个星期之前刚完成的。特意为今晚这一重要场合所作。题目就叫《征服者布罗茨基》。请允许我朗诵。”

此人又开始摆弄起纸张，但这次观众都保持安静。他前倾身体，开始朗诵。念了开头几行之后，他飞快地抬头看了看，吃惊地发现大厅仍旧一片安静。他继续朗读，自信心渐渐高涨，没多久便高傲地挥起双手，强调起某些重点语句。

我本以为这是一首泛泛描绘布罗茨基的诗作，但很快我就明白，此诗只关涉布罗茨基与酒精的一次次交锋。开头的几节将布罗茨基与几位神话英雄做了比较，于是，便有了布罗茨基面对入侵的敌军，站在小山顶上猛掷长矛的形象，有了布罗茨基勇抓海蛇的形象，有了布罗茨基被锁链绑在岩石上的形象。观众们继续崇敬地甚至肃穆地聆听着。我看了一眼柯林斯小姐，但没发现她表情有何明显变化。她一如之前，饶有兴趣却又超然地观察着那诗人，一根手指抵在下巴一侧。

几分钟之后，诗歌兀然转向。它放弃了神话背景，转而着力描绘最近发生在布罗茨基身上的几起真实事件——据我猜测，这些事件广为流传，已演化成当地传奇。当然，我对大部分指涉的事件一无所知，但我看得出，他在力图重估并夸大布罗茨基在每起事件中的作用。从文学角度看，我认为这部分诗歌较之前几节大有进步，但介绍如此具体且耳熟能详的内容反而打破了秃头男子在观众中已然建立起的威信。他一提到“公交车候车亭悲剧”，下面便又有人开始窃笑，当他提及布罗茨基“寡不敌众，战败负伤”、“最终被迫投降，躲在电话亭后”时，更多的窃笑声传开了，而当光头男说到“在校园远足中展现出无畏勇气”时，整个大厅爆发出了不约而同的阵阵笑声。

至此我已明白，这秃头男子已经没救了。最后的几小节主要赞颂布罗茨基重新找回了清醒，几乎每行每句都会引发阵阵大笑。我又看了看柯林斯小姐，看到她的手指快速地捋着下巴，除此之外，她一如之前那般镇定。在阵阵大笑与起哄声中，光头男子的声音几乎难以听见，他终于结束了朗诵，愤怒地聚拢纸张，大步走下舞台。一部分观众或许觉得刚才太过分了，便慷慨地鼓起掌来。

接下来几分钟，舞台空无一人，很快，观众们便扯着嗓子说起话来。我审视着下方的一张张面孔，颇有兴致地发现，虽然很多人相互交换着愉快的目光，但相当一部分人看起来很愤怒，正严厉地指着大厅里的其他人。这时，灯光又打在了舞台上，霍夫曼出现了。

酒店经理一脸暴怒，仪态全无，急匆匆走上讲台。

“女士们，先生们，拜托了！”人群安静了下来，他喊道，“拜托了！我请你们记得今晚的重要性。用冯·温特斯坦先生的话说，我们不是来观看歌舞表演的！”

这严厉的训斥并没有得到某些人的接受，一阵讥讽的“啾啾”声从我下方的人群中响起。但霍夫曼继续道：

“特别是，我吃惊地发现，你们许多人对布罗茨基先生仍抱有如此愚蠢而过时的看法。且不论齐格勒先生诗歌中许多其他的优点，其核心论点，即，布罗茨基先生已永远战胜了曾经荼毒他的一切恶魔，就无可置疑。齐格勒先生雄辩地阐述此点时，刚才那些嘲笑他的人，我相信，很快——是的，马上！——就会自惭形秽。是的，自惭形秽！一如一分钟之前，我替这座城市自惭形秽一样。”

说这话的时候，他猛捶讲台，而令人吃惊的是，很多观众竟自以为是地报以热烈掌声。霍夫曼显然松了口气，但显然不知如何回应此

种欢迎，就尴尬地鞠了几躬。接着，还没等掌声完全退去，他就镇定了下来，对着麦克风大声宣布道：

“布罗茨基先生不愧为我们这儿的一位俊杰啊！是我们年轻人精神与文化的源泉，是我们这些年长一辈的掌灯人，是我们这座城市黑暗历史篇章中的迷失与凄惨之人的指路明灯。布罗茨基先生当之无愧啊！请大家看着我！我用名誉、用我的信誉来担保我此刻对你们所说的话！但我何需说这些呢？很快，你们就会亲眼所见，亲耳所闻了。我绝非想做这样的介绍，也对不得已而为之深表遗憾。那么就让我们别再耽误时间了。允许我请出我们最尊敬的贵宾——斯图加特·内格尔基金会管弦乐团。今晚的指挥是我们自己独一无二的——里奥·布罗茨基先生！”

霍夫曼退至侧厢，一轮掌声响起。接下来几分钟悄然无息，接着，乐池亮起了灯光，乐师们鱼贯而出。又是一轮掌声，随后乐队成员循位入席，调试乐器，摆好乐谱架，此时一片寂静，寂静中透着紧张。甚至连我下方吵闹的人群，也好像明白接下来的表演十分严肃——他们已收起了扑克牌，正襟危坐，紧盯前方。

乐队终于安顿下来，灯光打在了近舞台侧厢的一片区域。又过了一分钟，全然无息，接着，后台传来了一阵撞击声。那声音愈来愈响，布罗茨基最后终于走进了灯光中。他停在那儿，也许让观众们有时间注意到他的亮相吧。

当然，在场的许多人都很难认出他来。他身着晚礼服西装，配一件鲜亮的白衬衫，头发梳得光溜溜的，可谓一表人才。然而，无可否认的是，他仍旧用那寒碜的烫衣板作拐杖，未免有煞风景。还有，他走向指挥台时，每走一步，烫衣板便“吧嗒”响一下。我留意到了他在那只空荡荡的裤腿上所做的手脚。我完全能够理解，他不希望那裤料来回摆动。但是，布罗茨基并没有在裤腿残根处打结，反而在膝盖下方一两寸处剪出了波纹状的裤边。我知道，完全雅观的办法是不可能有的，但是，在我看来，这条裤边也太夸张了，可能只会引得人们格外关注他的伤残。

然而，在他继续穿过舞台时，我好像明白自己可能完全想错了。尽管我一直盼望人群发现布罗茨基的状况后会倒吸一口气，但那一时刻却始终未曾到来。其实，就目前情势判断，观众好像根本没留意到他少了条腿，而是继续静静地期待着他走上指挥台。

可能是因为累了，也可能是因为紧张，他现在走路不像我早些时候在走廊里看见的那么顺畅。他步履如此蹒跚，我突然觉得，倘若还是无人注意到他的伤势，人家必定怀疑他喝醉酒了。离指挥台只有几码远了，他却突然停了下来，低着头愤愤地看着烫衣板——我发现它又一次开始撑开了。他晃了晃它，接着又走了起来。他坚持走了几步后，烫衣板上的什么东西散了开来。正当他将全身重量压在烫衣板上时，它终于散架了。布罗茨基连同烫衣板狠狠地摔倒在地。

观众对此事的反应甚为奇异。我本以为众人会大声惊呼，可他们却不以为然地静默了几秒钟。接着，一阵低语声传遍礼堂，人们齐声“嗯嗯”着，好像面对这种种令人泄气的迹象，大家都不再妄下结论了。无独有偶，那三位上台协助布罗茨基的舞台工作人员也是一副磨磨蹭蹭的样子，甚至流露出一丝厌恶。总之，他们还未来得及到他身边，此时躺在地板上一直跟烫衣板较劲的布罗茨基便愤怒地冲他们大喊，叫他们滚开。那三个人立马站定，不无迷惑地看着布罗茨基。

布罗茨基继续在地板上挣扎了一会儿。他时而好像要站起来，时而又想将绞进烫衣板里的衣服弄出来。有一阵子，他突然连声咒骂起来，可能是针对那烫衣板的吧，而扬声器将其清清楚楚地播放了出来。我又瞟了一眼柯林斯小姐，发现她这会儿坐在那里，身子前倾着。然而，随着布罗茨基继续挣扎，她又慢慢靠回座位，手指再次抵着下巴。

布罗茨基终于有了突破。他成功地将展开的烫衣板竖了起来，然后骨碌一下站起身。他骄傲地单腿站立，双手抓着烫衣板，双肘推出，好像准备攀爬上去。他狠狠地扫了一眼那三个舞台工作人员，他们退回侧厢后，他便将目光转向观众。

“我知道，我知道，”他说，尽管声音不大，但舞台前方的一排话筒好像照单全收了，大家都听见了。“我知道你们所有人在想什么。唉，你们错了。”

他垂下双眼，重新陷入尴尬。接着，他稍稍挺直了身子，用手抚摸那块烫衣板的棉衬表面，仿佛这会儿才想起烫衣板原先的用途。最后，他再次看向观众，说道：

“把你们脑中的这些想法全部抛开吧。那，”他冲地板甩了下头，“只是个不幸的意外。仅此而已。”

又一阵低语声掠过礼堂，然后大家再次安静下来。

接下来，布罗茨基继续在烫衣板上靠了一会儿，一动未动，紧盯着指挥台。我意识到，他正在估量到指挥台的距离，没错，接着，他开始行动了。他举起整个烫衣板架，猛砸到地上，就好像它是个助行架，然后拖着仅剩的一条腿跟上。起先，观众们似乎吃惊不小，但随着布罗茨基稳稳地向前移动，某些人就觉得自己是在观赏杂技动作，于是便鼓起掌来。很快，大厅里所有的人都接收到了这一讯息，就这样，伴着潮水般的掌声，布罗茨基一步步地向指挥台进发，完成了余下的征程。

一到达目的地，布罗茨基便立马放开烫衣板，一把抓住指挥台上的半圆形栏杆，悠然就位。他小心翼翼地将身子靠在栏杆上，然后拿起指挥棒。

此刻，为烫衣板动作而响起的掌声已渐渐平息，观众席再次恢复了噤声期待的气氛。乐师们也微微紧张地看着布罗茨基。然而，布罗茨基好像在回味多年后重掌乐队指挥棒的感受，他时而微笑，时而目光灼灼。终于，他将指挥棒扬至半空。乐师们刚摆好姿态，布罗茨基却又改变了主意，放下指挥棒，转向观众。他和气地柔声笑道：

“你们都以为我是个大酒鬼。现在就让我们来瞧瞧，我还有没有别的什么能耐。”

最近的麦克风离他也有一段距离，因此只有一小部分观众听见了他的话。总之，紧接着，他又举起了指挥棒，整个乐队立刻投身于穆勒里的《垂直》那刺耳的开篇音符之中。

我倒没觉得如此开篇有什么特别奇异的，但这显然出乎观众们的意料。许多人都从座位上惊跳而起，而随着这拉长的不协和和弦延续到第六、七小节的时候，我看到有些人的脸上呈现出几近恐慌的神情。甚至连一些乐师也焦急地看了看指挥，而后又看看乐谱。但布罗茨基仍在稳步调升乐曲的强度，始终保持他那夸张的慢节拍。演奏到第十二小节时，音符突然爆发，而后戛然而止。观众们轻轻地叹了口气，音乐立即又激昂起来。

布罗茨基不时地用那只空闲的手稳住自己，但这时候他已深深地沉醉了，似乎只需象征性的支撑便能保持平衡。他摇晃着肢体，尽情地在空中甩动双臂。在第一章的头几节，我发现一些乐队成员愧疚地看着观众，仿佛在说：“是啊，真的，他就是叫我们这么演奏的！”但接着，渐渐地，乐师们也沉浸在布罗茨基的幻境之中。起先，是小提琴师们入了迷，接着，我看到越来越多的乐师沉醉在自己的演奏

中。当布罗茨基引领他们进入忧郁的第二乐章时，整个乐团似乎都被他折服了。此时此刻，观众也一改先前的不安，定定地坐在那儿。

布罗茨基利用第二乐章较为松散的形式，将其推至空前奇异的境地，而我呢，尽管我熟知穆勒里乐曲的每一细节，却也渐渐入迷了。他几乎全然无视曲子的外在结构——即作曲家向装点作品表面的音调与旋律的倾斜——而恰恰侧重于隐藏在外壳下的独特的生命形态。所有这一切略显龌龊，近乎于裸露癖，表明布罗茨基自己对他正在揭示的事物本质深感窘迫，却又无法抵挡向纵深挺进的冲动。结果，这既令人胆怯又扣人心弦。

我又仔细看了看下方的人群。毫无疑问，这群狭隘观众的情感已被布罗茨基所俘获，我发现待会儿的问答环节也许不会像我原先担心的那般棘手了。显然，假若布罗茨基凭这场表演让观众心悦诚服，那么我如何回答问题就变得远没有那么重要了。我的任务实质上就成了支持一下观众们业已认可的东西而已——这样，纵然我调查得不够充分，但凭我说上几句得体婉转、幽默诙谐的话，便可全身而退。但另一方面，假若布罗茨基让观众心烦意乱，犹豫不决，那么，不论我的地位和经验如何，都会有一大堆的工作等着我去做。观众席上仍充满了焦躁不安，我想起第三乐章那愤慨激昂的情绪，不知布罗茨基到时会指挥成什么样子。

就在这时，头一次，我突然想到在观众中搜寻我的父母。几乎是同时，一个念头在我脑中一闪而过：在无数次细看人群时我都没有注意到他们，因而此刻在我下方发现他们的可能性就不大了。不过，我还是往前倾了倾身子，几乎是不顾一切地瞪大眼睛扫视了一遍礼堂。无论我如何伸长脖颈，大厅里某些地方我还是看不见，于是我意识到自己迟早得下到礼堂。然而，即使我还是没法找到父母，我至少可以找到霍夫曼或者斯达特曼小姐，问问我父母到底在哪里。不管怎样，我知道我再也耽搁不起更多时间，不能继续站在眼前的这个有利位置看演出了，于是我小心翼翼地转过身，走出了壁橱。

又一次出现在小楼梯的顶端时，我发现下面的队伍已排得老长，至少有二十个人在等待。每个排队的人刚才都在兴奋地交谈着，现在一看见我，他们就闭了口。我把壁橱占用了这么长时间，自己感觉非常内疚，走下梯子时，我含含糊糊地低声说了声抱歉，然后趁下一个排队的人开始急切地朝壁橱入口攀爬时，匆匆地沿着走廊离开了。

走廊较之前安静多了，主要是由于餐饮服务员的的活动暂停了下来。沿着走廊每走几码，我就能撞见一辆静止的推车，上面满载着货物，有时候，穿着工装的男人们会靠在上面，吸着烟，拿着泡沫塑料杯子喝东西。我终于停下脚步，问了其中一个人，到达礼堂最快的路线该怎么走，他只朝我的身后的一扇门指了指。我谢过他，拉开门，看到了下面灯光昏暗的楼梯间。

我下了至少五段楼梯。接着，我推开沉重的弹簧双开门，发现自己走进了一个洞穴般幽暗的后台区。借着微弱的灯光，我看到有几块矩形背景画板靠在墙边，上面画着一栋城堡式的房屋，月色下的天空，森林。我头顶上是呈十字形交叉的钢索。此刻，我已经可以清晰地听到乐团演奏了，我朝乐声走去，一路上尽力避开一个个盒状的障碍物体。最后，我慢慢走上了几级木头台阶，这时我意识到，自己已经站在了侧厢里。我正欲转身——原本我希望悄悄出现在近前排座位的某处——突然，乐声中的某种东西，一种之前未曾有过的疑惑充满了我的耳朵，迫使我停在了那里。

我站在那儿听了大约一分钟，然后上前一步，透过眼前厚重的折叠垂幕东张西望起来。当然，做这一切时我十分小心——自然，我希望无论如何要避免人群看到我的脸而鼓起掌来——然而，我却发现自己从一个很偏的角度注视着布罗茨基和乐队，而观众们却根本看不见我。

可以看出，我在楼里转悠的这段时间里，情况已经发生了很大变化。我觉得布罗茨基走得太远了，因为，那一通常标志着指挥与乐师相互疏离的技巧炫示已经渗进了乐队的演奏中。乐师们——我现在能从近处看到他们了——脸上都挂着一副怀疑、忧虑甚至厌恶的表情。接下来，随着我的眼睛渐渐适应了耀眼的舞台灯光，我把目光由乐队转向观众。我只能看见前面几排，但显然大家都在彼此交换焦虑的目光，不安地咳嗽着，不住地摇头。就在我观察的时候，一位女士起身离开了。然而，布罗茨基继续激情豪迈地指挥着，甚至好像渴望推波助澜。随后，我看到两位大提琴手交换了下眼神，摇了摇头。这显然是个谋反的信号，而布罗茨基无疑是注意到了。这会儿，他的指挥透出一股狂躁的气象，乐声转而危险地向乖僻反常的领地挺进。

直至今时，我仍旧未能看清布罗茨基的表情——我大致只能看见他的背影——但随着他旋身扭体愈发明显，我终于比较完整地瞥见了他的脸。这时我才意识到，还有其他某种因素在影响着布罗茨基的行为。我再次端详他——他的身体紧紧和着某个节拍，不由自主地扭动

着——发现他处于极度的痛苦中，他这样痛不欲生或许已经有一段时间了。我一意识这点，种种迹象就清楚无误了。他其实只是在拼命坚持而已，他的脸扭曲着，不仅是因为激情，还有其他原因啊！

我觉得自己有义务做点什么，就立刻估量了一下情势。布罗茨基还得再指挥一个中上等难度的乐章，另加那错综复杂的尾曲。他之前营造起来的美好印象被快速地磨蚀掉了。观众随时都可能再次翻脸。我越想，就越觉得应该叫停这表演，我不知道是不是现在就该走上舞台，立马叫停。的确，也许我是大厅里唯一一个可以这么做而又不让观众感到大难临头的人。

但接下来，我并没有行动，而是在想到底应该怎样去干涉。我该走上去挥手示意暂停吗？那样不仅会显得冒昧，而且会让人觉出我的不满——这会给人留下恶劣的印象。或许，更好的方法是，等到行板乐曲开始后，我再非常谦逊地走上台去，恭敬有礼地对布罗茨基和乐队微笑，踩着音乐的节拍款款入场，好像事先早被安排好了似的。毫无疑问，观众会热烈鼓掌，这时候我就可以——一直面带微笑——先为布罗茨基拍手，再为乐师们鼓掌。但愿那时候布罗茨基会冷静沉着地“慢慢结束”音乐，并朝观众频频鞠躬。我一出现在台上，观众们就不大可能找布罗茨基的麻烦了。说实在的，在我的率先带领下——我会继续鼓掌微笑，仿佛布罗茨基刚才的表演绝对美轮美奂——观众们可能会回忆起他先前那部分的表演，而使他重获他们的支持。这时布罗茨基就可以恭恭敬敬地鞠上几个躬，然后转身离开，而我呢，在众目睽睽下亲切地扶他走下指挥台，或许再把他那块烫衣板折好递给他，好让他再当拐杖使。然后我可能会领着他走向侧厢，频频回望观众，鼓励他们继续鼓掌等等。只要我一切判断绝对正确的话，事情就可以得到完美解决。

但就在这时，又发生了一件早就可能会发生的事情。布罗茨基的指挥棒在空中画了个大大的弧线，而几乎与此同时，另一只手向空中猛击。就这样，他好像失控了似的向空中蹦了几英寸，然后摔倒在舞台前方，带倒了指挥台的扶手、烫衣板、乐谱、乐谱架等所有东西。

我本以为大家会冲过去帮他，但他摔倒时众人只是倒吸了一口气，随后抽气声便渐渐消失，人们陷入了令人尴尬的沉默。接下来，布罗茨基仍然面部朝下，一动不动地趴在地上，这时，一阵低低的喧闹声又向礼堂的四面八方传开。终于，一位小提琴手把乐器放在一边，朝布罗茨基走去。还有其他一些人——舞台工作人员，乐师——

马上一一跟上，但他们向那个匍匐倒地的人围聚过去时仍有些犹豫，仿佛害怕他们会他们的发现完全不以为然。

刚才我一直在犹豫，不知道我的现身会造成什么结果。现在我缓过神来，急忙冲上舞台，加入到帮助布罗茨基的队伍中。我走近时，小提琴手大叫一声，跪倒在地，焦急地检查起布罗茨基。接着，他抬头看着我们，惊恐地低语道：“天哪，他失去了一条腿！他坚持了这么久才晕倒，真是奇迹！”

大家惊讶不已，我们围聚过来的十多个人互相交换了下眼色。不知何故，大家都有种明显的感觉，他失去一条腿的消息绝不能泄露出去，于是我们围聚得更紧了，以挡住观众们的视线。离布罗茨基最近的几个人在低声商榷是否要把他抬下舞台。接着，有人示意了一下，幕布开始合了起来。很快人们就发现，布罗茨基正好躺在幕布的轨线上，于是，当幕布过来时，几只胳膊伸了出来，半拖半拽地将他拉离了舞台前方。

这一拉一拽让布罗茨基稍稍清醒了一点，那位小提琴手把他的身体翻转过来，让他平躺在地上。布罗茨基睁开了眼睛，搜寻的目光扫过每张脸庞。然后，他迷迷糊糊地说：

“她在哪儿？她为什么不抱着我？”

众人又交换了下眼神。接着，有人低声说：

“柯林斯小姐。他说的一定是柯林斯小姐。”

他话音刚落，一阵轻咳声从我们背后传来，我们转身发现柯林斯小姐就站在幕布内。她看起来依然沉着淡定，礼貌而关切地看着我们。只有那交叉于胸前的双臂，比平常略高，才显示出她内心的纷乱。

“她在哪儿？”布罗茨基又迷迷糊糊地问了一遍。然后他突然轻轻地唱起歌来。

小提琴手抬头看着我们说：“他喝醉了？浑身都是酒味。”

布罗茨基停止了歌唱，闭上眼睛问道：“她在哪儿？她为什么不来？”

这一次，柯林斯小姐回了话，声音虽然不大，但从幕布那边传来却很清晰：“我在这儿，里奥。”

她的口吻近乎温柔，可是，当大家赶忙让出一条道来时，她并没有动。然而，她一看到地上的人，脸上终于浮现出痛苦的神情。布罗茨基仍然紧闭双眼，又开始哼哼起来。

接着，他睁开双眼，小心地四下看了看。他的目光首先看向幕布——或许是在寻找观众——随后，发现幕布拉上了，他又审视了一下低头看着他的一张张脸庞。最后，他看向了柯林斯小姐。

“我们拥抱吧，”他说，“让大家看看。幕布……”一番挣扎，他稍稍抬起了身子，喊道：“准备好再次拉开幕布！”接着，他轻柔地对柯林斯小姐说：“过来抱我。拥抱我。然后让他们拉开幕布。让全世界见证我们。”他又渐渐倒了下去，直至平躺在地上。“过来吧，”他低声道。

柯林斯小姐欲言又止。她看了看幕布，一丝惊恐在眼中闪现。

“让他们看看，”布罗茨基说，“让他们看看我们最后在一起了。让他们看看我们一生都彼此相爱。让他们看看吧。幕布拉开时，让他们看看吧。”

柯林斯小姐继续盯着布罗茨基，最后终于走向了他。大家小心地让开，有几位甚至干脆将目光转向了别处。快到他身边时，她停了下来，声音微微颤抖地说道：

“我们握个手吧。”

“不，不。一切都结束了。我们好好拥抱一下。让他们看看。”

柯林斯小姐犹豫片刻，然后径直走到他身边，跪了下来。我看到她的双眼噙满了泪水。

“亲爱的，”布罗茨基柔声道，“再抱抱我吧。我的伤口正疼得厉害。”

突然间，柯林斯小姐抽回了已经伸出的手，站起身来。她冷冷地低头看着布罗茨基，接着迅速地朝幕布走了回去。

布罗茨基好像没有发现她已隐退。他这会儿正盯着天花板，双臂张开，仿佛期盼着柯林斯小姐从天而降。

“你在哪儿？”他说，“让他们看看。拉开幕布的时候。让他们看看，我们最后还是在一起了。你在哪儿？”

“我不会来了，里奥。不管你现在去哪儿，你都得自己去了。”

布罗茨基一定是意识到了她语气的转变，因为他虽然仍旧盯着天花板，双臂却已垂了下来。

“伤口，你的伤口，”柯林斯小姐轻轻地说，“老是你的伤口。”她的脸扭曲变形，模样丑陋。“哦，我恨透了你！我恨你浪费了我的生命！我永远，永远都不会原谅你！你的伤口，你那愚蠢的小伤口！那才是你的真爱，里奥，那伤口，它才是你一生唯一的挚爱！即使我们努力尝试，即便我们重头再来，我也知道会有怎样的未来。你的音乐也是这样，不会有丝毫的不同。即便他们今晚接受了你，即便你在这座城市成了大名人，你也会统统毁掉的，你会毁掉一切，就像从前那样，把一切都毁于一旦。而这都是因为你那个伤口。我也好，音乐也罢，对你来说，我们不过就是你寻求慰藉的情妇罢了。你总是会回到你唯一的真爱那儿去。重回那个伤口！你知道我为何如此气愤吗？里奥，你在听我说吗？你的那个伤口，一点都不特别，根本没什么特别之处。仅仅在这座城市，我就知道有许多人的伤口比你的要严重得多。可人家却坚韧不拔，每个人都是，都有着比你强不知多少倍的勇气。他们继续生活。他们成了有价值的人。而你呢，里奥，看看你自己。总是抚慰你那伤口。你在听吗？听我说，我要你仔仔细细、一字一句地听我讲！你现在只有那个伤口了。我曾经想把一切都给你，但你却不感兴趣，你不可能再拥有我了。你浪费了我多少生命啊！我恨死你了！你听到我说的话了吗，里奥？看看你自己！看看你现在都成什么样子了？好吧，我来告诉你。你现在是要去往恐怖之地。一个漆黑而孤独的地方，而我是不会跟你去的。你自个儿去吧！跟你那愚蠢的小伤口一块儿去吧！”

布罗茨基一直在空中缓缓地晃着一只手。这会儿，趁她停下来的工夫，他说：

“我也许……我也许会再次成为指挥家。刚才的音乐，我倒下之前的音乐。还是蛮好的。你听见了吗？我也许会再次成为指挥家……”

“里奥，你在听我说吗？你永远都不会成为一个名副其实的指挥家。即便在以前，你也根本不是。你永远都不能为本城的市民服务，即便他们想要你这么做。因为你毫不关心他们的人生。就是这么回事啊！你的音乐永远只会关乎那个愚蠢的小伤口，永远不会有任何别的东西，永远不会有任何深刻的内涵，对其他任何人不会有任何价值。至少，我可以这样说，我已尽了我的绵薄之力。我已尽心尽力地帮助了这里不幸的人们。而你呢，看看你吧！你只关心你那伤口！这就是为什

么即便在过去你也不是个名副其实的音乐家。而你现在也绝对成不了货真价实的音乐家。里奥，你在听我说吗？我想让你听听这话。你永远都不过是在滥竽充数。你这个懦夫，不负责任的骗子……”

这时，一个满脸通红的胖子突然穿过幕布冲了进来。

“您的烫衣板，布罗茨基先生！”他把那东西高举在身前，兴高采烈地喊道。话音刚落，他便感到气氛不对头，连忙退了回去。

柯林斯小姐看了看这位新的闯入者，最后看了布罗茨基一眼，接着就从幕布间的空隙跑了出去。

布罗茨基的脸仍然冲着天花板，不过眼睛却又闭上了。我挤上前，跪在他身边，听了听他的心跳。

“我们的水手们，”他低声道，“我们的水手们。我们喝醉了的水手们。他们在哪儿？你们在哪儿？你们在哪儿？”

“是我，”我说，“我是瑞德。布罗茨基先生，我们必须马上找人来帮您。”

“瑞德。”他张开双眼，抬头看着我。“瑞德。也许那是真的。她说的那番话。”

“别担心，布罗茨基先生。您的音乐气势磅礴，特别是头两个乐章……”

“不，不，瑞德。我指的不是这个。现在那已经无所谓了。我是指她说的另一件事。说我要独自一人去，去一个漆黑、孤独的地方。或许那是真的。”突然，他从地上抬起头，直视我的双眼，一把紧紧地抓住了我的胳膊。“我不想去，瑞德，”他低声说道，“我不想去那儿。”

“布罗茨基先生，我会想办法把她劝回来的。我说过，特别是头两个乐章展现出了极大的创新性。她肯定是个通情达理的人。请原谅，我去去就来。”

我将胳膊从他手里挣脱开来，赶紧穿过舞台幕布走了出去。

第三十五章

我吃惊地发现，礼堂里已经大变样了。灯光已重新打开，观众席上几乎一名观众都没有。多达三分之二的客人已经离去，剩下的人大多站在过道里聊天。然而，我没有在此久留，因为我看到柯林斯小姐正沿着中央过道朝出口走去。我跳下舞台，急忙穿过人群，在她身后追赶，她刚到出口时，我便赶了上去，向她喊道：

“柯林斯小姐！请等一下！”

我们距离不远，她能听到我的叫喊。她转过身，看到了我，然后狠狠地瞪了我一眼。我吃了一惊，在过道上走了一半便驻足不前。突然间，我想要赶上她并与她谈谈的决心顿然消退，不知怎的，自己竟尴尬地低头看着双脚。终于，我又抬起了头，发现她已然离开了。

我继续待在原地站了一会儿，心想自己是不是太愚蠢了，竟让她这么轻易地走掉了。但接着，我的注意力渐渐被周围的各种谈话声吸引了，特别是站在我右边的一群人——六七个颇为年长的老者——我听到其中一人说道：

“听舒斯特太太说，那家伙今儿个一整天就没清醒过。唉，不管他再怎么有才干，如何要求我们去尊敬他那样的人？他给我们的孩子树立了怎样的榜样啊？不，不，太过分了。”

“在伯爵夫人家的晚宴上，”一位妇女说，“他肯定就喝了个大醉。他们耍了聪明才瞒天过海。”

“对不起，”我插话道，“你们对此事一无所知。我向你们保证，你们的消息极不准确。”

我以为单凭我的出现便能让他们大吃一惊，说不出话来。但他们欣然看了看我，仿佛我只是问了问他们是否介意我加入他们的谈话，然后便继续聊了起来。

“没人再想恭维克里斯托弗了，”第一个人说道，“刚刚那场演出，唉，就像你说的，简直乏味透了。”

“简直伤风败俗。没错。简直伤风败俗啊。”

“请原谅，”我这次更为强硬地打断道，“我碰巧专心聆听了布罗茨基先生在倒下之前的演奏，我个人的判断与你们的不同。依我看，他的表现富有挑战性，前所未有，可谓非常接近曲子的内在世界。”

我冷冷地瞪了他们一眼。他们又开心地看了看我，其中几位还礼貌地笑了笑，好像我刚开了个玩笑。接着，第一个人说道：

“没人在袒护克里斯托弗。我们现在都已经看透他了。但听到刚刚那样的表演，确实让人脑子里想起很多事情。”

“显然，”另一个男人说道，“布罗茨基认为马克斯·萨特勒没错。是的，实际上他一天到晚都在那么说。没错，他是在醉酒恍惚中说的，但那人总是醉醺醺的，我们也能几近了解他的想法了。马克斯·萨特勒。这倒不难解释我们刚刚听到的一切了。”

“克里斯托弗至少有种结构感。你能掌握的某种体系。”

“先生们，”我对他们喊道，“你们真讨厌！”

他们甚至没有扭头看我，我生气地离开了他们。

我回到过道，周围每个人好像都在谈论他们刚刚见到的情景。我发现许多人纯粹是出于需要讲述一场经历而在夸夸其谈，就像他们在一场火灾或者意外之后可能会做的那样。走到礼堂前面的时候，我看见有两个女人在哭，还有一个女人在安慰她们说：“没关系，现在都结束了。现在都结束了。”大厅的这块区域弥漫着一股咖啡的香味，许多人紧握杯碟，喝着咖啡，好像在稳定自己的情绪。

就在那时，我突然想起，自己应该回到上面一层，去看看古斯塔夫怎么样了。于是，我挤过人群，穿过一处紧急出口，离开了礼堂。

我发现自己身在一个静悄悄、空荡荡的走廊里。与楼上的那条走廊相仿，这条走廊同样逐渐弯转延展，但它明显是供宾客使用的。地毯十分厚实，灯光柔和而温暖，墙壁上挂着镶金叶框的油画。我没料到走廊里竟然空无一人，一时间，我站在原地犹豫了起来，不知该走哪条路。接着，就在我开始抬步之时，我听到身后有一个声音喊道：

“瑞德先生！”

我转身看到霍夫曼站在走廊远处向我挥臂。他又叫了我一声，但不知何故，他依然牢牢地停在原处，所以无奈之下我只好折了回去。

“霍夫曼先生，”我边走边说，“刚才发生的事真是太不幸了。”

“一场灾难。一场十足的灾难。”

“真的是太不幸了。但霍夫曼先生，您千万不要太灰心。为保证今晚成功，您已经竭尽所能了。我不妨指出，我还没有出场呢。我向您保证，我会尽力让晚会重回掌控之中。实际上，先生，我在想，我们能不能取消原计划中的问答部分。鉴于所发生的事情，我建议我只做个演讲，讲些合宜切题的话。比方说，我会建议大家牢记布罗茨基先生在病倒之前赋予这场非凡演出的意义，还有我们应努力忠实于那演出的精神，诸如此类的话。自然啰，我会讲得简短些。然后，我也许会为布罗茨基先生，要不就是为了纪念他，献上我的独奏，全看他那时的情形了……”

“瑞德先生，”霍夫曼郑重地说道，这时我才意识到他一直没在听。他神情专注，一直在看着我，好像仅仅是为了寻找插话的机会。

“瑞德先生，有件事情我想跟您提一下。一件小事。”

“哦，什么事，霍夫曼先生？”

“小事一桩，至少对您来说吧。但对我，对我的妻子，却意义重大。”突然，他猛地向后甩了下胳膊，面容因为狂怒而扭曲起来。我以为他要打我，但我马上意识到，他是在指向身后走廊远处的一个地方。柔和的灯光下，我看到一个女人的侧影，她背对着我们，斜身靠在一处壁龛里。壁龛上有面镜子，她的头又几乎贴着镜玻璃，所以她的影子倾斜着映入其中。我看向那身影时，霍夫曼或许觉得他头一个手势没能让我明白，于是又一次猛地向后甩了甩胳膊。接着，他说道：

“我说的是，先生，我妻子的剪报册。”

“您妻子的剪报册。啊，是的。是的，她太客气了……但是，霍夫曼先生，现在不是时候……”

“瑞德先生，您还记得您答应过会看看的吧。而且我们约好了，出于对您的考虑，先生，我不会在您不方便的时间里打扰您，我们约好了——您不记得了吗，先生？——我们约好了个暗号的。您觉得准备好来看剪报册的时候，就会给我个暗号。您还记得吗，先生？”

“当然，霍夫曼先生。我本来十分愿意……”

“我一直在细心观察，瑞德先生。只要我看到您在酒店周围溜达，走过门廊，喝着咖啡，我就会想：‘啊，他好像有点空闲了。或许现在就是时候了。’我等着暗号，我细致观察，但结果怎么样呢？呸！现在，您到此地的访问即将结束，再过几个小时，您就要坐飞机去赫尔辛基，去赶赴下一个约定了！有很多次，先生，我以为自己可能错过了，我以为我转了一下身，等转回来时误将您打暗号结束时的动作当成了其他动作。当然，如果是那样的话，如果您已多次发出暗号，是我太愚钝而没能接收到，那么，我自然会毫无保留、厚着脸皮、低三下四地向您道歉，向您卑躬屈膝。但是我认为，先生，您没有发出过这样的暗号。换句话说，先生，您对待……对待……”他回头看了看走廊远处的身影，压低声音道，“您看不起我的妻子。瞧，剪报册！”

直到这时，我才发现他正抱着两大本册子。他把册子举到我面前。

“给您，先生。我妻子为您辉煌的事业而奉献的成果。她多么崇拜您啊。您看得出来吧。看看这一页页剪报册！”他使劲打开其中一本，而将另一本夹在胳膊下。“瞧，先生。甚至还有从不知名的杂志上剪下的小剪报。顺便提到的您的事情。您看，先生，她多么热爱您啊！瞧这儿，先生！还有这儿和这儿！而您甚至抽不出时间浏览一下这些册子。我现在该怎么对她说？”他又指了指走廊远处的那个身影。

“我很抱歉，”我开口道，“我非常抱歉。但您看，我在这儿的时间好像非常混乱。我本来十分愿意……”这时我意识到，在这个越来越混乱的夜晚，我至少得保持一个清醒的头脑。我稍停片刻，然后以命令的口吻说道：“霍夫曼先生，或许您的妻子听到我亲口说出诚挚的道歉，会更容易接受。很高兴今晚早些时间见到了她。或许您现在可领我过去，我们很快便能解决这件事了。接着，当然，我真的该上台了，讲几句有关布罗茨基先生的话，然后表演独奏。我父母尤其会不耐烦的。”

听到这番话，霍夫曼好像有点困惑。过了一会儿，他试图重新点燃之前的愤怒，说道：“看看这一页页剪报册，先生！看看吧！”但怒火已经熄灭，他有些窘迫地看着我。“那，我们走吧，”他低声道，声音中有种惊人的挫败感。“我们走吧。”

他又停了一会儿，我感觉他脑海中正翻腾着某些遥远的回忆。接着，他毅然决然地走向妻子，我跟在他身后几步。

我们走近时，霍夫曼太太转过身。我停在了几步开外，她越过丈夫直直地看向了我，说道：

“很高兴又见到您了，瑞德先生。不幸的是，今晚好像不如我们希望的那般顺利啊。”

“很遗憾啊，”我说道，“好像是不太顺利。”然后我上前一步，补充道：“此外，夫人，事情一件接着一件，我好像忽视了原本非常期待想做的许多事情。”

我期望她对此暗示有所回应，但她只是饶有兴致地盯着我，等着我继续。这时，霍夫曼清了清嗓子，说道：

“亲爱的，我……我知道你的心愿。”

他温柔一笑，举起了剪报册，一手拿着一本。

霍夫曼太太惊恐地看着他。“把剪报册给我，”她厉声道，“你没权利！给我。”

“亲爱的……”霍夫曼咯咯一笑，目光落在了双脚上。

霍夫曼太太仍旧伸着手，表情狂怒。酒店经理先递给她一本，然后是另一本。他妻子把每一本都迅速瞄了一眼以核实无误，接着，她尴尬地不知所措起来。

“亲爱的，”霍夫曼喃喃道，“我只是以为不会有什么坏处……”他的声音越说越小，然后他又笑了笑。

霍夫曼太太冷冷地看了他一眼，接着转身对我说道：“很抱歉，瑞德先生，我丈夫竟然觉得有必要用这等小事烦扰您。祝您晚安。”

她将册子塞进腋下，走开了。但是，她还没走出几步，霍夫曼突然惊呼道：

“小事？不，不！不是小事！科斯敏斯基的册子也不是。斯蒂凡·哈利尔的册子也不是。不是小事。但愿它们是。但愿我能相信它们是！”

他妻子停下脚步，但没有转身，我和霍夫曼盯着她的背影，她静静地站在走廊昏暗的灯光中。然后，霍夫曼朝她走了几步。

“今晚。一团糟。为什么假装那不关己事？为什么继续容忍我？年复一年，失误连连。青年节之后，你对我的耐心肯定已经荡然无存了。但不，你继续容忍我。接着是展览周。你仍然容忍我。你仍然给

了我一次机会。好吧，我求过你，我知道。我求你再给我一次机会。你不忍心拒绝我。总之，你给了我今晚这个机会。而我该怎么表现呢？今晚一团糟。我们的儿子，我们唯一的儿子，在全市最尊贵的市民面前，成了笑料。那是我的错，是的，我知道。是我在鼓励他。甚至在最后一刻，我知道应该制止他，但我没有勇气。我让他坚持到最后。相信我，亲爱的，我从未想过要这样啊！从一开始，我就对自己说，我明天会告诉他，等明天，有更多时间了，我们好好谈谈。明天，明天，我一直拖了下去。是的，我承认我软弱。甚至今晚，我刚才说，再过几分钟，我就告诉他，可是不，不，我做不到啊，他就继续了。是的，我们的斯蒂芬，他登台亮相，在世人面前，弹奏了钢琴！让人捧腹的笑料！啊，但愿只有这一半耻辱就好了！每个人，整个城市，都知道是谁负责今晚的节目。整个城市都知道谁负责布罗茨基先生的恢复。好啊，好啊，我不否认，我失败了，我没能让他恢复。他是个醉鬼，我从一开始就应该看出那毫无用处。今晚，我们说话之时，一切都在崩溃。甚至是瑞德先生，甚至他，现在也无法挽救这局面。他只是让我们更尴尬而已。世界上最好的钢琴家，我请他来干什么？参加这场丢脸的晚会？为何我会允许自己笨拙的双手贴近音乐、艺术、文化这样神圣的东西？你，来自一个才华横溢的家庭，你可以嫁给任何人。你却犯了如此的错误。一场悲剧啊！但对你来说，还不算太晚。你依然楚楚动人。你为何还要再等？你还需要什么证明？离开我吧，离开我。找一个配得上你的人。找个科斯敏斯基，哈利尔，瑞德，莱昂哈特吧。你怎么会犯这样的错误呢？离开我吧，我求你了，离开我！你明白做你的监狱长有多么可恨吗？不，更糟呢，我是你脚踝上的那条锁链！离开我，离开我！”突然间，霍夫曼弯腰向前，拳击前额，上演了今晚我之前见他排练过的那个动作。“我亲爱的，我亲爱的，离开我吧。我的地位已无望了。过了今晚，我的矫饰终于要结束了。他们全都会知道了，连城里最小的孩子都会知道了。从今晚起，他们无论何时看到我在为事业而奔走，他们都知道我一无所有。没有才华，没有悟性，没有技巧。离开我吧，离开我。我什么都不是，就是头牛，一头牛，一头牛！”

他又做了一遍那个动作，重捶前额，手肘怪异地突起。接着，他跪了下来，开始抽泣。

“一团糟啊！”他哭泣着喃喃道，“全都糟透了啊！”

此时，霍夫曼太太转过身，小心地看着她丈夫。她眼神柔和，几近渴望，好像没因丈夫这突然间的情绪爆发而有一丝惊讶。她犹豫地迈出了一步，接着又是一步，朝着霍夫曼佝偻的身体走了过去。接

着，慢慢地，她伸出一只手，仿佛是要轻抚他的头顶。这只手在霍夫曼的上方停留片刻，没有触碰头部，接着便抽了回去。下一刻，她急忙转身，消失在走廊深处。

霍夫曼继续抽泣着，显然未察觉妻子的任何动作。我看了他一会儿，不知如何是好。接着，我突然意识到，现在我必须上场演出了。我心潮澎湃，想到现在为止我还没能在这幢大楼的任何一个角落发现我父母的踪迹。刚才我对霍夫曼还近乎怜悯，但现在这种感觉突然变了，我走近他，对着他的耳朵大喊道：

“霍夫曼先生，也许你已经把今晚弄得一团糟了，但我不想被你拖下水。我要去表演。我要竭尽全力为活动恢复秩序。但首先，霍夫曼先生，我想知道我的父母到底怎么了？”

霍夫曼抬起头，发现妻子已经离他而去，略感吃惊。然后，他有些气恼地注视着我，站起身来。

“您想知道什么，先生？”他疲惫地问道。

“我的父母，霍夫曼先生。他们在哪儿？您向我保证过，你们会好好照料他们的。但之前我找过，他们不在观众席。我现在要上台了，希望我父母已安顿好。所以现在，先生，我必须请你回答我。他们在哪儿？”

“您的父母，先生。”霍夫曼深吸了口气，一只手疲倦地捋了捋头发。“您得问斯达特曼小姐。她直接负责照顾他们。我只管活动的大框架。您看，既然我在那方面已经彻底失败了，您就别指望我能回答您的问题……”

“是的，是的，是的。”我越发不耐烦起来，“那么，斯达特曼小姐在哪儿？”

霍夫曼叹了口气，朝我身后指了指。我转过身，看到身后有一扇门。

“她在那里面？”我厉声问道。

霍夫曼点了点头，接着，他蹒跚着走向那处装了镜子的壁龛（他妻子刚才一直站在那儿），看着自己的影像。

我猛地敲了敲那扇门。没有回应。我向霍夫曼投去了责备的一瞥。这会儿他弓身伏在了壁龛的壁架上。我正想对他发泄更多的愤

怒，突然，我听到里面传出了一声人声，喊我进去。我最后看了一眼霍夫曼弓起的身子，随即打开了门。

第三十六章

我发现自己身在一间宽敞的现代化办公室里，和这幢大楼里我所看到过的任何房间都不同。它是一座附属建筑，看上去完全由玻璃搭建而成。房间里没有灯光，我看到黎明终于来临。片片柔和的晨曦映射在一摞摞摇摇欲坠的纸堆、文件柜和散落在桌上的号码簿与文件夹上。办公室里共有三张桌子，但此时只有斯达特曼小姐一人在里面。

她好像很忙，而且，房间里光线很暗淡，难以自如地阅读或写作，而她居然把灯都关了，我觉得很奇怪。我只能猜测她只是暂时关掉而已，以欣赏远方树后日出的景色。事实上，我进去的时候，她正坐在桌旁，手拿电话听筒，两眼透过巨大的玻璃窗格空洞地凝望着外面。

“早上好，瑞德先生。”她转过身来和我打招呼，“我一会儿就好。”然后她继续对着话筒说道：“是的，五分钟左右。香肠也是。几分钟后就该开始煎了。还有水果。现在应该准备好了。”

“斯达特曼女士，”我走到她的桌前，“有些事情比何时该煎香肠更急迫。”

她飞快地抬起头，向我扫了一眼，再次说道：“我一会儿就好，瑞德先生。”接着她继续对着听筒说话，并开始记下什么东西。

“斯达特曼小姐，”我的口气生硬起来，“我得请你挂断电话听我说。”

“等一下，”斯达特曼女士对电话那头的人说，“有人在我这儿，我得招待下。马上回你电话。”说着她挂断了电话，盯视着我。“怎么了，瑞德先生？”

“斯达特曼小姐，”我说，“我们初次见面时，您就向我保证会把与我此次访问相关的方方面面全告知我。您会全方位地向我通告我的日程安排以及我需承担的各种事务。我相信您是个可以信赖的人。但是很抱歉，我觉得您大大辜负了我的期望。”

“瑞德先生，我不知您这番偏激之论缘于何故。您有什么特别不高兴的事情吗？”

“我对每件事都不高兴，斯达特曼小姐。我没有得到我所需的重要信息。也没人告知我我的日程在最后一分钟做了变更。在关键时刻，我也没有得到支持或帮助。结果呢，我未能按照自己的意愿为此行任务做好准备。但是，尽管如此，我仍打算一会儿就上台，尽力为你们挽救那将要成为灾难的夜晚。但是，在我做这些之前，我想问您一个简单的问题。我父母在哪里？他们之前就坐着马车过来了。而我刚才在礼堂里找他们的时候，却没有看到他们。我没有看到他们坐在包厢或前面的贵宾席上。所以我想再次问您，斯达特曼小姐，他们在哪儿？为什么他们没有像您承诺的那样得到细致的照料？”

斯达特曼小姐仔细地端详着晨光中的我，然后叹了一口气。

“瑞德先生，我本来一直打算要跟您说说这件事。几个月前，当您告诉我们您父母想来拜访我们城市的时候，我们大家都非常高兴。每个人都是发自内心的高兴。但是我必须提醒您，瑞德先生，我们是从您，仅仅是从您这儿听说他们打算来此地的。这么说吧，在过去的三天里，特别是今天，我已尽我所能想去查明他们到底在哪里。我三番五次地给机场、火车站、公交公司和本城的每一座酒店打电话，但仍没有发现他们的踪迹。没有人听说过他们，也没有人见到他们。现在，瑞德先生，我得问问您了。您确定他们会来这个城市吗？”

她正说着的时候，一连串疑问在我脑中掠过，我突然感觉内心里有什么东西开始崩溃。为了掩饰我的不安，我转过身，面向晨曦。

“嗯，”我终于开口了，“我当时是非常确定他们这次会来的。”

“您当时是很确定。”斯达特曼用一种苛责的目光盯视着我，显然刚才我大大刺激了她的职业自豪感。“难道您不知道，瑞德先生，为了恭候您父母的到来，这里的每个人都操透了心，费尽了神？医疗安排，殷勤款待，马匹车辆？本地几位女士花了几周的时间排练了一个节目，来给您的父母在逗留期间解解闷。现在您却说，您当时非常确定他们会来。”

“那是自然，”我笑道，“当时我要是不能十分确定，我也是绝不想给大家添麻烦的。但事实是——”我不禁又大笑一声，“事实是，我当时确定这次他们终于要来了。当然啰，我认为他们这次一定会来，也不是毫无道理吧？毕竟，我现在处于事业的巅峰。我还能再继续这样旅行多久呢？当然，如果我给任何人添了不必要的麻烦，我深感抱歉，但可以肯定不会出现这种情况。他们一定在这儿的某个地

方。况且，我听到他们了。我把车停在树林里的时候，我听到他们来了，听到了马车声。他们一定在这儿，一定在，这不是毫无道理的……”

我瘫倒在附近的一张椅子上，意识到自己开始抽泣。这时，我突然想到我父母来这城市的可能性是多么渺茫。我实在想不明白，自己怎么会对此事如此自信，居然还先后向霍夫曼和斯达特曼小姐讨要解释。我又继续抽泣了一会儿，然后发现斯达特曼小姐正站在我面前。

“瑞德先生，瑞德先生。”她轻柔地重复道。我抑制住眼泪，她和蔼地说：“瑞德先生。也许这里还没有人曾向您提起过这件事。但曾经有一次，那是好几年前了，您父母确实来过这座城市。”

我停止抽泣，抬头望着她。她冲我一笑，接着慢慢走向玻璃窗，再次凝视外面的晨光。

“他们一定是一起来度假的，”她说，目光依旧停在远处。“他们乘火车过来，在城里待了两三天。照我说，那是几年前的事情了，那时您还没有像现在这么声名显赫，但是，您也绝非无名之辈，所以呢，有个人，也许是他们住的酒店里的人，问他们是否和您有关系。您知道，他们这么问是因为他们的名字和他们是英国人。于是这件事就这么传开了，说这对和蔼、年迈的英国夫妇是您的父母。那时虽没有今天这般兴师动众，但他们着实被照顾得很周到。几年后，当您名声远扬时，人们想起了这件事，想起了您父母曾来过这里。我本人对他们的到访没有很多记忆，因为当时我还太小。不过我记得人们在谈论这件事。”

我仔细盯着她的后背。“斯达特曼小姐，您不会是为了安慰我才告诉我这些的吧？”

“不，不，全是真的。谁都可以证实我说的话。正如我所说，我当时只是个小孩，但这儿有很多人都可以告诉您这些。另外，这一切都被完好地记录在案。”

“那他们看上去开心吗？他们有没有一起欢笑，有没有享受度假？”

“我保证他们很开心，瑞德先生。大家都这么说，他们乐在其中。事实上，每个人都记得他们是非常开心的一对。彼此体贴，情投意合。”

“但……但我想问的是，斯达特曼女士，他们有没有得到很好的照顾？我想问的这个……”

“他们当然得到了很好的照料。而且他们很开心。在此逗留期间，他们一直都很开心。”

“您怎么记得这些的？您不是说您那时候还是个小女孩吗？”

“我所说的是每个人都记得的东西。”

“如果您说的是真的，那为什么在我来这儿的这段时间里没有人跟我提起过呢？”

斯达特曼小姐犹豫片刻，再次转向树林和晨曦。“我不知道，”她轻声说，摇了摇头。“我不知道为何会这样。但您说得对。人们没有像你想象的那样大谈特谈。但是这也没错啊，我向您保证。我从儿时就记得非常清楚。”

外面开始传来鸟儿的鸣叫声和歌唱声。斯达特曼小姐继续盯着远方的树木，也许童年时的其他记忆正在她脑海里浮现。我朝她望了一会，然后说：

“您说他们在这里受到了款待。”

“嗯，是的，”斯达特曼小姐几乎耳语道，双眼依旧盯着远方。“我肯定他们受到了款待。那一定是个春天，这儿的春天可美了。还有老城区，您已亲眼目睹它有多么迷人。过往的普通人会给他们指点一些地方。历史建筑、工艺品博物馆、桥梁。无论哪儿，假如他们想停下来喝杯咖啡，用些点心，却又不知道要点些什么——或许是因为语言的问题吧——服务员会非常热情地帮忙。噢，是的，他们一定非常享受在这里的时光。”

“可是你说他们是坐火车来的。有人帮他们拿行李吗？”

“火车站的搬运工会立刻帮他们的。把所有行李搬到出租车上，然后出租车司机会看管行李。把您父母送达酒店，就那样。我相信他们甚至都不用考虑行李的事儿。”

“酒店？是哪家酒店？”

“一家非常舒适的酒店，瑞德先生。那个时候最好的酒店之一。他们一定非常喜欢那里。享受在那里的每分每秒。”

“我希望酒店离主干道不是很近。我母亲历来讨厌交通噪音。”

“那时候，当然，交通并不像现在这样是个大问题。我记得小时候我经常跟伙伴们在居民区的街上跳绳或者打球。毫无疑问，今天的孩子们可不行啦！噢，是的，我以前常那样，有时一玩就是几个小时。不过回到您的问题，瑞德先生，”斯达特曼小姐转向我，面带怅惘的微笑，“您父母那时住的酒店远离交通要道。是家田园式的酒店。它现在已不复存在，但如果您愿意，我可以给您看张照片。您想看吗？您父母住的那家酒店？”

“非常想看，斯达特曼小姐。”

她又笑了笑，穿过房间，走向桌边。我以为她想打开一个抽屉，但在最后一刻她改变方向，走向办公室的后墙。她举起一只手，拉住一根粗线，开始往下拉一幅像挂图似的东西。我马上发现那不是挂图，而是一幅彩色大照片。她继续往下拉，几乎拉至地面，滚轴发出“咔哒”一声，紧紧卡住了。她走回写字台，打开阅读台灯，将光束导向那幅照片。

接下来的一段时间里，我们俩静静地看着眼前的这幅照片。酒店看上去像是一座缩小版的童话城堡，由上世纪的疯狂国王建造而成。它矗立在一处陡峭峡谷的边缘，峡谷覆满蕨草和春花。照片是在一个风和日丽的日子从山谷背面拍摄的，构图明快悦目，很适合做成明信片或日历。

“我相信您父母当时就住在这个房间。”我听到斯达特曼小姐说。她不知从哪儿弄来了一根指示棒，指了指酒店一座角楼上的一扇窗户。“您看，他们可以看到很美的风景。”

“是的，没错。”

斯达特曼将指示棒朝下指，但我继续盯着那窗户，努力想象窗外的景象。特别是我母亲，她一定会喜欢这样的景致。即使是在艰难的日子里，即使她需要长期卧床，她依旧会因这样的景色而深感欣慰。她会看着微风吹过峡谷，拂动蕨草和树上的绿叶，树木盘根交错地沿远处山谷的斜坡攀援而上。她也一定会喜欢眼前广阔的天空。我注意到照片中最前面——右边一角，横穿底部——有一截山路，很有可能摄影师就是从这儿拍摄的。几乎可以确定，我母亲会从她的房间里看到这条山路。这样她就可以一窥远处那转瞬即逝的当地生活。奇特的车子或杂货车会从中经过，甚至也许是一辆二轮马车；有时是一辆拖拉机，或者是几个徒步远足的孩子。这些景象必定会让她无比开心。

最后，当我继续看着窗户的时候，我又开始哭了，并不像刚才那样无法抑制，但泪水盈满了我的眼眶，流下脸颊。斯达特曼小姐注意到了我的眼泪，但这次她好像觉得没有必要制止。她朝我微微一笑，然后转回那幅照片。

突然，房门上响起了一下敲门声，我被吓了一跳。斯达特曼小姐也愣了一下，说了声“抱歉，瑞德先生”，然后径直朝门口走去。

我转过身，看到一位身着白色制服的男子走了进来，身后拉着一辆餐车。他将车子放在门槛的中间，顶开那道门，然后望着窗外的晨光。

“今天是个好天气，”他说，依次冲我们微微一笑。“您的早餐，小姐。要把它放在那张桌子上吗？”

“早餐？”斯达特曼小姐一脸茫然。“应该是再过半个小时送过来的嘛。”

“冯·温特斯坦先生吩咐现在开始供应早餐，小姐。我觉得他是 对的。一般人都在这个时间用早餐。”

“噢。”斯达特曼小姐依然一脸困惑，她回头朝我看了一眼，仿佛在寻求帮助。随后她问那位男子：“外面的一切……都好吗？”

“现在一切都好，小姐。当然，布罗茨基先生晕倒之后，有过一阵恐慌，但现在大家都很开心，很享受。您看，冯·温特斯坦先生刚才在门厅做了一场精彩的演讲，他说这座城市有辉煌的历史文化遗产，值得我们引以为傲。他提到在过去的岁月中我们取得了许多成就，指出了其他城市所面临的糟糕问题，而那些问题在我们这里都根本无需担忧。这也是我们所需要的，小姐。很遗憾您没有在场聆听。听了那演讲，我们大家都为自己和我们的城市感到高兴，现在人人都怡然自得。瞧，那儿有几个人。”他指了指窗外，果然，外面微弱的灯光中，依稀可以见到几个人影小心翼翼地端着盘子缓慢地走过草地，在寻找地方坐下。

“抱歉，”我边说边站了起来，“我得去表演了。要迟到了。斯达特曼小姐，感谢您的好意，谢谢这一切。但现在请原谅我的离开。”

还没等她回应，我便匆匆挤过早餐车，奔向走廊。

第三十七章

一道苍白的晨光渗入这条幽暗的走廊。我朝那处镶着镜面的壁龛望去（刚才我就是在那里离开霍夫曼的），但他已经不在了。我朝礼堂方向快步走去，一路经过那些镶着金框的油画，途中遇到了另一位推着早餐车的侍者，当时他在俯身敲一扇门，但是，除了他以外，走廊里空无一人。

我继续匆匆赶路，四处寻找那个紧急出口，原先我正是从那里进入这条走廊的。此时此刻，我心中有股相当强烈的冲动，想着手开始演出。我突然意识到，无论我经历了怎样的失望，都无法减少我对大家的责任，为了看我坐在他们面前演奏钢琴，他们已经等待了好几星期。换句话说，今晚至少应以我惯常的水准演奏，这是我的职责所在。达不到这一点——我突然有种强烈的预感——就势必打开一扇奇怪的大门，把我带入黑暗未知的空间。

过了一会儿，走廊变得陌生起来。墙纸变成了深蓝色，签名照替代了油画，我意识到我已错过了那扇门。我发觉自己正朝着另一扇外观更加结实的大门走去，上面写着“舞台”的字样，于是，我决定由此进入。

在黑暗中摸索了几秒之后，我发现自己又一次来到了侧厢。我看见钢琴放在空旷的舞台中央，一两盏灯从上方投下昏暗的光亮。我还看到幕布依旧拉着，于是悄悄走上了舞台。

我俯视了一下布罗茨基早前躺过的地方，但现在已看不到任何痕迹。然后我又回头扫了一眼钢琴，不知如何是好。假如我就这样坐在凳子上开始演奏，技师们也许就会心有灵犀，拉开幕布，打开聚光灯。然而，也还有可能——谁也说不准到底发生了什么——技师们早就离岗，幕布根本不会打开。更何况，我上一次见到观众的时候，他们就站在一边心神不定地在聊天。我当机立断，最好就是走出帷幕，通告众人，给大家——观众和技师——做好相应准备的机会。我在脑海中迅速排练了几句台词，然后毫不迟疑地走向褶皱空隙处，拉开了厚重的帷幕。

我已经对礼堂可能的混乱做好了心理准备，但映入眼帘的一幕还是让我大吃一惊。不仅观众完全消失不见，所有的坐席也都不复存

在。我突然想到，这座大厅也许有某种装置，只要拉动机关，全部座椅就会遁入地板，这样礼堂的面积就翻了一番，可用作舞池或其他场地。但我随即想起了这座建筑的建造年代，觉得这完全不可能。我只能猜想，这些曾经堆叠放置的座椅，现在都已悉数清除，以防火灾。总之，在我眼前的是一个巨大、昏暗、空旷的场地。没有任何灯光，却随处可见天花板上的大块长方形挡板都已被卸走，一束束惨白的日光直接洒落在地板上。

我透过混浊的光线凝望，感觉可以辨认出有些人影还在大厅后部。他们好像站成一圈在开会——或许他们是舞台工作人员，在完成清理工作——接着，我听到了其中一人大步走离某处的脚步声。

我站在舞台边，思考着接下来怎么办。我想，我在斯达特曼小姐的办公室里呆的时间比想象的要长得多——可能长达一个小时了吧——很明显，观众已经放弃希望，认为我不会出现了。然而，如果发份通告，几分钟之内客人们就可以重聚在礼堂，而且即使座位已不翼而飞，我也不觉有任何理由不能上演一场称心如意的独奏。不过，我倒不清楚人们都到哪里去了，而且我意识到，我得首先找到霍夫曼或者现在的负责人，讨论下一步行动。

我爬下舞台，穿过大厅。还没走到一半，我就感觉自己迷失在黑暗中，于是我稍稍改变了方向，朝离我最近的那束光走去。正走着，一个身影从我眼前掠过。

“噢，抱歉，”面前的人说道，“请您原谅。”

我听出了斯蒂芬的声音，回答道：“你好！呃，至少你还在这儿。”

“噢，瑞德先生。对不起，我没有看见您。”他听起来既疲惫又沮丧。

“你真的应该更加高兴才对，”我对他说道，“你的演出很精彩。观众们都被打动了。”

“是啊。是的，我觉得他们确实给了我很大的支持。”

“那么，祝贺你啦！一番辛劳之后，一定很满足吧。”

“是啊，我想是的。”

我们开始在黑暗中相伴而行。此时，天花板上倾泻而下的日光让人更难辨别方向，但斯蒂芬却好像熟门熟路。

“您知道，瑞德先生，”他说，“我十分感谢您。您一直以来都给了我巨大的鼓励。可是，我今晚没有达到目标。反正没达到我自己的水准。当然，观众给了我热烈的掌声，但那是因为他们没有料到会有如此奇特的事情。不过，说真的，我知道自己还有很长的一段路要走。我父母是对的。”

“你父母？天哪，你不应该担心他们。”

“不，不是这样，瑞德先生，您不明白。我父母，您看，他们的标准可高啦。今晚来的人，他们都很友善，但说真的，他们对这些事情知之甚少。他们看到一位当地小伙有一定的演奏水平就非常兴奋。但我希望以真正的标准来衡量自己。而我知道，我父母也是如此。瑞德先生，我已经决定了。我要走出去。我要到更大的地方去，师从像鲁伯金和佩鲁齐这样的大师。我现在意识到，在这里，我永远达不到我想要的水平，在这座城市不行。看看他们，在一场十分平常的《玻璃激情》演奏结束后，看看他们鼓掌的样子吧。基本上就可以这么概括。我以前不明白，但我想您可以称我是小池塘里的一条大鱼吧。我该出去一下。出去看看我到底能做出什么成绩。”

我们继续走着，脚步声在礼堂中回荡。我接过他的话头：

“或许那倒是个明智的决定。其实，我肯定你是对的。到一个更大的城市，接受更大的挑战，我确信这对你大有好处。不过你必须慎重选择要师从谁。如果你愿意，我倒可以思量一下，看看能有啥法子。”

“瑞德先生，若那样，我将终身感激。是的，我得看看自己究竟有多大能耐。然后，某一天，我将重新回到这里，大显身手。好好给他们展示该怎样真正演奏《玻璃激情》。”他笑了笑，但那笑声还是十分不悦。

“你是个有才华的年轻人。你有锦绣前程。真的该振奋精神才对啊。”

“我也是这样想。我觉得我只是有点胆怯。直到今晚我才意识到，眼前有多大一座山峰等待我去攀登。您也许觉得这十分可笑，但您知道吗，我直到今天才明白。生活在这样一个地方，影响不言自明啊。你的思想格局会很小。是的，我以为今晚会上大功夫呢！您看，此前我的想法是多么荒唐。我父母十分正确。我还需要学习很多东西。”

“你父母？听着，我的建议是，眼下你得彻底忘掉父母的要求。我不妨说，我真的不理解他们怎么能……”

“啊，我们到了。这边走。”我们来到一个门口，斯蒂芬此刻拉开一块门帘。“它正是从这里通过的。”

“不好意思，是什么通过这里？”

“暖房。噢，或许您没听说过这个暖房。它其实挺有名的。在大厅建成一百年后落成，但现在几乎已经和它齐名了。那是大家去吃早饭的地方。”

我们来到一条走廊里，走廊一侧是长长的一排窗户。透过较近的一扇窗户，我可以望见清晨淡蓝色的天空。

“顺便问一句，”我们又开始往前走了起来，这时我说道，“不知布罗茨基先生怎么样了。他是否健康。他……是不是去世了？”

“布罗茨基先生？喔，没有啊，他会好起来的，我相信。他们把他送到某个地方去了。实际上，我听说他们把他送到了圣尼古拉斯专科医院。”

“圣尼古拉斯专科医院？”

“那是个收容穷苦人的地方。刚才大家在暖房里还在议论呢，都说，这下好了，那正是他该去的地方，在那儿，人们知道怎样处理他这样的问题。说实话，我有些震惊。事实上——我私下告诉您吧，瑞德先生——正是那一切促使我下了决心。我指的是离开此地这件事。在我看来，布罗茨基先生今晚的演出是许许多多年来在这音乐厅里最为曼妙动听的。当然它也是我的音乐欣赏史上最精彩的演出了。但是，您看到了实际情形。他们不喜欢这种音乐，这种音乐把他们吓了一跳。这大大超出了他们的料想。他那样倒下了，他们着实安心了许多。现在他们意识到想要别的东西。一些不那么极端的東西。”

“也许是某种与克里斯托弗先生相差不大的东西。”

斯蒂芬想了想。“有一点点区别。至少是个新的名字。他们现在意识到克里斯托弗不怎么样。他们确实想要更好的东西。但……但不是那样的。”

透过窗户，我看见了外面宽阔的草坪，太阳从远处的那排树木上方冉冉升起。

“你觉得布罗茨基先生现在怎么样了？”我问道。

“布罗茨基先生？噢，他会回到一直以来的那个老样子。我想，以酒度日吧。他们肯定不会轻易允许他改变，今晚以后肯定不会。正如我所说，他们把他送到了圣尼古拉斯专科医院。我在这里长大，瑞德先生，从许多方面讲，我依然热爱这座城市。但是，现在我渴望离开。”

“也许我该尽力说些什么吧。我的意思是，跟暖房里的人说上几句。说说布罗茨基先生，让他们正确看待他。”

斯蒂芬思虑了一会儿，摇了摇头。

“不必，瑞德先生。”

“但是我必须说，我跟你一样，也不喜欢这样。你根本不知道。我讲上几句话……”

“我并不这样认为，瑞德先生。他们现在甚至不会听您的了。自布罗茨基先生的那场演出之后，他们就不会再听您的了。那使他们想起了他们所恐惧的一切。况且，暖房里没有任何麦克风，甚至连个讲台都没有。嘈杂声此起彼伏，没人听得见您说的话。您看，暖房很大，几乎赶上礼堂那么大。从一个角落到另一个角落，肯定得有……呃，即使你保持绝对笔直的对角线，将一路上所有的桌子以及落座的宾客推到一边，距离至少仍有五十米。您将看到，那是一个很大的地方。我要是您，瑞德先生，我现在就会很轻松地享用我的早餐。毕竟，您还得考虑赫尔辛基之行呢。”

暖房果真很大，此时正沐浴在晨光中。人们在愉快交谈着，有些围坐在桌旁，有些站成一群。我看到人们正在喝咖啡或果汁，吃着盘中或碗中的食物。我们从人群中走过时，新鲜的蛋卷、鱼糕以及咸肉的香味儿依次扑鼻而来。我看见侍者端着餐盘和咖啡壶来回穿梭。在我周围，人们欢声笑语，互致问候，我突然觉得这整个气氛颇像是一场重聚联欢会。可是，这些人却是时常相互见面的。显然，今晚的活动使他们得以深刻地重估自我以及他们的社团，而最终的氛围——不管出于什么原因——显得颇为喜庆。

我现在明白了，斯蒂芬是对的，我想给这群人讲话实在是没有意义，更别提请他们回到礼堂去听我的独奏了。我突然感到又累又饿，就决定坐下来吃点早餐。然而，我环顾四周，却没有看见一张空椅子。而且，我转身后发现斯蒂芬已不在我身旁，而是在跟我们刚刚路过的一桌人攀谈。我看着他们向他热情问候，隐隐期待他能把我介绍给大家。但是，他好像沉浸在交谈中，很快也露出一副开心的样子。

我决定不管他，自己继续前行。我想早晚会有一个侍者发现我，会端着盘子和咖啡快步向我走来，也许还会帮我找到个座位。可是，尽管确实有个侍者好几次匆匆朝我走来，但他每次都从我身旁而过，我只能眼睁睁看着他为其他人服务。

过了一会儿，我发现自己正站在距离暖房正门很近的地方。有人已经打开大门，许多宾客纷纷拥向草坪。我走了出去，外面寒气袭人。但是，这里也一样，人们聚在一起交谈，喝着咖啡或者吃着东西。一些人已经面向朝阳，另一些人则四处闲逛，伸展双腿。有群人甚至坐在了湿漉漉的草地上，盘子和咖啡壶摊在四周，好像在野餐似的。

我看见不远处的草地上有一辆餐车，一位侍者正弯腰忙碌着。我越发饿了，于是向餐车走去，我正要拍那侍者的肩膀，他突然转过身，匆匆从我身边跑开，臂膊上压着三只大盘子——我瞥了一眼，只见上面放着鸡蛋、香肠、蘑菇和番茄。我眼睁睁地看着他匆忙离开，于是决定就在原地等他回来。

在等他的时候，我观察了一下周围的景致，发现自己完全不必担心能否应对这个城市的各种要求。一如往昔，事实已经充分证明，我有足够的经验和直觉帮自己渡过难关。当然，对今晚，我是感到有些失望，但是，进一步思考以后，我就明白了这种感觉不合时宜。毕竟，假如一个社会无须受外人的指引即可达至某种平衡，那是再好不过了。

过了几分钟，侍者还是没有回来——这期间，餐车上的热罐子散发出各种诱人的香味，撩得我垂涎欲滴——我当机立断，自己动手也未尝不可。我拿了个餐盘，正弯腰在下面几层寻找器皿，突然意识到有几个人站在我的身后。我转过身，看到了迎宾员们。

我认出来了，上次围聚在古斯塔夫病床边的这十几个人，现在全出现在了 my 面前。我转身时，有几位垂下了眼睛，但还有几个继续逼视着我。

“我的天哪，”我极力想掩饰自己亲手取用早餐的意图。“我的天哪，怎么了？不用说，我本来是想去探问古斯塔夫的境况的。我以为他已经去医院了。那就是说，他被照料得很好。我当然正准备去看他……”他们脸上流露出悲伤的神情，我打住了话头。

络腮胡迎宾员走上前，不自在地咳嗽了一声。“他半个小时前刚刚去世了，先生。这些年，他一直生活坎坷，但身体都很健康，所以

对他的死我们都很意外。太意外了。”

“我很难过。”听到这消息，我真的很难过。“真的很难过。非常感激你们，感激大家专程来告诉我。正如你们所知，我认识他才几天，但他一直对我很好，帮我拿包呀，等等。”

我看到络腮胡迎宾员的同伴们都正看着他，怂恿他再说些什么。他深吸了一口气。

“当然，瑞德先生，”他说，“我们来这里找您，是因为我们知道您想尽快知道这消息。可是，”他突然垂下目光，“可是，您看，先生，在他去世前，古斯塔夫，他一直想知道。一直想知道您是不是做过了演讲。就是，就是您将代表我们做的那个简短的演讲，先生。直到最后，他都非常想听到这消息。”

此时，所有迎宾员都垂下了双眼，静静等待我的回答。

“啊，”我说道，“这么说来，你们到现在还不知道礼堂里发生了什么喽。”

“我们刚才一直守在古斯塔夫身边，先生，”胡子迎宾员说道，“他刚刚才被抬走。您得原谅我们，瑞德先生。您做演讲的时候，我们都不在，这十分失礼，特别承蒙您还记得您那小小的承诺……”

“哎，”我礼貌地打断他，“很多事情都没能按计划进行。我很吃惊你们到现在还未听说，不过我觉得，正如你们所说，在这样的情况下……”我停顿片刻，做了个深呼吸，然后更加坚定地说：“我很抱歉，但事实上，许多事情，包括我为了你们准备的这一场演说，都没能按原计划进行。”

“先生，那么您是说……”络腮胡迎宾员的声音越来越低，其他迎宾员刚才一直盯视着我，这会儿他们一个个又垂下了目光。接着，站在人群后面的一个人近乎愤怒地大喊起来：

“古斯塔夫一直在问。直到最后都在问‘瑞德先生有消息了吗？’他一直都在这样问！”

几位同伴很快让他镇静了下来，随后是一阵长长的沉默。最后，始终低头看着草坪的络腮胡迎宾员开口道：

“那没关系。我们会一如既往，继续努力。事实上，我们将尽更大的努力。我们绝不让古斯塔夫失望。他始终是我们的精神支柱，尽管现在他离世了，但一切都不会变。我们得艰苦奋斗，我们一直都这

样，我们知道的，将来也不会更加轻松。但我们不会降低标准，一点都不会。我们会铭记古斯塔夫，我们会坚持不懈。当然，您的演说，先生，如果可能的话，一定会……一定有助于我们，这是无可置疑的。但当然啰，如果那时您不方便……”

“哎，”我渐渐失去了耐心，“你们很快就会知道到底发生什么事了。真的，我很吃惊，你们都不大关心公共大事。还有，你们似乎都不知道我过的是一种什么样的生活，不知道我得承担多大的责任。即使是现在，我站在这里和你们讲话，我还得考虑后面的赫尔辛基之行。所以，如果万事都不如你们所愿，那我深感抱歉。可是，你们无权像现在这样来纠缠我……”

我慢慢收起了话头。在我右边的远处，有一条小径从音乐大厅通往周边的树林。有那么一会儿，我留意到人们从大楼里涌出来，消失在树林后——也许，他们想趁天亮前赶回家，再休息上一两个小时。这时我认出了索菲和鲍里斯，他们果断地沿着小径前行。小男孩再次一手搂着妈妈，但除此之外，漫不经心的旁观者不会注意到他们的痛苦。我试图一窥他们脸上的表情，但他们离得太远了，很快他们也消失在了树林后。

“很抱歉，”我转过身，更加轻柔地说道，“但请你们原谅。”

“我们绝不降低标准。”络腮胡迎宾员静静地说，他仍然盯视着地面。“总有一天，我们能做到的。您看着吧。”

“请原谅。”

我正要离开，侍者就匆匆赶回来了，他推开老人们，走到餐车旁。我想起餐盘还被我藏在身后，便一把递给了他。

“今天早上的服务简直太不像话了。”我冷冷地说道，然后快步离开。

第三十八章

林间是一条笔直的小路，我可以清楚地看到小路尽头那扇高高的铁门。索菲和鲍里斯已经走得很远，我虽极力追赶了几分钟，却仍未能缩短我们之间的距离。各种各样的阻碍无法令我加快脚步。走在我前面的是一小群年轻人，每当我想超过他们的时候，他们就稍稍加快脚步，或者分散开来把整条小路占了。最后，当我看到远处索菲和鲍里斯已经快要到街上了的时候，我再也不管会给他们留下什么印象，冲过前面这群人狂奔起来。

此后，我一路稳步小跑，但当索菲和鲍里斯经过那扇门的时候，我还是跟他们相隔很远。等我到达那扇门时，我已气喘吁吁，不得不停下来喘口气。

穿过大门便是靠近城市中心的林荫大道。清晨的阳光照亮了对面的人行道。商店都还没有开门，街上走着一些去上班的人。我看到左边一些人正排着队要上电车，索菲和鲍里斯排在最后。我再次奔跑起来，但电车必定比我想象的要远得多，因为尽管我步履飞快，但一直到整支队伍都已经上了车我才赶到，而此时电车正要开动。于是我只能疯狂地挥手，才成功拦下司机，拼命挤上了车。

电车颠簸前行，我摇摇晃晃地在中间过道上走着。我跑得上气不接下气，只隐隐注意到车厢有一半满。我走到车厢后部，瘫倒在一个座位上，这时我才记起，我一定已经从索菲和鲍里斯身边走过了。我喘着粗气，侧身靠向一边，回头沿通道看去。

车厢被中间的出口处明显分成两部分。前半节车厢里是面对面的长长两排座位，我看到索菲和鲍里斯同坐在向阳的一侧，离司机不远。中间的出口处站着几位乘客，他们抓着拉手吊环，遮住了我的视线，我只得又向中间过道倾斜身子。这时，坐在我对面的那位先生——后半节车厢里的座位是设置成两张面对面的——拍了下大腿，说道：

“看样子，今天又是个大晴天。”

他穿着一件短拉链夹克，看起来既朴素又整洁，我猜他可能是一个技工——也许是个电工吧。我飞快地朝他笑了笑，他便开始讲他和同事前几天在里面工作的一幢大楼。我并不怎么专心地听他讲着，偶

尔冲他笑笑，作些表示同意的回应。与此同时，由于更多的人站起来挤到了出口处，我就更难看清索菲和鲍里斯了。

电车停了，乘客们下了车，我的视野顿时清晰起来。鲍里斯看起来还是像往常一样镇静，他把一只手搭在索菲的肩上，满腹狐疑地盯着其他乘客，好像他们对他母亲构成了威胁。我依旧看不清索菲的表情，只能看到隔几秒钟她就恼怒地挥挥手，可能在赶一只在她旁边乱飞的虫子。

我正想再次调整姿势，突然发觉那个电工不知怎的说起了他的父母。他告诉我，他的父母都已经八十多了，虽然他尽量每天都去看他们一次，但由于现在的这份工作，他越来越难做到这样了。我突然想起了什么，打断他道：

“抱歉，不过说起父母，好像我的父母很多年来过这座城市。只是来旅游观光的，您知道。距今已经好多年了吧。只是，告诉我这件事的那个人当时也只是个小孩，也记不大清了。所以我在想，既然我们谈起了父母——当然，我不是有意冒犯，您现在大概已经五十来岁了吧——不知您本人是否还记得他们来访过。”

“很有可能，”那个电工说道，“但是你得先描述一下他们。”

“嗯，我母亲个子很高，一头及肩黑发，鹰钩鼻，看上去颇为严厉，甚至无意严厉时也如此。”

电工想了一会儿，看着窗外掠过的城市风光。“嗯，”他点了点头，说道，“嗯，我想我记得那样一位女士。只有几天时间而已。四处观光，诸如此类的事情。”

“对。那么您想起来了？”

“嗯。她看上去非常和蔼。噢，那至少是十三四年前的事了。可能比那还要长。”

我激动地点点头。“这就跟斯达特曼小姐告诉我的对上号了。对，那就是我的母亲。告诉我，她在这儿过得好吗？”

电工仔细想了想，说：“我记得，她好像很喜欢这儿，对。事实上——”他好像看出了我脸上的关切，“事实上，我肯定她过得很好。”他向前倾了倾身，很有礼貌地拍了拍我的膝盖。“我非常肯定她在这儿很开心。呃，只要稍微想一想就知道。她一定很开心，是不是？”

“我想是的。”说着我把头扭向窗外。阳光照进了整个车厢内部。“我想是的，只是……”我深深叹了口气，“我只是希望我当时就知道。希望那时有人想到过告诉我。那我父亲呢？他看上去开心吗？”

“你父亲，嗯……”电工交叉起双臂，微微皱眉。

“他那时候一定特别瘦，”我说道，“头发花白，穿一件他最喜欢的夹克，粗花呢的，浅绿色，肘上有一块皮革补丁。”

电工继续回忆着，最后他摇了摇头，说道：“对不起，我不记得您父亲了。”

“那不可能。斯达特曼小姐很肯定地告诉我，他们是一起来的。”

“我肯定她说得没错。只是我自己记不起您的父亲了。您的母亲我记得，但您的父亲……”他又摇了摇头。

“可是，那太荒谬了！我母亲一个人来这里干什么？”

“我不是说您父亲没有和您母亲在一起。只是我记不起他了。听我说，别这么难过。要是我知道这会让您如此不安，我就不这么坦率了。我的记性很差，大家都这么说。就在昨天，我在小舅子家里吃午饭时，还把自己的工具箱忘在那儿了呢。我又浪费了四十分钟回去拿。我的工具箱啊！”他笑了笑，“您看，我的记性实在很差。像这样重要的事情，我是最不值得信任的一个人。我肯定您父亲一定跟您母亲在一起，尤其是如果别人也这样说的话。真的，我是最不可以信赖的人。”

但此时我已经扭过头，不再看他，开始再次看向车厢前部，鲍里斯终于控制不住他的情绪了。他扑进妈妈的怀里，肩膀随着抽泣不由自主地抖动。突然，我觉得好像没有比走向他更重要的事了。于是，我匆忙向电工说了句“对不起”，起身向车厢前部走去。

就在我快要走到他们身边时，电车突然一个急转弯，我不得不抓住车的横杆才没有摔倒。当我再看他们时，发现他们还是没有注意到我在靠近他们，尽管此时我正站在离他们很近的地方。他们依然紧紧相拥，闭着双眼。片片阳光洒在他们的胳膊和肩膀上。此时此刻，他们沉浸在自己的天地中，彼此安慰，仿佛连我都无法侵扰。我继续注视着他们，尽管他们显得痛苦不堪，但我的心中浮起一种奇怪的嫉妒感。我又向他们靠近了些，直至几乎可以感受到他们真切的拥抱。

索菲终于睁开了眼睛。她面无表情地看着我，小男孩继续靠在她的怀中哭泣。

“我很难过，”我终于开口了，“我对这一切很难过。我刚刚才听说了你父亲的事。当然，我一听说就赶来了……”

她脸上的表情阻止了我继续说下去。又过了一会儿，她还是对我很冷漠。最后她疲惫地说道：

“走开。你一直都徘徊在我们爱的门外。现在，看看你吧。你也同样无法走入我们的悲痛中。别管我们。你走吧。”

鲍里斯离开他母亲的怀抱，转身看着我，然后对母亲说：“不，不。我们要在一起。”

索菲摇了摇头。“不，没用的。随他去吧，鲍里斯。让他去闯荡世界，贡献他的专长和才智。他需要那么做。咱们放手让他去吧。”

鲍里斯困惑地看着我，然后又看看他妈妈。也许他是想要说些什么，但这时索菲站了起来。

“快点，鲍里斯。我们得在这儿下车了。鲍里斯，快点。”

电车正慢慢停下来，乘客们陆续从座位上站起身。一些人从我身边穿过，索菲和鲍里斯也挤过去了。我抓着横杆，看见鲍里斯沿中间的过道朝出口走去。就在那时他回头看看我，我听见他说：

“我们一定要在一起。一定要。”

然后我看见站在他后面的索菲，她怪异而冷漠地盯着我，我听到她说：

“他永远不会成为我们的一员。你得明白，鲍里斯。他永远不会像一个真正的父亲那样爱你。”

更多的人从我身边走过。我举起手。

“鲍里斯！”我喊道。

鲍里斯在人群中踌躇，再一次回头看我。

“鲍里斯！那次公共汽车之行，你还记得吗？那次乘公共汽车去人工湖。你还记得那有多好吗？车上每个人对我们都多友好啊。他们送给我们小礼物，一路歌唱。你还记得吗，鲍里斯？”

乘客们现在已经开始下车。鲍里斯最后看了我一眼，便从我的视线中消失了。更多的人从我身边走过，电车再一次开动了。

过了一会儿，我转身回到自己的座位上，再一次坐在了那个电工对面。他满脸堆笑。我发现他倾身向前，拍了拍我的肩膀，我这才意识到自己正在抽泣。

“听着，”他说道，“一切事情当时看来总是很糟糕。但是，一旦过去，就不会那么糟了。振作起来吧。”他继续说着这些空洞的话语，而我则一直抽泣不止。接着我听到他说：“来，来吃点早餐吧。像我们一样吃点东西。你一定会感觉好一点的。来吧。去吃点东西。”

我抬头看了看他，看见他的膝盖上有一只盘子，盘子上有一个吃了一半的羊角面包和一小块黄油。他的膝盖上全是面包屑。

“啊，”我挺直身子，恢复了镇静，说道，“你从哪儿拿的这个？”

电工指了指我肩膀后面。我转过身，看到一群乘客站在电车的正后方，那里有自助餐供应。我同时又发现，整个后半节车厢都非常拥挤，我们周围所有的乘客都在吃喝。与很多人的早餐相比，电工的早餐可谓简单素净。此刻我可以看见，人们从盛着鸡蛋、培根、西红柿、香肠的大盘子中间走过。

“来，”电工再一次说道，“去给你自己拿些早餐，然后我们来谈谈你所有的坎坷。或者如果你愿意的话，我们可以忘了这一切，聊聊你喜欢的事，只要能让你振作起来，什么都行。足球啊，电影呀，任何你喜欢的事情。但是，你现在要做的第一件事就是去吃早餐。你好像已经好久没吃东西了。”

“你说得很对，”我说，“现在我想起来了，我是好久没吃东西了。但请你先告诉我，这辆电车是要去哪里呀？我得回我住的酒店打包行李。你知道，我今天早上要乘飞机去赫尔辛基，必须马上先回酒店。”

“噢，这辆电车几乎可以载你到这座城市的任何一个地方。这就是我们所说的早间环线。还有夜间环线。电车一天两趟，环城走完全线。噢，是的，你可以乘这辆车到任何地方。晚上也一样，但是晚上的气氛会很不一样。噢，是的，这是一辆很不可思议的电车。”

“太好了。那么，请原谅我，我会接受你的建议，吃点早餐。其实，你说得很对。甚至单单想想这个就让我感觉好多了。”

“这种精气神才对嘛。”说完，电工拿起羊角面包向我致意。

我站起身，走向车厢后部。各种香味扑鼻而来。很多人在那儿就餐，但是越过他们的肩膀，我看到在电车后窗的下面摆放着一个大大的半圆形自助餐台。那儿的食物几乎应有尽有：炒鸡蛋，煎蛋，一系列冷盘肉和腊肠，爆炒土豆，蘑菇，熟番茄，还有一大盘鲑鱼卷和其他鱼类配品，两大篮羊角面包和不同种类的卷饼，一大玻璃碗的新鲜水果，很多壶咖啡和果汁。围在自助餐台前的每个人好像都在争先恐后地想拿取食物，但气氛显得非常亲切友好，人们互相传递食物，开心地攀谈着。

我拿了一只盘子，抬起头，透过后车窗看着渐行渐远的城市街道，感觉精神更加昂扬。毕竟，事情没有那么糟糕。不管这个城市带来了怎样的失望，我来到这儿无疑受到了极大的欢迎——就像我去过的其他任何地方一样。此刻，就在这儿，在我的访问即将结束之际，面前有一顿令人无比难忘的自助早餐，我想吃什么几乎就有什么，羊角面包看上去尤其可口诱人。的确，从周围乘客们狼吞虎咽的吃相来看，这些食物显然品质上乘，非常新鲜。可以说，我的目光所及之处，每样食物看上去无不诱人至之。

我开始动手，每样都拿了一点。这期间，我浮想联翩：我已经回到了座位上，与电工愉快地交谈，一边满口吃着食物，一边看着窗外清晨的街道。从很多方面来讲，此时此刻电工是我攀谈的理想人选。他明显很善良热心，但同时又谨慎而不冒昧。这会儿我看到他还在吃着他的羊角面包，显然不急着下车。实际上，他看上去好像准备在那儿坐很久。而且，电车在走着环线，如果我们两个相谈甚欢，他就会推迟下车，直到电车又整整绕了一圈后才下。同样，自助餐台也显然会在这儿再保留一段时间，这样我们就可以随时中止交谈去续添食物。我甚至可以看到我们不断地劝对方多吃一点儿。“来！再来一根腊肠！快，把盘子给我，我给你盛。”我们会继续坐在那儿，边吃边聊，畅谈足球或其他任何爱好。窗外，太阳越升越高，照亮了一条条街道和我们这一边的车厢。只有当我们把能吃下的都吃了，把可能聊的都聊了之后，电工才可能会看一眼手表，叹口气说，我酒店的那一站绕了一圈又要到了。我也叹了口气，不情不愿地站起身，掸了掸大腿上的面包屑。我们会握手，互道日安——他也会告诉我，他马上也得下车了——然后我离开，加入到围聚在下车处的那群兴高采烈的乘

客中。接着，电车停靠，我也许会向电工最后挥挥手，然后下车，确信我可以很自信很骄傲地期盼赫尔辛基之行。

我在杯里倒满咖啡，差点溢出来。然后，我用一只手小心地握着杯子，另一只手端着装满了丰盛食物的盘子，开始朝座位走去。

译后记

如果没有移民作家，那么整个英国当代文坛也许会大大失色，我们也无法读到众多风格迥异、多姿多彩的作品。崛起于二十世纪八十年代的石黑一雄，在英语文学界享有崇高的声望，与奈保尔、拉什迪并称“英国文坛移民三雄”。在三十多年的创作生涯中，他虽然并不多产，一共只发表了六部长篇小说和一部短篇小说集，但他的每部作品几乎都精雕细琢，堪称精品。六部小说中，除处女作《远山淡影》外，其余五部皆进入英国最重要的文学奖——布克奖——的决选名单，1989年他凭《长日将尽》一举折桂，其他作品也获得过大大小小的奖项。

石黑一雄一直把自己的小说创作视为一种国际文化的传播载体，他雄心勃勃地致力于创作一种能够把各种民族和文化背景融合在一起的“国际文学题材”，他本人也以“国际主义作家”自诩。他曾在多次访谈中表示，自己希望成为一位国际化小说家。“所谓国际化小说是指这样一种作品：它包含了对于世界上各种不同文化背景的人们都具有重要意义的生活景象。它可以涉及乘坐喷气式飞机穿梭往来于世界各大洲之间的人物，然而他们又可以同样从容地稳固立足于一个小小的地方……这个世界已经变得日益国际化，这是毫无疑问的事实。在过去，对于任何政治、商业、社会变革模式和文艺方面的问题，完全可以进行高水平的讨论而毋庸参照任何国际相关因素。然而，我们现在早已超越了这个历史阶段。如果小说能够作为一种重要的文学形式进入下一个世纪，那是因为作家们已经成功地把它塑造成为一种令人信服的国际化文学载体。我的雄心壮志就是要为它作出贡献。”生于日本，长在英国，石黑一雄穿梭于英日两种文化之间，对于这两种文化驾轻就熟，特殊的生活背景使得他的作品交织着日本文学和英国文学两种传统特质。读他的小说，既能感受到日本文学中淡雅朴素的距离美，又能体会到英国人隐忍克制的性格。他的小说还秉承了东西方小说的一些特点。例如，他对一些日常的微小细节的描写受到了契诃夫的影响；他恰到好处地把握人物的心理，则得益于他对陀思妥耶夫斯基的喜爱；他在小说中对人物心理及回忆的描述颇具意识流大师普鲁斯特的风范；他简洁干净且深藏不露的语言风格又让人想起了海明威。与此同时，它们又包含着日本文学特有的“物哀”之情。“物哀”并非简单的悲哀，悲哀只是“物哀”的一种情绪，而这种情绪所

包含的同情，意味着对他人悲哀的共鸣，对世相的共鸣，对在历史大浪中命如浮萍的小人物的命运的悲戚共鸣。

《无可慰藉》是一部颇具实验性质的小说。它与前三部作品风格迥异：卡夫卡式的叙事，大量的超现实主义描写，变幻莫测的场景，走马灯式的人物，使读者仿佛置身于主人公瑞德的梦境之中。评论界对小说的评价褒贬不一。

小说基本上由第一人称叙述，讲述钢琴演奏家瑞德应邀来到中欧一座不知名的城市，以期通过钢琴独奏会的形式帮助这里的人们解决某种无法言状的危机，重新找回这座城市文化重心。但随着故事的发展，读者很快就发现，瑞德不仅没能帮助他人，自己反而如跌入兔子洞的爱丽丝，深陷困境，无可慰藉。

小说共分四部分，描摹了瑞德在这座中欧城市四天三夜的离奇经历。石黑一雄的笔触从一开始的舒缓柔和到后来的荒诞迷离再到最后的几近恐怖，为读者揭开了这座貌似平和安宁，实则危机重重的城市的神秘面纱，带我们窥探了困在这个城市中的形形色色人物的人生百态。

如果把整部小说比作一幅画，把阅读过程视为赏析此画的话，一开始我们看到的只是舒缓柔和的画面一角，如书中主人公一样，全然不觉等待着我们的将是什么。第一部分描写瑞德为参加几天后的“周四之夜”演奏，拖着疲惫不堪的身躯来到霍夫曼的酒店，浑然不知在接下来的几天这个酒店会成为他的梦魇。从来到这个城市、下榻酒店的那一刻起，瑞德每到一处，每碰到一个人，都会收到五花八门或大或小的怪异请求，就是这些请求，在事情刚刚要迈入正轨的时候，同时将他拽向不同的方向：酒店迎宾员古斯塔夫希望他能同他的女儿交谈，帮她排解心结；酒店经理霍夫曼希望他能抽时间看看他妻子的剪报本；霍夫曼的儿子斯蒂芬希望他能帮他指导一首曲子；古斯塔夫的女儿索菲想要他陪她一起去找房子；索菲的儿子鲍里斯希望他们能一起去他们的旧公寓取心爱的玩具，不会说“不”的瑞德身陷这各种各样的“小忙”中，被搞得焦头烂额，无法自拔。

到了紧接着的第二部分，画面主体开始显现。鬼使神差般，瑞德过去生活中的人物，从儿时的玩伴到幼年的同学，从相亲至爱的妻儿到一墙之隔的邻居，全都在这个本应陌生的城市冒了出来，只有他在这个最熟悉的“陌生”城市步履蹒跚，茫然找不着北。而这一切无疑向读者传达了这样一个信息：对瑞德而言，这座不知名的中欧城市，绝非如他所言般“陌生”；而对这座城市而言，瑞德也绝不仅仅是个

“外来者”。随着这些人物的出现，瑞德的生活也开始浮出水面：自小遭遇家庭不和，缺乏父母关心，导致他即使长大成人，功成名就之后，内心深处依旧极度缺乏父母肯定，自信不足。小时候的遭遇加上长期漂泊，居无定所，使他生活中除了工作，别无其他，朋友疏离，亲人淡漠。他无法替儿时密友出头，也无法在聚会上支持家人，甚至不认识自家的旧公寓。最令读者大跌眼镜的是，古斯塔夫的女儿索菲和外孙鲍里斯竟然是瑞德疏远已久的妻儿，而他“第一次”在老城广场咖啡店见他们时，竟然把他们当做陌生人！这也就使得第二部分结束时，索菲和鲍里斯期盼已久的全家福晚餐以失败告终，瑞德尴尬离开他们的公寓，回到下榻的酒店。

到了第三部分，画面继续展开，画中迷离神秘的元素开始清晰可感。石黑一雄的笔调明显变得荒诞梦幻起来，读者置身文字之中，宛如坠入梦境。先是霍夫曼给瑞德找的疑似卫生间的练琴房，然后是神秘的荒地葬礼，接着是没来由的一堵高墙阻隔道路，最后以一组同样荒诞的迎宾员之舞结束。与此同时，围绕着主人公瑞德，其他两位重要人物酒店经理霍夫曼和前钢琴家、街市酒鬼布罗茨基的重头戏也开始上演，霍夫曼貌似名利双收、琴瑟和谐的日子背后是长期以来的夫妻感情淡漠；而布罗茨基则是长期沦为笑柄，身心俱疲，同分居多年的妻子柯林斯小姐重归于好的机会也是希望渺茫。

小说的第四部分，也是最后一部分，整幅画面全然展现在读者面前。随着全城准备许久、翘首以待的“周四之夜”的来临，前面暗涌的各种困境冲突全都显现，达到高潮：古斯塔夫因为迎宾员之舞运动过度，含恨离世，既没能同女儿索菲达成谅解，为她解开心结，也没能盼到瑞德在致辞中为迎宾员这一群体的荣誉呐喊；一心想要戒除酒瘾，东山再起，赢回美人心的布罗茨基再次与威士忌亲密接触，醉酒中被瑞德开车撞倒，并由一庸医做主切掉一条大腿，强忍着剧痛上台表演，却功败垂成，依旧没能赢得柯林斯小姐的谅解，破镜重圆；多年来在妻子面前长期自卑的霍夫曼不仅给布罗茨基递上那杯致命的威士忌，亲手毁掉自己苦心经营的成果，经过最后的剪报本事件之后，更是全面崩溃，一团混乱；而作为整个“周四之夜”的压轴人物，瑞德竟然没有机会登台演奏，而刚刚略有好转的同索菲和鲍里斯的关系也随着索菲的拒绝再次宣告破裂。至此，石黑一雄带我们走完了这漫长的四天三夜的“崩溃之旅”，小说开篇存在的问题依然存在，小城里处在困境中的人们依然在苦苦挣扎：所有人都心心念念的“周四之夜”终于以全面失败落下帷幕，瑞德没能为这座城市解决危机，也没

能修复与家人朋友的关系；布罗茨基没有梦想成真，霍夫曼也没能盼来奇迹，真正获得幸福。

读罢全篇，我们不禁要问，石黑一雄用如此多的篇幅为我们讲述这样一个略带荒诞的故事，到底用意何在？《无可慰藉》的故事表面上讲的是一个小城的人生百态，透过纸页，我们却看到了作者对当代人的生存状态的深刻思考。如同小说中的瑞德及其他所有人一样，行走在当代社会，我们的心灵全都带着自己的伤口，被困在各自形形色色的大泡泡中，无法与人沟通，也无法从外界获得帮助与慰藉。

这一主题无论是在小说形式还是故事内容上全都得到了印证。从形式上来说，小说以瑞德最初到达酒店为源头触点，据此一环套一环向外发散：一个故事的终结，必然意味着下一个故事的开始，整部小说也就成了一个神秘的故事世界，读者置身其中，宛如困于文字的迷宫，茫然不知出口所在。另一方面，从内容上来说，以瑞德为代表，故事中几乎所有人物都是怆然行走在这个花花世界，既无力帮助他人，也无法获得他人的帮助：瑞德陷在各种各样的“小忙”中无力脱身，霍夫曼和克莉丝汀被囚于失衡婚姻中，布罗茨基沉溺酒精，古斯塔夫直到离世也没有同索菲握手言欢，索菲受制于冷漠婚姻，柯林斯小姐对感情的再次尝试宣告失败，重归之前的困境，鲍里斯重新陷入缺乏父爱的境地，斯蒂芬再次体验无法令父母满意的苦果。就连故事中的次要人物也没能幸免：瑞德的儿时密友菲奥娜没有等来朋友为她出头说话，继续在小区过着遭人孤立、独来独往的生活，瑞德的小学同学杰弗里·桑德斯没有等来老同学的大驾光临，继续在异乡过着孤苦无依、穷困潦倒的生活。这一个个名字，一个个故事，一颗颗受伤的心灵，仿佛都是作者对当代人的生存现状敲下的一记记警钟。身处一个科技爆炸、沟通无限的世界，我们感受到的，却是史无前例的孤独无助。在全世界都可以社交起来的时候，我们却无法用最原始的方式获得真正有效的沟通。

石黑一雄是一位深具“怜悯心”的作家。从《远山淡影》开始，他的小说一直都在探索普通人在不可抗拒的环境下的生存状态。作为一个当代寓言，《无可慰藉》促使读者在日常琐碎的生活中思考人生，思考本真的存在。阅罢全书，掩卷沉思，透过荒诞不经的故事外表，俨然可以看见作者对当代社会人类生存状态的声声拷问：你的心灵被困住了吗？

郭国良
2012年12月于浙江大学港湾家园

KAZUO ISHIGURO

The Unconsoled

For Lorna and Naomi

The taxi driver seemed embarrassed to find there was no one - not even a clerk behind the reception desk - waiting to welcome me. He wandered across the deserted lobby, perhaps hoping to discover a staff member concealed behind one of the plants or armchairs. Eventually he put my suitcases down beside the elevator doors and, mumbling some excuse, took his leave of me.

The lobby was reasonably spacious, allowing several coffee tables to be spread around it with no sense of crowding. But the ceiling was low and had a definite sag, creating a slightly claustrophobic mood, and despite the sunshine outside the light was gloomy. Only near the reception desk was there a bright streak of sun on the wall, illuminating an area of dark wood panelling and a rack of magazines in German, French and English. I could see also a small silver bell on the reception desk and was about to go over to shake it when a door opened somewhere behind me and a young man in uniform appeared.

‘Good afternoon, sir,’ he said tiredly and, going behind the reception desk, began the registration procedures. Although he did mumble an apology for his absence, his manner remained for a time distinctly off-hand. As soon as I mentioned my name, however, he gave a start and straightened himself.

‘Mr Ryder, I’m so sorry I didn’t recognise you. Mr Hoffman, the manager, he was very much wanting to welcome you personally. But just now, unfortunately, he’s had to go to an important meeting.’

‘That’s perfectly all right. I’ll look forward to meeting him later on.’

The desk clerk hurried on through the registration forms, all the while muttering about how annoyed the manager would be to have missed my arrival. He twice mentioned how the preparations for 'Thursday night' were putting the latter under unusual pressure, keeping him away from the hotel far more than was usual. I simply nodded, unable to summon the energy to enquire into the precise nature of 'Thursday night'.

'Oh, and Mr Brodsky's been doing splendidly today,' the desk clerk said, brightening. 'Really splendidly. This morning he rehearsed that orchestra for four hours non-stop. And listen to him now! Still hard at it, working things out by himself.'

He indicated the rear of the lobby. Only then did I become aware that a piano was being played somewhere in the building, just audible above the muffled noise of the traffic outside. I raised my head and listened more closely. Someone was playing a single short phrase - it was from the second movement of Mullery's *Verticality* - over and over in a slow, preoccupied manner.

'Of course, if the manager were here,' the desk clerk was saying, 'he might well have brought Mr Brodsky out to meet you. But I'm not sure ...' He gave a laugh. 'I'm not sure if I should disturb him. You see, if he's deep in concentration ...'

'Of course, of course. Another time.'

'If the manager were here ...' He trailed off and laughed again. Then leaning forward, he said in a low voice:

'Do you know, sir, some guests have had the nerve to complain? About our closing off the drawing room like this each time Mr Brodsky requires the piano? It's amazing how some people think! Two different guests actually complained to Mr Hoffman yesterday. You can be sure, they were very quickly put in their place.'

'I'm sure they were. Brodsky, you say.' I thought about the name, but it meant nothing to me. Then I caught the desk clerk watching me with a puzzled look and said quickly:

'Yes, yes. I'll look forward to meeting Mr Brodsky in good time.'

'If only the manager were here, sir.'

'Please don't worry. Now if that's all, I'd very much appreciate ...'

'Of course, sir. You must be very tired after such a long journey. Here's your key. Gustav over there will show you to your room.'

I looked behind me and saw that an elderly porter was waiting across the lobby. He was standing in front of the open elevator, staring into its interior with a preoccupied air. He gave a start as I came walking up to him. He then picked up my suitcases and hurried into the elevator after me.

As we began our ascent, the elderly porter continued to hold onto both suitcases and I could see him growing red with the effort. The cases were both very heavy and a serious concern that he might pass out before me led me to say:

'You know, you really ought to put those down.'

'I'm glad you mention it, sir,' he said, and his voice betrayed surprisingly little of the physical effort he was expending. 'When I first started in this profession, very many years ago now, I used to place the bags on the floor. Pick them up only when I absolutely needed to. When in motion, so to speak. In fact, for the first fifteen years of working here, I have to say I used that method. It's one that many of the younger porters in this town still employ. But you won't find me doing anything of that sort now. Besides, sir, we're not going up far.'

We continued our ascent in silence. Then I said:

‘So you’ve worked in this hotel for some time.’

‘Twenty-seven years now, sir. I’ve seen plenty here in that time. But of course, this hotel was standing long before I ever got here. Frederick the Great is believed to have stayed a night here in the eighteenth century, and by all accounts it was a long-established inn even then. Oh yes, there have been events here of great historic interest over the years. Some time when you’re not so tired, sir, I’d be happy to relate a few of these things to you.’

‘But you were telling me,’ I said, ‘why you consider it a mistake to place luggage on the floor.’

‘Ah yes,’ the porter said. ‘Now that’s an interesting point. You see, sir, as you can imagine, in a town of this sort, there are many hotels. This means that many people in this town have at some point or other tried their hand at portering. Many people here seem to think they can simply put on a uniform and then that will be it, they’ll be able to do the job. It’s a delusion that’s been particularly nurtured in this town. Call it a local myth, if you will. And I’ll readily confess, there was a time when I unthinkingly subscribed to it myself. Then once - oh, it was many years ago now - my wife and I took a short holiday. We went to Switzerland, to Lucerne. My wife has passed away now, sir, but whenever I think of her I remember our short holiday. It’s very beautiful there by the lake. No doubt you know it. We took some lovely boat rides after breakfast. Well, to return to my point, during that holiday I observed that people in that town didn’t make the same sorts of assumptions about their porters as people here do. How can I put it, sir? There was much greater *respect* paid to porters there. The best ones were figures of some renown and had the leading hotels fighting for their services. I must say it opened my eyes. But in this town, well, there’s been this idea for many many years. In fact there are days when I wonder if it can ever be eradicated. Now I’m not saying people here are in any way rude to us. Far from it, I’ve always been treated with

politeness and consideration here. But, you see, sir, there's always this idea that anyone could do this job if they took it into their heads, if the fancy just took them. I suppose it's because everyone in this town at some point has had the experience of carrying luggage from place to place. Because they've done that, they assume being a hotel porter is just an extension of it. I've had people over the years, sir, in this very elevator, who've said to me: "I might give up what I'm doing one of these days and take up portering." Oh yes. Well, sir, one day - it wasn't long after our short holiday in Lucerne - I had one of our leading city councillors say more or less those exact words to me. "I'd like to do that one of these days," he said to me, indicating the bags. "That's the life for me. Not a care in the world." I suppose he was trying to be kind, sir. Implying I was to be envied. That was when I was younger, sir, I didn't then hold the bags, I had them on the floor, here in this very elevator, and I suppose in those days I might have looked a bit that way. You know, carefree, as the gentleman implied. Well, I tell you, sir, that was the last straw. I don't mean the gentleman's words made me so angry in themselves. But when he said that to me, well, things sort of fell into place. Things I'd been thinking about for some time. And as I explained to you, sir, I was fresh from our short holiday in Lucerne where I'd got some perspective. And I thought to myself, well, it's high time porters in this town set about changing the attitude prevalent here. You see, sir, I'd seen something different in Lucerne, and I felt, well, it really wasn't good enough, what went on here. So I thought hard about it and decided on a number of measures I would personally take. Of course, even then, I probably knew how difficult it would be. I think I may have realised all those years ago that it was perhaps already too late for my own generation. That things had gone too far. But I thought, well, even if I could do my part and change things just a little, it would at least make it easier for those who came after me. So I adopted my measures, sir, and I've stuck to

them, ever since that day the city councillor said what he did. And I'm proud to say a number of other porters in this town followed my lead. That's not to say they adopted precisely the same measures I did. But let's say their measures were, well, compatible.'

'I see. And one of your measures was not to put down the suitcases but to continue to hold them.'

'Exactly, sir, you've followed my gist very well. Of course, I have to say, when I took on these rules for myself, I was much younger and stronger, and I suppose I didn't really calculate for my growing weaker with age. It's funny, sir, but you don't. The other porters have said similar things. All the same, we all try to keep to our old resolutions. We've become a pretty close-knit group over the years, twelve of us, we're what's left of the ones who tried to change things all those years ago. If I were to go back on anything now, sir, I'd feel I was letting down the others. And if any of them were to go back on any of their old rules, I'd feel the same way. Because there's no doubt about it, some progress has been made in this town. There's a very long way to go yet, that's true, but we've often talked it over - we meet every Sunday afternoon at the Hungarian Café in the Old Town, you could come and join us, you'd be a most welcome guest, sir - well, we've often discussed these things and each of us agrees, without a doubt, there have been significant improvements in the attitude towards us in this town. The younger ones who came after us, of course, they take it all for granted. But our group at the Hungarian Café, we know we've made a difference, even if it's a small one. You'd be very welcome to join us, sir. I would happily introduce you to the group. We're not nearly as formal as we once were and it's been understood for some time that in special circumstances, guests can be introduced to our table. And it's very pleasant at this time of the year with this gentle sunshine in the afternoons. We have our table in the shade of the awning, looking across the Old Square. It's very

pleasant, sir, I'm sure you'll like it. But to return to what I was saying, we've been discussing this topic a lot at the Hungarian Café. I mean about these old resolutions we each made all those years ago. You see, none of us thought about what would happen when we got older. I suppose we were so involved in our work, we thought of things only on a day to day basis. Or perhaps we underestimated how long it would take to change these deeply ingrained attitudes. But there you are, sir. I'm now the age I am and every year it gets harder.'

The porter paused for a moment and, despite the physical strain he was under, seemed to get lost in his thoughts. Then he said:

'I should be honest with you, sir. It's only fair. When I was younger, when I first made these rules for myself, I would always carry up to three suitcases, however large or heavy. If a guest had a fourth, I'd put that one on the floor. But three, I could always manage. Well, the truth is, sir, four years ago I had a period of ill-health, and I was finding things difficult, and so we discussed it at the Hungarian Café. Well, in the end, my colleagues all agreed there was no need for me to be so strict on myself. After all, they said to me, all that's required is to impress on the guests something of the true nature of our work. Two bags or three, the effect would be much the same. I should reduce my minimum to two suitcases and no harm would be done. I accepted what they said, sir, but I know it's not quite the truth. I can see it doesn't have nearly the same effect when people look at me. The difference between seeing a porter laden with two bags and seeing one laden with three, you must admit, sir, even to the least practised eye, the effect is considerably different. I know that, sir, and I don't mind telling you it's painful for me to accept. But just to return to my point. I hope you see now why I don't wish to put down your bags. You have only two. At least for a few more years, two will be within my powers.'

‘Well, it’s all very commendable,’ I said. ‘You’ve certainly created the desired impact on me.’

‘I’d like you to know, sir, I’m not the only one who’s had to make changes. We discuss these things all the time at the Hungarian Café and the truth is, each one of us has had to make some changes. But I wouldn’t have you think we’re allowing each other’s standards to slip. If we did that, all our efforts over these years would be for nothing. We would rapidly become a laughing stock. Passers-by would mock us when they saw us gathered at our table on Sunday afternoons. Oh no, sir, we remain very strict with each other and, as I’m sure Miss Hilde will vouch, the community has come to respect our Sunday gatherings. As I say, sir, you’d be most welcome to join us. Both the café and the square are exceptionally pleasant on these sunny afternoons. And sometimes the café proprietor will arrange for gypsy violinists to play in the square. The proprietor himself, sir, has the greatest respect for us. The café isn’t large, but he’ll always ensure there’s plenty of room for us to sit around our table in comfort. Even when the rest of the café is extremely busy, the proprietor will see to it we don’t get crowded out or disturbed. Even on the busiest afternoons, if all of us around our table at one and the same time were to rotate our arms at full stretch, not one of us would make contact. That’s how much the proprietor respects us, sir. I’m sure Miss Hilde will vouch for what I’m saying.’

‘Pardon me,’ I said, ‘but who is this Miss Hilde you keep referring to?’

No sooner had I said this, I noticed that the porter was gazing past my shoulder at some spot behind me. Turning, I saw with a start that we were not alone in the elevator. A small young woman in a neat business suit was standing pressed into the corner behind me. Perceiving that I had at last noticed her, she smiled and took a step forward.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said to me, ‘I hope you don’t think I was eavesdropping, but I couldn’t help overhearing. I was listening to what Gustav was telling you, and I have to say he’s being rather unfair on those of us in this town. I mean when he says we don’t appreciate our hotel porters. Of course we do and we appreciate Gustav here most of all. Everyone loves him. You can see there’s a contradiction even in what he’s just told you. If we’re so unap-preciative, then how does he account for the great respect they’re treated with at the Hungarian Café? Really, Gustav, it’s very unkind of you to misrepresent us all to Mr Ryder.’

This was said in an unmistakably affectionate tone, but the porter seemed to feel real shame. He adjusted his posture away from us, the heavy cases thumping against his legs as he did so, and turned his gaze away sheepishly.

‘There, that’s shown him,’ the young woman said smiling. ‘But he’s one of the very best. We all love him. He’s exceedingly modest and so he’d never tell you himself, but the other hotel porters in this town all look up to him. In fact, it wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say they’re in awe of him. Sometimes you’ll see them sitting around their table on Sunday afternoons, and if Gustav hasn’t yet arrived, they won’t start talking. They feel it would be disrespectful, you see, to start proceedings without him. You’ll often see them, ten or eleven of them, sitting there silently with their coffees, waiting. At most, they might exchange the odd whisper, like they were in church. But not until Gustav arrives do they relax and start conversing. It’s worth going along to the Hungarian Café just to witness Gustav’s arrival. The contrast between before and after is very marked, I have to tell you. One moment there are these glum old faces sitting silently around the table. Then Gustav turns up and they start yelling and laughing. They punch each other in fun, slap each other on the back. They sometimes even dance, yes, up on the tables! They have a special “Porters’ Dance”, isn’t that so, Gustav? Oh yes, they really enjoy

themselves. But not a bit of it until Gustav's arrived. Of course he'd never tell you any of this himself, he's so modest. We do all love him here in this town.'

While the young woman was speaking, Gustav must have continued to turn himself away, for when I next looked at him he was facing the opposite corner of the elevator with his back to us. The weight of the suitcases was making his knees sag and his shoulders quiver. His head was bent right down so as to be practically hidden from us behind him, but whether this was due to bashfulness or sheer physical exertion was hard to say.

'I'm so sorry, Mr Ryder,' the young woman said. 'I haven't yet introduced myself. I'm Hilde Stratmann. I've been given the task of ensuring everything goes smoothly while you're here with us. I'm so glad you've managed to get here at last. We were all starting to get a little concerned. Everyone waited this morning for as long as they could, but many had important appointments and had to go off one by one. So it falls to me, a humble employee of the Civic Arts Institute, to tell you how greatly honoured we all feel by your visit.'

'I'm very pleased to be here. But concerning this morning. Did you just say ...'

'Oh, please don't worry at all about this morning, Mr Ryder. No one was put out in the least. The important thing is that you're here. You know, Mr Ryder, something on which I can certainly agree with Gustav is the Old Town. It really is most attractive and I always advise visitors to go there. It has a marvellous atmosphere, full of pavement cafés, craft shops, restaurants. It's only a short walk from here, so you should take the opportunity as soon as your schedule allows.'

'I'll certainly try and do that. Incidentally, Miss Stratmann, speaking of my schedule ...' I paused rather deliberately, expecting the young woman to exclaim at her

forgetfulness, perhaps reach into her attaché case and produce a sheet or a folder. But although she did break in quickly, it was to say:

‘It *is* a tight schedule, yes. But I do hope it’s not unreasonable. We’ve tried to keep it strictly to the essential things. Inevitably we were inundated, by so many of our societies, the local media, everybody. You have such a following in this town, Mr Ryder. Many people here believe you to be not only the world’s finest living pianist, but perhaps the very greatest of the century. But we think in the end we’ve managed to bring it down to the essentials. I trust there’s nothing there you’re too unhappy with.’

Just at this moment the elevator doors slid open and the elderly porter set off down the corridor. The suitcases made him drag his step along the carpet and Miss Stratmann and I, following on behind, had to measure our pace so as not to overtake him.

‘I do hope no one was offended,’ I said to her as we walked. ‘I mean, about my not having time for them on my schedule.’

‘Oh no, please don’t worry. We all know why you’re here and nobody wants it said that they distracted you. In fact, Mr Ryder, aside from two rather important social functions, everything else on your programme relates more or less directly to Thursday night. Of course, you’ve had a chance by now to familiarise yourself with your schedule.’

There was something about the way she uttered this last remark that made it difficult for me to respond entirely frankly. I thus muttered: ‘Yes, of course.’

‘It *is* a heavy schedule. But we were very much guided by your request to be allowed to see as much as possible at first hand. A very commendable approach, if I may say so.’

Ahead of us, the elderly porter stopped in front of a door. At last he lowered my suitcases and began fiddling with

the lock. As we came up to him, Gustav picked up the suitcases again and staggered into the room, saying: 'Please follow me, sir.' I was about to do so, when Miss Stratmann placed a hand on my arm.

'I won't keep you,' she said. 'But I did just want to check at this stage if there was anything at all on your schedule you weren't happy with.'

The door swung shut, leaving us standing out in the corridor.

'Well, Miss Stratmann,' I said, 'on the whole, it struck me as ... as a very well-balanced programme.'

'It was precisely with your request in mind that we arranged the meeting with the Citizens' Mutual Support Group. The Support Group is made up of ordinary people from every walk of life brought together by their sense of having suffered from the present crisis. You'll be able to hear first-hand accounts of what some people have had to go through.'

'Ah yes. That's sure to be most useful.'

'And as you'll have noticed, we've also respected your wish to meet with Mr Christoff himself. Given the circumstances, we perfectly appreciate your reasons for requesting such a meeting. Mr Christoff, for his part, is delighted, as you can well imagine. Naturally he has his own reasons for wanting to meet you. What I mean, of course, is that he and his friends will do their utmost to get you to see things their way. Naturally, it'll all be nonsense, but I'm sure you'll find it all very useful in drawing up a general picture of what's been going on here. Mr Ryder, you're looking very tired. I won't keep you any longer. Here's my card. Please don't hesitate to call if you have any problems or queries.'

I thanked her and watched her go off back down the corridor. When I entered my room I was still turning over the

various implications of this exchange and took a moment to register Gustav standing next to the bed.

‘Ah, here you are, sir.’

After the preponderance of dark wood panelling elsewhere in the building, I was surprised by the light modern look of the room. The wall facing me was glass almost from floor to ceiling and the sun was coming in pleasantly between the vertical blinds hung against it. My suitcases had been placed side by side next to the wardrobe.

‘Now, sir, if you’ll just bear with me a moment,’ Gustav said, ‘I’ll show you the features of the room. That way, your stay here will be as comfortable as possible.’

I followed Gustav around the room while he pointed out switches and other facilities. At one point he led me into the bathroom and continued his explanations there. I had been about to cut him short in the way I am accustomed to doing when being shown a hotel room by a porter, but something about the diligence with which he went about his task, something about his efforts to personalise something he went through many times each day, rather touched me and prevented me from interrupting. And then, as he continued with his explanations, waving a hand towards various parts of the room, it occurred to me that for all his professionalism, for all his genuine desire to see me comfortable, a certain matter that had been preoccupying him throughout the day had again pushed its way to the front of his mind. He was, in other words, worrying once more about his daughter and her little boy.

When the arrangement had been proposed to him several months earlier, Gustav had little supposed it would bring him anything other than uncomplicated delight. For an afternoon each week, he was to spend a couple of hours wandering around the Old Town with his grandson, thereby allowing Sophie to go off and enjoy a little time to herself. Moreover, the arrangement had immediately proved a success and within weeks

grandfather and grandson had evolved a routine highly agreeable to them both. On afternoons when it was not raining, they would start at the swing park, where Boris could demonstrate his latest feats of daring. If it was wet, they would start at the boat museum. They would then stroll about the little streets of the Old Town, looking in various gift shops, perhaps stopping at the Old Square to watch a mime artist or acrobat. The elderly porter being well known in the area, they would never get far without someone greeting them, and Gustav would receive numerous compliments regarding his grandson. They would next go over to the old bridge to watch the boats pass underneath. The expedition would then conclude at a favourite café, where they would order cake or ice cream and await Sophie's return.

Initially these little outings had brought Gustav immense satisfaction. But the increased contact with his daughter and grandson had obliged him to notice things he once might have pushed away, until he had no longer been able to pretend all was well. For one thing, there was the question of Sophie's general mood. In the early weeks, she had taken her leave of them cheerfully, hurrying away to the city centre to shop or to meet a friend. But lately she had taken to slouching off as though she had nothing to do with herself. There were, furthermore, clear signs that the trouble, whatever it was, had started to make its mark on Boris. True, his grandson was still for the most part his high-spirited self. But the porter had noticed how every now and then, particularly at any mention of his home life, a cloud would pass over the little boy's expression. Then two weeks ago something had happened which the elderly porter had not been able to expel from his mind.

He had been walking with Boris past one of the numerous cafés of the Old Town when he had suddenly noticed his daughter sitting inside. The awning had shaded the glass allowing a clear view through to the back, and Sophie had been visible sitting alone, a cup of coffee before her,

wearing a look of utter despondency. The revelation that she had not found the energy to leave the Old Town at all, to say nothing of the expression on her face, had given the porter quite a shock - so much so that it had taken a moment before he had thought to try and distract Boris. It had been too late: Boris, following the porter's gaze, had got a clear glimpse of his mother. The little boy had immediately looked away and the two of them had continued with their walk without once mentioning the matter. Boris had regained his good humour within minutes, but the episode had none the less greatly perturbed the porter and he had since turned it over many times in his mind. In fact, it was the recollection of this incident that had lent him such a preoccupied air down in the lobby, and which was now troubling him once more as he showed me around my room.

I had taken a liking to the old man and felt a wave of sympathy for him. Clearly he had been brooding on things for a long time and was now in danger of allowing his worries to attain unwarranted proportions. I thought about broaching the whole topic with him, but then, as Gustav came to the end of his routine, the weariness I had been experiencing intermittently ever since I had stepped off the plane came over me again. Resolving to take up the matter with him at a later point, I dismissed him with a generous tip.

Once the door had closed behind him, I collapsed fully clothed onto the bed and for a while gazed emptily up at the ceiling. At first my head remained filled with thoughts of Gustav and his various worries. But then as I went on lying there, I found myself turning over again the conversation I had had with Miss Stratmann. Clearly, this city was expecting of me something more than a simple recital. But when I tried to recall some basic details about the present visit, I had little success. I realised how foolish I had been not to have spoken more frankly to Miss Stratmann. If I had not received a copy of my schedule, the fault was hers, not mine, and my defensiveness had been quite without reason.

I thought again about the name Brodsky and this time I had the distinct impression I had either heard or read about him in the not so distant past. And then suddenly a moment came back to me from the long plane journey I had just completed. I had been sitting in the darkened cabin, the other passengers asleep around me, studying the schedule for this visit under the dim beam of the reading light. At one point the man next to me had awoken and after a few minutes had made some light-hearted remark. In fact, as I recalled, he had leaned over and put to me some little quiz question, something about World Cup footballers. Not wishing to be distracted from the careful study I was making of my schedule, I had brushed him off somewhat coldly. All this now returned to me clearly enough. Indeed, I could recall the very texture of the thick grey paper on which the schedule had been typed, the dull yellow patch cast on it by the reading light, the drone of the plane's engines - but try as I might, I could remember nothing of what had been written on that sheet.

Then after a few more minutes I felt my weariness engulfing me and decided there was little point in worrying myself further until I had had a little sleep. Indeed, I knew well from experience how much clearer things became after a rest. I could then go and find Miss Stratmann, explain to her about the misunderstanding, obtain a copy of my schedule and have her clarify whatever points needed clarifying.

I was just starting to doze off when something suddenly made me open my eyes again and stare up at the ceiling. I went on scrutinising the ceiling for some time, then sat up on the bed and looked around, the sense of recognition growing stronger by the second. The room I was now in, I realised, was the very room that had served as my bedroom during the two years my parents and I had lived at my aunt's house on the borders of England and Wales. I looked again around the room, then, lowering myself back down, stared once more at the ceiling. It had been recently re-plastered and

re-painted, its dimensions had been enlarged, the cornices had been removed, the decorations around the light fitting had been entirely altered. But it was unmistakably the same ceiling I had so often stared up at from my narrow creaking bed of those days.

I rolled over onto my side and looked down at the floor beside the bed. The hotel had provided a dark rug just where my feet would land. I could remember how once that same area of floor had been covered by a worn green mat, where several times a week I would set out in careful formations my plastic soldiers - over a hundred in all - which I had kept in two biscuit tins. I reached down a hand and let my fingers brush against the hotel rug, and as I did so a memory came back to me of one afternoon when I had been lost within my world of plastic soldiers and a furious row had broken out downstairs. The ferocity of the voices had been such that, even as a child of six or seven, I had realised this to be no ordinary row. But I had told myself it was nothing and, resting my cheek back down on the green mat, had continued with my battle plans. Near the centre of that green mat had been a torn patch that had always been a source of much irritation to me. But that afternoon, as the voices raged on downstairs, it had occurred to me for the first time that this tear could be used as a sort of bush terrain for my soldiers to cross. This discovery - that the blemish that had always threatened to undermine my imaginary world could in fact be incorporated into it - had been one of some excitement for me, and that 'bush' was to become a key factor in many of the battles I subsequently orchestrated.

All this came back to me as I continued to stare up at the ceiling. Of course, I remained highly conscious of how all around the room features had been altered or removed. Nevertheless, the realisation that after all this time I was once more back in my old childhood sanctuary caused a profound feeling of peace to come over me. I closed my eyes and for a moment it was as though I were once more surrounded

by all those old items of furniture. In the far corner to my right, the tall white wardrobe with the broken door knob. My aunt's painting of Salisbury Cathedral on the wall above my head. The bedside cabinet with its two small drawers filled with my little treasures and secrets. All the tensions of the day - the long flight, the confusions over my schedule, Gustav's problems - seemed to fall away and I felt myself sliding into a deep and exhausted sleep.

When I was roused by the bedside telephone, I had the impression it had been ringing for some time. I picked up the receiver and a voice said:

‘Hello? Mr Ryder?’

‘Yes, hello.’

‘Ah, Mr Ryder. This is Mr Hoffman speaking. The hotel manager.’

‘Ah yes. How do you do.’

‘Mr Ryder, we’re so extremely pleased to have you with us at last. You’re very welcome here.’

‘Thank you.’

‘Very welcome indeed, sir. Please don’t worry at all about your delayed arrival. As I believe Miss Stratmann told you, everyone present understood perfectly. After all, when one has the distances you have to cover, and with so many engagements around the world - ha ha! - such things are sometimes inevitable.’

‘But ...’

‘No, really, sir, there’s no need to utter another word on the matter. All the ladies and gentlemen, as I say, were very understanding. So let us put the matter behind us. The important thing is that you are here. And for that alone, Mr Ryder, our gratitude to you is unmeasurable.’

‘Well, thank you, Mr Hoffman.’

‘Now, sir, if you aren’t too busy just now, I would very much like at last to greet you face to face. Extend to you my personal welcome to our town and to this hotel.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said. ‘But just now I’m taking a short nap ...’

‘A short nap?’ There was a flash of irritation in the voice. The next moment the geniality had returned completely.

‘Why, of course, of course. You must be very tired. You’ve come such a long way. So then, let us say, whenever you are ready.’

‘I’ll look forward to meeting you, Mr Hoffman. No doubt, I’ll be down before long.’

‘Please come absolutely in your own time. For my part, I shall continue to wait here - that is, down here in the lobby - however long you care to take. So please don’t hurry at all.’

I thought about this for a moment. Then I said: ‘But Mr Hoffman, you must have so many other things to do.’

‘True, this is a very busy part of the day. But for you, Mr Ryder, I will happily wait here for as long as necessary.’

‘Please, Mr Hoffman, don’t waste your valuable time on my account. I’ll be down presently and then I’ll come and find you.’

‘Mr Ryder, it’s no bother at all. In fact, I’ll be honoured to wait here for you. So as I say, come entirely in your own time. I assure you, I will remain standing here until you arrive.’

I thanked him again and put down the receiver. Sitting up, I looked around me and guessed from the light that it was now the late afternoon. I felt more tired than ever, but there seemed little option other than to go down to the lobby. I got to my feet, went to one of my suitcases and found a less crumpled jacket than the one I was still wearing. As I was changing into it, a strong craving came

over me for some coffee and I left my room a few moments later with something approaching urgency.

I emerged from the elevator to find the lobby far livelier than before. All around me, guests were lounging in armchairs, leafing through newspapers or chatting together over cups of coffee. Near the reception desk several Japanese people were greeting one another with much jollity. I was slightly bemused by this transformation and did not notice the hotel manager until he had come right up to me.

He was in his fifties, and was larger and heavier than I had imagined from the voice on the phone. He offered me his hand, beaming broadly. As he did so, I noticed he was short of breath and that his forehead was lightly coated with sweat.

As we shook hands, he repeated several times what an honour my presence represented for the town and for his hotel in particular. Then he leaned forward and said with a confiding air: 'And let me assure you, sir, all the arrangements for Thursday night are in hand. There really is nothing you need worry about.'

I waited for him to say more, but when he merely went on smiling, I said: 'Well, that's good to hear.'

'No, sir, there really is nothing to worry about.'

There was an awkward pause. After a moment, Hoffman seemed about to say something else, but then stopped himself, gave a laugh and hit me lightly on the shoulder - a gesture I thought unduly familiar. Finally he said: 'Mr Ryder, if there is anything I can do to make your stay here more comfortable, please let me know without delay.'

'You're very kind.'

There was another pause. Then he laughed again, shook his head a little and once more hit me on the shoulder.

‘Mr Hoffman,’ I said, ‘was there perhaps something in particular you wished to speak to me about?’

‘Oh, nothing in particular, Mr Ryder. I just wished to greet you and make sure everything was to your satisfaction.’ Then suddenly he gave an exclamation. ‘Of course. Now you mention it, yes, there was something. But it was merely a small matter.’ Yet again, he shook his head and laughed. Then he said: ‘It’s to do with my wife’s albums.’

‘Your wife’s albums?’

‘My wife, Mr Ryder, is a very cultured woman. Naturally she’s a great admirer of yours. In fact she has followed your career with close interest and for some years has been collecting press cuttings about you.’

‘Really? How very good of her.’

‘In fact, she has compiled two albums of cuttings entirely devoted to you. The entries have been arranged chronologically and date back many years. Let me come to the point. It has always been my wife’s great hope that you would one day peruse these albums for yourself. The news that you were to visit our town naturally gave new life to this hope. Nevertheless she knew how busy you would be here and was insistent you should not be bothered on her account. But I could see what she secretly hoped, and so I promised her I would at least raise the matter with you. If you could find even a minute just to cast an eye over them, you have no idea what it would mean to her.’

‘You must convey my gratitude to your wife, Mr Hoffman. I shall be very happy to look at her albums.’

‘Mr Ryder, that’s very good of you! Very good of you indeed! As a matter of fact, I did bring the albums here to the hotel in readiness. But I can guess how busy you must be.’

‘I do have quite a busy schedule. However, I’m sure I’ll be able to find some time for your wife’s albums.’

‘How very good of you, Mr Ryder! But let me stress, the last thing I wish to do is put extra pressure on you. So let me make a suggestion. I will wait for you to indicate when you are ready to inspect the albums. Until you do so, I won’t bother you. Any time, night or day, when you feel the moment is right, please come and find me. I am usually to be found quite easily and I don’t leave the premises until late. I shall stop whatever it is I’m doing and go and fetch the albums. I’d feel much happier leaving it on such a basis. Really, I couldn’t bear to think I was adding further pressure to your schedule.’

‘That’s very considerate of you, Mr Hoffman.’

‘Actually it occurs to me, Mr Ryder. Over the coming days I may give the appearance of being frantically busy. But I would like you to understand, I shall never be too busy to attend to this matter. So even if I look very preoccupied, please don’t be put off.’

‘Very well. I’ll remember that.’

‘Perhaps we should agree on a signal of some sort. I say this because you may come searching for me and see me on the other side of a crowded room. It would be very onerous on you to have to push your way through such a seething mass. And in any case, by the time you reach the point in the room where you first saw me, I may myself have moved off. This is why a signal would be advisable. Something easily distinguishable which you can give above the heads of the crowd.’

‘Indeed, that seems a very sound idea.’

‘Excellent. I am heartened to discover you such an agreeable and kind person, Mr Ryder. If only one could say as much for certain other celebrities we have hosted here. So. It just remains for us to agree a signal. Perhaps I could suggest ... well, let us say something like this.’

He raised a hand, palm outwards, the fingers fanned out, and described a motion as though he were wiping a window.

‘Just an example,’ he said, putting his hand quickly behind his back. ‘Of course, another signal may be more to your liking.’

‘No, that signal is fine. I’ll give it to you as soon as I’m ready to look at your wife’s albums. It really is very kind of her to have gone to such trouble.’

‘I know it has given her profound satisfaction. Of course, if later on you think of some other signal you prefer, please phone me from your room, or else leave a message with one of the staff.’

‘You’re most kind, but the signal you suggest seems to me very elegant. Now, Mr Hoffman, I wonder if you would advise me where I might get some good coffee. I feel just now I could drink several cups.’

The manager laughed rather theatrically. ‘I know the feeling very well. I shall take you to the atrium. Please, follow me.’

He led the way to the corner of the lobby and through a pair of heavy swing doors. We entered a long gloomy corridor with dark wood panelling along both walls. There was so little natural light in the corridor that even at this point in the day a row of dim wall lamps had been left on. Hoffman continued to walk briskly ahead of me, turning every few steps to smile over his shoulder. About half-way down, we passed a rather grand-looking doorway and Hoffman, who must have noticed me looking at it, said:

‘Ah yes. Coffee would normally be served there in the drawing room. A splendid room, Mr Ryder, very comfortable. And now further adorned by some hand-made tables I found myself during a recent trip to Florence. I’m sure you’d approve of them. However, just now, as you know, we have closed off the room for Mr Brodsky.’

‘Oh yes. He was in there earlier when I arrived.’

‘He’s still in there, sir. I would take you in to introduce you to each other except, well, I feel this is perhaps not quite the moment. Mr Brodsky may ... well, let us say, it may not yet be the moment. Ha ha! But not to worry, there will be many opportunities for you two gentlemen to get to know one another.’

‘Mr Brodsky is in that room now?’

I glanced back towards the doorway and possibly slowed my pace a little. In any case, the manager grasped my arm and began firmly to lead me away.

‘He is indeed, sir. Very well, he’s sitting there silently just now, but I assure you, he will begin again at any moment. And this morning, you know, he rehearsed the orchestra for a full four hours. By all accounts, everything is going extremely well. So please, there’s nothing to worry about.’

The corridor eventually turned a corner after which it grew much brighter. In fact this section of it had windows all along one side causing pools of sunlight to form on the floor. Only when we had gone some way along this section did Hoffman let go of me. As we slowed to a leisurely pace, the manager gave a laugh to cover his embarrassment.

‘The atrium is just here, sir. Essentially it’s a bar, but it’s comfortable and you will be served coffee and whatever else you desire. Please, this way.’

We turned off the corridor and went under an arch.

‘This annexe,’ Hoffman said, leading me in, ‘was completed three years ago. We call it the atrium and we’re rather proud of it. It was designed for us by Antonio Zanotto.’

We came into a bright spacious hall. Owing to the glass ceiling high above us there was something of the feeling of

stepping out into a courtyard. The floor was a vast expanse of white tiles, at the centre of which, dominating everything, was a fountain - a tangle of nymph-like figures in marble gushing water with some force. In fact it struck me the water pressure was quite excessive; one could hardly look across to any part of the atrium without having to peer through the fine mist hovering in the air. Even so, I managed quickly to ascertain that each corner of the atrium had its own bar, with its separate collection of high-stools, easy chairs and tables. Waiters in white uniforms were criss-crossing the floor and there appeared to be a fair number of guests spread about the place - though such was the feeling of space one hardly noticed them.

I could see the manager watching me with a smug expression, waiting for me to express approval of our surroundings. At that moment, however, the need for coffee came over me so strongly that I simply turned away and made for the nearest of the bars.

I had already seated myself on a high-stool, my elbows up on the bar counter, when the manager caught up with me. He snapped his fingers at the barman, who was in any case coming to serve me, saying: 'Mr Ryder would like a pot of coffee. Kenyan!' Then, turning back to me, he said: 'I would enjoy nothing better just now than to join you, Mr Ryder. Converse in a leisurely way about music and the arts. Unfortunately there are a number of things I must do which I cannot possibly delay further. I wonder, sir, if you'd be so good as to excuse me?'

Although I insisted he had been more than kind, he spent several more minutes taking his leave of me. Then at last he glanced at his watch, let out an exclamation and hurried off.

Left alone, I must quickly have drifted off into my own thoughts, for I did not notice the barman return. He must have done so, however, for I was soon drinking coffee, staring at the mirrored wall behind the bar - in which I

could see not only my own reflection but much of the room behind me. After a while, for some reason, I found myself replaying in my head key moments from a football match I had attended many years earlier - an encounter between Germany and Holland. I adjusted my posture on the high-stool - I could see I was hunching excessively - and tried recalling the names of the players in the Dutch team that year. Rep, Krol, Haan, Neeskens. After several minutes I had succeeded in remembering all but two of the players, but these last two names remained just beyond the rim of my recall. As I tried to remember, the sound of the fountain behind me, which at first I had found quite soothing, began to annoy me. It seemed that if only it would stop, my memory would unlock and I would finally remember the names.

I was still trying to remember when a voice said behind me:

‘Excuse me, it’s Mr Ryder, isn’t it?’

I turned to find a fresh-faced young man in his early twenties. When I greeted him, he came up eagerly to the bar.

‘I do hope I’m not intruding,’ he said. ‘But when I saw you just now I simply had to come over and say how excited I am you’re here. You see, I’m a pianist myself. On a strictly amateur basis, I mean. And, well, I’ve always admired you terribly. When Father finally got word that you were coming, I was so thrilled.’

‘Father?’

‘I’m so sorry. I’m Stephan Hoffman. The manager’s son.’

‘Ah yes, I see. How do you do.’

‘You wouldn’t mind if I sat here for a minute, would you?’ The young man climbed up onto the stool next to mine.

‘You know, sir, Father’s just as thrilled, if not more so. Knowing Father he may not have told you just how *much* he’s thrilled. But believe me it means everything to him.’

‘Is that so?’

‘Yes, really, I’m hardly exaggerating. I remember the period when Father was still waiting for your reply. This peculiar silence would come over him whenever your name was mentioned. And then, when the pressure really built up, he’d start muttering under his breath about it all. “How much longer? How much longer until he replies? He’s going to turn us down. I can sense it.” I had to really work then, to keep his spirits up. Anyway, sir, you can imagine just what your being here now means to him. He’s such a perfectionist! When he organises an event like Thursday night, everything, *everything*, has to be just right. He goes over every detail in his head, over and over. Sometimes it does get a bit much, all this single-mindedness. But then I suppose if he didn’t have that side to him, he wouldn’t be Father and he wouldn’t achieve half of what he does.’

‘Indeed. He seems an admirable person.’

‘Actually, Mr Ryder,’ the young man said, ‘I did have something I wanted to ask you. It’s a request really. If it’s impossible, then please just say so. I won’t take it amiss.’

Stephan Hoffman paused as though to gather up his courage. I drank a little more coffee and gazed at the reflection of the two of us sitting side by side.

‘Well, this is also to do with Thursday night,’ he went on. ‘You see, Father’s asked me to play the piano at the event. I’ve practised and I’m ready and it’s not that I’m worried about it or anything ...’ As he said this, just for a second his assured manner faltered and I caught a glimpse of an anxious adolescent. But almost immediately he had recovered with a nonchalant shrug. ‘It’s just that with Thursday night being so important, I don’t want to let him down. To come to the point, I was just wondering if you would have a few minutes to spare to listen to me run through my piece. I’ve decided to play Jean-Louis La Roche’s *Dahlia*. I’m just an amateur and you’d have to be very tolerant. But I

thought I could just run through it and you could give me a few tips about how I might polish things up. ’

I thought about this for a moment. ‘So,’ I said after a while, ‘you’re set to perform on Thursday night.’

‘Of course, it’s a very small contribution to the evening alongside, well’ - he gave a laugh - ‘the other things taking place. All the same I want my bit to be as good as possible.’

‘Yes, I can quite understand. Well, I’d be pleased to do what I can for you.’

The young man’s face lit up. ‘Mr Ryder, I’m speechless! It’s the very thing I need ...’

‘But there *is* a problem. As you can guess, my time here is very restricted. I’ll have to find a moment when I have a few minutes free.’

‘Of course. Whenever it’s convenient for you, Mr Ryder. My goodness, I’m so flattered. To be frank, I thought you’d turn me down flat.’

A bleeper began to sound somewhere within the young man’s clothing. Stephan started, then reached inside his jacket.

‘Awfully sorry,’ he said, ‘but that’s the urgent one. I should have been somewhere else long ago. But when I saw you sitting here, Mr Ryder, I couldn’t resist coming over. I hope we can continue this discussion very shortly. But for now, please excuse me.’

He got down off the stool, but then for a second seemed tempted to start another exchange. Then the bleeper went off again and he hurried away with an embarrassed smile.

I turned back to my reflection behind the bar counter and began to sip my coffee again. I could not, however, recapture the mood of relaxed contemplation I had been enjoying before the young man’s arrival. Instead, I found myself

troubled once more by a sense that much was expected of me here, and yet that things were at present on a far from satisfactory footing. In fact, there seemed nothing for it but to seek out Miss Stratmann and clear up certain points once and for all. I resolved to go and find her as soon as I came to the end of my current cup of coffee. There was no reason for this to be an awkward encounter, and it would be simple enough to explain what had happened at our last meeting. 'Miss Stratmann,' I might say, 'I was very tired earlier and so when you asked about my schedule I misunderstood you. I thought you were asking me if I would have time to look at it straight away if you were to produce a copy then and there.' Or else I could go on the offensive, even adopting a tone of reproach. 'Miss Stratmann, I have to say I'm a little concerned and, yes, somewhat disappointed. Given the level of responsibility you and your fellow citizens seem content to place on my shoulders, I think I have a right to expect a certain standard of administrative back-up.'

I heard a movement near me and looking up saw that Gustav, the elderly porter, was standing by my stool. As I turned towards him, he smiled and said:

'Hello, sir. I just happened to see you here. I do hope you're enjoying your stay.'

'Oh, I am indeed. Though unfortunately I haven't yet had the opportunity to visit the Old Town as you recommended.'

'That's a pity, sir. Because that really is a very nice part of our city and it's so near. And the weather just now, I'd say it's ideal. A slight chill in the air, but sunny. Just warm enough still to sit outside, though I dare say you'll have to wear a jacket or a light coat. It's the best sort of day to see the Old Town.'

'You know,' I said, 'a little fresh air may be just what I need.'

‘I really would recommend it, sir. It would be such a shame if it came to your leaving our town without having enjoyed even a brief walk around the Old Town.’

‘You know, I think I’ll do just that. I’ll go off right now.’

‘If you find time to sit down at the Hungarian Café in the Old Square, I feel certain you wouldn’t regret it. I would suggest you order a pot of coffee and a piece of the apple strudel. Incidentally, sir, I did just wonder ...’ The porter paused a moment. Then he went on: ‘I did wonder if I might ask a small favour of you. I wouldn’t normally ask favours of guests, but in your case, I feel we’ve got to know one another pretty well.’

‘I’d be pleased to do something for you if it were at all possible,’ I said.

For a moment, the porter remained standing there silently.

‘It’s just a small thing,’ he said eventually. ‘You see, I know just now my daughter will be at the Hungarian Café. She’ll have little Boris with her. She’s a very pleasant young woman, sir, I’m sure you’d feel very sympathetic towards her. Most people do. She’s not what you’d call beautiful, but she has an attractive sort of appearance. She’s a very good-natured person at heart. But I suppose she’s always had this small weakness about her. Perhaps it was the way she was brought up, who can say? But it’s always been there. That’s to say, she has this tendency to let things overwhelm her sometimes, even when they’re well within her capacity to sort. Some little problem will come up, and instead of taking the few simple measures required, she just broods on it. That way, as you know, sir, small problems grow into larger ones. Before long, things look very deep to her and she gets herself into a mood of despair. It’s all so unnecessary. I don’t know what exactly is troubling her now, but I’m sure it’s not anything so insurmountable. I’ve seen

it so often before. But now, you see, Boris has started to notice. In fact, sir, if Sophie doesn't get a grip on things soon, I'm afraid the boy will become seriously worried. And he's such a delight at the moment. So full of openness and trust. I know it's impossible for him to go through the whole of his life like that, perhaps it's not even desirable. But still, at his age just now, I think he should have just a few more years of believing the world to be a place of sunshine and laughter.' He fell silent again and for a few moments seemed deep in thought. Then looking up he went on: 'If only Sophie could see clearly what was happening, I know she'd get a grip on things. She is at heart very conscientious, very keen to do the best for the people she most cares about. But the thing about Sophie, well, once she gets into this state, she does need a little help to recover her sense of perspective. A good talk, that's really all she needs. Just someone to sit down with her for a few minutes and make her look at things clearly. Help establish what the real problems are, which measures she should take to overcome them. That's all she needs, sir, a good talk, something to give her back her perspective. She'll do the rest herself. She can be very sensible when she means to be. Which brings me to my point, sir. If you happen to be going to the Old Town just now, I wondered if you wouldn't mind having a little word with Sophie. Of course, I realise this might be something of an inconvenience to you, but since you're going that way anyway, I thought I'd ask you. You wouldn't have to talk to her for long. Just a short talk, just to find out what's troubling her and to give her back a sense of proportion.'

The porter stopped and looked at me appealingly. After a moment, I said with a sigh:

'I'd like to be of some help, I really would. But listening to what you say, it seems to me quite likely that Sophie's worries, whatever they are, may well relate to family issues. And as you know, such problems tend to be very deeply enmeshed. An outsider such as myself may after some

frank discussion get to the bottom of one thing, only to find it connected to another problem. And so on and so on. Frankly, in my opinion, to talk through the whole tangled net of family issues, I would have thought you were yourself best suited to do that. As Sophie's father and the boy's grandfather, after all, you'd have a natural authority I simply lack.'

The porter seemed immediately to feel the burden of these words and I almost regretted having spoken them. Clearly I had hit upon a sensitive point. He turned away slightly and for several moments gazed emptily across the atrium in the direction of the fountain. Finally he said:

'I appreciate what you're telling me, sir. By rights, yes, I should be the one to talk to her, I can see that. Well, let me be honest - I don't quite know how to put this - but let me be quite honest with you. The truth of the matter is, Sophie and I haven't spoken to each other for many years. Not really since she was a child. So you can appreciate, it's somewhat difficult for me to accomplish what's required.'

The porter looked down at his feet and seemed to be waiting for my next utterance as though for a judgement.

'I'm sorry,' I said after a while, 'but I'm not quite clear what you're saying. You mean you haven't seen your daughter all this time?'

'No, no. As you know, I *see* her regularly, each time I take Boris off her. What I mean is, we don't speak. Perhaps you'd understand better if I were to give an illustration. Take those times Boris and I are waiting for her after one of our little walks around the Old Town. We might be sitting in Mr Krankl's coffee house, say. Boris might be in high spirits, talking loudly, laughing about everything. But as soon as he sees his mother coming through the door, he'll go silent. Not in any upset sort of way. He'll just restrain himself. He respects the ritual, you see? Then Sophie will

come up to our table and address *him*. Did we have a nice time? Where did we go? Has Grandfather not been too cold? Oh yes, she always asks after me. She worries that I'll get ill wandering about the district like that. But as I say, we don't speak directly, Sophie and me. "Say goodbye to Grandfather," she'll say to Boris by way of farewell and off they go together. That's the way things have been with us for many years and there seems no real call to alter them at this stage. But then, you see, in a situation like this one, I find myself at something of a loss. I do feel a good talk is what's required. And someone like yourself would in my opinion be ideal. Just a few words, sir. Just to help her identify what the problems actually are. If you can just do that, she'll do the rest, you can be assured of that.'

'Very well,' I said after thinking this over. 'Very well, I'll see what I can do. But I must stress what I said earlier. These things are often too complicated for an outsider. But I'll see what I can do.'

'I'll be indebted to you, sir. She'll be at the Hungarian Café at this moment. You should have no difficulty recognising her. She has long dark hair and a number of my features. And if you're in any doubt, you could always ask the proprietor or one of his staff to point her out.'

'Very well. I'll set off straight away.'

'I'll be so indebted, sir. And even if for some reason a talk with her proves impossible, I know you'll enjoy walking around the area.'

I lowered myself off the high-stool. 'Well then,' I said to him, 'I'll let you know how I get on.'

'Thank you so much, sir.'

3

The route from the hotel to the Old Town - a walk of some fifteen minutes - was distinctly unpromising. For much of the way glassy office buildings loomed above me along streets noisy with the late-afternoon traffic. But when I came out to the river and started across the hump-backed bridge leading to the Old Town, I could sense I was about to enter a quite different atmosphere. Visible on the opposite bank were colourful awnings and café parasols. I caught the movement of waiters and of children running in circles. A tiny dog was barking excitedly at the quayside, perhaps having noticed my approach.

A few minutes later I had entered the Old Town. The narrow cobbled streets were full of people walking at an easy pace. I wandered around aimlessly for some minutes, past numerous little souvenir shops, confectioners and bakeries. I also passed several cafés and for a moment I wondered if I would have difficulty locating the particular one referred to by the porter. But then I came out to a large square at the heart of the district and the Hungarian Café was immediately obvious. The sprawl of tables occupying the entire far corner of the square was, I could see, emanating from one small doorway beneath a striped awning.

I paused a moment to recover my breath and take in the surroundings. The sun was starting to set over the square. There was, as Gustav had warned, a chilly breeze which every now and then caused a flutter to pass through the parasols surrounding the café. Regardless, the majority of the tables were occupied. Many of the customers seemed to be tourists, but I could see also a fair number who looked like locals who had left their work early and were unwinding over a coffee and newspaper. Indeed, as I crossed the square I passed many

office workers standing in groups with their briefcases, talking cheerfully together.

On reaching the tables, I spent a few moments strolling around them, looking for someone likely to be the porter's daughter. Two students were arguing about a movie. A tourist was reading *Newsweek*. An old woman was throwing pieces of bread to some pigeons gathered around her feet. But I could not see any young women with long dark hair and a small boy. I stepped inside the café and discovered a small, rather gloomy room with just five or six tables. I could see how the overcrowding problem mentioned by the porter might become a very real one during the colder months, but on this occasion the only occupant was an old man in a beret, seated near the back. Deciding I should give up on the matter, I returned outside and was looking about for a waiter from whom to order some coffee, when I became aware of a voice calling my name.

Turning, I saw a woman sitting with a young boy waving to me from a nearby table. The pair clearly matched the porter's description and I could not understand how I had failed to notice them earlier. I was a little taken aback, moreover, that they should be expecting me, and it was a moment or two before I waved back and began making my way towards them.

Although the porter had referred to her as a 'young woman', Sophie was in early middle age, perhaps around forty or so. For all that, she was somewhat more attractive than I had expected. She was quite tall, slimly built and her long dark hair gave her a gypsy-like quality. The boy beside her was a little on the tubby side, and at this moment was regarding his mother with a cross expression.

'Well?' Sophie was looking up at me with a smile. 'Aren't you going to sit down?'

'Yes, yes,' I said, realising I had been standing there hesitantly. 'That is, if you don't mind.' I gave the boy a grin, but he just looked back at me with disapproval.

‘Of course we don’t mind. Do we, Boris? Boris, say hello to Mr Ryder.’

‘Hello, Boris,’ I said seating myself.

The boy continued to look at me with disapproval. Then he said to his mother: ‘Why did you tell him he could sit down? I was just explaining something to you.’

‘This is Mr Ryder, Boris,’ Sophie said. ‘He’s a special friend. Of course he can sit with us if he wants.’

‘But I was explaining to you how the Voyager flew. I knew you weren’t listening. You should learn to pay attention.’

‘I’m sorry, Boris,’ Sophie said, exchanging a quick smile with me. ‘I was trying awfully hard, but all this science is way above my head. Now why don’t you say hello to Mr Ryder?’

Boris looked at me for a moment, then said grumpily: ‘Hello.’ With that he turned his gaze away from me.

‘Please don’t let me be the source of any friction,’ I said. ‘Please, Boris, continue with what you were just explaining. In fact, I’d be very interested to hear about this aircraft myself.’

‘It’s not an aircraft,’ Boris said wearily. ‘It’s a vehicle for going through star systems. But you wouldn’t understand any better than Mother.’

‘Oh? How do you know I wouldn’t understand? I might have a very scientific mind. You shouldn’t judge people so quickly, Boris.’

He sighed heavily and kept his gaze averted from me. ‘You’ll be just like Mother,’ he said. ‘You’d lack concentration.’

‘Now come on, Boris,’ Sophie said. ‘You should be a little more accommodating. Mr Ryder’s a very special

friend. ’

‘Not only that,’ I said, ‘I’m a friend of your grandfather.’

For the first time, Boris regarded me with interest.

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘We’ve become good friends, your grandfather and I. I’m staying at his hotel.’

Boris went on studying me carefully.

‘Boris,’ Sophie said, ‘why don’t you say hello nicely to Mr Ryder? You still haven’t shown him any manners at all. You don’t want him going away thinking you’re an ill-mannered young man, do you?’

Boris went on looking at me a while longer. Then quite suddenly he flopped forward onto the table, burying his head in his arms. At the same time he began to swing his feet about underneath, for I could hear the clanging of his shoes against the metal table leg.

‘I’m sorry,’ Sophie said. ‘He’s been rather moody today.’

‘As a matter of fact,’ I said to her quietly, ‘there was something I wished to talk to you about. But, er ...’ I signalled with my eyes towards Boris. Sophie looked at me, then turned to the little boy, saying:

‘Boris, I’ve got to talk with Mr Ryder a moment. Why don’t you go and look at the swans? Just for a minute.’

Boris kept his head in his arms as though asleep, though his feet continued to clang rhythmically. Sophie shook his shoulder gently.

‘Come on now,’ she said. ‘There’s a black swan out there too. Go and stand over by those railings, where those nuns are. You’ll be able to see it for sure. You can come back in a few minutes and tell us what you’ve seen.’

For a few more seconds Boris gave no response. Then he sat up, let out another weary sigh and slid off his chair. For some reason best known to himself, he affected the mannerisms of someone utterly drunk and went staggering away from the table.

Once the boy was a sufficient distance away, I turned back to Sophie. Then an uncertainty came over me as to how I should begin and I sat hesitating for a moment. In any case, Sophie smiled and spoke first:

‘I’ve got good news. That Mr Mayer phoned earlier about a house. It’s just come on the market today. It sounds really promising. I’ve been thinking about it all day. Something tells me this might be it, the one we’ve been looking for all this time. I told him I’d go out there first thing tomorrow morning and have a good look. Really, it sounds perfect. About half an hour’s walk from the village, all by itself on a ridge, three storeys. Mr Mayer says the views over the forest are the best he’s seen in years. I know you’re very busy just now, but if it turns out to be anything like as good as it sounds, I’ll call you and perhaps you could come out. Boris too. It might be exactly what we’ve been looking for. I know it’s taken a long time, but I might have found it at last.’

‘Ah yes. Good.’

‘I’ll take the first bus out there in the morning. We’ll have to act fast. It won’t stay on the market long.’

She began to give me more details about the house. I remained silent, but only partly because of my uncertainty as to how I should respond. For the fact was, as we had been sitting together, Sophie’s face had come to seem steadily more familiar to me, until now I thought I could even remember vaguely some earlier discussions about buying just such a house in the woods. Meanwhile my expression had perhaps grown preoccupied, for even tually she broke off, then said in a different, more tentative voice:

‘I’m sorry about that last phone call. I hope you’re not still sulking about it.’

‘Sulking? Oh no.’

‘I keep thinking about it. I shouldn’t have said any of it. I hope you didn’t take it to heart. After all, how can you be expected to stay at home just now? What home? And with that kitchen the way it is! And I’ve been taking so long, finding somewhere for us. But I’m so hopeful now, about this house tomorrow.’

She began to talk again about the house. As she did so, I tried to recall something of the phone conversation to which she had just referred. After a while, I found a faint recollection returning to me of listening to this same voice – or rather a harder, angrier version of it – on the end of a telephone in the not-so-distant past. Eventually I thought I could recall also a certain phrase I had been shouting at her down the mouthpiece: ‘You live in such a small world!’ She had continued to argue and I had gone on repeating contemptuously: ‘Such a small world! You live in such a small world!’ To my frustration, however, I found nothing more of this exchange would come back to me.

Possibly I had begun to stare at her in my endeavour to jog my memory, for she now asked rather self-consciously:

‘Do you think I’ve put on weight?’

‘No, no.’ I turned away with a laugh. ‘You’re looking quite marvellous.’

It occurred to me I had not yet mentioned anything of the matter concerning her father and I tried again to think of a suitable way to broach the topic. But just then something jolted my chair from behind and I realised Boris had returned.

In fact the little boy was running around in circles near our table, kicking a discarded paper carton as though it were

a football. Noticing that I was now watching him, he juggled the carton from one foot to the other, then kicked it hard through the legs of my chair.

‘Number Nine!’ he shouted, holding his arms aloft. ‘A superb goal from Number Nine!’

‘Boris,’ I said, ‘hadn’t you better put that carton in the waste bin?’

‘When are we going to go?’ he asked, turning to me. ‘We’re going to be late. It’ll be dark soon.’

Looking past him I saw that indeed the sun was beginning to set over the square and that many of the tables had become vacant.

‘I’m sorry, Boris. What was it you were wanting to do?’

‘Hurry up!’ The little boy gave my arm a tug. ‘We’ll never get there!’

‘Where is it Boris wants to go?’ I asked his mother quietly.

‘To the swing park, of course.’ Sophie sighed and rose to her feet. ‘He wants to show you the progress he’s made.’

There seemed no choice but for me to rise also, and the next moment the three of us were setting off across the square.

‘So,’ I said to Boris as he fell in step beside me, ‘you’re going to show me a few things.’

‘When we were there earlier on,’ he said, taking my arm, ‘there was this boy, he was bigger than me, and he couldn’t even do a torpedo! Mother thought he was at least two years older than me. I showed him how to do it five times, but he was too scared. He just kept going to the top, then he couldn’t do it!’

‘Really. And of course, you’re not scared to do this thing. This torpedo.’

‘Of course I’m not scared! It’s easy! It’s completely easy!’

‘That’s good.’

‘He was too scared! It was so funny!’

We left the square and began to make our way through the small cobbled streets of the district. Boris seemed to know the way well, often running a few paces ahead in his impatience. Then at one point, he fell in step beside me again and asked:

‘Do you know Grandfather?’

‘Yes, I told you. We’re good friends.’

‘Grandfather’s very strong. He’s one of the strongest men in the town.’

‘Is that so?’

‘He’s a good fighter. He was a soldier once. He’s old, but he’s still a better fighter than most people. Street thugs don’t realise that sometimes, then they get a nasty surprise.’ Boris made a sudden lunging movement as he walked. ‘Before they know it, Grandfather’s got them on the ground.’

‘Really? That’s interesting, Boris.’

Just at that moment, as we continued through the little cobbled streets, I found myself remembering more of the argument I had had with Sophie. It had taken place perhaps a week or so ago, and I had been in a hotel room somewhere, listening to her voice at the other end of the line shouting:

‘How much longer can they expect you to carry on like this? Neither of us are so young any more! You’ve done your share now! Let somebody else do it all now!’

‘Look,’ I had been saying to her, my voice still calm, ‘the fact is, people need me. I arrive in a place and more

often than not find terrible problems. Deep-seated, seemingly intractable problems, and people are so grateful I've come.'

'But how much longer can you go on doing this for people? And for us, I mean for me and you and Boris, time's slipping away. Before you know it, Boris will be grown up. No one can expect you to keep on like this. And all these people, why can't they sort out their own problems? It might do them some good!'

'You've no idea!' I had broken in, now angry. 'You don't know what you're saying! Some of these places I visit, the people don't know a thing. They don't understand the first thing about modern music and if you leave them to themselves, it's obvious, they'll just get deeper and deeper into trouble. I'm needed, why can't you see that? I'm needed out here! You don't know what you're talking about!' And it was then I had shouted at her: 'Such a small world! You live in such a small world!'

We had come to a small playground encircled by railings. It was empty of people and I thought it had a rather melancholy atmosphere about it. Boris though led us enthusiastically through the little gate.

'Look, this is easy!' he said, and went running off towards the climbing frame.

For a while, Sophie and I stood in the fading light watching his figure climb higher and higher. Then she said quietly:

'You know, it's funny. When I was listening to that Mr Mayer, the way he was describing the living room of the house, I kept getting these pictures in my mind, of the apartment we lived in when I was small. All the time he was talking, I kept getting these pictures. Our old living room. And Mother and Papa, the way they were then. It's probably nothing like that. I'm not really expecting it to be. I'll get there tomorrow and I'll find it's completely different.'

But it made me hopeful. You know, a sort of omen.' She gave a small laugh, then touched my shoulder. 'You're looking so glum.'

'Am I? I'm sorry. It's all this travelling. I suppose I'm rather tired.'

Boris had reached the top of the climbing frame, but the light had grown so dim he was barely more than a silhouette against the sky. He gave us a shout, then, gripping the top rung, somersaulted his body around it.

'He's so proud of being able to do that,' Sophie said. Then she called out: 'Boris, it's too dark now. Come on down.'

'It's easy. It's easier in the dark.'

'Come on down now.'

'It's all this travelling,' I said. 'Hotel room after hotel room. Never seeing anyone you know. It's been very tiring. And even now, here in this city, there's so much pressure on me. The people here. Obviously they're expecting a lot of me. I mean, it's obvious ...'

'Look,' Sophie broke in gently, placing a hand on my arm, 'why don't we forget about it all for now? There'll be plenty of time for us to talk it over later. We're all tired. Come back with us to the apartment. It's only a few minutes' walk from here, just past the medieval chapel. I'm sure we could all do with a nice supper and a chance to put our feet up.'

She had spoken softly, her mouth close to my ear so that I could feel her breath. My earlier weariness came over me again and the idea of relaxing in the warmth of her apartment - perhaps lazing about with Boris on the carpet while Sophie prepared our meal - seemed suddenly highly enticing. So much so that for a brief moment I might even have closed my eyes

and stood there smiling dreamily. In any case I was brought out of my reverie by Boris's return.

'It's easy to do it in the dark,' he said.

I saw then that Boris looked cold and somewhat shaken. All his earlier energy had evaporated and it occurred to me the performance he had just put on had required large resources on his part.

'We're all going back to the apartment now,' I said. 'We'll have something nice to eat there.'

'Come on,' Sophie said, setting off. 'Time's getting on.'

A fine drizzle had started to fall and now that the sun had set, the air was much chillier. Boris took my hand again and we followed Sophie out of the swing park into a deserted back street.

It was clear we had now left behind the Old Town. The dingy brick walls that towered up on either side were windowless and appeared to be the backs of warehouses. As we made our way along the street, Sophie kept up a purposeful pace and before long I could sense Boris having difficulty keeping up. But when I asked him: 'Are we going too fast?' he looked at me with a furious expression.

'I can go much faster!' he shouted and broke into a trot, tugging at my hand. But almost straight away he slowed down again with a hurt look on his face. After a while, despite my maintaining an easy pace, I could hear his breath coming with a struggle. He then started to whisper to himself. I did not pay much attention at first, assuming he was simply trying to keep up his spirits. But then I heard him whisper:

'Number Nine ... It's Number Nine ...'

I glanced at him with curiosity. He looked wet and cold, and it occurred to me I should keep him conversing.

'This Number Nine,' I said. 'Is he a footballer?'

'The top footballer in the world.'

'Number Nine. Yes, of course.'

Up ahead of us, Sophie's figure vanished around a corner and Boris's grip on my hand tightened. I had not until this moment appreciated how far in front we had allowed his mother to get, and though we increased our pace, it seemed to take an inordinate time for us to reach the corner ourselves. Once we finally turned it, I saw to my annoyance that Sophie had gained even further on us.

We went past more dirty brick walls, some with extensive damp patches. The paving was uneven and I could see before us puddles glinting under the street lighting.

‘Don’t worry,’ I said to Boris. ‘We’re nearly there now.’

Boris was continuing to whisper to himself, repeating in time with his short breaths: ‘Number Nine ... Number Nine ...’

From the first, Boris’s mentions of ‘Number Nine’ had rung some distant bell for me. Now as I listened to his whispering, I recalled that ‘Number Nine’ was not in fact a real footballer, but one of Boris’s miniature players from his table-football game. The footballers, moulded in alabaster and each one weighted at the base, could be made with flicks of the finger to dribble, pass and shoot a tiny plastic ball. The game was intended for two people each controlling a team, but Boris only ever played on his own, spending hours lying on his front orchestrating matches full of dramatic reversals and nail-biting comebacks. He possessed six full teams, as well as miniature goals with authentic netting and a green felt cloth that opened out to form the pitch. Boris despised the manufacturers’ assumption that he would enjoy pretending the teams were ‘real’ ones, such as Ajax Amsterdam or AC Milan, and had given the teams his own names. The individual players, however - though Boris had come to know each one’s strengths and weaknesses intimately - he had never named, preferring to call them simply by their shirt numbers. Perhaps because he was not aware of the significance of shirt numbers in football - or perhaps it was just another wilful quirk of his imagination - a player’s number bore no relation to where Boris placed him in the team formation. Thus, the Number Ten of one team might be a legendary central defender, the Number Two a promising young winger.

'Number Nine' belonged to Boris's very favourite team, and was by far the most gifted of the players. However, for all his immense skill, Number Nine was a highly moody personality. His position in the team was somewhere in midfield, but often, for long stretches of a match, he would sulk in some obscure part of the pitch, apparently oblivious of the fact that his team was losing badly. Sometimes, Number Nine would continue in this lethargic manner for over an hour, so that his team would go four, five, six goals down, and the commentator - for indeed there was a commentator - would say in a mystified voice: 'Number Nine so far just hasn't found his form. I don't quite know what's wrong.' Then, perhaps with twenty minutes remaining, Number Nine would finally give a glimpse of his true ability, pulling back a goal for his side with some fine piece of skill.

'That's more like it!' the commentator would exclaim. 'At last, Number Nine shows what he can do!' From that moment on, Number Nine's form would grow steadily stronger, until before long he would be scoring one goal after another, and the opposing team would be concentrating entirely on preventing at virtually any cost Number Nine receiving the ball. But sooner or later he would, and then, no matter how many opponents stood between him and the goalmouth, he would manage to find a way through to score. Soon the inevitability of the outcome once he had received the ball was such that the commentator would say: 'It's a goal,' in tones of resigned admiration, not when the ball actually went into the net, but at the moment Number Nine first gained possession - even if this occurred deep within his own half. The spectators too - there were spectators - would commence their roar of triumph as soon as they saw Number Nine get the ball, the roar continuing intensely and evenly as Number Nine wove his way gracefully through his opponents, struck the ball past the goalkeeper, and turned to receive the adulation of his grateful team-mates.

As I was remembering all this, a vague recollection came into my head that some problem had recently arisen concerning

Number Nine, and I interrupted Boris's whispering by asking:

'How is Number Nine these days? On good form?'

Boris walked a few steps in silence, then said: 'We left the box behind.'

'The box?'

'Number Nine came off his base. Quite a few of them do that, it's easy to fix. I put Number Nine in a special box and I was going to fix him once Mother got the right kind of glue. I put him in the box, it was a special one, so I wouldn't forget where he was. But we left him behind.'

'I see. You mean, you left him where you used to live.'

'Mother forgot to pack him. But she said we could go back soon. To the old apartment and he'd be there. I can fix him, we've got the right sort of glue now. I've got a bit saved up.'

'I see.'

'Mother says it'll be all right, she's going to see about everything. Make sure the new people don't throw him away by mistake. She said we'd go back soon.'

I had the distinct impression Boris was hinting at something, and when he fell silent again, I said to him:

'Boris, if you wanted, I could take you back. Yes, we could go back together, the two of us. Back to the old apartment and fetch Number Nine. We can do it soon. Perhaps even tomorrow if I find a spare moment. Then as you say, you've got the glue. He'll be back to his best in no time. So don't worry. We'll do that very soon.'

Sophie's figure once again disappeared from our view, this time so abruptly I thought she must have gone into a doorway. Boris tugged at my hand and we both hurried on towards the spot where she had vanished.

We soon discovered that Sophie had in fact turned down a side-alley, whose entrance was little more than a crack in the wall. It descended steeply and appeared so narrow it did not seem possible to go down it without scraping an elbow along one or the other of the rough walls to either side. The darkness was broken only by two street lamps, one half-way down, the other at the very bottom.

Boris gripped my hand as we began our descent, and soon his breath was coming with difficulty again. After a while I noticed that Sophie had already reached the bottom of the alley, but she seemed at last to have become aware of our plight, and was standing beneath the lower lamp, gazing back up at us with a vaguely concerned expression. When we finally joined her, I said angrily:

‘Look, can’t you see we’ve been having trouble keeping up with you? It’s been a tiring day, both for me and for Boris.’

Sophie smiled dreamily. Then, putting an arm around Boris’s shoulder, she drew the little boy close to her.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said to him softly. ‘I know it’s a little unpleasant here and that it’s got cold and rainy. But never mind, very soon now we’ll be at the apartment. It’ll be very warm, we’ll see to that. Warm enough so that we can all just go around in T-shirts if we want. And there are those big new armchairs you can curl up in. A little boy like you could get lost in chairs like that. And you could look at your books, or watch one of the videos. Or if you like, we could bring down some board games from the cupboard. I could bring them all down for you, and you and Mr Ryder could play whichever one you wanted. You could put the big red cushions on the carpet and spread the game out on the floor. And all the time, I’ll be cooking our evening meal and preparing the table in the corner. In fact, instead of one large dish, I think I might make a selection of small things. Little meatballs, tiny cheese flans, a few little cakes. Don’t worry, I’ll remember all your favourites and I’ll lay it all

out on the table. Then we can sit down and eat, and then afterwards all three of us can go on with the board game. Of course, if you didn't feel like playing any more, we wouldn't have to go on. Perhaps you'll want to talk with Mr Ryder about football. Then, only when you're really tired, you can go off to bed. I know your new room's very small, but it's very snug, you said so yourself. You're sure to sleep very soundly tonight. You'll have forgotten all about this cold unpleasant walk by then. In fact you'll forget all about it the moment you go in through the door and you feel the nice warm heating. So don't get discouraged. It's only a little way to go now.'

She had had Boris in a hug while saying this, but now she suddenly released him, turned and began to walk again. The abruptness with which she did so caught me by surprise - for I had myself become steadily lulled by her words and had for a moment closed my eyes. Boris too looked bewildered, and by the time I had taken his hand his mother was once more several paces in front.

I was keen not to let her get too far ahead again, but just at that moment I became conscious of footsteps coming down behind us and I could not help lingering a second to look back up the alley. Just as I did so, the person entered the pool of light cast by the lower lamp and I saw that it was someone I knew. His name was Geoffrey Saunders and he had been in my year at school in England. I had not seen him since schooldays, so was naturally struck by how much he had aged. Even allowing for the unflattering effects of the lamplight and the cold drizzle, he looked overwhelmingly down-at-heel. He was wearing a raincoat that seemed to have lost its ability to fasten and which he was now clutching together at the front as he walked. I was not at all sure I wished to acknowledge him, but then, as Boris and I set off once more, Geoffrey Saunders fell in step alongside us.

'Hello, old chap,' he said. 'Thought it was you. Rotten evening it's turned out to be.'

‘Yes, miserable,’ I said. ‘And earlier it was so pleasant.’

The alley had brought us out onto a dark deserted road. There was a strong breeze and the city seemed far away.

‘Your boy?’ Geoffrey Saunders asked, nodding towards Boris. Then, before I could reply, he continued: ‘Nice boy. Well done. Looks very bright. Myself I never married. Always thought I would, but time’s just slipped away and now I suppose I never shall. To be honest, I suppose there’s more to it than that. But I don’t want to bore you with all the rotten luck I’ve had over the years. I’ve had some good things happen too. Still. Well done. Nice boy.’

Geoffrey Saunders leaned forward and gave Boris a salute. Boris, either too upset or too preoccupied, gave no response.

The road was now leading us downhill. As we walked through the darkness, I recalled how at school Geoffrey Saunders had been the golden boy of our year, always distinguishing himself both academically and on the sports field. His was the example forever being used to rebuke the rest of us for lack of effort, and it was widely reckoned that he would in time become school captain. He never did so, I recalled, owing to some crisis that had obliged him to leave the school suddenly during our fifth year.

‘I read in the papers you were coming,’ he was saying to me. ‘I’ve been expecting to hear from you. You know, to tell me when you’ll be popping round. I went and bought some cakes from the bakery so that I had something to offer you along with a cup of tea. After all, my digs may be rather dreary, what with my being single and all, but I still expect people to come and visit sometimes and I feel quite capable of looking after them well. So when I heard you were coming, I immediately popped out and bought a selection of tea cakes. That was the day before yesterday. Yesterday, I thought they were still presentable, though the icing had got a bit on the tough side. But today, when you still hadn’t called, I threw

them away. Pride, I suppose. I mean, you've been so successful, and I don't want you going away thinking I'm leading this miserable existence in small rented rooms with only stale cakes to offer a visitor. So I went to the bakery and got some fresh cakes. And I tidied my room up a bit. But you didn't call. Well, I suppose I can't blame you. I say' - he leaned forward again and looked at Boris - 'are you all right there? You sound completely puffed out.'

Boris, who indeed was struggling again, gave no sign of having heard.

'Better slow down for the little slowcoach,' Geoffrey Saunders said. 'It's just that I was a little unlucky in love at one stage. A lot of people in this town assume I'm homosexual. Just because I live alone in a rented room. I minded that at first, but I don't any more. All right, they mistake me for a homosexual. So what? As it happens, my needs are met by women. You know, the sort you pay. Perfectly adequate for me, and I'd say some of them are quite decent people. All the same, after a while, you start to despise them and they start to despise you. Can't help it. I know most of the whores in this town. I don't mean I've slept with them all. Not by any means! But they know me and I know them. I'm on nodding terms with a lot of them. You probably think I lead a miserable existence. I don't. It's just a matter of how you look at things. Occasionally friends come to visit me. I'm quite capable of entertaining them over a cup of tea. I do it quite well and they often say afterwards how much they enjoyed popping round.'

The road had been descending steeply for a while, but it now levelled, and we found ourselves in what appeared to be an abandoned farmyard. All about us in the moonlight there loomed the dark shapes of barns and outhouses. Sophie was continuing to lead the way, but she was now some distance in front and often I would glimpse her figure only as it disappeared around the edge of some broken building.

Fortunately Geoffrey Saunders seemed to know his way well, navigating a route through the dark with barely a thought. As I followed close behind him, a certain memory came back to me from our schooldays, of a crisp winter's morning in England, with an overcast sky and frost on the ground. I had been fourteen or fifteen and had been standing outside a pub with Geoffrey Saunders somewhere deep in the Worcestershire countryside. We had been paired together to mark a cross-country run, our task being simply to point the runners, as they emerged out of the mist, in the correct direction across a nearby field. I had been unusually upset that morning, and after fifteen minutes or so of our standing there together staring quietly into the fog, in spite of my best efforts, I had burst into tears. I had not known Geoffrey Saunders well at that point, though like everyone else I had always been keen to make a good impression on him. I had thus been quite mortified and my initial impression, once I had finally brought my emotions under control, had been that he was ignoring me with the utmost contempt. But then Geoffrey Saunders had begun to speak, at first without looking in my direction, then eventually turning to me. I could not now bring to mind just what it was he had said on that foggy morning, but I could recall well enough the impact his words had had. For one thing, even in my state of self-pity, I had been able to recognise the remarkable generosity he was displaying, and had felt a profound gratitude. It was also at that moment I had first realised, with a distinct chill, that there was another side to the school golden boy - some deeply vulnerable dimension that would ensure he would never live up to the expectations that had been placed on him. As we continued to walk together through the dark, I tried once more to remember just what he had said that morning, but to no avail.

With the ground levelling, Boris seemed to recover a little breath and he had once more begun to whisper. Now, perhaps encouraged by a sense that we were about to reach our destination, he found the energy to kick a stone in his path,

exclaiming out loud as he did so: 'Number Nine!' The stone skipped across the rough ground and landed in water somewhere in the darkness.

'That's a bit more like it,' Geoffrey Saunders said to Boris. 'Is that your position? Number Nine?'

When Boris failed to answer, I said quickly: 'Oh no, it's just his favourite footballer.'

'Oh yes? I watch a lot of football. On the television, that is.' He leaned forward to Boris again. 'Which number nine is that?'

'Oh, it's just his favourite player,' I said again.

'As far as centre forwards go,' Geoffrey Saunders went on, 'I rather like that Dutchman, plays for Milan. He's quite something.'

I was about to say something further to explain about Number Nine, but at that moment we came to a halt. I saw then that we were standing at the edge of a vast grassy field. Just how large it was, I could not ascertain, but I guessed it extended far beyond what could be seen by the moon. As we stood there, a harsh wind swept across the grass and on into the darkness.

'We appear to be lost,' I said to Geoffrey Saunders. 'Do you know your way around here?'

'Oh yes. I live not so far from here. Unfortunately I can't ask you in just now because I'm very tired and have to go to sleep. But I'll be ready to welcome you tomorrow. Let's say any time after nine o'clock.'

I looked across the field into the blackness.

'To be frank, we're in a little trouble just now,' I said. 'You see, we were on our way to the apartment of that woman we were following earlier. Now we've got ourselves

rather lost and I've no idea what her address is. She said something about living near a medieval chapel.'

'The medieval chapel? That's in the city centre.'

'Ah. Can we get to it by going across there?' I pointed over the field.

'Oh no, there's nothing that way. Nothing but emptiness. Only person living out there is that Brodsky fellow.'

'Brodsky,' I said. 'Hmm. I heard him practising in the hotel today. You all seem to know about this Brodsky here in this town.'

Geoffrey Saunders gave me a glance that made me suspect I had said something foolish.

'Well, he's been living here for years and years. Why shouldn't we know about him?'

'Yes, yes, of course.'

'A bit hard to believe the crazy old fellow's got it in him to conduct an orchestra. But I'm prepared to wait and see. Things can't very well get much worse. And if *you* start saying Brodsky's the thing, well, who am I to argue?'

I could not think what I might say to this. In any case, Geoffrey Saunders suddenly turned away from the field, saying:

'No, no, the city's over that way. I can direct you if you like.'

'We'd be very grateful,' I said as a chilly gust blew against us.

'Well now.' Geoffrey Saunders fell into thought for a moment. Then he said: 'To be honest, you'd be best off getting a bus. To walk from here would take a good half-hour or so. Perhaps the woman persuaded you her apartment was close by. Well, they always do that. It's one of their

tricks. You should never believe them. But it's no problem if you take a bus. I'll show you where you can pick one up.'

'We'd be very grateful,' I said again. 'Boris is getting cold. I hope this bus stop isn't far.'

'Oh, very near. Just follow me, old man.'

Geoffrey Saunders turned and led us back towards the abandoned farmyard. I sensed, however, that we were not retracing our footsteps and, sure enough, before long we found ourselves walking down a narrow street in what seemed a less than affluent suburb. Small terraced houses stood in rows on either side. Here and there I could see lights in windows, but for the most part the occupants appeared to have turned in for the night.

'It's all right,' I said quietly to Boris, who I sensed was close to exhaustion. 'We'll be at the apartment now very soon. Your mother will have everything ready for us by the time we turn up.'

We walked on for a while past more rows of houses. Then Boris began to mutter again:

'Number Nine ... It's Number Nine ...'

'Look, which number nine *is* this?' Geoffrey Saunders said, turning to him. 'You mean that Dutchman, don't you?'

'Number Nine's the best player so far in history,' Boris said.

'Yes, but which number nine do you mean?' Geoffrey Saunders's voice had now gained an edge of impatience. 'What's his name? Which is his team?'

'Boris just likes to call him ...'

'Once he scored seventeen goals in the last ten minutes!' Boris said.

'Oh nonsense.' Geoffrey Saunders seemed genuinely annoyed. 'I thought you were being serious. You're talking

nonsense. ’

‘He did!’ Boris shouted. ‘It was a world record!’

‘Quite!’ I joined in. ‘A world record!’ Then, recovering my composure somewhat, I gave a laugh. ‘That’s to say, well, it’s bound to be, isn’t it.’ I smiled appealingly at Geoffrey Saunders, but he ignored me.

‘But who are you talking about? Do you mean that Dutchman? Anyway, young man, you’ve got to realise, scoring goals isn’t everything. The defenders are just as important. The *really* great players are often defenders.’

‘Number Nine’s the best player so far in history!’ Boris said again. ‘When he’s on form, no defence can stop him!’

‘That’s right,’ I said. ‘Number Nine’s without doubt the world’s finest. Midfield, up front, everything. He does everything. Really.’

‘You’re talking nonsense, old man. Neither of you know what you’re talking about.’

‘We know perfectly well.’ By this time I was getting quite angry with Geoffrey Saunders. ‘In fact, what we’re saying is universally acknowledged. When Number Nine’s on form, really on form, the commentator shouts “goal” the moment he gets the ball, no matter where on the pitch ...’

‘Oh my goodness.’ Geoffrey Saunders turned away in disgust. ‘If that’s the sort of rubbish you fill your boy’s brain with, God help him.’

‘Now look here ...’ I put my face right up to his ear and spoke in an angry whisper. ‘Look here, can’t you understand ...’

‘It’s rubbish, old man. You’re filling the boy’s head with rubbish ...’

‘But he’s young, just a small boy. Can’t you understand ...’

‘No reason to fill his head with rubbish. Besides, he doesn’t look as young as all that. In my view, a boy his age, he should be making a proper contribution to things by now. Starting to pull his weight a bit. He should be learning about wallpapering, say, or tiling. Not all this nonsense about fantastical footballers ...’

‘Look, you idiot, just be quiet! Be quiet!’

‘A boy his age, it’s high time he was pulling his weight ...’

‘He’s my boy, I’ll say when it’s time for him to ...’

‘Wallpapering, tiling, something like that. To my mind, that’s the sort of thing ...’

‘Look, what do you know about it? What do you know, a miserable, lonely bachelor? What do you know about it?’

I pushed his shoulder roughly. Geoffrey Saunders became suddenly crestfallen. He shuffled a few paces on ahead of us, where he continued walking with his head slightly bowed, still clutching the front of his raincoat.

‘It’s all right,’ I said to Boris quietly. ‘We’ll be there soon.’

Boris did not respond and I saw that he was staring at Geoffrey Saunders’s lurching figure before us.

As we continued to walk, my anger at my old schoolmate began to subside. Besides, I had not forgotten that we were entirely reliant on him to show us the way to our bus stop. After a few moments I drew up closer to him, wondering if we were still on talking terms. To my surprise I heard Geoffrey Saunders muttering away to himself softly:

‘Yes, yes, we’ll talk over all these things when you come round for your cup of tea. We’ll talk over everything,

spend a nostalgic hour or two discussing schooldays and old schoolfriends. I'll have my room tidied, and we can sit on the armchairs, on either side of the fireplace. Yes, it does look rather like the sort of room one might rent in England. Or at least might have done a few years ago. That's why I took it. Reminded me of home. Anyway, we could sit on either side of the fireplace and talk about the lot. The masters, the boys, exchange news of mutual friends we're still in touch with. Ah, here we are.'

We had emerged into what looked like a small village square. There were a few small shops - where presumably the inhabitants of this district bought their groceries - all of them closed and gridded up for the night. In the middle of the square was a patch of green not much bigger than a traffic island. Geoffrey Saunders pointed to a solitary street lamp in front of the shops.

'You and your boy should wait over there. I know there's no sign, but don't worry, it's a recognised bus stop. Now, I'm afraid I'll have to leave you.'

Boris and I stared across to where he had pointed. The rain had stopped, but a mist was hovering around the base of the lamppost. There was nothing stirring around us.

'Are you sure a bus will come?' I asked.

'Oh yes. Naturally, at this time of night it might take a little while. But certainly it'll come in the end. You have to be patient, that's all. You might get a little chilly standing here, but believe me the bus is well worth the wait. It will come out of the darkness, all brightly lit up. And once you step on board, you'll find it's very warm and comfortable. And it always has the most cheerful crowd of passengers. They'll be laughing and joking, handing out hot drinks and snacks. They'll make you and your boy very welcome. Just ask the driver to let you off at the medieval chapel. It's just a short journey by bus.'

Geoffrey Saunders bade us good night, then turned and walked off. Boris and I watched him disappear down an alleyway between two houses, then began to make our way over to the bus stop.

We stood beneath the street lamp for several minutes, surrounded by silence. Eventually I put my arm around Boris saying: 'You must be getting cold.'

He pressed himself against my body, but said nothing, and when I glanced down at him I saw he was gazing thoughtfully along the darkened street. Somewhere far away a dog began to bark, then stopped. When we had been standing like that for a time, I said:

'Boris, I'm sorry. I should have arranged things better. I'm sorry.'

The little boy remained silent for a moment. Then he said: 'Don't worry. The bus will come soon.'

I could see across the little square the mist drifting in front of the short row of shops.

'I'm not sure a bus is coming, Boris,' I said eventually.

'It's all right. You've got to be patient.'

We went on waiting for several more moments. Then I said again:

'Boris, I'm not at all sure a bus is going to come.'

The little boy turned to me and sighed wearily. 'Stop worrying,' he said. 'Didn't you hear what the man said? We just have to wait.'

'Boris. Sometimes things don't happen as you expect. Even when someone tells you it will.'

Boris gave another sigh. 'Look, the man said, didn't he? Anyway, Mother will be waiting for us.'

I was trying to think of what to say next when the sound of a cough made us both start. Turning, I saw, just beyond the light cast by the street lamp, someone leaning out of a stationary car.

‘Good evening, Mr Ryder. Excuse me, but I was just going by and happened to see you. Is everything all right?’

I took a few steps towards the car and recognised Stephan, the hotel manager’s son.

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘Everything’s fine, thank you. We were ... well, we were waiting for a bus.’

‘Perhaps I could give you a lift. I was just on my way somewhere, a rather delicate mission Father’s entrusted me with. I say, it’s rather chilly out there. Why don’t you jump in?’

The young man got out and opened the passenger doors front and back. Thanking him, I helped Boris into the rear seat and got into the front. The next moment, the car had begun to move.

‘So this is your little boy,’ Stephan said as we sped through deserted streets. ‘How very nice to meet him, though he looks a bit exhausted just now. Oh well, let him rest. I’ll shake his hand another time.’

Glancing behind me, I saw that Boris was in the process of falling asleep, his head against the cushioned armrest.

‘So, Mr Ryder,’ Stephan went on. ‘I assume you’re wanting to return to the hotel.’

‘Actually, Boris and I were on our way to someone’s apartment. In the centre, near the medieval chapel.’

‘The medieval chapel? Hmm.’

‘Is that going to be a problem?’

‘Oh, not really. No problem at all.’ Stephan steered round a tight corner into another narrow dark street. ‘It’s

just that, well, as I mentioned, I was just on my way somewhere myself. To an appointment. Now let me see ...'

'Your appointment is an urgent one?'

'Well actually, Mr Ryder, it *is* rather. It's to do with Mr Brodsky, you see. In fact, it's quite crucial. Hmm. I wonder, if you and Boris were generous enough to wait just a few minutes while I saw to it, then I could drive you wherever you want afterwards.'

'Naturally you must attend to your business first. But I'd be grateful if there's not too much delay. You see, Boris hasn't had supper yet.'

'I'll be as quick as I can, Mr Ryder. I only wish I could take you immediately, but you see, I daren't be late. As I say, it's rather a tricky little mission ...'

'Of course, you must see to that first. We'll be very happy to wait.'

'I'll try and make it as quick as possible. Though to be honest, I don't see how I can take too many short cuts. In fact, it's the sort of thing Father would usually handle himself, or else one of the gentlemen, but well, it's just that Miss Collins has always had a soft spot for me ...' The young man broke off, suddenly embarrassed. Then he said: 'I'll try not to be long.'

We were now moving through a more salubrious district - closer, I guessed, to the city centre. The street lighting was much better and I noticed tram lines running alongside us. There was the occasional café or restaurant closed for the night, but for the most part the area was full of stately apartment buildings. The windows were all dark and our vehicle seemed the only thing for miles disturbing the hush. Stephan Hoffman drove in silence for a few minutes. Then he said suddenly, as though he had for some time been working himself up to it:

‘Look, it’s awfully impertinent of me. But are you *sure* you don’t want to go back to the hotel? It’s just that, I mean, with those journalists waiting for you there and everything.’

‘Journalists?’ I looked out into the night. ‘Ah yes. The journalists.’

‘Golly, I hope you don’t think I’m being cheeky. It’s just that I happened to see them as I was leaving. Sitting in the lobby with their folders and briefcases on their laps, looking very keyed up at the thought of meeting you. As I say, it’s none of my business and naturally you’ve got the whole thing worked out, I’m sure.’

‘Quite, quite,’ I said softly, and continued to look out of the window.

Stephan fell silent, no doubt deciding he should not press the matter further. But I found myself thinking about the journalists, and after a moment I thought I could perhaps remember some such appointment. Certainly, the image the young man had evoked of people sitting with folders and briefcases rang a bell. In the end, though, I could not recall with any definiteness such an item having been on my schedule and decided to forget the matter.

‘Ah, here we are,’ Stephan said beside me. ‘Now if you’d excuse me for a little while. Please make yourselves as comfortable as you can. I’ll be back as quickly as possible.’

We had come to a halt in front of a large white apartment building. Several storeys high, the dark wrought-iron balconies at each level gave it a Spanish flavour.

Stephan got out of the car and I watched him go up to the entrance. He stooped over the row of apartment buttons, pressed one, then stood waiting, a nervousness discernible in his posture. A moment later a light came on in the entrance hall.

The door was opened by an elderly, silver-haired woman. She looked slender and frail, but there was a certain gracefulness in her movement as she smiled and showed Stephan in. The door closed behind him, but by leaning right back in my seat I found I could still see the two of them clearly illuminated in the narrow pane to the side of the front door. Stephan was wiping his feet on the doormat, saying:

‘I’m sorry to come like this at such short notice.’

‘I’ve told you many times, Stephan,’ the elderly woman said, ‘I’m always here whenever you need to talk things over.’

‘Well actually, Miss Collins, it wasn’t ... Well, it’s not about the usual stuff. I wanted to talk to you about something else, a quite important matter. Father would have come himself, but, well, he was so busy ...’

‘Ah,’ the woman interrupted with a smile, ‘something else your father’s put you up to. He’s still giving you all the dirty work.’

There was a playful note in her voice, but Stephan seemed to miss it.

‘Not at all,’ he retorted earnestly. ‘On the contrary, this is a mission of a particularly delicate and difficult nature. Father entrusted me with it and I was very happy to accept ...’

‘So I’ve now become a mission! And one of a delicate and difficult nature at that!’

‘Well no. That’s to say ...’ Stephan paused in confusion.

The elderly woman seemed to decide she had teased Stephan enough. ‘All right,’ she said, ‘we’d better go inside and discuss this properly over some sherry.’

‘How kind of you, Miss Collins. But actually, I mustn’t stay long. I’ve got some people waiting out in the car.’ He indicated in our direction, but the elderly woman was already opening the door into her apartment.

I watched her lead Stephan through a small and tidy front parlour, through a second doorway and down a shadowy corridor decorated on either side with little framed water-colours. The corridor ended at Miss Collins’s drawing room – a large L-shaped affair at the back of the building. The light here was low and cosy, and at first glance the room looked expensively elegant in an old-fashioned way. On closer inspection, however, I could see much of the furniture was extremely worn, and that what at first I had taken for antiques were in fact little better than junk. Once luxurious couches and armchairs sat about the place in states of disrepair and the full-length velvet drapes were mottled and frayed. Stephan seated himself with an ease that betrayed his familiarity with the surroundings, but continued to look tense as Miss Collins busied herself at the drinks cabinet. When she eventually handed him a glass and sat down near him, the young man burst out abruptly: ‘It’s to do with Mr Brodsky.’

‘Ah,’ Miss Collins said. ‘I rather suspected as much.’

‘Miss Collins, the fact is, we wondered if you might consider helping us. Or rather, helping *him* ...’ Stephan broke off with a laugh and looked away.

Miss Collins tilted her head thoughtfully. Then she asked: ‘You’re asking me to help Leo?’

‘Oh, we’re not asking you to do anything you’d find distasteful or ... well, painful. Father understands perfectly how you must feel.’ He gave another short laugh.

‘It’s just that your help could prove crucial just at this stage in Mr Brodsky’s ... recovery.’

‘Ah.’ Miss Collins nodded and appeared to give this some thought. Then she said: ‘May I take it from all this, Stephan, that your father’s having only limited success with Leo?’

The teasing in her voice seemed to me more pronounced than ever, but again Stephan failed to notice it.

‘Not at all!’ he said crossly. ‘On the contrary, Father’s worked wonders, made enormous strides! It hasn’t been easy, but Father’s perseverance has been remarkable, even to those of us used to the way Father goes about things.’

‘Perhaps he hasn’t persevered enough.’

‘But you’ve no idea, Miss Collins! No idea! Sometimes he’s come home exhausted after a gruelling day at the hotel, so exhausted he’s had to go straight upstairs to bed. I’ve had Mother come down complaining and I’ve gone up there, up to their room, and found Father snoring away on his back, collapsed right across their bed. As you know, it’s been an important understanding for years that he goes to sleep on his side, never on his back, he always snores so badly otherwise, so you can imagine Mother’s disgust at discovering him like that. It’s usually God’s own job for me to rouse him but I have to because otherwise, I told you before, otherwise Mother refuses to go back into the bedroom. She’ll just hover out in the corridor with her angry look, she won’t go back in until I’ve woken him up, undressed him, got him in his bathrobe and guided him into the bathroom. But what I’m meaning to tell you is that, well, even when he’s that tired, sometimes the phone’s gone and it’s been one of the staff to say Mr Brodsky’s right on the edge, that he’s been demanding a drink, and, do you know, Father somehow finds more energy from somewhere. He pulls himself together, that look comes into his eyes, he gets dressed and goes off into the night, not to return for hours. He said he’d get Mr Brodsky fit and

he's giving everything he's got, every last bit to accomplish what he said he would.'

'That's very commendable. But exactly how far is he getting?'

'I assure you, Miss Collins, the progress has been astonishing. Everyone who's seen Mr Brodsky recently has remarked on it. There's so much more going on behind those eyes. His comments too, they have more and more meaning by the day. But most crucially, his ability, Mr Brodsky's great ability, *that's* returning without a doubt. By all accounts, the rehearsals have been going extremely promisingly. The orchestra, they've been completely won over by him. And when he's not been rehearsing at the concert hall, he's been busy working things out by himself. You can often catch little snatches of him at the piano now as you wander about the hotel. When Father hears that piano, he's so encouraged you can see he's ready to sacrifice any amount of sleep.'

The young man paused and looked at Miss Collins. For a moment she seemed far away, leaning her head to one side as though she too might catch a few notes from a distant piano. Then a gentle smile returned to her face and she looked again at Stephan.

'What I've heard,' she said, 'is that your father sits him up in that hotel drawing room, sits him up in front of the piano like he's some manikin, and Leo stays there for hours gently swaying on the stool without touching a note.'

'Miss Collins, that's quite unfair! Perhaps there were occasions like that in the early days, but it's a very different story now. In any case, even if he does sit there silently sometimes, surely you must remember this, it hardly means nothing's going on. Silence is just as likely to indicate the most profound ideas forming, the deepest energies being summoned. In fact, the other day, after a particularly long silence, Father actually went into the drawing room and there was Mr Brodsky staring down at the

piano keys. After a while he looked up at Father and said: "The violins need to be harsh. They must sound harsh." That's what he said. There may have been silence, but inside his head, there'd been a whole universe of music. What he'll show us all on Thursday night, it's thrilling to think about. Just so long as he doesn't falter now.'

'But you said, Stephan, you wanted me to help in some way.'

The young man, who had become increasingly animated, now collected himself.

'Well yes,' he said. 'That's what I've come here tonight to speak to you about. As I say, Mr Brodsky's been rapidly regaining all his old powers. And, well, naturally, along with his great talents, various other things are now re-emerging. To those of us who never knew him very well before, it's been something of a revelation. These days he's often so articulate, so urbane. Anyway, the point is, along with everything else, he's started to remember. Well, to put it bluntly, he talks about you. Thinks and talks about you all the time. Last night, just to give you an example - this is embarrassing but I'll tell you - last night he started to weep and couldn't stop. He just kept weeping, pouring out all his feelings for you. It's the third or fourth time it's happened, though last night's was the most extreme instance. It was almost midnight, Mr Brodsky hadn't emerged from the drawing room, so Father went to listen at the door and heard him sobbing. So he went in and found the place in complete darkness, and Mr Brodsky bowed over the piano, weeping. Well, there was a suite vacant upstairs, so Father took him up there and had the kitchen bring up all Mr Brodsky's favourite soups - he tends only to eat soups - and plied him with orange juice and soft drinks, but frankly, last night, it was touch and go. Apparently he was attacking the cartons of juice feverishly. If Father hadn't been there, it's very possible he would have cracked, even at this late stage. And all the time he continued to talk about you. Well, the point

I'm getting at - oh dear, I shouldn't stay too long, I've got people waiting in the car - my point is, with so much of the future of our city depending on him, we have to do everything to ensure he'll pull through this last bit. Dr Kaufmann agrees with Father, we're close to the last hurdle now. So you see how much hangs in the balance.'

Miss Collins continued to look at Stephan with the same distant half-smile, but still said nothing. After a moment, the young man went on:

'Miss Collins, I realise what I'm saying might well be opening up old wounds. And I appreciate you and Mr Brodsky haven't spoken to each other now for many years ...'

'Oh, that's not quite accurate. Only earlier this year, he shouted obscenities at me as I was strolling across the Volksgarten.'

Stephan laughed awkwardly, unsure how to handle Miss Collins's tone. Then he went on with some earnestness: 'Miss Collins, no one's suggesting you have any sort of extended contact with him. Good lord, no. You wish to put the past behind you. Father, everyone, they appreciate that. All we're asking, just one small thing, it might make such a difference, it would so encourage him and mean so much to him. We hoped you wouldn't mind us at least putting it to you.'

'I've already agreed to attend the banquet.'

'Yes, yes, of course. Father told me, we're so grateful ...'

'On the strict understanding there'll be no direct contact ...'

'That's completely understood, absolutely. The banquet, yes. But actually, Miss Collins, it was something further we wanted to ask of you, if you could just bear to think about it. You see, a group of gentlemen - Mr von Winterstein among

them - will be taking Mr Brodsky to the zoo tomorrow. Apparently in all the years, he's never visited it. His dog can't be admitted, naturally, but Mr Brodsky has finally consented to leave it in good hands for just a couple of hours. It was felt that an outing of this sort would help calm him. The giraffes in particular we thought might be relaxing. Well, I'll come to the point. The gentlemen wondered if you might possibly care to join the group at the zoo. Even say just a word or two to him. You wouldn't need to travel out with the party, you could just join them there, just for a few minutes, exchange a pleasant remark with him, perhaps say a few uplifting things, it could make all the difference. A few minutes, then you could be on your way. Please, Miss Collins, if you'd give this some consideration. So much might hang on it.'

While Stephan had been speaking, Miss Collins had risen from her seat and moved slowly over to her fireplace. She now remained standing quite still for several seconds, one hand resting on the mantelpiece as though to steady herself. When eventually she turned to Stephan again, I saw that her eyes had become moist.

'You see my problem, Stephan,' she said. 'I may have been married to him once. But for many years now, the only times I've encountered him, he's been shouting abuse at me. So you see, it's hard for me to guess what sort of conversation he'd best enjoy.'

'Miss Collins, I swear to you he's a different man now. These days he's so polite and urbane and ... but surely, you'd remember. If you could even just think about it. There's so much at stake.'

Miss Collins sipped her sherry thoughtfully. She seemed about to reply, but just at this point I heard Boris shift behind me in the back of the car. Turning, I saw that the little boy must have been awake for some time. He was gazing through his window out across the still and empty street, and

I sensed a sadness about him. I was about to say something, but he must have realised my attention was on him, for he asked quietly without moving:

‘Can you do bathrooms?’

‘Can I do bathrooms?’

Boris sighed heavily and went on gazing out into the darkness. Then he said: ‘I’d never done tiles before. That’s why I made all those mistakes. If someone had shown me, I could have done them.’

‘Yes, I’m sure you could have done. This is the bathroom in your new apartment?’

‘If someone had shown me, I could have done them all right. Then Mother would have been happy with the bathroom. She’d have liked the bathroom then.’

‘Ah. So she’s not happy with it at the moment?’

Boris looked at me as though I had said something immensely stupid. Then, with heavy irony, he said: ‘Why would she cry about the bathroom if she liked it?’

‘Why indeed? So she cries about the bathroom. I wonder why she does that.’

Boris turned back to his window and I could now see by the mixed light coming into the car that he was struggling not to burst into tears. At the last moment he managed to disguise his upset as a yawn and rubbed his face with his fists.

‘We’ll sort all these things out eventually,’ I said.
‘You’ll see.’

‘I could have done it all right if someone had shown me. Then Mother wouldn’t have cried.’

‘Yes, I’m sure you’d have made a very good job of it. But we’ll sort everything out soon.’

I straightened in my seat and gazed through the windscreen. There was hardly a lit window anywhere down the street. After a while I said: 'Boris, we have to have a good think now. Are you listening?'

There was silence from the back of the car.

'Boris,' I went on, 'we've got to make a decision. I know earlier we were on our way to join Mother. But now it's got very late. Boris, are you listening?'

I threw a glance over my shoulder and saw he was still staring vacantly out into the darkness. We went on sitting silently for several more moments. Then I said:

'The fact is, it's very late now. If we went back to the hotel we could see your grandfather. He'd be delighted to see you. You could have a room of your own or, if you preferred, we could have them set up another bed for you in my room. We could have them bring up something good to eat, then you could get off to sleep. Then tomorrow morning we'll get up for breakfast and decide what we'll do.'

There was silence behind me.

'I should have organised things better,' I said. 'I'm sorry. I ... I just wasn't thinking clearly tonight. It was so busy earlier on. But look, I promise we'll make it up tomorrow. We can do all kinds of things tomorrow. If you like, we could go back to the old apartment and get Number Nine. What do you say?'

Boris still said nothing.

'We've both had tiring days. Boris, what do you say?'

'We'd better go to the hotel.'

'I think that's the best idea. So that's settled then. When the gentleman comes back, we'll tell him our new plan.'

Just at this point a movement caught my eye and, glancing back to the apartment building, I saw that the front door was open. Miss Collins was in the process of showing Stephan out, and though they were parting amicably, something in both their manners suggested their meeting had concluded on an uneasy note. Soon the door closed and Stephan came hurrying back to the car.

‘I’m sorry to have been so long,’ he said, climbing into his seat. ‘I hope Boris has been all right.’ Placing his hands on the wheel, he let out a troubled sigh. Then he forced a smile and said: ‘Well, let’s get going.’

‘Actually,’ I said, ‘Boris and I had a good talk while you were gone. We think we’ll return to the hotel after all.’

‘If I may say so, Mr Ryder, that’s probably a good decision. So it’s back to the hotel. Jolly good.’ He glanced at his watch. ‘We’ll be there in no time. The journalists will have no real cause for complaint. No cause at all.’

Stephan started the engine and we set off again. As we drove through the deserted streets, the rain started once more and Stephan turned on the windscreen wipers. After a while, he said:

‘Mr Ryder, I wonder if I could be cheeky enough to remind you of the conversation we were having earlier. You know, when I met you in the atrium this afternoon.’

‘Ah yes,’ I said. ‘Yes, we were discussing your recital on Thursday night.’

‘You were very kind and said you might be able to find a few minutes for me. To listen to me run through the La Roche.’

Of course, this is probably completely impossible, but, well, I thought you wouldn't mind my asking. It's just that I was going to get in a little more practice tonight, once we got back to the hotel. I was wondering if, when you'd finished with these journalists, I know it's a great nuisance, but if you could come and listen for even a few minutes and tell me what you thought ...' He trailed off with a laugh.

I could see this was a matter of considerable importance for the young man and felt tempted to comply with his request. Nevertheless, after some consideration, I said:

'I'm sorry, tonight I'm so tired, it's imperative I get off to sleep as soon as possible. But don't worry, there's bound to be an opportunity in the near future. Look, why don't we leave it like this? I'm not sure precisely when I'll next have a few minutes to spare, but as soon as I do I'll phone the desk and get them to go and find you. If you're not in the hotel, I'll simply try again the next time I'm free and so on. That way we're bound to find a mutually convenient time before long. But tonight, really, if you don't mind, I really must get a good night's sleep.'

'Of course, Mr Ryder, I quite understand. By all means, let's do as you suggest. It's extremely kind of you. I'll wait to hear from you then.'

Stephan had spoken politely, but he seemed unduly disappointed, perhaps even mistaking my reply for some subtle refusal. Evidently he was in a state of such anxiety over his forthcoming performance that any setback, however minor, was apt to send him off into a cold panic. I felt some sympathy for him and said again reassuringly:

'Don't worry, we're bound to find an opportunity very soon.'

The rain continued to fall steadily as we travelled through the night-time streets. The young man remained silent for a long time and I wondered if he had become angry with

me. But then I caught sight of his profile in the changing light and realised he was turning over in his mind a particular incident from several years ago. It was an episode he had pondered many times before - often when lying awake at night or when driving alone - and now his fear that I would prove unable to help him had caused him once more to bring it to the front of his mind.

It had been the occasion of his mother's birthday. As he had parked his car in the familiar driveway that night - those were his college days when he had been living in Germany - he had braced himself for a painful few hours. But his father had opened the door to him, whispering excitedly:

'She's in a good mood. A very good mood.' His father had then turned and shouted into the house: 'Stephan is here, my dear. A little late, but he's here nevertheless.' Then in a whisper again: 'A very good mood. The best for a long time.'

The young man had gone through into the lounge to discover his mother reclining on a sofa, a cocktail glass in her hand. She was wearing a new dress and Stephan had been struck afresh at just how elegant a woman his mother was. She had not risen to greet him, obliging him to stoop down to kiss her cheek, but nevertheless the warmth of her manner as she invited him to take the armchair opposite had quite taken him aback. Behind him, his father, greatly pleased by this start to the evening, had emitted a small chuckle, then, indicating the apron he was wearing, had gone hurrying back towards the kitchen.

Left alone with his mother, Stephan's first feeling had been one of sheer terror - that something he said or did would shatter her good mood, thus undoing hours, perhaps days, of painstaking effort on his father's part. He had thus begun by giving brief, stilted replies to her queries about his college life, but when her attitude had remained consistently appreciative, found himself answering at greater and greater length. At one point he had referred to a college

professor as resembling 'a mentally balanced version of our foreign minister' - a phrase he had been particularly proud of and had used numerous times to his fellow students with considerable success. Had the early exchanges with his mother not gone so well, he would not have risked repeating it to her. But he had done so and with a leap of his heart had seen amusement momentarily light up her face. For all that, it had still come as a relief when his father had returned to announce dinner.

They had gone through to the dining room where the hotel manager had laid out the first course. The meal had started quietly. Then his father - a little abruptly, Stephan had thought - had commenced to tell an amusing anecdote concerning a group of Italian guests at the hotel. When he had finished, the hotel manager had urged Stephan to recount a story of his own, and when Stephan had started somewhat uncertainly his father had proceeded to support him with exaggerated laughter. So they had gone on, Stephan and his father taking turns to tell amusing stories and supporting each other with hearty responses. The tactic seemed to work, for eventually - Stephan could hardly believe it - his mother too had started to laugh for prolonged spells. The meal itself, moreover, had been prepared with the fanatical attention to detail characteristic of the hotel manager and was an astounding piece of cuisine. The wine was clearly something very special and by the time they were midway through the main course - an exquisite concoction of goose and wild berries - the mood of the evening had become one of genuine gaiety. Then the hotel manager, his face pink with the wine and laughter, had leaned over and said:

'Stephan, tell us again about that youth hostel you stayed in. You know, that one in the woods in Burgundy.'

For a second Stephan had been horrified. How could his father, who had conducted everything thus far so faultlessly, make such an obvious misjudgement? The story he was referring to involved extensive references to the hostel's lavatory

arrangements and was clearly unsuitable to put before his mother. Yet as he had hesitated, his father had given him a wink as though to say: 'Yes, yes, trust me, this will work. She'll love the story, it'll be a success.' Gravely doubtful though he was, Stephan's faith in his father had been such as to make him embark on the anecdote. He had not got far, however, before the thought ran through his mind that what had so far been a miraculously successful evening was about to come down in tatters around them. Nevertheless, egged on by his father's guffaws, he had continued, and then heard to his amazement his mother's open laughter. Looking up across the table, he had seen her shaking her head helplessly. Then, somewhere towards the end of his story, amidst all the laughter, Stephan had caught his mother giving his father a look of fondness. It was just a brief look, but there had been no mistaking it. The hotel manager, despite the tears of laughter in his eyes, had not missed it either, and turning to his son had given another wink, this time with an air of triumph. At that moment the young man had felt something very powerful rising in his breast. But before he had had the time clearly to identify it, his father had said to him:

'Now Stephan, before the sweet course we must rest. Why don't you play something for your mother on her birthday?' With this the hotel manager had waved towards the upright piano by the wall.

That gesture - that casual wave towards the dining-room upright - was one Stephan was to recall again and again over the years. And each time he did so something of the sickening chill he had felt at that moment would come back to him. At first he had looked at his father in disbelief, but the latter had simply gone on smiling contentedly, holding his hand out towards the piano.

'Come on, Stephan. Something your mother would like. A little Bach, perhaps. Or something contemporary. Kazan maybe. Or Mullery.'

The young man, forcing his gaze round to include his mother, had seen her face, softened by laughter along unfamiliar lines, smiling at him. She had then turned to the hotel manager rather than to Stephan and said: 'Yes, dear, I think Mullery would be just the thing. That would be splendid.'

'Come on, Stephan,' the hotel manager had said jovially. 'This is your mother's birthday, after all. Don't disappoint her.'

An idea had flashed through Stephan's mind - an idea rejected the very next instant - that his parents were conspiring together against him. Certainly from the way they were gazing at him - so full of proud anticipation - it was as though they had no memory at all of the anguished history surrounding his piano playing. In any case, the protest he had started to formulate had faded in his mouth, and he had risen to his feet as though it were someone else doing so.

The piano's position against the wall was such that, when Stephan had sat down at it, he had been able to see at the edge of his vision the figures of his parents, their elbows upon the table, each leaning slightly towards the other. After a moment he had actually turned and glanced directly towards them, aware as he did so that he had wanted to see them like that one last time - sitting together as though bound by an uncomplicated happiness. He had then turned back to the piano, overwhelmed by the certainty that the evening was about to fall. Curiously he had realised he was no longer at all surprised by the latest turn of events, that in fact he had been waiting for it all along and that it had brought with it a sense of relief.

For a few seconds, Stephan had gone on sitting without playing, trying desperately to shake off the effects of the wine and to run through in his mind the piece he was about to attempt. For one giddy moment he saw the possibility - it had after all been an evening of remarkable things - that he

would somehow perform at a level never before attained, and that he would finish to find his parents smiling, applauding and exchanging with each other looks of deep affection. But no sooner had he commenced the opening bar of Mullery's *Epicycloid*, he had realised the utter impossibility of any such scenario.

He had played on nevertheless. For a long time - throughout most of the first movement - the figures at the edge of his vision had remained very still. Then he had seen his mother lean back slightly in her chair and bring a hand up to her chin. Several bars later, his father had turned his gaze away from Stephan, placed both hands on his lap and had bowed his head forward so that he appeared to be studying a spot on the table before him.

Meanwhile the piece had gone on and on, and though the young man had felt tempted several times to abandon it, to stop altogether had somehow seemed the most dreadful option of all. So he had continued, and when at last the piece had finished, Stephan had sat staring at the keyboard for several moments before working up the courage to look round at the scene awaiting him.

Neither of his parents was looking at him. His father's head had now become so bowed the forehead was almost touching the table surface. His mother was looking in the other direction across the room, wearing the frosty expression Stephan was so familiar with and which, astonishingly, had been absent until that point in the evening.

Stephan had needed only a second to appraise this scene. Then he had got up and returned quickly to the dining table, as though by doing so the minutes since his leaving it could be expunged. For a little while, the three of them had continued to sit silently. Finally his mother had risen saying:

'It's been a very nice evening. Thank you, both of you. But I'm feeling tired now and I think I ought to go up to

bed. '

At first the hotel manager had seemed not to have heard. But as Stephan's mother had moved towards the door, he had raised his head and said very quietly: 'The cake, my dear. The cake. It's ... it's something rather special.'

'You're very kind, but really, I've had so much already to eat. I must get some sleep now.'

'Of course, of course.' The hotel manager had stared down at the table again with an air of resignation. But then, as Stephan's mother was about to pass through the door, the hotel manager had suddenly straightened and said loudly: 'At least, my dear, come and look at it. Just look at it. As I say, it's something special.'

His mother had hesitated, then said: 'Very well. Show it to me quickly. Then I really must sleep. It's the wine perhaps, but I feel extremely tired now.'

On hearing this, the hotel manager had started to his feet and the next instant had ushered his wife out of the dining room.

The young man had listened to his parents' footsteps going towards the kitchen, then, after no more than a minute, returning along the corridor and climbing the staircase. For some time after that Stephan had remained seated at the table. Various small noises had come from above but he had been unable to hear any voices. In the end it had occurred to him that his best course would simply be to drive back through the night to his digs. Certainly his presence at breakfast would hardly help his father on the slow, huge task of rebuilding his mother's good humour.

He had left the dining room intending to slip out of the house unnoticed, but out in the hallway he had encountered his father descending the staircase. The hotel manager had put his finger to his lips, saying:

‘We must speak quietly. Your mother’s just gone to bed.’

Stephan had informed his father of his intention to return to Heidelberg, to which the hotel manager had said: ‘What a pity. Your mother and I thought you’d be able to stay longer. But as you say, you have lectures in the morning. I’ll explain to your mother, she’s sure to understand.’

‘And Mother,’ Stephan had said. ‘I hope she enjoyed the evening.’

His father had smiled, but for a brief moment before he did so Stephan had seen a look of profound desolation cross his face.

‘Oh yes. I know she did. Oh yes. She was so glad you could take a break from your studies and come all this way. I know she was hoping you would stay a few days, but don’t worry. I’ll explain it to her.’

As he had driven along the deserted highways that night, Stephan had turned over every aspect of the evening’s events – just as he was to do again and again over the following years. The anguish he felt each time he recalled that occasion had gradually diminished with time, but now the steady approach of Thursday night had brought back many of the old terrors, causing him yet again, as we drove on through the rainy night, to be transported back to that painful evening of several years ago.

I felt sorry for the young man and broke the silence by saying to him:

‘I realise it’s none of my business, and I hope this doesn’t sound rude, but I do think you’ve been treated rather unfairly by your parents over the matter of your piano playing. My advice to you would be to try and enjoy your playing as much as you can, drawing satisfaction and meaning from it regardless of them.’

The young man considered this for several moments. Then he said:

'I'm grateful to you, Mr Ryder, for giving my position thought and all that. But actually - well, to be quite blunt about it - I don't think you really understand. I can see how to an outsider my mother's behaviour that night might look a little, well, a little inconsiderate. But that would be doing her an injustice and I'd really hate for you to go away with such an impression. You see, you've got to understand the whole background to this matter. For one thing, you see, from when I was four I had Mrs Tilkowski as my piano teacher. I suppose there's no reason why that would mean much to you, Mr Ryder, but you have to understand, Mrs Tilkowski is a very revered figure in this city, certainly not just *any* piano teacher. Her services aren't for sale in the usual way - though of course she takes fees like anyone else. That's to say, she's very serious about what she does and will only take children of the city's artistic and intellectual elite. For instance, Paulo Rozario, the surrealist painter, lived here for a time and Mrs Tilkowski taught both his daughters. And Professor Diegelmann's children. The Countess's nieces too. She chooses her pupils very carefully, and so you see I was very fortunate to get her, particularly since in those days Father didn't have the sort of standing in the community he has today. But I suppose my parents were as dedicated to the arts then as they are now. All through my childhood I remember them talking about artists and musicians and how important it was that such people were supported. Mother stays at home most of the time now, but in those days she was much more outgoing. If a musician, say, or an orchestra came through the town, she'd always make a point of going along to lend her support. She'd not only attend the performance, she'd always try and go to the dressing room afterwards to give her praise personally. Even if a performer had done badly, she'd still go to his dressing room afterwards to give a little encouragement and a few gentle hints. In fact she'd often invite musicians to

visit our house, or else offer to take them on a tour around the city. Usually their schedules were much too full to take up her offers, but, as no doubt you can vouch yourself, such invitations are always very uplifting to any performer. As for my father, he was extremely busy, but I remember he too used to do his best. Certainly, if there was a reception held in honour of some visiting celebrity, he'd always make a point of accompanying Mother to it, no matter how busy he was, so that he could play his part in welcoming the visitor. So you see, Mr Ryder, as far back as I can remember, my parents have been very cultured people who appreciated the importance of the arts in our society, and I'm sure that's why Mrs Tilkowski finally agreed to take me on as a pupil. I can see now it must have been a real triumph for my parents at the time, particularly for Mother, who'd gone about all the arrangements. There I was, having lessons from Mrs Tilkowski alongside Mr Rozario's and Professor Diegelmann's children! They must have been so proud. And for the first few years I did very well, I really did, so much so that Mrs Tilkowski once called me one of the most promising pupils she'd ever had. Things really went well until ... well, until when I was ten years old.'

The young man suddenly went silent, perhaps regretting having talked so freely. But I could see another part of him was eager to carry on with his revelations, and so I asked:

'What happened when you were ten?'

'Well, I'm ashamed to admit this, and to you of all people, Mr Ryder. But when I was ten, well, I just stopped practising. I'd turn up at Mrs Tilkowski's not having practised my passages at all. And when she asked why I hadn't, I'd just not speak. This is awfully embarrassing, it's like someone else I'm talking about, and I just wish by some magic it could be. But that's the truth, there you are, that's how I behaved. And after a few weeks of this, there was nothing for it but for Mrs Tilkowski to inform my parents that if things didn't change, she could no longer carry on

with me. I later found out Mother lost her temper a little and shouted at Mrs Tilkowski. Anyway it all ended rather badly. ’

‘And after that you went to another teacher?’

‘Yes, a Miss Henze, who wasn’t at all bad. But she was hardly Mrs Tilkowski. I still didn’t practise, but Miss Henze wasn’t so strict. Then when I was twelve, it all changed. It’s hard to explain just what happened, it may sound a little odd. I was just sitting in the lounge of our house one afternoon. It was very sunny, I remember I was reading this football magazine, and my father came wandering into the room. I remember he was wearing his grey waistcoat and his shirt-sleeves were rolled up and he stood in the middle of the floor and stared out through the window out into the garden. I knew Mother was out there, sitting out on the bench we used to have in those days under the fruit trees, and I was waiting for Father to go out and sit with her. But he just kept standing there. He had his back to me, so I couldn’t see his face, but whenever I looked up I could see he was staring out into the garden to where Mother was. Well, the third or fourth time I looked up and Father still hadn’t gone out, something suddenly dawned on me. I mean, that’s when I realised. That my mother and father had barely spoken to each other for months. It was very odd, this realisation just came over me, that they’d hardly spoken at all. It’s odd I hadn’t noticed it earlier but I hadn’t, not until that moment. But then I saw it very clearly. All in a rush, a number of different instances came back to me - times when previously Father and Mother would have said something to each other, but in fact they hadn’t. I don’t mean they’d been totally silent. But, you know, this coolness had come between them and I hadn’t seen it until that moment. I can tell you, Mr Ryder, it was a very strange feeling, that realisation coming over me. And almost at the same time this terrible other thing occurred to me - that this change must have dated back to when I’d lost Mrs Tilkowski. I couldn’t be

certain, because so much time had gone by, but once I'd thought about it I was sure that's when this thing had first started. I can't remember now if Father ever went out into the garden or not. I didn't say anything, just pretended to keep reading my football magazine, then after a while I went up to my room, lay down on the bed and thought it all over. It was after that I started to work hard again. I started practising really very diligently and I must have made a lot of progress, because after a few months Mother went to see Mrs Tilkowski to ask if she'd consider taking me back. I can see now it must have been quite a humiliation for Mother, having shouted that last time, and she must have had to do a lot of work on Mrs Tilkowski. Anyway, the result was, Mrs Tilkowski agreed to take me back, and this time I worked hard all the time, practising and practising. But you see, I'd lost those crucial two years. The years between ten and twelve, you know better than anyone how crucial they are. Believe me, Mr Ryder, I tried to make up for those lost years, I did everything I could, but really it was just too late. Even now I often stop and ask myself: "What on earth could I have been thinking of?" Oh, what I'd give now to have those years again! But you see, I don't think my parents really appreciated how damaging those missing two years would be. I think they thought once I'd got Mrs Tilkowski back, so long as I worked hard, they wouldn't make much difference. I know Mrs Tilkowski tried to explain it to them on more than one occasion, but I think they were so full of love and pride for me they just didn't take on board the reality of the situation. For quite a few years, they went on assuming I was making fine progress, that I was really gifted. It was only when I was seventeen it really hit them. There used to be a piano competition in those days, the Jürgen Flemming Prize, it was organised by the Civic Arts Institute for promising young people in the city. It used to have a reputation of sorts, though it's stopped now due to lack of funds. When I was seventeen, my parents had this idea I should enter it, and my mother actually went about seeing to all the

preliminaries for getting me entered. That was when they first realised how short of the mark I was. They listened very carefully to my playing - it was probably the first time they *really* listened - and they realised I'd only humiliate myself and the family by entering. I was quite keen to have a go anyway, but my parents decided it would damage my confidence too much. As I say, that was the first time they noticed how weak my playing was. Until then, their high hopes, and I suppose their love for me, just prevented them from listening at all objectively. That was the first time they took on board just how much damage those missing two years had done. Well, after that, naturally enough, my parents became very disappointed. Mother in particular seemed to resign herself to the idea that it had all been for nothing, all the effort she'd gone to, all the years with Mrs Tilkowski, that time she'd gone to beg her to take me back, all of it, she seemed to think of it all as a big waste. And she got rather despondent and stopped going out very much, stopped going to the concerts and functions. Father, though, he's always kept up some hope for me. That's typical of him really. He'll always keep hopeful right to the end. Every now and again, every year or so, he asks to hear me play, and whenever he does, I can see he's full of hope for me, I can see him thinking: "This time, this time it'll be different." But so far, each time I finish playing and look up I can see he's crestfallen again. Of course he does his best to hide it, but I can see it clearly enough. But he's never given up hope, and that's meant a lot to me.'

We were now speeding down a wide avenue flanked by tall office buildings. Although we sometimes passed rows of neatly parked cars, ours still seemed to be the only vehicle moving for miles.

'And it was your father's idea,' I asked, 'that you should perform on Thursday night?'

'Yes. There's faith for you! He first suggested it six months ago. He hasn't heard me play for almost two years, but

he's showing real faith in me. Of course he gave me every chance to say no, but I was so moved that he should show such faith in me after all those disappointments. So I said yes, I'd do it.'

'That was very brave of you. I do hope it turns out to be the correct decision.'

'Actually, Mr Ryder, I said yes because, well, even though I say so myself, I think I've made something of a breakthrough recently. Perhaps you'll know what I'm talking about, it's rather hard to explain. It's as though something in my head, something that was always blocking my progress, like a dam or something, it's like it's suddenly burst and a whole new spirit's been allowed to flow. I can't quite explain it, but the fact is I think I'm a significantly better pianist now than when Father last heard me. So you see, when he asked if I wanted to perform on Thursday night, nervous though I was, I said yes. If I hadn't, it wouldn't have been fair on him, after all the faith he's invested in me. That's not to say I'm not worried about Thursday night. I've been working on my piece very hard and I'll admit, I *am* a bit worried. But I know I've got a very good chance of surprising my parents. In any case, you see, I've always had this fantasy. Even when my playing was at its most wretched. I had this fantasy of spending months somewhere locked away, practising and practising. My parents wouldn't see me for months and months. Then one day I'd suddenly come home. A Sunday afternoon probably. In any case some time when Father would be home too. I'd come in, hardly say a word, just go to the piano, lift the lid, start playing. I'd not even have taken my coat off. I'd just play and play. Bach, Chopin, Beethoven. Then on to the modern stuff. Grebel. Kazan. Mullery. I'd just play and play. And my parents would have followed me into the dining room and they'd just be looking on in astonishment. It would be beyond their wildest dreams. But then, to their amazement, they'd realise that even as I played I was reaching greater and greater heights. Sublime,

sensitive adagios. Astounding fiery bravura passages. I'd climb higher and higher. And they'd be standing there in the middle of the room, Father still absently holding the newspaper he'd been reading, both of them completely astounded. In the end I'd finish with some stunning finale, then at last I'd turn to them and ... well, I've never been sure what happens after that. But it's a fantasy I've had ever since I was thirteen or fourteen. Thursday night may not turn out quite like it, but it's possible it could be pretty close. As I say, something's changed and I'm sure I'm almost there now. Ah, Mr Ryder, here we are. Well in time, I'm sure, for your journalists.'

The city centre had been so silent and devoid of traffic I had not recognised it. But, sure enough, we were now approaching the entrance of the hotel.

'If you don't mind,' Stephan went on, 'I'll drop you and Boris off here. I have to take the car round to the back.'

In the rear, Boris was looking tired, but was still awake. We got out, and I made sure the little boy had thanked Stephan before leading him towards the hotel.

The lights had been dimmed in the lobby and the hotel in general seemed to have fallen into quiet. The young desk clerk I had met on first arriving was on duty again, though he appeared to be fast asleep in his seat behind the reception desk. As we approached, he looked up and, recognising me, made an effort to wake himself up.

‘Good evening, sir,’ he said very cheerfully, but the next moment his weariness seemed to overtake him again.

‘Good evening. I’ll need another room. For Boris.’ I put my hand on the little boy’s shoulder. ‘As close to mine as possible please.’

‘Let me see what I can do, Mr Ryder.’

‘Actually, your porter here, Gustav, he happens to be Boris’s grandfather. I wonder if by any chance he’s still in the hotel.’

‘Oh yes, Gustav lives here. He has a little room up in the attic. But just now, I think he’d be asleep.’

‘Perhaps he wouldn’t mind being woken up. I know he’ll want to see Boris straight away.’

The desk clerk glanced worriedly at his watch. ‘Well, anything you say, sir,’ he said uncertainly and picked up the phone. After a short pause, I heard him get through.

‘Gustav? Gustav, I’m very sorry. This is Walter. Yes, yes, I’m sorry to wake you. Yes, I know, I’m very sorry. But please listen. Mr Ryder has just come in. He has your grandson with him.’

For the next few moments, the desk clerk listened, nodding several times. Then he put the receiver down and

smiled at me.

‘He’s coming immediately. He says he’ll see to everything.’

‘Jolly good.’

‘Mr Ryder, you must be very tired now.’

‘Yes, I am. It’s been an exhausting day. But I believe I have one more appointment. There should be some journalists waiting here for me.’

‘Ah. They finally left an hour or so ago. They said they’d arrange another appointment. I suggested they deal directly with Miss Stratmann so that you’re not bothered by them. Really, sir, you look very tired. You should stop worrying about such things and go off to bed.’

‘Yes, I suppose so. Hmm. So they left. First they turn up early, then they leave.’

‘Yes, sir, very annoying. But I would say, Mr Ryder, you should just go to bed now and sleep. You really ought to stop worrying. I’m very sure everything will be taken care of.’

I was grateful to the young clerk for these comforting words and indeed for the first time in hours began to feel a sense of relaxation coming over me. I put my elbows up on the reception desk and for a moment or so began to doze off there on my feet. I did not go quite to sleep, however, for I remained aware all the while of Boris leaning his head heavily against my side, and of the desk clerk’s voice, continuing in the same reassuring tones, just in front of my face.

‘Gustav won’t be long now,’ the latter was saying, ‘and he’ll see to it your boy’s comfortable. Really, sir, there’s nothing more to worry about. And Miss Stratmann, we’ve known her at this hotel for a long time. A most efficient lady. She’s looked after the affairs of many important visitors in the past and they’ve all been a hundred

per cent impressed by her. She just doesn't make mistakes. So you can leave her to worry about those journalists, there won't be any problems. And as for Boris, we're going to give him a room just across the hall from you. It has a very fine view in the morning he's bound to enjoy. So Mr Ryder, I really think you should just go off to sleep now. There's nothing more you could conceivably achieve today. In fact, if I may be so bold, I'd recommend you leave Boris to his grandfather once you've all got upstairs. Gustav will be here any minute, he's just putting on his uniform, that's what's holding him up just a little. He'll be down soon in all his finery, that's Gustav for you, uniform immaculate, not a thing out of place. Once he appears, you should just get him to take charge of everything. He's going as fast as he can. He'll just be tying his shoe-laces at this very moment, sitting on the edge of his little bed. Any moment now he'll be ready, he'll jump to his feet, though he'll have to take care not to hit his head on the rafters. A quick comb of his hair and then he'll be out into the corridor. Yes, he'll be here any second, and you can just go off to your room, unwind a little then get a good night's sleep. I'd recommend you take a night cap, one of the special cocktails you'll find ready-mixed in your mini-bar. They're quite excellent. Or perhaps you'd prefer some hot beverage to be brought up to you. And you could listen to some soothing music on the radio. There's a channel that broadcasts from Stockholm at this time of the night, just quiet late-night jazz, very soothing indeed, I often use it myself to wind down. Or else if you need to *really* unwind, may I suggest you go along and see the movie? Many of our guests are doing just that at this very moment.'

This last remark - this talk of a movie - brought me out of my drowsiness. Straightening, I said:

'I'm sorry, what's that you just said? Many of your guests have gone off to a movie?'

‘Yes, there’s a cinema just round the corner. They have a late-night performance. Many guests find popping round there and watching a film helps them to unwind at the end of a hard day. You could always do that as an alternative to taking a cocktail or a hot beverage.’

The telephone rang beside the desk clerk’s hand, and excusing himself he picked up the receiver. As he listened, I noticed he looked towards me awkwardly a few times. Then he said: ‘He’s just here, madam,’ and handed me the receiver.

‘Hello,’ I said.

For a few seconds there was silence. Then a voice said: ‘It’s me.’

It took me a moment to realise it was Sophie. But as soon as I did so, I became consumed by an intense rage towards her, and it was only Boris’s presence that stopped me shouting furiously down the line. In the end I said very coldly: ‘So. It’s you.’

There was another short silence before she said: ‘I’m calling from outside. In the street. I saw you and Boris go in. It’s probably better he doesn’t see me just now. It’s way past his bedtime. Try not to let him know you’re talking to me.’

I glanced down at Boris, who had dozed off on his feet leaning against me.

‘So what exactly do you think you’re doing?’ I asked.

I heard her sigh heavily. Then she said:

‘You’ve got every right to be angry. I ... I don’t know what happened. I can see how silly I’ve been now ...’

‘Look,’ I interrupted, anxious that I would not be able to keep my anger under control much longer, ‘where exactly are you?’

‘On the other side of the street. Under the arches, in front of the antique shops.’

‘I’ll be out in a minute. Just stay where you are.’

I handed the receiver back to the desk clerk and was relieved to see that Boris had remained asleep throughout the call. In any case, at that moment, the elevator doors opened and Gustav stepped out onto the carpet.

His uniform did indeed look immaculate. His thin white hair had been wetted and combed. A puffiness around the eyes and a slight stiffness in his gait were the only signs of his having been fast asleep just a few minutes earlier.

‘Ah, good evening, sir,’ he said as he approached.

‘Good evening.’

‘You’ve brought Boris with you. How very kind of you to have gone to such trouble.’ Gustav came towards us a few more steps, observing his grandson with a gentle smile. ‘My goodness, sir, look at him. Fallen fast asleep.’

‘Yes, he got very tired,’ I said.

‘He still looks so young when he’s asleep like that.’ The porter went on gazing tenderly at Boris for another moment. Then he looked up at me and said: ‘I was wondering, sir, if you managed to talk to Sophie. I’ve been thinking all afternoon about how you might have got on.’

‘Well, I did speak to her, yes.’

‘Ah. And did you get any inkling?’

‘Inkling?’

‘Of what’s preoccupying her?’

‘Ah. Well, although she said several quite revealing things ... to be frank, as I said to you earlier, it’s very difficult for an outsider like myself to make much sense of these things. Naturally I did form one or two vague ideas

about what might be troubling her, but really I feel more than ever it would be best if you yourself spoke to her.'

'But you see, sir, as I believe I explained to you before ...'

'Yes, yes, you and Sophie don't talk directly, I remember,' I said with a sudden rush of impatience.

'Nevertheless, surely, if this is a matter of importance to you ...'

'It's a matter of the utmost importance to me. Oh yes, sir, the *utmost* importance. It's for Boris's sake, you see. If we don't get to the bottom of this matter soon, he's going to become seriously worried, I know he is. There are clear signs already. And you only have to look at him, the way he is now, sir, you look at him like this, and you see he really is still so young. We owe it to him to keep his world free of such worries for a little while longer, don't you think so, sir? In fact, to call this matter one of importance to me is something of an understatement. Latterly I've hardly stopped worrying about it day and night. But you see ...' He paused, gazing blankly at the floor in front of him. Then he shook his head a little and sighed. 'You say I should speak to Sophie myself. It's not quite that simple, sir. You have to understand the history of the situation. You see, we've had this ... this *understanding* now for many years. Ever since she was young. When she was *very* small, of course, things were different then. Up until she was eight or nine, oh, Sophie and I, we'd talk all the time. I'd tell her stories, we'd go for long walks around the Old Town, hand in hand, just the two of us, talking and talking. You mustn't misunderstand, sir, I loved Sophie dearly then and I do so to this day. Oh yes, sir. We were *very* close when she was small. This understanding only started when she was eight years old. Yes, that's how old she was then. Incidentally, sir, this understanding of ours, it wasn't something I originally imagined going on for very long. I suppose I saw it as something that might last just a few days. That was all, sir,

that was all I intended. The first day, I remember I was off work and I was trying to put up a shelf in the kitchen for my wife. Sophie kept following me about, asking this, offering to fetch that, trying to help me. I maintained my silence, sir, I maintained it completely. She soon became bewildered and upset, of course, I could see that. But it was what I had decided and I had to be firm. It wasn't easy for me, sir. Oh goodness me, it wasn't easy at all, I loved my little girl more than anything in the world, but I told myself I had to be strong. Three days, I said to myself, three days would be sufficient, three days and that would be the end of it. Just three days, then I'd be able to come in from work, pick her up again, hold her close to me, we'd tell each other everything. Catch up, so to speak. In those days, I was working at the Alba Hotel and towards the end of that third day, as you can imagine, I was longing for my shift to end so that I could get home and see my little Sophie again. You can understand my disappointment, then, when on returning to the apartment, Sophie refused to come and greet me when I called to her. What's more, sir, when I went and found her she looked away from me very deliberately and left the room without speaking. As you can imagine, I was very hurt. And I suppose I got a little angry - as I say, I'd had a very hard day and had been so looking forward to seeing her. I said to myself, if *that's* how she wants to behave, let her see where it leads. So I ate my supper with my wife, then went to bed not having said a single word to Sophie. I suppose things just went on from there. One day followed another, and before you knew it, it just became the norm between us. I don't want you to misunderstand me, sir, we weren't quarrelling as such, there ceased to be any animosity between us fairly quickly. In fact, it was in those days just as it is now. Sophie and I remained very considerate towards one another. It's simply that we refrained from speaking. I admit, sir, I didn't at that stage imagine the thing going on for as long as it has. My intention, I suppose, was always that at some opportune point - on a special day such as her birthday - we'd put it

all behind us and go back to the way we'd been. But then her birthday came and went, Christmas also, it came and went, sir, and we somehow never resumed. Then when she was eleven, a certain sad little event occurred. In those days Sophie had this little white hamster. She called it Ulrich, she became greatly fond of it. She'd spend hours on end talking to it, taking it around the apartment in her hands. Then one day the creature disappeared. Sophie searched everywhere. Her mother and I also searched the apartment, we asked the neighbours about it, but to no avail. My wife did her best to reassure Sophie that Ulrich was safe - that he'd just gone on a little holiday and would be back before long. Then one evening, my wife had gone out and Sophie and I were alone in the apartment. I was in the bedroom with the radio up quite loud - there was a concert being broadcast - when I became aware that in the living room Sophie was sobbing uncontrollably. Almost immediately I guessed she'd at last found Ulrich. Or what remained of him - he'd been missing a few weeks by then. Well, the door between the bedroom and the living room was closed, and as I say, the radio was up loud, so it would have been perfectly conceivable I might not have heard her. So I remained in the bedroom, my ear close to the door, the concert playing behind me. I did of course think several times I'd go through to her, but then the longer I stood there at the door, the more odd it seemed that I should suddenly burst in. You see, sir, it wasn't as though she was sobbing so loudly. For a little while, I even sat down again, tried to pretend to myself I'd never heard her. But of course it just tore me up inside to hear her sob like that and I soon found myself standing at the door again, stooped over, trying to listen to Sophie over the sound of the concert. If she calls for me, I told myself, if she knocks or calls for me, then I'll go in. That's what I decided. If she shouts: "Papa!" then I'll go in, I'll explain I hadn't heard her before because of the music. I waited, but she neither called me nor knocked. The only thing she did, after some time of very distraught sobbing - it went straight to the heart, I

can tell you, sir - she called out as though to herself - I emphasise this, sir, as though saying it to herself - she called out: "I left Ulrich in the box! It was my fault! I forgot! It was my fault!" What had happened, I ascertained later, was that Sophie had put Ulrich inside this little gift box. She'd wanted to take him out somewhere, she was often taking him out to "show" him things. She'd put him inside this little gift box she had, all ready to go out, but then something had happened, she'd been distracted and she hadn't gone out at all, and meanwhile she'd forgotten she'd put Ulrich inside the box. On this night I'm telling you about, sir, weeks later, she'd been doing something around the apartment and suddenly remembered. Can you imagine what an awful moment that would have been for my little girl! Suddenly remembering like that, perhaps hoping against hope she'd remembered incorrectly and rushing to the box. Of course, there was Ulrich, still inside. Listening through the door I couldn't of course determine at the time everything that had happened, but I more or less guessed the moment she shouted that out. "I left Ulrich in the box! It was my fault!" But I want you to understand, sir, she said this as though to herself. If she'd said: "Papa! Please come out..." But no. Even so, I did actually think to myself: "If she calls out like that again, I'll go in." But she didn't. She just went on sobbing. I could picture her holding Ulrich in her fingers, perhaps hoping he could still be saved... Oh, it wasn't easy for me, sir. But the concert was continuing behind me, and you see, I remained in the bedroom. I heard my wife come in much later and the two of them talking and Sophie crying again. And then my wife came into the bedroom and told me what had happened. "Didn't you hear anything?" she asked, and I said: "Oh dear, no, I was listening to the concert." The next morning, at breakfast, Sophie said nothing to me, and I said nothing to her. We just continued with our understanding, in other words. But I realised, there was no doubting it, I realised Sophie *knew* I'd been listening. And what was more, she wasn't resenting

me for it. She passed me the milk jug, just as usual, the butter, she even took away my plate for me - an extra little service. What I'm saying, sir, is that Sophie understood our arrangement and respected it. After that, as you might imagine, things rather settled on that basis. You see, since we'd not brought an end to our understanding over the matter of Ulrich, it wouldn't have seemed right to bring it to an end until something at least as significant came along. Indeed, sir, to end it suddenly one day for no special reason would not only have been odd, really, it would have belittled the tragedy the whole Ulrich episode represented for my daughter. I do hope you can see this, sir. In any case, as I say, after that our understanding became, well, cemented, and even in these present circumstances it doesn't seem to me appropriate I should suddenly break such a long-standing arrangement. I dare say Sophie would feel much the same way. That's why, sir, I asked you, as a special favour, particularly since you happened to be walking that way this afternoon ...'

'Yes, yes, yes,' I broke in, feeling another wave of impatience. Then I said more gently: 'I appreciate how things stand between you and your daughter. But I wonder, isn't it possible, this very matter - this matter of your understanding. Isn't it possible that this might itself be at the heart of what's bothering her? That it was this understanding of yours she was thinking about that time you saw her sitting so despondently in the café?'

This seemed to stun Gustav and for some time he remained silent. Finally he said: 'That's never occurred to me before, sir, what you've just suggested. I'll have to give it some thought. I must say, it's never occurred to me before.' He was silent again for a few moments, a troubled expression on his face. Then he looked up and said: 'But why would she be so concerned about our understanding *now*? After all this time?' He shook his head slowly. 'May I ask you, sir? Is this an idea you formed from speaking to her?'

Suddenly I felt very weary and wished the whole affair to be taken off my hands. 'I don't know, I don't know,' I said. 'As I keep saying, these family matters ... I'm merely an outsider. How can I judge? I was simply saying it's a possibility.'

'Certainly it's something I'll have to give some thought to. For Boris's sake, I'm prepared to examine every possibility. Yes, I'll have to give it some thought.' Again he fell silent, the troubled expression growing on his face.

'I wonder, sir,' he said eventually, 'if I might request another favour. When you next see Sophie, perhaps you wouldn't mind investigating this particular possibility. I know you'd go about it in a very tactful way. I wouldn't normally ask such a thing, but, you see, I'm thinking of little Boris here. I'd be so grateful.'

He looked at me appealingly. In the end I gave a sigh and said: 'Very well. I'll do what I can for Boris's sake. But I can only say again, for an outsider like me ...'

Perhaps it was the mention of his name, but at that moment Boris started awake.

'Grandfather!' he exclaimed and, releasing me, made excitedly for Gustav with the obvious intention of embracing him. But at the last moment, the little boy seemed to remember himself and held out his hand instead.

'Good evening, Grandfather,' he said with calm dignity.

'Good evening, Boris.' Gustav patted him gently on the head. 'It's good to see you again. What sort of a day have you had?'

Boris gave a casual shrug. 'Somewhat tiring. Just the usual sort of day.'

'Just one minute,' Gustav said, 'and I'll see to everything.'

His arm around his grandson's shoulders, the porter went up to the reception desk. For the next few moments, he and the desk clerk exchanged hotel jargon in lowered tones. Then they both nodded in agreement about something and the desk clerk handed over a key.

'If you'd follow me, sir,' Gustav said. 'I'll show you where Boris will be staying.'

'Actually, I have another appointment.'

'At this hour? You have such a busy life, sir. Well, in that case, may I suggest I take Boris up myself and install him?'

'That's an excellent idea. I'd be very grateful.'

I walked with them to the elevator and gave a final wave as the doors closed on them. Then all at once the frustration and anger I had thus far managed to keep in check came flooding back, and without uttering another word to the desk clerk, I crossed the lobby and went out again into the night.

The street was deserted and silent. It took me a while to spot - a little way down on the opposite side - the stone arches Sophie had mentioned on the phone. For a moment, as I made my way towards them, I wondered if she had lost her nerve and fled. But then I saw her figure emerge from the shadows and could feel my fury rising once more.

Her expression was not as meek as I would have expected. She was watching me carefully, and as I came up to her she said, almost calmly:

‘You’ve got every right to be angry. I don’t know what happened. I suppose I was confused. You’ve got every right to be angry, I know.’

I looked at her nonchalantly. ‘Angry? Oh, I see. You’re talking about your behaviour earlier this evening. Well, yes, I must say, I felt very disappointed on behalf of Boris. Obviously, he was very upset. But as far as I’m concerned, quite frankly, it’s not something I’ve spent a lot of time thinking about. I’ve so much else on just now.’

‘I don’t know why it happened. I know how much you were depending on me ...’

‘I’ve never depended on you. I think you ought to calm down a little.’ I gave a quick laugh and began to walk slowly. ‘As far as I’m concerned, this simply isn’t a major issue. I’ve always been quite ready to go about my tasks with or without your support. I’m just disappointed on Boris’s behalf, that’s all.’

‘I’ve been very stupid, I see that now.’ Sophie had fallen in step alongside me. ‘I don’t know, I suppose I thought you and Boris - you have to see it from my side - you and Boris were lagging behind and I thought perhaps you

weren't so keen on what I'd planned for the evening and I supposed maybe you'd drift off anyway ... Look, if you like, I'll tell you everything. Everything you want to know. Every detail ...'

I stopped walking and turned to her. 'Obviously I haven't made myself clear. I'm not interested in any of this. I only came out here because I wanted to get some fresh air and unwind a little. It's been a hard day. As a matter of fact, I came out here because I wanted to take in a movie before bed.'

'A movie? Which movie's that?'

'How do I know which movie? Some late-night film. There's a cinema just down here. I thought I'd go and see it whatever it is. It's been a very hard day.'

I began to walk again, this time more purposefully. After a moment, to my satisfaction, I heard her footsteps pursuing me.

'Are you really not angry?' she asked, catching up.

'Of course I'm not angry. Why should I be?'

'Can I come too? To this movie?'

I gave a shrug and continued to walk at a steady pace. 'Please yourself. You're perfectly welcome.'

Sophie grasped my arm. 'If you want, I'll make a completely clean breast of it. I'll tell you everything. Everything you want to know about ...'

'Look, how many more times do I have to say this? I'm not in the least interested. All I want just now is to unwind. There's going to be a lot of pressure on me over these next few days.'

She continued to hold my arm and for a while we walked together in silence. Then she said quietly: 'It's so good of you. To be so understanding.'

I said nothing to this. In time we drifted off the pavement and continued down the centre of the deserted street.

‘Once I find a proper home for us,’ she said eventually, ‘then everything will go better. It’s bound to. This place I’m seeing in the morning, I’m really hopeful about it. It sounds exactly what we’ve always wanted.’

‘Yes. Let’s hope so.’

‘You could sound a little more excited. This could be a turning point for us.’

I shrugged and continued to walk. The cinema was still some distance away, but being virtually the only thing illuminated in the darkened street, our eyes had for some time been fixed on it. Then as we came nearer, Sophie gave a sigh and brought us to a halt.

‘Maybe I won’t come in,’ she said, disengaging her arm.

‘I need plenty of time to look at this house tomorrow. I have to make an early start. I’d better be getting back.’

For some reason her words took me quite by surprise, and for a second I remained uncertain how I should respond. I glanced over towards the cinema, then back at Sophie.

‘But I thought you said you wanted to ...’ I began, then, pausing, said in a calmer tone: ‘Listen, this is a very good film. I’m sure you’ll enjoy it.’

‘But you don’t even know which film it is.’

The idea flashed through my head that she was playing some sort of game. Even so, a strange panic had begun to seize me and I could not keep a pleading note out of my voice.

‘You know what I meant. The desk clerk. He suggested it to me. He’s someone I know to be very reliable. And the hotel has its reputation to think of. It’s hardly likely to

recommend ...' I trailed off, the panic now mounting further as Sophie began to move away from me. 'Look' - I raised my voice, no longer caring who heard me - 'I know this will be a good movie. And we haven't been to one together for so long. That's true, isn't it? When did we last do something like this together?'

Sophie appeared to give this consideration, then finally smiled and came back towards me.

'All right,' she said, taking my arm gently. 'All right. It's late, but I'll come in with you. As you say, it's ages since we did anything like this together. Let's have a really good time.'

I experienced a considerable feeling of relief, and as we entered the cinema it was all I could do not to grasp her tightly to me. Sophie seemed to sense something and nestled her head on my shoulder.

'It's so good of you,' she said softly. 'Not to be angry with me.'

'What is there to be angry about?' I muttered, looking about the foyer.

A little way in front of us, the last of a queue was filing into the theatre. I looked around for somewhere to buy tickets, but the kiosk was closed, and it occurred to me there might exist some special arrangement between the hotel and the cinema. In any case, when Sophie and I brought up the rear of the queue, a man in a green suit standing at the threshold smiled and ushered us in along with everyone else.

It was virtually a full house. The lights had not yet gone down and many people were moving around finding their seats. I was looking to see where we might sit when Sophie squeezed my arm excitedly.

'Oh, let's get something,' she said. 'Ice creams or popcorn or something.'

She was pointing down to the front of the theatre where a short queue had formed in front of a uniformed woman holding a tray of confectioneries.

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘But we’d better hurry or there’ll be no seats left. It’s very crowded in here.’

We made our way down to the front and joined the queue. After a while, as I was standing there, I could feel my anger rising again, until eventually I was obliged to turn away from Sophie altogether. Then I heard her say behind me:

‘I have to be honest. I didn’t actually come to the hotel tonight to find you. I didn’t even know you two would turn up there.’

‘Oh?’ I leaned forward, looking towards the confectioneries.

‘After what happened,’ Sophie went on, ‘I mean, once I’d realised how silly I’d been, well, I didn’t know what to do. Then I suddenly remembered. About Papa’s winter coat. I remembered I still hadn’t given it to him.’

There was a rustling noise. Turning, I noticed for the first time that Sophie was carrying on one arm a large shapeless package in brown paper. She raised it in the air, but it was obviously quite heavy and she soon lowered it again.

‘It was silly,’ she said. ‘There was no need to panic. But you see, I suddenly thought I could feel the winter in the air. And I remembered about the coat and I wanted to get it to him without any more delay. So I wrapped it up and came out. But then I got to the hotel and the evening was so mild. I could see I’d been panicking about nothing and I didn’t know if I should go in and give it to him tonight or not. So I was standing there and it got later and later and eventually I realised Papa would have gone to bed. I thought about leaving it at the desk for him, but then I wanted to give it to him myself. And I was thinking, well, I could just

as well give it to him in a few weeks' time, it's still so mild. That's when the car drove up and you and Boris got out. That's the truth of it.'

'I see.'

'I don't know if I'd have had the courage to face you otherwise. But there I was, right across the street from you, so I took a deep breath and phoned.'

'Well, I'm glad you did.' I gestured at our surroundings. 'After all, it's a long time since we've come to a movie together like this.'

She gave no response and when I looked at her she was gazing down fondly at the package on her arm. She patted it with her free hand.

'The season won't be turning for a little while yet,' she murmured, as much to the coat as to me. 'So there's no desperate hurry. We can give it to him in a few weeks.'

We had now reached the head of the queue and Sophie stepped in front of me to peer eagerly into the tray the uniformed woman was proffering.

'What are you going to have?' she asked. 'I think I want an icecream tub. No, a choc-ice. One of these.'

Looking over her shoulder, I saw the tray contained the usual ice creams and chocolate bars. But curiously these had all been pushed untidily to the edges of the tray to give pride of place to a large battered book. I leaned forward to examine it.

'That's a very useful manual, sir,' the uniformed woman said eagerly. 'I can heartily recommend it. I suppose I shouldn't be selling it here like this. But then the manager doesn't mind us selling the odd personal item, just so long as we don't do it too often.'

On the jacket was a photograph of a smiling man in overalls half-way up a step-ladder, a paint brush in his hand, a roll of wallpaper under his arm. When I picked it up I could feel the binding starting to come apart.

‘Actually it belonged to my eldest son,’ the uniformed woman continued. ‘But he’s grown up now and gone to Sweden. I was finally sorting through his things last week. I kept anything I thought had sentimental value and the rest of it I threw out. But then there were one or two things that didn’t seem to fit into either category. This old manual, sir, I can’t say it has much sentimental value, but it’s such a useful volume, it shows you how to do so many things around the house, decorating, tiling, it teaches you everything step by step with very clear diagrams. I remember my son found it very useful when he was growing up. I realise it’s a little ragged now, but it really is the most useful book. I’m not asking much for it, sir.’

‘Perhaps Boris would like it,’ I said to Sophie, flicking through the pages.

‘Oh, if you’ve got a growing boy, sir, it really would be perfect. I can vouch from our own experience. Our son got so much from it when he was that age. Painting, tiling, it shows you everything.’

The lights were starting to dim and I remembered we had yet to find seats.

‘Very well, thank you,’ I said.

The woman thanked me profusely as I paid her and we came away with the book and the ice creams.

‘It’s good of you to think of Boris like that,’ Sophie said as we moved up the aisle. Then she raised her package again with a rustle and hugged it to herself.

‘It’s odd to think Papa went the whole of last winter without a proper coat,’ she said. ‘But he was just too

proud to wear that old one. It was mild last year, so it didn't matter so much. But he can't go another winter like that.'

'No, he certainly shouldn't.'

'I'm quite unsentimental about it. I know Papa's getting older now. I've been thinking things through. About his retirement, for instance. He's getting older and it has to be faced.' Then she added quietly: 'I'll give it to him in a couple of weeks. That should be fine.'

The lights had continued to dim and the audience had quietened in anticipation. I realised the theatre was even more crowded than before and I wondered if we had left it too late to find seats. But then as the darkness settled over us, an usher came down the aisle with a torch and pointed out two seats near the front. Sophie and I edged down the row, mumbling apologies, and sat down just as the advertisements were starting.

Most of the advertisements were for local businesses and seemed to go on interminably. When the main feature finally started we had been seated for at least half an hour, and I saw with some relief it was to be the science fiction classic, *2001: A Space Odyssey* - a favourite of mine which I never tired of seeing. As soon as those impressive opening shots of a prehistoric world appeared on the screen, I could feel myself relaxing, and I was soon comfortably absorbed in the film. We were well into the central section of the narrative - with Clint Eastwood and Yul Brynner on board the spaceship bound for Jupiter - when I heard Sophie say beside me:

'But the weather could change. Just like that.'

I assumed she was referring to the film and murmured back something in assent. But a few minutes later, she said:

'Last year, it was a nice sunny autumn, just like this. It went on and on. People were sitting out on the pavements

drinking coffee right into November. Then suddenly, virtually overnight, it got so cold. It could easily be like that again this year. You never know, do you?'

'No, I suppose not.' By this time, of course, I had realised she was again talking about the coat.

'But it's not so urgent yet,' she murmured.

When I next glanced at her, she appeared to be watching the film again. I too turned back to the screen, but then after a few seconds certain fragments of memory began to come back to me there in the darkness of the cinema and my attention once more drifted from the film.

I found myself recalling quite vividly a certain occasion when I had been sitting in an uncomfortable, perhaps dirty armchair. It was probably the morning, a dull grey one, and I had been holding a newspaper in front of me. Boris had been lying on his front on the carpet nearby, drawing on a sketch pad with a wax crayon. From the little boy's age - he was still very small - I supposed this to be a memory deriving from six or seven years ago, though what room we had been in, in which house, I could not remember. A door to a neighbouring room had been left ajar through which several female voices could be heard chattering away.

For some time I had gone on reading my newspaper on the uncomfortable armchair, until something about Boris - some subtle change in his demeanour or his posture - had made me glance down at him. Then in an instant I had seen the situation before me. Boris had managed to draw on his sheet a perfectly recognisable 'Superman'. He had been attempting to do just such a thing for weeks, but for all our encouragement had been unable to produce even a vague likeness. But now, perhaps owing to that mixture of fluke and genuine breakthrough so often experienced in childhood, he had suddenly succeeded. The sketch was not quite finished - the mouth and eyes needed completing - but for all that I had been able to see at once the huge triumph it represented

for him. In fact I would have said something to him had I not noticed at that moment the way he was leaning forward in a state of great tension, his crayon held over the paper. He was, I had realised, hesitating whether to go on to refine his drawing at the risk of ruining it. I had been able to sense acutely his dilemma and had felt a temptation to say out loud: 'Boris, stop. That's enough. Stop there and show everyone what you've achieved. Show me, then show your mother, and then all those people talking now in the next room. What does it matter if it's not completely finished? Everyone will be astonished and so proud of you. Stop now before you lose it all.' But I had not said anything, continuing instead to watch him from around the edge of my newspaper. Finally Boris had made up his mind and begun to apply a few more touches with great care. Then, growing more confident, he had bent right forward and started to use the crayon with some recklessness. A moment later he had stopped abruptly, staring silently at his sheet. Then - and I could even now recall the anguish mounting within me - I had watched him attempting to salvage his picture, applying more and more crayon. Finally his face had fallen and, dropping the crayon onto the paper, he had risen and left the room without a word.

This whole episode had affected me to a surprising degree, and I had still been in the process of composing my emotions when Sophie's voice had said somewhere close by:

'You've no idea, have you?'

I had lowered my paper, startled by the bitterness of her tone, to find her standing in the room staring at me. Then she had said:

'You've no idea, what that was like for me, watching what happened then. It'll never be like that for you. Look at you, just reading the newspaper.' Then she had lowered her voice, making it gather even more intensity. 'That's the difference! He's not your own. Whatever you say, it makes a

difference. You'll never feel towards him like a real father. Look at you! You've no idea what I went through just then.'

With that she had turned and disappeared out of the room.

It had occurred to me to follow her through into the next room, visitors or no visitors, and bring her back for a talk. But in the end I had decided in favour of waiting where I was for her return. Sure enough, a few minutes later, Sophie had come back into the room, but something in her manner had prevented me from speaking and she had gone out again. In fact, although during the following half-hour Sophie had entered and left the room several more times, for all my resolve to make my feelings known to her, I had remained silent. Eventually, after a certain point, I had realised any chance to broach the topic without looking ridiculous had passed, and I had returned to my newspaper with a strong sense of hurt and frustration.

'Excuse me,' I heard a voice say behind me and a hand touched my shoulder. Turning, I saw a man in the row behind leaning forward and studying me carefully.

'It *is* Mr Ryder, isn't it? My goodness, it is. Please forgive me, I've been sitting here all this time, I didn't recognise you in this poor light. I'm Karl Pedersen. I'd been so looking forward to meeting you at the reception this morning. But of course unforeseeable circumstances prevented you from attending. How opportune I should now meet you like this.'

The man had white hair, glasses and a kindly face. I adjusted my posture slightly.

'Ah yes, Mr Pedersen. I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance. It was, as you say, all very unfortunate this morning. I too had been greatly looking forward to, er, to meeting you all.'

'As it happens, Mr Ryder, there are several other councillors here now in this cinema, all of whom were most

sorry to miss you this morning.' He looked about in the darkness. 'If I can just ascertain where they're sitting, I'd like to take you over to meet at least one or two of them.' Twisting round, he craned his neck to search the rows behind him. 'Unfortunately, just now I can't see anyone ...'

'Of course I'd be very pleased to meet your colleagues. But it's rather late now, and if they're enjoying the film, perhaps we should leave it to another time. There are bound to be many more opportunities.'

'I can't see anyone just now,' the man said, turning back to me. 'What a pity. I know they're in this cinema somewhere. In any case, sir, as a member of the civic council, may I say how pleased and honoured we all are by your visit?'

'You're very kind.'

'Mr Brodsky has by all accounts made very good progress at the concert hall this afternoon. Three or four hours solid rehearsing.'

'Yes, I heard. It's splendid.'

'I wonder, sir, if you managed today to visit our concert hall.'

'The concert hall? Well, no. Unfortunately I've not yet had the chance ...'

'Of course. You had a long journey coming here. Well, there's still plenty of time. I'm sure you'll be impressed by our concert hall, Mr Ryder. It really is a beautiful old building, and whatever else we've let deteriorate in this city, no one can accuse us of neglecting our concert hall. A very beautiful old building, and set in the most splendid surroundings too. That's to say, in Liebmann Park. You'll see what I mean, Mr Ryder. A pleasant walk through the trees, and then you come to the clearing - and there! The concert hall!

You'll see for yourself, sir. An ideal place for the community to gather, away from the bustle of the streets. I remember when I was a boy, there was a city orchestra in those days, and the first Sunday of each month everyone would gather in that clearing before the concert. I can remember all the various families arriving, everyone smartly dressed, more and more people arriving through the trees and greeting one another. And we children, we'd be running everywhere. In the autumn we had a game, a special game. We'd rush around gathering up all the fallen leaves we could see, bring them up to the gardener's shed and pile them up against the side. There was a particular plank, about this high on the wall of the shed, it had a stain on it. What we told each other was that we had to collect enough leaves so that the pile reached up to that stain before the adults started to file into the building. If we didn't, the whole city was going to explode into a million pieces, some such thing. So there we all were, rushing back and forth, our arms full of wet leaves! It's easy for someone of my age to become nostalgic, Mr Ryder, but there's no doubt about it, this was a very happy community once. There were large happy families here. And real lasting friendships. People treated one another with warmth and affection. We had a splendid community here once. For many many years. I'll be seventy-six next birthday, so I can vouch personally for that.'

Pedersen fell silent for a moment. He continued to lean forward, his arm on the back of my seat, and when I glanced at him I noticed his eyes were not on the screen but somewhere far away. Meanwhile, we were approaching that section of the film in which the astronauts first suspect the motives of the computer, HAL, central to every aspect of life aboard the spaceship. Clint Eastwood was stalking the claustrophobic corridors with a terse expression and a long-barrelled gun. I was just starting to become engrossed when Pedersen began to talk again.

'I have to be honest. I can't help feeling a little sorry for *him* Mr Christoff, I mean. Yes, odd as this may sound to you, I feel *sorry* for him. I've said as much to a few colleagues and they've just thought, oh, the old fellow's going soft, who can feel an ounce of pity for that charlatan? But, you see, I have a better memory of it than most. I remember what happened at the time Mr Christoff first arrived in this city. Of course I feel as angry as any of my colleagues about him. But, you see, I know well enough that at the start, right at the start of it, it wasn't Mr Christoff that pushed himself forward. No, no, it was ... well, it was *us*. That's to say, people like myself, I don't deny it, I was in a position of influence. We encouraged him. We celebrated him, flattered him, made it clear we looked to him for enlightenment and initiative. At least some of the responsibility for what happened lies with us. My younger colleagues, they perhaps weren't around so much in those early years. They only know Mr Christoff as this dominant figure around which so much revolved. They forget that he never asked to be put in such a position. Oh yes, I remember very well Mr Christoff first arriving in this city. He was a fairly young man then, on his own, very unassuming, modest even. If no one had encouraged him, I'm sure he'd have been happy to melt into the background, give the odd recital at a private function, nothing more. But it was the timing, Mr Ryder. The timing was unfortunate. Just when Mr Christoff turned up in our city, we were going through, well, a sort of hiatus. Mr Bernd, the painter, and Mr Vollmöller, a very fine composer, both of whom had for so long been at the helm of our cultural life here, they'd both died within months of each other and there was a certain feeling ... well, a kind of *unsettled* feeling. We were all very sad at the passing of two such fine men, but I suppose everyone felt too that now there was a chance for a change. A chance for something new and fresh. Inevitably, happy as we'd all been, after so many years of those two gentlemen being at the centre of everything, certain frustrations had built up. So you can

imagine, when word got around that the stranger lodging at Mrs Roth's was a professional cellist and one who'd performed with the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, and on several occasions under Kazimierz Studzinski, well, there was not a little excitement. I remember personally having much to do with the welcoming of Mr Christoff. I remember, you see, how it was, and also how unassuming he was at first. Now, with hindsight, I'd even say he was lacking in confidence. Most likely he'd had a few setbacks prior to coming here. But we fussed over him, pressed him for his views on everything, yes, that's how it all started. I remember personally helping to persuade him about that first recital. He was genuinely reluctant. And in any case, that first recital was originally to be just a small affair, to take place at the Countess's house. It was only two days before the date, when it became clear how many people were determined to attend, that the Countess was forced to move the venue to the Holtmann Gallery. From then on, Mr Christoff's recitals - we demanded at least one every six months - they were held at the concert hall, and they became our great talking points, year in, year out. But he was reluctant at the beginning. Not just that first time. For the first few years, we had to keep persuading him. Then naturally the acclaim, the applause, the flattery, they did their work, and soon enough Mr Christoff was putting himself and his ideas about. "I've flowered here," he was heard to say a lot around that time. "I've flowered since coming here." My point, you see, sir, was that it was *we* who pushed *him*. I do feel sorry for him now - though I dare say I'm probably the only person in this city who does. As you've noticed, there's a lot of anger directed at him. I'm realistic enough about the situation, Mr Ryder. One has to be ruthless. Our city is close to crisis. There's widespread misery. We have to start putting things right somewhere and we might as well start at the centre. We have to be ruthless, and as sorry as I feel for him, I can see there's nothing else for it. He and everything he has come to

represent must now be put away in some dark corner of our history. ’

Although I had continued to sit slightly turned towards him, thus making it clear I had not stopped listening, my attention had been drawn back to the movie. Clint Eastwood was talking into a microphone to his wife back on earth and tears were flowing down his face. I realised we were coming close to the famous scene in which Yul Brynner comes into the room and tests Eastwood’s speed on the draw by clapping his hands in front of him.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, ‘but how long ago was it Mr Christoff came to this town?’

I had asked this without a great deal of thought, at least half my attention on the screen. In fact I went on watching the movie for another two or three minutes before realising that behind me Pedersen was hanging his head in an attitude of profound shame. Sensing that my gaze had returned to him, he looked up and said:

‘You’re very right, Mr Ryder. Very right to reprimand us. Seventeen years and seven months. That’s a long time. A mistake such as ours might have been made anywhere, but then not to rectify it for so long? I can see how we must look to an outsider, to someone like yourself, sir, and I feel thoroughly ashamed, let me say so. I make no excuses. It took us an eternity to admit our error. Not, I dare say, to *see* it. But to admit it, even to ourselves, that was difficult and took a long time. We had, you see, plunged deep with Mr Christoff. Virtually every council member had at some time invited him to his house. He had been regularly seated next to Mr von Winterstein at the annual civic banquets. His photograph had adorned the cover of our city almanac. He had written the introduction to the programme for the Roggenkamp Exhibition. There were yet other implications. Things had gone further. There was for instance the unfortunate case of Mr Liebrich. Ah, but excuse me, I think I’ve just spotted Mr

Kollmann over there' - he craned his neck again, looking towards the back of the cinema - 'yes, that's Mr Kollmann, and with him, if I'm not mistaken, it's so difficult to see in this light, with him is Mr Schaefer. Both these gentlemen attended this morning's welcoming reception and I know they'd both be utterly delighted to meet you. Furthermore, on this matter we're discussing, I'm sure both these gentlemen will have much to say. I wonder if you'd care to go over and meet them.'

'I'd be honoured. But just now you were about to tell me ...'

'Ah yes, of course. The unfortunate case of Mr Liebrich. You see, sir, for many years before Mr Christoff's arrival, Mr Liebrich had been one of our most respected violin teachers. He taught the children of the best families. He was highly admired. Now Mr Christoff, not long after his first recital, was asked his opinion on Mr Liebrich and he let it be known that he didn't care much for Mr Liebrich at all. Not for his playing nor his teaching methods. By the time of Mr Liebrich's death a few years ago, he had lost virtually everything. His pupils, his friends, his place in society. That was just one case that sprang to mind. To admit that we'd been wrong about Mr Christoff all along - can you imagine the enormity of it, sir? Yes, we were weak, I admit it. Then again we had no idea things would reach the present level of crisis. People seemed by and large happy still. Year after year slipped by and if some of us had doubts we kept them to ourselves. But I don't defend our negligence, sir, not for a second. And I, in my position on the council at that time, I know I'm as culpable as anyone. In the end, and I feel thoroughly ashamed to admit this, in the end it was the people of this city, the ordinary people who forced us to face up to our responsibilities. The ordinary people, their lives by this point growing ever more miserable, were at least a clear step ahead of us. I remember the exact moment this fact first dawned on me. It was three years ago, I was

walking home after the latest of Mr Christoff's recitals - it was, I remember, Kazan's *Grotesqueries for Cello and Three Flutes*. I was hurrying home through the darkness of Liebmann Park, it was quite chilly, and I could see Mr Kohler the chemist walking a little way in front of me. I knew he'd also been at the concert and so I caught up with him and we started talking. At first I was careful to keep my thoughts to myself, but eventually I asked him if he'd enjoyed Mr Christoff's recital. Yes, he had, Mr Kohler said. There must have been something about the way he'd said it, because I recall asking him again a few moments later if he'd enjoyed the concert. This time Mr Kohler said yes, he'd enjoyed himself, but perhaps Mr Christoff's performance had been a little functional. Yes, "functional" was the word he used. As you can imagine, sir, I thought carefully before I next spoke. In the end I decided to throw caution to the wind, and I said: "Mr Kohler, I tend to agree with you. There was a certain dryness to it all." To which Mr Kohler remarked that "cold" was the word that had sprung to his mind. By then we'd reached the park gates. We wished each other good night and parted. But I remember I hardly slept that night, Mr Ryder. Ordinary people, decent citizens like Mr Kohler were now expressing such views. It was clear the pretence could no longer continue. It was time for us - all of us in positions of influence - to own up to our error, however far-reaching the implication. Ah, but excuse me, that is most definitely Mr Schaefer seated beside Mr Kollmann. Both of those gentlemen will, I know, have interesting viewpoints about what occurred. Being a generation younger than myself, they'll have seen things from a slightly different angle. Besides, I know how much they were longing to meet you this morning. Please, let's go over.'

Pedersen got to his feet and I watched his crouched figure edging down the row muttering apologies. On reaching the aisle, he straightened and gestured to me. Weary though I was, there seemed nothing for it but to join him, and I too rose and began to make my way towards the aisle. As I did so,

I noticed that an almost festive mood was pervading the cinema. Everywhere people were exchanging jokes and little remarks as they watched the film, and no one seemed to mind at all my pushing past. On the contrary, people seemed to tuck their legs to one side or jump to a standing position with eagerness. A few people even rolled right back in their seats, feet stuck up in the air, squealing with delight as they did so.

Once I reached the aisle, Pedersen began to lead the way up the carpeted slope. Somewhere among the rear stalls, he halted and with an ushering motion said:

‘After you, Mr Ryder.’

I once more found myself pushing past people, this time with Pedersen directly behind me, whispering apologies on our behalf. Before long we came upon a group of several men huddled together. It took me a moment to ascertain that a game of cards was in progress, some participants leaning forward from the row behind, while others leaned back from the row in front. They looked up as we approached, and when Pedersen announced me they all rose to a half-standing position. They seated themselves again only when I was comfortably installed in their midst, and I found myself shaking numerous hands proffered out of the darkness.

The man nearest me was dressed in a business suit, with his collar unbuttoned and his tie loosened. He smelt of whisky and I noticed he was having difficulty focusing on me. His companion, looking over his shoulder, was thin, with an oddly freckled face, and seemed more sober, though he too had his tie loosened. I did not have time to take in the rest of the company before the drunken man shook my hand a second time, saying:

‘I hope you’re enjoying the film, sir.’

‘I am indeed. In fact, it happens to be one of my all-time favourites.’

‘Ah. Well then, it’s fortunate that’s what’s showing tonight. Yes, I too like this film. A classic. Mr Ryder, would you care to take over this hand?’ He held his cards up to my face.

‘No thank you. Please don’t interrupt your game on my account.’

‘I was just telling Mr Ryder,’ Pedersen said behind me, ‘that life here wasn’t always the way it is today. Even you

gentlemen who are younger than me, I'm sure you'll be able to vouch ...'

'Ah yes, the good old days,' the drunken man said dreamily. 'Ah yes. Things were good here in the good old days.'

'Theo's thinking about Rosa Klenner,' said the freckled man behind him, causing laughter all around.

'Nonsense,' the drunken man protested. 'And stop trying to embarrass me in front of our distinguished guest.'

'Oh yes, oh yes,' his friend went on. 'In those days Theo here was completely in love with Rosa Klenner. That's to say, the present Mrs Christoff.'

'I was never in love with her. Anyway, I was already married by then.'

'All the more pitiful then, Theo. All the more pitiful.'

'It's complete nonsense.'

'I can remember, Theo,' a new voice said from the row behind, 'you used to bore us for hours talking about Rosa Klenner.'

'I didn't know her true nature in those days.'

'It was precisely her true nature that appealed to you,' the voice went on. 'You've always hankered after women who wouldn't look at you for three seconds.'

'There's some truth in that,' the freckled man said.

'There's no truth at all ...'

'No, let me explain to Mr Ryder.' The freckled man put his hand on his drunken friend's shoulder and leaned towards me. 'The present Mrs Christoff - we still tend to call her Rosa Klenner - she's a local girl, one of us, grew up with us. She's still a beautiful woman, and in those days, well,

she had us all captivated. She was very beautiful and very distant. She used to work at the Schlegel Gallery, which has closed now. She used to be there behind a desk, no more than an attendant really. She used to be there on Tuesdays and Thursdays ...'

'Tuesdays and *Fridays*,' the drunken man interrupted.

'Tuesdays and Fridays. Sorry. Naturally, Theo would remember. After all, he used to go to the gallery - it was just this little white room - he used to go there all the time and pretend to be looking at the exhibits.'

'Nonsense ...'

'You weren't the only one, were you, Theo? You had a lot of rivals. Jürgen Haase. Erich Brull. Even Heinz Wodak. They were all regulars.'

'And Otto Röscher,' Theo said nostalgically. 'He was often there.'

'Was that so? Yes, Rosa had a lot of admirers.'

'I never spoke to her,' Theo said. 'Except once, when I asked her for a catalogue.'

'The thing that became apparent about Rosa,' the freckled man continued, 'ever since we were all teenagers, was that as far as she was concerned all the local males were beneath her. She developed a reputation for turning down advances in the cruelest possible ways. That's why poor souls like Theo here, very wisely, never said a word to her. But then whenever someone of note, an artist, a musician, a writer, someone like that passed through the town, she'd pursue them with no shame whatsoever. She was always on this or that committee, which meant she had access to virtually every celebrity visiting the town. She'd get to go to all the receptions and half an hour into an event she'd have the guest in a corner, talking and talking, staring into his eyes. Of course, there was a lot of speculation - about her

sexual behaviour, I mean - but no one could ever prove anything. She was always very clever. But if you saw the way she flung herself at visiting celebrities, you couldn't doubt she'd have relations with at least some of them. She certainly charmed a whole lot of them, she was extremely attractive. But as for the local men, she wouldn't look at them.'

'Hans Jongboed always claimed to have had a fling with her,' the man called Theo put in. This caused much laughter, several voices nearby repeating derisively: 'Hans Jongboed!' Pedersen, however, was stirring uneasily.

'Gentlemen,' he began, 'Mr Ryder and I were just discussing ...'

'I never spoke to her. Except that once. To ask for a catalogue.'

'Ah, Theo, never mind.' The freckled man slapped his friend on the back, causing the latter to slump forward a little. 'Never mind. Look at her plight now.'

Theo seemed lost in thought. 'She was like that about everything,' he said. 'Not just about love. She'd only really have any time for members of the artistic circle, and then only for the real elite. You couldn't get any respect from her otherwise. She was disliked here. Long before she ever married Christoff, she was disliked.'

'If she wasn't so beautiful,' the freckled man said to me, 'she'd have been universally hated. As it was, there were always men like Theo here willing to fall under her spell. Anyway, Christoff arrived in this town. A professional cellist, and one with a distinguished track record! Rosa made a completely unashamed go for him. Didn't seem to care what any of us thought. She knew what she wanted and went about it quite ruthlessly. It was admirable in an appalling sort of way. Christoff was charmed and they got married during his first year here. Christoff was what she'd been waiting for

all that time. Well, I hope she's got her money's worth. Sixteen years of being his wife. It hasn't been so bad. But what now? He's finished here. What's she going to do now?'

'She won't even get a job in a gallery now,' Theo said. 'She's hurt us too much over the years. Hurt our pride. She's through in this city, every bit as much as Christoff himself.'

'One school of thought has it,' the freckled man said, 'that Rosa will leave town with Christoff and not ditch him until they're well settled elsewhere. But Mr Dremmler here' - he indicated someone in the row in front - 'is convinced she'll stay on here.'

The man in the row in front turned at the mention of his name. Evidently he had been listening to the discussion, for he now said with some authority: 'What you've got to remember about Rosa Klenner is that she's got a really timid side to her. I was at school with her, we were in the same year. She's always had it, that side to her, and it's her curse. This city isn't good enough for her, but she's too timid to leave. You notice, for all her ambitions, she's never attempted to leave us. This timid side to her, a lot of people don't notice it, but it's there. That's why my bet's on her staying. She'll stay and try her luck again here. She'll be hoping to hook some other celebrity passing through. After all, she's still a beautiful woman for her age.'

A high reedy voice somewhere nearby said: 'Maybe she'll go for Brodsky.'

This provoked the largest burst of laughter yet.

'It's perfectly possible,' the voice went on in a mock-hurt tone. 'All right, he's old, but she's no longer so young. And who else is there here in her league?' Again there was much laughter, spurring the speaker on. 'In fact, Brodsky's the best course for her. I'd recommend it to her.'

Anything else and all the resentment the town now feels towards Christoff will stay with her. But if she becomes Brodsky's mistress, or even Brodsky's *wife*, ah, by far the best way to obliterate her connection with Christoff. And it means she can just carry on in her ... her present *position*.'

By this point there was laughter all around us, with people even three rows in front turning and displaying their mirth. Next to me, Pedersen cleared his throat.

'Gentlemen, please,' he said. 'I'm disappointed. What will Mr Ryder make of all this? You're still thinking of Mr Brodsky - *Mr* Brodsky, please - you're still thinking of him in the old way. You're making yourselves look foolish. Mr Brodsky is no longer a figure of fun. Whatever one thinks of Mr Schmidt's proposition about Mrs Christoff, Mr Brodsky is *not* in any case an amusing option ...'

'It's good of you to have come here, Mr Ryder,' Theo cut in. 'But it's too late. Things have just reached a point here, it's just too late ...'

'That's rubbish, Theo,' Pedersen said. 'We're at a turning point, an important turning point. Mr Ryder has come here to tell us that. Haven't you, sir?'

'Yes ...'

'It's too late. We've lost it. Why don't we resign ourselves to being just another cold, lonely city? Other cities have. At least we'll be moving with the tide. The soul of this town, it's not sick, Mr Ryder, it's dead. It's too late now. Ten years ago, perhaps. There was still a chance then. But not now. Mr Pedersen' - the drunken man pointed limply at my companion - 'you, sir. It was you and Mr Thomas. And Mr Stika. All you good gentlemen. You all *prevaricated* ...'

'Let's not have this again, Theo,' the freckled man broke in. 'Mr Pedersen's right. It's not quite yet time for

such resignation. We've found Brodsky - *Mr Brodsky* - and for all we know he may be ...'

'Brodsky, Brodsky. It's too late. We're done for now. Let's just be a cold modern city and be done with it.'

I felt Pedersen's hand on my arm. 'Mr Ryder, I'm very sorry ...'

'You *prevaricated*, sir! Seventeen years. Seventeen years, Christoff's been left to get on with things unchallenged. And what do you offer us now? Brodsky! Mr Ryder, it's too late.'

'I'm truly sorry,' Pedersen said to me, 'you've had to listen to such talk.'

Someone behind us said: 'Theo, you're just drunk and depressed. Tomorrow morning you'll have to search out Mr Ryder and apologise to him.'

'Well,' I said, 'I'm interested to hear all sides of the discussion ...'

'But this is no side at all!' Pedersen protested. 'I assure you, Mr Ryder, Theo's sentiments are not in the least typical of what people here are now feeling. Everywhere, in the streets, in the trams, I sense a tremendous feeling, a feeling of optimism.'

This brought a general murmur of agreement.

'Don't believe it, Mr Ryder,' Theo said, grasping my sleeve. 'You're here on a fool's errand. Let's take a quick poll here in this cinema. Let's ask a few of the people here ...'

'Mr Ryder,' Pedersen said quickly, 'I'm going to go home, turn in for the night. It's a wonderful film, but I've seen it a number of times already. And you yourself, sir, you must be getting tired.'

‘Actually, I’m very tired indeed. I might leave with you, if I may.’ Then, turning, I said to the others: ‘Excuse me, gentlemen, but I think I’ll now return to my hotel.’

‘But Mr Ryder,’ the freckled man said, concern in his voice, ‘please don’t go just yet. You must stay at least until the astronaut dismantles HAL.’

‘Mr Ryder,’ a voice said from further down the row, ‘perhaps you’d care to take over my hand here. I’ve had enough of this game for tonight. And it’s always so hard to see the cards in this sort of light. My eyesight isn’t what it used to be.’

‘You’re very kind, but really I must go.’

I was about to exchange good nights, but Pedersen was already on his feet and starting to edge his way out. I followed on behind him, giving a few waves back to the company as I went.

Pedersen was clearly upset by what had taken place, for when we reached the aisle he continued walking silently with his head down. As we left the auditorium, I threw a last glance towards the screen and saw Clint Eastwood preparing for the dismantling of HAL, carefully checking over his giant screwdriver.

The night outside - its deathly hush, the chill, the thickening mist - was such a contrast to the warm hubbub in the cinema that we both paused on the pavement as though to regain our bearings.

‘Mr Ryder, I don’t know what to say,’ Pedersen said. ‘Theo’s an excellent fellow, but sometimes after a big dinner ...’ He shook his head despondently.

‘Let’s not worry. Hard-working people need to unwind. I very much enjoyed the evening.’

‘I feel thoroughly ashamed ...’

‘Please. Let’s forget it. Really, I enjoyed myself.’

We began to walk, our footsteps echoing in the empty street. For a time, Pedersen maintained a preoccupied silence. Then he said:

‘You must believe me, sir. We’ve never underestimated the difficulties of introducing such an idea to our community. I mean, this idea of Mr Brodsky. I can assure you we’ve gone about everything with considerable caution.’

‘Yes, I’m sure that’s so.’

‘At the start we took great care to whom we even mentioned the idea. It was vital that only those most likely to be sympathetic should hear of it during the earlier stages. Then, via these persons, we allowed the thing to seep out slowly to the public at large. That way we ensured that the whole notion was presented in the most positive light. At the same time, we took other measures. For instance, we gave a series of dinners in Mr Brodsky’s honour to which we invited carefully chosen guests from our higher ranks. At first these dinners were small and virtually secret, but gradually we have been able to spread our net wider and wider, gaining more and more support for our position. At any important public event, too, we’ve made sure Mr Brodsky has been seen amidst the dignitaries. When the Peking Ballet came here, for instance, we had him seated in the same box as Mr and Mrs Weiss. Then of course, at the personal level, we’ve all made a point when referring to him of employing only the most respectful tones. We’ve been working hard at it now for two years, and by and large we’ve been very satisfied. The general picture of him has definitely been changing. So much so that we judged it time to take this vital step. That’s why it was so discouraging just now. Those gentlemen in there, they’re the very ones who should be setting an example. If *they* revert to such an attitude each time they unwind a little, how can we ever expect the people at large ...’ He

trailed off and shook his head again. 'I feel let down. On my behalf and on yours, Mr Ryder.'

He became silent again. After we had not spoken for a while, I said with a sigh:

'Public opinion is never easy to shift.'

Pedersen remained silent for a few more steps, then said: 'You have to consider our starting point. When you look at it that way, when you consider our starting point, then I think you'll see we *have* made considerable progress. You must understand, sir, Mr Brodsky's been living here with us now for a long time, and in all those years no one had heard him talk about, let alone play, any music. Yes, we'd all vaguely known he'd once been a conductor in his old country. But you see, because we never saw anything of that side of him, we never thought of him like that. In fact, to be frank, until recently, Mr Brodsky was really only ever noticed when he got very drunk and went staggering about the town shouting. The rest of the time he was just this recluse who lived with his dog up by the north highway. Well, that's not quite true, he was also seen regularly at the library. Two or three mornings a week he'd come into the library, take his usual seat beneath the windows and tie his dog to the table leg. It's against the rules, to bring the dog in, but the librarians long ago decided it was the simplest thing, just to let him bring it in. Far simpler than starting a fight with Mr Brodsky. So you sometimes saw him there, his dog at his feet, thumbing through his pile of books - always these same turgid-looking volumes of history. And if anyone in the room started even the briefest of whispered exchanges, even merely greeted someone, he'd stand up and bellow at the culprit. Theoretically, of course, he was in the right. But then we've never been so strict about silence in our library. People like to talk a little when they meet, after all, as in any other public place. And when you think that Mr Brodsky was himself breaking the rules bringing his dog in, it's not surprising there was this notion that his behaviour was

unreasonable. But then just every once in a while, on certain mornings, a particular mood would descend on him. He'd be there reading at the table and then this forlorn look would come over him. You'd notice him sitting there, staring off into space, sometimes with tears welling in his eyes. Once that happened, people would know it was all right to talk. Usually someone would test the water first. And if Mr Brodsky made no response, then very quickly the whole room would start talking. Sometimes - people are so perverse! - the library becomes much noisier on such occasions than at any time when Mr Brodsky is absent. I remember one morning going in to return a book and the place sounded like a railway station. I had virtually to shout to make myself heard at the issue desk. And there was Mr Brodsky, very still in the middle of it all, in a world of his own. I must say he was a sad sight. The morning light made him look rather feeble. There was a droplet on the end of his nose, his eyes seemed so far away and he'd quite forgotten the page he was holding. And it occurred to me it was a little cruel, the way the atmosphere had turned. It was as though they were taking advantage of him, though I'm not quite sure in what sense. But you see, another morning, he'd have been quite capable of silencing the lot of them in an instant. Well anyway, Mr Ryder, what I'm trying to say is that for many years that's who Mr Brodsky was to us. I suppose it's too much to expect people to change *completely* their view of him in such a relatively short time. Considerable progress has been made, but as you saw just now ...' Again, exasperation seemed to overtake him. 'But *they* should know better,' he muttered to himself.

We came to a halt at a crossroad. The fog had got much thicker and I had lost my bearings. Pedersen glanced around, then began to walk again, leading me down a narrow street with rows of cars parked on the pavements.

'I'll see you to your hotel, Mr Ryder. I might as well go home this way as any other. The hotel is to your

satisfaction, I trust?'

'Oh yes, it's fine.'

'Mr Hoffman runs a fine establishment. He's an excellent manager and an excellent fellow all round. Of course, as you know, it's Mr Hoffman we have to thank for Mr Brodsky's, er, recovery.'

'Ah yes, of course.'

For a little while the cars on the pavement obliged us to walk in single file. Then we drifted out into the middle of the street, and when I drew up alongside him I saw that Pedersen's mood had lightened. He smiled and said:

'I understand you're going to the Countess's house tomorrow to listen to those records. Our mayor, Mr von Winterstein, I know he intends to join you there. He's very keen to take you aside and talk matters over with you. But the main thing, of course, is those records. Extraordinary!'

'Yes. I'm very much looking forward to it all.'

'The Countess is a remarkable lady. Time and again she's demonstrated a dimension to her thinking that puts the rest of us to shame. I've asked her more than once what on earth gave her the idea in the first place. "A hunch," she always says. "I woke up one morning with this hunch." What a lady! It could have been no easy task, obtaining those gramophone records. But she managed, using a specialist dealer in Berlin. Of course the rest of us knew nothing of it at the time, and I dare say if we had we'd have just laughed at the whole idea. And then she summoned us one evening to her residence. Just two years ago last month, a very pleasant, sunny evening. So there we all were, eleven of us, gathered in her drawing room, none of us knowing quite what to expect. She served us refreshments, then almost immediately began to address us. We had fretted long enough, she said. It was time we acted. Time we admitted how misguided we had been and took some positive steps to repair the damage as best we could.

Otherwise our grandchildren, their children after them, would never forgive us. Well, none of this was new, we'd been repeating such sentiments to each other for months by that point and we all just nodded, made the usual noises. But then the Countess continued. As far as Mr Christoff was concerned, she said, little further action was necessary. He was now thoroughly discredited in every walk of life throughout the city. But that in itself was hardly sufficient to put into reverse the spiral of misery gaining ever greater momentum at the heart of our community. We had somehow to build a new mood, a new era. We all nodded to this, but again, Mr Ryder, these were sentiments we had exchanged many times before. I believe Mr von Winterstein even said as much, though in the most courteous sort of way. This was when the Countess started to reveal just what was in her mind. The solution, she declared, had quite possibly been in our midst the whole time. She proceeded to explain herself further and, well, at first, naturally, we could hardly believe our ears. Mr Brodsky? Of the library and the drunken walks? Was she seriously talking about Mr *Brodsky*? Had it been anyone other than the Countess, I'm sure we'd have fallen about laughing. But the Countess, I remember, remained very sure of herself. She suggested we all make ourselves comfortable, she had some music for us to listen to. To listen to very carefully. Then she began to play those records to us, one after the other. We sat there and listened, the sun going down outside. The recording quality was poor. The Countess's stereogram, you'll see tomorrow, it's a somewhat dated affair. But none of this mattered. Within minutes the music had cast a spell over us all, had lulled us into a deeply tranquil mood. Some of us had tears in our eyes. We realised we were listening to something we had so sorely missed over the years. Suddenly it seemed more incomprehensible than ever that we should have come to celebrate someone like Mr Christoff. Here we were, listening to true music again. The work of a conductor not only immensely gifted, but who *shared our values*. Then the music stopped, we stood up and stretched our legs - we'd

been listening for well over three hours - and then, well, the idea of Mr Brodsky - Mr Brodsky! - seemed as absurd as ever. The recordings were very old, we pointed out. And Mr Brodsky for reasons best known to himself had abandoned music a long time ago. And besides, he had his ... his problems. One could hardly call him the same person. We were soon all shaking our heads. But then the Countess spoke up again. We were approaching crisis point. We had to keep an open mind. We had to seek out Mr Brodsky, talk with him, ascertain the present state of his powers. None of us needed reminding, surely, of the urgency of the situation. Each of us could recount dozens of sad cases. Of lives blighted by loneliness. Of families despairing of ever rediscovering the happiness they'd once taken for granted. It was at this point that Mr Hoffman, the manager of your hotel, suddenly cleared his throat and declared that he would see to Mr Brodsky. He would take it upon himself - he said this all very solemnly, he actually stood up to do so - he would take it upon himself to assess the situation, and if there was any hope at all of rehabilitating Mr Brodsky, then he, Mr Hoffman, would take personal charge. If we would entrust him with this task, he would vow to us not to let the community down. That was, as I say, just over two years ago. Since then we've watched with astonishment the dedication with which Mr Hoffman has gone about fulfilling his promise. The progress, if not always smooth, has been remarkable overall. And now Mr Brodsky is, well, he has been brought to his present condition. So much so that we felt we should wait no longer to take the crucial step. After all, we can only go so far simply *presenting* Mr Brodsky in a better light. At some point, the people of this town have to judge with their own eyes and ears. Well, so far, every indication is that we have not been over-ambitious. Mr Brodsky has been rehearsing regularly, and by all accounts has won fully the respect of the orchestra. It may be a great many years since he last gave a public performance, but it seems little has been lost. That passion, that fine vision we encountered in the Countess's drawing

room that evening, it's all been waiting somewhere deep inside and is now steadily reawakening. Yes, we have every confidence he will do us all proud come Thursday night. Meanwhile, for our part, we have done everything in our power to ensure the success of the evening. The Stuttgart Nagel Foundation Orchestra, as you know, if not of the very highest rank, is very well respected. Its services do not come cheaply. Nevertheless, there was hardly a dissenting voice over our hiring them for this most important of occasions, nor about the period involved. At first, two weeks' rehearsal time had been envisaged, but in the end, with full support from the Finance Committee, we stretched it to three weeks. Three weeks board and hospitality for a visiting orchestra, on top of fees, you can see, sir, it is no small undertaking. But there was hardly a whisper of opposition. Each council member has now come to understand the importance of Thursday night. Everyone sees that Mr Brodsky must be given every chance. For all that' - Pedersen suddenly heaved a sigh - 'for all that, as you saw yourself this very evening, old ingrained ideas are hard to erase. This is precisely why your help, Mr Ryder, your agreeing to come to our humble city may prove absolutely crucial to us. The people will listen to you in a way they would never listen to one of us. In fact, sir, I can tell you, the mood in this town has altered simply at the news of your arrival. There's the greatest anticipation building up around what you'll tell us on Thursday night. In the trams, in the cafés, people are talking of virtually nothing else. Of course, I don't know precisely what you've prepared for us. Perhaps you've taken care not to paint too rosy a picture, Perhaps you'll warn us of the hard work that lies ahead for each one of us if we're ever to re-discover the happiness we once had. You'll be very right to give us such warnings. But I know too how skilfully you'll appeal to the positive, public-spirited part of your listener. One thing in any case is certain. When you finish speaking, no one in this city will ever again look at Mr Brodsky and see the shabby old drunk they once did. Ah, I can

see you looking concerned, Mr Ryder. Please don't worry. We may look like a backwater town, but there are certain sorts of occasions at which we excel. Mr Hoffman in particular has been working hard to structure a truly magnificent evening. Rest assured, sir, every citizen of any standing will attend. And as for Mr Brodsky himself, as I say, I'm sure he won't let us down. He'll surpass everyone's expectations, I'm certain of it.'

In fact the look on my face noted by Pedersen had not to do with 'concern', so much as the growing annoyance I was feeling towards myself. For the truth was that my forthcoming address to this city was not only far from ready, I had yet to complete even the background research. I could not understand how with all my experience I had arrived at such a state of affairs. I remembered how that very afternoon in the hotel's elegant atrium, I had sat sipping the strong bitter coffee, reiterating to myself the importance of planning the rest of the day with care so as to make the best use of the very limited time. As I had sat watching the misty fountain in the mirror behind the bar, I had even pictured myself in a situation not unlike the one I had just encountered at the cinema, making a striking impression on the company with my easy authority over the range of local issues, producing at least one spontaneous witticism at Christoff's expense memorable enough to be quoted throughout the town the next day. Instead I had allowed myself to be deflected by other matters, with the result that, during my entire time at the cinema, I had been unable to manage a single noteworthy comment. It was even possible I had created the impression of being less than urbane. Suddenly I felt again an intense irritation with Sophie for the chaos she had caused and for the way she had obliged me to compromise so thoroughly my usual standards.

We came to a halt again and I realised we were standing in front of the hotel.

‘Well, it’s been a great pleasure,’ Pedersen said, holding out his hand to me. ‘I look forward to enjoying more of your company over the coming days. But now you must get some rest.’

I thanked him, wished him a good night and entered the lobby as his footsteps faded away into the darkness.

The young desk clerk was still on duty. ‘I hope you enjoyed the movie, sir,’ he said, handing me my key.

‘I did, very much. Thank you for suggesting it. It was very relaxing.’

‘Yes, many guests find it a good way to round off the day. Oh, Gustav reports that Boris was very happy with his room and went off to sleep immediately.’

‘Ah, good.’

I wished him a good night and hurried across to the elevator.

I arrived in my room feeling very grimy after the long day and, changing into my dressing gown, began to prepare for a shower. But then, as I was investigating the bathroom, an intense surge of weariness came over me, so that it was virtually all I could do to stagger back to my bed and collapse on top of it, sinking at once into a deep sleep.

I had not been asleep long when the telephone rang beside my ear. I let it ring for a while, then finally sat up on the bed and picked up the receiver.

‘Ah, Mr Ryder. It’s me. Hoffman.’

I waited for him to explain why he was disturbing me, but the hotel manager did not continue. There was an awkward silence and then he said again:

‘It’s me, sir. Hoffman.’ There was another pause, then he said: ‘I’m down here in the lobby.’

‘Oh yes.’

‘I’m sorry, Mr Ryder, perhaps you were in the middle of something.’

‘Actually I was just getting a little sleep.’

This remark seemed to stun Hoffman, for there followed another silence. I laughed quickly and said:

‘What I meant was, I was lying down, as it were. Naturally I won’t be having a full sleep until ... until all the day’s business is concluded.’

‘Quite, quite.’ Hoffman sounded relieved. ‘Just catching your breath, so to speak. Very understandable. Well, in any case, I shall be here in the lobby waiting for you, sir.’

I put down the receiver and sat on the bed wondering what to do. I felt as exhausted as ever - I could not have slept more than a few minutes - and it was tempting to forget the whole matter and simply go back to sleep. But I eventually saw the impossibility of doing so and got to my feet.

I discovered I had fallen asleep in my dressing gown, and I was about to remove it and get dressed when it occurred to me I might go down and deal with Hoffman still wearing it. At this time of night, after all, I was unlikely to encounter anyone except Hoffman and the desk clerk, and my going down in such attire would emphasise subtly but pointedly the lateness of the hour and the fact that he was keeping me from my sleep. I stepped out into the corridor and made my way to the elevator feeling not a little annoyed.

Initially at least, the dressing gown seemed to have the desired impact, for Hoffman's opening words as I entered the lobby were: 'I'm sorry to have disturbed your rest, Mr Ryder. It must be so tiring for you, all this travelling.'

I made no attempt to hide my weariness. Passing a hand through my hair, I said: 'It's perfectly all right, Mr Hoffman. But I trust this won't take too long. I am, in fact, feeling pretty tired now.'

'Oh, this won't take long, not long at all.'

'Fine.'

I noticed that Hoffman was wearing a raincoat and, underneath it, full evening dress with cummerbund and bow tie.

'You'll have heard, of course, the bad news,' he said.

'The bad news?'

'It's bad news, but let me say, sir, I am confident, very confident, it will not lead to anything serious. And before the evening is out, I trust you will be equally convinced of it, Mr Ryder.'

'I'm sure I will,' I said, nodding reassuringly. Then after a moment I decided the situation was hopeless and asked point blank: 'I'm sorry, Mr Hoffman, but what bad news are you referring to? There's been so much bad news lately.'

He looked at me in alarm. 'So much bad news?'

I gave a laugh. 'I mean the fighting in Africa and so on. Everywhere, bad news.' I gave another laugh.

'Oh, I see. I was of course referring to the bad news about Mr Brodsky's dog.'

'Ah yes. Mr Brodsky's dog.'

'You'll agree, sir, this is most unfortunate. The timing of it. One can proceed with the utmost care, and then something like this happens!' He gave an exasperated sigh.

'Yes, it's awful. Awful.'

'But as I say, I am confident. Yes, confident it will not lead to any major setback. Well now, may I suggest we go off at once? Actually, now I think of it, you were quite right, Mr Ryder. This is a much better time to set off. It means we shall arrive neither too early nor too late. Quite right, one must take these things calmly. Never get panicked. Well, sir, let's be off.'

'Er ... Mr Hoffman. I seem to have made a little misjudgement about my attire for this occasion. Perhaps you'll allow me a few minutes to go back upstairs and change into something else.'

'Oh' - Hoffman glanced fleetingly at me - 'you look splendid, Mr Ryder. Please don't worry. Now' - he looked anxiously at his watch - 'I suggest we be on our way. Yes, this is just the right sort of time. Please.'

Outside the night was dark and the rain was coming down steadily. I followed Hoffman around the hotel building, down a path and into a small outdoor car park containing five or six vehicles. There was a solitary lamp fastened to a fence post by which I could make out the large puddles on the ground before me.

Hoffman ran across to a large black car and held open its passenger door. As I made my way towards it I could feel wetness seeping through my carpet slippers. Just as I was stepping into the car, one foot sank deep into a puddle, completely soaking it. I let out an exclamation but Hoffman was already hurrying around to the driver's side.

Hoffman drove us out of the car park as I did my best to dry my feet on the soft flooring. When I looked up we were already out in the main street and I was surprised to see how heavy the traffic had become. Moreover, many shops and restaurants had now come awake, and crowds of customers were milling about inside the illuminated windows. As we continued, the traffic grew steadily until somewhere near the heart of the city, amidst three lanes of vehicles, we came to a complete standstill. Hoffman looked at his watch then banged his hand against the wheel in frustration.

'How unfortunate,' I said sympathetically. 'And when I was out only a little while ago, the whole town seemed to be asleep.'

He appeared very preoccupied and said absent-mindedly: 'The traffic in this town, it just gets worse and worse. I don't know what the solution is.' He banged the steering wheel again.

For the next few minutes, we sat in the car in silence as we edged slowly forwards. Then Hoffman said quietly:

'Mr Ryder has been travelling.'

I thought I had misheard him, but then he said it again - this time with a suave little wave of his hand - and I realised he was rehearsing what he would say upon arrival to explain our lateness.

'Mr Ryder has been travelling. Mr Ryder - has been *travelling*.'

As we proceeded through the dense night-time traffic, Hoffman continued occasionally to mutter things under his breath, most of which I failed to catch. He had gone into a world of his own and appeared to be growing increasingly tense. Once, after we had failed to reach a green light in time, I heard him mutter: 'No, no, Mr Brodsky! He was magnificent, a magnificent creature!'

Then at last we took a turning and found ourselves driving out of the city. Before long the buildings disappeared and we were travelling on a long road with dark open spaces - perhaps farmland - to either side. The traffic grew sparse enabling the powerful car to pick up speed. I could see Hoffman relaxing visibly, and when he next addressed me he had regained much of his usual urbane manner.

'Tell me, Mr Ryder. Is everything at the hotel to your satisfaction?'

'Oh yes. Everything's fine, thank you.'

'You're happy with your room?'

'Oh yes, yes.'

'Your bed. It's comfortable?'

'Very comfortable.'

'I ask because we do pride ourselves on our beds. We renew our mattresses at very frequent intervals. No other hotel in this town renews as many mattresses as we do. This I know for a fact. The mattresses we throw out would be considered serviceable for several further years by many of our so-called rivals. Did you know, Mr Ryder, that if one were to stand up, lengthways, end to end, all the used mattresses we throw out during five financial years, one would be able to make a line along our main street starting at the civic chambers, going right along to the fountain, round the corner of Sterngasse and as far down as Mr Winkler's pharmacy?'

‘Really. That’s most impressive.’

‘Mr Ryder, let me speak frankly. I’ve been giving much thought to the matter of your room. Naturally in the days leading to your arrival, I spent a long time considering which room to give you. Most hotels would have a simple answer to the question: “Which is the best room in the house?” But this is not the case in my hotel, Mr Ryder. Over the years, I’ve given so much individual attention to so many different rooms. There have even been times when I’ve become – ha ha! – some would say *obsessed*, yes, obsessed, with one room or another. Once I see the potential of a particular room, I spend many days thinking about it, and then I take the greatest care in having it renovated to match my vision as closely as possible. I am not always successful, but on a number of occasions the results, after much work, have come close to what I pictured in my head, and of course, that is very satisfying. But then – perhaps it’s some sort of defect in my nature – no sooner have I completed the renovation of one room to my satisfaction, I am seized by the potential of another. And before I know it, I find myself devoting great time and thought to the new project. Yes, some would call this obsessional, but I see nothing so wrong with it. Few things are as dull as a hotel with room after room completed along the same tired concepts. As far as I am concerned, each room must be thought about according to its own unique characteristics. In any case, what I’m getting at, Mr Ryder, is that I have no one favourite room in the hotel. So after a lot of thought, I concluded you’d be most happy in the room you are presently occupying. But having met you, I am now no longer certain.’

‘Oh no, Mr Hoffman,’ I said, interrupting. ‘The present room is fine.’

‘But I’ve been thinking about it on and off all day since meeting you, sir. It seems to me you’d be more temperamentally suited to another room I have in mind.’

Perhaps in the morning I'll show it to you. I'm quite sure you'll like it better.'

'No, Mr Hoffman, really. The present room ...'

'Let me be frank, Mr Ryder. Your coming has put the room you're now occupying under its first true test. You see, this is the first time I've had a truly distinguished guest in that room since its reconceptualisation four years ago. Of course, there was no way I could predict that you yourself would one day honour us. But the fact is, I worked on that room with someone very much like yourself in mind. What I'm trying to say, you see, is that it's only now, with your arrival, that it's been properly put to the use for which it was intended. And, well, I can see quite clearly that I made several crucial misjudgements four years ago. It's so difficult, even with my experience. No, without doubt I'm dissatisfied. It is not a happy match. My proposal to you, sir, is that we move you to 343, which I feel is much closer to your spirit. You'll feel much calmer there and sleep better. And as for your present room, well, I've been thinking about it on and off all day. I have a good mind to have it demolished in its present form.'

'Mr Hoffman, really, no!'

I had shouted this and Hoffman took his eyes off the road to stare at me in surprise. I laughed and, quickly recovering, said:

'What I meant was, please don't go to such trouble and expense on my account.'

'It would be for my own peace of mind, I assure you, Mr Ryder. My hotel is my life's work. I made a bad mistake concerning that room. I see nothing for it but demolition.'

'Mr Hoffman, that room ... The fact is, I feel a lot of affection for it. I really am very happy there.'

‘I don’t understand, sir.’ He seemed genuinely puzzled.

‘The room is clearly not correct for you. Now that I’ve met you, I can state that with some certainty. You don’t have to be so polite. I am surprised to find you so peculiarly attached to it.’

I gave a sudden laugh, perhaps an unnecessarily loud one.

‘Not at all. Peculiarly attached?’ - I gave another laugh - ‘It’s just a room, nothing more. If it needs to be demolished, then demolished it must be! I’ll gladly move to another room.’

‘Ah. I’m very pleased you see it that way. It would have been a source of great frustration to me, Mr Ryder, not simply during the rest of your stay, but throughout the years to come, to think that you once stayed at my hotel and were forced to endure such an unsuitable room. I really can’t think what could have been going on in my mind four years ago. A complete miscalculation!’

We had been speeding through the darkness for some time without encountering other headlights. Off in the distance I could see what may have been a few farmhouses, but otherwise there was little to break the empty blackness to either side. We travelled on in silence for a little while. Then Hoffman said:

‘This is a cruel stroke of luck, Mr Ryder. That dog, well, it wasn’t young, but it might easily have lasted another two or three years. And the preparations had been going so well.’ He shook his head. ‘It’s such bad timing.’ Then, turning to me with a smile, he went on: ‘But I’m confident. Yes, I’m confident. He won’t be deflected now, not even by something like this.’

‘Perhaps Mr Brodsky should be offered another dog as a sort of present. Perhaps a young puppy.’

I had said this without much thought, but Hoffman made a show of considering it respectfully.

‘I’m not sure, Mr Ryder. You must realise, he was extremely attached to Bruno. He kept little other company. He’ll be in a state of mourning. But you may be right, we must alleviate his loneliness now that Bruno has gone. Perhaps some other animal. Something soothing. A bird in a cage, say. Then in time, when he is ready, another dog could be introduced. I’m not sure.’

He fell silent for the next several minutes and I thought his mind had gone on to something else. But then suddenly, as he stared at the dark road unwinding before us, he muttered intensely under his breath:

‘An ox! Yes, an ox, an ox, an ox!’

But by this stage I was tired of the whole business of Brodsky’s dog and I leaned back in my seat without speaking, determined to relax for the remainder of the journey. At one point, in an attempt to find out something about the event to which we were travelling, I said to him: ‘I hope we shan’t be very late.’

‘No, no. Just right,’ Hoffman replied, but his mind seemed to be elsewhere. Then a few minutes later, I heard him mutter sharply once more: ‘An ox! An ox!’

After a while we turned off the open road and found ourselves in a salubrious residential district. I could see in the darkness large houses in their own grounds, often surrounded by high walls or hedges. Hoffman drove carefully around the leafy avenues, and I could hear him once more rehearsing his lines under his breath.

We passed through some tall iron gates into the courtyard of a substantial residence. There were already many vehicles parked around the grounds and it took the hotel manager a little while to find a space. He then got out and hurriedly went off towards the front entrance.

I remained in my seat a moment longer, studying the large house for clues concerning the occasion we were about to

attend. The front comprised a long row of huge windows coming almost to the ground. Most of these were lit behind their curtains, but I could see nothing of what was going on within.

Hoffman rang the doorbell and gestured for me to join him. When I got out of the car, the rain had eased to a drizzle. I pulled my dressing gown close around me and walked towards the house, taking care to avoid the puddles.

The door was opened by a maid who showed us into an expansive hallway decorated with grand portraits. The maid appeared to know Hoffman and there was a quick exchange as she took his raincoat. Hoffman paused a moment to straighten his tie in the mirror, before leading the way deeper into the building.

We arrived at a vast room flooded with lights in which a reception was in full swing. There were at least a hundred people present, standing about in smart evening dress, holding glasses and exchanging conversation. As we stood at the threshold, Hoffman raised an arm in front of me as though to protect me and searched the room with his gaze.

‘He’s not here yet,’ he muttered eventually. Then, turning to me with a smile, he said: ‘Mr Brodsky isn’t here yet. But I’m confident, *confident* he’ll be here before long.’

Hoffman turned back to the room and for a second seemed at a loss. Then he said: ‘If you’d just wait here a moment, Mr Ryder, I’ll go and fetch the Countess. Oh, and if you wouldn’t mind standing a little way back over here – ha ha! – just out of sight. As you’ll remember, you’re supposed to be our big surprise. Please, I won’t be long.’

He went into the room and for a few moments I watched his figure moving about the guests, his worried demeanour in marked contrast to the merriment all around him. I saw a number of people try to speak to him, but each time Hoffman

hurried on with a distracted smile. Eventually I lost sight of him and possibly drifted forward a little in my effort to locate him again. I must in any case have made myself conspicuous for I heard a voice next to me say: 'Ah, Mr Ryder, you've arrived. How delightful you're with us at last.'

A large woman of around sixty had placed her hand on my arm. I smiled and muttered some pleasantries, to which she said: 'Everyone here is so eager to meet you.' With that she began to lead me firmly into the heart of the gathering.

As I followed her, squeezing my way past the guests, the large woman began to ask me questions. At first these were the usual enquiries about my health and my journey. But then, as we continued to make our way around the room, she proceeded to quiz me with great thoroughness about the hotel. Indeed she went into such detail - did I approve of the soap? what did I make of the carpet in the lobby? - that I began to suspect she was some professional rival of Hoffman much peeved that I was staying at his establishment. However, her general attitude and the manner in which she regularly nodded and smiled at people as we passed left little doubt that she was the hostess of these proceedings, and I concluded that this was indeed the Countess herself.

I had assumed she was leading me either to a particular spot in the room or to a particular person, but after a while I got the distinct impression we were walking around in slow circles. In fact several times I felt certain we had already been in a part of the room at least twice before. The other thing I noticed with curiosity was that although heads would turn and greet my hostess she made no effort to introduce me to anyone. Moreover, although some people smiled politely at me from time to time, no one seemed especially interested in me. Certainly no one broke off a conversation on account of my passing by. I was somewhat puzzled by this, having steeled myself for the usual smotherings of questions and compliments.

Then after a while I noticed there was an odd quality to the whole atmosphere in the room - something forced, even theatrical about its conviviality - though I was unable immediately to put my finger on it. But then we finally came to a halt - the Countess falling into conversation with two women covered in jewellery - and I at last had the chance to look about me and gather some impressions. Only then did I realise that the occasion was not a cocktail party at all, but that in fact all these people were waiting to be called into dinner; that dinner should have been served at least two hours earlier, but that the Countess and her colleagues had been obliged to hold off its commencement due to the absences of both Brodsky - the official guest of honour - and myself - the evening's great surprise. Then, as I continued to cast my gaze about me, I began steadily to realise just what had taken place before our arrival.

The present occasion was the largest to date of the dinners given in Brodsky's honour. Being also the last before the crucial event on Thursday evening, it was never likely to have been a relaxed affair, and Brodsky's lateness had turned the tension up further. At first, though, the guests - all of them highly conscious of being the city's elite - had remained calm, everyone scrupulously avoiding any comment likely to be construed as casting doubt on Brodsky's dependability. Most, in fact, had managed not to mention Brodsky at all, relieving their anxiety simply by endless speculation over when dinner would be served.

Then had come the news concerning Brodsky's dog. How such news had come to be given out in so haphazard a manner was not clear. Possibly a phone call had come to the house and one of the civic leaders, in a misguided attempt to settle the atmosphere, had blurted it out to some guests. In any case, the consequences of allowing such a thing to spread mouth to mouth through a gathering already tense with worry and hunger was entirely predictable. Very soon, every sort of wild rumour had begun to circulate around the room. Brodsky

had been discovered, utterly drunk, cradling his dog's corpse. Brodsky had been found lying in a puddle in the street outside, talking gibberish. Brodsky, overcome with grief, had tried to kill himself by drinking paraffin. This last story had had its origins in an incident several years earlier when indeed, during a drunken binge, Brodsky had been rushed to hospital by a neighbouring farmer after imbibing a quantity of paraffin - though whether he had done so in a bid to kill himself or simply out of drunken confusion had never been established. Before long, in the wake of these rumours, despairing talk had started up everywhere.

'That dog meant everything to him. The man will never get up from this. We have to face it, we're right back at square one.'

'We have to call off Thursday night. Call it off straight away. It can't be anything but a disaster now. If we let it go ahead, the people of this city will never give us a second chance.'

'That fellow was always too risky. We should never have let it get this far. But what do we do now? We're lost, hopelessly lost.'

Then, even as the Countess and her colleagues had sought to regain control of the evening, a burst of shouting had erupted from near the centre of the room.

Many people were rushing towards the incident, a few retreating in panic. What had occurred was that one of the younger councillors had pinned to the floor a tubby, bald-headed figure who after a moment everyone had recognised to be Keller the vet. The young councillor had been pulled off but had held onto Keller's lapel so tenaciously the vet had been pulled up with him.

'I did my best!' Keller was shouting, red in the face.

'I did my best! What more could I have done? Two days ago the animal was fine!'

‘Fraud!’ the young councillor had bellowed and attempted another assault. Again he had been pulled off, but by now a number of others, recognising a good scapegoat, had begun also to shout at Keller. For a moment accusations had rained down on the vet from all sides, charging him with negligence, and with jeopardising the future of the whole community. At this point a voice had shouted: ‘What about the Breuers’ kittens? You spend all your time playing bridge, you let those kittens die one by one ...’

‘I only play bridge once a week and even then ...’ the vet had started to protest hoarsely, but immediately more voices had shouted over him. Suddenly everyone in the room had seemed to have a long-borne grievance against the vet concerning some beloved animal or other. Then someone had shouted that Keller owed him money, another that Keller had never returned a gardening fork borrowed six years earlier. Soon the feelings against the vet had risen to such a pitch it had seemed quite natural that those restraining the young councillor should slacken their grip. And when the latter had made yet another lunge, he had seemed this time to do so on behalf of the great majority of those present. The situation had looked on the verge of turning quite unpleasant, when a voice booming across the room had at last brought everyone to their senses.

That the room had fallen silent as quickly as it had perhaps owed more to the astonishment caused by the speaker’s identity than to any natural authority he commanded. For the figure everyone had turned to see glaring down at them from the platform had been that of Jakob Kanitz, a man noted in the town principally for his timidity. Now in his late forties, Jakob Kanitz had for as long as anyone could remember held the same dull clerical post at the town hall. He was rarely known to venture an opinion, still less contradict or argue. He had no close friends and several years earlier had moved out of the small house he had shared with his wife and three children to rent a tiny attic room

further down the same street. Whenever anyone had broached the matter, he had intimated he would very soon rejoin his family, but the years had gone by and his arrangements had not changed. Meanwhile, largely on account of his willingness to volunteer for the many mundane tasks around the organising of a cultural event, he had become an accepted, if somewhat patronised member of the town's artistic circles.

The room had had little time to get over its surprise before Jakob Kanitz - perhaps aware that his nerve would hold out for only so long - had begun to speak.

'Other cities! And I don't just mean Paris! Or Stuttgart! I mean smaller cities, no more than us, other cities. Gather together their best citizens, put a crisis like this before them, how would they be? They'd be calm, assured. Such people would know what to do, how to behave. What I'm saying to you, all of us here, we're the best of this town. It isn't beyond us. Together we can come through this crisis. Would they be fighting in Stuttgart?! There's no need for panic yet. No need to give up, to start quarrelling among ourselves. All right, the dog, it's a problem, but it's not the end, it doesn't mean anything yet. Whatever condition Mr Brodsky may be in at this moment, we can put him back on course again. We can do it, provided we all play our part tonight. I'm sure we can, we have to. Have to put him back on course. Because if we don't, if we don't pull together and get this right tonight, I tell you this, there's nothing left for us except misery! Yes, deep, lonely misery! There's no one else for us to turn to, it has to be Mr Brodsky, there's no one else now. He's probably on his way at this moment. We've got to stay calm. What are we doing, fighting? Would they fight in Stuttgart? We've got to think clearly. In his shoes, how would we feel? We must show we're all grieving with him, that the whole town shares his sorrow. Then again, friends, think about it, we must cheer him up. Oh yes! We can't spend the whole evening in gloom, send him away believing there's nothing left, he might as well go back to

... No, no! The right balance! We've got to be cheerful too, make him see there's so much more to life, that we're all looking to him, depending on him. Yes, we have to get it right, these next few hours. He's probably on his way now, God knows in what condition. These next few hours, they're crucial, crucial. We've got to do it right. Otherwise there's only misery. We must ... we must ...'

At this point Jakob Kanitz had become covered in confusion. He had remained standing there on the platform for several more seconds, not speaking, a huge embarrassment steadily engulfing him. Some residue of his earlier emotion had caused him to give one last glare to those assembled, then he had turned sheepishly and stepped down.

But this clumsy appeal had had an immediate impact. Even before Jakob Kanitz had finished speaking, a low assenting murmur had started up and more than one person had pushed reproachfully the shoulder of the young councillor - by this point shamefacedly shuffling his feet. Jakob Kanitz's departure from the stage had been followed by a few seconds of awkward silence. Then, steadily, conversation had broken out around the room, with everywhere people discussing in serious but calm tones what should be done once Brodsky arrived. Before long a consensus had emerged to the effect that Jakob Kanitz had got it more or less right. The task was to strike the correct balance between the sorrowful and the jovial. The atmosphere would have to be carefully monitored at all times by each and every person present. A feeling of resolution had gone around the room, and then, in time, people had begun gradually to relax, until eventually they were smiling, chatting, greeting one another in gracious, urbane tones, all as though the unseemly episodes of the last half-hour had not taken place. It had been somewhere around this point - no more than twenty minutes after Jakob Kanitz had finished speaking - that Hoffman and I had arrived. No wonder then that I should have detected something odd beneath the layer of refined merriment.

I was still turning over all that had happened prior to our arrival when I caught sight of Stephan on the other side of the room, talking to an elderly lady. Next to me, the Countess seemed still to be engrossed in her conversation with the two bejewelled women, and so, muttering an excuse under my breath, I drifted away from them. As I came towards him, Stephan saw me and smiled.

‘Ah, Mr Ryder. So you’ve arrived. I wonder if I might introduce you to Miss Collins.’

I then recognised the thin old lady to whose apartment we had driven earlier in the night. She was dressed simply but elegantly in a long black dress. She smiled and held out her hand as we exchanged greetings. I was about to make further polite conversation with her when Stephan leaned forward and said quietly:

‘I’ve been such a fool, Mr Ryder. Frankly I don’t know what’s for the best. Miss Collins has been very kind as usual, but I’d like also your opinion on it all.’

‘You mean ... about Mr Brodsky’s dog?’

‘Oh. No, no, that’s all awful, I realise that. But we were just discussing something else altogether. I really would appreciate your advice. In fact, Miss Collins was just now suggesting I seek you out, wasn’t that so, Miss Collins? You see, I hate to be a bore about this, but there’s been a complication. I mean, about my performance on Thursday night. God, I’ve been such a fool! As I told you, Mr Ryder, I’ve been preparing Jean-Louis La Roche’s *Dahlia*, but I never told Father about it. Not until tonight, that is. I’d been thinking I’d keep it a surprise for him, he so loves La Roche. What’s more, Father would never dream I was capable of mastering such a difficult piece, and so I thought it would be a tremendous surprise for him on both counts. But then just recently, with the big night so near now, I’d been thinking it wasn’t practical to keep it a secret any more. For one thing, it’s all got to be printed on the official

programme, there's going to be a copy next to each napkin, Father's been agonising over the design, trying to decide about the embossments, the illustration on the back, everything. I realised a few days ago I'd have to tell him, but I still wanted it to be something of a surprise, so I was waiting for the right sort of moment to come along. Well, earlier on, just after I dropped you and Boris off, I went into his office to put back the car keys, and there he was on the floor, going through a pile of papers. On his hands and knees, all the papers round him on the carpet, nothing unusual about it, Father often works like that. It's quite a small office, and his desk takes up a lot of the space anyway, so I had to tiptoe around everything to put the keys back. He asked me how everything was, then before I'd said anything seemed to become engrossed in his papers again. Well, for some reason, just as I was leaving, I caught sight of him on the carpet like that and I suddenly felt it would be the right moment to tell him. It was just an impulse. So I said to him, quite casually: "By the way, Father, I'm going to play La Roche's *Dahlia* on Thursday night. I thought you'd like to know." I didn't say it in any special way, I just told him and waited to see his reaction. Well, he put aside the document he was reading, but he kept gazing at the carpet in front of him. Then a smile came over his face and he said something like: "Ah yes, *Dahlia*," and for a few seconds he looked very happy. He didn't look up, he was still on his hands and knees, but he looked very happy. Then he closed his eyes and started to hum the opening of the adagio, he started to hum it there on the floor, moving his head in time. He seemed so happy and tranquil, Mr Ryder, at that point I was congratulating myself. Then he opened his eyes and smiled dreamily up at me and said: "Yes, it's beautiful. I've never understood why your mother despises it so." As I was just telling Miss Collins, I thought at first I'd misheard him. But then he said it again. "Your mother despises it so much. Yes, as you know, she's come to despise La Roche's later work so intensely these days. She won't let me play his recordings

anywhere in the house, not even with the headphones on.” Then he must have noticed how flabbergasted and upset I was. Because - typical Father! - he started straight away trying to make me feel better. “I should have asked you a long time ago,” he kept saying. “It’s all my fault.” Then he suddenly slapped his forehead like he’d just remembered something else and said: “Really, Stephan, I’ve let you *both* down. I thought at the time I was doing the right thing, not interfering, but I see now I’ve let you both down.” And when I asked what he meant, he explained how Mother’s been looking forward all this time to hearing me play Kazan’s *Glass Passions*. Apparently she’d let Father know some time ago this was what she wanted, and well, Mother would assume Father would arrange it all. But you see, Father saw my side to it. He’s very sensitive about such things. He realised that a musician - even an amateur like me - would want to make his own decision about such an important performance. So he’d not said anything to me, fully intending to explain it all to Mother when a chance came along. But then of course - well, I suppose I’d better explain it a bit more, Mr Ryder. You see, when I say Mother let Father know about the Kazan, I don’t mean she actually *told* him. It’s a little hard to explain to an outsider. The way it works is that Mother would somehow, you know, somehow just *let it be known* to Father without ever directly mentioning it. She’ll do it through signals, which to him would be very clear. I’m not sure precisely what she did this time. Perhaps he’d come home and found her listening to *Glass Passions* on the stereo. Well, since she very rarely puts anything on the stereo, that would be a pretty obvious sign. Or perhaps Father had come to bed after his bath and found her reading a book in bed on Kazan, I don’t know, it’s just the way things have always been done between them. Well, as you can see, it’s not as though Father could have suddenly said: “No, Stephan’s got to make his own choice.” Father was waiting, trying to find a suitable way of conveying his reply. And of course he wasn’t to know that, of all pieces, I was preparing La Roche’s *Dahlia*. God, I’ve

been so stupid! I had no idea Mother hated it so! Well, he told me how things stood, and when I asked him what he considered the best course, he thought about it and said I ought to carry on with what I'd prepared, it was too late to change it now. "Mother wouldn't blame you," he kept saying.

"She wouldn't blame you for a moment. She'll blame me and quite rightly." Poor Father, he was trying so hard to comfort me, but I could see how distressed he was getting about it all. After a while he was looking at a spot on the carpet - he was still on the floor but by this time all crouched up, like he was doing a press-up - he was looking at the carpet and I could hear him muttering things to himself. "I'll be able to take it. I'll be able to take it. I've lived through worse. I'll be able to take it." He seemed to have forgotten I was there, so in the end I just left, just quietly closed the door behind me. And since then - well, Mr Ryder, I've not been thinking about much else all evening. To be frank, I'm at a bit of a loss. So little time left. And *Glass Passions* is such a difficult piece, how can I possibly have it ready? In fact, if I had to be honest, I'd say that piece is still a little beyond my ability, even if I had the whole year to prepare it.'

The young man came to a halt with a troubled sigh. When after a few moments neither he nor Miss Collins had spoken, I concluded he was waiting for my opinion. So I said:

'Of course, this is none of my business, you must decide for yourself. But my own feeling is that at this late stage you should just stick with what you've prepared ...'

'Yes, I suppose you would say that, Mr Ryder.'

It was Miss Collins who had broken in. There was an unexpected cynicism in her tone which made me stop and turn to her. The old lady was looking at me in a knowing, slightly superior manner. 'No doubt,' she went on, 'you'd call it - what? - ah yes, "artistic integrity".'

‘It’s not so much that, Miss Collins,’ I said. ‘It’s just that from a practical viewpoint, I’d think it rather too late at this stage ...’

‘But how do you know it’s too late, Mr Ryder?’ she interrupted again. ‘You know very little about Stephan’s abilities. To say nothing of the deeper implications of his current predicament. Why do you take it upon yourself to pronounce like this, as though you’re blessed with some extra sense the rest of us lack?’

I had been feeling increasingly uncomfortable since Miss Collins’s initial intervention, and while she was saying this I had found myself turning away in an effort to avoid her gaze. I could not think of any obvious retort to her questions and after a moment, deciding it best to cut short the encounter, I gave a small laugh and drifted off into the crowd.

For the next several minutes I found myself wandering aimlessly around the room. As earlier, people sometimes turned as I went by, but no one seemed to recognise me. At one point I saw Pedersen, the man I had met in the cinema, laughing with a few other guests and thought I would go over to him. But before I could do so I felt something touch my elbow and turned to find Hoffman beside me.

‘I’m sorry I had to leave you for a moment. I hope you’re being well looked after. What a situation!’

The hotel manager was breathing heavily, his face covered in perspiration.

‘Oh yes, I’ve been enjoying myself.’ ‘I’m sorry, I had to leave the room to take a phone call. But now they’re on their way, definitely, they’re on their way. Mr Brodsky will be here any minute. My goodness!’ He glanced around, then leaned closer and lowered his voice. ‘This guest list was ill-judged. I warned them. Some of these people here!’ He shook his head. ‘What a situation!’

‘But at least Mr Brodsky is on his way ...’

‘Oh yes, yes. I must say, Mr Ryder, I’m so relieved you’re with us tonight. Just when we need you. By and large, I see no reason to change your speech too much on account of the, er, the circumstances. Perhaps a mention or two of the tragedy wouldn’t go amiss, but we’ll organise someone else to say a few words about the dog, so really, there’s no need for you to deviate from what you’ve prepared. The only thing - ha ha! - your address shouldn’t be too long. But of course, you’re the last person to ...’ He trailed off with a small laugh. Then he was looking around the room again. ‘Some of these people,’ he said again. ‘Very ill-judged. I warned them.’

Hoffman went on casting his gaze around the room, and I was thus able for a moment to turn my mind to the matter of the speech the hotel manager had mentioned. After a while, I said:

‘Mr Hoffman, in view of the circumstances we now find ourselves in, I feel a little uncertain about when precisely I should get up and ...’

‘Ah, quite, quite. How sensitive of you. As you say, if you just stood up at the usual point, one never knows what might be ... yes, yes, how far-sighted of you. I shall be sitting next to Mr Brodsky, and so perhaps you might leave it to me to assess when the best moment would be. Perhaps you’d be good enough to wait for me to signal to you. My goodness, Mr Ryder, it’s so reassuring to have someone like you with us at a time like this.’

‘I’m only too pleased to be of help.’

A noise on the other side of the room caused Hoffman to turn away abruptly. He craned his neck to see across the room, though it seemed obvious nothing of significance had occurred. I gave a cough to regain his attention.

‘Mr Hoffman, there’s just one other small matter. I was just wondering’ - I indicated my dressing gown - ‘I thought I might change into something a little more formal. I wondered if it was possible to borrow some clothes. Nothing special.’

Hoffman glanced distractedly at my attire, then almost immediately looked away again, saying absent-mindedly: ‘Oh, don’t worry, Mr Ryder. We’re not at all stuffy here.’

He was craning his neck once more to see across the room. It seemed to me clear he had not taken on board at all my problem and I was about to raise the matter again when there was a flurry of activity near the entrance. Hoffman started, then turned to me with a ghastly smile. ‘He’s here!’ he whispered, touched me on the shoulder and hurried off.

A hush fell across the room, and for a few seconds everyone was looking towards the door. I too tried to see what was going on, but found my view hopelessly obstructed. Then suddenly, as though remembering their resolve, people all around me were resuming their conversations in tones of controlled gaiety.

I made my way through the crowd until eventually I managed to see Brodsky being led across the room. The Countess was supporting one arm, Hoffman the other, and four or five others were fluttering anxiously nearby. Brodsky, evidently oblivious of his attendants, was gazing darkly up at the room’s ornate ceiling. He was taller, more upright than I had expected, though at this moment he was carrying himself with such stiffness - and at an oddly sloping angle - that from a distance it seemed his entourage were rolling him along on castors. He was unshaven, but not outrageously so, and his dinner jacket was slightly askew as though it had been put on him by someone else. His features, though coarsened and aged, had a trace left about them of the debonair.

For an instant I thought they were leading him to me, but then realised they were heading for the adjoining dining room. A waiter standing at the threshold ushered through Brodsky and his attendants and as they disappeared another hush fell on the room. Before long, the guests resumed their talking again, but I could sense a new tension in the air.

I noticed at this point a solitary upright chair left against a wall and it occurred to me that a fresh vantage point might better enable me to assess the prevailing mood and decide on the most appropriate sort of talk to give at dinner. I thus walked over, seated myself and for several minutes sat watching the room.

The guests were still laughing and talking, but there was no doubt the underlying tension was increasing. In view of this, and in view of the fact that someone else would be speaking specifically about the dog, it seemed wise that I make my talk as light-hearted as was reasonable. In the end I decided the best thing might be to recount some amusing behind-the-scenes anecdotes concerning a series of mishaps that had beset my last Italian tour. I had told these stories in public often enough to be quite confident of their ability to defuse tensions and felt sure they would be much appreciated in the present circumstances.

I was testing out to myself a few possible opening lines when I noticed the crowd had thinned considerably. Only then did I realise people were steadily going through into the dining room and rose to my feet.

A few people smiled vaguely at me as I joined the procession into dinner, but no one spoke to me. I did not really mind this, since I was still trying to shape in my mind a really captivating opening statement. As I moved closer to the dining-room doors, I found myself undecided between two possibilities. The first was: 'My name over the years has tended to be associated with certain qualities. A meticulous attention to detail. Precision in performance. The

tight control of dynamics.’ This mock-pompous start could then be rapidly undercut by the hilarious revelations of what had actually occurred in Rome. The alternative was to strike a more obviously farcical note from the start: ‘Collapsing curtain rails. Poisoned rodents. Misprinted score sheets. Few of you, I trust, would readily associate my name with such phenomena.’ Both openings had their pros and cons and in the end I decided against making a final choice until I had gained a better sense of the mood over dinner.

I entered the dining room, people talking excitedly all around me. Immediately I was struck by its vastness. Even with the present company - well over a hundred - I could see why it had been necessary to illuminate only one part of the room. A generous number of round tables had been laid with white tablecloths and silver, but there seemed to be just as many others, bare and without seating, disappearing in rows into the darkness on the far side. Many guests were already seated and the overall picture - the gleam of the ladies’ jewellery, the crisp whiteness of the waiters’ jackets, the backdrop of black dinner suits and the darkness beyond - was not unimpressive. I was surveying the scene from just inside the doorway, taking the opportunity to straighten my dressing gown, when the Countess appeared at my side. She began to lead me by the arm, much as she had done earlier, saying:

‘Mr Ryder, we’ve placed you at this table over here where you won’t be quite so conspicuous. We don’t want people spotting you and spoiling the surprise! But don’t worry, once we announce your presence and you stand up, you’ll be perfectly visible and audible to everyone.’

Although the table she led me to was in a corner, I could not see why it was particularly more discreet than any of the others. She seated me, then, saying something with a laugh - I could not hear her in the hubbub - hurried away.

I found I was sitting with four others - one middle-aged couple, another slightly younger - who all smiled routinely towards me before resuming their conversation. The husband of the older couple was explaining why their son wished to continue living in the United States, and then the conversation moved on to the couple's various other children. Occasionally one or the other of them remembered to include me in a nominal sort of way - by looking in my direction or, if a joke was made, by smiling at me. But none of them addressed me directly and I soon gave up trying to follow.

But then, as the waiters began to serve the soup, I noticed that their conversation had become sparse and distracted. Finally, somewhere during the main course, my companions seemed to drop all pretences and began to discuss the real matter preoccupying them. Casting barely disguised glances towards where Brodsky was seated, they exchanged speculations in lowered tones concerning the old man's present condition. At one point the younger of the women said:

'Surely, *somebody* should go up there and tell him how sorry we feel. We should all be going up there. No one seems to have said a word to him yet. Look, the people with him, they're hardly talking to him. Perhaps *we* should go up, we should start it off. Then everyone else might follow. Perhaps everyone's waiting, just like us.'

The others hastened to reassure her that our hosts had everything under control, that in any case Brodsky looked to be very well, but then the next minute they also were looking uneasily across the room.

Naturally I too had been taking the opportunity to observe Brodsky quite carefully. He had been placed at a table a little larger than the rest. Hoffman was to one side of him, the Countess on the other. The rest of his company comprised a ring of solemn grey-haired men. The way these latter seemed continuously to be conferring under their

breaths gave the table a conspiratorial air hardly helpful to the general atmosphere. As for Brodsky himself, he was showing no obvious sign of drunkenness and was eating steadily, if without enthusiasm. He nevertheless seemed to have retreated into a world of his own. For much of the main course, Hoffman had an arm behind Brodsky's back and appeared constantly to be murmuring into his ear, but the old man went on staring gloomily into space without responding. Once when the Countess touched his arm and said something, he again failed to reply.

Then towards the end of dessert - the food, if not spectacular, had been satisfying - I saw Hoffman making his way across the floor past the hurrying waiters and realised he was coming towards me. Arriving, he bent down and said in my ear:

'Mr Brodsky seems to wish to say a few words, but quite frankly - ha ha! - we've been trying to persuade him against doing so. We believe he shouldn't be put under any extra strain tonight. So, Mr Ryder, perhaps you would be good enough to watch carefully for my signal and rise promptly as soon as I give it. Then immediately you finish speaking, the Countess will bring the formal part of the proceedings to an end. Yes, really, we think it best Mr Brodsky isn't put under any extra strain. Poor man, ha ha! This guest list, really' - he shook his head and sighed - 'thank goodness you're here, Mr Ryder.'

Before I could say anything, he was dodging through the waiters again, hurrying back to his table.

I spent the next several minutes surveying the room and weighing up the two possible openings I had prepared for my speech. I was still prevaricating when the noise in the room suddenly subsided. I then became aware that a severe-faced man who had been sitting next to the Countess had risen to his feet.

The man was quite elderly and silver-haired. He exuded authority and almost immediately there was complete silence in the room. For a few more seconds the severe-faced man simply looked at the assembled guests with an air of reprimand. Then he said in a voice at once restrained and resonant:

‘Sir. When such a fine, noble companion passes away, there is little, so little others can say that does not seem empty and shallow. Nevertheless, we could not possibly let this evening go by without a few formal words on behalf of everyone in this room, to convey to you, Mr Brodsky, the deep sympathy we feel for you.’ He paused while a murmur of assent went around the room. Then he continued: ‘Your Bruno, sir, was not only much loved by those of us who saw him going about his business around our town. He came to achieve a status rare among human beings, let alone among our quadrupeds. That is to say, he became an emblem. Yes, sir, he came to exemplify for us certain key virtues. A fierce loyalty. A fearless passion for life. A refusal to be looked down upon. An urge to do things in one’s own special way, however seemingly outlandish to the eyes of grander observers. That is to say, the very virtues that have gone to build this unique and proud community of ours over the years. Virtues, sir, which if I may venture’ - his voice slowed with significance - ‘we hope very soon to see flower here again in every walk of life.’

He paused and looked around once more. He continued to hold the audience in his frosty gaze for another moment, then said finally:

‘Let us now, together, observe a minute’s silence in memory of our departed friend.’

As he lowered his eyes, people everywhere bowed their heads and complete silence reigned once more. At one point I looked up and noticed that some of the civic leaders on Brodsky’s table - perhaps in their anxiety to set a good

example - had adopted ludicrously exaggerated postures of grief. One of them, for instance, was clutching his forehead in both hands. For his part, Brodsky - who had remained immobile throughout the speech, not looking up once either at the speaker or the room in general - continued to sit quite still, and there was again something odd-angled about his whole posture. It was even possible he had fallen asleep in his chair and that the function of Hoffman's arm behind his back was primarily physical.

At the end of the minute, the severe-faced man sat down without speaking further, creating an awkward hiatus in the proceedings. A few people began cautiously to converse again, but then there came a movement from another table and I saw that a large balding man with blotchy skin had stood up.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said in a powerful voice. Then, turning to Brodsky, he bowed slightly and muttered: 'Sir.' He looked down at his hands for a few seconds, then gazed around the room. 'As many of you will already know, it was I who found the body of our beloved friend earlier this evening. I hope then that you will indulge me for a few moments while I say a few words concerning ... concerning what took place. For you see, sir' - he looked again at Brodsky - 'the fact is, I must beg your forgiveness. Let me explain myself.' The large man paused and swallowed. 'This evening, as usual, I was making my deliveries. I had almost finished by then, I had just two or three calls left to make, and I took a short cut down the alley running between the railway line and Schildstrasse. I would not normally take such a short cut, particularly after dark, but today I was earlier than usual, and as you know, there was a pleasant sunset. So I took the short cut. And there, at just about the half-way point along the alley, I saw him. Our dear friend. He had placed himself in a discreet position, virtually hidden between the lamp-post and the wooden fence. I knelt beside him to make sure that he had indeed passed on. As I did so, many thoughts went through my mind. I thought,

naturally, of you, sir. Of what a great friend he had always been to you, and what a tragic loss this would be. I thought too of how much the city at large would miss Bruno, how it would join you in your hour of grieving. And let me say it, sir, I felt, for all the sorrow of the moment, that fate had handed me a privilege. Yes, sir, a privilege. It had fallen to me to transport the body of our friend to the veterinary clinic. Then, sir, for what happened next, I ... I have no excuse. Just now, as Mr von Winterstein was speaking, I was sitting here tormented by indecision. Should I too stand up now and speak? In the end, as you see, I decided that yes, I would. Much better that Mr Brodsky hears it from my own lips than as gossip in the morning. Sir, I am bitterly ashamed of what took place next. I can only say that I had no intention, not in a hundred years ... I can now only beg your forgiveness. I have gone over it in my head many times in the last few hours and I see now what I should have done. I should have put down my packages. You see, I was still carrying two of them, the last of my deliveries. I should have put them down. They would have been safe enough in the alley, tucked in next to the fence. And even if someone had made off with them, what of it? But for some foolish reason, some idiotic professional instinct perhaps, I did not. I did not think. That is to say, as I lifted up Bruno's body, I was still clinging to the packages. I don't know what I expected. But the fact is - you will learn of this tomorrow, so I will tell you now myself - the fact is your Bruno must have been there for some time, for his body, magnificent though it was in death, had become cold and, well, it had stiffened. Yes, sir, stiffened. Forgive me, what I have to say now may bring you distress, but ... but let me continue. In order to carry my packages - how I regret it, a thousand times I've regretted it already - in order to continue carrying my packages, I hoisted Bruno high up onto my shoulder, not taking into account his stiffened condition. Only when I had gone most of the way down the alley in this manner did I hear a child's shout from somewhere and stop. Then of course the

enormity of my error dawned on me. Ladies and gentlemen, Mr Brodsky, need I spell it out to you? I see I must. The fact was this. On account of our friend's stiffness, on account of the foolish way I had chosen to transport him up on my shoulder, that is to say, in a virtually upright position ... Well, the point is, sir, from any of the houses in Schildstrasse the whole upper part of his body would have been visible over the top of the fence. In fact, cruelty upon cruelty, it was just that time of the evening when most households were gathered in their back rooms for their evening meals. They would have been gazing at their gardens as they ate and would have seen our noble friend gliding past, his paws thrust in front of him - ah, the indignity of it! Household after household! I have become haunted by it, sir, I can see it before me, how it must have looked. Forgive me, sir, forgive me, I could not remain sitting here a moment longer without unburdening myself of this ... this testimony to my bungling nature. What a misfortune that this sorrowful privilege should have fallen to a clod such as myself! Mr Brodsky, please, I beg you to accept these hopelessly inadequate apologies for the humiliation to which I subjected your noble companion so soon after his moment of departure. And the good people of Schildstrasse, perhaps some of them are here now, they like everyone else would have been deeply fond of Bruno. To have glimpsed him for the last time in such a manner ... I beg you, sir, everyone, I beg you, I beg your forgiveness. '

The large man sat down, shaking his head mournfully. Then a woman at a table near him rose, touching her eyes with a handkerchief.

'Surely there's no doubt about it,' she said. 'He was the greatest dog of his generation. Surely there's no doubt about it.'

A murmur of agreement went around the room. The civic leaders around Brodsky were nodding earnestly, but Brodsky himself still had not looked up.

We waited for the woman to say something more, but although she remained on her feet, she said nothing, merely continuing to sob and dab at her eyes. After a while a man in a velvet dinner jacket beside her rose and gently helped her back into her chair. He himself remained on his feet, however, and glared accusingly around the room. Then he said:

‘A statue. A bronze statue. I propose we build a bronze statue to Bruno so that we can remember him for ever. Something big and dignified. Perhaps in Walserstrasse. Mr von Winterstein’ - he addressed the severe-faced man - ‘let us resolve here, this evening, to build a statue to Bruno!’

Someone called out ‘hear, hear’ and a clamour of voices rose up expressing approval. Not only the severe-faced man, but all the civic leaders at Brodsky’s table looked suddenly confused. Several panicky glances were exchanged before the severe-faced man said without rising:

‘Of course, Mr Haller, it’s something we would consider very carefully. Along of course with other ideas as to how we might best commemorate ...’

‘This is going too far,’ a man’s voice suddenly interrupted from the other end of the room. ‘What an absurd idea. A statue for that dog? If that animal deserves a bronze statue, then our tortoise, Petra, she deserves one five times as big. And she met such a cruel end. It’s absurd. And that dog attacked Mrs Rahn only earlier this year ...’

The rest of this statement was drowned out by uproar all around the room. For a moment everyone seemed to be shouting at once. The man who had spoken, still on his feet, now turned to someone at his own table and began a furious argument. In the growing chaos, I became aware that Hoffman was waving across at me. Or rather, he was describing with his hand an odd circular motion - as though he were wiping an invisible window - and I recalled vaguely that this was some form of signal favoured by him. I rose to my feet and cleared my throat emphatically.

The room almost immediately fell silent and all eyes turned to me. The man who had objected to the statue broke off his argument and hurriedly took his seat. I cleared my throat a second time and was about to embark on my talk when I suddenly became aware that my dressing gown was hanging open, displaying the entire naked front of my body. Thrown into confusion, I hesitated for a second then sat back down again. Almost immediately, a woman stood up across the room and said stridently:

‘If a statue isn’t practical, then why not name a street after him? We’ve often changed street names to commemorate the dead. Surely, Mr von Winterstein, this isn’t too much to ask. Perhaps Meinhardstrasse. Or even Jahnstrasse.’

A chorus of approval went up for this idea and soon people were calling out all at once the names of other possible streets. The civic leaders were again looking profoundly uncomfortable.

A tall bearded man at a table near mine stood up and said in a booming voice: ‘I agree with Mr Holländer. This is going too far. Of course, we all feel sorry for Mr Brodsky. But let’s be honest, that dog was a menace, to other dogs and to humans alike. And if Mr Brodsky had thought to comb the creature’s fur from time to time, and treat him for the skin infection it obviously had for years ...’

The man was engulfed by a storm of angry protests. There were shouts of ‘Disgraceful!’ and ‘Shame!’ everywhere, and several people left their tables in order to lecture the offender. Hoffman was again signalling to me, wiping the air furiously, a horrible grin on his face. I could hear the bearded man’s voice booming over the mayhem: ‘It’s true. The creature was a disgusting mess!’

I checked that my gown was fastened tightly and was about to stand up again, when I saw Brodsky suddenly stir and rise to his feet.

The table made a noise as he rose and all heads turned towards him. In an instant, those who had left their seats had returned and silence reigned in the room once more.

For a second I thought Brodsky would crash across the table. But he maintained his balance, surveying the room for a moment. When he spoke his voice had a gentle huskiness about it.

‘Look, what is this?’ he said. ‘You think that dog was so important to me? He’s dead and that’s it. I want a woman. It gets lonely sometimes. I want a woman.’ He paused and for a while seemed to become lost in his thoughts. Then he said dreamily: ‘Our sailors. Our drunken sailors. What would have become of them now? She was young then. Young and so beautiful.’ He drifted back into his thoughts, gazing up at the lights suspended from the high ceiling, and for a second time I thought he might crash forward across the table. Hoffman must have feared something similar for he stood up and, placing a gentle hand behind Brodsky’s back, whispered something in his ear. Brodsky did not immediately respond. Then he muttered: ‘She loved me once. Loved me more than anything. Our drunken sailors. Where are they now?’

Hoffman gave a hearty laugh as though Brodsky had made a witticism. He smiled broadly at the room then whispered again in Brodsky’s ear. Brodsky finally seemed to recall where he was and, turning vaguely to the hotel manager, allowed himself to be coaxed back down into his chair.

There followed a silence during which no one stirred. Then the Countess stood up with a vivacious smile.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, at this point in the evening, we have a lovely surprise! He arrived only this afternoon, he must be very tired indeed, but he has consented nevertheless to be our surprise guest. Yes, everyone! Mr Ryder is here among us!’

The Countess made a flourishing gesture in my direction as excited exclamations broke out across the room. Before I could do anything, the people at my table had quickly engulfed me and were trying to shake my hand. The next instant I was aware of people all round me, gasping with pleasure, greeting me and holding out their hands. I responded to these advances as courteously as I could, but when I glanced over my shoulder - I had not had a chance to get up off my chair - I could see a crowd gathering at my back with many people pushing and standing on tip-toes. I saw I would have to take control of the situation before it disintegrated into chaos. With so many already on their feet, I decided the best course would be to elevate myself above them on some pedestal. Quickly ensuring my dressing gown was fastened, I clambered up onto my chair.

The clamour ceased instantly, people freezing where they stood to stare up at me. From my new vantage point I saw that over half the guests had left their tables and I decided to begin without delay.

‘Collapsing curtain rails! Poisoned rodents! Misprinted score sheets!’

I became aware of a single figure walking towards me through the stationary clusters of people. On arrival, Miss Collins pulled towards her a chair from the neighbouring table, sat down and proceeded to gaze up at me. Something about the way she did so distracted me sufficiently that for a moment I could not think of my next line. Seeing me hesitate, she crossed one leg over the other and said in a concerned voice:

‘Mr Ryder, are you feeling unwell?’

‘I’m fine, thank you, Miss Collins.’

‘I do hope,’ she went on, ‘you didn’t take too much to heart what I said to you earlier. I wanted to come and find you to apologise, but I couldn’t see you anywhere. I may have

spoken much more abrasively than was called for. I do hope you'll forgive me. It's just that even now, when I come upon someone of your calling, things suddenly come back to me and I find myself adopting that sort of tone.'

'It's quite all right, Miss Collins,' I said quietly, smiling down at her. 'Please don't worry. I wasn't really upset at all. If I walked away rather abruptly, it was just that I thought you might want the opportunity to talk unhindered with Stephan.'

'It's good of you to be so understanding,' Miss Collins said. 'I *am* sorry I got a little angry. But you must believe me, Mr Ryder, it wasn't just anger on my part. I do quite honestly wish to be of some help to you. It would greatly sadden me to see you making the same mistakes over and over. I wanted to say to you, now that we've met, you'd be very welcome to visit me for tea some afternoon. I'd be more than happy to talk over whatever happens to be on your mind. You'd have a sympathetic ear, I can assure you.'

'That's good of you, Miss Collins. I'm sure it's well meant. But if I may say so, it would seem your past experiences have left you less than well-disposed towards, as you yourself put it, those of my calling. I'm not at all sure you would enjoy having me visit you.'

Miss Collins appeared to give this some thought. Then she said: 'I can appreciate your misgivings. But I feel it would be perfectly possible for us to get on in a civil way. If you like it need only be a short visit. If you found you enjoyed it then you could always come back. Perhaps we could even go for a short walk. The Sternberg Garden is very close to my apartment. Mr Ryder, I've had many years to reflect on the past and I really am ready to put it behind me. I would very much like once more to lend a hand to someone such as yourself. Of course, I can't promise I'll have answers to every question. But I'll listen to you with sympathy. And you

can be sure, I won't idealise or sentimentalise you in the way a less experienced person might.'

'I'll think carefully about your invitation, Miss Collins,' I said to her. 'But I can't help thinking you've mistaken me for someone I clearly am not. I say this because the world seems full of people claiming to be geniuses of one sort or another, who are in fact remarkable only for a colossal inability to organise their lives. But for some reason there's always a queue of people like yourself, Miss Collins - very well-meaning people - eager to rush to the rescue of these types. Perhaps I flatter myself, but I can tell you, I am not one of their number. In fact, I can say with confidence that at this point in time, I'm not in any need of rescuing.'

Miss Collins had been shaking her head for some time. Now she said: 'Mr Ryder, it really would be a great sadness to me if you were to continue making your mistakes over and over. And to think that all the time, I was here, simply watching you and doing nothing. I really do think I might be of some help to you in your present plight. Of course, when I was with Leo' - she waved a hand vaguely towards Brodsky -

'I was too young, I didn't know nearly enough, I couldn't really see it, what was going on. But now I've had many years to think about everything. And when I heard you were coming to our town, I told myself it really was time I learnt to contain the bitterness. I've grown old, but I'm far from done yet. There are certain things in life I've come to understand well, very well, and it's not too late, I should try and put it to some use. It's in this spirit I'm inviting you to visit me, Mr Ryder. I apologise again for being a little short with you earlier when we met. It won't happen again, I promise. Please, do say you'll come.'

As she was speaking, the image of her drawing room - the low cosy light, the worn velvet drapes, the crumbling furniture - had drifted before me, and for a brief moment the thought of reclining on one of her couches, far from the

pressures of life, seemed peculiarly enticing. I took a deep breath and sighed.

‘I’ll bear your kind invitation in mind, Miss Collins,’ I said. ‘But for now, I’ll have to go to bed and get some rest. You must appreciate, I’ve been travelling for months, and since arriving here I’ve hardly had a moment’s pause. I’m extremely tired.’

As I said this, all my tiredness came back to me. The skin under my eyes felt itchy and I rubbed my face with the palm of my hand. I was still rubbing at my face when I felt a touch on my elbow and a voice said gently:

‘I’ll walk back with you, Mr Ryder.’

Stephan was reaching up to help me off the chair. I leant a hand on his shoulder and climbed down.

‘I’m very tired now too,’ Stephan said. ‘I’ll walk back with you.’

‘Walk back?’

‘Yes, I’m going to sleep in one of the rooms tonight. I often do that if I’m on duty early in the morning.’

For a moment his words continued to puzzle me. Then, as I looked past the clusters of standing and seated dinner guests, past the waiters and the tables, to where the vast room disappeared into darkness, it suddenly dawned on me that we were in the atrium of the hotel. I had not recognised it because earlier in the day I had entered it - and had viewed it - from the opposite end. Somewhere in the darkness on the far side would be the bar where I had drunk my coffee and planned the day ahead.

I had no chance to dwell on this realisation, however, for Stephan was leading me away with surprising insistence.

‘Let’s be getting back, Mr Ryder. Besides, there’s something I wanted to speak to you about.’

‘Good night, Mr Ryder,’ Miss Collins called as we strode past.

I glanced back to wish her good night, and would have done so in a less cursory manner had Stephan not continued to lead me away. Indeed, as we made our way across the floor, I could hear people wishing me good night on all sides, and although I smiled and waved as best I could, I was conscious I was not making as gracious an exit as I might. But Stephan was clearly preoccupied and, even while I was still returning good nights over my shoulder, he tugged at my arm and said:

‘Mr Ryder, I’ve been thinking. Perhaps I’m just getting above myself now, but I really think I ought to try the Kazan. I’ve remembered your advice earlier, just to stick to what I’ve prepared. But really, I’ve been thinking and I feel I might be able to conquer *Glass Passions*. It’s within my capabilities now, I really believe that. The real problem is time. But if I really go at it, really work at it, at night and everything, I think I might be able to do it.’

We had entered the darkened section of the atrium. Stephan’s heels echoed in the emptiness, the flip-flopping of my slippers marking a counterpoint. I could make out in the gloom, somewhere to our right, the pale marble of the large fountain, now silent and still.

‘This is none of my business, I know,’ I said. ‘But in your position I would just carry on with what you were originally going to play. It’s what you’ve chosen and that should be good enough. Anyway, in my opinion, it’s always a mistake to change a programme at the eleventh hour ...’

‘But Mr Ryder, you don’t quite understand. It’s Mother. She ...’

‘I’m aware of everything you told me earlier. And as I say, I don’t wish to interfere. But with respect, I think there comes a point in one’s life when one must stand by one’s decisions. A time to say: “This is me, this is what I’ve chosen to do.”’

‘Mr Ryder, I appreciate what you’re saying. But I think perhaps you’re only saying it - I know you’re advising me with the best of intentions - but I think you’re only saying what you’re saying because you don’t believe an amateur like me could possibly give a decent rendering of the Kazan, particularly with the limited time I have left. But you see, I was thinking hard about it all through dinner, and I really believe ...’

‘Really, you miss my point,’ I said, feeling a touch of impatience with him. ‘You really miss my point. What I’m saying is you have to make a stand.’

But the young man seemed not to be listening. ‘Mr Ryder,’ he went on, ‘I realise it’s awfully late and you’re getting tired. But I wondered. If you could just give me a few minutes, even fifteen minutes, say. We could go now to the drawing room and I could play you a snatch of the Kazan, not all of it, just a snatch. Then you could advise me whether I have any chance at all of coming up with the goods by Thursday night. Oh, excuse me.’

We had reached the far end of the atrium and we paused in the dark while Stephan unlocked the doors leading out to the corridor. I glanced back and the area where we had been dining looked hardly more than a small illuminated pool in the darkness. The guests seemed to be seated again, and I could see the figures of the waiters milling around with their trays.

The corridor was very dimly lit. Stephan locked behind us the doors to the atrium and we made our way side by side, not talking. After a while, when the young man had glanced towards me a few times, it occurred to me he was waiting for my decision. I gave a sigh, saying:

‘I’d certainly like to help you. I have much sympathy for you in your present situation. It’s just that it’s got so late now and ...’

‘Mr Ryder, I realise you’re getting tired. May I make a suggestion? What if I were to go into the drawing room by myself and you could stand outside the door and listen. Then as soon as you’d heard enough to form your opinion, you could go quietly off to bed. Of course, I won’t know if you’re still standing out there or not, so I’ll have every incentive to perform to my utmost right to the end - which is just what I need. You could tell me in the morning whether I have any chance at all for Thursday night.’

I thought about this. ‘Very well,’ I said eventually. ‘Your proposal strikes me as very reasonable. It serves both our needs very conveniently. Very well, we’ll do as you say.’

‘Mr Ryder, that’s jolly good of you. You’ve no idea what a help this is to me. I’ve been in such a quandary.’

In his excitement, the young man increased his pace. The corridor turned the corner and became very dark, so much so that as we hurried down it I had more than once to put my hand out for fear of veering into one or the other wall. Apart from at its very end, where some light was coming in from the glazed doors leading to the hotel lobby, there appeared to be no lighting whatsoever. I was making a mental note to raise the matter with Hoffman the next time I saw him when Stephan said: ‘Ah, here we are,’ and came to a halt. I then became aware we were standing by the drawing-room doors.

Stephan jingled about with more keys, and when the doors eventually opened I could see nothing beyond them except blackness. But the young man stepped eagerly into the room, then peeked his head back out into the corridor.

‘If you could give me just a few seconds to find the score,’ he said. ‘It’s somewhere in the piano stool, but everything’s such a mess in there.’

‘Don’t worry, I won’t go until I’ve formed a clear opinion.’

‘Mr Ryder, this is so good of you. Well, I won’t be a second.’

The doors closed with a rattle and for a few minutes there was silence. I remained standing in the darkness, glancing now and then to the end of the corridor and the light from the lobby.

Then at last Stephan commenced the opening movement of *Glass Passions*. After the first few bars, I found myself listening more and more intently. It was clear at once the young man was far from familiar with the piece, and yet, beneath the uncertainty and stiffness, I could discern an imagination of an originality and emotional subtlety that quite surprised me. Even in its present rough form, the young man’s reading of Kazan seemed to present certain dimensions never glimpsed in the great majority of interpretations.

I leaned forward closer to the doors, straining to catch his every hesitant nuance. But then, towards the end of the movement, fatigue suddenly engulfed me and I remembered how late it was. It occurred to me there was no real need to hear any more - given adequate time, the Kazan was very obviously within his capabilities - and I began to walk slowly away in the direction of the lobby.

II

I was woken by the ringing of the telephone on the bedside cabinet. My first thought was that I had again been disturbed after only a few minutes, but then I saw from the light that it was now well into the morning. I picked up the receiver, seized by a sudden concern that I had overslept.

‘Ah, Mr Ryder,’ Hoffman’s voice said. ‘You slept well, I hope.’

‘Thank you, Mr Hoffman, I slept very well. But of course I was just now in the process of getting up. With such a busy day in front of me’ - I gave a laugh - ‘it’s high time I was making a start.’

‘Indeed, sir, and what a day you have before you! I can well understand your wish to conserve your energy as much as possible at this point of the morning. Very wise, if I may say so. And particularly after giving us so much of yourself last night. Ah, that was such a marvellously witty address! The whole town is talking of nothing else this morning! In any case, Mr Ryder, since I knew you would be rising about this time I thought I might call you and let you know the situation. I am happy to inform you that 343 is now fully prepared. May I suggest you commence your occupancy of it immediately? Your belongings, if you have no objection, will be transferred while you are having your breakfast. 343, I know, will be so much more satisfactory than your present room. I do apologise once again for this mistake. It grieves me that it was made. But as I think I explained last night, it can sometimes be very hard to gauge these things.’

‘Yes, yes, I quite understand.’ I looked around the room and felt a desperate sadness starting to engulf me.

‘But Mr Hoffman’ - with an effort I brought my voice under

control - 'there's a slight complication. My boy, Boris, he's now here with me at this hotel and ...'

'Ah yes, and very welcome the young man is too. I've looked into the matter and he has been transferred to 342 adjoining you. In fact, Gustav saw to the young man's move earlier this morning. So you've nothing at all to worry about. Please, then, return to 343 after breakfast. You'll find all your belongings there. It's just one floor up from where you are now, I'm confident you'll find it much more to your taste. But of course if you're unhappy with it, please let me know immediately.'

I thanked him and replaced the receiver. I then climbed out of bed, looked around me again and took a deep breath. In the morning light my room did not look anything so special - just a typical hotel room - and it occurred to me that I was indeed displaying an unseemly attachment to it. Nevertheless, as I showered and dressed, I found myself growing increasingly emotional again. Then suddenly the thought came to me that before going down to breakfast, before anything, I should go and check that all was well with Boris. For all I knew, he was at this moment sitting alone in his new room in a state of some disorientation. I quickly finished dressing and, taking one last look behind me, went out of the room.

I was going along the corridor of the third floor searching for 342 when I heard a noise and saw Boris running towards me from the far end. He was running in a curious manner and I stopped in my tracks at the sight of him. Then I saw he was making steering motions with his hands and guessed he was impersonating someone in a speeding car. He was muttering furiously under his breath to an invisible passenger on his right and showed no sign of noticing me as he went hurtling past. A door was ajar further down the corridor, and as Boris approached it he yelled: 'Look out!' and swerved sharply into the room. From within came the sound of Boris's vocal

impression of things crashing. I walked up to the door and, checking that it was indeed 342, stepped inside.

I found Boris lying on his back on the bed, both feet high in the air.

‘Boris,’ I said, ‘you shouldn’t run around shouting like that. This is a hotel. For all you know, people might be asleep.’

‘Asleep! At this time of day!’

I shut the door behind me. ‘You shouldn’t make all this noise. There’ll be complaints.’

‘Tough luck if they complain. I’ll just get Grandfather to deal with them.’

His feet were still in the air and now he began languidly clapping his shoes together. I took a chair and watched him for a moment.

‘Boris, I have to talk to you. What I mean is, *we* have to talk, both of us. It’s good for us. You must have so many questions. About all this. Why we’re here in the hotel.’

I paused to see if he would say anything. Boris went on clapping his feet together in the air.

‘Boris, you’ve been very patient until now,’ I went on.

‘But I know there’s all kinds of things you’re wanting to ask. I’m sorry if I’ve always been too busy to sit and talk to you about them properly. And I’m sorry about last night. That was disappointing, for both of us. Boris, you must have so many questions. Some of them won’t have easy answers, but I’ll try and answer them the best I can.’

For some reason as I said this - perhaps it was to do with my old room and the thought that I might now have left it behind for ever - a powerful sense of loss welled up inside me and I was obliged to pause a moment. Boris went on clapping his feet for a little longer. Then his legs appeared

to grow tired and he allowed them to flop onto the bed. I cleared my throat, then said:

‘So Boris. Where shall we begin?’

‘Solar Man!’ Boris shrieked suddenly and chanted loudly the opening bars of some theme tune. With this he crashed over, disappearing into the gap between the bed and the wall.

‘Boris, I’m being serious. For goodness sake. We’ve got to talk these things over. Boris, please, come out from there.’

There was no reply. I sighed and got to my feet.

‘Boris, I want you to know that whenever you want to ask me anything, you can just ask. I’ll stop whatever I’m doing and come to talk things over with you. Even if I’m with people who seem very important, I want you to understand, they’re not as important to me as you. Boris, can you hear me? Boris, come out from there.’

‘I can’t. I can’t move.’

‘Boris. Please.’

‘I can’t move. I’ve broken three vertebrae.’

‘Very well, Boris. Perhaps we’ll talk when you’re feeling better. I’m going downstairs now to get some breakfast. Boris, listen. If you like, after breakfast, we could go back to the old apartment. If you want, we can do that. We could go and get that box then. The one with Number Nine in it.’

There was still no response. I waited a moment longer, then said: ‘Well, think about it, Boris. I’m going down to have breakfast now.’

With that, I left the room, closing the door quietly behind me.

I was shown into a long sun-filled room adjoining the front of the lobby. The large windows appeared to face the street at pavement level, but opaque glass had been used on the lower panes to give some privacy, and the sound of the traffic passing outside could be heard only in muffled tones. Tall palms and ceiling fans gave the place a vaguely exotic air. The tables had been arranged in two long rows and, as the waiter led me down the gangway between them, I noticed most of the tables had already been cleared.

The waiter seated me near the back and poured me some coffee. As he went away, I saw the only other guests present were a couple talking in Spanish near the doorway and an old man reading a paper a few tables from me. I supposed I was perhaps the last guest down to breakfast, but then again, I had had an exceptionally demanding night and saw no reason to feel any guilt about it.

On the contrary, as I sat watching the palms waving gently under the rotating fans, a feeling of contentment began to come over me. I had, after all, reason enough to be well satisfied with what I had achieved in the short time since my arrival. Naturally there were still many aspects to this local crisis that remained unclear, even mysterious. But then, I had not yet been here twenty-four hours and answers to questions were bound to present themselves before long. Later in the day, for instance, I would be visiting the Countess, when I would have the opportunity not just to refresh my memory of Brodsky's work from his old gramophone records, but to talk over the whole crisis in detail with both the Countess and the mayor. Then there was the meeting with the citizens most directly affected by the current problems - the importance of which I had stressed to Miss Stratmann the previous day - and the encounter with Christoff himself. In other words, several of my most significant appointments still lay in front of me, and it was pointless to attempt to draw any real conclusions or even to begin thinking about finalising my speech at this stage. For

the time being, I was entitled to feel pleased with the amount of information I had already absorbed, and could certainly afford a few minutes of indulgent relaxation as I ate my breakfast.

The waiter returned bearing cold meats, cheeses and a basket of fresh rolls, and I began to eat unhurriedly, pouring the strong coffee into my cup a little at a time. When eventually Stephan Hoffman appeared in the room, I was in something approaching a tranquil mood.

‘Good morning, Mr Ryder,’ the young man said, coming towards me with a smile. ‘I heard you’d just come down. I don’t want to disturb your breakfast, so I won’t stay long.’

He remained hovering beside my table, the smile still on his face, clearly waiting for me to speak. Only then did I remember our arrangement of the previous night.

‘Ah yes,’ I said. ‘The Kazan. Ah yes.’ I put down my butter knife and looked at him. ‘It is of course one of the most difficult pieces ever composed for piano. Given that you’ve only just started to practise it, it hardly surprised me to hear certain rough edges. Nothing much more than that, simply rough edges. With that piece there’s little one can do but devote time. A *lot* of time.’

I paused again. The smile had faded from Stephan’s face.

‘But on the whole,’ I went on, ‘and I don’t say such things lightly, I thought your rendering last night showed exceptional promise. Provided you have enough time, I’m certain you’ll give a very fair account of even that difficult piece. Of course the question is ...’

But the young man was no longer listening. Coming a step closer to me, he said:

‘Mr Ryder, let me get this clear. You’re saying practice is all it will take? That it’s within my grasp?’ Suddenly Stephan’s face contorted, his body doubled over and he

hammered his fist into his raised knee. Then he straightened, took a deep breath and beamed with delight. 'Mr Ryder, you've no idea, no idea what this means to me. What marvellous encouragement, you've no idea! I know this sounds immodest, but I'll tell you, I always felt it, deep within myself, I always felt I had it. But to hear you say so, you of all people, my God, it's priceless! Last night, Mr Ryder, I played on and on. Each time I felt tiredness coming over me, whenever I was tempted to stop, a little voice inside would say: "Wait. Mr Ryder may still be outside. He may need just a little more to make his assessment." And I'd put even more into it, everything, I went on and on. When I finished, about two hours ago, I must confess I did go up to the door and peek out. And of course, I found you'd gone to bed - very sensibly. But it was so good of you to have stayed as long as you did. I just hope you didn't sacrifice too much sleep on my account.'

'Oh no, no. I stayed at the door for ... a certain period. Enough to make my assessment.'

'It was so kind of you, Mr Ryder. I feel like someone else this morning. The clouds have lifted from my life!'

'Now look, you mustn't get the wrong idea. What I'm saying is that the piece is within your capabilities. But whether you have enough time left before ...'

'I'll make sure I have enough time. I'll take every single opportunity to get to the piano and practise. I'll forget about sleep. Don't you worry, Mr Ryder. I'll do my parents proud tomorrow night.'

'Tomorrow night? Oh yes ...'

'Oh, but here I am talking on selfishly about myself, I haven't even mentioned how sensationally you went down last night. At the dinner, I mean. Everyone's been talking about it, all over the city. It really was such a charming speech.'

‘Thank you. I’m glad it was appreciated.’

‘And I’m sure it helped enormously to create the atmosphere for what came afterwards. Yes, apparently - this is the *really* good news I should have reported to you immediately - as you saw, Miss Collins turned up last night. Well, at one point, as she was leaving, she and Mr Brodsky, apparently they exchanged smiles. Yes, really! Many people witnessed it. Father saw it himself. He’d been making no effort at all to bring them into direct contact, he’d been very careful things weren’t pushed too fast, especially with Miss Collins thinking it over about the zoo and everything. But it was just as she was leaving. Apparently Mr Brodsky noticed she was leaving and stood up. He’d been sitting at his table the whole evening, even though by this time people were milling about freely in the way they always do. But now Mr Brodsky, he got to his feet and looked across the room to the doorway where Miss Collins was saying good night to a few people. One of the gentlemen, I think it was Mr Weber, was escorting her out, but some instinct must have told her. Anyway, she glanced back at the room and of course saw Mr Brodsky on his feet gazing at her. Father noticed this, and so did quite a few others and the room got quite a bit quieter, and Father says he thought for a terrible moment she was going to give him a cold bitter look, her face had shaped up as though she was going to. But then at the last moment, she smiled. Yes, she gave Mr Brodsky a smile! Then she went out. Mr Brodsky, well, you can imagine what that would have meant to him. Just imagine, after all these years! According to Father, I saw him just now, Mr Brodsky’s been working with a new energy this morning. Already he’s been at the piano for an hour! It’s just as well I vacated it when I did! Father says there’s something entirely different about him this morning, and of course no suggestion whatsoever of needing a drink. It’s all been a triumph for Father as much as anyone, but I’m sure your speech contributed enormously to everything. We’re still waiting to hear from Miss Collins, about her coming to the zoo, I mean, but after what happened

last night, we can't help but be optimistic. What a morning it's turning into! Well, Mr Ryder, I won't keep you any longer, I'm sure you're longing to finish your breakfast. I'll just say thank you again for everything. I'm sure we'll run into each other during the day and I'll report to you how things are going with the Kazan.'

I wished him luck and watched him stride purposefully out of the room.

The encounter with the young man left me feeling more contented than ever. For the next several minutes I went on with my breakfast at the same leisurely pace, enjoying in particular the fresh taste of the local butter. At one point the waiter appeared with another pot of coffee then left again. After a while, for some reason, I found myself trying to remember the answer to a question once put to me by a man sitting beside me on a plane. Three pairs of brothers had played together in World Cup finals, he had said. Could I remember them? I had made some excuse and returned to my book, not wishing to be drawn into conversation. But then ever since, on occasions such as this when I found myself with a rare few minutes to myself, I would find the man's question coming back to me. The annoying thing was that I had at times over the years managed to remember all three sets of brothers, but then at other times would discover I had forgotten one pair or another. And so it was this morning. I remembered that the Charlton brothers had played for England in the 1966 final, the van der Kerkhof brothers for Holland in 1978. But try as I might I could not remember the third pair. After a while I began to grow quite annoyed at myself, and at one stage became quite determined I would not leave the breakfast table nor embark on my day's commitments until I had succeeded in remembering the third pair of brothers.

I was brought out of my reverie by the realisation that Boris had come into the room and was making his way towards me. He was doing so gradually, drifting nonchalantly from table to empty table, as though it were merely by chance he

was getting closer to me. He avoided looking at me and even when he had arrived at the next table he loitered there fingering the tablecloth, his back turned to me.

‘Boris, have you had breakfast?’ I asked.

He continued fiddling with the tablecloth. Then he asked in a tone that suggested he did not care much one way or the other: ‘Are we going to the old apartment?’

‘If you want to. I promised we’d go if you wanted to. Do you want to go, Boris?’

‘Haven’t you got work to do?’

‘Yes, but I can manage to do that later. We could go to the old apartment if you want. But if we’re going, we’ll have to set off straight away. As you say, I have quite a busy day in front of me.’

Boris seemed to be thinking things over. He kept his back to me and went on fiddling with the tablecloth.

‘Well, Boris? Shall we go?’

‘Will Number Nine be there?’

‘I should think so.’ Deciding I should take the initiative, I stood up and tossed my napkin next to my plate.

‘Boris, let’s set off straight away. It looks like a sunny day outside. We don’t even need to go up for jackets. Let’s just go straight away.’

Boris continued to look hesitant, but I put my arm around his shoulders and led him out of the breakfast room.

As Boris and I were crossing the lobby, I noticed the desk clerk waving to me.

‘Oh Mr Ryder,’ he said. ‘Those journalists came back earlier. I thought it best to send them away for now and suggested they try again in an hour’s time. Don’t worry, they were perfectly agreeable.’

I thought for a moment, then said: 'Unfortunately, I'm in the middle of something important just now. Perhaps you might ask these gentlemen to arrange a time properly through Miss Stratmann. Now if you'll excuse us, we have to be getting along.'

It was only when we had made our way out of the hotel and were standing on the sunny pavement that it occurred to me I could not remember how to get to the old apartment. For a few seconds I looked at the traffic moving slowly in front of us. Then Boris, perhaps sensing my difficulty, said: 'We can get a tram. From outside the fire station.'

'That's good. Okay then, Boris, you lead the way.'

The noise of the traffic was such that for the next few minutes we hardly talked. We dodged along narrow crowded pavements, crossed two busy little streets, then came out onto a broad avenue with tram lines and several lanes of slow traffic. The pavement was much wider here and we walked more freely through the pedestrians, past banks, offices and restaurants. Then I heard footsteps running up behind me and felt a hand touch my shoulder.

'Mr Ryder! Ah, here you are at last!'

The man I turned to find resembled an ageing rock singer. He had a weather-beaten face and long messy hair parted down the middle. His shirt and trousers were loose and cream-coloured.

'How do you do,' I said cautiously, aware that Boris was eyeing the man with suspicion.

'What a most unfortunate series of misunderstandings!' the man said laughing. 'We've been given so many different appointments. And last night we waited a long time, over two hours, but never mind! These things happen. I dare say none of it is your fault, sir. In fact, I'm sure it isn't.'

‘Ah yes. And you were waiting again this morning. Yes, yes, the desk clerk mentioned it.’

‘This morning, again, there was some misunderstanding.’ The long-haired man shrugged. ‘They said to come back in another hour. So we were just killing time over there, in that café, the photographer and I. But now that you’re passing, I wonder if we shouldn’t just do the interview and the photographs right now. Then we won’t need to bother you ever again. Of course, we realise that for someone such as yourself, talking to a small local paper like ours won’t be high among your priorities ...’

‘On the contrary,’ I said quickly, ‘I always place the highest importance on periodicals such as yours. You hold the key to the local feelings. People like yourself I regard as being among my most valued contacts in a town.’

‘How very kind of you to say so, Mr Ryder. And if I may say so, rather insightful.’

‘But I was going on to say that, unfortunately, just at this moment, I’m in the middle of something.’

‘Of course, of course. For that very reason, I was suggesting we just get the whole thing over and done with now, rather than that we continue to bother you throughout the day. Our photographer, Pedro, he’s over there now in that café. He can take a few quick pictures while I ask you two or three questions. Then you and this young gentleman, you can hurry along to wherever it is you’re going. The whole thing would take only about four or five minutes. It seems by far the simplest solution.’

‘Hmm. Just a few minutes, you say.’

‘Oh, we’d be more than delighted with a few minutes. We fully appreciate how many other important demands there must be on your time. As I say, we’re just over there. That café there.’

He was pointing to a spot a little distance away where some tables and chairs were spilling onto the pavement. It did not look the sort of place I would ideally conduct an interview, but it occurred to me this might be the simplest way to bring the matter of the journalists to an end.

‘Very well,’ I said. ‘But I have to emphasise, I have a particularly tight schedule this morning.’

‘Mr Ryder, it’s so gracious of you. And for a humble little paper like ours! Well, let’s get it done as quickly as possible. Please, this way.’

The long-haired journalist began to lead us back along the pavement, almost colliding with another pedestrian in his eagerness to return to his café. He was soon a few paces ahead and I took the opportunity to say to Boris:

‘Don’t worry, this won’t take any time at all. I’ll make sure of that.’

Boris continued to wear a disgruntled expression and so I added:

‘Look, you can sit and have something nice while you’re waiting. Some ice cream or cheesecake. Then we’ll set off immediately.’

We came to a halt by a narrow courtyard busy with parasols.

‘Here we are,’ the journalist said, gesturing towards one of the tables. ‘We’re just over here.’

‘If you don’t mind,’ I said to him, ‘I’ll first of all install Boris inside. I’ll come back out and join you in just one minute.’

‘An excellent idea.’

Although many of the tables out in the courtyard were occupied, there were no customers at all inside. The décor was light and modern, and the room was full of sunshine. A

plump young waitress of Nordic appearance was standing behind a glass counter inside which was displayed a range of cakes and pastries. As Boris seated himself at a table in the corner, the young woman came towards us with a smile.

‘So what would you like?’ she asked Boris. ‘We have this morning the freshest cakes in the whole town. They just arrived ten minutes ago. Everything’s very fresh.’

Boris proceeded to quiz the waitress very thoroughly about her cakes before settling on the almond and chocolate cheesecake.

‘Okay, I won’t be long,’ I said to him. ‘I’ll just go and see these people, then come right back. If you want anything, I’ll be just outside.’

Boris shrugged, his attention fixed on the waitress, now in the process of extricating an elaborate confection from out of the display cabinet.

When I came back out into the courtyard, I could not see the long-haired journalist anywhere. I strolled among the parasols for a while, peering at the faces of the people sitting at the tables. When I had gone once round the courtyard, I stopped to consider the possibility that the journalist had changed his mind and gone away. But this seemed extraordinary, and I looked around me once more. There were various people reading newspapers over their coffees. An old man was talking to the pigeons around his feet. Then I heard someone mention my name and, turning, saw the journalist sitting at a table directly behind me. He was in deep conversation with a squat, swarthy man whom I took to be the photographer. Letting out an exclamation I went up to them, but curiously the two men continued their discussion without looking up at me. Even when I drew up the remaining chair and sat down, the journalist - who was in mid-sentence - gave me no more than a cursory glance. Then, turning back to the swarthy photographer, he continued:

‘So don’t give him any hints about the significance of the building. You’ll just have to make up some arty justification, some reason why he has to be constantly in front of it.’

‘No problem,’ the photographer said nodding. ‘No problem.’

‘But don’t push him too much. That seems to be where Schulz went wrong in Vienna last month. And remember, like all these types, he’s very vain. So pretend to be a big fan of his. Tell him the paper had no idea when they sent you, but you happen to be a really huge fan. That’ll get him. But don’t mention the Sattler building until we’ve developed a rapport.’

‘Okay, okay.’ The photographer was still nodding. ‘But I kind of thought this would have been fixed up by now. I thought you’d have got him to agree already.’

‘I was going to try and fix it on the phone, but then Schulz warned me what a difficult shit the guy is.’ As he said this, the journalist turned to me and gave me a polite smile. The photographer, following his companion’s gaze, gave me a distracted nod, then the two of them returned to their discussion.

‘The trouble with Schulz,’ the journalist said, ‘is he never flatters them enough. And he’s got that manner, like he’s really impatient, even when he’s not. With these types, you just have to keep up the flattery. So all the time you snap, keep shouting “great”. Keep exclaiming. Don’t stop feeding his ego.’

‘Okay, okay. No problem.’

‘So I’ll start in with ...’ The journalist gave a weary sigh. ‘I’ll start talking about his performance in Vienna or something like that. I’ve got some notes on it here, I’ll bluff my way. But let’s not waste too much time. After a few minutes, you make out you’ve had this inspiration about going out to the Sattler building. I’ll make out I’m a bit annoyed at first, but then end up admitting it’s a brilliant idea.’

‘Okay, okay.’

‘You’re sure now. Let’s have no mistakes. Remember he’s a touchy bastard.’

‘I understand.’

‘Anything starts to go wrong, just say something flattering.’

‘Fine, fine.’

The two men nodded to each other. Then the journalist took a deep breath, clapped his hands together and turned to

face me, brightening suddenly as he did so.

‘Ah, Mr Ryder, here you are! It’s so good of you to give us some of your precious time. And the young man, he’s enjoying himself in there, I trust?’

‘Yes, yes. He’s ordered a very large piece of cheesecake.’

Both men laughed pleasantly. The swarthy photographer grinned and said:

‘Cheesecake. Yeah, that’s my favourite. From when I was a little kid.’

‘Oh, Mr Ryder, this is Pedro.’

The photographer smiled and held out his hand eagerly.

‘Very pleased to meet you, sir. This is a real break for me, I tell you. I was put on this assignment only this morning. When I got up, all I had to look forward to was another shoot in the council chambers. Then I get this call while I’m having my shower. Do you want to do it? they ask. Do I want to do it? The man’s been my hero since I was a kid, I tell them. Do I want to do it? Jesus, I’ll do it for nothing. I’ll pay *you* to do it, I tell them. Just tell me where to go. I swear I’ve never been this excited over an assignment.’

‘To be frank, Mr Ryder,’ the journalist said, ‘the photographer who was with me last night at the hotel, well, after we’d been waiting a few hours he started to get a little impatient. Naturally I was quite angry with him. “You don’t seem to realise,” I said to him. “If Mr Ryder has been delayed, it’s bound to be by the most important sorts of engagements. If he’s good enough to consent to give us some of his time and we need to wait a little, then wait we shall.” I tell you, sir, I got quite angry with him. And when I got back I told the editor it just wasn’t good enough.’

‘Find me another photographer for the morning,’ I demanded.

‘I want someone who fully appreciates Mr Ryder’s position and shows him the appropriate gratitude.’ Yes, I suppose I

got quite worked up about it. Anyway, we've got Pedro now, who turns out to be almost as big a fan of yours as I am.'

'Bigger, bigger,' Pedro protested. 'When I got the call this morning, I just couldn't believe it. My hero's in town and I'm going to get to shoot him. Jesus, I'm going to do the best job I've ever done, that's what I said to myself while I was taking my shower. A guy like that, you have to do the best job ever. I'll take him up against the Sattler building. That's how I saw it. I could see the whole composition in my head while I was taking my shower.'

'Now, Pedro,' the journalist said, looking at him sternly, 'I doubt very much if Mr Ryder cares to go over to the Sattler building just for the sake of our photographs. All right, it's only a few minutes drive at the most, but a few minutes is still no inconsiderable thing to a man on a tight schedule. No, Pedro, you'll just have to do the best you can here, take a few shots of Mr Ryder as we talk at this table. Okay, a pavement café, it's very clichéd, it will hardly show to good effect the unique charisma Mr Ryder carries around him. But it will just have to do. I admit, your idea of Mr Ryder against the Sattler building, it's inspired. But he simply doesn't have the time. We'll have to be satisfied with a much more ordinary picture of him.'

Pedro punched his fist into his palm and shook his head.

'I guess that's right. But Jesus, it's tough. A chance to take the great Mr Ryder, a once-in-a-lifetime chance, and I have to make do with another café scene. That's the way life deals you a hand.' He shook his head again sadly. Then for a moment the two of them sat there looking at me.

'Well,' I said eventually, 'this building of yours. Is it literally a few minutes drive away?'

Pedro sat up abruptly, his face lit with enthusiasm.

'You mean it? You'll pose in front of the Sattler building? Jesus, what a break! I just knew you'd be a great

guy! ’

‘Now wait ... ’

‘Are you sure, Mr Ryder?’ the journalist said grasping my arm. ‘Are you really sure? I know you’ve got a heavy schedule. Why, that’s really magnificent of you! And truly, it will take no more than three minutes by taxi. In fact, if you’ll just wait here, sir, I’ll go and hail one now. Pedro, why don’t you get a few shots of Mr Ryder here anyhow while he’s waiting.’

The journalist hurried off. The next moment I saw him at the edge of the pavement, leaning towards the oncoming traffic, an arm held poised in the air.

‘Mr Ryder, sir. Please.’

Pedro was crouched down on one knee, squinting up at me through a camera. I arranged myself in my chair - adopting a relaxed but not overly languid posture - and put on a genial smile.

Pedro snapped the shutter a few times. Then he retreated some distance and crouched down again, this time beside an empty table, disturbing as he did so a flock of pigeons pecking away at some crumbs. I was about to re-adjust my posture, when the journalist came rushing back.

‘Mr Ryder, I can’t find a taxi just now, but here’s a tram just arrived. Please hurry, we can jump on. Pedro, quickly, the tram.’

‘But will it be as quick as a taxi?’ I asked.

‘Yes, yes. In fact with the traffic like this the tram will be quicker. Really, Mr Ryder, you’ve no need to worry. The Sattler building is very near. In fact’ - he raised his hand to shade his eyes and looked into the far distance - ‘in fact, you can almost see it from here. If it weren’t for that grey tower over there, we’d be able to see the Sattler building right at this moment. That’s how close we are,

really. In fact, if someone of normal height - no taller than you or me - if such a person were to climb onto the roof of the Sattler building, stand up straight and hold up some pole-like object - a household mop, say - on a morning like this, we'd be able to see it quite easily above that grey tower. So you see, we'll be there in no time at all. But please, the tram, we must hurry.'

Pedro was already down at the kerb. I could see him, his heavy bag of equipment on his shoulder, trying to persuade the tram driver to wait for us. I followed the journalist out of the courtyard and clambered aboard.

The tram started up again as the three of us made our way down the central aisle. The carriage was crowded, making it impossible for us to sit near one another. I squeezed myself into a seat towards the back of the carriage, between a small elderly man and a matronly mother with a toddler on her lap. The seat was surprisingly comfortable and after a few moments I began rather to enjoy the journey. Opposite me were three old men reading one newspaper, held open by the man in the middle. The jogging of the tram seemed to give them difficulties and at times they tussled for command of a particular page.

We had been travelling for a while when I became aware of activity around me and saw that a ticket inspector was making her way down the aisle. It occurred to me then that my companions must have purchased my ticket for me - I certainly had not acquired one on boarding. When I next glanced over my shoulder I saw that the ticket inspector, a petite woman whose ugly black uniform could not entirely disguise her attractive figure, had all but reached our part of the carriage. All around me, people were producing their tickets and passes. Suppressing a sense of panic, I set about formulating something to say that would sound at once dignified and convincing.

Then the ticket inspector was looming above us and my neighbours all proffered their tickets. While she was still in the process of clipping them, I announced firmly:

‘I’m without a ticket, but in my case there are special circumstances which, if you’ll allow me, I’ll explain to you.’

The ticket inspector looked at me. Then she said: ‘Not having a ticket is one thing. But you know, you really let me down last night.’

As soon as she said this, I recognised Fiona Roberts, a girl from my village primary school in Worcestershire with whom I had developed a special friendship around the time I was nine years old. She had lived near us, a short way along the lane in a cottage not unlike ours, and I had often wandered down to spend an afternoon playing with her, particularly during the difficult period before our departure to Manchester. I had not seen her at all since those days, and so was quite taken aback by her accusing manner.

‘Ah yes,’ I said. ‘Last night. Yes.’

Fiona Roberts went on looking at me. Perhaps it was to do with the reproachful expression she was now wearing, but I suddenly found myself recalling an afternoon from our childhood, when the two of us had been sitting together under her parents’ dining table. We had, as usual, created our ‘hide-out’ by hanging an assortment of blankets and curtains down over the sides of the table. That particular afternoon had been warm and sunny, but we had persisted in sitting inside our hide-out, in the stuffy heat and near-darkness. I had been saying something to Fiona, no doubt at some length and in an upset manner. More than once she had tried to interrupt, but I had continued. Then finally, when I had finished, she had said:

‘That’s silly. That means you’ll be all on your own. You’ll get lonely.’

'I don't mind that,' I had said. 'I like being lonely.'

'You're just being silly again. No one likes being lonely. I'm going to have a big family. Five children at least. And I'm going to cook them a lovely supper every evening.' Then, when I did not respond, she had said again: 'You're just being silly. No one likes being on their own.'

'I do. I like it.'

'How can you *like* being lonely?'

'I do. I just do.'

In fact, I had felt some conviction in making this assertion. For by that afternoon it had already been several months since I had commenced my 'training sessions'; indeed, that particular obsession had probably reached its peak just around that time.

My 'training sessions' had come about quite unplanned. I had been playing by myself out in the lane one grey afternoon - absorbed in some fantasy, climbing in and out of a dried-out ditch running between a row of poplars and a field - when I had suddenly felt a sense of panic and a need for the company of my parents. Our cottage had not been far away - I had been able to see the back of it across the field - and yet the feeling of panic had grown rapidly until I had been all but overcome by the urge to run home at full speed across the rough grass. But for some reason - perhaps I had quickly associated the sensation with immaturity - I had forced myself to delay my departure. There had not been any question in my mind that I would, very soon, start to run across the field. It was simply a matter of holding back that moment with an effort of will for several more seconds. The strange mixture of fear and exhilaration I had experienced as I had stood there transfixed in the dried-out ditch was one that I was to come to know well in the weeks that followed. For within days, my 'training sessions' had become a

regular and important feature of my life. In time, they had acquired a certain ritual, so that as soon as I felt the earliest signs of my need to return home I would make myself go to a special spot along the lane, under a large oak tree, where I would remain standing for several minutes, fighting off my emotions. Often I would decide I had done enough, that I could now set off, only to pull myself back again, forcing myself to remain under the tree for just a few seconds more. There was no doubting the strange thrill that had accompanied the growing fear and panic of these occasions, a sensation which perhaps accounted for the somewhat compulsive hold my 'training sessions' came to have over me.

'But you know, don't you,' Fiona had said to me that afternoon, her face close to mine in the darkness, 'when *you* get married, it needn't be like it is with your mum and dad. It won't be like that at all. Husbands and wives don't always argue all the time. They only argue like that when ... when special things happen.'

'What special things?'

Fiona had remained silent for a moment. I had been about to repeat my question, this time more aggressively, when she had said with some deliberation:

'Your parents. They don't argue like that just because they don't get on. Don't you know? Don't you know why they argue all the time?'

Then suddenly an angry voice had called from outside our hide-out and Fiona had vanished. And as I had continued sitting alone in the darkness under the table, I had caught the sounds from the kitchen of Fiona and her mother arguing in lowered voices. At one point I had heard Fiona repeating in an injured tone: 'But why not? Why can't I tell him? Everybody else knows.' And her mother saying, her voice still lowered: 'He's younger than you. He's too young. You're not to tell him.'

These memories were brought to a halt as Fiona Roberts came a few steps closer, saying to me:

‘I waited till ten-thirty. Then I told everyone to eat. People were starving by then.’

‘Of course. Naturally.’ I laughed weakly and looked around the carriage. ‘Ten-thirty. By that time, yes, people are bound to get hungry ...’

‘And by that time, it was obvious you weren’t coming. No one believed any of it any more.’

‘No. I suppose by that time, inevitably ...’

‘At first it was going fine,’ Fiona Roberts said. ‘I’d never held anything like that before, but it was going fine. They were all there, Inge, Trude, all of them in my apartment. I was a little nervous, but it was going fine and I was really excited too. Some of the women, they’d prepared so much for the evening, they’d come with folders full of information and photos. It wasn’t until around nine o’clock the restlessness started up, and that’s when it first occurred to me you might not come. I kept going in and out of the room bringing in more coffee, refilling the bowls of snacks, trying to keep things going. I could see they were all starting to whisper, but I still thought, well, you might come along yet, you were probably just caught up in the traffic somewhere. Then it got later and later, and in the end they were talking and whispering quite openly. You know, even when I was still in the room. In my own apartment! That’s when I told them just to eat. I just wanted the whole thing over with then. So they all sat around eating, I’d prepared all these little omelettes, and even as they were eating, some of them like that Ulrike, they kept whispering and sniggering. But you know, in some ways I actually preferred the ones who sniggered. I preferred them to the likes of Trude, pretending to feel so sorry for me, taking care to be nice right to the end, oh, how I loathe that woman! I could see her as she was leaving, thinking to

herself: "Poor thing. She lives in a fantasy world. We really should have guessed." Oh, I hate the lot of them, I really despise myself for having got involved with them at all. But, you see, I was living on the estate for four years, I hadn't made a single proper friend, I was very isolated. For ages, those women, the people who were in my apartment last night, they wouldn't have anything to do with me. They consider themselves the elite on the estate, you see. They call themselves the Women's Arts and Cultural Foundation. It's silly, it's not a foundation in any real sense, but they think it sounds grand. They like to busy themselves whenever something's being organised in the city. When the Peking Ballet came, for instance, they made all the bunting for the welcoming reception. Anyway, they consider themselves very exclusive and until recently they wouldn't consider having anything to do with someone like me. That Inge, she wouldn't even say hello if I saw her around the estate. But that all changed, of course, once it got around. That I knew you, I mean. I'm not sure how it got out, I wasn't going around boasting about it. I suppose I must have just mentioned it to someone. Well anyway, as you can imagine, that changed everything. Inge herself stopped me one day earlier this year, when we were passing on the stairs, and invited me to one of their meetings. I didn't really want to get involved with them, but I went along, I suppose I thought I might make some friends at last, I don't know. Well right from the start, some of them, Inge and Trude too, they weren't at all sure whether to believe it or not, you know, about my being an old friend of yours. But they went along with it in the end, it made them feel pretty good, I suppose. This whole idea about looking after your parents, it wasn't mine, but obviously the fact that I knew you had a lot to do with it. When the news first came about your visit, Inge went along and put it to Mr von Braun, saying the Foundation was ready now, after the Peking Ballet, ready to take on something really important, and anyway, one of the group was an old friend of yours. That sort of thing. And so the Foundation

got the job, of looking after your parents during their stay here, and everybody was thrilled of course, though some of those women, they got pretty nervous about such a responsibility. But Inge kept them all confident, saying it was no more than we deserved now. We kept having these meetings when we'd come up with ideas about how to entertain your parents. Inge told us - I was sorry to hear this - neither of your parents is very well now, and so quite a lot of the obvious things, tours around the city, that sort of thing, weren't very suitable. But there were a lot of ideas, and everyone was beginning to get pretty excited. Then at the last meeting someone said, well, why shouldn't we ask *you* to come and personally meet us all? Talk over what your parents might like. There was dead silence for a moment. Then Inge said: "Why shouldn't we? After all, we're uniquely qualified to invite him." Then they were all staring at me. So in the end I said: "Well, I expect he's going to be busy, but if you like I could ask him." And I could see how thrilled they all were when I said that. Then once your reply came in, well, I became a princess, they treated me with such appreciation, smiling and caressing me whenever they ran into me, bringing presents for the children, offering to do this or that for me. So you can just imagine the effect it had last night when you didn't turn up.'

She gave a deep sigh and was silent for a moment, staring blankly through the window at the buildings going by outside. Eventually, she went on:

'I suppose I shouldn't blame you really. After all, we haven't seen each other for so long now. But I thought you'd want to come for your parents' sake. Everyone had so many ideas about what we could do for them here. This morning, they'll all be talking about me. Hardly any of them go out to work, they have husbands who bring in good money, they'll all be phoning each other or paying each other visits, they'll all be saying: "Poor woman, she lives in a world of her own. We should have seen it earlier. I'd like to do something to

help her, except that, well, she's so *wearying*." I can just hear them now, they'll be really enjoying themselves. And Inge, a part of her will be very angry. "The little bitch tricked us," she'll be thinking. But she'll be pleased, she'll be relieved. Inge, you see, as much as she liked the idea of my knowing you, she always found it threatening. I could tell that. And the way the others were all treating me these last few weeks, ever since your reply, that might have given her something to think about. She's been really torn, they all have. Anyway, they'll be enjoying themselves this morning, I know they will be.'

Naturally, as I listened to Fiona, I sensed I should be feeling considerable remorse over what had happened the previous night. However, despite her vivid account of the scenes at her apartment, as much as I felt deeply sorry for her, I found I had only the vaguest recollection of such an event having been on my schedule. Besides, her words had made me realise with something of a shock how little consideration I had so far given to the whole question of my parents' imminent arrival in the city. As Fiona had mentioned, they were neither of them in good health and could hardly be left to fend for themselves. Indeed, as I looked at the harsh traffic and the glassy buildings going by outside, I felt a strong sense of protectiveness towards my elderly parents. It was in fact the ideal solution that a group of local women be entrusted with their welfare, and it had been immensely foolish of me not to have taken the opportunity to meet and talk to them. I felt a panic beginning to seize me about what to do with my parents - I could not imagine how I could have given so little thought to this whole dimension to my visit - and for a moment my mind was racing. I suddenly saw my mother and my father, both small, white-haired and bowed with age, standing outside the railway station, surrounded by luggage they could not hope to transport by themselves. I could see them looking at the strange city around them, and then eventually my father, his pride getting the better of his good sense, picking up two, then three cases, while my

mother tried in vain to restrain him, holding his arm with her thin hand, saying: 'No, no, you can't carry that. It's much too much.' And my father, his face hard with determination, shaking off my mother saying: 'But who else is going to carry them? How else will we ever reach our hotel? Who else is going to help us in this place if we don't help ourselves?' All this while cars and lorries roared past them and commuters rushed by. My mother, sadly resigning herself, watching my father as he tottered with his heavy burden, four paces, five, then finally overcome, lowering the suitcases, shoulders stooped, his breath coming heavily. Then my mother, after a while, going to him, placing a gentle hand on his arm. 'Never mind. We'll find someone to help us.' And my father, now resigned, perhaps satisfied because he had demonstrated at least his spirit, looking quietly into the rush before him, searching for someone who might have come to meet them, who would see to their luggage, make welcoming conversation and take them off to a hotel in a comfortable car.

All these images filled my head as Fiona was speaking so that I was for some moments hardly able to consider her own unfortunate situation. But then I became aware of her saying:

'They'll be talking about how they'll have to be more careful from now on. I can just hear them. "We've become so much more prestigious now, we're bound to get all sorts trying to trick their way in. We have to be careful, especially now we've got so much responsibility. That little bitch should be a lesson to us." That sort of thing. God knows what kind of life I'm going to lead now on that estate. And my children, they've got to grow up there ...'

'Look,' I said interrupting, 'I can't tell you how badly I feel about this. But the fact is, something quite unforeseeable happened last night, I won't bore you with it here. I was of course extremely annoyed at having to let you down, but it was quite impossible even to get to a phone. I hope you hadn't gone to too much trouble.'

'I'd gone to a *lot* of trouble. It's not easy for me, you know, a single mother with two growing children ...'

'Listen, I really feel very badly about this. Let me make a suggestion. Just now I've got something I have to do with these journalists over there, but that won't take long. I'll get away from them as quickly as possible, I'll jump into a taxi and come to your apartment. I'll be there in, say, half an hour - forty-five minutes at the most. Then what we can do is this. We'll walk together all around your estate, so all these people, your neighbours, this Inge, this Trude, they can all see with their own eyes that we really are old friends. Then we'll call in on the more influential ones, like this Inge person. You could introduce me, I'll apologise about last night, explain how at the last moment I'd been unavoidably delayed. One by one, we'll win them over and repair the harm I did you last night. In fact, if we do this well, you might be even better established with your friends than you ever would have been. What do you say to that?'

For a few moments Fiona went on staring at the passing view. Then finally she said: 'My first instinct would be to say: "Forget the whole thing." It's got me nowhere, my claiming to be an old friend of yours. And anyway, maybe I don't need to be part of Inge's circle. It's just that I was so lonely before on the estate, but having had a taste of how they behave, I'm not sure I won't be happier just having my children for company. I could read a good book or watch the television in the evenings. But then I have to think not just about myself, but about my children. They have to grow up on the estate, they have to be accepted. For their sake, I ought to take up this suggestion of yours. As you say, if we do what you suggest, I might be better off than I would have been even if the party had been a roaring success. But you have to promise, swear on everything you hold dear, you won't let me down a second time. Because, you see, if we're to carry out your plan, it means as soon as I get in from this

shift, I'll have to start phoning round to fix up our visits. There's no way we can just go knocking on doors unexpectedly, it's just not that sort of neighbourhood. So you see how it would be if I made all these appointments and you didn't show up. There'd be nothing for it but for me to go the rounds on my own, explaining your absence all over again. So you must promise me you won't let me down once more.'

'You have my promise,' I said. 'As I say, I'll just finish off this small chore here then I'll jump into a taxi and be with you. Don't worry, Fiona, everything will sort itself out.'

Just as I said this I felt someone touch my arm. Turning, I saw Pedro on his feet, his large bag once more hoisted on his shoulder.

'Mr Ryder, please,' he said and pointed down the aisle to the exit.

The journalist was standing near the front ready to disembark.

'This is our stop here, Mr Ryder,' he called down, waving to me. 'If you don't mind, sir.'

I could feel the tram slowing to a halt. Rising to my feet, I squeezed out and made my way down the carriage.

The tram rattled away leaving the three of us standing in open countryside surrounded by windswept fields. I found the breeze refreshing and for a few moments stood watching the tram disappear across the fields into the horizon.

‘Mr Ryder, this way if you please.’

The journalist and Pedro were waiting a few paces away. I went up to them and we began to make our way across the grassy field. Now and then powerful gusts of wind tugged at our clothes and sent ripples across the grass. Eventually we reached the foot of a hill where we paused to recover our breath.

‘It’s just a short way up here,’ the journalist said, pointing up the hill.

After the struggle we had had walking through the long grass I was glad to see there was a dirt path leading us up the hill.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I don’t have much time, so perhaps we’d better be on our way.’

‘Of course, Mr Ryder.’

The journalist led the way up the path which climbed steeply in zig-zags. I managed to keep up with him, following just a step or two behind. Pedro, perhaps slowed down by his bags, quickly fell behind altogether. As we climbed, I found myself thinking about Fiona, about how I had let her down the previous night, and it struck me that for all the assurance with which I had so far conducted myself on this present visit, for all I had so far achieved, my handling of certain matters - at least by my own standards - left something to be desired. Quite aside from the embarrassment I had caused

Fiona, with my parents' arrival in the town now so imminent, it was vexing in the extreme that I had let slip such an opportunity to discuss their many complicated needs with the people in whose care they were to be entrusted. As my breath came harder, I could feel returning to me an intense sense of irritation with Sophie for the confusion she had brought into my affairs. Surely it was not too much to ask that, at such crucially important points in my life as this, she somehow contained her chaos to herself. All sorts of words I suddenly wished to say to her began filling my head and, had I not been short of breath, I might well have started to mutter them out loud.

After the path had turned three or four corners, we stopped to rest. Raising my gaze, I saw we now commanded a sweeping view over the surrounding countryside. There was field after field stretching into the distance. Only far on the horizon was there something that looked like a huddle of farm buildings.

'A splendid view,' the journalist said, panting and clawing his hair back off his face. 'It's so exhilarating to come up here. The fresh air will set us up well for the rest of the day. Well, better not waste time, pleasant as this all is.' He laughed cheerfully, then began to walk again.

As before I kept up closely with him, while Pedro lagged behind. Then at one point, as we were struggling up a particularly steep section, Pedro called out something from below. I thought he was appealing to us to slow down, but the journalist did not break his step, simply shouting over his shoulder against a blast of wind: 'What did you say?'

I could hear Pedro struggling to gain a few paces. Then I heard him shout:

'I said, we seem to have got the shit convinced. I think he's going to go along with it.'

‘Well,’ the journalist shouted back, ‘he’s co-operated so far, but you can never take these types for granted. So keep up the flattery. He’s come this far up and he seems quite happy about it. But then I don’t think the fool even knows the significance of the building.’

‘What do we tell him if he asks?’ Pedro shouted. ‘He’s bound to ask.’

‘Just change the subject. Ask him to alter his pose. Any talk about his appearance is bound to deflect him. If he keeps asking, well, we’ll have to tell him in the end, but by then we’ll have a whole lot of pictures and there’ll be nothing the shit can do.’

‘I’ll be glad when this is all over,’ Pedro said, his breath coming even harder now. ‘God, the way he keeps stroking his hands together makes my flesh creep.’ ‘We’re almost there now. We’ve been doing fine, now let’s not blow it at the last moment.’

‘Excuse me,’ I said interrupting, ‘but I need to stop for a second.’

‘Of course, Mr Ryder, how inconsiderate of me,’ the journalist said and we came to a halt. ‘I myself am a marathon runner,’ he went on, ‘and so have an unnatural advantage. But I must say, sir, you seem extremely fit indeed. And for a man of your age - I only know your age from my notes here, I’d never have guessed it otherwise - really, you’ve completely outpaced poor Pedro.’ Then he shouted to Pedro as the latter caught up with us: ‘Come on, slowcoach. Mr Ryder’s laughing at you.’

‘It’s not fair,’ Pedro said smiling. ‘Mr Ryder’s so gifted, and then on top of it all, to be blessed with such athleticism. Some of us aren’t so lucky.’

We stood looking out over the view, recovering our breath. Then the journalist said:

‘We’re very nearly there now. Let’s keep going. After all, Mr Ryder has a busy day ahead.’

The last part of the journey was the most arduous. The path grew ever steeper and frequently disintegrated into muddy puddles. Ahead of me the journalist continued on steadily, though I could see he was now bent forward with the effort. As I staggered on after him, my head began to fill again with things I wished to say to Sophie. ‘Do you realise?’ I caught myself muttering through clenched teeth in time to my steps. ‘Do you realise?’ Somehow the sentence never got any further, but with each step, either in my head or under my breath, I repeated this line over and over until the words themselves began to fuel my irritation.

The path at last levelled off and I could see a white building at the peak of the hill. The journalist and I stumbled towards it and the next moment we were leaning against its wall, panting away. After a while Pedro joined us, wheezing frantically. He collapsed against the wall, sagging down onto his knees, and I feared for a second he was about to have a seizure. But even as he continued to wheeze and pant, he began to unzip his bag. He pulled out a camera, then a lens. At this point the effort seemed to overwhelm him and, putting an arm to the wall, he buried his head in its crook and went on gasping for air.

When at last I felt reasonably recovered, I moved a few steps away from the building in order to get a view of it. A gust of wind almost flattened me back against the wall, but eventually I reached a spot from which I found myself looking at a tall cylinder of white brickwork, windowless apart from a single vertical slit near the top. It was as though a single turret had been removed from a medieval castle and transplanted here on top of the hill.

‘Mr Ryder, whenever you’re ready, sir.’

The journalist and Pedro had taken up a position some ten metres from the building. Pedro, now evidently recovered, had

set up his tripod and was peering through his viewfinder.

‘Right up against the wall, if you will, Mr Ryder,’ the journalist called.

I made my way back up to the building. ‘Gentlemen,’ I said, raising my voice above the wind, ‘before we begin, I’d like you just to explain to me the precise nature of this setting we’ve chosen.’

‘Mr Ryder, please,’ Pedro called, waving his hand in the air. ‘Stand right back against the wall. Perhaps an arm against it. Like this.’ He held his elbow out to the wind.

I stepped closer to the wall and did as requested. Pedro proceeded to take a number of photographs, occasionally shifting his tripod or changing his lens. All the while, the journalist remained close by, peering over Pedro’s shoulder and conferring with him.

‘Gentlemen,’ I said after a time, ‘surely it’s not unreasonable of me to ask ...’

‘Mr Ryder, please,’ Pedro said, jumping up from behind the camera. ‘Your tie!’

My tie had blown over my shoulder. I corrected it, taking the opportunity also to rearrange my hair.

‘Mr Ryder,’ Pedro called, ‘if we could please have some with your hand raised like this. Yes, yes! As though you’re ushering someone towards the building. Yes, that’s perfect, perfect. But please, smile proudly. Very proud, as though the building is your baby. Yes, that’s perfect. Yes, you look magnificent.’

I obeyed the instructions as best I could, though the powerful gusts made it difficult to maintain a suitably genial expression on my face.

Then after a time I became aware of a figure standing over to my left. I gained an impression of a man in a dark

coat huddling close to the wall, but at that moment I was having to hold a pose and could only see him at the edge of my vision. Pedro continued to shout instructions through the wind - to move my chin a fraction to one side, to smile more broadly - and some time seemed to pass before I was free to turn and look at the figure. When I finally did so, the man - he was tall and stick-like, with a bald head and bony features - started immediately to come towards me. He was holding his raincoat tightly to himself, but as he approached he held out his hand.

‘Mr Ryder, how do you do? It’s an honour to meet you.’

‘Ah yes,’ I said, studying him. ‘I’m very pleased to meet you, Mr ... er ...?’

The stick-like man looked taken aback. Then he said: ‘Christoff. I am Christoff.’

‘Ah, Mr Christoff.’ A particularly strong blast obliged us to brace ourselves for a few seconds, allowing me to recover somewhat. ‘Ah yes, Mr Christoff. Of course. I’ve heard a great deal about you.’

‘Mr Ryder,’ Christoff said, leaning towards me, ‘may I say straight away how grateful I am to you for agreeing to attend this lunch. I knew what a civilised person you were and so wasn’t in the least surprised when you responded positively. I knew, you see, you were the sort at least to give us a fair hearing. The sort that would be actually keen to hear our side of things. No, I wasn’t surprised at all, but I remain immensely grateful. Well now’ - he looked at his watch - ‘we’re a little late, but no matter. The traffic shouldn’t be so bad. Please, this way.’

I followed Christoff around to the back of the white building. Here the wind was less strong and a mass of piping spilling out of the brickwork was emitting a low humming noise. Christoff continued to lead the way towards a spot on the rim of the hill marked by two wooden posts. I pictured a

steep drop beyond the posts, but on reaching them I looked down to see a long flight of rickety stone steps leading dizzily down the hillside. Far below, the staircase met a paved road where I could make out the shape of a black car waiting, presumably, for us.

‘After you, Mr Ryder,’ Christoff said. ‘Please, descend at your own pace. There’s no hurry.’

However, I noticed he glanced anxiously again at his watch.

‘I’m very sorry we’re late,’ I said. ‘Those photographs took a little longer than I expected.’

‘Please don’t worry, Mr Ryder. I’m sure we’ll get there in good time. Please, after you.’

I felt a little giddy negotiating the first steps. There was no banister on either side and I was obliged to concentrate hard through fear that I would miss a step and fall right the way down the hillside. But thankfully the wind was less troublesome and after a while I found myself growing more confident - it was not so different from descending any other staircase - to the extent that I occasionally took my eyes off my feet altogether to survey the panoramic view before us.

The sky was still overcast, but the sun was beginning to break through the clouds. The road on which the car was waiting, I could now see, was built into a plateau. Beyond it the hill continued its descent down through a mass of tree-tops. Further below yet I could see fields stretching off in all directions into the distance. Faintly visible on the horizon was the skyline of the city.

Christoff remained directly behind me. For the first few minutes, perhaps noticing my nervousness about the descent, he refrained from conversing. But once I had built up my rhythm, he sighed and said:

‘Those woods, Mr Ryder. Down there to your right. Those are the Werdenberger Woods. Many of the wealthier people in this town, they like to have a chalet down there. The Werdenberger Woods are very pleasant. Only a short drive to the city, and yet one feels so far from everything. Once we’re in the car and we drive down the mountainside, you’ll see the chalets. Some are perched right on the edge of sheer drops. The views must be stunning. Rosa would have loved one of those chalets. In fact we had a particular one in mind, I’ll point it out to you as we drive down. One of the more modest ones, but very attractive just the same. The present owner hardly uses it, no more than two or three weeks in the year. If I’d made a good offer, he’d certainly have given it serious consideration. But there’s no point thinking about all that now. That’s all finished with.’

He fell silent for a few moments. Then his voice started again behind me.

‘It’s nothing grand. Rosa and I have never even seen inside it. But we’ve driven past it so many times, we can imagine what it would be like. It sits out on this little promontory, there’s a sheer drop, oh, you’d get the feeling of being suspended high in the sky. You’d see clouds from every window as you walked from room to room. Rosa would have loved it. We used to drive past, slow the car right down, sometimes even stop and sit there imagining it, how it would be inside, picturing it room by room. Well, as I say, that’s all in the past now. Useless to dwell on it. In any case, Mr Ryder, you didn’t agree to give us your precious time just to hear all this. Forgive me. Let us return to more important matters. You know, sir, we are all *immensely* gratified by your agreeing to come and talk with us. And what a telling contrast to these people, these men who claim to lead this community! On three separate occasions we invited them to attend one of our luncheons, to come and talk over the issues just as you’re about to do. But they wouldn’t entertain it. Not for a second! Far too proud, all of them. Von

Winterstein, the Countess, von Braun, all of them. It's because they're uncertain, you see. In their hearts they know they don't understand anything, so they refuse to come and have a proper discussion with us. Three times we've invited them, and each time the bluntest of refusals. But it would have been futile anyway. They wouldn't have understood the half of what we are saying.'

I became silent again. I felt I should make some comment, but it struck me I could only make myself audible by shouting back over my shoulder and I was not prepared to risk taking my eyes off the steps. For the next few minutes, then, we continued our descent in silence, Christoff's breathing becoming increasingly laboured behind me. Then I heard him say:

'To be perfectly fair, it's not their fault. The modern forms, they're so complex now. Kazan, Mullery, Yoshimoto. Even for a trained musician such as myself, it's hard now, very hard. The likes of von Winterstein, the Countess, what chance do they have? They're completely out of their depth. To them it's just crashing noise, a whirl of strange rhythms. Perhaps they've convinced themselves over the years they can hear something there, certain emotions, meanings. But the truth is, they've found nothing at all. They're out of their depth, they'll never understand how modern music works. Once it was simply Mozart, Bach, Tchaikovsky. Even the man in the street could make a reasoned guess about that sort of music. But the modern forms! How can people like this, untrained, provincial people, how can they ever understand such things, however great a sense of duty they feel towards the community? It's hopeless, Mr Ryder. They can't distinguish a crushed cadence from a struck motif. Or a fractured time signature from a sequence of vented rests. And now they misread the whole situation! They want things to go the opposite way! Mr Ryder, if you're getting tired, why don't we take a short rest?'

In fact I had paused a second because a bird, flying alarmingly close to my face, had caused me almost to lose my footing.

‘No, no, I’m fine,’ I called back, recommencing the descent.

‘These steps are rather too grimy to sit on. But if you liked, we could always just pause and stand.’

‘No, really, thank you. I’m fine.’

We proceeded down in silence for the next few minutes. Then Christoff said:

‘In my most detached moments, I actually feel sorry for them. I don’t blame them. After all they’ve done, after all they’ve said about me, I still at times see the situation objectively. And I say to myself, no, it’s really not their fault. It’s not their fault music has become so difficult and complicated. It’s unreasonable to expect anyone in a place like this to comprehend it. And yet these people, these civic leaders, they must give the appearance of knowing what they’re doing. So they repeat certain things to themselves, and after a while, they begin to believe themselves authorities. You see, in a place like this, there’s no one to contradict them. Please be very careful of the next few steps, Mr Ryder. They’re a little crumbled at the edges.’

I took the next several steps very slowly. Then when I glanced up I noticed we had not much further left to go.

‘It would have been useless,’ Christoff’s voice said behind me. ‘Even if they’d accepted our invitation, it would have been useless. They wouldn’t have understood the half of it. You, Mr Ryder, you’ll at least understand our arguments. Even if we fail to convince you, you will, I feel sure, go away with some respect for our position. But of course we hope to persuade you. Convince you that, regardless of my personal fate, the present direction must at all costs be maintained. Yes, you’re a brilliant musician, one of the most

gifted presently at work anywhere in the world. But nevertheless, even an expert of your calibre needs to apply his knowledge to a particular set of local conditions. Each community has its own history, its own special needs. The people I'll shortly introduce you to, Mr Ryder, are among the few, the very few in this town one might reasonably describe as intellectuals. They've taken the trouble to analyse the particular conditions that prevail here, and what's more, they - unlike von Winterstein and his sort - they do understand something of how the modern forms work. With their help, in the most civilised and respectful way, naturally, I'm hoping to persuade you, Mr Ryder, to modify your present stance. Of course, everyone you'll meet has the utmost respect for you and all you stand for. But we feel it's possible, even with your powerful insight, there may be certain aspects of the situation here you may not yet have fully appreciated. Here we are.'

In fact there were another twenty or so steps before we reached the road. Christoff remained silent for this last part of the descent. I was relieved, for his latter utterances had begun to annoy me. His implication that I was more or less ignorant of the local conditions, that I was the sort to draw conclusions without bothering with such factors, was quite insulting. I recalled how since my arrival in the city - in spite of my tight schedule, in spite of my fatigue - I had applied myself to this very task of acquainting myself with the local situation. I remembered, for instance, how the previous afternoon, when I could so easily have been taking a well-earned rest in the comfort of the hotel's atrium, I had instead set off into the town to gather my impressions. Indeed, the more I thought about Christoff's words, the more irked I felt, so that when we finally came down to the car and Christoff held open the passenger door for me, I climbed in with barely a word.

'We're not too behind time,' he said, getting into the driver's seat. 'If the traffic's good, we'll be there very

quickly. ’

As he said this, I remembered all at once my many other commitments for the day. There was, for instance, Fiona - no doubt expecting me at her apartment at any moment. The situation, I could see, would require a certain firmness on my part.

He started the car and we soon found ourselves descending a steeply curving road. Christoff, who appeared to know the road well, took each sharp bend with assurance. As we came lower the road became less vertiginous and the chalets he had mentioned, often precariously perched, began appearing to either side of us. Eventually I turned to him saying:

‘Mr Christoff, I’ve been looking forward very much to this lunch with you and your friends. To hearing your side of things. However, several things have come up unexpectedly this morning, and as a result I find I have a very busy day ahead of me. As a matter of fact, even as we speak ...’

‘Mr Ryder, please, you don’t have to explain. We knew from the outset how very busy you were likely to be and everyone present, I assure you, will be most understanding. If you leave after an hour and a half, even after an hour, no one, I can assure you, will be in the least offended. They’re a fine bunch, the only ones in this town with the ability to think and feel to this level. Whatever the outcome of this lunch, Mr Ryder, I’m sure you’ll be pleased to have met them. Many of them I remember when they were young and eager. A fine bunch, I can vouch for each of them. They’d once have thought themselves my protégés, I suppose. They still look up to me. But these days we’re colleagues, *friends*, perhaps something even deeper. These last few years have only made us draw closer. Naturally a few have left me, that’s inevitable. But the ones who’ve stayed, oh, they’ve been unwavering. I’m proud of them, I love them dearly. They’re the best hope for this town, though I know they’ll not be allowed any influence here for a good while yet. Ah, Mr Ryder, we’ll soon be

passing the chalet I was telling you about. It's around this next corner. It'll appear on your side.'

He fell silent, and when I looked at him I noticed he was close to tears. I felt a wave of sympathy for him and said gently:

'One never knows what the future might bring, Mr Christoff. Perhaps you and your wife will find a chalet very much like this some day. If not here, then in some other city.'

Christoff shook his head. 'I know you're trying to be kind, Mr Ryder. But really, there's no point. It's all finished between Rosa and me. She'll leave me. I've known that for some time. In fact the whole town knows it. No doubt you've heard them gossiping.'

'Well, I suppose I did hear one or two things ...'

'I'm sure there's a lot of gossip going about. I don't much care now. The essential thing is that Rosa will soon leave me. She won't tolerate being married to me much longer, not after what's happened. You mustn't get the wrong idea. We've grown to love each other over the years, grown to love each other very much. But you see, with us, that was always the understanding, right from the start. Ah, there it is, Mr Ryder. On your right. Rosa often sat in that seat you're in now and we'd drive past it slowly. Once we were driving past so slowly, we were so absorbed, we nearly collided with a vehicle coming up the hill. But yes, we had an understanding. While I enjoyed the pre-eminence I did in this community, she was able to love me. Oh yes, she loved me, she genuinely loved me. I can say this with utter conviction, Mr Ryder. Because you see, for Rosa, nothing else in life would be more important than to be married to someone in the position I was in. Perhaps that makes her sound a little shallow. But you mustn't misunderstand her. In her own way, in the way she knew, she loved me deeply. In any case, it's nonsense to believe people go on loving each other regardless of what

happens. It's just that in Rosa's case, well, the way she is, she's able to love me only under certain circumstances. That doesn't make her love for me any less real.'

For a little while, Christoff was silent again, evidently deep in thought. The road was turning a slow curve, offering a plunging view on my side. I gazed down at the valley below us and could make out what seemed to be an affluent suburb of large houses, each with an acre or so of its own ground.

'I was just remembering,' Christoff said, 'when I first came to this town. How excited they all were. And Rosa, how she came up to me that first time at the Arts Building.' He fell silent again for a moment. Then he said: 'You know, back then, I had no fanciful ideas about myself. By that point in my life I'd come to accept I was no genius. Or anything approaching one. I'd had a career of sorts, but a number of things had happened which had forced me to see my limitations. When I came to this town, my plan was to live quietly - I have a small private income - perhaps do a little teaching, something like that. But then people here, they were so appreciative of my small talents. So pleased I had come here! And after a while, I began thinking. I had, after all, worked hard, very hard, trying to come to terms with modern musical methods. I did understand something about them. I looked around me and thought, well, yes, I could make a contribution here. In a town like this, the way things were then, I saw how I might do it. I saw how I might do some real good. Well, Mr Ryder, after all these years, my belief is that I did do something worthwhile. I believe it sincerely. It's not simply that my protégés - my colleagues, I should say, my *friends* whom you'll meet shortly - it's not just that they've got me thinking it. No, I believe it, believe it very firmly. I did something worthwhile here. But you know how it is. A town like this. Sooner or later things start to go wrong with people's lives. Discontent grows. And the loneliness. And people like this, who understand almost nothing about music, they say to themselves, oh, we must have

had everything entirely wrong. Let's do the complete opposite. These accusations they make against me! They say my approach celebrates the mechanical, that I stifle natural emotion. How little they understand! As we'll demonstrate to you very shortly, Mr Ryder, I merely introduced an approach, a system that would allow people like this some way into the likes of Kazan and Mullery. Some way of discovering meaning and value in the works. I tell you, sir, when I first came here, they were crying out for precisely this. For some ordering, for a system they could comprehend. The people here, they were out of their depth, things were breaking down. People were afraid, they felt things slipping out of control. I have documents with me, you'll see everything shortly. You'll see then, I'm sure, just how misguided the present consensus is. Very well, I'm a mediocrity, that much I don't deny. But you'll see I was always on the right track. That what little I did achieve was a start, a useful contribution. What's needed now - I hope you'll see it, Mr Ryder, if only you would see it, then all might not be lost for this city - what's needed is someone, someone more gifted than myself, very well, but someone to continue, to *build* on what I've done. I made a contribution, Mr Ryder. I have the proof, you'll see when we arrive.'

We had come out onto a major highway. The road was broad and straight, revealing a large expanse of sky before us. Off in the distance, I could see two heavy lorries travelling in the inner lane, but otherwise the road ahead was virtually empty.

'I hope you don't imagine, Mr Ryder,' said Christoff after a while, 'that my bringing you to this lunch today is some desperate ploy on my part to regain my former pre-eminence here. I fully realise my personal position has become impossible. Besides, I've nothing left to give. I've given it all, everything I had, I've given it all to this city. I want to go away somewhere now, far away, somewhere quiet, by myself, and have nothing more to do with music. My

protégés, naturally, they'll be devastated when I leave. They still haven't accepted it. They want me to fight back. One word from me, they'd set to work, they'd do their utmost, go door to door even. I've told them how things stand, I've explained very frankly, but they still can't accept it. It's so difficult for them. They've looked up to me for so long, always found their meanings through me. They'll be devastated. But it makes no difference, it has to finish now. I want it to end. Even Rosa. Every minute of our marriage has been precious to me, Mr Ryder. But knowing it will finish, yet not knowing quite when - it's been terrible. I want it all to end now. I wish Rosa well. I hope she finds someone else, someone of proper stature. I just hope she has the sense to look beyond this town. This town can't provide the sort of figure she needs for a husband. No one here understands music properly. Ah, but if only I had your talent, Mr Ryder! Then Rosa and I, we could grow old together.'

The sky had become overcast. The traffic remained sparse and we found ourselves regularly overtaking long-distance lorries before speeding on. Thick forests appeared to either side, then eventually gave way to flat expanses of farmland. The tiredness of the last several days began to catch up with me, and as I continued to watch the highway unwind before us, I found it difficult not to doze. Then I heard Christoff's voice say: 'Ah, here we are,' and I opened my eyes again.

We had slowed right down and were approaching a small café - a white bungalow - standing alone on the roadside. It was the sort of place one might imagine lorry drivers stopping for a sandwich, though as Christoff steered the car across the gravelled forecourt and brought it to a halt, there were no other vehicles to be seen.

‘We’re having lunch here?’ I asked.

‘Yes. Our little circle, we’ve gathered here for years now. Everything’s very informal.’

We got out and walked towards the café. As we approached I could see bright pieces of cardboard hung from the awning, announcing various special offers.

‘Everything’s very informal,’ Christoff said again, opening the door for me. ‘Please make yourself at home.’

The décor inside was very basic. There were large picture windows going all the way round the room. Here and there posters advertising soft drinks or peanuts had been put up with sellotape. Some had become faded in the sunlight and one of them had turned simply into a rectangle of pale blue. Even now, with the sky overcast, there was a harshness to the daylight falling across the room.

There were eight or nine people already present, all seated at the tables near the back. They each had in front of them steaming bowls of what looked to be mashed potato. They had been eating hungrily with long wooden spoons, but now they all stopped and stared at me. One or two began to stand up, but Christoff greeted them cheerily, waving to them to remain seated. Then, turning to me, he said:

‘As you can see, lunch has started without us. But given our lateness, I’m sure you’ll excuse them. As for the others, well, I’m sure they won’t be much longer. In any case, we shouldn’t waste any more time. If you’d just step this way, Mr Ryder, I’ll introduce you to my good friends here.’

I was about to follow him when we became aware of a heavy bearded man in a striped apron signalling furtively to us from behind the service counter nearby.

‘Very well, Gerhard,’ Christoff said, turning to the man with a shrug. ‘I’ll start with you. This is Mr Ryder.’

The bearded man shook my hand saying: ‘Your lunch will be ready in no time, sir. You must be very hungry.’ Then he muttered something quickly to Christoff, glancing as he did so towards the rear of the café.

Both Christoff and I followed the bearded man’s gaze. As though he had been waiting for our attention to turn to him, a man who had been sitting by himself in the far corner now rose to his feet. He was portly and grey-haired, perhaps in his mid-fifties, dressed in a brilliant white jacket and shirt. He started to come towards us, then, stopping near the middle of the room, smiled at Christoff.

‘Henri,’ he said, and held up his arms in greeting.

Christoff stared coldly at the man, then turned away. ‘There’s nothing for you here,’ he said.

The white-jacketed man seemed not to hear. ‘I was just watching you, Henri,’ he continued genially, gesturing out of the window. ‘Walking across from your car. You’re still walking with that stoop. It used to be a sort of affectation, but now it seems to be there for real. There’s no need for it, Henri. Things may not be going your way, but there’s no need for a stoop.’

Christoff continued to keep his back turned to the man.

‘Come on, Henri. This is childish.’

‘I’ve told you,’ Christoff said. ‘We’ve nothing to say to each other.’

The white-jacketed man shrugged and took a few more steps towards us.

‘Mr Ryder,’ he said, ‘since Henri is determined not to introduce us, I’ll introduce myself. I’m Dr Lubanski. As you know, Henri and I were very close once. But now, you see, he doesn’t even talk to me.’

‘You’re not welcome here.’ Christoff was still not looking at the man. ‘Nobody wants you here.’

‘You see, Mr Ryder? Henri’s always had this childish side to him. So silly. Myself, I long ago came to terms with the fact that our paths have diverged. Once we used to sit and talk for hours. Didn’t we, Henri? Dissecting some work or other, arguing it through from every angle over our beers at the Schoppenhaus. I still think back fondly to those days at the Schoppenhaus. Sometimes I even wish I’d never had the good sense to disagree. That we could sit down again tonight, spend more hours arguing and discussing music, about how you’d prepare this or that piece. I live alone, Mr Ryder. As you can imagine’ - he laughed lightly - ‘things can get a little lonely at times. And then I start remembering how it was in those days. I think to myself, how good it would be, just to sit down with Henri again and talk over some score he’s preparing. There was a time he wouldn’t do anything without first consulting me about it. Wasn’t that so, Henri? Come on, let’s not be childish. Let’s at least be civil.’

‘Why today of all days?’ Christoff shouted suddenly.

‘No one wants you here! They’re all still very angry at you! Look! Look for yourself!’

Dr Lubanski, ignoring this outburst, embarked on some other reminiscence concerning himself and Christoff. The point of the story quickly eluded me and I found my gaze

wandering past him to those watching nervously from the tables at the back.

None of them appeared to be over forty years of age. Three were women and one of them in particular, I noticed, was looking at me with a peculiar intensity. She was in her early thirties, dressed in long black clothes and wearing spectacles with small, thick lenses. I would have studied the others more closely, but just at this point I remembered again what a busy day still lay before me, and how imperative it was that I remained firm with my present hosts if I were not to be detained here beyond the allotted time.

As Dr Lubanski came to a pause, I touched Christoff's arm, saying quietly: 'I wonder if the others will be much longer.'

'Well ...' Christoff glanced around the room. Then he said: 'It seems this might be all for today.'

I had the impression he was hoping to be contradicted. When no one said anything he turned back to me with a short laugh.

'A small gathering,' he said, 'but nevertheless we have ... we have the best minds of the town here, I assure you. Now Mr Ryder, please.'

He began to introduce his friends to me. Each smiled nervously and uttered a greeting as his or her name was called. All the while, I was aware of Dr Lubanski walking away slowly towards the back of the room, never taking his gaze off the proceedings. Then, as Christoff was coming to the end of his introductions, Dr Lubanski let out a loud laugh, causing the former to break off and throw a look of cold fury towards him. Dr Lubanski, who by this time had seated himself again at his table in the corner, gave another laugh and said:

'Well, Henri, whatever else you've lost over the years, you've not lost your nerve. You're going to repeat the whole

Offenbach saga to Mr *Ryder*? To Mr Ryder?’ He shook his head.

Christoff went on staring at his former friend. Some devastating retort seemed about to leave his lips, but then at the last moment he turned away without speaking.

‘Throw me out if you like,’ Dr Lubanski said, starting on his mashed potato again. ‘But it’s beginning to look as though’ - he waved his spoon around the room - ‘as though not everyone here is finding my presence so irksome. We could put it to a vote perhaps. I’d gladly leave if I’m genuinely not wanted. What about a show of hands?’

‘If you insist on staying, I don’t care in the least,’ Christoff said. ‘It makes no difference. I have my facts. I have them here.’ He raised a blue folder he had produced from somewhere and tapped it. ‘I’m quite sure of my ground. You can do what you want.’

Dr Lubanski turned to the others with a shrug that seemed to say: ‘What can you possibly do with someone like this?’ The young woman with the thick spectacles immediately looked away, but her companions seemed mostly confused, one or two of them even smiling back shyly.

‘Mr Ryder,’ Christoff said, ‘please sit down and make yourself comfortable. As soon as Gerhard returns, he will serve you lunch. Now’ - he clapped his hands together and his voice assumed the tones of someone addressing a large hall - ‘ladies and gentlemen. I must first of all thank Mr Ryder, on behalf of each of us present today, for agreeing to come and debate with us in the midst of what must surely be a very busy few days ...’

‘You’ve certainly got nerve,’ Dr Lubanski called from the back. ‘Not intimidated by me, not even by Mr Ryder. Quite a nerve, Henri.’

‘I’m not intimidated,’ Christoff retorted, ‘because I have the facts! Facts are facts! I have it here! The evidence! Yes, even Mr Ryder. Yes, sir’ - he turned to me

- 'even a man of your reputation. Even you are obliged to defer to *facts!*'

'Well, this will be worth witnessing,' Dr Lubanski said to the others. 'A provincial cellist lecturing Mr Ryder. Fine, let's hear it, let's hear it.'

For a second or two, Christoff hesitated. Then with some resolve he opened his folder saying: 'If I may start with a single case, which I think leads us to the heart of the controversy concerning ringed harmonies.'

For the next few minutes, Christoff outlined the background to the case of a certain local business family, leafing through his folder, reading out the occasional quotation or statistic. He seemed to present his case competently enough, but there was something about his tone - his unnecessarily slow delivery, the way he explained things twice and three times - that quickly got on my nerves. Indeed, it occurred to me Dr Lubanski had a point. There *was* something preposterous about this failed local musician presuming to lecture me.

'Now *that* you call a fact?' Dr Lubanski suddenly broke in as Christoff was reading from the minutes of a civic committee meeting. 'Ha! Henri's "facts" are always interesting, aren't they?'

'Let him have his say! Let Henri present his case to Mr Ryder!'

The young man who had spoken up had a pudgy face and a short leather jacket. Christoff smiled at him approvingly. Dr Lubanski raised his hands, saying: 'All right, all right.'

'Let him have his say!' the pudgy-faced young man said again. 'Then we'll see. We'll see what Mr Ryder makes of it all. Then we'll find out once and for all.'

It seemed to take Christoff a good few seconds to absorb the implication of these last words. At first he remained

frozen, the folder held aloft in his arms. Then he looked around at the faces surrounding him as though for the first time. All about the room there were searching gazes directed at him. For a moment Christoff appeared badly shaken. Looking away he muttered, almost to himself:

‘These are indeed facts. I’ve gathered evidence here. Any one of you can see it, peruse it.’ He peered into his folder. ‘I’m just summarising the evidence for brevity. That’s all.’ Then with an effort he seemed to regain his poise. ‘Mr Ryder,’ he said, ‘if you will bear with me a moment. I believe things will be much clearer very shortly.’

Christoff carried on with his argument, a slight tension in his voice, but otherwise in much the same manner as before. As he talked on, I remembered how the previous night I had given up precious hours of sleep in order to carry out further my investigations of the local conditions. How, despite my great tiredness, I had sat in the cinema, talking through the issues with the town’s leading citizens. Christoff’s repeated assumptions about my ignorance - even now, he was embarking on a long digression to explain a point completely obvious to me - were steadily bringing me to the point of exasperation.

I was not, it seemed, alone in my impatience. A number of others in the room were shifting uncomfortably. I noticed the young woman with the thick spectacles glaring from Christoff’s face to mine, and several times she looked to be on the verge of interrupting. But in the end it was a man with closely cropped hair sitting somewhere behind me who broke in.

‘Just one moment, one moment. Before we go further, let’s just get one thing settled. Once and for all.’

Dr Lubanski’s laugh again came from the back of the café. ‘Claude and his pigmented triad! You still haven’t resolved that?’

‘Claude,’ Christoff said, ‘this is hardly the time ...’

‘No! Now that Mr Ryder’s here, I want it settled.’

‘Claude, this isn’t the time to raise that again. I’m presenting an argument to show ...’

‘Perhaps it’s trivial. But let’s get it settled. Mr Ryder, Mr Ryder, is it truly the case that pigmented triads have intrinsic emotional values regardless of context? Do you believe that?’

I sensed the focus of the room fixing upon me. Christoff gave me a swift look, something like a plea mingled with fear. But in view of the earnestness of the enquiry - to say nothing of Christoff’s presumptuous behaviour up to this point - I saw no reason not to reply in the frankest terms. I thus said:

‘A pigmented triad has no intrinsic emotional properties. In fact, its emotional colour can change significantly not only according to context, but according to volume. This is my personal opinion.’

No one spoke, but the impact of my statement was discernible. One by one, hard gazes turned towards Christoff - who meanwhile was pretending to be engrossed in his folder. Then the man called Claude said quietly:

‘I knew it. I always knew it.’

‘But he convinced you you were wrong,’ Dr Lubanski said. ‘He bullied you into believing you were wrong.’

‘What has this to do with anything?’ Christoff cried. ‘Claude, look, you’ve taken us on a complete tangent. And Mr Ryder has so little time. We must return to the Offenbach case.’

But Claude seemed to be lost in thought. Eventually he turned and looked towards Dr Lubanski, who nodded and smiled

back gravely.

‘Mr Ryder has very little time,’ Christoff said again. ‘So if you’d all allow me, I’ll try and summarise my argument.’

Christoff began to go through what he considered the key points concerning the tragedy of the Offenbach family. He was affecting an air of nonchalance, though by now it was clear to everyone he was badly upset. In any case, around this point, I ceased to attend to him, his remark concerning my lack of time having caused me suddenly to remember Boris sitting waiting for me in that little café.

A considerable period, I realised, had elapsed since I had left him there. A picture came into my mind of the little boy, shortly after my departure, sitting in his corner with his drink and cheesecake, still full of anticipation about the trip before him. I could see him gazing cheerfully towards the other customers out in the sunny courtyard, now and then looking beyond them to the traffic in the street, thinking how before long he too would be out there travelling. He would recall once more the old apartment, the cupboard in the corner of the living room where, he had become increasingly certain, he had left the box containing Number Nine. Then as the minutes went by, the doubts that had always been lurking somewhere, doubts he had so far kept well buried, would begin creeping to the surface. But for a while yet, Boris would succeed in keeping up his spirits. I had simply been detained unexpectedly. Or perhaps I had gone somewhere to buy a picnic to take on the trip. In any case, there was still plenty remaining of the day. Then the waitress, the plump Scandinavian girl, would ask if he wanted anything further, betraying as she did so a note of concern which Boris would not fail to detect. And he would make a renewed show of being unworried, perhaps ordering with bravado another glass of milk shake. But the minutes would tick on. Boris would notice, outside in the courtyard, customers who had sat down long after his arrival closing

their newspapers, getting up and leaving. He would see the sky clouding over, the day moving into the afternoon. He would think again of the old apartment he had so loved, the cupboard in the living room, Number Nine, and slowly, as he picked away at the remains of his cheesecake, he would begin to resign himself to the idea that yet again he would be let down, that we would not set off on the journey after all.

Several voices were shouting around me. A young man in a green suit had risen to his feet and was trying to make a point to Christoff, while at least three others were waving their fingers to emphasise something.

‘But that’s an irrelevance,’ Christoff was shouting over them. ‘And in any case, it’s just Mr Ryder’s personal opinion ...’

This brought an onslaught down on him, almost everyone in the room attempting to respond at the same time. But in the end Christoff again managed to shout them down.

‘Yes! Yes! I’m aware of *exactly* who Mr Ryder is! But local conditions, local conditions, that’s another matter! He doesn’t yet know about our particular conditions! While I ... I have here ...’

The rest of this statement was drowned out, but Christoff raised the blue folder high above his head and waved it.

‘The nerve! The nerve!’ Dr Lubanski was calling from the back with a laugh.

‘With all respect, sir’ - Christoff was now addressing me directly - ‘with all respect, I am surprised you aren’t more interested in hearing about the conditions here. In fact, I’m *surprised*, your expertise notwithstanding, I’m *surprised* you should simply leap to your conclusions ...’

The chorus of protest came again, now more furious than ever.

‘For instance ...’ Christoff yelled over the top. ‘For instance, I was very surprised that you should allow the press to photograph you in front of the Sattler monument!’

To my consternation, this brought sudden silence.

‘Yes!’ Christoff was clearly delighted at the effect he had created. ‘Yes! I saw him! When I picked him up earlier on. Standing right in front of the Sattler monument. Smiling, gesturing towards it!’

The shocked silence continued. Some of those present seemed to grow embarrassed, while others - including the young woman with the thick spectacles - stared at me questioningly. I smiled and was about to make some comment when Dr Lubanski’s voice, now controlled and authoritative, said from the back:

‘If Mr Ryder chooses to make such a gesture, it can only indicate one thing. That the extent of our misguidedness is even deeper than we suspected.’

All eyes turned to him as he rose and came a few steps closer to the gathering. Dr Lubanski stopped and leant his head to one side as though listening to the distant sounds of the highway. Then he continued:

‘His message is one we must each of us examine carefully and take to our hearts. The Sattler monument! Of course, he’s right! It’s not overstating the case, not for one moment! Look at you, still trying to cling onto Henri’s foolish notions! Even those of us who’ve seen them for what they are, even us, the truth is we’ve remained complacent. The Sattler monument! Yes, that’s it. This city is at crisis point. Crisis point!’

It was gratifying that Dr Lubanski had immediately highlighted the preposterousness of Christoff’s statement, at the same time underlining the strong message I had wished to send out to the city. Nevertheless, my indignation towards Christoff was now considerable and I decided it was high time

I cut him down to size. But the whole room was again shouting all at once. The man named Claude was repeatedly banging his fist on a table surface to emphasise a point to a grizzled man with braces and muddy boots. At least four people, from different parts of the room, were shouting at Christoff. The situation seemed on the verge of chaos and it occurred to me this was as good a point as any to take my leave. But as I stood up, the young woman with thick spectacles materialised in front of me.

‘Mr Ryder, please tell us,’ she said. ‘Let’s get to the bottom of it. Is Henri right in believing we can’t at any cost abandon the circular dynamic in Kazan?’

She had not spoken loudly, but her voice had a penetrating quality. The whole room heard her question and immediately became quiet. A few of her companions gave her searching looks, but she glared back defiantly.

‘No, I’ll ask it,’ she said. ‘This is a unique opportunity. We can’t waste it. I’ll ask it. Mr Ryder, please. Tell us.’

‘But I have the facts,’ Christoff muttered miserably. ‘Here. I have it all.’

No one paid him any attention, every gaze having focused once more on me. Realising I would have to choose my next words carefully, I paused a moment. Then I said:

‘My own view is that Kazan never benefits from formalised restraints. Neither from the circular dynamic, nor even a double-bar structure. There are simply too many layers, too many emotions, especially in the later works.’

I could feel, almost physically, the tide of respect sweeping towards me. The pudgy-faced man was looking at me with something close to awe. A woman in a scarlet anorak was muttering: ‘That’s it, that’s it,’ as though I had just articulated something she had been struggling to formulate for years. The man named Claude had risen to his feet and now

took a few steps towards me, nodding vigorously. Dr Lubanski was also nodding, but slowly and with his eyes closed as if to say: 'Yes, yes, here at last is someone who really knows.' The young woman with the thick spectacles though had remained quite still, continuing to watch me carefully.

'I can understand,' I went on, 'the temptation to resort to such devices. There's a natural fear of the music flooding the musician's resources. But the answer surely is to rise to such a challenge, not to resort to restraints. Of course, the challenge might be too great, in which case the answer is to leave Kazan well alone. One should not, in any case, attempt to make a virtue out of one's limitations.'

At this last remark, many in the room seemed no longer able to hold back their feelings. The grizzled man with the muddy boots broke into vigorous applause, throwing snarling looks towards Christoff as he did so. Several others started to shout again at Christoff, and the woman in the scarlet anorak was again repeating, this time more loudly: 'That's it, that's it, that's it.' I felt strangely exhilarated and, raising my voice above the mounting excitement, continued:

'These failures of nerve are, in my experience, very often associated with certain other unattractive traits. A hostility towards the introspective tone, most often characterised by an over-use of the crushed cadence. A fondness for pointlessly matching fragmented passages with each other. And at the more personal level, a megalomania masquerading behind a modest and kindly manner ...'

I was obliged to break off because everyone in the room was now shouting at Christoff. He in turn was holding up his blue folder, thumbing its pages in the air, crying: 'The facts are here! Here!'

'Of course,' I shouted above the noise, 'this is another common failing. The belief that putting something in a folder will turn it into a fact!'

This was met by a roar of laughter that had at its heart an uncoiling fury. Then the young woman with the thick spectacles rose to her feet and went up to Christoff. She did so very calmly, transgressing the small area of space that had hitherto been maintained around the cellist.

‘You old fool,’ she said, and again her voice penetrated clearly through the clamour. ‘You’ve dragged us all down with you.’ Then, with some deliberation, she struck Christoff’s cheek with the outside of her hand.

There was a stunned pause. Then suddenly people were rising from their chairs, pushing one another aside in an attempt to reach Christoff, the desire to follow the young woman’s example evidently seizing them with some urgency. I was aware of a hand shaking my shoulder but for the moment was too preoccupied with what was unfolding before me to attend.

‘No, no, that’s enough!’ Dr Lubanski had somehow reached Christoff first and was holding up his hands. ‘No, let Henri be! What do you think you’re doing? That’s enough!’

Possibly it was only Dr Lubanski’s intervention that saved Christoff from a full-scale assault. I caught a glimpse of Christoff’s bewildered, frightened face, and then an angry circle settled around him and he ceased to be visible to me. The hand was shaking my shoulder again and I turned to find the bearded man with the apron – I recalled that his name was Gerhard – holding a steaming bowl of mashed potato.

‘Would you care for some lunch, Mr Ryder?’ he asked. ‘I’m sorry it’s a little late. But you see, we had to start a new vat.’

‘That’s very kind of you,’ I said, ‘but actually I really have to be going. I’ve left my little boy waiting for me.’ Then, leading him away from the noise, I said to him: ‘I wonder if you would show me through to the front.’ For

indeed, I had at that moment remembered that this café and the one in which I had left Boris were in fact parts of the same building, this being one of those establishments offering contrasting rooms - opening onto separate streets - catering to different kinds of clientele.

The bearded man was clearly disappointed by my refusal of lunch, but he recovered quickly, saying: 'Of course, Mr Ryder. It's this way.'

I followed him to the front of the room and round the service counter. There he unlatched a small door and indicated for me to go through. As I was doing so I took a last glance back and saw the pudgy-faced man up on a table top, waving Christoff's blue folder in the air. There were now hoots of laughter amidst the angry shouts, while Dr Lubanski's voice could be heard appealing with some emotion:

'No, Henri's had enough! Please, please! That's enough!'

I came through into a spacious kitchen tiled entirely in white. There was a strong smell of vinegar and I caught a glimpse of a large woman bent over a sizzling stove, but the bearded man had already crossed the floor and was opening another door in the far corner of the kitchen.

'It's this way, sir,' he said, ushering me.

The door was peculiarly tall and narrow. Indeed, it was so narrow I saw I would only pass through it by turning myself sideways. Moreover, when I peered in, I could see only darkness; there was nothing to suggest I was looking into anything other than a broom cupboard. But the bearded man made his ushering motion again and said:

'Please be careful of the steps, Mr Ryder.'

I then saw there were three steps - they appeared to be made from wooden boxes nailed one on top of the other - rising immediately from the threshold. I eased myself through the doorway and took each one with caution. As I reached the

top step, I saw in front of me a small rectangle of light. Two paces forward brought me right up to it and I found myself looking through a glass panel into a room filled with sunlight. I saw tables and chairs, and then I recognised the room where I had earlier left Boris. There was the plump young waitress - I was viewing the room from behind her counter - and, over in the corner, Boris gazing into space with a disgruntled expression. He had finished his cheesecake and was absent-mindedly running his fork up and down the tablecloth. Apart from a young couple sitting near the windows, the interior of the café was otherwise empty.

I felt something pushing against my side and realised the bearded man had squeezed up behind me and was now crouched down in the dark, jangling a set of keys. The next moment the whole of the partition before me opened and I found myself stepping into the café.

The waitress turned to me and smiled. Then she called across to Boris: 'Look who's here!'

Boris turned to me and pulled a long face. 'Where've you been?' he said wearily. 'You've been ages.'

'I'm very sorry, Boris,' I said. Then I asked the waitress: 'Has he been behaving himself?'

'Oh, he's a complete charmer. He's been telling me all about where you used to live. On that estate by the artificial lake.'

'Ah yes,' I said. 'The artificial lake. Yes, we were just about to go there now.'

'But you've been absolutely ages!' Boris said. 'Now we'll be late!'

'I'm very sorry, Boris. But don't worry, we still have plenty of time. And the old apartment isn't about to go away, is it? Still, you're quite right, we ought to be setting off straight away. Now let me see.' I turned back to the

waitress who had started to say something to the bearded man.

‘Excuse me, but I wonder if you could tell us how we can most easily get to this artificial lake.’

‘The artificial lake?’ The waitress pointed out of the window. ‘That bus waiting outside. That will take you right there.’

I looked where she was pointing and saw beyond the parasols in the courtyard a bus parked in the busy street more or less directly in front of us.

‘It’s been waiting there a long time already,’ the waitress went on. ‘So you’d better jump on. I think it’s due to leave any moment.’

I thanked her and, motioning to Boris, led the way out of the building into the sunshine.

We boarded the bus just as the driver was starting his engine. As I bought the tickets from him, I saw the bus was very full and remarked worriedly:

‘I hope my boy and I will be able to sit together.’

‘Oh, don’t worry,’ the driver said. ‘They’re a good crowd. Just leave it to me.’

With that he turned and bellowed something over his shoulder. There had been an unusually merry hubbub in progress, but the whole bus went quiet. Then the next moment, all over the bus, passengers were getting up from their seats, pointing, waving and generally conferring about how we might be best accommodated. A large woman leaned into the central aisle and called: ‘Over here! You can sit here!’ But another voice from another part of the bus shouted: ‘If you’ve got a little boy, it’s better over here, he won’t get sick. I’ll move over next to Mr Hartmann.’ Then another conference seemed to commence concerning our options.

‘You see, they’re a good crowd,’ the driver said cheerfully. ‘Newcomers always get a special welcome. Well, if you’d make yourselves comfortable, I’ll start us on our way.’

Boris and I hurried down the bus to where two passengers were standing in the aisle pointing to our seat. I let Boris in nearest the window and sat down just as the bus began to pull away.

Almost immediately I felt a tap on my shoulder and someone in the seat behind was reaching over to offer a packet of sweets.

‘The little boy might like this,’ a man’s voice said.

‘Thank you,’ I said. Then more loudly to the whole bus, I said: ‘Thank you. Thank you, all of you. You’ve all been most civil.’

‘Look!’ Boris clutched excitedly at my arm. ‘We’re going out onto the north highway.’

Before I could respond, a middle-aged woman appeared beside me in the aisle. Grasping the head-rest of my seat to maintain her balance, she held out a piece of cake on a paper napkin.

‘A gentleman at the back had this left over,’ she said. ‘He wondered if the young man would like it.’

I accepted it gratefully, once more thanking the bus in general. Then, as the woman disappeared, I heard a voice a few seats away saying: ‘It’s good to see a father and son getting on so well. Here they are, going on a little day trip together. We don’t see this sort of thing nearly enough these days.’

I felt a powerful surge of pride at these words and glanced towards Boris. Perhaps he too had heard, for he gave me a smile that had more than a hint of the conspiratorial about it.

‘Boris,’ I said, handing him the cake, ‘isn’t this a marvellous bus? It was worth the wait, don’t you think?’

Boris smiled again, but he was now examining the cake and said nothing.

‘Boris,’ I went on, ‘I’ve been meaning to say to you. Because you might wonder sometimes. You see, Boris, I could never have wished for anything better ...’ I laughed suddenly. ‘I’m sounding silly. What I mean is, I’m very happy. About you. Very happy we’re together.’ I gave another laugh. ‘Aren’t you enjoying this bus ride?’

Boris nodded, his mouth full of cake. ‘It’s good,’ he said.

‘I’m certainly enjoying it. And what kind people.’

At the back of the bus a few of the passengers began to sing. I felt very relaxed and sank deeper into my seat. Outside the day had grown overcast again. We were still in a built-up part of the town, but as I watched I saw two road signs go by, one after the other, marked: ‘North Highway’.

‘Excuse me,’ a man’s voice said somewhere behind us.

‘But I heard you saying to the driver you were going to the artificial lake. I hope it won’t be too chilly out there for you both. If you were just wanting somewhere nice to spend the afternoon, I’d recommend you get off a few stops earlier at the Maria Christina Gardens. There’s a boating pond there the young man might like.’

The speaker was sitting directly behind us. The backs of our seats were tall and I could not see the man clearly even though I craned round to do so. In any case I thanked him for his suggestion – it was clearly well meant – and started to explain the special nature of our visit to the artificial lake. I had not intended to go into detail, but once I had started I found there was something about the convivial atmosphere around us that compelled me to go on talking. In fact, I was rather pleased by the tone I happened to strike, perfectly poised between seriousness and jocularly. Moreover, I could tell from the sensitive murmurs coming from behind me that the man was listening carefully and sympathetically. In any case, before long, I found myself explaining about Number Nine and just why he was so special. I was just recounting how Boris had come to leave him behind in the box when the passenger interrupted with a polite cough.

‘Excuse me,’ he said, ‘but a trip of this kind is almost bound to cause a little worry. It’s perfectly natural. But really, if I may say so, I think you have every reason to be optimistic.’ He was presumably leaning right forward in his seat, for his voice, calm and soothing, was coming from a

spot just behind where Boris's shoulder was touching mine.

'I feel sure you'll find this Number Nine. Of course, you're worried just now. So many things could have gone wrong, you're thinking. That's only natural. But from what you've just told me, I feel sure it'll turn out well. Of course, when you first knock on the door, the new people might not know who you are and be a little suspicious. But then once you've explained they're bound to welcome you in. If it's the wife who's answered the door, she'll say: "Oh, at last! We've been wondering when you'd be coming round." Yes, I'm sure she will. And she'll turn and shout to her husband: "It's the little boy who used to live here!" And then the husband will come out, he'll be some kindly man, perhaps he'll be in the middle of re-decorating the apartment. And he'll say: "Well, at last. Come on in and have some tea." And he'll show you into the main room, while his wife slips into the kitchen to prepare the refreshments. And you'll notice straight away how much the place has changed since you were there, and the husband will see this and at first he'll be a little apologetic. But then, once you've made it quite clear you're not at all resentful about their changing things, he's sure to start showing you around the place, around the whole apartment, pointing out this change, that change, most of which he's seen to with his own hands and about which he's very proud. And then the wife will come into the living room with the tea and some little cakes she's made, and you'll all sit down and enjoy yourselves, eating and drinking, listening to this couple talking about how much they like the apartment and the estate. Of course, through all this, you'll both be concerned about Number Nine and be waiting for the right moment to bring up the purpose of your visit. But I expect they'll raise it first. I expect the wife will say, after you've been talking and drinking tea for a good while, she'll say: "And was there something you came back for? Something you left behind?" And that's when you could mention this Number Nine and the box. And then she's bound to say: "Oh yes, we kept that box in a special place.

We could see it was something important.” And even as she’s saying this, she’ll give her husband a little signal. Perhaps not even a signal, husbands and wives become almost telepathic when they’ve lived happily together for as many years as this couple have done. Of course, that’s not to say they don’t quarrel. Oh no, they may even have quarrelled quite often, perhaps even gone through patches over the years when they seriously fell out. But you’ll see when you meet them, a couple like this, you’ll see these things sort themselves out in the end and that they’re essentially very happy together. Well, the husband, he’ll go and fetch the box from some place where they keep important things, he’ll bring it in, perhaps it’ll be wrapped up in tissue paper. And of course, you’ll open it straight away and this Number Nine, he’ll be there inside, just the way you left him, still waiting to be glued to his base. So then you can close the box and the nice people will offer you some more tea. Then after a while you’ll say you’ll have to be going, you don’t wish to impose on them too much. But the wife will insist you have more of her cake. And the husband will want to show you both around the apartment one last time to admire all his redecorating. Then finally they’ll wave you off from the doorstep, saying to be sure to call whenever you’re passing by again. Of course, it may not happen precisely like this, but from what you’ve told me, I feel sure, by and large, that’s how things will turn out. So there’s no need to worry, no need at all ...’

The man’s voice in my ear, together with the gentle swaying of the bus as it proceeded along the highway, was producing an enormously relaxing effect. I had already closed my eyes soon after the man had started to speak, and now around this point, sinking further into my seat, I dozed off contentedly.

I became aware that Boris was shaking my shoulder. ‘We’ve got to get off now,’ he was saying.

Becoming fully awake, I realised the bus had come to a halt and that we were the only remaining passengers. At the front the driver had risen to his feet and was patiently waiting for us to disembark. As we made our way down the aisle, the driver said:

‘Do take care. It’s very chilly out there. That lake, in my opinion, should be filled. It’s nothing but a nuisance and every year several people drown in it. Admittedly some of these are suicides, and I suppose if the lake weren’t there, they might choose some other more unpleasant method. But in my view the lake should be filled.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Obviously the lake provokes controversy. I’m an outsider myself so I tend to keep out of these arguments.’

‘Very wise, sir. Well, do enjoy your day.’ Then, saluting Boris, he said: ‘Enjoy yourself, young man.’

Boris and I stepped down off the bus and as it drove away looked around at our surroundings. We were standing on the outer rim of a vast concrete basin. Some distance away, at the centre of the basin, was the artificial lake, its kidney shape making it resemble some gigantic version of the kind of vulgar swimming pool Hollywood stars were once reputed to own. I could not help admiring the way the lake – indeed the whole estate – proudly announced its artificiality. There was no trace of grass anywhere. Even the thin trees dotted around the concrete slopes had all been encased in steel pots and cut precisely into the paving. Looking down on the whole scene, completely encircling us, were the countless identical windows of the high-rise housing blocks. I noticed there was a subtle curve to the front of each block, making possible the seamless circular effect reminiscent of a sports stadium. But for all the apartments now surrounding us – at least four hundred, I guessed – there were hardly any people to be seen. I could make out a few figures walking briskly on the other side of the lake – a man with a dog, a woman with a

pram - but there was clearly something about the atmosphere that kept people indoors. Certainly, as the bus driver had warned, the climate was not conducive. Even as Boris and I stood there a bitter wind came blowing across the water.

‘Well, Boris,’ I said, ‘we’d better get a move on.’

The little boy seemed to have lost all his enthusiasm. He was staring emptily at the lake and did not move. I turned towards the block behind us, making an effort to put a spring into my step, but then remembered I did not know where in all this vastness our particular apartment was situated.

‘Boris, why don’t you lead the way? Come on, what’s the matter?’

Boris sighed then began to walk. I followed him up several flights of concrete stairs. Once, as we were turning the corner to climb the next flight, he let out a shriek and stiffened into a martial arts posture. I was startled, but saw immediately there was no assailant other than in the boy’s imagination. I said simply:

‘Very good, Boris.’

Thereafter, he repeated the shriek and the pose before turning up each new flight of stairs. Then to my relief - I was growing short of breath - Boris led us off the stairs and along a walkway. From this higher vantage point, the kidney shape of the lake was all the more evident. The sky was a dull white and although the walkway was covered - there must have been two or three more running directly above - there was scant shelter and gusts of wind blew at us with savage force. On our left-hand side were the apartments, a series of short concrete stairways linking the walkway to the main building like little bridges across a moat. Some of the stairways led up to apartment doors while others led down. As we walked on, I found myself studying each of these doors, but when after a few minutes none of them had stirred even

the faintest memory I gave up and glanced out at the view over the lake.

Boris, all the while, had been walking purposefully a few paces ahead, his excitement for our venture having apparently returned. He was whispering to himself, and the longer we walked the more his whispering seemed to grow in intensity. Then he began to jump as he walked, throwing karate blows at the air, the clatter of his feet echoing about us each time he landed. But he refrained from shrieking as he had on the stairs, and since we had not yet encountered a single person on the walkway, I decided there was no cause to restrain him.

After a while I happened to glance down at the lake and was surprised to find I was now looking at it from a considerably different angle. Only then did it occur to me that the walkway described a gradual circle right the way round the estate. It was perfectly possible that we could walk in circles indefinitely. I watched Boris hurrying on in front of me, busily performing his antics, and wondered if he remembered the way to the apartment any better than I did. Indeed, it occurred to me I had not planned matters at all well. I should at the very least have taken the trouble to contact beforehand the new occupants of the apartment. After all, when one thought about it, there was no reason why they would particularly wish to entertain us. A pessimism about the whole expedition began to come over me.

‘Boris,’ I called to him, ‘I hope you’re paying attention. We don’t want to walk right past it.’

He glanced back at me without ceasing his furious mutterings, then ran on further ahead and recommenced his karate movements.

Eventually it struck me we had been walking an inordinate time, and when I glanced down again at the lake, I could see we had come at least a full circle around it. Ahead of me Boris was still muttering busily to himself.

‘Look, wait a moment,’ I called to him. ‘Boris, wait.’

He stopped walking and gave me a sulky look as I came up to him.

‘Boris,’ I said gently, ‘are you sure you remember the way to the old apartment?’

He shrugged and looked away. Then he said lamely: ‘Of course I do.’

‘But we seem to have gone right the way round.’

Boris shrugged again. He had become engrossed by his shoe, which he was angling one way and then the other. Eventually he said: ‘They would have kept Number Nine safe, wouldn’t they?’

‘I should think so, Boris. He was in a box, an important-looking box. They would keep something like that aside. High up on a shelf, somewhere like that.’

For a moment Boris continued to regard his shoe. Then he said: ‘We went past it. We’ve gone past it twice.’

‘What? You mean we’ve been walking round and round up here in this chilly wind for nothing? Why didn’t you say so, Boris? I don’t understand you.’

He remained silent, moving his foot one way, then the other.

‘Well, do you suppose we should go back?’ I asked. ‘Or do we have to circle the lake yet again?’

Boris sighed and for a moment seemed deep in thought. Then he looked up and said: ‘All right. It’s back there. Just back there.’

We retraced our steps a short distance along the walkway. Before long Boris stopped at one of the stairways and glanced quickly up at the apartment door. Then almost immediately he turned his back to it and began once more to study his shoe.

‘Ah yes,’ I said, looking carefully up at the door. In fact the door - painted blue and with virtually nothing to distinguish it from any of the others - aroused no memories for me at all.

Boris glanced over his shoulder up at the apartment, then looked away again, poking his toe at the ground. For a while I remained at the bottom of the stairway, a little uncertain what to do next. Eventually, I said:

‘Boris, why don’t you just wait here a minute? I’ll go up and see if anyone’s in.’

The little boy went on prodding with his foot. I went up the steps and knocked on the door. There was no response. When I had knocked a second time with no result, I put my face up to the small glass panel. The glass was frosted and I could see nothing.

‘The window,’ Boris called from behind me. ‘Have a look through the window.’

I saw to my left a sort of balcony - really no more than a ledge running along the front of the building, too narrow even to put out an upright chair. I reached out a hand to its iron balustrade, and by leaning my body right over the wall of the stairway I was just able to peer in through the nearest window. I found myself looking into an open-plan lounge with a dining table at one end against a wall and rather dated modern furnishings.

‘Can you see it?’ Boris was calling. ‘Can you see the box?’

‘Just a minute.’

I tried to lean my body even further over the wall, conscious though I was of the gaping drop below me.

‘Can you see it?’

‘Just a minute, Boris.’

The room was by now growing steadily more familiar to me. The triangular clock on the wall, the cream foam sofa, the three-tiered hi-fi cabinet; I found object after object, as my gaze fell on it, bringing with it a poignant nudge of recognition. However, as I continued to peer into the room, I gained the strong impression that the whole of the rear section - which adjoined the main portion to form an 'L' - had not previously been there at all, that it was a very recent addition. Nevertheless, as I continued to look at it, this same rear section seemed in itself strongly reminiscent, and after a moment I realised this was because it resembled exactly the back part of the parlour in the house my parents and I had lived in for several months in Manchester. The house, a narrow city terrace, had been damp and badly in need of redecorating, but we had put up with it since we were staying only until my father's work enabled us to move away to something much better. To me, a nine-year-old, the house quickly came to represent not only an exciting change, but the hope that a fresh, happier chapter was unfolding for us all.

'You won't find anyone in there,' a man's voice said behind me. Straightening, I saw that the speaker had emerged from the neighbouring apartment. He was standing in front of his door at the top of a stairway parallel to the one I was standing on. The man was around fifty, with heavy, bulldog-like features. He was unkempt and his T-shirt had a damp patch around the chest.

'Ah,' I said, 'so this apartment is empty?'

The man shrugged. 'Maybe they're coming back. My wife and I, we don't like an empty apartment next to us, but after all that trouble, we're relieved, I can tell you. We're not unfriendly people. But after all of that, well, we'd much sooner have it the way it is now. Empty.'

'Ah. So it's been empty for some time. Weeks? Months?'

‘Oh, a month at least. They might be coming back, but we wouldn’t care if they didn’t. Mind you, I felt sorry for them at times. We’re not unfriendly people. And we’ve been through difficult times ourselves. But when it goes on like that, well, you just want them to go. We’d rather have it empty.’

‘I see. A lot of trouble.’

‘Oh yes. To be fair, I don’t think there was physical violence. But still, when you had to listen to them shouting late at night, it was very upsetting.’

‘Excuse me, but look here ...’ I came a step closer to him, signalling with my eyes that Boris was within earshot.

‘No, my wife didn’t like it one bit,’ the man went on, ignoring me. ‘Whenever it started, she used to bury her head in the pillow. Even in the kitchen once. I came in and there she was cooking with a pillow around her head. It wasn’t pleasant. Whenever we saw him he was sober, very respectable. He’d give us a quick salute, be on his way. But my wife was convinced that’s what was behind it. You know, drink ...’

‘Look,’ I whispered angrily, leaning over the concrete wall separating us, ‘can’t you see I have my boy with me? Is this the sort of talk to come out with in front of him?’

The man looked down towards Boris with a surprised expression. Then he said: ‘But he’s not so young, is he? You can’t protect him from everything. Still, if you don’t like talk of this kind, fine, let’s talk about something else. You think of a better topic if you can. I was just telling you how it was. But if you don’t want to talk about it ...’

‘No, I certainly don’t! I certainly don’t wish to hear ...’

‘Well, it wasn’t important. It’s just that, quite naturally, I tended to side with him rather than with her. If he’d actually got violent, well, that would have been something else, but there was never any evidence of that. So

I tended to blame *her*. Okay, he went away a lot, but from what we understood he had to, that was all part of his work. It wasn't a reason, that's what I'm saying, it wasn't a reason for her to behave in the way she did ...'

'Look, will you stop it? Don't you have any sense? The boy! He can hear ...'

'All right, he may be listening. So what? Children always hear these things sooner or later. I was just explaining why I tended to take his side, and that's why my wife brought up the drinking. The going away was one thing, my wife would say, but the drinking was another ...'

'Look, if you carry on like this, I'll be forced to terminate this conversation here and now. I'm warning you. I'll do it.'

'You can't hope to protect your boy for ever, you know. How old is he? He doesn't look so young. It's not good to over-shelter them. He's got to come to terms with the world, warts and all ...'

'He doesn't have to yet! Not just yet! Besides, I don't care what you think. What is it to you anyway? He's my boy, he's in my charge, I won't have this sort of talk ...'

'I don't know why you're getting so angry. I'm only making conversation. I was just telling you what we made of it. They weren't bad people, it's not that we disliked them, but it sometimes got too much. Mind you, I suppose it always sounds much worse when it's coming through a wall. Look, it's useless trying to hide it from a boy his age. You're fighting a losing battle. And what's the point ...'

'I don't care what you think! Not for a few years yet! He won't, he won't hear about such things ...'

'You're foolish. These things I'm talking about, it's just what happens in life. Even my wife and me, we've had our

ups and downs. That's why I sympathised with him. I know what it feels like, that first moment you suddenly realise ...'

'I warn you! I'll terminate this conversation! I'm warning you!'

'But then I never drank. That does change things. Going away a lot is one thing, but to drink like that ...'

'This is your last warning! Any more and I'll leave!'

'He was cruel when he was drunk. Not physical, all right, but we could hear a lot of it, he was cruel all right. We couldn't make out all the words, but we used to sit up in the dark and listen ...'

'That's it! That's it! I warned you! Now I'm going! I'm going!'

Turning my back on the man, I ran down the steps to where Boris was standing. I took his arm and began to hurry away, but as I did so the man started to yell after us:

'You're fighting a losing battle! He has to find out what it's like! It's just life! There's nothing wrong with it! It's just real life!'

Boris was looking back with some curiosity and I was obliged to tug hard at his arm. For several moments we kept up a steady pace. More than once I sensed Boris trying to slow down, but I kept going, anxious to put beyond possibility any threat of the man pursuing us. By the time we slowed to a halt, I found I was badly out of breath. Staggering over to the wall - it was disconcertingly low, finishing only just above my waist - I put my elbows up and leaned over. I looked out at the lake, at the high-rise blocks beyond, at the pale wide sky, and waited for my chest to stop heaving.

After a while I became aware of Boris standing alongside me. He had his back to me and was fiddling with a loose fragment of masonry near the top of the wall. I began to feel

a certain embarrassment about what had just occurred, and realised I would have to offer him some sort of explanation. I was still trying to think of something to say, when Boris, keeping his back to me, muttered:

‘That man was mad, wasn’t he?’

‘Yes, Boris, completely mad. Possibly deranged.’

Boris went on fiddling with the wall. Then he said: ‘It doesn’t matter any more. We don’t have to get Number Nine.’

‘If it wasn’t for that man, Boris ...’

‘It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter any more.’ Then Boris turned to me and smiled. ‘It’s been a great day so far,’ he said brightly.

‘You’re enjoying it?’

‘It’s been great. The bus trip, everything. It’s been great.’

I was seized by an impulse to reach out and embrace him, but it struck me he would be puzzled, possibly alarmed by such a gesture. In the end I lightly tousled his hair then turned back to the view.

The wind was no longer troublesome, and for a moment we stood there quietly side by side, looking out over the estate. Then I said:

‘Boris, I know you must be wondering. I mean, why it is we can’t just settle down and live quietly, the three of us. You must, I know you do, you must wonder why I have to go away all the time, even though your mother gets upset about it. Well, you have to understand, the reason I keep going on these trips, it’s not because I don’t love you and dearly want to be with you. In some ways, I’d like nothing better than to stay at home with you and Mother, live in an apartment like that one over there, anywhere. But you see, it’s not so simple. I have to keep going on these trips

because, you see, you can never tell when it's going to come along. I mean the very special one, the very important trip, the one that's very very important, not just for me but for everyone, everyone in the whole world. How can I explain it to you, Boris, you're so young. You see, it would be so easy just to miss it. To say one time, no, I won't go, I'll just rest. Then only later I'll discover that was the one, the very very important one. And you see, once you miss it, there's no going back, it would be too late. It won't matter how hard I travel afterwards, it won't matter, it would be too late, and all these years I've spent would have been for nothing. I've seen it happen to other people, Boris. They spend year after year travelling and they start to get tired, perhaps a little lazy. But that's often just when it comes along. And they miss it. And, you know, they regret it for the rest of their lives. They get bitter and sad. By the time they die, they've become broken people. So you see, Boris, that's why. That's why I've got to carry on for the moment, keep travelling all the time. It makes things very difficult for us, I realise. But we have to be strong and patient, all three of us. It won't be much longer, I'm sure. It'll come soon, the very important one, then it will all be done, I'll be able to relax and rest then. I could stay at home all I wanted, it wouldn't matter, we could enjoy ourselves, just the three of us. We could do all the things we haven't been able to do. It won't be long now, I'm sure of it, but we'll just have to be patient. Boris, I hope you can understand what I'm saying.'

Boris remained silent for a long time. Then suddenly he straightened and said sternly: 'Move off quietly. All of you.' With that he ran a few steps away and began his karate movements again.

For the next few minutes I went on leaning against the wall, looking out at the view, listening to the sounds of Boris whispering furiously to himself. Then when I glanced at him again, I realised he was enacting in his imagination the

latest version of a fantasy he had been playing through over and over during the past weeks. No doubt the fact of our being so close to its actual setting had made irresistible the prospect of going through it all again. For indeed, the scenario involved Boris and his grandfather fighting off a large gang of street thugs, in this very walkway, directly outside the old apartment.

I continued to watch him moving busily, now several yards away from me, and supposed he was coming to that part where he and his grandfather, standing shoulder to shoulder, ready themselves for another onslaught. There would already be a sea of unconscious bodies over the ground, but a number of the most persistent thugs would now be re-grouping for another assault. Boris and his grandfather would wait calmly side by side, while the thugs whispered strategies in the darkness of the walkway. In this, as in all such scenarios, Boris was in some vague way older. Not an adult exactly - which would make things too remote, as well as raising complications as to his grandfather's age - but somehow old enough to make credible the necessary physical feats.

Boris and Gustav would allow the thugs all the time they required to take up their formation. Then once the wave came, grandfather and grandson, a smoothly co-ordinated team, would deal efficiently, almost sadly, with the assailants flying at them from all sides. Eventually the attack would be over - but no, one last thug might leap out of the dark wielding some hideous blade. Gustav, being the nearest, would deliver a quick blow to the neck and then the battle would at last be over.

For a few silent moments, Boris and his grandfather would gravely survey the bodies littered about them. Then Gustav, casting his experienced gaze one last time over the scene, would give a nod, at which the two of them would turn away with the expressions of men who had undertaken work they had had to do, but had not enjoyed. They would ascend the short stairway to the door of the old apartment, take a last look

at the defeated street thugs - some of them by now beginning to moan or crawl away - before going inside.

'It's all right now,' Gustav would announce at the door. 'They're gone.'

Sophie and I would then emerge nervously into the entrance hall. Boris, coming in behind his grandfather, would add: 'But it's not quite over yet. They'll attack once more, perhaps before morning.'

This assessment of the situation, which had been so obvious to grandfather and grandson they had not even bothered to confer, would be greeted with anguish by myself and Sophie.

'No, I can't stand it!' Sophie would wail, then break down sobbing. I would hold her in my arms in an attempt to comfort her, but my own features would be crumpling. Faced with this pathetic spectacle, Boris and Gustav would not show a flicker of disparagement. Gustav would place a reassuring hand on my shoulder, saying: 'Don't worry. Boris and I will be here. And after this last attack, that will be the end of it.'

'That's right,' Boris would confirm. 'One more battle is the most they'll take.' Then turning to Gustav he would say: 'Grandfather, perhaps this next time, I'll try reasoning with them again. Give them a last chance to back away.'

'They won't listen,' Gustav would say, shaking his head gravely. 'But you're right. We should give them a last chance.'

Sophie and I, overwhelmed with fear, would disappear deeper into the apartment weeping in each other's arms. Boris and Gustav would look at each other, sigh wearily, then, unbolting the front door, go back outside.

They would find the walkway dark, silent and empty.

‘We might as well get some rest,’ Gustav would say. ‘You sleep first, Boris. I’ll wake you if I hear them coming.’

Boris, nodding, would sit down on the top step of the stairway and, with his back against the front door, go promptly to sleep.

Some time later, a touch on his arm, and he would spring to his feet instantly awake. His grandfather would already be staring down at the street thugs gathering before them in the walkway. They would be more numerous than ever, the last confrontation having compelled them to recruit every one of their number from every dark recess of the city. Now they would all be there, dressed in torn leathers, army jackets, cruel belts, holding metal bars or bicycle chains - but their own sense of honour forbidding them to bring guns. Boris and Gustav would come slowly down the stairway towards them, pausing perhaps on the second or third step up. Then Boris, at a signal from his grandfather, would begin to speak, raising his voice so that it rang around the concrete pillars:

‘We’ve fought you many times. There are even more of you this time, I can see. But you must each of you know in your hearts you cannot win. And this time my grandfather and I can’t guarantee some of you won’t get seriously hurt. There’s no sense in this fighting. You must all have had homes once. Mothers and fathers. Perhaps brothers and sisters. I want you to understand what’s happening. These attacks of yours, your continual terrorising of our apartment, has meant that my mother is crying all the time. She’s always tense and irritable, and this means she often tells me off for no reason. It also means Papa has to go away for long periods, sometimes abroad, which Mother doesn’t like. This is all the result of your terrorising the apartment. Perhaps you’re simply doing it because you’re high-spirited, because you come from broken homes and you know no better. This is why I’m trying to get you to understand what’s really happening,

the real effects of your inconsiderate behaviour. What it could come to sooner or later is that Papa won't come back home at all. We might even have to move out of the apartment altogether. This is why I've had to bring Grandfather here, away from his important work in charge of a big hotel. We can't allow you to continue with what you've been doing. And this is why we've been fighting you. Now that I've explained things to you, you have a chance to think it all over and go back. If you don't, then Grandfather and I will have no choice but to fight you again. We'll do our best to knock you unconscious without doing any long-lasting damage, but in a large fight, even with our level of skill, we can't guarantee some of you won't end up with bad bruises, even broken bones. So take your chance and go back.'

Gustav would give a small smile of approval at this speech, then the two of them would survey again the brutish faces before them. A significant proportion would be looking uncertainly at each other, fear rather than reason causing them to re-consider. But then their leaders - horrific, scowling characters - would start up a war-like growl, which would steadily spread through their ranks. Then they would surge forward. Quickly, Boris and his grandfather would take up positions, back to back, moving neatly in formation, employing their own carefully developed blend of karate and other combat techniques. The street thugs would come at them from every direction, only to be sent spinning, stumbling, flying away emitting grunts of surprised horror, until once again the ground would be covered with unconscious bodies. For the next several moments Boris and Gustav would stand together waiting, watching carefully, until the thugs began to stir, some groaning, others shaking their heads trying to determine where they were. At this point, Gustav would take a step forward, saying:

'Now go, let that be the finish. Leave this apartment alone. This was a very happy home before you started to

terrorise it. If you return again, my grandson and I will have no choice but to start breaking bones. ’

This speech would hardly be necessary. The street thugs would know that this time they had been thoroughly defeated, that they were fortunate not to be more badly hurt. Slowly they would begin to clamber to their feet and hobble away, supporting each other in twos and threes, many moaning in pain.

Once the last thug had limped away, Boris and Gustav would exchange a look of quiet satisfaction, turn and go back up to the apartment. As they came in, Sophie and I - we would have witnessed the entire scene from the window - would welcome them back jubilantly. ‘Thank God it’s over,’ I would say excitedly. ‘Thank God.’

‘I’ve already started to cook a celebratory meal,’ Sophie would announce, beaming happily, all the tension now fallen from her face. ‘We’re so grateful to you and Grandfather, Boris. Why don’t we all play a board game tonight?’

‘I’ll have to be going,’ Gustav would say. ‘I’ve got a lot to do back at the hotel. If there’s any further trouble, let me know. But I’m certain that’s the end of it.’

We would wave Gustav off as he went down the stairway. Then, closing the door, Boris, Sophie and I would settle in for the evening. Sophie would move in and out of the kitchen, preparing the meal, singing lightly to herself, while Boris and I lounged about on the floor of the living room, engrossed in the board game. Then, after we had been playing for an hour or so, at a point when Sophie was out of the room, I would suddenly look up at Boris with a serious expression and say quietly:

‘Thank you for what you did, Boris. Now things can be as they were. The way they were before.’

‘Look!’ Boris shouted, and I saw he was standing beside me again, pointing over the wall. ‘Look! It’s Aunt Kim!’

Sure enough, down on the ground below us, a woman was waving frantically to attract our attention. She was wearing a green cardigan which she was holding tightly to herself, and her hair was blowing about messily. Noticing we had at last spotted her, she shouted something, but it was lost in the wind.

‘Aunt Kim!’ Boris called down.

The woman gesticulated and shouted something again.

‘Let’s go down,’ Boris said, and began to lead the way, suddenly full of excitement once more.

I followed Boris as he ran down several flights of concrete stairs. As we came out at ground level, the wind immediately hit at us with great force, but Boris still managed to perform for the woman’s benefit a staggering motion as though landing from a parachute jump.

‘Aunt Kim’ was a stocky woman of around forty, whose somewhat stern face was definitely familiar to me.

‘You must be deaf, both of you,’ she said as we came up to her. ‘We saw you get off that bus and we were calling and calling, but were you listening? And then I come down here to get you and you’re nowhere to be found.’

‘Oh dear,’ I said. ‘We didn’t hear anything, did we, Boris? It must be this wind. So’ - I cast my gaze around me - ‘you were watching us from your apartment.’

The stocky woman pointed vaguely to one of the countless windows overlooking us. ‘We were calling and calling.’ Then, turning to Boris, she said: ‘Your mother’s up there, young feller. She’s just *longing* to see you.’

‘Mother?’

'You'd better come on up straight away, she's just longing to see you. And you know what? She's been cooking all afternoon, getting the most fantastic feast ready for when you get home tonight. You're just not going to believe it, she says she's prepared everything, all your favourites, everything you can think of. She was just telling me all about it, and then we looked out of the window and there you were, getting off the bus. Listen, I've just spent half an hour looking for you guys, I'm frozen. Do we have to keep standing out here?'

She had been holding out her hand. Boris took it and we all started towards the section of the building she had indicated. As we got closer, Boris ran on ahead, pushed open a fire door and disappeared inside. The door was swinging shut as the stocky woman and I approached. She held it open for me, saying as she did so: 'Ryder, aren't you supposed to be somewhere else? Sophie was just telling me how her phone's been ringing all afternoon. People trying to track you down.'

'Really? Ah. Well, as you see, I'm here.' I gave a laugh. 'I brought Boris here.'

The woman shrugged. 'I suppose you know your business.'

We were standing in a dimly lit space at the bottom of a stairwell. On the wall next to me was a bank of mail boxes and some fire equipment. As we started up the first flight - there were at least five more flights above us - the clatter of Boris's running feet came from somewhere over our heads, and then I heard him shout: 'Mother!' There were exclamations of delight, more clatter of feet, and Sophie's voice saying: 'Oh my darling, my darling!' A muffled quality to her voice suggested they were embracing, and by the time the stocky woman and I arrived on the landing they had disappeared inside the apartment.

'Excuse the mess,' the woman said, ushering me in.

I went through a tiny entrance hall into an open-plan room furnished with simple modern items. A large picture window dominated the room, and as I came in I saw Sophie and Boris standing together in front of it, their figures almost silhouettes against the grey sky. Sophie smiled briefly at me, then resumed her conversation with Boris. They seemed excited about something and Sophie kept hugging Boris's shoulders. From the way they were pointing out of the window, I thought that perhaps Sophie was recounting how she and the stocky woman had spotted us earlier. But as I moved closer I heard Sophie saying:

'Yes, really. Everything's virtually ready. We just have to heat a few things up, like the meat pies.'

Boris said something I did not catch, to which Sophie replied:

'Of course we can. We'll play whichever one you like. You can see which one you want once we've finished eating.'

Boris looked at his mother questioningly, and I noticed a guardedness had entered his manner, preventing him from becoming as excited as perhaps Sophie would have liked. Then, as he wandered off to another part of the room, Sophie stepped closer to me and shook her head sadly.

'I'm sorry,' she said quietly. 'It wasn't any good. If anything, it was worse than the one last month. The views are stunning, it's built right on a cliff edge, but it's just not sturdy enough. Mr Mayer agreed in the end. He thinks the roof could fall down in a strong gale, perhaps even within the next few years. I came straight back, I was home by eleven. I'm sorry. You're disappointed, I can tell.' She glanced across towards Boris, who was examining a portable cassette player left on a shelf.

'There's no need to get discouraged,' I said with a sigh. 'I'm sure we'll find something soon.'

‘But I was thinking,’ Sophie said. ‘On the coach coming back. I was thinking there’s no reason we can’t start doing all sorts of things together now, house or no house. So as soon as I got in, I started cooking. I thought tonight we could have a great feast, just the three of us. I remembered the way Mother used to do it when I was small, before her illness. She used to cook lots and lots of different little things and put them all out for us to pick and choose. They were such great evenings and I thought, well, tonight there’s no reason we couldn’t do something like that, just the three of us. I hadn’t really considered it before, not with that kitchen the way it is, but I had a good look around it and realised I was being silly. Okay, it’s far from ideal but a lot of it works. So I started cooking. I’ve been cooking right through the afternoon. And I’ve managed to make just about everything. All Boris’s favourites. It’s just sitting there waiting for us, it just needs warming up. We’ll have a great feast tonight.’

‘That’s good. I’m very much looking forward to it.’

‘There’s no reason why we can’t, even in that apartment. And you’ve been so understanding about ... about everything. I was thinking about it all. On the coach coming back. We’ve got to put the past behind us now. We’ve got to start doing things together again. Good things.’

‘Yes. You’re quite right.’

Sophie stared out of the window for a few seconds. Then she said: ‘Oh, I nearly forgot. That woman kept phoning. All the time I was cooking. Miss Stratmann. Asking if I knew where you were. Did she get hold of you?’

‘Miss Stratmann? Well no. What was she wanting?’

‘She seemed to think there’d been a mix up over some of your appointments today. She was very polite, kept apologising for disturbing me. She said she was sure you were well on top of everything, she was just phoning to check up,

that was all, she wasn't worried in the least. But then fifteen minutes later the phone would ring and it would be her again. '

'Well, it's nothing to be concerned about. Er ... she was under the impression I should have been somewhere else, you say? '

'I'm not sure what she was saying. She was very nice, but she kept on phoning. I over-cooked a tray of chicken tarts because of that. Then, the last time she phoned, she asked if I was looking forward to it. To this reception this evening at the Karwinsky Gallery. You hadn't told me about it, but she said it like they were expecting me. So I said, yes, I was very much looking forward to it. Then she asked if Boris was, and I said yes, he was too, and so were you, that you were really looking forward to it. That seemed to reassure her. She said she wasn't worried, she was just mentioning it, that was all. I put the phone down and I was a little disappointed at first. I thought this reception might interfere with our feast. But then I saw I had time to get everything ready first, that we could all go and come back, as long as we didn't have to stay too long we could still have our evening together. And then I thought, well, it's a good thing really. A good thing both for me and for Boris, to go to a reception like this.' She suddenly reached out to Boris, who had come wandering back towards us, and hugged him roughly. 'Boris, you'll be a big hit, won't you? You won't mind all these people. You just be yourself and you'll really enjoy it. You'll be a big hit. Then before you know it, it'll be time to go home and then we'll have a really great evening, just the three of us. I've got everything ready, all your favourites. '

Boris wearily fought off his mother's embrace and went off again. Sophie watched him with a smile, then turned to me, saying:

‘Hadn’t we better be setting off soon? The Karwinsky Gallery, it might take some time from here.’

‘Yes,’ I said and glanced at my watch. ‘Yes, you have a point.’ I turned to the stocky woman who had come back into the room. ‘Perhaps you could advise us,’ I said to her. ‘I’m not entirely certain which bus will take us to this gallery. Do you know if it’s coming in soon?’

‘To the Karwinsky Gallery?’ The stocky woman gave me a look of contempt and only Boris’s presence seemed to stop her adding something sarcastic. Then she said: ‘You won’t get a bus out to the Karwinsky Gallery from here. You’d have to take a bus back into the city centre. Then you’d have to wait for a tram outside the library. There’s no way you’ll make it on time.’

‘Ah. What a pity. I’d been relying on a bus being available.’

The stocky woman gave me another scornful look, then said: ‘Take my car. I won’t be needing it this evening.’

‘That’s awfully kind of you,’ I said. ‘But are you sure we won’t be ...’

‘Oh, cut the crap, Ryder. You need the car. There’s no other way you’d get out to the Karwinsky Gallery in time. Even with a car, you’d have to be starting out right now.’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘that’s just what I was thinking. But look, we don’t want to inconvenience you.’

‘You can just take a few boxes of books with you. I won’t be able to carry them if I have to go in by bus tomorrow.’

‘Yes, of course. Whatever we can do.’

‘Just drive them round to Hermann Roth’s shop in the morning, any time before ten.’

‘Don’t worry, Kim,’ Sophie said before I could say anything. ‘I’ll see to all that. You’re so good.’

‘Okay, you guys had better start moving. Hey, young feller’ - the stocky woman gestured to Boris - ‘why don’t you help me load up these books?’

For the next few minutes I found myself alone at the window gazing out at the view. The others had disappeared into a bedroom and I could hear them talking and laughing behind me. It occurred to me I should go in and assist them, but then I saw the importance of my taking the opportunity to collect my thoughts on the evening ahead, and I went on staring down at the artificial lake. Some children had started to kick a ball against the fence on the far side of the water, but otherwise the perimeter areas were deserted.

Eventually I heard the stocky woman calling me and became aware that they were waiting to leave. I came into the hallway to find Sophie and Boris, each carrying a cardboard box, already going out into the corridor. They began to argue about something as they set off down the staircase.

The stocky woman was holding open the front door for me. ‘Sophie’s determined it goes well tonight,’ she said, her voice lowered. ‘So don’t let her down again, Ryder.’

‘Don’t worry,’ I said. ‘I’ll make sure everything goes well.’

She gave me a hard look, then turned and went down the staircase jingling her keys.

I followed after her. We were on the second flight down when I saw a woman coming up the stairs with a tired gait. The figure squeezed past the stocky woman with a muttered ‘excuse me’ and we had already passed each other before I realised that it was Fiona Roberts, still in her ticket inspector’s uniform. She too did not seem to recognise me until the last moment - the light was poor on the stairs -

but she turned wearily, a hand on the metal banister, and said:

‘Oh, here you are. It’s good of you to be so punctual. I’m sorry I was a little longer than I said. There was a re-routing, a tram on the eastern circuit, so my shift went on much longer. I hope you haven’t been waiting here long.’

‘No, no.’ I drifted back up a step or two. ‘Not long at all. But unfortunately, my schedule has got very tight ...’

‘It’s all right, I won’t take any more of your time than necessary. Actually, I have to tell you, I phoned round the girls, just as we said, I phoned from the depot canteen during my break. I told them to expect me with a friend, but I didn’t actually tell them it was *you*. I was going to at first, just as we’d agreed, but I started by phoning Trude and as soon as I heard that voice, the way she said: “Oh yes, it’s you, dear,” I could hear so much in that voice, so much patronising bile. I could tell how all day she’d been talking about me, one phone call after another, with Inge and all the rest of them, discussing last night, all of them pretending to feel pity for me, saying how they’d have to treat me with sympathy, after all I was like an ill person, it was their duty to be kind. But of course they couldn’t keep me, how could someone like me be part of the Foundation? Oh, they’ll have enjoyed themselves today, I could hear it all, just in the way she said it as soon as I phoned. “Oh yes, it’s *you*, dear.” And I thought, all right then, let’s not give you any warning. Let’s see where you get by not believing me. That’s what I thought to myself. I thought, let’s hope you’re completely thrown when you open the door and see who’s standing there next to me. Let’s hope you’ve got your worst clothes on, perhaps your *sportswear*, and all your make-up’s off so that mound next to your nose is completely visible, and that your hair’s pinned back the way you do sometimes that makes you look at least fifteen years older. And let’s hope your apartment’s looking a mess, with

all those stupid magazines, those scandal sheets and romantic novelettes you read littering the furniture, and you'll be so thrown you won't know what to say, you'll be so embarrassed about everything, and you'll make it worse by saying one completely inane thing after another. And you'll offer refreshments then find you're short of everything, and you'll feel so foolish for never having believed me. Let's do that, I thought. So I never told her, I didn't tell any of them. I just said I'd be coming round with a friend.' She stopped and calmed herself a little. Then she said: 'I'm sorry. I hope I didn't sound vindictive. But I've been longing for this all day. It kept me going, doing all those tickets, it kept me going. The passengers must have wondered why I was going around like that, you know, with a gleam in my eye. Well, if you've got a tight schedule, I suppose we ought to start straight away. We can start at Trude's. Inge should be with her, she usually is at this time of the day, so we can deal with them both first off. I hardly care about the others. I just want to see the looks on the faces of those two. Well, let's go.'

She started up the stairs, all her former weariness gone. The stairs seemed to go on endlessly, one flight after another, until I was struggling for breath. Fiona, however, did not appear to be exerting herself at all. As we climbed she continued to talk, her voice lowered as though people might be listening all around us.

'You don't have to say too much to them,' I heard her saying at one point. 'Just let them fawn over you for a few minutes. But of course you might want to discuss your parents with them.'

When we finally came off the staircase I was so out of breath - my chest was actually wheezing - I was unable to attend much to the surroundings. I was aware of being led down a dim corridor past rows of doors and that Fiona, oblivious of my difficulties, was marching on ahead. Then suddenly she stopped and knocked at a door. Catching up with

her, I was obliged to lean a hand on the door frame, my head bowed, in an effort to recover my breath. When the door opened, I must have presented a somewhat crumpled figure beside the triumphant Fiona.

‘Trude,’ Fiona said. ‘I’ve brought a friend with me.’

With an effort I straightened myself and smiled pleasantly.

The woman who had opened the door was around fifty, plump with short white hair. She was wearing a loose pink jumper and baggy striped trousers. Trude glanced towards me briefly, then, noticing nothing out of the ordinary, turned to Fiona and said: 'Oh, yes. Well, I suppose you ought to come in.'

The condescension was obvious, but appeared only to heighten Fiona's anticipation, and she gave me a conspiratorial smile as we followed Trude inside.

'Is Inge here with you?' Fiona asked as we came into a tiny entrance hall.

'Yes, we've just come back,' Trude said. 'As it happens, we've got a lot to report. And since you just happened to call, you'll be the first to hear our news. That's lucky for you.'

This last remark seemed to be made entirely without irony. Trude then disappeared through a door, leaving us standing in the tiny hall, and we could hear her voice from within saying: 'Inge, it's Fiona. And some friend of hers. I suppose we ought to tell her what happened to us this afternoon.'

'Fiona?' Inge's voice sounded mildly outraged. Then with an effort, she said: 'Well, I suppose she ought to come in.'

Hearing this exchange, Fiona once again smiled excitedly at me. Then Trude's head peered round the door and we were shown into the lounge.

The room was not unlike the stocky woman's in size and shape, though the furniture was fussier and dominated by floral patterns. Perhaps it was simply that this apartment

faced a different direction, or perhaps the sky outside had cleared a little. In any case, the afternoon sun was drifting in through the large window and as I stepped into the light I fully expected the two women to start with recognition. Fiona obviously did so too for I noticed how she carefully stood to one side in case her presence lessened the impact. Neither Trude nor Inge, however, appeared to register anything. They each cast a quick uninterested glance at me and then Trude invited us, rather coldly, to sit down. We did so side by side on a narrow couch. Fiona, though initially bewildered, seemed to conclude that this unexpected turn of events could serve only to intensify the moment of revelation once it came, and gave me another gleeful little grin.

‘Shall I tell her or do you want to?’ Inge was saying.

Trude, who clearly deferred to the younger woman, said: ‘No, you tell it, Inge. You deserve to. But Fiona’ - she turned to us - ‘you’re not to go around telling people yet. We want to keep it a surprise for the meeting tonight, that’s only fair. Oh, didn’t we tell you about tonight’s meeting? Well, there, we’ve just told you. Do come if you’ve got time. Though since you’ve got your friend staying with you’ - she nodded towards me - ‘we’ll understand perfectly if you’re not able to come. But Inge, you tell it, you deserve to, really.’

‘Well, Fiona, I’m sure you’ll be interested in this, we’ve had a most exciting day. As you know, Mr von Braun had invited us to his office today to discuss with him personally our plans for looking after Mr Ryder’s parents. Oh, you didn’t know? I thought you *all* knew. Well, we’ll be reporting in detail tonight just how the meeting went, I’ll just tell you for now it went very nicely indeed, even if it had to be cut a little short. Oh, Mr von Braun was so apologetic about that, he couldn’t have been more so, could he, Trude? He was so apologetic about having to get away early, but when we learnt the reason, well, then we understood perfectly. You see, there’d been this very important trip arranged to the

zoo. Ah, you might laugh, Fiona dear, but this was no ordinary trip to the zoo. An official party, including naturally Mr von Braun himself, was going to take Mr Brodsky there. Do you know, Mr Brodsky had never been to the zoo? But the point was, Miss Collins had been persuaded to be there. Yes, at the zoo! Can you imagine that? After all these years! And no more than Mr Brodsky deserves, that's what we both said immediately. Yes, Miss Collins was going to be there when they arrived, she'd be waiting at an agreed place, and the official party would encounter her, and she would exchange conversation with Mr Brodsky. It had all been arranged. Can you imagine it? They were going to meet and actually talk after all this time! We said we could understand *perfectly* why our meeting had to be cut short, but Mr von Braun, he was so kind to us, he obviously felt badly about it, he said to us: "Why don't you ladies also come along to the zoo? I can't very well ask you to join the official party, but you could perhaps look on from a little distance." We said we'd be absolutely thrilled. And that's when he said to us: "Of course, if you do as I suggest, you'll not only get a glimpse of Mr Brodsky's first encounter with his wife after all this time, you'll" - and he paused, didn't he, Trude? he paused, then he said, cool as you like - "you'll also be able to see at close quarters Mr Ryder, who has most kindly agreed to be part of the official party. And if an opportune moment arises, though I can't guarantee this, I'll signal to you ladies and I could introduce you both to him." We were absolutely stunned! But of course, when we thought about it afterwards on the way home, we were just saying so to each other just now, when you think more carefully about it, it wasn't so surprising really. After all, we've come a long way in the last few years, what with the bunting for the Peking people, and all the effort we put into the sandwiches for the Henri Ledoux lunch ...'

'The Peking Ballet, that was the real turning point,' Trude put in.

‘Yes, that was the turning point. But I suppose we’d never really stopped to think about it, we’d just been getting on with things, going hard at it, we probably never realised how much we were going up all the time in everyone’s esteem. The truth is, quite honestly, we’ve now become a very important part of life in this city. It’s high time we realised that. Let’s face it, that’s why Mr von Braun invites us *personally* to his office, why he ends up suggesting the sorts of things he suggested today. “If an opportune moment arises, I’ll introduce you to him.” That’s what he said, wasn’t it, Trude? “I know Mr Ryder would be delighted to meet you both, especially since you’ll be looking after his parents, a matter of the utmost concern for him.” Of course, we’d always said, hadn’t we, that once we’d been given this assignment, we had a good chance of being introduced to Mr Ryder. But we hadn’t expected it to happen quite so soon and so we were very excited. Fiona, what’s wrong, dear?’

Beside me, Fiona had been shifting impatiently, trying to interrupt the flow of Inge’s words. Now that Inge had paused, Fiona nudged my arm and gave me a look as though to say: ‘Now! This is the moment!’ Unfortunately I was still a little out of breath from the climb up the stairs and this perhaps caused me to hesitate. In any case there was an awkward moment when all three women were staring at me. Then, when I said nothing, Inge went on:

‘Well, if you don’t mind, Fiona, I’ll just finish what I was saying. I’m sure you have plenty of very interesting stories to tell us, dear, and we’re very keen to hear them. No doubt you’ve had another very interesting day on your trams while we were in the city centre doing all this I’m now telling you about, but if you’d like to wait just a minute, you might hear something of passing interest to you. After all’ - and here the sarcasm in her voice struck me as crossing the boundary of civilised behaviour - ‘this does involve your *old friend*, your *old friend* Mr Ryder ...’

‘Inge, really!’ Trude put in, but a smile was hovering around her lips and the two of them exchanged a quick smirk.

Fiona was nudging me again. Glancing at her, I could see her patience had run out and that she was wanting her tormentors to get their comeuppance without further delay. Leaning forward, I cleared my throat, but before I could actually say anything, Inge had started to talk again.

‘Well, what I was saying was that when you think about it, it’s no more than we deserve now, this level of treatment. Clearly Mr von Braun believes so anyway. He was very kind and courteous to us the whole time, wasn’t he? He was so apologetic when he had to go off to the city hall to join the official party. “We’ll be arriving at the zoo in about thirty minutes,” he kept saying. “I do hope you ladies will be there.” It would be perfectly all right, he told us, if we came as close as five or six metres from the official party. After all, it wasn’t as though we were just members of the public! Oh, I’m sorry, Fiona, we hadn’t forgotten, we were *going* to mention to Mr von Braun how one of our group, that’s to say *you*, dear, how one of us was a very dear friend of Mr Ryder, a very dear friend of many years’ standing. We had every intention of mentioning it, but somehow we just never got round to it, did we, Trude?’

Again the two women exchanged smirks. Fiona stared at them in cold fury. I saw at this point things had gone too far and decided to intervene. However, two possible ways of doing so immediately presented themselves to me. One option was to draw attention to my identity in a way that elegantly entered the flow of what Inge happened to be saying. For instance, I might have interjected calmly: ‘Well, we didn’t have the pleasure of meeting at the zoo, but what does that matter when we can meet in the comfort of your own home?’ or some such thing. The alternative was simply to rise abruptly, perhaps throwing my arms out as I did so, and making the blunt declaration: ‘I am Ryder!’ I naturally wished to choose the course that would yield the maximum impact, but

the resulting hesitation caused me once more to miss my opportunity, for Inge had begun to talk again.

'We got to the zoo and we waited, oh, it was about twenty minutes, wasn't it, Trude? We waited by the little stand-up place where you can drink a cup of coffee, and after about twenty minutes we saw these cars come driving right up to the gates, and this very distinguished party got out. About ten or eleven of them, all gentlemen, Mr von Winterstein was there, and Mr Fischer and Mr Hoffman. And Mr von Braun, of course. And in the middle of it there was Mr Brodsky, looking very distinguished indeed, wasn't he, Trude? Nothing like the way he used to be. Of course we looked immediately for Mr Ryder but he wasn't there. Trude and I were looking from face to face, but they were all the usual ones, the councillors, you know. For a second we thought Mr Reitmayer was Mr Ryder, just as he was getting out of the car. Anyway, he wasn't with them, and we were saying to each other, he's probably coming along just a little later, what with his busy schedule. And there they were, all these gentlemen coming up the path, all wearing dark overcoats, except for Mr Brodsky who was wearing a grey one, very distinguished looking, with a matching hat. They came up past the maple trees, all at a leisurely pace, up to the first of the cages. Mr von Winterstein seemed to be the host, pointing things out to Mr Brodsky, pointing out the animals in each cage. But you could see no one was paying much attention to the animals, they were so keyed up about Mr Brodsky's encounter with Miss Collins. And we couldn't resist, could we, Trude? We went on ahead, we went round the corner to the central concourse and sure enough, there was Miss Collins, all by herself, standing in front of the giraffes, looking at them. There were a few other people strolling about, but of course they had no idea, it was only when the official party came round the corner people realised something was happening and moved away respectfully, and there was Miss Collins still standing in front of the giraffes, looking more alone than ever, and you could see her glancing towards the official

party as they came closer. She seemed so calm, you wouldn't know what was going on inside. And Mr Brodsky, we could see his expression, very stiff, stealing glances towards Miss Collins, even though they were still quite a long way apart, there were all the monkey and racoon cages still to go. Mr von Winterstein seemed to be introducing all the animals to Mr Brodsky, it was like the animals were all official guests at a banquet, wasn't it, Trude? We didn't know why the gentlemen couldn't just go straight to the giraffes and Miss Collins, but obviously this was the way it had been decided. And it was so exciting, so *moving*, for a moment we even forgot about the possibility of Mr Ryder turning up. You could see Mr Brodsky's breath in the air, all misty, and all the other gentlemen's too, and then, when there was only a few cages left, Mr Brodsky seemed to lose all interest in the animals and he took off his hat. It was a very old-fashioned, respectful sort of gesture, Fiona. We felt privileged to be there to see it.'

'You could see so much,' Trude broke in. 'So much in the way he did it, then just held his hat to his chest. It was like a declaration of love and apology all at the same time. It was very moving.'

'But I was telling the story, thank you, Trude. Miss Collins, she's so elegant, you'd never guess she was that age from a distance. Such a youthful figure. She turned to him very nonchalantly, just a cage or so separating them. Any members of the public there'd been had backed right away by this time, and Trude and I, we remembered what Mr von Braun had said, about the five metres, and we crept forward as much as we dared, but it seemed such a private moment, we didn't dare get up too close. First they nodded to each other and exchanged some very ordinary sort of greeting. Then Mr Brodsky, he suddenly took a few steps forward and reached out, quite swiftly, it was like he'd been planning it beforehand, Trude thought ...'

‘Yes, like he’d been rehearsing it in private for days ...’

‘Yes, it was like that. I agree with that. It was just like that. He reached out and took her hand and kissed it very lightly and politely, then let go. And Miss Collins, she just bowed gracefully, then immediately turned her attention to the other gentlemen, greeting them and smiling, we were too far away to catch what they were all saying. So there they all were and for a little while no one seemed to know what to do next. Then Mr von Winterstein took the initiative and started to explain something about the giraffes to both Mr Brodsky and Miss Collins, addressing them as though they were a couple - wasn’t he, Trude? As though they were a nice old couple who’d arrived together from the start. So there they were, Mr Brodsky and Miss Collins, after all these years, standing side by side, not touching, just standing side by side, both of them staring at the giraffes, listening to Mr von Winterstein. This went on for some time, and you could see the other gentlemen whispering among themselves about what ought to happen next. Then gradually, before you knew it, the gentlemen had all melted back, it was all very well done, so *civilised*, they all pretended to be in conversation with each other and drifted away a little at a time so that in the end there was just Mr Brodsky and Miss Collins left in front of the giraffes. Of course, we were watching very closely now and everyone else must have been too, but of course everyone was pretending not to look. And we saw Mr Brodsky turn very gracefully to Miss Collins, raise a hand towards the giraffes’ cage and he said something. It seemed to be something very heartfelt and Miss Collins bowed her head just a little, even she couldn’t remain unmoved, and then Mr Brodsky went on talking, occasionally you’d see him raise his hand again, like this, very gently, towards the giraffes. We couldn’t be sure if he was talking about the giraffes or about something else, but he kept raising his hand to the cage. Miss Collins did seem very overcome, but she’s such an elegant lady, she straightened herself and

smiled and then the two of them came strolling over to where the other gentlemen were talking. You could see her exchanging a few words with the gentlemen then, very pleasant and polite, she seemed to have quite a long talk with Mr Fischer, and then she was saying goodbye to them all, each of them in turn. She gave a little bow to Mr Brodsky, and you could see how pleased Mr Brodsky was with it all. He was standing there in a sort of dream, holding his hat to his chest. Then off she went up the path, all the way up to the refreshments hut, up past the fountain and out of sight by the polar bear enclosure. And once she'd gone, the gentlemen, they seemed to drop all their earlier pretence and gathered round Mr Brodsky, and you could see everyone was very pleased and excited and they seemed to be congratulating him. Oh, we'd have loved to have known what Mr Brodsky had said to Miss Collins! Perhaps we should have been bolder and gone a few steps nearer, we might have caught at least the odd word. But then, now we're who we are, we have to be more careful. In any case, it was all wonderful. And those trees at the zoo, they're so beautiful at this time of year. I do wonder what they said to each other. Trude thinks they really will get back together again now. Did you know, they never divorced? Isn't that interesting? All those years, and for all of Miss Collins's insisting on being called Miss Collins, they never divorced. Mr Brodsky deserves to win her back again. Oh, but I'm sorry, with all this excitement, we haven't even started telling you the main point! About Mr Ryder! You see, since Mr Ryder wasn't with the official party, we didn't really think we could come forward, even after Miss Collins had left. After all, Mr von Braun had suggested we come forward specifically to meet Mr Ryder. In any case, although we were watching Mr von Braun carefully, and we were quite near sometimes, he never looked towards us, he was probably very taken up with Mr Brodsky. So we didn't come forward. But then as they were leaving, we were watching them about to go through the gate, they all stopped and they were joined by someone, a man, but they were so far away by

this time we couldn't see clearly. But Trude felt sure it was Mr Ryder who'd joined them - her long sight's better than mine and I wasn't wearing my lenses. She was sure, weren't you, Trude? She was certain it was him, that he'd very tactfully kept out of the way so as not to make things any more difficult than they were for Mr Brodsky and Miss Collins, and he was now re-joining the official party at the gates. I thought at first it was just Mr Braunthal, but I didn't have my lenses in, and Trude was very sure it was Mr Ryder. And afterwards, when I thought about it, I too felt perhaps it *was* Mr Ryder. So we missed the opportunity to be introduced to him! They were so far away by this point, you see, already at the gates, and the drivers were already holding open the car doors. Even if we'd rushed across, we wouldn't have got there in time. So we didn't, in the *strictest* sense, meet Mr Ryder. But Trude and I were just discussing it, and we were saying, in almost every other sense, I mean in any sense that really matters, it's fair to say we met him today. After all, if he'd been with the official party, then certainly, that time by the giraffe cage, just after Miss Collins had gone, Mr von Braun would definitely have introduced us. It was hardly our fault we didn't realise how tactful Mr Ryder was going to be, that he'd stay down by the gates. Anyway, the point is, it's beyond question it *would have been appropriate*, our being introduced to him. That's the point. Mr von Braun for one obviously thought so, now that we occupy the position we do, it would clearly have been appropriate. And you know, Trude' - she turned to her friend - 'now I think about it further, I agree with you. We might as well announce to the meeting tonight that we actually met him. As you say, that's closer to the truth than saying we didn't. And we've so much to get through tonight, we simply don't have time to explain everything all over again. After all, it's only a quirk of fate that kept us from being formally introduced, that's all. To all intents and purposes, we *have* met him. He'll certainly hear all about us, if he hasn't already, he's bound to

enquire very closely about how his parents are to be looked after. So we've as good as met him, and as you say, it would be unfair if people thought otherwise. Oh, but please forgive me' - Inge suddenly turned to Fiona - 'I've forgotten, I'm talking to an *old friend* of Mr Ryder. This must all seem a fuss about nothing to such an *old friend*...'

'Inge,' Trude said, 'poor Fiona, she's very confused. Don't tease her.' Then, smiling at Fiona, she said: 'It's all right, dear, don't worry.'

As Trude was saying this, memories came back to me of the warm friendship Fiona and I had had as children. I recalled the small white cottage where she had lived, just a little walk away down that muddy lane in Worcestershire, and the two of us playing for hours under her parent's dining table. I remembered the times I had wandered down to the cottage, upset and confused, and how skilfully she had comforted me, allowing me quickly to forget whatever scene I had just left behind. The realisation that it was this same precious friendship that was being mocked before my eyes caused a fury to well up in me, and although Inge had again started to speak, I decided I could not let the situation go on unchecked another second. Determined not to repeat my earlier mistake of prevaricating, I leaned forward decisively, my intention to cut Inge off with a bold announcement of who I was, then to recline back again as the impact settled on the room. Unfortunately, although I put much force behind my intervention, all that came out was a slightly strangled grunt, which was nevertheless loud enough to cause Inge to stop and all three women to turn and stare at me. There was an awkward moment, before Fiona, no doubt wishing to cover up for my embarrassment - perhaps something of her old protectiveness towards me momentarily re-awakening - burst out:

'You two, you've no idea how foolish you look! Do you know why? No, you wouldn't guess, you two, you'd never guess just how stupid, how unspeakably ridiculous you both look at

this moment. You really wouldn't, it's typical, just typical of you both! Oh, I've meant to tell you for so long, ever since we met, well, you'll see for yourselves now, you can judge for yourselves now if you're fools or what. Look!'

Fiona jerked her head in my direction. Inge and Trude, both bewildered, once again stared at me. I made another concerted effort to announce myself, but to my dismay all I could manage was another grunt, more vigorous than the last but no more coherent. I took a deep breath, a panic now beginning to seize me, and tried again, only to produce another, this time more prolonged, straining noise.

'What on earth is she saying to us, Trude?' Inge said.

'Why's this little bitch speaking to us like this? How dare she? What's come over her?'

'It's my fault,' Trude said. 'It was my mistake. It was my idea to invite her into our group. It's just as well she's revealing her true colours before Mr Ryder's parents arrive. She's jealous, that's all. She's jealous that we met Mr Ryder today. While all she has are these pathetic little stories ...'

'What do you mean you met him today?' Fiona exploded.

'You said yourself just now you didn't ...'

'You know perfectly well it was as good as meeting him! Wasn't it, Trude? We're perfectly entitled to say we've met him now. It's just something you'll have to come to terms with, Fiona ...'

'Well in that case' - Fiona was now almost shrieking - 'let's see you come to terms with *this!*' She flung her arm towards me as though announcing the most dramatic of stage entrances. Once more I did my best to oblige. This time, fuelled by my mounting anger and frustration, the straining noise was more intense than ever and I could feel the sofa shake with my effort.

‘What’s wrong with this friend of yours?’ Inge asked, suddenly noticing me. But Trude was paying no attention.

‘I should never have listened to you,’ she was saying to Fiona bitterly. ‘It should have been obvious from the start what a little liar you were. And we let our children play with those brats of yours! They’re probably little liars too and now they’ve probably taught all our children how to tell lies. How ridiculous your party was last night. And the way you’ve decorated your apartment! How absurd! We were all laughing about it this morning ...’

‘Why don’t you help me!’ Fiona suddenly addressed me directly for the first time. ‘What’s the matter, why don’t you do something?’

In fact, all this time I had been continuing to strain. Now, just as Fiona turned to me, I caught a glimpse of myself in a mirror hung on the opposite wall. I saw that my face had become bright red and squashed into pig-like features, while my fists, clenched at chest level, were quivering along with the whole of my torso. Catching sight of myself in this condition took the wind right out of my sails and, losing heart, I collapsed back into the corner of the sofa, panting heavily.

‘I think, Fiona dear,’ Inge was saying, ‘it’s time you and this ... this friend of yours went on your way. I don’t think your attendance will be required this evening.’

‘It’s out of the question,’ Trude shouted. ‘We’ve got responsibilities now. We can’t afford to indulge little birds with broken wings like her. We’re no longer just a group of volunteers. We’ve got very important work to do and anyone not up to the mark will have to be let go.’

I could see tears appearing in Fiona’s eyes. She looked at me again, now with growing bitterness, and I thought of trying just once more to declare my identity, but the thought of the figure I had glimpsed in the mirror made me decide

against doing so. Instead, I staggered to my feet and went in search of the exit. I was still considerably out of breath from the straining, and when I reached the doorway I was obliged to stop a moment to lean against its frame. Behind me, I could hear the two women continuing to talk in heated tones. At one point, I heard Inge say: 'And what a disgusting person to bring to your apartment.' With an effort, I hurried out across the small hallway and, after some moments of fumbling frantically at the locks of the main door, succeeded in letting myself out into the corridor. Almost at once, I began to feel better and proceeded towards the staircase in a more composed manner.

Going down the successive flights of stairs, I looked at my watch and saw that it was high time we were setting off for the Karwinsky Gallery. Naturally I felt considerable regret about the situation I was having to leave behind, but clearly my priority had to be to ensure our punctual arrival at the evening's important event. I resolved nevertheless to attend to Fiona's problems in the reasonably near future.

When I finally reached the ground floor, I was greeted by a sign marked 'Car Park' on the wall and an arrow pointing the way. I went past several storage cupboards, then out through an exit.

I emerged at the rear of the apartment buildings, on the other side from the artificial lake. The evening sun was now low in the sky. There was an expanse of green land before me, sloping gradually away into the distance. The car park, immediately in front of me, was simply a rectangle of grass that had been fenced off, like a corral on an American ranch. The ground had not been concreted, though the to-ing and fro-ing of vehicles had worn it down virtually to bare earth. There was enough space for perhaps fifty cars, but at this moment there were only seven or eight, each parked some way away from the other, the sunset glancing off their bodywork. Near the back of the car park I could see the stocky woman and Boris loading the boot of an estate car. As I moved towards them, I noticed Sophie sitting in the front passenger seat, gazing emptily through the windscreen at the sunset.

The stocky woman was closing the boot as I came up to them.

'I'm sorry,' I said to her. 'I didn't realise you had so much to load up. I'd have given a hand except ...'

‘It’s all right. This one here gave me all the help I needed.’ The stocky woman ruffled Boris’s hair, then said to him: ‘So don’t worry, okay? You’re all going to have a great evening. Really. She’s cooked all your favourites.’

She bent down and gave Boris a reassuring squeeze, but the little boy seemed to be in a dream and stared off into the distance. The stocky woman held out the car keys to me.

‘There should be plenty of petrol. Take care how you drive.’

I thanked her and watched her walk off towards the apartment buildings. When I turned to him, Boris was staring at the sunset. I touched his shoulder and led him round the car. He climbed into the back seat without speaking.

Evidently the sunset was having an hypnotic effect, for when I got in behind the wheel Sophie too was still staring into the distance. She seemed hardly to notice my arrival, but then, as I was familiarising myself with the controls, she said quietly:

‘We can’t let this house business drag us all down. We can’t afford to. We don’t know when it’ll be, the next time you’re back with us. House or no house, we’ve got to start doing things, *good* things together. That’s what I realised this morning, coming back in the bus. Even with that apartment. And that kitchen.’

‘Yes, yes,’ I said and put the key into the ignition. ‘Now. Do you know the way to the gallery?’

The question brought Sophie out of her trance-like condition. ‘Oh,’ she said, putting her hands up to her mouth as though she had just remembered something. Then she said: ‘I could probably find the way from the city centre. But from here, I don’t know.’

I sighed heavily. I could sense things were in danger of slipping out of control again, and I felt returning some of

the intense annoyance I had experienced earlier in the day about the way Sophie had brought such chaos into my life. But then I heard her voice beside me say brightly:

‘Why don’t we ask the car park attendant? He might know.’

She was pointing to the entrance of the car park where, sure enough, there was a little wooden kiosk housing a uniformed figure, visible from the waist up.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘I’ll go and ask him.’

I got out and made my way towards the wooden kiosk. A car in the process of leaving the enclosure had paused beside the kiosk, and as I came closer I could see the attendant – a bald, fat man – leaning over his hatch, smiling jovially and gesturing to the driver. Their conversation went on for some time and I was on the verge of stepping in between them when the car at last started to pull away. Even then, the attendant continued to follow the vehicle with his eyes as it drove off along the long curving road that ran the perimeter of the housing estate. Indeed, he too seemed to have become transfixed by the sunset and, although I coughed directly under his hatch, he continued to gaze dreamily after the car. In the end I simply barked: ‘Good evening.’

The plump man started, then, looking down at me, replied: ‘Oh, good evening, sir.’

‘I’m sorry to disturb you,’ I said. ‘But we happen to be in something of a hurry. We need to get to the Karwinsky Gallery, but you see, being a visitor to this town I’m not at all sure of the quickest route from here.’

‘The Karwinsky Gallery.’ The man thought for a moment, then said: ‘Well, to be honest, it’s not at all straightforward, sir. In my opinion, the simplest thing would be for you to follow that gentleman who just left. In that red car.’ He pointed into the distance. ‘That gentleman, as luck would have it, lives very near the Karwinsky Gallery. I

could of course try and give you directions, but I'd have to sit and work it all out first, all those different turnings, particularly towards the end of your journey. I mean, when you come off the highway and you have to find your way through all those little roads around the farms. Simplest by far, sir, just to follow that gentleman in the red car. If I'm not mistaken, he lives just two or three turnings on from the Karwinsky Gallery. It's a very pleasant area and that gentleman, he and his wife very much like it there. It's the countryside out there, sir. He tells me he has a nice cottage with hens in the back yard and an apple tree. A nice sort of area for an art gallery, even if it's a bit out of the way. Well worth the drive, sir. The gentleman in that red car, he says he doesn't ever think of moving even though it's quite some way for him to come every day, here to this estate. Oh yes, he works here, he works in the administration block' - the man suddenly leaned right out of his hatch and pointed to some windows behind him - 'that block over there, sir. Oh no, these aren't all residential apartments by any means. To run an estate of this size, oh, it requires a lot of paperwork. That gentleman in the red car, he's been working here right from the first day the water company began building here. And now he oversees all the maintenance work on the estate. It's a big job, sir, and it's a long way for him to have to commute each day, but he says he never thinks about moving nearer. And I don't blame him, it's very nice out there. But here I am chattering on, and you must be in a hurry. I do apologise, sir. As I say, if you just follow that red car, that's by far the simplest way to do it. I'm sure you'll enjoy the Karwinsky Gallery. It's a nice part of the country, and the gallery itself, I'm told it has some very beautiful objects.'

I thanked him tersely and walked back to the car. When I climbed back in behind the wheel, Sophie and Boris were again gazing at the sunset. I started the engine without speaking. Only after we had bumped past the wooden kiosk - I gave the

car park attendant a quick wave - did Sophie ask: 'So you found out the way?'

'Yes, yes. We just follow the red car that left just now.'

As I said this, I realised how angry I still was at her. But I said nothing further and moved the car onto the road that circled the edge of the estate.

We passed block after block of apartments, the sunset reflected in the countless windows. Then the housing estate vanished and the road turned into a highway bound on either side by fir forests. The road was virtually empty, offering a clear view, and before long I spotted the red car up ahead, a small dot in the distance, travelling at an easy speed. Given the sparse traffic, I saw no necessity to follow hard up behind him and I too dropped to a leisurely speed with a respectful distance still between us. All the while, Sophie and Boris had both remained dreamily silent, and eventually I too began to get lulled into a tranquil mood watching the sun setting over the deserted highway.

After a little time, I found myself re-playing in my head the second goal scored by the Dutch football team in a World Cup semi-final against Italy some years ago. It had been a stupendous long-range shot and had always been one of my favourite sporting memories, but now, to my annoyance, I found I had forgotten the identity of the goal scorer. The name of Rensenbrink came drifting through my mind, and certainly he had been playing in that match, but in the end I felt certain he had not been the scorer. I saw again the ball floating through the sunshine, past the curiously transfixed Italian defenders, drifting on and on, beyond the outstretched hand of the goalkeeper. It was frustrating to have forgotten such a detail and I was systematically going through the names of all the Dutch footballers I could recall from that era, when Boris suddenly said behind me:

'We're too near the centre of the road. We're going to crash.'

'Nonsense,' I said. 'We're fine.'

'No, we're not!' I could feel him banging the back of my seat. 'We're too near the centre. If something comes the other way, we'll crash!'

I said nothing, but moved the car a little more towards the edge of the road. This seemed to reassure Boris and he became quiet again. Then Sophie said:

'You know, I have to admit, I wasn't at all happy when I first heard. About this reception, I mean. I thought it would spoil our evening together. But when I thought about it some more, and especially when I realised it wouldn't stop us having our meal tonight, I thought, well, it's a good thing. In some ways, it's exactly what we need. I know I can do well at it, and Boris too. We'll both do well, and then we'll have something to celebrate when we get back. The whole evening, it could really seal things for us.'

Before I could say something to this, Boris shouted again:

'We're much too near the centre!'

'I'm not moving any further over,' I said. 'We're perfectly fine now.'

'Perhaps he's frightened,' Sophie said to me quietly.

'Of course he's not frightened.'

'I'm frightened! We're going to have a major accident!'

'Boris, please be quiet. I'm driving perfectly safely.'

I had spoken quite sternly and Boris fell silent. But then, as I continued to drive, I became aware that Sophie was watching me uneasily. Occasionally she would glance back at Boris, then her gaze would return to me. Finally, she said quietly:

‘Why don’t we stop somewhere?’

‘Stop somewhere? Why do we want to do that?’

‘We’ll get to the gallery in good time. A few minutes wouldn’t make us late.’

‘I think we should just find the place first.’

Sophie fell into silence for another few minutes. Then she turned to me again and said: ‘I think we should stop. We could all have a drink and some refreshments. It’ll help you cool down.’

‘What do you mean, cool down?’

‘I want to stop!’ Boris called from the back.

‘What do you mean, cool down?’

‘It’s so important you two don’t have another quarrel tonight,’ said Sophie. ‘I can see it starting up again. But not this evening. I won’t let it. We should all go and relax. Get ourselves into the right sort of mood.’

‘What do you mean, right sort of mood? There’s nothing the matter with any of us.’

‘I want to stop! I’m frightened! I feel sick!’

‘Look’ - Sophie pointed at a passing sign - ‘there’s a service station coming up soon. Please, let’s stop there.’

‘This is completely unnecessary ...’

‘You’re getting really angry. And tonight’s so important. It’s not to happen tonight.’

‘I want to stop! I want the toilet!’

‘There it is now. Please, let’s stop. Let’s put it right before it gets any worse.’

‘Put what right?’

Sophie did not reply, but went on looking anxiously out through the windscreen. We were now moving through mountainous country. The fir forests had gone and in their place were craggy slopes towering up on either side of us. The service station was visible on the horizon, a structure resembling a spaceship built high into the cliffs. All my anger at Sophie had for the moment returned with a fresh intensity, but for all that - almost in spite of myself - I slowed down into the inside lane.

‘It’s all right, we’re stopping,’ Sophie said to Boris. ‘Don’t worry.’

‘He wasn’t worried in the first place,’ I said coldly, but Sophie did not seem to hear.

‘We’ll have a quick snack,’ she was telling the little boy. ‘We’ll all feel much better then.’

I followed a sign off the highway and up a steep narrow road. We climbed on through a number of hair-pin bends, then the road levelled off and we pulled into an open-air car park. Several lorries were parked side by side, as well as a dozen or so cars.

I climbed out and stretched my arms. When I glanced back, I saw Sophie helping Boris out of the car. I watched him take a few steps across the tarmac looking rather dozy. Then, as though to wake himself up, he turned his face up to the sky and let out a Tarzan yell, actually beating his chest as he did so.

‘Boris, stop that!’ I shouted.

‘But he’s not disturbing anyone,’ Sophie said. ‘No one can hear him.’

We were, it was true, high on a cliff-top and standing some distance away from the glassy structure that was the service station. The sunset had become a deep red and was reflecting off all the surfaces of the building. Without

speaking, I strode past the pair of them and on towards the entrance.

‘I’m not disturbing anyone!’ Boris shouted after me. There came a second Tarzan yell, this time tailing off into a yodel. I carried on without turning. Only when I got to the entrance did I pause and wait, holding open the heavy glass door for them.

We crossed a lobby area with a bank of public telephones, and then through a second glass door into the café area. An aroma of grilled meat greeted us. The room was vast, with long rows of oval tables. On all sides were large glass panes through which we could see expanses of sky. From somewhere far off came the sounds of the highway beneath us.

Boris hurried over to the self-service counter and picked up a tray. Asking Sophie to buy me a bottle of mineral water, I went off to select a table. There were not many customers - only four or five tables were occupied - but I walked right to the end of one of the long rows and sat down with my back to the clouds.

After a few minutes Boris and Sophie came down the aisle holding their trays. They sat down in front of me and began to spread out their refreshments in an oddly muted manner. I then noticed Sophie giving Boris glances and supposed that while at the counter she had been urging the little boy to say something to me - something to make good the damage done by our recent altercation. It had not until this point occurred to me any sort of reconciliation was necessary between me and Boris, and I was annoyed to see Sophie so clumsily meddling in the situation. In an attempt to lighten the mood, I made some humorous remark concerning the futuristic décor surrounding us, but Sophie replied distractedly and darted another glance at Boris. The lack of subtlety was such that she might as well have nudged him with an elbow. Boris, understandably, seemed reluctant to comply and continued grumpily to twist around his fingers a packet

of nuts he had purchased. Finally he mumbled without looking up:

‘I’ve been reading a book in French.’

I shrugged and looked out at the sunset. I was aware of Sophie urging Boris to say something further. Eventually he said sulkily:

‘I read a whole book in French.’

I turned to Sophie and said: ‘Myself, I’ve never got on with the French language. I still have more trouble with French than I do with Japanese. Really. I get by in Tokyo better than in Paris.’

Sophie, presumably dissatisfied with this response, fixed me with a hard stare. Irritated by her coerciveness, I turned away and looked again over my shoulder at the sunset. After a while, I heard Sophie say:

‘Boris is getting so much better at languages now.’

When neither Boris nor I responded, she leaned over towards the little boy, saying:

‘Boris, you’ve got to make more effort now. We’ll arrive at the gallery soon. There’ll be a lot of people there. Some of them might look very important, but you won’t be afraid, will you? Mother’s not going to be afraid of them, and neither will you. We’ll show everyone how well we can cope. We’ll be a big success, won’t we?’

For a moment Boris went on twisting his little packet round and round his fingers. Then he looked up and gave a sigh.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘I know what you have to do.’ Then he sat up and went on: ‘You have to put one hand in your pocket. Like this. And then you hold your drink, like this.’

He held the posture for a while, putting on as he did so an expression of great haughtiness. Sophie burst out laughing. I too could not help smiling a little.

‘And when people come up to you,’ Boris continued, ‘you just say over and over: “Quite remarkable! Quite remarkable!” Or if you like, you can say: “Priceless! Priceless!” And when the waiter comes up with things on a tray, you do this to him.’ Boris made a sour face and shook his finger from side to side.

Sophie was still laughing. ‘Boris, you’ll be a big hit tonight.’

Boris beamed, clearly pleased with himself. Then suddenly he got up, saying: ‘I’m going to the toilet now. I forgot I wanted to go. I won’t be a minute.’

He performed his disdainful finger shake for us one last time, then hurried off.

‘He’s very amusing sometimes,’ I said.

Sophie was watching over her shoulder Boris going off up the aisle. ‘He’s growing so fast,’ she said. Then she sighed and her expression grew more thoughtful. ‘Soon he’ll be grown. We don’t have much time.’

I said nothing, waiting for her to continue. For a few seconds she went on gazing over her shoulder. Then turning to me she said quietly: ‘This is his childhood, now, slipping away. Soon he’ll be grown and he’ll never have known anything better.’

‘You talk as though he’s having an awful time. He has a perfectly good life.’

‘All right, I know, his life isn’t so bad. But this is his childhood. I know what it should be like. Because I remember, you see, the way it was. When I was very small, before Mother got ill. Things were good then.’ She turned

back to face me, but her eyes seemed to focus on the clouds behind my back. 'I want something like that for him.'

'Well, don't worry. We'll sort things out very soon. In the meantime, Boris is doing just fine. There's no need to worry.'

'You're like everyone else.' There was now a hint of anger in her voice. 'You go on like there's all the time in the world. You just don't realise, do you? Papa may have a good few years left in him yet, but he's not getting any younger. One day he'll be gone and then there'll be only us. You and me and Boris. That's why we have to get a move on. Build something for ourselves soon.' She took a deep breath and shook her head, her eyes falling to the cup of coffee in front of her. 'You don't realise. You don't realise what a lonely place the world can become if you don't get on with things.'

I saw no point in taking issue. 'Well, that's what we'll do then,' I said. 'We'll find something soon.'

'You don't realise how little time there is. Look at us. We've hardly started.'

The accusing tone in her voice was growing. Meanwhile she appeared to have forgotten entirely the not insignificant role her own behaviour had played in preventing us from 'getting on with things'. I felt a sudden temptation to point out all kinds of things to her, but in the end remained silent. Then, when neither of us had spoken for some time, I rose to my feet, saying:

'Excuse me. I think I'll get something to eat after all.'

Sophie was staring again at the sky and seemed hardly to notice my departure. I made my way to the self-service counter and took a tray. It was as I was studying the choice of pastries, I suddenly remembered I did not know the way to the Karwinsky Gallery and that we were for the time being

entirely dependent on the red car. I thought about the red car, even now travelling out there on the highway, getting further and further from us, and I realised we could not afford to waste much more time lingering around the service station. In fact, it occurred to me we should set off again without delay, and I was on the verge of returning my tray and hurrying back to our table when I became aware that two people sitting nearby were talking about me.

Glancing round, I saw they were two middle-aged women, both smartly dressed. They were leaning across their table towards one another, speaking in lowered voices and, as far as I could make out, had no idea I was at that moment standing so close to them. They rarely referred to me by name and for this reason I could not at first be certain I was the subject of their discussion, but before long it became impossible to suppose they were talking of anyone else.

‘Oh yes,’ one of the women was saying. ‘They’ve been in touch with that Stratmann woman any number of times. She keeps assuring them he’ll turn up to inspect, but so far he hasn’t. Dieter says they don’t mind so much, it’s not as though they don’t have plenty of work to be getting on with, but they’re all of them so keyed up now, thinking he’s about to turn up any minute. And of course, Mr Schmidt keeps coming in every so often, shouting at them to tidy the place up, what if he came now and found the civic concert hall in such a condition? Dieter says they’re all nervous, even that Edmundo. And you never know with these geniuses, what they’ll pick out to criticise. They all still remember the time Igor Kobylansky came to inspect and he tested everything so minutely. How he got down on all fours while they all stood in a big circle on the stage around him, how they all watched him while he crawled about, tapping all the floorboards, putting his ear right down to them. The last two days Dieter’s not been the same, he’s been so on edge when he’s set off to work. It’s been awful for all of them. Each time he doesn’t show at an appointed time, they wait an hour or so

then phone this Stratmann woman again. She's always very apologetic, she's always got excuses, and arranges another time with them.'

As I listened to this, a thought that had occurred to me several times during the past few hours came to the fore of my mind: namely that it would be wise for me to contact Miss Stratmann more frequently than I had been doing thus far. In fact I could even see some point in telephoning her from the public call boxes I had seen out in the lobby. But before I could give further consideration to this idea, the woman went on:

'And this is all after this Stratmann woman had been insisting for weeks how anxious he was to carry out the inspection, that he wasn't concerned just about the acoustics and all the usual things, but about his parents, how they were to be accommodated in the hall during the evening. Apparently they're neither of them very well, so they require special seating, special facilities, they require trained people nearby in case one or the other has a seizure or whatever. The arrangements needed are quite complicated and, according to this Stratmann woman, he was keen to go over each and every detail with all the staff. Well, that part of it was quite touching, to show so much concern about his aged parents. But then what do you know, he doesn't show up! Of course, it could be to do with this Stratmann woman rather than him. That's what Dieter thinks. By all accounts *he's* got an excellent reputation, he doesn't sound at all the type to keep inconveniencing people like this.'

I had been getting quite annoyed at the women and was naturally relieved to hear these latter remarks. But it was what they had said concerning my parents - about the need to see to their various special requirements - that convinced me I could not afford to put off phoning Miss Stratmann a moment longer. Abandoning my tray on the counter, I hurried out into the lobby.

I stepped into a phone booth, searching through my pockets for Miss Stratmann's card. After a moment I found it and dialled the number. The phone was answered immediately by Miss Stratmann herself.

'Mr Ryder, how good of you to call. I'm so glad everything has been going so well.'

'Ah. So you think everything is going well.'

'Oh splendidly! You've been such a success everywhere. People have been so thrilled. And your after-dinner speech last night, oh, *everyone's* talking about how witty and entertaining it was. It's such a pleasure, if I may say so, having someone like you to work with.'

'Well, thank you, Miss Stratmann. It's kind of you to say so. It's a pleasure to be so well looked after. I was ringing just now because, er, because I wanted to check certain things relating to my schedule. Of course, there have been some unavoidable delays today, leading to one or two unfortunate consequences.'

I paused, expecting Miss Stratmann to say something, but there was silence at the other end. I gave a small laugh and continued: 'But of course, we're on our way at this moment to the Karwinsky Gallery. I mean, we're actually in the middle of our journey at this very moment. Naturally we wanted to get there in plenty of time, and I must say, we're all greatly looking forward to it. The countryside around the Karwinsky Gallery, I understand, is quite splendid. Yes, we're very happy to be on our way.'

'I'm so pleased, Mr Ryder.' Miss Stratmann sounded uncertain. 'I do hope you'll find the event enjoyable.' Then she said suddenly: 'Mr Ryder, I do hope we haven't offended you.'

'Offended me?'

‘We really didn’t mean to imply anything. I mean, by suggesting you go to the Countess’s house this morning. We all knew you’d be thoroughly familiar with Mr Brodsky’s work, no one ever dreamt otherwise. It’s just that some of those recordings were quite rare and the Countess and Mr von Winterstein both thought ... Oh dear, I do hope you’re not offended, Mr Ryder! We really didn’t mean to imply anything.’

‘I’m not offended in the least, Miss Stratmann. On the contrary, I’ve been very concerned that the Countess and Mr von Winterstein aren’t offended I was unable to turn up...’

‘Oh, please don’t worry on that score, Mr Ryder.’

‘I was very keen to meet and talk with them, but when circumstances made it impossible for me to do everything we had originally hoped, I thought they would understand, particularly since, as you say, there was no actual necessity for me to listen to Mr Brodsky’s recordings ...’

‘Mr Ryder, I’m sure the Countess and Mr von Winterstein both understand the situation perfectly. It was, in any case, I can see it now, a very presumptuous thing to have arranged, especially with your time so limited. I *do* hope you’re not offended.’

‘I assure you I’m not at all offended. But actually, Miss Stratmann, if I may. I was phoning you just now to discuss certain aspects, that is, certain *other* aspects of my schedule here.’

‘Yes, Mr Ryder?’

‘For instance, my visit to inspect the concert hall.’

‘Ah yes.’

I waited to see if she would say anything more, but when she said nothing, I went on: ‘Yes, I simply wanted to make sure everything was in order for my coming.’

Miss Stratmann at last responded to the troubled tone in my voice. 'Oh, I see,' she said. 'I take your point. I haven't scheduled very much time for you to carry out your inspection. But as you can see' - she paused and I could hear the rustle of a sheet of paper - 'as you can see, on either side of the concert hall visit, you have these two very important appointments. So I thought if you had to be a little squeezed for time anywhere, it should be at the concert hall. You could always return there at another point if you really needed to. Whereas, you see, we couldn't really afford to give less time to either of the other appointments. For instance, the meeting with the Citizens' Mutual Support Group, I know how much importance you place on meeting the ordinary people affected ...'

'Yes, of course, you're quite right. I agree absolutely with what you say. As you point out, I can always squeeze in a second visit to the concert hall at some later point. Yes, yes. It's just that I was slightly concerned about the, er, the arrangements. That's to say, for my parents.'

There was again silence at the other end. I cleared my throat and continued:

'That's to say, as you know, my mother and father are both advanced in years. It will be necessary to have special facilities for them at the concert hall.'

'Yes, yes, of course.' Miss Stratmann sounded slightly puzzled. 'And medical help nearby in the event of any unfortunate occurrences. Yes, it's all well in hand, as you'll see when you carry out your inspection.'

I thought about this for a moment. Then I said: 'My parents. That's who we're talking about. There's no confusion here, I trust.'

'Not at all, Mr Ryder. Please don't worry.'

I thanked her and came away from the telephone booths. As I stepped back into the café, I paused a moment inside the

doorway. The sunset was causing long shadows to fall across the room. The two middle-aged women were still talking earnestly, though I could not guess if they were still discussing me. Over at the far end, I could see Boris explaining something to Sophie and the two of them laughing happily. I continued to stand there for a few moments, turning over in my mind the conversation I had just had with Miss Stratmann. Thinking further about it, I could see there *was* something presumptuous in the notion that I would benefit from having the Countess play me Brodsky's old records. No doubt she and von Winterstein had been looking forward to guiding me step by step through the music. The thought irritated me and I felt thankful I had been obliged to miss the appointment.

Then I glanced at my watch and saw that, for all my words of reassurance to Miss Stratmann, we were in danger of arriving late at the Karwinsky Gallery. I made my way over to our table and, without sitting down, said:

'We'll have to be getting on now. We've been here quite some time.'

I had spoken with a certain urgency, but Sophie simply looked up and said:

'Boris thinks these doughnuts are the best he's ever tasted. That's what you were saying, wasn't it, Boris?'

I glanced at Boris and saw he was ignoring me. I then recalled our recent little altercation - I had for the moment forgotten all about it - and it struck me it would be best to say something conciliatory.

'So the doughnuts are good, you say,' I said to him. 'Are you going to let me try a piece?'

Boris continued to look the other way. I waited for a few seconds, then gave a shrug.

‘All right,’ I said. ‘If you don’t want to talk, that’s fine.’

Sophie touched Boris on the shoulder and was about to appeal to him, but I turned away saying: ‘Come on, we have to be on our way.’

Sophie nudged Boris once more. Then she said to me, a touch of desperation in her voice: ‘Let’s stay just a little longer. You’ve hardly sat with us at all yet. And Boris is so enjoying it here. Aren’t you, Boris?’

Again Boris showed no sign of having heard.

‘Look, we’ve got to get a move on now,’ I said. ‘We’re going to be late.’

Sophie looked again at Boris, then at me, anger gathering in her expression. Then finally she began to get up. I turned and made my way out of the café without looking back at them.

By the time I brought the car down the steep winding road and back onto the highway, the sun was very low in the sky. The traffic was as sparse as ever and I drove for a while at a good speed, scanning the horizon for signs of the red car. After several minutes we had left the mountains and were crossing vast expanses of farmland. On both sides of the highway the fields stretched on into the distance. It was while the road was taking a long slow curve across a piece of flat land that I spotted the red car again. It was still some way ahead, but I could see the driver proceeding as before at a leisurely speed. I reduced my own speed, and soon began to enjoy the scenery unfolding before me; the evening fields, the low sun flickering behind far-off trees, the occasional clusters of farm buildings - and all the while, the red car in front of us, drifting in and out of view with each turn of the road. Then I heard Sophie say beside me:

‘How many people do you think there’ll be?’

‘At this reception?’ I shrugged. ‘How should I know? I have to say, you seem to be getting yourself very worked up about this thing. It’s just another reception, that’s all.’

Sophie went on staring out at the view. Then she said: ‘A lot of the people tonight. They’ll be the same ones who were at the Rusconi banquet. That’s why I’m nervous. I thought you’d have realised that.’

I tried to recall the banquet she was referring to, but the name meant little to me.

‘I was getting so much better at these things until then,’ Sophie went on. ‘Those people were so horrible to me. I haven’t really recovered yet. There’s bound to be a lot of the same people tonight.’

I was still trying without success to recall this event. 'You mean, people were actually rude to you?' I asked.

'Rude? Well, I suppose you could call it that. They certainly made me feel pretty small and pathetic. I do hope they're not all there again tonight.'

'If anyone's rude to you tonight, you just come and tell me. And as far as I'm concerned, you can be as rude as you like back to them.'

Sophie turned and looked at Boris in the back seat. After a moment I realised the little boy had fallen asleep. Sophie went on watching him for a little longer, then turned back to me.

'Why are you starting it again?' she asked in a quite different voice. 'You know how much it upsets him. You're starting it all again. How long do you plan to keep it up this time?'

'Keep what up?' I asked tiredly. 'What are you talking about now?'

Sophie stared at me for a moment, then turned away. 'You don't realise,' she said almost to herself. 'We've no time for things like this. You just don't realise, do you?'

I felt my patience coming to an end. All the chaos I had been subjected to throughout the day came back to me and I found myself saying loudly:

'Look, why do you think you've got the right to criticise me like this all the time? Perhaps you haven't noticed, but I happen to be under great pressure just now. But instead of supporting me, you decide to criticise, criticise, criticise. And now you seem to be getting all ready to let me down at this reception. At least, you appear to be preparing the ground well enough for doing just that ...'

‘All right! We won’t come in then! Boris and I will wait in the car. You go to this thing by yourself!’

‘There’s no need for that. I was only saying ...’

‘I mean it! You go by yourself. That way we won’t be able to let you down.’

After this we travelled on for several minutes without speaking. Eventually I said:

‘Look, I’m sorry. You’ll probably be fine at this reception. In fact, I’m sure you will be.’

She did not reply. We continued to travel in silence and each time I glanced at her, I found her staring blankly at the red car in the distance. An odd sense of panic began to grow within me until finally I said:

‘Look, even if things don’t go right this evening, well, it won’t matter. What I mean is, it won’t make any difference to anything important. There’s no need for us to be silly like this.’

Sophie continued to stare at the red car. Then she said: ‘Do I look like I’ve put on weight? Be honest.’

‘No, not at all. You look marvellous.’

‘But I have. I’ve put on a little.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Whatever happens tonight, it won’t make any difference. Look, there’s no need to worry. We’ll have everything ready soon. A home, everything. So there’s no need to worry.’

As I said this something began to come back to me of the banquet she had mentioned earlier. In particular, an image came into my mind of Sophie, in a dark crimson evening dress, standing awkwardly by herself in the centre of a crowded room, while all around her people stood laughing and talking in little groups. I found myself thinking about the humiliation she must have endured and eventually touched her

gently on the arm. To my relief she responded by resting her head on my shoulder.

‘You’ll see,’ she said, almost under her breath. ‘I’ll show you. And so will Boris. Whoever’s there tonight, we’ll show you.’

‘Yes, yes. I’m sure you will. You’ll both be fine.’

It was several minutes later that I noticed the red car indicating to turn off the highway. I reduced the distance between us and soon we were following our guide up a quiet road rising between meadows. The noise of the highway receded as we continued to climb, and then we were travelling on dirt tracks hardly fit for modern transportation. At one point a thick hedge scraped all along one side of our car, and soon afterwards we were bumping across a muddy yard full of broken-down farm vehicles. Then we came out onto some good country roads weaving smoothly through the fields and picked up speed again. Eventually I heard Sophie shout: ‘Oh, there it is!’ and saw a wooden board on a tree announcing the Karwinsky Gallery.

I slowed right down as we approached the gateway. Two rusted gateposts were still standing, but the gate itself had gone. As the red car continued down the road, finally vanishing from our view, I steered between the posts into a large overgrown field.

There was a dirt path running up the middle of the field and for a little while we moved slowly uphill. As we reached the crest, a fine view opened before us. The field swept down into a shallow valley, in the pit of which sat an imposing house built in the manner of a French chateau. The sun was setting in the woods behind it, and even from this distance, I could see the building was full of faded charm, evoking the slow decline of some dreamy land-owning family.

I engaged a low gear and took the car carefully down the hill. I could see in my mirror Boris, now fully awake,

looking left and right, but the grass was so high it obscured entirely any view from the side windows.

As we came closer, I saw that a large area of the field near the house had become taken over with parked cars. I steered towards these as we completed our descent and saw there were almost a hundred vehicles in all, many of them polished to a gleam for the occasion. I drove around a little, trying to find a suitable spot to park, and came to a halt not far from the crumbling courtyard wall.

I got out of the car and stretched my limbs about. When I glanced back I saw that Sophie and Boris had also got out and that Sophie was fussing over Boris's appearance.

'Just remember,' I could hear her saying to him. 'No one in the room's more important than you. You just keep telling yourself that. Anyway, we won't be staying long.'

I was about to set off for the house when I became distracted by something at the corner of my eye. Turning, I saw that an old ruined car had been left abandoned in the grass close to where I was standing. The other guests had all left a space around it, as though its rust and general dilapidation might spread to their own vehicles.

I took a few steps towards the wreck. It had sunk some way into the earth and the grass had grown all around it, so that I might not have noticed it at all had the sunset not been striking its bonnet. There were no wheels and the driver's door had been torn off at the hinges. The paintwork had been gone over on numerous occasions, on the last of which the painter appeared to have used house paint before giving up mid-way. Both rear fenders had been replaced by mismatched substitutes from other vehicles. For all that, and even before I had examined it more closely, I knew I was looking at the remains of the old family car my father had driven for many years.

It was, of course, a long time since I had last laid eyes on it. Seeing it again in this sad state brought back to me its final days with us, when it had become so old I was acutely embarrassed my parents should continue to go about in it. Towards the end, I recalled, I had started to invent elaborate ploys to avoid taking journeys in it, so much did I dread being spotted by a schoolfriend or a teacher. But that had only been at the end. For many years I had clung to the belief that our car - despite its being quite inexpensive - was somehow superior to almost any other on the road and that this was the reason my father chose not to replace it. I could remember it parked in the drive of our little cottage in Worcestershire, its paint and metalwork gleaming, and my gazing at it for minutes at a time, feeling immensely proud. And on many afternoons - particularly on Sundays - I had spent hours playing in and around it. Occasionally I had brought out toys - perhaps even my collection of plastic soldiers - to lay out in the back seat. But more often I had simply built endless imaginary scenarios around the car, firing pistols through its windows, or conducting high-speed chases behind the wheel. Every so often, my mother would emerge from the house to tell me to stop slamming the car doors, the noise was driving her mad, and that if I did it once more she would 'skin me alive'. I could see her again quite vividly, standing at the back door of the cottage, shouting towards the car. The cottage had been a small one but, being deep in the countryside, had stood in a half-acre of grass. A lane went past our gate and on to the local farm, and twice a day a line of cows would go by, driven on by farmboys with muddy sticks. My father always left the car in the drive with its rear pointing to this lane, and I would often break off from what I was doing to watch the procession of cows through the back windscreen.

What we called our 'drive' was just an area of grass to the side of the house. It had never been concreted and in heavy rain the car would stand deep in water - a fact that could not have helped its rust problems and had possibly

hastened it to its present condition. But as a child I had found wet days a particular treat. Not only did the rain create an especially cosy atmosphere inside the car, it provided me with the challenge of having to leap over canals of mud each time I got in or out. At first my parents had disapproved of this practice, claiming I was making marks all over the car's upholstery, but once the vehicle was a few years old they had ceased to care about this point. The slamming doors, however, continued to annoy my mother throughout the time we owned the car. This was unfortunate since this slamming was central to the enacting of my scenarios, invariably punctuating key moments of dramatic tension. Matters were complicated by the fact that my mother sometimes went weeks, even months, without complaining about the doors, until I would have all but forgotten they could be a source of conflict. Then one day, when I was completely absorbed in some drama, she would suddenly appear, highly distressed, telling me just one more time and she would 'skin me alive'. On a few occasions this threat had been issued at a point when a door was actually ajar, leaving me in a quandary as to whether I should leave it open once I had finished playing - even though it might then remain open all night - or whether I should risk shutting it as quietly as possible. This dilemma would torment me throughout the remainder of my time playing with the car, thoroughly poisoning my enjoyment.

'What are you doing?' Sophie's voice said behind me.
'We ought to be going in.'

I realised she was talking to me, but I had become so taken up by the discovery of our old car that I murmured something back without really thinking. Then I heard her say:

'What's got into you? You seem to have fallen in love with that thing.'

Only then did I realise I was holding the car in a virtual embrace; I had been resting my cheek on its roof

while my hands made smooth circular motions over its scabbed surface. I straightened with a quick laugh, and turned to see Sophie and Boris staring at me.

‘In love with this? You have to be joking.’ I gave another laugh. ‘It’s criminal the way people leave wrecks like this lying around.’

They continued to stare at me, so I shouted: ‘What a disgusting heap!’ and gave the car a few good kicks. This seemed to satisfy them and they both turned away. I then saw that Sophie, despite her show of hurrying me, was still preoccupied with Boris’s appearance and had now resumed combing his hair.

I turned my attention back to the car, anxiety mounting that I might have inflicted some damage with my kicks. Closer examination showed that I had done no more than dislodge a few rusted flakes, but I was already full of remorse at having shown such callousness. I made my way through the grass around to the other side of the vehicle and peered in through the rear side window. Some flying object had struck the window but the glass had stayed intact, and I stared through the spiderweb cracks into the rear seat where I had once spent so many contented hours. Much of it, I could see, was covered with fungus. Rain water had pooled in one corner where the seat cushion met the arm-rest. When I tugged at the door, it came open with little trouble, but then became stuck half-way in the thick grass. There was just enough of a gap to enable me to squeeze in, and after a small struggle I managed to clamber onto the seat.

Once inside, it became clear that one end of the seat had fallen through the floor of the car, and I found myself unnaturally low. Through the window nearest my head I could see blades of grass and a pink evening sky. Re-adjusting myself I tugged at the door until it was almost shut again - something obstructed it from closing completely - and, after

a few moments, found myself in a reasonably comfortable position.

Before long, a deep restfulness started to settle over me and I allowed my eyes to close for a moment. As I did so, I found a memory coming back of one of the happier family expeditions undertaken in the vehicle, a time we had driven all over the local countryside in search of a second-hand bicycle for me. It had been a sunny Sunday afternoon and we had gone from village to village, examining bicycle after bicycle, my parents conferring earnestly in the front while I sat behind them in this very seat, watching the Worcestershire scenery go by. Those were the days before telephones were routinely owned in England, and my mother had had on her lap a copy of the local newspaper in which people advertising items for sale printed their whole addresses. Appointments had been unnecessary; a family like us could simply materialise at a door and say: 'We've come about the boy's bike' and be shown around to the back shed for the inspection. The more friendly people would offer tea - which my father would decline each time with the identical humorous remark. But one old woman - who had turned out to be selling not a 'boy's bike' at all, but her husband's after the latter's death - had insisted on our coming in. 'It's always such a pleasure,' she had said to us, 'to receive people like yourselves.' Then, as we had sat in her little sunlit parlour with our teacups, she had referred to us once more as 'people like yourselves', and suddenly, in the midst of listening to my father talking about the sort of bicycle most suitable for a boy of my age, it had dawned on me that to this old woman my parents and I represented an ideal of family happiness. A huge tension had followed this realisation, one which had continued to mount within me throughout the half-hour or so we had stayed. It was not that I had feared my parents would fail to keep up their usual show - it was inconceivable they would have started even the most sanitised version of one of their rows. But I had become convinced that at any second some sign, perhaps even some

smell, would cause the old woman to realise the enormity of her error, and I had watched with dread for the moment she would suddenly freeze in horror before us.

Sitting in the back of the old car, I tried to recall how that afternoon had ended, but I found my mind wandering instead to another afternoon altogether, one full of pouring rain, when I had come out to the car, to the sanctuary of this rear seat, while the troubles had raged on inside the house. On that afternoon, I had lain across the seat on my back, the top of my head squeezed under the arm-rest. From this vantage point, all I had been able to see from the windows had been the rain streaming down the glass. At that moment my profound wish had been that I would be allowed just to go on lying there undisturbed, hour after hour. But experience had taught me my father would at some stage emerge from the house, that he would walk past the car, go down to the gate and out into the lane, and so I had lain there for a long time, listening intently through the rain for the rattle of the back door latch. When at last the sound had come, I had sprung up and begun to play. I had mimicked an exciting tussle over a dropped pistol in such a way as to make clear I was far too absorbed to notice anything. Only when I had heard the wet tread of his feet go right to the end of the drive had I dared to stop. Then, quickly kneeling up on the seat, I had peered cautiously out of the back windscreen in time to see my father's raincoated figure, pausing by the gate, hunching slightly as he opened his umbrella. The next moment he had stepped purposefully into the lane and out of view.

I must have dozed off for I awoke with a jolt and saw that I was sitting in the back of the ruined car in complete darkness. In a slight panic I pushed at the door nearest me. At first it remained stuck, but then shifted a little at a time until I was able at last to squeeze myself out.

Brushing down my clothes, I looked about me. The house was brightly lit - I could see glittering chandeliers inside

tall windows - and over beside our car Sophie was still fussing with Boris's hair. I was standing beyond the pool of light cast by the house, but Sophie and Boris were virtually floodlit. As I watched, Sophie leaned down to the wing mirror to add some finishing touches to her make-up.

Boris turned to me as I emerged into the light. 'You've been ages,' he said.

'Yes, I'm sorry. We ought to be going in now.'

'Just one second,' Sophie muttered distractedly, still bending over the mirror.

'I'm getting hungry,' Boris said to me. 'When do we go home?'

'Don't worry, we won't stay long. All these people, they're waiting to meet us, so we'd better just go in and say hello. But we'll leave pretty quickly. Then we'll go home and have a good evening. Just ourselves.'

'Can we play Warlord?'

'Of course,' I said, delighted the little boy seemed now to have forgotten our earlier altercation. 'Or any other game you fancy. Even if we start playing one and half-way through you want to stop and play a different one, because you're bored or because you're losing, that's fine, Boris. Tonight we'll just change to whichever one you want to play. And if you wanted to stop altogether and just talk for a while, about football, say, then that's what we'll do. It'll be a marvellous evening, just the three of us. But first let's go in and get this over with. It won't be so bad.'

'Okay, I'm ready now,' Sophie announced, but then she bent down to the mirror one last time.

We passed under a stone arch into the courtyard. As we made our way towards the front entrance, Sophie said: 'I'm actually looking forward to this now. I feel good about it.'

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Just relax and be yourself.
Everything will be fine.’

The door was opened by a stout housemaid. As we wandered into the spacious entrance hall, she muttered:

‘It’s nice to see you again, sir.’

Only when I heard her say this did I realise I had been to the house before - that in fact it was the same one Hoffman had brought me to the previous evening.

‘Ah yes,’ I said, looking around at the oak-panelled walls, ‘it’s nice to be back again. This time, as you see, I’ve brought my family.’

The maid did not reply. Possibly this was due to deference, but when I glanced quickly at the woman standing sullenly by the door, I could not avoid sensing hostility. It was then that I noticed, on the round wooden table next to the umbrella stand, my face peering up from amid a spread of magazines and newspapers. Going up to the table, I pulled out what I saw to be the evening edition of the local newspaper, the entire front of which comprised a photograph of myself - taken apparently in a windswept field. Then I spotted the white building in the background and remembered the morning’s photo-session on the hilltop. I took the newspaper over to a lamp and held the picture under the yellow light.

The force of the wind was causing my hair to be flung right back. My tie was fluttering stiffly out behind an ear. My jacket was also flying behind me so that I looked to be wearing a cape. More puzzlingly, my features bore an expression of unbridled ferocity. My fist was raised to the wind, and I appeared to be in the midst of producing some warrior-like roar. I could not for the life of me understand how such a pose had come about. The headline - there was no

other text at all on the front page - proclaimed: 'ryder's rallying call' .

Somewhat nervously, I opened the newspaper and was confronted by a spread of six or seven smaller pictures, each a variation on the one on the front. My belligerent demeanour was evident in all but two of them. In these latter, I appeared to be presenting proudly the white building behind me, displaying as I did so a strange smile that revealed extensively my lower teeth but none of the upper. Scanning the columns beneath, my eye caught repeated references to someone named Max Sattler.

I would have examined the newspaper further but, suspecting as I did that the maid's hostility had to do with these very photographs, I began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. I put the paper down and came away from the table, resolving to study the report carefully at a later opportunity.

'It's time we went in,' I said to Sophie and Boris, who had been hovering in the middle of the hall. I had spoken loudly enough for the maid to hear and fully expected her to lead us through to the reception. But she made no movement and, after an awkward few seconds, I smiled at her saying: 'Of course, I can remember from last night.' With that I led the way into the house.

In fact the building was not at all as I remembered it, and we quickly found ourselves in a long panelled corridor quite unfamiliar to me. This proved not to matter, however, for a hubbub could be heard as soon as we had gone a little way down, and before long we were standing at the doorway of a narrow room packed with people in evening dress holding cocktail glasses.

At first glance the room appeared to be of a much smaller scale than the grand ballroom in which guests had gathered the night before. In fact on closer inspection I saw that originally it had probably not been a room at all, but a

corridor, or at best a long curving vestibule. Its curve was such as to suggest it might eventually describe a semi-circle, though it was impossible to ascertain this glancing in from the doorway. I could see on its outer side the huge windows, now covered by curtains, going on round the curve, while the inner wall appeared to be lined by doors. The floor was marble, chandeliers hung from the ceiling, and here and there around the room were art objects displayed on pedestals or in elegant glass cabinets.

We paused at the threshold, taking in this scene. I looked about for someone to come and usher us in, perhaps even announce our arrival, but though we stood and watched for some time no one came to us. Occasionally some person would come striding hurriedly in our direction, but then at the last moment turn out to have been making for some other guest.

I glanced at Sophie. She had an arm around Boris and both were staring apprehensively at the crowd.

‘Come on, let’s go in,’ I said nonchalantly. We all took a few steps into the room, but then came to a halt again a little way inside.

I looked around for Hoffman or Miss Stratmann or anyone else I recognised, but could see no one. Then, as I continued to stand there looking from face to face, the thought came to me that a great many of these same people might well have attended the event at which Sophie had been so appallingly treated. Suddenly I could see all the more vividly what Sophie had had to endure and felt a dangerous anger rising in me. Indeed, as I continued to look around the room, I could spot at least one group of guests - standing together almost where the room curved out of our view - who almost certainly had been among the major culprits. I studied them through the crowd: the men with their self-satisfied smiles, the pompous way they took their hands in and out of their trouser pockets as though to demonstrate to one and all how at ease they were

in a gathering of this sort; and the women, with their ridiculous costumes, and their way of shaking their heads helplessly when they laughed. It was unbelievable - utterly preposterous - that such people should presume to sneer or look down on anyone, let alone on someone like Sophie. In fact I saw no reason not to go immediately up to this group to give them a firm dressing down under the full gaze of their peers. Murmuring a quick word of reassurance in Sophie's ear, I set off across the floor.

As I made my way through the crowd, I saw that the room did indeed turn a slow semi-circle. I could now see also the waiters standing like sentries all along the inner wall, holding their trays of drinks and canapés. Sometimes people would jog me and apologise pleasantly, or I would exchange smiles with someone trying to push through in the opposite direction, but curiously no one appeared actually to recognise me. At one stage I found myself squeezing past three middle-aged men who were shaking their heads despondently at something, and I noticed that one was holding under his arm a copy of the evening newspaper. I saw my windswept face peeking from behind his elbow and wondered vaguely if the appearance of the photographs could in some way account for the odd way our arrival had thus far been ignored. But I was now virtually next to the people I had been making for and gave this idea no further thought.

Noticing my approach, two of the group stepped aside as though to welcome me into their circle. They were, I realised, discussing the art objects surrounding us, and as I came into their midst they were all nodding over something the last speaker had said. Then one of the women said:

'Yes, it's so clear you could draw a line across this room, just after that Van Thillo.' She pointed to a white statuette on a stand not far from us. 'Young Oskar never had the eye. And to be fair, he knew it, but he felt a duty, a duty to his family.'

‘I’m sorry, but I have to agree with Andreas,’ one of the men said. ‘Oskar was too proud. He should have delegated. To people who knew better.’

Then one of the other men said to me, smiling pleasantly: ‘And what is your feeling on this, sir? About Oskar’s contribution to the collection?’

I was momentarily taken aback by this enquiry, but I was not in a mood to be deflected.

‘It’s all very well you ladies and gentlemen standing here discussing Oskar’s inadequacy,’ I began. ‘But more important and to the point ...’

‘It would be going too far,’ a woman interrupted, ‘to call young Oskar inadequate. His taste was very different to his brother’s, and yes, he did make the odd mistake, but all in all I think he’s brought a welcome dimension to the collection. It breaks up the austerity. Without it, well, this collection would be like a good dinner without the sweet course. That caterpillar vase over there’ - she pointed through the crowd - ‘it really is rather delightful.’

‘It’s all very well ...’ I began again heatedly, but before I could get further, a man said firmly:

‘The caterpillar vase is the *only* one, the only one of his choices that earns its place here. His problem was that he had no sense of the collection as a whole, the balance of the thing.’

I could feel my patience running out.

‘Look,’ I shouted, ‘just stop this! Just for one second stop this, this inane chatter! Just stop it for one second and let someone else say something, someone else from outside, outside this closed little world you all seem so happy to inhabit!’

I paused and glared at them. My assertiveness had paid off for they were all of them - four men and three women -

staring at me in astonishment. Having at last gained their attention, my anger now felt deliciously under control, like some weapon I could wield with deliberation. I lowered my voice - I had shouted a little more loudly than I had intended - and continued:

‘Is it any wonder, is it any wonder at all that in this little town of yours, you have all these problems, this *crisis* as some of you choose to term it? That so many of you are so miserable and frustrated? Does it puzzle anyone, anyone from outside? Is it a surprise? Do we, we observers from a bigger, broader world, do we scratch our heads in bewilderment? Do we say to ourselves, how can it possibly be that a town such as this’ - I could feel someone tugging at my arm, but I was now determined to have my say - ‘that a town, a community like *this* should have such a crisis on its hands? Are we puzzled and amazed? No! Not for a moment! One arrives and immediately what does one see all around? Exemplified, ladies and gentlemen, by people like you, yes, you here! You *typify* - I’m sorry if I’m being unfair, if there are examples yet more gross and monstrous to be found under the rocks and paving stones of this city - but to my eyes, you, sir, and you, madam, yes, as much as I regret to break it to you, yes, you *exemplify* everything that’s so wrong here!’ The hand tugging at my sleeve, I realised, belonged to one of the women I was addressing, who for some reason was reaching behind the man standing next to me. I glanced a second in her direction, then went on: ‘For one thing, you lack basic manners. Look at the way you treat each other. Look at the way you treat my family. Even myself, a distinguished figure, your guest, look at you, far too concerned about Oskar’s art collecting. In other words, too obsessed, obsessed with the little internal disorders of this thing you call your community, too obsessed to display even the minimum level of good manners to us.’

The woman tugging my arm now moved round so that she was directly behind me and I was aware that she was saying

something to me in her effort to tear me away. I ignored her and continued:

‘And it’s here, of all places, what a cruel irony! Yes, it’s here, to *this* place my parents have to come. Of all places, here, to receive your so-called hospitality. What an irony, what a cruelty, of all places, after all these years, that it should be somewhere like this, with people like you! And my poor parents, coming all this way, to hear me perform for the very first time! Do you suppose this makes my task any easier, that I’m obliged to leave them in the care of people like you, and you, and you?’

‘Mr Ryder, Mr Ryder ...’ The woman at my elbow had been pulling insistently for some time and I now saw that this was none other than Miss Collins. This realisation made me lose my momentum and before I knew it she had succeeded in pulling me back from the group.

‘Ah, Miss Collins,’ I said to her, a little confused. ‘Good evening.’

‘You know, Mr Ryder,’ Miss Collins said, continuing to lead me away. ‘I’m genuinely surprised, I have to say it. I mean by the level of fascination there is. A friend told me just now that the whole town is gossiping about it. Gossiping, she assures me, in the kindest possible way! But I really can’t see what all the fuss is about. Just because I went today to the zoo! I really can’t understand it. I only agreed because they convinced me it was in everyone’s interests, you know, for Leo to do well tomorrow night. So I merely agreed to be there, that was all. And I suppose, to be truthful, I wished to say a few encouraging words to Leo, now that he’s gone this long without drinking. It seemed only fair I acknowledged it in some way. I assure you, Mr Ryder, if he’d gone this long without drinking at any other point in these last twenty years, I would have done exactly the same. It’s just that it hadn’t happened until now. There really

wasn't anything so significant about my presence at the zoo today.'

She had ceased to pull at me, but had kept her arm in mine and we now settled to a slow walk through the crowd.

'I'm sure there wasn't, Miss Collins,' I said. 'And let me assure you, when I came over to you just now, I didn't have the slightest intention of raising the subject of yourself and Mr Brodsky. Unlike the great majority of this town, I'm quite content not to pry into your private concerns.'

'That's very decent of you, Mr Ryder. But in any case, as I say, our meeting this afternoon didn't amount to anything so significant. People would be so disappointed if they knew. All that happened was that Leo came up to me and said: "You're looking very lovely today." Just the sort of thing you'd expect Leo to say after twenty years of being drunk. And that was just about all there was to it. Of course I thanked him, and said that he was looking better than I'd seen him for some time. He looked down at his shoes then, something I don't recall him ever doing when he was younger. He never did anything so timid in those days. Yes, his fire's burnt out, I could see that. But something's replaced it, something with some gravity. Well, there he was, looking down at his shoes, and Mr von Winterstein and the other gentlemen were all hovering about a little way behind, looking the other way, pretending they'd forgotten about us. I made some remark to Leo about the weather and he looked up and said, yes, the trees were looking splendid. Then he began to tell me which animals he'd liked of the ones he'd just seen. It was clear he hadn't been attending at all, because he said: "I love all these animals. The elephant, the crocodile, the chimpanzee." Well, the monkeys' cages were nearby and certainly they would have come that way, but they certainly wouldn't have passed the elephants or crocodiles and I said as much to Leo. But Leo brushed this aside as though I'd brought up something completely irrelevant. Then he seemed to

get into a slight panic. Perhaps it had to do with Mr von Winterstein coming a little closer just then. You see, my original agreement had been that I'd say a few words to Leo, just literally a few words. Mr von Winterstein had assured me he'd intervene after a minute or so. Well, those had been my conditions but then, once we'd started to talk, it did feel hopelessly short. I myself began to dread the sight of Mr von Winterstein hovering nearby. Anyway, Leo knew we had very little time because then he plunged right in. He said: "Perhaps we might try again. To live together. It's not too late." You must accept, Mr Ryder, this was somewhat blunt after all these years, even allowing for this afternoon's time restrictions. I simply said: "But what would we do together? We've hardly a thing in common now." And for a second or two, he looked about bewildered, as though I'd brought up a point he'd never before thought of. Then he pointed to the cage in front of us and said: "We could keep an animal. We could love and care for it together. Perhaps that was what we didn't have before." And I didn't know what to say so we were just standing there, and I could see Mr von Winterstein starting to come over, but then he must have sensed something, something in the way Leo and I were standing there, because he changed his mind and moved away again and started talking to Mr von Braun. Then Leo put up a finger in the air, that's a gesture of his from long ago, he put up his finger and said: "I had a dog, as you know, but he died yesterday. A dog's no good. We'll choose an animal that will live a long time. Twenty, twenty-five years. That way, so long as we look after it well, we'll die first, we won't have to mourn it. We never had children so let's do this." To which I said: "You simply haven't thought this through. Our beloved animal may well outlive us both, but it's unlikely the two of us will die at the same time. You may not have to mourn the animal, but if, say, I died before you, you'd have to mourn *me*." To which he said quickly: "That's better than having no one mourn you after you've gone." "But I have no fear of such a thing," I said to

him. I pointed out that I'd helped many people in this town over the years and that when I died I wouldn't be at all short of mourners. To which he said: "You never know. Things might go well for me from here. I too might have many mourners when I die. Perhaps hundreds." Then he said: "But what would that matter, if none of them really cared for me? I'd swap them all. For someone whom I'd loved and who'd loved me." I must admit, Mr Ryder, this conversation was making me a little sad and I was unable to think of anything else to say to him. Then Leo said: "If we'd had children back then, how old would they be? They would be beautiful by now." As though they take years to become beautiful! Then he said again: "We never had children. So let's do this instead." When he said this again, well, I suppose I became confused and I glanced past his shoulder at Mr von Winterstein, and immediately Mr von Winterstein came towards us making some jokey remark, and that was it. That was the end of our conversation.'

We were continuing to walk slowly around the room, her arm still in mine. I spent a moment digesting what she had told me. Then I said:

'I was just recalling, Miss Collins. The last time we met, you were kind enough to invite me to your apartment to discuss my problems. Ironically there seems now much more to discuss about the decisions *you* must make in life. I do wonder what you'll decide to do. If I may say so, you stand at something of a crossroad.'

Miss Collins laughed. 'Oh dear, Mr Ryder, I'm much too old to be standing at any crossroad. And it's really much too late for Leo to be talking like this. If this had all happened even just seven or eight years ago ...' She gave a sigh and for a fleeting moment a profound sadness crossed her face. Then she was once more wearing her gentle smile. 'This is hardly the time to be starting out with a whole new set of hopes and fears and dreams. Yes, yes, you'll hasten to tell me I'm not so elderly, that my life is far from over, I do

appreciate it. But the fact is, it *is* all very late in the day and it would be ... well, let us say it would be *messy* to complicate things now. Ah, the Mazursky! It never fails to captivate me!' She gestured towards a red clay cat mounted on a stand we were just passing. 'No, Leo has created quite sufficient mess in my life already. I've long since built up a different life for myself and if you ask people in this town, most of them I hope will tell you I've acquitted myself rather well. That I've been of much service to many of them over a time of increasing hardship here. Of course, I've not been able to achieve anything on your sort of scale, Mr Ryder. But that doesn't mean I can't enjoy a certain sense of satisfaction when I look back and see what I've been able to do. Yes, by and large, I feel quite satisfied with the life I've made for myself since Leo, and I'm quite content to let it stand at that.'

'But surely, Miss Collins, you should at least consider very carefully the present situation. I can't understand why you wouldn't see it as a fine reward, after all your good work, to be able to share the evening of your life with the man who - excuse me - with the man whom at some level one assumes you still love. I say this because, well, why else have you continued to live here in this city all these years? Why else have you never considered another marriage?'

'Oh, I've *considered* other marriages, Mr Ryder. At least three men over the years I might easily have settled for. But they ... they weren't right. Perhaps there *is* something in what you say. Leo was nearby and that made it impossible for me to feel sufficiently towards these others. Well, in any case, I'm talking of long ago. Your question, and perhaps an understandable one, is why shouldn't I now end my days with Leo? Well, let us consider for a moment. Leo is sober and calm now. Will he remain like that for long? Perhaps. There's a chance, I'll allow that. Particularly if he now wins recognition here, becomes a figure of renown again with large responsibilities. But if I agree to return to him, well,

that'll be a different matter. He will decide after a little time to destroy everything he's built, just as he did before. And where would that leave everyone? Where would that leave this city? In fact, Mr Ryder, I rather think I have a public duty not to accept these proposals of his.'

'Forgive me, Miss Collins, but I can't help feeling you're really not as convinced by your own arguments as you would like to be. That somewhere deep down you've always been waiting and waiting for your old life, your life with Mr Brodsky, to resume. That all your good work, for which I don't doubt the people of this town will always be grateful, you nevertheless looked on it essentially as something to be getting on with while you waited.'

Miss Collins leant her head and considered my words with an amused smile.

'Perhaps there's something in what you say, Mr Ryder,' she said eventually. 'Perhaps I wasn't so aware of the speed at which time went by. It was only recently, last year in fact, that it really struck me how time was getting on. That we were both of us getting old and that it was perhaps too late to think about retrieving what we had. Yes, you may be right. When I first left him, I didn't see it as such a permanent thing. But was I *waiting*, as you claim? I really don't know. I thought about things on a day by day basis. And now I find the time's all gone. But when I look at it all now, my life, what I've done with it, it doesn't seem so bad. I'd like to finish things this way, the way I have it now. Why must I get involved with Leo and his animal? It really will be much too messy.'

I was about to express again, in the gentlest sort of way, my scepticism as to whether she really believed all she was saying, when I became aware of Boris at my elbow.

'We've got to go home soon,' he said. 'Mother's getting upset.'

I looked across to where he was pointing. Sophie was standing a few steps from where I had originally left her, quite isolated, not talking to anyone. A feeble smile hovered on her face, though there was no one to display it to. Her shoulders were hunched and her gaze seemed to be fixed on the footwear of the group of guests nearest her.

The situation was clearly hopeless. Containing my fury at the whole room, I said to Boris: 'Yes, you're right. We'd better go. Bring your mother over. We'll try and slip out without people noticing. We attended, so no one can complain.'

I recalled from the previous evening that the house adjoined the hotel. As Boris disappeared into the crowd, I turned to look at the doors lining the wall, trying to recall which of them it had been that had led Stephan Hoffman and myself through to the hotel corridor. But just then Miss Collins, who was still holding my arm, started to talk again, saying:

'If I had to be honest, perfectly honest, then I'd have to admit it. Yes, in my less rational moments, it's been my dream.'

'Oh, what's that, Miss Collins?'

'Well, everything. Everything that's happening now. That Leo would pull himself together, that he'd find some position in this town worthy of him. That it would all be fine again, that the terrible years would be behind us for ever. Yes, I have to admit it, Mr Ryder. It's one thing, in the daylight hours, to be wise and reasoned. But during the nights, that's a different matter. Often enough over these years, I've woken up in the darkness, in the small hours, and I've lain awake thinking about it, thinking about just something like this happening. Now it's starting to happen for real, it's rather confusing. But then you see, it's not *really* starting. Oh, Leo might well be capable of achieving something here, he did once have a lot of talent, it can't all have faded away. And

it's true, he never got a chance, a proper chance before, where we were. But for the two of us, it's too late. Whatever he says, it's surely too late.'

'Miss Collins, I'd very much like to discuss this whole matter with you at greater length. But unfortunately, just now, I'm afraid I have to be going.'

Indeed, as I said this, I could see Sophie and Boris coming across the room towards me. Disentangling myself from Miss Collins, I considered again the choice of doors, stepping back a little to take in those hidden round the curve. When I studied them in turn, each door looked vaguely familiar, but I found I did not feel confident about any of them. It occurred to me to ask someone's advice, but I decided against this for fear of attracting attention to our early departure.

I led Sophie and Boris towards the doors, still in a quandary. For some reason, there had come into my head the numerous scenes from movies in which a character, wishing to make an impressive exit from a room, flings open the wrong door and walks into a cupboard. Although for exactly the opposite reason - I wished us to leave so inconspicuously that when it was discussed afterwards no one would be quite sure at which point we had done so - it was equally crucial I avoided such a calamity.

In the end I settled for the door most central in the row simply because it was the most imposing. There were pearl inlays within its deep panels and stone columns flanking each side. And at this moment, in front of each column, there stood a uniformed waiter as rigid as any sentry. A doorway of this status, I reasoned, while it might not necessarily take us directly through to the hotel, was certain to lead somewhere of significance from where we could work out our route, away from the public gaze.

Motioning Sophie and Boris to follow, I drifted towards the door and, giving one of the uniformed men a curt nod, as

though to say: 'There's no need to stir, I know what I'm doing,' pulled it open. Whereupon, to my horror, the very thing I had most feared occurred: I had opened a broom cupboard and, at that, one which had been filled beyond its capacity. Several household mops came tumbling out and fell with a clatter onto the marble floor, scattering a dark fluffy substance in all directions. Glancing into the cupboard, I saw an untidy heap of buckets, oily rags and aerosol cans.

'Excuse me,' I muttered to the uniformed man nearest me as he hastened to gather up the mops and, with glances now turning accusingly our way, I hurried in the direction of the neighbouring door.

Determined not to make the same mistake twice, I set about opening this second door with caution. I proceeded very slowly, and even though I could sense many eyes on my back, even though I could hear a rise in the hubbub and a voice saying close by: 'My God, that's Mr Ryder, isn't it?' I resisted the temptation to panic, inching the door toward me a little at a time, all the while peering into the crack to ensure there was nothing about to fall out. When to my relief I saw the door led into a corridor, I stepped quickly through and gestured urgently to Sophie and Boris.

I closed the door behind them and we all three looked about us. With some triumph I saw that I had, at the second attempt, chosen exactly the right door and we were now standing in the long dark corridor that led past the hotel drawing room and into the lobby. At first we remained motionless, a little stunned by the hush after the noise of the gallery. Then Boris yawned and said: 'That was a really boring party.'

'Atrocious,' I said, feeling furious again at every one of the people at the reception. 'What a pathetic lot. No idea at all about civilised behaviour.' Then I added: 'Mother was by far the most beautiful woman there. Wasn't she, Boris?'

Sophie giggled in the darkness.

'She was,' I said. 'By far the most beautiful.'

Boris seemed about to say something, but just then we all became aware of a slithering noise coming from somewhere in the darkness around us. Then, as my eyes accustomed themselves, I managed to make out further down the corridor the outline of some large beast, coming towards us slowly, emitting the noise each time it moved. Sophie and Boris had become aware of its presence at the same time and for a moment we all seemed to become transfixed. Then Boris exclaimed in a whisper:

'It's Grandfather!'

I then saw that the beast was indeed Gustav, hunched right over, holding one suitcase under his arm, a second by its handle and dragging behind him a third - the source of the slithering noise. For a moment he appeared to be hardly

moving forward at all, but simply rocking himself to a slow rhythm.

Boris made eagerly for him, while Sophie and I followed somewhat hesitantly. As we approached, Gustav, at last becoming aware of our presence, stopped and partially straightened. I could not see his expression in the darkness, but his voice sounded cheerful as he said:

‘Boris. What a pleasant surprise.’

‘It’s Grandfather!’ Boris exclaimed again. Then he said: ‘Are you busy?’

‘Yes, there’s lots of work.’

‘You must be very busy.’ There was an odd tension in Boris’s voice. ‘Very, *very* busy.’

‘Yes,’ Gustav said, recovering his breath. ‘It’s very busy.’

I stepped up to Gustav and said: ‘We’re sorry to interrupt you in the middle of your duties. We’ve just been attending a reception, but we’re now on our way home. To a big supper.’

‘Ah,’ the porter said looking at us. ‘Ah yes. That’s jolly good. I’m very pleased to see you all together like this.’ Then he said to Boris: ‘How are you, Boris? And how is your mother?’

‘Mother’s a bit tired,’ Boris said. ‘We’re all looking forward to the supper. We’re going to play Warlord afterwards.’

‘Now that sounds splendid. I’m sure you’ll enjoy yourselves. Well ...’ Gustav paused for a moment. Then he said: ‘I’d better be getting on with my work. We’re very busy at the moment.’

‘Yes,’ Boris said quietly.

Gustav ruffled Boris's hair. Then he hunched down again and recommenced his pulling. Reaching a hand out to Boris, I guided the little boy out of Gustav's way. Perhaps because we were watching, perhaps because the brief pause had restored some of his energy, the porter seemed this time to make much steadier progress as he moved past us into the darkness. I began to lead the way towards the lobby, but Boris was reluctant to follow, staring back down the corridor to where his grandfather's hunched shape could still be made out.

'Come on, let's hurry,' I said, putting an arm around his shoulder. 'We're all getting very hungry.'

I had started to walk again when I heard Sophie say behind me: 'No, it's this way.' I turned to find her stooping down by a small door I had not previously noticed. In fact, had I noticed it at all, I would not have assumed it to be anything more than a cupboard door, for it barely came up to my shoulder. Nevertheless, Sophie was now holding it open and Boris, with the air of someone who had done so numerous times before, stepped through it. Sophie continued to hold the door open and, after a little hesitation, I too stooped down and crept through after Boris.

I had half expected to find myself in a tunnel having to crawl on hands and knees, but in fact I was standing in another corridor. If anything it was more spacious than the one we had just left, but clearly intended only for staff. The floor was uncarpeted and there were bare pipes running along the wall. We were again in near-darkness, though a little further down, a bar of electric light was falling across the floor. We walked a short way towards the light, then Sophie stopped again and pushed a fire door by its bar. The next moment we were outside, standing in a quiet side-street.

It was a fine night with many stars visible. Glancing down the street I saw it was deserted and that all the shops were closed. As we started to walk, Sophie said lightly:

‘That was a surprise, meeting Grandfather like that. Wasn’t it, Boris?’

Boris did not respond. He was striding on in front of us, muttering quietly to himself.

‘You must be very hungry too,’ Sophie said to me. ‘I just hope there’ll be enough. I got so carried away cooking all these things earlier, I forgot to prepare a really substantial course. This afternoon I thought there’d be plenty, but now I think about it ...’

‘Don’t be silly, it’ll be fine,’ I said. ‘That’s exactly what I feel like anyway. A lot of small things, one after the other. I quite understand why Boris enjoys eating like that.’

‘Mother used to do it this way, when I was small. For our special evenings. Not birthdays or Christmas, we did the same as everyone else then. But for evenings we wanted to make special, just the three of us, Mother used to do it this way. Lots of delicious little things, one after the next. But then we moved, and Mother wasn’t well, and so we never did it much after that. I hope I’ve made enough for you. You must both be so hungry.’ Then suddenly she added: ‘I’m sorry. I wasn’t very impressive tonight, was I?’

I saw her again, standing alone helplessly in the middle of the throng, and I reached out and placed my arm around her. She responded by drawing herself close against me, and for the next few minutes we walked like that, not talking, through a series of deserted side-streets. At one point Boris fell in step beside us to ask:

‘Can I eat sitting on the sofa tonight?’

Sophie thought for a moment, then said: ‘Yes, all right. For this meal, yes, all right.’

Boris walked alongside us for several more paces, then asked: ‘Can I lie on the floor and eat?’

Sophie laughed. 'Just tonight, Boris. Tomorrow morning, at breakfast, you have to sit at the table again.'

This seemed to please Boris and he ran on ahead with some enthusiasm.

Eventually we came to a halt in front of a door squeezed between a barber's shop and a bakery. The street was a narrow one, made narrower by the many cars parked up on the pavement. As Sophie sorted through her keys, I glanced up and saw there were four more storeys above the shops. Some of the windows had lights on and I could hear faintly a television.

I followed the pair of them up two flights of stairs. As Sophie unlocked the front entrance the thought struck me that I was perhaps expected to behave as though familiar with the apartment. On the other hand, it was equally possible I was expected to behave like a guest. As we stepped inside, I decided to observe carefully Sophie's manner and take my cue from that. As it happened, no sooner had she closed the door behind us than Sophie announced she would have to turn on the oven and vanished further into the apartment. Boris, for his part, threw off his jacket and went running off making a noise like a police siren.

Left standing in the entrance hall, I took the opportunity to take a good look at my surroundings. There could be little doubt both Sophie and Boris expected me to know my way around, and certainly, the longer I stood gazing at the choice of half-open doors facing me, the dingy yellow wallpaper with its faint floral pattern, the exposed piping climbing from floor to ceiling behind the coat stand, I could feel some memory of this entrance hall gradually returning to me.

After a few minutes I went through into the living room. Although there were a number of features I did not recognise - the pair of old sunken armchairs to either side of the disused fireplace were undoubtedly recent acquisitions - my impression was that I could remember this room more clearly

than I had the entrance hall. The large oval dining table pushed against the wall, the second door leading through to the kitchen, the dark shapeless sofa, the tired orange carpet were all distinctly familiar. The overhanging light - a single bulb covered by a chintz shade - was casting a shadowy pattern all around so that I could not be sure the wallpaper was not here and there developing damp patches. Boris was lying in the middle of the floor and rolled over onto his back as I came further into the room.

‘I’ve decided to try an experiment,’ he declared, as much to the ceiling as to me. ‘I’m going to keep my neck like this.’

I looked down and saw that he had shortened his neck so that his chin was squeezed into his collar bone.

‘I see. And for how long are you going to do that?’

‘At least twenty-four hours.’

‘Very good, Boris.’

I stepped over him and went through into the kitchen. This was a long narrow room and once again unmistakably familiar. The grimy walls, the traces of cobweb near the cornicing, the dilapidated laundry equipment all tugged naggingly at my memory. Sophie had put on an apron and was kneeling down arranging something inside the oven. She looked up as I came in, made some remark about the food, pointed inside the oven and laughed cheerfully. I too gave a laugh, then, casting one more look about the kitchen, turned and went back into the living room.

Boris was still lying on the floor and as I entered he immediately shortened his neck again. I paid him no attention and sat down on the sofa. There was a newspaper on the carpet nearby and I picked it up thinking it might be the one containing the pictures of me. It was in fact several days old, but I decided to peruse it anyway. As I read through the front story - the man von Winterstein was being interviewed

about plans to conserve the Old Town - Boris continued to lie there on the carpet, not speaking, emitting occasionally some little robot-like noise. Whenever I stole a glance at him, I saw his neck was still shortened and decided to say nothing to him until he at least stopped this ridiculous game. Whether he was shortening his neck each time he guessed I was about to look at him, or whether he had it in a permanently contracted state, I could not tell and quickly ceased to care. 'Let him just lie there then,' I thought to myself and went on reading.

Eventually, after twenty minutes or so, Sophie came in with a platter laden with food. I could see vol-au-vents, savoury parcels, pies, all hand-sized and much of it intricate. Sophie laid the platter down on the dining table.

'You're very quiet,' she said looking about the room. 'Come on, let's enjoy ourselves now. Boris, look! And there's another plate like this to come. All your favourites! Now, why don't you choose a board game for us to play while I go and get the rest.'

As soon as Sophie disappeared back into the kitchen, Boris leapt to his feet, went to the table and stuffed a pie into his mouth. I was tempted to point out that his neck had returned to normal, but in the end went on reading the newspaper without speaking. Boris made his siren noise again and, moving rapidly across the room, stopped in front of a tall cupboard in the far corner. I remembered this was the cupboard inside which all the board games were kept, the broad flat boxes piled precariously on top of other toys and household items. Boris went on looking at the cupboard for a moment, then suddenly flung open the door.

'Which one are we going to play?' he asked.

I pretended not to hear and went on reading. I could see him at the edge of my vision, first turning towards me, then, as the realisation dawned on him that I would not reply, turning back to the cupboard. For some time, he stood there

contemplating his pile of board games, now and then reaching out to finger the edge of one or another box.

Sophie returned with more food. As she set about arranging the table, Boris went over to her and I could hear the two of them arguing quietly.

‘You said I could eat on the floor,’ Boris was maintaining.

Then after a while, he slumped down in front of me on the carpet again, placing a heaped plate beside him.

I rose to my feet and went to the table. Sophie hovered about me anxiously as I took a plate and regarded the choice.

‘It looks quite magnificent,’ I said, as I served myself.

Returning to my sofa, I saw that, by putting my plate down on a cushion beside me, I would be able to eat and continue to read my newspaper at the same time. I had decided earlier to examine the newspaper very carefully, scrutinising even the adverts for local businesses, and I now continued with this project, reaching over occasionally to my plate without taking my eyes off the newsprint.

Meanwhile Sophie had sat down on the floor near Boris, from time to time asking him a question – about how he liked a particular meat tart, or about some schoolfriend. But whenever she tried to start a conversation in this way, Boris had his mouth too full to reply with anything more than a grunt. Then Sophie said: ‘Well, Boris, did you decide which game you wanted?’

I could sense Boris’s gaze turning to me. Then he said quietly:

‘I don’t mind which one we play.’

‘You don’t mind?’ Sophie sounded incredulous. There was a lengthy pause, then she said: ‘All right then. If you

really don't care, I'll choose one.' I heard her rising to her feet. 'I'm going to choose one now.'

This strategy appeared to win Boris over for a moment. Getting up with some excitement, he followed his mother to the cupboard and I could hear the two of them conferring in front of the stack of boxes, their voices lowered as though in deference to the fact that I was reading. Eventually they came back and sat down on the floor again.

'Come on, let's set this out now,' Sophie said. 'We could start playing while we're eating.'

When I next glanced down at them, the board had been opened out and Boris was positioning the cards and plastic counters with some enthusiasm. I was thus surprised when a few minutes later I became aware of Sophie saying:

'What's the matter? You said you wanted this one.'

'I did.'

'Then what's the matter, Boris?'

There was a pause before Boris said: 'I'm too tired. Like Papa.'

Sophie gave a sigh. Then suddenly she said in a brighter voice:

'Boris, there's something Papa's bought for you.'

I could not resist peering round the edge of the newspaper, and as I did so Sophie threw me a conspiratorial smile.

'Can I give it to him now?' she asked me.

I had no idea what she was talking about and returned a puzzled look, but she rose to her feet and left the room. She returned almost immediately, holding up the tattered handyman's manual I had bought at the cinema the previous night. Boris, forgetting his supposed tiredness, leapt to his feet, but Sophie teasingly held the book away from him.

‘Papa and I went out together last night,’ she said. ‘It was a wonderful evening and, in the middle of it all, he remembered you and he bought this for you. You’ve never had anything like this before, have you, Boris?’

‘Don’t tell him it’s anything so marvellous,’ I said from behind the newspaper. ‘It’s just an old manual.’

‘It was very kind of Papa, wasn’t it?’

I stole another peek. Sophie had now let Boris take the book and he had dropped to his knees to examine it.

‘It’s great,’ he murmured, going through it. ‘This is really great.’ He paused at a page and stared at it. ‘It shows you how to do everything.’

He turned over some more pages and as he did so the book gave a sharp crack and fell apart into two sections. Boris carried on turning the pages as though nothing had happened. Sophie, who had started to reach down, stopped on seeing Boris’s reaction and straightened again.

‘It shows you everything,’ Boris said. ‘It’s really good.’

I had the distinct impression he was trying to address me. I went on reading, and a few seconds later I heard Sophie say softly: ‘I’ll get some sellotape. That’s all it needs.’

I heard Sophie leave the room and carried on reading. I could see, at the corner of my eye, Boris still turning the pages. After a little while, he looked up at me and said:

‘There’s a special sort of brush you can get for putting up wallpaper.’

I continued to read. Eventually Sophie came wandering back in.

‘It’s odd, I can’t find the sellotape anywhere,’ she was mumbling.

‘This book’s great,’ Boris said to her. ‘It shows you how to do everything.’

‘It’s odd. Perhaps we finished it.’ Sophie went back through into the kitchen.

I had a faint recollection of various rolls of adhesive tape being kept in the same cupboard as the board games, inside one of the small drawers near the bottom right-hand corner. I was thinking about putting down my newspaper and going over to conduct a search, but then Sophie came back into the room again.

‘Never mind,’ she said. ‘I’ll buy some tape in the morning and we’ll mend the book then. Now come on, Boris, let’s get started with the game or we’ll never finish before bed.’

Boris did not reply. I could hear him down on the carpet, still turning pages.

‘Well, if you’re not going to play,’ Sophie said, ‘I’ll just start on my own.’

There came the sound of a dice being rattled in its beaker. As I continued through my newspaper, I could not help feeling a little sorry for Sophie about the way the evening was turning out. But then, she could hardly have expected to introduce the level of chaos she had done without our having to pay some sort of price. Moreover, it was not even as though she had particularly excelled herself with the cooking. She had not thought to provide, for instance, any sardines on little triangles of toast, or any cheese and sausage kebabs. She had not made an omelette of any sort, or any cheese-stuffed potatoes, or fish cakes. Neither were there any stuffed peppers. Nor those little cubes of bread with anchovy paste on them, nor those pieces of cucumber sliced lengthways, not even wedges of hard-boiled egg with the zig-zag edges. And for afterwards, she had made no plum

slices, no buttercream fingers, not even a strawberry Swiss roll.

I became gradually conscious that Sophie had been rattling the dice for an inordinate period. In fact, the rattling had changed in character since she had first started to play with the dice. She now seemed to be shaking it with a feeble slowness, as though in time to some melody running through her head. I lowered the newspaper with a sense of alarm.

On the floor, Sophie was leaning on one stiffened arm, a posture that made her long hair plunge down over her shoulder, concealing her face entirely. She appeared to have become completely absorbed with the game, and her weight had tipped forward oddly, so that she was hovering right over the board. The whole of her body was rocking gently. Boris was watching her sulkily, passing his hands over the crack in his book.

Sophie went on and on shaking the dice, for thirty, forty seconds, before finally letting it roll out in front of her. She studied it dreamily, moved some pieces about the board, then began to shake the dice again. I could sense something dangerous in the atmosphere and decided it was time I took charge of the situation. Throwing the newspaper aside, I clapped my hands together and got to my feet.

‘I have to be getting back to the hotel,’ I announced. ‘And I’d suggest, very strongly, you both go off to bed. We’ve all had a long day.’

I glimpsed Sophie’s surprised expression as I strode out into the hall. The next moment she appeared behind me.

‘You’re going already? But have you had enough to eat?’

‘I’m sorry, I know you’ve worked hard to prepare the meal. But it’s got too late now. I have a very busy morning tomorrow.’

Sophie sighed and looked despondent. 'I'm sorry,' she said eventually. 'The evening wasn't very successful. I'm sorry.'

'Don't worry. It's not your fault. We were all rather tired. Now, I really have to be going.'

Sophie let me out sullenly, saying she would call me in the morning.

I spent the next several minutes wandering through the deserted streets trying to remember the way back to the hotel. I eventually came out onto a street I recognised, and began rather to enjoy the quiet of the night and the chance to be alone with just my thoughts and the sound of my footsteps. Before long, however, I felt again a certain regret about the way the evening had ended. But then the fact was, along with so much else, Sophie had succeeded in reducing my carefully planned time-table to chaos. And now here I was, reaching the end of my second day in the city having gained only the most superficial insights into the crisis I had come to assess. I recalled that I had even been prevented from keeping my morning's appointment with the Countess and the mayor, when I would have had the chance at last to hear for myself something of Brodsky's music. There was, of course, still plenty of time for me to make up lost ground; a number of substantial meetings still in front of me - such as that with the Citizens' Mutual Support Group - were certain to give me a much fuller picture of the situation here. Nevertheless, there could be no denying I had been placed under some pressure, and Sophie could hardly complain if I had not finished the day in the most relaxed of moods.

I had been strolling over a stone bridge thinking these thoughts. As I paused to gaze down into the water and at the row of lamps along the canalside, it occurred to me I still had the option of accepting Miss Collins's invitation to call on her. She had certainly intimated she was in a unique

position to be of assistance, and now, with my time here growing ever more limited, I could see how a good talk with her might greatly expedite matters, providing me with virtually all the information I would by now have gathered myself had Sophie not had her way. I thought again of Miss Collins's drawing room, the velvet drapes and the weary furniture, and felt a sudden wish that I was there at this very moment. I began to walk again, over the bridge and into the dark street, resolving to call on her in the morning at the first opportunity.

III

I awoke to find bright sunlight pouring in through the vertical blinds and was seized by the panicky feeling I had let far too much of the morning slip by. But then I remembered my decision of the night before to pay a call on Miss Collins and got out of bed feeling much calmer.

The room was smaller and distinctly stuffier than my former one and I again felt annoyed at Hoffman for having obliged me to move. But the whole matter of the rooms no longer seemed as important as it had done the previous morning and as I washed and dressed I found no difficulty placing my mind firmly on the important meeting with Miss Collins upon which so much now depended. By the time I left my room, I had stopped worrying altogether about having slept in - the sleep, I knew, would prove invaluable in the long run - and was looking forward to a good breakfast over which I could organise my thoughts on the issues I would raise with Miss Collins.

I was surprised, then, on arriving down at the breakfast room to be greeted by the sound of a vacuum cleaner. The doors to the room were closed and when I pushed them open a little I saw two women in overalls cleaning the carpet, the tables and chairs pushed against the walls. The prospect of facing such a crucial meeting without breakfast was not a happy one and I returned to the lobby more than a little disgruntled. I walked past a group of American tourists up to the reception desk. The desk clerk was sitting reading a magazine, but on seeing me rose to his feet.

‘Good morning, Mr Ryder.’

‘Good morning. I’m somewhat disappointed to find breakfast is not being served.’

For a second, the desk clerk looked puzzled. Then he said: 'Normally, sir, even at this hour, someone would have been able to serve you breakfast. But of course, today being today, naturally enough, a great many of our staff are over at the concert hall to assist with the preparations. Mr Hoffman has himself been there since the early hours. I'm afraid we're very much running at half strength. Unfortunately the atrium also has had to be closed until lunch time. Of course, if it's a matter of coffee and a few rolls ...'

'It's quite all right,' I said coldly. 'I simply don't have time to wait around while it's organised. I'll just have to do without breakfast this morning.'

The desk clerk began to apologise again, but I cut him off with a wave of my hand and walked away.

I stepped out of the hotel into the sunshine. It was not until I had walked some distance alongside the heavy traffic that I realised I was not at all sure of the location of Miss Collins's apartment. I had not attended carefully the night Stephan had driven us there, and besides, with the streets now so crowded with pedestrians and traffic, nothing was recognisable. I paused a moment on the pavement and considered asking a passer-by for directions. It was just conceivable Miss Collins was sufficiently well known in the city for me to do this. In fact I was about to stop a man in a business suit striding towards me, when I felt someone touch my shoulder from behind.

'Good morning, sir.'

I turned to find Gustav, holding a large cardboard box whose dimensions virtually obscured the upper half of his body. He was panting heavily, but whether this was due solely to his burden or because he had come hurrying after me, I could not tell. In any case, when I greeted him and enquired

where he was going, it was a little while before he could reply.

‘Oh, I was just taking this to the concert hall, sir,’ he said eventually. ‘The larger items were all transported by van last night, but then there are so many things still needed. I’ve been having to go back and forth between the hotel and the concert hall since early morning. Everyone’s very excited over there already, I can tell you, sir. There’s a real atmosphere there.’

‘That’s good to hear,’ I said. ‘I’m also very much looking forward to the event. But I wonder if you might be able to assist me. You see, I have an appointment at Miss Collins’s apartment this morning, but I’ve just for the moment lost my way a little.’

‘Miss Collins? Well then you’re not far at all. It’s this way, sir. I’ll walk with you, if I may. Oh no, don’t worry, sir, it’s directly on my route.’

His box was perhaps not as heavy as it looked, for once we started to walk, Gustav set a steady pace alongside me.

‘I’m very glad we’ve coincided like this, sir,’ he went on, ‘because to be quite frank, there’s a matter I’d been meaning to raise with you. In fact, I’d been meaning to raise it ever since we met, but somehow with one thing then another I never got around to it. And now tonight’s almost upon us and I still haven’t asked you. It’s just something that came up a few weeks ago, at the Hungarian Café, at one of our Sunday gatherings. It wasn’t long after we heard the news about you coming to our town, and of course, like everyone else, we were talking about it. And someone, I think it was Gianni, he was saying how he’d read you were a very decent sort, as different as you could get from these prima donna types, how you had a reputation for being very concerned about the ordinary citizen, he was saying all these things, sir. And there we were around the table, eight or nine of us, Josef wasn’t there that night, we were watching the sun go

down over the square and I think we each had the same thought all at once. At first we were all just sitting there in silence, none of us daring to say it aloud. In the end it was Karl, typical of him, Karl said what we were all thinking.

“Why don’t we ask him?” he said. “What have we got to lose? We should at least ask him. He sounds completely different to that other one. He might even agree, you never know. Why don’t we ask him, it might be our last chance.” And then we were all suddenly talking and talking about it, and ever since then, sir, to tell you the truth, we haven’t sat together for any length of time without bringing up the topic. We’d be talking about something else, everyone laughing, and then this silence would come over us and we’d realise we were all thinking about it again. That’s why I was starting to feel rather sorry for myself, sir. I thought, I’d seen you a few times, I’d had the honour of talking with you and yet I hadn’t worked up the nerve to ask. Now here we are, the big event only hours away and I still haven’t asked. How could I ever explain that to the boys on Sunday? As a matter of fact, when I got up this morning, sir, I said to myself, I must find him, I must at least put it to Mr Ryder, the boys are depending on it. But then everything was so busy, and you were bound to have so much to do, and I thought, well, I may well have lost my chance. So you see, I’m very glad we’ve coincided like this, I hope you won’t mind my putting it to you, and of course, if you felt we were asking the impossible, then naturally that would be the last of it, the boys would accept that, oh yes.’

We had turned a corner into a busy boulevard. Gustav fell silent as we crossed at a set of lights and it was not until we were on the other side walking past a row of Italian cafés that he said:

‘I’m sure you’ve guessed what I’m going to ask, sir. All we’re requesting is a small mention. That’s all, sir.’

‘A small mention?’

‘Just a small mention, sir. As you know, many of us, we’ve worked and worked over the years to try and change the attitude in this town towards our profession. We may have had a small effect, but by and large we’ve failed to make a general impact and, well, it’s perfectly understandable, there’s frustration setting in. We’re none of us getting any younger, there’s a feeling that things may never really change. But one word from you tonight, sir, that could alter the course of everything. It could be an historic turning point for our profession. That’s how the boys see it. In fact, sir, some of the boys believe this is our last chance, at least for our generation. When will we get a chance like this again? That’s what they keep asking. So here I am, I’ve put it to you, sir. Of course, if you feel it’s not quite the thing, and I could well understand your feeling that way, after all you’ve come here to address some very important issues, and what I’m talking about is a small matter. Big for us, but seen overall, I appreciate, it’s a small matter. If you felt it was impossible, sir, please say so and that’ll be the last you’ll hear of it.’

I thought for a moment, conscious that he was watching me intensely from around the edge of his box.

‘What you’re suggesting,’ I said after a while, ‘is that I make some small mention of you during ... during my address to the people of this town.’

‘No more than a few words at the most, sir.’

Certainly, the notion of coming to the help of the elderly porter and his colleagues in such a way had its appeal. I thought for a moment, then said: ‘Very well. I’d be happy to say something on your behalf.’

I heard Gustav take a deep breath as the impact of my reply sank in. Then he said quite quietly:

‘We’d be forever indebted to you, sir.’

He was about to say more, but I had somehow become taken by the idea of frustrating, for a while, his attempts to express his gratitude to me.

‘Yes, let’s think about it, how could we do it?’ I said quickly, assuming a preoccupied air. ‘Yes, I could say as I came up to the podium something like: “Before I begin, there’s a small yet rather important point I’d like to make.” Something like that. Yes, that would be easy enough.’

I suddenly saw quite vividly the gathering of sturdy old men around a café table, the looks on their faces - of disbelief, of unfathomed joy - as Gustav announced the news to them. I saw myself entering their midst, quietly and modestly, and their faces turning to me. All the while, I was conscious of Gustav walking by my side, no doubt virtually bursting to finish thanking me, but I nevertheless kept up my talk.

‘Yes, yes. “A small but important point,” I could say to them. “There is something which I, having seen many other cities around the world, find somewhat peculiar here ...” Perhaps “peculiar” is too strong a word. Perhaps I might say “eccentric”.’

‘Ah yes, sir,’ Gustav broke in. ‘“Eccentric” would be a fine word. None of us wants any antagonism stirred up. But this is precisely why you’re such a unique opportunity for us. You see, even if in a few years’ time another celebrity agreed to come to our town, and even if we were to succeed in persuading him to speak for us, what are the chances of his having your sort of tact, sir? “Eccentric” would be a perfect way to put it, sir.’

‘Yes, yes,’ I went on, ‘and I’d perhaps pause a second, looking at them with mild accusation, so that everyone, the whole hall, they’d be hushed and waiting. Then finally I might say something like, well, let me see, I might say: “Ladies and gentlemen, to all of you, living here as

you have for so many years, certain things may have come to appear normal, certain things which an outsider would immediately deem *conspicuous* ...” ’

Suddenly Gustav stopped walking. At first I thought he had perhaps done so because his urge to express his thanks had become overwhelming. But then I looked at him and realised this was not the case. He had frozen on the pavement, his head pushed right over to one side by the box so that his cheek was squashed against its side. His eyes were closed tight, and his expression bore a slight frown as though he was trying to make a difficult calculation in his head. Then, as I watched, his Adam's apple moved slowly up and down his neck - once, twice, three times.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked, putting an arm behind him. ‘Good gracious, you'd better sit down somewhere.’

I started to take the box from him, but Gustav's hands did not relinquish their grip.

‘No, no, sir,’ he said, his eyes still closed. ‘I'm perfectly all right.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes, yes. I'm perfectly all right.’

For a few more seconds he remained standing quite still. Then he opened his eyes and glanced about him, gave a faint laugh and began to walk again.

‘You've no idea what this will mean to us, sir,’ he said after we had gone several steps together. ‘And after all these years.’ He shook his head with a smile. ‘I'll convey the news to the boys at the first opportunity. There's a lot of work this morning, but one phone call to Josef, that will do it. He'll let the others know. Can you imagine, sir, what it will mean to them? Ah, but there's your turning. I have to go on a little further. Oh, don't worry, sir, I'm perfectly all right. Miss Collins's apartment, as you know,

is just down there on your right. Well, sir, I can't tell you how grateful I am. The boys will wait for tonight as they've waited for little else in their lives. I know it, sir.'

Wishing him a good day, I took the turning he had indicated. When, after a few steps, I glanced over my shoulder, Gustav was still standing on the corner watching me from around the edge of his box. Seeing me turn, he nodded his head emphatically - the box prevented him from waving - then went on his way.

The street I found myself in was a predominantly residential one. After a few blocks it grew quieter and there appeared above me the apartment houses with the Spanish-style balconies which I recognised from the night I had come down the street in Stephan's car. They stretched ahead block after block, and as I continued to walk I began to fear I might never recognise the one in front of which Boris and I had waited that night. But then I found myself stopping before a distinctly familiar entrance and after a moment I went up and peered through the glass panels on either side of the door.

The entrance hall was furnished in a tidy neutral way, and I was able to ascertain almost nothing from it. Then I remembered how that night I had watched Stephan and Miss Collins talk for a while in the front parlour before going further inside the building, and at the risk of being mistaken for an intruder I hooked a leg over the low wall and leaned across to look through the nearest window. The bright sun made it difficult for me to see inside, but I managed to make out a small stocky man in a white shirt and tie sitting alone in an armchair, more or less directly facing the window. His gaze appeared to be fixed on me, but his expression was empty and it was not at all clear whether he had registered me at all, or was simply staring out of the window lost in thought. None of this told me much, but when I pulled my leg back off the wall and looked again at the door,

I felt convinced it was indeed the right one and pressed the bell for the ground-floor apartment.

After a short wait, I was gratified to see through the glazed panels Miss Collins's figure coming towards me.

'Ah, Mr Ryder,' she said opening the door. 'I was wondering if I would see you this morning.'

'How do you do, Miss Collins. After some consideration, I decided I'd take advantage of your kind suggestion that I come and call on you. But I see you have a guest already this morning.' I gestured towards her front parlour. 'Perhaps you'd prefer I came back another time.'

'I won't hear of you going away, Mr Ryder. Actually, although you suggest I'm busy, compared to an average morning it's rather quiet here today. As you see, I've only one person waiting. Just now I'm with a young couple. I've been talking to them for an hour already, but they have such deep-seated problems, they've so much to talk about and haven't been able to until today, I haven't the heart to rush them. But if you wouldn't mind waiting in the front room, it really shouldn't take much longer.' Then, suddenly lowering her voice, she said: 'The gentleman waiting now, poor man, he's just miserable and lonely and wants a few minutes of someone listening to him say so, that's all. He won't be long, I'll send him away quite quickly. He comes virtually every morning, he doesn't mind being hastened on now and again, he gets a lot of my time.' Her voice then resumed its normal tones as she continued: 'Well, please come in, Mr Ryder, don't just keep standing out there like that, even though I see it's a very pleasant day. If you liked, if no one's waiting by then, we could go and walk in the Sternberg Garden. It's very close and we've a lot to discuss, I'm sure. In fact, I've given your position quite a lot of thought already.'

'How kind of you, Miss Collins. Actually, I knew you might be busy this morning, and I wouldn't have intruded on

you like this if there wasn't a certain amount of urgency involved. You see, the fact is' - I gave a heavy sigh and shook my head - 'the fact is, for one reason or another, I've not been able to go about things in quite the way I originally planned, and now, here we are, time is getting on and ... Well, for one thing, as you know, I have to give my talk to the people here tonight, and to be absolutely frank with you, Miss Collins ...' I almost came to a stop, but then saw her looking at me with a kindly expression and made an effort to continue. 'To be frank, there are a number of issues, local issues here, I'd like your advice on before ... before I can finalise' - I paused in an attempt to stop my voice wobbling - 'before I can finalise my address. After all, all these people are depending so much on me ...'

'Mr Ryder, Mr Ryder' - Miss Collins had placed her hand on my shoulder - 'please calm yourself. And do come in, please. That's better, come right in. Now please stop worrying yourself. It's very understandable you'd get a little agitated at this stage, that's perfectly natural. In fact, it's rather commendable you should be so concerned. We can discuss all these things, these local issues, don't worry, we'll do that very shortly. But let me say this much now, Mr Ryder. I do think you're worrying unduly. Yes, you'll have a lot of responsibility on your shoulders tonight, but then you've been in similar situations many many times before and by all accounts you've acquitted yourself more than creditably. Why would it be any different this time?'

'But what I'm saying to you, Miss Collins,' I said interrupting, 'is that this time it's been quite different. This time I've not been able to go *about things* ...' I sighed heavily again. 'The fact is I haven't had a chance to prepare my ground in the usual way ...'

'We'll talk about it all very soon. But Mr Ryder, I feel certain you're getting things out of all proportion. What have you to so concern yourself about? You have unrivalled expertise, you're a man of internationally recognised genius,

really, what have you to fear? The truth is' - she lowered her voice again - 'the people in a town like this, they'd be grateful for *anything* from you. Just talk to them about your general impressions, they're not about to complain. You've nothing at all to fear.'

I nodded, realising that she indeed had a point, and almost immediately I felt a tension lifting from me.

'But we'll discuss it all very thoroughly in just a little while.' Miss Collins, her hand still on my shoulder, was guiding me through into her front parlour. 'I promise I shan't be long. Please take a seat and make yourself comfortable.'

I went into a small square room filled with sunlight and fresh flowers. The disparate assortment of armchairs suggested the waiting room of a dentist or doctor, as did the magazines on the coffee table. At the sight of Miss Collins, the stocky man rose immediately to his feet, either out of courtesy or because he hoped she would now invite him through into the drawing room. I was expecting to be introduced, but the prevailing protocol seemed indeed to be that of a waiting room, for Miss Collins merely smiled at the man before disappearing through the inner door, murmuring apologetically as she did so, apparently to us both: 'I shan't be long.'

The stocky man sat down again and gazed at the floor. I thought for a moment he would say something, but when he remained silent I turned and seated myself on a wicker couch occupying the sun-filled bay of the window I had earlier looked through. The basket work creaked reassuringly as I settled myself into it. A broad band of sunlight was falling across my lap, and there was a large vase of tulips close to my face. I immediately felt very comfortable and in a quite different frame of mind concerning what lay before me than when I had rung the doorbell only minutes before. Of course, Miss Collins was absolutely right. A town of this sort would be grateful for virtually anything I cared to offer it. It

was hardly conceivable that people would scrutinise my points closely or become critical. And as Miss Collins had again pointed out, I had been in such positions countless times before. Even with my ground less well prepared than I would like, I was still bound to be able to deliver an address of some authority. As I continued to sit there in the sunshine, I found myself growing ever more tranquil, and more and more amazed I could ever have worked myself into such a state of anxiety.

‘I was just wondering,’ the stocky man suddenly said to me. ‘Are you still in touch with any of the old crowd? People like Tom Edwards? Or Chris Farleigh? Or those two girls who used to live at the Flooded Farmhouse?’

I realised then that the stocky man was Jonathan Parkhurst, whom I had known reasonably well during my student days in England.

‘No,’ I said to him, ‘unfortunately I’ve rather lost touch with everyone from those days. Having to move around from country to country as I do, it’s just impossible.’

He nodded without smiling. ‘I suppose it must be difficult,’ he said. ‘Well, *they* all remember *you*. Oh yes. When I was back in England last year I met up with a few of them. They’d all apparently been meeting once a year or so. I envy them sometimes, but mostly I’m glad I haven’t got myself stuck in a circle like that. That’s why I like living out here, I can be anyone I want here, people don’t expect me to be the clown all the time. But you know, when I went back, when I met them in this pub, they immediately started again.

“Hey, it’s old Parkers!” they all shouted. They still call me that, as though no time at all had gone by. “Parkers! It’s old Parkers!” They actually made this big braying noise to welcome me when I first came in, oh God, I can’t tell you how awful it was. And I could feel myself turning back into that pathetic clown I came here to get away from, yes, from the moment they started that braying noise. It was a nice

enough pub, mind you, a typical old English country pub, a real fire, those little brass things all over the bricks, an old sword over the mantelpiece, a hearty landlord saying cheerful things, all of that was very nostalgic, I do miss it all living out here. But the rest of it, my God, it makes me shudder just to think of it. They made that braying noise, fully expecting me to come bounding up to the table clowning away. And all through the evening, they kept mentioning one name after another, it wasn't as though they even discussed them, they just made more noises, or else laughed immediately they mentioned another name. You know, they'd mention someone like Samantha, and they'd all laugh and cheer and whoop. Then they'd call out some other name, Roger Peacock, say, and they'd all break out into some sort of football chant. It was quite awful. But the worst of it was they all expected me to be the clown again and I just couldn't do anything about it. It was like it was completely unthinkable I could have become someone else, and so I started it all again, the funny voices, the faces, oh yes, I found I could still do it all very well. I suppose they'd no reason to suppose I didn't carry on like that out here. In fact, that's exactly what one of them said. I think it was Tom Edwards, at one point in the evening, they were all very drunk, he slapped me hard on the back and said: "Parkers! They must love you out there! Parkers!" I suppose this must have been just after I'd done another of my turns for them, perhaps I'd been telling them about some aspect of life out here and I'd been clowning it up a bit, who knows, anyway that's what he said and the others were laughing and laughing. Oh yes, I was a big hit. They all kept saying how much they missed me, I was always such a good laugh, oh it was so long since I'd heard anyone say such a thing, so long since I'd been received like that, it was so warm and friendly. And yet what was I doing that for again? I'd vowed never to be like that, that's why I came out here. Even as I was walking to the pub, I'd been saying to myself all the way down the lane, it was very chilly that night, foggy and very chilly, I was telling myself all the

way down the lane, that was years ago, I'm not like that any more, I'm going to show them how I am now, and I said it over and over trying to make myself strong, but as soon as I walked in and saw that warm fire and they did that braying noise to welcome me, oh, it's been so lonely out here. Okay, here I don't have to do all those faces and funny voices, but at least that all worked. It may have been intolerable, but it worked, they all loved me, my old university friends, poor sods, they must believe I'm still like that. They'd never guess it, that my neighbours think I'm this very solemn, rather dull Englishman. Polite, they think, but very dull. Very lonely and very dull. Well, at least that's better than being Parkers again. That braying noise, oh, how pathetic, a group of middle-aged men making that sort of noise, and me, pulling my faces and doing those silly voices, oh God, it was truly nauseating. But I couldn't help it, it was so long since I'd been surrounded by friends like that. What about you, Ryder, don't you long for those days sometimes? Even you with all your success? Oh yes, that's what I was going to tell you. You may not remember any of them very well now, but they certainly remember *you* all right. Whenever they have one of these little reunions, it seems, there's a little part of the evening devoted specially to you. Oh yes, I've witnessed it. They go through a lot of the other names first, they don't like to get to you straight away, you know, they like a good run-up. They actually have little pauses when they all pretend they can't think of any more people from those days. Then finally one of them says: "What about Ryder? Anyone heard of him lately?" Then they all explode, making the most disgusting noise, something half-way between a jeer and a retch. They do it all together, repeatedly, really, that's all they do for about the first minute after your name's mentioned. Then they start to laugh and then they all start to mimic piano-playing, you know, like this' - Parkhurst put on a haughty expression and played an invisible keyboard in a highly precious manner - 'they all do this, then make more retching noises. Then they start in on the stories,

little things they remember about you, and you can tell they've already told them to each other many times over because they all know, they all know at which points to make the noises again, at which point to say: "What? You're kidding!" and so on. Oh, they really enjoy themselves. The time I was there, someone was remembering the evening the finals finished, how they were all getting ready to go out on the piss for the night and saw you coming up the road looking very serious. And they'd said to you: "Come on, Ryder, come and get pissed out of your brain with us!" and apparently you'd replied, and here whoever's telling it puts on this face, apparently you'd said' - Parkhurst once more transformed into the haughty creature and his voice assumed a preposterously pompous tone - ' "I'm much too busy. I can't afford not to practise tonight. I've missed two days' practice on account of these horrid exams!" Then they all make the retching noise together, and do their piano-playing in the air, and that's when they start ... Well, I won't tell you some of the other things they get up to, they're quite appalling, they're a loathsome lot and so unhappy, most of them, so frustrated and angry. '

As Parkhurst had been talking, a fragment of memory had come back to me from my student days, one which for a moment made me feel very tranquil, so much so that for a while I hardly cared what Parkhurst was saying. I was recalling a fine morning not unlike the present one, when I had also been relaxing in a couch beside a sunny window. I was in my little room in the old farmhouse I was sharing with four other students. On my lap was the score of some concerto I had been studying in a lackadaisical way for the previous hour, which I had been considerer-ing abandoning for one of the nineteenth-century novels piled on the wooden floor near my feet. The window was open allowing a breeze to drift through, and from outside came the voices of several students sitting in the uncut grass arguing about philosophy or poetry or some such thing. My small room had had little else in it apart from that couch - just a mattress on the floor and, in the

corner, a small desk and upright chair - but I had been very fond of it. Often the floor had become entirely covered with the books and magazines I browsed through on those long afternoons, and I had got into the habit of leaving my door ajar so that whoever happened to be passing could just wander in for a talk. I closed my eyes and for a moment was seized by a powerful longing to be back in that little farmhouse again surrounded by open fields and companions lazing in the tall grass, and it was some time before what Parkhurst was actually saying began to sink in. Only then did it occur to me that it was some of these same people, whose faces had now merged with one another in the memory, whom I had once languidly welcomed when they had peered around my door, and with whom I had spent a casual hour or two discussing some novelist or Spanish guitarist, it was some of these very people Parkhurst was now speaking of. But even then, such was the almost sensuous pleasure I was experiencing as I reclined in Miss Collins's wicker couch in the sun-filled bay that I still felt no more than a vague and distant discomfort concerning Parkhurst's words.

He went on talking and I had long since ceased to attend to him when I was startled by the sound of someone tapping the window pane behind me. Parkhurst seemed not to want to hear this and continued talking, and I too tried to ignore the noise as one might an alarm clock when disturbed in luxurious sleep. But the tapping persisted and Parkhurst finally broke off, saying: 'Oh goodness, it's that Brodsky fellow.'

Opening my eyes, I looked over my shoulder. Indeed Brodsky was peering in intently. The brightness outside, or perhaps something about his own vision, appeared to be giving him difficulty seeing in. His face was pressed against the glass and he was shading his eyes with both hands, but he seemed still not to see us and it occurred to me he was tapping the glass believing Miss Collins herself to be here in the room.

Eventually Parkhurst got to his feet, saying: 'I suppose I'd better see what he wants.'

I could hear Parkhurst opening the door and then voices arguing out in the hallway. Eventually Parkhurst came back into the room, rolled his eyes at me and gave a sigh.

Brodsky came in behind him. He looked taller than when I had last seen him across a crowded room, and I again noticed the odd way he held himself - at a slightly tilted angle as though about to topple over - but saw too that he was completely sober. He had on a scarlet bow tie and a rather dandy-ish black suit which looked brand-new. The collars of his white shirt were pointing outwards - whether by design or through excessive starching, I could not tell. He was holding a bouquet of flowers and his eyes were weary and sad. Brodsky paused at the threshold and peered tentatively around the door frame, perhaps expecting to discover Miss Collins in the room.

'She's busy, I told you,' Parkhurst said. 'Look, I happen to be a confidant of Miss Collins and I can say with certainty she will not wish to see you.' Parkhurst glanced at me, expecting me to confirm this, but I had decided not to get involved and simply gave Brodsky a weak smile. Only then did Brodsky recognise me.

'Mr Ryder,' he said, and bowed his head gravely. Then he turned again to Parkhurst. 'If she's in there, please, go and get her.' He indicated his bouquet as though it would in itself explain why his seeing her was so imperative. 'Please.'

'I told you, I can't help you. She won't see you. Besides, she's talking to some people.'

'Okay,' Brodsky murmured. 'Okay. You won't help me. Okay.'

With that he began to move towards the inner door through which Miss Collins had earlier disappeared. Parkhurst quickly blocked his route and for a moment Brodsky's tall gangly frame and Parkhurst's small stocky one came into conflict. Parkhurst's method of halting Brodsky consisted simply of pushing at the latter's chest with both hands. Brodsky, meanwhile, had placed a hand on Parkhurst's shoulder and was gazing over it towards the inner door, as though he were in a crowd and was politely peering over the person in front of him. All the while he continued to make a steady shuffling motion with his feet, intermittently mumbling the word 'please' .

'All right!' Parkhurst eventually shouted. 'All right, I'll go and talk to her. I know what she'll say, but all right, all right!'

They separated. Then Parkhurst said, raising his finger:

'But you wait here! You make jolly sure you wait here!'

Giving Brodsky a final glare, Parkhurst turned and went through the door, closing it firmly behind him.

At first Brodsky stood staring at the door and I thought he was about to follow Parkhurst. But in the end he turned around and sat down.

For some time Brodsky appeared to be rehearsing something in his head, his lips mouthing the odd word, and it did not feel appropriate to say anything to him. From time to time he would scrutinise the bouquet as though everything depended on it and the slightest blemish would be a major setback. Then, after we had been sitting without speaking for some time, he finally looked towards me and said:

'Mr Ryder. I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance at last.'

'How do you do, Mr Brodsky,' I said. 'I hope you're well.'

‘Oh ...’ He waved his hand in a vague gesture. ‘I can’t say I feel well. I have, you see, a pain.’

‘Oh? A pain?’ Then, when he said nothing, I asked: ‘You mean an emotional pain?’

‘No, no. It’s a wound. I got it many years ago and it’s always given me trouble. Bad pain. Perhaps that’s why I drank so much. If I drink, I don’t feel it.’

I waited for him to say more, but he became silent. After a moment I said:

‘You’re referring to a wound of the heart, Mr Brodsky?’

‘Heart? My heart’s not so bad. No, no, it’s to do with ...’ Suddenly he laughed loudly. ‘I see, Mr Ryder. You think I am being poetic. No, no, I meant simply, I had a wound. I was injured, very badly, many years ago. In Russia. The doctors weren’t so good, they did a bad job. And the pain’s been bad. It’s never healed properly. I’ve had it for so long now, it still hurts me.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. It must be a great nuisance.’

‘Nuisance?’ He thought about this then laughed again.

‘You could say that, Mr Ryder, my friend. A nuisance. It’s been a hell of a nuisance to me.’ He suddenly seemed to remember he was holding his flowers. He sniffed them and breathed in deeply. ‘But let’s not talk of this. You asked how I felt and I told you, but I didn’t mean to talk about it. I try to be brave about the wound. For years I never mentioned it, but now I’m old and I don’t drink, it’s got very painful. It hasn’t really healed at all.’

‘Surely there’s something you can do about it. Have you seen a doctor? Perhaps a specialist of some sort?’

Brodsky looked at his flowers again and smiled. ‘I want to make love to her again,’ he said almost to himself.

‘Before this wound gets worse. I want to make love to her again.’

There was an odd silence. Then I said:

‘If your wound is so old, Mr Brodsky, I wouldn’t have thought it’s likely to get worse.’

‘These old wounds.’ He gave a shrug. ‘They stay the same for years. You think you’ve got the measure of it. Then you get old and they start to grow again. But it’s not so bad just now. Perhaps I can still make love. I’m old now, but sometimes ...’ He leaned forward confidentially. ‘I tried it. You know, on my own. I can still do it. I can forget the pain. When I was drunk, my prick, you know, it was nothing, nothing. I never thought about it. Just for the toilet. That was all. But now I can do it, even with all the pain. I tried it, the night before last. I can’t necessarily, you know, not all the way, not everything. My prick’s so old and for so many years it was just, well, it was just the toilet. Ah.’ He leaned back in his chair and gazed past my shoulder into the sunshine. A wistful look had come into his eyes. ‘I so want to make love to her again. But we wouldn’t live here. Not in this place. I’ve always hated this place. I used to come by here, yes, I admit it, I used to walk by here late at night when no one could see me. She never knew, but I often used to come and stand out there, looking at the building. I used to hate this street, this apartment. We wouldn’t live here. You know, this is the first time, the first time I’ve come inside this terrible place. Why did she choose a place like this? It’s not what she likes. We’ll live outside the city. If she doesn’t want to come back to the farmhouse, that’s okay. We’ll find something else, another cottage maybe. Something surrounded by grass and trees where our animal can enjoy itself. Our animal, it won’t like it here.’ He looked around carefully at the walls and ceilings, perhaps for a moment re-considering the merits of the apartment. Then he concluded: ‘No, how can our animal enjoy it here? We’ll live somewhere, grass, trees, fields. You know, in a year’s time, six months, if the pain gets too much, my prick can’t do it, we can’t make love any more, I don’t care. As long as

I can make love to her just once more. No, once wouldn't be enough, we'll have to get back, you know, like we used to be. Six times, that's it, six times and we'll have remembered everything, that's all I want. After that, all right, all right. If someone, a doctor, God, if he said you can make love to her just six more times, then that's it, you'll be too old, your wound will hurt too much, after that it's the finish, it's just the toilet, I won't care. I'll say, all right, fine by me. As long as I can take her in my arms again, six times is enough, so we're like we used to be, back where we were, then I don't care, I don't care after that. We'll have our animal anyway. We won't need to make love. That's for young lovers who don't know each other enough, who've never hated each other and loved each other again. You know, I can do it still. I tried it, on my own, the night before last. Not all the way, but I could make it stiff.'

He paused and nodded to me with a serious expression.

'Really,' I said smiling. 'That's marvellous.'

Brodsky leaned back in his chair and gazed out of the window again. Then he said: 'It was different, not like when you're young. When you're young you think of whores, you know, whores doing filthy things, stuff like that. I don't care about any of that now, there's only one thing left I want my prick to do, I want to make love to her again in the old way, just where we left off, that's all. Then if it wants to rest, that's okay, I don't ask any more. But I want to do it again, six times, that's enough, the way we used to do it. When we were young, we weren't great lovers. We didn't do it everywhere like young people maybe do now, I don't know. But we had, well, a good understanding. Yes, at times, it's true, when I was young I got tired of it, the same way every time. But she was like that, she was ... she didn't want to do it any other way, I used to get angry with her, and she didn't know why. But now I want to repeat that old routine, step by step, exactly as we used to do it. The night before last, when I was, you know, when I was trying, I thought about

whores, imaginary ones, fantastic ones doing fantastic things, and nothing, nothing, nothing. And then I thought, well, that's reasonable. My old prick, there's only one last mission, why taunt it with all these whores, what's that got to do with my old prick now? There's only one last mission, I should think about that. So I did. I lay there in the dark, remembering, remembering, remembering. I could remember how we used to do it, step by step. And that's how we're going to do it again. Of course our bodies are old now, but I've thought it through. We'll do it just the way we did. And she'll remember, she'll not have forgotten, step by step by step. Once we're in the darkness, under the sheet, we were never so bold, you see, it was her, she was modest, she wanted it that way. I minded it then, I always wanted to say to her: "Why can't you be like a whore? Display yourself in the light?" But now I don't mind, I want to do it just the way we used to, pretend we're going to sleep, keep quiet, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. Then I'll say something suddenly, something bold and dirty in the dark. "I want them to see you naked," I'll say. "Drunken sailors in a bar. A sea-port tavern, drunken filthy men, I want them to see you naked on the floor." Yes, Mr Ryder, I used to say such things, suddenly, after we'd been lying there pretending to go to sleep, yes, suddenly break the silence, that's important, suddenly. Of course, she was young then, she was beautiful, now it sounds strange, an old woman naked on the floor of a tavern, but I'll say it anyway because that's how we used to get it started. She'll say nothing and so I'll say more. "I want them all to stare at you. On all fours, on the floor." But can you imagine it? A frail old woman doing that? What would our drunken sailors say now? But then maybe they've grown old with us, our sailors in the seaport tavern, maybe in their mind's eye she'll be just as she was then and they wouldn't care. "Yes, they'll be staring at you! All of them!" And I'll touch her, just the side of her hip, I remember that, she liked me to touch her sides, I'll touch her just as I used to, then I'll get close to her and

whisper: "I'll make you work in a brothel. Night after night." Can you imagine it? But I'll say it, because that's how it was. And I'll throw off the bedclothes and bend over her, I'll part her thighs, maybe they'll click, the joint between the thigh and the hip, it might make a little snapping noise, someone said she'd hurt her hip, maybe she can't part her thighs widely now. Well, we'll do it the best we can because that's what came next. Then I'll bend down to kiss her pussycat, I won't expect it to smell the way it did then, no, I've thought it through, it might smell bad, like stale fish, her whole body will smell bad maybe, I've thought hard about it. And me, my body, look at me now, it's not so good either. My skin, I have these scales, they keep flaking off, I don't know what it is. When it started, last year, it was just the scalp. When I combed my hair, these huge flakes, like fish scales, you could see through them, they came off. It was just the scalp, but now it's all over, my elbows, then my knees, now my chest. They smell like fish too, these flakes. Well, they'll keep falling, I won't be able to stop that, she'll have to put up with it, so I won't complain about her pussycat smelling the way it does, or the way her thighs won't part properly without clicking, I won't get angry, you won't see me trying to force them apart like something broken, no, no. We'll do it exactly like we used to. And my old prick, maybe only half stiff, when the time comes she'll reach down and she'll whisper: "Yes, I'll let them! I'll let the sailors all see me! I'll tease them till they can bear it no more!" Can you imagine it? The way she is now? But we won't care. And anyway, like I said, maybe the sailors will have aged with us. She'll reach down for it, my old prick, back then it would have been very hard, nothing in the world would have made it slack except for ... well, but now maybe it'll be only half stiff, that was the best I could get it the other night, who knows, maybe it will be all the way, and we'll try and put it in, but she might be like a shell, but we'll try. And at just the right moment, we'll remember when, even if nothing's happening down there, we'll

know how to finish the steps, because by then we'll have remembered so well, there'll be nothing to stop us, even if there's nothing happening down there, even if all we're doing is holding ourselves against each other, it won't matter, we'll still say it at just the right time. "They'll take you! They'll take you, you've teased them too long!" And she'll say: "Yes, they'll have me, all the sailors, they'll have me!" and even if nothing's happening down there, we can still hold each other, we'll hold each other and say it like we used to, it won't matter. Maybe the pain will be too much for my old prick, you know, because of my wound, but it won't matter, she'll remember how we did it. All these years, but she'll remember, every step. Mr Ryder, you don't have a wound?'

He was suddenly looking at me.

'A wound?'

'I have this old injury. Maybe that's why I drink. It gives me so much pain.'

'How unfortunate.' Then, after a short silence, I added: 'I did once injure a toe quite badly in a football match. I was nineteen. It wasn't anything too serious.'

'In Poland, Mr Ryder, when I was a conductor, even then, I never thought the wound would heal. When I conducted my orchestra, I always touched my wound, caressed it. Some days I picked at its edges, even pressed it hard between the fingers. You realise soon enough when a wound's not going to heal. The music, even when I was a conductor, I knew that's all it was, just a consolation. It helped for a while. I liked the feeling, pressing the wound, it fascinated me. A good wound, it can do that, it fascinates. It looks a little different every day. Has it changed? you wonder. Maybe it's healing at last. You look at it in a mirror, it looks different. But then you touch it and you know it's the same, your old friend. You do this year after year, and then you know it's not going to heal and in the end you get tired of

it. You get so tired.' He fell silent and looked again at his bouquet. Then he said again: 'You get so tired. You're not tired yet, Mr Ryder? You get so tired.'

'Perhaps,' I said tentatively, 'Miss Collins has the power to heal your wound.'

'Her?' He laughed suddenly then went silent again. After a while he said quietly: 'She'll be like the music. A consolation. A wonderful consolation. That's all I ask now. A consolation. But heal the wound?' He shook his head. 'If I showed it to you now, my friend, I could show it to you, you'd see that was an impossibility. A medical impossibility. All I want, all I ask for now is a consolation. Even if it's like the way I said, just half-way stiff and we're doing no more than just dancing, six more times, that'll be enough. After that the wound can do what it likes. We'll have our animal by then, the grass, the fields. Why did she choose a place like this?'

He looked around again and shook his head. This time he remained silent for a long time, perhaps for as long as two or three minutes. I was about to say something when he suddenly leaned forward in his chair.

'Mr Ryder, I had a dog, Bruno, he died. I've ... I've still not buried him. He's in a box, a sort of coffin. He was a good friend. Just a dog, but a good friend. I planned a small ceremony, just to say goodbye. Nothing special. Bruno, he's the past now, but a small ceremony just to say goodbye, what's wrong with that? Mr Ryder, I wanted to ask you. A small favour, for me and Bruno.'

The door suddenly opened and Miss Collins came into the room. Then, as Brodsky and I rose to our feet, Parkhurst came in behind her and closed the door.

'I'm very sorry, Miss Collins,' he said, giving Brodsky an angry look. 'He just wouldn't hear of respecting your privacy.'

Brodsky was standing stiffly in the middle of the room. As Miss Collins came closer, he gave a bow and I could see the shadow of a considerable elegance he must once have possessed. He held the bouquet out to her saying: 'Just a small gift. I picked them myself.'

Miss Collins took the flowers from him, but otherwise completely disregarded them. 'I might have guessed you'd come here like this, Mr Brodsky,' she said. 'I came to the zoo yesterday and now you think you can take any liberties you wish.'

Brodsky lowered his eyes. 'But there's so little time,' he said. 'We can't afford to waste time now.'

'Waste time to do what, Mr Brodsky? It's quite ridiculous, your coming here like this. You must know I'm busy in the mornings.'

'Please.' He raised his palm. 'Please. We're old now. We don't have to argue like we used to. I just came by to give you the flowers. And to make a simple proposal. That was all.'

'A proposal? What sort of proposal was that, Mr Brodsky?'

'Simply that you meet me this afternoon at St Peter's Cemetery. Half an hour, that's all. To be on our own and talk a few things over.'

'But there's nothing to talk over. It was clearly a mistake for me to come to the zoo yesterday. And did you say the *cemetery*? Why on earth are you proposing such a place for a rendez-vous? Have you altogether taken leave of your senses? A restaurant, a café, perhaps some gardens or a lake. But you propose a cemetery!'

'I'm sorry.' Brodsky seemed genuinely crestfallen. 'I didn't think. I'd forgotten. That is, I'd forgotten St Peter's Cemetery was a cemetery.'

‘Don’ t be so absurd. ’

‘I mean, I’ ve been there so often, we used to feel so peaceful there, Bruno and I. Even when things were at their worst, I felt not so bad when I was there, it was peaceful, very beautiful, we liked it there. That’ s why I asked. Really, I’ d forgotten. About the dead people being there. ’

‘And what did you intend for us to do there? Sit on a gravestone and reminisce about old times? Mr Brodsky, you really ought to think more carefully about your proposals. ’

‘But we used to like it there, Bruno and I. I thought you’ d like it too. ’

‘Oh, I see. Now that your dog has died, you wish me to go in its place. ’

‘I didn’ t mean it like that. ’ Brodsky suddenly lost his demure look and a flash of impatience crossed his face. ‘I didn’ t mean it that way at all, you know it. You always did this. I spend a long time thinking, trying to find something good for us, and then you, you scorn it, you laugh at it, you make out it’ s a ridiculous thing. Anyone else and you’ d say what a charming idea. You always did this. Like the time I arranged for us to sit in the front at the Kobylainsky concert ... ’

‘That was over thirty years ago. How can you still be talking about such things? ’

‘But it’ s the same, the same. I think of something, something good for us, because I know deep down you like things to be a little unusual. Then you just laugh at them. Maybe it’ s because my ideas, like the cemetery, they really appeal to you, deep down, and you can see I understand your heart. So you pretend ... ’

‘This is a nonsense. There’ s no reason on earth why we should be discussing such matters. It’ s much too late, there’ s nothing for us to discuss, Mr Brodsky. I can’ t meet

you in a cemetery whether it appeals to me or not, because I have nothing to discuss with you ...'

'I just wanted to explain. Why it happened, everything, why I was the way I was ...'

'It's much too late for that, Mr Brodsky. At least twenty years too late. Besides, I couldn't bear to listen to you trying to apologise all over again. Even now, I'm sure, I wouldn't be able to hear an apology on your lips without shuddering. For many, many years, an apology from you was not the end but the beginning. The beginning to another round of pain and humiliation. Oh, why don't you just leave me alone now? It's simply too late. Besides, you've taken to dressing absurdly since you became sober. What are these clothes you've started to wear?'

Brodsky hesitated, then said: 'It's what I've been advised to wear. By the people helping me. I'm to be a conductor again. I have to dress so people see me that way.'

'I almost said to you yesterday at the zoo. That ridiculous grey coat! Who told you to wear it? Mr Hoffman? Really, you should have a little more sense of your own appearance. These people are dressing you like some puppet, and you let them do it. And now look at you! This ridiculous suit. Do you imagine you look artistic like that?'

Brodsky glanced down at his attire, a hurt expression in his eyes. Then he looked up and said: 'You're an old woman. You don't know about the fashions now.'

'It's the prerogative of the old to deplore the clothes of the young. But how ridiculous that *you* should be the one dressed like that. Really, it's no use, it's simply not your style. Quite frankly, I think the town will prefer you in what you used to wear a few months ago. That's to say, rather elegant rags.'

'Don't laugh at me. I'm no longer like that. I might soon be a conductor again. These are my clothes now. When I

looked at myself, I thought I looked right. You forget, in Warsaw, I had clothes like these. A bow tie like this one. You forget now. ’

For a second, a sad look came into Miss Collins’s eyes. Then she said:

‘Of course I forget. Why would I remember such things? There have been so many more vivid things to remember in the years since. ’

‘Your dress,’ he said suddenly. ‘It’s very good. Very elegant. But your shoes, they’re as bad as ever, a disaster. You never accepted you have fat ankles. For a woman so thin, your ankles were always fat. And now look, even now. ’ He pointed at Miss Collins’s feet.

‘Don’t be so childish. Do you think it’s like those days in Warsaw when you could make me change my whole costume minutes before we left with just one remark like that? How much you live in the past, Mr Brodsky! Do you think it means the slightest thing to me, what you think of my footwear? And do you think I don’t realise now that it was all merely a trick you played, deliberately leaving it to the last possible moment to make your criticism? Of course, I’d change everything then, go out in something thrown on in a terrible rush. Then once we were sitting in the car, or perhaps at the concert hall, only then would I remember my eye-shadow was the wrong colour for the dress, or the necklace looked awful with the shoes. And it was all so important for me in those days. The conductor’s wife! It was so important for me and you knew that. Do you suppose I don’t see now just what you were doing? How you would say: “Good, good, very nice,” right until there were only a few minutes left. Then, yes, it would be something exactly like this. “Your shoes are a disaster!” As if you would know such a thing! What would *you* know about fashions today, you’ve been drunk for the last two decades. ’

‘Nevertheless,’ Brodsky said, a hint of imperiousness now entering his expression, ‘nevertheless, what I say is true. Those shoes make the lower half of your figure look absurd. It’s true.’

‘Look at this ridiculous suit! Some Italian creation, no doubt. The sort of thing a young ballet dancer might wear. And you believe this will help you gain credibility in the eyes of people here?’

‘Absurd shoes. You look like one of those toy soldiers with a base so you don’t fall over.’

‘It’s time for you to leave! How dare you come here like this, disturbing my morning! The young couple in there, they’re very distressed, they need my counsel more than ever this morning, and here, you’ve disturbed us. This is our last conversation. It was a mistake to have met you yesterday at the zoo.’

‘The cemetery.’ There was suddenly a desperate note in his voice. ‘You must meet me, this afternoon. Okay, I didn’t think, the dead people, I didn’t think. But I explained that. We have to talk before ... before this evening. Or else how can I? How can I do it? Can’t you see how important tonight is? We have to talk, you must meet me ...’

‘Look here.’ Parkhurst stepped forward and glared at Brodsky. ‘You heard what Miss Collins said. She’s requested you leave her residence. Leave her sight, leave her life. She’s too polite to say it, so I’ll say it on her behalf. After everything you’ve done, you have no right, not the shred of a right to make the request you’ve just made. How can you stand there requesting a meeting, as though all those things never occurred? Perhaps you’re pretending you were so drunk you don’t remember. Well then I’ll remind you. It’s not so long ago you stood out there in that street, urinating on the wall of this building, shouting obscenities at this very window. The police took you away in the end, dragged you away while you shouted the vilest things about Miss Collins. This

was no more than a year ago. No doubt, you're expecting Miss Collins to have forgotten by now. But I can assure you it was only one of many incidents like it. And as for your sartorial pronouncements, wasn't it less than three years ago you were found unconscious in the Volksgarten in clothes you'd repeatedly vomited over, taken to the Holy Trinity Church and there found to have body lice? Do you expect Miss Collins to care what such a man has to say about her dress sense? Let's face it, Mr Brodsky, once a man falls to the depths to which you fell, his position is irredeemable. You'll never, *never* win back a woman's love, I can tell you that with some authority. You'll never win back even her respect. Her pity perhaps, but nothing more. Conductor! Do you imagine this town will ever look at you and see anything other than a disgusting down-and-out? Let me remind you, Mr Brodsky, four years ago, perhaps five now, you physically attacked Miss Collins just off the Bahnhofplatz, and if not for two students who were passing you'd certainly have caused her serious injury. And all the time you were attempting to strike her, you were shouting the vilest ...'

'No, no, no!' Brodsky suddenly cried, shaking his head and covering his ears.

'You were shouting the vilest obscenities. Of a sexual and deviant nature. There was talk you should have been imprisoned for it. Then of course there was the episode at the telephone kiosk in Tillgasse ...'

'No, no!'

Brodsky grabbed Parkhurst by the lapel, causing the latter to recoil in alarm. But then Brodsky carried out no further aggression, simply clutching Parkhurst's lapel as though it were a lifeline. For the next few seconds, Parkhurst struggled to prise off Brodsky's fingers. When he finally succeeded, the whole of Brodsky's posture seemed to sag. The old man closed his eyes and sighed, then turned and walked silently out of the room.

At first the three of us remained standing in silence, unsure what to do or say next. Then the sound of Brodsky slamming the front door brought us to life and Parkhurst and I both moved to the window.

‘There he goes,’ Parkhurst said, his forehead against the glass. ‘Don’t worry, Miss Collins, he won’t be back.’

Miss Collins appeared not to hear. She wandered towards the door, then turned back again.

‘Please excuse me, I must ... I must ...’ She walked dreamily up to the window and looked out. ‘Please, I must ... You see, I hope you understand ...’

She was speaking to neither of us in particular. Then her confusion appeared to clear and she said: ‘Mr Parkhurst, you had no right to speak in that way to Leo. He has shown enormous courage this past year.’ She gave Parkhurst a piercing look, then hurried out of the room. The next moment we heard the door slam again.

I was still beside the window and could see Miss Collins’s figure hurrying away down the street. She had caught sight of Brodsky already a good way ahead and after a few seconds broke into a trot, perhaps wishing to avoid the indignity of having to call to him to make him wait. But Brodsky, with his odd lop-sided gait, kept up a surprisingly brisk pace. He was obviously upset and it appeared genuinely not to have occurred to him she would come out after him.

Miss Collins, her breath coming harder, pursued him past the rows of apartment houses, then past the shops at the upper end of the street, without appreciably closing the distance. Brodsky continued to walk steadily, now turning the corner where I had earlier parted with Gustav, and past the Italian cafés on the wide boulevard. The pavement was even more crowded than when I had come along it with Gustav, but Brodsky walked without looking up, so that he often came close to colliding with people in his path.

Then, as Brodsky approached the pedestrian crossing, Miss Collins appeared to realise she stood no chance of overtaking him. Coming to a halt, she cupped her hands around her mouth, but then seemed caught in some last dilemma, perhaps concerning whether to call out 'Leo' or else, as she had called him throughout their conversation, 'Mr Brodsky'. No doubt some instinct warned her of the urgency of the situation at which they had now arrived, for she called out: 'Leo! Leo! Leo! Please wait!'

Brodsky turned with a startled expression as Miss Collins came hurrying towards him. She was still holding the bouquet, and in his confusion Brodsky held out both hands as though offering to relieve her of it. But Miss Collins kept hold of the flowers and, though short of breath, sounded quite calm as she said: 'Mr Brodsky, please. Please wait.'

They stood together awkwardly for a moment, both suddenly conscious of the passers-by all around them, many of whom were starting to look their way, some barely hiding their curiosity. Then Miss Collins gestured back in the direction of her apartment, saying softly: 'The Sternberg Garden is very beautiful at this time of year. Why don't we go there and talk?'

They set off with more and more people looking their way, Miss Collins a step or two in front of Brodsky, both grateful for a clear reason to delay conversation until they had reached their destination. They turned the corner back into her street and before long were passing once again in front of the apartment houses. Then just a block or so away, Miss Collins stopped by a small iron gate tucked discreetly back from the pavement.

She reached for the latch, but paused a moment before opening the gate. It occurred to me then that the simple walk they had just completed together, the mere fact that they were now standing side by side at the entrance to the Sternberg Garden, would hold a significance for her far

beyond anything Brodsky could at that moment have suspected. For the truth was, she had made that same short journey with him, from the bustle of the boulevard, finishing at the little iron gate, countless times in her imagination down the years - ever since the mid-summer's afternoon they had chanced upon one another on the boulevard in front of the jeweller's shop. And in all those years, she had not forgotten the look of studied indifference with which he had turned away from her that day, pretending to be engrossed by something in the shop's window.

At that point - a good year before the start of the drunkenness and the abuse - such shows of indifference had still been the principal feature of any contact between them. And although by that afternoon she had already resolved several times to set in motion some form of reconciliation, she too had looked away and gone on walking. Only when she had gone further along the boulevard, beyond the Italian cafés, had she given in to her curiosity and glanced back. It was then she had realised he had been following her. He had again been peering into a shop window, but there he had been none the less, only a short way away.

She had slowed her walk, assuming he would sooner or later catch up. When she had reached her corner and he had still not done so, she had taken another glance back. On that day, as on this, the broad sunny pavement had been crowded with pedestrians, but she had had the satisfaction of gaining a clear view of him as he checked himself in mid-stride and looked away towards the flower stall he was passing. A smile had come to her lips, and as she had turned her corner she had been pleasantly surprised by the lightness of her own mood. Her walk now reduced to a dawdle, she too had started to peer into shop windows. She had looked in turn at the pâtisserie, the toy shop, the drapers - in those days the bookshop had not been there - all the while trying to formulate in her head her opening remark to him when he finally came up to her. 'Leo, what children we must be,'

she had considered saying. But that had seemed altogether too sensible and she had thought about something more ironic: 'I notice we seem to be going the same way' or some such thing. Then his figure had appeared around the corner and she had seen he was holding a bright bouquet. Turning away quickly, she had started to walk again, now at a reasonable pace. Then as she had approached her apartment, for the first time that day, she had been seized by a sense of annoyance at him. Her afternoon had been neatly planned. Why had he chosen this of all moments to seek a conversation with her? When she had arrived at her door, she had stolen another quick glance up the street, only to discover he was still at least twenty yards away.

She had closed her door behind her and, resisting the urge to look out of the window, had hurried to her bedroom at the rear of the building. There she had checked her appearance in her mirror and composed her emotions. Then, emerging from the bedroom, she had come to a startled halt in the corridor. The door at the far end had been standing ajar and she had been able to see right through, across her sun-filled front parlour and through the bay windows, to the pavement outside where he was now visible, his back to the house, loitering there as though he had arranged to meet someone at that very spot. For a moment she had not moved, suddenly afraid he would turn, look in through the glass and see her. Then his figure had drifted out of view and she had found herself gazing at the fronts of the houses on the opposite side, listening intently for the ring of the doorbell.

When after a minute he had still not rung, she had again felt a flash of anger towards him. He was, she had realised, waiting for her to come and invite him in. She had again calmed herself and, thinking over the situation carefully, had resolved to do nothing until he had rung the bell.

For the next several minutes she had proceeded to wait. Once she had returned to her bedroom for no particular

reason, then drifted back out into the corridor. Then eventually, when it had finally occurred to her he had gone, she had made her way slowly out to the entrance hall.

Opening the door and looking left and right, Miss Collins had been surprised to find no trace of him whatsoever. She had expected to discover him lurking a few doors away - or at least the flowers to be on the doorstep. For all that, at that moment, she had felt no regret. A small sense of relief, certainly, and a not unpleasant feeling of excitement that the reconciliation process had at last begun, but she had felt no regret at all. In fact, as she had sat down in her front parlour she had experienced a triumphant glow at having stood her ground. Such small victories, she had told herself, were very important and would help them to avoid repeating the errors of the past.

Only several months later had it occurred to her she had made a mistake that day. Even then, at first, the idea had remained a very vague one she did not examine carefully. But then as the months had continued, that summer's afternoon had come to occupy an increasingly dominant place in her thoughts. Her great error, she had concluded, had been to enter her apartment. By doing so, she had asked just a little too much of him. Having led him all that way, around the corner and down past the shops, what she should have done was to have paused at the little iron gate, then, making quite sure he had a clear view of her, gone into the Sternberg Garden. Then, without a doubt, he would have followed. And even if for a while they had wandered about the shrubs in silence, sooner or later they would have started to talk. And sooner or later he would have given her the flowers. Throughout the twenty odd years that had passed since then, Miss Collins had rarely glanced towards that iron gate without experiencing a small tug somewhere within her. And so it was that on this morning, as she finally led Brodsky into the garden, she did so with a certain sense of ceremony.

For all the prominence the Sternberg Garden had come to assume in Miss Collins's imagination, it was not an especially appealing place. Essentially a concreted square no larger than a supermarket car park, it seemed to exist primarily for horticultural interest, rather than to provide beauty or comfort to the neighbourhood. There was no grass or trees, simply rows of flower beds, and at this point in the day the square was a sun-trap with no obvious sign of shade anywhere. But Miss Collins, looking around at the flowers and ferns, clapped her hands in delight. Brodsky, closing the iron gate carefully after him, looked at the garden without enthusiasm, but seemed to take satisfaction from the fact that, aside from the apartment windows overlooking them, they had complete privacy.

'I sometimes bring them here, the people who come to see me,' Miss Collins said. 'It's so fascinating here. You'll see specimens you won't find anywhere else in Europe.'

She continued to stroll slowly, glancing admiringly about her, while Brodsky walked respectfully a few paces behind. The awkwardness they had displayed in each other's presence only a few minutes before had now evaporated entirely, so that someone glimpsing them from the gate might easily have mistaken them for an elderly couple of many years standing taking an habitual walk together in the sunshine.

'But of course,' Miss Collins said, pausing by a shrub, 'you've never liked gardens like these, have you, Mr Brodsky? You despise all this harnessing of nature.'

'Won't you call me Leo?'

'Very well. Leo. No, you'd prefer something wilder. But you see, it's only with careful control and planning some of these species can survive at all.'

Brodsky regarded solemnly the leaf Miss Collins was touching. Then he said: 'Do you remember? Every Sunday morning, after we'd had our coffee together at the Praga, we

used to go to that bookstore. So many old books, so cramped and dusty whichever way you turned. You remember? You used to get so impatient. But we used to go anyway, every Sunday, after our coffee at the Praga. ’

Miss Collins remained silent for a few seconds. Then she laughed lightly and began to walk slowly again. ‘The tadpole man,’ she said.

Brodsky smiled. ‘The tadpole man,’ he repeated, nodding. ‘That was it. If we went back now, maybe he’ll still be there, behind his table. The tadpole man. Did we ever ask him his name? He was always so polite to us. Even though we never bought his books. ’

‘Except for that morning he shouted at us. ’

‘He shouted at us? I don’t remember that. The tadpole man was always so polite. And we never bought his books. ’

‘Oh yes. Once we went in, it was raining, and we took great care not to drip water over his books, we shook our coats at the doorway, and yet he was very ill-tempered that morning and shouted at us. Don’t you remember? He shouted about my being English. Oh yes, he was very rude, but only that morning. The next Sunday, he seemed to have no memory of it. ’

‘That’s funny,’ Brodsky said. ‘I don’t remember. The tadpole man. I always remember him as so shy and polite. I don’t remember this time you’re talking about. ’

‘Perhaps I’ve remembered incorrectly,’ said Miss Collins. ‘Perhaps I’ve muddled him with someone else. ’

‘I think so. The tadpole man, he was always respectful. He wouldn’t have done such a thing. About you being English?’ Brodsky shook his head. ‘No, he was always respectful. ’

Miss Collins stopped again, for a moment absorbed by a fern.

‘So many people in those days,’ she said eventually.

‘They were like that. They would be so polite, so long-suffering. They’d go out of their way to be kind to you, sacrifice all sorts of things, and then one day, for no reason, the weather, anything, they’d just explode. Then back to normal again. There were so many like that. Like Andrzej. He was like that.’

‘Andrzej was crazy. You know, I read somewhere, he was killed in a car accident. Yes, I read it, in a Polish journal, five, six years ago. Killed in a car accident.’

‘How sad. I suppose many of those people from those days might be gone now.’

‘I liked Andrzej,’ Brodsky said. ‘I read it in a Polish journal, just a mention in passing, saying he’d been killed. A road accident. It was sad. I thought about those evenings, sitting in the old apartment. How we’d wrap up in blankets, share the coffee between us, all those books and journals everywhere and talk. About music, about literature, hours and hours, looking at the ceiling, talking, talking.’

‘I used to want to go to bed, but Andrzej would never go home. Sometimes he stayed till dawn.’

‘That’s right. If he was losing an argument, then he wouldn’t go. He’d never go until he thought he was winning. That’s why sometimes he stayed till dawn.’

Miss Collins smiled, then sighed. ‘How sad to hear he was killed,’ she said.

‘It wasn’t the tadpole man,’ Brodsky said. ‘It was the man in the picture gallery. He was the one who shouted. A strange one, always pretended not to know who we were. You remember? Even in the days after that performance of *Lafcadio*. Waiters, taxi drivers wanting to shake my hand, but when we went to the gallery, nothing. He looked at us, face like a stone, same as always. Then at the end, when things were going badly, we went in, it was raining that day, and he

shouted at us. We were making his floor wet, he said. And we'd always done it, whenever it rained, for years we'd done it, got his floor wet, all these years and he was sick of it. He was the one who shouted, said about you being English, it was him, not the tadpole. The tadpole was always respectful, right to the end. The tadpole shook my hand, I can remember, just before we left. You remember? We went to the bookshop, he knew it was the last time, he came out from behind his table and shook my hand. Most people didn't want to shake my hand by then, but he did. He was respectful, the tadpole, always.'

Miss Collins shielded her eyes with a hand and looked across to the far corner of the garden. Then she began to walk slowly again, saying: 'It's nice to remember some of these things. But we can't live in the past.'

'But you remember it,' Brodsky said. 'You remember it, the tadpole, the bookshop. Remember too that wardrobe? The door that fell off? You remember it all, just as I do.'

'Some things I remember. Other things, inevitably, I've forgotten.' Her voice had now become guarded. 'Some things, even from those times, are best forgotten.'

Brodsky appeared to give this consideration. Finally he said: 'Maybe you're right. The past, it's full of too many things. I'm ashamed, you know I'm ashamed, so let's finish. Let's finish with the past. Let's choose an animal.'

Miss Collins went on walking, now several steps in front of Brodsky. Then she stopped again and turned to him. 'I'll meet you this afternoon in the cemetery if that's what you wish. But you mustn't take that to mean anything. It doesn't mean I'm agreeing about your animal or about anything else. But I can see you're worried about tonight, that you'd wish to talk over your anxieties with someone else.'

'These last months. I saw the caterpillars, but I went on, I went on, I made myself ready. It will be for nothing if

you don't come back. '

'I'm only agreeing to meet you for a short time this afternoon. Half an hour perhaps. '

'But you'll think about it. You'll think about it before we meet. You'll think about it. The animal, everything. '

Miss Collins turned away and for a long time stood examining another shrub. Finally she said: 'Very well, I'll think about it. '

'You can see how it's been for me. How hard. Sometimes it was so terrible I wanted to die, just to stop it, but I went on because this time I could see a way. Conductor again. You'd come back. It will be like it was, even better maybe. Sometimes it got terrible, the caterpillars, there's nothing more I can do to prove it. We never had children. So let's get an animal. '

Miss Collins began to walk again, and this time Brodsky kept up alongside her, gazing gravely into her face. Miss Collins seemed about to speak again, but just at that moment Parkhurst said suddenly from behind me:

'I never join in with them, you know. I mean when they start in on you the way they do. I don't even laugh, not even smile, I don't join in at all. You probably think I'm just saying that, but it's true. They disgust me, the way they go on. And that braying noise! As soon as I walk through the door, that braying noise again! Not even a minute, they won't even give me that, they won't give me sixty seconds to show them I've changed. "Parkers! Parkers!" Oh, they disgust me ...'

'Look,' I said, feeling suddenly very impatient with him, 'if they annoy you so much, why don't you just speak your mind? Next time, why don't you confront them? Tell them to stop the braying noise. And ask them why, just why they hate me so much. Why my success offends them so. Yes, ask them that! In fact, for maximum impact, why don't you do it

right in the middle of your clowning? Yes, right in the middle of one of your anecdotes, when you're doing all those funny voices and faces. When they're all laughing and slapping you on the back, so delighted you haven't changed a bit, do it right then. Ask them suddenly: "Why? Why does Ryder's success challenge you so much?" That's what to do. That would not only do me a service, it would demonstrate to these fools in one elegant move that there is, and always was, a much deeper person behind your clowning exterior. Someone not easily manipulated or compromised. That would be my advice.'

'That's all very well!' Parkhurst shouted angrily. 'It's very easy for you to say that! You've nothing to lose, they hate you anyway! But these are my oldest friends. When I'm out here, surrounded by all these continentals, most of the time I'm fine. But now and again something happens, something unpleasant, and then I say to myself: "So what? What do I care? These are just foreigners. In my own country, I've got good friends, I've only to go back, they'll all be waiting there." It's all very well, you coming out with smart advice like that. Actually, come to think of it, it probably isn't all very well for you at all. I don't see why you're so complacent. You can't afford to forget your old friends any more than I can. It's right, you know, some of these things they say. You're downright complacent and you'll pay for it one day. Just because you've become famous! They're right, you know. "Why don't you confront them?" What arrogance!'

Parkhurst continued in this vein for a while longer, but I had stopped listening. For his mention of my 'complacency' had triggered something, causing me suddenly to remember that my parents were due shortly to arrive in the city. And there came over me, there in Miss Collins's front parlour, seizing me with an icy panic that was almost tangible, the realisation that I had not prepared at all the piece I was to perform before them this evening. Indeed, it

was several days, perhaps even weeks, since I had last touched a piano. Now here I was, only hours from this most important of performances, not even having made arrangements to rehearse. The more I thought over my situation, the more alarming it appeared. I saw I had allowed myself to become far too preoccupied with the talk I was to deliver, and somehow, unaccountably, had neglected the more fundamental matter of the performance. In fact, I could not for a moment even remember which piece I had decided to play. Was it Yamanaka's *Globe-structures: Option II*? Or was it Mullery's *Asbestos and Fibre*? Both pieces, when I came to think about them, were disturbingly hazy in my mind. Each, I remembered, contained sections of great complexity, but when I tried to think further about these passages, I found I could recall almost nothing. And meanwhile, for all I knew, my parents were already here in the city. I saw there was not a minute to be lost, that whatever the other calls on my time I had first to secure for myself at least two hours of quiet and privacy with a good piano.

Parkhurst was still talking earnestly.

'Look, I'm sorry,' I said, moving towards the door. 'I have to go immediately.'

Parkhurst jumped to his feet and his voice now took on a pleading tone.

'I don't join in, you know. Oh no, I don't join in at all.' He came after me as though to grasp my arm. 'I don't even smile. It's disgusting, the way they go on about you ...'

'That's fine, I'm grateful,' I said, moving out of his reach. 'But I really have to go now.'

Letting myself out of Miss Collins's apartment I hurried up the street, now unable to think of anything other than the need to get back to the hotel and the piano in the drawing room. In fact I was so preoccupied I not only neglected to

glance towards the little iron gate as I passed it, I failed to see Brodsky standing before me on the pavement until I was virtually on top of him. Brodsky bowed and greeted me calmly in a way that suggested he had been watching my approach for some time.

‘Mr Ryder. We meet again.’

‘Ah, Mr Brodsky,’ I replied, not breaking my stride. ‘Please excuse me, but I’m in a terrible hurry.’

Brodsky fell in step alongside me and for a while we walked together without speaking. Although it occurred to me there was something odd about this, I was too preoccupied to attempt any conversation.

We turned the corner together into the wide boulevard. Here the pavement was more crowded than ever - the office workers had come out for their lunch break - and we were obliged to slow down. It was then that Brodsky said beside me:

‘All that talk the other night. A big ceremony. A statue. No, no, we won’t have any of that. Bruno hated all these people. I’m going to bury him quietly, just me, what’s wrong with that? I found a place this morning, a little spot to bury him, just me, he wouldn’t want anyone else, he hated them all. Mr Ryder, I wanted music for him, the best music. A quiet little spot, I found it this morning, I know Bruno would like it there. I’ll dig. No need to dig so deep. Then I’ll sit beside the grave, think about him, all the things we did, say goodbye, that’s all. I wanted music while I think about him, the best music. Will you do it for me, Mr Ryder? Will you do it for me and Bruno? A favour, Mr Ryder. I’m asking you.’

‘Mr Brodsky,’ I said, walking briskly again, ‘I’m not clear what exactly you’re requesting. But I have to tell you, I’m in no position to consider any more calls on my time.’

‘Mr Ryder ...’

‘Mr Brodsky, I’m very sorry about your dog. But the fact is, I’ve been obliged to attend to too many requests, and as a result I’m now very hard pressed to get done the most important things I came here to ...’ Suddenly I felt a flash of impatience seize me and came to an abrupt halt. ‘Frankly, Mr Brodsky,’ I said, almost shouting, ‘I must ask you and everybody else to stop asking favours of me. The time has come for it to stop! It must stop!’

For a second Brodsky regarded me with a slightly puzzled expression. Then his gaze fell away and he looked utterly dejected. I immediately regretted my outburst, realising also the unreasonableness of blaming Brodsky for the numerous distractions I had had to deal with since arriving in the city. I sighed and said more gently:

‘Look, let me make a suggestion. Just now I’m going back to the hotel to rehearse. I’ll require at least two hours completely undisturbed. But after that, depending on how things have gone, I might be in a position to discuss further with you this matter concerning your dog. I must emphasise I can’t promise anything, but ...’

‘He was just a dog,’ Brodsky said suddenly. ‘But I want to say goodbye. I wanted the best music.’

‘Very well, Mr Brodsky, but I must now hurry on. I really am very short of time.’

I began to walk again. I had fully expected Brodsky to fall in step with me as before, but he did not move. I hesitated a second, somewhat reluctant simply to leave him on the pavement, but then remembered I could not now afford to be side-tracked at all. I hurried on past the Italian cafés, and did not glance back until I had reached the crossing and was waiting for the lights to change. For a moment, I could not see past the throngs of pedestrians, but then Brodsky’s figure came into view standing exactly where I had left him, leaning forward a little to gaze at the approaching traffic. The thought occurred to me that the spot where I had halted

earlier was in fact a tram stop and that Brodsky had remained standing there for the simple reason he was waiting for a tram. But then the lights changed and, as I crossed the boulevard, I found my thoughts turning back again to the much more pressing matter of my evening's performance.

When I came into the hotel I gained the impression the lobby was busy, but I had by this time become so preoccupied about my practice arrangements I did not look around at all. In fact I might even have pushed in front of some other guests as I leaned against the reception desk to address the clerk.

‘Excuse me, but is there anyone in the drawing room at the moment?’

‘The drawing room? Well, yes, Mr Ryder. Guests like to go there after lunch, so I should think ...’

‘I need to speak to Mr Hoffman immediately. It’s a matter of the utmost urgency.’

‘Yes, of course, Mr Ryder.’

The desk clerk picked up a phone and exchanged a few words. Then putting down the receiver he said: ‘Mr Hoffman won’t be a moment, Mr Ryder.’

‘Very well. But this is a matter of some urgency.’

As I said this, I felt a touch on my shoulder and turned to find Sophie next to me.

‘Oh hello,’ I said to her. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I was just trying to deliver something. You know, for Papa.’ Sophie gave a self-conscious laugh. ‘But he’s busy, he’s over at the concert hall.’

‘Oh, the coat,’ I said, noticing the package she was holding over her arm.

‘It’s getting chillier, so I brought it along, but he’s over at the concert hall and hasn’t come back. We’ve been

waiting almost half an hour now. If he isn't back in the next few minutes, we'll have to leave it for today.'

I noticed Boris sitting on a sofa on the other side of the lobby. My view of him was largely obscured by a group of tourists standing in the middle of the floor, but I could see that he was engrossed in the tattered handyman's manual I had bought at the cinema. Sophie followed my gaze and laughed again.

'He's been so absorbed in that book,' she said. 'After you left last night, he was looking at it right up until bed. And then this morning, from the time he got up.' She gave another laugh and looked over towards him again. 'It was such a good idea, to buy it for him.'

'I'm glad he's enjoying it,' I said, turning back to the reception desk. I raised my hand to enquire of the desk clerk what had become of Hoffman, but just then Sophie came a step closer and said in a different voice:

'How much longer are you planning to keep it up? It's really upsetting him, you know.'

I gave her a puzzled look, but she continued to fix me with a severe stare.

'I know things are difficult for you just now,' she went on. 'And I haven't helped much, I realise. But the fact is he's upset and worried by it. How much longer is it going to go on?'

'I'm not sure what you're referring to.'

'Look, I said I realise it's my fault too. What's the point in pretending it's not happening?'

'Pretending what's not happening? I suppose this is that Kim's suggestion, is it? To come to me with all these accusations?'

‘As a matter of fact, Kim always says it’s best I be much more frank with you. But this time, it’s nothing to do with her. I’m bringing this up because ... because I can’t bear to see Boris worrying like this.’

A little bewildered, I began to turn back to the desk clerk. But before I could attract his attention, Sophie said:

‘Look, I’m not accusing you of anything. You’ve been very understanding about everything. I couldn’t ask you to have been more reasonable. You haven’t even shouted at me. But I always knew there’d have to be some anger and it’s coming out like this.’

I gave a laugh. ‘I suppose this is the sort of pop psychology you talk with that Kim, is it?’

‘I always knew it,’ Sophie continued, ignoring my remark. ‘You’ve been very understanding about everything, more than anyone could ever expect, even Kim admits that. But it was never realistic. We couldn’t just go on like this, as though nothing had happened. You’re angry. Who can blame you? I always knew it would have to come out somehow. I just never thought it would be like this. Poor Boris. He doesn’t know what he’s done.’

I looked again over to where Boris was sitting. He seemed still to be completely absorbed in his manual.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘I’m still not at all sure what you’re talking about. Perhaps you’re just referring to the fact that Boris and I, we’ve been adjusting our behaviour towards one another a little. But surely that’s only appropriate given the circumstances. If I’ve been a little distant towards him recently, it’s simply because I don’t want to mislead him about the true nature of our life together now. We have to all be more cautious. After what’s happened, who knows what the future holds for the three of us? Boris has to learn to become more resilient, more independent. I’m sure in his own way, he understands this as much as I do.’

Sophie looked away and for a moment seemed to be thinking something over. I was about to attract the desk clerk's attention again when she said suddenly:

'Please. Come over now. Say something to him.'

'Come over? Well, the problem is, I've a matter of some urgency to attend to and just as soon as Hoffman turns up ...'

'Please, just a few words. It would make such a difference to him. Please.'

She was looking at me intently. When I gave a shrug, she turned and began to lead the way across the lobby.

Boris glanced up briefly as we approached, then stared down at his book again with a serious expression. I had assumed Sophie was going to say something, but to my annoyance, she simply gave me a meaningful look then walked on past Boris's sofa towards a magazine rack next to the windows. I thus found myself standing alone next to Boris while the little boy went on with his reading. Eventually I pulled up an armchair and sat down opposite him.

Boris continued to read, showing no sign of having noticed my presence. Then, without looking up, he muttered to himself:

'This book's great. It shows you everything.'

I was wondering how to respond, but then caught sight of Sophie, her back to us, pretending to examine a magazine she had just taken off the rack. I suddenly felt a wave of anger and bitterly regretted having followed her across the lobby. She had, I realised, managed to manoeuvre things so that, whatever I now said to Boris, she could count it a triumph and a vindication. I cast another look at her back, the slight stoop she was affecting around the shoulders to suggest her fascination with the magazine, and felt steadily more angry.

Boris turned over a page and continued to read. After a while he muttered once more without looking up: 'Tiling the bathroom. I'll be able to do it easily now.'

There was a selection of newspapers on a coffee table nearby and I saw no reason why I too should not be reading. I picked a paper and held it open before me. A few moments passed in silence. Then, as I was glancing over an article about the German car industry, I heard Boris say suddenly:

'Sorry.'

He had uttered the word in a somewhat aggressive manner and at first I wondered if Sophie had managed to prod him or give him a signal while I had been reading. But when I stole a glance towards Sophie, her back was still turned and she appeared not to have moved at all. Then Boris said:

'I'm sorry I was selfish. I won't be any more. I won't talk about Number Nine ever again. I'm much too old for that now. It'll be easy with this book. It's great. I'll be able to do everything soon. I'm going to do the bathroom again. I didn't realise before. But it shows you in here, it shows you everything. I won't talk about Number Nine ever again.'

It was as though he were uttering lines he had memorised and rehearsed. None the less, there was something emotional in his voice and I felt a strong urge to reach out and comfort him. But then I saw Sophie's shoulders rise and fall, and remembered my annoyance at her. I could see, moreover, that in the long run none of our interests would be served if I allowed Sophie to manipulate matters in the manner she was now attempting.

I closed the newspaper and rose to my feet, glancing behind me to see if Hoffman was anywhere to be seen. As I did so, Boris spoke again, a panic now evident in his voice.

'I promise. I promise I'll learn to do everything. It'll be easy now.'

His voice wobbled a little, but when I looked at him again, his eyes were still fixed firmly on his page. His face, I noticed, looked strangely flushed. I then caught a movement across the lobby and saw Hoffman waving to me from beside the reception desk.

‘I have to go now,’ I called to Sophie. ‘I’ve got something very important. I’ll see you both another time.’

Boris turned over a page, but did not look up.

‘Very soon,’ I said to Sophie, who had now turned. ‘We’ll talk more very soon. But I have to go now.’

Hoffman had made his way into the centre of the lobby and was waiting for me with an anxious demeanour.

‘I’m sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr Ryder,’ he said. ‘I should have anticipated you’d turn up well before time for a meeting such as this. I’ve just this moment come from the boardroom, and I can tell you, sir, these people, these ordinary ladies and gentlemen, they’re so extremely grateful, so grateful you’ve agreed to meet with them in person. That you, Mr Ryder, appreciate the importance of hearing from their own lips what they’ve been through.’

I looked at him sternly. ‘Mr Hoffman, there appears to be a misunderstanding. I require at this point in time two hours in which to practise. Two hours of complete privacy. I must ask you to clear the drawing room as quickly as possible.’

‘Ah yes, the drawing room.’ Then he gave a laugh. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Ryder, I don’t quite understand. As you know, the committee of the Citizens’ Mutual Support Group is at this very moment waiting up in the boardroom...’

‘Mr Hoffman, you don’t seem to appreciate the urgency of the situation. Owing to one unforeseen event after another, I haven’t had a chance to touch a piano now for many days. I

must insist I be allowed access to one as quickly as possible. ’

‘Ah yes, Mr Ryder. Of course, that’s perfectly understandable. I’ll do everything I can to be of assistance. But as far as the drawing room is concerned, it would not be at all practical at this moment. You see, it’s so full of guests ... ’

‘You appear quite ready to clear it for Mr Brodsky. ’

‘Ah, yes, quite right. Well, sir, if you were absolutely insistent you wanted the piano in the drawing room above all other pianos in the hotel, then certainly, yes, I would gladly comply. I would go in there now, personally, and request that all the guests leave, never mind if they are in the middle of taking coffee or whatever. Yes, I would do that ultimately. But perhaps before I resort to such extreme measures, you’d be so good as to consider certain other options. You see, sir, it is by no means the case that the piano in the drawing room is the best in the hotel. In fact some of the bass notes are distinctly dubious. ’

‘Mr Hoffman, if it isn’t to be the drawing room, then by all means, please, tell me what else you have available. I have no peculiar attachment to the drawing room itself. What I need is simply a good piano and privacy. ’

‘The practice room. That would serve your needs much better. ’

‘Very well, then. The practice room it is. ’

‘Excellent. ’

He began to lead me away. Then after just a few steps he stopped again and leaned forward confidentially.

‘I take it then, Mr Ryder, you’ll be requiring the practice room immediately you come out of the meeting? ’

‘Mr Hoffman, I don’t wish to have to stress to you yet again the urgency of the present situation ...’

‘Ah yes, yes, Mr Ryder. Of course, of course. I very much understand. So ... you’re requiring to practise *before* the meeting. Yes, yes, I understand perfectly. That will be no problem, these people will be more than happy to wait a little. Well, no matter, this way please.’

We left the lobby via a door I had not noticed before situated to the left of the elevator, and we were soon walking along what was clearly a service corridor. The walls were undecorated and the fluorescent tubes overhead lent everything a hard, stark aspect. We passed a series of large sliding doors from behind which came various kitchen noises. One door was open and I glimpsed a harshly lit room with metal canisters piled in columns on a wooden bench.

‘We’re having to do much of the catering for tonight here on hotel premises,’ said Hoffman. ‘The concert hall, as you can imagine, has very limited kitchen facilities.’

The corridor turned a corner and we passed what I supposed were the laundry rooms. At one point we passed a set of doors from behind which came the sound of two women screaming at each other with alarming venom. Hoffman, however, seemed to register nothing and walked on in silence. Then I heard him mutter:

‘No, no, these citizens. They’ll be grateful regardless. A little delay, they won’t mind at all.’

He eventually stopped in front of an unmarked door. I expected him to hold it open for me, but instead he averted his eyes from it and turned his whole body away.

‘In there, Mr Ryder,’ he mumbled and made a quick furtive gesture over his shoulder.

‘Thank you, Mr Hoffman.’ I pushed open the door.

Hoffman continued to stand rigidly on his spot, his gaze still averted. 'I shall wait here for you,' he muttered.

'No need to do that, Mr Hoffman. I'll be able to find my way back out.'

'I shall be here, sir. Don't you worry.'

I could not be bothered to argue and hurried on through the doorway.

I entered a long narrow room with a grey stone floor. The walls were covered to the ceiling with white tiles. I had the impression there was a row of sinks to my left, but I was by this point so anxious to get to the piano I paid little attention to such details. My gaze, in any case, had been immediately drawn to the wooden cubicles on my right. There were three of these, painted an unpleasant frog-green colour, standing side by side. The doors to the two outer cubicles were closed, but the central cubicle - which looked to have slightly broader dimensions - had its door ajar and I could see inside it a piano, the lid left open to display the keys. Without further ado I attempted to make my way inside, only to find this a frustratingly difficult task. The door - which swung inwards into the cubicle - was prevented from opening fully by the piano itself, and in order to get inside and close the door again I was obliged to squeeze myself tightly into a corner and to tug the edge of the door slowly past my chest. Eventually I succeeded in closing and locking the door, then managed - again with some difficulty in the cramped conditions - to pull the stool out from under the piano. Once I had seated myself, however, I felt reasonably comfortable, and when I ran my fingers up and down the keys I discovered that for all its discoloured notes and scratched outer body, the piano possessed a mellow sensitive tone and had been perfectly tuned. The acoustics within the cubicle, moreover, were not nearly as claustrophobic as one might have supposed.

A great sense of relief swept over me at this discovery and I suddenly realised how tense I had been over the past hour. I took several slow deep breaths and set about preparing myself for this most important of practice sessions. It was then I remembered I had still not resolved the question of which piece to perform this evening. My mother, I knew, would find particularly moving the central movement of Yamanaka's *Globestructures: Option II*. But my father would certainly prefer Mullery's *Asbestos and Fibre*. In fact it was even possible he would not approve much of the Yamanaka. I sat gazing at the keys for a few more moments before deciding firmly in favour of the Mullery.

The decision made me feel all the better and I was just preparing to embark on those explosive opening chords when I felt something hard tap against the back of my shoulder. Turning, I saw with dismay that the door of the cubicle had somehow come unlocked and was hanging open.

I clambered to a standing position and pushed the door closed. I then noticed the latch mechanism was dangling upside down on the door frame. After further examination, and with a little ingenuity, I managed to fix the latch back in place, but even as I locked the door once more I could see I had effected only the most temporary of solutions. The latch was liable to slip down again at any moment. I could be in the middle of *Asbestos and Fibre* - in the midst, say, of one of the highly intense passages in the third movement - and the door could easily swing open again exposing me to whoever happened by then to be wandering about outside my cubicle. And certainly, if some obtuse person, not realising I was inside, were to attempt to gain entry, the lock would not offer even nominal resistance.

All these thoughts ran through my mind as I seated myself back on the stool. But after a little while, I came to the conclusion that if I did not make full use of this opportunity to practise, I might never get another. And if the conditions were less than ideal, the piano itself was

perfectly adequate. With some determination, I willed myself to stop worrying about the faulty door behind me and to prepare myself once more for the opening bars of the Mullery.

Then, just as my fingers were poised over the keys, I heard a noise - a small creaking sound such as might be made by a shoe or some piece of clothing - somewhere alarmingly close by. I spun round on my stool. Only then did I notice that although the door had stayed closed, the whole of its upper section was missing, so that it more or less resembled a stable door. I had been so preoccupied with the faulty latch I had somehow completely failed to register this glaring fact. I now saw how the door ended at a rough edge just above waist height. Whether the upper section had been torn off as a result of wanton vandalism or because some renovation was taking place I could not be sure. In any case, even from my seated position I could, by craning my neck slightly, gain a clear view of the white tiles and sinks outside.

I could not believe Hoffman had had the effrontery to offer me such conditions. To be sure, no one else had come into the room so far, but it was perfectly conceivable a group of six or seven hotel staff could come in at any moment and begin using the sinks. The situation seemed to me untenable and I was about to abandon the cubicle angrily when I caught sight of a rag hanging from a nail on the door post close to the upper hinge.

I stared at this for a second, and then spotted another nail on the other door post at exactly the same height. Immediately guessing the purpose of the rag and the nails, I rose to my feet again to examine them further. The rag turned out to be an old bath towel. When I opened it out and hung it across the two nails, I found it formed a perfectly good curtain over the missing section of the door.

I sat down again feeling much better and prepared myself once more for the opening bars. Then, just as I was about to

start playing, I was yet again stopped by the creaking noise. Then I heard it once more, and I realised it was coming from the cubicle on my left. It now dawned on me not only that someone had been in the next cubicle the whole time, but that the sound insulation between the cubicles was virtually non-existent, and that I had remained unaware of the person until this point only because - for whatever reason - he had remained very still.

Furious, I rose again and pulled at the door, causing the latch to come loose again and the towel to fall to the ground. As I squeezed my way out, the man in the next cubicle, perhaps seeing no further reason to restrain himself, cleared his throat noisily. I hurried out of the room feeling thoroughly disgusted.

I was a little surprised to find Hoffman waiting for me in the corridor, but then remembered that he had indeed promised to do so. He was standing with his back to the wall, but as soon as I emerged straightened himself and stood to attention.

‘Now, Mr Ryder,’ he said smiling, ‘if you’d follow me. The ladies and gentlemen are very eager to meet you.’

I looked at him coldly. ‘What ladies and gentlemen, Mr Hoffman?’

‘Why, the members of the committee, Mr Ryder. Of the Citizens’ Mutual Support Group ...’

‘Look, Mr Hoffman ...’ I was very angry, but the delicacy of what I had to explain caused me to pause. Hoffman, at last noticing that something was troubling me, stopped in the middle of the corridor and gazed at me with concern.

‘Look, Mr Hoffman. I’m very sorry about this meeting. But it is imperative I get to practise. I cannot do anything else until I’ve first been allowed to practise.’

Hoffman appeared genuinely puzzled. 'I'm sorry, sir,' he said, his voice lowered discreetly. 'But you didn't practise just now?'

'I did not. I was ... I was unable to.'

'You were unable? Mr Ryder, is everything in order? I mean, you're not feeling unwell?'

'I'm perfectly well. Look' - I gave a sigh - 'if you must know, I was unable to practise in there because ... well, frankly, sir, the conditions do not provide the necessary level of privacy. No, sir, let me speak. The level of privacy is inadequate. It might be fine for some people, but for me ... Well, I'll tell you, Mr Hoffman, I'll tell you quite frankly. It's been the same since I was a child. I've never been able to practise unless I had complete, utter privacy.'

'Is that so, sir?' Hoffman was nodding gravely. 'I see, I see.'

'Well, I hope you do see. The conditions in there' - I shook my head - 'they are nowhere near adequate. Now the point is, I must, must, have satisfactory practice facilities ...'

'Yes, yes, of course.' He nodded sympathetically. 'I think, sir, I have the solution. The practice room in the annexe will give you absolute privacy. The piano is excellent, and as for the privacy, I can guarantee it, sir. It is very, very private.'

'Very well. That sounds like the answer. The annexe, you say.'

'Yes, sir. I'll take you there myself as soon as you've finished your meeting with the Citizens' Mutual Support ...'

'Look, Mr Hoffman!' I suddenly shouted, only just resisting the urge to grab his lapel. 'Listen to me! I do

not care about this group of citizens! I do not care how long they are kept waiting! The fact is, if I am not able to practise, I will pack up and leave this city immediately, in the next hour! That's right, Mr Hoffman. There will be no lecture, no performance, nothing! You understand me, Mr Hoffman? You understand me?'

Hoffman stared at me, the colour draining from his face. 'Yes, yes,' he muttered. 'Yes, of course, Mr Ryder.'

'So I must ask you' - I managed to control my voice a little - 'please. Kindly lead me to this annexe without further delay.'

'Very well, Mr Ryder.' He laughed oddly. 'I understand perfectly. After all, these are just ordinary citizens. What need is there for someone such as yourself ...' Then he collected himself and said firmly: 'This way, Mr Ryder, if you'd care to follow me.'

We walked a little way further along the corridor, then crossed a large laundry room containing several growling machines. Hoffman then ushered me through a narrow exit and I stepped out to find the double doors of the drawing room facing me.

‘We’ll take a short cut through here,’ Hoffman said.

As soon as we entered the drawing room, I understood better his earlier reluctance to clear the room for me. It was packed to overflowing with people, laughing and talking, some of them dressed very flamboyantly, and my first thought was that we had stumbled into a private party. But as we slowly made our way through the crowd, I could make out several distinct groups. Some exuberant locals were occupying one section of the room. Another group appeared to be comprised of rich young Americans - many of whom were singing in unison some college anthem; while in yet another area a group of Japanese men had drawn several tables together and were also carrying on boisterously. Curiously, though these groups were clearly separate, there appeared to be much interaction between them. All around me, people were wandering from table to table, slapping one another on the back, taking photographs of each other and passing plates of sandwiches back and forth. A harassed-looking waiter in a white uniform was going among them with a coffee jug in each hand. I thought to look for the piano, but found myself too busy squeezing past people in an effort to keep up with Hoffman. Eventually I reached the other side of the drawing room where Hoffman was holding open another door for me.

I went through into a passageway, one end of which was open to the outdoors. The next moment I stepped out into a small sunny car park, which I quickly recognised as the one

Hoffman had led me to the night we had driven to Brodsky's banquet. Hoffman ushered me towards a large black car, and a few minutes later we were moving slowly through the lunch-time congestion.

'The traffic in this town,' Hoffman sighed. 'Mr Ryder, would you like the air-conditioning? Are you sure? My goodness, look at this traffic. Thankfully we won't have to put up with it for long. We'll take the south road.'

Sure enough, at the next traffic lights Hoffman turned down a road on which the vehicles were moving much more smoothly, and in no time we were travelling at a good speed across open countryside.

'Ah yes, this is the wonderful thing about our town,' Hoffman said. 'No need to drive far before you find yourself in pleasant surroundings. You see, the air is improving already.'

I said something in agreement and fell silent, not wishing to be drawn into conversation at this point. For one thing I had begun to have misgivings about my earlier decision to perform *Asbestos and Fibre*. The more I thought about it, the more some recollection seemed to come back to me of my mother once expressing her irritation specifically with this composition. I considered for a moment the possibility of something altogether different, something like Kazan's *Wind Tunnels*, but then remembered the piece would take two and a quarter hours to perform. There was no doubting that the short, intense *Asbestos and Fibre* was the obvious choice. Nothing else of that length would provide quite the same opportunity to demonstrate such a wide range of moods. And certainly, on the surface at least, it was a piece one could expect my mother very much to appreciate. And yet there was still something - admittedly nothing more than the shadow of a recollection - that prevented me from feeling at ease with the choice.

Apart from a lorry far up ahead in the distance, we appeared now to be alone on the road. I watched the farmland going by on either side of us and tried again to recall this elusive fragment of memory.

‘We won’t be long now, Mr Ryder,’ Hoffman said beside me. ‘I’m sure you’ll find the practice room in the annexe much more to your liking. It’s very tranquil, an ideal place to practise for an hour or two. Very soon now, you’ll be lost in your music. How I envy you, sir! You’ll soon be browsing among your musical ideas. Just as if you were wandering through some magnificent gallery where by some miracle you’d been told you could pick up a shopping basket and take home whatever you fancied. Forgive me’ - he gave a laugh -

‘but I’ve always entertained just such a fantasy. My wife and I, walking together through some wonderful gallery full of the most beautiful objects. Apart from ourselves, the place is deserted. Not even an attendant. And yes, there is a shopping basket on my arm, we have been told we can take whatever we wish. There would be certain rules, naturally. We could not take more than could be held in the basket. And of course, we would not be permitted to sell anything later on - not that we would dream of abusing such a sublime opportunity in that way. So there we would be, my wife and I, walking together through this heavenly hall. This gallery, it would be part of some large country mansion somewhere, perhaps overlooking vast areas of land. The balcony would have a spectacular view. And great statues of lions at each corner. My wife and I, we would stand there gazing over the scenery, discussing which items we should take. In this fantasy, for some reason, there is always a storm about to break. The sky is a slate grey, and yet somehow the shadows are all as though the brightest summer sun were shining on us. Creepers, ivy, all over the terrace. And just my wife and I, our supermarket basket still empty, discussing our choice.’ He laughed suddenly. ‘Forgive me, Mr Ryder, I’m being indulgent. It’s just that this is how I imagine it must be for someone like yourself, someone of your genius, left at

a piano for an hour or so in tranquil surroundings. That this is how it must be for the inspired. You will wander amidst your sublime musical ideas. You will examine this one, shake your head, put it back. Beautiful as it is, it isn't quite what you were looking for. Ha! How beautiful it must be inside your head, Mr Ryder! How I would love to be able to accompany you on the journey you will embark on the moment your fingers touch the keys. But of course, you will go where I can't possibly follow. How I envy you, sir!'

I muttered something nondescript and we travelled on in silence for a while. Then Hoffman said:

'My wife, in the early days before we married. I think that's how she saw our life together. Something like that, Mr Ryder. That we would enter arm in arm some beautiful deserted museum with our shopping basket. Though of course she would never have seen it in quite such fanciful terms. You see, my wife comes from a long line of talented people. Her mother was a very fine painter. Her grandfather one of the greatest poets in the Flemish language of his generation. For some unaccountable reason, he was neglected, but that alters nothing. Oh, there are others in the family, very talented, all of them. Being brought up in a family like that, she always took beauty and talent for granted. How could it have been otherwise? I tell you, sir, it led to certain misunderstandings. In fact it led to a very large misunderstanding early in our relationship.'

He fell silent again and for a while stared at the road unwinding before us.

'It was music that first brought us together,' he said eventually. 'We would sit in the cafés in Herrengasse and talk about music. Or rather, I talked. I suppose I talked and talked. I remember once walking through the Volksgarten with her and describing in great detail, perhaps for a full hour, my feelings about Mullery's *Ventilations*. Of course, we were young, we had time to indulge ourselves in such things. Even

in those days, she didn't talk so much, but she listened to what I had to say and I could see she was deeply moved. Oh yes. Incidentally, Mr Ryder, I say we were young, but then I suppose neither of us were as young as all that. We were both the sort of age when we might already have been married for some time. Perhaps she was feeling some sense of urgency, who knows? In any case we talked of getting married, I was so in love with her, Mr Ryder, from the first I was very much in love with her. And she was so beautiful then. Even now, if you saw her, you'd see how very beautiful she must have been then. But beautiful in a special sort of way. You could see immediately she had a sensitivity to the finer things. I don't mind admitting to you, I was very much in love with her. I can't tell you what it meant to me when she agreed to marry me. I thought my life would be a joy, a continuous unbroken joy. But then it was just a few days later, a few days after she agreed to marry me, she came to visit me in my room for the first time. I was at that time working at the Hotel Burgenhof, and I was renting a room nearby in Glockenstrasse, beside the canal. Not exactly desirable, but a perfectly fine room. There were good bookshelves on one wall and an oak desk at the window. And as I say, it looked over the canal. It was the winter, a splendid sunny winter's morning, there was a beautiful light coming into the room. Of course, I had tidied everything, made it just so. She came in and looked around, she looked all around. Then she asked quietly: "But where do you compose your music?" I remember that very well, that actual instant, Mr Ryder, I remember it very vividly. I see it as a sort of turning point in my life. I don't exaggerate, sir. In many ways, I see it now, my present life started from that moment. Christine, standing by the window, that January light, her hand on the desk, just a few fingers as though to steady herself. She looked very beautiful. And she asked me that question with genuine surprise. You see, sir, she was puzzled. "But where do you compose your music? There's no piano." I didn't know what to say. I saw in an instant there had been a misunderstanding, a

misunderstanding of catastrophically cruel proportions. Can you blame me, sir, if I felt the temptation to save myself? I wouldn't have told an out and out lie. Oh no, not even to save myself. But it was a very difficult moment. I think of it now and I feel a shudder go through me, even now as I tell you this. "But where do you compose your music?" "No, there's no piano," I said cheerfully. "There's nothing. No manuscript paper, nothing. I've decided not to compose again for two years." That's what I said to her. I was very quick, I said it with no outward sign of distress or hesitation. I even gave a specific date on which I planned to return to my composing. But for the time being, no, I wasn't composing. What could I say, sir? Did you expect me to look at this woman, this woman I loved desperately, who had only a few days earlier agreed to marry me, did you expect me to take it lying down? To say to her: "Oh dear, it's all been a misunderstanding. Naturally I release you from any obligation. Please, let's part herewith ..." Of course I could not, sir. You might think I was dishonest. That's too harsh. In any case, you see, at that point in my life what I said wasn't entirely a lie. As it happened, I had every intention of taking up an instrument one day, and yes, I wished to try my hand at composition. So it wasn't a complete lie. I was disingenuous, yes, I admit it. But what else could I do? I couldn't let her go. So I told her I had made a decision to stop composing for two calendar years. In order to clear my head and my emotions, some such thing, I remember talking about it for some time. And she listened to me, taking it all in, nodding her beautiful, intelligent head in sympathy to this nonsense I was telling her. But what could I do, sir? And you know, after that morning, she never mentioned my composing again, never in all these years. Incidentally, Mr Ryder, I can see you're about to ask, I will tell you, I will assure you. I had never before that morning, never at any time during our courtship, during all our walks along the canal, the times we met for coffee in the cafés on Herrengasse, I never, *never*, intentionally led her to believe

I composed music. That I was perpetually in love with music, that it fuelled my spirit every day, that I heard it in my heart each morning I awoke, yes, these things I implied and they were true. But I never deliberately misled her, sir. Oh no, never. It was simply a terrible misunderstanding. She, coming from the family that she comes from, inevitably she *assumed* ... Who knows, sir? But until that morning in my room, I had never uttered a single word to imply such a thing. Well, as I say, Mr Ryder, she never mentioned the matter again, not once. We married in due course, bought a small apartment over Friedrich Square, I found a good position at the Ambassadors. We began our life together and for a time we were reasonably happy. Of course, I never forgot about ... about the misunderstanding. But it didn't worry me as much as you might suppose. You see, as I said before, in those days, well, I had every intention, when the time came, when there was an opportunity, to take up my instrument. Perhaps the violin. I had certain plans then, such as you do when you are young, when you don't realise how limited time is, when you don't realise there's a shell built around you, a hard shell so you *can't - get - out!*' Suddenly he took both hands off the steering wheel and pushed upwards against an invisible dome around him. The gesture contained more weariness than anger, and the next second he let his hands fall back onto the wheel again. He went on with a sigh: 'No, I didn't know about such things then. I still hoped I would become in time the sort of person she believed me to be. Indeed, sir, I believed I would succeed in becoming such a person precisely because of her presence, because of her influence. And the first year of our marriage, Mr Ryder, as I say, we were reasonably happy. We bought that apartment, it was perfectly adequate. There were days when I thought she'd realised about the misunderstanding and that she didn't mind. I don't know, every sort of thought ran through my mind in those days. Then in time, naturally, the date I'd mentioned, the two-year point when I was to return to composing, it came and went. I watched her carefully, but she

said nothing about it. She was quiet, that was true, but she was always quiet. She said nothing, did nothing unusual. But I suppose it was from around that time, around the time of the two-year mark, the tension came into our lives. It was a sort of low-lying tension, it seemed always to be there, however happily we might spend an evening, it would still be there. I would arrange little surprise outings to her favourite restaurant. Or bring home flowers or her favourite perfumes. Yes, I worked diligently to delight her. But there was always this tension. For a lot of the time I managed not to notice it. I told myself I was imagining it. I suppose I didn't wish to admit it was there and growing by the day. I only knew for sure it had been there the day it went away. Yes, it went away and then I realised what it had been. It was one afternoon, we'd been married three years by then, I came in from work, I'd brought her a little present, a book of poetry I happened to know she was wanting. She hadn't explicitly said so, but I had guessed it. I came into the apartment and found her looking down at the square. You could see all the people returning from work at that time of the afternoon. It was a noisy apartment, but not so bad when one is relatively young. I handed her the volume. "Just a small gift," I said to her. She continued to look out of the window. She was kneeling up on the sofa, her arms resting on the back of it so she could cradle her head as she gazed out. Then she took the book from me, very wearily, and without saying a word went on looking down at the square. I remained standing in the middle of the room waiting for her to say something, to acknowledge my gift. Perhaps she wasn't well. I stood waiting with some concern. Then finally she turned round and looked at me. Not unkindly, oh no, but she looked at me, it was a particular look. The look of someone *confirming* with her eyes what she had been thinking. Yes, that's what it was, and I knew then she had finally seen through me. And that was when I realised, realised what the tension had been. I had been waiting, all that time, I had been waiting for this moment. And you know, it may seem odd,

but it was a huge relief. At last, at last, she had seen through me. Oh, what a relief! I felt so liberated. I actually exclaimed: "Ha!" and smiled. She must have thought it odd and the next second I pulled myself together. I realised immediately - oh yes, my feeling of liberation was all too brief - I realised immediately what new dragons I had to wrestle and in a moment I was all caution. I saw I would have to work doubly, triply hard if I were to keep her. But you see, I still thought then that if I worked at it, even though she had *realised*, if I worked very hard at it, I could yet win her. What a fool I was! Do you know, for several years after that day, I continued to believe it, I actually believed I was succeeding? Oh, I attended very carefully. I did all in my power to please her. And I never grew complacent. I realised that her tastes, her preferences, were bound to change with time and so I watched every nuance, ready to anticipate any change. Oh yes, even though I say so myself, Mr Ryder, for those few years, I performed my role as her husband quite magnificently. If a composer she had liked for years was beginning to please her less, I would pick it up instantly, almost before she had articulated the change to herself. The next time the composer was mentioned, I would say quickly, even as she was hesitantly thinking of expressing her doubt, I would say quickly: "Of course, he's not what he was. Please, we won't bother to go to the concert tonight. You'll find it tiresome." And I would be rewarded by the unmistakable look of relief on her face. Oh yes, I was extremely attentive, and as I say, sir, I believed it. I fooled myself, I loved her so, I fooled myself into believing I was slowly winning her. For just a few years, I actually felt confident. And then it all changed, all changed in one evening. I saw how inevitable it all was, how all my great efforts could only add up to nothing. I saw it all in one evening, sir. We'd been invited to Mr Fischer's house, he'd organised a little reception for Jan Piotrowski following his concert here. We were just starting to get invited to such things then, I was beginning to earn a certain respect here

for my keen appreciation of the arts. Well, in any case, there we were at Mr Fischer's house, in his fine drawing room. Not a large gathering, forty at the most, it was a very relaxed sort of evening. I don't know if you ever met Piotrowski, sir. He turned out to be a very pleasant man indeed, most skilled at putting everyone at their ease. The conversation flowed very easily, we were all enjoying ourselves. Then at one point I went over to the table where there was a buffet, and I was helping myself to a few things when I realised Mr Piotrowski was standing there right next to me. I was still quite young then, I hadn't so much experience of celebrities, and I admit, yes, I was a little nervous. But then Mr Piotrowski smiled pleasantly, asked me if I was enjoying the evening, very quickly put me at my ease. And then he said: "I was just speaking to your most charming wife. She was telling me about her great love of Baudelaire. I had to confess to her I didn't know Baudelaire's work in any depth. She very correctly reprimanded me for this deplorable state of affairs. Oh, she made me thoroughly ashamed. I mean to put it right without delay. Your wife's love for the poet is absolutely infectious!" To which I nodded and said: "Yes, of course. She's always loved Baudelaire." "And with such passion," Piotrowski said. "She made me thoroughly ashamed." And that was all that took place, all that was said between us. But you see, Mr Ryder, my point is this. *I had never known of her love of Baudelaire!* Never even suspected it! You see what I am saying. *She had never revealed this passion to me!* And when Piotrowski said this to me, something fell into place. All of a sudden I saw clearly something I'd been trying not to see over the years. I mean, that she had always hidden certain parts of herself from me. Preserving them, as though contact with my coarseness would damage them. As I say, sir, I had perhaps always suspected it. That there was a whole side to herself she was preserving from me. And who could blame her? A woman of great sensitivity, brought up in a household such as hers. She had not hesitated to tell

Piotrowski, but at no point during our years together had she once hinted of this love of Baudelaire. For the next several minutes I wandered about the reception hardly knowing what I was saying to people, just mouthing pleasantries, in a turmoil inside. Then I looked across the room, it must have been half an hour after the conversation with Piotrowski, I looked across the room and I saw her, my wife, laughing happily on the sofa beside Piotrowski. There was nothing flirtatious, you understand. Oh no, my wife has always been meticulous where propriety is concerned. But she was laughing with an ease I realised I had not seen since our walks together along the canal in the days before we were married. That's to say, before she *realised*. It was a long sofa and there were two others sitting on it, and some people were also sitting on the floor in order to be near Piotrowski. But Piotrowski had just spoken to my wife and she was laughing happily. But it was not just this laugh, Mr Ryder, that spoke volumes to me. As I watched, I was standing on the other side of the room, as I watched, what happened next was this. Piotrowski until that point had been sitting on the edge of the sofa, his hands clasped around his knee, like so! As he laughed and made some remark to my wife, he began to recline, yes, as though he wished simply to sit back in the sofa. And as he began to recline, very swiftly, very deftly, my wife took a cushion from behind her and placed it for Piotrowski, so that by the time his head touched the back of the sofa, the cushion was there. It was done so swiftly, almost without thinking, a very graceful movement, Mr Ryder. And when I saw it, I felt my heart breaking. It was a movement so full of natural respect, a desire to be solicitous, to please in a small way. That little action, it revealed a whole realm of her heart she kept tightly closed to me. And I realised at that moment how deluded I had been. I realised then what I have known and never doubted since. I mean, sir, I realised she would leave me. Sooner or later. It was just a matter of time. Ever since that evening, I've known it.'

He fell silent and seemed once more to become lost in his thoughts. There was now farmland to either side of the road and I could see tractors moving slowly in the distance across the fields. I said to him:

‘Excuse me, but this particular evening you talk of. How long ago was it?’

‘How long ago?’ Hoffman seemed slightly affronted by the question. ‘Oh ... I suppose it was, well, Piotrowski’s concert here, that must have been twenty-two years ago.’

‘Twenty-two years,’ I said. ‘I take it your wife has remained with you all that time?’

Hoffman turned to me angrily. ‘What are you implying, sir? That I don’t know the state of affairs in my own home? That I don’t understand my own wife? Here I am confiding in you, sharing with you these intimate thoughts, and you care to lecture me about these matters as though you know far better than I ...’

‘I apologise, Mr Hoffman, if I appeared to be intruding. I simply wished to point out ...’

‘Point out nothing, sir! You know nothing of all this! The fact is, my situation is desperate and has been now for some time. I saw it that evening at Mr Fischer’s, as clear as daylight, as clear as I see this road before me now. Very well, it hasn’t happened yet, but that’s only because ... only because I’ve made *efforts*. Yes, sir, and what efforts I’ve made! Perhaps you would laugh at me. If I know it’s a lost cause, why do I torture myself? Why do I cling to her like this? It’s very easy for you to ask such a thing. But I love her deeply, sir, more today than ever. It’s unthinkable for me, I could never watch her leave, everything would become meaningless. Very well, I know it’s pointless, that sooner or later she’ll leave me for someone like Piotrowski, someone like that, someone like the man she thought I was before she realised. But you can’t scoff at a man for

clinging on. I've done my very best, sir, I've done my best in the only way open to someone like me. I've worked hard, I've organised events, sat on committees, and I've succeeded over the years in becoming a figure of some stature among the artistic and musical circles of this city. And then of course, there was always the one hope. There was the one hope, which perhaps explains how I've managed to keep her so long. That hope is now dead, has been dead for a good few years already, but you see, for a while, there was this one, single hope. I refer, of course, to our son, Stephan. If he'd been different, if he'd been blessed with at least some of the gifts her side of the family possess in such abundance! For a few years, we both hoped. In our separate ways, we both watched Stephan and hoped. We sent him to piano lessons, we watched him carefully, we hoped against hope. We strained to hear some spark that was never there, oh, we listened so hard, each for our different reasons, we wanted so much to hear something, but it was never there ...'

'Excuse me, Mr Hoffman. You say this about Stephan, but I can assure you ...'

'For years I fooled myself! I said, well, perhaps he will develop late. There's something there, some little seed. Oh, I fooled myself and I dare say my wife did too. We waited and waited, then in the last few years it became useless to pretend any more. Stephan is now twenty-three years of age. I can no longer tell myself he will suddenly blossom tomorrow or the next day. I've had to face it. He takes after me. And I know now, she realises it too. Of course, as a mother, she loves Stephan dearly. But far from being the means to my salvation, he has become the very opposite. Each time she looks at him, she sees the great mistake she made in marrying me ...'

'Mr Hoffman, really, I've had the pleasure of listening to Stephan's playing, and I have to say to you ...'

‘An embodiment, Mr Ryder! He’s become an embodiment of the great mistake she made in her life. Oh, if you’d met her family! When she was young she must always have *assumed*. She must have thought she’d one day have beautiful, talented children. Sensitive to beauty, like herself. And then she made her mistake! Of course, as a mother, she loves Stephan utterly. But that’s not to say she doesn’t look at him and see in him her mistake. He’s so like me, sir. I can’t deny it any longer. Not now he’s virtually a grown man ...’

‘Mr Hoffman, Stephan is a very gifted young man ...’

‘You don’t have to say such things, sir! Please don’t insult the frank intimacy into which I’ve taken you with such banal expressions of courtesy! I’m not a fool, I can see what Stephan is. For a while, he was my one hope, yes, but since then, since I saw it was useless, and if I am honest, I suppose I saw it at least six or seven years ago, I’ve tried - who can blame me? - I’ve tried to cling to her virtually one day at a time. I’ve said to her, look, wait at least until this next event I’m organising. Wait at least until that’s over, you might see me differently then. And when that event has come and gone, I’ll say to her immediately, no, wait, here’s something else, another magnificent event, I’m working at it. Please wait for that. That’s how I’ve worked it, sir. For the last six or seven years. Tonight, I know, is my last chance. I’ve staked everything on it. When I told her last year, when I first told her of my plans for this evening, when I outlined to her all the details, how the tables would be, the programme for the evening, even - you’ll forgive me - I had foreseen that you, or someone else of almost comparable stature, would accept the invitation and form the centrepiece of the evening, yes, when I first explained it all to her, explained how because of *me*, this mediocrity she has been chained to for so long, how because of me, Mr Brodsky would win the hearts and confidence of the citizens of this town, and on the crest of this great evening, turn the whole tide here - ha ha! - I tell you,

sir, she looked at me as though to say: "Here we go again." But I could see in her eyes a flicker. Something that said: "Perhaps you really will bring it off. That would be something." Yes, just a flicker, but it's just such flickers that have kept me going for this long, sir. Ah, here we are, Mr Ryder,'

We had pulled into a lay-by beside a field of tall grass.

'Mr Ryder,' Hoffman said. 'The fact is, I'm running a little late. I wonder if I could be so discourteous as to ask you to make your own way up to the annexe.'

Following his gaze, I saw that the field rose steeply up a hill and that perched at the very top was a small wooden hut. Hoffman rummaged about in the glove compartment and produced a key.

'You'll find a padlock on the door of the hut. The facilities are not luxurious, but then you'll have privacy, just as you requested. And the piano is an excellent example of the sort of uprights Bechstein produced in the twenties.'

I looked up at the hill again, then said: 'That hut up there?'

'I shall return for you, Mr Ryder, in two hours' time. Unless you would require a car sooner?'

'Two hours would be fine.'

'Well then, sir, I hope you find everything to your satisfaction.' Hoffman waved his hand towards the hut as though politely ushering me, but there was a trace of impatience in the gesture. I thanked him and got out of the car.

I pulled open a barred gate and followed a footpath that climbed up to the little wooden hut. The field was at first disconcertingly muddy, but as I climbed higher the ground grew firmer. Half-way up, I glanced over my shoulder and found I could see the long road curving through the farm fields, and the roof of what might well have been Hoffman's car going off into the distance.

I was a little out of breath by the time I reached the hut and unlocked the rusted padlock on the door. From the outside, the hut looked no different to an ordinary garden shed, but I was nevertheless taken aback to find it entirely undecorated inside. The walls and the floor were just rough boards, some of which had warped. I could see insects moving along the cracks in between them, while above me the remains of old cobwebs dangled from the rafters. An upright piano of somewhat grubby appearance took up most of the space, and when I pulled out the stool and sat down, I found my back virtually touching the wall behind me.

This same wall contained the only window in the hut, and by twisting round on my stool and craning my neck I found I had a view of the field outside descending steeply down to the road. The floor of the hut did not seem entirely level, and once I turned to face the piano again I had the uneasy feeling I was about to slide backwards down the hill. However, when I opened the piano and played a few phrases, I found it had a perfectly fine tone, the bass notes in particular having a pleasing richness to them. The action was not too light and the instrument had been very adequately tuned. It occurred to me the rough timber around me might even have been carefully chosen to provide the optimum level of absorption and reflection. Aside from a slight creaking

each time I pressed the sustaining pedal, the facilities left me with little to complain of.

After a short moment to collect my thoughts I went into the vertiginous opening of *Asbestos and Fibre*. Then as the first movement settled into its more reflective phase, I became increasingly relaxed, so much so that I found myself playing most of the first movement with my eyes closed.

As I began the second movement, I opened my eyes again and found the afternoon sunshine streaming through the window behind me, throwing my shadow sharply across the keyboard. Even the demands of the second movement, however, did nothing to alter my calm. Indeed, I realised I was in absolute control of every dimension of the composition. I recalled how worried I had allowed myself to become over the course of the day and now felt utterly foolish for having done so. Moreover, now I was in the midst of the piece, it seemed inconceivable that my mother would not be moved by it. The simple fact was, I had no reason whatsoever to feel anything other than utter confidence concerning the evening's performance.

It was as I was entering the sublime melancholy of the third movement that I became aware of a noise in the background. At first I thought it was connected with the soft pedal, and then that it was something to do with the floor. It was a faint, rhythmic noise that would stop and start, and for some time I tried not to pay any attention to it. But it continued to return, and then, during the pianissimo passages mid-way through the movement, I realised that someone was digging outside not far away.

The discovery that the sound had nothing to do with me enabled me to ignore it all the more easily and I continued with the third movement, enjoying the ease with which the tangled knots of emotion rose languidly to the surface and separated. I closed my eyes again, and before long began to picture the faces of my parents, sitting side by side,

listening with looks of solemn concentration. Oddly I did not picture them sitting in a concert hall - as I knew I would see them later in the evening - but in the living room of a neighbour in Worcestershire, a certain Mrs Clarkson, a widow with whom my mother had for a time been friendly. Possibly it was the tall grass outside the hut that had reminded me of Mrs Clarkson's. Her cottage, like ours, had been in the middle of a small field and naturally enough, being on her own, she had been unable to keep the grass under any sort of control. The inside of her house, by contrast, had been impeccably tidy. There had been a piano in one corner of her living room, which I could not remember ever having seen with the lid raised. For all I knew, it might well have been out of tune or broken. But a particular memory came back to me, of sitting quietly in that room, my cup of tea on my knee, listening to my parents chatting to Mrs Clarkson about music. Perhaps my father had just asked if she ever played her piano, for certainly, music had not been a regular topic with Mrs Clarkson. In any case, for no real logical reason, as I continued with the third movement of *Asbestos and Fibre* there in the wooden hut, I allowed myself the satisfaction of pretending I was back in that room in Mrs Clarkson's cottage, my father, my mother, Mrs Clarkson listening with serious expressions while I played the piano in the corner, the lace curtain threatening to blow across my face in the summer breeze.

As I approached the latter stages of the third movement I became conscious again of the digging noise. I was not sure whether it had ceased for a while then started up again or if it had been going on all the time, but in any case it now seemed much more conspicuous than before. The thought then suddenly occurred to me that the noise was being made by none other than Brodsky in the process of burying his dog. Indeed, I recollected his having declared on more than one occasion this morning his intention to bury his dog later in the day, and I even had a vague memory of having agreed to some

arrangement whereby I played the piano while he performed the burial ceremony.

I now began to picture something of what must have taken place prior to my arrival at the hut. Brodsky, presumably, had arrived some time earlier and had been waiting at a spot just over the peak of the hill, a stone's throw from the wooden hut, where there was a cluster of trees and a slight dip in the ground. He had stood at the spot quietly, having placed his spade against a tree trunk, and nearby on the ground, concealed almost entirely by the surrounding grass, the body of his dog wrapped in a bed sheet. As he had said to me this morning, he had planned a simple ceremony for which my piano accompaniment was to be the sole embellishment, and understandably he had not wished to commence proceedings until my arrival. He had thus waited, perhaps for as long as an hour, gazing at the sky and the view from the hill.

At first, naturally enough, Brodsky would have turned over memories of his late companion. But as the minutes had ticked by and there had continued to be no sign of me, his thoughts had turned to Miss Collins and their forthcoming rendez-vous at the cemetery. Before long, Brodsky had found himself remembering again a particular spring morning of many years ago, when he had carried two wicker chairs out into the field behind their cottage. That had been no more than a fortnight after their arrival in the city, and despite their depleted funds Miss Collins had been going about furnishing their new home with considerable energy. On that spring morning she had come down to breakfast and expressed a desire to take a short rest sitting in the fresh air and sunshine.

Thinking back to that morning, he had found he could recall vividly the wet yellow grass and the morning sun overhead as he had positioned the chairs side by side. She had emerged a little later and they had sat together for a time, exchanging the occasional relaxed remark. For a small moment that morning, there had been for the first time in months a feeling that the future might hold something for

them after all. Brodsky had been on the verge of articulating such a thought but then, remembering that it touched on the delicate topic of his recent failures, had changed his mind.

Then she had made her statement about the kitchen. Since he would not remove the sheets of hardboard from it, despite his having promised to do so for days, her progress there was hopelessly impeded. He had remained silent for a while, then had responded by saying, quite calmly, that he had much work waiting for him in the workshed. As they were unable to sit together even for a few minutes without becoming unpleasant, he might as well be making a start. And he had got up and walked through the cottage to the small shed in the front yard. Neither of them had raised their voices at any point and the entire altercation had lasted no more a few seconds. He had not attached much significance to it at the time and had soon become absorbed in his carpentry projects. On a few occasions during the course of the morning, he had looked up and seen her through the dusty shed window, wandering aimlessly about the front yard. He had gone on working, half expecting her to appear in the doorway, but each time she had gone back inside. He had come in for lunch - admittedly rather late - to discover she had already finished hers and disappeared upstairs. He had waited for a while then, returning to his shed, had gone on working there all through the afternoon. In time he had found himself watching the darkness falling and the lights coming on in the cottage. Close to midnight he had finally gone inside.

The whole of the downstairs of the cottage had been in darkness. In the living room, he had sat down on a wooden chair and, gazing at the moonlight falling over their ramshackle furniture, had thought over the curious way the day had gone. He had not been able to remember when they had ever spent an entire day in the way they had just done and, resolving to end things on a better note, had got to his feet and made his way up the staircase.

On reaching the landing, he had seen the light was still on in their bedroom. As he had made his way towards it, the floorboards had creaked loudly under him, announcing his approach as clearly as if he had called out to her. Arriving in front of their door he had paused and, looking down at the bar of light beneath it, had tried to collect himself a little. Then, just as he was reaching for the handle, from the other side of the door had come her cough. It had only been a small cough, almost certainly involuntary, and yet something about it had made him stop, then slowly retract his hand. Somewhere in that small sound had been a reminder of a dimension of her personality he had managed of late to keep shut out of his mind; a trait he had in happier times much admired, but which - he had suddenly realised it - he had been trying to ignore with increasing determination ever since the débâcle from which they had recently fled. Somehow, the cough had contained in it all her perfectionism, her high-mind-edness, that part of her that would always ask of herself if she was applying her energies in the most useful way possible. He had suddenly felt enormous irritation at her, for the cough, for the whole way the day had gone, and had turned and walked away, not caring how loudly the boards creaked under him. Then, back in the mottled darkness of the living room, he had lain down across the old sofa under an overcoat and fallen asleep.

The next morning he had woken early and prepared breakfast for them both. She had come down at her usual time and they had greeted each other not unpleasantly. He had started to express his regret about what had happened, but she had stopped him, saying they had both been astonishingly childish. They had then continued their breakfast, both clearly relieved the dispute was behind them. And yet for the rest of that day, for several of the days that had followed, something cold had remained in their lives. And when in the months to come, after the periods of silence between them had grown in both duration and frequency, and he had paused to puzzle over their origins, he had found himself returning to

that spring day, to the morning that had started so promisingly for them sitting side by side in the wet grass.

It was while he had been lost in such memories that I had finally arrived at the hut and begun to play. For the first several bars, Brodsky had gone on staring emptily into the distance. Then, with a sigh, he had brought his mind back to the task in hand and had picked up his spade. He had tested the ground with its edge, but then had gone no further, perhaps deciding the mood of the music was not yet what he required. Only when I had started upon the slow melancholy of the third movement had Brodsky commenced his digging. The ground was soft and had given him little trouble. He had then dragged the body of the dog across the tall grass and into the grave with little fuss, not feeling the temptation even to turn back the bed sheet for a last look. He had actually started to shovel some earth back when something, perhaps the sadness of the music drifting through the air to him, had finally made him pause. Then, straightening, he had allowed himself a few quiet moments looking down at the half-filled grave. Only as I had approached the end of the third movement had Brodsky retrieved his spade and recommenced his shovelling.

As I concluded the third movement, I could hear Brodsky still hard at work and decided I would forget the final movement - it was hardly suitable for the proceedings - and simply recommence the third once more. This, I felt, was the least I could do for Brodsky after having kept him waiting. The shovelling went on for a little longer, then came to a stop with almost half of the movement left to play. This would suit Brodsky well enough, I supposed, giving him a little more time to stand over the grave with his thoughts, and I found myself lending a greater emphasis to the elegiac nuances than I had previously.

When I had come once more to the end of the movement, I remained sitting quietly at the piano for several minutes before rising to stretch my limbs in the confined space. The

afternoon sunshine was now filling the hut, and I could hear crickets in the grass nearby. After a little while, it occurred to me I should go out and say at least a few words to Brodsky.

When I pushed open the door and looked out, I was surprised to see how low the sun had sunk over the road below. A few steps through the grass brought me to the footpath again and I climbed the remaining distance to the peak of the hill. I was then able to see how on the other side the ground descended more gradually down into a pleasant valley. Brodsky was standing over the grave under a cluster of thin trees a short way below me.

He did not turn as I came down to him, but he said quietly, not taking his eyes from the grave: 'Mr Ryder, thank you. That was very beautiful. I'm grateful, very grateful.'

I muttered something and stopped in the grass a respectful distance from the grave. Brodsky went on looking downwards for a while, then said:

'Just an old animal. But I wanted the best music. I'm very grateful.'

'Not at all, Mr Brodsky. It's my pleasure.'

He gave a sigh and glanced towards me for the first time. 'You know, I can't cry for Bruno. I tried, but I can't cry. My mind, it's full of the future. And sometimes, full of the past. I think, you know, of our old life. Let's go now, Mr Ryder. Let's leave Bruno here.' He turned and started to walk slowly down towards the valley. 'Let's leave now. Goodbye, Bruno, goodbye. You were a good friend, but just a dog. Let's leave him, Mr Ryder. Come, walk with me. Let's leave him. It was good you played for him. The very best music. But I can't cry now. She'll be coming soon. It won't be long now. Please, let's walk.'

I looked again down at the valley before us and now noticed it was entirely covered with gravestones. It occurred to me then that we were walking towards the very cemetery where Brodsky had arranged to meet Miss Collins. Indeed, as I fell in step alongside him, I heard Brodsky say:

‘Per Gustavsson’s tomb. We’re meeting there. No special reason. She said she knew the grave, that’s all. I’ll wait there, I don’t mind waiting a little.’

We had been walking through the rough grass, but now we came to a footpath, and as we made our way further down the hillside I found I could make out the cemetery more and more clearly. It was a tranquil, secluded setting. The gravestones were set out in orderly rows across the bed of the valley, with some making their way up the grass slopes on either side. Even at this moment, I noticed, a burial was taking place; I could make out the dark figures of the bereaved party, perhaps thirty people in all, gathered in the sunshine over to our left.

‘I do hope it goes well,’ I said. ‘I mean, of course, your meeting with Miss Collins.’

Brodsky shook his head. ‘This morning, I felt good. I thought if we only talked, things could come right again. But now, I don’t know. Maybe that man, your friend at her apartment this morning, maybe he’s right. Maybe she can never forgive me now. Maybe I went too far and she’ll never forgive me.’

‘I’m sure there’s no need to be so pessimistic,’ I said. ‘Whatever happened, it’s all in the past now. If the two of you could just ...’

‘All these years, Mr Ryder,’ he said. ‘Deep down. I never really accepted it, what they said about me back then. I never believed I was just this ... this nobody. Maybe with my head, yes, I accepted what they said. But in my heart, no, I never believed it. Not for a minute, in all these years. I

could always hear it, I could hear the music. So I knew I was better, better than they said. And for a little while after we came here, she knew it too, I know she did. But then, well, she began to doubt it, who can blame her? I don't blame her for going away. No, I don't. But I *do* blame her, I *do* blame her for not having done better. Oh yes, she should have done better! I made her hate me, can you imagine what that cost me? I gave her her freedom and what does she do? Nothing. Not even leave this town, just waste her time. On these *people*, these weak, useless people she talks to all day. If I'd known that was all she would do! A painful thing, Mr Ryder, to push away someone you love. You think I'd have done it? You think I'd have turned myself into this creature if that was all she was going to do? These weak, unhappy people she talks to! Once she had the highest goals. She was going to do great things. That's how it was. And look, she wasted it all. Didn't even leave this town. Do you wonder that I shouted at her from time to time? If that's all she was going to do, why didn't she say so back then? Does she think it's a joke, a big joke, being a drunken beggar? People think, okay, he's drunk, he doesn't care about anything. That's not true. Sometimes everything gets clear, very clear, and then ... do you know how awful it is then, Mr Ryder? She never took it, the chance I gave her. Never even left the city. Just talk, talk, these weak people. I shouted at her, can you blame me? She deserved it, everything I said, every piece of filthy abuse, she deserved it ...'

'Mr Brodsky, please, please. This is hardly the way to prepare yourself for this most important encounter ...'

'Does she think I enjoyed it? That I did it for fun? I didn't have to do it. Look, you see, when I want to stop the drink, I can. Does she think I did it for a joke?'

'Mr Brodsky, I don't wish to intrude. But surely the time has come to put such thoughts away for ever. Surely all these differences, misunderstandings, it's time they were forgotten. You must try and make the best of what's left of

your lives. Please, try and calm yourself. It won't do to meet with Miss Collins like this, you're sure to regret it later. In fact, Mr Brodsky, if I may say so, you've been quite correct so far in emphasising to her the future. Your idea of an animal is, in my view, a very good one. I really think you should continue to pursue that idea and others like it. There's really no reason to go over the past again. And of course there's every hope for the future now. For my part, I intend to do what I can tonight to see that you're accepted by the people of this city ...'

'Ah yes, Mr Ryder!' His mood seemed suddenly to change.

'Yes, yes, yes. Tonight, yes, tonight I intend ... I intend to be magnificent!'

'That's more the spirit, Mr Brodsky.'

'Tonight, I won't compromise, not at all. Yes, all right, they hounded me, I gave up, we ran away, came to this place. But in my heart I never gave up completely. I knew I'd never had a proper chance. And now, at last, tonight ... I've waited a long time, I won't compromise. This orchestra, they won't believe it, the way I'll stretch them. Mr Ryder, I'm grateful to you. You've been an inspiration. Until this morning I was afraid. Afraid of tonight, afraid what will happen. I'd better be careful, that's what I thought. Hoffman, all of them, go carefully, slowly, that's what they said. Take it slowly at the beginning, they said. Win them over little by little. But this morning, I saw your photograph. In the paper, the Sattler monument. I said that's it, that's it! All the way, take it all the way! Hold back nothing! This orchestra, they won't believe it! And these people, this city, they won't believe it either. Yes, take it all the way! She'll see it then. She'll see me again, she'll see who I really am, who I was all along! The Sattler monument, that's it!'

By this time the ground had levelled and we were walking along the grassy central path of the cemetery. I became aware

of some movement behind us and, glancing over my shoulder, saw one of the mourners from the funeral running towards us, signalling with some urgency. As he came nearer, I saw he was a dark, thick-set man of around fifty.

‘Mr Ryder, this is a real honour,’ he said breathlessly as I turned to him. ‘I’m the brother of the widow. She’d be so delighted if you’d join us.’

Looking where he was indicating, I saw we were now quite close to the funeral. Indeed, I could even catch in the breeze the sounds of forlorn sobbing.

‘This way, please,’ the man said.

‘But surely, at such a private moment ...’

‘No, no, please. My sister, everyone, they’d be so honoured. Please, this way.’

Somewhat reluctantly I began to follow. The ground became more marshy as we made our way through the gravestones. I was unable at first to see the widow amidst the rows of dark hunched-over backs, but as we came up to the gathering I spotted her at the front, bowed over the unfilled grave. Her distress seemed so immense, she looked perfectly capable of throwing herself onto the coffin. Perhaps because of this possibility, an old white-haired gentleman was holding her tightly by the arm and shoulder. Behind her, the great majority were sobbing in what appeared to be genuine grief, but even so, the widow’s anguished moans remained clearly distinguishable - slow, exhausted, yet shockingly full-chested cries such as might emerge from a victim of prolonged torture. The sound made me want to turn away, but the thick-set man was now gesturing for me to make my way to the front. When I did not move, he whispered none too quietly:

‘Mr Ryder, please.’

This caused a few mourners to turn and look at us.

‘Mr Ryder, this way.’

The thick-set man took my arm and we began to make our way through the crowd. As we did so, a number of faces turned to me and I heard at least two voices murmur: 'It's Mr Ryder.' By the time we had emerged at the front, much of the sobbing had abated and I could feel many pairs of eyes focused on my back. I adopted a posture of quiet respect, painfully aware that I was dressed in a casual light green jacket with not even a tie. My shirt, moreover, had a breezy orange and yellow pattern. I quickly buttoned the jacket while the thick-set man tried to attract the widow's attention.

'Eva,' he was saying gently. 'Eva.'

Although the white-haired gentleman turned to look at us, the widow gave no sign of having heard. She remained lost in her anguish, her cries falling rhythmically over the grave. Her brother glanced back at me with obvious embarrassment.

'Please,' I whispered, beginning to retreat, 'I'll offer my condolences a little later.'

'No, no, Mr Ryder, please. Just one moment.' The thick-set man now placed a hand on his sister's shoulder and said again, this time with distinct impatience: 'Eva. Eva.'

The widow straightened and finally, controlling her sobs, turned to face us.

'Eva,' her brother said. 'Mr Ryder is here.'

'Mr Ryder?'

'My deepest sympathies, madam,' I said lowering my head solemnly.

The widow continued to stare at me.

'Eva!' her brother hissed.

The widow started, looked at her brother, then at me again.

‘Mr Ryder,’ she said in a surprisingly composed voice, ‘this is truly an honour. Hermann’ - she gestured towards the grave - ‘is a great admirer of yours.’ Then suddenly she was overcome by sobs once more.

‘Eva!’

‘Madam,’ I said quickly, ‘I came here merely to express my deepest sympathies. I really am very sorry. But please, madam, everyone, let me now leave you to your grief ...’

‘Mr Ryder,’ the widow said, and I saw she had composed herself again. ‘This is an honour indeed. I’m sure everyone here would join me in saying that we are greatly, profoundly flattered.’

A chorus of assenting murmurs rose up behind me.

‘Mr Ryder,’ the widow went on, ‘how are you enjoying your stay in our town? I do hope you’ve found one or two things at least to fascinate you.’

‘I’m enjoying myself very much. Everyone here has been so kind. A delightful community. I’m very sorry about ... about the death.’

‘Perhaps you’d care for some refreshments. Some tea or coffee perhaps?’

‘No, no, really, please ...’

‘Do at least stay for something to drink. Oh dear, has no one brought any tea or coffee? Nothing?’ The widow gazed searchingly into the crowd.

‘Really, please, I had no intention of interrupting like this. Please, continue with ... what you were doing.’

‘But you must have something. Somebody, hasn’t somebody even a flask of coffee?’

Behind me many voices were consulting one another, and when I glanced over my shoulder I could see people searching

through their bags and pockets. The thick-set man was waving to the back of the crowd and then something was passed to him. As he stood examining it, I could see it was a slice of cake in a cellophane wrapper.

‘Is this the best we can do?’ the thick-set man shouted. ‘What is this?’

There was by now quite a hubbub building behind me. One voice in particular was asking angrily: ‘Otto, where’s that cheese?’ Eventually a packet of peppermints was handed to the thick-set man. The latter glared angrily back at the gathering, then turned to present the cake and the peppermints to his sister.

‘Really, you’re most kind,’ I said, ‘but I only came because ...’

‘Mr Ryder,’ the widow said, her voice now tense with emotion, ‘it seems this is all we can offer you. I don’t know what Hermann would have said, to be disgraced like this on this of all days. But here we are, I can only apologise. Look, this is all, this is all we can offer, all the hospitality we can offer.’

The voices behind me, which had quietened as the widow had started to speak, now broke into numerous arguments. I could hear someone shouting: ‘I didn’t! I didn’t say anything of the sort!’

Then the white-haired gentleman who earlier had been holding the widow at the graveside stepped forward and bowed to me.

‘Mr Ryder,’ he said, ‘forgive us for the shabby way we are returning this great compliment. You find us, as you can see, woefully unprepared. I can assure you, nevertheless, that each of us here is profoundly grateful. Please, accept the refreshments, inadequate though they are.’

‘Mr Ryder, here, please sit down.’ The widow was brushing with a handkerchief the surface of a flat marble tomb adjacent to her husband’s grave. ‘Please.’

I could now see a retreat was out of the question. I moved apologetically towards the tomb the widow had cleaned for me, saying: ‘Well, you’re all very kind.’

As soon as I sat down on the pale marble, the mourners seemed all to step forward and gather around me.

‘Please,’ I heard the widow say again. She was standing above me tearing at the cellophane containing the cake. When she had finally got it open, she handed me the cake, wrapper and all. I thanked her and began to eat. It was some sort of fruit cake and I had to make an effort to prevent it crumbling in my hands. It was, moreover, a somewhat generous slice and not something I could devour in a few quick mouthfuls. As I went on eating I had the feeling the mourners were steadily edging closer around me, though when I looked up at them, I saw they were all standing quite still, their eyes lowered respectfully. There was silence for some time, and then the thick-set man coughed and said:

‘It’s been a very pleasant day.’

‘Yes, very pleasant,’ I replied, though my mouth was full. ‘Very pleasant indeed.’

Then the elderly white-haired gentleman took a step forward and said: ‘There are some wonderful walks around our city, Mr Ryder. Just a little way out of the centre, some splendid rural walks. If you find yourself with a spare hour, I’d be very happy to take you on one of them.’

‘Mr Ryder, won’t you have a peppermint?’

The widow was holding the opened packet close to my face. I thanked her and put a peppermint in my mouth even though I knew it would go oddly with the cake.

‘And as for the city itself,’ the white-haired gentleman was saying. ‘If you have any interest in medieval architecture, there are a number of houses that would be of immense fascination. Particularly in the Old Town. I’d be very happy to show you around.’

‘Really,’ I said, ‘you’re very kind.’

I carried on eating, wishing now to finish the cake as quickly as possible. There was another silence and then the widow sighed and said:

‘It’s turned out very nice.’

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘the weather has been marvellous here ever since my arrival.’

This was met by a general murmur of approval all round, some people even laughing politely as though I had made a witticism. I forced what remained of the cake into my mouth and brushed the crumbs from my hands.

‘Look,’ I said, ‘you’ve all been so kind. But now, please, go on with the ceremony.’

‘Another peppermint, Mr Ryder. It’s all we can offer.’ The widow again thrust the packet towards my face.

It was then that the realisation suddenly dawned on me that at this precise moment the widow was feeling the most intense hatred towards me. Indeed, it occurred to me that, polite though they all were, virtually everyone else present – the thick-set man included – was bitterly resenting my presence. Curiously, just as this thought flashed through my head, a voice from the back said, not loudly but quite distinctly:

‘Why’s he so special anyway? This is Hermann’s time.’

There was an uneasy rumble of voices and at least two shocked whispers of: ‘Who said that?’ The white-haired gentleman coughed, then said:

‘The canals are also very beautiful to walk beside.’

‘What’s so special about him anyway? Interrupting everything.’

‘Shut up, you fool!’ someone retorted. ‘A fine time to disgrace us all.’

A number of voices growled support for this last utterance, but now a second voice had started to shout something aggressively.

‘Mr Ryder, please.’ The widow was again thrusting the peppermints at me.

‘No, really ...’

‘Please. Take another.’

A furious exchange involving four or five people started at the back of the crowd. A voice was shouting: ‘He’ll take us too far. The Sattler monument, that’s going too far.’

Then more and more people were starting to shout at each other, and I could sense a full-scale row about to erupt.

‘Mr Ryder’ - the thick-set man was bending down to me - ‘please ignore them. They’ve always disgraced the family. Always. We’re ashamed of them. Oh yes, we’re ashamed. Please don’t double our shame by listening.’

‘But surely ...’ I began to stand up, but felt something push me down again. I then saw the widow had a hand grasped around my shoulder.

‘Please relax, Mr Ryder,’ she said sharply. ‘Please finish your refreshments.’

There were now arguments raging everywhere and towards the back some people seemed to be jostling one another. The widow was continuing to hold me down by the shoulder, looking at the crowd with an expression of proud defiance.

‘I don’t care, I don’t care,’ a voice was shouting.
‘We’re better off the way we are!’

There was more jostling, and then a fat young man pushed his way out to the front. His face was very round and at this moment he was clearly worked up. He glared at me, then shouted:

‘It’s all very well your coming here like this. Standing in front of the Sattler monument! Smiling like that! Then you’ll move on. It’s not that simple for those of us who have to live here. The Sattler monument!’

The round-faced young man did not look like someone accustomed to making bold utterances and there seemed no doubting the sincerity of his emotions. I felt a little taken aback and for a moment found myself unable to respond. Then, as the round-faced young man began another volley of accusations, I felt something inside me give way. It occurred to me that I had somehow, unaccountably, made a miscalculation the previous day in choosing to be photographed in front of the Sattler monument. At the time, certainly, it had seemed the most telling way of sending out an appropriate signal to the citizens of this city. I had, of course, been all too aware of the pros and cons involved - I could recall how at breakfast that morning I had sat carefully weighing these up - but I now saw the possibility that there was even more to the business of the Sattler monument than I had supposed.

Encouraged by the round-faced young man, a few more people had begun to shout in my direction. Others were trying to restrain them, though not with the urgency one might have expected. Then, amidst all the shouting, I became aware of a new voice, speaking gently just behind my shoulder. It was a male voice, cultured and calm, which struck me as vaguely familiar.

‘Mr Ryder,’ it was saying. ‘Mr Ryder. The concert hall. You really ought to be on your way. They’re waiting for

you there. Really, you must allow yourself plenty of time to inspect the facilities and conditions ...'

Then the voice was drowned out as another particularly noisy exchange erupted in front of me. The round-faced young man pointed at me and began to say something over and over.

Then quite suddenly a hush descended over the crowd. At first I thought the mourners had finally calmed down and were waiting for me to speak. But then I noticed that the round-faced young man - indeed, everyone - was staring at a spot somewhere above my head. It was a few seconds before it occurred to me to twist round, and then I saw that Brodsky had stepped up onto a tomb and was standing directly over me.

It was perhaps simply the angle at which I was looking up at him - he was leaning forward slightly so that I could see against a vast background of sky much of the underside of his jaw - but there was something strikingly commanding about him. He seemed to loom above us like a huge statue, his open hands poised in the air. In fact, he was surveying the gathering before him in much the way I imagined he would an orchestra in the seconds before he began to conduct. Something about him suggested a strange authority over the very emotions which had just been running riot in front of him - that he could cause them to rise and fall as he pleased. For a little while longer, the silence continued. Then a solitary voice shouted:

'What do *you* want? You old drunk!'

Perhaps the person had intended this cry to set off another round of shouting. As it was, no one showed any sign of having heard it.

'You old drunk!' the person tried again, but already the conviction was evaporating from his voice.

Then there was silence as all eyes stared up at Brodsky. After what seemed an inordinate length of time, Brodsky said:

‘If that’s what you want to call me, fine. We’ll see. We’ll see who I am. In these days, weeks, months to come. We’ll see if that’s all I am.’

He had spoken unhurriedly, with a calm power that did nothing to undermine his initial impact. The mourners went on staring up at him, seemingly spellbound. Then Brodsky said tenderly:

‘Someone you loved has died. This is a precious moment.’

I felt the ends of his raincoat brush the back of my head, and I realised he was extending a hand down towards the widow.

‘This is a precious time. Come. Caress your wound now. It will be there for the rest of your life. But caress it now, while it’s raw and bleeding. Come.’

Brodsky stepped off the tomb, his hand still extended to the widow. She took it with a dreamy look, and then Brodsky placed his other hand behind her and began gently to lead her back to the edge of the open grave.

‘Come,’ I could hear him saying quietly. ‘Come now.’

They moved slowly through the fallen leaves until she was once again at the graveside looking down at the coffin. Then, as the widow began once more to sob, Brodsky withdrew carefully and took a step away from her. By this time there were many others weeping again, and I could see that in no time things would be as they had been prior to my arrival. For the moment, in any case, all attention had turned from me and I decided to take the opportunity to slip away.

I rose to my feet quietly and had managed to make my way past several graves when I heard someone walking close behind me. A voice said:

‘Indeed, Mr Ryder, it’s high time you got to the concert hall. One never can tell what adjustments might be called

for. ’

Turning, I recognised Pedersen, the elderly councillor I had met in the cinema on my first evening. I realised, furthermore, that it had been his voice I had heard speaking softly behind my shoulder earlier on.

‘Ah, Mr Pedersen,’ I said as he fell in step beside me. ‘I’m rather glad you reminded me about the concert hall. With feelings running so high back there, I must confess, I’d started to lose track of the time.’

‘Indeed and so had I,’ Pedersen said with a small laugh. ‘And I too have a meeting to get to. Hardly of comparable importance, but nevertheless, it has to do with this evening.’

We came to the grassy path running through the middle of the cemetery and both paused.

‘Perhaps you might assist me, Mr Pedersen,’ I said, looking about me. ‘I’ve arranged for a car to take me to the concert hall, it should be waiting for me. It’s just that I’m not certain how to get back down to the road.’

‘I’ll be pleased to show you, Mr Ryder. Please follow me.’

We began to walk again, away from the hill down which I had come with Brodsky. The sun was now setting over the valley and the shadows cast by the gravestones had noticeably lengthened. As we walked on, I sensed on at least two occasions that Pedersen was about to speak, but then he seemed to change his mind. In the end, I said to him matter-of-factly:

‘Some of those people just now. They seemed extremely exercised. I mean, about those photographs of me in the newspaper.’

‘Well you see, sir,’ Pedersen said with a sigh, ‘it’s the Sattler monument. Max Sattler has today as strong a hold

on people's emotions as he ever did.'

'I suppose you too have some views. I mean, about those photographs in front of the Sattler monument.'

Pedersen smiled awkwardly and avoided my gaze. 'How can I explain it?' he said eventually. 'It's so hard for an outsider to understand. Even an expert like yourself. It's not at all clear why Max Sattler - why that whole episode in the city's history - has come to mean so much to people here. On paper, it hardly amounts to anything very significant. And yes, it all happened almost a century ago. But you see, Mr Ryder, as you've no doubt discovered, Sattler has gained a place in the *imaginings* of citizens here. His role, if you like, has become mythical. Sometimes he's feared, sometimes he's abhorred. And at other times, his memory is worshipped. How can I explain it? Let me put it to you like this. There's a certain man I know, a good friend. Getting on in years now, but he's not had a bad life. He's well respected here, still plays an active role in civic affairs. Not a bad life at all. But this man, every now and then, he looks back over this life he's led and wonders if he didn't perhaps let certain things slip by. He wonders how things might have been if he'd been, well, a little less *timid*. A little less timid and a little more passionate.'

Pedersen gave a small laugh. The path had now curved round and I could see up ahead the dark iron gateway of the cemetery.

'Then he might, you know, start to think back,' Pedersen went on. 'Back to some pivotal point somewhere in his youth, before he became so set in his ways. He might recall, let us say, a moment when some woman tried to seduce him. Of course, he didn't allow it, he was much too proper. Or perhaps it was cowardice. Perhaps he was too young, who knows? He wonders if he'd taken another path then, if he'd been just a little more confident about ... about love and passion. You know how it is, Mr Ryder. You know the way old

men dream sometimes, wondering how it would have been if some key moment had gone another way. Well it can also be like that for a town, for a community. Every now and then, it looks back, looks back at its history and asks itself: "What if? What might we have become by now if we'd only ..." Ah, if we'd only what, Mr Ryder? Allowed Max Sattler to take us where he wished? Would we now be something else altogether? Would we be today a city like Antwerp? Like Stuttgart? I honestly don't think so, Mr Ryder. There are, you see, certain things about this town, certain things that are so embedded. They will never change, not in five, six, seven generations. Sattler, in practical terms, was an irrelevance. Just a man with wild dreams. He would never have changed anything fundamentally. It's just the same as with this friend of mine. He's the way he is. No experience, however crucial, would have changed that for him. Now, Mr Ryder, here we are. If you go down these steps, you'll find yourself back on the road.'

We had passed through the tall iron gates of the cemetery and were now standing in a large, carefully landscaped garden. Pedersen was pointing towards a hedge on my left behind which I could see some stone steps commencing a curving descent. I hesitated a moment, then said:

'Mr Pedersen, you've been exceedingly polite. But let me assure you, whenever the possibility arises that I've made an error of judgement, I'm not one to turn and hide from it. In any case, sir, this is something a person in my position has to come to terms with. That's to say, during the course of any one day I'll be called upon to make many important decisions, and the truth is, the most I can do is to weigh up the evidence available at the time as best I can and forge on. Sometimes, inevitably, yes, I'll be guilty of a miscalculation. How could it be otherwise? This is something I've long come to terms with. And as you can see, when such a thing occurs, my only concern is how I might make good the error at the first opportunity. So please, feel free to speak

frankly. If it's your view that I've made a mistake in posing in front of the Sattler monument, then please say so.'

Pedersen looked uncomfortable. He gazed back towards a mausoleum in the distance, then said: 'Well, Mr Ryder, this is simply my opinion.'

'I'd be very keen to hear it, sir.'

'Well, since you ask. Yes, sir. To be frank, I was rather disappointed when I saw the newspaper this morning. In my opinion, sir, as I've just explained, it's simply not in this city's nature to embrace the extremes of Sattler. He holds an attraction for certain people *precisely because* he's so distant, a piece of local myth. Reintroduce him as a serious prospect ... then frankly, sir, people here will panic. They will recoil. They will suddenly find themselves clinging to what they know, never mind what misery it has already brought them. You asked my view, sir. I feel that the introducing of Max Sattler into these discussions has seriously undermined the possibility of progress. But of course there is still tonight. In the end, it will all hinge on what happens tonight. On what you will say. And on what Mr Brodsky will show us. And as you point out, there's no one more adept than yourself at recovering lost ground.' For a moment he appeared to be pondering something quietly to himself. Then he shook his head gravely. 'Mr Ryder, the best thing you can do now, sir, is to get to the concert hall. Tonight, everything must go according to plan.'

'Yes, yes, you're quite right,' I said. 'I'm sure my car's at this moment waiting to take me there. Mr Pedersen, I'm grateful to you for your frankness.'

The steps descended steeply past tall hedges and shrubs. I then found myself standing beside the road, looking at the sun setting across the field on the opposite side. The stairway had brought me out at a point where the road curved sharply, but when I followed it round a little the view widened. I could then see up ahead the hill I had recently climbed - the outline of the little hut was visible against the sky - and Hoffman's car waiting down in the lay-by where he had dropped me earlier.

I walked on towards the car, my thoughts filled with the exchange I had just had with Pedersen. I remembered the time I had first met him in the cinema when his esteem for me had been obvious in his every word and gesture. Now, for all his good manners, it was clear he was deeply disappointed with me. I found this thought oddly troubling and, as I continued along the roadside gazing at the sunset, began to feel more and more annoyed that I had not proceeded with greater caution over the matter of the Sattler monument. It was true - as I had pointed out to Pedersen - that my decision had seemed to represent the wisest course open to me at the time. Nevertheless, I could not avoid the niggling feeling that for all the limitations on my time, for all the enormous pressures impinging on me, I should somehow by that point have been better informed. And now, even at this late stage, with the evening's event virtually upon me, there were still certain aspects to these local issues that were far from clear. I saw now what a mistake it had been to miss the Citizens' Mutual Support Group meeting earlier in the day - and all for the sake of a practice session that had proved far from necessary.

By the time I came up to Hoffman's car, I was feeling tired and disheartened. Hoffman was behind the wheel, writing busily in a notebook, and did not notice me until I had opened the passenger door.

'Ah, Mr Ryder,' he exclaimed, quickly putting his notebook away. 'Your practice went well, I trust?'

'Oh yes.'

'And the facilities?' He hurriedly started up the car. 'They were to your satisfaction?'

'Excellent, Mr Hoffman, thank you. But now I must get to the concert hall as quickly as possible. One never knows what sorts of adjustment may be necessary.'

'Of course. In fact, I too have to hurry to the concert hall just now.' He glanced at his watch. 'I must check the catering facilities. When I was there an hour ago, I'm pleased to say everything was going very smoothly. But of course, havoc can set in so rapidly.'

Hoffman steered the car back onto the road and we drove for a few minutes without talking. The road, though somewhat busier than on the outward journey, was still far from crowded and Hoffman quickly built up a good speed. I gazed out at the fields and tried to relax, but found my mind returning to the evening ahead. Then I heard Hoffman say:

'Mr Ryder, I hope you won't mind my bringing this up. Just a small matter. No doubt you've forgotten.' He gave a short laugh and shook his head.

'Which matter is this, Mr Hoffman?'

'I meant simply my wife's albums. You might recall I told you about them when we first met. My wife, she's been such a devoted admirer for so many years ...'

'Yes, of course, I remember very well. She has prepared some albums of cuttings of my career. Yes, yes, I hadn't

forgotten. In fact, throughout all these busy events, it's something I've been looking forward to very much.'

'She's gone about the matter with enormous devotion, sir. Over many years. Sometimes she's taken huge trouble to acquire certain back issues of journals or newspapers containing important articles about you. Indeed, sir, her dedication has been marvellous to witness. It really would mean so much to her ...'

'Mr Hoffman, I have every intention of inspecting the albums before long. As I say, I'm very much looking forward to doing so. However, just at this moment, I'd much appreciate it if we could take this opportunity to discuss, well, certain aspects concerning this evening.'

'As you wish, sir. But I can assure you, everything is well in hand. You have nothing to be concerned about.'

'Yes, yes, I'm sure. Nevertheless, since the event is now so close, surely it would be sensible to turn our minds to it a little. For instance, Mr Hoffman, there's the matter of my parents. While I have every confidence the people of this city will look after them well, the fact remains they're both in fragile health and so I'd greatly appreciate ...'

'Ah, of course, I perfectly understand. Indeed, may I say I find it most touching that you should display such concern over your parents. I'm only too happy to assure you that very thorough arrangements have been made to ensure their comfort at all times. A group of very charming and able local ladies has been detailed to look after them throughout their stay. And as for this evening's event, we have planned something a little special for them, a little flourish I trust will appeal to you. As you no doubt know, our local company, Seeler Brothers, was renowned for two centuries for its carriage-making, once supplying many distinguished customers as far afield as France and England. There are some splendid examples of the Seeler Brothers' craft still in the city and it was my fancy your parents would like to arrive at

the concert hall in a particularly distinguished specimen, for which we have prepared a pair of beautifully groomed thoroughbreds. Perhaps you can imagine the scene, Mr Ryder. By that time in the evening the clearing in front of the concert hall will be bathed in lights, and all the prominent members of our community will be congregating there, laughing and greeting one another, all of them wonderfully dressed, much excitement in the air. Cars, of course, are unable to reach the clearing, so people will be arriving on foot from out of the trees. And then once a substantial crowd has assembled outside the hall - can you picture this, sir? - there'll come from the darkness of the woods the sound of approaching horses. The ladies and gentlemen, they'll stop talking and turn their heads. The sound of hooves will get louder, coming all the time closer to the pool of light. And then they will burst into view, the splendid horses, the driver in tails and top hat, the gleaming carriage of the Seeler Brothers carrying your most charming parents! Can you imagine the excitement, the anticipation that will go through the crowd at that moment? Of course, your parents will not be required to ride in the carriage for long. Just for that central avenue through the woods. And I assure you, the carriage is a masterpiece of luxury. They will find it as sheltered and comfortable as any limousine. Naturally, there will be a slight rocking motion, but that, in a first-class carriage, becomes a positively soothing feature. I hope you can picture it, sir. I must confess, I had originally conceived this whole arrangement for your own arrival, but then realised you would prefer to be well ensconced backstage by that point in the proceedings. And after all, one wishes nothing to dilute the impact of your appearance on the stage. Then, when we heard the very happy news that your parents would also be honouring this town, I thought immediately: "Ah, the ideal solution!" Yes, sir, your parents' arrival will set the mood very nicely. We do not, of course, expect your parents to stand about thereafter. They'll be led straight into their special seats in the auditorium, and this

will signal to everyone else it is time they too were beginning to take their seats. And then, shortly after that, the formal part of the evening will commence. We will begin with a short piano recital by my son, Stephan. Ha ha! I admit this is something of an indulgence on my part. But Stephan was so eager for a platform and at the time I perhaps foolishly believed ... Well, there's no point in going into that now. Stephan will give a light piano recital, simply to create a certain atmosphere. For this part of the proceedings, the lights will remain up, to give people the chance to find their seats, greet one another, chat in the aisles and so on. Then, once everyone has settled, the lights will dim. There will follow a few formal words of welcome. Then, in time, the orchestra will come out, take their places, tune their instruments. And then, after a certain pause, Mr Brodsky will emerge. He will ... he will then perform. When he has finished, and there is - let us hope, let us *assume* it - there is thunderous applause, and Mr Brodsky has taken many bows, there will follow a small break. Not an intermission exactly, we will not allow the audience to leave their seats. But a short period of five minutes or so, when the lights will go up again and people will have a chance to collect their thoughts. Then, while people are still busy exchanging their views, Mr von Winterstein will appear on stage in front of the curtain. He will give a simple introduction. No more than a few minutes - what introduction is necessary, after all? Then he'll retreat to the wings. The whole auditorium will be plunged into darkness. And now we come to the moment, sir. The moment of your appearance. Indeed, this is a matter I'd been meaning to discuss with you, since to some degree your co-operation is essential. You see, sir, our concert hall is extremely beautiful but, being very old, it naturally lacks many facilities one would take for granted in a more modern building. The catering facilities, as I believe I've already mentioned, are far from adequate, obliging us to rely heavily on those of the hotel. But my point is this, sir. I have

borrowed from our sports centre - which is indeed very modern and well-equipped - the electronic scoreboard that usually hangs over the indoor arena. Just at this moment, the arena is looking very sorry for itself! Ugly black wires dangling down from the space the scoreboard usually occupies. Well, sir, to return to my point. Mr von Winterstein will retreat to the wings after his brief introduction. The whole auditorium, for a single moment, will be plunged into blackness, during which time the curtains will open. And then a single spot will come on, revealing you standing at the centre of the stage at the lectern. At that moment, obviously, the audience will burst into excited applause. Then, once the applause has subsided, before you have uttered a word - of course, this is so long as you are agreeable - a voice will boom out across the auditorium, pronouncing the first question. The voice will be that of Horst Jannings, this city's most senior actor. He will be up in the sound box speaking through the public address system. Horst has a fine rich baritone and he will read out each question slowly. And as he does so - this is my little idea, sir! - the words will be spelt out simultaneously on the electronic scoreboard fixed directly above your head. You see, until this point, owing to the darkness, no one would have been aware of the scoreboard. It will be as though the words are appearing in the air above you. Ha ha! Forgive me, but I thought the effect would serve both the drama of the occasion and at the same time bring added clarity to it. The words on the scoreboard, dare I say, will help some of those present to remember the gravely important nature of the issues you are addressing. After all, it could easily be that in all this excitement certain people will forget to concentrate. Well, you see, sir, with my little idea, there'll be little chance of that. Each question will be there in front of them, spelt out in giant letters. So then, sir, with your approval this is what we shall do. The first question will be announced, spelt out on the scoreboard, you will give your reply from the lectern, and, once you have finished, Horst will read out

the next question and so on. The only thing we would ask, Mr Ryder, is that at the end of each reply, you leave the lectern and come to the edge of the stage and bow. The reason for my requesting this is twofold. Firstly, because of the temporary nature of the electronic scoreboard, there are inevitably certain technical difficulties. It will take the electrician several seconds to load each question into the scoreboard, and then there will be an additional lag of fifteen to twenty seconds before the words start to appear on the board. So you see, sir, by moving to the edge of the stage and bowing, thus provoking inevitable applause, we will avoid a series of awkward pauses punctuating the proceedings. Then, just as each round of applause is dying, Horst's voice and the scoreboard will announce the next question, giving you ample time to return to the lectern. There is, sir, a further reason this strategy recommends itself. Your coming to the edge of the stage and bowing will tell the electrician, very unambiguously, that you have completed your answer. After all, we wish to avoid at all costs a situation in which, for instance, the scoreboard starts to print out the next question while you are still speaking. But you see, as I've explained, because of the time-lag problems this could all too easily occur. All it would take, after all, is for you to appear to finish - for you merely to pause - only for some final pertinent point to occur to you. You proceed to make this final point, but meanwhile the electrician has already started ... Ha! What a disaster! Let us not even contemplate it! So, sir, allow me then to suggest this simple but effective device of your coming to the edge of the stage at the end of each answer. In fact, sir, to give the electrician a few extra seconds to load the next question, it would be enormously helpful if you could in addition give some sort of inconspicuous signal as you approach the end of each reply. Perhaps, let us say, a modest shrug of the shoulder. Of course, Mr Ryder, all these arrangements are subject to your approval. If you're unhappy about any of these ideas, please speak plainly.'

As Hoffman had been talking, an all too vivid picture of the evening ahead had started to form in my mind. I could hear the applause, the buzz of the electronic scoreboard above my head. I saw myself performing the little shrug, then moving into the blinding lights towards the edge of the stage. And a curious, dreamy sense of unreality came over me as I realised just how unprepared I was. I saw Hoffman waiting for my response and murmured wearily:

‘It all sounds splendid, Mr Hoffman. You’ve thought the whole thing out very well.’

‘Ah. So you approve. All the details, they are all ...’

‘Yes, yes,’ I said, waving my hand impatiently. ‘The electronic scoreboard, the walking to the edge of the stage, the shrugs, yes, yes, yes. It’s all very well thought out.’

‘Ah.’ For a second Hoffman continued to look uncertain, but then seemed to conclude I had spoken sincerely.

‘Splendid, splendid. Then everything’s settled.’ He nodded to himself and fell silent for a while. Then I heard him mutter to himself again, not taking his eyes off the road:

‘Yes, yes. Everything’s settled.’

For the next several minutes, Hoffman said nothing further to me, though he continued to mutter to himself under his breath. There was now a pink hue over much of the sky, and as the road turned this way and that through the farmland the sun would appear in the windscreen before us, filling the car with its glow and obliging us to squint. Then at one point, as I was gazing out of my window, I heard Hoffman gasp suddenly:

‘An ox! An ox, an ox, an ox!’

Although this too had been uttered under his breath, I was sufficiently startled to turn and look at him. I saw then that Hoffman was still lost in his own world, staring ahead of him and nodding to himself. I looked around at the fields we were passing but, although I saw sheep in many of the

fields, could see no sign of an ox. I had a vague recollection of Hoffman doing something similar once before on a car journey with me, but then soon lost interest in the matter.

Before long we found ourselves back in the city streets and the traffic quickly slowed to a crawl. The pavements were crowded with people making their way home from work and many shop windows had already turned on their lights for the night. Now that I was back in the city, I felt some of my confidence returning. It occurred to me that once I reached the concert hall, once I had had the chance to stand on the stage and survey the surroundings, many things would fall into place.

‘Indeed, sir,’ Hoffman suddenly said, ‘everything is going to order. Nothing at all for you to worry about. This town, you’ll see, will do you proud. And as for Mr Brodsky, I continue to have every confidence in him.’

I decided I should at least make a show of being optimistic. ‘Yes,’ I said cheerfully, ‘I’m sure Mr Brodsky will be splendid tonight. He certainly seemed in fine form just now.’

‘Oh?’ Hoffman gave me a puzzled look. ‘You’ve seen him recently?’

‘Up at the cemetery just now. As I say, he seemed very confident ...’

‘Mr Brodsky was at the cemetery? Now I wonder what he was doing up there.’

Hoffman gave me a searching stare, and I thought for a moment about recounting the whole story of the funeral and Brodsky’s impressive intervention. But then in the end I could not find the energy and said simply:

‘I believe he has an appointment there in a little while. With Miss Collins.’

‘With Miss Collins? Good gracious. What on earth can this be about?’

I looked at him, somewhat surprised by his reaction. ‘It seems a reconciliation is becoming a genuine possibility,’ I said. ‘If such a happy conclusion does ensue, then Mr Hoffman, that will be something else you could quite legitimately take much credit for.’

‘Yes, yes.’ Hoffman was thinking something over, a frown forming on his face. ‘Mr Brodsky is at the cemetery now? Waiting for Miss Collins? How curious. Very curious.’

As we went further into the city centre, the traffic became ever more dense, until at one point, in a narrow back street, we came to a standstill. Hoffman, whose manner had continued to grow increasingly troubled, now turned to me again.

‘Mr Ryder, there’s something I must attend to. That is to say, I’ll still be joining you at the concert hall in due course, but just now ...’ He looked at his watch with distinct signs of panic. ‘You see, I must attend to ... to something ...’ Then he gripped the wheel and fixed me in a stare. ‘Mr Ryder, the fact is this. Owing to this wretched one-way system and this diabolical evening traffic, it will take us some time yet to reach the concert hall in this vehicle. Whereas on foot ...’ He suddenly pointed past me out of the window. ‘There it is. Before your very eyes. No more than a few minutes’ walk. Yes, sir, that roof there.’

I could see a large dome-shaped roof looming above the other buildings in the mid-distance. Certainly, it did not appear to be more than three or four blocks away.

‘Mr Hoffman,’ I said, ‘if you have something urgent to attend to, I’m quite happy to make my way on foot.’

‘Really? You’d forgive me?’

The traffic moved forward a few more inches then came to a standstill again.

‘In fact, I’d welcome the walk,’ I said. ‘It looks a pleasant evening. And as you say, it’s only a short distance on foot.’

‘This infernal one-way system! We might sit in this car for another hour! Mr Ryder, I’d be enormously grateful if you’d forgive me. But you see, there’s something I must ... I must see to ...’

‘Yes, yes, of course. I’ll get out here. You’ve been most kind as it is, driving me about like this at such a busy time. I’m most grateful.’

‘You’ll be approaching the concert hall from the rear. It’s a case of just proceeding on towards that roof. You can’t miss it if you keep the roof in view.’

‘Please don’t worry. I’ll have no trouble.’ Cutting short his apologies, I thanked him again and stepped out onto the pavement.

I soon found myself wandering down a narrow street past a row of specialist bookshops, then past some pleasant-looking tourist hotels. It was not at all difficult to keep the domed roof in view and for a little while I felt thankful for the chance to walk in the fresh air.

By the time I had gone two or three blocks, however, a number of troubling thoughts had entered my head which I found I could not dislodge. For one thing, I could see there was more than a chance the question-and-answer session would fail to go smoothly. Indeed, if the intensity of emotions displayed at the cemetery was anything to go by, the possibility of ugly scenes could not be ruled out. Moreover, if the question-and-answer session went badly enough, it was conceivable that my parents, witnessing the scene with mounting horror and embarrassment, would demand to be taken

out of the auditorium. In other words, they would leave before I had had the chance to get to the piano, and then it would be anyone's guess when they would ever again come to hear me perform. Even worse, if things went very badly indeed, it was not impossible one or the other of them would suffer a seizure. I felt as confident as ever that my mother and my father would be united in astonishment within seconds of my starting to play, but meanwhile the question-and-answer session stood massively in my way.

I realised I had become so preoccupied I had allowed the domed roof to disappear behind some buildings. I thought little of this at first, assuming it would come back into view soon enough. But then, as I walked on, the street grew even narrower, while the buildings around me seemed all to be six or seven storeys high, so that I could hardly see any sky, let alone the domed roof. I decided to look for a parallel street, but then, once I had taken the next turning, I found myself wandering from one tiny side-street to the next, quite possibly going in circles, the concert hall not visible anywhere.

After several minutes of this, a sense of panic began to engulf me and I thought about stopping someone to ask directions. But then it occurred to me this would be unwise. All the time I had been walking, people had been turning - sometimes even stopping dead on the pavement - to look at me. I had been vaguely aware of this, though in my concern to find my way I had not given it much thought. But I now saw that, with the evening's event so close, and with so much hanging in the balance, it would not do for me to be seen wandering the streets, obviously lost and uncertain. With an effort, I straightened my posture and adopted the demeanour of someone who, with all his affairs well in hand, was taking a relaxing stroll around the town. I forced myself to slow my pace and smiled pleasantly at anyone who stared my way.

Finally I turned another corner and spotted the concert hall before me, closer than ever. The street I now entered

was broader, with brightly lit cafés and shops on either side. The domed roof was no more than a block or two away, just beyond where the street curved out of view.

I felt not only relief, but also suddenly much better about the whole evening ahead. The feeling I had had earlier - that many things would fall into place once I reached the venue and was able to stand on the stage - came back to me and I proceeded down the street with something approaching enthusiasm.

But then, as I came round the bend, an odd sight greeted me. A little way ahead was a brick wall running across my path - in fact, across the entire breadth of the street. My first thought was that a railway line ran behind the wall, but then I noticed how the higher storeys of the buildings on either side of the street continued unbroken above the wall and on into the distance. While the wall aroused my curiosity, I did not immediately see it as a problem, assuming that once I got up to it I would find an arch or subway leading me through to the other side. The domed roof, in any case, was now very near, lit up by spotlights against the darkening sky.

It was only when I was virtually right up to the wall, it dawned on me there was no way to get past. The pavements on both sides of the street simply came to a dead stop at the brickwork. I looked around in bewilderment, then walked the length of the wall to the opposite pavement, unable quite to accept there was not somewhere a doorway, or even a small hole through which to crawl. I found nothing, and eventually, after standing helplessly before the wall for a time, I waved to a passer-by - a middle-aged woman emerging from a nearby gift shop - saying:

‘Excuse me, I wish to get to the concert hall. How can I get past this wall?’

The woman seemed surprised by my question. ‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘You can’t get past the wall. Of course you can’t. It

completely seals the street.'

'But this is extremely annoying,' I said. 'I have to get to the concert hall.'

'I suppose it is annoying,' the woman said as though she had never before considered the matter. 'When I saw you staring at it just now, sir, I just assumed you were a tourist. The wall's quite a tourist attraction, as you can see.'

She pointed to a spinner of postcards in front of the gift shop. Sure enough, in the light from the doorway, I could see postcard after postcard proudly featuring the wall.

'But what on earth's the point in having a wall in a place like this?' I asked, my voice rising despite myself.

'It really is monstrous. What purpose can it possibly serve?'

'I do sympathise. To an outsider, particularly to one trying to get somewhere in a hurry, it must be an annoyance. I suppose it's what you'd call a folly. It was built by some eccentric person at the end of the last century. Of course it's rather odd, but it's been famous ever since. In the summer, this whole area where we're standing now, it gets completely full of tourists. Americans, Japanese, all taking photographs of it.'

'This is nonsensical,' I said furiously. 'Please tell me the quickest way to reach the concert hall.'

'The concert hall, sir? Well, it's quite a long way if you're thinking of going on foot. Of course, we're very near it just now' - she glanced up at the roof - 'but in practical terms, that doesn't mean very much because of the wall.'

'This is quite ridiculous!' I had lost all patience.

'I'll find my own way. You're obviously quite unable to appreciate that a person might be very busy, working on a

tight schedule, and simply can't afford to dawdle about the town for hours. In fact, if I may say so, this wall is quite typical of this town. Utterly preposterous obstacles everywhere. And what do you do? Do you all get annoyed? Do you demand it's pulled down immediately so that people can go about their business? No, you put up with it for the best part of a century. You make postcards of it and believe it's charming. This brick wall charming? What a monstrosity! I may well use this wall as a symbol, I've a good mind to, in my speech tonight! It's just as well for you I've already composed much of what I'm going to say in my head and so am naturally reluctant to change things too much at this late stage. Good evening!'

I left the woman and began rapidly to retrace my steps back up the street, determined not to let such an absurd setback destroy my renewed sense of confidence. But then as I continued to walk, conscious all the time of the concert hall getting further and further away, I could feel my earlier despondency returning to me. The street seemed much longer than I remembered it, and then when I finally reached the end I found myself getting lost again in the network of narrow little alleys.

After several further minutes of useless wandering, I suddenly felt unable to go on and halted. Noticing I had stopped beside a pavement café, I collapsed into a chair at the nearest table and immediately felt what remained of my energy draining away. I was vaguely conscious that around me the darkness was falling, that an electric light was shining somewhere behind my head, that this same light was in all likelihood illuminating me to passers-by and fellow customers, but somehow I still could not find the urge to straighten my posture or even nominally to disguise my dejection. In time, a waiter appeared. I ordered a coffee from him, then went on staring down at the shadow cast by my head over the metallic surface of the table. All the possibilities that had disturbed me earlier concerning the

evening ahead now began to crowd all at once into my mind. Above all, the depressing idea kept returning to me that my decision to be photographed before the Sattler monument had irrevocably damaged my authority in this town; that it had left me with a daunting amount of ground to make up and that anything less than an utterly commanding performance during the question-and-answer session would result in catastrophic consequences all round. In fact, for a moment, I felt so overwhelmed by these thoughts I was on the brink of tears. But then I became aware of a hand on my back and someone repeating gently above me: 'Mr Ryder. Mr Ryder.'

I assumed it was the waiter returned with my coffee and gestured for him to place it before me. But the voice continued to call my name, and looking up I found Gustav regarding me with a concerned expression.

'Oh, hello,' I said.

'Good evening, sir. How are you? I thought it was you, but I wasn't sure so I came over. Are you all right, sir? We're all over there, all the boys, won't you come and join us? The boys would be so thrilled.'

I looked around me and saw I was sitting on the edge of a square. Although there was a single street lamp at its centre, the square was largely in darkness, so that the figures of the people moving across it appeared to be little more than shadows. Gustav was indicating to the opposite side where I could see another café, somewhat larger than the one I was now patronising, its open doorway and windows throwing out a warm light. Even at this distance, I could make out a lot of lively activity inside, and strains of fiddle music and laughter came drifting out to us through the evening. Only then did it dawn on me I was in fact sitting in the Old Town by the main square, looking over to the Hungarian Café. As I continued to glance about me, I could hear Gustav saying:

‘The boys, sir, they’ve been making me tell them over and over again. About, you know, sir, what you said, about how you *agreed* I’d already told them five, six times, but they wanted it all again. They’d barely stopped laughing and slapping each other about from the last time, but there they were again, saying: “Come on, Gustav, we know you haven’t told us everything yet. What *exactly* did Mr Ryder say?”

“I’ve told you,” I was saying to them. “I’ve told you. You know perfectly well.” But they wanted to hear it all again and I dare say they’ll want to hear it all several times more before the evening’s out. Of course, sir, although I adopt this weary tone each time they ask, naturally, that’s just for effect. In truth, of course, I’m every bit as thrilled as any of them and could happily repeat our conversation from this morning over and over. It’s so good to see them wearing such expressions again. Your promise, sir, it’s brought new hope, a new *youth* to their faces. Even Igor was smiling, laughing at some of the jokes! I can’t remember when I last saw them like this. Oh yes, sir, I’d be very happy to go over it many more times yet. Whenever I get to that moment, when you said: “Very well, I’d be happy to say something on your behalf,” whenever I get to that part, you should see them, sir! Cheering and laughing, slapping each other about, it’s been so long since I’ve seen them like this. So there we were, sir, drinking our beers and talking about your great generosity, talking about how after all these years portering would change for ever after tonight, yes, while we were in the midst of saying all this I happened to look out and I saw you, sir. The proprietor, as you can see, he’s left the door open. It gives the place a much better atmosphere, to be able to see right across the square as the night’s coming in. Well, there I was looking across the square and I was thinking to myself: “I wonder who that poor soul is sitting by himself over there.” But my eyes aren’t so good, you see, and I wasn’t aware it was actually you, sir. Then Karl, he said to me in a sort of whisper, he must have sensed it wouldn’t be a good idea to say it out loud, he said to me:

“I’m probably wrong, but isn’t that Mr Ryder himself? Over there?” And then I looked again and thought, yes, that’s possible. What on earth could he be doing out there in the cold and looking so sad? I’ll go and see if it really is him. Let me say, sir, Karl was very discreet. None of the others heard what he said, so aside from him, they won’t know why I’ve slipped out, though I dare say some of them might now be looking this way wondering what I’m up to. But really, sir, are you all right? You look like you’ve something on your mind.’

‘Oh ...’ I gave a sigh and wiped my face. ‘It’s nothing. It’s just that all this travelling, all this responsibility. Now and again it just gets ...’ I trailed off with a small laugh.

‘But why sit out here like this by yourself, sir? It’s a chilly evening, and in only your jacket. And this after my saying to you how welcome you’d be to join us whenever you wished at the Hungarian Café. Did you think you’d be welcomed with anything less than huge enthusiasm if you’d come over to us? Sitting out here on your own! Really, sir! Please come and join us without further delay. Then you can relax and enjoy yourself for a little while. Put all your worries out of your head. The boys will be overjoyed. Please.’

On the other side of the square, the glowing light in the doorway, the music, the laughter all certainly seemed inviting. I rose to my feet and wiped my face once more.

‘That’s it, sir. You’ll feel better in no time.’

‘Thank you. Thank you. Really, thank you.’ I made an effort to control my emotions. ‘I’m very grateful to you. Really. I just hope I won’t be intruding.’

Gustav laughed. ‘You’ll see soon enough if you’re intruding or not, sir.’

As we set off across the square, it occurred to me I had better prepare to present myself to the porters, who

undoubtedly would be overwhelmed with gratitude and excitement at my appearance. I felt more in control with each step I took and was about to make some pleasant remark to Gustav when he suddenly stopped walking. He had kept his hand gently on my back as we had set off across the square and I felt his fingers, just for a second, clutch at the material of my jacket. I turned and saw in the shadowy light Gustav standing quite still, looking down towards the ground, a hand raised to his brow as though he had suddenly remembered something of importance. Then, before I could say anything, he was shaking his head and smiling self-consciously.

‘Excuse me, sir. I just ... just ...’ He gave a small laugh and began to walk again.

‘Is everything all right?’

‘Oh yes, yes. You know, sir, the boys are going to be so thrilled when you walk in through that door.’

He moved a step or two ahead of me and led the way determinedly across the remainder of the square.

Only when I entered the café and felt the warmth of the log fire at the far end of the room did I realise how chilly the evening had become. The interior of the café had been rearranged since the previous time I had stepped inside it. Most of the tables had been pushed back against the walls, so as to allow a large circular table to dominate the centre of the floor. Around this were a dozen or so men, drinking beers and carrying on boisterously. They looked somewhat younger than Gustav, though almost all were in late middle-age. A little way away from them, over near the café counter, two thin men in gypsy dress were playing a brisk waltz on their fiddles. There were other customers present, but they all seemed content to sit in the background, often in the shadowy recesses of the room, as though conscious of being present at someone else's event.

As Gustav and I came in, the porters all turned and stared, not certain whether to believe their eyes. Then Gustav said: 'Yes, boys, it really is him. He's come in person to wish us well.'

A complete hush fell over the café while everyone - the porters, the waiters, the musicians, the other customers - stared at me. Then the room broke into warm applause. For some reason this reception took me by surprise and almost brought the tears back to my eyes. I smiled, saying: 'Thank you, thank you,' while the applause continued so intensely I could barely hear myself. The porters had all risen to their feet and even the gypsy musicians had tucked their fiddles under their arms to join in the applause. Gustav ushered me towards the central table and as I sat down the applause finally subsided. The musicians resumed their playing and I

found myself surrounded by a ring of excited faces. Gustav, who had seated himself next to me, began to say:

‘Boys, Mr Ryder has been good enough to ...’

Before he could finish, a stout porter with a red nose leaned over to me and raised his beer glass. ‘Mr Ryder, you’ve saved us,’ he declared. ‘Now our story will be different. My grandchildren, they’ll remember me differently. This is a great night for us.’

I was still smiling back at him when I felt a hand grasp my arm and found a gaunt, nervous-looking face staring into mine.

‘Please, Mr Ryder,’ the man said. ‘Please, you’ll really do it, won’t you? You won’t when the time comes, with all the other very important things on your mind, in front of all these people, you won’t change your mind and ...’

‘Don’t be so insolent,’ someone else said and the nervous man vanished as though someone had pulled him back. Then I could hear a voice saying behind me: ‘Of course he won’t change his mind. Who do you think you’re talking to?’

I turned in my seat, wishing to reassure the nervous man, but then someone else was shaking my hand saying:

‘Thank you, Mr Ryder, thank you.’

‘You’re all very kind,’ I said, smiling at the company in general. ‘Though I ... I really ought to warn you ...’

At that moment someone pushed against me, almost knocking me into the person next to me. I heard someone apologising and someone else saying: ‘Don’t push like that!’ Then another voice said, close to me: ‘I thought that was you out there just now, sir. I’m the one who pointed you out to Gustav. It’s so good of you to come and see us like this. Tonight will be a night we’ll remember for ever. A turning point for every porter in the town.’

‘Look, I have to warn you,’ I said loudly. ‘I’ll do my very best for you, but I have to warn you, I may not be quite the influence I once was. You see ...’

But my words were drowned out by a number of the porters starting up a chorus of ‘hurrahs’ for me. By the second one, the entire company of porters joined in, and then the music momentarily stopped as everyone else in the café joined in for the final, deafening hurrah. Then there was more applause.

‘Thank you, thank you,’ I said, genuinely moved. Then, as the applause began to fade, the red-nosed porter across the table said:

‘You’re very welcome here, sir. You’re a famous and renowned person, but I want you to know we here know a good sort when we see one. That’s right, we haven’t spent so long in this trade without developing a good nose for decency. You’re decent through and through, we can all see that. Decent and kind. You might think we’re all welcoming you now simply because you’re going to help us. And of course, we’re grateful to you. But I know this crowd, they’ve really taken to you, and they wouldn’t have done so if you weren’t a decent sort. If you’d been too proud, or insincere in any way, they’d have sniffed you out. Oh yes. Of course, they’d still have felt grateful, they’d have treated you well, but they wouldn’t be taking to you like this. What I’m trying to say, sir, is that even if you hadn’t been famous, if you were just some stranger who’d stumbled in here by accident, once we’d seen you were all right, once you’d explained you were far from home and were looking for some company, we’d have welcomed you. We wouldn’t have received you so differently from the way we did just now, once we’d seen what a good sort you were. Oh yes, we’re not nearly so stand-offish here as people say. From now on, sir, you can count each of us as your friend.’

‘That’s right,’ said someone to my right. ‘We’re your friends now. If you’re ever in any difficulty in this town, you’ll be able to rely on us.’

‘Thank you so much,’ I said. ‘Thank you. I’ll do my best for you all tonight. But really, I have to warn you ...’

‘Sir, please.’ It was Gustav talking gently near my ear. ‘Please stop worrying. Everything will be fine. Why not enjoy yourself for a few minutes at least?’

‘But I just wanted to warn these good friends of yours ...’

‘Really, sir,’ Gustav went on quietly. ‘Your dedication is admirable. But you worry too much. Please relax and enjoy yourself. Just for a few minutes. Look at us. All of us here have worries. I myself have to be off shortly to the concert hall again, back to all that work. But when we meet like this here, we’re glad to be among friends and we forget about things. We unwind and enjoy ourselves.’ Then Gustav raised his voice over the hubbub. ‘Come on, let’s show Mr Ryder how we *really* enjoy ourselves! Let’s show him how we do it!’

This pronouncement was met by a cheer and another burst of applause, then the applause turned into rhythmic clapping all around the table. The gypsies began to play faster in time with the clapping, and some of the other customers looking on began also to clap. I noticed too people elsewhere in the room actually breaking off their conversations and turning their seats around as though to witness an eagerly awaited spectacle. Someone I supposed was the proprietor - a dark, lanky man - emerged from a back room and stood leaning on the door frame, evidently just as anxious not to miss what was to follow.

Meanwhile the porters kept up their clapping, becoming ever more mirthful, some of them thumping the floor with

their feet to emphasise the beat. Then two waiters appeared and began hurriedly to clear the surface of the table. Beer glasses, coffee cups, sugar pots, ashtrays all vanished in an instant, and then one of the porters, a heavy bearded man, climbed up onto the table top. Behind his bushy beard his face was bright red, whether from embarrassment or from drinking I could not tell. In any case, once up on the table he seemed to have little inhibition and with a grin began to dance.

It was a curious, static dance, the feet hardly leaving the table surface, with the emphasis on the statuesque qualities of the human body rather than its agility or mobile grace. The bearded porter adopted a pose like some Greek god, his arms positioned as though carrying an invisible burden, and as the clapping and the shouts of encouragement continued, he would subtly change the angle of his hip or rotate himself slowly. I wondered for a moment if the whole thing was supposed to be comic, but for all the exuberant laughter around the table, it soon became clear there was no satiric intention in the performance. As I watched the bearded porter, someone nudged me and said:

‘This is it, Mr Ryder. Our dance. The Porters’ Dance. You’ve heard about it, I’m sure.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Ah yes. So this is the Porters’ Dance.’

‘This is it. But you haven’t seen anything yet.’ The speaker grinned and nudged me again.

I became aware that a large brown cardboard box was being passed around from porter to porter. The box had roughly the dimensions of a suitcase, though to judge from the way it was being tossed through the air, it was light and empty. The box travelled around the table for a few minutes then, at a particular point in the dance, was thrown up to the bearded porter. There was something well-practised about the whole routine. At the precise moment the bearded porter switched

pose and raised his arms up again, the cardboard box came through the air, landing smartly in his hands.

The bearded porter reacted as though he had caught a slab of stone - bringing a growl of apprehension from his audience - and for a second or two looked certain to buckle under the weight. But then, with considerable determination, he began to straighten himself, until finally he was standing perfectly upright, the box held against his chest. As cheers greeted this achievement, the bearded porter began slowly to raise the box above his head, until finally he was holding it aloft, both arms absolutely straight. Although in reality, of course, this was no feat at all, there was a dignity and drama to the performance which caused me to join in with the cheering, just as if he really had lifted a huge weight. The bearded porter then proceeded to create with some skill the illusion of his burden getting lighter and lighter. Before long he was holding the box up with one hand, performing little pirouettes as he did so, sometimes tossing the box over his shoulder and catching it behind his back. The lighter the burden became, the more exuberant his colleagues grew. Then, as the bearded porter's feats grew ever more flippant, his colleagues began to look around the table at one another, grinning, egging each other on, until another of their number, a wiry little man with a thin moustache, began to climb onto the table top.

The table wobbled and tilted, but the other porters laughed, as though this were all part of the drama, then held the table firm as the wiry porter clambered up. The bearded man failed at first to notice his colleague and continued to show off his control over the cardboard box, while the wiry porter stood moodily behind him like a man awaiting his turn with a coveted dance partner. Then at last the bearded porter saw the wiry man and threw the box over to him. As he caught the box the wiry porter staggered backwards, and it seemed he might tumble off the table altogether. But he recovered just in time, then, with much effort, straightened himself, the

box held on his back. As he did so, the bearded porter, now joining in with the clapping and smiling happily, came down off the table assisted by many hands.

The wiry porter went through much the same procedure as his predecessor, though with many more comic flourishes. He provoked roars of laughter as he pulled funny faces and performed stumbles in the best slapstick fashion. As I watched him, the rhythmic clapping, the gypsy violins, the laughter, the mock hoots of astonishment seemed to fill not just my ears but all my senses. Then, as a third porter replaced the wiry man on the table, I felt the human warmth starting to engulf me. Gustav's sentiments suddenly struck me as profoundly wise. What indeed was the point in worrying so much? It was essential every once in a while to unwind completely and enjoy oneself.

I closed my eyes and let the pleasant atmosphere wash around me, only vaguely conscious that I was still clapping, and that my foot was thumping time on the floorboard. A picture entered my mind of my parents, of the two of them in their horse-drawn carriage approaching the clearing outside the concert hall. I could see the local people - the black-jacketed men, the ladies with their coats and shawls and jewellery - breaking off their conversations and turning towards the sound of horse hooves coming from the darkness of the trees. And then the gleaming carriage would burst into the wash of lights, the handsome horses trotting to a halt, their breaths rising in the night air. And my mother and my father would be peering out of the carriage window, on their faces the first traces of excited anticipation, but also something guarded and reserved, a reluctance to give in completely to the hope that the evening would turn out a glittering triumph. And then, as the liveried coachman hurried to help them down, and a line of dignitaries formed to greet them, they would adopt the wilfully calm smiles I recalled from my childhood, from those rare occasions when my parents invited guests to the house for lunch or dinner.

I opened my eyes and saw there were now two porters up on the table together, performing an amusing routine. Whichever one was holding the box would stagger about on the verge of collapse, threatening to fall off the edge, only to relinquish the box to the other at the last moment. Then I noticed that Boris - who presumably had all this time been sitting somewhere in the café - had come right up to the table and was looking up at the two porters with obvious delight. From the way he clapped and laughed at all the right moments, the little boy was clearly very familiar with all the routines. He was sitting between two large swarthy porters who looked similar enough to be brothers. As I watched, Boris exchanged a remark with one of them, and the man laughed and tweaked playfully the little boy's cheek.

All the activity seemed to be drawing in more and more people from the square and the café was becoming very crowded. I noticed too that although there had been only two gypsy musicians when I had arrived, three others had now joined them and the music of their fiddles was coming from all directions with greater energy than ever. Then someone at the back - I had the impression it was not one of the porters - shouted out: 'Gustav!' and in no time the call had been taken up at the front of our table. 'Gustav! Gustav!' the porters shouted, turning it into a chant. Soon even the nervous-looking porter who had spoken to me earlier and who was now taking his turn up on the table - a spirited if not particularly skilful performance - joined in, so that even as he manipulated the box down his back and around his hip, he did so chanting: 'Gustav! Gustav!'

I looked around for Gustav - he was no longer by my side - and saw that he had gone over to Boris and was saying something into the little boy's ear. One of the swarthy brothers put a hand on Gustav's shoulder and I could see him imploring the elderly porter to take his turn. Gustav smiled and shook his head modestly, to be met only with an intensification in the chanting. Now virtually every person

in the room was chanting his name, and even those standing out in the square seemed to be joining in. Finally, giving Boris a weary smile, Gustav rose to his feet.

Being by some years the eldest of the porters, Gustav appeared to have more difficulty clambering up onto the table, but many hands reached forward to help him up. Once on the table, he straightened and smiled at his audience. The nervous-looking porter handed him the box, then promptly got down.

From the start Gustav's routine departed from that established by the earlier dancers. Rather than pretend the box was extremely heavy on first receiving it, he tossed it effortlessly onto one shoulder and made a shrugging motion. This produced loud laughter all round and I could hear cries of 'Good old Gustav!' and 'Trust him!' And then, as he continued to make light of the box, a waiter broke through to the front and tossed up onto the table an actual suitcase. From the way he swung it and the loud thud it produced, the suitcase was clearly not empty. It had landed close to Gustav's feet and a murmur went around the crowd. Then the chanting picked up again, faster than ever: 'Gustav! Gustav! Gustav!' I could see Boris following carefully every move his grandfather made, immense pride across his face, clapping his hands vigorously and joining in with the chanting. Gustav, noticing Boris, smiled once more to him, then reached down and grasped the handle of the suitcase.

As Gustav - still hunched over - brought the suitcase up to his hip, it seemed clear to me he was not faking its weight. Then as he straightened himself, the box still up on his shoulder, the suitcase in his hand, he closed his eyes and his face appeared to cloud over. But no one seemed to notice anything untoward - quite possibly this was a characteristic mannerism of Gustav's before he performed a feat - and the chanting and clapping continued deafeningly over the squealing violins. Sure enough, the next moment, Gustav had opened his eyes again and was smiling broadly at

everyone. Then, lifting the suitcase up further, he managed to grip it under his arm, and in this posture - the suitcase under one arm, the box on the opposite shoulder - he began to dance, making some slow shuffling movements with his feet. There were cheers and whoops, and I could hear someone near the entrance asking: 'What's he doing now? I can't see. What's he doing now?'

Then Gustav raised the suitcase up further and continued the dance with the suitcase up on one shoulder, the box on the other. The fact that the suitcase was much heavier than the box obliged him to lean very much to one side, but otherwise he looked at ease and his steps continued to have a sprightliness about them. Boris, beaming with delight, shouted to his grandfather something I could not hear, to which Gustav responded with a wry twist of the head, provoking further hoots and laughter.

Then, as Gustav continued his dance, I became aware of something going on behind me. For some time, someone had been jabbing an elbow into my back with annoying regularity, but I had assumed this had simply to do with the crowd's eagerness to get a good view of the performance. But I now turned and found that, directly behind me, despite the crowd pushing against them on all sides, two waiters were kneeling on the floor packing a suitcase. They had already filled much of it with what looked to be wooden chopping boards from the kitchen. One waiter was arranging the boards into a more dense formation while the other was gesturing impatiently to the back of the café, pointing angrily at the spaces that remained inside the suitcase. Then I could see more chopping boards arriving, two or three at a time, passed hand to hand through the crowd. The waiters worked quickly, packing the boards in until the case seemed full to bursting. But more chopping boards - sometimes just the broken sections of boards - were still coming down, and the waiters with practised ingenuity found ways to squeeze these in too. Perhaps they would have continued to pack more and more into

the case, but the jostling of the bodies around them seemed finally to exhaust their patience and they pushed down the lid, tugged at the straps and, pushing past me, heaved the suitcase onto the table.

Boris gave the new suitcase a stare then looked uncertainly up at Gustav. His grandfather was performing a slow shuffle not unlike that of a matador. For the moment the effort required to hold the box and the suitcase on his shoulders seemed to prevent him from noticing the fresh challenge placed before him. Boris watched his grandfather carefully, waiting for the moment he would see the second suitcase. Clearly everyone else was also waiting, but his grandfather went on and on with the dance, pretending to have noticed nothing. This was surely a trick on his part! Almost certainly, his grandfather was teasing the audience, and any moment now, Boris knew, he would pick up the heavy suitcase, perhaps discarding the empty box to do so. But for some reason, Gustav continued not to see it, and now people were shouting and pointing. Then at last Gustav noticed and his face - sandwiched between the box and the first suitcase - took on an expression of dismay. Everyone around Boris laughed and clapped all the harder. Gustav continued slowly to rotate himself but kept his gaze fixed on the new suitcase, his expression still troubled, and for an instant it occurred to Boris that his grandfather was not entirely faking his concern. But then all around him people were laughing, people who had seen his grandfather perform this same routine many times before, and the next moment Boris too was laughing and urging Gustav on. The little boy's voice caught Gustav's attention and once more grandfather and grandson exchanged smiles.

Then Gustav brought the empty box off his shoulder, and as it slid down his arm, with a contemptuousness that was almost graceful, he flicked the thing into the crowd. There was again a mixture of laughter and cheering, and the box, passed back over the heads of the spectators, vanished into

the recesses of the room. Then Gustav glanced down again at the new suitcase and hoisted the first higher on his shoulder. He put on once more an expression of grave concern - this time it was without any doubt entirely mock - and Boris laughed along with everyone else. Then Gustav began to bend at the knees. He did so very slowly, whether because of infirmity or out of showmanship was not clear, until he was crouching, the first suitcase still held on one shoulder, his free arm reaching for the handle of the suitcase at his feet. Then steadily, slowly, as the clapping continued, he raised himself again to a standing position, the heavier suitcase coming up with him.

Gustav was now mimicking enormous effort - much as the bearded porter had done earlier when he had first caught the cardboard box. Boris watched, pride welling inside him, turning occasionally from his grandfather to look at the admiring faces of the spectators pressing in around him. Even the gypsy musicians were now jockeying for a better view, employing the vigorous movement of their bowing elbows as a covert means to jostle. One fiddler had by this method made his way right to the front, so that he was now playing his violin leaning right over the table, his waist pressed against its edge.

Then Gustav again began to shuffle his feet. The weight of the two suitcases, particularly the one filled with the chopping boards which he did not attempt to hoist onto his shoulder - surely a physical impossibility - meant his steps now had only a nominal spring to them, but it was impressive nevertheless and the crowd became ecstatic. 'Good old Gustav!' the cries were going up again, and Boris too, unfamiliar though he was with this way of addressing his grandfather, called out at the top of his voice: 'Good old Gustav! Good old Gustav!'

Again the old porter appeared to hear Boris's voice above the rest and although this time he did not turn and acknowledge the little boy - he was pretending to be much

too concerned with his suitcases to do such a thing - a fresh jauntiness entered his movements. He started again to rotate slowly and his back lost the last hint of a slouch. For a moment Gustav looked magnificent, poised like a statue on the table top, one suitcase on his shoulder, the other at his hip, rotating to the clapping and the music. Then he appeared to stumble, but recovered almost immediately, and the crowd gave an 'ooh!' and more laughter at this little variation.

Then Boris became aware of some commotion behind him and saw that the two waiters were back, once more fussing with something on the floor, pushing back people around them to make room for their work. Both men were on their knees and were grappling with what looked like a large golfing bag. Their manner was cross and impatient - perhaps they were annoyed at the way the people pressing around them seemed forever to bump their knees into them. Boris glanced back at his grandfather, and then, when he looked again behind him, saw one of the waiters holding open the mouth of the bag as though something large was about to be slid into it. Sure enough, the other waiter emerged through the crowd, walking backwards, pushing people aside brusquely, dragging some object along the floor. Squeezing a little way back into the crowd, Boris saw that the object was a piece of machinery. It was hard to get a view - people's legs were in the way - but the object was an old engine of some kind, either from a motor bike or perhaps a speedboat. The two waiters were working hard to get it into the golfing bag, pulling at the already taut material, tugging at the zipper. Looking up again, Boris saw that his grandfather was still in full control of the two suitcases, showing no sign of needing to stop. The crowd, in any case, had no intention of letting him do so yet. And then there was a movement around him and the two waiters had heaved the golfing bag up onto the table.

There was for a moment a rise in the hubbub as word of the bag's arrival passed from the front to those further

back. Gustav did not notice the golfing bag immediately because his eyes were for the moment tightly shut in concentration, but soon enough the urgings of the crowd made him look around. His gaze fixed on the golfing bag and for a second Gustav looked very serious. Then he smiled and continued to rotate slowly. Then as before, though with nothing like the ease, he slid the lighter of the suitcases off his shoulder and down his arm. As it fell, Gustav, with a supreme effort, managed to push up his arm so that the suitcase was hoisted up towards the crowd. Being much heavier than the empty box, it could hardly describe a neat arc, and it bounced on the table top before falling into the arms of the porters at the front. The first suitcase, like the box earlier, vanished into the crowd, and all eyes were again fixed on Gustav. The chanting of his name started up again and the old man looked carefully at the golfing bag near his feet. The momentary relief of carrying only the one object - albeit the suitcase filled with chopping boards - seemed to give him new energy. He pulled a long face and shook his head doubtfully at the golfing bag, prompting the crowd to urge him on all the more. 'Come on, Gustav, you show them!' Boris could hear the porter next to him shouting.

Gustav then began to raise the heavy suitcase up to the shoulder on which earlier he had held the lighter one. He did this with deliberation, his eyes closed, crouched down on one knee, then slowly straightening. His legs quivered once or twice, and then he stood steady, the suitcase safely on his shoulder, his free arm outstretched towards the golfing bag. Suddenly a fear went through Boris and he shouted: 'No!' but this was drowned out in the chanting and the laughter, the 'oohs' and sighs of the crowd around him.

'Come on, Gustav!' the porter next to him was shouting. 'Show them what you can do! You show them!'

'No! No! Grandfather! Grandfather!'

‘Good old Gustav!’ voices were shouting. ‘Come on! Show them what you can do!’

‘Grandfather! Grandfather!’ Boris was now stretching his arms out across the table to catch his grandfather’s attention, but Gustav’s face remained grim with concentration, staring with enormous intensity at the strap of the golfing bag lying on the table surface. Then the elderly porter began to lower himself again, his whole body trembling under the weight of the suitcase on his shoulder, his hand grasping prematurely for the strap still some distance below him. There was a new tension in the room, a feeling perhaps that Gustav was at last attempting a feat that stretched even his abilities. The atmosphere, for all that, remained festive, the chanting of his name celebratory.

Boris searched appealingly the faces of the adults around him, then tugged at the arm of the porter next to him.

‘No! No! That’s enough. Grandfather’s done enough!’

The bearded porter - for it was he - looked at the little boy with surprise, then said with a laugh: ‘Don’t worry, don’t worry. Your grandfather’s magnificent. He can do this and much more. Much more. He’s magnificent.’

‘No! Grandfather’s done enough now!’

But no one, not even the bearded porter - who had placed a reassuring arm around Boris’s shoulder - was listening. For Gustav was now crouched virtually down to the table, his hand only an inch or two from the strap of the golfing bag. Then he had grasped it and, with his body still crouched low, positioned the strap around his free shoulder. He tugged the strap closer to himself and then began once more the ascent to a standing position. Boris shouted and banged the table top, then at last Gustav noticed him. His grandfather had already started to straighten his legs, but he stopped and for a second the two of them stared at each other.

‘No.’ Boris shook his head. ‘No. Grandfather’s done enough.’

Perhaps Gustav could not hear in all the noise, but he appeared to understand his grandson’s sentiments well enough. He nodded quickly, a reassuring smile flashed across his face, and then his eyes closed again in concentration.

‘No! No! Grandfather!’ Boris tugged again the bearded porter’s arm.

‘What’s the matter?’ the bearded porter asked, tears of laughter in his eyes. Then, without waiting for a reply, he turned his attention back to Gustav, joining in more loudly than ever with the chanting.

Gustav continued slowly to straighten himself. Once, twice, his body shook as though it might buckle. His face became strangely flushed. His jaw clenched furiously, his cheeks grew distorted, the muscles on his neck stood out. Even in the heavy din, the elderly porter’s breathing seemed audible. Yet no one other than Boris seemed to notice any of this.

‘Don’t worry, your grandfather’s magnificent!’ the bearded man said. ‘This is nothing! He does it every week!’

Gustav continued to straighten more and more, the golfing bag hanging from one shoulder, the suitcase hoisted up on the other. Then at last he was standing completely straight, his face quivering but triumphant, and for the first time in many minutes the rhythmic clapping broke down into wild applause and cheering. The fiddles too broke into a slower, grander melody befitting a finale. Gustav rotated slowly, his eyes barely open, his face a contortion of pain and dignity.

‘That’s enough! Grandfather! Stop! Stop!’

Gustav went on turning, determined to display his achievement to every eye in the room. Then something inside him seemed suddenly to snap. He paused abruptly, and for a

second seemed to rock gently, swaying as though in a breeze. The next instant he had recovered again and was continuing with his rotation. When he had come back to exactly the position in which he had first stood upright, only then did he begin to lower the suitcase from his shoulder. He let it fall to the table with a loud slam - it was too heavy, he had judged, to throw into the crowd without risk of injury to a spectator - then pushed it with his foot until it slid off the edge of the table into the arms of his waiting colleagues.

The crowd was now cheering and applauding, and then a section of it started to sing a song - some swaying ballad with Hungarian lyrics - along with the tune the gypsies were playing. More and more took up the song and very soon the whole room was singing. Up on the table, Gustav was lowering the golfing bag. It fell to the table with a metallic bang. This time he did not attempt to push it into the crowd, but held his arms aloft for a second - even this gesture now seemed to cost him greatly - then hastened to get down from the table. Numerous hands assisted him, and Boris watched his grandfather lower himself safely to the floor.

The room seemed now to have become preoccupied with the singing. The ballad had a sweet nostalgic quality to it, and as they sang people everywhere were starting to link arms so they could sway along together. One of the gypsy fiddlers climbed onto the table, to be quickly joined by a second, and soon the two of them were leading the whole room, moving their bodies in time even as they played their instruments.

Boris pushed through the crowd to where his grandfather was standing recovering his breath. Oddly, although Gustav had only a few seconds before been the focus of every gaze in the room, no one seemed now to pay much attention as grandfather and grandson embraced deeply, their eyes closed, making no attempt to hide from each other their immense relief. After what seemed a long time, Gustav smiled down at

Boris, but the little boy went on holding his grandfather tightly, not opening his eyes.

‘Boris,’ Gustav said. ‘Boris. There’s something you must promise me.’

The little boy gave no response other than to continue holding his grandfather.

‘Boris, listen. You’re a good boy. If something ever happens to me, if something ever does, you’ll have to take my place. You see, your mother and father, they’re fine people. But sometimes they find it hard. They’re not strong like you and me. So you see, if something happens to me, and I’m no longer here, you must be the strong one. You must look after your mother and father, keep the family strong, keep it together.’ Gustav released Boris from the embrace and gave him a smile. ‘You’ll promise me that, won’t you, Boris?’

Boris appeared to give this consideration, then nodded seriously. Then, the next moment, they seemed to become engulfed by the crowd and I could no longer see them. Someone was pulling at my sleeve, imploring me to link arms and join in the singing.

Looking around me, I saw that the other fiddlers had joined the two up on the table and the entire room appeared to be revolving around them united in song. Many more people had come into the café and the room was now virtually solid with bodies. I saw too that the doors were still open to the square, and that in the darkness outside people were also swaying and singing. I linked arms with a large man - a porter as far as I could guess - and a fat woman who presumably had walked in off the square, and found myself going round the room with them on either side of me. I was not familiar with the song being sung, but then I came to realise that most people present did not know the lyrics either, or have any familiarity with the Hungarian language, and were simply singing vague approximations of what they imagined the words to be. The man and woman on either side of

me, for instance, were singing quite different things, both entirely without embarrassment or hesitation. Indeed, a moment's attention revealed they were both singing nonsense words, but this seemed to matter little, and before long I too became caught up in the atmosphere and began to sing, making up words I thought sounded vaguely Hungarian. For some reason, this worked surprisingly well - I found more and more such words pouring out of me with gratifying ease - and before long I was singing with considerable emotion.

Eventually, perhaps twenty minutes later, I saw the crowd was at last starting to thin. I could see too the waiters sweeping up and returning tables to their original positions around the café. There was however a sizeable group of us still circling the room, arms linked together, singing passionately. The gypsies also had remained up on the table, displaying no signs of wishing to stop their playing. As I went around the room, carried along by the gentle tugs and pushes of my companions, I felt someone tapping me and looked over my shoulder to find the man I assumed was the café proprietor smiling at me. He was a lanky man and as I continued to sway along he obligingly kept up with me, adopting a crouched shuffle somewhat reminiscent of Groucho Marx.

'Mr Ryder, you look very tired.' He was shouting virtually in my ear, but I could still only just hear him above the singing. 'And you have such a long and important evening in front of you. Please, why don't you rest for a few minutes? We have a comfortable back room, my wife has prepared the couch with some blankets and cushions, she's turned on the gas fire. You'll find it very comfortable. You could just curl up and sleep for a while. The room's small, that's true, but it's right at the back and very quiet. No one will come in and disturb you, we'll make sure of that. You'll find it very comfortable. Really, sir, I think you should take advantage of the little time you now have before

the evening really begins. Please, come this way. You look so tired. '

As much as I was enjoying the singing and the company, I realised I was indeed immensely tired and that there was much sense in his suggestion. In fact the idea of a short rest appealed to me more and more, and as the proprietor continued to shuffle after me with a smile, I began to feel a deep gratitude towards him, not only for this kind offer, but also for having provided the facilities of this wonderful café, and for his generosity towards the porters - an obviously under-appreciated group within the community. I unlinked my arms, smiling my farewells to the people on either side, and then the proprietor had placed a hand on my shoulder and was guiding me towards a door at the back of the café.

He led me through a darkened room - I could make out stacks of merchandise piled up against the walls - and then opened another door through which a low warm light was visible.

'Here,' the proprietor said, ushering me in. 'Just relax here on the couch. Keep this door closed, and if it gets too warm just turn the gas fire down to the lower setting. Don't worry, it's perfectly safe.'

The fire was the only source of light in the room. In the orange glow I discerned the couch, which smelt musty but not unpleasant, and then before I realised it the door had closed, leaving me alone. I climbed onto the couch, which was just long enough for me to lie down on provided I curled my knees, and pulled up the blanket the proprietor's wife had left out for me.

IV

I awoke with the panicky sense that I had slept far too long. In fact my first thought was that it was now morning and that I had missed the whole of the evening's proceedings. But when I sat up on the couch I saw that apart from the glow of the gas fire everything around me was still dark.

I went to the window and pulled back the curtain. I found myself looking down on a narrow back yard taken up by several large dustbins. A light left on somewhere was dimly illuminating the yard, but I noticed too that the sky was no longer entirely dark and the fear went through me again that dawn was approaching. Letting go of the curtain, I began to make my way out of the room, bitterly regretting having ever taken up the café proprietor's offer of a place to rest.

I stepped into the small connecting room where earlier I had seen merchandise piled against the walls. The room was now in utter blackness and I twice bumped into hard objects as I groped about for a doorway. Eventually I came out into the main section of the café where not so long ago we had all danced and sung with so much good feeling. A little light was coming in from the windows facing the square and I could make out the jumbled shapes of chairs piled on top of tables. I made my way past them, and reaching the main doors looked out through the glass panels.

Nothing was stirring outside. The solitary street lamp at the centre of the empty square accounted for the light coming into the café, but I noticed again how the sky appeared to carry the first hints of morning. As I went on gazing out at the square, I found myself becoming increasingly angry. I could now see how I had allowed too many things to distract me from my central priorities - to the extent that I had now slept through a substantial part of this most crucial of

evenings in my life. Then my anger became mingled with a sense of despair and for a while I felt close to tears.

But then, as I continued to look at the night sky, I began to wonder if I had imagined the signs of dawn breaking. Indeed, now that I studied it more carefully, I saw the sky was still very dark, and the thought struck me that it was still relatively early and that I had begun to panic quite needlessly. For all I knew, it was still possible to arrive at the concert hall in time to witness much of the evening's events, and certainly to make my own contribution.

I had all the while been absent-mindedly rattling the doors. I now noticed the system of bolts and, unlatching each in turn, wandered out into the square.

The air felt wonderfully refreshing after the stuffiness of the café, and had I not been so short of time I would have strolled about the square for a few moments to clear my head. As it was, I set off purposefully in search of the concert hall.

For the next several minutes I hurried through the empty streets, past the closed cafés and shops, without once catching sight of the domed roof. The Old Town under the street lamps had a distinct charm about it, but the longer I went on walking the harder it became to suppress a sense of panic. I had expected, not unreasonably, to encounter a few taxis cruising the night; at the least a few people, perhaps drifting out of some late-night establishment, from whom I could get directions. But apart from some stray cats I appeared to be the only thing awake for miles around.

I crossed a tram line, then found myself walking along the embankment of a canal. There was a chilly wind blowing across the water and, with still no sign of the concert hall, I could not avoid the feeling that I was getting myself thoroughly lost. I had decided to try a turning a little way in front of me - a narrow street going off at a fine angle

- when I heard footsteps and saw a woman emerge from out of it.

I had grown so accustomed to the idea of the streets being completely deserted that I stopped in my tracks at the sight of her. My surprise had been compounded, moreover, by the fact that she was dressed in a flowing evening gown. The woman for her part had also stopped, but she seemed then to recognise me and with a smile started towards me again. As she stepped further into the lamplight, I saw she was in her late forties, perhaps even her early fifties. She was slightly plump, but carried herself with considerable grace.

‘Good evening, madam,’ I said. ‘I wonder if you might help me. I was looking for the concert hall. Am I going in the right direction?’

The woman had now come right up to me. Smiling again, she said:

‘No, actually it’s over that way. I’ve just come from it. I was walking to take the air, but I’ll gladly guide you back there, Mr Ryder. If you don’t object, that is.’

‘It would be a great pleasure, madam. But I don’t want to cut short your walk.’

‘No, no. I’ve already been walking for nearly an hour. It’s time I got back. I should really have waited and arrived with all the other guests. But I had this foolish notion I should be there through all the preparations, just in case I was needed. Of course, there’s nothing for me to do. Mr Ryder, please excuse me, I’ve not introduced myself. I’m Christine Hoffman. My husband is the manager of your hotel.’

‘I’m delighted to meet you, Mrs Hoffman. Your husband has told me a great deal about you.’

I regretted this remark as soon as it had left my mouth. I glanced quickly at Mrs Hoffman, but could no longer see her face clearly in the light.

‘It’s this way, Mr Ryder,’ she said. ‘It’s not far.’

The sleeves of her evening dress billowed as we started to walk. I coughed and said:

‘May I take it, from what you say, Mrs Hoffman, that proceedings are not yet fully under way at the concert hall? That the guests and so on, they’ve not yet all arrived?’

‘The guests? Oh no. I shouldn’t imagine any guests will arrive for at least another hour.’

‘Ah. Fine.’

We continued at an easy pace along the canal, both of us turning from time to time to gaze at the reflection of the lamps in the water.

‘I was wondering, Mr Ryder,’ she said eventually, ‘if my husband, when he spoke about me, if he left you with the impression that I was ... a rather cold person. I wonder if he left you with that impression.’

I gave a short laugh. ‘The overwhelming impression he left me with, Mrs Hoffman, was that he’s extremely devoted to you.’

She continued to walk in silence and I was not sure she had registered my reply. After a while she said:

‘When I was young, Mr Ryder, no one would ever have thought to describe me in such a way. As a cold person. Certainly when I was a child, I was anything but cold. Even now, I can’t think of myself like that.’

I mumbled something vaguely diplomatic. Then, as we turned away from the canal into a narrow side-street, I saw at last the domed roof of the concert hall illuminated against the night sky.

‘Even these days,’ Mrs Hoffman said beside me, ‘early in the morning, I have these dreams. Always early in the morning. The dreams are always about ... about tenderness.’

Nothing much happens in them, they're usually no more than little fragments. I might be watching my son, Stephan, for instance. Watching him play in the garden. We were very close once, Mr Ryder, when he was small. I'd comfort him, share his little triumphs with him. We were so close when he was small. Or sometimes a dream might be about my husband. The other morning, I dreamt my husband and I were unpacking a suitcase together. We were in some bedroom and we were unpacking it onto the bed. We might have been in an hotel room abroad or perhaps we were at home. In any case, we were unpacking this suitcase together and there was this ... this comfortable feeling between us. There we were, performing this task together. He'd take something out, then I'd take something out. Talking all the time, about nothing special, just exchanging conversation while we unpacked. It was only the morning before last, I had this dream. Then I woke up and I lay there looking at the dawn through the curtains, feeling very happy. I said to myself, it might soon *really* be like that. Later that very day, even, we would make a moment just like that one. We wouldn't necessarily unpack a suitcase, of course. But something, we'd do something later in the day, there'd be *some* chance. I fell asleep again, telling myself this, feeling very happy. Then the morning came. It's an odd thing, Mr Ryder, it happens like this every time. As soon as the day starts, this other thing, this *force*, it comes and takes over. And whatever I do, everything between us just goes another way, not the way I want it. I fight against it, Mr Ryder, but over the years I've steadily lost ground. It's something that's ... that's happening to me. My husband tries very hard, tries to help me, but it's no use. By the time I go down to breakfast, all the things I felt in the dream, they've long since gone.'

Some parked cars on the pavement obliged us to walk in single file and Mrs Hoffman moved a few steps ahead of me. When I drew up alongside her again, I asked:

'What do you suppose it is? This force you talk of?'

She laughed suddenly. 'I didn't mean it to sound quite so supernatural, Mr Ryder. Of course, the obvious answer would be that it's all to do with Mr Christoff. That's what I believed for some time. Certainly, that's what my husband believes, I know. Like many people in this city I thought it simply a matter of replacing Mr Christoff in our affections with someone more substantial. But lately I'm not at all sure. I'm coming to believe it might be to do with me. A sort of illness I have. It might even be part of the ageing process. After all, we get older and parts of us start to die. Perhaps we start to die emotionally too. Do you think that's possible, Mr Ryder? I do fear it, I do fear that might be the truth of it. That we shall see off Mr Christoff, only to find, in my particular case at least, that nothing has changed.'

We turned another corner. The pavements were very narrow and we moved into the centre of the street. I had the impression she was waiting for my response, and said eventually:

'Mrs Hoffman, in my opinion, whatever the facts about the ageing process, I would say it's essential for you to keep up your spirits. To not give in to this ... whatever it is.'

Mrs Hoffman looked up at the night sky and walked on for a while without replying. Then she said: 'These lovely dreams in the early morning. When the day starts and none of it happens, I often blame myself bitterly. But I assure you, I haven't given up yet, Mr Ryder. If I gave up, there'd be very little left in my life. I refuse just yet to let go of my dreams. I still want one day a warm and close family. But it's not just that, Mr Ryder. You see, I may be quite silly in believing this, perhaps you can tell me if I am. But one day, you see, I hope to catch it out, this whatever it is. I hope to catch it out and then it won't matter, all these years it's been steadily working on me, they'll all be wiped away. I have this feeling, that all it will take will be one

moment, even a *tiny* moment, provided it's the correct one. Like a cord suddenly snapping and a thick curtain dropping to the floor to reveal a whole new world, a world full of sunlight and warmth. Mr Ryder, you look utterly incredulous. Am I completely mad to believe this? That despite all these years, just one moment, the right moment, will change it all?'

What she had taken for incredulity had been nothing of the sort. Rather, while she had been speaking, I had remembered about Stephan's forthcoming recital and no doubt my excitement had made itself obvious. I now said, perhaps a little eagerly:

'Mrs Hoffman, I don't wish to raise any false hopes. But it's possible, just possible, you'll experience something very soon, something that might well be such a moment, exactly of the sort you talk of. It's just possible you'll encounter such a moment in the very near future. Something that will surprise you, force you to re-assess everything and see everything in a better, fresher light. Something that will indeed wipe away all these bad years. I don't wish to raise false hopes, I'm merely saying it's possible. Such a moment might even occur tonight, so it's essential you keep up your spirits.'

I stopped myself, the thought striking me that I was tempting fate. After all, although I had been impressed by the snatch of Stephan's playing I had caught, for all I knew the young man was perfectly capable of crumbling under pressure. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more I regretted having intimated as much as I had. When I looked at Mrs Hoffman, however, I noticed my words had neither surprised nor excited her. After a few moments she said:

'When you found me wandering these streets just now, Mr Ryder, I wasn't simply taking the air as I pretended. I was trying to prepare myself. Because the possibility you mention, it naturally did occur to me. A night like tonight.'

Yes, many things are possible. So I was preparing myself. And I don't mind confessing to you, I am at this moment a little frightened. Because you see, just occasionally in the past, such moments have come and I've not been strong enough to seize them. Who knows how many more such chances there will be? So you see, Mr Ryder, I was doing my best to prepare myself. Ah, here we are. This is the rear of the building. This entrance will take you into the kitchens. I'll show you to the performers' entrance. I won't come in myself just yet. I think I need to take a little more air. '

'I'm very glad to have met you, Mrs Hoffman. It's kind of you to have shown me here at such a time for you. I do hope everything goes well for you tonight. '

'Thank you, Mr Ryder. And you too, you have a lot to think about, I'm sure. It's been delightful to meet you. '

As Mrs Hoffman disappeared into the night, I turned and hurried towards the doorway she had indicated. I did so telling myself that I should heed fully the lesson of the false alarm I had just experienced; that it was imperative I did not let anything further deflect me from the crucial tasks in front of me. In fact, at this moment, on the point at last of entering the concert hall building, everything seemed suddenly very simple to me. The fact of the matter was that finally, after all these years, I was about to perform once more before my parents. The priority above all else, then, was to ensure that my performance was the richest, the most overwhelming of which I was capable. By comparison, even the question-and-answer session was a secondary consideration. All the setbacks, all the chaos of the preceding days would prove to have been of no consequence whatsoever provided I could now achieve, on this evening, my one central objective.

The broad white door was dimly illuminated from above by a single night light. I had to lean my weight on it before it would open and I entered the building with a slight stumble.

Although Mrs Hoffman had been confident this was the performers' entrance, my immediate impression was that I had come in through the kitchens after all. I was in a wide bare corridor lit harshly with fluorescent ceiling strips. From all around came the sound of voices calling and shouting, the clanging of heavy metallic objects, the hissing of water and steam. Directly in front of me was a catering trolley beside which two men in uniforms were arguing furiously. One man was holding a long piece of paper which had unrolled almost to his feet, and was repeatedly thrusting his finger at it. I thought about interrupting them to ask where I might find

Hoffman - my first concern now being to carry out an inspection of the auditorium, and of the piano itself, before the public began to arrive - but they seemed lost in their argument and I decided to walk on.

The corridor curved gradually. I encountered a good many people, but they all seemed very busy and somewhat fraught. Most of them, dressed in white uniforms, were hurrying with distracted expressions, carrying heavy sacks or else pushing trolleys. I did not feel inclined to stop any of them and carried on down the corridor assuming I would eventually reach some other section of the building where I would find the dressing rooms - and hopefully Hoffman or someone else who could show me the facilities. But then I realised a voice behind me was calling my name and turned to find a man running after me. He looked familiar, and then I recognised the bearded porter who had opened the dancing at the café earlier in the evening.

‘Mr Ryder,’ he said panting, ‘thank God I’ve found you at last. This is the third time I’ve gone round the building. He’s holding out well, but we’re all anxious to get him to hospital and he’s still insisting on not budging until he’s spoken to you. Please, it’s this way, sir. He’s holding out well, though, God bless him.’

‘Who’s holding out well? What’s happened?’

‘It’s this way, sir. We’d better go quickly, if you don’t mind. I’m sorry, Mr Ryder, I’m not explaining anything. It’s Gustav, he’s been taken ill. I wasn’t here myself when it happened, but a couple of the boys, Wilhelm and Hubert, they were working here with him, helping with the preparations, and they sent out the word. Of course as soon as I heard I sped over here and so did all the other boys. Apparently Gustav had been working very well, but then he went to the washroom and didn’t come out for a long time. This not being at all like Gustav, Wilhelm went in and had a look. It seems, sir, when he went in, Gustav was standing

over a sink, his head bowed over it. He wasn't so ill at that stage, he told Wilhelm he felt a bit giddy, that was all, and not to make a fuss. Wilhelm being Wilhelm, he wasn't sure what to do, especially with Gustav saying not to make a fuss, and so he went and got Hubert. Hubert took one look and decided Gustav had to lie down somewhere. So they got on either side of him to help him, and that's when they realised he'd passed out, still on his feet, gripping the sink. He was gripping the edges, really gripping them, and Wilhelm says they had to prise off his fingers one by one. Then Gustav seemed to come to a bit and they each took an arm and brought him out of there. And Gustav, he was saying again how he didn't want any fuss, how he was all right and could carry on working. But Hubert wouldn't hear of it and they put him in one of the dressing rooms, one of the empty ones.'

He had been leading the way down the corridor at a considerable pace, talking all the time over his shoulder, but now broke off as we dodged past a trolley.

'This is all very disturbing,' I said. 'Exactly when did this all happen?'

'I suppose it must have been a couple of hours ago. He didn't seem so bad at first and insisted all he needed was a few minutes to get his breath back. But Hubert was worried and sent out the word and we were all round here in no time, every one of us. We found a mattress for him to lie on, and a blanket, but then he seemed to get worse and we all talked about it and said he should get proper help. But Gustav wouldn't hear of it, he suddenly got very determined and said he had to speak to you, sir. He was very insistent, he said he'd go along to hospital soon enough if that's what we decided, but not before he'd spoken with you. And there he was getting worse right before our eyes. But there was no reasoning with him, sir, and so we went out searching for you again. Thank God I found you. It's this one here, the one on the end.'

I had imagined the corridor to be a continuous circuit, but I now saw that it came to an end at a cream-coloured wall ahead of us. The last door before the wall was ajar and, stopping at the threshold, the bearded porter peered cautiously into the room. Then he gestured to me and I stepped in after him.

There were a dozen or so people just inside the doorway who all turned to us, then hastily stood aside. I supposed these to be the other porters, but I did not pause to look at them carefully, my gaze being drawn to Gustav's figure on the other side of the small room.

He was lying on a mattress across the tiled floor, a blanket over his body. One of the porters was squatting down beside him saying something softly, but on seeing me stood up. Then within a moment the room had emptied, the door had closed behind me and I was alone with Gustav.

The small dressing room contained no furniture, not even a wooden chair. It was windowless and, though the ventilation grid near the ceiling was emitting a low hum, the air felt stale. The floor felt cold and hard, and the overhead light had either been extinguished or was not working, leaving the bulbs around the make-up mirror as our only source of light. I could see well enough, though, how Gustav's face had gone an odd grey colour. He was lying on his back, quite still except when every now and then some wave passed over him causing him to press his head back deeper into the mattress. He had smiled at me the moment I had entered, but had said nothing, no doubt saving himself for when we were alone. He now said, in a voice that was weak, but otherwise surprisingly composed:

'I'm very sorry, sir, to have dragged you here like this. It's most galling this should have happened, and tonight of all nights. Just when you're about to do your great favour for us.'

‘Yes, yes,’ I said quickly, ‘but look here. How are you feeling?’ I crouched down beside him.

‘I don’t suppose I’m so well. And in time I think I ought to go along to the hospital and have a few things checked out.’

He paused as another wave swept over him, and for a few seconds a quiet struggle ensued there on the mattress during which time the elderly porter closed his eyes. Then he opened them again and said:

‘I had to speak to you, sir. There was something I had to speak to you about.’

‘Please, let me assure you at once,’ I said, ‘that I remain as committed as ever to your cause. In fact, I’m very much looking forward to demonstrating to all the assembled tonight the unfairness of the treatment you and your colleagues have endured over the years. I fully intend to highlight the many misunderstandings ...’

I stopped, realising he was making an effort to attract my attention.

‘I didn’t doubt for a minute, sir,’ he said after a pause, ‘you’d be as good as your word. I’m very grateful to you for standing up for us like this. But it was about something else I wished to speak to you.’ He paused again and another silent struggle commenced under the blanket.

‘Really,’ I said, ‘I wonder if it wouldn’t be wise to go straight away to the hospital ...’

‘No, no. Please. Once I go to hospital, well, then it might all be too late. You see, it’s really time now I spoke to her. To Sophie, I mean. I really must speak to her. I know you’re very busy tonight, but you see, no one else knows. About the situation between me and Sophie, about our *understanding*. I know it’s a lot to ask, sir, but I wondered

if you might go and explain things to her. There's no one else who could do it.'

'I'm sorry,' I said, genuinely puzzled. 'Explain what exactly?'

'Explain to her, sir. Why our understanding ... why it has to finish now. It won't be easy to persuade her of it, after all these years. But if you could try and make her see why we have to try and end it now. I realise it's a lot to ask of you, but then it's a little while yet until you're expected on the stage. And as I say, you're the only one who knows ...'

He trailed off as another wave of pain engulfed him. I could sense all his muscles bracing themselves under the blanket, but this time he continued to gaze at me, somehow keeping his eyes open even as his whole frame shook. When his body had slackened again, I said:

'It's true, there's a little time yet until I'm required. Very well, I'll go and see what I can do. I'll try and make her understand. In any case, I'll bring her here as quickly as possible. But let's hope you'll recover very soon and the present situation will prove to have been not as crucial as you feared ...'

'Sir, please. I'd be very grateful if you'd bring her here quickly. Meanwhile I'll of course do all I can to hold out ...'

'Yes, yes, I'll set off straight away. Please be patient, I'll be as fast as I can.'

I rose to my feet and started for the door. I had almost reached it when a thought occurred to me and, turning, I made my way back to the figure on the floor.

'Boris,' I said to him, crouching down again. 'What about Boris? Should I bring him here too?'

Gustav looked up at me, then took a deep breath and closed his eyes. When he had not spoken for some moments, I said:

‘Perhaps it’s best he doesn’t see you in this ... this present condition.’

I thought I saw the faintest of nods, but Gustav remained silent, his eyes still closed.

‘After all,’ I went on, ‘he has a certain picture of you. Perhaps you’ll want him to remember you that way.’

This time Gustav nodded more definitely.

‘I just thought I should ask you,’ I said, rising to my feet again. ‘Very well. I’ll bring just Sophie here. I won’t be long.’

I had reached the door again - I was already turning the handle - when he suddenly shouted behind me:

‘Mr Ryder!’

Not only had he called surprisingly loudly, his voice had contained such a peculiar intensity I could hardly believe it had emerged from Gustav. And yet when I looked back at him, his eyes were again closed and he seemed quite still. I hurried to him once more with some apprehension. But then Gustav opened his eyes and looked up at me.

‘You must bring Boris too,’ he said very quietly. ‘He’s not so small now. Let him see me like this. He has to learn about life. Face up to it.’

The eyes closed again and as his features tightened I thought he was suffering another fit of pain. But this time there was something different, and as I looked down in concern I realised that the old man was crying. I continued to watch for a moment, not sure what to do. Finally I touched his shoulder gently.

‘I’ll be as quick as I can,’ I whispered.

When I came out of the dressing room, the other porters, who were all crowded near the doorway, turned to me with anxious looks. I pushed my way past them, saying firmly:

‘Please keep a careful watch on him, gentlemen. I have to carry out an urgent request and so you’ll have to excuse me for the moment.’

Someone started to ask a question, but I hurried on without stopping.

My plan was to find Hoffman and insist on being driven immediately to Sophie’s apartment. But then, as I continued briskly along the corridor, I realised I had no idea where to look for the hotel manager. Moreover, the corridor itself had taken on a very different aspect from the time I had come down it with the bearded porter. There were still a few catering trolleys being pushed about, but it had now become overwhelmingly dominated by persons I could only suppose were members of the visiting orchestra. Long rows of dressing rooms had appeared on either side of me, many with their doors open, and the musicians were standing about in twos and threes, chatting and laughing, sometimes calling across the corridor to one another. Occasionally I would pass a closed door from behind which came the sounds of some instrument, but on the whole their mood struck me as surprisingly frivolous. I was about to stop and ask one of them where I might find Hoffman when I suddenly caught sight of the hotel manager himself through the half-open door of a dressing room. I went up to it and pushed it a little further.

Hoffman was standing before a full-length mirror, studying himself carefully. He was in full evening dress and his face, I noticed, had been made up excessively so that some of the powder had fallen onto his shoulders and lapels. He was muttering something under his breath, never taking his gaze off his reflection. Then, as I continued to watch from the door, he performed a curious action. Bending forward suddenly at the waist, he brought his arm up very stiffly so

that the elbow was jutting outwards, and thumped himself on the forehead with his fist - once, twice, three times. Throughout it all he did not take his eyes off the mirror or cease his whispering. Then he straightened and looked at himself silently. It occurred to me he was about to repeat the whole action again and so I quickly cleared my throat and said:

‘Mr Hoffman.’

He started and stared at me.

‘I’ve disturbed you,’ I said. ‘I do apologise.’

Hoffman looked around him in a bewildered manner, then seemed to regain his composure.

‘Mr Ryder,’ he said with a smile. ‘How are you feeling? I trust you’re finding everything here to your satisfaction.’

‘Mr Hoffman, something of great urgency has come up. What I need just now is a car to take me to my destination as quickly as possible. I wonder if this could be arranged without delay.’

‘A car, Mr Ryder? Now?’

‘It’s a matter of the utmost urgency. Of course I intend to return here very promptly, in plenty of time to fulfil my various commitments.’

‘Yes, yes, of course.’ Hoffman looked vaguely troubled.

‘A car should be no problem at all. Of course, Mr Ryder, in normal circumstances I could have provided you also with a driver, or else I would have gladly driven you myself. Unfortunately, just at this moment, my staff have their hands very full. And as for myself, I have so many things to see to, as well as a few modest lines to rehearse. Ha ha! As you know, I will be making a short speech myself tonight. And as trivial as it undoubtedly will seem alongside your own contribution, and indeed, that of our Mr Brodsky, who

incidentally is a little late, I feel nevertheless I must prepare myself the best I can. Yes, yes, Mr Brodsky is a little late, it's true, but there's nothing to worry about. In fact, this is his dressing room, I was just checking it over. A perfectly good dressing room. I'm fully confident he'll be here at any moment. As you know, Mr Ryder, I personally have been overseeing Mr Brodsky's, er, recovery, and what a satisfying thing it has been to witness. Such motivation, such dignity! So much so that tonight, on this crucial night, I have utter confidence. Oh yes. Utter confidence! Indeed, a relapse at this stage, that would be unthinkable. A disaster for this whole city! And naturally a personal disaster for me. Of course this is the most trivial of concerns, but nevertheless, you'll forgive me, let me say it, for myself, a relapse on this crucial night, at this point, ah yes, for me it would mark the end. On the very brink of triumph, it would be my finish. A humiliating finish! I could look no one in this town in the face again. I would have to hide. Ha! But what am I doing, talking of such improbable scenarios? I have utter confidence in Mr Brodsky. He will be here.'

'Yes, I'm sure he will be, Mr Hoffman,' I said. 'In fact, I'm sure this whole occasion tonight will be a fine success ...'

'Yes, yes, I know it!' he shouted impatiently. 'I hardly need reassurance on such a point! I wouldn't have even mentioned it at all, after all there's plenty of time yet until things get started, I wouldn't have mentioned it at all if it wasn't for ... for the occurrences earlier tonight.'

'Occurrences?'

'Yes, yes. Ah, you haven't heard. How could you have done? There's nothing much to it, sir. A certain sequence of events took place earlier this evening, and as a consequence, when I last left Mr Brodsky a few hours ago, he was sipping a small glass of whisky. No, no, sir! I can see what you're

thinking. No, no! He consulted me fully. And after some consideration I relented, coming to the view that in these very special circumstances, a small glass would do no harm. I judged it best, sir. Perhaps I was wrong, we shall see. Personally, I do not think so. Of course, if I did make the wrong decision, then this whole evening - pugh! - a catastrophe from start to finish! I will be forced to hide for the rest of my life. But the fact is, sir, things became very complicated this evening and I was obliged to make a decision. In any case, the upshot of it all is that I left Mr Brodsky at his home with his small glass of whisky. I am confident he will stop at that. My only thought now is that I should perhaps have done something about that cupboard. But then again, I'm sure I'm being over-cautious. After all, Mr Brodsky has made such progress, he can surely be trusted absolutely, absolutely.' He had been fiddling with his bow tie and he now turned to the mirror to adjust it.

'Mr Hoffman,' I said, 'what exactly has happened? If something has happened to Mr Brodsky, or if anything else has occurred that's likely to alter the overall picture in any way, then surely I should be informed of it straight away. Surely you'll agree with me, Mr Hoffman.'

The hotel manager gave a laugh. 'Mr Ryder, you have entirely the wrong idea. There's no need for you to worry in the least. Look here, am I worried? No. My entire reputation rests on this evening, and yet am I not calm and confident? I tell you, sir, there's nothing whatsoever to concern yourself with.'

'Mr Hoffman, what were you referring to just now when you mentioned a cupboard?'

'Cupboard? Oh, merely the cupboard I discovered this evening at Mr Brodsky's home. You may know, he has for many years lived in an old farmhouse a little way off the north highway. I had of course been there many times before, but things being a little untidy - no doubt Mr Brodsky has his

own way of ordering things - I had never looked so carefully about his residence. That's to say, it was only this evening I discovered that he did after all have a further supply of drink. He swore to me he had forgotten all about it. It was only when it came up this evening, when I said, well, in the circumstances, in these very special circumstances owing to the upsetting business with Miss Collins and so on, it was only in these circumstances, you see, I agreed with him that on balance, despite the very small risk, yes, it would be best for him to have just one small glass of whisky, just to steady himself. After all, sir, the man was very distressed over this business of Miss Collins. It was only then, when I offered to fetch a hip flask from my car, that Mr Brodsky remembered there was still one cupboard he had not cleared out. And so we went into his, er, kitchen, I suppose you would call it. Mr Brodsky has done very well over the last months repairing the place. He's made steady progress, and now the elements hardly come in at all, though of course there aren't yet any windows as such. In any case, he opened the cupboard, which was actually lying on its side, and inside, well, there were a dozen or so old bottles of spirits. Mostly whisky. Mr Brodsky was as surprised as I was. It did occur to me, I have to admit it, that I should do something. That I should take the bottles away with me, or perhaps pour them out onto the ground. But then, sir, you can see it, that would have been an insult. A great affront to the courage and determination Mr Brodsky has shown. And having already suffered one great blow to his ego this evening on account of Miss Collins ...'

'Excuse me, Mr Hoffman, but what is this you keep mentioning about Miss Collins?'

'Ah, Miss Collins. Yes, well, that's another matter. That was why I happened to be there, at Mr Brodsky's farmhouse. You see, Mr Ryder, this evening I found myself the bearer of a most sad message. No one would have envied me such a task. The fact was, I had been growing uneasy for some

time, even before their meeting at the zoo yesterday. I had been worried, that's to say, on Miss Collins's behalf. Who would have guessed things would move so fast with them, and after all these years? Yes, yes, I was worried. Miss Collins is a dear lady for whom I have the highest regard. I could not bear to see her life torn apart again at this stage. You see, Mr Ryder, Miss Collins is a woman of immense wisdom, this whole town will testify to it, but for all that - and if you lived here, I'm sure you would agree - there has always been something vulnerable about her. We have all come to respect her enormously, and many people have found her counsel invaluable, but then at the same time - how can I put it? - we have always felt *protective* towards her. As Mr Brodsky became ... more himself over the months, many issues presented themselves that I for one had not properly considered before, and well, as I say, I became concerned. So you can imagine how it was, sir, when as I was driving you back this evening from your practice and you happened to mention so innocently that Miss Collins had agreed to a rendez-vous with Mr Brodsky, when you made it clear that Mr Brodsky was even at that moment waiting for her at St Peter's Cemetery ... My goodness, such fast moves! Our Mr Brodsky was clearly once something of a Valentino! Mr Ryder, I realised I had to do something. I could not allow Miss Collins's life to be plunged back into misery, particularly as a result of something I had done, however indirectly. So earlier this evening, after you most graciously allowed me to drop you off in the street, I took the opportunity to go and visit Miss Collins in her apartment. She was of course surprised to see me. Surprised I should have come personally on this of all evenings. In other words my presence alone spoke volumes. She showed me in immediately and I asked her to excuse the abruptness of my visit, and the fact that I could not approach the difficult topic I wished to discuss with the care and tact I would normally wish to employ. She of course understood perfectly. "I realise, Mr Hoffman," she said, "what great pressure you must be under this evening." We

sat down in her front parlour and I came straight to the point. I told her I had heard about their proposed rendezvous. Miss Collins lowered her eyes at this, just like a young schoolgirl. Then she said very sheepishly: "Yes, Mr Hoffman. Even as you were coming to my door just now, I was preparing myself. For well over an hour now, I've been trying out different outfits. Different ways to pin my hair. At my age, isn't it amusing? Yes, Mr Hoffman, it's quite true. He was here this morning and he persuaded me. I agreed to meet him." She said some such thing, it was mumbled, not at all the way that elegant lady usually speaks. And so I proceeded. Of course I did so very gently. I tactfully pointed out the possible pitfalls. "It is all very well, Miss Collins." I used such phrases. I trod as carefully as I could given the constraints on my time. Naturally, had it been another evening, had we had time to exchange pleasantries, to make small talk, I dare say I might have made a better job of it. Or perhaps it would have made little difference. The truth of the matter would always have been difficult for her. In any case, for all my going about things in the best way I could, when I eventually confronted her with the truth, when I said to her: "Miss Collins, all those old wounds will be reopened. They will hurt, they will give you agony. It will break you down, Miss Collins. Within weeks, within days. How can you have forgotten? How can you lay yourself open to it all again? Everything you went through before, the humiliation, the great hurt, it will all come back and more acutely than ever. And after everything you've done over the years to build a new life for yourself!" When I put things to her in such terms - oh, I tell you, sir, it was not easy - I could see her crumbling inside, even as she tried to maintain her outward calm. I could see the memory of it all coming back to her, the old aches starting again. It was not easy, sir, I can tell you, but I felt it my duty to continue. Then finally, she said very quietly: "But Mr Hoffman. I've promised him. I've promised I'd meet him this evening. He'll be depending on me. He always needs me before a big night

like this.” To which I said: “Miss Collins, of course he’ll be disappointed. But I will personally do my utmost to explain it to him. In any case, he’ll already know in his heart of hearts, just as you do, that this rendez-vous is ill-advised. That the past is now best left well alone.” And she looked out of the window as if in a dream and said: “But he’ll be there already. He’ll be there waiting.” To which I said: “I will go myself, Miss Collins. Yes, I am very busy tonight, but this is something I regard as so important I can only entrust myself with the task. In fact I will go now, immediately, to the cemetery and inform him of the situation. You can rest assured, Miss Collins, that I will do everything I can to comfort him. I will encourage him to think ahead, to the immensely important challenge in front of him this evening.” I said some such thing to her, Mr Ryder. And though I must say she looked for the moment completely destroyed, she is a sensible lady and a part of her must have known I was right. Because she touched my arm quite kindly, saying: “Go to him. Straight away. Do what you can.” And so I got up to leave, but then realised I still had one last painful duty left to perform. “Oh, and Miss Collins,” I said to her. “As far as this evening’s event is concerned. Under the circumstances, I would have supposed it best you stayed at home.” She nodded and I could see she was close to tears. “After all,” I went on, “one has to be sensitive to his feelings. Under the circumstances your presence in the hall might have a certain influence on him at this most crucial juncture.” She nodded again and indicated that she understood fully. I excused myself then and showed myself out. And then, although there were so many other pressing things waiting to be done - the bacon, the bread deliveries - I saw that the overwhelming priority was to see Mr Brodsky safely over this last unexpected hurdle. So I drove to the cemetery. It was dark by the time I arrived and it took me a little while walking among the graves before I could locate him, sitting on a tomb, looking despondent. And when he saw me approaching he looked up tiredly and said to me: “You’ve

come to tell me. I knew it. I knew it wasn't to be." This made my task easier, you might think, but I tell you, sir, it wasn't easy at all. To be the bearer of such news. I nodded solemnly and said, yes, he was right, she was not coming. She had thought things through and had changed her mind. Furthermore she had decided not to come to the concert hall tonight. I saw no point in going into it any further than that. And he looked very distraught, so for a moment I looked away and pretended to inspect the tomb next to the one he was sitting on. "Ah, old Mr Kaltz," I said to the trees, because I knew Mr Brodsky was weeping to himself quietly. "Ah, Mr Kaltz. How many years is it now since we buried him? It seems like yesterday, but I see it's already fourteen years. How lonely he was before he died." I was making some such conversation, so as to allow Mr Brodsky to weep. Then I sensed he had brought his tears under control and I turned to him and suggested he come back with me to the concert hall to get himself ready. But he said no, it was too early. He would become too tense hanging around the venue for so long. And I thought he might be right and suggested I drive him home. He agreed to this and so we made our way out of the cemetery and down to the car. And all through the drive, the whole time we were going up the north highway, he was just staring out of the window, saying nothing, the tears occasionally welling in his eyes. I realised then that we were not yet home and dry. That things were not quite so certain as they had seemed a few hours earlier. But I was still very confident, Mr Ryder, just as I am now. Then we arrived at his farmhouse. He has renovated it well, many of the rooms are now perfectly comfortable. We went into the main room and turned on the lamp and I looked about the place making light conversation. I offered to arrange for some people to come and look at the mildew problems on the walls. He didn't seem to hear, but just went on sitting in his chair with a far-away look. Then he said he wanted a drink. A small drink. I told him this was impossible. Then he said, very calmly, that it wasn't like the old way he wanted a drink. It wasn't like that. That sort

of drinking was behind him for good. But he had just suffered a terrible disappointment. His heart was breaking. He used those words. His heart was breaking, he said, but he knew how much rested on him this evening. He knew he had to do well. He wasn't asking for a drink in the old way. Surely I could tell that? And I looked at him and I could see he was telling the truth. I saw a saddened, disappointed but responsible man. He had come to know himself better than most men can ever hope to do, and he was fully in control. And he was saying that, in this crisis, a small drink was what he needed. To get him over the shock of this emotional blow. To give him the steadiness he needed for the demands of the evening ahead. Mr Ryder, I heard him ask for drink many times in the early days and this was a different thing altogether. I could see that. I looked deep into his eyes and said: "Mr Brodsky, can I trust you? I have some whisky in a hip flask in the car. If I gave you just a small glass can I trust you that that will be the end of it? One small glass and no more?" To which he said, meeting my gaze full on: "It's not like before. I swear to you." And so I went out to the car, it was very dark and the trees were making a furious noise in the wind, and I got the flask from the car and brought it in, and he was no longer in his chair. That's when I went through and found him in his kitchen. It's really an outhouse connected to the main farmhouse that Mr Brodsky has been very skilfully converting. Yes, that's when I found him opening the cupboard, the cupboard that was lying on its side. He'd forgotten all about it, he said when he realised I had come in. And there was the whisky. Bottles and bottles of it. He took out just one of the bottles, opened it and poured a small measure into a tumbler. Then, looking me in the eye, he poured the remainder of the bottle onto the floor. His kitchen floor, I should say, is largely earth, it's not as though it made a terrible mess. Well, he poured it out onto the ground, then we came back through to the main room and he sat down in his chair and began to sip the whisky. I watched him very carefully and I could see he was drinking not in the

way he used to. Even the fact that he could just sip like that ... I knew I had made the right decision. I told him I would have to be returning. That I had already stayed away much too long. The bacon and the bread had to be supervised. I stood up and then we both knew without speaking what was on my mind. That's to say, the cupboard. And Mr Brodsky looked me straight in the eye and said: "It's not like before." That was enough for me. To insist on staying any longer, that would only have undermined him. It would have been an insult. In any case, as I say, when I looked into his face I felt perfectly confident. I left without another thought. And it is only in the last few minutes, sir, that even a flicker of a doubt has crossed my mind. But I know rationally it is simply the tension before a great event. He will be here shortly, I'm certain of it. And the whole evening, I feel very confident, will be a success, a great success ...'

'Mr Hoffman,' I said, my impatience overtaking me, 'if you feel happy having left Mr Brodsky drinking whisky, well, that's your business. I'm not at all sure it was such a good decision, but then you know the situation much better than I do. In any case, may I remind you that I am myself in need of assistance at this moment? As I explained to you, I need a car as soon as possible. This really is a matter of some urgency, Mr Hoffman.'

'Ah yes, a car.' Hoffman looked about thoughtfully. 'The simplest thing, Mr Ryder, might be if you borrowed *my* car. It is parked outside that fire door just there.' He pointed a little further down the corridor. 'Now, where are the keys? Ah, here you are. The steering is slightly tilted to the left. I've been meaning to get it adjusted but things have been so busy. Please, make whatever use of it you will. I won't be needing it again until morning.'

I brought Hoffman's large black car out of the parking area and onto a twisting road shrouded on both sides by fir trees. This was clearly not the usual route out of the grounds. The road was pitted, unlit, and too narrow for two vehicles to pass without slowing. I drove cautiously, peering into the dark, expecting at any moment an obstacle or sharp bend. Then the road straightened and the headlights showed me I was driving through a forest. I picked up speed and for a few minutes travelled on through darkness. Then I caught sight of something bright through the trees to my left and, slowing down again, realised I was looking at the front of the concert hall, grandly illuminated against the night.

The building was now some way away and I was viewing it at an angle, but I could make out much of its impressive façade. There were rows of dignified stone columns to either side of the central arch, and tall windows reaching towards the vast domed roof. I wondered if the guests had started to arrive and, stopping the car altogether, lowered my window for a clearer view. But even when I raised myself in my seat, the trees prevented me from seeing anything of the building at ground level.

Then, as I continued to gaze towards the concert hall, the possibility struck me that at that very moment my parents were themselves on the point of arriving. I suddenly remembered with great vividness Hoffman's description of their horse-drawn carriage emerging out of the darkness into the admiring gaze of the crowd. In fact, just at that moment, as I continued to lean out of the window, I had the distinct impression I could hear somewhere not so far away the sound of their carriage going by. I switched off the engine and listened again, leaning my head out further. Then I got out

of the car altogether and stood there in the night, listening intently.

The wind was moving in the trees. Then I heard once more the faint noises I had before: the beat of hooves, a rhythmic jingling, the rattle of a wooden vehicle. Then the sounds faded behind the rustling of the trees. I went on listening for a little while longer, but could hear nothing more. Eventually I turned and got back into the car.

I had felt quite calm - almost tranquil - while standing out in the road, but once I started the car again I was seized by a powerful mixture of frustration, panic and anger. My parents were at that moment arriving, and yet here I was, my preparations far from completed, even now driving away from the concert hall in pursuit of some other matter altogether. I could not understand how I had allowed such a thing to come to pass, and I travelled on through the forest, my anger mounting, resolving to get finished whatever I had now to do at the first opportunity and return to the concert hall as quickly as possible. But then the further thought occurred to me that I did not really know how to reach Sophie's apartment or even if this forest road was taking me in the correct direction. A sense of futility began to come over me, but I sped on none the less, staring at the forest unfolding before me in the headlights.

Then suddenly I became aware of two figures standing waving up ahead of me. They were directly in my path and, though they moved aside as I came nearer, they continued to signal with urgency. Slowing down, I saw that a group of five or six people had set up camp on the roadside around a small portable stove. My first notion was that these were vagrants, but then I saw a middle-aged woman in smart clothes and a grey-haired man in a suit leaning down to my window. Behind them, the others - who had been sitting around the stove on what appeared to be upturned crates - were now rising and coming towards the car. They were all, I noticed, holding tin camping mugs.

As I lowered the window, the woman peered in at me, saying:

‘Oh, we’re so glad you came along. You see, we were just locked in debate and we couldn’t come to any sort of agreement. That’s always the trouble, isn’t it? We can never agree about anything when there’s action needed.’

‘But certainly,’ the grey-haired man in the suit said solemnly, ‘we need to come to some conclusion soon.’

But before either of them had said anything else, I saw that the figure who had come up behind them and was now leaning down looking at me was that of Geoffrey Saunders, my old schoolmate. Recognising me, he pushed his way in front and tapped the door of the car.

‘Ah, I was wondering when I’d see you again,’ he said.

‘To be perfectly honest, I’d been getting a bit cross about it. You know, you not coming by for your cup of tea. And when you’d said and all. Still, I suppose now’s not the time to go into it. But all the same, it’s a bit cheeky of you, old chap. Never mind. You’d better come on out of there.’ With that, he opened the car door and stood aside. I was about to protest, but he continued: ‘Better come and get a cup of coffee. Then you can join in with the discussion we’re having.’

‘Quite frankly, Saunders,’ I said, ‘this isn’t the best time for me.’

‘Oh, do come on, old chap.’ There was a hint of annoyance in his voice. ‘You know, I’ve been thinking quite a lot about you since we met the other night. Remembering about our schooldays and all that. This morning, for instance, I woke up thinking about that time, you probably don’t remember it, that time the two of us were marking a cross-country run for some younger boys. Must have been the lower sixth, I suppose. You probably don’t remember, but I was thinking about it, this morning, lying in bed. We were

standing waiting outside this pub opposite this big field and you were awfully upset about something. Come on out, old chap, I can't speak to you like this.' He was continuing to usher me impatiently. 'That's it, that's better.' He grasped my elbow with his free hand - he was holding his tin cup in the other - as I came reluctantly out of the car.

'Yes, I was thinking about that day. One of those foggy October mornings you always get in England. There we were, standing around, waiting for these third-years to come puffing their way out of the mist, and I remember you kept saying: "It's all right for you, it's all very well for you" and being awfully miserable. So in the end I said to you: "Look, it's not just you, old chap. You're not the only one in the world with worries." And I started telling you about that time when I was seven or eight, when we'd gone on one of our family holidays, my parents, my little brother and I. We'd gone to one of those English seaside resorts, Bournemouth, some place like that. Perhaps it was the Isle of Wight. The weather was fine and all that, but you know, something wasn't right, we just weren't getting on. Common enough on family holidays, of course, but I didn't know that then, I was only seven or eight. Anyway it just wasn't working out and one afternoon Father just stormed off. I mean just out of the blue. We'd been looking at something on the seafront and my mother was in the middle of pointing out something to us and suddenly, off he went. Didn't shout or anything, just walked off. We didn't know what to do, so we just started following him, Mother, little Christopher and I, we followed him. Not close up, always thirty yards or so behind, just enough so we could still see him. And Father kept walking. All along the seafront, up the path with the cliffs, past the beach huts and all the people sunbathing. Then he went towards the town, past the tennis courts and through the shopping areas. We must have followed him for over an hour. And after a while we started to make a sort of game of it. We'd say: "Look, he's not angry any more. He's just playing about!" Or we'd say: "He's got his head like

that on purpose. Look at that!" and laugh and laugh. And if you looked carefully, you could believe he was doing a funny walk. Christopher, he was only little, I told him that, I told him Father was doing the walk just to be funny and Christopher laughed and laughed, like it was all a great game. And Mother too, she was laughing, saying: "Oh your father, boys!" and laughing some more. And we kept on walking like that, and I was the only one, you see, even though I was only seven or eight, I was the only one who knew Father wasn't really doing it for a joke. That he hadn't got over it at all and was perhaps getting angrier and angrier because we were following him. Because perhaps he wanted to sit down on a bench or go into a café somewhere, but couldn't because of us. You remember all this? I told it all to you that day. And I looked at Mother at one point because I wanted it all to stop, and that was when I realised. I realised she'd convinced herself, convinced herself utterly that Father was doing it all for fun. And little Christopher, he was all the time wanting to run up. You know, run right up behind Father. And I had to keep making excuses, laughing all the time, saying: "No, that's not allowed. That's not part of the game. We've got to keep a long way back or it won't work." But Mother, you see, she was saying: "Oh yes! Why don't you go and pull his shirt and see if you can get back before he catches you!" And I had to keep saying, because I was the only one, you realise, I was the only one, I had to keep saying: "No, no, let's wait. Stay back, stay back." He looked funny, my father. He had an odd sort of gait when you looked at him like that from a distance. Look, old chap, why don't you sit down? You look completely exhausted and very worried. Just sit down here and help us decide.'

Geoffrey Saunders was indicating an upturned orange crate near the camping stove. I felt indeed very tired and decided that whatever tasks lay before me, I would accomplish them better after a brief pause and a sip of coffee. I seated myself, aware as I did so that my knees were shaking and that I was lowering myself onto the crate in the most unsteady

way. People gathered around me sympathetically. Someone was holding out a cup of coffee, while someone else had placed a hand on my back, saying: 'Just relax. Just take it easy.'

'Thank you, thank you,' I said and, taking the coffee, gulped it greedily despite its being very hot.

The grey-haired man in the suit now crouched down in front of me and, looking into my face, said very gently: 'We're going to have to come to a decision. You're going to have to help us.'

'A decision?'

'Yes. About Mr Brodsky.'

'Ah yes.' I drank a little more from the tin cup. 'Yes, I know. I realise it's all down to me now.'

'I wouldn't go so far as to say that,' the grey-haired man said.

I looked at him again. He was a reassuring figure with a kindly, calm manner. But just at this moment, I could see, he was very serious.

'I wouldn't go so far as to say it was *all* down to you. It's just that, given the situation, we each of us have to take some responsibility. My own opinion, as I've made clear, is that it should come off.'

'Come off?'

The grey-haired man nodded gravely. I then saw the stethoscope round his neck and realised he was a doctor of some sort.

'Ah yes,' I said. 'It has to come off. Yes.'

It was then that I looked about me and saw with a start, on the ground not far from the car, a large tangle of metal. The thought vaguely crossed my mind that I had caused this wreck, that I had perhaps been involved in some accident without knowing it. Rising to my feet - immediately several

hands reached out to steady me - I moved towards the metal and saw that it was in fact the remains of a bicycle. The metal was hopelessly contorted and, to my horror, I saw Brodsky in the midst of it. He was lying with his back to the earth and his eyes watched calmly as I approached him.

‘Mr Brodsky,’ I murmured, staring at him.

‘Ah. Ryder,’ he said, with surprisingly little pain in his voice.

I turned back to the grey-haired man, who had come up behind me, saying to him: ‘I’m sure this was nothing to do with me. I have no recollection of any sort of accident. I was merely driving ...’

The grey-haired man, nodding understandingly, signalled to me to be quiet. Then, leading me away a little, he said in a low voice: ‘Almost certainly, he was attempting suicide. He’s very drunk. Very very drunk.’

‘Ah. Yes.’

‘I’m certain he was attempting suicide. But now, all he’s achieved is to get his legs entangled. The right leg is virtually unscathed. It’s simply stuck. The left leg is also stuck. It’s this left leg that troubles me. It isn’t in a good condition.’

‘No,’ I said, and glanced over my shoulder at Brodsky again. He appeared to notice and said up into the darkness:

‘Ryder. Hello.’

‘We were discussing it for some time before you came by,’ the grey-haired man continued. ‘My feeling is that it has to come off. That way we might save his life. After some debate, the majority of those present have come to that view. Though the two ladies over there are against it. They are all for waiting longer for an ambulance. But I feel we run a grave risk by doing so. That is my professional opinion.’

‘Ah yes. Yes, I can see your point.’

‘In my view, the left leg must come off without delay. I am a surgeon, but unfortunately I have no equipment with me. No painkillers, nothing. Not even an aspirin. You see, I was off-duty, just walking out here to get some air. Just like these other good people here. I happened to have this stethoscope in my pocket from earlier, but nothing else. But now you’ve arrived, this may change things. You have supplies in the car?’

‘In the car? Well, actually, I don’t know. You see, it’s a borrowed car.’

‘You mean it’s a hired car.’

‘Not exactly. It’s borrowed. From an acquaintance.’

‘I see.’ He looked gravely down at the ground, thinking to himself. Over his shoulder I could see the others watching us anxiously. Then the surgeon said:

‘Perhaps you wouldn’t mind looking in the boot. There might be something there to help us. Some sharp implement with which I could carry out the operation.’

I thought about this, then said: ‘I’ll be happy to go and look. But perhaps first I should go and have a word with Mr Brodsky. You see, I do know him to some extent and I really should speak to him before ... before such a drastic step is taken.’

‘Very well,’ the surgeon said. ‘But my feeling - my professional opinion - is that we’ve wasted a great deal of time already. Please be as quick as you can.’

I went over again to Brodsky and looked down into his face.

‘Mr Brodsky ...’ I began, but he interrupted immediately.

‘Ryder, help me. I have to get to her.’

‘To Miss Collins? I think there are other things just now to be concerned with.’

‘No, no. I must speak with her. I see it. I see it very clearly now. My mind’s very clear now. Since this happened, I don’t know, I was on my bicycle, something hit me, some vehicle, a car, who knows? I must have been drunk, I don’t remember that part, but I can remember the rest of it. I can see it now, I can see everything. It’s him. All the time, he’s wanted it to fail. It’s him, he’s done all this.’

‘Who? Hoffman?’

‘He’s the lowest. The lowest. I couldn’t see it before, but now I see it all. Since the vehicle hit me, whatever it was, a car, a truck, since then I can see it all. He came to me tonight, very sympathetic. I was waiting in the cemetery. Waiting and waiting. My heart pounding. I’ve been waiting all these years. You don’t know, Ryder? I’ve been waiting a long time. Even when I was drunk, I was waiting. Next week, I used to say. Next week I’ll stop drinking and go to her. I’ll ask her to meet me at St Peter’s Cemetery. Year after year I said this. And now at last there I was, waiting. On Per Gustavsson’s tomb where I used to sit sometimes with Bruno. I was waiting. Fifteen minutes, then half an hour, then an hour. Then *he* comes. He touches me, here, on the shoulder. She’s changed her mind, he says. She’s not coming. Not even coming tonight to the concert hall. He’s kind as usual. I listen to him. Drink whisky. It will calm you. This is special. But I can’t drink whisky, I say. How can I drink whisky? Are you crazy? No, drink whisky, he says. Just a little. It’ll steady you. I thought he was being kind. Now I see it. Right from the start, he never meant it to work. He believed I could never do it. I could never do it because I’m this ... this *piece of dung*. That’s what he thought. I’m sober now. I drank enough to kill a horse, but since that vehicle, I’m sober. I can see it all clearly now. It’s him. He’s lower than me. I won’t let him succeed. I’ll do it. Help me, Ryder. I won’t let him. I’m going to the concert hall

now. I'll show everyone. It's ready, the music, it's all here in my head, all here. I'll show everyone. But she has to come. I've got to speak to her. Help me, Ryder. Get me to her. She has to come, just sit in the concert hall. She'll remember then. He's the lowest, but I can see it clearly now. Help me, Ryder.'

'Mr Brodsky,' I said interrupting. 'There's a surgeon present. He's going to have to perform an operation. It might be a little painful.'

'Help me, Ryder. Just help me get to her. Your car? Your car? Take me. Take me to her. She'll be in that apartment. I hate it. How I hate it, hate it. I used to stand outside. Take me to her, Ryder. Take me now.'

'Mr Brodsky, you don't seem to realise your condition. There's little time to be lost. In fact, I promised the surgeon I'd search the boot. I'll be back in just a moment.'

'She's so afraid. But it's not too late. We could have an animal. But never mind that now, never mind the animal. Just come to the concert hall. That's all I ask. Just come to the hall. That's all I ask.'

I left Brodsky and went to the car. Opening the boot I found that Hoffman had crammed it untidily with assorted items. There was a broken chair, a pair of rubber boots, a collection of plastic cartons. Then I found a torch, and when I shone it around the boot I discovered a small hacksaw lying in a corner. It looked a little oily, but when I ran a finger along the blade the teeth felt sharp enough. I closed the boot and made my way over to where the others were standing talking around the stove. As I approached, I could hear the surgeon saying:

'Obstetrics is a dull field now. Not like when I was studying.'

'Excuse me,' I said. 'I found this.'

‘Ah,’ the surgeon said, turning to me. ‘Thank you. And you’ve spoken with Mr Brodsky? Good.’

I suddenly felt resentful at having been drawn into this whole affair to the extent that I had, and I said, perhaps a little tetchily, looking around at the ring of faces:

‘Aren’t there proper resources in this town for eventualities like this? Did you say you’d called an ambulance?’

‘We called for one about an hour ago,’ Geoffrey Saunders spoke up. ‘From that call box over there. Unfortunately, ambulances are in short supply tonight on account of the big event at the concert hall.’

I looked where he was pointing and saw that indeed, standing some way back from the road, almost where the darkness of the forest began, was a public telephone box. The sight of it suddenly brought back to me the urgent business I had been in the midst of, and it occurred to me that by telephoning Sophie now I would not only be able to give her some advance warning, I would be able to get some directions as to how I might reach her apartment.

‘If you’d excuse me,’ I said, moving off. ‘I have an important call to make just now.’

I walked towards the trees and entered the telephone box. As I searched through my pockets for some coins, I could see through the glass panel the figure of the surgeon walking slowly towards the prone Brodsky, the hacksaw held tactfully behind his back. Geoffrey Saunders and the others were circling uneasily, looking down into their tin cups or at their feet. Then the surgeon turned and said something to them, and two of the men, Geoffrey Saunders and a young man in a brown leather jacket, went over reluctantly to join him. For a few seconds the three of them stood looking down grimly at Brodsky.

I turned away and dialled Sophie's number. The phone rang for some time, then Sophie, sounding sleepy and slightly alarmed, came on the line. I took a deep breath.

'Look,' I said, 'you don't seem to realise just how much pressure is on me now. Do you suppose this is easy for me? I've very little time left now and I've still not had a second to inspect the concert hall. Instead there are all these other things people expect me to do. You think tonight's easy for me? Do you realise what tonight is? My parents, they're coming tonight. That's right! They're coming at last, tonight! They may well be there at this very moment! And look what happens. Do they leave me free to prepare? No, they give me one thing to do after the other. This confounded question-and-answer session for one thing. They've actually brought in an electronic scoreboard. Can you believe it? What am I supposed to do? They take so much for granted, all these people. What do they want me to do, on this night of all nights? But it's the same as everywhere else. They expect everything from me. They'll probably turn on me tonight, it wouldn't surprise me. When they get unhappy about my answers, they'll turn on me, and then where will I be? I might not even get as far as the piano. Or my parents might leave, the moment they start to turn on me ...'

'Look, calm down,' Sophie said. 'It'll be all right. They never turn on you. You always say they'll turn on you and so far no one, not a single person in all these years, has turned on you ...'

'But don't you understand what I'm saying? This isn't just any night. My parents are coming. If they turn on me tonight, it will be ... it will be ...'

'They're not going to turn on you,' Sophie broke in again. 'You say this every time. From all over the world you phone to say the same thing. Whenever you reach this point. They're going to turn on me, they're going to find me out. And what happens? A few hours later you call again, and

you're very calm and self-satisfied. I ask you how it went and you sound mildly surprised I should even bring it up.

"Oh, it was fine," you say. Always just something like that and then you move onto other things, like none of it's worth discussing ...'

'Wait a minute. What are you referring to? What phone calls are these? These phone calls, do you realise how much trouble I go to to make them to you? Sometimes I'm frantically busy, but I still somehow find a few minutes in my schedule to call, just to make sure you're all right. And more often than not it's you, you pour out all your problems to me. What do you mean implying I talk the way you say ...'

'There's no point in going into it. The point I'm making is that everything will be fine tonight ...'

'It's all very well for you to say that. You're just like all these others. You just take it for granted. You think all I have to do is turn up and everything else will just follow ...' I suddenly remembered Gustav lying on his mattress in the unfurnished dressing room and stopped abruptly.

'What's the matter?' Sophie asked.

For a few moments more I continued to collect myself. Then I said:

'Look. There's something I meant to tell you. It's bad news. I'm sorry.'

Sophie was silent at the other end.

'It's your father,' I said. 'He's been taken ill. He's at the concert hall. You have to come immediately.'

I paused again, but Sophie still did not speak.

'He's holding out well,' I went on after another moment. 'But you have to come straight away. Boris too. In

fact, that's why I was calling. I have a car. I'm on my way now to pick you both up.'

For what seemed a long time, the line remained silent. Then Sophie said:

'I'm sorry about yesterday evening. At the Karwinsky Gallery, I mean.' She paused and I thought she was going to go silent again. But then she continued: 'I was pathetic. You don't have to pretend. I know I was pathetic. I don't know what it is, I just can't manage in situations like that. I'm going to have to face it. I'll never be the sort who can travel with you from city to city, accompanying you at all these functions. I just can't do it. I'm sorry.'

'But what does that matter?' I said gently. 'That gallery yesterday, I'd forgotten all about it. Who cares what sort of impression you make on people like that? They were awful people, every one of them. And you were by far the most beautiful woman there.'

'I can't believe that,' she said, laughing suddenly. 'I'm an old crow now.'

'But you're ageing beautifully.'

'What a thing to say!' She laughed again. 'How dare you!'

'I'm sorry,' I said, laughing also. 'I meant you hadn't aged at all. Not so anyone would notice.'

'Not so anyone would notice?!'

'I don't know ...' Confused, I gave another laugh. 'Perhaps you looked haggard and ugly. I can't remember now.'

Sophie laughed once more, then fell silent. When she next spoke, her voice had become earnest again. 'But I was pathetic. I can't ever travel with you while I'm like this.'

‘Look, I promise, I won’t be travelling much longer now. Tonight, if it goes well, you never know. That might be it.’

‘And I’m sorry I haven’t found anything yet. I promise I’ll find something for us soon. Somewhere really comfortable.’

I could not find an immediate response to this and for a few seconds we were both silent. Then I heard her say:

‘Do you really not mind? About the way I was yesterday? The way I always am?’

‘I don’t mind at all. You can behave in any way you like at functions like that. Do whatever you want. It doesn’t make any difference. You’re worth more than the whole room of them put together.’

Sophie said nothing. After a while I went on:

‘It’s partly my fault too. About the house, I mean. It’s not fair just leaving it to you to find one. Perhaps from now, provided tonight goes well, we can do it differently. We could look for something together.’

The line remained silent and for a second I wondered if Sophie had gone away. But then she said in a distant, dreamy voice:

‘We’re bound to find something soon, aren’t we?’

‘Yes, of course. We’ll search together. Boris too. We’ll find something.’

‘And you’re coming by soon, aren’t you? To take us to Papa?’

‘Yes, yes. I’ll be coming as quickly as I can. So try and be ready, both of you.’

‘Yes, all right.’ Her voice still sounded distant and lacking in urgency. ‘I’ll wake Boris up now. Yes, all right.’

When I stepped out of the phone box, it was my impression there were definite signs of dawn in the sky. I saw the crowd around Brodsky and, as I came closer, spotted the surgeon down on his knees, sawing away. Brodsky appeared to be accepting his ordeal in silence, but then, just as I reached the car, he let out a hideous cry that rang through the trees.

‘I have to be going now,’ I said to no one in particular, and indeed no one seemed to hear me. But then, as I closed my door and started the engine, their faces all turned to me with horrified expressions. Before I could close my window, Geoffrey Saunders had come running up.

‘Look here,’ he said angrily. ‘Look here. You can’t go just yet. Once he’s freed, we’ll need to take him somewhere. We’ll need your car, can’t you see that? Surely that’s common sense.’

‘Look, Saunders,’ I said firmly. ‘I appreciate you’ve got problems here. I’d like to help more, but I’ve done all I can. I’ve got things of my own to worry about now.’

‘That’s typical of you, old chap,’ he said. ‘Just typical.’

‘Look, you just haven’t the faintest. Really, Saunders, you haven’t the faintest. I’ve got more responsibilities than you could ever imagine. Look, I just don’t lead the sort of life you do!’

I had bellowed this last statement, and I noticed that even the surgeon had stopped his work and was looking over at me. For all I knew Brodsky too had for the moment forgotten his pain and was staring at me. I felt self-conscious and said in a more conciliatory tone:

‘I’m sorry, but I’ve got something very urgent to attend to. By the time you’re all through, by the time Mr Brodsky’s in any condition to be transported anywhere, I’m certain the

ambulance will have arrived. In any case, I'm sorry, but I can't wait a minute longer. '

With that I quickly raised the window and set the car moving again through the forest.

The road continued through the forest for some time. Eventually the trees began to thin out and I could glimpse the morning glowing dimly in the distance. Then the trees finally disappeared and I came into the deserted city streets.

A red light obliged me to stop at an intersection, and as I sat there waiting in the silence - no other vehicle was in sight - I looked about and found myself slowly beginning to recognise the district I had entered. I was, I realised with relief, already very near Sophie's apartment; indeed, the street directly facing me would, I was sure, lead me directly to it. I recalled too that the apartment was over a barber's shop, and when the lights changed I crossed the intersection and drove down the silent street, studying carefully the buildings I was passing. Then I saw ahead of me in the distance two figures waiting at the edge of the kerb and pushed down on the accelerator.

Sophie and Boris were wearing only light jackets and looked to have grown cold in the early morning air. They came running up to the car, and Sophie, leaning down, shouted angrily:

'You were so long! What took you so long?'

Before I could respond, Boris placed a hand on Sophie's arm, saying:

'It's all right. We'll get there in time. It's all right.'

I looked at the little boy. He was holding a large briefcase resembling a doctor's bag, which gave him a slightly comical air of gravity. But his manner was

nevertheless oddly reassuring and he seemed to succeed in calming his mother.

I had expected Sophie to sit next to me, but she and Boris both got in the back.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said as I turned the car, ‘but I don’t know my way around here so well yet.’

‘Who’s with him now?’ Sophie demanded, her voice again very taut. ‘Is someone looking after him now?’

‘He’s with his colleagues. They’re all with him. Every one of them.’

‘You see?’ Boris’s voice said gently behind me. ‘I told you. So don’t worry. It’ll be all right.’

Sophie gave a heavy sigh, but again Boris seemed to have succeeded in calming her. Then a moment later, I heard him say:

‘They’re taking good care of him. So don’t worry. They’re taking good care of him. Aren’t they?’

This question was evidently directed at me. I had become somewhat resentful about the role he had assumed for himself – I was not happy either that the two of them should sit together in the back as though I were a taxi driver – and I decided not to reply.

For the next few minutes we travelled in silence. We came to the intersection again, after which I did my best to remember the route back to the forest road. We were still going through the empty city streets when Sophie said softly, her voice barely audible above the engine:

‘This is a warning.’

I was not sure if she was addressing me and was about to glance over my shoulder at her when she continued in the same soft voice:

‘Boris, are you listening to me? We have to face up to it, this is a warning. Your grandfather, he’s getting older. He needs to slow down. There’s no point trying to deny it. He needs to slow down.’

Boris said something in reply, but I could not hear him.

‘I’ve been thinking about it for some time now,’ Sophie went on. ‘I didn’t say anything to you before, because I know how much you ... how much you think of your grandfather. But I’ve been thinking it over for some time. There were other signs long before this. Now this has happened, we can’t hide from it any more. He’s getting older and he’s got to slow down. I’ve made plans, I never told you, but I’ve been making plans for a long time. I’m going to have a talk with Mr Hoffman. A good talk with him about Grandfather’s future. I’ve prepared all the information. I’ve spoken to Mr Sedelmayer at the Imperial Hotel and also Mr Weissberg at the Ambassadors. I never said to you before, but I could see Grandfather wasn’t as strong as he used to be. So I’ve been finding out. It’s not at all unusual, when someone’s worked at an hotel for as long as your grandfather has, it’s not at all unusual at a certain stage that he’s given a slightly different sort of job. So that he doesn’t have to do quite as much as before. At the Imperial Hotel, there’s this man, much older than your grandfather, you see him as soon as you go into the lobby. He used to be the chef, but when he was too old to do that any more, that’s what they decided. He’s got a splendid uniform and he’s in the corner of the lobby behind this big mahogany desk with a pen-and-ink stand. Mr Sedelmayer says it works very well, that he’s worth every penny. The guests, particularly the regular ones, they’d be outraged if they came into the lobby and the old man wasn’t sitting there behind the desk. The whole thing gives the place so much distinction. Well, I thought I’d talk to Mr Hoffman about it. Grandfather could do something like that. Of course, he’d get paid less, but he could keep his little room, he’s so fond of it, and get his meals. Perhaps they

could set him up with a desk like at the Imperial. But then Grandfather might want to stand. In a special uniform, somewhere in the lobby. I don't mean this should all happen immediately. But before too long. He's not so young now and this is a warning. We can't hide from it. There's nothing to be gained in pretending about it.'

Sophie paused a moment. I had by this time brought the car back to the edge of the forest. The dawn sky had become a purple colour.

'Don't worry,' Boris said. 'Grandfather will be all right.'

I could hear Sophie let out a deep breath. Then she said:

'He'll have more time then, too. He won't be nearly as busy, and you'll be able to spend more afternoons with him in the Old Town. Or wherever else you might want to go with him. But he'll need a good coat. That's why I'm bringing this now. It's time I gave it to him. I've had it long enough.'

There was a rustling sound and, glancing in my mirror, I noticed that Sophie was holding beside her the soft brown package containing her father's overcoat. At this point I was obliged to attract her attention to ask something about our route, and she seemed to become aware of my presence for the first time since setting out. She leaned forward and said close to my ear:

'I've been ready for something like this to happen. I'm going to talk to Mr Hoffman soon.'

I murmured something in assent and turned the headlights up as we entered the darkness of the forest.

'Other people,' Sophie said. 'They just carry on like there's all the time in the world. I've never been able to do that.'

For the next few minutes she remained silent, but I could sense her presence very near me, and for some reason found

myself expecting to feel at any moment the touch of her fingers on my face. Then she said quietly:

‘I remember. After Mother died. How lonely it got.’

I glanced at her again in the mirror. She was still leaning forward towards me, but her eyes were fixed on the forest going by outside.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said softly, and made another rustling sound with the coat. ‘I’ll see to it we’re all fine. The three of us. I’ll see to it.’

I brought the car to a halt in a small parking area somewhere behind the concert hall. A door was facing us over which a night light was still shining and, though it was not the door I had used before, I got out and hurried towards it. When I glanced back, Boris was helping his mother out of the car. He insisted on keeping one hand protectively behind her as the two of them came briskly towards the building and the doctor’s bag he was clutching in the other hand banged awkwardly about his legs.

The door brought us into the long circular corridor and almost immediately we were obliged to stand aside for a catering trolley being pushed by two men. The temperature felt a good few degrees warmer than before - it was now positively stuffy - but then I noticed nearby two musicians in evening dress chatting amiably in a doorway and realised with relief that we had entered not far from where I had left Gustav.

As I led the way down the corridor, it became increasingly crowded with orchestra members. Most had by now changed for the performance, but the atmosphere among them seemed still to be a very frivolous one. They were shouting and laughing across the corridor more than ever and at one point we nearly collided with a man emerging from a dressing room posturing with a cello as though it were a guitar. Then someone said;

‘Oh, it’s Mr Ryder, isn’t it? We met before, you remember me?’

A group of four or five men coming the other way along the corridor had paused and was looking towards us. They were in full evening dress and I saw in an instant they were all drunk. The man who had spoken was holding a bouquet of roses and, as he came towards me, waved it about carelessly.

‘The cinema the other night,’ he said. ‘Mr Pedersen introduced us. How are you, sir? My friends tell me I disgraced myself that night and that I owe you many apologies.’

‘Oh yes,’ I said, recognising the man. ‘How are you? I’m very pleased to see you again. Unfortunately, I have something very urgent just now ...’

‘I hope I wasn’t rude,’ the drunken man said, coming right up to me until his face was almost touching mine. ‘My intention is never rude.’

At this his companions all made noises of suppressed mirth.

‘No, you weren’t rude at all,’ I said. ‘But just now, you must forgive me ...’

‘We were searching,’ the drunken man said, ‘for the maestro. No, no, not you, sir. Our *very own* maestro. We’ve brought him flowers, you see. As a token of our great respect. Do you know where we might find him, sir?’

‘Unfortunately I have no idea. I ... I don’t think you’ll find Mr Brodsky in this building just yet.’

‘No? Not arrived yet?’ The drunken man turned to his companions. ‘Our maestro isn’t here yet. What do you make of it?’ Then to me: ‘We have flowers for him.’ He shook the bouquet again and a few petals drifted to the floor. ‘A token of fondness and respect from the city council. And apology. Of course. We misunderstood him for so long.’ There

were more sounds of suppressed laughter from his companions.

‘Not here yet. Our very own beloved maestro. Well, in that case, we’d better while away a little more time with these musicians. Or perhaps we’ll go back to the bar. What do we do, my friends?’

I could see Sophie and Boris both watching with mounting impatience.

‘Excuse me,’ I muttered and started to walk away. Behind us, the men erupted into more muffled laughter, but I decided not to look back.

Eventually our surroundings grew quieter and then we could see in front of us the end of the corridor and the porters crowded together outside the last dressing room. Sophie increased her pace, but then halted while we were still a little way away. For their part, the porters, noticing our approach, had quickly formed a gangway and one of them - a wiry man with a moustache I recognised from the Hungarian Café - came towards us. He looked uncertain and initially addressed only me.

‘He’s holding out well, sir. He’s holding out well.’ Then he turned to Sophie and, lowering his eyes, muttered: ‘He’s holding out well, Miss Sophie.’

Sophie did not respond at first, simply staring past the porters to where the door of the dressing room was standing slightly ajar. Then she said suddenly, as if to justify her presence:

‘I’ve brought something for him. Here’ - she lifted up the package - ‘I’ve brought this for him.’

Someone called into the dressing room and two more porters who had been inside appeared at the threshold. Sophie did not move and for a moment no one appeared to know what to say or do next. Then Boris strode in front of us, his black bag hoisted up in the air before him.

‘Please, gentlemen,’ he said. ‘Stand to one side, please. Over here, please.’

He waved the porters away from the door. The two men at the threshold remained where they were, looking bemused, and Boris gestured impatiently to them. ‘Gentlemen! Over here please!’

Having cleared a reasonable space in front of the dressing room, Boris glanced back at his mother. Sophie came forward a few more steps then stopped again. Her eyes fixed on the door

the two porters had left it half open - with a look of some apprehension. Again no one seemed sure what to do next, and again it was Boris who broke the silence.

‘Mother, wait here please,’ he said, and with that, turned and vanished into the dressing room.

Sophie relaxed visibly. She came a few steps closer and leaned forward almost nonchalantly to see if any of the room’s interior was visible. Finding that Boris had pushed the door virtually closed behind him, she straightened and stood waiting as though in a bus queue, her package draped over her folded arms.

Boris emerged again after a few minutes. Still holding his doctor’s bag, he carefully closed the door behind him.

‘Grandfather says he’s very pleased we’ve come,’ he said quietly, looking at his mother. ‘He’s very pleased.’

He went on looking up into his mother’s face and I was at first puzzled by the way he did so. Then I realised he was waiting for Sophie to give him a message to take back to Gustav, and sure enough, Sophie said after some thought:

‘Tell him I’ve brought something for him. A present. That I’m bringing it in for him in just a moment. I’m ... I’m just getting it ready.’

Once Boris had disappeared back into the dressing room, Sophie placed the overcoat over one arm and began to smooth out the wrinkles on the soft brown packaging. It was perhaps to do with the glaring pointlessness of this activity, but I was at this moment suddenly reminded of the many other calls on my time. I remembered, for instance, that I had still to inspect the conditions in the auditorium and that my chances of doing so to any useful degree were diminishing by the minute.

‘I’ll be back very soon,’ I said to Sophie. ‘There’s something I have to see to.’

She continued to attend to her package and gave no response. I was about to repeat myself more loudly, but then, thinking better of drawing undue attention to myself, hurried off quietly in search of Hoffman.

I had gone a little way down the corridor when I saw a commotion ahead of me. A dozen or so people were pushing against one another shouting and gesticulating and my first thought was that in all the mounting tension a quarrel had broken out among the kitchen staff. But then I noticed the entire crowd was moving slowly towards me and that it comprised a curious mixture of people. Some were in full evening dress, while others - in anoraks, raincoats and jeans - appeared to have come straight in off the streets. A few orchestra members had also attached themselves to this group.

One of the men shouting the loudest looked familiar and I was trying to recall where I had seen him before when I heard him cry:

‘Mr Brodsky, I really must insist!’

I then recognised the grey-haired surgeon I had encountered earlier in the forest, and realised that indeed, at the centre of the crowd, moving forward slowly with a look of stubborn determination, was Brodsky. He looked ghastly. The skin on his face and neck had become white and startingly shrivelled.

‘But he says he’s all right! Why can’t you let him decide?’ a middle-aged man in a dinner suit shouted back. A number of voices immediately endorsed this statement, to be met in turn by a chorus of protest.

Meanwhile Brodsky continued his slow progress, ignoring all the commotion around him. It looked at first as though he were being borne aloft by the crowd, but as he came closer I saw he was walking by himself with the aid of a crutch. There was something about this crutch which made me look at it more

closely and I saw that it was in fact an ironing board which Brodsky was holding, vertically and folded, under his armpit.

As I stood watching this spectacle, people seemed one by one to notice me and fall respectfully silent, so that the closer the crowd came, the more quiet it grew. The surgeon, however, continued to shout:

‘Mr Brodsky! Your body has had a very severe shock. I really must insist you sit down and relax!’

Brodsky was looking downwards, concentrating hard on each step, and did not see me for some time. Then finally, sensing a change in those around him, he glanced up.

‘Ah, Ryder,’ he said. ‘Here you are.’

‘Mr Brodsky. How are you feeling now?’

‘I’m fine,’ he said calmly.

The crowd now stood off a little and he covered the remaining distance towards me with greater ease. When I complimented him on the way he had so quickly mastered the art of walking with a crutch, he looked down at his ironing board as though remembering it for the first time in a while.

‘The man who brought me here,’ he said, ‘he happened to have it, this thing, in the back of his van. It’s not so bad. It’s strong, I can walk with it fine. The only trouble, Ryder. Sometimes it starts to open up. Like this.’

He shook it, and sure enough the ironing board began to slip open. A catch prevented it from opening more than slightly, but I could see how its repeatedly unfolding even to this extent would prove a serious irritation.

‘I need some string for it,’ Brodsky said a little sadly. ‘Something like that. But there’s no time now.’

As I looked down to where he was indicating, I could not help staring aghast at his left trouser leg, tied into a knot just below his thigh.

‘Mr Brodsky,’ I said, forcing myself to look up again, ‘you can’t be feeling so well just now. Do you have the energy to conduct the orchestra this evening?’

‘Yes, yes. I feel fine. I’ll conduct and it will be ... it will be magnificent. Just the way I’ve always known it would be. And she’ll see then, with her own eyes and ears. All these years, I wasn’t being such a fool. All these years I had it in me, waiting. She’ll see me tonight, Ryder. It will be magnificent.’

‘You’re referring to Miss Collins? But is she coming here?’

‘She’s coming here, she’s coming. Oh yes, yes. He did his best to stop her, make her afraid, but she’s coming, oh yes. I’ve seen through his game now. Ryder, I got to her apartment, I walked a long way, it was hard, but in the end this man came by, this good man here’ - Brodsky looked around at the crowd and waved vaguely towards someone - ‘he came by, he had a van. We went to her apartment, I knocked on the door, I knocked and knocked. Someone, a neighbour, thought it was like before. You know, I used to do that, knock and knock on the door at night, and they’d get the police in the end. But I said, no, you fool, I’m not drunk any more. I had an accident and now I’m sober, I can see everything. I shouted this all up to him, the neighbour, some fat old man. I can see everything now, see everything he’s been doing all this time, yes, that’s what I shouted up. And then she was coming to the door, her, she was coming, and she could hear me talking to her neighbour and I could see her through the glass, not knowing what to do, and so I forgot the neighbour and started to talk to her. She listened, but she didn’t open the door at first, but then I said, look, I’ve had an accident, and she opened the door then. Where’s that tailor? Where’s he gone? He was supposed to get my jacket ready.’ Brodsky looked around him and a voice from the back of the crowd said:

‘He won’t be long, Mr Brodsky. In fact, here he is.’

A small man emerged with a tape measure and began to measure up Brodsky.

‘What’s this? What’s this?’ Brodsky muttered impatiently. Then he said to me: ‘I have no suit. They had one ready, it was delivered to my house, they say. Who knows? I had the accident, I don’t know where it is now. They’ll just have to get me a new one. A suit and a dress shirt, I want the best tonight. She’ll see what I meant, all those years.’

‘Mr Brodsky,’ I said, ‘you were telling me about Miss Collins. Do I understand you’ve managed to persuade her to come tonight after all?’

‘Oh, she’ll be coming. She promised. She won’t break her promise a second time. She never came to the cemetery. I waited and waited but she never came. But that wasn’t her fault. It was him, that hotel manager, he made her afraid. But I told her it’s too late for fear now. We’ve been afraid all our lives and now we have to be brave. At first she wasn’t listening. What have you done? she kept asking. She wasn’t the way you usually see her, she was almost crying, holding her hands up to her face, almost crying, not even caring the neighbours could hear it all. The dead of night and she was saying, Leo, Leo - yes, she calls me that now - Leo, what have you done to your leg? There’s blood. And I said it’s nothing, it doesn’t matter. An accident, but there was a doctor passing by, never mind that now, I told her, much more important, you have to come tonight. Don’t listen to that wretch from the hotel, that ... that *bell-boy*. There’s very little time left. Tonight she’d see what I’d always meant. All those years, I wasn’t the fool she thought. And she was saying she couldn’t come, she wasn’t ready, and besides, she said, all those wounds, they’d open again. And I said don’t listen to that bell-boy, that hotel janitor, it’s too late for that. And she pointed and said, but what’s

happened, your leg, it's bleeding, and I said never mind, I shouted at her then. Never mind, I said. Don't you see it, I have to have you come! You have to come! You have to see for yourself, you have to come! Then I could see it, that she knew how serious I was. I could see her eyes, how things changed behind them, how the fear went, how something came alive, and I knew I'd won at last and that cleaner of hotel lavatories had lost. And I said to her, quietly now, I said to her: "So you'll come?" And she nodded calmly and I knew I could trust her. Not a trace of doubt, Ryder. She nodded and I knew I could trust her so I turned and went away then. I came here, this good man - where is he? - he brought me here in his van. But I would have walked, there's nothing so wrong with me now.'

'But Mr Brodsky,' I said, 'are you sure you're well enough to go on stage? After all, you've had a terrible accident ...'

I had not intended it, but my taking up of this theme had the effect of setting off another round of shouting. The surgeon pushed his way to the front and, raising his voice above the others, punched his fist into his hand for emphasis.

'Mr Brodsky, I insist! Even if it's only for several minutes, you *must* relax!'

'I'm fine, I'm fine, leave me be!' Brodsky shouted and began to walk. Then, turning back to me - I had remained stationary - he called: 'If you see that bell-boy, Ryder, tell him I'm here. Tell him that. He thought I'd never get this far, he thinks I'm dog-shit. Tell him I'm here. See how he likes it.' With that he went off down the corridor, pursued by the arguing crowd.

I continued in the opposite direction, looking for some sign of Hoffman. There were now fewer orchestra members standing about the corridor and many of the dressing-room doors had

closed. At one point I was thinking of doubling back and peering in more closely through those doorways that were open, when I caught sight of Hoffman's figure in the corridor up ahead of me.

He had his back to me and was pacing slowly with his head bowed down. Although I was too far away to hear him, it was clear he was rehearsing his lines to himself. Then as I came nearer he suddenly lurched forward. I thought he was about to fall, but then realised he was once more performing the curious movement I had watched him practising in Brodsky's dressing-room mirror. Stooping right over, he brought up his arm, the elbow jutting outward, and began to bang his forehead with his fist. He was still doing so when I came up behind him and coughed. Hoffman straightened with a start and turned to me.

'Ah, Mr Ryder. Please don't worry. I'm sure Mr Brodsky will be here any moment now.'

'Indeed, Mr Hoffman. In fact, if you were just now rehearsing your speech of apology to the audience for Mr Brodsky's nonappearance, I'm pleased to inform you it will not be required. Mr Brodsky is now here.' I gestured down the corridor. 'He's just arrived.'

Hoffman looked astonished and for a second froze completely. Then he collected himself and said:

'Ah. Good. What a relief. But then of course, I was always ... I was always very confident.' He laughed, looking up and down the corridor as though hoping to catch sight of Brodsky. Then he laughed again and said: 'Well, I'd better go and see to him.'

'Mr Hoffman, before you do that, I'd very much appreciate you giving me the latest news regarding my parents. They are, I trust, safely in this building by now? And your idea of the horse and carriage - I believe I heard

it as I was driving past the front of the building earlier on - I trust it created the impact you were hoping for?’

‘Your parents?’ Hoffman looked confused again. Then he put his hand on my shoulder and said: ‘Ah yes. Your parents. Now let me see.’

‘Mr Hoffman, I’ve been trusting you and your colleagues to take good care of my parents. Neither is in the best of health ...’

‘Of course, of course. There’s no need to worry. It’s simply that, with so many things to consider, and Mr Brodsky being a little late, though you tell me he has now appeared ... Ha ha ...’ He trailed off and once more cast his gaze down the corridor. I asked quite coldly:

‘Mr Hoffman, where are my parents at this moment? Do you have any idea?’

‘Ah. At this precise moment, I have to be honest, I do not myself ... But I can assure you they are in the most capable hands. Of course, I would dearly wish to oversee personally every aspect of the evening, but you must understand ... Ha ha. Miss Stratmann. She would know exactly where your parents are. She has been instructed to keep a close eye on the situation regarding your parents. Not that there is any danger of their ever being in want of attention while they’re with us. On the contrary I have had to ask Miss Stratmann to watch carefully that they don’t become exhausted on account of the hospitality that will inevitably be showered on them from all directions ...’

‘Mr Hoffman, I take it you have no idea where they are at this point in time. And where is Miss Stratmann?’

‘Oh, I’m sure she’s here somewhere. Mr Ryder, let’s walk along and go and see how Mr Brodsky is doing. I’ve no doubt we’ll soon come across Miss Stratmann along the way. She may even be in the office. In any case, sir’ - he suddenly

adopted a more commanding manner - 'we won't achieve a great deal standing here.'

We set off together down the corridor. As we walked, Hoffman seemed to recover completely his composure and he said with a smile:

'Now we can be certain it will all go well. You, sir, look like a man who knows exactly what he's doing. And with Mr Brodsky here, all is now set. Everything will go just as planned. A splendid evening lies before us all.'

Then his step altered and I noticed he was staring at something in front of us. Following his gaze, I saw Stephan standing in the middle of the corridor with a troubled expression. The young man saw us and came towards us quickly.

'Good evening, Mr Ryder,' he said. Then, lowering his voice, he said to Hoffman: 'Father, perhaps we could have a word.'

'We're very busy, Stephan. Mr Brodsky has just now arrived.'

'Yes, I heard. But you see, Father, it's to do with Mother.'

'Ah. Mother.'

'It's just that she's still in the foyer and I'm due on in fifteen minutes. I saw her just now, she was just wandering about the foyer, and I told her I was going on soon and she said: "Well, dear, I have to see to a few things. I'll try and catch the end of your performance at least, but I'll just have to see to a few things first." That's what she said, but she didn't look that busy. Really, though, it's time you and Mother were both taking your seats. I'm on in less than fifteen minutes.'

'Yes, yes, I'll be along in just a moment. And your mother, I'm sure she'll finish whatever she's doing very

soon. Why get so worried? Just go back to your dressing room and get yourself ready. ’

‘But what is it Mother’s got to do in the foyer? She’s just standing there, chatting with anyone who happens by. Soon she’ll be the only one left there. People are taking their seats now. ’

‘I expect she’s just stretching her legs before settling down for the evening. Now, Stephan, calm yourself. You’ve got to get the evening off to a good start. We’re all counting on you. ’

The young man thought about this, then seemed suddenly to remember me.

‘You’ve been so kind, Mr Ryder,’ he said with a smile. ‘Your encouragement has been invaluable. ’

‘Your encouragement?’ Hoffman looked at me in astonishment.

‘Oh yes,’ Stephan said. ‘Mr Ryder has been extremely generous with both his time and his praise. He’s been listening to me practise and he’s given me the greatest encouragement I’ve had in years. ’

Hoffman was looking from one to the other of us, a smile of incredulity hovering on his lips. Then he said to me:

‘You’ve been spending time listening to Stephan? To him?’

‘I have indeed. I tried to tell you this once before, Mr Hoffman. Your son has considerable gifts and, whatever else occurs tonight, I feel sure his performance will prove a sensation. ’

‘Why, you really think so? But the fact remains, sir, that Stephan here, he ... he ...’ Hoffman appeared to become confused, and with a quick laugh slapped his son on the back.

'Well then, Stephan, it seems you might have something for us.'

'I hope so, Father. But Mother's still in the foyer. Perhaps she's waiting for *you*. I mean, it's always awkward, a woman sitting by herself at an occasion like this. Perhaps that's all it is. As soon as you go in and take your seat, she might come and join you. It's just that I have to go on very soon now.'

'Very well, Stephan, I'll see to it. Don't worry. Now you get back to your dressing room and get yourself ready. Mr Ryder and I have just a few things to deal with first.'

Although Stephan still looked unhappy, we left him and continued on our way.

'I should warn you, Mr Hoffman,' I said when we had gone a little further down the corridor. 'You may find Mr Brodsky has adopted a somewhat hostile attitude towards ... well, towards yourself.'

'Towards me?' Hoffman looked surprised.

'That's to say, when I saw him just now, he was expressing a certain annoyance with you. He seemed to have some sort of grievance. I thought I ought just to let you know.'

Hoffman mumbled something I could not hear. Then, as the corridor continued its gradual curve, what was obviously Brodsky's dressing room - a small crowd was loitering outside it - appeared ahead of us. The hotel manager slowed down, then stopped altogether.

'Mr Ryder, I've been thinking over what Stephan just said. On second thoughts, I think I'd better go and see to my wife. Make sure she's all right. After all, the nerves on a night like this, you understand.'

'Of course.'

‘Then you’ll forgive me. I wonder, sir, if I could ask you just to check that all is well with Mr Brodsky over there. I myself, yes, really’ - he looked at his watch - ‘it’s time I was taking my seat. Stephan’s quite right.’

Hoffman gave a short laugh and hurried off in the direction from which we had come.

I waited until he was out of sight, then walked towards the gathering around Brodsky’s doorway. Some people seemed to be standing there out of simple curiosity, while others were conducting heated arguments in subdued tones. The grey-haired surgeon was hovering close to the door, emphasising something to an orchestra member, repeatedly waving his hand in an exasperated manner towards the interior of the dressing room. The door itself, I was surprised to see, was wide open, and as I approached it the little tailor I had seen earlier popped his head out, shouting: ‘Mr Brodsky wants a pair of scissors. A large pair of scissors!’ Someone went hurrying off and the tailor disappeared again inside. I pushed my way through the crowd and looked into the room.

Brodsky was sitting with his back to the doorway, studying himself in his dressing mirror. He was now wearing a dinner jacket, both shoulders of which the tailor was pinching and tugging. He had on also a dress shirt, but as yet no bow tie.

‘Ah, Ryder,’ he said, seeing my reflection. ‘Come in, come in. You know, it’s a long time since I’ve worn clothes like these.’

He sounded much calmer than when I had last encountered him and I was reminded of the commanding air he had displayed in the cemetery that moment he had appeared in front of the mourners.

‘Now, Mr Brodsky,’ the tailor said, straightening himself, and for a few moments the two of them considered the jacket in the mirror. Then Brodsky shook his head.

‘No, no. A little tighter still,’ he said. ‘Here and here. Too much material.’

‘It won’t take a moment, Mr Brodsky.’ The tailor hurriedly took off the jacket and, giving me a quick bow as he passed, disappeared out of the door.

Brodsky went on looking at his reflection, fingering thoughtfully his winged collar. Then he picked up a comb and made some adjustments to his hair - which I noticed had been rubbed with a shiny lotion.

‘How are you feeling now?’ I asked, moving closer to him.

‘Good,’ he said slowly, continuing to attend to his hair. ‘I feel good now.’

And your leg? You’re sure you can perform with such a severe injury?’

‘My leg, it’s nothing.’ He put down his comb and considered the effect. ‘It wasn’t so bad as it looked. I’m fine now.’

As Brodsky said this, I could see in the mirror the surgeon - who had all the time remained near the doorway - take a step into the room with the look of someone no longer able to contain himself. But before the latter could say anything, Brodsky shouted at the mirror with some ferocity:

‘I’m fine now! The wound is nothing!’

The surgeon retreated back to the threshold, but from there continued to stare angrily at Brodsky’s back.

‘But Mr Brodsky,’ I said quietly, ‘you’ve lost a limb. That can never be a trivial matter.’

‘I lost a limb, it’s true.’ Brodsky was attending again to his hair. ‘But that was years ago, Ryder. Many years ago. When I was a child perhaps. It was all so long ago, I don’t quite remember. That fool of a doctor, he didn’t realise. I

was all caught in that bicycle, but it was just the artificial leg, the one that was trapped. The fool didn't even realise it. Calls himself a surgeon! All my life, it feels like it, Ryder, I've been without that leg. How long ago was it now? You start to forget, once you get to this sort of age. You don't even mind it any more. It gets to be like an old friend, a wound. Of course, it troubles you from time to time, but I've lived with it so long. It must have happened when I was a child. A railway accident, maybe. In the Ukraine somewhere. In the snow maybe. Who knows? It doesn't matter now. It feels like it's been this way all my life. Just one leg. It's not so bad. You get by. That fool of a doctor. He sawed off the wooden leg. Yes, there was blood, it's bleeding still, I need scissors for it, Ryder. I've sent out for scissors. No, no, not for the wound. The trouser leg, I mean this trouser leg here. How can I conduct with this trouser leg flapping empty like this? But that idiot of a doctor, that hospital intern, he cut off the wooden one, so what can I do now? I have to' - he mimicked with his fingers scissors cutting across the material just above the knee - 'I have to do something. Make it as elegant as possible. That fool, not only does he ruin my wooden leg, he grazes the stump. It's years since the wound's bled like this. What an idiot, with his face so serious. A very important man he thinks himself, and he saws off my wooden leg. Cuts the end of my stump. No wonder it keeps bleeding. Blood everywhere. But I lost it years ago. A long time ago, that's how it feels now. I've had a lifetime to get used to it. But now the idiot with his saw, it's bleeding again.' He looked down and rubbed something into the floor with his shoe. 'I've sent out for scissors. I have to look my best, Ryder. I'm not a vain man. I don't do this because I'm vain. But a man must look decent at a time like this. She'll see me tonight, she'll remember tonight through all the years we've got left. And this orchestra, it's a good orchestra. Here, let me show you.' He reached forward and held a baton up to the light. 'A good baton. There's a particular feel, you can

tell. It makes a difference, you know. For me, the point is always important. The point must be just so.' He stared at the baton. 'It's been a long time, but I'm not afraid. I'll show them all tonight. And I won't compromise. I'll take it the whole way. Like you say, Ryder. Max Sattler. But what an idiot, that man! That fool! That hospital janitor!'

These last words Brodsky shouted with some relish into the mirror and I saw the surgeon - who had been looking on from the doorway with an expression of astonishment - retreat sheepishly out of view.

With the surgeon finally gone, Brodsky for the first time displayed signs of strain. He closed his eyes and leaned over to one side in his chair, breathing heavily. But then, the next moment, a man burst into the room proffering a pair of scissors.

'Ah, at last,' Brodsky said, taking them. Then, once the man had left, he placed the scissors on the shelf in front of the mirror and began to stand up. He used the back of his chair to hoist himself up, then stretched a hand towards the ironing board leaning against the wall near the mirror. I moved forward to assist him, but with surprising agility he reached the ironing board unaided and tucked it under his arm.

'You see,' he said, gazing down sadly at the empty trouser leg. 'I have to do something here.'

'Would you like me to call back the tailor?'

'No, no. That man, he won't know what to do. I'll do it myself.'

Brodsky went on looking down at the empty trouser leg. As I watched him, I remembered the various other pressing matters awaiting my attention. In particular, I needed to return to Sophie and Boris, and to find out the latest on Gustav's condition. It was even possible some crucial

decision concerning Gustav had been deferred pending my return. I gave a cough and said:

‘If you don’t mind, Mr Brodsky, I have to be getting along.’

Brodsky was still gazing down at his trouser leg. ‘It will be magnificent tonight, Ryder,’ he said quietly. ‘She’ll see. She’ll see at last.’

The scene outside Gustav's dressing room had not changed greatly in the time I had been away. The porters had perhaps moved further away from the doorway and were now huddled in murmured conference on the other side of the corridor. Sophie, however, was standing much as I had last seen her, the package folded over her arms, gazing at the slightly open door. Noticing my approach, one of the porters came towards me and said in a low voice:

'He's still holding out well, sir. But Josef's gone to fetch the doctor now. We decided we couldn't leave it any longer.'

I nodded, then asked quietly, glancing towards Sophie: 'Hasn't she gone in at all?'

'Not yet, sir. Though I'm sure Miss Sophie will do so very shortly.'

We both regarded her a moment.

'And Boris?' I asked.

'Oh, he's been in a few times, sir.'

'A few times?'

'Oh yes. He's in there just now.'

I nodded again, then went up to Sophie. She had been unaware of my return and gave a start as I touched her gently on the shoulder. Then she laughed and said:

'He's in there. Papa.'

'Yes.'

She adjusted her position a little, leaning to one side as though trying to improve her view through the doorway.

‘Aren’t you going to give him the coat?’ I asked.

Sophie looked down at it, then said: ‘Oh yes. Yes, yes. I was just going to ...’ She trailed off and again leaned to one side. Then she called out:

‘Boris? Boris! Come out a minute.’

After a few seconds Boris emerged looking very collected and closed the door carefully behind him.

‘Well?’ Sophie asked.

Boris gave me a quick glance. Then, turning to his mother, he said:

‘Grandfather says he’s sorry. He said to say he’s sorry.’

‘Is that all? That’s all he said?’

For an instant, uncertainty crossed the little boy’s face. Then he said reassuringly: ‘I’ll go back in. He’ll say more.’

‘But is that all he said to you just now? That he’s sorry?’

‘Don’t worry. I’ll go back in.’

‘Just a minute.’ Sophie began to tear the wrapping off the overcoat. ‘Take this in to your grandfather. Give it to him. See if it fits him properly. Tell him I can always adjust a few things.’

She let the torn wrapping fall to the floor and held up a dark brown overcoat. Boris took it without fuss and went back into the dressing room. Perhaps on account of the coat – it sat very bulkily in the little boy’s arms – Boris left the door half open behind him and soon a murmur of voices came out into the corridor. Sophie did not move from her spot, but I could see her straining to catch some words. Behind us the porters were still keeping a respectful distance, but I could see they too were now looking anxiously at the door.

Several moments passed, then Boris came out again.

‘Grandfather says thank you,’ he said to Sophie. ‘He’s very happy now. He says he’s very happy.’

‘Is that all he said?’

‘He said he’s happy. He wasn’t comfortable before, but now the coat’s come, he says it means a lot to him.’ Boris glanced behind him, then back at his mother. ‘He says he’s very happy with the coat.’

‘That’s all he said? Nothing about ... nothing about if it fits him? If he likes the colour?’

Because I was watching Sophie at this point, I did not see precisely what it was Boris did next. My impression was that he did nothing remarkable, simply pausing a little while he thought of a response to his mother’s query. But Sophie suddenly shouted:

‘Why are you doing that?’

The little boy stared in bewilderment.

‘Why are you doing that? You know what I mean. Like this! Like this!’ She grabbed Boris by the shoulder and began to shake him violently. ‘Just like his grandfather!’ she said, turning to me. ‘He copies it!’ Then to the porters, who were all looking on in alarm: ‘His grandfather! That’s where he gets it from. You see the way he does that with his shoulder? So smug, so self-satisfied. You see it? Exactly like his grandfather!’ She glared at Boris and continued to shake him. ‘Oh, so you think you’re so grand, do you? Do you?’

Boris pulled himself free and staggered back a few steps.

‘Did you see it?’ Sophie asked me. ‘The way he always does that. It’s just like his grandfather.’

Boris took a few more steps away from us. Then, reaching down, he picked off the floor the black doctor’s bag he had

brought with him and held it up defensively in front of his chest. I thought he was about to burst into tears, but at the last moment he managed to control himself.

‘Don’t worry ...’ he began, then stopped. He hoisted the black bag higher in front of his chest. ‘Don’t worry. I’ll ... I’ll ...’ He gave up and looked about him. The door to the neighbouring room was only a short way behind him and the little boy turned quickly and disappeared through it, slamming it shut after him.

‘Are you mad?’ I said to Sophie. ‘He’s upset enough as it is.’

Sophie remained silent for a moment. Then she gave a sigh and walked over to the door through which Boris had disappeared. She knocked, then went in.

I heard Boris say something, but although Sophie had left the door open, I could not make out his words.

‘I’m sorry,’ I heard Sophie say in reply. ‘I didn’t mean to.’

Boris said something else I could not catch.

‘No, no, it’s all right,’ Sophie said gently. ‘You’ve been wonderful.’ Then after a pause, she said: ‘I’ve got to go and speak with your grandfather now. I’ve got to go.’

Boris said something again.

‘Yes, all right,’ Sophie said. ‘I’ll ask him to come in and wait with you.’

The little boy now began to say something quite lengthy.

‘No, he won’t,’ Sophie interrupted after a while. ‘He’ll be nice to you. No, I promise. He will. I’ll ask him to come in. But I’ve got to go and speak to Grandfather now. Before the doctor arrives.’

Sophie came out of the room and closed the door. Then, coming close to me, she said very quietly:

‘Please go in and wait with him. He’s upset. I’ve got to go and speak to Papa.’ Then, before I could move, she had placed a hand on my arm, saying: ‘Please be warm to him again. Like you used to be. He so misses it.’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t know what you’re referring to. If he’s upset, it’s because you ...’

‘Please,’ Sophie said. ‘Perhaps it’s my fault it’s all been happening, but please let it stop now. Please go in and sit with him.’

‘Of course I’ll sit with him,’ I said coldly. ‘Why wouldn’t I? You’d better go in to your father. He probably heard all of that just now.’

I entered the room in which Boris had ensconced himself and was surprised to find it did not resemble any of the other dressing rooms I had seen in the corridor. In fact, it was much more like a classroom, with its neat rows of small desks and chairs and, at the front, a large blackboard. The place was large and dimly lit with heavy shadows everywhere. Boris was sitting at a desk near the back and glanced up briefly as I came in. I said nothing to him and began looking around.

There was an intense scrawl on the blackboard and I wondered vaguely if Boris had done it. Then, as I continued to move around the empty desks, gazing at the charts and maps pinned up on the walls, the little boy gave a heavy sigh. I glanced at him and saw that he had placed his black bag on his lap and was struggling to remove something from it. Eventually he brought out a large book and put it down on the desk in front of him.

I turned away and continued moving around the room. When I next glanced at him, he was leafing through the pages with an admiring expression, and I realised he was once again looking at the handiwork manual. Feeling not a little

irritated, I turned to look at a poster warning against the dangers of solvent abuse. Then Boris said behind me:

‘I really like this book. It shows you everything.’

He had tried to say this as though to himself, but I had drifted quite far from where he was sitting and so he had been obliged to raise his voice quite unnaturally. I decided not to respond and continued to wander around the room.

After a while Boris sighed heavily once more.

‘Mother gets so upset sometimes,’ he said.

Again, there was no sense of his having addressed me properly, and so I did not respond. Besides, when I eventually turned to him, he was pretending to be absorbed in his book. I wandered over to the other corner of the room and found pinned on the wall a large sheet marked ‘Lost Property’. There was a long list of entries in every kind of handwriting, a column each for the date, the article lost and the owner’s name. For some reason, I found this sheet diverting and went on studying it for a little while. The entries near the top appeared to have been written in earnest – a lost pen, a lost chess piece, a lost wallet. Then, from about half-way down, the entries grew facetious. Someone was claiming to have lost ‘three million US dollars’. Another entry was that of ‘Genghis Khan’ who had lost ‘the Asian Continent’.

‘I really like this book,’ Boris said behind me. ‘It shows you everything.’

Suddenly my patience snapped and I went quickly over to him and slammed my hand down on the desktop.

‘Look, why do you keep reading this thing?’ I demanded.

‘What did your mother tell you about it? She told you it was a marvellous present, I suppose. Well, it wasn’t. Is that what she told you? That it’s a splendid present? That I chose it for you with great care? Look at it! Look at it!’ – I

attempted to tug the book out from under his grasp, but he clung to it, putting his arms down over it - 'it's just a useless old manual someone wanted to throw away. Do you think a book like this, something like this, can teach you about anything?'

I was still trying to pull it out from under him, but Boris, leaning right over the desk, was now protecting the book with his body. All the while he maintained an unnerving silence. I tugged again, determined to take the thing off him once and for all.

'Listen, this is a useless present. Utterly useless. No thought, no affection, nothing went into it. An afterthought, it's got it written over every page. But you think it's something marvellous I gave you! Give it to me, give it to me!'

Perhaps the fear that the manual would be torn apart caused Boris suddenly to raise his arms, and I found myself holding the book up by one cover. He still did not utter a sound, and I felt somewhat foolish about my outburst. I glanced at the book, hanging from my hand, then threw it towards the far corner of the room. It hit a desk and landed somewhere in the shadows. I immediately felt calmer and took a deep breath. When I next looked at him, Boris was sitting up rigidly, staring towards the part of the room where the manual had landed. He then got to his feet and hurried to retrieve it. He had not got half-way, however, when Sophie's voice called urgently from the corridor:

'Boris, come here a moment. Just a moment.'

Boris hesitated, looking once more over to where the manual had landed, then went out of the room.

'Boris,' I could hear Sophie saying outside, 'go and ask Grandfather how he's feeling now. And ask him if he wants any adjustments on the coat. The buttons at the bottom may be wrong. It might flap in the wind, if he stands up on the

bridge a lot. Go and ask him, but don't stay and talk for a long time. Just ask him then come straight out.'

By the time I came back into the corridor, the little boy had already disappeared into Gustav's dressing room, and the scene that greeted me was a familiar one: Sophie standing tensely on the spot, her eyes on the door; the porters, a little way behind, looking on with their worried expressions. There was, however, a forlorn look in Sophie's face I had not noticed before and I suddenly felt a rush of tenderness towards her. I went up to her and placed my arm around her shoulders.

'This is a difficult time for us all,' I said gently. 'A very difficult time.'

I began to draw her closer to me, but she suddenly shook me off and went on staring at the doorway. Startled by this rebuttal, I said to her angrily:

'Look, we've all got to support each other at times like this.'

Sophie did not respond, and then Boris came out of the dressing room again.

'Grandfather says the coat's just what he wanted and he likes it even more because Mother gave it to him.'

Sophie made an exasperated noise. 'But does he want me to adjust it? Why doesn't he tell me? The doctor will be here soon.'

'He says ... he says he loves the coat. He loves it very much.'

'Ask him about the lower buttons. If he's going to keep standing up on the bridge in the wind, it will have to do up properly.'

Boris considered this for a second, then nodded and went back into the dressing room.

‘Look,’ I said to Sophie, ‘you don’t seem to realise how much pressure I’m under just now. Do you realise I’m due on stage very shortly? I’ll have to answer complex questions about the future of this community. There’s going to be an electronic scoreboard. Do you realise what this means? It’s all very well you worrying about these buttons and so on. Do you realise the pressure I’m under just now?’

Sophie turned to me with a distressed look and seemed about to say something, but just then Boris appeared again. This time he looked very seriously into his mother’s face but said nothing.

‘Well, what did he say?’ Sophie asked.

‘He says he loves the coat very much. He says it reminds him of a coat Mother had when Mother was little. Something about the colour. He says it used to have a picture of a bear on it. The coat Mother used to have.’

‘Do I need to adjust it?! Why won’t he give me a straight answer? The doctor will be here soon!’

‘You don’t seem to understand,’ I said interrupting.

‘There are people out there depending on me. There’s going to be an electronic scoreboard, everything. They want me to come to the edge of the stage after each answer. That’s a lot of pressure. You don’t seem to ...’

I stopped, becoming aware that Gustav was calling out something. Boris immediately turned and went back into the dressing room, and for what felt a long time Sophie and I stood there together waiting for him to come back. When he finally did so, the little boy looked at neither of us but, striding past, stopped in front of the porters.

‘Gentlemen, please.’ He made an ushering motion.

‘Grandfather would like you all to go in. He wants you all to be with him now.’

Boris began to lead the way and, after a slight hesitation, the porters followed keenly. They filed past us, some of them mumbling an awkward word or two to Sophie.

Once the last of them had gone in, I peered into the room but still could not see Gustav on account of the porters crowded just inside the doorway. There came the sound of three or four voices talking at once, and I was about to move closer when Sophie suddenly brushed past me and entered the room. There was a lot of movement and the voices stopped.

I strode up to the doorway. The porters having formed a gangway to let Sophie through, I now had a clear view of Gustav lying on his mattress. The brown overcoat was draped over the upper part of his body on top of the grey blanket I remembered from earlier. He had no pillow and clearly lacked the strength to raise his head, but he was looking up at his daughter with a gentle smile around his eyes.

Sophie had stopped two or three paces from where Gustav was lying. Her back was turned to me, so I could not see her expression, but she appeared to be staring down at him. Then, after several moments of silence, Sophie said:

‘Do you remember that day you came to school? When you came with my swimming kit? I’d left it at home and I was so upset all through the morning, wondering what I was going to do, and then you came with the blue sportsbag, the one with the string strap, came right into the classroom. Do you remember, Papa?’

‘This coat will keep me warm now,’ Gustav said. ‘It’s what I’ve been needing.’

‘You only had half an hour off, so you’d run all the way from the hotel. You came into the classroom, holding the blue sportsbag.’

‘I was always very proud of you.’

'I'd been so worried all morning. Wondering what I was going to do.'

'This is a very good coat. Look at this collar. And it's real leather all along here.'

'Excuse me,' a voice said close to me and I turned to find a young man with spectacles and a doctor's bag trying to squeeze past. Close behind him was another porter I recognised from the Hungarian Café. The two of them went into the room, and the young doctor, hurrying to Gustav, knelt down beside him and began to look him over.

Sophie silently stared at the doctor. Then, as though acknowledging it was now someone else's turn to receive her father's attention, she took a few steps back. Boris walked over to her and for a moment they were standing almost touching, but Sophie seemed not to notice the little boy and went on staring at the doctor's hunched-over back.

It was just at this point I suddenly remembered again the many things needing to be done before my performance, and it occurred to me that, with the doctor having arrived, this was as good a moment as any for me to slip away. I moved quietly back out into the corridor and was about to set off in search of Hoffman when I heard a movement behind me and felt my arm being grasped roughly.

'Where do you think you're going?' Sophie asked in an angry whisper.

'I'm sorry, but you clearly don't understand. I've got a lot to do now. There's going to be an electronic scoreboard, everything. There's an awful lot depending on me.' I said this, all the time trying to free my arm from her grip.

'But Boris. He needs you here. We both need you here.'

'Look, you obviously have no idea! My parents, don't you see? My parents will be arriving at any moment! There's a thousand things I have to do! You've no idea, you've clearly

no idea at all!' I finally wrenched myself free. 'Look, I'll come back,' I called in a conciliatory tone over my shoulder as I hurried away. 'I'll come back as soon as I can.'

I was still making my way rapidly along the corridor when I became aware of several figures standing in a line against the wall. Glancing towards them, I saw they were all wearing kitchen overalls and, as far as I could make out, were each waiting their turn to climb into a small black cupboard. Growing curious, I slowed my pace, then eventually turned and walked towards them.

The cupboard, I could now see, was tall and narrow like a broom closet and fixed to the wall a half-metre or so off the ground. A short series of steps led up to it, and from the demeanour of those in the queue I supposed the cupboard contained a urinal or perhaps a drinking fountain. But as I came closer I saw that the man currently at the top of the steps was bent right forward with his rear protruding, to all appearances rummaging busily through the cupboard's contents. Those in the queue, meanwhile, were gesticulating and calling up impatiently for him to finish his turn. Then, as the man came out of the cupboard and was looking cautiously behind him for the top step, someone in the queue let out an exclamation and pointed in my direction. All heads turned to me and the next moment the queue had dissolved as everyone hurried to make way for me. The man who had been in the cupboard came down the steps as quickly as he could, then, bowing to me, made an ushering motion up to the cupboard.

'Thank you,' I said, 'but I believe there were others already waiting.'

There was a storm of protest and several hands virtually pushed me up the short staircase.

The narrow door of the cupboard had fallen shut, and when I opened it - it pulled towards me, obliging me to balance

precariously on the top step - I discovered to my surprise that I was looking down onto the auditorium from a vast height. The entire back of the cupboard was missing and, were I reckless enough, I saw that I could, by leaning out and stretching a little, touch the concert hall ceiling. The view certainly was commanding, but the whole arrangement struck me as idiotically hazardous. The cupboard, if anything, actually leaned forward, encouraging a careless spectator to totter towards the edge. Meanwhile only a thin cord tied at waist height had been provided to resist a plunge down into the audience. I could not see any obvious reason for the cupboard - other than perhaps that it was part of some system which allowed flags and such to be suspended across the hall.

I moved my feet carefully until they were both inside the cupboard, then, gripping the door frame tightly, took a look at the scene below me.

Around three-quarters of the seats were now occupied, but the lights were still up and everywhere people were chatting and greeting one another. Some were waving to those in distant rows, others crowding the aisles, talking and laughing. All the while more people were arriving by the two main doors. The array of gleaming music stands in the orchestra pit was catching the light, while on the stage itself - the curtains had been left open - a solitary grand piano was waiting with its lid raised. As I looked down at this instrument on which I was soon to give this most momentous of performances, the thought struck me that this was as close as I was now likely to come to carrying out an inspection of the conditions, and I again felt frustration about the whole way I had organised my time since arriving in the city.

Then, as I watched, Stephan Hoffman came onto the stage from the wings. There had been no announcement and the lights did not dim even slightly. Stephan's manner, moreover, lacked any sense of ceremony. He walked briskly to the piano with a preoccupied air, not glancing towards the audience. It was

hardly surprising then that most people in the hall displayed nothing more than mild curiosity and went on with their talking and greeting. Certainly there was some surprise when he went into the explosive opening of *Glass Passions*, but even then the large majority seemed to conclude, after a few seconds, that the young man was simply testing out the piano or else the amplification system. Then, only several bars in, something seemed to catch Stephan's eye and his playing lost all intensity, as though someone had suddenly pulled out a plug. His gaze followed something moving through the crowd, until eventually he was playing with his head twisted right away from the piano. I then saw he was watching a couple of figures leaving the auditorium and, leaning forward a little further, made out just in time Hoffman and his wife disappearing below me out of my angle of vision.

Stephan stopped playing altogether and, swivelling right round on his stool, sat staring after his parents. This action appeared to remove any remaining doubts in the crowd that Stephan was engaged in a sound check. Indeed, for a moment he looked for all the world like someone awaiting signals from technicians on the other side of the hall, and no one paid any attention when he eventually rose from the stool and strode off the stage.

Only when he had reached the wings did he allow himself to give in to the feeling of outrage now engulfing him. On the other hand, the notion that he had abandoned the stage after only a few bars had for the moment a sense of utter unreality about it, and he hardly gave it thought as he hurried down the wooden steps and through the series of backstage doors.

When he emerged into the corridor it was busy with rushing stage-hands and catering staff. Stephan set off towards the lobby where he hoped to find his parents, but before he had gone far he spotted his father coming towards him, unaccompanied and wearing a preoccupied air. For his part the hotel manager did not notice Stephan until they were

virtually about to collide. He then stopped and stared at his son with astonishment.

‘What? You’re not playing?’

‘Father, why did you and Mother leave like that? And where’s Mother now? Isn’t she feeling well?’

‘Your mother.’ Hoffman sighed gravely. ‘Your mother felt it was correct she should leave at this point. Of course, I escorted her and ... Well, let me be truthful, Stephan. Let me say it. I tended to concur with her view. I didn’t resist the idea. You look at me like that, Stephan. Yes, I realise I’ve let you down. I promised you you could have this chance, this platform to play in front of the whole town, in front of all our friends and colleagues. Yes, yes, I promised you this. Perhaps it was you yourself who asked me, perhaps you caught me when I was distracted, who knows how it came about? It doesn’t matter. The point is I agreed, I promised, I didn’t want to go back on it, there, it was my fault. But you have to try and understand, Stephan, how it is for us, your parents. How difficult it is to have to witness ...’

‘I’m going to talk to Mother,’ Stephan said and began to walk off. For a brief second Hoffman looked aghast, and then he grasped his son’s arm quite roughly, laughing self-consciously as he did so.

‘You can’t do that, Stephan. What I mean is, you see, your mother has gone to the ladies’ room. Ha ha. In any case, I think it best you let her sit things out, so to speak. But Stephan, what have you done? You should be playing. Ah, but perhaps that’s for the best in the end. A few embarrassing questions, but no more than that.’

‘Father, I’m going back to play. Please take your seat. And please persuade Mother to come back.’

‘Stephan, Stephan.’ Hoffman shook his head and placed a hand on his son’s shoulder. ‘I want you to know that we both

think very highly of you. We're both immensely proud. But this idea of yours, this idea you've had all your life. I mean about ... about your music. Your mother and I, we've never had the heart to tell you. Naturally, we wanted you to have your dreams. But this. All this' - he gestured in the direction of the auditorium - 'this has all been a terrible mistake. We should never have let things get this far. You see, Stephan, the fact is this. Your playing is very charming. Extremely accomplished in its way. We've always enjoyed listening to you play at home. But music, serious music, music at the sort of level required tonight ... that, you see, is another thing. No, no, don't interrupt, I'm trying to tell you something, something I should have said long ago. You see, this is the civic concert hall. Audiences, concert audiences, they are not like friends and relatives who listen sympathetically in the living room. Real concert audiences, they are used to standards, professional standards. Stephan, how can I put this?'

'Father,' Stephan interrupted, 'you don't realise. I've practised hard. And even though the piece I'm about to play is a very late choice, nevertheless, I've practised very hard and if you'd only come now you'd see ...'

'Stephan, Stephan ...' Hoffman shook his head again. 'If only it were just a matter of hard work. If only it were just that. But some of us, we're just not born with the gift. We haven't got it in us, and that's something we have to come to terms with. It's terrible I have to tell you this at such a moment, and after having led you on for so long. I hope you can forgive us, your mother and me, we were weak for so long. But we could see how much pleasure it brought you and we didn't have the heart. But it's no excuse, I know that. This is awful, my heart bleeds for you at this moment, it really does. I hope you'll be able to forgive us. It was a terrible mistake, to have let you go this far. To have you go on stage in front of the whole town. Your mother and I, we love you too much to be able to watch it. It would simply be too much

to ... to see our own dear son being made a laughing stock. There, I've said it, I've put my cards on the table. It's cruel, but I've told you at last. I thought I might be able to do it. That I would be able to sit there amidst the smirks and the sniggers. But when the moment came, your mother found she could not, and neither could I. What is it? Why won't you listen to me? Don't you realise this is bringing me great pain? It's not easy to speak so frankly, even to one's own son ...'

'Father, please, I beg you. Just come and listen, if only for a few minutes, and judge for yourself. And Mother. Please, please, persuade Mother. You'll both see then, I know you will ...'

'Stephan, it's time for you to go back on stage. Your name is printed on the programme. You have appeared once already. You must now at the very least make a go of it. Let everyone see that you at least did your best. There, that's my advice. Never mind them, never mind their sniggers. Even if they openly laugh as though some hilarious pantomime were being performed on the stage rather than a solemn and profound piece of music, even then, you can remember your mother and father are proud you at least had the courage to see it through. Yes, you must go now and see it through, Stephan. But you must forgive us, we simply love you too much to witness it. In fact, Stephan, I believe it would break your mother's heart to do so. Now you must go, there's little time left. Go, go, go.'

Hoffman spun around, a hand to his forehead, as though reeling from a migraine, and in this manner drifted a few steps away from Stephan. Then he abruptly straightened and looked back at his son.

'Stephan,' he said sternly. 'It's time for you to go back on stage.'

Stephan went on staring at his father for a second, then, seeing finally that his cause was a hopeless one, turned and

set off down the corridor.

As he made his way again through the succession of backstage doors, Stephan found himself besieged by a variety of thoughts and emotions. Naturally he was frustrated at this failure to persuade his parents to return to their seats. Moreover, he could feel awakening deep within him a nagging fear he had not experienced for some years - namely that what his father had said was true and that he was indeed the victim of some massive delusion. But then as he approached the wings his confidence rapidly returned and with it came an aggressive urge to find out for himself just what he was capable of.

Stephan came back onto the stage to find the lights had dimmed a little. The auditorium was far from dark, however, and many guests were still on their feet. In various parts of the hall waves of people could be seen rising up as someone else crept along a row to their seat. The hubbub lowered only slightly as the young man sat down at the piano and continued steadily while he waited for his emotions to settle. Then his hands came down in the harsh, precise way they had earlier, evoking a territory somewhere between shock and exhilaration essential for the opening of *Glass Passions*.

By the time he was half-way through the brief prologue, the audience had become significantly quieter. By the time he was completing the first movement, the auditorium had fallen entirely silent. Those who had been standing talking in the aisles were still on their feet, but appeared frozen, their eyes fixed on the stage. All those seated were watching and listening with concentration. A small crowd had formed at one of the entrances where the last of the people drifting in had stopped in their tracks. As Stephan began the second movement, the technicians turned the house lights right down and I could no longer see the audience well. But there was no doubting the general astonishment which continued to envelope the hall. Admittedly a part of this response was down to the

audience's surprise at discovering one of their own young men capable of scaling such technical heights as they were now witnessing. But over and beyond his expertise, there was some strangely intense quality to Stephan's playing that virtually refused to be ignored. It was my impression, moreover, that many of those present saw in this unexpected start to the evening a kind of omen. If this was merely the prelude, what did the rest of the proceedings hold in store? Would the evening prove a turning point for the community after all? Such seemed to be the unspoken questions behind many a startled face in the crowd below me.

Stephan rounded off with a wistful, faintly ironic reading of the coda. There was a second or two of silence after he had finished, and then the hall burst into enthusiastic applause, which the young man leapt to his feet to acknowledge. He was clearly delighted, and if he was feeling all the more frustrated that his parents were not present to witness this triumph, he did not allow it to show on his face. He took several bows as the applause continued, and then, perhaps suddenly remembering his contribution was only a modest part of the whole programme, retreated hastily out of view.

The applause continued strongly for some time before subsiding into an excited murmur. Then, before people had had much chance to exchange views, a severe-faced man with silver hair appeared from the wings. As he came slowly and self-importantly towards the lectern at the front, I recognised him as the man who had presided over the banquet in honour of Brodsky on my first night.

The auditorium quickly fell silent, but for a good thirty seconds the severe-faced man said nothing, simply regarding the audience with faint disgust. Then finally he took a weary breath and said:

'Although it is my wish that you all enjoy this evening, I would remind you that we are not gathered here now to

witness a cabaret. Gravely important issues lie behind tonight's occasion. Make no mistake. Issues relating to our future, to the very identity of our community.'

The severe-faced man continued to reiterate pedantically this same point for several more minutes, occasionally taking long pauses during which he surveyed the room with a scowl. I began to lose interest and, remembering the queue of people behind me waiting to use the cupboard, decided to allow someone else his turn. But just as I was negotiating my way out of the confined space, I realised the severe-faced man had moved onto a fresh point - that in fact he was in the process of introducing someone onto the stage.

The personage in question, it seemed, was not only 'the cornerstone of the city's entire library system', but was also possessed of the ability to 'capture the curl of the dewdrop on the tip of an autumn leaf'. The severe-faced man stared contemptuously at the audience for one last time, then mumbled a name and stalked off. The auditorium broke into keen applause, directed evidently at the severe-faced man rather than the person he had introduced. Indeed, the latter did not appear for another minute or so, and when he did was greeted somewhat hesitantly.

The man was small and neat with a bald head and a moustache. He came on carrying a folder which he put down on the lectern. He then unclipped some sheets of paper and began to shuffle them about, never once looking up to acknowledge the audience. A restlessness began to grow in the hall. I became curious again and, deciding that those in the queue would not mind waiting just a little longer, repositioned myself carefully near the edge of the cupboard.

When the bald-headed man finally spoke, he did so much too close to the microphone and his voice boomed shakily.

'I would like tonight to present a selection of my work from each of my three periods. Many of these poems will be familiar to you from my readings at the Café Adèle, but I

trust you will not object to hearing them again in this grand context. And I will tell you now, there will be a small surprise at the end. Something I trust will bring you a modest amount of pleasure. ’

He then returned to shuffling his papers and a few murmured conversations started up in the crowd. Then the bald-headed man at last made up his mind and coughed loudly into the microphone, restoring the silence.

Many of the poems used rhyme and were relatively short. There were poems about fish in the city park, snow-storms, broken windows remembered from childhood - all delivered in a curiously high-pitched incantatory tone. My attention drifted for a few minutes, and then I became aware that a section of the audience somewhere directly below me had started to talk quite audibly.

For the moment the voices were reasonably discreet, but even as I listened they seemed to grow bolder. Eventually - while the bald-headed man was reciting a long poem about different cats owned by his mother over the years - the noise drifting up to me became that of a sizeable party consorting in more or less normal tones. Overcoming my sense of caution, I moved right to the very edge of the cupboard and, holding on to the wooden frame with both hands, peered down.

The talking was indeed coming from a group seated directly below me, but the number of those involved was smaller than I had supposed. Seven or eight people had apparently decided to pay no further attention to the poet and were now happily conversing with each other, some of them having turned completely in their seats to do so. I was about to study this group more closely, when I caught sight of Miss Collins sitting several rows behind.

She was wearing the elegant black evening dress she had worn at the banquet of the first night, her shawl still around her shoulders. She was watching the bald-headed man

sympathetically, her head tilted slightly to one side, a finger raised to her chin. I continued to watch her for a while but there was nothing at all about her appearance to suggest she was anything other than perfectly calm and serene.

My gaze returned to the rowdy group below me and I noticed that playing cards were now being passed around. Only then did I realise that the core of this group comprised the drunken men I had encountered in the cinema on my first night, and then just a little while ago in the corridor.

The game of cards grew ever more boisterous, until the whole lot of them were bursting into cheers or whoops of laughter. Disapproving looks were being cast in their direction, but then gradually more and more people in the hall began also to talk, albeit in more restrained voices.

The bald-headed man showed no sign of noticing and continued to recite earnestly, poem after poem. Then, about twenty minutes after he had first come on stage, he paused and, gathering some sheets together, said:

‘And now we enter my second period. As some of you will already know, my second period was ushered in by one key incident. An incident that made it no longer possible for me to create with the tools I had hitherto employed. That is to say, the discovery that my wife had been unfaithful.’

He hung down his head as if this memory still grieved him. It was then that one of the group below me shouted:

‘So he obviously *was* using the wrong tools!’

His companions all laughed, then someone else called out:

‘A bad workman always blames his tools.’

‘His wife did too it seems,’ said the first voice.

This exchange, clearly intended to be heard by as many people as possible, provoked a fair amount of tittering. It

was not clear how much of it the bald-headed man had heard from the stage, but he paused and, without looking in the direction of his hecklers, shuffled his papers again. If he had intended to say more by way of introducing his second period, he now abandoned the idea and started once more to recite.

The bald-headed man's second period was not obviously different from his first and the restlessness in the audience grew. So much so that when after a few more minutes one of the drunken men shouted something I could not catch, a substantial part of the hall laughed quite openly. For the first time, the bald-headed man seemed to realise he was losing control of the audience and, looking up in mid-sentence, stood blinking into the lights as though in shock. An obvious course open to him was to abandon the stage. A more dignified option would have been to read three or four more poems before departing. The bald-headed man, however, embarked on another solution altogether. He began to read again at a panic-stricken pace with the intention presumably of completing his planned programme as quickly as possible. The effect was not only to render him more or less incoherent, but also to give encouragement to his enemies, who now saw they had him on the run. More and more remarks were shouted out - no longer just by the group below me - to be greeted each time with laughter from all around the hall.

Then at last the bald-headed man made an attempt to regain control. He put aside his folder and, not saying a word, stared pleadingly from the lectern. The crowd, much of which had been laughing, quietened - perhaps as much out of curiosity as from remorse. When the bald-headed man finally spoke, his voice had gained a degree of authority.

'I promised you a small surprise,' he said. 'Now here it is. A new poem. I finished it only a week ago. I composed it especially for this great occasion tonight. It is called, simply, "Brotsky the Conqueror". If you will allow me.'

The man shuffled his sheets again, but this time the audience remained silent. Then he leaned forward and began to recite. After the first few lines, he glanced up quickly and seemed surprised to find the hall still silent. He continued to read, and as he did so grew increasingly confident, so that before long he was waving his hands about loftily to emphasise key phrases.

I had imagined the poem would be a general portrait of Brodsky, but it soon became clear it was concerned solely with Brodsky's battles with alcohol. The earlier stanzas drew comparisons between Brodsky and a variety of mythical heroes. There were images of Brodsky hurling spears from a hilltop at an invading army, Brodsky grappling with a sea-serpent, Brodsky chained to a rock. The audience continued to listen with a respectful, even solemn attitude. I glanced at Miss Collins, but could see no obvious change in her demeanour. She was, just as before, observing the poet with an interested but detached air, a finger on the side of her chin.

After several minutes the poem shifted ground. It abandoned its mythical backdrops, focusing instead on actual incidents involving Brodsky from the recent past - incidents which as far as I could guess had passed into local legend. Most of these references were of course lost on me, but I could see an attempt was being made to re-appraise and dignify Brodsky's role in each episode. From a literary standpoint, this section of the poem struck me as a great improvement on the earlier, but the introduction of such concrete and familiar contexts had the effect of breaking whatever hold the bald-headed man had established over the audience. A reference to 'the bus-shelter tragedy' set off some tittering again, which grew more widespread at the mention of Brodsky 'outnumbered and battle-worn' being 'forced finally to surrender, behind the telephone booth'. But it was when the bald-headed man spoke of 'a glittering

show of valour on the school outing' that the entire hall, as one, erupted into laughter.

From this point on, it was clear to me nothing could save the bald-headed man. The final stanzas, devoted to eulogising Brodsky's new-found sobriety, were greeted virtually line by line with gales of laughter. When I glanced again at Miss Collins, I could see the finger on her chin making quick stroking motions, but otherwise she looked as composed as ever. The bald-headed man, barely audible above the laughing and the heckling, finally came to the end and, gathering up his sheets indignantly, stalked off the stage. A portion of the audience, feeling perhaps that things had gone too far, applauded quite generously.

For the next few minutes the stage remained empty and the audience was soon talking at full volume. Surveying the faces below me I saw with interest that, although many people were exchanging mirthful looks, a significant number appeared to be angry and were gesturing sternly towards others in the hall. And then the spotlight fell onto the stage again and Hoffman appeared.

The hotel manager looked furious and came hurrying to the lectern without ceremony.

'Ladies and gentlemen, please!' he cried, even as the crowd began to quieten. 'Please! I ask you to remember the import of this evening. To quote Mr von Winterstein, we are not here to attend a cabaret!'

The ferocity of this reprimand did not go down well with some of the crowd, and an ironic 'ooh' rose up from the group below me. But Hoffman went on:

'In particular, I am shocked to find so many of you persisting in this idiotically out-of-date view of Mr Brodsky. Setting aside the many other great merits of Mr Ziegler's poem, its central premise, namely that Mr Brodsky has conquered once and for all the demons that once plagued

him, cannot be doubted. Those of you who chose just now to laugh at Mr Ziegler's eloquent articulation of this point will, I am sure, very shortly - yes, in the next few moments! - come to feel ashamed. Yes, ashamed! As ashamed as I felt on behalf of this whole city just a minute ago! '

He thumped the lectern as he said this and a surprisingly large proportion of the audience erupted into self-righteous applause. Hoffman, visibly relieved, but evidently unsure how to respond to this reception, bowed awkwardly a few times. Then, before the applause had died down entirely, he collected himself and declared loudly into the microphone:

'Mr Brodsky deserves to be nothing less than a towering figure in our community! The spiritual and cultural fountainhead for our young people. A lantern-bearer for those of us more senior in years, perhaps, but who none the less have become lost and forlorn in these dark chapters of our city's history. Mr Brodsky deserves nothing less! Here, look at me! I stake my reputation, my *credibility* on what I am now telling you! But why need I say this? In a brief moment, you will perceive it with your own eyes and ears. This is hardly the introduction I intended to give and I regret that I was compelled to give it. But let us not delay any more. Let me call onto the stage our highly esteemed guests, the Stuttgart Nagel Foundation Orchestra. Conducted this evening by our very own - Mr Leo Brodsky! '

There was a good round of applause as Hoffman went off into the wings. For the next few minutes nothing happened, and then the orchestra pit became illuminated and the musicians came out. There was another round of applause, followed by a tense hush as the orchestra members shifted around on their seats, tuned their instruments and fiddled with their music stands. Even the rowdy group below me seemed to have accepted the seriousness of what was about to unfold; they had put away their playing cards and were now sitting attentively, their gazes fixed in front of them.

The orchestra finally settled and a spotlight fell on an area of the stage near the wings. For another minute nothing happened, and then there came a thumping sound from off-stage. The noise grew louder until finally Brodsky stepped into the pool of light. He paused there, perhaps to allow the audience time to register his appearance.

Certainly, many of those present would have had difficulty recognising him. With his evening suit, brilliantly white dress shirt and coiffured hair, he was an impressive figure. There was no denying, however, that the shabby ironing board he was still using as his crutch undermined the effect somewhat. Moreover, as he began to make his way towards the conductor's podium - the ironing board thumping with each step - I noticed the handiwork he had carried out on the empty trouser leg. His desire not to have the material flapping about was perfectly understandable. But rather than knotting it at the stump, Brodsky had cut a wavy hemline an inch or two below the knee. An entirely elegant solution, I could see, was not possible, but this hem seemed to me far too ostentatious, likely only to draw extra attention to his injury.

And yet, as he continued to advance across the stage, it appeared I was quite mistaken on this point. For although I kept waiting for the crowd to gasp on discovering Brodsky's condition, the moment never came. Indeed, as far as I could discern, the audience seemed not to notice the missing leg at all, and continued simply to wait in hushed anticipation for Brodsky to reach the podium.

Perhaps it was the exhaustion, or perhaps the tension, but he did not seem able to reproduce the smooth walk with the ironing board I had witnessed earlier in the corridor. He was lurching badly and it occurred to me that, with his injury still unnoticed, such a gait was bound to arouse suspicions of drunkenness. He was several yards from the podium when he stopped and looked down crossly at his ironing board - which I saw had once more started to come open. He

shook it, then began to walk again. He managed a few more steps, then something on the ironing board gave way. It began to unfold itself under him just as he was placing his weight on it, and Brodsky and the board went down together in a heap.

The reaction to this occurrence was an odd one. Instead of the cries of alarm one might have expected, the audience, for the initial second or two, maintained a disapproving silence. Then a murmur went across the auditorium, a kind of collective 'hmm', as though conclusions were being reserved in the face of discouraging signs. Similarly, the three stage-hands who approached to give Brodsky assistance did so with a marked lack of urgency, and even a hint of distaste. In any case, before they could reach him, Brodsky, who had been busy wrestling with the ironing board, shouted angrily from the floor for them to go away. The three men stopped in their tracks, then went on watching Brodsky with something not unlike morbid fascination.

Brodsky continued grappling on the floor for some moments. At times he appeared to be attempting to stand up, at others he seemed more intent on extricating some part of his clothing trapped in the mechanisms of the ironing board. At one point he broke into a series of oaths, presumably directed at the board, which the amplification system picked up all too clearly. I glanced again at Miss Collins and saw that she had now sat forward in her seat. But then, as Brodsky's struggles continued, she leaned back again slowly and raised her finger back up to her chin.

Then at last Brodsky made a breakthrough. He succeeded in erecting the ironing board in its unfolded position and pulled himself up. He stood there proudly on his one good leg, gripping the board with both hands, elbows pushed out, as if preparing to mount it. He glared at the three stage-hands and, as they began to retreat back into the wings, turned his gaze on the audience.

‘I know, I know,’ he said and, although he was not speaking loudly, the microphones along the front of the stage seemed to pick him up so that he was quite audible. ‘I know what you’re all thinking. Well, you’re wrong.’

He looked down and became engrossed again with his predicament. Then he straightened himself up a little more, and began to pass his hand along the padded surface of the ironing board as though its original purpose had only now occurred to him. Finally he looked at the audience again and said:

‘Dispel all such notions from your mind. That’ - he thrust his head towards the floor - ‘was simply an unfortunate accident. Nothing more.’

Another murmur went across the auditorium and then there was silence again.

For the next few moments, Brodsky continued to stand crouched over the ironing board, not moving, his gaze fixed on the conductor’s podium. I realised he was measuring the distance to the podium, and indeed, the next instant, he began his journey. He proceeded by lifting the entire frame of the ironing board and banging it down again in the manner of a zimmer, dragging his single leg after it. At first the audience seemed taken aback, but as Brodsky moved steadily forwards, some people, concluding they were witnessing a sort of circus act, began to clap. This cue was quickly taken up all around the hall so that the remainder of Brodsky’s journey to the podium was completed against a background of substantial applause.

On reaching his destination, Brodsky let go of the ironing board and, grasping the semi-circular rail around the podium, eased himself into position. He balanced his body carefully against the rail then picked up the baton.

The applause for the ironing board act had by now died down and there was once again an atmosphere of hushed

anticipation. The musicians too were looking at Brodsky slightly nervously. But Brodsky seemed to be savouring the feeling of being back at the helm of an orchestra after so many years, and for a time went on smiling and gazing about him. Then at last he raised his baton in the air. The musicians poised themselves, but Brodsky changed his mind again and, lowering the baton, turned to the audience. He smiled genially and said:

‘You all think I’m a filthy drunk. We’ll see now if that’s all I am.’

The nearest microphone was a certain distance away and only a portion of the audience appeared to hear this remark. In any case, the very next instant, he had raised the baton again and the orchestra was plunged into the harsh opening semibreves of Mullery’s *Verticality*.

It did not seem to me a particularly outlandish way to open the piece, but clearly it was not what the audience was expecting. Many people started visibly in their seats and, as the elongated discords stretched on into the sixth and seventh bars, I could see on some faces expressions of near-panic. Even some of the musicians were looking anxiously from the conductor to their scores. But Brodsky continued steadily to turn up the intensity, maintaining all the while his exaggeratedly slow tempo. Then he reached the twelfth bar when the notes burst and came fluttering down. A kind of sigh went around the audience, then almost immediately the music began to build again.

Brodsky occasionally steadied himself with his free hand, but he had by this point entered some deeper part of himself, and seemed able to maintain his balance with only nominal support. He swayed his torso. He swung both arms through the air with abandon. During the early passages of the first movement, I noticed some members of the orchestra glancing guiltily at the audience as though to say: ‘Yes, really, this is what he’s told us to do!’ But then steadily the

musicians became engrossed in Brodsky's vision. First it was the violins who became quite carried away, and then I could see more and more musicians losing themselves in their performance. By the time Brodsky led them into the melancholy of the second movement, the orchestra appeared to have accepted entirely his authority. The audience too had by this point lost its earlier restlessness and was sitting transfixed.

Brodsky took advantage of the looser form of the second movement to push into ever stranger territories, and I too - accustomed though I was to every sort of angle on Mullery - grew fascinated. He was almost perversely ignoring the outer structure of the music - the composer's nods towards tonality and melody that decorated the surface of the work - to focus instead on the peculiar life-forms hiding just under the shell. There was a slightly sordid quality about it all, something close to exhibitionism, that suggested Brodsky was himself profoundly embarrassed by the nature of what he was uncovering, but could not resist the compulsion to go yet further. The effect was unnerving, but compelling.

I studied again the crowd below me. There was no doubting this provincial audience had become emotionally gripped by Brodsky, and I now saw the possibility that my question-and-answer session would not prove as tricky as I had feared. Obviously, if Brodsky managed to convince the audience with this display, how I answered the questions became far less critical. My task would become one essentially of endorsing something to which the audience had already been won round - in which case, even with my inadequate level of research, there was no reason I should not acquit myself perfectly adequately with a few diplomatic, occasionally humorous remarks. If on the other hand Brodsky were to leave the audience in turmoil and indecision, I would, regardless of my status and experience, have my work very much cut out for me. The atmosphere in the auditorium was still one of unease and,

remembering the perturbed anger of the third movement, I wondered what would happen once Brodsky commenced it.

Just at this point it suddenly occurred to me for the first time to search the audience for my parents. Almost simultaneously, the idea flashed through my head that, since I had not noticed them already on the numerous occasions I had studied the crowd, the likelihood of my now discovering their faces below me was not great. I nevertheless leaned forward, almost recklessly, and scanned the auditorium with my gaze. There were certain parts of the hall I could not see no matter how much I craned forward, and I realised I would sooner or later have to go down into the auditorium itself. Then, even if I were still unable to find my parents, I could at least dig out Hoffman or Miss Stratmann and demand to know of my parents' whereabouts. Either way, I saw I could ill afford to spend further time watching proceedings from my present vantage point and, turning carefully, began to make my way out of the cupboard.

When I emerged again at the top of the small staircase, I saw the queue below me had greatly lengthened. There were now at least twenty people waiting, and I felt rather guilty to have taken as long as I had. Everyone in the queue was talking excitedly, but fell silent at the sight of me. I mumbled a vague apology as I came down the steps, then hurried off down the corridor just as the person next in line began eagerly to climb towards the cupboard entrance.

The corridor was much calmer than before, owing largely to a lull in the activities of the catering staff. Every several yards along the corridor I would encounter a stationary trolley, fully laden, sometimes with men in overalls leaning against it, smoking and drinking from styrofoam cups. Eventually, when I stopped and asked one such person the quickest route to the auditorium, he simply pointed to a door behind me. Thanking him, I pulled it open and found myself looking down an ill-lit stairwell.

I descended at least five flights. Then I pushed through a pair of heavy swing doors and found myself wandering through some cavernous backstage area. In the gloomy light, I could make out rectangular slabs of painted backdrop - a castle tenement, a moonlit sky, a forest - propped against the wall. Above my head was a criss-cross of steel cables. The orchestra could now be heard quite clearly and I moved towards the music doing my best not to collide into the many box-like objects in my path. Eventually, after wandering up a set of wooden steps, I realised I was standing in the wings. I was about to turn back - I had hoped to emerge discreetly somewhere near the front stalls - but then something about the music now filling my ears, something problematic that had not been there before, caused me to pause.

I stood there listening for a minute or so, and then took a step forward and peered around the edge of the heavy folded drapes before me. I did this of course with considerable caution - naturally I wished to avoid at all costs the crowd's spotting my face and bursting into applause - only to discover I was looking at Brodsky and the orchestra from a sharp angle and was unlikely to be visible at all to the audience.

I could see much had changed while I had been wandering around the building. Brodsky, I supposed, had taken things too far, for that tentativeness of technique that so often signals a disaffinity between a conductor and his musicians had entered the orchestra's sound. The musicians - I was now able to see them at close quarters - were wearing expressions of incredulity, distress, even disgust. Then, as my eyes grew more accustomed to the glare of the stagelights, I gazed past the orchestra to the audience. Only the first few rows were visible to me, but it was clear people were now exchanging worried looks, coughing uneasily, shaking their heads. Even as I watched, one woman stood up to leave. Brodsky, however, continued to conduct in an impassioned manner, and if anything seemed eager to push things still

further. Then I saw two of the cellists exchange looks and shake their heads. It was a clear sign of mutiny and Brodsky undoubtedly noticed it. His conducting now took on a manic quality and the music veered dangerously towards the realms of perversity.

Up to this point I had not been able to see Brodsky's expression very well - I had mainly his back view - but as his twisting and turning grew more pronounced, I began to catch fuller glimpses of his face. Only then did it dawn on me that some other factor altogether was influencing Brodsky's behaviour. I watched him carefully again - the way his body was twisting and clenching to some rhythm of its own dictating - and I realised that Brodsky was in great pain and probably had been for some time. Once I had recognised this, the signs were unmistakable. He was only just managing to keep going at all, and his face was distorted with something more than passion.

I felt an onus to do something, and quickly appraised the situation. Brodsky had still to get through one and a half demanding movements plus the intricate epilogue. The favourable impression he had created earlier was being rapidly eroded. The audience was liable to become unruly again at any moment. The more I thought about it, the more obvious it became that the performance had to be brought to a halt, and I began to wonder if I should not now walk out onto the stage to bring this about. Indeed I was probably the only person in the hall who could do so without the audience sensing a major calamity.

For the next few minutes, however, I made no move, preoccupied with the question of how precisely to execute such an intervention. Would I come on waving about my arms to signal a halt? That might not only appear presumptuous, but suggest a certain disapproval on my part - a disastrous impression. A much better course, perhaps, would be to wait for the andante to commence and then to come on very modestly, smiling courteously to Brodsky and the orchestra,

timing my walk to the music as though the whole entrance had been planned long in advance. No doubt the audience would break into applause, at which point I could in turn - all the time smiling - applaud first Brodsky and then the musicians. Hopefully then Brodsky would have the presence of mind to 'fade out' the music and take bows. With my presence on the stage, the chances of the crowd giving Brodsky trouble were remote. In fact with my lead - I would continue to applaud and smile as though for all the world Brodsky had delivered something of indisputable beauty - the memories of the earlier part of his performance might return sufficiently to bring the audience back onto his side. Brodsky could take a respectable number of bows, and then, as he turned to leave, I could be seen genially to assist him from the podium, perhaps folding his ironing board and handing it to him to use again as his crutch. I might then guide him towards the wings, frequently glancing back to the audience to encourage further applause and so on. I could just about see the thing being brought off provided I judged everything absolutely correctly.

But just at that moment something else occurred which perhaps had been on the cards for some time. Brodsky swung his baton in a large arc, almost simultaneously punching the air with his other hand. As he did so, he appeared to become unstuck. He ascended a few inches into the air then crashed down across the front of the stage, taking the podium rail, the ironing board, the score, the music stand, all with him.

I expected people to rush to his aid, but the gasp that greeted his fall faded into an embarrassed silence. And then, as Brodsky continued to lie there face down on the floor, not moving, a low hubbub started up again throughout the auditorium. Finally, one of the violinists put aside his instrument and made towards Brodsky. A number of others - stage-hands, musicians - soon followed his lead, but there remained something hesitant about the way they closed in

around the prone figure, as though they expected to disapprove thoroughly of what they discovered.

I came to my senses around this point - I had been hesitating, unsure what impact my revealing myself would have - and hurried onto the stage to join Brodsky's helpers. As I approached, the violinist let out a cry and, dropping down onto his knees, began to examine Brodsky with a new urgency. Then he looked up at us and said in a horrified whisper: 'My God, he's lost a leg! It's a wonder he took this long to pass out!'

There were gasps of surprise and the dozen or so of us who had gathered around exchanged looks. For some reason, there was a distinct feeling that news of the missing leg must not be allowed to get out and we drew closer together to keep out the audience's gaze. Those nearest to Brodsky were conferring in low voices about whether to carry him off the stage. Then someone signalled and the curtain began to close. It quickly became clear that Brodsky was lying directly in the line of the curtain, and several arms reached out and half dragged him away from the front of the stage just as the curtain came across.

The movement had the effect of reviving Brodsky a little, and when the violinist turned him onto his back he opened his eyes and looked searchingly from face to face. Then he said, in a voice that sounded more sleepy than anything else:

'Where is she? Why isn't she holding me?'

There were more looks exchanged. Then someone whispered:

'Miss Collins. He must mean Miss Collins.'

No sooner had these words been uttered than there was a gentle cough behind us and we turned to find Miss Collins standing just inside the curtain. She still seemed very composed and was gazing towards us with a look of polite concern. Only the way her hands were clasped in front of her,

slightly higher on her chest than might be expected, indicated any turmoil within.

‘Where is she?’ Brodsky asked again in his sleepy voice. Then suddenly he began softly to sing to himself.

The violinist looked up at us. ‘Is he drunk? He certainly smells of drink.’

Brodsky ceased singing, then said again, his eyes now closing: ‘Where is she? Why doesn’t she come?’

This time Miss Collins answered, not loudly, but very clearly from the curtain: ‘I’m here, Leo.’

She had spoken in a tone approaching tenderness, but when a gangway immediately formed for her she did not move. The sight of the figure on the floor, however, finally brought signs of distress to her face. Brodsky, his eyes still closed, began to hum again.

Then he opened his eyes and looked about himself carefully. His gaze went first to the curtain - perhaps in search of the audience - then, finding it closed, examined again the faces staring down at him. Finally he looked towards Miss Collins.

‘Let’s embrace,’ he said. ‘Let’s show the world. The curtain ...’ With some effort, he raised himself a little and called out: ‘Get ready to open the curtain again!’ Then he said softly to Miss Collins: ‘Come and hold me. Embrace me. Then let them open the curtain. We’ll let the world see.’ He slowly lowered himself again until he was lying flat on his back. ‘Come on,’ he murmured.

Miss Collins seemed on the verge of speaking, but then changed her mind. She glanced towards the curtain, a look of fear coming into her eyes.

‘Let them see it,’ Brodsky said. ‘Let them see we were together at the end. That we loved each other all our lives. Let’s show them. When the curtains open, let them see it.’

Miss Collins went on staring at Brodsky, then finally began to walk towards him. People moved away discreetly, some going so far as to turn their gazes in the other direction. She stopped before she had quite reached him and said in a voice that trembled a little:

‘We can hold hands if you like.’

‘No, no. This is the finish. Let’s embrace properly. Let them see.’

Miss Collins hesitated for a second, then went right up to him and knelt down. Her eyes, I could see, had filled with tears.

‘My love,’ Brodsky said softly. ‘Hold me again. My wound’s so painful now.’

Suddenly Miss Collins withdrew the hand she had started to extend and rose to her feet. She stared down coldly at Brodsky, then walked back briskly towards the curtain.

Brodsky seemed not to notice her retreat. He was now staring up at the ceiling, his arms spread open as though he expected Miss Collins to come descending from above.

‘Where are you?’ he said. ‘Let them see it. When they open the curtain. Let them see we were together at the end. Where are you?’

‘I won’t come, Leo. Wherever you’re going now, you’ll have to go by yourself.’

Brodsky must have registered her new tone, for although he continued to gaze up at the ceiling his arms fell to his sides.

‘Your wound,’ Miss Collins said quietly, ‘Always your wound.’ Then her face contorted into ugliness. ‘Oh, how I hate you! How I hate you for wasting my life! I shall never, never forgive you! Your wound, your silly little wound! That’s your real love, Leo, that wound, the one true love of

your life! I know how it will be, even if we tried, even if we managed to build something all over again. The music too, that would be no different. Even if they'd accepted you tonight, even if you became celebrated in this town, you'd destroy it all, you'd destroy everything, pull it all down around you just as you did before. And all because of that wound. Me, the music, we're neither of us anything more to you than mistresses you seek consolation from. You'll always go back to your one real love. To that wound! And you know what makes me so angry? Leo, are you listening to me? Your wound, it's nothing special, nothing special at all. In this town alone, I know there are many people with far worse. And yet they carry on, every one of them, with far greater courage than you ever did. They go on with their lives. They become something worthwhile. But you, Leo, look at you. Always tending your wound. Are you listening? Listen to me, I want you to hear every word of it! That wound's all you have now. I tried to give you everything once, but you weren't interested and you shan't have me a second time. How you wasted my life! How I hate you! Can you hear me, Leo? Look at you! What's to become of you now? Well, I'll tell you. You're going somewhere horrible now. Somewhere dark and lonely, and I won't come with you. Go on your own! Go on your own with that silly little wound! '

Brodsky had been waving a hand slowly in the air. Now, as she paused, he said:

'I might be ... I might be a conductor again. The music just now, before I fell. It was good. You heard it? I might be a conductor again...'

'Leo, are you listening to me? You'll never be a *proper* conductor. You never were, even back then. You'll never be able to serve the people of this city, even if they wanted you to. Because you care nothing for their lives. That's the truth of it. Your music will only ever be about that silly little wound, it will never be anything more than that, it'll never be anything profound, anything of any value to anyone

else. At least I, in my small way, I can say I did what I could. That I did my best to help the unhappy people here. But you, look at you. You've only ever cared about that wound. That's why even back then you were never a *real* musician. And you'll never become one now. Leo, are you listening to me? I want you to hear this. You'll never be anything more than a charlatan. A cowardly, irresponsible fraud ...'

Suddenly a stout man with a red face burst through the curtain.

'Your ironing board, Mr Brodsky!' he announced cheerfully, holding the object up before him. Then, sensing the atmosphere, he shrank back.

Miss Collins stared at the newcomer, then, casting a last glance towards Brodsky, ran out through the gap in the curtain.

Brodsky's face was still turned up to the ceiling but now his eyes had closed again. Pushing myself forward, I knelt down beside him and listened to his heartbeat.

'Our sailors,' he murmured. 'Our sailors. Our drunken sailors. Where are they now? Where are you? Where are you?'

'It's me,' I said. 'Ryder. Mr Brodsky, we must get you some help very quickly.'

'Ryder.' He opened his eyes and gazed up at me. 'Ryder. Maybe it's true. What she says.'

'Don't worry yourself, Mr Brodsky. Your music was magnificent. Particularly the first two movements ...'

'No, no, Ryder. I didn't mean all that. That hardly matters now. I meant the other thing she said. About me going alone. To some dark, lonely place. Maybe that's true.' Suddenly he raised his head off the floor and stared into my eyes. 'I don't want to go, Ryder,' he said in a whisper. 'I don't want to go.'

‘Mr Brodsky, I’ll try and bring her back. As I say, the first two movements in particular displayed enormous innovation. I’m sure she can be reasoned with. Please excuse me, I won’t be a moment.’

Freeing my arm from his grip, I hurried out through the curtain.

I was surprised to find the auditorium quite transformed. The house lights had come back on and to all practical intents there was no longer an audience. As much as two-thirds of the guests had left, and of those remaining most were standing about talking in the aisles. I did not dwell long on this scene, however, having caught sight of Miss Collins making her way up the central aisle towards the exit. Stepping down off the stage, I hurried after her through the crowds and came within calling distance just as she was reaching the exit.

‘Miss Collins! Just a moment, please!’

She turned and, spotting me, fixed me with a hard stare. Somewhat taken aback, I stopped in my tracks half-way up the aisle. Suddenly I could feel draining away all my resolve to catch up and speak with her, and for some reason found myself looking down awkwardly at my feet. When eventually I raised my head again, I saw that she had gone.

I went on standing there a little while longer, wondering if I had been foolish to let her go so easily. But then gradually I found my attention being drawn by the various conversations taking place around me. In particular there was a group standing to my right - six or seven quite elderly people - and I could hear one of the men saying:

‘According to Mrs Schuster, the fellow hasn’t been sober for one day during this whole business. Now how can we be asked to respect a man like that, however talented? What sort of example is he for our children? No, no, it’s all been allowed to go too far.’

‘At the Countess’s dinner,’ a woman said, ‘almost certainly he was drunk then. It was only by very clever work

they managed to hide it. ’

‘Excuse me,’ I said breaking in, ‘but you know nothing of this matter. I can assure you you’re quite badly informed.’

I fully expected my presence alone to stun them into silence. But they glanced at me pleasantly - as though I had merely asked if they minded my joining them - then returned to their conversation.

‘No one wants to start praising Christoff again,’ the first man said. ‘But that rendition just now. As you say, it did border on the tasteless.’

‘It bordered on the immoral. That’s it. It bordered on the immoral.’

‘Excuse me,’ I said, interrupting this time more forcefully. ‘But I happened to listen very carefully to what Mr Brodsky managed to do before his collapse and my own assessment differs from yours. In my view, he achieved something challenging, fresh, indeed something very close to the inner heart of the piece.’

I gave them all a frosty stare. They looked at me pleasantly again, some of them laughing politely as if I had made a joke. Then the first man said:

‘No one’s defending Christoff. We’ve all seen through him now. But when you listen to something like that just now, it does put things in perspective for you.’

‘Apparently,’ another man said, ‘Brodsky believes Max Sattler had it right. Yes. He’s actually been going round saying it for much of the day. No doubt he was talking in a drunken stupor, but since the man’s always drunk that’s as close as we’ll get to his thoughts. Max Sattler. That explains a lot about what we just heard.’

‘Christoff at least had a sense of structure. Some system you could get hold of.’

‘Gentlemen,’ I shouted at them, ‘you disgust me!’

They did not even turn to look at me and I moved away from them angrily.

As I made my way back down the aisle, everyone around me seemed to be discussing what they had just witnessed. I noticed many were talking out of the sheer need to talk out an experience, in the way they might have done after a fire or an accident. As I reached the front of the auditorium, I saw two women crying and a third comforting them, saying: ‘It’s all right, it’s all finished now. All finished now.’ An aroma of coffee was pervading this section of the hall and a number of people were clutching cups and saucers, drinking as though to steady themselves.

Just then it occurred to me I should return to the upper level to see how Gustav was getting on, and, pushing my way through the throng, I left the auditorium via an emergency exit.

I found myself in a hushed, empty corridor. Like the one upstairs, it curved gradually, but this corridor was clearly intended to be used by guests. The carpeting was generous, the lights subdued and warm. Along the wall were paintings framed in gold leaf. I had not expected the corridor to be so deserted and for a moment stood hesitating about which way to go. Then, when I started to walk, I heard a voice call behind me:

‘Mr Ryder!’

I turned to see Hoffman further down the corridor waving his arm. He called me again, but for some reason remained glued to his spot, so that in the end I was obliged to retrace my steps.

‘Mr Hoffman,’ I said as I came towards him. ‘It’s most unfortunate what has happened.’

‘A disaster. An unmitigated disaster.’

‘It’s really most unfortunate. But Mr Hoffman, you mustn’t get too down-hearted. You’ve done all you could to make the evening a success. And if I may point out, I have yet to make my appearance. I assure you I’ll do whatever is in my power to bring the evening back under control. In fact, sir, I was wondering if we might not do away with the question-and-answer session in its original format. My suggestion would be that I simply give a speech, something apt, taking into account what has occurred. I might for instance say a few words suggesting we keep in our hearts the meaning of the extraordinary performance Mr Brodsky was in the midst of giving before he was taken ill, and that we should endeavour to be true to the spirit of that performance, something of that sort. Naturally I will keep the whole thing short. I might then perhaps dedicate my own recital to Mr Brodsky or else to his memory, depending on his condition by that point ...’

‘Mr Ryder,’ Hoffman said gravely, and it occurred to me he had not been listening. He was very preoccupied and appeared to have been watching me simply for an opportunity to break in. ‘Mr Ryder, there’s a matter I wanted to bring up with you. A small matter.’

‘Oh, what is that, Mr Hoffman?’

‘A small matter, at least to you. For me, for my wife, a matter of some importance.’ Suddenly his face contorted with fury and he flung back his arm. I thought he was about to strike me, but then realised he was pointing to a spot behind him further down the corridor. In the subdued light I saw the silhouette of a woman, her back to us, leaning into an alcove. The recess was mirrored and her head was virtually touching the glass, so that her reflection slanted away from her. As I gazed towards this figure, Hoffman, perhaps thinking his first gesture had not got through to me, flung his arm back a second time. Then he said:

‘I refer, sir, to my wife’s albums.’

‘Your wife’s albums. Ah yes. Yes, she very kindly ... But surely, Mr Hoffman, now is hardly the time ...’

‘Mr Ryder, you will recall you promised you would look at them. And we agreed, out of consideration for you, sir, so that you would not be inconvenienced at an unsuitable time, we agreed - do you not recall, sir? - we agreed on a signal. A signal you would give me when you felt ready to inspect the albums. You recall it, sir?’

‘Of course, Mr Hoffman. And I had every intention ...’

‘I have watched you very keenly, Mr Ryder. Whenever I caught a glimpse of you strolling around the hotel, walking across the foyer, taking your coffee, I would think to myself: “Ah, he appears to have a moment. Perhaps now is the time.” And I waited for the signal, I watched you very carefully, but did it ever come? Pugh! And now here we are, your visit here all but over, just a few hours to go to your flight and your next engagement in Helsinki! There were times, sir, when I thought I had perhaps missed it, that I had turned away for a second and, turning back, mistaken the finishing moments of your signal for some other gesture. If of course this is the case, that you have given the signal on a number of occasions and it is I who have been too obtuse to receive it, then naturally I will apologise without reservation, without shame, without dignity, I will grovel to you. But it is my contention, sir, that you have given no such signal. In other words, sir, that you have treated ... treated’ - he glanced back towards the figure down the corridor and lowered his voice - ‘you have treated my wife with contempt. Look, here they are!’

Only then did I notice the two large volumes he was carrying in his arms. He held them up to me.

‘Here you are, sir. The fruits of my wife’s devotion to your marvellous career. How she admires you. You can see it. Look at these pages!’ He struggled to open one of the albums while holding the other under his arm. ‘Look, sir. Even

small little cuttings from obscure magazines. Things said about you in passing. You see, sir, how devoted she is to you. Look here, sir! And here and here! And you cannot find the time even to glance over these albums. What am I to say to her now?' He gestured again towards the figure down the corridor.

'I'm sorry,' I began. 'I'm terribly sorry. But you see, my time here just seemed to get very confused. I had every intention ...' I then saw that, with all the mounting chaos of the evening, I at least had to keep a cool head. I paused, then said with some command: 'Mr Hoffman, perhaps your wife will find it easier to accept my sincere apologies if she hears them from my own lips. I had the great pleasure of meeting her earlier this evening. Perhaps if you would now lead me to her, we shall be able to sort this matter out quickly. Then of course I really should go on stage, say a few words about Mr Brodsky then give my recital. My parents in particular will be getting impatient.'

Hoffman looked slightly bewildered by these words. Then, trying to re-ignite his earlier anger, he said: 'Look at these pages, sir! Look at them!' But the fire had now died, and he looked at me a little sheepishly. 'Then let us go,' he said in a low voice which had a shocking defeat about it. 'Let us go.'

But he did not move for another moment and I had the impression he was turning over in his head some distant memories. Then with resolve he began to walk towards his wife and I followed a few paces behind.

Mrs Hoffman turned as we approached. I stopped a little way away, but she looked straight past her husband and said to me:

'It's very nice to see you again, Mr Ryder. Unfortunately the evening seems not to be unfolding quite as we all had hoped.'

‘Regrettably,’ I said, ‘it would seem not.’ Then taking a step forward, I added: ‘Furthermore, madam, with one thing and another, I appear to have neglected a number of things I was very much looking forward to doing.’

I expected her to respond to this hint, but she merely gazed at me with interest and waited for me to go on. Then Hoffman cleared his throat and said:

‘My dear. I ... I knew of your wish.’

With a meek smile, he held up the albums, one in each hand.

Mrs Hoffman stared at him in horror. ‘Give me those albums,’ she said sternly. ‘You had no right! Give them to me.’

‘My dear ...’ Hoffman gave a little giggle and his gaze dropped to his feet.

Mrs Hoffman continued to hold out her hand, a furious expression on her face. The hotel manager handed her one album and then the other. His wife gave each a quick glance to verify their identities, and then seemed to become overwhelmed with embarrassment.

‘My dear,’ Hoffman mumbled, ‘I merely thought it would do no harm ...’ Again he trailed off and laughed.

Mrs Hoffman stared coldly at him. Then, turning to me, she said: ‘I’m very sorry, Mr Ryder, my husband felt the need to trouble you with such trivial things. Good evening to you.’

She tucked the albums under her arm and began to walk away. She had gone no more than a few paces, however, when Hoffman suddenly exclaimed:

‘Trivial? No, no! But they are not trivial! And neither is the album on Kosminsky. Nor the album on Stefan Hallier.’

Not trivial! If only they were. If only I could believe they were! ’

His wife stopped but did not turn, and Hoffman and I stared at her back view as she stood there quite still in the low light of the corridor. Then Hoffman took a few steps towards her.

‘The evening. It’s a shambles. Why pretend it’s anything else? Why continue to tolerate me? Year after year, blunder after blunder. After the Youth Festival, your patience with me was surely at its end. But no, you put up with me further. Then Exhibition Week. Still you put up with me. Still you give me another chance. Very well, I begged you, I know. Implored you for one further chance. And you didn’t have the heart to refuse me. In a word, you gave me tonight. And what have I to show for it? The evening is a shambles. Our son, our only son, making a laughing stock of himself before the most distinguished citizens of this town. That was my fault, yes, I know it. I encouraged him. Even at the last moment I knew I should have stopped him, but I didn’t have the strength. I let him go through with it right to the end. Believe me, my dear, I never intended it. From the beginning I said to myself, I’ll tell him tomorrow, we’ll have a proper talk about it tomorrow when there’ll be more time. Tomorrow, tomorrow, I kept putting it off. Yes, I was weak, I admit it. Even tonight, I was saying, just a few more minutes and I’ll tell him, but no, no, I couldn’t and he went on. Yes, our Stephan, he went up there in front of the whole world and played the piano! A laughing stock! Ah, but if only that were the half of it! Everyone, the whole city, knows who is responsible for tonight’s proceedings. And the whole city knows who took on the responsibility for Mr Brodsky’s recovery. Very well, very well, I don’t deny it, I failed, I couldn’t bring him round. The man’s a drunk, I should have seen how useless it was from the start. The evening is collapsing all around us while we speak. Even Mr Ryder here, even he can’t save it now. He only adds to our embarrassment.

The finest pianist in the world, I bring him here to what? To take part in this disgrace? Why was I ever allowed to put my clumsy hands anywhere near such divine things as music, art, culture? You, from a talented family, you could have married anyone. What a mistake you made. A tragedy. But it's not too late for you. You are still beautiful. Why wait any longer? What further proof do you need? Leave me. Leave me. Find someone worthy of you. A Kosminsky, a Hallier, a Ryder, a Leonhardt. How did you ever come to make such a mistake? Leave me, I beg you, leave me. Do you see how hateful it is to be your prison warden? No, worse, the very ball and chain on your ankle? Leave me, leave me' - suddenly Hoffman stooped forward and bringing his fist up to his forehead, performed the movement I had watched him rehearsing earlier in the evening. 'My love, my love, leave me. My position is now impossible. After tonight, my pretence, at last, it's over. They'll all know it, down to the smallest child in the town. From tonight, whenever they see me scuttling about my business, they'll know I have nothing. No talent, no sensitivity, no finesse. Leave me, leave me. I'm nothing but an *ox*, an *ox*, an *ox*!'

He performed his action again, his elbow jutting out oddly as he thumped his forehead. Then he sank down onto his knees and began to sob.

'A shambles,' he was mumbling through his sobs. 'Everything a shambles.'

Mrs Hoffman had by now turned and was watching her husband carefully. She did not seem at all astonished by the outburst, and a look of tenderness, almost of longing, had come into her eyes. She took a hesitant step, then another, towards Hoffman's bent-over form. Then slowly she reached out a hand as though to touch gently the top of his head. The hand hovered over Hoffman for a second without making contact and then she withdrew it. The next moment, she had turned on her heel and disappeared down the corridor.

Hoffman went on sobbing, evidently oblivious of any of his wife's movements. I watched him for a while, not quite sure what to do next. Then suddenly I realised I must now be well due on stage. And I remembered in a flood of emotion how I had so far been unable to find a single sign of my parents' presence anywhere in the building. My feelings towards Hoffman, which until this point had been close to pity, suddenly turned and, advancing on him, I shouted into his ear:

'Mr Hoffman, it may well be that you have made a shambles of your evening. But I will not be dragged down with you. I intend to go out there and perform. I shall do my best to bring back some order to these proceedings. But first of all, Mr Hoffman, I demand to know once and for all. What has become of my parents?'

Hoffman looked up and seemed slightly surprised to find his wife gone. Then, regarding me with some irritation, he got to his feet.

'What is it you are wanting, sir?' he asked wearily.

'My parents, Mr Hoffman. Where are they? You assured me they would be well looked after. And yet earlier, when I looked, they were not in the audience. I am now about to go on the stage and I wish my parents to be comfortably installed. So now, sir, I must ask you to answer me. Where are they?'

'Your parents, sir.' Hoffman took a deep breath and ran his hand tiredly through his hair. 'You must ask Miss Stratmann. She's in direct charge of their welfare. I merely supervised the larger structure of events. And since, as you see, I have been an utter failure in that respect, you can hardly expect me to be able to answer your question ...'

'Yes, yes, yes,' I said, growing impatient. 'So where is Miss Stratmann?'

Hoffman sighed and pointed over my shoulder. Turning, I saw there was a door behind me.

‘She’s in there?’ I asked sternly.

Hoffman nodded, then, staggering over to the mirrored alcove where his wife had been standing, gazed at his reflection.

I gave the door a sharp knock. When there was no reply, I glanced accusingly over at Hoffman. He was now bowed over the ledge of the alcove. I was about to vent more of my anger on him when I heard a voice from within calling me to come in. I took a last look at Hoffman’s hunched-over form, then opened the door.

The large modern office I found myself in was quite unlike anything else I had so far encountered within the building. It was a sort of annexe, seemingly constructed entirely out of glass. There were no lights on in the room and I saw that the dawn had finally come. Soft patches of early sunlight were drifting over the tottering piles of paper, the filing cabinets, the directories and folders strewn about on the desks. The office contained three desks in all, but at this moment Miss Stratmann was the only person present.

She appeared to be busy and it struck me as odd she should have switched off the lights, for the pale glow in the room was hardly sufficient to read or write by. I could only suppose she had switched them off just momentarily to enjoy the view of the sun coming up behind the trees in the far distance. Indeed, as I came in, she was sitting at her desk, a telephone receiver in her hand, gazing out emptily through the huge glass panes.

‘Good morning, Mr Ryder,’ she said, turning to me. ‘I’ll be with you in just a moment.’ Then she said into the receiver: ‘Yes, in about five minutes. The sausages too. They should start frying in the next few minutes. And the fruit. That ought to be ready by now.’

‘Miss Stratmann,’ I said, advancing towards her desk, ‘there are matters more pressing than when the sausages should be fried.’

She glanced up at me quickly and said once more: ‘I’ll be with you in a moment, Mr Ryder.’ Then she spoke into the receiver again and began to write something down.

‘Miss Stratmann,’ I said, hardening my voice, ‘I have to ask you to come off that telephone and listen to what I

have to say. ’

‘Hold on,’ Miss Stratmann said into the phone. ‘I’ve got someone here I’d better deal with. I won’t be a minute.’ Then she put down the receiver and glared at me. ‘What is it, Mr Ryder?’

‘Miss Stratmann,’ I said, ‘when we first met, you assured me you would keep me fully informed on all aspects of my visit here. That you would advise me fully about my schedule and the nature of my various commitments. I believed you to be someone I could depend on. I’m sorry to say you’ve fallen considerably short of expectations.’

‘Mr Ryder, I don’t know to what I owe this tirade. Is there something in particular you’re unhappy with?’

‘I am unhappy with everything, Miss Stratmann. I have not had important information when I’ve needed it. I have not been told of last-minute changes to my schedule. I haven’t been supported or assisted at crucial points. As a result, I have not been able to prepare myself for my tasks in the way I would have liked. Nevertheless, for all that, I intend shortly to go on stage where I’ll endeavour to salvage something from what is turning out to be a disastrous evening for you all. But before I do so, I have one simple thing to ask you. Where are my parents? They arrived some time ago by horse and carriage. But when I looked for them earlier in the auditorium, I could not see them. They had not been seated in any of the boxes nor in any of the VIP seats at the front. So I ask you again, Miss Stratmann, where are they? Why have they not been looked after in the careful way you promised?’

Miss Stratmann studied me carefully in the dawn light, then gave a sigh.

‘Mr Ryder, I’ve been meaning to speak to you about this for some time. We were all of us very pleased when you informed us some months ago of your parents’ intention to visit our city. Everyone was truly delighted. But I must

remind you, Mr Ryder, it was from you and you alone that we heard of their plans to visit us. Now for the past three days, and today in particular, I have been doing all I can to ascertain their whereabouts. I have repeatedly telephoned the airport, the railway station, the bus companies, every hotel in this city, and I have found no sign of them. No one has heard from them, no one has seen them. Now, Mr Ryder, *I* have to ask *you*. Are you certain they are coming to this town?'

As she had been talking, a number of doubts had passed through my mind and suddenly I felt something inside me beginning to collapse. To conceal my discomfort, I turned away and looked out at the dawn.

'Well,' I said eventually, 'I was very sure they would come this time.'

'You were very sure.' Miss Stratmann, whose professional pride I had obviously ruffled quite badly, was now fixing me with an accusing stare. 'Do you realise, Mr Ryder, the great trouble everyone here has gone to in anticipation of your parents' arrival? The medical arrangements, the hospitality, the horse and carriage? One group of local ladies has spent many weeks putting together a programme to entertain your parents during their stay. You were very sure they were coming, you say.'

'Naturally,' I said with a laugh, 'I would never have put people to such trouble had I been anything less than convinced. But the fact was' - another laugh escaped me -

'the fact was, I was sure that this time, at last, they would come. Surely, it wasn't unreasonable of me to assume they would come this time? After all, I'm at the height of my powers now. How much longer am I supposed to go on travelling like this? Of course, I'm sorry if I've put anyone to unnecessary inconvenience, but surely it won't come to that. They must be here somewhere. Besides, I heard them. When I stopped the car in the woods, I could hear them coming, their

horse and carriage. I heard them, they must be here, surely, it's not unreasonable ...'

I collapsed into a nearby chair and realised I had started to sob. As I did so, I remembered all at once just how tenuous had been the whole possibility of my parents' coming to the town. I could not understand at all how I had ever been so confident about the matter to the extent of demanding an explanation from Hoffman and then Miss Stratmann in the manner I had just been doing. I continued to sob for several more moments, then became aware that Miss Stratmann was standing over me.

'Mr Ryder, Mr Ryder,' she was repeating gently. Then, as I brought my tears under control, she said in a kindly tone: 'Mr Ryder. Perhaps no one here has mentioned this to you yet. But there was a time once, quite some years ago now, when your parents did come to this city.'

I stopped sobbing and looked up at her. She gave me a smile, then walked away slowly towards the glass and gazed out again at the dawn.

'They must have been taking a holiday together,' she said, her eyes still on the distance. 'They came by train and stayed two or three days looking about the city. As I say, it was some time ago and you weren't quite as eminent as you are today. But all the same, you were hardly unknown and someone, the people at their hotel perhaps, asked if they were related to you. You know, because of the name and their being English. That's how it got out, that this nice, elderly English couple were your parents. There may not have been quite the fuss there'd be today, but they were looked after very well indeed. And then over the years, as your fame spread, people remembered about it, about the time your parents came here. I don't personally have many memories of their visit because I was so small then. Though I can remember people talking about it.'

I looked carefully at her back. 'Miss Stratmann, you're not telling me all this just to comfort me, are you?'

'No, no, it's all true. Anyone will confirm what I'm saying. As I say, I was just a child then, but a lot of people here would be able to tell you all about it. Besides, it's all been pretty well documented.'

'But did they seem happy? Were they laughing together and enjoying their holiday?'

'I'm sure they were, Mr Ryder. By all accounts, they enjoyed themselves very much here. In fact everyone remembers them as a very pleasant couple. Very kind and considerate to one another.'

'But ... but what I'm asking, Miss Stratmann, is were they well looked after? That's what I'm asking you...'

'Of course they were well looked after. And they enjoyed themselves. They were very happy the whole time they were here.'

'How can you remember that? You said yourself you were no more than a child at the time.'

'What I'm reporting is how everyone here remembers it.'

'If any of this you're saying is true, how is it no one has raised the matter with me the whole time I've been here?'

Miss Stratmann hesitated a second and turned again to the trees and the sunrise. 'I don't know,' she said softly, shaking her head. 'I don't know why that should be. But you're right. People don't talk about it as much as you'd think they would. But there's no mistake, I can assure you. I remember it all distinctly from my childhood.'

From outside came the sounds of birds beginning their chorus. Miss Stratmann went on gazing at the trees in the

distance, other memories from her childhood perhaps drifting through her mind. I watched her for a while, then said:

‘You say they were treated well here.’

‘Oh yes,’ Miss Stratmann said almost in a whisper, her eyes still far away. ‘I’m sure they were very well treated. It would have been the spring, and the spring is so lovely here. And the Old Town, you’ve seen for yourself how charming it is. People would have pointed things out to them, just ordinary people who happened to be passing. The buildings of special interest, the crafts museum, the bridges. And if they stopped for a coffee and a snack anywhere and weren’t quite sure what to order, perhaps because of the language problem, the waiter or waitress would have been very helpful. Oh yes, they would have enjoyed themselves here.’

‘But you said they came by rail. Did anyone help them with their luggage?’

‘Oh, the railway porters would have immediately gone about helping them. Taken all the luggage out to the taxi, then the taxi driver would have seen to it after that. They’d have been driven to their hotel and that would have been that. I’m sure they didn’t have to even think about their luggage.’

‘Hotel? Which hotel was this?’

‘A very comfortable hotel, Mr Ryder. One of the best there was in those days. They were sure to have loved it there. Loved every minute of it.’

‘It wasn’t too near the main roads, I hope. My mother always hated traffic noise.’

‘In those days, of course, the traffic wasn’t nearly the problem it is now. I remember when I was a child, I used to play with my friends in some of the residential streets with a skipping rope or a ball. No question of children doing that today! Oh yes, we used to play like that, sometimes for

hours. But to return to your question, Mr Ryder' - Miss Stratmann turned to me with a wistful smile - 'the hotel your parents stayed in was nowhere near traffic. It was an idyllic hotel. It doesn't exist any more, but if you like I can show you a picture of it. Would you like to see it? The hotel you parents stayed in?'

'I would very much, Miss Stratmann.'

She smiled again and came back across the room towards her desk. I thought she was about to open a drawer, but at the last moment she changed course and went to the rear wall of the office. Reaching up a hand, she tugged at a cord and began pulling down something that looked like a wall chart. I then saw it was not a chart as such, but a gigantic colour photograph. She continued to pull it down almost to the floor, where the roller gave a click and held fast. Then, moving back to her desk, she switched on her reading lamp and turned the beam towards the picture.

For the next few moments we both studied the picture before us in silence. The hotel looked like a smaller version of the sort of fairy-tale castle built by mad kings in the last century. It stood right on the edge of a plunging valley covered with ferns and spring flowers. The photograph had been taken on a sunny day from the opposite side of the valley, providing the kind of comfortable composition suitable for a postcard or calendar.

'I believe your parents stayed in this room here,' I heard Miss Stratmann say. She had produced from somewhere a pointer and was indicating a window in one of the hotel's turrets. 'A nice view they would have had, you see?'

'Yes, indeed.'

Miss Stratmann lowered her pointer, but I continued to stare at the window, trying to imagine the view it would have presented. My mother in particular would have much appreciated such a view. Even if she had had one of her bad

days, and had had to spend her whole time in bed, she would still have been greatly comforted by it. She would have watched the breeze blowing through the pit of the valley, disturbing the ferns and the foliage on the twisted trees climbing the valley slope on the far side. She would have liked too the wide expanse of sky visible to her. I then noticed in the very foreground of the picture - cutting across the bottom right-hand corner - a section of the hill road from which presumably the photographer had taken the shot. My mother, almost certainly, would have had a view of this road from her room. She would then have been able to watch the local life going by in the distance. The odd car or grocery van would have passed, perhaps even a horse-drawn cart; now and then a farm tractor or some children hiking. Such sights were bound to have cheered her greatly.

Eventually, as I went on looking at the window, I began to weep again. Not as uncontrollably as before, but the tears filled my eyes very steadily and ran down my face. Miss Stratmann noticed my tears, but this time appeared to feel no need to stop them. She smiled gently at me, then turned back to the picture.

Suddenly I was startled by a knock at the door. Miss Stratmann too gave a start. Then she said: 'Excuse me, Mr Ryder,' and walked over to the door.

I turned in my seat as a man in a white uniform came in, pulling after him a catering trolley. He brought the trolley half-way over the threshold so that it was propping open the door and looked out at the dawn.

'It's going to be a fine day,' he said, smiling at us in turn. 'Here's your breakfast, miss. Would you like it on the desk there?'

'Breakfast?' Miss Stratmann looked confused. 'It's not supposed to be served for another half an hour yet.'

‘Mr von Winterstein ordered breakfast to commence now, miss. And in my view, he’s right. The people are in need of breakfast at this point.’

‘Oh.’ Miss Stratmann continued to look confused and glanced back at me as though for guidance. Then she asked the man: ‘Is everything out there ... all right?’

‘Everything’s fine now, miss. Of course, after Mr Brodsky passed out like that, there was a bit of a panic, but now everyone’s very happy and enjoying themselves. You see, Mr von Winterstein gave a fine speech in the foyer just now all about the splendid heritage of this city, all the things we’ve got to be proud of. He mentioned a lot of our achievements down the years, pointed out all the awful problems other cities are blighted with we here never have to worry about. It’s what we needed, miss. I’m sorry you weren’t there to hear it. It made us all feel good about ourselves and our city and now everyone’s enjoying themselves. Look, there’s some of them now.’ He pointed out through the glass, and sure enough, in the faint light outside, several figures could be made out walking slowly across the grass holding their plates carefully in front of them, looking around for somewhere to sit down.

‘Excuse me,’ I said, getting to my feet. ‘I must go and perform. I’m going to be late. Miss Stratmann, I’m very grateful. For your kindness, for everything. But please excuse me now.’

Without waiting for a reply, I pushed my way past the breakfast trolley out into the corridor.

A pale morning light was now permeating the gloom of the corridor. I glanced towards the mirrored alcove where I had left Hoffman, but he had gone. I hurried on in the direction of the auditorium, past the paintings in their golden frames. At one point I encountered another waiter with a breakfast trolley stooping down to knock on a door, but otherwise the corridor was deserted.

I continued to walk quickly, looking about for the emergency door that had originally brought me into this corridor. I had now become seized by a quite overwhelming urge to get my performance under way. Whatever disappointments I had just suffered did not, I realised, reduce at all my responsibility to all those who had waited many weeks for the moment I sat before them in front of a piano. In other words, it was my duty to perform on this evening at least to my usual standards. To do anything less - I suddenly sensed this strongly - would be to open some strange door through which I would hurtle into a dark, unknown space.

After a time the corridor began to grow unfamiliar. The wallpaper became a deep blue, signed photographs replaced the paintings, and I realised I had missed my door. I saw, however, that I was approaching another altogether more substantial door marked 'Stage' and decided to go through.

For a few seconds I groped through darkness, then found myself once more in the wings. I could see the piano in the middle of the empty stage, dimly lit from above by just one or two lights. I saw too that the curtains were still closed and stepped quietly out onto the stage.

I peered down at the spot where Brodsky had earlier been lying, but could not see even a mark. I then glanced back to the piano, unsure how to proceed. If I sat down at the stool and began simply to play, it was possible the technicians would have the sense to draw back the curtains and to turn up the spotlights. There was always the chance, however - one could not tell what had been going on - that the technicians had all abandoned their posts and the curtains would not even open. Moreover, when I had last seen the audience, people had been standing about talking restlessly. The best course, I decided, would be to step out through the curtains and make an announcement, giving everyone - the audience, the technicians - the chance to prepare themselves. I quickly rehearsed a few lines in my head, then, without further ado, went up to the gap in the drapes and drew back the heavy material.

I had been ready to find the auditorium in some disorder, but the sight that greeted me quite took me aback. Not only was the audience absent in its entirety, all the seating had vanished as well. The idea came to me that the hall perhaps had some sort of device whereby at the tug of a lever all the seats disappeared into the floor - thus enabling the auditorium to double as a dance floor or whatever - but then I remembered the age of the building and decided this was highly unlikely. I could only suppose the seats had been of the stacking kind and had now all been cleared away as a fire precaution. In any case, before me now was a vast, dark, empty space. There were no lights on at all, but instead, here and there, large rectangular sections of the ceiling had been removed, allowing the daylight to come down in pale shafts onto the floor.

Peering into the murky light, I thought I could make out a few figures towards the very back of the hall. They seemed to be standing around in conference - these were perhaps the stagehands completing their tidying up - and then I heard the echo of footsteps as one of them strode off somewhere.

I stood there on the edge of the stage wondering what to do next. I had, I supposed, spent much longer in Miss Stratmann's office than I had thought - possibly as long as an hour - and clearly the audience had given up hope of my ever appearing. Nevertheless, if an announcement were to be made, the guests could be gathered back into the auditorium in a matter of minutes, and even with the seating gone I could see no reason why a perfectly satisfactory recital could not then take place. It was unclear, though, where the people had all got to and I realised I would first have to find Hoffman, or whoever had now taken charge, to discuss the next step.

I climbed down off the stage and set off across the hall. I had not got half-way across before I began to feel disorientated in the darkness and, changing course a little, made towards the nearest shaft of light. Just as I did so, a figure brushed in front of me.

'Oh, excuse me,' the person said. 'I beg your pardon.'

I recognised Stephan's voice and said: 'Hello. So you at least are still here.'

'Oh, Mr Ryder. I'm sorry, I didn't see you.' He sounded tired and dejected.

'You really ought to be feeling more cheerful,' I said to him. 'You gave a splendid performance. The audience was extremely moved.'

'Yes. Yes, I suppose they did give me a good reception.'

'Well, congratulations. After all that hard work, it must be very satisfying for you.'

'Yes, I suppose so.'

We started to walk side by side through the darkness. If anything, the daylight from the ceiling made it all the more

difficult to see where one was going, but Stephan appeared to know his way.

‘You know, Mr Ryder,’ he said after a moment, ‘I’m jolly grateful to you. You’ve been marvellously encouraging. But the truth is, I didn’t come up to scratch tonight. Not by my own standards anyway. Of course, the audience gave me a big hand, but that’s because they weren’t expecting anything so special. But really, I know myself I’ve got a long way to go. My parents are right.’

‘Your parents? Good gracious, you shouldn’t worry about them.’

‘No, no, Mr Ryder, you don’t understand. My parents, you see, they have the highest standards. These people who are here tonight, they were very kind but really, they don’t know so much about these things. They saw a local boy playing at a certain level and got very excited. But I want to be measured by real standards. And I know my parents do too. Mr Ryder, I’ve come to a decision. I’m going off. I need to go somewhere bigger, study under someone like Lubetkin or Peruzzi. I realise now I can never reach the levels I want to here, not in this city. Look at the way they clapped what was after all a pretty ordinary performance of *Glass Passions*. That just about summed it up. I didn’t really see it before, but I suppose you could call me a big fish in a small pond. I ought to go away for a bit. See what I can really do.’

We continued to walk, our footsteps resounding through the auditorium. Then I said:

‘That may well be wise. In fact, I’m sure you’re right. A move to a bigger city, bigger challenges, I’m sure it will do you good. But you must be careful who you study with. If you like, I’ll give the matter some thought and see if I can arrange something.’

‘Mr Ryder, if you’d do that, I’d be eternally grateful. Yes, I need to see how far I can go. Then one day I’ll come

back here and show them. Show them how you *really* play *Glass Passions*.' He gave a laugh, but still sounded far from cheerful.

'You're a talented young man. You've got everything ahead of you. You really ought to be in better spirits.'

'I suppose so. I suppose I'm just a bit daunted. I didn't realise until tonight just what a huge climb I've still got in front of me. You'll think this is very funny, but do you know, I thought I'd have it all wrapped up tonight. It shows what it does to you, living in a place like this. You start thinking small. Yes, I thought I'd do everything there was to do tonight! You see how ridiculous my thinking has been until now. My parents are quite right. I've a great deal left to learn.'

'Your parents? Listen, my advice is to forget about your parents altogether for now. If I may say so, I really don't understand how they can ...'

'Ah, here we are. It's this way.' We had arrived at some sort of doorway and Stephan was tugging at a curtain hung across it. 'It's through here.'

'Sorry, what's through here?'

'The conservatory. Oh, perhaps you haven't heard of the conservatory. It's very famous. It was built a hundred years after the hall itself, but now it's almost as famous. That's where everyone's gone to eat breakfast.'

We found ourselves in a corridor, all down one side of which was a long row of windows. I could see through the nearer of them the light blue morning sky.

'Incidentally,' I said as we began to walk again, 'I was wondering about Mr Brodsky. About his condition. Is he ... deceased?'

'Mr Brodsky? Oh no, he's going to be fine, I'm sure. They took him off somewhere. Actually, I heard they took him

to the St Nicholas Clinic.'

'The St Nicholas Clinic?'

'It's the place that takes in down-and-outs. In the conservatory just now, people were talking about it, saying, well, that's where he belongs, that's where they know how to deal with problems like his. I was a bit shocked, to tell you the truth. In fact - I'll tell you this, Mr Ryder, in confidence - all of that helped me make up my mind. About going away, I mean. That performance Mr Brodsky gave tonight, in my opinion it was the finest thing that's been heard in this concert hall for many many years. Certainly for as long as I've been able to appreciate music. But you saw what happened. They didn't want it, it startled them. It was much more than they'd ever bargained for. They're very relieved he collapsed like that. They realise now they want something else. Something a little less extreme.'

'Something not so different from Mr Christoff perhaps.'

Stephan thought about this. 'A *little* different. A new name, at least. They realise now Mr Christoff isn't quite the thing. They do want *something* better. But ... but not *that*.'

Through the windows I could now see the wide expanse of lawn outside and the sun rising over the row of trees in the distance.

'What do you suppose will become of Mr Brodsky now?' I asked.

'Mr Brodsky? Oh, he'll just go back to being what he's always been here. See out his days as the town drunk, I suppose. They certainly won't let him be much else, not after tonight. As I say, they took him to the St Nicholas Clinic. I've grown up here, Mr Ryder, and in many ways I still love this town. But I'm eager to be leaving now.'

'Perhaps I should try and say something. I mean, address the crowd in the conservatory. Say a few words about Mr

Brodsky. Put them right about him. ’

Stephan considered this for a few steps, then shook his head.

‘It’s not worth it, Mr Ryder. ’

‘But I must say, I don’t like this any more than you do. You never know. A few words from me ... ’

‘I don’t think so, Mr Ryder. They won’t listen even to you now. Not after that performance from Mr Brodsky. That reminded them of everything they’re afraid of. Besides, there’s no microphone or anything in the conservatory, not even a platform you can stand up and speak from. You’d never get yourself heard over all the noise. You see, it’s pretty big, almost as big as the auditorium itself. From corner to corner, it must be ... well, even if you kept to a dead straight diagonal, knocking aside any tables and guests seated in your way, you’d still measure out fifty metres at least. It’s a jolly big place, as you’ll see. If I were you, Mr Ryder, I’d just relax now and enjoy your breakfast. After all, you’ve got Helsinki to be thinking about. ’

The conservatory, right enough, was a vast affair, which at this moment was bathed in morning sunlight. Everywhere people were talking cheerfully, some seated around tables, others standing in little groups. I could see people drinking coffee and fruit juice, others eating from plates or bowls, and as we made our way through the crowd I caught in turn the aromas of fresh rolls, fish cakes, bacon. I could see waiters rushing about with plates and jugs of coffee. All around me voices were greeting one another in delight, and it struck me the whole atmosphere resembled that of a reunion. And yet these were people who saw each other constantly. Clearly the evening’s events had made them reassess themselves and their community in some profound way, and the resulting mood, for whatever reason, appeared to be one of mutual celebration.

I could see now that Stephan was right. There was little point in my attempting to address this crowd, let alone in asking them to return to the auditorium for my recital. Feeling suddenly tired and extremely hungry, I decided to sit down and have some breakfast myself. When I looked about, however, I could see no free chairs anywhere. Moreover, I turned to find that Stephan was no longer walking beside me, but had been drawn into conversation by a group at a table we had just passed. I watched him being greeted warmly, half expecting him to introduce me. But he seemed to become engrossed in the conversation, and very soon he too had adopted a cheerful demeanour.

I decided to leave him to it and walked on through the crowd. I thought that sooner or later a waiter would spot me and come rushing up with a plate and a cup of coffee, perhaps show me to a seat. But though on a few occasions a waiter did come hurrying in my direction, each time he pushed past me and I was obliged to watch him serving someone else.

Then after a while I realised I was standing close to the main doors of the conservatory. Someone had thrown them wide open and many guests had spilled out onto the lawn. I stepped out a little way and was surprised by the chill in the air. But here, too, people were standing talking in groups, drinking their coffees or else eating on their feet. Some had turned to face the sunrise, while others were wandering about stretching their legs. One particular group had even sat down on the wet grass, plates and coffee jugs spread around them as for a picnic.

I spotted a catering trolley on the grass not far away with a waiter hunched busily over it. My hunger growing ever greater, I made my way towards it and was just about to tap the waiter on the shoulder when he turned and rushed past me, his arms burdened with three large plates - upon which I glimpsed scrambled eggs, sausages, mushrooms, tomatoes. I watched him go hurrying off, then decided I would not budge from beside the trolley until he returned.

As I waited, I surveyed the scene around me and saw how needless had been my worries concerning my ability to cope with the various demands presented to me in this city. As ever, my experience and my instincts had proved more than sufficient to see me through. Of course I felt a certain disappointment about the evening, but then, as I thought about it further, I could see the inappropriateness of such feelings. After all, if a community could reach some sort of an equilibrium without having to be guided by an outsider, then so much the better.

When after several minutes the waiter had not returned - throughout which time I had been continually teased by the various aromas rising from the hot canisters on the trolley - I decided there was no good reason why I should not serve myself. I had already taken a plate and was bending down searching the lower tiers for some utensils, when I became conscious of a number of figures standing behind me. Turning, I found myself looking at the porters.

As far as I could make out, all of the dozen or so I had last seen gathered together around Gustav's sick-bed were now here before me. As I had turned, some had lowered their eyes, but a few continued to regard me intensely.

'My goodness,' I said, doing my best to hide the fact that I had been about to serve myself breakfast. 'My goodness, what's happened? Naturally, I had meant to come up and see how Gustav was getting on. I was assuming he'd have gone to hospital by now. That's to say, that he was in good hands. I was certainly about to come up as soon as ...' I paused, seeing the expressions of grief on their faces.

The bearded porter stepped forward and coughed awkwardly. 'He passed away half an hour ago, sir. He'd had trouble on and off over the years, but he'd been very fit, and so it was very unexpected for us. Very unexpected.'

'I'm very sorry.' I found that indeed I felt great sorrow at this news. 'Very sorry indeed. I'm very grateful

to you, to all of you, for coming out here like this to tell me. As you know, I had only known him for a few days, but he had been very kind to me, assisting me with my bags and so on. ’

I could see the bearded porter’s colleagues all looking at him, egging him on to say something. The bearded porter took a deep breath.

‘Of course, Mr Ryder,’ he said, ‘we came to find you because we knew you’d want to hear the news quickly. But also’ - he suddenly lowered his gaze - ‘but also, you see, sir, before he passed away, Gustav, he kept wanting to know. Wanting to know if you’d made your speech yet. That’s to say, the little speech you were going to make on our behalf, sir. Right to the end, he was very keen to hear news of it. ’

All the porters had now lowered their eyes and were waiting silently for my response.

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘So you’re not aware then of what occurred in the auditorium. ’

‘We’ve all been with Gustav until just now, sir,’ said the bearded porter. ‘He’s only just now been taken away. You must excuse us, Mr Ryder. It was very rude of us not to be present while you were giving your address, especially if you were so good as to remember your little promise to us and ... ’

‘Look,’ I broke in gently, ‘many things didn’t go as planned. I’m surprised you haven’t heard, but then I suppose, as you say, in these circumstances ... ’ I paused, then, taking a breath, said in a firmer voice: ‘I’m sorry, but the fact is, many things, not just the little speech I had prepared for you, did not go ahead as planned. ’

‘So you’re saying, sir ... ’ The bearded porter trailed off, then hung his head in disappointment. The other porters, who had all been staring at me, one by one lowered their eyes

again. Then one of them near the back of the group burst out in an almost angry tone:

‘Gustav kept asking. Right to the end he kept asking. “Any news of Mr Ryder yet?” He kept asking that.’

A number of his colleagues quickly pacified him, and there then followed a lengthy silence. Finally the bearded porter said, still looking down at the grass:

‘It makes no difference. We’ll all carry on trying, just the same. In fact we’ll now try harder than ever. We won’t let Gustav down. He was always our inspiration and nothing will change now he’s gone. We’ve got an uphill struggle, we always have had, we know that, and it’s not going to get any easier now. But we won’t let standards slip, not one little bit. We’ll remember Gustav and we’ll keep at it. Of course, your little speech, sir, if it had been possible, it would have been ... it would have helped us, no doubt about it. But of course, if at the time it seemed to you inappropriate ...’

‘Look,’ I said, now beginning to lose patience, ‘you’ll all find out soon enough what occurred. Really, I’m surprised you haven’t made it your business to find out more about the larger concerns of your community. What’s more, you seem to have no idea what sort of life I have to lead. Of the vast responsibilities I have to carry. Even now, as I stand here talking to you, I’m having to think about my next engagement in Helsinki. If everything hasn’t quite gone as planned for you, I’m sorry. But you really have no right to come bothering me like this ...’

The words faded in my mouth. In the distance over to my right was a path leading from the concert hall into the surrounding woods. I had for some time been aware of a stream of people emerging from the building and disappearing off behind the trees - on their way home, presumably, for a couple of hours’ rest before the start of the day. I now spotted among them Sophie and Boris, walking purposefully

along the path. The little boy had once more placed his arm supportively around his mother, but otherwise there was nothing about them to alert the casual onlooker to their distress. I tried to see the expressions on their faces, but they were too far away, and the next moment they too had vanished behind the trees.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said more gently, turning back to the porters, ‘but you must all excuse me now.’

‘We won’t let standards slip,’ the bearded porter said quietly, still looking at the ground. ‘We’ll do it one day. You’ll see.’

‘Excuse me.’

Just as I was moving away the waiter came rushing back, pushing the old men aside to reach his trolley. Remembering the plate I was still holding behind my back, I thrust it at him.

‘The catering this morning has been appalling,’ I said coldly, before hurrying off.

The path cut a completely straight line through the woods so that I could see clearly to the tall iron gate at the far end. Sophie and Boris had already covered a surprising amount of ground, and although I walked as fast as I could, after a few minutes I had hardly reduced the distance between us. I was continually impeded, furthermore, by a group of young people walking a little in front of me who, whenever I tried to overtake, increased their pace or else spread themselves right across the path. In the end, when I could see that Sophie and Boris were about to reach the street, I broke into a run and burst through the young people, no longer caring what sort of impression I created.

After this I maintained a steady trot, yet was still not even within hailing distance as Sophie and Boris passed through the gate. By the time I reached the gate myself, my breath was coming in gasps and I was obliged to pause.

I had come out onto one of the boulevards near the heart of the city. The morning sun was lighting up the opposite pavement. The shops were still closed, but there was already a fair number of people walking about, going off to their day's work. I then saw, over to my left, a queue in the process of boarding a tram, and Sophie and Boris bringing up its rear. I broke out again into a trot, but the tram must have been further away than I had thought for, although I kept up a good pace, I did not reach it until after the entire queue had boarded and the vehicle was about to pull away. Only by waving frantically did I manage to stall the driver and struggle aboard myself.

The tram lurched forward as I staggered down the central aisle. I was so out of breath I only vaguely registered that the carriage was half full, and only when I collapsed into a

seat near the rear did it occur to me I must have walked past Sophie and Boris. Still panting, I leaned to one side and looked back up the aisle.

The carriage was divided into two distinct sections separated by an exit area in the middle. In the front portion, the seating was arranged as two long rows facing one another, and I could see Sophie and Boris sitting together on the sunny side of the tram not far from the driver's cabin. My view of them was obscured by some passengers standing in the exit area hanging onto straps, and I leaned further over into the aisle. As I did so, the man sitting opposite me - in our half of the carriage, the seats were arranged in pairs facing one another - slapped his thigh and said:

‘Another sunny day by the look of things.’

He was dressed neatly, if modestly, in a short zip-up jacket, and I supposed he was some sort of skilled workman - an electrician perhaps. I smiled at him quickly, upon which he began to tell me something about a building he and his colleagues had been working in for the past several days. I listened to him vaguely, occasionally smiling or making an assenting noise. Meanwhile my view of Sophie and Boris became further obscured as more and more people rose to their feet and crowded around the exit doors.

Then the tram stopped, the passengers got out and my view improved. Boris, looking as self-possessed as ever, had one hand on Sophie's shoulder and was regarding the other passengers suspiciously as though they presented a threat to his mother. Sophie's expression was still hidden from me. I could see her though, every few seconds, making an irritated waving motion through the air, perhaps at some insect flying around her.

I was about to adjust my position again when I realised the electrician had somehow got onto the topic of his parents. They were now both in their eighties, he was telling me, and though he did his best to visit them once a day, this

was becoming increasingly difficult due to his current job. A thought suddenly came to me and I interrupted him saying:

‘Excuse me, but speaking of parents, it seems mine were here in this city some years ago. Just as tourists, you know. It would have been a good few years ago now. It’s just that the person who told me was only a child at the time and had no clear memory of them. So I was just wondering, since we were talking about parents, and well, I don’t mean to be rude, but I assume you must be well into your fifties, I wondered if you yourself had any memory of their visit.’

‘It’s quite possible,’ the electrician said. ‘But you’ll have to describe them a little.’

‘Well, my mother, she’s quite a tall woman. Dark hair, shoulder length. A rather bird-like nose. That would make her look a little stern, even when she wasn’t intending to be.’

The electrician thought for a moment, looking out at the city going by outside. ‘Yes,’ he said, nodding. ‘Yes, I think I can remember a lady just like that. It was just for a few days. Looking around at the sights, that sort of thing.’

‘That’s it. You remember then?’

‘Yes, she seemed very pleasant. This would have been, oh, at least thirteen, fourteen years ago. Maybe even longer than that.’

I nodded enthusiastically. ‘That would tie in with what Miss Stratmann told me. Yes, that was my mother. Tell me, did she seem to be enjoying herself here?’

The electrician thought hard, then said: ‘From what I recall, she appeared to like it here, yes. In fact’ - he had spotted my look of concern - ‘in fact, I’m *certain* she did.’ He reached forward and patted my knee in a kindly manner. ‘I’m jolly certain she enjoyed it here. Look, just think about it. She’s bound to have done, isn’t she?’

‘I suppose so,’ I said and turned to the window. The sun was now moving across the interior of the tram. ‘I suppose so. It’s just that ...’ I gave a deep sigh. ‘It’s just that I wish I’d known at the time. I wish someone had thought to inform me. And what about my father? Did he seem to be enjoying himself?’

‘Your father. Hmm.’ The electrician folded his arms, a slight frown on his face.

‘He would have been quite thin by then,’ I said. ‘Greying hair. He had a favourite jacket. A tweed one, pale green, with leather elbow patches.’

The electrician continued to think. Then finally he shook his head. ‘I’m sorry. I can’t say I remember your father.’

‘But that’s impossible. Miss Stratmann assured me they came here together.’

‘I’m sure she’s right. It’s just that I personally can’t remember your father. Your mother, yes. But your father ...’ He shook his head again.

‘But that’s ridiculous! What would my mother have been doing here alone?’

‘I’m not saying he wasn’t with her. It’s just that I don’t remember him. Look, don’t upset yourself so much. I wouldn’t have been so frank if I’d known it was going to upset you like this. I’ve got a terrible memory. Everyone says so. Just yesterday I left my tool-box at my brother-in-law’s house where I had my lunch. I lost forty minutes going back to get it. My tool box!’ He gave a laugh. ‘You see, my memory’s terrible. I’m the last person to trust about something important like this. I’m sure your father would have been here with your mother. Particularly if that’s what other people are saying. Really, I’m the last person to rely on.’

But I had now turned away from him and was once more looking towards the front of the carriage, where Boris had finally given in to his emotions. He was now being embraced by his mother, and I could see his shoulders moving with his sobs. Suddenly there seemed nothing of importance other than to go to him and, muttering a quick apology to the electrician, I rose and began to make my way up the carriage.

I had almost reached them when the tram turned a sharp curve and I was forced to grab a nearby pole to keep my balance. When I looked again, I realised that Sophie and Boris had remained quite unaware of my approach, even though I was now standing very close to them. They were still in a deep embrace, their eyes closed. Patches of sunlight were drifting over their arms and shoulders. There was at that moment something so private about their comforting of each other that it seemed impossible even for me to intrude. And as I went on gazing at them, I began to feel, for all their obvious distress, a strange sense of envy. I moved a little closer until I could almost feel the very texture of their embrace.

Then at last Sophie opened her eyes. She watched me expressionlessly as the little boy continued to sob into her breast.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said to her eventually. ‘I’m very sorry about everything. I only heard about your father just now. Of course, I came after you as soon as I heard ...’

Something about her expression made me stop. For another moment, Sophie went on regarding me coldly. Then she said tiredly:

‘Leave us. You were always on the outside of our love. Now look at you. On the outside of our grief too. Leave us. Go away.’

Boris broke away from her and turned to look at me. Then he said to his mother: ‘No, no. We’ve got to keep

together. ’

Sophie shook her head. ‘No, it’s useless. Leave him be, Boris. Let him go around the world, giving out his expertise and wisdom. He needs to do it. Let’s just leave him to it now. ’

Boris stared at me in confusion, then back at his mother. He might have been about to say something, but at that moment Sophie stood up.

‘Come on, Boris. We’ve got to get off here. Boris, come on. ’

Indeed the tram was slowing down and other passengers were getting up from their seats. A few people pushed past me, and then Sophie and Boris squeezed by. Still clutching my pole, I watched Boris moving away down the aisle towards the exit. At one point he glanced back at me, and I heard him say:

‘But we’ve got to stay together. We’ve got to. ’

I then saw Sophie’s face behind him, gazing at me with an odd detachment, and I heard her voice say:

‘He’ll never be one of us. You’ve got to understand that, Boris. He’ll never love you like a real father. ’

More people pushed past me. I raised my hand in the air.

‘Boris! ’ I called.

The little boy, hanging back in the throng, looked towards me once more.

‘Boris! That bus ride, you remember it? That bus ride to the artificial lake. Remember, Boris, how good it was? How kind everyone was to us on the bus? The little presents they gave, the singing. You remember, Boris?’

Passengers had now started to disembark. Boris gave me one last glance and then disappeared from my view. More people pushed past and then the tram began to move again.

After a while I turned and made my way back to my seat. The electrician smiled cheerfully as I sat down again in front of him. Then I became aware of him leaning forward, patting my shoulder, and I realised I was sobbing.

‘Listen,’ he was saying, ‘everything always seems very bad at the time. But it all passes, nothing’s ever as bad as it looks. Do cheer up.’ For a while he went on uttering such empty phrases while I continued to sob. Then I heard him say: ‘Look, why don’t you have some breakfast. Just have something to eat, like the rest of us. You’re bound to feel a little better then. Come on. Go and get something to eat.’

I glanced up and saw that the electrician was holding a plate on his lap, on which was a half-finished croissant and a small knob of butter. His knees were covered in crumbs.

‘Ah,’ I said, straightening and recovering my composure. ‘Where did you get that?’

The electrician indicated beyond my shoulder. Turning, I saw a crowd of passengers standing at the very rear of the tram where some sort of buffet had been laid out. I noticed too that the whole back half of the carriage had become quite crowded, and that all around us passengers were eating and drinking. The electrician’s breakfast was modest in comparison to many being consumed; I could now see people working their way through large plates of eggs, bacon, tomatoes, sausages.

‘Come on,’ the electrician said again. ‘Go and get yourself some breakfast. Then we’ll talk about all your troubles. Or if you prefer, we can just forget about it all and talk about whatever you like, whatever’s likely to cheer you up. Football, cinema. Anything you like. But the first thing to do is to get some breakfast. You look like you haven’t eaten for some time.’

‘You’re quite right,’ I said. ‘Now I think of it, I haven’t eaten for a very long time. But please tell me. Where

is this tram going? I have to get to my hotel to pack my things. You see, I have a flight this morning to Helsinki. I have to get to my hotel pretty soon. ’

‘Oh, this tram will get you more or less anywhere you like in the city. This is what we call the morning circuit. Then there’s the evening circuit. Twice a day a tram goes right the way round the entire circuit. Oh yes, you can go anywhere on this tram. It’s the same again in the evening, but the atmosphere’s quite different then. Oh yes, this is a marvellous tram. ’

‘How splendid. Well then, excuse me. I think I’ll take up your suggestion and get some breakfast. In fact, you’re quite right. Even the idea of it is making me feel better. ’

‘That’s more the spirit,’ the electrician said and raised his croissant in a salute.

I got up and went to the back of the carriage. Various aromas came wafting towards me. A number of people were in the act of serving themselves, but peering over their shoulders I saw a large buffet presented in a semi-circular arrangement directly beneath the rear window of the tram. There was on offer virtually everything one could wish for: scrambled eggs, fried eggs, a choice of cold meats and sausages, sautéed potatoes, mushrooms, cooked tomatoes. There was a large platter with rolled herrings and other fish preparations, two huge baskets filled with croissants and different sorts of rolls, a glass bowl of fresh fruit, numerous jugs of coffee and juices. Everyone around the buffet seemed more than eager to get to the food, and yet the atmosphere was extremely cordial, with people passing things to one another and exchanging cheerful remarks.

I took a plate, glancing up as I did so through the rear window with its receding view of the city streets, and could feel my spirits rising yet further. Things had not, after all, gone so badly. Whatever disappointments this city had brought, there was no doubting that my presence had been

greatly appreciated - just as it had been everywhere else I had ever gone. And now here I was, my visit almost at its close, a thoroughly impressive buffet before me offering virtually everything I had ever wished to eat for breakfast. The croissants looked particularly promising. Indeed, from the manner in which passengers all around the carriage were devouring theirs, it was obvious they were extremely fresh and of the highest possible quality. Then again, nothing my gaze fell upon looked anything less than enticing.

I started to serve myself a little of everything. As I did so, I began to picture myself, already back in my seat, exchanging pleasant talk with the electrician, glancing out between mouthfuls at the early-morning streets. The electrician was in many ways the ideal person for me to talk to at this moment. He was clearly kind-hearted, but at the same time careful not to be intrusive. I could see him now, still eating his croissant, obviously in no hurry to get off the tram. In fact, he looked set to go on sitting there for a long time to come. And with the tram running a continuous circuit, if the two of us were enjoying our conversation, he was just the sort to delay getting off until the next time his stop came around. The buffet too was clearly here to stay for some time yet, so that we would be able to break off from our conversation every now and then to replenish our plates. I could even see us repeatedly persuading each other to have more. 'Go on! Just one more sausage! Here, give me your plate, I'll get it for you.' We would go on sitting there together, eating, exchanging views on football and whatever else took our fancy, while outside the sun rose higher and higher in the sky, brightening the streets and our side of the carriage. And only when we were thoroughly done, when we had eaten and talked all we could possibly want, the electrician might glance at his watch, give a sigh and point out that the stop for my hotel was coming round again. I too would sigh, and with some reluctance rise to my feet, brushing the crumbs off my lap. We would shake hands, wish each other a good day - he too would be having to get off

before long, he would tell me - and I would go off to join the crowd of cheerful passengers gathering around the exit. Then, as the tram came to a halt, I would perhaps give the electrician one last wave and disembark, secure in the knowledge that I could look forward to Helsinki with pride and confidence.

I filled my coffee cup almost to the brim. Then, holding it carefully in one hand, my generously laden plate in the other, I began making my way back to my seat.

双语版石黑一雄作品

浮世画家

An Artist of the Floating World

二〇一七年诺贝尔文学奖获奖作家

Kazuo Ishiguro



〔英〕石黑一雄

著

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译

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APRIL, 1949

NOVEMBER, 1949

JUNE, 1950

浮世画家

献给我的父母

前言

我是于一九八一年九月，在伦敦谢菲德公园的一处地下室公寓里开始写《浮世画家》的。那年我二十六岁。我的第一部小说《远山淡影》即将付印，但当时我并没有明确的理由相信自己会成为一名专职作家。

那年夏天，我和洛娜回到伦敦（此前我们一直住在加的夫），在大城市找到了新的工作，但是没有住所。几年之前，我们俩都是一个松散的关系网的成员，这个关系网里的人年轻、左倾、另类，住在拉德布罗克丛林和哈默史密斯附近的临时住房里，从事慈善工作或组织各种活动。那年夏天，我们就这样来到这座城市，无忧无虑，相信在自己找到合适的房子之前，肯定能跟别人暂时合住，现在想来那种自信真是挺奇怪的。还好，并没有什么事情来挑战我们的自信，我们很快就在喧闹繁华的金贩道附近找到了一小间出租的地下室。

公寓旁边是当时尚属尖端科技的维京唱片公司的录音棚，我们经常看见毛发浓密的大汉，搬着器材在那座没有窗户、墙壁五颜六色的楼房里进进出出。但是楼房的隔音效果堪称典范，当我背对小小的后花园，坐在我们的小餐桌旁时，我感到这种写作环境再理想不过了。

洛娜通勤的时间比我长得多。她在刘易舍姆找到一份地方政府的社会服务工作，在城市的另一边上班。我的工作地点就在一箭之遥——我成了伦敦西区古利奈人组织的“移民工作者”，这是一个深受好评的组织，致力于帮助无家可归的人。为了公平起见，我们俩制定了一个协议：每天早晨同时起床，洛娜出门的时候，我准时坐在桌旁，准备完成每天九十分钟的清晨写作，然后再去上班。

许多从事着挑战性工作的作家，都创作出了超凡的杰作。然而我总是无法一心二用，这说来可悲，甚至有点病态，那几个星期，我坐在餐桌旁试图写作，阳光一点点地洒进地下室，那是我对于“业余”写作所做的唯一尝试。这种尝试不能说完全成功。我发现自己盯着空白的稿纸，拼命克制着想去睡个回笼觉的冲动。（白天的工作很快变得紧张起来，经常不得不加班到深夜。）洛娜坚持让我吃一顿古怪的早餐开始新的一天，早餐由可怕的粗纤维构成，再撒上酵母和麦芽粉——这种绝密配方，吃得我有时在椅子上直不起腰来，但她的做法于事无补。尽管如此，在那些早晨的写作中，《浮世画家》的核心——

故事框架和中心前提——在我脑海里差不多完全成型了。我把它写成一个十五页的短篇小说（后由格兰塔出版社出版，书名是《战后之夏》）。我写这个短篇的时候，心里就清楚地知道，我需要一个庞大和复杂得多的结构，来把我已经想象中看见并受其诱惑的想法，融入小说之中。后来因为工作所迫，我的清晨写作计划彻底中断了。

直到一九八二年的冬天，我才认真地重拾《浮世画家》的创作。那时《远山淡影》已经出版，它作为第一部小说，自然引起了各种争议。这本书被美国和好几个非英语国家引进出版，并使我登上了次年春天揭晓的格兰塔出版社“20位最优秀的英国年轻小说家”榜单。我的写作事业似乎仍然不太稳定，但现在我有理由放开手脚了，于是我辞掉了古利奈人组织的工作，成了一名专职作家。

我们搬到了伦敦的东南部，住在一座高高的维多利亚风格房屋的顶层，那里位于上西德汉姆地区，环境幽静。我们的厨房没有水池，因此不得不把脏盘子都堆在一个旧的活动茶几上，推到卫生间里去。不过，这里离洛娜上班的地方很近，我们不必把闹钟设得那么早了。可怕的配方早餐也停止了。这座房子的主人是迈克尔和莉诺·马歇尔，他们六十出头，是一对可爱的老夫妇，住在楼下。很快我们就养成一个习惯：在上了一天班之后聚集在他们的厨房（那里有水池），跟他们一起喝茶，吃美味的花式蛋糕，轻松地闲聊，我们经常聊的有趣话题是图书、政治、板球、广告业，以及英国人的怪癖。（几年之后，莉诺不幸猝死，我把《长日将尽》这本书献给了她。）差不多也是在这个时候，我得到了即将推出的四频道给我的工作机会，说起来，正是我作为一名电视剧编剧的经历（我最终有两部单集电视剧在那个频道播出）对我《浮世画家》的写作产生了巨大的，也可以说是逆向的影响。

我发现自己近乎痴迷地拿我的剧本——特别是对话加舞台提示部分——跟我已经出版的小说中的章节做对比，并且问我自己：“我的小说跟我的剧本有很大不同吗？”厚厚的一部《远山淡影》，在我看来跟一个剧本那么类似——对话，接着是“舞台提示”，接着又是对话。我开始感到沮丧。如果一部小说所提供的体验，跟观众打开电视所获得的没有什么差别，那为什么还要写小说呢？小说作为一种形式，如果不能提供某种独一无二的、其他形式无法替代的东西，那么它在电影和电视的巨大冲击下还有什么生存希望呢？（我必须指出，在上世纪八十年代初期，当代小说的境遇似乎比今天不景气得多。）我在谢菲德公园奋力写作的那些早晨，对自己想写的故事有着清晰的想法。但是如今在西德汉姆，我却进入了一个漫长的实验期，尝试着

用各种不同的方式讲述那个故事。我打定主意，我的新小说绝不是一个“散文体的剧本”。那么它会是什么呢？

就在那个时候，我感染了一种病毒，几天卧床不起。最难受的阶段过去之后，我感觉不再需要接连昏睡几小时了，就找到我带到床上的那本书——它被裹在我的羽绒被里到处乱滚，是新近出版的基尔马丁——蒙克利夫翻译的马塞尔·普鲁斯特《追忆似水年华》的第一卷。也许是因为当时身处病榻，使我更能体会这本书的意境（其实我并不是普鲁斯特的铁杆粉丝，当时不是，现在也不是：我认为他长篇累牍的大段描写实在是过于沉闷），但是我完全被“序曲”和“贡布雷”那些部分吸引住了。我读了一遍又一遍。让我深感激动的，除了这些段落的超凡之美，还有我当时脑海中产生（后来写在笔记上）的普鲁斯特的“移动方法”——也就是他从一个情节引入下一个情节的方法。事件和场景的顺序并没有遵循时间表的要求，也不是线性地展开情节。而是一些看似无关紧要的思绪联想，或者变幻莫测的记忆，把小说从一个章节带入另一个章节。有时，看到目前的事件由前一个事件触发，使人不由得产生疑问：“为什么？”究竟什么原因，这两个貌似毫不相关的瞬间，在叙述者的脑海里被放在了一起？于是，我找到了一种令人兴奋的、更加自由的方式来写我的小说，它可以在纸上制造丰富的意境，提供在屏幕上无法捕捉的内心活动。如果我能根据叙述者的思绪联想和流动记忆，从一个段落走向另一个段落，我就差不多能像一位抽象画家那样，自由地选择把形状和色彩安放在画布上。我可以把两天前的一个场景，直接放在二十年前的一个场景旁边，请读者思索两者之间的关系。通常，叙述者自己并不需要完全清楚某一特定的并置关系的深层原因。我看到了一种写作方式，它能恰到好处地提出多层次的自我欺骗和否认，足以蒙蔽任何人对其自身及过往的看法。对一位小说家来说，突破性的时刻经常就像这样，是一些不起眼的、私密的小事件。现在回想起来，我发现那三天在西德汉姆感染病毒，卧床养病，反复研读普鲁斯特的那二十页文字，是我写作生涯中一个关键的转折点——可以这么说，它远比荣获一项大奖，或者在电影首映式上走红地毯重要得多。我后来写的一切，都是由我在那三天里的顿悟所决定的。

我在此还应该谈一谈《浮世画家》里的日本元素。从严格意义上说，这是我所有小说里最日本的一部，故事场景完全在日本，人物也都是日本人。小说的语言——第一人称叙述和对话——被理解为是日语，虽然小说是以英语呈现的。换句话说，你应该把这本书想象成某种翻译作品：在一句句英语文字的背后是日语。这个策略对我写在纸

上的每一句话都有影响。我希望语言能够流畅自然，却又不能变得过于口语化——过于“英语”。我经常发现我在逐字逐句地翻译日语的句式和客套话。但大多数时候是在寻找一种典雅但略不自然的表达方式，以暗示自始至终英语后面所流淌着的日语的韵律节奏和繁文缛节。

最后，我想在这里补充一点关于创作这部小说的更大的社会背景。《浮世画家》写于一九八一年至一九八五年之间，那些年英国正在经历关键的、痛苦的、经常难以驾驭的转型期。玛格丽特·撒切尔领导的政府终结了战后的政治共识——关于福利国家和“混合”经济（重要资产和行业均为公有和私有）的愿望。当时有一个公开而强硬的计划，要将英国从一个以制造业和重工业为基础、拥有大量有组织劳动力的国家，转变为一个以服务业为主导的经济体，拥有分散、灵活、非工会化的劳动力资源。在那个时代，出现了矿工罢工、沃平争端、核裁军运动游行、福克纳群岛战争、爱尔兰共和军恐怖主义，还出现了一种名为“货币主义”的经济理论，将大幅削减公共服务作为治疗病态经济的唯一良方。我还记得，我与一位交情最深、关系最亲密的朋友共进晚餐，因为两人对矿工罢工持有相反意见，发生了激烈的争吵。这部小说以二战前后的日本为背景，但很大程度上是根据我当时身处的英国而创作的：各行各业的人们都面临选择政治立场的压力；狂热的、往往是年轻的那些派系的刻板和笃定，渐渐变为自以为是和恶意的咄咄逼人；在政治变革时期“艺术家角色”的苦闷困惑。对我个人来说，我有一种挥之不去的感觉：想要超越受时代局限的教条主义狂热实在太难了；我还有一种恐惧，生怕时代和历史会证明一个人所支持的是一项错误、可耻，甚至邪恶的事业，尽管他怀有良好的心愿，却为此白白浪费了自己最宝贵的时光和才华。

石黑一雄
二〇一六年一月于伦敦

一九四八年十月

如果在一个阳光灿烂的日子，你走过那座在当地仍被称为“犹疑桥”的小木桥，爬上陡峭的小路，走不了多远，就能在两棵银杏树的树梢间看见我家宅子的屋顶。即使在山上没有占据这样显眼的位置，它在周围的房屋间也显得鹤立鸡群，因此，你顺着小路走上来时，会纳闷这宅子的主人会是怎样的富翁。

其实我不是富翁，而且从来没有富过。宅子之所以看上去这样壮观，是因为它是我的前任房主建造的，而他不是别人，正是杉村明。当然啦，你也许刚来到这个城市，还不熟悉杉村明这个名字。凡是二战前住在这里的人，只要一跟他们提起杉村明，他们就会告诉你，三十多年前，杉村无疑是城里最受尊敬、最德高望重的人之一。

你得知了这点，再来到山顶，站在那里看着精美的雪松大门，围墙里大片的庭园，琉璃瓦的屋顶，还有那些美不胜收的雕梁画栋，你会疑惑我这个人何德何能，竟能拥有这样的房产。事实上，我买这座房宅出价低廉——当时甚至不到房产的真正价值的一半。由于那个时候杉村家人发起了一种十分奇特——有人会说是愚蠢——的程序，才使我得以购得这座豪宅。

说起来约莫是十五年前的事了。当时，我的情况每个月都有起色，妻子开始催促我物色一个新居。她以她惯常的远见，振振有词地阐述拥有一座跟我们地位相称的房屋有多重要——不是出于虚荣，而是考虑到孩子们将来的婚配。我觉得她说得有道理，但是我们的长女节子只有十四五岁，我就没有着急物色。不过，有一年左右，每当我听说有合适的房子出售，都会记得去打听打听。记得是我的一个学生来告诉我，说杉村明去世一年之后，他的宅子准备出售。购买这样一座豪宅对我来说是天方夜谭，我以为这个建议是出于我的学生一向对我的过度敬重。不过我还是去打听了，结果得到了意想不到的答复。

一天下午，两位仪态高傲、白发苍苍的女士来访，她们就是杉村明的女儿。当我表示得到这样一个显赫家庭的关注，感到受宠若惊时，那位姐姐冷冷地告诉我，她们这么做不只是出于礼节。前几个月里，许多人都来打听她们先父的宅子，家人最后决定全部回绝，只留下四个候选人。这四个人是家庭成员根据其品行和成就，严格挑选出来的。

“父亲建造的房产必须传给一个他认可和赞赏的人，”她继续说道，“这对我们来说是第一要紧的。当然啦，情形所迫，我们也不得不从经济上来考虑，但这绝对是第二位的。因此，我们定了一个价钱。”

说到这里，一直没有开口的妹妹递给我一个信封，她们神情凝重地注视着我把它打开。里面只有一张纸，上面用毛笔典雅地写着一个数字。我刚想表达对这么低廉的价格的惊讶，却从她们脸上的表情看出，进一步谈论价钱问题会引起反感。姐姐只是说道：“这不是为了让你们互相竞价。我们并不指望得到超过规定价钱的数额。从现在起，我们打算要做的是进行一场信誉拍卖。”

她解释说，她们亲自前来，是代表杉村家族正式请我接受——当然啦，跟另外三位候选人一起——对我的背景和信誉的细致调查。然后从中挑出一个合适的买主。

这是一个奇怪的程序，但我觉得没理由反对。其实，这跟男婚女嫁要走的程序差不多。而且，能被这个古老而保守的家庭认为是一个有资格的候选人，我感到有点受宠若惊。我表示愿意接受调查，并向她们表达了我的谢意，这时，妹妹第一次跟我说话了，她说：“小野先生，父亲是个文化人。他对艺术家非常尊重。实际上，他知道您的作品。”

在后来的日子里，我自己也做了些调查，发现妹妹的话果然不假。杉村明确确实可算是热衷艺术，曾无数次出资赞助画展。我还听到一些有趣的传言：杉村家族很大一部分人根本不同意出售房宅，曾有过一些激烈的争论。最后，迫于经济压力，不得不变卖房产。交易过程中这些古怪的手续，实际上是那些不愿房产转到外人手中的人所做的一种妥协。这些安排有些专横，这是无需否认的。但在我来说，我愿意体谅一个拥有这样辉煌历史的家族的情感。但妻子对调查一事很不以为然。

“她们以为自己是谁？”她不满地说。“应该告诉她们，我们不想再跟她们发生任何关系。”

“可是有什么坏处呢？”我说。“我们没有什么不愿意让她们发现的。不错，我家境不殷实，但这点杉村家的人肯定已经知道了，而她们仍然把我们看作有资格的候选人。就让她们调查去吧，她们只会发现对我们有利的东西。”我还刻意加了一句：“实际上，她们所做

的事，就跟我们要跟她们联姻差不多。我们必须慢慢习惯这类事情。”

而且，“信誉拍卖”——用那位姐姐的话——的想法确实值得赞许。我奇怪为什么我们没有用这种方法解决更多的问题。这样的竞争要值得称道得多，它用以评判的不是某人的钱包大小，而是他的道德操守和成就。我仍然记得，当我得知杉村一家——经过最为周密彻底的调查之后——认为我最有资格买下他们如此珍视的那座房子时，我内心深处曾感到多么满足。毫无疑问，这座房子也值得我们忍受一些麻烦，它外表壮观、盛气凌人，里面却是精心挑选的色彩柔和的天然木料，我们住在里面之后才发现，这座房子特别有助于放松心情，安享宁静。

然而，在交易期间，杉村一家的专横显而易见，有些家庭成员毫不掩饰他们对我们的敌意，换了一个不太善解人意的买主，准会觉得受到冒犯，放弃这笔买卖。即使到了后来，我有时还会碰到杉村家的一些人，他们不是礼貌地跟我寒暄，而是站在大街上盘问我那所宅子的状况，以及我对它做了什么改造。

最近，我很少听到杉村家人的消息了。不过日本投降后不久，曾经来找我商量售房事宜的两姐妹中的妹妹，突然来访。连年的战争把她变成了一个消瘦的、弱不禁风的老太太。她以他们家族一贯的作风，毫不掩饰地表示她只关心宅子在战争中受的损害，而并不关心住在宅子里的人。听了我和健二的遭遇，她只是淡淡地表示了几句同情，然后就对炸弹造成的破坏提出一大堆问题。这使我一开始对她非常反感，可是后来我注意到，她的目光总是不由自主地打量着房子，还有，她斟酌词句的时候会突然停住话头，于是，我理解了她在再次回到这座老宅的百感交集的激动心情。后来我推测，出售房宅时还活着的那些家人如今想必都去世了，我开始对她产生恻隐之心，便提出带她四处看看。

宅子在战争中遭到一些破坏。杉村明在房子东边建了厢房，共有三间大屋，有一道长廊跟主宅相连，长廊横贯主宅一侧的庭园。长廊从头至尾精美繁华，有人说杉村建造长廊——以及东厢房——是为了他的父母，他希望跟父母保持距离。不管怎么说，这道长廊是宅子里最引人注目的特色之一。下午，外面的繁枝茂叶把光和影投洒在整个长廊，人走在里面，就像在庭院隧道里穿行一般。炸弹造成的破坏主要是在这一部分，我们在庭院里审视长廊时，我看见杉村小姐难过得两眼垂泪。此时，我先前对这位老太太的不满情绪早已烟消云散，我

一再向她保证，一有机会就把受损的地方修好，让宅子恢复她父亲当初建造的样子。

我信誓旦旦的时候，并不知道物资仍然这么匮乏。日本投降之后很长时间，我们经常要等上好几个星期，才能等来一片木头或一包钉子。在这种情况下，我只能尽量先照顾主宅——它也没有逃过战争的破坏，庭院走廊和东厢房的修理进展缓慢。我想尽办法防止出现严重的衰败，但宅子的那个部分始终没能开放。而且，现在这里只剩下我和仙子，似乎也不需要扩大我们的生活空间。

今天，如果我领你走到宅子后面，拉开厚重的纱门，让你看看杉村庭院里长廊的遗迹，你仍然会感受到它当初的奇妙壮观。但是毫无疑问，你也会注意到我未能阻挡的蛛网和霉斑，以及天花板上大大的裂缝，只用防水帆布盖着，遮挡天空。有时，天刚亮，我拉开纱门，发现一道道绚丽的阳光透过防水帆布照射下来，映出悬在空气中的尘雾，就好像天花板是刚刚塌下来的一般。

除了长廊和东厢房，受损最严重的是阳台。我们家的人，特别是我的两个女儿，以前总是喜欢坐在那里消磨时光，聊天，欣赏园子。因此，日本投降后，节子——我已婚的女儿——第一次来看我们时，阳台的情形让她感到难过极了。那时我已经把破坏最严重的地方修好了，但阳台的一端仍然高低不平，满是裂缝，因为当年的炸弹把地板都掀了起来。阳台顶上也遭到破坏，一到下雨天，我们就不得不在地上摆一排容器，接上面漏下来的雨水。

不过，在过去的这一年，我总算取得了一些进展，到节子上个月又来看我们的时候，阳台已经差不多修复了。因为姐姐回来，仙子专门请假在家，加上天气不错，我的两个女儿许多时间都呆在外面，就像过去一样。我经常跟她们一起凑热闹，有时候，时光又像回到了很久以前，某个阳光灿烂的日子，全家人一起坐在那里，有一搭没一搭地闲聊。上个月的有一天——应该是节子到来后的第二天早晨——我们吃过早饭，一起坐在阳台上，仙子说道：

“节子，你终于来了，我总算松了口气。你可以把爸爸从我手里暂时接过去了。”

“仙子，说实在的……”她的姐姐在垫子上不安地蠕动着。

“爸爸现在退休了，需要人好好照顾呢，”仙子继续说，脸上带着调皮的笑容，“你得让他有点事做，不然他就会感到郁闷。”

“说实在的……”节子紧张地笑笑，然后叹了口气，把目光转向园子。“枫树似乎完全恢复了，看上去多么精神啊。”

“节子大概根本不知道你最近是个什么情况，爸爸。她只记得你当年是个暴君，把我们支使得团团转。你现在温和多了，是不是这样？”

我笑了一声，向节子表明这都是在开玩笑，然而我的长女还是一脸忧心忡忡的样子。仙子又转向姐姐，接着说道，“但是他确实需要人好好照料，整天呆在家里闷闷不乐。”

“她又在胡说八道了，”我插嘴说，“如果我整天郁闷，这些东西是怎么修好的呢？”

“是啊，”节子说着，笑眯眯地转向我。“房子现在看上去棒极了。爸爸一定干得很辛苦。”

“苦活累活都有人来帮他干，”仙子说，“看来你不相信我的话，节子。爸爸现在大不一样了。你不用再害怕他。他脾气温柔随和多了。”

“仙子，说实在的……”

“他偶尔还自己做饭呢。你都不会相信，是不是？最近爸爸的厨艺可是大有长进。”

“仙子，这件事我们已经谈得够多了。”节子轻声说。

“是不是这样，爸爸？你的进步可真不小。”

我又笑了笑，疲惫地摇摇头。我记得就在这时，仙子把脸转向园子，对着阳光闭上双眼，说道：

“我说，等我结了婚，他可不能指望我回来做饭了。我要做的事情已经够多了，哪还有空照顾爸爸。”

仙子说这话的时候，她的姐姐——刚才一直拘谨地望着别处——用询问的目光飞快地看了我一眼。她立刻又转移视线，因为必须回应仙子的笑容。但是节子的神态举止中出现了一种新的、更深沉的不安，幸好这时候她的小儿子在阳台上奔跑，飞快地从我们身边蹿过，使她有机会改变话题，她似乎松了口气。

“一郎，安静点！”她冲着儿子的背影喊道。

一郎一直跟父母住在现代化的公寓里，现在见到我们老宅这么宽敞，毫无疑问是被迷住了。他似乎不像我们这样喜欢在阳台上闲坐，而是喜欢以很快的速度从阳台一头跑到另一头，有时还在擦得锃亮的地板上滑行。他不止一次差点儿打翻了我们的茶盘，他母亲一直叫他安稳地坐下来，但收效甚微。这次也是，节子叫他跟我们一起坐在垫子上，他却不肯，只在阳台那头生气。

“过来，一郎，”我喊道，“我一直跟女人聊天，已经聊腻了。你过来坐在我旁边，我们谈谈男子汉的话题。”

这一招很灵，他立刻就过来了。他把垫子放在我身边，端端正正地坐好，小手背在后面，肩膀挺得笔直。

“外公，”他一本正经地对我说，“我有个问题。”

“好的，一郎，什么问题？”

“我想知道怪兽的事。”

“怪兽？”

“它是史前的吗？”

“史前？这样的词你都知道？你准是一个聪明的孩子。”

这时候，一郎的架子端不住了。他放弃了正襟危坐，仰面滚在地上，开始把双脚悬在半空踢蹬。

“一郎！”节子焦急地压低声音喊道。“在外公面前这么没有教养。快坐好了！”

听了这话，一郎只是让双脚懒洋洋地落到地板上。他把双臂交叉放在胸前，闭上了眼睛。

“外公，”他用困意蒙眬的声音说，“怪兽是史前的吗？”

“什么怪兽，一郎？”

“请原谅他，”节子说，脸上带着紧张不安的笑容，“我们昨天来的时候，火车站外面贴着一张电影海报。他纠缠了出租车司机一路，问了人家许多问题。不巧的是我自己没有看见那张海报。”

“外公！怪兽到底是不是史前的？我想听到一个答案！”

“一郎！”他母亲狠狠瞪了他一眼。

“我不能肯定，一郎。我认为我们必须看了电影才知道。”

“那什么时候看电影呢？”

“唔。你最好跟你母亲商量一下。这种事说不好，也许电影太恐怖了，不适合小孩子看。”

我说这话没有惹恼他的意思，但是外孙的反应吓了我一跳。他一骨碌坐了起来，气呼呼地瞪着我，嘴里喊道：“你怎么敢！你说什么呀！”

“一郎！”节子惊愕地叫道。可是一郎继续用那种最吓人的目光看着我，他母亲只好从自己的垫子上起身，走了过来。“一郎！”她摇晃着他的胳膊，轻声地说。“不许那样瞪着外公。”

听了这话，一郎又躺倒在地，悬空踢蹬双脚。他母亲又朝我不安地笑了笑。

“这么没有教养。”她说。她似乎不知道再说点什么，便又笑了笑。

“一郎君，”仙子说着，站了起来，“你为什么不来帮我收拾收拾早饭的东西呢？”

“女人干的活。”一郎说，两只脚仍然乱踢着。

“这么说一郎不肯帮我喽？这就麻烦了。桌子这么重，我力气这么小，一个人可没法把它搬走。不知道有谁能帮我呢？”

话音未落，一郎一跃而起，看也不看我们一眼，大步走进屋去。仙子呵呵笑着，跟了进去。

节子看了一眼他们的背影，然后端起茶壶，给我斟满。“没想到事情这么严重，”她说，声音压得低低的，“我说的是仙子的婚事。”

“没有那么严重，”我说，摇了摇头，“实际上，八字还没一撇呢。这才刚刚开始。”

“请原谅，可是听了仙子刚才的话，我自然以为事情多半已经……”她的话没有说完，接着又补了一句，“请原谅。”然而听她说话的口气，似乎提出了一个悬而未决的问题。

“仙子恐怕不是第一次这样说话了，”我说，“实际上，自从开始议论这档婚事以来，她的表现就一直有些异样。上个星期，毛利先

生来看我们——你还记得他吗？”

“当然记得。他还好吧？”

“挺好的。他只是路过，进来问候一声。问题是，仙子就开始当着他的面谈起了这档婚事。她当时的态度就跟刚才差不多，好像一切都谈妥了似的。真是让人尴尬。毛利先生走的时候还向我表示祝贺，并问我新郎是做什么的。”

“天哪，”节子若有所思地说，“那肯定让人怪难堪的。”

“这可不能怪毛利先生。你自己刚才也听见了。一个陌生人会怎么想呢？”

女儿没有回答，我们在那里默默地坐了一阵。后来，我朝节子看去时，她正出神地看着园子，两只手托着茶杯，似乎已经把它给忘记了。她上个月来看我们的时候，我也有几次——也许是光线照在她身上的样子，或者其他类似的原因——发现自己在仔细端详她的容貌。毫无疑问，随着年岁增长，节子越变越好看了。她小时候，我和她母亲担心她长相平平，以后找不到好婆家。节子小小年纪五官就有点男性化，到了青春期这个特点越发明显。因此，我的两个女儿每次吵架，仙子总是喊姐姐“假小子！假小子！”，使她无言以对。谁知道这样的事情对人格产生了什么样的影响呢？仙子长大后这么任性，节子却这么害羞、腼腆，绝对不是偶然的。可是现在，节子年近三十，容貌却大有改观，看上去自有一种风韵。我还记得她母亲的预言——“我们的节子是夏季开花，”她经常这么说。我以前以为妻子只是在自我安慰，可是上个月有好几次，我吃惊地发现她的预言多么正确。

节子从深思中回过神来，又朝屋子里看了一眼。然后她说：“以我的看法，恐怕去年的事给仙子伤害很大。也许比我们设想的还要严重。”

我叹了口气，点点头。“当时我可能对她不够在意。”

“我相信爸爸已经尽力了。毫无疑问，这样的事对女人来说是个可怕的打击。”

“不得不承认，我当时以为她在演戏，你妹妹有时候就喜欢那样。她一直口口声声说那是‘爱情的结合’，后来黄了，便也只好把戏演下去。唉，也许根本就不是演戏。”

“我们当时还把它当笑话，”节子说，“说不定真的是爱情的结合。”

我们又沉默了。我屋里传出一郎的声音，一迭声地嚷嚷着什么。

“请原谅，”节子换了一种口吻说，“有没有听说去年的婚事究竟为什么会泡汤？太让人感到意外了。”

“不知道。现在已经无所谓了，不是吗？”

“那当然，请原谅。”节子似乎琢磨了一会儿，然后说：“只是池田总是追问我去年的事，追问三宅家为什么要那样突然反悔。”她轻笑了一声，几乎是对自己笑。“他似乎认准我有什么事情瞒着他，我们都瞒着他。我只能一再地向他保证，我什么也不知道。”

“请你相信，”我有点冷淡地说，“我也不明白其中的奥秘。如果我知道，肯定不会瞒着你和池田的。”

“那当然。请原谅，我不是故意暗示……”她又一次尴尬地停住了话头。

那天早晨我对女儿表现得有点急躁，但节子不是第一次用这样的口气追问我去年的事，以及三宅家解除婚约的原因。她为什么认定我有事瞒着她呢？我不知道。即使三宅家有什么特殊的原因突然毁约，按理也不会如实告诉我的。

按我自己的猜测，这件事并没有什么了不得的内幕。诚然，他们最后一刻突然毁婚，确实令人十分意外，但凭什么就断定其中必有隐情呢？我感觉事情很简单，就是家庭地位过于悬殊。从我对三宅一家的观察来看，他们只是又骄傲又厚道的人，想到儿子要攀高枝，就觉得心里不太舒服。其实，他们早在几年前就想解除婚约的，只是小两口儿口口声声说是“爱情的结合”，再加上这些日子大家都在说新事新办，三宅家就搞不清怎么办才好了。是的，事情的来龙去脉不会比这更复杂了。

也有可能，看到我似乎赞成这桩婚事，他们觉得迷惑不解。我把名声地位之类的东西看得很淡，本能地对此不感兴趣。实际上，我这辈子从来没有对自己的社会地位有很清楚的认识，即使现在，某件事，或某人说的什么话，使我想起我所拥有的较高地位时，我还经常感到惊讶。比如那天晚上，我去了老地方“逍遥区”，在川上夫人的酒馆里喝酒，结果我和绅太郎发现里面只有我们两位客人，这种情况最近越来越频繁了。我们像往常一样，坐在吧台前我们的高凳子上，

跟川上夫人闲聊，时间一小时一小时地过去，再没有别的顾客进来，我们的话便越说越亲密。后来，川上夫人说起了她的几个亲戚，抱怨那个年轻人怀才不遇，找不到称心如意的工作，这时绅太郎突然喊了起来：

“你得把他领到先生这儿来，欧巴桑！只要先生在适当的时候说一句好话，你亲戚立马就能找到一个好工作。”

“你在说什么呀，绅太郎？”我不满地说。“我已经退休。现在没有什么关系了。”

“像先生这样地位的人推荐一下，不管是谁都会买账的，”绅太郎不肯罢休。“就让那个小伙子来见见先生好了，欧巴桑。”

绅太郎说得这样肯定，我先是感到很吃惊，接着我意识到，他是又想起了许多年前我为他弟弟做的一件小事。

那应该是一九三五年或一九三六年，记得当时我只是例行公事，给国务院的一个熟人写了一封推荐信，大概就是诸如此类的事情吧。我本来根本没当一回事，可是一天下午，我正在家里休息，妻子来报说门口有客人。

“请他们进来。”我说。

“可他们硬是不肯进来打扰你。”

我来到门口，那里站着绅太郎和他的弟弟——还只是个毛头小伙子。他们一看见我，就开始鞠躬、赔笑。

“请上来吧，”我说，可他们只是一味地鞠躬、赔笑。“绅太郎，请上来，到榻榻米上坐。”

“不了，先生，”绅太郎说，一边不停地鞠躬，满脸堆笑，“我们冒昧到您府上来，实在是太失礼了。实在是太叨扰了。但是我们在家里呆不住，一定要来谢谢您才是。”

“快进来吧。好像节子正在沏茶呢。”

“不了，先生，实在是太叨扰了。太叨扰了。”然后绅太郎转向他弟弟，急促地小声说：“良夫！良夫！”

年轻人这才停止鞠躬，局促地抬头看着我。接着他说：“我将一辈子对您感恩不尽。我一定发奋图强，不辜负您的推荐。我向您保

证，绝不让您失望。我要勤勉工作，努力让上司满意。不管我将来有了什么出息，都不会忘记让我事业起步的恩人。”

“其实这不算什么。也是你本来应得的。”

听了这话，两人立刻一迭声地表示反对，然后绅太郎对他弟弟说：“良夫，我们已经占用了先生太多时间。不过在离开之前，你要再好好地看看帮助过你的恩人。我们真是三生有幸，遇到这样德高望重又这样仁慈的恩人。”

“是啊。”年轻人喃喃地说，抬头看着我。

“别这样，绅太郎，弄得怪不好意思的。快请进来，我们喝几杯清酒庆祝一下。”

“不了，先生，我们必须走了。像这样跑来打扰您下午的清静，实在是太叨扰了。可是我们等不及了，必须立刻来向您表示感谢。”

他们的到访——我必须承认——使我体会到某种成就感。在忙碌的事业生涯中，很少有机会停下来观望一下，但偶尔会出现这样的时刻，使你突然看清自己已经走了多远。事实摆在眼前，我几乎浑然不觉地就让一个年轻人的事业有了好的开始。早在几年前，这样的事情是无法想象的，我竟然已经达到了这样高的地位，自己却还没有意识到。

“今非昔比，许多事情都变了，绅太郎，”那天夜里我在川上夫人的酒馆里说道，“我现在退休了，已经没有那么多关系。”

其实我心里也知道，绅太郎的断言也有一定的道理。如果我愿意去试一试，说不定又会为我的影响力之大而感到惊讶。就像我说的，我对自己的地位从来没有清醒的认识。

不管怎样，绅太郎虽说有时候在某些事情上表现得天真幼稚，但决不应该因此就轻视他，现如今，已经很难碰到一个像他这样没有被这个时代的冷漠和怨恨玷污的人了。走进川上夫人的酒馆，看见绅太郎就像过去约十七年的任何一个夜晚一样坐在吧台旁，看见他在那里漫不经心地、以他独特的方式一圈圈地转动他的帽子，实在是一件令人欣慰的事情。似乎对绅太郎来说，什么都没有改变。他会彬彬有礼地跟我打招呼，就好像仍旧是我的学生，然后整个晚上，不管他喝得多醉，都会一如既往地称我“先生”，并始终对我毕恭毕敬。有时，他甚至会带着年轻学徒那种恳切的表情，问我一些关于技巧或风格的问题——事实上，绅太郎早就跟艺术分道扬镳了。这些年来，他把时

间都用来给图书画插图，而且我得知他目前的专长是画消防车。他整天整天呆在自己的阁楼上，画出一辆又一辆消防车的草图。但是我认为到了晚上，几杯酒下肚之后，绅太郎愿意相信自己仍是当初跟我学画的那个满怀理想的年轻画家。

川上夫人有一股促狭劲儿，绅太郎的这股孩子气经常成为她打趣的对象。比如，最近的一天晚上，外面下着暴雨，绅太郎冲进小酒馆，把帽子里的水挤在门垫上。

“哎哟，绅太郎君！”川上夫人冲他嚷道。“太不像话了！”

听了这话，绅太郎非常痛苦地抬起头，似乎真的犯了什么滔天大罪。然后他开始一迭声地道歉，川上夫人更是得理不饶人。

“我从没见过这么粗野的，绅太郎君。你好像压根儿就不尊重我。”

“得了得了，欧巴桑，”过了一会儿，我恳求她道，“够了，快告诉他你只是在开玩笑。”

“开玩笑？才不是呢。实在是太粗野了。”

就这么一路数落，最后绅太郎的样子惨不忍睹。可是有的时候，别人认认真真地跟绅太郎说话，他却认准了对方是在捉弄他。有一次，他高兴地大声谈论一位刚刚作为战争罪犯被处死的将军，弄得川上夫人十分为难。他嚷嚷道：“我从小就一直很崇拜那个人。不知道他现在怎么样了。肯定已经退休了。”

那天夜里，酒馆里来了几个新的客人，他们都不满地看着他。川上夫人为生意考虑，走到他身前，轻声把将军的遭遇告诉了他，绅太郎却放声大笑起来。

“天哪，欧巴桑，”他大声说，“你的有些玩笑开得真过分。”

绅太郎在这些事情上的无知经常令人吃惊，不过就像我说的，不应该因此而轻视他。如今还有这样没被世态炎凉玷污的人，我们应该感到庆幸才是。实际上，大概就是因为绅太郎的这个特点——始终不受世俗损害的天性——我最近这些年越来越愿意跟他在一起。

至于川上夫人，她虽然尽量不让现行的生活方式影响自己，但不可否认，几年的战争使她衰老了不少。战争前，她或许仍可以被称为“年轻女人”，战争后，似乎她内在的什么东西破碎、萎缩了。如果想起她在战争中失去的那些亲人，这就不足为怪了。对她来说，生意

也越来越难做。她肯定很难相信这里就是她十六七年前开小酒馆的那个地方。我们过去的那个“逍遥地”，现在已几乎荡然无存。她昔日的那些竞争对手早就关门离开了，川上夫人肯定也不止一次考虑过这么做。

回想她的酒馆刚开张的时候，挤在众多酒吧和小吃店中间，我还记得当时有人怀疑它能不能开得下去。确实，只要你走在那些小街小巷，总会碰到数不清的布幌，它们挂在小店的门前，从四面八方朝你逼来，每个布幌上都用醒目的字迹写着店里有吸引力的东西。当时，那片地方热闹非凡，店铺再多也不愁没有生意。特别是比较暖和的夜晚，更是人头攒动，人们不急不忙地从一个酒馆逛到另一个酒馆，或者就站在马路中间聊天。汽车早就不敢往那里开了，就连自行车也只能费力地推着，才能穿过那些挤挤挨挨、目中无人的行人。

我所说的我们的“逍遥地”，充其量就是一个喝酒、吃饭和聊天的地方。要找真正寻欢作乐的场所——要找艺伎馆和戏园子，就必须到市中心去。不过对我来说，我更愿意去我们那片地方。那里吸引了一批活跃而有身份的人，其中许多像我们一样——画家和作家，因为这里可以大声交谈直至深夜，所以都被吸引了过来。我们那群人经常光顾的小店叫“左右宫”，位于三条小街的交汇处，那里有一片铺砌的空地。左右宫不像周围的那些店铺，它占地面积很大，还有二楼，许多女招待穿着西式的或传统的服装。左右宫把所有竞争对手都比了下去，这里也有我的一份小小功劳，他们知道这点，便在角落里专留一张桌子给我们使用。实际上，跟我一起在那里喝酒的都是我的得意门生：黑田，村崎，田中——优秀的年轻人，已经声名鹊起。他们都非常喜欢聊天，我记得在那张桌旁进行过许多激情洋溢的辩论。

应该承认，绅太郎从来不属于那个精英团体。我个人倒不反对他加入我们圈子，但是我的学生中有很强烈的等级观念，绅太郎无疑并不属于第一流。实际上，我记得就在绅太郎和他弟弟到访我家后不久的一天晚上，我在酒馆的桌旁谈到此事。我记得黑田之流大肆嘲笑绅太郎兄弟对区区一个白领工作这样感激涕零。后来，学生们神色凝重地听我谈论我的观点：当一个人辛勤工作，并不刻意追名逐利，只是为了充分发挥自己的聪明才智时，名利就会在不知不觉中找上门来。这时，其中一个学生——无疑就是黑田——探身向前说道：

“一段时间以来，我一直怀疑先生没有意识到他在这个城里人们心目中的崇高地位。确实，他刚才说的那个例子充分证明，如今他的名望已经超出了艺术圈，扩展到生活的各个领域。先生对这样的敬重

感到吃惊，这是他一贯的做派。但我们在座的各位却丝毫不觉得意外。实际上可以这么说，虽然芸芸大众都对先生尊重有加，但只有我们这张桌子旁的人才知道，这种尊重还远远不够。我个人毫不怀疑，先生的名望还会与日俱增，在未来的日子里，我们最大的骄傲就是告诉别人，我们曾经是小野增二的弟子。”

这没有什么可吃惊的，每天晚上到了一定的时候，大家喝得有点微醺时，我那些弟子就开始对我百般恭维，大唱赞歌，这似乎已成为一种习惯。特别是黑田，似乎被看做他们的代言人，更是巧舌如簧。当然啦，我一向对他们的话不以为然，但这次不同，当绅太郎和他弟弟站在我门口鞠躬赔笑时，我体验到了一种暖融融的满足感。

不过，如果凭此断定我只跟得意门生交往，也是不准确的。事实上，当我第一次走进川上夫人的酒馆时，我就相信我这么做是希望那天夜里跟绅太郎好好谈谈。今天，当我试图回忆那个夜晚时，却发现我的记忆里，它已经跟所有其他夜晚的声色光影融在一起。门口高挂的灯笼，左右宫外聚集的人群的欢声笑语，烹炒煎炸的香味，还有一位吧台女侍者在规劝某人回到妻子身边——四面八方回荡着无数木屐踩在水泥地上的清脆声音。我记得那是一个温暖的夏日夜晚，我发现绅太郎不在他经常光顾的地方，就在那些小酒馆里漫无目的地找了一阵。酒馆之间虽然存在竞争，却维持着一种和睦友善的关系，因此，那天夜里我在一家这样的酒馆打听绅太郎，那位女侍者自然就不带一丝妒意地建议我到“新开的那家”去找找看。

毫无疑问，川上夫人会指出酒馆这么多年产生的无数变化——她所做的小小“改进”。但是在我的印象里，她的小酒馆今天看上去跟那第一个夜晚并无两样。人一走进去，立刻就会感受到两种不同的对比，温暖、低垂的灯盏把吧台照亮，而房间里的其他地方却一片昏暗。大多数客人喜欢坐在吧台那儿的灯光里，这时小酒馆给人一种温馨、亲密的气氛。我记得那第一个夜晚我赞赏地四处环顾，周围的世界已经发生了那么多变化，川上夫人还是一如既往的令人愉快。

可是其余的一切都改变了。今天从川上夫人的酒馆出来，站在门口，你会相信刚才是在远离文明世界的地方喝酒。周围都是一片荒凉的废墟。只有远处几座楼房的背影，使你这里离市中心并不遥远。川上夫人称之为“战争的破坏”。但是我记得，日本投降后不久，我走在这片地区时，那些楼房许多都还竖立着。左右宫仍然存在，但窗户都被炸飞了，房顶也塌了一半。我记得当时我穿过那些破

损的房屋时，曾经怀疑它们能不能重新恢复生机。后来有一天早晨我再过来，发现推土机已经把它们统统夷为平地。

所以现在小街的另一边只是一片碎石瓦砾。政府肯定有他们的计划，但这个样子已经有三年了。雨水积在小凹坑里，在破砖碎瓦间变成一汪汪死水。川上夫人只好在窗户上蒙一层驱蚊的纱网——虽然她认为这样会影响生意。

川上夫人酒馆这边的房屋倒没有倒塌，但许多都无人居住。比如酒馆两边的房子已经空了一段时间，使川上夫人感到很不舒服。她经常跟我们说，如果她有一天发了大财，就把那些房子都买下来，扩大营业。现在她只希望有人能搬进去住。她并不在乎别人也像她一样开酒馆，只要她不再感觉像住在墓地里就行。

如果夜幕降临，你走出川上夫人的酒馆，会忍不住伫立片刻，凝望面前的那片废墟。你仍然可以就着暮色分辨出破碎的砖瓦和木头，偶尔还有管子从地上冒出来，如同杂草一样。然后你往前走，一路又经过许多成堆的瓦砾，还有数不清的小水坑在路灯下一闪一闪。

山上就是我们家，你来到山脚，在犹疑桥上停住脚步，回头眺望我们昔日逍遥地的废墟，如果太阳还没有完全落山，你可以看见那排旧的电线杆——上面仍然没有电线——顺着你刚才的来路消失在暮色中。你可以看见黑压压的鸟儿不安地聚集在电线杆顶上，似乎在等待那些曾经横跨天空的电线。

不久前的一天晚上，我站在那座小木桥上，看见远处的碎砖瓦砾间升起两股烟。也许是政府的工人正在进行一项慢得永无止境的工程，或者是孩子们在玩某种越轨的游戏。可是这两股被夜空衬托的烟，使我的心情陷入忧郁。它们就像某个废弃的葬礼上的柴堆。就像川上夫人说的，是一片坟地，如果你没有忘记昔日经常光顾这里的那些人，你就会忍不住这样想。

我把话题扯远了。我刚才是想叙述节子上个月在这里小住的情景。

我也许已经说过，节子来的第一天主要是坐在外面的阳台上，跟她妹妹聊天。我记得下午四五点钟的时候，我的两个女儿就女人的话题聊得很深，我离开她们去找我那外孙，他几分钟前跑进屋里去了。

我在走廊的时候，突然听见砰的一声巨响，震得整个房子都摇晃了。我大吃一惊，赶紧走进餐厅。白天的那个时候，餐厅基本上处于

阴影之中，我刚从明亮的阳台回来，过了好一会儿才弄清一郎根本不在屋里。接着又是一声巨响，紧跟着又是几声，还伴随着外孙的喊叫声：“呀！呀！”声音是从旁边的钢琴房里传出来的。我走到门口，听了一会儿，然后轻轻地打开门。

钢琴房跟餐厅不同，整个白天都能照到阳光。这里光线明亮充足，如果面积再大一点，在这里吃饭倒是一个理想的地方。有一段时间，我用它来存放画作和材料，但现在除了那架立式德国钢琴，屋里空无一物。毫无疑问，空荡荡的屋子吸引了我的外孙，就像先前阳台吸引了他一样。我发现他在地板上前进，一边奇怪地跺着脚，在我看来是在模仿什么人骑马跑过开阔地。他背对着门，所以过了一会儿才发现我在观察他。

“外公！”他说，气愤地转过身，“你没看见我正忙着吗？”

“对不起，一郎，我没有意识到。”

“我现在不能陪你玩！”

“实在太抱歉了。可是在外面听着声音太刺激了，我就想进来看看。”

外孙继续气呼呼地瞪着我。过了一会儿，他闷闷不乐地说：“好吧。但是你必须坐下来，不许出声。我忙着呢。”

“很好。”我笑着说。“非常感谢，一郎。”

我走过屋子，在窗口坐了下来，外孙一直用眼睛瞪着我。前一天晚上，一郎跟母亲来的时候，我送给他一个素描本和一套彩色蜡笔。现在我注意到素描本放在旁边的榻榻米上，周围散落着三四支蜡笔。我看见素描本的前几页已经画了东西，刚要拿过来细看，一郎突然又开始了刚才被我打断的演出。

“呀！呀！”

我注视了他一会儿，但一点也看不懂他演的是哪一出戏。他忽而重复骑马的动作，忽而又似乎跟无数看不见的敌人搏斗。他嘴里一直不出声地嘟囔着几句口号。我努力想听清，结果发现并没有具体的话语，只是用舌头打出声音。

他尽量不理睬我，但显然我的存在还是对他产生了抑制作用。有几次，似乎灵感突然离开了他，他动作做到一半就停住了，然后才又

行动起来。过不了多久他就泄了气，一屁股坐在地板上。我不知道是不是应该鼓掌，后来决定不鼓了。

“很精彩，一郎。可是你告诉我，你演的是谁呢？”

“你猜，外公。”

“唔。是不是义经大人⁽¹⁾？不是？那就是将校的武士？唔。是不是忍者？风的忍者。”

“外公完全猜错了。”

“那就告诉我吧，到底是谁呢？”

“独行侠！”

“什么？”

“独行侠！银马！”

“独行侠？是个牛仔吗？”

“银马！”一郎又开始骑马奔驰，这次嘴里还发出马嘶声。

我注视了外孙一会儿。“你怎么学会扮演牛仔的，一郎？”我终于问道，但他只顾骑马、嘶鸣。

“一郎，”我加重了语气，“等一等，听我说。扮演义经大人那样的角色才有趣呢，比这有趣得多。我告诉你为什么好吗？一郎，听外公说给你听。一郎，你听外公说呀，一郎！”

也许我不经意地提高了声音，只见他停下来望着我，脸上带着惊异的表情。我继续看了他一会儿，然后叹了口气。

“对不起，一郎，我不应该打断你的。当然你想扮演谁就扮演谁，牛仔也行。你必须原谅你的外公。他刚才有点失态了。”

外孙还是瞪着我，我想他快要哭了，或者想跑出屋子。

“好了，一郎，你还是照你刚才的那样演吧。”

一郎还是继续瞪着我。然后他突然嚷了起来：“独行侠！银马！”又开始骑马狂奔。他脚踩得比刚才更凶，震得整个屋子都在发抖。我注视了他一会儿，然后伸手拿起了他的素描本。

前面四五页，一郎基本上算是浪费了。他的技巧倒不差，但是那些素描——电车和火车——刚画了一点就半途而废。一郎发现我在查

看素描本，赶紧跑了过来。

“外公！谁让你看这些的？”他想把本子从我手里抢过去，但我不让他够到。

“好了，一郎，不要不讲道理。外公想看看你拿他送你的蜡笔做什么了。这是很公平的。”我放下素描本，打开第一张画。“很不错啊，一郎。唔。可是你知道吗，如果你愿意，可以画得更好呢。”

“不许外公看！”

外孙又想把素描本抢走，我不得不用胳膊挡开他的双手。

“外公！把我的本子还给我！”

“好了，一郎，别这样。让外公看看。来，一郎，把那边的那些蜡笔拿给我。把它们拿过来，我们一起画点儿东西。外公教你。”

这话产生了惊人的效果。外孙立刻就不再争夺，跑去把地板上的蜡笔都捡了起来。他回来时，态度完全变了——带有一种专注。他在我身边坐下，把蜡笔递给我，专心地注视着，不再说话。

我把素描本翻到新的一页，放在他面前的地板上。“让我先看你画，一郎。然后外公看看能不能帮你把它画得更好。你想画什么呢？”

外孙变得非常安静。他低头若有所思地看着空白的画纸，并没有动笔。

“你为什么不试着画画昨天看到的東西呢？”我建议道。“你第一次进城看见的东西？”

一郎继续看着素描本。然后他抬起头问道：“外公以前是个有名的画家吗？”

“有名的画家？”我笑了起来。“我想你可以这么说。这是你妈妈说的吗？”

“爸爸说你曾经是个有名的画家，后来不得不结束了。”

“我退休了，一郎。每个人到了一定的年纪都要退休的。年纪大了，应该休息休息了。”

“爸爸说你不得不结束，因为日本战败了。”

我又笑了起来，伸手拿过素描本。我一页页地往后翻，看我外孙画的电车，并把本子举远了端详。“到了一定的年纪，一郎，你就不想再干，想休息了。你爸爸到了我这个年纪，也会停止工作。有朝一日，你像我这样老了，也会想要休息的。好了”——我又翻到那页白纸，把本子重新放到他面前——“你想给我画什么呢，一郎？”

“餐厅里的那幅画是外公画的吗？”

“不是，那是一位叫浦山的画家画的。怎么，你喜欢吗？”“走廊里的那幅是外公画的吗？”

“那是另一位画家的作品，外公的一位老朋友。”

“那么外公的画在哪里呢？”

“暂时收起来了。好了，一郎，我们还是做要紧的事吧。你给我画什么呢？你记得昨天的什么？你怎么啦，一郎？突然变得这么安静。”

“我想看看外公的画。”

“我相信，像你这样聪明的男孩子，一定能记住各种各样的东西。你看见的那张电影海报怎么样？就是有史前怪兽的那张。我相信你这样的人能把它画得很好。说不定比那张真的海报还要好呢。”

一郎似乎考虑了一会儿。然后他一翻身趴在地上，把脸贴近画纸，开始画了起来。

他拿起一支深棕色的蜡笔，在纸的下部画了一排箱子——很快它们就变成了城市楼房的轮廓。然后，城市上空出现了一个蜥蜴状的大怪物，靠后腿直立着。这时，外孙用一支红蜡笔换掉了深棕色的，开始在蜥蜴周围画出许多鲜红的道道。

“这是什么，一郎？是火吗？”

一郎继续画红道道，没有回答。

“为什么有火，一郎？跟怪兽出现有关吗？”

“电缆。”一郎说着，不耐烦地叹了口气。

“电缆？那倒挺有趣的。我不知道电缆为什么会冒火，你知道吗？”

一郎又叹了口气，继续画着。他又拿起深色蜡笔，开始在纸的底部画一些惊惶失措、四处逃窜的人。

“你画得非常好，一郎，”我评价道，“也许，为了奖励你，外公明天会带你去看电影呢。你愿意吗？”

外孙停住笔，抬起头来。“电影可能太恐怖了，外公不能看。”他说。

“我不相信，”我笑着说，“不过倒可能会吓坏你妈妈和你小姨。”

听了这话，一郎放声大笑。他一翻身，仰面躺着，又笑了几声。“妈妈和仙子小姨肯定会被吓坏的！”他冲着天花板嚷道。

“但是我们男人会喜欢的，对不对，一郎？我们明天就去。你愿意吗？我们把女人也带去，看她们会吓成什么样。”

一郎继续放声大笑。“仙子小姨肯定一下子就吓坏了！”

“可能会的，”我说，又笑了起来，“太好了，我们明天都去。好了，一郎，你还是继续画画吧。”

“仙子小姨会吓坏了的！她会想要离开的！”

“好了，一郎，我们接着画吧。你画得非常好。”

一郎又翻过身，继续画画。可是他刚才的注意力似乎已经消失。他开始在素描底部添加越来越多的逃跑的身影，全都叠在一起，看不清楚了。最后，他索性不再好好画了，开始在画的下部胡乱地涂抹。

“一郎，你在做什么呀？如果你再这么做，我们明天就不去看电影了。一郎，快住手！”

外孙一骨碌爬起来，大声喊道：“银马！”

“一郎，快坐下。你还没有画完呢。”

“仙子小姨在哪儿？”

“她跟你妈妈说话呢。好了，一郎，你的画还没有画完呢。一郎！”

可是我的外孙已经跑出了屋子，一边嘴里喊道：“独行侠！银马！”

我记不清接下来的几分钟我在做什么了。很可能就坐在钢琴屋里，看着一郎的画发呆，脑子里什么也不想，最近我这样的时候越来越多。不过，后来我还是站起来，去找我的家人。

我发现节子独自坐在阳台上，望着外面的园子。太阳还很明亮，但天气凉多了，我走到阳台，节子转过身，把一个垫子放在阳光底下给我坐。

“我们新沏了些茶，”她说，“你想喝吗，爸爸？”

我谢了她，她给我倒茶时，我把目光投向外面的园子。

虽然受到战争的破坏，但我们的园子恢复得不错，仍然能看出是杉村明四十多年前建造的那个园子。在远处靠近后墙的地方，我看见仙子和一郎正在端详一片竹林。那片竹林像园子里的其他花草树木一样，是完全长成之后，杉村先生从城里别的地方移栽过来的。实际上有人传说，杉村先生亲自在城里四处溜达，隔着栅栏往别人的园子里张望，一看到他中意的花草树木，就出大价钱从主人手里买下，移栽过来。如果真是这样，那么他的选择真是巧夺天工。最后的效果非常和谐，直到今天也是如此。整个园子有一种天然的、杂乱无章的感觉，完全没有一点人工的痕迹。

“仙子对孩子总是这么好，”节子看着他们，说道，“一郎非常喜欢她。”

“一郎是个好孩子，”我说，“一点也不像他这个年龄的许多孩子那样腼腆。”

“但愿他刚才没有给你添麻烦。他有时候很任性的。如果他调皮捣蛋，你就尽管骂他。”

“一点儿没有。我们相处得很好。实际上，我们刚才是在一起练习画画来着。”

“真的？他肯定喜欢。”

“他还演戏给我看了，”我说，“动作演得可逼真了。”

“噢，是的。他经常这样自己玩很长时间。”

“那些话是他自己编的吗？我使劲听也听不懂他在说什么。”

女儿用手掩面而笑。“他肯定是在演牛仔呢。他每次演牛仔，就假装在说英语。”

“英语？太神奇了。怪不得呢。”

“有一次，我们带他去看了一部美国牛仔电影。从那以后，他就一直非常喜欢牛仔。我们还不得不给他买了一顶宽边的高呢帽。他相信牛仔能发出他那种滑稽的声音。看上去肯定很奇怪。”

“原来是这样，”我笑着说，“我外孙变成了牛仔。”

园子里，微风轻轻吹拂着树叶。仙子蹲在后墙根的那盏旧石灯旁，指着什么东西给一郎看。

“不过，”我叹了口气说，“就在几年前，还不会允许一郎看牛仔这样的电影呢。”

节子没有回头，仍然望着园子，说：“池田认为，一郎与其崇拜宫本武藏⁽²⁾那样的人，还不如喜欢牛仔呢。池田认为，现在对孩子们来说，美国英雄是更好的榜样。”

“是吗？原来池田是这么想的。”

一郎似乎对那个石灯不感兴趣，只见他使劲拽着小姨的胳膊。节子在我身边尴尬地笑了一声。

“他太无礼了。把人拽来拽去的。真是没有教养。”

“对了，”我说，“我和一郎决定明天去看电影。”

“真的？”

我立刻看出节子的态度犹豫不决。

“是的，”我说，“他好像对那个史前怪兽特别感兴趣。别担心，我看了报纸。那个电影非常适合他这个年龄的男孩子。”

“是啊，我相信。”

“实际上，我想我们应该都去。也就是说，全家一起出动。”

节子不安地清了清嗓子。“那肯定特别有意思。只是仙子明天可能还有别的计划。”

“哦？什么计划？”

“我记得她想要我们都去鹿苑。但是没关系，可以换个时间再去。”

“我不知道仙子有什么计划。她肯定没有问过我。而且，我已经跟一郎说了明天要去看电影。他现在心思全在这上面呢。”

“是的，”节子说，“我相信他肯定愿意去看电影。”

仙子顺着花园小径朝我们走来，一郎在前面牵着她的手。毫无疑问，我应该马上跟她商量第二天的事，但是她和一郎没有在阳台上停留，而是进屋洗手去了。所以，直到那天晚上吃过晚饭，我才把这事提了出来。

餐厅虽然白天不见阳光，非常昏暗，但天黑之后，灯罩低低地垂在饭桌上，气氛倒显得很温馨。我们在桌旁坐了几分钟，读报纸，看杂志，然后我对外孙说：

“一郎啊，你有没有把明天的事告诉你小姨呀？”

正在看书的一郎抬起头，一脸疑惑。

“我们带不带女人一起去呀？”我说。“还记得我们说的话吗？她们可能会觉得太恐怖的。”

这次外孙明白了我的意思，笑了。“可能对仙子小姨来说是太恐怖了，”他说，“仙子小姨，你想去吗？”

“去哪儿，一郎？”仙子问。

“看怪兽电影。”

“我想明天大家都去看电影，”我解释说，“也就是说，全家一起出动。”

“明天？”仙子看着我，然后转向我的外孙。“噢，明天可去不成，不是吗，一郎？我们要去鹿苑的，记得吗？”

“鹿苑可以先等一等，”我说，“孩子现在盼着看电影呢。”

“说什么呀，”仙子说，“事情都安排好了。我们在回来的路上要去看望渡边夫人。她一直想见见一郎呢。而且，我们很久以前就决定了。是不是，一郎？”

“爸爸是一片好意，”节子插进来说，“但我知道渡边夫人盼着我们去呢。也许我们应该后天再去看电影吧。”

“可是一郎一直盼着呢，”我不同意，“是不是这样，一郎？这些女人真讨厌。”

一郎没有看我，显然又沉浸在他的书里了。

“你跟这些女人说，一郎。”我说。

外孙只是盯着他的书。

“一郎。”

突然，他把书扔在桌上，站起来跑出餐厅，进了钢琴房。

我轻声笑了一下。“瞧，”我对仙子说，“你们让他失望了。不应该改变计划的。”

“别说傻话了，爸爸。渡边夫人的事早就安排好了。而且，带一郎去看那样的电影是不合适的。他不会喜欢那样的电影，是不是，节子？”

我的长女局促不安地笑了笑。“爸爸是一片好意，”她轻声说，“也许后天吧……”

我叹了口气，摇摇头，又接着看报纸了。过了几分钟，显然我的两个女儿都不准备去把一郎找回来了，我便站起身，走进了钢琴房。

一郎够不着灯罩上的开关，就打开了钢琴顶上的台灯。我发现他在琴凳上坐着，侧着脑袋靠在琴盖上。他的五官挤压着深色的木头，表情气呼呼的。

“真对不起，一郎，”我说，“你不要觉得失望，我们后天再去。”

一郎没有反应，于是我说：“好了，一郎，这没有什么，用不着这么失望。”

我走向窗口。外面已经很黑了，我只能看见我和身后屋子映在玻璃里的影像。我听见另一个屋里传来女人们低低的谈话声。

“开心点吧，一郎，”我说，“没什么可难过的。我们后天再去，我向你保证。”

当我再次转过来看着一郎时，他的脑袋还是那样伏在琴盖上，但手指在琴盖上挪动，像在弹琴一样。

我轻声笑了。“好了，一郎，我们就后天去吧。我们可不能受女人的管制，是不是？”我又笑了一声。“恐怕她们觉得那个电影太恐怖了。嗯，一郎？”

外孙还是没有回答，但他的手指继续在琴盖上移动。我想最好让他自己待一段时间，就又笑了一声，返身回到餐厅。

我发现两个女儿默默地坐在那里看杂志。我坐下来，重重地叹了口气，但她们谁也没有反应。我重新戴上阅读眼镜，刚准备看报纸，仙子突然轻声说道：“爸爸，我们沏点茶好吗？”

“太感谢了，仙子。但我暂时不要。”

我们继续默默地阅读了一会儿。然后节子说：“爸爸明天跟我们一起去吗？那样我们就仍然是全家一起出动。”

“我很想去。可是我明天恐怕还有几件事要做呢。”

“你说什么呀？”仙子插嘴说道。“有什么事要做？”然后转向节子，又说：“别听爸爸的。他最近什么事情也没有。他只是闷闷不乐地在家里转悠，现在他总是这样。”

“如果爸爸跟我们一起去，就太让人高兴了。”节子对我说。

“真遗憾，”我说，又低头去看报纸，“但我确实有一两件事要做。”

“那你准备一个人呆在家里吗？”仙子问。

“如果你们都去，我就只好自己呆着了。”

节子礼貌地咳嗽了一声，然后说道：“不如我也在家呆着吧。我和爸爸还没有机会好好聊聊呢。”

仙子从桌子对面望着姐姐。“你用不着不出去玩。大老远来的，可不能整天在屋里呆着。”

“可是我真的很愿意留在家陪陪爸爸。我想我们有许多话要聊呢。”

“爸爸，瞧瞧你做的好事。”仙子说。然后她又转向她姐姐：“那么只有我带一郎去了。”

“一郎肯定喜欢跟你去玩一天的，仙子，”节子笑微微地说，“目前你是他最喜欢的人了。”

我很高兴节子决定留在家，确实，我们很少有机会不受打扰地好好聊聊。一个做父亲的，对于自己已婚女儿的生活，有许多希望了

解的东西，而又不能直接发问。但我那天晚上压根儿也没想到，节子希望留在我家里陪我，是有她自己的原因的。

也许是因为上了年岁，我现在总喜欢漫无目的地在一个个屋里闲逛。那天下午——节子到来的第二天——她打开客厅的拉门时，我一定是站在那里出神很久了。

“对不起，”她说，“我待会儿再来。”

我转过身，看见女儿跪在门槛上，手里拿着插满鲜花和剪枝的花瓶，不觉小小地吃了一惊。

“不，请进来吧，”我对她说，“我并没有在做什么。”

退休以后，我有了更多自己的时间。确实，退休的好处就是可以按自己的节奏过日子，知道把辛苦和名利都放下了，心里感到很轻松。然而，我竟然不知不觉地走进了客厅——偏偏是客厅——一定是心不在焉了。多年来，我一直坚持父亲灌输给我的观念，一个家里的客厅是专门留着接待重要客人，或祭拜佛坛的，是神圣不可侵犯的，是不能被日常琐事所玷污的。因此，跟别人家相比，我家的客厅总是有一种庄严肃穆的气氛。我虽然没有像父亲那样定下规矩，但孩子们小的时候，除非特别吩咐，平常是不许她们进入客厅的。

我对客厅的尊重可能显得有点过分了，但你必须知道，在我成长的那个家庭——在鹤冈村，从这里乘火车要半天——我在十二岁前是禁止进入客厅的。那间屋子在许多意义上都是家庭的中心，在好奇心的促使下，我凭着偶尔匆匆瞥见的一两眼，在脑海里构想客厅内部的情形。日后，我仅凭匆匆几瞥的印象，便能在画布上再现一副场景，令我的同事们称奇，这个本领大概也要感谢我的父亲，感谢他在我性格成型的那些年里，无意中对我艺术鉴赏力的训练。在我满了十二岁后，“商务会”就开始了，我发现自己每星期要进客厅一次。

“我和增二今天晚上要商量事情。”父亲总是在晚饭时宣布。他说这话有两个目的，一是让我饭后自己前去报到，二是警告家里其他人，那天晚上不得在客厅附近发出声音。

吃过晚饭，父亲就进了客厅，大约十五分钟后再叫我过去。我进去时，房间里没有灯光，只在地板中央竖着一根高高的蜡烛。在那圈烛光里，父亲盘腿坐在榻榻米上，后面放着他的那个木头“商务箱”。他示意我坐在他对面的烛光里，我坐下时，明亮的烛光使房间

的其他地方都处于阴影之中。越过父亲的肩膀，我隐约可以看见那边墙上的佛坛，或壁龛周围的几件装饰品。

父亲开始说话。他从“商务箱”里取出厚厚的小本子，打开其中的几本，指给我看那一排排密密麻麻的数字。他一直用那种慎重的、严肃的口吻说话，偶尔会停住话头，抬起头来，似乎想求得我的肯定。每到这时，我便赶紧唯唯诺诺：“是的，是的。”

不用说，我根本就听不懂父亲在说什么。他满口行话术语，列举冗长复杂的计算，并不因为对方是个小孩子而有所迁就。但我似乎也不可能请他停下来详细解释。因为我发现，我被允许进入客厅，是因为他认为我已经年岁不小，能够理解这样的谈话了。我感到羞愧，同时提心吊胆，担心他随时会要求我说点什么，而不只是唯唯诺诺，那样就露馅了。一个月过去，我并没有被要求说更多的话，但我还是终日惶惶不安，担心着下一次“商务会”。

我现在当然明白了，父亲从来就没指望我听懂他的话，但我始终不能确定他为什么要让我经受这样的折磨。也许，他是想早早给我留下这样的印象：他希望我日后能接管家族的生意。

或者，他觉得我作为将来的一家之主，应该参与所有的决策，因为那些决策的影响会一直持续到我成年以后。那样，当我继承一个不尽完美的企业时，就没什么理由可抱怨了——父亲大概是这样考虑的吧。

我记得，十五岁的时候，我被叫进客厅参加另一种会议。客厅像往常一样点着高高的蜡烛，父亲坐在烛光中央。可是那天晚上，他面前放的不是商务箱，而是一个沉甸甸的陶制烟灰缸。我觉得迷惑不解，因为这个烟灰缸——家里最大的——平常是专门给客人用的。

“你把它们全都带来了？”他问。

“我照您的吩咐做了。”

我把怀里的那堆绘画和素描放在父亲旁边。纸张大大小小，大部分都被颜料弄得皱皱巴巴，放在一起显得乱糟糟的。

我默默地坐着，父亲查看我的作品。他拿起一幅画，仔细看一会儿，然后放到一边。那堆画看到一半时，他不抬头地问道：

“增二，你确定你所有的画都在这儿了？是不是还有一两张没有拿来？”

我没有立刻回答。他抬起头，问道：“嗯？”

“可能还有一两张没有拿来。”

“那么，毫无疑问，增二，没有拿来的那些画正是你自己最骄傲的，是不是这样？”

他又低下头去看那些画了，我就没有回答。我注视着他查看那堆画作。一次，他把一张画举到烛火前，说：“这是从西山下来的那条小路，是不是？你画得非常逼真，这是不用说的。正是从山上下来的景象。画得很好。”

“谢谢。”

“你知道吗，增二”——父亲的目光仍然盯着那张画——“我听你母亲说过一句奇怪的话。她好像认为，你希望以后专门从事绘画。”

他这话不像是提问，所以我没有回答。但他抬起头，又说了一遍：“增二，你母亲似乎认为你希望以后专门从事绘画。她这么想自然是错了。”

“那是自然。”我轻声说。

“你的意思是，她可能有一些误解？”

“肯定是的。”

“我明白了。”

父亲继续端详那些画作，我坐在那里默默注视他，就这样又过了几分钟。然后，他不抬头地说：“我似乎听见你母亲从外面走过。你听见了吗？”

“我好像并没有听见动静。”

“我猜想那是你母亲。既然她走过，就请她也进来吧。”

我站起来，走到门口。走廊里黑黢黢的，并没有人，我早就知道是这样。我听见父亲在我身后说：“增二，你去叫她时，顺便把你其他的画作也都一起带来。”

也许只是我的错觉，但我几分钟后跟母亲一起回到客厅时，我觉得那个陶制烟灰缸好像被挪动了，比刚才更靠近蜡烛一点。我还隐约

闻到空气里有一股烟味，可是我扫了一眼烟灰缸，并没看出有使用过的痕迹。

我把最后几张画放在先前那堆的旁边，父亲心不在焉地点点头。他似乎仍然沉浸在我的作品里，并不理会默默坐在他面前的我和母亲。最后，他叹了口气，抬起头来对我说：“增二，你恐怕没有多少时间去做云游僧，是不是？”

“云游僧？我想是的。”

“他们对这个世界有许多话要说。我大部分时间都不怎么理会他们。我们应该对僧人以礼相待，虽然他们有时候让你觉得跟叫花子没什么两样。”

他停住了，于是我说：“是的，是的。”

父亲转向母亲，说：“你还记得吗，幸子，以前经常到这个村子里来的那些云游僧？我们儿子出生后不久，一个云游僧到我们家来，是个瘦瘦的老头子，只剩一只手，却长得很健壮。你还记得他吗？”

“可是那时候我们的儿子还只是个婴儿。”母亲说。她声音很低，似乎不想让我听见。相反，父亲却不必要地提高了声音，好像在跟观众讲话：

“他留给我们一个警告。他对我们说，增二肢体健康，但天生有个弱点。这弱点会使他耽于懒惰和欺骗。这话你还记得吗，幸子？”

“但我记得那个僧人还说了我们儿子许多好话呢。”

“那倒是的。我们儿子有许多好的品质，僧人确实指出来了。但是你记得他的警告吗，幸子？他说要想让好品质占上风，我们教养他的人就必须时刻提高警惕，不让这个弱点冒头。不然的话，就像那个老僧人说的，增二就会成为一个没有出息的人。”

“也许，”母亲谨慎地说，“我们不应该把那些僧人的话放在心上。”

父亲听了这话似乎有些吃惊。过了一会儿，他若有所思地点点头，好像母亲提出了一个令人迷惑的观点。“当时我也不愿意把他的当真，”他接着说道，“可是在增二成长的每个阶段，我不得不承认那个老头的话是有道理的。我们儿子的性格中确实有个弱点，这是不可否认的。他的秉性倒不顽劣，但我们必须不断对付他的懒惰，他的不求实际，以及他的意志薄弱。”

然后，父亲又沉思着拿起我的三四张画作，用两只手托着，似乎想掂一掂它们的分量。他把目光转向我，说道：“增二，你母亲似乎认为你希望以后专门从事绘画。她是不是产生了某种误解呢？”

我垂下眼睛，一言不发。接着，我听见母亲在我身边几乎耳语般地说：“他年纪还小呢，我相信这只是他孩子气的心血来潮吧。”

静默片刻后，父亲说：“增二，告诉我，你知不知道画家生活在什么样的境遇里？”

我没有做声，望着面前的地板。

“画家的生活肮脏而贫穷，”父亲的声音继续说，“这样的生活境遇，使他们容易变得软弱和堕落。我说得对吗，幸子？”

“那是自然。可是，也许有一两个画家既能追求艺术，同时又能避开这些陷阱。”

“当然，肯定有例外。”父亲说。我仍然低垂着目光，但我从他的声音里听出，他又那样迷惑不解地频频点头了。“那是少数特别有毅力、有个性的人。我担心我们的儿子远远不是这样的人，而是正好相反。我们有责任保护他远离这样的危险。毕竟，我们希望他日后成为一个令我们骄傲的人，是不是？”

“当然。”母亲说。

我迅速抬起头来。蜡烛已经燃到一半，烛光把父亲的半边脸照得轮廓分明。他已经把画作放到了腿上，我注意他正用手指不耐烦地捋着纸边。

“增二，”他说，“你可以离开了。我想跟你母亲谈谈。”

我记得那天晚上过了一段时间后，我在黑暗中遇到了母亲。很可能是在一个走廊里遇见她的，但我记不清了。我也不记得我当时为什么摸黑在房子里溜达，但肯定不是为了偷听父母说话——因为我记得自己离开客厅后，便打定主意不去理睬客厅里的事。当然，那个时候房子的照明都很差，所以我们站在黑暗里说话也是很经常的事。我能看见母亲的身影站在我面前，但看不清她的脸。

“家里有一股烧东西的味儿。”我说。

“烧东西？”母亲沉默了一会儿，然后说道：“没有，我觉得没有。你肯定是搞错了，增二。”

“我闻到了烟味儿，”我说，“刚才又闻到了。父亲还在客厅里吗？”

“是的，他在工作。”

“他在那里做什么我一点儿也不关心。”我说。

母亲没有做声，于是我又说：“父亲点燃的只是我的雄心抱负。”

“这可真好，增二。”

“您千万别误会我，母亲。我不希望很多年后，我发现自己坐在父亲现在坐的地方，跟我的儿子讲算账和钱财。如果我成为那样的人，你会为我感到骄傲吗？”

“会的，增二。你父亲的生活还有更多内容，你年纪太小，还不可能知道。”

“我绝不会为自己感到骄傲的。我说我有雄心，指的是我希望能超越这样一种生活。”

母亲沉默了片刻。然后她说：“年轻的时候，会觉得许多事情看上去都是无聊、无趣的。但是年长一些，就会发现这些对你来说才是最重要的。”

我没有回答她的话。我记得当时我是这么说的：“我以前害怕父亲的商务会。现在它们只是让我感到厌倦。实际上，让我感到厌恶。我有幸参加的这些会议是什么呢？数小钱，点硬币，一小时接一小时。如果我以后的生活变成这样，我永远也不会原谅自己的。”我顿了顿，看母亲有什么话要说。有那么一刻，我似乎觉得她已经在我说话时悄悄走开，我现在是独自一人站在那里。然而，我接着听见她就站在我面前，于是我又说了一遍：“我压根儿就不关心父亲在客厅里做什么。他只是点燃了我的雄心抱负。”

唉，我发现我又把话扯远了。我本来是想叙述上个月节子到客厅里来换鲜花时，我跟她的对话。

我记得，节子坐在佛坛旁边，开始把装饰佛坛的那些凋谢的花枝换掉。我坐在她后面一点，注视着她小心地把每个花枝抖一抖，再放在自己腿上，我相信当时我们有一搭没一搭地说着些闲话。后来，她眼睛仍然盯在花上，对我说道：

“爸爸，原谅我提到这件事。不用说，您肯定已经想过了。”

“什么事，节子？”

“我之所以又提这件事，因为我估摸着仙子的婚事肯定会有进展。”

节子已经开始把她花瓶里新剪的花枝插到佛坛周围的花瓶里去。这件事她做得非常仔细，每插一枝就停下来看看效果。“我只是想说，”她继续说道，“一旦开始认真商议婚事，爸爸最好采取一些预防措施。”

“预防措施？这个自然，我们会谨慎行事的。可是你到底想说什么呢？”

“请原谅我，实际上我指的是调查。”

“啊，这不用说，我们会尽量彻底调查的。我们还雇用去年的那个侦探。你也记得，他是非常可靠的。”

节子仔细地调整一根花梗。“原谅我，我肯定是没有表达清楚。实际上，我指的是他们的调查。”

“对不起，我好像不太明白你的意思。我不认为我们有什么需要隐瞒的。”

节子不安地笑了一声。“爸爸千万要原谅我。您知道，我一向不擅长说话。池田总是骂我词不达意。他口才那么好。我应该尽力向他学习，这是不用说的。”

“我认为你说话绝对没有问题，但我恐怕没有完全明白你的意思。”

突然，节子沮丧地举起双手。“有风，”她叹着气说，又一次探身端详她的花儿，“我喜欢把它们插成这样，可是风好像不同意呢。”她又变得心事重重。过了一会儿，她说：“您必须原谅我，爸爸。在我家里，池田说话要清楚一些。但是他不在这里。我只是想说，也许爸爸应该采取一些预防措施。以免出现误会。毕竟，仙子已经快二十六岁。我们可再经不起去年那样的打击了。”

“关于什么的误会，节子？”

“关于过去。可是请原谅，我肯定是多虑了。爸爸无疑全都考虑到了，会采取必要的做法的。”

她坐回去，研究她的插花，然后面带微笑转向我。“我对这些东西不太在行。”她指着那些鲜花说。

“它们看上去很漂亮。”

她将信将疑地看了一眼佛坛，不自然地笑了一声。

昨天，我乘电车在静谧的荒川郊外兜风时，脑海里又一次想起客厅里的那段对话，心里一阵烦躁。车子一直往南开，景色不再那么杂乱，我望着窗外，又想起了女儿坐在佛坛前，建议我采取“预防措施”的情形。我又想起她把脸微微转向我，说：“毕竟，我们可再经不起去年那样的打击了。”接着我又想起她来的第二天早晨，坐在阳台上暗示我去年三宅家退婚另有隐情时，脸上那副意味深长的表情。在过去这个月里，我一想起这些心情就受影响。但是直到昨天，独自一人在这个城市僻静的郊外旅游时，我才更仔细地审视我的感受，我意识到，我的恼怒其实并不是针对节子，而是针对她的丈夫。

我想，一个妻子受丈夫观念的影响是无可厚非的——哪怕这些观点像池田的那样荒唐可笑。可是，如果一个人诱导自己的妻子对她的亲生父亲产生怀疑，这就足以引起愤怒了。过去，我考虑到池田在满洲肯定吃过不少苦，便一直对他的某些行为采取隐忍的态度。比如，他经常表现出对我们这代人的怨恨情绪，我从来不以为意。我一直以为这种情绪会随着时间而淡化。没想到，在池田身上，它们反倒变得越来越尖刻和不可理喻了。

这些事情如今都妨碍不到我——毕竟，节子和池田住得很远，我一年也只见到他们一次——然而，自从节子上个月来过之后，这些荒谬可笑的观念似乎也对仙子产生了影响。这使我很恼火，过去几天里，我好几次忍不住想给节子写封信，表达一下愤怒的情绪。夫妻之间互相交流一些毫无根据的想法也就罢了，但那只是他们两人的事情。换了一个更加严厉的父亲，无疑早就采取措施了。

上个月，我不止一次看见我的两个女儿在深谈，注意到她们做贼心虚地突然停住话头，然后又装模作样地说些不痛不痒的闲话。实际上，我记得在节子来访的五天里，这样的事情至少发生了三次。后来，就在几天前，仙子和我快要吃完早饭时，她突然对我说：

“我昨天经过清水百货商店时，你猜我看见谁站在车站？是三宅次郎！”

“三宅？”我吃惊地从碗上抬起头，仙子竟然这样毫不脸红地提到这个名字，“唉，真是不巧。”

“不巧？实际上，爸爸，我很高兴看到他呢。他倒显得有点不好意思，所以我就没有跟他多聊。而且我还得回去上班呢。我正好出来办事。你知道吗，他已经快要结婚了。”

“他告诉你的？真是无耻。”

“当然啦，他没有主动说。是我问他的。我对他说，我正在谈新的婆家，然后问他的婚事有什么着落。我就这么问了他一句。他的脸刷就红了！后来他告诉我，他现在已经订婚。一切都谈妥了。”

“说实在的，仙子，你不应该这么大大咧咧。你干吗非要提结婚的事呢？”

“我很好奇呀。我已经不再为这件事感到难过了。现在婚事进展顺利，那天我就在想，如果三宅次郎还在为去年的事而苦恼，该是多么不值啊。所以，你可以想象当我得知他已经订婚时有多么高兴。”

“明白了。”

“我希望不久能见见他的新娘。我想她肯定很漂亮，你说呢，爸爸？”

“肯定的。”

我们继续吃了一會兒，然后仙子又说：“我还差点儿问了他一件别的事。但我没问。”她探身向前，压低声音说：“我差点儿问他去年的事。问他们为什么要退婚。”

“幸亏你没问。而且，他们当时就把理由说得很清楚了。他们觉得那个小伙子配不上你。”

“但你知道那只是礼节上的说法，爸爸。我们一直没有弄清真正的原因。至少，我从没听说过。”这时，她的语气有些异样，使我再次从碗上抬起头来。仙子把筷子举在半空，似乎在等我说些什么。看到我继续吃早饭，她说：“你说，他们为什么退婚呢？你有没有发现其中的秘密？”

“我什么也没发现。我刚才说了，他们觉得那个年轻人高攀不上。这个理由是很说得通的。”

“爸爸，我在想是不是因为我不符合他们的要求。也许我不够漂亮。你认为是不是这样？”

“跟你没有任何关系，你知道的。退婚有各种各样的理由。”

“那么，爸爸，既然跟我没关系，我就不明白他们为什么会那样突然提出退婚。”

我觉得女儿说这番话时语气有点做作、不自然。也许是我的错觉，可是一个父亲是能够注意到女儿说话时每一点细微的语气变化的。

总之，跟仙子的那段对话，使我又想起了我那次跟三宅次郎邂逅，后来跟他在车站聊了一会儿的情景。大概就是一年以前——跟三宅家联姻的事正在商议中——一天下午五六点钟的时候，城里挤满了下班回家的人。不知为什么，我正在横手区行走，想去木村公司大楼外的电车站。如果你对横手区很熟悉，就会知道店铺楼上那些数不清的简陋破旧的小办公室。那天我遇见三宅次郎时，他正从一间这样的办公室里出来，走下两个店铺门脸之间的狭窄楼梯。

之前我曾见过他两次，但都是在正式的家庭聚会上，他穿着最好的衣服。现在他的样子截然不同，身上是一件看着很旧、有点嫌大的雨衣，胳膊下夹着一个公文包。看他的模样，活像一个被老板吆来喝去的打工者。确实，他的整个姿势都像是随时要鞠躬似的。我问他，他刚才出来的那家办公室是不是他上班的地方，他不自然地笑了，好像他从一个名声不好的场所出来被我抓住了一样。

我倒也想过，仅仅因为跟我邂逅他就这样尴尬，似乎有点过分。但当时我想他之所以窘迫，是因为他的办公楼和周围环境都很破败。约莫一个星期后，我惊讶地得知三宅家决定退婚，才发现自己又想起了那次相遇，并试图从中寻找蛛丝马迹。

“我在想，”我对节子说，当时她正好过来看望我们，“在我跟他说话的时候，他们家是不是就已经决定退婚了。”

“怪不得爸爸发现他那么紧张不安呢，”节子说，“他有没有说什么话，暗示他们的打算？”

那只是街头相遇的一星期之后，但我已经记不清我跟年轻的三宅到底聊了什么。那天下午，我以为他跟仙子的婚事随时都会宣布，就把他当成未来的家庭成员来对待。我只把注意力放在让年轻的三宅在

我面前放松下来，根本没有怎么考虑在走向汽车站的过程中，还有后来站在那里等车的几分钟里，我们究竟说了什么。

不过，当我后来考虑整个事情时，我突然产生了一个新的想法：也许正是那次邂逅导致了后来的退婚。

“这是很有可能的，”我对节子说，“我看到了三宅的工作地点，他觉得很不好意思。大概这使他又一次认识到我们两家的差距实在太大。毕竟，这个想法他们经常挂在嘴上，不可能只是礼节上的说法。”

节子似乎不以为然。看来她回家后跟丈夫讨论了妹妹婚约泡汤的事。今年，她似乎带来了她自己的观点——至少是池田的观点。于是，我不得不重新回忆跟三宅的那次偶遇，从另一个角度细细品味。但是正如我前面说的，事情发生的一个星期后我都记不真切，更别提现在时间已经过去了一年。

但我确实想起了一段不同寻常的对话，而以前觉得它没有什么意义。当时，我和三宅已经走到主街上，站在木村公司的大楼前，等待我们各自的电车。我记得三宅说：

“今天我们上班得到噩耗。我们总公司的总裁过世了。”

“我很难过。他年岁已高？”

“才六十出头。我一直没机会当面见他，只在期刊上看过他的照片。他是个了不起的人，我们都觉得好像一下子成了孤儿。”

“这对你们大家肯定是个打击。”

“确实如此，”三宅停顿了一会儿，继续说道：“不过，我们办公室的人实在不知道怎样表达自己的敬意才合适。不瞒您说，总裁是自杀的。”

“是吗？”

“是的。他被人发现煤气中毒。他似乎先试图切腹自杀，肚子上有几道小小的伤痕。”三宅神色凝重地看着地面。“他是代表他管辖的几家公司谢罪呢。”

“谢罪？”

“我们总裁似乎觉得要为我们在战争中所做的一些事情负责。两个元老已经被美国人开除了，但总裁显然觉得这还不够。他的行动是

代表我们大家向战争中遇害的家庭谢罪。”

“唉，其实，”我说，“这种做法有点太极端了。整个世界似乎都走火入魔了。每天都有报道说又有某人谢罪自杀。告诉我，三宅先生，你不认为这是一种极大的浪费吗？说到底，如果你的国家卷入战争，你只能尽你的力量去支持，这是无可厚非的。有什么必要以死谢罪呢？”

“您无疑是对的，先生。可是说句实话，公司上下倒是如释重负。我们现在觉得可以忘记过去的罪行，展望未来了。我们总裁做了一件了不起的事。”

“但也是一种极大的浪费。我们一些最优秀的人就这样放弃了自己的生命。”

“是的，先生，确实可惜。有时候我认为，有许多应该以死谢罪的人却贪生怕死，不敢面对自己的责任。结果反倒是我们总裁那样的人慨然赴死。许多人又恢复了他们在战争中的位置。其中一些比战争罪犯好不了多少。他们才应该出来谢罪。”

“我明白你的意思，”我说，“但是，那些在战争中为国家尽忠效力，战斗和工作过的人们，不能被称作战争罪犯。最近这个词恐怕用得太过随意了。”

“可是，先生，正是这些人把国家引入了歧途。他们完全应该勇于承担责任。这些人不肯承认自己的错误，实在是懦夫的做法。而且那些错误是代表整个国家犯下的，就更是一种最怯懦的做法。”

那天下午三宅真的跟我说了这番话吗？也许我把他的话跟池田可能会说的话搞混了。这是很有可能的。毕竟，我已经把三宅看做未来的女婿，所以，不知怎么一来，就把他跟真正的女婿混为一谈了。

“最怯懦的做法”听上去确实更像池田的话，性情温和的年轻的三宅不太可能这么说。不过，我相信那天在汽车站肯定有过这样的对话，我觉得他突然提起这样一个话题，委实有点奇怪。至于“最怯懦的做法”这样的话，我可以肯定三宅说的。实际上现在想来，我相信是那天晚上安葬健二骨灰的仪式之后，池田说这句话的。

我儿子的骨灰花了一年多时间才从满洲运来。我们不断被告知，那些共产党弄得那里每件事都千难万难。后来他的骨灰终于运来了，跟那次穿越雷区同时阵亡的另外二十三个年轻人一起，所以很难保证那骨灰真的是健二的，是健二一个人的。“即使哥哥的骨灰跟别人的

混在一起，”当时节子写信给我说，“也只是跟他战友的骨灰相混。对此我们没什么可抱怨的。”于是我们权当那些骨灰是健二的，在两年前的上个月为他举行了一个迟到的葬礼。

在墓地的仪式刚举行到一半，我看见池田怒气冲冲地大步走开了。我问节子，她丈夫是怎么回事，节子快速地低语道：“请原谅他吧，他不舒服。营养不良，好几个月都没缓过来。”

可是后来，参加仪式的宾客都聚集在我们家时，节子对我说：“请您理解，爸爸。这样的仪式让池田感到非常难过。”

“真令人感动，”我说，“没想到他跟你哥哥关系这么亲密。”

“他们每次见面都很合得来，”节子说，“而且，池田一向非常欣赏健二这样的人。他说跟健二在一起很轻松自在。”

“那他就更不应该中途离开呀！”

“对不起，爸爸，池田丝毫没有不敬的意思。但我们这一年参加过太多这样的仪式，池田的朋友和战友，每次都使他很生气。”

“生气？他为什么生气呢？”

这时又来了许多客人，我只好中断了我们的谈话。直到那天晚上，我才有机会跟池田单独谈谈。家里还有不少客人没有走，聚集在客厅里。我看见女婿高高的身影独自站在屋子那边。他打开了通向园子的纱门，背对噼噼喳喳谈话的客人，望着外面黑暗的夜色。我走到他身边，说道：

“池田，节子告诉我，这些仪式让你感到生气。”

他转过脸，微笑着说。“恐怕是这样的。我一想起这些事情，想起这样的浪费，就很生气。”

“是啊，想到这样的浪费确实令人难过。可是健二像其他许多人一样，死得英勇壮烈。”

女婿凝视着我，五官僵硬，面无表情。他经常会这么做，我总是感到非常别扭。毫无疑问，他的目光并无恶意，但是，也许因为池田是个体格强壮的男子汉，五官生得粗犷，所以很容易感到他是在威胁或谴责别人。

“壮烈牺牲似乎没完没了，”他终于说道，“我们中学同年毕业的半数同学都壮烈牺牲了。都是为了愚蠢的事业，但他们永远不会知

道这点。爸爸，您知道是什么让我感到生气吗？”

“是什么呢，池田？”

“当初派健二他们去英勇赴死的那些人，如今在哪里呢？他们照样活得好好的，跟以前没什么两样。许多人在美国人面前表现乖巧，甚至比以前更得意，但实际上就是他们把我们引入了灾难。到头来，我们还要为健二他们伤心。我就是为此感到生气。勇敢的青年为愚蠢的事业丢掉性命，真正的罪犯却仍然活在我们中间。不敢露出自己的真面目，不敢承担自己的责任。”我相信就在那时，他把身子又转向外面黑暗夜色，说道：“在我看来，这才是最怯懦的做法。”

仪式弄得我心力交瘁，不然我可能会反驳他的一些说法。但我想以后还有机会进行这样的谈话，便把话题岔到别的事情上去了。我记得我跟他一起站在那里，望着外面的黑暗，询问他的工作和一郎的情况。池田从战场回来后，我几乎很少见到他，那是我第一次认识这个变化了的、有点尖刻的女婿，而现在我已经习惯了。那天晚上，看到他那样说话，看到他参战前的那种拘谨已经毫无踪影，我感到很吃惊。但我以为是葬礼影响了他的心情，更主要的，是战争经历使他情绪失控——节子曾经向我暗示，他在战争中的遭遇十分惨痛。

没想到，我那天晚上在他身上发现的情绪，却成了他现在的一种常态。战争前两年跟节子结婚的那个谦逊的、彬彬有礼的青年，如今已经判若两人。当然啦，他那一代的这么多人都死了，可是他为什么要对长辈怀有这样的怨恨呢？我发现池田的观点有些刻薄，甚至恶毒，令我担忧——特别是它们似乎正在影响节子。

有这种变化的绝不仅仅是我女婿一个人。最近周围比比皆是。年轻一代的性格出现了一种我不能完全明白的改变，这种改变在某些方面无疑是令人不安的。例如，那天晚上在川上夫人的酒馆里，我无意间听见坐在柜台旁的一个男人说：

“听说他们把那个傻子送到医院去了。脑震荡，还断了几根肋骨。”

“你是说平山那小子吗？”川上夫人满脸关切地问。

“他叫那个名字吗？就是那个整天到处溜达、大叫大嚷的家伙。应该有人让他别那么做了。他昨天夜里似乎被人打了一顿。真不像话，不管他嘴里嚷嚷什么，也不能那样对待一个傻子呀。”

这时，我转向那个人说：“请原谅，你说平山那小子被人打了？为什么呢？”

“似乎他一直在唱那些老军歌，喊一些退步的口号。”

“可是平山小子总是那么做呀，”我说，“他只会唱两三首歌，是别人教他的。”

那人耸了耸肩。“没错，那样去揍一个傻子有什么意思？真是丧心病狂。傻子当时在茅桥上，你知道那儿夜里总有一些下三滥的人。傻子坐在桥头，又唱又喊的，大约一个小时。他们在马路对面的酒馆里听见了，其中几个人就不耐烦了。”

“这又是什么道理呢？”川上夫人说，“平山小子从来不伤害人。”

“唉，应该有人教他唱几支新歌才好，”那人说着，喝了口酒，“如果他再到处唱那些老歌，肯定还会挨揍的。”

我们仍然叫他“平山小子”，其实他至少有五十岁了。但这名字听上去倒也不是不合适，他的智力只相当于一个小孩子。在我的记忆里，他是由贫民教区的天主教嬷嬷照看的，但据说他是生在一个姓平山的家里。早年间，我们的“逍遥地”繁荣兴旺的时候，平山小子总是坐在左右宫或附近另一家酒馆门口的地上。正像川上夫人说的，他从来不伤害人，在战争前和战争中，他唱战歌、模仿政治演说，成为“逍遥地”著名的街头一景。

是谁教他唱歌的呢？我不知道。他的固定节目只有两三首歌，而且只会唱其中的一句。他总是用浑厚有力的声音唱歌，为了取悦观众，他还会双手叉腰站在那里，笑嘻嘻地望着天空，喊道：“这个村子必须向皇军献礼！你们有些人会献出生命！你们有些人会凯旋，迎接新的黎明！”——以及诸如此类的话。人们总是说：“平山小子也许并不明白这些话的意思，但他的架势摆得很到位。是个十足的日本人。”我经常看见人们停下来给他钱，或买东西给他吃，每逢这时，傻子脸上就会绽开笑容。毫无疑问，平山小子之所以迷恋这些政治歌曲，是因为它们为他赢得了公众的关注。

那些日子没有人照顾傻子。人们到底是怎么回事，竟然想到要去揍他呢？他们大概不喜欢他的唱歌和演说，可是，很可能当初就是他们拍着傻子的脑袋，称赞他鼓励他，直到那些片段在他脑海里扎下根来。

正像我说的，最近国家的情绪都有了变化，池田的态度大概绝不是例外。我若认为年轻的三宅也怀有这样的怨恨情绪，恐怕有失公允，可是就目前的情形来看，如果你仔细研究每个人对你说的每句话，似乎都会发现其中贯穿着同样的怨恨情绪。据我所知，三宅确实说过诸如此类的话。也许三宅和池田那一代人都会这样想、这样说。

我想我已经提到，昨天我乘车前往城市南部的荒川区。荒川是城市往南的公路线的最后一站，许多人看到汽车开到这么远的郊外，都表示意外。确实，荒川的街道清扫得干干净净，人行道上栽种着一排排枫树，互相隔开的房屋显得气派非凡，周围一派田园景色，使人很难把它当成城市的一部分。但是在我看来，当局把公路线延伸到荒川是很正确的。住在城里的人从中受益匪浅，他们很容易就能接触到比较清静、远离尘嚣的环境。我们并不是一直有这么便利的条件，我至今记得住在城里那种逼仄压抑的感觉，特别是漫长而炎热的夏天，在目前的公路线开通之前，这种感觉着实令人难受。

我相信，目前的路线是一九三一年开通的，取代了三十年来那条不完善的、令乘客十分不满的线路。如果你那时不住在这里，便很难想象这些新的路线对城市许多方面产生的巨大影响。所有的地区似乎都在一夜之间变了模样。原本拥挤繁忙的公园无人问津了，老字号店铺的生意严重受损。

当然啦，另外一些地区意外地发现得了好处，其中就有犹疑桥对面的那片地方，它很快就变成了我们的逍遥地。在新的公路线开通之前，你会发现那里只有几条冷清清的小街巷和一排排瓦房。当时谁也没把这地方当回事儿，说起来只是“古川东边”。新的公路线一开通，在终点站古川站下车的乘客，走几步路就能到达市中心，比乘坐第二条曲里拐弯的电车路线还要快捷，结果就是，在那片地区步行的人突然变得熙熙攘攘。在那里开业的十几家酒馆，经过多少年的惨淡经营，一下子生意兴隆，新的酒馆也一家接一家地开张。

后来成为左右宫的那家酒馆，当时只是叫“山形酒馆”——山形就是店老板，一位退伍老兵——这家是那个地区年头最久的一家。当时它显得有点单调，但我从第一次进城之后，许多年里一直是它的常客。在我的记忆中，直到新的公路线开通了几个月之后，山形才明白周围发生了什么事，开始另做打算。那片地方将要发展成为一应俱全的饮酒一条街，他自己的酒吧——历史最为悠久，位于三条路的交叉口——自然在当地的诸多酒吧中成了元老。因此，他觉得自己有责任扩大营业范围。他楼上的商家巴不得把生意转手卖掉，必要的资金也

很容易就能筹措到。无论从他的酒吧，还是从整个这片地区来说，最大的障碍就是城市官方的态度。

在这一点上，山形的想法无疑是正确的。当时正值一九三三年或一九三四年——你恐怕记得，那个时候考虑建立一个新的娱乐区是不合时宜的。当局一直在煞费苦心制定政策，严格控制城市生活中的浮华，确实，在市中心，许多更加颓废的场所正在停业关闭。我听着山形的想法，起初不以为然。后来他跟我描述了他脑海里的蓝图，我才深受触动，答应尽力助他一臂之力。

我相信前面已经提到，左右宫的存在有我一份小小的功劳。当然啦，我不是一个富人，在经济上无能为力。但那个时候，我在这个城里已经有了一定的声望。我记得当时我还没有在国务院的艺术委员会供职，但在那里有许多熟人，他们经常向我咨询政策上的事。因此，我代表山形向当局提出请求还是有一定分量的。

“店主打算，”我解释说，“酒馆的主题就是颂扬当今日本正在涌现的新的爱国精神。酒馆的装潢将会体现这种新精神，如果顾客与这种精神格格不入，就坚决要求他离开。还有，店主打算让他的酒馆成为本城画家和作家的聚集地，让那些其作品最能反映新精神的艺术家聚在这里饮酒。关于这最后一点，我已经得到我的许多同仁的支持，其中有画家原田雅之，剧作家三角，记者尾辻繁雄和夏希英二——你们知道，他们的作品都是坚定地效忠于天皇陛下的。”

我接着指出，这样一个酒馆，考虑到它在这里的权威地位，肯定会给这个地区奠定一种令人称许的基调。

“不然的话，”我警告道，“我担心我们又将面对一个以颓废为特征的地区，而我们一直在尽力对抗这种颓废，知道它一直在削弱我们的文化结构。”

当局的反应可不仅仅是默许，而是非常热情，令我感到意外。我想，这又一次说明，人有时候会突然发现他的地位远比他自己以为的要高。我从来不把地位放在心上，所以带给我这么大成就感的并不是左右宫的开业，而是我很骄傲地看到我一段时间以来坚持的观点得到了支持——也就是说，日本的新精神与自我享受并不矛盾；也就是说，没有理由把寻找快乐跟颓废相提并论。

于是，新干线开通之后大约两年半，左右宫开张了。装修很讲究，很全面，每个人天黑后在那条路上溜达，都不可能不注意到那灯火通明的店面，那么多大大小小的灯笼挂在山墙上，挂在屋檐下，整

整齐地排在窗台上和门框上。还有那个悬在横梁上被照得亮亮的巨大旗帜，上面是新酒馆的名字，背景是队伍里的军靴齐步前进。

开张后不久的一天晚上，山形把我请到里面，让我选一张最喜欢的桌子，并说那桌子以后就归我一个人使用。我想，这主要是为了感谢我为他做的一点小事，同时，当然啦，也因为我一直是山形酒吧的一位常客。

确实，在山形酒吧变成左右宫之前，我已经光临它二十多年。我并非刻意挑选——就像我说的，这个酒吧并无出众之处——当我还年轻的时候第一次来到这个城市，就住在古川，而山形酒吧正好就在附近。

也许你很难想象古川那个时候有多丑陋。是的，如果你是刚来这个城市，听我提到古川区，你脑海里浮现的大概是今天的那个公园，以及那些名闻遐迩的桃树。可是，当我第一次来到这个城市时——那是一九一三年——这个地方到处都是小公司的厂房和仓库，许多都已废弃不用或年久失修。房屋老旧破败，住在古川的都是那些只付得起最低房租的人。

我住的是个小阁楼，楼下是一位老太太跟她未婚的儿子一起生活，其实很不适合我的需求。房子里没有电，我不得不点着油灯绘画。房间狭小，几乎连一个画架也放不下，画画时总免不了把颜料溅在墙上和榻榻米上。我夜里工作时，经常会吵醒老太太或她的儿子。最烦人的是，阁楼的天花板太矮，我直不起身子，经常半弓着腰工作几个小时，脑袋还时时撞在房梁上。但是那时候我被竹田公司接受，当画家养活自己，心里非常高兴，也就不太在意这些不如意的条件了。

当然啦，我白天不在阁楼里工作，而是在竹田大师的“工作室”里。工作室也在古川，是一家饭店楼上一间长长的屋子——确实很长，可供我们十五个人把画架放成一排。天花板虽然比我小阁楼的高，但中间严重塌陷，所以我们每次进屋都会开玩笑，说它又比前一天下降了几厘米。屋子从这头到那头都是窗户，本应该使我们有充足的光线作画，可是不知怎的，照进来的一道道阳光总是太刺眼，屋里看上去像一个船舱一样。还有一个问题，楼下的饭店老板不许我们晚上六点之后还留在工作室，因为那时候他的客人开始来了。“你们在上面的声音像一群牛。”他总是这么说。我们没有别的选择，只好回到各自的住所继续工作。

也许我应该解释一下，我们如果晚上不加班，是不可能按时完成工作的。竹田公司以其能在很短时间内提供大量画作而自豪。是的，竹田大师让我们明白，如果我们不能在船开走前的最后期限完成任务，那么要不了多久，客户就会去找同行的那些竞争对手。结果就是，我们每天加班加点，熬到深夜，第二天还是感到惴惴不安，因为没有赶上计划。当截止日期临近时，我们经常每天晚上只睡两三个小时，通宵达旦地绘画。有时候任务一个接一个，我们整天累得筋疲力尽，晕晕乎乎。尽管如此，我不记得我们有哪次没有按时完成任务，从这里也可看出竹田大师对我们的控制。

我跟随竹田大师大约一年之后，公司里来了一个新的画家。他就是中原康成，我相信你对这个名字没有什么印象。实际上，你没有理由接触过它，因为中原康成没有任何名气。他充其量只是在战争爆发的几年前，在汤山区一所中学谋得一个图画教师的职务——听说他现在还在那里就职，当局觉得没有理由像替换他的那么多同行一样替换他。我每次想起他，总记得他叫“乌龟”，这是在竹田公司的那些日子大家给他起的绰号，后来我们交往甚密，我一直亲切地用这个绰号称呼他。

我至今留着一张乌龟的画作——一幅自画像，是他离开竹田公司后不久画的。画面上是一个瘦瘦的、戴着眼镜的年轻人，穿着衬衫坐在一间拥挤而昏暗的屋子里，周围是画架和东倒西歪的家具，窗外的光线照亮了他的一侧脸庞。这张脸上的真诚和腼腆跟我记忆中的那个人完全吻合，在这方面，乌龟是绝对诚实的。看着这幅自画像，你可能会把他当成那种在汽车上你可以果断地用胳膊肘将其挤到一边抢占座位的人。然而，似乎我们每一个人都有各自独特的自负。如果说乌龟的谦逊使他没有隐瞒自己腼腆的性格，那么，这份谦逊可没能阻止他给自己加上一种知识分子的清高神情——我从不记得他有过这种神情。不过说句公道话，我不记得有哪位同行能够绝对诚实地画出一幅自画像。不管他多么精确地对着镜子再现自己的表面细节，画上所展示的人格特性却与其他人看到的真实情况相距甚远。

乌龟之所以得此绰号，是因为他进入公司时，我们正在赶一个特别繁忙的任务，结果，在别人能画出六七幅作品的的时间里，他只能完成两三幅。起初，大家以为他动作慢是由于经验不足，便只在背后叫他乌龟。可是一星期又一星期过去，他的速度并没提高，对他的不满便增加了。很快，大家就都当面乌龟长乌龟短地叫他，他完全知道这个绰号并不表示亲热，但我记得他尽量把它当作昵称来接受。例如，如果有人长屋子的那头喊道：“喂，乌龟，你还在画你上星期开始

画的那个花瓣吗？”他就会勉强大笑几声，只当对方是在开玩笑。他显然没有能力保护自己的尊严，我记得同事们都认为这是由于乌龟来自根岸地区，当时人们普遍缺乏公允地相信，来自城市那片地区的人无一例外都是软弱的、没有骨气的。

我记得一天早晨，竹田大师暂时离开了长屋子，我的两个同事走到乌龟的画架前，指责他速度太慢。我的画架离他的不远，我能清楚地看到乌龟脸上不安的表情，只听他回答：

“请你们对我有点耐心吧。我特别希望向你们，我的前辈，学习怎么迅速地、保质保量地完成工作。过去这几个星期，我已经尽了最大的努力让自己画得快一些，可是，唉，有几幅画不得不废弃了，因为抢速度影响了质量，会给我们公司的高标准抹黑的。但我会尽力提高我在你们心目中的可怜地位。请你们原谅我，耐心地再等一段时间。”

乌龟把这番请求重复了两三遍，那两个折磨他的人不依不饶，只管辱骂他懒惰，说他依赖我们大家替他完成工作。这时，我们大多数人都放下画笔，聚拢过来。我记得，当那两个人开始用特别难听的话辱骂乌龟，我看到别的同事只是饶有兴趣地袖手旁观时，我上前一步，说道：

“够了，你们难道看不出来，你们是在跟一个有艺德的人说话吗？如果一位画家不肯为了速度而牺牲质量，那是值得我们大家尊敬的。如果你们看不到这点，那真是瞎了眼睛。”

当然啦，这已经是许多年前的事了，我不敢保证那天上午我真的是这么说的。但我确实站在乌龟一边说了诸如此类的话，这点我可以肯定。因为我至今清楚地记得，乌龟转向我时，脸上那种感激和宽慰的神情，以及在场的其他人惊愕的目光。我在同事们中间颇受尊敬——我的工作无论是质量还是数量都无可挑剔——我相信由于我的干预，结束了乌龟所受的折磨，至少那天上午如此。

你也许认为，我拿这样一件小事大做文章，有点过分。毕竟，我替乌龟辩护时所说的观点，似乎是很浅显的——任何一个尊重严肃艺术的人都会时时刻刻这么想。但是我们必须记住当时竹田大师公司的风气——以及我们大家的情绪，每个人都在跟时间赛跑，为了保住公司来之不易的名声。大家心里很清楚，我们替人画的那些东西——艺伎，樱桃树，游动的鲤鱼，庙宇——主要为了运出去让外国人看着有“日本味儿”，至于具体的风格和细节，基本上没人注意。因此，如

果我说我那天的行为显示了我日后大受尊敬的品质，倒也不是过分夸张。这种品质就是不管周围的人怎么想，都要有自己的思考和判断。有一点不可否认，那天上午只有我一个人站出来为乌龟说话。

乌龟感谢了我的挺身而出以及我后来对他的一些帮助，但那时候工作节奏太快，过了一段时间之后，我才得以跟他亲密地长谈。事实上，我相信是我刚才所述的那件事发生的近两个月后，我们疯狂的工作日程才终于有了点空当。我在多摩川庙宇的场院上溜达，我只要有点空闲经常这么做。突然，我看见乌龟坐在阳光下的一张凳子上，似乎睡着了。

我对多摩川的场院一直情有独钟，我也同意今天的那些篱笆和一排排树木确实有助于营造一种与庙宇相符的气氛。但是，如今我每次去那里，都发现自己很怀念昔日的多摩川场院。当时没有这些篱笆和树木，场院似乎更加开阔，充满生机。在那一大片绿色的草地上，可以看见零零星星的卖糖果和气球的小摊，以及变魔术和玩杂耍的即兴演出。我还记得，如果你想照相，去多摩川场院再合适不过，因为走不了多远就会看见一个摄影师，跟三脚架和黑斗篷一起挤在他的小摊位里。我在那里发现乌龟的那个下午，是初春的一个星期天，到处都是家长领着孩子。我走过去，坐在他身边，他一下子惊醒了。

“哎呀，小野君！”他喊了一声，顿时满脸放光。“今天能看见您真是好运气。哎呀，就在刚才我还跟自己念叨，如果我有一点闲钱，就给小野君买一样东西，感谢他这样善待我。可是，我现在只买得起便宜的东西，那样就太不恭敬了。所以，小野君，请让我暂时发自内心地感谢您为我所做的一切吧。”

“我没做什么，”我说，“我只是有几次说了心里话，仅此而已。”

“可是，说实在的，小野君，像您这样的人太少了。能跟这样的人一起共事真是三生有幸。不管我们今后怎样分道扬镳，我都会永远铭记您的好意。”

我记得我听了一会儿他对我勇气和美德的称赞，然后我说：“这段时间我总想跟你谈谈。知道吗，我一直思前想后，我考虑在不久的将来离开竹田大师。”

乌龟惊愕地看着我。然后，他滑稽地看了看周围，似乎担心我的话被人偷听了。

“我很幸运，”我继续说道，“我的作品引起了画家和版画复制师森山诚二的兴趣。你肯定听说过他吧？”

乌龟仍然盯着我，摇了摇头。

“森山先生，”我说，“是一位真正的艺术家。很可能还是一位伟大的艺术家。我真是非常幸运，能够得到他的赏识和忠告。其实，是他认为我留在竹田大师这里会对我的天赋造成无法弥补的伤害，他邀请我去做他的学生。”

“是吗？”乌龟谨慎地说。

“知道吗，刚才我在公园里溜达时，心里这么想：‘不用说，森山先生的想法完全正确。那些做粗活的愿意在竹田大师手下当牛做马，混口饭吃，就随他们去吧。我们这些真正有雄心壮志的人，必须另寻出路。’”

说到这里，我意味深长地看了乌龟一眼。他还是那样瞪着我，脸上出现了一种困惑不解的表情。

“恕我冒昧，我跟森山先生提到了你，”我对他说，“实际上，我说我认为你在我目前的同事中间是个例外。在他们中，只有你是真正有天赋，有艺术追求的。”

“哎呀，小野君”——他笑了起来——“您怎么能这么说呢？我知道您是一片好意，可是这话太过奖了。”

“我已经决定接受森山先生的诚意邀请，”我继续说道，“我劝你也让我把你的作品拿给他看看。如果运气好，说不定你也会被请去做他的学生呢。”

乌龟看着我，一脸痛苦的表情。

“可是，小野君，您在说什么呀？”他压低声音说。“竹田大师是因为我爸爸一位德高望重的熟人推荐才接受我的。说真的，虽然我有这样那样的毛病，但大师对我一直非常宽容。我怎么能只干了几个月就这样背信弃义，一走了之呢？”突然，乌龟似乎悟出自己话里的意思，赶紧找补道：“当然啦，小野君，我绝不是指您背信弃义。您的情况不一样。我绝没有……”他说不下去了，只是尴尬地赔笑。然后，他努力控制住自己，问道：“小野君，您真的要离开竹田大师吗？”

“在我看来，”我说，“竹田大师不配你我这样的人为他效忠。效忠不是白给的。效忠的内容太丰富了。经常有人口口声声说效忠，盲目地跟从别人。而我，不愿意这样度过我的生命。”

当然啦，那天下午我在多摩川庙宇里的原话可能并不是这样。我曾经多次讲述这不同寻常的一幕，说的次数一多，这个故事就开始具有自己的生命。但是，即使我那天没有这样简洁地向乌龟表达我的想法，我也可以断定刚才这番话确实准确表达了我在人生那个阶段的态度和决心。

顺便说一句，我后来不得不在一些地方反复讲述在竹田公司的那段日子，其中一个地方就是左右宫的那张桌旁。我的弟子们似乎都对我早年的经历特别感兴趣——也许因为他们本能地想知道老师在他们那个年纪在做什么吧。总之，在那些夜晚的聚会中，我在竹田大师手下的经历经常被提出来。

“那并不是一段很糟糕的经历，”我记得自己又一次这样对他们说，“它教会了我许多重要的东西。”

“请原谅，先生”——我记得是黑田在桌上探着身子说——“我觉得很难相信，您所描述的那样一个地方，能教给一个艺术家什么有价值的东西呢？”

“是的，先生，”另一个声音说，“跟我说说那样一个地方能教给您什么吧。听上去那就像是一个做硬纸箱的作坊。”

左右宫的谈话总是这样。我跟某人谈话，其他人各自闲聊，一旦我被问到有趣的问题，他们便都停住自己的话头，围成一圈，眼巴巴地等着我回答。似乎他们自己闲聊时总是竖着一只耳朵，随时捕捉我可能传授的新知识。这并不是说他们不加辨别、全盘接受，恰恰相反，他们都是一些聪明的年轻人，我若没有经过深思熟虑，是不敢轻易开口的。

“在竹田那里，”我对他们说，“我学到了人生早年的重要一课。尊重老师是没有错的，但是一定要勇于挑战权威。在竹田的经历告诉我，永远不要盲目从众，而要认真考虑自己被推往哪个方向。如果说有一件事是我鼓励你们大家去做的，那就是永远不要随波逐流。要超越我们周围那些低级和颓废的影响，在过去的十年、十五年里，它们大大削弱了我们民族的精魂。”毫无疑问，我喝得有点微醉，在那里夸夸其谈了，但酒馆角落的那张桌旁的谈话经常是这样。

“是的，先生，”有人说，“我们一定都牢记在心。我们一定努力不随波逐流。”

“我认为，我们这张桌旁的人，”我继续说道，“有权利为自己感到骄傲。怪诞和浮华曾在我们周围盛行。如今，日本终于出现了一种更为阳刚的精神，而你们都是其中的一分子。实际上，我希望你们会成为新精神的先锋而得到承认。是的”——这时，我已经不只是对桌旁的人说话，而是对周围的所有听众演讲了——“我们大家聚集的这个酒馆，就是这种新精神的见证，我们在座的各位都有权利感到自豪。”

经常，随着酒越喝越热闹，外面的人也会聚集在我们桌子周围，参加我们的辩论和讲话，或只是在一旁倾听，感受这种氛围。一般来说，我的弟子还是愿意让陌生人旁听的，当然啦，如果受到无聊之徒的骚扰，或者某人的观点实在可憎，他们也会很快把他排挤出去。虽然大家吵吵嚷嚷、演讲发言直到深夜，但左右宫里很少发生真正的争吵。我们经常光顾那里的人，都被同一种基本精神团结在一起。也就是说，这个酒馆正如古川当时所希望的那样，代表了某种美好的东西，酒馆里的人可以因自豪和尊严而沉醉。

这个家里的什么地方有一张黑田的画作。黑田是我的弟子中最有天分的，作品描绘的是左右宫里的这样一个夜晚。标题是“爱国精神”。看到这样的标题，你大概以为画面上是行进的士兵或诸如此类的东西。其实，黑田的观点是：爱国精神植根于很深的地方，在我们每个人的日常生活中，取决于我们在哪里喝酒、跟什么人交往。这是他对左右宫精神的贡献——因为他当时对此深信不疑。这是一幅油画，画面上有几张桌子，在很大程度上吸收了左右宫的色彩和装潢——最引人注目的是二楼阳台栏杆上悬挂的爱国旗帜和标语。旗帜下面，客人们聚在桌旁谈话，在前面最显著的地方是一个身穿和服的女侍者端着酒水匆匆走来。这是一幅很精彩的画作，惟妙惟肖地刻画了左右宫里那种喧闹同时又值得尊敬和骄傲的氛围。今天，每当我看到这幅画，仍然会感到一种满足感，想到我——凭着我在这个城里的一点威望——为这样一个地方的开张做出了我一点小小的贡献。

这些日子，晚上在川上夫人的酒吧里，我经常发现自己在回想左右宫，回想昔日的时光。因为，有时候川上夫人的酒吧只有我和绅太郎两位客人，我们一起坐在吧台旁那些低垂的灯盏下，免不了会产生怀旧的情绪。我们会开始谈论过去的某个人，谈到他能喝多少酒，或者他的某种滑稽的怪癖。很快，我们就努力让川上夫人回忆那个人，

在启发她的过程中，我们发现又想起了关于那个人的越来越多的有趣事情。那天晚上，这样的回忆让我们开怀大笑一场之后，川上夫人说：“哎呀，我想不起这个名字了，但要看见他的脸我肯定能认出来。”她在这种场合经常这么说。

“说实在的，欧巴桑，”我回忆着说，“他其实从来没有光顾这里。他总是在马路对面喝酒。”

“噢，对了，在那个酒馆。不过，如果看见他，我还是能认出来的。不过谁知道呢？人的变化太大了。我经常在马路上看见一个人，以为自己认识呢，就想上前去打招呼。可是再一看，心里又没把握了。”

“哎呀，欧巴桑，”绅太郎插嘴说，“那天，我在马路上跟一个人打招呼，以为他是我以前认识的人。可是那人好像把我当成了疯子。他没有理我就走开了！”

绅太郎似乎觉得这是一个有趣的故事，说完就大笑起来。川上夫人也面露微笑，但没有跟他一起放声大笑。然后她转向我，说道：

“先生，你必须去劝说你那些朋友再来光顾这个地方。实际上，每次我们看见一张过去认识的熟悉面孔，就应该拦住他，叫他到这个小酒馆来。那样，我们说不定就能重建昔日的繁华了。”

“这可真是个好主意，欧巴桑，”我说，“我会尽量记住这么做的。我会在大马路上拦住别人，说：‘我记得我过去认识你。你曾是我们这个地区的常客。你大概以为过去的一切都消失了，其实你错了。川上夫人还在，跟以前一样，一切都在慢慢地重新恢复。’”

“没错，先生，”川上夫人说，“你就跟他们说，他们会错过机会的。那时候生意就开始兴隆了。而且，先生也有责任把过去那些人再召集起来。在这里，大家总是把先生当成天然的领袖呢。”

“说得好，欧巴桑，”绅太郎说，“古时候，如果一个将军的士兵在一场战役后失散了，他会很快把他们重新召集到一起。先生也差不多是这个地位。”

“胡说什么呀。”我大笑着说。

“是这样的，先生，”川上夫人继续说道，“你重新找到那些老人，把他们叫回来。然后，过一阵子，我就把隔壁的房子也盘下来，开一个像过去那样的大酒馆。跟过去的大酒馆一模一样。”

“是的，先生，”绅太郎还在那里说着，“将军必须把他的人重新召集起来。”

“这个想法很有趣，欧巴桑，”我说，“你知道吗，左右宫曾经也是个很小的地方。比这间酒馆大不了多少。我们逐渐地就把它变成了后来的规模。是啊，也许我们只需如法炮制，让你这个地方也兴隆起来。现在局势稳定一些了，那些顾客会回来的。”

“你可以把你所有的画家朋友都带回来，先生，”川上夫人说，“过不了多久，报社那些人也就都跟来了。”

“多么有趣的想法。我们倒是可能促成这件事。只是我担心，欧巴桑，你恐怕应付不了这样大的一个酒馆。我们可不想让你过分劳累啊。”

“胡说，”川上夫人说，做出一副嗔怒的样子，“只要先生赶紧去做他分内的事，你们就会看到这里的一切都会料理得井井有条。”

最近我们总是一遍遍地重复这样的谈话。谁说过去的逍遥地不会再回来？我和川上夫人这样的人，可能是把这件事当成玩笑来说，但是在我们说说笑笑的背后，隐隐地有一种严肃的乐观情绪。“将军必须把他的人召集回来。”也许他确实应该这么做。也许，等仙子彻底有了归宿之后，我就会开始认真考虑川上夫人的计划。

我想，我这里应该提一句，战争结束后我只见过我以前的门徒黑田一次。很偶然的，在一个雨天的早晨，在占领后的第一年——左右宫和其他那些建筑物都还没有被摧毁。我步行去某个地方，正好路过昔日逍遥地的废墟，我从雨伞下面注视着那些断壁残垣。我记得那天有许多工人在周围闲逛，所以一开始我并没有留意站在那里看着一座被烧毁的楼房的那个身影。后来快要走过时，我才意识到那个人已经转过身来，正注视着我。我停住脚步，转过头，透过伞上滴滴答答的雨水，赫然看见黑田面无表情地望着我，我内心顿时一种异样的震惊。

黑田打着伞，没戴帽子，穿着一件深色的雨衣。他身后被烧焦的楼房正在滴水，残缺不全的排水管正在把大量的雨水泼溅在离他不远的地方。我记得一辆卡车在我们俩之间驶过，车上全是建筑工人。接着，我注意到他的雨伞断了一根钢条，使更多的雨水溅在他的脚边。

战前，黑田的脸圆乎乎的，现在却颧骨高凸，腮帮子都瘪了进去，下巴上和脖子里出现了深深的纹路。我站在那里就想：“他已经

不再年轻了。”

他轻轻地转了转头。我不知道他是想鞠躬，还是调整一下脑袋，躲开破伞溅下来的雨水。然后，他一转身，朝另一方向走去了。

但是我在这里并不想细说黑田的事。实际上，如果不是上个月在电车上跟佐藤博士偶然相遇，意外地提到他的名字，我根本不会想到他的。

那天下午，我终于带一郎去看他的怪兽电影——前一天因为仙子的固执，我们没有去成。我和外孙是自己去的，仙子不肯看电影，节子又一次主动提出留在家里。当然啦，仙子觉得这电影太幼稚了，但是一郎却对女人的行为有自己的解释。那天我们坐下来吃午饭时，他还在说：

“仙子小姨和妈妈不去了。这电影对女人来说太恐怖了。她们会被吓坏的，是不是这样，外公？”

“是的，我想你说得对，一郎。”

“她们肯定会被吓坏的。仙子小姨，你害怕了，不敢去看电影，是不是？”

“哦，是的。”仙子说着，做出害怕的样子。

“就连外公也害怕了。你看，就连外公也害怕了。他还是个男人呢。”

那天下午，我站在门口准备出发去看电影，目睹了一郎和他母亲之间的奇怪一幕。节子在给一郎系鞋带，我却看见一郎不停地想对她说些什么。每次节子说：“你说什么，一郎，我听不见。”他就气呼呼地瞪着眼睛，然后飞快地扫我一眼，看我有没有听见。最后，鞋带终于系好了，节子弯下腰，让一郎对着她的耳朵说。然后她点点头，回屋里去了。片刻之后拿着一件雨衣出来，叠得好好的交给一郎。

“不太可能下雨。”我望着前门外面，说道。确实，户外阳光灿烂。

“没关系，”节子说，“一郎愿意带着雨衣。”

他这么坚持要带雨衣，使我感到费解。我们来到阳光下，下山朝车站走去，这时我看见一郎走起路来摇摇摆摆的——似乎挂在胳膊上

的那件雨衣把他变成了亨弗莱·鲍嘉⁽³⁾那样的人。于是我想，他大概是想模仿他的某本漫画书上的英雄吧。

大概快要走到山脚下时，一郎突然大声说道：“外公，你以前是个有名的画家。”

“我想是的，一郎。”

“我叫仙子小姨把外公的画拿给我看看。可是她不肯。”

“唔。它们暂时都收起来了。”

“仙子小姨不听话，是不是，外公？我叫她把外公的画拿给我看，她为什么不拿给我看？”

我笑了起来，说道：“我不知道，一郎。也许她忙着做别的事情吧。”

“她不听话。”

我又笑了一声，说：“我想是的，一郎。”

从我们家走到车站要十分钟。先下山走到河边，再顺着新修的水泥堤坝往前走，往北的新干道就在新的住房小区的那头跟公路汇合。上个月那个阳光灿烂的下午，我和外孙乘车到市中心去，途中我们遇到了佐藤博士。

我意识到我还没有怎么谈到佐藤一家，其长子就是目前正跟仙子商议婚事的年轻人。总的来说，佐藤一家跟去年三宅家的人完全不同。当然，三宅一家是正经体面的人，但说句公道话，他们不能被称为有名望的家族，而佐藤一家，毫不夸张地说，当属名门望族。尽管我和佐藤博士以前并不很熟，但我对他在艺术界的活动一向并不陌生，许多年来，每逢在路上遇见，我们总要彬彬有礼地问候几句，以表示知道对方的名气。然而，当我们上个月相遇时，情况自然就不一样了。

电车一直要过了古平站对面河上的金属桥才会变得拥挤，因此，佐藤博士在我们后一站上车时，在我们旁边找到了一个空座位。不可避免地，我们的谈话一开始有点尴尬，因为婚事刚刚开始商议，正处于微妙的阶段，拿出来公开谈论似乎还不合适，而如果假装没这回事，未免又有点可笑。最后，我们都开始夸赞“我们共同的朋友京先生”的功绩——他是这桩婚事的牵线人——然后佐藤博士微笑着说：“但愿他的努力能使我们很快再次相见。”关于这件事，我们也只能

说到这个份儿上了。我忍不住注意到，佐藤先生面对有些尴尬的局面镇定自若，而三宅一家去年从头到尾处理事情都那么不得体，这其中的差别太明显了。不管最后的结果如何，跟佐藤家这样的人打交道，使人心里感到很踏实。

我们主要谈论一些无关紧要的小事。佐藤先生的态度和蔼可亲，他探过身来问一郎出来高不高兴，又问我们要去看什么电影，我的外孙跟他说话一点也不拘束。

“真是好孩子。”佐藤博士赞赏地对我说。

就在佐藤博士快要到站的时候——他已经把帽子又戴上了——他突然说道：“我们还有一位共同的熟人呢，他叫黑田先生。”

我看着他，感到有点吃惊。“黑田先生，”我说，“啊，肯定是我以前收作门徒的那个年轻人了。”

“没错。我最近见过他，他碰巧提到您的名字。”

“是吗？我已经有一段时间没见到他了。从战争之前就一直没见到。黑田先生最近怎么样？他在做什么？”

“我相信他准备在新的上町学院担任一个职位，教美术课。所以我才碰到了他。学院好意请我去给他们做就业指导。”

“啊，那么您跟黑田先生并不熟悉。”

“是啊，但我估计今后能经常见到他。”

“是吗？”我说。“这么说黑田先生还记得我，真难为他了。”

“是啊，没错。我们在谈论一件事的时候他提到了您的名字。我还没有机会跟他长聊。如果我再看到他，会告诉他我见到了您。”

“啊，那是。”

电车正在驶过金属桥，车轮发出哐啷哐啷的巨大噪音。一郎一直跪在座位上看窗外的风景，这时指着下面水里的什么东西。佐藤先生转脸去看，又跟一郎交谈了几句，看他的车站要到了，便站起身来。他又暗示了一下“京先生的努力”，便鞠一个躬，下车去了。

像往常一样，过了桥的那一站上车的人很多，我们坐在车上就不太舒服了。后来，在电影院门前下车时，我一眼就看见那张海报很醒目地贴在入口处。外孙两天前画的那张草图还是挺像的，只是海报上

没有火。一郎记得的其实是那些撞击的线条——很像一道道的闪电——画家以此来强调蜥蜴巨怪的凶猛。

一郎走到海报前，高声大笑起来。

“一眼就看得出来是人造的怪兽，”他指着说，“谁都看得出来。它是个假的。”说着又笑。

“一郎，不要这么高声地笑。大家都在看你呢。”

“可是我忍不住。这个怪兽太像假的了。谁会害怕这样的东西呢？”

我们在里面坐定，电影开始以后，我才发现了他那件雨衣的真正用途。电影放到十分钟时，我们听见阴森森的音乐，银幕上出现一个黑黢黢的山洞，里面迷雾缭绕。一郎轻声说：“没意思。等有趣的事情发生的时候，你告诉我好吗？”说着，他就把雨衣蒙在了头上。片刻之后，随着一声巨吼，蜥蜴巨怪从山洞里出来了。一郎用手一把抓住了我的胳膊，我看了他一眼，发现他的另一只手抓住雨衣，把脑袋蒙得紧紧的。

在看电影的整个过程中，那件雨衣几乎一直蒙在他头上。偶尔，我的胳膊被摇晃着，一个声音从雨衣下面传出来问道：“开始有意思了吗？”我就不得不小声给他描述银幕上的情景，最后雨衣好歹露出了一道小缝。不出几分钟——只要一有怪兽出现的迹象——那道小缝就会合上，他的声音就会说：“没意思。等有了好玩的东西，别忘了告诉我。”

回到家里，一郎却因看了电影而兴高采烈。“我从来没看过这么棒的电影。”他不住地说，我们坐下来吃晚饭时，他还在那里向我们发表评论。

“仙子小姨，我来告诉你下面是怎么回事好吗？可吓人了。要我告诉你吗？”

“我太害怕了，一郎，连饭都吃不下了。”仙子说。

“我警告你，后面还要更可怕呢。还想听我说吗？”

“哦，我不知道，一郎。你已经把我吓坏了。”

我本来不想在饭桌上提到佐藤博士，使话题变得严肃，可是要讲述这一天的经历，自然就会提到我们的见面。于是，一郎停住话头

时，我就说：“顺便说一句，我们在车上碰到佐藤博士了。他正坐车去看什么人。”

听了我的话，两个女儿都停止吃饭，惊讶地看着我。

“但是我们没有说什么重要的事，”我轻轻笑了一声说，“其实就说了几句玩笑话。仅此而已。”

两个女儿看上去将信将疑，但又开始吃饭了。仙子扫了一眼姐姐，节子便说：“佐藤博士好吗？”

“看上去很好。”

我们默不作声地吃了一会儿。也许一郎又开始谈论电影了。总之，我过了一会儿才说：

“真奇怪，佐藤博士竟然见到了我以前的一個弟子。就是黑田。似乎黑田要在新的学院里任职了。”

我从碗边抬起目光，看见两个女儿又停了筷子。显然，她们刚才交换了目光，我又像上个月有几次那样明确感觉到她们议论过我的什么事。

那天晚上，我和两个女儿又坐在桌旁看报纸和杂志，突然房子里什么地方传来有节奏的重击声。仙子惊慌地抬起头，节子说：

“是一郎。他睡不着觉的时候就会这么做。”

“可怜的一郎，”仙子说，“他肯定会一直梦见怪兽。爸爸好坏，带他去看那样一部电影。”

“胡说，”我说，“他看得很开心。”

“我认为是爸爸自己想看，”仙子调皮地笑着对姐姐说，“可怜的一郎。被硬拽着去看了一部那么可怕的电影。”

节子一脸尴尬地转向我。“爸爸带一郎去看电影也是一片好意。”她喃喃地说。

“可一郎现在睡不着觉了，”仙子说，“带他去看那样的电影真是荒唐。不，节子，你呆着别动，我去。”

节子看着妹妹离开房间，然后说道：

“仙子对孩子真好啊。我们回家后，一郎会想她的。”

“是啊。”

“她总是对孩子这么好。爸爸，你还记得吗？她以前总是陪木下家的小孩子玩那些游戏。”

“是啊。”我笑着说。然后我补充道：“木下家的男孩子现在已经长大，不愿意过来玩了。”

“仙子总是对孩子这么好，”节子又说了一遍，“看到她这把年纪还没有出嫁，真让人难受。”

“是啊。对她来说，战争来得真不是时候。”

我们接着看报纸和杂志。过了一会儿，节子说：

“今天下午真巧啊，在车上遇到佐藤博士。他似乎是个很有风度的绅士。”

“没错。听别人说，他的儿子也没给父亲丢脸。”

“是吗？”节子说，若有所思。

我们继续看报纸和杂志。过了一会儿，女儿又一次打破了沉默。

“佐藤博士跟黑田先生熟悉吗？”

“只是有点认识，”我从报纸上抬起目光，说道，“他们好像在什么地方见过。”

“不知道黑田先生最近怎么样了。我记得他以前经常上这儿来，你们在客厅里一谈就是好几个小时。”

“我也不知道黑田的近况。”

“请原谅，可是我想，爸爸最近是不是应该去拜访一下黑田先生呢？”

“拜访他？”

“黑田先生。也许还有另一些类似的老熟人。”

“我好像不太明白你的意思，节子。”

“请原谅，我只是想建议爸爸，可能应该跟过去的某些熟人谈谈。也就是说，赶在佐藤家请的侦探之前。毕竟，我们不希望出现任何不必要的误解。”

“是的，我想也是。”我说，然后接着看报纸。

我相信我们没有继续谈论这件事。节子上个月住在这里时也没有再提这个话题。

昨天，我乘车去荒川，灿烂夺目的秋阳洒满整个车厢。我有一段时间没去荒川了——实际上，自从战争结束后就没有去过——我望着窗外，发现原本熟悉的景色有了许多变化。经过户阪和荣町时，我看见记忆中的那些小木屋间赫然耸立着一些砖结构的公寓楼。后来，车从南町的那些工厂后面驶过，我看见许多工厂变得十分破败。一个厂院又一个厂院，都乱糟糟地堆着破木头和波纹金属，有时候索性就是一片破砖碎瓦。

可是，当车开过河上的THK公司大桥后，气氛出现了戏剧性的变化。车在田野和丛林间穿行，不久，公路线尽头的延绵陡峭的山岭脚下便可看见荒川郊外的景色了。汽车非常缓慢地往山下开，然后停住，下车一看，脚下是扫得干干净净的人行道，心里顿时产生一种强烈的感觉，似乎自己已经远离尘嚣。

我听说荒川丝毫没有遭到轰炸袭击。确实，我昨天看到那里跟以前完全一样。在樱桃树的浓荫下往山上走了一段，我就来到了松田智众家，这里也几乎毫无变化。

松田家不像我家那么宽敞和有特色，它就是荒川典型的那种牢固、体面的房屋。独自耸立在那里，周围一圈木栅栏，跟邻居保持着恰到好处的距离。门口有一蓬杜鹃花，还有一根粗粗的柱子扎进地里，上面标着家族姓氏。我拉了门铃，一个我不认识的四十岁左右的女人过来应门。她把我领进客厅，拉开通向阳台的滑门，让阳光洒进来，使我瞥见了外面的花园。然后她离开了我，说：“松田先生马上就来。”

我是住在森山诚二家别墅里时第一次见到松田的，我和乌龟离开竹田公司后就去了那里。实际上，当松田那天第一次到别墅来时，我在那里已经生活了大约六年。那天上午一直下雨，我们一群人就聚在一间屋里喝酒、打牌，消磨时间。午饭后不久，我们刚要再打开一大瓶酒，突然听见院子里有个陌生的声音在大叫大嚷。

那声音粗壮、果断，我们都沉默下来，紧张地面面相觑。因为我们脑海里都闪过同样的念头——是警察来找我们麻烦了。这当然是个完全没有根据的想法，我们并没有犯什么罪过。而且，如果在酒吧里

聊天时有人对我们的生活方式提出质疑，我们任何一个人都会振振有词地把他驳回去。可是，此刻意外地听到那个果断的声音喊着“家里有人吗”，我们一下子却暴露了内心的负罪感，想到我们喝酒到深夜，经常一觉睡到中午，在一座衰败的别墅里过着毫无规律的生活。

过了一会儿，一个离纱门最近的同伴才打开了门，跟那个喊叫的人说了几句，然后转过身来说：“小野，一位先生想跟你说话。”

我走到外面的阳台上，看见一个年纪跟我差不多大的面容消瘦的年轻人，站在宽敞的四方院子中央。我一直很清楚地记得跟松田的第一次见面。雨已经停了，太阳出来了。他周围是一个个水洼，还有从别墅上方那些雪松上落下来的湿漉漉的树叶。他的衣着太时髦，不可能是警察。外套裁剪得有型有款，竖着高领子，帽子歪斜在眼睛上，显出一副俏皮的样子。我出来时，他正饶有兴趣地打量着周围，不知怎的，虽然是第一次见到他，但松田那副神态却使我立刻知道他骨子里的那股傲气。他看见了我，便匆匆地朝阳台走来。

“小野先生？”

我问他有何贵干。他转过身，又朝院子里扫了一眼，然后微笑着抬头看我。

“一个有趣的地方。这里以前肯定是一座豪宅，属于一个大地主。”

“不错。”

“小野先生，我叫松田智众。实际上我们有过通信。我在冈田——武田协会工作。”

如今冈田——武田协会已经不存在了——是占领军的众多牺牲品之一——但你很可能听说过它，或至少听说过战前每年一次它举行的画展。那个时候，冈田——武田展览是本城绘画界和版画界涌现的艺术家们想要取得公众认可的主要渠道。这个展览名望很高，后来一些年里，本城的大多数一流画家都拿出自己的最新大作，跟那些新秀的作品放在一起展出。就在松田来访的那个下午的几个星期前，冈田——武田协会曾写信跟我谈到这个展览的事。

“您的回信勾起了我的好奇心，小野先生，”松田说，“所以我想登门拜访，弄清是怎么回事。”

我冷冷地看着他，说：“我相信我在回信里已经把话讲得很清楚了。不过，非常感谢您的来访。”

他眼睛周围隐约浮现出一点笑意。“小野先生，”他说，“在我看来，您正在放弃一个提升自己名望的重要机会。因此请您告诉我，您一再表示不愿跟我们发生关系，这是您本人的想法吗？还是您的老师替您做了这个决定？”

“我当然要征求老师的意见。我最近那封信里表达的决定是正确的，对此我深信不疑。非常感谢您拨冗来访，但是很遗憾，我现在正忙着，不能请您进来。就祝您一切顺利吧。”

“等一等，小野先生，”松田说，笑容里嘲讽的意味更明显了，“不瞒您说，我并不关心展览的事。有资格参展的人多得是。小野先生，我之所以上这儿来，是因为我想见见您。”

“是吗？真不敢当。”

“是的。我是想说，我看了您的作品很受触动。我相信您是很有天分的。”

“您过奖了。我无疑是多亏老师的精心调教。”

“那是那是。好了，小野先生，我们忘掉这个展览吧。请您理解，我并不是只在冈田——武田协会当一个办事员。我也是真正热爱艺术的。我也有我的信念和热情。每当发现某人具有令我兴奋的才华时，我就觉得一定要做点什么才好。我很愿意跟您交换一些想法，小野先生。这些想法您也许从未有过，而我慎重地认为，它们肯定对您作为一个艺术家的发展大有好处。我现在就不多占用您的时间了。请允许我至少留下我的名片吧。”

他从钱包里掏出名片，放在阳台的边缘，然后很快地鞠了一躬，转身离开。在院子里刚走到一半，他又转过身，大声对我说：“请认真考虑一下我的请求，小野先生。我只是希望跟您交换一些想法，仅此而已。”

那已经是近三十年前的事了，我们都还年轻，雄心勃勃。昨天，松田看上去判若两人。他身体欠佳，病病恹恹，原本帅气高傲的面孔如今也变了形，下巴耷拉着，好像跟脸的上半部脱了节。刚才前来应门的那个女人搀他进屋，扶他坐了下来。屋里只剩下了我们两个人时，松田看着我说：

“你倒好像还挺硬朗的。至于我嘛，你看得出来，自从上次见面之后，我是一天不如一天啊。”

我表达了同情，并说他看上去没有那么糟糕。

“别想骗我了，小野，”他笑着说，“我知道我是越来越不中用了。看来也没有什么办法了。我只能等着瞧，看我的身体是逐渐恢复呢，还是越来越糟。好了，别再说这些令人不快的话题了。你又能来看我真是令人惊喜。我们上次分手好像并不愉快。”

“是吗？我可并没有意识到我们吵架了。”

“当然没有。干吗要吵架呢？我很高兴你又来看我。从我们上次见面到现在，肯定有三年了。”

“我想是的。我不是故意躲着你。我一段时间以来一直想过来看你，但总是这个事那个事的……”

“当然当然，”他说，“你的事多。请你千万原谅我没能去参加美智子的葬礼。我本来想写信表达我的歉意的。事实上，我是几天以后才知道这件事的。后来，不用说了，我自己的身体……”

“当然，当然。其实，我相信铺张隆重的葬礼会让她感到不安。而且，她肯定知道你是一直牵挂着她的。”

“我还记得你和美智子当初走到一起的情景，”他笑着说，兀自点着头，“那天我可真为你高兴啊，小野。”

“是的，”我说着也笑了起来，“你实际上就是我们的媒人。你那个叔叔根本就办不了事。”

“没错，”松田笑微微地说，“你一说我都想起来了。他太不好意思了，一说点什么、做点什么，脸就涨得通红。你还记得那次在柳町饭店商量婚事吗？”

我们都大笑起来。然后我说：

“你为我们做了很多。我都怀疑，如果没有你，事情还能不能办成。美智子总是对你心怀感激。”

“真残酷啊，”松田叹着气说，“战争把一切都毁了。我听说是一次疯狂的突袭。”

“是的。别人几乎都没有受伤。就像你说的，真残酷啊。”

“对不起，我又勾起令人痛苦的事情来了。”

“没关系。跟你在一起回忆她也是一种安慰。我又想起了她过去的样子。”

“是的。”

女人端上了茶。她把托盘放下时，松田对她说：“铃木小姐，这是我的一位老同事。我们过去关系很好。”

她转向我，鞠了一躬。

“铃木小姐既是我的管家，又是我的护士，”松田说，“我现在还活着多亏了她。”

铃木小姐笑了一声，又鞠了一躬，离开了。

她走了之后，我和松田默默地坐在那里，都望着铃木小姐刚才打开的纱门外面。从我坐的地方，可以看见一双草鞋放在阳台上晾着。但是花园本身我看不见多少，一时间，我很想站起来，走到外面的阳台去。可是想到松田肯定想陪我出去，而他的身体又不允许，我便坐着没动，心里猜想花园是不是还跟过去一样。在我的记忆里，松田家的花园虽然不大，但布置得很有品位：地上铺着柔软的青苔，种着几棵形状优美的小树，还有一方深深的池塘。跟松田一起坐在那里，我偶尔听见外面传来泼溅的水声，我正要问他是不是养了鲤鱼，他却说话了：

“我刚才说，我现在活着多亏了铃木小姐，这一点也不夸张。她不止一次起了关键的作用。你知道的，小野，虽然时运不济，但我好歹还有一些积蓄和财产，因此还能雇得起她。别的一些人就没有这么幸运了。我算不上富裕，但如果我知道某个老同事有了难处，还是会尽量帮助的。毕竟，我没有孩子，把钱留给谁呢？”

我笑了一声。“你还是过去的那个松田。喜欢直截了当。谢谢你了，可是我来的目的不是这个。我也好歹积攒了一些财产。”

“啊，这使我很高兴。你还记得中根吧？就是南帝国学院的校长？我还经常见到他。这些日子，他过得比乞丐强不了多少。当然啦，他表面上还撑着，实际上全靠借钱过活。”

“真可怕。”

“发生了一些很不公正的事情，”松田说，“不过，我们好歹保住了自己的财产。小野，你就更有理由庆幸了。你看上去还保住了你

的健康呢。”

“是的，”我说，“我确实有很多理由庆幸。”

外面的池塘里又传来了泼溅的水声，我想可能是小鸟在水边戏水。

“你花园的声音跟我那里很不一样，”我说，“只要听声音，我就知道我们是在城外。”

“是吗？我都不记得城市的声音是什么样的了。最近几年，我的世界就只有这么大。这座房子和这座花园。”

“实际上，我确实是来请你帮忙的。但不是你刚才暗示的那件事。”

“看得出来你不高兴了，”他点着头说，“还是过去的老样子。”

我们都笑了起来。然后他说：“那么，我有什么可以效劳的呢？”

“是这样的，”我说，“小女仙子，目前正在谈论婚事。”

“是吗？”

“不瞒你说，我有点替她担心。她已经二十六岁了。战争把她给耽误了。不然，她这会儿肯定早就嫁人了。”

“我还记得仙子小姐。那时候她还是个小姑娘。一眨眼都二十六岁了。正像你说的，战争把事情都耽误了，甚至把大好的前程都耽误了。”

“她去年差点儿就结婚了，”我说，“可是到了最后一刻，婚事没有谈成。既然聊到这个话题，我倒想问一句，去年有没有人为仙子的的事来找你？我没有冒昧的意思，只是……”

“一点也不冒昧，我完全理解。可是，没有，我没跟任何人说过话。去年的这个时候我病得很重。即使有侦探来找，铃木小姐也肯定会把他打发走的。”

我点点头，然后说道：“今年也许会有人来拜访你。”

“哦？那好，我肯定只会说你的好话。毕竟，我们曾经是很好的同事。”

“太感谢了。”

“你来看我让我很高兴，”他说，“不过牵涉到仙子小姐的婚事，这是完全没有必要的。也许我们分手的时候不是很愉快，但那样的事不应该成为我们之间的障碍。不用说，我肯定只会说你的好话。”

“对此我没有怀疑，”我说，“你一向是个宽厚仁慈的人。”

“不过，如果这件事让我们俩又聚到一起，我倒也蛮高兴。”

松田费力地探过身，开始给我们的茶杯里添水。“原谅我，小野，”他最后说道，“我觉得你好像还有什么心事。”

“是吗？”

“请原谅我这样冒昧地追问，但是铃木小姐很快就会进来，警告我应该回去休息了。恐怕我不能陪客人多呆，哪怕是过去的老同事。”

“当然，非常抱歉，我真是太不周到了。”

“别说傻话，小野。你暂时还不用离开。我的意思是，如果你有什么要紧的话想说就赶紧说吧。”突然，他放声大笑起来，说道：“天哪，你好像被我的无礼吓呆了。”

“没有没有。是我太不周到了。不过，事实上我只是来谈论我女儿的婚事的。”

“明白了。”

“不过，”我继续说，“我原本想把一些可能出现的情况都提一下。你知道，目前的婚事调查可能会比较微妙。希望你到时候谨慎地回答那些询问，我将感激不尽。”

“没问题。”他望着我，眼睛里闪过一丝笑意。“极度谨慎。”

“特别是，跟过去有关的事。”

“我已经说过了，”松田说，口气变得有点冷淡，“关于你的过去，我只会说好话的。”

“当然。”

松田继续看了我一会儿，然后叹了口气。

“这三年里，我几乎没有走出这座房子，”他说，“但我们国家发生的事情我还是有所耳闻。我意识到，如今那些人因为你我这样的人过去引以自豪的事情而谴责我们。我猜想你就是为这个而担心，小野。你大概认为，我赞扬你的那些话其实正是最好被人忘记的。”

“不是这样，”我赶紧说道，“你我都有许多值得骄傲的东西。不过牵涉到谈婚论嫁，还是应该谨慎行事。你让我放心了。我知道你会像过去一样公正地做出你的评价。”

“我会尽力的，”松田说，“不过，小野，有些事情我们应该引以自豪。千万别在意如今的人怎么说。过不了多久，也许再过几年，我们这样的人就能因为我们过去的努力而昂首挺胸。我只希望我能活着看到那一天。我希望看到我毕生的努力得到承认。”

“当然，我也是同样感受。至于婚事……”

“不用担心，”松田打断了我的话，“我会尽力谨慎回答的。”

我鞠了一躬。沉默了一会儿，他说道：

“小野，如果你对过去有这份担心，是不是最近一直在拜访以前的其他熟人？”

“实际上，你是我拜访的第一个。我们过去的老朋友，现在许多都不知道在哪里了。”

“黑田呢？我听说他就住在城里。”

“是吗？我一直没有跟他联系，自从……自从战争开始之后。”

“如果担心仙子小姐的终身大事，恐怕最好把黑田找出来，不管有多么费事。”

“是的。只是我不知道他在哪里。”

“明白了。但愿他们的侦探也跟我们一样找不到他。不过，有时候那些侦探是很有办法的。”

“是的。”

“小野，你的脸色真难看。你刚进来的时候看上去那么健康。这就是跟一个病人呆在一间屋里的结果。”

我笑了，说：“才不是呢。只是孩子的事确实让人操心。”

松田又叹了口气，说：“有时候别人对我说，我这辈子过得挺亏，没有结婚，没有孩子。可是我看看周围，似乎生孩子除了操心没有别的。”

“事实差不多就是这样。”

“不过，”他说，“想到可以把财产留给孩子，倒也是一个安慰。”

“是啊。”

几分钟后，正如松田预言的，铃木小姐进来了，对他说了几句话。松田无奈地笑着对我说：

“我的护士来接我了。当然啦，欢迎你留在这里，想呆多久就呆多久。请原谅我失陪了，小野。”

后来，我在终点站等汽车把我送上山、送回城时，想到松田的保证，“关于你的过去，我只会说好话的”，我内心感到一阵宽慰。其实，就算我不去登门拜访，我也有理由相信他会这么做。但是跟老同事重新建立联系总是好的。总之，昨天的荒川一行还是很有收获。

[\(1\)](#) 日本平安时代末期的武将。

[\(2\)](#) 日本战国末期与德川幕府前期的剑术家、兵法家。

[\(3\)](#) 好莱坞银幕硬汉。

一九四九年四月

一星期有三四个晚上，我仍然发现自己顺着那条小路，下山走到河边和那座小木桥，战前就住在这里的一些人依旧管那座桥叫“犹疑桥”。我们之所以还这么叫它，是因为就在不久之前，过了桥就进入了我们的逍遥地，你会看见那些所谓良心不安的人在那里犹豫不决地徘徊，不知道是寻欢作乐地度过一晚上呢，还是回家去陪老婆。不过，如果有时候看到我站在那座桥上，若有所思地倚着栏杆，我可不是在那儿犹豫。我只是喜欢在太阳落山时站在那里欣赏景色，观察周围正在发生的变化。

在我刚才过来的山脚下，已经出现了一簇簇新的楼房。顺着河岸往前看，一年前只有杂草和烂泥的地方，如今市政公司正在建设公寓楼，将来给员工们住。但是公寓楼离竣工还早着呢，太阳沉落到河面时，你会把工地当成城里某些地区仍能看见的轰炸后的废墟。

不过这样的废墟每星期都在减少。如今要想见到大片的废墟，大概要往北一直走到若宫区，或者去主街和春日町之间遭受轰炸最严重的地方。而我相信仅在一年以前，轰炸的废墟还是这个城里一种常见的风景，到处都是。比如，犹疑桥过去的那片地方——曾经是我们的逍遥地的所在——就在去年这个时候还是一片残砖碎瓦。现在每天都在施工，日新月异。川上夫人的酒馆外面，以前是寻欢作乐的人们摩肩接踵，现在正在建造一条宽宽的水泥马路，路的两边已经打好了一排排大型办公楼的地基。

不久前的一天晚上，川上夫人告诉我，市政公司提出花大价钱买下她的酒馆，其实我早就想到她早晚有一天会停业搬走的。

“我不知道该怎么办，”她对我说，“在这里呆了这么长时间，冷不丁走了心里真难受。我昨天夜里一直想着这件事没合眼。我对自己说，现在绅太郎也不来了，我只剩下先生这一个靠得住的主顾。我真的不知道该怎么办了。”

这些日子我确实成了她唯一的主顾。自从去年冬天发生了那件小事之后，绅太郎就没有在川上夫人的酒馆露过面——无疑是没有勇气来见我。这对川上夫人来说是够倒霉的，因为她跟这件事一点关系也没有。

那是去年冬天的一个晚上，我们像往常一样一起喝酒，绅太郎第一次向我提到他希望在—所新办的中学谋到一份教职。然后他继续向我透露，他实际上已经申请了几个这样的职位。绅太郎这么多年都是我的弟子，这样的事情自然没有理由不来征求我的意见。我完全明白，如今别的人——如他的雇主——在这类事上做他的担保人要合适得多。不过我承认，当我得知他竟然并没有征求我的意见就去申请教职时，还是觉得有点意外。去年冬天，新年过后不久的一天，绅太郎来访，我发现他站在我家门口，局促不安地吃吃发笑：“先生，我这样来叨扰您真是太失礼了。”我当时有一种类似如释重负的感觉，似乎事情正在回到更加熟悉的轨道上来。

在客厅里，我点了一个火盆，我们都坐在旁边烘手。我注意到绅太郎没有脱掉的外衣上有雪花在融化，便问他：

“又下雪了吗？”

“下得不大，先生。不像今天早晨那样。”

“很抱歉这屋里很冷。恐怕是家里最冷的屋子了。”

“没关系，先生。我自己屋里还要冷得多呢。”他愉快地微笑着，在炭火上搓着自己的双手。“能这样款待我已经太感谢了。先生这么多年一直很照顾我。先生对我的帮助，我真是数也数不完的。”

“哪里哪里，绅太郎。实际上，我有时候觉得我过去对你有些怠慢呢。虽然时间过去了那么久，但如果我有什么办法可以弥补我的疏忽的，请尽管告诉我。”

绅太郎笑了几声，继续搓着双手。“哎呀，先生，您这是说到哪里去了。我永远也数不尽先生对我的恩典。”

我注视了他一会儿，然后说道：“那么告诉我，绅太郎，我能为你做些什么呢？”

他神色惊讶地抬起头，又笑了几声。

“请原谅，先生。我在这里太舒服了，把我来这里叨扰您的目的都忘光了。”

他对我说，他很有希望得到他申请的东町中学的教职。据可靠消息，他相信对方很看好他。

“可是，先生，似乎有那么一两点，委员会好像仍然有些不大满意。”

“哦？”

“是的，先生。也许我应该实话实说。我提到的这一两点，是跟过去有关。”

“过去？”

“是的，先生。”说到这里，绅太郎不自然地笑了一声。然后，他鼓足勇气继续说道：“您必须知道，先生，我对您高山仰止。我从先生这里学到了这么多东西，我会继续为我跟先生的关系而感到骄傲。”

我点点头，等他往下说。

“是这样的，先生，如果您能亲自给委员会写一封信，证实一下我所说的某些话，我将感激不尽。”

“是什么话呢，绅太郎。”

绅太郎又吃吃笑了几声，然后又把双手拢到火盆上。

“只是为了让委员会满意，先生。没有别的。您可能记得，先生，我们曾经有过意见分歧。关于我在中国危机时候的作品。”

“中国危机？我好像不记得我们有过争吵，绅太郎。”

“请原谅，先生，也许我说得夸张了。绝对没有到争吵那么严重的程度。但我确实鲁莽地表达过自己的不同意见。也就是说，我反对过您对我作品的建议。”

“请原谅，绅太郎，我不记得你说的是什么事了。”

“这样的区区小事，自然不会留在先生的记忆里了。可是，在这个节骨眼儿上，这件事对我很重要呢。也许我提醒一下您就会想起来，我们那天晚上的聚会，庆祝小川先生订婚的聚会。就是那天晚上——我记得是在神原饭店——我大概有点喝高了，就不管不顾地表达了我对您的看法。”

“我对那天晚上的事依稀有点印象，但很难说记得多么清楚。可是，绅太郎，那样一点小小的分歧跟今天的事有什么关系呢？”

“请原谅，先生，是这样的，这件事有点非同小可。委员会必须把一些细节弄清楚。毕竟，还得让美国官方满意……”绅太郎不安地停住话头。然后又说：“我请求您，先生，仔细回想一下那天的小分歧。我当时虽然对于跟您学到那么多东西心怀感激——现在也是——”

但实际上，我并不总是赞同您的观点。是的，我可以并不夸张地说，我对当时我们学校的立场方向是有很强的保留意见的。比如，您也许还记得，虽然我最终听从您的指导画了中国危机的海报，但我心存怀疑，而且向您表明了我想法。”

“中国危机的海报，”我思忖着说，“是的，我想起了你的海报。当时国家处于紧要关头，应该停止犹豫，做出决策了。据我回忆，你画得很好，我们都为你的作品感到骄傲。”

“可是您也该记得，先生，我对您希望我画的作品一直疑虑重重。您仔细想想，那天晚上我在神原饭店公开表达了我的不同意见。请原谅，先生，拿这样一件小事来麻烦您。”

我记得自己沉默了一会儿。在这期间我肯定是站了起来，因为我记得接下来说话时我已经站在了屋子的另一头，在阳台的纱门前。

“你希望我给你的委员会写一封信，”我最后说道，“证明你没有受我影响。这就是你的请求。”

“不是那样的，先生。您误会了。能跟您的大名连在一起，我只有骄傲的份儿。只是关于中国危机海报的那件事，如果能让委员会相信……”

他又没有把话说完。我把纱门拉开一道细细的缝。凉风吹进了屋里，但我似乎并不介意。我从缝隙里越过阳台望着外面的花园。雪花慢慢地飘落。

“绅太郎，”我说，“你为什么不能勇敢地面对过去呢？当时你的海报活动使你名声大噪。赢得许多荣誉和称赞。也许当今世界对你的作品有不同的观点，但你不需要用谎言替自己开脱。”

“是的，先生，”绅太郎说，“我同意您的观点。可是回到手边的这件事上，如果您能就中国危机海报的事给委员会写封信，那我真是感激不尽了。实际上，我已经把委员会主席的姓名地址都拿来了。”

“绅太郎，请听我说。”

“先生，无论从哪方面来说，我对您的教诲和栽培都一直心怀感激。但是目前，我正处于事业的关键阶段。如果退休了，自然可以静思冥想。可是我生活在一个纷扰的世界上，要想得到这个职位，有一

两件事我必须处理好，其实从别的方面来说这个职位已经是我的了。先生，我请求您，考虑考虑我的处境吧。”

我没有回答，只是继续望着雪花静静地在我的花园飘落。身后，我听见绅太郎站了起来。

“这是姓名和地址，先生。如果可以的话，我就把它们留在这儿了。希望您有空的时候考虑考虑这件事，我实在是感激不尽。”

静默了片刻，我猜想他是等在那里，看我是不是回过身，让他不失体面地告辞。我继续凝望着我的花园。雪花虽然不停地飘落，但并没有在花草树枝上堆积。就在我注视的当儿，一股微风吹来，摇动了一根枫树枝，把大部分雪花都抖落下来。只有花园后面那盏石灯的顶上积了一层厚厚的白色。

我听见绅太郎说了声对不起，离开了房间。

也许，我那天对绅太郎有点过于苛刻了。但是，你如果知道了他来访几个星期前发生的事，就肯定能够理解我为什么对他想逃避责任的做法这样缺乏同情了。实际上，绅太郎来访正是在仙子相亲的几天之后。

整个去年秋天，仙子跟佐藤大郎的婚事进展得还算顺利。十月份时交换了照片，我们通过中间人京先生得知，那个年轻人很想跟仙子见面。仙子，当然啦，假装要考虑考虑，但那个时候，显然我女儿——已经芳龄二十六——经不起轻易错过佐藤大郎这样的对象了。

于是我告诉京先生我们同意相亲，最后大家敲定了十一月的一个日子，地点在春日公园饭店。你大概也认为春日公园饭店这些日子变得有些粗俗，因此我对这个选择有点不满意。可是京先生向我保证，到时候会定一个包间，并且说佐藤家的人很喜欢那里的饭菜，最后我也就同意了，虽然并没有什么热情。

京先生还说，未来的新郎一家把这次相亲看得很重——他的父母和弟弟都打算出席。他建议说，如果我们带一个亲戚或朋友去给仙子壮壮胆，那就再好不过。可是，节子离得那么远，我们能请谁来参加这样一个活动呢？也许，就是因为我们觉得在相亲时可能处于下风，再加上我们对地点的不满意，使仙子对这件事变得格外紧张。相亲之前的那几个星期真是度日如年。

经常，仙子下班一回家就说些这样的话：“爸爸，你一整天都做什么了？大概又跟平常一样闷闷不乐地闲逛吧？”其实，我压根儿没有“闷闷不乐地闲逛”，我是在为保证这门亲事有个好结果而忙碌呢。可是，我当时觉得不能把事情进展的细节告诉她，以免让她操心，所以就对我白天的活动含糊其辞，这样一来，她就更加含沙射影地攻击我了。现在回想起来，当时我们不把某些事情摊开来说，反而使仙子更加感到紧张，如果当时我开诚布公，倒可以避免我们那时候的许多令人不快的交流。

比如，我记得有一天下午，仙子回家时我正在花园里修剪灌木。她在阳台上客客气气地跟我打了声招呼，就又进屋去了。几分钟后，我坐在阳台上，望着外面的花园，欣赏我的劳动成果，这时仙子换了和服，端着茶出来了。她把托盘放在我们俩之间，坐了下来。我记得那是去年晚秋一个晴朗宜人的下午，柔和的阳光洒在树叶子上。她循着我的视线望去，说道：

“爸爸，您为什么把竹子剪成那样？现在看上去不协调了。”

“不协调？你这样认为吗？我倒觉得蛮协调的。你看，你应该考虑到嫩枝最茂盛的地方。”

“爸爸总是喜欢没事找事。我看他非把那片竹子也毁了不可。”

“把竹子也毁了不可？”我扭头望着女儿。“这是什么意思？难道我曾经把别的什么东西毁掉了？”

“杜鹃花一直没有恢复原先的模样。这都是爸爸整天没事可做的结果。爸爸只好没事找事，胡乱插手。”

“请原谅，仙子。我不太明白你的意思。你是说杜鹃花也不协调了吗？”

仙子又看着花园，叹了口气。“你应该随它们去的。”

“对不起，仙子，可是在我看来，竹子和杜鹃花都大有改观呢。我好像根本没有看到你所说的‘不协调’之处。”

“那么，爸爸一定是眼睛瞎了。或者，就是品位太差。”

“品位太差？那可真奇怪了。知道吗，仙子，别人可从来不把品位太差跟我的名字联系在一起。”

“唉，在我看来，爸爸，”她疲倦地说，“竹子就是不协调。你还把浓荫密布的感觉给破坏了。”

我坐在那里默默地望着花园。“是的，”过了一会儿，我终于点点头说道，“我想你大概是从那个角度看的，仙子。你从来就没有艺术家的直觉。你和节子都没有。健二就不一样。你们两个女儿都遗传了你妈妈。实际上，我记得你妈妈以前就说过这种不靠谱的评论。”

“难道爸爸在剪枝方面是个权威吗？对不起，我没有意识到。”

“我倒没有自诩为权威。只是我被批评为品位太差，感到有点吃惊。在我来说，这个批评倒很稀罕，仅此而已。”

“很好，爸爸，我相信这只是观点不同。”

“仙子，你母亲跟你很像。她总是毫不犹豫地想到什么就说什么。我想这倒是很坦诚。”

“我相信爸爸在这些事上最有发言权。这是无可争议的。”

“仙子，我记得你母亲有时甚至在我作画时也品头论足。她经常说出一个观点来，逗得我发笑。然后她自己也笑，然后承认对这些事一窍不通。”

“那么，我想，爸爸在他的绘画上也是一贯正确的喽？”

“仙子，讨论这件事毫无意义。而且，如果你不喜欢我在花园里做的改进，就尽管出去依你的想法把它恢复过来好了。”

“爸爸真是太好了。可是您说我什么时候做这件事呢？我可不像爸爸那样整天闲着。”

“你说什么呀，仙子？我今天很忙的。”我气呼呼地瞪了她一会儿，但她只顾看着花园，脸上显出疲倦的神情。我转过头，叹了口气。“可是讨论这件事毫无意义。至少你妈妈说了这样的话我们还可以一起笑笑。”

那个时候，我真想告诉她，我为了她实际上是怎样在尽心尽力。如果我这么说了，女儿肯定会感到吃惊——而且肯定会为刚才那样对待我而感到羞愧。其实，就在那天，我去了一趟柳川区，因为我发现黑田现在就住在那里。

寻找黑田的下落其实倒并不很难。上町学院的那位艺术教授，当我向他表示我没有不良动机后，他不仅立刻把地址告诉了我，而且跟我讲了我这位昔日的弟子这些年的遭遇。看来，黑田自从战争结束被释放以后，日子过得还不算糟糕。这个世界就是这样，他在监狱里的

那些年倒成了他有力的推荐证明，一些组织明确表示欢迎他，愿意给他排忧解难。因此他不费吹灰之力就找到工作——多半是给人辅导功课——并得到自己开始绘画所需要的材料。后来，去年初夏的时候，他在上町学院谋得了一个艺术教师的职位。

听说黑田的事业进展顺利，我感到很高兴——甚至很骄傲，也许这么说有点不妥。但是，尽管环境使师生关系变得疏远，但我毕竟以前做过他的老师，现在继续为他的事业发展感到骄傲也是情理之中的。

黑田住的地方不很富裕。我在那些房屋破败的小巷子里穿行了一段时间，然后来到一个像是工厂前院的水泥场地。没错，我看见场地那头停着几辆卡车，再往远处，铁丝网栅栏后面，一辆推土机正在挖土。我记得我当时站在那里，注视着那辆推土机，片刻之后才意识到面前这栋新的大楼实际上正是黑田的公寓楼。

我上到二楼，两个小男孩在走廊里来回骑三轮车。我找到了黑田的房门。我按了一遍铃，没有回音，但已经打定主意要见他一面，就继续按铃。

一个二十岁左右、满脸稚嫩的小伙子把门打开了。

“非常抱歉”——他非常真诚地说——“黑田先生现在不在家。我想，先生，您大概是他的一位同事吧？”

“也可以这么说吧。我有几件事想跟黑田先生商量一下。”

“那样的话，就劳驾您进屋等一等吧。我相信黑田先生很快就会回来的，如果没有见到您，他肯定会感到很遗憾。”

“但我实在不愿意给你添麻烦。”

“没关系，先生。请进来吧。”

那个单元房很小，像现在的许多住房一样，基本上没有什么过道，朝门里迈一小步就是榻榻米。屋里显得很整洁，墙上挂着许多绘画和挂件。充足的阳光从宽敞的窗户洒进来。我看出窗户外面是一个狭小的阳台。推土机的声音从外面传来。

“希望您没有什么急事，先生，”年轻人说着，递给我一个垫子，“黑田先生回来如果知道我没让您进屋，肯定不会原谅我的。请允许我给您沏点茶吧。”

“太感谢了，”我说，自己坐了下来，“你是黑田先生的学生吗？”

年轻人轻轻地笑了一声。“黑田先生很宽厚，把我称作他的弟子，实际上我怀疑自己是否配得上这样的称号。我叫恩池。黑田先生过去辅导过我，现在他虽然在学院担当重任，还是非常慷慨地继续关注我的作品。”

“是吗？”

外面传来推土机在工作的声音。一时间，年轻人手足无措地在一旁陪着，然后道了声抱歉，说：“请原谅，我去沏壶茶来。”

几分钟后，他回来了，我指着墙上的一幅画，说道：“黑田先生的风格一目了然。”

听了这话，年轻人笑了一声，尴尬地看着那幅画，双手仍然端着茶盘。然后他说：

“恐怕这幅画离黑田先生的标准还差得很远呢，先生。”

“这不是黑田先生的作品？”

“不好意思，先生，这是我的一件拙作。承蒙老师看得起，挂出来献丑。”

“是吗？不错，不错。”

我继续凝望着那幅画。年轻人把茶盘放在我身边的一张矮几上，自己坐了下来。

“这真的是你的作品吗？啊，我不得不说你很有天分。非常有天分。”

他尴尬地又笑了一声。“我有黑田先生做我的老师，真是三生有幸。恐怕我要学的东西还很多。”

“我还以为这肯定是黑田先生的画作呢。风格笔调有那种特征。”

年轻人笨手笨脚地摆弄着茶壶，似乎不知道怎么倒茶。我注视着他揭开壶盖往里面看。

“黑田先生总是告诉我，”他说，“我应该争取画出自己鲜明的风格。可是我实在太敬慕黑田先生的画风了，总是不由自主地模仿

他。”

“暂时模仿自己的老师倒不是一件坏事。那样能学到很多东西。可是在适当的时候，你会形成自己的观点和技法，因为你毫无疑问是一个很有天分的年轻人。是的，我相信你的前途不可限量。怪不得黑田先生这样关注你。”

“先生，黑田先生对我的恩情是说不完的。是啊，您也看见了，我现在甚至就住在他的公寓里呢。我已经在这里住了将近两个星期了。以前的房主把我赶了出来，多亏黑田先生向我伸出援助之手。他对我的恩情，先生，真是说也说不完的。”

“你说你被原来的房主赶出来了？”

“我向您保证，先生，”他轻笑了一声说，“我是付了房租的。可是，不管我怎样小心，还是免不了会把颜料洒在榻榻米上，之后房主就把我赶出来了。”

我们俩都笑了起来。然后我说：

“对不起，我不是不同情你的遭遇。只是我想起了我早年间也有过这样的烦恼。不过只要坚持不懈，你很快就能得到理想的条件的，我向你保证。”

我们俩又都笑了。

“先生，谢谢您的鼓励，”年轻人说着，开始倒茶，“我想黑田先生很快就会回来了。请您不要急着离开。黑田先生肯定非常愿意有机会感谢您所做的一切。”

我惊讶地看着他。“你认为黑田先生想感谢我？”

“请原谅，先生，我以为您是科登协会的。”

“科登协会？对不起，那是什么？”

年轻人看了我一眼，又变得像先前那样尴尬。“对不起，先生，我弄错了。我以为您是科登协会的。”

“很抱歉，我不是。我只是黑田先生的一个老熟人。”

“明白了。是以前的同事吗？”

“是的，我想你可以这么说，”我又抬头看着墙上年轻人的那幅作品，“确实不错，”我说，“很有天分。”我意识到年轻人正在仔

细地端详着我。最后，他说道：

“对不起，先生，我可以请问您的名字吗？”

“很抱歉，你肯定认为我很失礼。我叫小野。”

“明白了。”

年轻人站起来，走到窗口。我望着矮几上的两杯茶袅袅地冒着热气。片刻之后：

“黑田先生还要很久才能回来吗？”我问。

起初，我以为年轻人不会回答。但他眼睛望着窗外，头也不回地说：“如果他没有很快回来，您也许不应该再耽误您的其他事情。”

“如果你不介意的话，我就再等一会儿，既然已经大老远地过来了。”

“我会告诉黑田先生您来拜访过。也许他会给您写信。”

外面的走廊上，那些孩子似乎把三轮车撞在了离我们不远的墙上，互相大声嚷嚷。我突然想到，站在窗口的年轻人多么像一个生气的孩子。

“请原谅我这么说，恩池先生，”我说，“可是你年纪很轻。我和黑田先生刚认识的时候，你实际上还只是个小孩子。关于你不知道具体情况的一些事情，我希望你不要草率地得出结论。”

“具体情况？”他说，转过身来看着我。“请原谅，先生，可是您自己知道具体情况吗？您知道他受了多少苦吗？”

“大多数事情都不像表面上那么简单，恩池先生。你们这一代的年轻人看问题太简单了。不过，我们俩目前辩论这个问题似乎毫无意义。如果你不介意的话，我还是继续等黑田先生吧。”

“我倒建议，先生，您不要再耽误您别的事情了。黑田先生回来我会告诉他的。”此前年轻人一直保持着礼貌的语气，现在似乎再也克制不住自己了。“坦率地说，我很惊讶您有这样的勇气。竟然登门拜访，似乎您只是一位友好的访客。”

“我确实是一位友好的访客。如果让我来说，我觉得应该由黑田先生决定愿不愿意接见我。”

“先生，我对黑田先生非常了解，以我的判断，您最好还是离开吧。他不会愿意见您的。”

我叹了口气，站起身来。年轻人又转眼望着窗外。当我从衣帽架上取下我的帽子时，他又一次转向我。“具体情况，小野先生，”他说，声音有一种异样的镇静，“显然您对具体情况根本一无所知。不然您怎么胆敢上这儿来？举个例子，先生，我敢说您从来不知道黑田先生肩膀上的伤吧？他当时痛得要命，可是那些看守只顾图省事，忘了汇报伤情，他直到战争结束才得到治疗。当然啦，他们倒是没有忘记不时地给他一顿毒打。叛徒。他们是这样叫他的。叛徒。每天，从早到晚。可是我们现在都知道了谁才是真正的叛徒。”

我系好鞋带，朝门口走去。

“你太年轻了，恩池先生，还不了解这个复杂的世界。”

“我们现在都知道了谁才是真正的叛徒。他们许多人仍然逍遥法外。”

“你会告诉黑田先生我来过了，是吗？也许他会好心写信给我。祝你愉快，恩池先生。”

当然，我不会让年轻人的话严重影响我的情绪，可是，考虑到仙子的婚事，如果黑田真的像恩池说的那样对我的过去耿耿于怀，那倒是很令人不安。不管怎么说，我作为一个父亲，有责任把事情向前推进，不管多么令人不快，因此，那天下午回到家里，我给黑田写了封信，表达了跟他再次见面的愿望，并特别指出我有一件棘手而重要的事情要跟他商量。我这封信的语气是友好的、寻求和解的，几天后我收到他的冷淡而简慢的回信时，不免感到很失望。

“我没有理由相信我们的见面会产生什么有价值的结果，”我昔日的学生这样写道，“感谢您那天亲自来访，但我觉得不应该再麻烦您这样受累了。”

必须承认，黑田先生的做法给我的心情笼罩了一丝阴影。它无疑使我对仙子的婚事不再那么乐观了。虽然像我前面说的，我没有告诉女儿我在努力争取跟黑田见面，但她无疑感觉到事情进展不太顺利，这自然使她的心情更加焦虑。

到了相亲的那天，女儿看上去太紧张了，我开始担心她那天晚上会给佐藤一家留下不好的印象——他们肯定会表现得镇定自若、游刃

有余。到了下午四五点钟，我觉得应该想办法让仙子的心情轻松起来，因此，在她走过我坐着看报纸的餐厅时，我对她说：

“真令人吃惊啊，仙子，你竟然整天什么也不做，只顾打扮自己。我还以为你是要去参加婚礼呢。”

“爸爸就喜欢嘲笑别人，自己不好好地做准备。”她反驳道。

“我只需要一点时间就准备好了，”我笑着说，“你一整天都这样，真是很反常呢。”

“是爸爸自己有问题。他太骄傲了，不肯为这样的事情好好做准备。”

我吃惊地抬头看着她。“你这是什么意思？‘太骄傲’？你想说什么呢，仙子？”

“我的终身大事不过是区区小事，如果爸爸不愿意为此小题大做，也是完全可以理解的。毕竟，爸爸的报纸还没有看完呢。”

“可是你在改变话题。你刚才说我‘太骄傲’，为什么不说得详细一点呢？”

“我只希望到时候爸爸表现得体面一点。”她说，然后气冲冲地离开了房间。

在那些艰难的日子里，这样的情况经常出现，我总是不由自主地想起前一年她跟三宅家商量亲事时的态度，跟现在形成多么鲜明的对比。那时候，她非常放松，甚至有点沾沾自喜。当然啦，她对三宅次郎很熟悉。我敢肯定她一直坚信他们俩会结婚，把两家之间的议事只当成是繁琐的程序。所以也难怪她后来遭受的打击那么惨重，但我觉得她没必要像那天下午那样含沙射影。不管怎么说，那小小的口角并没有帮助我们端正对这次相亲的态度，反而导致了那天晚上在春日公园饭店的情形。

许多年来，春日公园饭店一直是城里最令人愉快的西式风格饭店。可是最近，管理部门开始以一种比较粗俗的风格装饰房间——无疑是想让经常光顾这里的美国客人觉得它体现了“日本”魅力。不过，京先生预定的那个房间还是非常令人愉悦的，其特点是通过宽敞的窗户能看到春日山的西山坡，整个城市的万家灯火也尽收眼底。房间里主要是一张大大的圆桌和几把高背椅，一面墙上挂了一幅画，我认出是我战前认识的艺术家的作品。

大概是这种场合气氛有点紧张，我酒喝得快了一点，那天晚上的事情我有点记不太清了。我只记得我对佐藤大郎——我要当成女婿来看的那个年轻人——立刻产生了好感。他不仅看上去有学问、有责任心，而且具有我在他父亲身上看到并欣赏的那种气定神闲的风度。我和仙子刚到时，佐藤大郎镇定自若、但很有礼貌地迎接了我们，使我立刻想到了多年前在同样情形下给我留下深刻印象的年轻人——也就是说，当时在帝国饭店跟节子相亲的池田。当时，我考虑到佐藤大郎的温文尔雅肯定会随着时间消失，就像池田那样。当然啦，我希望佐藤大郎永远不必忍受池田的那种惨痛经历。

至于佐藤博士，他看上去依然是那么指挥若定。虽然在那个晚上之前我们并没有被正式介绍，但我和佐藤先生实际上已经认识多年，出于对彼此名望的尊敬，我们在街上遇到都会打招呼。他妻子是一位五十多岁、相貌不俗的女人，我们碰到也会问候一声，除此之外就没有什么交流了。看得出来，她和她丈夫一样，也是一个很有风度，善于处理任何尴尬局面的人。佐藤一家唯一没有给我留下好感的，是他们的小儿子光男，我估摸他大约是二十出头。

现在再来回忆那个晚上，我相信我打第一眼起就对年轻的光男产生了怀疑。但我不能肯定最初是什么引起了我的警觉——也许他使我想起了我在黑田的公寓房里遇见的年轻的恩池。总之，大家开始吃饭时，我发现自己对这些怀疑越来越确定。虽然这时候光男的一举一动都合乎礼仪，但是偶尔瞥见他看我的眼神，或者他隔着桌子把碗递给我时的神情，都使我感觉到他的敌意和谴责。

我们用餐几分钟后，我突然起了一个念头：实际上光男的态度跟他家里的其他人没什么不同——只是他掩饰的功夫还没有那么高明。从那以后，我经常朝光男看，似乎他才能最清楚地表明佐藤一家的真实想法。可是，光男坐在桌子那头，离我有一段距离，而且坐在他旁边的京先生似乎一直在跟他长谈，因此在那个阶段我跟光男没能正经谈上几句话。

“仙子小姐，我们听说你很喜欢弹钢琴。”我记得佐藤夫人这样说。

仙子轻轻笑了一声，说：“我没有怎么练琴。”

“我年轻的时候也弹钢琴，”佐藤夫人说，“可是现在也不练琴了。我们女人的时间太少，没工夫追求这些事情，你说是不是？”

“是啊。”我女儿局促不安地说。

“我本人对音乐的鉴赏能力很差，”佐藤大郎插进来说，同时目光坚定地盯着仙子，“实际上，我妈妈经常骂我是音盲。所以，我对自己的品位一点信心也没有，只好去问她应该欣赏哪些作曲家。”

“胡说什么呀。”佐藤夫人说。

“你知道吗，仙子小姐，”大郎继续说，“有一次我弄到一套巴赫钢琴协奏曲的唱片，我非常喜欢，可妈妈总是批评它，骂我品位太差。我的观点当然斗不过这位母亲大人喽。结果，我现在几乎不听巴赫了。不过仙子小姐，也许你能救我一把。你喜欢巴赫吗？”

“巴赫？”一时间我女儿显得有些茫然。然后她微微一笑，说：“喜欢啊，非常喜欢。”

“啊，”佐藤一郎得意地说，“现在母亲需要重新考虑考虑了。”

“别听我儿子胡说八道，仙子小姐。我从来没有从整体上批评过巴赫的作品。可是你跟我说说，就钢琴来说，肖邦是不是更有表现力？”

“是的。”仙子说。

在那天晚上早先时候，我女儿的回答都是这么拘谨僵硬。必须承认，这也在我的意料之中。在家人或亲密朋友中间，仙子说起话来口无遮拦，经常滔滔不绝，妙语连珠。可是我知道，在比较正式场合，她常常不知道该说什么好，所以给人的印象是一个腼腆的姑娘。相亲的时候出现这种情况，正是我所担心的。因为我非常清楚——佐藤夫人的姿态似乎也证实了这点——佐藤家不是那种旧式家庭，喜欢家里的女性成员沉默寡言，贤淑稳重。我已经预料到这点，所以在准备这次相亲时，一再强调我的观点，叫仙子尽量展示她活泼、机智的特性。女儿也完全赞成这样的策略，并信誓旦旦地表示要表现得坦率、自然，我甚至担心她会表现得过了头。此时，我注视着仙子努力用简单、顺从的语言回答佐藤家人的问题，目光几乎从不离开她的饭碗，我可以想象到她内心的痛苦。

撇开仙子的问题，饭桌上的谈话似乎倒是很轻松流畅。特别是佐藤博士，非常擅长制造轻松的气氛，如果不是时时意识到年轻的光男在凝视我，我可能就会忘记这个场合有多么重要，从而放松警惕了。我记得饭桌上佐藤博士舒舒服服地靠在椅背上，说道：

“最近市中心的游行好像越来越多了。您知道吗，小野先生，今天下午我乘车，看见一个男人的额头上有一道很大的伤。他坐在我旁边，于是我很自然地问他要不要紧，并建议他去医院看看。结果你知道怎么着，他刚去看过医生，现在决定重新加入游行的队伍。你对这件事怎么看，小野先生？”

佐藤先生的语气很随意，但一时间我产生了一个印象，似乎整个桌上的人——包括仙子——都停下筷子听我的回答。当然啦，很有可能我过于敏感了。但我清楚地记得，我的目光扫向年轻的光男时，他正以一种不同寻常的专注凝视着我。

“有人受伤，确实令人遗憾，”我说。“大家的情绪无疑都很激动。”

“我相信您是对的，小野先生，”佐藤夫人插言道，“情绪确实很激动，但现在人们似乎做得太过分了。这么多人受伤。但我丈夫说他们的出发点是好的。我真不明白他是什么意思。”

我以为佐藤博士会做出回答，但饭桌上又是一片静默，大家似乎再一次把注意力集中到我身上。

“是啊，正如您所说的，”我说，“这么多人受伤确实太遗憾了。”

“我太太总是歪曲我的意思，这次也不例外，小野先生，”佐藤博士说，“我从没有说过这样的争斗是一件好事。但我一直在使我太太相信，这些事除了有人受伤以外，还有另外的意义。当然啦，我们并不希望看到有人受伤。但是其中蕴含的精神——人们觉得需要公开而强烈地表达自己的观点——这精神是一种健康的东西，您不这么认为吗，小野先生？”

也许我稍微迟疑了一下，没等我回答，佐藤太郎说话了。

“可是父亲，现在事情毫无疑问已经失控。民主是一件好事，但并不意味着市民一有不同意见就有权出来搞暴动。在这方面，我们日本人表现得还像小孩子。我们还需要学习怎样把握民主的责任。”

“这里的情况倒很特别，”佐藤博士大笑着说，“看来至少在这个问题上，父亲倒比儿子开明得多。太郎也许是对的。目前，我们国家就像一个刚刚学习走路和跑步的小男孩。但是我说，其内在的精神是健康的。就像看着一个正在成长的孩子蹒跚学步，擦伤了膝盖。我

们不会希望去阻止他，把他锁在屋里的。您不这么认为吗，小野先生？或者，像我太太和儿子指出的那样，是我过于开明了？”

也许我又产生错觉了——正如我说的，我喝酒喝得太快了一点——我总觉得佐藤所说的意见分歧，其实并没有什么不一致的地方。与此同时，我注意到年轻的光男又在注视着我了。

“是啊，”我说，“但愿别再有人受伤了。”

我记得这个时候，佐藤太郎改变了话题，问仙子对城里新开的一家百货商店怎么看，一时间，谈话转向了一些无关紧要的事情。

这样的场合对任何一个准新娘来说都不容易——让一个年轻姑娘在经受审视的同时，还要做出对她未来幸福如此至关重要的判断，实在是有点不公平——但是必须承认，我没有想到仙子承受压力的能力这么差。随着夜晚一点点过去，她的自信心似乎越来越萎缩了，最后除了“是”和“不是”，再也说不出别的话来。我看得出，佐藤太郎正在努力让仙子放松下来，但是在这种场合，他又不能表现得太迫切，结果，他一次次试图打开一个幽默的话题，餐桌上一次次地陷入尴尬的冷场。我注视着女儿的痛苦，又一次想到前一年的相亲过程是多么截然不同。当时节子正好过来探亲，也去参加了，给妹妹一些精神上的支持，但那天晚上仙子似乎并不需要别人。我还记得，我看到仙子和三宅次郎隔着餐桌调皮地眉来眼去，似乎在嘲笑相亲的繁文缛节，我当时还觉得颇为恼火呢。

“您记得吧，小野先生，”佐藤博士说，“上次我们见面时，发现我们有一个共同的熟人，那位黑田先生。”

这时候晚餐已经接近尾声。

“是啊，没错。”我说。

“我的这个儿子”——佐藤博士指着年轻的光男，之前我还没有跟他交谈过一句话——“目前正在上町学院读书，也就是黑田先生任教的那所学校。”

“是吗？”我转向年轻人。“那么你跟黑田先生很熟悉了？”

“不太熟悉，”年轻人说，“非常遗憾，我在艺术方面没有天分，跟艺术教师的接触非常有限。”

“黑田先生的口碑不错，是不是，光男？”佐藤博士插言道。

“是的。”

“小野先生曾经跟黑田先生很熟。你知道吗？”

“知道，我听说过。”光男说。

这时，佐藤太郎又一次改变了话题：

“你知道吗，仙子小姐，对于我没有音乐细胞，我一向有我的一套理论。我小的时候，爸爸妈妈总是不把钢琴的音调准。在我人格形成最关键的那些年里，仙子小姐，我每天被迫听妈妈在一架音色不准的钢琴上练琴。我的问题可能就出在这里，你认为呢？”

“是的。”仙子说，又低头看着食物。

“是呀，我一向咬定这都是妈妈的错，可是这么些年来，她总是因为我没有音乐天分而惩罚我。我一直受到极不公正的待遇，仙子小姐，你说是不是？”

仙子笑了一下，什么也没说。

这时，一直默不作声的京先生似乎开始讲述他的一件有趣的轶事。据仙子回忆，他的故事刚讲到一半，我就打断了他，转向年轻佐藤光男，说道：

“黑田先生肯定跟你谈起过我。”

光男满脸困惑地抬起头。

“谈起过您，先生？”他迟疑地说。“我想他肯定经常谈到您，但我跟黑田先生不是很熟，所以……”他没有把话说完，求助地望着他的父母。

“我相信，”佐藤博士说，从容不迫的语气令我惊异，“黑田先生很清楚地记得小野先生。”

“恐怕黑田先生对我的评价不会特别高。”我说，又看着光男。

年轻人又一次尴尬地把目光转向他的父母。这次说话的是佐藤夫人：

“恰恰相反，我相信他对您的评价是非常高的，小野先生。”

“佐藤夫人，”我说，声音可能略高了一点，“有些人认为我的事业产生了负面影响。这种影响现在最好被抹去或遗忘。我对这种观点并不是浑然不知。我想，黑田先生就是持有这种观点的人。”

“是吗？”也许我是弄错了，但我总觉得佐藤博士注视我的目光很像老师在等一个学生背诵一篇课文。

“是的。至于我自己，我还没有做好心理准备，接受这样一种观点。”

“我想您肯定是对自己过于苛刻了，小野先生。”佐藤大郎说，但我立刻接着说道：

“有些人会说，我这样的人应该为我们这个民族遭遇的可怕事件负责。就我个人而言，我毫不讳言我犯过不少错误。我承认我做的许多事情对我们的民族极其有害，我承认在那种最后给我们人民带来数不清的痛苦的影响当中，也有我的一份。这我承认。您看到了吧，佐藤博士，我毫不掩饰地承认。”

佐藤博士探身向前，脸上是一副困惑的表情。

“请原谅，小野先生，”他说，“您是说您对自己的工作不满意？对您的绘画？”

“我的绘画。我的教学。您看到了，佐藤博士，我毫不掩饰地承认这一点。我只能说，当时我是凭着坚定的信念做事的。我满心相信我是在为我的同胞们谋福利。可是您看到了，我现在坦然承认我错了。”

“我相信您对自己太苛刻了，小野先生。”佐藤大郎语气欢快地说。然后他转向仙子，说道：“告诉我，仙子小姐，你爸爸总是对自己这样严厉吗？”

我意识到仙子刚才一直惊愕地看着我。也许就是因为这样，太郎的问题令她猝不及防，那天晚上她第一次表现出了平常口无遮拦的性格。

“爸爸一点儿也不严厉。我不得不对他严厉一点。不然的话，他天天都不肯起床吃早饭。”

“是吗？”佐藤大郎说，看到仙子终于不再那么拘谨地回答问题，他高兴极了。“我爸爸起床也很晚。人们都说，年纪大的人睡觉没有我们多，可是从我们的经验来看，好像并不是这样呢。”

仙子笑了起来，说：“大概只是爸爸这样吧。我相信佐藤夫人起床一点儿也不困难。”

“好事情，”佐藤博士对我说，“我们还没有出门，他们就开始拿我们打趣了。”

我不想声称整个婚事到这时候算是尘埃落定，但是我确实感到，直到这一刻，这场尴尬的、有可能一败涂地的相亲，才变成了一个愉快而成功的夜晚。饭后，我们喝茶聊天，等到叫出租车的时候，大家都觉得彼此相处融洽。最关键的是，佐藤太郎和仙子虽然还保持着必要的距离，但显然已经互相产生了好感。

当然啦，我必须承认那天晚上某些时候令我感到痛苦，同时我也承认，如果不是情势所迫，我不会那样毫不犹豫地做出那种关于过去的申明。说到这里，我不得不说一句，任何一个看重自己尊严的人，却希望长久地回避自己过去所做事物的责任，这是我很难以理解的。承认自己人生中所犯的过错，并不总是容易的事，但却能获得一种满足和尊严。不管怎么说，怀着信念所犯的过错，并没有什么可羞愧的。而不愿或不能承认这些过错，才是最丢脸的事。

就拿绅太郎来说吧——看起来他似乎保住了他朝思暮想的那份教职。在我看来，如果绅太郎有勇气坦诚地承认他过去所做的事，他现在会更加快乐。我想，新年后不久的那天下午他在我这里受到冷遇之后，他在中国危机海报的问题上可能会换一种策略去应付他的那个委员会。但我猜想绅太郎还是坚持用虚伪的方式追求他的目标。是的，我现在逐渐相信，绅太郎的天性中始终存在着狡诈的、不可告人的一面，只是我过去没有真正认识到罢了。

“知道吗，欧巴桑，”不久前的一天晚上，我在酒馆里对川上夫人说，“我怀疑绅太郎绝不是他让我们相信的那种超凡脱俗的人。他只是通过那种方式在别人面前获得优越感，让自己为所欲为。像绅太郎这样的人，如果他们不想做什么事，就会装出一副束手无策的样子，得到别人的原谅。”

“哎哟，先生。”川上夫人不满地看了我一眼，可以理解，她不愿把一个这么长时间的老主顾往坏处想。

“举个例子，欧巴桑，”我继续说道，“想想他是怎么狡猾地躲避了战争吧。别人都在流血牺牲的时候，绅太郎只是躲在他那间小工作室里继续画画，似乎什么事儿也没有。”

“可是先生，绅太郎君的一条腿不好……”

“不管腿好不好，每个人都要响应召唤。当然啦，他们最后找到了他，可是战争几天之内就结束了。知道吗，欧巴桑，绅太郎有一次告诉我，因为战争的缘故，他两个星期没有工作。这就是绅太郎为战争付出的代价。相信我吧，欧巴桑，我们的老朋友在他孩子气的外表下面，还隐藏着很多东西呢。”

“唉，不管怎么说，”川上夫人疲惫地说，“看样子他再也不会回到这里来了。”

“是的，欧巴桑。似乎你永远失去他了。”

川上夫人手里燃着一根香烟，身子靠在柜台边，环顾着她小小的酒馆。像往常一样，酒馆里只有我们两个人。夕阳透过窗户上的纱网照进来，使得屋里比天黑后川上夫人打开灯盏时显得更加老旧，灰尘仆仆。外面，那些人还在干活。在过去的半个小时里，什么地方一直回响着锤子的声音，一辆卡车开动，或电钻响起，经常震得整个酒馆都在晃动。那个夏季的夜晚，我循着川上夫人的目光在屋里扫视，突然想到，在市政公司此刻在我们周围建造的水泥大厦中间，她的小酒馆将会显得多么渺小、破旧、格格不入啊。于是，我对川上夫人说：

“知道吗，欧巴桑，你真的必须认真考虑一下接受这份报价，搬到别的地方去了。这是个难得的机会。”

“可是我在这里这么长时间了。”她说，一边挥手掸开她吐出的烟雾。

“你可以开一家新的酒馆呀，欧巴桑。在板桥区，甚至在主街上。你放心，我每次路过肯定都会进去的。”

川上夫人沉默了片刻，似乎在外面工人干活的声音中倾听着什么。然后，她脸上浮现出笑容，说道：“这里曾经是一个那么繁华的地区。您还记得吗，先生？”

我也朝她微笑，但什么也没说。当然，过去这个地方是很好的。我们都过得很开心，说说笑笑中弥漫着那种精神，还有那些争论也总是发自内心，无比真诚。可是，那股精神也许并不总是有益的。那个小世界就像现在的许多事情一样，已经消失，一去不复返了。那天晚上，我很想把这些话都对川上夫人说一说，又觉得这样做不明智。显然，老街在她的心里非常珍贵——她的许多生活和精力都倾注在这里——她不愿承认这里已经永远消失，我自然是理解的。

一九四九年十一月

我第一次见到佐藤博士的情景仍然记忆犹新，而且我相信我的记忆没有丝毫偏差。现在说起来准有十六年了，是我搬进那座房子之后的第二天。我记得那是夏季一个阳光灿烂的日子，我正在外面整理栅栏，或者是往门上钉什么东西，一边跟路过的新邻居们打着招呼。我背对小路忙了一会儿，突然意识到有人站在我身后，似乎在注视着我干活。我转过身，看见一个年纪跟我相仿的男人饶有兴趣地打量着新刻在门柱上的我的名牌。

“这么说，您是小野先生，”他说，“哎呀，真是不胜荣幸。像您这样地位的人住到我们这里，真是莫大的荣幸。我个人也跟艺术界沾点儿边。我叫佐藤，是京都大学的。”

“佐藤博士？哎呀，久仰大名，幸会幸会。”

我记得那天我们在我家门外聊了一段时间，还清楚地记得当时佐藤博士几次提及我的作品和事业。我记得他继续往山下走去时，又一次重复类似的话：“像您这样有身份的人住到我们这里，真是莫大的荣幸，小野先生。”

从那以后，我和佐藤博士每次相遇都会恭敬地互致问候。当然，自从第一次交谈之后，我们很少停下来深聊，直到最近的婚事把我们的关系拉得更近。可是我对初次相逢的记忆——佐藤博士认出门牌上我的名字——足以使我相信我的长女节子至少在上个月她试图暗示的几件事上是大错特错了。比如，佐藤博士不可能以前对我一无所知，直到去年开始商议婚事才不得不弄清我的身份。

今年节子来的时间很短，而且住在仙子和大郎在泉町的新家里，所以那天上午我跟她在河边公园里散步，是跟她好好谈谈的唯一机会。事后，我在脑子里反复思量我们的谈话，我觉得她那天对我说的一些话特别令人恼火，我认为我的感觉不是毫无道理。

不过，我当时不可能细想节子的话，我记得我心情很好，因为又能跟女儿在一起而高兴，而且很长时间没有在河边公园散步了，走在里面感觉心旷神怡。那是一个多月前的事，你也记得，天气还很晴朗，但树叶已经开始凋零。我和节子走在横贯公园中央的林荫大道

上，我们说好要在大正天皇的雕像旁边跟仙子和一郎碰头，现在时间还早，我们放慢脚步，时不时地停下来欣赏秋天的景色。

也许你同意我的观点：河边公园是我们城市公园里最令人满意的。在河边区拥挤的大街小巷里穿行一段时间后，发现自己来到浓荫密布的宽敞的林间大道上，肯定会感到神清气爽。如果你刚来到这座城市，不熟悉河边公园的历史，我也许应该解释一下我为什么一直对这个公园情有独钟。

在公园里，你肯定记得经过一片片孤立的草地，比学校操场大不了多少，你在林荫大道漫步时，能透过树丛看见它们。似乎公园的设计师脑子乱了，让一些计划半途而废。事实差不多就是这样。几年前，杉村明——他死后不久我买下了他的房子——关于河边公园有一些宏伟的计划。我发现杉村明的名字最近很少听见了，但不要忘记就在不久以前，他还是城里无可争议的最有影响的人物之一。我听说他曾经拥有四栋房子，你走在这个城里，隔不了多久就会碰到属于杉村或跟他密切相关的企业。后来，在一九二〇年或一九二一年，处在事业巅峰期的杉村决定拿出他的大量财富和资本，投资一个能让他在城市 and 市民心中永远留下烙印的计划。他打算改造河边公园——当时那是一个毫无生趣、鲜有人光顾的地方——使它成为城市的文化中心。不仅公园面积要扩大，让人们可以在更多的自然环境中放松心情，而且公园里还将有几个闪亮夺目的文化中心——自然科学博物馆，高桥学校的新歌舞伎剧场，他们在白滨路上的那个剧场最近被火烧了，一个欧式风格的演奏大厅，还有，说来奇怪，一个专埋城里死猫死狗的公墓。我不记得还有什么计划了，但那个蓝图无疑是非常宏伟的。杉村希望不仅改变河边区，而且改变整个城市的文化格局，增加北岸的文化分量。正如我前面说的，他试图在城市的风格中永远留下他的印记。

改造公园的计划正在进行，突然遇到了严重的财政困难。我不清楚具体的细节，但结果是杉村的那些“文化中心”始终没有建成。杉村自己损失了一大笔钱，再也没有恢复他先前的影响力。战后，河边公园直接划归市政府管辖，建了这些林荫大道。杉村的宏伟计划剩下的就是那一片片空荡荡的草地，那是他计划中的展览馆和剧场所在的地方。

我前面可能已经说过，在我购买杉村最后一栋房子时我跟他家人的交往，并没有特别地使我想起那个人来。不过，最近我每次在河边公园漫步，都会想起杉村和他的那些规划，我承认我开始对此人产生

了某种敬仰之情。是的，一个人渴望超越平凡，不甘于庸庸碌碌，无疑是值得敬仰的，尽管他最后失败了，并因为雄心壮志而损失了一笔财产。而且我相信，杉村死的时候并非不快乐。因为他的失败完全不同于大多数人的没有尊严的失败，杉村这样的人对此肯定心知肚明。如果一个人是在别人根本没有勇气或意愿去尝试的事情上失败了，那么他从这个角度回顾自己的一生时，肯定会感到一种安慰，一种发自内心的欣慰。

但我并不想把思绪停留在杉村身上。我前面说到，我那天正跟节子在河边公园漫步，心情很好，虽然她的有些话不太入耳——我是一段时间之后回想起来才完全领会这些话的意义的。当时，在前面不远的地方，路中央耸立着大正天皇的雕像，我们约好要在这里跟仙子和一郎碰头的，因此我和节子的谈话只好告一段落。我把目光投向雕像周围的那些板凳，突然听见一个小男孩的声音喊道：“外公来了！”

一郎朝我跑来，双臂张开，似乎想跟我拥抱。可是跑到我跟前，他似乎又克制住了自己，板起面孔，露出一副严肃的神情，伸出手来要跟我握手。

“你好。”他说，一副煞有介事的样子。

“啊，一郎，你真的长成一个男子汉了。你现在多大了？”

“应该是八岁了。请这边走，外公。我有几件事要跟您商量。”

我和他妈妈跟着他来到仙子坐的那个板凳旁。我的小女儿穿着一件我以前从没见过的鲜艳的裙子。

“你看上去很喜庆，仙子，”我对她说，“似乎闺女一过门，就马上变得认不出来了。”

“女人没必要一结婚就穿得灰头土脸。”仙子快言快语地回答，但听了我的话似乎还是蛮开心的。

我记得，我们都在大正天皇的雕像下坐了一会儿，聊着闲话。之所以约好在公园碰面，是因为两个女儿想要一起去买布料，我就答应带一郎到一家百货商店吃午饭，下午再带他到市中心转转。一郎巴不得赶紧离开，我们坐在那里说话时，他一个劲儿地捅我的胳膊，说：

“外公，让女人自己聊天好了。我们还有事情要做呢。”

我和外孙来到百货商店时，已经稍稍过了平常吃午饭的时间，饭店里不那么拥挤了。一郎在橱窗里陈列的各种菜式中慢慢挑选，有一

次还转过脸来对我说：

“外公，你知道我现在最喜欢吃什么吗？”

“嗯，我不知道，一郎。烤热饼？冰激凌？”

“是菠菜！菠菜给你力量！”他挺起胸膛，伸缩着二头肌。

“明白了。那么，这里的儿童套餐有一些菠菜。”

“儿童套餐是给小孩子吃的。”

“也许吧，但是很好吃。外公自己也想要一份呢。”

“好吧，那我也要儿童套餐，陪陪外公。叫那个人多给我盛些菠菜。”

“没问题，一郎。”

“外公，你要尽量多吃菠菜，菠菜给你力量。”

一郎挑选了一张紧挨着大窗户的桌子，等餐的时候，他不停地把脸贴在玻璃上，观察着四层楼下面的繁忙的主街道。自从一年多前节子上我家来过之后，我就没有见过一郎——他因为染病没来参加仙子的婚礼——我很惊讶他这段时间长得这么快。不仅个头高了许多，整个举手投足都变得稳重，不那么孩子气了。尤其是他的眼睛，目光似乎比以前成熟多了。

那天，我注视着一郎把脸贴在玻璃上，观察下面的街道时，看出他跟他父亲长得越来越像了。他身上也有节子的特征，主要是神情和细微的脸部动作。我又一次惊奇地发现，一郎跟我儿子健二当年的模样何其相似。我承认，看到孩子们继承了家里其他人的这些特征，我感到一种莫名的欣慰，我希望我的外孙能把这些特征一直保留到他成年。

当然，我们并不是只在孩童时期才接受这些细微的遗传。我们在成年初期十分敬仰的某位老师或导师留下的印迹，会在我们开始重新评价甚至排斥他的教诲之后，仍然长期存在。某些特征，就像当年那种影响的影子一样，一直陪伴着我们的一生。比如我发现，我的某些举止特征——我解释什么事情时的手势，我想表达讽刺或烦躁时的语气变化，甚至我喜欢使用的、别人以为是我自己发明的整句话语——我发现所有这些特征，我最初都是从我的老师毛利先生那里学来的。也许我可以不夸张地说一句：我自己的许多学生也会从我这里学到这些细微的特征。而且我还希望，尽管他们或许会重新评估跟我学习的

那些年，但大多数人都会永远为自己学到的东西而心怀感激。从我自己来说，我的老师森山诚二，我们总是叫他“毛利君”，尽管有许多显而易见的缺点，但后来每次谈起他来，我都认为，我生活在若叶县山区他家别墅里的那七年，对我的事业起着至关重要的作用。

如今，每当我回忆毛利君的别墅，总是想起从那条通向附近村庄的山路望下去的景象，心里感到特别欣慰。顺着那条山路往上走，别墅就会在下面的山谷里出现，一片深色的长方形木头建筑，掩映在高高的雪松树丛中。别墅的三面是长长的厢房，连起来构成长方形的三边，中间围着一个院子。第四面是一道雪松树篱和大门，把院子整个儿围在中间，可以想象在古时候，那道沉重的大门关上之后，敌人要想进来可不是件容易的事。

现在闯进别墅就没那么困难了。在山路上看不真切，其实毛利君的别墅已经荒败不堪。从山路上怎么也猜不到别墅内部一间间屋子的状况，剥落的墙纸，榻榻米的地板有几处破损严重，如果落脚不当心，就有踩穿地板掉下去的危险。实际上，当我试图回忆近处看到的别墅情景时，脑海中浮现的是破碎的房瓦，腐烂的窗格门框，糟朽碎裂的阳台。那些房顶不断出现新的裂缝，一场夜雨过后，每个屋里都弥漫着湿木头和烂树叶的味儿。在有些月份里，昆虫和蛾子大量地侵入，密密麻麻地沾在木头家具上，钻进每一道缝隙，你忍不住担心它们会使别墅彻底倒塌。

在那么多屋子里，只有两三间的状况能使你想起别墅当年的辉煌。其中一间白天大部分时间都光线明亮，是专门留给特殊场合用的。我记得毛利君每完成一幅新的画作，都会把他的学生——共有十位——召集到那间屋里。我还记得，进屋之前，我们每个人都会在门槛上停下脚步，屏住呼吸欣赏支在屋子中央的那幅画作。这个时候，毛利君也许在侍弄花草，或望着窗外，似乎并没注意我们的到来。不一会儿，我们都坐在画作周围的地板上，互相指指点点，压低声音说：“看先生怎样填补画面的那个角落。真是高明！”但没有一个人会说：“先生，这真是一幅杰作！”我们要表现得仿佛老师不在场似的，这是这种场合的一种惯例。

新的画作经常都会有所创新，于是我们中间就会展开激烈的争论。比如有一次，我记得我们走进屋，迎面看见一幅画：从一个很低的角度看到的一个跪着的女人——角度很低，我们似乎是从地面仰视她。

“显然，”我记得有人评价道，“低角度使女人显得更有尊严。这是一个非常惊人的成就。这个女人从其他方面来说都显得楚楚可怜。正是这种张力赋予了这幅画含蓄的力量。”

“也许是这样，”另一个人说，“女人确实具有某种尊严，但不是来自低视角。显然先生是在告诉我们一些更加深刻的东西。他是在说，这个视角看上去低，是因为我们太习惯于我们眼睛的高度。先生显然是想把我们从那样武断和局限性的视角中解放出来。他在对我们说，‘没必要总是从惯常的角度来看事物。’正因为此，这幅画才这样发人深省。”

很快，我们都提高嗓门，互相争论着对毛利君用意的看法。我们一边争论，一边不住地偷偷望望老师，而他并不表示出赞成谁的说法。我记得他只是站在屋子那头，双臂抱在胸前，透过窗户的木格栅望着外面的院子，脸上带着饶有兴味的神情。他听我们争论一段时间，便转过身说道：“也许你们应该走了。我还有事情要做。”听了这话，我们便鱼贯走出屋子，同时嘴里再次喃喃说着对新画作的赞赏。

我讲述这副场景时，意识到毛利君的行为会使你觉得有点傲慢。但是如果你处在一个总是被人仰视和欣赏的地位，或许就更能理解他表现出来的那种高傲了。总是对学生灌输和说教并不可取，在许多情况下，更高明的做法是保持沉默，让学生们有机会思考和争论。正如我说的，任何一个曾经地位显赫的人都会欣赏这种做法。

不管怎么说，关于老师作品的争论可以持续好几个星期。由于毛利君自己始终不作任何解释，我们便把目光投向我们中间的一员——一位名叫佐佐木的画家，当时自诩为毛利君的得意门生。虽然我刚才说了，有些争论可以持续很长时间，但一旦佐佐木对某个问题做出决定，一般就表示争论到此结束。同样，如果佐佐木提出某人的画作有对老师“不忠”的地方，对方几乎总是立刻缴械投降——或者放弃作品，或者，在有些情况下，把作品跟垃圾一起付之一炬。

实际上，据我回忆，我们一起到达别墅后的几个月里，乌龟一次次在这种情形下销毁自己的画作。我虽然很容易就适应了环境，但我这位同伴的作品却经常表现出违背老师观点的元素，我记得我多次替他向我的新同事们求情，分辩说他不是故意对毛利君不忠。那些日子里，乌龟经常神情沮丧地走到我跟前，领我去看他的某幅没有完成的作品，压低声音说：“小野君，请你告诉我，这符合老师的风格吗？”

有时，就连我也恼火地发现他无意中采用了另一种显然大逆不道的元素。其实毛利君的艺术风格不难掌握。那些日子，“现代歌麿¹¹”的标签经常用在我们老师身上，虽然当时这个头衔可以轻而易举地授予任何一个专门描绘青楼女子的有为画家，但也确实能够概括毛利君的思想。毛利君有意识地试图把歌麿的传统“现代化”；在他的许多最著名的绘画中——如《系腰鼓》或《出浴》——都是按古典歌麿的方式从背后看女人的。他的作品里还再现了许多类似的古典风格：女人把一条毛巾举到面前，女人梳理长长的秀发。毛利君广泛运用通过女性手拿或身穿的衣物来表达情感的传统技巧，而不是直接描绘女性的面部。但与此同时，他的作品充斥着欧洲风格的影响，歌麿的忠实崇拜者们会认为这是打破传统。例如，他早就不再使用传统的黑线条勾勒物体，而选用西方的色块，以光和影来制造三维效果。毫无疑问，他的核心风格也是借鉴了欧洲画风：对柔和色彩的运用。毛利君希望在他笔下的女性周围形成一种忧郁的、夜晚般的氛围，在我跟他学习的那些年里，他用色彩做了大量实验，试图捕捉灯笼的光的感觉。正因为此，毛利君的画作中总会有一盏灯笼，或虚或实，这简直成了他作品的标记，乌龟来到别墅一年之后，用起颜色来效果完全不对，他心里还挺纳闷，明明记得画上了一盏灯笼，为什么又被指责为不忠实老师的风格呢？这大概足以说明乌龟在领会毛利君的艺术要素时是多么迟钝了。

虽然我多次求情，但佐佐木之流对乌龟的问题没有什么耐心，有时，气氛变得像他在竹田大师的公司一样紧张，充满火药味。后来——我记得那是我们进入别墅第二年的时候——佐佐木发生了变化，这变化使他遭受的敌意比他曾经强加给乌龟的更加厉害和凶险。

一般来说，每群学生当中都会有一个领头人——老师格外欣赏他的才能，挑出来让其他人仿效。这位尖子学生对老师的思想领会得最透彻，一般就会像佐佐木那样，向能力较差或经验不足的学生解释这些思想。同样，正是这位尖子学生最有可能看到老师作品中的缺憾，或形成跟老师观点有分歧的思想。当然啦，从理论上说，一位好老师应该接受这种倾向——是的，作为他把学生培养成熟的一个标记。然而，实际上其中牵扯的情绪非常复杂。有时，当一个人投入许多时间精力培育一个有天赋的学生时，就很容易把这种艺术上的成熟看成是一种背叛，于是就会出现一些令人遗憾的局面。

是的，在佐佐木跟老师发生争论之后，我们对佐佐木的态度是有失公允的，不过此刻在这里回忆这些事情似乎意义不大。但我清楚地记得佐佐木最终离开我们的那个夜晚。

我们大多数人已经上床睡觉了。我黑着灯躺在一间荒败的屋子里，还没有睡着，就听见佐佐木的声音在阳台上喊叫某人。他似乎没有得到对方的回答，最后我听见纱门关闭的声音，佐佐木的脚步声越来越近。我听见他在另一间屋门口停住脚步，说了些什么，但似乎也无人作答。他的脚步声更近了，接着我听见他拉开了我隔壁那个房间的纱门。

“我和你是这么多年的好朋友，”我听见他说，“你就不能好歹跟我说句话吗？”

对方没有回答。佐佐木又说：

“你能不能告诉我那些画在哪儿？”

仍然没有回答。我躺在黑暗里，听见老鼠在隔壁屋子的地板下面沙沙地跑来跑去，在我看来，这声音就是某种回答了。

“既然你这么讨厌它们，”佐佐木的声音继续说道，“还留着它们做什么？可它们眼下碰巧对我来说很重要。我不管去哪里都想带着它们。我没有别的东西可以带走。”

隔壁又是老鼠沙沙跑动的声音在回答，然后是长久的沉默。是的，沉默的时间太长了，我还以为佐佐木已经出门走进黑暗而我没有听见。可是接着，我听他又说话了：

“过去这几天里，有人对我做了一些可怕的事。但是令我最受伤害的，是你竟然不肯对我说一句安慰的话。”

又是沉默。然后佐佐木说：“你就不肯看我一眼，祝我一切顺利吗？”

最后，我听见纱门关上了，还听见佐佐木走下阳台，穿过院子的声音。

佐佐木走后，别墅里很少提到他，偶尔说起，也总是简单地称他为“叛徒”。是的，当我回忆我们经常沉醉其中的口舌之争时，我就想起，我们一谈起佐佐木就会引起相互间的争论。

在比较暖和的日子，我们屋子的纱门都开着，几个人聚集在一间屋里，就能看见另一群人也聚集在对面的厢房里。很快，这种状况就会导致某人隔着院子大声喊叫，诙谐地挑衅对方，不一会儿，两伙人便聚在各自的阳台上，冲着对方大嚷大骂。现在回忆起来，这种行为听上去或许有些荒唐，但是别墅的结构，以及从一侧厢房朝另一侧厢

房喊叫时产生的回音效果，似乎鼓励我们沉醉在这种孩子气的擂台赛中。那些辱骂的话有时不着边际——比如，奚落某人男子汉的神勇，或取笑某人刚完成的一幅画作——大部分时候都没有恶意，我记得许多对骂非常有趣，逗得两边的人都大笑不已。总的来说，我回忆中的这些对骂，足以说明那些年我们在别墅里相互竞争又亲如一家的关系。然而，对骂中有一两次提到佐佐木的名字，局面就会立刻失控，同事们超越界线，跑到院子里大打出手。我们很快就知道了，拿某人跟“叛徒”相比，即使是开玩笑，对方也不可能心平气和地接受。

从我的这些回忆中，你可能会认为我们对老师以及他的观点忠心耿耿，死心塌地。现在想来——当一种影响的缺点已经昭然若揭——我们很容易批评地看待一位培养这种风气的老师。可是话又说回来，任何一个拥有雄心壮志的人，任何一个能够干成大事业，觉得需要尽量全面地传播他的思想的人，都会多多少少理解毛利君的行为方式。现在我们知道了他的事业做得怎样，会觉得这做法有点愚蠢，但当时毛利君的愿望是彻底改变我们这个城市的绘画风格。正因为心里怀着这样一个目的，他把许多时间和财富都用于培养学生。在评价我以前的这位老师时，或许是有必要记住这点的。

当然，他的影响不只限于绘画领域。那些年里，我们的生活完全与老师的价值观和生活方式相一致，比如我们必须花大量时间探索城里的“浮华世界”——充斥着娱乐、消遣和饮酒的夜晚世界，它们是我们所有绘画的背景。如今我想起当年的市中心来总是感到一丝怀念：街道没有这么拥挤、喧嚣，工厂接受着晚风吹来的各个季节的花香。我们最喜欢去的地方是小岛街运河旁的一家小茶馆，名叫“水中灯笼”——确实，当你朝茶馆走去时，能看见茶馆的灯笼映在运河里的倒影。茶馆老板娘是毛利君的老朋友，这就保证了我们总是受到慷慨的款待，我记得在那里度过的几个难忘的夜晚，跟老板娘一起饮酒、唱歌。还有一个地方我们也经常光顾，是永田街的一个射箭厅，那里的老板娘总是不厌其烦地告诉我们，许多年前，她在秋叶原做艺伎时，毛利君以她为模特创作了一系列木刻画，引起轰动。那家射箭厅里有大约六七个姑娘，过了一阵，我们每人都有了自已心仪的对象，把烟斗递来递去地抽，消磨夜晚的时光。

我们的寻欢作乐也不只限于在城里探险。毛利君在娱乐界的熟人简直数不胜数，一年到头都有流浪演员、舞蹈家和音乐家组成的赤贫大军光临别墅，被当成失散已久的老朋友一样款待。大量的酒被拿了出来，客人们唱歌跳舞直至深夜，很快，就有人被派去叫醒附近村里的酒店老板，再添新酒。那些日子有一位常客叫摩季，是讲故事能

手，一个乐呵呵的胖男人，他艺术地再现那些古老的传说，使我们一会儿乐不可支，一会儿泪流满面。许多年后，我几次在左右宫遇见摩季，共同回忆在别墅里的那些夜晚，啧啧称奇。摩季坚信他记得许多这样的晚会都通宵达旦，再持续一整天，直到第二天夜晚。我对此不敢确定，但我记得毛利君别墅白天的情景，到处是一具具疲惫的身体横躺竖卧，还有人躺在外面的院子里，阳光洒在他们身上。

然而，我十分清楚地记得这样一个夜晚。当时，我独自走在别墅中央的院子里，呼吸着夜晚清新的空气，为暂时逃离了那些寻欢作乐而感到轻松。我记得我朝储藏室的门口走去，进门前，我回头望望院子那边的屋子，我的同事们和客人们都在那里嬉笑玩乐。我看见数不清的身影在纸屏风后面晃动，夜空中飘来一个歌者的声音。

我朝储藏室走去，因为在别墅里，没有几处地方能让人不受打扰地独处一段时间。我想象在很久以前，当别墅里还有卫兵和仆人时，这个储藏室是用来存放武器和盔甲的。可是那天夜里当我走进屋里，点亮挂在门上的灯笼时，却发现地上乱糟糟的堆满了各种东西，必须跳着脚才能走进去。到处都是—堆堆用绳子捆着的旧画布，破烂的画架，还有各种瓶瓶罐罐，里面插着画笔和木棍。我总算挪到一小片空地上坐下来。我注意到，门上的灯笼把我周围的东西照出长长的影子，形成一种诡异的效果，似乎我坐在一处阴森恐怖的小墓地里。

我想，我准是完全陷入了沉思，因为我记得听到储藏室的门被打开的声音时吃了一惊。我一抬头，看见毛利君站在门口，便赶紧说道：“晚上好，先生。”

也许门上的灯笼不足以照亮我呆的地方，或者我的脸处在阴影里。总之，毛利君探头张望，问道：

“是谁呀？是小野吗？”

“是的，先生。”

他继续探头张望了一会。然后，他把灯笼从横梁上摘下来，举在面前，开始小心地绕过地板上的杂物，朝我走来。他这么做的时候，手里的灯笼使我们周围暗影摇曳。我赶紧腾出一点地方给他，但毛利君已经在不远处一只旧木箱上坐了下来。他叹了口气，说道：

“我出来透透新鲜空气，看见这里有灯光。到处都一片漆黑，只有这点灯光。我心里想，如今这间储藏室已经不是情人们幽会的地方了。这里面的人肯定处于孤独中。”

“我准是坐在这里做起梦来了，先生。我没打算在这里呆这么长时间。”

他把灯笼放在脚边的地板上，从我坐的地方只能看见他的剪影。“刚才有个跳舞的姑娘似乎很喜欢你呢，”他说，“夜晚还没结束，你就消失了，她准会感到失望的。”

“我不是故意对我们的客人无礼，先生。我像您一样，只是想出来透透新鲜空气。”

我们沉默了片刻。院子那头，可以听见我们的同伴在拍着巴掌唱歌。

“那么，小野，”毛利君终于开口说道，“你对我的老朋友仪三郎是怎么看的？他可真是个人物呢。”

“没错，先生。他看起来是个很和善的绅士。”

“现在他可能穿得衣衫褴褛，当年可是个名人呢。从他今天晚上的表演来看，他过去的技艺并没有全丢掉。”

“是的。”

“那么，小野，你的烦恼来自哪里呢？”

“烦恼，先生？没有，我没有烦恼。”

“是不是你发现我的老朋友仪三郎有点讨厌？”

“没有没有，先生，”我紧张地笑了笑，“啊，一点也没有。他是个最有魅力的绅士。”

然后，我们聊了一会儿别的，有一搭没一搭，脑子里想起什么就说什么。后来毛利君又把话题转到我的“烦恼”上，我便知道他是准备坐在那里等我一吐为快了，我终于说道：

“仪三郎君确实是个最慈善的绅士。他和他的那些舞者一片好意地让我们开心。但我忍不住在想，先生，过去这几个月里，他们这样的人来访得太频繁了。”

毛利君没有回答，于是我接着说道：

“请原谅，先生，我不是不尊重仪三郎君和他的朋友。但是，我有时候感到困惑。我不明白我们画家是否应该花这么多时间跟仪三郎君那样的人在一起娱乐。”

我记得就是这时，老师站了起来，举着灯笼走向储藏室里面的墙壁。墙壁原先处于黑暗中，老师把灯笼凑近时，挂在墙上的三幅上下排列的木版画便被清楚地照亮了。每幅画上都是一个艺伎在整理发型，她们都坐在地上，视角是从后面看去。毛利君仔细端详了一会儿，把灯笼从一幅画挪向另一幅。然后他摇摇头，自己嘟囔道：“致命的败笔。细节造成的致命的败笔。”几秒钟后，他仍然盯着版画继续说：“可是人总是对自己早期的作品怀有感情。也许你有一天也会对你在这里创作的作品产生同样的感情。”他又摇摇头，说：“可是这些画都有致命的败笔，小野。”

“我不能同意，先生，”我说，“我认为这些木刻画出色地证明了一位画家的才华能够超越某一种风格的局限。我经常认为，先生早期的木刻画被锁在这样的屋子里真是太可惜了。它们完全应该跟先生的绘画一起公开展出。”

毛利君仍然全神贯注地端详他的木刻画。“致命的败笔，”他又说了一遍，“但我那时候还很年轻。”他又挪动灯笼，让一幅画隐入阴影，让另一幅画显现出来。然后他说：“这些都是从主街一家艺伎馆里看到的景象。在我年轻的时候，那是一家口碑很好的艺伎馆。我和仪三郎经常一起光顾这些地方。”过了片刻，他又说道：“这些都有致命的败笔，小野。”

“可是，先生，我认为即使眼光最敏锐的人，在这些木刻画里也挑不出错来。”

他又端详了一会儿木刻画，然后开始朝这边走来。我觉得他花了过多的时间走过地板上的那些杂物。有几次，我听见他喃喃自语，还听见他用脚踢开一个罐子或箱子的声音。是的，有一两次我以为毛利君是在那一片狼藉中寻找什么东西——也许是他早年的其他木刻画，但最后他又坐回到那只旧木箱上，叹了口气。又沉默了一会儿，他说：

“仪三郎是个不幸的人，一辈子过得不顺心。他的才华都被毁掉了。他曾经爱过的那些人，或者早就死了，或者把他给抛弃了。即使在我们年轻的时候，他的性格就是孤独的，落落寡欢的。”毛利君停顿了一会儿，然后继续说道：“可是有时候我们跟青楼女子一起饮酒作乐，仪三郎就会变得开心起来。他想听什么，那些女人就对他说什么，至少在那个晚上他对那些话是相信的。当然啦，天一亮，他这样有智慧的人就不可能继续相信这样的话。但仪三郎并不因此就看轻那些夜晚。他以前总是说，最好的东西总是在夜晚聚集，在早晨消失。”

人们所说的浮华世界，小野，就是仪三郎知道如何珍惜的那个世界。”

毛利君又停住了话头。像刚才一样，我只能看见他的剪影，但我感觉他在倾听院子那头寻欢作乐的声音。然后他说：“如今他年纪大了，心情不好，但在许多方面几乎没有什么变化。今晚他是快乐的，就像他以前在那些娱乐场所一样。”他深深吸了口气，好像在抽烟一样。然后他继续说：“画家有希望捕捉的最细微、最脆弱的美，就飘浮在天黑后的那些娱乐场所里。而在这样的夜晚，小野，那种美也会飘到我们这里。可是挂在那里的那几幅画，它们没有表现出一点那种虚幻的、转瞬即逝的特征。严重的败笔，小野。”

“可是，先生，在我看来，这些木刻画非常有力地表现了这些内容。”

“我创作那些木刻画的时候还很年轻。我怀疑，我之所以没能描绘那个浮华世界，是因为我无法让自己相信它的价值。年轻人对于快乐经常会产生犯罪感，估计我也是这样。我想，我当时认为在这样的场所虚度光阴，用自己的技巧去描绘如此短暂、看不见摸不着的东西，实在是一种浪费，是一种颓废。当一个人对一个世界的美产生怀疑时，是很难欣赏它的。”

我想了想，说：“是的，先生，我承认您所说的很适用于我自己的作品。我会尽力好好去做的。”

毛利君似乎没有听见我的话。“可是我很久以前就消除了那些怀疑，小野，”他继续说道，“年老之后，当我回顾自己的一生，看到我用毕生的精力去捕捉那个世界独特的美，我相信我会感到心满意足的。没有人能使我相信我是虚度了光阴。”

当然，毛利君的原话可能并不是这样。是的，仔细想来，这样的话倒更像是我在左右宫里喝了点酒之后，对我的那些学生说的。“作为日本新一代画家，你们对本民族的文化负有重大的责任。有你们这样的人做我的学生，我深感自豪。我自己的画作不值得多少夸赞，可是当我回顾自己的一生，想起我在事业上培养和帮助过你们在座各位，那么没有人能使我相信我是虚度了光阴。”每次我说出这样的话，聚集在周旁的那些年轻人都会提高嗓门，一个盖过一个地说我不该这样贬低我自己的作品——他们吵吵嚷嚷地告诉我，那些作品无疑将会流芳百世。可是，正如我前面说过的，许多成为我鲜明特色的话语和表达方式，实际上都是从毛利君那里继承来的，所以很可能这正

是老师那天夜里的原话，当时给我留下了那么强烈的印象，并在我心里留下烙印。

唉，我的话题又跑远了。我要讲述的是上个月在河边公园跟节子有过那番不快的交谈之后，带外孙在百货商店吃饭的情景。实际上，我记得我正在回忆一郎对菠菜的赞扬。

午饭端上来了，我记得一郎坐在那里，专心研究盘子里的菠菜，有时还用勺子戳一戳。然后他抬起目光，说道：“外公，你看着！”

外孙撮起满满一大勺菠菜，高高举起，开始往嘴里倒。看他的吃相，活像某人在喝瓶里的最后几滴酒。

“一郎，”我说，“这样的吃相可不雅观。”

可是外孙继续把菠菜往嘴里塞，同时使劲嚼着。吃完了一勺他才把勺子放下，两个腮帮子鼓得都快爆炸了。然后，他嘴里仍然嚼着，脸上突然做出一副严肃的表情，挺起胸膛，开始用拳头出击周围的空气。

“你在做什么呀，一郎？告诉外公，你在做什么。”

“你猜，外公！”他嘴里塞着菠菜说道。

“嗯，我不知道，一郎。是一个男人在喝酒、打架？不是？那你告诉我吧，外公猜不着。”

“大力水手！”

“那是什么，一郎？又是你崇拜的一个英雄吗？”

“大力水手吃菠菜。吃了菠菜就有力量。”他又挺起胸膛，对着空气挥拳头。

“我明白了，一郎，”我笑着说，“菠菜确实是一种奇妙的食物。”

“酒也给人力量吗？”

我微笑着摇摇头。“酒使人相信自己有了力量。可是实际上，一郎，你的力量并不比喝酒之前更大。”

“那男人干吗还喝酒呢，外公？”

“我不知道，一郎。也许因为他们可以暂时相信自己有力量吧。其实酒并不能使人变得更强壮。”

“菠菜使人真的有力量。”

“那么菠菜比酒好多了。你继续吃菠菜吧，一郎。可是你看，你盘子里的其他东西怎么办呢？”

“我也喜欢喝酒。还有威士忌。在家的時候，我经常去一家酒馆。”

“是吗，一郎。我认为你最好接着吃菠菜，就像你说的，菠菜真的能给人力量。”

“我最喜欢清酒。我每天晚上都要喝十瓶，然后再喝十瓶威士忌。”

“是吗，一郎。那酒量可不小。肯定会让你妈妈头疼的。”

“女人根本不懂我们男人喝酒的事。”一郎说，把注意力转向了面前的午饭。可是他很快又抬起头来，说：“外公今晚要来吃晚饭。”

“是的，一郎。估计仙子小姨会准备一些好吃的东西。”

“仙子小姨买了一些清酒。她说外公和大郎姨夫会把它们都喝光。”

“呵，我们也许会的。我想女人们也会喝一点。但是她说得对，一郎，酒主要是给男人喝的。”

“外公，如果女人喝了酒会怎么样？”

“嗯，说不好。女人不像我们男人这样强壮，一郎。所以她们可能很快就喝醉了。”

“仙子小姨会喝醉！她只喝一小杯就醉得一塌糊涂！”

我笑了一声。“是的，很有可能。”

“仙子小姨醉得一塌糊涂！她会唱歌，然后趴在桌上睡觉！”

“看来，一郎，”我仍然笑着说，“我们男人最好把酒看牢了，是不是？”

“男人更强壮，所以能喝更多的酒。”

“没错，一郎。我们最好把酒看牢了。”

然后，我思忖了片刻，又说：“我想你现在有八岁了，一郎。你正在长成一个男子汉。谁知道呢？说不定今晚外公会让你喝几口清酒呢。”

外孙以一种有点害怕的表情看着我，什么也没说。我朝他微笑，然后扫了一眼旁边大窗户外面的浅灰色天空。

“你从来没见过你的舅舅健二，一郎。他在你这个年纪，也跟你一样高矮，一样结实。我记得他第一次喝清酒时就跟你现在差不多大。一郎，我保证让你今晚尝尝酒味儿。”

一郎似乎考虑了一会儿，然后说道：

“妈妈那儿会有麻烦。”

“别担心你妈妈，一郎。外公对付得了她。”

一郎厌烦地摇摇头。“女人永远不懂男人喝酒的事。”他说。

“你这样的男人应该尝尝清酒了。别担心，一郎，就把你妈妈交给外公好了。我们可不能让女人牵着鼻子走，是不是？”

外孙继续沉思了一会儿，然后突然大声说：

“仙子小姨会喝醉！”

我笑了。“我们等着瞧吧，一郎。”我说。

“仙子小姨会醉得一塌糊涂！”

大约过了十五分钟，我们正在等冰激凌的时候，一郎用若有所思的语气问道：

“外公，你知道野口佑次郎吗？”

“你肯定是指野口由纪夫吧，一郎。不，我跟他不认识。”

外孙没有回答，似乎在专注地研究旁边窗玻璃上他的影像。

“今天上午，”我继续说，“我跟你妈妈在公园里谈话的时候，她似乎脑子里也想着野口先生。估计大人们昨晚吃饭的时候谈论过他，是不是？”

一郎继续望着自己的影像，过了一会儿，他转过脸来问我：

“野口先生像外公一样吗？”

“野口先生像我一样？啊，至少你妈妈就不是这么认为的。那只是我有一次对你大郎姨夫说的话，没什么大不了的。你妈妈似乎把它看得过于认真了。我不太记得我当时在跟大郎姨夫说什么了，但外公碰巧说他跟野口先生那样的人有一两个共同点。现在你告诉我，一郎，昨晚大人们都说什么了？”

“外公，野口先生为什么要杀死自己？”

“很难说得准，一郎。我并不认识野口先生。”

“那他是个坏人吗？”

“不，他不是坏人。他只是一个非常努力地做着他认为最有益的事情的人。可是你知道吗，一郎，战争结束后，情况变得很不一样。野口先生创作的歌曲曾经非常出名，不仅在这个城市，而且在整个日本。收音机里播，酒馆里也唱。你舅舅健二他们在行军中和作战前也唱这些歌。战后，野口先生认为他的歌——唉——是一种错误。他想起所有那些被杀害的人，所有那些跟你年龄相仿却失去了父母的小男孩，一郎，他想起了所有这些事情，认为自己的那些歌或许是个错误。他觉得他应该谢罪。向每一个离世的人谢罪。向那些失去双亲的小男孩谢罪。向那些失去像你这样的小男孩的父母谢罪。他想对所有这些人说声对不起。我认为这就是他自杀的原因。野口先生绝对不是个坏人，一郎。他有勇气承认他所犯的错误。他很勇敢，很高尚。”

一郎带着若有所思的表情注视着我。我笑了一声，说：“怎么啦，一郎？”

外孙似乎想说话，却又转过去看着他映在窗玻璃上的脸。

“你外公说自己像野口先生，其实没有任何意思，”我说，“他只是在开玩笑，仅此而已。下次你再听见你妈妈讲到野口先生，就把这话告诉她。从她今天上午说的话来看，她把事情完全理解错了。你怎么了，一郎？突然变得这么安静。”

吃过午饭，我们在市中心的店铺里逛了逛，看玩具，看图书。下午四五点钟的时候，我在樱桥街一家时髦的餐厅又请一郎吃了一客冰激凌，然后我们就前往大郎和仙子在泉町的公寓。

你可能知道，泉町如今成为家境良好的年轻夫妇非常热衷的一个地方，那里确实有一种干净体面的氛围。但是吸引年轻夫妇的大多数新建的公寓楼，在我看来缺乏想象力，很压抑。就拿大郎和仙子的公

寓来说吧，是三层楼上一套狭小的两居室，天花板很低，能听见隔壁人家的声音，从窗户看出去，只能看见对面的楼房和窗户。没过一会儿，我就开始觉得这套房子憋屈，我相信这并不是因为我习惯了那座宽敞的传统老宅。不过，仙子似乎对她的公寓感到很得意，嘴里不停地赞扬它的“现代”特征。房子看上去很容易保持干净，通风也很好，特别是整个公寓楼的厨房和浴室，全是按西方风格设计的，就像我女儿说的，比起我那座房子里的设施来，不知道要实用多少倍呢。

厨房虽然方便，毕竟还是太小，那天晚上，我想进去看看两个女儿晚饭准备得怎么样了，却似乎连站的地方都没有。因为这个，还因为两个女儿看上去都很忙，我就没有跟她们多聊。但我还是说了一句：

“你们知道吗，一郎今天告诉我，他很想尝尝清酒呢。”

节子和仙子并排站在那里切菜，都停住手，抬起眼来看着我。

“我想了想，我们不妨就让他喝一点尝尝，”我继续说道，“不过也许应该用水稀释一下。”

“对不起，爸爸，”节子说，“您是说让一郎今天晚上喝酒？”

“就喝一点点。他毕竟一天天在长大。不过我说了，你最好把酒稀释一下。”

两个女儿交换了一下目光。仙子说：“爸爸，他才八岁。”

“只要你用水稀释一下就没关系。你们女人可能不理解，但这些事情对一郎这样的男孩子来说意义非常重大。关系到自尊心。他会一辈子都记得的。”

“爸爸，这真是胡说，”仙子说，“一郎只会感到不舒服。”

“不管胡说不胡说吧，我已经仔细考虑过了。你们女人有时候不能充分理解一个男孩的自尊心。”我指着放在她们头顶格架上的那瓶清酒，“一小滴就够了。”

说完，我就转身离开，却又听见仙子说道：“节子，这是根本不可能的。真不知道爸爸是怎么想的。”

“这么大惊小怪做什么？”我在门口转过身说。我听见从我身后的客厅里传来大郎和我外孙的欢笑声。我压低声音，接着说道：

“反正，我已经答应他了，他一心盼着呢。你们女人有时候根本不理解别人的自尊心。”

我又准备离开，这次是节子说话了：

“爸爸这么体贴地考虑到一郎的感受，真是太难为他了。不过，是不是最好等一郎再长大点呢？”

我轻轻笑了一声。“知道吗，我记得当年健二这么大的时候，我决定让他尝尝清酒，你们的妈妈也是这样反对的。结果，喝一点酒并没有给你们的哥哥带来什么害处。”

话一出口，我就后悔不该在这样琐碎的争论中提到健二。是的，我记得我当时对自己非常恼火，很可能没有注意听节子下面的话。我记得她似乎是这么说的：

“毫无疑问，爸爸在培养哥哥上是很用心思的。不过，从后来的事情看，我们发现至少在一两点上，倒是妈妈的观点更加正确。”

说实在的，也许节子并没有说出这样令人不快的话。也许我把她说的话完全理会错了，因为我清楚地记得仙子对姐姐的话没有任何反应，只是厌倦地转回去继续切菜。而且，我也不会认为大家好好地交谈着，节子会无缘无故地说出这番话来。可是，当我想到那天上午在河边公园节子的那些含沙射影的言词时，便不得不承认她是有可能说出类似的话的。总之，我记得节子最后说道：

“而且，恐怕池田也会希望一郎长大一些再喝酒的。但是爸爸这样体贴一郎的感受，真是太用心了。”

我担心一郎听到我们的谈话，而且不愿意给我们难得的家庭聚会罩上阴影，便没有继续争论，离开了厨房。我记得我后来就跟一郎和一郎坐在客厅里，一边等晚饭，一边愉快地聊天。

过了一小时左右，我们终于坐下来吃饭了。这时，一郎伸出手，用手指敲了敲放在桌上的酒瓶，意味深长地看着我。我朝他微笑，但什么也没说。

女人们准备了一顿丰盛的晚餐，很快大家就轻松自如地聊了起来。一郎给我们讲了他一位同事的故事，把我们全都逗笑了。那位同事愚蠢得可笑，再加上运气不好，总也完不成任务，并因此而出了名。一郎讲这个故事时，说道：

“后来，情况越来越严重，我们的上司也开始叫他‘乌龟’。最近一次开会时，早坂先生没有留神，竟然张口宣布道：‘听完乌龟的报告，我们就休会吃午饭。’”

“是吗？”我有些吃惊地大声说。“真有意思。我以前也有一位同事叫那个外号。原因似乎也大同小异。”

太郎好像对这一巧合并不感到特别意外。他礼貌地点点头，说道：“我记得我上学的时候有一个同学，我们也都叫他‘乌龟’。实际上，就像每个团队都有一个天然的领袖一样，似乎每个团队也有一个‘乌龟’。”

然后，太郎又继续讲他的故事。当然啦，现在想想，女婿的话完全正确。由同类人组成的团队，几乎都有自己的“乌龟”，虽然并不总叫这个名字。比如，在我的学生中间，就是绅太郎担当这一角色。这不是否认绅太郎的基本能力，可是跟黑田之类的一比，他的才华就逊色多了。

我想，总的来说，我并不欣赏这个世界上的“乌龟们”。人们也许赞赏他们的吃苦耐劳和他们的求生能力，却怀疑他们缺乏坦诚，善于欺骗。最后，人们会唾弃他们打着事业的名义而不肯冒险，或为了他们声称自己所信仰的某个理念而退缩不前。乌龟之流永远不会成为某个重大灾难的牺牲品，就像杉村明在改造河边公园的计划上遭受重挫那样。然而同样，虽然他们有时也能混成个老师之类，获得一点地位，但永远也不可能取得任何超凡脱俗的成就。

我承认，在毛利君别墅的那些年里，我是很喜欢乌龟的，但是我从来没有把他当成一个平等的人来尊重。这是由我们关系的性质决定的，我们的友谊，是从乌龟在竹田公司受迫害的时候开始建立，又在初入别墅，乌龟艰难起步的那几个月里逐渐牢固的。过了一段时间，我们的友谊形成了固定模式，他始终对我给予他的一些难以言说的“支持”感激不尽。后来他已经掌握技巧，知道怎样作画才不致引起别墅其他人的敌意，而且他凭自己随和的、乐于助人的性格，赢得了大家的好感，但是他仍然在很长时间里一直对我说：

“我太感谢你了，小野君。多亏了你，这里的人才这样善待我。”

当然，在某种意义上，乌龟确实应该感谢我。如果没有我的激励，显然他永远不会考虑离开竹田大师的公司，投师于毛利君的门下。他对迈出这冒险性的一步犹豫再三，可是一旦不得不这么做了，

他便从没有怀疑过当初的决定。是的，在很长时间里——至少在最初两年——乌龟对毛利君恭敬有加，我记得他无法跟我们的老师对话，只会唯唯诺诺地说“是的，先生”或“不，先生”。

那些年里，乌龟继续像以前那样慢悠悠地作画，但这并没有激起任何人的反感。实际上，很多人的工作速度都很慢，而且这帮家伙还喜欢取笑我们这些作画敏捷的人。我记得他们称我们为“机械师”，把我们有了灵感之后的专注、狂热的工作方式比作一个蒸汽机驾驶员，不断地往火里添煤，生怕机器随时都会熄火。我们反唇相讥，把这帮磨洋工的人称为“后退者”。“后退者”原本是别墅里用来形容这样一个人的：他在一间拥挤的房间里作画，周围都是对着画架工作的人，他却总是每过几分钟就要后退几步，观察他作品的效果——结果，他就总会撞上在他身后工作的同事。当然，这么说是很不公平的，不能因为某个画家愿意从容不迫地作画——用比喻的说法，就是后退几步——就说他行为孤僻，但我们很喜欢这个称呼里的挑衅性。是的，我记得我们经常说说笑笑地拿“机械师”和“后退者”来打趣。

实际上，我们每个人都会为“后退”感到愧疚，因此，我们工作时尽量避免挤在一起。在夏季的几个月中，许多同事把画架支在阳台上，彼此拉开距离，或者就在院子里，另一些人则坚守在许多房间里，因为他们喜欢根据光线的变化从一个房间换到另一个房间。我和乌龟总喜欢在那间废弃的厨房里工作——那是别墅侧翼一座很大的、类似谷仓的附属建筑。

进门时脚下是踩实的泥地，再往里走，是一个垫高的木板平台，很宽，放得下我们的两个画架。房梁很低，有许多挂钩——可以把锅和其他炊具挂在上面——墙上有竹架子，正适合我们放置画笔、抹布和颜料什么的。我还记得我和乌龟把一个发黑的大罐子灌满了水，拎到平台上，挂在那个旧滑轮上，我们作画时，它便悬在我们肩膀的高度。

我记得一天下午，我们像平时一样在厨房里作画，乌龟对我说：

“小野君，我对你现在的作品感到很好奇，肯定不同一般。”

我笑了，眼睛没有离开我的画布。“你为什么这么说？我只是在做一个小实验，仅此而已。”

“可是小野君，我已经很长时间没有见你这么专注地工作了。而且你要求保密。你已经至少两年没有要求保密了。自从你开始为第一

次画展准备那幅《狮舞》之后，就再没有过。”

也许我应该解释一下，偶尔，一位画家觉得某件作品在完成前会受某种评论的干扰，便要求对那件作品“保密”，大家便知道，在画家撤回他的要求之前，谁也不能看那幅作品。大家这样密切地在一起生活和工作，这是一种合理的安排，使画家有自己的探索空间，而不用担心出洋相。

“真的这么引人注目？”我说。“我还觉得我把自己的兴奋掩饰得很好呢。”

“小野君，你一定忘记了，我们已经肩并肩地在一起作画快八年了。嗯，没错，我看出这幅画不同一般。”

“八年了，”我说，“我想是的。”

“没错，小野君。跟你这么有才华的人一起工作，是我的荣幸。偶尔让我有点无地自容，但实在是一种很大的荣幸。”

“你过奖了。”我微笑着说，一边继续作画。

“没有过奖，小野君。真的，我觉得，这些年来，如果没有你的作品在我眼前不断激励着我，我绝不可能取得这样的进步。你无疑注意到了，拙作《秋日的姑娘》从你的杰作《日落的姑娘》里获得了多少灵感。小野君，这只是我试图仿效你的才华的许多尝试之一。我知道，只是一种单薄的尝试，但毛利君非常仁慈，夸奖说这是我的一个显著进步。”

“我不知道，”我停住画笔，端详着我的作品，“我不知道这幅画是否也能给你灵感。”

我继续研究我那画了一半的作品，过了一会儿，我隔着我们中间那个古老的罐子朝我的朋友望去。乌龟在愉快地作画，没有感觉到我的目光。跟我在竹田大师的公司初次认识他的那个时候相比，他长了些肉，以前那种疲倦的、心惊胆战的神情也在很大程度上被一种孩子气的心满意足所取代。实际上，我记得当时有人把乌龟比作一只刚被人宠爱过的哈巴狗，没错，那天下午我在旧厨房里注视他作画时，觉得这个形容并不算离谱。

“告诉我，乌龟，”我对他说，“你对你目前的作品很满意，是吗？”

“非常满意，谢谢你，小野君。”他毫不迟疑地回答。接着抬起头来，咧嘴笑笑又说：“当然啦，要跟你的作品相提并论还早着呢，小野君。”

他的目光又回到他的画作上，我又注视了他一会儿，然后问道：

“你有时候是不是想过尝试一些……一些新的画法？”

“新的画法，小野君？”他说，没有抬头。

“告诉我，乌龟，你有没有想过，有朝一日创作出真正有分量的作品？我不是指我们在这别墅里欣赏和称赞的这些，我是指真正有分量的作品。能够对我国的人民做出巨大贡献的作品。乌龟，正是为了这个目的，我才谈到需要探索新的画法。”

我说话时密切注视着乌龟，但乌龟并没有停止作画。

“说实在的，小野君，”他说，“我这样地位卑微的人一直在尝试新的画法。可是在过去的一年里，我相信自己终于找到了正确的路子。你知道的，小野君，我发现在这一年里，毛利君越来越注意地观察我的作品。我知道他对我感到满意。谁知道呢，也许将来某个时候，我的作品能跟你和毛利君一起展出呢。”他终于抬起头来看着我，不自然地笑了笑。“请原谅，小野君。我是想入非非，好让自己能够坚持下去。”

我决定不再谈这件事。我打算过些日子试着跟我的朋友推心置腹，可是却被别的事情绊住了。

在刚才那段对话几天之后的一个晴朗的早晨，我走进那间旧厨房，发现乌龟站在那个类似谷仓的建筑物后面的平台上，直瞪瞪地看着我。我刚从外面明亮的阳光下进来，眼睛过了几秒钟才适应了屋里的昏暗，但我很快注意到乌龟脸上那副警觉的、几乎是受了惊吓的表情。没错，他那样不自然地把胳膊举到胸前，又让它垂落下去，使我觉得他以为我要打他。他没有支起他的画架，也没有为一天的工作做其他的准备，我跟他打招呼时，他一声不吭。我走过去问道：

“出什么事了？”

“小野君……”他低声叫了一句，便不说话了。我朝平台走去时，他紧张地把目光投向他的左边。我循着他的视线，看到我那幅没有画完的作品，它被罩了起来，背过去靠墙放着。乌龟不安地指了指它，说道：

“小野君，你是在开玩笑吗？”

“不，乌龟，”我说，一边走上平台，“绝对不是开玩笑。”

我走到作品前，扯掉罩布，把它转过来面朝我们。乌龟立刻挪开了目光。

“我的朋友，”我说，“你曾经勇敢地听了我的话，跟我一起跨出了事业上重要的一步。现在我请你考虑再跟我一起往前跨一步。”

乌龟还是扭着脸，说：

“小野君，老师知道这幅画吗？”

“不，还不知道。但我想我会拿给他看的。从现在起，我打算一直按这个路子画。乌龟，看看我的作品。我来给你解释我想做什么。也许我们可以再次共同跨出重要的一步呢。”

终于，他转过脸来看着我。

“小野君，”他用近乎耳语的声音说，“你是个叛徒。请你原谅。”

说完，他匆匆离开了房间。

那幅令乌龟如此不安的作品名为《得意》，它已经很久不在我手里了，但我创作它时非常投入，所以每个细节都深深地印在我的记忆里。是的，我觉得如果我愿意的话，现在还能十分精确地把那幅画重新再画出来。它的灵感来自我几个星期前目睹的不起眼的一幕，当时我正跟松田一起在外面散步。

我记得我们是去跟松田在冈田——武田协会的几位同事见面，他要把我介绍给他们。那时候正值夏末，最热的天已经过去，但我记得我跟着松田坚定的步伐走在西鹤的桥上，用手擦去脸上的汗，心里希望我的同伴走慢一些。松田那天穿着一件典雅的白色夏装，帽子像往常一样歪戴着，显得很有个性。他虽然走得很快，但脚步轻盈，看不出有一丝匆忙。他在桥中央停住脚步，我发现他似乎根本没感到热得难受。

“从这上面看过去很有意思，”他说，“你说呢，小野？”

在我们下面，一左一右耸立着两个工厂。挤在两个工厂之间的，是一片密密麻麻、杂乱无章的屋顶，有的是廉价的木瓦，有的是用波纹金属临时搭建而成。今天，西鹤区仍然被看成一个贫困地区，而当

年情况要糟糕得多。一个陌生人从桥上看去，会以为这里是一片遭到毁灭的荒地，可是仔细观察，却能看见许多小小的人影在那些房子周围忙碌地活动，就像蚂蚁在石头周围奔走一样。

“看看下面，小野，”松田说，“我们城里这样的地方越来越多。仅仅两三年前，这里还没有这么糟糕。现在它成了一个贫民区。穷人越来越多，小野，他们不得不离开农村的老宅，到这里来跟这些人一起受罪。”

“真可怕，”我说，“真想为他们做点什么。”

松田微笑地看着我——那种高高在上的笑容，总是使我感到别扭，感到自己很蠢。“善意的观点，”他说，又转过去看着桥下，“大家都说这种话。在生活的各个层面。可是，这样的地方像毒蘑菇一样到处蔓延。小野，你深吸一口气。即使在这里也能闻到污水的臭味。”

“我注意到气味不好。真的是从下面飘过来的吗？”

松田没有回答，只是继续看着下面的贫民区，脸上带着古怪的笑容。然后他说：

“政客和商人很少看到这样的地方。即使看到，也是像我们这样站得远远的。我怀疑有多少政客和商人在那下面走过。说到这点，我也不相信有多少画家这么做过。”

我听出他语气里带有激将的成分，便说：

“如果约会不会迟到，我倒不反对下去走一走。”

松田说得不错，那股臭气确实是那片社区的污水散发出来的。我们来到铁桥脚下，开始在那些狭窄的小巷里穿行时，气味越来越强烈，最后达到了令人作呕的程度。炎热中没有一丝风，周围的空气中唯一的动静就是嗡嗡不绝的苍蝇。我又一次发现我吃力地想追上松田的步伐，但这次可不希望他放慢速度。

在我们两边，有许多类似集市上已经收摊的小摊，实际上就是家家户户的住房，有时只用一道布帘跟小巷子隔开。有的门前坐着老人，我们经过时，他们饶有兴趣但毫无敌意地盯着我们看；到处都有小孩子跑来跑去，我们脚边似乎一直有猫在逃窜。我们往前走着，躲开晾晒在粗糙绳子上的床单和衣物，经过哭闹的婴儿，吠叫的狗，还有隔着小巷、仿佛是从帘子后面彼此亲热交谈的邻居。过了一会儿，

我越来越强烈地意识到窄巷的两边是挖出来的阴沟。苍蝇在阴沟上方嗡嗡盘旋，我跟着松田往前走，清楚地感觉到阴沟之间的路越来越窄，最后我们好像是走在一根倒地的树干上。

终于，我们来到一个像是院子的地方，一片简陋的茅草屋挡住了前面的路。松田指着两间茅草屋之间的一个豁口，从那里能看见一片开阔的荒地。

“我们从那里穿过去，”他说，“就能绕到小金井街后面。”

快要走到松田指的那条路的入口时，我注意到三个小男孩弯腰在看地上的什么东西，还用棍子捅它。我们走过去，他们猛地转过身，满脸怒容，虽然我什么也没看见，但他们的表现告诉我，他们正在折磨一个动物。松田肯定也得出了同样的结论，我们走过小男孩身边时他说：“唉，这里也没有别的东西让他们娱乐。”

我当时对那些小男孩没有多想。几天之后，他们三个人的形象又清晰地浮现在我脑海里：怒容满面地转向我们，挥着手里的棍子，站在那片肮脏的地方。我把它用作《得意》的核心画面。但我应该指出，当乌龟那天早晨偷看我那幅没有画完的作品时，他看见的那三个男孩在一两个重要方面跟原型有所不同。尽管他们仍然站在简陋肮脏的茅草屋前，身上的衣服也跟那几个男孩一样破烂不堪，但是他们脸上的怒容，不再是小罪犯被当场抓住时的那种心虚和提防，而是像准备作战的武士一样，很阳刚地蹙着眉头。另外，我画里的男孩子用古代剑道的姿势举着棍子，也并不是一种巧合。

在这三个男孩的头顶上，乌龟会看见画面自然过渡到第二组形象——三个衣冠楚楚、脑满肠肥的男人，坐在一家舒适的酒馆里，开怀大笑。他们脸上的表情显得很颓废，也许是在交流关于女人的什么笑话。这两组截然相反的形象，在日本列岛的海岸线上融在一起。右下角的留白处是大大的红色字体：“得意”，左下角用较小的字体写着这句宣言：“可是年轻人准备为尊严而战。”

当我描绘这幅早年的、无疑很不成熟的作品时，你肯定觉得其中一些特点并不陌生。你也许知道我的作品《放眼地平线》，那是三十年代的一幅木刻画，在这个城市赢得了一定的荣誉和影响。《放眼地平线》实际上是《得意》的翻版，由于两幅作品相隔多年，肯定存在一些差异。你大概记得，后一幅画也是两组截然不同的形象互相融合，由日本的海岸线连结在一起。画面上部那组形象仍是三个衣冠楚楚的男人在交谈，但这次他们表情紧张，不知所措地面面相觑。用不

着我提醒，这三张脸酷似那三位显赫一时的政治家。画面下部是一组占主导地位的形象，那三个贫困交加的男孩成了神色坚定的战士。其中两人端着上了刺刀的步枪，中间站着一位军官，举着长剑指向前方——西边的亚洲。他们身后不再是赤贫的背景，而是一片太阳军旗。右下角的“得意”二字换成了“放眼地平线”，左下角写着：“没有时间怯懦地闲聊。日本必须前进。”

当然，如果你是刚来这个城市，可能没有接触到这幅作品。但我认为可以毫不夸张地说，战前生活在这个城里的许多人都对它很熟悉，它因为笔触大胆，色彩运用效果强烈，在当时获得很多好评。当然啦，我很清楚地意识到，《放眼地平线》这部作品，撇开其艺术价值不谈，其表达的情绪现在已经过时。是的，我愿意率先承认，那些情绪或许是应该受到谴责的。我不是那种不敢承认昔日作品中的缺点的人。

但是我不想谈论《放眼地平线》。我在这里提到它，是因为它跟早年那幅作品有明显的关系，而且我想说明跟松田相识对我后来事业的影响。那天早晨乌龟在厨房里发现那件事之前的几个星期，我开始定期去看松田。我想，我不断地去看他，是因为他的思想吸引着我，我记得我一开始对他并没有什么好感。是的，刚开始我们的聚会到了最后，互相总是产生强烈的敌意。比如，我记得就在我跟着他穿过西鹤贫民区之后不久，有一天晚上我跟他一起到市中心的一家酒馆。我记不清酒馆的名字和方位了，只清楚地记得那是一个黑暗、肮脏的地方，顾客看上去都来自城市的底层。我一进去就感到不安，但松田似乎对这里很熟悉，跟几个围在桌旁打牌的男人打了招呼，便领我走向一个放着一张小空桌子的隔间。

我们坐下不久，两个相貌粗鲁、喝得微醉的男人，踉踉跄跄地走进隔间，想跟我们聊天。松田直截了当地叫他们走开，我还以为要有麻烦了，但松田似乎把两个男人震慑住了，他们一言不发就离开了我们。

之后，我们边喝边聊了一会儿，我很快就发现我们的交谈有点令人恼火。我记得我忍不住对他说：

“毫无疑问，我们画家有时候确实值得你们这样的人取笑。但你想当然地认为我们都很天真，不谙世事，恐怕是不对的。”

松田大笑着说：

“你肯定记得，小野，我认识许多画家。总的来说，你们都是极端颓废的一群人。对这个世界的了解经常还不如一个孩子。”

我刚要反驳，松田又接着说道：“就拿你的这个计划来说吧，小野。就是你刚才非常真诚地提出的那个计划。它很令人感动，但是请原谅，却正好反映了你们这些画家特有的天真。”

“我不明白为什么我的想法值得你这样嘲笑。我本以为你很关心这个城里的穷人，看来我是错了。”

“你不用这样孩子气地改变话题。你很清楚我关心他们。可是让我们暂且考虑一下你的那个小小的计划吧。假设你的老师破天荒地动了恻隐之心。然后你们整个别墅的人就会花一个星期，或两个星期创作——什么呢？——二十幅画？最多三十幅。似乎没必要再多画了，反正你们最多也只能卖出十多幅。然后你们会怎么做呢，小野？带着辛辛苦苦挣来的一小袋硬币走进这个城市的贫民区？碰到一个穷人就给一分钱？”

“请原谅，松田，但我必须再说一遍——你把我想得这么幼稚是大错特错了。我从来也没有提议画展仅限于毛利君师生。我很清楚我们想要缓解的贫困规模有多大，所以才来跟你商量这个建议。你们冈田——武田协会正可以推动这样一个计划。全城定期举办大型画展，吸引更多的画家，会给那些人带来很大的救助。”

“对不起，小野，”松田说，笑微微地摇了摇头，“但恐怕我的判断是正确的。作为一个整体，你们画家是极其幼稚的。”他靠在椅背上，叹了口气。桌上满是烟灰，松田若有所思地用前面客人留下的一个空火柴盒的边缘在烟灰里画出图案。“最近有一种画家，”他继续说道，“他们的最大才华就是远离现实世界，躲在象牙塔内。不幸的是，这样的画家目前还占主导地位，而你，小野，正受到其中一位画家的影响。别这么生气，这是事实。你对这个世界的认识还像个孩子。比如，我怀疑你能不能告诉我卡尔·马克思是谁。”

我气呼呼地看了他一眼，没有说话。他笑了一声，说：“明白了吧？你也别太难过。你的大多数同事并不比你懂得多。”

“别胡扯了。我当然知道卡尔·马克思。”

“哎哟，对不起，小野。也许我低估你了。那么，请你跟我谈谈马克思吧。”

我耸了耸肩，说：“我记得他领导了俄国革命。”

“那么列宁是怎么回事呢，小野？他也许是马克思的副指挥官？”

“大概是同事吧。”我看见松田又露出了微笑，便不等他开口，赶紧说道：“反正，你真是荒唐。这些都是某个遥远国家的事情。我们现在谈的是这个城里的穷人。”

“是的，小野，是的。可是你看，你其实什么都不知道。你认为冈田——武田协会一心想唤醒画家，把他们领入现实世界，这点没错。但如果我什么时候说过我们协会想变成一只大的讨饭碗，那我就是误导了你。我们对慈善不感兴趣。”

“我不明白做点善事有什么不对。如果与此同时还能打开我们这些颓废画家的眼睛，那就更好了，我应该想到的。”

“如果你相信一点好心肠的善事能帮助我们国家的穷人，那你的眼睛还远远没有睁开，小野。事实是，日本面临危机。我们落在贪婪的商人和软弱的政客手中。这样的人会让贫困日益加剧。除非，我们新生的一代采取行动。但我不是政治鼓动家，小野。我关心的是艺术，是你这样的画家。有才华的年轻画家，还没有被你那个封闭的小世界永远地蒙蔽双眼。冈田——武田的存在是为了帮助你这样的人睁开双眼，为这个艰难时代创作出真正有价值的作品。”

“请原谅，松田，但我觉得你才是天真幼稚的。一位画家关心的是如何捕捉到美。他在这方面不管技艺多么高超，都不会对你说的那些事情产生什么影响。是的，如果冈田——武田真的像你所说的那样，那么我觉得它是个拙劣的构想，建立在一个错误的想法上，不清楚艺术到底能做什么、不能做什么。”

“你知道得很清楚，小野，我们看问题没有这么简单。事实上，冈田——武田的存在不是孤立的。生活的各个领域都有我们这样的年轻人——在政界、军界——大家的想法都一样。我们是新生的一代。我们团结起来，就有能力做出真正有价值的事业。正好，我们一些人对艺术情有独钟，希望看到艺术能响应当今世界的呼唤。事实上，小野，在这样的时期，当周围的人民越来越贫穷，孩子们越来越饥饿、病弱，一个画家躲在象牙塔里精益求精地画艺伎是远远不够的。看得出来，你生我的气了，正在绞尽脑汁想办法反驳我。其实我是一片好意，小野。我希望你过后仔细考虑一下这些事情。因为你确实是一个才华横溢的人。”

“那么，你告诉我，松田，我们这些颓废愚蠢的画家怎么帮助你们实现政治革命呢？”

令我恼火的是，松田在桌子对面又露出那种轻蔑的笑容。“革命？说实在的，小野，共产主义者想要革命，我们可不要那玩意儿。实际上正好相反。我们要的是光复。我们只是希望天皇陛下恢复他一国之主的正当地位。”

“可是天皇已经在这个位置上了。”

“说实在的，小野，你可真是幼稚糊涂。”他的语气虽然还是一如既往地平静，这时似乎显出了一些严厉。“天皇是我们当然的领袖，然而实际上是怎样呢？他的权利都被那些商人和他们的政客夺走了。听我说，小野，日本不再是个落后的农业国家。我们现在是个强大的民族，能跟任何西方国家抗衡。在亚洲半球，日本像一个巨人，屹立在侏儒和残废中间。可是我们却眼睁睁地看着我们的人民越来越水深火热，我们的孩子死于营养不良。与此同时，商人越来越富，政客永远在那里找借口、扯闲话。你能想象任何一个西方国家允许这样的局面存在吗？他们肯定早就采取行动了。”

“行动？你指的是什么样的行动，松田？”

“现在我们应该打造一个像英国和法国那样强大而富有的帝国。我们必须利用我们的力量向外扩张。时机已到，日本应该在世界列强中占领它应得的位置。相信我吧，小野，我们有办法做到这点，但还没有找到决心。而且我们必须摆脱那些商人和政客。然后，军队就会只听从天皇陛下的召唤。”说到这里，他微微一笑，目光又转向他在烟灰里画的图案。“但这只是别人操心的事，”他说，“我们这样的人，小野，关心的只是艺术。”

不过，我相信两三个星期后乌龟在废弃的厨房里的紧张不安，跟我那天晚上跟松田讨论的这些事情并没有多大关系。乌龟没有这样的洞察力，能从我那幅没有完成的作品里看到这么多东西。他所能看出的，只是作品体现了对毛利君风格的明目张胆的忽视，而且我没有像其他同学那样努力去捕捉娱乐世界里转瞬即逝的灯光。作品用大胆的书法来强调视觉冲击，当然，更重要的是，乌龟看到我大量使用硬笔勾勒轮廓——你知道的，这是一种传统画法，而毛利君教学的基础就是反对这种画法——乌龟看到这点，肯定是大惊失色了。

不管他愤怒的原因是什么，从那天早晨之后我就知道，我再也不可能向周围的人隐瞒我的那些快速形成的思想，而且老师早晚也会有

所耳闻。因此，当我跟毛利君在高见花园的亭子里进行那番谈话的时候，我已经在脑海里反复想过怎么对他说，告诉他我已经决定不让自己趋炎附势。

大约是厨房那个上午过去一星期后，我和毛利君下午到城里办事——大概是采买颜料吧，我记不清了。但我记得我们办事的时候，毛利君对我的态度没有任何异样。夜幕降临时，我们发现离火车进站还有一点时间，便顺着横河车站后面陡峭的台阶，走向上面的高见花园。

当时，高见花园有一座非常宜人的亭子，就建在山坡上，俯瞰着下面的地区——实际上离今天的和平纪念碑所在的地方不远。那个亭子最吸引人的特点是古雅的亭檐上挂满了灯笼——但我记得那天晚上我们走近时，那些灯笼都没有点亮。亭子里面像大房间一样宽敞，但四周没有围墙，只有拱柱支撑着顶部，那些柱子挡住了从这里看下去的景致。

那天晚上跟毛利君在一起，很可能是我第一次发现那个亭子。在后来许多年里，它一直是最喜欢的地方，直到在战争中被摧毁。我和我的学生路过那里时，我经常带他们到亭子里去。是的，我相信在战争刚刚开始后，我和黑田就在那个亭子里进行了最后一次谈话，他是我的学生中最有天分的一个。

总之，我记得我第一次跟毛利君走进亭子时，天空变成了浅红色，下面仍然可见的那片黑乎乎的屋顶正在亮起一盏盏灯。毛利君往前走了几步，然后靠在一根柱子上，仰望着天空，神情里有几分满足，他并不转身地对我说：

“小野，我们的帕子里有一些火柴和蜡烛。劳驾你把这些灯笼点亮。我想效果肯定非常有趣。”

我绕着亭子点亮一盏盏灯笼，周围寂静无声的花园便隐入黑暗之中。我点灯的时候，时不时地扫一眼毛利君被夜空衬托着的身影。他若有所思地望着外面的景色。大概点到一半灯笼的时候，我听见他说：

“那么，小野，是什么让你这么烦恼呢？”

“您说什么，先生？”

“你今天提到，有件事让你很烦恼。”

我轻轻笑了一声，伸手去点一盏灯笼。

“一件小事，先生。我不想拿它烦扰先生，但我实在不知道该怎么办。是这样的，两天前，我发现我的一些画被人拿走了，我一直把它们放在旧厨房里的。”

毛利君沉默了一会儿，然后说：

“别人对这件事怎么说？”

“我问过他们，但好像没有人知道。至少，没有人愿意告诉我。”

“那你得出了什么结论呢，小野？难道有人阴谋暗算你？”

“嗯，实际上，先生，别人似乎都巴不得躲着我。是的，这几天我没能跟他们任何人说上一句话。我刚走进一间屋子，人们就沉默下来，或者干脆一走了之。”

他听了这话未作评论，我朝他看了一眼，他似乎仍然全神贯注地望着日落的天空。我正在点亮另一盏灯笼，又听他说道：

“你的画目前在我手里。对不起，我把它们拿走，让你紧张了。只是那天我碰巧有点时间，就想看看你最近的作品。你当时好像出去了。我想你回来后我应该告诉你的，小野。我向你道歉。”

“哎呀，没关系的，先生。您对拙作这样感兴趣，我真是感激不尽。”

“我当然应该感兴趣。你是我最有成就的学生。这么多年来我一直在培养你。”

“那是那是，先生。我欠您的恩情实在太多了。”

我们俩都沉默了一会儿，我继续点灯笼。然后我停来说道：

“知道我的画完好无损，我心里一块石头落了地。我应该知道事情其实很简单。现在我可以放心了。”

毛利君听了这话什么也没说，从他的侧影看，他仍然在眺望夜景。我想他大概没有听见我的话，就提高点声音说道：

“知道我的画完好无损，我总算可以放心了。”

“是的，小野。”毛利君说，似乎从某种沉思中被惊醒了。“那天我手头正好有点空闲，就叫人去把你最近的作品拿来了。”

“我真蠢，不应该担心的。我很高兴我的画完好无损。”

他良久没有开口，我又以为他没有听见我的话。可是他突然说：“我看见的东西让我感到有点吃惊。你似乎在另辟蹊径。”

当然啦，他也许并没有使用这个词，“另辟蹊径”。因为我想起这个词是我自己后来经常使用的，我很可能是想起了后来我自己在那个亭子里对黑田说的话。可是，我相信毛利君确实有时提到“另辟蹊径”。也许，这又一次证明我继承了老师的特点。总之，我记得我当时没有回答，只是不自然地笑了一声，便伸手去点另一盏灯笼。这时我听见他说：

“年轻画家做些尝试不是一件坏事。至少，他可以摆脱一些比较肤浅的兴趣。然后胸有成竹地回到更加严肃的作品上来。”他顿了顿，又仿佛是自言自语地说：“是的，做些尝试不是一件坏事。年轻人是难免的。绝对不是一件坏事。”

“先生，”我说，“我强烈地感觉到我最近的作品是我画过的最好的。”

“不是一件坏事，绝对不是一件坏事。可是，不应该把太多的时间花在这样的尝试上。不然就会变成一个耽于旅行的人。最好还是趁早回到严肃的作品上来。”

我等着，看他是否还有话要说。过了片刻，我说：“我还担心那些画的安全，实在是太愚蠢了。可是您看，先生，它们比我的其他作品更让我感到骄傲。其实，我应该猜到事情的原因就这么简单。”

毛利君仍然沉默着。我越过正在点亮的那盏灯笼看了他一眼，看不清他是在考虑我的话，还是在想另外的事。夜幕继续降临，我点亮的灯笼越来越多，亭子里的光影很奇特。但我还是只能看见毛利君的剪影靠在柱子上，背对着我。

“顺便说一句，”他终于说道，“我听说你最近完成了一两幅作品，它们不在我拿到的那些画里。”

“很有可能，有一两幅画我没有跟别的放在一起。”

“啊。这些无疑就是你最喜欢的画了。”

我没有回答。毛利君接着说道：

“我们回去之后，小野，也许你会把另外那几幅画拿给我。我很想看看。”

我考虑了一会儿，说道：“当然，我会非常感谢先生对它们的评论。可是，我记不清我把它们放在哪儿了。”

“我相信你会努力把它们找到的。”

“我会的，先生。现在，我或许应该把其他的画从先生那里拿回来，感谢先生对它们的兴趣。它们无疑给您的屋子添乱了，我一回去就尽快把它们拿走。”

“不用管那些画，小野。你只要找到剩下的那些画，拿来给我就行了。”

“很遗憾，先生，我恐怕找不到剩下来的那些画了。”

“明白了，小野。”他疲惫地叹了口气，我看见他又一次抬头仰望夜空。“那么，你认为你不可能把你的那些画拿给我看了？”

“是的，先生，恐怕不能。”

“明白了。当然，你已经考虑过倘若离开我这里后的前途了。”

“我希望先生能理解我的想法，继续支持我追求事业。”

他继续沉默，于是我接着说：

“先生，离开别墅我会感到非常痛苦。过去这几年是我生命中最快乐、最有价值的一段时光。我把同事们都看作亲兄弟。至于先生，唉，千言万语说不尽先生的恩情。我请求您再看看我的新作品，重新审视一下。也许，我们回去后，先生会允许我解释每幅画的意图。”

他似乎没有听见我的话。我便又说道：

“这些年我学到不少东西。探究娱乐世界，发现它的转瞬即逝的美，这些都使我受益匪浅。但我觉得现在我应该向别的方面发展了。先生，我相信在这个动荡不安的时代，画家必须看重一些比随着晨光消失的欢乐更加实在的东西。画家不必总是缩在一个颓废而闭塞的世界里。先生，我的责任心告诉我，我不能永远做一个浮世画家。”

说完，我把注意力又转向灯笼。过了片刻，毛利君说：

“一段时间以来，你一直是最优秀的学生。看到你离开我会很惋惜的。这样吧，给你三天时间把剩下来的那些画拿给我。你把它们拿来给我，然后把心思转入正轨。”

“我已经说过了，先生，我非常遗憾，不能把那些画拿给您。”

毛利君发出一点声音，似乎是对自己笑了笑。然后他说：“正如你刚才指出的，小野，这是一个动荡不安的时代。对于一个默默无闻、没权没势的年轻画家来说更是如此。如果你不是这样有才华，我会为你离开我之后的前途担心。但你是个聪明人。你肯定已经做好了安排。”

“实际上，我没有做任何安排。这么长时间以来，别墅一直是我的家。我从没认真考虑过要离开它。”

“是吗。好吧，就像我说的，小野，如果你不是这么有才华，我倒是有理由替你担心。但你是个聪明的年轻人。”我看见毛利君的剪影转过来对着我。“你肯定能找到给杂志和漫画书画插图的工作。说不定，你还能进入一家来我这里之前受雇的那种公司。当然，这将意味着你作为一名严肃画家的生涯到此结束，但所有这些你无疑已经考虑过了。”

身为老师，明知道一位学生仍然对他心存仰慕，却说出这样报复性的话来，真是大可不必。可是，一位绘画大师投入这么多时间和资源培养一个学生，而且允许学生的名字公开与他自己的名字联系在一起，那么他一时失态，做出令自己后悔的反应，即便不是可以原谅的，也应该是可以理解的。在作品的所有权上耍心眼无疑显得有些小气，可是，如果大多数作画材料和颜料都是老师提供的，那么他偶尔忘记学生有权任意处置自己的作品，当然也是可以理解的。

但是，作为一个老师——不管他多么有名——表现出这样的傲慢，这样的占有欲，着实令人遗憾。现在，我的脑海里还时常会浮现出那个寒冷冬日的早晨，那股烟味儿再次扑鼻而来，比以往任何时候都更强烈。那是战争爆发前的冬天，我焦虑地站在黑田住处的门口——是他在中町地区租住的一个简陋住房。我辨别出那股烟味儿是房子里发出来的，里面还传出一个女人的哭泣声。我一个劲儿地拉铃，叫人过来给我开门，可是里面无人应答。最后，我决定自己直接进去，可是我刚把大门拉开，一位穿制服的警察就出现在了门口。

“你想做什么？”他问。

“我来找黑田先生。他在家吗？”

“房主已经被带到警察局接受审问。”

“审问？”

“我建议你回家吧，”警察说，“不然我们也会对你进行调查。我们现在对所有跟房主密切相关的人都感兴趣。”

“可是为什么呢？黑田先生犯了什么事吗？”

“谁也不想跟他这样的人来往。如果你还不走，我们就要把你也弄去审问了。”

房子里，那个女人还在哭泣——我断定那是黑田的母亲。我还听见有人大声对她嚷嚷着什么。

“负责的警官在哪里？”我问。

“快走吧，你想被捕吗？”

“你先别忙，让我解释一下，”我说，“我的名字是小野。”警察毫无反应，于是我不太有把握地继续说：“是我向你们通风报信，你们才过来的。我是小野增二，是画家和内务部文化委员会的委员。实际上，我还是反爱国动向委员会的官方顾问。我认为这里肯定有某些误会，我想跟负责的人谈谈。”

警察将信将疑地看了我一会儿，转身进了房子。很快，他回来了，示意我进去。

我跟着他走进黑田的住所，看见柜子和抽屉里的东西都被倾倒在地板上。我发现有些书捆起来堆在了地上，客厅里的榻榻米被掀开，一个警察举着火把查看下面的地板。从一个关着门的房间里，我更清楚地听见黑田的母亲在哭泣，一个警察在粗声恶气地审问她。

我被领到房子后面的阳台上。在小院子中央，另一位穿制服的警察和一个便衣站在一堆火旁。便衣转过身来，朝我走了几步。

“小野先生么？”他很恭敬地问。

领我进来的那个警察似乎意识到刚才不该对我那么粗鲁，立刻转身进屋去了。

“黑田先生怎么了？”

“去接受审问了，小野先生。别担心，我们会照顾好他的。”

我望着他身后已快要熄灭的火堆。那个穿制服的警察正用一根棍子在里面捅着。

“你们烧掉这些画作得到过官方许可吗？”我问。

“我们的政策是，凡是不需要作为证据的有害物品一律销毁。我们已经挑了足够的样品。剩下来的这些垃圾就烧掉了。”

“我不明白怎么会发生这种事情。我只是建议委员会派人过来跟黑田先生谈谈，这也是为了他好。”我又看着院子中央那堆快要熄灭的火。“完全没必要把这些东西烧掉。里面有许多很不错的作品。”

“小野先生，我们很感谢您的帮助。但现在调查已经开始，您必须让有关部门来处理这件事。我们向您保证，黑田先生会得到公正的待遇的。”

他微笑着，把脸转向火堆，对那个穿制服的警察说了一句什么。警察又往火里捅了几下，压低声音嘟囔了一句，好像是：“反爱国的垃圾。”

我留在阳台上，不敢相信地注视着这一切。最后，那个便衣又转向我说：“小野先生，我建议您还是回家吧。”

“事情发展得太过分了，”我说，“你们为什么要审问黑田夫人？这些事跟她有什么关系？”

“现在这是警方的事情，小野先生，已经跟您没有关系了。”

“事情发展得太过分了。我打算跟冲方先生谈谈。没错，我还要直接去找佐分先生本人。”

便衣大声叫屋里的某个人，刚才出来应门的那个警察便出现在我身边。

“感谢小野先生的帮助，送他出去吧。”便衣说。然后他转向火堆，突然咳嗽了一声。“劣质作品的烟味也难闻。”他笑着说，一边用手扇着面前的空气。

可是我又离题了。我记得我是在回忆上个月节子短暂来访的那天的事情。实际上，我是在叙述太郎在饭桌上讲同事的故事，逗得我们开怀大笑。

我记得晚饭在非常令人满意的气氛中进行着。但是每次仙子斟酒，我都忍不住忐忑不安地看着一郎。前面几次，他隔着桌子，心照不宣地笑着看我一眼，我尽量不动声色地迎接他的目光。时间一点点过去，酒添了一巡又一巡，他不再看我，而是气呼呼地瞪着给我们斟酒的仙子。

太郎又给我们讲了他同事的几个有趣的故事，然后节子对他说：

“你太有意思了，太郎君。但我听仙子说，你们公司现在士气很高。不用说，在这样的气氛里工作一定很受鼓舞吧？”

听了这话，太郎的态度突然变得非常真诚。“确实如此，节子小姐，”他点点头说，“战后我们做的一些改进，现在公司上下已经看到了成效。如果我们发奋努力，再有不到十年，KNC应该不仅闻名日本，还会蜚声全球呢。”

“太妙了。仙子还告诉我，你们分部的主任是个非常仁慈的人。那肯定对提高士气很有帮助。”

“你说得太对了。早坂先生不仅为人慈善，还是个很有能力和眼光的人。节子小姐，我可以向你保证，在一个没有能力的庸人手下工作，不管他心眼有多好，都是一种令人沮丧的经历。我们真是三生有幸，能有早坂先生这样的人做我们的领导。”

“是啊，池田也很幸运，也有一位非常能干的上司。”

“是吗，节子小姐？我就知道日本电气这样的公司应该是这样的。只有最优秀的人才能在这样的公司里担任一官半职。”

“确实如此，我们太幸运了。但我相信KNC公司也是一样，太郎君。池田一向对KNC评价很高。”

“请原谅，太郎，”我这时插嘴道，“当然，我相信你有足够的理由以乐观的态度看待KNC。但是我一直想问问你，你真的认为战后所做的那么多彻底改变是有益的吗？我听说旧的管理模式几乎都不存在了。”

女婿若有所思地微笑着，然后说道：“非常感谢岳父大人的关心。年轻和活力并不总能产生最好的结果。可是坦白地说，岳父大人，我们需要彻底改头换面。当今的世界需要新的领导、新的举措。”

“当然，当然。你们的新领导都是最有能力的人，对此我毫不怀疑。可是，太郎，请你告诉我，你有时候是否担心我们跟随美国人的步子有点太仓促了？我举双手赞成许多旧的方式必须彻底废除，可是，你难道没有想过，一些好东西也跟糟粕一起被丢弃了吗？是的，有时候日本看上去就像一个小孩子在跟一个不认识的大人学习。”

“父亲说得很对。我确实认为我们有时候太仓促了点。但是总的来说，美国人是有大量东西值得我们学习的。就拿最近几年来说吧，我们日本在理解民主和个人权益等问题上已经前进了一大步。说实在的，岳父大人，我感到日本终于打好地基，要创建一个美好的未来了。所以，我们这样的公司才能够信心百倍地展望未来。”

“是的，大郎君，”节子说，“池田也有这样的感觉。他最近许多次发表他的观点，说经过四年的混乱，我们国家终于确定了今后的蓝图。”

虽然我女儿是在对大郎说话，但我明显感觉到她这番话是说给我听的。大郎似乎也这么认为，他没有回答节子，而是继续对我说：

“实际上，岳父大人，上个星期我参加了毕业生的聚餐，自日本投降后，生活在各个阶层的代表第一次表达了对未来的乐观情绪。大家感到绝不只是在KNC事情步入正轨。我完全理解岳父大人的担忧，但我相信，这些年的教训总的来说是有益的，会领导我们开创一个美好的未来。但我也许说得不对，岳父大人。”

“没有，没有，”我笑着对他说，“正如你说的，你们这代人有一个美好的未来。而且你们都这样信心十足。我只能深深地祝福你们。”

女婿似乎想回答，但就在这时，一郎就像先前那样，隔着桌子用手指敲敲酒瓶。大郎转向他，说：“啊，一郎君，我们的谈话正缺你呢。告诉我，你长大以后想做什么？”

外孙继续端详了一会儿酒瓶，然后气呼呼地看了我一眼。他母亲碰了碰他的胳膊，轻声对他说：“一郎，大郎姨夫问你呢。你告诉他你将来想做什么。”

“日本电气公司总裁！”一郎大声宣布。

我们都笑了。

“你可以肯定吗，一郎君？”大郎问，“你不想当我们KNC的老板？”

“日本电气是最好的公司！”

我们又都笑了。

“真是太遗憾了，”大郎说，“几年以后我们KNC正需要一郎君这样的人呢。”

这段对话似乎让一郎暂时忘记了清酒，从这时起，他一直显得很开心，大人为什么事发笑的时候，他也跟着大声起哄。只是晚饭快要结束时，他用漫不经心的口吻问道：

“酒都喝完了？”

“都喝完了，”仙子说，“一郎君还想喝橘子汁吗？”

一郎彬彬有礼地拒绝了，又转向正在对他解释什么事情的大郎。然而，我还是能想象到他的失望，心里对节子有点恼火，她为什么不能多体谅体谅儿子的感受呢？

大约一个多小时后，我走进公寓的那间小客房跟一郎道晚安，才有机会单独跟他说话。灯还亮着，但一郎已经钻进被窝，他趴着，面颊贴着枕头。我关掉灯，发现对面公寓楼的灯光透过百叶窗照进来，把一道道横格栅的影子投在天花板和墙上。隔壁屋子传来两个女儿的笑声，我跪在一郎的床边，他轻声说：

“外公，仙子小姨喝醉了吗？”

“好像没有，一郎。她只是在笑什么事情。”

“她可能有点醉了，你说呢，外公？”

“嗯，也许吧。有一点点醉，没什么关系的。”

“女人对付不了清酒，是不是，外公？”他说，对着枕头咯咯笑出了声。

我笑了一声，对他说：“知道吗，一郎，没必要为今晚喝酒的事难过。其实没什么大不了的。你很快就长大了，到时候想喝多少酒就喝多少酒。”

我起身走到窗户前，看看能不能把百叶窗关严一点。我开关了几次，但窗条之间的缝隙还是很大，我总能看见对面公寓里亮灯的窗户。

“是的，一郎，真的没什么可难过的。”

外孙一时没有说话。然后我听见身后传来他的声音：“外公不要担心。”

“哦？这话是什么意思呢，一郎？”

“外公不要担心。如果外公担心，就睡不着觉。年纪大的人睡不着觉，就会生病。”

“明白了。很好，一郎。外公保证不担心。你也不许难过。实际上，真的没有什么可难过的。”

一郎没有说话。我又把百叶窗开合了一次。

“当然啦，”我说，“如果一郎今晚真的坚持要喝酒，外公肯定会站出来让他喝到的。可是，我想我们这次让着女人是对的。没必要为这样的小事惹她们生气。”

“有时候在家里，”一郎说，“爸爸想做一件事，妈妈不许他做。有时候，就连爸爸也斗不过妈妈。”

“是吗。”我笑着说。

“所以外公不要担心。”

“我们俩都没有什么可担心的，一郎。”我从窗口转过身，又跪在一郎的被子旁边。“好了，你睡吧。”

“外公晚上还走吗？”

“是啊，外公很快就回自己家里去。”

“为什么外公不能也住在这里？”

“这里没有地方了，一郎。外公自己有一座大房子，记得吗？”

“外公明天去车站送我们吗？”

“当然，一郎，我会去的。而且，你肯定很快又会来看我们的。”

“外公不要难过没让妈妈给我喝酒。”

“你看起来长得很快，一郎，”我笑着说，“你长大后会成为个体面的男子汉。也许你真的会做日本电气的老板，或者类似了不起的人物。好了，我们安静一会儿，看你能不能睡着。”

我在他身边又坐了一会儿，他说话时我轻声回答。我想就在这个时候，我坐在黑暗房间里等外孙睡着，听着隔壁偶尔传来的笑声时，我脑海里又想起了那天上午跟节子在河边公园的对话。这大概是我第一次有机会这么做，在此之前，我并没有觉得节子的话这么令人

恼火。可是我记得，当我离开睡熟的外孙，到客厅里去跟他们一起闲坐时，我已经很生大女儿的气，所以我坐下后不久就对太郎说道：

“你知道吗，有时候想想真奇怪。我和你父亲认识肯定超过十六年了，可是直到去年才成为这样好的朋友。”

“是啊，”女婿说，“但我想事情经常是这样。许多邻居都只是见面打个招呼。想起来挺遗憾的。”

“当然啦，”我说，“拿我和佐藤博士来说，我们不仅仅是邻居。我们俩都跟艺术界有关系，知道对方的名望。我和你父亲没有从一开始就建立友谊，就更令人遗憾了。你认为呢，太郎？”

我说话的时候，迅速扫了一眼节子，看她是否在听。

“确实令人遗憾，”太郎说，“但至少你们最后有机会成为朋友。”

“我的意思是，太郎，正因为我们一直知道对方在艺术界的名望，这件事就更令人遗憾。”

“是啊，确实太遗憾了。按理说，知道邻居也是一个名声显赫的同行，应该使两人关系更加亲密才是。可是我想，大家都忙忙碌碌，经常也就顾不上了。”

我有些得意地朝节子看了一眼，但是看女儿的神情，似乎没有理解太郎这番话的意思。当然啦，她可能并没在听，但我猜想节子实际上是听懂了，只是为了自尊没有朝我看，因为这番话足以证明她那天上午在河边公园的含沙射影是完全错误的。

我们迈着悠闲的步子，走在宽阔的中央林荫大道上，欣赏着两边秋天的树木。我们在交流仙子对新生活的感觉，一致认为从各个方面来看，仙子非常幸福。

“真是谢天谢地，”我说，“她的终身大事成了我的一块心病，现在一切都显得这么美满。太郎是个很不错的人。”

“想起来真奇怪，”节子微笑着说，“就在一年前，我们还那么为她操心。”

“多么令人欣慰啊。你知道吗，节子，我很感谢你在这件事上的帮助。事情进展不顺利的时候，你给了你妹妹很大的支持。”

“恰恰相反，我做得很少，还差得远呢。”

“当然啦，”我笑着说，“去年是你提醒了我。‘预防措施’——还记得吗，节子？你看，我没有把你的建议当耳旁风。”

“对不起，爸爸，什么建议？”

“好了，节子，没必要这样遮遮掩掩。现在我非常愿意承认我事业中有些方面是不值得我感到自豪的。是的，就像你建议的那样，我在商量婚事的时候这样承认了。”

“对不起，我真不明白爸爸指的是什么。”

“仙子没有跟你说过相亲的事？那天晚上，我确保她的幸福不会因为我的事业而受到阻碍。我相信我不管怎样都会那么去做的，但我还是感谢你去年的建议。”

“请原谅，爸爸，我不记得去年提过什么建议呀。至于相亲的事，仙子确实跟我提过许多次。实际上相亲后不久她就给我写了封信，表示对爸爸……爸爸说的关于自己的话感到意外。”

“我知道她肯定感到意外。仙子总是低估她的老爸。但我可不是那种人，太要面子，不敢面对现实，就让自己的女儿受苦。”

“仙子对我说，她对爸爸那天晚上的行为感到非常困惑。似乎佐藤一家也很困惑。谁都不明白爸爸那么做是什么意思。是的，我把仙子的信念给池田听的时候，他也表示迷惑不解。”

“这可真奇怪，”我笑着说，“哎呀，节子，去年不是你督促我这么做的吗。是你建议我采取‘预防措施’，免得我们像错过三宅一样，错过跟佐藤家的联姻。你不记得了吗？”

“我一定是太健忘了，真的想不起来爸爸指的是什么。”

“噢，节子，这可真奇怪。”

节子突然停住脚步，大声说道：“这个时候的枫叶真好看！”

“是啊，”我说，“到了深秋肯定还会更好看。”

“太美了。”女儿笑着说，我们继续往前走。然后她说：“实际上，爸爸，昨天晚上我们谈到一两件事，谈话中大郎君碰巧提到他上星期跟你在一起。你们谈到一位作曲家最近自杀了。”

“野口由纪夫？啊，对了，我记起那段对话了。让我想想，我记得大郎说那个人的自杀是毫无疑义的。”

“大郎君有点担心爸爸对野口先生的死太感兴趣。是的，爸爸似乎在拿野口先生的事业跟自己相比。我们听到这个消息都很担心。实际上，我们最近都有点担心，是不是爸爸退休以后变得有点情绪消沉了。”

我笑了，说：“你尽可以放宽心，节子。我从来没有考虑采取野口先生那样的行动。”

“据我理解，”她继续说，“野口先生的歌曲在战争的每个阶段都流传得很广。所以他才希望跟政治家和军官们一起承担责任。而爸爸这么想自己就错了。爸爸毕竟只是一个画家。”

“我向你保证，节子，我绝对不会考虑采取野口那样的行为。我可以毫不自夸地说，我当年也是个很有影响的人，并把这种影响用于灾难性的目的。”

女儿似乎思索了一会儿，然后说道：

“请原谅，也许我们应该以正确的角度看问题。爸爸画了许多优秀的杰作，毫无疑问在其他画家中是最有影响的。但是爸爸的作品跟我们正在谈论的这些大事没什么关系。爸爸只是一位画家。他千万别再以为自己做了多大的错事。”

“哎哟，节子，这个建议可跟去年的完全不同。当时我的事业似乎是个很大的罪过呢。”

“请原谅，爸爸，但我只能再说一遍，我不明白你为什么提到去年的婚事。是的，我不明白爸爸的事业会跟婚事扯上什么关系。似乎佐藤一家压根儿就不关心，就像我们说的，他们对爸爸在相亲时的表现很不理解。”

“这倒很奇怪了，节子。事实上，我和佐藤博士已经认识多年。他是本城最著名的艺术评论家之一，多年来肯定一直关注我的事业，完全知道其中一些令人遗憾的方面。所以，我完全应该在商议婚事的过程中表明我的态度。是的，我坚信佐藤博士很赞赏我的做法。”

“请原谅，但是从大郎君的话里，似乎佐藤博士对爸爸的事业并没有这么熟悉。当然啦，他一直知道爸爸是他的邻居。但是似乎在去年开始谈论婚事之前，他并不知道爸爸跟艺术界有什么关系。”

“你完全错了，节子，”我笑着说，“我和佐藤博士很多年前就知道对方。我们经常站在街上，互相交流艺术界的新鲜事。”

“那我肯定是弄错了。请原谅。但是我需要强调一下，并没有人认为爸爸的过去是需要受到谴责的。所以我们希望爸爸别再把自己想成那位不幸的作曲家那样的人。”

我没有继续跟节子争论，我记得我们很快就开始讨论一些无关紧要的话题。但是，我女儿那天上午的许多断言肯定是错的。首先，佐藤博士不可能这么多年对我作为画家的名望一无所知。那天吃完晚饭后，我想办法让太郎证实这点，只是为了让节子明白，我自己是从未怀疑过的。比如，我十分清楚地记得约十六年前那个晴朗的日子，我站在新家外面修理栅栏时，佐藤博士第一次跟我打招呼。“一位像您这样地位的画家住在我们这里，真是不胜荣幸。”他认出了名牌上我的名字，这么说道。我十分清楚地记得那次见面，节子毫无疑问是弄错了。

[\(1\)](#) 歌麿，全名喜多川歌麿（1753—1806），日本浮世绘画家，以绘制仕女像著称。

一九五〇年六月

昨天快要中午的时候，接到松田先生去世的消息，我给自己简单做了点午饭，然后出去活动活动。

我往山下走去，天气温暖宜人。到了河边，我走上犹疑桥，环顾周围的景色。天空一片蔚蓝，在河岸往前一点的地方，在新公寓楼开始的地方，我看见两个小男孩在水边玩鱼竿。我注视着他们，心里想着松田先生的噩耗。

自从商议仙子婚事的时候跟松田重新建立联系之后，我一直打算多来看看他，然而实际上，直到约莫一个月前，我才再度前往荒川。我完全是心血来潮，并不知道他已经去日无多。也许，松田那天下午向我倾吐心声之后，去世时会感到欣慰一些。

到了他家，铃木小姐一眼就认出了我，兴奋地把让我进去了。看她的样子，似乎自从我十八个月前来过之后，松田先生没有多少拜访者。

“他比你上次来的时候硬朗多了。”铃木小姐高兴地说。

我被让进了客厅，片刻之后，松田不用搀扶走了进来，穿一件宽松的和服。他再次看见我显得很开心，我们谈着无关紧要的小事，谈着认识的熟人。我记得，是铃木小姐端茶进来又离开之后，我才想起来感谢松田在我最近卧病期间写信来鼓励我。

“你似乎恢复得很不错嘛，小野，”他说，“看你的样子，怎么也猜不到你最近刚生过病。”

“现在好多了，”我说，“我要当心，别让自己太累着了。我到哪儿都不得不拄着这根拐棍。在其他方面，我感觉跟以前没有两样。”

“你让我失望了，小野。我还以为我们会是两个同病相怜的老头子呢。可是看你的气色，还跟你上次来的时候一样。我只好坐在这里，嫉妒你的健康。”

“胡说什么呀，松田，你看上去很精神。”

“你别想骗我了，小野，”他笑着说，“不过这一年里我确实增加了一点体重。好了，告诉我，仙子幸福吗？我听说她的婚事进展顺

利。你上次来这里的时候，似乎很为她的将来担心呢。”

“结果非常圆满。今年秋天她就要生孩子了。经过那么多担忧之后，仙子的事情解决得再理想也不过了。”

“秋天就要生孩子了。那肯定是值得期待的。”

“实际上，”我说，“我的大女儿下个月要生她的第二个孩子了。她一直想再要一个孩子，所以这是个特别好的消息。”

“是啊，是啊。很快又有两个外孙了。”他坐在那里，兀自点头微笑。然后他说：“你肯定还记得吧，小野，我一直忙着改造整个世界，无暇考虑自己的终身大事。你还记得你和美智子结婚前，我们俩的那些争论吗？”

我们俩都笑了起来。

“两个外孙，”松田又说，“嗯，那是很值得期待的。”

“是啊，想到我的女儿，我觉得自己非常幸运。”

“告诉我，小野，你最近还作画吗？”

“作几幅水彩画消磨时间。花花草草一类，自娱自乐而已。”

“听到你又在作画我很高兴，画什么都行。你上次来看我的时候，似乎已经彻底放弃作画了。你当时情绪非常消沉。”

“肯定是的。我当时很长时间没拿画笔了。”

“是的，小野，你当时显得非常消沉。”他笑眯眯地抬头看着我，说：“当年，你那么渴望做出伟大的贡献。”

我也微笑地看着他，说：“你也一样，松田。你的抱负不比我小。说到底，我们的中国危机运动的那份宣言还是你写的呢。那样的雄心壮志可不一般啊。”

我们俩又笑了起来。然后他说：

“你肯定还记得，小野，我过去经常说你幼稚，经常取笑你狭窄的艺术家的视野。你总是那么生我的气。唉，最后看来，我们俩的视野都不够开阔啊。”

“我想是的。如果我们看问题更清楚一点，那么松田，像你和我这样的人——谁知道呢？——应该能做出真正有价值的事情。我们曾

经多么有精力、有勇气啊。我们肯定有足够的精力和勇气，才能做出新日本运动这样的壮举，你还记得吗？”

“是啊。当时有一些强大的势力跟我们作对。我们很容易就会失去勇气。我想我们当时的意志肯定非常坚决，小野。”

“可是，至少我一直没有把问题看得很清楚。用你的话说，是艺术家的狭窄视野。唉，即使现在，我也觉得很难想象世界的范围远不止这个城市。”

“最近，”松田说，“我觉得很难想象世界的范围远不止我的花园。所以，现在视野更开阔的也许是你了，小野。”

我们又一起哈哈大笑，然后松田端起茶杯喝了一口。

“我们没必要过分责怪自己，”他说，“我们至少为自己的信念而尽力了。只是到了最后，我们发现自己只是芸芸众生。是没有特殊洞察力的芸芸众生。在这样的时代做芸芸众生，算是我们的不幸吧。”

松田刚才提到他的花园，把我的注意力引到了那边。这是一个温和的春日午后，铃木小姐让纱门半开着，所以从我坐的地方能看到明亮的阳光照在阳台干干净净的木板上。一阵微风吹进屋里，里面有一股淡淡的烟味儿。我站起来，朝纱门走去。

“烧东西的气味仍然让我感到不安，”我说，“就在不久前，它还意味着大火和爆炸。”我继续凝望着外面的花园，过了一会儿继续说：“到下个月，美智子就去世五年了。”

松田继续沉默了一阵，然后我听见他在我身后说：

“这些日子，烟味儿一般意味着某个邻居在清理他的花园。”

房间里的什么地方，钟开始敲响了。

“该去喂鲤鱼了，”松田说，“知道吗，我跟铃木小姐争论了很长时间，她才让我重新开始喂鱼。我以前每天都喂，可是几个月前，我在那些踏脚石上滑了一跤。后来我不得不跟她争论了很长时间。”

松田站起身，穿上放在阳台上的一双草鞋，跟我一起走进了花园。花园那头的池塘沐浴在阳光下，我们小心翼翼地踩着那些踏脚石，走过布满青苔的滑腻腻的小土墩。

我们站在池塘边，看着幽深的池水，突然一个响声，惊得我们都抬头看去。在离我们不远的地方，一个约莫四五岁的小男孩从花园栅栏顶上朝我们看，两只胳膊都吊在树枝上。松田笑了，大声喊道：

“啊，下午好，小少爷！”

小男孩继续盯着我们看了一会儿，然后就消失了。松田笑着开始往水里扔鱼食。“邻居家的孩子，”他说，“每天这个时候都要爬到那棵树上看我出来喂鱼。但他很害羞，我一跟他说话，他就跑了。”他对自己笑了一声。“我经常纳闷他为什么每天不厌其烦地这么做。有什么可看的呢？一个拄拐棍的老头子，站在池塘边喂鱼。我不知道这副情景有什么让他这么着迷的。”

我又看看栅栏上刚才那张小脸出现的地方，说：“啊，今天他有了意外发现。今天他看见两个拄拐杖的老头子站在池塘边。”

松田开心地笑了起来，继续往水里扔鱼食。两三条漂亮的鲤鱼跃出水面，鳞片在阳光下闪闪发亮。

“军官，政治家，商人，”松田说，“他们都因为国家的遭遇而受到谴责。至于我们这样的人，小野，我们的贡献一向微乎其微。现在没有人在意你我这样的人曾经做过什么。他们看着我们，只看见两个拄拐棍的老头子。”他笑微微地看着我，然后继续喂鱼。“如今在意的只有我们，只有你我这样的人，小野，我们回顾自己的一生，看到它们的瑕疵，如今在意的只有我们。”

那天下午，松田虽然嘴里这么说，但举止神态却显示他压根不是一个感到幻灭的人。他当然更没有理由在幻灭中死去。也许，他回顾自己的一生时确实看到某些瑕疵，但他肯定也认识到，他能够引以自豪的正是这些方面。正如他自己指出的，他和我这样的人，我们欣慰地知道，当年我们不管做了什么，都是凭着一腔热血去做的。当然啦，我们有一些大胆的举动，做事情经常过于投入。但这比起因为缺乏勇气或意志力，而从来不敢尝试自己相信的东西来，肯定更值得称道。当一个人从内心深处产生信念时，再犹豫不决便是卑鄙的了。我相信，松田回顾自己的一生时，一定也会这样想的。

我经常想起一个特定的时刻——是一九三八年的五月，就在我获得重田基金奖后不久。事业发展到那个时候，我已经获得过各种奖项和荣誉，但重田基金奖在大部分人心目中是一个重要的里程碑。而且我记得，我们就在那个星期完成了我们的新日本运动，并取得巨大成功。颁奖后的那天晚上举办了盛大的庆祝活动。我记得我坐在左右宫

里，被学生和新老同事们围在中间，不断接受敬酒，耳边全是溢美之词。那天晚上，各种各样的熟人都到左右宫来向我表示祝贺。我甚至记得，一位我以前从没见过的警长也赶来祝贺。奇怪的是，那天晚上我虽然很高兴，心里却并没有获奖理应带来的深深的成就感和满足感。实际上，直到几天之后，我出门来到若叶省的山区时，才体会到了这样的感受。

我已经有大约十六年没有再去若叶了——自从离开毛利君的别墅后就没有去过。当时我走得那么坚决，其实心里很惶恐，担心我的未来一无所成。这么多年来，我虽然跟毛利君断绝了一切正式联系，但我对任何跟我以前的老师有关的消息都很好奇，所以完全清楚他在城里的名望不断下降。他努力在歌麿传统中加入欧洲画风，却被认为其基调是反爱国的，我不时听说他挣扎着举办画展，地点越来越名不见经传。实际上，我从不止一个渠道得知，他为了维持生计，已经开始给流行杂志画插图了。与此同时，我相信毛利君一直在关注我事业的发展，肯定也已听说我获得重田基金奖。那天，我在乡村车站下火车时，内心强烈地感受到时光飞逝，物是人非。

那是一个阳光灿烂的春日午后，我顺着那些林间山路朝毛利君的别墅走去。我走得很慢，回忆着我当年走在这条路上的熟悉的感觉。我一边走，一边想象着我跟毛利君再次面对面会怎么样。也许他会把我当成贵宾，也许他会像我在别墅最后那段日子一样冷淡、漠然，也许，他对我的态度，会像当年我是他的得意门生时那样——似乎我们各自的地位并没有发生这样大的变化。我觉得最后一种可能性最大，我记得我脑子里盘算着我如何作答。我决定不按过去的老习惯称他为“先生”，而只是把他当成一个同行那样来称呼。如果他死活不肯承认我现在的地位，我会友好地笑一声，说一句这样的话：“你看，毛利君，我并没有像你曾经担心的那样，不得不去给漫画书画插图。”

后来我发现，我在高高的山路上已经走到那个制高点，从这里可以清楚地看到下面洼地里绿树丛中的别墅。我停下脚步欣赏这片景致，就像多年前经常做的那样。一阵风吹来，沁人心脾，我看见下面山洼里的树轻轻摇摆。我不知道别墅有没有重新装修过，从这么远的距离是看不出来的。

过了一会儿，我坐在山上的杂草丛中，继续凝望着毛利君的别墅。我在乡村车站的一个小摊上买了些橘子，我把它们从帕子里拿出来，开始一个接一个地吃着。我坐在那里，俯瞰着别墅，津津有味地品尝着新鲜的橘子，这时候，那种深深的成就感和满足感才开始在内

心升起。那种感觉很难描述，它与较小的成就所带来的得意截然不同——而且，正如我说的，也不同于我在左右宫的庆祝会上的任何感受。那是一种内心深处的喜悦，坚信自己的努力得到了公正的承认。我付出的艰辛，我战胜的疑虑，所有的一切都是值得的。我取得了真正有价值的卓越成就。那天，我没有再往别墅走——那似乎已经毫无意义。我只是在那里坐了一小时左右，吃着那些橘子，内心无比满足。

我想，不是许多人都能体会到那种感觉的。乌龟那样的人——绅太郎那样的人——他们也许很勤勉，有能力，没恶意，但他们永远不会知道我那天感受到的那种幸福。因为他们不知道勇于冒险、超越平庸是什么滋味。

不过，松田完全不同。我和他虽然经常争吵，但我们的生活方式是完全一致的，我相信他也能回忆起一两个这样的时刻。上次我们交谈时，他脸上带着温和的笑容，对我说：“我们至少是凭信念做事，而且不遗余力。”也许人到后来会重新评价自己的成就，但知道一生中有一两次像我那天在高高的山路上体会到的那种真正的满足，也是令人欣慰的。

昨天早晨，我在犹疑桥上站了片刻，心里想着松田，然后我朝昔日我们的逍遥地所在的地方走去。这里已经重建，变得几乎认不出来了。昔日横贯中心的那条窄巷，当年总是熙熙攘攘，挂满了各种酒馆饭店的旗帜，如今变成了一条宽阔的水泥大道，沉重的大卡车整天在上面来来往往。川上夫人酒馆的旧址，现在是一座四层的玻璃墙办公大楼。周围还有几座这样的大楼，白天可以看见办事员、邮差、送货者忙碌地进进出出。现在要一直走到古川才能看见酒馆，但偶尔会认出一片栅栏或一棵树是昔日留下来的，在这新的背景下显得格格不入。

左右宫曾经所在的地方，如今是一组缩在道路里面的办公室的前院。有些高级职员把车停在这个院里，除此之外，这里主要是铺着沥青的空地，间或种着几棵小树。院子前面对着马路的地方，有一条公园里的那种长凳。我不知道它放在那里给谁坐的，也从没看见那些忙碌的人有谁停下来坐在上面休息。但是我想象这条长凳所占据的位置，非常接近我们昔日在左右宫的那张桌子，所以我有时就喜欢在上面坐坐。这条板凳可能不是对公众开放的，但是它离人行道很近，所以从没有人反对我坐在上面。昨天上午，阳光那么和煦地照耀着，我又在板凳上坐下，休息了一会儿，观察着周围的动静。

时间一定是接近中午了，因为我看见马路对面，三五成群的职员们穿着耀眼的白衬衫，从玻璃墙面的大楼里涌出来，那正是川上夫人的酒馆曾经所在的地方。我注视着，突然发现这些年轻人都那么朝气蓬勃，充满乐观精神。一次，两个离开大楼的年轻人停下来跟另一个正好进楼的青年说话。他们站在那座玻璃墙面的大楼的台阶上，在阳光下开怀大笑。其中一个年轻人的脸我看得最清楚，笑起来的样子特别开心，像个孩子那样天真无邪。接着，那三位同事迅速打了个招呼，便各走各的路了。

我坐在长凳上注视着这些年轻的职员，兀自微笑。当然啦，有的时候，我回忆起早年那些灯火通明的酒馆，那些人聚集在灯笼下，笑得或许比昨天那些年轻人更加喧闹一点，却是同样的热情洋溢，这时候我不免有些怀旧，怀念过去，怀念昔日的这片地区。可是看到我们的城市得到重建，看到这些年一切迅速得到恢复，又让我由衷感到喜悦。看来，我们国家不管曾经犯过什么错误，现在又有机会重振旗鼓了。我们只能深深地祝福这些年轻人。

KAZUO ISHIGURO

An Artist of the Floating World

For my parents

Introduction

I began *An Artist of the Floating World* in September 1981, in a basement flat in Shepherd's Bush, London. I was twenty-six years old. My first novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, was being prepared for publication, but at that point I had no sensible reason to believe I had before me a life as a full-time novelist.

Lorna and I had returned to London that summer (we'd been living in Cardiff), having secured new jobs in the capital, but no accommodation. A few years earlier, we'd both been part of a loose network of young, left-leaning, alternative types who lived in short-life housing around Ladbroke Grove and Hammersmith, and worked for charitable projects or campaign groups. It seems odd now to recall the carefree way we just turned up in the city that summer confident we'd be able to stay in one shared house or another until we found a suitable place of our own. As it turned out, nothing came along to challenge our complacency, and before long we'd found a small basement to rent just off the bustling Goldhawk Road.

The flat adjoined the recording studios of the then cutting-edge Virgin Records, and we often glimpsed large hairy men heaving equipment in and out of the windowless, colourfully muralled building. But the sound-proofing was exemplary, and when I sat at our dining table, my back to our tiny rear garden, I had a more than adequate environment for writing.

Lorna had by far the longer commute to work. She'd got a job as a local authority social worker in Lewisham on the other side of the city. My job was only a stone's throw away - I'd become the 'resettlement worker' for West London Cyrenians, a well-regarded organisation working with the homeless. To make things fairer, we came to an agreement:

we'd get up at the same time each morning, and by the point Lorna was going out the door, I'd be installed at the table ready for my ninety minutes of early morning writing before I set off for my own job.

Many superb works have been produced by writers holding down demanding jobs. But I have always been pathetically, almost pathologically, unable to divide my attention, and those several weeks I attempted to write at the dining table as the sun rose steadily to fill the basement have been to date my only attempt to write 'part-time'. It wasn't an unqualified success. I found myself staring at blank sheets, battling the urge to go back to bed. (My day job soon grew intense, often obliging me to work late into the night.) Nor were things helped by Lorna's insistence that I start each day with a bizarre breakfast made up of hideously coarse fibres sprinkled over with yeast and wheatgerm - a recipe that would sometimes have me doubled up in my chair. All the same, it was during these sessions that the kernel - the story and central premise - of *An Artist* came to me more or less fully formed. I managed to write it up as a fifteen-page story (later published in *Granta* as 'The Summer after the War'), but even as I did so, I knew I'd need a much larger, more complex architecture to build the idea into the novel I could already see, tantalisingly, in my imagination. Then the demands of my job put an end to my morning sessions altogether.

I didn't return to *An Artist* in earnest until the winter of 1982. By then, *A Pale View of Hills* had been published to what was, for a first novel, very reasonable noise. The book had found publishers in the US and in several foreign languages, and had got me on the inaugural *Granta* list of the Twenty Best of Young British Novelists due to be unveiled the following spring. My writing career still looked precarious, but I now had reasons to be bold, and I quit my job at the Cyrenians to become a full-time writer.

We moved to south-east London, to occupy the top floor of a tall Victorian house in a quiet neighbourhood of Upper Sydenham. Our kitchen lacked a sink, obliging us to load dirty dishes onto an old tea trolley and wheel it into the bathroom. But we were now closer to Lorna's work, and we could set the alarm for much later. The hideous breakfasts ceased. The house was owned by Michael and Lenore Marshall, a wonderful couple in their early sixties who lived downstairs, and we soon got into the routine of gathering in their kitchen (which had a sink) at the end of each working day to share tea, Mr Kipling cakes and rambling, often hilarious conversation about books, politics, cricket, the advertising industry, the eccentricities of the English. (A few years later, following Lenore's sudden death, I dedicated *The Remains of the Day* to her memory.) Also around this time I was offered work by the soon-to-be-launched Channel 4, and it was my experience of working as a television screenwriter (I eventually had two single dramas broadcast on that channel) that was to have a significant, if contrary impact on the writing of *An Artist*.

I found myself rather obsessively comparing pages from my screenplays - essentially dialogue plus directions - with pages from my published novel, and asking myself, 'Is my fiction sufficiently different from a screenplay?' Whole hunks of *A Pale View* looked to me awfully similar to a screenplay - dialogue followed by 'direction' followed by more dialogue. I began to feel deflated. Why bother to write a novel if it was going to offer more or less the same experience someone could have by turning on a television? How could the novel, as a form, hope to survive against the might of cinema and television if it couldn't offer something unique, something the other forms couldn't properly do? (In the early 1980s, I should point out, the contemporary novel seemed in much more fragile health than it does today.) I had a clear idea, from those morning efforts in Shepherd's Bush, of the story I wanted to write. But in Sydenham I now entered an extended period of experimenting with different ways to

tell it. I was determined that my new novel wouldn't be a 'prose screenplay'. But what then could it be?

It was at this time I came down with a virus and spent a few days in bed. Once I came out of the worst of it, and no longer felt like sleeping for hours on end, I discovered that the book I'd brought to bed, the object now rolling about inside my duvet, was the first volume of the recently published Kilmartin-Moncrieff translation of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. It's possible my sick-bed circumstances provided a heightened context for this work (I was not then, nor am I now, an unqualified Proust fan: I find swathes of his writing crushingly boring), but I became completely riveted by the 'Overture' and 'Combray' sections. I went over them again and again. Quite aside from the sublime beauty of these passages, I was thrilled by what I then called in my mind (and later in my notes) Proust's 'methods of movement' - the means by which he got one episode to lead into the next. The ordering of events and scenes didn't follow the demands of chronology, nor those of an unfolding linear plot. Instead, tangential thought associations, or the vagaries of memory seemed to move the novel from one section to the next. Sometimes the very fact that the present episode had been triggered by the previous one raised the question 'Why?' For what reason had these two seemingly unrelated moments been placed side by side in the narrator's mind? I could now see an exciting, freer way of composing my novel; one that could produce richness on the page and offer inner movements impossible to capture on a screen. If I could go from one passage to the next according to the narrator's thought associations and drifting memories, I could compose almost in the way an abstract painter might choose to place shapes and colours around a canvas. I could put down a scene from two days ago right beside one from twenty years earlier, and ask the reader to ponder the relationship between the two. Often the narrator himself would not need to know fully the deeper reasons for a particular juxtaposition. I could see a way of writing that

could properly suggest the many layers of self-deception and denial that shrouded any person's view of their own self and past. Breakthrough moments for a novelist are often like this: scruffy, private little events. Looking back now, I can see that those three days recovering from a virus in a bedroom in Sydenham, going over the same twenty pages of Proust, were a key turning point in my writing life - one much more significant than, say, the receiving of a major award or walking down red carpets at film premiers. Everything I have subsequently written has been determined by the revelations that came to me during those days.

I should say something here about the Japanese aspect of *An Artist*. It is, in a literal sense, the most Japanese of my novels, being set entirely in Japan with only Japanese characters. The language in the novel - the first-person narration and the dialogue - is understood to be in Japanese, even though the novel is presented in English. In other words, you are supposed to imagine this book is some kind of translation: that behind the English sentences are Japanese ones. This strategy had implications for every word I wrote on the page. I wanted the language to flow and to feel natural, and yet it couldn't become too colloquial - too 'English'. At times I found myself translating Japanese phrases and pleasantries quite literally. But most of the time it was a case of finding an elegant yet slightly stilted register that would suggest the rhythms and stylised formality of the Japanese language running all the time behind the English.

Lastly, let me add a note here concerning the larger social context in which the novel was created. *An Artist* was written between 1981 and 1985, years of crucial, often fractious and bitter transition in Britain. The governments of Margaret Thatcher had brought an end to the post-war political consensus about the welfare state and the desirability of a 'mixed' economy (in which key assets and industries are owned publicly as well as privately). There

was an overt and strident programme to transform the country from one based on manufacturing and heavy industries, with large organised workforces, into a predominantly service-based economy with a fragmented, flexible, non-unionised labour pool. It was the era of the miners' strike, the Wapping dispute, CND marches, the Falklands War, IRA terrorism, an economic theory - 'monetarism' - that characterised deep cuts to public services as the necessary medicine to heal a sick economy. I remember falling out badly with one of my oldest and closest friends over dinner as we took opposing views on the miners' strike. This novel is set in Japan before and after the Second World War, but it was very much shaped by the Britain in which I was then living: the pressures on people in every walk of life to take political sides; the rigid certainties, shading into self-righteousness and sinister aggression, of ardent, often youthful factions; the agonising about the 'role of the artist' in a time of political change. And for me personally: the nagging sense of how difficult it is to see clearly above the dogmatic fervours of one's day; and the fear that time and history would show that for all one's good intentions, one had backed a wrong, shameful, even evil cause, and wasted one's best years and talents to it.

Kazuo Ishiguro
London, January 2016

OCTOBER, 1948

If on a sunny day you climb the steep path leading up from the little wooden bridge still referred to around here as 'the Bridge of Hesitation', you will not have to walk far before the roof of my house becomes visible between the tops of two gingko trees. Even if it did not occupy such a commanding position on the hill, the house would still stand out from all others nearby, so that as you come up the path, you may find yourself wondering what sort of wealthy man owns it.

But then I am not, nor have I ever been, a wealthy man. The imposing air of the house will be accounted for, perhaps, if I inform you that it was built by my predecessor, and that he was none other than Akira Sugimura. Of course, you may be new to this city, in which case the name of Akira Sugimura may not be familiar to you. But mention it to anyone who lived here before the war and you will learn that for thirty years or so, Sugimura was unquestionably amongst the city's most respected and influential men.

If I tell you this, and when arriving at the top of the hill you stand and look at the fine cedar gateway, the large area bound by the garden wall, the roof with its elegant tiles and its stylishly carved ridgepole pointing out over the view, you may well wonder how I came to acquire such a property, being as I claim a man of only moderate means. The truth is, I bought the house for a nominal sum - a figure probably not even half the property's true value at that time. This was made possible owing to a most curious - some may say foolish - procedure instigated by the Sugimura family during the sale.

It is now already a thing of some fifteen years ago. In those days, when my circumstances seemed to improve with each month, my wife had begun to press me to find a new house.

With her usual foresight, she had argued the importance of our having a house in keeping with our status - not out of vanity, but for the sake of our children's marriage prospects. I saw the sense in this, but since Setsuko, our eldest, was still only fourteen or fifteen, I did not go about the matter with any urgency. Nevertheless, for a year or so, whenever I heard of a suitable house for sale, I would remember to make enquiries. It was one of my pupils who first brought it to my attention that Akira Sugimura's house, a year after his death, was to be sold off. That I should buy such a house seemed absurd, and I put the suggestion down to the exaggerated respect my pupils always had for me. But I made enquiries all the same, and gained an unexpected response.

I received a visit one afternoon from two haughty, grey-haired ladies, who turned out to be the daughters of Akira Sugimura. When I expressed my surprise at receiving such personal attention from a family of such distinction, the elder of the sisters told me coldly that they had not come simply out of courtesy. Over the previous months, a fair number of enquiries had been received for their late father's house, but the family had in the end decided to refuse all but four of the applications. These four applicants had been selected carefully by family members on grounds purely of good character and achievement.

'It is of the first importance to us', she went on, 'that the house our father built should pass to one he would have approved of and deemed worthy of it. Of course, circumstances oblige us to consider the financial aspect, but this is strictly secondary. We have therefore set a price.'

At this point, the younger sister, who had barely spoken, presented me with an envelope, and they watched me sternly as I opened it. Inside was a single sheet of paper, blank but for a figure written elegantly with an ink brush. I was about to express my astonishment at the low price, but then saw from the faces before me that further discussion of finances

would be considered distasteful. The elder sister said simply: 'It will not be in the interests of any of you to try to outbid one another. We are not interested in receiving anything beyond the quoted price. What we mean to do from here on is to conduct an auction of prestige.'

They had come in person, she explained, to ask formally on behalf of the Sugimura family that I submit myself - along, of course, with the other three applicants - to a closer investigation of my background and credentials. A suitable buyer could thus be chosen.

It was an eccentric procedure, but I saw nothing objectionable about it; it was, after all, much the same as being involved in a marriage negotiation. Indeed, I felt somewhat flattered to be considered by this old and hidebound family as a worthy candidate. When I gave my consent to the investigation, and expressed my gratitude to them, the younger sister addressed me for the first time, saying: 'Our father was a cultured man, Mr Ono. He had much respect for artists. Indeed, he knew of your work.'

In the days which followed, I made enquiries of my own, and discovered the truth of the younger sister's words; Akira Sugimura had indeed been something of an art enthusiast who on numerous occasions had supported exhibitions with his money. I also came across certain interesting rumours: a significant section of the Sugimura family, it seemed, had been against selling the house at all, and there had been some bitter arguments. In the end, financial pressures meant a sale was inevitable, and the odd procedures around the transaction represented the compromise reached with those who had not wished the house to pass out of the family. That there was something high-handed about these arrangements there was no denying; but for my part, I was prepared to sympathize with the sentiments of a family with such a distinguished history. My wife, however, did not take kindly to the idea of an investigation.

‘Who do they think they are?’ she protested. ‘We should tell them we want nothing further to do with them.’

‘But where’s the harm?’ I pointed out. ‘We have nothing we wouldn’t want them to discover. True, I don’t have a wealthy background, but no doubt the Sugimuras know that already, and they still think us worthy candidates. Let them investigate, they can only find things that will be to our advantage.’ And I made a point of adding: ‘In any case, they’re doing no more than they would if we were negotiating a marriage with them. We’ll have to get used to this sort of thing.’

Besides, there was surely much to admire in the idea of ‘an auction of prestige’, as the elder daughter called it. One wonders why things are not settled more often by such means. How so much more honourable is such a contest, in which one’s moral conduct and achievement are brought as witnesses rather than the size of one’s purse. I can still recall the deep satisfaction I felt when I learnt the Sugimuras - after the most thorough investigation - had deemed me the most worthy of the house they so prized. And certainly, the house is one worth having suffered a few inconveniences for; despite its impressive and imposing exterior, it is inside a place of soft, natural woods selected for the beauty of their grains, and all of us who lived in it came to find it most conducive to relaxation and calm.

For all that, the Sugimuras’ high-handedness was apparent everywhere during the transactions, some family members making no attempts to hide their hostility towards us, and a less understanding buyer might well have taken offence and abandoned the whole matter. Even in later years I would sometimes encounter by chance some member of the family who, instead of exchanging the usual kind of polite talk, would stand there in the street interrogating me as to the state of the house and any alterations I had made.

These days, I hardly ever hear of the Sugimuras. I did, though, receive a visit shortly after the surrender from the younger of the two sisters who had approached me at the time of the sale. The war years had turned her into a thin, ailing old woman. In the way characteristic of the family, she made scant effort to hide the fact that her concern lay with how the house - rather than its inhabitants - had fared during the war; she gave only the briefest of commiserations on hearing about my wife and about Kenji, before embarking on questions concerning the bomb damage. This made me bitter towards her at first; but then I began to notice how her eyes would roam involuntarily around the room, and how she would occasionally pause abruptly in the midst of one of her measured and formal sentences, and I realized she was experiencing waves of emotion at finding herself back in this house once more. Then, when I surmised that most of her family members from the time of the sale were now dead, I began to feel pity for her and offered to show her around.

The house had received its share of the war damage. Akira Sugimura had built an eastern wing to the house, comprising three large rooms, connected to the main body of the house by a long corridor running down one side of the garden. This corridor was so extravagant in its length that some people have suggested Sugimura built it - together with the east wing - for his parents, whom he wished to keep at a distance. The corridor was, in any case, one of the most appealing features of the house; in the afternoon, its entire length would be crossed by the lights and shades of the foliage outside, so that one felt one was walking through a garden tunnel. The bulk of the bomb damage had been to this section of the house, and as we surveyed it from the garden I could see Miss Sugimura was close to tears. By this point, I had lost all my earlier sense of irritation with the old woman and I reassured her as best I could that the damage would be repaired at the first opportunity, and the house would be once more as her father had built it.

I had no idea when I promised her this that supplies would remain so scarce. For a long time after the surrender one could wait weeks just for a particular piece of wood or a supply of nails. What work I could do under such circumstances had to be done to the main body of the house - which had by no means entirely escaped damage - and progress on the garden corridor and the east wing has been slow. I have done what I can to prevent any serious deterioration, but we are still far from being able to open that part of the house again. Besides, now with only Noriko and myself left here, there seems less urgency to be extending our living space.

Today, if I took you to the back of the house, and moved aside the heavy screen to let you gaze down the remains of Sugimura's garden corridor, you may still gain an impression of how picturesque it once was. But no doubt you will notice too the cobwebs and mould that I have not been able to keep out; and the large gaps in the ceiling, shielded from the sky only by sheets of tarpaulin. Sometimes, in the early morning, I have moved back that screen to find the sunlight pouring through the tarpaulin in tinted shafts, revealing clouds of dust hanging in the air as though the ceiling had only that moment crashed down.

Aside from the corridor and the east wing, the most serious damage was to the veranda. Members of my family, and particularly my two daughters, had always been fond of passing the time sitting there, chatting and viewing the garden; and so, when Setsuko - my married daughter - first came to visit us after the surrender, I was not surprised to see how saddened she was by its condition. I had by then repaired the worst of the damage, but at one end it was still billowed and cracked where the impact of the blast had pushed up the boards from underneath. The veranda roof, too, had suffered, and on rainy days we were still having to line the floorboards with receptacles to catch the water that came dripping through.

Over this past year, however, I was able to make a certain amount of progress, and by the time Setsuko came down to visit us again last month, the veranda was more or less entirely restored. Noriko had taken time off work for her sister's visit, and so, with the good weather continuing, my two daughters spent a lot of their time out there as of old. I often joined them, and at times it was almost as it had been years ago, when on a sunny day the family would sit there together exchanging relaxed, often vacuous talk. At one point last month - it must have been the first morning after Setsuko's arrival - we were sitting there on the veranda after breakfast, when Noriko said:

'I'm relieved you've come at last, Setsuko. You'll take Father off my hands a little.'

'Noriko, really ...' Her elder sister shifted uncomfortably on her cushion.

'Father takes a lot of looking after now he's retired,' Noriko went on, with a mischievous grin. 'You've got to keep him occupied or he starts to mope.'

'Really ...' Setsuko smiled nervously, then turned to the garden with a sigh. 'The maple tree seems to have recovered completely. It's looking splendid.'

'Setsuko probably has no idea of what you're like these days, Father. She only remembers you from when you were a tyrant and ordered us all around. You're much more gentle these days, isn't that so?'

I gave a laugh to show Setsuko this was all in good humour, but my elder daughter continued to look uncomfortable. Noriko turned back to her sister and added:

'But he does take a lot more looking after, moping around the house all day.'

'She's talking nonsense as usual,' I put in. 'If I spend the whole day moping, how did all these repairs get done?'

‘Indeed,’ Setsuko said, turning to me and smiling. ‘The house is looking marvellous now. Father must have worked very hard.’

‘He had men in to help with all the difficult parts,’ Noriko said. ‘You don’t seem to believe me, Setsuko. Father’s very different now. There’s no need to be afraid of him any more. He’s much more gentle and domesticated.’

‘Noriko, really ...’

‘He even cooks meals from time to time. You wouldn’t have believed it, would you? But Father’s becoming a much better cook these days.’

‘Noriko, I think we’ve discussed this enough,’ Setsuko said, quietly.

‘Isn’t that so, Father? You’re making a lot of progress.’

I gave another smile and shook my head wearily. It was at that point, as I remember, that Noriko turned towards the garden, and closing her eyes to the sunshine, said:

‘Well, he can’t rely on me to come back and cook when I’m married. I’ll have enough to do without Father to look after as well.’

As Noriko said this, her elder sister - whose gaze until then had been demurely turned away - gave me a swift, enquiring look. Her eyes left me again immediately, for she was obliged to return Noriko’s smile. But a new, more profound uneasiness had entered Setsuko’s manner and she seemed grateful when her little boy, speeding past us down the veranda, gave her an opportunity to change the subject.

‘Ichiro, please settle!’ she called after him.

No doubt, after the modern apartment of his parents, Ichiro was fascinated by the large amount of space in our house. In any case, he seemed not to share our fondness for

sitting on the veranda, preferring instead to run at great speed up and down its length, sometimes sliding along the polished boards. More than once, he had come close to upsetting our tea tray, but his mother's requests that he sit down had so far been to little avail. This time too, when Setsuko called to him to take a cushion with us, he remained sulking at the end of the veranda.

'Come on, Ichiro,' I called out, 'I'm tired of talking to women all the time. You come and sit beside me and we'll talk about men's things.'

This brought him straight away. He placed his cushion next to me, then seated himself in a most noble posture, hands on hips, his shoulders flung well back.

'Oji,' he said to me sternly, 'I have a question.'

'Yes, Ichiro, what is it?'

'I want to know about the monster.'

'The monster?'

'Is it prehistoric?'

'Prehistoric? You know words like that already? You must be a clever boy.'

At this point, Ichiro's dignity seemed to give way. Abandoning his pose, he rolled on to his back and began waving his feet in the air.

'Ichiro!' Setsuko called in an urgent whisper. 'Such bad manners in front of your grandfather. Sit up!'

Ichiro's only response was to allow his feet to slump lifelessly on to the floorboards. He then folded his arms over his chest and closed his eyes.

'Oji,' he said, in a sleepy voice, 'is the monster prehistoric?'

'Which monster is this, Ichiro?'

‘Please excuse him,’ Setsuko said, with a nervous smile. ‘There was a film poster outside the railway station when we arrived yesterday. He inconvenienced the taxi driver with numerous questions. It’s so unfortunate I didn’t see the poster myself.’

‘Oji! Is the monster prehistoric or isn’t it? I want an answer!’

‘Ichiro!’ His mother gave him a horrified look.

‘I’m not sure, Ichiro. I should think we have to see the film to find out.’

‘When do we see the film then?’

‘Hmm. You’d best discuss it with your mother. You never know, it may be too frightening for young children.’

I had not meant this remark to be provocative, but its effect on my grandson was startling. He rolled back into a sitting position and glared at me, shouting: ‘How dare you! What are you saying!’

‘Ichiro!’ Setsuko exclaimed in dismay. But Ichiro continued to regard me with the most fearsome look, and his mother was obliged to leave her cushion to come over to us.

‘Ichiro!’ she whispered to him, shaking his arm. ‘Don’t stare at your grandfather like that.’

Ichiro responded by falling on to his back again and waving his feet in the air. His mother gave me another nervous smile.

‘So bad-mannered,’ she said. Then seemingly at a loss for further words, she smiled again.

‘Ichiro-san,’ Noriko said, getting to her feet, ‘why don’t you come and help me put away the breakfast things?’

‘Women’s work,’ Ichiro said, his feet still waving.

‘So Ichiro won’t help me? Now that’s a problem. The table’s so heavy I’m not strong enough to put that away on my

own. I wonder who could help then?'

This brought Ichiro abruptly to his feet, and he went striding indoors without glancing back at us. Noriko laughed and followed him in.

Setsuko glanced after them, then lifting the teapot, began refilling my cup. 'I had no idea things had come so far,' she said, her voice lowered. 'I mean as regards Noriko's marriage negotiations.'

'Things haven't come far at all,' I said, shaking my head. 'In fact, nothing's settled at all. We're still at an early stage.'

'Forgive me, but from what Noriko said just a moment ago, I naturally supposed things were more or less ...' She trailed off, then said again: 'Forgive me.' But she said it in such a way that a question was left hanging in the air.

'I'm afraid this isn't the first time Noriko's spoken like that,' I said. 'In fact, she's been behaving oddly ever since these present negotiations began. Last week, we had a visit from Mr Mori - you remember him?'

'Of course. He's well?'

'Well enough. He was just passing and called to pay his respects. The point is, Noriko began to talk about the marriage negotiations in front of him. She took much the same attitude as just now, that everything was settled. It was most embarrassing. Mr Mori even congratulated me as he was leaving, and asked me the groom's occupation.'

'Indeed,' Setsuko said, thoughtfully. 'It must have been embarrassing.'

'But it was hardly Mr Mori's fault. You heard her yourself just now. What was a stranger supposed to think?'

My daughter did not reply, and we sat there in silence for a few moments. Once, when I glanced over at her, Setsuko

was gazing out at the garden, holding her teacup in both hands as though she had forgotten it was there. It was one of several occasions during her visit last month when - perhaps because of the way the light caught her, or some such thing - I found myself contemplating her appearance. For there can be no doubt, Setsuko is becoming better looking as she gets older. In her youth, her mother and I had worried that she was too plain to make a good marriage. Even as a child, Setsuko had rather masculine features, which seemed only to grow more pronounced with adolescence; so much so that whenever my daughters quarrelled, Noriko was always able to get the better of her elder sister by calling her 'Boy! Boy!' Who knows what effect such things have on personalities? It is no coincidence, surely, that Noriko should have grown up so headstrong, and Setsuko so shy and retiring. But now, it seems, as she approaches her thirties, Setsuko's looks are taking on a new and not inconsiderable dignity. I can recall her mother predicting this - 'Our Setsuko will flower in the summer,' she had often said. I had thought this merely my wife's way of consoling herself, but then several times last month, I was struck by how correct she in fact had been.

Setsuko came out of her reverie, and cast another glance inside the house. Then she said: 'I would suppose what happened last year greatly upset Noriko. Much more perhaps than we supposed.'

I gave a sigh and nodded. 'It's possible I didn't pay enough attention to her at the time.'

'I'm sure Father did all he could. But of course, such things are a terrible blow to a woman.'

'I have to admit, I thought she was play-acting a little, the way your sister does sometimes. She'd been insisting it was a "love match", so when it fell through, she'd be obliged to behave accordingly. But perhaps it wasn't all play-acting.'

‘We laughed at the time,’ Setsuko said, ‘but perhaps it really was a love match.’

We fell silent again. From inside the house, we could hear Ichiro’s voice shouting something repeatedly.

‘Forgive me,’ Setsuko said, in a new voice. ‘But did we ever hear any further as to why the proposal fell through last year? It was so unexpected.’

‘I have no idea. It hardly matters now, does it?’

‘Of course not, forgive me.’ Setsuko seemed to consider something for a moment, then she spoke again: ‘It’s just that Suichi persists in asking me from time to time about last year, about why the Miyakes should have pulled out like that.’ She gave a little laugh, almost to herself. ‘He seems convinced I know some secret and that we’re all keeping it from him. I have to continually reassure him that I have no idea myself.’

‘I assure you,’ I said a little coldly, ‘it remains equally a mystery to me. If I knew, I wouldn’t keep it from you and Suichi.’

‘Of course. Please excuse me, I didn’t mean to imply ...’ Again, she trailed off awkwardly.

I may have appeared a little short with my daughter that morning, but then that was not the first time Setsuko had questioned me in such a way concerning last year and the Miyakes’ withdrawal. Why she should believe I am keeping something from her, I do not know. If the Miyakes had some special reason for withdrawing like that, it would stand to reason they would not confide in me about it.

My own guess is that there was nothing so remarkable about the matter. True, their withdrawal at the last moment was most unexpected, but why should one suppose from this that there was anything peculiar in it? My feeling is that it was simply a matter of family status. The Miyakes, from what

I saw of them, were just the proud, honest sort who would feel uncomfortable at the thought of their son marrying above his station. Indeed, a few years ago, they would probably have withdrawn more promptly, but what with the couple claiming it was a 'love match', and with all the talk these days of the new ways, the Miyakes are the kind of people who would become confused as to their correct course. No doubt the explanation is no more complicated than that.

It is possible, too, that they were confused by my apparent approval of the match. For I was very lax in considering the matter of status, it simply not being my instinct to concern myself with such things. Indeed, I have never at any point in my life been very aware of my own social standing, and even now, I am often surprised afresh when some event, or something someone may say, reminds me of the rather high esteem in which I am held. Just the other evening, for instance, I was down in our old pleasure district, drinking at Mrs Kawakami's place, where - as happens increasingly these days - Shintaro and I had found ourselves the only customers. We were as usual sitting up at the bar on our high-stools, exchanging remarks with Mrs Kawakami, and as the hours had gone by, and no one else had come in, our exchanges had grown more intimate. At one point, Mrs Kawakami was talking about some relative of hers, complaining that the young man had been unable to find a job worthy of his abilities, when Shintaro suddenly exclaimed:

'You must send him to Sensei here, Obasan! A good word from Sensei in the right place, your relative will soon find a good post.'

'What are you saying, Shintaro?' I protested. 'I'm retired now. I have no connections these days.'

'A recommendation from a man of Sensei's standing will command respect from anyone,' Shintaro had persisted. 'Send the young man to Sensei, Obasan.'

I was at first a little taken aback by the conviction of Shintaro's assertions. But then I realized he was remembering yet again that small deed I had performed for his younger brother all those years ago.

It must have been in 1935 or 1936, a very routine matter as I recall - a letter of recommendation to an acquaintance in the State Department, some such thing. I would have given the matter little further thought, but then one afternoon while I was relaxing at home, my wife announced there were visitors for me at the entryway.

'Please show them in,' I had said.

'But they insist they won't bother you by coming in.'

I went out to the entryway, and standing there were Shintaro and his younger brother - then no more than a youth. As soon as they saw me, they began bowing and giggling.

'Please step up,' I said, but they continued simply to bow and giggle. 'Shintaro, please. Step up to the tatami.'

'No, Sensei,' Shintaro said, all the time smiling and bowing. 'It is the height of impertinence for us to come to your house like this. The height of impertinence. But we could not remain at home any longer without thanking you.'

'Come on inside. I believe Setsuko was just making some tea.'

'No, Sensei, it is the height of impertinence. Really.' Then turning to his brother, Shintaro whispered quickly: 'Yoshio! Yoshio!'

For the first time, the young man stopped bowing and looked up at me nervously. Then he said: 'I will be grateful to you for the remainder of my life. I will exert every particle of my being to be worthy of your recommendation. I assure you, I will not let you down. I will work hard, and strive to satisfy my superiors. And however much I may be

promoted in the future, I will never forget the man who enabled me to start on my career. ’

‘Really, it was nothing. It’s no more than you deserve. ’

This brought frantic protests from both of them, then Shintaro said to his brother: ‘Yoshio, we have imposed enough on Sensei as it is. But before we leave, take a good look again at the man who has helped you. We are greatly privileged to have a benefactor of such influence and generosity. ’

‘Indeed, ’ the youth muttered, and gazed up at me.

‘Please, Shintaro, this is embarrassing. Please come in and we’ll celebrate with some sake. ’

‘No, Sensei, we must leave you now. It was the greatest impertinence to come here like this and disturb your afternoon. But we could not delay thanking you for one moment longer. ’

This visit - I must admit it - left me with a certain feeling of achievement. It was one of those moments, in the midst of a busy career allowing little chance for stopping and taking stock, which illuminate suddenly just how far one has come. For true enough, I had almost unthinkingly started a young man on a good career. A few years earlier, such a thing would have been inconceivable and yet I had brought myself to such a position almost without realizing it.

‘Many things have changed since the old days, Shintaro, ’ I pointed out the other night down at Mrs Kawakami’s. ‘I’m retired now, I don’t have so many connections. ’

But then for all I know, Shintaro may not be so wrong in his assumptions. It may be that if I chose to put it to the test, I would again be surprised by the extent of my

influence. As I say, I have never had a keen awareness of my own standing.

In any case, even if Shintaro may at times display naïveté about certain things, this is nothing to be disparaged, it being no easy thing now to come across someone so untainted by the cynicism and bitterness of our day. There is something reassuring about going into Mrs Kawakami's and finding Shintaro sitting up there at the bar, just as one may have found him on any evening for the past seventeen or so years, absent-mindedly turning his cap round and round on the counter in that old way of his. It really is as though nothing has changed for Shintaro. He will greet me very politely, as though he were still my pupil, and throughout the evening, however drunk he may get, he will continue to address me as 'Sensei' and maintain his most respectful manner towards me. Sometimes he will even ask me questions relating to technique or style with all the eagerness of a young apprentice - though the truth is, of course, Shintaro has long ceased to be concerned with any real art. For some years now, he has devoted his time to his book illustrations, and his present speciality, I gather, is fire engines. He will work day after day up in that attic room of his, sketching out fire engine after fire engine. But I suppose in the evenings, after a few drinks, Shintaro likes to believe he is still the idealistic young artist I first took under my supervision.

This childlike aspect of Shintaro has frequently been a source of entertainment for Mrs Kawakami, who has a somewhat wicked side to her. One night recently, for instance, during a rainstorm, Shintaro had come running into the little bar and begun squeezing his cap out over the doormat.

'Really, Shintaro-san!' Mrs Kawakami had shouted at him. 'What terrible manners!'

At this, Shintaro had looked up in great distress, as though indeed he had committed an outrageous offence. He had

then begun to apologize profusely, thus leading Mrs Kawakami on further.

‘I’ve never seen such manners, Shintaro-san. You seem to have no respect for me at all.’

‘Now stop this, Obasan,’ I had appealed to her after a while. ‘That’s enough, tell him you’re just joking.’

‘Joking? I’m hardly joking. The height of bad manners.’

And so it had gone on, until Shintaro had become quite pitiful to watch. But then again, on other occasions, Shintaro will be convinced he is being teased when in fact he is being spoken to quite earnestly. There was the time he had put Mrs Kawakami in difficulties by declaring cheerfully of a general who had just been executed as a war criminal: ‘I’ve always admired that man since I was a boy. I wonder what he’s up to now. Retired, no doubt.’

Some new customers had been present that night and had looked at him disapprovingly. When Mrs Kawakami, concerned for her trade, had gone to him and told him quietly of the general’s fate, Shintaro had burst out laughing.

‘Really, Obasan,’ he had said loudly. ‘Some of your jokes are quite extreme.’

Shintaro’s ignorance of such matters is often remarkable, but as I say, it is not something to disparage. One should be thankful there are still those uncontaminated by the current cynicism. In fact, it is probably this very quality of Shintaro’s - this sense that he has remained somehow unscathed by things - which has led me to enjoy his company more and more over these recent years.

As for Mrs Kawakami, although she will do her best not to allow the current mood to affect her, there is no denying she has been greatly aged by the war years. Before the war, she may still have passed for a ‘young woman’, but since then something inside her seems to have broken and sagged. And

when one remembers those she has lost in the war, it is hardly any wonder. Business too has become increasingly difficult for her; certainly, it must be hard for her to believe this is the same district where she first opened her little place those sixteen or seventeen years ago. For nothing really remains of our old pleasure district now, almost all her old competitors have closed up and left, and Mrs Kawakami must more than once have considered doing likewise.

But when her place first appeared, it was squeezed in amidst so many other bars and eating houses, I remember some people doubting if it could survive long. Indeed, you could hardly walk down those little streets without brushing against the numerous cloth banners pressing at you from all sides, leaning out at you from their shop fronts, each declaring the attractions of their establishment in boisterous lettering. But in those days, there was enough custom in the district to keep any number of such establishments thriving. On the warmer evenings particularly, the area would fill with people strolling unhurriedly from bar to bar, or just standing talking in the middle of the street. Cars had long ceased to venture through, and even a bicycle could only be pushed with difficulty past those throngs of uncaring pedestrians.

I say 'our pleasure district', but I suppose it was really nothing more than somewhere to drink, eat and talk. You would have had to go into the city centre for the real pleasure quarters - for the geisha houses and theatres. For myself though, our own district was always preferable. It drew a lively but respectable crowd, many of them people like us - artists and writers lured by the promise of noisy conversations continuing into the night. The establishment my own group frequented was called 'Migi-Hidari', and stood at a point where three side streets intersected to form a paved precinct. The Migi-Hidari, unlike any of its neighbours, was a large sprawling place with an upper floor and plenty of

hostesses both in Western and traditional dress. I had played my own small part in the *Migi-Hidari*'s coming to so dwarf its competitors, and in recognition of this, our group had been provided with a table in one corner for our sole use. Those who drank with me there were, in effect, the *élite* of my school: Kuroda, Murasaki, Tanaka - brilliant young men, already with growing reputations. They all of them relished conversation, and I remember many passionate arguments taking place around that table.

Shintaro, I should say, was never one of that select group. I would not myself have objected to his joining us, but there existed a strong sense of hierarchy amongst my pupils, and Shintaro was certainly not regarded as of the first rank. In fact, I can recall one night, shortly after Shintaro and his brother had paid that visit to my house, my discussing that episode around our table. I remember the likes of Kuroda laughing at how grateful the brothers had been over 'a mere white-collar appointment'; but then they all listened solemnly as I recounted my view on how influence and status can creep up on someone who works busily, not pursuing these ends in themselves, but for the satisfaction of performing his tasks to the best of his ability. At this point, one of them - no doubt it was Kuroda - leaned forward and said:

'I have suspected for some time that Sensei was unaware of the high regard in which he is held by people in this city. Indeed, as the instance he has just related amply illustrates, his reputation has now spread beyond the world of art, to all walks of life. But how typical of Sensei's modest nature that he is unaware of this. How typical that he himself should be the most surprised by the esteem accorded to him. But to all of us here it comes as no surprise. In fact, it may be said that respected enormously as he is by the public at large, it is we here at this table who alone know the extent to which that respect still falls short. But I personally have no doubt. His reputation will become all

the greater, and in years to come, our proudest honour will be to tell others that we were once the pupils of Masuji Ono. ’

Now there was nothing remarkable in all this; it had become something of a habit that at some point in the evening, when we had all drunk a little, my protégés would take to making speeches of a loyal nature to me. And Kuroda in particular, being looked on as a sort of spokesman for them, gave a fair proportion of these. Of course, I usually ignored them, but on this particular occasion, as when Shintaro and his brother had stood bowing and giggling in my entryway, I experienced a warm glow of satisfaction.

But then it would not be accurate to suggest I only socialized with the best of my pupils. Indeed, the first time I ever stepped into Mrs Kawakami’s, I believe I did so because I wished to spend the evening talking something over with Shintaro. Today, when I try to recall that evening, I find my memory of it merging with the sounds and images from all those other evenings; the lanterns hung above doorways, the laughter of people congregated outside the Migi-Hidari, the smell of deep-fried food, a bar hostess persuading someone to return to his wife - and echoing from every direction, the clicking of numerous wooden sandals on the concrete. I remember it being a warm summer’s night, and not finding Shintaro in his usual haunts, I wandered around those tiny bars for some time. For all the competition there must have existed between those establishments, a neighbourly spirit reigned, and it was quite natural that on asking after Shintaro at one such bar that night, I should be advised by the hostess, without a trace of resentment, to try for him at the ‘new place’ .

No doubt, Mrs Kawakami could point out numerous changes - her little ‘improvements’ - that she has made over the years. But my impression is that her little place looked much the same that first night as it does today. On entering, one tends to be struck by the contrast between the bar counter,

lit up by warm, low-hung lights, and the rest of the room, which is in shadow. Most of her customers prefer to sit up at the bar within that pool of light, and this gives a cosy, intimate feel to the place. I remember looking around me with approval that first night, and today, for all the changes which have transformed the world around it, Mrs Kawakami's remains as pleasing as ever.

But little else has remained unchanged. Coming out of Mrs Kawakami's now, you could stand at her doorway and believe you have just been drinking at some outpost of civilization. All around, there is nothing but a desert of demolished rubble. Only the backs of several buildings far in the distance will remind you that you are not so far from the city centre. 'War damage,' Mrs Kawakami calls it. But I remember walking around the district shortly after the surrender and many of those buildings were still standing. The Migi-Hidari was still there, the windows all blown out, part of the roof fallen in. And I remember wondering to myself as I walked past those shattered buildings, if they would ever again come back to life. Then I came by one morning and the bulldozers had pulled down everything.

So now that side of the street is nothing but rubble. No doubt the authorities have their plans, but it has been that way for three years. The rain collects in small puddles and grows stagnant amidst the broken brick. As a consequence, Mrs Kawakami has been obliged to put up mosquito wiring on her windows - not an effect she thinks will attract customers.

The buildings on Mrs Kawakami's own side of the street have remained standing, but many are unoccupied; the properties on either side of her, for instance, have been vacant for some time, a situation which makes her uncomfortable. If she became suddenly rich, she often tells us, she would buy up those properties and expand. In the meantime, she waits for someone to move into them; she would not mind if they became bars just like hers, anything

provided she no longer had to live in the midst of a graveyard.

If you were to come out of Mrs Kawakami's as the darkness was setting in, you might feel compelled to pause a moment and gaze at that wasted expanse before you. You might still be able to make out through the gloom those heaps of broken brick and timber, and perhaps here and there, pieces of piping protruding from the ground like weeds. Then as you walked on past more heaps of rubble, numerous small puddles would gleam a moment as they caught in the lamplight.

And if on reaching the foot of the hill which climbs up to my house, you pause at the Bridge of Hesitation and look back towards the remains of our old pleasure district, if the sun has not yet set completely, you may see the line of old telegraph poles - still without wires to connect them - disappearing into the gloom down the route you have just come. And you may be able to make out the dark clusters of birds perched uncomfortably on the tops of the poles, as though awaiting the wires along which they once lined the sky.

One evening not so long ago, I was standing on that little wooden bridge and saw away in the distance two columns of smoke rising from the rubble. Perhaps it was government workers continuing some interminably slow programme; or perhaps children indulging in some delinquent game. But the sight of those columns against the sky put me in a melancholy mood. They were like pyres at some abandoned funeral. A graveyard, Mrs Kawakami says, and when one remembers all those people who once frequented the area, one cannot help seeing it that way.

But I am digressing. I was trying to recall here details of Setsuko's stay with us last month.

As I may have said, Setsuko spent much of the first day of her visit sitting out on the veranda, talking with her sister. At one point towards the latter part of the afternoon when my daughters were particularly deep in women's talk, I recall I left them to go in search of my grandson, who a few minutes earlier had gone running off into the house.

It was as I was coming down the corridor that a heavy thump made the whole house shake. Alarmed, I hurried on into the dining room. At that time of day, our dining room is largely in shadow, and after the brightness of the veranda, it took my eyes a moment or two to ascertain that Ichiro was not in the room at all. Then came another thump, followed by several more, together with my grandson's voice shouting: 'Yah! Yah!' The noise was coming from the adjoining piano room. I went to the doorway, listened for a moment, then quietly slid back the partition.

In contrast to the dining room, the piano room catches the sun throughout the day. It fills with a sharp, clear light, and had it been any larger, would have been an ideal place in which to take our meals. At one time, I had used it to store paintings and materials, but nowadays, apart from the upright German piano, the room is practically bare. No doubt this lack of clutter had inspired my grandson in much the same way as the veranda had earlier; for I found him progressing across the floor with a curious stamping movement, which I took to be an impersonation of someone galloping on horseback across open land. Because his back was turned to the doorway, it was some moments before he realized he was being observed.

'Oji!' he said, turning angrily. 'Can't you see I'm busy?'

'I'm sorry, Ichiro, I didn't realize.'

'I can't play with you just now!'

‘I’m very sorry. But it sounded so exciting from out here I wondered if I could come in and watch.’

For a moment, my grandson went on staring at me crossly. Then he said moodily: ‘All right. But you have to sit and be quiet. I’m busy.’

‘Very well,’ I said, with a laugh. ‘Thank you very much, Ichiro.’

My grandson continued to glare at me as I crossed the room and seated myself by the window. When Ichiro had arrived with his mother the previous evening, I had made him a gift of a sketchpad and a set of coloured crayons. I now noticed the sketchpad lying on the tatami nearby, three or four of the crayons scattered around it. I could see the first few leaves of the pad had been drawn on and was about to reach over to investigate, when Ichiro suddenly recommenced the drama I had interrupted.

‘Yah! Yah!’

I watched him for a while, but could make little sense of the scenes he was enacting. At intervals, he would repeat his horse movement; at other times, he appeared to be in combat with numerous invisible enemies. All the while, he continued to mutter lines of dialogue under his breath. I tried hard to make these out, but as far as I could tell he was not using actual words, simply making sounds with his tongue.

Clearly, though he did his best to ignore me, my presence was having an inhibiting effect. Several times he froze in mid-movement as though inspiration had suddenly deserted him, before throwing himself into action again. Then before long he gave up and slumped on to the floor. I wondered if I should applaud, but thought better of it.

‘Very impressive, Ichiro. But tell me, who were you pretending to be?’

‘You guess, Oji.’

‘Hmm. Lord Yoshitsune perhaps? No? A samurai warrior, then? Hmm. Or a ninja perhaps? The Ninja of the Wind.’

‘Oji’s completely on the wrong scent.’

‘Then tell me. Who were you?’

‘Lone Ranger!’

‘What?’

‘Lone Ranger! Hi yo Silver!’

‘Lone Ranger? Is that a cowboy?’

‘Hi yo Silver!’ Ichiro began to gallop again, and this time made a neighing noise.

I watched my grandson for a moment. ‘How did you learn to play cowboys, Ichiro?’ I asked eventually, but he just continued to gallop and neigh.

‘Ichiro,’ I said, more firmly, ‘wait a moment and listen. It’s more interesting, more interesting by far, to pretend to be someone like Lord Yoshitsune. Shall I tell you why? Ichiro, listen, Oji will explain it to you. Ichiro, listen to your Oji-san. Ichiro!’

Possibly I raised my voice more than I had intended, for he stopped and looked at me with a startled expression. I continued to look at him for a moment, then gave a sigh.

‘I’m sorry, Ichiro, I shouldn’t have interrupted. Of course you can be anyone you like. Even a cowboy. You must forgive your Oji-san. He was forgetting for a moment.’

My grandson continued to stare at me, and it occurred to me he was about to burst into tears or else run out of the room.

‘Please, Ichiro, you just carry on with what you were doing.’

For a moment longer, Ichiro went on staring at me. Then he suddenly yelled out: ‘Lone Ranger! Hi yo Silver!’ and

began to gallop again. He stamped more violently than ever, causing the whole room to shake around us. I went on watching him for a moment, then reached over and picked up his sketchpad.

Ichiro had used up the first four or five sheets somewhat wastefully. His technique was not at all bad, but the sketches - of trams and trains - had each been abandoned at a very early stage. Ichiro noticed me examining the sketchpad and came hurrying over.

‘Oji! Who said you could look at those?’ He tried to snatch the pad away from me, but I held it out of his reach.

‘Now, Ichiro, don’t be unkind. Oji wants to see what you’ve been doing with the crayons he gave you. That’s only fair.’ I lowered the sketchpad and opened it at the first drawing. ‘Very impressive, Ichiro. Hmm. But you know, you could be even better if you wanted.’

‘Oji can’t see those!’

My grandson made another attempt to snatch away the pad, obliging me to hold off his hands with my arm.

‘Oji! Give me back my book!’

‘Now, Ichiro, stop that. Let your Oji see. Look, Ichiro, bring me those crayons over there. Bring them over and we’ll draw something together. Oji will show you.’

These words had a surprising effect. My grandson immediately stopped struggling, then went to gather up the crayons scattered on the floor. When he came back, something new - a kind of fascination - had entered his manner. He seated himself beside me and held out the crayons, watching carefully, but saying nothing.

I turned the sketchpad to a new sheet and placed it on the floor in front of him. ‘Let me see you do something first, Ichiro. Then Oji will see if he can help to make it better at all. What do you want to draw?’

My grandson had become very quiet. He looked down at the blank sheet thoughtfully, but made no move to start drawing.

‘Why don’t you try and draw something you saw yesterday?’ I suggested. ‘Something you saw when you first arrived in the city.’

Ichiro went on looking at the sketchpad. Then he looked up and asked: ‘Was Oji a famous artist once?’

‘A famous artist?’ I gave a laugh. ‘I suppose you might say that. Is that what your mother says?’

‘Father says you used to be a famous artist. But you had to finish.’

‘I’ve retired, Ichiro. Everyone retires when they get to a certain age. It’s only right, they deserve a rest.’

‘Father says you had to finish. Because Japan lost the war.’

I gave another laugh, then reached forward and took the sketchpad. I turned back the leaves, looking through my grandson’s sketches of trams, and held one up at arm’s length for a better view. ‘You reach a certain age, Ichiro, and you want a rest from things. Your father too will stop working when he gets to my age. And one day, you’ll be my age and you’ll want a rest too. Now’ - I returned to the blank sheet and placed the pad before him again - ‘what will you draw for me, Ichiro?’

‘Did Oji do the picture in the dining room?’

‘No, that’s by an artist called Urayama. Why, do you like it?’

‘Did Oji paint the one in the corridor?’

‘That’s by another fine artist, an old friend of Oji’s.’

‘Where are Oji’s pictures then?’

'They're tidied away for the moment. Now, Ichiro, let's get back to important things. What will you draw for me? What do you remember from yesterday? What's the matter, Ichiro? Suddenly so quiet.'

'I want to see Oji's pictures.'

'I'm sure a bright boy like you can remember all sorts of things. What about the film poster you saw? The one with the prehistoric monster. I'm sure someone like you could do it very well. Even better than the real poster perhaps.'

Ichiro seemed to consider this for a moment. Then he rolled over on to his front, and with his face close to the paper, began to draw.

Using a dark brown crayon, he drew on the lower part of the sheet a row of boxes - which soon became a skyline of city buildings. And then there emerged, looming above the city, a huge lizard-like creature up on its hind legs. At this point my grandson exchanged his brown crayon for a red one and began to make bright streaks all around the lizard.

'What is this, Ichiro? Fire?'

Ichiro continued with his red streaks, not answering.

'Why is there fire, Ichiro? Is it to do with the monster appearing?'

'Electric cables,' Ichiro said, with an impatient sigh.

'Electric cables? Now that's interesting. I wonder why electric cables cause fire. Do you know?'

Ichiro gave another sigh and continued to draw. He picked up his dark crayon again and began to draw at the foot of the sheet panic-stricken people fleeing in all directions.

'You're doing this very well, Ichiro,' I remarked.

'Perhaps as a reward, Oji might take you to see the movie tomorrow. Would you like that?'

My grandson paused and looked up. 'It might be too scary for Oji,' he said.

'I doubt that,' I said, with a laugh. 'But it may well frighten your mother and your aunt.'

At this, Ichiro burst into loud laughter. He rolled over on to his back and laughed some more. 'Mother and Aunt Noriko will be really scared!' he shouted at the ceiling.

'But we men will enjoy it, won't we, Ichiro? We'll go tomorrow. Would you like that? We'll take the women with us and watch them get frightened.'

Ichiro continued to laugh loudly. 'Aunt Noriko will get scared straightaway!'

'She probably will,' I said, laughing again myself. 'Very well, we'll all go tomorrow. Now, Ichiro, you'd better go on with your picture.'

'Aunt Noriko will get scared! She'll want to leave!'

'Now, Ichiro, let's carry on. You were doing very well.'

Ichiro rolled back over and returned to his picture. His earlier concentration, though, seemed to have deserted him; he began to add more and more fleeing figures at the bottom of his sketch until the shapes merged and became meaningless. Eventually abandoning any sense of care, he started to scribble wildly all over the lower section of the sheet.

'Ichiro, what are you doing? We won't go to the movie if you're going to do that. Ichiro, stop that!'

My grandson sprang to his feet and yelled out: 'Hi yo Silver!'

'Ichiro, sit down. You haven't finished yet.'

'Where's Aunt Noriko?'

‘She’s talking with your mother. Now, Ichiro, you haven’t finished your picture yet. Ichiro!’

But my grandson went running out of the room, shouting: ‘Lone Ranger! Hi yo Silver!’

I cannot recall precisely what I did with myself for the next several minutes. Quite possibly I remained sitting there in the piano room, gazing at Ichiro’s drawings, thinking about nothing in particular as I am increasingly prone to do these days. Eventually, though, I rose to my feet and went in search of my family.

I found Setsuko sitting alone on the veranda, looking out at the garden. The sun was still bright, but the day had grown much cooler, and as I appeared Setsuko turned and moved a cushion into a patch of sunlight for me.

‘We made fresh tea,’ she said. ‘Would you care for some, Father?’

I thanked her, and as she poured for me, I cast my gaze out to the garden.

For all it suffered during the war, our garden has recovered well, and is still recognizably the one Akira Sugimura built some forty years ago. Down at the far end, near the back wall, I could see Noriko and Ichiro examining a bamboo bush. That bush, like almost all the other shrubs and trees in the garden, had been transplanted fully grown by Sugimura from elsewhere in the city. In fact, one rumour has it that Sugimura personally walked around the city, peering over garden fences, offering large sums of money to the owner of any shrub or tree he wished to uproot for himself. If this is true, then he made his choice with admirable skill; the result was - and remains today - splendidly harmonious. There is a natural, rambling feeling about the garden, with barely a hint of artificial design.

‘Noriko was always so good with children,’ Setsuko remarked, her eyes on them. ‘Ichiro’s taken a great liking

to her. ’

‘Ichiro’s a fine boy,’ I said. ‘Not at all shy like a lot of children that age.’

‘I hope he wasn’t giving you trouble just now. He can be quite headstrong at times. Please don’t hesitate to scold him if he becomes a nuisance.’

‘Not at all. We’re getting on fine. We were just practising some drawing together, in fact.’

‘Really? I’m sure he enjoyed that.’

‘He was play-acting some scenario for me too,’ I said. ‘He mimes his actions very well.’

‘Oh yes. He occupies himself for long periods that way.’

‘Does he make up his own words? I was trying to listen, but I couldn’t make out what he was saying.’

My daughter raised a hand to cover her laugh. ‘He must have been playing cowboys. When he plays cowboys, he tries to speak English.’

‘English? Extraordinary. So that’s what it was.’

‘We took him once to the cinema to see an American cowboy film. He’s been very fond of cowboys ever since. We even had to buy him a ten-gallon hat. He’s convinced cowboys make that funny sound he does. It must have seemed very strange.’

‘So that’s what it was,’ I said with a laugh. ‘My grandson’s become a cowboy.’

Down in the garden, a breeze was making the foliage sway.

Noriko was crouching down by the old stone lantern near the back wall, pointing something out to Ichiro.

‘Still,’ I said, with a sigh, ‘only a few years ago, Ichiro wouldn’t have been allowed to see such a thing as a

cowboy film. ’

Setsuko, without turning from the garden, said: ‘Suichi believes it’s better he likes cowboys than that he idolize people like Miyamoto Musashi. Suichi thinks the American heroes are the better models for children now. ’

‘Is that so? So that’s Suichi’s view. ’

Ichiro seemed unimpressed by the stone lantern, for we could see him tugging violently at his aunt’s arm. Beside me, Setsuko gave an embarrassed laugh.

‘He’s so arrogant. Pulling people back and forth. Such bad manners. ’

‘Incidentally,’ I said, ‘Ichiro and I decided we’d go to the cinema tomorrow. ’

‘Really?’

I could see at once the uncertainty in Setsuko’s manner.

‘Yes,’ I said, ‘he seems very keen on this prehistoric monster. Don’t worry, I looked it up in the newspaper. The movie’s perfectly suitable for a boy of his age. ’

‘Yes, I’m sure. ’

‘In fact, I thought we should all go. A family outing, so to speak. ’

Setsuko cleared her throat nervously. ‘That would be most enjoyable. Except perhaps Noriko may also have some plans for tomorrow. ’

‘Oh? What plans are those?’

‘I believe she was wanting us all to go to the deer park. But I’m sure that can be done another time. ’

‘I had no idea Noriko had any plans. She certainly never asked me about them. Besides, I’ve already told Ichiro we’d go to the movie tomorrow. His heart will be set on it now. ’

‘Indeed,’ said Setsuko. ‘I’m sure he’d like to go to the cinema.’

Noriko was coming up the garden path towards us, Ichiro leading her by the hand. No doubt I might have taken up with her straightaway the matter of the following day, but she and Ichiro did not stay on the veranda, going inside to wash their hands. As it was, I was not able to raise the matter until after supper that evening.

Although during the day the dining room is a rather gloomy place on account of the sun rarely reaching it, after dark, with the lightshade low over the table, it has a cosy atmosphere. We had been sitting around the table for several minutes, reading newspapers and magazines, when I said to my grandson:

‘Well, Ichiro, have you told your aunt about tomorrow?’

Ichiro looked up from his book with a puzzled expression.

‘Shall we take the women with us or not?’ I said. ‘Remember what we said. They might find it too scary.’

This time my grandson understood me and grinned. ‘It might be too scary for Aunt Noriko,’ he said. ‘Do you want to come, Aunt Noriko?’

‘Come to what, Ichiro-san?’ Noriko asked.

‘Monster film.’

‘I thought we would all go tomorrow to the cinema,’ I explained. ‘A family outing, so to speak.’

‘Tomorrow?’ Noriko looked at me, then turned to my grandson. ‘Well, we can’t go tomorrow, can we, Ichiro? We’re going to the deer park, remember?’

‘The deer park can wait,’ I said. ‘The boy’s looking forward to his film now.’

‘Nonsense,’ Noriko said. ‘Everything’s arranged. We’re going to call in on Mrs Watanabe on the way back. She’s been wanting to meet Ichiro. Anyway, we decided a long time ago. Didn’t we, Ichiro?’

‘It’s very kind of Father,’ Setsuko put in. ‘But I understand Mrs Watanabe is expecting us. Perhaps we should leave the cinema until the day after.’

‘But Ichiro’s been looking forward to it,’ I protested. ‘Isn’t that so, Ichiro? What a nuisance these women are.’

Ichiro did not look at me, apparently absorbed again in his book.

‘You tell these women, Ichiro,’ I said.

My grandson continued to stare at his book.

‘Ichiro.’

Suddenly, dropping his book on the table, he got to his feet and went running out of the room, through into the piano room.

I gave a small laugh. ‘There,’ I said to Noriko. ‘You’ve disappointed him now. You should have left things as they were.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Father. We’d arranged Mrs Watanabe’s long ago. Besides, it’s ridiculous to take Ichiro to see a film like that. He won’t enjoy a film like that, will he, Setsuko?’

My elder daughter smiled uncomfortably. ‘It’s very kind of Father,’ she said, quietly. ‘Perhaps the day after ...’

I gave a sigh, shaking my head, and returned to my newspaper. But when after a few minutes it became clear that neither of my daughters was going to bring Ichiro back, I got up myself and went into the piano room.

Ichiro, unable to reach the cord on the lightshade, had switched on the lamp on top of the piano. I found him sitting

on the piano stool, one side of his head resting on the piano lid. His features, squashed against the dark wood, bore a disgruntled look.

‘I’m sorry about this, Ichiro,’ I said. ‘But don’t be disappointed. We’ll go the day after.’

Ichiro gave no reaction, so I said: ‘Now, Ichiro, this is nothing to be so disappointed about.’

I walked over to the window. It had become quite dark outside, and all I could see was my reflection and that of the room behind me. From the other room, I could hear the women talking in lowered voices.

‘Cheer up, Ichiro,’ I said. ‘This is nothing to get upset about. We’ll go the day after, I promise you.’

When I turned again to Ichiro, his head was resting on the piano lid as before; but now, he was walking his fingers along the lid, as though playing the keys.

I gave a light laugh. ‘Well, Ichiro, we’ll just go the day after. We can’t have the women ruling over us, can we?’ I gave another laugh. ‘I expect they thought it would be too scary. Eh, Ichiro?’

My grandson still gave no response, though he continued his finger movements on the piano lid. I decided it would be best to leave him alone for a few moments, and giving another laugh, went back through into the dining room.

I found my daughters sitting in silence, reading their magazines. As I sat down, I gave a heavy sigh, but neither of them responded to this. I had replaced my reading glasses on my face and was about to start on my newspaper, when Noriko said in a quiet voice: ‘Father, shall we make some tea?’

‘That’s kind of you, Noriko. But not for me just now.’

‘What about you, Setsuko?’

‘Thank you, Noriko. But I don’t think I will either.’

We continued to read in silence for a few more moments. Then Setsuko said: 'Will Father be coming with us tomorrow? We could still have our family outing then.'

'I'd like to. But I'm afraid there're a few things I have to be getting on with tomorrow.'

'What do you mean?' Noriko broke in. 'What things are those?' Then turning to Setsuko, she said: 'Don't listen to Father. He's got nothing to do these days. He'll just mope about the house like he always does now.'

'It would be very pleasant if Father would accompany us,' Setsuko said to me.

'It's regrettable,' I said, looking down at my newspaper again. 'But I have one or two things to attend to.'

'So you're going to stay at home all on your own?' Noriko asked.

'If you're all going away, it seems I'll have to.'

Setsuko gave a polite cough. Then she said: 'Perhaps then I'll remain at home also. Father and I have had little chance to exchange news.'

Noriko stared across the table at her sister. 'There's no need for you to miss out. You've come all this way, you don't want to spend all your time indoors.'

'But I would very much enjoy staying and keeping Father company. I expect we have a lot more news to exchange.'

'Father, look what you've done,' Noriko said. Then to her sister, she said: 'So it's only me and Ichiro now.'

'Ichiro will enjoy spending the day with you, Noriko,' Setsuko said with a smile. 'You're very much his favourite at the moment.'

I was glad about Setsuko's decision to remain at home, for indeed, we had had little opportunity to talk without

interruption; and there are, of course, many things a father wishes to know about a married daughter's life which he cannot ask outright. But what never occurred to me that evening was that Setsuko would have her own reasons for wishing to remain in the house with me.

It is perhaps a sign of my advancing years that I have taken to wandering into rooms for no purpose. When Setsuko slid open the door of the reception room that afternoon - on the second day of her visit - I must have been standing there lost in thought for some considerable time.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'll come back later.'

I turned, a little startled, to find my daughter kneeling at the threshold, holding a vase filled with flowers and cuttings.

'No, please come in,' I said to her. 'I was doing nothing in particular.'

Retirement places more time on your hands. Indeed, it is one of the enjoyments of retirement that you are able to drift through the day at your own pace, easy in the knowledge that you have put hard work and achievement behind you. Nevertheless, I must be getting absent-minded indeed to be wandering aimlessly into - of all places - the reception room. For throughout my years I have preserved the sense, instilled in me by my father, that the reception room of a house is a place to be revered, a place to be kept unsoiled by everyday trivialities, reserved for the receiving of important guests, or else the paying of respects at the Buddhist altar. Accordingly, the reception room of my house has always had a more solemn atmosphere than that to be found in most households; and although I never made a rule of it as my own father did, I discouraged my children while they were young from entering the room unless specifically bidden to do so.

My respect for reception rooms may well appear exaggerated, but then you must realize that in the house I grew up in - in Tsuruoka Village, a half-day's train journey from here - I was forbidden even to enter the reception room until the age of twelve. That room being in many senses the centre of the house, curiosity compelled me to construct an image of its interior from the occasional glimpses I managed to catch of it. Later in my life I was often to surprise colleagues with my ability to realize a scene on canvas based only on the briefest of passing glances; it is possible I have my father to thank for this skill, and the inadvertent training he gave my artist's eye during those formative years. In any case, when I reached the age of twelve, the 'business meetings' began, and then I found myself inside that room once every week.

'Masuji and I will be discussing business tonight,' my father would announce during supper. And that would serve both as my summons to present myself after the meal, and as a warning to the rest of the family to make no noise in the vicinity of the reception room that evening.

My father would disappear into the room after supper, and call me some fifteen minutes later. The room I entered would be lit by a single tall candle standing in the centre of the floor. Within the circle of light it cast, my father would be sitting cross-legged on the tatami before his wooden 'business box'. He would gesture for me to sit opposite him in the light, and as I did so, the brightness of the candle would put the rest of the room into shadow. Only vaguely would I be able to discern past my father's shoulder the Buddhist altar by the far wall, or the few hangings adorning the alcoves.

My father would then begin his talking. From out of his 'business box' he would produce small, fat notebooks, some of which he would open so that he could point out to me columns of densely packed figures. All the while, his talking would continue in a measured, grave tone, to pause only

occasionally when he would look up at me as though for confirmation. At these points, I would hurriedly utter: 'Yes, indeed.'

Of course, it was quite impossible for me to follow what my father was saying. Employing jargon, recounting his way through lengthy calculations, he made no concessions to the fact that he was addressing a young boy. But it seemed equally impossible for me to ask him to stop and explain. For as I saw it, I had been allowed into the reception room only because I had been deemed old enough to understand such talk. My sense of shame was matched only by a terrible fear that at any moment I would be called upon to say more than 'Yes, indeed' and my game would be up. And although month after month went by and I was never required to say anything more, I nevertheless lived in dread of the next 'business meeting'.

Of course, it is clear to me now that my father never expected me for a moment to follow his talk, but I have never ascertained just why he put me through these ordeals. Perhaps he wished to impress upon me from that early age his expectation that I would eventually take over the family business. Or perhaps he felt that as future head of the family, it was only right I should be consulted on all decisions whose repercussions were likely to extend into my adulthood; that way, so my father may have figured it, I would have less cause for complaint were I to inherit an unsound business.

Then when I was fifteen, I remember being called into the reception room for a different kind of meeting. As ever, the room was lit by the tall candle, my father sat at the centre of its light. But that evening, instead of his business box, he had before him a heavy earthenware ashpot. This puzzled me, for this ashpot - the largest in the house - was normally produced only for guests.

'You've brought all of them?' he asked.

‘I’ve done as you instructed.’

I laid beside my father the pile of paintings and sketches I had been holding in my arms. They made an untidy pile, sheets of varying sizes and quality, most of which had warped or wrinkled with the paint.

I sat in silence while my father looked through my work. He would regard each painting for a moment, then lay it to one side. When he was almost half-way through my collection, he said without looking up:

‘Masuji, are you sure all your work is here? Aren’t there one or two paintings you haven’t brought me?’

I did not answer immediately. He looked up and asked: ‘Well?’

‘It’s possible there may be one or two I have not brought.’

‘Indeed. And no doubt, Masuji, the missing paintings are the very ones you’re most proud of. Isn’t that so?’

He had turned his eyes down to the paintings again, so I did not answer. For several more moments, I watched him going through the pile. Once, he held one painting close to the candle flame, saying: ‘This is the path leading down from Nishiyama hill, is it not? Certainly you’ve caught the likeness very well. That’s just how it looks coming down the hill. Very skilful.’

‘Thank you.’

‘You know, Masuji’ - my father’s eyes were still fixed on the painting - ‘I’ve heard a curious thing from your mother. She seems to be under the impression you wish to take up painting as a profession.’

He did not phrase this as a question, so I did not at first reply. But then he looked up and repeated: ‘Your mother, Masuji, seems to be under the impression that you

wish to take up painting as a profession. Naturally, she is mistaken in supposing this.'

'Naturally,' I said, quietly.

'You mean, there has been some misunderstanding on her part.'

'No doubt.'

'I see.'

For a few more minutes, my father continued to study the paintings, and I sat there watching him in silence. Then he said without looking up: 'In fact, I think that was your mother going by outside. Did you hear her?'

'I'm afraid I didn't hear anyone.'

'I think it was your mother. Ask her to step in here since she's passing.'

I rose to my feet and went to the doorway. The corridor was dark and empty, as I had known it would be. Behind me, I heard my father's voice say: 'While you're fetching her, Masuji, gather together the rest of your paintings and bring them to me.'

Perhaps it was simply my imagination, but when I returned to the room a few minutes later, accompanied by my mother, I received the impression the earthenware ashpot had been moved slightly nearer the candle. I also thought there was a smell of burning in the air, but when I glanced into the ashpot, there were no signs of its having been used.

My father acknowledged me distractedly when I placed the last examples of my work beside the original pile. He appeared still to be preoccupied with my paintings, and for some time, he ignored both my mother and me, seated before him in silence. Then finally, he gave a sigh, looked up and said to me: 'I don't expect, Masuji, you have much time for wandering priests, do you?'

‘Wandering priests? I suppose not.’

‘They have a lot to say about this world. I don’t pay much attention to them most of the time. But it’s only decent to be courteous to holy men, even if they strike you sometimes as nothing more than beggars.’

He paused, so I said: ‘Yes, indeed.’

Then my father turned to my mother and said: ‘Do you remember, Sachiko, the wandering priests who used to come through this village? There was one who came to this house just after our son here was born. A thin old man, with only one hand. But a very sturdy fellow for all that. You remember him?’

‘Yes, of course,’ my mother said. ‘But perhaps one should not take to heart what some of these priests have to say.’

‘But you remember,’ my father said, ‘this priest gained a deep insight into Masuji’s heart. He left us with a warning, you remember, Sachiko?’

‘But our son was no more than a baby then,’ my mother said. Her voice was lowered, as though she somehow hoped I would not hear. In contrast, my father’s voice was needlessly loud, as if addressing an audience:

‘He left us with a warning. Masuji’s limbs were healthy, he told us, but he had been born with a flaw in his nature. A weak streak that would give him a tendency towards slothfulness and deceit. You remember this, Sachiko?’

‘But I believe the priest also had many positive things to say about our son.’

‘This is true. Our son had a lot of good qualities, the priest did point that out. But you recall his warning, Sachiko? He said if the good points were to dominate, we who brought him up would have to be vigilant and check this weak streak whenever it tried to manifest itself. Otherwise, so

the old priest told us, Masuji here would grow up to be a good-for-nothing. ’

‘But perhaps,’ my mother said cautiously, ‘it is unwise to take to heart what these priests have to say.’

My father appeared a little surprised by this remark. Then, after a moment, he nodded thoughtfully, as though my mother had made a perplexing point. ‘I was myself reluctant to take him seriously at the time,’ he continued. ‘But then at every stage of Masuji’s growing up, I’ve been obliged to acknowledge that old man’s words. It can’t be denied, there is a weakness running through our son’s character. There’s little in the way of malice in him. But unceasingly, we’ve had to combat his laziness, his dislike of useful work, his weak will.’

Then, with some deliberation, my father picked up three or four of my paintings and held them in both hands as though to test their weight. He turned his gaze towards me and said: ‘Masuji, your mother here was under the impression that you wished to pursue painting as a profession. Has there perhaps been some misunderstanding on her part?’

I lowered my eyes and remained silent. Then I heard my mother’s voice beside me, almost whispering, say: ‘He’s still very young. I’m sure It’s just a childish whim of his.’

There was a pause, then my father said: ‘Tell me, Masuji, have you any idea what kind of a world artists inhabit?’

I remained silent, looking at the floor before me.

‘Artists’, my father’s voice continued, ‘live in squalor and poverty. They inhabit a world which gives them every temptation to become weak-willed and depraved. Am I not right, Sachiko?’

‘Naturally. Yet perhaps there are one or two who are able to pursue an artistic career and yet avoid such pitfalls.’

‘Of course, there are exceptions,’ my father said. My eyes were still lowered, but I could tell from his voice that he was again nodding in his perplexed manner. ‘The handful with extraordinary resolve and character. But I’m afraid our son here is far from being such a person. Indeed, quite the contrary. It is our duty to protect him from such dangers. We do, after all, wish him to become someone we can be proud of, don’t we?’

‘Of course,’ my mother said.

I looked up quickly. The candle had burned half-way down its length and the flame was sharply illuminating one side of my father’s face. He had now placed the paintings on his lap, and I noticed how his fingers were moving impatiently along their edges.

‘Masuji,’ he said, ‘you may leave us now. I wish to speak with your mother.’

I can remember a little later that night, coming across my mother in the darkness. In all likelihood, it was in one of the corridors that I encountered her, though I do not remember this. Neither do I remember why I was wandering around the house in the dark, but it was certainly not in order to eavesdrop on my parents - for I do recall being resolved to pay no heed to what occurred in the reception room after my departure. In those days, of course, houses were all badly lit, so it was not at all unusual that we should stand in the dark and converse. I could make out my mother’s figure in front of me, but could not see her face.

‘There’s a smell of burning around the house,’ I remarked.

‘Burning?’ My mother was silent for a while, then she said: ‘No. I don’t think so. It must be your imagination,

Masuji. ’

‘I smelt burning,’ I said. ‘There, I just caught it again. Is Father still in the reception room?’

‘Yes. He’s working on something.’

‘Whatever he’s doing in there,’ I said, ‘it doesn’t bother me in the least.’

My mother made no sound, so I added: ‘The only thing Father’s succeeded in kindling is my ambition.’

‘That is good to hear, Masuji.’

‘You mustn’t misunderstand me, Mother. I have no wish to find myself in years to come, sitting where Father is now sitting, telling my own son about accounts and money. Would you be proud of me if I grew to be like that?’

‘I would indeed, Masuji. There is much more to a life like your father’s than you can possibly know at your age.’

‘I would never be proud of myself. When I said I was ambitious, I meant I wished to rise above such a life.’

My mother fell silent for some moments. Then she said: ‘When you are young, there are many things which appear dull and lifeless. But as you get older, you will find these are the very things that are most important to you.’

I did not reply to this. Instead, I believe I said: ‘Once, I was terrified of Father’s business meetings. But for some time now, they’ve simply bored me. In fact, they disgust me. What are these meetings I’m so privileged to attend? The counting of loose change. The fingering of coins, hour after hour. I would never forgive myself if my life came to be like that.’ I paused and waited to see if my mother would say anything. For a moment, I had a peculiar feeling she had walked silently away while I had been speaking and I was now standing there alone. But then I heard her move just in front of me, so I repeated: ‘It doesn’t bother me in the

least what Father's doing in the reception room. All he's kindled is my ambition.'

However, I see I am drifting. My intention had been to record here that conversation I had with Setsuko last month when she came into the reception room to change the flowers.

As I recall it, Setsuko had seated herself before the Buddhist altar and had begun to remove the more tired of the flowers decorating it. I had seated myself a little behind her, watching the way she carefully shook each stem before placing it on her lap, and I believe we were talking about something quite light-hearted at that stage. But then she said, without turning from her flowers:

'Excuse me for mentioning this, Father. No doubt, it would have already occurred to you.'

'What is that, Setsuko?'

'I merely mention it because I gather it is very likely Noriko's marriage negotiations will progress.'

Setsuko had begun to transfer, one by one, the fresh cuttings from out of her vase into those surrounding the altar. She was performing this task with great care, pausing after each flower to consider the effect. 'I merely wished to say,' she went on, 'once the negotiations begin in earnest, it may be as well if Father were to take certain precautionary steps.'

'Precautionary steps? Naturally, we'll go carefully. But what precisely did you have in mind?'

'Forgive me, I was referring particularly to the investigations.'

'Well, of course, we'll be as thorough as necessary. We'll hire the same detective as last year. He was very reliable, you may remember.'

Setsuko carefully repositioned a stem. 'Forgive me, I am no doubt expressing myself unclearly. I was, in fact, referring to *their* investigations.'

'I'm sorry, I'm not sure I follow you. I was not aware we had anything to hide.'

Setsuko gave a nervous laugh. 'Father must forgive me. As you know, I've never had a gift for conversation. Suichi is forever scolding me for expressing myself badly. He expresses himself so eloquently. No doubt, I should endeavour to learn from him.'

'I'm sure your conversation is fine, but I'm afraid I don't quite follow what you are saying.'

Suddenly, Setsuko raised her hands in despair. 'The breeze,' she said with a sigh, and reached forward to her flowers once more. 'I like them like this, but the breeze doesn't seem to agree.' For a moment, she became preoccupied again. Then she said: 'You must forgive me, Father. In my place, Suichi would express things better. But of course, he isn't here. I merely wished to say that it is perhaps wise if Father would take certain precautionary steps. To ensure misunderstandings do not arise. After all, Noriko is almost twenty-six now. We cannot afford many more disappointments such as last year's.'

'Misunderstandings about what, Setsuko?'

'About the past. But please, I'm sure I'm speaking quite needlessly. Father has no doubt thought already of all these things and will do whatever is necessary.'

She sat back, pondering her work, then turned to me with a smile. 'I have little skill in these things,' she said, indicating the flowers.

'They look splendid.'

She gave a doubtful glance towards the altar and laughed self-consciously.

Yesterday, as I was enjoying the tram ride down to the quiet suburb of Arakawa, the recollection of that exchange in the reception room came into my mind, causing me to experience a wave of irritation. As I looked out of the window at the scenery, growing ever less cluttered as we continued south, the image returned to my mind of my daughter seated in front of the altar, advising me to take 'precautionary steps'. I remembered again the way she had turned her face towards me slightly to say: 'After all, we cannot afford many more disappointments such as last year's.' And I remembered again her knowing manner on the veranda that first morning of her visit, when she had hinted I had some peculiar secret about the Miyakes' withdrawal last year. Such recollections had already marred my mood over this past month; but it was yesterday, in the tranquillity of travelling alone to the quieter reaches of the city, that I was able to consider my feelings more clearly, and I came to realize my sense of irritation was not essentially directed against Setsuko, but against her husband.

It is, I suppose, natural enough that a wife is influenced by her husband's ideas - even, as in the case of Suichi's, when they are quite irrational. But when a man induces his wife to turn suspicious thoughts against her own father, then that is surely cause enough for resentment. On account of what he must have suffered out in Manchuria, I have in the past tried to adopt a tolerant attitude towards certain aspects of his behaviour; I have not taken personally, for instance, the frequent signs of bitterness he has displayed towards my generation. But then I always assumed such feelings fade with time. However, so far as Suichi is concerned, they seem to be actually growing more trenchant and unreasonable.

All this would not be bothering me now - after all, Setsuko and Suichi live far away, and I never see them more than once a year - if it were not that latterly, ever since Setsuko's visit last month, these same irrational ideas seem

to be infecting Noriko's mind. This is what has irritated me and tempted me several times these past few days to write an angry letter to Setsuko. It is all very well a husband and wife occupying each other with ridiculous speculations, but they should keep such things to themselves. A stricter father, no doubt, would have done something long ago.

More than once last month, I had come upon my daughters deep in discussion and noticed how they broke off guiltily before starting some fresh, rather unconvincing conversation. In fact, I can recall this happening at least three times during the course of the five days Setsuko spent here. And then just a few days ago, Noriko and I were finishing breakfast when she said to me:

'I was walking past the Shimizu department store yesterday and guess who I saw standing at the tram stop? It was Jiro Miyake!'

'Miyake?' I looked up from my bowl, surprised to hear Noriko mentioning the name so brazenly. 'Why, that was unfortunate.'

'Unfortunate? Well actually, Father, I was rather pleased to see him. He seemed embarrassed though, so I didn't talk to him for long. In any case, I had to get back to the office. I was just out on an errand, you see. But did you know he's engaged to be married now?'

'He told you that? What a nerve.'

'He didn't volunteer it, of course. I asked him. I told him I was in the middle of new negotiations now and asked him how his own marriage prospects were. I asked him just like that. His face was going scarlet! But then he came out with it and said he was all but engaged now. It's all practically settled.'

'Really, Noriko, you shouldn't be so indiscreet. Why did you have to mention marriage at all?'

‘I was curious. I’m not upset about it any more. And with the present negotiations going so well, I was just thinking the other day, what a pity it would be if Jiro Miyake was still brooding over last year. So you can imagine how pleased I was to find him practically engaged.’

‘I see.’

‘I hope I get to meet his bride soon. I’m sure she’s very nice, aren’t you, Father?’

‘I’m sure.’

We continued eating for a moment. Then Noriko said: ‘There was something else I almost asked him. But I didn’t.’ She leaned forward and whispered: ‘I almost asked about last year. About why they pulled out.’

‘It’s just as well you didn’t. Besides, they gave their reason clearly enough at the time. They felt the young man was inadequately placed to be worthy of you.’

‘But you know that was just formality, Father. We never found out the real reason. At least, I never got to hear about it.’ It was at this point that something in her voice made me look up again from my bowl. Noriko was holding her chopsticks poised in the air, as though waiting for me to say something. Then, as I continued eating, she said: ‘Why do you suppose they pulled out? Did you ever discover about that?’

‘I discovered nothing. As I say, they said they felt the young man was inadequately placed. It’s a perfectly good answer.’

‘I wonder, Father, if it was simply that I didn’t come up to their requirements. Perhaps I wasn’t pretty enough. Do you think that’s what it was?’

‘It wasn’t anything to do with you, you know that. There are all sorts of reasons why a family pulls out of a negotiation.’

‘Well, Father, if it wasn’t to do with me, then I wonder what it could have been to make them pull out like that.’

It seemed to me there was something unnaturally deliberate in the way my daughter uttered those words. Perhaps I imagined it, but then a father comes to notice any small inflexions in his daughter’s speech.

In any case, that exchange with Noriko put me in mind again of the occasion I myself had encountered Jiro Miyake and had ended up talking with him at a tram stop. It was just over a year ago - the negotiations with the Miyake family were still going on at that point - towards the late afternoon when the city was full of people returning home after the day’s work. For some reason, I had been walking through the Yokote district and was making towards the tram stop outside the Kimura Company Building. If you are familiar with the Yokote district, you will know of the numerous small, rather seedy offices that line the upper storeys of the shops there. When I encountered Jiro Miyake that day, he was emerging from one such office, having come down a narrow staircase between two shop fronts.

I had met him twice prior to that day, but only at formal family meetings when he had turned out in his best clothes. Now he looked quite different, dressed in a tired-looking raincoat a little too large for him, clutching a briefcase under his arm. He had the appearance of a young man much accustomed to being bossed around; indeed, his whole posture seemed to be fixed on the verge of bowing. When I asked him if the office he had just left was his workplace, he began laughing nervously, as though I had caught him coming out of some disreputable house.

It did occur to me his awkwardness was perhaps too extreme to be accounted for merely by our chance meeting; but at the time I put it down to his embarrassment at the shabby appearance of his office building and its surroundings. It was only a week or so afterwards, when learning with surprise

that the Miyakes had pulled out, that I found myself casting my mind back to that encounter, searching it for significance.

‘I wonder,’ I said to Setsuko, for she was down on one of her visits at the time, ‘if all the while I was talking with him, they’d already decided on a withdrawal.’

‘That would certainly account for the nervousness Father observed,’ Setsuko had said. ‘Did he not say anything to hint at their intentions?’

But even then, only a week after the actual encounter, I could hardly recall the conversation I had had with young Miyake. That afternoon, of course, I was still going on the assumption that his engagement to Noriko would be announced any day, and that I was dealing with a future member of my family. My attentions, then, were focused on getting young Miyake to relax in my presence, and I did not give as much thought as I might to what was actually said during our short walk to the tram stop and the few minutes we spent standing there together.

Nevertheless, as I pondered over the whole business during the days which followed, a new idea struck me: that perhaps the encounter itself had helped bring about the withdrawal.

‘It’s just possible,’ I put it to Setsuko. ‘Miyake was very self-conscious about my having seen his workplace. Possibly it struck him afresh that there was too much of a gulf between our families. After all, it’s a point they’ve made too often for it to be just formality.’

But Setsuko, it would seem, was unconvinced by that theory. And it seems she must have gone home to her husband to speculate over the failure of her sister’s proposal. For this year, she appears to have returned with her own theories – or at least, those of Suichi. So then I am obliged to think back yet again to that encounter with Miyake, to turn

it over from yet another perspective. But as I have said, I could barely recall what had taken place just one week afterwards, and now more than a year has passed.

But then one particular exchange has come back to me which I gave little significance to before. Miyake and I had reached the main street and were standing in front of the Kimura Company Building awaiting our respective trams. And I remember Miyake saying:

‘We had some sad news at work today. The President of our parent company is now deceased.’

‘I’m very sorry to hear that. Was he advanced in years?’

‘He was only in his early sixties. I never had the chance to see him in the flesh, though of course I saw photographs of him in our periodicals. He was a great man, and we all feel as though we’ve been orphaned.’

‘It must be a blow to you all.’

‘Indeed it is,’ Miyake said, and paused for a moment. Then he continued: ‘However, we at our office are at something of a loss as to the most appropriate way of showing our respect. You see, to be quite frank, the President committed suicide.’

‘Really?’

‘Indeed. He was found gassed. But it seems he tried hara-kiri first, for there were minor scratches around his stomach.’ Miyake looked down at the ground solemnly. ‘It was his apology on behalf of the companies under his charge.’

‘His apology?’

‘Our President clearly felt responsible for certain undertakings we were involved in during the war. Two senior men were already dismissed by the Americans, but our

President obviously felt it was not enough. His act was an apology on behalf of us all to the families of those killed in the war. ’

‘Why, really,’ I said, ‘that seems rather extreme. The world seems to have gone mad. Every day there seems to be a report of someone else killing himself in apology. Tell me, Mr Miyake, don’t you find it all a great waste? After all, if your country is at war, you do all you can in support, there’s no shame in that. What need is there to apologize by death?’

‘No doubt you’re right, sir. But to be frank, there’s much relief around the company. We feel now we can forget our past transgressions and look to the future. It was a great thing our President did. ’

‘But a great waste, too. Some of our best men are giving up their lives in this way. ’

‘Indeed, sir, it is a pity. Sometimes I think there are many who should be giving their lives in apology who are too cowardly to face up to their responsibilities. It is then left to the likes of our President to carry out the noble gestures. There are plenty of men already back in positions they held during the war. Some of them are no better than war criminals. They should be the ones apologizing. ’

‘I see your point,’ I said. ‘But those who fought and worked loyally for our country during the war cannot be called war criminals. I fear that’s an expression used too freely these days. ’

‘But these are the men who led the country astray, sir. Surely, it’s only right they should acknowledge their responsibility. It’s a cowardice that these men refuse to admit to their mistakes. And when those mistakes were made on behalf of the whole country, why then it must be the greatest cowardice of all. ’

Did Miyake really say all this to me that afternoon? Perhaps I am getting his words confused with the sort of thing Suichi will come out and say. This is quite possible; I had after all come to regard Miyake as my prospective son-in-law, and I may indeed have somehow associated him with my actual son-in-law. Certainly, phrases like 'the greatest cowardice of all' sound much more like Suichi than the mild-mannered young Miyake. I am certain enough, though, that some such conversation did take place at the tram stop that day, and I suppose it is somewhat curious he should have brought up such a topic as he did. But as for the phrase 'the greatest cowardice of all', I am sure that is Suichi's. In fact, now I think of it, I am sure Suichi used it that evening after the ceremony for the burying of Kenji's ashes.

It had taken more than a year for my son's ashes to arrive from Manchuria. The communists, we were constantly told, had made everything difficult there. Then when his ashes finally came, along with those of the twenty-three other young men who had died attempting that hopeless charge across the minefield, there were no assurances the ashes were in fact Kenji's and Kenji's alone. 'But if my brother's ashes are mingled,' Setsuko had written to me at the time, 'they would only be mingled with those of his comrades. We cannot complain about that.' And so we accepted the ashes as Kenji's and carried out the belated ceremony for him two years ago last month.

It was in the midst of the ceremony at the cemetery that I saw Suichi striding away angrily. When I asked Setsuko what the matter was with her husband, she whispered quickly: 'Please forgive him, he isn't well. A touch of malnutrition, he hasn't shaken it off for months.'

But later, as the guests from the ceremony were gathering in my house, Setsuko said to me: 'Please understand, Father. Such ceremonies upset Suichi deeply.'

‘How touching,’ I said. ‘I had no idea he was so close to your brother.’

‘They got on well whenever they met,’ Setsuko said. ‘Besides, Suichi identifies very much with the likes of Kenji. He says it could so easily have been him.’

‘But isn’t that all the more reason not to desert the ceremony?’

‘I’m sorry, Father, Suichi never intended to appear disrespectful. But we have attended so many such ceremonies this past year, for Suichi’s friends and comrades, and they always make him so angry.’

‘Angry? What is it he’s angry about?’

But more guests were arriving at that point and I was obliged to break off our conversation. It was not until later that evening I got a chance to talk to Suichi himself. Many of the guests were still with us, gathered in the reception room. I spotted my son-in-law’s tall figure across the room, standing alone; he had parted the screens which opened on to the garden, and with his back turned to the hum of conversation, was gazing out into the darkness. I went up to him and said:

‘Setsuko tells me, Suichi, these ceremonies make you angry.’

He turned and smiled. ‘I suppose they do. I get angry thinking about things. About the waste.’

‘Yes. It’s terrible to think of the waste. But Kenji, like many others, died very bravely.’

For a moment, my son-in-law gazed at me with a still, expressionless face; it is something he does from time to time which I have never quite got used to. The gaze, no doubt, is quite innocent, but perhaps because Suichi is a physically powerful man and his features rather fearsome, it is easy to read something threatening or accusing there.

‘There seems to be no end of courageous deaths,’ he said, eventually. ‘Half of my high school graduation year have died courageous deaths. They were all for stupid causes, though they were never to know that. Do you know, Father, what really makes me angry?’

‘What is that, Suichi?’

‘Those who sent the likes of Kenji out there to die these brave deaths, where are they today? They’re carrying on with their lives, much the same as ever. Many are more successful than before, behaving so well in front of the Americans, the very ones who led us to disaster. And yet it’s the likes of Kenji we have to mourn. This is what makes me angry. Brave young men die for stupid causes, and the real culprits are still with us. Afraid to show themselves for what they are, to admit their responsibility.’ And it was then, I am sure, as he turned back to the darkness outside, that he said: ‘To my mind, that’s the greatest cowardice of all.’

I had been drained by the ceremony, otherwise I might have challenged some of his assumptions. But I judged there would be other opportunities for such talk and moved the conversation to other matters. I recall standing there with him, looking out into the night, enquiring about his work and about Ichiro. At that point, I had hardly seen Suichi since his return from the war, and that was my first experience of the changed, somewhat bitter son-in-law I have now come to get used to. I was surprised that evening to find him talking in that way, with no trace of the rigid manners he had had before going to war; but I put it down to the emotional effect of the burial ceremony, and more generally, to the enormous impact of his war experience - which, so Setsuko had hinted, had been of a terrible nature.

But in fact the mood I found him in that evening proved to be typical of his general mood these days; the transformation from the polite, self-effacing young man who

married Setsuko two years before the war is quite remarkable. Of course, it is tragic that so many of his generation died as they did, but why must he harbour such bitterness for his elders? There is a hardness, almost a maliciousness to Suichi's views now which I find worrying - even more so since they appear to be influencing Setsuko.

But such a transformation is by no means unique to my son-in-law. These days I see it all around me; something has changed in the character of the younger generation in a way I do not fully understand, and certain aspects of this change are undeniably disturbing. For instance, just the other night down at Mrs Kawakami's, I overheard a man sitting further along the counter saying:

'I hear they took that idiot to hospital. A few broken ribs and concussion.'

'You mean the Hirayama boy?' Mrs Kawakami asked, with a look of concern.

'Is that his name? The one's who's always wandering around shouting things out. Someone really ought to get him to stop. It seems he got beaten up again last night. It's a shame, taking on an idiot like that, whatever he's shouting out.'

At this point, I turned to the man and said: 'Excuse me, you say the Hirayama boy's been attacked? For what reason?'

'It seems he kept singing one of those old military songs and chanting regressive slogans.'

'But the Hirayama boy's always done that,' I pointed out. 'He's only able to sing two or three songs. It's what he was taught.'

The man shrugged. 'I agree, what's the sense in beating up an idiot like that? It's just callousness. But he was over by the Kayabashi bridge, and you know how sleazy things get there after dark. He'd been sitting up on the bridge post,

singing and chanting for about an hour. They could hear him in the bar across the way, and it seems a few of them got tired of it.'

'What sense is there in that?' Mrs Kawakami said. 'The Hirayama boy means no harm.'

'Well, someone should teach him to sing new songs,' the man said, drinking from his glass. 'He'll only get beaten up again if he goes around singing those old ones.'

We still call him 'the Hirayama boy' though he must now be at least fifty. But then the name does not seem inappropriate, for he has the mental age of a child. As far back as I can remember, he has been looked after by the Catholic nuns at the mission, but presumably he was born into a family called Hirayama. In the old days, when our pleasure district was flourishing, the Hirayama boy could always be found sitting on the ground near the entrance to the Migi-Hidari or one of its neighbouring establishments. He was, as Mrs Kawakami had said, quite harmless, and indeed, in the years before and during the war he became a popular figure in the pleasure district with his war songs and mimicking of patriotic speeches.

Who had taught him his songs, I do not know. There were no more than two or three in his repertoire, and he knew only a verse of each. But he would deliver these in a voice of considerable carrying power, and between the singing, he would amuse spectators by standing there grinning at the sky, his hands on his hips, shouting: 'This village must provide its share of sacrifices for the Emperor! Some of you will lay down your lives! Some of you will return triumphant to a new dawn!' - or some such words. And people would say, 'The Hirayama boy may not have it all there, but he's got the right attitude. He's Japanese.' I often saw people stop to give him money, or else buy him something to eat, and on those occasions the idiot's face would light up into a smile. No doubt, the Hirayama boy became fixated on those patriotic

songs because of the attention and popularity they earned him.

Nobody minded idiots in those days. What has come over people that they feel inclined to beat the man up? They may not like his songs and speeches, but in all likelihood they are the same people who once patted his head and encouraged him until those few snatches embedded themselves in his brain.

But as I say, there is a different mood in the country these days, and Suichi's attitudes are probably by no means exceptional. Perhaps I am being unfair if I credit young Miyake, too, with such bitterness, but then the way things are at present, if you examine anything anyone says to you, it seems you will find a thread of this same bitter feeling running through it. For all I know, Miyake did speak those words; perhaps all men of Miyake's and Suichi's generation have come to think and speak like that.

I believe I have already mentioned that yesterday I took a trip down to the south of the city, to the Arakawa district. Arakawa is the last stop on the city tramline going south, and many people express surprise that the line should extend so far down into the suburbs. Indeed, it is hard to think of Arakawa, with its cleanly swept residential streets, its rows of maple trees on the pavements, its dignified houses each set apart from the next, and its general air of being surrounded by countryside, as being part of the city. But to my mind, the authorities were correct to take the tramline as far as Arakawa; it can only be of benefit to city-dwellers that they have easy access to calmer, less crowded surroundings. We were not always so well served, and I can recall how the hemmed-in feeling one gets in a city, especially during the hot summer weeks, was significantly greater in the days before the present tramlines were laid down.

I believe it was 1931 when the present lines began to operate, superseding the inadequate lines which had so irritated passengers for the previous thirty years. If you were not living here then, it is perhaps hard to imagine the impact these new lines had on many aspects of life in the city. Whole districts seemed to change character overnight; parks that had always been busy with people became deserted; long-established businesses suffered severe losses.

There were, of course, those districts which found themselves unexpectedly benefited, and among these was that area on the other side of the Bridge of Hesitation soon to become our pleasure district. Prior to the new tramlines, you would have found there only a few dull back streets with rows of shingled-roof houses. No one at that time considered it a district in its own right and one could only locate it by saying 'east of Furukawa'. The new tram circuit, however, meant that passengers disembarking at the terminus in Furukawa could reach the city centre more quickly on foot than by making a second, highly circuitous tram journey, and the result was a sudden influx of people walking through that area. The handful of bars that were there already began, after years of mediocre trade, to flourish dramatically, while new ones opened one after the other.

The establishment that was to become the Migi-Hidari was known at that time simply as 'Yamagata's' - after its proprietor, an old veteran soldier - and was the longest-established bar in the district. It was a somewhat colourless place in those days, but I had used it regularly over the years since first coming to the city. As far as I recall, it was not until a few months after the arrival of the new tramlines that Yamagata saw what was happening around him, and began to formulate his ideas. With the area set to become a fully fledged drinking quarter, his own establishment - being the oldest, and situated as it was at the intersection of three streets - stood naturally to become a sort of patriarch among local establishments. In view of this, so he

saw it, it was his responsibility to expand and re-open in grand style. The tradesman above him was ready to be bought out, and the necessary capital could be raised without difficulty. The main stumbling block, both as regards his own establishment and the district as a whole, was the attitude of the city authorities.

In this, Yamagata was undoubtedly correct. For this was 1933 or 1934 - an unlikely time, you may recall, to be contemplating the birth of a new pleasure district. The authorities had been applying arduous policies to keep the more frivolous side of the city's life in check, and indeed, in the city centre, many of the more decadent establishments were in the process of being closed down. At first, then, I did not listen to Yamagata's ideas with much sympathy. It was only when he told me just what sort of place he had in mind that I became sufficiently impressed and promised I would do what I could to help him.

I believe I have already mentioned the fact that I played a small part in the Migi-Hidari's coming into existence. Of course, not being a man of wealth, there was little I could do financially. But by that time my reputation in this city had grown to a certain extent; as I recall, I was not yet serving on the arts committee of the State Department, but I had many personal links there and was already being consulted frequently on matters of policy. So then, my petition to the authorities on Yamagata's behalf was not without weight.

'It is the owner's intention', I explained, 'that the proposed establishment be a celebration of the new patriotic spirit emerging in Japan today. The décor would reflect the new spirit, and any patron incompatible with that spirit would be firmly encouraged to leave. Furthermore, it is the owner's intention that the establishment be a place where this city's artists and writers whose works most reflect the new spirit can gather and drink together. With respect to this last point, I have myself secured the support of various of my colleagues, among them the painter, Masayuki Harada;

the playwright, Misumi; the journalists, Shigeo Otsuji and Eiji Nastuki - all of them, as you will know, producers of work unflinchingly loyal to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor.'

I went on to point out how such an establishment, given its dominance in the neighbourhood, would be an ideal means by which to ensure that a desirable tone prevailed in the district.

'Otherwise,' I warned, 'I fear we are faced with the growth of another quarter characterized by the very sort of decadence we have been doing our best to combat and which we know so weakens the fibre of our culture.'

The authorities responded not simply with acquiescence, but with an enthusiasm that surprised me. It was, I suppose, another of those instances when one is struck by the realization that one is held in rather higher esteem than one supposed. But then I was never one to concern myself with matters of esteem, and this was not why the advent of the Migi-Hidari brought me so much personal satisfaction; rather, I was proud to see borne out something I had maintained for some time - namely that the new spirit of Japan was not incompatible with enjoying oneself; that is to say, there was no reason why pleasure-seeking had to go hand in hand with decadence.

So then, some two-and-a-half years after the coming of the new tramlines, the Migi-Hidari was opened. The renovations had been skilful and extensive, so that anyone strolling that way after dark could hardly fail to notice that brightly-lit front with its numerous lanterns, large and small, hung along the gables, under the eaves, in neat rows along the window ledges and above the main entryway; then, too, there was that enormous illuminated banner suspended from the ridgepole bearing the new name of the premises against a background of army boots marching in formation.

One evening, shortly after its opening, Yamagata took me inside, told me to choose my favourite table, and declared that thereafter it was reserved for my sole use. Primarily, I suppose, this was in recognition of the small service I had done him. But then, of course, I had always been one of Yamagata's best customers.

Indeed, I had been going into Yamagata's for over twenty years prior to its transformation into the Migi-Hidari. This was not really through any deliberate choice on my part - as I say, it was an undistinguished sort of place - but when I first came to this city as a young man, I was living in Furukawa and Yamagata's place happened to be at hand.

It is perhaps hard for you to picture how ugly Furukawa was in those days. Indeed, if you are new to the city, my talking of the Furukawa district probably conjures up the park that stands there today and the peach trees for which it is renowned. But when I first came to this city - in 1913 - the area was full of factories and warehouses belonging to the smaller companies, many of them abandoned or in disrepair. The houses were old and shabby and the only people who lived in Furukawa were those who could afford only the lowest rents.

Mine was a small attic room above an old woman living with her unmarried son, and was quite unsuitable for my needs. There being no electricity in the house, I was obliged to paint by oil-light; there was barely enough space to set up an easel, and I could not avoid splashing the walls and tatami with paint; I would often wake the old woman or her son while working through the night; and most vexing of all, the attic ceiling was too low to allow me to stand up fully, so I would often work for hours in a half-crouched position, hitting my head continually on the rafters. But then in those days I was so delighted at having been accepted by the Takeda firm, and to be earning my living as an artist, that I gave little thought to these unhappy conditions.

During the day, of course, I did not work in my room, but at Master Takeda's 'studio'. This, too, was in Furukawa, a long room above a restaurant - long enough, in fact, for all fifteen of us to set up easels all in a row. The ceiling, though higher than that in my attic room, sagged considerably at the centre, so that whenever we entered the room we always joked that it had descended a few more centimetres since the previous day. There were windows along the length of the room, and these should have given us a good light to work by; but somehow the shafts of sunlight that came in were always too sharp, giving the room something of the look of a ship's cabin. The other problem with the place was the fact that the restaurateur downstairs would not allow us to remain after six o'clock in the evening when his customers would begin to come in. 'You sound like a herd of cattle up there,' he would say. We would thus have no choice but to continue our work back at our respective lodgings.

I should perhaps explain that there was no chance of our completing our schedule without working in the evenings. The Takeda firm prided itself on its ability to provide a high number of paintings at very short notice; indeed, Master Takeda gave us to understand that if we failed to fulfil our deadline in time for the ship leaving harbour, we would quickly lose future commissions to rival firms. The result was that we would work the most arduous hours, late into the night, and still feel guilty the next day because we were behind schedule. Often, as the deadline date approached, it would not be unusual for us all to be living on just two or three hours of sleep each night, and painting around the clock. At times, if several commissions came in one after the next, we would be going from day to day dizzy with exhaustion. But for all that, I cannot recall our ever failing to complete a commission on time, and, I suppose, that gives some indication of the hold Master Takeda had over us.

After I had been with Master Takeda for a year or so, a new artist joined the firm. This was Yasunari Nakahara, a name which I doubt will mean much to you. In fact, there is no reason why you should have come across it, since he never achieved any kind of reputation. The most he did was eventually to gain a post as art teacher at a high school in the Yuyama district a few years before the war - a post, I am told, he still holds today, the authorities seeing no reason to replace him as they did so many of his fellow teachers. Myself, I always remember him as 'the Tortoise', the name given to him during those days at the Takeda firm, and one which I came to use affectionately throughout our friendship.

I have still in my possession a painting by the Tortoise - a self-portrait he painted not long after the Takeda days. It shows a thin young man with spectacles, sitting in his shirtsleeves in a cramped, shadowy room, surrounded by easels and rickety furniture, his face caught on one side by the light coming from the window. The earnestness and timidity written on the face are certainly true to the man I remember, and in this respect, the Tortoise has been remarkably honest; looking at the portrait, you would probably take him to be the sort you could confidently elbow aside for an empty tram seat. But then each of us, it seems, has his own special conceits. If the Tortoise's modesty forbade him to disguise his timid nature, it did not prevent him attributing to himself a kind of lofty intellectual air - which I for one have no recollection of. But then to be fair, I cannot recall any colleague who could paint a self-portrait with absolute honesty; however accurately one may fill in the surface details of one's mirror reflection, the personality represented rarely comes near the truth as others would see it.

The Tortoise earned his nickname because, joining the firm in the midst of a particularly busy commission, he proceeded to produce only two or three canvasses in the time

it took the rest of us to complete six or seven. At first, his slowness was put down to inexperience and the nickname was used only behind his back. But as the weeks went by and his rate had not improved, the bitterness against him grew. It soon became commonplace for people to call him 'Tortoise' to his face, and although he fully realized the name was anything but affectionate, I remember him trying his best to take it as though it were. For instance, if someone called across the long room: 'Hey, Tortoise, are you still painting that petal you began last week?' he would make an effort to laugh as though to share in the joke. I recall my colleagues often attributing this apparent inability to defend his dignity to the fact that the Tortoise was from the Negishi district; for in those days, as today, there prevailed the rather unfair myth that those from that part of the city invariably grew up weak and spineless.

I remember one morning, when Master Takeda had left the long room for a moment, two of my colleagues going up to the Tortoise's easel and challenging him about his lack of speed. My easel stood not far from his, so I could see clearly the nervous expression on his face as he replied:

'I beg you to be patient with me. It is my greatest wish to learn from you, my superior colleagues, how to produce work of such quality so quickly. I have done my utmost in these past weeks to paint faster, but sadly I was forced to abandon several pictures, because the loss of quality on account of my hurrying was such that I would have disgraced the high standards of our firm. But I will do all I can to improve my poor standing in your eyes. I beg you to forgive me and to be patient a while longer.'

The Tortoise repeated this plea two or three times over, while his tormentors persisted with their abuse, accusing him of laziness and of relying on the rest of us to do his share of the work. By this time, most of us had ceased to paint and had gathered round. I believe it was after his accusers had begun to abuse the Tortoise in particularly harsh terms, and

when I saw that the rest of my colleagues would do nothing but watch with a kind of fascination, that I stepped forward and said:

‘That’s enough, can’t you see you’re talking to someone with artistic integrity? If an artist refuses to sacrifice quality for the sake of speed, then that’s something we should all respect. You’ve become fools if you can’t see that.’

Of course, this is all a matter of many years ago now and I cannot vouch that those were my exact words that morning. But I spoke in some such way on the Tortoise’s behalf, of that I am quite certain; for I can distinctly recall the gratitude and relief on the Tortoise’s face as he turned to me, and the astonished stares of all the others present. I myself commanded considerable respect amongst my colleagues - my own output being unchallengeable in terms either of quality or quantity - and I believe my intervention put an end to the Tortoise’s ordeal at least for the rest of that morning.

You may perhaps think I am taking too much credit in relating this small episode; after all, the point I was making in the Tortoise’s defence seems a very obvious one - one you may think would occur instantly to anyone with any respect for serious art. But it is necessary to remember the climate of those days at Master Takeda’s - the feeling amongst us that we were all battling together against time to preserve the hard-earned reputation of the firm. We were also quite aware that the essential point about the sort of things we were commissioned to paint - geishas, cherry trees, swimming carps, temples - was that they look ‘Japanese’ to the foreigners to whom they were shipped out, and all finer points of style were quite likely to go unnoticed. So I do not think I am claiming undue credit for my younger self if I suggest my actions that day were a manifestation of a quality I came to be much respected for in later years - the ability to think and judge for myself, even if it meant going against

the sway of those around me. The fact remains, certainly, that I was the only one to come to the Tortoise's defence that morning.

Although the Tortoise managed to thank me for that small intervention, and for subsequent acts of support, the pace of those days was such that it was some time before I was able to talk to him at length in any intimacy. Indeed, I believe almost two months had elapsed since the incident I have just related, when there came at last something of a lull in our frantic schedule. I was strolling around the grounds of Tamagawa temple, as I often did when I found some spare time, and spotted the Tortoise sitting on a bench in the sunshine, apparently asleep.

I remain an enthusiast of the Tamagawa grounds, and would agree that the hedges and rows of trees to be found there today may indeed help provide an atmosphere more in keeping with a place of worship. But whenever I go there now, I find myself becoming nostalgic for the Tamagawa grounds as they used to be. In those days, before the hedges and trees, the grounds seemed far more extensive and full of life; scattered all over the open expanse of green, you would see stalls selling candy and balloons, sideshows with jugglers or conjurers; the Tamagawa grounds were also the place to go, I remember, if you wanted a photograph made, for you could not stroll far without coming across a photographer camped in his stall with his tripod and dark cloak. The afternoon I found the Tortoise there was on a Sunday at the start of spring, and everywhere was busy with parents and children. He woke with a start as I walked over and sat next to him.

‘Why, Ono-san!’ he exclaimed, his face lighting up. ‘What good fortune to see you today. Why, just a moment ago, I was saying to myself, if only I had a little spare money, I would buy something for Ono-san, some token of gratitude for his kindness to me. But for the moment I can only afford something cheap and that would be an insult. So in the

meantime, Ono-san, let me just thank you from my heart for all you've done for me.'

'I've not done very much,' I said. 'I just spoke my mind a few times, that's all.'

'But truly, Ono-san, men like you are all too rare. It is an honour to be a colleague of such a man. However much our paths may part in years to come, I'll always remember your kindness.'

I recall having to listen for several more moments to his praise of my courage and integrity. Then I said: 'I'd been meaning to talk to you for some time. You see, I've been thinking things over and I'm considering leaving Master Takeda in the near future.'

The Tortoise stared at me with astonishment. Then, comically, he looked about him as though in fear I had been overheard.

'I've been very fortunate,' I went on. 'My work has caught the interest of the painter and printmaker, Seiji Moriyama. You've heard of him, no doubt?'

The Tortoise, still staring at me, shook his head.

'Mr Moriyama,' I said, 'is a *true* artist. In all likelihood, a great one. I've been exceptionally fortunate to receive his attention and advice. 'Indeed, it's his opinion that my remaining with Master Takeda will do irreparable harm to my gifts, and he has invited me to become his pupil.'

'Is that so?' my companion remarked warily.

'And you know, as I was strolling through the park just now, I was thinking to myself: "Of course, Mr Moriyama is absolutely correct. It's all very well for the rest of those workhorses to toil under Master Takeda to earn their living. But those of us with serious ambitions must look elsewhere."'

At this point, I gave the Tortoise a meaningful glance. He continued to stare at me, a puzzled look entering his expression.

'I'm afraid I took the liberty of mentioning you to Mr Moriyama,' I told him. 'In fact, I expressed the opinion that you were the exception amongst my present colleagues. You alone among them had real talent and serious aspirations.'

'Really, Ono-san,' - he burst into laughter - 'how can you say such a thing? I know you mean to be kind to me, but this is going too far.'

'I've made up my mind to accept Mr Moriyama's kind offer,' I continued. 'And I urge you to let me show your work to him. With luck, you too may be invited to become his pupil.'

The Tortoise looked at me with distress on his face.

'But Ono-san, what are you saying?' he said in a lowered voice. 'Master Takeda took me on through the recommendation of a most respected acquaintance of my father. And really, he has shown me great tolerance, despite all my problems. How can I be so disloyal as to leave after only a few months?' Then suddenly, the Tortoise seemed to see the import of his words, and added hurriedly: 'But of course, Ono-san, I don't imply *you* are in any way disloyal. Circumstances are different in your case. I wouldn't presume ...' He faded off into embarrassed giggling. Then with an effort, he pulled himself together to ask: 'Are you serious about leaving Master Takeda, Ono-san?'

'In my opinion,' I said, 'Master Takeda doesn't deserve the loyalty of the likes of you and me. Loyalty has to be earned. There's too much made of loyalty. All too often men talk of loyalty and follow blindly. I for one have no wish to lead my life like that.'

These, of course, may not have been the precise words I used that afternoon at the Tamagawa temple; for I have had cause to recount this particular scene many times before, and it is inevitable that with repeated telling, such accounts begin to take on a life of their own. But even if I did not express myself to the Tortoise quite so succinctly that day, I think it can be assumed those words I have just attributed to myself do represent accurately enough my attitude and resolve at that point in my life.

One place, incidentally, where I was obliged to tell and retell stories of those days at the Takeda firm was around that table in the Migi-Hidari; my pupils seemed to share a fascination for hearing about this early part of my career - perhaps because they were naturally interested to learn what their teacher was doing at their age. In any case, the topic of my days with Master Takeda would come up frequently during the course of those evenings.

‘It wasn’t such a bad experience,’ I remember telling them once. ‘It taught me some important things.’

‘Forgive me, Sensei,’ - I believe it was Kuroda who leaned across the table to say this - ‘but I find it hard to believe a place like the one you describe could teach an artist anything useful whatsoever.’

‘Yes, Sensei,’ said another voice, ‘do tell us what a place like that could have possibly taught you. It sounds more like a firm producing cardboard boxes.’

This was the way things would go at the Migi-Hidari. I could be having a conversation with someone, the rest of them talking amongst themselves, and as soon as an interesting question had been asked of me, they would all break off their own conversations and I would have a circle of faces awaiting my reply. It was as though they never talked amongst themselves without having an ear open for another piece of knowledge I might impart. This is not to say that they were uncritical; quite the contrary, they were a brilliant set of

young men and one would never dare say anything without first having thought about it.

‘Being at Takeda’s’, I told them, ‘taught me an important lesson early in my life. That while it was right to look up to teachers, it was always important to question their authority. The Takeda experience taught me never to follow the crowd blindly, but to consider carefully the direction in which I was being pushed. And if there’s one thing I’ve tried to encourage you all to do, it’s been to rise above the sway of things. To rise above the undesirable and decadent influences that have swamped us and have done so much to weaken the fibre of our nation these past ten, fifteen years.’ No doubt I was a little drunk and sounded rather grandiose, but that was the way those sessions around that corner table went.

‘Indeed, Sensei,’ someone said, ‘we must all remember that. We must all endeavour to rise above the sway of things.’

‘And I think we here around this table,’ I went on, ‘have a right to be proud of ourselves. The grotesque and the frivolous have been prevalent all around us. But now at last a finer, more manly spirit is emerging in Japan and you here are part of it. In fact, it’s my wish that you should go on to become recognized as nothing less than the spearhead of the new spirit. Indeed’ - and by this point, I would be addressing not just those around the table, but all those listening nearby - ‘this establishment of ours where we all gather is a testimony to the new emerging spirit and all of us here have a right to be proud.’

Frequently, as the drinking got merrier, outsiders would come crowding round our table to join in our arguments and speeches, or simply to listen and soak in the atmosphere. On the whole, my pupils were ready enough to give strangers a hearing, though of course, if we were imposed on by a bore, or by someone with disagreeable views, they would be quick to

squeeze him out. But for all the shouting and speechmaking that went on into the night, real quarrels were rare at the Migi-Hidari, all of us who frequented that place being united by the same essential spirit; that is to say, the establishment proved to be everything Yamagata had wished; it represented something fine and one could get drunk there with pride and dignity.

I have somewhere in this house a painting by Kuroda, that most gifted of my pupils, depicting one such evening at the Migi-Hidari. It is entitled: 'The Patriotic Spirit', a title that may lead you to expect a work depicting soldiers on the march or some such thing. Of course, it was Kuroda's very point that a patriotic spirit began somewhere further back, in the routine of our daily lives, in such things as where we drank and who we mixed with. It was his tribute - for he believed in such things then - to the spirit of the Migi-Hidari. The picture, painted in oils, shows several tables and takes in much of the colour and décor of the place - most noticeably, the patriotic banners and slogans suspended from the rails of the upper balcony. Beneath the banners, guests are gathered around tables in conversation, while in the foreground a waitress in a kimono hurries with a tray of drinks. It is a fine painting, capturing very accurately the boisterous, yet somehow proud and respectable atmosphere of the Migi-Hidari. And whenever I happen to look at it today, it still brings me a certain satisfaction to recall that I - with whatever influence my reputation had gained in this city - was able to do my small part in bringing such a place into being.

Quite often these days, in the evenings down at Mrs Kawakami's, I find myself reminiscing about the Migi-Hidari and the old days. For there is something about Mrs Kawakami's place when Shintaro and I are the only customers there, something about sitting together up at the bar under those low-hung lights, that puts us in a nostalgic mood. We may start discussing someone from the past, about how much he

could drink perhaps, or some funny mannerism he had. Then before long we will be trying to get Mrs Kawakami to recall the man, and in our attempts to jog her memory, we will find ourselves remembering more and more amusing things about him. The other night, after we had been laughing over just such a set of reminiscences, Mrs Kawakami said, as she often will do on these occasions: 'Well, I don't recall the name, but I'm sure I'd recognize his face.'

'Well in truth, Obasan,' I said, remembering, 'he was never a real customer here. He used to always drink across the street.'

'Oh yes, at the big place. Still, if I saw him, I may recognize him. But then again, who knows? People change so much. Every now and then, I see someone in the street, and I think I know them and I should greet them. But then I look at them again and I'm not so sure.'

'Why, Obasan,' Shintaro put in, 'just the other day, I greeted someone in the street, thinking it was someone I knew. But the man obviously thought I was a madman. He walked away without replying!'

Shintaro seemed to regard this as an amusing story and laughed loudly. Mrs Kawakami smiled, but did not join in his laughter. Then she turned to me and said:

'Sensei, you must try and persuade your friends to start coming back to these parts. In fact, perhaps each time we see an old face from those days, we should be stopping him and telling him to come here to this little place. That way we could start rebuilding the old days.'

'Now that's a splendid idea, Obasan,' I said. 'I'll try and remember to do that. I'll stop people in the street and say: "I remember you from the old days. You used to be a regular around our district. Well, you may think it's all gone, but you're wrong. Mrs Kawakami's is still there, the

same as ever, and things are slowly building back up again. ” ’

‘That’s it, Sensei,’ Mrs Kawakami said. ‘You tell them they’ll be missing out. Business will start to improve then. After all, it’s Sensei’s duty to bring back the old crowd. Everyone always looked up to Sensei as the natural leader around here.’

‘A good point, Obasan,’ Shintaro said. ‘In olden times, if a lord had his troops scattered after a battle, he’d soon go about gathering them together again. Sensei is in a similar position.’

‘What nonsense,’ I said, laughing.

‘That’s right, Sensei,’ Mrs Kawakami went on, ‘you find all the old people again and tell them to come back. Then after a while, I’ll buy the place next door and we’ll open up a grand old place. Just like that big place used to be.’

‘Indeed, Sensei,’ Shintaro was still saying. ‘A lord must gather his men again.’

‘An interesting idea, Obasan,’ I said, nodding. ‘And you know, the Migi-Hidari was just a small place once. No bigger than this place here. But then in time we managed to turn it into what it was. Well, perhaps we’ll just have to do the same thing again with this place of yours. Now things are settling a little, the custom ought to be coming back.’

‘You could bring in all your artist friends again, Sensei,’ Mrs Kawakami said. ‘Then before long, all the newspaper men will follow.’

‘An interesting idea. We could probably pull it off. Except I wonder, Obasan. You may not be able to handle such a big place. We wouldn’t want you getting out of your depth.’

‘Nonsense,’ Mrs Kawakami said, putting on an offended look. ‘If Sensei will hurry up and do his part, you’ll see

how well things will be managed around here. ’

Recently we have had such conversations over and over. And who is to say the old district will not return again? The likes of Mrs Kawakami and I, we may tend to make a joke about it, but behind our bantering there is a thread of serious optimism. ‘A lord must gather his men.’ And so perhaps he should. Perhaps, when Noriko’s future is once and for all settled, I will give some serious consideration to Mrs Kawakami’s schemes.

I suppose I might mention here that I have seen my former protégé, Kuroda, just once since the end of the war. It was quite by chance on a rainy morning during the first year of the occupation - before the Migi-Hidari and all those other buildings had been demolished. I was walking somewhere, making my way through what was left of our old pleasure district, looking from under my umbrella at those skeletal remains. I remember there were workmen wandering around that day, and so at first I paid no attention to the figure standing looking at one of the burnt-out buildings. It was only as I walked by that I became aware the figure had turned and was watching me. I paused, then looked around, and through the rain dripping off my umbrella, saw with a strange shock Kuroda looking expressionlessly towards me.

Beneath his umbrella, he was hatless and dressed in a dark raincoat. The charred buildings behind him were dripping and the remnant of some gutter was making a large amount of rainwater splash down not far from him. I remember a truck going by between us, full of building workers. And I noticed how one of the spokes of his umbrella was broken, causing some more splashing just beside his foot.

Kuroda’s face, which had been quite round before the war, had hollowed out around the cheekbones, and what looked like heavy lines had appeared towards the chin and the throat. And

I thought to myself as I stood there: 'He's not young any more.'

He moved his head very slightly. I was not sure if it was the beginning of a bow, or if he was just adjusting his head to get out of the splash of rainwater from his broken umbrella. Then he turned and began to walk off in the other direction.

But it was not my intention to dwell on Kuroda here. Indeed, he would not be on my mind at all had his name not turned up so unexpectedly last month, during the chance meeting on the tram with Dr Saito.

It was the afternoon I eventually took Ichiro to see his monster film - a trip he had been denied the previous day by Noriko's stubbornness. In fact, my grandson and I went by ourselves, Noriko refusing to come and Setsuko again volunteering to remain at home. It was, of course, simple childishness on Noriko's part, but Ichiro had his own interpretation of the women's behaviour. As we sat down to lunch that day, he continued to say:

'Aunt Noriko and Mother aren't coming. It's much too scaring for women. They'd be much too scared, isn't that right, Oji?'

'Yes, I expect that's right, Ichiro.'

'They'd be much too scared. Aunt Noriko, you'd be far too scared to see the film, wouldn't you?'

'Oh yes,' Noriko said, pulling a frightened face.

'Even Oji's scared. Look, you can see even Oji's scared. And he's a man.'

That afternoon, as I was standing at the end of the entryway waiting to leave for the cinema, I witnessed a curious scene between Ichiro and his mother. While Setsuko was strapping up his sandals, I could see my grandson continually trying to say something to her. But whenever

Setsuko said: 'What is it, Ichiro, I can't hear,' he would glare angrily, then cast a quick glance towards me to see if I had heard. Finally, once the sandals had been put on, Setsuko bent down so that Ichiro could whisper into her ear. She then nodded and disappeared into the house, returning a moment later with a raincoat, which she folded and handed to him.

'It's unlikely to rain,' I remarked, looking out beyond the front entrance. Indeed, it was a fine day outside.

'All the same,' Setsuko said, 'Ichiro would like to take it with him.'

I was puzzled by this insistence on the raincoat. Then once we were out in the sunshine, and making our way down the hill towards the tram stop, I noticed the swagger with which Ichiro walked - as though the coat slung through his arm had transformed him into someone like Humphrey Bogart - and concluded it was all in imitation of some comic-book hero of his.

I suppose we were almost at the bottom of the hill when Ichiro declared loudly: 'Oji, you used to be a famous artist.'

'I expect that's right, Ichiro.'

'I told Aunt Noriko to show me Oji's pictures. But she won't show me.'

'Hmm. They're all tidied away just for the moment.'

'Aunt Noriko's disobedient, isn't she, Oji? I told her to show me Oji's pictures. Why won't she show me?'

I laughed and said: 'I don't know, Ichiro. Perhaps she was busy with something.'

'She's disobedient.'

I gave another laugh, saying: 'I suppose so, Ichiro.'

The tram stop is ten minutes' walk from our house; down the hill to the river, then a little way along the new concrete embankment, and the northbound circuit joins the road just beyond the site of the new housing schemes. That sunny afternoon last month, my grandson and I boarded there for the city centre, and it was on that journey we encountered Dr Saito.

I realize I have said very little so far about the Saito family, the eldest son of which is presently involved in marriage talks with Noriko. The Saitos are, all in all, a very different sort of prospect from the Miyakes of last year. The Miyakes were, of course, decent enough people, but they could not, in all fairness, be called a family of any prestige, whereas the Saito family, without exaggeration, is just that. In fact, although Dr Saito and I were not properly acquainted before, I had always known of his activities in the world of the arts, and for years, whenever we had passed in the street, we had exchanged greetings politely to acknowledge our familiarity with each other's reputations. But of course, on the occasion on which we met last month, things had become very different.

The tram does not become crowded until it has crossed the river at the steel bridge opposite Tanibashi Station, and so, when Dr Saito boarded one stop after us, he was able to take a vacant seat beside me. Inevitably, our conversation began a little uncomfortably; for the negotiations were at an early, delicate stage, and it did not seem proper to discuss them openly; but then it would have been absurd to pretend they were not going on. In the end, we both praised the merits of 'our mutual friend, Mr Kyo' - the go-between in the proposal - and Dr Saito remarked with a smile: 'Let us hope his efforts bring us together again shortly.' And that was as close as we came to discussing the matter. I could not help noticing the marked contrast between the assured way Dr Saito had responded to the slightly awkward situation, and the nervous, clumsy way the Miyake family had handled things

from start to finish last year. Whatever the eventual outcome, one does feel reassured to be dealing with the likes of the Saito family.

Otherwise, we talked mainly of small things. Dr Saito has a warm, genial manner, and when he leaned forward to ask Ichiro how he was enjoying his visit, and about the movie we were about to see, my grandson showed no inhibitions about conversing with him.

‘A fine boy,’ Dr Saito said to me, approvingly.

It was shortly before his stop - he had already put his hat back on - that Dr Saito remarked: ‘We have another mutual acquaintance. A certain Mr Kuroda.’

I looked at him, a little startled. ‘Mr Kuroda,’ I repeated. ‘Ah, no doubt that would be the same gentleman I once supervised.’

‘That’s right. I came across him recently and he happened to mention your name.’

‘Is that so? I haven’t come across him for some time. Not since before the war, certainly. How is Mr Kuroda these days? What is he up to?’

‘I believe he is about to take up an appointment at the new Uemachi College, where he will teach art. This was how I came across him. I was kindly asked by the college to advise on the appointments board.’

‘Ah, so you don’t know Mr Kuroda well.’

‘Indeed not. But I hope to see more of him in future.’

‘Is that so?’ I said. ‘So Mr Kuroda still remembers me. How good of him.’

‘Yes, indeed. He mentioned your name when we happened to be discussing something. I’ve not had the opportunity to talk to him at any length. But should I see him again, I’ll mention that I saw you.’

‘Ah, indeed.’

The tram was crossing the steel bridge and the wheels made a loud clanging noise. Ichiro, who had been kneeling on his seat to see out of the window, pointed out something down in the water. Dr Saito turned to look, exchanged a few more words with Ichiro, then got to his feet as his stop approached. He made a last allusion to ‘the efforts of Mr Kyo’ before bowing and making his way to the exit.

As usual, many people crowded on at the stop after the bridge, and the rest of our journey was rather uncomfortable. When we got off just in front of the cinema, I could see the poster prominently displayed at the entrance. My grandson had achieved a close likeness in his sketch of two days earlier, though there was no fire in the picture; what Ichiro had remembered were the impact lines - resembling streaks of lightning - which the artist had painted in to emphasize the ferocity of the giant lizard.

Ichiro went up to the poster and burst into loud laughter.

‘It’s easy to see that’s a made-up monster,’ he said, pointing. ‘Anyone can see that. It’s just made up.’ And he laughed again.

‘Ichiro, please don’t laugh so loudly. Everyone’s looking at you.’

‘But I can’t help it. The monster looks so made up. Who’d be scared of a thing like that?’

It was only once we were seated inside, and the film had begun, that I discovered the true purpose of his raincoat. Ten minutes into the film, we heard ominous music and on the screen appeared a dark cave with mist swirling about it. Ichiro whispered: ‘This is boring. Will you tell me when something interesting starts to happen?’ And with that, he threw the raincoat over his head. A moment later, there was a roar and the giant lizard emerged from the cave. Ichiro’s

hand was clutching at my arm, and when I glanced at him his other hand was holding the raincoat in place as tightly as possible.

The coat continued to cover his head for more or less the whole duration of the film. Occasionally, my arm would be shaken and a voice would ask from underneath: 'Is it getting interesting yet?' I would then be obliged to describe in whispers what was on the screen until a small gap appeared in the raincoat. But within minutes - at the slightest hint that the monster would reappear - the gap would close and his voice would say: 'This is boring. Don't forget to tell me when it gets interesting.'

When we got home, though, Ichiro was full of enthusiasm for the film. 'The best movie I've ever seen,' he continued to say, and he was still giving us his version of it when we sat down to supper.

'Aunt Noriko, shall I tell you what happened next? It gets very scary. Shall I tell you?'

'I'm getting so frightened, Ichiro, I can hardly eat,' Noriko said.

'I'm warning you, it gets even more frightening. Shall I tell you more?'

'Oh, I'm not sure, Ichiro. You've got me so frightened already.'

It had not been my intention to make heavy talk at the supper table by bringing up Dr Saito, but then it would have been unnatural not to mention our meeting when recounting the day's events. So, when Ichiro paused a moment, I said: 'Incidentally, we met Dr Saito on the tram. He was travelling up to see someone.'

When I said this, my two daughters both stopped eating and looked at me with surprise.

‘But we didn’t talk about anything significant,’ I said, with a small laugh. ‘Really. We just exchanged pleasantries, that’s all.’

My daughters seemed unconvinced, but they began to eat again. Noriko glanced over to her elder sister, then Setsuko said: ‘Dr Saito was well?’

‘He appeared to be.’

We ate on quietly for a while. Perhaps Ichiro began to talk about the movie again. In any case, it was a little later in the meal that I said:

‘An odd thing. It turns out Dr Saito met a former pupil of mine. Kuroda, in fact. It seems Kuroda’s taking up a post at the new college.’

I looked up from my bowl and saw my daughters had again stopped eating. It was clear they had just exchanged glances, and it was one of those instances last month when I got a distinct impression they had at some point been discussing certain things about me.

That night, my two daughters and I were sitting around the table again, reading our newspapers and magazines, when we were disturbed by a dull thudding noise coming rhythmically from somewhere within the house. Noriko looked up in alarm, but Setsuko said:

‘It’s just Ichiro. He does that when he can’t fall asleep.’

‘Poor Ichiro,’ Noriko said. ‘I expect he keeps dreaming of the monster. It was so wicked of Father to take him to see a film like that.’

‘Nonsense,’ I said. ‘He enjoyed it.’

‘I think Father just wanted to see it himself,’ Noriko said to her sister with a grin. ‘Poor Ichiro. Being dragged along to a nasty film like that.’

Setsuko turned towards me with an embarrassed look. 'It was so kind of Father to take Ichiro,' she murmured.

'But now he can't sleep,' Noriko said. 'Ridiculous to take him to a film like that. No, you stay, Setsuko. I'll go.'

Setsuko watched her sister leave the room, then said:

'Noriko is so good with children. Ichiro will miss her when we go home.'

'Yes, indeed.'

'She was always good with children. Do you remember, Father, how she used to play those games with the Kinoshitas' little children?'

'Yes, indeed,' I said, with a laugh. Then I added: 'The Kinoshita boys are far too big these days to want to come around here.'

'She's always been so good with children,' Setsuko repeated. 'How sad to see her reach this age and still unmarried.'

'Indeed. The war came at a bad time for her.'

For a few moments we continued with our reading. Then Setsuko said:

'It was fortuitous to have met Dr Saito on the tram this afternoon. He sounds an admirable gentleman.'

'He is indeed. And from all accounts, the son is well worthy of his father.'

'Is that so?' Setsuko said, thoughtfully.

We returned to our reading for a few more moments. Then my daughter again broke the silence.

'And Dr Saito is acquainted with Mr Kuroda?'

‘Only slightly,’ I said, not looking up from my paper.
‘It seems they met somewhere.’

‘I wonder how Mr Kuroda is these days. I can remember how he used to come here, and you would talk together for hours in the reception room.’

‘I’ve no idea about Kuroda these days.’

‘Forgive me, but I wonder if it may not be wise if Father were to visit Mr Kuroda soon.’

‘Visit him?’

‘Mr Kuroda. And perhaps certain other such acquaintances from the past.’

‘I’m not sure I follow what you’re saying, Setsuko.’

‘Forgive me, I simply meant to suggest that Father may wish to speak to certain acquaintances from his past. That is to say, before the Saitos’ detective does. After all, we do not wish any unnecessary misunderstandings to arise.’

‘No, I suppose we don’t,’ I said, returning to my paper.

I believe we did not discuss the matter further after that. Neither did Setsuko raise it again for the remainder of her stay last month.

Yesterday, as I took the tram down to Arakawa, the carriage was filled with bright autumn sunshine. I had not made the journey to Arakawa for a little while - in fact, not since the end of the war - and as I gazed out of my window, I noticed many changes in what had once been familiar scenery. Passing through Tozaka-cho and Sakaemachi, I could see brick apartment blocks looming above the small wooden houses I remembered from before. Then, as we passed the backs of the factories in Minamimachi, I saw how abandoned many of them had become; one factory yard went by after another, untidily

stacked with broken timber, old sheets of corrugated metal, and often what looked to be plain rubble.

But then, after the tramline crosses the river at the THK Corporation Bridge, the atmosphere changes dramatically. You are travelling amidst fields and trees, and before long, the suburb of Arakawa will become visible at the bottom of the long steep hill where the tramline ends. The tram will move very slowly down the hill, then brake to a halt, and as you step out on to those cleanly swept pavements, you will be overcome by the distinct feeling you have left the city behind.

Arakawa, I have heard, completely escaped the bombings; and indeed, yesterday the place looked just as it had always done. A short walk up a hill, pleasantly shaded by cherry trees, brought me to Chishu Matsuda's house and that too was quite unchanged.

Matsuda's house, not as large or full of eccentricity as my own, is typical of the sort of solid, respectable house to be found in Arakawa. It stands on its own grounds, circled by a board fence, at a reasonable distance from the neighbouring properties: at the gateway, there is a bush of azaleas and a thick post sunk in the ground giving the family inscriptions. I pulled the bell and was answered by a woman of around forty whom I did not recognize. She showed me into the reception room, where she slid back the screen to the veranda, allowing the sun to enter and giving me a glimpse of the garden outside. Then she left me, saying: 'Mr Matsuda will not be a moment.'

I had first met Matsuda while living at Seiji Moriyama's villa, where the Tortoise and I had gone after leaving the Takeda firm. In fact, when Matsuda first came to the villa that day, I must already have been living there for some six years. It had been raining throughout the morning, and a group of us had been passing the time drinking and playing cards in one of the rooms. Then shortly after lunch, just as

we had opened another large bottle, we heard a stranger's voice calling out in the yard.

The voice was strong and assured, and we all of us fell silent and looked at each other in panic. For the fact was we had all leapt to the same thought - that the police had come to reprimand us. This was of course an utterly irrational idea, for we had not committed any sort of crime. And had, say, someone challenged our lifestyle during a conversation in a bar, any one of us would have been able to put up a spirited defence on its behalf. But that firm voice calling 'Anyone home?' had caught us unawares, causing us to betray our sense of guilt concerning our late nights of drinking, the way we slept through many of our mornings, the way we lived a life without routine in a decaying villa.

It was some moments then before one of my companions nearest the screen opened it, exchanged a few words with the caller, then turned and said: 'Ono, a gentleman wishes to speak with you.'

I went out on to the veranda to find a lean-featured young man of around my own age standing in the middle of the large square yard. I have retained a vivid picture of that first time I saw Matsuda. The rain had stopped and the sun was out. All around him were puddles of water and wet leaves fallen from the cedar trees overlooking the villa. He was dressed too dandyishly to be a policeman; his overcoat was sharply tailored with a high upturned collar, and he wore his hat slanted down over his eyes in a somewhat mocking manner. As I emerged, he was glancing around with interest at his surroundings, and something in the way he did this immediately suggested to me, that first time I saw him, Matsuda's arrogant nature. He saw me and came unhurriedly towards the veranda.

'Mr Ono?'

I asked what I could do for him. He turned, cast his eyes around the grounds again, then smiled up at me.

‘An interesting place. This must have been a grand building once. Owned by a lord of some sort.’

‘Indeed,’

‘Mr Ono, my name is Chishu Matsuda. We have, in fact, been in correspondence. I work for the Okada-Shingen Society.’

The Okada-Shingen Society no longer exists today - one of many such victims of the occupying forces - but quite possibly you will have heard of it, or at least of the exhibition it held each year until the war. The Okada-Shingen exhibition was for a time the principal means in this city by which artists emerging in painting and printmaking came to win public acclaim. Indeed, such was its reputation that in its latter years, most of the city’s leading artists were displaying their latest works there alongside those of the newer talents. It was in connection with this same exhibition that the Okada-Shingen Society had written to me a few weeks prior to the afternoon of Matsuda’s visit.

‘I was made a little curious by your reply, Mr Ono,’ Matsuda said. ‘So I thought I’d call by and discover what it was all about.’

I looked at him coldly and said: ‘I believe I made all the necessary points in my letter of reply. It was, however, most kind of you to have approached me.’

A slight smile appeared around his eyes. ‘Mr Ono,’ he said, ‘it seems to me you are forgoing an important opportunity to enhance your reputation. So please tell me, when you insist you wish to have nothing to do with us, is that your own personal opinion? Or is it what your teacher happened to decree?’

‘Naturally, I sought my teacher’s advice. I am perfectly confident that the decision conveyed in my recent letter is the correct one. It was very good of you to come out here,

but unfortunately I am occupied at this moment and cannot ask you to step up. I'll therefore bid you a good day.'

'One moment please, Mr Ono,' Matsuda said, his smile looking ever more mocking. He took a few more steps, coming right up to the veranda, and looked up at me. 'To be frank, I am not bothered about the exhibition. There are many others worthy of it. I came here, Mr Ono, because I wished to meet you.'

'Really? How good of you.'

'Indeed. I wished to say I am very struck by what I have seen of your work. I believe you have much talent.'

'You're most kind. No doubt I owe much to the excellence of my teacher's guidance.'

'No doubt. Now, Mr Ono, let us forget this exhibition. You must appreciate I do not merely work for the Okada-Shingen as a kind of clerk. I am a true lover of art. I have my beliefs and passions. And when every once in a while I come across a talent that truly excites me, then I feel I must do something about it. I would very much like to discuss certain ideas with you, Mr Ono. Ideas which may never have occurred to you before, but which I modestly suggest will be of benefit to your development as an artist. But I'll keep you no longer for the moment. Let me at least leave my calling card.'

He took his card from his wallet, placed it on the edge of the veranda, then with a quick bow, took his leave. But before he was half-way across the yard, he turned and called to me: 'Please consider my request carefully, Mr Ono. I merely wish to discuss certain ideas with you, that's all.'

That was almost thirty years ago, when we were both young and ambitious. Yesterday, Matsuda looked a very different man. His body has become broken down by ill-health, and his once handsome, arrogant face has become distorted by a lower jaw that seems no longer able to align itself with the upper.

The woman who had answered the door to me helped him into the room and assisted him to sit down. When we were alone, Matsuda looked at me and said:

‘You seem to have preserved your health well. As for myself, you can see I’ve deteriorated even further since our last meeting.’

I expressed sympathy, but stated he did not look as bad as all that.

‘Don’t try and fool me, Ono,’ he said with a smile. ‘I know exactly how feeble I’m growing. There’s little to be done, apparently. I have to just wait and see if my body recovers or else goes on getting worse. Still, enough about such cheerless matters. This is something of a surprise, to have you visit me again. I suppose we didn’t part on the easiest of terms.’

‘Really? But I wasn’t aware we’d quarrelled.’

‘Of course not. Why would we quarrel? I’m glad you’ve come to see me again. It must be three years since we last saw each other.’

‘I believe so. It wasn’t my intention to avoid you. I’d been meaning for some time to come out and pay a visit. But what with one thing and another ...’

‘Naturally,’ he said. ‘You had a lot to attend to. You must forgive me, of course, for failing to attend Michiko-san’s funeral. I’d meant to write and express my apologies. The fact of the matter is, I didn’t hear what had occurred until several days later. And then, of course, my own health ...’

‘Naturally, naturally. Indeed, I’m sure she would have been embarrassed by a large ostentatious ceremony. In any case, she would have known your thoughts would have been with her.’

'I can remember when you and Michiko-san were brought together.' He gave a laugh, nodding to himself. 'I was very happy for you that day, Ono.'

'Indeed,' I said, also laughing. 'You were to all intents our go-between. That uncle of yours just couldn't cope with the job.'

'That's right,' Matsuda said, smiling, 'you're bringing it all back to me. He'd get so embarrassed, he couldn't say or do anything without flushing scarlet. You remember that marriage meeting at the Yanagimachi Hotel?'

We both laughed. Then I said:

'You did a lot on our behalf. I doubt if it would have been brought off without you. Michiko always thought of you with gratitude.'

'A cruel thing,' Matsuda said, sighing. 'And with the war all but over. I heard it was something of a freak raid.'

'Indeed. Hardly anyone else was hurt. It was as you say, a cruel thing.'

'But I'm bringing back terrible thoughts, I'm sorry.'

'Not at all. It's something of a comfort to remember her with you. I remember her back in the old days then.'

'Indeed,'

The woman brought in the tea. As she was laying down the tray, Matsuda said to her: 'Miss Suzuki, this is an old colleague of mine. We were very close once.'

She turned to me and bowed.

'Miss Suzuki doubles as my housekeeper and nurse,' Matsuda said. 'She's responsible for the fact that I'm still breathing.'

Miss Suzuki gave a laugh, bowed again and took her leave.

For a few moments after she had gone, Matsuda and I sat quietly, both gazing out between the screens Miss Suzuki had opened earlier. From where I sat, a pair of straw sandals were visible, left out on the veranda in the sun. But I could not see much of the garden itself, and for a moment felt tempted to rise to my feet and go out on the veranda. But realizing Matsuda would wish to accompany me and find difficulty doing so, I remained seated, wondering to myself if the garden was as it had been. As I remembered it, Matsuda's garden, though small, was arranged with much taste: a floor of smooth moss, a few small shapely trees and a deep pond. While sitting with Matsuda, I had caught an occasional splashing sound coming from outside and I was about to ask him if he still kept carp, when he said:

'I wasn't exaggerating when I told you Miss Suzuki was responsible for my life. She's been quite crucial on more than one occasion. You see, Ono, despite everything, I managed to hold on to some savings and assets. As a result, I'm able to employ her. Not so lucky for some others. I'm not exactly wealthy, but then, if I knew an old colleague was in difficulties, I'd do what I could to assist. After all, I have no children to leave money to.'

I gave a laugh. 'Same old Matsuda. Very forthright. It's kind of you, but that's not what brought me here. I too managed to hold on to my assets.'

'Ah, I'm pleased to hear that. You remember Nakane, the principal at Minami Imperial College? I see him from time to time. These days he's little better than a beggar. Of course, he tries to keep up appearances, but he lives entirely off borrowed money.'

'How terrible.'

'Some very unjust things have occurred,' Matsuda said. 'Still, we both managed to hold on to our assets. And you have more reason to be thankful, Ono. You appear to have held on to your health.'

‘Indeed,’ I said. ‘I have much to be thankful for.’

Again, a splashing sound came from the pond outside, and it occurred to me it could be birds bathing at the water’s edge.

‘Your garden sounds distinctly different to mine,’ I remarked. ‘I can tell just listening to it that we’re out of the city.’

‘Is that so? I hardly remember what the city sounds like. This has been the extent of my world for the past few years. This house and this garden.’

‘As a matter of fact, I did come to ask your help. But not in the way you implied earlier.’

‘I see you’ve taken offence,’ he said, nodding. ‘Much the same as ever.’

We both laughed. Then he said: ‘So what can I do for you?’

‘The fact is,’ I said, ‘Noriko, my younger daughter, is at this moment involved in marriage talks.’

‘Is that so?’

‘To be frank, I’m a little concerned for her. She’s already twenty-six. The war made things difficult for her. Otherwise, there’s no doubting she’d have been married by now.’

‘I believe I recall Miss Noriko. But she was just a little girl. Twenty-six already. As you say, the war has made things difficult, even for the best prospects.’

‘She was almost married last year,’ I said, ‘but the talks fell through at the last moment. I wonder, while we’re on the subject, did anyone approach you last year concerning Noriko? I don’t mean to be impertinent, but ...’

‘Not impertinent in the least, I quite understand. But no, I never spoke to anyone. But then I was very ill this

time last year. If some detective had appeared, Miss Suzuki would no doubt have sent him away.'

I nodded, then said: 'It's just possible someone may call on you this year.'

'Oh? Well, I'll only have the best things to say about you. After all, we were good colleagues once.'

'I'm very grateful.'

'It's good of you to have called like this,' he said.

'But so far as Miss Noriko's marriage is concerned, it was quite unnecessary. We may not have parted on the easiest of terms, but things like that shouldn't come between us. Naturally, I'd say only the best things about you.'

'I didn't doubt it,' I said. 'You were always a generous man.'

'Still, if it's brought us together again, I'm glad.'

With some effort, Matsuda reached forward and began to refill our teacups. 'Forgive me, Ono,' he said, eventually, 'but you still seem uneasy about something.'

'I do?'

'Forgive me for putting it so bluntly, but the fact is very soon Miss Suzuki will be coming in to warn me I should retire again. I'm afraid I'm not able to entertain guests for prolonged periods, not even old colleagues.'

'Of course, I'm very sorry. It's most inconsiderate of me.'

'Don't be ridiculous, Ono. You can't go for a while yet. I was saying this because if you came here with a particular point to raise, it would be best if you'd do so soon.' Suddenly, he burst into laughter, saying: 'Really, you look aghast at my bad manners.'

'Not at all. It's most inconsiderate of me. But the truth is, I came simply to talk about my daughter's marriage

prospects. ’

‘I see. ’

‘But I suppose, ’ I continued, ‘it was my intention to mention certain eventualities. You see, the present negotiations may be quite delicate in nature. I’d be extremely beholden to you if you’d answer any queries which may come your way with delicacy. ’

‘Of course. ’ His gaze was on me, and there was a touch of amusement in his eyes. ‘With utmost delicacy. ’

‘Particularly, that is, with regards to the past. ’

‘But I’ve said already, ’ Matsuda said, and his voice had become a little colder, ‘I have only the best of things to report of you from the past. ’

‘Of course, ’

Matsuda continued to look at me for a while, then he sighed.

‘I’ve hardly moved from this house for the last three years, ’ he said. ‘But I still keep my ears open for what’s happening in this country of ours. I realize there are now those who would condemn the likes of you and me for the very things we were once proud to have achieved. And I suppose this is why you’re worried, Ono. You think perhaps I will praise you for things perhaps best forgotten. ’

‘No such thing, ’ I said hastily. ‘You and I both have a lot to be proud of. It’s merely that where marriage talks are concerned, one has to appreciate the delicacy of the situation. But you’ve put my mind at rest. I know you’ll exercise your judgement as well as ever. ’

‘I will do my best, ’ Matsuda said. ‘But, Ono, there are things we should both be proud of. Never mind what people today are all saying. Before long, a few more years, and the likes of us will be able to hold our heads high about what we

tried to do. I simply hope I live as long as that. It's my wish to see my life's efforts vindicated.'

'Of course. I feel quite the same. But in respect to marriage negotiations ...'

'Naturally', Matsuda broke in, 'I'll do my best to exercise delicacy.'

I bowed, and we fell silent for a moment. Then he said:

'But tell me, Ono, if it's the case that you're worried about the past, I assume you've been visiting a few of the others from those days?'

'In fact, you're the first I've come to. I've no idea where many of our old friends are these days.'

'What about Kuroda? I hear he's living in the city somewhere.'

'Is that so? I haven't been in touch with him since ... since the war.'

'If we're worrying about Miss Noriko's future, perhaps you'd best seek him out, painful as it may be.'

'Indeed. It's simply that I have no idea where he is.'

'I see. Hopefully their detective will be equally lost as to where to find him. But then sometimes those detectives can be very resourceful.'

'Indeed,'

'Ono, you look deathly pale. And you looked so healthy when you first arrived. That's what comes of sharing a room with a sickly man.'

I laughed and said: 'Not at all. It's just that one's children can be a great worry.'

Matsuda sighed again and said: 'People sometimes tell me I've missed out on life because I never married and had

children. But when I look around me, children seem to be nothing but worry. ’

‘That’s not far from the truth. ’

‘Still,’ he said, ‘it would be a comfort to think one had children to leave one’s assets to. ’

‘Indeed, ’

A few minutes later, as Matsuda had predicted, Miss Suzuki came in and said something to him. Matsuda smiled and said with resignation:

‘My nurse has come to fetch me. Of course, you’re welcome to remain here as long as you wish. But you must excuse me, Ono. ’

Later, as I waited at the terminus for a tram to take me up the steep hill and back into the city, I felt a certain comfort in recalling Matsuda’s assurance that he would have ‘only the best of things to report from the past’. Of course, I could have been reasonably confident of this without my having gone to visit him. But then again, it is always good to re-establish contact with old colleagues. All in all, yesterday’s trip to Arakawa was surely well worthwhile.

APRIL, 1949

On three or four evenings a week I still find myself taking that path down to the river and the little wooden bridge still known to some who lived here before the war as 'the Bridge of Hesitation'. We called it that because until not so long ago, crossing it would have taken you into our pleasure district, and conscience-troubled men - so it was said - were to be seen hovering there, caught between seeking an evening's entertainment and returning home to their wives. But if sometimes I am to be seen up on that bridge, leaning thoughtfully against the rail, it is not that I am hesitating. It is simply that I enjoy standing there as the sun sets, surveying my surroundings and the changes taking place around me.

Clusters of new houses have appeared towards the foot of the hill down which I have just come. And further along the riverbank, where a year ago there was only grass and mud, a city corporation is building apartment blocks for future employees. But these are still far from completion, and when the sun is low over the river, one might even mistake them for the bombed ruins still to be found in certain parts of this city.

But then such ruins become more and more scarce each week; indeed, one would probably have to go as far north as the Wakamiya district, or else to that badly struck area between Honcho and Kasugamachi to encounter them now in any number. But only a year ago, I am sure bombed ruins were still a commonplace sight all over this city. For instance, that area across from the Bridge of Hesitation - that area where our pleasure district had been - was this time last year still a desert of rubble. But now, work progresses there steadily every day. Outside Mrs Kawakami's, where once throngs of pleasure-seekers had squeezed past one another, a

wide concrete road is being built, and along both sides of it, the foundations for rows of large office buildings.

I suppose by the time Mrs Kawakami informed me one evening not so long ago of the corporation's offer to buy her out for a generous sum, I had long since accepted she would sooner or later have to close up and move.

'I don't know what I should do,' she had said to me.

'It would be terrible to leave here after all this time. I was awake thinking about it all last night. But then again, Sensei, when I thought about it, I said to myself, well, now with Shintaro-san gone, Sensei's the only dependable customer I have left. I really don't know what I should do.'

I am indeed her only real customer these days; Shintaro has not shown his face at Mrs Kawakami's since that small episode last winter - lacking the courage, no doubt, to face me. This was, I suppose, unfortunate for Mrs Kawakami, who had had nothing to do with the affair.

It had been one evening last winter, while we were drinking together as was usual then, that Shintaro first mentioned to me his ambition to gain a teaching post at one of the new high schools. He then went on to reveal that in fact he had already made several applications for such posts. Now it is, of course, many years since Shintaro was my pupil, and there is no reason why he should not have gone about such matters without consulting me; I was fully aware there were others now - his employer, for instance - far more suitably placed to act as guarantor in such matters. Nevertheless, I confess I was somewhat surprised he should not have confided in me at all about these applications. And so, when Shintaro presented himself at my house that winter's day shortly after New Year, when I found him standing giggling nervously in my entryway, saying: 'Sensei, it is a great impertinence of me to come here like this,' I felt something akin to relief, as though things were returning to a more familiar footing.

In the reception room I lit a brazier, and we both sat over it warming our hands. I noticed some snowflakes melting on the overcoat Shintaro was continuing to wear, and asked him:

‘The snow has started again?’

‘Just a little, Sensei. Nothing like this morning.’

‘I’m sorry it’s so cold in here. The coldest room in the house, I fear.’

‘Not at all, Sensei. My own rooms are far colder.’ He smiled happily and rubbed his hands together over the charcoal. ‘It’s good of you to receive me like this. Sensei has been very good to me over the years, I cannot begin to calculate what you have done for me.’

‘Not at all, Shintaro. In fact, I sometimes think I rather neglected you in the old days. So if there’s some way I can redeem my negligence, even at this late stage, I’d be pleased to hear of it.’

Shintaro laughed and went on rubbing his hands. ‘Really, Sensei, you say the most absurd things. I can never begin to calculate what you have done for me.’

I watched him for a moment, then said: ‘So tell me, Shintaro, what is it I can do for you?’

He looked up with a surprised expression, then laughed again.

‘Excuse me, Sensei. I was getting so comfortable here, I’d quite forgotten my purpose in coming to trouble you like this.’

He was, he told me, most optimistic about his application to Higashimachi High School; reliable sources gave him to believe it was being viewed with much favour.

‘However, Sensei, there appear to be just one or two small points on which the committee seem still a little

unsatisfied. ’

‘Oh?’

‘Indeed, Sensei. Perhaps I should be frank. The small points I refer to concern the past.’

‘The past?’

‘Indeed, Sensei.’ At this point, Shintaro gave a nervous laugh. Then with an effort, he continued: ‘You must know, Sensei, that my respect for you is of the very highest. I have learnt so much from Sensei, and I will continue to be proud of our association.’

I nodded and waited for him to go on.

‘The fact is, Sensei, I would be most grateful if you would yourself write to the committee, just to confirm certain statements I have made.’

‘And what sort of statements are these, Shintaro?’

Shintaro gave another giggle, then reached his hands out over the brazier again.

‘It is simply to satisfy the committee, Sensei. Nothing more. You may recall, Sensei, how we once had cause to disagree. Over the matter of my work during the China crisis.’

‘The China crisis? I’m afraid I don’t recall our quarrelling, Shintaro.’

‘Forgive me, Sensei, perhaps I exaggerate. It was never as pronounced a thing as a quarrel. But I did indeed have the indiscretion to express my disagreement. That is to say, I resisted your suggestions concerning my work.’

‘Forgive me, Shintaro, I don’t recall what it is you’re referring to.’

‘No doubt such a trivial matter would not remain in Sensei’s mind. But as it happens, it is of some importance to

me at this juncture. You may remember better if I remind you of the party we had that night, the party to celebrate Mr Ogawa's engagement. It was that same night - I believe we were at the Hamabara Hotel - I perhaps drank a little too much and had the rudeness to express my views to you.'

'I have a vague recollection of that night, but I cannot say I remember it clearly. Still, Shintaro, what has a small disagreement like that to do with anything now?'

'Forgive me, Sensei, but as it happens, the matter has come to have some significance. The committee is obliged to be reassured of certain things. After all, there are the American authorities to satisfy ...' Shintaro trailed off nervously. Then he said: 'I beg you, Sensei, to try and recall that little disagreement. Grateful as I was - and still remain - for the wealth of things I learnt under your supervision, I did not always, in fact, concur with your view. Indeed, I may not be exaggerating to say that I had strong reservations about the direction our school was taking at that time. You may recall, for instance, that despite my eventually following your instructions over the China crisis posters, I had misgivings and indeed went so far as to make my views known to you.'

'The China crisis posters,' I said, thinking to myself.

'Yes, I remember your posters now. It was a crucial time for the nation. A time to stop dithering and decide what we wanted. As I recall, you did well and we were all proud of your work.'

'But you will recall, Sensei, I had serious misgivings about the work you wished me to do. If you will recall, I openly expressed my disagreement that evening at the Hamabara Hotel. Forgive me, Sensei, for worrying you with such a trivial matter.'

I suppose I remained silent for some moments. I must have stood up at around this point, for when I next spoke, I

recall I was standing across the room from him, over by the veranda screens.

‘You wish me to write a letter to your committee,’ I said eventually, ‘disassociating you from my influence. This is what your request amounts to.’

‘Nothing of the sort, Sensei. You misunderstand. I am as proud as ever to be associated with your name. It’s simply that over the matter of the China poster campaign, if the committee could just be reassured ...’

He trailed off again. I slid open a screen just far enough to form a tiny gap. Cold air came blowing into the room, but for some reason this did not concern me. I gazed through the gap, across the veranda and out into the garden. The snow was falling in slow drifting flakes.

‘Shintaro,’ I said, ‘why don’t you simply face up to the past? You gained much credit at the time for your poster campaign. Much credit and much praise. The world may now have a different opinion of your work, but there’s no need to lie about yourself.’

‘Indeed, Sensei,’ Shintaro said. ‘I take your point. But getting back to the matter in hand, I would be most grateful if you would write to the committee concerning the China crisis posters. In fact, I have here with me the name and address of the committee chairman.’

‘Shintaro, please listen to me.’

‘Sensei, with every respect, I am always very grateful for your advice and learning. But at this moment, I am a man in the midst of my career. It is all very well to reflect and ponder when one is in retirement. But as it happens, I live in a busy world and there are one or two things I must see to if I am to secure this post, which by all other counts is mine already. Sensei, I beg you, please consider my position.’

I did not reply, but continued to look out at the snow falling on my garden. Behind me, I could hear Shintaro getting to his feet.

‘Here is the name and address, Sensei. If I may, I will leave them here. I would be most grateful if you would give the matter due consideration when you have a little time.’

There was a pause while, I suppose, he waited to see if I would turn and allow him to take his leave with some dignity. I went on gazing at my garden. For all its steady fall, the snow had settled only very lightly on the shrubs and branches. Indeed, as I watched, a breeze shook a branch of the maple tree, shaking off most of the snow. Only the stone lantern at the back of the garden had a substantial cap of white on it.

I heard Shintaro excuse himself and leave the room.

It may perhaps appear as if I was unnecessarily hard on Shintaro that day. But then if one bears in mind what had been taking place in the weeks immediately prior to that visit of his, it is surely understandable why I should have felt so unsympathetic towards his efforts to shirk his responsibilities. For in fact, Shintaro’s visit had come only a few days after Noriko’s *miai*.

The negotiations around Noriko’s proposed marriage to Taro Saito had progressed successfully enough throughout last autumn; an exchange of photographs had taken place in October and we had subsequently received word via Mr Kyo, our go-between, that the young man was keen to meet Noriko. Noriko, of course, made a show of thinking this over, but by that point, it had become obvious that my daughter - already twenty-six - could hardly pass over lightly a prospect like Taro Saito.

I thus informed Mr Kyo that we were agreeable to a *miai*, and eventually a date in November and the Kasuga Park Hotel

were agreed upon. The Kasuga Park Hotel, you may agree, has these days a certain vulgar air about it, and I was somewhat unhappy with the choice. But then Mr Kyo had assured me a private room would be booked, and had gone on to suggest that the Saitos were much fond of the food there, and I finally gave my consent, albeit without enthusiasm.

Mr Kyo had also made the point that the *miai* looked to be heavily weighted towards the prospective groom's family - his younger brother, as well as his parents, intended to be present. It would be perfectly acceptable, he gave me to understand, if we were to bring a relative or close friend to give Noriko additional support. But of course, with Setsuko so far away, there was no one we could properly ask to attend such an occasion. And it may well have been this feeling that we would somehow be at a disadvantage at the *miai*, together with our unhappiness with the venue, that caused Noriko to be more tense about the matter than she might otherwise have been. In any case, the weeks leading up to the *miai* were difficult ones.

Often, she would come home from her office and immediately make some remark like: 'What have you been doing all day, Father? Just moping around as usual, I expect.' Far from 'moping around', as it happened, I would have been busy in my efforts to secure a good outcome to the marriage negotiations. But because at that time I believed it important not to worry her with details of how matters were proceeding, I would talk only vaguely concerning my day, thus allowing her to continue with her insinuations. In retrospect, I see that our not openly discussing certain matters may well have made Noriko all the more tense, and a franker approach on my part may well have prevented many of the unpleasant exchanges that took place between us around that time.

I recall one afternoon, for instance, Noriko arriving home as I was pruning some shrubs out in the garden. She had greeted me from the veranda in a perfectly civil way, before

disappearing again into the house. Then a few minutes later I was sitting on the veranda, looking out at the garden to assess the effect of my work, when Noriko, now changed into a kimono, appeared again with some tea. She put the tray down between us and seated herself. It was, as I recall, one of the last of those splendid autumn afternoons we had last year, and a tender light was falling across the foliage. Following my gaze, she said:

‘Father, why have you cut the bamboo like that? It looks unbalanced now.’

‘Unbalanced? Do you think so? I think it looks balanced enough. You see, you have to take into account where the younger shoots are dominant.’

‘Father tends to meddle too much. I think he’s going to ruin that bush too.’

‘Ruin that bush too?’ I turned towards my daughter. ‘Whatever do you mean? You’re saying I’ve ruined others?’

‘The azaleas have never regained their looks. That’s what comes of Father having so much time on his hands. He ends up meddling where it’s not required.’

‘Excuse me, Noriko, I don’t quite see your point. You’re saying the azaleas are unbalanced too?’

Noriko looked at the garden again and gave a sigh. ‘You should have left things as they were.’

‘I’m sorry, Noriko, but to my eyes, both the bamboo and the azaleas are much improved. I’m afraid I don’t see your “unbalanced” aspect at all.’

‘Well then, Father must be going blind. Or perhaps it’s just poor taste.’

‘Poor taste? Now that’s curious. You know, Noriko, people have not on the whole associated poor taste with my name.’

‘Well, to my eyes, Father,’ she said tiredly, ‘the bamboo is unbalanced. And you’ve spoiled the way the tree hangs over it too.’

For a moment, I sat gazing at the garden in silence. ‘Yes,’ I said, eventually, and gave a nod. ‘I suppose you might see it that way, Noriko. You never did have an artistic instinct. Neither you nor Setsuko. Kenji was another matter, but you girls took after your mother. In fact, I remember your mother used to make just such misguided comments.’

‘Is Father such an authority on how to cut shrubs? I didn’t realize that. I’m sorry.’

‘I didn’t claim to be an authority. It’s simply that I’m a little surprised to be accused of poor taste. It’s an unusual accusation in my own case, that’s all.’

‘Very well, Father, I’m sure it’s all a matter of opinion.’

‘Your mother was rather like you, Noriko. She had no bones about saying whatever came into her head. It’s quite honest, I suppose.’

‘I’m sure Father knows best about such things. That’s beyond dispute, no doubt.’

‘I remember, Noriko, your mother would sometimes even make her comments while I was painting. She would try to make some point and make me laugh. Then she’d laugh, too, and concede she knew little about such things.’

‘So Father was always right about his paintings too, I suppose.’

‘Noriko, this is a pointless discussion. Besides, if you don’t like what I’ve done in the garden, you’re welcome to go out there and do what you like to set things right.’

‘That’s very kind of Father. But when do you suggest I do it? I don’t have all day long as Father does.’

‘What do you mean, Noriko? I’ve had a busy day.’ I glared at her for a moment, but she went on looking at the garden, a weary expression on her face. I turned away and gave a sigh. ‘But this is a pointless discussion. Your mother at least could say such things and we would laugh together.’

At such moments, it was indeed tempting to point out to her the extent to which I was in fact exerting myself on her behalf. Had I done so, my daughter would no doubt have been surprised - and, I dare say, ashamed at her behaviour towards me. That very day, for instance, I had actually been to the Yanagawa district, where I had discovered Kuroda was now living.

It had not, in the end, been a difficult task to discover Kuroda’s whereabouts. The art professor at Uemachi College, once I had assured him of my good intentions, had given me not only the address, but an account of what had been happening to my former pupil over these past years. Kuroda, it seemed, had not fared at all badly since his release at the end of the war. Such are the ways of this world that his years in prison gave him strong credentials, and certain groups had made a point of welcoming him and seeing to his needs. He had thus experienced little difficulty finding work - mainly small tutoring jobs - or the materials to recommence his own painting. Then, towards the early part of last summer, he had been given the post of art teacher at Uemachi College.

Now, it may seem somewhat perverse of me to say so, but I was pleased - and indeed rather proud - to hear Kuroda’s career was progressing well. But then it is only natural after all that his former teacher should continue to take pride in such things, even if circumstances have caused teacher and pupil to become estranged.

Kuroda did not live in a good quarter. I walked for some time through little alleys filled with dilapidated lodging houses before coming to a concrete square resembling the forecourt of a factory. Indeed, across the square, I could see some trucks had been parked, and farther on, behind a mesh fence, a bulldozer was churning up the ground. I recall I was standing watching the bulldozer for some moments before realizing the large new building above me was in fact Kuroda's apartment block.

I climbed to the second floor, where two small boys were riding a tricycle up and down the corridor, and searched out Kuroda's door. My first ring was not answered, but I was by then firmly resolved to go ahead with the encounter and rang again.

A fresh-faced young man of around twenty opened the door.

'I'm very sorry' - he spoke very earnestly - 'but Mr Kuroda isn't home at present. I wonder, sir, are you perhaps a work associate?'

'In a manner of speaking. There were a few matters I wished to discuss with Mr Kuroda.'

'In that case, perhaps you'd be so good as to come in and wait. I'm sure Mr Kuroda will not be gone long, and he would very much regret it if he were to miss you.'

'But I don't wish to put you to any bother.'

'Not at all, sir. Please, please come in.'

The apartment was small, and like many of these modern affairs, had no entryway as such, the tatami starting a little way inside the front door with only a shallow step up. There was a tidy look to the place, and a number of paintings and hangings adorned the walls. Plenty of sunlight came into the apartment through the large windows, which I could see opened on to a narrow balcony. The noise of the bulldozer could be heard coming from outside.

‘I hope you were not in a hurry, sir,’ the young man said, placing a cushion for me. ‘But Mr Kuroda would never forgive me if he returned to learn I had let you go. Please allow me to make you some tea.’

‘How very kind,’ I said, seating myself. ‘You are a student of Mr Kuroda’s?’

The young man gave a small laugh. ‘Mr Kuroda is kind enough to refer to me as his protégé, although I am myself doubtful if I am worthy of such a title. My name is Enchi. Mr Kuroda used to tutor me, and now, despite his heavy commitments at his college, he most generously continues to take an interest in my work.’

‘Is that so?’

From outside came the noise of the bulldozer at work. For a moment or two, the young man hovered awkwardly, then excused himself, saying: ‘Please, I will prepare some tea.’

A few minutes later, when he reappeared, I pointed to a painting on the wall, saying: ‘Mr Kuroda’s style is quite unmistakable.’

At this, the young man gave a laugh and looked awkwardly towards the painting, the tea tray still in his hands. Then he said:

‘I’m afraid that painting is far from Mr Kuroda’s standards, sir.’

‘It isn’t Mr Kuroda’s work?’

‘I’m afraid, sir, that is one of my own efforts. My teacher has been so good as to deem it worthy of display.’

‘Really? Well, well.’

I went on gazing up at the painting. The young man put the tray down on a low table near me, and seated himself.

‘Really, that is your own work? Well, I must say you have much talent. Much talent indeed.’

He gave another embarrassed laugh. 'I'm very fortunate in having Mr Kuroda for a teacher. But I fear I still have much to learn.'

'And I was so sure it was an example of Mr Kuroda's own work. The brush strokes have that quality to them.'

The young man was fussing rather clumsily with the teapot, as though unsure how to proceed. I watched him lift up the lid to peer inside.

'Mr Kuroda is always telling me,' he said, 'I should try and paint in a style more distinctly my own. But I find so much to admire in Mr Kuroda's ways, I can hardly help mimicking him.'

'It's no bad thing to mimic one's teacher for a while. One learns a lot that way. But all in good time, you'll develop your own ideas and techniques, for you're undoubtedly a young man of much talent. Yes, I'm sure you have a most promising future. It's no wonder Mr Kuroda takes an interest in you.'

'I cannot begin to tell you, sir, what I owe to Mr Kuroda. Why, as you can see, I am now even lodging here in his apartment. I have been here for almost two weeks. I was thrown out of my previous lodgings, and Mr Kuroda came to my rescue. It is impossible to tell you, sir, all he has done for me.'

'You say you were thrown out of your lodgings?'

'I assure you, sir,' he said, with a small laugh, 'I paid my rent. But you see, as much as I tried, I could not avoid getting paint on the tatami, and eventually the landlord threw me out.'

We both laughed at this. Then I said:

'I'm sorry, I don't mean to be unsympathetic. It's just that I remember just such problems myself when I was starting

out. But you'll soon acquire the right conditions to work if you persevere, I assure you.'

We both laughed again.

'You're very encouraging, sir,' the young man said, and began to pour the tea. 'I don't suppose Mr Kuroda will be long now. I beg you not to hurry away. Mr Kuroda will be most glad for the opportunity to thank you for all you have done.'

I looked at him in surprise. 'You think Mr Kuroda wishes to thank me?'

'Excuse me, sir, but I was assuming you are from the Cordon Society.'

'The Cordon Society? I'm sorry, what is that?'

The young man glanced towards me, some of his earlier awkwardness returning. 'I'm sorry, sir, it's my mistake. I assumed you were from the Cordon Society.'

'I'm afraid I'm not. I'm simply an old acquaintance of Mr Kuroda's.'

'I see. An old colleague?'

'Indeed. I suppose you could say that.' I gazed up again at the young man's painting on the wall. 'Yes, indeed,' I said. 'Very talented. Very talented indeed.' I had become aware that the young man was now looking at me carefully. Eventually, he said:

'I'm sorry, sir, but may I ask your name?'

'I'm sorry, you must think me most rude. My name is Ono.'

'I see.'

The young man rose to his feet and went over to the window. For a moment or two, I watched the steam rising from the two cups on the table.

‘Will Mr Kuroda be long now?’ I asked, eventually.

At first, I did not think the young man was going to reply. But then he said, without turning from the window:

‘Perhaps if he has not returned soon, you should not detain yourself further from your other business.’

‘If you don’t mind, I’ll wait a little longer, now that I’ve made the journey out here.’

‘I will inform Mr Kuroda of your visit. Perhaps he will write to you.’

Out in the corridor, the children seemed to be banging their tricycle against the wall not far from us and shouting at each other. It struck me then how much like a sulking child the young man at the window looked.

‘Forgive me for saying this, Mr Enchi,’ I said. ‘But you are very young. Indeed, you could only have been a boy when Mr Kuroda and I first knew each other. I would ask you not to jump to conclusions about matters of which you do not know the full details.’

‘The full details?’ he said, turning to me. ‘Excuse me, sir, but are you yourself aware of the full details? Do you know what he suffered?’

‘Most things are more complicated than they appear, Mr Enchi. Young men of your generation tend to see things far too simply. In any case, there seems little point in the two of us debating such matters at this moment. I will, if you don’t mind, wait for Mr Kuroda.’

‘I would suggest, sir, you delay yourself no further from your other business. I will inform Mr Kuroda when he returns.’ Until this point, the young man had managed to maintain a polite tone in his voice, but now he seemed to lose his self-control. ‘Frankly, sir, I am amazed at your nerve. To come here as though you were simply a friendly visitor.’

‘But I am a friendly visitor. And if I may say so, I think it is for Mr Kuroda to decide whether or not he wishes to receive me as such.’

‘Sir, I have come to know Mr Kuroda well, and in my judgement it is best you leave. He will not wish to see you.’

I gave a sigh and rose to my feet. The young man was again looking out of the window. But as I was removing my hat from the coat stand, he turned to me once more. ‘The full details, Mr Ono,’ he said, and his voice had a strange kind of composure. ‘It is clearly you who are ignorant of the full details. Or else how would you dare come here like this? For instance, sir, I take it you never knew about Mr Kuroda’s shoulder? He was in great pain, but the warders conveniently forgot to report the injury and it was not attended to until the end of the war. But of course, they remembered it well enough whenever they decided to give him another beating. Traitor. That’s what they called him. Traitor. Every minute of every day. But now we all know who the real traitors were.’

I finished lacing my shoes and started for the door.

‘You’re too young, Mr Enchi, to know about this world and its complications.’

‘We all know now who the real traitors were. And many of them are still walking free.’

‘You will tell Mr Kuroda I was here? Perhaps he will be so good as to write to me. Good day, Mr Enchi.’

Naturally, I did not allow the young man’s words to upset me unduly, but in the light of Noriko’s marriage negotiations, the possibility that Kuroda was as hostile to my memory as Enchi had suggested was indeed a disturbing one. It was, in any case, my duty as a father to press on with the matter, unpleasant though it was, and on returning home that afternoon, I composed a letter to Kuroda, expressing my

desire that we should meet again, particularly since I had a matter of some delicacy and importance to discuss with him. The tone of my letter had been friendly and conciliatory, and so I was disappointed by the cold and offensively brief reply I received a few days later.

‘I have no reason to believe a meeting between us would produce anything of value,’ my former pupil had written. ‘I thank you for your courtesy in calling the other day, but I feel I should not trouble you further to fulfil such obligations.’

This matter with Kuroda did, I confess, cast something of a shadow over my mood; it certainly marred my optimism concerning Noriko’s negotiations. And though, as I have said, I kept from her the details of my attempts to meet with Kuroda, my daughter undoubtedly sensed the matter had not been resolved satisfactorily, and this no doubt contributed to her anxiety.

On the actual day of the *miai* itself, my daughter seemed so tense, I became concerned as to the impression she would make that evening in front of the Saitos - who were themselves bound to display a smooth and relaxed assurance. Towards the latter part of the afternoon, I felt it would be prudent to try and lighten Noriko’s mood somewhat, and this was the impulse behind my remarking to her as she passed through the dining room where I was sat reading:

‘It’s astonishing, Noriko, how you can spend the whole day doing nothing but preparing your appearance. You’d think this was the marriage ceremony itself.’

‘It’s just like Father to mock then not be properly ready himself,’ she snapped back.

‘I’ll only need a little time to be ready,’ I said, with a laugh. ‘Quite extraordinary, your taking the whole day like this.’

‘That’s Father’s trouble. He’s too proud to prepare properly for these things.’

I looked up at her in astonishment. ‘What do you mean, “too proud”? What are you suggesting, Noriko?’

My daughter turned away, adjusting her hairclasp.

‘Noriko, what do you mean, “too proud”? What are you suggesting?’

‘If Father doesn’t want to make a fuss over something as trivial as my future, then that’s quite understandable. After all, Father hasn’t even finished his newspaper yet.’

‘But you’re changing your tack now. You were saying something about my being “too proud”. Why don’t you say more about it?’

‘I just hope Father’s presentable when the time comes,’ she said, and went purposefully out of the room.

On that occasion, as often during those difficult days, I was obliged to reflect on the marked contrast of Noriko’s attitude with that she had displayed the previous year, during the negotiations with the Miyake family. Then, she had been relaxed almost to the point of complacency; but of course, she had known Jiro Miyake well; I dare say she had been confident the two of them would marry, and had regarded the discussions between families as nothing more than cumbersome formalities. No doubt the shock she subsequently received was a bitter one, but it seems to me unnecessary for her to have made insinuations such as she did that afternoon. In any case, that little altercation hardly helped to put us in the right frame of mind for a *miai*, and in all likelihood contributed to what took place that evening at the Kasuga Park Hotel.

For many years, the Kasuga Park Hotel had been amongst the most pleasant of the Western-style hotels in the city; these

days, though, the management has taken to decorating the rooms in a somewhat vulgar manner - intended, no doubt, to strike the American clientele with whom the place is popular as being charmingly 'Japanese'. For all that, the room Mr Kyo had booked was pleasing enough, its main feature being the view from the wide bay windows down the west slope of Kasuga Hill, the lights of the city visible far below us. Otherwise, the room was dominated by a large circular table and high-backed chairs, and a painting on one wall which I recognized to be by Matsumoto, an artist I had known slightly before the war.

It may well be that the tension of the occasion made me drink a little more quickly than I intended, for my memories of the evening are not as clear as they might be. I do remember forming immediately a favourable impression of Taro Saito, the young man I was being asked to consider for a son-in-law. Not only did he seem an intelligent, responsible sort, he possessed all the assured grace and manners I admired in his father. Indeed, observing the unworried, yet highly courteous way Taro Saito received myself and Noriko as we first arrived, I was reminded of another young man who had impressed me in a parallel situation some years earlier - that is to say, Suichi at Setsuko's *miai* at what was in those days the Imperial Inn. And for a moment, I considered the possibility that Taro Saito's courtesy and good-naturedness would fade with time as surely as Suichi's has done. But then, of course, it is to be hoped that Taro Saito will never have to endure the embittering experiences Suichi is said to have done.

As for Dr Saito himself, he seemed as commanding a presence as ever. Despite our never having been properly introduced prior to that evening, Dr Saito and I had in fact been acquainted for some years, having taken to greeting one another in the street out of mutual recognition of our respective reputations. His wife, a handsome woman in her fifties, I had likewise exchanged greetings with, but little

else; I could see she was, like her husband, someone of considerable poise, confident of handling any awkward situation that might arise. The only member of the Saito family who did not impress me was the younger son - Mitsuo - whom I guessed to be in his early twenties.

Now that I think back to that evening, I am sure my suspicions about young Mitsuo were aroused as soon as I saw him. I am still uncertain as to what first set off a warning - perhaps it was that he reminded me of young Enchi whom I had encountered in Kuroda's apartment, In any case, as we began to eat, I found myself becoming increasingly confirmed in these suspicions. Although at this point Mitsuo was behaving with all due decorum, there was something in the way I would catch him looking at me, or about the way he would pass a bowl to me across the table, that made me sense his hostility and accusation.

And then, after we had been eating for several minutes, I was struck by a sudden thought; that Mitsuo's attitude was not in fact any different from that of the rest of his family - it was simply that he was not as skilled in disguising it. From then on, I took to glancing over at Mitsuo, as though he were the clearest indicator of what the Saitos were really thinking. However, because he was sitting at some distance across the table, and because Mr Kyo, next to him, appeared to be engaging him in prolonged conversation, I did not have any significant exchanges with Mitsuo at that stage of the proceedings.

'We hear you're fond of playing the piano, Miss Noriko,' I remember Mrs Saito remarking at one point.

Noriko gave a small laugh and said: 'I don't practise nearly enough.'

'I used to play when I was younger,' said Mrs Saito. 'But now I too am out of practice. We women are given so little time for such pursuits, don't you think?'

‘Indeed,’ my daughter said, rather nervously.

‘I have very poor appreciation of music myself,’ Taro Saito put in, gazing unflinchingly at Noriko. ‘In fact, my mother always accuses me of being tone-deaf. As a result, I have no confidence in my own taste, and I’m obliged to consult her about which composers to admire.’

‘What nonsense,’ said Mrs Saito.

‘You know, Miss Noriko,’ Taro went on, ‘I once acquired a set of recordings of a Bach piano concerto. I was very fond of it, but my mother was forever criticizing it and chastising my poor taste. Naturally my opinions stood little chance against the likes of Mother here. Consequently I now hardly listen to Bach. But perhaps you could come to my rescue, Miss Noriko. Aren’t you fond of Bach?’

‘Bach?’ For a second, my daughter looked at a loss. Then she smiled and said: ‘Yes, indeed. Very much so.’

‘Ah,’ Taro Saito said triumphantly, ‘now Mother will need to reconsider things.’

‘My son is talking nonsense, Miss Noriko. I’ve never criticized Bach’s work as a whole. But tell me, don’t you agree Chopin is more eloquent so far as the piano is concerned?’

‘Indeed,’ said Noriko.

Such stiff responses typified my daughter’s performance for much of the earlier part of the evening. This was not, I might say, altogether unexpected. When amongst family, or in the company of close friends, Noriko is in the habit of adopting her somewhat flippant manner of address, and often achieves a wit and eloquence of sorts; but in more formal settings, I have often known her to have difficulty finding an appropriate tone, thus giving the impression she is a timid young woman. That this was precisely what was occurring on this of all occasions was reason for concern; for it

seemed to me clear - and Mrs Saito's own high profile appeared to confirm this - the Saitos were not the old-fashioned sort of family who preferred their female members to be silent and demure. I had in fact anticipated this, and in our preparations for the *miai*, had stressed my opinion that Noriko should as far as appropriate emphasize her lively, intelligent qualities. My daughter had been in full agreement with such a strategy, and indeed, had declared so determinedly her intention to behave in a frank and natural way, I had even feared she would go too far and outrage the proceedings. So, as I watched her struggling to produce simple, compliant replies to the Saitos' promptings, her gaze rarely leaving her bowl, I could imagine the frustration Noriko was experiencing.

Noriko's problems aside, however, talk seemed to flow easily around the table. Dr Saito in particular proved so expert at generating a relaxed atmosphere, that, had it not been for my awareness of young Mitsuo's gaze on me, I might well have forgotten the gravity of the occasion and lowered my guard. At one point during the meal, I can recall Dr Saito leaning back comfortably in his chair, saying:

'It seems there were more demonstrations in the city centre today. You know, Mr Ono, I was on the tram this afternoon and a man got in with a large bruise over his forehead. He sat next to me, so naturally I asked him if he was all right and advised him to visit the clinic. But you know, it turned out he had just been to a doctor, and he was now determined to rejoin his companions in the demonstrations. What do you make of that, Mr Ono?'

Dr Saito had spoken casually enough, but I got for a moment the impression that the whole table - Noriko included - had stopped eating to hear my reply. It is quite possible, of course, that I imagined this; but then I do recall quite distinctly that when I threw a glance towards young Mitsuo, he was watching me with a peculiar intensity.

‘It’s regrettable indeed,’ I said, ‘that people are getting hurt. No doubt feelings are running high.’

‘I’m sure you’re right, Mr Ono,’ Mrs Saito put in. ‘Feelings may well be running high, but people seem to be going too far now. So many getting injured. But my husband here claims it’s all for the good. I really don’t understand what he means.’

I expected Dr Saito to react to this, but instead there was another pause during which attention seemed once more to focus in my direction.

‘It is, as you say,’ I remarked, ‘a great pity so many have been injured.’

‘My wife is misrepresenting me as usual, Mr Ono,’ Dr Saito said. ‘I never claimed all this fighting was a good thing. But I’ve been trying to convince my wife there’s more to these things than simply people getting injured. Of course, one doesn’t want to see people hurt. But the underlying spirit – that people feel the need to express their views openly and strongly – now that’s a healthy thing, don’t you think so, Mr Ono?’

Perhaps I hesitated for a moment; in any case, Taro Saito spoke before I could reply.

‘But surely, Father, things are getting out of hand now. Democracy is a fine thing, but it doesn’t mean citizens have a right to run riot whenever they disagree with something. In this respect, we Japanese have been shown to be like children. We’ve yet to learn how to handle the responsibility of democracy.’

‘Here’s an unusual case,’ Dr Saito said, laughing. ‘It seems on this question at least, it’s the father who’s far more liberal than the son. Taro may be right. At this moment, our country is like a young boy learning to walk and run. But I say the underlying spirit is healthy. It’s like watching a growing boy running and grazing his knee. One doesn’t wish to

prevent him and keep him locked indoors. Don't you think so, Mr Ono? Or am I being too liberal, as my wife and my son insist?'

Perhaps again I was mistaken - for as I say, I was drinking a little faster than I had intended - but there seemed to me a curious lack of disharmony about the Saito's supposed difference of views. Meanwhile, young Mitsuo, I noticed, was once more watching me.

'Indeed,' I said. 'I hope no more people are injured.'

I believe at this point Taro Saito changed the subject by asking Noriko her opinion on one of the city's recently opened department stores, and for a while the conversation reverted to smaller topics.

These occasions are not, of course, easy for any prospective bride - it seems unfair to ask a young woman to make judgements so crucial to her future happiness while under such scrutiny herself - but I must admit I had not expected Noriko to take the tension quite so badly. As the evening progressed, her confidence seemed to wane further and further, until she seemed unable to say little more than 'yes' or 'no'. Taro Saito, I could see, was doing his best to get Noriko to relax, but the occasion demanded he should not appear overly persistent, and time and again, his attempts to start a humorous exchange would end in awkward silences. As I watched my daughter's distress, I was struck again by the contrast of the proceedings with the *miai* the previous year. Setsuko, down on one of her visits then, had been present to give her sister support, but Noriko had seemed in little need of it that night. Indeed, I could recall my irritation at the way Noriko and Jiro Miyake had continued to exchange mischievous glances across the table, as though to mock the formality of the occasion.

'You remember, Mr Ono,' Dr Saito said, 'the last time we met, we discovered we had a mutual acquaintance. A Mr

Kuroda. ’

We were by this time nearing the end of the meal.

‘Ah yes, indeed,’ I said.

‘My son here’ - Dr Saito indicated young Mitsuo with whom I had so far exchanged barely a word - ‘is presently studying at Uemachi College, where, of course, Mr Kuroda is now teaching.’

‘Is that so?’ I turned to the young man. ‘So you know Mr Kuroda well?’

‘Not well,’ the young man said. ‘Regrettably, I have no ability in the arts, and my contact with the art professors is limited.’

‘But Mr Kuroda is well spoken of, isn’t he, Mitsuo?’ Dr Saito put in.

‘He is indeed.’

‘Mr Ono here was a close acquaintance of Mr Kuroda once. Did you know that?’

‘Yes, I’d heard,’ Mitsuo said.

At this point, Taro Saito changed the subject again by saying:

‘You know, Miss Noriko, I’ve always had a theory about my poor ear for music. When I was a child, my parents never kept the piano tuned. Every day, throughout my most formative years, Miss Noriko, I was obliged to listen to Mother here practising on an out-of-tune piano. It’s quite possible, don’t you think, this is behind all my troubles?’

‘Yes,’ Noriko said, and looked back down at her food.

‘There. I always maintained it was Mother’s fault. And she’s constantly chastised me all these years for having a bad ear. I’ve been most unfairly treated, wouldn’t you say, Miss Noriko?’

Noriko smiled, but said nothing.

Around this point, evidently, Mr Kyo, who had thus far kept in the background, began to tell one of his comic anecdotes. According at least to Noriko's account of things, he was still in the midst of his story when I interrupted by turning to young Mitsuo Saito and saying:

'Mr Kuroda has no doubt spoken to you about me.'

Mitsuo looked up with a puzzled expression.

'Spoken about you, sir?' he said, hesitantly. 'I'm sure he often mentions you, but I'm afraid I'm not well acquainted with Mr Kuroda and consequently ...' He trailed off, and looked towards his parents for help.

'I'm sure,' Dr Saito said, in what struck me as a rather deliberate voice, 'Mr Kuroda remembers Mr Ono well enough.'

'I do not think,' I said, looking at Mitsuo again, 'that Mr Kuroda would have a particularly high opinion of me.'

The young man turned awkwardly once more towards his parents. This time, it was Mrs Saito who said:

'On the contrary, I'm sure he would have the highest opinion of you, Mr Ono.'

'There are some, Mrs Saito,' I said, perhaps a little loudly, 'who believe my career to have been a negative influence. An influence now best erased and forgotten. I am not unaware of this viewpoint. Mr Kuroda, I would think, is one who would hold it.'

'Is that so?' Perhaps I was mistaken about this, but I thought Dr Saito was watching me rather like a teacher waiting for a pupil to go on with a lesson he has learnt by heart.

‘Indeed. And as for myself, I am now quite prepared to accept the validity of such an opinion.’

‘I’m sure you’re being unfair on yourself, Mr Ono,’ Taro Saito began to say, but I quickly went on:

‘There are some who would say it is people like myself who are responsible for the terrible things that happened to this nation of ours. As far as I am concerned, I freely admit I made many mistakes. I accept that much of what I did was ultimately harmful to our nation, that mine was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for our own people. I admit this. You see, Dr Saito, I admit this quite readily.’

Dr Saito leaned forward, a puzzled expression on his face.

‘Forgive me, Mr Ono,’ he said. ‘You’re saying you are unhappy about the work you did? With your paintings?’

‘My paintings. My teachings. As you see, Dr Saito, I admit this quite readily. All I can say is that at the time I acted in good faith. I believed in all sincerity I was achieving good for my fellow countrymen. But as you see, I am not now afraid to admit I was mistaken.’

‘I’m sure you’re too harsh on yourself, Mr Ono,’ Taro Saito said cheerfully. Then turning to Noriko, he said: ‘Tell me, Miss Noriko, is your father always so strict with himself?’

Noriko, I realized, had been staring at me in astonishment. Perhaps as a result of this, she was taken off guard by Taro, and her customary flippancy came to her lips for the first time that evening.

‘Father’s not strict at all. It’s me that has to be strict with him. Otherwise he’d never be up for breakfast.’

‘Is that so?’ Taro Saito said, delighted to have drawn a less formal response from Noriko. ‘My father is also a

late riser. They say older people sleep less than we do, but from our experience this seems quite incorrect.'

Noriko laughed and said: 'I think it's just fathers. I'm sure Mrs Saito has no trouble getting up.'

'A fine thing,' Dr Saito remarked to me. 'They're making fun of us and we're not even out of the room.'

I would not wish to claim that the whole engagement had hung in the balance until that point, but it is certainly my feeling that that was when the *miai* turned from being an awkward, potentially disastrous one into a successful evening. We went on talking and drinking sake for a good while after the meal, and by the time taxis were called, there was a clear feeling that we had all got on well. Most crucially, although they had kept an appropriate distance, it was obvious Taro Saito and Noriko had taken to one another.

Of course, I do not pretend certain moments of that evening were not painful for me; nor do I claim I would so easily have made the sort of declaration I did concerning the past had circumstances not impressed upon me the prudence of doing so. Having said this, I must say I find it hard to understand how any man who values his self-respect would wish for long to avoid responsibility for his past deeds; it may not always be an easy thing, but there is certainly a satisfaction and dignity to be gained in coming to terms with the mistakes one has made in the course of one's life. In any case, there is surely no great shame in mistakes made in the best of faith. It is surely a thing far more shameful to be unable or unwilling to acknowledge them.

Consider Shintaro, for instance - who appears, incidentally, to have secured the teaching post he was so coveting. Shintaro would in my view be a happier man today if he had the courage and honesty to accept what he did in the past. It is, I suppose, possible that the cold reaction he received from me that afternoon just after New Year may have persuaded him to change tack in dealing with his committee

over the matter of his China crisis posters. But my guess is that Shintaro persisted with his small hypocrisies in pursuit of his goal. Indeed, I have come to believe now that there has always been a cunning, underhand side to Shintaro's nature, which I had not really noticed in the past.

'You know, Obasan,' I said to Mrs Kawakami when I was down there one evening not so long ago, 'I rather suspect Shintaro was never quite the unworldly sort he would have us believe. That's just his way of gaining an advantage over people and getting things to go his way. People like Shintaro, if they don't want to do something, they pretend they're helplessly lost about it and they're forgiven everything.'

'Really, Sensei.' Mrs Kawakami gave me a disapproving look, understandably reluctant to think ill of someone who had for so long been her best customer.

'For instance, Obasan,' I went on, 'think how cleverly he avoided the war. While others were losing so much, Shintaro just went on working in that little studio of his as though nothing was happening.'

'But Sensei, Shintaro-san has a bad leg ...'

'Bad leg or not, everyone was being called up. Of course, they found him in the end, but then the war was over within days. You know, Obasan, Shintaro told me once he lost two working weeks on account of the war. That's what the war cost Shintaro. Believe me, Obasan, there's far more to our old friend beneath his childish exterior.'

'Well, in any case,' Mrs Kawakami said tiredly, 'it looks as though he won't be returning here any more now.'

'Indeed, Obasan. It seems you've lost him for good.'

Mrs Kawakami, a cigarette burning in her hand, leaned on her edge of the counter and cast an eye around her little bar. We were as usual alone in the place. The early evening

sun was coming in through the mosquito nets on the windows, making the room look more dusty and older than it does once darkness has set in and Mrs Kawakami's lamps are illuminating it. Outside, the men were still working. For the past hour, the sound of hammering had been echoing in from somewhere, and a truck starting or a burst of drilling would frequently cause the whole place to shake. And as I followed Mrs Kawakami's glance around the room that summer's evening, I was struck by the thought of how small, shabby and out of place her little bar would seem amidst the large concrete buildings the city corporation was even at that moment erecting around us. And I said to Mrs Kawakami:

'You know, Obasan, you really must think seriously about accepting this offer and moving elsewhere now. It's a great opportunity.'

'But I've been here so long,' she said, and waved a hand to clear the smoke from her cigarette.

'You could open a fine new place, Obasan. In the Kitabashi district, or even in Honcho. You can be sure I'll drop in whenever I'm passing by.'

Mrs Kawakami was quiet for a moment, as though listening for something amidst the sounds the workmen were making outside. Then a smile spread over her face and she said: 'This was such a splendid district once. You remember, Sensei?'

I returned her smile, but did not say anything. Of course, the old district had been fine. We had all enjoyed ourselves and the spirit that had pervaded the bantering and those arguments had never been less than sincere. But then perhaps that same spirit had not always been for the best. Like many things now, it is perhaps as well that that little world has passed away and will not be returning. I was tempted to say as much to Mrs Kawakami that evening, but decided it would be tactless to do so. For clearly, the old district was dear to her heart - much of her life and energy

had been invested in it - and one can surely understand her reluctance to accept it has gone for ever.

NOVEMBER, 1949

My recollection of the first time I ever met Dr Saito remains quite vivid, and I am thus confident enough of its accuracy. It must have been all of sixteen years ago now, on the day after I moved into my house. I recall it being a bright summer's day, and I was outside adjusting the fence, or perhaps fixing something to the gateway, and exchanging greetings with those of my new neighbours who passed by. Then at one point, after my back had been turned to the path for some time, I became aware that someone was standing behind me, apparently to watch me work. I turned to find a man of around my own age studying with interest my newly inscribed name on the gatepost.

'So you are Mr Ono,' he remarked. 'Well now, this is a real honour. A real honour to have someone of your stature here in our neighbourhood. I am myself, you see, involved in the world of fine art. My name is Saito, from the Imperial City University.'

'Dr Saito? Why, this is a great privilege. I have heard much about you, sir.'

I believe we went on talking for several moments there outside my gateway, and I am sure I am not mistaken in recalling that Dr Saito, on that same occasion, made several more references to my work and career. And before he went on his way down the hill, I remember his repeating words to the effect of: 'A great honour to have an artist of your stature in our neighbourhood, Mr Ono.'

Thereafter, Dr Saito and I always greeted each other respectfully whenever we chanced to meet. It is true, I suppose, that after that initial encounter - until recent events gave us cause for greater intimacy - we rarely stopped for prolonged conversations. But my memory of that

first meeting, and of Dr Saito recognizing my name on the gatepost, is sufficiently clear for me to assert with some confidence that my elder daughter, Setsuko, was quite mistaken in at least some of the things she tried to imply last month. It is hardly possible, for instance, that Dr Saito had no idea who I was until the marriage negotiations last year obliged him to find out.

Because her visit this year was so brief, and because she spent it staying at Noriko and Taro's new home in the Izumimachi district, my walk with Setsuko that morning through Kawabe Park was really my only chance to speak properly with her. It is not surprising then that I should be turning that conversation over in my mind for some time afterwards, and I do not think it unreasonable that I now find myself becoming increasingly irritated by certain things she said to me that day.

At the time, however, I could not have been dwelling too deeply on Setsuko's words, for I recall being in a good enough mood, happy to be in my daughter's company again, and enjoying walking through Kawabe Park, which I had not done for a while. This was just over a month ago, when as you will recall, the days were still sunny, though the leaves were already falling. Setsuko and I were making our way down the wide avenue of trees that runs through the middle of the park, and because we were well ahead of the time we had agreed to meet Noriko and Ichiro beside the statue of the Emperor Taisho, we were walking at an easy pace, stopping every now and then to admire the autumn scenery.

Perhaps you will agree with me that Kawabe Park is the most rewarding of the city parks; certainly after one has been walking around those crowded little streets of the Kawabe district for a time, it is most refreshing to find oneself in one of those spacious long avenues hung over with trees. But if you are new to this city, and unfamiliar with the history of Kawabe Park, I should perhaps explain here why the park has always held a special interest for me.

Here and there around the park, you will no doubt recall passing certain isolated patches of grass, none larger than a school yard, visible through the trees as you walk down any of those avenues. It is as though those who planned the park had become confused and abandoned some scheme or other half-completed. This, in fact, was more or less the case. Some years ago, Akira Sugimura - he whose house I had bought shortly after his death - had the most ambitious of plans concerning Kawabe Park. I realize Akira Sugimura's name is rarely heard these days, but let me point out that not so long ago he was unquestionably one of the most influential men in the city. At one stage, so I heard, he possessed four houses, and it was hardly possible to walk around this city for long before stumbling across some enterprise or other owned by or connected heavily with Sugimura. Then, around 1920 or 1921, at the peak of his success, Sugimura decided to gamble much of his wealth and capital on a project that would allow him to leave his mark for ever on this city and its people. He planned to convert Kawabe Park - which was then a rather drab neglected place - into the focus of the city's culture. Not only would the grounds be enlarged to contain more natural areas for people to relax, the park was to become the site for several glittering cultural centres - a museum of natural science; a new kabuki theatre for the Takahashi school, who had recently lost their venue in Shirahama Street through fire; a European-style concert hall; and also, somewhat eccentrically, a cemetery for the city's cats and dogs. I cannot remember what else he planned, but there was no mistaking the sweeping ambition of the scheme. Sugimura hoped not only to transform the Kawabe district, but the whole cultural balance of the city, bringing a new emphasis to the northern side of the river. It was, as I have said, nothing less than the attempt of one man to stamp his mark for ever on the character of the city.

Work on the park was well underway, it seems, when the scheme ran into terrible financial difficulties. I am not clear on the details of the affair, but the result was that

Sugimura's 'cultural centres' were never built. Sugimura himself lost a great deal of money and never again regained his old influence. After the war, Kawabe Park came under the direct control of the city authorities who built the avenues of trees. All that remain today of Sugimura's schemes are those oddly empty patches of grass where his museums and theatres would have stood.

I may have said before that my dealings with Sugimura's family after his death - on the occasion of my buying the last of his houses - were not of the kind to make me particularly well disposed to the man's memory. Nevertheless, whenever I find myself wandering around Kawabe Park these days, I start to think of Sugimura and his schemes, and I confess I am beginning to feel a certain admiration for the man. For indeed, a man who aspires to rise above the mediocre, to be something more than ordinary, surely deserves admiration, even if in the end he fails and loses a fortune on account of his ambitions. It is my belief, furthermore, that Sugimura did not die an unhappy man. For his failure was quite unlike the undignified failures of most ordinary lives, and a man like Sugimura would have known this. If one has failed only where others have not had the courage or will to try, there is a consolation - indeed, a deep satisfaction - to be gained from this observation when looking back over one's life.

But it was not my intention to dwell on Sugimura. As I say, I was by and large enjoying my walk through Kawabe Park with Setsuko that day, notwithstanding certain of her remarks - whose significance I did not fully grasp until I reflected on them some time later. In any case, our conversation was brought to an end by the fact that in the middle of our path only a short distance ahead loomed the statue of the Emperor Taisho where we had arranged to meet Noriko and Ichiro. I was casting my gaze towards the benches that circled the statue when I heard a boy's voice shout: 'There's Oji!'

Ichiro came running towards me, his arms outstretched as though to anticipate an embrace. But then as he reached me, he appeared to check himself, and fixing a solemn expression on his face, held out his hand to be shaken.

‘Good day,’ he said, in a businesslike manner.

‘Well, Ichiro, you’re indeed growing into a man. How old are you now?’

‘I believe I’m eight. Please come this way, Oji. I have a few things to discuss with you.’

His mother and I followed him to the bench where Noriko was waiting. My younger daughter was wearing a bright dress I had never seen before.

‘You’re looking very cheerful, Noriko,’ I said to her. ‘It seems when a daughter leaves home, she immediately begins to get unrecognizable.’

‘There’s no need for a woman to dress drably simply because she marries,’ Noriko said quickly, but she seemed pleased by my compliment none the less.

As I recall, we all sat down for a while beneath the Emperor Taisho and conversed for a while. The reason for our meeting in the park was that my two daughters had wished to spend some time together shopping for fabrics, and I had thus agreed to take Ichiro to lunch at a department store, then spend the afternoon showing him the city centre. Ichiro was impatient to leave, and continued to nudge my arm as we sat talking, saying:

‘Oji, let the women chatter between themselves. We have things to attend to.’

My grandson and I found ourselves at the department store slightly after the usual time for lunch, and the restaurant floor was no longer crowded. Ichiro took his time choosing between the various dishes displayed in the cabinets, at one point, turning to me and saying:

‘Oji, you guess what my favourite food is now.’

‘Hmm. I don’t know, Ichiro. Hot-cake? Ice-cream?’

‘Spinach! Spinach gives you strength!’ He puffed out his chest and flexed his biceps.

‘I see. Well now, the Junior Lunch here has some spinach.’

‘Junior Lunch is for small children.’

‘That may be so, but it’s very nice. Oji may order one for himself.’

‘All right. I’ll have Junior Lunch too. To keep Oji company. But tell the man to give me lots of spinach.’

‘Very well, Ichiro.’

‘Oji, you’re to eat spinach as often as possible. It gives you strength.’

Ichiro chose for us one of the tables beside the row of wide windows, and while waiting for our lunch, continued to place his face against the glass to observe the busy main street four storeys below. I had not seen Ichiro since Setsuko’s visit to my home over a year ago – he had not been present at Noriko’s wedding on account of a virus – and I was struck by how much he had grown in that time. Not only was he significantly taller, his whole manner had become calmer and less childlike. His eyes in particular seemed to have a much older gaze.

In fact, as I watched Ichiro that day, pressing his face against the glass to see the street below, I could see how much he was coming to resemble his father. There were traces of Setsuko too, but these were to be found mainly in his mannerisms and little facial habits. And of course, I was struck yet again by the similarity Ichiro bore to how my own son, Kenji, had been at that age. I confess I take a strange comfort from observing children inherit these resemblances

from other members of the family, and it is my hope that my grandson will retain them into his adult years.

Of course, it is not only when we are children that we are open to these small inheritances; a teacher or mentor whom one admires greatly in early adulthood will leave his mark, and indeed, long after one has come to re-evaluate, perhaps even reject, the bulk of that man's teachings, certain traits will tend to survive, like some shadow of that influence, to remain with one throughout one's life. I am aware, for instance, that certain of my mannerisms - the way I poise my hand when I am explaining something, certain inflexions in my voice when I am trying to convey irony or impatience, even whole phrases I am fond of using that people have come to think of as my own - I am aware these are all traits I originally acquired from Mori-san, my former teacher. And perhaps I will not be flattering myself unduly were I to suppose many of my own pupils will in turn have gained such small inheritances from me. I would hope, furthermore, that in spite of any reassessments they may have come to make concerning those years under my supervision, most of them will have remained grateful for much of what they learnt. Certainly, for my own part, whatever the obvious shortcomings of my former teacher, Seiji Moriyama, or 'Mori-san' as we always called him, whatever occurred between us in the end, I would always acknowledge that those seven years I spent living at his family villa out in the hilly countryside of the Wakaba prefecture were some of the most crucial to my career.

When I try today to summon a picture of Mori-san's villa, I tend to recall one particularly satisfying view of it from up on the mountain path leading to the nearest village. As one climbed that path, the villa would appear down in the hollow below, a dark wooden rectangle set amidst the tall cedar trees. The three long sections of the villa linked to form three sides of the rectangle around a central yard; the fourth side was completed by a cedar fence and gateway, so

that the yard was entirely enclosed, and one could imagine how in olden times, it would have been no easy task for hostile visitors to gain entry once that heavy gate had swung shut.

A modern intruder, however, would have found little such difficulty. For though one would have been unable to see this from up on that path, Mori-san's villa was in a state of considerable dilapidation. From up on that path, one would not have guessed how the interiors of the building comprised room after room of torn papering, of tatami floors so worn that in several places there was a danger of falling right through if one trod carelessly. In fact, when I try to recall a picture of the villa seen at closer quarters, what comes to me is an impression of broken roof tiles, decaying latticework, chipped and rotting verandas. Those roofs were forever developing new leaks and after a night of rain, the smell of damp wood and mouldering leaves would pervade every room. And there were those months when insects and moths would invade in such numbers, clinging everywhere to the woodwork, burrowing into every crevice, so that one feared they would cause the place to collapse once and for all.

Of all those rooms, only two or three were in a condition to suggest the splendour the villa must once have possessed. One such room, which filled with a clear light through much of the day, was reserved for special occasions, and I remember how from time to time Mori-san would summon all his pupils - there were ten of us - into that room whenever he had completed a new painting. I recall how before we stepped inside, each of us would pause at the threshold and gasp in admiration at the picture mounted at the centre of the floor. Mori-san, meanwhile, would be attending to a plant perhaps, or looking out of the window, seemingly oblivious to our arrival. Before long, we would all be seated on the floor around the painting, pointing things out to each other in hushed tones: 'And look at the way Sensei has filled in that corner there. Remarkable!' But no one would actually say:

‘Sensei, what a marvellous painting,’ for it was somehow the convention of these occasions that we behave as though our teacher were not present.

Often a new painting would feature some striking innovation, and a debate of some passion would develop among us. Once, for example, I remember we came into the room to be confronted by a picture of a kneeling woman seen from a peculiarly low point of view - so low that we appeared to be looking up at her from floor level.

‘Clearly,’ I remember someone asserting, ‘the low perspective lends the woman a dignity she would otherwise not have. It is a most astonishing achievement. For in all other respects, she looks a self-pitying sort. It is this tension that gives the painting its subtle power.’

‘This may be so,’ someone else said. ‘The woman may well have a sort of dignity, but that hardly derives from the low viewpoint. It seems clear that Sensei is telling us something much more pertinent. He is saying that the perspective appears low only because we have become so attuned to a particular eye level. It is clearly Sensei’s desire to liberate us from such arbitrary and confining habits. He’s saying to us, “there’s no need to always see things from the usual tired angles”. This is why this painting is so inspiring.’

Soon we were all shouting and contradicting each other with our theories about Mori-san’s intentions. And although as we argued, we continually stole glances towards our teacher, he gave no indication as to which of our theories he approved of. I recall him simply standing there at the far end of the room, his arms folded, gazing out across the yard through the wood-lattice bars of the window, an amused look on his face. Then, after he had listened to us argue for some time, he turned and said: ‘Perhaps you’d all leave me now. There are certain matters I wish to attend to.’ At which we

all filed out of the room, once more muttering our admiration for the new painting.

As I recount this I am aware that Mori-san's behaviour may strike you as somewhat arrogant. But it is perhaps easier to understand the aloofness he displayed on such occasions if one has oneself been in a position in which one is constantly looked up to and admired. For it is by no means desirable that one be always instructing and pronouncing to one's pupils; there are many situations when it is preferable to remain silent so as to allow them the chance to debate and ponder. As I say, anyone who has been in a position of large influence will appreciate this.

The effect was, in any case, that arguments about our teacher's work could go on for weeks on end. In the continued absence of any explication from Mori-san himself, the tendency was for us to look to one of our number, an artist called Sasaki, who at that point enjoyed the status of being Mori-san's leading pupil. Although as I have said, some arguments could go on a long time, once Sasaki finally made up his mind on a matter, that would usually mark the end of the dispute. Similarly, if Sasaki were to suggest a person's painting was in any way 'disloyal' to our teacher, this would almost always lead to immediate capitulation on the part of the offender - who would then abandon the painting, or in some cases, burn it along with the refuse.

In fact, as I recall, the Tortoise, for several months after our arrival together at the villa, was repeatedly destroying his work under such circumstances. For while I was able to settle easily enough into the way of things there, my companion would again and again produce work displaying elements clearly contrary to our teacher's principles, and I remember many times pleading to my new colleagues on his behalf, explaining that he was not intentionally being disloyal to Mori-san. Often during those early days, the Tortoise would approach me with a distressed air and lead me off to see some half-completed work of his, saying in a low

voice: 'Ono-san, please tell me, is this as our teacher would do it?'

And at times, even I became exasperated to discover he had unwittingly employed yet some other obviously offensive element. For it was not as though Mori-san's priorities were at all hard to grasp. The label, 'the modern Utamaro', was often applied to our teacher in those days, and although this was a title conferred all too readily then on any competent artist who specialized in portraying pleasure district women, it tends to sum up Mori-san's concerns rather well. For Mori-san was consciously trying to 'modernize' the Utamaro tradition; in many of his most notable paintings - 'Tying a Dance Drum', say, or 'After a Bath' - the woman is seen from the back in classic Utamaro fashion. Various other such classic features recur in his work: the woman holding a towel to her face, the woman combing out her long hair. And Mori-san made extensive use of the traditional device of expressing emotion through the textiles which the woman holds or wears rather than through the look on her face. But at the same time, his work was full of European influences, which the more staunch admirers of Utamaro would have regarded as iconoclastic; he had, for instance, long abandoned the use of the traditional dark outline to define his shapes, preferring instead the Western use of blocks of colour, with light and shade to create a three-dimensional appearance. And no doubt, he had taken his cue from the Europeans in what was his most central concern: the use of subdued colours. Mori-san's wish was to evoke a certain melancholy, nocturnal atmosphere around his women, and throughout the years I studied under him, he experimented extensively with colours in an attempt to capture the feel of lantern light. Because of this, it was something of a hallmark of Mori-san's work that a lantern would always figure somewhere in the picture, by implication if not in actuality. It was perhaps typical of the Tortoise's slowness in grasping the essentials of Mori-san's art that even after a year at the villa, he was using colours that created quite the wrong effect, then wondering why he was

again being accused of disloyalty when he had remembered to include a lantern in his composition.

For all my pleadings, the likes of Sasaki had little patience for the Tortoise's difficulties and at times the atmosphere threatened to become as hostile for my companion as any he had experienced at Master Takeda's firm. And then - I believe it was some time during our second year at the villa - a change came over Sasaki, a change that was to lead to his suffering hostility of an altogether harsher and darker nature than anything he had ever orchestrated against the Tortoise.

One supposes all groups of pupils tend to have a leader figure - someone whose abilities the teacher has singled out as an example for the others to follow. And it is this leading pupil, by virtue of his having the strongest grasp of his teacher's ideas, who will tend to function, as did Sasaki, as the main interpreter of those ideas to the less able or less experienced pupils. But by the same token, it is this same leading pupil who is most likely to see shortcomings in the teacher's work, or else develop views of his own divergent from those of his teacher. In theory, of course, a good teacher should accept this tendency - indeed, welcome it as a sign that he has brought his pupil to a point of maturity. In practice, however, the emotions involved can be quite complicated. Sometimes, when one has nurtured a gifted pupil long and hard, it is difficult to see any such maturing of talent as anything other than treachery, and some regrettable situations are apt to arise.

Certainly, what we did to Sasaki following his dispute with our teacher was quite unwarranted, and there seems little to be gained in my recalling such things here. I do, however, have some vivid recollections of that night when Sasaki finally left us.

Most of us had already turned in. I was myself lying awake in the darkness in one of those dilapidated rooms, when

I heard Sasaki's voice calling to someone a little way down the veranda. He seemed to receive no answer from whoever it was he was addressing, and eventually there came the sounds of a screen sliding shut and Sasaki's footsteps coming nearer. I heard him stop at another room and say something, but again he seemed to be met only with silence. His footsteps came still closer, then I heard him slide open the screen of the room next to mine.

'You and I have been good friends for many years,' I heard him say. 'Won't you at least speak to me?'

There was no response from the person he had addressed. Then Sasaki said:

'Won't you just tell me where the paintings are?'

There was still no response. But as I lay there in the darkness, I could hear the sound of rats scuttling under the floorboards of that neighbouring room, and it seemed to me this noise was some sort of reply.

'If you find them so offensive,' Sasaki's voice continued, 'there's no sense in your keeping them. But they happen to mean a great deal to me at this moment. I wish to take them with me, wherever it is I'm going. I've nothing else to take with me.'

Again, there came the scuttling noise of rats in reply, then a long silence. Indeed, the silence went on for so long, I thought perhaps Sasaki had walked off into the darkness and I had failed to hear him. But then I heard him say again:

'These past few days, the others have done some terrible things to me. But what has hurt me the most has been your refusal to give me even one word of comfort.'

There was another silence. Then Sasaki said: 'Won't you even look at me now and wish me well?'

Eventually, I heard the screen slide shut, and the sounds of Sasaki stepping down from the veranda and walking away

across the yard.

After his departure, Sasaki was hardly mentioned at the villa and on the few occasions he was, he tended to be referred to simply as 'the traitor'. Indeed, I am reminded of just how much Sasaki's memory was prone to cause offence amongst us when I recall what occurred once or twice during those slanging contests we often indulged in.

On warmer days, because we tended to leave the screens of our rooms wide open, several of us congregating in a room might catch sight of another group similarly gathered on the opposite wing. This situation would soon lead to someone calling out across the yard a witty provocation, and before long, both groups would be assembled out on their respective verandas, shouting insults across at each other. This behaviour may sound absurd when I recount it, but there was something about the architecture of the villa and the echoing acoustics it produced when one shouted from one wing to another, that somehow encouraged us to indulge in these childish contests. The insults could be far-ranging - making fun of someone's manly prowess, say, or of a painting someone had just completed - but for the most part were devoid of any intent to wound, and I recall many highly amusing exchanges which had both sides red with laughter. Indeed, by and large, my memories of these exchanges sum up well enough the competitive yet family-like intimacy we enjoyed during those years at the villa. And yet, when once or twice Sasaki's name was invoked during the course of these insults, things suddenly got out of hand, with colleagues abandoning boundaries and actually scrapping in the yard. It did not take us long to learn that to compare someone to 'the traitor', even in fun, was never likely to be received in good humour.

You may gather from such recollections that our devotion to our teacher and to his principles was fierce and total.

And it is easy with hindsight - once the shortcomings of an influence have become obvious - to be critical of a teacher who fosters such a climate. But then again, anyone who has held ambitions on a grand scale, anyone who has been in a position to achieve something large and has felt the need to impart his ideas as thoroughly as possible, will have some sympathy for the way Mori-san conducted things. For though it may seem a little foolish now in the light of what became of his career, it was Mori-san's wish at that time to do nothing less than change fundamentally the identity of painting as practised in our city. It was with no less a goal in mind that he devoted so much of his time and wealth to the nurturing of pupils, and it is perhaps important to remember this when making judgements concerning my former teacher.

His influence over us was not, of course, confined merely to the realms of painting. We lived throughout those years almost entirely in accordance with his values and lifestyle, and this entailed spending much time exploring the city's 'floating world' - the night-time world of pleasure, entertainment and drink which formed the backdrop for all our paintings. I always feel a certain nostalgia now in recalling the city centre as it was in those days; the streets were not so filled with the noise of traffic, and the factories had yet to take the fragrance of seasonal blossoms from the night air. A favourite haunt of ours was a small teahouse beside the canal in Kojima Street called 'Water Lanterns' - for indeed, the lanterns of the establishment could be seen reflected in the canal as one approached. The proprietress was an old friend of Mori-san's, which ensured we always received generous treatment, and I recall some memorable nights there, singing and drinking with our hostesses. Our other regular haunt was an archery parlour in Nagata Street, where the proprietress never tired of reminding us how years before, when she had been working as a geisha in Akihara, Mori-san had used her as a model for a series of wood-block prints which had proved immensely popular. Some six or seven young women hosted that archery parlour and after a while we

each had our own favourites with whom to exchange pipes and pass away the night.

Neither was our merrymaking limited to these expeditions into the city. Mori-san seemed to have a never-ending line of acquaintances from the world of entertaining, and impoverished troupes of wandering actors, dancers and musicians were forever arriving at the villa to be greeted as long-lost friends. Large quantities of liquor would then be produced, our visitors would sing and dance through the night, and before long someone would have to be sent out to awaken the wine seller at the nearest village for replenishments. One regular visitor of those days was a story-teller called Maki, a fat jolly man who could reduce us all to helpless laughter one moment and tears of sadness the next with his renderings of the old tales. Years later, I came across Maki a few times at the Migi-Hidari, and we would reminisce with some amazement about those nights at the villa. Maki was convinced he remembered many of those parties continuing straight through one night, through the following day and into a second night. Although I could not be so certain of this, I had to admit to recollections of Mori-san's villa in the daytime, littered everywhere with sleeping or exhausted bodies, some of them collapsed out in the yard with the sun beating down on them.

I have, however, a more vivid memory concerning one such night. I can recall walking alone across the central yard, grateful for the fresh night air, having for a moment escaped the revellings. I remember I walked over to the entrance of the storeroom, and before going in, glanced back across the yard towards the room where my companions and our visitors were entertaining each other. I could see numerous silhouettes dancing behind the paper screens, and a singer's voice came drifting out through the night to me.

I had made my way to the storeroom because it was one of the few places in the villa where there was a chance of remaining undisturbed for any length of time. I imagine in

days gone by, when the villa had housed guards and retainers, the room had been used for storing weapons and armour. But when I stepped inside that night and lit the lantern hanging above the door, I found the floor so cluttered with every sort of object it was impossible to cross it without hopping from space to space; everywhere were stacks of old canvasses tied together with rope, broken easels, all manner of pots and jars with brushes or sticks protruding. I negotiated my way to a clearing on the floor and sat down. The lantern above the door, I noticed, was causing the objects around me to throw exaggerated shadows; it was an eerie effect, as though I were sitting in some grotesque miniature cemetery.

I suppose I must have become quite lost in my broodings, for I recall being startled by the sound of the storeroom door sliding open. I looked up to see Mori-san in the doorway and said hurriedly: 'Good evening, Sensei.'

Possibly the lantern above the door did not give sufficient light to illuminate my part of the room, or perhaps it was simply that my face was in shadow. In any case, Mori-san peered forward and asked:

'Who is that? Ono?'

'Indeed, Sensei.'

He continued to peer forward for a moment. Then, taking the lantern down from the beam and holding it out before him, he began to make his way towards me, stepping carefully through the objects on the floor. As he did so, the lantern in his hand caused shadows to move all around us. I hastened to clear a space for him, but before I could do so, Mori-san had seated himself a little way away on an old wooden chest. He gave a sigh and said:

'I stepped out for a little fresh air, and I saw this light on in here. Darkness everywhere, except this one light. And I thought to myself, now that storeroom's hardly a place

for lovers to be hiding away. Whoever's in there must be in a lonely mood. '

'I suppose I must have been sitting here in a dream, Sensei. I had no intention of remaining here so long. '

He had placed the lantern on the floor beside him, so that from where I sat, I could see only his silhouette. 'One of those dancing girls appeared very taken with you earlier,' he said. 'She'll be disappointed to find you've vanished now the night's here. '

'I didn't mean to appear rude to our guests, Sensei. Like yourself, I simply came out for some fresh air. '

We were silent for a moment. Across the yard, our companions could be heard singing and clapping their hands in time.

'Well, Ono,' Mori-san said eventually, 'what do you make of my old friend Gisaburo? Quite a character. '

'Indeed, Sensei. He seems a most affable gentleman. '

'He may be dressed in rags these days, but he was once quite a celebrity. And as he showed us tonight, he still has much of his old skill left. '

'Indeed. '

'So then, Ono. What is it that worries you? '

'Worries me, Sensei? Why, nothing at all. '

'Can it be that you find something a little offensive about old Gisaburo? '

'Not at all, Sensei.' I laughed self-consciously. 'Why, not at all. A most charming gentleman. '

For a little time after that, we talked of other matters, of anything which came to mind. But when Mori-san had turned the conversation back once more to my 'worries', when it

became clear he was prepared to sit there waiting until I unburdened myself, I finally said:

‘Gisaburo-san does indeed appear to be the most good-hearted gentleman. He and his dancers have been most kind to entertain us. But then I cannot help thinking, Sensei, we have been visited by their like so often these past few months.’

Mori-san gave no reply, so I continued:

‘Forgive me, Sensei, I mean no disrespect to Gisaburo-san and his friends. But at times I am a little puzzled. I am puzzled that we artists should be devoting so much of our time enjoying the company of those like Gisaburo-san.’

I believe it was around this point that my teacher rose to his feet and, lantern in hand, made his way across the floor towards the back wall of the storeroom. The wall had previously been in darkness, but as he held the lantern up to it, three wood-block prints, hung one below the other, became sharply illuminated. Each of these portrayed a geisha adjusting her coiffure, each seated on the floor and viewed from the back. Mori-san studied the pictures for a few moments, moving the lantern from one to the next. Then he shook his head and muttered to himself: ‘Fatally flawed. Fatally flawed by trivial concerns.’ A few seconds later, he added without turning from the pictures: ‘But one always feels affection for one’s early works. Perhaps you’ll feel the same one day for the work you’ve done here.’ Then he shook his head again, saying: ‘But these are all fatally flawed, Ono.’

‘I cannot agree, Sensei,’ I said. ‘I think those prints are marvellous examples of how an artist’s talent can transcend the limitations of a particular style. I’ve often thought it a great shame Sensei’s early prints should be confined to such rooms as these. Surely they should be open to display along with his paintings.’

Mori-san remained absorbed by his pictures. 'Fatally flawed,' he repeated. 'But I suppose I was very young.' He moved his lantern again, causing one picture to fade into shadow and another to appear. Then he said: 'These are all scenes from a certain geisha house in Honcho. A very well-regarded one in my younger days. Gisaburo and I often used to visit such places together.' Then after a moment or two, he said again: 'These are fatally flawed, Ono.'

'But Sensei, I cannot see what faults even the most discerning eye would see in these prints.'

He continued to study the pictures for a few moments more, then began to come back across the room. It seemed to me that he took an inordinate amount of time negotiating his way through the objects on the floor; at times, I would hear him mumbling to himself and the sound of his feet pushing away a jar or box. Indeed, I once or twice thought Mori-san was actually searching for something - perhaps more of his early prints - amidst the chaotic piles, but eventually he seated himself back on the old wooden chest and drew a sigh. After a few further moments of silence, he said:

'Gisaburo is an unhappy man. He's had a sad life. His talent has gone to ruin. Those he once loved have long since died or deserted him. Even in our younger days, he was already a lonely, sad character.' Mori-san paused a moment. Then he went on: 'But then sometimes we used to drink and enjoy ourselves with the women of the pleasure quarters, and Gisaburo would become happy. Those women would tell him all the things he wanted to hear, and for the night anyway, he'd be able to believe them. Once the morning came, of course, he was too intelligent a man to go on believing such things. But Gisaburo didn't value those nights any the less for that. The best things, he always used to say, are put together of a night and vanish with the morning. What people call the floating world, Ono, was a world Gisaburo knew how to value.'

Mori-san paused again. As before, I could see his form only in silhouette, but it was my impression he was listening to the sounds of the merrymaking from across the yard. Then he said: 'He's older and sadder now, but he's changed little in many respects. Tonight he's happy, just as he used to be in those pleasure houses.' He drew a long breath, as though he were smoking tobacco. Then he went on: 'The finest, most fragile beauty an artist can hope to capture drifts within those pleasure houses after dark. And on nights like these, Ono, some of that beauty drifts into our own quarters here. But as for those pictures up there, they don't even hint at these transitory, illusory qualities. They're deeply flawed, Ono.'

'But Sensei, to my eyes, those prints suggest most impressively these very things.'

'I was very young when I prepared those prints. I suspect the reason I couldn't celebrate the floating world was that I couldn't bring myself to believe in its worth. Young men are often guilt-ridden about pleasure, and I suppose I was no different. I suppose I thought that to pass away one's time in such places, to spend one's skills celebrating things so intangible and transient, I suppose I thought it all rather wasteful, all rather decadent. It's hard to appreciate the beauty of a world when one doubts its very validity.'

I thought about this, then said: 'Indeed, Sensei, I admit what you say may well apply in respect to my own work. I will do all I can to put matters right.'

Mori-san appeared not to hear me. 'But I've long since lost all such doubts, Ono,' he continued. 'When I am an old man, when I look back over my life and see I have devoted it to the task of capturing the unique beauty of that world, I believe I will be well satisfied. And no man will make me believe I've wasted my time.'

It is possible, of course, that Mori-san did not use those exact words. Indeed, on reflection, such phrases sound rather more like the sort of thing I myself would declare to my own pupils after we had been drinking a little at the Migi-Hidari. 'As the new generation of Japanese artists, you have a great responsibility towards the culture of this nation. I am proud to have the likes of you as my pupils. And while I may deserve only the smallest praise for my own paintings, when I come to look back over my life and remember I have nurtured and assisted the careers of all of you here, why then no man will make me believe I have wasted my time.' And whenever I made some such statement, all those young men congregated around the table would drown each other out in protest at the way I had dismissed my own paintings - which, they clamoured to inform me, were without doubt great works assured of their place in posterity. But then again, as I have said, many phrases and expressions which came to be most characteristic of me I actually inherited from Mori-san, and so it is quite possible that those were my teacher's exact words that night, instilled in me by the powerful impression they made on me at the time.

But again I have drifted. I was trying to recall the lunch I had at the department store with my grandson last month following that annoying conversation with Setsuko in Kawabe Park. In fact, I believe I was remembering in particular Ichiro's extolling of spinach.

Once our lunch had arrived, I recall, Ichiro sat there preoccupied with the spinach on his plate, sometimes prodding at it with his spoon. Then he looked up and said: 'Oji, you watch!'

My grandson proceeded to pile as much spinach as possible on to the spoon, then raised it high into the air and began pouring it into his mouth. His method resembled someone drinking the last dregs from a bottle.

‘Ichiro,’ I said, ‘I’m not sure that’s such good manners.’

But my grandson continued putting more spinach into his mouth, all the time chewing vigorously. He put down his spoon only when it was empty and his cheeks were full to bursting. Then, still chewing, he fixed a stern expression on his face, thrust out his chest and began punching at the air around him.

‘What are you doing, Ichiro? You tell me now what you’re up to.’

‘You guess, Oji!’ he said, through the spinach.

‘Hmm. I don’t know, Ichiro. A man drinking sake and fighting. No? Then you tell me. Oji can’t guess.’

‘Popeye Sailor!’

‘What’s that, Ichiro? Another of your heroes?’

‘Popeye Sailor eats spinach. Spinach makes him strong.’ He thrust out his chest again and threw more punches at the air.

‘I see, Ichiro,’ I said, laughing. ‘Spinach is a wonderful food indeed.’

‘Does sake make you strong?’

I smiled and shook my head. ‘Sake can make you believe you’re strong. But in reality, Ichiro, you’re no stronger than before you drank it.’

‘Why do men drink sake then, Oji?’

‘I don’t know, Ichiro. Perhaps because for a little while, they can believe they’re stronger. But sake doesn’t really make a man stronger.’

‘Spinach makes you really strong.’

‘Then spinach is much better than sake. You go on eating spinach, Ichiro. But look, what about all these other things

on your plate?’

‘I like drinking sake too. And whisky. At home, there’s a bar I always go to.’

‘Is that so, Ichiro. I think it’s better you go on eating spinach. As you say, that makes you really strong.’

‘I like sake best. I drink ten bottles every night. Then I drink ten bottles of whisky.’

‘Is that so, Ichiro. Now that’s real drinking indeed. This must be a real headache for Mother.’

‘Women never understand about us men drinking,’ Ichiro said, and turned his attention to the lunch in front of him. But soon he looked up again and said: ‘Oji’s coming for supper tonight.’

‘That’s right, Ichiro. I expect Aunt Noriko will prepare something very nice.’

‘Aunt Noriko’s bought some sake. She said Oji and Uncle Taro will drink it all up.’

‘Well, we may do indeed. I’m sure the women will like a little too. But she’s right, Ichiro. Sake’s mainly for the men.’

‘Oji, what happens if women drink sake?’

‘Hmm. There’s no telling. Women aren’t as strong as we men are, Ichiro. So perhaps they’ll get drunk very quickly.’

‘Aunt Noriko might get drunk! She might have a tiny cupful and get completely drunk!’

I gave a laugh. ‘Yes, that’s quite possible.’

‘Aunt Noriko might get completely drunk! She’ll sing songs then fall asleep at the table!’

‘Well, Ichiro,’ I said, still laughing, ‘we men had better keep the sake to ourselves then, hadn’t we?’

‘Men are stronger, so we can drink more.’

‘That’s right, Ichiro. We’d best keep the sake to ourselves.’

Then, after I had thought for a moment, I added: ‘I suppose you’re eight years old now, Ichiro. You’re growing to be a big man. Who knows? Perhaps Oji will see to it you get some sake tonight.’

My grandson looked at me with a slightly threatened expression, and said nothing. I smiled at him, then glanced out at the pale grey sky through the large windows beside us.

‘You never met your Uncle Kenji, Ichiro. When he was your age, he was as big and strong as you are now. I remember he had his first taste of sake at around your age. I’ll see to it, Ichiro, you get a small taste tonight.’

Ichiro seemed to consider this for a moment. Then he said:

‘Mother might be trouble.’

‘Don’t worry about your mother, Ichiro. Your Oji will be able to handle her.’

Ichiro shook his head wearily. ‘Women never understand men drinking,’ he remarked.

‘Well, it’s time a man like you tasted a little sake. Don’t you worry, Ichiro, you leave your mother to Oji. We can’t have the women bossing us around now, can we?’

My grandson remained absorbed in his thoughts for a moment. Then suddenly he said very loudly:

‘Aunt Noriko might get drunk!’

I laughed. ‘We’ll see, Ichiro,’ I said.

‘Aunt Noriko might get completely drunk!’

It was perhaps fifteen minutes or so later, as we were waiting for ice-cream, that Ichiro asked in a thoughtful

voice.

‘Oji, did you know Yujiro Naguchi?’

‘You must mean Yukio Naguchi, Ichiro. No, I never knew him personally.’

My grandson did not respond, apparently absorbed by his reflection in the glass pane beside him.

‘Your mother,’ I went on, ‘also seemed to have Mr Naguchi on her mind when I was speaking with her in the park this morning. I take it the adults were discussing him at supper last night, were they?’

For a moment, Ichiro went on gazing at his reflection. Then he turned to me and asked:

‘Was Mr Naguchi like Oji?’

‘Was Mr Naguchi like me? Well, your mother for one doesn’t seem to think so. It was just something I said to your Uncle Taro once, Ichiro, it was nothing very serious. Your mother seems to have picked it up far too earnestly. I hardly remember what I was talking to Uncle Taro about at the time, but Oji just happened to suggest he had one or two things in common with people like Mr Naguchi. Now you tell me, Ichiro, what were the adults all saying last night?’

‘Oji, why did Mr Naguchi kill himself?’

‘That’s hard to say for sure, Ichiro. I never knew Mr Naguchi personally.’

‘But was he a bad man?’

‘No. He wasn’t a bad man. He was just someone who worked very hard doing what he thought was for the best. But you see, Ichiro, when the war ended, things were very different. The songs Mr Naguchi composed had become very famous, not just in this city, but all over Japan. They were sung on the radio and in bars. And the likes of your Uncle Kenji sang them when they were marching or before a battle. And after

the war, Mr Naguchi thought his songs had been - well - a sort of mistake. He thought of all the people who had been killed, all the little boys your age, Ichiro, who no longer had parents, he thought of all these things and he thought perhaps his songs were a mistake. And he felt he should apologize. To everyone who was left. To little boys who no longer had parents. And to parents who had lost little boys like you. To all these people, he wanted to say sorry. I think that's why he killed himself. Mr Naguchi wasn't a bad man at all, Ichiro. He was brave to admit the mistakes he'd made. He was very brave and honourable.'

Ichiro was watching me with a thoughtful expression. I gave a laugh and said: 'What's the matter, Ichiro?'

My grandson seemed about to speak, but then turned again to look at his face reflected in the glass.

'Your Oji never meant anything by saying he was like Mr Naguchi,' I said. 'It was a sort of joke he was making, that's all. You tell your mother that, the next time you hear her talking about Mr Naguchi. Because from what she was saying this morning, she's picked the whole thing up quite wrongly. What's the matter, Ichiro? Suddenly so quiet.'

After lunch we spent some time wandering around shops in the city centre, looking at toys and books. Then, towards the latter part of the afternoon, I treated Ichiro to another ice-cream at one of those smart refectories along Sakurabashi Street, before making our way to Taro and Noriko's new apartment in Izumimachi.

The Izumimachi area, as you may be aware, has now become very popular with young couples from the better backgrounds, and there is certainly a clean, respectable atmosphere there. But most of the newly-built apartment blocks that have drawn these young couples seem to me unimaginative and constrictive. Taro and Noriko's apartment, for instance, is a

small two-room affair on the third floor: the ceilings are low, sounds come in from neighbouring apartments and the view from the window is principally of the opposite block and its windows. I am sure it is not simply because I am accustomed to my more spacious, traditional house that even after a short time I begin to find the place claustrophobic. Noriko, however, seems very proud of her apartment, and is forever extolling its 'modern' qualities. It is, apparently, very easy to keep clean, and the ventilation most effective; in particular, the kitchens and bathrooms throughout the block are of Western design and are, so my daughter assures me, infinitely more practical than, say, the arrangements in my own house.

However convenient the kitchen, it is very small, and when I stepped inside it that evening to see how my daughters were progressing with the meal, there seemed no space for me to stand. Because of this, and because my daughters both seemed busy, I did not remain chatting with them long. But I did remark at one point:

'You know, Ichiro was telling me earlier he's keen to taste a little sake.'

Setsuko and Noriko, who had been standing side by side slicing vegetables, both stopped and glanced up at me.

'I gave it some thought and decided we could let him have a small taste,' I went on. 'But perhaps you should dilute it with some water.'

'I'm sorry, Father,' Setsuko said, 'but you're suggesting Ichiro drink sake tonight?'

'Just a little. He's a growing boy after all. But as I say, you'd best dilute it.'

My daughters exchanged glances. Then Noriko said: 'Father, he's only eight years old.'

‘There’s no harm so long as you mix it with water. You women may not understand, but these things mean a great deal to a young boy like Ichiro. It’s a question of pride. He’ll remember it for the rest of his life.’

‘Father, this is nonsense,’ said Noriko. ‘Ichiro would just be sick.’

‘Nonsense or not I’ve thought this over carefully. You women sometimes don’t have enough sympathy for a boy’s pride.’ I pointed to the sake bottle standing on a shelf above their heads. ‘Just a small drop will do.’

With that, I began to leave. But then I heard Noriko say: ‘Setsuko, it’s out of the question. I don’t know what Father can be thinking.’

‘Why all this fuss?’ I said, turning at the doorway. Behind me, from the main room, I could hear Taro and my grandson laughing over something. I lowered my voice and continued:

‘Anyway, I’ve promised him now, he’s looking forward to it. You women sometimes just don’t understand about pride.’

I was making to leave again, when this time it was Setsuko who spoke.

‘It is very kind of Father to consider Ichiro’s feelings so carefully. However, I wonder if it wouldn’t perhaps be best to wait till Ichiro is a little older.’

I gave a small laugh. ‘You know, I remember your mother protesting in just the same way when I decided to let Kenji have a taste of sake at this age. Well, it certainly did your brother no harm.’

I regretted immediately introducing Kenji into such a trivial disagreement. Indeed, I believe I was momentarily quite annoyed with myself, and it is possible I did not pay much attention to what Setsuko said next. In any case, it seems to me she said something like:

‘There is no doubt Father devoted the most careful thought to my brother’s upbringing. Nevertheless, in the light of what came to pass, we can perhaps see that on one or two points at least, Mother may in fact have had the more correct ideas.’

To be fair, it is possible she did not say anything quite so unpleasant. Indeed, it is possible I misinterpreted entirely what she actually said, for I distinctly recall Noriko not reacting at all to her sister’s words other than to turn wearily back to her vegetables. Besides, I would not have thought Setsuko capable of introducing so gratuitously such a note to the conversation. Then again, when I consider the sort of insinuations Setsuko had been making in Kawabe Park earlier that same day, I suppose I have to admit the possibility that she did say something along such lines. In any case, I recall Setsuko concluding by saying:

‘Besides, I fear Suichi would not wish Ichiro to drink sake until he is a little older. But it is most kind of Father to have given such consideration to Ichiro’s feelings.’

Conscious that Ichiro might overhear our conversation, and not wishing to put a cloud over what was a rare family reunion, I let the argument rest there and left the kitchen. For a while after that, as I recall, I sat in the main room with Taro and Ichiro, exchanging enjoyable talk as we awaited supper.

We eventually sat down to eat an hour or so later. As we were doing so, Ichiro reached over to the sake flask on the table, tapped it with his fingers and looked over at me knowingly. I smiled at him, but said nothing.

The women had prepared a splendid meal and the conversation was soon flowing effortlessly. At one point, Taro had us all laughing with the story of a colleague of his at work, who through a mixture of misfortune and his own

comical stupidity, had gained a reputation for never meeting deadlines. Once, while relating this story, Taro said:

‘Indeed, things have got to such a state it seems our superiors have taken to calling him “the Tortoise”. During a meeting recently, Mr Hayasaka forgot himself and actually announced: “We’ll hear the Tortoise’s report, then break for lunch.” ’

‘Is that so?’ I exclaimed with some surprise. ‘That’s very curious. I myself once had a colleague who had that nickname. For much the same reasons, it would seem.’

But Taro did not seem particularly struck by this coincidence. He nodded politely, and said: ‘I remember at school, too, there was a pupil we all called “the Tortoise”. In fact, just as every group has a natural leader, I suspect every group has its “Tortoise”.’

With that, Taro returned to the relating of his anecdote. Of course, now I come to think of it, I suppose my son-in-law was quite correct; most groups of peers would have their ‘Tortoise’, even if the name itself is not always used. Amongst my own pupils, for instance, it was Shintaro who fulfilled such a role. This is not to deny Shintaro’s basic competence; but when placed alongside the likes of Kuroda, it was as though his talent lacked an entire dimension.

I suppose I do not on the whole greatly admire the Tortoises of this world. While one may appreciate their plodding steadiness and ability to survive, one suspects their lack of frankness, their capacity for treachery. And I suppose, in the end, one despises their unwillingness to take chances in the name of ambition or for the sake of a principle they claim to believe in. Their like will never fall victim to the sort of grand catastrophe that, say, Akira Sugimura suffered over Kawabe Park; but by the same token, notwithstanding the small sorts of respectability they may sometimes achieve as school-teachers or whatever, they will never accomplish anything above the mediocre.

It is true, I grew quite fond of the Tortoise during those years we spent together at Mori-san's villa, but then I do not believe I ever respected him as an equal. This had to do with the very nature of our friendship, which had been forged during the days of the Tortoise's persecution at Master Takeda's firm and then through his difficulties in our early months at the villa; somehow, after a time, it had cemented itself into one in which he was perpetually indebted to me for some undefined 'support' I gave him. Long after he had grasped how to paint without arousing the hostility of the others at the villa, long after he had come to be generally well liked for his pleasant, obliging nature, he was still saying to me things like:

'I'm so grateful to you, Ono-san. It's due to you I'm treated so well here.'

In one sense, of course, the Tortoise *was* indebted to me; for clearly, without my initiative, he would never have considered leaving Master Takeda's to become Mori-san's pupil. He had been extremely reluctant to take such an adventurous step, but once having been compelled to do so, he had never doubted the decision. Indeed, the Tortoise held Mori-san in such reverence that for a long time - for the first two years at least - I cannot recall his being able to hold a conversation with our teacher, other than to mumble: 'Yes, Sensei' or 'No, Sensei.'

Throughout those years, the Tortoise continued to paint as slowly as he ever did, but it did not occur to anyone to hold this against him. In fact, there were a number of others who worked just as slowly, and this faction actually had a tendency to mock those of us with faster working habits. I remember they labelled us 'the engineers', comparing the intense and frantic way we worked once an idea had struck with an engine driver shovelling on coal for fear the steam would at any moment run out. We in turn named the slow faction 'the backwarders'. A 'backwarder' was originally a term used at the villa for someone who, in a room crowded

with people working at easels, insisted on stepping backwards every few minutes to view his canvas - with the result that he continually collided with colleagues working behind him. It was of course quite unfair to suggest that because an artist liked to take time with a painting - stepping back, as it were, metaphorically - he was any more likely to be guilty of this antisocial habit, but then we enjoyed the very provocativeness of the label. Indeed, I recall a lot of good-humoured bantering concerning 'engineers' and 'backwarders' .

In truth, though, just about all of us were prone to be guilty of 'backwarding' , and because of this, we would as far as possible avoid crowding together when working. In the summer months, many of my colleagues would set up easels spaced out at points along the verandas, or else out in the yard itself, while others insisted on reserving large numbers of rooms because they liked to circulate from room to room according to the light. The Tortoise and I always tended to work in the disused kitchen - a large, barn-like annex behind one of the wings.

The floor as one entered was of trodden earth, but towards the back was a raised boarded platform, wide enough for our two easels. The low crossbeams with their hooks - from which once hung pots and other kitchen utensils - and the bamboo racks on the walls, proved most useful for our brushes, rags, paints and so on. And I can recall how the Tortoise and I would fill a large old blackened pot full of water, carry it on to the platform and suspend it on the old pulleys so that it hung at shoulder height between us as we painted.

I remember one afternoon, we were painting in the old kitchen as usual, when the Tortoise said to me:

'I'm very curious, Ono-san, about your present painting. It must be something very special.'

I smiled without taking my eyes from my work. 'Why do you say that? It's just a little experiment of mine, that's all.'

'But Ono-san, it's a long time since I've seen you working with such intensity. And you've requested privacy. You haven't requested privacy now for at least two years. Not since you were preparing "Lion-dance" for your first exhibition.'

I should perhaps explain here that occasionally, whenever an artist felt a particular work would be hampered by comments of any sort before its completion, he would 'request privacy' for that work, and it was then understood that no one would attempt to look at it until such time as the artist withdrew his request. This was a sensible arrangement, living and working as we did so closely, and gave one room to take risks without fear of making a fool of oneself.

'Is it really so noticeable?' I said. 'I thought I was hiding my excitement rather well.'

'You must be forgetting, Ono-san. We've been painting side by side for almost eight years now. Oh yes, I can tell this is something quite special for you.'

'Eight years,' I remarked. 'I suppose that's right.'

'Indeed, Ono-san. And it's been a privilege to work so close to one of your talent. More than a little humbling at times, but a great privilege nonetheless.'

'You exaggerate,' I said, smiling and continuing to paint.

'Not at all, Ono-san. Indeed, I feel I would never have progressed as I have over these years without the constant inspiration of seeing your works appearing before my eyes. No doubt you've noted the extent to which my modest "Autumn Girl" owes itself to your magnificent "Girl at Sunset".

One of many attempts on my part, Ono-san, to emulate your brilliance. A feeble attempt, I realize, but then Mori-san was good enough to praise it as a significant step forward for me.'

'I wonder now.' I ceased my brush strokes for a moment and looked at my work. 'I wonder if this painting here will also inspire you.'

I continued to regard my half-finished painting for a moment, then glanced across to my friend over the ancient pot suspended between us. The Tortoise was painting happily, unaware of my gaze. He had put on a little more flesh since the days I had first known him at Master Takeda's, and the harassed, fearful look of those days had been largely replaced by an air of childlike contentment. In fact, I recall someone around that time comparing the Tortoise to a puppy who had just been petted, and indeed, this description was not inappropriate to the impression I received as I watched him paint that afternoon in the old kitchen.

'Tell me, Tortoise,' I said to him. 'You're quite happy with your work at present, are you?'

'Most happy, thank you, Ono-san,' he replied immediately. Then glancing up, he added hastily with a grin: 'Of course, it has a long way to go before it can stand alongside your work, Ono-san.'

His eyes returned to his painting and I watched him working for a few more moments. Then I asked:

'You don't consider sometimes trying some ... some new approaches?'

'New approaches, Ono-san?' he said, not looking up.

'Tell me, Tortoise, don't you have ambitions to one day produce paintings of genuine importance? I don't mean simply work that we may admire and praise amongst ourselves here at the villa. I refer to work of real importance. Work that will

be a significant contribution to the people of our nation. It's to this end, Tortoise, I talk of the need for a new approach. '

I had watched him carefully as I said all this, but the Tortoise did not pause in his painting.

'To tell you the truth, Ono-san,' he said, 'someone in my humble position is always trying new approaches. But over this past year, I believe I'm beginning to find the right path at last. You see, Ono-san, I've noticed Mori-san looking at my work more and more closely this past year. I know he's pleased with me. Who knows, sometime in the future, I may even be permitted to exhibit alongside yourself and Mori-san.' Then at last he looked across to me and laughed self-consciously. 'Forgive me, Ono-san. Just a fantasy to keep me persevering.'

I decided to let the matter drop. I had intended to try again at some later date to draw my friend into my confidence, but as it turned out, I was pre-empted by events.

It was a sunny morning a few days after the conversation I have just recounted, when I stepped into the old kitchen to discover the Tortoise standing up on the platform at the back of that barn-like building, staring towards me. It took my eyes a few seconds to adjust to the shade after the brightness of the morning outside, but I soon noticed the guarded, almost alarmed expression he was wearing; indeed, there was something in the way he raised an arm awkwardly towards his chest before letting it fall again that suggested he expected me to attack him. He had made no attempt to set up his easel or otherwise prepare for the day's work, and when I greeted him he remained silent. I came nearer and asked:

'Is something wrong?'

'Ono-san ...' he muttered, but said no more. Then as I came up to the platform, he looked nervously to his left. I

followed his gaze to my unfinished painting, covered over and stacked faced against the wall. The Tortoise gestured nervously towards it and said:

‘Ono-san, is this a joke of yours?’

‘No, Tortoise,’ I said, climbing up on to the platform. ‘It’s no joke at all.’

I walked over to the painting, pulled off the drapes and turned it around to face us. The Tortoise immediately averted his eyes.

‘My friend,’ I said, ‘you were once brave enough to listen to me and we took together an important step in our careers. I’d ask you now to consider taking another step forward with me.’

The Tortoise continued to hold his face away. He said:

‘Ono-san, is our teacher aware of this painting?’

‘No, not yet. But I suppose I may as well show it to him. From now on, I intend to always paint along these lines. Tortoise, look at my painting. Let me explain to you what I’m trying to do. Then perhaps we can again take an important step forward together.’

At last he turned to look at me.

‘Ono-san,’ he said, in a near whisper, ‘you are a traitor. Now please excuse me.’

With that, he hurried out of the building.

The painting which had so upset the Tortoise was one entitled ‘Complacency’, and although it did not remain in my possession for long, such was my investment in it at that time that its details have stayed imprinted on my memory; indeed, had I the desire to do so, I feel I could quite accurately recreate that painting today. The inspiration behind it had been a small scene I had witnessed some weeks

previously, something I had seen while out walking with Matsuda.

We were, I recall, on our way to meet some of Matsuda's colleagues from the Okada-Shingen Society to whom he wished to introduce me. It was towards the end of summer; the hottest days were past, but I can recall following Matsuda's steady stride along the steel bridge at Nishizuru, mopping the sweat from my face and wishing my companion would walk more slowly. Matsuda was dressed that day in an elegant white summer jacket and, as ever, wore his hat slanted down stylishly. For all his pace, his strides had an effortless quality with no suggestion of hurry. And when he paused, half-way across the bridge, I saw he did not seem even to be suffering from the heat.

'You get an interesting view from up here,' he remarked. 'You agree, Ono?'

The view below us was framed by two factory plants looming one to our right, the other to our left. Wedged in between was a dense muddle of roofs, some of the cheap shingled variety, others improvised out of corrugated metals. The Nishizuru district still has today a certain reputation as a deprived area, but in those days, things were infinitely worse. Viewed from the bridge, a stranger may well have assumed that community to be some derelict site half-way to demolition were it not for the many small figures, visible on closer inspection, moving busily around the houses like ants swarming around stones.

'Look down there, Ono,' Matsuda said. 'There are more and more places in our city like this. Only two or three years ago, this was not such a bad place. But now it's growing into a shanty district. More and more people become poor, Ono, and they are obliged to leave their houses in the countryside to join their fellow sufferers in places like this.'

‘How terrible,’ I said. ‘It makes one want to do something for them.’

Matsuda smiled at me - one of his superior smiles which always made me feel uncomfortable and foolish. ‘Well-meaning sentiments,’ he said, turning back to the view. ‘We all utter them. In every walk of life. Meanwhile, places like these grow everywhere like a bad fungus. Take a deep breath, Ono. Even from here, you can smell the sewage.’

‘I’d noticed an odour. Is it really coming from down there?’

Matsuda did not reply, but continued to look down at that shanty community with a strange smile on his face. Then he said:

‘Politicians and businessmen rarely see places like this. At least if they do, they stand at a safe distance, as we are now. I doubt if many politicians or businessmen have taken a walk down there. Come to that, I doubt if many artists have either.’

Noticing the challenge in his voice, I said:

‘I wouldn’t object if it won’t make us late for our appointment.’

‘On the contrary, we will save ourselves a kilometre or two by cutting through down there.’

Matsuda had been correct in supposing the odour derived from the sewers of that community. As we climbed down to the foot of the steel bridge and began making our way through a series of narrow alleys, the smell grew ever stronger until it became quite nauseous. There was no longer a trace of wind to combat the heat, the only movement in the air around us being the perpetual buzzing of flies. Again, I found myself struggling to keep up with Matsuda’s strides, but this time felt no desire for him to slow down.

On either side of us were what might have been stalls at some marketplace, closed down for the day, but which in fact constituted individual households, partitioned from the alleyway sometimes only by a cloth curtain. Old people sat in some of the doorways, and as we went past gave interested, though never hostile, stares; small children appeared to be coming and going in all directions, while cats too seemed forever to be scurrying away from around our feet. We walked on, dodging blankets and washing hung out along coarse pieces of string; past crying babies, barking dogs and neighbours chatting amiably across the alleyway to each other, seemingly from behind closed curtains. After a while, I grew increasingly aware of the open-sewer ditches dug on either side of the narrow path we were walking. There were flies hovering all along their length and as I continued to follow Matsuda, I had the distinct feeling the space between the ditches was growing more and more narrow, until it was as though we were balancing along a fallen tree trunk.

Eventually we came to a kind of yard where a crowd of shanty huts closed off the way ahead. But Matsuda pointed to a gap between two of the huts through which was visible an open piece of wasteground.

‘If we cut across there,’ he said, ‘we’ll come up behind Kogane Street.’

Near the entrance of the passage Matsuda had indicated, I noticed three small boys bowed over something on the ground, prodding at it with sticks. As we approached, they spun round with scowls on their faces and although I saw nothing, something in their manner told me they were torturing some animal. Matsuda must have drawn the same conclusion, for he said to me as we walked past: ‘Well, they have little else to amuse themselves with around here.’

I gave those boys little further thought at the time. Then some days later, that image of the three of them, turning towards us with scowls on their faces, brandishing

their sticks, standing there amidst all that squalor, returned to me with some vividness, and I used it as the central image of 'Complacency'. But I might point out that when the Tortoise stole a look at my unfinished painting that morning, the three boys he saw would have differed from their models in one or two important respects. For although they still stood in front of a squalid shanty hut, and their clothes were the same rags the original boys wore, the scowls on their faces would not have been guilty, defensive scowls of little criminals caught in the act; rather, they would have worn the manly scowls of samurai warriors ready to fight. It is no coincidence, furthermore, that the boys in my picture held their sticks in classic kendo stances.

Above the heads of these three boys, the Tortoise would have seen the painting fading into a second image - that of three fat, well-dressed men, sitting in a comfortable bar laughing together. The looks on their faces seem decadent; perhaps they are exchanging jokes about their mistresses or some such matter. These two contrasting images are moulded together within the coastline of the Japanese islands. Down the right-hand margin, in bold red characters, is the word 'Complacency'; down the left-hand side, in smaller characters, is the declaration: 'But the young are ready to fight for their dignity.'

When I describe this early and no doubt unsophisticated work, certain of its features may perhaps strike you as familiar. For it is possible you are acquainted with my painting, 'Eyes to the Horizon' which, as a print in the thirties, achieved a certain fame and influence throughout this city. 'Eyes to the Horizon' was indeed a reworking of 'Complacency', though with such differences as might be expected given the passage of years between the two. The later painting, you may recall, also employed two contrasting images merging into one another, bound by the coastline of Japan; the upper image was again that of three well-dressed men conferring, but this time they wore nervous expressions,

looking to each other for initiative. And these faces, I need not remind you, resembled those of three prominent politicians. For the lower, more dominant image, the three poverty-stricken boys had become stern-faced soldiers; two of them held bayoneted rifles, flanking an officer who held out his sword, pointing the way forward, west towards Asia. Behind them, there was no longer a backdrop of poverty; simply the military flag of the rising sun. The word 'Complacency' down the right-hand margin had been replaced by 'Eyes to the Horizon!' and on the left-hand side, the message, 'No time for cowardly talking. Japan must go forward.'

Of course, if you are new to this city, it is possible you will not have come across this work. But I do not think it an exaggeration to say that a great many of those living here before the war would be familiar with it, for it did receive much praise at the time for its vigorous brush technique and, particularly, its powerful use of colour. But I am fully aware, of course, that 'Eyes to the Horizon', whatever its artistic merits, is a painting whose sentiments are now outdated. Indeed, I would be the first to admit that those same sentiments are perhaps worthy of condemnation. I am not one of those who are afraid to admit to the shortcomings of past achievements.

But I did not wish to discuss 'Eyes to the Horizon'. I mention it here only because of its obvious relationship to that earlier painting, and I suppose, to acknowledge the impact my meeting Matsuda had on my subsequent career. I had begun to see Matsuda regularly some weeks prior to that morning in the kitchen when the Tortoise had made his discovery. It is, I suppose, a measure of the appeal his ideas had for me that I continued to meet him, for as I recall, I did not at first take much of a liking to him. Indeed, most of our earlier meetings would end with our becoming extremely antagonistic towards one another. I remember one evening, for instance, not long after that day I

followed him through the poverty of Nishizuru, going with him to a bar somewhere in the city centre. I do not recall the name or the whereabouts of the bar, but I remember it vividly as a dark, dirty place, frequented by what looked to be the city's low life. I felt apprehensive as soon as I walked in, but Matsuda seemed to be familiar with the place, saluting to some men playing cards around a table, before leading me to an alcove containing a small, unoccupied table.

My apprehension was not eased when shortly after we had sat down, two rough-looking men, both fairly drunk, came staggering into the alcove, wishing to engage us in conversation. Matsuda told them quite flatly to go away, and I fully expected trouble, but something about my companion seemed to unnerve the men, and they left us without comment.

After that, we sat drinking and conversing for some time, and before long, I recall, our exchanges had become abrasive. At one point I remember saying to him:

'No doubt, we artists may at times deserve mockery from the likes of you. But I'm afraid you're mistaken in assuming we're all so naive about the world.'

Matsuda laughed and said:

'But you must remember, Ono, I come across many artists. You are on the whole an astonishingly decadent crowd. Often with no more than a child's knowledge of the affairs of this world.'

I was about to protest, but Matsuda continued: 'Take for instance, Ono, this scheme of yours. The one you were proposing so earnestly just now. It's very touching, but if I may say so, displays all the naïveté typical of you artists.'

'I fail to see why my idea is so worthy of your mockery. But then I obviously made a mistake in assuming you felt concern for the poor of this city.'

‘No need for such childish jibes. You know very well my concern. But let’s consider your little scheme for a moment. Let’s suppose the unlikely occurs and your teacher is sympathetic. So then all of you at your villa will spend a week, perhaps two, producing - what? - twenty paintings? Thirty at the most. There seems little point in producing more, you won’t sell more than ten or eleven in any case. What will you do then, Ono? Wander the poor areas of this city with a little purse of coins you’ve raised from all this hard work? Give a sen to each poor person you meet?’

‘Forgive me, Matsuda, but I must repeat - you’re quite wrong to assume me so naïve. I wasn’t for a moment suggesting the exhibition be confined simply to Mori-san’s group. I’m fully aware of the scale of the poverty we’re seeking to alleviate, and this is why I’m coming to you with this suggestion. Your Okada-Shingen Society is ably placed to develop such a scheme. Large exhibitions held regularly throughout the city, attracting ever more artists, would bring significant relief to these people.’

‘I’m sorry, Ono,’ Matsuda said, smiling and shaking his head, ‘but I fear I was correct in my assumption after all. As a breed, you artists are desperately naïve.’ He leaned back in his seat and gave a sigh. The surface of our table was covered in cigarette ash and Matsuda was thoughtfully sweeping patterns in it with the edge of an empty matchbox left by previous occupants. ‘There’s a certain kind of artist these days,’ he went on, ‘whose greatest talent lies in hiding away from the real world. Unfortunately, such artists appear to be in dominance at present, and you, Ono, have come under the sway of one of them. Don’t look so angry, it’s true. Your knowledge of the world is like a child’s. I doubt, for instance, if you could even tell me who Karl Marx was.’

I gave him what must have been a sulky look, but said nothing. He gave a laugh and said: ‘You see? But don’t be too upset. Most of your colleagues know no better.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I know of Karl Marx.’

‘Why, I’m sorry, Ono. Perhaps I did underestimate you. Please, tell me about Marx.’

I shrugged and said: ‘I believe he led the Russian revolution.’

‘Then what about Lenin, Ono? Was he perhaps Marx’s second-in-command?’

‘A colleague of some kind.’ I saw Matsuda was grinning again, and so said quickly, before he could speak: ‘In any case, you’re being preposterous. These are the concerns of some far-away country. I’m talking about the poor here in our own city.’

‘Indeed, Ono, indeed. But there again, you see, you know very little about anything. You were quite correct in assuming the Okada-Shingen Society was concerned to wake up artists and introduce them to the real world. But I have misled you if I ever suggested our society wished to be turned into a large begging bowl. We’re not interested in charity.’

‘I fail to see what there is to object to in a little charity. And if at the same time it opens the eyes of us decadent artists, then so much the better, I would have thought.’

‘Your eyes are indeed far from open, Ono, if you believe a little good-hearted charity can help the poor of our country. The truth is, Japan is headed for crisis. We are in the hands of greedy businessmen and weak politicians. Such people will see to it poverty grows every day. Unless, that is, we, the emerging generation, take action. But I’m no political agitator, Ono. My concern is with art. And with artists like you. Talented young artists, not yet irreversibly blinkered by that enclosed little world you all inhabit. The Okada-Shingen exists to help the likes of you

open your eyes and produce work of genuine value for these difficult times.'

'Forgive me, Matsuda, but it strikes me it's you who are in fact the naive one. An artist's concern is to capture beauty wherever he finds it. But however skilfully he may come to do this, he will have little influence on the sort of matters you talk of. Indeed, if the Okada-Shingen is as you claim it is, then it seems to me ill-conceived indeed. It seems to be founded on a naive mistake about what art can and cannot do.'

'You know full well, Ono, we do not see things so simply. The fact is, the Okada-Shingen does not exist in isolation. There are young men like us in all walks of life - in politics, in the military - who think the same way. We are the emerging generation. Together, it is within our capability to achieve something of real value. It just so happens that some of us care deeply about art and wish to see it responding to the world of today. The truth is, Ono, in times like these, when people are getting poorer, and children are growing more hungry and sick all around you, it is simply not enough for an artist to hide away somewhere, perfecting pictures of courtesans. I can see you're angry with me, and even now you're searching for some way to come back at me. But I mean well, Ono. I hope later on you'll think carefully about these things. For you, above all, are someone of immense talent.'

'Well, do tell me then, Matsuda. How can we decadent foolish artists help bring about your political revolution?'

To my annoyance, Matsuda was once more smiling disparagingly across the table. 'Revolution? Really, Ono! The communists want a revolution. We want nothing of the sort. Quite the opposite, in fact. We wish for a restoration. We simply ask that his Imperial Majesty the Emperor be restored to his rightful place as head of our state.'

'But our Emperor is precisely that already.'

‘Really, Ono. So naive and confused.’ His voice, though it remained, as ever, perfectly calm, seemed at this point to grow harder. ‘Our Emperor is our rightful leader, and yet what in reality has become of things? Power has been grasped from him by these businessmen and their politicians. Listen, Ono, Japan is no longer a backward country of peasant farmers. We are now a mighty nation, capable of matching any of the Western nations. In the Asian hemisphere, Japan stands like a giant amidst cripples and dwarfs. And yet we allow our people to grow more and more desperate, our little children to die of malnutrition. Meanwhile, the businessmen get richer and the politicians forever make excuses and chatter. Can you imagine any of the Western powers allowing such a situation? They would surely have taken action long ago.’

‘Action? What sort of action do you refer to, Matsuda?’

‘It’s time for us to forge an empire as powerful and wealthy as those of the British and the French. We must use our strength to expand abroad. The time is now well due for Japan to take her rightful place amongst the world powers. Believe me, Ono, we have the means to do so, but have yet to discover the will. And we must rid ourselves of these businessmen and politicians. Then the military will be answerable only to his Imperial Majesty the Emperor.’ Then he gave a small laugh and turned his gaze back down to the patterns he was weaving in the cigarette ash. ‘But this is largely for others to worry over,’ he said. ‘The likes of us, Ono, we must concern ourselves with art.’

It is my belief, though, that the reason for the Tortoise’s upset in the disused kitchen two or three weeks later had not so much to do with these issues I discussed with Matsuda that night; the Tortoise would not have had the perception to have seen so far into that unfinished painting of mine. All he would have recognized was that it represented a blatant disregard for Mori-san’s priorities; abandoned had been the school’s collective endeavour to capture the fragile lantern light of the pleasure world; bold calligraphy had

been introduced to complement the visual impact; and above all, no doubt, the Tortoise would have been shocked to observe that my technique made extensive use of the hard outline - a traditional enough method, as you will know, but one whose rejection was fundamental to Mori-san's teaching.

Whatever the reasons for his outrage, I knew after that morning I could no longer hide my rapidly developing ideas from those around me, and that it was only a matter of time before our teacher himself came to hear of it all. Thus, by the time I had that conversation with Mori-san inside the pavilion at Takami Gardens, I had turned over in my mind many times what I might say to him, and was firmly resolved not to let myself down.

It was a week or so after that morning in the kitchen. Mori-san and I had spent the afternoon in the city on some errand - perhaps to select and order our materials, I do not remember. What I do recall is that as we went about our business, Mori-san did not behave in any way oddly towards me. Then, with the evening drawing in, finding ourselves with a little time before our train, we climbed the steep steps behind Yotsugawa Station up to the Takami Gardens.

In those days there stood up on Takami Gardens a most pleasing pavilion, just on the rim of the hill overlooking the area - not far, in fact, from where the peace memorial stands today. The most noticeably attractive feature of the pavilion was the way the eaves of its elegant roof were hung all the way round with lanterns - although on that particular night, as I recall, the lanterns were all unlit as we approached. Stepping in under the roof, the pavilion was as spacious as a large room, but since it was not enclosed on any side, only the arched posts supporting the roof broke one's view out over the district below.

Quite possibly, that evening with Mori-san was the occasion I first discovered that pavilion. It was to remain a favourite spot for me over the years, until it was eventually

destroyed during the war, and I often took my own pupils there whenever we happened to be passing that way. Indeed, I believe it was in that same pavilion, just before the start of the war, that I was to have my last conversation with Kuroda, the most gifted of my pupils.

In any case, that first evening I followed Mori-san inside it, I recall the sky had become a pale crimson colour and lights were coming on amidst the muddle of roofs still visible down below in the gloom. Mori-san took a few further steps towards the view, then leaning a shoulder against a post, looked up at the sky with some satisfaction and said without turning to me:

‘Ono, there are some matches and tapers in our kerchief. Kindly light these lanterns. The effect, I imagine, will be most interesting.’

As I made my way around the pavilion, lighting lantern after lantern, the gardens around us, which had become still and silent, steadily faded into darkness. All the while, I continued to glance towards the silhouette of Mori-san outlined against the sky, gazing out thoughtfully at the view. I had lit perhaps half of the lanterns when I heard him say:

‘So then, Ono, what is this matter troubling you so much?’

‘I’m sorry, Sensei?’

‘You mentioned earlier today, there was something troubling you.’

I gave a small laugh as I reached up towards a lantern.

‘Just a small thing, Sensei. I wouldn’t bother Sensei with it, but then I am not sure what to make of it. The fact is, two days ago, I discovered that certain of my paintings had been removed from where I always store them in the old kitchen.’

Mori-san remained silent for a moment. Then he said:

‘And what did the others have to say about this?’

‘I asked them, but no one seemed to know anything. Or at least, no one seemed willing to tell me.’

‘So what did you conclude, Ono? Is there some conspiracy against you?’

‘Well, as a matter of fact, Sensei, the others do appear anxious to avoid my company. Indeed, I have been unable to have a single conversation with any of them over these past few days. When I enter a room, people go silent or else leave altogether.’

He made no comment on this, and when I glanced towards him, he appeared to be still absorbed by the setting sky. I was in the process of lighting another lantern when I heard him say:

‘Your paintings are presently in my possession. I’m sorry if I caused you alarm by taking them. It just so happened I had a little spare time the other day and thought it a good opportunity to catch up on your recent work. You appeared to be out somewhere at the time. I suppose I should have told you when you returned, Ono. My apologies.’

‘Why, not at all, Sensei. I’m most grateful you should take such an interest in my work.’

‘But it’s only natural I should take interest. You are my most accomplished pupil. I have invested years nurturing your talent.’

‘Of course, Sensei. I cannot begin to estimate what I owe you.’

Neither of us spoke for a few moments, while I continued to light lanterns. Then I paused and said:

‘I am very relieved no harm has come to my paintings. I should have known there was some simple explanation of this

kind. I can now put my mind at rest. ’

Mori-san said nothing to this, and from what I could make of his silhouette, he did not take his eyes from the view. It occurred to me he had not heard me, so I said a little more loudly:

‘I am glad I can put my mind at rest regarding the safety of my paintings. ’

‘Yes, Ono, ’ Mori-san said, as though startled out of some far-away thoughts. ‘I had a little spare time on my hands, So I had someone go and fetch me your recent work. ’

‘It was foolish of me to have worried. I’m glad the paintings are safe. ’

He did not speak for some time so that I again thought he had not heard me. But then he said: ‘I was a little surprised by what I saw. You seem to be exploring curious avenues. ’

Of course, he may well not have used that precise phrase, ‘exploring curious avenues’. For it occurs to me that expression was one I myself tended to use frequently in later years and it may well be that I am remembering my own words to Kuroda on that later occasion in that same pavilion. But then again, I believe Mori-san did at times refer to ‘exploring avenues’; in fact, this is probably another example of my inheriting a characteristic from my former teacher. In any case, I recall I did not respond other than to give a self-conscious laugh and reach for another lantern. Then I heard him saying:

‘It’s no bad thing that a young artist experiment a little. Amongst other things, he is able to get some of his more superficial interests out of his system that way. Then he can return to more serious work with more commitment than ever. ’ Then, after a pause, he muttered as though to himself: ‘No, it’s no bad thing to experiment. It’s all part of being young. It’s no bad thing at all. ’

‘Sensei,’ I said, ‘I feel strongly that my recent work is the finest I have yet done.’

‘It’s no bad thing, no bad thing at all. But then again, one shouldn’t spend too much time with such experiments. One can become like someone who travels too much. Best return to serious work before too long.’

I waited to see if he would say anything more. After a few moments, I said: ‘I was no doubt foolish to worry so much for the safety of those paintings. But you see, Sensei, I am more proud of them than anything else I have done. All the same, I should have guessed there would be some such simple explanation.’

Mori-san remained silent. When I glanced at him past the lantern I was lighting, it was difficult to tell whether he was pondering my words or thinking about something else altogether. There was a strange mixture of light in the pavilion as the sky continued to set and I lit more and more lanterns. But Mori-san’s figure remained in silhouette, leaning against a post, his back to me.

‘Incidentally, Ono,’ he said, eventually, ‘I was told there were one or two other paintings you’ve completed recently that were not with those I have now.’

‘Quite possibly, there are one or two I did not store with the others.’

‘Ah. And no doubt these are the very paintings you are most fond of.’

I did not reply to this. Then Mori-san went on:

‘Perhaps when we return, Ono, you will bring me these other paintings. I would be most interested to see them.’

I thought for a moment, then said: ‘I would, of course, be most grateful for Sensei’s opinions of them. However, I am not at all certain as to where I left them.’

‘But you will endeavour to find them, I trust.’

‘I will, Sensei. In the meantime, I will perhaps relieve Sensei of the other paintings to which he was so kind as to give his attention. No doubt they are cluttering up his quarters, so I shall remove them as soon as we return.’

‘No need to bother with those paintings, Ono. It will be sufficient if you find the remaining ones and bring them to me.’

‘I regret, Sensei, that I will not be able to find the remaining paintings.’

‘I see, Ono.’ He gave a tired sigh, and I could see him once again gazing up at the sky. ‘So you do not think you will be able to bring me those paintings of yours.’

‘No, Sensei. I fear not.’

‘I see. Of course, you have considered your future in the event of your leaving my patronage.’

‘It had been my hope that Sensei would understand my position and continue to support me in pursuing my career.’

He remained silent, so eventually I went on:

‘Sensei, it would cause me the greatest pain to leave the villa. These past several years have been the happiest and most valuable of my life. My colleagues I look upon as brothers. And as for Sensei himself, why, I can hardly begin to estimate what I owe him. I would beg you to look once more at my new paintings and reconsider them. Perhaps, in fact, Sensei will allow me when we return to explain my intentions in each picture.’

He still gave no sign of having heard me. So I continued:

‘I have learnt many things over these past years. I have learnt much in contemplating the world of pleasure, and recognizing its fragile beauty. But I now feel it is time for me to progress to other things. Sensei, it is my belief that

in such troubled times as these, artists must learn to value something more tangible than those pleasurable things that disappear with the morning light. It is not necessary that artists always occupy a decadent and enclosed world. My conscience, Sensei, tells me I cannot remain forever an artist of the floating world.'

With that, I turned my attention back to the lanterns. After a few moments, Mori-san said:

'You have been for some time now my most accomplished pupil. It will be a matter of some pain to me to see you leave. Let us say, then, that you have three days to bring me those remaining paintings. You will bring those to me, then turn your mind back to more proper concerns.'

'As I have already said, Sensei, it is to my deep regret that I will be unable to bring you those paintings.'

Mori-san made a sound as though he were laughing to himself. Then he said: 'As you point out yourself, Ono, these are troubled times. All the more so for a young artist, practically unknown and without resources. If you were less talented, I would fear for your future after leaving me. But you are a clever fellow. No doubt you have made arrangements.'

'As a matter of fact, I have made no arrangements whatsoever. The villa has been my home for so long, I never seriously contemplated it ceasing to be so.'

'Is that so. Well, as I say, Ono, were you less talented, there would be cause for worry. But you are a clever young man.' I saw Mori-san's silhouette turn to face me. 'You will no doubt succeed in finding work illustrating magazines and comic books. Perhaps you will even manage to join a firm like the one you were employed by when you first came to me. Of course, it will mean the end of your development as a serious artist, but then no doubt you've taken all this into account.'

These may sound unnecessarily vindictive words for a teacher to use to a pupil whose admiration he knows he still commands. But then again, when a master painter has given so much in time and resources to a certain pupil, when furthermore he has allowed that pupil's name to be associated in public with his own, it is perhaps understandable, if not entirely excusable, that the teacher lose for a moment his sense of proportion and react in ways he may later regret. And though the manoeuvrings over the possession of the paintings will no doubt appear petty, it is surely understandable if a teacher who has actually supplied most of the paints and materials should forget in such a moment that his pupil has any right whatever over his own work.

For all that, it is clear that such arrogance and possessiveness on the part of a teacher - however renowned he may be - is to be regretted. From time to time, I still turn over in my mind that cold winter's morning and the smell of burning growing ever stronger in my nostrils. It was the winter before the outbreak of war and I was standing anxiously at the door of Kuroda's house - a shabby little affair he used to rent in the Nakamachi area. The burning smell, I could tell, originated from somewhere within the house, from where also came the sound of a woman sobbing. I pulled the bell rope repeatedly and shouted for someone to come and receive me, but there was no response. Eventually I decided to let myself in, but as I pulled back the outer door, a uniformed policeman appeared in the entryway.

'What do you want?' he demanded.

'I came looking for Mr Kuroda. He is home?'

'The occupant has been taken to police headquarters for questioning.'

'Questioning?'

'I advise you to go home,' the officer said. 'Or else we'll be wanting to start checking on you too. We're

interested now in all close associates of the occupant.'

'But why? Has Mr Kuroda committed any crime?'

'No one wants his sort around. If you don't go on your way, we'll have you in for questioning too.'

Inside the house, the woman - Kuroda's mother, I assumed - continued to sob. I could hear someone shouting something at her.

'Where is the officer in charge?' I asked.

'On your way. You want to be arrested?'

'Before we go any further,' I said, 'let me explain that my name is Ono.' The officer showed no recognition, so I continued a little uncertainly: 'I am the man on whose information you have been brought here. I am Masuji Ono, the artist and member of the Cultural Committee of the Interior Department. Indeed, I am an official adviser to the Committee of Unpatriotic Activities. I believe there's been some sort of mistake here and I would like to speak with whoever is in charge.'

The officer looked at me suspiciously for a moment, then turned and disappeared into the house. Before long, he came back and gestured for me to step up.

As I followed him through Kuroda's house, I saw everywhere the contents of cupboards and drawers emptied out over the floor. Some books, I noticed, had been piled up and tied into bundles, while in the main room, the tatami had been lifted and an officer was investigating the floorboards beneath with a torch. From behind a closed partition, I could hear more clearly Kuroda's mother sobbing and an officer shouting questions at her.

I was led out to the veranda at the back of the house. In the middle of the small yard another uniformed officer and a man in plain clothes were standing around a bonfire. The plain-clothes man turned and came a few steps towards me.

‘Mr Ono?’ he asked, quite respectfully.

The officer who had led me in seemed to sense his earlier rudeness had been inappropriate and quickly turned back into the house.

‘What has happened to Mr Kuroda?’

‘Taken for questioning, Mr Ono. We’ll take care of him, don’t you worry.’

I stared past him at the fire, now almost burnt out. The uniformed officer was poking the pile with a stick.

‘Did you have authorization to burn those paintings?’ I asked.

‘It’s our policy to destroy any offensive material which won’t be needed as evidence. We’ve selected a good enough sample. The rest of this trash we’re just burning.’

‘I had no idea’, I said, ‘something like this would happen. I merely suggested to the committee someone come round and give Mr Kuroda a talking-to for his own good.’ I stared again at the smouldering pile in the middle of the yard. ‘It was quite unnecessary to burn those. There were many fine works amongst them.’

‘Mr Ono, we’re grateful for your help. But now the investigations have been started, you must leave them in the hands of the appropriate authorities. We’ll see to it your Mr Kuroda is treated fairly.’

He smiled, and turning back to the fire, said something to the uniformed officer. The latter poked the fire again and said something under his breath which sounded like: ‘Unpatriotic trash.’

I remained on the veranda, watching with unbelieving eyes. Eventually, the plain-clothes officer turned to me again and said: ‘Mr Ono, I suggest you return home now.’

‘Things have gone much too far,’ I said. ‘And why are you interrogating Mrs Kuroda? What has she to do with anything?’

‘This is a police matter now, Mr Ono. It doesn’t concern you any longer.’

‘Things have gone much too far. I intend to discuss this with Mr Ubukata. Indeed, I may well take it straight up to Mr Saburi himself.’

The plain-clothes man called to someone in the house and the officer who had answered the door to me appeared at my side.

‘Thank Mr Ono for his help and show him out,’ the plain-clothes man said. Then as he turned back to the fire, he gave a sudden cough. ‘Bad paintings make bad smoke,’ he said with a grin, beating at the air about his face.

But this is all of limited relevance here. I believe I was recalling the events of that day last month when Setsuko was down on her short visit; in fact, I was recounting how Taro had got us all laughing around the supper table with his anecdotes about his work colleagues.

As I remember, supper continued to proceed in a most satisfactory manner. I could not, however, avoid some discomfort in observing Ichiro whenever Noriko poured out sake. For the first few times, he would glance across the table at me with a conspiratorial smile, which I did my best to return in as neutral a way as possible. But then as the meal progressed, and sake continued to be poured, he ceased to look at me, but would stare crossly at his aunt as she refilled our cups.

Taro had told us several more amusing stories about his colleagues, when Setsuko said to him:

'You make such fun, Taro-san. But I learn from Noriko that morale is very high at your company just now. Surely, it must be most stimulating to work in such an atmosphere.'

At this, Taro's manner became suddenly very earnest. 'It is indeed, Setsuko-san,' he said, nodding. 'The changes we made after the war are now beginning to bear fruit at all levels of the company. We feel very optimistic about the future. Within the next ten years, provided we all do our best, KNC should be a name recognized not just all over Japan but all over the world.'

'How splendid. And Noriko was telling me your branch director is a very kindly man. That too must make a big difference to morale.'

'You're indeed right. But then Mr Hayasaka is not only a kindly man, he is someone of the greatest ability and vision. I can assure you, Setsuko-san, to work for an incompetent superior, however kindly, can be a demoralizing experience. We are very fortunate to have someone like Mr Hayasaka to lead us.'

'Indeed, Suichi too is very fortunate in that he has a very capable superior.'

'Is that so, Setsuko-san? But then I would expect as much of a company like Nippon Electrics. Only the best sort of people would hold responsibility in such a firm.'

'We are so fortunate that seems to be the case. But I am sure it is equally true at KNC, Taro-san. Suichi always speaks highly of KNC.'

'Excuse me, Taro,' I put in at this point. 'Of course, I'm sure you have every reason to be optimistic at KNC. But I've been meaning to ask you, is it in your opinion entirely for the good that so many sweeping changes were made at your firm after the war? I hear there is hardly any of the old management left.'

My son-in-law smiled thoughtfully, then said: 'I appreciate very much Father's concern. Youth and vigour alone will not always produce the best results. But in all frankness, Father, a complete overhaul was called for. We needed new leaders with a new approach appropriate to the world of today.'

'Of course, of course. And I've no doubt your new leaders are the most capable of men. But tell me, Taro, don't you worry at times we might be a little too hasty in following the Americans? I would be the first to agree many of the old ways must now be erased for ever, but don't you think sometimes some good things are being thrown out with the bad?' Indeed, sometimes Japan has come to look like a small child learning from a strange adult.'

'Father is very right. At times, I'm sure, we have been a little hasty. But by and large, the Americans have an immense amount to teach us. Just in these few years, for instance, we Japanese have already come a long way in understanding such things as democracy and individual rights. Indeed, Father, I have a feeling Japan has finally established a foundation on which to build a brilliant future. This is why firms like ours can look forward with the greatest confidence.'

'Indeed, Taro-san,' Setsuko said. 'Suichi has just that same feeling. He has expressed on a number of occasions recently his opinion that after four years of confusion, our country has finally set its sights on the future.'

Although my daughter had addressed this remark to Taro, I had the distinct impression it had been made for my benefit. Taro too seemed to take it that way, for rather than reply to Setsuko, he continued:

'In fact, Father, just the other week I attended a reunion dinner of my school graduation year and for the first time since the surrender, all those present from every walk of life were expressing optimism for the future. It is then

by no means just at KNC there is a feeling things are coming right. And while I fully understand Father's worries, I'm confident that by and large the lessons of these past years have been good ones and will lead us all on to a splendid future. But perhaps I am to be corrected, Father.'

'Not at all, not at all,' I said, and gave him a smile.

'As you say, no doubt your generation has a splendid future. And you are all so confident. I can only wish you the best.'

My son-in-law seemed about to respond to this, but just then, Ichiro reached across the table and tapped the sake flask with his finger, as he had done once before. Taro turned to him, saying: 'Ah, Ichiro-san. Just who we needed for our discussions. Tell us, what do you think you'll be when you grow up?'

My grandson continued to regard the sake flask for a moment, then glanced over towards me with a sullen look. His mother touched his arm, whispering to him: 'Ichiro, Uncle Taro's asking you. You tell him what you want to be.'

'President of Nippon Electrics!' Ichiro declared loudly.

We all laughed.

'Now are you sure of that, Ichiro-san?' Taro asked. 'You don't instead wish to lead us at KNC?'

'Nippon Electrics is the best company!'

We all laughed again.

'A great shame for us,' Taro remarked. 'Ichiro-san is just who we'll need at KNC in a few years.'

This exchange seemed to take Ichiro's mind off the sake, and from then on, he seemed to enjoy himself, joining in loudly whenever the adults laughed at something. Only towards the very end of our meal did he ask in a quite disinterested voice:

‘Is the sake all finished now?’

‘All gone,’ Noriko said. ‘Would Ichiro-san like more orange juice?’

Ichiro refused this offer in a well-mannered way, and turned back to Taro, who had been explaining something to him. For all that, I could imagine his disappointment and felt a wave of irritation at Setsuko for not being a little more understanding of her little boy’s feelings.

I got my chance to talk alone with Ichiro an hour or so later when I went into the small spare room of the apartment to say good-night to him. The light was still on, but Ichiro was under the quilt, on his front, a cheek pressed against his pillow. When I turned off the light, I discovered the blinds did not prevent light from the opposite apartment block coming into the room to throw shadowy bars across the walls and ceiling. From the next room came the sounds of my daughters laughing over something, and as I knelt down beside Ichiro’s quilt he whispered:

‘Oji, is Aunt Noriko drunk?’

‘I don’t think so, Ichiro. She’s just laughing at something, that’s all.’

‘She might be a little bit drunk. Don’t you think, Oji?’

‘Well, perhaps. Just a little. There’s no harm in that.’

‘Women can’t handle sake, can they, Oji?’ he said, and giggled into his pillow.

I gave a laugh, then said to him: ‘You know, Ichiro, there’s no need to be upset about the sake tonight. It really doesn’t matter. Soon you’ll be older, and then you’ll be able to drink sake as much as you like.’

I rose and went to the window to see if the blinds could not be made more effective. I opened and shut them a few times, but the slats remained sufficiently separated so that I could always see the lighted windows of the block opposite.

‘No, Ichiro, it’s really nothing to get upset about.’

For a moment, my grandson gave no response. Then I heard his voice say behind me: ‘Oji’s not to worry.’

‘Oh? Now what do you mean by that, Ichiro?’

‘Oji’s not to worry. Because if he worries, he won’t get to sleep. And if old people don’t sleep, they get ill.’

‘I see. Very well then, Ichiro. Oji promises not to worry. But you’re not to be upset either. Because really, there’s nothing to be getting upset about.’

Ichiro remained silent. I opened and closed the blinds again.

‘But then, of course,’ I said, ‘if Ichiro had actually insisted on sake tonight, Oji was ready to step in and see to it he got some. But as it was, I think we were right to let the women have their way this time. It’s not worth getting them upset over such little things.’

‘Sometimes at home,’ Ichiro said, ‘Father wants to do something and Mother tells him it’s not allowed. Sometimes, even Father’s no match for Mother.’

‘Is that so,’ I said, with a laugh.

‘So Oji’s not to worry.’

‘There’s nothing for either of us to worry about, Ichiro.’ I turned away from the window and knelt down again beside his quilt. ‘Now you try and fall asleep.’

‘Is Oji staying the night?’

‘No, Oji’s going back to his own house soon.’

‘Why can’t Oji stay here too?’

‘There’s not enough room here, Ichiro. Oji has a large house all to himself, remember.’

‘Will Oji come to say goodbye at the station tomorrow?’

‘Of course, Ichiro. I’ll do that. And no doubt, you’ll be down to visit again before long.’

‘Oji’s not to worry he couldn’t make Mother give me sake.’

‘You seem to be growing up very fast, Ichiro,’ I said, laughing. ‘You’ll be a fine man when you’re grown. Perhaps you really will be head of Nippon Electrics. Or something just as grand. Now, let’s keep quiet for a while and see if you fall asleep.’

I went on sitting beside him for several more moments, giving quiet replies whenever he spoke. And I believe it was during those moments, as I waited in that darkened room for my grandson to fall asleep, listening to the occasional burst of laughter from the neighbouring room, that I began turning over in my mind the conversation I had had that morning with Setsuko in Kawabe Park. That was probably the first opportunity I had had to do so, and until that point, it had not really occurred to me to be so irritated by Setsuko’s words. But by the time I left my sleeping grandson to rejoin the others in the main room, I believe I had become quite annoyed with my elder daughter, and this no doubt accounts for my saying to Taro, not long after I had sat down:

‘You know, it’s odd when one thinks about it. Your father and I must have been acquainted for over sixteen years, and yet it’s only over this past year we’ve become such good friends.’

‘Indeed,’ said my son-in-law, ‘but I suppose it’s often that way. One always has so many neighbours one does no more than exchange good mornings with. A great pity when you think about it.’

‘But then of course,’ I said, ‘as regards Dr Saito and myself, it wasn’t simply that we were neighbours. Connected as we both were with the art world, we knew of each other by reputation. All the more pity then that your father and I didn’t make more effort to be friends from the beginning. Don’t you think so, Taro?’

As I said this, I gave a quick glance towards Setsuko to make sure she was listening.

‘A great pity indeed,’ Taro said. ‘But at least you had the chance to become friends in the end.’

‘But what I mean, Taro, is that it’s all the more pity since we knew each of other’s reputations in the art world all that time.’

‘Yes, a great pity indeed. One would think the knowledge that a neighbour was also a distinguished colleague would lead to more intimate relations. But then I suppose, what with busy schedules and the next thing, this is too often not the case.’

I glanced with some satisfaction towards Setsuko, but my daughter showed no sign at all of registering the significance of Taro’s words. It is possible, of course, that she was not really attending; my guess, though, is that Setsuko had indeed understood, but was too proud to return my glance, confronted as she was with proof that she had been quite mistaken in making her insinuations that morning in Kawabe Park.

We had been walking down the wide central avenue of the park at an easy pace, admiring the autumnal trees lined on either side of us. We had been comparing our impressions on how Noriko was taking to her new life, and had agreed that to all appearances, she was very happy indeed.

‘It’s all very gratifying,’ I was saying. ‘Her future was becoming a grave worry to me, but now everything looks

very good for her. Taro is an admirable man. One could hardly have hoped for a better match. ’

‘It seems strange to think’ , Setsuko said with a smile, ‘it was only a year ago we were all so worried for her. ’

‘It’s all very gratifying. And you know, Setsuko, I’m grateful to you for your part in it all. You were a great support to your sister when things weren’t going so well. ’

‘On the contrary, I could do so little, being so far away. ’

‘And of course,’ I said, with a laugh, ‘it was you who warned me last year. “Precautionary steps” - you remember that, Setsuko? As you see, I didn’t ignore your advice. ’

‘I’m sorry, Father, what advice was this? ’

‘Now Setsuko, there’s no need to be so tactful. I’m quite prepared now to acknowledge there are certain aspects to my career I have no cause to be proud of. Indeed, I acknowledged as much during the negotiations, just as you suggested. ’

‘I’m sorry, I’m not at all clear what Father is referring to. ’

‘Noriko hasn’t told you about the *miai*? Well, I made sure that evening there’d be no obstacles to her happiness on account of my career. I dare say I would have done so in any case, but I was nevertheless grateful for your advice last year. ’

‘Forgive me, Father, but I don’t recall offering any advice last year. As for the matter of the *miai*, however, Noriko has indeed mentioned it to me a number of times. ’
Indeed, she wrote to me soon after the *miai* expressing surprise at Father’s … at Father’s words about himself. ’

‘I dare say she was surprised. Noriko always did underestimate her old father. But I’m hardly the sort to

allow my own daughter to suffer simply because I'm too proud to face up to things.'

'Noriko told me she was extremely puzzled by Father's behaviour that night. It seems the Saitos were equally puzzled. No one was at all sure what Father meant by it all. Indeed, Suichi also expressed his bewilderment when I read him Noriko's letter.'

'But this is extraordinary,' I said, laughing. 'Why, Setsuko, it was you yourself who pushed me to it last year. It was you who suggested I take "precautionary steps" so that we didn't slip up with the Saitos as we did with the Miyakes. Do you not remember?'

'No doubt I am being most forgetful, but I am afraid I have no recollection of what Father refers to.'

'Now, Setsuko, this is extraordinary.'

Setsuko suddenly stopped walking and exclaimed: 'How wonderful the maples look at this time of year!'

'Indeed,' I said. 'No doubt they'll look even better further into the autumn.'

'So wonderful,' my daughter said, smiling, and we began to walk again. Then she said: 'As a matter of fact, Father, it so happened that last night we were discussing one or two things, and Taro-san happened to mention a conversation he had had with you just last week. A conversation concerning the composer who recently committed suicide.'

'Yukio Naguchi? Ah yes, I remember that conversation. Now let me see, I believe Taro was suggesting the man's suicide was pointless.'

'Taro-san was somewhat concerned Father should be so interested in Mr Naguchi's death. Indeed, it would seem Father was drawing a comparison between Mr Naguchi's career and his own. We all felt concern at this news. In fact, we

have all been somewhat concerned lately that Father is not becoming a little downhearted following his retirement. ’

I laughed and said: ‘You can put your mind at rest, Setsuko. I am not for one moment contemplating taking the sort of action Mr Naguchi did. ’

‘From what I understand, ’ she continued, ‘Mr Naguchi’s songs came to have enormous prevalence at every level of the war effort. There would thus appear to have been some substance to his wish that he should share responsibility along with the politicians and generals. But Father is wrong to even begin thinking in such terms about himself. Father was, after all, a painter. ’

‘Let me assure you, Setsuko, I wouldn’t for a moment consider the sort of action Naguchi took. But then I am not too proud to see that I too was a man of some influence, who used that influence towards a disastrous end. ’

My daughter seemed to consider this for a moment. Then she said:

‘Forgive me, but it is perhaps important to see things in a proper perspective. Father painted some splendid pictures, and was no doubt most influential amongst other such painters. But Father’s work had hardly to do with these larger matters of which we are speaking. Father was simply a painter. He must stop believing he has done some great wrong. ’

‘Well now, Setsuko, this is very different advice from last year. Then it seemed my career was a great liability. ’

‘Forgive me, Father, but I can only repeat I do not understand these references to the marriage negotiations last year. Indeed, it is some mystery to me why Father’s career should have been of any particular relevance to the negotiations. The Saitos, it would seem, were certainly not concerned and, as we have said, they were very puzzled by Father’s behaviour at the *miai*. ’

‘This is quite astonishing, Setsuko. The situation was that Dr Saito and I had been acquainted for a long time. As one of the city’s most eminent art critics, he would have followed my career over the years and have been fully aware of its more regrettable aspects. It was therefore right and proper that I should make my attitude clear at that point in the proceedings. Indeed, I’m quite confident Dr Saito much appreciated my doing so.’

‘Forgive me, but it would appear from what Taro-san has said that Dr Saito was never so familiar with Father’s career. Of course, he always knew Father as a neighbour. But it would seem he was unaware that Father was connected with the art world at all until last year when the negotiations began.’

‘You’re quite wrong, Setsuko,’ I said with a laugh. ‘Dr Saito and I have known about each other for many years. We often used to stop in the street and exchange news about the art world.’

‘No doubt then I am mistaken. Forgive me. But it is nevertheless important to stress that no one has ever considered Father’s past something to view with recrimination. One hopes then that Father will cease to think of himself in terms of men like that unfortunate composer.’

I did not persist in arguing with Setsuko, and I seem to recall we soon moved on to discussing more casual topics. However, there is surely no doubt that my daughter was in error over much of what she asserted that morning. For one thing, it is impossible that Dr Saito could have been ignorant of my reputation as a painter for all those years. And when that evening after supper I contrived to get Taro to confirm this, I did so merely to make the point clear to Setsuko; for there was never any doubt in my mind. I have, for instance, the most vivid recollection of that sunny day some sixteen years ago when Dr Saito first addressed me as I stood adjusting the fence outside my new house. ‘A great

honour to have an artist of your stature in our neighbourhood,' he had said, recognizing my name on the gatepost. I remember that meeting quite clearly, and there can be no doubt that Setsuko is mistaken.

JUNE, 1950

After receiving the news of Matsuda's death late yesterday morning, I made myself a light lunch, then went out for a little exercise.

The day was pleasantly warm as I made my way down the hill. On reaching the river, I stepped up on to the Bridge of Hesitation and looked around me. The sky was a clear blue, and a little way down the bank, along where the new apartment blocks began, I could see two small boys playing with fishing poles at the water's edge. I watched them for some moments, turning over in my mind the news about Matsuda.

I had always meant to pay Matsuda further visits since re-establishing contact with him during Noriko's marriage negotiations, but in fact had not managed to get out to Arakawa again until just a month or so ago. I had gone on sheer impulse, having no idea at the time he was so near his end. Perhaps Matsuda would have died a little happier for having shared his thoughts with me that afternoon.

On my arrival at his house, Miss Suzuki had recognized me instantly and shown me in with some excitement. The way she did this seemed to suggest Matsuda had not had many callers since my visit eighteen months earlier.

'He's much stronger than the last time you were here,' she said happily.

I was shown into the reception room and a few moments later, Matsuda came in unaided, dressed in a loose kimono. He was clearly glad to see me again, and for some moments we talked of small matters and of mutual acquaintances. I believe it was not until Miss Suzuki had brought our tea and left again that I remembered to thank Matsuda for his letter of encouragement during my recent illness.

'You appear to have made a good recovery, Ono,' he remarked. 'To look at you, I'd never guess you'd been ill so recently.'

'I'm much better now,' I said. 'I have to be careful not to overexert myself. And I'm obliged to carry this stick around with me. Otherwise I feel as well as I ever did.'

'You disappoint me, Ono. And I thought we could be two old men discussing our ill health together. But here you are and it's just like the last time you came. I have to sit here and envy you your health.'

'Nonsense, Matsuda. You're looking very well.'

'You'll hardly convince me of that, Ono,' he said with a laugh, 'though it's true I've regained a little weight over this past year. But tell me, is Noriko-san happy? I heard her marriage went through successfully. When you last came here, you were very worried for her future.'

'Things have turned out very well. She's now expecting a child in the autumn. After all that worry, things have gone as well as I could ever have hoped for Noriko.'

'A grandchild in the autumn. Now that must be something to look forward to.'

'As a matter of fact,' I said, 'my elder daughter is expecting her second child next month. She's been longing for another child, so it's particularly good news.'

'Indeed, indeed. Two grandchildren to look forward to.' For a moment, he sat there smiling and nodding to himself. Then he said: 'No doubt you remember, Ono, I was always far too busy improving the world to think about marriage. Do you remember those arguments we used to have, just before you and Michiko-san were married?'

We both laughed.

‘Two grandchildren,’ Matsuda said again. ‘Now, there’s something to look forward to.’

‘Indeed. I’ve been most fortunate as regards my daughters.’

‘And tell me, Ono, are you painting these days?’

‘A few watercolours to pass the time. Plants and flowers mostly, just for my own amusement.’

‘I’m glad to hear you’re painting again in any case. When you last came to see me, you seemed to have given up painting for good. You were very disillusioned then.’

‘No doubt I was. I didn’t touch paints for a long time.’

‘Yes, Ono, you seemed very disillusioned.’ Then he looked up at me with a smile and said: ‘But then of course, you wanted so badly to make a grand contribution.’

I returned his smile, saying: ‘But so did you, Matsuda. Your goals were no less grand. It was you, after all, who composed that manifesto for our China crisis campaign. Those were hardly the most modest of aspirations.’

We both laughed again. Then he said:

‘No doubt you’ll remember, Ono, how I used to call you naïve. How I used to tease you for your narrow artist’s perspective. You used to get so angry with me. Well, it seems in the end neither of us had a broad enough view.’

‘I suppose that’s right. But if we’d seen things a little more clearly, then the likes of you and I me, Matsuda – who knows? – we may have done some real good. We had much energy and courage once. Indeed, we must have had plenty of both to conduct something like that New Japan campaign, you remember?’

‘Indeed. There were some powerful forces set against us then. We might easily have lost our nerve. I suppose we must

have been very determined, Ono. ’

‘But then I for one never saw things too clearly. A narrow artist’s perspective, as you say. Why, even now, I find it hard to think of the world extending much beyond this city. ’

‘These days’ , Matsuda said, ‘I find it hard to think of the world extending much beyond my garden. So perhaps you’re the one with the wider perspective now, Ono. ’

We laughed together once more, then Matsuda took a sip from his teacup.

‘But there’s no need to blame ourselves unduly,’ he said. ‘We at least acted on what we believed and did our utmost. It’s just that in the end we turned out to be ordinary men. Ordinary men with no special gifts of insight. It was simply our misfortune to have been ordinary men during such times. ’

Matsuda’s earlier reference to his garden had drawn my attention in that direction. It was a mild spring afternoon, and Miss Suzuki had left a screen partially open, so that from where I sat I could see the sun reflected brightly on the polished boards of the veranda. A soft breeze was coming into the room, and with it a faint odour of smoke. I rose to my feet and went over to the screens.

‘The smell of burning still makes me uneasy,’ I remarked. ‘It’s not so long ago it meant bombings and fire. ’ I went on gazing out on to the garden for a moment, then added: ‘Next month, it will be five years already since Michiko died. ’

Matsuda remained silent for a while. Then I heard him say behind me:

‘These days, a smell of burning usually means a neighbour is clearing his garden. ’

Somewhere within the house, a clock began to chime.

‘It’s time to feed the carp,’ Matsuda said. ‘You know, I had to argue with Miss Suzuki for a long time before she would allow me to start feeding the carp again. I used to do it regularly, but then a few months ago, I tripped on one of those stepping stones. I had to argue with her a long time after that.’

Matsuda rose to his feet, and putting on some straw sandals left out on the veranda, we stepped down into the garden. The pond lay amidst sunshine at the far end of the garden and we proceeded with care along the stepping stones that ran across the smooth mounds of moss.

It was while we were standing at the edge of the pond, looking into the thick green water, that a sound made us both glance up. At a point not far from us, a small boy of about four or five was peering over the top of the garden fence, clinging with both arms to the branch of a tree. Matsuda smiled and called out:

‘Ah, good afternoon, Botchan!’

The boy went on staring at us for a moment, then vanished. Matsuda smiled and began to throw feed into the water. ‘Some neighbour’s boy,’ he said. ‘Every day at this time, he climbs up on that tree trunk to watch me come out and feed my fish. But he’s shy and if I try and speak to him he runs away.’ He gave a small laugh to himself. ‘I often wonder why he makes the effort like that every day. There’s nothing much for him to see. Just an old man with a stick, standing by his pond feeding the carp. I wonder what he finds so fascinating in such a scene.’

I looked over to the fence again to where a moment ago the small face had been, and said: ‘Well, today he got a surprise. Today, he saw two old men with sticks, standing by the pond.’

Matsuda laughed happily and went on throwing feed into the water. Two or three splendid carp had come to the

surface, their scales glistening in the sunlight.

‘Army officers, politicians, businessmen,’ Matsuda said. ‘They’ve all been blamed for what happened to this country. But as for the likes of us, Ono, our contribution was always marginal. No one cares now what the likes of you and me once did. They look at us and see only two old men with their sticks.’ He smiled at me, then went on feeding the fish. ‘We’re the only ones who care now. The likes of you and me, Ono, when we look back over our lives and see they were flawed, we’re the only ones who care now.’

But even as he uttered such words, there remained something in Matsuda’s manner that afternoon to suggest he was anything but a disillusioned man. And surely there was no reason for him to have died disillusioned. He may indeed have looked back over his life and seen certain flaws, but surely he would have recognized also those aspects he could feel proud of. For, as he pointed out himself, the likes of him and me, we have the satisfaction of knowing that whatever we did, we did at the time in the best of faith. Of course, we took some bold steps and often did things with much single-mindedness; but this is surely preferable to never putting one’s convictions to the test, for lack of will or courage. When one holds convictions deeply enough, there surely comes a point when it is despicable to prevaricate further. I feel confident Matsuda would have thought along these same lines when looking back over his life.

There is a particular moment I often bring to my mind - it was in the May of 1938, just after I had been presented with the Shigeta Foundation Award. By that point in my career I had received various awards and honours, but the Shigeta Foundation Award was in most people’s view a major milestone. In addition, as I recall, we had finished that same week our New Japan campaign, which had proved a great success. The night after the presentation, then, was one of much celebrating. I remember sitting in the Migi-Hidari, surrounded by my pupils and various of my colleagues, being

plied with drink, listening to speech after speech in tribute to me. All manner of acquaintances called in to the Migi-Hidari that night to offer their congratulations; I even recall a chief of police I had never met before coming in to pay his respects. But happy as I was that night, the feeling of deep triumph and fulfilment which the award should have brought was curiously missing. In fact, I was not to experience such a feeling until a few days later, when I was out in the hilly countryside of the Wakaba province.

I had not been back to Wakaba for some sixteen years - not since that day I had left Mori-san's villa, determined, but nevertheless fearful that the future held nothing for me. Over the course of those years, though I had broken all formal contacts with Mori-san, I had remained curious of any news concerning my old teacher, and so was fully aware of the steady decline of his reputation in the city. His endeavours to bring European influence into the Utamaro tradition had come to be regarded as fundamentally unpatriotic, and he would be heard of from time to time holding struggling exhibitions at ever less prestigious venues. In fact, I had heard from more than one source that he had begun illustrating popular magazines to maintain his income. At the same time, I could be quite confident Mori-san had followed the course of my career and there was every chance he had heard of my receiving the Shigeta Foundation Award. It was then with a keen awareness of the changes time had brought on us that I stepped off the train at the village station that day.

It was a sunny spring afternoon as I set off towards Mori-san's villa along those hilly paths through the woodland. I went slowly, savouring the experience of that walk I had once known so well. And all the while I turned over in my mind what might occur when I came face to face with Mori-san once more. Perhaps he would receive me as an honoured guest; or perhaps he would be as cold and distant as during my final days at the villa; then again, he might

behave towards me in much the way he had always done while I had been his favourite pupil - that is, as though the great changes in our respective status had not occurred. The last of these possibilities struck me as the most likely and I remember considering how I would respond. I would not, I resolved, revert to old habits and address him as 'Sensei'; instead, I would simply address him as though he were a colleague. And if he persisted in failing to acknowledge the position I now occupied, I would say, with a friendly laugh, something to the effect of: 'As you see, Mori-san, I have not been obliged to spend my time illustrating comic books as you once feared.'

In time I found myself at that spot on the high mountain path that gave a fine view of the villa standing amongst trees in the hollow below. I paused a moment to admire that view, as I had often done years before. There was a refreshing wind, and down in the hollow, I could see the trees swaying gently. I wondered to myself if the villa had been renovated, but it was impossible to ascertain from such a distance.

After a while, I seated myself amidst the wild grass growing along the ridge and went on gazing at Mori-san's villa. I had bought some oranges at a stall by the village station, and taking these from my kerchief, I began to eat them one by one. And it was as I sat there, looking down at the villa, enjoying the taste of those fresh oranges, that that deep sense of triumph and satisfaction began to rise within me. It is hard to describe the feeling, for it was quite different from the sort of elation one feels from smaller triumphs - and, as I say, quite different from anything I had experienced during the celebrations at the Migi-Hidari. It was a profound sense of happiness deriving from the conviction that one's efforts have been justified; that the hard work undertaken, the doubts overcome, have all been worthwhile; that one has achieved something of real value and distinction. I did not go any further towards the

villa that day - it seemed quite pointless. I simply continued to sit there for an hour or so, in deep contentment, eating my oranges.

It is not, I fancy, a feeling many people will come to experience. The likes of the Tortoise - the likes of Shintaro - they may plod on, competent and inoffensive, but their kind will never know the sort of happiness I felt that day. For their kind do not know what it is to risk everything in the endeavour to rise above the mediocre.

Matsuda, though, was a different case. Although he and I often quarrelled, our approaches to life were identical, and I am confident he would have been able to look back on one or two such moments. Indeed, I am sure he was thinking along these lines when he said to me that last time we spoke, a gentle smile on his face: 'We at least acted on what we believed and did our utmost.' For however one may come in later years to reassess one's achievements, it is always a consolation to know that one's life has contained a moment or two of real satisfaction such as I experienced that day up on that high mountain path.

Yesterday morning, after standing on the Bridge of Hesitation for some moments thinking about Matsuda, I walked on to where our pleasure district used to be. The area has now been rebuilt and has become quite unrecognizable. The narrow little street that once ran through the centre of the district, crowded with people and the cloth banners of the various establishments, has now been replaced by a wide concrete road along which heavy trucks come and go all day. Where Mrs Kawakami's stood, there is now a glass-fronted office building, four storeys high. Neighbouring it are more such large buildings, and during the day, one can see office workers, delivery men, messengers, all moving busily in and out of them. There are no bars now until one reaches Furu-kawa, but here and there, one may recognize a piece of fencing or else a tree, left over from the old days, looking oddly incongruous in its new setting.

Where the Migi-Hidari once stood is now a front yard for a group of offices set back from the road. Some of the senior employees leave their cars in this yard, but it is for the most part a clear space of tarmac with a few young trees planted at various points. At the front of this yard, facing the road, there is a bench of the sort one may find in a park. For whose benefit it has been placed there, I do not know, for I have never seen any of these busy people ever stopping to relax on it. But it is my fancy that the bench occupies a spot very close to where our old table in the Migi-Hidari would have been situated, and I have taken at times to sitting on it. It may well not be a public bench, but then it is close to the pavement, and no one has ever objected to my sitting there. Yesterday morning, with the sun shining pleasantly, I sat down on it again and remained there for a while, observing the activity around me.

It must have been approaching the lunch hour by then, for across the road I could see groups of employees in their bright white shirtsleeves emerging from the glass-fronted building where Mrs Kawakami's used to be. And as I watched, I was struck by how full of optimism and enthusiasm these young people were. At one point, two young men leaving the building stopped to talk with a third who was on his way in. They stood on the doorsteps of that glass-fronted building, laughing together in the sunshine. One young man, whose face I could see most clearly, was laughing in a particularly cheerful manner, with something of the open innocence of a child. Then with a quick gesture, the three colleagues parted and went their ways.

I smiled to myself as I watched these young office workers from my bench. Of course, at times, when I remember those brightly-lit bars and all those people gathered beneath the lamps, laughing a little more boisterously perhaps than those young men yesterday, but with much the same good-heartedness, I feel a certain nostalgia for the past and the district as it used to be. But to see how our city has been

rebuilt, how things have recovered so rapidly over these years, fills me with genuine gladness. Our nation, it seems, whatever mistakes it may have made in the past, has now another chance to make a better go of things. One can only wish these young people well.

双语版石黑一雄作品

被掩埋的巨人

The Buried Giant

二〇一七年诺贝尔文学奖获奖作家

Kazuo Ishiguro



〔英〕石黑一雄

著

周小进

译

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被掩埋的巨人

献给黛博拉·罗杰斯（1938—2014）

第一部

第一章

要找到后来令英格兰闻名的那种曲折小道和静谧草场，你可能要花很长时间。目之所及，尽是荒无人烟的土地；山岩嶙峋，荒野萧瑟，偶尔会有人工开凿的粗糙小路。罗马人留下来的大道，那时候大多已经损毁，或者长满杂草野树，没入了荒野。河流沼泽上，压着冰冷的雾气，正适合仍在这片土地上活动的食人兽⁽¹⁾。住在附近的人们——什么样的绝境使他们到这种阴冷的地方安家呢——很可能畏惧这些巨兽，它们粗重的喘气声很远就能听到，过一会儿雾气中才会显露出它们丑陋的躯体。但是，这些怪兽不会令人诧异。那时人们应该把食人兽当成日常的危险，何况还有很多要担心的事情。怎样从坚硬的土地上获取食物；怎样避免柴火烧完；怎样阻止一天能杀死十几头猪、让孩子脸颊上长出绿色皮疹的那种疾病。

反正食人兽不算太坏，只要别去激怒它们。不过事实还是必须接受：不时会有一个家伙，或许是和同类发生了争执，跌跌撞撞闯进某个村庄，发着可怕的怒火，人们叫喊着，挥舞着武器，但它全不理睬，横冲直闯，躲闪不及的都要受伤。或者，不时会有食人兽把某个孩子抓到迷雾里。对于这种灾害，当时的人们只好看得超脱一点。

在一片大沼泽附近，就有这么一块地方，坐落在嶙峋的山峦投下的阴影之中。这儿住着一对年老的夫妇，男的叫埃克索，女的叫比特丽丝。也许这不是他们准确的名字，也不是全名，但为了方便起见，我们就这么称呼他们吧。我本来想说，这对夫妇过着“孤独”的生活，但根据我们对这个词的理解，那时候没有人是“孤独”的。为了取暖和安全，村民们生活在室内，住的地方多从山腰挖进去，深入山腹，有地下通道和走廊相互连通。我们这对老夫妇，就生活在这样一个大巢穴里，算不上是“建筑”吧，和大约六十位村民住在一起。如果你离开他们的巢穴，沿着山脚走二十分钟，应该就会看到第二个村庄，在你眼里，和第一个没什么不同。但对村民自己来说，肯定有很多细微的差别，有的让他们骄傲，有的让他们羞愧。

我无意让人觉得，那时候的英国就只有这些东西，以为当辉煌的文明在世界其他地方蓬勃发展之时，我们这儿的人还刚刚走出铁器时代。假使你能够在乡间漫游，定会遇到有音乐、美食和高超竞技技巧的城堡，或者有饱学之士的修道院。问题是没法到处旅行。就算有一

匹强健的马，天气晴好，一连走上好几天，你也可能看不到绿林中露出城堡或修道院来。你碰到的很可能都是我刚刚描述过的这种村落；而且，除非随身携带食品或衣物作为礼品，或配备令人生畏的武器，否则未必会受到欢迎。很遗憾我描绘了当时我们国家的这么一幅景象，但事实就是这样。

回头说说埃克索和比特丽丝吧。我说过，这对年老的夫妇住在巢穴的外围，住所受自然的侵袭较多，大家晚上聚集的“大室”中烧着火堆，但他们几乎享受不到。以前某个时候，他们也许曾住在火堆附近——和孩子们住在一起的时候。实际上，浮现在埃克索脑海中的正是这个念头。这是黎明前那段空寂的时光，他躺在床上，妻子在身旁酣睡，一种莫名的失落感噬咬着他的心，让他无法再次入睡。

也许，正是因为这个原因，这天夜里，埃克索干脆下了床，悄悄溜到屋外，在巢穴入口旁那条破旧的板凳上坐下，等候着晨曦的来临。这时候是春天，但空气仍然刺骨，虽然埃克索出来的时候，随手拿起了比特丽丝的斗篷披在身上。不过，他一直沉浸在思绪之中，等他意识到冷的时候，天上几乎都没了星星，一片亮光从地平线上蔓延开来，昏暗中传来第一声鸟鸣。

他缓缓站起身，心里后悔在外面待得太久。他身体健康，但上次发烧花了挺长时间才恢复，他可不想又发起热来。现在他能感受到腿部的湿气，不过转身进屋的时候，他感觉很满足：因为几件在记忆中躲藏了许久的事情，今天早晨他终于想起来了。而且，他现在觉得某个重大决定快要在他脑中成形了，一个推迟了太久的决定，所以心里颇为兴奋，急着要与妻子分享。

屋内，巢穴里的通道仍旧漆黑一团，他只好摸索着走过那一小段路，回到住处。巢穴内所谓的“门”，大多不过是个拱廊，算是进入住处的标记。这种开放的布局，村民们不会认为有碍隐私，反而有利于房间保暖，大火堆或巢穴里许可的其他小火堆的暖气能通过通道传来。然而，埃克索和比特丽丝的房间远离火堆，倒有一扇真正的门，一个木头做的大框，上面纵横交错地绑着小树枝、蓟条和藤萝，要把它们撩到一边才能进出，但能挡住寒风。这扇门埃克索宁愿不要，但时日久了，门已经成为令比特丽丝颇感骄傲的物品。回家的时候，他常常发现妻子正在摘掉门上已经枯萎的藤蔓，换上她白天采摘来的新枝。

这天早晨，埃克索把门帘撩开一点点，刚好能让自己进屋，小心翼翼不吵醒妻子。晨曦透过外墙上的细缝渗入屋内。他能隐约看到自

己的手，干草皮铺成的床上，比特丽丝盖着厚厚的毯子，还在沉睡。

他想喊醒妻子。因为心里有个声音告诉他，此时此刻，如果妻子醒着、与他说话，他和那个决定之间无论还有什么阻碍，都会瞬间瓦解。可时候还早，要等一会儿村民们才会起床，开始一天的劳作，于是他在房间角落里那张矮凳上坐下来，身上仍旧紧紧裹着妻子的斗篷。

他心想，不知道今天早上的雾有多重，天光渐亮，也许等会儿能看到雾从墙壁缝隙里渗入房间。接着，他的思绪又飘离了这些事情，回到他此前一直考虑的问题上。他们一直是这么生活的吗，就两个人，住在村子的边缘？抑或以前情况不是这样？刚才，在屋外，他回想起了以前的一些片段：那是个短暂的时刻，他走在巢穴中央长长的过道上，一条胳膊挽着自己的一个孩子，走路时微微弓着身，不是因为像现在这样上了年纪，而是不希望脑袋在昏暗中撞上屋梁。当时孩子可能在跟他说话，讲了什么好笑的事，两人都在大笑。可是现在呢，和之前在外面的时候一样，他脑子里一片模糊，越集中精力，那些片段似乎就越不清晰。也许这一切都是个老傻瓜的想象。也许上帝从来没有赐予他们孩子。

你可能会想，埃克索为什么不去找其他村民帮助他回忆往事呢？但这可能不像你想得这么容易。因为在这个群体中，人们很少谈论过去。我倒不是说这是什么禁忌。我是说，过去消失在一片迷雾之中，就像沼泽地上的雾气一样。这些村民就从没想过要去回想往事——哪怕是刚刚过去的事情。

举个例子吧。有件事已经让埃克索心烦了很长时间：他肯定，不久前村子里有个女人，长长的红色头发——大家认为这个女人对村庄很重要。有人受了伤或生了病，大家就立即去请这个红头发的女人，她有高超的治疗技能。可是，现在哪儿也找不到这个女人，好像也没人去想这是怎么回事，她不在了，都没人表示遗憾。有天上午，埃克索和三个邻居一起挖开霜冻的土地时，提起过这件事情，从他们的反应来看，他们是真的不明白他在说什么。其中一位还停下手中的农活，努力回想，但最后还是摇了摇头。“肯定是很久很久以前的事情，”他说。

一天晚上，他跟比特丽丝提起这事。“我也不记得这个女人，”比特丽丝说。“也许你是出于自己的需要，想出了这么个女的，埃克索，虽然你身旁已经有个妻子了，腰板比你自已还直呢。”

这是去年秋天什么时候的事情，当时周围一片黑暗，两人并肩躺在床上，听着外面雨打房屋的声音。

“我的公主，这么多年你的确一点儿也没老，”埃克索说道。“但这个女人不是我想象出来的，只要花点时间想一想，你自己也会记起来。一个月前，她就在我们家门口，友好地问我们，需不需要她带点什么东西来。你肯定还记得吧。”

“可她为什么要给我们带东西呢？她是我们的亲戚吗？”

“我想不是亲戚，公主。她就是好心帮忙。你肯定记得吧。她常到门口来，问我们冷不冷、饿不饿。”

“埃克索，我想问的是，她为什么要单单把我们挑出来，要帮我们的忙？”

“当时我也感到疑惑，公主。我还记得，当时我想，这个女人专门照顾病人，可我们两人和村里其他人一样健康啊。难道有消息说要发瘟疫了，所以她来看看我们？可结果呢，没有瘟疫，她就是好心帮忙。现在我们谈起了她，我就能回想起更多事情了。她就站在那儿，跟我们说，孩子们骂我们，不用去理会。就这样。后来我们就没见过她了。”

“埃克索啊，这个红头发的女人是你凭空想出来的，而且她还是个傻瓜，竟然去担心几个孩子的游戏。”

“我当时正是这么想的，公主。孩子们哪能伤害到我们呢，不过是外面天气不好，他们找点乐子而已。我跟她说，我们根本就没想过这事，可她终究还是好心。现在我想起来了，她还说，我们晚上没有蜡烛，是个遗憾。”

“如果这家伙同情我们没有蜡烛的话，”比特丽丝说道，“那她至少弄对了一件事情。这是对我们的侮辱，我们的手和其他人一样稳，却禁止我们在这样的晚上用蜡烛。别人的屋子里点着蜡烛，他们喝多了苹果酒，都醉得不省人事，要不就是一大堆孩子乱跑。他们拿的是我们的蜡烛，现在你就在我身边，埃克索，可我却几乎看不见你的身体。”

“公主啊，这不是有意要侮辱我们。事情一直就是这样罢了，没别的。”

“对了，拿走我们蜡烛这件事，不是只有你想出来的这个女人觉得奇怪。昨天，也许是前天吧，我在河边，从那些女人旁边经过，她们以为我走远了，听不见她们说话，但我肯定我听得明白，她们说，像我们这样正直的夫妻，每天晚上只能摸黑坐着，真是件不光彩的事情。所以呢，这样想的可不仅仅只有你想象出来的这个女人。”

“我的公主，我不是一直跟你说嘛，这不是我想象出来的女人。一个月前，这儿所有人都认识她，都讲她的好话。可现在每个人，包括你，都不记得有过这么个人，这是怎么回事呢？”

这个春天的早晨，埃克索回想着这段谈话，觉得自己几乎可以承认，关于红头发女人的事情，是自己弄错了。他毕竟上了年纪，偶尔会犯糊涂。但是，让人困惑的类似情景还有很多，红头发女人不过是其中一个而已。让人丧气的是，他一下子想不起来那么多的例子，但例子数不胜数，这一点他确信无疑。比如，跟玛塔有关的那件事情。

玛塔是个九岁或十岁的小姑娘，大家都知道她胆子大。孩子们到处乱跑会有危险，可那些令人毛骨悚然的故事都不能打消她对冒险的喜爱。那天傍晚，离天黑不到一小时，雾气已经聚起，山坡上传来狼的嚎叫声，这时候有消息说玛塔不见了，每个人都警觉地停下了手中的活儿。接下来不长的时间内，巢穴里到处都是呼喊她的声音，脚步声在通道里来来回回，村民们搜索了所有睡室、储物洞、椽子下方的空隙，寻遍了孩子找乐子的一切藏身之地。

在这慌乱之中，两名牧羊人从山坡上值勤归来，回到“大室”中，挨着火堆烤火。这时候，其中一位牧羊人说，头天他们看到一只金鹰在头顶盘旋，一圈、两圈，然后又绕了一圈。绝对没错，他说，那就是金鹰。消息很快在巢穴中传开去，不久火堆四周便围了一群人，听牧羊人讲故事。连埃克索也匆忙赶了过来，因为金鹰在这个地区出现，可是真正的新闻。金鹰有很多能力，其中一项是能够吓走狼群，据说在别的地方，因为这些大鸟，狼已经全部消失了。

一开始，人们迫切地盘问两位牧羊人，要他们一遍又一遍地重复这个故事。接着听众慢慢开始怀疑起来。有人指出，此前有多次类似的说法，可最后都没有依据。另一个人说，这两个牧羊人头一年春天讲过一模一样的故事，可后来再也没有人见到过他们说的金鹰。两位牧羊人愤怒地说，之前没有报告过，不久人群分成两派，一派站在牧羊人那边，一派则自称记得头一年发生过类似的情况。

就在争吵越来越激烈的时候，埃克索发现，自己又有了那熟悉的感觉：什么地方不对劲。他离开推搡着、叫嚷着的人群，走到外面，盯着渐暗下去的天空和地面上滚滚而过的迷雾。过了一会儿，各种碎片开始在他脑海里拼合起来：走失的玛塔、可能的危险、不久前大家都还在找她等等。但这些回忆已经开始模糊，就像醒来之后那几秒钟里回想的梦。人们仍在争论着金鹰的事情，声音从他身后传来，他拼命集中精力，才能抓住小玛塔这个念头。他就这样站在那儿，却突然听到一个女孩自顾自唱歌的声音，看到玛塔从迷雾里走出来，出现在他眼前。

“孩子啊，你可真是个奇怪的家伙，”玛塔蹦蹦跳跳走上来时，埃克索对她说。“你难道不害怕黑暗吗？不怕狼和食人兽？”

“噢，我害怕它们啊，先生，”她笑着说道。“可我知道怎么躲开它们。希望我父母没找我。上个星期我真被揍得够呛。”

“找你？他们当然找你。整个村子不都在找你吗？听听里面的吵闹声吧。那都是为了你啊，孩子。”

玛塔笑出声来，说道：“行了吧，先生！他们没有想我，我知道。我也能听到，他们可不是为我吵。”

她一说，埃克索就想起来，女孩的话当然是对的：里面的声音根本不是为她争吵，他们吵的完全是另外一件事情。他朝通道那边侧侧身，听得清楚一些，里面的声音大起来，他不时能听到只言片语，于是慢慢回想起牧羊人和金鹰的事情。他正在想是不是该跟玛塔解释一下，玛塔却突然从他身旁跳过去，进了屋。

他跟在后面，也进了屋，以为她一出现，大家肯定会感到欣慰、高兴。而且说实话，他心里也想过，和她一起走进来，自己多少也能得到一点儿功劳。可是，他们走进“大室”的时候，村民们还在聚精会神地争论着牧羊人的事情，只有几个人朝他们这边望了一眼。玛塔的母亲倒是从人群里跑出来，还跟她说了句话：“你在这儿啊！别这样乱跑！要跟你说多少次？”然后她的注意力又回到火堆旁的争论上去了。这时候玛塔冲埃克索做了个鬼脸，好像是说：“你看，我说的没错吧？”然后她消失在暗处，找她的伙伴去了。

屋里已经亮多了。他们俩的屋子在巢穴的外围，朝外开了一扇小窗，不过窗户太高，要站到板凳上才能望到外面。这时候窗户上盖了一块布，但清晨的第一缕阳光还是从一个角透进来，在比特丽丝静卧之处的上方形成一道光柱。埃克索看到，光柱里似乎有一只虫子，在

妻子脑袋上方的空气中盘旋。他随即意识到，那是一只蜘蛛，吊在一根看不见的垂直蛛丝上，就在他看的时候，蜘蛛开始向下滑动。埃克索悄无声息地站起身来，走到小屋子的另一侧，一只手从熟睡的妻子上方扫过，把蜘蛛抓住了。他站了一会儿，低头看着妻子。她熟睡的时候，脸上平静祥和，这种表情现在在她醒的时候已经难得一见了，这一幕让他突然有一种幸福感，他自己也觉得意外。这一刻，他知道自己已经做了决定，他又一次想唤醒妻子，跟她说这个消息。但他明白这会是个自私的行动，而且，他怎么能肯定妻子会有什么反应呢？最后，他静静地回到了凳子旁，坐下的时候，他想起那只蜘蛛来，缓缓摊开了手掌。

之前坐在外面的凳子上等待天亮的时候，他曾努力回想，自己和比特丽丝当初是怎么谈起出远门的念头的。当时他想，他能回忆起某个晚上两人就在这间屋里谈过一次，可是现在呢，看着蜘蛛在手掌边缘跑了一圈，落在泥土地面上，他突然感到很确定：第一次提及这个话题，就是穿黑色破布的陌生人经过村庄的那一天。

那是个灰蒙蒙的上午——难道已经是去年十一月的事情了？——埃克索正沿着河边一条垂柳匝地的小路大步往前走。他从地里回来，匆匆忙忙赶回巢穴，可能是回去拿工具，或是工头下了新的命令。这时，右边的灌木丛里突然传来一阵响亮的人声，他停下脚步。他第一个念头是来了食人兽，迅速在周围搜寻石头或木棒。随即他意识到，说话的声音——都是女的——虽然愤怒、激动，却没有食人兽袭击时的那种恐慌。不过，他还是坚定地穿过一排刺柏丛，来到一片空地上，看见五个女人紧紧站在一起——谈不上青春年少，不过也都是生儿育女的年纪。她们背对着他，仍然在冲远处的什么东西叫喊着。他都快走到跟前了，其中一个女人才惊讶地注意到了他，接着其他女人也都转过身来，有些傲慢地打量着他。

“哎呀呀，”其中一位说道。“是巧合吧，也许不仅仅是巧合呢。她丈夫来啦，也许能让她明白点儿。”

最先看到他的那个女人说：“我们让你妻子不要去，可她不听。她坚持要给那个陌生人送吃的，那很可能是个魔鬼，要不就是乔装改扮的什么妖精。”

“我妻子有危险吗？女士们，请你们把事情讲清楚。”

“有个奇怪的女人，一上午都在我们这儿晃来晃去，”另一个女人说。“头发披到背上，穿着黑色破布做的斗篷。她自称是撒克逊

人，可穿着和我们见过的撒克逊人都不一样。我们在河岸上洗东西的时候，她打算从我们身后悄悄爬上来，不过我们及时发现，把她赶走了。但她一直回来，有时候好像因为什么事情很伤心，有时候又找我们要吃的。现在我们觉得，先生啊，那时候她一直在冲你妻子施咒，因为比特丽丝一定要往魔鬼那儿跑，今天上午就已经两次了，我们只好拽住她的胳膊。现在她把我们赶开，跑到老刺树那儿去了，现在魔鬼就坐在那儿等着呢。先生，我们尽力拦她，可她身上肯定有魔鬼的力量，像你妻子这么瘦、这么老的女人，不可能有那么大力气。”

“老刺树……”

“她刚刚才出发，先生。可那一定是魔鬼，你要是去追她的话，要当心啊，别摔跤，要是被毒蓟草划伤，可好不了。”

埃克索努力不在这些女人面前流露出自己的厌烦。他礼貌地说，“非常感谢，女士们。我现在去看看我妻子要干什么。告辞。”

“老刺树”指的是一棵真正的山楂树，似乎直接长在一处高坡的岩石上，离巢穴只有几步之遥；不过，在我们的村民们看来，老刺树也是一个看美景的好去处。如果天气晴朗，风也不大，那可是打发时光的好地方。从脚下到河边的土地一览无余，能一直看到河湾和更远处的沼泽。星期天，孩子们常常在盘根错节的树根间玩耍，有时候还敢从高坡那头直接跳下去——那实际上只是个缓坡，孩子们不会受伤，只会像木桶一样顺着草坡滚下去。但是，如果是这样的上午，大人孩子都忙自己的事情，那儿就没人了，因此，埃克索穿过迷雾上坡时，看到只有两个女人，并不感到奇怪。两人的身形映在背后白色的天空上，几乎成了剪影。那个陌生人坐在那儿，背靠着岩石，穿着果然奇怪。至少从远处看，她的斗篷是用很多块布片缝起来的，在风里呼呼扇动，让她看起来像一只要飞起来的大鸟。比特丽丝在她身旁——还站着，低着头——显得娇小脆弱。两人正在急切地交谈，看到埃克索从坡下走来，两人停止了谈话，看着他。比特丽丝来到高坡的边缘朝下喊：

“就在那儿停下来，丈夫，不要往前走了！我过来。但你不要爬上来打扰这位可怜的女士，现在她总算能歇歇脚、吃点昨天的面包了。”

埃克索按妻子的要求等着，不久看到妻子沿着长长的田间道路，来到他站立的地方。她径直来到他跟前，用低低的声音说话，显然是担心他们的谈话会随风飘进陌生人的耳朵：

“那些愚蠢的女人让你来找我的吗，丈夫？我在她们那个年纪的时候，我敢肯定，充满恐惧和愚蠢信仰的是那些年纪大的，她们以为每块石头上都有魔咒，每只野猫都是邪恶的鬼魂。可现在我自己上了年纪，却发现相信这些的都是年轻人，好像他们从不知道主已经允诺一直与我们同在一样。看看那可怜的陌生人，你自己看看她，又疲劳又孤单，她在树林里、田野上游荡了四天，没有哪个村子让她逗留。这还是基督徒的地方呐，却把她当作魔鬼，或许当作麻风病人，虽然她皮肤上没什么痕迹。好啦，我的丈夫，我要给这个女人一点儿安慰，把身上这点儿可怜的食物给她，希望你不是来阻拦我的。”

“我可不会这么说，公主，因为我亲眼看到，你说的是真的。甚至到这儿之前，我就在想，我们都不会好心接待一位陌生人了，真是件羞耻的事情。”

“那么，我的丈夫，你就忙你的事情去吧，他们肯定又要抱怨你干活太慢了，而且马上又要教孩子们编排我们俩。”

“没人说过我干活慢，我的公主。你从哪儿听到这话的？我从没听谁抱怨过，我还能干重活儿，不比年轻二十岁的人差。”

“我的丈夫，我只是开个玩笑。没错，没有人抱怨你干活不好。”

“孩子们骂我们，跟我干活儿快慢没有关系，而且他们的父母太愚蠢，或者酒喝得太多了，没教他们文明礼貌、尊重别人。”

“别激动，丈夫。我跟你说了，我是开玩笑的，以后不会这么说了。刚才那个陌生人在跟我说事情，我很感兴趣，你可能也会感兴趣。不过我先要听她讲完，所以我再次请你去忙你自己的事情，让我听她说话，尽量给她一些安慰。”

“我刚才跟你说话也许太严厉了，很抱歉，公主。”

可比特丽丝已经转过身去，正沿着坡路往上走，要回到老刺树和那个斗篷呼呼扇动的人那儿。

过了一会儿，埃克索此事已了，该回到地里干活了。他冒着让其他工友们生气的风险，绕了点路，又从老刺树旁经过。因为，实际情况是，虽然他和妻子一样，瞧不起那些女人生性多疑，但他心里无法消除顾虑，觉得这个陌生人多少有些危险，让比特丽丝单独和那个女人在一起，他一直心中不安。看见妻子的身形，他松了口气。她一个人站在高坡的岩石前面，望着天空，似乎沉浸在思绪之中，他冲她喊

了一声，她这才注意到他。看着她下坡，比以前更加缓慢，他心里又一次想到，最近她的步伐好像有点不一样。倒不是一瘸一拐，而是似乎身上有什么部位隐隐作痛。她走到近前，他问道，她那位奇怪的同伴怎么啦，比特丽丝简洁地回答：“她走了。”

“她该感谢你的好心吧，公主。你和她谈了很久吗？”

“很久，她有很多事情要说。”

“她说的话让你烦恼了，我的公主，我能看出来。也许那些女人说得对，还是避开她比较好。”

“她没让我烦恼，埃克索。不过她让我思考。”

“你的情绪很奇怪。你确定她消失之前没给你上魔咒？”

“丈夫啊，你爬上坡到刺树那儿去，就能看到她在路上，刚刚才动身。她希望山那边的人们会更热情一些。”

“那好吧，既然你没什么事儿，我就走啦，我的公主。你行了善，上帝会高兴的，你一直就这么好心。”

可是，这一次，他妻子似乎不愿意放他走。她抓住他的胳膊，好像临时要借助他稳住身子，然后把脑袋靠在他胸前。他一只手本能地抬起来，抚摸她被风吹乱的头发。他低头看了她一眼，惊讶地发现她的眼睛仍旧睁得大大的。

“你的情绪很奇怪，真的，”他说。“陌生人都跟你说了什么？”

她脑袋又在他胸前靠了一会儿。然后她直起身子，放开了他。“现在想起来啊，埃克索，你一直说的话可能还真有些道理。大家都在忘记昨天和前天的事情，真是奇怪啊。像是我们都得了什么毛病一样。”

“我以前就说过嘛，公主。比如那个红头发的女人……”

“别管红头发的女人了，埃克索。是我们没记住的其他事情。”说这话的时候，她望着远方的重重迷雾，可现在她却直愣愣地看着他，他看到她眼里充满忧伤与渴望。就在那时——他肯定——她对他说：“埃克索，我知道，你很早以前就下定决心反对这件事了。但现在在该重新考虑了。我们必须出门一趟，不能耽搁。”

“出门，公主？出门干什么呢？”

“到我们儿子的村庄去。丈夫啊，我俩都知道，那并不远。就算我们走得慢，最多几天也就到了，大平原再往东一点儿。何况春天很快就到了。”

“我们当然可以出趟门，公主。是不是刚才那个陌生人说的什么话让你想起来了呢？”

“我想这件事很长时间了，埃克索，不过刚才那个可怜的女人说了些话，的确让我希望不要再耽搁了。儿子在他的村庄里等着我们。我们还要让他等多久呢？”

“等春天来了，公主，我们一定要考虑出门的事。可你为什么说，是我一直不希望这么做呢？”

“埃克索，这件事情我们俩以前是怎么谈的，我已经不太记得了。只记得你总是反对的，虽然我很渴望去。”

“好吧，我的公主，等手头没活儿了，邻居们也不会骂我们磨蹭，我们再来谈这件事吧。现在我该走了。很快我们会继续商量这件事的。”

然而，在接下来的几天内，他们虽然提到过出门的想法，却从没好好商量过。因为他们发现，一提起这个话题，两人就有一种奇怪的、不舒服的感觉，于是和其他多年的夫妻一样，两人慢慢达成了默契，尽可能避开这个话题。我说的是“尽可能”，因为有时似乎有谈的必要——你甚至可以说，有这个冲动——两人中有一个无法克服。但两人在这种情况下的谈话，不可避免地都在支吾其词或情绪失控中很快结束。那一次，埃克索直截了当地问妻子，那个陌生的女人那天在老刺树下跟她说了什么，比特丽丝的脸上立即笼罩了阴云，有一下子似乎眼泪都快出来了。此后，埃克索就小心翼翼，避免提到那个陌生人。

过了一段时间，埃克索已经记不起来最初怎么谈起了出门的事情，也不记得当时两人都是怎么想的。但是这天早晨，天亮前的那个寒冷时刻，他坐在外面，至少一部分记忆变得清晰起来，他回想起了很多事情：红头发的女人、玛塔、披黑色破布斗篷的陌生人，还有我们在此不必关心的很多往事。他还清晰地记起了几周前的那个星期天发生的事情，那天他们夺走了比特丽丝的蜡烛。

对这些村民来说，星期天是休息的日子，至少不需要到田地里干活。但牲口仍要照料，有很多事情等着去做，禁止一切可能称为劳作

的事情是不可能的，牧师也接受了这一点。那个星期天，早晨埃克索补好靴子，然后走出屋子，来到春日的阳光下，看到邻居们全在巢穴外面，一些坐在草地上，另一些坐在小凳子或木头上，谈着，笑着，干着活儿。孩子们到处玩，有两个人在草坪上制作车轮，一帮孩子围着他们看。这一年里，这是第一个天气晴好、可以进行这种户外活动的星期天，因此有种节日般的气氛。埃克索站在巢穴入口处，目光越过村民们，望着远处的平地变成了下行的缓坡，与沼泽相连。这时候，他能看见迷雾又升了起来，心想，到下午，大家又要裹在灰色的蒙蒙雨雾中了。

站了一会儿，他意识到，牧羊草场篱笆那边，发生了一阵骚乱。一开始他没当回事，可随后他耳朵捕捉到了随风飘来的声音，立即紧张起来。埃克索上了年纪，视力已经不太行了，非常恼人，但他的耳朵仍然可靠，从篱笆边的人群发出的混乱叫嚷声中，他辨别出了比特丽丝的声音，比平时高，似乎很伤心。

其他人都停下来，转过身睁大眼睛看着。这时埃克索急急忙忙从他们中间穿过，差点儿撞上乱走的孩子和丢在草地上的物品。可是，他还没来得及赶到那一小撮推推搡搡的人群跟前，人群突然散开了，比特丽丝从中间挤出来，双手把什么东西抓在怀里。周围的面孔大多流露出好笑的表情，但随即出现在他妻子身旁的那个女人——一个寡妇，她的铁匠丈夫头一年死于发热——却怒气冲冲，面孔都扭曲了。比特丽丝甩开欺负她的人，她自己脸上一直罩着一层近乎木然的严霜，可一见到埃克索正朝她走来，那张脸上立即绽出生动的表情。

现在想来，埃克索觉得，当时妻子似乎满脸欣慰，而不是别的模样。比特丽丝倒不是觉得，他来一切就会万事大吉；但他一出现，事情对她来说就完全不同了。她盯着他，不仅面露欣慰，还有几乎恳求的表情，接着将她一直小心守护着的物品递到他跟前。

“这是我们的，埃克索！我们再也不用在黑暗中坐着了。快拿好，我的丈夫，这是我们的！”

她递到他跟前的，是一根多少有些变形的粗短蜡烛。铁匠的遗孀又一次想把蜡烛夺走，但比特丽丝把伸过来的那只手打开了。

“拿着，丈夫！那边那个孩子——小诺拉，她今天上午自己做的，做好就给我了，她觉得我们肯定不愿意再这么过夜了。”

这话引起了新一轮的叫喊声，有些人大笑起来。但比特丽丝仍旧盯着埃克索，脸上充满信任和恳求。今天清晨，他坐在巢穴外面的凳

子上等待天明时，最先回想起来的的就是当时她脸上的那副模样。这个场景不过是三个星期前的事情，后来他怎么就忘了呢？为什么后来他从没想起过，到今天才回忆起来呢？

他伸出了一只手，却没能拿到蜡烛——人群挡住了他，无法靠近——当时他充满信心地大声说：“不要担心，公主。你不要担心。”就在说的时候，他已经意识到这话很空洞，所以看到人群安静下来，连铁匠的遗孀都退了一步，他感到非常惊讶。随即他发现，人群的反应不是因为他的话，而是因为牧师从他身后走了过来。

“在主日里，这是闹什么呢？”牧师从埃克索身旁大步走过，瞪着一言不发的人群。“啊？”

“先生，是因为比特丽丝女士，”铁匠的遗孀说。“她弄来了一根蜡烛。”

比特丽丝的脸上又罩了一层霜，但牧师看着她的时候，她并没有避开他的目光。

“我能看出来，这话是真的，比特丽丝女士，”牧师说道。“你应该没忘记吧，议事会有决定，你和你丈夫不得在室内使用蜡烛。”

“先生，我们俩一辈子都没有打翻过蜡烛。我们不愿意整晚整晚都在黑暗中坐着。”

“已经决定了，你们必须遵守，除非议事会另做决定。”

埃克索看到她的眼里闪着怒火。“这是纯粹的恶毒。恶毒。”这话她说得很轻，几乎是喃喃自语，但说话时眼睛直愣愣地盯着牧师。

“拿走她的蜡烛，”牧师说。“照我说的办。把蜡烛拿走。”

几只手向她伸过来，在埃克索看来，她似乎没有完全明白牧师的意思。因为她站在拥挤的人群中间，眼神迷茫，手里还紧紧抓着蜡烛，似乎出于某种她已经忘记的本能。然后她再次恐慌起来，又把蜡烛朝埃克索这边递，她的身体踉跄了一下，但手势却没变。人们挤到她身上，但她并没有摔倒，重新站稳之后，她又一次把蜡烛递给他。他想去接，可另一只手一把抢走了蜡烛，接着传来了牧师低沉的声音：

“够了！让比特丽丝女士安静一下，谁也不许对她恶言恶语。她上了年纪，不明白自己做的事情。我说，够了！这种行为，不符合主日。”

埃克索终于能接近她，把她抱在怀里，人群渐渐散开。回想那一刻，埃克索觉得当时两人就这样紧贴在一起站了很久，她的头靠在他胸前，就像那个陌生女人来的那天一样，好像她只是累了，需要喘口气。他一直抱着她，牧师再次让大家散开。最后他们终于分开了，两人看看四周，发现已经没有其他人了，只有他们两个，站在牧羊草场上栓的木门旁边。

“这有什么关系呢，公主？”他说道。“我们要蜡烛做什么呢？没有蜡烛在屋子里活动，我们都习惯了。不管有没有蜡烛，我们两人说说话不都是很开心的吗？”

他仔细打量着她。她显得神情恍惚，倒不是特别伤心。

“对不起啊，埃克索，”她说。“蜡烛没了。我应该保密，不让其他人知道。可小姑娘给我蜡烛的时候，我太高兴了，还是她自己专门给我们做的呢。现在蜡烛没了。没关系。”

“完全没有关系，公主。”

“埃克索，他们认为我们俩是一对傻瓜。”

她向前迈了一步，又把头搁在他胸前。就是在这个时候，她说起了儿子。她头在他怀里，声音不清晰，一开始他还以为听错了。

“我们的儿子啊，埃克索。你记得我们的儿子吗？他们刚才推我的时候，我想起了我们的儿子。一个强壮、正直的男子汉。我们为什么要留在这个地方？我们到儿子的村庄去吧。他会保护我们，保证没人欺负我们。都这么多年过去了，埃克索，你心里的主意就不能改吗？你还认为我们不能去？”

她对着他的胸口轻柔地说着这些话，许多记忆的片段浮现在埃克索的脑海里，往事纷至沓来，他感觉都快晕了。他松开手，往后退了一步，担心自己站立不稳，妻子也跟着摔跤。

“你这说的是什么话呢，公主？以前是我阻止我们去儿子的村庄吗？”

“当然是你啊，埃克索。当然是你。”

“公主，我为什么要反对去呢？”

“我一直都认为你是反对的，丈夫。可是，哎呀，埃克索，你有没有质疑，我现在记不清楚了。今天天气不错，可我们为什么要在外面站着呢？”

比特丽丝似乎又有些恍惚。她盯着他的脸，又看看周围，望望和煦的阳光，邻居们又开始关注他们俩了。

“我们回屋子里坐着吧，”过了一会儿，她说道。“就我们俩单独待一会儿。天气很好，没错，可我太累了。我们进屋去吧。”

“没错，公主。避开这阳光，坐下来，休息一会儿。你很快就会觉得好一些。”

巢穴各处，其他人开始起床了。牧羊人肯定早就出去了，可他一直沉浸在思绪中，没听到牧羊人出门的声音。在屋子的另一边，比特丽丝发出了喃喃的声音，好像要开口唱歌一样，然后在毯子下面翻了个身。埃克索察觉到了这些动静，静静地走过来，轻轻地在床边坐下，等着。

比特丽丝翻过身来，仰面躺着，懵懵懂懂睁开眼睛，看着埃克索。

“早上好啊，丈夫，”她终于开口说道。“很高兴我睡觉的时候，精灵们没把你抓走。”

“公主，我有事要跟你谈。”

比特丽丝仍旧凝视着他，眼睛还是半睁半闭。然后她起身坐好，早先照亮蜘蛛的那束光，现在落在她脸上。她灰色的头发蓬松散乱，垂在肩膀上，但埃克索看到她在晨光中的这副模样，心里觉得很高兴。

“你想谈什么呢，埃克索，都等不及让我揉揉眼睛醒醒神儿？”

“公主，我们以前谈过可以出趟门。你看，现在春天到了，也许是该出发了。”

“出发，埃克索？什么时候出发？”

“能走就马上走。我们只需要离开几天。我们走了，村子里没有关系。我们去跟牧师说一下。”

“我们要去见儿子，埃克索？”

“是啊。去见我们的儿子。”

外面，鸟儿们已在欢唱。比特丽丝目光转向窗户，看着透过布照进来的阳光。

“有些日子里，我能清楚地想起他来，”她说。“可是，过了一天，我的记忆就好像蒙了一层雾。不过，我们的儿子是个善良的男子汉，这我能肯定。”

“公主啊，他现在为什么不和我们在一起了呢？”

“我不知道，埃克索。也许他和长老们吵了架，不走不行吧。我问过大家，这儿没人记得他。但他肯定没做过什么丢脸的事情，这我能肯定。你自己什么都不记得了吗，埃克索？”

“刚才在外面，安安静静的，我尽量去回忆，想起了很多事情。可现在我想不起儿子来，不记得他的脸或者声音，虽然有时候我想我能够看到他小时候的样子，有一次我牵着他的手在河岸上走，还有一次他在哭，我过去安慰他。但是，今天他是什么模样，在哪里住，他自己是不是也有儿子了，我统统不记得。公主啊，我还希望你能记得多一些呢。”

“他是我们的儿子，”比特丽丝说。“所以就算记不清楚，我也能感觉到他的一些事情。而且我知道，他希望我们离开这个地方，和他一起过，让他保护我们。”

“他是我们生的，当然会希望我们和他一起生活。”

“说是这么说，埃克索啊，我还是会想念这个地方的。我们俩这间小屋，这个村子。离开一辈子生活的村庄可不容易呢。”

“公主，没人逼我们鲁莽行事。刚才等太阳起山的时候，我在想，我们需要出趟门，到儿子的村庄去，和他谈谈。就算我们是他的父母，也不能在某个天气晴朗的日子里突然冒出来，要求住在他的村子里。”

“你说得对，丈夫。”

“公主啊，还有一件事让我担心。也许像你所说的那样，那个村子走几天就到了。可我们上哪儿去找呢？”

比特丽丝沉默了，眼睛凝视着面前的空气，肩膀随呼吸轻轻晃动。“我相信我们会知道路的，埃克索，”过了一会儿，她开口说道。“现在我们还不知道他究竟住在哪个村子，但是和其他女人把我们的蜂蜜和锡拿出去交易的时候，我肯定常常路过附近的村庄。我闭着眼睛都能走到大平原，还有那个撒克逊村子，从我们经常歇脚的地

方再往前去一点儿就是。儿子的村庄，再往前走一点儿应该就到了，所以找到他的村子不会很麻烦。埃克索，我们真的马上去吗？”

“是的，公主。我们今天就开始准备。”

[\(1\)](#) 食人兽 (Ogre)，西方民间传说中的一种巨大、丑陋、凶残的类人妖怪，又译作“食人魔”。

第二章

然而，出发之前，他们还有不少事情要处理。在这样的村子里，旅行必备的很多东西——毯子、水壶、火绒——都是公共财物，要和邻居们商量好了才能使用。而且，埃克索与比特丽丝虽然上了年纪，也有每天的工作份额，不能未经大家同意就直接出门。等他们终于做好了出门的准备，天气变了，又耽搁了下来。既然晴朗的日子肯定马上就要来到，为什么还要在雾、雨和严寒中冒险呢？

不过，他们最后还是动身了，拿着手杖、背着行囊。那是个晴朗的早晨，天上飘着淡淡的白云，风很大。埃克索本来希望天一亮就出发——他知道天气不会差——但比特丽丝坚持要等到太阳再高一点。她说，第一天，他们要在那个撒克逊村庄过夜，一天走到那儿很容易，他们的首要任务是，尽可能在中午的时候穿过大平原的一角，那儿的黑暗力量那时候很可能在睡觉。

他们有一段时间没有一起走远路了，埃克索有点担心妻子的体力。一个小时之后，他放心了：比特丽丝步伐慢——他又一次注意到，她走路的时候身体有点倾斜，好像什么地方疼似的——但她一直向前走，脸迎着开阔地上的风，遇到蓟丛矮树也不畏惧。上坡的时候，或者遇到泥地，脚陷下去要花大力气才能拔出来，她马上就会慢下来，但仍然坚持往前走。

出发前的那些日子里，比特丽丝越来越自信，相信自己能够回忆起路线，至少到撒克逊村庄的路没问题，多年来她经常和其他女人一起到那儿去。可是，等到巢穴上那嶙峋的山峦从视野中消失，他们穿过了沼泽尽头的山谷，她开始有点疑惑了。在分岔路口，或者面对一片大风呼啸的田地，她就要停下来，站很长时间，打量着前方的土地，眼神中不免有些恐慌。

“别担心，公主，”这时候埃克索就会说，“别担心，慢慢来。”

“可是，埃克索啊，”她会转过脸，对他说，“我们不能慢啊。中午之前穿过大平原才安全。”

“我们会到那儿的，公主。你不要急，慢慢来。”

我在这儿不妨说一下，那时候在开阔地上找路，比现在要难得多，不仅仅是因为缺乏可靠的罗盘和地图。今天，我们有篱笆，将乡村方便地划分成田地、道路和草场，可那时候没有篱笆，旅行者看到的自然景观往往没什么特别之处，往哪儿走都是一样的。远处地平线上矗立的一排大石头，小溪的某处弯道，山谷的起伏形状——只能靠这些线索才能找到路。而且一旦走错路，往往有致命的后果。更不要说在恶劣天气中丢掉性命了：走上歧路，意味着遭受攻击的巨大危险——人、兽、鬼——躲在远离大路的阴暗之中。

你可能会惊讶于一件事：这对老夫妇平时有那么多话要说，走路的时候却很少交谈。在那个时候，摔伤脚踝、破皮感染，都可能威胁到生命，所以大家都知道，走路的时候必须小心翼翼、全神贯注。你可能也会注意到，遇到窄路两人不能并肩而行，走在前面的总是比特丽丝，不是埃克索。你也许会感到惊讶，因为遇到可能有危险的领域，男人先走似乎是很自然的事情——当然，遇到林地或者可能有狼或熊的地方，他们会默默地交换位置。但是，大多时候，埃克索总是让妻子走在前面，原因是，他们可能遇到的每一个凶魔恶鬼，据说都是从队伍的尾部发起攻击的——我想，类似于老虎跟踪羚羊群后部的某只羊。这样的例子很多：一位旅行者回头去看走在后面的同伴，却发现人已经消失了，毫无踪迹。比特丽丝担心发生这样的事，所以不时要问一声：“你还在吗，埃克索？”他总是答道：“在这儿呢，公主。”

中午之前他们就到了大平原边上。埃克索建议继续走，穿过危险地带，但比特丽丝非常坚定，一定要等到中午。他们在通向原野的一道山梁顶上找了块石头坐下来，手杖插在面前的地里，两人认真地观察着手杖的影子越来越短。

“太阳不错，埃克索，”她说。“而且我从没听说过有谁在原野的这个角落里遭遇过什么邪恶的事情。但是，还是等到正午吧，那时候魔鬼恐怕都懒得睁眼看我们。”

“就按你说的办，公主，我们等一等。而且，你说得对，这毕竟是大平原，虽然这个角落还算太平。”

他们就这样坐着，俯瞰着下方的原野，几乎不讲话。有一下子，比特丽丝说了一句：

“埃克索，等我们见到儿子，他肯定会坚持要我们住到他的村子里。虽然邻居们有时候会笑话我们上了年纪，可都这么多年了，离开

他们会不会感觉很奇怪？”

“还没决定呢，公主。这些事情，等我们见到儿子了，都跟他谈谈。”埃克索又凝视着下面的大平原。过了一会儿，他摇摇头，轻声说道：“奇怪，他的事我此刻一点儿也记不起来。”

“我刚才想，我昨晚梦到过他，”比特丽丝说。“站在一口井旁边，身体朝一边侧了一点点，在喊什么人。之前或之后的事情，现在都不记得了。”

“至少你看到过他，公主，虽然只是梦里。他是什么样子呢？”

“一张坚毅、英俊的脸，这我还记得。但是眼睛的颜色啦，脸型啦，现在都没印象了。”

“他的脸，我现在一点儿也想不起来，”埃克索说。“肯定都是因为这迷雾。很多事情我很高兴自己不记得，可这样的事情不让我们记住，真是件残酷的事情。”

她往他身边靠了靠，头枕在他肩上。大风吹打着他们，她的斗篷有点儿松了。埃克索用手臂挽住她，拉好斗篷，把她紧紧裹住。

“我敢说，我们俩总有一个人很快会想起来，”他说。

“我们努力想吧，埃克索。两人都努力。这就好像我们把一块宝石放错了地方，找不到了。但只要努力，我们肯定会找到的。”

“肯定会是的，公主。你看，影子快没啦。我们该下去了。”

比特丽丝直起身子，开始在行囊里找东西。“在这儿，我们要带着这个。”

她把东西递给他，看起来像两颗光滑的鹅卵石，但他仔细一看，发现每块石头上面都刻着复杂的图案。

“两颗都放进腰带里，埃克索，小心一点，刻图案的那一面要朝外面。能帮助我主耶稣保佑我们平安。我这儿还有。”

“我只带一颗就够了，公主。”

“不，埃克索，我们平分吧。我记得有条路从那儿一直下去，除非雨水把路冲坏了，否则比之前走过的很多地方都好走。但是，有个地方我们要特别小心。埃克索，你在听我说话吗？那条路从埋葬巨人的地方经过，就是那个地方。不知道的话，那就是一座普通的小山丘，我会告诉你的，你看到我示意，就不要走那条路了，从小山丘旁

边绕过去，到另一边之后再回到路上。不管是不是正午，从那样的坟墓上踩过去，都对我们没好处。你听明白我说的话没有，埃克索？”

“别担心，公主，我听得明白。”

“还有，不用我提醒你了吧：路上要是看到陌生人，或者旁边有人喊我们，或者某个可怜的动物掉进了陷阱，或者在沟里受了伤，任何吸引你注意力的类似事情，你一句话都不要说，也不要停下脚步。”

“我可不是傻瓜，公主。”

“那好吧，埃克索，我们该走了。”

正如比特丽丝所说，他们在大平原上只要走一小段路。他们走的那条路有时有些泥泞，但路一直看得到，而且总有阳光。一开始是下坡，随后慢慢攀升，最后来到一条高高的山梁上，两边都是沼地。正午烈日当头，所以风虽然猛烈，倒也能消解酷热。地上到处长满了石楠和荆豆，都高不过膝盖，偶尔会看到一棵树——孤零零、干巴巴的样子，被无尽的大风压弯了身体。然后他们右边出现了一道山谷，让他们想起大平原的力量和神秘，提醒他们现在走的只是其中一个小小的角落。

两人走路时相距很近，埃克索几乎紧贴着妻子的脚后跟。尽管如此，穿越大平原的过程中，比特丽丝每走五六步就要问一遍，就像连续祷告一样：“你还在吗，埃克索？”他就回答：“还在呢，公主。”除了这种仪式性的问答之外，两人都不说话。到达埋葬巨人的山丘时，比特丽丝打了个紧急的手势，两人离开道路，走进石楠地里，仍旧语调平稳地一问一答，好像是要骗过偷听的魔鬼似的。埃克索一直留意着，看看有没有快速飘过的迷雾，或者天上会不会突然暗下来，但都没有，于是两人经过了大平原。上坡时，两人经过一片鸟儿欢唱的小树林，比特丽丝没说话，但他能看出来，她的体态放松了，两人的一问一答也结束了。

他们在一条小溪边休息，在溪里洗了脚，吃了面包，拿水壶装满水。从这儿开始，他们要走一条长长的、沉陷下去的大道，是罗马时代留下来的，两边有榆树和橡树，走起来容易得多，但要保持警觉，因为他们肯定会遇到其他的行路人。果然，头一个小时里，他们就遇到了对面走来的路人——一个女人带着两个孩子；一个赶驴的男孩；两名演戏的，急匆匆要赶上自己的戏班。每次他们都停下脚步，互相问好，不过有一次，他们听到车轮和马蹄的声音，跑到路旁的沟里躲

了起来，后来发现其实也没有危险——赶马车的是个撒克逊农夫，车上堆了高高的柴火。

半下午的时候，天上开始积起云来，好像风暴即将来临。他们在一棵大橡树下休息，背对着路，来往的人看不见他们。他们面前是一片开阔地，一览无余，所以天气一变，他们立即注意到了。

“别担心，公主，”埃克索说。“我们在这棵树下待着，不会淋到雨，等雨停出太阳了再走。”

可比特丽丝站起身来，身体向前倾着，抬起一只手遮挡眼睛。“埃克索，我能看到路前面就拐了弯。离那个老宅子不远了。和其他女人来的时候，我去过一次。宅子都废了，不过那时候屋顶还是好的。”

“风暴开始之前，能赶到那儿吗，公主？”

“现在走的话，就能赶到。”

“那就快点吧。没必要浑身淋湿，搭上性命。现在看来，这棵树遮不了雨，全是洞，我都能看到头顶的天空啦。”

* * *

比特丽丝记错了，废弃的宅子实际上没有那么近。当第一阵雨滴落下，头顶的天空暗下来时，两人还在一条又窄又长的小路上艰难地走，路上长满了齐腰的荨麻，要用手杖拨开才能通过。虽然大路上能清楚地看到废弃的宅子，在小路上却看不见，被杂树灌木挡住了，所以两人看到宅子突然出现在眼前，倒吃了一惊，也松了口气。

在罗马人统治的时代，这也许是幢辉煌的宅子，但现在只剩下一小部分，其余的都坍塌了。一度气派非凡的地板暴露在风吹日晒之下，到处都是水坑，地砖破损，缝隙里长满了杂草。残垣断壁，有的地方只有膝盖那么高，依稀能看出以前的房间布局。一道石头拱门通向尚未坍塌的建筑内部，埃克索和比特丽丝小心翼翼地走过去，在门槛前停下脚步，倾听了一会儿。最后埃克索喊道：“里面有人吗？”没人回答，他又说：“两个上了年纪的不列颠人，找个地方避避风暴。我们没有恶意。”

仍然没人回答，于是他们穿过拱门，走过一段阴暗的过道，以前这儿应该是个走廊。两人步入一片灰色的亮光中，来到一个宽敞的房间，有一堵墙全塌了。隔壁的房间整个儿消失了，杂树乱草密密匝

匝，径直漫到了房间地板的边缘。但是，三堵矗立的墙围起了一块遮风挡雨的地方，屋顶没有破损。曾经雪白的墙壁，如今肮脏不堪。靠墙有两个暗黑的人影，一坐一站，相距较远。

一块跌落下来的砖头上，坐着一个身形瘦小的女人，像只鸟一样，显然上了年纪——比埃克索和比特丽丝还老——披着黑色斗篷，兜帽推到脑后，现出一张苍老的面孔。她双目深陷，几乎看不到；背部并没有完全靠在身后的墙上。她怀里有什么东西在动，埃克索看到那是只兔子，被一双瘦骨嶙峋的手紧紧抓着。

同一堵墙的墙根下，有一个瘦削的男人，身材异常高大，站得远远的，好像是要在能够避雨的前提下，尽可能离老妇人远一些。他穿着一件厚厚的长外套——牧羊人在寒冷的冬天守夜时穿的那种，外套下面露出小腿来，却是光着的。脚上穿着的，是渔夫们穿的那种鞋子，埃克索经常看到。这人看来年纪不大，但头顶已经秃了，光亮亮的，只有脑袋两侧有两丛黑色的头发。他僵硬地站着，背对着房间，一只手扶着面前的墙，好像在认真倾听墙那边的声音一样。埃克索与比特丽丝走进来的时候，他回头望了一眼，但没说话。老妇人也在默默地盯着他们。埃克索说了句“愿你们平安”，那两人才动起来。高个子男人说，“再进来一点儿吧，朋友们，要不就淋湿啦。”

果然，这时候云破天开，大雨顺着屋顶破损的地方流下来，溅落在两位来访者的脚边。埃克索谢过他，领着妻子走到墙边，在那两人中间选了块地方。他帮比特丽丝取下行囊，然后又把自己的行囊放到地上。

四个人就这样待着，风暴更加猛烈，一道闪电照亮了屋内。高个子男人和老妇人奇怪的僵硬姿势似乎给埃克索和比特丽丝上了魔咒，他们两人也一动不动，一句话都没说，好像他们看到了一幅画，迈步走进画里，于是只好变成了画中人。

风暴的势头过去，大雨连绵而下，那个鸟一般的老妇人终于开了口。她一只手紧紧抓着兔子，另一只手抚摸着，说道：

“兄弟姐妹，愿上帝与你们同在。请你们原谅我没有早点打招呼，刚才看到你们来，我非常惊讶。不过还是欢迎你们。风暴没来之前，可是出门的好天气。但这种天气来得快，也去得快。你们的行程不会耽搁太久的，休息一会儿反而更好。两位这是要上哪儿去呢？”

“我们要上儿子的村里去，”埃克索说，“他等着迎接我们呢。不过，我们希望天黑之前能到一个撒克逊村庄，晚上要在那儿过

夜。”

“撒克逊人做事有点儿野，”那老妇人说道。“不过，看到行路的，他们比我们自己人还要热情。两位，坐下来吧。后面那段木头是干的，我经常坐那上面，很舒服。”

埃克索和比特丽丝听从她的建议，坐了下来，雨仍旧在哗哗地下，大家又沉默了一会儿。这时老妇人那边似乎有动静，埃克索转脸去看。她在用力拽兔子的耳朵，兔子拼命挣扎，她那只手却像鹰爪一样死死抓住。就在埃克索看着的时候，老妇人一只手突然拿出一把生了锈的大刀子来，放到兔子的咽喉上。比特丽丝吓了一跳，埃克索这才意识到，他们脚下，乃至整个破损的地板上，到处都有一块块的黑色，原来竟是血迹，在常春藤的气味和潮湿石块的霉味中，还夹杂着杀戮留下的气息，微弱却依稀可辨。

把刀放到兔子咽喉上之后，老妇人又不动了。埃克索发现，她深陷的眼睛正盯着另一头的那个高个子男人，好像在等他发出信号一样。但那个男人仍然保持着原来的僵硬姿势，额头几乎都快碰到墙了。他要么没注意到老妇人，要么就是一心不予理睬。

“好心的太太啊，”埃克索说，“要是必须杀，您就杀了这兔子吧。干干净净拧断脖子。或者找块石头，一下子砸死。”

“要是我有这个力气就好啦，阁下，可我没力气啊。我只有把刀，刃口还算锋利，没别的。”

“那我很乐意帮助您。不必用您的刀子。”埃克索站起身来，伸出一只手，但老妇人没有任何放开兔子的动作。她一动不动，刀子仍旧放在兔子的咽喉上，目光凝视着房间对面的那个男人。

高个子男人终于转过身来，面对着大家。“朋友们，”他说，“刚才看你们进来，我也很吃惊，但现在我很高兴。因为我看得出来，你们是好人的，所以我请求你们，在等待风暴过去的时候，听听我的困难。我是个普通的船夫，把旅人渡过汹涌的水域。这工作干活时间长，如果等候的人多，我就没什么觉睡，每扳一下桨，胳膊就疼，但这些我都不在意。无论刮风下雨，还是日头毒辣，我都要干活。但我劲头还算足，我可以盼着休息的日子。因为我们有几个船夫，每人都能轮流休息，不过每一轮要干好几个星期。休息的日子里，我们每个人都有特别的地方要去，朋友们，这儿就是我的地方。我曾是个无忧无虑的孩子，在这幢宅子里长大。宅子和以前不一样了，但对我来说，这儿有宝贵的记忆，我到这儿来，只求能够安安静静地享受我的

记忆。现在请你们评评理。每次我一来，不到一个小时，这位老妇人就会从拱门里走进来。她坐好之后，就开始奚落我，没日没夜，一刻不停。她没有依据地狠心指责我；在黑暗的掩盖下，用最可怕的语言诅咒我。她不肯给我片刻的安宁。有时候，你们也看到了，她会带来一只兔子，或者其他小动物，就为了杀掉，用血玷污这个宝贵的地方。我想尽了办法劝说她离开，但是，无论上帝赐予了她的灵魂多少怜悯心，她都置之不理。她不走，也不停止对我的奚落。现在多亏了你们突然进来，才让她暂停了对我的烦扰。不久我就要回去了，到河上开始几个星期的劳动。朋友们，我请求你们，想点办法让她走吧。劝劝她，这样做是对神不敬。你们是从外面来的，也许能影响她。”

船夫说完后，大家沉默了一会儿。埃克索后来记得，当时他隐隐有回答的冲动，但同时又觉得这个人是在梦里跟自己说话，没有真正的义务要回答他。比特丽丝似乎也不觉得必须回答，因为她眼睛还盯着老妇人，这时候老妇人已经把刀从兔子咽喉上拿开，用刀刃的边缘抚摸着兔子的毛，那样子几乎充满爱意。最后比特丽丝说话了。

“我请求您，夫人，让我丈夫帮您杀死兔子吧。在这样的地方，没有必要流血，又没有盆接住。那会给这位诚实的船夫带来厄运，还有您自己，以及到这儿来休息的所有过路人。把刀收起来吧，换个地方仁慈地杀死这只兔子也就是了。他是个卖力的船夫，您这样戏弄他有什么好处呢？”

“公主，我们还是先不要急着跟这位女士说重话，”埃克索轻声说道。“我们还不知道他们之间发生了什么事。这位船夫似乎很诚实，可话又说回来，这位女士到这儿来这么做，可能也有正当理由。”

“先生，您说的太对了，”老妇人说。“我这辈子也没多少日子了，这样打发有什么趣味吗？我倒宁愿走得远远的，和自己的丈夫在一起，正是因为这个船夫，我才和丈夫分开。先生，我丈夫可是个明智、谨慎的人，那次旅行，我们计划了很久，多少年都谈着它、梦着它。最后总算做好了准备，需要的东西都备齐了，我们上了路，几天后找到了那个海湾，渡过去就到了岛上。我们等着船夫，不久就看到了他的船。真是走霉运啊，来的就是那个人。你看看他个子多高。他站在船上，手里拿着长桨，背后就是天空，就像演戏的人踩高跷一样。我和丈夫站在石头上，他来到跟前，把船系好。他骗了我们，到今天我都不明白他是怎么做到的。我们太信任他了。岛近在眼前，这个船夫带走了我丈夫，却把我丢在岸上等着，我们在一起四十多年

啊，几乎没分开过一天。我不明白他怎么能骗住我们。他的声音可能让我们进入了梦境，我还不知道怎么回事，他就划着船，带走了我丈夫，我还在岸上。可那时候，我还不相信。谁会想到这个船夫如此狠心呢？所以，我就等着。我心里想，可能是船一次只能载一名客人，那天水有些急，天空几乎和今天一样暗。我站在石头上，看着船越来越小，最后变成了一个点。我还在等着，不久那个点变大了，船朝我这边来了。很快我就看到了船夫，脑袋光滑得像鹅卵石一样，船上没有客人。我想这次该轮到我了，很快我就能和心爱的丈夫在一起。可是，他来到我等待的地方，把绳子系到桩上，然后摇着头，拒绝让我渡过去。我又讲道理，又哭又喊，可他都不听。反而呢——真是狠心啊——反而给我一只兔子，说是在岛边的陷阱里抓到的。他想，我第一次一个人过夜，兔子带给我当晚餐倒不错。然后他看看没别人要坐船，就开船走了，把我一个人丢在岸上哭，手里还拿着他那该死的兔子。随后我放开兔子，让它跑到石楠地里——跟你们说，那天晚上我可没胃口吃东西，后来很多个晚上都一样。我每次来，也带个小礼物，就是这个原因。带个兔子煮给他吃，感谢他那天的好心。”

“那只兔子本来是给我自己当晚餐的，”船夫的声音从房间那边传来。“我同情她，才给了她。就是好心帮个忙。”

“先生，你们的事情我们都不知道，”比特丽丝说。“但是，骗这位女士，把她丢在岸上，听起来的确很残酷。你为什么要做这种事情呢？”

“我好心的女士，这位老太太说的，可不是一般的岛。这么多年来，我们这些船夫渡了好多人过去，现在岛上的田地树林里该有几百人了吧。可那是个奇怪的地方，人一到岛上，就只能孤单地在草地上、树林里行走，看不见其他人。偶尔，如果晚上有月亮，或者风暴即将来临，也许能感觉到其他人的存在。但大多日子里，对每个旅行者来说，他都是岛上唯一的居民。我倒愿意把这位太太渡过去，可等她明白不能和丈夫在一起，她就说不愿意孤单地过，所以不上岛了。我听从了她的决定——我必须这么做啊——让她自己走了。兔子呢，我说过，只是好心才给她的。你们看看，她是怎么答谢的。”

“这个船夫嘴巴会讲，”老妇人说。“你们是外面来的，可他还是敢骗你们。他会让你们相信，岛上每个人都是孤魂野鬼，可实际上不是这样。我和丈夫很多年做梦都想去的，难道会是那种地方？实际情况是，很多夫妻都被允许渡海，到岛上一起生活。很多人手挽着手，在树林里和安静的沙滩上散步。我和丈夫知道。我们小的时候就

知道了。两位好心人啊，你们在记忆里找一找，现在就能想起来，我说的是真的。在岸边等的时候，我们哪里知道，划船过来的，竟会是一个这么残酷的船夫。”

“她说的话，只有一部分是真的，”船夫说。“偶尔会有一对夫妇，获得允许一起上岛，但这种情况很少。需要两人之间，有罕见的深爱紧紧相连。偶尔会有，这我不否认，所以如果遇到夫妻，甚至是还没有结婚的情人，要我们渡过去，我们就有责任仔细盘问他们。判断两人之间的爱是不是深到可以一起过去，这是我们的责任。这位女士不愿意承认，但她和她丈夫之间的爱就是太弱了。让她先扪心自问，然后再来说我那天的判断对不对。”

“夫人，”比特丽丝说。“您怎么说？”

老妇人不说话。她低着头，气呼呼地继续用刀摩擦着兔子的皮毛。

“夫人，”埃克索说，“雨一停，我们就要上路啦。为什么不和我们一起离开这儿呢？我们很愿意和您一起走一段路。我们可以聊聊天，您想谈什么就谈什么。让这位好心的船夫待在这儿，安安静静享受一下吧，趁房子还没有全部倒塌。这样坐着，有什么好处呢？如果您愿意，在我们分手之前，我可以干干净净地把兔子杀了。您看怎么样？”

老妇人没回答，也没有表示她听到了埃克索的话。过了一会儿，她慢慢站起身来，兔子紧紧抓在胸前，迈步朝房间坍塌的那边走过去，她个子很矮，斗篷在地上拖着。屋顶上有水溅落在她身上，可她似乎并不在意。她走到房间远端，望了望外面的雨和侵入房间地面的野草，然后慢慢弯下腰，把兔子放在脚下。兔子一开始没有动，可能是因为害怕身体僵硬了，然后便没入了草丛里。

老妇人小心翼翼地直起身子。转身的时候，她似乎在看着船夫——她眼睛深陷得厉害，所以很难确定是不是看他——然后说道：“这两位陌生人让我没了胃口。但是，胃口会回来的，我肯定。”

说完，她提起斗篷的边，缓缓踏入草丛，就像慢慢走进水坑一样。雨打在她身上，她把斗篷的帽子又往上拉了拉，然后迈步走进了荨麻丛。

“再等一会儿，我们和您一起走，”埃克索在她身后喊道。但他感觉到比特丽丝的手搭在自己的胳膊上，听她低声说道：“别管她的

闲事，埃克索。让她走吧。”

稍后，埃克索走到老妇人迈步出去的地方，心里还有点儿期待在什么地方看到她，也许被灌木丛挡住了，没法继续走。但他没看到她的踪迹。

“谢谢啦，朋友们，”船夫在她身后说。“至少今天我也许可以安静一会儿，想想我小时候的事儿。”

“我们马上也会走开啦，船夫，”埃克索说。“雨停下来就走。”

“不要急，朋友们。你们讲了公道话，我很感谢。”

埃克索继续盯着外面的雨。他听见妻子在身后说：“先生，这以前肯定是个气派的宅子吧。”

“噢，是的，好心的女士。小的时候，我可不知道宅子有多气派，因为我没见过别的地方。有漂亮的画和珠宝，还有智慧而善良的仆人。那边过去，还有个宴会大厅呢。”

“先生，看到现在这幅光景，心里不好受吧。”

“房子还在这儿，我就很感激，好心的女士。这房子经历过战争年月，差不多的宅子，很多都烧掉了，现在不过是一两个土堆而已，上面长满了野草和石楠。”

这时埃克索听到比特丽丝在身后走了过来，感觉到她一只手放在自己肩膀上。“怎么啦，埃克索？”她低声问道。“你有心事，我看得出来。”

“没什么，公主。就是这儿的废墟而已。有一下子好像是我在这儿回忆往事一样。”

“什么样的往事呢，埃克索？”

“不知道啊，公主。这人提到战争和烧毁的房子，好像我也想起了什么事情。我认识你之前的事情，应该是。”

“还有我们俩不认识的时候吗，埃克索？有时候我感觉我们俩从生下来就一直在一起。”

“我也觉得是这样，公主。我只是一时发傻，这是个奇怪的地方。”

她若有所思地看着他。然后她捏了一下他的手，轻轻地说：“这的确是个奇怪的地方，可能比淋雨更糟糕。我想走了，埃克索。说不定那个女人要回来，或者发生更糟糕的事情。”

埃克索点点头。然后他转过脸，对着房间那边喊道：“好啦，船夫，看来雨要停了，我们该上路啦。谢谢你让我们躲雨。”

听到这话，船夫什么也没说，可是他们背行囊的时候，他却走过来帮忙，把他们的手杖递了过来。“旅途平安，朋友们，”他说。“希望你们见到儿子的时候，他平安健康。”

他们又表示感谢，两人要穿过拱门时，比特丽丝突然停下脚步回头看。

“既然我们要走了，先生，”她说，“也许再也见不着了，我不能请你回答我一个小问题。”

船夫站在墙边原来的位置，认真地看着她。

“先生，你之前说过，”比特丽丝继续说道，“你有责任盘问等待渡海的夫妻。你说，需要核查一下，看看他们之间是否有深爱，能够到岛上一起生活。先生，我想问的就是这个。你要怎么盘问，才能核查清楚呢？”

船夫似乎犹豫了一下。随后他说道：“老实说，好心的女士，我不该谈这些事情。我们今天甚至都不该见面，因为机缘巧合，我们才相遇了，我并不感到遗憾。你们两位都是好心人，还帮我说了话，我很感谢。所以我尽量回答你吧。你说得对，我有责任盘问所有渡海上岛的人。如果像你所说的那样，碰到的是一对夫妻，又自称深爱着对方，那我就必须让他们说出最珍贵的记忆。我先问一个，再问另外一个。两人要分开回答。这样，他们关系的实质就会显露出来。”

“但是，先生，”比特丽丝问，“要看出人们心里的事情，不是很难吗？外表很容易让人上当。”

“好心的女士，这倒是真的。不过，我们这些船夫多年来见过很多人，要看穿骗人的外表，不需要花很久。而且，旅行的人谈起最珍贵的记忆，是不可能掩饰真相的。一对夫妻也许自称有爱的纽带，但我们船夫看到的可能是憎恶、愤怒甚至仇恨。又或许是一大片荒芜。有时候是对孤独的畏惧，没有别的。持久的爱，多年不变——这个我们就见得很少了。真要是见到了，我们只会高高兴兴地把他们渡过去。好心的女士啊，我已经说得太多啦。”

“谢谢你，船夫。就当满足了一下一个老太婆的好奇心吧。现在我们告辞，不打扰你啦。”

“祝你们旅途平安。”

他们回到之前走过的那条蕨草及膝、荨麻丛生的小道。风暴过后路很滑，尽管他们急着远离宅子，脚下还是非常小心。等他们最后回到沉陷下去的罗马大道，雨还没有停，两人看到一棵大树，便躲到了树下。

“你湿透了吗，公主？”

“不用担心，埃克索。这外套还起点作用。你怎么样？”

“没事，太阳一出来就干了。”

他们放下行囊，靠在树干上缓口气。过了一会儿，比特丽丝轻声说：

“埃克索，我害怕。”

“为什么呢，我的公主，怎么啦？你现在不会有什么事啦。”

“还记得那个奇怪的女人吗，穿着破布做的斗篷？那天你看着我们在老刺树那儿谈话的。她看起来也许像个流浪的疯子，可她跟我讲的故事，和刚才那位老太太说的有很多相同的地方。她丈夫也是被一名船夫带走的，她被留在岸上。她孤孤单单，一边哭一边从海湾往回走，发现自己来到一个深谷的边缘，眼前的路、身后的路，都能看得一清二楚，路上都是像她一样哭哭啼啼的人。听她这样说，当时我还不太害怕，埃克索，我心里想，这和我们没有关系。可她接着说，这块土地中了魔咒，被遗忘的迷雾笼罩住了，这事我们俩也经常谈到。然后她问我，‘如果记不住你们共享的过去，你和你丈夫怎么能证明对彼此的爱呢？’后来我一直想着这件事情。有时候一想到就觉得害怕。”

“公主啊，有什么好担心的呢？我们又不打算到那种岛上去，也不愿意去。”

“话是这么说，埃克索。万一我们还没机会考虑去那种地方，我们之间的爱就枯萎了呢？”

“你说的什么话，我的公主？我们的爱怎么会枯萎呢？和年轻时候傻傻的热恋相比，现在我们的爱不是更深吗？”

“可是，埃克索啊，我们都不记得那些日子。后来很多年的事情，也都记不住了。我们不记得我们之间的激烈争吵，还有我们珍惜的那些快乐时光。我们连儿子都不记得，也不知道他为什么离开了我们。”

“我们还可以恢复那些记忆，公主。而且，无论我记得什么、忘记什么，我对你的心都会是一样的。你的感受不也是这样吗，公主？”

“是啊，埃克索。可是，我又想，我们心里的感受，会不会像今天这雨滴一样呢？天上的雨早就停了，不过树上浸满了水，所以还有些雨滴落在我们身上。我在想，没有了记忆，就没有了源头，我们的爱会不会慢慢枯萎、死亡。”

“上帝不会允许这种事情发生，公主。”这话他说得很轻，几乎是喃喃自语，因为他自己也感觉到，一股莫名的恐惧在心里涌上来。

“在老刺树说话那天，”比特丽丝继续说道，“那个奇怪的女人要我抓紧时间。她说，我们要想尽办法，把我们在一起的事情都回想起来，不论好事坏事。现在呢，我们走的时候，那个船夫给的回答，我意料到了，也正是我害怕的。我们现在这个样子，埃克索，能有什么机会呢？如果有那么个人问我们最珍贵的记忆的话？埃克索，我真害怕。”

“好啦，公主，没什么好害怕的。我们的记忆没有永久丢失，不过是被这邪恶的迷雾放到什么地方找不到了。我们会找到的，哪怕是一件事一件事去想。我们出门，不就是为了这个吗？等我们看到儿子，很多事情肯定就会想起来。”

“希望如此吧。船夫的话让我更加害怕了。”

“忘记他吧，公主。他的船，还有他的岛，对我们有什么用处呢？你说的对，外面雨停了，我们别待在树下了，走出去干得还要快一些。我们上路吧，不去想这些烦心事儿了。”

第三章

从远处稍微高点儿的地方看，这个撒克逊村子与埃克索和比特丽丝的巢穴不同，更像你们所熟悉的“村庄”。至少有一点——也许是因为撒克逊人对幽闭症更加敏感——这儿不朝山腰里面挖。如果你像埃克索和比特丽丝那天晚上一样，从陡峭的山壁上下来，你应该能看到，下方大概有四十多幢独立的房子，在谷底排成两个大略的圆形，一个在内一个在外。你从远处可能还看不出房子大小和华丽程度上的区别，但你肯定能看到茅草屋顶，很多是“圆屋”，你们当中有些人，也许还有你们的父母，就是在类似的屋子里长大的。如果说撒克逊人愿意牺牲一点儿安全，换取通风的益处，那么他们也采取了认真的弥补措施：村庄周围有一圈高高的木桩围篱，木桩用绳索相连，顶端削得尖尖的，像巨大的铅笔。无论从哪个地方走近，围篱至少都有两个人那么高，外侧还挖了一道深沟，让人更加不敢爬过去了。

埃克索和比特丽丝从山坡下来，两人停下脚步喘气的时候，看到的应该就是这幅景象。太阳快从山谷那边落下去了，比特丽丝的眼睛更好，所以还是走在前面，身体向前倾着，比埃克索快一两步，周围的草和蒲公英和她腰一般高。

“我看到四个人守着大门，不，五个，”她说道。“我想他们手里拿着长矛。上次和其他女人一起来的时候，只有一个看门人，带着两条狗。”

“公主啊，你确定他们会欢迎我们吗？”

“别担心，埃克索，他们现在对我已经很熟悉了。而且，这儿有个长老是不列颠人，虽然不是同一个部族，但大家都把他当成有智慧的领袖。他会给我们一个安全的地方过夜。不过呢，埃克索，我觉得好像出什么事情了，心里有些不踏实。噢，又来了一个拿长矛的，带着一群凶恶的狗。”

“谁知道撒克逊人在干什么，”埃克索说。“我们还不如找别的地方过夜呢。”

“天就快黑啦，埃克索，而且长矛可不是用来对付我们的。还有啊，村子里有个女人，我打算去见一下，她很懂医药，比我们村子里谁都强。”

埃克索等着她继续往下说，可她只是望着远处，于是他问：“那你为什么要去找懂医药的人呢，公主？”

“我有时候感觉有点不舒服。这个女人可能知道怎么治。”

“什么样的不舒服啊，公主？哪里不舒服？”

“没什么大不了的。我也是因为要到这儿找地方过夜，所以才想起来。”

“可是什么地方呢，公主？哪里痛？”

“哦……”她没有转身，一只手按在腰间，就在肋部下方，然后笑了起来。“真的没什么大不了的。你看，今天走这么多路，都看得出来有什么事。”

“的确一点儿也看不出来，公主，倒是我一直要停下来休息。”

“我就这么说嘛，埃克索。所以没什么好担心的。”

“一点儿也看不出来。实际上，公主啊，你和只有你一半年纪的那些女人一样健康。不过，如果这儿有人能帮你解除疼痛，那么去看看能有什么坏处呢？”

“我刚就这么说嘛，埃克索。我带了一点锡，换药。”

“谁愿意身上有地方痛呢？我们都有这种情况，只要有办法，也都想治好。只要这个女人在这儿，守卫们又放我们进去，那我们一定要去。”

他们走过壕沟上的桥时，天快黑了，大门两边都点起了火把。守卫们高大魁梧，但看到他们来，却面露恐慌。

“等一下，埃克索，”比特丽丝低声说。“我一个人去跟他们说说。”

“别靠近他们的长矛啊，公主。狗看起来倒还安静，那些撒克逊人好像都吓傻了。”

“你都是个老头子了，埃克索，如果他们害怕的是你，我马上就告诉他们这是个错误。”

她大胆地朝他们走过去。大家围住她，一边听她说，一边不时朝埃克索狐疑地看着。随后其中一个人冲他喊，说的是撒克逊语，让他

走到火把跟前，大概是要看看他是不是年轻人假扮的。然后他们又和比特丽丝说了几句话，就让他们俩过去了。

从远处看，这个村庄是两圈整洁有序的房子，但一走上村子里的小路，埃克索惊讶地发现，这儿成了混乱的迷宫。天色这会儿是快黑了，没错，可他跟在比特丽丝后面，看不出这地方有任何逻辑或规律。建筑物会突然从他眼前冒出来，挡住去路，他们只好走旁边那些令人疑惑的小胡同。这时候他们比在外面走大路时还要小心：之前下了暴雨，路上都是泥坑水洼；而且撒克逊人好像满不在乎地听凭各种各样的东西丢在路中间，甚至还有石块。但是，让埃克索最难受的，是那种难闻的气味，随着他们的脚步或强或弱，但一直都在。和当时的人们一样，他已经习惯了人畜粪便的气味，但这种气味要难闻得多。很快，他就发现了气味的来源：整个村子的人都把一堆堆的腐肉放在房子前面或道路旁边，作为给各种神祇的供奉。有一下子气味特别浓烈，埃克索转身去看，一幢小房子的屋檐下挂着一个黑色的东西，上面有一大堆苍蝇，苍蝇嗡一声飞走，那东西的形状顿时就不一样了。随后，他们又看到一群孩子拽着一头猪的耳朵；狗、牛、驴子，到处乱晃，没人看管。路上遇到的几个人，要么默默地盯着他们，要么快速消失在门或窗户后面。

“今晚这里有点奇怪，”比特丽丝低声说。“一般他们会坐在房子前面，或者围个圈，又说又笑。孩子们该跟在我们身后，问上一百个问题，不知道该骂我们，还是该当我们是朋友。今天奇怪，都很安静，这让我觉得不踏实。”

“我们有没有走错路，公主，这是朝他们让我们过夜的地方走吗？”

“本来我想先去找那个女人，看看有没有药。但看现在这个样子，我们最好还是直接到那幢破旧的长屋里去吧，别遇上什么事儿。”

“那位女药师，住得离这儿远吗？”

“我记得就在这附近。”

“那我们去看看她在不在吧。你身上的痛是小事情，我们都知道，但如果能治好，干吗还让它痛呢。”

“等到明天上午也来得及，埃克索。这是小事情，要不是说起来，我都不觉得痛。”

“话是这么说，公主，但是既然来了，为什么不去看看这位聪明的女士呢？”

“你要是特别希望去，那我们就去吧，埃克索。我倒愿意明天上午再说，或者下次经过这儿的时候再来。”

两人说着话，一拐弯来到一个地方，好像是村庄的广场。广场中央烧着明亮的篝火，在火光的照耀下，能看到周围坐满了人——撒克逊人，有老有少，还有小婴儿，抱在父母的怀里。埃克索首先想到的是，他们闯进了异教徒的仪式。但是，等他们停下脚步仔细看了看，埃克索才发现人们的注意力没有集中点。他能看到的那些人神情严肃，也许心里感到害怕。人们说话声音都很低，人群中弥漫着一种焦虑的气氛。一条狗冲埃克索和比特丽丝叫了一声，随即被黑暗中的人赶走了。有些人注意到了他们，眼神空洞地看了一会儿，然后就不去管了。

“谁知道他们这是担心什么事情，埃克索，”比特丽丝说。“要不是女药师就在附近，我倒宁愿走开。让我来看看还能不能找到去她家的路。”

他们朝右边一排小房子走去，这时他们意识到，黑暗中还有很多人，在默默地看着篝火周围的人。比特丽丝停下脚步，跟一个站在自家门口的女人说话，埃克索随即意识到，她就是那个女药师。他在黑暗中看不清楚，但依稀能辨别出一个脊背挺直的中年女人，个子很高，手里抓着一条披巾，紧紧裹住肩头。她和比特丽丝继续低声交谈着，不时望望人群，又看看埃克索。最后，那个女人打个手势，让他们进屋，但比特丽丝走到埃克索跟前，轻声说道：

“让我跟她单独谈谈，埃克索。帮我把行囊拿下来，在外面等我吧。”

“我不能和你一起去吗，我的公主，虽然我听不懂这撒克逊话？”

“这是女人的事情，丈夫。让我单独和她谈，她说要把我这副老身子骨好好检查检查。”

“对不起啦，公主。我刚才没想清楚。让我把行囊拿下来，我就在外面等着，多久都行。”

两个女人进屋后，埃克索感到浑身疲乏，尤其是肩膀和腿。他取下自己的行囊，靠在身后的土墙上，看着人群。焦躁的情绪越来越

浓：有些人从周围的黑暗中大步走出来，加入人群中，还有人匆匆忙忙从火堆旁离开，过一会儿又匆匆回来。火光照亮一些面孔，轮廓异常分明，另一些面孔则隐藏在暗处，可过了一会儿，埃克索发现，原来所有人都在焦虑地等待，等着什么人或什么事情从火堆左侧的木柱大厅里现身。这幢建筑很可能是撒克逊人聚会的地方，里面可能也烧着篝火，因为窗户里光亮摇曳，一明一暗。

他背靠着墙，比特丽丝和那个女药师的声音从身后什么地方隐约传来。他差点要开始打盹了，这时人群躁动起来，发出低低的喧闹声。几个人从木柱大厅里出来，朝火堆走去。人群分开，让他们通过，大家安静下来，好像是要等他们发布通告，但没有通告，很快人们就围了上去，声音又开始大起来。埃克索发现，人们的注意力几乎全部集中在最后从大厅里出来的那个人身上。他看上去不会超过三十岁，但有一种天生的威严。他穿着朴素，和农夫差不多，但和村里其他人都不一样。倒不仅仅是他的披风掀起来，搭在一侧的肩膀上，露出了腰带和剑柄。也不仅仅是因为他的头发比其他村民长——几乎一直垂到肩膀上，一部分用皮条扎住，以免挡住眼睛。实际上，埃克索真正想到的是，这个男人这样扎头发，是为了避免战斗时头发挡住视野。埃克索自然而然想到了这一点，但随后回想起来，他吃了一惊，因为这个念头里有似曾相识的成分。陌生人大步走到人群中间，一只手落在剑柄上，埃克索立即感觉到这个动作带来的独特感受：自得、兴奋、恐惧掺杂在一起。他暗暗告诉自己，这些奇怪的感受回头再说，现在不要去考虑，要注意眼前的事情。

这个人的姿态，他移动和站立的样子，使他和周围的人大相径庭。“虽然这个人想假装成普通的撒克逊人，”埃克索心想，“但他的的确确是名武士。也许还是一名一旦起意，便能掀起狂澜的武士。”

大厅里出来的另外两个人紧张地跟在他身后，武士往人群中走一点，他们俩就想办法跟在他身边，像孩子担心被父母丢下一样。这两个人也很年轻，都佩着剑，每人手里还抓着一根长矛，但两人显然不太习惯使用武器。而且，他们畏畏缩缩，身形僵硬，其他村民冲他们说鼓励的话，他们也没有反应。人们用手拍他们的后背、捏他们的肩膀，但他们的目光躲躲闪闪，神情慌张。

“长头发的是个陌生人，比我们早到一两个小时，”比特丽丝的声音在他耳边说道。“撒克逊人，不过来自很远的地方。东方的沼泽地，他这么说的，他最近在那儿和海上来的强盗打过仗。”

之前，埃克索已经意识到，两位女人的声音越来越清晰。他转过身，看见比特丽丝和屋子的女主人已经出来了，站在门边，就在自己身后。女药师用撒克逊语轻声说了一会儿，然后比特丽丝在他耳畔说道：

“看来事情是这样的：今天早些时候，村里一个人气喘吁吁地跑回来，肩膀受了伤，大家让他平静下来，他才说明了原委。他和他的哥哥，还有他侄子，在河边的老地方钓鱼，碰到了两个食人兽。不过，根据肩膀受伤的这个人说法，这可不是一般的食人兽。大得吓人，比他见过的食人兽速度更快，也更狡猾。两个魔鬼——村子里的人现在谈起来，都是这么称呼它们的——当场就杀死了他哥哥，抓走了男孩，男孩还活着，挣扎不休。受伤的男人沿着河边小道逃跑，身后粗重恶心的气息越来越近，不过最后他还是甩掉了它，保住了性命。你看那边那个应该就是他，埃克索，胳膊上绑着木条，正在跟那个陌生人说话。他虽然受了伤，却急着让侄子领着村子里最强壮的男人回到那个地方。他们在河边看到了篝火的烟，就在他们准备好武器，悄悄爬过去的时候，灌木丛里突然闯出那两个魔鬼来，看来它们预先布置好了陷阱。女药师说，大家还没想到逃命，就已经有三个人死了，其他人都回来了，没有受伤，但大多躲在床上瑟瑟发抖、胡言乱语，吓得都不敢出来祝福这几个打算此刻出发的勇士。虽然天快黑了，迷雾即将来临，这些勇敢的人仍要去完成十二个健壮的人白天都无法完成的事情。”

“小男孩是死是活，他们知道吗？”

“他们什么都不知道，但他们还是会到河边去。第一队人马胆战心惊地回来之后，长老们无论怎么催促，再也没人有胆子加入第二次远征。可这时候来了好运，这个陌生人进了村，他的马伤了脚，要找个地方过夜。他今天才认识小男孩和他家人，但他宣布说，愿意帮村子的忙。和他一起去的，是男孩另外两个叔叔，看看他们的样子，我看帮不上武士的忙，可能还会碍手碍脚。你看，埃克索，他们害怕得要命。”

“我能看出来，公主。但他们这么害怕却依然决定去，还是很勇敢。我们不该今天晚上来给村子添麻烦。现在好像还有人在哭，看来今天晚上还有事啊。”

女药师似乎能听懂埃克索的意思，因为她又说话了，用的是本族语言，然后比特丽丝说，“她说现在直接去长屋，天亮之前都不要露

面了。她说，在这样的夜晚，要是我们在村里走来走去的话，人们怎么对待我们，可真难说得很。”

“我正是这么想的，公主。那我们就听这位好心女士的话吧。你还记得路吧。”

可就在这时候，众人突然吵嚷起来，然后吵闹声变成了欢呼声，人群又动了起来，好像在努力地变换形状，然后开始前行，武士和两个同伴走在中央。有人开始低声吟唱，很快在黑暗中观看的人也加入进来——包括那位女药师。行进的队伍朝这边走来，明亮的篝火留在身后，但队伍里有几支火把，所以埃克索能隐约看到几张脸，有的恐惧，有的激动。每次火把照亮武士的时候，他的表情都很镇定。他朝左右两边看着，向鼓励他的人们致意，一只手又放在剑柄上。他们经过埃克索和比特丽丝身旁，从一排房子中间走过，看不见了，但过了一會兒，仍然能听到远处的吟唱声。

埃克索和比特丽丝呆立不动，也许是被这种气氛吓住了。然后比特丽丝开始问女药师，到长屋怎么走最好，在埃克索看来，两个女人随即开始谈论到某个其他地方的路了，因为她们打着手势，指着远处村庄上方的山峦。

等整个村庄安静下来，他们才动身到过夜的地方去。在黑暗中找路更加困难了，角落里偶有点着的火把，投下黑影重重，只会增加混乱。他们走的路，和人群行进的方向相反，经过的房子里都是漆黑的，没有明显的生命迹象。

“走慢点，公主，”埃克索低声说。“我们俩要是在地上摔一跤，恐怕没有人来帮忙。”

“埃克索，我想我们又迷路了。我们回到刚才拐弯的地方吧，我肯定能找到路。”

过了一會兒，路变直了，他们发现路旁就是在山上曾看到的防御围篱。那尖尖的木桩在他们上方，比夜晚的天空还要黑。两人往前走的时候，埃克索能听到头顶上方有窃窃私语声。接着他看见了其他人，都在上面，沿着防御墙有规律地排列着，从围篱上方盯着外面黑暗的荒野。他还没来得及告诉比特丽丝他发现的情况，就听到背后传来急匆匆的脚步声，他们加快了脚步，可这时候旁边已经有个移动的火把，他们身前人影晃动。一开始，埃克索以为碰到了从对面来的一帮村民，但随即发现自己和比特丽丝已被团团围住。不同年龄和体形的撒克逊人挤了上来，有些拿着长矛，有些挥舞着锄头、镰刀等工

具。几个声音同时跟他们讲话，好像还有更多人陆续赶来。埃克索感到火把的热度扑面而来，他把比特丽丝抱得紧一点，目光凝视周围，看能不能找出带头的人，但没找到。而且，每张面孔都神色慌张，他意识到，任何鲁莽动作，都可能导致灾难。一个眼神疯狂的年轻人已经哆哆嗦嗦把刀举在空中，埃克索把比特丽丝拉过来，离刀锋远点儿，脑子里回想着他会说的那几句撒克逊话。他什么都没想起来，只好发出几声安慰的声音，就像对付一匹不听话的马那样。

“算啦，埃克索，”比特丽丝低声说。“他们不会感谢你给他们唱催眠曲的。”她用撒克逊语先跟一个人讲话，然后又对另一个人讲，但气氛并没有改善。人们开始叫喊、争辩，一条狗拽着绳子，从队列里窜出来，冲他们恶狠狠地叫。

突然，周围紧张的人们一下子松懈下来。他们的声音低下去，最后只能听到一个声音，在不远处愤怒地叫喊。声音越来越近，人群分开，一个身材粗短、身形扭曲的人拄着一根粗拐杖，拖着脚步走到火把的光亮下。

他年纪很大，虽然脊梁挺得比较直，脖子和脑袋却以奇怪的角度从肩上伸出来。但是，所有在场的人似乎都服从他的权威——连那条狗都不叫了，躲进了黑暗中。埃克索对撒克逊语所知有限，但他仍能听出来，这个身形扭曲的人勃然大怒，倒不仅仅是因为村民们对陌生人不友好：他在批评他们擅自离开哨岗。火光下的脸孔都神情沮丧，虽然仍旧疑惑。接着，长者的声音更高、更愤怒了，人们似乎也慢慢想起了什么事情，一个一个悄悄回到了黑暗中。等到最后一个人也已经离开，周围响起攀爬梯子的声音，这个身形扭曲的老人仍在背后责骂不休。

最后，他转身面对埃克索和比特丽丝，用他们的语言说话，而且不带一点儿口音。“他们怎么连这都忘记了，而且刚才还亲眼看着那位武士带着他们的两个兄弟出发，去做他们自己没有勇气做的事情？他们的记忆这么糟糕，是因为羞愧吗，还是仅仅因为害怕？”

“他们的确很害怕，艾弗，”比特丽丝说。“刚才就算脚边落下一只蜘蛛，也会让他们互相厮打起来。你派来欢迎我们的队伍，可不怎么样啊。”

“我向你道歉，比特丽丝夫人。也向你道歉，先生。一般情况下，他们是不会这样对待你们的，不过你们也看到了，这是个充满恐惧的夜晚。”

“我们要到长屋去，这会儿迷路啦，艾弗，”比特丽丝说。“你帮我们指个路，我们就很感激啦。刚才发生这样的事情，我和丈夫都很想待在屋里休息。”

“朋友们，我倒希望你们能在长屋受到友好的招待，但这样的晚上，我的邻居们会干什么，倒很难说。你和你好心的丈夫愿意到我自己家里过夜吗？那要省心得多，不会有人打扰。”

“我们很高兴接受你的善意，先生，”埃克索插了一句。“我和妻子都很需要休息。”

“那请跟我来吧，朋友们。在后面跟紧点儿，到家之前不要大声说话。”

他们在黑暗中跟着艾弗，来到一幢房子前，这屋舍结构上和其他房子差不多，但要大一些，而且是独立的。他们穿过低矮的门廊进了屋，空气里充满着木柴的烟味儿，让埃克索胸口发紧，但他觉得这气味温暖友好。屋子中央焖烧着堆火，周围有编织毯、动物皮和橡木、白蜡木做的家具。埃克索从行囊里拿毯子，比特丽丝一下子坐到一把能摇动的座椅上，松了口气。艾弗还站在门口，似乎心事重重。

“你们刚才的遭遇，”他说，“我想想都觉得羞愧。”

“我们都不要去想这件事啦，先生，”埃克索说。“你已经对我们够友好啦。而且晚上来的时候，我们也亲眼看到了那些勇敢的人出发，去完成危险的任务。所以我们非常理解村子里的恐慌气氛，有些人做些傻事，也是正常的。”

“既然你们两位陌生人都记得我们的麻烦，那些傻瓜怎么这么快就忘记了呢？命令连孩子都听得懂，就是要求他们不惜代价守住围篱上的岗位，这关系到全村人的安全，何况如果我们的英雄们被妖怪追到门边，他们还需要帮忙呢。瞧瞧他们都在干什么？两个陌生人走过，他们就扑过来，像发疯的狼一样，站岗的命令都忘光了，也不记得为什么要站岗。要不是这地方经常发生这种奇怪的遗忘症，我都要怀疑自己脑子是不是出了问题。”

“我们那儿也是一样的，先生，”埃克索说。“邻居忘记事情的情况，我和妻子见过很多次。”

“这倒有意思了，先生。我还担心这种病只在我们这儿传播呢。周围的人都忘记了，常常只有我一个人还有些记忆，是因为我老了，还是因为我是个不列颠人，住在撒克逊人当中？”

“我们发现情况也是这样，先生。我们自己也受到了这迷雾的影响——我和妻子一直称之为迷雾——但年轻人的情况似乎更严重。先生，你找到解释了吗？”

“我听到过很多说法，朋友，大多是撒克逊人的迷信。但去年冬天，有个陌生人到这边来，说了一些话，我越想越觉得有道理。咦，这是怎么回事？”艾弗一直待在门边，手里拄着拐杖，这时突然转过身去，对一个体形扭曲的人来说，这个动作异常敏捷。“原谅你们的主人，朋友们。可能是我们的勇士们回来啦。你们最好待在这里，不要露面。”

他走之后，埃克索和比特丽丝沉默了一会儿，两人坐在各自的椅子上，闭着眼睛，感谢这休息的机会。然后比特丽丝低声说道：

“你觉得艾弗刚才想说什么呢，埃克索？”

“哪件事情，公主？”

“他在谈迷雾啊，还有迷雾的原因。”

“就是他听过的一个传言。我们一定要请他说清楚。他是个可敬的人。他一直和撒克逊人住在一起吗？”

“据我所知，很久以前他娶了个撒克逊女人，后来就一直住在这儿。那个女人怎么样，我没听说过。埃克索，要是能找到迷雾的原因，那不是件很好的事情吗？”

“真是件好事，但究竟能有什么好处，我还不知道。”

“你怎么能这么说呢，埃克索？你怎么能说这么狠心的话呢？”

“怎么啦，公主？出什么事情啦？”埃克索从椅子上坐起来，望着妻子。“我只是说，找到了原因，也不能让迷雾消失，无论是从这儿还是从我们自己的地方。”

“只要有机会了解这迷雾，就可能对我们意义非凡。你怎么能这么轻描淡写地说呢，埃克索？”

“对不起，公主，我不是有意要这么说的。我心里刚才在想别的事。”

“我们可是今天才从船夫那儿听到消息的，你怎么还能想别的事呢？”

“别的事，公主，比如：那些勇士们有没有回来，孩子有没有受伤。还有，这村子的守卫们人心惶惶，大门也不牢固，那些魔鬼今晚会不会攻进来报复。要想的事情很多，管不了迷雾或者那个奇怪船夫的迷信话。”

“没必要讲狠话，埃克索。我可不希望吵架。”

“请原谅，公主。肯定是这儿的气氛影响了我。”

可是，比特丽丝已经眼泪汪汪了。“没必要说话这么凶嘛，”她几乎是喃喃自语。

埃克索站起身来，走到她的摇椅旁，微微蹲下，把她紧紧抱在胸前。“对不起啊，公主，”他说。“我们离开这个地方之前，一定能和艾弗谈谈迷雾的事。”两人就这样抱了一会儿，他又接着说道：“说实话，公主，我刚才心里倒在想一件具体的事情。”

“什么事啊，埃克索？”

“我在想，你身上的痛，女药师是怎么说的。”

“她说没关系，上了年纪很正常。”

“我就这么说嘛，公主。我不是说过不用担心吗？”

“我可没担心，丈夫。是你坚持要今天晚上去见那个女人的。”

“见见她也很好啊，就算我们以前担心你身上的痛，现在也不用担心啦。”

她从他怀里轻轻挣脱出来，靠到摇椅上。“埃克索，”她说，“女药师提到了一位老僧侣，她说比她懂得更多。他帮助过这个村里很多人，这个叫乔纳斯的僧侣。他的修道院离这儿有一天的路程，沿着上山的路向东。”

“沿着上山的路向东。”埃克索迈步朝门那边走去，望着外面的黑夜。门是开的，艾弗离开的时候没有关。“公主啊，我在想，我们明天也可以走高地上的那条路，和走低地上那条穿过树林的路差不多。”

“那条路不好走，埃克索。要爬山。至少要多花一天，儿子还在焦虑地等着我们呢。”

“没错。可是，走了这么远，不去看看这位睿智的僧侣，好像很可惜。”

“女药师以为我们要去那个方向，所以这么说说而已。我跟她说不走山路到儿子的村庄更方便，她也认为没这个必要了，就是身上痛，老年人都有的，没有其他毛病。”

埃克索目光穿过门廊，继续盯着外面的黑夜。“公主啊，我们回头再考虑一下。现在艾弗回来啦，看起来不太高兴。”

艾弗大步走进来，喘着粗气，坐在一把堆满兽皮的宽大椅子上，随手将拐杖喀嗒一声丢在脚下。“一个年轻的傻瓜说，看见一个魔鬼从围篱外面爬上来，探头探脑朝里面望。大混乱啊，这个不用我说了，我只好组织一队人去看看是不是真的。他指的那个地方除了夜晚的天空，什么也没有，可他还是说魔鬼就在那儿看着我们，其他人都缩到我后面，像孩子一样，还拿着锄头和长矛。然后那个傻瓜承认守夜的时候睡着了，梦见了魔鬼，可即使这样，他们急忙回到各自的岗位了吗？他们都吓得不敢动，我只好发誓说，要把他们揍成烂泥，让他们家人都认不得。”他环顾四周，仍旧喘着粗气。“原谅你们的主人吧，朋友们。今晚要是能睡的话，我就睡里面那间屋，你们在这儿尽量让自己舒服一点儿吧，反正能为你们提供的也很少。”

“恰恰相反，先生，”埃克索说，“你为我们提供了非常舒适的住处，我们很感谢。很遗憾你刚才出去，没有听到更好的消息。”

“我们必须等，也许要到半夜，甚至黎明。朋友们，你们要到哪儿去呢？”

“我们明天出发往东走，先生，到儿子的村庄去，他急着见我们呢。不过，这件事情，你也许能帮点忙。我和妻子刚才正在讨论该走哪条路。我们听说有个睿智的僧侣，名叫乔纳斯，住在山上的修道院里，要走山路去，我们有件小事情请教他。”

“乔纳斯当然很有名望，不过我没有亲眼见过他。一定要去见见他，不过要小心，到修道院的路可不好走。大半天都要爬山。等山路走完，你们要注意，不要迷路，那地方就是魁瑞格的地盘。”

“魁瑞格，那条母龙吗？我很久没听人谈到过她了。这里的人现在还很害怕她吗？”

“她现在几乎不下山了，”艾弗说。“一时兴起也许会攻击路过的行人，但是算在她头上的事情，可能是野兽或土匪干的。依我看，带来威胁的不是魁瑞格做的事，而是她还一直存在。只要她还活着，还能自由行动，各种各样的邪恶就会在我们的土地上滋生，像瘟疫一

样。比如今晚给我们带来灾难的魔鬼。它们是哪来的呢？这可不是普通的食人兽。这儿谁也没见过类似的东西。它们为什么要到这儿来呢，为什么要到我们的河岸上安营？魁瑞格现在很少现身，但很多黑暗的力量都来自于她，这么多年她还没被人杀死，真是个耻辱。”

“可是，艾弗，”比特丽丝说，“谁愿意去挑战这么个怪兽呢？无论怎么说，魁瑞格可是条极其凶猛的龙，又躲藏在很难去的山里。”

“你说得对，比特丽丝夫人，这是个艰难的任务。情况是这样的：亚瑟王的时代留下了一位年老的骑士，多年前他受这位伟大国王的指令，去杀死魁瑞格。你们要是走山路，还有可能碰上他。看到他，你们肯定认得出来：他穿着一副上了锈的锁子甲，骑着一匹老马，遇人就说他的神圣使命，不过我猜这个老傻子从没给母龙带来什么麻烦。我们等他完成任务，恐怕要等到很老啦。朋友们，无论怎么说，你们应该去修道院一趟，但是要小心一点，夜晚到来之前就要找到安身的地方。”

艾弗迈步朝里屋走去，但比特丽丝很快站起身来，说道：

“艾弗，之前你谈到过迷雾。说你听人说起过它的原因，后来你有事走了，没来得及说下去。现在我们很希望听你谈谈这件事。”

“对啦，迷雾。可真是个好名字。比特丽丝夫人，我们听说的话，谁知道是不是真的呢？我想，刚才我说过，去年有个陌生人骑马经过，在这儿过夜。他是从东边沼泽来的，和今天这位勇敢的客人一样，不过说话的口音很难懂。我请他在这个旧房子里休息，和你们一样，晚上我们谈了很多事情，也谈到了迷雾，你们用的这个名称倒很贴切。他对我们这个奇怪的毛病非常感兴趣，一遍一遍提了很多问题。然后他提了一个说法，我当时没在意，但后来一直在考虑。陌生人认为，可能是上帝本人忘记了我们过去的很多事情——遥远的事情，当天的事情。如果一件事情上帝不记得，我们这些凡人怎么可能还记得呢？”

比特丽丝瞪大眼睛看着他。“这种事情有可能吗，艾弗？我们大家都是主的孩子。我们做过的事情，发生在我们身上的事情，上帝真会忘记吗？”

“这正是我问过的问题，比特丽丝夫人，陌生人没有回答。但从那以后，我就一直在想他的话。也许这也是个不错的说法，可以解释

你们所说的迷雾。现在，请你们原谅，朋友们，我要抽空休息一会儿啦。”

* * *

埃克索意识到，比特丽丝在摇他的肩膀。他不知道两人睡了多久：天还是黑的，但外面人声嘈杂，他听见艾弗的声音从上方传来：“让我们祈祷吧，希望是好消息，不是我们的末日。”等埃克索坐起来，主人已经走了，比特丽丝说道：“快点，埃克索，是好消息还是坏消息，我们马上就知道了。”

埃克索睡眠惺忪，一只手挽住妻子的胳膊，两人踉踉跄跄走入黑夜。外面点亮了更多的火把，有些从围篱上照下来，所以路看得比以前更加清楚。人们来来往往，狗在吠叫，孩子们在哭。接下来一切似乎自动有了秩序，埃克索和比特丽丝发现自己置身于一个队伍之中，大家都在朝一个方向赶。队伍突然停下来，埃克索惊讶地发现，他们已经到了中央的广场——显然，从艾弗家到这儿，不是只有他们之前走过的那条道，还有一条更直的路。篝火熊熊，烧得比以前更旺，以至于有一刻埃克索以为，村民们停住脚步，是因为靠近火的地方太热了。他从人们的头顶望过去，发现那位武士已经回来了。他镇定地站在篝火的左边，身体一侧被火光照亮，另一侧在黑暗中。埃克索发现，他被火光照亮的那一侧脸上有细小的血点，好像他刚从血雾中穿过一样。他的长发仍旧系着，但松了一点儿，看起来湿漉漉的。他的衣服上全是泥巴，也许还有血，出发时漫不经心搭在一侧肩上的披风，有几处地方现在已经破了。但这个人似乎并没有受伤，正在和村中三位长老轻声说话，艾弗也在其中。埃克索还看到，武士的臂弯里托着什么东西。

与此同时，人们开始吟唱，一开始声音很轻，然后越来越大，最后武士转过身去，向人群致意，没有一点儿粗鲁骄横的样子。他开始对人们讲话，尽管声音够响，大家都能听到，但给人的印象是，他在用低沉、亲密的语调谈论严肃的话题。

听众们安静下来，努力去听他说的每个字，不久人们便张大了嘴巴，要么表示赞许，要么感到震惊。有一下，他朝身旁的一个地方做了个手势，埃克索第一次看到，和武士一起出发的那两个人正坐在地上，也在火光照亮的光圈之内。他们看起来好像是从高处跌落了下来，现在还头晕目眩，站不起来。人们开始为这两人吟唱，但他们似乎没注意到，眼睛仍旧空洞地瞪着前方。

然后武士又转脸看着人群，说了句话，吟唱声消退下去。他向前跨了一步，离篝火更近，一只手抓住他一直带着的那个东西，举到空中。

埃克索看到，那似乎是个动物的脑袋，脖子很粗，从咽喉下方切下来。黑色的卷毛从头顶挂下来，披在脸部周围，那张脸没有五官、怪诞可怖：本来应该有眼睛、鼻子和嘴巴的地方，只有长着很多小疙瘩的肉，像鹅的瘤一样，脸颊上有几丛绒毛一样的毛发。人群里发出一声惊叫，埃克索感觉到大家在往后退。这时候他才意识到，大家看到的不是脑袋，而是一个大得异常的人形怪物的肩臂部位。武士举起战利品时，抓着的是二头肌附近的残根，肩膀那头朝着最上方，这时埃克索看到，这一块东西被剑从身体上砍下，他原来以为是一缕缕毛发的东西，实际上是肌腱从伤口里钻了出来，挂在外面。

过了一会儿，武士把战利品放下来，丢在脚下，好像他无法充分表达对怪物躯体的鄙视一样。人们又一次缩回去，然后又挤上前，吟唱声再次响起，但这次马上就停止了，因为武士又开始讲话。埃克索一句也听不懂，但能明显感觉到周围人们的紧张、激动。比特丽丝在他耳边说：

“两头怪物，都被我们的英雄杀死了。一个受了致命伤，逃进了树林，肯定活不过今天晚上。另一个坚持战斗，被武士切了一块下来，你看就在地上，偿还了它的罪行。那魔鬼拖着剩下的身体，跑到湖里想止住疼痛，在黑色的湖水里沉下去了。那个孩子，埃克索，看到那边那个孩子了吗？”

在光亮的边缘，一小群女人围着一个坐在石头上的少年。他身材瘦削，有黑色的头发，身上裹着毯子。他身高已经接近成人了，但你能感觉到，毯子下面裹着的身体细细长长，仍然是个少年。一个女人拿来了一只木桶，正帮他洗掉脸上和脖子上的污垢，但他似乎浑然不觉。他的眼睛一直盯着前方武士的后背，偶尔歪一下脑袋，似乎想绕过武士的腿，看一眼地上那个东西。

看到这个得救的孩子还活着，而且显然没受重伤，埃克索没觉得欣慰或高兴，反倒隐约有些不安，这让他自己十分惊讶。一开始，他以为这和小男孩本人的奇怪模样有关，但随即他发现了问题所在：小男孩的安危刚刚还是所有人关注的焦点，现在大家对待他的样子却有些不对劲。这里头有种谨慎的沉默，近乎冷漠，让埃克索想起自己村子里关于小女孩玛塔的那件事情，他怀疑这个男孩是不是也和玛塔一样，正在被大家遗忘。可是，这儿的情况显然不是这样。现在大家甚

至开始指着小男孩了，照顾他的女人们回瞪着人群，似乎是要保护他。

“我听不明白他们在说什么，埃克索，”比特丽丝在他耳边说。“这个孩子能安全回来已是万幸了，想想他那双稚嫩的眼睛刚才见过的事情，可以说他平静得让人惊讶，但是有些人却在为孩子的事情争吵。”

武士仍旧在对人们说话，语气里有恳求的意味。听起来好像他在指责什么人，埃克索能感觉到人们的情绪发生了变化。钦佩与感激逐渐变成了其他情感，周围的人声音渐渐高起来，声音里有疑惑甚至恐惧。武士又说话了，声音严厉，同时指着身后的男孩。这时艾弗走进光亮之中，站到武士身旁，开始说话，一部分人更加直接地表示抗议。埃克索身后有个声音喊了起来，顿时四下里一片喧哗。艾弗提高了声音，人们安静了一会儿，但叫喊声立即又恢复了，黑暗中开始有人推搡。

“哎呀，埃克索，快，我们快点走！”比特丽丝对着他耳朵大声喊道。“这地方我们不能待了。”

埃克索用胳膊搂住她的肩膀，推开人群往外走，他心里一动，又回头望了一眼。那个男孩没动地方，仍然瞪大眼睛看着武士的后背，显然没有察觉到眼前的混乱。照顾他的那个女人已经退在一旁，眼神疑惑，看看男孩，又看看人群。比特丽丝拉了一下他的胳膊。“埃克索，快点，带我们离开吧。我担心我们会受到伤害。”

全村的人肯定都到广场上去了，因为回艾弗家的路上，他们没遇到人。直到看到了房子，埃克索才开口问道：“刚才都说些什么呢，公主？”

“我一点把握也没有，埃克索。大家一起说话，我一下子弄不明白。一场争吵，关于那个得救的孩子，有人发脾气。我们还是先离开吧，发生了什么事，以后慢慢会弄清楚的。”

* * *

第二天上午埃克索醒来的时候，一道道阳光照进了房间。他躺在地上，不过他身下铺着软垫子，身上盖着暖和的毯子——这样的安排，比他平日里奢华得多——他现在感觉身体休息得很好。而且，他心情很不错，因为醒来的时候，他脑子里留下了愉快的回忆。

比特丽丝在他身旁动了动，但眼睛还是闭的，呼吸也很均匀。和往常醒来的时候一样，埃克索看着她，等着心里慢慢涌起一股柔情。很快和他预料的一样，他心里感到平安喜乐，但今天还夹杂着一丝悲伤。这种感觉让他惊讶，他一只手轻轻抚摸着妻子肩头，仿佛这个动作能够驱走阴影一样。

他听到外面有吵闹声，但不是晚上把他吵醒的那种声音，而是一个普通的上午，人们在各自干着自己的活儿。他想起来，自己和比特丽丝睡得太晚了，但他忍住没去喊醒比特丽丝，而是继续凝视着她。最后，他小心翼翼地起身，走到木头门边，把门推开一点儿。这扇门——应该是真正的“门”，有木头铰链——发出吱呀的声音，强烈的阳光从缝隙里照进来，可比特丽丝还没醒。现在，埃克索有点儿担心，他回到她躺的地方，在她一旁蹲下，这个动作让他感到膝盖僵硬。最后，他妻子终于睁开了眼睛，仰脸看着他。

“我们该起床啦，公主，”他心里感到宽慰，但没有流露出来。“村子里的人都在干活啦，我们的主人早就走了。”

“那你该早点喊醒我，埃克索。”

“你看起来很平静，昨天很累，我想你该多睡一会儿。我这样想是对的，现在你看起来像年轻姑娘一样鲜嫩呢。”

“这一大早就开始说胡话了。我们都不知道晚上发生了什么。从外面的声音来看，他们还没有自相残杀、全部死光嘛。那是孩子们的声音，我听到了，狗听起来也吃饱了，很开心。埃克索，这儿有水洗脸吗？”

两人尽量把自己收拾得整洁一点，过了一会儿——艾弗还没有回来——他们走到清新、明媚的阳光下，想找点儿吃的。在埃克索眼里，现在的村庄要和善得多。那些圆形的棚屋晚上显得乱七八糟，现在却整整齐齐排列在眼前，投下相似的影子，排成一条穿过村庄的齐整大道。男人女人来来往往，拿着工具或洗衣桶，身后跟着一群群孩子。狗还和昨天晚上一样多，但似乎更加温驯。只有一头驴子在水井前方的阳光下愉悦地排便，才让埃克索想起头天晚上进村时看到的混乱。他们经过的时候，甚至还有人点头简单地打招呼，但没有人和他们讲话。

走了不远，他们看到艾弗和那位武士站在一起，在前面的街道上，身形相差悬殊，头凑在一起讨论着。埃克索和比特丽丝走上前来，艾弗往后退了一步，不好意思地笑了笑。

“我不希望太早把你们吵醒，”他对他们说。“可我是个糟糕的主人，你们两位肯定都饿坏了吧。请跟我到长屋去，我保证让你们吃饱。不过首先呢，朋友们，来见见我们昨晚的英雄。你们会发现，维斯坦先生听懂我们的话没问题。”

埃克索转身面对着武士，点了点头。“我和妻子感到荣幸，能遇见如此勇敢大度、本领出众的人。你昨晚的行动非常了不起。”

“我的行动没什么特殊的，先生，不要再谈我的本领啦。”和以前一样，武士的声音很柔和，眼睛周围荡漾着笑意。“我昨晚运气好，而且，有勇敢的伙伴们协助。”

“他说的伙伴们，”艾弗说，“忙着尿裤子，根本没加入战斗。是他一个人杀死了妖魔。”

“说真的，先生，别提这件事了。”武士这话是对艾弗说的，但他现在凝视着埃克索，好像埃克索脸上有什么标记，让他十分着迷一样。

“先生，我们的语言，你说得非常好，”埃克索说。对方的凝视让他吃了一惊。

武士继续打量着埃克索，然后才回过神来，笑了。“原谅我，先生。有一下子我以为……不过请你原谅我吧。我的血统是正宗的撒克逊人，但我是在离这儿不远的地方长大的，常和不列颠人在一起。所以我不仅会讲自己的话，也学会了你们的语言。这段时间我有些生疏了，因为我住在遥远的东方沼地，那地方能听到很多奇怪的话，但没有你们的语言。所以要请你原谅我的错误。”

“哪里哪里，先生，”埃克索说。“旁人几乎听不出这不是你的本族语。实际上，昨天晚上我注意到你佩剑的方式，和一般撒克逊人相比，位置更高，离手更近，走路的时候手能轻易落在剑柄上。如果我说这种方式更像不列颠人，希望你不要介意。”

维斯坦又笑了。“我的撒克逊伙伴们不仅一直嘲笑我佩剑的方式，还笑话我挥剑的样子。不过，你也看到，我的剑术是不列颠人教的，我想不到还有谁能教得更好。这帮助我渡过了很多危险，昨天晚上也一样。请原谅我的鲁莽，先生，不过我看到，你也不是本地人。你的部族是在西边吗？”

“我们是从隔壁的部族来的，先生。一天的路程而已。”

“那么，也许你以前在更西边的地方住过？”

“先生，正如我刚才所说，我是从隔壁的部族来的。”

“请原谅我不够礼貌。我来到西边这么远的地方，发现自己越来越想念小时候的地方了，不过我知道那儿离这里还有不少路。我发现到哪儿似乎都能看到记忆中的熟悉面孔。你和你好心的妻子今天上午要回家吗？”

“不，先生，我们往东边走，去儿子的村庄，希望两天内能赶到。”

“哦。你就是走穿过树林的那条路了。”

“先生，实际上我们打算走高地上的那条路，从山区经过，那儿的修道院里有个睿智的人，我们希望能够拜见他。”

“是这样啊？”维斯坦若有所思地点点头，又一次仔细打量起埃克索来。“我听人说，那要爬很陡的山啊。”

“我的客人们还没吃早餐呢，”艾弗插了一句。“请原谅我们，维斯坦阁下，我要领他们去长屋啦。然后如果可以的话，先生，我想继续我们刚才的讨论。”他放低声音，继续用撒克逊语说话，维斯坦则点头相应。接着，艾弗转脸看着埃克索和比特丽丝，然后摇摇头，沉重地说：“尽管这个人昨晚付出了巨大努力，我们的麻烦远没有结束呢。请跟我来吧，朋友们，你们肯定饿坏了。”

艾弗在前面走，一瘸一拐地，每一步都要用拐杖拄地。他似乎心事重重，没注意到在熙来攘往的小巷里，客人们已经落在后面。有一下子，艾弗在前面好几步远，埃克索对比特丽丝说：“那位武士是个可敬的人物，你觉得呢，公主？”

“毫无疑问，”她低声回答。“可是，他盯着你看的样子很奇怪呀，埃克索。”

没有时间继续谈话了，因为艾弗终于发现可能把客人们丢了，于是在一个拐角处停了下来。

不久，他们来到一个洒满阳光的庭院，鹅在院子里走来走去。院子一分为二，中间有一条人工小溪——地上挖出来的一道水渠，渠里水不深，但流得急。小溪最宽的地方，有一座简单的小桥，用两块石板搭成，一个大孩子正蹲在石板上洗衣服。埃克索觉得这个场景近乎田园风光，他想停下来好好欣赏一番，可艾弗一直大步向前，朝着那

幢低矮的建筑走去，建筑位于院子的远端，与院子同宽，屋顶盖着厚厚的茅草。

一走进去，你很可能会觉得，长屋和你在某些情况下亲眼见过的那种乡村食堂差不多。屋里有一排排的长桌和板凳，一端是厨房和提供食物的区域。和现代设施的主要差别是，这儿到处都是干草：头顶、脚下都有草，桌面上也有，不过不是有意为之——长屋里经常有风，草被刮得到处都是。这样的上午，就在我们的客人们坐下来准备吃早饭时，阳光从小小的窗户里照进来，你会发现就连空气里都飘着细小的干草粒。

他们到的时候，长屋里没人，但艾弗进了厨房区，一会儿功夫，便有两位年长的妇女出来，拿着面包、蜂蜜、饼干、罐装的牛奶和水。随后艾弗也跟着出来了，拿着一盘鸡块，埃克索和比特丽丝心怀感激地狼吞虎咽起来。

一开始，他们吃着东西，没有讲话，这时候才意识到自己有多饿。艾弗在对面坐下，继续思考着，眼神迷茫、心事重重。过了好一会儿，比特丽丝说道：

“艾弗，这些撒克逊人是你的一个大负担。你也许希望回到自己的部族里去吧，虽然那个男孩已平安回来，食人兽也都杀死了。”

“那可不是食人兽，夫人，和这个地方以前见过的东西都不一样。它们不再在村庄大门外面游荡了，一桩让人害怕的大事可算是了结了。那个男孩可就是另外一回事了。他虽然回来了，安全却谈不上。”艾弗的身体从桌子那边探过来，他压低了声音，尽管周围没有其他人。“你说得对，比特丽丝夫人，和这些野蛮人住在一起，我自己也觉得奇怪。还不如住在老鼠洞里。那位勇敢的陌生人会怎么看我们呢，昨晚他还帮了我们大忙？”

“怎么啦，先生，发生什么事啦？”埃克索问道。“昨晚我们也在火堆边，感觉到要发生激烈的争吵，我们就走了，现在还不知道后来发生了什么事。”

“你们躲起来是对的，朋友们。这些异教徒昨晚都激动得很，相互争吵，几乎要抠出对方的眼珠子。如果他们发现人群中有两个不列颠陌生人，接下来会干什么呢？我都不敢想。男孩埃德温平安回来了，但是，村子里开始庆祝的时候，女人们就在他身上发现了一个小伤口。我亲自看过，其他长老也看过。胸部下方有一个痕迹，和孩子摔跤跌伤差不多。可是那些女人，还是他的亲戚呢，却说那是被咬出

来的伤口，今天上午整个村子都这么说了。为了安全起见，我只好把孩子锁在棚子里，就是这样，他的同伴、他的家人，仍然在门口扔石头，叫喊着要把他拉出去杀掉。”

“但这怎么可能呢，艾弗？”比特丽丝问。“又是迷雾的原因吗，让他们忘记了孩子最近的可怕遭遇？”

“是这样就好啦，夫人。这次他们好像什么都记得清清楚楚。异教徒的眼光，超越不了他们的迷信。他们相信，小男孩既然被魔鬼咬了，很快就会变成魔鬼，在村庄内为非作歹。他们害怕他，维斯坦阁下昨晚将他从一场厄运中救出，但如果他留下来，恐怕还会遭遇更可怕的厄运呢。”

“先生，”埃克索说，“这儿肯定还有明智的人，让大家听听道理吧。”

“就算有，数量也太少了，就算我们能够命令大家节制一两天，不久无知者就会占上风。”

“那能怎么办呢，先生？”

“那位武士也和你们一样担心，我们俩一早上都在讨论。我提议，他骑马离开的时候，把男孩带走——这当然有点强人所难——然后把他丢在某个遥远的村庄里，这样他还有开始新生活的机会。这个人为了我们，刚刚冒了生命危险，这么快就提出这样的要求，让我心里感到深深的愧疚，可我想不出还有什么别的办法。维斯坦正在考虑我的提议，不过他要为国王办事，因为马受伤，以及昨晚的麻烦，已经耽搁了。实际上，我现在该去看看孩子是不是安全，然后去问问武士有没有做决定。”艾弗站起身来，拿起拐杖。“动身之前，来告别吧，朋友们。你们听了这些事情，希望快点离开这里，头也不回，我能理解。”

* * *

埃克索看着艾弗走出门廊，大步穿过洒满阳光的庭院，走了。“坏消息啊，公主，”他说。

“是啊，埃克索，不过和我们没关系。我们不要在这里逗留了。今天要走山路呢。”

食物和牛奶非常新鲜，他们默默地吃了一会儿。然后比特丽丝说：

“你觉得有道理吗，埃克索？艾弗昨晚关于迷雾的话，说是上帝自己让我们忘记的。”

“我不知道对这话该怎么看，公主。”

“埃克索，今天早上我有个想法，就是刚刚醒过来的时候。”

“是什么想法呢，公主？”

“就是一时的想法。也许我们做过什么事，惹上帝发怒了。也许他不是发怒，而是感到耻辱。”

“真是个奇怪的想法，公主。可如果真是你说的这样，那他为什么不惩罚我们呢？为什么把我们变得跟傻瓜一样，连一个小时之前发生的事情都会忘掉？”

“也许上帝为我们感到耻辱，或者是我们做了什么事，以至于他希望自己能够忘记。像陌生人跟艾弗说的那样，如果上帝不想记住，那我们记不住也就不奇怪了。”

“我们究竟可能做过什么事情，让上帝感到如此耻辱呢？”

“我不知道，埃克索。但肯定不是你和我做过的什么事情，因为上帝一直眷爱我们。如果我们向他祈祷，请求他至少记住几件对我们最宝贵的事情，谁知道呢，说不定他能听到，满足我们的愿望。”

外面传来一阵笑声。埃克索微微侧着脑袋，看到院子里有一群孩子，在小溪上的石板桥上玩平衡木游戏。就在他看的时候，其中一个发出一声尖叫，掉进了水里。

“谁知道呢，公主，”他说。“也许山上那位睿智的僧侣会给我们解释。不过，既然我们谈到了今天早晨醒来的事情，我当时也有个想法，或许和你的念头差不多时候吧。是个记忆，简单的记忆，但我已经很高兴了。”

“哦，埃克索，那是什么记忆呢？”

“我记得我们俩正经过一个市场，或者是个节日庆典。我们在一个村庄里，但不是我们自己的村子，你穿着那件有帽子的浅绿色斗篷。”

“那肯定是个梦，丈夫啊，要么就是很久以前的事。我没有绿斗篷。”

“没错，公主，我说的就是很久以前。是个夏天，但我们所在的那个地方有寒冷的风，你把那件绿色斗篷穿在身上，但没戴帽子。一个市场，或者是个节日庆典。村庄在山坡上，刚进去的地方有羊圈，里面有山羊。”

“那我们在那儿干什么呢，埃克索？”

“我们就手挽着手走路，然后有个陌生人，村子里的，突然挡住我们的路。他看了你一眼，眼睛瞪得大大的，好像看见了女神一样。你还记得吗，公主？一个年轻人，不过我想那时候我们也很年轻。他说他从没见过这么漂亮的女人。然后他伸出手来，碰了碰你的胳膊。你还有印象吗，公主？”

“我有点想起来了，不过还不太清晰。我想你说的是个喝醉酒的人吧。”

“也许有点儿醉吧，公主，我不知道。我刚说过，那是个庆祝的日子。反正他看到了你，感到很震惊。说你的美是他的眼睛从没有见过的。”

“那真是很久以前了！那天你不是妒忌了吗，和那人吵了一架，我们差点被赶出了村子？”

“这我可没想起来，公主。我想到的那一次，你穿着绿斗篷，是个节庆的日子，还是这个陌生人，看到我是你的保护人，就转身对我说，她是我见过的最美的人，你呢，我的朋友，一定要好好照顾她。他是这么说的。”

“我有点想起来了，我肯定你妒忌得和他吵了一架。”

“我怎么会做那种事呢？现在想起陌生人的话，我还感到很骄傲呢。他见过的最美的人。而且他让我把你照顾得好好的。”

“就算你当时感到骄傲，埃克索，你肯定也妒忌了。你不是去挑战他了吗，虽然他喝醉了酒？”

“我记得不是这样的，公主。也许我只是假装妒忌，开个玩笑而已。但我应该知道，那个人没有恶意。今天早上我醒来的时候就想起了这件事，虽然过去了很多年。”

“既然你记得是这样，埃克索，那就让它保持这样吧。有了这迷雾，任何记忆都是宝贵的，我们还是紧紧抓住比较好。”

“我在想，那件斗篷后来怎么样了。你一直穿得很好。”

“那是件斗篷，埃克索，和别的斗篷一样，这么多年肯定穿破啦。”

“我们不是丢在哪儿了吗？也许丢在某块有阳光的石头上？”

“这件事我倒想起来了。而且当时我为丢斗篷的事狠狠责怪过你。”

“我想你是责怪过我，公主，不过我现在想不起来那有什么道理。”

“噢，埃克索，无论有没有迷雾，我们能想起几件事情来，就够令人安慰啦。也许上帝已经听到了我们的话，正抓紧帮助我们回忆呢。”

“我们还会记得更多，公主，只要我们用心。到那时候，就算哪一天我们愿意去听某个狡猾的船夫的瞎话，他也骗不到我们啦。我们现在还是吃完早饭吧。太阳很高了，我们要走山路，别太晚了。”

* * *

他们往回走，到艾弗的房子去，刚刚经过头天晚上差点被人攻击的地方，就听到有人从上面向下喊。他们四处张望，在高高的防御墙上发现了维斯坦，蹲在一个瞭望台上。

“很高兴看到你们还在这儿，朋友们，”武士朝下面喊道。

“还在这儿，”埃克索朝围篱走了几步，喊道。“不过正急着赶路呢。你呢，先生？你今天要在这儿休息吗？”

“我马上也要离开。不过，先生，如果能冒昧同你说几句话，那我就太感激啦。我承诺不会耽误你太久。”

埃克索和比特丽丝相互看了一眼，然后她低声说，“你愿意就跟他谈谈吧，埃克索。我回到艾弗家里，准备上路的东西。”

埃克索点点头，然后转脸对着维斯坦喊道：“好啊，先生。你要我上来吗？”

“随便你吧，先生。我倒很愿意下来，不过上午阳光明媚，这儿的景色能振奋精神呢。如果你不嫌爬梯子麻烦的话，我想请你上来看。”

“去看看他想干什么，埃克索，”比特丽丝低声说。“但是你要小心一点，我说的可不仅仅是梯子。”

他小心翼翼一级一级上了梯子，来到武士跟前，武士伸出一只手表示欢迎。埃克索在窄窄的平台上站稳了，然后低头往下望，比特丽丝还在下面看着。他轻快地挥挥手，她这才有些不太情愿地迈步朝艾弗的房子走去——他站在高处，能清楚地看到那幢房子。他一直看着她，过了一会儿才转过脸来，目光越过围篱上沿，望着远处。

“你看，我没有撒谎吧，阁下，”两人肩并肩迎风站着，维斯坦说道。“眼睛能看到的，都非常壮观。”

那天上午他们眼前的风景，和今天英国乡村房子的高窗前看到的景观，可能不会有很大差别。这两个人应该能看到，他们的右边是渐次而下的谷坡，每隔一段距离就有绿色的山脊，他们的左边是对面的谷坡，长满了松树，应该显得更朦胧一些，因为更远，与地平线上群山的轮廓融为一体。他们的正前方，则是一望无垠的谷底，一条河流在谷底蜿蜒，直到尽头，更远处则是无边无际的沼泽地，布满一块块的池塘和湖泊。水边应该有榆树和柳树，还有浓密的林地，那时候应该会给人们带来不祥的感觉。河的右岸，在阳光和阴影的交汇处，能看到一处早已废弃的村庄。

“昨天，我骑马从那个山坡下来的，”维斯坦说，“我的马不需要催促，自己奔跑起来，好像就是为了开心。我们穿过田野、河流和湖泊，我的精神好极了。真是件奇怪的事情，好像我回到了以前熟悉的场景一样，虽然就我所知，我从没到过这个地方。会不会我走过这条道，不过那时候还是小男孩，不记得路，却能记住这些景观？这儿的树和高沼地，还有天空，好像能唤醒沉睡的记忆。”

埃克索说，“有可能这块地方和西方你出生的地方有很多相似之处。”

“肯定是这样，先生。在东方的沼泽地，我们没有什么山可言，树和草也没有我们眼前这样的颜色。可是，我的马正是在高兴地奔跑时弄坏了蹄铁，今天早上这里的好心人又给它装了一副，但我要骑得慢一点，因为一只蹄子擦伤了。先生，实际情况是，我请你上来，可不光是要欣赏田园风景，而是要避开闲杂的耳目。我想，男孩埃德温的遭遇，你已经听说了吧？”

“艾弗阁下跟我们说过，我们认为在你勇敢地介入之后发生这样的事，真是坏消息。”

“你可能也知道，长老们认为男孩在这里的处境凶多吉少，所以求我今天把他带走。他们让我把他丢在某个遥远的村庄，跟人家编个理由，就说孩子是在路上找到的，没吃东西，又迷了路。我很愿意这样做，但我担心，这个计划救不了他。消息很快就会传出去，下个月，明年，男孩会发现今天的麻烦又来了，那时候情况会更加糟糕，因为他来的时间不长，又不知道他属于哪个部族。你能明白这种情况吗，先生？”

“你的担心很有道理，维斯坦阁下。”

武士刚才说话时，一直凝视着面前的风景。风把一缕头发吹到了脸上，他伸手把头发拨开。这时候，他似乎突然在埃克索的面孔上看到了什么东西，一下子竟忘记了自己在说什么。他歪着脑袋，认真地看着埃克索。然后他低低地笑了一声，说道：

“原谅我，先生。我刚刚想到了别的事情。还是回到我说的话吧。昨天晚上之前，我对这个男孩一无所知，但在每一个新的可怕事件面前，他都镇定应对，给我留下了深刻印象。昨晚，我的同伴们出发时虽然都很勇敢，走近妖魔营地时却被恐惧压倒了。这个男孩虽然在妖魔手里待了好几个小时，举止却镇定自若，让我非常惊讶。想到这个男孩的厄运现在几乎已成定局，我感到十分痛苦。因此我一直在想办法，如果你和你好心的妻子肯伸出援手，也许问题还能解决。”

“我们很愿意尽力而为，先生。先让我听听你的想法吧。”

“长老们让我把孩子带到某个遥远的村庄，毫无疑问他们说的那个撒克逊人的村庄。但正是在撒克逊人的村庄里，男孩才永远不会安全，因为撒克逊人都有关于男孩伤口的迷信。但是，如果把他留给不列颠人，就算故事传到那儿，也不会有危险，因为不列颠人知道这是胡说八道。他很强壮，我刚才说过，他也非常勇敢，虽然话很少。无论到哪个地方，他立即就会成为有用的好帮手。先生，之前你说过，你要往东走，到你儿子的村庄去。我想那正是我们要找的那种信奉基督教的村庄。如果你和你的妻子帮他说说话，也许还能得到你儿子的支持，这件事就肯定能有好的结果。当然，如果我送过去，那些好心的人可能也会收留孩子，但我是个陌生人，会引起恐惧和怀疑。而且，我到这儿来，是有任务在身，不能到东边那么远。”

“这么说，”埃克索说，“你是建议我和妻子把孩子从这儿带走。”

“这正是我的建议，先生。但是，我虽然有任务在身，至少可以一起走一段路。你说过打算走山路。我会很高兴陪着你们和男孩，至少到山的那一边。有我陪伴会很无聊，不过，大家都知道山里面有危险，我的剑可能会对你们有用。你们的行李也可以让马来驮，她一条腿不方便，不过驮行李不会有意见的。你看怎么样，阁下？”

“我看这是个绝好的计划。我和妻子听到男孩的困境都很难过，如果能帮助他解决，我们会很高兴。你的话很有智慧，先生。显然，现在他和不列颠人一起最安全。我相信我儿子的村庄会善待他，我儿子在村庄里也是个受人尊敬的人物，几乎也算是长老了，就是年纪小一点。我知道，他会为男孩说话的，保证让他受到欢迎。”

“我非常欣慰。我去把我们的计划告诉艾弗阁下，想办法悄悄把孩子从谷仓带走。你和你妻子马上就能动身吗？”

“我妻子这时候正在准备路上的东西呢。”

“那么，就请你们在南门等着。我马上带我的马和男孩埃德温过来。先生，非常感谢你帮忙克服困难。很高兴未来一两天能和你们同行。”

第四章

他这辈子都没从那么高那么远的地方看自己的村庄，这景象让他惊讶。面对午后雾气中的风景，他下意识地动着手指头，仿佛那是个东西，他一伸手就可以抓到。那位老太太刚才焦虑地看着他爬树，现在她仍然在树脚下，冲上面喊，让他不要再爬了。但埃德温没理睬，因为他比任何人都更了解树。武士命令他放哨，他就小心挑选了这棵榆树，他知道这棵树虽然病恹恹的，却蕴含着力量，会欢迎他。而且，这儿是观察那座桥的最佳地点，还能看到通向桥的那条山路，现在他能清楚地看到三名士兵在和骑马的人说话。骑马的人已经下了马，抓着焦躁不安的的缰绳，正和士兵们激烈争论。

他了解树——而这棵榆树就像斯特法。把他扛走吧，丢到树林里烂掉。大一点的孩子们总是这么说斯特法。“没法干活的老瘸子不都该这样吗？”但埃德温看到的是斯特法的本来面目：一位老武士，身体里仍然隐藏着力量，见识甚至比长老们还要高。村子里只有斯特法见过战场——他的两条腿就是在战场上伤的——因此，反过来，斯特法也能够认出埃德温的本来面目。有些男孩子比他力气大，可能会把他按到地上、打他，并以此为乐。但只有埃德温拥有武士的灵魂，其他人没有。

“我观察过你，”老斯特法有一次对他说，“在暴风雨一样的拳头之下，你的眼睛仍然镇定，好像要记住每一拳。这样的眼睛，只有最好的武士冷漠地穿过激烈的战场时，我才见过。不久的将来，你会成为令人敬畏的人物。”

现在，这已经开始了。这正在成为事实，就像斯特法预料的一样。

一阵大风吹过，树摇晃起来，埃德温换了一下手，抓住另一根树枝，再次努力回想早上发生的事情。他阿姨的脸扭曲变形，都认不出来了。她一直在尖叫着诅咒他，但艾弗长老没让她讲完，把她从谷仓门口推开，同时也挡住了埃德温的视线，让他看不见她。他阿姨对他一直不错，不过，就算她现在要诅咒他，他也不在乎。不久前，她还想让埃德温喊她“母亲”，可他从没喊过。因为他知道，他真正的母亲在路上。他真正的母亲不会那样冲他尖叫，还要艾弗长老把她拉走。今天早上，在谷仓里，他听到了真正的母亲的声音。

艾弗长老把他推了进去，里面漆黑一片，接着门关上了，他阿姨那张扭曲的脸——所有那些脸——都消失了。一开始，马车只是谷仓中央一团巨大的黑影。慢慢地，他看出了马车的形状，他伸出手，木头摸上去腐烂潮湿。外面，那些声音又开始叫嚷起来，然后又是噼里啪啦的声音，先零零散散，随后连续几声，伴随着木头破裂的声音，谷仓里似乎不那么黑了。

他知道，噪音是石头砸在薄板墙上发出来的，但他不予理会，注意力集中在面前的马车上。马车有多久没使用了？为什么歪歪倒倒地立在那里？如果没有用，为什么要保留在谷仓里呢？

这时候，他听见了她的声音：一开始很难辨别，因为外面很吵闹，还有石头砸墙的声音，但后来慢慢清晰起来。“这算不了什么，埃德温，”她说，“这算不了什么。你可以轻松地承受。”

“但是，长老们不一定能一直挡住他们，”他朝黑暗中说道。他的声音极低，一只手还在抚摸着马车的一侧。

“这算不了什么，埃德温。根本算不了什么。”

“石头可能会把这薄墙砸穿。”

“不要担心，埃德温。你难道不知道吗？石头是由你控制的。你看，你面前是什么？”

“一辆破烂的旧马车。”

“噢，这就对啦。围着马车走，埃德温。围着马车一圈一圈走，因为你是骡子，系在大转轮上。一圈一圈走，埃德温。你转，大转轮才会转，你转，石头才会不停地来。一圈一圈围着马车转，埃德温。一圈一圈围着马车转。”

“为什么我要转轮子呢，母亲？”就在他说话的时候，他的脚已经开始围着马车走了。

“因为你是骡子，埃德温。一圈一圈转吧。你听到了那尖锐的破裂声。你不转轮子，那声音就无法继续。转啊，埃德温，一圈一圈转。围着马车一圈一圈转。”

于是他听从她的命令，手放在马车挡板的上方，双手交替，以保持冲劲。他就这样转了多少圈？一百？两百？他不停地看到，一个角落里有一个神秘的土堆；另一个角落里，窄窄一线阳光落在谷仓的地板上，有一只死乌鸦侧身躺着，羽毛仍旧完好。在微弱的光亮中，这

两个东西——土堆和死乌鸦——也一圈一圈地转。有一次，他大声问道：“我阿姨真的诅咒我了吗？”但没有回答，他想母亲是不是已经走了。可随后她的声音又回来了：“尽你的职责，埃德温。你是骡子。不要停。你控制着一切。如果你停下来，那些声音也会停。那为什么要害怕它们呢？”

有时候，他绕着马车连续转三四圈，也听不到一声尖锐的噼啪。随后，好像是要补足一样，一下子会传来好几声噼啪，外面的叫喊声也会上升到新的高度。

“你在哪里，母亲？”他问过一次。“你还在路上吗？”

没有回答。过了几圈之后，她说，“我本来会给你兄弟姐妹，埃德温，给你很多兄弟姐妹。可现在你只有一个人了。所以要为我找到你的力量。你已经十二岁，差不多成人了。你一个人要抵得上四五个强壮的儿子。找到你的力量吧，来救我。”

又一阵风摇动榆树，埃德温心想，他藏身的这个谷仓是不是狼群进村那天大家躲藏的地方？老斯特法经常跟他讲这个故事。

“孩子啊，你那时候还很小，可能都不记得。狼大白天就来了，三只，若无其事地直接走进了村子。”这时斯特法的声音会充满鄙夷。“全村人都害怕得躲藏起来。有些男人在外面的地里，这是真的。但村里还有很多。他们躲在打谷的谷仓里。不光是妇女和孩子，男人们也躲起来了。他们说，那些狼有奇怪的眼睛。最好还是不要去惹它们。所以狼群想干什么就干什么。它们咬死了母鸡。吃掉了山羊。而这时候全村人都躲起来了。有些躲在自己家里。大多躲在谷仓里。我是个跛子，他们把我丢在原地，坐在手推车上，这双烂腿伸在外面，就在明德里德夫人家外面那条沟旁边。狼朝我走过来。来吃了我吧，我说，我可不会因为一头狼而躲进谷仓。但狼群没理会我，我看着它们从身旁走过，皮毛几乎都擦到了这双没用的腿。它们想干什么就干什么，它们走了很久，那些勇敢的男人才从躲藏的地方爬出来。大白天来了三头狼，这儿却没有一个男人敢站出来。”

围着马车转圈的时候，他想到了斯特法的故事。“你还在路上吗，母亲？”他又问了一次，但同样没有回答。他的腿开始累了，而且他真的不愿意再看到那个土堆和那只死乌鸦，最后她终于说道：

“够啦，埃德温。你干得很卖力。现在，如果你愿意，召唤你的武士吧。把这事了结了。”

听到这话，埃德温感到宽慰，但他继续围着马车转圈。他知道，召唤维斯坦，需要巨大的努力。和头天晚上一样，他必须从内心深处发愿。

但他还是找到了力量，他一旦相信武士已在路上，便立即慢下了脚步——就算是骡子，一天快结束时也会赶得慢一些，他满意地发现，噼啪声越来越少了。等安静了好一阵子，他才停下来，靠在马车边上，慢慢调匀呼吸。接着，谷仓的门开了，武士站在耀眼的阳光里。

维斯坦走进来，没有随手关门，似乎是要表示他的鄙视，无论门外最近聚集过什么样的敌对力量。门开着，谷仓里便有一大块方形的阳光，埃德温看看周围，黑暗中很突兀的马车，这时候显得破烂得可怜。维斯坦当时就直接喊他“年轻的战友”了吗？埃德温不太确定，但他还记得武士领着自己走进那块阳光里，拉起他的衬衫，查看伤口。然后维斯坦直起身，回过头仔细看看身后，低声说道：

“我年轻的朋友，你遵守昨晚的承诺了吗？关于你的伤口？”

“是的，先生。我正是按你的话去做的。”

“你没告诉任何人，包括你好心的阿姨？”

“我没告诉任何人，先生。尽管他们相信那是食人兽的咬痕，并且因此恨我。”

“年轻的战友，让他们继续这样相信吧。如果他们知道你的伤口是怎么来的，那可要糟糕十倍。”

“那和你一起去的我那两个叔叔怎么办，先生？难道他们不知道真相吗？”

“你的叔叔们虽然勇敢，但当时很不舒服，没有进营地。所以只要我们两人保守秘密就行了，等伤口愈合，任何人都没必要怀疑了。尽量保持伤口干净，白天或晚上都不要抓。明白吗？”

“我明白，先生。”

早些时候，他们两人在爬山，埃德温停下来等候两位上了年纪的不列颠人时，曾努力回想与伤口有关的情况。当时他站在矮小的石楠丛里，拉着维斯坦那匹马的缰绳，脑子里没有清晰的印象。但是，现在埃德温在树上，看着桥上细小的人影，回想起了那潮湿的空气和那黑暗，回想起了小木笼子上盖的熊皮的强烈气味，以及笼子颠簸时小

甲虫落在头上和肩上的感觉。他想起自己调整姿势，抓住面前摇摇晃晃的栅栏，以免笼子在地上拖的时候，自己被甩来甩去。然后一切又安静下来，他等着熊皮被拿开，等着新鲜的空气涌到他四周，等着借助火堆的光亮看一眼夜晚。这种情况当天晚上已经发生两次，因此他并不是特别害怕。他还记得其他事情：食人兽的臭味，还有那个邪恶的小东西往笼子松动的木柱上撞，迫使埃德温尽可能往后靠。

那个小东西动作很快，很难看清楚。他当时觉得，它形状和大小像个小公鸡，但没有喙和羽毛。它用牙齿和爪子攻击，而且一直发出粗哑尖锐的叫声。埃德温相信，木头柱子能够挡住牙齿和爪子，但那个小东西的尾巴不时会碰巧打到笼子上，那笼子就显得脆弱多了。幸好，这东西还小——埃德温猜测应该还处在幼年期——似乎并不知道它的尾巴有很大力量。

当时，小东西的攻击似乎没完没了，但现在埃德温觉得，实际上时间并不长，后来那个小东西就被用绳子拽走了。然后熊皮砰一声落下来，一切又漆黑一片，他又得抓住木柱，因为笼子被拖到另一个地方。

这样的情况，他经历过几遍？只有两三次吗？还是有十次，甚至十二次？尽管当时的情况糟糕，但是第一次之后他也许就睡着了，后面被小东西攻击，都是梦到的。

最后一次，熊皮很长时间都没有取下来。他等待着，听着那东西粗厉的叫声，有时候很远，有时候近得多，还有食人兽互相讲话时的咕哝声，他知道这次情况会不一样。正是在那焦虑等待的时刻，他请求有人拯救他。他是从灵魂深处提出这个请求的，因此几乎就等于祈祷，等这请求在他脑子里成形，他立即觉得能达成所愿。

那一刻，笼子开始颤抖，埃德温意识到，笼子整个前面的部分，包括防护栅栏，都被拉到了一边。这让他往回缩了缩，与此同时，熊皮被拉下来，那凶恶的东西冲他猛扑过来。他坐在那儿，本能地抬起脚踢出去，但那东西非常灵巧，埃德温只好用拳头和胳膊乱打。有一下子，他以为那东西已经抓住了自己，还瞬间闭上了眼睛，可等他再次睁开眼睛，却发现对手只在空气中乱抓，拴它的绳子正在往后拽。只有在类似的少数情况下，他才能清楚地看到那东西的模样，发现之前的印象还算准确：那东西看上去像一只被拔了毛的鸡，不过头长得像蛇。它又冲埃德温来了，他只好再次努力把它打开。接着，突然之间，笼子的前部又回到原位，熊皮又将他罩在黑暗之中。后来，他身

体扭曲地挤在小笼子里，才感觉到左侧肋下疼痛，也感觉到那儿湿漉漉、黏糊糊的。

埃德温再次调整了一下他在树上的落脚点，右手伸下去轻轻摸了摸伤口。疼痛已经不厉害了。爬上来的时候，粗糙的衬衫有时候会摩擦伤口，痛得他直咧嘴，但如果像现在这样不动，伤口几乎没什么感觉。那天上午在谷仓里，武士在门口检查伤口时，那里看起来也不过是一簇细小的洞而已。伤口很浅——没他以前受过的很多次伤严重。然而，由于人们相信这是食人兽的咬痕，才引起了这么多麻烦。当时要是他更加坚定地面对那个东西，也许根本就不会受伤。

但他知道，面对考验，他并没有做出耻辱的事。他从没害怕得大声叫喊，也没有祈求食人兽发发慈悲。那个小东西开始冲过来的时候，他吓了一跳，但后来他都抬着头，与它对抗。实际上，他临危不乱、思路清晰，还能发现这个小东西处在幼年期，因此完全有可能让它感到害怕，就像我们可以让一条任性的狗心生畏惧一样。所以他一直睁着眼睛，努力瞪着它、吓退它。他知道，他真正的母亲会因为这件事而为他感到特别骄傲。没错，现在他想起来，那东西一开始的突袭结束之后，攻击就慢慢不怎么凶狠了，反而是埃德温渐渐控制着战斗。他再次回想那东西在空气中乱抓的情形，现在看来那似乎不是要继续战斗，而是被绳子勒住了喉咙，惊慌失措。实际上，食人兽很可能认为埃德温是打斗的胜利者，所以这个做法才被终止了。

“我观察过你，孩子，”老斯特法说过。“你有某种罕见的东西。有一天，你会找到人教你本领，与你的武士灵魂匹配的本领。那时候你会真正成为令人畏惧的人物。你不会躲在谷仓里，听凭狼在村庄里大摇大摆地走。”

现在这一切都实现了。武士选择了他，他们要一起去完成一项任务。可他们的任务是什么呢？维斯坦没有讲清楚，只说他远在东方沼泽的国王现在正等着听任务完成的消息。为什么和这两个年老的不列颠人一起上路呢？他们到每个路口都要休息。

埃德温向下方凝视着他们。他们现在正和武士热烈地讨论着。老太太已经不再劝说他从树上下来了，三人在两棵大松树的掩护下，看着桥上的士兵。埃德温在树上，看到骑马的那位又上了马，正朝空中打着手势。然后，三位士兵似乎从他跟前走开了，骑马的人调转马头，离开桥，又下山回去了。

埃德温之前想过，武士为什么不愿意一直走山间的主路，坚持要走山谷一侧陡峭的小道；现在原因很明显，他是希望避开骑马的人，比如他们刚刚看到的那位。但是，现在看来，他们要继续往前走，就必须到下面的路上，从桥上经过瀑布，而士兵们仍旧在那儿。维斯坦在下面，能看到骑马的人已经离开了吗？埃德温想告诉他这一情况，可又觉得不能在树上喊，以免士兵们听到动静。他必须从树上爬下来，去告诉维斯坦。之前有四个潜在对手，也许武士不太愿意正面冲突，现在桥上只有三个人了，他可能会认为形势对自己有利。如果只有埃德温和武士两个人，他们肯定很早就下去直接面对士兵了，维斯坦之所以小心，肯定是因为这对上了年纪的夫妇。维斯坦带着他们，肯定有充足的理由，而且他们对埃德温一直很和善，但作为旅行的同伴，他们还是让人丧气。

他又想起了阿姨扭曲的面孔。她已经开始尖叫着诅咒他了，但那现在都不要紧了。因为他和武士在一起，他也在路上，就像他真正的母亲一样。他们也许能碰上她，谁知道呢？看到他站在那儿，和武士并肩，她一定会感到骄傲。和她一起的男人们一定会颤抖。

第五章

大半个上午，这队人都在艰难地爬山，然后发现一条湍急的河流挡住了去路。于是他们回头下山，穿过一片雾气弥漫的林地，寻找山间的主路，他们推测，主路上应该有过河的桥。

他们的推测是对的，路上有桥，但看到桥上的士兵之后，他们决定在松树下面休息，等那些人离开。因为一开始士兵们似乎不是驻扎在那儿的，只是在瀑布边让人和马休息一会儿。时间慢慢过去，士兵们没有继续前进的迹象。他们会轮流趴下来，从桥上伸手够水，洒在脸上；或者背靠木头栏杆坐着，玩色子。后来，第四个人骑着马来了，其他人站起身来，听他指示。

埃克索、比特丽丝和武士没有埃德温在树上那么好的视野，但他们藏在树后，也都看到了发生的事情。看见骑手又骑马走开，三人交换了一下眼色。

“他们可能还要待很久，”维斯坦说。“可你们都急着赶到修道院去。”

“先生，我们最好天黑前赶到，”埃克索说。“我们听说母龙魁瑞格在这个地方游荡，天黑以后只有傻瓜才会待在户外。你认为他们是什么样的士兵呢？”

“这么远的地方很难看清，先生，我对本地装束毫不了解。不过我猜他们应该是不列颠人，忠于布雷纳斯爵爷。也许该请比特丽丝夫人指点一下。”

“我眼睛不行，路太远了，”比特丽丝说。“不过，我想你是对的，维斯坦阁下。他们穿着黑色的军装，我常常看到布雷纳斯爵爷的手下是这副打扮。”

“我们没什么好躲的，”埃克索说。“可以解释一下，他们会让我们过去的，不会找麻烦。”

“我相信是这样。”武士说完，沉默了一会儿，眼睛望着桥。士兵们又坐了下来，好像在接着玩游戏。“但是，”武士继续说道，“如果我们要在他们的监视之下过桥，请允许我提个建议。埃克索阁下，你和比特丽丝先走，和那些人好好谈谈。这个男孩可以牵着马在

后面跟着，我和他并肩走，我会下巴像傻瓜一样耷拉下来，眼神散乱。你们一定要告诉士兵们，我是个哑巴，脑子有点傻，男孩和我是兄弟，别人欠你们钱，所以把我们兄弟俩借给你抵债。我把剑和腰带藏到马背行李最里面。万一他们发现，你们要说是你们的。”

“这样演戏真的有必要吗，维斯坦阁下？”比特丽丝问道。“那些士兵虽然态度常常很粗鲁，但我们以前见过很多，都没什么麻烦。”

“那是当然，夫人。但带着武器的人一旦远离指挥官，便是很难信任的。我呢，是个陌生人，他们也许认为嘲笑或挑衅一下很有趣。我们把男孩从树上喊下来，按照我的提议做吧。”

* * *

他们从树林里出来，离桥还有不少路，但士兵们马上发现了他们，都站起身来。

“维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝低声说，“我担心这事恐怕没这么顺利。你身上还是有某种东西，能让人看出你是名武士，无论你脸上的表情多么愚蠢。”

“我演戏可不熟练，夫人。如果你能帮助我改善伪装，我会很乐意听从你的意见。”

“是你走路的步伐，先生，”比特丽丝说。“你走路的样子像武士。先小步走几步，然后迈一大步，就像你随时都会打个趔趄一样。”

“这是很好的建议，夫人，谢谢你。现在我不说话了，否则他们就知道我不是哑巴。埃克索阁下，请用机智的话语，让这些家伙放我们过去吧。”

他们离桥越来越近，水冲下岩石，从三位等待着的士兵脚下流过，水声越来越响，在埃克索听来，似乎是不祥的预兆。他在前面带路，听着身后马蹄踩在苔藓地上的声音，等来到士兵近前，他便让大家停下。

士兵们没穿锁子甲，没戴头盔，穿着相同的黑色套袍，肩带从右肩斜挎到左臀，明白无误地宣示着他们的身份。他们的剑暂时没有出鞘，但两名士兵手放在剑柄上。一个矮小、粗壮，肌肉结实；另一个是年轻人，比埃德温大不了多少，身材也不高。两人都理着短平头。

相比之下，第三位士兵个子很高，留着灰白的长发，梳理得很整齐，披到肩膀上，头上箍着一根黑色的绳子，将头发拢到脑后。不仅外貌，他连姿态也与其他士兵明显不同。其他人僵硬地站在桥头挡住去路，他却在后面，隔着几步远，懒洋洋地靠在一根桥柱上，双手抱胸，好像晚上在篝火旁听故事一样。

那位粗壮的士兵向前迈了一步，所以埃克索先对他说话。“你们好，各位。我们没有恶意，只想平平安安过桥。”

粗壮的士兵没有回答。他脸上疑惑不定，瞪着埃克索，既慌乱又鄙夷。他回头看了一眼身后的年轻士兵，没得到什么示意，于是又转过脸盯着埃克索。

埃克索意识到，这里头可能有误会：士兵们在等候另外一拨人，还没意识到自己弄错了。于是他说道：“先生，我们就是普通的农夫，要到儿子的村庄去。”

粗壮的士兵这时定了定神，回答埃克索的话，声音太大了点儿。“农夫，和你一起走路的是什么人？看长相是撒克逊人。”

“这兄弟俩刚刚归我们管理，我们要想办法训练呢。不过，你们看，这个还只是个孩子，另一个是有点傻的哑巴，看来他们也帮不上我们什么忙。”

埃克索说话的时候，那个头发灰白的高个子士兵好像突然想起了什么事一样，站直了身子，侧着脑袋，一副聚精会神的样子。同时，粗壮的士兵愤怒地盯着埃克索和比特丽丝身后。然后，他大步从两人身旁走过，仔细打量另外这两个人，一只手仍旧按在剑柄上。埃德温拉着马，茫然地看着走过来的士兵。维斯坦却一个人咯咯地笑着，眼珠乱转，嘴张得大大的。

粗壮的士兵看看这个，又看看那个，好像要寻找线索。然后，他好像再也无法克制自己的烦躁，一把抓住维斯坦的头发，愤怒地拽着。“没人给你剪头发吗，撒克逊人？”他对着武士的耳朵喊道，然后又拽他的头发，似乎是要维斯坦跪下来。维斯坦踉跄了一下，不过没有摔跤，同时发出了可怜的呜咽声。

“他不会说话，先生，”比特丽丝说。“你能看出来，他是个傻子。对他手脚重一点，他倒无所谓，但大家都知道他有犟脾气，我们还没来得及驯服呢。”

妻子说话的时候，埃克索感觉到身后有细微的动静，于是转身看着仍在桥上的两位士兵。他看到头发灰白的高个子士兵已经举起了一只手臂。他的手指快要做出指点的动作，却突然松弛下来，成了个没有意义的姿势。最后，他这条手臂全放下来了，但他的眼睛还在不满地看着。埃克索看着这一切，突然觉得能够理解头发灰白的士兵刚刚经历的内心感受，甚至有似曾相识之感：愤怒的批评都快到嘴边了，只是他及时想起来，他并没有正式的授权去指责这位粗壮的同事。埃克索肯定，自己在什么地方曾有过几乎相同的经历，不过他努力把这个念头抛开，用缓和的语气说道：

“先生们，你们肯定有公务要忙，对不起耽误了你们的时间。如果你让我们过桥，我们很快就不会给你们添麻烦啦。”

但粗壮的士兵还在折磨维斯坦。“跟我要犟脾气，可不明智啊，”他吼叫道。“让他耍脾气，看看有什么代价！”

最后，他总算放开了维斯坦，大步回到自己在桥上的位置。他什么也没说，满面怒容，像个生气的人，却完全忘了自己为什么要生气。

水流的声音似乎只是增加了气氛的紧张感。埃克索心想，如果他转过身，带着大家回到树林，不知道士兵们会怎么样。就在这时候，头发灰白的士兵走上前来，和另外两个人并排，第一次开口说道：

“大叔，桥上有几块木板断了。我们站在这儿，也许就是因为这个，为了提醒像你们这样的好人过桥小心，要不就跟着水流滚下山去了。”

“那你真是好心，先生。我们会小心过桥的。”

“你那边那匹马，大叔，刚才朝这边走的时候，我看到有点跛。”

“一条腿伤了，先生，我们希望不太严重，不过你能看到，我们不骑。”

“这些木板被水溅多了，烂了，所以我们才在这儿，不过我的战友们认为，我们到这儿来可能还有别的任务。所以我要问你一下，大叔，你和你好心的妻子路上看到陌生人了吗？”

“先生，在这儿我们自己就是陌生人，”比特丽丝说道，“所以就算看到陌生人，也不能马上认出来。不过，我们在路上走了两天，

没看到什么特别的情况。”

头发灰白的士兵注意到了比特丽丝，眼睛似乎柔和起来，露出了笑意。“夫人，你这么大年纪的女人，要到儿子的村庄，可走了不少路啊。你和他一起住在那儿，不是很好吗，让他每天能够照顾你的生活？何必让你这样走，路上遇到危险又没人保护？”

“我希望你说得对，先生，等我们见到他，我和丈夫会跟他谈谈。可是，我们很久没见他了，心里不免有些疑虑，不知道他会怎样对待我们。”

头发灰白的士兵继续和善地打量着她。“夫人，”他说，“也许你什么也不用担心。我自己也离父亲母亲很远，很久没见他们了。也许以前曾讲过什么狠话，谁知道呢？但是，如果他们明天来找我，像你们现在这样，跋涉了很远的路程，那我一定会满心欢喜地迎接他们，这你们不会怀疑吧？我不知道你儿子是什么样的人，夫人，不过我敢打赌他和我也没什么大区别，他一看到你们，肯定就会流出幸福的泪水。”

“能这样说，先生，你真是好心，”比特丽丝说。“我想你说得对，我和丈夫也常常这样说，但是听别人说出来，还是一位远离家乡的儿子，真是令人欣慰。”

“平平安安上路吧，夫人。如果你们碰巧在路上遇到我的母亲和父亲从另外那个方向过来，请跟他们说点好心的话，让他们继续赶路，因为他们肯定会不虚此行。”头发灰白的士兵站在一旁，让他们过去。“请记住有些木板不牢固。大叔，最好你自己牵马过去。孩子或傻子可干不了这件事。”

粗壮的士兵一直不满地看着，这时似乎也服从了同事身上那股天然的权威。他转过身，背对着所有人，闷闷不乐地靠在栏杆上看水。年轻的士兵犹豫了一下，然后走过来，站在头发灰白的人身边，两人礼貌地点点头，埃克索又一次感谢他们，牵过马，不让马的眼睛看下面的急流，然后过了桥。

* * *

等士兵和桥都消失在视野中，维斯坦停下来，建议大家离开主路，走一条向上通往树林的小路。

“我对树林里的路有很好的直觉，”他说。“我觉得走这条路，能少绕一个大弯。而且，这条路上经常有士兵和强盗，我们离开更加安全。”

随后一段时间，武士在前面带路；他找了根棍子，拨开荆棘灌木。紧随其后的是埃德温，他拉着马笼头，不时低声和马说话。等埃克索和比特丽丝从后面跟上来，路已经好走多了。不过，这条捷径——如果算是捷径的话——越来越难走，周围的树越来越密，荆棘丛生、树根交错，每一步都要小心。一如既往，他们走路的时候都不说话，不过有一下子，埃克索和比特丽丝已经落后了不少，比特丽丝回头喊道：“你在那儿吗，埃克索？”

“还在呢，公主。”没错，埃克索就在她身后几步远。“别担心，没听说这儿的树林有什么特别的危险，离大平原也很远。”

“埃克索，我刚才在想。我们这位武士演戏可不差啊。他的伪装可能连我都会上当，那个野蛮的家伙拽他的头发，他都没有露出马脚。”

“没错，他演得很好。”

“埃克索，我刚才在想。我们要离开村庄很长时间。有很多庄稼要种，篱笆和大门需要修理，他们竟然让我们走了，你不觉得奇怪吗？你觉得他们会抱怨我们在需要咱俩的时候走了吗？”

“毫无疑问，公主，他们会想念我们的。但我们离开时间不长，牧师也理解我们希望看到儿子。”

“我希望是这样，埃克索。我可不希望他们说，我们在最需要的时候离开了。”

“总有人会这么说的，不过大部分人会理解我们的需要，换作他们，也会这么做。”

他们默默地继续走了一会儿。然后比特丽丝又说道：“你还在那儿吗，埃克索？”

“还在，公主。”

“他们那样是不对的。拿走我们的蜡烛。”

“现在谁在乎呢，公主？而且夏天就快到了。”

“这事我有点记忆了，埃克索。我在想，我身上痛，一开始也许就是因为没有蜡烛。”

“你在说什么呢，公主？这怎么可能呢？”

“我想，也许是因为晚上黑。”

“那儿有棵李子树，走过去小心一点。这儿可不能摔跤。”

“我会小心的，埃克索，你也小心点。”

“你身上痛，为什么会是因为晚上黑呢，公主？”

“去年冬天据说我们村子附近有个小精灵，埃克索，你还记得吗？我们自己没看见过，可他们说这个小精灵喜欢黑暗。我们长时间待在黑暗中，我在想小精灵也许到我们这儿来了，只是我们不知道，就在我们的屋子里，给我带来了这个麻烦。”

“如果它到我们这儿来了，无论屋子是不是黑的，我们应该都会知道，公主。就算漆黑一团，我们应该也能听到它在动，或者发出叹息声。”

“现在既然谈到，埃克索，我想起来了，去年冬天我晚上醒过来，你在旁边睡得很沉，我肯定屋子里有奇怪的声响，把我吵醒了。”

“可能是老鼠之类的东西，公主。”

“不是那种声音，我想我听到这声音也不止一次。现在想一想，我身上大概也就是从那时候开始痛的。”

“哦，如果是小精灵，那又怎么样呢，公主？你身上的痛不过是个小麻烦，这个家伙只是玩闹，没有恶意，类似于有一次某个捣蛋的孩子把老鼠头放在伊尼德夫人的编织篮里，就是为了看她吓得到处乱跑。”

“你这话说得对，埃克索。只是玩闹，没有恶意。我想你是对的。不过呢，丈夫……”她住了口，慢慢从两棵紧贴在一起的老树干中间走过去。然后她说道：“不过呢，等我们回家，我晚上要点蜡烛。我不想让那个小精灵或者别的东西给我们带来更大的麻烦。”

“我们会想办法的，不要担心，公主。我们一回去，就和牧师谈谈。但修道院的僧侣会给你明智的建议，治好你身上的痛，这点小麻烦也就没有啦。”

“这我知道，埃克索。这件事我也不是很担心。”

* * *

维斯坦说，他走的路要少绕一个大弯。很难判断他说得对不对，无论怎样，中午刚过，他们就走出了树林，回到了主路上。路上有车轮轧出的沟痕，有的地方有水坑，但他们可以走得更自在了，过了一会儿，路面就更干、更平了。温暖的阳光从低垂的树枝间洒下来，他们心情很好。

然后维斯坦又让大家停下来，指着他们面前的地面。“我们前面不远，有一名孤身一人的骑手，”他说。他们没走多久，便看到前路旁有一块空地，有新鲜的脚印通过。他们交换个眼色，小心翼翼地向前走。

等到走近了，他们发现空地很大：也许以前更加繁华的日子里，有人曾打算在这儿建房子，周围再开辟一片果园。从主路通到这儿的小径，虽然杂草丛生，却挖得很用心，小径的尽头处是个巨大的圆形区域，头顶上方没有遮蔽，除了中央一棵茂盛的大橡树。从他们站立的地方，能看到一个人坐在树荫下，背靠着树干。这时他们看到的是他的侧影，似乎穿着盔甲：两条覆盖着铁甲的腿僵硬地在草地上伸着，像孩子一样。那张脸被橡树叶挡住了，看不清楚，不过他们能看到他没戴头盔。一匹上了鞍的马在一旁满足地吃草。

“来人通报身份！”那人从树下喊道。“若是强盗和小偷，我将站起身来持剑相迎。”

“回答他，埃克索，”维斯坦低声说道。“我们看看他是干什么的。”

“我们就是普通的路人，先生，”埃克索喊道。“我们只希望平安路过。”

“你们有几个人？那是马的声音吗？”

“一匹跛脚的马，先生。人有四个。我和我妻子是不列颠老人，带着一个还没长胡子的男孩，还有一个有点傻的哑巴，是他们的撒克逊亲戚最近给我们的。”

“那就到我这儿来吧，朋友们。我有面包可以分享，你们一定渴望休息，我也渴望有你们做个伴。”

“我们该到他那儿去吗，埃克索？”比特丽丝问。

“我看去吧，”埃克索还没回答，维斯坦便说道。“他对我们没危险，听起来像年纪不小了。同样，我们还是像之前那样表演。我再假装下巴耷拉着，眼睛傻兮兮的。”

“但这个人有盔甲、有武器，先生，”比特丽丝说。“你的武器放在马背上，与毯子和蜜罐放在一起，你确定这算是准备好了吗？”

“我的剑藏起来，不引人注目比较好，夫人。需要的时候，我会很快找到的。让年轻人埃德温拉着缰绳，不要让马离我太远。”

“过来吧，朋友们！”陌生人喊道，并没有调整那僵硬的姿势。

“你们不会有什么麻烦！我是位骑士，也是不列颠人。带着武器，没错，但是你们走近点，就能看到我只是个上了年纪的老傻子。我带着剑、穿着盔甲，只是出于对我的国王的义务，就是受人爱戴的伟大的亚瑟王，现在已经上天堂很多年了，我几乎也有这么长时间没有愤怒地拔剑啦。那是我的老战马霍拉斯，你们看就在那儿。他一直要承受这金属盔甲的负担。看看他，腿也弯了，背也塌了。唉，我知道，每次我骑上去，他有多受罪。但是他心肠可好呢，我的霍拉斯，我知道他宁愿这样。我们就这样旅行，全副盔甲，以我们伟大国王的名义，一直就这样，直到我们俩都挪不动脚为止。来吧，朋友们，不要害怕我！”

他们转弯进入空地，大家走近橡树时，埃克索看到，这位骑士的确不是令人畏惧的人物。他看起来非常高，但埃克索觉得那盔甲下的身体肯定十分瘦削，虽说还挺结实。他的盔甲磨损上锈了，尽管他肯定花了最大的气力予以保护。他的短袍本来是白色的，现在打满了一层层的补丁。盔甲上伸出来的那张脸和善慈祥，长满了皱纹；脑袋上光秃秃的，只有几缕长长的白头发轻轻飘着。他坐在地上不动，双腿叉开，或许会让人觉得可怜，不过这时候阳光从头顶的树枝间洒落下来，在他身上画出光亮和阴影交替的图案，让他看上去如登王座、气象威严。

“可怜的霍拉斯今天没吃早饭，因为我们是在石头地上醒来的。然后我又一直急着赶路，我承认，我脾气不太好。我不肯让他停下来。他的脚步越来越慢，但他的把戏，我早已经熟悉了，绝不会让他得逞。我知道你不累！我跟他讲，然后轻轻踢了他一下。他跟我玩的这些把戏，朋友们，我可不能容忍。但他走得越来越慢，我呢，是个心肠软的傻子，虽然知道他心里其实在笑呢，还是舍不得他，我说，

好吧，霍拉斯，别走了，你去吃草吧。所以你们看，我就在这儿啦，又当了一回傻瓜。到我这儿来吧，朋友们。”他伸出手，盔甲吱吱作响，从身前草地上的一个包袱里拿出一块面包。“这是刚烤出来的，经过一家磨坊的时候，人家给我的，还不到一个小时呢。来吧，朋友们，到我旁边坐坐，我们一起吃。”

埃克索扶着比特丽丝的胳膊，让她坐到橡树盘结的树根上，然后他自己在妻子和老骑士中间坐下来。后背一靠上那生苔藓的树皮，他顿时感到舒服多了，会唱歌的鸟儿在树上窸窣窸窣，面包传过来，又软又新鲜。比特丽丝的头靠在他肩膀上，她胸口起伏了一阵子，然后也开始大口吃起来。

但维斯坦没有坐下来。他咯咯笑着，用各种方法向老骑士充分展示了自己的愚蠢，然后晃到了长满长草的地方，和牵着马的埃德温站在一起。比特丽丝吃完了面包，身体向前倾着，开始与陌生人说话。

“先生，我没有及时与你打招呼，请你务必原谅，”她说。“我们可不是经常能看见骑士的，想到能与骑士见面，我有些惶恐。希望你没有不高兴。”

“一点儿也没有，夫人，有你们陪着我非常高兴。你们还有很远的路要走吗？”

“我们儿子的村子还要走一天，我们希望拜见这山中修道院里一位睿智的僧侣，所以走的是山路。”

“啊，那些神圣的神父们。我肯定他们会好好招待你们。去年春天他们帮了霍拉斯一个大忙，他一只蹄子化了脓，我还担心他活不了了呢。我自己呢，几年前摔过一跤，休息期间也得到了他们的关照。但是，如果你们是要请人治疗这个哑巴的话，我恐怕只有上帝自己才能让他开口说话。”

骑士说这话时，朝维斯坦看了一眼，却发现维斯坦正朝他走来，脸上那愚蠢的模样消失了。

“先生，那就请允许我给你个意外吧，”他说。“我可以说话啦。”

老骑士吃了一惊，然后扭过身去，身上的盔甲吱吱作响，两眼瞪着埃克索，似乎在质问。

“骑士阁下，请不要责怪我的朋友们，”维斯坦说。“是我请求他们这么做的。但现在既然不用害怕你了，我就不要这伪装了。请你原谅。”

“我倒不在意，先生，”老骑士说，“在这个世界上还是小心一点好。但你告诉我，你是什么人，让我也不用害怕你。”

“我名叫维斯坦，先生，从东方的沼泽地来的，受我的国王差遣，到这个地方来。”

“啊。那离家真很远啦。”

“离家很远，先生，这些道路对我来说应该很陌生，可每个路口，我都觉得好像遥远的记忆复活了。”

“先生，那肯定是因为你以前来过。”

“肯定是这样，我听人说过，我不是在沼泽地生的，而是在从这儿往西的某个地方。那能够遇到你就更是幸运了，先生，我想你是高文骑士吧，也是从西边那儿来的，都知道你经常在这块地方。”

“没错，我就是高文，那位曾以巨大智慧与公正统治这片土地的国王——伟大的亚瑟王——是我的舅舅，我在西方待了很多年，不过这些日子里，我和霍拉斯是走到哪儿算哪儿。”

“如果我的时间自由，那我宁愿今天就往西走，呼吸那个地方的空气。但我要完成任务，快点赶回去报告。不过，能够遇到伟大的亚瑟王的骑士，真的非常荣幸，何况还是他的外甥呢。我虽然是个撒克逊人，却非常敬重他的大名。”

“很高兴听你这么说，先生。”

“高文爵士，我既然神奇地恢复了说话的能力，那我就想问你一个小问题。”

“随便问吧。”

“现在坐在你身边的这位先生，是好心的埃克索阁下，他是位农夫，来自一个信奉基督教的村庄，离这儿两天的路程。年纪和你差不多。高文爵士，现在我请问你，你转过头来仔细看看他。你以前见过他的脸吗，哪怕是很久以前？”

“我的天哪，维斯坦阁下！”埃克索以为比特丽丝已经睡着了，可这时她却再次坐直了身子。“你为什么这么问？”

“我没有恶意，夫人。高文爵士是从西边来的，我猜他以前也许见过你丈夫。这能有什么坏处呢？”

“维斯坦阁下，”埃克索说，“我们第一次见面之后，我看你就不时奇怪地看着我，我也想知道原因。你究竟认为我是谁呢？”

维斯坦之前站在那儿，低头面对着三个并肩坐在橡树下的人，这时他蹲下来，屁股坐在脚后跟上。他这样做，或许是要显得谦和一些，但在埃克索看来，这位武士几乎就是要更加仔细地查看他的容貌。

“我们暂且请高文爵士照我的请求做吧，”维斯坦说，“只需要他稍稍转一下头。如果你愿意，可以看成是孩子气的游戏。我请求你，先生，看看你身边这个人，告诉我们以前有没有见过他。”

高文爵士低声一笑，身体向前倾。他一副急着找乐子的模样，好像有人请他玩游戏一样。但是，他一凝视埃克索的脸，立即就露出了惊讶的表情——甚至是震惊。埃克索本能地转过脸去，与此同时，老骑士的身体又使劲靠回到树干上。

“怎么样，先生？”维斯坦饶有兴趣地看着，问道。

“我想我和这位先生之前没有见过，”高文爵士说。

“你确定吗？时间能改变相貌啊。”

“维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝插了句话，“你在我丈夫脸上要找什么呢？为什么要这位好心的骑士做这件事，大家都不过刚刚才认识他？”

“请原谅，夫人。这块地方唤醒了记忆，都像焦躁不安的麻雀，我知道它们随时可能飞到风里去。我这一天都觉得，你丈夫的脸会唤醒某个重要的记忆。我真诚地希望你们两人安全经过这荒山野路，但是说实话吧，我提出与你们同行，也是有原因的。”

“可是，我丈夫一直住在这附近，你怎么可能在西方见过他呢？”

“不要管它了，公主。维斯坦阁下把我当成他以前认识的什么人。”

“肯定是这样，朋友们！”高文爵士说。“我和霍拉斯常常认错脸，以为是过去某个人。霍拉斯，你看那位，我这样说。路上，在我们前面，那就是我们的老朋友蒂迪尔，我们还以为他在巴顿山之战中

死了呢。等走近一看，霍拉斯会哼一声，好像是说，高文呐，你真是个老糊涂，这个人年纪很小，都够当他孙子啦，而且长得一点儿也不像！”

“维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝说，“请告诉我。我丈夫让你想到的那个人，你小的时候爱他吗？还是害怕他？”

“现在，最好还是别说了，公主。”

但是，维斯坦屁股坐在脚后跟上，身体轻轻晃动，眼睛却一直盯着埃克索。“夫人，我相信那是我爱的人。因为今天早晨我们见面的时候，我的心高兴得都要跳出来了。然而，不久前……”他默默地看着埃克索，那眼神似乎在做梦一般。接着，这位武士突然脸一沉，站起来，转过身去。“我无法回答你，比特丽丝夫人，因为我也不了解我自己。本来我以为，与你们同行，一些记忆就会苏醒，但现在还没有。高文爵士，你身体还好吧？”

没错，这时候高文的身体已经向前耷拉下去。听了这话，他直起身，叹了口气。“还好，谢谢你关心。不过，我和霍拉斯很多个晚上没有柔软的床，没有遮风挡雨的地方，我们两个都累啦。没别的事情。”他抬起一只手，抚摸着额头上一处地方，不过在埃克索看来，他真正的目的也许是要挡住视线，不想看到身旁那张脸。

“维斯坦阁下，”埃克索说，“既然我们现在坦诚地交谈，那么，也许我可以来问问一些事情。你说，你到这方土地，是受你的国王所差。既然如此，在一个和平已久的地方旅行，为什么如此急迫地伪装自己呢？如果我妻子和那个可怜的男孩要与你同行，我们就希望知道同伴的真实身份，知道他可能有什么样的朋友和敌人。”

“你的话有道理，先生。正如你所说，这块土地安定和平。但我是个撒克逊人，要穿过不列颠人统治的领域，而且这附近的统治者是布雷纳斯爵爷，他的士兵四处巡查，征收谷物和牲口。我不希望因为误解而引起争吵。所以，我就需要伪装，先生，这样我们大家都更加安全。”

“也许你说得对，维斯坦阁下，”埃克索说，“但是，刚才我在桥上看到，布雷纳斯爵爷的士兵似乎不是在随意打发时间，而是有任务，驻守在桥上，要不是迷雾笼罩在他们心头，他们也许会更仔细地盘查你。先生，你有没有可能与布雷纳斯爵爷为敌？”

有一刻，维斯坦似乎陷入了沉思，眼睛看着一根盘结的树根，那树根从橡树的树干伸出，经过他站立的地方，然后慢慢钻入地下。最后，他又回过神来，这次在草茬子上坐下。

“那好吧，先生，”他说，“我就都说出来。在你和这位好骑士面前，也没有关系。我们东方的人听到传言，说这块土地上，我们的撒克逊同胞正遭受不列颠人的欺凌。我的国王为他的族人担心，就派我前来查探真实的情况。我来就是为了这件事，先生，马脚受伤的时候，我正在和平地履行我的职责。”

“先生，我很理解你所处的位置，”高文说。“我和霍拉斯常去撒克逊人掌管的地方，也感到有必要小心行事。这种时候我倒宁愿丢掉盔甲，让人以为是个普通的农夫。可是，我们要是把这盔甲丢在什么地方，以后怎么还能找到呢？而且，虽然亚瑟已经离世多年，我们难道没有责任骄傲地佩戴他的徽记，让所有人都看到吗？于是我们就大胆往前走，我很高兴地告诉你们，大家看到我是亚瑟王的骑士，对我们都很友好。”

“高文爵士，你在这附近受到欢迎，这毫不奇怪，”维斯坦说。“但是，那些地方的人们曾把亚瑟当作可怕的敌人，情况真的也是一样的吗？”

“先生，我和霍拉斯发现我们国王的名字到处都受到欢迎，也包括你提到的那些地方。因为亚瑟对被他们打败的人宽容大度，他们很快就爱上了他，把他当作自己人。”

一种焦虑与不安已经在埃克索心中萦绕了有一会儿了——至少从大家提到亚瑟的名字后，他就一直有这种感觉。这时候他听着维斯坦和老骑士的谈话，终于回想起了一些片段。能记起来的不多，不过有点儿东西能够抓住、能够思考，这让他感到欣慰。他想起自己站在一顶帐篷里面，那是一顶大帐篷，军队在战场附近搭建的那种。那是晚上，点着一根大蜡烛，烛光摇曳，外面的风鼓动着帐篷四壁。帐篷里还有其他人。或许有好几个人，但他记不起他们的面孔。他，埃克索，心里正在为什么事情生气，但他明白，隐藏自己的怒火很重要，至少不能马上发作。

“维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝在他身旁说道，“我来跟你说，在我们自己的村子里，有几户撒克逊人家很受尊重。你自己也看到了我们今天离开的那个撒克逊村庄。那些人过得兴旺，虽然有时候要在妖魔

手里遭点儿罪，比如你勇敢杀死的那些，但那可不是不列颠人干的。”

“这位好心的女士说的是真话，”高文爵士说。“我们爱着的亚瑟在这儿给不列颠人和撒克逊人带来了持久的和平，虽然我们仍能听到遥远的地方发生战争的消息，但我们这儿，大家长期以来都是朋友和亲人。”

“我所见到的一切，与你的话一致，”维斯坦说，“我也急着带一份令人高兴的报告回去，虽然我还要看看山那边的地方。高文爵士，我不知道以后还有没有机会向如此智慧的人提问，那么请允许我现在就问吧。你们伟大的国王用了什么神奇的本领，治愈了这片土地上的战争创伤，以至于今天在这儿旅行的人，几乎看不到任何伤疤或阴影？”

“这个问题值得你问，先生。我的回答是，我的舅舅作为统治者，从不认为自己比上帝更伟大，总是祈求指引。所以，被他征服的人，和与他并肩战斗的人一样，看到了他的公正，希望他当他们的国王。”

“尽管如此，先生，一个人孩子昨天被人屠杀，今天却称对方为兄弟，这难道不是奇怪的事情吗？而这似乎正是亚瑟完成的伟绩。”

“维斯坦阁下，你刚才的话触及了这件事情的核心。你说屠杀孩子。但亚瑟总是告诫我们放过卷入战乱的无辜者。还有，先生，他还命令我们尽最大努力去拯救和保护所有女人、孩子和老人，无论是不列颠人还是撒克逊人。虽然战事激烈，这些行动却打下了相互信任的基础。”

“你的话听起来很有道理，但对我来说，这似乎仍是个难以索解的奇迹，”维斯坦说。“埃克索阁下，你不觉得亚瑟统一这个国家是件神奇的事情吗？”

“维斯坦阁下，我再说一次，”比特丽丝喊道，“你把我丈夫当成什么人？先生，他对战争一无所知！”

可是，突然之间，她的话没人听了。埃德温刚才晃到了路上，这时叫喊起来，紧接着传来急促的马蹄声，由远而近。埃克索后来回想起来，觉得维斯坦当时是真的全神贯注，忙着对过去做一些奇怪的猜测，因为骑马的人进入空地时，这位警觉的武士几乎都没站起身来。只见那人以高超的技巧让马放慢速度，小跑着朝大橡树而来。

埃克索立即认出了骑马的人，就是那位头发灰白的高个子士兵，在桥上曾礼貌地对比特丽丝说过话。他脸上仍带着淡淡的笑意，但走过来的时候剑已经拔出，不过剑尖朝下，剑柄贴在马鞍边上。就在马再跨几步就会撞到树上的时候，他勒住缰绳。“你好，高文爵士，”他说，同时微微点了点头。

老骑士坐在那儿，鄙夷地看着他。“你这是什么意思，先生，到这儿来拔剑？”

“请原谅我，高文爵士。我只想问一问和你同行的这几个人。”他低头看着维斯坦，维斯坦下巴又耷拉下来，正一个人咯咯傻笑。那士兵眼睛没离开维斯坦，口里喊道：“小男孩，那匹马不要再靠近了！”没错，在他身后，埃德温正牵着维斯坦的马慢慢走过来。“听我的话，孩子！放开缰绳，过来到我面前站好，和你的傻哥哥一起。我在等着呢，孩子。”

就算听不懂士兵的话，埃德温似乎也能够理解他的意思，他放开了马缰绳，走到维斯坦身边。这时候，士兵略微调整了一下马的位置。埃克索注意到了这一点，他立即明白，士兵是要在自己和对方之间保持特定的角度和距离，以便在突然发生冲突的情况下获得最大优势。之前，考虑到维斯坦站立的位置，士兵自己的马头和马脖子会临时阻挡他第一次挥剑，维斯坦就可能获得关键的那一点儿时间，要么去惊扰马，要么跑到马的另一侧，如果是后者，那么士兵的剑要越过马的身体，攻击力量和范围就会减小。现在马的位置略作调整，像维斯坦这样没有武器的人要突袭士兵，几乎等于自杀。士兵的新位置体现了高超技巧，看来同时还考虑到了维斯坦的马，那匹马没人看管，就在他身后不远。现在维斯坦如果要骑上自己的马，就必须绕个大弯子，避开士兵持剑的那一侧，那样他在跑过去之前，几乎肯定会被士兵的马从背后撞上。

埃克索注意到了这一切，他钦佩士兵的战术技巧，也惊讶于其复杂含义。以前某个时候，埃克索也曾催马向前，以与另一位同行骑手并辔而行，这个动作幅度很小，但实际上非常重要。那天他在干什么呢？他们两个人，他自己和另外那位骑手，一直在马背上等待，眼睛望着辽阔的灰色原野。此前，同伴的马一直在前面，因为埃克索记得马尾巴在他眼前摇晃、抖动，当时他心里想，这是因为动物的本能呢，还是因为空阔的土地上刮着狂风？

埃克索抛开这些令人困惑的念头，慢慢起身，然后帮助妻子也站起来。高文爵士仍旧坐着，像是粘在了橡树脚下，愤怒地看着新来的

人。随后他低声对埃克索说，“先生，扶我站起来。”

埃克索和比特丽丝一起动手，各扶住一条胳膊，才让老骑士站起身来。不过，等他全副盔甲，站直了身子，挺起胸膛，可真是一副威风凛凛的模样。但高文爵士只是闷闷不乐地瞪着那位士兵，仅此而已，最后埃克索先开口说话。

“你为什么要这样对待我们呢，先生？我们不过是普通的路人。你刚在瀑布旁边盘问过我们，还不到一个小时，你就不记得了吗？”

“大叔，我清楚地记得你，”灰白头发的士兵说。“尽管刚才见面的时候，我们这些守桥的人遇到了一种奇怪的魔咒，以至于我们都忘记了守桥的目的。现在，我站岗结束，打算骑马到营地，才突然想起了起来。后来我想到了你，大叔，以及你们这些人如何溜了过去，就掉转马头，追了上来。孩子！不要晃来晃去，听到没！待在你傻哥哥身边！”

埃德温闷闷不乐地回到维斯坦身边，眼睛望着武士，似乎是要问他的意见。武士仍旧傻笑着，但没发出声音，口水从一边嘴角挂下来。他眼珠乱转、东张西望，不过埃克索猜想，实际上武士是在仔细测算他和马之间有多远，还有对手的位置，他得出的结论很可能和埃克索一样。

“高文爵士，”埃克索低声说。“要是现在出事情，我请求你帮我保护我的好妻子。”

“那将是我的荣耀，先生。放心吧。”

埃克索点头表示感谢，这时灰白头发的士兵正从马上下来。埃克索又一次发现，自己非常钦佩他下马的技巧，等他站在维斯坦和男孩面前时，他和两人之间的距离和角度刚刚好；而且，他持剑的方法不会累着胳膊，他的马则能挡住身后的突袭。

“大叔，我告诉你，上次见面的时候我们忘了什么事情。我们之前刚收到消息，一名撒克逊武士离开了附近一个村庄，还带了一名受伤的男孩。”士兵冲埃德温点点头。“和那边那个男孩年纪差不多。好啦，大叔，我不知道你和这位好心的女士与这件事有什么关系。我要找的只是这个撒克逊人和他带的男孩。老老实实说话，你就不会受到伤害。”

“这儿没有什么武士，先生。我们和你没什么争执，和布雷纳斯爵爷也没有纠葛，我想你的主人是他吧。”

“大叔，你知道你这说的是什么话吗？帮我们的敌人遮掩，你就要对我们负责任，无论你年纪多大。和你同行的是什么人——这个哑巴和这个男孩？”

“我已经说过了，先生，他们是欠债的人给我们的，代替谷物和锡块。他们要干一年的活，帮他们家还债。”

“你肯定没弄错吗，大叔？”

“我不知道你们要找谁，先生，但肯定不会是这两个可怜的撒克逊人。你把时间花在我们身上，而你的敌人却在别的地方逍遥自在。”

士兵考虑着这句话——埃克索的声音有意想不到的权威——他的样子开始有些犹豫了。“高文爵士，”他问。“对于这些人，你了解多少？”

“我和霍拉斯在这儿休息，他们从这儿经过，和我们碰上了。我相信他们是老实人。”

士兵又一次仔细看着维斯坦的面孔。“一个不会说话的傻子，是吗？”他向前走了两步，举起剑，剑尖对着维斯坦的喉咙。“但他一定像我们一样害怕死亡吧。”

埃克索看得出来，士兵第一次犯了个错误。他离对手太近了，现在维斯坦有可能突然行动，在士兵的剑刺出之前，抓住他握剑的那条胳膊，尽管这样做仍然有很大危险。然而，维斯坦继续咯咯笑着，又冲身旁的埃德温傻笑。但是，这次士兵的行为，似乎引起了高文爵士的愤怒。

“先生，一个小时前我还不认识他们，”他喊道。“但我可不会眼睁睁看着他们受人欺负。”

“高文爵士，这和你没有关系。我希望你能够保持沉默。”

“先生，你好大的胆子，敢对亚瑟王的骑士这么说话？”

“这个傻子，”士兵继续说话，完全不理睬高文爵士，“会不会是乔装改扮的武士？他手头没有武器，也就没什么区别。无论他是武士还是傻子，我的剑都够锋利。”

“他好大的胆子！”高文爵士自言自语道。

灰白头发的士兵也许突然意识到了自己的错误，往后退了两步，回到了之前站的地方，手里剑的位置也低下来，放到了腰部。“孩子，”他说，“往前走，到我这儿来。”

“他只说撒克逊话，先生，又是个害羞的孩子，”埃克索说。

“大叔，他不需要说话。只要拉起衣服，我们就知道他是不是和武士一起离开村庄的那个男孩。孩子，再走近一步。”

埃德温走到近前，士兵不拿剑的那只手伸了过来。埃德温想把他推开，两人扭打了一会儿，但随即男孩的上衣被拉起来，埃克索看到，他肋骨下方有一个肿块，周围一圈小点，那是干了的血迹。比特丽丝和高文一人一边，都探着身子去看个仔细，但士兵自己不愿意将目光从维斯坦身上移开。过了好长时间，他决定看看伤口，那就必须快速把脑袋转过来，就在这一刻，埃德温发出一声尖锐、刺耳的叫声——不能算是喊叫，那声音倒让埃克索想起一只绝望的狐狸。士兵愣了一下，埃德温抓住这个机会挣脱开来。这时候，埃克索才意识到，刚才的声音不是男孩发出的，而是维斯坦；武士的马之前在懒洋洋地啃草皮，听到这声音，突然转过头，朝他们冲过来。

士兵自己的马在他身后一阵乱动，让他更加疑惑，等他回过神来，维斯坦已经跑到了攻击范围之外。维斯坦的那匹母马以惊人的速度奔过来，维斯坦做了个朝一边跑的假动作，实际上跑向了另一边，同时又发出了一声尖锐的呼叫。母马放慢脚步，身体挡在维斯坦和他的对手之间，让维斯坦几乎可以悠闲地在离橡树几步远的地方站好位置。母马又转过头，聪明地在后面跟上主人。埃克索以为，维斯坦打算在母马从面前经过的时候骑上去，因为他这时正张开双臂等着。在母马遮住视线之前的那个短暂瞬间，埃克索甚至看到了他的手伸向马鞍。但是，那匹马随后小步跑开，回到了刚才啃草皮的地方，马背上没有人。维斯坦一直静静地站在那儿，不过一只手里多了一把剑。

比特丽丝不自觉地低声叫喊出来，埃克索一条胳膊揽住她，把她搂在身边。他另一侧的高文爵士嗯了一声，似乎是对维斯坦的动作表示赞赏。老骑士一只脚踩着凸起的橡树根，一只手搭在膝盖上，兴致勃勃地观看着。

现在，灰白头发的士兵背对着他们：当然，这也是没办法，因为他现在必须面对维斯坦。埃克索惊讶地看到，这位士兵刚才那么娴熟、那么镇定，现在已经有些不知所措了。他朝他的马望去——马受了惊，已经跑到远处了——似乎是想恢复信心，然后他举起剑，双手

紧握着剑柄，剑尖略微高出肩膀。埃克索知道，这个姿势欠考虑，只会让胳膊上的肌肉疲乏。相比之下，维斯坦显得镇定，几乎有些漫不经心，就和头天晚上他们一开始看到他动身离开村庄时一样。他慢慢朝士兵走去，在他跟前几步远的地方停下来，一只手拿着剑，剑的位置很低。

“高文爵士，”士兵说话的语调不一样了，“我听见你在我背后走动。你是否和我站在一起，共同对付这个敌人？”

“我站在这儿保护这对好心的夫妇，先生。除此之外，这场争议和我没有关系，你刚才也这么说过。这位武士也许是你的敌人，但目前还不是我的敌人。”

“这人是撒克逊武士，高文爵士，到我们这儿来捣乱。帮助我面对他吧。我当然渴望履行职责，但如果他就是我们要找的人，那无论从哪个方面讲，他都是个可怕的家伙。”

“我有什么理由因为他是个陌生人就拿起武器对付他呢？先生，是你粗鲁地闯进了这个宁静的地方。”

一阵沉默。然后，士兵对维斯坦说：“你要一直不说话吗，先生？现在我们俩面对面，你也该露出真实面目了吧！”

“我名叫维斯坦，先生，是从东方来的武士。你的布雷纳斯爵爷好像要对我不利，究竟是为了什么，我并不知道，我只是和平地旅行，执行国王的任务。我相信你要伤害那个无辜的男孩，我既然看到了，现在就必须阻止你。”

“高文爵士，”士兵喊道，“我再一次请求你，请你帮助你的不列颠同胞。如果这人是维斯坦的话，据说已经有五十多名海寇死在他一个人手里啦。”

“先生，如果五十名凶悍的海寇都被他杀死了，多一个虚弱的老骑士，结果又会有什么不同呢？”

“我请求你，高文爵士，不要开玩笑。这是个无法无天的家伙，随时都会动手。从他眼睛里，我能看出来。告诉你，他可是到这儿来捣乱的。”

“我捣了什么乱，你说说看，”维斯坦说。“我和平地在你们国家旅行，包里只有一把剑，那是用来对付野兽和土匪的。如果你能说出我的罪行，现在就说吧，动手之前我愿意先听听你的指责。”

“先生，我不知道你究竟捣了什么乱，但布雷纳斯爵爷要除掉你，我相信他。”

“这么说，你说不出我做了什么坏事，却急匆匆地追上来要杀我。”

“高文爵士，我请求你帮助我！他虽然凶悍，我们两个人，加上谨慎的策略，也许可以打败他。”

“先生，我要提醒你，我是亚瑟王的骑士，不是你们布雷纳斯爵爷的走卒。我不会因为谣传或者对方是外国人，就对陌生人动武。在我看来，你拿不出对付他的充足理由。”

“那你是逼我说了，先生。这个消息，是布雷纳斯爵爷自己允许我听的，虽然这样的机密，像我这样职位低的人没有权利知道。这个人到我们国家，是要杀死巨龙魁瑞格。他来这儿，就是这个目的！”

“杀死魁瑞格？”高文爵士似乎真的给搞糊涂了。他从树下大步走过来，瞪着维斯坦，好像是第一次看到他一样。“这是真的吗，先生？”

“我不希望对亚瑟王的骑士撒谎，那就让我直截了当宣布吧。除了之前我说过的职责之外，我的国王还让我杀死那条在这个国家游荡的母龙。但是，这个任务有什么好反对的呢？那是条凶猛的龙，威胁到所有人。士兵，你告诉我，为什么因为这个任务，我就成了你的敌人呢？”

“杀死魁瑞格？！你是真的要杀死魁瑞格？！”高文爵士叫了起来。“可是，先生，这可是我的任务！你难道不知道吗？这是亚瑟王亲自授予我的任务！”

“高文爵士，这件事我们回头再谈。让我先对付这位士兵，我和朋友们本来打算和平地经过这儿，他却要把我们当成敌人。”

“高文爵士，如果你不来助我，恐怕这就是我的末日了！我恳求你啦，先生，想想布雷纳斯爵爷对亚瑟王的敬爱与怀念，拿起武器对付这个撒克逊人！”

“维斯坦阁下，杀死魁瑞格，是我的任务！我和霍拉斯已经制订了详尽的计划，要把她引出来，我们不要别人帮助！”

“先生，放下你的剑，”维斯坦对士兵说，“我还可以放过你。否则，你就要当场丧命了。”

士兵犹豫了片刻，然后说道：“之前我以为自己很强大，一个人就能对付你，但现在我看得出来，先生，那是愚蠢的想法。我狂妄自大，可能会因此受惩罚。但是，我绝不会像个懦夫一样放下武器。”

“你的国王有什么权利，”高文爵士喊道，“命令你从另一个国家跑来，篡夺亚瑟王骑士的任务？”

“请原谅，高文爵士，但是你要杀死魁瑞格已经很多年了，小孩子都长成了大人。如果我能够给这个国家帮个忙，解除这个苦难，为什么要生气呢？”

“为什么生气，先生？你根本不知道你在干什么！你以为杀魁瑞格是件容易的事？她不仅凶猛，还聪明着呢！过去这几年，大家几乎都没听说过她的事情了，一旦你鲁莽行事，只会激怒她，整个国家都跟着遭罪。先生，这件事需要巧妙地处理，否则灾难就会降到全国无辜民众的头上！我和霍拉斯等了这么久，你以为就没有原因么？一步走错，就会有严重后果啊，先生！”

“那就帮助我吧，高文爵士，”士兵喊道，他已经不去遮掩内心的恐惧了。“我们一起解除这个威胁！”

高文爵士疑惑地看着士兵，好像一下子忘了自己是谁一样。然后他语调更为平和地说：“我不会帮助你，先生。我不是你主人的朋友，因为我害怕他有邪恶动机。我也害怕你会伤害这儿的其他人，无论我们陷入了什么阴谋，他们都是无辜的。”

“高文爵士，现在我的生死存于一线，像落入蜘蛛网的苍蝇。我最后一次求助于你，虽然这件事情我并不完全明白，但我求你考虑一下，如果不是给我们添乱，那他到这个国家来干什么呢？”

“先生，他到这儿来的任务，他已经解释清楚了。虽然他计划草率、让我生气，但我不能因为这一点，就拿起武器和你一起对付他。”

“战斗吧，士兵，”维斯坦用近乎和解的口吻说道，“战斗吧，把这事给了结了。”

“维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝突然说道，“让这位士兵放下剑，骑马离开，会有什么坏处吗？之前在桥上他跟我说话很和气，他可能不是坏人。”

“如果我按你说的做，比特丽丝夫人，他会把我们的消息告诉别人，肯定很快就会带着三十名士兵回来，甚至更多。那时候恐怕就不会有什么仁慈了。而且，请你注意，他要伤害那个男孩。”

“也许他愿意发个誓，不会出卖我们。”

“你的仁慈让我感动，夫人，”灰白头发的士兵接过话头，但眼睛仍旧盯着维斯坦。“但我不是恶棍，不会卑鄙地利用别人的好心。撒克逊人说得没错。放我走，我就会像他说的那样做，因为这是职责所在，我没有别的选择。但我感谢你说了这些好话，如果这是我生命最后的时刻，那么我离开这个世界时，心里也会因为你的话而更加平静。”

“还有，先生，”比特丽丝说，“你之前提出的关于你父母的请求，我并没有忘记。那时候你是开玩笑的，我知道，而且我们也不大可能碰到他们。但是，如果我们真的碰上了，我会让他们知道，你一直热切渴望与他们相见。”

“我再次感谢你，夫人。但这时候我不能让这种念头令自己心软。这个人名气很响，但在这场决斗中，命运仍然有可能眷顾我，到那时候，你也许会后悔曾为我发善心。”

“很有可能，”比特丽丝说着，叹了口气。“那么，维斯坦阁下，你要为我们尽力啊。我要转过脸去，杀人我可不喜欢。小先生埃德温最好也不要看，请你跟他说一下，我相信只有你下命令他才会当回事。”

“请原谅，夫人，”维斯坦说，“但我宁愿让男孩亲眼看着事情的进程，我那么大的时候，他们常常让我看。我知道他亲眼目睹武士们的战斗时不会退缩畏惧。”这时他用撒克逊语说了几句话，埃德温刚才在不远处独自站着，这时走到树旁，站到埃克索和比特丽丝身边。他目光警觉，似乎从不眨眼。

埃克索能听到灰发士兵的呼吸声，现在声音更响了，因为每次呼气，他都会发出一声低吼。向前冲时，他将剑高高举过头顶，这种攻击方式看起来简单草率，甚至是自寻死路；但是，到维斯坦跟前的那一刹那，他突然改变了路线，做出向左进攻的假动作，剑也放下来，和臀部一般高。埃克索心中一阵怜悯的刺痛，意识到这灰发士兵自己也明白，如果战斗持续，他根本没什么机会，所以把一切都压在这个近乎绝望的策略上。但维斯坦已经预料到了，或许他的本能使他足以察觉。撒克逊人侧身避开，拔出剑横着迎上冲过来的士兵，动作干净

利落。士兵发出一声像水桶丢到井里撞击水面的声音，然后俯身跌倒在地。高文爵士低声祈祷，比特丽丝问：“现在结束了吗，埃克索？”

“结束了，公主。”

埃德温盯着倒在地上的那个人，表情和之前几乎没有变化。埃克索顺着男孩的目光望去，看到草丛里一条被倒地的士兵惊动的蛇正从他的身体下方滑出来。蛇是黑色的，但有黄色、白色的斑点，它灵巧地爬过去，慢慢露出整个身体，这时埃克索闻到了一股人的内脏的浓烈气息。他本能地搂着比特丽丝往旁边跨了一步，以免那东西跑到他们脚下。但那东西仍旧朝他们这边滑过来，遇到一丛蓟草时一分为二，像溪水遇到岩石分流一样，然后又合二为一，继续越滑越近。

“走远点，公主，”埃克索一边说，一边带着她走开。“结束了，这样也好。这个人要伤害我们，尽管原因还不清楚。”

“埃克索阁下，让我尽量来跟你说明白是怎么回事吧，”维斯坦说道。他刚刚在地上擦剑，现在站起身，朝他们走过来。“没错，在这个国家，我们的撒克逊同胞与你们和谐相处。但我们在家里听到消息，说布雷纳斯爵爷要征服这片土地，据为己有，然后向居住在这儿的所有撒克逊人开战。”

“我也听到了同样的消息，先生，”高文爵士说。“这可怜虫，此刻像鳟鱼一样被开了膛，刚才我不肯站到他那一边，这也是个原因。我担心布雷纳斯爵爷要破坏亚瑟王缔造的伟大和平。”

“我们在家里还听说了别的，先生，”维斯坦说。“说布雷纳斯的城堡里有一位危险的客人。一个挪威人，据说有驯龙的本领。我的国王担心布雷纳斯爵爷要抓住魁瑞格，放到军队里帮他打仗。这条母龙要是上了战场，那可是个凶猛的士兵啊，真要那样的话，布雷纳斯肯定会有所企图。所以国王派我来杀死这条龙，以免她的凶残发泄到所有反对布雷纳斯爵爷的人头上。高文爵士，你似乎很震惊，但我说的都是实话。”

“先生，如果我很震惊，那是因为你说的话还真有些依据。我年轻的时候，有一次我要面对对方军队里的一条龙，那可是个可怕的东西。我的战友们之前都渴望胜利，那一刻看到龙的样子，都吓得不能动弹，论力气和机智，那条龙还比不上魁瑞格一半。如果魁瑞格成了布雷纳斯爵爷的仆役，那她肯定会挑起新的战争。可我希望没人能驯

服这条凶悍的龙。”他停下来，朝倒地的士兵那边望望，又摇了摇头。

维斯坦大步走到埃德温站立的地方，抓住他一条胳膊，慢慢领着他朝尸体走去。两人肩并肩在尸体旁站了一会儿，维斯坦低声说着话，不时用手指着，又盯着埃德温的脸，查看他的反应。有一下，埃克索看见维斯坦的指头在空中划出一条线，他可能在跟男孩解释剑刃的运动路线。在此过程中，埃德温一直眼神空洞地盯着倒在地上的

人。

这时高文爵士来到埃克索身边，说道：“这个安静的地方，肯定是上帝赐给所有疲惫旅行者的礼物，现在被血污染了，真让人伤心啊。我们尽快把这个人埋了吧，不久别的人就会到这边来，我把他的马带到布雷纳斯爵爷的兵营去，跟他们说，我遇到他的时候，他被强盗攻击了，并且把坟墓的位置告诉他的朋友们。与此同时，先生——”他转脸对维斯坦说道——“我敦促你立即回到东方。不要去想魁瑞格了，你放心吧，听到今天的这些情况之后，我和霍拉斯会加倍努力，把她杀死。来吧，朋友们，我们将这个人入土，让他平静地回归造物主吧。”

第二部

第六章

埃克索疲惫不堪，却无法入睡。僧侣们为他提供了一个楼上的房间，不需要抵御从泥土里冒上来的寒气，这令人宽慰，但是，在高出地面的楼上，他总是不太睡得着。哪怕是在谷仓或马厩里过夜，他爬上梯子，往往也难以入睡，担心着身体下方那个巨大的空洞。今晚他睡不着，也许是因为上方的黑暗中有鸟。现在，鸟儿基本上都沉寂下来，但不时会传来一阵窸窣窸窣的声响，或者是翅膀拍打的声音，他心里就想着要双臂抱住沉睡的比特丽丝，不让空中飘下来的难闻的羽毛落到她的身上。

当天早些时候，他们刚进入房间时，鸟就在那儿。那时候，他已经感觉到，这些乌鸦、黑鸫、林鸽，都在椽子上低头看着他们，不是吗？还是他的记忆被后来的事件篡改了？

或许，睡不着觉是因为维斯坦一直在叮叮当当砍柴，那声音现在仍旧在修道院里回荡。比特丽丝很快就睡着了，没受这声音影响；房间中央有个黑影，他知道那是桌子，之前他们在那儿吃饭的，桌子那边，在房间的另一头，埃德温也已经入睡，发出了低低的鼾声。但是，就他所知，维斯坦根本没睡。这位武士一直坐在远处的角落里，等最后一位僧侣离开了下面的院子，他才起身，消失在夜色中。现在他又来了——尽管乔纳斯神父警告过——又在劈柴火。

僧侣们开完会后出了会场，过了很久才渐渐散去。有几次埃克索快睡着了，却被下面说话的声音吵醒了。有时候有四五个人的声音，都压得很低，往往带着愤怒或恐惧。现在，已经有一段时间没听到说话的声音了，可就在埃克索又一次慢慢进入梦乡时，他心里总觉得房间窗户下方还有僧侣，不止几个，而是几十个，穿着袍子，默默地站在月光下，听着维斯坦劈柴的声音在修道院中回响。

之前，下午的阳光洒满房间的时候，埃克索曾朝窗户外面看过，似乎修道院的所有人都在那儿——四十多名僧侣——三五成群在院子里等候。人群里有一种偷偷摸摸的氛围，好像他们都不希望谈话被别人听到，哪怕是他们自己人。埃克索看到，有些僧侣看对方的眼神中有敌意。他们穿的修士长袍都是同样的褐色布料，有的缺顶帽子，有的缺条袖子。他们似乎急着到对面那幢大石头建筑里面去，但有什么事情耽搁了，大家显然都很焦躁。

埃克索朝下方的院子里望了一会儿，这时传来一阵喧闹声，他身体探出窗外，朝正下方望去。他看到了建筑的外墙，白色的石头在阳光下显得发黄，外墙上凿有楼梯，从地面一直通到他跟前。楼梯半腰上有一位僧侣——埃克索能看到他的头顶——手里拿着托盘，上面放着食物和一罐牛奶。那人停下了脚步，以调整托盘的位置，埃克索看着他的动作，心里很紧张，他知道楼梯年深日久，磨得高低不平，外侧没有栏杆，人要紧贴着墙壁攀爬，否则一不小心，就会一头栽到下面的硬鹅卵石上。不仅如此，正在上楼的这位僧侣好像腿有些跛，可是他继续往上爬，很慢，但很稳。

埃克索走到门边，打算接过他手中的托盘，但这位僧侣——他们很快就知道他是布莱恩神父——坚持要自己把托盘放到桌上，还说：“你是我们的客人，那就让我来招待客人吧。”

那时候维斯坦和男孩已经走了，也许空气中已经回响起了他们劈柴的声音。因此就只有他和比特丽丝肩并肩，在木头桌子旁坐下来，心怀感激地享用着面包、水果和牛奶。他们用餐时，布莱恩神父高兴地说着话，有时候好像梦呓一般，谈以前的客人、附近小河里能抓到的鱼，以及去年冬天死前一直和他们生活在一起的一条野狗。布莱恩神父上了年纪，但精力不错，有时候他从桌旁站起身来，拖着那条坏腿在房间里走来走去，嘴里不停地说着话，还不时到窗户前看看下面的同事。

与此同时，在他们头顶上方，那些鸟一直在屋顶下面来回穿梭，偶尔会有羽毛飘下来，落在牛奶上。埃克索本打算把鸟赶走，但他担心僧侣们也许喜欢这些鸟，所以没赶。后来，外面的楼梯上传来急促的脚步声，一个身材高大的僧侣，留着黑胡子，满面通红，闯进了房间，让埃克索吃了一惊。

“魔鬼！魔鬼！”僧侣仰面瞪着椽子，喊道。“我要把它们浸在血里！”

新来的僧侣拿着一个草袋子，这时他伸手进去，掏出一块石头，朝鸟群中扔去。“魔鬼！该死的魔鬼，魔鬼，魔鬼！”

第一块石头刚弹回地面，他又扔出第二块石头，接着是第三块。石头落地的地方离桌子有些距离，但比特丽丝已经用双臂抱住了脑袋，埃克索站起来，朝留着黑胡子的僧侣走去。但布莱恩神父先到，他抓住那人的两条胳膊，说道：

“伊拉斯谟兄弟，我求你啦！住手吧，安静一下！”

这时候，鸟儿发出尖叫声，四散乱飞，留胡子的僧侣高声喊道：“我知道它们！我知道它们！”

“安静下来，兄弟！”

“你不要拦着我，神父！它们是魔鬼派来的！”

“伊拉斯谟，它们也有可能是上帝派来的。我们还不知道啊。”

“我知道它们是魔鬼！看看它们的眼睛！如果是上帝派来的，怎么会用那样的眼睛看着我们呢？”

“伊拉斯谟，你安静一下。我们这儿还有客人。”

听到这话，留胡子的僧侣注意到了埃克索和比特丽丝。他愤怒地瞪着他们俩，然后对布莱恩神父说：“为什么这个时候带客人到这儿来？他们到这儿来干什么？”

“他们不过是路过的老实人，兄弟，我们很高兴招待他们，这是我们的传统。”

“布莱恩神父，你把我们的事情告诉陌生人，真是个傻瓜！你看，他们在监视我们！”

“他们没监视任何人，对我们的问题也没有兴趣。他们自己的问题够多了，我相信。”

突然，留胡子的僧侣又拿出一块石头，准备扔出去，不过布莱恩神父及时拦住了。“回去吧，伊拉斯谟，把袋子放下来。好啦，袋子留给我吧。你这样拿着袋子跑来跑去，是不行的。”

留胡子的僧侣甩开布莱恩神父，急切地把袋子抓在胸前。布莱恩神父听凭他获得这小小的胜利，带着他来到门口，就在他转脸怒视着屋顶时，轻轻地把他推到楼梯上。

“下去吧，伊拉斯谟。下面的人想你啦。回去吧，小心不要摔跤。”

那名僧侣终于走了。布莱恩神父回到房间里，一只手挥舞着，赶走空气中飘着的羽毛。

“我给两位道歉了。他是个好人，但这种生活已经不适合他了。请坐吧，安安静静把东西吃完。”

“不过呢，神父，”比特丽丝说，“那人说我们在不方便的时候打扰了你们，也许他说得对。我们绝对不想增加你们这儿的负担，乔纳斯神父的智慧大家都知道，只要你让我们快点儿请教他一下，我们马上就走。我们能见他吗，有没有消息？”

布莱恩神父摇摇头。“和我之前告诉你的一样，夫人。乔纳斯身体不好，院长下了严令，除非院长亲自许可，否则谁也不要去打搅他。我知道你们急着见乔纳斯，费了不少气力才到这儿，所以你们到了之后，我就一直在想办法跟院长说一下。但是，你们也看到了，这时候很忙，刚刚又来了一位重要人物，要见院长，我们的会议又推迟了。我们大家在等着呢，院长却回到书房里和客人谈话去了。”

比特丽丝一直站在窗前，看着留胡子的僧侣顺着石阶走下去，这时她手指着外面，说道：“好心的神父啊，那是院长回来了吗？”

埃克索走到她身旁，看见一个瘦削的身形，神态威严，迈着大步走到院子中央。僧侣们停止谈话，纷纷朝他那儿聚拢过去。

“啊，没错，是院长回来了。现在，请你们安静地把东西吃完吧。乔纳斯的事情呢，耐心一点，恐怕要到会议结束，我才能告诉你们院长的决定。但我不会忘记，放心吧，还会帮你们说话。”

武士用斧头劈柴的声音，那时候肯定就在院子里回响，和现在一样。实际上，埃克索仍能清晰地回忆起来，当时他一边看着僧侣们列队进入对面的建筑，一边心里疑惑：从传来的声音看，这是一个人劈柴，还是两个人呢？因为第一声劈柴的声音刚传来，紧接着又响起了第二声，很难判断后者是劈柴发出的声音，还是前一声的回声。现在，埃克索在黑暗中躺着，回想这件事情，他相信当时埃德温也在那儿，一斧子一斧子跟着维斯坦劈柴。男孩很可能已经很会砍柴了。当天早些时候，在他们到修道院之前，男孩曾用随手找到的两块扁石头飞快地挖坑，让大家都很惊讶。

那时候埃克索已经停下来休息了，武士让他保存体力，因为等会儿还要爬山到修道院去。所以他站到士兵仍在流血的尸体旁边，以免在树枝上聚集的鸟儿下来糟蹋。埃克索记得，维斯坦一直用士兵的剑挖坟墓，还说他不愿意用自己的剑挖，以免弄钝了剑刃。但高文爵士却说，“无论士兵的主人有什么阴谋，士兵自己死得很有尊严，骑士的剑给他挖坑安葬，正是得其所哉。”不过，这两人都停了下来，惊讶地看着埃德温用原始工具挖得飞快。随后，两人继续干活的时候，维斯坦说道：

“高文爵士，我担心布雷纳斯爵爷不会相信这个说法。”

“他会相信的，先生，”高文爵士一边继续挖坑，一边回答。“我们两人关系有点儿冷淡，但他把我当做老实的傻子，编不出这样的奇怪故事。我甚至还可以跟他们说，士兵在我怀里流血而死的时候，还一直在谈论强盗呢。你可能认为，说这种谎话是一桩严重的罪行，但我知道，上帝会仁慈地看待这件事的，难道这不也是为了避免更多流血吗？先生，我会让布雷纳斯相信我的。不过，你仍旧有危险，应该早点回去。”

“高文爵士，我在这儿的任务一完成，就立即赶回去，绝不耽搁。如果我的马脚没有痊愈的话，我甚至可能拿它换另一匹马——到东方的沼泽地，可要骑很长时间呢。不过，那样做我会难过的，她可是一匹难得的马。”

“确实难得！我的霍拉斯，哎呀，已经没那么灵巧啦，但很多次紧要关头，他都在我身边，就像你的这匹母马刚刚赶到你身边一样。真是匹难得的马，失去她，你会伤心的。但话说回来，速度很关键，所以你还是上路吧，别管你的任务了。我和霍拉斯会对付那条母龙的，所以你没有理由还念念不忘她了。不管怎么说，我刚才抽空好好想了一下，布雷纳斯要让魁瑞格帮他作战，我看他不会成功。那是个最凶悍、最难驯服的家伙，说喷火就喷火，不管是布雷纳斯的敌人，还是她自己的队伍。这本身就是个荒谬的想法，先生。不要去想了，赶紧在被敌人包围之前回家吧。”维斯坦继续挖坑，没有回答，高文爵士又问：“这件事你可以答应吗，维斯坦阁下？”

“答应什么，高文爵士？”

“答应你不再去想母龙的事，赶紧回家。”

“你似乎急着要我答应嘛。”

“我不仅要考虑你的安全，先生，我还要考虑其他人的。如果你激怒魁瑞格，她会伤害那些人的。还有，和你一起旅行的这些人怎么办？”

“没错，这些朋友的安全让我担心。我会和他们同行，一直到修道院，我可不能把他们丢在这偏僻的路上，没人保护。然后呢，我们就该分道扬镳啦。”

“那么，到了修道院之后，你就要回家吧。”

“等我准备好回家了，自然会回的，骑士阁下。”

死者内脏发出的气味，让埃克索往后退了几步，这时他发现，这样看高文爵士更加清楚。骑士站在齐腰深的坑里，额头上大汗淋漓，也许因为这个原因，他脸上的表情不像平常那么和善。他正怒气冲冲地看着维斯坦，而维斯坦呢，似乎浑然不觉，在继续挖坑。

士兵的死，让比特丽丝心情沮丧。其他人把坑越挖越深，她慢慢走回到那棵大橡树下，又在树荫里坐了下来，头一直低着。埃克索本想去和她坐在一起，要不是那群乌鸦，他肯定去了。现在，他在黑暗中躺着，也开始为这位被杀的士兵感到难过。他想起士兵在那座小桥上对他们以礼相待，对比特丽丝讲话时轻声细语。埃克索又想起来，刚进入路边那块空地时，士兵将马的位置控制得非常精准。当时，这件事还让埃克索想起了什么往事；现在，夜晚万籁俱寂，他记起高沼地起起伏伏，天空低垂，一群羊从石楠间穿过。

那时他坐在马背上，前面骑马的人是他的同伴，一个名叫哈维的人，他粗壮的身体发出的气味，把马匹的气味都遮盖了。他们在大风呼啸的原野中间停了下来，因为他们发现远处有动静，等他们发现那没有威胁，埃克索伸了伸胳膊——他们骑了很长时间的马——看着哈维那匹马摆着尾巴，一左一右，好像是为了不让苍蝇落在屁股上。当时他看不见同伴的脸，但哈维背部的形状，以及他整个人的姿态，都表明他一看到前方有人靠近，心中便起了敌意。埃克索的目光越过哈维，朝前方望去，他能分辨出一些黑点，那都是绵羊的脸，黑点之中有四个人，一个骑着驴子，其他人步行。似乎没有狗。埃克索想，这几个牧羊人肯定早就发现了他们——天空下面两名骑手，轮廓分明——四人缓慢而坚定地向前走着，因此就算心中感到紧张，表面上也看不出来。反正荒野上只有一条长长的路，埃克索想，牧羊人如果想避开他们，那就只好掉头回去了。

对方慢慢走近，他看到四个人虽然年纪不算老，却都瘦弱憔悴。他心中一沉，因为他知道，这些人的虚弱模样只会刺激同伴，让他更加野蛮。埃克索等待着，四个人到了几乎可以打招呼致意的距离，他立即催马向前，小心地赶到哈维坐骑的一侧，他知道牧羊人和大部分羊肯定要从这边经过。他特别让自己的马落后一头，以便同伴能够维持优越感。但是，如果哈维挥动马鞭，或者拿起挂在马鞍上的棒子，对牧羊人发起突然攻击，那么埃克索正好挡在中间。同时，这一举动从表面上看，是亲密友好的表示，何况哈维也没有这么缜密的心思，不会去怀疑背后的真正动机。的确，埃克索还记得，他骑马上去的时

候，同伴还漫不经心地地点了点头，然后又转过脸去，神情抑郁地望着茫茫荒野。

迎面走来的牧羊人让埃克索特别担心，这是因为几天前在一个撒克逊村庄里发生了一件事情。那是个天气晴朗的上午，当时埃克索和村民们一样大吃一惊。事先毫无征兆，哈维突然催马向前，疯狂地殴打等待从井中汲水的人们。那次哈维用的是鞭子还是棒子？在荒野上骑马的那天，埃克索曾试图回想这一细节。如果哈维选择用鞭子打路过的牧羊人，那范围要大一些，胳膊也更省力些；他甚至可能冒险，将鞭子从埃克索的马头上方挥过去。但是，如果哈维选择用棒子的话，鉴于埃克索现在的位置，他就必须催马到埃克索前方，再拨转马头，然后才能攻击。对他的同伴来说，那样的举动就太刻意了：哈维这个人，喜欢让暴力行为看起来像兴致所至、不费气力。

他精心的举动有没有拯救那些牧羊人呢，他想不起来了。他朦朦胧胧地记得，绵羊从他们身旁若无其事地经过，但他脑海中关于牧羊人的记忆，和村民们挨打的场景混到了一起。那天上午，他们两人到那个村子里去干什么呢？埃克索记得有愤怒的叫喊、孩子的哭泣和仇恨的表情，记得他自己也很生气，与其说是发哈维的火，倒不如说是憎恨把他和这么个同伴安排到一起的人。他们的使命如果完成，将会是一项了不起的成就，至高无上、前所未有的，上帝都会认为，使命完成的时刻，人类离他更近了。然而，和这么个野蛮的东西捆绑在一起，埃克索能做成什么事呢？

他又想起了那位头发灰白的士兵，还有他在桥上的那个小动作。就在他那位粗壮的同事一边叫喊一边拉扯维斯坦的头发时，这位头发灰白的士兵略微抬起了胳膊，手指几乎已经做出了指点的姿势，批评的话几乎要脱口而出。这时他的胳膊又放了下来。那一刻灰发士兵的心理感受，埃克索当时就明白了。后来士兵对比特丽丝说话特别温和，埃克索很感谢他。他记得，比特丽丝站在桥头时，表情庄重、警觉，后来却变得喜悦、柔和，那才是他最珍爱的模样。那画面让他心动，同时又让他害怕。一个陌生人——还是个有潜在危险的陌生人——只要说几句和善的话，她就欣然释怀，又对世界充满了信任。这想法让他不安，他一时冲动，想用手轻轻抚摸身旁比特丽丝的肩头。可她不是一直都这样吗？她对他如此宝贵，这不也是个原因吗？这么多年熬过来，她不是也没有受过重大伤害吗？

“那不可能是迷迭香，先生，”他想起比特丽丝急切地这样对他说。他蹲着，一只膝盖跪在地上，因为那天天气很好，地上是干的。

比特丽丝肯定一直站在他身后，因为他还记得，他用双手分开地上的杂草时，她的影子就落在他面前的地面上。“那不可能是迷迭香，先生。谁见过有这样黄色花朵的迷迭香呢？”

“那就是我把名字搞错了，姑娘，”埃克索说道。“但是，我肯定这花很常见，不会有什么害处。”

“可你真的很懂植物吗，先生？这儿野生的东西，我母亲都教过我，但我们眼前的这种东西，我却不熟悉。”

“那么，它也许是刚刚从异乡来到这里的一种植物。为什么这么紧张呢，姑娘？”

“我很紧张，先生，是因为这有可能是我从小就害怕的一种野草。”

“为什么要害怕野草呢，除非有毒，那你不该碰它就好啦。但是，你呀，自己拿手去摸，现在还要我也去摸！”

“哎呀，没有毒，先生！至少没有你说的那种毒。但是，我母亲有一次详细地描述过一种植物，她警告说，年轻女孩子在石楠丛里看到这种植物，就会遭遇厄运。”

“什么样的厄运呢，姑娘？”

“我没胆子跟你说，先生。”

但是，就在她说这话的时候，这位年轻女人——比特丽丝那天就是个年轻女人——已经在他身旁蹲下来，两人的胳膊碰了一下，她迎着他的目光，充满信任地微微一笑。

“如果看到它就要遭厄运的话，”埃克索说，“让我从路上跑过来，就为了看一眼，又是出于什么好心呢？”

“哎呀，你又不会遭厄运，先生！只是说没结婚的女孩子。还有另外一种植物，肯定会给你这样的男人带来厄运。”

“那你最好跟我说说另外那种植物是什么样的，让我心里对它有些害怕，就像你害怕这种植物一样。”

“你就拿我开心吧，先生。有一天啊，你要摔个跟斗，发现那种草就在你鼻子旁边呢。到那时候，你就知道这是不是好笑的事情了。”

他仍旧记得手伸进石楠丛里的感觉，记得风从头顶的树枝间刮过，记得身边那位年轻的女人。那是不是他们第一次谈话呢？至少那时候他们肯定认识对方；比特丽丝肯定不会对一个完全不认识的人如此信任吧。

砍柴的声音刚才停了一会儿，现在又开始了，埃克索这才想起来，武士也许整个晚上都要待在外面。就算在战斗中，维斯坦也显得镇定、谨慎，但是头天晚上和今天白天的压力，可能累积在他身上，他需要通过干活缓解一下。尽管如此，他的行为还是很奇怪。乔纳斯神父说得很清楚，不要再去砍柴，可他呢，又去砍了，何况天已经这么黑了。之前，他们刚到的时候，武士这么做似乎是出于礼貌。不过，埃克索发现，就算是那时候，维斯坦要去砍柴，也有他自己的原因。

“柴火棚位置很好，”武士解释说。“我和男孩干活的时候，能清楚地看到周围的事情。更妙的是，我们把柴火送到需要的地方，就可以随意走动，查看周围环境，尽管有几扇门关着，我们进不去。”

说话的时候，两人在修道院的高墙旁边，俯瞰着周围的树林。那时候僧侣们早已去开会了，四下里很安静。此前不久，比特丽丝在房间里打盹睡着了，埃克索出了门，在半下午的阳光下溜达，他沿着破损的台阶爬上去，维斯坦正在上面，低头望着地上厚厚的树叶。

“可为什么要这么麻烦呢，维斯坦阁下？”埃克索问他。“难道你怀疑这些好心的僧侣？”

武士一只手举在额前，遮住眼睛，说道：“之前我们沿那条路上山的时候，我只想找个角落躺下来，做做美梦。但现在我们到了这儿，我总觉得这地方对我们有危险。”

“维斯坦阁下，你肯定是累了，所以才疑虑重重。这儿能有什么事让你不安心呢？”

“目前还没有确切的事情。可是，你想想啊。之前我到马厩去看我的马，听到后面的马棚里有声音。是这样的，先生，另外那个马棚和我这里隔着墙，但我能听到那边还有一匹马；我们刚到的时候，我牵马进去，那里可没有别的马。后来我走到另外一边，发现马棚的门关着，门上挂着一只大锁，没钥匙可进不去。”

“这件事能有很多解释，维斯坦阁下，未必有危险。那匹马也许之前在外面吃草，后来才牵进来。”

“这事我跟一名僧侣提过，他们这儿是不养马的，他们不希望用这种方法减轻负担。看来我们来之后，还有别的人来过，这个人不想让人知道他在这儿。”

“你这一说，维斯坦阁下，我倒想起来，布莱恩神父提到过，说有一名重要的客人来见院长，所以他们的大会才推迟了。我们不知道这儿发生了什么事，但这件事十有八九和我们没有任何关系。”

维斯坦若有所思地点点头。“也许你说得对，埃克索阁下。睡一会儿也许能打消我的疑心。不过，我还是派小男孩出去了，让他多逛逛，和成年人相比，说他天生好奇，人家更容易相信吧。刚才，他回来报告说，他在那块地方听到有人呻吟，那儿，”维斯坦转过身，用手指了指，“就是人有病痛时发出的声音。小先生埃德温跟着声音悄悄进了屋，发现有个房间门是关的，门外有血迹，有的时间久了，有的是新鲜的。”

“奇怪是奇怪，不过某个僧侣倒霉，遇到了意外，也算不得什么了不起的事情，也许是在这台阶上摔了一跤。”

“先生，我承认，我并没有确切的依据怀疑这儿有问题。也许是出于武士的本能吧，我真希望我腰带上挂着剑，不用再假装成农夫了。我感到担心，或许是因为这些墙壁在悄悄跟我说着以前的事情。”

“这是什么意思呢，先生？”

“这个地方不久之前肯定不是什么修道院，而是个山顶要塞，而且建造得很好，为的是抵御敌人。我们爬上山的那条累人的路，你还记得吧？绕来绕去，好像就是要让我们用尽气力一样？现在你往下看，先生，你看那些路上方的防御工事。以前守军就从那儿用弓箭、石头和滚烫的水来对付入侵者。那时候，如果能到达大门口，就算是了不起的事情了。”

“我看到了。那要爬上来可真不容易。”

“还有呢，埃克索阁下，我敢打赌，这要塞以前肯定是在撒克逊人手里，因为我看到了我同族人的很多记号，也许你看不到。你看那儿——”维斯坦指着下面一个铺着鹅卵石的院子，院子四周有围墙——“我猜，就在那儿，以前有第二道大门，比第一道更加坚固，但从那条路爬上来的入侵者却看不见。他们只看到第一道门，于是拼命攻打，但其实那是我们撒克逊人说的水闸门，就像控制河水的水闸一

样。守军可以先计算好，有意把一部分敌人放进来，然后关上水闸门，把后面跟上来的敌人挡在外面。这时候，放进来的敌人就在两道门之间，被孤立了，就在那个地方。他们人数不够，会再次受到来自上面的攻击。先将他们杀光，然后再放下一拨人进来。你明白这个道理了吧，先生。今天，这是个和平而虔诚的地方，但用不着太费力，你就能看到流血和恐怖。”

“你观察得很好，维斯坦阁下，你教我看到的東西，让我震惊。”

“我也可以打赌，这儿曾有过撒克逊家庭，从很远的地方逃过来的，到这个要塞里寻求庇护。女人、孩子、伤员、老人、病人。你看那边，之前僧侣们聚集的那个院子。以前，除了极度虚弱的人之外，所有人都会出来，在那儿站着，亲眼看着入侵者在两道门之间哀嚎，像落入陷阱的老鼠一样。”

“先生，这我就没法相信了。他们肯定会在下面什么地方躲起来，祈祷上帝救他们脱难。”

“只有最胆小的才会这么做。大部分人都会站在那个院子里，甚至爬上来，就是我们现在站的地方，宁愿冒着被箭或矛伤到的风险，也要享受享受下面敌人的痛苦模样。”

埃克索摇着头。“你说的那些人，肯定不会因为流血而感到快乐吧，哪怕流血的是敌人。”

“恰恰相反，先生。我说的那些人走过了一条残暴之路，亲眼见过自己的孩子和亲人残肢断臂、惨遭蹂躏。他们经历了漫长的苦难，一路上死神就在身后，不过数步之遥，最终才到达这个地方，找到了他们的避难所。这时候来了一支入侵的军队，人数众多。要塞或许能支撑几天，甚至一两个星期。但他们知道，他们终将面对自己的末日。他们知道，现在抱在怀里的婴儿，不久将成为血淋淋的玩具，在这鹅卵石上被踢来踢去。他们知道，因为他们已经见过，他们是从那儿逃出来的。他们见过敌人烧杀劫掠，见过已经受伤、即将死去的年轻女孩，惨遭敌人轮奸。他们知道这迟早要来，所以必须珍惜要塞被围的头几天，这时候敌人要为后来的猖狂先付出代价。埃克索阁下，换句话说，对那些无法复仇的人来说，这是提前享受复仇之乐。所以啊，先生，我才会说，我的那些撒克逊同胞会站在这儿，鼓掌欢呼，敌人死得越惨，他们就会越高兴。”

“我无法相信，先生。尚未做出的行径怎么可能激起如此之深的恨呢？曾在此避难的那些好心的人们，应该到最后一刻还坚守着希望，看到有人受苦，无论敌人还是朋友，肯定都会感到怜悯、震惊。”

“你年纪比我大不少，埃克索阁下，但说到流血的事情，恐怕我是老人，你是青年。我见过年长的女人和年幼的孩子，脸上写着深仇大恨，像深不见底的海，有时候我自己也会感觉到那样的仇恨。”

“这我无法接受，先生，而且，我们谈的是一段野蛮的过去，希望它一去不复返。感谢上帝，我们的争论永远不需要拿到现实中检验。”

武士用奇怪的眼光看着埃克索。他似乎想说什么，然后改变了主意。他转身去看身后的那些石头建筑，说：“之前我抱着一大堆柴火，在这一带走动，在每个拐弯的地方，我都看到了过去的痕迹，真令人着迷。实际上啊，先生，就算第二道门被攻破，这个要塞也还有很多陷阱等着敌人，有些设计得非常狡猾。这儿的僧侣根本不知道自己每天经过的是什么地方。不过，这个就不多说啦。既然我们俩这会儿安安静静在一起，埃克索阁下，我要为之前曾让你不快道歉，请你原谅。我是说，我不该盘问那位好心的骑士关于你的情况。”

“这事就不要去想啦，先生。就算你的做法让我和我妻子感到意外，也谈不上冒犯。你把我当成别人了，很常见的错误。”

“那我谢谢你的理解。我把你当成了另外一个人，那人的脸我永远不会忘记，虽然最后一次看到他的时候，我还是个小孩。”

“那是在西方吧。”

“没错，先生，在我被带走之前。我说的那个人不是武士，但佩着剑，骑一匹漂亮的种马。他常到我们村子里来，我们这些男孩子只见过农民和船夫，所以对我们来说，他可是个神奇的人物。”

“没错。这一点我能理解。”

“我还记得，他到村子的任何地方，我们都跟着，不过总有些羞怯，不敢跟得太近。有时候他很急，跟长老们说话，或者召唤大家到广场上集合。有时候他悠闲地逛着，跟这个说说话，跟那个聊聊天，好像要打发时光似的。他不怎么懂我们的话，不过我们的村子在河边，河上有船来来往往，村里很多人都会说他的语言，所以他从不缺

少伙伴。有时候他会回头看看我们，脸上带着微笑，但我们那时候还小，他一回头，我们就四下里散开，躲藏起来。”

“我们的语言，你学得那么好，就是在这个村子里？”

“不是，那是后来的事。我被抓走之后。”

“被抓走，维斯坦阁下？”

“士兵们把我从村子里抓走，从很小开始训练，一直到今天成为武士。抓走我的是不列颠人，所以我很快学会了像他们那样讲话，像他们那样战斗。那是很久以前了，事情在脑海里变成了奇怪的样子。今天在那个村庄里，我第一次看到你，也许是因为早晨的光亮吧，我觉得自己又成了那个小男孩，羞怯地看着那个伟大的人物，他的披风在风中飘舞，他从村中走过，像猪群和牛群中的狮子。我猜这可能是因为你微笑时一侧嘴角的样子，或者是你与陌生人微微点头打招呼的方式。不过，现在我知道了，是我搞错了，你不可能是那个人。这事就不说了。你好心的妻子怎么样啦，先生？没累坏吧，我希望？”

“她算是喘了口气啦，谢谢你关心，不过我刚让她再休息一会儿。反正我们还要等僧侣们开完会，等院长允许我们去见那位睿智的乔纳斯医生。”

“真是一位坚强的女士，先生。她能一路走到这儿，毫无怨言，我很钦佩。啊，小男孩又回来啦。”

“你看他捂着伤口，维斯坦阁下。我们也要带他去见乔纳斯神父。”

维斯坦似乎没听见这句话。他离开墙边，走下几级台阶迎接埃德温，两人脑袋碰在一起，低声交谈了一会儿。男孩的样子有些激动，武士则皱着眉头听着，不时点点头。埃克索也走下来，维斯坦轻声说：

“小先生埃德温发现了一件奇怪的事情，我们最好去亲眼看看。让他带路，我们跟着，不过走路时要摆出无所事事的样子，说不定那边那位老僧侣是有意留下来监视我们的。”

没错，一位孤零零的僧侣，正在扫院子。他们走到近前，埃克索发现他嘴里喃喃自语，沉浸在自己的世界里。埃德温带着大家穿过院子，进入两幢建筑中间的狭窄过道，那位僧侣几乎都没抬眼朝他们这边看。他们从过道里走出来，前面是个高低不平的斜坡，稀稀落落长

着草，沿着一排不过一人高的枯树，有一条小路，通到修道院外面。在黄昏的天空下，众人跟在埃德温身后，维斯坦低声说：

“我很喜欢这个男孩。埃克索阁下，我们可以调整原来的计划，不一定要把他留在你儿子的村子里。让他在我身边多待一段时间，对我来说很合适。”

“先生，听你这么说，我感到不安。”

“为什么呢？他可不太向往挖冻土、喂猪食的生活。”

“可是，在你身边，他会做什么呢？”

“等我的使命完成了，我就带他回东方沼地去。”

“你打算让他到那儿干什么呢，先生？天天跟挪威人作战？”

“你皱着眉头，先生，但这个男孩性情特殊。他能成为优秀的武士。嘘，我们看看他发现了什么。”

路旁有三间木头棚屋，都破旧不堪，每间看上去似乎都要靠旁边的那间支撑着。潮湿的地面上有车轮的痕迹，埃德温停下来指给大家看。然后他带着众人到了最远的那间棚屋。

棚屋没有门，一大块屋顶破了，能看到天空。他们一进来，几只鸟慌乱地飞走了，埃克索看到，在这个阴森森、空荡荡的地方，有一辆制作粗糙的马车——也许是僧侣们自己做的——两只车轮陷在泥里。引人注意的是，马车车厢的顶上，有一个巨大的笼子。埃克索走到近前，发现笼子本身是铁的，后背上有一根粗木柱，将笼子牢牢固定在下面的木板上。木柱上挂满了铁链镣铐，在脑袋那么高的地方还有个东西，好像是个黑色的铁面具，不过眼睛的地方没有洞，只在嘴巴处开了个小孔。车上以及车子周围，落满了羽毛和粪便。埃德温拉开笼子的门，又把门推来推去，铰链发出吱吱呀呀的声音。他又开始激动地说了起来，维斯坦的目光在棚子里搜索着，不时冲埃德温点点头。

“真奇怪，”埃克索说道，“这些僧侣竟然需要这么个东西。毫无疑问，这是某种礼拜仪式上用的。”

武士迈步围着马车走，小心翼翼避开脚下的泥坑。“我以前见过一次类似的东西，”他说。“你可能以为，这个设备是让关在笼子里的人经受自然的严酷考验。但是，看看吧，这些栅栏之间的缝隙很大，我的肩膀都能过去。这儿，你们看，这些羽毛上沾了血，都硬

了，粘在铁笼子上。所以，人锁在这里，是送给山上的鸟的。他被这些镣铐锁住，根本没法赶走那些饥饿的鸟。这个铁面具看起来很可怕，其实是仁慈的体现，因为戴上面具，至少眼睛不会被啄瞎。”

“也许有什么更加温和的用途吧，”埃克索说道，但埃德温又开始说话了，维斯坦转过头，望着棚子外面。

“男孩说，他跟着车轮的痕迹走，到了附近悬崖边上的一个地方，”武士过了好久，才开口说道。“他说，那儿的地上车辙很深，表明马车经常停在那个地方。换句话说，这些迹象都证明我的猜测是对的，而且我也能看出来，这辆车不久前还被拉出去过。”

“我不明白这是什么意思，维斯坦阁下，但我承认，现在我开始和你一样感到不安了。这个东西让我脊背发凉，让我想回到妻子身边。”

“那我们就回去吧，先生。不要再待在这儿了。”

他们走出棚屋，埃德温又一次在前面领路。他突然停了下来。在前方昏暗的暮色中，埃克索看到一个穿僧袍的身影，站在长草之中，离他们不远。

“我看就是刚才扫院子的那个僧侣，”武士对埃克索说。

“他看见我们了吗？”

“我认为他看到我们了，也知道我们看到了他。可他仍旧站在那儿一动不动，像棵树一样。好吧，我们过去。”

僧侣站在路旁一个地方，草有他膝盖那么高。他们走近时，他仍旧一动不动，只有袍子和长长的白头发随风飘动。他身材瘦削，简直瘦骨嶙峋，两只鼓起来的眼睛空洞无神地瞪着他们。

“你在看着我们，先生，”维斯坦停下脚步，说道，“你知道我们刚才发现了什么。所以呢，也许你可以告诉我们，那个东西是拿来干什么的。”

僧侣一言不发，用手指了指修道院。

“也许他起过誓，不能言语，”埃克索说。“或者像你最近假装的那样，是个哑巴，维斯坦阁下。”

僧侣走出草丛，来到路上。他奇怪的眼睛依次凝视着大家，然后他又指了指修道院，便迈步出发了。大家跟在他身后，只保持着很短

的距离，僧侣不停地回过头来看看他们。

现在，在黄昏的天空下，修道院的建筑成了黑影。他们走近时，僧侣停下脚步，食指放到嘴唇上，然后更加谨慎地向前走。他似乎很担心被人看到，要避开中央的院子。他领着大家走过建筑背后的狭窄过道，泥地上要么坑坑洼洼，要么是陡坡。有一次，他们要低着头，贴着一堵墙走，头顶上传来了僧侣们开会的声音。一片混乱之中，有个声音在叫喊，接着另一个声音——可能是院长——让大家保持秩序。众人没有时间停留，不久他们在一个拱廊下陆续聚齐，穿过拱廊就是主庭院。僧侣急切地打着手势，让大家尽可能安静、尽可能快地过去。

实际上，他们并不需要从点着火把的院子中央经过，只要沿着一条石柱回廊的阴影，从庭院的一个角落穿过去。僧侣又停下了脚步，埃克索悄声对他说：

“好心的先生啊，你肯定是要带我们到什么地方去，那我请你允许我带上我妻子，丢下她一个人，我心中不安。”

僧侣立即转过头来，牢牢盯着埃克索，然后摇摇头，用手指着昏暗处。这时候，埃克索才发现，比特丽丝就站在回廊远处的一个通道口上。他心中一宽，挥了挥手，大家都朝她那边走去，僧侣们的会场中响起一阵愤怒的声音，从他们身后传来。

“你怎么样啊，公主？”比特丽丝已经伸出手来，他伸手握住。

“安安静静地休息呢，埃克索，这位不说话的僧侣突然出现在我面前，我还以为他是幽灵。但他急着带我们去什么地方，我们最好跟上。”

僧侣又做了那个让大家噤声的动作，然后打手势让大家继续走。比特丽丝站在门槛边等着，大家相继从她跟前走过，进了通道。

通道变得像隧道一样，和他们家乡的巢穴村差不多，小壁龛里的灯摇曳不定，无法驱散黑暗。比特丽丝挽着埃克索的胳膊，埃克索则把一只手伸在前面。有一下子他们又回到了户外，穿过一个泥泞的院子，两侧是耕耘过的一块块田地，然后进入了另一幢低矮的石头建筑。这儿通道更宽，灯火也更亮，僧侣似乎终于放松了下来。他喘了口气，又一次打量着大家，然后打手势让他们等着，自己走进一道拱门，消失了。过了一会儿，僧侣出来，带大家往里走。里面一个虚弱

的声音说道，“进来吧，客人们。这个房间招待客人过于简陋，但欢迎你们。”

* * *

埃克索一边等着睡意降临，一边又回想起他们四个人和那位沉默的僧侣一起，挤进了那个小小的房间。床边点着一根蜡烛，他感到比特丽丝往后缩了一下，因为她看到了躺在床上那个人。然后她吸了口气，朝房间里面又迈了两步。屋里几乎挤不下，但很快大家就围着床找到了自己的位置，武士和男孩待在最远处的角落里。埃克索的后背紧贴着冰冷的石头墙，比特丽丝就站在他跟前，紧靠在他身上，好像这样心里踏实一点一样——她都快挤到病床上去了。隐约有呕吐和小便的气味。那位沉默的僧侣正围着床上的人忙活，帮助他坐起身来。

房间的主人头发雪白，年纪很大了。他身材高大，不久之前应该精神很好，但现在坐起来这么简单的事情，似乎都给他带来很多痛苦。他起身的时候，一条粗糙的毯子滑下来，露出睡衣，上面有一块块血迹。但是，让比特丽丝缩回去的，是床头昏暗的烛光下这个人的脖子和脸。他下巴一侧有个肿块，由深紫色慢慢变成了黄色，所以他的脑袋要稍微歪着。肿块中间裂开，上面覆盖着脓和凝固的血。脸上，从颧骨下方到下颌，有一个洞，口腔内部和牙龈都露了出来。这个人要微笑一下，恐怕非常困难，不过，等他坐起来、安顿好，他还是笑了笑。

“欢迎，欢迎。我是乔纳斯，我知道你们走了很远的路要来见我。我亲爱的客人们，不要这么怜悯地看着我。这伤口也有段日子了，已经不像以前那么痛啦。”

“乔纳斯神父，”比特丽丝说，“我们现在明白了，为什么你好心的院长不愿意让陌生人来打扰你。我们本想等待他许可，不过这位善良的僧侣把我们带过来了。”

“尼尼安是我最信任的朋友，虽然他发过静默的誓言，但是我们完全明白对方的心意。你们来了之后，他一直观察你们每个人，经常向我报告。院长还毫不知情，但我想我们该见面了。”

“可是，神父，你怎么会受这样的伤呢？”比特丽丝问。“你可是个出了名的善良、睿智之人啊。”

“这个话题我们就不谈了，夫人，因为我力气虚弱，不能长时间说话。我知道你们两人——你以及这位勇敢的男孩——都需要我看看。让我先看看男孩吧，我知道他身上有伤。小伙子，靠近点，到有光的地方来。”

他声音轻柔，但有种自然的威严。埃德温正打算迈步过去，维斯坦却伸出手，抓住了男孩的胳膊。也许是因为摇曳的烛光，或者是因为武士颤抖的影子落在他身后的墙上，有一刻埃克索觉得，维斯坦盯着那位受伤的僧侣，目光特别凶狠，甚至充满仇恨。武士把男孩拉回到墙边，自己向前迈了一步，似乎是要挡住对方的进攻。

“有什么问题吗，牧羊人？”乔纳斯神父问。“你担心我伤口的毒会传给你的兄弟吗？我并不需要用手去碰他。让他靠近点，我用眼睛就可以查看他的伤口。”

“男孩的伤口是干净的，”维斯坦说。“这位好心的女人才需要你的帮助。”

“维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝说，“你怎么能说这种话？干净的伤口也随时都会发炎，这你肯定很清楚吧。这个男孩必须听听这位睿智僧侣的指引。”

维斯坦似乎没听见比特丽丝的话，仍旧瞪着床上的僧侣。乔纳斯神父也打量着武士，好像他是个非常有趣的物件一样。过了一会儿，乔纳斯神父说：

“对一个普通的牧羊人来说，你站的样子，可真够大胆啊。”

“那肯定是因为我的职业习惯。放羊的人要站很久，提防夜晚聚集的狼。”

“当然是这样啦。我还想，牧羊人还要做出快速判断，听到黑暗中的声响，要知道那是危险，还是朋友到访。快速准确做出决定的能力肯定关系重大。”

“听到树枝折断的声音，或者看到黑暗中的人影，只有愚蠢的牧羊人才会以为那是同伴前来帮忙。我们放羊的都很谨慎，还有啊，先生，我们刚刚亲眼见到了你们谷仓里的器具。”

“哦。我就想你迟早要谈到这件事的。牧羊人，你怎么看这一发现？”

“它让我感到愤怒。”

“愤怒？”乔纳斯神父说这话用了不少力气，好像他自己突然感到愤怒了一样。“为什么让你感到愤怒呢？”

“那好吧，先生，如果我说的不对，你尽管告诉我。我的猜测是，这儿有个传统：僧侣们轮流到那个笼子里去，让野鸟啄食身体，希望这样能够补偿这个国家早已犯下却未受惩罚的罪行。连我眼前这恶心的伤口，也是这样造成的，据我所知，虔诚的感觉会减轻你们的痛苦。但是，我要说，看到你的伤口，我并不感到同情。给最邪恶的行为罩上面纱，先生，怎么就可以称之为忏悔呢？难道你们基督教的神，用自我施加的痛苦和几句祈祷词，就能轻易收买了吗？正义未曾伸张，难道他一点儿也不关心？”

“牧羊人，我们侍奉的，是一位仁慈之神，你是个异教徒，也许难以理解。无论罪行多重，向这样的神祈求宽恕，都算不得愚蠢。我主的仁慈是无限的。”

“无限仁慈的神有什么用呢，先生？你嘲笑我是异教徒，可我们祖祖辈辈信奉的众神，明确宣布他们的规则，我们一旦破坏他们的律法，即受到严厉惩罚。你们基督徒信奉的仁慈之神，许可人们满足贪欲，觊觎土地和鲜血，他们知道，几句祈祷的话加上一点儿忏悔，就能换回宽恕和祝福。”

“你说得没错，牧羊人，在这个修道院里，仍然有人相信这种事情。但我向你保证，我和尼尼安很久以前就放弃了这种妄想，而且我们并不孤单。我们知道，上帝的仁慈不可滥用，然而我很多修道的弟兄，包括院长，目前还不能接受这一点。他们仍然相信，那个笼子，再加上经常祈祷，就够了。但这些黑乌鸦、黑老鸱，是上帝发怒的兆头。以前没有过。去年冬天，我们当中最强健的弟兄，都被风吹得流泪，但那时候的鸟儿不过是调皮的孩子，嘴巴只会造成微小的伤害。抖抖锁链，或者叫一声，它们就不敢靠近。但是，现在一种新的鸟来了，体型更大，胆子更大，眼睛里有愤怒。它们带着不动声色的怒火，撕扯我们的身体，不管我们如何挣扎或叫喊。过去这几个月，我们已经失去了三位亲爱的朋友，还有很多受了重伤。这些肯定是预兆吧。”

维斯坦的模样缓和了一些，但他一直坚定地站在男孩身前。“你是说，”他问道，“这个修道院里有我的朋友？”

“没错，牧羊人，在这个房间里。在其他地方，我们仍有不同意见，此时此刻，他们正在激烈争论下一步该怎么办。院长会坚持说，

我们该一如既往。和我们观点相同的人会说，该停止了。我们沿着这条路走，不会获得宽恕。我们必须揭开隐藏的事情，直面过去。但是，恐怕这样的声音不多，也不会占上风。牧羊人，现在你信任我了吗，愿意让我看看男孩的伤口吗？”

维斯坦站着不动，但过了一会儿，他让到一边，示意埃德温过去。不说话的僧侣立即扶着乔纳斯神父，让他坐得更直一点——两位僧侣突然都忙碌起来——然后他抓起床边的烛台，把埃德温拉到近前，不耐烦地撩起男孩的衣衫，给乔纳斯神父看。似乎过了很久，两位僧侣一直看着男孩的伤口——尼尼安将那一团光亮移来移去——好像那是一池水，里面包含着一个小小的世界。最后，两位僧侣交换了一个眼神，在埃克索看来，那似乎是表示大功告成，但紧接着乔纳斯神父身体颤抖着，又倒回到枕头上，表情近乎无奈，甚至是悲伤。尼尼安急忙放下蜡烛去照顾他，埃德温则悄悄回到黑暗中，站在维斯坦身旁。

“乔纳斯神父，”比特丽丝说，“你看过了小男孩的伤口，告诉我们伤口干净吗，能不能自行愈合。”

乔纳斯神父闭着眼睛，仍旧在喘着粗气，不过他平静地说：“我相信，只要他小心，伤口能自行愈合。他离开之前，尼尼安神父会为他准备好药膏。”

“神父，”比特丽丝继续说，“你和维斯坦阁下的谈话，我不能完全理解。但我很感兴趣。”

“是吗，夫人？”乔纳斯神父仍在喘气，但他睁开了眼睛，看着她。

“昨天晚上，在山下的一个村庄里，”比特丽丝说，“我和一位精通医药的女士谈过。她很了解我的病，但是，我一问起她这迷雾是怎么回事，为什么我们会眨眼便忘记一个小时之前的事，就像忘记多年前某个上午的事一样，她就坦白说，她根本不知道这是怎么回事，也不知是何人所为。不过，她说如果有睿智的人知道，那就肯定是你了，就是住在山上修道院里的乔纳斯神父。所以，我和丈夫就到这儿来了，尽管到儿子的村庄去，这条路更难走，而且他还在那儿焦急地等着呢。我希望你能给我们说说这迷雾，我和埃克索用什么办法可以摆脱。也许我是个愚蠢的女人，但我觉得，你和维斯坦阁下张口闭口牧羊人，实际上说的就是这迷雾，过去的事情我们忘记了不少，你们

也很担心。所以，请允许我问问你，也问问维斯坦阁下。为什么迷雾会降临到我们头上，你们两人知道吗？”

乔纳斯神父和维斯坦互相看了一眼。然后维斯坦低声说：

“比特丽丝夫人，那是因为魁瑞格，在这山间游荡的那条龙。你说的迷雾，就是她引起的。但这儿的僧侣们庇护她，而且庇护了很多年。现在我就敢打赌，他们要是知道了我的身份，肯定会派人来杀我。”

“乔纳斯神父，这是真的吗？”比特丽丝问。“迷雾是那条母龙造出来的？”

僧侣似乎走了一下神，然后他转脸对比特丽丝说：“牧羊人说的是真话，夫人。是魁瑞格的气息填满了这片土地，夺去了我们的记忆。”

“埃克索，你听到了吗？迷雾是那条母龙造成的！维斯坦阁下，或者其他，甚至是路上遇到的那位老骑士，只要有人能杀掉它，那我们的记忆就可以恢复啦！埃克索，你怎么这么安静呢？”

没错，埃克索刚才陷入了沉思，他听见了妻子的话，注意到了她的激动情绪，但他只朝她伸出了一只手，并没有别的表示。他还没开口，乔纳斯神父对维斯坦说道：

“牧羊人，既然你知道有危险，为什么还在此逗留？为什么不带着这位男孩上路呢？”

“男孩需要休息，我也一样。”

“但你没有休息啊，牧羊人。你在劈柴，像恶狼一样晃来晃去。”

“我们来的时候，你们的柴火不多了。这山里晚上又很冷。”

“还有别的事让我疑惑，牧羊人。布雷纳斯爵爷为什么要抓你？他的士兵在全国追查你，有很多天了。去年，有个从东方来的人要找魁瑞格，布雷纳斯认为那可能是你，就派人出来追查。他们到山上来询问你的踪迹。牧羊人，你和布雷纳斯是什么关系？”

“我们还是小伙子的时候就认识，那时我俩比这位男孩还小呢。”

“你到这个国家来是有任务的，牧羊人。为什么要去算旧账，给自己找麻烦呢？我跟你说，你带上这个男孩走吧，僧侣们会议结束之前就走。”

“既然布雷纳斯爵爷如此看重，今晚就来找我，那我就应该站在这儿，与他会面。”

“维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝说，“我不知道你和布雷纳斯爵爷之间是怎么回事。但是，如果你的使命是杀死大龙魁瑞格，那么我请求你，不要为别的事情分心。算账以后还有时间。”

“这位夫人说得对，牧羊人。劈柴的目的，恐怕我也知道。听我们的话吧，先生。这个男孩给了你一个独一无二的机会，以后可能就没有这样的机会了。带上他，走吧。”

维斯坦若有所思地看着乔纳斯神父，然后礼貌地点点头。“今天见到你我很高兴，神父。如果之前我对你不够尊重，那我向你道歉。但现在请允许我和这个男孩向你告别。我知道比特丽丝夫人还需要你看一看，她是个勇敢而善良的女人。我请你留些力气给她看病。感谢你的忠告，告辞了。”

埃克索躺在黑暗中，一边期盼着睡神降临，一边努力回想，当时在乔纳斯神父的小房间里，为什么自己大多时候都没怎么说话。总该有什么原因。比特丽丝发现了迷雾的源头，兴高采烈地转过脸来跟他说，但他仍旧没说话，只是伸出手去握住了她的手。当时某种强烈而奇怪的情感在他胸中翻腾，几乎让他如临梦境，尽管周围的人说的每个字都清清楚楚传入了他耳中。他感觉好像站在冬天河面上的一艘船里，在浓雾中眺望，心里知道大雾随时会分开，露出前方陆地的清晰轮廓来。而且，当时他有一种恐惧感，与此同时却又感到好奇——或者是种比好奇更强烈、更阴暗的感觉——他心里坚定地告诉自己：“无论前方是什么，让我看看，让我看看。”

这话他当时真的说出来了吗？也许吧，而且就在那一刻，比特丽丝兴奋地转脸对他喊道：“埃克索，你听见了吗？迷雾是那条母龙造成的！”

维斯坦和男孩离开了乔纳斯神父的房间，之后发生的事情，他记不清楚。那位不说话的僧侣尼尼安肯定也一起走了，可能要给男孩拿治伤口的膏药，也可能就是领着他们出去，不让别人发现。反正最后只有他和比特丽丝留在乔纳斯神父身边，神父虽然受了伤，非常疲劳，还是给妻子做了仔细的检查。他没让她脱衣服——这让埃克索放

了心——当时的情况他记得很模糊，不过他脑海里留下了一幅画面：乔纳斯把耳朵贴在比特丽丝的腰部，闭着眼睛、聚精会神，好像能听到身体里发出的微弱信号一样。埃克索也记得，僧侣眨着眼睛，问了比特丽丝一连串的问题。喝水后感到恶心吗？脖子后面痛过吗？还有些问题埃克索记不住了，不过每个问题，比特丽丝的回答都是否定的，她说的“不”越多，埃克索就越高兴。只有一次，乔纳斯问她小便里有没有血，她回答说是，有时候有，埃克索紧张起来。但僧侣只是点了点头，好像这是意料之中的正常现象一样，然后就接着问下一个问题了。后来检查是怎么结束的呢？他记得乔纳斯微笑着说：“看来你可以安心去找你儿子了。”埃克索自己说，“你看，公主，我就说没什么事嘛。”然后僧侣小心翼翼地慢慢躺下去，在床上喘气休息。尼尼安不在，埃克索赶紧跑过去，用水罐把僧侣的杯子加满水。他把杯子送到病人嘴边，看到小小的血珠从他下嘴唇上滑落，在水中散开。然后乔纳斯神父抬眼看着比特丽丝，说道：

“夫人，你称作迷雾的这个东西——现在知道了它背后的真相，你好像很高兴。”

“真的高兴，神父，因为现在我们有个方向了。”

“小心一点，这是个有人迫切守护的秘密，虽然现在公开也许更好。”

“是不是秘密，也不是我要小心的事情，神父，我高兴的是，埃克索和我既然知道了，现在行动就有了依据。”

“可是，好心的夫人啊，你这么确定不要这迷雾吗？有些事情藏起来，不放在心里，难道不是更好吗？”

“对有些人来说也许是这样，神父，但对我们不是。我和埃克索都希望再次拥有我们共同度过的美好时光。被人夺走那些记忆的感觉就像一个小偷晚上进来，拿走了我们最宝贵的东西。”

“可迷雾笼罩着所有的记忆啊，好的坏的都包括。不是吗，夫人？”

“我们也愿意让坏的记忆回来，哪怕会让我们哭泣，或者气得发抖。因为，那不就是我们共同度过的一生吗？”

“这么说，夫人，你不怕坏的记忆？”

“有什么可怕的呢，神父？我和埃克索现在对对方的感情，说明我们走过的路虽然被迷雾遮住，但是一路上不会有危险。这就像一个结局幸福的故事，连孩子都知道，过去经历的曲折不必害怕。无论我们这一生是什么样子，我和埃克索会一起回忆，因为这是我们两人都很珍视的。”

肯定有一只鸟从房间屋顶下飞过。那声音吓了他一跳，埃克索这才意识到，刚才有一下他是真的睡着了。他还意识到，劈柴的声音停了，周围安静下来。武士回到他们的房间了吗？埃克索什么也没听到。隔着桌子的黑影，在房间另一头埃德温睡觉的地方，似乎也没有别人。乔纳斯神父给比特丽丝做完检查、问过问题，然后又说了什么呢？是的，她回答说，她小便里有过血，可他只是笑笑，又问了别的事情。埃克索说，你看，公主，我就说没什么事嘛。乔纳斯神父笑了，他受了伤，很疲惫，可他还是说，你可以安心去找你儿子了。但是，这些问题，比特丽丝都不害怕。他知道，比特丽丝害怕的是船夫的问题，比乔纳斯神父的问题更难回答，所以知道迷雾的根源之后，她才那么高兴。埃克索，你听见了吗？她兴高采烈。埃克索，你听见了吗？她说道，脸上容光焕发。

第七章

一只手在推埃克索，可等他坐起来，那人影已经到了房间另一头，正弯着腰低声对埃德温说，“快点，孩子，快点！不要发出声音！”身旁的比特丽丝已经醒了，冰冷的空气让他惊颤。埃克索摇摇晃晃站起身来，然后弯腰抓住妻子的双手。

还是深夜，但外面有人叫喊，下面的院子里肯定点了火把，因为窗户对面的墙上有一块块光亮。喊醒他们的僧侣把睡意朦胧的男孩拉到他们这边来，他的脸还在黑暗中，可埃克索已经认出了那一瘸一拐的步态是布莱恩神父的。

“朋友们，我会想办法救你们，”布莱恩神父的声音仍然很低。“但你们动作要快点，按我说的做。来了士兵，二十个，甚至有三十，要抓你们。他们已经围住了年纪大一点的那位撒克逊兄弟，但他很敏捷，牵着他们团团转，给你们创造逃跑的机会。不要动，孩子，待在我身边！”埃德温要朝窗户旁边走，但布莱恩神父伸手抓住了他的胳膊。“我要带你们去个安全的地方，但我们先得离开这房间，不能让人看见。士兵们在下面的广场上来回巡逻，但他们眼睛都望着塔上，那个撒克逊人还在塔上坚持着呢。如果上帝眷顾，他们也许不会注意到我们走下外面的台阶，那最困难的一关就算过去了。但是，不要发出声响，否则他们就会朝这边看，下台阶要小心，不要绊着。我先下去，等我打手势，你们就跟上。不，夫人，你的行囊只能留在这里。保住性命就不错了！”

他们缩在门边，听着布莱恩神父下楼的脚步声，他走得极慢，对大家简直是煎熬。最后，埃克索小心翼翼朝门外望去，看见火把在院子较远的那一边移动；他还没来得及仔细看看是怎么回事，布莱恩神父先吸引了他的注意力，他就站在正下方，拼命打着手势。

楼梯顺着墙壁一路斜下，台阶大多在黑暗中，只有接近地面的地方有块亮光，一轮满月明晃晃地照在上面。

“在我后面跟紧点儿，公主，”埃克索说道。“别看院子那边，眼睛一直盯着下一步落脚的地方，否则摔下去可够呛，而且下面都是敌人。把我刚讲的话告诉男孩，我们出发吧。”

埃克索虽然发了指令，自己下楼的时候却忍不住朝院子那边望。院子较远的那一侧有一座圆柱形的石塔，俯瞰僧侣们之前开会的那幢建筑，士兵聚集在石塔周围，明亮的火把晃动着，队伍中似乎有些混乱。埃克索下了一半台阶的时候，两名士兵突然离开队伍，往广场这边跑，他觉得这下子肯定要被发现。不过，那两名士兵从一个门里进去，消失了；埃克索心里谢天谢地，领着比特丽丝和埃德温进入回廊的阴影之中，布莱恩神父在那儿等着。

他们跟在僧侣后面，沿着狭窄的通道走，其中有些通道，静默的尼尼安神父之前可能带他们走过。路上常常漆黑一片，向导拖着一只脚，发出簌簌声，大家只能跟着这声音走。然后他们来到一个房间，一部分屋顶已经塌了。月光洒进来，照着一堆堆的木头箱子和破旧家具。埃克索闻到了霉菌和死水潭的气味。

“振作一点，朋友们，”布莱恩神父说，这次他不再压低声音了。他到了房间一个角落里，正在把东西搬开。“你们快安全啦。”

“神父，”埃克索说，“感谢你救了我们，但请你告诉我们发生了什么事。”

布莱恩神父继续清理那个角落，眼睛也没抬，口中回答道：“先生，这对我们也是个谜。他们今晚不请自来，拥进大门，拥进我们家里，好像这是他们的地方一样。他们说，要抓刚到的这两个撒克逊年轻人，没提到你和你妻子，但我不相信他们会友好地对待你们。这个男孩呢，他们显然是想要他的命，就像他们现在追杀他哥哥一样。你们先要脱离危险，以后有时间慢慢去寻思这些士兵的行为。”

“我们是今天早晨才认识维斯坦阁下的，”比特丽丝说，“但是，在他面临着可怕命运的时候，我们自行逃走，心里感到不安。”

“士兵们还是有可能追上来的，夫人，因为我们身后的门都没有上锁。如果那个人勇敢地为你们争取逃跑的时间，甚至要牺牲自己的性命，那么你们应该心怀感激去抓住这个机会。这道暗门下面，有条隧道，是古时候挖的。顺着隧道，可以从地下走到树林里，你们从树林里出来，追赶你们的人就被甩远了。先生，请你帮我抬一下，太重了，我两只手不够。”

两人一起动手，也花了不少力气才把门拉开，门在他们面前立起来，露出一个方形的黑洞。

“让男孩先下去，”僧侣说，“我们很多年没用这条通道了，谁知道台阶有没有塌掉。他脚下灵活，摔一跤不会太严重。”

但埃德温跟比特丽丝说了些什么，比特丽丝对大家说：“埃德温阁下要去帮助维斯坦阁下。”

“公主，跟他说，我们从通道里逃出去，就是帮维斯坦的忙。随便你怎么跟他说，但是要说服他快点来。”

比特丽丝跟男孩说话的时候，男孩身上似乎发生了什么变化。他一直盯着地板上那个洞，月光反射在他眼睛里，那一刻在埃克索看来，男孩的眼睛里有种奇怪的东西，好像他慢慢进入了魔咒之中一样。比特丽丝还在说话，埃德温便迈步朝暗门走去，没有回头看大家，直接进了那个黑洞，消失了。他的脚步声渐渐远去，埃克索拉住比特丽丝的手，说道：

“我们也下去吧，公主。跟紧点儿啊。”

通向地下的台阶很平缓——扁平的石块嵌在泥土中——踩上去也比较牢固。头顶的暗门开着，有一些光亮，他们能看到一点前方的路。但是，就在埃克索转身对布莱恩神父说话的时候，暗门关上了，传来轰隆一声巨响，如同雷鸣。

三人都停下脚步，站在那儿一动不动。空气不像埃克索想象的那样污浊；实际上，他似乎还能感觉到一点儿微风。埃德温在前面什么地方开口说话，比特丽丝低声回答。然后她轻声说道：

“男孩问，为什么布莱恩神父在后面把门给关上了。我跟他讲，他很可能是急着把洞口藏起来，也许现在那些士兵已经进了房间。可是啊，埃克索，这事我也觉得有些奇怪。你听，那肯定是他吧，在搬东西把门压住？神父自己说，通道很多年没人走了，如果前面有泥土或者水挡路，我们回去怎么开门呢？门那么重，现在上面又压了东西？”

“是有些奇怪。但修道院里来了士兵，这一点确定无疑，我们刚才不是都看到了吗？我看我们也没别的选择了，只能继续往前走，希望这条路能安全地通到树林。告诉男孩继续往前走，但是要慢一点，一只手要一直扶着这长满青苔的墙，我担心前面只会越来越暗。”

但是，他们再往前走，发现有一线微弱的光，有时甚至还能分辨出彼此的轮廓。脚下不时会有水坑，吓人一跳，而且在这段路上，埃克索不止一次感觉头顶上有声音，但埃德温和比特丽丝都没什么反

应，他也就当作是自己想象出来的，不去理睬了。后来埃德温突然停下脚步，埃克索差点都撞到了他身上。他感到身后的比特丽丝捏紧了他的手，有一刻，他们就这样静静地在黑暗中站着。比特丽丝贴得更紧了，他的脖子能感觉到她的气息，她用极低的声音说：“你听到了没，埃克索？”

“听到什么，公主？”

埃德温用手碰碰他，以示警告，他们又沉默下来。最后，比特丽丝对着他的耳朵说：“这里面有什么东西，埃克索。”

“也许是只蝙蝠，公主。或者老鼠。”

“不是，埃克索。我现在能听到。是人的呼吸声。”

埃克索再次倾听。这时候传来一个尖锐的声音，是敲打发出的声响，重复了三次，四次，就在他们前面。一道亮光闪过，接着亮起一团微弱的火焰，火光下现出一个坐在地上的人影，随即又是一片黑暗。

“不要害怕，朋友们，”一个声音说。“是高文啊，亚瑟王的骑士。等这火绒点起来，我们就能看清楚对方啦。”

又是一通击打火石的声音，最后一根蜡烛终于亮起来，火焰慢慢稳定。

高文爵士坐在一个黑黑的土堆上。这个座位显然不太理想，因为他身体角度奇怪，像个随时会滚下来的巨大玩偶。他手里的蜡烛光影摇曳，照亮了他的脸和上半身，他在喘着粗气。和往常一样，他穿着盔甲，剑出了鞘，斜插在脚下的土里。他目光凶狠地瞪着大家，蜡烛从一张脸照到另一张脸。

“看来你们都到了，”他终于开口说道。“我放心了。”

“你吓了我们一跳，高文爵士，”埃克索说。“你躲在这儿，要干什么？”

“我下来有一会儿了，在你们前面走，朋友们。我带着剑，穿着盔甲，个子又高，走得跌跌撞撞，还要低着头，所以走不快，你们就发现我啦。”

“你这不算解释啊，先生。你为什么在我们前面走？”

“保护你们啊，先生！那些僧侣欺骗了你们，这令人难过，但是真的。这下面有一头野兽，他们想让你们在野兽嘴里送命。令人高兴的是，不是每个僧侣都这么想。尼尼安，那个不讲话的，把我领到这下面来，没被人发现，我要带着你们到安全的地方。”

“你这消息真让人回不过神来，高文爵士，”埃克索说。“不过，你先给我们说说这头野兽吧。是什么样的兽呢？我们现在站在这儿，有没有危险？”

“做有危险的打算吧，先生。僧侣们如果不想你们碰到野兽，是不会让你们下来的。这就是他们用的办法。他们是信基督的人，不能用剑，甚至也不能下毒。他们希望谁死，就让谁下来，过一两天，他们就会忘记做过这件事。啊，没错，这就是他们的办法，尤其是院长。到星期天，他甚至还会相信，是他救了你们，否则你们就被士兵抓走了。这隧道里潜伏的野兽干了什么，他就算想起来，也不会承认，甚至还会说这是上帝的意愿。好啦，今晚一位亚瑟王的骑士在前面开路，我们看看上帝的意愿是什么。”

“高文爵士，”比特丽丝问，“你是说，那些僧侣要我们死？”

“夫人，他们当然希望这个男孩死。我试图让他们明白，这没有必要，甚至还庄重地发了誓，带他远离这个国家，但都不行，他们不听我的话！就算维斯坦阁下被捕或被杀，他们也不愿意冒险放走男孩，因为说不定哪天又会来个什么人，要找这个男孩。我说，我带他走得远远的，但他们担心以后的事情，所以要他死。本来他们也许会饶了你和你丈夫的性命，但他们做的事，你们肯定会看到。如果我提前知道这一切，还会不会到这个修道院来呢？谁知道啊？这似乎是我的职责吧，是不是呢？可他们要这样对付一个男孩，还有一对虔诚、无辜的夫妻，这我可不答应！幸运的是，不是所有僧侣都这么想，你们知道，尼尼安，那位不说话的僧侣，是他带着我悄悄下来的。我打算在你们前面走得更远一些，但这身盔甲，还有这麻烦的大个头——这么多年，这个大个头让我诅咒过多少次！一个人长这么高，有什么好处呢？能摘到挂在高处的梨子，可是一支箭射来，从矮一点的人头顶飞过去，却差点要了我的命。我看威胁我性命的箭，不比我摘的梨子少！”

“高文爵士，”埃克索说，“你说住在这下面的兽，究竟是什么东西？”

“我从没见过，先生，只知道有些人被僧侣们送下来，被它咬死了。”

“一个凡人拿一把剑，能杀死它吗？”

“你说什么呢，先生？我是个凡人，这我不否认，可我是个训练有素的骑士啊，年轻的时候跟随伟大的亚瑟很多年，他教我要快乐地面对一切挑战，哪怕恐惧渗入骨髓，因为就算我们是凡人，趁着还活在这人世，就该绽放光彩，让上帝看到！先生，和所有与亚瑟并肩作战的人一样，我对付过魔鬼妖怪，也对付过最阴险的人，哪怕在最激烈的战斗之中，也总是效仿我伟大的国王。你这是什么意思呢，先生？你怎么敢这么说？你那时候在场吗？我可在场啊，先生，现在盯着你的这双眼睛，当时可什么都见过！可是，又怎么样呢，又怎么样呢，朋友们，这事以后什么时候再讨论吧。原谅我，我们有别的事要做，当然有啦。你刚才问什么来着，先生？哎呀，对啦，这头兽，没错，我知道它很凶猛，但不是什么魔鬼精灵，这把剑足以杀死它。”

“可是，高文爵士，”比特丽丝说，“现在我们知道了这些情况，你还认为我们该沿着隧道继续往前走吗？”

“我们有什么办法呢，夫人？如果我没弄错的话，退路已经封起来了，我们回不去，但那扇门却随时会打开，把一批士兵放进隧道。没有别的办法，只能往前走，路上只有一头野兽，我们很快就能到树林，把追赶你们的人甩得远远的，因为尼尼安跟我说过，这条隧道是通的，没有损坏。所以，在蜡烛熄灭之前，我们还是动身吧，只有这条道啦。”

“我们该相信他吗，埃克索？”比特丽丝问。她毫不遮掩，不在乎高文爵士也能听到。“我脑子有点乱，也不愿意相信好心的布莱恩神父会背叛我们。可这位骑士说的话也有道理。”

“我们跟他走吧，公主。高文爵士，我们感谢你花这么大功夫。请带领我们到安全的地方吧，希望这头野兽已经睡着，或者潜到其他地方去了。”

“恐怕我们没这么好运吧。走吧，朋友们，我们要勇敢地往前走。”老骑士慢慢站起身来，拿蜡烛的那只手伸到前面。“埃克索阁下，也许你能帮我们拿着蜡烛，因为我需要两只手，随时准备用剑。”

他们往隧道深处走，高文爵士在最前面，埃克索拿着蜡烛跟着，比特丽丝在后面拉着埃克索的手，埃德温在最后。没别的办法，只能排成单列，因为隧道还是很窄，上面挂着苔藓，露出粗壮的树根，顶部越来越低，最后连比特丽丝都要弯着腰走路。埃克索尽量举高蜡烛，但这时隧道里的风大了，他经常要把蜡烛放下来，用另一只手罩住火焰。不过高文爵士没有一句怨言，他的身影在大家前方，举剑过肩，似乎一直就保持着这个样子。比特丽丝突然叫了一声，拉住了埃克索的胳膊。

“什么事，公主？”

“噢，埃克索，停下来！我的脚刚才碰到了什么东西，但你的蜡烛移得太快了。”

“那有什么关系，公主？我们还要继续走。”

“埃克索，我觉得那是个孩子！我的脚碰了一下，我看了一眼，然后你的蜡烛就移走了。哎呀，我相信那是个死了很久的孩子！”

“好啦，公主，别难过。你在哪儿看到的？”

“走吧，走吧，朋友们，”高文爵士在黑暗中说道。“这地方的很多东西，最好还是不要看。”

比特丽丝似乎没听见骑士的话。“在那边，埃克索。蜡烛往那边照。就是那儿，埃克索，往那地上照，我可不敢再看那可怜的脸！”

高文爵士建议大家不要看，但他自己还是折回来，埃德温也来到了比特丽丝身边。埃克索弓着腰，拿着蜡烛到处照，看到了潮湿的泥土、树根以及石块。接着火光下出现了一只大蝙蝠，伸展双翅，仰面躺着，好像在安睡。蝙蝠的毛看起来又湿又黏，面孔像猪，没有毛发，伸展的翅膀上的凹陷处，已经积了水。要不是胸口上有些特殊，这东西真像是在睡觉。埃克索把蜡烛移得更近一些，大家都瞪大了眼睛：蝙蝠身前有个圆洞，从胸口下方一直到肚子，包括两侧胸腔的一部分。伤口特别整齐，好像有人在一只脆苹果上咬了一口。

“这样的伤口，可能是谁干的呢？”埃克索问。

蜡烛可能是移得太快了，烛火晃了一下，灭了。

“别担心，朋友们，”高文爵士说。“我会再找到火绒的。”

“我不是跟你说过吗，埃克索？”听声音，比特丽丝好像都要哭出来了。“脚一碰到，我就知道那是个孩子。”

“你说什么呢，公主？那不是孩子。你说什么呢？”

“这可怜的孩子发生什么事了呢？他的父母呢？”

“公主，那就是个蝙蝠，黑暗的地方经常有这种东西。”

“哎呀，埃克索，那是个孩子，我肯定！”

“蜡烛灭了，公主，否则我可以再给你看一下。就是个蝙蝠，不是别的，不过我自己倒想看看蝙蝠下面是什么东西。高文爵士，你注意到蝙蝠躺的地方了吗？”

“我不明白你说什么，先生。”

“我觉得那东西好像是躺在骨头堆上，我好像看到了一两个头骨，只能是人的骨头。”

“先生，你这是说什么呢？”高文的声音不经意间高了起来。
“什么头骨？我可没看到头骨，先生！只有一只倒霉的蝙蝠！”

这时比特丽丝在默默地抽泣，埃克索直起身去抱她。

“那不是孩子，公主，”他更加轻柔地说。“不要难过。”

“死得孤零零的。他父母在哪儿呢，埃克索？”

“你这是说什么呢，先生？头骨？我可没看到头骨！就是有几根老骨头，那又怎么样？又怎么样啊，有什么好大惊小怪的？我们不是在地下吗？但我没看到骨头堆，我不知道你这是说什么，埃克索阁下。那时候你在场吗？你站在伟大的亚瑟身边吗？我要骄傲地说，我在啊，先生，他是个又勇猛又仁慈的统帅。是啊，没错，是我去跟院长说的，让他留意维斯坦阁下的身份和动机，可我有什么办法？修道的人心会这么黑，难道我能猜到？你的说法根本没有依据，先生！这是对所有曾与伟大的亚瑟王并肩战斗的人的侮辱！这里没有什么骨头堆！现在我不是要救你们吗？”

“高文爵士，你的声音太高了，谁知道那些士兵这时候在哪儿呢。”

“我知道了情况，还能怎么办，先生？没错，我骑马到这儿来，和院长说了话，可我怎么知道他的心有这么黑呢？还有那个好人，可怜的乔纳斯，肝都被鸟啄过，恐怕活不久了，可院长却活得好好的，皮都没给鸟碰过……”

高文爵士住了口，隧道更深处传来一个声音，打断了他的话。声音的远近很难判断，但那肯定是野兽的叫声；听起来像狼嚎，不过也有点儿像熊发出的低吼声。叫声延续的时间很短，但足以让埃克索一把拉过比特丽丝，高文爵士快速从地上拔起剑。他们站在那儿，一句话也不说，等着那声音再次响起。过了一会儿，没有声音传来，高文爵士突然笑了，他没发出什么声响，却笑得几乎喘不过气来。他还在笑的时候，比特丽丝在埃克索耳边说：“我们离开这个地方吧，丈夫。我不愿意再想起这个孤零零的坟地。”

高文爵士不笑了。他说道：“也许我们刚才听到了野兽的叫声，但我们没有选择，只能继续前进。好啦，朋友们，让我们结束争吵。我们很快就能把蜡烛点起来，不过我们先摸黑走一会儿，以免蜡烛把野兽马上引来。看，这儿有一点点光，可以走路。来吧，朋友们，不要再争吵了。我的剑准备好了，我们继续前进。”

隧道更加曲折，大家也更加小心，每到拐弯的地方都害怕会冒出什么东西。但他们没遇到什么，也没有听到之前的野兽叫声。然后隧道突然下降，走过一段长长的陡坡后，他们来到一间很大的地下房间。

大家都停下来喘口气，打量周围的新环境。他们脑袋贴着隧道顶部的泥土走了那么长时间，看到这儿屋顶很高、材料坚固，都感到欣慰。等高文爵士再次点亮蜡烛，埃克索意识到，这似乎是个陵墓，四周的墙上有壁画和罗马字母的痕迹。他们前面有两根结实的柱子，形成一道门，通向另一个大小相仿的房间，房间门口有一块明亮的月光。看不出来月光来自哪里——也许两根柱子上的拱门背后有个通风口，这时机缘巧合，月光刚好能从那儿射进来，照亮了柱子上的霉菌青苔，以及另外那个房间的一部分。乍一看，房间地板上似乎铺着碎石，但埃克索很快发现，那其实是厚厚的一层骨头。这时候他才意识到，自己脚下也是破碎的骸骨，两个房间的地面上全是骨头。

“这肯定是个古老的墓地，”他大声说。“埋葬的人真不少啊。”

“墓地，”高文爵士喃喃地说，“没错，是个墓地。”他刚才一手拿剑，一手拿蜡烛，绕着房间缓缓走了一圈。现在他正朝拱门走去，在第二个房间前面，他突然停了下来，好像被那明亮的月光镇住了一样。他把剑插到地上，埃克索看着他的剪影靠在剑上，手里的蜡烛上下移动着，颇有些厌倦的模样。

“我们不用吵啦，埃克索阁下。这都是人的头骨，我不否认。这儿一条胳膊，那儿一条腿，现在都是骨头啦。一个古老的墓地。也许是吧。先生，我敢说我们整个国家都是这样。翠绿的山谷。春天里怡人的小灌木丛。可是，你往土里挖，雏菊毛茛下面，就是死者的尸骨。先生，我说的不仅仅是举行了基督教葬礼的那些人。我们的土地下面，埋着过去屠杀留下的遗骸。我和霍拉斯啊，我们已经厌倦了。厌倦了，也都老了。”

“高文爵士，”埃克索说，“我们这儿只有一把剑。我请你不要沮丧，也不要忘记野兽就在附近。”

“我没有忘记野兽，先生。我只是在考虑我们面前的这道门。你抬头看看，看见没？”高文爵士举起蜡烛，照着拱门下沿，那儿似乎有一排矛头，对着地面。

“一道闸门，”埃克索说。

“没错，先生。这道门可没那么老。比我们俩都年轻，我敢打赌。有人把闸门打开了，希望我们进去。你看那边，那是拉住闸门的绳索。还有那边，那是滑轮。有人经常到这儿来，开门关门，也许是喂野兽。”高文爵士朝一根柱子走去，脚下踩着骨头，发出咯吱咯吱的声音。“如果我砍断这根绳索，闸门肯定会落下来，挡住我们出去的路。但如果野兽在那边，这闸门就能把它挡住。这是那个撒克逊男孩发出的声音吗，还是偷偷进来了什么精灵？”

正是埃德温。他回到黑暗中，唱了起来；一开始声音很轻，埃克索以为他只是在安抚紧张情绪，但随后他的声音越来越高。那似乎是首舒缓的摇篮曲，唱的时候，他脸对着墙，身体轻轻摇晃着。

“这男孩像着了魔似的，”高文爵士说。“别管他，现在我们要做决定，埃克索阁下。我们该继续走吗？还是该砍断绳索，无论门那边有什么东西，至少可以挡一阵子？”

“先生，依我看，我们砍断绳索吧。想开门的时候，我们肯定还能打开。等门放下来，我们先看看要对付的是什么东西。”

“明智的建议，先生。我就按你说的办。”

高文爵士把蜡烛递给埃克索，向前迈了一步，举起剑，砍在柱子上，发出金属撞击石头的声音，大门的下半部分晃了晃，但没有落下来。高文爵士叹了口气，有点儿不好意思。然后他重新站好位置，再次举起剑，又砍了一下。

这一次，啪嗒一声，大门轰隆隆落下，在月光下扬起一片灰尘。那声音惊天动地——埃德温突然停止了歌唱——埃克索瞪大眼睛，盯着面前的铁栅栏，看那边会出现什么东西。但没有野兽的迹象，过了一会儿，大家都松了口气。

他们现在被困住了，但是闸门落下，大家都感到一阵轻松，四个人开始在陵墓里四处走动。高文爵士把剑插入剑鞘，走到闸门前，轻轻摸了摸栅栏。

“好铁，”他说。“货真价实的东西。”

比特丽丝之前安静了很长时间。这时她走到埃克索跟前，把脑袋贴在他胸口。他一条胳膊把她揽住，发现她脸上都是眼泪。

“好啦，公主，”他说，“振作一点。我们很快就能出去呼吸夜晚的空气啦。”

“这些头骨，埃克索。这么多！这头野兽真的能杀死这么多人？”

她声音不大，可高文爵士转过头来说：“你这是什么意思，夫人？难道是说人是我杀的？”他的声音很疲惫，没有之前在隧道里说话时的怒气，但有一种特别强烈的情绪。“你说，这么多头骨。可我们不是在地下吗？你这是什么意思呢？一名亚瑟王的骑士，能杀得了这么多？”他转过身，对着闸门，一根指头从上到下摸着一根铁条。

“过去，很多年前，我在梦里看到自己杀敌人。那是在梦里，很久以前的事了。敌人呢，有好几百，也许和这儿的人数差不多。我就一直拼杀、拼杀。不过是个愚蠢的梦，但我现在还能想起来。”他叹了口气，然后看看比特丽丝。“我都不知道该怎么回答你，夫人。我以为这样做，会令上帝喜悦。我怎么能猜到，这些卑鄙的僧侣竟然心黑到这个地步？我和霍拉斯到修道院时，太阳还没落山，你们也刚到不久，因为那时候我想，我必须尽快告诉院长。后来我发现他要对付你们，就假装出得意的样子。我跟他告别，他们都以为我走了，实际上我把霍拉斯丢在树林里，趁着夜色又走上了山。感谢上帝，不是所有僧侣都那么想。我知道好心的乔纳斯会接待我。我从他那儿知道了院长的计划，就让尼尼安悄悄带我到这儿来，等着你们。该死，这男孩又来了！”

没错，埃德温又在唱歌了，这次他没之前那么大声，但姿势很奇怪。他身体向前倾着，两手握成拳头，放在太阳穴上，在黑暗中走来走去，步伐很慢，像一个人在扮演动物跳舞。

“最近发生了很多事情，他肯定承受不了，”埃克索说。“他表现得非常坚韧，已经很了不起了，我们一离开这儿，一定要好好照顾他。高文爵士，你跟我们说说，那些僧侣为什么要杀死这样一个无辜少年呢？”

“先生，无论我怎么争辩，院长都要杀掉这个男孩。所以我才把霍拉斯丢在树林里，回到了……”

“高文爵士，请你解释。这和他身上的食人兽伤口有没有关系？那些可都是有学识的基督徒啊。”

“男孩身上没有食人兽咬的伤口。那个伤口是龙咬的。昨天，那个士兵拉起他衣服的时候，我当场就看出来了。他怎么遇上了龙，这谁知道呢？但那肯定是龙咬的，现在他的血液里会充满欲望，要去找条母龙。同样，附近任何母龙只要闻到他的气息，也会来找他。所以维斯坦阁下才会急于保护他，先生。他认为埃德温阁下能带他找到魁瑞格。出于同样的原因，这些僧侣和士兵要杀死他。你们看，这男孩更疯了！”

“那这些头骨呢，先生，”比特丽丝突然问骑士。“为什么有这么多？都是孩子吗？有些很小，都能放到你手掌里。”

“公主，不要难过了。这是个墓地而已。”

“你这是什么意思，夫人？婴儿的头骨？我斗过男人、魔鬼和龙。但是屠杀婴儿？夫人，你怎么敢这么说！”

突然，仍在唱歌的埃德温从他们身旁挤过去，跑到闸门边，紧紧贴在栅栏上。

“回来，孩子，”高文爵士抓住他的肩膀，说道。“这儿有危险。还有，不要唱歌了！”

埃德温双手紧抓着栅栏，和老骑士拉扯了一会儿。随后，两人分开，都从闸门前往后退。比特丽丝靠在埃克索胸前，发出一声低呼，但这时埃克索的视线被埃德温和高文爵士挡住了。接着，那头野兽出现在月光之下，埃克索能看得更清楚了。

“上帝保佑我们，”比特丽丝说。“这东西就是从大平原上直接跑过来的，连空气都变冷了。”

“不要担心，公主。它打不破铁栅栏。”

高文爵士的剑立即拔了出来，他低声笑了。“没我担心的那么糟糕，”他说，忍不住又笑了几声。

“够糟糕了吧，先生，”埃克索说。“看起来它能够一个一个把我们给吞了。”

他们所看到的，很像一只剥了皮的大动物：肌肉和关节上，紧紧裹着一层不透明的膜，像翻过来的羊肚。野兽现在裹在月光下，大小与外形看起来都像一头公牛，但它的脑袋很特殊，像狼，颜色要深一些——尽管给人的感觉是被火烧过之后的焦黑色，而不是自然的黑色毛发或皮肉。它的嘴巴很大，眼睛像蛇。

高文爵士仍旧一个人笑着。“从那个阴暗的隧道里走出来，我连最奇怪的东西都想象到了，早做好了准备。先生，有一次啊，我在杜玛姆沼泽上见到的狼，脑袋像可怕的老巫婆一样！在库尔维奇山，见过双头食人兽，战斗中发出吼叫时，能朝你喷血！这东西嘛，也不过是条生气的狗而已。”

“但它却拦住了我们获得自由的路，高文爵士。”

“没错，它的确挡了路。所以，我们可以瞪着它，过一个小时士兵们就会从隧道里追上来。或者打开闸门，与它战斗。”

“高文爵士，我倒觉得这是个比疯狗更加凶狠的敌人。我请你不要大意。”

“我是个老头子，先生，已经很多年没有愤怒地拔剑了。但我仍旧是个受过良好训练的骑士，只要这头野兽不是来自另一个世界，我就会占上风。”

“你看，埃克索，”比特丽丝说，“它的眼睛一直跟着埃德温阁下。”

奇怪的是，埃德温现在很平静，他一直在试探性地走着，先朝左边，然后是右边，总是要回头看看那头野兽，而野兽的目光从未离开过他。

“狗急着要这个男孩哪，”高文爵士若有所思地说。“也许这个妖怪身体里有龙的卵。”

“不管是什么妖怪，”埃克索说，“它在等着我们的下一步行动，耐心不同寻常啊。”

“那么，我来提个办法，朋友们，”高文爵士说。“我讨厌利用这个男孩，像绑个小山羊引诱狼一样。但他似乎是个勇敢的少年，在这儿走来走去，没有武器，同样有危险。让他拿着蜡烛，到房间后面去站着。你呢，埃克索阁下，可以想办法再打开闸门，可能还需要你好心的妻子帮忙，门一开，野兽就能过来。我猜它会直接朝男孩冲过去。我知道它冲过去的路线，就站在这儿，在它经过的时候劈死它。你同意这个计划吗，先生？”

“这个计划很疯狂。但我也担心士兵们很快就会发现隧道。我们试一下吧，先生，我和妻子会尽力的，哪怕我们俩要一起吊到绳子上，也要把门打开。公主啊，你跟埃德温阁下解释一下我们的计划，看他愿不愿意。”

可是，埃德温似乎不用听任何人讲，就已经明白了高文爵士的策略。男孩从骑士手里接过蜡烛，斟酌好距离，在骨头堆上走了十步，回到了黑暗之中。他转过身来，面前的蜡烛几乎毫不颤动，一双亮闪闪的眼睛紧紧盯着栅栏后的野兽。

“那就快点，公主，”埃克索说。“爬到我背上，抓住绳头。晃来晃去的那个，看见了吧。”

一开始，他们俩差点一起滚倒在地。随后两人扶着柱子站稳了，又摸索了一会儿，他听见她说，“我抓住啦，埃克索。让我下来，绳子也会跟着下来。把我抓住啊，要不然我就一下子跌下来了。”

“高文爵士，”埃克索低声喊道。“你准备好了吗，先生？”

“准备好了。”

“要是野兽从你身边跑过去，那这个勇敢的男孩就死定啦。”

“这我知道，先生。不会让它跑过去的。”

“慢慢放我下来，埃克索。如果我抓着绳子吊在半空中，你就把我拉下来。”

埃克索放开比特丽丝，有一下子她悬挂在空中，她身体的重量不够，拉不起闸门。随后埃克索抓住了她双手附近的另一段绳子，两人一起向下拉。一开始没什么动静，接着有什么东西动了，闸门颤抖着升了起来。埃克索继续拉，他看不见门，于是喊道：“够高了吗，先生？”

停顿了一会儿，高文爵士的声音传回来。“这条狗正等着我们呢，中间没有障碍啦。”

埃克索扭过身体，头从柱子旁边探出去，刚好看到那野兽向前跳了出来。老骑士的脸在月光下，看起来他似乎惊呆了。他挥动宝剑，但太晚了，那野兽从他身边经过，径直朝埃德温冲去。

男孩瞪大了眼睛，但手里的蜡烛没有掉下来。他朝旁边跨了一步，让野兽过去，几乎像是礼貌谦让。让埃克索惊讶的是，那野兽真的就过去了，继续朝他们刚走出来的黑暗隧道中跑去。

“我拉着门，”埃克索喊道。“到门里去，逃命吧！”

但是，无论是他身旁的比特丽丝，还是已经放下剑的高文爵士，似乎都没听到。那可怕的野兽刚从埃德温身边冲过去，肯定随时都会回来，可他好像毫不关心。男孩拿着蜡烛，来到老骑士站的地方，两人一起瞪大眼睛看着地上。

“把门放下来吧，埃克索阁下，”高文爵士没有抬头。“我们等一下再拉起来。”

埃克索发现，老骑士和男孩正认真观察着地上正在动的什么东西。他放下闸门，这时比特丽丝说：

“是个可怕的东西，埃克索，我就没必要去看了。你想看就去吧，然后告诉我。”

“野兽不是跑进隧道了吗，公主？”

“一部分吧，我听见它的脚步停了下来。好啦，埃克索，去吧，看看骑士脚下的另外那一部分。”

埃克索走了过去，高文爵士和埃德温都吓了一跳，好像恍惚中突然被人摇醒一样。然后两人让到一旁，埃克索看见了月光下野兽的脑袋。

“嘴巴就是动个不停，”高文爵士不安地说。“我想拿出剑来再劈它几下，又担心那是亵渎，会给我们带来更多厄运。希望它停下来不要动就好了。”

的确，很难相信这砍下的脑袋不是个活东西。野兽的头侧面着地，能看到一只眼睛，仍旧亮闪闪的，像海里的动物那样。上下颚有节奏地动着，似乎有罕见的力气，舌头因此在嘴巴里一起一落，好像是活的。

“我们都要感谢你，高文爵士，”埃克索说。

“不过是一条狗罢了，先生，就是更糟糕的东西，我也乐意奉陪。不过，这个撒克逊男孩勇气罕见呐，我很高兴帮了他一点儿忙。但我们现在要快点走了，而且还要小心，谁知道上面在发生什么事呢，说不定房间那边还有头野兽。”

这时他们在一根柱子后面发现了一个摇柄，把绳子系上去，很快就轻松地拉起了闸门。大家让野兽的脑袋留在原来的地方，从闸门下穿过，高文爵士又一次举着剑走在前面，埃德温走在最后。

陵墓的第二个房间，显然是野兽的巢穴：古老的骨头之中，有新近的羊和鹿的骨架，还有一些骨架是黑色的，气味难闻，他们无法辨认。随后他们又必须弯着腰、屏着气，走过一条曲折的通道。他们没有遇到野兽，最后终于听到了鸟鸣声。远处出现一块光亮，不久大家来到一片树林中，四下里晨曦初亮。

埃克索有点恍惚，两棵大树之间有一堆树根，他拉着比特丽丝的手，扶她坐到树根上。一开始比特丽丝气喘吁吁，没法开口，过了一会儿，她抬起头来，说道：

“我这旁边还有地方，丈夫。如果我们现在安全了，那就坐下来，一起看看最后的星星吧。谢天谢地，我们俩都没事，那邪恶的隧道总算走出来了。”接着她说：“埃德温阁下呢，埃克索？我没看到他。”

在清晨的微光中，埃克索四下张望，看到高文爵士就在附近，在晨光的映衬下显出剪影，脑袋低着，一只手扶着树干，正在调匀呼吸。可男孩却不见踪影。

“刚才还在我们后面，”埃克索说。“我们走出隧道的时候，我听见他喊了一声。”

“我看着他加快速度走了，先生，”高文爵士说道。他没有转身，仍旧气喘吁吁的。“他不像我们这些老人，不用靠在橡树上喘个不停。我猜他是急着回到修道院去救维斯坦。”

“你没想过拦住他吗，先生？他这急匆匆地去，肯定有很大危险，维斯坦阁下这时候已经被杀或者被抓啦。”

“你想要我干什么呢，先生？我能做的都做了。躲在那个连空气都没有的地方。那头野兽之前吞噬了很多勇敢的人，我把它杀了。可

是，到头来，那个男孩却跑回到了修道院！难道要我穿着这沉重的盔甲，带着剑，跟在后面追？我都累垮了，先生。累垮啦。现在我的职责是什么？我要歇一下，好好想想。如果亚瑟在，会让我干什么呢？”

“高文爵士，”比特丽丝问，“我们该不该认为，是你最先去告诉院长，说维斯坦阁下的真实身份是东方来的撒克逊武士？”

“为什么又要提这件事呢，夫人？我不是带着你们到安全的地方了吗？踩过那么多头骨，才步入这美好的清晨？那么多。不用低头看，每踩一脚，都能听到咔嚓声。死了多少，先生？一百？一千？你数过吗，埃克索阁下？莫非你不在场，先生？”他仍旧是树边的一个剪影，他的话有时候听不清楚，鸟儿们已经开始了清晨的合唱。

“无论今晚发生了什么，”埃克索说，“我们都该好好感谢你，高文爵士。显然，你的勇气和本领都不减当年。不过，我也有个问题要问你。”

“放过我吧，先生，够了。这山坡上长满了树，我怎么能去追一个灵巧的年轻人呢？我已经垮掉啦，先生，不仅仅是喘不上气。”

“高文爵士，很久以前我们曾是战友，是不是？”

“放过我吧，先生。我今晚尽了我的职责。难道还不够吗？现在，我必须去找我可怜的霍拉斯了，我把他拴在一根树枝上，不让他乱跑，要是狼或熊来攻击他怎么办？”

“这迷雾遮住了我的过去，”埃克索说。“但最近我发现，我慢慢想起了某个任务，一项重要的任务，交给我去完成的。是不是一项法律呢？让所有人更接近上帝的伟大法律？高文爵士，看到你，听你谈起亚瑟，我想起了一些遗忘已久的事情。”

“我可怜的霍拉斯啊，先生，那么厌恶夜晚的树林。猫头鹰或狐狸一叫，他都会吓得够呛，尽管面对箭雨他毫不畏缩。我要去找他了，也提醒一下你们两位好人，不要在这儿休息太久。忘掉那两个撒克逊年轻人吧。现在多想想在村里等着你们的宝贝儿子。依我看，你们现在毯子和食物都没了，最好快点上路。和货船的船夫讲句好话，你们就能搭船顺水而下。不要在这儿停留，谁知道士兵们什么时候到这儿来？朋友们，上帝保佑你们。”

一阵沙沙的声响，几声咚咚的脚步声，高文爵士的身形消失在黑暗的树林中。过了一会儿，比特丽丝说道：

“我们没跟他道别，埃克索，我感觉很糟糕。可是，他跟我们的告别很奇怪啊，也很突然。”

“我也这么想，公主。但他给我们的建议也许很明智。我们该快点去找儿子，不去管最近碰到的那些伙伴。我有点担心可怜的埃德温阁下，但既然他急着回修道院去，我们能帮上什么忙呢？”

“我们再休息一会儿吧，埃克索。很快我们就上路，就我们俩，去找艘货船加快速度也很不错。儿子肯定在担心，我们怎么还没到。”

第八章

那名年轻的僧侣是个身形瘦削、面色憔悴的皮克特人，能流利地说埃德温的语言。有个年纪差不多的人陪着，他显然很高兴。两人在清晨的雾霭中走着，一开始，他兴致勃勃地说个不停。但是，进入树林之后，年轻僧侣就默不作声，埃德温甚至想，自己是不是什么地方得罪了这位领路人。更有可能的是，树林中藏匿着东西，僧侣担心会引起它们的注意；在悦耳的鸟鸣声中，不时传来奇怪的啾啾声和沙沙声。埃德温又一次问道：“我哥哥的伤口不致命吧？”这次他不是为了放心，而是为了打破沉默。但对方的回答简短，似乎不耐烦。

“乔纳斯神父说没事。他最明智。”

这么说，维斯坦受伤不会很重。他肯定是不久前走这同一条路下山的，那时候天还没亮。他要靠在领路人的胳膊上吗？或者他还能够骑马，可能由一名僧侣牵着缰绳？

“把男孩领到山下箍桶匠的屋里。不要让人看见你离开修道院。”根据年轻僧侣的说法，乔纳斯神父是这么吩咐的。看来埃德温很快就能和武士团聚，但他能期待什么样的欢迎呢？第一次遇到挑战，他就让维斯坦失望了。埃德温没能在战斗一开始时就赶到他身旁，而是跑进了那条长长的隧道。但他母亲不在那下面，最后隧道的出口终于出现，在遥远的前方，黑暗中如同月亮，这时候梦的阴云才从他心头散去，他回过神来，想起发生的事，感到非常震惊。

至少，他走入清晨的寒冷空气之后，是尽了力的。他几乎是一路跑回到了山上的修道院，遇到最陡的坡才会慢下来。有时候，他要穿过密林，感觉走错了路，但随后树木变稀，修道院又出现在灰色的天空之下。于是他接着往上爬，到大门的时候，双腿酸痛、气喘吁吁。

大门旁的那扇小门没锁，他打起精神，偷偷摸摸溜了进去。山路走了一半的时候，他就意识到了烟味儿，这时候烟熏得他胸口疼，忍不住要大声咳嗽。他知道，这时候去移干草车，肯定太迟了，顿时感到心里空荡荡的，没有着落。但他还是把这种感觉放到了一边，继续朝里面走。

一开始，他没有碰到僧侣，也没遇上士兵。他沿着高墙走，脑袋低着，以免被远处某扇窗户里的人看到，这时他看到下面大门内的小

院子里，挤满了士兵们的马。马鞍没下，四周都是高墙，所以马儿都在焦虑地转圈，地方很小，有时候会互相撞上。他继续朝僧侣的住处走去，换作别的孩子，肯定就直接跑到中央的院子里去了，他却心思周密，想了一下修道院的布局之后，他走了一条绕弯子的路，利用了他记忆中的那些隐秘路径。就是快到目的地的时候，他还是要躲在一根石柱后面，先小心翼翼地看看周围。

中央的院子简直认不出来了。三个人穿着僧袍，懒洋洋地扫着地，在他看的时候，又来了一个人，拿着桶往鹅卵石上泼水，躲在一旁的几只乌鸦受了惊吓，飞走了。地面上零零散散撒了干草和沙，他注意到有几个人形的东西，用麻布盖着，他猜可能是尸体。他知道维斯坦曾在那儿负隅抗敌的古老石塔，这时依然巍巍耸立，但连塔也发生了变化：塔身很多地方成了焦黑色，尤其是入门的拱廊和每一扇窄窗的周围。在埃德温看来，整个石塔似乎一下子缩小了。他从柱子后面伸长脖子，想确定一下，麻布覆盖的人形周围那一摊摊潮湿的地方，究竟是血还是水，这时一双瘦骨嶙峋的手从背后抓住了他的肩膀。

他扭过身子，发现尼尼安神父——那个不说话的僧侣——正盯着自己的眼睛。埃德温没有喊叫，而是指着尸体，低声说道：“维斯坦阁下，我的撒克逊兄弟。他也躺在那儿？”

沉默的僧侣似乎能听懂他的话，用力摇了摇头。他抬起一根手指，放在嘴唇上，但就在做这个熟悉的动作时，他仍在瞪着埃德温的脸，似乎是要警告对方。然后，尼尼安偷眼望了望四周，把埃德温拉走了。

“我们能确定吗，武士，”头一天他曾问维斯坦，“那些当兵的真的会来？谁会告诉他们，我们在这儿呢？这些僧侣显然都相信，我们不过是牧羊人。”

“谁知道呢，孩子。也许没人会来打扰我们吧。但是，我觉得有个人可能会说出我们的行踪，此时此刻，说不定好心的布雷纳斯正在发命令呢。用心检查，年轻的战友。不列颠人喜欢往干草垛里插木条，把草分成一份份的。从上到下，我们都需要不掺杂物的干草。”

当时，他和维斯坦在古老石塔后面的谷仓里。武士这下子不去劈柴了，却又急不可耐地要把马棚后面储藏的干草搬过来，堆到那辆摇摇晃晃的推车上。他们动手干这件事的时候，他又不时让埃德温爬上

草垛，用棒子往里捅。武士站在地上认真看着，有时候会让他到某个地方重新捅一遍，或者命令他把腿伸进某个具体的位置，越深越好。

“这些修道的人有些马虎大意，”维斯坦解释道。“也许会把铁锹或草叉丢在干草堆里。如果是这样的话，把东西拿出来可是帮他们的忙，这儿工具不多。”

当时武士没有透露准备干草的目的，但埃德温立即知道，这与眼前的冲突有关，所以等干草摞好了，他问了个关于士兵的问题。

“谁会背叛我们呢，武士？僧侣们没怀疑我们。他们忙着神圣的争辩，几乎都不看我们。”

“也许吧，孩子。那儿也捅一捅。就那儿。”

“武士，有没有可能那对年老的夫妇会背叛我们？他们显然很傻、很老实。”

“尽管他们是不列颠人，我却不担心他们会背叛。但是，孩子，你要以为他们傻，那就错了。至少，埃克索阁下是个有城府的人。”

“武士，我们为什么跟他们一起走呢？他们总是拖慢我们。”

“他们拖慢我们，没错，很快我们就会分手。但今天早晨我们出发的时候，我很希望有埃克索阁下的陪伴。也许我还希望他能多陪一会儿。我说过，他是个有城府的人。我和他也许还有更多事情可以讨论。但是，我们还是专心做好眼前的事情吧。我们要把车子装得稳稳当当的。我们需要不掺杂物的干草。那儿不能有木头或铁。孩子，你看我要指望你呢。”

可埃德温却让他失望了。他怎么会睡了那么久呢？躺下来本身就是个错误。他就该直挺挺地坐在角落里，偶尔闭闭眼睛，像维斯坦那样，一听到声音立即就能站起身来。可他呢，像个婴儿一样，喝了老太太递来的一杯牛奶，就在房间那一头沉睡不醒。

他真正的母亲在梦里喊他了吗？也许是这个原因，他才睡了那么久，被跛脚的僧侣叫醒之后，他没有冲到武士身旁，而是跟在其他人后面，进了那条奇怪的长隧道，好像他仍旧在梦境深处一样。

那毫无疑问是他母亲的声音，同一个声音在谷仓里也曾向他呼喊。“埃德温，为了我，找到力量吧。找到力量，来救我。来救我。来救我。”与头天早晨相比，这时的声音里有一种急迫感。还有别

的：站在打开的暗门前、盯着通向黑暗的台阶时，他曾感到有东西在拉他，力气很大，让他头晕目眩，几乎要呕吐。

年轻的僧侣用手杖挡住李树的枝桠，等待埃德温走到前面去。这时候他终于说话了，不过声音很低。

“抄小路。我们很快就能看到箍桶匠小屋的屋顶。”

他们走出树林，眼前大地开阔，斜斜没入退却的迷雾之中，但埃德温仍然能够听见，附近蕨丛中有东西在动，并发出啾啾声。他想起了夏末那个霞光灿烂的傍晚，他和那位女孩谈过话。

那天，一开始他没看见池塘，因为池塘很小，隐藏在灯芯草中。一片颜色鲜艳的昆虫在他面前飞了起来，一般情况下，他会关注昆虫，但这次水边传来的声音吸引了他的注意力。动物落入了陷阱？声音又来了，夹在鸟鸣声和风声之中。这声音有个规律：一阵剧烈的摩擦声，好像在挣扎，然后是寂静。不久，又传来摩擦声。他小心翼翼地走到近前，听见了吃力的呼吸声。然后，他眼前就出现了那个女孩。

她仰面躺在野草中，身体扭到了一边。她比他要大几岁，十五或十六，她的眼睛盯着他，毫无惧色。他打量了一会儿才意识到，她姿势奇怪，是因为她双手被绑住了，压在身体下面。四周有一片地方，野草是平的，那是她挣扎时靠腿的力量滑动身体碾压出来的。她穿着布罩衣，在腰间系住，衣服一侧已经变了颜色——或许是浸泡了水，她的腿肤色特别黑，两条腿上都有蓟草划出来的新鲜伤痕。

他想，这可能是个鬼魂或精灵，但她开口说话时，却没有回声。

“你想要干什么？你为什么要来？”

埃德温定定神，说道：“你要是愿意，我可以帮你。”

“这些绳结不难解。他们就是绑得比平时紧一点。”

这时候他才注意到，她脸上、脖子上全是汗。连说话的时候，她双手仍在背后不停地挣扎着。

“你受伤了吗？”他问。

“没有。但一只甲壳虫刚落在我膝盖上，趴在那儿咬了我一口。现在肿起来了。我能看出来，你自己还是个孩子，帮不了我。没关系，我自己能行。”

她绷紧了脸，扭动着，将身体从地面抬起了一点点，但她的眼睛一直盯着他。他看着，呆住了，以为她那双手随时会从身后拿出来。但是，她泄了气，身体松软下来，躺在草上，嘴里大口喘着气，眼睛愤怒地盯着他。

“我可以帮忙，”埃德温说。“我擅长解绳结。”

“你还是个孩子。”

“不是。我都快十二了。”

“他们很快就会回来。如果他们发现你解开了绳子，会打你的。”

“他们是大人吗？”

“他们自己以为是，但其实不过是男孩子。不过，比你大点儿，而且有三个。要是打你一顿，他们肯定会很高兴。他们会把你的脑袋摁到那边的泥水里，直到你晕过去。我看他们以前干过。”

“他们是村子里的吗？”

“村子？”她鄙夷地看着他。“你的村子？我们每天都经过不同的村子。我们才不会管你的村子呢！他们可能很快就会回来，那你就麻烦了。”

“我不害怕。如果你愿意，我可以帮你脱身。”

“我总是自己脱身。”她又扭动起来。

“他们为什么要绑住你？”

“为什么？我想是为了看吧。看我想办法脱身。现在他们走了，偷吃的去了。”然后她说：“我还以为你们这些村民整天都要干活呢。你母亲为什么让你到处乱逛？”

“我得到了允许，因为今天我一个人已经完成了三个角。”然后他又说道：“我真正的母亲已经不在这个村子里了。”

“她去哪儿啦？”

“我不知道。她是被人抓走的。我现在和阿姨住。”

“我像你这么大，还是个孩子的时候，”她说，“也住在一个村子里。现在我到处旅行。”

“和谁一起旅行呢？”

“噢……和他们。我们经常经过这条路。我记得他们以前在这个地方绑过我，把我丢在这儿，就是同一个地方，去年春天的时候。”

“我来把你放开，”他突然说。“如果他们回来，我也不怕他们。”

但是，有什么东西拦住了他。他本来以为她的眼睛会避开，身体要调整一下，因为他要走过来了。但她却一直瞪大眼睛看着他，与此同时，她的双手仍在背后挣扎着。她发出一声长长的叹息声，这时他才意识到，她刚才一直屏着呼吸，时间挺长。

“我一般是能解开的，”她说。“如果你不在，我现在都已经解开了。”

“他们绑你，是不想让你逃走吗？”

“逃走？我能逃到哪里？我和他们旅行呢。”然后她说，“你到我这儿来干吗？为什么不去帮助你母亲？”

“我母亲？”他是真的吃了一惊。“我母亲为什么要我去帮她？”

“你说她是被抓走的，不是吗？”

“是啊，但那是很久以前的事。她现在很开心。”

“她怎么能开心呢？你不是说她在旅行吗？难道你不觉得她想有人来帮助她吗？”

“她就是在旅行。她不会要我去……”

“她不会要你去，因为以前你还是个孩子。可你现在都快是个男人了。”她不说话了，弓起背，又一次攒足了力气挣扎。然后她又松软下来。“有时候，”她说，“他们回来，我还没有解开，他们也不来解。他们就看，一句话也不说，一直到我自己解开绳子，双手挣脱出来。他们就一直坐在那儿看哪、看哪，裤裆里那魔鬼角也一直变大。他们要是说话，我会觉得好一点儿。但他们就一直瞪着眼睛看啊、看啊，一句话也不说。”然后她又说：“看到你的时候，我以为你也会这么做。我以为你会坐下来，睁大眼睛看着，不说话。”

“要我帮你解吗？我不怕他们，而且我擅长解绳子。”

“你还是个孩子。”眼泪突然流出来了。事情发生得太快，而且她脸上没有情绪改变的迹象，所以埃德温一开始以为那只是汗水。随即他意识到，那是眼泪，她半仰着脸，所以眼泪流得很奇怪，经过鼻梁，然后从另一边的脸颊上流下去。在这过程中，她眼睛一直盯着他。她的眼泪让他疑惑，他当时就愣了。

“那来吧，”她说。她第一次侧过身体，目光也侧过去，看着水里的芦苇。

埃德温匆忙上来，像发现了机会的小偷一样，蹲在草地上开始解绳结。绳子又细又粗糙，无情地勒进了她的手腕；两只手掌叠在一起，相比之下，显得又小又脆弱。一开始，绳结解不开，他强迫自己镇定下来，仔细观察绳子缠绕的路径。然后他又试了一次，一个绳结解开了。这下他更加自信，继续解其他的绳结，不时看一眼那柔软的手掌，像一对温驯的小动物一样等待着。

他把绳子拉开之后，她转过身来，坐在他面前，两人之间的距离突然近得有些尴尬。他发现，她不像大多数人那样发出干粪便的气味：她的味道，像用湿柴生出来的火。

“如果他们回来，”她轻声说，“会把你拖过芦苇，然后把你淹个半死。你最好走。回到你的村子。”她试探着伸出一只手来——似乎还不太确定现在这只手能不能动——在他胸口推了一把。“走吧。快。”

“我不怕他们。”

“你是不怕。但他们还是会那么干。你帮了我，但你现在必须走了。走吧。快。”

太阳落山之前，他回来了，她躺过的地方，草还是平的，但看不到她留下的其他痕迹。不过，那地方感觉安静得出奇，他在草丛里坐了一会儿，看芦苇在风里摇摆。

女孩的事，他从没告诉过别人，包括他的阿姨——她当时就会下结论说女孩是个魔鬼——也没告诉其他男孩子。但在随后的几个星期里，他脑海里常常突然出现她鲜活的样子；有时候是在晚上，在他的梦里；更多是在白天，在他挖地或帮忙修房顶的时候，然后他两腿之间的魔鬼角就会变大。最后魔鬼角会退回去，留给他一种羞耻感，然后他又会想起女孩的话：“你到我这儿来干吗？为什么不去帮助你母亲？”

可他怎么去找母亲呢？女孩自己说过，他“还是个孩子”。但话又说回来，她也说他很快就会成为男人。他一想起这些话，就会重新体验一遍羞耻感，但前面的路该怎么走，他一直看不清。

然而，维斯坦推开谷仓门的那一刻，这一切都变了。那一刻，刺眼的光射进来，维斯坦宣布，他——埃德温——被选中参与这一使命。现在，他们两个人，埃德温和武士，要穿越这个国家，不久他们必然会与她相遇。到那时候，与她一起旅行的那些人就要颤抖。

可是，引领他离开的，真的是她的声音吗？难道不是对士兵们的畏惧？一条小溪沿山坡而下，溪边有一条几乎没人走过的路，他跟在年轻僧侣后面，脑海里想起了这些问题。被人喊起来，从窗户里看到士兵们围着古老的石塔乱跑，他确定当时没有惊慌失措吗？现在，仔细考虑之后，他确信当时心里并未感到恐惧。之前，白天的时候，武士领着他进入石塔，两人谈了话，那时候埃德温也只觉得很想和维斯坦并肩战斗，对付即将到来的敌人。

从他们来到修道院之后，维斯坦就念念不忘石塔。埃德温还记得，他们在柴火棚里劈柴的时候，维斯坦不时抬头望着石塔。他们推着车到处送柴火时，有两次都特别绕道，就为了从塔边经过。所以后来的那一幕也就不奇怪了：僧侣们一进去开会，中央的院子里没人了，武士立即把斧头靠在柴堆上，说：“等一会儿吧，小战友，这位又高又老的朋友一直盯着我们，我们去看个仔细。我觉得，我们到哪儿，它都一直看着，我们到现在还没去拜访它，它生气了。”

他们穿过低矮的拱廊，进入又冷又暗的石塔内部。武士对他说：“小心啊。你以为进了塔，可你看看脚下。”

埃德温低下头，看到眼前似乎有条壕沟，围着圆形的石墙形成一个圆圈。沟太宽了，跳不过去，两块木板搭成一个简单的桥，只有从桥上走，才能到达塔中央的夯土地面。他迈步走上木板，眼睛望着黑漆漆的桥下，武士在他身后说：

“注意到了吧，年轻的战友，那下面没有水。如果你径直奔下去，我敢说，那也不过你腰那么深。奇怪，你不觉得吗？为什么在里面挖条壕沟？这样的小塔，为什么要壕沟？能有什么用呢？”维斯坦从木板上走过来，用脚后跟试了试塔中央的地面，然后继续说道：“古人建这个塔，也许是用来屠杀动物的。也许这儿就是以前的屠宰场。动物杀死之后，没有用的东西，他们就直接推进旁边的沟里。你觉得呢，孩子？”

“有可能，武士，”埃德温说。“但是，要把牲口领过那么窄的木板，可不是容易的事情。”

“也许以前这儿有更好的桥，”维斯坦说。“很结实，一头牛都能站上去。领过桥之后，如果牲口猜到了自己的命运，或者第一击没能让牲口跪下来，那么这样的布置就能保证牲口不会轻易逃掉。想象一下，动物扭过头，想冲出去，却发现四面都是沟。一座小桥急切之间是很难找到的。以前这儿是个屠宰场，看来这个想法不算傻。跟我说说，孩子，你抬头看看，能发现什么？”

埃德温望着高高的头顶上那一圈天空，说道：“顶上是开口的，武士。像烟囱一样。”

“这话很有意思。你再说一遍。”

“像个烟囱，武士。”

“你认为是怎么回事呢？”

“如果古代的人用这个地方来屠宰，武士，那么他们应该在我们现在站的地方生火。他们也许能剥骨头、烤肉，烟可以直接飘出去。”

“有可能，孩子，就像你说的那样。以前这儿曾发生过什么事，恐怕这些基督教僧侣一点儿也不知道吧？我猜，这些先生们到塔里来，是因为这里偏僻、安静。你看这环形的墙有多厚。我们进来的时候，乌鸦在乱叫，但一点儿声音也透不出去。还有，光从上面那样射进来。肯定会让僧侣们想起上帝的荣光。你说呢，孩子？”

“没错，那些先生们可以进来祈祷，武士。不过，要跪下来，这地上可太湿了。”

“也许他们是站着祈祷的，他们不可能猜到，这儿曾经是屠杀和焚烧的场所。孩子，上面你还看到了什么？”

“没了，先生。”

“没了？”

“只有台阶，先生。”

“对啦，台阶。你跟我说说台阶。”

“一圈一圈的，顺着环形的墙走。一直延伸到顶上的天空。”

“观察得很好。现在，你听仔细了。”维斯坦走近了点儿，压低了声音。“这个地方，不仅是这座古塔，而是整个地方，今天大家称作修道院的整个地方，以前是我们的撒克逊祖先在战争时期修建的要塞，我敢打赌。所以有很多聪明的陷阱，来迎接入侵的不列颠人。”武士走到一旁，一边看着壕沟，一边绕着圈慢慢走。最后他又抬头向上望，说道：“把这儿想象成要塞，孩子。过了很多天，要塞被攻破了，敌人拥进来。每个院子里，每堵墙壁上，都在搏斗。现在，你想象这个场景。我们的两个撒克逊兄弟，在外面的院子里，抵挡着一大群不列颠人。他们勇敢地战斗，但敌人太多，我们的英雄们必须撤退。我们假设他们退到这儿，就退到这座古塔里。他们跳过小桥，转过身来，就在这儿面对敌人。不列颠人信心更足了。他们把我们的兄弟逼入了死角。他们拿着剑和斧头逼近，冲过桥，来杀我们的英雄。我们勇敢的兄弟砍倒前面几个，但很快就要继续撤退。孩子，你看那边。他们沿着墙上盘旋的台阶撤退。更多的不列颠人跨过壕沟，最后我们站的地方都挤满了人。但是，不列颠人数量多，却不能发挥优势。因为我们勇敢的兄弟两人并肩，站在台阶上作战，入侵者一次只能上去两个人。我们的英雄本领高强，他们必须步步撤退，越撤越高，但入侵者却不能以数量压倒他们。不列颠人一倒下，后面的就跟上来，然后又倒下。但是，我们的兄弟肯定会累。他们越撤越高，入侵者在台阶上步步紧逼。这可怎么办呢？怎么办，埃德温？我们的族人最后胆怯了吗？他们转过身，跑上最后几圈台阶，偶尔才会回身打几下。这肯定完了。不列颠人胜利在握。站在下面看的那些人笑了，像饥饿的人看见了大餐。但是，你仔细看着，孩子。看到什么了？我们的撒克逊兄弟走近头顶那片光晕一样的天空，你看到什么啦？”维斯坦抓住埃德温的肩膀，调整他的位置，指着天上的出口。

“说啊，孩子。你看到什么了？”

“我们的兄弟设了一个陷阱，先生。他们往上撤退，就是为了把不列颠人引过来，像把蚂蚁引到蜜罐里一样。”

“说得好，孩子！那么，陷阱是怎么设的呢？”

埃德温想了想，说道：“在台阶抵达最高点的地方，武士，我看到了，从这儿看好像是个壁龛。或者是个门道？”

“很好。那你认为那里藏着什么东西呢？”

“会不会藏着十几名我们最优秀的武士？然后他们和我们两位兄弟一起，一路杀下来，一直杀到下面的不列颠人当中。”

“再想想，孩子。”

“那，一头凶猛的熊，武士。或者一头狮子。”

“孩子，你上次见到狮子是什么时候？”

“是火，武士。壁龛后面是火。”

“说得好，孩子。那么久远的事情，我们难以确定。但我敢打赌，上面藏的就是火。那个小壁龛，站在下面几乎看不到，里面藏着一根火把，也许有两三根，点亮了，在那堵墙后面。剩下的，你来跟我说吧，孩子。”

“我们的兄弟们把火把扔下来。”

“什么，扔到敌人头上？”

“不是，武士。扔到壕沟里。”

“壕沟？里面全是水？”

“不是，武士。壕沟里全是木柴。像我们卖力劈的那种木柴。”

“就是这样，孩子。月亮上来之前，我们还要多劈点柴。我们还要弄很多干草呢。像个烟囱，孩子，你说的。你说得对。我们现在就站在烟囱里。我们的祖先造塔，就是为了这个目的。否则这儿要塔干什么呢？站在外面的墙上，和站在塔顶，视野是一样的。但是你想想，孩子，一根火把扔进这道所谓的壕沟里。然后又扔进一根。之前我们在周围看的时候，我看到塔背上离地面很近的地方有好几个口子。也就是说，像今天晚上这样的强东风，会把火苗扇得更高。不列颠人怎么能逃出这地狱的火海呢？四周是坚固的墙，只有一个窄窄的桥通向自由，而整道壕沟都大火熊熊。不过，孩子，我们离开这个地方吧。我们猜出了这么多秘密，这座古塔可能会不高兴。”

维斯坦转身准备过桥，但埃德温还在盯着塔顶看。

“但是，武士，”他说。“我们那两个勇敢的兄弟。他们也要和敌人一起，在火里烧死吗？”

“就算烧死了，难道不是很辉煌、很划算的事情吗？不过，也许不会到那一步。在下面的热浪升上来时，我们的两个兄弟也许能冲到洞开的塔顶边上，然后从上面跳下去。他们能这么做吗，孩子？虽然他们没有翅膀？”

“他们没有翅膀，”埃德温说，“但他们的战友可能推了一辆车在塔后面。车上装满了厚厚的干草。”

“有可能，孩子。谁知道古时候这儿发生了什么事呢？现在，我们不要再做梦啦，还去劈点柴火吧。夏天到来之前，这些好心的僧侣还要熬过很多个寒冷的夜晚呢。”

在战斗中，没有时间进行复杂的信息交换。飞快地看一眼，挥一下手臂，在吵闹声中喊一句话：真正的武士靠这些，就能够传递自己的想法。那天下午在塔里，维斯坦带着这样的气度说明自己的想法，而埃德温让他彻底失望。

可是，武士是不是期望太高？连老斯特法也只说过埃德温的巨大潜力，只说一旦他学会了武士之道，前途不可限量。维斯坦对他的训练还没结束呢，埃德温怎么能表现出那样的默契？现在武士似乎是受了伤，但这肯定不是埃德温一个人的错吧。

年轻的僧侣在溪边停下来，脱下鞋子。“我们在这儿过河，”他说。“桥还在小溪下游，而且那儿土地开阔，没什么遮挡。隔座山，从山顶上都可能看到我们。”然后他指着埃德温的鞋子，说道：“你的鞋好像做工很不错啊。你自己做的吗？”

“鲍德温阁下给我做的。他是村里技术最高的鞋匠，不过每到月圆的时候，他都要发狂。”

“脱下来。泡了水肯定就毁了。你看见垫脚石了吗？头再低一点，尽量往水面以下看。那儿，看到了没？那就是我们的路。眼睛一直看着路，就不会掉进水里。”

和之前一样，年轻僧侣的语气又有些不礼貌。有没有可能，他们出发之后，他利用路上的时间，心里慢慢想明白了，知道了埃德温在事情中的角色？刚开始的时候，年轻僧侣不仅态度更加热情，而且话很多，几乎停不下来。

他们在乔纳斯神父房间外面那条阴冷的走廊里见面，之前埃德温在外面等了一会儿，里面有几个人在争论，声音很低，但都很激动。埃德温不知道接下来他们会说什么，心里慢慢害怕起来，令他宽慰的是，他们没喊他进房间，却有一名年轻僧侣走了出来，脸上笑容灿烂。

“他们选了我当你的向导，”他喜气洋洋地用埃德温的语言说。“乔纳斯神父说，我们要马上出发，悄悄出去，不能让人看到。勇敢

点，我年轻的兄弟，很快你就到你哥哥身边啦。”

年轻僧侣走路的样子很奇怪，他整个人缩起来，像很冷一样，两只手都藏在袍子里，埃德温跟着他下山，心里想，他是不是天生就没有胳膊。等两人离开修道院，进入安全地带，年轻僧侣放慢脚步，与埃德温并肩，这时他从袍子里伸出一条又瘦又长的胳膊，用力搂住了埃德温的肩膀。

“你已经逃走了，这样跑回来很傻。听到这事，乔纳斯神父很生气。但是，你看看你，现在又安全地离开啦，运气好的话，还没人知道你回来过呢。不过，这都是什么事啊！你哥哥总是这么喜欢吵架吗？还是某个士兵经过的时候，狠狠地羞辱过他？也许等你到他床边，我的小兄弟，你可以问问他，事情是怎么开始的，我们可都搞不清楚前因后果。如果是他冒犯了士兵，那他的话肯定是非常难听，因为来见院长要干什么，那帮人统统忘记了，大家都跟疯了一样，要惩罚你哥哥的胆大妄为。我自己是被他们的喊叫声吵醒的，虽然我的房间离院子很远。我紧张地跑到那儿，什么也做不了，只能和其他僧侣一起，无助地站在那儿，惊讶地看着事情发生。不久他们告诉我，你哥哥跑进了那座古塔，以躲避愤怒的士兵，士兵们跟在后面也冲了进去，要把他撕成碎片，后来你哥哥好像奋力和他们打了起来。还势均力敌呢，真让人觉得意外，士兵有三十多人，他不过是个放羊的撒克逊人。我们在外面，以为随时都会看到他被大卸八块，血淋淋地被人抬出来，可实际上呢，倒是士兵们一个接一个惊慌失措地从塔里跑出来，有的踉踉跄跄，抬着受伤的战友。我们简直不相信自己的眼睛！我们都祈祷争执快点结束，无论原来谁侮辱了谁，这样的暴力肯定都不好。可打斗却一直进行，后来啊，小兄弟，可怕的故事就发生啦。谁知道呢，说不定上帝看到自己的神圣建筑里发生这样恶劣的争执，生气了，伸出手指来降了天火？也可能是哪个士兵，拿着火把跑来跑去，摔了一跤，铸成了大错。多可怕啊！突然之间，塔就烧着了！谁能想到，一座潮湿的古塔竟然这么能烧？可塔真的燃起了熊熊大火，布雷纳斯的手下和你哥哥都困在里面。他们要是立即抛开双方的争执，尽可能快地跑出来，那倒还好，但我猜他们肯定是想扑灭大火，等到发现四下里全是火海，就已经来不及了。真是场极其可怕的故事，几个人跑出来，倒在地上扭动挣扎，最后也都死了。但是，小兄弟，奇迹中的奇迹是，你哥哥竟然逃出来了！尼尼安神父发现他在黑暗中乱走，有点迷糊，受了伤，但还活着，而这时候其他人还在看着大火熊熊的古塔，为里面的人祈祷。你哥哥活下来了，乔纳斯神父亲自给他治了伤，只有我们几个人知道这件事，乔纳斯神父让我们严格

保密，连院长也不能说。他担心如果消息传出去，布雷纳斯爵爷会派更多士兵过来复仇，实际上大多士兵死于事故，不是你哥哥杀的，但这一点他可不管。你一个字也不要说出去，对你有好处，至少要等到你们俩远远离开这个国家。乔纳斯神父很生气，你竟然冒着生命危险回到修道院，但他也很高兴，因为让你和哥哥团聚就更容易了。‘他们必须一起离开这个国家，’他说。乔纳斯神父真是最善良的人，就算被那些鸟啄成重伤，他仍然是我们当中最有智慧的。我敢说，你哥哥这条命可多亏了他和尼尼安神父。”

但是，他说这些话，是之前的事情。现在，年轻的僧侣疏远了，两只手又紧紧缩回到袍子里。埃德温跟在他身后过河，眼睛尽量看清楚激流之下的石头。这时他想到，他应该向武士坦白一切，跟他说母亲的事，说她在召唤。如果他诚恳、坦白地把一切从头解释清楚，维斯坦也许能够理解，再给他一次机会。

想到这儿，埃德温心情有些好转。他一手拎着一只鞋子，轻快地跳向下一块石头。

第三部

高文的第一次浮想

那些讨厌的寡妇。上帝把她们放在我面前，放在这山路上，有什么用意呢？他想考验我的谦卑吗？他看着我救了那对柔弱的夫妻，还有那个受伤的男孩，看着我杀死一条魔鬼一样的狗，在沾满露水的树叶上还没睡到一个小时，又要起身，牵挂着我还没有完成的任务，我和霍拉斯又要出发，不是下山找个遮风挡雨的村子，而是又要在灰色的天空下，走一条陡峭的山路，难道这一切还不够吗？但是，他还是让那些寡妇挡着我的路，毫无疑问，我做得也不错，客客气气地跟她们说话。她们说了些侮辱人的蠢话，用土块砸霍拉斯的后腿——好像霍拉斯会惊慌失措，难看地撒腿乱跑一样——我呢，几乎都没有回头看她们，而是对着霍拉斯的耳朵说话，提醒他我们必须承受这样的考验，因为在那遥远的山巅，在风暴云聚集的地方，还有一场更严峻的考验等着我们。而且，那些衣衫破烂、饱经风霜的妇人，以前也都是清纯的少女，有些容貌美丽、举止优雅，或者至少清新活泼——在男人眼里，这一点并不逊于美丽与优雅。她不也是这样吗？我有时候会想起她来，在抑郁的秋天，眼前大地一望无垠，空阔、孤寂，骑马一天都走不到头。她不是什么美人，但我觉得够让人欢喜了。我只看过她一眼，年轻的时候，我那时候跟她说过话没有呢？可她有时候会回到我脑海里，我相信我睡觉的时候她也来过，因为我一觉醒来，梦境渐渐远去，我却常常还有一种神秘的满足感。

今天早上霍拉斯把我喊醒的时候，我就有这种感觉，醒来还感到快乐。我累了一晚上，就睡在树林里松软的地上，霍拉斯踩踏着地面，要把我喊醒。他很清楚，我已经没有以前的精力啦，折腾了一个晚上，睡一个小时就爬起来继续赶路，对我可不是容易的事情。但是，看到太阳已经高挂在阴凉的树林上方，他就不能让我继续睡觉了。他不停地踏脚，最后我只好起来，锁子甲都喀喀作响，好像不愿意。我越来越讨厌这盔甲了。它真的帮我挡过什么吗？最多少受一两次小伤而已。我身体一直健康，要感谢的是这把剑，不是盔甲。我站起身，观察周围的树叶。夏天还没过去，怎么落了这么多呢？这些树为我们遮风挡雨，难道生病了吗？一缕阳光从高高的枝叶间穿透下来，落在霍拉斯的鼻子上，我看着他鼻子晃来晃去，好像那缕光是只苍蝇，飞下来要折磨他。他晚上过得也不好，一直听着周围树林里的声音，心里担心他的骑士不知道上哪儿冒险去了。他那么早叫醒我，

我有点不开心，但我还是走过去，双手轻轻抱住他的脖子，把头贴在他的鬃毛上歇了一会儿。他这个主人心狠着呢，这我知道。我知道他累了，可还是逼他继续走；他什么错误也没犯，可我还要骂他。还有这一大堆铁家伙，我穿着累，他驮着也累。我们还要一起走多久呢？我轻轻拍着他，说：“我们很快就能找到一个友好的村子，你就能吃顿早餐，比你刚才吃的好。”

我这样说，是因为我相信维斯坦阁下的问题已经解决了。但是，我们没走多少路，还没出树林呢，就碰上了那名衣衫破烂的僧侣，鞋子都破了，在我们前面匆匆忙忙赶往布雷纳斯爵爷的营地，他还能告诉我们什么消息呢，无非是维斯坦阁下逃出了修道院，晚上来抓他的人都死了，很多都成了焦黑的骨头。真是个人物啊！奇怪的是，听到这个消息，我心里很高兴，尽管我原以为不必完成的那项艰巨任务，现在又要去完成。所以，我和霍拉斯也不去想什么干草、烤肉和友好的伙伴啦，现在又在这儿爬山。谢天谢地，至少我们离那该死的修道院越来越远。没错，那些僧侣和令人憎恶的布雷纳斯没杀死维斯坦阁下，我心里感到欣慰。但是，他可真是个人物啊！每天他手上流的血，都要让塞文河泛滥啦！那个穿着破烂的僧侣说，他受伤了，但谁能指望像维斯坦阁下这样的人物会轻易倒下来，说死就死呢？让那个男孩埃德温就那样跑走，我真傻啊，现在，谁敢说他们两人会找不到对方呢？真傻，可我当时很累，而且，也没想到维斯坦阁下竟能逃掉。真是个人物啊！他要是生在我们那个年代，虽然是个撒克逊人，也能赢得亚瑟的赞赏。我们当中最优秀的，也不愿意与他正面为敌。不过，昨天他和布雷纳斯的士兵战斗时，我发现他左侧也许有个小小的弱点。或者是他当时卖了个破绽？如果再看他战斗一次，我就能搞清楚。不过他仍旧是个本领很高的武士，也只有亚瑟王的骑士才能看出问题来。看他战斗的时候，我的确是这么想的，我对自己说，你看那儿，左侧有个小小的弱点。聪明的对手可以利用。但是，我们哪个会不尊重他呢？

可这些讨厌的寡妇，她们怎么跑到我们的路上了呢？我们这一天难道还不够忙吗？耐心还没有耗尽？我们到下一个山顶停一下吧，上坡的时候我对霍拉斯说。我们要停一下，休息一会儿，虽然天上起了乌云，可能有风暴。如果没树，我也要在矮石楠上坐下来，我们还是要休息休息。可等路平坦下来，我们看到了什么呢？一群大鸟蹲在石头上，都一起飞起来，不是飞到越来越暗的天空，而是朝我们飞。后来我才看明白，那不是鸟，而是一帮上了年纪的女人，披着大斗篷，聚到我们面前的路上。

为什么要在这个荒凉的地方聚会？没有石头堆，没有干枯的井，什么标记也没有。没有一棵小树，没有一片灌木丛，不能给行路的人遮太阳挡雨。只有她们从上面起身的那些白石头，嵌在路两边的土里。我们要确定一下，我对霍拉斯说，我们要确定一下，我老眼昏花，有没有看错，是不是土匪朝我们扑过来了。但是，没有必要拔剑——剑刃上还有那只恶魔狗的黏液的气味，尽管睡觉前我把剑深深插在地里——因为她们肯定是上了年纪的女人，不过，如果有一两面盾牌抵挡一下，倒是不错的。女士们——霍拉斯，既然我们终于甩开了她们，就称她们为女士吧，她们不也值得同情吗？我们不要称她们为泼妇吧，虽然她们极不礼貌，让人真想这么称呼。让我们再提醒一下自己，至少她们中的有些曾经容貌美丽、举止优雅。

“他来啦，”其中一个喊道，“那个假骑士！”我走近的时候，其他人也跟着喊起来，本来我们可以从她们当中直接走过去，但我可不是一遇到逆境就躲开的那种人。于是我让霍拉斯停下来，就在她们当中，但我的眼睛却凝视着下一座山峰，好像在打量那聚集的云一样。她们的破衣服在我们身边扇动，我能感觉到她们的叫喊声扑面而来，这时候我才从马上低头看着她们。有十五个吗？二十？有人伸手去碰霍拉斯的肚腹，我低声让他不要烦躁。然后我挺直身体，说道，“女士们，如果我们要说话，你们就必须停止叫嚷！”听到这话，她们安静下来，但她们的目光仍然很愤怒。我说：“你们想要怎么样，女士们？为什么要这样拦住我？”一个女人喊道：“我们认识你，你就是那个愚蠢的骑士，胆小如鼠，不敢完成交给你的任务。”另一个说，“如果你很早以前就完成了上帝交给你的任务，我们这时候还会痛苦地到处流浪吗？”又有一个说，“他害怕他的职责！你们看他的脸色。他害怕他的职责！”

我强忍住怒火，要求她们解释。有一个比其他人稍微礼貌一点儿，她走上前来。“原谅我们，骑士。我们在这天空下流浪很多天了，看到你大胆地骑着马往我们这边走，我们就忍不住要你听听我们的悲痛。”

“夫人，”我对她说，“也许我看起来年老体弱。但我仍然是伟大的亚瑟的骑士。如果你们告诉我有什么麻烦，我将很高兴尽力帮助。”

让我疑惑不解的是，那些女人——包括那个懂礼貌的——都讽刺地大笑起来，然后一个声音说：“你要是很早以前履行了职责，杀死了母龙，那我们就不必这么痛苦地流浪啦。”

这让我震惊，我喊道：“你们知道什么？魁瑞格，你们知道什么？”但我及时意识到，必须克制。于是我平静地说：“请解释一下，女士们，是什么迫使你们在路上流浪？”人群后面有个干涩的声音说，“你问我们为什么流浪，骑士，我很高兴跟你说说。那个船夫问我问题，我的爱人已经在船里了，正伸手扶我上船呢，可这时候我发现，我最宝贵的记忆都被夺走了。当时我不知道，但现在我知道了，偷走我记忆的贼，就是魁瑞格的呼吸，你很久以前就该杀死她。”

“这你怎么知道呢，夫人？”我质问道。我没法隐藏内心的惊恐。这样一个流浪者，怎么可能知道如此严守的秘密呢？那个礼貌的女人奇怪地笑了笑，说道：“我们是寡妇，骑士。现在能瞒住我们的事情不多了。”

这时候我才感觉到霍拉斯颤抖了一下，我听见自己问，“女士们，你们是什么？是人还是鬼？”她们又一次大笑起来，那嘲讽的声音让霍拉斯不安地挪动着一只蹄子。我轻轻拍着他，说：“女士们，你们为什么笑？这个问题很傻吗？”人群后面那个嘶哑的声音说道：“看他有多害怕！现在他害怕我们，就像害怕龙一样！”

“女士，这是什么废话？”我更加用力地喊道，霍拉斯却违背我的意愿，往后退了一步，我使劲拉缰绳才让他稳住。“我不害怕龙。虽然魁瑞格很凶悍，但是我这辈子也面对过更加邪恶的东西。如果说我没有早点杀死她，那是因为她非常狡猾，躲在那些高山的岩石里面。你谴责我，女士，但是现在我们还听得到魁瑞格的风声吗？有段时间，人们只知道她每个月至少都要攻击一个村庄，但是我们已经很久没有听说过类似的事情了吧，小男孩都长成了大人。她知道被我盯住了，所以不敢出来，只躲在那些山里。”

我还在说话的时候，有个女人掀开她的破斗篷，一团泥土砸在霍拉斯的脖子上。我无法忍受，对霍拉斯说，我们得走。我们的使命，这些老娘儿们能知道什么？我催他向前走，奇怪的是，他一动不动，我只好用力踢他，他这才迈步。幸好那些黑色的人影在我们前面分开，我又一次抬眼去看远方的山峰。想到那荒凉的高山，我的心沉了下来。我想，就算是这些不知天高地厚的老太婆陪着我，也比那刺骨的风好。但是，那些女人似乎是要提醒我，这样的感受是错误的，竟然在我身后齐声唱了起来，我感到有更多泥巴朝我们这儿飞。她们唱的是什么呢？她们敢喊“懦夫”吗？我真想转过身去，发泄怒火，但及时忍住了。懦夫，懦夫。她们知道什么？她们在场吗？很久以前的

那一天，我们出发去面对魁瑞格，那时候她们在场吗？那时候她们会说我是懦夫吗，或者我们五个人中随便哪一个？那是个伟大的任务，最后只有三个人回来了。任务完成之后，女士们，我几乎都没休息，不是又急忙赶到山谷边，兑现了我对那位年轻姑娘的承诺吗？

厄德拉，她后来跟我说了她的名字。她不是什么美人，穿的也是最简单的衣服，但和我有时候梦到的另外那一位一样，她脸上红霞灿烂，让我心动。我看见她在路边，双手拿着锄头。她刚刚才成为女人，身材娇小柔弱。我要去完成那项艰难的任务，但是，看到这样天真的人儿，独自游荡，离我刚抛在身后的恐怖之地又那么近，我无法从她身旁骑马而过，不予理睬。

“回来，姑娘，”我骑在公马上向下喊道，那时候还没有霍拉斯呢，连我自己都很年轻。“你这是犯了什么傻，要往那边走？这山谷里正在打仗，难道你不知道吗？”

“我很清楚，先生，”她说，毫不胆怯地看着我。“我已经走了很远的路，很快我就要到山谷里去，加入战斗。”

“你是受了精灵的蛊惑吗，姑娘？我刚从谷底来，久经沙场的武士都害怕得呕吐不止。我都不愿意你从远处听到一丁点儿回声。为什么扛那么大一个锄头呢？”

“我认识一个撒克逊领主，就在下面的山谷里，我全心全意祈祷，希望他没死，希望上帝保护好他。他对我亲爱的母亲和姐妹们做了那样的事情，我一定要他死在我手里，我扛锄头就是为了这个。这把锄头能刨冬天早晨的冻土，同样也能刨这个撒克逊人的骨头。”

这时候我只好下马，抓住她的胳膊，虽然她想挣脱开。如果她今天还活着——厄德拉，她后来跟我说了她的名字——应该和你们的年纪差不多，女士们。她甚至有可能刚才就在你们当中，谁知道呢？不算了不起的美人，但和另外那位一样，她的天真打动了我的心。“让我去，先生！”她喊道。我回答说：“你不能进入山谷。站在边上看一眼你都会晕倒。”“我不是懦夫，先生，”她喊道。“让我去！”我们就那样站在路边，像两个吵架的孩子，为了让她安静下来，我只好说：

“姑娘，我不知道该怎么打消你的念头。但是，你想想，你一个人去找那个人报仇，能有多大机会呢？如果我帮助你，你的机会就会增加很多倍。所以你要耐心一些，到阴凉的地方坐一会儿。你看那边，到那棵接骨木下面坐着，等我回来。我去和四位战友一起完成一

项任务，很危险，但时间不会很长。如果我死了，你还能看到我再次从这里经过，绑在这同一匹马的马鞍上，那你就知道，我无法履行我的承诺了。否则，我发誓一定会回来，我们一起下去，实现你复仇的梦想。耐心点，姑娘，我相信你的所求是正当的，既然这样，上帝一定会让这位领主活着，等我们去找他。”

这是懦夫的话吗，女士们，就在那天说的，就在我骑马去对付魁瑞格那天？任务完成了，我知道自己侥幸活了下来——我们五个人，有两个没回来——便立即往回赶，虽然我很疲惫，我要回到山谷边缘，回到那棵接骨木下，姑娘还在那儿等着，双手抱着锄头。她跳了起来，再次看到她，又让我心动。我又一次试图说服她不要去，因为我害怕看到她进入山谷，她却愤怒地说：“先生，难道你是骗人的？你不履行对我的承诺？”于是我把她放到马鞍上——她拉着缰绳，怀里还抱着锄头——我在前面步行，领着马和姑娘往山谷里走。她脸色变白了吗，当我们刚听到那喧闹声的时候？还是当我们在战场外围遇到被人紧紧追赶、走投无路的撒克逊人的时候？那些筋疲力尽的武士，从我们前面爬过，伤口的血一路洒在地上，她畏缩了吗？她眼里有泪花，我看见她的锄头在抖动，但她没有扭过头去。她的眼睛忙个不停，在血淋淋的战场上前后左右搜索。然后我自己上了马，把她放在我身前，好像她是只温驯的羊羔一样，我们一起骑马进了战场最深处。那时候我有过怯懦之色吗？我挥舞着剑，用盾牌遮挡她，骑着马东奔西突，直到最后两人都摔在泥浆里？她马上站起身来，找回了锄头，开始在一堆堆残肢断臂之间辟出一条路来。我们耳里全是奇怪的叫喊声，但她似乎没有听到，就像一位信奉基督教的正经好姑娘，只管自己走路，不理睬粗俗男人们的下流叫喊。我那时候年轻，脚下灵活，拿着剑在她周围跑来跑去，砍倒所有想伤害她的人，用盾牌遮挡不时飞过来的箭。最后，她终于看到了她要找的人，然而，我们好像漂浮在惊涛骇浪中一样，虽然岛屿就在眼前，却总被浪推开，无法靠近。我们两人那天就是这样。我战斗着、砍杀着，保护着她，但是过了很久我们才来到那人跟前，而且有三个人专门守卫着他。我把盾牌交给那姑娘，说：“挡好自己，他就快是你的了。”我以一对三，也知道他们都是本领很高的武士，但我还是一个一个打败了他们，最后我直接面对她恨之入骨的那位撒克逊领主。他在血流成河的战场上走，腿上全是血，但我能看出来，他不是武士，我把他打倒，他躺在地上喘着气，腿已经没用了，眼睛充满仇恨地瞪着天空。这时候她来了，站到他跟前，盾牌丢在一边，她的眼神让我脊背发凉，超过那可怕战场上的一切。然后她的锄头下来了，不是抡起胳膊甩下来，而是轻轻地锄一下，接着是第二下，好像她是在地里刨庄稼一样。我看不

下去，喊道：“了结了吧，姑娘，要不我自己来啦！”她说：“别管我了，先生。我谢谢你帮忙，但现在结束了。”“才结束一半呢，姑娘，”我喊道，“我还要让你安全地离开山谷。”但她不再听我说话，又去做她那可怕的事。我本来会继续争辩下去，可就在这时候，他从人群中出来了。我说的是埃克索阁下，这是他现在的身份，那天他当然更年轻，但那时候他就有一副智慧的样子，我一看到他，好像战场的喧闹立即退去，成了我们周围低低的背景声音一样。

“为什么毫不遮挡地站着呢，先生？”我对他说。“剑还在鞘里？至少从地上捡个盾牌吧，把自己遮起来。”

但他目光悠远，仿佛在一个花香扑鼻的清晨，站在雏菊盛开的草地上。“如果上帝决定引一支箭到这边来，”他说，“我也不会去拦。高文爵士，很高兴看到你平安无事。你是刚到吗，还是一开始就在这儿？”

这话说的，好像我们俩是在夏季集市上聊天一样，我不得不又一次喊道：“遮挡一下，先生！战场上还有很多敌人。”他仍旧像看风景一样，我想起了他的问题，说道：“战斗开始的时候我就在，后来亚瑟选了我和其他四个人去完成一项有重要意义的任务。我刚刚才回来。”

这话总算引起了他的注意。“有重要意义的任务？顺利吗？”

“伤心的是，我们失去了两位战友，但任务完成了，梅林很满意。”

“梅林阁下，”他说。“那个老人家也许是智者，但他让我不寒而栗。”然后他又看了看周围，说道，“很遗憾你失去了朋友。今天，将会有更多的人离去。”

“但胜利肯定属于我们，”我说。“这些该死的撒克逊人。为什么要这样继续打下去呢？只有死神才会感谢他们拼命。”

“我相信，他们这样做，完全是因为对我们的愤怒和仇恨，”他说。“因为这时候他们肯定已经获得了消息，知道我们对留在他们村里的那些无辜的人做过什么。我自己刚从那儿回来，那些撒克逊士兵怎么可能不知道这消息呢？”

“你说的是什么消息，埃克索阁下？”

“我们正式允诺不伤害他们的妇女、儿童和老人，所以他们留在村子里，没人保护。但是，现在他们都被我们的人杀了，包括最小的婴儿。如果有人刚刚对我们干过这种事，我们的仇恨能消除吗？难道我们不会像他们这样拼死战斗，每一道伤口都是一个慰藉？”

“为什么老谈这件事呢，埃克索阁下？今天，我们胜利在握，而且会名垂后世。”

“我为什么老谈这件事？先生，我以亚瑟的名义，与这些村庄友好相处。有个村子里，大家说我是和平骑士。今天，我看着我们的十几个士兵长驱直入，毫无怜悯之心，唯一能抵抗他们的，是一帮还没我们肩膀那么高的男孩子。”

“听到这消息，我很难过。但我再次敦促你，先生，至少捡起一面盾牌吧。”

“我经过的每一个村庄都是这样，而我们的人还为此洋洋得意。”

“不要责怪自己，先生，也不要责怪我舅舅。你曾宣扬的那伟大法律，在其生效之时，是一件真正了不起的事情。这么多年来，多少无辜的不列颠人和撒克逊人，因为这部法律而保住了性命？法律后来没能维持下去，但那并不是你的错。”

“可他们直到今天仍然相信我们的协议。一开始他们只有畏惧和仇恨，是我赢得了他们的信任。我们今天的所作所为，让我成了骗子和刽子手，亚瑟的胜利，我一点儿也不感到高兴。”

“你说这种胡话是想干什么呢，先生？如果你这是要背叛，那我们不要耽搁，现在就来见个分晓吧！”

“我不会去伤害你舅舅，先生。可是，高文爵士，用这么大的代价赢来的胜利，你怎么能这么高兴呢？”

“埃克索阁下，今天下令对那些撒克逊村庄动手时，我舅舅肯定心情沉重，他不知道除此之外，还有什么别的方法获得持久的和平。想想吧，先生。你怜悯的那些撒克逊男孩，很快就会成为武士，迫不及待地要为今天丧生的父亲报仇。那些小女孩的子宫里很快会生长出更多的武士，这屠杀的魔咒永远不会破解。你看看复仇的欲望有多么强烈！你现在就看，看看这位漂亮的姑娘，我自己护送过来的，你看她还没停手呢！然而，今天的伟大胜利，就是个难得的机会。我们也许能一劳永逸地破解这个邪恶的魔咒，而一位伟大的君王应当果断行

动、抓住机会。埃克索阁下，希望这一天名垂青史，从今往后我们的土地能获得多年的和平。”

“我不明白你的意思，先生。今天我们的确杀了无数撒克逊人，无论是武士还是婴儿，但是穿过这片土地，那边还有更多的撒克逊人。他们从东方来，坐船登上我们的海岸，每天都在建起新的村庄。这仇恨的循环根本没有打破，先生，反而因为今天的屠杀而更加牢固。现在我去见你舅舅了，汇报我看到的情况。他相信上帝会微笑着看待今天的行为吗？我去看看他脸上的表情就知道了。”

屠杀婴儿的刽子手。这就是我们那天干的事？那我护送的那位呢，后来她怎么样了？刚才她也在你们当中吗，女士们？我骑马去履行职责，为什么要这样围住我？让一个老人安安静静地去吧。屠杀婴儿的刽子手。但我当时不在场啊，就算在，我和一位伟大的君王争辩，能有什么作用？他还是我舅舅呢。那时候我不过是个年轻的骑士，而且，这么多年过去了，事实不是证明他是正确的吗？你们不是在和平之中慢慢变老的吗？那就让我们上路吧，不要在背后侮辱我们。‘无辜者保护法’真是一部了不起的律法，让人更亲近上帝——亚瑟自己总是这么说，抑或是埃克索阁下说的？那时候我们称他为埃克索勒姆或者埃克索勒斯，可现在他叫埃克索，还有个好妻子。为什么要奚落我呢，女士们？你们悲伤，是我的错吗？我的日子就快到了，我不会回头，像你们那样在大地上流浪。我将心满意足去见船夫，踏上他那艘摇晃的小船，水在四周拍打着，耳朵里传来他划桨的声音，我也许能睡一会儿。我将由熟睡而半醒，看见太阳落在水面，岸越来越远，然后又打盹，回到梦境，直到船夫的声音再次将我轻轻唤醒。如果他要提问——有人说他会这样——那我就诚实回答，我有什么好隐藏的呢？我没有妻子，虽然有时候我渴望有。但我是个好骑士，将自己的职责执行到底。我就这么说吧，他会明白我没有撒谎。我也不会在意他。那温柔的落日，他从船的一边走到另一边，影子落在我身上。但是，这一切还要等一等。今天，我和霍拉斯要在这灰色的天空下上山，爬上那荒凉的山坡，攀上下一座山峰，因为我们的事情还没完成，魁瑞格在等着我们。

第十章

他从未想过要欺骗武士。好像是欺骗自行悄悄降在原野上，将两人裹在其中。

箍桶匠的小屋似乎建在一道深沟里，茅草屋顶离地面很近，埃德温低下头进去的时候，感觉像是爬进了一个洞。他预料到屋里会很黑，但那令人窒息的闷热——以及木头发出的浓烟——让他措手不及，他咳嗽起来，用这种方式通知屋里的人他到了。

“看到你平安无事，我很高兴，年轻的战友。”

维斯坦的声音从暗火那边的黑暗中传来，接着埃德温在一张铺着草皮的床上分辨出了武士的身形。

“你受伤严重吗，武士？”

维斯坦坐起来，慢慢挪到火光下，埃德温看见他的脸、脖子和肩膀上全是汗。但伸向火堆的那双手却颤抖着，好像很冷一样。

“伤口是小事。但伤口引起了发热。之前更加严重，我都不记得是怎么到这儿的了。好心的僧侣们说，他们把我绑在马背上，我猜我大概一直在喃喃不休吧，就像在树林里扮演咧着嘴的傻瓜时一样。你怎么样呢，战友？我相信，除了之前那个伤口之外，你没有别的伤了吧。”

“我非常好，武士，但此刻站在你面前却很羞愧。我可不是你的好战友，你战斗的时候我在睡觉。骂我吧，把我赶走，那也是我应得的惩罚。”

“不用这么急，埃德温阁下。如果说你昨天晚上让我失望了，我马上就会告诉你，怎么弥补你对我的亏欠。”

武士小心翼翼地把双脚挪到泥土地面上，弯下腰来，朝火里扔了一根木柴。埃德温发现，他左臂上紧紧地缠着绷带，一边脸上有一大片瘀伤，一只眼睛几乎没法睁开。

“没错，”维斯坦说，“当时我从熊熊燃烧的塔顶往下看，我们精心准备的推车却不在那儿，我的确想骂你。从高塔上跳下，摔到石头地上？我已经被热浪裹住了。我听着下面敌人痛苦的叫声，我问自

己，就算我们一起化为灰烬，我们能合得来吗？在夜空下独自摔下去，是不是更好？但是，我还没拿定主意，那辆车竟然来了，是我自己的马拉来的，由一名僧侣牵着缰绳。我不去管这名僧侣是敌是友，立即从烟囱口上跳了下去。我们之前的工作做得很好，我的战友，我整个人都扎了进去，好像车上的干草是水一样，但草里并没有什么东西把我刺穿。醒来的时候，我躺在餐桌上，对乔纳斯神父忠心耿耿的一些僧侣在周围照顾我，好像我是他们的晚餐一样。那时候，我肯定烧发得很厉害了，不知道是因为受了伤，还是因为被火烤的，他们说只好把我嘴巴堵住，以免我胡言乱语，然后把我送到山下安全的地方。但是，如果众神眷顾，这烧很快就会过去，那我们就出发，完成我们的任务。”

“武士，我仍然很羞愧。就是醒来之后，看到士兵围住了塔，我仍然让精灵迷了心窍，跟在那些不列颠老人后面逃出了修道院。我祈求你现在骂我吧，或者打我，但你刚才说了，我还可以弥补昨天晚上的耻辱行为。告诉我怎么弥补，武士，无论你给我什么任务，我都马上去完成。”

就在他说这话的时候，母亲已经在召唤他，她的声音在这小茅屋里回响，以至于埃德温都不确定，这些话究竟有没有说出来。不过，他应该说出来了，因为他听到维斯坦说：

“你以为我选了你，只是因为你的勇气吗，年轻的战友？你有非常出色的精神，如果我们能完成这项任务，全身而退，我会让你学习本领，使你成为真正的武士。但是，你现在只是一块粗铁，还算不得刀刃。埃德温阁下，我选择你，首先是因为我看到你有猎人的禀赋，与你的武士精神匹配。两者都有，可真是很罕见的事情。”

“这怎么可能呢，武士？我对打猎一无所知。”

“一头喝母狼奶水的小狼，能够在荒野里捕捉到猎物的气息。我相信这是天生的禀赋。等我发烧好了，我们再往山里面走，我敢打赌，你会发现天空本身将向你低语，告诉你选择哪条路，才能让我们站到母龙的巢穴跟前。”

“武士，恐怕你的信任放错了地方，最后没法兑现。我们家族没人拥有这种技能，也没人说过我可能有。斯特法看出我有武士的灵魂，但他也没提到过这种能力。”

“那好吧，年轻的战友，那就让我一个人相信你的能力吧。我绝不会说你自夸有这个本事。等我发烧好了，我们立即出发，到东边的

山里去。大家都说魁瑞格的巢穴在那儿，每到路口，我就会跟着你的脚步走。”

欺骗，就是在这个时候开始的。他此前没有欺骗的打算，现在也不喜欢。然而，欺骗悄悄来到两人之间，像个小妖精，从黑暗的角落迈步出场。他母亲仍在召唤。“为我找到你的力量吧，埃德温。你几乎长大成人了。找到你的力量，来救我。”他希望安慰母亲，也渴望挽回武士对自己的印象，于是说道：

“真奇怪，武士。你这一说起来，我就已经感觉到母龙的吸引力啦。不像是气息，更像是风里的某种味道。我们该马上就走，因为我是不是能一直感觉到，谁也说不清楚。”

他说这话的时候，脑海中快速闪过一幕幕场景：那些人围成半圆静静地坐着，看着他母亲试图挣脱束缚，他走进营地，让那些人大吃一惊。这时候他们都该是成年人了，很可能留着胡子、腆着肚子，再也不是那天大摇大摆走进村庄的那群身材挺拔的小青年了。都是壮实、粗鄙的男人，他们伸手去拿斧头，看到埃德温身后跟着的武士，眼睛里会流露出恐惧。

可他怎么能欺骗武士呢？这是他的老师，又是他最崇拜的人。而维斯坦却点着头，满意地说：“我一见到你就知道啦，埃德温阁下。在河边把你从食人兽那儿救回来的时候就知道了。”他将进入他们的营地。他将释放母亲。那些壮实的男人将被杀掉，或许会让他们逃入山间的雾霭之中。然后呢？他们要匆忙赶去完成一项紧急任务，同时埃德温必须解释，他为什么要欺骗武士。

或许是为了让自己尽量不去想这些念头——因为他感觉到，现在已经没有退路了——他说道：“武士，我有个问题想问你。不过也许你会觉得不礼貌。”

维斯坦又躺了下去，没入了黑暗中。现在，埃德温只能看到一只裸露的膝盖，缓慢地摇来摇去。

“问吧，小战友。”

“我在寻思啊，武士，本来我们可以逃离修道院，早半天去找魁瑞格的，你和布雷纳斯爵爷之间是不是有什么特别的仇恨，所以你才留下来与他的士兵战斗？你连任务都暂时放到一边，肯定有什么重要的理由吧。”

接下来的沉默很长，以至于埃德温以为，武士在令人窒息的空气中晕过去了。但是，那只膝盖仍旧在缓缓晃动，当他的声音终于从黑暗中传来时，发烧引起的微微颤抖似乎已经消失了。

“我没有借口，小战友。我只能承认自己很傻，而且好心的神父还刚提醒过我不要忘记职责呢！你看，你师傅的意志力多么脆弱。不过，我首先是一名武士，面对战斗，如果我明知道能够打赢，要我逃走可不容易。你说得对，说不定我们本可以现在就站在母龙的巢穴旁，喊她出来迎接。但我知道他们是布雷纳斯的人，也许他自己还会来，不留下来与他们会面，我可做不到。”

“那我猜得没错，武士。你和布雷纳斯爵爷之间有什么旧仇。”

“没有真正的仇恨。我们小的时候就认识，和你现在差不多大。那是在西方的一个遥远国家，我们住在一个守卫森严的要塞里，二十多个男孩，从早到晚接受训练，要成为不列颠军队中的武士。我慢慢喜欢上了那些伙伴，他们都很优秀，我们像兄弟一样生活在一起。大家都很好，只有布雷纳斯例外，他是爵爷的儿子，不屑于和我们打成一片。但他经常和我们一起训练，他的本领很弱，可是如果我们要与他用木剑格斗，或者在沙坑里摔跤，我们都必须让他赢。爵爷的儿子如果不能取得辉煌的胜利，那我们大家都要受罚。你能想象吗，小战友？我们那时候都是骄傲的少年，可每天都要让那么弱的对手征服我们，那是什么感受？更糟糕的是，我们假装被打败的时候，布雷纳斯还很喜欢羞辱对手。踩住我们的脖子，或者在我们已经躺倒在地的时候再踢上几脚，他都很高兴。我的战友，想想我们当时是什么感受吧！”

“我能理解，武士。”

“但是，今天我有理由感谢布雷纳斯爵爷，因为他让我避免了可悲的命运。我刚才说过，埃德温阁下，我已经爱上了要塞里的伙伴们，把他们当成兄弟，虽然他们是不列颠人，我是撒克逊人。”

“可是，武士啊，你和他们一起长大，一起面对艰巨的任务，爱上他们有什么可耻的吗？”

“当然可耻，孩子。现在连想起以前对他们的感情，我都会感到耻辱。是布雷纳斯让我明白了这个错误。可能是因为我的本领技巧比较出色吧，他喜欢选我当格斗对手，最厉害的羞辱手段，都要留着，用在我身上。他很快发现我是撒克逊人，于是以此为理由，让我的所有伙伴都来反对我。连以前和我最亲密的伙伴，也加入了反对我的行

列，在我的食物里吐口水，或者在寒冷的冬天早晨，在我们一边担心教官生气一边急匆匆赶往训练场时，把我的衣服藏起来。那时候布雷纳斯给我上了一堂重要的课，我明白了，像兄弟一样去爱不列颠人，是一件耻辱的事情，于是我下定决心离开要塞，虽然在要塞之外，我没有亲人、没有朋友。”

维斯坦停了一会儿，粗重的喘气声从火堆那边传过来。

“那么，在你离开之前，武士，你找布雷纳斯爵爷报仇了吗？”

“我的战友，你来判断一下，我这算不算报了仇，我自己还没拿定主意呢。根据要塞的规定，我们这些学徒一天训练结束，晚饭后有一个小时的时间，可以自由活动。我们会在院子里生个火，围坐在周围，像其他男孩子一样聊天、开玩笑。当然，布雷纳斯不和我们一起，他有专门的地方，但是那天晚上，我看见他从一旁走过，不知道是干什么。我起身离开人群，伙伴们并没有生疑。和别的要塞一样，那儿也有很多秘密通道，我都很熟悉。不久，我来到一个没人守卫的角落，城垛的黑影落在地面上。布雷纳斯优哉游哉朝我这边走来，一个人，我从黑暗中现身，他停下脚步，惊恐地看着我。他立即明白，这绝不是偶然碰上，而且他平日里的力量都失效了。真是奇怪的事啊，埃德温阁下，这位平时趾高气扬的爵爷，一下子变成了婴儿，在我面前害怕得简直要尿裤子。我真想跟他说：‘我的爵爷，我看到你的剑背在身后。你知道你的剑术比我们高明得多，拔出剑来和我比一比，你肯定不会胆怯吧。’但我没说这种话，因为如果我在那个黑暗的角落里伤了他，那我还能逃出要塞开始新的生活吗？我什么都没说，就默默地站在他身前，让时间在我们两人之间慢慢过去，因为我希望这一刻永生难忘。他往后退缩，之所以没有大喊救命，是因为残存的一点儿自尊告诉他，如果喊出来，那肯定一辈子都得忍受羞辱。我们都没有跟对方说话。等时间差不多了，我就走了，你看，埃德温阁下，我们之间没发生什么事，也可以说什么都发生了。我知道，我当天晚上就应该离开了，那不是战争时期，守卫并不严。我悄悄避开卫兵们，也没跟人告别，很快我就来到了外面的月光之下，孤零零一个少年，离开了我亲爱的伙伴们，我的亲人们很久以前就被杀了，只有依靠自己的勇气和新近学到的本领才能继续走下去。”

“武士，布雷纳斯今天还要抓你，是害怕你报以前的仇吗？”

“谁知道哪些魔鬼在那个傻瓜耳朵里说悄悄话？现在他是个了不起的爵爷啦，在这个国家和邻国声威显赫，但他一直害怕有撒克逊人从东方来，从他的地盘上经过。他是不是一遍遍重温那天晚上的场

景，以至于恐惧在他身上生了根，像肚子里盘了一条大虫子呢？或者母龙的气息让他忘了害怕我的原因，恐惧感却因为没有原因反而更加可怕？有个从东方沼泽来的撒克逊武士，我很熟悉，去年在这个国家和平旅行，被杀了。不过，我仍然要感谢布雷纳斯爵爷给我的教训，否则我现在还把不列颠人当作兄弟呢。小战友，你怎么啦？你两只脚动来动去，好像我这儿发烧传给你了一样。”

看来，他的焦虑没有隐藏好，但维斯坦肯定不会怀疑自己骗了他吧。有没有可能武士也能听见他母亲的声音？刚才武士说话的时候，她一直在呼喊。“你没有力量来救我吗，埃德温？难道你还是太小了？你不到我这儿来吗，埃德温？那天你不是答应我一定要来吗？”

“对不起，武士。猎人的本能让我有些急躁，因为我担心那气味会消失，外面太阳快起山了。”

“等我能爬上马背，我们立即出发。再给我一点儿时间吧，战友，如果我发烧，剑都举不起来，我们俩怎么能面对母龙这么凶悍的对手呢？”

第十一章

他渴望有一块阳光，让比特丽丝暖和起来。可是，虽然对面的河岸沐浴在早晨的阳光之中，他们这边却又暗又冷。他们俩走路的时候，埃克索能感觉到她渐渐朝自己身上靠过来，颤抖得越来越厉害。他正准备提议再休息一次，这时他们看到了柳树后面的屋顶，伸到了水面之上。

他们花了不少工夫，才走下那道泥泞的山坡，来到船屋跟前。他们迈步走进低矮的门廊，里面几乎漆黑一片，河水近在咫尺，在脚下拍打着，让比特丽丝颤抖得更厉害。他们踏着潮湿的木板，继续往里走。透过屋顶上挂下来的长草，他们看到了远处的灯芯草丛，还有一大片河水。接着，一个男人的身影从左侧的黑暗中站起来，说道：“朋友们，你们是什么人啊？”

“愿上帝与你同在，先生，”埃克索说。“很抱歉，可能吵醒你了。我们就是两个疲惫的路人，想到下游我们儿子的村庄去。”

那人走到亮处，打量着他们。他是个身材魁梧的中年人，留着胡子，身上披着几层兽皮。最后，他开口问话，语气倒也友好。

“这位女士病了？”

“她只是累了，先生，不过剩下的路走不动了。我们在想，不知道你有没有货船或者小筏子，可以载我们一程。我们只能靠你发发善心了，最近遇到了不幸的事情，我们的行囊都没了，本来能用来答谢你的锡块也丢了。先生，我能看出来，你这儿下水的只有一条船。如果你允许我们用这条船的话，所有交予我们看管的货物，我们一定保证安全。”

船夫看看那艘在棚顶下轻轻摇晃的船，然后又看看埃克索。“这条船要下河，还要等一等呢，朋友，我在等同伴运麦子过来，装到船上。看来你们两人都很累，最近又遇上了不幸的事情。那么，请你们听听我的主意吧。朋友们，你们看那儿。看到那些筐子了吧。”

“筐子，先生？”

“它们也许看起来不结实，但在水里浮得好，能承受你们的重量，不过得一人坐一只筐子。我们常常用筐子装整袋整袋的麦子，有

时候甚至还装屠宰好的猪，绑在船后面，就是河上风浪大，也很安全。今天，你们看，河上很平静，所以不用担心。”

“你真是好心，先生。不过，你没有大一点的筐子，能装下我们两个人吗？”

“你们得一人坐一只，朋友们，否则可能会落水。但我很愿意把两只筐子绑到一起，你们坐进去，和一只筐子差不多。如果看到河这边有一个矮一点儿的船屋，那么你们就到啦，请你们把筐子系好，丢在那儿。”

“埃克索，”比特丽丝低声说，“我们不要分开。我们还是一起步行吧，慢一点也没关系。”

“公主啊，我们已经走不了啦。我们两人都需要取暖、吃东西，顺着这条河走，我们很快就能到儿子那儿啦。”

“拜托啦，埃克索。我不想分开。”

“可这位好心人说，要把两只筐子绑在一起，就像我们手挽着手一样。”接着，他转身对船夫说：“我非常感激，先生。我们就按照你的建议办。请帮忙把筐子绑紧一点，水流再急，也不会把我们分开。”

“朋友，水流得急不危险，流得慢才危险。筐子容易在岸边的野草里缠住，那就走不动了。不过，我会借你一根粗棍子，用来推筐子，所以你们不用害怕。”

船夫走到小码头的边上，拿着绳子开始忙活起来。比特丽丝低声说：

“埃克索，不要让我们分开。”

“我们不会分开，公主。你看他绳结打得多牢，我们会一直在一起。”

“水流会把我们分开，埃克索，别去管这个人跟我们说的话。”

“我们会没事的，公主，很快就能到儿子的村里。”

船夫在喊他们，他们小心翼翼踩着几块小石头走下去，两只筐子在水中一上一下，船夫用一根长竿把筐子稳住。“里面铺好了兽皮，”他说，“你们几乎感觉不到河上的冷气。”

埃克索发现蹲下来身上很疼，但他还是一直双手扶着比特丽丝，直到她在第一个筐子里蹲下来，安全地坐好。

“不要站起来啊，公主，要不然筐子就危险了。”

“你自己不进来吗，埃克索？”

“现在就进来，就在你旁边。你看，这位好心人把我们俩紧紧绑在一起啦。”

“别丢下我一个人，埃克索。”

但是，她一边说着，一边似乎已经定下心来，在筐子里躺好，像个即将入睡的孩子。

“好心的先生，”埃克索说。“你看，我妻子冷得发抖。你有没有东西，可以借给她盖一盖？”

船夫也在看着比特丽丝，她侧身蜷缩着，闭上了眼睛。突然，船夫脱下身上的一件兽皮衣服，弯下腰，把衣服盖在她身上。她似乎没有注意——眼睛仍然是闭的——于是埃克索代妻子向他表示感谢。

“不客气，朋友。把所有东西都留在矮船屋那儿就行了。”他用长竿将他们推到河中心。“坐低点儿，棍子放在手边，防止野草。”

河面上冷得刺骨。破碎的冰块东一片西一片，不过他们的两个筐子能轻松通过，有时候还会轻轻碰一下。筐子的外形和船差不多，有船头船尾，不过容易打转，所以有时候埃克索一抬眼，又能望到上游岸边的船屋。

他们身边长草摇曳，晨曦从草间漫过来；正如船夫所说，河水平稳地流淌着，无风无浪。不过，埃克索仍旧一直望着比特丽丝的筐子，筐子里似乎全被兽皮衣服塞满了，只能看到一小撮头发，让人知道她还在里面。有一次他喊道：“公主，我们马上就能到啦，”她没有回答，于是他伸出手，把她的筐子拉近一点儿。

“公主，你在睡觉吗？”

“埃克索，你还在那儿？”

“当然啦，我在这儿。”

“埃克索。我还以为，可能你又离开我了呢。”

“我为什么要离开你呢，公主？而且那个人把我们俩的筐子紧紧绑在一起啊。”

“我不知道这是做梦还是回忆。可我刚才看到，我自己深夜站在我们的屋子里。那是很久以前，我身上紧紧裹着那件獾皮斗篷，是你好心做的，送给我当礼物。我就那样站着，还在我们以前住的屋子，不是现在那间，因为墙上从左到右编着山毛榉枝条，我看着一只毛毛虫沿着墙慢慢爬，心里想，夜这么深了，这只毛毛虫为什么不睡觉呢。”

“别管毛毛虫啦，你自己为什么半夜不睡觉，盯着墙看呢？”

“我想啊，埃克索，我站在那儿，是因为你走了，离开我了。也许那人给我盖的这件兽皮衣服，让我想起了以前那件，因为站在墙边的时候，我把那件衣服抓得紧紧的，那件你用獾皮给我做的衣服，后来在那场大火里烧掉了。我看着毛毛虫，问它为什么不睡觉，那样一个小动物知道白天和黑夜的分别吗？不过，我相信真正的原因是你走了，埃克索。”

“一个离奇的梦，公主，可能还要发烧呢。但我们很快就能烤上暖和的火啦。”

“你还在那儿吗，埃克索？”

“当然啦，我在这儿，船屋已经早就看不见啦。”

“那天晚上你不在我身边，埃克索。还有我们宝贝的儿子。他一两天前走的，他说等你回来的时候，他不愿意在家里。所以就只有我一个人，在我们原来的屋子里，深更半夜。但那时候我们还有蜡烛，所以我能看见那只毛毛虫。”

“你说的可真是个离奇的梦，公主，肯定是发烧受凉引起的。我真希望太阳别这么慢悠悠的，早点出来才好。”

“你说的对，埃克索。这儿很冷，盖着兽皮也冷。”

“我愿意把你抱在怀里暖和一下，可在这河上没办法。”

“埃克索。我们自己的儿子是不是某一天生气离开了我们，我们关上门，让他永远都不要回来？”

“公主，我看到前面水里有什么东西，也许是艘船，卡在芦苇丛里了。”

“你漂远了，埃克索。说话我都快听不见了。”

“我就在你身边，公主。”

他矮着身子坐在筐子里，双腿朝前伸着，这时候他两手扶着筐子的边缘，小心翼翼换成了蹲的姿势。

“现在看得更清楚了。是艘小船，卡在芦苇丛里了，在前面河岸拐弯的地方。正好在我们的路上，我们要小心，要不然也会卡住。”

“埃克索，不要离开我。”

“我就在你身边，公主。不过，我得抓住这根棍子，要避开这草丛。”

现在筐子越来越慢，朝河岸拐弯处那泥浆一样的河水里漂去。埃克索把棍子伸进河水，发现一下子就碰到了河底，他想把筐子往河中心推，但是棍子似乎被河底吸住了，没法用力气。这时，长满深草的田野上，天已经亮了，他看清楚了两只筐子四周都缠着厚厚的水草，好像要把他们牢牢绑在这片静止的泥水中一样。那艘船就在他们跟前，他们极其缓慢地漂过去，埃克索伸出棍子抵住船尾，两人的筐子停了下来。

“丈夫，这是另外那个船屋吗？”

“还没到。”埃克索抬眼望望另一边正在流动的河水。“很抱歉，公主。我们卡在芦苇丛里了。不过我们前面有艘桨划的小船，如果还没坏的话，后面的路我们可以自己划船。”埃克索再次将棍子伸进水里，慢慢把筐子撑到小船附近。

他们位置较低，抬头仰望，船显得很高大，埃克索能清楚地看到粗糙、破旧的木板，以及船舷上缘的底部，那上面挂着一排细小的冰柱，像蜡烛油一样。他把棍子插在水中，在筐子里小心翼翼地站起身来，朝小船中望去。

船首有一片橘色的光，他仔细一看，才发现堆在船板上的那一堆破旧衣服，原来是位上了年纪的女人。她衣服比较特殊——是由很多黑色的小布片拼缀而成的，而且脸上满是污垢，让埃克索一时没认出来。她坐的姿势也很奇怪，脑袋朝一边歪着，几乎碰到了船舱的地板。这个女人的衣服似乎让他想起了什么，这时她睁开了眼睛，看着他。

“陌生人啊，救救我，”她人没动，嘴里低声说道。

“你生病了吗，夫人？”

“我一只胳膊不能动了，否则我就站起来划桨了。救救我，陌生人。”

“你在跟谁说话呢，埃克索？”比特丽丝的声音从身后传来。
“小心啊，会不会是魔鬼？”

“就是个可怜的女人而已，可能比我们年纪还大，在船里受了伤。”

“不要忘了我，埃克索。”

“忘了你？我怎么会忘了你呢，公主？”

“这迷雾让我们忘记了很多东西。为什么不会让我们忘记对方呢？”

“那种事永远不会发生，公主。现在，我要帮这个可怜的女人啦，如果运气好的话，也许我们三个人都能坐她的船到下游去。”

“陌生人，我听见你说的话了。非常欢迎你们乘我的船。不过先帮帮我吧，我摔了跤，受伤了。”

“埃克索，不要把我丢在这儿。不要忘了我。”

“我就是到我们身边这艘船上去一下，公主。我要帮一帮这位可怜的陌生人。”

冷气让他四肢僵硬，爬上船的时候，他差点跌倒，不过他及时稳住了身子，四下里看看。

船看上去简单结实，没有明显的漏水痕迹。靠近船尾的地方堆着货物，但埃克索没怎么注意，因为那个女人又说话了。早晨的阳光仍旧照在她身上，他能看出来，她的眼睛盯着自己脚下，目光非常专注——以至于他自己也忍不住低头看看。他没注意到什么特别的东西，于是小心跨过船的龙骨，继续朝她走去。

“陌生人。我看得出来，你年纪不小了，但你还有力气。摆一副凶狠的模样给它们看。摆一副凶狠的模样，把它们吓走。”

“来吧，夫人。你能坐起来吗？”他这样问，是因为她奇怪的姿势让他担心，她松散的灰白头发披下来，都碰到了潮湿的地板。

“来，我来帮你。尽量坐起来一点儿。”

他弯下身子，手碰到了她，这时一把上锈的刀从她手里掉下来，落在地板上。与此同时，什么小动物从她那堆衣服里窜出来，匆匆忙忙跑进了黑暗中。

“那些老鼠给你添麻烦了吗，夫人？”

“到处都是，陌生人。听我的，摆副凶狠的模样给它们看。”

这时候他才想起来，刚才她不是看他的脚，而是看他脚后面的什么东西，在船的尾部。他转过身，阳光斜射过来，照得他眼花，无法看清楚那儿有什么东西在动。

“是老鼠吗，夫人？”

“它们怕你，陌生人。有一下子也怕我，但最后一点一点耗尽了我的气力。要不是你来，这时候它们肯定全在我身上了。”

“等一等，夫人。”

他举起一只手遮着太阳，迈步朝船尾走去，眼睛盯着黑暗中那一堆东西。缠在一起的网，一条堆成一团的水淋淋的毯子，一件类似于锄头的长柄工具横放在湿毯子上。还有一个没有盖子的木箱——渔夫用这种箱子来装抓到的鱼，以保持新鲜。他朝里面一看，却发现箱子里装的不是鱼，而是剥了皮的兔子，数量不少，密密匝匝堆着，细小的腿好像都缠在一起一样。就在他看着的时候，那一大堆肌肉、手肘、脚踝突然动了起来。埃克索往后退了一步，同时看到一只眼睛睁开了，接着又一只也睁开了。后面有声响，他转过身去，船的另一边仍然沐浴在橘色光亮之中，老太太缩在船头，浑身上下爬满了小妖精，多得数不清。初看之下，她似乎颇为享受，那些又瘦又小的家伙在她的破衣服里、脸上、肩膀上跑来跑去，好像都急着表达对她的喜爱。这时候越来越多的小精灵从河里冒出来，纷纷往船上爬。

埃克索弯腰去拿那件长柄工具，但他也被一种静谧感包裹住了，发现自己从乱糟糟的渔网中抽出工具时，悠闲自在得出奇。他知道越来越多的精灵从水里冒出来——多少已经上船了呢？三十？四十？——它们的声音合在一起，在他听来，好像是孩子们在远处玩耍。他并非完全心不在焉，还知道把那个长柄工具举起来——是把锄头，肯定没错，朝上的那一端不是有上了锈的刃口吗？抑或是又一个精灵趴在上面？——然后挥下来，砸在正朝船边上爬的那些小手指、小膝盖上。接着，又挥了第二下，这次砸向有剥皮兔子的那只箱子，更多精灵正从里面往外跑。不过，他一直算不得什么剑客，他所擅长的是外

交，如果有必要的话，还有阴谋。但是，外交为他赢来的信任，他又何曾背叛过？恰恰相反，是他自己被人背叛了，可他总还能挥动两下武器吧，现在他就要挥起锄头，东打西砸——他不是该保护比特丽丝，不让这群东西侵犯她吗？可是它们不停地拥过来，越来越多——还是从那个箱子里出来的吗？或者是从浅水里爬上来的？现在它们是不是已经围住了在筐子里睡觉的比特丽丝？锄头最后那一下子起了点效果，有几只掉进了水里，接着又是一下子，有两只甚至三只飞了出去，那位老太太只是个陌生人，与自己妻子相比，他对她能有什么义务呢？但她就在那儿，这个陌生女人，被一堆蠕动的精灵覆盖着，几乎看不见。埃克索走到船的另一头，举起锄头，在空中抡了一圈，在不伤害陌生人的情况下，尽可能扫开一些。可它们却不肯轻易放手！现在呢，它们竟然胆敢对他说话了一一抑或说话的是被它们覆盖着的老太太本人？

“别管她，陌生人。把她交给我们。别管她，陌生人。”

埃克索再次挥动锄头，锄头在空气中划过，好像划过浓稠的水，不过还是命中了目标，有几只被打散了，但更多的又赶了过来。

“把她交给我们，陌生人，”老太太又说道。这次埃克索突然想到，说话的人指的不是生命垂危的陌生人，而是比特丽丝。恐惧感扎进他心里，像深不见底的洞，他转头去看芦苇丛中妻子乘坐的那只筐子，发现筐子周围的水中纷纷扰扰，尽是手臂和肩膀。同时，一大群精灵从一侧往他自己乘坐的筐子上爬，差点把筐子掀翻，幸好筐子里已经有很多精灵，起到了压舱的作用。但是，它们爬上来，只是为了由此进入旁边的筐子。埃克索看见其他精灵正聚集到比特丽丝盖的兽皮上，他喊了一声，从船舷爬出去，落在水里。水比他想象的更深，直到腰部，但他只是打了个冷颤，便立即发出一声武士的吼叫，那声音似乎来自遥远的记忆。他把锄头高高举在头顶，摇摇晃晃朝筐子走去。精灵在拉他的衣服，而且水感觉像蜜一样稠，他一锄头砸在自己的筐子上，武器在空中划过的速度慢得让人心急，但一旦落下，精灵纷纷落水，比他想象的还多。接下来的一锄头，产生了更大的破坏——这次锄头的刃口肯定是朝外的，那被他砸飞到阳光之中的，难道不是带血的肉吗？然而，比特丽丝仍然遥不可及。她怡然自得地在水上漂着，精灵在她周围越积越多，有的来自陆地，从河岸的草丛中拥出来。有些甚至黏附在他的锄头上，他手一松，让锄头落在水里。突然之间，他只希望能赶到比特丽丝身边。

他踩着泥巴涉水而行，穿过野草，穿过折断的香蒲丛，但比特丽丝显得更加遥远。接着又传来了陌生人的声音。这时埃克索在水里，位置较低，看不见她，但他能想象出老太太的样子，清清楚楚印在脑海里，令人惊讶：她瘫倒在自己的船上，早晨的阳光照着，精灵们在她身上自由自在、到处乱跑，这时她的话传入他耳中：

“别管她，陌生人。把她交给我们。”

“诅咒你，”埃克索一边咬牙骂着，一边艰难地往前走。“我绝不会丢开她，绝不会。”

“你可是个明智的人啊，陌生人。你很早就知道，她的病已经没救啦。你到时候怎么能承受呢，那即将发生在她身上的事情？你希望这一天快快到来吗？好让你看着最爱的人痛苦地抽搐，而你除了在她耳边说几句好话，毫无其他办法？把她交给我们吧，我们会减轻她的痛苦，和之前我们为很多人做的一样。”

“诅咒你！我不会把她交给你们！”

“把她交给我们，我们保证，她将不再感到疼痛。我们将在河水中把她洗净，岁月的痕迹会从她身上消退，她就像在一场愉快的梦里。要留着她干什么呢，先生？除了动物被杀那样的痛苦，你还能给她什么呢？”

“我不会理你的。走开。离她远点。”

他把双手紧紧握在一起，两条胳膊伸直形成一根棍棒，摆过来，又摆过去，在水中开出一条路，最后终于来到比特丽丝跟前，她还在筐子里沉沉地睡着。精灵在她盖的兽皮上聚集，他用手一个个把它们拉下来、甩开。

“你为什么不把她留给我们？你这样可不是对她好。”

他在水里推着筐子往岸上走，河底渐高，筐子搁浅在湿泥上，周围是野草和香蒲。他弯下腰，双手把妻子从筐子里抱出来。幸好，她多少苏醒了一些，知道抱住他的脖子。两人踉踉跄跄往前走，先上了岸，然后又走了一会儿，来到田野上。埃克索感觉脚下的地面又干又硬，这才把妻子放下来，两人坐在草丛里，他喘着气，她则慢慢清醒过来。

“埃克索，我们这是到了什么地方？”

“公主，你感觉怎么样？我们必须离开这个地方。我来背着你。”

“埃克索，你身上都湿透啦！你掉进水里了吗？”

“这是个邪恶的地方，公主，我们必须马上离开。我很愿意背着你，年轻的时候我们俩傻兮兮的，春天暖和的日子里，我就是这样背着你玩儿的。”

“我们要离开这条河吗？高文爵士说得对啊，我们顺着河走，要快一些。这地方看起来很高，我们可没爬过这么高的山呢。”

“我们没别的办法，公主。我们必须离这儿远远的。来吧，我来背着你。来吧，公主，扶住我的肩膀。”

第十二章

埃德温听到武士的声音在下面喊，要他爬得慢一些，但他不予理会。维斯坦太慢了，而且似乎不明白当前情况的紧迫性。两人山崖还没爬到一半时，他曾问埃德温：“年轻的战友啊，刚从我们头顶飞过的，是一头鹰吗？”那究竟是什么，有什么关系呢？武士发了烧，所以脆弱了，身体上、意志上都脆弱了。

再爬一会儿就到了，至少他就翻过了山崖，能站到结实的地面上。那他就能奔跑了——他多么渴望奔跑啊！——可朝哪儿跑呢？这一下子，他们的目的地好像从脑海中飘走了一样。何况，还有更重要的事情要跟维斯坦说：他欺骗过维斯坦，现在差不多是坦白的时候了。他们把那匹筋疲力尽的母马系在山路旁一株小灌木上，然后开始爬山，那时候他就下定了决心，等到了山顶，就把一切和盘托出。可现在他就快到那儿了，脑海中却空空如也，思绪纷乱，像一团团烟雾。

他攀过最后几块岩石，起身站在悬崖的边缘。眼前的土地空旷荒凉，缓缓向上与地平线上灰白的山峰相连。附近有一块块的石楠地和野草地，不过成人的脚踝那么高。奇怪的是，在不远不近的某个地方，似乎有一片树林，树木葱翠，在大风中静静地立着。难道是某位神仙一时兴起，从密林中抓出一小撮来，放在这块荒凉的土地上？

埃德温气喘吁吁，但还是发力向前跑去。那片树林，肯定就是他该去的地方，一到那儿，他什么都会记起来。维斯坦的声音又在身后什么地方叫喊——武士肯定也爬上了崖顶——但埃德温不回头，跑得更快了。他要到那树林之中才开始坦白。在大树的遮掩之下，他会记得更清楚，两人谈话时也不会有呼啸的大风。

大地突然立起，迎面而来，撞得他差点儿闭过气去。这来得太突然，他头晕目眩，只能在地上躺一会儿，等他想跳起来的时候，背后却有个柔软而有力的东西摠住了他。这时他意识到，维斯坦用膝盖抵住了自己的后背，正在捆绑自己的双手。

“之前你问我们为什么带绳子，”维斯坦说。“现在你看多有作用。”

埃德温想起了两人在山下路上的谈话。他急着开始上山，看见武士小心翼翼地把东西从马鞍上放进两只口袋，他觉得很不耐烦。

“我们要快点儿，武士！要这些东西有什么用呢？”

“来，背着这个，战友。母龙已经够厉害了，我们犯不着又冻又饿，把自己弄垮，帮她的忙。”

“可气味会消失的！我们要绳子有什么用呢？”

“小战友，我们也许用得上啊，那时候要找，树枝上可长不出绳子来。”

现在，绳子不仅绑住了他的手，还缠住了他的腰，等他最后站起来，身后已经被绳子拽住，很难再向前走。

“武士，你不再是我的朋友和老师了吗？”

“都是，而且还是你的保护人。从现在开始，你可不能走得那么急啦。”

他发现自己并不在意绳子。受绳子所限，他只能像骡子那样走路，这让他想起了不久之前，他不得不扮演骡子的角色，围着马车不停地转圈。现在他又成了那头骡子吗，虽然被绳子拽着，却仍旧固执地往山坡上走？

他走着、走着，偶尔一口气能迈出好几步，然后绳子就把他拉停了。他耳朵里有一个声音——熟悉的声音——一半是歌唱，半是吟诵，那是一首童谣，他从小就很熟悉。这声音令人又舒心又担忧，而且他发现，如果一边拽绳子，一边跟着唱，那声音就不再那么令人心烦。于是他就跟着唱，一开始声音很低，然后他嗓子逐渐放开，迎风而歌：“谁打翻了麦酒杯？谁砍断了龙的尾？谁把蛇留在桶内？是你的表兄艾德尼？”还有一些词他记不起来了，但让他惊讶的是，他只要跟着那声音吟唱，正确的歌词就会自动出来。

树林很近了，武士又一次把他拉住。

“慢点儿啊，小战友。进入这片奇怪的树林，光靠勇气是不够的。你看那边。这么高的山上有松树倒也没什么，但是旁边的难道不是橡树和榆树吗？”

“别去管这儿长着什么树啦，武士，也别管天空上飞的是什么鸟！我们剩下的时间很少，要快点！”

他们进了树林，脚下的地变了：有柔软的苔藓、荨麻甚至蕨类。头顶树叶浓密，像屋顶一样，所以他们在半明半暗之中走了一会儿。但是，这却不是真正意义上的森林，因为不久他们就看到一处空地，上方露出圆形的天空来。埃德温想，如果这真是某位神祇的杰作，那么他肯定是想用树来隐藏前方的什么东西。他愤怒地拉着绳子，说道：

“磨蹭什么呢，武士？难道你是害怕了吗？”

“看看这个地方，小战友。你猎人的本能看来发挥了作用。我们前方肯定就是龙的巢穴。”

“我们两人中，我才是猎人，武士。我告诉你，那空地里没有龙。我们要快点从旁边过去，然后继续向前，还有更多路要走呢！”

“你的伤口，小战友。让我看看，伤口是不是还那么干净。”

“别管我的伤口啦！我告诉你，这气味会消失的！松开绳子，武士。就算你不跑，我也要继续跑！”

这次，维斯坦放开了他，埃德温从蓟草和交错的树根上跑过去。他绊了几跤，因为他被绑着，不能伸出手去保持平衡。不过，到达空地的时候，他并没有受伤。他在空地边缘停下脚步，看着眼前的景象。

空地中央有个池塘。水面冻住了，如果有人很勇敢或很愚蠢的话，可以在上面走，二十来步就能到对岸。冰面平滑如镜，只在靠近对岸的地方，一棵死树树干中空，从上面冒出来。岸上，离枯树不远的地方，有一只巨大的食人兽，手肘和膝盖着地，蹲在水边，脑袋全部没在水中。也许这野兽正在喝水——或者在找水面下方的什么东西——后来水突然结冰，把他冻在里面了。如果不注意看，那食人兽像具无头尸体，爬到池塘边喝水的时候被人砍掉了脑袋。

池塘上方那块天空，将奇怪的光射在那食人兽身上，埃德温盯着它看了一会儿，简直觉得这食人兽会活过来，突然抬起一张可怖、涨红的脸。然后，他吃惊地发现，池塘右手边远处，还有一头野兽，姿势一模一样。那儿还有！——第三只，就在他面前不远，在这边的岸上，身体被蕨类遮住了一部分。

一般情况下，食人兽只会让他感到厌恶，但这些食人兽，以及那令人伤心的离奇姿势，让埃德温感到有些同情。是什么让它们遭遇了

这种命运呢？他迈步朝它们走去，可身上的绳子又拉紧了，维斯坦的声音就在身后：

“战友，你仍然不承认这是龙的巢穴吗？”

“不是这儿，武士。我们要继续往前走。”

“可这地方在跟我说话呢。就算不是巢穴，难道不是她来喝水洗澡的地方吗？”

“我看这个地方受到了诅咒，武士，不该在这儿跟她战斗。在这儿我们只会遭到厄运。你看看那些可怜的食人兽。简直和你那天晚上杀死的魔鬼一样大。”

“你在说什么呢，孩子？”

“你没看到吗？你看，那儿！还有那儿！”

“埃德温阁下，你太疲惫了，我之前就担心这事。我们休息一会儿吧。就算这个地方阴森森的，至少可以避避风。”

“你怎么能想到休息呢，武士？这些可怜的家伙不就是这么倒霉的吗，在这中了魔咒的地方待得太久了？它们这可是在发出危险信号啊，武士，你要留意！”

“我只需要留意一个危险信号，那就是让你休息，可不能让你把自己的心脏给跑炸了。”

他感到被人向后拽，后背撞上了一棵树。然后武士围着他转圈，他胸部和肩部被绳子捆住，几乎一点儿也动不了。

“这棵树可没害你，小战友。”武士一只手轻轻地搭在他肩膀上。“干吗要这样浪费力气，把树拔起来呢？依我看，你还是安静下来休息休息吧，让我来仔细看看这地方。”

他看着维斯坦小心地穿过荨麻丛，朝池塘走去。到了水边，武士先来回慢慢走了几趟，眼睛盯着地面，有时候如果发现了特别的东西，还会蹲下来查看。然后他直起身子，似乎陷入了长时间的冥想之中，目光越过树梢，落在池塘的对岸。在埃德温看来，武士现在近乎成了一个剪影，背景是冰封的水面。他为什么都不去看那些食人兽呢？

维斯坦身体一动，突然之间手里已经多了把剑，拿剑的胳膊伸着，在空气中纹丝不动。然后剑又回到了鞘中，武士转过身来，迈步

往回走。

“我们可不是最早到这儿来的，”他说。“过去一小时内，有其他人来过这儿，而且不是那条母龙。埃德温阁下，你平静了一些，我很高兴。”

“武士，我有事情要向你坦白。一说出来，你也许当场就要把我杀掉，哪怕我现在绑在这棵树上。”

“说吧，孩子，不要害怕我。”

“武士，你说我有猎人的天赋，在你说那话的时候，我感觉到一股强烈的力量吸引着我，于是就让你相信，我鼻子里闻到了魁瑞格的气息。但是，我一直在骗你。”

维斯坦走过来，站到他跟前。

“接着说，战友。”

“我没法接着说，武士。”

“你应该更加害怕自己的沉默，而不是我的愤怒。说！”

“我说不了，武士。我们俩刚开始爬山的时候，我知道该怎么跟你说。可是现在……我究竟对你隐瞒了什么，我都不太确定了。”

“是那条母龙的气息，没别的了。它以前对你没什么影响，可现在已经控制你了。我们离它很近了，这是个明确的信号。”

“我担心，这个受诅咒的池塘让我着了魔，武士，可能也让你着了魔，让你心满意足地晃来晃去，都懒得看那些被淹死的食人兽。不过，我知道我有事情该向你坦白，就是想不起来是什么事，要是能想起来就好了。”

“只要带我找到母龙的巢穴，无论你跟我撒过什么小谎，我都可以原谅。”

“可问题就在这里啊，武士。我们拼命赶路，马累得心脏都差点炸了，然后又爬上了这座陡峭的山，可我压根儿就没带你去找母龙。”

维斯坦靠得那么近，埃德温都能感觉到他的呼吸。

“那你带着我，埃德温阁下，是要上哪儿呢？”

“是我母亲，武士，现在我想起来了。我阿姨不是我母亲。我真正的母亲被抓走了，那时候我还是个小孩，但我看在眼里。我答应过她，总有一天我会带她回来。现在我快成人了，还有你在身边，就是那些人看到我们也会颤抖的。我骗了你，武士，但是请你理解我的感受，既然我们离她这么近了，就帮帮我吧。”

“你母亲。你是说她在这附近？”

“是的，武士。但不在这儿。不是这个受诅咒的地方。”

“抓走她的那些人，你还有印象吗？”

“他们样子很凶恶，武士，而且好像是杀人的老手。那天，村里谁也不敢站出来。”

“撒克逊人还是不列颠人？”

“是不列颠人，武士。三个人，斯特法说他们不久之前肯定当过兵，因为他能看出来，他们身上有士兵的样子。我还不到五岁，否则我就要为她战斗。”

“我自己的母亲也是被抓走的，小战友，所以我很理解你的想法。而且，她被抓的时候，我也是个没有力量的孩子。那是战争年月，我很傻，我看过那些家伙杀死、绞死了很多人，所以看到他们对我母亲笑，我还以为他们会善待她，对她好。也许你也是这样吧，埃德温阁下，你那时候还小，还不了解男人。”

“我母亲是和平时期被抓走的，武士，所以没有遭遇大的伤害。她一直在各个国家之间到处游荡，这种日子也许不算差。可她一直想回到我身边，而且和她一起游荡的那些人，有时候很残酷。武士，接受我的坦白吧，回头再来惩罚我，现在请你帮助我面对抓我母亲的人，她已经等了我很多年了。”

维斯坦用奇怪的目光瞪着他。他似乎张口要说什么，却摇了摇头，往旁边走开几步，简直像做错了事一样。埃德温从没见过武士这副模样，很吃惊地看着。

“我可以原谅你这次的欺骗，埃德温阁下，”维斯坦终于转过脸来，开口说道。“也原谅你可能说过的其他小谎话。而且，我很快就会把你从树上解开，无论你带我去见什么敌人，我们两人都一起去。但是，作为条件，我要你答应我一件事。”

“说吧，武士。”

“如果我死了，你还活着，那么你要答应我这件事。答应我，你要在心里仇恨不列颠人。”

“这是什么意思呢，武士？哪些不列颠人？”

“小战友，是所有的不列颠人。包括对你友好的那些人。”

“我不明白，武士。与我分享面包的不列颠人，我也要仇恨吗？如果有人救了我的命呢，比如最近救了我的高文爵士？”

“有些不列颠人似乎值得我们尊敬甚至爱戴，这一点我最了解。但是，与个人的感受相比，现在有更大的事情要我们承担。屠杀我们族人的，是亚瑟领导的不列颠人。抓走你母亲和我母亲的，是不列颠人。我们有义务去仇恨每一个不列颠男人、女人和孩子。所以你要答应我。如果我在传授你本领之前就倒下去，你答应我，要保护好你心中的仇恨。如果这火变弱或者可能熄灭，那你要小心照料，让火焰再燃烧起来。这你能答应吗，埃德温阁下？”

“很好，武士，我答应。可是现在我听见了母亲的召唤，我们在这个阴暗的地方也待了很久了。”

“那么，我们去找她吧。但你要要有心理准备，也许我们太迟了，不一定救得了她。”

“这是什么意思呢，武士？那怎么可能呢，她现在还在召唤我呢。”

“那我们就抓紧时间去吧。记住一件事情就行了，小战友。救援未必来得及，但报仇的机会多得是。让我再听一遍你的承诺。答应我，你要一直仇恨不列颠人，直到你受伤倒下，或者年老死去。”

“我很高兴地再次承诺，武士。把我从树上解下来吧，现在我能清楚地感觉到我们该走哪条路了。”

第十三章

埃克索能看出来，那只山羊在这山里过得悠闲自在。山风很大，而且羊的左边两条腿位置高，右边两条腿位置低，但它统统不理睬，正开心地啃着草皮和石楠。这羊力气很大——上山的时候，埃克索已经领教了——他和比特丽丝需要休息，要找个地方把羊拴牢，也很不容易。最后他发现了一个死树根，从山坡的地面上突出来，于是把绳子仔细拴在树根上。

从他们现在坐的地方，能清楚地看到山羊。那两块大岩石相互依靠着，像一对老夫妻，他们还没爬上来的时候就已经看到了，不过埃克索并不想到岩石那儿休息，他希望能提前找个地方避避风。山坡上光秃秃的，什么也没有，他们只好继续坚持，沿着窄窄的山路往上爬，山风猛烈，那头羊也和山风一样任性。等他们最后来到这两块岩石旁，才发现这似乎是上帝为他们准备好的避难所，周围大风呼号，他们却只感觉到空气微微拂动。不过，两人还是紧紧依偎着，好像是害怕头顶的岩石一样。

“埃克索，这整片旷野还在我们下方啊。我们不是顺着那条河下去的吗？”

“没走多远，后来上了岸，公主。”

“现在我们又爬上了山。”

“没错，公主。上山究竟有多难，恐怕那个小姑娘没跟我们说。”

“这是肯定的，埃克索，她说得好像散步一样轻松。但谁又能责怪她呢？还是个孩子，却比同龄人多出那么多操心事。埃克索，你看那边。下面那个山谷里，看见他们了吗？”

埃克索抬起一只手挡住阳光，使劲朝他妻子指的方向看，但最后他还是摇了摇头。“公主，我的眼睛没你好。下面一座座山连着，一个山谷接着一个山谷，但我看不到什么特殊的東西。”

“那边，埃克索，顺着我的指头看。那不是一排士兵吗？”

“现在我看到了，没错。但他们不在动吧。”

“在动啊，埃克索，可能是士兵，走路排着长队。”

“我眼睛不好，公主，我看一点儿也没动。就算是士兵，离我们那么远，也不会给我们添麻烦。我更担心西边的风暴云啊，要说添麻烦，那比远处的士兵可要快得多。”

“你说得对，丈夫，不知道我们还要走多远的路。那个小姑娘没说实话，她一直说像散步一样轻松。可我们能责怪她吗？她父母不在，还要操心弟弟们呢。她让我们来做这件事，肯定也是被逼无奈，没别的办法了。”

“我看得更清楚了，公主，云后面露出来了一点儿太阳。那不是士兵，也不是人，是一排鸟。”

“真是傻话，埃克索。如果是鸟，我们从这儿怎么能看得见呢？”

“公主，它们没你想的那么远。黑色的鸟，排成一排坐着，山里的鸟是这样。”

“那么，我们看的时候，怎么没有一只鸟飞起来呢？”

“等会儿也许就有鸟飞起来了，公主。至少我呢，是不会责怪那个小姑娘的，她的处境不是也很艰难吗？我们刚看到她的时候，浑身都是湿的，冻得发抖，要不是她帮忙，我们还不知道怎么样呢？而且啊，公主，我记得，急着要把这山羊牵到巨人冢的，可不止她一个人呢。你刚才不也是同样焦急吗？还不到一个小时。”

“我现在还很焦急，埃克索。杀掉魁瑞格，这迷雾就没了，难道不是好事吗？只不过刚才我看着山羊那样悠闲地啃草皮，很难相信这样一个傻家伙，竟然能够对付巨大的母龙。”

之前他们初次看到那个石头小屋的时候，那只山羊也和现在一样，正心满意足地啃着草。小屋隐藏在一道隐隐耸现的山崖脚下的阴暗处，很容易错过，比特丽丝指给埃克索看，埃克索还以为那是个入口，里面是居住区，和家乡的房子差不多，是山腰上挖出来的。他们走近之后，才发现那是个独立的房子，墙和屋顶都是一块块的深灰色岩石。水从高处淌下来，像一条细线，落在崖壁前，聚在离石屋不远的的一个池子里，然后顺着坡地流走。石屋前方不远处，有一个很小的牧场，用篱笆围着，被初升的太阳照得明晃晃的，整个牧场里只有一只山羊。它和往常一样正忙着吃草，看到埃克索和比特丽丝，惊讶地瞪大眼睛看着。

不过，孩子们还没注意到他们。女孩和她两个弟弟站在一条沟的边上，背对着他们，正全神贯注看着脚下什么东西。有一次，其中一个小男孩朝沟里扔了什么东西，女孩一急，拉住他的胳膊往后拽。

“他们这是在干什么呢，埃克索？”比特丽丝说。“看起来像是调皮捣蛋，可最小的那个太小啦，一不小心会滚下去。”

他们从山羊旁经过，孩子们还没注意到，埃克索尽量轻柔地喊了一声：“愿上帝与你们同在。”三个孩子都警觉地转过身来。

三人脸上都有内疚的表情，佐证了比特丽丝的想法，他们可能在顽皮。女孩比两个男孩要高出一头，她迅速缓过神来，脸带微笑。

“老人家！欢迎你们！昨天晚上我们还祈祷呢，请上帝让你们来，看看，你们这就来了！欢迎，欢迎！”

她踩着水汪汪的草地走过来，两个弟弟在后面跟着。

“你认错人啦，孩子，”埃克索说。“我们就是两个迷路的行人，又冷又累，刚刚在河里被野精灵攻击，衣服全湿了。能不能喊一声你的母亲或父亲，允许我们取取暖，借个火烤烤衣服？”

“我们没弄错，先生！昨晚我们向上帝耶稣祈祷，现在你们就到啦！请吧，老人家，到屋里来，火都生好了。”

“但是，你的父母呢，孩子？”比特丽丝问。“我们虽然很疲惫，但也不愿意闯进人家，要等房子的女主人或男主人召唤才能进门吧。”

“现在就我们三个人啦，夫人，所以你可以称呼我为房子的女主人！请进去，取取暖吧。梁上挂的袋子里有食物，火旁边有木柴。进去吧，老人家，我们先不打扰你们休息了，我们要看着山羊。”

“我们感谢你的好意，孩子，”埃克索说。“但请你告诉我们，最近的村庄离这儿远吗？”

女孩脸上掠过一层阴云，她看了看已经在两旁站好的弟弟。然后，她再次微笑道：“先生，我们这是住在很高的山上。离其他村子都很远，所以请你们留在我们这儿，享受我们提供的火和食物吧。你们肯定很累了，我也能看出来，这风吹得你们发抖。所以呢，离开的话，就不要再说了。进屋去休息吧，老人家，我们已经等了你们很久了！”

“那沟里面有什么东西，让你们这么关心啊？”比特丽丝突然问。

“噢，没什么，夫人！什么也没有！你看你们还站在风里，衣服都是湿的！难道你们不愿意接受我们的招待，不愿意到我们的火边休息吗？你们看，火堆的烟都从屋顶上冒出来了呢！”

* * *

“那儿！”埃克索从岩石上起身，用手指着。“一只鸟飞上天啦。我不是跟你说过嘛，公主，那是鸟排成了一排。它在空中越飞越高，看见没？”

比特丽丝刚才也站起来了，这时她往外迈了一步，走出两块岩石形成的避难所，埃克索看到风立即把她的衣服吹了起来。

“没错，是一只鸟，”她说。“但不是从那一排里面飞出来的。也许你还没看到我手指的东西，埃克索。我说的是那儿，在更远的那道山梁上，那些黑色的东西，几乎都贴着天空。”

“我能看见，公主。别站在风里，回来吧。”

“无论是不是士兵，他们都在慢慢移动。那只鸟不是从那儿飞起来的。”

“别站在风里，公主，坐下来吧。我们要尽量留些力气。谁知道我们还要拉着这只羊走多远呢？”

比特丽丝回到栖身的地方，把从孩子们那儿借来的斗篷裹得紧紧的。她再次挨着丈夫坐下来，说道：“埃克索，你真的相信吗？有那么多了不起的骑士、武士，倒是我们这对没有气力的老夫妻，在自家村子里连蜡烛都不许点，竟然能杀死这条母龙？靠这头脾气倔犟的山羊帮我们就够啦？”

“谁知道是不是这样呢，公主。也许这都是那个小姑娘的痴心妄想，没有根据。但我们感谢她的热情招待，按她说的做也是应该的。也许她说得对，谁知道呢，说不定这样能杀了魁瑞格呢。”

“埃克索，你跟我说说。如果母龙真被杀死了，这迷雾也散了，我们会记起很多事来。埃克索啊，你有没有害怕过呢？”

“你自己不是说过了吗，公主？我们一起的日子，就像一个结局美好的故事，无论这过程中有什么曲折。”

“我之前说过这话，埃克索。可是，现在我们真的可能亲手杀死魁瑞格了，我还是有点儿害怕迷雾会散掉。你也是这样吗，埃克索？”

“也许是吧，公主。也许我一直就有些担心。但我最害怕你之前说过的话。就是我们在火堆旁休息的时候说的。”

“我那时候说什么啦，埃克索？”

“你不记得啦，公主？”

“我们是不是愚蠢地争吵啦？我现在不记得了，只知道当时又冷又累，大脑都不转了。”

“既然你不记得了，公主，那就这样忘了这事吧。”

“可是，埃克索，自从离开孩子们以后，我就有种感觉。好像你在疏远我，我们一起走路的时候都是这样，可不仅仅是因为那头难拉的山羊。我现在不记得了，会不会是因为我们之前吵架了呢？”

“我可不是有意要疏远你，公主。请原谅。如果不是因为山羊拽来拽去的话，那肯定是因为我在想我们俩说过的什么傻话。相信我，还是忘记了好。”

* * *

他把房间中央的火烧旺，小屋里的其他地方都暗下来。埃克索把衣服一件一件拿到火堆旁烘干，比特丽丝垫着几块小毯子，在一旁安稳地睡着。可是，突然之间，她坐起身来，四周张望着。

“火太热了吗，公主？”

有一下子，她脸上仍然很迷茫，然后她又疲惫地躺在毯子上。不过，她眼睛仍然睁着，埃克索正打算再问一遍，她却低声说道：

“丈夫啊，我是在想很久以前的一个晚上。你走了，留下我一个人在床上，心里不知道你还会不会回来。”

“公主，虽然我们躲开了河上那些精灵，但我担心你身上的咒还没完全解除，所以才会做这些梦。”

“不是梦，丈夫。就是记忆中的一两件事情又回想起来了。那个晚上特别黑，我就在那儿，一个人在床上，我心里清楚，你去找更年轻、更漂亮的女人去了。”

“你还不相信我吗，公主？这都是那些精灵，还在我们俩之间捣蛋。”

“也许你说得对，埃克索。就算那真是记忆，也是很久以前了。不过呢……”她没说话了，埃克索以为她又打盹睡着了。可她又接着说道：“不过呢，丈夫，那些回忆让我不敢亲近你。等我们休息好了，再次上路的时候，让我走在前面一点儿，你在后面。我们就这样走吧，丈夫，因为我将不欢迎你在我身旁。”

听到这话，一开始他没说什么。然后他把衣服从火边拿开，放下来，转头看着她。她的眼睛又闭上了，但他肯定她没有睡着。过了很久，埃克索终于能说出话来，不过声音很轻。

“那将是最令我伤心的事，公主。当地面够宽时，却和你分开走路——我们以前总是一起走的。”

比特丽丝似乎并没有听到，功夫不大，她的呼吸变得悠长均匀。他穿上刚烘好的衣服，在一块毯子上躺下来，离他妻子不远，但没有碰到她。他从骨子里感到疲惫，然而他又一次看到那些精灵在他面前的河水中挤作一团，还有他在空中挥下的锄头，落在它们中间，他想起了那像孩子们在远处玩耍一般的声音，想起了自己如何打斗，简直像个武士一样，声音里充满愤怒。现在呢，她说了这话。他脑海里浮现出一幅画面，清晰、逼真：他和比特丽丝走在山路上，头顶是空阔的灰色天空，她走在前面，离他有几步远，他心里涌起一股深深的凄凉感。他们就那样走着，一对老夫妻，低着头，隔着五六步的距离。

醒来的时候，他发现火已经熄了，火堆冒着烟，比特丽丝站在那儿，隔着石头间的一道小缝向外望，这样的屋子，石头间的缝隙也就成了窗户。他又想起了两人最近的谈话，可比特丽丝转过身来，一块三角形的阳光照在她的脸上，她兴高采烈地说道：

“刚才看到外面日头高了，埃克索啊，我打算喊醒你。可我一直想着你在河里泡了那么久，恐怕还要多休息，不是打个盹就可行的。”

他没有回答，她这才问道：“怎么啦，埃克索？为什么这样看着我？”

“我感到欣慰、高兴，才一直盯着你，公主。”

“我感觉好多啦，埃克索。休息一下就好了。”

“这我现在能看出来。那么，我们就快点上路吧，你说的，我们睡觉的时候，日头已经高啦。”

“我一直在看那几个孩子，埃克索。这时候还站在那条沟旁边呢，和我们刚到的时候一样。下面有什么东西把他们吸引住了，我敢打赌，肯定是在顽皮，因为他们经常往后面看，好像担心被大人发现挨批评一样。他们的亲人都上哪儿去了呢，埃克索？”

“那不干我们的事，而且他们好像也能吃饱穿暖。我们去告别，然后上路吧。”

“埃克索，我和你之前争吵了吗？我感觉我们俩之间好像有点事儿。”

“没什么不能放下的，公主。不过也许等会儿我们就会谈起来，谁知道呢？我们还是赶紧动身吧，否则等会儿又要又冷又饿啦。”

他们走进清冷的阳光下，埃克索看到草上结着一块块的冰，天空辽阔，重峦叠嶂，绵延到天际。山羊在那边的围栏里吃东西，脚边有一只满是泥浆、倒扣的桶。

三个孩子仍然在沟边，朝沟里望着，背对着小屋，似乎在争吵。女孩最先发觉埃克索和比特丽丝，人还没有完全转过身来，脸上已经绽出灿烂的微笑。

“亲爱的老人家！”她拉着弟弟，迅速从沟边离开。“我们家很简陋，希望你们休息得还算舒服！”

“的确很舒服，孩子，我们非常感激。现在我们休息好了，可以动身啦。你们的家人呢，为什么把你们丢下不管？”

女孩和站在她两边的弟弟们互相看了看。然后，她有些犹豫地说道：“我们自己过，先生，”说着用两条胳膊分别挽住了两个弟弟。

“沟里有什么东西，你们那么关心？”比特丽丝问。

“是我们的山羊，夫人。那是我们最好的羊呢，可是死了。”

“山羊怎么死了呢，孩子？”埃克索轻声问。“那边那一只看起来很好嘛。”

孩子们又互相看了看，眼神来去之间似乎做好了决定。

“你去看看吧，先生，”说着，女孩放开两个弟弟，迈步让到一边。

他朝沟边走去，比特丽丝与他并肩走着。走了一半，埃克索停下来，低声说道：“公主啊，让我一个人先去吧。”

“难道你以为死山羊我以前都没见过，埃克索？”

“虽然见过，公主啊，你还是在这儿等一下。”

沟有一人深。这时候太阳几乎直射进沟里，里面有什么，应该很容易看清楚；但是，阳光却形成了重重晦暗难辨的阴影，有水洼的地方结了冰，冰面上光影交错、令人眩晕。那山羊原来似乎非常大，现在却碎成很多块，散落在各处。那儿一条后腿，这儿是脖子和脑袋——脸上的表情似乎颇为平静。过了一会儿，他才辨认出山羊柔软的腹部，向上袒露着，黑色的泥浆中慢慢显出一只大手来，按在山羊的肚子上。这时候埃克索才意识到，一开始他以为那只是一只死山羊，但实际上大部分属于另外一个东西，与山羊缠在一起。那边突起的部分是它的肩膀；那儿是僵硬的膝盖。接着，他发现有点动静，这才意识到沟里那个东西是活的。

“你看见什么啦，埃克索？”

“不要上前，公主。这可不是让你开心的东西。我猜是个可怜的食人兽吧，要死了，但一时又死不了，也许这些孩子犯傻，扔了个山羊给它，以为它吃点东西就能好起来。”

就在他说话的时候，一个没有毛发的大脑袋在泥浆中慢慢旋转，一只眼睛瞪得大大的，也跟着转动。然后泥浆快速下陷，形成一个漩涡，那个脑袋不见了。

“我们没有喂食人兽，先生，”女孩在他身后说。“我们知道决不能给食人兽喂食物，它们来了，我们就该躲进屋子关好门。这个食人兽来了，我们就是这么做的，先生，我们从窗户里看着它拉倒篱笆，抓走了我们最好的羊。然后它就坐在那儿，先生，就是你站的地方，两条腿挂在沟边，像小婴儿那样，开心地吃着山羊，生吃的，食人兽都这样。我们知道不能开门，太阳都快下山了，那个食人兽还在吃我们的山羊，但我们能看出来，它越来越虚弱。最后它终于站起身来，手里拿着剩下的山羊，然后它就摔倒了，先是跪着，接着就侧着身子倒下去。再后来呢，它就滚进沟里了，还拿着山羊呢，在沟里待两天了，还没死。”

“我们走远一点儿吧，孩子，”埃克索说。“你和你弟弟最好别看。可是，这可怜的食人兽怎么会病成这样呢？难道你家的山羊生病

了？”

“不是生病了，先生，是有毒！我们按照布朗温教的方法，喂了它整整一个多礼拜。每天喂六次叶子。”

“你为什么这么这么做呢，孩子？”

“哎呀，先生，让山羊有毒，给母龙吃啊。这可怜的食人兽又不知道，所以把自己给毒了。但这不是我们的错，先生，因为它本来就不该抢东西！”

“等一下，孩子，”埃克索说。“你是说你们是有意这么喂羊的，让它身上带毒？”

“为母龙准备的毒，先生，但布朗温说，不会伤害我们。你看，我们怎么知道这毒会伤害食人兽呢？不是我们的错，先生，我们也没有恶意！”

“孩子啊，谁也不会责怪你们。不过，请你告诉我，你们为什么想要毒死魁瑞格呢？你们说的母龙就是它吧。”

“哎呀，先生！我们早上晚上都祈祷，有时候白天也祈祷。今天早上你们来的时候，我们就知道，上帝派你们来了。拜托啦，你们就是来帮助我们的，是吧！我们不过是可怜的孩子，被我们的父母遗忘了！我们就只剩下这只羊了，你们能把羊带过去吗，沿着那条路牵上山，到巨人冢去？路很容易走的，先生，来回要不了半天，我不能丢下这两个小的，要不然我就自己去了。我们喂这只羊的方法，和被食人兽吃掉的那只一样，这只还多吃了三天叶子呢。先生，你只要把羊牵到巨人冢，拴好丢在那儿，让母龙来吃就行了，而且路很好走，像散步一样轻松。答应我们吧，老人家，因为除此之外，我们担心再也没有别的办法能让我们亲爱的父母回来了。”

“你总算谈到父母了，”比特丽丝说。“要怎么做，才能让父母回到你们身边呢？”

“我们刚才不是说过了吗，夫人？你们只要把山羊带上山，丢在巨人冢就行了，大家都知道经常有人留食物在那儿给母龙。然后呢，谁知道，她会消失吧，就像那可怜的食人兽一样，吃山羊之前，那食人兽看起来可是很强壮的！以前我们一直害怕布朗温，因为她会巫术，但是她看到我们就我们住在这儿，父母把我们给忘记了，就同情我们。所以，老人家，请你们帮助我们，谁知道以后什么时候有人会来

这儿呢？就算有士兵或者陌生人经过，我们也害怕露面，但你们就是我们求上帝耶稣派来的人。”

“可是，这个世界，你们这样的小孩子知道什么呢，”埃克索问，“竟会相信一只有毒的山羊就能把你们的父母带回到身边？”

“这是布朗温跟我们说的，先生，虽然她是个可怕的老太太，但是她从不撒谎。她说，我们的父母把我们忘了，是因为那条母龙住在这里。我们经常调皮，让母亲生气，但是布朗温说，她只要一记起我们，就会急忙赶来，一个一个抱住我们，就像这样。”女孩突然做出把小孩抱在胸前的样子，眼睛闭着，轻轻摇晃了一会儿。然后，她睁开眼睛，继续说道：“但是，现在母龙下了咒，让我们的父母把我们忘了，所以他们不会回家。布朗温说，受母龙诅咒的不仅仅是我们，而是所有人，它消失得越早越好。所以呢，先生啊，我们就卖力干活，两只羊都完全按她说的那样喂，一天喂六次。拜托答应我们的请求吧，否则我们就永远也见不到母亲和父亲啦。我们只请求你们，把山羊带到巨人冢拴好就行了，然后你们想去哪儿就去哪儿。”

比特丽丝正准备讲话，但埃克索抢先说道：“对不起啊，孩子。我们也希望能帮忙，但爬那么高，到山里去，我们已经不行啦。我们老啦，你也看得出来，又在路上走了好多天，没力气啦。我们也没办法，只好快点上路，以免又遇到不幸的事情。”

“可是，先生啊，是上帝亲自把你们送到我们面前的！而且路很短，很轻松，从这儿开始没有一个陡坡。”

“亲爱的孩子啊，”埃克索说，“我们心里都向着你，到下一个村庄，我们就请人帮忙。但是我们太虚弱了，你让我们做的事情，我们做不了，肯定还会有人从这儿经过，愿意帮你把羊牵过去。我们这些老人可不行，但我们会祈祷你们父母归来，祈祷上帝保佑，让你们永远平安无事。”

“不要走，老人家！食人兽中了毒，不是我们的错。”

埃克索拉着妻子的胳膊，转身离开孩子们。两人经过山羊圈的时候，他才回头看，孩子们仍旧站在那儿，三人排成一排，默默地看着，身后就是直插云霄的崖壁。埃克索挥挥手表示鼓励，但他心里感到有些羞愧——也许还有遥远记忆的痕迹，一次类似的告别——于是加快了脚步。

他们没走多远——泥泞的地面刚开始下降，眼前出现了宽阔的谷地——比特丽丝拉拉他的胳膊，让他慢下来。

“丈夫啊，刚才孩子们在场，我不想绕开你跟他们说话，”她说。“可是，我们真的没能力帮他们做这件事吗？”

“他们目前没有危险，公主，我们有我们的事情。你身上的痛怎么样啦？”

“我身上的痛没有加重。埃克索，看看那些孩子，我们走了，他们还一直看着，我们在他们眼里都变成小点了吧。我们至少可以在这块石头这儿歇一下，再谈谈这件事吧？我们不要不加考虑就急忙离开。”

“不要回头看他们，公主，那样只会勾起他们的希望。我们不能回去，也不去牵羊，我们要往下走，到这个山谷里，烤烤火，吃点好心的陌生人给的食物。”

“可是，埃克索，想想他们的请求吧。”比特丽丝这时让两人停下了脚步。“我们还有可能碰上这样的机会吗？想一想！我们碰巧到了这个地方，离魁瑞格的巢穴这么近。那些孩子又有一头有毒的山羊，虽然我们又老又弱，但有了山羊，说不定我们两个人就能杀死母龙呢！想一想吧，埃克索！如果魁瑞格死了，迷雾很快就会散掉。也许那些孩子说得对，也许真的是上帝把我们领到了这儿，谁知道呢？”

埃克索又沉默了一会儿，努力克制回头看那座石屋的冲动。“山羊能不能伤害到魁瑞格，还很难说呢，”他开口说道。“一头倒霉的食人兽是一回事。这头母龙，可是个连军队都能打散的家伙。我们这样一对老傻瓜，晃到离她巢穴那么近的地方，恐怕不明智吧？”

“我们不用去面对她，埃克索，只要拴好山羊，然后快点走。魁瑞格可能要过好几天才会到那个地方，到那时候，我们已经安全地到了儿子的村庄啦。埃克索，我俩在一起这么久的记忆，难道我们都不想要回来吗？难道我们要变得像某个晚上一起遮风避雨的陌生人？来吧，丈夫，你点个头吧，我们回去，照孩子们的请求做。”

* * *

就这样，他们到了这儿，越爬越高，山风也越来越大。两块岩石能临时遮挡一下，可他们不能一直待在这儿。埃克索又开始怀疑，自

已让了步，答应做这件事，也许是个愚蠢的决定。

“公主啊，”最后他说道，“假如我们真的做了这件事。假如上帝眷顾，我们成功了，杀死了母龙。那我希望你能答应我一件事。”

现在她挨在他身边坐着，不过眼睛仍旧望着远方那一排细小的身影。

“答应什么呢，埃克索？”

“是这样的，公主。如果魁瑞格真的死了，迷雾开始消散。如果记忆恢复，你发现我曾经让你多次失望。或者你想起我做过不好的事情，再来看我，看到的已经不是现在你眼中的这同一个人了。那么，请你至少答应我。请你答应我，公主，你不会忘记这一刻你心里对我的感情。如果迷雾消退，只会将我们两人分开，那记忆恢复又有什么好处呢？这你能答应我吗，公主？答应我，无论迷雾消散之后你看到的是个什么样的人，你要永远记着这一刻你心里对我的感情。”

“我答应你，埃克索，要做到也不难。”

“公主啊，听你这么说，我感到无比宽慰，都无法用语言表达了。”

“你的情绪很奇怪啊，埃克索。但是，谁知道巨人冢还有多远呢？我们不要再坐在这两块石头下面耽误时间啦。我们离开的时候，那些孩子很焦虑，他们还等着我们回去呢。”

高文的第二次浮想

这该死的风。我们这是要遇到风暴吗？是风是雨，霍拉斯都不会在意，只是现在坐在他身上的，是个陌生人，不是他的老主人。“就是个疲惫的女人，”我告诉他，“比我更需要骑马。所以你好好驮着她吧。”可她还在这儿干什么呢？她有多么虚弱，难道埃克索阁下看不出来吗？带她到这苦寒的高上来，难道他疯了吗？可她自己要往前走，和他一样倔强，无论我怎么说，他们都不回头。所以，我只好踉踉跄跄地步行，一只手扶着霍拉斯的鞍子，拖着这上锈的盔甲。

“我们以前对女士不都很有礼貌吗？”我低声对霍拉斯说。“难道我们自己走自己的路，丢下这对拉着羊的老夫妻不管？”

一开始，我看到他们在山下，显得很渺小，还以为是那两个人来了呢。“你看山下，霍拉斯，”我说。“他们都已经碰头啦。他们都已经来啦，好像和布雷纳斯的人打了一架，那家伙一点儿也没受伤。”霍拉斯呢，朝我这边若有所思地看了一眼，好像是问：“那么，高文啊，这是我们最后一次一起爬这陡坡了吗？”我没有回答，只是轻轻摸摸他的脖子，可我心里想，“那武士是个年轻而可怕的家伙。不过，也许我斗得过他呢，谁知道？他打倒布雷纳斯的手下时，我就看出来啦。换作别人是看不出来的，但我看出来啦。左侧有个小破绽，聪明的对手可以抓住。”

但是，如果亚瑟在，现在会希望我怎么做呢？他的影子仍旧笼罩着这块土地，也包围着我。他会让我蹲伏下来，像野兽一样等待猎物吗？可这些山光秃秃的，能藏到哪儿呢？只有风，能把一个人遮住吗？也许，我该找个悬崖，守在上面朝他们扔石头？那可不是亚瑟王骑士的风范。我宁愿公开露面，迎上去，再游说一次试试看。“回去吧，先生。你不仅给你自己和年轻的伙伴带来了危险，还危及到了这个国家所有善良的人们。让一个了解魁瑞格的人来对付魁瑞格。你都看见啦，我这已经准备去杀她了。”但是，类似的请求，他之前并没有理会，现在为什么还要听呢？毕竟他已经到了附近，还有那个被咬过的男孩给他领路，直奔魁瑞格的老巢。救那个男孩，是不是个错误？但是院长真让我震惊，我知道上帝会因此感谢我。

“他们的路线准确无误，好像有地图一样，”我对霍拉斯说。“那我们该在哪儿等呢？我们该在哪儿面对他们呢？”

那片小树林。我想起来了。奇怪的是，那儿的树长得很茂盛，其他地方都被风刮得光溜溜的。小树林容得下一名骑士和他的坐骑。我不会像土匪一样突然跳出来，但是，为什么要提前一个小时就让对方看到我们呢？

于是我轻轻踢了霍拉斯一下，现在他对此已经没什么反应了，我们穿过了最高的山脊，那儿地面平坦、没有坡度，四面都是冽冽寒风。好不容易到了那树林中，我们俩都谢天谢地，不过那些树长得可真奇怪，让人怀疑是不是梅林亲自在这儿下了咒。梅林阁下真是个人物啊！有一度我以为他给死神都下了咒，可是，现在连梅林也上路啦。他现在住在天堂呢，还是地狱？埃克索阁下也许认为梅林是魔鬼的仆人，但是他却常常用他的本领，去做让上帝微笑的事。也不要说他没有勇气。很多次他和我们并肩战斗，面对飞矢和乱斧。这能算是梅林的树林吧，长在这儿就为了一个目的：让我有一天能在此歇息，等待那个人，阻止他破坏我们那天成就的伟大事业。我们五个人，两个死在母龙手中，然而梅林阁下站在我们身边，在魁瑞格尾巴的扫击范围内镇定地走着，否则他的功夫怎么能施展呢？

我和霍拉斯到的时候，树林里安静平和。甚至还有一两只鸟在树上唱着歌，虽然头顶上的树枝动个不停，但下面却安安静静，如同平和的春天；在这儿，一个老人终于可以定定神，慢慢理一理脑海里的思绪，而不会满脑子念头像暴风骤雨一样！我和霍拉斯上一次到这树林里来，该是好几年前了吧。地上的野草都长疯了，荨麻叶本来不过小孩手掌摊开那么大，现在却足以把一个成年人裹上两层。我把霍拉斯丢在一个开阔一点的地方，让他去找点儿吃的，自己到浓密的枝叶下走了一会儿。我为什么不歇息在这儿呢，靠着这棵漂亮的橡树？等他们来到这个地方——他们一定会来的，到那时候，我和他要会面啦，武士对武士。

我穿过巨大的荨麻——我穿着这咯吱作响的金属盔甲，难道是为了这个目的？让小腿不被这柔软的刺扎伤？——最后，我到了那片空地，还有那个池塘，头顶上露出了灰色的天空。周围有三棵大树，但每棵树都从腰间裂开，上半截栽在水里。我们上次来的时候，这些树还站得直挺挺的吧？被雷电击中了吗？或者是树太老了，渴望池塘的滋养？它们离水那么近，却又喝不到？现在，它们想怎么喝就能怎么喝啦，山上的鸟在它们破裂的树干上做了窝。我就要在这样的地方面对那个撒克逊人吗？如果被 he 打败，我也许还剩点儿力气，能爬到水边。就算那冰不拦着我，我也不愿意滚进水里，穿着这盔甲泡在水里发胀可不是开心的事情；还有霍拉斯呢，他会不会想念主人，小心翼

翼跨过盘根错节的树根，把我的尸体拖上来？不过，我见过战场上的战友们，受伤了躺在那儿，渴望喝水；也亲眼见过一些人爬到河边或湖边，尽管这样做让他们备感痛苦。有没有某种大秘密，只有将死的人才知道？我的老战友，比埃尔阁下，那天躺在那座山的红土上，就渴望有水。我的葫芦里还有点水，我对他说，不是，他要的是湖或者河。但我们离得太远了，我说。“我诅咒你，高文，”他叫道。“这是我最后的心愿，你都不答应我，我们还是战友，一起打过那么多仗呢！”“可这母龙把你都撕成两半了，”我对他说。“如果要带你去水边的话，我就要在这夏天的日头下走，一条胳膊夹住你的一半身体，否则到不了那种地方。”可他对我说，“高文啊，我心里不会迎接死亡，除非你把我放在水边，我要听着水轻轻拍打的声音，慢慢闭上眼睛。”他一定要这么做，也不去管我们的任务有没有完成，他为此牺牲值不值得。我弯下腰去抱他的时候，他才问：“还有谁活下来了？”我告诉他，米勒斯阁下牺牲了，但有三个活着，还有梅林阁下。可他还是不问任务有没有完成，只是不停地谈河啊湖啊，甚至还说起了大海，我别的也做不了，只知道这是我的老战友，一位勇士，和我一样，被亚瑟选中来执行这项伟大的任务，虽然山谷里正在开战。他忘记自己的职责了吗？我把他抱起来，他喊得惊天动地，这时候才明白哪怕走几小步，都要付出巨大代价，我们就那样，站在红色的山上，在夏天的烈日下，就是骑马到最近的河也要一个小时。我把他放下来，那时候他嘴里只谈大海啦。他眼睛已经闭上了，我把葫芦里的水洒在他脸上，他感谢我，那样子让我觉得，在他心里，他已经站在了岸边。“结果我的，是剑哪，还是斧子？”他问。我说：“你这是说什么呢，战友？是母龙的尾巴打中了你，但是我们的任务完成了，你带着尊严与荣耀离开。”“母龙，”他说。“母龙怎么啦？”“除了一根之外，所有的矛全扎在她肋部，”我说，“现在她睡着了。”可他又忘了我们的任务，开始谈起大海来，说他小时候就有一条船，晚上如果平静，他父亲就带他到大海深处。

等我自己的时候到了，我也会渴望大海吗？我想，有泥土我就满足了。我也不会要求某个具体的地方，不过还是在这个国度内吧，我和霍拉斯在这儿开心地游荡了很多年。之前那些黑寡妇要是听我这样说，会笑话我的，会迫不及待地提醒我，我会和谁分享我那抔黄土呢。“愚蠢的骑士！你倒真是要好好挑选安息的地方，否则你会发现，你亲手屠杀的那些人成了你的邻居！”她们朝霍拉斯屁股上扔泥巴的时候，不是也这样嘲笑过吗？她们真是大胆！她们在场吗？现在坐在我马鞍上的这个女人，如果能听到我的内心想法，会不会也那样说呢？她在那个空气污浊的地道里曾说起过婴儿被屠杀，虽然我救了

她，僧侣们的阴谋没有得逞。她怎么敢那么说呢？现在她坐在我的马鞍上，骑着我亲爱的战马，我和霍拉斯在一起的旅程，谁知道今后还有没有呢？

有一下子，我们以为这就是我们的最后一程，但我们搞错了，把这对好心的夫妻当成了其他人，所以我们又安安静静地多走了一会儿。不过，我一边牵着霍拉斯的缰绳，一边还要回头望，因为他们肯定会来，虽然我们领先了不少路。埃克索阁下在我身边走，因为那只羊，他走得不稳。他猜到了我为什么经常往回看吗？“高文爵士，我们以前不是战友吗？”走出隧道那天清晨，我听他这么问，我让他去找条船，顺河而下。可他还在这儿，仍然在山里，还带着他好心的妻子。我不愿与他目光相对。我们俩都老了，都为年月所遮盖，就像草遮盖着我们曾经战斗过、屠杀过的大地。你想干什么呢，先生？你带着这只羊是怎么回事？

“回去吧，朋友们，”他们在树林里碰到我的时候，我说。“你们这样上了年纪的人，不该朝这儿走。你看看，好心的夫人还捂着腰呢。从这儿到巨人冢，至少还有一英里，只有小石头可以藏身，还得低着头蜷缩在后面。趁你们还有力气，回去吧，我保证把羊带到冢上拴好。”但是，两人都半信半疑地看着我，埃克索阁下拉着羊不放。头顶的树枝瑟瑟作响，他妻子坐在一棵橡树的树根上，眼睛望着池塘，以及那几棵俯身水面的断树。我轻声说：“这路不适合你的好妻子，先生。为什么不接受我的建议，顺着河走，离开山里呢？”“我们必须把羊牵到我们承诺的地方，”埃克索阁下说。“我们答应过一个孩子。”说这话的时候，他有没有奇怪地看着我呢？还是我做梦？“我和霍拉斯可以把羊送去，”我说。“这任务交给我们，你不放心吗？这羊就算被魁瑞格一口吞下去，我也不相信能把她怎么样，也许能耽搁她一会儿，给我制造个机会。所以呢，把这羊给我们吧，你们回头下山，要不你们两人走着走着，说不定就要摔倒啦。”

他们走到一旁的树丛中，避开我，我能听到他们压低了声音在说话，但听不见说的是什么。然后埃克索阁下走到我跟前，说：“我妻子再休息一会儿，然后我们就继续走，先生，到巨人冢去。”我明白再争辩已经没有用了，而且我自己也急着上路，维斯坦阁下和他那个被咬的孩子在后面还有多远，谁知道呢？

第四部

第十五章

你们有些人会有隆重的纪念碑，让活着的人记住你们受的罪。有些人只会有粗糙的木头十字架或者彩色石块，其他的人呢，就只能藏匿在历史的阴影中。无论如何，你们都是一个古老进程的一部分，所以当初立巨人冢，有可能就是为了纪念这个地方很久以前发生过的类似悲剧——年轻的无辜者在战争中遭到屠杀。除此之外，很难想到立此巨冢的其他原因。如果建在低一点的地方，我们的祖先也许是为了纪念一场胜利或一位国王。但是，为什么要选一个这么高、这么远的地方，把沉重的大石头堆得比一个人还高呢？

我敢肯定，埃克索疲惫地走上山坡时，同样也为这个问题感到疑惑。那个小姑娘第一次提到巨人冢时，他想到的是一个东西立在大土堆上。但这个石冢却在山坡上突然出现，周围没有任何其他东西提醒人们它的存在。不过，山羊似乎立即意识到这是个特殊的地方，石冢刚一出现，像一根黑色的手指指向天空时，它就马上疯狂地挣扎起来。“它明白自己的命，”高文爵士说道。他拉着马往山上走，比特丽丝坐在马背上。

现在呢，山羊似乎忘记了之前的恐惧，正心满意足地啃着草。

“有没有可能是因为魁瑞格的气息，对人和山羊都能起作用？”

问这话的是比特丽丝，她正用双手抓着拴羊的绳子。埃克索这下子把羊交给她，自己正用石头把一根木桩砸进土里，拴羊的绳子绑在木桩上。

“谁知道啊，公主。但是如果上帝真关心山羊的话，那就该快点把母龙引来，否则这可怜的东西孤零零地要等很久啊。”

“如果羊先死了，埃克索，你觉得母龙会吃死动物身上不新鲜的肉吗？”

“母龙喜欢什么肉，谁知道呢？不过这里有些草，公主，虽然不怎么样，但能让山羊活一阵子。”

“你看那儿，埃克索。我们两人都累了，我还以为骑士会帮忙呢。可他已经忘记了他平常的礼貌。”

的确如此，到了石冢之后，高文爵士就异常沉默。“这就是你们要找的地方，”他几乎有些生气地说，然后就转身走开了。现在，他背对着他们站着，盯着天上的云。

“高文爵士，”埃克索停下手头的活儿，喊道。“你能帮忙拉着这头羊吗？我可怜的妻子已经拉不动了。”

老骑士没有反应，埃克索以为他没听见，正准备再说一遍，高文却突然转过身来，脸上庄重得可怕，以至于他们两人都瞪大了眼睛。

“我看到他们在下面，”老骑士说。“现在，谁也拦不住他们啦。”

“你看到谁了呢，先生？”埃克索问。骑士没有说话，他又问：“是士兵吗？之前我们看到过，很远的地平线上有个长长的队伍，但我们以为他们是朝另一边走，离我们越来越远。”

“我说的是你最近的伙伴们，先生。昨天我们见面的时候，你和他们一起走的。他们从下面的树林里出来了，现在谁能拦住他们呢？有一下子，我还希望那只是两名黑寡妇，离开了那个该死的队伍。但那只是天上的云耍的把戏，是他们俩，没错。”

“这么说，维斯坦阁下还是从修道院里逃了出来，”埃克索说。

“是逃出来了，先生。现在他来了，也拉着绳子，绑的不是山羊，而是那个给他当向导的撒克逊男孩。”

最后，高文爵士终于注意到比特丽丝正在拼命拽住山羊，赶紧从悬崖边上赶过来，抓住了绳子。但比特丽丝并没有放手，有一下子，好像她和骑士两人在争夺这只羊。过了一会儿，两人都站稳了，都抓着绳子，老骑士在比特丽丝前方，隔着一两步的距离。

“我们的朋友也看见我们了吗，高文爵士？”埃克索问道，转身继续干活。

“我敢打赌，武士眼睛很尖，现在就能看到我们站在高处，背后就是天空，正在和山羊拔河比力气呢！”他笑了一声，但声音中仍然有一丝忧郁。“是的，”他又说道。“我想他能清楚地看到我们。”

“那他就会和我们联手，”比特丽丝说，“一起杀死母龙。”

高文爵士不安地轮流打量着他们俩。然后他说道：“埃克索阁下，你现在仍然相信这一点？”

“相信什么，高文爵士？”

“在这个偏僻的地方相聚，我们俩是战友？”

“请把意思说清楚，骑士阁下。”

高文牵着羊来到埃克索跪着的地方，他没察觉到比特丽丝在后面跟着，手里还抓着绳子的另一端。

“埃克索阁下，我们多年前不就已经分道扬镳了吗？我仍然跟着亚瑟，而你呢……”这时候，他似乎意识到比特丽丝在身后，于是他转过身，礼貌地鞠了个躬。“亲爱的女士，我请你放开绳子，休息吧。我不会让羊跑掉的。到那边的石冢旁坐下来。至少可以挡一挡风。”

“谢谢你，高文爵士，”比特丽丝说。“那我就把羊交给你啦，它对我们可很宝贵啊。”

她迈步朝石冢走去，身体前倾、肩膀缩着，以抵挡大风，那样子让埃克索隐隐约约回想起了什么往事。这在他心中激起了特殊的情感，还没来得及压制，就已经让他备感意外，甚至感到震惊，因为他一方面强烈渴望立即走到她身边，为她遮风挡雨，另一方面却又清晰地感受到了愤怒与怨恨。她说起过，某一个漫长的夜晚，她独自一人，因为他不在而备受煎熬。然而，有没有可能，他自己也曾有过某个同样痛苦的夜晚，甚至几个这样的夜晚？比特丽丝在石冢前停下来，对着那些石块低下头，好像道歉一样，这时他感到记忆更加清晰，愤怒也更加强烈了，一种恐惧感袭来，让他转过脸去不再看她。这时候他才注意到，高文爵士也在凝望着比特丽丝，眼里露出温柔的神情，似乎陷入了沉思。随后骑士回过神来，靠到埃克索身旁，弯下腰来，似乎是要排除一切被比特丽丝听到的可能。

“你选的道路也许更加神圣，谁又敢说不是呢？”他说道。“丢开战争与和平的大事。丢开那条让人更亲近上帝的好法律。永远丢开亚瑟，一心去……”他又朝比特丽丝那边望了一眼，她仍旧站着，为了避开大风，额头几乎都要碰到那些堆砌起来的石块了。“一心去陪伴你的好妻子，先生。我注意到了，她在你身边走着，像一个温暖的影子。我当初也该这样做吗？可是，上帝将我们引上了不同的道路。我有职责。哈哈！现在我害怕他吗？不怕，先生，从没怕过。我对你没有任何指责。你帮助推行的那条伟大律法被撕碎了，沾满了血！但是，有一段时间，那法律的确生了效。撕碎了，沾满了血！现在谁为这事责怪我们呢？我害怕年轻吗？单凭年轻就能打败对手吗？让他来

吧，让他来。这一点你记住，先生！那一天我亲眼见到了你，你说耳朵里有孩子和婴儿的哭声。我也听到啦，先生，可是那与医生帐篷里传出来的病人的哭声，有什么不同吗？治疗虽然带来痛苦，却能让一个人保住性命。但是，这一点我承认。有些日子里，我也希望有个温暖的影子跟着我。现在我一转身，还希望能看到一个呢。地上的每个动物、天上的每只鸟，不都渴望有温柔的伴侣吗？有那么一两个，为了她们，我倒愿意舍弃大好年华。我现在为什么要怕他？我斗过长着獠牙的挪威人，鼻子像驯鹿一样——那不是面具！给你，先生，把你的山羊拴好吧。你还要把那根桩砸多深啊？你这是要拴山羊还是拴狮子？”

高文把绳子递给埃克索，大步走开了，一直走到大地边缘似乎与天空相接的地方，才停下脚步。埃克索单膝跪在草上，把绳子紧紧绕在木桩的槽口上，然后又一次望着妻子。她站在石冢旁，和之前差不多，她那姿势又让他心中一动，但让他欣慰的是，之前那种怨恨的感觉，这次没有了。相反，他感到一股极其强烈的冲动，要去保护她，不仅是要遮挡猛烈的风，而且是要挡住另一种又大又暗，正在他们周围聚集的东西。他站起身，急忙朝她走去。

“羊拴牢了，公主，”他说。“等你准备好了，我们就沿着这山坡离开吧。对孩子们和我们自己承诺的任务，不是已经完成了吗？”

“噢，埃克索，我不想回到那树林里去。”

“你说什么呢，公主？”

“埃克索，你没到池塘边，你在忙着和这位骑士说话。你没朝那冰冷的水里看。”

“风太大，公主，你是累了。”

“我看见他们的脸仰着，好像躺在床上睡觉一样。”

“谁啊，公主？”

“那些婴儿，就在水面之下不远。一开始我以为他们在微笑，有些在招手，等走近一看，才发现他们躺在那儿，一动不动。”

“这就是你刚才靠着树休息时做的一个梦。我记得看到你睡着啦，当时心里还觉得宽慰呢，尽管我在和老骑士谈话。”

“我真的看见了他们，埃克索。在绿色的水草里。我们不要回到树林去，因为我肯定，那儿有恶魔。”

高文爵士凝视着山下，一条胳膊已经举在空中，这时他并没有转身，但嘴里喊了起来，声音随着风传过来。“他们很快就到了！正急匆匆上坡。”

“我们到他那儿去吧，公主，但你把斗篷裹紧点。我真是傻，不该带你走这么远，但我们很快又能找到遮风的地方。不过，我们先看看这好心的骑士究竟在担心什么。”

他们走过去的时候，那只山羊在拉绳子，不过木桩并没有动。埃克索很想看看山下来的人离这儿还有多远，可这时老骑士转身朝他们走过来，在离山羊不远的地方，三人都停下了脚步。

“高文爵士，”埃克索说，“我妻子身体虚弱，必须回去找个地方休息，吃点东西。我们能像上山的时候一样，让你的马驮着她吗？”

“你这提的是什么要求？太过分啦，先生！在梅林的树林中见面的时候，我不是告诉你们不要再往山上爬了吗？是你们两人坚持要到这里来。”

“也许我们是傻，先生，但我们是怀着一个目标的，如果我们自个儿下山的话，你必须答应我们，不要把山羊放掉，把羊拉上山可花了我们很多气力。”

“把羊放掉？我为什么要在乎你的羊呢，先生？那个撒克逊武士很快就要来了，他可不是等闲之辈！去吧，不相信的话自己去看看！我为什么要在乎你的羊呢？埃克索阁下，看到你在我面前，让我想起了那个晚上。风也很猛，和现在一样。你呢，当着亚瑟的面骂他，而我们其他人都低着头站着！把你打倒的任务，谁愿意接受呢？我们每个人都避开国王的眼睛，害怕他以目光示意，下令将你打倒，虽然你没带武器。可是，你看啊，先生，亚瑟是位伟大的国王，这又多了一项证明！你当着他最优秀的骑士的面咒骂他，可他却温和地回答你的话。你还记得吧，先生？”

“我一点儿也不记得，高文爵士。你们那条母龙的气息，把这一切全挡住了。”

“我像其他人一样低着头，眼睛看着脚，心里却担心你的头随时可能会从我脚旁滚过！可是，亚瑟却温和地与你说话！你一点儿都想不起来了？那天晚上的风几乎和现在一样猛烈，我们的帐篷随时会飞到黑暗的天空中。可是，亚瑟却用温和的言语来回应咒骂。他感谢你

的贡献。感谢你的友谊。他要求我们记住你的荣耀。你大怒离开，冲进狂风暴雨之中，先生，我自己则低声跟你告了别。你没有听见，因为我说得很轻，但那也是真诚的告别，而且这样做的也不止我一个。我们多少也都理解你的愤怒，先生，虽然你犯了大错，不该咒骂亚瑟，还是在他取得伟大胜利的日子！现在你说魁瑞格的气息挡住了记忆，或者只是因为上了年纪，甚至是这足以将最明智的僧侣变成傻瓜的山风？”

“我不在乎那些记忆，高文爵士。今天我要找的记忆，是我妻子提到的另外一个风雨交加的夜晚。”

“我给了你一个真诚的告别，先生，让我坦白吧，你骂亚瑟的时候，也说出了我一部分心里话。因为你帮助推行的是一项伟大的约定，而且遵守了很多年。因为这项约定，哪怕是在战斗的前夕，所有的人不都睡得更好吗，无论基督徒还是异教徒？作战的时候知道我们的无辜老幼在村子里很安全？可是呢，先生，战争没有结束啊。以前我们为土地、为上帝而战，现在我们又作战，为死去的战友们报仇，而那些人本身也是在复仇之中被杀害的。什么时候才能结束呢？婴儿长成大人，只知道年年打仗。而你的伟大法律已经遭到破坏……”

“高文爵士，那天之前，双方没有人破坏过法律，”埃克索说。“破坏法律是亵渎神明的事情。”

“啊，现在你记起来了！”

“我的记忆是，上帝被背叛了，先生。如果迷雾把我的记忆全部带走，我也不感到遗憾。”

“有一阵子，埃克索阁下，我也希望这样。但很快我就理解了一位真正伟大的国王的战略。因为战争终于停止了，难道不是吗，先生？那天之后，我们不一直处于和平之中吗？”

“不要再提醒我了，高文爵士。我并不领情。让我看着和亲爱的妻子一起度过的日子吧，她在我身旁发抖呢。你不愿意把马借给我们吗，先生？至少到我们见面的那个树林。我们会把马安全地留在那儿等着你。”

“噢，埃克索，我不愿意回到树林！为什么一定要我们现在离开，下山到那个地方去呢？丈夫啊，你是不是仍然害怕迷雾消散，尽管我对你作了承诺？”

“我的马，先生？你这是暗示说，我已经用不着我的霍拉斯了？这你说得太轻率啦，先生！我可不害怕他，尽管他年轻，占了便宜！”

“我没有暗示什么，高文爵士，只请求你这匹好马帮忙，驮我妻子下山休息……”

“我的马，先生？你要坚持把他的眼睛蒙起来，不让他看着主人倒下？那是匹战马，先生！可不是在毛茛丛里撒欢的小矮马！战马啊，先生，无论上帝旨意如何，让我倒下还是获胜，他都敢看！”

“如果我妻子只能由我自己背下山的话，骑士阁下，那就这样吧。我还以为你能让我们用一下你的马，至少到树林那么多路……”

“我要待在这儿，埃克索，别管这残酷的山风了，如果维斯坦阁下马上要来，我们就留下来，看看能活过今天的，是他还是母龙。丈夫啊，难道你还是不愿意这迷雾消退吗？”

“我以前见过很多次啦，先生！急不可待的年轻人，被经验丰富的老家伙打倒。很多次啦！”

“先生，我再次请求你回想一下你的绅士风度。这风把我妻子的气力都耗尽了。”

“我已经向你发过誓了，就在今天早上，无论迷雾消散之后出现什么情况，我都不会忘记我今天心里对你的感情，丈夫啊，难道这还不够吗？”

“难道你无法理解一位伟大国王的行动吗，先生？我们只能看着，只能赞赏。一位伟大的国王，像上帝本人一样，必须做出令常人畏缩的行动！你以为我的眼睛就看不见吗？路上看到一两朵娇柔的花儿，我难道就不想放在胸口？难道床上就只能让这身铁衣裳给我作伴？谁说我是个懦夫，先生？谁说我屠杀婴儿？那天你上哪儿去啦？和我们一起吗？我的头盔！我丢在树林里啦！可现在要头盔有什么用呢？这身盔甲我都想脱掉，只是这盔甲下面的身体，像只剥了皮的狐狸，我担心你们看到了会笑话！”

有一下子，三个人都在相互叫喊，大风呼号，成了与他们抗衡的第四个声音，但现在埃克索突然意识到，高文和妻子都已经住了口，盯着他身后看。他一转身，看见武士和那名撒克逊男孩站在悬崖边上，高文爵士之前也曾站在同一地点，若有所思地眺望着远方。这时天上阴云密布，所以在埃克索看来，这两位似乎是驾着云凌空而降

的。他们的剪影，看起来特别像一幅定格的图画：武士双手紧紧拉着缰绳，像驾驶战车一样；男孩身体向前倾着，与地面形成一定角度，双臂向前伸展，似乎是为了平衡身体。风里传来了一个新的声音，接着埃克索听见高文说：“啊！这孩子又唱起来了！你就不能让他停下来吗，先生？”

维斯坦笑了一声，两个身影都动了起来，男孩在前面拉着，两人走了过来。

“很抱歉，”武士说道。“我只能想出这个办法来阻止他，否则他要踩着石头一路跳过来，把自己折腾死为止。”

“这男孩是怎么了，埃克索？”比特丽丝在他耳边说道，听到她声音里又恢复了往日的温柔亲密，埃克索心生感激。“那条狗出现之前，他就是这个样子。”

“他一定要唱得这么难听吗？”高文爵士又对武士说。“我倒想打他几耳光，但是恐怕他都感觉不到！”

武士越走越近，又笑了起来，然后他高兴地看了一眼埃克索和比特丽丝。“我的朋友们，这可没想到啊。我还以为这时候你们早到儿子的村庄了。怎么到这个偏僻的地方来了呢？”

“和你一样，维斯坦阁下。这条母龙夺走了我们宝贵的记忆，我们渴望看到她的末日。你看，先生，我们带来了一头有毒的山羊，让它帮我们达成心愿。”

维斯坦打量着山羊，然后摇了摇头。“朋友们，我们要面对的，肯定是个庞大而狡猾的家伙。恐怕你们的山羊对她没什么作用，最多打一两个嗝而已。”

“把羊牵到这儿来，可花了我们不少力气，维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝说，“尽管上山的时候又遇到了这位好心的骑士，得到了他的帮助。但是在这儿看到你，我很高兴，因为看来我们不用完全指望这头山羊啦。”

但是，这时候埃德温的歌声让大家很难听见对方的话，而且他在拼命拉绳子，目标显然是下一道山坡坡顶的某个地方。维斯坦狠狠拉了一下绳子，然后说道：

“埃德温阁下似乎急于赶到那边山上去。高文爵士，那山里有什么？我看到石头叠在一起，好像是要隐藏一个坑洞或巢穴啊。”

“为什么问我呢，先生？”高文爵士说。“问你年轻的同伴吧，他也许连歌都可以不唱了呢！”

“我用绳子拉着他，先生，但我没法控制他——简直和发疯的小妖精一样。”

“维斯坦阁下，”埃克索说，“我们都有责任不让这个男孩受到伤害。在这么高的地方，我们要仔细盯着他。”

“说得好，先生。如果可以的话，我就把他绑在你拴山羊的那根木桩上。”

武士牵着埃德温，来到埃克索钉的木桩旁，蹲下身子，开始把捆男孩的绳子系上去。的确，在埃克索看来，维斯坦这件事似乎做得特别仔细，每个结紧不紧，埃克索的木桩是否牢靠，都要反复测试。同时，男孩自己仍旧对周围浑然不觉。他多少安静了一些，但目光一直盯着坡顶的岩石，而且仍旧在安静而执拗地拽着绳子。他的歌声远没有刚才那么尖锐，但有一种绝不放弃的味道，让埃克索想起疲惫的士兵唱着歌以继续行军。山羊呢，在绳子许可的范围内，已经走到了最远的地方，不过眼睛仍然在傻傻地盯着前方，好像很感兴趣一样。

至于高文爵士，他一直仔细地观察着维斯坦的每一个动作，而且——在埃克索看来——他的眼睛里慢慢露出了某种狡黠的神色。撒克逊武士专心做着手头的事情，骑士则悄悄走到近前，拔出剑，插在泥土里，然后将两条胳膊放在宽大的剑柄上，让剑支撑着身体。现在，他保持着这个姿势，正在观察维斯坦，埃克索想到，他也许在回忆关于武士的各种细节：身高、攻击范围、小腿的力量、绑着绷带的左臂。

维斯坦满意地系好了绳子，站起身来，转身面对着高文爵士。两人互相看着，短短一瞬间，他们眼神中有种奇怪的焦虑感，随后维斯坦便热情地笑了。

“这个习惯呢，就能看出不列颠人和撒克逊人的不同了，”他用手指着，说道。“你看那儿，先生。你的剑拔出来了，你用它来支撑身体，好像那是椅子或板凳之类的东西。虽然教我的是不列颠人，但对任何撒克逊武士来说，这都是个奇怪的做法。”

“活到我这把风烛残年吧，先生，你就知道是不是那么奇怪了！这是和平年代，我想一把好剑能起点作用总是高兴的吧，哪怕是用来给主人歇歇这把老骨头。有什么奇怪的呢，先生？”

“可是，高文爵士，你仔细看看，剑都插进土里了。对我们撒克逊人来说，剑的刃口是连睡觉都要关心的事情。我们甚至都不让刃口接触到空气，担心它失去哪怕一丁点儿锋刃。”

“是这样吗？锋利的剑刃很重要，维斯坦阁下，这我不打算争辩。不过，也不是什么都靠剑刃吧？好的步伐，可靠的战略，镇定自若的勇气。还要有那么一点儿野路子，让人难以捉摸。先生，这些才是决定竞技的要素。还要相信获胜是上帝的旨意。所以呢，还是让老人家歇歇脚吧。而且，剑插在剑鞘里，有时候不是来不及拔吗？我在很多战场上都是这么站着喘气的，心里很踏实，因为我的剑已经拔出来了，随时可以出击，绝不会等我要用它的时候，它却揉着眼睛，迷迷糊糊地问我，这是下午呢，还是早晨啊。”

“看来我们撒克逊人对剑更狠心一些。因为我们根本不许它睡觉，哪怕在黑暗的剑鞘中休息时也不许睡。看看我自己的剑吧，先生。它很了解我的脾气。它知道，一旦呼吸了空气，很快就会碰上皮肉和骨头。”

“看来是风俗不同吧，先生。这让我想起以前认识的一个撒克逊人，一个不错的家伙，我和他在一个寒冷的夜晚搜集柴火。我忙着用剑砍一棵死树，而他就在我旁边，只用双手，有时候用块钝石头。‘你忘记你的剑了吗，我的朋友？’我问他。‘为什么要空手，像头有利爪的熊呢？’但他不听我的。当时我以为他疯了，现在呢，你让我明白道理啦。就是活到我这么大年纪，还是有功课要学习啊！”

两人都笑了笑，然后维斯坦说：

“高文爵士，站在我这边的也许不仅仅是风俗。他们总是教我，哪怕在我的剑刃穿过对手身体时，我的脑子里也必须为接下来的那一剑做准备。如果我的剑刃不够锋利，先生，剑的运行哪怕只慢一丁点儿，碰上骨头时顿了一下，或者在对手缠结的内脏中耽搁了，那么我的下一剑必然会慢，胜负也许就在这一瞬间。”

“你说得对，先生。我相信我是年纪大了，而且多年没有打仗，才这么粗心。从现在开始我要以你为榜样，可是我的膝盖因为爬山没了力气，求你给我这份小小的安慰吧。”

“当然啦，先生，你舒服就行。看见你这么休息，我想起了这一点而已。”

突然，埃德温停止歌唱，开始叫喊起来。他一遍一遍喊着相同的话，埃克索转过脸，低声问身旁的比特丽丝：“他说什么呢，公主？”

“他说，那山上有什么土匪的营地。要我们都跟他去。”

维斯坦和高文两人瞪大眼睛看着这男孩，神色都有些尴尬。埃德温一边喊叫，一边拽着绳子，过了一会儿，他安静下来，瘫软在地上，好像马上就要哭出来似的。时间过得很慢，大家很久都没说话，只有大风呼号。

“高文爵士，”最后埃克索说道。“现在我们都看着你啦，先生。我们之间就不要遮遮掩掩了。你是母龙的守护人，不是吗？”

“是的，先生。”高文神色傲慢，轮流盯着大家，包括埃德温。“她的守护人，最近也是她唯一的朋友。僧侣们喂了她很多年，和你们一样，把动物拴在这个地方。但是现在他们自己吵了起来，魁瑞格察觉到了他们的背叛。不过她知道，我依然忠心耿耿。”

“那么，高文爵士，”维斯坦说，“你能不能告诉大家，我们现在站的地方，就在这母龙附近吗？”

“她就在附近，先生。你能找到这儿来，很不容易，尽管你运气好，碰到了这个男孩给你当向导。”

埃德温已经站起身，又开始唱起来，不过声音很低，像吟诵经文一样。

“埃德温阁下以后可能运气更好呢，”武士说。“因为我有直觉，这个学生很快就会超过他可怜的老师，总有一天会为他的同胞做出了不起的事情。也许和你们的亚瑟王差不多呢。”

“先生，你说什么？就这个像傻子一样又拉绳子又唱歌的男孩？”

“高文爵士，”比特丽丝插了一句，“能说的话，就跟我这个疲惫的老太太说说吧。你是位优秀的骑士，还是伟大的亚瑟王的外甥，怎么成了母龙的守护人呢？”

“夫人，也许维斯坦阁下很想解释这件事。”

“恰恰相反，我和比特丽丝夫人一样，很想听听你的说法。不过，以后还有时间。首先，我们要解决一个问题。我该放开埃德温阁

下，看看他往哪儿跑吗？还是你，高文爵士，领我们去魁瑞格的巢穴？”

男孩正在挣扎，高文爵士瞪大眼睛看着，眼神空洞，然后他叹了口气。“把他留在这儿吧，”他语气沉重地说。“我来带路。”他挺直了身子，从地上拔起剑来，小心地插回剑鞘。

“我谢谢你啦，先生，”维斯坦说。“我们不让这孩子涉险，我很感谢。不过，现在就算没有向导，我或许也能猜出路来。我们要去的地方，就是下一道山坡顶上那些石头那儿，是不是啊？”

高文爵士又叹了口气，望了一眼埃克索，好像是要求助一样，然后又伤心地摇了摇头。“非常对，先生，”他说。“那些石头围成一圈，中间是个坑，可不是小坑哪，有采石场那么大。你们会发现魁瑞格在那儿睡觉。维斯坦阁下，如果你真想要斗它，那就必须爬到坑下面去。现在我问你，先生，你真打算做这么疯狂的事情吗？”

“先生，我走了这么远的路来，就是为了做这件事。”

“维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝说，“我这个老太太要插句嘴，请你原谅。你刚才嘲笑我们的山羊，但你现在面临的是一场大战。如果这位骑士不愿帮助你，至少允许我们把山羊牵上这最后的山坡，然后把它赶进坑里去。如果你要一个人与母龙战斗的话，中毒的母龙行动总要慢一点。”

“谢谢你，夫人，你的建议非常周到。不过，我也许会利用她正在睡觉的机会，下毒这种武器我就不想使用了。何况我现在也没什么耐心，不想再等半天或者更久，看看母龙吃了晚餐之后会不会生病。”

“那我们就做个了结吧，”高文爵士说。“来吧，先生，我来带路。”然后他对埃克索和比特丽丝说：“在山下等着吧，朋友们，在石冢旁边避避风。你们不用等很久的。”

“可是，高文爵士，”比特丽丝说，“我和丈夫用尽了气力才走了这么远。我们愿意和你一起走完这最后的山坡，如果没什么危险的话。”

高文爵士又一次无奈地摇摇头。“那我们就一起走吧，朋友们。我敢说你们不会受到伤害，而且你们在场，我自己也轻松一些。走吧，朋友们，到魁瑞格的巢穴去，说话声音轻一点啊，不要把她惊醒。”

* * *

他们沿着下一条道往上走，山风没那么猛烈了，尽管大家都觉得离天空更近，几乎触手可及。骑士和武士大步走在前面，像两位老伙伴一起散步，不久他们俩和这对老夫妻之间就拉开了距离。

“这是傻事，公主，”两人走着，埃克索说道。“我们跟着他们走干什么呢？谁知道前面还有什么危险？我们回去吧，和那个小男孩一起等着。”

但比特丽丝仍然坚定地向前走。“我希望我们继续走，”她说。“来吧，埃克索，抓住我的手，帮助我不要泄气。因为现在我在想，最担心迷雾消散的人应该是我，不是你。刚才站在那堆石头那儿，我想起来了，丈夫啊，我曾对你做过不好的事情。想起那些事情可能回到我们脑海中，你看看，你握的这只手都在颤抖！到时候你会对我说什么呢？你会不会转身就走，把我丢在这荒山上？这勇敢的武士现在就在我们前面走，我心里有个声音，希望他倒下去，但是我不愿意我们躲躲藏藏。是的，不愿意，埃克索，你不也这样想吗？我们一起走过的路，无论阴云密布还是阳光明媚，我们都坦坦荡荡地面对吧！如果这位武士真要在母龙自己的巢穴里与她战斗，让我们尽力帮他提升斗志吧。有危险的时候喊一声，或者在对手发起猛烈攻击的时候提醒一下，说不定结果就不一样了。”

埃克索任凭她絮絮叨叨，一边走路一边心不在焉地听着，因为他又意识到，在遥远的记忆边缘藏着什么事情：一个风雨交加的夜晚，一次深深的伤害，一种孤独感在他面前裂开，如同深不见底的海水。孤身一人在屋里站着，无法入睡，手里拿着一根点亮的小蜡烛——那个人真的是他，而不是比特丽丝吗？

“我们的儿子后来怎么啦，公主？”他突然问道，随即感觉她的手抓紧了。“他真的在村里等我们吗？会不会我们在全中国找上一年都没有他的踪影？”

“这我也想过，但我不敢说出来。现在还是别说了吧，埃克索，人家会听到的。”

的确，高文爵士和维斯坦已经停了下来，在前面的路上等着，看来两人正在愉快地交谈。埃克索走上来，听见高文爵士正笑着说道：

“我说实话吧，维斯坦阁下，我希望这时候魁瑞格的气息夺走你的记忆，让你忘记为什么和我走在一起。我就等着你问，我这是要把

你领到哪儿呢？可是，从你的眼睛和步伐上看，你可一点儿也没忘记啊！”

维斯坦微笑着。“我有抵抗奇怪魔咒的天赋，先生，我相信国王把这件任务交给我，正是因为这个原因。在东方的沼泽地，我们从没有过像魁瑞格那样的家伙，但是有神奇魔力的动物，我们却知道很多，大家发现我的战友们晕倒了，在梦里游荡，我却不怎么受影响。我想国王选择我，这是唯一的原因吧。我国内的所有战友，几乎都比你身边走的这位更加优秀。”

“这让人很难相信，维斯坦阁下！传言和现场观察，都证明你有罕见的本领。”

“这你过奖啦，先生。昨天，我不得不在你的注视之下打倒那名士兵，我小小的造诣，在你这样才能卓越的人眼里算不了什么，我心里很清楚。打败一名胆怯的卫兵够了，但要获得你的赞赏，恐怕还差得远呢。”

“这真是胡说，先生！你是个了不起的人物，这种话就不要再说了！好啦，朋友们”——高文转过脸来看看着埃克索和比特丽丝——“现在路不远啦。我们趁她还在睡觉，继续走吧。”

他们默默地继续走路。这次埃克索和比特丽丝没有落后，高文和维斯坦似乎被某种庄重的氛围包裹，在前面走路时一步一顿，如同参加重大礼仪。而且地面平缓下来，有点像高原，走起来也不那么累。他们在下面谈论过的那些石块，现在就矗立在前方。他们逐渐走近，埃克索看到，路边有个小山丘，石块在山丘顶部大致排列成半圆形。他还看到一排小石头，像阶梯一样，一直向上通到山丘顶部，看来那上面肯定是个很深的坑。他们现在所到的地方，周围的草或黑或焦，四下里本来就没有树或灌木，这时更增添了荒凉衰败的气氛。到了那粗糙的石头台阶下面，高文让大家停下来，面色郑重地对维斯坦说道：

“先生，你就不最后再考虑一下放弃这个危险的计划吗？为什么不现在回头，去找你那位绑在木桩上的孤儿呢？这时候风里还有他的声音呢。”

武士回头望望他们走过的路，然后又看着高文爵士。“你知道的，先生。我无法回头。带我去看龙吧。”

老骑士若有所思地点点头，好像维斯坦刚刚随口发表了一个非常有趣的观点一样。

“好吧，朋友们，”他说。“那你们不要大声说话，我们吵醒她干什么呢？”

高文爵士在前面带路，爬上山丘，快到那圈岩石的时候，他打了个手势，让大家停下。他小心翼翼地探头张望，过了一会儿，他招手让他们上来，低声说：“站到这儿来，朋友们，你们能看得很清楚。”

埃克索扶着妻子站到身旁一块突出的地方，然后俯身到岩石上看。下面的坑比他想象的更宽、更浅——不像是真正从地上挖出来的，更像一个干枯的水塘。大半个坑被暗淡的阳光照着，似乎全是灰色的石头和沙砾——到边缘兀然变成了焦黑的草——因此除了龙之外，眼睛能看见的唯一的活东西，是一片孤零零的山楂树丛，从坑内深处正中央的那块石头里冒出来，非常惹眼。

至于龙呢，一开始几乎很难判断是死是活。她俯身卧着，脑袋扭在一边，四肢伸开，这姿势让人觉得是具尸体，被人从高处扔进了坑里。实际上，要确定这是条龙，都要花点时间：她瘦弱不堪，看起来更像个虫子一样的爬行动物，习惯了水里的生活，却阴差阳错爬上了岸，现在正脱水呢。她的皮肤本该油滑光亮，有着青铜一样的色泽，现在却白得发黄，让人想起某种鱼的肚子。残剩的翅膀不过是一层层耷拉着的皮，不仔细看的话，会以为是龙身体两侧堆积的树叶。龙的脑袋扭向与灰色砾石相对的那一侧，所以埃克索只能看到一只眼睛，上面有海龟那样的眼皮罩着，无精打采地一睁一闭，遵循着某种内在节奏。这一动作，加上脊背的微微起伏，是魁瑞格仍旧活着的仅有迹象。

“这真的是她吗，埃克索？”比特丽丝低声说。“这可怜的东西，不过是一条有点肉的细绳子罢了，真是她？”

“可是，公主啊，你看那儿，”高文的声音从他们身后传来。“只要她还有气息，她的影响就还在。”

“她生病了吗，或者已经中毒了？”埃克索问。

“她就是老了，先生，就像我们所有人都会老一样。但她还在呼吸，所以梅林的办法仍然有效。”

“这事我开始有点儿想起来了，”埃克索说。“我记得这是梅林的办法，而且是个阴险的办法。”

“阴险，先生？”高文说。“为什么阴险呢？这是唯一的办法。那场战斗还没有真正获胜，我就和四位好战友骑马出发，去驯服这个家伙，那时候她又凶猛又暴躁，驯服之后，梅林才能够在她的气息里种下这伟大的魔咒。他也许是个阴险的人，但这件事他遵从的不仅是亚瑟的命令，还有上帝的旨意。如果没有这条母龙的气息，和平会来吗？先生，看看我们现在的生活！老仇敌变成了兄弟，每个村都是。维斯坦阁下，你看到这儿的情况之后，就没有说过话。我再问一次。难道你不能让这可怜的家伙寿终正寝吗？她的气息不如以前，但即使现在也仍然有魔力。想想吧，先生，一旦这呼吸停止，这片土地上沉睡多年的东西将被唤醒！是啊，我们屠杀了很多人，这我承认，也不去管什么强者弱者。上帝也许不会冲我们微笑，但我们让这片土地免于战争。离开这儿吧，先生，我求你啦。我们信奉的神也许不一样，但你的神肯定也和我的一样，会保佑这条龙吧。”

维斯坦转过脸，目光从坑中落到老骑士身上。

“希望过错被人遗忘，犯错者逍遥法外，这是什么样的神呢，先生？”

“你问得好，维斯坦阁下，我知道我的神为我们那天的行为感到不安。但事情过去很久了，死者安息于地下，地上早已覆盖着怡人的绿草。年轻一代对他们一无所知。我求你离开这个地方，让魁瑞格的作用再发挥一段时间。她还能活一两个季节吧，最多了。可是，那么长时间也许就足以让旧伤口永远愈合，让永久的和平降临在我们中间。你看她多么希望活下去，先生！发发慈悲，离开这个地方吧。让这个国家在遗忘中平复。”

“愚蠢啊，先生。蛆虫越活越肥，旧伤口怎么可能愈合？和平建立在屠杀与魔法师的骗术之上，怎么能够持久？我明白这是你虔诚的渴望，渴望你那些恐怖的往事像尘土一样消于无形。但是，它们却在泥土中蛰伏，像死者的白骨一样，等着人们发掘。高文爵士，我的答复没有更改。我必须到下面的坑里去。”

高文爵士庄重地点点头。“我理解，先生。”

“那么我要反过来请求你了，骑士阁下。你愿意把这个地方留给我，回到现在正在山下等着的那匹忠实的老马那儿去吗？”

“你知道我做不到，维斯坦阁下。”

“我也是这么想的。那好吧。”

维斯坦从埃克索和比特丽丝身边走过，走下粗糙的台阶。他又一次到了山丘脚下，四下里看看，然后说话了，声音与原来完全不同：

“高文爵士，这儿的泥土看起来很奇怪。是不是母龙在精力旺盛的时候喷火烧成这个样子的？还是这儿经常遭受雷击，新草长出来之前，地上被焚烧过？”

高文跟着他也下了山丘，这时他走下台阶，两人四下里随便逛了一会儿，像同伴在寻找搭帐篷的地方一样。

“这事儿我也弄不明白，维斯坦阁下，”高文说道。“就算年轻的时候，她也一直在上面，我想地面应该不是魁瑞格烧焦的。也许一直就是这样，我们把她移到这儿放进巢穴的时候，就是这样的。”高文跺跺脚，用脚后跟试一试地面。“不过，地面很不错啊，先生。”

“是啊。”维斯坦背对着高文，也在用脚测试地面。

“不过，也许还不够宽？”骑士说道。“你看那条边到了悬崖上。人在这儿倒下，肯定能在友好的土地上安息，但他的血也许会很快流过烧焦的草地，从那边淌到崖下去。我可不是说你的啊，先生，但我可不希望自己的内脏挂在崖壁上，像白色的海鸥粪便一样！”

两人都大笑起来，接着维斯坦说：

“这是不必要的担心，先生。你看，那边悬崖前的地面要略微高一些。至于另外那一边嘛，距离很远，而且还要先经过一大片干渴的泥土呢。”

“观察很细致。那好吧，这个地方不错！”高文爵士仰头看着埃克索和比特丽丝，他们俩仍旧站在那块突出的地方，不过现在都背对着坑。“埃克索阁下，”他兴冲冲地喊道，“你一直是个外交高手。现在，你还愿意用你的雄辩之术，让我们两人像朋友一样离开这个地方吗？”

“对不起，高文爵士。你多次帮助我们，我们感谢你。但是，我们到这儿来，是要看着魁瑞格死，如果你要守护她，那我和我妻子就不能帮你说话了。在这件事情上，我们站在维斯坦阁下一边。”

“这我明白了，先生。那么，至少让我提个要求。我并不害怕面前这个人。但是，如果倒下去的是我，你们能不能把我的好霍拉斯带

下山去？他肯定会欢迎两个好心的不列颠人骑在背上。你们也许会以为，他可能会哼哼唧唧发牢骚，但你们两人对他来说不会太重。带着我亲爱的霍拉斯离开这里，等你们用不上他了，给他找块上好的绿草地，让他一边尽情地吃，一边想想过去的事情吧。你们可以帮我这个忙吗，朋友？”

“我们将很高兴帮忙，先生，而且你的马还是我们的救星呢，这下山的路可不容易。”

“说起这件事，先生。”高文这时候已经到了山丘脚下。“之前我曾劝你们利用那条河，我现在再说一次。让霍拉斯驮着你们下山，你们一到河边，就找艘船往东走。马鞍里有锡块和金币，可以支付船费。”

“我们感谢你，先生。你慷慨大方，令我们感动。”

“但是，高文爵士，”比特丽丝说。“如果你的马驮我们两人下山，那么你倒下去之后，尸体怎么下山呢？你太好心了，忘记考虑自己的尸体啦。把你埋葬在这么个孤零零的地方，我们会很难过的。”

有一刻，老骑士的面色变得庄重起来，几乎有些悲怆。但是，那张脸上随即绽出笑容来，他说：“好啦，夫人。我还指望能获胜呢，我们就不要讨论怎么埋葬了吧！反正现在对我来说，这座山也不见得比其他地方更加孤单，就算这场战斗不顺利，我还担心我的鬼魂在低地上要看着不想看的场景呢。所以不要谈论尸体啦，夫人！维斯坦阁下，如果运气不在你那边，你有没有什么事要请这两位朋友帮忙呢？”

“和你一样，先生，我也宁愿不去考虑失败。然而，你虽然年纪大了，却是个令人生畏的对手，这一点只有大傻瓜才会否认。所以我也要麻烦这对好心的夫妻，请你们帮个忙。如果我不在了，请你们把埃德温阁下送到一个好心的村子里去，并请转告他，我把他看作我最优秀的徒弟。”

“我们答应你，先生，”埃克索说。“我们会为他找到最好的村子，尽管他身上带着特殊的伤，前途不容乐观。”

“说得好。这提醒了我，我应该更加努力，不能在这次较量中倒下。好啦，高文爵士，我们可以开始了吧？”

“还有一个请求，”老骑士说，“这次是向你提的，维斯坦阁下。这事我提起来有些不好意思，因为与刚才我们愉快讨论的话题有

关。先生，我说的是拔剑的问题。我年纪大了，要把这件旧武器从剑鞘里拔出来，我发现要花很长时间，愚蠢得很。如果我们两人面对面，剑都不拔的话，恐怕我就只能供你戏耍了，我知道你拔剑有多快。哎呀，先生，我还在跳来跳去，一边咒骂一边不停地拽这个铁家伙，而你却优哉游哉，心里想是该砍下我的脑袋呢，还是该唱首颂歌慢慢等着！不过，如果我们同意先各自把剑拔出来……哎呀，这可真让我难为情，先生！”

“不用再说了，高文爵士。靠拔剑快占对手便宜的武士，我看也没什么了不起。我们就听你的建议，先把剑拔出来再斗吧。”

“谢谢你，先生。作为回报，虽然我看你的胳膊绑了绷带，但我发誓绝不占这个便宜。”

“我很感谢，先生，虽然这只是个小伤。”

“那好吧，先生。承蒙俯允。”

老骑士拔出了剑——真的花了不少时间——将剑插在地上，像他之前在巨人冢时那样。但这次他没有靠在剑上，而是站在那儿，上上下下打量着这件武器，似乎既喜爱又厌倦。然后他双手握住剑，举在空中——高文的姿势，有一种无上的威仪。

“我要转过脸去了，埃克索，”比特丽丝说。“结束了跟我说，最好干净利落，不要受长罪。”

一开始，两人都将剑尖朝下，这样胳膊不会疲惫。埃克索身在高处，能清楚地看到两个人的位置：在最多五步开外的地方，维斯坦的身体略略向左斜，并非直接面对着对手。这样的姿势，两人保持了一会儿，然后维斯坦向右边缓缓跨了三步，所以从表面上看，他朝外的那侧肩膀已不在剑所能保护的范围之内。但是，要利用这一点，高文就必须快速拉近两人的距离。骑士盯着武士，目光中含有指责的意味，同时也跟着小心迈步向右边移动，埃克索看在眼里，并不感到奇怪。与此同时，维斯坦改变了双手握剑的位置，埃克索不太确定高文是否注意到了这一变化——维斯坦的身体有可能挡住了骑士的视线。但现在高文也在改变握剑姿势，让剑的重量从右臂落到左臂。然后两人保持着新的姿势，在不知情的旁观者眼里，他们两人的姿势、距离，可能与之前完全一样。但是，埃克索能感觉到，新的位置有不一样的含义。他已经很久没有如此细致地观察战斗了，但仍然有一种沮丧的感觉，好像眼前发生的一切，自己所能看到的，连一半都不到。

不过，他知道，两人之间的角斗已经到了关键时刻；不可能这样一直持续下去，很快其中一方就必须出击。

尽管如此，高文和维斯坦交手之突然还是让埃克索吃了一惊。好像有人对他们同时发出了信号一样，两人之间的距离消失了，刹那之间，他们已紧紧抱在一起。事情在电光火石之间发生，在埃克索看来，两人似乎抛开了剑，张开臂膀以复杂的动作锁住了对方。与此同时，两人略微旋转了一下，像跳舞一样，这时候埃克索看到，两人的剑似乎融在了一起，也许是因为两柄剑撞击的力量太大吧。这让两人都觉得尴尬，正尽最大努力，要把武器拉开。但这可不是容易的事情，老骑士拼尽气力，脸上表情都扭曲了。维斯坦的脸这时看不见，但埃克索看到他的脖子和肩膀都在颤抖，显然他也在尽全力扭转这一僵局。可是，他们的努力似乎都白费了：时间越久，两柄剑似乎就粘得更牢，看来没别的办法，只好抛开武器，重新开始战斗了。不过，两人好像都不愿意放弃，尽管这样拼命，简直要把力气耗光。接着，某根弦崩断，两柄剑瞬间分开。剑刃分开时，黑色的尘埃——让剑刃紧紧粘在一起的，也许就是这种物质——从中间腾起，飞向空中。高文脸上露出惊讶而又欣慰的表情，他身体转了半个圈子，单膝跪在地上。维斯坦被这股大力推动，几乎转了整整一圈，停下来时，用重获自由的剑指着悬崖之外的云，背部正好对着骑士。

“上帝保佑他，”比特丽丝在身旁说道，埃克索这才意识到，她一直也在观看。等他低头再看时，高文另一只膝盖也跪在了地上。接着，骑士巨大的身躯扭曲着，慢慢倒下，摔在黑色的草地上。他又挣扎了一会儿，像睡梦中的人扭动身体，让姿势更舒服一些，等他脸朝着天空，脸上便显出满足的表情，尽管他的腿仍在身体下面别扭地蜷缩着。维斯坦谨慎地走过去，老骑士似乎在说什么，但埃克索离得太远了，听不见。武士在对手身前站了一会儿，忘了自己手里还拿着剑，埃克索能看见黑色的液体，滴滴答答由剑尖落入泥土。

比特丽丝贴在他身上。“他是母龙的守护人，”她说，“可他对我们很好。要不是他，谁知道我们这时候在哪儿呢，埃克索，看着他倒下去，我很难过。”

他把比特丽丝抱紧。过了一会儿，他放开她，向下爬了一点儿，能更清楚地看看躺在地上的高文。维斯坦说得对：地面在悬崖边上略微隆起，血流到那儿便聚集起来，不会洒下崖壁。他看在眼里，感到无比凄凉，但与此同时，他也觉得——虽然只是一种隐隐约约的感受——心中某种强烈的愤怒，埋藏已久，现在终于平息了。

“了不起啊，先生，”埃克索朝下面喊道。“现在，你和母龙之间没有阻碍啦。”

维斯坦一直低头看着倒在地上的骑士，这时他走到山丘脚下，步伐缓慢，多少有些摇晃，他抬头向上望着，脸上神情迷茫，如在梦中。

“很久以前，”他说，“我就学会了在战斗中不畏惧死神。但是，面对这位骑士的时候，我想我听到了死神的脚步声，在我身后轻轻传来。他年纪很大，但差点占了上风。”

这时候，武士似乎意识到，自己手里还拿着剑，他似乎打算把剑插进山丘脚下的松软泥土里，但在最后一刻住了手，剑尖几乎都碰到泥土了。他直起身子，说道：“这时候把剑擦干净干什么？为什么不让骑士的血和母龙的血合在一起呢？”

他沿着山丘一侧走上来，脚步仍然不稳，像喝醉了酒。他从他们两人身旁走过，靠着一块石头探出身体，眼睛盯着下面的坑，肩膀随着呼吸起伏。

“维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝轻声说。“我们现在都急于看你杀死魁瑞格。不过，结束之后，你能埋葬这位可怜的骑士吗？我丈夫很疲惫，还要留点儿力气赶路呢。”

“亚瑟令人憎恨，他是亚瑟的亲戚，”维斯坦转脸对她说，“不过，我也不会把他的尸体丢给乌鸦。放心吧，夫人，我会照顾他，甚至可能把他葬到这坑里，让他与守护了很久的龙待在一起。”

“那就快点，先生，”比特丽丝说，“结束任务吧。龙虽然很虚弱，但不杀了它，我们心里就不踏实。”

然而，维斯坦似乎听不见她的话了，因为他正盯着埃克索，脸上有种悠远的神情。

“你没事吧，先生？”埃克索开口问道。

“埃克索阁下，”武士说，“我们以后也许就不会见面了。所以请允许我最后再问一次。有个温和的不列颠人，我小时候就认识，像智慧的王子一样经过我们的村庄，让人们梦想着各种办法，使无辜者免受战争的灾祸，那个人是你吗？如果你还记得，我请求你在我们分手之前告诉我。”

“就算我是那个人，先生，今天我也只能透过这条龙的气息，才能看到他，我看到的是个做着梦的傻瓜，但他的用心是善良的，还要亲眼看着庄重的誓言毁于残酷的屠杀。在撒克逊村庄中传播协议的，还有其他人；但是，如果你能多少回忆起我的面孔，又何必去假设那是旁人呢？”

“先生，我们刚见面的时候，我想到过，但不能确定。感谢你坦诚相告。”

“那么，也请你对我坦言，因为从昨天见面开始，这件事就在我心里记挂着，说实话，也许在此之前我早就想着这事了。你想起来的这个人，维斯坦阁下，你想找他报仇吗？”

“你在说什么呢，丈夫？”比特丽丝挤到前面来，站在埃克索和武士之间。“你和这位武士之间，能有什么争执呢？如果有，那他得先把我打倒。”

“公主啊，维斯坦阁下谈的是我很久以前蜕去的一层皮，那时候我们还没见面呢。我曾希望那层皮丢在被人遗忘的路上，早就碎成齏粉。”然后又对维斯坦说：“你怎么说呢，先生？你的剑上仍然滴着血。如果你渴望的是复仇，那这件事很容易，不过我请求你保护我亲爱的妻子，她在这儿为我发抖呢。”

“我曾远远地倾慕着那个人，后来，有时候我的确希望他遭到残酷惩罚，为他在背叛中所起的作用负责。但是，今天我看到，他当初的行为并非欺诈，他对自己的同胞和我的族人都怀有善意。如果我再遇到他，先生，我会请他和平地离开，虽然我知道，现在和平不会持久了。现在请让一让吧，朋友们，让我下去完成我的任务。”

在下方的坑中，龙的位置、姿势仍然和原来一样：就算魁瑞格的感官在警告她，附近来了陌生人——尤其是沿着陡峭的坑壁下来的那个人——从外表上也看不出任何迹象。她脊骨的一起一伏，也许比原来更明显一点？那眼睛一睁一闭，是不是也比原来急一些？埃克索不确定。但是，就在盯着下面那条龙的时候，他想到一个念头：那片山楂树丛——坑里除了母龙之外的唯一活物——已经成了母龙的巨大慰藉，此时此刻，她在心里仍然想爬过去。埃克索知道，这个念头有些异想天开，可是他越看越觉得有道理。否则这样的地方怎么能长出一片孤零零的树丛呢？难道不是梅林自己让树长在这儿，给母龙做个伴儿的吗？

维斯坦继续往下走，剑没有插入剑鞘。他的目光一直没有离开躺在地上的龙，好像她会突然起身，变成一个可怕的魔鬼一样。有一下他脚下没站稳，把剑插到地里，以免背部着地一直往下滑。石头和沙砾沿着土坡纷纷落下，但魁瑞格仍然没有反应。

接着，维斯坦安全地到了地面。他擦擦额头，望望上面的埃克索和比特丽丝，然后朝母龙走去，在几步开外的地方停下来。他举起剑，开始检查剑刃，发现刃口上有一条条的血迹，他似乎吃了一惊。维斯坦一动不动，就保持着这个样子，以至于埃克索心里想，自从取胜之后，武士就有一种奇怪的情绪，难道因此一时忘了自己到坑里的目的了？

但是，与之前和老骑士战斗时一样，维斯坦突然开始向前移动。他没有跑，而是快步走，人从龙的身体上越过，但步伐并没有紊乱，然后他加快了脚步，好像急着赶到坑的另一侧一样。但是，在此过程中，他的剑划了一道又急又低的弧线，埃克索看见母龙的脑袋飞到空中，滚了几下，最后在石头地上停住不动了。不过，脑袋并没有在地上停多久，汹涌的血液先在脑袋两侧分开流过，随后脑袋便浮了起来，在坑底快速漂过去，到山楂树丛那儿停了下来，卡住不动了，喉咙朝上向着天空。这场景让埃克索想起了高文在地道里砍下来的那条狗怪的脑袋，心中又感到一阵凄凉。他强迫自己扭过头去，不看母龙，而去看维斯坦的身形：他一直在走，从没停下脚步。这时候武士一边避开漫延的血池，一边绕路回来，到了坑边，开始往上爬，手里的剑仍然没有放回剑鞘。

“结束了，埃克索，”比特丽丝说。

“是的，公主。不过，我还有个问题想问武士。”

* * *

维斯坦从坑里爬出来，花了很长时间，令人感到意外。最后，他终于来到两人面前，显得垂头丧气，一点儿凯旋的模样也没有。他一言不发，在坑口边缘的黑色地面上坐下，终于把手里的剑深深插进土里。他眼神空洞，但他没有看坑里，而是望着远处，望着天上的云和淡灰色的山峦。

过了一会儿，比特丽丝走过去，轻轻碰了碰他的胳膊。“我们感谢你这一举动，维斯坦阁下，”她说。“这块土地上还有很多人，如果在场的话，也会感谢你。为什么这么沮丧呢？”

“沮丧？没关系，夫人，我的精神很快就会好起来。就是这下子……”维斯坦转过脸去，又一次凝视着天边的云。然后他说道：

“也许我和你们不列颠人相处太久了。鄙视你们当中的懦弱者，钦佩、热爱你们当中的优秀者，而且从我很小的时候起，就一直是这样。现在我坐在这儿发抖，不是因为疲惫，而是因为想起了我自己亲手做过的事情。我必须快点狠下心来，否则就只能成为国王的软弱武士，不能在以后的事情中尽力。”

“你这说的是什么呢，先生？”比特丽丝问。“现在还有什么别的任务等着你吗？”

“等着我的是公正与复仇，夫人。两者都耽搁很久了，所以很快就会到来。可是，现在时候快到了，我发现自己心里却颤抖起来，像个姑娘一样。这只能是因为我在你们当中待得太久了。”

“你之前对我说过的话，先生，”埃克索说，“我也不是没有留意。你说，你会希望我在和平中离开，虽然和平不会持久了。当时我就想，你这是什么意思呢，连你下坑的时候我还在想。现在你可以给我们解释解释吗？”

“看得出来，埃克索阁下，你已经开始明白了。我的国王派我来杀死这条母龙，不仅是为了纪念很久以前被屠杀的同胞。你开始明白了，先生，这条龙一死，就为即将到来的征服铺平了道路。”

“征服，先生？”埃克索靠到他身边。“这怎么可能呢，维斯坦阁下？难道你们的撒克逊军队壮大了，增加了很多海外的兄弟？或者是你们的武士异常勇猛，所以打算征服和平已久的土地？”

“没错，我们的军队在数量上还很单薄，连东方的沼泽地也不例外。但是，你看看这片土地。每个山谷、每条河流，现在都有撒克逊人的村庄，每个村庄都有强壮的汉子和即将长大的男孩。我们的军队横扫西方之时，这些村庄的人会壮大我们的力量。”

“你说这话，大概是刚才取得了胜利，昏了头吧，维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝说。“这怎么可能呢？你自己亲眼看到了，这儿的每个村庄，你的同胞和我的同胞都生活在一起。从小就爱着的邻居，他们怎么可能去下手呢？”

“夫人，你看看你丈夫的脸。我坐在这儿，好像面前有让人无法睁眼的强光一样，为什么呢？你丈夫已经开始明白了。”

“没错，公主，武士的话让我不寒而栗。我和你希望魁瑞格死掉，我们只想着自己的宝贵记忆。可是，多少古老的仇恨将在这块土地上复活，谁又知道呢？我们只好希望上帝能找到办法，维系两族之间的纽带，可习俗与猜忌一直让我们难以团结。如果对土地和征服的新欲望，被巧舌之辈嫁接到古老的怨恨之上，谁知道会带来什么灾祸呢？”

“惧怕就对啦，先生，”维斯坦说。“巨人，以前埋在地下，现在动起来啦。他肯定很快就会起来，到那时候，我们之间的友好纽带，就会像小女孩用细细的花茎打的结一样，脆弱不堪。人们会在夜间烧掉邻居的房子。清晨将孩子们吊死在树上。河水发臭，河上漂着泡了很多天的肿胀尸体。我们的军队一面推进，一面会因为愤怒和复仇的渴望而继续壮大。对你们不列颠人来说，那将是向你们滚去的一个大火球。你们要么逃跑，要么毁灭。一个个国家会相继沦陷，这儿会成为一块全新的土地，撒克逊人的土地，没有痕迹表明你们曾在这儿生活过，除了一两群无人照看的绵羊，在山里游荡。”

“他说得对吗，埃克索？他肯定是头脑发热，才这么说的吧？”

“他有可能说错了，公主，但这不是头脑发热。母龙死了，亚瑟的影子也会慢慢消失。”然后他对维斯坦说：“我感到欣慰，先生，你描述的这些可怕景象，至少你自己没有引以为乐。”

“如果我能够的话，埃克索阁下，我会引以为乐的，因为那将是正当的复仇。但是，我在你们当中生活得太久，变得软弱了，就算我努力，心中也有个声音反对这仇恨的火焰。这是个弱点，让我感到羞耻，但我很快会用我亲手训练出来的人代替我的位置，他的意志比我要纯粹得多。”

“你说的是埃德温阁下，先生？”

“是的，现在母龙被杀，对他的影响也就没了，我敢说他很快就会更加镇定。那个男孩有真正的武士精神，这样的人很少。其余的他很快就能学会，我会锻炼他的心，不允许他像我这样，被柔弱的情感侵入。在我们未来的事业中，他将毫不留情。”

“维斯坦阁下，”比特丽丝说，“我还是不知道，你这究竟是不是头脑发热的疯话。但我和我丈夫体力越来越弱，我们必须回到下面去找地方休息了。你能记住你的承诺，好好埋葬这位好心的骑士吗？”

“我承诺，夫人，不过我担心那些鸟现在就找到了他。好朋友们，你们提前获得了警告，有足够的时间逃走。坐上骑士的马，快点离开这儿吧。如果一定要去，那就去找你们儿子的村庄吧，但最多逗留一两天，在我们的军队到来之前，谁知道村子里什么时候会烧起战火呢？你们的儿子如果不肯听从你们的警告，那就丢下他，尽可能往西边跑。你们还有可能跑在屠杀前头。现在就去吧，找到骑士的马。如果你们发现埃德温阁下镇定多了，奇怪的烧退去了，那就把他放开，让他上来找我。他未来要经历大风大浪，我希望他看看这个地方，看看倒下的骑士和死掉的母龙，统统在他脚下。而且，现在我想起来了，他能用一两块石头挖坟呢！好啦，快点走吧，好心的朋友们，就此别过。”

第十六章

那头山羊一直在埃德温脑袋旁边的草地上踩着，已经有一会儿了。为什么它一定要靠得这么近呢？虽然他们两个绑在同一根木桩上，但是互不相扰的地方还是有的吧。

埃德温本来可以站起身来，把山羊赶走，但他感觉太累了。刚才疲惫感突然袭来，势不可挡，以至于他一头栽倒在地，一侧脸颊贴在草上。他迷迷糊糊快睡着了，脑海里却突然闪过一个念头：母亲已经走了，于是又被惊醒过来。他身体没动，眼睛也一直闭着，但他对着地面说：“母亲。我们来啦。就是现在要耽搁一会儿。”

没有回答，他感觉到巨大的空虚在心里漫延开来。后来他一直半睡半醒，期间曾向她呼喊了好几次，回答他的只有沉寂。现在，这头山羊却在啃噬他耳朵旁边的草。

“原谅我，母亲，”他轻声对着土地说。“他们绑住了我。我无法脱身。”

上方有人的声音。这时他才意识到，周围脚步声不是山羊发出的。有人在解开他的双手，绳子从身体下面抽出去。一只温柔的手托起他的头，他睁开眼睛，看见那位老太太——比特丽丝夫人——正低头看着自己。他发现身上的绑绳已经解开，便站了起来。

一条腿的膝盖疼得厉害，一阵风吹得他摇摇晃晃，但他还能保持平衡。他看看周围：灰色的天空，绵延的大地，下一座山顶上的岩石。不久前，那些岩石对他至关重要，可现在她走了，这一点毋庸置疑。他想起了武士说过的话：救援未必来得及，但报仇的机会多得是。如果真是这样，那么，抓走他母亲的那些人，定要付出高昂的代价。

没有维斯坦的踪迹。只有那对年长的夫妻在这儿，但埃德温也感到欣慰。他们站在他面前，关切地盯着他。看到好心的比特丽丝夫人，他感觉突然要哭出来一样。但是，埃德温意识到，她好像在说什么话——和维斯坦有关，于是努力去听。

她的撒克逊话不太好懂，风似乎把她的话带走了。最后，他打断她的话，问道：“维斯坦阁下倒下倒下了吗？”

她住了口，但没有作答。他又重复了一遍，提高嗓门盖过了风的声音，这时比特丽丝才使劲摇了摇头，说道：

“你没听到我的话吗，埃德温阁下？我告诉你，维斯坦阁下没事，顺那条路上去，他在那儿等你。”

这消息让他备感欣慰，他撒腿就跑，但随即发现自己头晕目眩，还没到路上就只好停了下来。他站稳了，然后回头望，看见那对年老的夫妻已经朝这边走了几步。这时埃德温注意到，他们非常虚弱。在风中，两人站在一起，互相依靠着，与他第一次见到他们的时候相比，显得老了许多。他们还有力气下山吗？现在他们正望着他，表情很奇怪，在他们身后，那头山羊也安静下来了，正瞪大眼睛看着他。埃德温心里闪过一个奇怪的念头：这一刻自己从头到脚全是血，所以大家都盯着他。他低头一看，衣服上有泥巴和草，除此之外，他没发现什么特别的。

那位老头子突然喊了些什么话。是不列颠人的语言，埃德温听不懂。是警告吗？还是要求？接着比特丽丝夫人的声音从风中传来。

“埃德温阁下！我们两人都求你一件事。以后的日子里，记住我们啊。记住我们，记住你还是个男孩的时候，我们之间的友谊。”

听到这话的时候，埃德温想起了另外一件事：他对武士的承诺；仇恨所有不列颠人的义务。不过，维斯坦肯定没打算把这对好心的夫妇也包括在内吧。埃克索阁下呢，正颤巍巍地将一只手举到空中。这是要告别呢，还是打算拦住他？

埃德温转过身去，这次他奔跑的时候，虽然风从一侧猛烈地吹着，他的身体并没有让他失望。他的母亲已经走了，很可能永远也不会回来了，但武士还在，正等着他。路越来越陡，膝盖也越来越疼，但他继续奔跑着。

第十七章

我在松树底下躲雨，他们在暴风雨中骑马而来。这种天气，可不适合年纪这么大的夫妇，那匹马也同样疲惫不堪。老头子是不是担心，再多走一步，马的心脏就会受不了？否则，离最近的树也只有二十来步了，为什么要在泥浆中停下来呢？不过，马在滂沱大雨中耐心地站着，等着老头子把她扶下来。就算是图画里的人物，动作也不可能这么慢吧？“来吧，朋友们，”我冲他们喊道。“快点，来躲一躲。”

两人都没听到。也许是雨水的嘶嘶声，堵住了他们的耳朵？或者是因为他们上了年纪？我又喊了一声，这次老头子四下里望望，总算看见了我。她终于从马上滑下来，他张臂接住，虽然她又瘦又小，但我看他也没什么力气了，未必抱得动她。所以我离开避雨的地方，老头子转过脸，看见我踩着泥水在草地上跑，吃了一惊。不过他还是接受了我的帮助，因为他自己不是马上就要瘫倒了吗？他妻子的胳膊还搂着他的脖子呢。我从他手里把她接过来，急忙跑到树下，她的分量对我来说毫不费力。我听见老头子在我后面喘着气。妻子给陌生人抱着，也许他有些担心。于是我将她轻轻放下来，表示我是好心帮忙，没有别的意思。我把她的头靠在柔软的树皮上，上面遮蔽得很严实，偶尔有一两滴雨落在她身边。

老头子在她身旁蹲下来，说着鼓励的话，我走到一旁，不想干扰他们的亲密举动。我原来避雨的地方在树林和开阔地交界处，我回到那儿，看着滂沱大雨横扫过高沼地。这么大的雨，找个地方躲一躲，谁能怪罪我呢？耽搁的路程，我能轻松赶上，还能更好地迎接后面几个星期的连续劳作。我听见他们在我身后谈话，可我能怎么办呢？难道为了避开他们的喃喃交谈，我要站到雨里去？

“公主啊，你这是发烧了说胡话。”

“不，不是的，埃克索，”她说。“是回想起来的，还有别的呢。我们之前怎么会忘了呢？我们的儿子现在住在一座岛上。到了一个隐秘的小海湾，就能看到岛，现在肯定离我们不远了。”

“怎么会这样呢，公主？”

“你没有听见吗，埃克索？我现在都能听见呢。我们这不是到了大海附近吗？”

“只是下雨，公主。也许是条河。”

“以前我们被迷雾罩着，埃克索，所以忘记了，但现在记忆开始清晰了。附近有座岛，我们的儿子在那儿等着。埃克索，你没有听见大海的声音吗？”

“公主啊，是你发烧了。我们很快就能找到地方休息，你又会好起来的。”

“问问这位陌生人吧，埃克索。这地方他比我们熟悉。问他附近有没有海湾。”

“公主啊，他就是个帮助我们的好心人。在这种事情上他怎么会有特别的智慧呢？”

“问问他，埃克索。能有什么坏处呢？”

我该继续沉默吗？我该怎么办？我转过身，说道：“先生，这位好心的女士是对的。”老头子吃了一惊，眼神中流露出恐惧。我心里有点儿希望再次沉默，转过身，去看那匹在雨中屹立不动的老马。可是，我既然已经开口了，就必须说下去。我伸手一指，越过他们蜷缩之处，指向后方。

“那儿有条道，在那些树中间，一直走，就到了女士所说的海湾。岸边大多是鹅卵石，不过，如果潮水低，比如现在这时候，石头就会让位于沙子。好心的女士，你说的没错。往海里去路不远，有一座小岛。”

他们默默地看着我，她疲惫而开心，他则愈加恐惧。他们就一直不说话吗？还是想要我继续说？

“我看了天，”我说。“雨很快就会停，傍晚会放晴。如果你们希望我划船送你们上岛，我很愿意效劳。”

“埃克索，我说吧！”

“那么你是船夫吗，先生？”老头子严肃地问。“我们以前有没有在哪儿见过？”

“没错，我是船夫，”我告诉他。“我们有没有见过，我记不得了，我每天要划船很长时间，送很多人。”

老头子看上去更加害怕了，他蹲在妻子身旁，把她紧紧抱住。我觉得最好还是换个话题，于是说道：

“你的马还在雨里站着呢。虽然没有拴，也没什么阻拦他到附近的树下去。”

“那是匹老战马，先生。”老头子很高兴不谈海湾的事情，所以急切地回答道。“他仍然遵守纪律，虽然他的主人已经不在了。我们马上就去照顾他，我们最近答应过他勇敢的主人。不过我刚才在担心我亲爱的妻子。先生，你知道哪儿能找到休息的地方，生个火给她取暖吗？”

我不能撒谎，而且我有自己的职责。“巧得很，”我回答，“海湾上就有个休息的小地方。是我自己搭的，用树枝和破布盖了个简单的屋顶。不到一个小时前，我留了个火堆在旁边，应该还可以重新点着。”

他犹豫着，小心查看我脸上的表情。老妇人现在闭上了眼睛，头靠在他肩膀上。他说，“船夫，我妻子刚才说那些话，是因为发烧了。我们不需要什么岛。最好我们还是在这些友好的树下躲躲雨，等雨停了，我们就继续赶路。”

“埃克索，你在说什么呢？”女人睁开眼睛，说道。“我们的儿子等待的时间还不够长吗？让这位好心的船夫带我们去海湾。”

老头子仍在犹豫，但他能感觉到妻子在怀里发抖，他望着我，眼里充满着绝望的祈求。

“如果你愿意，”我说，“我可以抱着这位好心的女士，到海湾去的一路上就能轻松一些。”

“我自己来抱她，先生，”他说，像是打了败仗却仍然一身傲气。“如果她自己不能走过去，那就让我用臂膀抱她过去。”

该怎么回答这句话呢？毕竟现在丈夫几乎和妻子一样虚弱。

“海湾不远，”我轻声说。“但下去的路很陡，坑坑洼洼，还有盘根错节的树根。请允许我来抱她，先生。这是最安全的。只要路上好走，你就一直在我旁边。行啦，等雨停了，我们就快点下去，你看这位好心的女士都冷得发抖。”

不久，雨停了，我抱着她走下山，老头子在后面踉踉跄跄地跟着，等我们来到海边的时候，黑色的云朵好像被一只手不耐烦地推到了天空的一侧。红色的晚霞洒满海滨，裹着雾气的太阳正缓缓向海平面落去，我的船在海浪里摇摆着。我再次表现了我的温柔，将她放到

干兽皮和树枝铺成的粗糙垫子上，头靠着一块长满苔藓的石头。我还没来得及迈步走开，他就跑过来手忙脚乱地照顾妻子。

“看那边，”我在沉睡的火堆旁蹲下来，说道。“岛在那儿。”

老妇人略微偏一下头，就能看到大海，她低声叫了出来。他则必须在坚硬的鹅卵石上转过身子才能看见。他瞪大眼睛望着海面，不时流露出疑惑的神情。

“那儿，朋友，”我说。“看那边。在海岸和地平线中间的地方。”

“我的眼睛不太好，”他说。“对啦，我想现在我看到了。那是树冠吗？还是高高低低的岩石？”

“那应该是树，朋友，因为那座岛是个温和的地方。”说话的时候，我一直在折小树枝，照顾火堆。他们两人都望着海上的岛，我跪下来，吹火堆的余烬，地上的石头硌得我骨头都疼。这个男人和这个女人，难道不是自愿到这儿来的吗？让他们决定自己的路吧，我心里想。

“现在感觉到暖和一点儿了吗，公主？”他叫道。“很快你就能好起来啦。”

“我看到岛了，埃克索，”她说。我打扰了他们的亲密一刻，可又有什么办法呢？“我们的儿子就在那儿等着。这件事情我们以前竟然忘了，真奇怪。”

他嘟囔了一句，算是回答，我看见他又开始心神不宁。“当然啦，公主，”他说，“我们还没决定吧。我们真的要渡海到那个地方去吗？而且，我们也没办法付船费，锡块和金币都丢在马背上了。”

我该沉默吗？“那没有关系，朋友们，”我说。“你们欠我的，我很愿意回头再到马鞍里拿。那匹马不会走远的。”有些人可能会说这是狡猾，但我说这话，只是出于好心，我很清楚以后再也不会碰到那匹马了。他们继续低声交谈，我一直背对着他们，照顾火堆。我又哪里希望打扰他们呢？可是，她却提高了声音，话也说得比之前更加清晰。

“船夫，”她说。“我曾听过一个传说，也许在我还是孩子的时候吧。说是有个岛，树木葱葱、溪水潺潺，但是那个地方有一些奇怪的特点。很多人渡海上了岛，但是，对在岛上居住的每个人来说，好

像他是一个人在岛上行走，他的邻居，他既看不见也听不见。我们面前的这座岛是这样的吗，先生？”

我继续折着小树枝，小心地放在火苗周围。“好女士啊，符合你描述的岛，我知道好几个呢。这座岛是不是，谁知道啊？”

这是个回避问题的回答，也让她胆子更大。“我还听说了，船夫，”她说，“有些时候，那些奇怪的影响会不起作用。某些旅行者能够获得豁免。我听的这消息对吗，先生？”

“亲爱的女士，”我说，“我只是个普通的船夫。这些问题，可不是我能谈论的。不过，既然这儿没有别人，让我补充一点儿吧。我听人说过，某些时候，或许是风暴之中，就像刚才过去的那场风暴，又或许是夏天某个月圆的夜晚，岛上的人可能感觉到其他人和他一起在风中移动。这可能就是你以前听说过的情况，好心的女士。”

“不，船夫，”她说，“还有别的。我听说，一个男人和一个女人一起过了一辈子，爱的纽带异常牢固，就可以到岛上去，不会孤零零地在岛上游荡。我听说他们就可以享受互相陪伴之乐，和以前那么多年一样。我听说的这件事是真的吗，船夫？”

“我再再说一遍吧，好心的女士啊。我只是个船夫，任务是把想过去的人渡过去。我只能谈我每天劳作中看到的事情。”

“可是，现在这里只有你能指引我们，船夫。所以我要问你，先生。如果你现在把我和我丈夫渡过去，我们能不分开，而是像现在这样手挽着手在岛上走吗？”

“那好吧，好心的女士。我跟你坦诚地说吧。你和你丈夫这样的夫妻，我们这些船夫很少遇到。你们骑着马在雨里走的时候，我就看出来，你们极其罕见地爱着对方。所以，毫无疑问，你们会得到许可，能一起住到岛上。这你可以放心。”

“你的话让我非常高兴，船夫，”她说，身体上的一根弦似乎松了下来。接着她说：“谁知道呢？在风暴中，或者平静的月圆之夜，我和埃克索也许还能看见儿子就在身边呢。说不定还能与他说一两句话。”

火堆现在烧得很平稳，于是我站起身来。“看那儿，”我指着海上，说道。“船就在浅水中。不过，我把桨藏在附近一个山洞，放在一个有小鱼的水潭里。朋友们，现在我去取船桨，我走之后，你们两

人可以无拘无束地谈话，不用顾忌我在旁边啦。如果你们希望坐船上岛，那就做个最终的决定吧。我先离开一下。”

但是，她却没那么轻易放过我。“船夫啊，你走之前，再说句话，”她说。“告诉我们，你回来的时候，在答应渡我们上岛之前，是不是打算轮流问我们问题。因为我听人说过，船夫用这种方法，找出那些能在岛上一起生活的不同寻常的夫妻。”

他们都盯着我，黄昏的光落在两人脸上，我看见他的脸上满是猜疑。我看着她的眼睛，没看他。

“好心的女士啊，”我说，“我感谢你的提醒。之前很匆忙，把按照传统应该做的事情给忘了。就是像你所说的那样，不过对你们俩这样做，只是出于惯例。我说过，一开始我就看出来，罕见的恩爱把你们这对夫妻连在一起。好啦，朋友们，我要走啦，时间不多了。做好决定等我回来吧。”

于是我离开他们，走过黄昏下的海滨，海浪的声音越来越响，脚下的石头慢慢变成了潮湿的沙子。每次我一回头，看到的都是同一幅景象，不过每次都要小一点儿：白头发的老人，蹲在他的女人面前，庄重地交谈着。她靠在石头上，被遮住了，几乎看不到，只能看见她说话时有一只手一起一伏。一对恩爱的夫妻，但我有我的职责，我继续朝洞里走，去拿我的船桨。

扛着船桨回来的时候，我先从他们的眼睛里看出了他们的决定，然后才听见他说道：“我们请你送我们上岛，船夫。”

“那么，我们快点上船吧，我已经耽搁啦。”说着，我转过身，似乎是要朝海那边跑。但是，我随即又转身回来，说，“哎呀，还要等等。我们先必须走一走这愚蠢的形式。好吧，朋友们，请听我说。好心的先生，请你现在起身，离我们远一点儿。等你听不见了，我就和你温柔的妻子说几句话。她坐在那儿就行了，不用动。过一会儿，无论你站在海滩上什么地方，我都会去找你。我们很快就能谈完，然后回到这儿，带着好心的女士一起上船。”

他瞪大眼睛看着我，现在他的半颗心希望能够信任我。最后他说道：“很好，船夫。我就到这海滩上逛一会儿。”又对他的女人说，“我们就分开一下子，公主。”

“不用担心，埃克索，”她说。“我体力恢复了不少，在这位好心人的保护下很安全。”

他走开了，慢慢走到海湾东边崖壁的巨大阴影下。鸟群在他面前散开，但很快又飞回来，继续像刚才一样在海草和石头上啄食。他走得有些一瘸一拐，背弯着，一副快要被打败的样子，但我能看出来，他体内仍有小小的火苗。

女人坐在我面前，抬头微微一笑。我问什么呢？

“不要害怕我的问题，好心的女士，”我说。这时候我希望附近有一堵长长的墙，跟她谈话的时候，我的脸可以对着墙，但是附近没有墙，只有傍晚的轻风，落日的余晖照在我脸上。我把袍子拉到膝盖上，在她面前蹲下，我看见她丈夫这么做过。

“我不害怕你的问题，船夫，”她轻声说。“因为我知道心里对他是什么感受。你想问什么，就问吧。我的回答会是诚实的，只会证明一个结果。”

我问了一两个问题，常见的问题，这种事情难道我做得还少吗？为了鼓励她，表示我很认真，我不时会再问一个问题。但这几乎没有必要，因为她很放松。她娓娓道来，有时候会闭上眼睛，声音一直清晰、平稳。我仔细听着，这是我的职责，但我的目光却越过海滩，望着那位疲惫老人的身影，此刻他正焦急地在小岩石间来回踱步。

这时我想起来，其他地方还有事情等着我呢，于是我打断了她的回忆，说道：“我谢谢你了，好心的女士。现在让我快点去找你的丈夫吧。”

他肯定已经开始信任我了，否则为什么要走到离妻子那么远的地方呢？他听见我的脚步声，转过身来，好像刚从梦中醒来。霞光落在他身上，我看见他的脸上不再充满疑虑，而是笼罩着深深的悲伤，眼睛里还闪着泪花。

“怎么样啊，先生？”他低声问。

“聆听你的女士说话是件快事，”我回答。风开始大起来，但他语气轻柔，所以我也放低了声音。“现在呀，朋友，我们简短一点吧，这样我们就能快点动身啦。”

“你随便问吧，先生。”

“朋友，我没有什么让人为难的问题。你好心的妻子刚才回忆说，有一天你们俩拿着从市场上买回来的鸡蛋。她说，她抱着一筐子

鸡蛋，你在她身边，一路上一直盯着筐子，担心她走路的时候鸡蛋会撞破。她回忆起那一幕，感到很幸福。”

“我也一样，船夫，”他微笑着看了我一眼。“我担心鸡蛋，因为前一次到市场去的时候，她绊了一下，打破了一两个。路很短，但那天我们俩都很愉快。”

“和她回忆的情况一样，”我说。“那好吧，我们不要再浪费时间了，因为这次谈话只是出于惯例。我们去把好心的女士带到船上吧。”

我在前面带路，打算回到小棚子那儿找他妻子，但他却慢吞吞的，我也只好跟着慢下来。

“别担心风浪，朋友，”我以为他担心的是这个。“海湾很安全，从这儿到岛上不会有什么风险。”

“我很信任你的判断，船夫。”

“是这样的，朋友，”我又说道。路走得慢，那干吗不利用这个机会再说话呢？“刚才如果我们有时间的话，也许我还可以问一个问题。现在既然我们俩一起朝那边走，我告诉你这个问题是什么，你愿意听吗？”

“当然啦，船夫。”

“我打算问你，你们这么多年在一起，有没有什么记忆，让你感到特别痛苦？就这个问题。”

“这算作问答的一部分吗，先生？”

“噢，当然不是啦，”我说。“那早已经结束啦。同样的问题，之前我也问过你好心的妻子，所以这不过是我感到好奇罢了。你不要回答啦，朋友，我也不介意。你看那边。”我指着路过的一块岩石。

“那上面可不仅仅是些贝壳啊。如果有时间，我可以让你看看怎么从岩石上把它们撬下来，轻轻松松做一顿晚餐。我经常把它们放到火堆上烤。”

“船夫啊，”他庄重地说道，脚步更慢了。“如果你希望我回答，那我就来回答你的问题。我不确定她是怎么回答的，因为即使像我们这样的夫妻，也有很多事情不对彼此说。而且，之前有一条母龙，她的气息污染了空气，我们的记忆，无论美好还是阴暗，都被她夺走了。但是，母龙今天被杀死了，很多事情开始在我脑海中清晰起

来。你问有什么记忆带来特别的痛苦。我没有别的可说，船夫，那肯定是我们的儿子。我们最后见他的时候，他都快成人了，但他脸上还没长出胡子，就离开了我们。之前发生过争吵，他离开，也只是到附近的村庄去，我以为他过几天就会回来。”

“你妻子也是这么说的，朋友，”我说。“而且，她说儿子离开，是她的错。”

“如果她认为前面的事情是她的错，那么后面的事情，我就要负很大责任了。因为有短短的一段时间，她曾对我不忠，这是真的。船夫啊，可能是我做了什么事，把她赶到了另一个人的怀抱里。或者是因为我该说的没说、该做的没做？现在，那都是很遥远的事情了，像一只鸟飞过，成为天空上的一个小点。但我们的儿子亲眼见过那怨恨的一幕，那时他年纪不大不小，既不像孩子那样能用好话哄骗，又不像成人那样明白人心的复杂。他离开之时，发誓说再也不回来，我和她重归于好之后，他仍然没回家。”

“这件事你妻子跟我说过。不久之后消息传来，说你们的儿子被肆虐全国的瘟疫夺走了。朋友，我自己在那一场瘟疫中失去了父母，我记得很清楚。但是，为什么要因此自责呢？那是上帝或魔鬼降下的瘟疫，你能有什么责任？”

“船夫啊，我禁止她到他的坟上去。真是件残酷的事情。她希望我们一起去看看他安息的地方，但是我不允许。现在，很多年过去了，但我们前几天才动身去找他，那时候母龙的迷雾已经夺走了我们的记忆，我们都不清楚自己要找什么。”

“啊，原来是这样，”我说。“这件事，你的妻子可没好意思说。那么，是你阻拦了她去看儿子的坟。”

“我做了件残酷的事，先生。那可是更加阴暗的背叛，甚于妻子一两个月的小小不忠。”

“你不仅阻止妻子到儿子的安息之所哀悼，甚至连自己也不去，先生，你当时这么做，是想获得什么呢？”

“获得？什么也获得不了，船夫。那就是愚蠢和自傲。或者是人心之中潜伏着的其他什么东西。也许是渴望惩罚，先生。我在口头和行动上都主张宽恕，但内心中封锁多年的某个小角落却渴望复仇。那是件卑微而阴暗的事情，对不起她，也对不起我儿子。”

“朋友，我感谢你告诉我这件事，”我对他说。“也许说出来更好。虽然这次谈话不会影响我的职责，现在我们就是两个伙伴聊天，但我承认，之前我心里有一点点顾忌，觉得该听到的，还没有全部听到。现在，我将毫无顾虑、心情舒畅地送你们过去。不过，请你告诉我，朋友，是什么让你改变那么多年的决心，最后决定出门呢？有人说过什么吗？还是突然就改变了想法？毕竟人心和我们面前这海浪和天空一样难以索解啊。”

“船夫，这我自己也不清楚。现在，我觉得让我改变主意的，不是某一件事情，是我们多年一起生活，让我慢慢改变了。也许没有别的原因了，船夫。伤口愈合很慢，但终究还是愈合了。不久前有一天早晨，晨曦初现，带来了今年春天最早的迹象，我看着妻子，她还在睡，虽然阳光已经照亮了我们的房间。我知道，最后一片黑暗已经离我而去。于是我们就这样出门了，先生。现在我妻子回忆说，我们的儿子在我们之前渡海上了岛，因此他的坟墓应该在岛上，在树林之中，或者在宁静的海滨。船夫，我已经对你坦诚相告，希望不会动摇你之前对我们的看法。我想，有些人听了我的话，可能会认为我们的爱有瑕疵，破裂了。但是，一对老夫夫妻的恩爱缓缓前行，上帝会知道的，他明白黑色的阴影是整体的一部分。”

“不要担心，朋友。你对我说的话，只让我想起你和妻子骑着疲惫的马在雨中走来的场景。好啦，先生，不用再说了，谁知道下一场风暴会不会来呢。我们快点到她那儿去，抱她上船吧。”

她靠着岩石坐着，睡着了，脸上露出满足的神情，身旁的火堆冒着烟。

“这次我自己来抱她，船夫，”他说。“我感觉力气恢复了。”

我能让他这么做吗？那可不会减轻我的任务。“这石头上可不好走啊，朋友，”我说。“你抱着她，如果摔一跤，那后果该有多严重呢？这种事我已经习惯了，她可不是第一个需要抱上船的人。你可以在我们旁边走，如果愿意，还能跟她讲话。记得她抱着鸡蛋，你在旁边忧心忡忡地走吗？就像那样吧。”

他脸上又露出恐惧之色。不过他轻声回答道：“好吧，船夫。按你说的办。”

他在我身旁走着，一边低声说些鼓励她的话。我步子迈得太快了吗？因为他现在落到后面了，抱她走进海水的时候，我感觉他一只手死死抓着我的后背。但是，这可不是停留的地方，因为码头藏在冰冷

的水面之下，我的脚必须找准位置。我踩到水下的石头上，海水又变浅了，在脚下涌动。我上了船，我怀里抱着她，但船身几乎没有倾斜。船尾的垫子淋了雨，已经湿了。我踢开上面几层湿透了的垫子，把她轻轻放下来。我让她自己慢慢坐起来，头就靠在船舷下方，然后到柜子里找毯子，帮她挡一挡海风。

我把毯子裹在她身上的时候，感觉到他爬上了船，地板随着他的脚步晃动。“朋友，”我说，“你看，海里浪越来越大了。这是条很小的船。我一次只能载一个人，不敢多载。”

这时候我能清楚地看出他内心的火，因为火苗都快从他眼里喷出来了。“我还以为我们都说好了呢，船夫，”他说，“我和妻子不能分开，要一起上岛。我不是已经说了很多遍吗？你问问题不也是为了这个目的吗？”

“请不要误会，朋友，”我说。“我只是说坐船渡海的实际操作问题。你们两人会一起住在岛上，手挽着手，和你们以前一样，这一点毫无疑问。如果在某个阴凉的地方找到你儿子的墓地，你可以考虑在周围放些野花，岛上有，你能找到。林地里有紫铃石楠，说不定还有金盏花呢。但是，今天渡海，我请你回到海滩上再等一会儿。我会保证好心的女士在对岸舒舒服服的，因为我知道船靠岸后不远处有个地方，三块古老的岩石面对面，像老朋友一样。我让她先在那儿待着，有石头遮风挡雨，还能看见海，然后我就尽快回来接你。但是，现在请你离开，回到岸上再等一会儿。”

落日的红光照在他身上，或许那仍旧是他眼睛里的火？“我妻子坐在船上，我就不会从这条船上下去，先生。划桨送我们过去吧，遵守你的诺言。还是要我自己来划桨？”

“桨在我手里，先生，决定船里能坐多少人，仍然是我的职责。虽然我们友好相待，但是，你难道怀疑这里头有什么见不得人的把戏吗？难道你担心我不回来接你？”

“我对你没有任何指责，先生。可是，关于船夫和他们的行事方式，有很多传闻。我无意冒犯，只是求你现在渡我们两个过去，不要再犹豫了。”

“船夫，”身后传来她的声音，我转过头去，刚好看到她一只手在空气中摸索着，好像是要找出我的位置一样，尽管她的眼睛还是闭的。“船夫。请你离开一下。让我和丈夫单独说会儿话。”

我敢把船丢给他们吗？可是，她现在肯定要帮我讲话。我双手牢牢握着桨，迈步从他身边走过，下了船，走进水里。海水涨到了我的膝盖，浸湿了袍子的下摆。船系得很牢，桨又在我手上。还能捣什么鬼呢？但我还是不敢走得太远，我眼睛望着海岸，站在那儿像石头一样一动不动，可我发现自己又一次闯入了他们的亲密时刻。隔着海浪轻轻拍打的声音，我听见了他们的谈话。

“他走开了吗，埃克索？”

“他在水里站着，公主。他不愿意离开船，我敢说，他也不会给我们很长时间。”

“埃克索，这不是和船夫吵架的时候。我们今天能碰上他，就算很幸运了。碰上了一个对我们印象很好的船夫。”

“可是，我们常听人说起他们狡猾的把戏，难道不是吗，公主？”

“我信任他，埃克索。他会说话算话的。”

“你怎么这么确定呢，公主？”

“我知道，埃克索。他是个好人，不会让我们失望。按照他说的做吧，到岸上等着他回来。他很快就会回来接你。我们就这么办，埃克索，否则我担心他给我们的特殊优待，恐怕又会失去。他答应我们在岛上能在一起，就算在一辈子都很恩爱的人当中，能享受这种优待的肯定也寥寥无几。为什么不愿意等一会儿，而要拿这么大的奖赏冒险呢？不要和他争吵，否则，谁知道我们下次会碰上什么样的野蛮人呢？埃克索，请你与他握手言和吧。这时候我都担心他会生气，怕他改变主意呢。埃克索，你还在那儿吗？”

“我还在你跟前，公主。我们竟然在谈论分开上岛，这难道是真的吗？”

“也就是一会儿，丈夫。现在他在干什么？”

“还一动不动站在那儿，用他长长的后背和闪亮的脑袋对着我们。公主啊，你真的相信我们能信任这个人吗？”

“我相信，埃克索。”

“你刚才与他谈过话。谈得开心吗？”

“谈得很开心，丈夫。你不也一样吗？”

“我想是吧，公主。”

海湾上的日落。背后的沉默。我敢回到他们那儿吗？

“告诉我，公主，”我听见他说。“这迷雾消退了，你高兴吗？”

“也许这件事会给这块土地带来可怕的后果。但对我们来说，消退得正是时候。”

“我一直在想啊，公主。如果迷雾没有剥夺我们的记忆，这么多年来，我们的爱是不是不会如此牢固？也许有了迷雾，旧伤才得以愈合。”

“现在这又有什么关系呢，埃克索？和船夫握手言和吧，让他把我们渡过去。既然他会先送一个，然后送另一个，为什么要和他吵呢？埃克索，你说呢？”

“好吧，公主。我按你说的做。”

“那就离开我，回到岸上去吧。”

“我会照办的，公主。”

“那你还耽搁什么呢，丈夫？你以为船夫就不会不耐烦吗？”

“好吧，公主。不过，让我再抱你一次吧。”

他们在拥抱吗，即使我把她裹得像个婴儿一样？即使他必须跪下来，在坚硬的船板上把身体扭曲成奇怪的形状？我想他们真的拥抱了，只要他们没开口说话，我就不敢转身。我怀里抱着桨，轻轻摇晃的水里，有船桨投下的影子吗？还需要多久？最后，终于又听到了他们的声音。

“我们到岛上再继续谈吧，公主，”他说。

“我们就到岛上谈，埃克索。迷雾一散，我们要说的话会很多。船夫还站在水里吗？”

“是的，公主。我现在就去，和他握手言和。”

“那就再见啦，埃克索。”

“再见啦，我唯一的挚爱。”

我听见他涉水过来。他打算跟我说句话吗？刚才他说要握手言和。可是，我转过脸，他却并没有朝我这边看，只是望着陆地，还有海滩上的落日。我也没有去看他的眼睛。他从我旁边经过，没有回头看。在海滩上等着我吧，朋友，我低声说，但他没听见，继续涉水而去。

KAZUO ISHIGURO

The Buried Giant

DEBORAH ROGERS
1938- 2014

PART I

Chapter One

You would have searched a long time for the sort of winding lane or tranquil meadow for which England later became celebrated. There were instead miles of desolate, uncultivated land; here and there rough-hewn paths over craggy hills or bleak moorland. Most of the roads left by the Romans would by then have become broken or overgrown, often fading into wilderness. Icy fogs hung over rivers and marshes, serving all too well the ogres that were then still native to this land. The people who lived nearby - one wonders what desperation led them to settle in such gloomy spots - might well have feared these creatures, whose panting breaths could be heard long before their deformed figures emerged from the mist. But such monsters were not cause for astonishment. People then would have regarded them as everyday hazards, and in those days there was so much else to worry about. How to get food out of the hard ground; how not to run out of firewood; how to stop the sickness that could kill a dozen pigs in a single day and produce green rashes on the cheeks of children.

In any case, ogres were not so bad provided one did not provoke them. One had to accept that every so often, perhaps following some obscure dispute in their ranks, a creature would come blundering into a village in a terrible rage, and despite shouts and brandishings of weapons, rampage about injuring anyone slow to move out of its path. Or that every so often, an ogre might carry off a child into the mist. The people of the day had to be philosophical about such outrages.

In one such area on the edge of a vast bog, in the shadow of some jagged hills, lived an elderly couple, Axl and Beatrice. Perhaps these were not their exact or full names, but for ease, this is how we will refer to them. I would say

this couple lived an isolated life, but in those days few were 'isolated' in any sense we would understand. For warmth and protection, the villagers lived in shelters, many of them dug deep into the hillside, connecting one to the other by underground passages and covered corridors. Our elderly couple lived within one such sprawling warren - 'building' would be too grand a word - with roughly sixty other villagers. If you came out of their warren and walked for twenty minutes around the hill, you would have reached the next settlement, and to your eyes, this one would have seemed identical to the first. But to the inhabitants themselves, there would have been many distinguishing details of which they would have been proud or ashamed.

I have no wish to give the impression that this was all there was to the Britain of those days; that at a time when magnificent civilisations flourished elsewhere in the world, we were here not much beyond the Iron Age. Had you been able to roam the countryside at will, you might well have discovered castles containing music, fine food, athletic excellence; or monasteries with inhabitants steeped in learning. But there is no getting around it. Even on a strong horse, in good weather, you could have ridden for days without spotting any castle or monastery looming out of the greenery. Mostly you would have found communities like the one I have just described, and unless you had with you gifts of food or clothing, or were ferociously armed, you would not have been sure of a welcome. I am sorry to paint such a picture of our country at that time, but there you are.

To return to Axl and Beatrice. As I said, this elderly couple lived on the outer fringes of the warren, where their shelter was less protected from the elements and hardly benefited from the fire in the Great Chamber where everyone congregated at night. Perhaps there had been a time when they had lived closer to the fire; a time when they had lived with their children. In fact, it was just such an idea that would drift into Axl's mind as he lay in his bed during the empty

hours before dawn, his wife soundly asleep beside him, and then a sense of some unnamed loss would gnaw at his heart, preventing him from returning to sleep.

Perhaps that was why, on this particular morning, Axl had abandoned his bed altogether and slipped quietly outside to sit on the old warped bench beside the entrance to the warren in wait for the first signs of daylight. It was spring, but the air still felt bitter, even with Beatrice's cloak, which he had taken on his way out and wrapped around himself. Yet he had become so absorbed in his thoughts that by the time he realised how cold he was, the stars had all but gone, a glow was spreading on the horizon, and the first notes of birdsong were emerging from the dimness.

He rose slowly to his feet, regretting having stayed out so long. He was in good health, but it had taken a while to shake off his last fever and he did not wish it to return. Now he could feel the damp in his legs, but as he turned to go back inside, he was well satisfied: for he had this morning succeeded in remembering a number of things that had eluded him for some time. Moreover, he now sensed he was about to come to some momentous decision - one that had been put off far too long - and felt an excitement within him which he was eager to share with his wife.

Inside, the passageways of the warren were still in complete darkness, and he was obliged to feel his way the short distance back to the door of his chamber. Many of the 'doorways' within the warren were simple archways to mark the threshold to a chamber. The open nature of this arrangement would not have struck the villagers as compromising their privacy, but allowed rooms to benefit from any warmth coming down the corridors from the great fire or the smaller fires permitted within the warren. Axl and Beatrice's room, however, being too far from any fire had something we might recognise as an actual door; a large wooden frame criss-crossed with small branches, vines and thistles which someone going in and out would each time have

to lift to one side, but which shut out the chilly draughts. Axl would happily have done without this door, but it had over time become an object of considerable pride to Beatrice. He had often returned to find his wife pulling off withered pieces from the construct and replacing them with fresh cuttings she had gathered during the day.

This morning, Axl moved the barrier just enough to let himself in, taking care to make as little noise as possible. Here, the early dawn light was leaking into the room through the small chinks of their outer wall. He could see his hand dimly before him, and on the turf bed, Beatrice's form still sound asleep under the thick blankets.

He was tempted to wake his wife. For a part of him felt sure that if, at this moment, she were awake and talking to him, whatever last barriers remained between him and his decision would finally crumble. But it was some time yet until the community roused itself and the day's work began, so he settled himself on the low stool in the corner of the chamber, his wife's cloak still tight around him.

He wondered how thick the mist would be that morning, and if, as the dark faded, he would see it had seeped through the cracks right into their chamber. But then his thoughts drifted away from such matters, back to what had been preoccupying him. Had they always lived like this, just the two of them, at the periphery of the community? Or had things once been quite different? Earlier, outside, some fragments of a remembrance had come back to him: a small moment when he was walking down the long central corridor of the warren, his arm around one of his own children, his gait a little crouched not on account of age as it might be now, but simply because he wished to avoid hitting his head on the beams in the murky light. Possibly the child had just been speaking to him, saying something amusing, and they were both of them laughing. But now, as earlier outside, nothing would quite settle in his mind, and the more he concentrated, the fainter the fragments seemed to grow. Perhaps these were just an

elderly fool's imaginings. Perhaps it was that God had never given them children.

You may wonder why Axl did not turn to his fellow villagers for assistance in recalling the past, but this was not as easy as you might suppose. For in this community the past was rarely discussed. I do not mean that it was taboo. I mean that it had somehow faded into a mist as dense as that which hung over the marshes. It simply did not occur to these villagers to think about the past - even the recent one.

To take an instance, one that had bothered Axl for some time: He was sure that not so long ago, there had been in their midst a woman with long red hair - a woman regarded as crucial to their village. Whenever anyone injured themselves or fell sick, it had been this red-haired woman, so skilled at healing, who was immediately sent for. Yet now this same woman was no longer to be found anywhere, and no one seemed to wonder what had occurred, or even to express regret at her absence. When one morning Axl had mentioned the matter to three neighbours while working with them to break up the frosted field, their response told him that they genuinely had no idea what he was talking about. One of them had even paused in his work in an effort to remember, but had ended by shaking his head. 'Must have been a long time ago,' he had said.

'Neither have I any memory of such a woman,' Beatrice had said to him when he had brought up the matter with her one night. 'Perhaps you dreamt her up for your own needs, Axl, even though you've a wife here beside you and with a back straighter than yours.'

This had been some time the previous autumn, and they had been lying side by side on their bed in the pitch black, listening to the rain beating against their shelter.

'It's true you've hardly aged at all down the years, princess,' Axl had said. 'But the woman was no dream, and you'd remember her yourself if you spared a moment to think

about it. There she was at our door only a month ago, a kindly soul asking if there was anything she might bring us. Surely you remember. ’

‘But why was she wishing to bring us anything at all? Was she a kin to us?’

‘I don’t believe she was, princess. She was just being kind. Surely you remember. She was often at the door asking if we weren’t cold or hungry. ’

‘What I’m asking, Axl, is what business was it of hers to single us out for her kindness?’

‘I wondered myself at the time, princess. I remember thinking here’s a woman given to tending the sick, and yet here’s the two of us both as healthy as any in the village. Is there perhaps talk of a plague on the way and she’s here to look us over? But it turns out there’s no plague and she’s just being kind. Now we’re talking about her there’s even more comes back to me. She was standing there telling us not to mind the children calling us names. That was it. Then we never saw her again. ’

‘Not only is this red-haired woman a dream from your mind, Axl, she’s a fool to be worrying herself about a few children and their games. ’

‘Just what I thought at the time, princess. What harm can children do us and they just passing the time of day when the weather’s too dreary outside. I told her how we hadn’t given it a second thought, but she meant kindly all the same. And then I remember her saying it was a pity we had to spend our nights without a candle. ’

‘If this creature pitied us our lack of a candle,’ Beatrice had said, ‘she had one thing right at least. It’s an insult, forbidding us a candle through nights like these and our hands as steady as any of them. While there’s others with candles in their chamber, senseless each night from cider, or else with children running wild. Yet it’s our

candle they've taken, and now I can hardly see your outline, Axl, though you're right beside me.'

'There's no insult intended, princess. It's just the way things have always been done and that's all there is to it.'

'Well it's not just your dream woman thinks it strange we should have our candle taken from us. Yesterday or was it the day before, I was at the river and walking past the women and I'm sure I heard them saying, when they supposed I'd gone out of hearing, how it was a disgrace an upright couple like us having to sit in the dark each night. So your dream woman's not alone in thinking what she does.'

'She's no dream woman I keep telling you, princess. Everyone here knew her a month ago and had a good word for her. What can it be makes everyone, yourself included, forget she ever lived?'

Recalling the conversation now on this spring's morning, Axl felt almost ready to admit he had been mistaken about the red-haired woman. He was after all an ageing man and prone to occasional confusion. And yet, this instance of the red-haired woman had been merely one of a steady run of such puzzling episodes. Frustratingly, he could not at this moment think of so many examples, but they had been numerous, of that there was no doubt. There had been, for instance, the incident concerning Marta.

This was a little girl of nine or ten who had always had a reputation for fearlessness. All the hair-raising tales of what could happen to wandering children seemed not to dampen her sense of adventure. So the evening when, with less than an hour of daylight remaining, the mist coming in and the wolves audible on the hillside, the word went around that Marta was missing, everyone had stopped what they were doing in alarm. For the next little while, voices called her name all around the warren and footsteps rushed up and down its corridors as villagers searched every sleeping chamber, the

storage burrows, the cavities beneath the rafters, any hiding place a child might go to amuse herself.

Then in the midst of this panic, two shepherds returning from their shift on the hills came into the Great Chamber and began warming themselves by the fire. As they did so, one of them announced how the day before they had watched a wren-eagle circle above their heads, once, twice, then a third time. There was no mistake, he said, it had been a wren-eagle. Word quickly went around the warren and soon a crowd had gathered around the fire to listen to the shepherds. Even Axl had hurried to join them, for the appearance of a wren-eagle in their country was news indeed. Among the many powers attributed to the wren-eagle was the ability to frighten away wolves, and elsewhere in the land, it was said, wolves had vanished altogether on account of these birds.

At first the shepherds were questioned eagerly and made to repeat their story over and over. Then steadily a scepticism began to spread among the listeners. There had been many similar claims, someone pointed out, and each time they had proved unfounded. Someone else stated that these same two shepherds had only the previous spring brought back an identical story, and yet no further sightings had followed. The shepherds angrily denied bringing any such previous report, and soon the crowd was dividing between those taking the shepherds' side and those claiming some memory of the alleged episode the previous year.

As the quarrel grew heated, Axl found coming over him that familiar nagging sense that something was not right, and removing himself from the shouting and jostling, went outside to stare at the darkening sky and the mist rolling over the ground. And after a while, fragments began to piece themselves together in his mind, of the missing Marta, of the danger, of how not long ago everyone had been searching for her. But already these recollections were growing confused, in much the way a dream does in the seconds after waking, and it was only with a supreme act of concentration that Axl held

onto the thought of little Marta at all while voices behind him continued to argue about the wren-eagle. Then, as he was standing there like that, he heard the sound of a girl singing to herself and saw Marta emerge before him out of the mist.

‘You’re a strange one, child,’ Axl said as she came skipping up to him. ‘Aren’t you afraid of the dark? Of the wolves or the ogres?’

‘Oh, I’m afraid of them, sir,’ she said with a smile. ‘But I know how to hide from them. I hope my parents haven’t been asking for me. I got such a hiding last week.’

‘Asking for you? Of course they’ve been asking for you. Isn’t the whole village searching for you? Listen to that uproar inside. That’s all for you, child.’

Marta laughed and said: ‘Oh stop it, sir! I know they’ve not missed me. And I can hear, that’s not me they’re shouting about.’

When she said this, it occurred to Axl that sure enough the girl was right: the voices inside were not arguing about her at all, but about some other matter altogether. He leaned towards the doorway to hear better, and as he caught the odd phrase amidst the raised voices, it began to come back to him, about the shepherds and the wren-eagle. He was wondering if he should explain something of this to Marta when she suddenly skipped past him and went inside.

He followed her in, anticipating the relief and joy her appearance would cause. And to be frank, it had occurred to him that by coming in with her, he would get a little of the credit for her safe return. But as they entered the Great Chamber the villagers were still so engrossed in their quarrel over the shepherds only a few of them even bothered to look their way. Marta’s mother did come away from the crowd long enough to say to the child: ‘So here you are! Don’t you be wandering off that way! How often must I tell

you?’ before turning her attention back to the arguments raging around the fire. At this, Marta gave Axl a grin as though to say: ‘See what I told you?’ and vanished into the shadows in search of her companions.

The room had grown significantly lighter. Their chamber, being on the outer fringe, had a small window to the outside, though it was too high to gaze out of without standing on a stool. It was at this moment covered with a cloth, but now an early ray of sun was penetrating from one corner, casting a beam over where Beatrice was sleeping. Axl could see, caught in this ray, what looked like an insect hovering in the air just above his wife’s head. He then realised it was a spider, suspended by its invisible vertical thread, and even as he watched, it started on its smooth descent. Rising noiselessly, Axl crossed the small room and swept his hand through the space above his sleeping wife, catching the spider within his palm. Then he stood there a moment looking down at her. There was a peacefulness on her sleeping face he rarely saw now when she was awake, and the sudden rush of happiness the sight brought him took him by surprise. He knew then he had made up his mind, and he wanted again to awaken her, just so he might break to her his news. But he saw the selfishness of such an action - and besides, how could he be so sure of her response? In the end he went back quietly to his stool, and as he seated himself again, remembered the spider and opened his hand gently.

When earlier he had been sitting on the bench outside waiting for the first light, he had tried to recall how he and Beatrice had first come to discuss the idea of their journey. He had thought then he had located a particular conversation they had had one night in this same chamber, but now, as he watched the spider run round the edge of his hand and onto the earthen floor, it struck him with certainty that the first mention of the subject had come that day the stranger in dark rags had passed through the village.

It had been a grey morning - was it as long ago now as last November? - and Axl had been striding beside the river along a footpath overhung with willows. He was hurrying back to the warren from the fields, perhaps to fetch a tool or receive new instructions from a foreman. In any case, he was stopped by a burst of raised voices from beyond the bushes to his right. His first thought was of ogres, and he searched quickly around for a rock or stick. Then he realised the voices - all of women - though angry and excited, lacked the panic that accompanied ogre attacks. He nevertheless pushed his way determinedly through a hedge of juniper shrubs and stumbled into a clearing, where he saw five women - not in their first youth, but still of child-bearing age - standing closely together. Their backs were turned to him and they went on shouting at something in the distance. He was almost up to them before one of the women noticed him with a start, but then the others turned and regarded him almost with insolence.

'Well, well,' said one. 'Perhaps it's chance or something more. But here's the husband and hopefully he'll drive sense into her.'

The woman who had seen him first said: 'We told your wife not to go but she wouldn't listen. She's insisting she'll take food to the stranger though she's most likely a demon or else some elf disguised.'

'Is my wife in danger? Ladies, please explain yourselves.'

'There's a strange woman been wandering around us all morning,' another said. 'Hair down her back and a cloak of black rags. She claimed to be a Saxon but she's not dressed like any Saxon we ever met. She tried to creep up behind us on the riverbank when we were attending to the laundry, but we saw her in good time and chased her away. But she kept returning, acting like she was heart-broken for something, other times asking us for food. We reckon she was all the

while aiming her spell straight towards your wife, sir, for twice this morning already we had to hold Beatrice back by the arms, so intent was she on going to the demon. And now she's fought us all off and gone up to the old thorn where even now the demon's sitting waiting for her. We held her all we could, sir, but it must be the demon's powers already moving through her because her strength was unnatural for a woman so thin-boned and aged as your wife.'

'The old thorn ...'

'She set off only a moment ago, sir. But that's a demon to be sure, and if you're off after her you'll watch you're not stumbling or cutting yourself on a poisoned thistle the way it will never heal.'

Axl did his best to hide his irritation with these women, saying politely: 'I'm grateful, ladies. I'll go and see what my wife is up to. Excuse me.'

To our villagers, 'the old thorn' denoted a local beauty spot as much as the actual hawthorn tree that grew seemingly right out of the rock at the edge of the promontory a short walk from the warren. On a sunny day, provided the wind was not strong, it was a pleasant place to pass the time. You had a good view of the land down to the water, of the river's curve and the marshes beyond. On Sundays children often played around the gnarled roots, sometimes daring to jump off the end of the promontory, which in fact had only a gentle drop that would cause a child no injury, but simply to roll like a barrel down the grassy slope. But on a morning like this one, when adults and children alike were busy with tasks, the spot would have been deserted, and Axl, coming through the mist up the incline, was not surprised to see the two women were alone, their figures almost silhouettes against the white sky. Sure enough, the stranger, seated with her back against the rock, was dressed curiously. From a distance, at least, her cloak appeared to be made of many separate pieces of cloth stitched together, and it was now

flapping in the wind, giving its owner the appearance of a great bird about to take flight. Beside her, Beatrice - still on her feet, though with head lowered towards her companion - appeared slight and vulnerable. They were in earnest conversation, but spotting Axl's approach below, stopped and watched him. Then Beatrice came to the edge of the promontory and called down:

‘Just stop there, husband, no further! I’ll come to you. But don’t climb up here and be disturbing this poor lady’s peace now she’s at last able to rest her feet and eat a little of yesterday’s bread.’

Axl waited as instructed and before long saw his wife coming down the long field-path to where he was standing. She came right up to him, and concerned no doubt that the wind would carry their words up to the stranger, said in a low voice:

‘Have those foolish women sent you after me, husband? When I was their age, I’m sure it was the old ones were full of fear and foolish beliefs, reckoning every stone cursed and each stray cat an evil spirit. But now I’m grown old myself, what do I find but it’s the young are riddled with beliefs like they never heard the Lord’s promise to walk beside us at all times. Look at that poor stranger, see her yourself, exhausted and solitary, and she’s wandered the forest and fields for four days, village after village commanding her to travel on. And it’s Christian country she’s walked across, but taken for a demon or maybe a leper though her skin bears no mark of it. Now, husband, I hope you’re not here to tell me I’m not to give this poor woman comfort and what sorry food I have with me.’

‘I wouldn’t tell you any such thing, princess, for I see for myself what you’re saying is true. I was thinking before I even came here how it’s a shameful thing we can’t receive a stranger with kindness any more.’

‘Then go on with your business, husband, for I’m sure they’ll be complaining again how slow you are at your work, and before you know they’ll have the children chanting at us again.’

‘No one’s ever said I’m slow in my work, princess. Where did you hear such a thing? I’ve never heard a word of such complaint and I’m able to take the same burden as any man twenty years younger.’

‘I’m only teasing, husband. Right enough, there’s no one complaining about your work.’

‘If there’s children calling us names, it’s not to do with my work being fast or slow but parents too foolish or more likely drunk to teach them manners or respect.’

‘Calm yourself, husband. I told you I was just teasing and I won’t do so again. The stranger was telling me something that greatly interests me and may some time interest you too. But she needs to finish the telling of it, so let me ask you again to hurry on with whatever task you have to do and leave me to listen to her and give what comfort I can.’

‘I’m sorry, princess, if I spoke harshly to you just then.’

But Beatrice had already turned and was climbing the path back to the thorn tree and the figure in the flapping cloak.

A little later, having completed his errand, Axl was returning to the fields, and at the risk of testing the patience of his colleagues, deviated from his route to go past the old thorn again. For the truth was that while he had fully shared his wife’s scorn for the suspicious instincts of the women, he had not been able to free himself from the thought that the stranger did pose some sort of threat, and he had been uneasy since leaving Beatrice with her. He was relieved then to see his wife’s figure, alone on the promontory in front of the rock, looking out at the sky. She

seemed lost in thought, and failed to notice him until he called up to her. As he watched her descending the path, more slowly than before, it occurred to him not for the first time that there was something different lately in her gait. She was not limping exactly, but it was as though she were nursing some secret pain somewhere. When he asked her, as she approached, what had become of her odd companion, Beatrice said simply: 'She went on her way.'

'She would have been grateful for your kindness, princess. Did you speak long with her?'

'I did and she had a deal to say.'

'I can see she said something to trouble you, princess. Perhaps those women were right and she was one best avoided.'

'She's not upset me, Axl. She has me thinking though.'

'You're in a strange mood. Are you sure she hasn't put some spell on you before vanishing into the air?'

'Walk up there to the thorn, husband, and you'll see her on the path and only recently departed. She's hoping for better charity from those around the hill.'

'Well then I'll leave you, princess, since I see you've come to no harm. God will be pleased for the kindness you've shown as is always your way.'

But this time his wife seemed reluctant to let him go. She grasped his arm, as though momentarily to steady herself, then let her head rest on his chest. As though by its own instinct, his hand rose to caress her hair, grown tangled in the wind, and when he glanced down at her he was surprised to see her eyes still wide open.

'You're in a strange mood, right enough,' he said. 'What did that stranger say to you?'

She kept her head on his chest for a moment longer. Then she straightened and let go of him. 'Now I think of it, Axl, there may be something in what you're always saying. It's queer the way the world's forgetting people and things from only yesterday and the day before that. Like a sickness come over us all.'

'Just what I was saying, princess. Take that red-haired woman ...'

'Never mind the red-haired woman, Axl. It's what else we're not remembering.' She had said this while looking away into the mist-layered distance, but now she looked straight at him and he could see her eyes were filled with sadness and yearning. And it was then - he was sure - that she said to him: 'You've long set your heart against it, Axl, I know. But it's time now to think on it anew. There's a journey we must go on, and no more delay.'

'A journey, princess? What sort of journey?'

'A journey to our son's village. It's not far, husband, we know that. Even with our slow steps, it's a few days' walk at most, a little way east beyond the Great Plain. And the spring will soon be upon us.'

'We might go on such a trip, certainly, princess. Was there something that stranger said just now got you thinking of it?'

'It's been a thing in my thoughts a long time, Axl, though it's what that poor woman said just now makes me wish to delay no further. Our son awaits us in his village. How much longer must we keep him waiting?'

'When the spring's here, princess, we'll certainly think about just such a journey. But why do you say it's my wishes always stood in the way of it?'

'I don't remember now all that's passed between us on it, Axl. Only that you always set your heart against it, even

as I longed for it.'

'Well, princess, let's talk about it more when there's no work waiting and neighbours ready to call us slow. Let me go on my way just now. We'll talk more on it soon.'

But in the days that followed, even if they alluded to the idea of this journey, they never talked properly about it. For they found they became oddly uncomfortable whenever the topic was broached, and before long an understanding had grown between them, in the silent way understandings do between a husband and wife of many years, to avoid the subject as much as possible. I say 'as much as possible', for there appeared at times to be a need - a compulsion, you might say - to which one or the other would have to yield. But whatever discussions they had in such circumstances inevitably ended quickly in evasiveness or bad temper. And on the one occasion Axl had asked his wife straight out what the strange woman had said to her that day up at the old thorn, Beatrice's expression had clouded, and she had seemed for a moment on the verge of tears. After this, Axl had taken care to avoid any reference to the stranger.

After a while Axl could no longer remember how talk of this journey had started, or what it had ever meant to them. But then this morning, sitting outside in the cold hour before dawn, his memory seemed partially at least to clear, and many things had come back to him: the red-haired woman; Marta; the stranger in dark rags; other memories with which we need not concern ourselves here. And he had remembered, quite vividly, what had happened only a few Sundays ago, when they had taken Beatrice's candle from her.

Sundays were a day of rest for these villagers, at least to the extent that they did not work in the fields. But the livestock had still to be cared for, and with so many other tasks waiting to be done, the pastor had accepted the impracticality of forbidding everything that might be construed as labour. So it was that when Axl emerged into the

spring sunshine that particular Sunday after a morning of mending boots, the sight that greeted him was of his neighbours spread all around the terrain in front of the warren, some sitting in the patchy grass, others on small stools or logs, talking, laughing and working. Children were playing everywhere, and one group had gathered around two men constructing on the grass the wheel for a wagon. It was the first Sunday of the year the weather had permitted such outdoor activity, and there was an almost festive atmosphere. Nevertheless, as he stood there at the warren entrance and gazed beyond the villagers to where the land sloped down towards the marshes, Axl could see the mist rising again, and supposed that by the afternoon they would be submerged once more in grey drizzle.

He had been standing there a while when he became aware of a commotion going on over down by the fencing to the grazing fields. It did not greatly interest him at first, but then something in the breeze caught his ear and made him straighten. For though his eyesight had grown annoyingly blurred with the years, Axl's hearing had remained reliable, and he had discerned, in the muddle of shouting emerging from the crowd by the fence, Beatrice's voice raised in distress.

Others too were stopping what they were doing to turn and stare. But now Axl hurried through their midst, narrowly avoiding wandering children and objects left on the grass. Before he could reach the small jostling knot of people, however, it suddenly dispersed, and Beatrice emerged from its centre, clutching something with both hands to her breast. The faces around her mostly showed amusement, but the woman who quickly appeared at his wife's shoulder - the widow of a blacksmith who had died of fever the previous year - had features twisted with fury. Beatrice shook off her tormentor, her own face all the time a stern, near-blank mask, but when she saw Axl coming towards her, it broke into emotion.

Thinking about this now, it seemed to Axl the look on his wife's face then had been, more than anything else, one of

overwhelming relief. It was not that Beatrice had believed all would be well once he had arrived; but his presence had made all the difference to her. She had gazed at him not just with relief, but also something like pleading, and held out to him the object she had been jealously guarding.

‘This is ours, Axl! We’ll not sit in darkness any longer. Take it quickly, husband, it’s ours!’

She was holding towards him a squat, somewhat misshapen candle. The blacksmith’s widow tried again to snatch it from her, but Beatrice struck away the invading hand.

‘Take it, husband! That child there, little Nora, she brought it to me this morning after making it with her own hands, thinking we’d grown tired of spending our nights as we do.’

This set off another round of shouting and also some laughter. But Beatrice went on gazing at Axl, her expression full of trust and entreaty, and it was a picture of her face at that moment which had first come back to him this morning on the bench outside the warren as he had sat waiting for the dawn to break. How was it he had forgotten this episode when it could have occurred no more than three weeks ago? How could it be he had not thought about it again until today?

Although he had stretched out his arm, he had not been able to take the candle – the crowd had kept him just out of reach – and he had said, loudly and with some conviction:

‘Don’t worry, princess. Don’t you worry.’ He was conscious of the emptiness of what he was saying even as he spoke, so he was surprised when the crowd quietened, and even the blacksmith’s widow took a step back. Only then did he realise the reaction had not been to his words, but to the approach behind him of the pastor.

‘What manners are these for the Lord’s day?’ The pastor strode past Axl and glared at the now silent gathering. ‘Well?’

'It's Mistress Beatrice, sir,' the blacksmith's widow said. 'She's got herself a candle.'

Beatrice's face was a tight mask again, but she did not avoid the pastor's gaze when it settled on her.

'I can see for myself it's true, Mistress Beatrice,' the pastor said. 'Now you'll not have forgotten the council's edict that you and your husband will not be permitted candles in your chamber.'

'We've neither of us ever tumbled a candle in our lives, sir. We will not sit night after night in darkness.'

'The decision has been made and you're to abide by it until the council decides otherwise.'

Axl saw the anger blaze in her eyes. 'It's nothing but unkindness. That's all it is.' She said this quietly, almost under her breath, but looking straight at the pastor.

'Remove the candle from her,' the pastor said. 'Do as I say. Take it from her.'

As several hands reached towards her, it seemed to Axl she had not fully understood what the pastor had said. For she stood in the middle of the jostling with a puzzled look, continuing to grip the candle as if only by some forgotten instinct. Then panic seemed to seize her and she held the candle out towards Axl again, even as she was knocked off balance. She did not fall on account of those pressing in on her, and recovering, held out the candle for him yet again. He tried to take it, but another hand snatched it away, and then the pastor's voice boomed out:

'Enough! Leave Mistress Beatrice in peace and none of you speak unkindly to her. She's an old woman who doesn't understand all she does. Enough I say! This is no fit behaviour for the Lord's day.'

Axl, finally reaching her, took her in his arms, and the crowd melted away. When he recalled this moment, it seemed to

him they stayed like that for a long time, standing close together, she with her head resting on his chest, just the way she had done the day of the strange woman's visit, as though she were merely weary and wishing to catch her breath. He continued to hold her as the pastor called again for the people to disperse. When finally they separated and looked around themselves, they found they were alone beside the cow field and its barred wooden gate.

'What does it matter, princess?' he said. 'What do we need with a candle? We're well used to moving around our room without one. And don't we keep ourselves entertained well enough with our talk, candle or no candle?'

He observed her carefully. She appeared dreamy, and not particularly upset.

'I'm sorry, Axl,' she said. 'The candle's gone. I should have kept it a secret for the two of us. But I was overjoyed when the young girl brought it to me and she'd crafted it herself just for us. Now it's gone. No matter.'

'No matter at all, princess.'

'They think us a foolish pair, Axl.'

She took a step forward and placed her head on his chest again. And it was then that she said, her voice muffled so he at first thought he had misheard:

'Our son, Axl. Do you remember our son? When they were pushing me just now, it was our son I remembered. A fine, strong, upright man. Why must we stay in this place? Let's go to our son's village. He'll protect us and see no one treats us ill. Will your heart not change on it, Axl, and all these years now passed? Do you still say we can't go to him?'

As she said this, softly into his chest, many fragments of memory tugged at Axl's mind, so much so that he felt almost faint. He loosened his hold on her and stepped back, fearing he might sway and cause her to lose her own balance.

‘What’s this you’re saying, princess? Was I ever the one to stop us journeying to our son’s village?’

‘But surely you were, Axl. Surely you were.’

‘When did I speak against such a journey, princess?’

‘I always thought you did, husband. But oh, Axl, I don’t remember clearly now you question it. And why do we stand out here, fine day though it is?’

Beatrice appeared confused again. She looked into his face, then all around her, at the pleasant sunshine, their neighbours once more giving attention to their activities.

‘Let’s go and sit in our chamber,’ she said after a while. ‘Let it be just the two of us for a while. A fine day, right enough, but I’m all tired out. Let’s go inside.’

‘That’s right, princess. Sit down and rest a while, out of this sun. You’ll soon feel better.’

There were others awake now all around the warren. The shepherds must have gone out some time ago though he had been so lost in thought he had not even heard them. At the other end of the room Beatrice made a murmuring sound, as though she were preparing to sing, then turned over under the blankets. Recognising these signals, Axl made his way across to the bed in silence, sat carefully on its edge and waited.

Beatrice shifted onto her back, opened her eyes partially and gazed at Axl.

‘Good morning, husband,’ she said eventually. ‘I’m glad to see the spirits chose not to take you away as I slept.’

‘Princess, there’s something I want to talk about.’

Beatrice went on gazing up at him, her eyes still only half open. Then she brought herself up to a sitting posture, her face crossing the beam of light that earlier had illuminated the spider. Her grey mane, untied and matted,

hung stiffly down past her shoulders, but Axl still felt happiness stir within him at this sight of her in the morning light.

‘What is it you have to say, Axl, and before I’ve had time to rub the sleep from my eyes?’

‘We talked before, princess, about a journey we might make. Well, here’s the spring upon us, and perhaps it’s time we set off.’

‘Set off, Axl? Set off when?’

‘As soon as we’re able. We need only be gone a few days. The village can spare us. We’ll talk to the pastor.’

‘And will we go to see our son, Axl?’

‘That’s where we’ll go. To see our son.’

Outside the birds were now in chorus. Beatrice turned her gaze towards the window and the sun leaking past the cloth hung over it.

‘Some days I remember him clear enough,’ she said.

‘Then the next day it’s as if a veil’s fallen over his memory. But our son’s a fine and good man, I know that for sure.’

‘Why is he not with us here now, princess?’

‘I don’t know, Axl. It could be he quarrelled with the elders and had to leave. I’ve asked around and there’s no one here remembers him. But he wouldn’t have done anything to bring shame on himself, I know for sure. Can you remember nothing of it yourself, Axl?’

‘When I was outside just now, doing my best to remember all I could in the stillness, many things came back to me. But I can’t remember our son, neither his face nor his voice, though sometimes I think I can see him when he was a small boy, and I’m leading him by the hand beside the riverbank, or when he was weeping one time and I was reaching out to

comfort him. But what he looks like today, where he's living, if he has a son of his own, I don't remember at all. I was hoping you'd remember more, princess.'

'He's our son,' Beatrice said. 'So I can feel things about him, even if I don't remember clearly. And I know he longs for us to leave this place and be living with him under his protection.'

'He's our flesh and blood, so why would he not want us to join him?'

'Even so, I'll miss this place, Axl. This small chamber of ours and this village. No light thing to leave a place you've known all your life.'

'No one's asking us to do it without thought, princess. While I was waiting for the sun to rise just now, I was thinking we'll need to make this journey to our son's village and talk with him. For even if we're his mother and father, it's not for us to arrive one fine day and demand to live as part of his village.'

'You're right, husband.'

'There's another thing troubles me, princess. This village may only be a few days away as you say. But how will we know where to find it?'

Beatrice fell silent, gazing into the space before her, her shoulders swaying gently with her breathing. 'I believe we'll know our way well enough, Axl,' she said eventually.

'Even if we don't yet know his exact village, I'll have travelled to ones nearby often enough with the other women when trading our honey and tin. I'll know my way blindfolded to the Great Plain, and the Saxon village beyond where we've often rested. Our son's village can only be a little way further, so we'll find it with little trouble. Axl, are we really to go soon?'

'Yes, princess. We'll start preparing today.'

Chapter Two

There were, however, plenty of things to attend to before they could set off. In a village like this, many items necessary for their journey - blankets, water flasks, tinder - were communally owned and securing their use required much bargaining with neighbours. Moreover, Axl and Beatrice, advanced though they were in years, had their burden of daily duties and could not simply go away without the consent of the community. And even when they were finally ready to leave, a turn in the weather delayed them further. For what was the point of risking the hazards of fog, rain and cold when sunshine was surely just around the corner?

But they did eventually set off, with walking sticks and bundles on their backs, on a bright morning of wispy white clouds and a strong breeze. Axl had wished to start at first light - it was clear to him the day would be fine - but Beatrice had insisted on waiting till the sun was higher. The Saxon village where they would shelter the first night, she argued, was easily within a day's walk, and surely their priority was to cross the corner of the Great Plain as close to noon as possible, when the dark forces of that place were most likely to be dormant.

It had been a while since they had walked any distance together, and Axl had been anxious about his wife's stamina. But after an hour he found himself reassured: though her pace was slow - he noticed again something lop-sided about her gait, as if she were cushioning some pain - Beatrice kept moving on steadily, head down into the wind in open land, undaunted when confronted by thistles and undergrowth. On uphill, or ground so muddy it was an effort to pull one foot out after the other, she would slow right down, but keep pushing on.

In the days before their journey's start, Beatrice had grown increasingly confident of remembering their route, at least as far as the Saxon village which she had regularly visited with the other women over the years. But once they lost sight of the craggy hills above their settlement, and had crossed the valley beyond the marshland, she became less certain. At a fork in a path, or facing a windswept field, she would pause and stand for a long time, panic creeping into her gaze as she surveyed the land.

'Don't worry, princess,' Axl would say on such occasions. 'Don't worry and take all the time you need.'

'But Axl,' she would say, turning to him, 'we don't have time. We must cross the Great Plain at noon if we're to do so in safety.'

'We'll be there in good time, princess. You take all the time you need.'

I might point out here that navigation in open country was something much more difficult in those days, and not just because of the lack of reliable compasses and maps. We did not yet have the hedgerows that so pleasantly divide the countryside today into field, lane and meadow. A traveller of that time would, often as not, find himself in featureless landscape, the view almost identical whichever way he turned. A row of standing stones on the far horizon, a turn of a stream, the particular rise and fall of a valley: such clues were the only means of charting a course. And the consequences of a wrong turn could often prove fatal. Never mind the possibilities of perishing in bad weather: straying off course meant exposing oneself more than ever to the risk of assailants - human, animal or supernatural - lurking away from the established roads.

You might have been surprised by how little they conversed as they walked, this couple usually so full of things to tell each other. But at a time when a broken ankle or an infected graze could be life-threatening, there was a

recognition that concentration was desirable at each and every step. You might also have noted that whenever the path grew too narrow to walk side by side, it was always Beatrice, not Axl, who went in front. This too might surprise you, it seeming more natural for the man to go first into potentially hazardous terrain, and sure enough, in woodland or where there was the possibility of wolves or bears, they would switch positions without discussion. But for the most part, Axl would make sure his wife went first, for the reason that practically every fiend or evil spirit they were likely to encounter was known to target its prey at the rear of a party - in much the way, I suppose, a big cat will stalk an antelope at the back of the herd. There were numerous instances of a traveller glancing back to the companion walking behind, only to find the latter vanished without trace. It was the fear of such an occurrence that compelled Beatrice intermittently to ask as they walked: 'Are you still there, Axl?' To which he would answer routinely: 'Still here, princess.'

They reached the edge of the Great Plain by late morning. Axl suggested they push on and put the hazard behind them, but Beatrice was adamant they should wait till noon. They sat down on a rock at the top of the hillslope leading down to the plain, and watched carefully the shortening shadows of their sticks, held upright before them in the earth.

'It may be a good sky, Axl,' she said. 'And I've not heard of any wickedness befalling a person in this corner of the plain. All the same, better wait for noon, when surely no demon will care even to peek out to see us pass.'

'We'll wait, just as you say, princess. And you're right, this is the Great Plain after all, even if it's a benevolent corner of it.'

They sat there like that for a little while, looking down at the land before them, hardly speaking. At one point Beatrice said:

‘When we see our son, Axl, he’s sure to insist we live at his village. Won’t it be strange to leave our neighbours after these years, even if they’re sometimes teasing our grey hairs?’

‘Nothing’s decided yet, princess. We’ll talk everything over with our son when we see him.’ Axl went on gazing out at the Great Plain. Then he shook his head and said quietly: ‘It’s odd, the way I can’t recall him at all just now.’

‘I thought I dreamt about him last night,’ Beatrice said. ‘Standing by a well, and turning, just a little to one side, and calling to someone. What came before or after’s gone now.’

‘At least you saw him, princess, even if in a dream. What did he look like?’

‘A strong, handsome face, that much I remember. But the colour of his eyes, the turn of his cheek, I’ve no memory of them.’

‘I don’t recall his face now at all,’ Axl said. ‘It must all be the work of this mist. Many things I’ll happily let go to it, but it’s cruel when we can’t remember a precious thing like that.’

She moved closer to him, letting her head fall on his shoulder. The wind was now beating hard at them and part of her cloak had come loose. Putting an arm around her, Axl trapped the cloak and held it tightly to her.

‘Well, I dare say one or the other of us will remember soon enough,’ he said.

‘Let’s try, Axl. Let’s both of us try. It’s as if we’ve mislaid a precious stone. But surely we’ll find it again if we both try.’

‘Surely we will, princess. But look, the shadows are almost gone. It’s time for us to go down.’

Beatrice straightened and began rummaging in her bundle. 'Here, we'll carry these.'

She handed to him what looked like two smooth pebbles, but when he studied them he saw complex patterns cut into the face of each one.

'Put them in your belt, Axl, and take care to keep the markings facing out. It will help the Lord Christ keep us safe. I'll carry these others.'

'One will be enough for me, princess.'

'No, Axl, we'll share them equally. Now what I remember is there's a path to follow down there and unless rain's washed it away the walking will be easier than most of what we've had. But there's one place we need to be cautious. Axl, are you listening to me? It's when the path goes over where the giant is buried. To one who doesn't know it, it's an ordinary hill, but I'll signal to you and when you see me you're to follow off the path and round the edge of the hill till we meet the same path on its way down. It'll do us no good treading over such a grave, high noon or not. Are you fully understanding me, Axl?'

'Don't worry, princess, I understand you very well.'

'And I don't need to remind you. If we see a stranger on our path, or calling us from nearby, or any poor animal caught in a trap or injured in a ditch, or any such thing might catch your attention, you don't speak a word or slow your step for it.'

'I'm no fool, princess.'

'Well, then, Axl, it's time we went.'

As Beatrice had promised, they were required to walk on the Great Plain for only a short distance. Their path, though muddy at times, remained defined and never took them out of sunlight. After an initial descent it climbed steadily, till they found themselves walking along a high ridge, moorland on

either side of them. The wind was fierce, but if anything a welcome antidote to the noon sun. The ground everywhere was covered in heather and gorse, never more than knee high, and only occasionally did a tree come into view - some solitary, crone-like specimen, bowed by endless gales. Then a valley appeared to their right, reminding them of the power and mystery of the Great Plain, and that they were now trespassing on but a small corner of it.

They walked close together, Axl almost at his wife's heels. Even so, throughout the crossing, Beatrice continued every five or six steps to chant, in the manner of a litany, the question: 'Are you still there, Axl?' to which he would respond: 'Still here, princess.' Aside from this ritualistic exchange, they said nothing. Even when they reached the giant's burial mound, and Beatrice made urgent signs for them to move from the path into the heather, they kept up this call and response in level tones, as though wishing to deceive any listening demons about their intentions. All the while Axl watched for fast-moving mist or sudden darkenings in the sky, but there came no hint of either, and then they had put the Great Plain behind them. As they climbed through a small wood full of songbirds, Beatrice made no comment, but he could see her whole posture relax, and her refrain came to an end.

They rested beside a brook, where they bathed their feet, ate bread and refilled their flasks. From this point their route followed a long sunken lane from Roman days, lined by oaks and elms, which was much easier walking, but required vigilance on account of the other wayfarers they were bound to meet. And sure enough, during the first hour, they encountered coming the other way a woman with her two children, a boy driving donkeys, and a pair of travelling players hurrying to rejoin their troupe. On each occasion they stopped to exchange pleasantries, but another time, hearing the clatter of approaching wheels and hooves, they

hid themselves in the ditch. This too proved harmless - a Saxon farmer with a horse and cart piled high with firewood.

Toward mid-afternoon the sky began to cloud as though for a storm. They had been resting beneath a large oak, their backs to the road and hidden from the passing traffic. A clean sweep of land lay visible before them, so they had noticed immediately the coming change.

‘Don’t worry, princess,’ Axl said. ‘We’ll stay dry beneath this tree until the sun returns.’

But Beatrice was on her feet, leaning forward, a hand raised to shield her eyes. ‘I can see the road ahead curving into the distance, Axl. And I see it’s not far to the old villa. I took shelter there once before when I came with the women. A ruin, but the roof was still good then.’

‘Can we reach it before the storm breaks, princess?’

‘We’ll reach it if we go now.’

‘Then let’s hurry. There’s no reason to catch our deaths from a drenching. And this tree, now I’m looking at it, is full of holes the way I can see most of the sky above me.’

* * *

The ruined villa was further from the road than Beatrice remembered. With the first drops of rain and the sky darkening above them, they found themselves struggling down a long narrow path waist high with nettles through which they had to beat their way with their sticks. Though it had been clearly visible from the road, the ruin was obscured for much of this approach by trees and foliage, so that it was with a start, as well as relief, that the travellers suddenly found themselves before it.

The villa must have been splendid enough in Roman days, but now only a small section was standing. Once magnificent floors lay exposed to the elements, disfigured by stagnant

puddles, weeds and grass sprouting through the faded tiles. The remains of walls, in places barely ankle high, revealed the old layout of the rooms. A stone arch led into the surviving part of the building, and Axl and Beatrice now moved cautiously towards it, pausing at the threshold to listen. Eventually Axl called out: 'Is anyone within?' And when there was no reply: 'We're two elderly Britons seeking shelter from the storm. We come in peace.'

Still there was silence and they went in under the arch into the shade of what must once have been a corridor. They emerged into the grey light of a spacious room, though here too, an entire wall had fallen away. The adjoining room had disappeared altogether, and evergreens were pressing in oppressively right up to the edge of the floor. The three standing walls, however, provided a sheltered area, with a good ceiling. Here, against the grimy masonry of what once had been whitewashed walls, were two dark figures, one standing, the other sitting, some distance apart.

Seated on a piece of fallen masonry was a small, bird-like old woman - older than Axl and Beatrice - in a dark cloak, the hood pushed back enough to reveal her leathery features. Her eyes were sunk deep so that you could hardly see them. The curve of her back was not quite touching the wall behind her. Something stirred on her lap and Axl saw it was a rabbit, held tightly in her bony hands.

At the furthest point along the same wall, as though he had moved as far from the old woman as possible while keeping under cover, was a thin, unusually tall man. He wore a thick long coat of the sort a shepherd might wear during a cold night's watch, but where it ended, the exposed lower parts of his legs were bare. On his feet were the kind of shoes Axl had seen on fishermen. Though he was probably still young, the top of his head was smoothly bald, while dark tufts sprouted around his ears. The man was standing rigidly, his back to the room, one hand on the wall before him as though listening intently to something occurring on the other side.

He glanced over his shoulder as Axl and Beatrice came in, but said nothing. The old woman too was staring at them in silence and only when Axl said: 'Peace be with you,' did they unfreeze a little. The tall man said: 'Come in further, friends, or you will not stay dry.'

Sure enough, the sky had truly opened now and rainwater was running down some section of broken roof and splashing on the floor near where the visitors were standing. Thanking him, Axl led his wife to the wall, choosing a spot midway between their hosts. He helped Beatrice take off her bundle, then put his own down onto the ground.

Then the four of them remained like that for some time while the storm grew ever more fierce, and a flash of lightning illuminated the shelter. The oddly frozen stances of the tall man and the old woman seemed to cast a spell on Axl and Beatrice, for now they too remained as still and silent. It was almost as if, coming across a picture and stepping inside it, they had been compelled to become painted figures in their turn.

Then as the downpour settled to a steady fall, the bird-like old woman finally broke the silence. Stroking her rabbit with one hand while clutching it tightly in the other, she said:

'God be with you, cousins. You'll forgive me not greeting you earlier, but I was surprised to see you here. You'll know you're welcome nonetheless. A fine day for travelling until this storm came. But it's the kind that vanishes as suddenly as it appears. Your journey won't be long delayed and all the better for your taking a rest. Which way do you go, cousins?'

'We're on our way to our son's village,' Axl said, 'where he waits anxiously to welcome us. But tonight we'll seek shelter at a Saxon village we hope to reach by nightfall.'

‘Saxons have their wild ways,’ the old woman said.

‘But they’ll welcome a traveller more readily than do our own kind. Be seated, cousins. That log behind you is dry and I’ve often sat contentedly on it.’

Axl and Beatrice did as suggested, and then there was silence for a few further moments while the rain continued to beat down. Eventually a movement from the old woman made Axl glance towards her. She was pulling back the rabbit’s ears, and as the animal struggled to free itself, her claw-like hand kept it firmly in its grasp. Then, as Axl watched, the old woman produced in her other hand a large rusted knife and placed it against the creature’s throat. As Beatrice beside him started, Axl realised that the dark patches beneath their feet, and elsewhere all over the ruined floor, were old bloodstains, and that mingled with the smell of ivy and damp mouldering stone was another faint but lingering one of slaughter.

Having placed her knife to the rabbit’s throat, the old woman became quite still again. Her sunken eyes, Axl realised, were fixed on the tall man at the far end of the wall, as though she were waiting for a signal from him. But the man remained in the same rigid posture as before, his forehead almost touching the wall. He either had not noticed the old woman or else was determined to ignore her.

‘Good mistress,’ Axl said, ‘kill the rabbit if you must. But break its neck cleanly. Or else take a stone and give it a good blow.’

‘Had I the strength, sir, but I’m too weak. I have a knife with a sharp edge and that is all.’

‘Then I’ll gladly assist you. There’s no need for your knife.’ Axl rose to his feet, holding out his hand, but the old woman made no move to give up the rabbit. She remained exactly as before, the knife on the animal’s throat, her gaze fixed on the man across the room.

At last the tall man turned to face them. 'Friends,' he said, 'I was surprised to see you enter earlier, but now I'm glad. For I see you're good people, and I beg you, while you wait for this storm to pass, listen to my plight. I'm a humble boatman who ferries travellers across choppy waters. I don't mind the work though the hours are long and when there are many waiting to cross there's little sleep and my limbs ache with each thrust of the oar. I work through rain and wind and under the parching sun. But I keep my spirits up looking forward to my rest days. For I'm but one of several boatmen and we're each able to take our turn to rest, if only after long weeks of labour. On our rest days, we each have a special place to go, and this, friends, is mine. This house where I was once a carefree child. It's not as it once was, but for me it's filled with precious memories, and I come here asking only the quiet to enjoy them. Now consider this. Whenever I come here, within an hour of my arrival, this old woman will enter through that arch. She'll sit herself down and taunt me hour by hour, night and day. She'll make cruel and unjust accusations. Under cover of dark, she'll curse me with the most horrible curses. She will not give me a moment's respite. Sometimes, as you see, she'll bring with her a rabbit, or some such small creature, so she can slay it and pollute this precious place with its blood. I've done all I can to persuade her to leave me, but what pity God placed in her soul, she has learnt to ignore. She will not go, nor will she cease to taunt. Even now it's only your unexpected entrance that has caused her to pause in her persecution. And before long it will be time to begin my journey back, to more long weeks of toil on the water. Friends, I beg you, do what you can to make her leave. Persuade her that her behaviour is ungodly. You may have influence on her, being as you are from the outside.'

There was a silence after the boatman stopped talking. Axl remembered later feeling a vague compulsion to reply, but at the same time a sense that the man had spoken to him in a dream and that there was no real obligation to do so.

Beatrice too seemed to feel no urge to respond, for her eyes remained on the old woman, who had now taken the knife away from the rabbit's throat, and was stroking its fur, almost affectionately, with the edge of the blade. Eventually Beatrice said:

'Mistress, I beg you, allow my husband to assist with your rabbit. There's no call to spill blood in a place such as this, and no basin to catch it. You'll bring bad luck not only to this honest boatman but to yourself and all other travellers who stray in here seeking shelter. Put that knife away and slaughter the creature gently elsewhere. And what good can come of taunting this man as you do, a hard-working boatman?'

'Let's not be hasty to speak harshly to this lady, princess,' Axl said gently. 'We don't know what has occurred between these people. This boatman seems honest, but then again, this lady may have just cause to come here and spend her time as she does.'

'You couldn't have spoken more aptly, sir,' the old woman said. 'Do I think this a charming way to spend my fading days? I'd rather be far from here, in the company of my own husband, and it's because of this boatman I'm now parted from him. My husband was a wise and careful man, sir, and we planned our journey for a long time, talked of it and dreamt of it over many years. And when finally we were ready, and had all we needed, we set off on the road and after several days found the cove from where we could cross to the island. We waited for the ferryman, and in time, saw his boat coming towards us. But as luck would have it, it was this very man here who came to us. See how tall he is. Standing on his boat on the water, against the sky with his long oar, he looked as tall and thin as those players do when they hobble on their stilts. He came to where my husband and I were standing on the rocks and tied his boat. And to this day I don't know how he did it, but somehow he tricked us. We were too trusting. With the island so near, this boatman took away

my husband and left me waiting on the shore, after forty years and more of our being husband and wife and hardly a day apart. I can't think how he did it. His voice must have put us in a dream, because before I knew it he was rowing off with my husband and I was still on land. Even then, I didn't believe it. For who could suspect such cruelty from a boatman? So I waited. I said to myself, it's simply that the boat cannot take more than one passenger at a time, for the water was unsettled that day, and the sky almost as dark as it is now. I stood there on the rock and watched the boat getting smaller and then a speck. And still I waited, and in time the speck grew larger and it was the boatman coming back to me. I could soon see his head as smooth as a pebble, now with no passenger left in his boat. And I imagined it was my turn and I would soon be with my beloved again. But when he came to where I was waiting, and tied his rope to the pole, he shook his head and refused to take me across. I argued and wept and called to him, but he would not listen. Instead he offered me - such cruelty! - he offered a rabbit he said had been caught in a trap on the island's shore. He'd brought it to me thinking it a fitting supper for my first evening of solitude. Then seeing there was no one else waiting to be ferried, he pushed away, leaving me weeping on the shore, holding his wretched rabbit. I let it run off into the heather a moment later, for I tell you I had little appetite that evening or for many evenings after. That's why it is I bring him my own little gift each time I come here. A rabbit for his stew in return for his kindness that day.'

'The rabbit was intended for my own supper that evening,' the boatman's voice broke in from across the room. 'Feeling pity, I gave it to her. It was simple kindness.'

'We know nothing of your affairs, sir,' Beatrice said. 'But it does seem a cruel deception to leave this lady alone on the shore that way. What was it made you do such a thing?'

‘Good lady, the island this old woman speaks of is no ordinary one. We boatmen have ferried many there over the years, and by now there will be hundreds inhabiting its fields and woods. But it’s a place of strange qualities, and one who arrives there will walk among its greenery and trees in solitude, never seeing another soul. Occasionally on a moonlit night or when a storm’s ready to break, he may sense the presence of his fellow inhabitants. But most days, for each traveller, it’s as though he’s the island’s only resident. I’d happily have ferried this woman, but when she understood she wouldn’t be with her husband, she declared she didn’t care for such solitude and refused to go. I bowed to her decision, as I’m obliged to do, and let her go her own way. The rabbit, as I say, I gave her out of simple kindness. You see how she thanks me for it.’

‘This boatman is a sly one,’ the old woman said. ‘He’ll dare to deceive you, even though you’re from the outside. He’ll have you believe every soul roams that island in solitude, but it isn’t true. Would my husband and I have dreamt long years to go to a place like that? The truth is there’s many permitted to cross the water as wedded man and wife to dwell together on the island. Many who roam those same forests and quiet beaches arm in arm. My husband and I knew this. We knew it as children. Good cousins, if you search through your own memories, you’ll remember it to be true even as I speak of it now. We had little inkling as we waited in that cove how cruel a boatman would come over the water to us.’

‘There’s truth in just one part of what she says,’ the boatman said. ‘Occasionally a couple may be permitted to cross to the island together, but this is rare. It requires an unusually strong bond of love between them. It does sometimes occur, I don’t deny, and that’s why when we find a man and wife, or even unmarried lovers, waiting to be carried over, it’s our duty to question them carefully. For it falls to us to perceive if their bond is strong enough to cross

together. This lady is reluctant to accept it, but her bond with her husband was simply too weak. Let her look into her heart, then dare say my judgement that day was in error.'

'Mistress,' Beatrice said. 'What do you say?'

The old woman remained silent. She kept her eyes lowered, and went on running the blade sulkily over the rabbit's fur.

'Mistress,' Axl said, 'once the rain stops, we'll be returning to the road. Why not leave this place with us? We'll gladly walk with you some of your way. We could talk at leisure about whatever pleases you. Leave this good boatman in peace to enjoy what remains of this house while it stands. What's to be gained sitting here like this? And if you wish it, I'll kill the rabbit cleanly before our paths part. What do you say?'

The old woman gave no reply, nor any indication of having heard Axl's words. After some time, she rose slowly to her feet, the rabbit held closely to her chest. The woman was tiny in stature and her cloak dragged along the floor as she made her way to the broken side of the room. Some water splashed onto her from a section of the ceiling, but she seemed not to care. When she had reached the far end of the floor, she looked out at the rain and the encroaching greenery. Then bending slowly, she set the rabbit down near her feet. The animal, perhaps stiff with fear, did not move at first. Then it vanished into the grass.

The old woman straightened herself carefully. When she turned she appeared to be looking at the boatman - her strangely sunken eyes made it hard to be certain - then said: 'These strangers have taken away my appetite. But it will return, I've no doubt.'

With that she lifted the hem of her cloak and stepped slowly down into the grass like one easing herself into a pool. The rain fell on her steadily, and she pulled her hood

further over her head before taking her next steps into the tall nettles.

‘Wait a few moments and we’ll walk with you,’ Axl called after her. But he felt Beatrice’s hand on his arm and heard her whisper: ‘Best not meddle with her, Axl. Let her go.’

When Axl walked over to where the old woman had stepped down, he half expected to see her somewhere, impeded by the foliage and unable to go on. But there was now no sign of her.

‘Thank you, friends,’ the boatman said behind him. ‘Perhaps for this day at least, I shall be allowed peace to remember my childhood.’

‘We too will be out of your way, boatman,’ said Axl. ‘Just as soon as this lets up.’

‘No hurry, friends. You spoke judiciously and I thank you for it.’

Axl went on staring at the rain. He heard his wife say behind him: ‘This must once have been a splendid house, sir.’

‘Oh, it was, good lady. When I was a boy, I didn’t know just how splendid, for it was all I knew. There were fine pictures and treasures, kind and wise servants. Just through there was the banqueting hall.’

‘It must sadden you to see it like this, sir.’

‘I’m simply grateful, good lady, it still stands as it does. For this house has witnessed days of war, when many others like it were burnt to the ground and are no more now than a mound or two beneath grass and heather.’

Then Axl heard Beatrice’s footsteps coming towards him and felt her hand on his shoulder. ‘What is it, Axl?’ she asked, her voice lowered. ‘You’re troubled, I can see it.’

‘It’s nothing, princess. It’s just this ruin here. For a moment it was as if I were the one remembering things here.’

‘What manner of things, Axl?’

‘I don’t know, princess. When the man speaks of wars and burning houses, it’s almost as if something comes back to me. From the days before I knew you, it must be.’

‘Was there ever a time before we knew one another, Axl? Sometimes I feel we must have been together since we were babes.’

‘It seems that way to me too, princess. It’s just some foolishness coming over me in this strange place.’

She was looking at him thoughtfully. Then she squeezed his hand and said quietly: ‘This is a queer place indeed and may bring us more harm than the rain ever could. I’m anxious to leave it, Axl. Before that woman returns or something worse.’

Axl nodded. Then turning, he called across the room: ‘Well, boatman, the sky looks to be clearing so we’ll be on our way. Many thanks for allowing us shelter.’

The boatman said nothing to this, but as they were putting on their bundles, he came to assist them, handing them their walking sticks. ‘A safe journey, friends,’ he said. ‘May you find your son in good health.’

They thanked him again, and were proceeding through the arch when Beatrice suddenly stopped and looked back.

‘Since we’re leaving you, sir,’ she said, ‘and may not meet with you again, I wonder if you’ll allow me a small question.’

The boatman, standing at his spot by the wall, was watching her carefully.

‘You spoke earlier, sir,’ Beatrice went on, ‘of your duty to question a couple waiting to cross the water. You

spoke of the need to discover if their bond of love is such as to allow them to dwell together on the island. Well, sir, I was wondering this. How do you question them to discover what you must?'

For a moment the boatman seemed uncertain. Then he said: 'Frankly, good lady, it's not for me to talk of such matters. Indeed, we shouldn't by rights have met today, but some curious chance brought us together and I'm not sorry for it. You were both kind and took my part and for that I'm grateful. So I will answer you as best I can. It is, as you say, my duty to question all who wish to cross to the island. If it's a couple such as you speak of, who claim their bond is so strong, then I must ask them to put their most cherished memories before me. I'll ask one, then the other to do this. Each must speak separately. In this way the real nature of their bond is soon revealed.'

'But isn't it hard, sir,' Beatrice asked, 'to see what truly lies in people's hearts? Appearances deceive so easily.'

'That's true, good lady, but then we boatmen have seen so many over the years it doesn't take us long to see beyond deceptions. Besides, when travellers speak of their most cherished memories, it's impossible for them to disguise the truth. A couple may claim to be bonded by love, but we boatmen may see instead resentment, anger, even hatred. Or a great barrenness. Sometimes a fear of loneliness and nothing more. Abiding love that has endured the years - that we see only rarely. When we do, we're only too glad to ferry the couple together. Good lady, I've already said more than I should.'

'I thank you for it, boatman. It's just to satisfy an old woman's curiosity. Now we'll leave you in peace.'

'May you have a safe journey.'

* * *

They retraced their steps along the path they had beaten earlier through the ferns and nettles. The storm had made the ground underneath treacherous, so for all their anxiety to put the villa behind them, they proceeded at a careful pace. When they finally reached the sunken lane, the rain still had not ceased, and they took shelter under the first large tree they could find.

‘Are you soaked through, princess?’

‘Don’t worry, Axl. This coat did its work. How is it with you?’

‘Nothing the sun won’t soon dry when it returns.’

They put down their bundles and leant against the trunk, recovering their breaths. After a while, Beatrice said quietly:

‘Axl, I feel afraid.’

‘Why, what is it, princess? No harm can come to you now.’

‘Do you remember the strange woman in dark rags you watched me talking to up by the old thorn that day? She may have looked a mad wanderer, but the story she told had much in common with the old woman’s just now. Her husband too had been taken by a boatman and she left behind on the shore. And when she was coming back from the cove, weeping for loneliness, she found herself crossing the edge of a high valley, and she could see the path a long way before and a long way behind, and all along it people weeping just like her. When I heard this I was only partly afraid, saying to myself it was nothing to do with us, Axl. But she went on speaking, about how this land had become cursed with a mist of forgetfulness, a thing we’ve remarked on often enough ourselves. And then she asked me: “How will you and your husband prove your love for each other when you can’t remember the past you’ve shared?” And I’ve been thinking

about it ever since. Sometimes I think of it and it makes me so afraid. ’

‘But what’s to fear, princess? We’ve no plans to go to any such island or any desire to do so. ’

‘Even so, Axl. What if our love withers before we’ve a chance even to think of going to such a place? ’

‘What are you saying, princess? How can our love wither? Isn’t it stronger now than when we were foolish young lovers? ’

‘But Axl, we can’t even remember those days. Or any of the years between. We don’t remember our fierce quarrels or the small moments we enjoyed and treasured. We don’t remember our son or why he’s away from us. ’

‘We can make all those memories come back, princess. Besides, the feeling in my heart for you will be there just the same, no matter what I remember or forget. Don’t you feel the same, princess? ’

‘I do, Axl. But then again I wonder if what we feel in our hearts today isn’t like these raindrops still falling on us from the soaked leaves above, even though the sky itself long stopped raining. I’m wondering if without our memories, there’s nothing for it but for our love to fade and die. ’

‘God wouldn’t allow such a thing, princess. ’ Axl said this quietly, almost under his breath, for he had himself felt an unnamed fear welling up within him.

‘The day I spoke with her by the old thorn, ’ Beatrice continued, ‘the strange woman warned me to waste no more time. She said we had to do all we could to remember what we’ve shared, the good and the bad. And now that boatman, when we were leaving, gives the very answer I expected and feared. What chance do we have, Axl, the way we are now? If someone like that asked of us our most treasured memories? Axl, I’m so afraid. ’

‘There, princess, there’s nothing to fear. Our memories aren’t gone for ever, just mislaid somewhere on account of this wretched mist. We’ll find them again, one by one if we have to. Isn’t that why we’re on this journey? Once our son’s standing before us, many things are sure to start coming back.’

‘I hope so. That boatman’s words have made me all the more afraid.’

‘Forget him, princess. What do we want with his boat, or his island come to that? And you’re right, the rain’s stopped out there and we’ll be drier stepping out from under this tree. Let’s be on our way, and no more of these worries.’

Chapter Three

The Saxon village, viewed from a distance and a certain height, would have been something more familiar to you as a 'village' than Axl and Beatrice's warren. For one thing - perhaps because the Saxons had a keener sense of claustrophobia - there was none of this digging into the hillside. If you were coming down the steep valley slope, as Axl and Beatrice were that evening, you would have seen below you some forty or more individual houses, laid out on the valley floor in two rough circles, one within the other. You might have been too far away to notice the variations in size and splendour, but you would have made out the thatched roofs, and the fact that many were 'roundhouses' not so far removed from the kind in which some of you, or perhaps your parents, were brought up. And if the Saxons were happy to sacrifice a little security for the benefits of open air, they were careful to compensate: a tall fence of tethered timber poles, their points sharpened like giant pencils, completely encircled the village. At any given point, the fence was at least twice a man's height, and to make the prospect of scaling it even less enticing, a deep trench followed it all the way around the outside.

That would have been the picture Axl and Beatrice saw below them as they paused to catch their breaths during their descent down the hill. The sun was setting over the valley now, and Beatrice, who had the better sight, was once more leaning forward, a step or two in front of Axl, the grass and dandelions around her as tall as her waist.

'I can see four, no five men guarding the gate,' she was saying. 'And I think they're holding spears. When I was last here with the women, it was nothing more than one gate-keeper with a pair of dogs.'

‘Are you sure there’ll be a welcome here for us, princess?’

‘Don’t worry, Axl, they know me well enough by now. Besides, one of their elders here is a Briton, regarded by all as a wise leader even if he’s not of their blood. He’ll see to it we have a safe roof tonight. Even so, Axl, I think something’s happened and I’m uneasy. Now here’s another man with a spear arrived, and that’s a pack of fierce dogs with him.’

‘Who knows what goes on with Saxons,’ said Axl. ‘We may be better seeking shelter elsewhere tonight.’

‘The dark will be soon on us, Axl, and those spears are not intended for us. Besides, there’s a woman in this village I was wanting to visit, one who knows her medicines beyond anyone in our own.’

Axl waited for her to say something further, and when she went on peering into the distance, he asked: ‘And why would you be after medicines, princess?’

‘A small discomfort I feel from time to time. This woman might know of something to soothe it.’

‘What sort of discomfort, princess? Where does it trouble you?’

‘It’s nothing. It’s only because we’re needing to shelter here I’m thinking of it at all.’

‘But where does it lie, princess? This pain?’

‘Oh ...’ Without turning to him, she pressed a hand to her side, just below the ribcage, then laughed. ‘It’s nothing to speak of. You can see, it hasn’t slowed me walking here today.’

‘It hasn’t slowed you one bit, princess, and I’ve been the one having to beg we stop and rest.’

‘That’s what I’m saying, Axl. So it’s nothing to worry about.’

‘It hasn’t slowed you down at all. In fact, princess, you must be as strong as any woman half your age. Still, if there’s someone here to help with your pain, what’s the harm in going to her?’

‘That’s all I was saying, Axl. I’ve brought a little tin to trade for medicines.’

‘Who wants these little pains? We all have them, and we’d all be rid of them if we could. By all means, let’s go to this woman if she’s here, and those guards let us pass.’

It was nearly dark by the time they crossed the bridge over the trench, and torches had been lit on either side of the gate. The guards were large and burly but looked panicked by their approach.

‘Wait a moment, Axl,’ Beatrice said quietly. ‘I’ll go alone to speak with them.’

‘Don’t go near their spears, princess. The dogs look calm but those Saxons look foolish with fear.’

‘If it’s you they fear, Axl, old man that you are, I’ll soon show them their great error.’

She walked towards them boldly. The men gathered around her and as she addressed them they threw suspicious glances towards Axl. Then one of them called to him, in the Saxon language, to step closer to the torches, presumably so they could see he was not a younger man in disguise. Then after a few more exchanges with Beatrice the men allowed them through.

Axl was puzzled that a village which from a distance looked to be two orderly rings of houses could turn out to be such a chaotic labyrinth now they were walking through its narrow lanes. Admittedly the light was fading, but as he followed Beatrice, he could discern no logic or pattern to

the place. Buildings would loom unexpectedly in front of them, blocking their way and forcing them down baffling side alleys. They were obliged, moreover, to walk with even more caution than out on the roads: not only was the ground pitted and full of puddles from the earlier storm, the Saxons seemed to find it acceptable to leave random objects, even pieces of rubble, lying in the middle of the path. But what troubled Axl most was the odour that grew stronger and fainter as they walked, but never went away. Like anyone of his time, he was well reconciled to the smell of excrement, human or animal, but this was something altogether more offensive. Before long he had determined its source: all over the village people had left out, on the fronts of houses or on the side of the street, piles of putrefying meat as offerings to their various gods. At one point, startled by a particularly strong assault, Axl had turned to see, suspended from the eaves of a hut, a dark object whose shape changed before his eyes as the colony of flies perched on it dispersed. A moment later they encountered a pig being dragged by its ears by a group of children; dogs, cows and donkeys under no one's supervision. The few people they met stared silently at them, or else quickly vanished behind a door or shutter.

'There's something strange here tonight,' Beatrice whispered as they walked. 'Usually they'd be sitting in front of their houses or perhaps gathered in circles laughing and talking. And the children would be following us by now asking a hundred questions and wondering if to call us names or be our friends. Everything's eerily still and it makes me uneasy.'

'Are we lost, princess, or are we still going toward the place they'll be sheltering us?'

'I'd been thinking we'd visit first the woman about the medicines. But with things the way they are, we may be better going straight to the old longhouse and keeping out of harm's way.'

‘Are we far from the medicine lady’s house?’

‘As I remember it, not far at all now.’

‘Then let’s see if she’s there. Even if your pain’s a trivial thing, as we know it to be, there’s no sense in feeling it at all if it can be taken away.’

‘It can wait till the morning, Axl. It’s not even a pain I notice till we’re speaking of it.’

‘Even so, princess, now we’re here, why not go and see the wise woman?’

‘We’ll do so if you particularly wish it, Axl. Though I’d have happily left it for the morning or maybe the next time I’m passing through this place.’

Even as they were talking, they turned a corner into what appeared to be the village square. There was a bonfire blazing at its centre, and all around it, illuminated by its light, a large crowd. There were Saxons of all ages, even tiny children in their parents’ arms, and Axl’s first thought was that they had stumbled upon a pagan ceremony. But as they stopped to consider the scene before them, he saw there was no focus to the crowd’s attention. The faces he could see were solemn, perhaps frightened. Voices were lowered, and collectively came through the air as a worried murmur. A dog barked at Axl and Beatrice and was promptly chased away by shadowy figures. Those among the crowd who noticed the visitors stared their way blankly before losing interest.

‘Who knows what concerns them here, Axl,’ Beatrice said. ‘I’d walk away except the medicine woman’s house is somewhere near. Let me see if I can still find my way to it.’

As they moved towards a row of huts to their right, they became aware of many more people in the shadows, silently watching the crowd around the fire. Beatrice stopped to talk to one of them, a woman standing in front of her own door,

and after a while Axl realised this was the medicine woman herself. He could not see her well in the near-darkness, but made out the straight-backed figure of a tall woman, probably in her middle years, clutching a shawl around her arms and shoulders. She and Beatrice went on conferring in low voices, sometimes glancing towards the crowd, sometimes at Axl. Eventually the woman gestured for them to enter her hut, but Beatrice, coming up to him, said softly:

‘Let me speak with her alone, Axl. Help me take off this bundle and wait out here for me.’

‘Can’t I be with you, princess, even if I hardly understand this Saxon tongue?’

‘These are women’s matters, husband. Let me talk with her alone, and she’s saying she’ll examine my old body carefully.’

‘I’m sorry, princess, I wasn’t thinking clearly. Let me take your bundle from you and I’ll be waiting here as long as you wish.’

After the two women had gone inside, Axl felt a great weariness, especially in his shoulders and legs. Removing his own burden, he leaned against the turf wall behind him and gazed over at the crowd. There was now a growing restlessness: people would stride from the darkness around him to join the crowd while others hurried away from the fire, only to return a moment later. The blaze illuminated some faces sharply, while leaving others in shadow, but after a time, Axl came to the conclusion these people were all waiting, in a state of some anxiety, for someone or something to emerge from the timber hall to the left of the fire. This building, probably some meeting place for the Saxons, must have had a fire of its own burning inside, for its windows flickered between blackness and light.

He was on the verge of nodding off, his back to the wall, the muffled voices of Beatrice and the medicine woman

somewhere behind him, when the crowd surged and shifted, letting out a soft collective growl. Several men had emerged from the timber hall and were walking towards the fire. The crowd parted and quietened for them, as though in expectation of an announcement, but none came, and soon people were pressing around the newcomers, their voices building again. Axl noticed that attention was focused almost entirely on the man who had come out last from the hall. He was probably no more than thirty but had about him a natural authority. Although he was dressed simply, as a farmer might be, he did not look like anyone else in the village. It was not just the way he had swept his cloak over one shoulder, revealing his belt and the handle of his sword. Nor was it simply that his hair was longer than any of the villagers' - it hung almost down to his shoulders and he had tied some of it with a thong to prevent it swaying over his eyes. In fact the actual thought that crossed Axl's mind was that this man had tied his hair to stop it falling across his vision *during combat*. This thought had come to Axl quite naturally, and only on reflection did it startle him, for it had carried with it an element of recognition. Moreover, when the stranger, striding into the midst of the crowd, allowed his hand to fall and rest on the sword handle, Axl had felt, almost tangibly, the peculiar mix of comfort, excitement and fear such a movement could bring. Telling himself he would return to these curious sensations at some later point, he shut them out of his mind and concentrated on the scene unfolding before him.

It was the bearing of the man, the way he moved and held himself, that so set him apart from those around him. 'No matter that he tries to pass himself off as an ordinary Saxon,' Axl thought, 'this man is a *warrior*. And perhaps one capable of wreaking great devastation when he wishes it.'

Two of the other men who had emerged from the hall were hovering nervously behind him, and whenever the warrior drifted further into the crowd, both men tried their best to

stay near him, like children anxious not to be left behind by a parent. The two men, who were both young, also wore swords, and in addition, each was clutching a spear, but it was evident they were quite unaccustomed to such weapons. They were, moreover, stiff with fear and seemed unable to respond to the words of encouragement their fellow villagers were giving them. Their gazes darted about in panic even as hands patted their backs or squeezed their shoulders.

‘The long-haired fellow is a stranger arrived only an hour or two before us,’ Beatrice’s voice said close to his ear. ‘A Saxon, but one from a distant country. The fenlands in the east, so he says, where he’s lately been fighting sea raiders.’

Axl had been aware for some time that the voices of the women had grown more distinct, and turning, saw that Beatrice and her hostess had come out of the house and were standing at the door just behind him. The medicine woman now spoke softly, for some time, in Saxon, after which Beatrice said into his ear:

‘It seems earlier today one of the village men came back out of breath and his shoulder wounded, and when prevailed upon to calm himself told of how he and his brother, together with his nephew, a boy of twelve, were fishing at their usual spot by the river and were set upon by two ogres. Except according to this wounded man these were no ordinary ogres. Monstrous and able to move faster and with greater cunning than any ogre he’d ever seen. The fiends - for it’s by that name these villagers are talking of them - the fiends killed his brother outright and carried off the boy, who was alive and struggling. The wounded man himself got away only after a long chase along the river path, the foul grunts coming closer behind him all the while, but he outran them in the end. That would be him there now, Axl, with the splint on his arm, talking to the stranger. Wounded though he was, he was anxious enough for his nephew to lead a party of this village’s strongest men back to the spot, and they saw smoke

from a campfire near the bank, and as they were creeping up to it, their weapons at the ready, the bushes opened and it seems these same two fiends had set a trap. The medicine woman says three men were killed even before the others thought to run for their lives, and though they returned unhurt, most of them are now shivering and muttering to themselves in their beds, too shaken to come out and wish well these brave men willing to go out now, even with the darkness coming and the mist setting in, to do what couldn't be done by twelve strong men in broad daylight.'

'Do they know the boy is still alive?'

'They know nothing, but they'll go out to the river even so. After the first party returned in terror, for all the urging of the elders, there was not a single man brave enough to join a further expedition. Then as fortune would have it, here's this stranger come into the village seeking a night's shelter after his horse has hurt a foot. And though he knows nothing of this boy or his family before today, he's declared himself willing to come to the village's aid. Those others going out with him are two more of the boy's uncles, and by the look of them, I'd say they're more likely to hinder that warrior than be of help. Look, Axl, they're sick with fear.'

'I see that right enough, princess. But they're brave men all the same, to go out when they're so afraid. We chose a bad night to ask this village's hospitality. There's weeping somewhere even now, and there may be a great deal more before the night's passed.'

The medicine woman seemed to understand something of what Axl had said, for she spoke again, in her own language, then Beatrice said: 'She says to go straight to the old longhouse now and not show ourselves again till morning. If we choose to wander the village, she says there's no telling how we may be greeted on a night like this.'

'My own thoughts exactly, princess. Then let's be taking the good lady's advice, if you can still remember the way.'

But just at that moment the crowd made a sudden noise, then the noise became cheering, and the crowd shifted again, as if struggling to change shape. Then it began to move, the warrior and his two companions near its centre. A low chanting started up, and soon the spectators in the shadows - the medicine woman included - joined in. The procession came towards them, and though the brightness of the fire had been left behind, several torches were moving within it, so that Axl could catch glimpses of faces, some frightened, some excited. Whenever a torch illuminated the warrior, his expression was calm, gazing to left and right to acknowledge words of encouragement, his hand once more on the handle of his sword. They went past Axl and Beatrice, continued between a row of huts and out of view, though the muted chanting remained audible for some time.

Perhaps daunted by the atmosphere, neither Axl nor Beatrice moved for a while. Then Beatrice began to question the medicine woman on the best way to reach the longhouse, and it seemed to Axl the two women were soon discussing directions to some other destination altogether, for they pointed and gestured into the distance towards the hills above the village.

They finally set off for their lodgings only when quiet had descended over the village. It was harder than ever to find one's way in the darkness, and the occasional torches burning on corners seemed only to increase the confusion with their shadows. They were proceeding in the opposite direction to that in which the crowd had gone, and the houses they passed were dark with no obvious signs of life.

'Walk slowly, princess,' Axl said softly. 'If either of us takes a bad tumble on this ground, I'm not certain there'll be a soul coming out to help us.'

'Axl, I think we've lost our way again. Let's go back to the last corner and this time I'll be sure to find it.'

In time the path straightened and they found themselves walking beside the perimeter fence they had seen from the hill. Its sharpened poles loomed above them a shade darker than the night sky, and as they went on, Axl could hear murmured voices somewhere above them. Then he saw they were no longer alone: high up along the ramparts, at regular intervals, were shapes he realised were people gazing out over the fence into the dark wilderness beyond. He had barely time to share this observation with Beatrice before they heard footsteps gathering behind them. They quickened their pace, but now a torch was moving nearby and shadows swung rapidly before them. At first Axl thought they had stumbled upon a group of villagers coming in the other direction, but then saw that he and Beatrice were entirely surrounded. Saxon men of varying ages and builds, some with spears, others wielding hoes, scythes and other tools, were jostling around them. Several voices addressed them at once, and ever more people seemed to be arriving. Axl felt the heat of the torches thrust at their faces, and holding Beatrice close to him, tried to locate with his gaze the leader of this group, but could find no such figure. Every face, moreover, was filled with panic, and he realised any careless move could bring disaster. He pulled Beatrice out of the reach of a particularly wild-eyed young man who had raised a trembling knife in the air, and searched his memory for some Saxon phrases. When nothing came to him, he made do with a few soothing noises, such as he might have made to an unruly horse.

‘Stop that, Axl,’ Beatrice whispered. ‘They won’t thank you for singing lullabies to them.’ She addressed one, then another of the men in Saxon, but the mood did not improve. Shouted arguments were breaking out, and a dog, tugging on a rope, broke through the ranks to snarl at them.

Then the tense figures around them seemed all at once to sag. Their voices quietened till there was only the one, shouting angrily, somewhere still a little way off. The voice

came closer and the crowd parted to let through a squat, misshapen man who shuffled into the pool of light leaning on a thick staff.

He was quite elderly, and though his back was relatively straight, his neck and head protruded from his shoulders at a grotesque angle. Nonetheless all present appeared to yield to his authority - the dog too ceased barking and vanished into the shadows. Even with his limited Saxon, Axl could tell the misshapen man's fury had only partly to do with the villagers' treatment of strangers: they were being reprimanded for abandoning their sentry posts, and the faces caught in the torchlight became crestfallen, though filled with confusion. Then as the elder's voice rose to a new level of anger, the men seemed slowly to remember something, and one by one slipped back into the night. But even when the last of them had gone, and there were sounds of feet clambering up ladders, the misshapen man went on hurling insults after them.

Finally he turned to Axl and Beatrice, and switching to their language, said with no trace of an accent: 'How can it be they forget even this, and so soon after watching the warrior leave with two of their own cousins to do what none of them had the courage for? Is it shame makes their memories so weak or simply fear?'

'They're fearful right enough, Ivor,' Beatrice said. 'Just now a spider falling beside them could set them tearing at one another. A sorry crew you sent out to greet us.'

'My apologies, Mistress Beatrice. And to you too, sir. It's not the welcome you would usually get here, but as you see, you've arrived on a night filled with dread.'

'We've lost our way to the old longhouse, Ivor,' Beatrice said. 'If you'd point us to it we'd be much beholden to you. Especially after that greeting, my husband and I are eager to be indoors and resting.'

‘I’d like to promise you a kind welcome at the longhouse, friends, but on this night there’s no telling what my neighbours may see fit to do. I’d be easier if you and your good husband agreed to spend the night under my own roof, where I know you’ll remain undisturbed.’

‘We accept your kindness gladly, sir,’ Axl broke in. ‘My wife and I are much in need of rest.’

‘Then follow me, friends. Stay close behind me and keep your voices low till we arrive.’

They followed Ivor through the dark until they reached a house which, though in structure much like the others, was larger and stood apart by itself. When they entered under the low arch, the air was thick with woodsmoke, which, even as it made Axl’s chest tighten, felt warm and welcoming. The fire was smouldering in the centre of the room, surrounded by woven rugs, animal skins and furniture crafted from oak and ash. As Axl went about extricating blankets from their bundles, Beatrice sank gratefully into a rocking chair. Ivor, though, remained standing by the doorway, a preoccupied look on his face.

‘The treatment you received just now,’ he said, ‘I shudder with shame to think of it.’

‘Please let’s think no more of it, sir,’ Axl said. ‘You’ve shown us more kindness than we could deserve. And we arrived this evening in time to see the brave men set off on their dangerous mission. So we understand all too well the dread that hangs in the air, and it’s no wonder some should behave foolishly.’

‘If you strangers remember our troubles well enough, how is it those fools are forgetting them already? They were told in terms a child would understand to hold their positions on the fence at all costs, the safety of the whole community depending on it, to say nothing of the need to aid our heroes should they appear at the gates pursued by monsters. So what

do they do? Two strangers go by, and remembering nothing of their orders or even the reasons for them, they set on you like crazed wolves. I'd be doubting my own senses if such strange forgetfulness didn't occur so often in this place.'

'It's the same in our own country, sir,' Axl said. 'My wife and I have witnessed many incidents of such forgetfulness among our own neighbours.'

'Interesting to hear that, sir. And I was fearing this a kind of plague spreading through our country only. And is it because I'm old, or that I'm a Briton living here among Saxons, that I'm often left alone holding some memory when all around me have let it slip?'

'We've found it just the same, sir. Though we suffer enough from the mist - for that's how my wife and I have come to call it - we seem to do so less than the younger ones. Can you see an explanation for it, sir?'

'I've heard many things spoken about it, friend, and mostly Saxon superstition. But last winter a stranger came this way who had something to say on this matter to which I find myself giving more credence the more I think on it. Now what's this?' Ivor, who had remained by the door, his staff in his hand, turned with surprising agility for one so twisted. 'Excuse your host, friends. This may be our brave men already returned. It's best for now you remain in here and not show yourselves.'

Once he had left, Axl and Beatrice remained silent for some time, their eyes closed, grateful, in their respective chairs, for the chance to rest. Then Beatrice said quietly:

'What do you suppose Ivor was going to say then, Axl?'

'About what, princess?'

'He was talking of the mist and the reason for it.'

'Just a rumour he heard once. By all means let's ask him to speak more on it. An admirable man. Has he always lived

among Saxons? ’

‘Ever since he married a Saxon woman a long time ago, so I’m told. What became of her I never heard. Axl, wouldn’t it be a fine thing to know the cause of the mist? ’

‘A fine thing indeed, but what good it will do, I don’t know. ’

‘How can you say so, Axl? How can you say such a heartless thing? ’

‘What is it, princess? What’s the matter? ’ Axl sat up in his chair and looked over to his wife. ‘I only meant knowing its cause wouldn’t make it go away, here or in our own country. ’

‘If there’s even a chance of understanding the mist, it could make such a difference to us. How can you speak so lightly of it, Axl? ’

‘I’m sorry, princess, I didn’t mean to do so. My mind was on other things. ’

‘How can you be thinking of other things, and we only today heard what we did from that boatman? ’

‘Other things, princess, such as if those brave men have come back and with the child unharmed. Or if this village with its frightened guards and flimsy gate is to be invaded this night by monstrous fiends wishing revenge for the rude attention paid them. There’s plenty for a mind to dwell on, never mind the mist or the superstitious talk of strange boatmen. ’

‘No need for harsh words, Axl. I never wished a quarrel. ’

‘Forgive me, princess. It must be this mood here is affecting me. ’

But Beatrice had become tearful. ‘No need to talk so harshly,’ she muttered almost to herself.

Rising, Axl made his way to her rocking chair and crouching slightly, held her closely to his chest. 'I'm sorry, princess,' he said. 'We'll be sure to talk to Ivor about the mist before we leave this place.' Then after a moment, during which they continued to hold each other, he said: 'To be frank, princess, there was a particular thing on my mind just now.'

'What was that, Axl?'

'I was wondering what the medicine woman said to you about your pain.'

'She said it was nothing but what's to be expected with the years.'

'Just what I always said, princess. Didn't I tell you there was no need for worry?'

'I wasn't the one worrying, husband. It was you insisting we go see the woman tonight.'

'It's as well we did, for now we needn't worry about your pain, if ever we did before.'

She gently freed herself from his embrace and allowed her chair to rock back. 'Axl,' she said. 'The medicine woman mentioned an old monk she says is even wiser than her. He's helped many from this village, a monk called Jonus. His monastery's a day from here, up on the mountain road east.'

'The mountain road east.' Axl wandered towards the door, which Ivor had left ajar, and looked out into the darkness. 'I'm thinking, princess, we could as easily take the higher road tomorrow as the low one through the woods.'

'That's a hard road, Axl. A lot of climbing. It will add at least a day to our journey and there's our own son anxious for our arrival.'

'That's all true. But it seems a pity, having come this far, not to visit this wise monk.'

‘It was only something the medicine woman said, thinking we were travelling that way. I told her our son’s village was more easily reached by the low road, and she agreed herself then it was hardly worth our while, there being nothing troubling me but the usual aches that come with the years.’

Axl went on gazing through the doorway into the dark. ‘Even so, princess, we might think about it yet. But here’s Ivor returning, and not looking happy.’

Ivor came striding in, breathing heavily, and sitting down in a wide chair piled with skins, allowed his staff to fall with a clatter at his feet. ‘A young fool swears he sees a fiend scaled the outside of our fence and now peeking at us over the top of it. A mighty commotion, I needn’t tell you, and it’s all I can do to raise a party to go and see if it’s true. Of course, there’s nothing where he points but the night sky, but he goes on saying the fiend’s there looking at us, and the rest of them cowering behind me like children with their hoes and spears. Then the fool confesses he fell asleep on his watch and saw the fiend in his dream, and even then do they hasten back to their posts? They’re so terrified, I have to swear to beat them till their own kin mistake them for mutton.’ He looked around him, still taking heavy breaths. ‘Excuse your host, friends. I’ll be sleeping in that inner room if I’m to sleep at all tonight, so do what you can to find comfort here, though there’s little on offer.’

‘On the contrary, sir,’ Axl said, ‘you’ve offered us wondrously comfortable lodgings and we’re grateful for it. I’m sorry it wasn’t better news called you out just now.’

‘We must wait, perhaps well into the night and the morning too. To where do you travel, friends?’

‘We’ll set off east tomorrow, sir, to our son’s village, where he anxiously awaits us. But on this matter you may be of help, for my wife and I were just arguing the best road to take. We hear of a wise monk by the name of Jonus at a

monastery up on the mountain road whom we might consult on a small matter. ’

‘Jonus certainly has a revered name, though I’ve never met the man face to face. Go to him by all means, but be warned, the journey to the monastery’s no easy one. The path will climb steeply for much of your day. And when at last it levels you must take care not to lose your way, for you’ll be in Querig country. ’

‘Querig, the she-dragon? I’ve not heard talk of her in a long time. Is she still feared in this country?’

‘She rarely leaves the mountains now,’ Ivor said. ‘Though she may on a whim attack a passing traveller, it’s likely she’s often blamed for the work of wild animals or bandits. In my view Querig’s menace comes less from her own actions than from the fact of her continuing presence. So long as she’s left at liberty, all manner of evil can’t help but breed across our land like a pestilence. Take these fiends which curse us tonight. Where did they come from? They’re no mere ogres. No one here has seen their like before. Why did they journey here, to make camp on our riverbank? Querig may rarely show herself, but many a dark force stems from her and it’s a disgrace she remains unslain all these years. ’

‘But Ivor,’ Beatrice said, ‘who’d wish to challenge such a beast? By all accounts Querig’s a dragon of great fierceness, and hidden in difficult terrain. ’

‘You’re right, Mistress Beatrice, it’s a daunting task. It happens there’s an aged knight left from Arthur’s days, charged by that great king many years ago to slay Querig. You may come across him should you take the mountain road. He’s not easily missed, dressed in rusted chainmail and mounted on a weary steed, always eager to proclaim his sacred mission, though I’d guess the old fool has never given that she-dragon a single moment of anxiety. We’ll reach a great age waiting for the day he fulfils his duty. By all means, friends,

travel to the monastery, but go with caution and be sure to reach safe shelter by nightfall. ’

Ivor began to move to the inner room, but Beatrice quickly sat up and said:

‘You were talking earlier, Ivor, about the mist. How you heard something of the cause for it, but then were called away before you could say more. We’re anxious now to hear you speak on this matter. ’

‘Ah, the mist. A good name for it. Who knows how much truth there is in what we hear, Mistress Beatrice? I suppose I was speaking of the stranger riding through our country last year and sheltered here. He was from the fens, much like our brave visitor tonight, though speaking a dialect often hard to understand. I offered him use of this poor house, as I’ve done you, and we talked on many matters through the evening, among them this mist, as you so aptly call it. Our strange affliction interested him greatly, and he questioned me again and again on the matter. And then he ventured something I dismissed at the time, but have since much pondered. The stranger thought it might be God himself had forgotten much from our pasts, events far distant, events of the same day. And if a thing is not in God’s mind, then what chance of it remaining in those of mortal men? ’

Beatrice stared at him. ‘Can such a thing be possible, Ivor? We’re each of us his dear child. Would God really forget what we have done and what’s happened to us? ’

‘My question exactly, Mistress Beatrice, and the stranger could offer no answer. But since that time, I’ve found myself thinking more and more of his words. Perhaps it’s as good an explanation as any for what you name the mist. Now forgive me, friends, I must take some rest while I can. ’

* * *

Axl became aware that Beatrice was shaking his shoulder. He had no idea how long they had slept: it was still dark, but there were noises outside, and he heard Ivor say somewhere above him: 'Let's pray it's good news and not our end.' When Axl sat up, however, their host had already gone, and Beatrice said: 'Hurry, Axl, and we'll see which it is.'

Bleary with sleep, he slipped his arm through his wife's and together they stumbled out into the night. There were many more torches lit now, some blazing from the ramparts, making it much easier than before to see one's way. People were moving everywhere, dogs barking and children crying. Then some order seemed to impose itself, and Axl and Beatrice found themselves in a procession hurrying in a single direction. They came to an abrupt halt, and Axl was surprised to see they were already at the central square - there was obviously a more direct route from Ivor's house than the one they had taken earlier. The bonfire was blazing more fiercely than ever, so much so that Axl thought for an instant it was its heat that had caused the villagers to stop. But looking past the rows of heads, he saw the warrior had returned. He was standing there quite calmly, to the left of the fire, one side of his figure illuminated, the other in shadow. The visible part of his face was covered in what Axl recognised as tiny spots of blood, as if he had just come walking through a fine mist of the stuff. His long hair, though still tied, had come loose and looked wet. His clothes were covered in mud and perhaps blood, and the cloak he had nonchalantly flung over his shoulder at his departure was now torn in several places. But the man himself appeared uninjured, and he was now talking quietly to three of the village elders, Ivor among them. Axl could see too that the warrior was holding some object in the crook of his arm.

Meanwhile, chanting had started, softly at first, then gathering momentum, till eventually the warrior turned to acknowledge it. His manner was devoid of any crude swagger. And when he began to address the crowd, his voice, though

loud enough for all to hear, somehow gave the impression he was speaking in a low, intimate tone appropriate to solemn subject matter.

His listeners hushed to catch each word, and soon he was drawing from them gasps of approval or of horror. At one point he gestured to a spot behind him and Axl noticed for the first time, sitting on the ground just within the circle of light, the two men who had gone out with the warrior. They looked as if they had fallen there from a height and were too dazed to get up. The crowd started up a chant for them, but the pair seemed not to notice, continuing instead to stare at the air before them.

The warrior then turned back to the crowd and said something which caused the chanting to fade. He stepped closer to the fire, and grasping in one hand the object he had been carrying, raised it into the air.

Axl saw what appeared to be the head of a thick-necked creature severed just below the throat. Dark curls of hair hung down from the crown to frame an eerily featureless face: where the eyes, nose and mouth should have been there was only pimpled flesh, like that of a goose, with a few tufts of down-like hair on the cheeks. A growl escaped the crowd and Axl felt it cower back. Only then did he realise that what they were looking at was not a head at all, but a section of the shoulder and upper arm of some abnormally large, human-like creature. The warrior was, in fact, holding up his trophy by the stump close to the bicep with the shoulder end uppermost, and in that moment Axl saw that what he had taken for strands of hair were entrails dangling out of the cut by which the segment had been separated from the body.

After only a short time, the warrior lowered his trophy and let it fall at his feet, as though he could now barely work up sufficient contempt for the creature's remains. For a second time, the crowd recoiled, before edging forward again, and then the chanting started up once more. But this time it

died almost instantly for the warrior was speaking again, and though Axl could understand none of it, he could sense palpably the nervous excitement around him. Beatrice said in his ear:

‘Our hero has killed both monsters. One took its mortal wound into the forest, and will not live through the night. The other stood and fought and for its sins the warrior has brought of it what you see on the ground there. The rest of the fiend crawled to the lake to numb its pain and sank there beneath the black waters. The child, Axl, you see there the child?’

Almost beyond the light of the fire a small group of women had huddled around a thin, dark-haired youth seated on a stone. He was already close to a man’s height, but one sensed that beneath the blanket now wrapped around him, he still had the gangly frame of a boy. One woman had brought out a bucket and was washing off the grime from his face and neck, but he seemed oblivious. His eyes were fixed on the warrior’s back just in front of him, though intermittently he would angle his head to one side, as though trying to peer around the warrior’s legs at the thing on the ground.

Axl was surprised that the sight of the rescued child, alive and evidently without serious injury, provoked in him neither relief nor joy, but a vague unease. He supposed at first this was to do with the odd manner of the boy himself, but then it occurred to him what was really wrong: there was something amiss in the way this boy, whose safety had until so recently been at the centre of the community’s concerns, was now being received. There was a reserve, almost a coldness, that reminded Axl of that incident involving the girl Marta in his own village, and he wondered if this boy, like her, was in the process of being forgotten. But surely this could not be the case here. People were even now pointing at the boy, and the women attending him were staring back defensively.

‘I can’t catch what they’re saying, Axl,’ Beatrice said in his ear. ‘Some quarrel about the child, though a great mercy he’s been brought back safe and he himself showing surprising calm after what his young eyes have beheld.’

The warrior was still addressing the crowd, and a tone of entreaty had entered his voice. It was almost as if he was making an accusation, and Axl could feel the mood of the crowd changing. The sense of awe and gratitude was giving way to some other emotion, and there was confusion, even fear in the rumble of voices swelling around him. The warrior spoke again, his voice stern, gesturing behind him towards the boy. Then Ivor came within the light of the fire and standing beside the warrior said something which drew a less inhibited growl of protest from parts of his audience. A voice behind Axl shouted something, then arguments were breaking out on all sides. Ivor raised his voice and for a small moment there was quiet, but almost straight away the shouting resumed, and now there was jostling in the shadows.

‘Oh, Axl, please, let’s hurry away!’ Beatrice cried into his ear. ‘This is no place for us.’

Axl put his arm around her shoulders and began to push their way through, but something made him glance back one more time. The boy had not changed his position, and was still staring at the warrior’s back, apparently unaware of the commotion before him. But the woman who had been tending to him had stepped away, and was glancing uncertainly from the boy to the crowd. Beatrice tugged his arm. ‘Axl, please, take us away from here. I’m afraid we’ll be hurt.’

The entire village must have been at the square, for they encountered no one on their way back to Ivor’s house. Only as it came into view did Axl ask: ‘What was being said just now, princess?’

‘I’m not at all sure, Axl. There was too much of it at once for my weak understanding. A quarrel about the boy who

was saved, and tempers being lost. It's well we're away and we'll find out in time what's occurred.'

* * *

When Axl awoke the next morning there were shafts of sunlight crossing the room. He was on the floor, but he had been sleeping on a bed of soft rugs beneath warm blankets - an arrangement more luxurious than he was accustomed to - and his limbs felt well rested. He was in good spirits, moreover, because he had awoken with a pleasant memory drifting through his head.

Beatrice stirred beside him but her eyes remained closed and her breathing unbroken. Axl watched her, as he often did at such moments, waiting for a sense of tender joy to fill his breast. It soon did so, just as he expected, but today was mingled with a trace of sadness. The feeling surprised him, and he ran his hand lightly along his wife's shoulder, as though such an action would chase away the shadow.

He could hear noises outside, but unlike those that had woken them in the night, these were of people going about their business of an ordinary morning. It occurred to him he and Beatrice had slept unwisely late, but he still refrained from waking Beatrice and went on gazing at her. Eventually he rose carefully, stepped over to the timber door and pushed it open a little way. This door - it would have been a 'proper' door on wooden hinges - made a creaking noise and the sun entered powerfully through the gap, but still Beatrice slept on. Now somewhat concerned, Axl returned to where she lay and crouched down beside her, feeling the stiffness in his knees as he did so. At last his wife opened her eyes and looked up at him.

'Time we were rising, princess,' he said, hiding his relief. 'The village is alive and our host long gone.'

'Then you should have roused me earlier, Axl.'

‘You looked so peaceful, and after that long day I imagined sleep would be welcome to you. And I was right for now you’re looking as fresh as a young maid.’

‘Talking your nonsense already and we don’t even know what happened in the night. From the sound of things out there, they haven’t beaten each other to bloody pulp. That’s children I hear and the dogs sound fed and happy. Axl, is there water to wash with here?’

A little later, having made themselves presentable as best they could - and with Ivor still not returned - they wandered out into the crisp, bright air in search of something to eat. The village now appeared to Axl a far more benevolent place. The round huts which in the dark had seemed so haphazardly positioned now stood before them in neat rows, their matching shadows forming an orderly avenue through the village. There was a bustle of men and women moving about with tools or washing tubs, groups of children following in their wake. The dogs, though numerous as ever, seemed docile. Only a donkey contentedly defecating in the sun right in front of a well reminded Axl of the unruly place he had entered the night before. There were even nods and subdued greetings from villagers as they passed, though no one went so far as to speak to them.

They had not gone far when they spotted the contrasting figures of Ivor and the warrior standing ahead of them in the street, heads close together in discussion. As Axl and Beatrice approached, Ivor took a step back and smiled self-consciously.

‘I wished not to wake you prematurely,’ he said to them. ‘But I’m a poor host and you both must be famished. Follow me to the old longhouse and I’ll see you’re given your fill. But first, friends, greet our hero of last night. You’ll find Master Wistan understands our tongue with ease.’

Axl turned to the warrior and bowed his head. ‘My wife and I are honoured to meet a man of such courage, generosity

and skill. Your deeds last night were remarkable.'

'My deeds were nothing extraordinary, sir, no more my skills.' The warrior's voice, as before, was gentle and a smile hovered about his eyes. 'I had good fortune last night, and besides, was ably helped by brave comrades.'

'The comrades he speaks of', Ivor said, 'were too busy soiling themselves to join the battle. It's this man alone destroyed the fiends.'

'Really, sir, no more on this matter.' The warrior had addressed Ivor, but was now gazing intently at Axl, as though some mark on the latter's face greatly fascinated him.

'You speak our language well, sir,' Axl said, taken aback by the scrutiny.

The warrior went on studying Axl, then caught himself and laughed. 'Forgive me, sir. I thought for a moment ... But forgive me. My blood is Saxon through and through, but I was brought up in a country not far from here and was often among Britons. So I learnt to speak your tongue alongside my own. These days I'm less accustomed to it, living as I do far away in the fenlands, where one hears many strange tongues but not yours. So you must excuse my errors.'

'Far from it, sir,' Axl said. 'One can hardly tell you aren't a native speaker. In fact, I couldn't help notice last night your way of wearing your sword, closer and higher on the waist than Saxons are accustomed to do, your hand falling easily on the handle as you walk. I hope you won't be offended when I say it's a manner much like a Briton's.'

Again Wistan laughed. 'My Saxon comrades ceaselessly jest not only on my wearing of the sword, but my wielding of it. But you see, my skills were taught to me by Britons, and I've never wished for better teaching. It has preserved me well through many dangers, and did so again last night. Excuse my impertinence, sir, but I see you're not from these

parts yourself. Can it be your native country is to the west?’

‘We’re from the neighbouring country, sir. A day’s walk away, no more.’

‘Yet perhaps in distant days you lived further west?’

‘As I say, sir, I’m from the neighbouring country.’

‘Forgive my poor manners. Travelling this far west, I find myself nostalgic for the country of my childhood, though I know it’s some distance yet. I find myself seeing everywhere shadows of half-remembered faces. Are you and your good wife returning home this morning?’

‘No, sir, we go east to our son’s village, which we hope to reach within two days.’

‘Ah. The road through the forest then.’

‘Actually, sir, we mean to take the high road through the mountains, there being a wise man in the monastery there we hope will grant us an audience.’

‘Is that so?’ Wistan nodded thoughtfully, and once more looked carefully at Axl. ‘I’m told that’s a steep climb.’

‘My guests have not yet breakfasted,’ Ivor said, breaking in. ‘Excuse us, Master Wistan, while I walk them to the longhouse. Then if we may, sir, I’d like to resume our discussion of just now.’ He lowered his voice and continued in Saxon, to which Wistan replied with a nod. Then turning to Axl and Beatrice, Ivor shook his head and said gravely:

‘Despite this man’s great efforts last night, our problems are far from over. But follow me, friends, you must be famished.’

Ivor marched off with his lurching gait, prodding the earth at each step with his staff. He seemed too distracted to notice his guests falling behind in the crowded alleys. At one point, when Ivor was several paces ahead, Axl said to

Beatrice: 'That warrior's an admirable fellow, didn't you think so, princess?'

'No doubt,' she replied quietly. 'But that was a strange way he had of staring at you, Axl.'

There was no time to say more, for Ivor, at last noticing he was in danger of losing them, had stopped at a corner.

Before long they came to a sunny courtyard. There were roaming geese, and the yard itself was bisected by an artificial stream - a shallow channel cut into the earth - along which the water trickled with urgency. At its broadest point the stream was forded by a simple little bridge of two flat rocks, and at that moment an older child was squatting on one of them, washing clothes. It was a scene that struck Axl as almost idyllic, and he would have paused to take it in further had Ivor not kept striding firmly on towards the low, heavily thatched building whose length ran the entire far edge of the yard.

Once inside it, you would not have thought this longhouse so different from the sort of rustic canteen many of you will have experienced in one institution or another. There were rows of long tables and benches, and towards one end, a kitchen and serving area. Its main difference from a modern facility would have been the dominating presence of hay: there was hay above one's head, and beneath one's feet, and though not by design, all over the surface of the tables, blown around by the gusts that regularly swept through the place. On a morning such as this, as our travellers sat down to breakfast, the sun breaking in through the porthole-like windows would have revealed the air itself to be filled with drifting specks of hay.

The old longhouse was deserted when they arrived, but Ivor went into the kitchen area, and a moment later two elderly women appeared with bread, honey, biscuits and jugs of milk and water. Then Ivor himself came back with a tray of

poultry cuts which Axl and Beatrice proceeded to devour gratefully.

At first they ate without speaking, only now conscious of how hungry they had been. Ivor, facing them across the table, continued to brood, his eyes far away in thought, and it was only after some time that Beatrice said:

‘These Saxons are a great burden to you, Ivor. Perhaps you’re wishing to be back with your own kind, even with the boy returned safe and the ogres slain.’

‘Those were no ogres, mistress, nor any creatures seen before in these parts. It’s a great fear removed they no longer roam outside our gates. The boy though is another matter. Returned he may be, but far from safe.’ Ivor leaned across the table towards them and lowered his voice, even though they were once more alone. ‘You’re right, Mistress Beatrice, I wonder at myself to live among such savages. Better dwell in a pit of rats. What can that brave stranger think of us, and after all he did last night?’

‘Why, sir, what has occurred?’ Axl asked. ‘We were there at the fire last night, but sensing a fierce quarrel, took our leave and remain ignorant of what went on.’

‘You did well to hide yourselves, friends. These pagans were sufficiently aroused last night to tear out each other’s eyes. How they might have treated a pair of strange Britons found in their midst I dread to think. The boy Edwin was safely returned, but even as the village began to rejoice, the women found on him a small wound. I inspected it myself as did the other elders. A mark just below his chest, no worse than what a child receives after a tumble. But the women, his own kin at that, declared it a bite, and that’s what the village is calling it this morning. I’ve had to have the boy locked in a shed for his safety, and even so, his companions, his very family members, throwing stones at the door and calling for him to be brought out and slaughtered.’

‘But how can this be, Ivor?’ Beatrice asked. ‘Is it the mist’s work again that they’ve lost all memory of the horrors the child so lately suffered?’

‘If only it were, mistress. But this time they appear to remember all too well. The pagans will not look beyond their superstitions. It’s their conviction that once bitten by a fiend, the boy will before long turn fiend himself and wreak horror here within our walls. They fear him and should he remain here, he’ll suffer a fate as terrible as any from which Master Wistan saved him last night.’

‘Surely, sir,’ Axl said, ‘there are those here wise enough to argue better sense.’

‘If there are, we’re outnumbered, and even if we may command restraint for a day or two, it won’t be long before the ignorant have their way.’

‘Then what’s to be done, sir?’

‘The warrior’s as horrified as you are, and we two have been in discussion all morning. I’ve proposed he take the boy with him when he rides out, imposition though this is, and leave him at some village sufficiently distant where he may have a chance of a new life. I felt shame to the depths of my heart to ask such a thing of a man so soon after he has risked his life for us, but I could see little else to do. Wistan is now considering my proposal, though he has an errand for his king and already delayed on account of his horse and last night’s troubles. In fact, I must check the boy’s still safe now, then go see if the warrior has made his decision.’ Ivor rose and picked up his staff. ‘Come and say farewell before you leave, friends. Though after what you’ve heard I’ll understand your wish to hurry from here without a backward glance.’

* * *

Axl watched Ivor's figure through the doorway striding off across the sunny courtyard. 'Dismal news, princess,' he said.

'It is, Axl, but it's not to do with us. Let's not dally further in this place. Our path today's a steep one.'

The food and milk were very fresh, and they ate on for a while in silence. Then Beatrice said:

'Do you suppose there's any truth in it, Axl? What Ivor was saying last night about the mist, that it was God himself making us forget.'

'I didn't know what to think of it, princess.'

'Axl, a thought came to me about it this morning, just as I was waking.'

'What thought was that, princess?'

'It was just a thought. That perhaps God is angry about something we've done. Or maybe he's not angry, but ashamed.'

'A curious thought, princess. But if it's as you say, why doesn't he punish us? Why make us forget like fools even things that happened the hour before?'

'Perhaps God's so deeply ashamed of us, of something we did, that he's wishing himself to forget. And as the stranger told Ivor, when God won't remember, it's no wonder we're unable to do so.'

'What on this earth could we have done to make God so ashamed?'

'I don't know, Axl. But it's surely not anything you and I ever did, for he's always loved us well. If we were to pray to him, pray and ask for him to remember at least a few of the things most precious to us, who knows, he may hear and grant us our wish.'

There was a burst of laughter outside. Tilting his head a little, Axl was able to see out in the yard a group of

children balancing on the flat rocks over the little stream. As he watched, one of them fell into the water with a squeal.

‘Who’s to say, princess,’ he said. ‘Perhaps the wise monk in the mountains will explain it to us. But now we’re speaking of waking this morning, there’s something came to me also, perhaps the same moment you were having these thoughts. It was a memory, a simple one, but I was pleased enough with it.’

‘Oh, Axl! What memory was that?’

‘I was remembering a time we were walking through a market or a festival. We were in a village, but not our own, and you were wearing that light green cloak with the hood.’

‘This must be a dream or else a long time ago, husband. I have no green cloak.’

‘I’m talking of long ago, right enough, princess. A summer’s day, but there was a chill wind in this place where we were, and you’d placed the green cloak around you, though you kept the hood from your head. A market or perhaps some festival. It was a village on a slope with goats in a pen where you first set foot in it.’

‘And what was it we were doing there, Axl?’

‘We were just walking arm in arm, and then there was a stranger, a man from the village, suddenly in our path. And taking one glance at you, he stared like he was beholding a goddess. Do you remember it, princess? A young man, though I suppose we too were young then. And he was exclaiming he’d never set eyes on a woman so beautiful. Then he reached forward and touched your arm. Do you have a memory of it, princess?’

‘There’s something comes back to me, but not clearly. I’m thinking this was a drunken man you’re talking of.’

‘A little drunk perhaps, I don’t know, princess. It was a day of festivities, as I say. All the same, he saw you and

was amazed. Said you were the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. '

'Then this must be a long time ago right enough! Isn't this the day you grew jealous and quarrelled with the man, the way we were almost run out of the village? '

'I recall nothing like that, princess. The time I'm thinking of, you had on the green cloak, and it was some festival day, and this same stranger, seeing I was your protector, turned to me and said, she's the loveliest vision I've seen so you be sure to take very good care of her my friend. That's what he said. '

'It comes back to me somewhat, but I'm sure you then had a jealous quarrel with him. '

'How could I have done such a thing when even now I feel the pride rising through me at the stranger's words? The most beautiful vision he'd seen. And he was telling me to take the very best care of you. '

'If you felt proud, Axl, you were jealous also. Didn't you stand up to the man even though he was drunk? '

'It's not how I remember it, princess. Perhaps I just made a show of being jealous as a sort of jest. But I would have known the fellow meant no harm. It's what I woke with this morning, though it's been many years. '

'If that's how you've remembered it, Axl, let it be the way it was. With this mist upon us, any memory's a precious thing and we'd best hold tight to it. '

'I wonder what became of that cloak. You always took good care of it. '

'It was a cloak, Axl, and like any cloak it must have worn thin with the years. '

'Didn't we lose it somewhere? Left on a sunny rock perhaps? '

‘Now that comes back to me. And I blamed you bitterly for its loss.’

‘I believe you did, princess, though I can’t think now what justice there was in that.’

‘Oh, Axl, it’s a relief we can remember a few things still, mist or no mist. It could be God’s already heard us and is hastening to help us remember.’

‘And we’ll remember plenty more, princess, when we set our minds to it. There’ll be no sly boatman able to trick us then, even if there ever comes a day we care at all for his foolish chatter. But let’s eat up now. The sun’s high and we’re late for that steep path.’

* * *

They were walking back to Ivor’s house, and had just passed the spot where they were nearly assaulted the previous night, when they heard a voice calling from above. Glancing around, they spotted Wistan high up on the rampart, perched on a lookout’s platform.

‘Glad to see you still here, friends,’ the warrior called down.

‘Still here,’ Axl called in reply, taking a few paces towards the fence. ‘But hastening on our way. And you, sir? Will you rest here for the day?’

‘I too must leave shortly. But if I may impose on you, sir, for a short conversation, I’d be most thankful. I promise not to detain you long.’

Axl and Beatrice exchanged looks, and she said quietly: ‘Speak with him if you will, Axl. I’ll return to Ivor’s and prepare provisions for our journey.’

Axl nodded, then turning to Wistan, called: ‘Very well, sir. Do you wish me to come up?’

‘As you will, sir. I’ll happily come down, but it’s a splendid morning and the view is such as to lift the spirits. If the ladder’s no trouble to you, I urge you to join me up here.’

‘Go see what he wants, Axl,’ Beatrice said quietly. ‘But be careful, and it’s not just the ladder I’m speaking of.’

He took each rung with care until he reached the warrior, waiting with an extended hand. Axl steadied himself on the narrow platform, then looked down to see Beatrice watching from below. Only after he had waved cheerfully did she move off somewhat reluctantly towards Ivor’s house – now clearly visible from his high vantage point. He kept watching her for a further moment, then turned and gazed out over the top of the fence.

‘You see I didn’t lie, sir,’ Wistan said, as they stood there side by side, the wind on their faces. ‘It’s quite splendid as far as the eye will reach.’

The view before them that morning may not have differed so greatly from one to be had from the high windows of an English country house today. The two men would have seen, to their right, the valleyside coming down in regular green ridges, while far to their left, the opposite slope, covered with pine trees, would have appeared hazier, because more distant, as it merged with the outlines of the mountains on the horizon. Directly before them was a clear view along the valley floor; of the river curving gently as it followed the corridor out of view; of the expanses of marshland broken by patches of pond and lake further in the distance. There would have been elms and willows near the water, as well as dense woodland, which in those days would have stirred a sense of foreboding. And just where the sunlight went into shadow on the left bank of the river could be seen some remnants of a long-abandoned village.

‘Yesterday I rode down that hillside,’ Wistan said, ‘and my mare with hardly any prompting set into a gallop as though for sheer joy. We raced across fields, past lake and river, and my spirit soared. A strange thing, as if I were returning to scenes from an early life, though to my knowledge I’ve never before visited this country. Can it be I passed this way as a small boy too young to know my whereabouts, yet old enough to retain these sights? The trees and moorland here, the sky itself seem to tug at some lost memory.’

‘It’s possible’, Axl said, ‘this country and the one further west where you were born share many likenesses.’

‘That must be it, sir. In the fenlands we have no hills to speak of, and the trees and grass lack the colour before us now. But it was on that joyful gallop my mare broke her shoe, and though this morning the good people here have given her another, I will have to ride gently for one hoof is bruised. The truth is, sir, I brought you up here not simply to admire the country, but to be away from unwelcome ears. I take it you’ve by now heard what’s occurred to the boy Edwin?’

‘Master Ivor told us of it, and we thought it poor news to succeed your brave intervention.’

‘You may know also how the elders, despairing of what would happen to the boy here, begged I take him away today. They ask I leave the boy in some distant village, telling some story of how I found him lost and hungry on the road. This I’d do gladly enough, except I fear such a plan can hardly save him. Word will easily travel across the country and next month, next year, the boy could find himself in the very plight he is in today, yet all the worse for being lately arrived and his people unknown. You see how it is, sir?’

‘You’re wise to fear such an outcome, Master Wistan.’

The warrior, who had been speaking while gazing out at the scenery, pushed back a tangled lock of hair the wind had blown across his face. As he did so, he seemed suddenly to see something in Axl's own features and, for a small moment, to forget what he had been saying. He gazed intently at Axl, angling his head. Then he gave a small laugh, saying:

'Forgive me, sir. I was just now reminded of something. But to return to my point. I knew nothing of this boy before last night, but I've been impressed by the steady way he has faced each new terror set before him. My comrades last night, brave though they were when setting out, were overcome with fear as we approached the fiends' camp. The boy, however, even though left at the fiends' mercy for many hours, held himself with a calm I could only wonder at. It would pain me greatly to think his fate's now all but sealed. So I've been thinking of a way out, and if you and your good wife were to consent to lend a hand, all may yet be well.'

'We're keen to do what we can, sir. Let me hear what you propose.'

'When the elders asked me to take the boy to a distant village, they meant no doubt a *Saxon* village. But it's precisely in a Saxon village the boy will never be safe, for it is Saxons who share this superstition about the bite he carries. If he were to be left with Britons, however, who see such nonsense for what it is, there can be no danger, even if the story were to pursue him. He's strong, and as I've said, has remarkable courage, even if he speaks little. He'll be a useful pair of hands for any community from the day he arrives. Now, sir, you said earlier you're on your way east to your son's village. I take it this will be just such a Christian village as we seek. If you and your wife were to plead for him, with perhaps the support of your son, that would surely secure a good outcome. Of course, it may be the same good people would accept the boy from me, but then I'll be a stranger to them, and one to arouse fear and suspicion.

What's more, the errand which has brought me to this country will prevent my travelling so far east.'

'You're suggesting then,' Axl said, 'that my wife and I be the ones to take the boy from here.'

'That is indeed my suggestion, sir. However, my errand will permit me to travel at least part of the same road. You said you would take the path through the mountains. I'd happily accompany you and the boy, at least to the other side. My company will be a tedious imposition, but then the mountains are known to contain dangers, and my sword may yet prove of service to you. And your bags too could be carried by the horse, for even if her foot's tender, she'll not complain of it. What do you say, sir?'

'I think it an excellent plan. My wife and I were distressed to hear of the boy's plight, and we'll be happy if we can aid some resolution. And what you say is wise, sir. It's among Britons, surely, he's safest now. I've no doubt he'll be received with kindness at my son's village, for my son himself is a respected figure there, practically an elder in all but his years. He'll speak for the boy, I know, and ensure his welcome.'

'I'm much relieved. I'll let Master Ivor know our plan and seek a way to remove the boy quietly from the barn. Are you and your wife ready to leave shortly?'

'My wife is even now packing provisions for the journey.'

'Then please wait by the south gate. I'll come by presently with the mare and the boy Edwin. I'm grateful to you, sir, for the sharing of this trouble. And glad we're to be companions for a day or two.'

Chapter Four

Never in his life had he seen his village from such a height and distance, and it amazed him. It was like an object he could pick up in his hand, and he flexed his fingers experimentally over the view in the afternoon haze. The old woman, who had watched his ascent with anxiety, was still at the foot of the tree, calling up to him to climb no further. But Edwin ignored her, for he knew trees better than anyone. When the warrior had ordered him to keep watch, he had selected the elm with care, knowing that for all its sickly appearance, it would possess its own subtle strength and welcome him. It commanded, moreover, the best view of the bridge, and of the mountain road leading up to it, and he could see clearly the three soldiers talking to the rider. The latter had now dismounted, and holding his restless horse by the bridle, was arguing fiercely with the soldiers.

He knew his trees - and this elm was just like Steffa. 'Let him be carried off and left to rot in the forest.' That was what the older boys always said about Steffa. 'Isn't that what happens to old cripples unable to work?' But Edwin had seen Steffa for what he was: an ancient warrior, still secretly strong, and with an understanding that went beyond even that of the elders. Steffa, alone in the village, had once known battlefields - it was the battlefields that had taken his legs - and that was why, in turn, Steffa had been able to recognise Edwin for what he was. There were other boys stronger, who might amuse themselves pinning Edwin to the ground and beating him. But it was Edwin, not any of them, who possessed a warrior's soul.

'I've watched you, boy,' old Steffa had once said to him. 'Under a storm of fists, your eyes still calm, as if memorising each blow. Eyes I've seen only on the finest

warriors moving coldly through the rage of battle. Some day soon you'll become one to fear.'

And now it was starting. It was coming true, just as Steffa had predicted.

As a strong breeze swayed the tree, Edwin moved his grip to a different branch and tried again to recall the events of the morning. His aunt's face had become distorted out of all recognition. She had been shrieking a curse at him, but Elder Ivor had not let her finish, pushing her away from the doorway of the barn, blocking Edwin's view of her as he did so. His aunt had always been good to him, but if she now wanted to curse him, Edwin did not care. Not long ago she had tried to get Edwin to address her as 'mother', but he had never done so. For he knew his real mother was travelling. His real mother would not shriek at him like that, and have to be dragged away by Elder Ivor. And this morning, in the barn, he had heard his real mother's voice.

Elder Ivor had pushed him inside, into the darkness, and the door had closed, taking away his aunt's twisted face - and all those other faces. At first the wagon had appeared only as a looming black shape in the middle of the barn. Then gradually he had distinguished its outline, and when he had reached towards it, the wood had felt moist and rotten. Outside, the voices were shouting again, and then the cracking noises had come. They had started sporadically, then several had come at once, accompanied by a splintering sound, after which the barn had seemed slightly less dark.

He knew the noises were stones striking the rickety walls, but he ignored them to concentrate on the wagon before him. How long ago had it last been used? Why did it stand so crookedly? If it was now of no use, why was it kept like this in the barn?

It was then he had heard her voice: difficult to distinguish at first, on account of the din outside and the sound of the stones, but it had grown steadily more clear.

‘It’s nothing, Edwin,’ she was saying. ‘Nothing at all. You can bear it easily.’

‘But the elders may not be able to hold them back for ever,’ he had said into the dark, though under his breath, even as his hand had stroked the side of the wagon.

‘It’s nothing, Edwin. Nothing at all.’

‘The stones may break these thin walls.’

‘Don’t worry, Edwin. Didn’t you know? Those stones are under your control. Look, what’s that before you?’

‘An old and broken wagon.’

‘Well, there you are. Go round and round the wagon, Edwin. Go round and round the wagon, because you’re the mule tethered to the big wheel. Round and round, Edwin. The big wheel can only turn if you turn it, and only if you turn it can the stones keep coming. Round and round the wagon, Edwin. Go round and round and round the wagon.’

‘Why must I turn the wheel, mother?’ Even as he had spoken, his feet had started circling the wagon.

‘Because you’re the mule, Edwin. Round and round. Those sharp cracking noises you hear. They can’t continue unless you turn the wheel. Turn it, Edwin, round and round. Round and round the wagon.’

So he had followed her commands, keeping his hands on the upper edges of the wagon’s boards, passing one hand over the other to maintain his momentum. How many times had he gone round like that? A hundred? Two hundred? He would keep seeing, in one corner, a mysterious mound of earth; in another corner, where a narrow line of sun fell across the floor of the barn, a dead crow on its side, feathers still intact. In the half-dark, these two sights – the mound of earth and the dead crow – had come around again and again. Once he had asked out loud, ‘Did my aunt really curse me?’ but no reply had come, and he had wondered if his mother had

gone away. But then her voice had returned, saying, 'Do your duty, Edwin. You're the mule. Don't stop just yet. You control everything. If you stop, so will those noises. So why fear them?'

Sometimes he went three or even four times around the wagon without hearing a single sharp crack. But then as though to compensate, several cracks would come at once, and the shouting outside would rise to a new pitch.

'Where are you, mother?' he had asked once. 'Are you still travelling?'

No reply had come, but then several turns later, she had said, 'I'd have given you brothers and sisters, Edwin, many of them. But you're on your own. So find the strength for me. You're twelve years old, almost grown now. You must be by yourself four, five strong sons. Find the strength and come rescue me.'

As another breeze rocked the elm, Edwin wondered if the barn he had been in was the same one in which the people had hidden the day the wolves had come to the village. Old Steffa had told him the story often enough.

'You were very young then, boy, perhaps too young to remember. Wolves, in broad daylight, three of them, walking calmly right into the village.' Then Steffa's voice would fill with contempt. 'And the village hid in fear. Some men were away in the fields, it's true. But there were plenty still here. They hid themselves in the threshing barn. Not just the women and the children but the men too. The wolves had strange eyes, they said. Best not to challenge them. So the wolves took all they wished. They slaughtered the hens. Feasted on the goats. And all the while, the village hid. Some in their houses. Most in the threshing barn. Cripple that I am, they left me where I was, sitting in the barrow, these broken legs poking out, beside the ditch outside Mistress Mindred's. The wolves trotted towards me. Come and eat me, I said, I'll not hide in a barn for a wolf. But they

cared not for me and I watched them go right past, their fur as good as brushing these useless feet. They took all they wished, and only after they'd long departed did those brave men creep out of their hiding places. Three wolves in daylight, and not a man here to stand up to them.'

He had thought about Steffa's story as he had circled the wagon. 'Are you still travelling, mother?' he had asked once more, and again had received no reply. His legs were growing weary, and he had grown heartily sick of seeing the mound of earth and the dead crow, when at last she had said:

'Enough, Edwin. You've worked hard. Call your warrior now if you wish. Bring an end to it.'

Edwin had heard this with relief, but had carried on circling the wagon. To summon Wistan, he knew, would require immense effort. As he had the night before, he would have to will his coming from the very depths of his heart.

But somehow he had found the strength, and once he was confident the warrior was on his way, Edwin had slowed his pace - for even mules were driven more slowly towards the end of a day - and noted with satisfaction the cracking noises were growing more sparse. But only when silence had continued for a long time did he finally stop, and leaning against the side of the wagon, begin to recover his breath. Then the barn door had opened and the warrior had been standing there against the dazzling sunshine.

Wistan had come in leaving the door wide open behind him as though to show his contempt for whatever hostile forces had lately been gathered outside. This had brought a large rectangle of sun into the barn, and when Edwin had glanced about himself, the wagon, so dominant in the dark, had looked pathetically dilapidated. Had Wistan called him 'young comrade' straight away? Edwin was unsure, but he did remember the warrior leading him into that patch of light, lifting his shirt and scrutinising the wound. Wistan had then

straightened, glanced carefully over his shoulder, and said in a low voice:

‘So, my young friend, have you kept your promise of last night? About this wound of yours?’

‘Yes, sir. I’ve done just as you said.’

‘You’ve told no one, not even your good aunt?’

‘I’ve told no one, sir. Even though they believe it an ogre’s bite and hate me for it.’

‘Let them go on believing it, young comrade. Ten times worse if they learn the truth of how you received it.’

‘But what of my two uncles who came with you, sir? Don’t they know the truth?’

‘Your uncles, brave as they were, became too sick to enter the camp. So it’s just the two of us who must keep the secret, and once the wound’s healed there’s no need for anyone to wonder about it. Keep it as clean as you can, and never scratch it, by night or day. Do you understand?’

‘I understand, sir.’

Earlier, when they had been climbing the valleyside, and he had stopped to wait for the two elderly Britons, Edwin had tried to remember the circumstances around the wound. On that occasion, standing amidst the stubbled heather, tugging the reins of Wistan’s mare, nothing had formed clearly in his mind. But now, in the branches of the elm, gazing at the tiny figures down on the bridge, Edwin found coming back to him the dank air and blackness; the high smell of the bearskin covering the little wooden cage; the feel of the tiny beetles falling onto his head and shoulders when the cage was jolted. He recalled adjusting his posture and gripping the shaky grid before him to avoid being tossed about as the cage dragged along the ground. Then everything had become still again, and he had waited for the bearskin to be removed, for the cold air to rush in around him, and to glimpse the night by the

glow of the nearby fire. For this was what had happened twice already that night, and the repetition had removed the edge from his fear. He remembered more: the stink of the ogres, and the vicious little creature hurling itself at the rickety poles of the cage, obliging Edwin to push as far back as he could.

The creature had moved so quickly it had been hard to get a clear view of it. He had had the impression of something the size and shape of a cockerel, though with no beak or feathers. It attacked with teeth and claws, all the time letting out a shrill squawking. Edwin trusted the wooden poles against the teeth and the claws, but now and then, the little creature's tail would whip by accident against the cage and then everything seemed much more vulnerable. Thankfully the creature - still in its infancy, Edwin supposed - seemed oblivious of the power in its tail.

Although at the time these attacks seemed to go on forever, Edwin now supposed they had not lasted so long before the creature had been pulled back by its leash. Then the bearskin would thump over him, all would be blackness again, and he would have to grip the poles as the cage was dragged to another spot.

How often had he had to endure this sequence? Had it been just two or three times? Or as often as ten, or even twelve? Perhaps after the first time he had fallen asleep, even in those conditions, and dreamt the rest of the attacks.

Then on that final occasion, the bearskin had not come off for a long time. He had waited, listening to the creature's squawks, sometimes far away, sometimes much closer, and the grumbling sounds the ogres made when talking to each other, and he had known that something different was about to happen. And it had been during those moments of dreadful anticipation that he had asked for a rescuer. He had made the request from the depths of his being, so it had been

something almost like a prayer, and as soon as it had taken shape in his mind, he had felt certain it would be granted.

At that very moment the cage had begun to tremble, and Edwin had realised the entire front section, with its protective grid, was being drawn aside. Even as this realisation made him shrink back, the bearskin was pulled off and the ferocious creature flew at him. In his sitting position, his instinct was to raise his feet and kick out, but the creature was agile, and Edwin found himself beating it off with fists and arms. Once he thought the creature had got the better of him, and had for an instant closed his eyes, but then opened them again to see his opponent clawing the air as the leash dragged it back. It was one of the few times he had been permitted a good glimpse of the creature, and he saw that his earlier impression had not been inaccurate: it looked like a plucked chicken, though with the head of a serpent. It came for him again, and Edwin was once more beating it off the best he could. Then quite suddenly, the cage front was restored before him, and the bearskin plunged him back in blackness. And it had only been in the moments afterwards, contorted inside the little cage, that he had felt the tingling on his left side just beneath the ribs, and had felt the wet stickiness there.

Edwin adjusted again his foothold within the elm, and bringing down his right hand, touched gently his wound. There was no longer any depth to the pain. During the climb up the valley side, the coarseness of his shirt had at times made him grimace, but when he was still, as he was now, he could hardly feel a thing. Even that morning in the barn, when the warrior had examined it in the doorway, it had seemed little more than a cluster of tiny punctures. The wound was superficial - not as bad as many he had had before. And yet, because people believed it to be an ogre's bite, it had caused all this trouble. Had he faced the creature with even more determination, perhaps he could have avoided receiving any wound at all.

But he knew there was no shame in how he had faced his ordeal. He had never cried out in terror, or pleaded to the ogres for mercy. After the little creature's first lunges - which had taken him by surprise - Edwin had met it with head held up. In fact he had had the presence of mind to realise the creature was an infant, and that one could in all probability create fear in it, just as one might in an unruly dog. And so he had kept his eyes open and tried to stare it down. His real mother, he knew, would be particularly proud of him for this. Indeed, now that he thought about it, the venom had gone out of the creature's attacks soon after its opening forays, and it had been Edwin who had gained more and more control of the combat. He recalled again the creature clawing the air, and it seemed to him now likely it had not been displaying an eagerness to continue the fight, but simply panic at the choking leash. It was quite possible, in fact, the ogres had judged Edwin the victor of the encounter, and that was why proceedings had been brought to an end.

'I've watched you, boy,' old Steffa had said. 'You have something rare. One day you'll find someone to teach you the skills to match your warrior's soul. Then you'll be one to fear indeed. You'll not be one to hide in a barn while mere wolves stroll unhindered about the village.'

Now it was all coming to pass. The warrior had chosen him, and they were to go together to fulfil an errand. But what was their task? Wistan had not made it clear, saying only that his king, far away in the fenland, was even now waiting to hear of its conclusion. And why travel with these two elderly Britons who required rest at each turn of the road?

Edwin gazed down at them. They were now discussing something earnestly with the warrior. The old woman had given up trying to talk him down, and all three were now watching the soldiers on the bridge from behind the cover of two giant pines. From his own vantage point, Edwin could see the rider had remounted and was gesticulating into the air. Then the

three soldiers appeared to move away from him, and the rider turned his horse and set off at a gallop away from the bridge, back down the mountain.

Edwin had wondered earlier why the warrior had been so reluctant to stay on the main mountain road, insisting on the steep cut up the valleyside; now it was obvious he had wished to avoid riders such as the one they had just seen. But there now seemed no way to proceed with their journey without going down onto the road and crossing the bridge past the waterfall, and the soldiers were still there. Had Wistan been able to see from down where he was that the rider had departed? Edwin wanted to alert him to this development, but felt he should not shout from the tree in case the soldiers somehow caught the sound. He would have to climb down and tell Wistan. Perhaps, while there had been four potential opponents, the warrior had been hesitant about a confrontation, but now with only three at the bridge, he would consider the odds in his favour. Had it just been Edwin and the warrior, they would surely have gone down to face the soldiers long ago, but the presence of the elderly couple must have made Wistan cautious. No doubt Wistan had brought them along for a good reason, and they had so far been kind to Edwin, but they were frustrating companions all the same.

He remembered again his aunt's contorted features. She had started to shriek a curse at him, but none of that mattered any more. For he was with the warrior now, and he was travelling, just like his real mother. Who was to say they might not come across her? She would be so proud to see him standing there, side by side with the warrior. And the men with her would tremble.

Chapter Five

After a punishing climb for much of the morning, the party had found its way obstructed by a fast-flowing river. So they had made a partial descent through shrouded woodlands in search of the main mountain road, along which, they reasoned, there would surely be a bridge across the water.

They had been right about the bridge, but on spotting the soldiers there, had decided to rest amidst the pine trees until the men had gone. For at first the soldiers had not appeared to be stationed there, but merely refreshing themselves and their horses at the waterfall. But time had passed and the soldiers had shown no signs of moving on. They would take turns getting onto their bellies, reaching down from the bridge and splashing themselves; or sit with their backs against the timber rails, playing dice. Then a fourth man had arrived on horseback, bringing the men to their feet, and had issued instructions to them.

Though they did not have as good a view as Edwin's high in his tree, Axl, Beatrice and the warrior had observed well enough all that had passed from behind their cover of greenery, and once the horseman had ridden off again, exchanged questioning looks.

'They may remain a long time yet,' Wistan said. 'And you're both anxious to reach the monastery.'

'It's desirable we do so by nightfall, sir,' said Axl.

'We hear the she-dragon Querig roams that country, and only fools would be abroad there in the dark. What manner of soldiers do you suppose them to be?'

'Not easy at this distance, sir, and I've little knowledge of local dress. But I'd suppose them Britons, and

ones loyal to Lord Brennus. Perhaps Mistress Beatrice will correct me. ’

‘It’s far for my old eyes,’ Beatrice said, ‘but I’d suppose you right, Master Wistan. They have the dark uniforms I’ve often seen on Lord Brennus’s men. ’

‘We’ve nothing to hide from them,’ Axl said. ‘If we explain ourselves, they’ll let us go by in peace. ’

‘I’m sure that’s so,’ the warrior said, then fell silent for a moment, gazing down at the bridge. The soldiers had seated themselves again and seemed to be resuming their game. ‘Even so,’ he went on, ‘if we’re to cross the bridge under their gazes, let me propose this much. Master Axl, you and Mistress Beatrice will lead the way and talk wisely to the men. The boy can bring the mare behind you, and I’ll walk beside him, my jaw slack like a fool’s, my eyes wandering loosely. You must tell the soldiers I’m a mute and a half-wit, and the boy and I are brothers lent you in place of debts owed you. I’ll hide this sword and belt deep in the horse’s pack. Should they find it, you must claim it as your own. ’

‘Is such a play really necessary, Master Wistan?’ Beatrice asked. ‘These soldiers may often show coarse manners, but we’ve met many before without incident. ’

‘No doubt, mistress. But men with arms, far from their commanders, aren’t easy to trust. And here I am, a stranger who they may think good sport to mock and challenge. So let’s call the boy down off the tree and do as I propose. ’

* * *

They emerged from the woods still some way from the bridge, but the soldiers saw them immediately and rose to their feet.

‘Master Wistan,’ Beatrice said quietly, ‘I fear this will not go well. There remains something about you that

proclaims you a warrior, no matter what foolish look you wear. ’

‘I’m no skilled player, mistress. If you can help improve my disguise, I’d hear it gladly. ’

‘It’s your stride, sir,’ Beatrice said. ‘You have a warrior’s way of walking. Take instead small steps followed by a large one, the way you might stumble any moment. ’

‘That’s good advice, thank you, mistress. Now I should say no more, or they may see I’m no mute. Master Axl, talk us wisely past these fellows. ’

As they came closer to the bridge, the noise of the water rushing down the rocks and under the feet of the three awaiting soldiers grew more intense, and to Axl had something ominous about it. He led the way, listening to the horse’s steps behind him on the mossy ground, and brought them to a halt when they were within hailing distance of the men.

They wore no chainmail or helmets, but their identical dark tunics, with straps crossing from right shoulder to left hip, declared clearly their trade. Their swords were for now sheathed, though two of them were waiting with hands on the hilts. One was small, stocky and muscular; the other, a youth not much older than Edwin, was also short in stature. Both had closely cropped hair. In contrast, the third soldier was tall, with long grey hair, carefully groomed, that touched his shoulders and was held back by a dark string encircling his skull. Not only his appearance, but his manner differed noticeably from that of his companions; for while the latter were standing stiffly to bar the way across the bridge, he had remained several paces behind, leaning languidly against one of the bridge posts, arms folded before him as though listening to a tale beside a night fire.

The stocky soldier took a step towards them, so it was to him Axl addressed his words. ‘Good day, sirs. We mean no harm and wish only to proceed in peace. ’

The stocky soldier gave no reply. Uncertainty was crossing his face, and he glared at Axl with a mixture of panic and contempt. He cast a glance back to the young soldier behind him, then finding nothing to enlighten him, returned his gaze to Axl.

It occurred to Axl there had been some confusion: that the soldiers had been expecting another party altogether, and had yet to realise their mistake. So he said: 'We're just simple farmers, sir, on our way to our son's village.'

The stocky soldier, now collecting himself, replied to Axl in an unnecessarily loud voice. 'Who are these you travel with, farmer? Saxons by the look of them.'

'Two brothers just come under our care who we must do our best to train. Though as you see, one's still a child, and the other a slow-witted mute, so the relief they bring us may be slender.'

As Axl said this, the tall grey-haired soldier, as though suddenly reminded of something, took his weight from the bridge post, his head tilting in concentration. Meanwhile, the stocky soldier was staring angrily beyond both Axl and Beatrice. Then, his hand still on the hilt of his sword, he strode past to scrutinise the others. Edwin was holding the mare, and watched the oncoming soldier with expressionless eyes. Wistan, though, was giggling loudly to himself, his eyes roving, mouth wide open.

The stocky soldier looked from one to the other as though for a clue. Then his frustration seemed to get the better of him. Grabbing Wistan's hair, he tugged it in a rage. 'No one cut your hair, Saxon?' he shouted into the warrior's ear, then tugged again as though to bring Wistan to his knees. Wistan stumbled, but managed to stay on his feet, letting out pitiful whimpers.

'He doesn't speak, sir,' Beatrice said. 'As you see, he's simple. He doesn't mind rough treatment, but he's known

for a temper we've yet to tame.'

As his wife spoke, a small movement made Axl turn back to the soldiers still on the bridge. He saw then that the tall grey-haired man had raised an arm; his fingers all but formed a pointing shape before softening and collapsing in an aimless gesture. Finally he let his arm fall altogether, though his eyes went on watching with disapproval. Observing this, Axl suddenly had the feeling he understood, even recognised, what the grey-haired soldier had just gone through: an angry reprimand had all but shaped itself on his lips, but he had remembered in time that he lacked any formal authority over his stocky colleague. Axl was sure he had once had an almost identical experience himself somewhere, but he forced away the thought, and said in a conciliatory tone:

'You must be busy with your duties, gentlemen, and we're sorry to distract you. If you'd let us pass, we'll soon be out of your way.'

But the stocky soldier was still tormenting Wistan. 'He'd be unwise to lose his temper with *me!*' he bellowed. 'Let him do so and taste his price!'

Then finally he let go of Wistan and strode back to take up his position again on the bridge. He said nothing, looking like an angry man who had completely forgotten why he was angry.

The noise of the rushing water seemed only to add to the tense mood, and Axl wondered how the soldiers would react were he to turn and lead the party back towards the woods. But just at that moment, the grey-haired soldier came forward until he was level with the other two and spoke for the first time.

'This bridge has a few planks broken, uncle. Maybe that's why we're standing here, to warn good people like yourselves to cross with care or be down the mountainside tumbling with the tide.'

‘That’s kind of you, sir. We’ll go then with caution.’

‘Your horse there, uncle. I thought I saw it limping coming towards us.’

‘She has a hurt foot, sir, but we hope it’s no serious thing, though we don’t mount her, as you see.’

‘Those boards are rotted with the spray, and that’s why we’re here, though my comrades think there was some further errand must have brought us. So I’ll ask you, uncle, if you and your good wife have seen any strangers on your travels.’

‘We’re strangers here ourselves, sir,’ Beatrice said, ‘so wouldn’t quickly know another. Though on two days’ journey we’ve seen nothing out of the ordinary.’

Noticing Beatrice, the grey-haired soldier’s eyes seemed to soften and smile. ‘A long walk for a woman of your years to make to a son’s village, mistress. Wouldn’t you rather be living there with him where he can see to your comforts each day, instead of having you walk like this, unsheltered from the road’s dangers?’

‘I wish it right enough, sir, and when we see him, my husband and I will talk to him of it. But then it’s a long time since we saw him and we can’t help wonder how he’ll receive us.’

The grey-haired soldier went on regarding her gently. ‘It may be, mistress,’ he said, ‘you’ve not a thing to worry about. I’m myself far from my mother and father, and not seen them in a long while. Perhaps harsh words were said once, who knows? But if they came to find me tomorrow, having walked hard distances as you’re doing now, do you doubt I’d receive them with my heart breaking with joy? I don’t know the kind of man your son is, mistress, but I’d wager he’s not so different to me, and there’ll be happy tears no sooner than he first sees you.’

‘You’re kind to say so, sir,’ said Beatrice. ‘I suppose you’re right, and my husband and I have often said as much, but it’s a comfort to hear it said, and from a son far from home at that.’

‘Go on your journey in peace, mistress. And if by chance you come upon my own mother and father on the road, coming the other way, speak gently to them and tell them to press on, for their journey won’t be a wasted one.’ The grey-haired soldier stood aside to let them pass. ‘And please remember the unsteady boards. Uncle, you’d best lead that mare over yourself. It’s no task for children or God’s fools.’

The stocky soldier, who had been watching with a disgruntled air, seemed nevertheless to yield to the natural authority of his colleague. Turning his back to them all, he leaned sulkily over the rail to look at the water. The young soldier hesitated, then came to stand beside the grey-haired man, and they both nodded politely as Axl, thanking them a last time, led the mare over the bridge, shielding her eyes from the drop.

* * *

Once the soldiers and the bridge were no longer in sight, Wistan stopped and suggested they leave the main road to follow a narrow path rising up into the woods.

‘I’ve always had an instinct for my way through a forest,’ he said. ‘And I feel sure this path will allow us to cut a large corner. Besides, we’ll be much safer away from a road such as this, well travelled by soldiers and bandits.’

For a while after that, it was the warrior who led the party, beating back brambles and bushes with a stick he had found. Edwin, holding the mare by her muzzle, often whispering to her, followed closely behind, so that by the

time Axl and Beatrice came in their wake, the path had been made much easier. Even so, the short cut - if short cut it was - became increasingly arduous: the trees deepened around them, tangled roots and thistles obliging them to attend to each step. As was the custom, they conversed little as they went, but at one point, when Axl and Beatrice had fallen some way behind, Beatrice called back: 'Are you still there, Axl?'

'Still here, princess.' Indeed, Axl was just a few paces behind. 'Don't worry, these woods aren't known for special dangers, and a good way from the Great Plain.'

'I was just thinking, Axl. Our warrior's not a bad player at that. His disguise might have had me fooled, and never letting up with it, even with that brute tugging his hair.'

'He performed it well, right enough.'

'I was thinking, Axl. It'll be a long time we're away from our own village. Don't you think it a wonder they let us go when there's still a lot of planting to do, and fences and gates to be mended? Do you suppose they'll be complaining of our absence when we're needed?'

'They'll be missing us, no doubt, princess. But we're not away long, and the pastor understands our wishing to see our own son.'

'I hope that's right, Axl. I wouldn't want them saying we're gone just when they have most need of us.'

'There'll always be some to say so, but the better of them will understand our need, and would want the same in our place.'

For a while they continued without talking. Then Beatrice said again: 'Are you still there, Axl?'

'Still here, princess.'

‘It wasn’t right of them. To take away our candle.’

‘Who cares about that now, princess? And the summer coming.’

‘I was remembering about it, Axl. And I was thinking maybe it’s because of our lack of a candle I first took this pain I now have.’

‘What’s that you’re saying, princess? How can that be?’

‘I’m thinking it was maybe the darkness did it.’

‘Go carefully through that blackthorn there. It’s not a spot to take a fall.’

‘I’ll be careful, Axl, and you do the same.’

‘How can it be the darkness gave you the pain, princess?’

‘Do you remember, Axl, there was talk last winter of a sprite seen near our village? We never saw it ourselves, but they said it was one fond of the dark. In all those hours we had of darkness, I’m thinking it might sometimes have been with us without our knowing, in our very chamber, and brought me this trouble.’

‘We would have known had it been with us, princess, dark or not. Even in thick blackness, we would have heard it move or give a sigh.’

‘Now I think of it, Axl, I think there were times last winter I woke in the night, you fast asleep beside me, and I was sure it was a strange noise in the room roused me.’

‘Likely a mouse or some creature, princess.’

‘It wasn’t that kind of sound, and it was more than once I thought I heard it. And now I’m thinking of it, it was around the same time the pain first came.’

‘Well, if it was the sprite, what of it, princess? Your pain’s nothing more than a tiny trouble, the work of a

creature more playful than evil, the same way some wicked child once left that rat's head in Mistress Enid's weaving basket just to see her run about in fright.'

'You're right what you say there, Axl. More playful than evil. I suppose you're right. Even so, husband ...' She fell silent while she negotiated her way between two ancient trunks pressing against each other. Then she said: 'Even so, when we go back, I want a candle for our nights. I don't want that sprite or any other bringing us something worse.'

'We'll see to it, don't worry, princess. We'll talk to the pastor as soon as we return. But the monks at the monastery will give you wise advice about your pain, and there'll be no lasting mischief done.'

'I know it, Axl. It's not a thing to worry me greatly.'

* * *

It was hard to say if Wistan had been right about his path cutting off a corner, but in any case, shortly after midday, they emerged out of the woods back onto the main road. Here it was wheel-rutted and boggy in parts, but now they could walk more freely, and in time the path grew drier and more level. With a pleasant sun falling through the overhanging branches, they travelled in good spirits.

Then Wistan brought them to a halt again and indicated the ground before them. 'There's a solitary rider not far before us,' he said. And they did not go much further before they saw ahead of them a clearing to the side of their road, and fresh tracks turning into it. Exchanging glances, they stepped forwards cautiously.

As the clearing came more into view, they saw it was of a fair size: perhaps once, in more prosperous times, someone had hoped to build a house here with a surrounding orchard. The path leading off from the main road, though overgrown, had been dug with care, ending in a large circular area, open

to the sky except for one huge spreading oak at its centre. From where they now stood, they could see a figure seated in the shadows of the tree, his back against the trunk. He was for the moment in profile to them, and appeared to be in armour: two metal legs stuck out stiffly onto the grass in a child-like way. The face itself was obscured by foliage sprouting from the bark, though they could see he wore no helmet. A saddled horse was grazing contentedly nearby.

‘Declare who you are!’ the man called out from under the tree. ‘All bandits and thieves I’ll rise to meet sword in hand!’

‘Answer him, Master Axl,’ Wistan whispered. ‘Let’s discover what he’s about.’

‘We’re simple wayfarers, sir,’ Axl called back. ‘We wish only to go by in peace.’

‘How many are you? And is that a horse I hear?’

‘A limping one, sir. Otherwise we are four. My wife and I being elderly Britons, and with us a beardless boy and a half-wit mute lately given us by their Saxon kin.’

‘Then come over to me, friends! I have bread here to share, and you must long for rest, as I do for your company.’

‘Shall we go to him, Axl?’ Beatrice asked.

‘I say we do,’ Wistan said, before Axl could respond.

‘He’s no danger to us and sounds a man of decent years. All the same, let’s perform our drama as before. I’ll once more affect a slack jaw and foolish eyes.’

‘But this man is armoured and armed, sir,’ Beatrice said. ‘Are you certain your own weapon is ready enough, packed on a horse amidst blankets and honey pots?’

‘It’s well my sword’s hidden from suspicious eyes, mistress. And I’ll find it soon enough when I need it. Young

Edwin will hold the rein and see the mare doesn't stray too far from me.'

'Come forth, friends!' the stranger shouted, not adjusting his rigid posture. 'No harm will come to you! I'm a knight and a Briton too. Armed, it's true, but come closer and you'll see I'm just a whiskery old fool. This sword and armour I carry only out of duty to my king, the great and beloved Arthur, now many years in heaven, and it's almost as long surely since I drew in anger. My old battlehorse, Horace, you see him there. He's had to suffer the burden of all this metal. Look at him, his legs bowed, back sunk. Oh, I know how much he suffers each time I mount. But he has a great heart, my Horace, and I know he'd have it no other way. We'll travel like this, in full armour, in the name of our great king, and will do so till neither of us can take another step. Come friends, don't fear me!'

They turned into the clearing, and as they approached the oak, Axl saw that indeed, the knight was no threatening figure. He appeared to be very tall, but beneath his armour Axl supposed him thin, if wiry. His armour was frayed and rusted, though no doubt he had done all he could to preserve it. His tunic, once white, showed repeated mending. The face protruding from the armour was kindly and creased; above it, several long strands of snowy hair fluttered from an otherwise bald head. He might have been a sorry sight, fixed to the ground, legs splayed before him, except that the sun falling through the branches above was now dappling him in patterns of light and shade that made him look almost like one enthroned.

'Poor Horace missed his breakfast this morning, for we were on rocky ground when we awoke. Then I was so keen to press on all morning, and I admit it, in an ill temper. I wouldn't let him stop. His steps grew slower, but I know his tricks well enough by now, and would have none of it. I know you're not weary! I told him, and gave him a little spur. These tricks he plays on me, friends, I won't stand for them!

But slower and slower he goes, and soft-hearted fool I am, even knowing full well he's laughing to himself, I relent and say, very well, Horace, stop and feed yourself. So here you find me, taken for a fool again. Come, join me, friends.' He reached forward, his armour complaining, and removed a loaf from a sack in the grass before him. 'This is fresh baked, given to me passing a mill not an hour ago. Come, friends, sit beside me and share it.'

Axl held Beatrice's arm as she lowered herself down onto the gnarled roots of the oak, then he sat down himself between his wife and the old knight. He felt immediately grateful for the mossy bark behind him, the songbirds jostling above, and when the bread was passed, it was soft and fresh. Beatrice leant her head against his shoulder, and her chest rose and fell for a while before she too began to eat with relish.

But Wistan had not sat down. After giggling, and otherwise amply displaying his idiocy to the old knight, he had wandered away to where Edwin was standing in the tall grass, holding his mare. Then Beatrice, finishing her bread, sat forward to address the stranger.

'You must forgive my not greeting you sooner, sir,' she said. 'But it's not often we see a knight and I was awestruck by the thought. I hope you weren't offended.'

'Not offended at all, mistress, and glad of your company. Is your journey still a long one?'

'Our son's village is another day away now we're come by the mountain road, wishing to visit a wise monk at the monastery in these hills.'

'Ah, the holy fathers. I'm sure they'll receive you kindly. They were a great help to Horace last spring when he had a poisoned hoof and I feared he wouldn't be spared. And I myself, recovering some years ago from a fall, found much

comfort in their balms. But if you seek a cure for your mute, I fear it's only God himself can bring speech to his lips.'

The knight had said this glancing towards Wistan, only to find the latter walking towards him, the foolish look vanished from his features.

'Allow me then to surprise you, sir,' he said. 'Speech is restored to me.'

The old knight started, then, armour creaking, twisted round to glare enquiringly at Axl.

'Don't blame my friends, sir knight,' Wistan said. 'They were only doing as I begged them. But now there's no cause to fear you, I would cast off my disguise. Please forgive me.'

'I don't mind, sir,' the old knight said, 'for it's as well in this world to be cautious. But tell me now what sort you are that I in turn have no cause to fear you.'

'The name is Wistan, sir, from the fenlands in the east, travelling these parts on my king's errand.'

'Ah. Far from home indeed.'

'Far from home, sir, and these roads should be strange to me. Yet at each turn it's as if another distant memory stirs.'

'It must be then, sir, you came this way before.'

'It must be so, and I heard I was born not in the fens but in a country further west of here. All the more fortunate then to chance upon you, sir, supposing you might be Sir Gawain, from those same western lands, well known to ride in these parts.'

'I'm Gawain, right enough, nephew of the great Arthur who once ruled these lands with such wisdom and justice. I was settled many years in the west, but these days Horace and I travel where we may.'

‘If my hours were my own, I’d ride west this very day and breathe the air of that country. But I’m obliged to complete my errand and hurry back with news of it. Yet it’s an honour indeed to meet a knight of the great Arthur, and a nephew at that. Saxon though I am, his name is one I hold in esteem.’

‘I take pleasure in hearing you say so, sir.’

‘Sir Gawain, with my speech so miraculously restored, I would ask a small question of you.’

‘Ask freely.’

‘This gentleman now sits beside you, he’s the good Master Axl, a farmer from a Christian village two days away. A man of familiar years to yourself. Sir Gawain, I ask you now, turn and look carefully at him. Is his face one you’ve seen before, though a long time ago?’

‘Good heavens, Master Wistan!’ Beatrice, who Axl thought had fallen asleep, was leaning forward again. ‘What is this you ask?’

‘I mean no harm, mistress. Sir Gawain being from the west country, I fancy he might have glimpsed your husband in days past. What harm’s in it?’

‘Master Wistan,’ Axl said, ‘I’ve seen you look strangely at me from time to time since our first meeting, and waited for some account of it. What is it you believe me to be?’

Wistan, who had been standing over where they were sitting three abreast beneath the great oak, now crouched down onto his heels. Perhaps he had done so to appear less challenging, but to Axl it was almost as if the warrior was wishing to scrutinise their faces more closely.

‘Let’s for now have Sir Gawain do as I ask,’ Wistan said, ‘and it’s only a small turn of his head needed. See it as a childish game if you will. I beg you, sir, look at this

man beside you and say if you've ever seen him in days past.'

Sir Gawain gave a chuckle, and moved his torso forward. He seemed eager for amusement, as though indeed he had just been invited to participate in a game. But as he gazed into Axl's face, his expression changed to one of surprise - even of shock. Instinctively, Axl turned away, just as the old knight appeared almost to push himself backwards into the tree trunk.

'Well, sir?' Wistan asked, watching with interest.

'I don't believe this gentleman and I met till today,' said Sir Gawain.

'Are you sure? The years can be a rich disguise.'

'Master Wistan,' Beatrice interrupted, 'what is it you search for in my husband's face? Why ask such a thing of this kind knight, until this moment a stranger to us all?'

'Forgive me, mistress. This country awakens so many memories, though each seems like some restless sparrow I know will flee any moment into the breeze. Your husband's face has all day promised me an important remembrance, and if truth be told, that was a reason for my proposing to travel with you, though I sincerely wish to see you both safely through these wild roads.'

'But why would you know my husband from the west when he's always lived in country nearby?'

'Never mind it, princess. Master Wistan has confused me for someone he once knew.'

'That's what it must be, friends!' said Sir Gawain.

'Horace and I often mistake a face for one from the past. See there, Horace, I say. That's our old friend Tudur before us on the road, and we thought he fell at Mount Badon. Then we ride closer and Horace will give a snort, as if to say,

what a fool you are, Gawain, this fellow's young enough to be his grandson, and with not even a passing likeness!'

'Master Wistan,' Beatrice said, 'tell me this much. Does my husband remind you of one you loved as a child? Or is it one you dreaded?'

'Best leave it now, princess.'

But Wistan, rocking gently on his heels, was gazing steadily at Axl. 'I believe it must be one I loved, mistress. For when we met this morning, my heart leapt for joy. And yet before long ...' He went on looking at Axl silently, his eyes almost dreamlike. Then his face darkened, and rising to his feet again, the warrior turned away. 'I can't answer you, Mistress Beatrice, for I know not myself. I supposed by travelling beside you the memories would awaken, but they've not yet done so. Sir Gawain, are you well?'

Indeed, Gawain had slumped forward. He now straightened and breathed a sigh. 'Well enough, thank you for asking. Yet Horace and I have gone many nights without a soft bed or decent shelter, and we're both weary. That's all there is to it.' He raised his hand and caressed a spot on his forehead, though his real purpose, it occurred to Axl, might have been to obscure his view of the face beside him.

'Master Wistan,' Axl said, 'since we're now speaking frankly, perhaps I may in turn ask something of you. You say you're in this country on your king's errand. But why so anxious to adopt your disguise travelling through a country long settled in peace? If my wife and that poor boy are to travel beside you, we'd wish to know the full nature of our companion, and who his friends and enemies might be.'

'You speak fairly, sir. This country, as you say, is well settled and at peace. Yet here I am a Saxon crossing lands ruled by Britons, and in these parts by the Lord Brennus, whose guards roam boldly to gather their taxes of corn and livestock. I wish no quarrel of the sort may come

from a misunderstanding. Hence my disguise, sir, and we'll all of us move more safely for it.'

'You may be right, Master Wistan,' Axl said. 'Yet I saw on the bridge Lord Brennus's guards seemed not to be passing their time idly, but stationed there for a purpose, and if not for the mist clouding their minds, they might have tested you more closely. Can it be, sir, you're some enemy to Lord Brennus?'

For a moment Wistan appeared lost in thought, following with his eyes one of the gnarled roots stretching from the oak's trunk and past where he stood, before burrowing itself into the earth. Eventually he came nearer again, and this time sat down on the stubbled grass.

'Very well, sir,' he said, 'I'll speak fully. I don't mind doing so before you and this fine knight. We've heard rumours in the east of our fellow Saxons across this land ill used by Britons. My king, worrying for his kin, sent me on this mission to observe the real state of affairs. That's all I am, sir, and was going about my errand peaceably when my horse hurt her foot.'

'I understand well your position, sir,' said Gawain.

'Horace and I often find ourselves on Saxon-governed land and feel the same need for caution. Then I wish to be rid of this armour and taken for a humble farmer. But if we left this metal somewhere, how would we ever find it again? And even though it's years since Arthur fell, isn't it our duty still to wear his crest with pride for all to see? So we go on boldly and when men see I'm a knight of Arthur, I'm happy to report they look on us gently.'

'It's no surprise you're welcomed in these parts, Sir Gawain,' Wistan said. 'But can it really be the same in those countries where Arthur was once such a dreaded enemy?'

'Horace and I find our king's name well received everywhere, sir, even in those countries you mention. For

Arthur was one so generous to those he defeated they soon grew to love him as their own. ’

For some time - in fact, ever since Arthur’s name had first been mentioned - a nagging, uneasy feeling had been troubling Axl. Now at last, as he listened to Wistan and the old knight talk, a fragment of memory came to him. It was not much, but it nevertheless brought him relief to have something to hold and examine. He remembered standing inside a tent, a large one of the sort an army will erect near a battlefield. It was night, and there was a heavy candle flickering, and the wind outside making the tent’s walls suck and billow. There were others in the tent with him. Several others, perhaps, but he could not remember their faces. He, Axl, was angry about something, but he had understood the importance of hiding his anger at least for the time being.

‘Master Wistan,’ Beatrice was saying beside him, ‘let me tell you in our own village there are several Saxon families among the most respected. And you saw yourself the Saxon village from which we came today. Those people prosper, and though they sometimes suffer at the hands of fiends such as those you so bravely put down, it’s not by any Briton. ’

‘The good mistress speaks truly,’ Sir Gawain said. ‘Our beloved Arthur brought lasting peace here between Briton and Saxon, and though we still hear of wars in distant places, here we’ve long been friends and kin. ’

‘All I’ve seen agree with your words,’ Wistan said, ‘and I’m eager to carry back a happy report, though I’ve yet to see the lands beyond these hills. Sir Gawain, I don’t know if ever again I’ll be free to ask this of one so wise, so let me do so now. By what strange skill did your great king heal the scars of war in these lands that a traveller can see barely a mark or shadow left of them today?’

‘The question does you credit, sir. My reply is that my uncle was a ruler never thought himself greater than God, and always prayed for guidance. So it was that the conquered, no

less than those who fought at his side, saw his fairness and wished him as their king. ’

‘Even so, sir, isn’t it a strange thing when a man calls another brother who only yesterday slaughtered his children? And yet this is the very thing Arthur appears to have accomplished. ’

‘You touch the heart of it just there, Master Wistan. Slaughter children, you say. And yet Arthur charged us at all times to spare the innocents caught in the clatter of war. More, sir, he commanded us to rescue and give sanctuary when we could to all women, children and elderly, be they Briton or Saxon. On such actions were bonds of trust built, even as battles raged. ’

‘What you say rings true, and yet it still seems to me a curious wonder,’ Wistan said. ‘Master Axl, do you not feel it a remarkable thing, how Arthur has united this country?’

‘Master Wistan, once again,’ Beatrice exclaimed, ‘who do you take my husband to be? He knows nothing, sir, of the wars!’

But suddenly no one was listening any more, for Edwin, who had drifted back to the road, was now shouting, and then came the beating of rapidly approaching hooves. Later when he thought back to it, it occurred to Axl that Wistan must indeed have become preoccupied with his curious speculations about the past, for the usually alert warrior had barely risen to his feet as the rider turned into the clearing, then slowing the horse with admirable control, came trotting towards the great oak.

Axl recognised immediately the tall, grey-haired soldier who had spoken courteously to Beatrice at the bridge. The man still wore a faint smile, but was approaching them with his sword drawn, though pointed downwards, the hilt resting on the edge of the saddle. He came to a halt where just a few more of the animal’s strides would have brought him to the

tree. 'Good day, Sir Gawain,' he said, bowing his head a little.

The old knight gazed up contemptuously from where he sat. 'What do you mean by this, sir, arriving here sword unsheathed?'

'Forgive me, Sir Gawain. I wish only to question these companions of yours.' He looked down at Wistan, who had again let his jaw drop slackly, and was giggling to himself. Without taking his eyes off the warrior, the soldier shouted: 'Boy, move that horse no closer!' For indeed, behind him, Edwin had been approaching with Wistan's mare. 'Hear me, lad! Let go the rein and come stand here before me beside your idiot brother. I'm waiting, lad.'

Edwin appeared to comprehend the soldier's wishes, if not his actual words, for he left the mare and came to join Wistan. As he did so, the soldier adjusted slightly the position of his horse. Axl, noticing this, understood immediately that the soldier was maintaining a particular angle and distance between himself and his charges that would give him the greatest advantage in the event of sudden conflict. Before, with Wistan standing where he was, the head and neck of the soldier's own horse would momentarily have obstructed his first swing of the sword, giving Wistan vital time either to unsettle the horse, or run to its blind side, where the sword's reach was diminished in scope and power by having to be brought across the body. But now the small adjusting of the horse had made it practically suicidal for an unarmed man, as Wistan was, to storm the rider. The soldier's new position seemed also to have taken expert account of Wistan's mare, loose some distance behind the soldier's back. Wistan was now unable to run for his horse without describing a wide curve to avoid the sword side of the rider, making it a near-certainty he would be run through from behind before reaching his destination.

Axl noted all this with a sense of admiration for the soldier's strategic skill, as well as dismay at its implications. There had been a time when Axl, too, had once nudged his horse forward, in another small but subtly vital manoeuvre, bringing himself in line with a fellow rider. What had he been doing that day? The two of them, he and the other rider, had been waiting on horseback, staring out across a vast grey moor. Until that moment his companion's horse had been in front, for Axl remembered its tail flicking and swaying before him, and wondering how much of this action was due to the animal's reflexes, and how much to the fierce wind sweeping across the empty land.

Axl pushed these puzzling thoughts away as he struggled to his feet, then helped up his wife. Sir Gawain remained seated, apparently stuck to the foot of the oak, glowering at the newcomer. Then he said quietly to Axl: 'Sir, help me rise.'

It took both Axl and Beatrice, one on each arm, to bring the old knight to his feet, but when finally he straightened to his full height in his armour and pulled back his shoulders, he was an impressive sight. But Sir Gawain seemed content to stare moodily at the soldier, and eventually it was Axl who spoke.

'Why do you come upon us like this, sir, and we but simple wayfarers? Do you not remember how you quizzed us not an hour before by the waterfall?'

'I recall you well, uncle,' the grey-haired soldier said. 'Though when we last met a strange spell had fallen on us guarding the bridge that we forgot our very purpose being there. Only now, my post relieved and riding to our camp, it all suddenly returns to me. Then I thought of you, uncle, and your party slipping past, and turned my horse to hurry after you. Boy! Don't wander, I say! Remain beside your idiot brother!'

Edwin sulkily returned to Wistan's side and looked enquiringly at the warrior. The latter was still giggling quietly, a line of saliva spilling from one corner of his mouth. His eyes were roaming wildly, but Axl guessed the warrior was in fact taking careful measure of the distance to his own horse, and the proximity of his opponent, and in all probability coming to the same conclusions as Axl's.

'Sir Gawain,' Axl whispered. 'If there's to be trouble now, I beg you assist me to defend my good wife here.'

'I'll do so on my honour, sir. Rest assured of it.'

Axl nodded gratefully, but now the grey-haired soldier was dismounting. Again Axl found himself admiring the skilful way he did this, so that when finally he stood to face Wistan and the boy, he was once more at exactly the correct distance and angle to them; his sword, moreover, was carried so as not to exhaust his arm, while his horse shielded him from any unexpected assault from the rear.

'I'll tell you what slipped our mind when we last met, uncle. We'd just received word of a Saxon warrior left a nearby village bringing with him a wounded lad.' The soldier nodded at Edwin. 'A lad the age of that one there. Now, uncle, I don't know what you and the good woman here are to this matter. I seek only this Saxon and his lad. Speak frankly and no harm will visit you.'

'There's no warrior here, sir. And we've no quarrel with you, nor with Lord Brennus who I suppose to be your master.'

'Do you know what you speak of, uncle? Lend a mask to our enemies and you'll answer to us, whatever your years. Who are these you travel with, this mute and this lad?'

'As I said before, sir, they're given to us by debtors, in place of corn and tin. They'll work a year to pay their family's debt.'

'Sure you're not mistaken, uncle?'

‘I know not whom you seek, sir, but it wouldn’t be these poor Saxons. And while you spend your time with us, your enemies move freely elsewhere.’

The soldier gave this consideration - Axl’s voice had carried unexpected authority - uncertainty entering his manner. ‘Sir Gawain,’ he asked. ‘What do you know of these people?’

‘They chanced on us as Horace and I rested here. I believe them to be simple creatures.’

The soldier once more scrutinised Wistan’s features. ‘A mute fool, is it?’ He took two steps forward and raised the sword so the point was aimed at Wistan’s throat. ‘But he surely fears death like the rest of us.’

Axl saw that for the first time the soldier had made an error. He had come too close to his opponent, and although it would be a hideous risk, it was now conceivable for Wistan to move very suddenly and seize the arm holding the sword before it could strike. Wistan, however, went on giggling, then smiled foolishly at Edwin beside him. This latest action, however, seemed to arouse Sir Gawain’s anger.

‘They may be strangers to me only an hour ago, sir,’ he boomed. ‘But I’ll not see them treated with rudeness.’

‘This doesn’t concern you, Sir Gawain. I would ask you to remain silent.’

‘Do you dare speak to a knight of Arthur that way, sir?’

‘Can it be possible,’ the soldier said, completely ignoring Sir Gawain, ‘this idiot here is a warrior disguised? With no weapon about him, it makes little difference. Mine’s a blade sharp enough whichever he may be.’

‘How dare he!’ Sir Gawain muttered to himself.

The grey-haired soldier, perhaps suddenly realising his error, took two paces back till he was exactly where he had been before, and lowered the sword to waist height. 'Boy,' he said. 'Step forward to me.'

'He speaks only the Saxon tongue, sir, and a shy boy too,' Axl said.

'He needn't speak, uncle. Only raise his shirt and we'll know if he's the one left the village with the warrior. Boy, a step closer to me.'

As Edwin came nearer the soldier reached out with his free hand. A tussle ensued as Edwin tried to fight him off, but the shirt was soon dragged up the boy's torso, and Axl saw, a little way below the ribs, a swollen patch of skin encircled by tiny dots of dried blood. On either side of him, Beatrice and Gawain were now leaning forward to see better, but the soldier himself, reluctant to take his gaze off Wistan, did not glance at the wound for some time. When finally he did so, he was obliged to make a swift turn of his head, and at that very moment, Edwin produced a piercing, high-pitched noise - not a scream exactly, but something that reminded Axl of a forlorn fox. The soldier was for an instant distracted by it, and Edwin seized the chance to break from his grasp. Only then did Axl realise the noise was coming not from the boy, but from Wistan; and that in response, the warrior's mare, until then languidly munching the ground, had suddenly turned and was charging straight for them.

The soldier's own horse had made a panicked motion behind him, causing him further confusion, and by the time he had recovered, Wistan had gone clear of the sword's reach. The mare kept coming at daunting speed, and Wistan, feinting one way, then moving the other, produced another shrill call. The mare slowed to a canter, bringing herself between Wistan and his opponent, enabling the warrior, in an almost leisurely manner, to take up a position several strides from the oak.

The mare turned again, moving smartly in pursuit of her master. Axl supposed Wistan's intention was to mount the animal as she came past, for the warrior was now waiting, both arms poised in the air. Axl even saw him reach towards the saddle just before the mare momentarily obscured him from view. But then the horse cantered on riderless towards the spot where so recently she had been enjoying the grass. Wistan had remained standing quite still, but now with a sword in his hand.

A small exclamation escaped Beatrice, and Axl, placing an arm around her, drew her closer. On his other side, Gawain made a grunting noise which seemed to signify his appreciation of Wistan's manoeuvre. The old knight had placed a foot up on one of the raised roots of the oak, and was watching with keen interest, a hand on his knee.

The grey-haired soldier's back was now turned to them: in this, of course, he had had little choice, for he had now to face Wistan. Axl was surprised to see that this soldier, so controlled and expert only a moment ago, had become quite disorientated. He was looking towards his horse - which had trotted some way away in panic - as though for reassurance, then raised his sword, the tip just above the level of his shoulder, gripping tightly with both hands. This posture, Axl knew, was premature, and would only exhaust the arm muscles. Wistan, in contrast, looked calm, almost nonchalant, just as he had done the previous night when they had first glimpsed him setting off out of the village. He came slowly towards the soldier, stopping a few steps before him, sword held low in just one hand.

'Sir Gawain,' the soldier said, a new note in his voice, 'I hear you move at my back. Do you stand with me against this foe?'

'I stand here to protect this good couple, sir. Otherwise, this dispute is not my concern, as you so lately

reported. This warrior may be your foe, but he isn't yet mine.'

'This fellow's a Saxon warrior, Sir Gawain, and here to do us mischief. Help me face him, for though I'm keen to do my duty, if this is the man we seek he's a fearful fellow by all accounts.'

'What reason have I to take arms against a man simply for being a stranger? It's you, sir, came into this tranquil place with your rude manners.'

There was silence for a while. Then the soldier said to Wistan: 'Do you stay mute, sir? Or will you reveal yourself now we face one another!'

'I'm Wistan, sir, a warrior from the east visiting this country. It seems your Lord Brennus would have me hurt, though for what reason I know not since I travel in peace on an errand for my king. And it's my belief you mean to harm that innocent boy, and seeing this I must now frustrate you.'

'Sir Gawain,' the soldier cried, 'will you come to the aid of a fellow Briton, I ask you once again. If this is Wistan, it's said more than fifty Norsemen have fallen by his hand alone.'

'If fifty fierce Vikings fell to him, what difference can one old and weary knight make to the outcome now, sir?'

'I beg you, do not jest, Sir Gawain. This is a wild fellow, and he'll strike at any moment. I see it in his eye. He's here to do us all mischief, I tell you.'

'Name the mischief I bring,' Wistan said, 'travelling peacefully through your country, a single sword in my pack to defend against wild creatures and bandits. If you can name my crime, do so now, for I'd hear the charge before I strike you.'

‘I’m ignorant of the nature of your mischief, sir, but have faith enough in Lord Brennus’s desire to be free of you.’

‘No charge to name, then, yet you hurry here to slay me.’

‘Sir Gawain, I beg you help me! Fierce as he is, the two of us with careful strategy might overcome him.’

‘Sir, let me remind you, I’m a knight of Arthur, no foot soldier of your Lord Brennus. I don’t take up arms against strangers on rumour or for their foreign blood. And it seems to me you’re unable to give good cause for taking against him.’

‘You force me to speak then, sir, though these are confidences to which a man of my humble rank has no right, even if Lord Brennus himself let me hear them. This man is come to this country on a mission to slay the dragon Querig. This is what brings him here!’

‘Slay Querig?’ Sir Gawain sounded genuinely dumbfounded. He strode forward from the tree and stared at Wistan as if seeing him for the first time. ‘Is this true, sir?’

‘I’ve no wish to lie to a knight of Arthur, so let me declare it. Further to my duty reported earlier, I’ve been charged by my king to slay the she-dragon who roams this country. But what objection could there be to such a task? A fierce dragon bringing danger to all alike. Tell me, soldier, why is it such a mission makes me your enemy?’

‘Slay Querig?! You really mean to slay Querig?!’ Sir Gawain was now shouting. ‘But sir, this is a mission entrusted to *me*! Do you not know this? A mission entrusted to me by Arthur himself!’

‘A dispute for some other time, Sir Gawain. Let me first attend to this soldier who would make an enemy of me and my

friends when we would go by in peace. ’

‘Sir Gawain, if you’ll not come to my aid, I fear this is my final hour! I implore you, sir, remember the affection Lord Brennus has for Arthur and his memory and take arms against this Saxon! ’

‘It is *my* duty to slay Querig, Master Wistan! Horace and I have laid careful plans to lure her out and we seek no assistance! ’

‘Lay down your sword, sir,’ Wistan said to the soldier, ‘and I may spare you yet. Otherwise end your life on this ground. ’

The soldier hesitated, but then said: ‘I see now I was foolish to suppose myself strong enough to take you alone, sir. I may be punished yet for my vanity. But I won’t now lay down my sword like a coward. ’

‘By what right’ , Sir Gawain cried, ‘does your king order you to come from another country and usurp the duties given to a knight of Arthur?’

‘Forgive me, Sir Gawain, but it’s many a year you’ve had to slay Querig, and small children have become grown men in the time. If I can do this country a service and rid it of this scourge, why be angry?’

‘Why be angry, sir? You know not what you’re about! You think it an easy matter to slay Querig? She’s as wise as she’s fierce! You’ll only anger her with your foolishness, and this whole country will need suffer her wrath, where we’ve hardly heard a thing of her these past several years. It requires the most delicate handling, sir, or a calamity will befall the innocent right across this country! Why do you suppose Horace and I have so bided our time? One misstep will have grave consequences, sir! ’

‘Then help me, Sir Gawain,’ the soldier shouted, now making no effort to hide his fear. ‘Let’s together put out

this menace! ’

Sir Gawain looked at the soldier with a puzzled air, as if he had forgotten for the moment who he was. Then he said in a calmer voice: ‘I’ll not aid you, sir. I’m no friend of your master, for I fear his dark motives. I fear too the harm you intend to these others here, who must be innocents in whatever intrigue enfolds us.’

‘Sir Gawain, I hang here between life and death as a fly caught in a web. I make my last appeal to you, and though I don’t understand the full part of this matter, I beg you consider why he comes to our country if not to do us mischief!’

‘He gives good account of his errand here, sir, and though he angers me with his careless plans, it’s hardly reason to join you in arms against him.’

‘Fight now, soldier,’ Wistan said, his tone almost conciliatory. ‘Fight and be done with it.’

‘Will it do harm, Master Wistan,’ Beatrice said suddenly, ‘to let this soldier surrender his sword and ride away? He spoke kindly to me before on the bridge and he’s perhaps not a bad man.’

‘If I do as you ask, Mistress Beatrice, he’ll take news back of us and surely return before long with thirty or more soldiers. There’ll be little mercy shown then. And mark you, he means sinister harm to the boy.’

‘Perhaps he would willingly swear an oath not to betray us.’

‘Your kindness touches me, mistress,’ the grey-haired soldier intervened, never taking his eyes off Wistan. ‘But I’m no scoundrel and won’t take rude advantage of it. What the Saxon says is true. Spare me and I’ll do just as he says, for duty allows me no other course. Yet I thank you for your

gentle words, and if these are to be my last moments, then I'll leave this world a little more peacefully for them.'

'What's more, sir,' Beatrice said, 'I've not forgotten your earlier request, concerning your mother and father. You made it then in jest, I know, and it's not likely we'll encounter them. But if ever we do so, they'll know of how you waited with longing to see them again.'

'I thank you once more, mistress. But this is no time for me to soften my heart with such thoughts. Fortune may favour me yet in this contest, no matter this man's reputation, and then you may regret you ever wished me kindness.'

'Most likely so,' Beatrice said and sighed. 'Then Master Wistan, you must do your best for us. I'll look away, for I take no pleasure in slaughter. And I bid you tell young Master Edwin do the same, for I'm sure he'll only heed if you command it.'

'Pardon me, mistress,' Wistan said, 'but I would the boy witness all that unfolds, just as I was often made to do at his age. I know he'll not flinch or retch to witness the ways of warriors.' He now spoke several sentences in Saxon, and Edwin, who had been standing by himself a short way away, walked over to the tree and stood beside Axl and Beatrice. His eyes, watchful, seemed never to blink.

Axl could hear the grey-haired soldier's breathing, more audible now because the man was releasing a low growl with each breath. When he charged forward he did so with his sword high above his head in what seemed an unsophisticated, even suicidal attack; but just before he reached Wistan, he abruptly altered his trajectory, and feinted to his left, his sword lowered to his hip. The grey-haired soldier, Axl understood with a twinge of pity, knowing he stood little chance should the combat mature, had wagered everything on this one desperate ploy. But Wistan had anticipated it, or perhaps it was that his instincts were enough. The Saxon

side-stepped neatly, and drew his own sword across the oncoming man in a single simple movement. The soldier let out a sound such as a bucket makes when, dropped into a well, it first strikes the water; he then fell forward onto the ground. Sir Gawain muttered a prayer, and Beatrice asked: 'Is it done now, Axl?'

'It's done, princess.'

Edwin was staring at the fallen man, his expression barely changed from before. Following the boy's gaze, Axl saw that a serpent, disturbed in the grass by the soldier's fall, was now sliding out from under the body. Though dark, the creature was mottled with yellows and whites, and as it revealed more of itself, travelling swiftly across the ground, Axl caught the powerful odour of a man's insides. He instinctively stepped to one side, moving Beatrice with him, in case the creature should come searching for their feet. Still it kept coming their way, parting in two around a clump of thistle, as a stream might part around a rock, before becoming one again and continuing ever closer.

'Come away, princess,' Axl said, leading her. 'It's done, and it's as well. This man meant us harm, though the reason's still not clear.'

'Let me enlighten you as far as I can, Master Axl,' Wistan said. He had been cleaning his sword on the ground, but now rose and came towards them. 'It's true our Saxon kin in this country live in good harmony with your people. But we've reports at home of Lord Brennus's ambitions to conquer this land for himself and make war on all Saxons now living on it.'

'I hear the same reports, sir,' Sir Gawain said. 'It was another reason I wouldn't side with this wretch now gutted like a trout. I fear this Lord Brennus is one who would undo the great peace won by Arthur.'

‘We at home hear more, sir,’ said Wistan. ‘That Brennus entertains in his castle a dangerous guest. A Norseman said to possess the wisdom to tame dragons. It’s my king’s fear Lord Brennus means to capture Querig to fight in the ranks of his army. This she-dragon would make a fierce soldier indeed, and Brennus would then rightly harbour ambition. It’s for this I’m sent to destroy the dragon before her savagery turns on all who oppose Lord Brennus. Sir Gawain, you look aghast, but I speak sincerely.’

‘If I’m aghast, sir, it’s because there’s a sound ring to your words. When I was a young man, I once faced a dragon in an opposing army, and a fearful thing it was. My comrades, hungry for victory the moment before, froze for fear at the sight, and this a creature not half the equal of Querig in might or cunning. If Querig is made a servant of Lord Brennus, it will surely tempt new wars. Yet it’s my hope she’s too wild to be tamed by any man.’ He paused, looked towards the fallen soldier and shook his head.

Wistan strode over to where Edwin was standing, and grasping the boy by the arm, began gently to lead him towards the corpse. Then for a little while the two of them stood side by side over the soldier, Wistan talking quietly, pointing occasionally, and looking into Edwin’s face to check the response. At one stage, Axl saw Wistan’s finger trace a smooth line through the air, as perhaps he explained to the boy the journey made by his blade. All the while, Edwin went on gazing blankly at the fallen man.

Sir Gawain, appearing now at Axl’s side, said: ‘It’s a great sadness this tranquil spot, surely a gift from God to all weary travellers, is now polluted by blood. Let’s bury this man quickly, before anyone else comes this way, and I’ll take his horse to Lord Brennus’s camp, together with news of how I came upon him attacked by bandits, and where his friends may find his grave. Meanwhile, sir’ - he turned to address Wistan - ‘I urge you return straight away east. Think no more of Querig, for you can be assured Horace and I,

hearing all we have today, will redouble our efforts to slay her. Now come, friends, let's put this man in the earth that he may return to his maker peacefully. '

PART II

Chapter Six

For all his tiredness, Axl was finding sleep elusive. The monks had provided them with a room on the upper storey, and while it was a relief not to have to contend with the cold seeping up from the soil, he had never slept easily above ground. Even when sheltering in barns or stables, he had often climbed ladders to a restless night troubled by the cavernous space beneath him. Or perhaps his restlessness tonight had to do with the presence of the birds in the dark above. They were now largely silent, but every so often would come a small rustle, or a beating of wings, and he would feel the urge to fling his arms over Beatrice's sleeping form to protect her from the foul feathers drifting down through the air.

The birds had been there when they had first entered the chamber earlier in the day. And had he not felt, even then, something malevolent in the way these crows, blackbirds, woodpigeons looked down on them from the rafters? Or was it just that his memory had become coloured by subsequent events?

Or perhaps the sleeplessness was on account of the sounds, even now echoing across the monastery grounds, of Wistan chopping firewood. The noise had not prevented Beatrice from sinking easily into sleep, and on the other side of the room, beyond the dark shape he knew to be the table on which they had earlier eaten, Edwin had settled to a gentle snoring. But Wistan, as far as Axl knew, had not slept at all. The warrior had remained sitting over in the far corner, waiting for the last monk to leave the courtyard below, then gone out into the night. And now here he was again - and despite Father Jonus's warning - cutting more firewood.

The monks had taken some time to disperse after emerging from their meeting. Several times Axl had come close to sleep only to be brought to the surface again by voices below. Sometimes they were four or five, always lowered, often filled with anger or fear. There had been no voices now for some time, and yet as he drifted again towards slumber, Axl could not shake the feeling there were still monks below their window, not just a few, but dozens of robed figures, standing silently under the moonlight, listening to Wistan's blows resounding across the grounds.

Earlier, with the afternoon sun filling the chamber, Axl had looked out of the window to see what appeared to be the entire community - more than forty monks - waiting in clusters all around the courtyard. There was a furtive mood among them, as if they were keen their words were not overheard even by those in their own ranks, and Axl could see hostile glances exchanged. Their habits were all of the same brown cloth, sometimes missing a hood or a sleeve. They seemed anxious to go into the large stone building opposite, but there had been a delay and their impatience was palpable.

Axl had been gazing down on the courtyard for several moments when a noise made him lean further out of the window and look directly beneath him. He had seen then the outer wall of the building, its pale stone revealing yellow hues in the sun, and the staircase cut into it rising from the ground towards him. Midway up these stairs was a monk - Axl could see the top of his head - holding a tray laden with food and a jug of milk. The man was pausing to rebalance the tray, and Axl watched the manoeuvre with alarm, knowing how these steps were worn unevenly, and that with no rail on the outside, one had always to keep pressed to the wall to be sure not to plunge down onto the hard cobbles. On top of it all, the monk now ascending appeared to have a limp, yet he kept coming, slowly and steadily.

Axl went to the door to relieve the man of the tray, but the monk - Father Brian, as they were soon to learn he was

called - insisted on carrying it to the table himself, saying: 'You are our guests, so let me serve you as such.'

Wistan and the boy had left by then, and perhaps the sound of their woodcutting was already ringing through the air. So it had been just he and Beatrice who had sat down, side by side, at the wooden table and devoured gratefully the bread, fruit and milk. As they did so, Father Brian had chatted happily, sometimes dreamily, about past visitors, the fish to be caught in nearby streams, a stray dog that had lived with them until its death the previous winter. Sometimes Father Brian, an elderly but sprightly man, got up from the table and shuffled about the room dragging about his bad leg, talking all the while, every now and then going to the window to check on his colleagues below.

Meanwhile, above their heads, the birds had been criss-crossing the underside of the roof, their feathers occasionally drifting down to blemish the surface of the milk. Axl had been tempted to chase off these birds, but had refrained in case the monks regarded them with affection. He was taken aback then when rapid footsteps came up the stairs outside, and a large monk with a dark beard and a flushed face burst into the room.

'Demons! Demons!' he shouted, glaring up at the rafters. 'I'll see them soak in blood!'

The newcomer was carrying a straw bag, and he now reached into it, brought out a stone and hurled it up at the birds.

'Demons! Foul demons, demons, demons!'

As the first stone ricocheted down to the ground, he threw a second and then a third. The stones were landing away from the table, but Beatrice had covered her head with both arms, and Axl, rising, began to move towards the bearded man. But Father Brian had reached him first, and clutching both the man's arms, said:

‘Brother Irasmus, I beg you! Stop this and calm yourself!’

The birds by now were screeching and flying in all directions, and the bearded monk shouted over the commotion: ‘I know them! I know them!’

‘Calm yourself, brother!’

‘Don’t you stop me, father! They’re agents of the devil!’

‘They may yet be agents of God, Irasmus. We don’t yet know.’

‘I know them to be of the devil! Look at their eyes! How can they be of God and gaze at us with such eyes?’

‘Irasmus, calm yourself. We have guests present.’

At these words, the bearded monk became aware of Axl and Beatrice. He stared angrily at them, then said to Father Brian: ‘Why bring guests into the house at a time like this? Why do they come here?’

‘They’re just good people travelling by, brother, and we’re happy to give them hospitality as is ever our custom.’

‘Father Brian, you’re a fool to tell strangers of our affairs! Look, they spy on us!’

‘They spy on no one, nor do they have any interest in our problems, having plenty of their own, I don’t doubt.’

Suddenly the bearded man drew out another stone and prepared to hurl it, but Father Brian managed to prevent him.

‘Go back down, Irasmus, and let go this bag. Here, leave it with me. It won’t do, carrying it everywhere the way you do.’

The bearded man shook off the older monk, and clutched his sack jealously to his chest. Father Brian, allowing Irasmus this small victory, ushered him to the doorway, and

even as the latter turned to glare again at the roof, pushed him gently out onto the stairway.

‘Go back down, Irasmus. They miss you down there. Go back down and take care you don’t fall.’

When the man had finally gone, Father Brian came back into the room, waving his hand at the feathers floating in the air.

‘My apologies to you both. He’s a good man, but this way of life no longer suits him. Please be seated again and finish your meal in peace.’

‘And yet, father,’ Beatrice said, ‘that fellow may be right when he says we intrude on you at an uneasy time. We’ve no desire to increase your burdens here, and if you’ll only let us quickly consult Father Jonus, whose wisdom’s well known, we’ll be on our way. Is there word yet if we might see him?’

Father Brian shook his head. ‘It’s as I told you earlier, mistress. Jonus has been unwell, and the abbot’s given strict orders no one will disturb him other than with permission given by the abbot himself. Knowing of your desire to meet with Jonus, and the pains you took to come here, I’ve been trying since your arrival to attract the abbot’s ear. Yet as you see, you come at a busy time, and now there’s a visitor of some importance arrived for the abbot, delaying our conference further. The abbot’s even now gone back to his study to talk with the visitor while the rest of us wait for him.’

Beatrice had been standing at the window to watch the bearded monk’s departure down the stone steps, and she now pointed, saying: ‘Good father, isn’t that the abbot returning now?’

Axl, coming to her side, saw a gaunt figure striding with authority into the centre of the courtyard. The monks,

breaking from their conversations, were all moving towards him.

‘Ah yes, there’s the abbot returned. Now finish your meal in peace. And regarding Jonus, be patient, for I fear I’ll not be able to bring you the abbot’s decision till after this conference is over. Yet I’ll not forget, I promise, and will petition well for you.’

It was surely the case that then, as now, the warrior’s axe blows had been ringing across the courtyard. In fact, Axl could distinctly recall asking himself, as he watched the monks filing into the building opposite, if he was hearing one woodcutter or two; for a second blow would follow so close behind the first it was hard to tell if it was a real sound or an echo. Thinking about it now, lying in the dark, Axl was sure Edwin had been chopping alongside Wistan, matching the warrior blow for blow. In all likelihood the boy was already an expert woodcutter. Earlier that day, before they had come to this monastery, he had astonished them by digging so rapidly with two flat stones he had happened to find nearby.

Axl by then had ceased to dig, having been persuaded by the warrior to preserve his strength for the climb to the monastery. So he had stood beside the oozing body of the soldier, guarding it from the birds gathering in the branches. Wistan, Axl recalled, had been using the dead man’s sword to dig the grave, remarking that he was reluctant to blunt his own on such a task. Sir Gawain, however, had said:

‘This soldier died honourably, no matter the schemes of his master, and a knight’s sword is put to good use giving him a grave.’ Both men, though, had paused to watch in wonder the progress being made by Edwin with his rudimentary tools. Then, as they resumed their work, Wistan had said:

‘I fear, Sir Gawain, Lord Brennus will not believe such a story.’

‘He’ll believe it well enough, sir,’ Gawain had replied, continuing to dig. ‘There’s a coolness between us, but he has me for an honest fool without the wit to invent devious tales. I may tell them how the soldier spoke of bandits even as he bled to death in my arms. Some will think it a grave sin to tell such a lie, yet I know God will look mercifully on it, for isn’t it to stop further bloodshed? I’ll make Brennus believe me, sir. Even so, you remain in danger and have good reason to hurry home.’

‘I’ll do so without delay, Sir Gawain, as soon as my errand here’s finished. If my mare’s foot isn’t soon healed, I may even trade her for another, for that’s a long ride to the fens. Yet I’ll be sorry for she’s a rare horse.’

‘A rare one indeed! My Horace, alas, no longer possesses such agility, yet he’s come to me in many an hour of need, as your mare came to you just now. A rare horse, and one you’ll be sad to lose. Even so, speed is crucial, so be on your way and never mind your errand. Horace and I will see to the she-dragon, so you’ve no cause to think further of her. In any case, now I’ve had time to dwell on it, I see Lord Brennus can never succeed in recruiting Querig into his army. She’s the most wild and untameable of creatures and will as quickly spew fire on her own ranks as on Brennus’s foes. The whole idea’s outlandish, sir. Think no more of it and hurry home before your enemies corner you.’ Then when Wistan continued to dig without responding, Sir Gawain asked: ‘Do I have your word on it, Master Wistan?’

‘On what, Sir Gawain?’

‘That you’ll think no more of the she-dragon and hurry home.’

‘You seem keen to hear me say so.’

‘I think not just of your safety, sir, but of those on whom Querig will turn should you arouse her. And what of these companions who travel with you?’

'It's true, the safety of these friends gives me concern. I'll go beside them as far as the monastery, for I can hardly leave them defenceless on these wild roads. Thereafter, it may be best we part.'

'So after the monastery, you'll make your way home.'

'I'll set off home when I'm ready, sir knight.'

The smell rising from the dead man's innards had obliged Axl to take a few steps away, and when he did so, he found he had a better view of Sir Gawain. The knight was now waist deep in the ground, and the perspiration had drenched his forehead, so perhaps that was why his expression had lost its customary benevolence. He was regarding Wistan with intense hostility, while the latter, oblivious, carried on digging.

Beatrice had been upset by the soldier's death. As the grave had grown deeper, she had walked slowly back to the great oak and seated herself again in its shade, her head bowed. Axl had wanted to go and sit with her, and but for the gathering crows, would have done so. Now, lying in the darkness, he too began to feel a sadness for the slain man. He remembered the soldier's courtesy towards them on the little bridge, and the gentle way he had spoken to Beatrice. Axl recalled too the precise way he had positioned his horse when first entering the clearing. Something in the way he had done so had tugged on his memory at the time, and now, in the night's stillness, Axl remembered the rise and fall of moorland, the brooding sky, and the flock of sheep coming through the heather.

He had been on horseback, and in front of him was mounted his companion, a man called Harvey, the smell of whose heavy body overpowered that of their horses. They had halted in the midst of the windswept wilderness because they had spotted movement in the distance, and once it was clear it signified no threat, Axl had stretched his arms - they had been riding a long time - and watched the tail of Harvey's horse swinging from side to side as though to prevent the flies

settling on its rear. Although his companion's face was hidden from him at that moment, the shape of Harvey's back, indeed his whole posture, announced the malevolence aroused by the sight of the approaching party. Gazing past Harvey, Axl could now make out the dark dots that were the sheep's faces, and moving among them four men - one on a donkey, the others on foot. There appeared to be no dogs. The shepherds, Axl supposed, must long ago have spotted them - two riders clearly outlined against the sky - but if they had felt apprehension there was no sign of it in their slow, relentless trudge forwards. There was, in any case, just the one long path across the moor, and Axl supposed the shepherds could avoid them only by turning back.

As the group came nearer, he could see that all four men, though far from old, were sickly and thin. This observation brought a sinking to his heart, for he knew the men's condition would only further provoke his companion's savagery. Axl waited until the party was almost within hailing distance, then nudged forward his horse, positioning it carefully to the side of Harvey where he knew the shepherds, and most of the flock, were bound to pass. He made sure to keep his own horse a nose behind, to allow his companion the illusion of seniority. Yet Axl was now in a position that would shield the shepherds from any sudden assault Harvey might launch with his whip, or with the club hooked to his saddle. All the while, the manoeuvre would have suggested on the surface only camaraderie, and in any case, Harvey did not possess the subtlety of mind even to suspect its real purpose. Indeed, Axl recalled his companion nodding absent-mindedly as he drew up, before turning back to stare moodily across the moor.

Axl had been especially anxious on behalf of the approaching shepherds because of something that had occurred a few days earlier in a Saxon village. It had been a sunny morning, and on that occasion Axl had been as startled as any of the villagers. Without warning, Harvey had heeled his

horse forward and started to rain down blows on the people waiting to draw water from the well. Had Harvey used his whip or his club on that occasion? Axl had tried to recall this detail that day on the moor. If Harvey chose to assault the passing shepherds with his whip, the reach would be greater and require less leverage of the arm; he might even dare to swing it over the head of Axl's horse. If, however, he chose his club, with Axl positioned as he now was, Harvey would be obliged to push his horse beyond Axl's and rotate partially before attacking. Such a manoeuvre would appear too deliberate for his companion: Harvey was the type that liked his savagery to look impulsive and effortless.

He could not remember now if his careful actions had saved the shepherds. He had a vague recollection of sheep drifting innocently past them, but his memory of the shepherds themselves had become confusingly bound up with that attack on the villagers by the well. What had brought the pair of them to that village that morning? Axl remembered the cries of outrage, children crying, the looks of hatred, and his own fury, not so much at Harvey himself, but at those who had handicapped him with such a companion. Their mission, if accomplished, would surely be an achievement unique and new, one so supreme God himself would judge it a moment when men came a step closer to him. Yet how could Axl hope to do anything tethered to such a brute?

The grey-haired soldier came back into his thoughts, and the little half-gesture he had made on the bridge. As his stocky colleague had shouted and pulled on Wistan's hair, the grey-haired man had started to raise his arm, his fingers almost in a pointing gesture, a reprimand all but escaping his lips. Then he had let his arm fall. Axl had understood exactly what the grey-haired man had experienced during those moments. The soldier had then spoken with particular gentleness to Beatrice, and Axl had been grateful to him. He recalled Beatrice's expression as she had stood before the bridge, changing from grave and guarded to the softly smiling

one so dear to him. The picture now seized his heart, and at the same time made him fearful. A stranger - a potentially dangerous one at that - had but to say a few kindly words and there she was, ready to trust the world again. The thought troubled him and he felt the urge to run his hand gently over the shoulder now beside him. But had she not always been thus? Was it not part of what made her so precious to him? And had she not survived these many years with no great harm coming to her?

‘It can’t be rosemary, sir,’ he remembered Beatrice saying to him, her voice tense with anxiety. He was crouching down, one knee pressed into the ground, for it was a fine day and the soil dry. Beatrice must have been standing behind him, for he could remember her shadow on the forest floor before him as he parted the undergrowth with his hands. ‘It can’t be rosemary, sir. Whoever saw rosemary with such yellow flowers on it?’

‘Then I have its name wrong, maiden,’ Axl had said. ‘But I know for certain it’s one commonly seen, and not one to bring you mischief.’

‘But are you really one who knows his plants, sir? My mother taught me everything grows wild in this country, yet what’s before us now is strange to me.’

‘Then it’s likely something foreign to these parts lately arrived. Why distress yourself so, maiden?’

‘I distress myself, sir, because it’s likely this is a weed I’m brought up to fear.’

‘Why fear a weed except that it’s poisonous, and then all’s needed is not to touch it. Yet there you were, reaching down with your hands, and now getting me to do the same!’

‘Oh, it’s not poisonous, sir! At least not in the way you mean. Yet my mother once described closely a plant and warned that to see it in the heather was bad luck for any young girl.’

‘What sort of bad luck, maiden?’

‘I’m not bold enough to tell you, sir.’

But even as she said this, the young woman – for that was what Beatrice was that day – had crouched down beside him so that their elbows touched for a brief moment, and smiled trustingly into his gaze.

‘If it’s such bad luck to see it,’ Axl had said, ‘what kindness is it to bring me from the road just to place my gaze on it?’

‘Oh, it’s not bad luck for *you*, sir! Only for unmarried girls. There’s another plant entirely brings bad luck to men like yourself.’

‘You’d better tell me what this other looks like, so I may dread it as you do this one.’

‘You may enjoy mocking me, sir. Yet one day you’ll take a tumble and find the weed next to your nose. You’ll see then if it’s a laughing matter or not.’

He could remember now the feel of the heather as he had passed his hand through it, the wind in the branches above, and the presence of the young woman beside him. Could that have been the first time they had conversed? Surely they had at least known one another by sight; surely it was inconceivable even Beatrice would have been so trusting of a total stranger.

The woodcutting noises, which had paused for a while, now started up again, and it occurred to Axl the warrior might remain outside the entire night. Wistan appeared calm and thoughtful, even in combat, yet it was possible the tensions of the day and previous night had mounted on his nerves, and he needed to work them off in this way. Even so, his behaviour was odd. Father Jonus had specifically warned against further woodcutting, yet here he was, back at it again and with night well fallen. Earlier, when they had

first arrived, it had seemed a simple courtesy on the warrior's part. And at that point, as Axl had discovered, Wistan had had his own reasons for cutting wood.

'The woodshed is well positioned,' the warrior had explained. 'The boy and I were able to keep good watch on the comings and goings while we worked. Even better, when we delivered the wood where it was needed, we roamed at will to inspect the surroundings, even if a few doors stayed barred to us.'

The two of them had been talking up by the high monastery wall overlooking the surrounding forest. The monks had long gone into their meeting by then, and a hush had fallen over the grounds. Several moments before, with Beatrice dozing in the chamber, Axl had wandered out under the late afternoon sun, and climbed the worn stone steps to where Wistan was looking down on the dense foliage below.

'But why go to such trouble, Master Wistan?' Axl had asked. 'Can it be you're suspicious of these good monks here?'

The warrior, a hand raised to shield his eyes, said: 'When we were climbing that path earlier, I wanted nothing but to curl in a corner adrift in my dreams. Yet now we're here, I can't keep away the feeling this place holds dangers for us.'

'It must be weariness makes your suspicions keen, Master Wistan. What can trouble you here?'

'Nothing yet I can point to with conviction. But consider this. When I returned to the stables earlier to see all was well with the mare, I heard sounds coming from the stall behind. I mean, sir, this other stall was separated by a wall, but I could hear another horse beyond, though no horse was there when we first arrived and I led in the mare. Then when I walked to the other side, I found there the

stable door shut and a great lock hanging on it only a key would release. ’

‘There may be many innocent explanations, Master Wistan. The horse may have been at pasture and lately brought in. ’

‘I spoke to a monk on that very point, and learnt they keep no horses here from a wish not to ease their burdens unduly. It would seem since our own arrival some other visitor has come, and one anxious to keep his presence hidden. ’

‘Now you mention it, Master Wistan, I recall Father Brian made mention of an important visitor arriving for the abbot, and their great conference being delayed on account of his coming. We know nothing of what goes on here, and in all likelihood, none of it touches us. ’

Wistan nodded thoughtfully. ‘Perhaps you’re right, Master Axl. A little sleep would calm my suspicions. Even so, I sent the boy to wander further this place, supposing he’d be excused a natural curiosity more readily than a grown man. Not long ago he returned to report he’d heard a groaning from those quarters over there’ - Wistan turned and pointed - ‘as of a man in pain. Creeping indoors after this sound, Master Edwin saw marks of blood both old and fresh outside a closed chamber. ’

‘Curious certainly. Yet there’d be no mystery in a monk meeting some unfortunate accident, perhaps tripping on these very steps. ’

‘I concede, sir, I’ve no hard reason to suppose anything amiss here. Perhaps it’s a warrior’s instinct makes me wish my sword was in my belt and I was done pretending to be a farmboy. Or maybe my fears derive simply from what these walls whisper to me of days gone by. ’

‘What can you mean, sir? ’

‘Only that not long ago, this place was surely no monastery, but a hillfort, and one well made to fight off foes. You recall the exhausting road we climbed? How the path turned back and forth as though eager to drain our strength? Look down there now, sir, see the battlements running above those same paths. It’s from there the defenders once showered their guests from above with arrows, rocks, boiling water. It would have been a feat merely to reach the gate.’

‘I see it. It can’t have been an easy climb.’

‘Further, Master Axl, I’d wager this fort was once in Saxon hands, for I see about it many signs of my kin perhaps invisible to you. Look there’ - Wistan pointed down to a cobbled yard below hemmed in by walls - ‘I fancy just there stood a second gate, much stronger than the first, yet hidden to invaders climbing the road. They saw only the first and strained to storm it, but that gate would have been what we Saxons call a watergate, after those barriers that control a river’s flow. Through this watergate would be let past, quite deliberately, a measured number of the enemy. Then the watergate would close on those following. Now those isolated between the two gates, in that space just there, would find themselves outnumbered, and once again, attacked from above. They would be slaughtered before the next group let through. You see how it worked, sir. This is today a place of peace and prayer, yet you needn’t gaze so deep to find blood and terror.’

‘You read it well, Master Wistan, and I shudder at what you show me.’

‘I’d wager too there were Saxon families here, fled from far and wide seeking protection in this fort. Women, children, wounded, old, sick. See over there, the yard where the monks gathered earlier. All but the weakest would have come out and stood there, all the better to witness the invaders squeal like trapped mice between the two gates.’

‘That I can’t believe, sir. They would surely have hidden themselves below and prayed for deliverance.’

‘Only the most cowardly of them. Most would have stood there in that yard, or even come up here where we now stand, happy to risk an arrow or spear to enjoy the agonies below.’

Axl shook his head. ‘Surely the sort of people you speak of would take no pleasure in bloodshed, even of the enemy.’

‘On the contrary, sir. I speak of people at the end of a brutal road, having seen their children and kin mutilated and ravished. They’ve reached this, their sanctuary, only after long torment, death chasing at their heels. And now comes an invading army of overwhelming size. The fort may hold several days, perhaps even a week or two. But they know in the end they will face their own slaughter. They know the infants they circle in their arms will before long be bloodied toys kicked about these cobbles. They know because they’ve seen it already, from whence they fled. They’ve seen the enemy burn and cut, take turns to rape young girls even as they lie dying of their wounds. They know this is to come, and so must cherish the earlier days of the siege, when the enemy first pay the price for what they will later do. In other words, Master Axl, it’s vengeance to be relished *in advance* by those not able to take it in its proper place. That’s why I say, sir, my Saxon cousins would have stood here to cheer and clap, and the more cruel the death, the more merry they would have been.’

‘I won’t believe it, sir. How is it possible to hate so deeply for deeds not yet done? The good people who once took shelter here would have kept alive their hopes to the end, and surely watched all suffering, of friend and foe, with pity and horror.’

‘You’re much the senior in years, Master Axl, but in matters of blood, it may be I’m the elder and you the youth. I’ve seen dark hatred as bottomless as the sea on the faces

of old women and tender children, and some days felt such hatred myself. ’

‘I won’t have it, sir, and besides, we talk of a barbarous past hopefully gone for ever. Our argument need never be put to the test, thank God. ’

The warrior looked strangely at Axl. He appeared about to say something, then to change his mind. Then he turned to survey the stone buildings behind them saying: ‘Wandering these grounds earlier, my arms heavy with firewood, I spotted at every turn fascinating traces of that past. The fact is, sir, even with the second gate breached, this fort would have held many more traps for the enemy, some devilishly cunning. The monks here hardly know what they pass each day. But enough of this. While we share this quiet moment, let me ask your forgiveness, Master Axl, for the discomfort I caused you earlier. I refer to my questioning that good knight about you. ’

‘Think no more of it, sir. There’s no offence, even if you did surprise me, and my wife also. You mistook me for another, an easy error. ’

‘I thank you for your understanding. I took you for one whose face I can never forget, even though I was a small boy when I saw it last. ’

‘In the west country then. ’

‘That’s right, sir, in the time before I was taken. The man I speak of was no warrior, yet wore a sword and rode a fine stallion. He came often to our village, and to us boys who knew only farmers and boatmen, was a thing of wonder. ’

‘Yes. I see how he might be. ’

‘I recall we followed him all about the village, though always at a shy distance. Some days he’d move with urgency, talking with elders or calling a crowd to gather in the square. Other days he’d wander at leisure, talking to one and

all as if to pass the day. He knew little of our tongue, but our village being on the river, the boats coming and going, many spoke his language, so he never lacked for companions. He'd sometimes turn to us with a smile, but we being young would scatter and hide.'

'And was it in this village you learnt our tongue so well?'

'No, that came later. When I was taken.'

'Taken, Master Wistan?'

'I was taken from that village by soldiers and trained from a tender age to be the warrior I am today. It was Britons took me, so I soon learnt to speak and fight in their manner. It's long ago and things take strange shapes in the mind. When I first saw you today in that village, perhaps a trick of the morning light, I felt I was that boy again, shyly peeking at that great man with his flowing cloak, moving through our village like a lion amongst pigs and cows. I fancy it was a small corner of your smile, or something about your way of greeting a stranger, head bowed a little. Yet now I see I was mistaken, since you could not have been that man. No more of this. How is your good wife, sir? Not exhausted, I hope?'

'She's recovered her breath well, I thank you for asking, though I've told her to rest further just now. We're forced, in any case, to wait till the monks return from their meeting and the abbot gives permission to visit the wise physician Jonus.'

'A resolute lady, sir. I admired how she made her way here giving no complaint. Ah, here's the boy back again.'

'See how he holds his injury, Master Wistan. We must take him also to Father Jonus.'

Wistan seemed not to hear this. Leaving the wall, he went down the little steps to meet Edwin, and for a few moments

the two conferred in low voices, heads close together. The boy's manner was animated, and the warrior listened with a frown, nodding occasionally. As Axl came down the steps to their level, Wistan said quietly:

'Master Edwin reports a curious discovery we may do well to see with our own eyes. Let's follow him, but walk as we've no clear purpose, in case that old monk there is left on purpose to spy on us.'

Indeed, a solitary monk was sweeping the courtyard and as they came closer, Axl noticed he was mouthing words silently to himself, lost in his world. He barely glanced their way as Edwin led them across the courtyard and into a gap between two buildings. They emerged where thin grass covered uneven sloping ground, and a row of withered trees, hardly taller than a man, marked a path leading away from the monastery. As they followed Edwin under a setting sky, Wistan said softly:

'I'm much taken by this boy. Master Axl, we may yet revise our plan to leave him at your son's village. It would suit me well to keep him by me a while longer.'

'I'm troubled to hear you say so, sir.'

'Why so? He hardly longs for a life feeding pigs and digging the cold soil.'

'Yet what will become of him at your side?'

'Once my mission's complete, I'll take him back to the fens.'

'And what will you have him do there, sir? Fight Norsemen all his days?'

'You frown, sir, but the boy has an unusual temperament. He'll make a fine warrior. But hush, let's see what he has for us.'

They had come to where three wooden shacks stood at the side of the lane, in such disrepair that each appeared to be

held up by its neighbour. The wet ground was rutted with wheeltracks, and Edwin paused to point these out. Then he led them into the furthest of the three shacks.

There was no door, and much of the roof was open to the sky. As they came in, several birds flew off in furious commotion, and Axl saw, in the gloomy space vacated, a crudely made cart - perhaps the work of the monks themselves - its two wheels sunk into the mud. What arrested the attention was a large cage mounted on its carriage, and coming closer, Axl noticed that though the cage was itself iron, a thick wooden pillar ran down its spine, fixing it firmly to the boards underneath. This same post was festooned with chains and manacles, and at head height, what appeared to be a blackened iron mask, though with no holes for the eyes, and only a small one for the mouth. The cart, and the area all around it, was covered with feathers and droppings. Edwin pulled open the cage door and proceeded to move it back and forth on its squeaking hinge. He was again speaking excited words, to which Wistan, throwing searching glances around the shed, returned the occasional nod.

'It's curious,' Axl said, 'these monks should have need of such an object as this. No doubt to aid some pious ritual.'

The warrior started to move around the cart, stepping carefully to avoid the stagnant puddles. 'I saw something like this once before,' he said. 'You may suppose this device intended to expose the man within it to the cruelty of the elements. Yet look, see how these bars stand far enough apart to allow my shoulder to pass through. And here, look, how these feathers stick to the iron in hardened blood. A man fastened here is offered thus to the mountain birds. Caught in these cuffs, he has no way to fight off the hungry beaks. This iron mask, though it may look frightful, is in fact a thing of mercy, for with it the eyes at least aren't feasted on.'

‘There may yet be some more gentle purpose,’ Axl said, but Edwin had started to talk again, and Wistan turned and looked out of the shed.

‘The boy says he followed these tracks out to a spot nearby on the cliff’s edge,’ the warrior said, eventually.

‘He says the ground’s well rutted there, showing where this wagon has often stayed. In other words, the signs all support my guess, and I can see too this cart’s been wheeled out just lately.’

‘I don’t know what it means, Master Wistan, but I admit I now begin to share your uneasiness. This object sends a chill through me and makes me want to return to my wife’s side.’

‘It’s as well we do, sir. Let’s stay no longer.’

But as they came out of the shack, Edwin, who again was leading, stopped abruptly. Looking past him into the evening gloom, Axl could see a robed figure in the tall grass a short distance from them.

‘I’d say it’s the monk lately sweeping the yard,’ the warrior said to Axl.

‘Does he see us?’

‘I’d say he sees us and knows we see him. Yet he stands there still as a tree. Well, let’s go to him.’

The monk was standing at a spot to the side of their path, the grass up to his knee. As they approached the man remained quite still, though the wind pulled at his robe and long white hair. He was thin, almost emaciated, and his protruding eyes stared at them without expression.

‘You observe us, sir,’ Wistan said, stopping, ‘and you know what we’ve just discovered. So perhaps you’d tell us the purpose to which you monks put that device.’

Saying nothing, the monk pointed towards the monastery.

‘It may be he’s vowed to silence,’ Axl said. ‘Or else as mute as you lately pretended, Master Wistan.’

The monk came out of the grass and onto the path. His strange eyes fixed each of them in turn, then he pointed again towards the monastery and set off. They followed him, just a short distance behind, the monk continually glancing back at them over his shoulder.

The monastery buildings were now dark shapes against the setting sky. As they drew closer, the monk paused, moved his forefinger over his lips, then continued at a more cautious pace. He seemed anxious they remain unseen, and to avoid the central courtyard. He took them down narrow passageways behind buildings where the earth was pitted or sloped severely. Once, as they went with heads bowed along a wall, there came from the very windows above sounds from the monks’ conference. One voice was shouting over a hubbub, then a second voice - perhaps that of the abbot - called for order. But there was no time to loiter, and soon they were gathered at an archway through which could be seen the main courtyard. The monk now indicated with urgent signs that they were to proceed as quickly and quietly as possible.

As it was they were not obliged to cross the courtyard, where torches were now burning, but only to skirt one corner under the shadows of a colonnade. When the monk halted again, Axl whispered to him:

‘Good sir, since your intention must be to take us somewhere, I’d ask you to let me go fetch my wife, for I’m uneasy leaving her alone.’

The monk, who had turned immediately to fix Axl in a stare, shook his head and pointed into the semi-dark. Only then did Axl spot Beatrice standing in a doorway further down the cloister. Relieved, he gave a wave, and as the party moved towards her, there came from behind them a surge of angry voices from the monks’ meeting.

‘How is it with you, princess?’ he asked, reaching to take her outstretched hands.

‘Peacefully taking my rest, Axl, when this silent monk appeared before me, the way I took him for a phantom. But he’s keen to lead us somewhere and we’d best follow.’

The monk repeated his gesture for silence, then beckoning, pushed past Beatrice across the threshold where she had been waiting.

The corridors now became as tunnel-like as those of their warren at home, and the lamps flickering in the little alcoves hardly dispelled the darkness. Axl, with Beatrice holding his arm, kept a hand held out before him. For a moment they were back in the open air, crossing a muddy yard between ploughed allotments, then into another low stone building. Here the corridor was wider and lit by larger flames, and the monk seemed finally to relax. Recovering his breath, he looked them over once more, then signalling for them to wait, vanished under an arch. After a little time, the monk appeared again and ushered them forward. As he did so, a frail voice from within said: ‘Come in, guests. A poor chamber this to receive you, but you’re welcome.’

* * *

As he waited for sleep to come to him, Axl recalled once again how the four of them, together with the silent monk, had squeezed into the tiny cell. A candle was burning next to the bed, and he had felt Beatrice recoil as she caught sight of the figure lying in it. Then she had taken a breath and moved further into the room. There was hardly space for them all, but they had before long arranged themselves around the bed, the warrior and the boy in the corner furthest away. Axl’s back was pressed against the chilly stone wall, but Beatrice, standing just in front and leaning into him as if for reassurance, was almost up to the sickbed. There was a faint smell of vomit and urine. The silent monk, meanwhile,

was fussing about the man in the bed, helping to raise him to a sitting position.

Their host was white-haired and advanced in years. His frame was large, and until recently must have been vigorous, but now the simple act of sitting up appeared to cause multiple agonies. A coarse blanket fell from around him as he raised himself, revealing a nightshirt patched with bloodstains. But what had caused Beatrice to shrink back was the man's neck and face, starkly illuminated by the bedside candle. A swollen mound under one side of the chin, a deep purple fading to a yellow, obliged the head to be held at a slight angle. The peak of the mound was split and caked with pus and old blood. On the face itself, a gouge ran from just below the cheek bone down to the jaw, exposing a section of the man's inner mouth and gum. It must have cost him greatly to smile, but once he was settled in his new position, the monk did just this.

'Welcome, welcome. I'm Jonus, whom I know you came a long way to see. My dear guests, don't look at me with such pity. These wounds are no longer new, and hardly bring the pain they once did.'

'We see now, Father Jonus,' Beatrice said, 'why your good abbot's so reluctant to have strangers impose on you. We'd have waited for his permission, but this kind monk led us to you.'

'Ninian here is my most trusted friend, and even if he's vowed to silence, we understand one another perfectly. He's watched each of you since your arrival and brought me frequent reports. I thought it time we met, even if the abbot knows nothing of it.'

'But what can have caused you such injuries, father?' Beatrice asked. 'And you a man famed for kindness and wisdom.'

‘Let’s leave the topic, mistress, for my feeble strength won’t allow us to speak for long. I know two of you here, yourself and this brave boy, seek my advice. Let me see the boy first, who I understand carries a wound. Come closer into the light, dear lad.’

The monk’s voice, though soft, possessed a natural command, and Edwin started to move towards him. But immediately Wistan reached forward and gripped the boy by the arm. Perhaps it was an effect of the candle flame, or the warrior’s trembling shadow cast on the wall behind him, but it seemed to Axl that for an instant Wistan’s eyes were fixed on the injured monk with peculiar intensity, even hatred. The warrior drew the boy back to the wall, then took a step forward himself as though to shield his charge.

‘What’s wrong, shepherd?’ asked Father Jonus. ‘Do you fear poison from my wounds will travel to your brother? Then my hand needn’t touch him. Let him step closer and my eyes alone will test his injury.’

‘The boy’s wound is clean,’ Wistan said. ‘It’s just this good woman now seeks your help.’

‘Master Wistan,’ Beatrice said, ‘how can you say such a thing? You must know well how a wound clean one moment turns fevered the next. The boy must seek this wise monk’s guidance.’

Wistan seemed not to hear Beatrice, and continued to stare at the monk. Father Jonus, in turn, regarded the warrior as though he were a thing of great fascination. After a while, Father Jonus said:

‘You stand with remarkable boldness for a humble shepherd.’

‘It must be the habit of my trade. A shepherd must stand long hours watchful of wolves gathering in the night.’

‘No doubt that’s so. I imagine too how a shepherd must judge quickly, hearing a sound in the dark, if it heralds danger or the approach of a friend. Much must rest on the ability to make such decisions quickly and well.’

‘Only a foolish shepherd hears a snapping twig or spots a shape in the dark and assumes a companion come to relieve him. We’re a cautious breed, and what’s more, sir, I’ve just now seen with my own eyes the device in your barn.’

‘Ah. I thought you’d come upon it sooner or later. What do you make of your discovery, shepherd?’

‘It angers me.’

‘Angers you?’ Father Jonus rasped this with some force, as though himself suddenly angered. ‘Why does it anger you?’

‘Tell me if I’m wrong, sir. My surmise is that the custom here has been for the monks to take turns in that cage exposing their bodies to the wild birds, hoping this way to atone for crimes once committed in this country and long unpunished. Even these ugly wounds I see here before me have been gained in this way, and for all I know a sense of piety eases your suffering. Yet let me say I feel no pity to see your gashes. How can you describe as penance, sir, the drawing of a veil over the foulest deeds? Is your Christian god one to be bribed so easily with self-inflicted pain and a few prayers? Does he care so little for justice left undone?’

‘Our god is a god of mercy, shepherd, whom you, a pagan, may find hard to comprehend. It’s no foolishness to seek forgiveness from such a god, however great the crime. Our god’s mercy is boundless.’

‘What use is a god with boundless mercy, sir? You mock me as a pagan, yet the gods of my ancestors pronounce clearly their ways and punish severely when we break their laws. Your Christian god of mercy gives men licence to pursue their

greed, their lust for land and blood, knowing a few prayers and a little penance will bring forgiveness and blessing. ’

‘It’s true, shepherd, that here in this monastery, there are those who still believe such things. But let me assure you, Ninian and I have long let go such delusions, and neither are we alone. We know our god’s mercy is not to be abused, yet many of my brother monks, the abbot included, will not yet accept this. They still believe that cage, and our constant prayers, will be enough. Yet these dark crows and ravens are a sign of God’s anger. They never came before. Even last winter, though the wind made the strongest of us weep, the birds were but mischievous children, their beaks bringing only small sufferings. A shake of the chains or a shout was enough to keep them at bay. But now a new breed comes to find us, larger, bolder and with fury in their eyes. They tear at us in calm anger, no matter how we struggle or cry out. We’ve lost three dear friends these past months, and many more of us carry deep wounds. These surely are signs. ’

Wistan’s manner had been softening, but he had kept himself firmly in front of the boy. ‘Are you saying’, he asked, ‘I have friends here in this monastery?’

‘In this room, shepherd, yes. Elsewhere, we remain divided and even now they argue in great passion about how we are to continue. The abbot will insist we carry on as always. Others of our view will say it’s time to stop. That no forgiveness awaits us at the end of this path. That we must uncover what’s been hidden and face the past. But those voices, I fear, remain few and will not carry the day. Shepherd, will you trust me now to see this boy’s wound?’

For a moment Wistan remained still. Then he moved aside, signalling to Edwin to step forward. Immediately the silent monk helped Father Jonus to a more upright position – both monks had become suddenly quite animated – then grasping the candleholder from the bedside, tugged Edwin closer, impatiently raising the boy’s shirt for Father Jonus to see.

Then, for what seemed a long time, both monks went on looking at the boy's wound - Ninian moving the light one way then the other - as though it were a pool within which a miniature world was contained. Eventually the monks exchanged what seemed to Axl looks of triumph, but the very next moment Father Jonus fell shaking back onto his pillows, with an expression closer to resignation or else sadness. As Ninian hastily put down the candle to attend to him, Edwin slipped back into the shadows to stand beside Wistan.

'Father Jonus,' Beatrice said, 'now you've seen the boy's wound, tell us if it's clean and will heal on its own.'

Father Jonus's eyes were closed, and he was still breathing heavily, but he said quite calmly: 'I believe it will heal if he takes good care. Father Ninian will prepare an ointment for him before he leaves this place.'

'Father,' Beatrice went on, 'your present conversation with Master Wistan isn't entirely within my understanding. Yet it interests me greatly.'

'Is that so, mistress?' Father Jonus, still recovering his breath, opened his eyes and looked at her.

'Last night in a village below,' Beatrice said, 'I spoke with a woman wise with medicines. She had much to tell about my sickness, but when I asked her about this mist, the same that makes us forget the last hour as readily as a morning many years past, she confessed she had no idea what or whose work it was. Yet she said if there was one wise enough to know, it would be you, Father Jonus, up here in this monastery. So my husband and I made our way here, even though it's a harder road to our son's village where we're impatiently awaited. It was my hope you'd tell us something of this mist and how Axl and I might be free of it. It may be I'm a foolish woman, but it seemed to me just now, for all the talk of shepherds, you and Master Wistan were speaking of this same mist, and much bothered by what's been lost of our

past. So let me ask this of you, and Master Wistan too. Do the both of you know what causes this mist to fall over us?’

Father Jonus and Wistan exchanged looks. Then Wistan said quietly:

‘It’s the dragon Querig, Mistress Beatrice, that roams these peaks. She’s the cause of the mist you speak of. Yet these monks here protect her, and have done so for years. I’d wager even now, if they’re wise to my identity, they’ll have sent for men to destroy me.’

‘Father Jonus, can this be true?’ Beatrice asked. ‘The mist is the work of this she-dragon?’

The monk, who for an instant had seemed far away, turned to Beatrice. ‘The shepherd tells the truth, mistress. It’s Querig’s breath which fills this land and robs us of memories.’

‘Axl, do you hear that? The she-dragon’s the cause of the mist! If Master Wistan, or anyone else, even that old knight met on the road, can slay the creature, our memories will be restored to us! Axl, why so quiet?’

Indeed, Axl had been lost in thought, and although he had heard his wife’s words, and noticed her excitement, it was all he could do simply to reach out a hand to her. Before he could find any words, Father Jonus said to Wistan:

‘Shepherd, if you know your danger, why do you dally here? Why not take this boy and be on your way?’

‘The boy needs rest, as I do.’

‘But you don’t rest, shepherd. You cut firewood and wander like a hungry wolf.’

‘When we arrived your log pile was low. And the nights are cold in these mountains.’

‘There’s something else puzzles me, shepherd. Why does Lord Brennus hunt you as he does? For many days now, his

soldiers have searched the country for you. Even last year, when another man came from the east to hunt Querig, Brennus believed it might be you and sent men out to search for you. They came up here asking for you. Shepherd, who are you to Brennus?'

'We knew one another as young lads, even before the age of this boy here.'

'You've come to this country on an errand, shepherd. Why jeopardise it to settle old scores? I say to you, take this boy and be on your way, even before the monks come out of their meeting.'

'If Lord Brennus does me the courtesy to come here after me this night, I'm obliged then to stand and face him.'

'Master Wistan,' Beatrice said, 'I don't know what's between you and Lord Brennus. But if it's your mission to slay the great dragon Querig, I beg you, don't be distracted from it. There'll be time to settle scores later.'

'The mistress is right, shepherd. I fear I know too the purpose of all this woodcutting. Listen to what we say, sir. This boy gives you a unique chance the like of which may not come your way again. Take him and be on your way.'

Wistan looked thoughtfully at Father Jonus, then bowed his head politely. 'I'm happy to have met you, father. And I apologise if earlier I addressed you discourteously. But now let me and this boy take our leave of you. I know Mistress Beatrice still wishes for advice, and she's a brave and good woman. I beg you preserve some strength to attend to her. Now I'll thank you for your counsel, and bid you farewell.'

Lying in the darkness, still hopeful sleep would overtake him, Axl tried to remember why he had been so oddly silent for much of his time in Father Jonus's cell. There had been some reason, and even when Beatrice, triumphant to discover the origin of the mist, had turned to him and exclaimed, he had been able only to reach out his hand to her, still not

speaking. He had been in the throes of some powerful and strange emotion, one that had all but put him in a dream, though every word being spoken around him still reached his ears with perfect clarity. He had felt as one standing in a boat on a wintry river, looking out into dense fog, knowing it would at any moment part to reveal vivid glimpses of the land ahead. And he had been caught in a kind of terror, yet at the same time had felt a curiosity - or something stronger and darker - and he had told himself firmly, 'Whatever it may be, let me see it, let me see it.'

Had he actually spoken these words out loud? Perhaps he had done so, and just at the instant Beatrice had turned to him in excitement, exclaiming, 'Axl, do you hear that? The she-dragon's the cause of the mist!'

He could not remember clearly what had happened once Wistan and the boy had departed Father Jonus's chamber. The silent monk, Ninian, must have left with them, probably to provide the ointment for the boy's wound, or simply to lead them back unobserved. In any case, he and Beatrice had been left alone with Father Jonus, and the latter, despite his wounds and his exhaustion, had examined his wife thoroughly. The monk had not asked her to remove any clothing - Axl had been relieved - and though here too his recollection was hazy, an image came to him of Jonus pressing an ear to Beatrice's side, eyes closed in concentration as though some faint message might be heard coming from within. Axl remembered too the monk, with blinking eyes, putting to Beatrice a series of questions. Did she feel sick after drinking water? Did she ever feel pain at the back of her neck? There were other questions Axl could now no longer remember, but Beatrice had replied in the negative to one after the next, and the more she did so, the more pleased Axl had become. Only once, when Jonus asked if she had noticed blood in her urine, and she replied that yes, she sometimes had, did Axl feel unease. But the monk had nodded, as though this was normal and to be expected, and gone straight on to

the next question. How then had this examination ended? He remembered Father Jonus smiling and saying, 'So you can go to your son with nothing to fear,' and Axl himself saying, 'You see, princess, I always knew it was nothing.' Then the monk had eased himself carefully back down in his bed and lain there, recovering his breath. In Ninian's absence, Axl had hurried to fill the monk's drinking cup from the jug, and as he had placed it to the sick man's mouth, had seen tiny droplets of blood slide from the lower lip and spread in the water. Then Father Jonus had looked up at Beatrice and said:

'Mistress, you seem happy to know the truth about this thing you call the mist.'

'Happy indeed, father, for now there's a way forward for us.'

'Take care, for it's a secret guarded jealously by some, though it's maybe for the best it remains so no longer.'

'It's not for me to care if it's a secret or not, father, but I'm glad Axl and I know it and can now act on it.'

'Yet are you so certain, good mistress, you wish to be free of this mist? Is it not better some things remain hidden from our minds?'

'It may be so for some, father, but not for us. Axl and I wish to have again the happy moments we shared together. To be robbed of them is as if a thief came in the night and took what's most precious from us.'

'Yet the mist covers all memories, the bad as well as the good. Isn't that so, mistress?'

'We'll have the bad ones come back too, even if they make us weep or shake with anger. For isn't it the life we've shared?'

'You've no fear, then, of bad memories, mistress?'

‘What’s to fear, father? What Axl and I feel today in our hearts for each other tells us the path taken here can hold no danger for us, no matter that the mist hides it now. It’s like a tale with a happy end, when even a child knows not to fear the twists and turns before. Axl and I would remember our life together, whatever its shape, for it’s been a thing dear to us.’

A bird must have flown across the ceiling above him. The sound had startled him, and then Axl realised that for a moment or two he had actually been asleep. He realised too there were no more woodcutting noises, and the grounds were silent. Had the warrior returned to their chamber? Axl had heard nothing, and there were no signs, beyond the dark shape of the table, of anyone else asleep on Edwin’s side of the room. What had Father Jonus said after examining Beatrice and concluding with his questions? Yes, she had said, she had noticed blood in her urine, but he had smiled and asked something else. You see, princess, Axl had said, I always told you it was nothing. And Father Jonus had smiled, despite his wounds and his exhaustion, and said, you can go to your son with nothing to fear. But these had never been the questions Beatrice had feared. Beatrice, he knew, feared the boatman’s questions, harder to answer than Father Jonus’s, and that was why she had been so pleased to learn the cause of the mist. Axl, do you hear that? She had been triumphant. Axl, do you hear that? she had said, her face radiant.

Chapter Seven

A hand had been shaking him, but by the time Axl sat up the figure was already on the other side of the room, bending over Edwin and whispering, 'Quickly, boy, quickly! And not a sound!' Beatrice was awake beside him, and Axl rose unsteadily to his feet, the cold air startling him, then reached down to grasp his wife's outstretched hands.

It was still the depths of night, but voices were calling outside and surely torches had been lit in the courtyard below, for there were now illuminated patches on the wall facing the window. The monk who had awoken them was dragging the boy, still half asleep, over to their side, and Axl recognised Father Brian's limping gait before his face emerged from the dark.

'I'll try and save you, friends,' Father Brian said, his voice still a whisper, 'but you must be quick and do as I say. There are soldiers arrived, twenty, even thirty, with a will to hunt you down. They already have the older Saxon brother trapped, but he's a lively one and keeps them occupied, giving you a chance of escape. Be still, boy, stay with me!' Edwin was moving to the window, but Father Brian had reached out and clasped his arm. 'I mean to lead you to safety, but we must first leave this chamber unseen. Soldiers cross the square below, but their eyes are on the tower where the Saxon still holds out. With God's help they won't notice us go down the steps outside, and then the worst will be behind us. But cause no sound to make their gazes turn, and take care not to trip on the steps. I'll descend first, then signal your moment to follow. No, mistress, you must leave your bundle here. Let it be enough to keep your lives!'

They crouched near the door and listened to Father Brian's footsteps descend with agonising slowness.

Eventually, when Axl peered cautiously through the doorway, he saw torches moving at the far end of the courtyard; but before he could discern clearly what was going on, his attention was drawn by Father Brian, standing directly below and signalling frantically.

The staircase, running diagonally down the side of the wall, was mostly in shadow except for one patch, quite near the ground, lit up brightly by the nearly full moon.

‘Follow close behind me, princess,’ Axl said. ‘Don’t look across the yard, but keep your eyes on where your foot may find the next step, or it’ll be a hard fall and only enemies to come to our aid. Tell the boy what I’ve just said, and let’s have this behind us.’

Despite his own instructions, Axl could not help glancing across the courtyard as he went down. On the far side, soldiers had gathered around a cylindrical stone tower overlooking the building in which the monks had earlier had their meeting. Blazing torches were being waved, and there appeared to be disorder in their ranks. When Axl was halfway down the steps, two soldiers broke away and came running across the square, and he was sure they would be spotted. But the men vanished into a doorway, and before long Axl was gratefully ushering both Beatrice and Edwin into the shadows of the cloisters where Father Brian was waiting.

They followed the monk along narrow corridors, some of which may have been the same as those taken earlier with the silent Father Ninian. Often they moved through complete darkness, following the rhythmic hiss of their guide’s dragged foot. Then they came into a chamber whose ceiling had partly fallen away. Moonlight was pouring in, revealing piles of wooden boxes and broken furniture. Axl could smell mould and stagnant water.

‘Take heart, friends,’ Father Brian said, no longer whispering. He had gone into a corner and was moving objects aside. ‘You’re nearly safe.’

‘Father,’ Axl said, ‘we’re grateful to you for this rescue, but please tell us what’s occurred.’

Father Brian continued clearing the corner, and did not look up as he said: ‘A mystery to us, sir. They came this night without invitation, pouring through the gates and through our home as if it were their own. They demanded the two young Saxons lately arrived here, and though they made no mention of you or your wife, I wouldn’t trust them to treat you gently. This boy here, they would clearly wish to murder, as they do even now his brother. You must save yourselves and there’ll be time later to ponder the soldiers’ ways.’

‘Master Wistan was a stranger to us only this morning,’ Beatrice said, ‘yet we’re uneasy making our escape while a terrible fate threatens him.’

‘The soldiers may yet come on our heels, mistress, for we left no barred doors behind us. And if that fellow bravely buys your escape, even with his own life, you must grasp it gratefully. Under this trapdoor is a tunnel dug in ancient times. It will take you underground into the forest, where you’ll emerge far from your pursuers. Now help me raise it, sir, for it’s too heavy for my hands alone.’

Even for the two of them, it took some effort to raise the door till it stood up at a steep angle before them, revealing a square of deeper blackness.

‘Let the boy go down first,’ the monk said, ‘for it’s years since any of us used this passage and who knows if the steps haven’t crumbled. He’s nimble-footed and could take a fall better.’

But Edwin was saying something to Beatrice, and she now said: ‘Master Edwin would go to Master Wistan’s aid.’

‘Tell him, princess, we might help Wistan yet by making our escape through this tunnel. Tell the boy what you must, but persuade him to come quickly.’

As Beatrice spoke to him, a change seemed to come over the boy. He kept staring at the hole in the floor, and his eyes, caught in the moonlight, seemed to Axl at that moment to have something strange about them, as though he were steadily coming under a spell. Then even as Beatrice was speaking, Edwin walked towards the trap-door and without looking back at them, stepped into the blackness and vanished. As his footsteps grew fainter, Axl took Beatrice's hand and said:

'Let's go too, princess. Stay close to me.'

The steps leading underground were shallow - flat stones sunk into earth - and felt solid enough. They could see something of the way ahead by the light from the open trap-door above them, but just as Axl turned to speak to Father Brian, the door closed with what seemed a thunderous crash.

They all three stopped and for a while remained quite still. The air did not feel as stale as Axl had expected; in fact he thought he could feel a faint breeze. Somewhere in front of them, Edwin started to speak, and Beatrice answered him in a whisper. Then she said softly:

'The boy asks why Father Brian closed the door on us as he did. I told him he was most likely anxious to hide the tunnel from the soldiers maybe even now entering the room. All the same, Axl, it struck me a little queer too. And isn't that him now, surely, moving objects over the door? If we find the way ahead obstructed by earth or water, the father himself saying it's years since anyone came this way, how will we return and open that door, the way it's so heavy and now with objects above it?'

'Queer right enough. But there's no doubting there's soldiers in the monastery, for didn't we see them ourselves just now? I don't see what choice we have but to go on and pray this tunnel brings us safely to the forest. Tell the boy to keep moving forward, but slowly and always a hand to this mossy wall, for I fear this passage will only grow darker.'

Yet as they went forward they found there was a feeble light, so that at times they could even make out each other's outlines. There were sudden puddles that surprised their feet, and more than once during this phase of their journey, Axl thought he heard a noise up ahead, but since neither Edwin nor Beatrice reacted he put it down to his overwrought imagination. But then Edwin suddenly halted, almost causing Axl to collide into him. He felt Beatrice behind him squeeze his hand, and for a moment they stood there very still in the dark. Then Beatrice moved even closer to him, and her breath felt warm on his neck as she said in the softest of whispers:

'Do you hear it, Axl?'

'Hear what, princess?'

Edwin's hand touched him warningly, and they were silent again. Eventually Beatrice said in his ear: 'There's something here with us, Axl.'

'Perhaps a bat, princess. Or a rat.'

'No, Axl. I hear it now. It's a man's breathing.'

Axl listened again. Then there came a sharp noise, a striking sound repeating three times, four times, just beyond where they were standing. There were bright flashes, then a tiny flame which grew momentarily to reveal the shape of a seated man, then all was darkness again.

'Fear not, friends,' a voice said. 'It's only Gawain, Arthur's knight. And as soon as this tinder lights we'll see each other better.'

There were more noises of flints, then eventually a candle flamed and began to burn steadily.

Sir Gawain was sitting on a dark mound. It evidently did not make an ideal seat for he was at an odd angle, like a giant doll about to topple. The candle in his hand illuminated his face and upper torso with wobbling shadows, and he was breathing heavily. As before, he was in tunic and

armour; his sword, unsheathed, had been thrust at an angle into the ground near the foot of the mound. He stared at them balefully, moving the candle from one face to the next.

‘So you’re all here,’ he said finally. ‘I’m relieved.’

‘You surprise us, Sir Gawain,’ Axl said. ‘What do you mean by hiding yourself here?’

‘I’ve been down here a while and walking before you, friends. Yet with this sword and armour, and my great height which forces me to stumble and go with bowed head, I can’t walk quickly and now you discover me.’

‘You hardly explain yourself, sir. Why do you walk before us?’

‘To defend you, sir! The melancholy truth is the monks have deceived you. There’s a beast dwells down here and they mean you to perish by it. Happily, not every monk thinks alike. Ninian, the silent one, brought me down here unseen and I’ll guide you to safety yet.’

‘Your news overwhelms us, Sir Gawain,’ said Axl. ‘But first tell us of this beast you speak of. What is its nature and does it threaten us even as we stand here?’

‘Assume it does, sir. The monks wouldn’t have sent you down here if they didn’t mean you to meet the beast. It’s always their way. As men of Christ, it’s beyond them to use a sword or even poison. So they send down here those they wish dead, and in a day or two they’ll have forgotten they ever did so. Oh yes, that’s their way, especially the abbot’s. By Sunday he may even have convinced himself he saved you from those soldiers. And the work of whatever prowls this tunnel, should it cross his mind, he’ll disown, or even call God’s will. Well, let’s see what God wills tonight now a knight of Arthur walks before you!’

‘You’re saying, Sir Gawain,’ Beatrice asked, ‘the monks wish us dead?’

‘They certainly wish this boy dead, mistress. I tried to make them see it wasn’t necessary, even made a solemn promise to take him far away from this country, but no, they don’t listen to me! They won’t risk this boy loose, even with Master Wistan captured or killed, for who’s to say there won’t come some other fellow one day to find this boy. I’ll take him far away, I said, but they fear what may happen and wish him dead. You and your good husband they might have spared but that you’d inevitably be witnesses to their deeds. Had I seen all this in advance, would I have travelled here to this monastery? Who knows? It seemed my duty then, did it not? But their plans for the boy, and for an innocent Christian couple, I could not allow it! Luckily not all the monks think alike, you know, and Ninian, the silent one, led me down here unwatched. It was my intention to go before you much further, but this armour and my stumbling height - how many times over the years have I cursed this height! What advantage does it bring a man to be so tall? For every high-dangling pear I reached there’s been an arrow threatened me would have flown over a smaller man!’

‘Sir Gawain,’ Axl said, ‘what kind of beast is it, this one you say dwells down here?’

‘I never saw it, sir, only know those the monks send this way perish by it.’

‘Is it one can be killed by an ordinary sword held by a mortal man?’

‘What do you say, sir? I’m a mortal man, I don’t deny it, but I’m a knight well trained and nurtured for long years of my youth by the great Arthur, who taught me to face all manner of challenge with gladness, even when fear seeps to the marrow, for if we’re mortal let us at least shine handsomely in God’s eyes while we walk this earth! Like all who stood with Arthur, sir, I’ve faced beelzebubs and

monsters as well as the darkest intents of men, and always upheld my great king's example even in the midst of ferocious conflict. What is it you suggest, sir? How dare you? Were you there? *I* was there, sir, and saw all with these same eyes that fix you now! But what of it, what of it, friends, this is a discussion for some other time. Forgive me, we have other matters to attend to, of course we have. What is it you asked, sir? Ah yes, this beast, yes, I understand it's monstrous fierce but no demon or spirit and this sword is good enough to slay it.'

'But Sir Gawain,' Beatrice said, 'do you really propose we walk further down this tunnel knowing what we now do?'

'What choice have we, mistress? If I'm not mistaken, the way back to the monastery is locked to us, and yet that same door may open any time to pour forth soldiers into this tunnel. There's nothing for it but to go on, and but for this one beast in our way, we may soon find ourselves in the forest far from your pursuers, for Ninian assures me this is a true tunnel and well maintained. So let's be on our way before this candle burns down, it's the only one I have.'

'Do we trust him, Axl?' Beatrice asked, making no effort to prevent Sir Gawain hearing. 'My mind's giddy now and loath to believe our kind Father Brian's betrayed us. Yet what this knight says has the ring of truth to it.'

'Let's follow him, princess. Sir Gawain, we thank you for your trouble. Please lead us now to safety, and let's hope this beast's dozing or gone prowling the night.'

'I fear we have no such luck. But come, friends, we'll go with courage.' The old knight rose slowly to his feet, then held out the candle at arm's length. 'Master Axl, perhaps you'll carry for us this flame, for I'll need both my hands to keep my sword at the ready.'

They went on into the tunnel, Sir Gawain leading, Axl following with the flame, Beatrice holding his arm from behind, and Edwin now at the rear. There was no option but to go in single file, the passage remaining narrow, and the ceiling of dangling moss and sinewy roots grew lower and lower until even Beatrice had to stoop. Axl did his best to hold the candle high, but the breeze in the tunnel was now stronger, and he was often obliged to lower it and cover the flame with his other hand. Sir Gawain though never complained, and his shape going before them, sword raised over his shoulder, seemed never to vary. Then Beatrice let out an exclamation and tugged Axl's arm.

‘What is it, princess?’

‘Oh, Axl, stop! My foot touched something then, but your candle moved too quickly.’

‘What of it, princess? We have to move on.’

‘Axl, I thought it a child! My foot touched it and I saw it before your light passed. Oh, I believe it's a small child long dead!’

‘There, princess, don't distress yourself. Where was it you saw it?’

‘Come, come, friends,’ Sir Gawain said from the dark. ‘Many things in this place are best left unseen.’

Beatrice seemed not to hear the knight. ‘It was over here, Axl. Bring the flame this way. Down there, Axl, shine it down there, though I dread to see its poor face again!’

Despite his counsel, Sir Gawain had doubled back, and Edwin too was now at Beatrice's side. Axl crouched forward and moved the candle here and there, revealing damp earth, tree roots and stones. Then the flame illuminated a large bat lying on its back as though peacefully asleep, wings stretched right out. Its fur looked wet and sticky. The pig-like face was hairless, and little puddles had formed in the

cavities of the outspread wings. The creature might indeed have been sleeping but for what was on the front of its torso. As Axl brought the flame even closer, they all stared at the circular hole extending from just below the bat's breast down to its belly, taking in parts of the ribcage to either side. The wound was peculiarly clean, as though someone had taken a bite from a crisp apple.

'What could have done work like this?' Axl asked.

He must have moved the candle too swiftly, for at that moment the flame guttered and went out.

'Don't worry, friends,' Sir Gawain said. 'I'll find my tinder again.'

'Didn't I tell you, Axl?' Beatrice sounded close to tears. 'I knew it was a baby the moment my foot touched it.'

'What are you saying, princess? It's not a baby. What are you saying?'

'What could have happened to the poor child? And what of its parents?'

'Princess, it's simply a bat, the like of which often haunts dark places.'

'Oh Axl, it was a baby, I'm sure of it!'

'I'm sorry this flame's out, princess, or I'd show you again. A bat it is, nothing more, yet myself I'd look again at what it lies on. Sir Gawain, did you notice the creature's bed?'

'I don't know what you mean, sir.'

'It seemed to me the creature lay on a bed of bones, for I thought I saw a skull or two that could only have belonged to men.'

'What do you suggest, sir?' Sir Gawain's voice became carelessly loud. 'What skulls? I saw no skulls, sir! Only a

bat fallen on misfortune! ’

Beatrice was now sobbing quietly, and Axl straightened to embrace her.

‘It was no child, princess,’ he said more gently. ‘Don’ t upset yourself.’

‘Such a lonely death. Where were its parents, Axl?’

‘What are you suggesting, sir? Skulls? I saw no skulls! And what if there are a few old bones here? What of it, is that anything extraordinary? Aren’ t we underground? But I saw no bed of bones, I don’ t know what you suggest, Master Axl. Were you there, sir? Did you stand beside the great Arthur? I’ m proud to say I did, sir, and he was a commander as merciful as he was gallant. Yes, indeed, it was I who came to the abbot to warn of Master Wistan’ s identity and intentions, what choice had I? Was I to guess how dark the hearts of holy men could turn? Your suggestions are unwarranted, sir! An insult to all who ever stood alongside the great Arthur! There are no beds of bones here! And am I not here now to save you?’

‘Sir Gawain, your voice booms too much and who knows where the soldiers are this moment.’

‘What could I do, sir, knowing what I did? Yes, I rode here and spoke to the abbot, yet how was I to know the darkness of that man’ s heart? And the better men, poor Jonus, his liver pecked and his days not long, while that abbot lives on with barely a scratch from those birds ...’

Sir Gawain broke off, interrupted by a noise from further down the tunnel. It was hard to determine how distant or near it had been, but the sound was unmistakably the cry of a beast; it had resembled the howl of a wolf, though there had also been something of the deeper roar of a bear. The cry had not been prolonged, but it made Axl clasp Beatrice to him, and Sir Gawain snatched his sword from out of the ground. Then, for several moments, they remained standing in silence,

listening for the sound to return. But nothing further came, and suddenly Sir Gawain began to laugh, quietly and breathlessly. As his laughter went on, Beatrice said into Axl's ear: 'Let's leave this place, husband. I wish no more reminding of this lonely grave.'

Sir Gawain stopped laughing and said: 'Perhaps we heard then the beast, but we have no choice but to go on. So, friends, let's finish our quarrel. We'll light the candle again before long, but let's go a little way now without it in case it hastens the beast our way. See, here's a pale light and enough to walk by. Come, friends, no more of this quarrel. My sword's ready and let's continue.'

The tunnel became more tortuous, and they moved with greater caution, fearing what each turn would reveal. But they encountered nothing, nor heard the cry again. Then the tunnel descended steeply for a good distance before coming out into a large underground chamber.

They all paused to recover their breaths and look around at their new surroundings. After the long walk with the earth brushing their heads, it was a relief to see the ceiling not only so high above them, but composed of more solid material. Once Sir Gawain had lit the candle again, Axl realised they were in some sort of mausoleum, surrounded by walls bearing traces of murals and Roman letters. Before them a pair of substantial pillars formed a gateway into a further chamber of comparable proportions, and falling across this threshold was an intense pool of moonlight. Its source was not obvious: perhaps somewhere behind the high arch crossing the two pillars there was an opening which at that moment, by sheer chance, was aligned to receive the moon. The light illuminated much of the moss and fungus on the pillars, as well as a section of the next chamber, whose floor appeared to be covered in rubble, but which Axl soon realised was comprised of a vast layer of bones. Only then did it occur to him that under his feet were more broken skeletons, and that

this strange floor extended for the entirety of both chambers.

‘This must be some ancient burial place,’ he said aloud. ‘Yet there are so many buried here.’

‘A burial place,’ Sir Gawain muttered. ‘Yes, a burial place.’ He had been moving slowly around the chamber, sword in one hand, candle in the other. Now he went towards the arch, but stopped short of the second chamber, as if suddenly daunted by the brilliant moonlight. He thrust his sword into the ground, and Axl watched his silhouette leaning on his weapon, moving the candle up and down with a weary air.

‘We need not quarrel, Master Axl. Here are the skulls of men, I won’t deny it. There an arm, there a leg, but just bones now. An old burial ground. And so it may be. I dare say, sir, our whole country is this way. A fine green valley. A pleasant copse in the springtime. Dig its soil, and not far beneath the daisies and buttercups come the dead. And I don’t talk, sir, only of those who received Christian burial. Beneath our soil lie the remains of old slaughter. Horace and I, we’ve grown weary of it. Weary and we no longer young.’

‘Sir Gawain,’ Axl said, ‘we have but one sword between us. I ask you not to grow melancholic, nor forget the beast is near.’

‘I don’t forget the beast, sir. I merely consider this gateway before us. Look up there, you see it?’ Sir Gawain was holding up the candle to reveal along the lower edge of the arch what appeared to be a row of spearheads pointing down to the ground.

‘A portcullis,’ Axl said.

‘Exactly, sir. This gate isn’t so ancient. Younger than either of us, I’d wager. Someone has raised it for us, wishing us to pass through. See there, the ropes that hold it. And there, the pulleys. Someone comes here often to make this gate rise and fall, and perhaps feed the beast.’ Sir

Gawain stepped towards one of the pillars, his feet crunching over bones. 'If I cut this rope, the gate will surely come down, it will bar our way out. Yet if the beast's beyond, we'll be shielded from it. Is that the Saxon boy I hear or some pixie stolen in here?'

Indeed Edwin, back in the shadows, had started to sing; faintly at first so that Axl had thought the boy was simply soothing his nerves, but then his voice had become steadily more conspicuous. His song seemed to be a slow lullaby, and he was rendering it with his face to the wall, his body rocking gently.

'The boy behaves as one bewitched,' Sir Gawain said.

'Never mind him, we must now decide, Master Axl. Do we walk on? Or do we cut this rope to give us at least a moment shielded from what lies beyond?'

'I say we cut the rope, sir. We can surely raise the gate again when we wish. Let's first discover what we face while the gate's down.'

'Wise counsel, sir. I'll do as you say.'

Handing Axl the candle, Sir Gawain took a further step forward, raised his sword and swung at the pillar. There was the sound of metal striking stone, and the lower section of the gate shook, but remained suspended. Sir Gawain sighed with a hint of embarrassment. Then he repositioned himself, raised the sword again, and struck once more.

This time there was a snapping sound, and the gate crashed down raising a cloud of dust in the moonlight. The noise felt immense - Edwin abruptly stopped his singing - and Axl stared through the iron grid now fallen before them to see what it would summon. But there was no sign of the beast, and after a moment they all let go their breaths.

For all that they were now effectively trapped, the lowering of the portcullis brought a sense of relief, and they all four began to wander around the mausoleum. Sir

Gawain, who had sheathed his sword, went up to the bars and touched them gingerly.

‘Good iron,’ he said. ‘It’ll do its work.’

Beatrice, who had been quiet for some time, came up to Axl and pressed her head against his chest. As he put an arm around her, he realised her cheek was wet with tears.

‘Come, princess,’ he said, ‘take heart. We’ll be out in the night air before long.’

‘All these skulls, Axl. So many! Can this beast really have killed so many?’

She had spoken softly, but Sir Gawain turned to them.

‘What do you suggest, mistress? That *I* committed this slaughter?’ He said this tiredly, with none of the anger he had shown earlier in the tunnel, but there was a peculiar intensity in his voice. ‘So many skulls, you say. Yet are we not underground? What is it you suggest? Can just one knight of Arthur have killed so many?’ He turned back to the gate and ran a finger along one of the bars. ‘Once, years ago, in a dream, I watched myself killing the enemy. It was in my sleep and long ago. The enemy, in their hundreds, perhaps as many as this. I fought and I fought. Just a foolish dream, but still I recall it.’ He sighed, then looked at Beatrice.

‘I hardly know how to answer you, mistress. I acted as I thought would please God. How was I to guess how dark had grown the hearts of these wretched monks? Horace and I came to this monastery while the sun was up, not long after you yourself arrived, for I supposed then I had need to speak urgently with the abbot. Then I discovered what he plotted against you, and I feigned complacence. I bade him farewell, and they all believed me gone, but I left Horace in the forest and returned up here on foot hidden by the night. Not all the monks think alike, thank God. I knew the good Jonus would receive me. And learning from him the abbot’s schemes, I had Ninian bring me unseen down to this place to await you. Curse it, the boy starts again!’

Sure enough, Edwin was singing once more, not as loudly as before, but now in a curious posture. He had bent forward, a fist to each temple, and was moving slowly about in the shadows like someone in a dance enacting the part of an animal.

‘The recent events surely overwhelm him,’ Axl said. ‘It’s a wonder he’s shown the fortitude he has, and we must attend to him well once we’re away from here. But Sir Gawain, tell us now, why do the monks seek to murder such an innocent lad?’

‘No matter how I argued, sir, the abbot would have the boy destroyed. So I left Horace in the forest and retraced my steps ...’

‘Sir Gawain, please explain. Has this to do with his ogre’s wound? Yet these are men of Christian learning.’

‘That’s no ogre’s bite the boy carries. It’s a dragon gave him that wound. I saw it right away when yesterday that soldier raised his shirt. Who knows how he met with a dragon, but a dragon’s bite it is, and now the desire will be rising in his blood to seek congress with a she-dragon. And in turn, any she-dragon near enough to scent him will come seeking him. This is why Master Wistan is so fond of his protégé, sir. He believes Master Edwin will lead him to Querig. And for this same reason, the monks and these soldiers would have him dead. Look, the boy grows ever wilder!’

‘What are all these skulls, sir?’ Beatrice suddenly asked the knight. ‘Why so many? Can they all have belonged to babies? Some are surely small enough to fit in your palm.’

‘Princess, don’t distress yourself. This is a burial place, nothing more.’

‘What is it you suggest, mistress? The skulls of babes? I’ve fought men, beelzebubs, dragons. But a slaughterer of infants? How dare you, mistress!’

Suddenly Edwin, still singing, pushed past them, and going up to the portcullis pressed himself against the bars.

‘Get back, boy,’ Sir Gawain said, grasping his shoulders. ‘There’s danger here, and that’s enough of your songs!’

Edwin gripped the bars with both hands, and for a moment he and the old knight tussled. Then they both broke off and stepped back from the gate. Beatrice, at Axl’s breast, let out a small gasp, but at that instant Axl’s view was obscured by Edwin and Sir Gawain. Then the beast came into the pool of moonlight, and he saw it more clearly.

‘God protect us,’ Beatrice said. ‘Here’s a creature escaped from the Great Plain itself, and the air grows colder.’

‘Don’t worry, princess. It can’t breach those bars.’

Sir Gawain, who had immediately drawn his sword again, began to laugh quietly. ‘Not nearly as bad as I feared,’ he said, then laughed a little more.

‘Surely bad enough, sir,’ Axl said. ‘It looks well able to devour each of us in turn.’

They might have been gazing at a large skinned animal: an opaque membrane, like the lining of a sheep’s stomach, was stretched tightly over the sinews and joints. Swathed as it was now in moonshadow, the beast appeared roughly the size and shape of a bull, but its head was distinctly wolf-like and of a darker hue - though even here the impression was of blackening by flames rather than of naturally dark fur or flesh. The jaws were massive, the eyes reptilian.

Sir Gawain was still laughing to himself. ‘Coming down that gloomy tunnel my wild imaginings had readied me for worse. Once, sir, on the marshes at Dumum, I faced wolves with the heads of hideous hags! And at Mount Culwich, double-

headed ogres that spewed blood at you even as they roared their battle-cry! Here's little more than an angry dog.'

'Yet it bars our way to freedom, Sir Gawain.'

'It does that for sure. So we may stare at it for an hour until the soldiers come down the tunnel behind us. Or we may lift this gate and fight it.'

'I'm inclined to think it a foe darker than a fierce dog, Sir Gawain. I ask you not to grow complacent.'

'I'm an old man, sir, and it's many a year since I swung this blade in anger. Yet I'm still a knight well trained, and if this be a beast of this earth, I'll get the better of it.'

'See, Axl,' Beatrice said, 'how its eyes follow Master Edwin.'

Edwin, now strangely calm, had been walking experimentally, first left, then to the right, always staring back at the beast whose gaze never left him.

'The dog hungers for the boy,' Sir Gawain said thoughtfully. 'It may be there's dragon spawn within this monster.'

'Whatever its nature,' Axl said, 'it awaits our next move with strange patience.'

'Then let me propose this, friends,' said Sir Gawain.

'I'm loath to use this Saxon boy like a young goat tied to trap a wolf. Yet he seems a brave lad, and in no less danger wandering here weapon-less. Let him take the candle and go stand there at the back of the chamber. Then if you, Master Axl, can somehow raise this gate again, perhaps even with your good wife's help, the beast will be free to come through. My fancy is it will make straight for the boy. Knowing the path of its charge, I'll stand here and cut it down as it passes. Do you approve the scheme, sir?'

‘It’s a desperate one. Yet I too fear the soldiers will soon discover this tunnel. So let’s try it, sir, and even with my wife and I hanging together on the rope, we’ll do our best to raise this gate. Princess, explain to Master Edwin our plan and let’s see if he’ll enter into it.’

But Edwin seemed to have grasped Sir Gawain’s strategy without a word being said to him. Taking the candle from the knight, the boy measured out ten good strides over the bones till he was back in the shadows. When he turned again, the candle below his face barely trembled, and revealed blazing eyes fixed on the creature beyond the bars.

‘Quick then, princess,’ Axl said. ‘Climb on my back and try to reach the rope’s end. See where it dangles there.’

At first they nearly toppled over. Then they used the pillar itself to support them, and after a little more groping, he heard her say: ‘I hold it, Axl. Release me and it’ll surely come down with me. Catch me so I don’t fall all at once.’

‘Sir Gawain,’ Axl called softly. ‘Are you ready, sir?’

‘We’re ready.’

‘If the beast passes you, then surely it’s the end of this brave boy.’

‘I know it, sir. And it will not pass.’

‘Let me down slowly, Axl. If I’m still in the air holding the rope, reach up and tug me down.’

Axl released Beatrice and for an instant she hung suspended in the air, her body weight insufficient to raise the gate. Then Axl managed to grip another portion of the rope close to her two hands, and they tugged together. At first nothing happened, then something yielded, and the gate

rose with a shudder. Axl continued tugging, and unable to see the effect, called out: 'Is it high yet, sir?'

There was a pause before Sir Gawain's voice came back. 'The dog stares our way and nothing now between us.'

Twisting, Axl looked around the pillar in time to see the beast leap forward. The old knight's face, caught in moonlight, looked aghast as he swung his sword, but too late, and the creature was past him and moving unerringly towards Edwin.

The boy's eyes grew large, but he did not drop the candle. Instead he moved aside, almost as if out of politeness, to let the beast pass. And to Axl's surprise, the creature did just that, running on into the blackness of the tunnel out of which not long ago they had all emerged.

'I'll hold it up yet,' Axl shouted. 'Cross the threshold and save yourselves!'

But neither Beatrice beside him, nor Sir Gawain, who had lowered his sword, seemed to hear. Even Edwin appeared to have lost interest in the terrible creature that had just sped past him and would surely return any moment. The boy, candle held before him, came over to where the old knight was standing, and together they stared down at the ground.

'Let the gate fall, Master Axl,' Sir Gawain said without looking up. 'We'll raise it again soon enough.'

The old knight and the boy, Axl realised, were regarding with fascination something moving on the ground before them. He let the gate fall, and as he did so, Beatrice said:

'A fearsome thing, Axl, and I've no need to see it. But go and look if you will and tell me what you see.'

'Didn't the beast run into the tunnel, princess?'

'Some of it did, and I heard its footsteps cease. Now, Axl, go and see the part of it lies at the knight's feet.'

As Axl came towards them, Sir Gawain and Edwin both started as though shaken from a trance. Then they moved aside and Axl saw the beast's head in the moonlight.

'The jaws will not cease,' Sir Gawain said in a perturbed tone. 'I've a mind to take my sword to it again, yet fear that would be a desecration to bring more evil upon us. Yet I wish it would cease moving.'

Indeed it was hard to believe the severed head was not a living thing. It lay on its side, the one visible eye gleaming like a sea creature. The jaws moved rhythmically with a strange energy, so that the tongue, flopping amidst the teeth, appeared to stir with life.

'We're beholden to you, Sir Gawain,' Axl said.

'A mere dog, sir, and I'd happily face worse. Yet this Saxon boy shows rare courage, and I'm glad to have done him some service. But now we must hurry on, and with caution too, for who knows what occurs above us, or even if a second beast awaits beyond that chamber.'

They now discovered a crank behind one of the pillars, and fastening the rope end to it, soon raised the gate without difficulty. Leaving the beast's head where it had fallen, they passed under the portcullis, Sir Gawain once more leading, sword poised, and Edwin at the rear.

The second chamber of the mausoleum showed clear signs of having served as the beast's lair: amidst the ancient bones were fresher carcasses of sheep and deer, as well as other dark, foulsmelling shapes they could not identify. Then they were once more walking stooped and short of breath along a winding passage. They encountered no more beasts, and eventually they heard birdsong. A patch of light appeared in the distance, and then they came out into the forest, the early dawn all around them.

In a kind of daze, Axl came upon a cluster of roots rising between two large trees, and taking Beatrice's hand,

helped her sit down on it. At first Beatrice was too short of breath to speak, but after a moment she looked up, saying:

‘There’s room here beside me, husband. If we’re safe for now, let’s sit together and watch the stars fade. I’m thankful we’re both well and that evil tunnel’s behind us.’ Then she said: ‘Where’s Master Edwin, Axl? I don’t see him.’

Looking about him in the half-light, Axl spotted Sir Gawain’s figure nearby, silhouetted against the dawn, head bowed, a hand on a tree trunk to steady him while he regained his breath. But there was no sign of the boy.

‘Just now he was behind us,’ Axl said. ‘I even heard him exclaim as we came into the fresh air.’

‘I watched him hasten on, sir,’ Sir Gawain said without turning, his breath still laboured. ‘Not being elderly as the rest of us, he’s no need to lean on oaks panting and gasping. I suppose he hurries back to the monastery to rescue Master Wistan.’

‘Didn’t you think to delay him, sir? Surely he hurries to grave danger, and Master Wistan by now killed or captured.’

‘What would you have me do, sir? I did all I could. Hid myself in that airless place. Overcame the beast though it had devoured many brave men before us. Then at the end of it all, the boy runs back to the monastery! Am I to give chase with this heavy armour and sword? I’m all done in, sir. All done in. What’s my duty now? I must pause and think it over. What would Arthur have me do?’

‘Are we to understand, Sir Gawain,’ Beatrice asked, ‘that it was you in the first place came to tell the abbot of Master Wistan’s real identity as a Saxon warrior from the east?’

‘Why go through it again, mistress? Did I not lead you to safety? So many skulls we trod upon before coming out to this sweet dawn! So many. No need to look down, one hears their cackle with each tread. How many dead, sir? A hundred? A thousand? Did you count, Master Axl? Or were you not there, sir?’ He was still a silhouette beside a tree, his words sometimes hard to catch now the birds had begun their early chorus.

‘Whatever the history of this night,’ Axl said, ‘we owe you much thanks, Sir Gawain. Clearly your courage and skill remain undiminished. Yet I too have a question to put to you.’

‘Spare me, sir, enough. How can I chase a nimble youth up these wooded slopes? I’m drained, sir, and perhaps not just of breath.’

‘Sir Gawain, were we not comrades once long ago?’

‘Spare me, sir. I did my duty tonight. Is that not enough? Now I must go find my poor Horace, tied to a branch so he wouldn’t wander, yet what if a wolf or bear comes upon him?’

‘The mist hangs heavily across my past,’ Axl said.

‘Yet lately I find myself reminded of some task, and one of gravity, with which I was once entrusted. Was it a law, a great law to bring all men closer to God? Your presence, and your talk of Arthur, stirs long-faded thoughts, Sir Gawain.’

‘My poor Horace, sir, so dislikes the forest at night. The hooting owl or the screech of a fox is enough to frighten him, no matter he’ll face a shower of arrows without flinching. I’ll go to him now, and let me urge you good people not to rest here too late. Forget the young Saxons, the pair of them. Think now of your own cherished son waiting for you at his village. Best go on your way quickly, I say, now you’re without your blankets and provisions. The river’s near and a fast tide on it flowing east. A friendly word with

a bargeman may secure you a ride downstream. But don't dally here, for who knows when soldiers will come this way? God protect you, friends.'

With a rustle and a few thumps, Sir Gawain's form disappeared into the dark foliage. After a moment, Beatrice said:

'We didn't bid him farewell, Axl, and I feel poorly for it. Yet that was a strange leave he took of us and a sudden one.'

'I thought so too, princess. But perhaps he gives us wise counsel. We should hurry on to our son and never mind our recent companions. I feel concern for poor Master Edwin, yet if he'll hasten back to the monastery, what can we do for him?'

'Let's rest just a moment longer, Axl. Soon we'll be on our way, the two of us, and we'd do well to seek a barge to speed our journey. Our son must be wondering what keeps us.'

Chapter Eight

The young monk was a thin, sickly-looking Pict who spoke Edwin's language well. No doubt he had been delighted to have in his company someone nearer his own age, and for the first part of the journey down through the dawn mists, he had talked with relish. But since entering the trees, the young monk had fallen silent and Edwin now wondered if he had in some way offended his guide. More likely the monk was simply anxious not to attract the attention of whatever lurked in these woods; amidst the pleasant birdsong, there had been some strange hissings and murmurs. When Edwin had asked once again, more from a wish to break the silence than for reassurance, 'So my brother's wounds seemed not to be mortal?' the reply had been almost curt.

'Father Jonus says not. There's none wiser.'

Wistan, then, could not be so badly hurt. Indeed, he must have managed this same journey down the hill not long ago, and while it was still dark. Had he had to lean heavily on the arm of his guide? Or had he managed to go mounted on his mare, perhaps with a monk holding steady the bridle?

'Show this boy down to the cooper's cottage. And take care no one sees you leave the monastery.' Such, according to the young monk, had been Father Jonus's instruction to him. So Edwin would soon be reunited with the warrior, but what sort of welcome could he expect? He had let Wistan down at the first challenge. Instead of hurrying to his side at the first sign of battle, Edwin had run off into the long tunnel. But his mother had not been down there, and only when the tunnel's end had finally appeared, distant and moon-like in the blackness, had he felt lifting from him the heavy clouds of dream and realised with horror what had occurred.

At least he had done his utmost once he had emerged into the chilly morning air. He had run almost the whole way back up to the monastery, slowing only for the steepest slopes. Sometimes, pushing through the woods, he had felt himself lost, but then the trees had thinned and the monastery had appeared against the pale sky. So he had gone on climbing and arrived at the big gate, breathless and with his legs aching.

The small door beside the main gate was unlocked, and he had managed to collect himself sufficiently to enter the grounds with stealthy care. He had been aware of smoke for the latter part of his climb, but now it tickled his chest, making it hard not to cough loudly. He knew then for sure it was too late to move the hay wagon, and felt a great emptiness opening within him. But he had pushed the feeling aside for another moment, and pressed on into the grounds.

For some time he came across neither monk nor soldier. But as he moved along the high wall, ducking his head so as not to be spotted from some far-off window, he had seen below the soldiers' horses crowded together in the small yard inside the main gate. Bound on all sides by high walls, the animals, still saddled, were circling nervously, even though there was scarcely space to do so without colliding. Then as he came towards the monks' quarters, where another of his age might well have rushed on to the central courtyard, he had had the presence of mind to recall the geography of the grounds and proceed by a roundabout route, utilising what he remembered of the back ways. Even on reaching his destination, he had placed himself behind a stone pillar and peered round cautiously.

The central courtyard was barely recognisable. Three robed figures were sweeping wearily, and as he watched, a fourth arrived with a pail and tossed water across the cobbles, setting to flight several lurking crows. The ground was strewn in places with straw and with sand, and his eyes were drawn to the several shapes covered over with sackcloth, which he supposed to be corpses. The old stone tower, where

he knew Wistan had held out, loomed over the scene, but this too had changed: it was charred and blackened in many places, especially around its arched entry-way and each of its narrow windows. To Edwin's eyes the tower as a whole appeared to have shrunk. He had been craning his neck around the pillar to ascertain if the pools surrounding the covered shapes were of blood or of water, when the bony hands had grasped his shoulders from behind.

He had twisted around to find Father Ninian, the silent monk, staring into his eyes. Edwin had not cried out, but had said, in a low voice, pointing towards the bodies: 'Master Wistan, my Saxon brother. Does he lie there?'

The silent monk appeared to understand, and shook his head emphatically. But even as he raised a finger to his lips in the familiar manner, he had stared warningly into Edwin's face. Then, glancing furtively around him, Ninian had tugged Edwin away from the courtyard.

'Can we be certain, warrior,' he had asked Wistan the day before, 'the soldiers will really come? Who'll tell them we're here? Surely these monks believe us but simple shepherds.'

'Who knows, boy. Perhaps we'll be left in peace. But there's one I fancy may betray our presence here, and even now the good Brennus may be issuing his orders. Test it well, young comrade. Britons have a way of dividing a bale from within with wooden slats. We need it pure hay all the way down.'

He and Wistan had been in the barn behind the old tower. Having for the moment done with woodcutting, the warrior had been seized by the urge to load the rickety wagon high with the hay stored at the back of the shed. As they had set about this task, Edwin had been required at regular intervals to clamber up onto the bales and prod into them with a stick. The warrior, observing carefully from the ground, would

sometimes make him go over a section again, or order him to thrust a leg as far down as possible into a particular spot.

‘These holy men are just the sort to get absent-minded,’ Wistan had said by way of explanation. ‘They may have left a spade or pitchfork in the hay. If so, it would be a service to retrieve it for them, tools being scarce up here.’

Although at that point the warrior had given no hint as to the purpose of the hay, Edwin had known straight away it had to do with the confrontation ahead, and that was why, as the bales had piled up, he had asked his question about the soldiers.

‘Who’ll betray us, warrior? The monks don’t suspect us. They’re so concerned with their holy quarrels, they hardly glance our way.’

‘Maybe so, boy. But test there too. Just there.’

‘Can it be, warrior, it’s the old couple will betray us? Surely they’re too foolish and honest.’

‘They may be Britons, but I don’t fear their treachery. Yet you’d be wrong to suppose them foolish, boy. Master Axl, for one, is a deep fellow.’

‘Warrior, why do we travel with them? They slow us at every turn.’

‘They slow us, right enough, and we’ll part ways soon. Yet this morning as we set off, I felt eager for Master Axl’s company. And I may wish for more of it yet. As I say, he’s a deep one. He and I may have a little more to discuss. But just now let’s concentrate on what faces us here. We must load this wagon in a sure and steady way. We need pure hay. No wood or iron there. See how I depend on you, boy.’

But Edwin had let him down. How could he have gone on sleeping for so long? It had been a mistake to lie down at all. He should simply have sat upright in the corner, napping

a few winks the way he had seen Wistan do, ready at the first noise to start to his feet. Instead, like an infant, he had accepted from the old woman a cup of milk, and fallen into a deep sleep in his corner of the chamber.

Had his real mother called him in his dreams? Perhaps that was why he had remained asleep for so long. And why, when he had been shaken awake by the crippled monk, instead of rushing to the warrior's side, he had followed after the others down into the long, strange tunnel, for all the world as if he were still in the depths of dreaming.

It had been his mother's voice without doubt, the same voice that had called to him in the barn. 'Find the strength for me, Edwin. Find the strength and come rescue me. Come rescue me. Come rescue me.' There had been an urgency there he had not heard the previous morning. And there had been more: as he had stood at that open trap-door, staring down at the steps leading into the darkness, he had felt something pull at him with such force he had become giddy, almost sick.

The young monk was holding back blackthorn with a stick, waiting for Edwin to go ahead of him. Now at last he spoke, though in a hushed voice.

'A short cut. We'll soon see the roof of the cooper's cottage.'

As they came out of the woods to where the land swept down into the receding mist, Edwin could still hear movement and hissing in the nearby bracken. And he thought of the sunny evening towards the end of summer, when he had talked with the girl.

He had not at first seen the pond that day, for it had been small and well hidden by rushes. A cloud of brightly coloured insects had flown up before him, an event normally to draw his attention, but on this occasion he had been too preoccupied by the noise coming from the water's edge. An animal in a trap? There it was again, behind the birdsong and

the wind. The noise followed a pattern: an intense burst of rustling, as of a struggle, then silence. Then soon, more rustling. Approaching cautiously, he had heard laboured breathing. Then the girl had been before him.

She was lying on her back in the rough grass, her torso twisted to one side. She was a few years older than him - fifteen or sixteen - and her eyes were fixed on him without fear. It took a while to realise her odd posture had to do with her hands being tied under her body. The flattened grass around her marked the area where, by pushing with her legs, she had been sliding about in her struggles. Her cloth smock, tied at the waist, was discoloured - perhaps soaked - all along one side, and both her legs, unusually dark-skinned, bore fresh scratches from the thistles.

It occurred to him she was an apparition or a sprite, but when she spoke her voice had no echo to it.

‘What do you want? Why have you come?’

Recovering himself, Edwin said: ‘If you like, I could help you.’

‘These knots aren’t difficult. They just tied me more tightly than usual.’

Only now did he notice her face and neck were covered in perspiration. Even as she spoke, her hands, under her back, were busily struggling.

‘Are you hurt?’ he asked.

‘Not hurt. But a beetle landed on my knee just now. It clung on and bit me. There’ll be a swelling now. I can see you’re still too much of a child to help me. It doesn’t matter, I’ll manage myself.’

Her gaze remained fixed on him, even as her face tightened and she twisted and raised her torso a little way off the ground. He watched, transfixed, expecting at any moment to see the hands come out from under her. But she

sagged down defeated and lay in the grass, breathing hard and staring angrily at him.

‘I could help,’ Edwin said. ‘I’m good with knots.’

‘You’re just a child.’

‘I’m not. I’m nearly twelve.’

‘They’ll come back soon. If they find you’ve untied me, they’ll beat you.’

‘Are they grown-ups?’

‘They think they are, but they’re just boys. Older than you though and there’s three of them. They’d like nothing better than to beat you. They’ll force your head into that muddy water until you pass out. I’ve watched them do it before.’

‘Are they from the village?’

‘The village?’ She looked at him with contempt. ‘*Your* village? We pass village after village every day. What do we care about your village? They may come back soon, then you’ll be in trouble.’

‘I’m not afraid. I could free you if you like.’

‘I always free myself.’ She twisted again.

‘Why did they tie you?’

‘Why? I suppose so they could watch. Watch me try to get free. But they’re gone now, to steal food.’ Then she said:

‘I thought you villagers worked all day. Why does your mother let you wander?’

‘I’m allowed because I finished three corners by myself already today.’ Then he added: ‘My real mother’s not in the village any more.’

‘Where’s she gone?’

‘I don’t know. She was taken. I live with my aunt now.’

‘When I was a child like you,’ she said, ‘I lived in a village. Now I travel.’

‘Who do you travel with?’

‘Oh ... with them. We pass this way quite often. I remember them tying me and leaving me here once before, this very spot, last spring.’

‘I’ll release you,’ he said suddenly. ‘And if they come back, I won’t be frightened of them.’

Yet something still held him back. He had expected her eyes to shift away, or her body at least to accommodate the prospect of his approach. But she had gone on staring at him, while under her arched back her hands continued their struggle. Only when she let out a long sigh did he realise she had been holding her breath for some time.

‘I can usually do it,’ she said. ‘If you weren’t here, I’d have done it by now.’

‘Do they tie you to stop you running away?’

‘Run away? Where would I run away? I travel with them.’ Then she said: ‘Why did you come to me? Why don’t you go help your mother instead?’

‘My mother?’ He was genuinely surprised. ‘Why should my mother want me to help her?’

‘You said she was taken, didn’t you?’

‘Yes, but that was long ago. She’s happy now.’

‘How can she be happy? Don’t you think she wants someone to come and help her?’

‘She’s just travelling. She wouldn’t want me to ...’

‘She didn’t want you to come before because you were a child. But you’re nearly a man now.’ She fell silent, arching her back as she made another concerted effort. Then she sagged back down again. ‘Sometimes,’ she said, ‘if

they come back and I haven't got myself free, they don't untie me. They watch and don't say a word until I manage by myself and my hands come loose. Until then they sit there watching and watching, their devil's horns growing between their legs. I'd mind it less if they spoke. But they stare and stare and don't say anything.' Then she said: 'When I saw you, I thought you'd do the same. I thought you'd sit and stare and not say a thing.'

'Shall I untie you? I'm not afraid of them, and I'm good with knots.'

'You're only a child.' Suddenly tears appeared. It happened so quickly, and because her face showed no other sign of emotion, Edwin thought at first he was watching perspiration. But then he realised they were tears, and because her face was half-upturned, the tears rolled oddly, past the bridge of her nose and down the opposite cheek. All the while she held her gaze on him. The tears confused him, making him stop in his tracks.

'Come on then,' she said, and for the first time moved onto her side, letting her gaze fall away towards the bulrushes in the water.

Edwin hurried forward, like a thief spying an opportunity, and crouching in the grass began to tug at the knots. The twine was thin and coarse, cutting cruelly into her wrists; the palms, in contrast, spread open one across the other, were small and tender. At first the knots did not yield, but he forced himself to be calm and studied carefully the path the coils took. Then when he tried again, the knot gave under his touch. Now he went about his work more confidently, glancing from time to time at the soft palms, waiting like a pair of docile creatures.

After he pulled the twine from her, she turned and sat facing him at what suddenly felt an uncomfortably close distance. She did not, he noticed, smell of stale excrement

the way most people did: her odour was like that of a fire made from damp wood.

‘If they come,’ she said quietly, ‘they’ll drag you through the reeds then half-drown you. You’d better go. Go back to your village.’ She reached out a hand experimentally, as though unsure if even now it was under her control, and pushed his chest. ‘Go. Hurry.’

‘I’m not afraid of them.’

‘You’re not afraid. But they’ll still do all these things to you. You helped me, but you have to go away now. Go, hurry.’

When he returned just before sunset, the grass was still flattened where she had lain, but there was no other trace left of her. All the same, the spot felt almost uncannily tranquil, and he had sat down in the grass for some moments, watching the bulrushes waving in the wind.

He never told anyone about the girl - not his aunt, who would quickly have concluded she was a demon, nor any of the other boys. But in the weeks that followed, a vivid image of her had often returned to him unbidden; sometimes at night, within his dreams; often in broad daylight, as he was digging the ground or helping to mend a roof, and then the devil’s horn would grow between his legs. Eventually the horn would go away, leaving him with a feeling of shame, and then the girl’s words would return to him: ‘Why did you come to me? Why don’t you go help your mother instead?’

But how could he go to his mother? The girl herself had said he was ‘only a child’. Then again, as she had pointed out, he would soon be a man. Whenever he recalled those words, he would feel his shame anew, and yet he had been able to see no way forward.

But that had all changed the moment Wistan had thrown open the barn door, forcing in the dazzling light, and declared that it was he, Edwin, who had been chosen for the

mission. And now here they were, Edwin and the warrior, travelling across the country, and surely it would not be long till they came upon her. Then the men travelling with her would tremble.

But had it really been her voice that had led him away? Had it not been sheer terror of the soldiers? Such questions drifted into his mind as he followed the young monk down a barely trodden path beside a descending stream. Was he sure he had not simply panicked when he had been awoken and seen from the window the soldiers running about the old tower? But now, when he considered it all carefully, he was certain he had felt no fear. And earlier, during the day, when the warrior had led him into that same tower and they had talked, Edwin had felt only an impatience to stand at Wistan's side in the face of the oncoming enemy.

Wistan had been preoccupied with the old tower from the time they had first arrived at the monastery. Edwin could remember him continually glancing up at it while they had been cutting logs in the woodshed. And when they had pushed the barrow around the grounds to deliver the firewood, they had twice made diversions just to go past it. So it had come as no surprise, once the monks had disappeared into their meeting and the courtyard was empty, that the warrior should lean the axe on the woodpile and say: 'Come a moment, young comrade, and we'll examine more closely this tall and ancient friend who stares down at us. It seems to me he watches where we go, and takes offence we've yet to pay him a visit.'

As they had entered under the low arch into the chilly dimness of the tower's interior, the warrior had said to him: 'Take care. You think you're inside, but look to your feet.'

Glancing down, Edwin had seen in front of him a kind of moat which followed the circular wall all the way to form a ring. It was too wide for a man to leap, and the simple bridge of two planks was the only way to reach the central

floor of trodden earth. As he stepped onto the planks, gazing down into the darkness below, he heard the warrior say behind him:

‘Notice there’s no water there, young comrade. And even if you fell right in, I’d say you’d find it no deeper than your own height. Curious, don’t you think? Why a moat on the *inside*? Why a moat at all for a small tower like this? What good can it do?’ Wistan came over the planks himself and tested with his heel the central floor. ‘Perhaps,’ he went on, ‘the ancients built this tower to slaughter animals. Perhaps once this was their killing floor. What they didn’t wish to keep of an animal, they simply pushed over the side into the moat. What do you think, boy?’

‘That’s possible, warrior,’ Edwin said. ‘Yet it would have been no easy thing to lead a beast across narrow planks like that.’

‘Perhaps in olden times there was a better bridge here,’ Wistan said. ‘Sturdy enough to bear an ox or a bull. Once the beast had been led over, and it guessed its fate, or when the first blow failed to make it sink to its knees, this arrangement ensured it could not easily flee. Imagine the animal twisting, trying to charge, yet finding the moat wherever it turned. And the one small bridge so hard to locate in a frenzy. It’s no foolish notion, that this was once such a place of slaughter. Tell me, boy, what do you find when you look up?’

Edwin, seeing the circle of sky high above, said: ‘It’s open at the top, warrior. Like a chimney.’

‘You say something interesting there. Let’s hear it again.’

‘It’s like a chimney, warrior.’

‘What do you make of it?’

‘If the ancients used this place for their slaughter, warrior, they’d have been able to build a fire just where we now stand. They could have jointed the animal, roasted the meat, the smoke escaping up to the sky.’

‘It’s likely, boy, just as you say. I wonder if these Christian monks have any inkling of what went on here once? These gentlemen, I fancy, come inside this tower for its quiet and seclusion. See how thick is this circling wall. Hardly a sound comes through it, though the crows were shrieking as we entered. And the way the light comes from on high. It must remind them of their god’s grace. What do you say, boy?’

‘The gentlemen might come in here and pray, right enough, warrior. Though this ground’s too soiled to kneel on.’

‘Perhaps they pray standing, guessing little how this was once a place of slaughter and burning. What else do you see looking up, boy?’

‘Nothing, sir.’

‘Nothing?’

‘Only the steps, warrior.’

‘Ah, the steps. Tell me about the steps.’

‘They first rise over the moat, then circle and circle, bending with the roundness of the wall. They rise till they reach the sky at the top.’

‘That’s well observed. Now listen carefully.’ Wistan stepped closer and lowered his voice. ‘This place, not just this old tower, but this entire place, all of what men today call this monastery, I’d wager was once a hillfort built by our Saxon forefathers in times of war. So it contains many cunning traps to welcome invading Britons.’ The warrior moved away and slowly paced the perimeter of the floor, staring down into the moat. Eventually he looked up again and

said: 'Imagine this place a fort, boy. The siege broken after many days, the enemy pouring in. Fighting in every yard, on every wall. Now picture this. Two of our Saxon cousins, out there in the yard, hold back a large body of Britons. They fight bravely, but the enemy's too great in number and our heroes must retreat. Let's suppose they retreat here, into this very tower. They skip across the little bridge and turn to face their foes at this very spot. The Britons grow confident. They have our cousins cornered. They press in with their swords and axes, hurry over the bridge towards our heroes. Our brave kin bring down the first of them, but soon must retreat further. Look there, boy. They retreat up those winding stairs along the wall. Still more Britons cross the moat until this space where we stand is filled. Yet the Britons' greater numbers can't yet be turned to advantage. For our brave cousins fight two abreast on the stairs, and the invaders can but meet them two against two. Our heroes are skilled, and though they retreat higher and higher, the invaders cannot overwhelm them. As Britons fall, those following take their place, then fall in their turn. But surely our cousins grow weary. Higher and higher they retreat, the invaders pursue them stair by stair. But what's this? What's this, Edwin? Do our kin finally lose their nerve? They turn and run the remaining circles of steps, only now and then striking behind them. This is surely the end. The Britons are triumphant. Those watching from down here smile like hungry men before a banquet. But look carefully, boy. What do you see? What do you see as our Saxon cousins near that halo of sky above?' Grasping Edwin's shoulders, Wistan repositioned him, pointing up to the opening. 'Speak, boy. What do you see?'

'Our cousins spring a trap, sir. They retreat upwards only to draw in the Britons as ants to a honey pot.'

'Well said, lad! And how's the trap made?'

Edwin considered for a moment, then said: 'Just before the stairway reaches its highest point, warrior, I can see

what looks from here to be an alcove. Or is it a doorway?’

‘Good. And what do you suppose hides there?’

‘Can it be a dozen of our greatest warriors? Then together with our two cousins, they can fight their way down again till they cut into the ranks of the Britons here below.’

‘Think again, boy.’

‘A fierce bear, then, warrior. Or a lion.’

‘When did you last meet a lion, boy?’

‘Fire, warrior. There’s fire behind that alcove.’

‘Well said, boy. We can’t know for sure what happened so long ago. Yet I’d wager that’s what waited up there. In that little alcove, hardly glimpsed from down here, was a torch, or maybe two or three, blazing behind that wall. Tell me the rest, boy.’

‘Our cousins throw the torches down.’

‘What, onto the heads of the enemy?’

‘No, warrior. Down into the moat.’

‘The moat? Filled with water?’

‘No, warrior. The moat’s filled with firewood. Just like the firewood we’ve sweated to cut.’

‘Just so, boy. And we’ll cut more yet before the moon’s high. And we’ll find ourselves plenty of dry hay too. A chimney, you said, boy. You’re right. It’s a chimney we stand in now. Our forefathers built it for just such a purpose. Why else a tower here, when a man looking from the top has no better view than one at the wall outside? But imagine, boy, a torch dropping into this so-called moat. Then another. When we circled this place earlier, I saw at its back, close to the ground, openings in the stone. That means a strong wind from the east, such as we have tonight, will fan the flames

ever higher. And how are the Britons to escape the inferno? A solid wall around them, only a single narrow bridge to freedom, and the moat itself ablaze. But let's leave this place, boy. It may be this ancient tower grows displeased we should guess so many of his secrets.'

Wistan turned towards the planks, but Edwin was still gazing up to the top of the tower.

'But warrior,' he said. 'Our two brave cousins. Must they burn in the flames with their foes?'

'If they did, wouldn't it be a glorious bargain? Yet perhaps it needn't come to that. Perhaps our two cousins, even as the scalding heat rises, race to the rim of the opening and leap from the top. Would they do that, boy? Even though they lack wings?'

'They have no wings,' Edwin said, 'but their comrades may have brought a wagon behind the tower. A wagon loaded deep with hay.'

'It's possible, boy. Who knows what went on here in ancient days? Now let's finish with our dreaming and cut a little more wood. For surely these good monks face many chilly nights yet before the summer comes.'

In a battle, there was no time for elaborate exchanges of information. A swift look, a wave of a hand, a barked word over the noise: that was all true warriors needed to convey their wishes to one another. It had been in such a spirit Wistan had made his thoughts clear that afternoon in the tower, and Edwin had let him down utterly.

But had the warrior expected too much? Even old Steffa had only talked of Edwin's great promise, what he would become *once he had been taught the warrior's ways*. Wistan had yet to finish training him, so how was Edwin to respond with such understanding? And now, it seems, the warrior was wounded, but surely this could not be Edwin's fault alone.

The young monk had paused by the edge of the stream to unfasten his shoes. 'This is where we ford,' he said. 'The bridge is much further down and the land there's too open. We may be seen from even the next hilltop.' Then pointing to Edwin's shoes, he said: 'Those look skilfully crafted. Did you make them yourself?'

'Master Baldwin made them for me. The most skilled shoemaker in the village, even though he has fits every full moon.'

'Off with them. A soaking's sure to wreck them. Can you see the stepping stones? Lower your head more, and try to gaze beneath the water's surface. There, you see them? That's our pathway. Keep them in your sight and you'll stay dry.'

Again, the young monk's tone had something curt about it. Could it be that since they had set off he had had time to piece together in his mind Edwin's role in what had occurred? At the start of their journey, the young monk had not only been warmer in manner, he had hardly been able to stop talking.

They had met in the chilly corridor outside Father Jonus's cell, where Edwin had been waiting while several voices, lowered but passionate, argued from within. The dread of what he might soon be told had mounted, and Edwin had been relieved when instead of being summoned inside, he had seen the young monk emerge, a cheerful smile on his face.

'I've been chosen to be your guide,' he had said triumphantly, in Edwin's language. 'Father Jonus says we're to go at once and slip out unseen. Be brave, young cousin, you'll be at your brother's side before long.'

The young monk had an odd way of walking, clutching himself tightly like someone intensely cold, both arms lost within his robe, so that Edwin, following him down the mountain path, had wondered at first if he was one of those born with missing limbs. But as soon as the monastery was

safely behind them, the young monk had fallen in step beside him, and producing a thin, long arm had placed it supportively around Edwin's shoulders.

'It was foolish of you to come back as you did, and after you'd made good your escape. Father Jonus was angry to hear of it. But here you are, safely away again, and with luck no one's the wiser about your return. But what an affair this is! Is your brother always so quarrelsome? Or is it one of the soldiers made some fierce insult to him in passing? Perhaps once you reach his bedside, young cousin, you'll ask him how it all began, for none of us can make head or tail of it. If it was he who insulted the soldiers, then it must have been something strong indeed, for they as one forgot whatever purpose brought them to see the abbot, and turning into wild men, set about trying to extract payment for his boldness. I myself woke at the sounds of the shouting, even though my own chamber's far from the courtyard. I ran there in alarm, only to stand helpless alongside my fellow monks, watching in horror all that unfolded. Your brother, they soon told me, had run into the ancient tower to escape the wrath of the soldiers, and though they rushed in after him with a mind to tear him limb from limb, it seems he began to fight them as best he knew. And a surprising match he seemed to be, even though they were thirty or more and he just one Saxon shepherd. We watched expecting any moment to see his bloody remains brought out, and instead it's soldier after soldier running from that tower in panic, or staggering out carrying wounded comrades. We could hardly believe our eyes! We were praying for the quarrel soon to end, for whatever the original insult, such violence's surely uncalled for. Yet it went on and on, and then, young cousin, the dreadful accident occurred. Who knows it wasn't God himself, frowning on so black a quarrel within his holy buildings, pointed a finger and struck them with fire? More likely it was one of the soldiers running back and forth with torches tripped and made his great error. The horror of it! Suddenly the tower was ablaze! And who'd think an old damp tower could offer so much

kindling? Yet blaze it did and Lord Brennus's men together with your brother caught within. They'd have done better forgetting their quarrel at once and running out as fast as they could, but I fancy they thought instead to fight the flames, and saw only too late the fires engulfing them. An accident of true ghastliness, and the few who came out did so just to die twisting horribly on the ground. Yet miracle of miracles, young cousin, your brother it turns out escaped! Father Ninian found him wandering the darkness of the grounds, dazed and wounded, but still alive, even as the rest of us watched the blazing tower and prayed for the trapped men inside. Your brother lives, but Father Jonus, who himself treated his wounds, has counselled the few of us who know this news to keep it a solemn secret, even from the abbot himself. For he fears if the news gets further, Lord Brennus will send out more soldiers seeking vengeance, not caring that most died by accident and not by your brother's hand. You'd do well not to whisper a word of it to anyone, at least not until you're both far from this country. Father Jonus was angry you should risk yourself returning to the monastery, yet he's contented he can the more easily reunite you with your brother. "They must travel together out of this country," he said. The best of men is Father Jonus, and still our wisest, even after what the birds have done to him. I dare say your brother owes him and Father Ninian his life.'

But that had been earlier. Now the young monk had become distant, and his arms were once again tucked firmly within his robe. As Edwin followed him across the stream, trying his best to see the rocks beneath the swiftly running water, the thought came to him that he should make a clean breast of it to the warrior; tell him about his mother and how she had called to him. If he explained it all from the start, honestly and frankly, it was possible Wistan would understand and give him another chance.

A shoe in each hand, Edwin sprang lightly towards the next rock, faintly cheered by this possibility.

PART III

Gawain' s First Reverie

Those dark widows. For what purpose did God place them on this mountain path before me? Does he wish to test my humility? Is it not enough he watches me save that gentle couple, the wounded boy also, slay a devil dog, sleep barely an hour on dew-soaked leaves before rising to learn my tasks are yet far from done, that Horace and I must set off again, not down to some sheltering village, but up another steep path beneath a grey sky? Yet he placed those widows there in my way, no doubt about it, and I did well to address them courteously. Even as they sank to foolish insults and throwing clumps of earth at Horace's hindquarters - as though Horace could be panicked into an unseemly gallop! - I gave them not so much as a backward glance, speaking instead into Horace's ear, reminding him we must bear all such trials well, for a far greater one awaited us up in those distant peaks where storm clouds now gathered. Besides, those weathered women with their flapping rags were once innocent maidens, some possessing beauty and grace, or at least the freshness that will often serve as well in a man's eye. Was she not that way, the one I sometimes remember when there stretches before me as much land, empty and companionless, as I could ride on a dreary autumn's day? No beauty was she, yet delightful enough for me. I only glimpsed her once, when I was young, and did I even speak to her then? Yet she returns sometimes in my mind's eye, and I believe she has visited me in my sleep, for I often awake with a mysterious contentment even as my dreams fade from me.

I felt the lingering joys of just such a feeling as Horace woke me this morning, stamping the soft forest ground where I had lain down after the night's exertions. He knows full well I no longer have the old stamina, that after such a night it is no easy thing for me to sleep but a short hour

before setting off once more. Yet seeing the sun already high over the shady roof of the forest, he would not let me sleep on. He stamped his feet until I rose, chainmail complaining. I curse this armour more and more. Has it really saved me from much? A small wound or two at best. It is the sword, not the armour, I have to thank for this abiding health. I rose and observed the leaves around me. Why so many fallen and the summer not yet old? Do these trees ail, even as they shelter us? A shaft of sun breaking through the high foliage fell across Horace's muzzle, and I watched him shake his nose from side to side, as though that beam were a fly sent to torment him. He had no pleasant night either, listening to noises of the forest all about him, wondering to what dangers his knight had gone. Displeased though I was that he aroused me so soon, when I stepped towards him, it was only to hold his neck gently in both my arms, and for a brief moment rest my head in his mane. A hard master he has, I know that. I push him on when I know him to be weary, curse him when he has done no wrong. And all this metal as much burden for him as for me. How much further will we ride together? I patted him gently, saying, 'We'll find a friendly village soon, and you'll have a better breakfast than the one you just had.'

I spoke this way believing the problem of Master Wistan settled. But we were hardly down the path, not yet out of the woods, when we came across the bedraggled monk, his shoes broken, hurrying before us to Lord Brennus's camp, and what does he tell us but that Master Wistan has escaped the monastery, leaving his pursuers of the night dead, many no more than charred bones. What a fellow! Strange how my heart fills with joy to hear the news, even though it brings back a heavy task I thought behind us. So Horace and I put aside our thoughts of hay and roast meat and good company, and now we climb uphill once more. Thankfully, at least, we travel further from that cursed monastery. In my heart, it is true, I am relieved Master Wistan did not perish at the hands of those monks and the wretched Brennus. But what a fellow! The blood he sheds each day would make the Severn overflow! He

was wounded, the bedraggled monk thought, but who can rely on one such as Master Wistan to lie down and die easily? How foolish I was to let the boy Edwin run off that way, and now who will wager against the two of them finding each other? So foolish, yet I was weary then, and besides, little imagined Master Wistan could escape. What a fellow! Had he been a man of our day, Saxon though he is, he would have won Arthur's admiration. Even the best of us would have feared to meet him as a foe. Yet yesterday, when I saw him meet Brennus's soldier in combat, I might have seen a small weakness on his left side. Or was it his clever ploy of the moment? If I watch him fight once more, I will know better. A skilful warrior all the same, and it would take a knight of Arthur to suspect it, but I thought it so, as I watched the fight. I said to myself, look there, a small lapse on the left side. One a canny opponent might just exploit. Yet which of us would not have respected him?

Yet these dark widows, why do they cross our path? Is our day not busy enough? Our patience not yet sufficiently taxed? We'll stop at the next crest, I was saying to Horace as we came up the slope. We'll stop and rest even though black clouds gather and we most likely face a storm. And if there be no trees I'll still sit down right there on the scrubbed heather and we shall rest all the same. Yet when the road finally levelled, what do we see but great birds perched on their rocks, and they rise as one, not to fly into the darkening sky, but towards us. Then I saw they were no birds, but old women in flapping cloaks, assembling on the path before us.

Why choose such a barren spot to gather? Not a cairn, nor a dry well to mark it. No thin tree nor shrub to comfort a wayfarer from sun or rain. Just these chalky rocks from which they rose, sunk into the earth on either side of the road. Let's be sure, I said to Horace, let's be sure my old eyes don't let me down and these are not bandits come to set upon us. But there was no need to draw the sword - its blade

still stinks of that devil dog's slime, no matter I thrust it deep in the ground before I slept - for they were old women sure enough, though we might have made good use of a shield or two against them. Ladies, let us remember them as ladies, Horace, now we are finally beyond them, for are they not to be pitied? We will not call them hags, even if their manners tempt us to. Let us remember that once, some among them at least possessed grace and beauty.

'Here he comes,' cried one, 'the impostor knight!' Others took up the cry as I came closer, and we might have trotted through their ranks, but I am not one to shy from adversity. So I brought Horace to a halt right in their midst, though gazing towards the next peak as if studying the gathering clouds. Only when their rags flapped around me, and I could feel the blast of their shouts, did I gaze down from the saddle at them. Were there fifteen? Twenty? Hands reached to touch Horace's flanks, and I whispered to calm him. Then I straightened and said, 'Ladies, if we are to talk, you must cease this noise!' To which they quietened, but their looks stayed angry, and I said then, 'What do you want of me, ladies? Why come upon me this way?' To which one woman calls up, 'We know you for the foolish knight too timid to complete the task given him.' And another, 'If you'd done long ago what God asked of you, would we be wandering the land in woe this way?' And yet another, 'He dreads his duty! See it on his face. He dreads his duty!'

I contained my anger and asked them to explain themselves. Whereupon one a little more civil than the rest stepped forward. 'Forgive us, knight. It's long days we've wandered under these skies and to see you in person come riding boldly our way, we cannot but make you hear our laments.'

'Mistress,' I said to her, 'I may look burdened by years. But I remain a knight of the great Arthur. If you'll tell me your troubles, I'll gladly help you as I can.'

To my dismay the women - the civil one included - all broke into a sarcastic laugh, and then a voice said: 'Had you done your duty long ago and slain the she-dragon, we'd not be wandering distressed this way.'

This shook me, and I cried out, 'What do you know of it? What do you know of Querig?' but saw in time the need for restraint. And so I spoke calmly: 'Explain it, ladies, what compels you to walk the roads this way?' To which a parched voice behind said, 'If you ask why I wander, knight, I'll happily tell you. When the boatman put to me his questions, my beloved already in the boat and reaching out to help me in, I found my most treasured memories robbed from me. I didn't know then but know now, Querig's breath was the thief robbed me, the very creature you were to have slain long ago.'

'How can you know this, mistress?' I demanded, no longer able to hide my consternation. For how can it be such vagabonds know a secret so well guarded? To which the civil one then smiles strangely and says, 'We're widows, knight. There's little can be hidden from us now.'

Only then do I feel Horace give a tremble, and I hear myself ask, 'What are you, ladies? Are you living or dead?' To which the women once more break into laughter, a jeering sound to it that makes Horace shift a hoof uneasily. I pat him gently while I say, 'Ladies, why do you laugh? Was that so foolish a question?' And the raspy voice behind says, 'See how fearful he is! Now he fears us as readily as he does the dragon!'

'What nonsense is this, lady?' I shout more forcefully, as Horace takes a step back against my wishes, and I have to tug to steady him. 'I fear no dragon, and fierce though Querig is, I've faced far greater evils in my time. If I've been slow to slay her, it's only because she hides herself with great cunning in those high rocks. You rebuke me, madam, but what do we hear of Querig now? A time was she thought

nothing of raiding a village or more each month, yet boys have grown into men since we last heard of the like. She knows I close in, so she dares not show herself beyond these hills. ’

Even as I spoke, one woman opened her raggy cloak and a clump of mud struck Horace’s neck. Intolerable, I told Horace, we must go on. What can these old crones know of our mission? I nudged him to move forward but he was strangely frozen, and I had to dig in my spur to make him push forward. Thankfully the dark figures parted before us and I was gazing again at the distant peaks. My heart sank at the thought of those desolate high grounds. Even the company of these unholy hags, I thought, might be preferable to those bleak winds. But as though to disabuse me of such sentiments, the women started up their chant behind me, and I felt more mud flung our way. But what do they chant? Do they dare cry ‘coward’? I had a mind to turn and show my wrath, yet remembered myself in time. Coward, coward. What do they know? Were they there? Were they there that day long ago we rode out to face Querig? Would they have called me coward then, or any of us five? And even after that great mission - from which only three returned - did I not then, ladies, with hardly a rest, hurry to the valley’s edge to make good my promise to the young maid?

Edra, she later told me was her name. She was no beauty, and dressed in the simplest weeds, but like that other I sometimes dream of, she had a bloom tugged my heart. I saw her on the roadside carrying her hoe in both her arms. Only lately become a woman, she was small and slight, and the sight of such innocence, wandering unprotected so near the horrors from which I just came made it impossible for me to ride by, even if I went to such a mission as I did.

‘Turn back, maiden,’ I called down from the stallion, this being before the days of Horace, when even I was young. ‘What great foolishness makes you go that way? Don’t you know a battle rages down in this valley?’

‘I know it well, sir,’ she says, and no fear meeting my eye. ‘It’s a long journey I’ve made to come this far, and soon I’ll be down the valley and join the battle.’

‘Has some sprite bewitched you, maiden? I came from the valley floor just now where seasoned warriors spew out their stomachs from dread. I’d not have you hear even a distant echo of it. And why that hoe so large for you?’

‘There’s a Saxon lord I know is down in the valley now, and I pray with all my heart he isn’t fallen and God will protect him well. For I will have him die at my hands only, after what he did to my dear mother and sisters, and I carry this hoe to do the work. It breaks the ground of a winter’s morning, so it will do well enough on this Saxon’s bones.’

I was obliged then to dismount and hold her by the arm even as she tried to pull away. If she still lives today - Edra, she later told me was her name - she would now be near your age, ladies. It may even be she was among you just now, how would I know? No great beauty, but like that other, her innocence spoke to me. ‘Let me go, sir!’ she cries, to which I say, ‘You’ll not go down into that valley. The sight from the edge alone will make you swoon.’ ‘I’m no weakling, sir,’ she cries. ‘Let me go!’ And there we stand on the roadside like two quarrelling children, and I can calm her only by saying:

‘Maiden, I see nothing will dissuade you. But think how remote the chances of your finding alone the vengeance you crave. Yet with my help your chances will improve manyfold. So be patient and sit a while out of this sun. Look there, sit beneath that elder tree, and wait for my return. I go to join four comrades on a mission which though grave with danger, won’t keep me long. Should I perish you’ll see me come this way again tied across the saddle of this same horse, and you’ll know I can no longer keep my promise. Otherwise I swear I’ll return and we’ll together go down to make your dream of vengeance true. Be patient, maiden, and if

your cause is just, as I believe it to be, God will see this lord doesn't fall before we reach him. '

Were these the words of a coward, ladies, uttered that very day, even as I rode out to face Querig? And once we were done with our task, and I saw I had been spared - though two of us five had not - I hastened back, weary as I was, to that valley's edge and the elder tree where the maid still waited, her hoe in her arms. She sprang to her feet, and the sight of her again tugged my heart. Yet when I tried once more to sway her from her intent, for I dreaded to see her enter that valley, she said angrily, 'Are you false, sir? Will you not keep your promise to me?' So I placed her on the saddle - she held the rein even as she clasped the hoe to her bosom - and I led on foot both horse and maiden down the valley slopes. Did she blanch as we first heard the din? Or when on the outskirts of the battle we met desperate Saxons, their pursuers on their heels? Did she wilt when exhausted warriors groped across our path trailing wounds along the ground? Small tears appeared and I saw her hoe tremble, but she did not turn away. For her eyes had their task, searching that bloody field left and right, far and near. Then I mounted the horse myself, and carrying her before me as if she were some gentle lamb, we rode together into the thick. Did I look timid then, thrashing with my sword, covering her with my shield, turning the horse this way and that until finally the battle tossed us both into the mud? But she was quickly on her feet, and recovering her hoe, began to tread a path through the mashed and quartered heaps. Our ears filled with the strange cries, but she seemed not to hear, the way a good Christian maid refuses the lewd shouts of the coarse men she passes. I was young then and nimble of foot, so ran about her with my sword, cutting down any who would do her harm, sheltering her with my shield from the arrows that regularly fell among us. Then she saw at last the one she sought, yet it was as if we were adrift on choppy waves and though an isle seems near, the tides somehow keep it beyond reach. It was that way for us that day. I fought

and battered and kept her safe, yet it seemed an eternity till we stood before him, and even then three men specially to guard him. I passed my shield to the maid, saying, 'Shelter well, for your prize is almost yours,' and though I faced three, and I saw they were warriors of skill, I defeated them one by one till I faced the Saxon lord she so hated. His knees were thick with the gore he waded through, but I saw this was no warrior, and I brought him down till he lay breathing on the earth, his legs no more use to him, staring his hatred up at the sky. So she came then and stood above him, the shield tossed aside, and the look in her eyes chilled my blood over all else to be seen across that ghastly field. Then she brought the hoe down not with a swing, but a small prod, then another, the way she is searching for potatoes in the soil, until I am made to cry, 'Finish it, maiden, or I'll do it myself!' to which she says, 'Leave me now, sir. I thank you for your service, but now it's done.'

'Only half done, maiden,' I cry, 'till I see you safe from this valley,' but she no longer listens and goes on with her foul work. I would have quarrelled further, but it was then he appeared from the crowd. I mean Master Axl, as I now know him, a younger man that day to be sure, but a wise countenance even then, and when I saw him it was as if the noise of battle receded to a hush around us.

'Why stand so exposed, sir?' I say to him. 'And your sword still in its sheath? Take up a fallen shield at least and cover yourself.'

But he keeps a faraway look, as if he stands in a meadow of daisies on a fragrant morning. 'If God chooses to direct an arrow this way,' he says, 'I'll not impede it. Sir Gawain, I'm pleased to see you well. Are you lately arrived, or have you been here from its start?'

This as if we meet at some summer fair, and I am obliged to cry again, 'Cover yourself, sir! The field remains thick with the foe.' And when he continues to survey the scenery, I say, remembering his question to me: 'I was here at the

battle's start, but Arthur then chose me as one of five to ride to a mission of great import. I'm only now returned from it.'

At last I draw his attention. 'A mission of great import? And did it go well?'

'Sadly, two comrades lost, but we accomplished it to Master Merlin's satisfaction.'

'Master Merlin,' he says. 'A sage he may be, but that old man makes me shudder.' Then he glances about once more, saying, 'I'm sorry to hear of your lost friends. Many more will be missed before the day closes.'

'Yet the victory's surely ours,' I say. 'These cursed Saxons. Why fight on this way with only Death to thank them for it?'

'I believe they do so for sheer anger and hatred of us,' he says. 'For it must be by now word has reached their ears of what's been done to their innocents left in their villages. I'm myself just come from them, so why would the news not reach also the Saxon ranks?'

'What news do you speak of, Master Axl?'

'News of their women, children and elderly, left unprotected after our solemn agreement not to harm them, now all slaughtered by our hands, even the smallest babes. If this were lately done to us, would our hatred exhaust itself? Would we not also fight to the last as they do, each fresh wound given a balm?'

'Why dwell on this matter, Master Axl? Our victory today's secure and will be a famous one.'

'Why do I dwell on it? Sir, these are the very villages I befriended in Arthur's name. In one village they called me the Knight of Peace, and today I watched a mere dozen of our men ride through it with no hint of mercy, the only ones to oppose them boys not yet grown to our shoulders.'

‘I’m saddened to hear this news. But I press you again, sir, pick up a shield at least.’

‘I came upon village by village the same, and our own men boasting of what they did.’

‘Don’t blame yourself, sir, nor my uncle. The great law you once brokered was a thing truly wondrous while it held. How many innocents, Briton or Saxon, were spared over the years for it? That it didn’t hold forever is none of your doing.’

‘Yet they believed in our bargain till this day. It was I won their trust where first there was only fear and hatred. Today our deeds make me a liar and a butcher, and I take no joy in Arthur’s victory.’

‘What will you do with such wild words, sir? If it’s treachery you contemplate, let’s face one another with no more delay!’

‘Your uncle’s safe from me, sir. Yet how do you rejoice, Sir Gawain, in a victory won at this price?’

‘Master Axl, what was done in these Saxon towns today my uncle would have commanded only with a heavy heart, knowing of no other way for peace to prevail. Think, sir. Those small Saxon boys you lament would soon have become warriors burning to avenge their fathers fallen today. The small girls soon bearing more in their wombs, and this circle of slaughter would never be broken. Look how deep runs the lust for vengeance! Look even now, at that fair maid, one I escorted here myself, watch her there still at her work! Yet with today’s great victory a rare chance comes. We may once and for all sever this evil circle, and a great king must act boldly on it. May this be a famous day, Master Axl, from which our land can be in peace for years to come.’

‘I fail to understand you, sir. Though today we slaughter a sea of Saxons, be they warriors or babes, there are yet many more across the land. They come from the east,

they land by ship on our coasts, they build new villages by the day. This circle of hate is hardly broken, sir, but forged instead in iron by what's done today. I'll go now to your uncle and report what I've seen. I would see from his face if he believes God will smile on such deeds.'

A slaughterer of babes. Is that what we were that day? And what of that one I escorted, what became of her? Was she among you just now, ladies? Why gather about me this way as I ride to my duty? Let an old man go in peace. A slaughterer of babes. Yet I was not there, and even had I been, what good for me to argue with a great king, and he my uncle too? I was but a young knight then, and besides, is he not proved right each year that passes? Did you not all grow old in a time of peace? So leave us to go our way without insults at our back. The Law of the Innocents, a mighty law indeed, one to bring men closer to God - so Arthur himself always said, or was it Master Axl called it that? We called him Axelum or Axelus then, but now he goes by Axl, and has a fine wife. Why taunt me, ladies? Is it my fault you grieve? My time will come before long, and I will not turn back to roam this land as you do. I shall greet the boatman contentedly, enter his rocking boat, the waters lapping all about, and I may sleep a while, the sound of his oar in my ears. And I will move from slumber to half-waking, and see the sun sunk low over the water, and the shore moved further still, and nod myself back into dreams till the boatman's voice stirs me gently once more. And were he to ask questions, as some say he will, I would answer honestly, for what have I left to hide? I had no wife, though at times I longed for one. Yet I was a good knight who performed his duty to the end. Let me say so, and he will see I do not lie. I will not mind him. The gentle sunset, his shadow falling over me as he moves from one side of his vessel to the other. But this will wait. Today Horace and I must climb below this grey sky, up the barren slope towards the next peak, for our work is unfinished and Querig awaits us.

Chapter Ten

He had never intended to deceive the warrior. It was as if the deception itself had come quietly over the fields to envelop the two of them.

The cooper's hut appeared to be built inside a deep ditch, its thatch roof so close to the earth that Edwin, lowering his head to pass under it, felt he was climbing into a hole. So he had been prepared for the darkness, but the stifling warmth - and the thick woodsmoke - took him aback, and he announced his arrival with a fit of coughing.

'I'm pleased to see you safe, young comrade.'

Wistan's voice came out of the darkness beyond the smouldering fire, then Edwin discerned the warrior's form on a turf bed.

'Are you badly hurt, warrior?'

As Wistan sat up, slowly moving into the glow, Edwin saw his face, neck and shoulders were covered in perspiration. Yet the hands that reached to the fire were trembling as if from cold.

'The wounds are trivial. But they brought with them this fever. It was worse earlier, and I've little memory of coming here. The good monks say they tied me to the mare's back, and I fancy I was muttering all the while as when playing the slack-jawed fool in the forest. What of you, comrade? You bear no wounds, I trust, beyond the one you carried before.'

'I'm perfectly well, warrior, yet stand before you in shame. I'm a poor comrade to you, sleeping while you fought. Curse me and banish me from your sight, for it'll be a thing well earned.'

‘Not so fast, Master Edwin. If you failed me last night, I’ll soon tell you a way to make up your debt to me.’

The warrior carefully brought both feet to the earth floor, reached down and tossed a log onto the flames. Edwin saw then how his left arm was bound tightly in sacking, and that one side of his face had a spreading bruise that partially closed one eye.

‘True,’ Wistan said, ‘when I first looked down from the top of that burning tower and the wagon we so carefully prepared wasn’t there, I’d a mind to curse you. A long fall to stony ground and hot smoke already around me. Listening to the agonies of my enemies below, I asked, do I mingle with them even as we become ash together? Or better be smashed alone under the night sky? Yet before I could find an answer, the wagon arrived after all, tugged by my own mare, a monk pulling her bridle. I hardly asked if this monk was friend or foe, but leapt from that chimney mouth, and our earlier work was well enough done, comrade, for though I plunged through the hay as if it were water, I met nothing to pierce me. I awoke on a table, gentle monks loyal to Father Jonus attending me all around as if I was their supper. The fever must already have taken hold by then, whether from these wounds or from the great heat, for they say they had to muffle my ravings till they brought me down here out of harm’s way. But if the gods favour us, the fever will pass soon and we’ll set off to finish our errand.’

‘Warrior, I still stand here in shame. Even after I awoke and saw the soldiers around the tower, I let some sprite possess me, and fled the monastery behind those elderly Britons. I’d beg you to curse me now or beat me, but I heard you say there was some way I might make up to you for last night’s disgrace. Tell me the way, warrior, and I’ll fall on whatever task you give me with impatience.’

Even as he said this, his mother’s voice had called, resounding around the little hovel so Edwin was hardly sure

he had spoken these words aloud. But he must have done, for he heard Wistan say:

‘Do you suppose I chose you for your courage alone, young comrade? You’ve remarkable spirit right enough, and if we survive this errand, I’ll see you learn the skills to make you a true warrior. But just now you’re rough-hewn, not yet a blade. I chose you above others, Master Edwin, because I saw you had the hunter’s gift to match your warrior spirit. A rare thing indeed to have both.’

‘How can that be, warrior? I know nothing of hunting.’

‘A wolf cub, drinking its mother’s milk, can pick up the scent of a prey in the wild. I believe it a gift of nature. Once this fever leaves me, we’ll go further into these hills and I’ll wager you’ll find the sky itself whispering to you which path to take till we stand before the she-dragon’s very lair.’

‘Warrior, I fear you misplace your faith where it will find no shelter. No kin of mine ever boasted of such skills, and no one suspected me of them. Even Steffa, who saw my warrior’s soul, never mentioned such skills as these.’

‘Then leave it to me alone to believe in them, young comrade. I’ll never say you made any such boast. As soon as this fever leaves me, we’ll set off towards those eastern hills, where all talk has it Querig has her lair, and I’ll follow in your footsteps at each fork.’

It was then the deception had begun. He had never planned it, nor welcomed it when, like a pixie stepping out from its dark corner, it had entered their presence. His mother had continued to call. ‘Find the strength for me, Edwin. You’re almost grown. Find the strength and come rescue me.’ And it was as much the wish to appease her as his eagerness to redeem himself in the warrior’s eyes that had made him say:

‘It’s curious, warrior. Now you speak of it, I feel already this she-dragon’s pull. More a taste in the wind than

a scent. We should go without delay, for who knows how long I'll feel it.'

Even as he said this, the scenes were rapidly filling his mind: how he would enter their camp, startling them as they sat silently in their semi-circle to watch his mother trying to free herself. They would be full-grown men by now; most likely bearded and heavy-bellied, no longer the lithe young men who had come swaggering into their village that day. Burly, coarse men, and as they reached for their axes, they would see the warrior following behind Edwin and fear would enter their eyes.

But how could he deceive the warrior - his teacher and the man he admired above all others? And here was Wistan nodding with satisfaction, saying: 'I knew it as soon as I saw you, Master Edwin. Even as I released you from those ogres by the river.' He would enter their camp. He would free his mother. The burly men would be killed, or perhaps be allowed to flee into the mountain fog. And then what? Edwin would have to explain why, even as they were hurrying to complete an urgent errand, he had chosen to deceive the warrior.

Partly to distract himself from such thoughts - for he now sensed it was too late for a retreat - he said: 'Warrior, there's a question I have of you. Though you may think it impertinent.'

Wistan was receding back into the darkness, reclining once more onto his bed. Now all Edwin could see of him was one bare knee moving slowly from side to side.

'Ask it, young comrade.'

'I'm wondering, warrior. Is there some special feud between you and Lord Brennus makes you stay and fight his soldiers when we might have fled the monastery and be half a day closer to Querig? It must be some mighty reason to make you put aside even your errand.'

The silence that followed was so long Edwin thought the warrior had passed out in the stifling air. But then there was the knee still moving slowly, and when the voice eventually came out of the darkness, the slight tremor of the fever seemed to have evaporated.

‘I’ve no excuse, young comrade. I can only confess my folly, and that after the good father’s warning not to forget my duty! See how weak is the resolve of your master. Yet I’m a warrior before all else, and it’s no easy thing to flee a battle I know I can win. You’re right, we could even now be standing at the she-dragon’s den, calling her to come greet us. But Brennus I knew it to be, even a hope he’d come in person, and it was more than I could do not to stay and welcome them.’

‘Then I’m right, warrior. There’s some feud between you and Lord Brennus.’

‘No feud worth the name. We knew each other as boys, as young as you are now. This was in a country further west of here, in a well-guarded fort where we boys, twenty or more, were trained morning till night to become warriors in the Britons’ ranks. I grew to feel great affection for my companions of those days, for they were splendid fellows and we lived like brothers. All except Brennus, that is, for being the lord’s son, he loathed to mix with us. Yet he often trained with us, and though his skills were feeble, whenever one of us faced him with a wooden sword, or at wrestling in the sandpit, we had to let him win. Anything short of glorious victory for the lord’s son would result in punishments for us all. Can you imagine it, young comrade? To be proud young boys, as we were, and have such an inferior opponent appear to conquer us day after day? Worse, Brennus delighted in heaping humiliations on his opponents even as we feigned defeat. It pleased him to stand on our necks, or to kick us as we lay for him on the ground. Imagine how this felt to us, comrade!’

‘I see it well, warrior.’

‘But today I’ve reason to be grateful to Lord Brennus, for he saved me from a pitiable fate. I’ve told you already, Master Edwin, I’d begun to love my companions in that fort as my own brothers, even though they were Britons and I a Saxon.’

‘But is that so shameful, warrior, if you were brought up beside them facing harsh tasks together?’

‘Of course it’s shameful, boy. I feel shame even now remembering the affection I had for them. But it was Brennus showed me my error. Perhaps because even then my skills stood out, he delighted to choose me as his sparring opponent, and reserved his greatest humiliations for me. And he was not slow to notice I was a Saxon boy, and before long, turned each of my companions against me on that account. Even those once closest to me joined against me, spitting in my food, or hiding my clothes as we hurried to our training on a harsh winter’s morning, fearful of our teachers’ wrath. It was a great lesson Brennus taught me then, and when I understood how I shamed myself loving Britons as my brothers, I made up my mind to leave that fort, even with no friend or kin beyond those walls.’

Wistan ceased speaking for a moment while his breath came heavily from beyond the fire.

‘So did you take your revenge on Lord Brennus, warrior, before you left that place?’

‘Judge for me if I did or not, comrade, for I’m undecided on the question. The custom in that fort was for us apprentices, after our day’s training, to be allowed an hour after supper to idle away together. We’d build a fire in the yard and sit around it talking and jesting the way boys will. Brennus never joined us, of course, for he had his privileged quarters, but on that evening, for whatever reason, I saw him walk past. I moved away from the rest then, my companions

suspecting nothing. Now that fort, like any other, had many hidden passages, all of which I knew well, so that before long I was in an unwatched corner where the battlements cast black shadows over the ground. Brennus came strolling my way, alone, and when I moved from the gloom he stopped and looked at me with terror. For he saw at once this could be no chance encounter, and further, that his usual powers were suspended. It was curious, Master Edwin, to see this swaggering lord turned so swiftly to an infant ready to make water before me for fear. I was sorely tempted to say to him, "Good sir, I see your sword on your hip. Knowing how much more skilfully you wield it, you'll have no fear drawing it against mine." Yet I said no such thing, for had I hurt him in that dark corner, what of my dreams of a life beyond those walls? I said nothing, but remained before him in silence, letting the moment grow long between us, for I wished it to be one never forgotten. And though he cowered back and would have cried for help had not some remnant of pride told him to do so would ensure his abiding humiliation, we neither of us spoke to the other. Then in time I left him, and so you see, Master Edwin, nothing and yet everything had passed between us. I knew then I'd do well to leave that very night, and since these were no longer times of war, the watch wasn't strict. I slipped quietly past the guards, saying no farewells, and was soon a boy under the moonlight, my dear companions left behind, my own kin long slaughtered, nothing but my courage and lately learned skills to carry on my journey.'

'Warrior, does Brennus hunt you even today fearing your vengeance from those days?'

'Who knows what demons whisper in that fool's ear? A great lord now, in this country and the next, yet he lives in dread of any Saxon traveller from the east passing through his lands. Has he fed the fear of that night again and again that it now sits in his belly a giant worm? Or is it the she-dragon's breath makes him forget whatever cause he once had to fear me, yet the dread grows all the more monstrous for

being unnamed? Only last year a Saxon warrior from the fens, one I knew well, was killed as he travelled in peace through this very country. Yet I remain indebted to Lord Brennus for the lesson he taught me, for without it I might even now be counting Britons as my brother warriors. What troubles you, young comrade? You shift from foot to foot as if my fever possesses you also.'

So he had failed to hide his restlessness, but surely Wistan could not suspect his deception. Was it possible the warrior too could hear his mother's voice? She had been calling all the while the warrior had been speaking. 'Will you not find the strength for me, Edwin? Are you too young after all? Will you not come to me, Edwin? Did you not promise me that day you would?'

'I'm sorry, warrior. It's my hunter's instinct makes me impatient, for I fear to lose the scent, and the morning sun already rising outside.'

'We'll be gone as soon as I'm able to climb onto that mare's back. But leave me a little longer, comrade, for how else can we face such an opponent as this dragon when I'm too fevered to lift a sword?'

Chapter Eleven

He longed for a patch of sun to warm Beatrice. But though the opposite bank was often bathed in morning light, their side of the river remained shaded and cold. Axl could feel her leaning on him as they walked, and her shivering had grown steadily worse. He had been about to suggest another rest when at last they spotted the roof behind the willows, jutting out into the water.

It took some time to negotiate the muddy slope down to the boathouse, and when they stepped under its low arch, the near-darkness and the proximity of the lapping water seemed only to make Beatrice shiver more. They moved further inside, over damp wooden boards, and saw beyond the roof's overhang tall grass, rushes, and an expanse of the river. Then a man's figure rose from the shadows to their left, saying: 'Who might you be, friends?'

'God be with you, sir,' Axl said. 'We're sorry if we brought you from your sleep. We're just two weary travellers wishing to go downriver to our son's village.'

A broad, bearded man of middle years, clad in layers of animal skins, emerged into the light and scrutinised them. Eventually he asked, not unkindly:

'Is the lady there unwell?'

'She's only tired, sir, but unable to walk the remaining way. We hoped you might spare a barge or small boat to carry us. We depend on your kindness, for some misfortune lately took the bundles we carried, and with them the tin to recompense you. I can see, sir, you have but one boat now in the water. I can at least promise you safe passage for any cargo you'd entrust should you allow us to use it.'

The boatkeeper looked out at the boat rocking gently under the roof, then back at Axl. 'It'll be a while yet, friend, till this boat goes downstream, for I'm waiting for my companion to return with barley to fill it. But I see you're both weary and lately suffered some misfortune. So let me make this suggestion. Look there, friends. You see those baskets.'

'Baskets, sir?'

'They may look flimsy, but float well and will bear your weight, though you'll have to go one in each. We're accustomed to filling them with full sacks of corn, or even at times a slaughtered pig, and tethered behind a boat they'll travel even a rough river without jeopardy. And today, as you see, the water's steady, so you'll travel without worry.'

'You're kind, sir. But have you no basket large enough for the two of us?'

'You must go one to each basket, friends, or else fear drowning. But I'll gladly tether two together so you'll go almost as good as one. When you see the lower boathouse on this same side, your journey will be over, and I'll ask you to leave the baskets there well tied.'

'Axl,' Beatrice whispered, 'let's not separate. Let's go together on foot, slow though it may be.'

'Walking's beyond us now, princess. We both need warmth and food, and this river will carry us swiftly to our son's welcome.'

'Please, Axl. I don't want us to separate.'

'But this good man says he'll truss our two baskets together, and it'll be as good as we're arm in arm.' Then turning to the boatkeeper, he said: 'I'm grateful to you, sir. We'll do as you suggest. Please tie the baskets tightly, so there's no chance a swift tide will move us apart.'

‘The danger isn’t the river’s speed, friend, but its slowness. It’s easy to get caught in the weeds near the bank and move no further. Yet I’ll lend you a strong staff to push with, so you’ll have little to fear.’

As the boatkeeper went to the edge of his jetty and began to busy himself with rope, Beatrice whispered:

‘Axl, please let’s not be parted.’

‘We’re not to be parted, princess. Look how he makes his knots to keep us together.’

‘The tide may part us, Axl, never mind what this man tells us.’

‘We’ll be fine, princess, and soon at our son’s village.’

Then the boatkeeper was calling them, and they stepped carefully down the little stones to where he was steadying with a long pole two baskets bobbing in the water. ‘They’re well lined with hide,’ he said. ‘You’ll hardly feel the river’s cold.’

Though he found it painful to crouch, Axl kept both hands on Beatrice until she had safely lowered herself into the first basket.

‘Don’t try and rise, princess, or you’ll endanger the vessel.’

‘Won’t you get in yourself, Axl?’

‘I’m getting in right beside you. Look, this good man’s fastened us tight together.’

‘Don’t leave me here alone, Axl.’

But even as she said this, she appeared reassured, and lay down in the basket like a child going to sleep.

‘Good sir,’ Axl said. ‘See how my wife trembles from the cold. Is there something you might lend to cover her?’

The boatkeeper too was looking at Beatrice, who had now curled up on her side and closed her eyes. Suddenly he removed one of the furs he was wearing, and bending forward, laid it on top of her. She seemed not to notice - her eyes remained closed - so it was Axl who thanked him.

‘Welcome, friend. Leave everything at the lower boathouse for me.’ The man pushed them into the tide with his pole. ‘Sit low and keep the staff handy for the weeds.’

It was bitingly cold on the river. Broken ice drifted here and there in sheets, but their baskets moved past them with ease, sometimes bumping gently one against the other. The baskets were shaped almost like boats, with a bow and stern, but had a tendency to rotate, so that at times Axl found himself gazing back up the river to the boathouse still visible on the bank.

The dawn was pouring through the waving grass beside them, and as the boatkeeper had promised, the river moved at an easy pace. Even so, Axl found himself glancing continuously over at Beatrice’s basket, which appeared to be filled entirely by the animal skin, with only a small portion of her hair visible to betray her presence. Once he called out: ‘We’ll be there in no time, princess,’ and when there was no response, reached over to tug her basket closer.

‘Princess, are you sleeping?’

‘Axl, are you still there?’

‘Of course I’m still here.’

‘Axl. I thought maybe you’d left me again.’

‘Why would I leave you, princess? And the man’s tied our vessels so carefully together.’

‘I don’t know if it’s a thing dreamt or remembered. But I saw myself just then, standing in our chamber in the dead of night. It was long ago and I had tight around me that cloak of badger hides you made once as a tender gift to me. I

was standing like that, and in our former chamber too, not the one we have now, for the wall had branches of beech crossing left to right, and I was watching a caterpillar crawling slowly along it, and asking why a caterpillar wouldn't be asleep so late at night.'

'Never mind caterpillars, what were you doing yourself awake and staring at a wall in the pit of the night?'

'I think I was standing that way because you'd gone and left me, Axl. Maybe this fur the man's put over me reminds me of that one then, for I was holding it to myself while I stood there, the one you'd made for me from badger skins, which later we lost in that fire. I was watching the caterpillar and asking why it didn't sleep and if a creature like that even knew night from day. Yet I believe the reason was that you'd gone away, Axl.'

'A wild dream, princess, and maybe a fever coming too. But we'll be beside a warm fire before long.'

'Are you still there, Axl?'

'Of course I'm here, and the boathouse long out of sight now.'

'You'd left me that night, Axl. And our precious son too. He'd left a day or two before, saying he'd no wish to be at home when you returned. So it was just me alone, in our former chamber, the dead of night. But we had a candle in those days, and I was able to see that caterpillar.'

'That's a strange dream you speak of, princess, no doubt brought on by your fever and this cold. I wish the sun would rise with less patience.'

'You're right, Axl. It's cold here, even under this rug.'

'I'd warm you in my arms but the river won't allow it.'

‘Axl. Can it be our own son left us in anger one day and we closed our door to him, telling him never to return?’

‘Princess, I see something before us in the water, maybe a boat stuck in the reeds.’

‘You’re drifting further away, Axl. I can hardly hear you.’

‘I’m here beside you, princess.’

He had been sitting low in his basket, his legs spread before him, but now shifted carefully into a crouching posture, holding the rim to either side.

‘I see it better now. A small rowing boat, stuck in the reeds where the bank turns ahead. It’s in our path and we’ll have to take care or we’ll be stuck the same way.’

‘Axl, don’t go away from me.’

‘I’m here beside you, princess. But let me take this staff and keep us clear of the rushes.’

The baskets were moving ever more slowly now, pulling inwards towards the sludge-like water where the bank made its turn. Thrusting the staff into the water, Axl found he could touch the bottom easily, but when he tried to push off back into the tide, the river floor sucked at the stick, allowing him no purchase. He could see too, in the morning light breaking over the long-grassed fields, how weeds had woven thickly around both baskets, as though to bind them further to this stagnant spot. The boat was almost before them, and as they drifted lethargically towards it, Axl held out the staff to touch against its stern and brought them to a halt.

‘Is it the other boathouse, husband?’

‘Not yet.’ Axl glanced over to that part of the river still gliding downstream. ‘I’m sorry, princess. We’re caught in the reeds. But here’s a rowing boat before us, and if it’s worthy, we’ll use it ourselves to complete the journey.’

Pushing the staff once more into the water, Axl manoeuvred them slowly to a position alongside the vessel.

From their low vantage point, the boat loomed large, and Axl could see in fine detail the damaged, coarsened wood, and the underside of the gunwale, where a row of tiny icicles hung like candlewax. Planting the staff in the water, he now rose carefully to his full height within his basket and peered into the boat.

The bow end was bathed in an orange light and it took him a moment to see that the pile of rags heaped there on the boards was in fact an elderly woman. The unusual nature of her garment - a patchwork of numerous small dark rags - and the sooty grime smeared over her face had momentarily deceived him. Moreover, she was seated in a peculiar posture, her head tilted heavily to one side, so that it was almost touching the boat's floor. Something about the old woman's clothes tugged at his memory, but now she opened her eyes and stared at him.

'Help me, stranger,' she said quietly, not altering her posture.

'Are you sick, mistress?'

'My arm won't obey me, or I'd by now be up and taken the oar. Help me, stranger.'

'Who do you speak to, Axl?' Beatrice's voice came from behind him. 'Take care it's not some demon.'

'It's just a poor woman of our years or more, injured in her boat.'

'Don't forget me, Axl.'

'Forget you? Why would I ever forget you, princess?'

'This mist makes us forget so much. Why should it not make us forget each other?'

‘Such a thing can’t ever happen, princess. Now I must help this poor woman, and perhaps with luck we’ll all three use her boat to journey downstream.’

‘Stranger, I hear what you say. You’ll be most welcome to share my boat. But help me now for I’m fallen and hurt.’

‘Axl, don’t leave me here. Don’t forget me.’

‘I’m just stepping onto this boat beside us, princess. I must attend to this poor stranger.’

The cold had stiffened his limbs, and he almost lost his balance as he climbed into the larger vessel. But he steadied himself, then looked around him.

The boat seemed simple and sturdy, with no obvious signs of leakage. There was cargo piled near the stern, but Axl paid this little attention, for the woman was saying something again. The morning sun was still fully upon her, and he could see how her gaze was fixed with some intensity on his feet - so much so that he could not help looking down at them himself. Noticing nothing remarkable, he continued towards her, stepping carefully over the boat’s bracing.

‘Stranger. I see you’re not young, but you’ve strength left. Show them a fierce face. A fierce face to make them flee.’

‘Come, mistress. Are you able to sit up?’ He had said this for he was troubled by her strange posture - her loose grey hair was hanging down and touching the damp boards.

‘Here, I’ll help you. Try to sit higher.’

As he leant forward and touched her, a rusted knife she had been holding fell from her grasp onto the boards. In the same instant, some small creature scampered out from her rags and away into the shadows.

‘Do the rats bother you, mistress?’

‘They’re over there, stranger. Show them a fierce face, I say.’

It now occurred to him she had not been staring at his feet, but beyond him, to something at the back of the boat. He turned, but the low sun dazzled him and he could not discern clearly whatever was moving there.

‘Are they rats, mistress?’

‘They fear you, stranger. They feared me too for a little while, but they sapped me little by little as they will. Had you not come they’d be covering me even now.’

‘Wait a moment, mistress.’

He stepped towards the stern, a hand raised against the low sun, and gazed down at the objects piled in the shadows. He could make out tangled nets, a soaked-through blanket left in a heap, a long-handled tool, like a hoe, lying across it. And there was a wooden, lidless box - the sort fishermen used to keep fresh the dying fish they had caught. But when he peered into it, he saw not fish but skinned rabbits - a considerable number of them, pressed so closely one against the other their tiny limbs appeared to be locked together. Then, as he watched, the whole mass of sinews, elbows and ankles began to shift. Axl took a step back even as he saw an eye open, and then another. A sound made him turn, and he saw at the other end of the boat, still bathed in orange light, the old woman slumped against the bow with pixies - too many to count - swarming over her. At first glance she looked contented, as if being smothered in affection, while the small, scrawny creatures ran through her rags and over her face and shoulders. And now there came more and more out of the river, climbing over the rim of the boat.

Axl reached down for the long-handled tool before him, but he too had become enveloped by a sense of tranquillity, and he found himself extracting the pole from the tangled netting in a strangely leisurely manner. He knew more and

more creatures were rising from the water - how many might have boarded now? Thirty? Sixty? - and their collective voices seemed to him to resemble the sound of children playing in the distance. He had the presence of mind to raise the long tool - a hoe, surely, for was that not a rusted blade on the end rising into the sky, or yet another creature clinging to it? - and bring it crashing down onto the tiny knuckles and knees mounting the side of the boat. Then a second swing, this time towards the box with the skinned rabbits from which more pixies were running out. But then he had never been much of a swordsman, his skill being for diplomacy and, when required, intrigue, though who could claim he had ever betrayed the trust his skills had won? On the contrary, it was he who had been betrayed, but he could still wield a weapon in some fashion, and now he would bring it down this way and that, for had he not to defend Beatrice from these swarming creatures? But here they came, more and more - were they still coming from that box, or from the shallow waters? Were they even now gathering around Beatrice asleep in her basket? The last blow of the hoe had had some effect, for several creatures had fallen back into the water, and then another blow had sent two, even three, flying through the air, and the old woman was a stranger, what obligation did he have to her before his own wife? But there she was, the strange woman, hardly visible now beneath the writhing creatures, and Axl crossed the length of the boat, hoe raised, and made another arc in the air to sweep off as many as possible without injury to the stranger. Yet how they clung on! And now they even dared to speak to him - or was that the old woman herself from beneath them?

‘Leave her, stranger. Leave her to us. Leave her, stranger.’

Axl swung the hoe again, and it moved as though the air were thick water, but found its mark, scattering several creatures even as more arrived.

‘Leave her to us, stranger,’ the old woman said again, and only this time did it occur to him, with a stab of fear that seemed bottomless, that the speaker was talking not of the dying stranger before him but of Beatrice. And turning to his wife’s basket in the reeds, he saw the waters around it alive with limbs and shoulders. His own basket was nearly capsizing from the pull of the creatures trying to climb in, preserved only by the ballast of those already inside. But they were boarding his basket only to gain access to its neighbour. He could see other creatures massing over the animal skin covering Beatrice, and uttering a cry, he climbed the side of the boat and let himself fall into the water. It was deeper than he had anticipated, coming above his waist, but the shock of it took his breath only for an instant, before he let out a warrior’s bellow that came to him as if from a distant memory, and he lurched towards the baskets, the hoe held high above him. There was tugging at his clothes, and the water felt honey-like, but when he brought the hoe down onto his own basket, even though his weapon travelled with frustrating slowness through the air, once it landed more creatures than he could have suspected tumbled out into the water. The next swing caused even greater destruction - he must this time have swung with the blade outwards, for was that not bloodied flesh he saw flying up into the sunlight? And yet Beatrice remained an age away, floating complacently even as the creatures rose about her, and now they came from the land too, pouring through the grass on the riverbank. Creatures were now even hanging from his hoe and he let it fall into the water, suddenly wishing only to be at Beatrice’s side.

He waded through the weeds, the broken bulrushes, the mud tugging at his feet, but Beatrice remained further away than ever. Then came the stranger’s voice again, and even though now, down in the water, he could no longer see her, Axl could picture the old woman with startling clarity in his mind’s eye, slumped on the floor of her boat in the morning sun, the

pixies moving freely over her as she uttered the words he could hear:

‘Leave her, stranger. Leave her to us.’

‘Curse you,’ Axl muttered under his breath, as he pushed himself forward. ‘I’ll never, never give her up.’

‘A wise man like you, stranger. You’ve known a long time now there’s no cure to save her. How will you bear it, what now lies in wait for her? Do you long for that day you watch your dearest love twist in agony and with nothing to offer but kind words for her ear? Give her to us and we’ll ease her suffering, as we’ve done for all these others before her.’

‘Curse you! I’ll not give her to you!’

‘Give her to us and we’ll see she suffers no pain. We’ll wash her in the river’s waters, the years will fall from her, and she’ll be as in a pleasant dream. Why keep her, sir? What can you give her but the agony of an animal in slaughter?’

‘I’ll be rid of you. Get off. Get off her.’

Locking his hands together to make a club, he swung one way then the other, clearing a path in the water as he waded on, till at last he was before Beatrice, still fast asleep in her basket. The pixies were swarming over the animal skin that covered her, and he began to pull them off one by one, hurling them away.

‘Why will you not give her to us? This is no kindness you show her.’

He pushed the basket through the water until the ground rose up and the basket was sitting on wet mud amidst grass and bulrushes. He leant forward then and gathered his wife in his arms, lifting her out. Thankfully she came back to wakefulness enough to cling to his neck, and they made faltering steps together, first onto the bank, then further, into the fields. Only when the land felt hard and dry beneath

them did Axl lower her, and they sat in the grass together, he recovering his breath, she becoming steadily more awake.

‘Axl, what is this place we’ve come to?’

‘Princess, how are you feeling now? We must get away from this spot. I’ll carry you on my back.’

‘Axl, you’re soaked through! Did you fall in the river?’

‘This is an evil spot, princess, and we must leave quickly. I’ll gladly carry you on my back, the way I used to do when we were young and foolish and enjoying a warm spring’s day.’

‘Must we leave the river behind us? Sir Gawain’s right surely that it will carry us all the more swiftly where we’ll go. The land here looks as high in the mountains as we ever were before.’

‘We’ve no choice, princess. We must get far from here. Come, I’ll have you on my back. Come, princess, reach for my shoulders.’

Chapter Twelve

He could hear the warrior's voice below him, appealing to him to climb more slowly, but Edwin ignored it. Wistan was too slow, and in general appeared not to appreciate the urgency of their situation. When they were still not halfway up the cliff, he had asked Edwin: 'Can that be a hawk just flew past us, young comrade?' What did it matter what it was? His fever had made the warrior soft, both in mind and body.

Only a little further to climb, then he at least would be over the edge and standing on firm ground. He could then run - how he longed to run! - but to where? Their destination had, for the moment, drifted beyond his recall. What was more, there had been something important to tell the warrior: he had been deceiving Wistan about something, and now it was almost time to confess. When they had started their climb, leaving the exhausted mare tied to a shrub beside the mountain path, he had resolved to make a clean breast of it once they reached the top. Yet now he was almost there, his mind held nothing but confused wisps.

He clambered over the last rocks and pulled himself up over the precipice. The land before him was bare and wind-scarred, rising gradually towards the pale peaks on the horizon. Nearby were patches of heather and mountain grass, but nothing taller than a man's ankle. Yet strangely, there in the mid-distance, was what appeared to be a wood, its lush trees standing calmly against the battling wind. Had some god, on a whim, picked up in his fingers a section of rich forest and set it down in this inhospitable terrain?

Though out of breath from the climb, Edwin pushed himself forward into a run. For those trees, surely, were where he had to be, and once there he would remember everything. Wistan's voice was shouting again somewhere behind him - the

warrior must finally have arrived at the top - but Edwin, not glancing back, ran all the faster. He would leave his confession until those trees. Within their shelter, he would be able to remember more clearly, and they could talk without the wind's howl.

The ground came up to meet him and knocked the breath from him. It happened so unexpectedly he was obliged to lie there a moment, quite dazed, and when he tried to spring back to his feet something soft but forceful kept him down. He realised then that Wistan's knee was on his back, and that his hands were being tied behind him.

'You asked before why we must carry rope with us,' Wistan said. 'Now you see how useful it can be.'

Edwin began to remember their exchange down on the path below. Eager to start the climb, he had been annoyed by the way the warrior was carefully transferring items from his saddle into two sacks for them to carry.

'We must hurry, warrior! Why do we need all these things?'

'Here, carry this, comrade. The she-dragon's foe enough without us growing weak with cold and hunger to aid her.'

'But the scent will be lost! And what need do we have of rope?'

'We may need it yet, young comrade, and we won't find it growing on branches up there.'

Now the rope had been wound around his waist as well as his wrists, so that when finally he rose to his feet, he could move forward only against the pull of his leash.

'Warrior, are you no longer my friend and teacher?'

'I'm still that and your protector too. From here you must go with less haste.'

He found he did not mind the rope. The gait it obliged him to adopt was like that of a mule, and he was reminded of a time not long ago when he had had to impersonate just such a beast, going round and round a wagon. Was he the same mule now, stubbornly pushing his way up the slope even as the rope pulled him back?

He pulled and pulled, occasionally managing several steps at a run before the rope jerked him to a halt. A voice was in his ears - a familiar voice - half-singing, half-chanting a children's rhyme, one he knew well from when he was younger. It was comforting and disturbing in equal measure and he found if he chanted along while tugging on the rope, the voice lost something of its unsettling edge. So he chanted, at first under his breath, then with less inhibition into the wind: 'Who knocked over the cup of ale? Who cut off the dragon's tail? Who left the snake inside the pail?' 'Twas your Cousin Adny.' There were further lines he did not remember, but he was surprised to find that he had but to chant along with the voice and the words would come out correctly.

The trees were near now and the warrior tugged him back again.

'Slowly, young comrade. We need more than courage to enter this strange grove. Look there. Pine trees at this height's no mystery, but aren't those oaks and elms beside them?'

'No matter what trees grow here, warrior, or what birds fly these skies! We have little time left and must hurry!'

They entered the wood and the ground changed beneath them: there was soft moss, nettles, even ferns. The leaves above them were dense enough to form a ceiling, so that for a while they wandered in a grey half-light. Yet this was no forest, for soon they could see before them a clearing with its circle of open sky above it. The thought came to Edwin that if this was indeed the work of a god, the intention must

have been to conceal with these trees whatever lay ahead. He pulled angrily at the rope, saying:

‘Why dally, warrior? Can it be you’re afraid?’

‘Look at this place, young comrade. Your hunter’s instincts have served us well. This must be the dragon’s lair before us now.’

‘I’m the hunter of us two, warrior, and I tell you that clearing holds no dragon. We must hurry past it and beyond, for we’ve further to go!’

‘Your wound, young comrade. Let me see if it remains clean.’

‘Never mind my wound! I tell you the scent will be lost! Let go the rope, warrior. I’ll run on even if you will not!’

This time Wistan released him, and Edwin pushed past thistles and tangled roots. Several times he lost his balance, for trussed as he was he had no hand to put out to steady himself. But he reached the clearing without injury, and stopped at its edge to take in the sight before him.

At the centre of the clearing was a pond. It was frozen over, so a man - were he brave or foolish enough - might cross it in twenty or so strides. The smoothness of the ice’s surface was interrupted only near the far side, where the hollowed-out trunk of a dead tree burst up through it. Along the bank, not far from the ruined tree, a large ogre was crouching down on its knees and elbows at the water’s very edge, its head completely submerged. Perhaps the creature had been drinking - or searching for something beneath the surface - and had been overtaken by the sudden freeze. To a careless observer, the ogre might have been a headless corpse, decapitated as it crawled to quench its thirst.

The patch of sky above the pond cast a strange light down on the ogre, and Edwin stared at it for a while, almost expecting it to return to life, bringing up a ghastly and

flushed face. Then, with a start, he realised there was a second creature in an identical posture on the far right-hand edge of the pond. And there! - yet a third, not far before him, on the near bank, half-concealed by the ferns.

Ogres usually aroused only revulsion in him, but these creatures, and the eerie melancholy of their postures, made Edwin feel a tug of pity. What had brought them to such a fate? He began to move toward them, but the rope was taut again, and he heard Wistan say close behind him:

‘Do you still deny this is a dragon’s lair, comrade?’

‘Not here, warrior. We must go further.’

‘Yet this spot whispers to me. Even if not her lair, isn’t this a place she comes to drink and bathe?’

‘I say it’s cursed, warrior, and no place to do battle with her. We’ll have only ill luck here. Look at those poor ogres. And they almost as large as the fiends you killed the other night.’

‘What do you speak of, boy?’

‘Don’t you see them? Look, there! And there!’

‘Master Edwin, you’ve become exhausted, as I feared. Let’s rest a while. Even if this is a gloomy spot, it gives us respite from the wind.’

‘How can you talk of rest, warrior? And isn’t that how those poor creatures met their fate, loitering in this bewitched place too long? Heed their warning, warrior!’

‘The only warning I heed tells me to make you rest before you drive your own heart to burst.’

He felt himself tugged, and his back struck against the bark of a tree. Then the warrior was trudging around him, circling rope about his chest and shoulders till he could hardly move.

‘This good tree means you no harm, young comrade.’ The warrior placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. ‘Why waste strength this way to uproot it? Calm yourself and rest, I say, while I study more closely this place.’

He watched Wistan picking his way through the nettles down to the pond. Reaching the water’s edge, the warrior spent several moments walking slowly back and forth, staring closely at the ground, sometimes crouching down to examine whatever caught his eye. Then he straightened, and for a long time seemed to fall into a reverie, gazing over at the trees on the far side of the pond. For Edwin, the warrior was now a near-silhouette against the frozen water. Why did he not even glance towards the ogres?

Wistan made a movement and suddenly the sword was in his hand, the arm poised and unmoving in the air. Then the weapon was returned to its scabbard and the warrior, turning from the water, came walking back towards him.

‘We’re hardly the first visitors here,’ he said. ‘Even this past hour, some party’s come this way, and it’s no she-dragon. Master Edwin, I’m glad to see you calmer.’

‘Warrior, I’ve a confession to make. One that may make you slay me even as I stand trussed to this tree.’

‘Speak, boy, and don’t fear me.’

‘Warrior, you claimed for me the hunter’s gift, and even as you spoke of it I felt a strong pull, so let you believe I had Querig in my nostrils. But I was always deceiving you.’

Wistan came closer till he was standing right before him.

‘Go on, comrade.’

‘I can’t go on, warrior.’

‘You’ve more to fear from your silence than my anger. Speak.’

‘I can’t, warrior. When we began to climb, I knew just what to tell you. Yet now ... I’m uncertain what it is I’ve kept hidden from you.’

‘It’s the she-dragon’s breath, nothing more. It’s had little sway over you before, but now overpowers you. A sure sign we’re close to her.’

‘I fear it’s this cursed pool bewitches me, warrior, and maybe bewitches you too, making you content to dally this way and hardly glancing at those drowned ogres. Yet I know there’s a confession I have to make and only wish I could find it.’

‘Show me the way to the she-dragon’s lair and I’ll forgive whatever small lies you’ve told me.’

‘But that’s just it, warrior. We rode the mare till her heart nearly burst, then climbed this steep mountainside, yet I’m not leading you at all to the she-dragon.’

Wistan had come so close Edwin could feel the warrior’s breath.

‘Where could it be then, Master Edwin, you lead me?’

‘It’s my mother, warrior, I remember it now. My aunt’s not my mother. My real mother was taken, and even though I was a small boy then, I was watching. And I promised her I’d one day bring her back. Now I’m nearly grown, and have you beside me, even those men would tremble to face us. I deceived you, warrior, but understand my feelings and help me now we’re so near her.’

‘Your mother. You say she’s near us now?’

‘Yes, warrior. But not here. Not this cursed place.’

‘What do you remember of the men who took her?’

‘They looked fierce, warrior, and well used to killing. Not a man in the village dared come out to face them that day.’

‘Saxons or Britons?’

‘They were Britons, warrior. Three men, and Steffa said they must not long before have been soldiers, for he recognised their soldiers’ ways. I wasn’t yet five years old, or else I’d have fought for her.’

‘My own mother was taken, young comrade, so I understand your thoughts well. And I too was a child and weak when she was taken. These were times of war, and in my foolishness, seeing how the men slaughtered and hanged so many, I rejoiced to see the way they smiled at her, believing they meant to treat her with gentleness and favour. Perhaps it was this way for you too, Master Edwin, when you were young and still to know of men’s ways.’

‘My mother was taken in peaceful times, warrior, so no great harm has met her. She’s been travelling country to country, and it may not be such a bad life. Yet she longs to return to me, and it’s true, the men who travel with her are sometimes cruel. Warrior, accept this confession, punish me later, but help me now face her captors, for it’s long years she’s waited for me.’

Wistan stared at him strangely. He seemed on the brink of saying something, but then shook his head and walked a few steps away from the tree, almost like one ashamed. Edwin had never seen the warrior wear such an air, and watched him with surprise.

‘I’ll readily forgive you this deception, Master Edwin,’ Wistan said eventually, turning back to face him.

‘And any other small lies you may have told. And soon I’ll release you from this tree and we’ll go to face whatever foe you may lead us to. But in return I ask you to make a promise.’

‘Tell me, warrior.’

‘Should I fall and you survive, promise me this. That you’ll carry in your heart a hatred of Britons.’

‘What do you mean, warrior? Which Britons?’

‘All Britons, young comrade. Even those who show you kindness.’

‘I don’t understand, warrior. Must I hate a Briton who shares with me his bread? Or saves me from a foe as lately did the good Sir Gawain?’

‘There are Britons who tempt our respect, even our love, I know this only too well. But there are now greater things press on us than what each may feel for another. It was Britons under Arthur slaughtered our kind. It was Britons took your mother and mine. We’ve a duty to hate every man, woman and child of their blood. So promise me this. Should I fall before I pass to you my skills, promise me you’ll tend well this hatred in your heart. And should it ever flicker or threaten to die, shield it with care till the flame takes hold again. Will you promise me this, Master Edwin?’

‘Very well, warrior, I promise it. But now I hear my mother calling, and surely we’ve stayed in this gloomy place too long.’

‘Let’s go to her then. But be prepared in case we come too late for her rescue.’

‘What can you mean, warrior? How can that ever be, for I hear her call even now.’

‘Then let’s hasten to her call. Just know one thing, young comrade. When the hour’s too late for rescue, it’s still early enough for revenge. So let me hear your promise again. Promise me you’ll hate the Briton till the day you fall from your wounds or the heaviness of your years.’

‘I gladly promise it again, warrior. But release me from this tree, for I now feel clearly which way we must go.’

Chapter Thirteen

The goat, Axl could see, was well at home on this mountain terrain. It was eating happily the stubbly grass and heather, not caring about the wind, or that its left legs were poised so much lower than the right. The animal had a fierce tug - as Axl had discovered all too well during their ascent - and it had not been easy to find a way of safely tethering it while he and Beatrice took their rest. But he had spotted a dead tree root protruding from the slope, and had carefully bound the rope to it.

The goat was clearly visible from where they now sat. The two large rocks, leaning one towards the other like an old married couple, had been visible from some way down, but Axl had hoped to come across a shelter from the wind long before they reached them. Yet the bare hillside had offered nothing, and they had had to persevere up the little path, the goat tugging as impulsively as the fierce gusts. But when at last they reached the twin rocks, it was as if God had crafted for them this sanctuary, for while they could still hear the blasts around them, they felt only faint stirrings in the air. Even so, they sat close against one another, as if in imitation of the stones above them.

‘Here’s all this country still below us, Axl. Didn’t that river carry us down at all?’

‘We were halted before we could get far, princess.’

‘And now we climb uphill again.’

‘Right enough, princess. I fear that young girl hid from us the true hardship of this task.’

‘No doubt about it, Axl, she made it sound an easy stroll. But who’ll blame her? Still a child and more cares

than one her age should bear. Axl, look there. Down in that valley, do you see them?’

A hand raised to the glare, Axl tried to discern what his wife was indicating, but eventually shook his head. ‘My eyes aren’t as good as yours, princess. I see valley after valley where the mountains descend, but nothing remarkable.’

‘There, Axl, follow my finger. Aren’t those soldiers walking in a line?’

‘I see them now, right enough. But surely they’re not moving.’

‘They’re moving, Axl, and might be soldiers, the way they go in a long line.’

‘To my poor eyes, princess, they seem not to move at all. And even if they’re soldiers, they’re surely too far to bother us. It’s those storm clouds to the west concern me more, for they’ll bring mischief swifter than any soldiers in the distance.’

‘You’re right, husband, and I wonder how much further it is we’re to go. That young girl wasn’t honest, insisting it was but a simple stroll. Yet can we blame her? Her parents absent and her younger brothers to worry over. She must have been desperate to have us do her bidding.’

‘I can see them more clearly, princess, now the sun peeks from behind the clouds. They’re not soldiers or men at all, but a row of birds.’

‘What foolishness, Axl. If they’re birds, how would we see them from here at all?’

‘They’re closer than you imagine, princess. Dark birds sat in a line, the way they do in the mountains.’

‘Then why is it one doesn’t fly into the air as we watch them?’

‘One may fly up yet, princess. And I for one won’t blame that young lass, for isn’t she in a black plight? And where would we have been without her help, soaked and shivering as we were when we first saw her? Besides, princess, as I remember it, it wasn’t the girl alone keen to have this goat go up to the giant’s cairn. Is it even an hour gone by you were as anxious?’

‘I’m still as anxious for it, Axl. For wouldn’t it be a fine thing if Querig were slain and this mist no more? It’s just when I see that goat chewing the earth that way, it’s hard to believe a foolish creature like that could ever do away with a great she-dragon.’

The goat had been eating with equal appetite earlier that morning when they had first come upon the little stone cottage. The cottage had been easy to miss, hidden within a pocket of shadow at the foot of a looming cliff, and even when Beatrice had pointed it out to him, Axl had mistaken it for the entrance to a settlement not unlike their own, dug deep into the mountainside. Only as they had come closer had he realised it was an isolated structure, the walls and roof alike built from shards of dark grey rock. Water was falling from high above in a fine thread just in front of the cliffside, to collect in a pool not far from the cottage and trickle away where the land dipped out of view. A little way before the cottage, just now brightly illuminated by the morning sun, was a small fenced paddock, the sole occupant of which was the goat. As usual the animal had been eating busily, but broke off to stare in astonishment at Axl and Beatrice.

The children though had remained unaware of their approach. The girl and her two younger brothers were standing at the edge of a ditch, their backs to their visitors, preoccupied with something beneath their feet. Once, one of the small boys crouched down to throw something into the ditch, provoking the girl to pull him back by the arm.

‘What can they be doing, Axl?’ Beatrice said. ‘Mischief by the look of it, and the youngest of them still small enough to tumble in without meaning to.’

When they had gone past the goat and the children still were unaware of them, Axl called out as gently as he could: ‘God be with you,’ causing all three to spin round in alarm.

Their guilty countenances supported Beatrice’s notion that they had been up to no good, but the girl – a head taller than the two boys – recovered quickly and smiled.

‘Elders! You’re welcome! We prayed to God only last night to send you and here you’ve come to us! Welcome, welcome!’

She came splashing over the marshy grass towards them, her brothers close behind.

‘You mistake us, child,’ Axl said. ‘We’re just two lost travellers, cold and weary, our clothes wet from the river where we were attacked only lately by savage pixies. Would you call your mother or father to allow us warmth and the chance to dry ourselves beside a fire?’

‘We’re not mistaken, sir! We prayed to the God Jesus last night and now you’ve come! Please, elders, go inside our house, where a fire’s still burning.’

‘But where are your parents, child?’ Beatrice asked. ‘Weary as we are, we’d not intrude, and so wait for the lady or master of the house to call us through the door.’

‘It’s just us three now, mistress, so you can call me lady of the house! Please go inside and warm yourselves. You’ll find food in the sack hanging from the beam, and there’s wood beside the fire to add. Go inside, elders, and we’ll not disturb your rest for a while yet, for we must see to the goat.’

‘We accept your kindness gratefully, child,’ Axl said. ‘But tell us if the nearest village is far from here.’

A shadow crossed the girl’s face, and she exchanged looks with her brothers, now lined up beside her. Then she smiled again and said: ‘We’re very high in the mountains here, sir. It’s far to any village, so we’d ask you to stay here with us, and the warm fire and food we offer. You must be very weary, and I see how this wind makes you both shiver. So please, no more talk of going away. Go inside and rest, elders, for we’ve waited for you so long!’

‘What is it so interests you in that ditch there?’ Beatrice asked suddenly.

‘Oh, it’s nothing, mistress! Nothing at all! But here you’re standing in this wind and your clothes wet! Won’t you accept our hospitality, and rest yourselves beside our fire? See how even now its smoke rises from the roof!’

* * *

‘There!’ Axl took his weight from the rock and pointed. ‘A bird flown to the sky. Didn’t I tell you, princess, those are birds standing in a line? Do you see it climbing in the sky?’

Beatrice, who had risen to her feet a few moments before, now took a step beyond the sanctuary of their rocks, and Axl saw the wind immediately pull at her clothes.

‘A bird, right enough,’ she said. ‘But it didn’t rise from those figures yonder. It could be you still don’t see what I point to, Axl. I mean there, on the further ridge, those dark shapes almost against the sky.’

‘I see them well enough, princess. But come back out of the wind.’

‘Soldiers or not, they move slowly on. The bird was never one of them.’

‘Come out of the wind, princess, and sit down. We must gather strength the best we can. Who knows how much further we must pull this goat?’

Beatrice came back to their shelter, holding close to herself the cloak borrowed from the children. ‘Axl,’ she said, as she seated herself again beside him, ‘do you really believe it? That before the great knights and warriors, it’s a weary old couple like us, forbidden a candle in our own village, who may slay the she-dragon? And with this ill-tempered goat to aid us?’

‘Who knows it’ll be so, princess. Maybe it’s all just a young girl’s wishing and nothing more. But we were grateful for her hospitality, and so we shouldn’t mind doing as she asks. And who knows she isn’t right, and Querig will be slain this way.’

‘Axl, tell me. If the she-dragon’s really slain, and the mist starts to clear. Axl, do you ever fear what will then be revealed to us?’

‘Didn’t you say it yourself, princess? Our life together’s like a tale with a happy end, no matter what turns it took on the way.’

‘I said so before, Axl. Yet now it may even be we’ll slay Querig with our own hands, there’s a part of me fears the mist’s fading. Can it be so with you, Axl?’

‘Perhaps it is, princess. Perhaps it’s always been so. But I fear most what you spoke of earlier. I mean as we rested beside the fire.’

‘What was it I said then, Axl?’

‘You don’t remember, princess?’

‘Did we have some foolish quarrel? I’ve no memory of it now, except that I was near my wit’s end from cold and want of rest.’

‘If you’ve no memory of it, princess, then let it stay forgotten.’

‘But I’ve felt something, Axl, ever since we left those children. It’s as if you’re holding yourself away from me as we walk, and not just on account of that tugging goat. Can it be we quarrelled earlier, though I’ve no memory of it?’

‘I’d no intention to hold myself away from you, princess. Forgive me. If it’s not the goat pulling this way and that, then it must be I’m still thinking of some foolishness that was said between us. Trust me, it’s best forgotten.’

* * *

He had got the fire blazing again in the centre of the floor, and all else inside the small cottage had fallen into shadow. Axl had been drying his clothes, holding each garment up to the flames, while Beatrice slept peacefully nearby in a nest of rugs. But then quite suddenly, she had sat up and looked around her.

‘Is the fire too hot for you, princess?’

For a moment she continued to look bewildered, then wearily lowered herself back down onto the rugs. Her eyes though remained open and Axl was about to repeat his question when she had said quietly:

‘I was thinking of a night long ago, husband. When you were gone, leaving me in a lonely bed, wondering to myself if you’d ever come back to me.’

‘Princess, though we escaped those pixies on the river, I fear some spell still lingers on you to give you such dreams.’

‘No dream, husband. Just a memory or two returning. The night as dark as any, and there I was, alone in our bed,

knowing all the while you were gone to another younger and fairer.'

'Won't you believe me, princess? This is the work of those pixies still working mischief between us.'

'You may be right, Axl. And if they were true memories, they're of long ago. Even so ...' She became silent, so that Axl thought she had dozed off again. But then she said:

'Even so, husband, they're remembrances to make me shrink from you. When we've finished resting here, and we're on our path again, let me walk a little way in front and you behind. Let's go on our way like that, husband, for I'll not welcome your step beside me now.'

He said nothing to this at first. Then he lowered the garment away from the fire and turned to look at her. Her eyes were closed again, yet he was sure she had not fallen asleep. When Axl finally found his voice, it had come out as no more than a whisper.

'It would be the saddest thing to me, princess. To walk separately from you, when the ground will let us go as we always did.'

Beatrice gave no indication of having heard, and within moments her breathing had grown long and even. He had then put on his newly warmed clothes and lain down on a blanket not far from his wife, but without touching her. An overwhelming tiredness swept over him, and yet he saw again the pixies swarming in the water before him, and the hoe he had swung through the air landing in their midst, and he remembered the noise as of children playing in the distance, and how he had fought, almost like a warrior with fury in his voice. And now she had said what she had. A picture came into his mind, clear and vivid, of himself and Beatrice on a mountain road, large grey skies above them, she walking several steps before him, and a great melancholy welled up within him. There they went, an elderly couple, heads bowed, five, six paces apart.

He awoke to find the fire smouldering, and Beatrice on her feet, peering out through one of the small gaps in the stone that constituted the windows of an abode such as this. Thoughts of their last exchange returned to him, but Beatrice turned, her features caught in a triangle of sunlight, and said in a cheerful voice:

‘I thought to wake you before, Axl, seeing the morning grow outside. But then I kept thinking of the soaking you got in the river and that you needed more than a brief nod or two.’

Only when he did not reply did she ask: ‘What is it, Axl? Why look at me like that?’

‘I’m just gazing at you in relief and happiness, princess.’

‘I’m feeling much better, Axl. Rest was all I needed.’

‘I see that now. Then let’s soon be on our way, for as you say, the morning’s grown while we slept.’

‘I’ve been watching these children, Axl. Even now they stand by that same ditch as when we first came upon them. They’ve something down there draws them and it’s some mischief, I’ll wager, for they often glance back the way they think some adult will discover and scold them. Where can their people be, Axl?’

‘It’s not our concern, and besides, they seem well enough fed and clothed. Let’s say our farewells and be gone.’

‘Axl, can it be you and I were quarrelling earlier? I feel something came between us.’

‘Nothing we can’t put aside, princess. Though we may speak of it before the day’s finished, who knows? But let’s be on our way before hunger and cold overtake us again.’

When they emerged into the chilly sunshine, Axl saw patches of ice on the grass, a large sky and mountains fading into the distance. The goat was eating over in its enclosure, a muddy upturned bucket near its feet.

The three children were still beside the ditch, looking down into it, their backs to the cottage, and appeared to be quarrelling. The girl was the first to realise Axl and Beatrice were approaching, and even as she spun around her face broke into a bright smile.

‘Dear elders!’ She started to come quickly away from the ditch, pulling her brothers with her. ‘I hope you found our home comfortable, humble though it is!’

‘We did, child, and we’re most grateful to you. Now we’re well rested and ready to be on our way. But what’s become of your people that they leave you alone?’

The girl exchanged glances with her brothers, who had taken up positions on either side of her. Then she said, a little hesitantly: ‘We manage by ourselves, sir,’ and put an arm around each of the boys.

‘And what is it down in that ditch draws you so?’ Beatrice asked.

‘It’s just our goat, mistress. It was once our best goat, but it died.’

‘How did your goat come to die, child?’ Axl asked gently. ‘The other there looks well enough.’

The children exchanged more glances, and a decision seemed to pass among them.

‘Go look if you will, sir,’ the girl said, and letting go of her brothers, she stepped to one side.

Beatrice fell in step beside him as he went towards the ditch. Before they were halfway there, Axl stopped and said in a whisper: ‘Let me go alone first, princess.’

‘Do you think I never saw a dead goat before, Axl?’

‘Even so, princess. Wait here a moment.’

The ditch was as deep as a man’s height. The sun, now shining almost directly into it, should have made it easier to discern what was before him, but instead created confusing shadows, and where there was puddle and ice, a myriad of dazzling surfaces. The goat appeared to have been of monstrous proportions, and now lay in several dismembered pieces. Over there, a hind leg; there the neck and head – the latter wearing a serene expression. It took a little longer to identify the soft upturned belly of the animal, because pressed into it was a giant hand emerging from the dark mud. Only then did he see that much of what initially he had taken to be of the dead goat belonged to a second creature entangled with it. That mound there was a shoulder; that a stiffened knee. Then he saw movement and realised the thing in the ditch was still alive.

‘What do you see, Axl?’

‘Don’t come forward, princess. It’s no sight to raise your spirits. Some poor ogre, I’d suppose, dying a slow death, and maybe these children have foolishly thrown it a goat, thinking it might recover itself with eating.’

Even as he spoke, a large hairless head revolved slowly in the slime, a gaping eye moving with it. Then the mud sucked greedily and the head vanished.

‘We didn’t feed the ogre, sir,’ the girl’s voice said behind him. ‘We know never to feed an ogre, but to bar ourselves inside at their coming. And so we did with this one, sir, and we watched from our window while he pulled down our fence and took our best goat. Then he sat down just there, sir, where you are now, his legs dangling over like he’s an infant, and happily eating the goat raw, the way ogres will. We knew not to unbar the door, and the sun getting lower, and the ogre still eating our goat, but we

could see he's getting weaker, sir. Then at last he stands up, holding what's left of the goat, then he falls down, first to his knees, then onto his side. Next thing he rolls into the ditch, goat and all, and it's two days he's been down there and still not dead.'

'Let's come away, child,' Axl said. 'This is no sight for you or your brothers. But what is it made this poor ogre so sick? Can it be your goat was diseased?'

'Not diseased, sir, poisoned! We'd been feeding it more than a full week just the way Bronwen taught us. Six times each day with the leaves.'

'Why did you do such a thing, child?'

'Why, sir, to make the goat poisonous for the she-dragon. This poor ogre wasn't to know that and so he poisoned himself. But it's not our fault, sir, because he shouldn't have been marauding the way he was!'

'A moment, child,' Axl said. 'Are you saying you fed the goat deliberately to fill it with poison?'

'Poison for the she-dragon, sir, but Bronwen said it wouldn't harm any of us. So how could we know the poison might harm an ogre? We weren't to blame, sir, and meant no wickedness!'

'No one will ever blame you, child. Yet tell me, why were you wishing to prepare poison for Querig, for I take it this is the she-dragon you talk of?'

'Oh, sir! We said our prayers morning and night and often in the day too. And when you came this morning, we knew God had sent you. So please say you'll help us, for we're just poor children forgotten by our parents! Will you take that goat there, the only one left to us now, and go with it up that path to the giant's cairn? It's an easy walk, sir, less than half a day there and back, and I'd do it myself but can't leave these young ones alone. We've fed this goat just

the way we did the one eaten by the ogre, and this with three more days' leaves in it. If only you'd take it to the giant's cairn and leave it tethered there for the she-dragon, sir, and it's but an easy stroll. Please say you'll do it, elders, for we're fearing nothing else will bring our dear mother and father back to us.'

'At last you speak of them,' Beatrice said. 'What's to be done to bring your parents back to you?'

'Didn't we just tell you, mistress? If you'd only take the goat up to the giant's cairn, where it's well known food's regularly left for the she-dragon. Then who knows, she'll perish the same way that poor ogre has, and he was a strong-looking one before his meal! We'd always been afraid before of Bronwen because of her wise arts, but when she saw we were here alone, forgotten by our own parents, she took pity on us. So please help us, elders, for who knows when anyone else will come this way? We're afraid to show ourselves to soldiers or strange men who pass, but you're the ones we prayed for to the God Jesus.'

'But what is it young children like you can know of this world,' asked Axl, 'that you believe a poisonous goat will bring your parents back to you?'

'It's what Bronwen told us, sir, and though she's a terrible old woman, she never lies. She said it's the she-dragon lives over us here made our parents forget us. And even though we often make our mother angry with our mischief, Bronwen says the day she remembers us again, she'll hurry back and hold us one by one like this.' The girl suddenly clutched an invisible child to her breast, her eyes closing, and rocked gently for a moment. Then opening her eyes again, she went on: 'But for now the she-dragon's cast some spell to make our parents forget us, so they'll not come home. Bronwen says the she-dragon's a curse not just to us but to everyone and the sooner she perishes the better. So we worked hard, sir, feeding both goats exactly as she said, six times

each day. Please do as we ask, or we won't ever see our mother and father again. All we ask is you tether the goat at the giant's cairn then go your way.'

Beatrice started to speak, but Axl said over her quickly: 'I'm sorry, child. We wish we could help you, but to climb higher into these hills is now beyond us. We're elderly, and as you see, weary from days of hard travel. We've no choice but to hurry on our way before further misfortune takes us.'

'But, sir, it was God himself sent you to us! And it's but a short stroll, and not even a steep path from here.'

'Dear child,' Axl said, 'our hearts go out to you, and we'll raise help at the next village. But we're too weak to do what you ask, and surely others will pass this way soon, happy to take the goat for you. It's beyond us old ones, but we'll pray for your parents' return and that God will keep you safe always.'

'Don't go, elders! It wasn't our fault the ogre was poisoned.'

Taking his wife's arm, Axl led her away from the children. He did not look back until they had passed the goat's pen, and then he saw the children still standing there, three abreast, watching silently, the towering cliffs behind them. Axl waved encouragingly, but something like shame - and perhaps the trace of some distant memory, a memory of another such departure - made him increase his pace.

But before they had gone far - the marshy ground had started to descend and the valleys to open before them - Beatrice tugged his arm to slow them.

'I didn't wish to talk across you before those children, husband,' she said. 'But is it really beyond us to do as they ask?'

‘They’re in no immediate peril, princess, and we have our own worries. How goes your pain now?’

‘My pain’s no worse. Axl, look how those children stand as we left them, watching as we grow ever smaller in their sight. Can’t we at least pause beside this stone and talk further on it? Let’s not hasten away carelessly.’

‘Don’t look back to them, princess, for you only taunt their hopes. We’ll not go back to their goat, but down into this valley, a fire and what food kind strangers may give us.’

‘But think on what it is they ask, Axl.’ Beatrice had now brought them to a halt. ‘Will a chance like this ever come our way again? Think on it! We stumble to this spot so near Querig’s lair. And these children offer a poisonous goat by which even the two of us, old and weak though we are, might bring down the she-dragon! Think on it, Axl! If Querig falls, the mist will fast begin to clear. Who’s to say those children aren’t right and God himself didn’t bring us this way?’

Axl remained silent for a moment, fighting the urge to look back towards the stone cottage. ‘There’s no telling that goat will bring any harm at all to Querig,’ he said eventually. ‘A hapless ogre’s one thing. This she-dragon’s a creature to scatter an army. And can it be wise for two elderly fools like us to wander so near her lair?’

‘We’re not to face her, Axl, only to tether the goat and flee. It may be days before Querig comes to the spot, and we’ll by then be safe at our son’s village. Axl, don’t we want returned to us our memories of this long life lived together? Or will we become like strangers met one night in a shelter? Come, husband, say we’ll turn back and do as those children bid us.’

* * *

So here they were, climbing still higher, the winds growing stronger. For the moment, the twin rocks provided good shelter, but they could not stay like this for ever. Axl wondered yet again if he had been foolish to give in.

‘Princess,’ he said eventually. ‘Suppose we really do this thing. Suppose God allows us to succeed, and we bring down the she-dragon. I’d like you then to promise me something.’

She was sitting close beside him now, though her eyes were still on the distance and the line of tiny figures.

‘What is it you ask, Axl?’

‘It’s simply this, princess. Should Querig really die and the mist begin to clear. Should memories return, and among them of times I disappointed you. Or yet of dark deeds I may once have done to make you look at me and see no longer the man you do now. Promise me this at least. Promise, princess, you’ll not forget what you feel in your heart for me at this moment. For what good’s a memory’s returning from the mist if it’s only to push away another? Will you promise me, princess? Promise to keep what you feel for me this moment always in your heart, no matter what you see once the mist’s gone.’

‘I’ll promise it, Axl, and no hardship to do so.’

‘Words can’t tell how it comforts me to hear you say it, princess.’

‘A queer mood you’re in, Axl. But who knows how much further it is till the giant’s cairn? Let’s not spend any more time sitting between these great stones. Those children were anxious when we left, and they’ll be awaiting our return.’

Gawain's Second Reverie

This cursed wind. Is this a storm before us? Horace will mind neither wind nor rain, only that a stranger sits astride him now and not his old master. 'Just a weary woman,' I tell him, 'with greater need of the saddle than me. So carry her in good grace.' Yet why is she here at all? Does Master Axl not see how frail she grows? Has he lost his mind to bring her to these unforgiving heights? But she presses on as determined as he, and nothing I say will turn them back. So I stagger here on foot, a hand on Horace's bridle, heaving this rusty coat. 'Did we not always serve ladies with courtesy?' I murmur to Horace. 'Would we ride on, leaving this good couple tugging at their goat?'

I saw them first as small figures far below and took them for those others. 'See down there, Horace,' I said then. 'Already they've found each other. Already they come, and as though that fellow took no wounds at all from Brennus.'

And Horace looked my way thoughtfully, as though to ask, 'Then, Gawain, will this be the last time we climb this bleak slope together?' And I gave no reply but to stroke gently his neck, though I thought to myself, 'That warrior's young and a terrible fellow. Yet I may have the beating of him, who's to say? I saw something even as he brought down Brennus's man. Another would not see it, yet I did. A small opening on the left for a canny foe.'

But what would Arthur have me do now? His shadow still falls across the land and engulfs me. Would he have me crouch like a beast awaiting its prey? Yet where to hide on these bare slopes? Will the wind alone conceal a man? Or should I perch on some precipice and hurl down a boulder at them? Hardly the way for a knight of Arthur. I would rather show myself openly, greet him, try once more a little diplomacy.

‘Turn back, sir. You endanger not just yourself and your innocent companion, but all the good folk of this country. Leave Querig to one who knows her ways. You see me even now on my way to slay her.’ But such pleas were ignored before. Why would he hear me now he is come so close, and the bitten boy to guide him to her very door? Was I a fool to rescue that boy? Yet the abbot appals me so, and I know God will thank me for what I did.

‘They come as surely as they have a chart,’ I said to Horace. ‘So where shall we wait? Where shall we face them?’

The copse. I remembered it then. Strange how the trees grow so lush there, when the wind sweeps all around so bare. The copse will provide covering for a knight and his horse. I will not pounce like a bandit, yet why show myself a good hour before the encounter?

So I put a little spur on Horace, though it hardly makes an impression on him now, and we crossed the high edge of the land, neither rising nor falling, battered all the way by the wind. We were both thankful to reach those trees, even if they grow so strangely one wonders if Merlin himself cast a spell here. What a fellow was Master Merlin! I thought once he had placed a spell on Death himself, yet even Merlin has taken his path now. Is it heaven or hell he makes his home? Master Axl may believe Merlin a servant of the devil, yet his powers were often enough spent in ways to make God smile. And let it not be said he was without courage. Many times he showed himself to the falling arrows and wild axes alongside us. These may well be Merlin’s woods, and made for this very purpose: that I may some day shelter here to await the one who would undo our great work of that day. Two of us five fell to the she-dragon, yet Master Merlin stood beside us, moving calmly within the sweep of Querig’s tail, for how else could his work be done?

The woods were hushed and peaceful when Horace and I reached them. Even a bird or two singing in the trees, and if

the branches stirred wildly, down below was as a calm spring's day where at last an old man's thoughts may drift from one ear to the other without tossing in a tempest! It must be several years now since Horace and I were last in these woods. Weeds have grown monstrous here, a nettle rightly the spread of a small child's palm stands large enough to wrap around a man twice over. I left Horace at a gentle spot to chew on what he could, and wandered a while beneath the sheltering leaves. Why should I not rest here, leaning on this good oak? And when in time they come to this place, as they surely will, he and I will face each other as fellow warriors.

I pushed through the giant nettles - is it for this I have worn this creaking metal? To defend my shins from these feathery stings? - until I reached the clearing and the pond, the grey sky above it peeping through. Around its rim, three great trees, yet each one cracked at the waist and fallen forward into the water. Surely they stood proudly when we were last here. Did lightning strike them? Or did they in weary old age long for the pond's succour, always so near where they grew, yet beyond reach? They drink all they wish now, and mountain birds nest in their broken spines. Will it be at such a spot I meet the Saxon? If he defeats me I may have life left to crawl to the water. I would not tumble in, even if the ice would admit me, for it would be no pleasure to grow bloated beneath this armour, and what chance Horace, missing his master, will come tip-toeing through the gnarled roots and drag out my remains? Yet I've seen comrades in battle yearn for water as they lie with their wounds, and watched yet others crawl to the edge of a river or lake, even though they double their agonies to do so. Is there some great secret known only to dying men? My old comrade, Master Buel, longed for water that day, as he lay on the red clay of that mountain. There's water here left in my gourd, I told him, but no, he demands a lake or river. But we're far from any such thing, I say. 'Curse you, Gawain,' he cries. 'My last wish, will you not grant it, and we comrades through

many bold battles?’ ‘But this she-dragon’s all but parted you in two,’ I tell him. ‘If I must carry you to water, I’ll have to go under this summer sun, a separate part of you under each arm before we reach any such place.’ But he says to me, ‘My heart will welcome death only when you lay me down beside water, Gawain, where I hear its gentle lapping as my eyes close.’ He demands this, and cares not whether our errand is well done, or if his life is given at a good price. Only when I reach down to raise him does he ask: ‘Who else survives?’ And I tell him Master Millus is fallen, yet three of us still stand, and Master Merlin too. And still he asks not if the errand is well finished, but talks of lakes and rivers, and now even of the sea, and it is all I can do to remember this is my old comrade, and a brave one, chosen like me by Arthur for this great task, even as a battle rages down in the valley. Does he forget his duty? I lift him, and he cries out to the heavens, and only then understands the cost even of a few small steps, and there we are, atop a red mountain in the summer heat, an hour’s journey even on horseback to the river. And as I lower him he talks now only of the sea. His eyes blind now, when I sprinkle water on his face from my gourd, he thanks me the way I suppose in his mind’s eye he stands upon a shore. ‘Was it sword or axe finished me?’ he asks, and I say, ‘What do you talk of, comrade? It’s the she-dragon’s tail met you, but our task’s done and you depart with pride and honour.’ ‘The she-dragon,’ he says. ‘What’s become of the she-dragon?’ ‘All but one of the spears rest in her flank,’ I say, ‘and now she sleeps.’ Yet he forgets the errand again, and talks of the sea, and of a boat he knew as a small boy when his father took him far from the shore on a kind evening.

When my own time comes, will I too long for the sea? I think I will be content enough with the soil. And I will not demand the exact spot, but let it be within this country Horace and I have spent the years roaming contentedly. Those dark widows of earlier would cackle to hear me, and hasten to remind me with what I may share my plot of earth. ‘Foolish

knight! You above all need choose your resting place well, or find yourself a neighbour to the very ones you slaughtered! ' Did they not make some such jest even as they threw mud at Horace's rump? How dare they! Were they there? Can it be this woman now rides in my saddle would say as much if she could hear my thoughts? She talked of slaughtered babes down in that foul-aired tunnel, even as I delivered her from the monks' black plans. How dare she? And now she sits in my saddle, astride my dear battlehorse, and who knows how many more journeys are left to Horace and me?

For a while we thought this might be our last, but I had mistaken this good couple for those others, and a while longer we travel in peace. Yet even as I lead Horace by the bridle, I must glance back, for surely they are coming, even if we go well ahead. Master Axl walks beside me, his goat forbidding him a steady step. Does he guess why I look back so often? 'Sir Gawain, were we not comrades once?' I heard him ask it early this morning as we came out of the tunnel, and I told him to find a boat to go downstream. Yet here he is, still in the mountains, his good wife beside him. I will not meet his eye. Age cloaks us both, as the grass and weeds cloak the fields where we once fought and slaughtered. What is it you seek, sir? What is this goat you bring?

'Turn back, friends,' I said when they came upon me in the woods. 'This is no walk for elderly travellers like you. And look how the good mistress holds her side. Between here and the giant's cairn there's still a mile or more, and the only shelter small rocks behind which one must curl with bowed head. Turn back while you still have strength, and I'll see this goat's left at the cairn and tethered well.' But they both eyed me suspiciously, and Master Axl would not let go the goat. The branches rustled above, and his wife seated on the roots of an oak, gazing to the pond and the cracked trees stooping to water, and I said softly: 'This is no journey for your good wife, sir. Why did you not do as I advised and take the river down out of these hills?' 'We

must take this goat where we promised,' says Master Axl. 'A promise made to a child.' And does he look at me strangely as he says so, or do I dream it? 'Horace and I will take the goat,' I say. 'Will you not trust us with the errand? I hardly believe this goat will much trouble Querig even if devoured whole, yet she may be a little slowed and lend me an advantage. So give me the creature and turn back down the mountain before one or the other of you fall in your own footsteps.'

They moved then into the trees away from me, and I could hear the shape of their lowered voices, but no words. Then Master Axl comes to me and says: 'A moment more for my wife to rest, then we will carry on, sir, to the giant's cairn.' I see it is useless to argue more, and I also eager to continue on our way, for who knows how far behind is Master Wistan and his bitten boy?

PART IV

Chapter Fifteen

Some of you will have fine monuments by which the living may remember the evil done to you. Some of you will have only crude wooden crosses or painted rocks, while yet others of you must remain hidden in the shadows of history. You are in any case part of an ancient procession, and so it is always possible the giant's cairn was erected to mark the site of some such tragedy long ago when young innocents were slaughtered in war. This aside, it is not easy to think of reasons for its standing. One can see why on lower ground our ancestors might have wished to commemorate a victory or a king. But why stack heavy stones to above a man's height in so high and remote a place as this?

It was a question, I am sure, equally to baffle Axl as he came wearily up the mountain slope. When the young girl had first mentioned the giant's cairn, he had pictured something atop a large mound. Yet this cairn had simply appeared before them on the incline, no feature around it to explain its presence. The goat, nonetheless, seemed immediately to sense its significance, struggling frantically as soon as the cairn had become visible as a dark finger against the sky. 'It knows its fate,' Sir Gawain had remarked, guiding his horse up with Beatrice in the saddle.

But now the goat had forgotten its earlier dread and was chewing the mountain grass contentedly.

'Can it be Querig's mist works its mischief on goats and men alike?'

It was Beatrice who asked this as she held with both hands the animal's rope. Axl had for the moment relinquished the creature while he hammered into the ground with a stone the wooden stake around which the rope had been wound.

‘Who knows, princess. But if God cares at all for goats, he’ll bring the she-dragon here before long, or it’ll be a lonely wait for this poor animal.’

‘If the goat dies first, Axl, do you suppose she’ll still sup on meat not living and fresh?’

‘Who knows how a she-dragon likes her meat? But there’s grass here to keep this goat a while, princess, even if it’s of a mean sort.’

‘Look there, Axl. I thought the knight would help us, weary as we both are. But he’s forgotten his usual manners.’

Indeed Sir Gawain had become oddly reticent since their arrival at the cairn. ‘This is the place you seek,’ he had said in an almost sulky voice, before wandering off. And now he stood with his back to them, staring at the clouds.

‘Sir Gawain,’ Axl called out, pausing from his work. ‘Will you not assist holding this goat? My poor wife grows tired from it.’

The old knight did not react, and Axl, assuming he had not heard, was about to repeat his request, when Gawain turned suddenly, and with such a look of solemnity, they both stared at him.

‘I see them below,’ the old knight said. ‘And nothing now to turn them.’

‘Who is it you see, sir?’ Axl asked. Then when the knight remained silent, ‘Are they soldiers? We watched earlier some long column on the horizon, but thought they moved away from us.’

‘I speak of your recent companions, sir. The same with whom you travelled yesterday when we met. They emerge from the wood below, and who’ll stop them now? For a moment, I raised a hope I merely looked on two black widows strayed from that infernal procession. But it was the cloudy sky playing its tricks, and it’s them, no mistake.’

‘So Master Wistan escaped the monastery after all,’ Axl said.

‘That he did, sir. And now he comes, and on his rope not a goat, but the Saxon boy to guide him.’

At last Sir Gawain seemed to notice Beatrice struggling with the animal and came hurriedly from the cliff edge to seize the rope. But Beatrice did not let go, and for a moment it was as if she and the knight were tussling for control of the goat. In time they stood steadily, both holding the rope, the old knight a step or two in front of Beatrice.

‘And have our friends in turn seen us here, Sir Gawain?’ Axl asked, returning to his task.

‘I’ll wager that warrior has keen eyes, and sees us even now against the sky, figures in a tug contest, the goat our opponent!’ He laughed to himself, but a melancholy lingered in his voice. ‘Yes,’ he said finally. ‘I fancy he sees us well enough.’

‘Then he joins forces with us,’ Beatrice said, ‘to bring down the she-dragon.’

Sir Gawain looked from one to the other of them uneasily. Then he said: ‘Master Axl, do you still persist in believing it?’

‘Believing what, Sir Gawain?’

‘That we gather here in this forsaken spot as comrades?’

‘Make your meaning clearer, sir knight.’

Gawain led the goat to where Axl was kneeling, oblivious of Beatrice following behind, still clutching her end of the rope.

‘Master Axl, didn’t our ways part years ago? Mine remained with Arthur, while yours ...’ He seemed now to become aware of Beatrice behind him, and turning, bowed

politely. 'Dear lady, I beg you let go this rope and rest. I'll not let the animal escape. Sit down beside the cairn there. It will shelter at least some part of you from this wind.'

'Thank you, Sir Gawain,' Beatrice said. 'Then I'll trust you with this creature, and it's a precious one to us.'

She began to make her way towards the cairn, and something about the way she did so, her shoulders hunched against the wind, caused a fragment of recollection to stir on the edges of Axl's mind. The emotion it provoked, even before he could hold it down, surprised and shocked him, for mingled with the overwhelming desire to go to her now and shelter her, were distinct shadows of anger and bitterness. She had talked of a long night spent alone, tormented by his absence, but could it be he too had known such a night, or even several, of similar anguish? Then, as Beatrice stopped before the cairn and bowed her head to the stones as if in apology, he felt both memory and anger growing firmer, and a fear made him turn away from her. Only then did he notice Sir Gawain also gazing over at Beatrice, a look of tenderness in his eyes, seemingly lost in his thoughts. But the knight soon collected himself, and coming closer to Axl, leant right down as though to remove any small chance of Beatrice overhearing.

'Who's to say your path wasn't the more godly?' he said. 'To leave behind all great talk of war and peace. Leave behind that fine law to bring men closer to God. To leave behind Arthur once and for all and devote yourself to ...' He glanced over again at Beatrice, who had remained on her feet, her forehead almost touching the piled stones in her effort to escape the wind. 'To a good wife, sir. I've watched how she goes beside you as a kind shadow. Should I have done the same? Yet God guided us down separate paths. I had a duty. Ha! And do I fear him now? Never, sir, never. I accuse you of nothing. That great law you brokered torn down in blood! Yet it held well for a time. Torn down in blood!

Who blames us for it now? Do I fear youth? Is it youth alone can defeat an opponent? Let him come, let him come. Remember it, sir! I saw you that very day and you talked of cries in your ears of children and babes. I heard the same, sir, yet were they not like the cries from the surgeon's tent when a man's life is spared even as the cure brings agonies? Yet I admit it. There are days I long for a kind shadow to follow me. Even now I turn in hope to see one. Doesn't every animal, every bird in the sky crave a tender companion? There were one or two I'd willingly have given my years. Why should I fear him now? I've fought fanged Norsemen with reindeer snouts, and they no masks! Here, sir, tie your goat now. How much deeper will you drive that stake? Is it a goat you tether or a lion?'

Handing Axl the rope, Gawain went striding off, not stopping till he stood where the land's edge appeared to meet the sky. Axl, one knee pressed into the grass, tied the rope tightly around the notch in the wood, then looked once more over to his wife. She was standing at the cairn much as before, and though something in her posture again tugged at him, he was relieved to find in himself no trace of the earlier bitterness. Instead he felt almost overcome by an urge to defend her, not just from the harsh wind, but from something else large and dark even then gathering around them. He rose and hurried to her.

'The goat's well secured, princess,' he said. 'Just as soon as you're ready, let's be off down this slope. For haven't we completed the errand promised to those children and to ourselves?'

'Oh Axl, I don't want to go back to those woods.'

'What are you saying, princess?'

'Axl, you never went to the pond's edge, you were so busy talking to this knight. You never looked into that chilly water.'

‘These winds have tired you, princess.’

‘I saw their faces staring up as if resting in their beds.’

‘Who, princess?’

‘The babes, and only a short way beneath the water’s surface. I thought first they were smiling, and some waving, but when I went nearer I saw how they lay unmoving.’

‘Just another dream came to you while you rested against that tree. I remember seeing you asleep there and took comfort from it at the time, even as I talked with the old knight.’

‘I truly saw them, Axl. Among the green weed. Let’s not go back to that wood, for I’m sure some evil lingers there.’

Sir Gawain, gazing down at the view, had raised his arm in the air, and now without turning, shouted through the wind: ‘They’ll soon be upon us! They come up the slope eagerly.’

‘Let’s go to him, princess, but keep the cloak around you. I was foolish to bring you this far, but we’ll soon find shelter again. Yet let’s see what troubles the good knight.’

The goat was pulling at its rope as they passed, but the stake showed no sign of shifting. Axl had been keen to see how near the approaching figures were, but now the old knight came walking towards them, and they all three halted not far from where the animal was tethered.

‘Sir Gawain,’ Axl said, ‘my wife grows weak and must return to shelter and food. May we carry her down on your horse as we brought her up?’

‘What’s this you ask? Too much, sir! Did I not tell you when we met in Merlin’s wood to climb this hill no further? It was you both insisted on coming here.’

‘Perhaps we were foolish, sir, but we had a purpose, and if we must turn back without you, you must promise not to free this goat cost us so dearly to bring here.’

‘Free the goat? What do I care for your goat, sir? The Saxon warrior will soon be upon us, and what a fellow he is! Go, look if you doubt it! What do I care for your goat? Master Axl, I see you before me now and I’m reminded of that night. The wind as fierce then as this one. And you, cursing Arthur to his face while the rest of us stood with heads bowed! For who wanted the task of striking you down? Each of us hiding from the king’s eye, for fear he’d command with one glance to run you through, unarmed though you were. But see, sir, Arthur was a great king, and here’s more proof of it! You cursed him before his finest knights, yet he replied gently to you. You recall this, sir?’

‘I recall nothing of it, Sir Gawain. Your she-dragon’s breath keeps it all from me.’

‘My eyes lowered like the rest, expecting your head to roll past my feet even as I gazed down at them! Yet Arthur spoke to you with gentleness! You don’t recall even a part of it? The wind that night almost as strong as this one, our tent ready to fly into the dark sky. Yet Arthur meets curses with gentle words. He thanked you for your service. For your friendship. And he bade us all think of you with honour. I myself whispered farewell to you, sir, as you took your fury into the storm. You didn’t hear me, for it was said under my breath, but a sincere farewell all the same, and I wasn’t alone. We all shared something of your anger, sir, even if you did wrong to curse Arthur, and on the very day of his great victory! You say now Querig’s breath keeps this from your mind, or is it the years alone, or even this wind enough to make the wisest monk a fool?’

‘I don’t care for any of these memories, Sir Gawain. Today I seek others from another stormy night my wife speaks of.’

‘A sincere farewell I bade you, sir, and let me confess it, when you cursed Arthur a small part of me spoke through you. For that was a great treaty you brokored, and well held for years. Didn’t all men, Christian and pagan, sleep more easily for it, even on the eve of battle? To fight knowing our innocents safe in our villages? And yet, sir, the wars didn’t finish. Where once we fought for land and God, we now fought to avenge fallen comrades, themselves slaughtered in vengeance. Where could it end? Babes growing to men knowing only days of war. And your great law already suffering violation ...’

‘The law was well held on both sides until that day, Sir Gawain,’ Axl said. ‘It was an unholy thing to break it.’

‘Ah, now you recall it!’

‘My memory’s of God himself betrayed, sir. And I’m not sorry if the mist robs me further of it.’

‘For a time I wished the same of the mist, Master Axl. Yet soon I understood the hand of a truly great king. For the wars stopped at last, wasn’t that so, sir? Hasn’t peace been our companion since that day?’

‘Remind me no more, Sir Gawain. I don’t thank you for it. Let me see instead the life I led with my dear wife, shivering here beside me. Will you not lend us your horse, sir? At least down to the woods where we met. We’ll leave him safely there to await you.’

‘Oh Axl, I’ll not return to those woods! Why insist we leave this place now and go down there? Can it be, husband, you still fear the mist’s fading, never mind the promise I made you?’

‘My horse, sir? You imply I’ve no more use of my Horace? You go too far, sir! I don’t fear him, even if he’s youth on his side!’

'I imply nothing, Sir Gawain, only ask for the assistance of your excellent horse to carry my wife down to shelter ...'

'My horse, sir? Do you insist his eyes be masked or watch his master's fall? He's a battlehorse, sir! Not some pony frolics in buttercups! A battlehorse, sir, and well ready to see me fall or triumph as God wills!'

'If my wife must travel on my own back, sir knight, so be it. Yet I thought you might spare your horse at least the distance down to the wood ...'

'I'll remain here, Axl, never mind this cruel wind, and if Master Wistan's nearly upon us, we'll stay and see if it's him or the she-dragon survives this day. Or is it you'd rather not see the mist fade after all, husband?'

'I've seen it before many times, sir! An eager young one brought down by a wise old head. Many times!'

'Sir, let me implore you again to remember your gentlemanly ways. This wind drains my wife of strength.'

'Is it not enough, husband, I swore you an oath, and only this morning, I'd not let go what I feel in my heart for you today, no matter what the mist's fading reveals?'

'Will you not understand the acts of a great king, sir? We can only watch and wonder. A great king, like God himself, must perform deeds mortals flinch from! Do you think there were none that caught my eye? A tender flower or two passed on the way I didn't long to press to my bosom? Is this metal coat to be my only bedfellow? Who calls me a coward, sir? Or a slaughterer of babes? Where were you that day? Were you with us? My helmet! I left it in those woods! But what need of it now? The armour too I'd take off but I fear you all laughing to see the skinned fox beneath!'

For a moment, all three of them were shouting over each other, the howl of the wind a fourth voice against theirs,

but now Axl became aware that both Gawain and his wife had fallen silent and were staring past his shoulder. Turning, he saw the warrior and the Saxon boy standing at the cliff's edge, almost on the very spot where before Sir Gawain had been gazing broodingly out at the view. The sky had thickened, so that to Axl it was as if the newcomers had been carried here on the clouds. Now both of them, in near-silhouette, appeared peculiarly transfixed: the warrior holding firm his rein in both hands like a charioteer; the boy leaning forward at an angle, both arms outstretched as though for balance. There was a new sound in the wind, and then Axl heard Sir Gawain say: 'Ah! the boy sings again! Can you not make him cease, sir?'

Wistan gave a laugh, and the two figures lost their rigidity and came towards them, the boy pulling in front.

'My apologies,' the warrior said. 'Yet it's all I can do to stop him leaping rock to rock till he breaks himself.'

'What can be the matter with the boy, Axl?' Beatrice said, close to his ear, and he was grateful to hear the gentle intimacy returned to her voice. 'He was just this way before that dog appeared.'

'Must he sing so untunefully?' Sir Gawain addressed Wistan again. 'I'd box his ears but fear he'd not even feel me!'

The warrior, still approaching, laughed again, then glanced cheerfully at Axl and Beatrice. 'My friends, this is a surprise. I fancied you'd be in your son's village by now. What brings you instead to this lonely spot?'

'The same business as yours, Master Wistan. We crave the end to this she-dragon who robs us of treasured memories. You see, sir, we've brought with us a poisoned goat to do our work.'

Wistan regarded the animal and shook his head. 'This must be a mighty and cunning creature we face, friends. I

fear your goat may not trouble her beyond a belch or two. ’

‘It taxed us greatly bringing it here, Master Wistan,’ Beatrice said, ‘even if we were helped by this good knight met again on the way up. But seeing you here, I’m cheered, for it must be our hopes no longer rest solely with our animal.’

But now Edwin’s singing was making it hard for them to hear one another, and the boy was tugging more than ever, the object of his attention quite evidently a spot at the crest of the next slope. Wistan gave the rope a sharp pull, then said:

‘Master Edwin appears anxious to reach those rocks up there. Sir Gawain, what lies in them? I see stones piled one upon another, as though to hide a pit or lair.’

‘Why ask me, sir?’ said Sir Gawain. ‘Ask your young companion and he may even stop his songs!’

‘I hold him by a leash, sir, but can no more control him than a crazed goblin.’

‘Master Wistan,’ Axl said, ‘we share a duty to keep this boy from harm. We must watch him carefully in this high place.’

‘Well said, sir. I’ll tether him, if I may, to the same post as your goat.’

The warrior led Edwin to where Axl had hammered in the stake, and crouching down began securing the boy’s rope to it. Indeed it seemed to Axl that Wistan lavished unusual care on this task, testing repeatedly each knot he made, as well as the soundness of Axl’s handiwork. Meanwhile the boy himself remained oblivious. He calmed somewhat, but his gaze stayed fixed on the rocks at the top of the slope, and he continued to tug with quiet insistence. His singing, though far less shrill, had gained a dogged quality that reminded Axl of the way exhausted soldiers sing to keep marching. For

its part, the goat had moved as far away as its own rope would allow, but was nonetheless gawping in fascination.

As for Sir Gawain, he had been watching Wistan's every movement with care, and - so it seemed to Axl - a kind of sly cunning had come into his eyes. As the Saxon warrior had become absorbed in his task, the knight had moved stealthily closer, drawn out his sword, and planting it into the soil, leant his weight on it, forearms resting on the broad hilt. In this stance, Gawain was now watching Wistan, and it struck Axl he might be memorising details concerning the warrior's person: his height, his reach, the strength in the calves, the strapped left arm.

His work completed to his satisfaction, Wistan rose and turned to face Sir Gawain. For a small moment there was a strange uneasiness in the looks they exchanged, then Wistan smiled warmly.

'Now here's a custom divides Britons from Saxons,' he said, pointing. 'See there, sir. Your sword's drawn and you use it to rest your weight, as if it's cousin to a chair or footstool. To any Saxon warrior, even one taught by Britons as I was, it seems a strange custom.'

'Grow to my creaky years, sir, you'll see if it seems so strange! In days of peace like these, I fancy a good sword's only too glad of the work, even if just to relieve its owner's bones. What's odd about it, sir?'

'But observe, Sir Gawain, how it presses into the earth. Now to us Saxons, a sword's edge is a thing of never-sleeping worry. We fear to show a blade even the air lest it lose a tiny part of its edge.'

'Is that so? A sharp edge's of importance, Master Wistan, I'll not dispute. But isn't there too much made of it? Good footwork, sound strategy, calm courage. And that little wildness makes a warrior hard to predict. These are what determine a contest, sir. And the knowledge God wills

one's victory. So let an old man rest his shoulders. Besides, aren't there times a sword left in the sheath's drawn too late? I've stood this way on many a battlefield to gather breath, comforted my blade's already out and ready, and it won't be rubbing its eyes and asking me if it's afternoon or morn even as I try to put it to good use.'

'Then it must be we Saxons keep our swords more heartlessly. For we demand they not sleep at all, even as they rest in the dark of their scabbards. Take my own here, sir. It knows my manner well. It doesn't expect to take the air without soon touching flesh and bone.'

'A difference in custom then, sir. It reminds me of a Saxon I once knew, a fine fellow, and he and I gathering kindling on a cold night. I would be busying my sword to hack from a dead tree, yet there he is beside me, employing his bare hands and sometimes a blunt stone. "Have you forgotten your blade, friend?" I asked him. "Why go at it like a sharp-clawed bear?" But he wouldn't hear me. At the time I thought him crazed, yet now you enlighten me. Even with my years, there are still lessons to learn!'

They both laughed briefly, then Wistan said:

'There may be more than custom on my side, Sir Gawain. I was always taught that even as my blade travels through one opponent, I must in my thought prepare the cut that will follow. Now if my edge isn't sharp, sir, and the blade's passage slowed even a tiny instant, snagged in bone or dawdling through the tangles of a man's insides, I'll surely be late for the next cut, and on such may hang victory or defeat.'

'You're right, sir. I believe it's old age and these long years of peace make me careless. I'll follow your example from here, yet just now my knees sag from the climb, and I beg you allow me this small relief.'

‘Of course, sir, take your comfort. Merely a thought struck me seeing you rest that way.’

Suddenly Edwin stopped singing and began to shout. He was making the same statement over and over, and Axl, turning to Beatrice beside him, asked quietly: ‘What is it he says, princess?’

‘He talks of some bandits’ camp lies up there. He bids us all follow him to it.’

Wistan and Gawain were both staring at the boy with something like embarrassment. For another moment, Edwin continued to shout and pull, then fell silent, slumping down onto the ground, and appeared on the verge of tears. No one spoke for what seemed a long time, the wind howling between them.

‘Sir Gawain,’ Axl said finally. ‘We look now to you, sir. Let’s keep no more disguises between us. You’re the she-dragon’s protector, are you not?’

‘I am, sir.’ Gawain gazed at each of them in turn, Edwin included, with an air of defiance. ‘Her protector, and lately her only friend. The monks kept her fed for years, leaving tethered animals at this spot, as you do. But now they quarrel among themselves, and Querig senses their treachery. Yet she knows I stay loyal.’

‘Then Sir Gawain,’ Wistan said, ‘will you care to tell us if we stand near the she-dragon now?’

‘She’s near, sir. You’ve done well to arrive here, even if you had good fortune stumbling on that boy for a guide.’

Edwin, who was back on his feet, began to sing once more, albeit in a low chant-like manner.

‘Master Edwin here may prove of greater fortune yet,’ said the warrior. ‘For I’ve a hunch he’s a pupil to quickly surpass his poor master and one day do great things for his kin. Perhaps even as your Arthur did for his.’

‘What, sir? This boy now singing and tugging like a half-wit?’

‘Sir Gawain,’ Beatrice interrupted, ‘tell a weary old woman if you will. How is it a fine knight like you, and a nephew to the great Arthur, turns out this she-dragon’s protector?’

‘Perhaps Master Wistan here’s keen to explain it, mistress.’

‘On the contrary, I’m as eager as Mistress Beatrice to hear your account of it. Yet all in good time. First, we must settle one question. Will I cut loose Master Edwin to see where he runs? Or will you, Sir Gawain, lead the way to Querig’s lair?’

Sir Gawain stared emptily at the struggling boy, then sighed. ‘Leave him where he is,’ he said heavily. ‘I’ll lead the way.’ He straightened to his full height, pulled the sword from the ground and carefully returned it to its scabbard.

‘I thank you, sir,’ Wistan said. ‘I’m grateful we spare the boy the danger. Yet I may now guess the way without a guide. We must go to those rocks atop this next slope, must we not?’

Sir Gawain sighed again, glanced at Axl as though for help, then shook his head sadly. ‘Quite right, sir,’ he said. ‘Those rocks circle a pit, and no small one. A pit as deep as a quarry, and you’ll find Querig asleep there. If you really mean to fight her, Master Wistan, you’ll have to climb down into it. Now I ask you, sir, do you really mean to do such a wild thing?’

‘I’ve come this long way to do so, sir.’

‘Master Wistan,’ Beatrice said, ‘if you’ll excuse an old woman’s intrusion. You laughed just now at our goat, but this is a great battle you face. If this knight will not help

you, at least allow us to take our goat up this last slope and prod it down into this pit. If you must fight a she-dragon single-handed, let it be one slowed by poison.'

'Thank you, mistress, your concern's well received. Yet while I may take advantage of her slumber, poison's a weapon I don't care to employ. Besides, I lack the patience now to wait another half day or more to discover if the she-dragon will sicken from her supper.'

'Then let's have it over with,' Sir Gawain said. 'Come, sir, I'll lead the way.' Then to Axl and Beatrice: 'Wait down here, friends, and hide from the wind beside the cairn. You'll not wait long.'

'But Sir Gawain,' Beatrice said, 'my husband and I've stretched our strength to come this far. We'd walk with you this last slope if there's a way to do so without danger.'

Sir Gawain once again shook his head helplessly. 'Then let's all go together, friends. I dare say no harm will befall you, and I'll be easier myself for your presence. Come, friends, let's go to Querig's lair, and keep your voices low lest she stir from her sleep.'

* * *

As they ascended the next path, the wind grew less harsh, even though they felt more than ever to be touching the sky. The knight and the warrior were striding steadily before them, for all the world like two old companions taking the air together, and before long a distance had opened between them and the elderly couple.

'This is foolishness, princess,' Axl said as they walked. 'What business do we have following these gentlemen? And who knows what dangers lie ahead? Let's turn back and wait beside the boy.'

But Beatrice's step remained determined. 'I'll have us go on,' she said. 'Here, Axl, take my hand and help me keep

my courage. For I'm thinking now I'm the one to fear most the mist's clearing, not you. I stood beside those stones just now and it came to me there were dark things I did to you once, husband. Feel how this hand trembles in yours to think they may be returned to us! What will you say to me then? Will you turn away and leave me on this bleak hill? There's a part of me would see this brave warrior fall even as he walks before us now, yet I'll not have us hide. No, I'll not, Axl, and aren't you the same? Let's see freely the path we've come together, whether it's in dark or mellow sun. And if this warrior must really face the she-dragon in her own pit, let's do what we can to keep up his spirits. It may be a shout of warning in the right place, or one to rouse him from a fierce blow will make the difference.'

Axl had let her talk on, listening with only half his mind as he walked, because he had become aware once more of something at the far edge of his memory: a stormy night, a bitter hurt, a loneliness opening before him like unfathomed waters. Could it really have been he, not Beatrice, standing alone in their chamber, unable to sleep, a small candle lit before him?

'What became of our son, princess?' he asked suddenly, and felt her hand tighten on his. 'Does he really wait for us in his village? Or will we search this country for a year and still not find him?'

'It's a thought came to me too, but I was afraid to think it aloud. But hush now, Axl, or we'll be heard.'

Indeed Sir Gawain and Wistan had halted on the path ahead to wait for them, and appeared to be in genial conversation. As he came up to them, Axl could hear Sir Gawain saying with a small chuckle:

'I'll confess, Master Wistan, my hope's that even now Querig's breath will rob you of the memory of why you walk beside me. I await eagerly your asking where it is I lead

you! Yet I see from both your eye and step you forget little.’

Wistan smiled. ‘I believe, sir, it’s this very gift to withstand strange spells won me this errand from my king. For in the fens, we’ve never known a creature quite like this Querig, yet have known others with wonderful powers, and it was noticed how little I was swayed, even as my comrades swooned and wandered in dreams. I fancy this was my king’s only reason to choose me, for almost all my comrades at home are better warriors than this one walks beside you now.’

‘Impossible to believe, Master Wistan! Both report and observation tell of your extraordinary qualities.’

‘You overestimate me, sir. Yesterday, needing to bring down that soldier under your gaze, I was all too aware how a man of your skill might view my small accomplishments. Sufficient to defeat a frightened guardsman, but far short of your approval, I fear.’

‘What nonsense, sir! You’re a splendid fellow, and no more of it! Now, friends’ - Gawain turned his gaze to include Axl and Beatrice - ‘it’s not so far now. Let’s be moving on while she still sleeps.’

They continued in silence. This time Axl and Beatrice did not fall behind, for a sense of solemnity seemed to descend on Gawain and Wistan, making them proceed in front at an almost ceremonial pace. In any case, the ground had become less demanding, levelling to something like a plateau. The rocks they had discussed from below now loomed before them, and Axl could see, as they came ever nearer, how they were arranged in a rough semi-circle around the top of a mound to the side of their path. He could see too how a row of smaller stones rose in a kind of stairway up the side of the mound, leading right up to the rim of what could only be a pit of significant depth. The grass all around where they had now arrived seemed to have been blackened or burnt, lending the surroundings - already without tree or shrub - an

atmosphere of decay. Gawain, bringing the party to a halt near where the crude stairway began, turned to face Wistan with some deliberation.

‘Will you not consider a last time, sir, leaving this dangerous plan? Why not return now to your orphan tied to his stick? There’s his voice in the wind even now.’

The warrior glanced back the way they had come, then looked again at Sir Gawain. ‘You know it, sir. I cannot turn back. Show me this dragon.’

The old knight nodded thoughtfully, as though Wistan had just made some casual but fascinating observation.

‘Very well, friends,’ he said. ‘Then keep your voices low, for what purpose should we wake her?’

Sir Gawain led the way up the side of the mound and on reaching the rocks signalled for them to wait. He then peered over carefully, and after a moment, beckoned to them, saying in a low voice: ‘Come stand along here, friends, and you’ll see her well enough.’

Axl helped his wife onto a ledge beside him, then leant over one of the rocks. The pit below was broader and shallower than he had expected - more like a drained pond than something actually dug into the ground. The greater part of it was now in pale sunlight, and seemed to consist entirely of grey rock and gravel - the blackened grass finishing abruptly at the rim - so that the only living thing visible, aside from the dragon herself, was a solitary hawthorn bush sprouting incongruously through the stone near the centre of the pit’s belly.

As for the dragon, it was hardly clear at first she was alive. Her posture - prone, head twisted to one side, limbs outspread - might easily have resulted from her corpse being hurled into the pit from a height. In fact it took a moment to ascertain this was a dragon at all: she was so emaciated she looked more some worm-like reptile accustomed to water

that had mistakenly come aground and was in the process of dehydrating. Her skin, which should have appeared oiled and of a colour not unlike bronze, was instead a yellowing white, reminiscent of the underside of certain fish. The remnants of her wings were sagging folds of skin that a careless glance might have taken for dead leaves accumulated to either side of her. The head being turned against the grey pebbles, Axl could see only the one eye, which was hooded in the manner of a turtle's, and which opened and closed lethargically according to some internal rhythm. This movement, and the faintest rise and fall along the creature's backbone, were the only indicators that Querig was still alive.

'Can this really be her, Axl?' Beatrice said quietly. 'This poor creature no more than a fleshy thread?'

'Yet look there, mistress,' Gawain's voice said behind them. 'So long as she's breath left, she does her duty.'

'Is she sick or perhaps already poisoned?' asked Axl.

'She simply grows old, sir, as we all must do. But she still breathes, and so Merlin's work lingers.'

'Now a little of this comes back to me,' Axl said. 'I remember Merlin's work here and dark it was too.'

'Dark, sir?' said Gawain. 'Why dark? It was the only way. Even before that battle was properly won, I rode out with four good comrades to tame this same creature, in those days both mighty and angry, so Merlin could place this great spell on her breath. A dark man he may have been, but in this he did God's will, not only Arthur's. Without this she-dragon's breath, would peace ever have come? Look how we live now, sir! Old foes as cousins, village by village. Master Wistan, you fall silent before this sight. I ask again. Will you not leave this poor creature to live out her life? Her breath isn't what it was, yet holds the magic even now. Think, sir, once that breath should cease, what might be awoken across this land even after these years! Yes, we

slaughtered plenty, I admit it, caring not who was strong and who weak. God may not have smiled at us, but we cleansed the land of war. Leave this place, sir, I beg you. We may pray to different gods, yet surely yours will bless this dragon as does mine.'

Wistan turned away from the pit to look at the old knight.

'What kind of god is it, sir, wishes wrongs to go forgotten and unpunished?'

'You ask it well, Master Wistan, and I know my god looks uneasily on our deeds of that day. Yet it's long past and the bones lie sheltered beneath a pleasant green carpet. The young know nothing of them. I beg you leave this place, and let Querig do her work a while longer. Another season or two, that's the most she'll last. Yet even that may be long enough for old wounds to heal for ever, and an eternal peace to hold among us. Look how she clings to life, sir! Be merciful and leave this place. Leave this country to rest in forgetfulness.'

'Foolishness, sir. How can old wounds heal while maggots linger so richly? Or a peace hold for ever built on slaughter and a magician's trickery? I see how devoutly you wish it, for your old horrors to crumble as dust. Yet they await in the soil as white bones for men to uncover. Sir Gawain, my answer's unchanged. I must go down into this pit.'

Sir Gawain nodded gravely. 'I understand, sir.'

'Then I must ask you in turn, sir knight. Will you leave this place to me and return now to your fine old stallion awaits you below?'

'You know I cannot, Master Wistan.'

'It's as I thought. Well then.'

Wistan came past Axl and Beatrice, and down the rough-hewn steps. When he was once more at the foot of the mound,

he looked around him and said, in a quite new voice: 'Sir Gawain, this earth looks curious here. Can it be the she-dragon, in her more vigorous days, blasted it this way? Or does lightning strike here often to burn the ground before new grasses return?'

Gawain, who had followed him down the mound, also came off the steps, and for a moment the two of them strolled about randomly like companions pondering at which spot to pitch their tent.

'It's something always puzzled me too, Master Wistan,' Gawain was saying. 'For even when younger, she remained above, and I don't suppose it's Querig made this blasted ground. Perhaps it was always thus, even when we first brought her here and lowered her into her lair.' Gawain tapped his heel experimentally on the soil. 'A good floor, sir, nevertheless.'

'Indeed.' Wistan, his back to Gawain, was also testing the ground with his foot.

'Though perhaps a little short in width?' remarked the knight. 'See how that edge rolls over the cliffside. A man who fell here would rest on friendly earth, sure enough, yet his blood may run swiftly through these burnt grasses and over the side. I don't speak for you, sir, but I'll not fancy my insides dripping over the cliff like a gull's white droppings!'

They both laughed, then Wistan said:

'A needless worry, sir. See how the ground lifts slightly before the cliff there. As for the opposite edge, it's too far the other way and plenty of thirsty soil first.'

'That's well observed. Well, then, it's no bad spot!' Sir Gawain looked up at Axl and Beatrice, who were still up on the ledge, though now with their backs to the pit.

'Master Axl,' he called cheerfully, 'you were always the

great one for diplomacy. Do you care to use your fine eloquence now to let us leave this place as friends?’

‘I’m sorry, Sir Gawain. You’ve shown us much kindness and we thank you for it. Yet we’re now here to see the end of Querig, and if you’ll defend her, there’s nothing I or my wife can say on your side. Our will’s with Master Wistan in this matter.’

‘I see it, sir. Then let me ask at least this of you. I don’t fear this fellow before me. Yet if I should be the one to fall, will you take my good Horace back down this mountain? He’ll welcome a pair of good Britons on his back. You may think he grumbles, but you’ll not be too much for him. Take my dear Horace far away from here and when you’ve no more use of him, find him a fine green meadow where he may eat to his heart’s content and think of old days. Will you do this for me, friends?’

‘We’ll do it gladly, sir, and your horse will be the saving of us too, for it’s a harsh journey down these hills.’

‘On that point, sir.’ Gawain had now come right to the foot of the mound. ‘I urged you once before to use the river, and do so again. Let Horace take you down these slopes, but once you meet the river, search for a boat to take you east. There’s tin and coins in the saddle to buy your passage.’

‘We thank you, sir. Your generosity moves us.’

‘But Sir Gawain,’ Beatrice said. ‘If your horse takes the two of us, then how’s your fallen body to be carried from this mountain? In your kindness you neglect your own corpse. And we’d be sorry to bury you in so lonely a spot as this.’

For an instant, the old knight’s features became solemn, almost sorrowful. Then they creased into a smile, and he said: ‘Now, mistress. Let’s not discuss burial plans while I still expect to emerge victorious! In any case, this

mountain's no less lonely a spot to me now than any other, and I'd fear the sights my ghost must witness on lower ground should this contest go another way. So no more talk of corpses, madam! Master Wistan, have you anything to ask of these friends should fortune not go your way?'

'Like you, sir, I prefer not to think of defeat. Yet only a mighty fool will believe you anything other than a formidable foe, no matter your years. So I too will burden this good couple with a request. If I'm no more, please see to it Master Edwin reaches a kind village, and let him know I considered him the worthiest of apprentices.'

'We'll do so, sir,' Axl said. 'We'll seek the best for him, even though the wound he carries makes his future a dark one.'

'That's well said. Now I'm reminded I must do even more to survive this meeting. Well, Sir Gawain, shall we go to it?'

'Yet one more request,' said the old knight, 'and this one to you, Master Wistan. I raise the matter with embarrassment, for it touches what we discussed with pleasure a moment ago. I mean, sir, the question of drawing the sword. With my heavy years, I find it takes a foolishly long time to pull this old weapon out of its sheath. If you and I faced each other, swords undrawn, my fear is I'd provide you with feeble entertainment, knowing how fast you draw. Why, sir, I might still be hobbling about, muttering small curses and tugging at this iron with one grip then another even as you take the air, wondering if to cut off my head or else sing an ode while waiting! Yet if we were to agree to draw our swords in our own time ... Why this embarrasses me greatly, sir!'

'Not another word on it, Sir Gawain. I never think well of a warrior who leans on the speedy draw of a blade to take advantage of his opponent. So let's meet with swords ready drawn, just as you suggest.'

‘I thank you, sir. And in return, though I see your arm strapped, I vow not to seek any special advantage of it.’

‘I’m grateful, sir, though this injury’s a trivial one.’

‘Well then, sir. With your permission.’

The old knight drew his sword - indeed it seemed to take some time - and placed the point into the ground, just as he had done earlier at the giant’s cairn. But instead of leaning on it, he stood there regarding his weapon up and down with a mixture of weariness and affection. Then he took the sword in both hands and raised it - and Gawain’s posture took on an unmistakable grandeur.

‘I’ll turn away now, Axl,’ Beatrice said. ‘Tell me when it’s finished, and let it not be long or unclean.’

At first both men held their swords pointing downwards, so as not to exhaust their arms. From his vantage point, Axl could see their positions clearly: at most five strides apart, Wistan’s body angled slightly to the left away from his opponent’s. They held these positions for a time, then Wistan moved three slow steps to his right, so that to all appearances, his outside shoulder was no longer protected by his sword. But to take advantage, Gawain would have had to close the gap very rapidly, and Axl was hardly surprised when the knight, gazing accusingly at the warrior, himself moved to the right with deliberate strides. Wistan meanwhile changed the grip of both his hands on his sword, and Axl could not be sure Gawain had noticed the change - Wistan’s body possibly obscuring the knight’s view. But now Gawain too was changing his hold, letting the sword’s weight fall from the right arm to the left. Then the two men became fixed in their new positions, and to an innocent spectator, they may have looked, in relation to one another, practically unchanged from before. Yet Axl could sense that these new positions had a different significance. It had been a long time since he had had to consider combat in such detail, and

there remained a frustrating sense that he was failing to see half of what was unfolding before him. But he knew somehow the contest had reached a critical point; that things could not be held like this for long without one or the other combatant being forced to commit himself.

Even so, he was taken aback by the suddenness with which Gawain and Wistan met. It was as if they had responded to a signal: the space between them vanished, and the two were suddenly locked in tense embrace. It happened so quickly it appeared to Axl the men had abandoned their swords and were now holding one another in a complicated and mutual armlock. As they did so, they rotated a little, like dancers, and Axl could then see that their two blades, perhaps because of the huge impact of their coming together, had become melded as one. Both men, mortified by this turn of events, were now doing their best to prise the weapons apart. But this was no easy task, and the old knight's features were contorted with the effort. Wistan's face, for the moment, was not visible, but Axl could see the warrior's neck and shoulders shaking as he too did all he could to reverse the calamity. But their efforts were in vain: with each moment, the two swords seemed to fasten more thoroughly, and surely there was nothing for it but to abandon the weapons and start the contest afresh. Neither man, though, appeared willing to give up, even as the effort threatened to drain them of their strength. Then something gave and the blades came apart. As they did so, some dark grain - perhaps the substance that had caused the blades to fasten together in the first place - flew up into the air between them. Gawain, with a look of astonished relief, reeled halfway round and sank to one knee. Wistan, for his part, had been carried by the momentum into turning a near circle, and had come to a halt pointing his now liberated sword towards the clouds beyond the cliff, his back fully turned to the knight.

'God protect him,' Beatrice said beside him, and Axl realised she had been watching all the while. When he looked

down again, Gawain had lowered his other knee to the ground. Then the tall figure of the knight fell slowly, twistingly, onto the dark grass. There he struggled a moment, like a man in his sleep trying to make himself more comfortable, and when his face was turned to the sky, even though his legs were still folded untidily beneath him, Gawain seemed content. As Wistan approached with a concerned stride, the old knight appeared to say something, but Axl was too far to hear. The warrior remained standing over his opponent for some time, his sword held forgotten at his side, and Axl could see dark drops falling from the tip of the blade onto the soil.

Beatrice pressed herself against him. 'He was the she-dragon's defender,' she said, 'yet showed us kindness. Who knows where we'd be now without him, Axl, and I'm sorry to see him fallen.'

He pressed Beatrice close to him. Then releasing her, he climbed down a little way to where he could see better Gawain's body lying on the earth. Wistan had been correct: the blood had flowed only to where the ground rose in a kind of lip at the cliff's edge, and was pooling there with no danger of spilling over. The sight caused a melancholy to sweep over him, but also - though it was a distant and vague one - the feeling that some great anger within him had at long last been answered.

'Bravo, sir,' Axl called down. 'Now there's nothing stands between you and the she-dragon.'

Wistan, who had all the while been staring down at the fallen knight, now came slowly, somewhat giddily, to the foot of the mound, and when he looked up appeared to be in something of a dream.

'I learned long ago', he said, 'not to fear Death as I fought. Yet I thought I heard his soft tread behind me as I faced this knight. Long in years, yet he was close to getting the better of me.'

The warrior seemed then to notice the sword still in his hand, and made as though to thrust it into the soft earth at the foot of the mound. But at the last moment he stopped himself, the blade almost at the soil, and straightening, said: 'Why clean this sword yet? Why not let this knight's blood mingle with the she-dragon's?'

He came up the side of the mound, his gait still somewhat like a drunkard's. Brushing past them, he leant over a rock and gazed down into the pit, his shoulders moving with each breath.

'Master Wistan,' Beatrice said gently. 'We're now impatient to see you slay Querig. But will you bury the poor knight after? My husband here's weary and must save his strength for what remains of our journey.'

'He was a kin of the hated Arthur,' Wistan said, turning to her, 'yet I'll not leave him to the crows. Rest assured, mistress, I'll see to him, and may even lay him down in this pit, beside the creature he so long defended.'

'Then hurry, sir,' Beatrice said, 'and finish the task. For though she's feeble, we'll not be easy till we know she's slain.'

But Wistan seemed no longer to hear her, for he was now gazing at Axl with a faraway expression.

'Are you well, sir?' Axl asked eventually.

'Master Axl,' the warrior said, 'we may not meet again. So let me ask one last time. Could you be that gentle Briton from my boyhood who once moved like a wise prince through our village, making men dream of ways to keep innocents beyond the reach of war? If you have a remembrance of it, I ask you to confide in me before we part.'

'If I was that man, sir, I see him today only through the haze of this creature's breath, and he looks a fool and a dreamer, yet one who meant well, and suffered to see solemn

oaths undone in cruel slaughter. There were others spread the treaty through the Saxon villages, but if my face stirs something in you, why suppose it was another's?

'I thought it when we first met, sir, but couldn't be sure. I thank you for your frankness.'

'Then speak frankly to me in turn, for it's a thing shifts within me since our meeting yesterday, and perhaps, in truth, for far longer. This man you remember, Master Wistan. Is he one of whom you would seek vengeance?'

'What are you saying, husband?' Beatrice pushed forward, placing herself between Axl and the warrior. 'What quarrel can there be between you and this warrior? If there is one, he'll need strike me first.'

'Master Wistan talks of a skin I shed before we two ever met, princess. One I hoped had long crumbled on a forgotten path.' Then to Wistan: 'What do you say, sir? Your sword still drips. If it's vengeance you crave, it's a thing easily found, though I beg you protect my dear wife who trembles for me.'

'That man was one I once adored from afar, and it's true there were times later I wished him cruelly punished for his part in the betrayal. Yet I see today he may have acted with no cunning, wishing well for his own kin and ours alike. If I met him again, sir, I'd bid him go in peace, even though I know peace now can't hold for long. But excuse me, friends, and let me go down and end my errand.'

Down in the pit, neither the dragon's position nor posture had changed: if her senses were warning her of the proximity of strangers - and of one in particular making his way down the steep side of the pit - Querig gave no indication of it. Or could it be the rise and fall of her spine had become a little more pronounced? And was there a new urgency in the hooded eye as it opened and shut? Axl could not be sure. But as he continued to gaze down at the

creature, the idea came to him that the hawthorn bush - the only other thing alive in the pit - had become a source of great comfort to her, and that even now, in her mind's eye, she was reaching for it. Axl realised the idea was fanciful, yet the more he watched, the more credible it seemed. For how was it a solitary bush was growing in a place like this? Could it not be that Merlin himself had allowed it to grow here, so that the dragon would have a companion?

Wistan was continuing his descent, his sword still unsheathed. His gaze rarely strayed from the spot where the creature lay, as if he half expected her to rise suddenly, transformed into a formidable demon. At one stage he slipped, and dug his sword into the ground to avoid sliding some way down on his backside. This episode sent stones and gravel cascading down the slope, but Querig still gave no response.

Then Wistan was safely on the ground. He wiped his forehead, glanced up at Axl and Beatrice, then moved towards the dragon, stopping several strides away. He then raised his sword and began to scrutinise the blade, apparently taken aback to discover it streaked with blood. For several moments, Wistan remained like this, not moving, so that Axl wondered if the strange mood that had overtaken the warrior since his victory had momentarily made him forget his reason for entering the pit.

But then with something of the unexpectedness that had characterised his contest with the old knight, Wistan suddenly moved forward. He did not run, but walked briskly, stepping over the dragon's body without breaking stride, and hurried on as though anxious to reach the other side of the pit. But his sword had described a swift, low arc in passing, and Axl saw the dragon's head spin into the air and roll a little way before coming to rest on the stony ground. It did not remain there long, however, for it was soon engulfed by the rich tide that first parted around it, then buoyed it up till it swam glidingly across the floor of the pit. It came to a stop at the hawthorn, where it lodged, the throat up to

the sky. The sight brought back to Axl the head of the monster dog Gawain had severed in the tunnel, and again a melancholy threatened to sweep over him. He made himself look away from the dragon, and watch instead the figure of Wistan, who had not stopped walking. The warrior was now circling back, avoiding the ever-spreading pool, and then with his sword still unsheathed, began the climb out of the pit.

‘It’s done, Axl,’ Beatrice said.

‘It is, princess. Yet there’s still a question I wish to ask this warrior.’

* * *

Wistan took a surprisingly long time to climb out of the pit. When at last he appeared before them again, he looked overwhelmed and not in the least triumphant. Without a word, he sat down on the blackened ground right on the rim of the pit, and at last thrust his sword deep into the earth. Then he gazed emptily, not into the pit, but beyond, at the clouds and the pale hills in the distance.

After a moment, Beatrice went over to him and touched his arm gently. ‘We thank you for this deed, Master Wistan,’ she said. ‘And there’ll be many more across the land would thank you if they were here. Why look so despondent?’

‘Despondent? No matter, I’ll regain my spirit soon, mistress. Yet just at this moment ...’ Wistan turned away from Beatrice and once more gazed at the clouds. Then he said: ‘Perhaps I’ve been too long among you Britons. Despised the cowardly among you, admired and loved the best of you, and all from a tender age. And now I sit here, shaking not from weariness, but at the very thought of what my own hands have done. I must soon steel my heart or be a frail warrior for my king in what’s to come.’

‘What is this you speak of, sir?’ Beatrice asked.
‘What further task awaits you now?’

‘It’s justice and vengeance await, mistress. And they’ll soon hurry this way, for both are much delayed. Yet now the hour’s almost upon us, I find my heart trembles like a maid’s. It can only be I’ve been too long among you.’

‘I didn’t fail to notice, sir,’ Axl said, ‘your earlier remark to me. You said you’d wish me to go in peace, yet that peace couldn’t hold much longer. I wondered then what you meant by it, even as you descended into this pit. Will you explain yourself to us now?’

‘I see you begin to understand, Master Axl. My king sent me to destroy this she-dragon not simply to build a monument to kin slain long ago. You begin to see, sir, this dragon died to make ready the way for the coming conquest.’

‘Conquest, sir?’ Axl moved closer to him. ‘How can this be, Master Wistan? Are your Saxon armies so swelled by your cousins from overseas? Or is it that your warriors are so fierce you talk of conquest in lands well held in peace?’

‘It’s true our armies are yet meagre in numbers, even in the fenlands. Yet look across this whole land. In every valley, beside every river, you’ll now find Saxon communities, and each with strong men and growing boys. It’s from these we’ll swell our ranks even as we come sweeping westward.’

‘Surely you speak in the confusion of your victory, Master Wistan,’ Beatrice said. ‘How can this be? You see yourself how in these parts it’s your kin and mine mingle village by village. Who among them would turn on neighbours loved since childhood?’

‘Yet see your husband’s face, mistress. He begins to understand why I sit here as before a light too fierce for my gaze.’

‘Right enough, princess, the warrior’s words make me tremble. You and I longed for Querig’s end, thinking only of our own dear memories. Yet who knows what old hatreds will

loosen across the land now? We must hope God yet finds a way to preserve the bonds between our peoples, yet custom and suspicion have always divided us. Who knows what will come when quick-tongued men make ancient grievances rhyme with fresh desire for land and conquest?’

‘How right to fear it, sir,’ Wistan said. ‘The giant, once well buried, now stirs. When soon he rises, as surely he will, the friendly bonds between us will prove as knots young girls make with the stems of small flowers. Men will burn their neighbours’ houses by night. Hang children from trees at dawn. The rivers will stink with corpses bloated from their days of voyaging. And even as they move on, our armies will grow larger, swollen by anger and thirst for vengeance. For you Britons, it’ll be as a ball of fire rolls towards you. You’ll flee or perish. And country by country, this will become a new land, a Saxon land, with no more trace of your people’s time here than a flock or two of sheep wandering the hills untended.’

‘Can he be right, Axl? Surely he speaks in a fever?’

‘He may yet be mistaken, princess, but this is no fever. The she-dragon’s no more, and Arthur’s shadow will fade with her.’ Then to Wistan, he said: ‘I’m comforted at least, sir, to find you take no delight in these horrors you paint.’

‘I’d take delight if I could, Master Axl, for it’ll be vengeance justly served. Yet I’m enfeebled by my years among you, and try as I will, a part of me turns from the flames of hatred. It’s a weakness shames me, yet I’ll soon offer in my place one trained by my own hand, one with a will far cleaner than mine.’

‘You speak of Master Edwin, sir?’

‘I do, and I dare say he’ll be growing quickly more calm now the dragon’s slain and her pull gone from him. That boy has a true warrior’s spirit given only to a few. The rest

he'll learn fast enough, and I'll train his heart well to admit no soft sentiments as have invaded mine. He'll show no mercy in our work ahead.'

'Master Wistan,' Beatrice said, 'I still don't know if you speak only in a mad fever. But my husband and I grow weak, and must return to lower ground and shelter. Will you remember your promise to bury well the gentle knight?'

'I promise to do so, mistress, though I fear even now the birds find him. Good friends, forewarned as you are, you've time enough to escape. Take the knight's horse and ride fast from these parts. Seek your son's village if you must, but linger there no more than a day or two, for who knows how soon the flames will be lit before our coming armies. If your son will not hear your warnings, leave him and flee as far west as you can. You may yet keep ahead of the slaughter. Go now and find the knight's horse. And should you find Master Edwin much calmed, his strange fever passed, cut him free and bid him come up here to me. A fierce future now opens before him, and it's my wish he sees this place, the fallen knight and the broken she-dragon, all before his next steps. Besides, I recall how well he digs a grave with a stray stone or two! Now hurry away, gentle friends, and farewell.'

Chapter Sixteen

For some time now the goat had been trampling the grass very near Edwin's head. Why did the animal have to come so close? They might be tied to the same post, but surely there was territory enough for each of them.

He might have got up and chased the goat away, but Edwin felt too tired. The exhaustion had swept over him a little earlier, and with such intensity that he had fallen forward onto the ground, the mountain grass pressing against his cheek. He had reached the edges of sleep, but then had been startled back to wakefulness by the sudden conviction that his mother had gone. He had not moved, and had kept his eyes closed, but he had muttered aloud into the ground: 'Mother. We're coming. Only a little longer now.'

There had been no answer, and he had felt a great emptiness opening within him. Since then, drifting between sleep and waking, he had several more times called to her, to be answered only by silence. And now the goat was chewing the grass next to his ear.

'Forgive me, mother,' he said softly into the earth. 'They tied me. I couldn't get free.'

There were voices above him. Only then did it occur to him the footsteps around him were not those of the goat. Someone was untying his hands, and the rope was pulling away from under him. A gentle hand raised his head, and he opened his eyes to see the old woman - Mistress Beatrice - peering down at him. He realised he was no longer tied, and rose to his feet.

One of his knees ached badly, but when a gust of wind rocked him, he was able to keep his balance. He looked about him: there was the grey sky, the rising land, the rocks up on

the crest of the next hill. Not long ago, those rocks had meant everything to him, but now she was gone, of that there was no doubt. And he remembered something the warrior had said: that when it was too late for rescue, it was still early enough for revenge. If that were true, those who had taken his mother would pay a terrible price.

There was no sign of Wistan. It was just the old couple here, but Edwin felt comforted by their presence. They were standing before him, gazing at him with concern, and the sight of the kindly Mistress Beatrice made him feel suddenly close to tears. But Edwin realised she was saying something - something about Wistan - and made an effort to listen.

Her Saxon was hard to understand, and the wind seemed to carry her words away. In the end he cut across her to ask: 'Is Master Wistan fallen?'

She fell silent, but did not reply. Only when he repeated himself, in a voice that rose above the wind, did Mistress Beatrice shake her head emphatically and say:

'Don't you hear me, Master Edwin? I tell you Master Wistan is well and awaits you at the top of that path.'

The news filled him with relief, and he broke into a run, but then a giddiness quickly overtook him, obliging him to stop before he had even reached the path. He steadied himself, then glancing back, saw the old couple had taken a few steps in his direction. Edwin noticed now how frail they seemed. There they were standing together in the wind, each leaning against the other, looking far older than when he had first met them. Did they have strength left to descend the mountainside? But now they were gazing at him with an odd expression, and behind them, the goat too had ceased its restless activity to stare at him. A strange thought went through Edwin's mind, that he was at that moment covered head to toe in blood, and this was why he had become the object of such scrutiny. But when he glanced down, though his clothes were marked with mud and grass, he saw nothing unusual.

The old man suddenly called out something. It was in the Britons' tongue and Edwin could not understand. Was it a warning? A request? Then Mistress Beatrice's voice came through the wind.

'Master Edwin! We both beg this of you. In the days to come, remember us. Remember us and this friendship when you were still a boy.'

As he heard this, something else came back to Edwin: a promise made to the warrior; a duty to hate all Britons. But surely Wistan had not meant to include this gentle couple. And now here was Master Axl, raising a hand uncertainly into the air. Was it in farewell or an attempt to detain him?

Edwin turned away, and this time when he ran, even with the wind pushing from one side, his body did not fail him. His mother was gone, most likely gone beyond all retrieving, but the warrior was well and waiting for him. He continued to run, even as the path grew steeper and the ache in his knee grew worse.

Chapter Seventeen

They came riding through the rainstorm as I sheltered under the pines. No weather for a pair so long in years and the sagging horse no less weary. Does the old man fear for the animal's heart with one more step? Why else halt in the mud with twenty paces still to the nearest tree? Yet the horse stands with patience under the downpour as the old man lifts her down. Could they perform the task more slowly were they painted figures in a picture? 'Come, friends,' I call to them. 'Hurry and take shelter.'

Neither hears me. Perhaps it's the hiss of the rain or is it their age seals their ears? I call again, and now the old man looks about him and sees me at last. Finally she slides down into his arms, and though she's but a thin sparrow, I see he's barely strength left to hold her. So I leave my shelter, and the old man turns in alarm to see me splash across the grass. But he accepts my assistance, for wasn't he about to sink to the earth, his good wife's arms still circling his neck? I take her from him and hurry back to the trees, she no burden to me at all. I hear the old man panting at my heels. Perhaps he fears for his wife in the arms of a stranger. So I set her down with care, to show I mean them only friendship. I place her head against the soft bark, and well sheltered above, even if a drop or two still falls around her.

The old man crouches beside her, speaking words of encouragement, and I move away, not wishing to intrude on their intimacy. I stand again at my old spot where the trees meet the open ground, and watch the rain sweep across the moorland. Who can blame me sheltering from rain like this? I will easily make up time on my journey, and be all the better for the weeks of unbroken toil to come. I hear them talk at

my back, yet what am I to do? Step into the rain to be beyond their murmurings?

‘It’s just the fever talking, princess.’

‘No, no, Axl,’ she says. ‘It comes back to me, something more. How did we ever forget? Our son lives on an island. An island seen from a sheltered cove, and surely near us now.’

‘How can that be, princess?’

‘Don’t you hear it, Axl? I hear it even now. Isn’t that the sea near us?’

‘Just the rain, princess. Or maybe a river.’

‘We forgot it, Axl, with the mist over us, but now it starts to clear. There’s an island near, and our son waits there. Axl, don’t you hear the sea?’

‘Just your fever, princess. We’ll find shelter soon and you’ll be fine again.’

‘Ask this stranger, Axl. He knows this country better than us. Ask if there’s not a cove nearby.’

‘He’s just a kind man came to our aid, princess. Why should he have any special wisdom of such things?’

‘Ask him, Axl. What harm can it do?’

Do I remain silent? What am I to do? I turn and say, ‘The good lady’s right, sir.’ The old man starts, and there’s fear in his eyes. A part of me wishes to fall silent again; to turn away and watch the old horse standing steadfast in the rain. Yet now I’ve spoken I must go on. I point beyond the spot where they huddle.

‘A path there, between those trees, leads down to a cove such as the one the lady speaks of. For the most part covered in shingle, though when the tide’s low, as it will be now, the pebbles give way to sand. And as you say, good lady. There’s an island a little way out to sea.’

They watch me in silence, she with a weary happiness, he with mounting fear. Will they not say anything? Do they expect me to tell more?

‘I’ve watched the sky,’ I say. ‘This rain will clear shortly and the evening will be a fine one. So if you wish me to row you over to the island, I’d be pleased to do so.’

‘Didn’t I tell you, Axl!’

‘Are you then a boatman, sir?’ the old man asks solemnly. ‘And can it be we met somewhere before?’

‘I’m a boatman, sure enough,’ I tell him. ‘It’s more than I can remember if we met before, for I’m obliged to ferry so many and for long hours each day.’

The old man looks more fearful than ever, holds his wife close as he crouches beside her. Judging it best to change the topic, I say:

‘Your horse still stands in the rain. Even though he’s untethered and nothing to stop him seeking the nearby trees.’

‘He’s an old battlehorse, sir.’ The old man, happy to leave talk of the cove, speaks with quick eagerness. ‘He keeps his discipline, even though his master’s no more. We must see to him in time, the way we lately promised his brave owner. But just now I worry for my dear wife. Do you know where we may find shelter, sir, and a fire to warm her?’

I cannot lie and I have my duty. ‘As it happens,’ I reply, ‘there’s a small shelter found on this very cove. It’s one I stitched myself, a simple roof of twigs and rags. I left a fire smouldering beside it this last hour and it’ll not be beyond reviving.’

He hesitates, searching my face carefully. The old woman’s eyes are now closed and her head rests on his shoulder. He says, ‘Boatman, my wife spoke just now in a fever. We’ve no need of islands. Better we shelter beneath

these friendly trees till the rain's gone, then we'll journey on our way.'

'Axl, what are you saying?' the woman says, opening her eyes. 'Hasn't our son waited long enough? Let this good boatman lead us to the cove.'

The old man hesitates still, but feels his wife shiver in his arms, and his eyes look to me with desperate entreaty.

'If you wish,' I say, 'I'll carry the good lady and make the way to the cove easier.'

'I'll carry her myself, sir,' he says, like one defeated yet defiant. 'If she's not able to go by her own feet, then she'll go in my arms.'

What to say to this, the husband now almost as weak as the wife?

'The cove's not far,' I say gently. 'But the way down's steep, with pits and twisted roots. Please allow me to carry her, sir. It's the safest thing. You'll walk close beside us where the way allows. Come, when the rain eases, we'll hurry down, for see how the good lady trembles for cold.'

The rain stopped before long and I carried her down the hill-path, the old man stumbling behind, and when we came out to the beach, the dark clouds were swept to one side of the sky as if by an impatient hand. The reddish hues of evening all across the shore, a foggy sun falling towards the sea, and my boat rocking out in the waves. With another show of gentleness, I laid her down under the rude cover of dried skins and branches, placing her head against a cushion of mossy rock. He comes fussing about her even before I can step away.

'See there,' I say, and crouch beside the slumbering fire. 'There's the island.'

Only a small turn of the head gives the woman a view of the sea, and she lets out a soft cry. He must turn on the hard pebbles, and stares bewildered here and there at the waves.

‘There, friend,’ I say. ‘Look there. Midway between the shore and the horizon.’

‘My eyes aren’t so good,’ he says. ‘But yes, I believe I see it now. Are those the tops of trees? Or jagged rocks?’

‘They’ll be trees, friend, for it’s a gentle place.’ I say this all the while breaking twigs and attending the fire. They both look out to the island and I kneel down, the pebbles harsh against my bones, to blow at the embers. This man and woman, did they not come of their own will? Let them decide their own paths, I say to myself.

‘Do you feel the warmth now, princess?’ he cries. ‘You’ll soon be yourself again.’

‘I see the island, Axl,’ she says, and how can I but intrude upon this intimacy? ‘That’s where our son awaits. So strange how we ever forgot such a thing.’

He mumbles a reply and I see he grows troubled again.

‘Surely, princess,’ he says, ‘we’re not yet decided. Do we really want to cross to such a place? Besides, we’ve no way to pay for our passage, for we left the tin and coins with the horse.’

Am I to remain silent? ‘That’s no matter, friends,’ I say. ‘I’ll gladly take what’s owed later from the saddle. That steed won’t wander far.’ Some may call this cunning, but I spoke from simple charity, knowing well I would never come upon the horse again. They talked on in gentle voices, and I kept my back to them, attending to the fire. For do I wish to intrude on them? Yet she lifts her voice, and one more steady than before.

‘Boatman,’ she says. ‘There’s a tale I once heard, perhaps as a small child. Of an island full of gentle woods and streams, yet also a place of strange qualities. Many cross to it, yet for each who dwells there, it’s as if he walks the island alone, his neighbours unseen and unheard. Can this be true of the island now before us, sir?’

I go on breaking twigs and placing them carefully about the flame. ‘Good lady, I know of several islands to fit such a description. Who knows if this one is among them?’

An evasive answer, and one to give her boldness. ‘I also heard, boatman,’ she says, ‘there are times when these strange conditions cease to prevail. Of special dispensations granted certain travellers. Did I hear right, sir?’

‘Dear lady,’ I say, ‘I’m just a humble boatman. It’s not for me to talk of such matters. But since there’s no one else here, let me offer this. I’ve heard it said there may be certain times, perhaps during a storm such as the one just passed, or on a summer’s night when the moon’s full, an islander may get a sense of others moving beside him in the wind. This may be what you once heard, good lady.’

‘No, boatman,’ she says, ‘it was something more. I heard it said a man and woman, after a lifetime shared, and with a bond of love unusually strong, may travel to the island with no need to roam it apart. I heard they may enjoy the pleasures of one another’s company, as they did through all the years before. Could this be a true thing I heard, boatman?’

‘I’ll say it again, good lady. I’m just a boatman, charged with ferrying over those who wish to cross the water. I can speak only of what I observe in my daily toil.’

‘Yet there’s no one here now but you to guide us, boatman. So I ask this of you, sir. If you now ferry my husband and me, can it be we’ll not be parted, but free to walk the island arm in arm the way we go now?’

‘Very well, good lady. I’ll speak to you frankly. You and your husband are a pair as we boatmen rarely set eyes upon. I saw your unusual devotion to each other even as you came riding through the rain. So there’s no question but that you’ll be permitted to dwell on the island together. Be assured on that point.’

‘What you say fills me with happiness, boatman,’ she says, and appears to sag in relief. Then she says, ‘And who knows? During a storm, or on a calm moonlit night, Axl and I may glimpse our son close by. Even speak with him a word or two.’

The fire now burning steadily I rise to my feet. ‘See there,’ I say, pointing out to sea. ‘The boat stirs in the shallows. But I keep my oar hidden in a nearby cave, dipped in a rockpool where tiny fish circle. Friends, I’ll go now to fetch it, and while I’m gone, you may talk here between you, unhindered by my presence. Let’s have you come to your decision once and for all if this is a voyage you wish to make. Now I’ll leave you a moment.’

But she will not release me so easily. ‘One word more before you go, boatman,’ she says. ‘Tell us if when you return, before you’ll consent to ferry us, you intend to question us each in turn. For I heard this was the way among boatmen, to discover those rare ones fit to walk the island unseparated.’

They both gaze at me, the evening light upon their faces, and I see his filled with suspicion. I meet her eyes, not his.

‘Good lady,’ I say, ‘I’m grateful for this reminder. In my haste I may easily have neglected what I’m bound by custom to do. It’s as you say, yet in this case only for the sake of tradition. For as I said, I saw from the first how you were a pair tied by an extraordinary devotion. Now excuse me, friends, for my time grows short. Have your decision for my return.’

So I left them then, and walked across the evening shore till the waves grew loud and the pebbles turned underfoot to wet sand. Whenever I looked back at them, I saw the same sight, if each time a little smaller: the grey old man, crouched in solemn conference before his woman. Of her I could see little, for the rock she leant on hid all but the rise and fall of her hand as she spoke. A devoted couple, but I had my duty, and I went on to the cave and the oar.

When I came back to them, the oar upon my shoulder, I could see their decision in their eyes even before he said, 'We ask you to take us to the island, boatman.'

'Then let's hasten to the boat, for I'm already much delayed,' I say, and move away as though to hurry towards the waves. But then I turn back, saying, 'Ah, but wait. We must first go through this foolish ritual. Then, friends, let me propose this. Good sir, if you'd rise now and walk a little way from us. Once you're out of hearing, I'll speak briefly with your gentle wife. She needn't stir from where she sits. Then in time I'll come to you wherever you stand on this beach. We'll soon be done and return here to fetch this good lady to the boat.'

He stares at me, a part of him now longing to trust me. He says at last, 'Very well, boatman, I'll wander a moment about this shore.' Then to his woman, 'We'll be parted but an instant, princess.'

'There's no concern, Axl,' she says. 'I'm much restored, and safe under this kind man's protection.'

Away he goes, walking slowly to the east of the cove and the great shadow of the cliff. The birds scatter before him, but return quickly to peck as before at their seaweed and rock. He limps slightly, and his back bent like one close to defeat, yet I see still some small fire within him.

The woman sits before me looking up with a soft smile. What am I to ask?

‘Don’t fear my questions, good lady,’ I say. I would wish now for a long wall nearby, to which to turn my face even as I speak to her, but there’s only the evening breeze, and the low sun on my face. I crouch before her, as I saw her husband do, pulling my robe up to my knees.

‘I don’t fear your questions, boatman,’ she says quietly. ‘For I know what I feel in my heart for him. Ask me what you will. My answers will be honest, yet prove only one thing.’

I ask a question or two, the usual questions, for have I not done this often enough? Then every now and then, to encourage her and to show I attend, I ask another. But there’s hardly the need, for she speaks freely. She talks on, her eyes sometimes closing, her voice always clear and steady. And I listen with care, as is my duty, even as my gaze goes across the cove, to the figure of the tired old man pacing anxiously among the small rocks.

Then remembering the work awaiting me elsewhere, I break into her recollections, saying, ‘I thank you, good lady. Let me now hurry to your good husband.’

Surely he begins to trust me now, for why else wander so far from his wife? He hears my footsteps and turns as from a dream. The evening glow upon him, and I see his face no longer filled with suspicion, but a deep sorrow, and small tears in his eyes.

‘How goes it, sir?’ he asks quietly.

‘A pleasure to listen to your good lady,’ I reply, matching my voice to his soft tones, though the wind grows unruly. ‘But now, friend, let’s be brief, so we can be on our way.’

‘Ask what you will, sir.’

‘I have no searching question, friend. But your good wife just now recalled a day the two of you carried eggs back

from a market. She said she held them in a basket before her, and you walked beside her, peering into the basket all the way for fear her steps would injure the eggs. She recalled the time with happiness. ’

‘I think I do too, boatman,’ he says, and looks at me with a smile. ‘I was anxious for the eggs because she’d stumbled on a previous errand, breaking one or two. A small walk, but we were well contented that day. ’

‘It’s as she remembers it,’ I say. ‘Well then, let’s waste no more time, for this talk was only to satisfy custom. Let’s go fetch the good lady and carry her to the boat. ’

And I begin to lead the way back to the shelter and his wife, but now he goes at a dreary pace, slowing me with him.

‘Don’t be afraid of those waves, friend,’ I say, thinking here’s the source of his worry. ‘The estuary’s well protected and no harm can come between here and the island. ’

‘I’ll readily trust your judgement, boatman. ’

‘Friend, as it happens,’ I say, for why not fill this slow journey with a little more talk? ‘There was a question I might have asked just now had we more time. Since we walk together this way, would you mind my telling you what it was? ’

‘Not at all, boatman. ’

‘I was simply going to ask, was there some remembrance from your years together still brought you particular pain? That’s all it was. ’

‘Do we still speak as part of the questioning, sir? ’

‘Oh no,’ I say. ‘That’s over and finished. I asked the same of your good wife earlier, so it was merely to satisfy my own curiosity. Remain silent on it, friend, I take no offence. Look there. ’ I point to a rock we are passing.

‘Those aren’t mere barnacles. With more time, I’d show how

to prise them from the rockside to make a handy supper. I've often toasted them over a fire.'

'Boatman,' he says gravely, and his steps slow further still. 'I'll answer your question if you wish. I can't be certain how she answered, for there's much held in silence even between those like us. What's more, until this day, a she-dragon's breath polluted the air, robbing memories both happy and dark. But the dragon's slain and already many things grow clearer in my mind. You ask for a memory brings particular pain. What else can I say, boatman, than it's of our son, almost grown when we last saw him, but who left us before a beard was on his face. It was after some quarrel and only to a nearby village, and I thought it a matter of days before he returned.'

'Your wife spoke of the same, friend,' I tell him. 'And she said she's to blame for his leaving.'

'If she convicts herself for the first part of it, there's plenty to lay at my door for the next. For it's true there was a small moment she was unfaithful to me. It may be, boatman, I did something to drive her to the arms of another. Or was it what I failed to say or do? It's all distant now, like a bird flown by and become a speck in the sky. But our son was witness to its bitterness, and at an age too old to be fooled with soft words, yet too young to know the many strange ways of our hearts. He left vowing never to return, and was still away from us when she and I were happily reunited.'

'This part your wife told me. And how soon after came news of your good son taken by the plague swept the country. My own parents were lost in that same plague, friend, and I remember it well. But why blame yourself for it? A plague sent by God or the devil, but what fault lies with you for it?'

'I forbade her to go to his grave, boatman. A cruel thing. She wished us to go together to where he rested, but I

wouldn't have it. Now many years have passed and it's only a few days ago we set off to find it, and by then the she-dragon's mist had robbed us of any clear knowledge of what we sought.'

'Ah, so that's it,' I say. 'That part your wife was shy to reveal. So it was you stopped her visiting his grave.'

'A cruel thing I did, sir. And a darker betrayal than the small infidelity cuckolded me a month or two.'

'What did you hope to gain, sir, preventing not just your wife but even yourself grieving at your son's resting place?'

'Gain? There was nothing to gain, boatman. It was just foolishness and pride. And whatever else lurks in the depths of a man's heart. Perhaps it was a craving to punish, sir. I spoke and acted forgiveness, yet kept locked through long years some small chamber in my heart that yearned for vengeance. A petty and black thing I did her, and my son also.'

'I thank you for confiding this, friend,' I say to him.

'And perhaps it's as well. For though this talk intrudes in no part on my duty, and we speak now as two companions passing the day, I confess there was before a small unease in my mind, a feeling I'd yet to hear all there was. Now I'll be able to row you with a carefree contentment. But tell me, friend, what is it made you break your resolve of so many years and come out at last on this journey? Was it something said? Or a change of heart as unknowable as the tide and sky before us?'

'I've wondered myself, boatman. And I think now it's no single thing changed my heart, but it was gradually won back by the years shared between us. That may be all it was, boatman. A wound that healed slowly, but heal it did. For there was a morning not long ago, the dawn brought with it

the first signs of this spring, and I watched my wife still asleep though the sun already lit our chamber. And I knew the last of the darkness had left me. So we came on this journey, sir, and now my wife recalls our son crossing before us to this island, so his burial place must be within its woods or perhaps on its gentle shores. Boatman, I've spoken honestly to you, and I hope it doesn't cast your earlier judgement of us in doubt. For I suppose there's some would hear my words and think our love flawed and broken. But God will know the slow tread of an old couple's love for each other, and understand how black shadows make part of its whole.'

'Don't worry, friend. What you told me merely echoes what I saw when you and your wife first came through the rain on that weary steed. Well, sir, no more talk, for who knows if another storm will come our way. Let's hurry to her and carry her to the boat.'

She sits asleep at the rock with a look of contentment, the fire smoking beside her.

'I'll carry her myself this time, boatman,' he says. 'I feel my strength restored to me.'

Can I allow this? It will make my task no easier. 'These pebbles make hard walking, friend,' I say. 'What will be the cost of your stumbling as you carry her? I'm well used to the work, for she'll not be the first to need carrying to a boat. You can walk beside us, talking to her as you wish. Let it be like when she carried those eggs and you went anxiously beside her.'

The fear returns to his face. Yet he replies quietly, 'Very well, boatman. Let's do as you say.'

He walks at my side, muttering encouragement to her. Do I stride too swiftly? For now he lags behind, and as I carry her into the sea I feel his hand grasp desperately at my back. Yet this is no place to loiter, for my feet must discover the quay where it hides beneath the chilly water's

surface. I step onto the stones, the lapping waves grow shallow again, and I enter the boat, hardly tilting though I carry her in my arms. My rugs near the stern wet from the rain. I kick away the soaked early layers and lay her down gently. I leave her sitting up, her head just beneath the gunwale, and search the chest for dry blankets against the sea wind.

I feel him climb into the boat even as I wrap her and the floor rocks with his tread. 'Friend,' I say, 'you see the waters grow more restless. And this is but a small vessel. I daren't carry more than one passenger at a time.'

I see the fire in him well enough now, for it blazes through his eyes. 'I thought it well understood, boatman,' he says, 'my wife and I would cross to the island unseparated. Didn't you say so repeatedly, and this the purpose of your questions?'

'Please don't misunderstand, friend,' I say. 'I speak only of the practical matter of crossing this water. It's beyond question the two of you will dwell on the island together, going arm in arm as you've always done. And if your son's burial place is found in some shaded spot, you may think of placing wild flowers about it, such as you'll find growing around the island. There'll be bell heather, even marigold in the woodland. Yet for this crossing today, I ask you to wait a while longer back on the shore. I'll see to it the good lady's comfortable on the opposite one, for I know a spot close to the boat's landing where three ancient rocks face one another like old companions. I'll leave her there well sheltered, yet with a view of the waves, and hasten back to fetch you. But leave us for now and wait on the shore a moment longer.'

The red glow of the sunset on him, or is it still the fire in his gaze? 'I'll not step off this boat, sir, while my wife sits within it. Row us over together as you promised. Or must I row myself?'

‘I hold the oar, sir, and it remains my duty to pronounce how many may ride in this vessel. Can it be, despite our recent friendship, you suspect some foul trickery? Do you fear I’ll not return for you?’

‘I accuse you of nothing, sir. Yet many rumours abound of boatmen and their ways. I mean no offence, but beg you take us both now, and no more dallying.’

‘Boatman,’ comes her voice, and I turn in time to see her hand reach at the empty air as though to find me there, though her eyes remain closed. ‘Boatman. Leave us a small moment. Let my husband and I speak alone a while.’

Dare I leave the boat to them? Yet surely she now speaks for me. The oar firm in my hands, I step past him over the boards and into the water. The sea rises to my knee soaking the hem of my robe. The vessel’s well tied and I have the oar. What mischief can come of it? Still I dare not wade far, and though I look to the shore and remain still as a rock, I find I again intrude on their intimacy. I hear them over the quiet lapping waves.

‘Has he left us, Axl?’

‘He stands in the water, princess. He was reluctant to leave his boat and I’d say he’ll not give us long.’

‘Axl, this is no time to quarrel with the boatman. We’ve had great fortune coming upon him today. A boatman who looks so favourably on us.’

‘Yet we’ve often heard of their sly tricks, isn’t that so, princess?’

‘I trust him, Axl. He’ll keep his word.’

‘How can you be so sure, princess?’

‘I know it, Axl. He’s a good man and won’t let us down. Do as he says and wait for him back on the land. He’ll come for you soon enough. Let’s do it this way, Axl, or I fear

we'll lose the great dispensation offered us. We're promised our time together on the island, as only a few can be, even among those entwined a lifetime. Why risk such a prize for a few moments of waiting? Don't quarrel with him, or who knows next time we'll face some brute of a man? Axl, please make your peace with him. Even now I fear he grows angry and will change his mind. Axl, are you still there?'

'I'm still before you, princess. Can it really be we're talking of going our ways separately?'

'It's only for a moment or two, husband. What does he do now?'

'Still stands there unmoving, showing only his tall back and shining head to us. Princess, do you really believe we can trust this man?'

'I do, Axl.'

'Your talk with him just now. Did it go happily?'

'It went happily, husband. Wasn't it the same for you?'

'I suppose it was, princess.'

The sunset on the cove. Silence at my back. Dare I turn to them yet?

'Tell me, princess,' I hear him say. 'Are you glad of the mist's fading?'

'It may bring horrors to this land. Yet for us it fades just in time.'

'I was wondering, princess. Could it be our love would never have grown so strong down the years had the mist not robbed us the way it did? Perhaps it allowed old wounds to heal.'

'What does it matter now, Axl? Mend your friendship with the boatman, and let him ferry us over. If it's one of us he'll row, then the other, why quarrel with him? Axl, what do you say?'

‘Very well, princess. I’ll do as you say.’

‘So leave me now and return to the shore.’

‘I’ll do so, princess.’

‘Then why do you still linger, husband? Do you think boatmen never grow impatient?’

‘Very well, princess. But let me just hold you once more.’

Do they embrace now, even though I left her swaddled like a babe? Even though he must kneel and make a strange shape on the boat’s hard floor? I suppose they do, and for as long as the silence remains, I dare not turn. The oar in my arms, does it cast a shadow in this swaying water? How much longer? At last their voices return.

‘We’ll talk more on the island, princess,’ he says.

‘We’ll do that, Axl. And with the mist gone, we’ll have plenty to talk of. Does the boatman still stand in the water?’

‘He does, princess. I’ll go now and make my peace with him.’

‘Farewell then, Axl.’

‘Farewell, my one true love.’

I hear him coming through the water. Does he intend a word for me? He spoke of mending our friendship. Yet when I turn he does not look my way, only to the land and the low sun on the cove. And neither do I search for his eye. He wades on past me, not glancing back. Wait for me on the shore, friend, I say quietly, but he does not hear and he wades on.

双语版石黑一雄作品

远山淡影

A Pale View of Hills

二〇一七年诺贝尔文学奖获奖作家

Kazuo Ishiguro



〔英〕石黑一雄

著

张晓意

译

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远山淡影

第一部

第一章

我们最终给小女儿取名叫妮基。这不是缩写，这是我和她父亲达成的妥协。真奇怪，是他想取一个日本名字，而我——或许是出于不愿想起过去的私心——反而坚持要英文名。他最终同意妮基这个名字，觉得还是有点东方的味道在里头。

妮基今年早些时候来看过我，四月的时候，那时天还很冷，细雨绵绵。也许她本打算多待几天，我不知道。但我住的乡下房子和房子里的安静让她不安，没多久，我就看出来她急着想回伦敦自己的生活中去。她不耐烦地听着我的古典唱片，随意地翻着一本本杂志。经常有她的电话，她大踏步走过地毯，瘦瘦的身材挤在紧紧的衣服里，小心地关上身后的门，不让我听到她的谈话。五天后她离开。

直到来的第二天她才提起景子。那是一个灰暗的、刮着风的早晨，我们把沙发挪近窗户，看雨水落在花园里。

“你指望过我去吗？”她问。“我是说葬礼。”

“不，没有。我知道你不会来。”

“我真的很难过，听到她的死讯。我差点就来了。”

“我从不指望你会来。”

“别人不知道我到底是怎么了，”她说，“我没有告诉任何人。我想我那时觉得很丢脸。别人不会真的理解的，他们不可能理解我的感受。姐妹之间应该是很亲近的，不是吗？你可能不太喜欢她们，可你还是和她们很亲近。但是我和她根本不是这样。我甚至都不记得她长什么样了。”

“是啊，你很久没见到她了。”

“我只记得她是一个让我难受的人。这就是我对她的印象。可是我真的很难过，听到她的消息。”

也许不单单是这里的安静驱使我女儿回伦敦去。虽然我们从来不长谈景子的死，但它从来挥之不去，在我们交谈时，时刻萦绕在我们的心头。

和妮基不同，景子是纯血统的日本人，不止一家报纸马上就发现了这个事实。英国人有一个奇特的想法，觉得我们这个民族天生爱自杀，好像无需多解释；因为这就是他们报导的全部内容：她是个日本人，她在自己的房间里上吊自杀。

那天晚上，我站在窗前，看着外面漆黑一片，突然听到妮基在我身后问：“你在看什么呢，妈妈？”她坐在房间那头的长靠背椅上，膝盖上放着一本软皮书。

“我在想以前认识的一个人。以前认识的一个女人。”

“在你……来英国之前认识的？”

“我在长崎时认识的，要是你指的是这个。”她还看着我，我就补充道，“很久以前了。在我认识你父亲之前很久。”

这下她好像满意了，嘟囔了句什么，继续看她的书。从很多方面来说，妮基是个孝顺的孩子。她不仅仅是来看看景子死后我的情况；她是出于一种使命感来的。这几年，她开始欣赏起我过去的某些方面。她来是准备告诉我：事实仍旧如此，我不应后悔从前做的那些决定。简而言之，是来安慰我说我不应为景子的死负责。

如今我并不想多谈景子，多说无益。我在这里提起她只是因为这是今年四月妮基来我这里时的情形，正是在那段时间里，我在这么多年后又想起了佐知子。我和佐知子并不很熟。事实上我们的友谊就只有几个星期，那是在许多年前的一个夏天。

那时最坏的日子已经过去了。美国大兵还是和以前一样多——因为朝鲜半岛还在打仗——但是在长崎，在经历了那一切之后，日子显得平静安详。空气中处处感觉到变化。

我和丈夫住在东边的城郊，离市中心有一小段电车的距离。旁边有一条河，我听说战前河边有一个小村庄。然而炸弹扔下来以后就只剩下烧焦的废墟。人们开始重建家园，不久，四栋混凝土大楼拔地而起，每栋有四十间左右的独立公寓。这四栋楼里，我们这一栋是最后建的，也宣告重建计划暂告一段落；公寓楼和小河之间是一片好几英亩废弃不用的空地，尽是污泥和臭水沟。很多人抱怨这会危害健康，确实，那里的污水很吓人。一年到头死水积满土坑，到了夏天还有让人受不了的蚊子。时不时看见有公务人员来丈量土地、在本子上写写画画，但是好几个月过去，没有任何动静。

这些公寓楼的住户都和我们相似——都是刚结婚的年轻夫妇，男人们在规模渐大的公司里找到了不错的工作。很多公寓都是公司所有，然后以优惠的价格租给员工们。每间公寓都是一样的：榻榻米的地板，西式的浴室和厨房。房子不大，天气暖和一点时又不凉快，不过大家普遍感到心满意足。可是我记得公寓楼里又确实有一种临时过渡的感觉，好像我们都在等着有一天我们会搬到更好的房子里去。

一座小木屋在战争的炮火和政府的推土机中幸存下来。我从窗户就能看见木屋独自伫立在那片空地的尽头，就在河岸边。是乡下常见的那种木屋子，斜斜的瓦屋顶都快碰到地面了。我不干活时经常站在窗前盯着它看。

从佐知子搬到那里受到的关注看来，我不是唯一一个盯着木屋看的人。有一天大家看到两个男的在那里忙活，大家议论着他们是不是政府的人。后来就听说有个女的带着她的小女儿住进了那里，我自己也看见过她们几次，看见她们小心翼翼地走过臭水坑。

我是在快夏天时——那时我已经怀孕三四个月了——第一次看见那辆破旧的白色美国大车的，车子正跌跌撞撞地穿过空地朝河边开去。那时天已经快黑了，小屋后的最后几缕阳光滑过金属的车身。

后来一天下午，我在电车站听到两个女人在谈论刚搬进河边那间破房子的那个女人。其中一个对另一个说，那天早上她跟那个女人说话，却受到了明显的冷落。听话的人也觉得新来的人似乎不是很友善——大概是傲慢。她们觉得那个女人至少有三十岁了，因为那个孩子至少十岁了。第一个女人说陌生人是东京腔，肯定不是长崎人。她们说了一会儿她的那个“美国朋友”，然后第一个女人又回头说这个陌生人早上是如何冷落她的。

如今我并不怀疑那时和我住在同一区的女人里有的也受了很多苦，也充满了痛苦、可怕的回忆。但是看着她们每天围着自己的丈夫和孩子忙得团团转，那时的我很难相信——她们的生活也曾经历了战争的不幸和噩梦。我从来不想显得不友好，可是大概我也从来没有刻意努力显得友好。因为那时我还是想独自一人、不被打扰。

那天我饶有兴趣地听着那两个女人谈论佐知子。我至今还清楚地记得那天下午电车站的情景。六月的雨季终于过去，天开始放晴，湿透了的砖头和水泥都开始变干。我们站在一座铁路桥上，山脚下铁路的一侧是鳞次栉比的屋顶，好像一座座房子从山坡上滚下来。越过这些房子，再过去一些，就是我们的公寓楼，像四根水泥柱子立在那

里。当时我隐隐地同情佐知子，有时我远远地看着她，感觉她不太合群，而我觉得自己可以理解她的那种心情。

那年夏天我们成了朋友，至少有一小段时间她允许我介入她的私事。如今我已经记不得我们是怎么认识的。我只记得一天下午，我在出公寓区的小路上看见她在我前头。我急忙走上前去，而佐知子不缓不慢地迈着步子。那时我们应该已经知道对方的名字，因为我记得我边往前走边叫她。

佐知子转过身站住、等我追上她。“什么事？”她问。

“找到你太好了，”我有点上气不接下气地说，“你女儿，我出来时看见她在打架。就在水沟旁。”

“她在打架？”

“和另外两个孩子。其中一个男的。看起来打得挺凶。”

“我知道了。”说完她继续往前走。我跟在她的旁边。

“我不是想吓你，”我说，“可真的看起来打得挺凶。事实上我想我看到你女儿脸划伤了。”

“我知道了。”

“就在那里，空地边上。”

“你想他们还在打吗？”她继续往山上走。

“呃，我想不打了。我看见你女儿跑了。”

佐知子看着我，笑了笑。“你不习惯看小孩子打架？”

“呃，我想小孩子是会打架。但我想我应该告诉你一声。还有你看，我想你女儿不是要去上学。另外两个孩子继续往学校的方向走，而她却回河那边去了。”

佐知子没有回答，继续往山上走。

“其实，”我接着说，“我以前就想跟你说了。是这样的，最近我时常看见你的女儿。我在想，她是不是偶尔会逃学。”

小路在山顶上分岔了。佐知子停住脚步，转向我。

“谢谢你的关心，悦子，”她说，“你真好心。我肯定你会是一位好母亲。”

之前我和电车站的女人一样认为佐知子三十岁上下。然而也许是她略显年轻的身材骗了大家，她的脸远不止三十岁。她用一副觉得有点好笑的神情看着我，而她神情里的某些东西让我尴尬地笑了笑。

“很感激你这样来找我，”她又说道，“可是你瞧，我现在忙得很。我得到城里去。”

“知道了。我只是想最好来跟你说一声，没别的。”

她又用那副觉得好笑的神情看了我一会儿，然后说：“太谢谢你了。现在请原谅，我得到城里去了。”她欠了欠身，走向通往电车站的小路。

“只是她的脸划伤了，”我稍稍提高了声音，说。“而且河那边有些地方很危险。我想最好来跟你说一声。”

她再次转过身来，看着我。“你要是有空，悦子，”她说，“今天能帮我看一下女儿吗？我下午会回来。我肯定你们能处得来。”

“要是你希望如此，我不介意。我得说，你女儿看上去还很小，不能让她一整天自己一个人待着。”

“太谢谢你了，”佐知子再次说道，然后又笑了笑。“没错，我肯定你会是一位好母亲。”

和佐知子分开后，我走下山，穿过公寓区，很快回到了我们的公寓楼外，面对着那片空地。我没有看见小女孩，正打算进去，突然看见河边有动静。万里子刚才肯定是蹲下去了，因为现在我可以清楚地看见她小小的身影穿过泥地。刚开始，我想忘了这整件事，回去干活。但是最后，我迈开步子向她走去，小心地避开水沟。

我印象那是我第一次跟万里子说话。所以很可能她那天早上的反应并没有什么奇怪的地方，毕竟我对她来说是陌生人，她很有理由不相信我。要是我那时确实感到一种奇怪的不安，那也只不过是万里子的态度的自然反应。

那时雨季刚过去几个星期，河水还很高、很急。空地和河岸之间有一道陡坡，小女孩就站在坡底的泥地里，那里的土显然湿得多。万里子穿着一件普通的到膝盖的棉布连衣裙，剪得短短的头发让她的脸像个男孩子。她抬头看着站在泥土坡上头的我，没有笑容。

“你好，”我说，“我刚刚和你母亲说话。你肯定就是万里子吧。”

小女孩还是盯着我，没有吭声。之前我以为她的脸受伤了，现在看清楚那只是被土弄脏了。

“你怎么没去上学？”我问。

她还是不说话。过了一会儿才说：“我不上学。”

“可小孩子应该上学。你不想去吗？”

“我不上学。”

“可你妈妈没有送你到这里的学校去吗？”

万里子没有回答。相反，她往后退了一步。

“小心，”我说。“你会掉到河里的。很滑。”

她还是站在坡底抬起头来瞪着我。我看见她的小鞋子躺在旁边的泥土里。她的脚丫子和鞋子一样陷在泥土里。

“我刚刚和你母亲说过话，”我说，亲切地笑了笑，“她说你可以到我家来等她。就在那里，那栋楼里。你可以来尝尝我昨天做的蛋糕。好不好，万里子？你还可以跟我说说你自已。”

万里子还是小心地看着我。然后，她一边目不转睛地看着我，一边弯下腰捡起鞋子。一开始我以为她这是要跟我走。可是她还是一直盯着我，我才明白她是抓住鞋子随时准备跑掉。

“我不会伤害你的，”我紧张地笑了笑，说，“我是你妈妈的朋友。”

我记得这就是那天上午我和万里子间发生的一切。我不想吓着她，不久就转身回去。这孩子的反应着实让我失望；那时，这类小事都会让我对做母亲产生怀疑。我对自己说，这不是什么大不了的事，将来我一定有机会和这个小女孩做朋友。而后来，我是在大约两周后的一个下午才又和万里子说话的。

那天下午之前，我从没进去过那间房子，佐知子请我去时我很意外。我马上想到她是有事才请我去的，而事实确实如此。

屋里很整洁，但是很破旧。屋顶的木梁看上去很旧、不牢固，到处都有一股霉味。房前的大部分拉门都打开了，好让阳光从走廊照进来。尽管如此，房子里的大部分地方还是照不到太阳。

万里子躺在离阳光最远的角落里。我看见她身旁的影子里有什么东西在动，走近一看，一只大猫蜷缩在榻榻米上。

“你好，万里子，”我说，“你还记得我吗？”

她停下抚摸猫的手，抬起头来。

“我们以前见过，”我又说，“记得吗？在河边。”

小女孩好像没有认出我来。她看了我一会儿，又继续抚摸她的猫。我听见在我身后，佐知子正在屋子中间地面的炉子上准备泡茶。我正想走过去，突然听见万里子说：“它快生小猫了。”

“哦，真的？太好了。”

“你要一只小猫吗？”

“谢谢你，万里子。我得看看。可是我肯定它们全都会找到好地方的。”

“你为什么不要一只？”孩子说，“另外一个女人说她要一只。”

“我得看看，万里子。另外一位女士是谁？”

“另外一个女人。在河对岸。她说她要一只。”

“可是我想河对岸没有人住，万里子。那里只有树和林子。”

“她说她要带我去她家。她住在河对岸。我没有跟她去。”

我看了她一会儿。突然我想到了什么，笑了出来。

“那是我，万里子。你不记得了吗？那天你妈妈进城去时我叫你去我家。”

万里子再次抬起头来看我。“不是你，”她说，“是另外一个女人。她住在河对岸。她昨晚来这儿了。那时妈妈不在。”

“昨晚？你妈妈不在？”

“她说她要带我去她家，可是我没有跟她去。因为天黑了。她说我们可以拿那个灯笼”——她指了指挂在墙上的灯笼——“可是我没有跟她去。因为天黑了。”

在我身后，佐知子站起身来，看着她女儿。万里子不说话了，转过身去，继续抚摸她的猫。

“我们到走廊去吧，”佐知子对我说，手里端着盛着茶具的托盘。“那里比较凉快。”

我们去了走廊，把万里子留在角落里。在走廊上看不到河水，但是可以看到斜坡和河边潮湿的泥土。佐知子在垫子上坐下，开始倒茶。

“这里到处都是流浪猫，”她说，“对要出生的这些小东西我可没那么乐观。”

“是啊，很多野猫野狗，”我说，“真不像话。万里子的猫是在这里捡的吗？”

“不，我们带来的。我是不想带它来，可是万里子不听。”

“你们从东京一路带来？”

“哦，不。我们在长崎住了快一年了。在城市的另一头。”

“哦，真的？我才知道。你和……和朋友一起住？”

佐知子停下正在倒茶的手，看着我，双手握着茶壶。我在她眼里又看见了上次她看着我的那种觉得好笑的神情。

“我想你搞错了，悦子，”她终于说道，又接着倒茶。“我们住在我伯父家。”

“我向你保证，我只是……”

“是啊，当然。所以没什么不好意思的。”她笑了笑，把茶递给我。“抱歉，悦子，我并没有要取笑你。其实，我有事要找你。一点小忙。”佐知子开始给自己倒茶，这时，她的态度变得严肃许多。倒完茶，她放下茶壶，看着我。“是这样的，悦子，一些事情没有照我计划的那样。结果，我发现自己钱不够了。不是什么大数目，你知道。就一点点。”

“我明白的，”我压低声音，说。“你一定很艰难，带着万里子。”

“悦子，能帮帮我吗？”

我鞠了鞠躬。“我自己有些积蓄，”我说，几乎是耳语。“我很乐意帮忙。”

可是让我想不到的是，佐知子大笑起来。“太谢谢你了，”她说，“可是我并不是要叫你借钱给我。我有别的打算。前几天你提到一个开面店的朋友。”

“你是指藤原太太？”

“你说她需要一个帮手。像这样的小工作就可以帮我大忙。”

“这个嘛，”我拿不准地说，“你要的话我问问。”

“那真是太好了。”佐知子看了我一会儿。“可是你好像很没有把握，悦子。”

“没有的事。我下次看到她就帮你问。可是我在想”——我再次压低声音——“白天谁照顾你女儿呢？”

“万里子？她可以在店里帮忙。她很能干。”

“我相信她行。可是您看，我不知道藤原太太会怎么想。毕竟其实万里子白天应该上学才对。”

“我向你保证，悦子。万里子决不会造成什么麻烦。况且下星期学校就都放假了。我会保证不让她碍事的。这点你可以放心。”

我再次鞠了鞠躬。“我下次看到她就帮你问。”

“太感谢你了。”佐知子呷了一口茶。“其实我想让你这几天就去找你的朋友。”

“我试试看。”

“你真是太好了。”

我们沉默片刻。之前我就注意到了佐知子的茶壶；是用浅色瓷器做的，做工很精细。我手里的茶杯也是同一种精美的材料做的。精美的茶具与破旧的屋子和走廊下方泥泞的土地形成了强烈的对比。我之前就注意到这点，喝茶时这种感觉更加明显。当我抬起头来时才发现佐知子在看着我。

“我用惯了好陶瓷，悦子，”她说，“你瞧，我不是一直都住在这种”——她朝屋子挥了挥手——“这种地方。当然了，我不介意吃一点苦。可是对有些东西，我还是很讲究的。”

我欠了欠身，没说什么。佐知子也研究起她手里的杯子来。她小心地转动着杯子，仔细观察，然后突然说道：“我想可以说我偷了这

套茶具。可是我想伯父他不会太想它们的。”

我有些吃惊地看着她。佐知子把杯子放下，挥手赶走几只苍蝇。

“你说你住在你伯父家？”我问。

她慢慢地点了点头。“一栋很漂亮的房子。花园里还有池塘。和眼前的这一切很不一样。”

一时间我们两个人都往屋子里看。万里子还像我们出来时那样躺在她的角落里，背对着我们，好像在跟她的猫说话。

我们俩沉默了片刻后，我说：“我还不知道河对面住着人。”

佐知子转头看着远处的树木。“不，我没见过那里有人。”

“可是帮你看孩子的那个人。万里子说她是从那里来的。”

“我没有谁帮我看孩子，悦子。我在这谁也不认识。”

“刚才万里子跟我说有个女的……”

“请别当真。”

“你是说那是万里子编出来的？”

有那么一小会儿，佐知子像是在想些什么。然后她才说：“对。是她编出来的。”

“我想小孩子经常干这种事。”

佐知子点点头。“你当妈妈后，悦子，”她笑着说，“你就得要习惯这种事了。”

接着我们聊到别的事上去了。那时我们的友谊刚刚开始，我们只谈论一些无关紧要的小事。直到几个星期后的一天早上，我才再次听到万里子提起那个来找她的女人。

第二章

那时，回到中川一带仍然会令我悲喜交加。这里山峦起伏，再次走在一座座房子间那些狭窄、陡峭的街道上总是给我一种深深的失落感。虽然我不会想来就来，但总也无法长久地远离这里。

拜访藤原太太同样会给我这种感觉；因为她是我母亲最好的朋友之一，一位和蔼的女士，头发已经花白。她的面店开在一条热闹的小巷子里；店门口有一块水泥地，屋顶伸了出去，客人就在那里，坐在木桌和长凳上吃面。她的客人主要是午休和下班时来光顾的上班族，其他钟点则没有什么客人。

那天下午我有点紧张，因为那是佐知子到那边工作后我第一次去。我在担心——替她们两个都担心——尤其是因为我不知道藤原太太是不是真的需要帮手。那天很热，小巷里都是人。进到阴凉处我真高兴。

藤原太太见到我很高兴。她让我在一张桌子旁坐下，然后去取茶。那天下午没有什么客人——可能一个都没有，我不记得了——也没有看见佐知子。藤原太太取来茶时，我问她：“我的朋友在这里做得怎么样？她还行吧？”

“你的朋友？”藤原太太转头朝厨房的门看去。“她在削土豆。我想很快就会出来了。”然后，好像转念一想，她站起来，朝厨房门口走了几步。“佐知子太太，”她喊道，“悦子来了。”我听见里面传来一声应答。

藤原太太回来坐下，伸过手来摸我的肚子。“开始变明显了，”她说，“你现在开始可得当心啊。”

“反正我也没干多少活，”我说。“我日子很清闲。”

“那就好。我记得我怀第一胎时，遇上了地震，挺大的地震。我那时怀的是和夫。可他后来也健康得很。别太担心，悦子。”

“我会的。”我朝厨房门口看了一眼，“我的朋友在这里做得还好吧？”

藤原太太顺着我的目光朝厨房看去。然后又转向我，说：“我想还好。你们是好朋友，对吗？”

“是的。我在现在住的地方没有多少朋友。我很高兴认识了佐知子。”

“是啊。那太好了。”她坐在那里，看了我几秒钟。“悦子，你今天很累的样子。”

“我想是很累。”我笑了笑。“我想是怀孕的缘故。”

“是啊，自然。”藤原太太还是看着我的脸。“但我是说你好像——不太开心。”

“不开心？才没有呢。我只是有点累，我没有比现在更开心了。”

“那就好。你现在得多想想开心的事。孩子啊。未来啊。”

“是的，我会的。想到孩子我就很开心。”

“很好。”她点点头，但还是盯着我。“心态决定一切。一位母亲应该得到她想要的所有的照顾，她需要以一种积极的心态来抚养孩子。”

“我确实很期待。”我笑了笑，说。厨房里传出声响，我又一次看过去，但还是没有看见佐知子。

“我每周都看见一个年轻的女子，”藤原太太接着说道。“怀孕六七个月了。我每次去墓地都看见她。我没有跟她说过话，但是她看上去很悲伤，和她的丈夫站在那里。真是羞愧啊，一个孕妇和她的丈夫每周日不做别的，就想着死人。我知道他们是敬爱死者，但仍旧不应该这样。他们应该想着未来才是。”

“我想她很难忘记过去。”

“我想是吧。我很同情她。但是现在他们应该向前看。每周都来墓地，这样怎么能把孩子带到这个世上来呢？”

“大概不能。”

“墓地不是年轻人去的地方。和夫有时会陪我去，但我从来没有要他一定要去。他现在也应该向前看了。”

“和夫还好吗？”我问。“他的工作顺利吗？”

“工作很顺利。下个月他就会得到晋升。但他也该想想别的事了。他不可能永远年轻。”

突然我看见外面太阳下来来往往的人群中站着一个小小的身影。

“哎呀，那不是万里子吗？”我问。

藤原太太坐在椅子上转过头去。“万里子，”她喊道。“你到哪里去了？”

万里子站在马路上不动。但不一会儿，她走进阴凉的水泥地，走过我们，在旁边的一张空桌子坐下。

藤原太太先是看着万里子，然后不安地看了我一眼，好像要说什么，但是她站了起来，朝小女孩走去。

“万里子，你到哪里去了？”藤原太太压低了声音，但我还是听得见。“你不可以老是这样子乱跑。你妈妈很生气。”

万里子看着自己的手指，没有抬头看藤原太太。

“还有万里子，请你不要那样子跟客人说话。你不知道那样子很没礼貌吗？你妈妈很生气。”

万里子还是看着自己的手指。在她身后，佐知子出现在厨房门口。我记得那天早上看见佐知子时，我再次惊讶于她比我原先以为的要老得多；她的长发都塞进了头巾里，这样一来，眼角和嘴角的皱纹变得更加明显。

“你妈妈来了，”藤原太太说，“我想她一定很生气。”

小女孩还是坐在那里，背对着她妈妈。佐知子很快地瞥了她一眼，笑着转向我。

“你好啊，悦子，”她说，优雅地鞠了一躬。“在这里见到你真是惊喜。”

在水泥地的另一头，两个上班模样的女人走进来坐下。藤原太太朝她们鞠了个躬，又转向万里子。

“你为什么不到厨房去一会儿呢？”她小声说。“你妈妈会告诉你要做些什么的。很简单的。我相信像你这么聪明的女孩子一定会做的。”

万里子没有反应。藤原太太抬头看看佐知子，一刹那，我觉得她们冷冷地交换了眼神。然后藤原太太转身向她的客人走去。看来她认识她们，边走过水泥地，边熟识地跟她们打招呼。

佐知子走过来在桌子边坐下。“厨房里真热啊，”她说。

“你在这里做得怎么样？”我问她。

“做得怎么样？哦，悦子，这真是很有趣的经历，在面店里工作。我得说，我从没想过有一天我会在这种地方擦桌子。但是”——她很快地笑了笑——“很有趣。”

“我知道了。那万里子呢，她习惯吗？”

我们都往万里子的桌子看去；那孩子还是看着她的手。

“哦，她很好，”佐知子说。“当然了，她有时候很好动。但是你怎么可能要她安静地待在这里呢？真遗憾，悦子，但是你看，我的女儿并没有我的幽默感。她不觉得这里很有趣。”佐知子笑了笑，又看看万里子。然后她站起来，朝她走去。

她静静地问：“藤原太太跟我说的是真的吗？”

小女孩没有回答。

“她说你又对客人不礼貌了。是真的吗？”

万里子还是不做声。

“她跟我说的是真的吗？万里子，人家问你话时你要回答。”

“那个女人又来了，”万里子说。“昨晚。你不在的时候。”

佐知子看了她女儿一两秒钟，然后说：“我想你现在最好进去。进去，我来告诉你干些什么。”

“她昨天晚上又来了。她说她要带我去她家。”

“进去，万里子，到厨房里去等我。”

“她要带我去她住的地方。”

“万里子，进去。”

水泥地的那边，藤原太太和那两个女人为了什么事大笑起来。万里子还是看着她的手掌。佐知子走开了，回到我这张桌子。

“请原谅，悦子，”她说。“我有东西在煮。我一会儿就回来。”然后她降低声音加了句：“你不能指望她会对这种地方感兴趣，不是吗？”她笑了笑，走向厨房。到了门口，她再次转向她的女儿。

“快点，万里子，进来。”

万里子没有动。佐知子耸耸肩，进去了。

同样在那段时间，初夏时，绪方先生到我们这里来了，那是他那年早些时候搬出长崎后第一次到这里来。他是我的公公，可是我却老是把当作“绪方先生”，即使在我自己也姓绪方的时候。那时，我已经认识他很久了——比我认识二郎还要久——一直叫他“绪方先生”，我从来不习惯叫他“爸爸”。

他们父子俩长得不像。如今回想起二郎，我的眼前出现一个矮矮、结实的、表情严肃的男人；我丈夫对外表一丝不苟，即使在家里，也经常穿衬衫、打领带。现在我还能想见他坐在客厅的榻榻米上，弓着背吃早、晚餐，就像我以前常见的那样。我记得他老是弓着背——像拳击手那样——不管站着还是走路。相反，他的父亲总是坐得直直的，神情轻松、和蔼。那年夏天他来的时候，他的健康状况还很好，身体硬朗、精神矍铄，不像有那么大岁数。

我记得一天早上，他第一次提到松田重夫。那时他已经住了几天了，显然觉得这间小四方屋子很舒适，想多住几天。那是一个明媚的早晨，我们仨在吃早餐，二郎还没去上班。

“你们的同学会，”他对二郎说。“在今晚，是吧？”

“不，是明天晚上。”

“你会见到松田重夫吗？”

“重夫？我想不会见到。他不常参加这些活动。我很抱歉得出去，不能陪你，爸爸。我想不去的，但是那样会让他们不高兴。”

“别担心。悦子会把我照顾得很好的。而且这些活动也很重要。”

“我想请几天假，”二郎说，“可是眼下我们很忙。我说过了，订单刚好在您来的那天来了。真是讨厌。”

“哪儿的话，”他父亲说。“我完全理解。我自己前不久也还在为工作忙碌呢。我没有那么老，你知道。”

“没有，当然没有。”

我们安静地吃着早餐。突然绪方先生说：

“那么你觉得明天不会遇到松田重夫。但是你们偶尔还是会碰面吧？”

“最近不常见了。长大以后大家就各走各的了。”

“是啊，都是这样。学生们都各走各的，然后发现很难保持联系。所以这些同学会就很重要。人不应该那么快就忘记以前的感情。应该时不时地看看过去，才能更好地认识事情。没错，我觉得明天你当然要去。”

“也许爸爸星期天的时候还在这里，”我丈夫说。“那样我们也许能去哪里走走。”

“嗯，好啊。好主意。但是如果你得上班，那一点儿也不要紧。”

“不，我想我星期天没事。很抱歉眼下我太忙了。”

“明天你们请了以前的老师没？”绪方先生问。

“据我所知没有。”

“真是遗憾啊，这种场合老师不太常被邀请。我以前有时也被邀请。在我年轻的时候，我们总是不忘要邀请老师。我认为这样才恰当。这是一个机会让老师看看他的劳动成果，让学生们向他表示感激。我认为老师应该出席才对。”

“是，也许您说得对。”

“现在的人很容易就忘记他们的教育归功于谁。”

“是，您说得很对。”

我丈夫吃完早餐，放下筷子。我给他倒了些茶。

“有一天我碰到了一件奇怪的小事情，”绪方先生说。“现在想想我觉得挺有趣。一天我在长崎的图书馆看见了一本期刊——一本教师期刊。我没听说过那个期刊，我教书的时候没有那个期刊。读那本期刊，你会以为现在日本的教师都变成共产主义者了。”

“显然共产主义现在在日本越来越流行，”我丈夫说。

“你的朋友松田重夫在上面发表了文章。想想我看见文章里提到我的名字时是多么惊讶。我没想到现在还有人记得我。”

“我肯定在长崎还有很多人记得爸爸，”我插了一句。

“太奇怪了。他提到远藤老师和我，说到我们的退休。要是我没理解错的话，他暗示说这一行没了我们真是庆幸。事实上，他甚至觉得我们在战争结束后就该被解职了。太奇怪了。”

“您确定是同一个松田重夫吗？”二郎问。

“同一个。栗山高中的。太奇怪了。我记得他以前常来我们家和你玩。你妈妈特别喜欢他。我问图书馆的管理员可不可以买一本，她说她会帮我订一本。到时我拿给你看。”

“这不是忘恩负义吗？”我说。

“当时我可惊讶了，”绪方先生转向我说。“是我把他介绍给栗山高中的校长的。”

二郎喝完茶，用毛巾擦了擦嘴。“太遗憾了。我说过了，我有一段时间没见到重夫了。请原谅，爸爸，但是我得走了，不然要迟到了。”

“哦，当然。工作顺利。”

二郎走下玄关，开始穿鞋。我对绪方先生说：“像爸爸这种地位的人一定会听到一些批评。这是很自然的。”

“是啊，”他说，笑了起来。“别在意这件事，悦子。我一点都不介意。只是二郎要去参加同学会，让我又想起了这件事。不知道远藤读到这篇文章没有。”

“祝您今天愉快，爸爸，”二郎在玄关那里说道。“可以的话我会争取早点回来。”

“胡说什么。别为我操心。工作重要。”

那天上午晚些时候，绪方先生从房里出来，穿着外套、打着领带。

“您要出去吗，爸爸？”我问。

“我想去见见远藤老师。”

“远藤老师？”

“对，我想去看看他最近过得怎么样。”

“可是您不是要在吃午饭前去吧？”

“我想我最好马上去，”他看了看表，说。“远藤现在住的地方离长崎市区有点远。我得搭电车。”

“那让我给您准备一份便当吧，不用多长时间。”

“哎呀，谢谢了，悦子。那我就等几分钟。其实我是想让你帮我准备便当的。”

“那您就说出来，”我站起身来，说。“您不能老用这种暗示来得到您想要的东西，爸爸。”

“可是我知道你会领会我的意思的，悦子。我对你有信心。”

我走向厨房，穿上拖鞋，走进铺着瓷砖的地面。几分钟后，拉门开了，绪方先生出现在门口。他就坐在门口看我准备便当。

“你在给我做什么呢？”

“没什么。只是昨晚的剩菜。这么短的时间里，不可能要求更好的了。”

“但是我肯定你还是会剩菜变得很可口。你拿蛋要做什么？那个不是剩菜吧？”

“我要加一个煎蛋。您运气好，爸爸，我那么慷慨。”

“煎蛋。你一定要教我怎么做煎蛋。难不难？”

“很难。您这个年纪是学不来的。”

“可是我很想学。还有，你说‘您这个年纪’是什么意思？我还年轻，还可以学很多新东西。”

“您真的打算成为一名厨师吗，爸爸？”

“没什么可笑的。这些年来，我渐渐懂得欣赏做菜了。它是一门艺术，我确信这点，就像绘画或诗歌一样高雅。不能因为它的产品很快就消失了而不懂得欣赏。”

“您要坚持画画，爸爸。您画得越来越好了。”

“画画啊。”他叹了一口气。“画画已经不能像以前那样给我满足感了。不，我想我应该学做煎蛋做得跟你一样好，悦子。我回福冈前你一定要教我。”

“一旦您学会了，您就不会再觉得它是什么艺术了。也许女人应该把这些事情保密。”

他笑了起来，像是在对自己笑，然后又安安静静地看我做事情。

“你想是男孩还是女孩呢，悦子？”过了好一会儿他问道。

“我一点儿都不在乎。要是男孩就取您的名字。”

“真的？一言为定？”

“现在再想想，我又拿不准了。我不记得爸爸的名字了。征尔——这个名字不好听。”

“那只是因为我长得丑，悦子。我记得有一个班的学生说我长得像河马。可是你不应该光看外表就觉得不行。”

“没错。我们还得看看二郎是怎么想的。”

“是。”

“可是我希望我的儿子能取您的名字，爸爸。”

“那可真让我高兴。”他笑着朝我微微鞠了一躬。“可我是知道家人坚持要用自己的名字给孩子取名是多么讨人厌的。我记得我和老伴给二郎起名字的时候，我想用我一个叔叔的名字，可是孩子他妈不喜欢这种用亲戚的名字给孩子取名的做法。当然，后来她让步了。景子是个很固执的人。”

“景子是个好名字。要是女孩，也许可以叫景子。”

“你可不能这么匆忙地做决定。你要是没有说到做到，会让老人家很失望的。”

“对不起，我想到了就说出来了。”

“而且，悦子，我相信还有其他人的名字你想用。其他跟你亲近的人。”

“也许吧。不过要是男孩，我想用您的名字。您以前就像我的父亲。”

“我现在不像你的父亲了？”

“像，当然像。可是不一样。”

“我希望二郎是个好丈夫。”

“当然是了。我再幸福不过了。”

“孩子也会让你幸福。”

“是。怀孕的时机再好不过了。现在我们在这里安定下来了，二郎的工作也很顺利。这个时候要孩子最好。”

“那么你觉得幸福？”

“是的，我很幸福。”

“很好。我真替你们两个高兴。”

“给，做好了。”我把涂漆的便当盒递给他。

“啊对了，剩菜，”他说，接过去，深深地鞠了一躬。他微微打开盖子。“但看上去很可口。”

我终于回到客厅。绪方先生在玄关那里穿鞋。

“告诉我，悦子，”他头也不抬地说。“你见过这个松田重夫吗？”

“一两次。我们结婚后他来过。”

“但是现在他和二郎不是什么特别要好的朋友吧？”

“不是。我们寄寄贺年卡，仅此而已。”

“我要叫二郎写信给他。重夫应该道歉。要不然我就要叫二郎跟这个年轻人断交。”

“我知道了。”

“我本想早点跟他说，就在刚才吃早饭的时候。但是这种事最好留到晚上再说。”

“也许您说得对。”

绪方先生再次感谢我做的便当，然后出门了。

结果，那天晚上他并没有提起这件事。他们两个回家时都很累了，一整晚大都在看报纸，很少说话。只有一次绪方先生提到了远藤老师。那是在吃晚饭的时候，他轻描淡写地说了句：“远藤看来不错，只是想念他的工作。毕竟教书是他的生命。”

那天晚上躺在床上准备睡觉时，我对二郎说：“我希望爸爸对我们的接待还满意。”

“不然他还想要怎么样？”我丈夫说。“你要是这么不放心，干吗不带他出去走走？”

“你周六下午要上班吗？”

“怎么可能不上班？我进度已经落后了。他刚好挑在最不方便的时候来。实在太糟了。”

“但是我们周日还是可以出去，对吧？”

印象中我好像没有得到回答，虽然我久久地仰望着漆黑的房间、等着。辛苦地工作了一天之后，二郎总是很累，不想说话。

不管怎样，看来我是瞎操心绪方先生了，因为那次是他待得最久的一次。我记得佐知子来敲门的那天晚上他还在。

佐知子穿着一件我之前从没见过的裙子，肩膀上披着一条围巾。脸上仔仔细细地化了妆，但是有一小撮头发松了，垂到了脸上。

“很抱歉打扰你，悦子，”她笑着说。“我在想万里子是不是在这里。”

“万里子？怎么了，没有啊。”

“哦，没关系。你没有见到过她？”

“抱歉，没有。她丢了？”

“不是的，”她笑了笑，说，“只是我回去时她不在屋子里，没别的。我肯定我很快就能找到她。”

我们在玄关那里说话，我突然发觉二郎和绪方先生在看这边，就介绍了佐知子。他们相互鞠了躬。

“真让人担心，”绪方先生说。“也许我们最好马上打电话给警察。”

“没这个必要，”佐知子说。“我肯定我会找到她的。”

“可是也许安全起见，还是打一下好。”

“真的不用”——佐知子的声音里有一丝生气——“没有必要。我肯定我会找到她的。”

“我帮你找，”我边说边穿上外套。

我丈夫不满地看着我，好像要说什么，但又没说。最后，他说：“天快黑了。”

“真的，悦子，不必这么大惊小怪的，”佐知子说。“不过要是你不介意出来一下的话，我感激不尽。”

“要小心，悦子，”绪方先生说。“要是没有很快找到孩子，就给警察打电话。”

我们下了楼。外面热气还未散尽，空地那头，太阳落得低低的，照亮了泥泞的水沟。

“公寓这一带你找了吗？”我问。

“没有，还没有。”

“那我们找找看吧。”我开始加快步子。“万里子可能待在什么朋友家吗？”

“我想不可能。真的，悦子”——佐知子笑了笑，拉住我的胳膊——“没必要这么慌张。她不会有事的。其实，悦子，我来找你是想告诉你一些事情。你瞧，事情终于定下来了。我们过几天就要去美国了。”

“美国？”也许是因为佐知子抓住我的胳膊，也许是因为吃惊，我停住了脚步。

“对，美国。你肯定没听说过这么个地方。”看到我吃惊她好像很开心。

我又走了起来。公寓楼这一带都是水泥路，偶尔会遇见几棵细细的小树，是楼盖好了以后种的。头顶上，大部分窗户的灯都亮了。

“你不再问我别的了吗？”佐知子追上我，说。“你不问我为什么要去？要和谁去？”

“若这是你想要的，我真替你高兴，”我说。“可是也许我们应该先找到您的女儿。”

“悦子，你得明白，我没有什么丢脸的。我没有什么好隐瞒的。请你问些你想知道的事吧，我不觉得丢脸。”

“我想也许我们应该先找到您的女儿。我们可以以后再说。”

“好吧，悦子，”她笑了笑，说。“我们先找万里子吧。”

我们找了孩子们玩耍的地方，看了每一栋公寓楼，很快发现我们回到了原来的地方。突然，我看见其中一栋公寓的主入口有两个女人在说话。

“那里的两位太太也许能帮我们，”我说。

佐知子没有动。她朝她们看了看，说道：“我不觉得。”

“但是她们可能见过她。她们可能见过您的女儿。”

佐知子还是看着她们。然后她冷笑一声，耸耸肩，说：“好吧，我们去给她们一些嚼舌根的东西吧。我不在乎。”

我们走过去，佐知子礼貌又镇静地问了她们。两位太太交换了关切的眼神，但是她们都没有看见小女孩。佐知子请她们放心，没什么可担心的，我们就离开了。

“我肯定这下她们高兴了，”她对我说。“现在她们有东西可聊了。”

“我相信她们肯定没有恶意。她们看上去都是真的很关心。”

“你真好，悦子，不过不必跟我说这些。我从来不在乎她们那样的人想什么，现在我更不在乎了。”

我们停住脚步。我看了看四周，又望望公寓的窗户。“她会在哪儿呢？”我说。

“你瞧，悦子，我没有什么丢脸的。我没有什么好瞒着你的。或者是瞒着那些女人。”

“你想我们要不要到河边找一找？”

“河边？哦，我已经找过了。”

“那另一边呢？她可能到对面去了。”

“我想不会，悦子。其实，要是我没猜错的话，她现在已经回去了。大概还很高兴自己惹了这些麻烦。”

“那我们去看看。”

我们回到空地边，太阳已经落到河的下面去了，只能看见河边柳树的轮廓。

“你不用跟着我，”佐知子说。“我很快就会找到她了。”

“没关系。我和你一起去。”

“那好吧。一起走吧。”

我们朝小屋走去。地上凹凸不平，我只穿着木屐，很难走。

“你出去了多久？”我问。佐知子在我前面一两步；她没有回答，我想她可能没有听到，又问了一遍：“你出去了多久？”

“哦，不太久。”

“是多久？半小时？不止？”

“我想大概三四个钟头。”

“我知道了。”

我们一路穿过泥地，尽量当心不踩到臭水坑。快到小屋时，我说：“也许我们应该到对面看一看，以防万一。”

“树林里？我女儿不会在那里的。我们进屋去看看。没必要这么担心，悦子。”她又笑了笑，但是我觉得她的笑声里有丝丝的颤抖。

屋里没有电灯，一片漆黑。我在玄关等着，佐知子进屋去。她叫她女儿的名字，打开连着主室的两个小房间的拉门。我站在玄关，听着她在黑暗里来回走动，然后她回到玄关。

“也许你是对的，”她说。“我们最好到对面看看。”

河边的半空中有很多小虫子。我们静静地朝下游的小木桥走去。走过木桥，对岸就是之前佐知子提到的树林。

我们正走在桥上，佐知子突然转向我，飞快地说道：“我们最后去了酒吧。我们本来是要去看电影的，加里·库珀演的，可是排队的人太多了。城里很挤，又有很多喝醉酒的。最后我们去了酒吧，他们给了我们单独的一间小房间。”

“我知道了。”

“我想你没有去过酒吧吧，悦子？”

“没有，没去过。”

那是我第一次到河对岸去。脚下的泥土很软，甚至感觉要陷下去。这也许只是我的想象，但是那时我在河边觉得凉飕飕的，很不自在，像是感觉到有事要发生。我重新加快脚步，朝前面漆黑的树林走去。

佐知子拉住我的胳膊不让我往前走。我顺着她的目光看见河边草地上离河很近的地方躺着一捆什么东西。模模糊糊地看不清楚，只看见地上有一团比周围草地颜色深的黑影。我的第一反应是要冲过去，却发现佐知子还呆呆地站着，盯着那团东西看。

“那是什么？”我傻乎乎地问。

“是万里子，”她静静地说。当她转过头来看着我时，眼睛里有一种异样的神情。

第三章

也许随着时间的推移，我对这些事情的记忆已经模糊，事情可能不是我记得的这个样子。但是我清楚地记得有一个神秘的咒语把我们两个定住了。天越来越暗，我们呆呆地站在原地，盯着远处河边的那个影子。突然间，咒语解除了，我们两个都跑了起来。跑近时，我看见万里子缩成一团侧躺着，背对着我们。佐知子比我早一点到那里，我怀着孕，行动不方便，等我到时，佐知子已经站在孩子身边了。万里子的眼睛睁着，一开始我还以为她死了。但是后来我看见她的眼睛动了，用奇怪的、空洞的眼神盯着我们。

佐知子单腿跪下，扶起孩子的头。万里子还是那么盯着。

“你没事吧，万里子？”我有点上气不接下气地说道。

她没有回答。佐知子也不做声，检查着她的女儿，把她在怀里翻来翻去，好像她是一个易碎的、没有感觉的洋娃娃。我发现佐知子的袖子上有血，再一看，是万里子身上来的。

“我们最好叫人，”我说。

“不严重，”佐知子说。“只是擦伤。看，伤口不大。”

万里子躺在水沟里，短裙有一面浸在黑色的水里。血从她大腿内侧的伤口流出来。

“怎么了？”佐知子问她女儿。“出什么事了？”

万里子还是盯着她妈妈看。

“她可能吓着了，”我说。“现在最好别问她问题。”

佐知子扶万里子站了起来。

“我们很担心你，万里子，”我说。小女孩狐疑地看了我一眼，转过去，走了起来。她走得很稳；腿上的伤看来并无大碍。

我们往回走，过了木桥，沿着河边走。她们两个走在我前面，没有说话。我们回到小屋时，天已经全黑了。

佐知子把万里子带进浴室。我点燃主室中间的炉子泡茶。除了炉子，刚才佐知子点亮的一盏吊着的旧灯笼是屋子里唯一的亮光，屋里

大部分地方都还是漆黑一片。角落里，几只黑色的小猫仔被我们吵醒，开始骚动不安。它们的爪子在榻榻米上发出沙沙的声音。

再次出现时，母女两人都换上了和服。她们进了隔壁的一间小房间，我又等了一会儿。佐知子的声音透过隔板传了出来。

最后，佐知子一个人出来了。“还是很热，”她说，走过房间，把通向走廊的拉门打开。

“她怎么样了？”我问。

“她没事。伤口没什么。”佐知子在拉门旁坐下来吹风。

“我们要不要把这件事报告警察？”

“警察？要报告什么呢？万里子说她爬树，结果摔倒了，弄了那个伤。”

“这么说她今天晚上没有和什么人在一起？”

“没有。她能和谁在一起呢？”

“那个女人？”我说。

“哪个女人？”

“万里子说的那个女人。你现在还认为是她编出来的吗？”

佐知子叹了口气。“我想不完全是编的，”她说。“是万里子以前见过的一个人。以前，她还很小的时候。”

“可是这个女人今晚会不会在这里呢？”

佐知子笑了笑。“不会的，悦子，不可能。不管怎么说，那个女人已经死了。相信我，悦子，说什么有个女人，都是万里子发难时的小把戏。我已经很习惯她这些小把戏了。”

“可是她为什么要编这些故事呢？”

“为什么？”佐知子耸了耸肩。“小孩子就喜欢做这些。悦子，你自己当了妈妈以后也要习惯这些事情。”

“你肯定她今天晚上没有和什么人在一起？”

“很肯定。我很了解自己的女儿。”

我们都不说话了。蚊子在我们周围嗡嗡叫。佐知子用手掩住嘴打了个哈欠。

“你瞧，悦子，”她说，“我很快就要离开日本了。你好像不是很在意。”

“我当然在意了。而且我很高兴，要是这是你所向往的。不过不会遇到……很多困难吗？”

“困难？”

“我是指，搬到另一个国家，语言、习惯都不同。”

“我明白你的意思，悦子。但是说真的，我不觉得有什么可担心的。你瞧，我听说过很多有关美国的事，对美国并不完全陌生。至于语言嘛，我已经会说很多了。我和弗兰克都说英语。我在美国住一阵子后，就能像美国女人一样说话了。我真的不觉得有什么可担心的。我知道我能行。”

我微微鞠了一躬，但没说什么。两只小猫朝佐知子坐的地方走来。她看了它们一会儿，然后笑了笑。“当然了，”她说，“有时我也在想事情会怎么样呢。但是真的”——她对我笑了笑——“我知道我能行。”

“其实，”我说，“我担心的是万里子。她会怎么样呢？”

“万里子？哦，她没问题的。你了解小孩子。他们比大人更能适应新环境，不是吗？”

“不过对她来说仍是个很大的变化。她准备好了吗？”

佐知子不耐烦地叹了口气。“说真的，悦子，你觉得我难道没有考虑过这些吗？你以为我决定要离开这个国家前没有首先考虑女儿的利益吗？”

“当然，”我说，“你一定会仔仔细细地考虑。”

“对我来说，女儿的利益是最重要的，悦子。我不会做出有损她的未来的决定。我已经仔细地考虑过了整件事情，我也和弗兰克商量过了。我向你保证，万里子没事的。不会有问题的。”

“可是她的学习呢，会怎么样呢？”

佐知子又笑了。“悦子，我又不是要到深山老林去。美国有学校。而且你要明白，我的女儿非常聪明。她爸爸出身名门，我这边也

是，我的亲戚都是很有地位的人。悦子，你不能因为……因为眼前的事物就认为她是什么贫农的孩子。”

“没有。我从来没有……”

“她很聪明。你没有见过她真正的样子，悦子。在眼前这种环境里，小孩子自然有时有点笨拙。但你要是我伯父的家里头看见她，你就会发现她真正的品质。大人跟她说话时，她回答得清楚、流利，不会像很多小孩子那样傻笑或者扭扭捏捏。而且绝没有这些小把戏。她去上学，跟最优秀的孩子交朋友。我们还给她请了一位家庭教师，老师对她的评价很高。她这么快就能赶上真是叫人吃惊。”

“赶上？”

“这个”——佐知子耸耸肩——“很不幸，万里子的学习总是时不时地被打断。这个事，那个事，我们又经常搬家。但是我们现在比较困难，悦子。要不是战争，要是我丈夫还活着，万里子就能过上我们这种地位的家庭应有的生活。”

“是的，”我说。“没错。”

佐知子可能是听出我的语气不大对，抬起头来看着我。当她往下说时，语气变紧了。

“我不用离开东京的。悦子，”她说。“但是我离开了，为了万里子。我大老远地来我伯父家住，是因为我认为这样对我女儿最好。我本来不用这么做的，我根本用不着离开东京。”

我鞠了一躬。佐知子看了我一会儿，然后转头凝视着屋外漆黑的一片。

“可是如今你离开了你伯父家，”我说。“现在又即将要离开日本。”

佐知子生气地看着我。“你为什么这么说话呢，悦子？你为什么不能祝福我呢？就因为你妒忌？”

“我是祝福你的。而且我向你保证我……”

“万里子在美国会过得很好的，你为什么不肯相信？那里更适合孩子的成长。在那里她的机会更多，在美国女人的生活要好得多。”

“我向你保证我替你高兴。至于我自己，我再心满意足不过了。二郎的工作很顺利，现在又在我们想要的时候有了孩子……”

“她可以成为女商人，甚至是女演员。这就是美国，悦子，什么事情都有可能。弗兰克说我也有可能成为女商人。在那里这些事情都有可能发生。”

“我相信。只是就我而言，我对我现在的生活非常满意。”

佐知子看着那两只小猫在她身旁的榻榻米上乱抓。有几分钟我们两个都没有说话。

“我得回去了，”我打破沉默。“他们要担心我了。”我站起来，可是佐知子仍然看着那两只小猫。“你们什么时候离开？”我问。

“这几天。弗兰克会开车来接我们。周末我们就会坐上船了。”

“那么我想你不会再去给藤原太太帮忙了吧。”

佐知子抬起头来看我，冷笑道：“悦子，我要去美国了。我不再需要到面店工作了。”

“我知道了。”

“其实，悦子，要请你转告藤原太太。我不会再见到她了。”

“你不自己跟她说吗？”

她不耐烦地叹了口气。“悦子，难道你不能体会对我这样的人来说每天在面店里工作有多讨厌吗？不过我不抱怨，要我做什么，我就做什么。但是现在都结束了，我不想再见到那个地方了。”一只小猫在抓佐知子和服的袖子。佐知子用手背重重地拍了它一下，小家伙急忙往回跑过榻榻米。“所以请向藤原太太转达我对她的问候，”她说。“也祝她生意兴隆。”

“我会的。现在请原谅，我得走了。”

这次，佐知子站起来，送我到玄关。

“我们离开前我会去道别的，”我穿鞋时她说。

一开始这好像只是一个很普通的梦；我梦见了前一天看见的事——我们看见一个小女孩在公园里玩。第二天晚上，我又做了同样的梦。其实，这几个月里，我做了几次这样的梦。

那天下午，我和妮基到村子里去时，看见小女孩在玩秋千。那是妮基来的第三天，雨小了，变成毛毛细雨。我有几天没有出门了，走

在蜿蜒的小路上，户外的空气令我神清气爽。

妮基走得很快，每走一步，窄窄的皮靴子都咯咯响。虽然我也可以走得很快，但是我更喜欢慢慢走。妮基，我认为，应该懂得走路本身的快乐。再者，虽然她在这里长大，却体会不到乡下给人的感觉。我们边走，我边把我的想法原原本本地说给她听。她反驳说这里不是真正的乡下，只是迎合住在这里的有钱人的一种居住模式。我想她说得对；我一直没敢到英国北部的农业区去，妮基说，那里才是真正的乡下。尽管如此，这些年来，我越来越喜欢这些小路带来的平静和安详。

到村子后，我带妮基去我有时光顾的茶馆。村子不大，只有几间旅馆和商店；茶馆开在街角，在一家面包店楼上。那天下午，妮基和我坐在靠窗的桌子，我们就是从那里看见小女孩在底下的公园玩。我们看见她爬上一个秋千，朝坐在旁边长椅上的两个女人喊。她是个活泼可爱的小女孩，穿着绿色橡胶雨衣和小橡胶雨靴。

“也许你很快就会结婚生孩子，”我说。“我怀念小孩子。”

“这是我最不想做的事了，”妮基说。

“好吧，我想你还太年轻。”

“这和年不年轻没关系。我就是不喜欢一群小孩子在你旁边大喊大叫。”

“别担心，妮基，”我笑了，说。“我不是在强迫你生孩子。我刚刚突然心血来潮想当外婆，没别的。我想也许你能让我当上外婆，不过这事不急。”

小女孩站在秋千上，拼命拉链子，可是不知怎么，就是没办法让秋千荡得更高。但是她仍旧笑着，又朝那两个女人喊。

“我的一个朋友刚生了孩子，”妮基说。“她高兴得不得了。我真不明白。那小东西乱喊乱叫的。”

“至少她很开心。你的朋友几岁？”

“十九岁。”

“十九岁？比你还小。她结婚了吗？”

“没有。这有什么差别？”

“可是这样子她肯定不高兴。”

“为什么不高兴？就因为 she 没结婚？”

“是的。还有她才十九岁。我不敢相信这样她会高兴。”

“她结没结婚有什么差别？她想要孩子，所有的事情都是她计划好的。”

“她告诉你的？”

“可是，妈妈，我了解她，她是我的朋友。我知道她想要孩子。”

长椅上的女人站了起来。其中一个喊那个女孩子。小女孩从秋千上下来，跑向她们。

“那孩子的父亲呢？”我问。

“他也很高兴。我记得当他们发现他们有孩子了，我们全都出去庆祝。”

“可是人们总是假装高兴的样子。就像昨天晚上我们在电视上看的那部电影。”

“什么电影？”

“我想你没有在看。你在看你的杂志。”

“哦那个。那电影很烂。”

“是很烂。但我就是这个意思。我肯定没有人在知道有孩子时会像电影里的人那样。”

“说真的，妈妈，我真不知道你怎么能坐得住看那种垃圾。你以前都不习惯看电视。我记得以前我电视看太多，你总是叫我把电视关掉。”

我笑了。“你瞧，我们的角色变了，妮基。我相信你是为我好。你一定不能让我像那样浪费时间。”

我们离开茶馆往回走时，空中乌云密布，雨也变大了。我们刚走过一个小小的火车站不多远，就听见后面有人喊：“谢林汉姆太太！谢林汉姆太太！”

我回头看见一个穿着大衣的小个子女人正急急地走过来。

“我猜是你，”她追上我们，说。“你最近好吗？”她给了我一个灿烂的微笑。

“你好，沃特斯太太，”我说。“很高兴又见到你。”

“看来又是坏天气。哦，你好，景子”——她碰了碰妮基的袖子——“我没注意是你。”

“不是，”我急忙说，“这是妮基。”

“妮基，没错。天啊，你长这么大了，亲爱的。难怪我弄混了。你长这么大了。”

“你好，沃特斯太太，”妮基舒了口气，说。

沃特斯太太住在附近。现在我偶尔才见到她，几年前她教我的两个女儿钢琴。她教了景子好几年，而妮基只在小时候教了一年左右。我很快就发现沃特斯太太的钢琴技术有限，而且她对音乐的总的看法也常常让我生气。比如说，她把肖邦和柴可夫斯基的作品都称为“动听的旋律”。可是她为人和蔼可亲，我不忍心把她换掉。

“你最近怎么样，亲爱的？”她问妮基。

“我？哦，我住在伦敦。”

“哦，是吗？你在那里干什么呢？读书？”

“我其实也没干什么。只是住在那里。”

“哦，我知道了。不过你在那里很开心，是吧？这是最主要的，不是吗？”

“是的，我很开心。”

“那就好，这是最主要的，不是吗？那景子呢？”沃特斯太太转向我。“她最近怎么样？”

“景子？哦，她搬到曼彻斯特去了。”

“哦，是吗？听说那个城市总的来说还不错。她喜欢那里吗？”

“我最近没有她的消息。”

“哦，好吧。我想没有消息就是好消息。景子还弹琴吗？”

“我想还弹。我最近都没有她的消息。”

沃特斯太太终于看出我不想谈论景子，尴尬地笑了笑，放开这个话题。景子离开家的这几年来，每次遇见我，沃特斯太太总是要问起景子。我很明显不想谈论景子，而且到那天下午都还讲不出我女儿在什么地方。但是沃特斯太太从不把这些放在心上。很可能以后我们每次见面，沃特斯太太还会笑着向我打听景子的事。

我们到家时，雨一直淅淅沥沥地下着。

“我想我让你丢脸了，对吗？”妮基对我说。我们又坐在沙发上，看着外面的花园。

“你怎么会这么想？”我说。

“我应该跟她说我正在考虑上大学什么的。”

“我一点都不介意你说自己什么。我不觉得丢脸。”

“我想你不会。”

“不过我想你对她很不耐烦。你从来都不太喜欢她，不是吗？”

“沃特斯太太？哦，我以前很讨厌上她的课。无聊死了。我常常睡着，然后耳边不时有小小的声音，叫你把手指放在这里、这里或这里。是你的主意吗，让我上钢琴课？”

“主要是我的意思。你瞧，以前我对你期望很高。”

妮基笑了。“对不起我没学成。可这得怪你自己。我根本没有学音乐的天赋。我们屋里有个女孩是弹吉他的，她想教我几个和弦，可是我根本就不想学。我想沃特斯太太让我这辈子都讨厌音乐了。”

“将来有一天你可能会重新爱上音乐，那时你就会感激上过那些课了。”

“可是我把学的全忘了。”

“不可能全忘的。那个年纪学的东西是不会全丢掉的。”

“反正是浪费时间，”妮基嘟囔道。她坐在那里看着窗外，过了一会儿，转向我说：“我想很难跟别人说吧。我是指景子的事。”

“我那样说最省事，”我答道。“她着实吓了我一跳。”

“我想是这样。”妮基又面无表情地看着窗外。“景子没有来参加爸爸的葬礼，对吧？”她终于说道。

“你明知道她没去干吗还问？”

“我随口说说，没什么。”

“你是要说因为她没有参加你爸爸的葬礼所以你也不参加她的葬礼？别这么孩子气，妮基。”

“我不是孩子气。我是说事实就是这样。她从来不是我们生活的一部分——既不在我的生活里也不在爸爸的生活里。我从没想过她会来参加爸爸的葬礼。”

我没有回答，我们静静地坐在沙发上。然后妮基说：

“刚才真是不自在，和沃特斯太太说话的时候。你好像很喜欢？”

“喜欢什么？”

“假装景子还活着。”

“我不喜欢骗人。”也许是我的话蹦得太快，妮基好像吓了一跳。

“我知道，”她轻声说。

那天晚上雨下了一整夜，第二天——妮基来的第四天——仍旧淅淅沥沥地下个不停。

“今天晚上我换个房间可以吗？”妮基说。“我可以睡空房间。”我们刚吃完早餐，正在厨房里洗盘子。

“空房间？”我笑了笑。“这里现在都是空房间。你要睡空房间当然可以，没有什么不可以。你不喜欢你的旧房间了？”

“睡在那里我觉得不自在。”

“太没良心了，妮基。我本来希望你还把它当作自己的房间的。”

“我是这么想来着，”她急忙说。“我不是不喜欢那个房间。”她不说了，用干毛巾擦着刀子。最后她终于说：“是另外那间。她的房间。就在正对面，让我觉得不自在。”

我停下手里的事，板着脸看着她。

“我忍不住，妈妈。一想到那间房间就在正对面我就觉得怪怪的。”

“睡空房间去吧，”我冷冷地说。“可是你得自己铺床。”

虽然我对妮基换房间的要求表现得很生气，但是我并不想难为她。因为我自己也曾对那个房间感到不安。在许多方面，那个房间是这栋房子里最好的房间，从那里看果园视野极好。但是很长时间里，它一直是景子极小心守护的私人领域，所以即使在她已经离开了六年后的今天，那里仍然笼罩着一股神秘的空气——这种感觉在景子死后更加强烈。

在她最终离开我们的前两三年，景子把自己关在那个房间里，把我们挡在她的世界之外。她很少出来，虽然有时我们都上床睡觉后我听到她在房子里走动。我猜想她在房间里看杂志，听广播。她没有朋友，也不许我们其他人进她的房间。吃饭时，我把她的盘子留在厨房里，她会下来拿，然后又把自己锁起来。我发现房间里乱糟糟的。有发霉的香水和脏衣服的味道，我偶尔瞥见里面，地上是成堆的衣服和无数的时尚杂志。我只得连哄带骗叫她把衣服拿出来洗。最后我们达成共识：每几个星期，我会在她房间门口看见一袋要洗的衣服，我把衣服洗了，拿回去。后来，大家渐渐习惯了她的做法，而当她偶尔心血来潮冒险到客厅里来时，大家就都很紧张。她每次出来无一例外地都是以争吵收场，不是和妮基吵架，就是和我丈夫吵架，最后她又回到自己的房间里去。

我没有见过景子在曼彻斯特的房间，她死的那个房间。作为一个母亲，这么想可能有点病态，但是听到她自杀的消息时，我脑子里的第一个想法——甚至在我感到震惊之前——是：在他们发现之前她那么吊着多久了。在自己家里，我们都一连几天看不见她；在一个没有人认识她的陌生城市里，更别指望会很快被人发现。后来，验尸官说她已经死亡“好几天了”。是房东太太开的门，她以为景子没有交房租就离开了。

我发现这个画面一直出现在我的脑海里——我的女儿在房间里吊了好几天。画面的恐怖从未减弱，但是我早就不觉得这是什么病态的事了；就像人身上的伤口，久而久之你就会熟悉最痛的部分。

“在空房间里睡我至少能暖和些，”妮基说。

“妮基，你晚上要是觉得冷，把暖气打开就好了。”

“我知道。”她叹了口气。“最近我总是睡不好。我想我老做噩梦，但是醒来后就想不起来了。”

“昨天晚上我做了一个梦，”我说。

“我想可能跟这里的安静有关。我不习惯晚上这么安静。”

“我梦见了那个小女孩。昨天我们看见的那个。公园里那个。”

“我在车上就能睡着，可是我不记得怎么在安静的地方睡觉了。”妮基耸耸肩，把一些餐具扔进抽屉里。“也许在空房间里我能睡得好一点。”

我跟妮基说起这个梦，在我第一次做这个梦的时候。这也许表明我从那时起就觉得这不是一个普通的梦。我肯定从一开始就怀疑——虽然不确定是为什么——这个梦跟我们看见的那个小女孩没多大关系，而是跟我两天前想起佐知子有关。

第四章

一天下午，我丈夫下班回来之前，我正在厨房里准备晚饭，突然听见客厅传来奇怪的声音。我停下手里的活侧耳倾听。声音又响了——是很难听的小提琴声。声音持续了几分钟，然后停了。

当我终于来到客厅时，发现绪方先生正弯着腰坐在棋盘前。夕阳照射进来，尽管开着电风扇，屋里还是湿气很重。我把窗户开得更些。

“你们昨晚没有把棋下完吗？”我走向他，问。

“没有。二郎说他累了。我猜这是他的诡计。你瞧，我在这里把他围住了。”

“这样啊。”

“他仰赖我现在的记性不好了。所以我在温习我的步子。”

“您真是厉害，爸爸。可是我想二郎不会这么狡猾的。”

“也许吧。我敢说现在你比我更了解他。”绪方先生继续研究棋盘，过了一会儿，抬起头来，笑了笑。“你一定觉得很有趣吧。二郎在公司里辛苦工作，而我在家里等他下班回来和我下棋。我就像一个孩子在等爸爸回来。”

“哦，我宁愿您还是下棋的好。您刚才的琴声实在是太可怕了。”

“太没礼貌了。我还希望能感动你呢，悦子。”

小提琴放在旁边的地板上，已经放回盒子里了。绪方先生看着我打开盒子。

“我看见它放在那边的架子上，就擅自拿下来了。”他说。“别担心，悦子。我拿得很小心。”

“我看不一定。正如您说的，爸爸现在像个小孩子。”我拿起小提琴仔细检查。“只不过小孩子够不着那么高的架子。”

我把琴塞到下巴底下。绪方先生一直看着我。

“给我拉一首吧，”他说。“我肯定你拉得比我好。”

“那是肯定的。”我把琴重新放下，搁在一旁。“可是我好久没拉琴了。”

“你是说你都没有练习？太可惜了，悦子。你以前是那么喜欢这个乐器。”

“我想我以前是很喜欢。可现在很少碰了。”

“太不应该了，悦子。你以前是那么喜欢。我还记得以前你三更半夜拉琴，把全家都吵醒了。”

“把全家都吵醒了？我什么时候干过这种事？”

“有，我记得。你刚来我们家住时。”绪方先生笑了笑。“别在意，悦子。我们都原谅你了。现在我想想，你以前最崇拜哪个作曲家来着？是门德尔松吗？”

“是真的吗？我把全家都吵醒了？”

“别在意，悦子。那是好几年前的事了。给我拉一首门德尔松的吧。”

“可是你们干吗不阻止我？”

“只是刚开始的几个晚上。而且我们一点都不介意。”

我轻轻地拨了拨琴弦。音已经走调了。

“我那时肯定成了您的负担，”我静静地说。

“胡说。”

“可是家里其他人。他们肯定觉得我是个疯丫头。”

“他们才不会把你想得这么坏。毕竟最后你跟二郎结了婚。现在好了，悦子，别说这些了。给我拉一首吧。”

“我那时候像什么样子呢，爸爸？我像个疯子吗？”

“你被吓坏了，这是很自然的事。大家都吓坏了，我们这些幸存下来的人。现在，悦子，忘了这些事吧。我很抱歉提起这件事。”

我再次把琴放到下巴底下。

“啊，”他说，“门德尔松。”

我就这么把琴夹在下巴下。过了几秒钟，我放下琴，叹了口气，说：“我现在拉不出来。”

“对不起，悦子。”绪方先生说，声音变沉重了。“也许我不应该碰琴的。”

我抬起头来看他，笑着说：“瞧，小朋友现在知道错了。”

“我在架子上看见它，想起了以前的事。”

“我以后再拉给您听吧。我练习练习。”

他微微地鞠了一躬，眼里又露出了喜悦。

“我会记着你说过的话的，悦子。说不定你还可以教教我。”

“我不能什么都教您，爸爸。您还说您要学做菜。”

“啊对了。还有那个。”

“您下次来的时候我再拉给您听吧。”

“我会记着的，”他说。

那天晚上吃完饭，二郎和父亲坐下来下棋。我收拾完晚餐的东西，拿了些针线活坐下来。棋下到一半时，绪方先生说：

“我刚想到了什么。你不介意的话，我要重新走那步。”

“当然可以，”二郎说。

“可是这样对你很不公平。特别是现在我的形势比你有利。”

“没关系。请重新走那步吧。”

“你不介意？”

“一点儿也不。”

他们继续静静地下棋。

“二郎，”几分钟后绪方先生说，“我在想，信你写了吗？给松田重夫的信？”

我停下手里的针线，抬起头来。二郎还在专心地下棋，他走完那一步才答道：“重夫？哦，还没。我打算写的。但是最近实在是太忙了。”

“当然，我十分理解。我刚好想到这件事，没什么。”

“我最近实在是没时间。”

“当然。不急。我并不是要老缠着你。只是信早点写的好。他那篇文章已经登出来几个星期了。”

“是，当然。您说得很对。”

他们接着下棋。有好几分钟，两个人都没有说话。突然绪方先生说：

“你觉得他会是什么反应呢？”

“重夫？我不知道。我说过了，我现在跟他不熟。”

“你说他加入了共产党？”

“我说不准。我上次见到他时，他确实说支持共产党。”

“真遗憾。不过话说回来，现在日本发生了太多事情让年轻人动摇。”

“是的，的确。”

“现在很多年轻人都被什么思想啊、理论啊冲昏了头。不过他可能会收回前言并道歉的。及时地提醒个人的责任之类的东西也没有。你知道，我怀疑他都没有停下来想过自己在干什么。我想他写那篇文章时是一手拿着笔，一手拿着共产主义的书。他最后会收回前言的。”

“很可能。我最近的工作实在是太多了。”

“当然，当然。工作第一。别为这件事操心。现在，是不是轮到我了？”

他们接着下棋，很少说话。有一次，我听见绪方先生说：“你走的跟我想的一样。你要动动脑筋才能从那里突围。”

他们下了好一会，突然有敲门声。二郎抬起头来，给我递了个眼色。我放下针线，站了起来。

我打开门，看见两个男人笑嘻嘻地朝我鞠躬。那时已经很晚了，一开始我以为他们走错门了。可后来我认出他们是二郎的同事，就请他们进来。他们站在玄关自顾自地笑着。其中一个矮矮胖胖的，脸很

红。另一个瘦一些，皮肤很白，像欧洲人的白；但是他好像也喝酒了，脸颊上露出粉色的斑。他们系着的领带都松了，外套挂在手上。

二郎见到他们很高兴，叫他们进去坐。可是他们只是站在玄关，笑个不停。

“啊，绪方，”白皮肤的那个对二郎说，“我们可能来的不是时候。”

“不会。不过你们在这附近做什么呢？”

“我们去看村崎的哥哥。其实，我们还没回家呢。”

“我们不敢回家，所以来打扰你，”胖胖的那个插进来说。“我们没有跟太太说我们要晚点回去。”

“真是混蛋，你们两个，”二郎说。“你们干吗不脱鞋进来呢？”

“我们来的不是时候，”白皮肤的那个又说。“我看见你有客人。”他朝绪方先生笑了笑，鞠了一躬。

“这是我父亲，可是你们不进来我怎么介绍呢？”

客人终于脱了鞋，进来坐下。二郎把他们介绍给父亲，他们再次鞠躬，又笑了起来。

“你们是二郎公司的？”绪方先生问。

“是的，”矮矮胖胖的那个答道。“很荣幸，虽然他让我们很不好过。在办公室里我们叫你儿子‘法老’，因为他让我们像奴隶一样工作，自己却什么都不做。”

“胡说八道，”我丈夫说。

“是真的。他像苦役一样驱使我们，然后自己坐下来看报纸。”

绪方先生好像听得有点迷糊，但是看见其他人在笑，他也笑了笑。

“啊，这是什么？”白皮肤的那个指了指棋盘。“瞧，我就知道我们会打扰你们。”

“我们只是在下棋打发时间，”二郎说。

“接着下吧。别让我们这种混蛋打断你们下棋。”

“别傻了。有你们这样的笨蛋在旁边，我怎么能集中精神。”说着二郎把棋盘推到一边。有一两个棋子倒了，他看也不看就把它们摆正。“那么说，你们去看村崎的哥哥。悦子，给客人倒茶。”我丈夫说这句话之前，我已经往厨房走去了。可这时矮矮胖胖的那个突然拼命挥手。

“夫人，夫人，坐下。请坐下。我们一会儿就走。您请坐。”

“不麻烦，”我笑着说。

“不用，夫人，我求您”——他越说越大声——“正如您丈夫说的，我们只是两个混蛋。不用麻烦了，请坐下。”

我正想遵照他的意思，突然看见二郎生气地看了我一眼。

“至少喝杯茶再走，”我说。“一点儿也不麻烦。”

“既然坐下了，就多坐一会儿，”我丈夫对客人说。“反正我也想听听村崎的哥哥的事。他真的像人们说的那样疯疯癫癫的吗？”

“他的确是个怪人，”矮矮胖胖的那个笑着说。“今晚确实没有让我们失望。你听说过他妻子的事吗？”

我欠了欠身，悄悄地到厨房去。我泡了茶，在盘子上放了几块那天早些时候做的蛋糕。我听见客厅传来笑声，我丈夫也在笑。其中一个客人又很大声地叫了他一次“法老”。我回到客厅时，二郎和他的客人们聊得正欢。矮矮胖胖的那个正在说一件趣闻，说一个内阁大臣遇见麦克阿瑟将军的事。我把蛋糕放在他们旁边，给他们倒了茶，然后在绪方先生身边坐下。二郎的朋友又开了几个政治家的玩笑，然后白皮肤的那个假装生气了，因为另一个说了一位他敬仰的人物的坏话。大家笑他，他板起脸来。

“对了，花田，”我丈夫对他说。“有一天我在办公室听说了一件有趣的事情。我听说在上次选举时，你威胁你太太说要用高尔夫球棍打她，因为她不跟你选同样的人。”

“你听谁胡说的？”

“消息可靠的人说的。”

“没错，”矮矮胖胖的那个说。“还有，你太太打算报告警察说你政治胁迫。”

“胡说八道。再说，我没有高尔夫球棍了。我去年都卖掉了。”

“你还有一根七号铁杆，”矮矮胖胖的那个说。“上周在你家我看到过。你可能是用那个。”

“可是你不能说没有这事吧，花田？”二郎说。

“什么高尔夫球棍，都是胡说八道。”

“可是你没能让她照你说的做，这是真的吧。”

白皮肤的那个耸耸肩。“这个嘛，她要投给谁是她自己的权利。”

“那你为什么威胁她？”他的朋友问。

“我自然是在试着跟她讲道理。我太太投给吉田就因为他长得像她叔叔。女人就是这样。她们不懂政治。她们以为可以像选衣服那样选国家领导人。”

“所以你就用七号铁杆打她，”二郎说。

“是真的吗？”绪方先生问。从我把茶拿来到现在，他都没有说话。其他三人都不笑了，白皮肤的那个惊讶地看着绪方先生。

“没有。”他突然变得正经八百，微微鞠了一躬。“我没有真的打她。”

“不，不，”绪方先生说。“我是说你太太和你——你们真的投给不同的政党？”

“啊，是的。”他耸耸肩，然后苦笑了一下。“我能怎么办呢？”

“对不起。我不是要多管闲事。”绪方先生低低地鞠了一躬，白皮肤的那个回敬了一个。这一鞠好像成了信号，三个年轻人又开始说说笑笑起来。他们不谈政治了，聊起公司里的同事来。添茶时，我注意到虽然我端了不少蛋糕出来，但是已经快没了。我添完茶，回到绪方先生身旁坐下。

客人们待了一个小时左右。二郎送他们到门口，然后回来坐下，叹了口气。“晚了，”他说。“我得睡觉了。”

绪方先生正在研究棋盘。“我想有几个棋子摆错了，”他说。“我肯定马应该在这格，不是那格。”

“很可能。”

“那我把它放在这里了。同意吗？”

“好，好。我肯定您是对的。我们以后再把棋下完吧，爸爸。我得赶快睡觉了。”

“再走几步吧。我们很快就能下完了。”

“说真的，还是算了吧。我现在太累了。”

“好吧。”

我把刚才做的针线活收起来，坐着等其他人去睡觉。可是二郎翻开一份报纸读了起来。他看见盘子里还有一块蛋糕，就若无其事地拿起来吃。过了一会儿，绪方先生说：

“我们还是现在把它下完吧。只差几步了。”

“爸爸，我现在真的很累了。我明天早上还得上班呢。”

“是的，好吧。”

二郎继续一面看报纸一面吃蛋糕。我看见有一些蛋糕屑掉在榻榻米上。绪方先生又盯着棋盘看了一会儿。

“太奇怪了，”他终于说道，“你朋友刚刚说的事。”

“哦？什么事？”二郎的眼睛没有离开报纸。

“他和他太太投票给不同的政党的事。几年前这种事情是不可能的。”

“没错。”

“如今的事情都太奇怪了。不过我想这就是所谓的民主吧。”绪方先生叹了口气。“我们急着想从美国人那里学来的这些东西，不一定是好的。”

“是的，确实不一定都好。”

“看看出了什么事。丈夫和妻子投票给不同的政党。再也不能在这些事上信任妻子，真是悲哀。”

二郎边看他的报纸边说：“是啊，太可惜了。”

“现在的妻子都忘了对家庭的忠诚。想干什么就干什么，一时高兴的话就把票投给另一个党。这事在现在的日本太典型了。人人借着民主的名义丢掉忠诚。”

二郎抬头看了他父亲一眼，很快又把目光移回报纸。“您说得很对，”他说。“不过当然了，美国人带来的东西也不全是坏的。”

“美国人，他们从来就不理解日本人的处世之道。从来没有。他们的做法也许很适合美国人，可是在日本情况就不一样，很不一样。”绪方先生又叹了一口气。“纪律，忠诚，从前是这些东西把日本人团结在一起。也许听起来不太真实，可确实是这样的。人们都有一种责任感。对自己的家庭，对上级，对国家。可是现在人们不再讲这些了，而是讲什么民主。当一个人想自私自利时，想丢掉责任时，就说民主。”

“是的，您说得对。”二郎打了个哈欠，挠了挠侧脸。

“就拿我这一行来说吧。多年来，我们有一套自己精心建立并热爱的体系。美国人来了，不假思索地把这套体系废除了、粉碎掉。他们决定要把我们的学校变得像美国那样的，我们的孩子应该学美国孩子学的东西。而日本人对这些全都欢迎，大谈特谈什么民主”——他摇了摇头——“学校里很多好东西都被毁了。”

“是的，我想您说得很对。”二郎再次抬起头来。“不过当然了，旧的教育体系里也有一些缺点，其他体系也是。”

“二郎，你说什么？你在哪里看到的吗？”

“只是我的看法。”

“那是你在报纸上看到的吗？我这一辈子都在教育年轻人。后来我看着美国人把整个教育体系都给粉碎了。现在的学校太奇怪了，他们教给孩子的为人处世之道太奇怪了。而且很多东西都不教了。你知道吗？现在的孩子离开学校时对自己国家的历史一无所知。”

“这确实令人遗憾。不过我也记得我上学时的一些怪事。比如说，我记得以前老师教过神是怎样创造日本的。我们这个民族是多么的神圣和至高无上。我们得把课本一个字、一个字地背下来。有些事情也许并不是什么损失。”

“可是二郎，事情不是这么简单。你根本不知道是怎么回事。事情绝不像你想的那么简单。我们献身教育，确保优良的传统传承下去，确保孩子们形成正确的国家观、民族观。以前的日本有一种精神把大家团结在一起。想象一下现在的孩子是怎么样的。在学校里他学不到什么价值观——也许除了说他应该向生活索取任何他想要的东

西。回到家里，他发现父母在打架，因为他母亲拒绝投票给他父亲支持的党。这是什么世道？”

“是的，我明白您的意思。现在，爸爸，请原谅，我得去睡觉了。”

“我们尽了全力，像远藤和我这样的人，我们尽全力教导这个国家。很多好东西都被毁了。”

“确实太遗憾了。”我丈夫站了起来。“对不起，爸爸，可是我得睡了。我明天还要忙一天呢。”

绪方先生抬头看着他的儿子，脸上有些惊讶。“啊，当然。我把你拖得这么晚真是太不应该了。”他微微地鞠了一躬。

“没有的事。我很抱歉我们不能接着聊，可是我真的得去睡觉了。”

“啊，当然。”

二郎向他父亲道了晚安，离开客厅。绪方先生盯着二郎走出去的那扇门看了好几秒钟，好像在等他儿子随时会回来。然后他转向我，表情很不安。

“我没注意到已经这么晚了，”他说。“我不是有意不让二郎睡觉的。”

第五章

“走了？可他有没有在旅馆里留口信给你？”

佐知子笑了。“你太吃惊了，悦子，”她说。“没有，他什么也没留。他们只知道他昨天上午离开的。老实说，我猜到会这样。”

我才注意到我还端着盘子。我小心地把盘子放下，然后在佐知子对面的垫子上坐下。那天早上，公寓里吹着凉爽的微风。

“可是你多惨啊，”我说。“你把东西都收拾好、准备妥当，在等着他。”

“这对我来说不新鲜，悦子。在东京的时候——我是在东京认识他的——在东京的时候，也发生过同样的事。所以这对我来说不新鲜了。我已经学会预料到这类情况。”

“你还说你今晚要回到城里去？一个人去？”

“别大惊小怪的，悦子。跟东京比起来，长崎像是个沉闷的小镇。如果他还在长崎的话，我今晚就能找到他。旅馆可以换，可是他的习惯是不会改的。”

“可是太让人伤心了。你需要的话，我可以去陪着万里子到你回来。”

“啊，你太好了。万里子一个人待着没问题，不过要是你今晚愿意去陪她一两个小时，那真是太谢谢你了。不过我肯定事情自然会好起来的，悦子。你瞧，你要是有我的一些经历的话，你就懂得不为这种小小的挫折烦恼了。”

“可是要是他……我是说，要是他已经离开长崎了呢？”

“哦，他没有走远，悦子。再说，如果他真的要离开我的话，他会留个字条什么的，不是吗？所以说，他没有走远。他知道我会去找他。”

佐知子微笑着看着我。我不知道该说什么。

“再说了，悦子，”她接着说，“他大老远地到这里来。他大老远地到长崎来我伯父家找我，大老远地从东京来。若不是为了他答应过的事，他为什么要这么做呢？要知道，悦子，他最想做的就是带我

去美国。这就是他想做的。这一点没有改变，现在只不过是稍稍的耽搁。”她干笑了一声。“你瞧，有时候他像个孩子。”

“可是你的朋友这样走了是什么意思呢？我不明白。”

“没什么好明白的，悦子，这没什么大不了的。他想做的就是带我去美国，过稳定、体面的生活。这是他真正想做的。不然他干吗要大老远地来我伯父家找我呢？所以说，悦子，没什么好担心的。”

“是的，我想没什么好担心的。”

佐知子好像还想说些什么，却停住不说了。她低头看了看盘子里的茶具。“那现在，悦子，”她笑着说，“我们倒茶吧。”

她静静地看着我倒茶。期间我很快地瞥了她一眼，她笑了，像是在鼓励我接着倒。我倒完茶，我们静静地坐了一会儿。

“对了，悦子，”佐知子说，“我想你已经跟藤原太太说了我的情况了吧。”

“是的。我前天见到她。”

“我想她一定在想我怎么了。”

“我告诉她有人要带你到美国去。她完全理解。”

“你瞧，悦子，”佐知子说，“我发现自己现在处境艰难。”

“是的，我可以理解。”

“经济方面，和其他各个方面。”

“是的，我明白，”我说，并微微地鞠了一躬。“你要的话，我当然可以跟藤原太太说。我相信在这种情况下她很乐意……”

“不，不，悦子”——佐知子笑了起来——“我不想回她的小面馆。我肯定很快就要离开、到美国去了。只是稍稍推迟几天，没别的。但是与此同时，你瞧，我需要一点钱。我记得，悦子，你以前说过可以帮我。”

她和蔼地微笑着看着我。我也看着她。片刻后，我鞠了一躬，说：

“我有一些私房钱。不是很多，但是我很乐意尽我所能。”

佐知子优雅地鞠了一躬，然后拿起她的茶杯，说：“我不会说个数让你为难。要借多少全看你自己。你觉得多少合适，我都会感激地接受。当然了，钱会及时归还，这点你尽管放心，悦子。”

“那是，”我静静地说。“我不担心这个。”

佐知子仍然和蔼地微笑着看着我。我说了声“失陪”，走出房间。

卧室里，阳光照射进来，照亮了空气中的灰尘。我在柜子底部的一排小抽屉旁跪了下来。我打开最底下的那个抽屉，取出各种东西——相册、贺卡、一个装着我母亲画的水彩画的夹子——小心翼翼地将它们放在旁边的地板上。抽屉的最底下放着一个黑色的漆制礼盒。打开盒子，里面装着一些我珍藏的信件——我丈夫不知道这些信件——和两三张小照片。我从盒子的最底下取出装着钱的信封。我小心翼翼地把东西放回原样，关上抽屉。离开卧室前，我打开衣橱，挑了一条样子合适的丝巾把信封包上。

我回到客厅时，佐知子正在给自己添茶，没有抬起头来看我。我把包好的丝巾放在她身旁的地板上时，她也没有看，继续倒茶。我坐下时她朝我点了一下头，然后喝起茶来。只是在放下杯子时，她很快地用余光瞥了一下坐垫旁的那包东西。

“你好像有点误会，悦子，”她说。“你瞧，对我所做的一切，我没有觉得丢脸或见不得人的。你想问什么都可以。”

“是的，当然。”

“比如说，悦子，你为什么从来不问我‘我的朋友’的事？你坚持这么叫他。真的没有什么可丢脸的。怎么了，悦子，你已经开始脸红了。”

“我向你保证我没有觉得丢脸。其实……”

“你有，悦子，我看得出来。”佐知子笑了一声，拍了一下掌。“可你为什么不明白我没有那么好隐瞒的，也没有那么好丢脸的？你为什么要脸红呢？就因为我提到弗兰克？”

“我没有觉得丢脸。我向你保证我从没想过……”

“你为什么从来不问我他的事，悦子？你肯定有很多问题想问。为什么不问呢？毕竟左邻右舍都很好奇，你一定也是，悦子。所以请别拘束，想问什么就问吧。”

“可是我真的……”

“快点，悦子，我要你问。问我他的事。我一定要你问。问我他的事吧，悦子。”

“那好吧。”

“好？说啊，悦子，问吧。”

“好吧。他长什么样，你的朋友？”

“他长什么样？”佐知子又笑了。“你就想知道这个？好吧，他和一般的老外一样高，他的头发开始变稀了。他不老，你明白。老外更容易秃头，你知道吗，悦子？现在再问点别的吧。你肯定还有其他事情想知道。”

“这个，说真的……”

“快点，悦子，问啊。我要你问。”

“可是我真的没有什么想……”

“肯定有，你为什么不问呢？问我他的事吧，悦子，问我吧。”

“好吧，其实，”我说，“我确实想知道一件事。”

佐知子好像突然僵住了。她把本来握在胸前的手放下，放回大腿上。

“我确实想知道，”我说，“他会不会说日语？”

有一会儿，佐知子没有做声。然后她笑了，神情变轻松了。她再次端起茶杯，抿了几口。她开口说话时，声音听起来很恍惚。

“老外学我们的语言很难，”她说，然后停了一下，出神地笑着。“弗兰克的日语很糟糕，所以我们用英语交谈。你懂英语吗，悦子？一点都不懂？是这样，以前我父亲英语说得很好。他有亲戚在欧洲，所以他一直鼓励我学英语。不过后来当然了，结婚后，我就不学了。我丈夫不许我学。他把我的英语书都收走了。可是我没有忘记英语。我在东京遇到老外时就都想起来。”

我们静静地坐了一会儿。然后佐知子疲惫地叹了口气。

“我想我得赶快回去了，”她说。她弯下腰拿起包好的丝巾，没有打开看，就把它放进手提包里。

“不再喝点茶吗？”我问。

她耸了耸肩。“那就再来一点吧。”

我给她满上。佐知子看着我，然后说：“要是不方便——我是说今天晚上——也没有关系。万里子这么大了，可以一个人待着。”

“不要紧。我肯定我丈夫不会反对的。”

“你太好了，悦子，”佐知子有气无力地说。“也许我应该警告你。我女儿这几天情绪很不好。”

“没关系，”我笑着说。“我得习惯小孩子的各种脾气。”

佐知子又慢慢地喝起茶来，好像并不急着回去。然后放下茶杯，呆呆地看着自己的手背。

过了好一会儿，她终于开口说道：“我知道那时长崎这里遭受了可怕的事情。可是东京的情况也很坏。一周又一周，情况糟透了，不见好转。后来，我们都住在地道和破房子里，到处都是废墟。住在东京的人都目睹了一些可怕的事情。万里子也是。”她还是盯着自己的手背。

“是的，”我说。“那段时间一定很艰难。”

“这个女人。你听万里子说起的这个女人。是万里子在东京看到的。她在东京还目睹了一些其他的事情，一些可怕的事情，可是她一直记得那个女人。”她把手翻过来，看着手心，一会儿看看这手，一会儿看看那手，像是在作比较。

“而这个女人，”我说。“在空袭中被炸死了？”

“她自杀了。他们说她割断了自己的喉咙。我不知道她是谁。事情是这样的，那天早上万里子跑了出去。我不记得她为什么跑出去了，可能是在为什么事情生气。反正她跑到街上去了，所以我去追她。那时还很早，周围没有人。万里子跑进一条小巷子里，我跟了过去。小巷的尽头是一条运河，那个女人跪在那里，前臂浸在水里。一个年轻女人，很瘦。我一看见她就知道有什么不对劲。你瞧，悦子，她转过来，对万里子笑了笑。我知道有什么不对劲，万里子肯定也感觉到了，因为她停下不跑了。一开始我以为那个女人是个瞎子，因为她的眼神，她的眼睛好像什么也看不见。然后，她把手臂从水里拿出来，让我们看她抱在水底下的东西。是个婴儿。我拉住万里子，离开了那条巷子。”

我没有说话，等着下文。佐知子拿起茶壶给自己倒了些茶。

“正如我刚才说的，”她说，“我听说那个女人自杀了。几天以后。”

“那时万里子几岁？”

“五岁，快六岁了。她在东京还目睹了一些其他的事情。可是她一直记得那个女人。”

“她全看见了？她看见婴儿了？”

“是的。其实，很长时间里，我以为她并不懂得她看见的事情。那天之后她并没有提起这件事。那时她也没有特别不安。直到一个月左右以后，她才第一次提起这件事。那时我们睡在一栋老建筑里。我半夜醒来，看见万里子站着，盯着门口看。那里没有门，只有一个出入口。而万里子站着，盯着那里。我吓坏了。你知道，那个房子没有门，什么人都可以进去。我问万里子怎么了，她说有个女人站在那里看着我们。我问是什么样的女人，她说是那天早上我们看见的那个。站在门口看着我们。我起来看了看，可是那里并没有人。当然了，很可能是有个女的曾站在那里。那里什么人都可以进去。”

“我明白了。万里子把她当作你们见到的那个人了。”

“我猜想是这样的。不管是怎么回事，事情就是这样开始的，万里子对那个女人的幻想。我以为她长大以后就会好了，可是最近又开始了。如果今天晚上她又说起这个，请不要理她。”

“好的，我知道了。”

“你知道小孩子就是这样，”佐知子说。“他们编一些事情来玩，结果分不清哪些是真的、哪些是假的。”

“是的，我想这一点儿都不奇怪。”

“你瞧，悦子，万里子出生的时候很艰难。”

“是的，一定是这样的，”我说。“我很幸运。我知道。”

“那时很艰难。也许我不应该那时结婚。毕竟大家都看得出来战争快来了。可是话说回来，悦子，没有人知道战争是什么样的，那时没有。我嫁入了一个很有名望的家庭。我从没想到战争会造成这么大的影响。”

佐知子放下茶杯，一只手捋了一下头发。然后她很快地笑了笑。“至于今天晚上，悦子，”她说，“我女儿很会自己跟自己玩。所以请不用太费心。”

说起儿子时，藤原太太的脸常常变得疲倦。

“他一天天变老，”她说。“很快他就只剩下老姑娘可挑了。”

我们坐在她的面摊前的水泥空地。一旁几张桌子上有一些上班族在吃午饭。

“可怜的和夫，”我笑了笑，说。“不过我可以理解他的感受。美智子小姐的事太令人伤心了。而且他们订婚很长时间了，对吧？”

“三年。我从不明白干吗要订婚这么长时间。没错，美智子是个好女孩。我肯定她会第一个同意我的观点，和夫不应该再这样想着她了。她会希望和夫继续好好地生活下去。”

“不过和夫一定很难过。计划了那么多年的事情最后变成这个样子。”

“可是这些都已经过去了，”藤原太太说。“我们都应该把以前的事放在身后。你也是，悦子，我记得以前你难过极了。可是你挺过来了，继续生活。”

“是的，不过我很幸运。那个时候绪方先生对我很好。要是没有他，我不知道我会怎样。”

“是啊，他对你很好。而且当然了，你因此认识了你丈夫。不过这是你应得的。”

“要是绪方先生没有收留我，我真不知道我现在会怎样。不过我可以理解他是多么伤心——我是指您的儿子。即使是我，我有时也会想起中村君。我忍不住。有时候我醒过来，忘了自己在哪里。我以为我还在这里，在中川……”

“好了，悦子，别说了。”藤原太太看了我好一会儿，然后叹了口气。“不过我也是。像你说的，早上，醒来的时候，这事趁你不注意的时候就会找上你。我常常醒过来，心想我得赶快起来给大家准备早饭。”

我们谁也不说话了。过了一会儿，藤原太太笑了笑。

“你太坏了，悦子，”她说。“瞧，你让我都说了这些话。”

“我太傻了，”我说。“不管怎么说，中村君和我，我们之间从来都没有什么。我是说，我们并没有定下什么事。”

藤原太太还是看着我，出神地点了点头。这时，空地那一边的一个客人站了起来，准备离开。

我看着藤原太太走向他，是个穿着衬衫的整洁的年轻人。他们互相鞠躬，然后愉快地聊了起来。那人扣上公文包时说了些什么，藤原太太开心地笑了。他们又互相鞠了一躬，然后那人消失在午后上班的人群里。我刚好利用这个时间调整一下情绪。藤原太太回来时，我说：

“我得走了。眼下您忙得很。”

“你坐着休息吧。你才刚来。我给你弄点吃的。”

“不，不用了。”

“听我说，悦子，你要是不在这里吃，可得再过一个小时才能吃到午饭。你知道现在规律的饮食对你来说多么重要。”

“是，我想是的。”

藤原太太细细地看了我一会儿，然后说：“你现在有那么多盼头，悦子。你在为什么事情不开心呢？”

“不开心？可我一点儿也没有不开心。”

她还是看着我，我紧张地笑了笑。

“孩子出生以后，”她说，“你就会开心起来了，相信我。而且你会是个好母亲的，悦子。”

“我希望如此。”

“你肯定会有的。”

“是。”我抬起头来，笑了。

藤原太太点了点头。然后再次站起身来。

佐知子的小屋里越来越暗——屋里只有一盏灯笼——起先我以为万里子在盯着墙上的黑点。她伸出一根指头，那个东西动了一下。这时我才发现是一只蜘蛛。

“万里子，别碰它。这样不好。”

她把双手都放到背后，不过还是盯着蜘蛛看。

“以前我们养了一只猫，”她说。“在我们到这里来之前。那只猫会抓蜘蛛。”

“我知道了。住手，别碰它，万里子。”

“可是它没有毒。”

“是没有毒，可是别碰它，很脏。”

“以前我们养的那只猫，它会吃蜘蛛。我要是吃蜘蛛会怎么样？”

“我不知道，万里子。”

“我会生病吗？”

“我不知道。”我接着做我带来的针线活。万里子继续盯着蜘蛛。最后她说：“我知道你今晚晚上为什么过来。”

“我来是因为小女孩自己一个人待着不好。”

“是因为那个女人。是因为那个女人可能会再来。”

“你干吗不再多拿些画给我看呢？你刚才给我看的那些很漂亮。”

万里子没有回答，走向窗户，看着外面。

“你妈妈很快就回来了，”我说。“你干吗不再多拿些画给我看呢？”

万里子还是看着外面。最后，她回到去看蜘蛛前坐着的角落。

“你今天都做了什么，万里子？”我问。“你画画了吗？”

“我跟小胖和小美玩。”

“太好了。他们住在哪里？公寓里吗？”

“它是小胖”——她指了指身旁的一只黑色小猫——“它是小美。”

我笑了。“哦，我明白了。是可爱的小猫，是吗？不过你不和别的孩子玩吗？住在公寓里的孩子？”

“我跟小胖和小美玩。”

“可是你应该试着和别的孩子交朋友。我肯定他们都是好孩子。”

“他们偷了花花。那是我最喜欢的小猫。”

“他们偷了小猫？哦天啊，他们为什么要这么做？”

万里子开始抚摸小猫。“现在我没有花花了。”

“也许它很快就会出现。我肯定那些孩子只是玩一玩。”

“他们杀了它。现在我没有花花了。”

“哦。他们怎么会做这种事？”

“我向他们扔石头。因为他们说了难听的话。”

“啊，你不应该扔石头，万里子。”

“他们说了难听的话。说妈妈。我向他们扔石头，他们就偷走了花花，不把它还回来。”

“咳，你还有其他的小猫啊。”

万里子又朝窗户走去。她的个子刚好够让她把手肘靠在窗沿上。有几分钟的时间，她看着外面，脸贴在窗户上。

“我想出去，”她突然说。

“出去？可是已经很晚了，外面很黑。而且你妈妈就快回来了。”

“可是我想出去。”

“待在这里，万里子。”

她还是看着外面。我试着看看她看到了什么；从我坐的地方我只看到一片漆黑。

“也许你应该对其他孩子好一点。这样你就可以和他们交朋友了。”

“我知道妈妈为什么叫你来。”

“你要是扔石头，怎么能交得到朋友呢？”

“是因为那个女人。是因为妈妈知道那个女人。”

“我不知道你在说什么，万里子。再跟我说说你的小猫。它们长大一些，你还会再给它们画画吗？”

“是因为那个女人可能会再来。所以妈妈叫你来。”

“我想不是这样。”

“妈妈见过那个女人。前两天的一个晚上，她看见她了。”

我猛地停下手里的针线活，抬起头来看万里子。她不再看着窗外，而是面无表情地看着我，样子很奇怪。

“你妈妈是在哪里看见这个——这个人的？”

“那里。在那里看见的。所以她叫你来。”

万里子离开窗户，回到她的小猫身边。母猫出现了，小猫都偎依到妈妈怀里。万里子在它们旁边躺下，小声地说起话来。她的低语让人隐隐地觉得不安。

“你妈妈就快回来了，”我说。“她现在会在干什么呢？”

万里子仍旧在低语。

“她跟我说了好多弗兰克的事，”我说。“他听上去是个好人。”

万里子不做声了。一刹那间，我们面面相觑。

“他是个坏蛋，”万里子说。

“你这样说可不好，万里子。你妈妈跟我说了好多弗兰克的事，他听上去确实是个好人。而且我相信他对你很好，不是吗？”

她站起来，走向墙壁。蜘蛛还在那里。

“对，我相信他是个好人。他对你很好，不是吗，万里子？”

万里子伸出手去。蜘蛛沿着墙壁慢慢地爬着。

“万里子，别碰它。”

“我们在东京养的那只猫，它会抓蜘蛛。我们本来要把它带来的。”

蜘蛛挪了地方以后，我看得更清楚了。它的腿又粗又短，每一条腿都在黄色的墙壁上投下一道阴影。

“它是只好猫，”万里子接着说。“它本来要和我们一起来长崎。”

“你们带它来了吗？”

“它不见了。我们出发的前一天。妈妈答应说我们可以带上它的，可是它不见了。”

“这样啊。”

她突然伸出手去，抓住了蜘蛛的一条腿，把它从墙壁上拿下来。其他几条腿在空中疯狂地乱舞。

“万里子，放开它。它很脏。”

万里子把手翻过来，蜘蛛爬到她的手掌上。她把另一只手盖上，把蜘蛛关在里面。

“万里子，放开它。”

“它没有毒，”她说，向我走来。

“没有毒，可是很脏。放回角落去。”

“可是它没有毒。”

她站在我面前，蜘蛛合在她手里。我从她的手指缝里看见蜘蛛的一条腿在慢慢地、有节奏地抖动。

“把它放回角落去，万里子。”

“我把它吃了会怎么样？它没有毒。”

“你会得重病的。好了，万里子，把它放回角落去。”

万里子把蜘蛛拿到嘴边，张开嘴巴。

“别傻了，万里子。很脏。”

她张大嘴巴，然后分开合着的手，蜘蛛掉在我的正前方。我吓得往后退。蜘蛛飞快地沿着榻榻米跑进我身后的黑暗里去。我过了一会儿才回过神来，这时万里子已经跑出小屋了。

第六章

我不知道那天晚上我找她找了多久。应该是挺久的，因为那时我的肚子已经很大了，我总是当心行动不能太匆忙。而且，到了外面，我突然发现走在河边十分惬意。河岸上有块地方草长得很高。那天晚上我一定是穿着木屐，因为我清楚地记得草在我脚边的感觉。我走着，身边一直萦绕着昆虫的叫声。

最后我终于听出来其中有个沙沙的声音，像有条蛇在我身后的草地里爬行。我停下来细听，发现了声音的来源：一条旧绳子缠在我的脚踝上，我在草地一直拖着它。我小心地把它从脚上解下来。我把它拿到月光底下，它在我手指里湿漉漉的，满是泥。

“喂，万里子，”我喊道，她就坐在我前面不远的草丛里，蜷起腿，下巴靠在膝盖上。一棵柳树——河岸上有几株柳树——垂到她坐的地方。我往前走了几步，把她的脸看得更清楚些。

“那是什么？”她问。

“没什么。我走路时，它缠住我的脚了。”

“到底是什么？”

“没什么，只是一条旧绳子。你为什么跑到这里来？”

“你要一只小猫吗？”

“一只小猫？”

“妈妈说我们不能带着小猫。你要一只吗？”

“我不想要。”

“可是我们得赶快帮它们找到一个家。不然妈妈说我们就得把它们淹死。”

“那太遗憾了。”

“你可以要小胖。”

“这得看看。”

“你干吗拿着那个？”

“我说了，没什么。它缠住我的脚了。”我往前一步。“你这是做什么，万里子？”

“做什么？”

“你刚刚的表情很奇怪。”

“我没有。你干吗拿着绳子？”

“你刚刚的表情很奇怪。非常奇怪。”

“你干吗拿着绳子？”

我注视了她一会儿。她的脸上露出害怕的样子。

“那么，你不想要小猫吗？”她问。

“不，我不想要。你是怎么了？”

万里子站了起来。我走到柳树底下，看见小屋在不远处，屋顶的颜色比天空深。我听见万里子跑进黑暗里的脚步声。

我回到小屋的门口，听见里面传来佐知子生气的声音。我进屋时，母女俩都转过来看我。佐知子站在屋子中央，她女儿在她面前。她精心打扮的脸在灯笼的照射下像一张面具。

“恐怕万里子给你添麻烦了，”她对我说。

“啊，她跑到外面去了……”

“跟悦子道歉。”她狠狠地抓着万里子的胳膊。

“我还要出去。”

“你不许动。马上道歉。”

“我要出去。”

佐知子举起一只手重重地打孩子的大腿背。“马上跟悦子道歉。”

万里子的眼睛里闪烁着小小的泪珠。她很快地瞥了我一眼，然后转向她妈妈。“你为什么老是出去？”

佐知子再次举起手来警告她。

“你为什么老是和弗兰克出去？”

“你要不要道歉？”

“弗兰克像猪一样撒尿。他是臭水沟里的猪。”

佐知子吃惊地看着她的孩子，手停在半空中。

“他喝自己的尿。”

“住嘴。”

“他喝自己的尿，还在床上大便。”

佐知子还是生气地盯着她，人却呆住了。

“他喝自己的尿。”万里子挣开佐知子的手臂，若无其事地走过客厅。走到玄关，她转过身来，回瞪着她妈妈。“他像猪一样撒尿，”她又说了一遍，然后跑了出去。

佐知子还是盯着玄关，显然忘了我的存在。

“不去追她吗？”过了一会儿，我说。

佐知子看着我，好像稍微缓过来了。“不用，”她边说边坐下来。“别管她。”

“可是已经很晚了。”

“别管她。她高兴了就会回来了。”

水壶已经在炉子上滚了好一会儿了。佐知子把它从火上拿开，开始泡茶。我看了她一会儿，然后静静地问：

“找到你的朋友了吗？”

“是的，悦子，”她说。“我找到他了。”她继续泡茶，没有抬起头来看我。然后她说：“太谢谢你今天晚上到这里来了。我为万里子的事道歉。”

我还是看着她。最后，我说：“你现在打算怎么办？”

“打算怎么办？”佐知子添满茶壶，把剩下的水倒到火里。“悦子，我跟你说过很多次了，对我来说最重要的是我女儿的幸福。这是我优先考虑的。毕竟我是个母亲。我不是什么不懂得自重的年轻酒吧女郎。我是个母亲，我女儿的利益是第一位的。”

“当然。”

“我打算给我的伯父写信。我要告诉他我的行踪，他有权知道我现在的情况，我会都告诉他。然后他同意的话，我要跟他商量我们有没有可能回那里去。”佐知子双手拿起茶壶，轻轻地摇晃起来。“事实上，悦子，我很高兴事情变成这个样子。想象一下我女儿会多么的不习惯，突然发现自己在一个都是老外的地方，一个都是老美的地方。突然有一个老美做爸爸，想象一下她会多么不知所措。你明白我说的话吗，悦子？她这辈子已经有太多的动荡不安了，她应该找个地方安顿下来。事情变成这个样子也好。”

我嘟囔了一声表示同意。

“孩子，悦子，”她接着说，“就意味着责任。你很快就会明白这点了。这就是他害怕的，谁都看得出来。他怕万里子。这个，我不能接受，悦子。我必须先考虑我的女儿。事情变成这个样子也好。”她的手还在摇晃着茶壶。

“你一定很失望吧，”最后，我说道。

“失望？”——佐知子笑了——“悦子，你以为这种小事会让我失望吗？我在你这个年纪时也许会。可是现在不会了。过去这几年，我经历了太多的事情。不管怎样，我料到会这样。哦没错，我一点也不惊讶。我料到了。上次，在东京，也差不多是这样。他不见了，把我们的钱都花光了，三天内全都喝光了。其中很多是我的钱。你知道吗？悦子，我甚至在旅馆里当女佣。没错，当女佣。可是我不抱怨，我们钱凑得差不多了，再过几个星期我们就可以坐船去美国了。可是他把钱全喝光了。那么多个星期，我跪在地上擦地板，可是他三天内就全都喝光了。这次他又来了，和一文不值的酒吧女郎泡在酒吧里。我怎么能把我女儿的未来交到他这种人的手上？我是个母亲，我必须先考虑我的女儿。”

我们又都不说话了。佐知子把茶壶放下，盯着它。

“我希望你伯父能理解你，”我说。

她耸了耸肩。“至于我伯父，悦子，我会和他商量的。我愿意为了万里子而这么做。他要是不同意，我就再想别的办法。反正我不打算陪着一个洋酒鬼去美国。我很高兴他找了个酒吧女郎陪他喝酒，我肯定他们真是般配。可是至于我，我要做对万里子最好的事情，这就是我的决定。”

佐知子又盯着茶壶看了一会儿。然后她叹了一口气，站了起来，走向窗户，往外看。

“我们现在不去找她吗？”我说。

“不用，”佐知子边看着窗外边说。“她很快就会回来了。她想待在外面就让她待在外面吧。”

如今的我无限追悔以前对景子的态度。毕竟在这个国家，像她那个年纪的年轻女孩想离开家不是想不到的。我做成的事似乎就是让她在最后真的离开家时——事情已经过去快六年了——切断了和我的所有关系。可是我怎么也想不到她这么快就消失得无影无踪；我所能预见的是待在家里不开心的女儿会发现承受不了外面的世界。我是为了她好才一直强烈反对她的。

那天早上——妮基来的第五天——我很早就醒过来，脑子里的第一个念头是我没有听到这几个晚上和清晨都能听到的雨声。然后我想起了是什么让我醒过来。

我躺在被窝里，来来回回地看在微光中依稀可见的东西。几分钟后，我感觉平静了一些，就又闭上眼睛。可是我并没有睡。我想着那个房东——景子的房东——想着她是怎样终于打开曼彻斯特的房门的。

我睁开眼睛，又看着房间里的东西。最后我爬起来，穿上晨衣，去盥洗室。我小心不吵醒睡在我隔壁客房里的妮基。当我走出盥洗室时，我在楼梯口站了一会儿。楼梯的那边，走廊的尽头，可以看见景子的房门。门和平时一样关着。我直盯着门，然后往前迈开步子。最后我来到了房门前。我站在那里，好像听见一个细小的声音，是里面传来的动静。我又听了一会儿，可是什么也听不见了。我伸出手去，打开门。

灰暗的光线里，景子的房间显得凄凉；床上只有一条床单，旁边是她的白色梳妆台，地上有几个纸板箱，装着她没有带到曼彻斯特去的东西。我走进房间。窗帘开着，我能看见下面的果园。天空露出鱼肚白；似乎没有在下雨。窗户下、草地上，两只鸟在啄着掉下来的苹果。这时，我开始觉得冷，于是回到自己的房间。

“我的一个朋友在写一首关于你的诗，”妮基说。我们正在厨房里吃早饭。

“关于我？为什么呢？”

“我跟她说了你的事，她就决定要写一首诗。她是个才华横溢的诗人。”

“一首关于我的诗？太荒唐了。有什么可写的？她都不认识我。”

“我说了，妈妈，我跟她说了你的事。她理解人的能力真是惊人。你瞧，她自己也经历了很多事情。”

“我明白了。你这个朋友几岁？”

“妈妈，你总是关心别人几岁。人重要的不是年龄，而是经历。有的人活到一百岁也没经历过什么事。”

“我想是的。”我笑了，瞥了一眼窗子。外面下起了蒙蒙细雨。

“我跟她说了你的事，”妮基说。“你的、爸爸的，还有你们是怎么离开日本的。她听了以后印象深刻。她能体会事情是什么样的，知道做起来并不像听起来的那么容易。”

我盯着窗子看了一会儿。然后我很快地说：“我相信你的朋友一定能写出一首好诗。”我从水果篮里拿了一个苹果，妮基看着我拿起小刀来削。

“很多女人，”她说，“被孩子和讨厌的丈夫捆住手脚，过得很不开心。可是她们没有勇气改变一切。就这么过完一生。”

“嗯哼。所以你是说她们应该抛弃孩子，是吗，妮基？”

“你知道我的意思。人浪费生命是悲惨的。”

我没有做声，虽然我女儿停了下来，像是在等着我回答。

“一定很不容易，你做的那些，妈妈。你应该为你所做的感到自豪。”

我继续削苹果。削完后，拿纸巾擦干手指。

“我的朋友们也都这么想，”妮基说。“那些知道你的事的。”

“我真是受宠若惊。谢谢你那些了不起的朋友。”

“我只是说说而已。”

“你已经把意思说得很清楚了。”

也许那天早上我没有必要敷衍她，不过妮基一直觉得应该在这些事情上把我劝开。再者，其实她并不知道我们在长崎的最后那段日子究竟发生了什么。她可能是通过她父亲告诉她的事构建了一些图画。这样的图画不可避免是不准确的。事实上，虽然我的丈夫写了很多令人印象深刻的关于日本的文章，但是他从不曾理解我们的文化，更不理解二郎这样的人。我并非在深情地怀念二郎，可是他绝不是我丈夫想的那种呆呆笨笨的人。二郎努力为家庭尽到他的本分，他也希望我尽到我的本分；在他自己看来，他是个称职的丈夫。而确实，在他当女儿父亲的那七年，他是个好父亲。不管在最后的那段日子里，我如何说服自己，我从不假装景子不会想念他。

不过这些事情都已经过去了，我也不愿再去想它们。我离开日本的动机是正当的，而且我知道我时刻把景子的利益放在心上。再想这些也没什么用了。

我正在修剪窗台上的盆栽，弄着弄着，突然发觉妮基很安静。我转过头去看她，她站在壁炉前，视线越过我，看着外面的园子。我回头看窗外，顺着她的视线看她在看什么；虽然玻璃上有雾，但仍然可以看清楚花园。妮基好像是在看着篱笆附近，那里风和雨打进来，打乱了支撑幼小的西红柿的藤。

“我想那些西红柿今年是不行了，”我说。“我都没怎么去管它们。”

我仍旧看着那些藤，突然听见抽屉被打开的声音。我再次转过头去，妮基正在翻抽屉。早饭后，她决定把她爸爸在报纸上发表的文章统统读一遍，一早上大部分时间花在了翻找家里的抽屉和书架上。

我继续整理我的盆栽；盆栽有不少，杂乱地堆满窗台。身后，我能听见妮基翻抽屉的声音。突然她又没有声响了。我转过头去时，她的视线再次越过我，看着外面的园子。

“我要去喂金鱼，”她说。

“金鱼？”

妮基没有回答就走了出去，一会儿我看见她大步走过草坪。我擦掉玻璃上的一块雾，看着她。妮基走到花园的尽头，走到假山中的鱼池。她把饲料倒进鱼池，在那里站了几秒钟，盯着鱼池。我可以看见她的侧影；她很瘦，虽然穿着时髦衣服，却明显还是有些孩子气。我看着风吹乱她的头发，心想她怎么不穿外衣就出去了。

往回走时，她在西红柿边上停下。尽管雨点不小，她还是站在那里观察了它们一会儿。接着她走近几步，开始小心翼翼地把藤弄直起来。她扶起几根完全倒下去的藤，然后蹲了下来，膝盖几乎碰到了湿漉漉的草地，把我放在地上、用来赶走偷吃的鸟儿的网弄正。

“谢谢你，妮基，”她进屋时我对她说。“你太有心了。”

她嘟囔了一声，在长靠背椅上坐下。我注意到她变得有些不好意思。

“我今年真的没怎么去管那些西红柿，”我又说道。“不过我想也没什么关系。现在那么多的西红柿我都不知道该怎么办。去年，我把大部分都给了莫里森夫妇。”

“哦天啊，”妮基说，“莫里森夫妇。亲爱的莫里森老两口怎么样了？”

“妮基，莫里森夫妇都是很好的人。我想不通你干吗要这么瞧不起他们。以前你和卡西还是最好的朋友。”

“哦没错，卡西。她最近怎么样了？还住在家里吧，我想？”

“啊，是的。她现在在银行上班。”

“很像她。”

“在我看来，她这个年纪做这个再适合不过了。还有，玛里琳结婚了，你知道吗？”

“哦是吗？她嫁给谁了？”

“我不记得她丈夫是做什么的了。我见过他一次。他看来很讨人喜欢。”

“我猜他是个教区牧师之类的。”

“好了，妮基，我真是想不通你为什么非得用这种语气。莫里森夫妇一直对我们很好。”

妮基不耐烦地叹了口气，说：“他们做事的方式就是让我讨厌。比如说他们教育孩子的方式。”

“可是你好几年没见到莫里森夫妇了。”

“我以前认识卡西时已经见得够多的了。他们那种人真是无药可救。我想我应该替卡西难过。”

“你就因为卡西没有像你一样到伦敦去住而责怪她？我得说，妮基，这可不像你和你朋友们所标榜的宽容大度。”

“哦，没关系。反正你也不明白我在讲什么。”她瞥了我一眼，然后又叹了一口气。“没关系，”她看着另一边，又说了一次。

我又盯着她看了一会儿。最后，我转回窗台，继续摆弄我的盆栽，没有说话。

“你知道，妮基，”几分钟后我说道，“我很高兴你有处得来的好朋友。毕竟，现在你要过自己的生活。这是自然的。”

我的女儿没有做声。我看了她一眼，她正在看从抽屉里找到的一份报纸。

“我很想见见你的朋友，”我说。“随时欢迎你带他们到这里来。”

妮基轻轻地甩了一下头，不让头发遮住视线，继续看报纸，脸上露出专注的神情。

我重新回到盆栽上，因为这些信号我再明白不过了。每当我打探她在伦敦的生活，妮基就摆出一副微妙的、但是相当斩钉截铁的态度；她用这种方式告诉我，我不应该再问下去，不然会后悔。结果，我对她目前生活的认识大部分都是靠猜想。可是，在她的信里——妮基总是记得写信——她提到了一些在谈话中不可能涉及的东西。比如说，我就是从信里知道她的男朋友叫大卫，在伦敦的一所大学里学政治。可是在谈话中，要是我问他好吗，我知道那道障碍马上就会严严实实地落下。

如此强烈地保护自己的隐私让我想起了她的姐姐。因为事实上，我的两个女儿有很多共同点，比我丈夫承认的要多得多。在他看来，她们是完全不同的；而且，他形成这么一种看法，认为景子天生就是一个难相处的人，对此我们无能为力。其实，虽然他从未直说出来，但是他会暗示说景子从她爸爸那里继承了这种性格。我没有反驳，因为这是最简单的解释：怪二郎，不怪我们。当然了，我丈夫并不知道小时候的景子是什么样的；他要是知道的话，就会发现这两个女孩在小时候有多像。都是火爆脾气，都有很强的占有欲；生气的话，不会像其他孩子那样很快忘记他们的怒火，而是会闷闷不乐一整天。可是，一个长成了快乐、自信的年轻姑娘——我对妮基的未来充满信心——另一个越来越不快乐，最终结束了自己的生命。我并不像我丈夫

那样，觉得可以把原因简单地归咎于天性或二郎。可是，这些事情都已经过去了，再想也没什么用了。

“对了，妈妈，”妮基说。“今天早上是你吧？”

“今天早上？”

“早上我听见一些动静。很早的时候，大概四点吧。”

“很抱歉吵到你了。对，是我。”我笑了起来。“怎么了，你以为还会是谁呢？”我还在笑，一时停不下来。妮基瞪着我，报纸还摊在她面前。“哦，对不起我把你吵醒了，妮基，”我终于止住了笑，说道。

“没关系，反正我已经醒了。这几天我好像都睡不好。”

“换了房间也睡不好？你可能得去看医生。”

“我可能会去。”妮基说道，又继续看报纸。

我放下一直拿着的大剪刀，转向她。“你知道，很奇怪。今天早上我又做了那个梦。”

“什么梦？”

“我昨天跟你说的那个，不过我想那时你没有在听。我又梦见了那个小女孩。”

“哪个小女孩？”

“那天我们在村里喝咖啡时看见的，在荡秋千的那个。”

妮基耸了耸肩。“哦，那个，”她没有抬头，说。

“其实，根本不是那个小女孩。今天早上我意识到这一点。看似是她，但其实不是。”

妮基又一次抬起头来看着我，然后说：“我想你是指她。景子。”

“景子？”我微微地笑了。“多奇怪的想法。为什么是景子呢？不，跟景子没有关系。”

妮基还是不确定地看着我。

“只是我以前认识的一个小女孩，”我说。“很久以前。”

“哪个小女孩？”

“你不认识。我很久以前认识的。”

妮基又耸了耸肩。“我甚至压根就无法入睡。我想昨天晚上我只睡了大概四个小时。”

“太让人担心了，妮基。特别是在你这种年纪。你可能得去看医生。你随时可以去找弗格森医生。”

妮基又做了个不耐烦的动作，继续看她爸爸登在报纸上的文章。我看了她一会儿。

“其实，今天早上我还意识到别的事情，”我说。“关于那个梦的。”

我女儿似乎没有在听。

“你瞧，”我说，“那个小女孩根本不是在秋千上。一开始好像是秋千。但其实她不是在秋千上。”

妮基嘟囔了句什么，继续看报纸。

第二部

第七章

夏天越来越热，公寓区旁的那片空地也让人越来越不能忍受。大部分的土干得裂开了，而雨季里积的雨水却还留在凹下去的沟和坑里。空地滋生各种虫子，其中蚊子最多，随处可见。公寓里的人一直在抱怨，可是几年以后，对那块空地的愤怒逐渐变成了听之任之、冷嘲热讽。

那年夏天我经常要穿过那块空地到佐知子的小屋去，这段路真够讨厌的；虫子飞进你的头发，地面的裂缝里看得到大大小小的蚊子。我至今仍清楚地记得那段路，那一趟趟来回——还有对即将做妈妈的担心，还有绪方先生的来访——使得那个夏天与众不同。可是除此之外，那个夏天跟别的夏天没什么两样。很多时候——后来几年也是——我都呆呆地望着窗外的景色。晴朗一些的日子里，我能看见河对岸的树后面淡淡的山的轮廓，映着白云。那景色还挺好看，有时还能带给我难得的消遣，打发我在公寓里的那一个个漫长、无聊的下午。

除了空地的事，那年夏天小区的人还关心其他话题。报纸上都在说占领快结束了，东京的政客们忙着吵来吵去。公寓里的人也经常谈论这件事，但跟讲起空地一样，带着冷嘲热讽。大家更关心的是儿童谋杀案的报道，案件震惊了当时的长崎。先是一个男孩，后来是一个小女孩发现被殴打致死。当发现第三名受害者时——又一个小女孩被吊死在树上——小区里的妈妈们几乎惊慌失措。虽说事件都发生在城市的另一头，但这丝毫不能减轻人们的恐惧：小区里几乎看不见小孩子的身影，尤其是在晚上。

我不清楚当时的那些报道让佐知子担心到什么程度。诚然她似乎不像以前那样把万里子一个人留下，可是后来我怀疑这更主要的是因为她生活中的其他进展；她收到了她伯父的回信，说愿意让她们回去住，之后我很快就发现佐知子对小女孩的态度变了：她对孩子似乎更有耐心、更加随和了。

收到她伯父的来信后，佐知子大大地松了一口气，一开始我毫不怀疑她会回去。然而，日子一天天过去，我开始怀疑她的打算。一方面，收到信后的几天，我发现佐知子没有把这件事情告诉万里子。后来，几周过去了，佐知子不仅没有准备离开，我发现她也没有给她伯父回信。

要不是佐知子特别不愿提起她伯父家，我想我不会去想这个事情。我越来越好奇。虽然佐知子三缄其口，我还是知道了一些事情；比如说，这个伯父似乎并不是佐知子的血亲，而是她丈夫那边的亲戚；佐知子是在到他家来的几个月前才知道他的。这个伯父很有钱，他的房子不是一般的大——而且就只住着他、他女儿和一个女佣——所以足以腾出空间来让佐知子和她的小女儿住。其实佐知子不只一次地说到那所房子大部分都是空的，静悄悄的。

我对这个伯父的女儿特别好奇。据我所知，她与佐知子年纪相仿，没有结婚。佐知子很少提起她的表姐，可是我清楚地记得那时的一次交谈。当时我认为佐知子之所以迟迟不回她伯父家去是因为她和她的表姐不和。那天早上我一定是试探着跟佐知子说起这个，因而打开了她的话匣子，佐知子很少直说她在她伯父家里的生活，那次是少有的几次之一。那次交谈如今仍历历在目；那是八月中旬的一个没有风的、干燥的早上，我们站在山顶的桥上等进城的电车。我不记得那天我们是要去哪里，也不记得是在哪里离开万里子的——我记得孩子没有和我们在一起。佐知子看着远处的风景，举起一只手来挡着脸，遮住太阳。

“我搞不懂，悦子，”她说，“你怎么会有这种想法。恰恰相反，安子和我是最好的朋友，我也很想再见到她。我真不明白你怎么会想得刚好相反，悦子。”

“对不起，我一定是弄错了，”我说。“不知怎么的，我觉得你不大想回那里去。”

“没有的事，悦子。我们刚认识时，确实是，那时我正在考虑其他的可能性。可是一个母亲应该考虑出现的、给孩子的各种机会，难道应该为此受到责备吗？只是有一阵子，我们似乎有一个不错的选择。但是进一步考虑之后，我放弃了。事情就是这样，悦子，现在我对这些计划都没有兴趣了。我很高兴事情有了最好的结局，现在我盼着回到我伯父家去。至于安子，我们都十分尊敬对方。我不明白是什么让你有相反的想法，悦子。”

“真的很抱歉。我只是记得有一次你提到了吵架什么的。”

“吵架？”她看了我一会儿，然后脸上露出了笑容。“哦，我知道你指什么了。不，悦子，那不是吵架。那只是小小的口角。为了什么来着？你瞧，我都不记得是为了什么事了，太小的事了。哦对了，没错，我们在争谁来准备晚饭。对，没错，就为了这个。你瞧，悦

子，那时我们轮流做饭。女佣做一个晚上，再来是我表姐，然后轮到我。一天轮到女佣做饭，她却病了，安子和我两个人都争着要做。你千万别误会，悦子，我们通常相处得很好。只是当你老是见到同一个人、见不到别人时，有时难免会有摩擦。”

“是的，我很理解。对不起，我误会了。”

“要知道，悦子，当有女佣帮你做所有的杂事时，时间就过得出奇的慢。安子和我都找些这样、那样的事来做，可是整天除了坐着聊天以外实在是没什么好做的。那几个月，我们一起坐在那所房子里，几乎见不到什么外人。我们没有真的吵起来真是奇迹。也许吧，我的意思是。”

“是的，确实如此。之前是我误会您了。”

“是啊，悦子，恐怕你是误会了。我记得这件事只是因为这是在我们离开之前不久发生的，从那以后我就再也没有见过我的表姐了。不过说那是吵架还真是好笑。”她笑了笑。“其实，我想安子要是想起这件事也会笑出来的。”

也许就是在那天早上我们决定在佐知子离开前，要找一天一起去哪里走走。而事实上，不久之后的一个炎热的下午，我陪佐知子母女去了稻佐山。稻佐山是长崎的山区，俯视港口，山上的景色很有名；稻佐山离我们住的地方不远——其实我从公寓的窗口看见的就是稻佐山——可是那时候，我极少外出，去稻佐山就成了一次远足。我记得那时我盼了好几天；我想这是我那些日子的美好回忆之一。

我们在下午最热的时候坐渡船到稻佐山去。港口的嘈杂声跟随着我们的船——铁锤的叮当声，机器的轰鸣声，时不时传来的低沉的船的汽笛声——在那个时候的长崎，这些声音可不是什么噪声；它们是重建的声音，当时仍然可以振奋人心。

到了对岸，那里的海风比较大，天气没有那么闷热了。我们坐在缆车站空地的长椅上，仍旧可以听到风传来的港口的声音。凉风习习，空地上还有难得的遮阳的地方，我们心里更加感激；这里只不过是一块水泥空地——那天空地上大多是母亲带着孩子——像个学校的操场。空地的一边，在一排旋转栅门后是缆车靠站的木站台。有好一会儿，我们坐在那里出神地看着缆车上上下下；一辆缆车慢慢地向山上升去，渐渐地变成空中的一小点，而另一辆则越来越低，越来越大，最后停在站台上。栅门旁的小屋里，一个男的在控制一些操作

杆；他戴着一顶帽子，每次缆车安全地停下来以后，他都要探出身来和围过来看的孩子们聊天。

我们决定坐缆车到山顶去，由此那天第一次遇见了那个美国女人。佐知子和女儿去买票，我一个人坐在长椅上。突然我注意到空地的另一头有个卖糖果和玩具的小摊。我想说不定可以买糖给万里子，就站起来走过去。两个孩子在我前面，争吵着要买什么。我等着他们，发现玩具里有一副塑料双筒望远镜。那两个孩子还在吵，我回头看了一眼空地。佐知子和万里子还站在栅门旁；佐知子好像在和两个女人讲话。

“您要什么，夫人？”

孩子们走了。小摊后站着一个人穿着整洁的夏季制服的小伙子。

“我能试试这个吗？”我指了指双筒望远镜。

“当然可以，夫人。虽然只是玩具，但是能看得挺远的。”

我举起望远镜，抬头看山坡；望远镜居然能看得很清楚。我转向空地，发现佐知子女女在镜头里。佐知子今天穿着一件浅色和服，系着一条精致的腰带——我想那腰带是特殊场合才拿出来系的——她的姿态在人群里很优雅。她还在和那两个女人讲话，其中一个像是外国人。

“又是一个大热天啊，夫人，”我递给小伙子钱时他说。“你们要坐缆车吗？”

“我们正要去坐。”

“上面的风景很棒。山顶上那个是我们建的电视塔。到了明年，缆车就能直通那里了，直通山顶。”

“太好了。祝你今天过得愉快。”

“谢谢您，夫人。”

我拿着双筒望远镜走回去。虽然那时我并不懂英语，但是我马上猜到那个外国女人是美国人。她很高，一头红色的波浪发，戴着一副边角往上翘的眼镜。她在大声跟佐知子说话。看见佐知子那么自如地用英语回答她我很是吃惊。另外一个女人是日本人；胖胖的，四十岁上下，身边有个八九岁的敦实的小男孩。我走过去，向他们鞠躬问好，然后把双筒望远镜递给万里子。

“只是个玩具，”我说。“不过可以看见不少东西。”

万里子打开包装，认真地研究望远镜。她举起望远镜，先是看看空地，然后抬头看山坡。

“说谢谢，万里子，”佐知子说。

万里子只顾着看。然后她放下望远镜，把塑料绳套到脖子上。

“谢谢悦子阿姨，”她有点不情愿地说。

那个美国女人指着望远镜，用英语说了什么，笑了。双筒望远镜同样引起了那个敦实的小男孩的注意。他原本在看着山坡和下降的缆车，现在走近万里子，眼睛盯着望远镜。

“太谢谢了，悦子，”佐知子说。

“没什么。只是一个玩具。”

缆车到了，我们走过栅门，走上凹下去的木板。好像除了我们以外，那两个女人和那个男孩便是仅有的乘客了。戴帽子的男人走出他的小屋，引领我们一个个走进缆车。车厢里光秃秃的，就是个金属壳子。四面都有大窗户，两面长的墙壁下各有一条长椅。

缆车没有马上开动，而是在站台上停留了几分钟，那个敦实的小男孩开始不耐烦地走来走去。在我身边，万里子跪在长椅上看窗外。从我们这边的窗户可以看见空地和聚集在栅门旁的小观众们。万里子像是在测试望远镜的性能，一会儿把望远镜拿到眼前，一会儿又拿开。这时，敦实的小男孩走过来，也跪在她旁边的椅子上。一开始两个孩子谁也没有理谁。最后，那个男孩说：

“现在我要看。”说着伸手去要望远镜。万里子冷冷地看着他。

“阿明，不能这样要东西，”他妈妈说。“好好地跟小姐姐要。”

小男孩把手拿开，看着万里子。万里子回瞪着他。小男孩转身走到另一边的窗户去。

缆车启动了，栅门旁的孩子们朝我们挥手。我本能地抓住窗户旁的铁栏杆，那个美国女人紧张地叫了一声，笑了。空地越变越小，接着，山坡在我们底下移动；我们渐渐升高，缆车轻轻地摇晃着；有一会儿，树顶像是擦着窗户，突然我们的脚下空了，出现了一个巨大的

山壑，我们悬在空中了。佐知子轻轻地笑了笑，指了指窗外的什么东西。万里子又拿起望远镜看。

缆车到了终点，我们小心翼翼地一个接一个出来，像是不能肯定自己已经到了坚实的地面。上面的这个站台没有水泥地，走出木地板就是一小片草地。除了引导我们出站台的穿着制服的男人以外，看不见其他人。草地后立着几张野餐用的木桌，几乎掩映在松树林里。草地的这边，我们下车的地方，有一道铁栅栏围住悬崖。我们大致搞清楚所在的方位后就走到栅栏边去看缓缓向下的山坡。过了一会儿，那两个女人和那个男孩也走了过来。

“太壮观了，不是吗？”那个日本女人对我说。“我带我的朋友饱览风光。她以前没来过日本。”

“这样啊。我希望她在这里玩得开心。”

“我希望如此。可惜我的英语说得不好。你的朋友说得比我好多了。”

“是啊，她说得很好。”

我们俩都看了一眼佐知子。她和那个美国女人又用英语聊开了。

“受到这么好的教育真好，”日本女人对我说。“好了，祝你们今天全都玩得愉快。”

我们互相鞠了鞠躬，日本女人朝她的美国客人招了招手，示意他们该走了。

“我能看一下吗？”敦实的小男孩生气地问，再次伸出手去。万里子像在缆车里那样盯着他。

“我想看，”小男孩说得更凶了。

“阿明，记住好好地跟小姐姐要。”

“求你！我想看。”

万里子又看了他一小会儿，才把塑料绳从脖子上拿下来，把望远镜递给小男孩。男孩举起望远镜朝栅栏那边看去。

“这个一点都不好，”他看了好一会儿后跟他妈妈说道。“没有我的那个好。妈妈，你看，都看不清楚那边的树。你看啊。”

他要把望远镜给他妈妈。万里子伸出手去拿，可是男孩一把闪开，又递给他妈妈。

“你看啊，妈妈。都看不见那边的树，近处的那些。”

“阿明，把望远镜还给小姐姐。”

“这个没有我的那个好。”

“好了，阿明，这么说话没有礼貌。你知道不是每个人都像你这么幸运。”

万里子伸手去拿望远镜，这次男孩放手了。

“跟小姐姐说谢谢，”他妈妈说。

小男孩什么也没说就走开了。他妈妈笑了笑。

“谢谢你，”她对万里子说。“你真好。”接着她又依次对佐知子和我笑了笑。“景色很漂亮，不是吗？”她说。“祝愿你们今天玩得愉快。”

山路上满是松针，沿着山坡蜿蜒而上。我们慢慢地走，时不时停下来休息。万里子很安静，而且——让我很意外——一点都没有耍淘气的样子，只是奇怪不愿意跟她妈妈和我走在一起。她一会儿落在后面，让我们担心地回过头去看；一会儿又跑过去，走在前头。

在我们从缆车上下来约一个小时以后，我们第二次遇到那个美国女人。她和她的同伴正从山上下来，认出了我们，高兴地打招呼。胖胖的小男孩走在她们后面，没有跟我们打招呼。美国女人走过去时用英语跟佐知子说了什么，听了佐知子的回答以后笑了起来。她好像想停下来交谈，可是日本女人跟她儿子没有停下脚步；美国女人挥挥手，继续往前走。

当我称赞佐知子的英语时，她笑了笑，没说什么。我注意到这次偶遇在她身上产生了奇怪的效应。她变得很安静，边走边陷入了沉思。当万里子又冲到前面去时，她对我说：

“我父亲是个很受人尊敬的人，悦子。德高望重。可是他的海外关系差点毁了我的婚事。”她微微一笑，摇了摇头说，“真奇怪，悦子。现在这些都恍若隔世。”

“是啊，”我说。“一切都大变样了。”

山路转了一个大弯，又是上坡。树木变少了，突然在我们周围天空豁然开朗。前头，万里子叫了起来，指着什么东西，然后兴冲冲地往前跑去。

“我很少见到我父亲，”佐知子说。“他大部分时间都在国外，在欧洲和美国。我小时候曾经梦想有一天我会去美国，去那里变成电影明星。我妈妈笑话我，可是爸爸说我要是把英语学好了，就能很容易地成为一个女商人。我以前很喜欢学英语。”

万里子在一个像是平地的地方停下来，又朝我们不知道喊了什么。

“我记得有一次，”佐知子接着说，“我父亲从美国带了一本书给我，英文版的《圣诞颂歌》。它成了我的目标，悦子。我想学好英语，看懂那本书。可惜没有机会实现。结婚以后，我丈夫不准我继续学。事实上，他让我把那本书扔掉。”

“太可惜了，”我说。

“我丈夫就是这样，悦子。很严厉，很爱国。他从来不是一个体谅别人的人。但是他的家庭出身很好，我父母觉得门当户对。他禁止我学英语时我没有反对。毕竟没有意义了。”

我们走到万里子站的地方；小路的边上有一块突出去的四方形平地，周围围着几块大石头。一根倒下来的巨大树干表面被刨光、弄平，做成长椅。佐知子和我坐下来歇口气。

“别太靠近边上，万里子，”佐知子喊道。小女孩已经走到大石头那里去，拿起望远镜看。

坐在山的边缘俯视这番景色，我有一种忐忑不安的心情；在我们底下很远的地方可以看见港口，像个掉在水里的精密的机器零部件。港口过去，对岸是通向长崎的群山。山脚下房屋密布，高高低低。远处右手边是港口的入海口。

我们在那里稍坐片刻，歇口气、吹吹风。这时我说道：

“你不会想到这里曾经发生的一切，不是吗？一切看上去是那么生机勃勃。可是下面那一整片”——我朝底下的景色挥了挥手——“那一整片在炸弹掉下来的时候受了多么严重的打击。可是看看现在。”

佐知子点点头，然后笑着转向我，说：“你今天心情真不错啊，悦子。”

“到这里来走走真是太好了。我决定从今往后要乐观。我以后一定要过得幸福。藤原太太一直对我说往前看是多么重要。她是对的。假设人们没有往前看，那么这里”——我又指了指底下的景色——“这里就都还是废墟一片。”

佐知子又笑了。“是啊，你说得对，悦子。这里就都还是废墟一片。”说完，她又回头看着下面的风景。过了一会儿她说：“对了，悦子，你的朋友，藤原太太，我想她在战争中失去了她的家人是吧。”

我点点头。“以前她有五个孩子。她丈夫还是长崎的重要人物。炸弹掉下来的时候，除了大儿子以外都死了。她一定受了很大的打击，可是她还一直坚持。”

“是啊，”佐知子慢慢地点着头，说，“我猜有这类事情。那她一直都是开面馆的吗？”

“没有，当然没有了。她丈夫是个要人。是后来，她失去了一切以后才有面馆的。每次我看见她，都对自己说：我应该像她那样，我应该往前看。因为从很多方面来说，她失去的比我多。毕竟看看我现在。我要开始组建自己的家庭了。”

“是啊，你说得太对了。”风吹乱了佐知子梳得整整齐齐的头发。她捋了一下头发，然后深深地吸了一口气，“你说得太对了，悦子，我们不应该老想着过去。战争毁了我的很多东西，可是我还有我的女儿。正如你说的，我们应该往前看。”

“你知道吗，”我说，“我是最近几天才认真地想这件事的。我是指为人父母。现在我没有那么害怕了。我要高高兴兴地迎接它。从今往后我要乐观。”

“你就应该这样，悦子。毕竟你还有很多盼头。其实你很快就会发现，是做母亲让生活变得真正有意义。住在我伯父家里闷了点又有什么关系呢？我只要给我女儿最好的。我们要给她请最好的家庭教师，她很快就会把功课赶上。正如你说的，悦子，我们必须对生活乐观。”

“你这么想我真高兴，”我说。“我们俩真的都应该心存感激。我们也许在战争中失去了很多，但是还有那么多盼头。”

“是啊，悦子。还有很多盼头。”

万里子走过来，站在我们面前。也许她听见了我们的一些谈话，因为她对我说：

“我们又要和安子阿姨一起住了。妈妈有没有告诉你？”

“有，”我说，“她告诉我了。你很想再回到那里去住吗，万里子？”

“现在我们可以留着小猫了，”小女孩说。“安子阿姨的房子很大。”

“这件事还要再看，万里子，”佐知子说。

万里子看了她妈妈一会儿，然后说：“可是安子阿姨喜欢猫。再说，反正圆圆本来就是我们从她那里拿过来的。所以那些小猫也是她的。”

“是没错，万里子，可是我们还得看看。我们得看看安子阿姨的爸爸怎么说。”

小女孩生气地看了她妈妈一眼，然后又转向我，表情严肃地说：“我们可以留着小猫。”

下午快过去的时候，我们回到了下缆车时的空旷地。我们的午餐盒里还有一些饼干和巧克力，我们就在一张野餐桌上坐下，吃了起来。空地的那头，一些人站在铁栏杆旁，等下山的缆车。

我们坐了几分钟，突然听见有人叫我们。那个美国女人大踏步地从空地的那头走过来，笑容满脸。她一屁股坐下，一点儿也没有觉得不好意思，朝我们一个个笑了笑之后就跟佐知子说起英语来。我想她很高兴有机会交谈，而不是用手比划。我朝周围看了看，果然看见那个日本女人就在附近，在给她儿子穿外套。她不是很想跟我们一起的样子，但最后还是微笑地走过来。她在我对面坐下，她儿子坐在她身旁，这时我发现母子俩的体型很像，都是圆圆胖胖的；最明显的是两个人的脸颊都有垂肉，有点像斗牛犬。美国女人一直高声地跟佐知子讲个不停。

在陌生人到来之前，万里子已经打开她的素描本，开始画画。胖脸女人跟我寒暄过后转向小女孩。

“你今天玩得开心吗？”她问万里子。“这上面很漂亮，不是吗？”

万里子仍旧低着头画画。可是女人一点儿也没有在意。

“你在画什么呢？”她问。“很漂亮的样子。”

这次万里子停了下来，冷冷地看着日本女人。

“很漂亮的样子。可以让我们看看吗？”女人伸手拿过素描本。“是不是很漂亮，阿明？”她对她儿子说。“小姐姐是不是很聪明？”

男孩趴到桌子上来，好看得清楚些。他饶有兴趣地看着万里子的画，但是没说什么。

“真是漂亮。”女人翻着素描本。“这些都是今天画的吗？”

一开始万里子没有答话。但过了一会儿，她说道：“这些蜡笔是新的。今天早上才买的。新蜡笔比较不好画。”

“这样啊。是啊，新蜡笔比较不好画，不是吗？阿明也画画，是不是，阿明？”

“画画很简单，”男孩说。

“这些小画是不是很漂亮，阿明？”

万里子指着翻开的那一页，说：“我不喜欢这一张。蜡笔还磨得不够。下面一张比较好。”

“哦是啊。这张真漂亮！”

“这张是在港口画的，”万里子说。“可是那里又吵又热，所以我匆匆忙忙地画的。”

“可是画得很好。你喜欢画画吗？”

“喜欢。”

佐知子和美国女人也都转过来看素描本。美国女人指着上面的画，大声地用日语说了好几次“太棒了”。

“这是什么？”胖脸女人又问道。“是蝴蝶啊！把蝴蝶画这么好一定很不容易吧。蝴蝶不会一直呆着不动。”

“我记得它的样子，”万里子说。“我之前看见一只。”

女人点点头，然后转向佐知子。“你女儿真聪明。我想一个小孩会用记忆和想象是很值得表扬的。这个年纪的很多孩子都还只会照着书上的画。”

“是啊，”佐知子说。“我想是这样。”

佐知子的语气里带着轻蔑，让我很是惊讶，因为她一直在极其友好地跟美国女人说话。敦实的男孩趴得更近了些，用手指指着画页。

“那些船太大了，”他说。“如果那个是树的话，那船应该要画得小很多。”

他妈妈想了想，说：“啊，也许。可这幅画还是很漂亮。你不觉得吗，阿明？”

“船画得太大了，”男孩说。

女人笑了笑。“你可千万别生阿明的气，”她对佐知子说。“你瞧，他有一个非常优秀的美术家庭教师，所以他明显比大部分同龄的孩子在这些方面更有眼力。你女儿有教画画的家庭教师吗？”

“没有。”佐知子的语气仍旧很冷淡。可是那个女人丝毫没有察觉。

“请人来教画画根本不是什么坏主意，”她接着说。“我丈夫一开始不同意。他觉得阿明有数学和科学的家庭教师就够了。但是我认为画画也很重要。孩子应该从小培养他的想象力。学校的老师也同意我的看法。可是他学得最好的是数学。我认为数学很重要，你说呢？”

“是，确实，”佐知子说。“我相信数学很有用。”

“数学能提高孩子的智力。你会发现大多数数学学得好的孩子其他方面也都很好。关于请数学老师我丈夫和我没有异议。结果很值得。去年，阿明在班上一直是第三、第四名，可今年一直是第一。”

“数学很简单，”男孩说道。接着他问万里子：“你会九九乘法表吗？”

他妈妈又笑了。“我猜这个小姑娘一定也很聪明。从她的画就能看出来。”

“数学很简单，”男孩再次说道。“九九乘法表简单得不得了。”

“是啊，阿明已经会整张乘法表了。很多同龄的孩子只会算到三或四。阿明，九乘以五得多少？”

“九五四十五！”

“那九乘以九呢？”

“九九八十一！”

美国女人问了佐知子什么，佐知子点点头，美国女人就拍了拍手，又用日语说了几次“太棒了”。

“你女儿看来很聪明，”胖脸女人对佐知子说。“她喜欢上学吗？阿明几乎喜欢学校里的所有科目。除了数学和画图，他的地理也很好。我的这位朋友很惊讶地发现阿明知道美国所有大城市的名字。是不是，苏西小姐？”女人转向她的朋友，说了几个结结巴巴的英语单词。美国女人没听懂，但是朝男孩赞许地笑了笑。

“可阿明最喜欢的科目是数学。是不是，阿明？”

“数学很简单！”

“这个小姑娘最喜欢的科目是什么呢？”女人再次转向万里子，问道。

万里子没有马上回答。过了一会儿，她说：“我也喜欢数学。”

“你也喜欢数学。太好了。”

“那九乘以六是多少？”男孩生气地问她。

“孩子喜欢学校的功课真是太好了，不是吗？”他妈妈说。

“快点啊，九乘以六是多少？”

我问：“阿明君长大以后想做什么？”

“阿明，告诉这位阿姨你长大以后想当什么。”

“三菱公司的董事长！”

“他爸爸的公司，”他母亲解释道。“阿明已经下定决心了。”

“是，我知道了，”我笑着说。“多好啊。”

“你爸爸在哪里工作？”男孩问万里子。

“好了，阿明，别问东问西的，没有礼貌。”女人又转向佐知子。“很多同龄的男孩子都还只会说想当警察啊、消防员啊。可是阿明很小的时候就想到三菱工作了。”

“你爸爸在哪里工作？”男孩又问了一次。这次他妈妈没有阻止他，而是好奇地看着万里子。

“他是动物园里的饲养员，”万里子说。

一时间没有人说话。奇怪的是，万里子的回答似乎挫了男孩的锐气，他阴沉着脸坐回椅子上。这时，他母亲有点不知所措地说：

“多有意思的职业啊。我们都很喜欢动物。你丈夫的动物园在这附近吗？”

佐知子还没来得及回答，万里子就窸窸窣窣地爬下椅子，一声不响地朝附近的树丛走去。我们都看着她。

“她是你最大的孩子吗？”女人问佐知子。

“我只有一个。”

“哦，这样。这也不是什么坏事。独生子女更独立。而且我想独生子女通常也更刻苦。我们这个”——她把手放到男孩的头上——“和老大相差六岁。”

美国女人惊呼一声，拍起手来。万里子正稳稳地爬上树枝。胖脸女人在座位上转过身去，担心地看着万里子。

“你女儿真像个假小子，”她说。

美国女人开心地重复了一遍“假小子”，又拍起手来。

“这样安全吗？”胖脸女人问。“她可能会掉下来。”

佐知子笑了笑，对那个女人的态度突然变得热情得多。“你不习惯孩子爬树吗？”她问。

胖脸女人仍旧担心地看着万里子。“你肯定这样安全吗？树枝可能会断掉。”

佐知子笑了一声。“我肯定我女儿知道自己在做什么。谢谢你的关心。你真好心。”说着优雅地鞠了一躬。这时美国女人跟佐知子说了什么，她们俩又用英语聊开了。胖脸女人把视线从树上收回来。

“请千万别怪我多管闲事，”她一只手搭在我的胳膊上，说，“可是我忍不住注意到，这是你的第一胎吧？”

“是的，”我笑着说。“预产期在秋天。”

“多好啊。对了，你丈夫也是饲养员吗？”

“哦，不是。他在电器公司工作。”

“真的？”

胖脸女人开始给我一些照顾婴儿方面的建议。这时，我越过她的肩膀看见男孩离开桌子，朝万里子爬的树走去。

“应该让孩子多听好的音乐，”女人说。“我肯定效果很明显。孩子从一开始就应该听好音乐。”

“是的，我很喜欢音乐。”

男孩站在树下，抬头困惑地看着万里子。

“我们大儿子的音乐鉴赏力没有阿明好，”女人接着说。“我丈夫说是因为他很小的时候没有听够多的好音乐，我认为他说得对。那时的广播放了太多的军乐。我确信一点儿好处都没有。”

胖脸女人说话时，我看见男孩试着在树干上找一个踏脚的地方。万里子爬下来一些，像是在教他。在我身旁，美国女人一直大笑不停，时不时蹦出几个日语单词。男孩终于成功地离开地面；他一只脚踩在树缝里，双手紧紧握住一根树枝。虽然离地面只有几厘米，但他看上去很紧张。很难说万里子是不是故意的，只是万里子在下来时，狠狠地踩在了男孩的手指上。男孩尖叫一声，笨重地摔了下来。

他母亲惊恐地转过头去。佐知子和美国女人不知道发生了什么，也都看了过来。男孩侧躺在地上，号啕大哭。他母亲赶忙跑过去，跪下去检查他的腿。男孩不停地哭。空地那头等缆车的乘客都往这边看。大约一分钟以后，男孩呜咽着被他妈妈带回桌子这边。

“爬树很危险，”女人生气地说。

“他摔得不重，”我安慰她说。“他根本没有爬多高。”

“他可能摔断骨头。我想应该阻止孩子爬树。爬树太愚蠢了。”

“她踢我，”男孩哭着说。“她把我从树上踢下来。她要杀我。”

“她踢你？小姑娘踢你？”

我看见佐知子瞥了她女儿一眼。万里子又爬到高高的树上去了。

“她要杀我。”

“小姑娘踢你？”

“你儿子只是脚踩滑了，”我赶紧插嘴说。“我都看见了。他根本没摔着。”

“她踢我。她要杀我。”

女人也转过头去看那棵树。

“他只是脚踩滑了，”我重复道。

“你不应该做这种蠢事，阿明，”女人生气地说。“爬树很危险。”

“她要杀我。”

“你不准再爬树。”

男孩继续抽泣着。

比起英国，日本城市里的旅馆、茶馆、商店似乎更加喜欢夜幕降临；天还没黑，窗户上的灯笼、门口的霓虹招牌早早就亮了起来。那天傍晚，当我们重新走上长崎的街道时，已经灯火通明了；我们快傍晚时离开稻佐山，在浜屋百货公司里的美食街吃了晚饭。晚饭后，我们还不回去，在巷子里慢慢地溜达，并不急着去电车站。我记得那时的年轻情侣流行在街上手牵手——我和二郎从来没有过——我们一路走着，看见很多这样的情侣在寻找晚上的娱乐。夏季傍晚的天空变成了浅紫色。

路旁有很多卖鱼的小摊，傍晚的这个时候，渔船都回港了，你经常能看到肩上扛着满满一箱刚打上来的鱼的男人穿梭在拥挤的巷子里。就是在这样一条有很多垃圾和悠闲漫步者的巷子里，我们遇到了那个抓阉儿的小摊。我从来不去那种小摊凑热闹，在英国也没有那种小摊——也许集市里有一——所以要不是想起那个傍晚，我可能已经不记得那种东西了。

我们站在人群后面看。一个女人抱着一个两三岁的小男孩；台上，一个绑着头巾的男人弯下腰来，好让男孩能够到碗。小男孩好不

容易从碗里抽出一个签来，却似乎不知道该怎么办。他把签捏在手里，茫然地看着周围的一张张笑脸。绑着头巾的男人把腰弯得更低，对小男孩说了什么，惹得旁边的人想笑。最后，母亲把孩子放下来，拿过他手里的签，递给那个男人。小男孩抽中了一支口红，女人笑着收下了。

万里子踮起脚尖看小摊的后面摆着些什么奖品。突然她转向佐知子，说：“我要抽一次签。”

“这纯粹是浪费钱，万里子。”

“我要抽一次签。”她显得很急迫，真让人奇怪。“我想试试这个抓阄儿。”

“给你，万里子。”我递给她一个硬币。

她有点吃惊地转向我，然后接过硬币，挤到人群的前面去。

又有几个人试了试手气；一个女人抽中一块糖果，一个中年男子抽中一个橡皮球。接着轮到万里子。

“好了，小妹妹，”——男人慢慢地摇了摇碗——“闭上眼睛，努力地想那边的那只大熊。”

“我不要熊，”万里子说。

男人做了个鬼脸，大家都笑了。“你不要那只大毛绒熊？好，好，小妹妹，那你要什么呢？”

万里子指着小摊的后面，说：“那个篮子。”

“那个篮子？”男人耸了耸肩。“好吧，小妹妹，紧紧地闭上眼睛，想着你的篮子。准备好了吗？”

万里子抽中了一个花盆。她回到我们站的地方，把奖品递给我。

“你不想要吗？”我问。“你抽中的。”

“我要那个篮子。小猫们现在需要有自己的篮子。”

“好了，别在意。”

万里子转向她妈妈。“我想再试一次。”

佐知子叹了口气。“天晚了。”

“我想再试一次。就一次。”

万里子再次挤到台子那去。我们等她时，佐知子转向我，说：

“真奇怪，我对她的印象不是那样的。我指你的朋友，藤原太太。”

“哦？”

佐知子侧过头去看了看抓阄儿的人群，说：“不，悦子，恐怕我的看法跟你不一样。我的印象是你的朋友已经一无所有了。”

“不是的，”我说。

“哦？那她还有什么指望呢，悦子？她靠什么活下去呢？”

“她有一家店。虽然不大，但是对她来说很重要。”

“她的店？”

“还有她的儿子，事业正蒸蒸日上。”

佐知子又转过头去看着小摊。“对，我想是这样，”她疲惫地笑了笑说。“我想她还有她的儿子。”

这次万里子抽中一支铅笔，生气地走回来。我们要走了，可万里子还在看着抓阄儿的小摊。

“走了，”佐知子说。“悦子阿姨要回家了。”

“我想再试一次。就一次。”

佐知子不耐烦地叹了口气，然后看看我。我耸耸肩，笑了笑。

“好吧，”佐知子说。“再试一次。”

又有几个人抽中奖品。有一次一个年轻女子抽中一个粉饼盒，大家觉得这个奖品太适合她了，鼓了鼓掌。看见万里子第三次出现，绑着头巾的男人又做了一个鬼脸。

“啊，小妹妹，又回来了！还想要那个篮子？你不觉得那只大毛绒熊更好吗？”

万里子没有回答，默默地等着男人把碗递给她。万里子抽出一支，男人仔细地看了看，然后瞥了一眼身后放奖品的地方，又仔细地看了一次万里子的签，最后终于点点头。

“你没有抽中篮子。不过你抽中了——一个大奖！”

四周响起笑声和掌声。男人走到小摊的后面，拿来一个像是只大木盒子的东西。

“给你妈妈装菜！”他说——不是对万里子，而是对人群——并把奖品展示了一小会儿。我身旁的佐知子笑了出来，跟着鼓起掌来。大家让开一条路让万里子拿着奖品出来。

我们离开人群时佐知子还在笑，笑得流出了泪珠儿；她擦了擦眼睛，然后看着那个盒子。

“真是个怪模怪样的东西，”她一面递给我，一面说。

那盒子跟装橙子的盒子一般大，异常的轻；木头很光滑，但没有上漆，盒子的一侧有两块铁丝网做的滑板。

“也许会很有用，”我打开其中一个滑板说。

“我抽中了大奖，”万里子说。

“是，干得好，”佐知子说。

“我有一次抽中过一件和服，”万里子对我说。“在东京，我有一次抽中过一件和服。”

“啊，你又抽中了。”

“悦子，能帮我拿一下包吗？我好把这个东西带回去。”

“我抽中了大奖，”万里子说。

“是，你做得太好了，”她妈妈轻声笑着说。

我们离开抓阄儿的小摊。街上丢着废报纸和各种垃圾。

“小猫们可以住在里面，不是吗？”万里子说。“我们可以在里面放些垫子，就成了它们的家了。”

佐知子不确定地看着怀里的盒子。“我不知道它们会不会喜欢这东西。”

“盒子可以做它们的家。我们要搬到安子阿姨家去时，可以把它们放在里面。”

佐知子疲惫地笑了笑。

“可以吧，妈妈？我们可以把小猫们放在里面。”

“是，我想可以，”佐知子说。“是，好。我们到时把小猫们放在里面。”

“这么说我们可以留着小猫咯？”

“对，我们可以留着小猫。我想安子阿姨的父亲不会反对。”

万里子往前跑了一段，等着我们。

“那么我们再也不用帮它们找家了？”

“对，现在不用了。我们要搬到安子阿姨家去，所以我们可以留着小猫。”

“那我们不用帮它们找主人了。我们可以把它们全留着。我们可以把它们放在盒子里，对不对，妈妈？”

“对，”佐知子说，把头向后一仰，又笑了起来。

我经常想起那天晚上回家的电车上万里子的脸。她看着窗外，额头贴在玻璃上；男孩子气的脸，被窗外不断闪过的流光溢彩照亮。万里子一路上都没有说话，佐知子和我也说得不多。我记得她问了我：

“你丈夫会不会生气？”

“很可能，”我微微一笑，说。“不过昨天我已经告诉他我可能会晚回。”

“今天玩得真开心。”

“是啊。二郎只能坐着生气。我今天玩得很开心。”

“我们以后一定要再出来玩，悦子。”

“是啊，一定。”

“我们搬家以后你要记得来看我。”

“会，我会记得。”

之后我们就没有说话了。不久，电车减速准备靠站，我感到佐知子突然吓了一跳。她看着下客门，那里站着两三个人。其中一个女人在看着万里子。女人三十岁上下，消瘦的脸，疲惫的神情。她很可能只是无意地看着万里子，要不是因为佐知子的反应，我想我不会觉得有什么不对劲。万里子一直在看着窗外，没有注意到那个女人。

女人注意到佐知子在看她，就转了过去。电车靠站了，门开了，女人下了车。

“你认识那个人？”我轻声问。

佐知子笑了笑。“不，我认错了。”

“你把她当作别人了？”

“就一小会儿工夫。其实一点都不像。”她又笑了一声，然后瞧瞧外面，看我们到哪了。

第八章

回想起来，那年夏天，绪方先生跟我们待在一起那么久的用意很明显。知子莫若父，他一定已经猜到二郎要怎么处理松田重夫那篇登在杂志上的文章惹出的事情；我丈夫只是在等绪方先生回福冈，这件事就会被忘掉。而他可以继续欣然同意：这种侮辱家族名声的事应该迅速地、坚决地予以回应；这件事不仅是他父亲关心的，也是他关心的；他一有时间就会给他的老同学写信。现在回想起来，这就是二郎面对可能的尴尬局面时的一贯做法。如果多年之后，他在面对另一场危机时不是采取同一种态度，我也许不会离开长崎。但这是后话了。

我在前面已经讲了有天晚上，我丈夫的两个喝得醉醺醺的同事来到家里，打断了他和绪方先生下棋。那晚我铺床时，很想就松田重夫的整件事情和二郎谈谈；我并不希望二郎违心地写这封信，但我越来越强烈地希望他能把他的立场更清楚地告诉他父亲。但结果，那晚，和前几次一样，我最终没有说出口。一来，我丈夫会觉得对这件事情我不应该说话；二来，晚上的那个时候，二郎总是很累，和他说话只会让他不耐烦。总之，我们夫妇间从不开口讨论这样的事情。

第二天，绪方先生一整天都待在公寓里，时不时研究那盘棋，他告诉我说，昨天晚上棋下到关键时刻被打断了。到了晚上，晚饭后约一小时，他又把棋盘拿出来，开始研究棋子。忽然，他抬起头来对我丈夫说：

“那么，二郎，明天就是大日子啦。”

二郎把眼睛从报纸上移开，笑了笑，说：“没什么大不了的。”

“胡说。明天可是你的大日子。当然了，为公司尽全力是你的本分，但要我说，不管明天结果如何，这件事本身就很不了不起。你的资历不深，就能叫你代表公司，这事在今天，也是很少见的。”

二郎耸了耸肩。“是不多见。当然了，即使明天进行得异常顺利，也并不保证我能获得提升。可是我想经理应该会对我的今年的业绩感到满意。”

“要我说，大家都觉得他对你很有信心。你觉得明天会怎么样？”

“我当然希望一切顺利。现阶段需要参与各方通力合作。这只是为秋天的正式谈判做准备。没什么特别的。”

“我们就等着瞧吧。现在，二郎，我们把这盘棋下完怎么样？我们已经下了三天了。”

“哦，对了，下棋。当然了，爸爸，您知道不管明天我多成功，都不一定保证我能获得提升。”

“我当然知道了，二郎。我自己也是从残酷的职场竞争中过来的。我再清楚不过了。有时那些哪方面都比不上你的人却被选中了。但你不能让这些事妨碍你。你只要坚持，最后一定会成功。现在，把棋下完吧。”

我丈夫瞥了一眼棋盘，却没有要上前去的意思。“我没记错的话，您快赢了。”他说。

“局面是对你不利，可是是有办法化解的。记得吗，二郎，我第一次教你下棋时，是怎么一直警告你不要太早出车的？你现在还是犯同样的错误。看出来了吗？”

“车，是啊。您说得对。”

“还有，顺便说一下，二郎，我想你下棋前没有先想好步子，是吧？记不记得以前我是怎么费老大劲教你至少要先想好三步？可是我想你没有。”

“先想三步？不，我没有。我不像您那么会下棋，爸爸。反正我想您已经赢了。”

“其实，二郎，这盘棋你老早就没有先想好步子，真叫人心痛。我告诉过你多少次？一个好棋手得想好了再走棋，至少要先想好三步。”

“对，我想是这样。”

“比如说，你为什么要把马走到这里来？二郎，看过来，你连看都没看。记得你为什么要把这个走到这里来吗？”

二郎瞥了一眼棋盘。“说实话，我不记得了，”他说，“那时可能很有理由应该那么走。”

“很有理由？胡说八道，二郎。前几步，你是想好了步子，我看得出来。你那时其实是有一个战略的。可一旦我打乱了你的战略，你

就放弃了，你就开始走一步想一步了。你不记得我以前总是跟你说：下棋就是不停地贯彻战略。就是敌人破坏了你的计划也不放弃，而是马上想出另一个战略。胜负并不是在王被将时决定的。当棋手放弃运用任何战略时，胜负就已经定局了。你的兵七零八落，没有共同的目标，走一步想一步，这时你就输了。”

“很对，爸爸，我承认。我输了。现在让我们忘了这件事吧。”

绪方先生瞥了我一眼，又转向二郎。“这是什么话？今天我很认真地研究了这盘棋，发现你至少有三种方法可以解围。”

我丈夫放下报纸。“请原谅，可要是我没理解错，”他说，“是您自己说：不能始终贯彻战略的棋手就一定会输。而您也一再指出：我走一步想一步。那就没必要再下了吧。现在请您原谅，我要读完这篇报道。”

“什么，二郎，这纯粹是投降主义。我说了，你还没输呢。你现在应该组织防守，稳住阵脚，然后再向我进攻。二郎，你从小就有些投降主义。我真希望把它从你身上根除，可到头来，还是老样子。”

“请原谅，可我看不出这跟投降主义有什么关系。这只是一盘棋……”

“也许这确实只是一盘棋。但是知子莫若父。一位父亲能看出这些讨厌的特征的苗头。你的这种品格，我可一点儿也不觉得骄傲，二郎。第一个战略失败了，你就马上放弃。现在要你防守，你就生气，不想再下了。啊，这跟你九岁时一模一样。”

“爸爸，胡说什么啊。我一整天有很多事要做，哪有时间想下棋的事？”

二郎说得很大声，把绪方先生吓了一跳。

“对您来说没问题，爸爸，”我丈夫接着说。“您有一整天的时间来想您的战略和计划。而我有更重要的事要做。”

说完，我丈夫又回到报纸上。他父亲则一直吃惊地盯着他。最后，绪方先生笑了起来。

“好了，二郎，”他说，“我们像两个渔夫的妻子在吵架。”说着又笑了一声。“像两个渔夫的妻子。”

二郎没有抬起头来。

“好了，二郎，我们别吵了。你要是不想下了，我们就别下了。”

我丈夫还是没有听到的样子。

绪方先生又笑了一声。“好了，你赢了。我们不下了。但是让我来告诉你怎么走出这小小的困境。有三种方法。第一种最简单，而且对此我束手无策。看，二郎，看这边。二郎，看，我在教你。”

二郎仍旧没有理他父亲，一副专心致志地看报纸的样子。他翻了一页，继续看。

绪方先生对着自个儿点点头，轻声笑了笑。“跟小时候一样，”他说。“不称心时就生气，拿他一点儿办法也没有。”他看了我一眼，苦笑着，然后又转向他儿子。“二郎，看，至少看看这个。很简单。”

突然间，我丈夫扔下报纸，朝他父亲的方向直起身。很明显，他是想把棋盘和上面的棋子统统打翻。可一个不小心，还没打到棋盘，先把脚边的茶壶给踢倒了。茶壶侧滚，壶盖咣当一声开了，茶水立刻流到了榻榻米上。二郎不知道发生了什么，转过头来瞪着流出来的茶水，然后又转回去盯着棋盘。看见棋子还立在格子上好像让他更加恼火。一时间我以为他会再去把它们打翻。可是他站起来，抓起报纸，一言不发地走了出去。

我赶紧朝茶水流出来的地方跑去。有些水已经开始渗到二郎坐的垫子里去了。我拿开垫子，用围裙的角擦了擦。

“跟以前一个样，”绪方先生说，眼角泛着淡淡的微笑。“孩子长成了大人，却没有变多少。”

我跑到厨房去找了一块布。回来时，绪方先生仍那么坐着，眼角仍浮着微笑。他盯着榻榻米上的水渍，陷入沉思，似乎着了迷。我犹豫了一下才跪下来把它擦掉。

“你千万别为这件事生气，悦子，”他终于开口说道，“没什么好生气的。”

“是。”我一边擦地板一边说道。

“好了，我想我们也赶紧睡吧。偶尔早点睡对身体好。”

“是。”

“你千万别为这件事生气，悦子。二郎明天早上就会忘了整件事的，你看着吧。我记得很清楚他这种一时的脾气。其实，真让人怀念啊，看见这种小小的场面。让我想起他小时候的样子来。对，真是让人怀念。”

我仍旧擦着地板。

“好了，悦子，”他说，“没什么好生气的。”

到第二天早晨之前，我没有再和我丈夫说话。他一边吃早饭一边扫几眼我放在碗边的早报。他很少说话，对于他父亲没有出现也没有说什么。而我仔细地听绪方先生房里的动静，但什么也没听到。

“我希望今天一切顺利，”我们好几分钟没有说话，我打破沉默说。

我丈夫耸耸肩，说：“没什么大不了的。”然后他抬起头来看着我，说：“我今天本来想系那条黑色的丝绸领带，可你好像拿去弄什么了。我希望你别老乱动我的领带。”

“那条黑色的丝绸领带？和其他领带一起挂在架子上啊。”

“刚才没有看见。我希望你别老乱动它们。”

“丝绸的那条应该也在那里的，”我说，“我前天烫好了，因为我知道你今天要戴，我肯定放回去了。你确定不在那里吗？”

我丈夫不耐烦地叹了口气，低头看报纸。“没关系，”他说，“这条也行。”

他继续默默地吃着早饭，与此同时仍不见绪方先生出现。最后，我站起来，到他的房门口去。我站了一会儿，没有听见任何动静，于是准备开个小缝看看。这时我丈夫转过来，说：

“你在干什么呢？要知道我可没有一早上的时间。”说着递出茶杯。

我再次坐下，把他吃完的碗盘放到一边，倒上茶。他很快地抿着，一边扫着报纸的头版。

“今天对我们很重要，”我说，“我希望事情顺利。”

“没什么大不了的，”他低着头说。

可是，那天出门前，二郎却在玄关那里的镜子前仔仔细细地照了照，整了整领带，看了看下巴，检查是不是刮干净了。他离开以后，我再次来到绪方先生的房门口听动静。还是什么都没听到。

“爸爸？”我轻声叫道。

“啊，悦子，”我听见里面传来绪方先生的声音。“我该猜到你不会让我睡懒觉。”

我松了一口气，回到厨房，新泡了一壶茶，然后把绪方先生的早饭准备好。当绪方先生终于坐下来吃早饭时，他轻描淡写地说道：

“我想二郎已经走了吧。”

“哦是，他早走了。我正准备把爸爸的早饭倒掉。我以为他懒得中午前都不想起床。”

“啊，别那么不近人情，悦子。等你到了我这个年纪，你就会想偶尔放松一下。再说，跟你们在一起，我就像放假一样。”

“好了，我想就这一次，可以原谅爸爸这么偷懒。”

“回到福冈以后我就没有机会像今天这样睡懒觉了，”他拿起筷子说，接着，深深地叹了口气。“我想我差不多该回去了。”

“回去？可是不急啊，爸爸。”

“不，我真的差不多该回去了。还有很多工作要接着做。”

“工作？什么工作？”

“这个嘛，首先，我得给阳台装上新的护板。再就是假山。这个我都还没开始弄呢。石头几个月前就运来了，放在花园里，等着我回去。”他叹了口气，开始吃早饭。“回去以后我确实没有机会像今天这样睡懒觉了。”

“可是没有必要急着回去不是，爸爸？假山可以再等一等。”

“你太好了，悦子。可是时间紧迫。你瞧，我想我女儿和她丈夫今年秋天又会南下，我得在他们来之前把所有的事做完。去年和前年，他们都在秋天时来看我。所以我想今年他们会再来。”

“我明白了。”

“没错，他们今年秋天一定想再来。那个时候对纪久子的丈夫最方便。纪久子在信里总是说她多想看看我的新房子。”

绪方先生不由自主地点点头，然后端起碗接着吃饭。我看了他一会儿。

“纪久子真是个孝顺的女儿啊，爸爸，”我说，“大老远地从大阪过来。她一定很想念您。”

“我想她是觉得有必要偶尔离开一下她的公公。除此之外我想不到她为什么要跑这么老远。”

“您太坏了，爸爸。我肯定她是想您了。我要把您的话告诉她。”

绪方先生笑了。“可这是真的。老渡边像个军阀似的统治他们。每次南下，他们都要说他变得多么的让人难以忍受。我自己是相当喜欢这位老人的，但不可否认他是个老军阀。我猜他们会喜欢一个类似这里的地方，悦子，一间属于他们自己的公寓。不是什么坏事，年轻夫妇跟父母分开住。现在越来越多的夫妇这样做。年轻人不想一直受专制的老人的统治。”

绪方先生好像突然想起碗里的饭，赶紧吃了起来。吃完早饭后，他站起来，走到窗边。他在那里站了一会儿，背对着我，看着窗外的风景。然后他调整了一下窗户，让更多空气进来，深深地吸了一口气。

“您喜欢您的新房子吗，爸爸？”我问。

“我的房子？怎么，是的。正如我说的，有这里那里还需要弄一弄。但它小多了。长崎的房子对一个老人来说太大了。”

他依旧看着窗外；在早晨强烈的阳光下，我看不清他的头和肩膀。

“可那是栋好房子，旧的那栋，”我说。“我要是往那里走的话，还会停下来看看它。其实，上周我从藤原太太那里回来时就路过了。”

他没有做声，依旧看着外面的风景，我就以为他没有听见我的话。但过了一会儿，他说：

“老房子怎么样了？”

“哦，跟以前差不多。新住户一定是喜欢原来的样子。”

他微微转向我。“那那些杜鹃花呢，悦子？还在门口吗？”亮光仍旧使我看不清他的脸，但是我从他的声音听出他在微笑。

“杜鹃花？”

“啊，我想你不会记得的。”他转回去，伸了伸胳膊。“我那天种在门口的。事情最后定下来的那天。”

“什么事情定下来？”

“你和二郎结婚的事。但是我从来没有告诉你杜鹃花的事，所以我想我不应该指望你记得它们。”

“您为我种了一些杜鹃花？多好的想法。可是没有，我不记得您提起过。”

“可要知道，悦子，是你要我种的。”他再次转向我。“事实上，你断然要求我种在门口。”

“什么？”——我笑了——“我要求您的？”

“是的，你要求我的。把我当成雇来的花匠。你不记得了？当我以为终于一切都定下来了，你终于要成为我的媳妇时，你对我说还有一件事，你不会住在一所门口没有杜鹃花的房子里。要是我不种杜鹃花，整件事就都告吹。所以我能怎么办呢？我立刻出去，种了杜鹃花。”

我笑了笑，说：“您这么一说，我想起来像是有那么回事。可是太可笑了，爸爸。我从来没有强迫您。”

“哦不，你有，悦子。你说你不会住在一所门口没有杜鹃花的房子里。”他离开窗户，再次在我对面坐下。“没错，悦子，”他说，“当成雇来的花匠。”

我们俩都笑了，我开始倒茶。

“您瞧，杜鹃花一直是我最喜欢的花，”我说。

“是，你说过。”

我倒完茶，我们静静地坐着，看着蒸汽从茶杯里冒出来。

过了一会儿我说：“那时我对二郎的计划一无所知。”

“是啊。”

我伸出手去把一碟小蛋糕放在他的茶杯旁。绪方先生微笑地看着它们。最后，他说道：

“杜鹃花长得很漂亮。可是那时，当然了，你们已经搬走了。但这也不是什么坏事，年轻夫妇自己住。看看纪久子和她丈夫。他们想搬出来自己住，可是老渡边让他们想都别想。他真是老军阀。”

“现在想想，”我说，“上周门口是有杜鹃花。新住户一定同意我的看法。房子门口一定要有杜鹃花。”

“我很高兴它们还在。”绪方先生呷了一口茶。然后他叹了口气，笑了一声，说：“那个渡边真是老军阀。”

早饭后不久，绪方先生建议我们应该去长崎逛逛——用他的话说“像游客那样”。我立刻同意，我们坐电车进城。我记得我们先在一个美术馆里待了一会儿，然后，快中午前，我们去参观离市中心不远的的一个大型开放公园里的和平纪念雕像。

这个公园一般被叫做“和平公园”——我一直不知道这是不是它的正式名称——而确实，尽管有孩子和鸟儿的叫声，这一大片绿地上却笼罩着一种肃穆的气氛。公园里常见的装饰，诸如灌木和喷泉，少之又少，而且都很朴素；平坦的草地、广阔的夏日天空以及雕像本身——一尊巨大的白色雕像，纪念原子弹的遇难者——占据了公园的主要部分。

雕像貌似一位希腊男神，伸开双臂坐着。他的右手指向天空，炸弹掉下来的地方；另一只手向左侧伸展开去，意喻挡住邪恶势力。他双眼紧闭，在祈祷。

我一直觉得那尊雕像长得很丑，而且我无法将它和炸弹掉下来那天发生的事以及随后的可怕的日子联系起来。远远看近乎可笑，像个警察在指挥交通。我一直觉得它就只是一尊雕像，虽然大多数长崎人似乎把它当作一种象征，但我怀疑大家的感觉和我一样。如今我要是偶尔回忆起长崎的那尊大白色雕像，我总是首先想起我和绪方先生去参观和平公园的那个早晨，以及他的明信片的事。

“照片上看起来不怎么样，”我记得绪方先生举起他刚买的雕像的明信片说。我们站在离雕像五十码开外的地方。“我一直想寄张明信片，”他接着说，“虽然现在我随时都会回福冈去，但我想还是值得寄的。悦子，你有笔吗？也许我应该马上就寄，不然一定会忘记。”

我在手提包里找到一支笔，我们在附近的长椅上坐下。我发现他一直盯着卡片空白的那面，笔拿在手上，却没有写。我感到奇怪。有一两次，我看见他抬头看看雕像，像是在寻找灵感。最后我问他：

“您是要寄给福冈的朋友吗？”

“哦，只是一个熟人。”

“爸爸看上去做贼心虚，”我说，“我在想他会是在写给谁呢。”

绪方先生惊讶地朝上一看，然后大笑起来。“心虚？真的吗？”

“真的，很心虚。我在想要是没有人看着爸爸，他会干什么呢。”

绪方先生大笑个不停，笑得我觉得椅子在晃。等他笑得不那么厉害时，他说：“很好，悦子。你抓住我了。你抓住我在给我的女朋友写信”——“女朋友”这个词他用的是英语。“当场抓住。”说着又笑了起来。

“我一直猜想爸爸在福冈的生活很精彩。”

“是，悦子”——他仍轻轻地笑着——“很精彩的生活。”接着他深吸了一口气，再次低头看明信片。“你知道，我真的不晓得该写什么。也许我可以什么都不写，就这样寄出去。毕竟我只是想让她看看雕像长什么样。但话说回来，这样可能太随便了。”

“啊，我不能给您建议，爸爸，除非您告诉我这位神秘的女士是谁。”

“这位神秘的女士，悦子，在福冈开一家小饭馆。离我的房子很近，所以我经常去那里吃晚饭。有时我和她聊聊，她人不错，我答应要寄给她一张和平纪念雕像的明信片。恐怕事情就是这样。”

“我知道了，爸爸。可我还是不相信。”

“人很不错的一位老太太，但过一会儿就让人觉得烦了。如果只有我一个客人，她就整顿饭的工夫站着，讲个不停。不幸的是附近没有多少合适的吃饭的地方。你瞧，悦子，你要是像你答应过的那样教我做饭，我就不必忍受她那种人了。”

“可这是白费力气，”我笑着说，“爸爸不可能学会的。”

“胡说。你只是怕我超过你。你太自私了，悦子。好了我想想”——他再次看看明信片——“我该跟这位老太太说些什么呢？”

“您还记得藤原太太吗？”我问，“她现在在开一家面馆。在爸爸的老房子附近。”

“是，我听说了。太遗憾了。像她那种地位的人开起了面馆。”

“可她很喜欢。面馆让她有事可做。她经常问起您。”

“太遗憾了，”他重复道。“她丈夫是个很有地位的人。我很尊敬他。可如今她开起了面馆。不可思议。”他沉重地摇摇头。“我想去拜访她、向她问好，可我想这会让她觉得很难堪。我是说就她的现状。”

“爸爸，她并不觉得开面馆是件丢脸的事。她觉得自豪。她说她一直想做生意，不管是多么小的生意。我想您去看她，她会很高兴的。”

“你说她的店在中川？”

“对。离老房子很近。”

绪方先生似乎考虑了一会儿。然后他转向我说：“那好，悦子。我们去看她吧。”他匆匆地在明信片上写了几句，把笔还给我。

“您是说现在，爸爸？”我被他的突然决定吓了一跳。

“对，干吗不呢？”

“很好。我想她可以给我们午饭吃。”

“对，也许。但我可不想让那位好太太觉得丢脸。”

“她会很乐意做午饭给我们吃的。”

绪方先生点点头，没有说话。沉默片刻后，他慢慢说道：“其实，悦子，我早就想去中川了。我想拜访那里的一个人。”

“哦？”

“我在想这会儿他在不在家。”

“您想去拜访谁，爸爸？”

“重夫。松田重夫。我一直想去拜访他。他可能回家吃午饭，这样的话我就能找到他。比去学校打搅他好。”

许久，绪方先生凝视着雕像的方向，脸上露出有点拿不定主意的表情。我不做声，看着他把手信片拿在手里转啊转。突然，他拍了一下膝盖，站起来。

“好，悦子，”他说，“就这么办吧。我们先去找重夫，然后去拜访藤原太太。”

我们搭上去往中川的电车时一定已经是中午时分了；车厢内又挤又闷，车厢外的马路上满是吃午饭的人群。但当我们渐渐离开市中心时，乘客越来越少，电车到达终点站中川时，就只剩下几个人了。

走出电车，绪方先生站了一会儿，摸着下巴。很难说他是品味重回这里的滋味，还是只是在想松田重夫家怎么走。我们站在一个水泥院子里，周围停着几辆空电车，头顶上是横七竖八的黑色电线。太阳很大，照得油漆的车身十分晃眼。

“真热啊，”绪方先生擦了擦额头，说道。然后他迈开步子，朝电车庭院那头后面的一排房子走去。我跟着他。

几年来，这一带并没有变多少。我们走在弯弯曲曲的小路上，一会儿上、一会儿下。山上哪儿能盖房子，房子就矗立在哪儿，其中的很多房子我依然熟悉；有的站在斜坡上摇摇欲坠，有的挤在看不见的角落里。很多阳台上挂着毯子啦、洗的衣服啦。我们走着，经过几间看上去气派一点的房子，但我们既没有经过绪方先生的老房子，也没有经过以前我和父母住在一起的房子。事实上，我怀疑绪方先生是不是故意选了一条避开它们的路。

我猜想我们最多走了十或者十五分钟，但太阳和陡坡让我们筋疲力尽。最后我们在一个陡坡的中央停了下来，绪方先生拉我到人行道旁一棵茂密的树下乘凉。接着他指着马路对面一栋旧式大斜瓦屋顶、样子舒适的老房子，说：

“那就是重夫家。我跟他父亲很熟。就我所知，他母亲仍跟他住在一起。”说完，绪方先生又开始摸下巴，像刚下电车时那样。我没说什么，只是等着。

“他很可能不在家，”绪方先生说，“他有可能和同事一起待在教研室里午休。”

我仍旧是等着，不做声。绪方先生依然站在我旁边，凝视着那所房子。最后，他说：

“悦子，这里离藤原太太那多远？你知道吗？”

“几分钟就到了。”

“我在想，也许最好是你先过去，我去找你。这样可能最好。”

“好的。要是您希望如此。”

“其实是我做事太欠考虑。”

“我不是弱不禁风，爸爸。”

他笑了一声，然后又瞥了一眼房子。“我想最好这样，”他重复道，“你先过去。”

“好的。”

“我不会很久。其实”——他又瞥了一眼房子——“其实，你干吗不在这里等着，我去按门铃。要是看见我进去，你就先到藤原太太那里去。我太欠考虑了。”

“一点儿都不要紧，爸爸。现在您听好了，不然您永远也别想找到面馆。您记得以前那个医生的诊所吗？”

但这时绪方先生已经没有在听了。马路对面的大门开了，一个瘦瘦的、戴着眼镜的年轻人走出来。他穿着衬衫，腋下夹着一只小公文包。走到太阳底下时，他眯了眯眼睛。接着他转向公文包，开始找东西。松田重夫比我之前见过的几次看起来更瘦、更年轻。

第九章

松田重夫扣上公文包的扣子，然后一边心烦意乱地看看周围，一边朝马路这边走来。他扫了我们这边一眼，却没有认出我们，继续往前走。

绪方先生看着他走过去。当年轻人走了几码远时，他才喊道：“啊，重夫！”

松田重夫停下脚步，转过身来，然后迷惑不解地朝我们走来。

“你好吗，重夫？”

年轻人透过镜片细细看来，接着高兴地笑了起来。

“啊呀，绪方先生！太意外了！”他鞠了一躬，然后伸出手来。“真是个惊喜。啊，还有悦子！你们好吗？真高兴又见到你们。”

我们互相鞠了躬，他还和我们都握了手。接着他对绪方先生说：

“你们是要去找我吗？太不巧了，我的午休时间快到了。”他看了看表。“但我们还可以进去坐几分钟。”

“不，不，”绪方先生赶忙说。“别让我们打搅了你的工作。我们只是刚好路过这里，我想起你住在这里，正把你家指给悦子看。”

“不客气，我能腾出几分钟来。至少喝杯茶吧。这天外面热得要命。”

“不，不。你得工作。”

一时间两个人站着对视。

“最近怎么样，重夫？”绪方先生问。“学校里怎么样？”

“哦，老样子。您知道的。而您，绪方先生，但愿您退休后过得愉快？我不知道您在长崎。我和二郎现在几乎都失去联系了。”接着他转向我，说：“我一直想写信，但老是忘记。”

我笑了笑，说了几句客套话。然后两人又对视着。

“您看上去气色真不错，绪方先生，”松田重夫说。“您喜欢福冈吗？”

“喜欢，一座好城市。我的老家，你知道。”

“真的？”

又是一阵沉默。接着绪方先生说：“千万别让我们耽搁了你。你要是赶时间的话，我很理解。”

“不，不。我还有几分钟。真可惜您没有早点路过这里。也许您离开长崎前可以来找我。”

“好，我尽量。可我有很多人要去拜访。”

“是，我理解。”

“还有你母亲，她好吗？”

“是，她很好。谢谢您。”

一时间，两人又不说话了。

“我很高兴一切都好，”绪方先生打破沉默，说道，“对，我们刚好路过这里，我在告诉悦子你住在这里。事实上，我刚刚想起你以前常来我们家和二郎玩，你们都还是小孩子的时候。”

松田重夫笑了。“时间过得真快啊，不是吗？”他说。

“是啊。我刚还在跟悦子说呢。事实上，我正告诉她一件奇怪的小事。我看见你家时突然想起来的。一件奇怪的小事。”

“哦，是吗？”

“是的。我看见你家时刚好想起来，就这么回事。是这样，有一天我读到一篇东西。一本期刊里的一篇文章。我想是叫《新教育文摘》。”

一时间年轻人没有做声，过了一会儿他调整了一下在人行道上的站姿，放下公文包。

“嗯哼，”他说。

“读了以后我有点吃惊。事实上是很惊讶。”

“是。我想您会的。”

“文章很奇怪，重夫。很奇怪。”

松田重夫深吸了一口气，然后看着地板。他点点头，但没有说什么。

“我早想来找你谈谈，”绪方先生接着说，“但自然了，我把这件事忘了。重夫，老实告诉我，你相信你写的东西吗？解释一下是什么让你写那些东西。解释给我听，重夫，这样我才能安心地回到福冈去。现在我很迷惑。”

松田重夫用鞋跟踢着一块小石头。最后他叹了口气，抬头看绪方先生，正了正眼镜。

“这几年很多事都变了，”他说。

“啊，自然是这样。我看得出来。可这算什么回答，重夫？”

“绪方先生，让我解释给您听。”他停顿了一下，又低头看地板，中间挠了一下耳朵。“您瞧，您必须理解。现在很多事都变了。而且还在变。我们现在的生活和过去……过去您是位有影响力的人物时不一样了。”

“但是，重夫，这和事情有什么关系？时代可能是变了，但为什么写那种文章？我做了什么冒犯你的事了吗？”

“没有，从来没有。至少对我个人没有。”

“我想也是。还记得那天我把你介绍给现在学校的校长吗？不是很久以前的事吧。或者说那也是另一个时代的事？”

“绪方先生”——松田重夫提高了嗓门，神态里似乎透出一丝权威——“绪方先生，我真希望您早一个小时来，那样我也许能解释得清楚些。现在没有时间把整件事情讲清楚。但是让我就说这么多。是的，我相信我文章里写的每一个字，现在仍然相信。您那个时候，老师教给日本的孩子们可怕的东西。他们学到的是最具破坏力的谎言。最糟糕的是，老师教他们不能看、不能问。这就是为什么我们国家会卷入有史以来最可怕的灾难。”

“我们也许是打了败仗，”绪方先生打断他说，“但不能因此而照搬敌人的那一套。我们打败仗是因为我们没有足够的枪和坦克，不是因为我们的人民胆小，不是因为我们的社会浮浅。重夫，你不知道我们多么辛勤地工作，我们这些人，像我，像远藤老师，你在文章里

也侮辱了他。我们深切地关心我们的国家，辛勤工作让正确的价值观保留下来，并传承下去。”

“我不怀疑这些。我不怀疑您的真诚和辛勤工作。我从来没有质疑过这点。可是您的精力用在了不对的地方，罪恶的地方。您当时不会发觉，但恐怕这是事实。如今一切都过去了，我们惟有感激。”

“太奇怪了，重夫。你真的相信这些？谁教你说这些的？”

“绪方先生，坦诚一些吧。您一定心知肚明我说的都是真的。而且说句公道话，不应该责备您没有认识到您的行为的真正后果。当时很少有人认识到局势发展的方向，而那些少数认清时局的人却因直抒己见而被投进监狱。不过现在他们被释放了，他们将带领我们走向新的黎明。”

“新的黎明？胡说八道些什么？”

“好了，我得走了。很抱歉我们不能多谈谈。”

“这是什么话，重夫？你怎么能说出这种话？你显然不知道像远藤老师这样的人为工作付出了多少努力和心血。那时你还是小孩子，你怎么可能知道事情是什么样的？你怎么可能知道我们付出了什么，取得了什么？”

“事实上，我碰巧熟悉您的职业的某些方面。比如说，在西坂小学解雇并监禁了五名教师。我没记错的话是1938年4月。不过现在那些人被释放了，他们将帮助我们迈向新的黎明。现在请原谅。”松田重夫拎起公文包，朝我们依次鞠了躬。“代我向二郎问好，”他补充道，然后转身离去。

绪方先生看着年轻人走下山去，消失不见。之后他仍在原地站了好一会儿，没有说话。当他最终转向我时，眼角泛着微笑。

“多么自信的年轻人啊，”他说，“我想我以前也是一样。坚持己见。”

“爸爸，”我说，“现在我们该去看藤原太太了吧。我们该吃午饭了。”

“哎呀，当然了，悦子。我太粗心了，让你这么大热天地站着。对，我们去看那位好太太吧。我很高兴能再见到她。”

我们走下山，接着走过一条小河上的一座木桥。桥下有一群孩子在河边玩耍，其中几个拿着鱼竿。路上我对绪方先生说：

“他都是在胡说八道。”

“谁？你指重夫？”

“都是些可耻的话。我觉得您根本不用在意，爸爸。”

绪方先生笑了笑，但没有回答。

和平时一样，那个钟点，那一带的商业街挤满了人。走进面馆阴凉的前院时，我欣喜地看见几张桌子上坐着客人。藤原太太看见我们，走了过来。

“哎呀，绪方先生，”她一眼就认出他来，惊呼道，“再次见到您真是太好了。很久不见了，不是吗？”

“确实是很久了。”绪方先生回敬藤原太太的鞠躬。“是啊，很久了。”

看见他们如此热情地打招呼，我很是感动，因为据我所知，他们并不熟识。他们没完没了地鞠躬来鞠躬去，最后藤原太太才去给我们取东西吃。

她很快就端来两碗热腾腾的面，抱歉说没有什么更好的东西来招待我们。绪方先生感激地鞠了一躬，吃起来。

“我还以为您早把我忘了呢，藤原太太，”他微笑着说。“说真的，好久了。”

“像这样久别重逢真是件高兴的事。”藤原太太在我那张长凳的角上坐下，说，“悦子跟我说您现在住在福冈。我去过福冈几次。很好的城市，不是吗？”

“是的，没错。福冈是我的老家。”

“福冈是您的老家？可是您在这里生活、工作了那么多年。难道长崎没有值得您留念的吗？”

绪方先生笑了，把头歪向一边。“一个人也许会在一个地方工作、奉献，但是到了最后”——他耸耸肩，怀念地笑了笑——“到了最后，他仍旧想回到他生长的故乡去。”

藤原太太点点头，表示理解，然后说道：“绪方先生，我刚刚在想您当秀一学校校长的那时候。他以前可怕您了。”

绪方先生笑了。“是，我清楚地记得您的秀一。一个聪明的男孩子。很聪明。”

“您真的还记得他，绪方先生？”

“是，当然，我记得秀一。他学习很用功。是个好孩子。”

“是啊，他是个好孩子。”

绪方先生用筷子指了指碗，说：“太好吃了。”

“瞎说。很抱歉没有什么更好的东西来招待你们。”

“不，真的，很好吃。”

“让我想想，”藤原太太说。“那个时候有个老师，她对秀一很好。她叫什么名字来着？我想是铃木，铃木小姐。您知道她后来怎么样了，绪方先生？”

“铃木小姐？啊，是，我想起来了。但是很遗憾我不知道她现在在哪里。”

“她对秀一很好。还有另外一个老师，名字叫黑田。一个很棒的年轻人。”

“黑田……”绪方先生慢慢地点点头。“啊，是，黑田。我记得他。是位好老师。”

“是啊，一个与众不同的年轻人。我丈夫对他印象特别深刻。您知道他后来怎么样了？”

“黑田……”绪方先生仍若有所思地点着头。一缕阳光照在他脸上，照亮了他眼睛周围的许多皱纹。“黑田，让我想想。我有一次遇到过他，很偶然的，战争开始的时候。我想他参战了。从那以后我就再也没有他的消息了。是，是位好老师。以前的很多人都没有消息了。”

有人叫藤原太太，我们看着她匆匆地走过水泥地到客人的桌子那去。她站在那里行了好一会儿的礼，然后收拾桌上的碗盘，走进厨房。

绪方先生看着她，然后摇摇头。“看见她这样真是遗憾，”他低声说。我没说什么，只是吃饭。过了一会儿绪方先生从桌子那头俯过身来，问：“悦子，你以前说她儿子叫什么名字来着？我是指活着的那个。”

“和夫，”我小声说。

他点点头，接着吃面。

过了一会儿藤原太太回来。“没有什么更好的东西来招待你们，真是不好意思，”她说。

“瞎说，”绪方先生说。“面很好吃。对了，和夫最近怎么样？”

“他很好。他身体健康，工作也顺利。”

“很好。悦子刚才跟我说他在一家汽车公司上班。”

“是，他在那里做得很好。而且他正在考虑再婚。”

“真的？”

“以前他说他不会再结婚，但是现在他开始向前看了。他目前还没有考虑的对象，但至少他开始考虑未来了。”

“这样想才对，”绪方先生说。“啊，他还年轻，不是？”

“当然了。他还有一大把日子呢。”

“当然了。他的日子还长着呢。你一定要给他找一个好姑娘，藤原太太。”

她笑了。“您以为我没试过？不过现在的女孩子大不一样了。太让我吃惊了，世道变得如此之大、如此之快。”

“确实，您说得很对。现在的女孩子都任性得很。而且整天在讲什么洗衣机啦、洋裙啦。悦子也是。”

“胡说，爸爸。”

藤原太太又笑了，然后说：“我记得我第一次听说洗衣机时，我不敢相信有人会想要那玩意。明明有一双好好的手可以干活，干吗要花那个钱？不过我相信悦子不会同意我的看法的。”

我正想说什么，却被绪方先生抢先一步：“我跟您说我前些天听说的一件事。其实是二郎的一个同事告诉我的。显然是在上次的选举中，要投给哪个政党，他妻子和他意见不合。他就打她，但是他妻子仍然没有让步。所以最后，他们分别投给了不同的政党。您能想像过去会发生这种事吗？太奇怪了。”

藤原太太摇摇头。“世道变太多了，”她叹了口气，说。“不过我听悦子说二郎现在在公司里干得很好。您一定很为他骄傲，绪方先生。”

“是，我想那孩子确实干得不错。事实上，今天他将代表他们公司参加一个很重要的会议。看来他们正在考虑再次提拔他。”

“太了不起了。”

“他去年才刚刚获得提升。我想领导一定对他评价很高。”

“太了不起了。您一定很为他骄傲。”

“那小子是个工作很努力的人。从小就是。我记得小时候，其他父亲都在使劲地叫孩子要更刻苦地学习，我却要不断地叫他多去玩一玩，学得那么刻苦对身体不好。”

藤原太太笑了，摇摇头说：“是啊，和夫也工作得很拼命，常常看文件看到半夜。我劝他不要工作得这么辛苦，可他不听。”

“是，他们根本不听。但是我得承认，我以前也是这样。当你相信你做的是对的时，你就不愿意浪费一分一秒。我妻子也常劝我多休息，可我就是不听。”

“是啊，和夫就是这样。可他要是再结婚了，就得改改了。”

“别指望结了婚就会改变，”绪方先生笑着说。说完，他把筷子整齐地搁在碗上。“哎呀，太好吃了。”

“瞎说。很抱歉没有什么更好的东西来招待你们。您还要吗？”

“有多的话，我很乐意。要知道，我得趁这些日子多享受享受这么好的饭菜。”

“瞎说，”藤原太太站起来，再次说道。

我们回到家后不久，二郎也下班回家了，比平时早一个小时左右。他愉快地向他父亲问好——完全忘了前一天晚上发脾气的事——然后洗澡去了。洗完澡出来时，他换上了和服，哼着小曲儿。他在垫子上坐下，开始用毛巾擦头发。

“那么，事情怎么样？”绪方先生问。

“什么事情？哦，您是指那个会啊。还不错。不算太糟。”

我正要去厨房，但在门口停了下来，想听听二郎接下来会说些什么。他父亲也一直看着他。而二郎只是擦着头发，没有看我们。

“事实上，”他终于开口说道，“我想我干得还不错。我说服他们的代表签了一份协议。不是合同，但差不离了。我的老板相当吃惊。他们很少像这样答应下来。老板让我提早下班。”

“哎呀，真是好消息，”绪方先生说道，然后笑了一声。他朝我看了一眼，又转向他儿子。“真是好消息。”

“恭喜，”我对着我丈夫微笑地说道。“我太高兴了。”

二郎抬起头来，好像这才注意到我。

“你干吗那样站在那里？”他问。“你知道我不介意来点茶。”他放下毛巾，开始梳头。

那天晚上，为了庆祝二郎谈判成功，我准备了比平时丰盛的晚餐。不管是晚餐时，还是晚餐后直到睡觉，绪方先生都没有提起白天见到松田重夫的事。可是晚餐刚开始时，他突然说道：

“哦，二郎，我明天要回去了。”

二郎抬起头来。“您要回去了？哦，太遗憾了。我希望您这几天住得开心。”

“是，我好好地休息了一番。事实上，我比原计划多待了好一阵子。”

“我们欢迎您住在这里，爸爸，”二郎说。“不用急着回去，我向您保证。”

“谢谢你们，可我该回去了。有些事情要接着做。”

“方便的时候，请一定要再来。”

“爸爸，”我说，“孩子出生以后您一定要来看孩子。”

绪方先生微笑着说：“那大概在新年吧。在那之前我不会来打搅你的，悦子。你会有够多的事要忙，哪有时间照顾我？”

“真遗憾您来的不是时候，”我丈夫说，“也许下一次我的工作就没有逼得这么紧了，我们就有时间多聊聊了。”

“好了，别担心了，二郎。没有什么比看到你如此投入工作更让我高兴的了。”

“现在这笔生意终于谈成了，”二郎说，“我的时间就多一些了。真遗憾您这时候要回去。我正在考虑请两天假呢。但我想是无济于事了。”

“爸爸，”我打断二郎的话，“要是二郎能请两天假，您不能多待一个星期吗？”

我丈夫停下在吃饭的手，但没有抬头。

“很诱人的提议，”绪方先生说，“但我想我真的该回去了。”

二郎接着吃饭。“真遗憾，”他说。

“没错，我真的得在纪久子和她丈夫来之前把阳台弄好。他们秋天时一定会想来的。”

二郎没有回答，我们静静地吃着晚饭。过了一会儿，绪方先生说：

“而且我不能整天坐在这里想着下棋。”他有点不自然地笑了笑。

二郎点点头，但没有说什么。绪方先生又笑了一声，我们继续静静地吃饭。

“您最近喝清酒吗，爸爸？”过了好一会儿二郎问道。

“清酒？有时喝一点。不常喝。”

“既然这是您住在这里的最后一晚，我们喝点酒吧。”

绪方先生像是想了好一会儿。最后他微笑着说：“没有必要为了我一个糟老头瞎忙活。但我和你喝一杯，庆祝你美好的前程。”

二郎冲我点点头。我走向碗柜，取出一个酒瓶和两个杯子。

这时绪方先生说：“我一直相信你会成功。你总是很有前途。”

“就凭今天的事并不保证他们一定会提升我，”我丈夫说。“但我想我今天的努力也没什么坏处。”

“当然没有，”绪方先生说。“不会有什么坏处。”

他俩都静静地看着我倒酒。然后绪方先生放下筷子，举起酒杯。

“为你的将来干杯，二郎，”他说。

我丈夫嘴里还吃着东西，也举起酒杯。

“也为您干杯，爸爸，”他说。

回忆，我发现，可能是不可靠的东西；常常被你回忆时的环境所大大地扭曲，毫无疑问，我现在在这里的某些回忆就是这样。比如说，我发现这种想法很诱人，即：那天下午我看见了一个先兆；那天我脑子里闪过的可怕的画面和一个人长时间地无聊时做的各种白日梦是完全不同的，来得更加强烈、更加逼真。

很可能根本不是什么大不了的事。一个小女孩被发现吊死在树上的惨剧——更甚于之前的那几起儿童谋杀案——震惊了整个小区。所以那年夏天我不会是唯一一个被这类幻象所困扰的人。

那是我们去稻佐山一两天之后，下午晚些时候，我正在公寓里忙着一些零活，无意间瞥了一眼窗外。从我第一次看见那辆美国大车以来，那片废弃的空地肯定已经变硬了很多，因为现在我看见车在凹凸不平的路面上行驶并没有什么困难。车越来越近，然后跌跌撞撞地开上了我们窗户底下的水泥路。反光的挡风玻璃让我看不清车里，但我确定车里不只司机一个。车在住宅区这兜了一下，然后开出了我的视线。

一定是在那个时候，当我有些困惑地看着小木屋时，我看见了那个幻象。没有任何明显的征兆，那个毛骨悚然的画面就突然闯进我的脑海。我不安地从窗户边走开，继续做我的家务，努力把那个画面赶出脑海，但过了好几分钟，我才觉得摆脱掉了它，思绪回到再次出现的白色大车上。

大约一个小时以后我看见一个人穿过空地朝木屋走去。我遮起眼睛好看得更清楚些；是个女人——瘦瘦的——慢慢地、小心翼翼地走着。她在小屋外停了一会儿，然后消失在斜斜的屋顶后面。我一直盯着那里，但她没有再出现；显然她进去了。

我在窗口站了一会儿，不知道该怎么办。最后，我穿上木屐，走出公寓。外面正是一天中最热的时候，穿过干巴巴的空地的那段不长的路却似乎永远也走不完。当我终于走到小屋时，我累得忘了我来干什么。这时，我听见屋里的说话声，有点吓了一跳。一个声音是万里子的；另一个声音我不认识。我走近门口，但听不清楚她们在说什么。我在那里站了站，拿不准该怎么办。最后我打开门叫了起来。说话声停止了。我等了一下，然后走了进去。

第十章

从亮晃晃的外头进来，小屋里似乎又冷又暗。阳光从各处狭窄的缝隙里强烈地照射进来，在榻榻米上投下一个个小光斑。木头的潮味还跟以前一样重。

过了一两秒钟我的眼睛才适应过来。一位老妇人坐在榻榻米上，万里子坐在她面前。老妇人转过来看我时很小心地摆头，像是怕伤着脖子。她的脸瘦瘦的，而且粉笔般苍白，开始时令我有点不安。她看上去七十岁上下，虽说她脆弱的脖子和肩膀可能是因为上了年纪，也可能是因为身体不好。她穿着一一般在葬礼上才穿的暗黑色和服，眼睛有点凹，面无表情地看着我。

“你好，”她终于开口说道。

我微微欠了欠身，也说了句“您好”。我们尴尬地对视了一两秒钟。

“你是邻居？”老妇人问。她说话是一个字、一个字慢慢地吐出来。

“是的，”我说，“一个朋友。”

她又看了我一会儿，然后问：“你知道主人上哪儿去了吗？她把孩子一个人扔下了。”

小女孩换了位置，和陌生人并排坐着。听到老妇人问的问题，万里子目不转睛地看着我。

“不，我不知道，”我说。

“真奇怪，”妇人说。“孩子好像也不知道。她会去哪儿了呢？我不能待很久。”

我们又对视了一会儿。

“您从远处来的吗？”我问。

“相当远。请原谅我的服装。我刚参加了一个葬礼。”

“我知道了。”我又鞠了一躬。

“伤感的场合，”老妇人说道，出神地慢慢点起头来。“我父亲以前的一个同事。家父身体虚弱，不能出门，让我代为致意。是个伤感的场合。”她环顾了一下小屋的内部，摆头时同样是很小心。“你不知道她去哪儿了？”她又问了一遍。

“是的，很遗憾我不清楚。”

“我不能等太久。家父会担心的。”

“有没有什么话我可以代为转达？”我问。

老妇人没有马上回答。过了一会儿，她说：“也许你可以告诉她我来找过她，向她问好。我是她的亲戚。我叫川田安子。”

“安子女士？”我努力掩饰我的惊讶。“您是安子女士，佐知子的表姐？”

老妇人鞠了一躬，鞠躬时肩膀微微颤抖。“请告诉她我来找过她，向她问好。你不知道她去哪儿了？”

我再次否认知道任何消息。妇人又一次出神地点起头来。

“如今的长崎大不一样了，”她说。“今天下午我都认不出来了。”

“是，”我说。“我想是变了很多。可是您不住在长崎吗？”

“我们已经在长崎住了好多年了。正如你说的，长崎变了很多。出现了很多新楼，还有新的街道。我上一次到城里来一定是在春天的时候。可即便在这段时间里也盖起了新楼。我肯定春天的时候是没有那些楼的。事实上，我想那次我也是来参加一个葬礼。没错，山下先生的丧礼。不知为何，春天的葬礼似乎更加伤感。你说你是邻居？很高兴认识你。”她的脸抖动了一下，我看见她在微笑；她的眼睛眯得细细的，嘴角向下弯，而不是向上。站在玄关我觉得不舒服，但又不敢走到榻榻米上去。

“很高兴见到您，”我说。“佐知子常提起您。”

“她提起我？”妇人似乎回味了一下这句话。“我们在等着她搬来和我们住。跟家父和我。也许她跟你说了。”

“是的，她说过。”

“我们三个星期前就开始等。可她一直没来。”

“三个星期前？这个嘛，我想这里面一定有什么误会。我知道她一直在准备搬家。”

老妇人再次环顾了一下小屋。“真遗憾她不在家，”她说。“不过如果你是她的邻居，那我很高兴认识你。”她再次鞠了一躬，然后一直盯着我看。“也许你能替我传个话给她，”她说。

“啊，当然可以。”

妇人沉默了一会儿才开口说道：“我们发生了小小的争执，她和我。也许她告诉过你。只不过是这个小误会，没什么。结果第二天我惊讶地发现她已经收拾好东西，离开了。我确实很惊讶。我无意冒犯她。家父说是我的错。”她停顿了一下。“我无意冒犯她，”她重复道。

我从没想到过佐知子的伯父和表姐不知道她有个美国朋友。我再次鞠了一躬，不知道回答什么。

“我承认她走了以后我很想她，”老妇人接着说。“我也想念万里子。我很喜欢她们的陪伴，我不应该发脾气、说了那些话。”她再次停下，脸转向万里子，再转回来。“家父虽然方式不同，但也想念她们。你瞧，他听得出来。他能听到房子里安静了好多。一天早上我发现他醒着，他对我说房子安静得让他想到坟墓。就像个坟墓，他说。她们搬回去对家父大有好处。也许佐知子愿意为了家父而搬回去。”

“我一定把您的感受传达给佐知子，”我说。

“也是为了她自己，”老妇人说。“毕竟一个女人不能没有一个男人来引导她。否则只会带来不良后果。家父虽然有病在身，但没有生命危险。她现在该回来了，不为别的也该为了她自己。”老妇人开始解开放在身旁的方巾。“事实上，我把它们带来了，”她说。“没什么，只是我自己织的几件开襟毛衣。不过是好羊毛。我本打算她们回去以后给她们，但我今天带来了。起初我织了一件要给万里子，后来我想也给她母亲织一件好了。”她举起一件毛衣，然后看看小女孩。她笑的时候嘴角再次向下弯。

“真漂亮，”我说。“您一定花了很多时间。”

“是好羊毛，”妇人重复道。她把毛衣重新包起来，然后把方巾小心地系好。“现在我得回去了。家父要担心了。”

老妇人站起来，走下榻榻米。我帮她穿好木屐。万里子也来到榻榻米边，老妇人轻轻地碰了碰孩子的头顶。

她说：“万里子，要记住把我对你说的话告诉你妈妈。还有，你不用担心你的小猫。房子里有足够的地方给它们住。”

“我们很快就会回去，”万里子说。“我会告诉妈妈的。”

妇人又笑了笑。然后她转向我，鞠了一躬。“很高兴认识你。我不能再久留了。你瞧，家父身体不好。”

“哦，是你啊，悦子，”佐知子说。那天晚上我又回到她的小屋。然后她笑了一声，说：“别那么吃惊的样子。你早知道我不会永远住在这里，不是吗？”

衣服、毯子和无数其他的东西堆得榻榻米上到处都是。我做了恰当的回答，然后找了个不碍事的地方坐下。我注意到身旁的地板上有两件看起来很漂亮的和服，我从没见过佐知子穿过。我还看见了一一地板中央，一个硬纸盒里一一她那套精美的浅白色陶瓷茶具。

佐知子已经把中间的几扇拉门都打开了，让最后的日光照进屋来；然而，昏暗还是在迅速地袭来，从走廊射进来的余晖基本上照不到万里子坐着的那个远远的角落。她静静地看着她妈妈。旁边，两只小猫在嬉戏打闹；小女孩怀里抱着另外一只。

“我想万里子告诉你了，”我对佐知子说。“早些时候有人来找你。你表姐来过这里。”

“是。万里子告诉我了。”佐知子继续收拾她的箱子。

“你明天早上离开？”

“对，”她有点不耐烦地说。然后她叹了一口气，抬头看我。

“对，悦子，我们明天早上离开。”她叠了件什么放进箱子的角落里。

“你的行李这么多，”我终于说道。“要怎么全都搬走呢？”

佐知子没有马上回答。过了一会儿，她一边收拾，一边说：“你是知道的，悦子。我们有车。”

我不说话了。佐知子深深地叹了口气，从房间那头朝我坐的地方看了一眼。

“对，我们要离开长崎了，悦子。我向你保证，我本打算全都收拾好了以后就去道别。我不会不跟你道谢就离开的，你对我那么好。对了，至于借的钱，我会通过邮局还给你。这点请不用担心。”她又开始收拾。

“你们要搬去哪里？”我问。

“神户。现在所有的事情都定下来了，不会再改变了。”

“神户？”

“对，悦子，神户。然后从那里去美国。弗兰克已经把所有的事情都安排好了。你不替我高兴吗？”她很快扬了扬嘴角，又转开了。

我还是盯着她。万里子也一直看着她。她怀里的小猫挣扎着想去和榻榻米上的小猫一起玩，可是小女孩紧紧地抱住它。她身边，屋子的角上，我看见了她在抓阉摊上赢的那只装菜的盒子；看来万里子已经把盒子改造成了小猫们的家。

“对了，悦子，那边那堆”——佐知子指了指——“那些东西我带不走了。我没想到东西这么多。那里有些质量还不错。你要的话就请拿去用吧。我当然没有冒犯的意思。仅仅是因为有些东西质量挺好。”

“可是你伯父怎么办？”我说。“还有你的表姐？”

“我伯父？”她耸耸肩。“很谢谢他请我去他家住。可是恐怕现在我另有打算。你不知道，悦子，离开这个地方我是多么如释重负。我相信我再也不会见到这种破地方了。”她又朝我看了一眼，笑了。

“我知道你在想什么。我向你保证，悦子，你想错了。这次他不会再让我失望了。明天一大早他就会开车过来。你不替我高兴吗？”佐知子看了看满地的行李，叹了口气。然后她跨过一堆衣服，在装茶具的盒子边跪下，开始往里面装一卷卷的羊毛。

“你决定了吗？”万里子突然问。

“现在没时间谈这个，万里子，”她妈妈说。“我这会儿很忙。”

“可是你说过我可以留着它们。你不记得了吗？”

佐知子轻轻摇了摇纸箱；瓷器仍然嘎嘎作响。她看了看周围，找到一块布，把它撕成碎布条。

“你说过我可以留着它们，”万里子重复道。

“万里子，请你稍微考虑一下眼前的情况。我们怎么可能带上那些畜牲呢？”

“可是你说过我可以留着它们。”

佐知子叹了口气，有一会儿像是在想事情。她低头看看茶具，手里捏着碎布条。

“你说过的，妈妈，”万里子说。“你不记得了吗？你说过我可以留着的。”

佐知子抬头看看她女儿，然后又看看那些小猫。“如今情况不同了，”她疲惫地说。这时，一股怒气划过她的脸，她一把扔掉那些布条。“万里子，你老想着那些畜牲干吗？我们怎么可能带上它们？不行，我们只能把它们留在这里。”

“可是你说过我可以留着它们。”

佐知子看了她女儿一会儿。“你就不能考虑一下其他事情吗？”她说，声音变得很低。“你难道还小，看不出除了这些肮脏的小东西以外，还有其他更重要的事情？你得懂事一点了。你不能总是对这些东西恋恋不舍。这些只是……只是动物，你看不出来吗？你不明白这个吗，孩子？你不明白吗？”

万里子也瞪着她妈妈。

“你喜欢的话，万里子，”我插进去说，“我可以时不时地来喂它们。它们最后都会找到家的。不用担心。”

小女孩转向我说：“妈妈说过我可以留着小猫。”

“别再孩子气了，”佐知子说。“你只是在故意捣乱，跟平时一样。这些肮脏的小畜牲有什么大不了的？”她站起来，走向万里子的角落。榻榻米上的小猫急忙后退；佐知子低头看看它们，然后深吸了一口气。她相当镇定地把蔬菜盒子侧翻过来——这样，铁丝网的滑板就朝上了一——弯下腰，把小猫一只只地扔进盒子里。然后她转向她女儿；万里子紧紧抱住剩下的一只小猫。

“把它给我，”佐知子说。

万里子抱着小猫不放。佐知子走上前去，伸出一只手。小女孩转过来看我。

“这只是小胖，”她说。“你想不想看看它，悦子阿姨？这只是小胖。”

“把那东西给我，万里子，”佐知子说。“你不明白吗，那只是一只动物。你怎么就不明白呢，万里子？你真的还小吗？那不是你的小宝宝，只是一只动物，就像老鼠啊、蛇啊。现在把它给我。”

万里子抬头瞪着她妈妈，然后慢慢地把小猫放下。小猫落在了她面前的榻榻米上，挣扎着被佐知子抓了起来。佐知子把它也扔进了蔬菜盒子里，然后“啪”地关上铁丝网。

“待在这里，”她对女儿说，然后拎起盒子。她经过我身边时，对我说：“真是太傻了，它们只是几只动物，有什么大不了的？”

万里子站了起来，像是要跟着她妈妈。佐知子在玄关那里回过头来说：“照我说的做。待在这里。”

有一会儿，万里子站在榻榻米的边上不动，看着她妈妈消失在门口。

“在这里等你妈妈，万里子，”我对她说。

小女孩转过来看了我一眼，然后就跑出去了。

起先，我没有动。一两分钟以后，我站起来、穿上木屐。在门口，我看见佐知子到河边去了，蔬菜盒子放在她脚边；她似乎没有注意到她女儿站在她身后几码的地方，就在陡坡上面。我离开小屋，朝万里子站着的地方走去。

“我们回到屋里去吧，万里子，”我轻声说。

小女孩仍旧看着她妈妈，面无表情。在我们下方，佐知子在河边小心翼翼地蹲下，把盒子拉近了一点。

“我们进去吧，万里子，”我又说了一遍，可小女孩还是没有理我。我离开她，走下泥泞的斜坡，朝佐知子蹲着的地方走去。夕阳透过树枝照在对岸，河边的芦苇在我们周围的泥地上投下长长的影子。虽然佐知子找了块有草的地方蹲下，但那里也都是泥。

“我们不能放了它们吗？”我静静地说。“谁知道呢。也许有人要它们。”

佐知子低头看着铁丝网里的小猫。她“啪”地把盒子打开，取出一只小猫，然后又把盒子关上。她双手抓住小猫，看了一会儿，然后

抬头看了我一眼，说：“这只是一只动物，悦子。就只是一只动物。”

她把小猫放进水里、按住。她保持这个姿势，眼睛盯着水里，双手都在水下。她穿着一件日常的夏季和服，两只袖子的袖口都碰到了水。

突然佐知子第一次转过头去看了一眼她女儿，手依旧放在水里。我本能地顺着她的视线看去，一刹那间，我们俩都回头看着万里子。小女孩站在斜坡顶上，依旧面无表情地看着。看见她母亲的脸转向她，她微微地把头转开；然后一动不动，双手背在身后。

佐知子把手从水里拿出来，看着仍旧抓在手里的小猫。她把小猫拿得近一点，水流下她的手腕和手臂。

“还活着，”她疲倦地说。然后她转向我说：“看看这水，悦子。太脏了。”她厌恶地把湿漉漉的小猫扔回盒子里，关上盖子。“这些小东西在顽抗，”她嘟囔道，举起手腕，给我看上面的抓痕。不知怎么的，佐知子的头发也湿了；一滴水，然后又一滴从垂到她脸上的一小撮头发上流下来。

佐知子换了个姿势，把蔬菜盒子推向河边；盒子滑了下来，掉进水里。佐知子伸出手去抓住盒子，不让它漂走。河水几乎没到了铁丝网的半腰。她仍旧抓着盒子不放，最后双手把盒子一推。盒子漂进水里，冒着泡泡，沉得更下去了。佐知子站了起来，我们俩一起注视着盒子。盒子漂着，然后一股水流冲来，盒子加速往下游漂去。

这时什么东西从我眼前闪过，我猛地转头。万里子跑下河边，跑到几码远处的一块突进水里的浅滩上。她站在那里看着漂流的盒子，脸上依旧没有表情。盒子被芦苇缠住，松开了又继续前进。万里子又跑了起来。她沿着河岸跑了一段，然后又停下来，看着盒子。这时，盒子只剩一个小角露在水面上了。

“这水真脏，”佐知子说。她甩了甩手上的水，把和服两边的袖口一一拧干，然后掸掉膝盖上的泥。“我们进去吧，悦子。这里的虫子越来越让人受不了了。”

“我们不去找万里子吗？天很快就黑了。”

佐知子转过去叫她女儿的名字。万里子已经跑到五十码开外了，眼睛仍然看着河水，似乎没有听见在叫她。佐知子耸耸肩，说：“她

一会儿会回来的。现在我得趁天没黑赶紧把东西收拾完。”说完爬上斜坡，朝小屋走去。

佐知子点亮灯笼，挂在一处低木梁上。“别担心，悦子，”她说。“她很快就会回来了。”她走过一地板的各种各样的东西，跟刚才一样在敞开的拉门前坐下。身后，夕阳已经褪去，天色昏暗。

佐知子接着收拾东西。我在房间的另一头坐下，看着她。

“你现在怎么打算的？”我问。“到了神户以后要干什么？”

“全都安排好了，悦子，”她回答说，没有抬头。“不用担心。弗兰克都安排好了。”

“可为什么是神户？”

“他有朋友在那里。在美军基地。他得到了一份货船上的工作，他很快就能回美国了。然后他会寄给我们所需的钱，我们就去美国找他。他都安排好了。”

“你是说，他要先你们离开日本？”

佐知子笑了一声。“人要有耐心，悦子。一旦他到了美国，他就能找到工作、寄钱来。这是目前最可行的方案。毕竟他回到美国后找工作会容易得多。我不介意多等一些时间。”

“我知道了。”

“他都安排好了，悦子。他在神户给我们找好了住的地方，他还安排好到时我们坐的船可以比一般价格低将近一半。”说到这里，她叹了口气。“你不知道离开这个地方我有多高兴。”

佐知子又继续收拾东西。屋外微弱的光线照在她的半张脸上，而她的手和袖子都在灯笼的亮光里。感觉很奇怪。

“你在神户要等很久吗？”我问。

她耸耸肩。“我做好了耐心等待的准备，悦子。人要有耐心。”

光线很暗，我看不清楚她在叠什么；但似乎不好叠，她叠好又打开重新叠，反复了好几次。

“不管怎样，悦子，”她接着说，“他若不是确实实真心的，干吗要给自己找这个麻烦呢？他干吗要特意为我做这些呢？悦子，有时候你好像很怀疑。你应该为我高兴才是。事情总算开始好转了。”

“是，当然了。我很为你高兴。”

“可说真的，悦子，他特意为我做了这些而你还怀疑他，这是不公平的。相当不公平。”

“是。”

“而且万里子在美国也会过得更好。美国更适合女孩子成长。在那里，她可以做各种各样的事。她可以成为女商人。她可以进大学学画画，然后成为一个艺术家。所有这些事情在美国要容易得多，悦子。日本不适合女孩子成长。在这里她能有什么指望呢？”

我没有回答。佐知子抬头看了我一眼，轻轻笑了笑。

“笑一笑，悦子，”她说。“事情最后会变好的。”

“是，我相信会的。”

“当然会了。”

“是。”

佐知子又继续收拾了一分钟左右，她的手突然停下来，从房间那头朝我看过来。脸上像我刚才描述的那样一半阴、一半亮。

“我想你一定认为我是个傻瓜，”她静静地说。“是不是，悦子？”

我也看着她，有点吃惊。

“我知道我们可能永远见不到美国，”她说。“也知道即使见到了，有多少困难等着我们。你以为我没想过这些吗？”

我没有回答，我们就这么对视着。

“可是那又怎么样？”佐知子说。“那又有什么关系呢？我为什么不应该去神户呢？毕竟，悦子，我会损失什么呢？我伯父的房子里没有什么可以给我的。只有一些空房间，没别的了。我可以找一间坐着，然后慢慢变老。除此之外什么都没有。只有空房间，没别的了。你是知道的，悦子。”

“可万里子呢，”我说。“万里子怎么办？”

“万里子？她会应付得过来的。她得应付过来。”佐知子还是透过昏暗的灯光看着我，半张脸在阴影里。她接着说：“你以为我认为自己是个好母亲？”

我没有回答。突然，佐知子笑了起来。

“我们干吗这样子说话？”她说道，双手又忙活了起来。“一切都会好的，我向你保证。到了美国以后我会给你写信。也许，悦子，也许有一天你还能来看我们。带着你的孩子。”

“是，没错。”

“也许那个时候你已经孩子成群了。”

“是，”我不自然地笑了笑。“谁知道呢。”

佐知子叹了口气，举起双手。“要收拾的东西真多啊，”她咕哝道。“有些东西只好不带了。”

我坐在那里，看着她。几分钟以后，我终于开口说道：

“你愿意的话，我可以去找万里子。天很黑了。”

“你只会让自己受累，悦子。我快收拾完了，到时她要是还没回来，我们一起出去找她。”

“没关系。我去找找她。天已经全黑了。”

佐知子抬头看了一眼，耸耸肩，说：“你最好把灯笼带上，河边很滑。”

我站起来，把灯笼从木梁上拿下来，朝门口走去。阴影随着我的脚步掠过小屋。离开时，我回头看了一眼佐知子。我只看见她的剪影，坐在敞开的拉门前，身后的天空已经全黑了。

我沿着河边走，蚊虫跟着我的灯笼。偶尔有虫子飞进灯笼里出不来，我只好停下来，拿稳灯笼，等虫子找到出来的路。

不久那座小木桥就出现在了面前。走过木桥时，我在桥上停了一会儿，看着夜晚的天空。我记得在桥上时，一股异样的宁静向我袭来。我倚在栏杆上站了几分钟，听着脚下河水的声音。当我终于转身时，我看见了自己的影子，被灯光投在桥的木板条上。

“你在这里做什么？”我问。小女孩就在我面前，蜷缩在另一边的栏杆底下。我走上前去，好更清楚地看见灯笼底下的她。她看着她的手掌，不发一语。

“你是怎么了？”我说。“你为什么这样子坐在这里？”

灯笼周围聚集了不少虫子。我把灯笼拿到面前，放低，灯光把孩子的脸照得更亮了。过了好久，她才开口说道：“我不想走。明天我不想走。”

我叹了口气。“你会喜欢的。每个人对新事物总是有点害怕。可你会喜欢那里的。”

“我不想走。我不喜欢他。他像头猪。”

“你不能这么说话，”我生气地说。我们对视了一会儿，然后她又低头看着她的手。

“你不能这么说话。”我说，语气变缓和了。“他很喜欢你，他会像个新爸爸。一切都会变好的，我向你保证。”

孩子不做声。我又叹了口气。

“不管怎样，”我接着说，“你要是不喜欢那里，我们随时可以回来。”

这一次，她抬起头来，怀疑地看着我。

“是，我保证，”我说。“你要是不喜欢那里，我们就马上回来。可我们得试试看，看看我们喜不喜欢那里。我相信我们会喜欢的。”

小女孩紧紧地盯着我。“你拿着那个做什么？”她问。

“这个？照亮脚下的路而已，就这样。”

“你拿着它做什么？”

“我说了。照亮脚下的路而已。你是怎么了？”我笑了一声。“你干吗这样看着我？我不会伤害你的。”

她一面盯着我，一面慢慢地站起来。

“你是怎么了？”我又问了一遍。

孩子跑了起来，在木板上发出“咚咚咚”的声音。跑到桥头时，她停了下来，怀疑地看着我。我对她笑了笑，拿起灯笼。孩子又跑了起来。

半轮月亮出现在水里，我静静地待在桥上看了几分钟。有一次，我想我在昏暗中看见万里子沿着河岸朝小屋的方向跑去。

第十一章

起初我肯定有人经过我的床，走出房间，轻轻关上门。后来我清醒多了，发现这是多么荒唐的想法。

我躺在床上听着外面的动静。很显然，我听到了隔壁妮基的声音；在这里她一直抱怨睡不好。也有可能根本没有什么声响，我又习惯性地早早就醒过来。

外面传来鸟叫声，可我的房间里仍然一片漆黑。几分钟后，我起来找晨衣。我打开房门时，外面的天色还很朦胧。我朝楼梯平台走去，几乎是下意识地瞥了一眼走廊尽头景子的房门。

突然，一刹那，我肯定从景子的房里传来声响，在屋外的鸟叫声中夹杂着一个微小但清晰的声响。我停下来听，然后迈开脚步朝房门走去。又传来了几个声响，这时我意识到是楼下厨房传来的声音。我在平台上站了一会儿，然后走下楼梯。

妮基从厨房里出来，看见我吓了一跳。

“哦，妈妈，你吓了我一大跳。”

在走廊朦朦胧胧的光线中，我看见她瘦瘦的身子穿着一件浅色晨衣，双手握着茶杯。

“对不起，妮基。我把你当作小偷了。”

我女儿深吸了一口气，但似乎仍惊魂未定。过了一会儿，她说：“我睡不着，就想不如起来冲杯咖啡。”

“现在几点？”

“我想大概五点。”

她走进客厅，留下我一个人站在楼梯脚下。我走进厨房冲了杯咖啡，然后也到客厅去。客厅里，妮基已经拉开窗帘，叉开腿坐在一张硬靠背椅上，呆呆地看着花园。窗外灰蒙蒙的亮光照在她脸上。

“你觉得还会不会下雨？”我问。

她耸耸肩，继续看着窗外。我在壁炉旁坐下，看着她。过了一会儿，她疲惫地叹了口气，说道：

“我睡得不怎么好。老是做噩梦。”

“真让人担心，妮基。你这种年纪不应该有睡眠问题。”

她没说什么，仍旧看着花园。

“你做什么噩梦？”我问。

“哦，就是噩梦。”

“什么噩梦，妮基？”

“就是噩梦，”她说，突然就生气了。“管它是什么噩梦？”

我们都不说话了。过了一会儿，妮基头也不回地说道：

“我想爸爸应该多关心她一点，不是吗？大多数时候爸爸都不管她。这样真是不公平。”

我等着她是不是还要说些什么。然后我说：“咳，可以理解。他毕竟不是她的亲爸爸。”

“可是真是不公平。”

我看见外面天快亮了。一只孤零零的小鸟在窗子附近什么地方叽叽喳喳地叫着。

“你爸爸有时相当的理想主义，”我说。“你瞧，那个时候他真的相信我们能在这里给她一个幸福的生活。”

妮基耸耸肩。我看了她好一会儿，然后说：“可是你瞧，妮基，我一开始就知道。我一开始就知道她在这里不会幸福的。可我还是决定把她带来。”

我女儿似乎在思索着我的话，过了一会儿转向我说：“别傻了，你怎么会知道呢？而且你为她尽力了。您是最不应该受到责备的人。”

我没有回答。她没有化妆的脸显得很年轻。

“不管怎样，”她说，“人有时就得冒险。你做得完全正确。你不能看着生命白白浪费。”

我放下一直握着的咖啡杯，越过她，看着外面的花园。没有要下雨的迹象，天空似乎比前几个早上晴朗。

“要是你接受现实，留在原地，”妮基接着说，“那才是太愚蠢了。至少你尽力了。”

“你说得对。现在我们别说这个了。”

“人要是浪费生命真是太愚蠢了。”

“我们别说这个了，”我语气更加坚定地说。“现在说这些有什么用呢？”

我女儿再次把脸转过去。我们默默地坐了一会儿，然后我站起来，走近窗户。

“今天早上看来天气不错，”我说。“也许会出太阳。要是出太阳的话，妮基，我们出去散散步。散步很有好处。”

“我想是吧，”她咕哝道。

我离开客厅时，我女儿仍旧叉开腿坐在椅子上，一手托着下巴，呆呆地看着外面的花园。

电话响起来时，我和妮基正在厨房里吃早餐。这几天老有电话找她，所以自然是她去接电话。等她接完电话回来，她的咖啡已经冷掉了。

“又是你的朋友？”我问。

她点点头，走过去打开炉子烧水。

“是这样的，妈妈，”她说，“我下午得回去了。行吗？”她站在那里，一手放在水壶柄上，一手放在臀部。

“当然可以。你能来这里我很高兴，妮基。”

“我很快会再来看你的。可现在我真的得回去了。”

“你用不着道歉。如今你过自己的生活很重要。”

妮基转过身去等水开。水槽上方的窗户还有一些雾气，但外面已经出太阳了。妮基冲了咖啡，然后在桌子旁坐下。

“哦，对了，妈妈，”她说。“你记得我跟你提起的那个朋友，在写关于你的诗的那个？”

我微微一笑。“哦，记得。你的朋友。”

“她想让我带张照片什么的回去。长崎的。你有这样的东西吗？旧明信片什么的？”

“我想我可以找一找。太荒唐了”——我笑了一声——“她能写我什么呢？”

“她是个很棒的诗人。她经历了很多事情，你瞧。所以我跟她说了你的事。”

“我相信她一定会写出了不起的诗来，妮基。”

“就旧明信片什么的。让她看看一切都是什么样的。”

“这个嘛，妮基，我不敢肯定。得看得出一切都是什么样的，是吗？”

“你知道我的意思。”

我又笑了一声。“我待会儿给你找找看。”

妮基刚在一片烤面包上涂了些黄油，现在又把黄油刮掉一些。我女儿从小就瘦，却担心变胖，让我觉得好笑。我看了她一会儿。

“话说回来，”我终于说道，“真可惜你今天就要离开。我本打算今晚一起去看电影。”

“看电影？为什么，在放什么？”

“我不知道他们现在放些什么电影。我以为你会清楚些。”

“说真的，妈妈，我们好久没有一起看电影了，不是吗？从我长大以后。”妮基微笑了一下，霎时间她的脸变得孩子气。接着，她放下小刀，盯着自己的杯子。“我也不常看电影，”她说。“在伦敦总有一大堆电影看，可我们不常去。”

“啊，你要是喜欢的话，也可以去看戏。如今有公车直达剧院。我不知道他们现在在演什么，不过我们能查到。本地的报纸是不是在那里，就在你后面？”

“好了，妈妈，别麻烦了。没有什么意义。”

“我想他们不时会演些好戏。相当现代的。报上有。”

“没有什么意义，妈妈。我今天就得回去了。我很想留下来，可是我真的得回去了。”

“当然，妮基。不必道歉。”我给了桌子那头的她一个微笑。
“事实上，你有处得来的好朋友，我感到很欣慰。随时欢迎你带他们来这里。”

“好的，妈妈，谢谢你。”

妮基睡的空房间是个简陋的小房间；那天早上，阳光流泻了进来。

“这个给你朋友行吗？”我在门口问道。

妮基正在床边收拾箱子，抬头看了一眼我找到的日历。“可以，”她说。

我走进房间。透过窗子，我可以看见下面的果园和一排排整齐的小树。我手里的日历原本每个月份都有一张照片，如今撕得只剩下最后一张了。我盯着这最后一张照片看了一会儿。

“别给我什么重要的东西，”妮基说。“没有的话也没关系。”

我笑了，把照片跟她的其他东西一起放在床上。“只是一本旧日历，没什么。我也不知道为什么会留着。”

妮基拨了些头发到耳后，继续整理。

“我想，”我终于开口说道，“你打算暂时继续住在伦敦。”

她耸了耸肩。“这个，我在那里很开心。”

“一定要替我向你的朋友们问好。”

“好的，我会的。”

“还有大卫。这是他的名字吧？”

她又耸了耸肩，没说什么。她带了三双不同的靴子回来，现在正想办法装到箱子里去。

“妮基，我想你还没有打算结婚吧？”

“我干吗打算结婚？”

“我问问而已。”

“我干吗要结婚？意义何在？”

“你打算就这么继续——住在伦敦，是吗？”

“我干吗要结婚呢？太愚蠢了，妈妈。”她把日历卷起来、收好。“那么多女人被灌输这种思想，认为生活就是结婚，然后生一大堆孩子。”

我还是看着她。过了一会儿，我说：“可说到底，妮基，没别的什么了。”

“天啊，妈妈，我有很多事情可以干。我不想固定下来，然后整天围着丈夫和一大群吵吵闹闹的孩子团团转。你怎么突然唠叨起这个了？”箱子的盖子关不上，妮基不耐烦地直往下按。

“我只是想知道你是怎么打算的，妮基，”我笑了下说。“没必要生这么大的气。你当然要照自己的想法生活。”

她把盖子重新打开，整了整里面的东西。

“好了，妮基，没必要生这么大的气。”

这次，她总算把盖子给关上了。“天晓得我干吗带了这么多东西？”她小声自言自语道。

“你要怎么跟别人说，妈妈？”妮基问。“别人问我去哪儿了，你要怎么跟他们说？”

我女儿决定她可以吃过午饭再走，我俩就从屋后的果园出来散步。太阳还在，可天气很冷。我不解地看着她。

“我就告诉他们你住在伦敦啊，妮基。不是这样吗？”

“我想是。可他们不会问我在干什么吗？像那天沃特斯老太太那样？”

“是啊，他们有时候会问。我就说你和朋友们住在一起。说真的，妮基，我不知道你那么在乎人们对你的看法。”

“我没有。”

我们继续慢慢地走着。许多地方很泥泞。

“我想你不太喜欢，对不对，妈妈？”

“喜欢什么，妮基？”

“我的做法。你不喜欢我搬出去。还有和大卫住啊，等等。”

我们来到了果园尽头。妮基跨出园子，走上一条弯弯曲曲的小路；她走到路的对面，朝一片原野的几扇木门走去。我跟在她后面。草地很大，从我们面前缓缓地升上去。在最高点有两棵瘦瘦的假挪威槭映着蓝天。

“我并不为你感到羞耻，妮基，”我说。“你应该按照自己的想法生活。”

我女儿注视着原野。“以前这里有马，不是吗？”她说，举起双手去摸木门。我放眼望去，没有看见马。

“说来奇怪，”我说道。“我记得我刚结婚时，我和我丈夫吵了起来，因为他不想和他父亲住在一起。你瞧，那时的日本，子女还是应该跟父母住一起的。我们为此吵个不停。”

“我敢说你一定觉得轻松多了，”妮基说道，视线没有离开原野。

“轻松？为什么？”

“因为不用和他父亲一起住。”

“相反，妮基。我更愿意他和我们一起住。再说，他妻子不在了。日本传统的生活方式一点儿也不坏。”

“你现在当然会这么说了。可我敢说你那时肯定不是这么想的。”

“可是妮基，你真的不明白。我非常喜欢我的公公。”我看了她一会儿，最后还是笑了笑。“也许你说得对。也许他不和我们一起住我是轻松多了。我记不清了。”我伸出手去摸木门的顶端。一些水汽沾到了我的手指上。我发现妮基在看我，就把手举给她看。“还有些霜，”我说。

“你还常常想日本吗，妈妈？”

“我想是的。”我又转回去看着原野。“我会回忆一些往事。”

两匹小马出现在假挪威槭附近。一时间，它们静静地站在那里，并排站在阳光下。

“我今天早上给你的那本日历，”我说。“上面是长崎港口的风景。今天早上我想起有一次我们到那里去，一次郊游。港口周围的那些山非常漂亮。”

那两匹小马慢慢地走到树后面去。

“有什么特别的？”妮基问。

“特别？”

“你们去港口的那天。”

“哦，没什么特别的。我刚好想到，就这样。那天景子很高兴。我们坐了缆车。”我笑了一声，转向妮基。“对，没什么特别的。只是件快乐的往事，仅此而已。”

我女儿叹了口气，说：“这里好安静啊。我都不记得有这么安静了。”

“是啊，比起伦敦，这里一定显得很安静。”

“我想你一个人住在这里有时候一定有点无聊。”

“可是我喜欢安静，妮基。我一直觉得这里最像英国。”

我的视线离开原野，回头看着我们身后的果园。

“我们刚来这里的时候没有那些树，”过了许久，我说道，“一整片都是原野，你从这里就可以看见房子。你父亲刚带我到这里来的时候，妮基，我记得我觉得这里的一切都那么像英国。原野啊，房子啊。正是我一直以来想像中的英国的样子，我高兴极了。”

妮基深吸了一口气，离开木门，说：“我们回去吧，我得赶紧走了。”

我们重新穿过果园时，天空似乎又布起了乌云。

“前些日子我突然想到，”我说，“也许现在我该把房子卖了。”

“卖了？”

“是啊。也许该换个小一点的房子。我想想而已。”

“你想把房子卖了？”我女儿担心地看着我。“可这房子很好。”

“但如今太大了。”

“可这房子很好，妈妈。卖掉太可惜了。”

“我想也是。我想想而已，妮基，没别的。”

我本想送她去火车站——离这里不过几分钟的路——可这似乎会让她不自在。午饭后不久她就走了，一副奇怪的、难为情的样子，好像她是没有经过我的同意离开的。下午天空转阴了，起了风，我站在门口看着她走到车道尽头。她穿着和来时一样的紧身衣，有点费力地拖着箱子。到门口时，妮基回头看了一眼，发现我还站在门口，似乎有点吃惊。我笑了笑，朝她挥挥手。

译后记

读完整部作品，感觉就像它的标题所示，留给读者的只是一个模糊的印象、一种淡淡的感觉，整部书连一个完整的故事情节都没有，留下无数的空白让读者自己去想象。而且，即便是已知的信息，也得靠读者自己从小说的字里行间一块块拼起来，小说中没有多少介绍故事背景、人物来龙去脉之类的说明性文字。

构成这本书的是主人公悦子零碎的回忆。回忆是石黑的作品里最重要的题材。正如书中说的：“回忆，我发现，可能是不可靠的东西。”悦子的回忆充满矛盾和空白。回忆不仅由于时间的流逝变得模糊，而且是非常主观的东西，加入了人的情感和选择。石黑说：“我喜欢回忆，是因为回忆是我们审视自己生活的过滤器。回忆模糊不清，就给自己欺骗提供了机会。作为一个作家，我更关心的是人们告诉自己发生了什么，而不是实际发生了什么。”石黑一雄关心的不是外部的现实世界，而是人复杂的内心世界。通过扭曲的回忆所反映的微妙东西可以帮助人们窥探这个世界：为什么他在这个时候想起这件事？他对这件事是什么感觉？他说他记不清发生了什么事，却还是要说给我们听，那么读者能相信他多少？等等。

总之，石黑笔下的主人公的回忆是扭曲的，读者不能完全相信，很可能要带着批判的眼光阅读第二遍。比如，书的一开始就是故事矛盾激化的地方：景子自杀了。可是接下来并没有解释为什么自杀，转而开始回忆悦子在二战后的长崎与一位友人的一段友谊。读者会想：怎么讲到另一件事去了？她对女儿的自杀心情如何？她女儿为什么自杀？

读完全书，大家都会觉得悦子和佐知子其实是同一个人，景子其实也就是万里子。石黑说：“我希望读者能明白她的故事是通过她朋友的故事来讲的。”不管佐知子母女是不是真有其人，悦子利用她们做掩护，精心编织了一个看似是别人的故事，想藏在别人的面具之下减轻自己的罪恶感。读者可能从一开始就怀疑是这样，但找不到确实的文本证据。到了书的最后，“那天景子很高兴。我们坐了缆车。”淡淡一句就戳破了悦子在整本书中精心设计的谎言。她的心理防线在最后还是崩溃了，她不想或者忘了伪装。书的戏剧效果极强。

为什么要这样写，石黑的解释是，当时他在伦敦收留无家可归者的慈善机构里做社工，“我有很多时间和无家可归的人在一起，我倾听他们的故事，听他们说怎么会到这里来，我发现他们不会直截了当、坦白地说他们的故事。”“我就觉得用这种方法写小说很有意思：某个人觉得自己的经历太过痛苦或不堪，无法启口，于是借用别人的故事来讲自己的故事。”

小说始终没有交待景子到底为什么自杀，悦子为什么离开日本（悦子为自己设计的在长崎的形象是一个传统的、尽本分的妻子，与她后来离开丈夫、离开祖国的大胆行为相去甚远。）悦子回忆的重点不是她们具体怎样离开日本到达英国，也不是景子在英国到底过得如何（景子在英国的生活我们可以从悦子本身少量的叙述中看出来，也可以从妮基对景子的回忆中窥见一斑。景子一直与这个异国新家格格不入，后来更是自我封闭、有点病态，最终导致自杀）。悦子的回忆集中在去与留的抉择。这反映出悦子心里深知景子悲剧的根源在日本，景子的自杀触发了悦子内心长期以来的担忧：自己选择离开日本的决定到底对不对？

对于离开日本的决定，按佐知子自己（我们把她看作悦子的代言人）的话说：“我是个母亲，我女儿的利益是第一位的。”“万里子在美国会过得很好的……那里更适合孩子的成长。在那里她的机会更多，在美国女人的生活要好得多。”“日本不适合女孩子成长。在这里她能有什么指望呢？”

虽然佐知子口口声声去美国都是为了女儿，但是读者能体味到去美国似乎更符合佐知子自己的愿望和利益，而不是万里子的。从主观愿望来说，万里子不愿意去美国，想回安子阿姨家，讨厌那个美国酒鬼。万里子甚至在她们第一次准备离开的时候试图上吊自杀。当然，在佐知子的回忆里把它说成是一个从树上摔下来的小意外。从客观条件来说，回安子阿姨家对万里子来说意味着稳定的生活，去美国则存在着很多不确定因素，是很冒险的举动。然而对佐知子来说，她伯父家只是个有无数空房间的坟墓，美国则是一个充满可能性的国家。这是她从小梦想，在日本饱经战乱之苦后，这种向往异国的心情更加强烈。所以纵使弗兰克不是一个十分可靠的人，却是她改变现状唯一的希望。

就算佐知子确实是为了女儿好（不冒点险怎么能变得更好呢？），她在母女关系上处理得也不是很好。她们的关系大部分时候都很紧张，她时常把万里子一个人撇在家里。这种紧张在淹死小猫的

事件上达到高潮。她没有如约让万里子带着小猫回到安子阿姨家，很明显后来也没有像她保证的那样：“你要是不喜欢那里，我们随时可以回来。”桥上悦子与万里子谈话的那一幕，评论家们基本上都认为实际上就是她们母女俩在谈话。这无疑是说服万里子去美国的一次重要的对话，回忆到这里时，当时的情形又清清楚楚地浮现在眼前，悦子无意中就跨过了旁观者的界限，变成了当事人。此时故事接近尾声，悦子与她的代言人之间的界限变得十分模糊，而到了最后就如前面所说的彻底崩溃。

悦子一会儿安慰自己：“我离开日本的动机是正当的，而且我知道我时刻把景子的利益放在心上。”一会儿又说：“我一开始就知道她在这里不会幸福的。可我还是决定把她带来。”她的一生都在做着激烈的良心斗争，当她的担心最终变为现实时——景子用自杀结束了自己不开心的一生——这种斗争达到了高潮。景子死后，悦子心中充满自责和悔恨。

从“时钟时间”计算，小说的时间跨度是妮基来看望悦子的那五天。这五天里，悦子想起了大约二十年前在长崎的往事，“心理时间”的跨度长达二十几年。作者似乎将她的一生浓缩在这几天里。故事一会儿发生在距离现代较近的英国，一会儿又回到遥远的战后的长崎。因为利用回忆，作者就可以轻易地在各个不同的时空（物理时空与心理时空）之间跳来跳去，无需多费笔墨加以交待，过去与现在交织在一起，造成了一种亦真亦幻的效果。

小说以战后的长崎为背景。一个关键词就是：改变。事物在变（重建正在如火如荼地进行，如佐知子的表姐说的：“我肯定春天的时候是没有那些楼的。”读者就能直观地感受到），人心也在变。书中虽然没有一个地方直接描写原子弹爆炸，但原子弹爆炸带来的阴影却无处不在。首先，悦子、佐知子和藤原太太都在原子弹爆炸中失去了很多，可是她们对战后生活的态度却迥然不同。积极乐观、向前看的藤原太太安心地经营着小小的面店，悦子和佐知子则不能像藤原太太那样坦然接受现实生活。其次，儿童是战争首当其冲的受害者，战争中儿童的利益往往最容易被牺牲。经历了战争的万里子对大人感到恐惧、不信任。再者，绪方先生所代表的旧价值观受到了以松田重夫为代表的新价值观的强烈挑战。夫妻关系也开始发生变化。

石黑以自己的家乡长崎作为处女作的背景自然与他的身世分不开，但他也一再强调读者不要把他的作品与某个特定的历史时期对号入座（比如他的另外一部小说《长日将尽》是以两战期间的英国为背

景，《我辈孤雏》则是以三十年代上海公共租界为背景）。他希望人们更多地把他的小说看成是隐喻和象征。选择故事发生在这里而不是那里更多的是技巧上的需要，而不是内容上的需要。他通常是故事、主题已经成形在胸了，最后才为故事寻找适合的地点。比如此书场景最初设置在英国康沃尔郡，而不是长崎。作者无意写一本历史小说，本书的中心还是探讨内疚和自欺的。

此外，石黑也一再强调他对背景的描写也不是如实描绘，只是取其典型。他认为如今的小说没有必要像十九世纪时那样细致入微地描写风景，因为电视、电影等媒体在写实方面比小说更有优势。小说家只需用几个关键词引起读者联想就够了。例如，介绍佐知子的小屋时，石黑只说“是乡下常见的那种木屋子，斜斜的瓦屋顶都快碰到地面了”，剩下的就靠读者自己去联想了。石黑对日本的印象除了儿时的记忆和父母的言传身教以外，还来自五十年代的日本电影，例如小津安二郎、黑泽明和成濑巳喜男的电影。

另外，书中平淡之中见辛辣讽刺的地方也比比皆是。例如，举世闻名的和平雕像就被作者揶揄了一番：

我一直觉得那尊雕像长得很丑，而且我无法将它和炸弹掉下来那天发生的事以及随后的可怕的日子联系起来。远远看近乎可笑，像个警察在指挥交通。我一直觉得它就只是一尊雕像，虽然大多数长崎人似乎把它当作一种象征，但我怀疑大家的感觉和我一样。

然而你不得不佩服他的角度很新颖，说法也不无道理。

此书出版于1982年，是石黑的处女作。其中的很多东西成了他日后的标志，如：第一人称叙述、回忆、幽默与讽刺、国际化的视角等。

石黑的第一部作品就获得了英国皇家学会颁发的温尼弗雷德·霍尔比纪念奖。虽然这部书出版至今已经快三十年了，但仍在不断重印。它的艺术价值和魅力得到了时间的检验，探讨人性的主题也永远不会过时，现在读来仍令人唏嘘感慨。

译者

KAZUO ISHIGURO

A Pale View of Hills

PART ONE

Chapter One

Niki, the name we finally gave my younger daughter, is not an abbreviation; it was a compromise I reached with her father. For paradoxically it was he who wanted to give her a Japanese name, and I — perhaps out of some selfish desire not to be reminded of the past — insisted on an English one. He finally agreed to Niki, thinking it had some vague echo of the East about it.

She came to see me earlier this year, in April, when the days were still cold and drizzly. Perhaps she had intended to stay longer, I do not know. But my country house and the quiet that surrounds it made her restless, and before long I could see she was anxious to return to her life in London. She listened impatiently to my classical records, flicked through numerous magazines. The telephone rang for her regularly, and she would stride across the carpet, her thin figure squeezed into her tight clothes, taking care to close the door behind her so I would not overhear her conversation. She left after five days.

She did not mention Keiko until the second day. It was a grey windy morning, and we had moved the armchairs nearer the windows to watch the rain falling on my garden.

“Did you expect me to be there?” she asked. “At the funeral, I mean.”

“No, I suppose not. I didn’t really think you’d come.”

“It did upset me, hearing about her. I almost came.”

“I never expected you to come.”

“People didn’t know what was wrong with me,” she said. “I didn’t tell anybody. I suppose I was embarrassed. They wouldn’t understand really, they wouldn’t understand how I felt about it. Sisters are supposed to be people you’re close

to, aren't they. You may not like them much, but you're still close to them. That's just not how it was though. I don't even remember what she looked like now."

"Yes, it's quite a time since you saw her."

"I just remember her as someone who used to make me miserable. That's what I remember about her. But I was sad though, when I heard."

Perhaps it was not just the quiet that drove my daughter back to London. For although we never dwelt long on the subject of Keiko's death, it was never far away, hovering over us whenever we talked.

Keiko, unlike Niki, was pure Japanese, and more than one newspaper was quick to pick up on this fact. The English are fond of their idea that our race has an instinct for suicide, as if further explanations are unnecessary; for that was all they reported, that she was Japanese and that she had hung herself in her room.

That same evening I was standing at the windows, looking out into the darkness, when I heard Niki say behind me; "What are you thinking about now, Mother?" She was sitting across the settee, a paperback book on her knee.

"I was thinking about someone I knew once. A woman I knew once."

"Someone you knew when you ... before you came to England?"

"I knew her when I was living in Nagasaki, if that's what you mean." She continued to watch me, so I added: "A long time ago. Long before I met your father."

She seemed satisfied and with some vague comment returned to her book. In many ways Niki is an affectionate child. She had not come simply to see how I had taken the news of Keiko's death; she had come to me out of a sense of mission.

For in recent years she has taken it upon herself to admire certain aspects of my past, and she had come prepared to tell me things were no different now, that I should have no regrets for those choices I once made. In short, to reassure me I was not responsible for Keiko's death.

I have no great wish to dwell on Keiko now, it brings me little comfort. I only mention her here because those were the circumstances around Niki's visit this April, and because it was during that visit I remembered Sachiko again after all this time. I never knew Sachiko well. In fact our friendship was no more than a matter of some several weeks one summer many years ago.

The worst days were over by then. American soldiers were as numerous as ever—for there was fighting in Korea—but in Nagasaki, after what had gone before, those were days of calm and relief. The world had a feeling of change about it.

My husband and I lived in an area to the east of the city, a short tram journey from the centre of town. A river ran near us, and I was once told that before the war a small village had grown up on the riverbank. But then the bomb had fallen and afterwards all that remained were charred ruins. Rebuilding had got under way and in time four concrete buildings had been erected, each containing forty or so separate apartments. Of the four, our block had been built last and it marked the point where the rebuilding programme had come to a halt; between us and the river lay an expanse of wasteground, several acres of dried mud and ditches. Many complained it was a health hazard, and indeed the drainage was appalling. All year round there were craters filled with stagnant water, and in the summer months the mosquitoes became intolerable. From time to time officials were to be seen pacing out measurements or scribbling down notes, but the months went by and nothing was done.

The occupants of the apartment blocks were much like ourselves — young married couples, the husbands having found good employment with expanding firms. Many of the apartments were owned by the firms, who rented them to employees at a generous rate. Each apartment was identical; the floors were tatami, the bathrooms and kitchens of a Western design. They were small and rather difficult to keep cool during the warmer months, but on the whole the feeling amongst the occupants seemed one of satisfaction. And yet I remember an unmistakable air of transience there, as if we were all of us waiting for the day we could move to something better.

One wooden cottage had survived both the devastation of the war and the government bulldozers. I could see it from our window, standing alone at the end of that expanse of wasteground, practically on the edge of the river. It was the kind of cottage often seen in the countryside, with a tiled roof sloping almost to the ground. Often, during my empty moments, I would stand at my window gazing at it.

To judge from the attention attracted by Sachiko's arrival, I was not alone in gazing at that cottage. There was much talk about two men seen working there one day — as to whether or not they were government workers. Later there was talk that a woman and her little girl were living there, and I saw them myself on several occasions, making their way across the ditchy ground.

It was towards the beginning of summer — I was in my third or fourth month of pregnancy by then — when I first watched that large American car, white and battered, bumping its way over the wasteground towards the river. It was well into the evening, and the sun setting behind the cottage gleamed a moment against the metal.

Then one afternoon I heard two women talking at the tram stop, about the woman who had moved into the derelict house by the river. One was explaining to her companion how she had spoken to the woman that morning and had received a clear

snub. Her companion agreed the newcomer seemed unfriendly — proud probably. She must be thirty at the youngest, they thought, for the child was at least ten. The first woman said the stranger had spoken with a Tokyo dialect and certainly was not from Nagasaki. They discussed for a while her “American friend”, then the woman spoke again of how unfriendly the stranger had been to her that morning.

Now I do not doubt that amongst those women I lived with then, there were those who had suffered, those with sad and terrible memories. But to watch them each day, busily involved with their husbands and their children, I found this hard to believe — that their lives had ever held the tragedies and nightmares of wartime. It was never my intention to appear unfriendly, but it was probably true that I made no special effort to seem otherwise. For at that point in my life, I was still wishing to be left alone.

It was with interest then that I listened to those women talking of Sachiko. I can recall quite vividly that afternoon at the tram stop. It was one of the first days of bright sunlight after the rainy season in June, and the soaked surfaces of brick and concrete were drying all around us. We were standing on a railway bridge and on one side of the tracks at the foot of the hill could be seen a cluster of roofs, as if houses had come tumbling down the slope. Beyond the houses, a little way off, were our apartment blocks standing like four concrete pillars. I felt a kind of sympathy for Sachiko then, and felt I understood something of that aloofness I had noticed about her when I had watched her from afar.

We were to become friends that summer and for a short time at least I was to be admitted into her confidence. I am not sure now how it was we first met. I remember one afternoon spotting her figure ahead of me on the path leading out of the housing precinct. I was hurrying, but Sachiko walked on with a steady stride. By that point we must have

already known each other by name, for I remember calling to her as I got nearer.

Sachiko turned and waited for me to catch up. "Is something wrong?" she asked.

"I'm glad I found you," I said, a little out of breath. "Your daughter, she was fighting just as I came out. Back there near the ditches."

"She was fighting?"

"With two other children. One of them was a boy. It looked a nasty little fight."

"I see." Sachiko began to walk again. I fell in step beside her.

"I don't want to alarm you," I said, "but it did look quite a nasty fight. In fact, I think I saw a cut on your daughter's cheek."

"I see."

"It was back there, on the edge of the wasteground."

"And are they still fighting, do you think?" She continued to walk up the hill.

"Well, no. I saw your daughter running off."

Sachiko looked at me and smiled. "Are you not used to seeing children fight?"

"Well, children do fight, I suppose. But I thought I ought to tell you. And you see, I don't think she's on her way to school. The other children carried on towards the school, but your daughter went back towards the river."

Sachiko made no reply and continued to walk up the hill.

"As a matter of fact," I continued, "I'd meant to mention this to you before. You see, I've seen your daughter on a number of occasions recently. I wonder, perhaps, if she hasn't been playing truant a little."

The path forked at the top of the hill. Sachiko stopped and we turned to each other.

“It’s very kind of you to be so concerned, Etsuko,” she said. “So very kind. I’m sure you’ll make a splendid mother.”

I had supposed previously — like the women at the tram stop — that Sachiko was a woman of thirty or so. But possibly her youthful figure had been deceiving, for she had the face of an older person. She was gazing at me with a slightly amused expression, and something in the way she did so caused me to laugh self-consciously.

“I do appreciate your coming to find me like this,” she went on. “But as you see, I’m rather busy just now. I have to go into Nagasaki.”

“I see. I just thought it best to come and tell you, that’s all.”

For a moment, she continued to look at me with her amused expression. Then she said: “How kind you are. Now please excuse me. I must get into town.” She bowed, then turned towards the path that led up towards the tram stop.

“It’s just that she had a cut on her face,” I said, raising my voice a little. “And the river’s quite dangerous in places. I thought it best to come and tell you.”

She turned and looked at me once more. “If you have nothing else to concern yourself with, Etsuko,” she said, “then perhaps you’d care to look after my daughter for the day. I’ll be back sometime in the afternoon. I’m sure you’ll get on very well with her.”

“I wouldn’t object, if that’s what you wish. I must say, your daughter seems quite young to be left on her own all day.”

“How kind you are,” Sachiko said again. Then she smiled once more. “Yes, I’m sure you’ll make a splendid mother.”

After parting with Sachiko, I made my way down the hill and back through the housing precinct. I soon found myself back outside our apartment block, facing that expanse of wasteground. Seeing no sign of the little girl, I was about to go inside, but then caught sight of some movement along the riverbank. Mariko must previously have been crouching down, for now I could see her small figure quite clearly across the muddy ground. At first, I felt the urge to forget the whole matter and return to my housework. Eventually, however, I began making my way towards her, taking care to avoid the ditches.

As far as I remember, that was the first occasion I spoke to Mariko. Quite probably there was nothing so unusual about her behaviour that morning, for, after all, I was a stranger to the child and she had every right to regard me with suspicion. And if in fact I did experience a curious feeling of unease at the time, it was probably nothing more than a simple response to Mariko's manner.

The river that morning was still quite high and flowing swiftly after the rainy season a few weeks earlier. The ground sloped down steeply before it reached the water's edge, and the mud at the foot of the slope, where the little girl was standing, looked distinctly wetter. Mariko was dressed in a simple cotton dress which ended at her knees, and her short trimmed hair made her face look boyish. She looked up, not smiling, to where I stood at the top of the muddy slope.

"Hello," I said, "I was just speaking with your mother. You must be Mariko-San."

The little girl continued to stare up at me, saying nothing. What I had thought earlier to be a wound on her cheek, I now saw to be a smudge of mud.

"Shouldn't you be at school?" I asked.

She remained silent for a moment. Then she said: "I don't go to school."

"But all children must go to school. Don't you like to go?"

"I don't go to school."

"But hasn't your mother sent you to a school here?"

Mariko did not reply. Instead, she took a step away from me.

"Careful," I said. "You'll fall into the water. It's very slippery."

She continued to stare up at me from the bottom of the slope. I could see her small shoes lying in the mud beside her. Her bare feet, like her shoes, were covered in mud.

"I was just speaking with your mother," I said, smiling at her reassuringly. "She said it would be perfectly all right if you came and waited for her at my house. It's just over there, that building there. You could come and try some cakes I made yesterday. Would you like that, Mariko-San? And you could tell me all about yourself."

Mariko continued to watch me carefully. Then, without taking her eyes off me, she crouched down and picked up her shoes. At first, I took this as a sign that she was about to follow me. But then as she continued to stare up at me, I realized she was holding her shoes in readiness to run away.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I said, with a nervous laugh. "I'm a friend of your mother's."

As far as I remember, that was all that took place between us that morning. I had no wish to alarm the child further, and before long I turned and made my way back across the wasteground. The child's response had, it is true, upset me somewhat; for in those days, such small things were capable of arousing in me every kind of misgiving about

motherhood. I told myself the episode was insignificant, and that in any case, further opportunities to make friends with the little girl were bound to present themselves over the coming days. As it was, I did not speak to Mariko again until one afternoon a fortnight or so later.

I had never been inside the cottage prior to that afternoon, and I had been rather surprised when Sachiko had asked me in. In fact, I had sensed immediately that she had done so with something in mind, and as it turned out, I was not mistaken.

The cottage was tidy, but I remember a kind of stark shabbiness about the place; the wooden beams that crossed the ceiling looked old and insecure, and a faint odour of dampness lingered everywhere. At the front of the cottage, the main partitions had been left wide open to allow the sunlight in across the veranda. For all that, much of the place remained in shadow.

Mariko was lying in the corner furthest from the sunlight. I could see something moving beside her in the shade, and when I came closer, saw a large cat curled up on the tatami.

“Hello, Mariko-San,” I said. “Don’t you remember me?”

She stopped stroking the cat and looked up.

“We met the other day,” I went on. “Don’t you remember? You were by the river.”

The little girl showed no signs of recognition. She looked at me for a while, then began to stroke her cat again. Behind me, I could hear Sachiko preparing the tea on the open stove at the centre of the room. I was about to go over to her, when Mariko said suddenly: “She’s going to have kittens.”

“Oh really? How nice.”

“Do you want a kitten?”

“That’s very kind of you, Mariko-San. We’ll see. But I’m sure they’ll all find nice homes.”

“Why don’t you take a kitten?” the child said. “The other woman said she’d take one.”

“We’ll see, Mariko-San. Which other lady was this?”

“The other woman. The woman from across the river. She said she’d take one.”

“But I don’t think anyone lives over there, Mariko-San. It’s just trees and forest over there.”

“She said she’d take me to her house. She lives across the river. I didn’t go with her.”

I looked at the child for a second. Then a thought struck me and I laughed.

“But that was me, Mariko-San. Don’t you remember? I asked you to come to my house while your mother was away in the town.”

Mariko looked up at me again. “Not you,” she said. “The other woman. The woman from across the river. She was here last night. While Mother was away.”

“Last night? While your mother was away?”

“She said she’d take me to her house, but I didn’t go with her. Because it was dark. She said we could take the lantern with us” — she gestured towards a lantern hung on the wall — “but I didn’t go with her. Because it was dark.”

Behind me, Sachiko had got to her feet and was looking at her daughter. Mariko became silent, then turned away and began once more to stroke her cat.

“Let’s go out on the veranda,” Sachiko said to me. She was holding the tea things on a tray. “It’s cooler out there.”

We did as she suggested, leaving Mariko in her corner. From the veranda, the river itself was hidden from view, but I could see where the ground sloped down and the mud became wetter as it approached the water. Sachiko seated herself on a cushion and began to pour the tea.

“The place is alive with stray cats,” she said. “I’m not so optimistic about these kittens.”

“Yes, there are so many strays,” I said. “It’s such a shame. Did Mariko find her cat around here somewhere?”

“No, we brought that creature with us. I’d have preferred to leave it behind myself, but Mariko wouldn’t hear of it.”

“You brought it all the way from Tokyo?”

“Oh no. We’ve been living in Nagasaki for almost a year now. On the other side of the city.”

“Oh really? I didn’t realize that. You lived there with ... with friends?”

Sachiko stopped pouring and looked at me, the teapot held in both hands. I saw in her gaze something of that amused expression with which she had observed me on that earlier occasion.

“I’m afraid you’re quite wrong, Etsuko,” she said, eventually. Then she began to pour the tea again. “We were staying at my uncle’s house.”

“I assure you, I was merely ...”

“Yes, of course. So there’s no need to get embarrassed, is there?” She laughed and passed me my teacup. “I’m sorry, Etsuko, I don’t mean to tease you. As a matter of fact, I did have something to ask you. A little favour.” Sachiko began to pour tea into her own cup, and as she did so, a more serious air seemed to enter her manner. Then she put down the teapot and looked at me. “You see, Etsuko, certain

arrangements I made have not gone as planned. As a result, I find myself in need of money. Not a great deal, you understand. Just a small amount. ”

“I quite understand,” I said, lowering my voice. “It must be very difficult for you, with Mariko-San to think of. ”

“Etsuko, may I ask a favour of you? ”

I bowed. “I have some savings of my own,” I said, almost in a whisper. “I’d be pleased to be of some assistance. ”

To my surprise, Sachiko laughed loudly. “You’re very kind,” she said. “But I didn’t in fact want you to lend me money. I had something else in mind. You mentioned something the other day. A friend of yours who ran a noodle shop. ”

“Mrs Fujiwara, you mean? ”

“You were saying she may want an assistant. A small job like that would be very useful to me. ”

“Well,” I said, uncertainly, “I could enquire if you wish. ”

“That would be very kind. ” Sachiko looked at me for a moment. “But you look rather unsure about it, Etsuko. ”

“Not at all. I’ll enquire when I next see her. But I was just wondering” — I lowered my voice again — “who would look after your daughter during the day? ”

“Mariko? She could help at the noodle shop. She’s quite capable of being useful. ”

“I’m sure she is. But you see, I’m not certain how Mrs Fujiwara would feel. After all, Mariko should in reality be at school during the day. ”

“I assure you, Etsuko, Mariko won’t be the slightest problem. Besides, the schools are closing next week. And I’ll

make sure she won't get in the way. You can rest assured on that. ”

I bowed again. “I'll enquire when I next see her. ”

“I'm very grateful to you. ” Sachiko took a sip from her teacup. “In fact, perhaps I could ask you to see your friend within the next few days. ”

“I'll try. ”

“You're so kind. ”

We fell silent for a moment. My attention had been caught earlier by Sachiko's teapot; it appeared a fine piece of craftsmanship made from a pale china. The teacup I now held in my hand was of the same delicate material. As we sat drinking our tea, I was struck, not for the first time, by the odd contrast of the tea-set alongside the shabbiness of the cottage and the muddy ground beneath the veranda. When I looked up, I realized Sachiko had been watching me.

“I'm used to good crockery, Etsuko, ” she said. “You see, I don't always live like ” — she waved a hand towards the cottage — “like this. Of course, I don't mind a little discomfort. But about some things, I'm still rather discerning. ”

I bowed, saying nothing. Sachiko, also, began to study her teacup. She continued to examine it, turning it carefully in her hands. Then suddenly she said: “I suppose it's true to say I stole this tea-set. Still, I don't suppose my uncle will miss it much. ”

I looked at her, somewhat surprised. Sachiko put the teacup down in front of her and waved away some flies.

“You were living at your uncle's house, you say? ” I asked.

She nodded slowly. “A most beautiful house. With a pond in the garden. Very different from these present

surroundings. ”

For a moment, we both glanced towards the inside of the cottage. Mariko was lying in her corner, just as we had left her, her back turned towards us. She appeared to be talking quietly to her cat.

“I didn’t realize”, I said, when neither of us had spoken for some time, “that anyone lived across the river. ”

Sachiko turned and glanced towards the trees on the far bank. “No, I haven’t seen anyone there. ”

“But your babysitter. Mariko was saying she came from over there. ”

“I have no babysitter, Etsuko. I know nobody here. ”

“Mariko was telling me about some lady ...”

“Please don’t pay any attention. ”

“You mean she was just making it up? ”

For a brief moment, Sachiko seemed to be considering something. Then she said: “Yes. She was just making it up. ”

“Well, I suppose children often do things like that. ”

Sachiko nodded. “When you become a mother, Etsuko, ” she said, smiling, “you’ll need to get used to such things. ”

We drifted on to other subjects then. Those were early days in our friendship and we talked mainly of little things. It was not until one morning some weeks later that I heard Mariko mention again a woman who had approached her.

Chapter Two

In those days, returning to the Nakagawa district still provoked in me mixed emotions of sadness and pleasure. It is a hilly area, and climbing again those steep narrow streets between the clusters of houses never failed to fill me with a deep sense of loss. Though not a place I visited on casual impulse, I was unable to stay away for long.

Calling on Mrs Fujiwara aroused in me much the same mixture of feelings; for she had been amongst my mother's closest friends, a kindly woman with hair that was by then turning grey. Her noodle shop was situated in a busy sidestreet; it had a concrete forecourt under the cover of an extended roof and it was there her customers ate, at the wooden tables and benches. She did a lot of trade with office workers during their lunch breaks and again on their way home, but at other times of the day the clientele became sparse.

I was a little anxious that afternoon, for it was the first time I had called at the shop since Sachiko had started to work there. I felt concerned — on both their behalves — especially since I was not sure how genuinely Mrs Fujiwara had wanted an assistant. It was a hot day, and the little sidestreet was alive with people. I was glad to come into the shade.

Mrs Fujiwara was pleased to see me. She sat me down at a table, then went to fetch some tea. Customers were few that afternoon — perhaps there were none, I do not remember — and Sachiko was not to be seen. When Mrs Fujiwara came back, I asked her: “How is my friend getting along? Is she managing all right?”

“Your friend?” Mrs Fujiwara looked over her shoulder towards the doorway of the kitchen. “She was peeling prawns.

I expect she'll be out soon." Then, as if on second thoughts, she got to her feet and walked a little way towards the doorway. "Sachiko-San," she called. "Etsuko is here." I heard a voice reply from within.

As she sat down again, Mrs Fujiwara reached over and touched my stomach. "It's beginning to show now," she said. "You must take good care from now on."

"I don't do a great deal anyway," I said. "I lead a very easy life."

"That's good. I remember my first time, there was an earthquake, quite a large one. I was carrying Kazuo then. He came perfectly healthy though. Try not to worry too much, Etsuko."

"I try not to." I glanced towards the kitchen door. "Is my friend getting on well here?"

Mrs Fujiwara followed my gaze towards the kitchen. Then she turned to me again and said: "I expect so. You're good friends, are you?"

"Yes. I haven't found many friends where we live. I'm very glad to have met Sachiko."

"Yes. That was fortunate." She sat there looking at me for several seconds. "Etsuko, you're looking rather tired today."

"I suppose I am." I laughed a little. "It's only to be expected, I suppose."

"Yes, of course." Mrs Fujiwara kept looking into my face. "But I meant you looked a little — miserable."

"Miserable? I certainly don't feel it. I'm just a little tired, but otherwise I've never been happier."

"That's good. You must keep your mind on happy things now. Your child. And the future."

"Yes, I will. Thinking about the child cheers me up."

“Good.” She nodded, still keeping her gaze on me. “Your attitude makes all the difference. A mother can take all the physical care she likes, she needs a positive attitude to bring up a child.”

“Well, I’m certainly looking forward to it,” I said, with a laugh. A noise made me look towards the kitchen again, but Sachiko was still not in sight.

“There’s a young woman I see every week,” Mrs Fujiwara went on. “She must be six or seven months pregnant now. I see her every time I go to visit the cemetery. I’ve never spoken to her, but she looks so sad, standing there with her husband. It’s a shame, a pregnant girl and her husband spending their Sundays thinking about the dead. I know they’re being respectful, but all the same, I think it’s a shame. They should be thinking about the future.”

“I suppose she finds it hard to forget.”

“I suppose so. I feel sorry for her. But they should be thinking ahead now. That’s no way to bring a child into the world, visiting the cemetery every week.”

“Perhaps not.”

“Cemeteries are no places for young people. Kazuo comes with me sometimes, but I never insist. It’s time he started looking ahead too.”

“How is Kazuo?” I asked. “Is his work coming on well?”

“His work’s fine. He’s expecting to be promoted next month. But he needs to give other things a little thought. He won’t be young for ever.”

Just then my eye was caught by a small figure standing out in the sunlight amidst the rush of passers-by.

“Why, isn’t that Mariko?” I said.

Mrs Fujiwara turned in her seat. "Mariko-San," she called. "Where have you been?"

For a moment, Mariko remained standing out in the street. Then she stepped into the shade of the forecourt, came walking past us and sat down at an empty table nearby.

Mrs Fujiwara watched the little girl, then gave me an uneasy look. She seemed about to say something, but then got to her feet and went over to the little girl.

"Mariko-San, where have you been?" Mrs Fujiwara had lowered her voice, but I was still able to hear. "You're not to keep running off like that. Your mother's very angry with you."

Mariko was studying her fingers. She did not look up at Mrs Fujiwara.

"And Mariko-San, please, you're never to talk to customers like that. Don't you know it's very rude? Your mother's very angry with you."

Mariko went on studying her hands. Behind her, Sachiko appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. Seeing Sachiko that morning, I recall I was struck afresh by the impression that she was indeed older than I had first supposed; with her long hair hidden away inside a handkerchief, the tired areas of skin around her eyes and mouth seemed somehow more pronounced.

"Here's your mother now," said Mrs Fujiwara. "I expect she's very angry with you."

The little girl had remained seated with her back to her mother. Sachiko threw a quick glance towards her, then turned to me with a smile.

"How do you do, Etsuko," she said, with an elegant bow. "What a pleasant surprise to see you here."

At the other end of the forecourt, two women in office clothes were seating themselves at a table. Mrs Fujiwara gestured towards them, then turned to Mariko once more.

“Why don’t you go into the kitchen for a little while,” she said, in a low voice. “Your mother will show you what to do. It’s very easy. I’m sure a clever girl like you could manage.”

Mariko gave no sign of having heard. Mrs Fujiwara glanced up at Sachiko, and for a brief instant I thought they exchanged cold glances. Then Mrs Fujiwara turned and went off towards her customers. She appeared to know them, for as she walked across the forecourt, she gave them a familiar greeting.

Sachiko came and sat at the edge of my table. “It’s so hot inside that kitchen,” she said.

“How are you getting on here?” I asked her.

“How am I getting on? Well, Etsuko, it’s certainly an amusing sort of experience, working in a noodle shop. I must say, I never imagined I’d one day find myself scrubbing tables in a place like this. Still” — she laughed quickly — “it’s quite amusing.”

“I see. And Mariko, is she settling in?”

We both glanced over to Mariko’s table; the child was still looking down at her hands.

“Oh, Mariko’s fine,” said Sachiko. “Of course, she’s rather restless at times. But then you’d hardly expect otherwise under the circumstances. It’s regrettable, Etsuko, but you see, my daughter doesn’t seem to share my sense of humour. She doesn’t find it quite so amusing here.” Sachiko smiled and glanced towards Mariko again. Then she got to her feet and went over to her.

She asked quietly: “Is it true what Mrs Fujiwara told me?”

The little girl remained silent.

“She says you were being rude to customers again. Is that true?”

Mariko still gave no response.

“Is it true what she told me? Mariko, please answer when you’re spoken to.”

“The woman came round again,” said Mariko. “Last night. While you were gone.”

Sachiko looked at her daughter for a second or two. Then she said: “I think you should go inside now. Go on, I’ll show you what you have to do.”

“She came again last night. She said she’d take me to her house.”

“Go on, Mariko, go on into the kitchen and wait for me there.”

“She’s going to show me where she lives.”

“Mariko, go inside.”

Across the forecourt, Mrs Fujiwara and the two women were laughing loudly about something. Mariko continued to stare at her palms. Sachiko turned away and came back to my table.

“Excuse me a moment, Etsuko,” she said. “But I left something boiling. I’ll be back in just a moment.” Then lowering her voice, she added: “You can hardly expect her to get enthusiastic about a place like this, can you?” She smiled and went towards the kitchen. At the doorway, she turned once more to her daughter.

“Come on, Mariko, come inside.”

Mariko did not move. Sachiko shrugged, then disappeared inside the kitchen.

Around that same time, in early summer, Ogata-San came to visit us, his first visit since moving away from Nagasaki earlier that year. He was my husband's father, and it seems rather odd I always thought of him as "Ogata-San", even in those days when that was my own name. But then I had known him as "Ogata-San" for such a long time — since long before I had ever met Jiro — I had never got used to calling him "Father".

There was little family resemblance between Ogata-San and my husband. When I recall Jiro today, I picture a small stocky man wearing a stern expression; my husband was always fastidious about his appearance, and even at home would frequently dress in shirt and tie. I see him now as I saw him so often, seated on the tatami in our living room, hunched forward over his breakfast or supper. I remember he had this same tendency to hunch forward — in a manner not unlike that of a boxer — whether standing or walking. By contrast, his father would always sit with his shoulders flung well back, and had a relaxed, generous manner about him. When he came to visit us that summer, Ogata-San was still in the best of health, displaying a well-built physique and the robust energy of a much younger man.

I remember the morning he first mentioned Shigeo Matsuda. He had been with us for a few days by then, apparently finding the small square room comfortable enough for an extended stay. It was a bright morning and the three of us were finishing breakfast before Jiro left for the office.

"This school reunion of yours," he said to Jiro.
"That's tonight, is it?"

"No, tomorrow evening."

"Will you be seeing Shigeo Matsuda?"

"Shigeo? No, I doubt it. He doesn't usually attend these occasions. I'm sorry to be going off and leaving you, Father.

I'd rather give the thing a miss, but that may cause offence. ”

“Don't worry. Etsuko-San will look after me well enough. And these occasions are important. ”

“I'd take some days off work,” Jiro said, “but we're so busy just now. As I say, this order came into the office the day you arrived. A real nuisance. ”

“Not at all,” said his father. “I understand perfectly. It wasn't so long ago I was rushed off my feet with work myself. I'm not so old, you know. ”

“No, of course. ”

We ate on in silence for several moments. Then Ogata-San said:

“So you don't think you'll be running into Shigeo Matsuda. But you still see him from time to time? ”

“Not so often these days. We've gone such separate ways since we got older. ”

“Yes, this is what happens. Pupils all go separate ways, and then they find it so difficult to keep in touch. That's why these reunions are so important. One shouldn't be so quick to forget old allegiances. And it's good to take a glance back now and then, it helps keep things in perspective. Yes, I think you should certainly go along tomorrow. ”

“Perhaps Father will still be with us on Sunday,” my husband said. “Then perhaps we could go out somewhere for the day. ”

“Yes, we can do that. A splendid idea. But if you have work to do, it doesn't matter in the least. ”

“No, I think I can leave Sunday free. I'm sorry to be so busy at the moment. ”

“Have you asked any of your old teachers along tomorrow?” Ogata-San asked.

“Not that I know of.”

“It’s a shame teachers aren’t asked more often to these occasions. I was asked along from time to time. And when I was younger, we always made a point of inviting our teachers. I think it’s only proper. It’s an opportunity for a teacher to see the fruits of his work, and for the pupils to express their gratitude to him. I think it’s only proper that teachers are present.”

“Yes, perhaps you have a point.”

“Men these days forget so easily to whom they owe their education.”

“Yes, you’re very right.”

My husband finished eating and laid down his chopsticks. I poured him some tea.

“An odd little thing happened the other day,” Ogata-San said. “In retrospect, I suppose it’s rather amusing. I was at the library in Nagasaki, and I came across this periodical — a teachers’ periodical. I’d never heard of it, it wasn’t in existence in my days. To read it, you’d think all the teachers in Japan were communists now.”

“Apparently communism is growing in the country,” my husband said.

“Your friend Shigeo Matsuda had written in it. Now imagine my surprise when I saw my name mentioned in his article. I didn’t think I was so noteworthy these days.”

“I’m sure Father is still remembered very well in Nagasaki,” I put in.

“It was quite extraordinary. He was talking about Dr Endo and myself, about our retirements. If I understood him correctly, he was implying that the profession was well rid

of us. In fact, he went so far as to suggest we should have been dismissed at the end of the war. Quite extraordinary. ”

“Are you sure it’s the same Shigeo Matsuda?” asked Jiro.

“The same one. From Kuriyama Highschool. Extraordinary. I remember when he used to come to our house, to play with you. Your mother used to spoil him. I asked the librarian if I could buy a copy, and she said she would order one for me. I’ll show it to you. ”

“It seems very disloyal,” I said.

“I was so surprised,” Ogata-San said, turning to me. “And I was the one who introduced him to the headmaster at Kuriyama. ”

Jiro drank up his tea and wiped his mouth with his napkin. “It’s very regrettable. As I say, I haven’t seen Shigeo for some time. I’m sorry, Father, but you must excuse me now or I’ll be late. ”

“Why certainly. Have a good day at work. ”

Jiro stepped down to the entryway, where he started to put on his shoes. I said to Ogata-San: “Someone who reached your position, Father, must expect a little criticism. That’s only natural. ”

“Of course,” he said, breaking out into a laugh. “No, don’t concern yourself about it, Etsuko. I hadn’t given it a second thought. I just happened to think of it because Jiro was going to his reunion. I wonder if Endo read the article. ”

“I hope you have a good day, Father,” Jiro called from the entryway. “I’ll try to be back a little early if I can. ”

“Nonsense, don’t make such a fuss. Your work is important. ”

A little later that morning, Ogata-San emerged from his room dressed in his jacket and tie.

“Are you going out, Father?” I asked.

“I thought I’d just pay a visit to Dr Endo.”

“Dr Endo?”

“Yes, I thought I’d go and see how he was keeping these days.”

“But you’re not going before lunch, are you?”

“I thought I’d better go quite soon,” he said, looking at his watch. “Endo lives a little way outside Nagasaki now. I’ll need to get a train.”

“Well, let me pack you a lunch-box, it won’t take a minute.”

“Why, thank you, Etsuko. In that case I’ll wait a few minutes. In fact, I was hoping you’d offer to pack me lunch.”

“Then you should have asked,” I said, getting to my feet. “You won’t always get what you want just by hinting like that, Father.”

“But I knew you’d pick me up correctly, Etsuko. I have faith in you.”

I went through to the kitchen, put on some sandals and stepped down to the tiled floor. A few minutes later, the partition slid open and Ogata-San appeared at the doorway. He seated himself at the threshold to watch me working.

“What is that you’re cooking me there?”

“Nothing much. Just left-overs from last night. At such short notice, you don’t deserve any better.”

“And yet you’ll manage to turn it into something quite appetizing, I’m sure. What’s that you’re doing with the egg? That’s not a left-over too, is it?”

“I’m adding an omelette. You’re very fortunate, Father, I’m in such a generous mood.”

“An omelette. You must teach me how to do that. Is it difficult?”

“Extremely difficult. It would be hopeless you trying to learn at this stage.”

“But I’m very keen to learn. And what do you mean ‘at this stage’? I’m still young enough to learn many new things.”

“Are you really planning on becoming a cook, Father?”

“It’s nothing to laugh at. I’ve come to appreciate cooking over the years. It’s an art, I’m convinced of it, just as noble as painting or poetry. It’s not appreciated simply because the product disappears so quickly.”

“Persevere with painting, Father. You do it much better.”

“Painting.” He gave a sigh. “It doesn’t give me the satisfaction it once did. No, I think I should learn to cook omelettes as well as you do, Etsuko. You must show me before I go back to Fukuoka.”

“You wouldn’t think it such an art once you’d learnt how it was done. Perhaps women should keep these things secret.”

He laughed, as if to himself, then continued to watch me quietly.

“Which are you hoping for, Etsuko?” he asked, eventually. “A boy or a girl?”

“I really don’t mind. If it’s a boy we could name him after you.”

“Really? Is that a promise?”

“On second thoughts I don’t know. I was forgetting what Father’s first name was. Seiji — that’s an ugly sort of

name. ”

“But that’s only because you find me ugly, Etsuko. I remember one class of pupils decided I resembled a hippopotamus. But you shouldn’t be put off by such outer trappings. ”

“That’s true. Well, we’ll have to see what Jiro thinks. ”

“Yes. ”

“But I’d like my son to be named after you, Father. ”

“That would make me very happy. ” He smiled and gave me a small bow. “But then I know how irritating it is when relatives insist on having children named after them. I remember the time my wife and I argued over what to call Jiro. I wanted to name him after an uncle of mine, but my wife disliked this practice of naming children after relatives. Of course, she had her way in the end. Keiko was a hard woman to budge. ”

“Keiko is a nice name. Perhaps if it’s a girl we could call her Keiko. ”

“You shouldn’t make such promises so rashly. You’ll make an old man very disappointed if you don’t keep to them. ”

“I’m sorry, I was just thinking aloud. ”

“And besides, Etsuko, I’m sure there are others you’d prefer to name your child after. Others you were closer to. ”

“Perhaps. But if it’s a boy I’d like him to be named after you. You were like a father to me once. ”

“Am I no longer like a father to you? ”

“Yes, of course. But it’s different. ”

“Jiro is a good husband to you, I hope. ”

“Of course. I couldn’t be happier. ”

“And the child will make you happy.”

“Yes. It couldn't have happened at a better time. We're quite settled here now, and Jiro's work is going well. This is the ideal time for this to have happened.”

“So you're happy?”

“Yes, I'm very happy.”

“Good. I'm happy for you both.”

“There, it's all ready for you.” I handed him the lacquer lunch-box.

“Ah yes, the left-overs,” he said, receiving it with a dramatic bow. He lifted the lid a little. “It looks delightful though.”

When I eventually went back into the living room, Ogata-San was putting on his shoes in the entryway.

“Tell me, Etsuko,” he said, not looking up from his laces. “Have you met this Shigeo Matsuda?”

“Once or twice. He used to visit us after we were married.”

“But he and Jiro aren't such close friends these days?”

“Hardly. We exchange greeting cards, but that's all.”

“I'm going to suggest to Jiro he writes to his friend. Shigeo should apologize. Or else I'll have to insist Jiro disassociates himself from that young man.”

“I see.”

“I thought of suggesting it to him earlier, when we were talking at breakfast. But then that kind of talk is best left till the evening.”

“You're probably right.”

Ogata-San thanked me once more for the lunch-box before leaving.

As it turned out, he did not bring the matter up that night. They both seemed tired when they came in and spent most of the evening reading newspapers, speaking little. And only once did Ogata-San mention Dr Endo. That was at supper, and he said simply: "Endo seemed well. He misses his work though. After all, the man lived for it."

In bed that night, before we fell asleep, I said to Jiro: "I hope Father's quite content with the way we're receiving him."

"What else can he expect?" my husband said. "Why don't you take him out somewhere if you're so worried."

"Will you be working on Saturday afternoon?"

"How can I afford not to? I'm behind schedule as it is. He happened to choose the most difficult of times to visit me. It's just too bad."

"But we could still go out on Sunday, couldn't we?"

I have a feeling I did not receive a reply then, though I lay gazing up into the darkness waiting. Jiro was often tired after a day's work and not in the mood for conversation.

In any case, it seems I was worrying unduly about Ogata-San, for his visit that summer turned out to be one of his lengthiest. I remember he was still with us that night Sachiko knocked on our apartment door.

She was wearing a dress I had never seen before, and there was a shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her face had been carefully made up, but a thin strand of hair had come loose and was hanging over her cheek.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, Etsuko," she said, smiling. "I was wondering if by any chance Mariko was here."

"Mariko? Why, no."

"Well, never mind. You haven't seen her at all?"

“I’m afraid not. You’ve lost her?”

“There’s no need to look like that,” she said, with a laugh. “It’s just that she wasn’t in the cottage when I got back, that’s all. I’m sure I’ll find her very soon.”

We were talking at the entryway, and I became aware of Jiro and Ogata-San looking towards us. I introduced Sachiko, and they all bowed to each other.

“This is worrying,” Ogata-San said. “Perhaps we’d better phone the police straight away.”

“There’s no need for that,” said Sachiko. “I’m sure I’ll find her.”

“But perhaps it’s best to be safe and phone anyway.”

“No really” — a slight hint of irritation had entered Sachiko’s voice — “there’s no need. I’m sure I’ll find her.”

“I’ll help you look for her,” I said, starting to put on my jacket.

My husband looked at me disapprovingly. He seemed about to speak, but then stopped himself. In the end, he said: “It’s almost dark now.”

“Really, Etsuko, there’s no need to make such a fuss,” Sachiko was saying. “But if you don’t mind coming out for a minute, I’ll be most grateful.”

“Take care, Etsuko,” Ogata-San said. “And phone the police if you don’t find the child soon.”

We descended the flight of stairs. Outside it was still warm, and across the wasteground the sun had sunk very low, highlighting the muddy furrows.

“Have you looked around the housing precinct?” I asked.

“No, not yet.”

“Let’s look then.” I began to walk rapidly. “Does Mariko have friends she may be with?”

“I don’t think so. Really, Etsuko” — Sachiko laughed and put a hand on my arm — “there’s no need to be so alarmed. Nothing will have happened to her. In fact, Etsuko, I really came round because I wanted to tell you some news. You see, it’s all been settled at last. We’re leaving for America within the next few days.”

“America?” Perhaps because of Sachiko’s hand on my arm, perhaps out of sheer surprise, I stopped walking.

“Yes, America. You’ve no doubt heard of such a place.” She seemed pleased at my astonishment.

I began to walk again. Our precinct was an expanse of paved concrete, interrupted occasionally by thin young trees planted when the buildings had gone up. Above us, lights had come on in most of the windows.

“Aren’t you going to ask me anything more?” Sachiko said, catching up with me. “Aren’t you going to ask me why I’m going? And who I’m going with?”

“I’m very glad if this is what you wanted,” I said. “But perhaps we should find your daughter first.”

“Etsuko, you must understand, there’s nothing I’m ashamed of. There’s nothing I want to hide from anyone. Please ask me anything you want, I’m not ashamed.”

“I thought perhaps we should find your daughter first. We can talk later.”

“Very well, Etsuko,” she said, with a laugh. “Let’s find Mariko first.”

We searched the playing areas and walked around each of the apartment blocks. Soon we found ourselves back where we had started. Then I spotted two women talking by the main entrance to one of the apartment blocks.

“Perhaps those ladies over there could help us,” I said.

Sachiko did not move. She looked over towards the two women, then said: “I doubt it.”

“But they may have seen her. They may have seen your daughter.”

Sachiko continued to look at the women. Then she gave a short laugh and shrugged. “Very well,” she said. “Let’s give them something to gossip about. It’s no concern of mine.”

We walked over to them and Sachiko politely and calmly made her enquiries. The women exchanged concerned looks, but neither had seen the little girl. Sachiko assured them there was no cause for alarm, and we took our leave.

“I’m sure that made their day,” she said to me. “Now they’ll have something to talk about.”

“I’m sure they had no malicious thoughts whatsoever. They both seemed genuinely concerned.”

“You’re so kind, Etsuko, but there’s really no need to convince me of such things. You see, it’s never been any concern to me what people like that thought, and I care even less now.”

We stopped walking. I threw a glance around me, and up at the apartment windows. “Where else could she be?” I said.

“You see, Etsuko, there’s nothing I’m ashamed of. There’s nothing I want to hide from you. Or from those women, for that matter.”

“Do you think we should search by the river?”

“The river? Oh, I’ve looked along there.”

“What about the other side? Perhaps she’s over on the other side.”

“I doubt it, Etsuko. In fact, if I know my daughter, she’ll be back at the cottage at this very moment. Probably rather pleased with herself to have caused this fuss.”

“Well, let’s go and see.”

When we came back to the edge of the wasteground, the sun was disappearing behind the river, silhouetting the willow trees along the bank.

“There’s no need for you to come with me,” Sachiko said. “I’ll find her in good time.”

“It’s all right. I’ll come with you.”

“Very well then. Come with me.”

We began walking towards the cottage. I was wearing sandals and found it hard going on the uneven earth.

“How long were you out?” I asked. Sachiko was a pace or two ahead of me; she did not reply at first, and I thought possibly she had not heard me. “How long were you out?” I repeated.

“Oh, not long.”

“How long? Half an hour? Longer?”

“About three or four hours, I suppose.”

“I see.”

We continued our way across the muddy ground, doing our best to avoid any puddles. As we approached the cottage, I said: “Perhaps we should look over on the other side, just in case.”

“The woods? My daughter wouldn’t be over there. Let’s go and look in the cottage. There’s no need to look so worried, Etsuko.” She laughed again, but I thought her voice wobbled a little as she did so.

The cottage, having no electricity, was in darkness. I waited in the entryway while Sachiko stepped up to the

tatami. She called her daughter's name and slid back the partitions to the two smaller rooms that adjoined the main one. I stood listening to her moving around in the darkness, then she came back to the entryway.

"Perhaps you're right," she said. "We'd better look on the other bank."

Along the river the air was full of insects. We walked in silence, towards the small wooden bridge further downstream. Beyond it, on the opposite bank, were the woods Sachiko had mentioned earlier.

We were crossing the bridge, when Sachiko turned to me and said rapidly: "We went to a bar in the end. We were going to go to the cinema, to a film with Gary Cooper, but there was a long queue. The town was very crowded and a lot of people were drunk. We went to a bar in the end and they gave us a little room to ourselves."

"I see."

"I suppose you don't go to bars, do you, Etsuko?"

"No, I don't."

That was the first time I had crossed to the far side of the river. The ground felt soft, almost marshy under my feet. Perhaps it is just my fancy that I felt a cold touch of unease there on that bank, a feeling not unlike premonition, which caused me to walk with renewed urgency towards the darkness of the trees before us.

Sachiko stopped me, grasping my arm. Following her gaze, I could see a short way along the bank something like a bundle lying on the grass, close to the river's edge. It was just discernible in the gloom, a few shades darker than the ground around it. My first impulse was to run towards it, but then I realized Sachiko was standing quite still, gazing towards the object.

"What is it?" I said, rather stupidly.

“It’s Mariko,” she said, quietly. And when she turned to me there was a strange look in her eyes.

Chapter Three

It is possible that my memory of these events will have grown hazy with time, that things did not happen in quite the way they come back to me today. But I remember with some distinctness that eerie spell which seemed to bind the two of us as we stood there in the coming darkness looking towards that shape further down the bank. Then the spell broke and we both began to run. As we came nearer, I saw Mariko lying curled on her side, knees hunched, her back towards us. Sachiko reached the spot a little ahead of me, I being slowed by my pregnancy, and she was standing over the child when I joined her. Mariko's eyes were open and at first I thought she was dead. But then I saw them move and they stared up at us with a peculiar blankness.

Sachiko dropped on to one knee and lifted the child's head. Mariko continued to stare.

"Mariko-San, are you all right?" I said, a little out of breath.

She did not reply. Sachiko too was silent, examining her daughter, turning her in her arms as if she were a fragile, but senseless doll. I noticed the blood on Sachiko's sleeve, then saw it was coming from Mariko.

"We'd better call someone," I said.

"It's not serious," Sachiko said. "It's just a graze. See, it's just a small cut."

Mariko had been lying in a puddle and one side of her short dress was soaked in dark water. The blood was coming from a wound on the inside of her thigh.

"What happened?" Sachiko said to her daughter. "What happened to you?"

Mariko went on looking at her mother.

“She’s probably shocked,” I said. “Perhaps it’s best not to question her immediately.”

Sachiko brought Mariko to her feet.

“We were very worried about you, Mariko-San,” I said. The little girl gave me a suspicious look, then turned away and started to walk. She walked quite steadily; the wound on her leg did not seem to trouble her unduly.

We walked back over the bridge and along the river. The two of them walked in front of me, not talking. It was completely dark by the time we reached the cottage.

Sachiko took Mariko into the bathroom. I lit the stove in the centre of the main room to make some tea. Aside from the stove, an old hanging lantern Sachiko had lit provided the only source of light, and large areas of the room remained in shadow. In one corner several tiny black kittens aroused by our arrival started to move restlessly. Their claws, catching in the tatami, made a scuttling noise.

When they appeared again, both mother and daughter had changed into kimonos. They went through to one of the small adjoining rooms and I continued to wait for some time. The sound of Sachiko’s voice came through the screen.

Finally, Sachiko came out alone. “It’s still very hot,” she remarked. She crossed the room and slid apart the partitions which opened out on to the veranda.

“How is she?” I asked.

“She’s all right. The cut’s nothing.” Sachiko sat down in the breeze, next to the partitions.

“Shall we report the matter to the police?”

“The police? But what is there to report? Mariko says she was climbing a tree and fell. That’s how she got her cut.”

“So she wasn’t with anyone tonight?”

“No. Who could she have been with?”

“And what about this woman?” I said.

“What woman?”

“This woman Mariko talks about. Are you still certain she’s imaginary?”

Sachiko sighed. “She’s not entirely imaginary, I suppose,” she said. “She’s just someone Mariko saw once. Once, when she was much younger.”

“But do you think she could have been here tonight, this woman?”

Sachiko gave a laugh. “No, Etsuko, that’s quite impossible. In any case, that woman’s dead. Believe me, Etsuko, all this about a woman, it’s just a little game Mariko likes to play when she means to be difficult. I’ve grown quite used to these little games of hers.”

“But why should she tell stories like that?”

“Why?” Sachiko shrugged. “It’s just what children like to do. Once you become a mother, Etsuko, you’ll need to get used to such things.”

“You’re sure she was with no one tonight?”

“Quite sure. I know my own daughter well enough.”

We fell silent for a moment. Mosquitoes were humming in the air around us. Sachiko gave a yawn, covering her mouth with a hand.

“So you see, Etsuko,” she said, “I’ll be leaving Japan very shortly. You don’t seem very impressed.”

“Of course I am. And I’m very pleased, if this is what you wished. But won’t there be … various difficulties?”

“Difficulties?”

“I mean, moving to a different country, with a different language and foreign ways. ”

“I understand your concern, Etsuko. But really, I don't think there's much for me to worry about. You see, I've heard so much about America, it won't be like an entirely foreign country. And as for the language, I already speak it to a certain extent. Frank-San and I, we always talk in English. Once I've been in America for a little while, I should speak it like an American woman. I really don't see there's any cause for me to be worrying. I know I'll manage. ”

I gave a small bow, but said nothing. Two of the kittens began making their way towards where Sachiko was sitting. She watched them for a moment, then gave a laugh. “Of course,” she said, “I sometimes have moments when I wonder how everything will turn out. But really” — she smiled at me — “I know I'll manage. ”

“Actually,” I said, “it was Mariko I had in mind. What will become of her? ”

“Mariko? Oh, she'll be fine. You know how children are. They find it so much easier to settle into new surroundings, don't they? ”

“But it would still be an enormous change for her. Is she ready for such a thing? ”

Sachiko sighed impatiently. “Really, Etsuko, did you think I hadn't considered all this? Did you suppose I would decide to leave the country without having first given the most careful consideration to my daughter's welfare? ”

“Naturally,” I said, “you'd give it the most careful consideration. ”

“My daughter's welfare is of the utmost importance to me, Etsuko. I wouldn't make any decision that jeopardized her future. I've given the whole matter much consideration, and

I've discussed it with Frank. I assure you, Mariko will be fine. There'll be no problems. ”

“But her education, what will become of that? ”

Sachiko laughed again. “Etsuko, I'm not about to leave for the jungle. There are such things as schools in America. And you must understand, my daughter is a very bright child. Her father was an accomplished man, and on my side too, there were relatives of the highest rank. You mustn't suppose, Etsuko, simply because you've seen her in these ... in these present surroundings, that she's some peasant's child. ”

“Of course not. I didn't for one moment ...”

“She's a very bright child. You haven't seen her as she really is, Etsuko. In surroundings like this, you can only expect a child to prove a little awkward at times. But if you'd seen her while we were at my uncle's house, you'd have seen her true qualities then. If an adult addressed her, she'd answer back very clearly and intelligently, there'd be none of this giggling and shying away like most other children. And there were certainly none of these little games of hers. She went to school, and made friends with the best kinds of children. And we had a private tutor for her, and he praised her very highly. It was astonishing how quickly she began to catch up. ”

“To catch up? ”

“Well” — Sachiko gave a shrug — “it's unfortunate that Mariko's education's had to be interrupted from time to time. What with one thing and another, and our moving around so much. But these are difficult times we've come through, Etsuko. If it wasn't for the war, if my husband was still alive, then Mariko would have had the kind of up-bringing appropriate to a family of our position. ”

“Yes, ” I said. “Indeed. ”

Perhaps Sachiko had caught something in my tone; she looked up and stared at me, and when she spoke again, her voice had become more tense.

“I didn’t need to leave Tokyo, Etsuko,” she said. “But I did, for Mariko’s sake. I came all this way to stay at my uncle’s house, because I thought it would be best for my daughter. I didn’t have to do that, I didn’t need to leave Tokyo at all.”

I gave a bow. Sachiko looked at me for a moment, then turned and gazed out through the open partitions, out into the darkness.

“But you’ve left your uncle now,” I said. “And now you’re about to leave Japan.”

Sachiko glared at me angrily. “Why do you speak to me like this, Etsuko? Why is it you can’t wish me well? Is it simply that you’re envious?”

“But I do wish you well. And I assure you I …”

“Mariko will be fine in America, why won’t you believe that? It’s a better place for a child to grow up. And she’ll have far more opportunities there, life’s much better for a woman in America.”

“I assure you I’m happy for you. As for myself, I couldn’t be happier with things as they are. Jiro’s work is going so well, and now the child arriving just when we wanted it …”

“She could become a business girl, a film actress even. America’s like that, Etsuko, so many things are possible. Frank says I could become a business woman too. Such things are possible out there.”

“I’m sure they are. It’s just that personally, I’m very happy with my life where I am.”

Sachiko gazed at the two small kittens, clawing at the tatami beside her. For several moments we were silent.

“I must be getting back,” I said, eventually. “They’ll be getting worried about me.” I rose to my feet, but Sachiko did not take her eyes off the kittens. “When is it you leave?” I asked.

“Within the next few days. Frank will come and get us in his car. We should be on a ship by the end of the week.”

“I take it then you won’t be helping Mrs Fujiwara much longer.”

Sachiko looked up at me with a short incredulous laugh. “Etsuko, I’m about to go to America. There’s no need for me to work any more in a noodle shop.”

“I see.”

“In fact, Etsuko, perhaps you’d care to tell Mrs Fujiwara what’s happened to me. I don’t expect to be seeing her again.”

“Won’t you tell her yourself?”

She sighed impatiently. “Etsuko, can’t you appreciate how loathsome it’s been for someone such as myself to work each day in a noodle shop? But I didn’t complain and I did what was required of me. But now it’s over, I’ve no great wish to see that place again.” A kitten had been clawing at the sleeve of Sachiko’s kimono. She gave it a sharp slap with the back of her hand and the little creature went scurrying back across the tatami. “So please give my regards to Mrs Fujiwara,” she said. “And my best wishes for her trade.”

“I’ll do that. Now please excuse me, I must go.”

This time, Sachiko got to her feet and accompanied me to the entryway.

“I’ll come and say goodbye before we leave,” she said, as I was putting on my sandals.

At first it had seemed a perfectly innocent dream; I had merely dreamt of something I had seen the previous day — the little girl we had watched playing in the park. And then the dream came back the following night. Indeed, over the past few months, it has returned to me several times.

Niki and I had watched the girl playing on the swings the afternoon we had walked into the village. It was the third day of Niki's visit and the rain had eased to a drizzle. I had not been out of the house for several days and enjoyed the feel of the air as we stepped into the winding lane outside.

Niki tended to walk rather fast, her narrow leather boots creaking with each stride. Although I found it no trouble keeping up with her, I would have preferred a more leisurely pace. Niki, one supposes, has yet to learn the pleasures of walking for its own sake. Neither does she seem sensitive to the feel of the countryside despite having grown up here. I said as much to her as we walked, and she retorted that this was not the real countryside, just a residential version to cater for the wealthy people who lived here. I dare say she is right; I have never ventured north to the agricultural areas of England where, Niki insists, I will find the real countryside. Nevertheless, there is a calm and quietness about these lanes I have come to appreciate over the years.

When we arrived at the village I took Niki to the tea shop where I sometimes go. The village is small, just a few hotels and shops; the tea shop is on a street corner, upstairs above a bakery. That afternoon, Niki and I sat at a table next to the windows, and it was from there we watched the little girl playing in the park below. As we watched, she climbed on to a swing and called out towards two women sitting together on a bench nearby. She was a cheerful little girl, dressed in a green mackintosh and small Wellington boots.

“Perhaps you’ll get married and have children soon,” I said. “I miss little children.”

“I can’t think of anything I’d like less,” said Niki.

“Well, I suppose you’re still rather young.”

“It’s nothing to do with how young or old I am. I just don’t feel like having a lot of kids screaming around me.”

“Don’t worry, Niki,” I said, with a laugh. “I wasn’t insisting you became a mother just yet. I had this passing fancy just now to be a grandmother, that’s all. I thought perhaps you’d oblige, but it can wait.”

The little girl, standing on the seat of the swing, was pulling hard on the chains, but somehow she could not make the swing go higher. She smiled anyway and called out again to the women.

“A friend of mine’s just had a baby,” Niki said. “She’s really pleased. I can’t think why. Horrible screaming thing she’s produced.”

“Well, at least she’s happy. How old is your friend?”

“Nineteen.”

“Nineteen? She’s even younger than you are. Is she married?”

“No. What difference does that make?”

“But surely she can’t be happy about it.”

“Why not? Just because she isn’t married?”

“There’s that. And the fact that she’s only nineteen. I can’t believe she was happy about it.”

“What difference does it make whether she’s married? She wanted it, she planned it and everything.”

“Is that what she told you?”

“But, Mother, I know her, she’s a friend of mine. I know she wanted it.”

The women on the bench got to their feet. One of them called to the little girl. She came off the swing and went running towards the women.

“And what about the father?” I asked.

“He was happy about it too. I remember when they first found out. We all went out to celebrate.”

“But people always pretend to be delighted. It’s like that film we saw on the television last night.”

“What film?”

“I expect you weren’t watching it. You were reading your magazine.”

“Oh that. It looked awful.”

“It certainly was. But that’s what I mean. I’m sure nobody ever receives the news of a baby like these people do in these films.”

“Honestly, Mother, I don’t know how you can sit and watch rubbish like that. You hardly used to watch television at all. I remember you used to keep telling me off because I watched it so much.”

I laughed. “You see how our roles are reversing, Niki. I’m sure you’re very good for me. You must stop me wasting my time away like that.”

As we made our way back from the tea shop, the sky had clouded over ominously and the drizzle had become heavier. We had walked a little way past the small railway station when a voice called from behind us: “Mrs Sheringham! Mrs Sheringham!”

I turned and saw a small woman in an overcoat hurrying up the road.

“I thought it was you,” she said, catching up with us. “And how have you been keeping?” She gave me a cheerful smile.

“Hello, Mrs Waters,” I said. “How nice to see you again.”

“Seems to have turned all miserable again, hasn’t it? Why, hello, Keiko” — she touched Niki’s sleeve — “I didn’t realize it was you.”

“No,” I said hurriedly, “this is Niki.”

“Niki, of course. Good gracious, you’ve completely grown up, dear. That’s why I got you muddled. You’ve completely grown up.”

“Hello, Mrs Waters,” Niki said, recovering.

Mrs Waters lives not far from me. These days I see her only very occasionally, but several years ago she had given piano lessons to both my daughters. She had taught Keiko for a number of years, and then Niki for a year or so when she was still a child. It had not taken me long to see Mrs Waters was a very limited pianist and her attitude to music in general had often irritated me; for instance, she would refer to works by Chopin and Tchaikovsky alike as “charming melodies”. But she was such an affectionate woman I never had the heart to replace her.

“And what are you doing with yourself these days, dear?” she asked Niki.

“Me? Oh, I live in London.”

“Oh yes? And what are you doing there? Studying?”

“I’m not doing anything really. I just live there.”

“Oh, I see. But you’re happy there, are you? That’s the main thing, isn’t it.”

“Yes, I’m happy enough.”

“Well, that’s the main thing, isn’t it. And what about Keiko?” Mrs Waters turned to me. “How is Keiko getting on now?”

“Keiko? Oh, she went to live in Manchester.”

“Oh yes? That’s a nice city on the whole. That’s what I’ve heard anyway. And does she like it up there?”

“I haven’t heard from her recently.”

“Oh well. No news is good news, I expect. And does Keiko still play the piano?”

“I expect she does. I haven’t heard from her recently.”

My lack of enthusiasm seemed finally to penetrate, and she dropped the subject with an awkward laugh. Such persistence on her part has characterized our encounters over the years since Keiko’s leaving home. Neither my evident reluctance to discuss Keiko nor the fact that until that afternoon I had been unable to tell her so much as my daughter’s whereabouts had succeeded in making any lasting impression upon her. In all probability, Mrs Waters will continue to ask cheerfully after my daughter whenever we happen to meet.

By the time we got home, the rain was falling steadily.

“I suppose I embarrassed you, didn’t I?” Niki said to me. We were sitting once again in our armchairs, looking out into the garden.

“Why do you suppose that?” I said.

“I should have told her I was thinking of going to university or something like that.”

“I don’t mind in the least what you say about yourself. I’m not ashamed of you.”

“No, I suppose not.”

“But I did think you were rather off-hand with her. You never did like that woman much, did you?”

“Mrs Waters? Well, I used to hate those lessons she gave me. They were sheer boredom. I used to just go off in a dream, then now and again there’d be this little voice telling me to put my finger here or here or here. Was that your idea, getting me to have lessons?”

“It was mainly mine. You see, I had great plans for you once.”

Niki laughed. “I’m sorry to be such a failure. But it’s your own fault. I haven’t got any musical sense at all. There’s this girl in our house who plays the guitar, and she was trying to show me some chords, but I couldn’t be bothered to even learn those. I think Mrs Waters put me off music for life.”

“You may come back to it some time and you’ll appreciate having had lessons.”

“But I’ve forgotten everything I ever learnt.”

“I doubt if you would have forgotten everything. Nothing you learn at that age is totally lost.”

“A waste of time, anyway,” Niki muttered. She sat looking out of the windows for some time. Then she turned to me and said: “I suppose it must be quite difficult to tell people. About Keiko, I mean.”

“It seemed easiest to say what I did,” I replied. “She rather took me by surprise.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Niki went on looking out of the window with an empty expression. “Keiko didn’t come to Dad’s funeral, did she?” she said, eventually.

“You know perfectly well she didn’t so why ask?”

“I was just saying, that’s all.”

“You mean you didn’t come to her funeral because she didn’t come to your father’s? Don’t be so childish, Niki.”

“I’m not being childish. I’m just saying that’s the way it was. She was never a part of our lives — not mine or Dad’s anyway. I never expected her to be at Dad’s funeral.”

I did not reply and we sat silently in our armchairs. Then Niki said:

“It was odd just now, with Mrs Waters. It was almost like you enjoyed it.”

“Enjoyed what?”

“Pretending Keiko was alive.”

“I don’t enjoy deceiving people.” Perhaps I snapped a little, for Niki looked startled.

“No, I suppose not,” she said, lamely.

It rained throughout that night, and the next day — the fourth day of Niki’s stay — it was still raining steadily.

“Do you mind if I change rooms tonight?” Niki said. “I could use the spare bedroom.” We were in the kitchen, washing the dishes after breakfast.

“The spare bedroom?” I laughed a little. “They’re all spare bedrooms now. No, there’s no reason why you shouldn’t sleep in the spare room. Have you taken a dislike to your old room?”

“I feel a bit odd sleeping there.”

“How unkind, Niki. I hoped you’d still feel it was your room.”

“Yes, I do,” she said, hurriedly. “It’s not that I don’t like it.” She fell silent, wiping some knives with a tea-towel. Finally she said: “It’s that other room. Her

room. It gives me an odd feeling, that room being right opposite.”

I stopped what I was doing and looked at her sternly.

“Well, I can’t help it, Mother. I just feel strange thinking about that room being right opposite.”

“Take the spare room by all means,” I said, coldly. “But you’ll need to make up the bed in there.”

Although I had made a show of being upset by Niki’s request to change rooms, I had no wish to make it difficult for her to do so. For I too had experienced a disturbing feeling about that room opposite. In many ways, that room is the most pleasant in the house, with a splendid view across the orchard. But it had been Keiko’s fanatically guarded domain for so long, a strange spell seemed to linger there even now, six years after she had left it — a spell that had grown all the stronger now that Keiko was dead.

For the two or three years before she finally left us, Keiko had retreated into that bedroom, shutting us out of her life. She rarely came out, although I would sometimes hear her moving around the house after we had all gone to bed. I surmised that she spent her time reading magazines and listening to her radio. She had no friends, and the rest of us were forbidden entry into her room. At mealtimes I would leave her plate in the kitchen and she would come down to get it, then shut herself in again. The room, I realized, was in a terrible condition. An odour of stale perfume and dirty linen came from within, and on the occasions I had glimpsed inside, I had seen countless glossy magazines lying on the floor amidst heaps of clothes. I had to coax her to put out her laundry, and in this at least we reached an understanding: every few weeks I would find a bag of washing outside her door, which I would wash and return. In the end, the rest of us grew used to her ways, and when by some impulse Keiko ventured down into our living room, we would all feel a great tension. Invariably, these excursions would

end with her fighting, with Niki or with my husband, and then she would be back in her room.

I never saw Keiko's room in Manchester, the room in which she died. It may seem morbid of a mother to have such thoughts, but on hearing of her suicide, the first thought that ran through my mind — before I registered even the shock — was to wonder how long she had been there like that before they had found her. She had lived amidst her own family without being seen for days on end; little hope she would be discovered quickly in a strange city where no one knew her. Later, the coroner said she had been there “for several days”. It was the landlady who had opened the door, thinking Keiko had left without paying the rent.

I have found myself continually bringing to mind that picture — of my daughter hanging in her room for days on end. The horror of that image has never diminished, but it has long ceased to be a morbid matter; as with a wound on one's own body, it is possible to develop an intimacy with the most disturbing of things.

“I'll probably be warmer in the spare room anyhow,” Niki said.

“If you're cold at night, Niki, you can simply turn up the heating.”

“I suppose so.” She gave a sigh. “I haven't slept very well lately. I think I'm getting bad dreams, but I can never remember them properly once I wake up.”

“I had a dream last night,” I said.

“I think it might be to do with the quiet. I'm not used to it being so quiet at night.”

“I dreamt about that little girl. The one we were watching yesterday. The little girl in the park.”

“I can sleep right through traffic, but I've forgotten what it's like, sleeping in the quiet.” Niki shrugged and

dropped some cutlery into the drawer. “Perhaps I’ll sleep better in the spare room.”

The fact that I mentioned my dream to Niki, that first time I had it, indicates perhaps that I had doubts even then as to its innocence. I must have suspected from the start — without fully knowing why — that the dream had to do not so much with the little girl we had watched, but with my having remembered Sachiko two days previously.

Chapter Four

I was in the kitchen one afternoon preparing the supper before my husband came home from work, when I heard a strange sound coming from the living room. I stopped what I was doing and listened. It came again — the sound of a violin being played very badly. The noises continued for a few minutes then stopped.

When eventually I went into the living room, I found Ogata-San bowed over a chess-board. The late afternoon sun was streaming in and despite the electric fans a humidity had set in all around the apartment. I opened the windows a little wider.

“Didn’t you finish your game last night?” I asked, coming over to him.

“No, Jiro claimed he was too tired. A ploy on his part, I suspect. You see, I have him in a nice corner here.”

“I see.”

“He’s relying on the fact that my memory’s so foggy these days. So I’m just going over my strategy again.”

“How resourceful of you, Father. But I doubt if Jiro’s mind works quite so cunningly.”

“Perhaps not. I dare say you know him better than I do these days.” Ogata-San continued to study the board for several moments, then looked up and laughed. “This must seem amusing to you. Jiro sweating away in his office and here I am preparing a game of chess for when he comes home. I feel like a small child waiting for his father.”

“Well, I’d much rather you occupied yourself with chess. Your musical recital earlier was hideous.”

“How disrespectful. And I thought you’d be moved, Etsuko.”

The violin was on the floor nearby, put back in its case. Ogata-San watched me as I began opening the case.

“I noticed it up there on the shelf,” he said. “I took the liberty of bringing it down. Don’t look so concerned, Etsuko. I was very gentle with it.”

“I can’t be sure. As you say, Father’s like a child these days.” I held up the violin and examined it. “Except small children can’t reach up to high shelves.”

I tucked the instrument under my chin. Ogata-San continued to watch me.

“Play something for me,” he said. “I’m sure you can do better than me.”

“I’m sure I can.” Once more I held the violin out at arm’s length. “But it’s been such a long time.”

“You mean you haven’t been practising? Now that’s a pity, Etsuko. You used to be so devoted to the instrument.”

“I suppose I was once. But I hardly touch it now.”

“A great shame, Etsuko. And you were so devoted. I remember when you used to play in the dead of night and wake up the house.”

“Wake up the house? When did I do that?”

“Yes, I remember. When you first came to stay with us.” Ogata-San gave a laugh. “Don’t look so worried, Etsuko. We all forgave you. Now let me see, who was the composer you used to admire so much? Was it Mendelssohn?”

“Is that true? I woke up the house?”

“Don’t look so worried, Etsuko. It was years ago. Play me something by Mendelssohn.”

“But why didn’t you stop me?”

“It was only for the first few nights. And besides, we didn’t mind in the least.”

I plucked the strings lightly. The violin was out of tune.

“I must have been such a burden to you in those days,” I said, quietly.

“Nonsense.”

“But the rest of the family. They must have thought I was a mad girl.”

“They couldn’t have thought too badly of you. After all, it ended up with you marrying Jiro. Now come on, Etsuko, enough of this. Play me something.”

“What was I like in those days, Father? Was I like a mad person?”

“You were very shocked, which was only to be expected. We were all shocked, those of us who were left. Now, Etsuko, let’s forget these things. I’m sorry I ever brought up the matter.”

I brought the instrument up to my chin once more.

“Ah,” he said, “Mendelssohn.”

I remained like that for several seconds, the violin under my chin. Then I brought it down to my lap and sighed.

“I hardly play it now,” I said.

“I’m sorry, Etsuko.” Ogata-San’s voice had become solemn. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have touched it.”

I looked up at him and smiled. “So,” I said, “the little child is feeling guilty now.”

“It’s just that I saw it up there and I remembered it from those days.”

“I’ll play it for you another time. After I’ve practised a little.”

He gave me a small bow, and the smile returned to his eyes.

“I’ll remember you promised, Etsuko. And perhaps you could teach me a little.”

“I can’t teach you everything, Father. You said you wanted to learn to cook.”

“Ah yes. That too.”

“I’ll play for you the next time you come to stay with us.”

“I’ll remember you promised,” he said.

After supper that evening, Jiro and his father settled down to their game of chess. I cleared up the supper things and then sat down with some sewing. At one point during their game, Ogata-San said:

“I’ve just noticed something. If you don’t mind, I’d like to make that move again.”

“Certainly,” said Jiro.

“But then it’s rather unfair on you. Especially since I seem to have the better of you at the moment.”

“No, not at all. Please take the move again.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Not at all.”

They played on in silence.

“Jiro,” Ogata-San said after several minutes, “I was just wondering. Have you written that letter yet? To Shigeo Matsuda?”

I looked up from my sewing. Jiro appeared absorbed in the game and did not reply until he had moved his piece.

“Shigeo? Well, not yet. I’ve been meaning to. But I’ve been so busy just recently.”

“Of course. I quite understand. I just happened to think of it, that’s all.”

“I don’t seem to have had much time just recently.”

“Of course. There’s no hurry. I don’t mean to keep pestering you like this. It’s just that it might be more appropriate if he heard from you fairly soon. It’s a few weeks now since his article appeared.”

“Yes, certainly. You’re quite right.”

They returned to their game. For some moments neither of them spoke. Then Ogata-San said:

“How do you suppose he’ll react?”

“Shigeo? I don’t know. As I say, I don’t know him very well these days.”

“He’s joined the Communist Party, you say?”

“I’m not certain. He certainly expressed such sympathies when I last saw him.”

“A great pity. But then there are so many things in Japan today to sway a young man.”

“Yes, no doubt.”

“So many young men these days get carried away with ideas and theories. But perhaps he’ll back down and apologize. There’s nothing like a timely reminder of one’s personal obligations. You know, I suspect Shigeo never even stopped to consider what he was doing. I think he wrote that article with a pen in one hand and his books about communism in the other. He may well back down in the end.”

“Quite possibly. I’ve just had so much work recently.”

“Of course, of course. Your work must take precedence. Please don’t worry about it. Now, was it my move?”

They continued their game, speaking little. Once I heard Ogata-San say: "You're moving just as I anticipated. You'll need to be very clever to escape from that corner."

They had been playing for sometime when there was a knock at the door. Jiro looked up and threw me a glance. I put down my sewing and got to my feet.

When I opened the door, I found two men grinning and bowing at me. It was quite late by then and I thought at first they had come to the wrong apartment. But then I recognized them as two of Jiro's colleagues and asked them in. They stood in the entryway giggling to themselves. One was a tubby little man whose face looked quite flushed. His companion was thinner, with a pale complexion like that of a European; but it seemed he too had been drinking, for pink blotches had appeared on each of his cheeks. They were both wearing ties, loosened untidily, and were holding jackets over their arms.

Jiro seemed pleased to see them and called to them to sit down. But they remained in the entryway, giggling.

"Ah, Ogata," the pale-faced man said to Jiro, "perhaps we've caught you at a bad time."

"Not at all. What are you doing in these parts anyway?"

"We've been to see Murasaki's brother. In fact, we haven't been home yet."

"We came to disturb you because we're afraid to go home," the tubby man put in. "We didn't tell our wives we'd be late."

"What rabble you are, the pair of you," said Jiro. "Why don't you take off your shoes and come up here?"

"We've caught you at a bad time," the pale-faced man said again. "I can see you've got a visitor." He grinned and bowed towards Ogata-San.

“This is my father, but how can I introduce you if you don't come in?”

The visitors finally took off their shoes and seated themselves. Jiro introduced them to his father and they began once more to bow and giggle.

“You gentlemen are from Jiro's firm?” Ogata-San asked.

“Yes, indeed,” the tubby man replied. “A great honour it is too, even if he does give us a tough time. We call your son ‘Pharaoh’ in the office because he urges the rest of us to work like slaves while he does nothing himself.”

“What nonsense,” said my husband.

“It's true. He orders us around like we're his dogsbodies. Then he sits down and reads the newspaper.”

Ogata-San seemed a little confused, but seeing the others laugh he joined in.

“And what's this here?” The pale-faced man indicated the chess-board. “You see, I knew we'd interrupted something.”

“We were just playing chess to pass the time,” said Jiro.

“Go on playing then. Don't let rabble like us interrupt.”

“Don't be silly. How could I concentrate with idiots like you around.” Jiro pushed away the chess-board. One or two of the pieces fell over and he stood them up again without looking at the squares. “So. You've been to see Murasaki's brother. Etsuko, get some tea for the gentlemen.” My husband had said this despite the fact that I was already on my way to the kitchen. But then the tubby man started to wave his hand frantically.

“Madam, madam, sit down. Please. We'll be going in just a moment. Please be seated.”

“It’s no trouble,” I said, smiling.

“No, madam, I implore you” — he had started to shout quite loudly — “We’re just rabble, like your husband says. Please don’t make a fuss, please sit down.”

I was about to obey him, but then I saw Jiro give me an angry look.

“At least have some tea with us,” I said. “It’s no trouble at all.”

“Now you’ve sat down, you may as well stay a while,” my husband said to the visitors. “Anyway, I want to know about Murasaki’s brother. Is he as mad as they say he is?”

“He’s a character all right,” the tubby man said, with a laugh. “We certainly weren’t disappointed. And did anyone tell you about his wife?”

I bowed and made my way into the kitchen unnoticed. I prepared the tea and put on to a plate some cakes I had been making earlier that day. I could hear laughter coming from the living room, my husband’s voice amongst them. One of the visitors was calling him “Pharaoh” again in a loud voice. When I returned to the living room, Jiro and his visitors seemed in high spirits. The tubby man was relating an anecdote, about some cabinet minister’s encounter with General MacArthur. I put the cakes near them, poured out their tea, then sat down beside Ogata-San. Jiro’s friends made several more jokes concerning politicians and then the pale-faced man pretended to be offended because his companion had spoken disparagingly of some personage he admired. He kept a straight face while the others teased him.

“By the way, Hanada,” my husband said to him. “I heard an interesting story the other day at the office. I was told during the last elections, you threatened to beat your wife with a golf club because she wouldn’t vote the way you wanted.”

“Where did you pick up this rubbish?”

“I got it from reliable sources.”

“That’s right,” the tubby man said. “And your wife was going to call the police to report political intimidation.”

“What rubbish. Besides, I don’t have golf clubs any more. I sold them all last year.”

“You still have that seven-iron,” said the tubby man. “I saw it in your apartment last week. Maybe you used that.”

“But you can’t deny it, can you, Hanada?” said Jiro.

“It’s nonsense about the golf club.”

“But it’s true you couldn’t get her to obey you.”

The pale-faced man shrugged. “Well, it’s her personal right to vote any way she pleases.”

“Then why did you threaten her?” his friend asked.

“I was trying to make her see sense, of course. My wife votes for Yoshida just because he looks like her uncle. That’s typical of women. They don’t understand politics. They think they can choose the country’s leaders the same way they choose dresses.”

“So you gave her a seven-iron,” said Jiro.

“Is that really true?” Ogata-San asked. He had not spoken since I had come back in with the tea. The other three stopped laughing and the pale-faced man looked at Ogata-San with a surprised expression.

“Well, no.” He became suddenly formal and gave a small bow. “I didn’t actually hit her.”

“No, no,” said Ogata-San. “I meant your wife and yourself — you voted for separate parties?”

“Well, yes.” He shrugged, then giggled awkwardly.
“What could I do?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.” Ogata-San gave a low bow, and the pale-faced man returned it. As if the bowing were a signal, the three younger men started once more to laugh and talk amongst themselves. They moved off politics and began discussing various members of their firm. When I was pouring more tea, I noticed that the cakes, despite my having put out a generous amount, had almost all disappeared. I finished refilling their teacups, then sat down again beside Ogata-San.

The visitors stayed for an hour or so. Jiro saw them to the door then sat down again with a sigh. “It’s getting late,” he said. “I’ll need to turn in soon.”

Ogata-San was examining the chess board. “I think the pieces got jogged a little,” he said. “I’m sure the horse was on this square, not that one.”

“Quite probably.”

“I’ll put it here then. Are we agreed on this?”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure you’re right. We’ll have to finish the game another time, Father. I’ll need to retire very shortly.”

“How about playing just the next few moves. We may well finish it off.”

“Really, I’d rather not. I’m feeling very tired now.”

“Of course.”

I packed away the sewing I had been doing earlier in the evening and sat waiting for the others to retire. Jiro, however, picked up a newspaper and started to read the back page. Then he took the last remaining cake from the plate and

began to eat nonchalantly. After several moments, Ogata-San said:

“Perhaps we ought to just finish it off now. It’ll only take a few more moves.”

“Father, I really am too tired now. I have work to go to in the morning.”

“Yes, of course.”

Jiro went back to his newspapers. He continued to eat the cake and I watched several crumbs drop on to the tatami. Ogata-San continued to gaze at the chess-board for some time.

“Quite extraordinary”, he said, eventually, “what your friend was saying.”

“Oh? What was that?” Jiro did not look up from his newspaper.

“About him and his wife voting for different parties. A few years ago that would have been unthinkable.”

“No doubt.”

“Quite extraordinary the things that happen now. But that’s what’s meant by democracy, I suppose.” Ogata-San gave a sigh. “These things we’ve learnt so eagerly from the Americans, they aren’t always to the good.”

“No, indeed they’re not.”

“Look what happens. Husband and wife voting for different parties. It’s a sad state of affairs when a wife can’t be relied on in such matters any more.”

Jiro continued to read his newspaper. “Yes, it’s regrettable,” he said.

“A wife these days feels no sense of loyalty towards the household. She just does what she pleases, votes for a different party if the whim takes her. That’s so typical of

the way things have gone in Japan. All in the name of democracy people abandon obligations. ”

Jiro looked up at his father for a brief moment, then turned his eyes back to his paper. “No doubt you’re very right,” he said. “But surely the Americans didn’t bring all bad. ”

“The Americans, they never understood the way things were in Japan. Not for one moment have they understood. Their ways may be fine for Americans, but in Japan things are different, very different.” Ogata-San sighed again. “Discipline, loyalty, such things held Japan together once. That may sound fanciful, but it’s true. People were bound by a sense of duty. Towards one’s family, towards superiors, towards the country. But now instead there’s all this talk of democracy. You hear it whenever people want to be selfish, whenever they want to forget obligations. ”

“Yes, no doubt you’re right. ” Jiro yawned and scratched the side of his face.

“Take what happened in my profession, for instance. Here was a system we’d nurtured and cherished for years. The Americans came and stripped it, tore it down without a thought. They decided our schools would be like American schools, the children should learn what American children learn. And the Japanese welcomed it all. Welcomed it with a lot of talk about democracy” — he shook his head — “Many fine things were destroyed in our schools. ”

“Yes, I’m sure that’s very true. ” Jiro glanced up once more. “But surely there were some faults in the old system, in schools as much as anywhere. ”

“Jiro, what is this? Something you read somewhere? ”

“It’s just my opinion. ”

“Did you read that in your newspaper? I devoted my life to the teaching of the young. And then I watched the

Americans tear it all down. Quite extraordinary what goes on in schools now, the way children are taught to behave. Extraordinary. And so much just isn't taught any more. Do you know, children leave school today knowing nothing about the history of their own country?"

"That may be a pity, admittedly. But then I remember some odd things from my schooldays. I remember being taught all about how Japan was created by the gods, for instance. How we as a nation were divine and supreme. We had to memorize the text book word for word. Some things aren't such a loss, perhaps."

"But Jiro, things aren't as simple as that. You clearly don't understand how such things worked. Things aren't nearly as simple as you presume. We devoted ourselves to ensuring that proper qualities were handed down, that children grew up with the correct attitude to their country, to their fellows. There was a spirit in Japan once, it bound us all together. Just imagine what it must be like being a young boy today. He's taught no values at school — except perhaps that he should selfishly demand whatever he wants out of life. He goes home and finds his parents fighting because his mother refuses to vote for his father's party. What a state of affairs."

"Yes, I see your point. Now, Father, I'm sorry but I must go to bed."

"We did our best, men like Endo and I, we did our best to nurture what was good in the country. A lot of good has been destroyed."

"It's most regrettable." My husband got to his feet. "Excuse me, Father, but I must sleep. I have another busy day tomorrow."

Ogata-San looked up at his son, a somewhat surprised expression on his face. "Why, of course. How inconsiderate of me to have kept you so late." He gave a small bow.

“Not at all. I’m sorry we can’t talk longer, but I really ought to get some sleep now.”

“Why, of course.”

Jiro wished his father a good night’s sleep and left the room. For a few seconds, Ogata-San gazed at the door through which Jiro had disappeared as if he expected his son to return at any moment. Then he turned to me with a troubled look.

“I didn’t realize how late it was,” he said. “I didn’t mean to keep Jiro up.”

Chapter Five

“Gone? And had he left you no message at his hotel?”

Sachiko laughed. “You look so astonished, Etsuko,” she said. “No, he’d left nothing. He’d gone yesterday morning, that’s all they knew. To tell you the truth, I half expected this.”

I realized I was still holding the tray. I laid it down carefully then seated myself on a cushion opposite Sachiko. There was a pleasant breeze blowing through the apartment that morning.

“But how terrible for you,” I said. “And you were waiting with everything packed and ready.”

“This is nothing new to me, Etsuko. Back in Tokyo — that’s where I first met him, you see — back in Tokyo, it was just the same thing. Oh no, this is nothing new to me. I’ve learnt to expect such things.”

“And you say you’re going back into town tonight? On your own?”

“Don’t look so shocked, Etsuko. After Tokyo, Nagasaki seems a tame little town. If he’s still in Nagasaki, I’ll find him tonight. He may change his hotel, but he won’t have changed his habits.”

“But this is all so distressing. If you wish, I’d be glad to come and sit with Mariko until you get back.”

“Why, how kind of you. Mariko’s quite capable of being left on her own, but if you’re prepared to spend a couple of hours with her tonight, that would be most kind. But I’m sure this whole thing will sort itself out, Etsuko. You see, when you’ve come through some of the things I have, you learn not to let small set-backs like this worry you.”

“But what if he’s ... I mean, what if he’s left Nagasaki altogether?”

“Oh, he hasn’t gone far, Etsuko. Besides, if he really meant to leave me, he would have left a note of some kind, wouldn’t he? You see, he hasn’t gone far. He knows I’ll come and find him.”

Sachiko looked at me and smiled. I found myself at a loss for any reply.

“Besides, Etsuko,” she went on, “he did come all the way down here. He came down all this way to Nagasaki to find me at my uncle’s house, all that way from Tokyo. Now why would he have done that if he didn’t mean everything he’s promised? You see, Etsuko, what he wants most is to take me to America. That’s what he wants. Nothing’s changed really, this is just a slight delay.” She gave a quick laugh. “Sometimes, you see, he’s like a little child.”

“But what do you think your friend means by going off like this? I don’t understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand, Etsuko, it hardly matters. What he really wants is to take me to America and lead a steady respectable life there. That’s what he really wants. Otherwise why would he have come all that way and found me at my uncle’s house? You see, Etsuko, this isn’t anything to be so worried about.”

“No, I’m sure it isn’t.”

Sachiko seemed about to speak again, but then appeared to stop herself. She stared down at the tea things on the tray.

“Well then, Etsuko,” she said, with a smile, “let’s pour the tea.”

She watched in silence as I poured. Once when I glanced quickly towards her, she smiled as if to encourage me. I finished pouring the tea and for a moment or two we sat there quietly.

“Incidentally, Etsuko,” Sachiko said, “I take it you’ve spoken to Mrs Fujiwara and explained my position to her.”

“Yes. I saw her the day before yesterday.”

“I suppose she’d been wondering what had become of me.”

“I explained to her that you’d been called away to America. She was perfectly understanding about it.”

“You see, Etsuko,” said Sachiko, “I find myself in a difficult situation now.”

“Yes, I can appreciate that.”

“As regards finances, as well as everything else.”

“Yes, I see,” I said, with a small bow. “If you wish, I could certainly talk to Mrs Fujiwara. I’m sure under the circumstances she’d be happy to …”

“No, no, Etsuko” — Sachiko gave a laugh — “I’ve no desire to return to her little noodle shop. I fully expect to be leaving for America in the near future. It’s merely a case of things being delayed a little, that’s all. But in the meantime, you see, I’ll need a little money. And I was just remembering, Etsuko, how you once offered to assist me in that respect.”

She was looking at me with a kindly smile. I looked back at her for a few moments. Then I bowed and said:

“I have some savings of my own. Not a great deal, but I’d be glad to do what I can.”

Sachiko bowed gracefully, then lifted her teacup. “I won’t embarrass you”, she said, “by naming any particular sum. That, of course, is entirely up to you. I’ll gratefully accept whatever you feel is appropriate. Of course, the loan will be returned in due course, you can rest assured of that, Etsuko.”

“Naturally,” I said, quietly. “I had no doubts on that.”

Sachiko continued to regard me with her kindly smile. I excused myself and left the room.

In the bedroom, the sun was streaming in, revealing all the dust in the air. I knelt beside a set of small drawers at the foot of our cupboard. From the lowest drawer I removed various items — photograph albums, greeting cards, a folder of water-colours my mother had painted — laying them carefully on the floor beside me. At the bottom of the drawer was the black lacquer gift-box. Lifting the lid, I found the several letters I had preserved — unknown to my husband — together with two or three small photographs. From beneath these, I took out the envelope containing my money. I carefully put back everything as it had been and closed the drawer. Before leaving the room, I opened the wardrobe, chose a silk scarf of a suitably discreet pattern, and wrapped it around the envelope.

When I returned to the living room, Sachiko was refilling her teacup. She did not look up at me, and when I laid the folded scarf on the floor beside her, she carried on pouring the tea without glancing at it. She gave me a nod as I sat down, then began to sip from her cup. Only once, as she was lowering her teacup, did she cast a quick sideways glance at the bundle beside her cushion.

“There’s something you don’t seem to understand, Etsuko,” she said. “You see, I’m not ashamed or embarrassed about anything I’ve done. You can feel free to ask whatever you like.”

“Yes, of course.”

“For instance, Etsuko, why is it you never ask me anything about ‘my friend’, as you insist on calling him? There really isn’t anything to get embarrassed about. Why, Etsuko, you’re beginning to blush already.”

“I assure you I’m not getting embarrassed. In fact …”

“But you are, Etsuko, I can see you are.” Sachiko gave a laugh and clapped her hands together. “But why can’t you understand I’ve nothing to hide, I’ve nothing to be ashamed of? Why are you blushing like this? Just because I mentioned Frank?”

“But I’m not embarrassed. And I assure you I’ve never assumed anything …”

“Why do you never ask me about him, Etsuko? There must be all sorts of questions you’d like to ask. So why don’t you ask them? After all, everybody else in the neighbourhood seems interested enough, you must be too, Etsuko. So please feel free, ask me anything you like.”

“But really, I …”

“Come on, Etsuko, I insist. Ask me about him. I do want you to. Ask me about him, Etsuko.”

“Very well then.”

“Well? Go on, Etsuko, ask.”

“Very well. What does he look like, your friend?”

“What does he look like?” Sachiko laughed again. “Is that all you wish to know? Well, he’s tall like most of these foreigners, and his hair’s going a little thin. He’s not old, you understand. Foreigners go bald more easily, did you know that, Etsuko? Now ask me something else about him. There must be other things you want to know.”

“Well, quite honestly …”

“Come on, Etsuko, ask. I want you to ask.”

“But really, there’s nothing I wish to …”

“But there must be, why won’t you ask? Ask me about him, Etsuko, ask me.”

“Well, in fact,” I said, “I did wonder about one thing.” Sachiko seemed to suddenly freeze. She had been holding her hands together in front of her, but now she lowered them and placed them back on her lap.

“I did wonder”, I said, “if he spoke Japanese at all.” For a moment, Sachiko said nothing. Then she smiled and her manner seemed to relax. She lifted her teacup again and took several sips. Then when she spoke again, her voice sounded almost dreamy.

“Foreigners have so much trouble with our language,” she said. She paused and smiled to herself. “Frank’s Japanese is quite terrible, so we converse in English. Do you know English at all, Etsuko? Not at all? You see, my father used to speak good English. He had connections in Europe and he always used to encourage me to study the language. But then of course, when I married, I stopped learning. My husband forbade it. He took away all my English books. But I didn’t forget it. When I met foreigners in Tokyo, it came back to me.”

We sat in silence for a little while. Then Sachiko gave a tired sigh.

“I suppose I’d better get back fairly soon,” she said. She reached down and picked up the folded scarf. Then without inspecting it, she dropped it into her handbag.

“You won’t have a little more tea?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Just a little more perhaps.”

I refilled the cups. Sachiko watched me, then said: “If it’s inconvenient — about tonight, I mean — it wouldn’t matter at all. Mariko should be capable of being left on her own by now.”

“It’s no trouble. I’m sure my husband won’t object.”

“You’re very kind, Etsuko,” Sachiko said, in a flat tone. Then she said: “I should warn you, perhaps. My

daughter has been in a somewhat difficult mood these past few days. ”

“That’s all right,” I said, smiling. “I’ll need to get used to children in every kind of mood. ”

Sachiko went on drinking her tea slowly. She seemed in no hurry to be returning. Then she put down her teacup and for some moments sat examining the back of her hands.

“I know it was a terrible thing that happened here in Nagasaki,” she said, finally. “But it was bad in Tokyo too. Week after week it went on, it was very bad. Towards the end we were all living in tunnels and derelict buildings and there was nothing but rubble. Everyone who lived in Tokyo saw unpleasant things. And Mariko did too.” She continued to gaze at the back of her hands.

“Yes,” I said. “It must have been a very difficult time. ”

“This woman. This woman you’ve heard Mariko talk about. That was something Mariko saw in Tokyo. She saw other things in Tokyo, some terrible things, but she’s always remembered that woman.” She turned over her hands and looked at the palms looking from one to the other as if to compare them.

“And this woman,” I said. “She was killed in an air-raid?”

“She killed herself. They said she cut her throat. I never knew her. You see, Mariko went running off one morning. I can’t remember why, perhaps she was upset about something. Anyway she went running off out into the streets, so I went chasing after her. It was very early, there was nobody about. Mariko ran down an alleyway, and I followed after her. There was a canal at the end and the woman was kneeling there, up to her elbows in water. A young woman, very thin. I knew something was wrong as soon as I saw her. You see, Etsuko, she turned round and smiled at Mariko. I knew something was wrong and Mariko must have done too because she stopped

running. At first I thought the woman was blind, she had that kind of look, her eyes didn't seem to actually see anything. Well, she brought her arms out of the canal and showed us what she'd been holding under the water. It was a baby. I took hold of Mariko then and we came out of the alley."

I remained silent, waiting for her to continue. Sachiko helped herself to more tea from the pot.

"As I say," she said, "I heard the woman killed herself. That was a few days afterwards."

"How old was Mariko then?"

"Five, almost six. She saw other things in Tokyo. But she always remembers that woman."

"She saw everything? She saw the baby?"

"Yes. Actually, for a long time I thought she hadn't understood what she'd seen. She didn't talk about it afterwards. She didn't even seem particularly upset at the time. She didn't start talking about it until a month or so later. We were sleeping in this old building then. I woke up in the night and saw Mariko sitting up, staring at the doorway. There wasn't a door, it was just this doorway, and Mariko was sitting up looking at it. I was quite alarmed. You see, there was nothing to stop anyone walking into the building. I asked Mariko what was wrong and she said a woman had been standing there watching us. I asked what sort of woman and Mariko said it was the one we'd seen that morning. Watching us from the doorway. I got up and looked around but there wasn't anyone there. It's quite possible, of course, that some woman was standing there. There was nothing to stop anyone stepping inside."

"I see. And Mariko mistook her for the woman you'd seen."

"I expect that's what happened. In any case, that's when it started, Mariko's obsession with that woman. I thought

she'd grown out of it, but just recently it's started again. If she starts to talk about it tonight, please don't pay her any attention. "

"Yes, I see. "

"You know how it is with children," said Sachiko. "They play at make-believe and they get confused where their fantasies begin and end. "

"Yes, I suppose it's nothing unusual really. "

"You see, Etsuko, things were very difficult when Mariko was born. "

"Yes, they must have been," I said. "I'm very fortunate, I know. "

"Things were very difficult. Perhaps it was foolish to have married when I did. After all, everyone could see a war was coming. But then again, Etsuko, no one knew what a war was really like, not in those days. I married into a highly respected family. I never thought a war could change things so much. "

Sachiko put down her teacup and passed a hand through her hair. Then she smiled quickly. "As regards tonight, Etsuko," she said, "my daughter is quite capable of amusing herself. So please don't bother too much with her. "

Mrs Fujiwara's face often grew weary when she talked about her son.

"He's becoming an old man," she was saying. "Soon he'll have only the old maids to choose from. "

We were sitting in the forecourt of her noodle shop. Several tables were occupied by office-workers having their lunch.

"Poor Kazuo-San," I said, with a laugh. "But I can understand how he feels. It was so sad about Miss Michiko. And they were engaged for a long time, weren't they? "

“Three years. I never saw the point in these long engagements. Yes, Michiko was a nice girl. I’m sure she’d be the first to agree with me about Kazuo mourning her like this. She would have wanted him to continue with his life.”

“It must be difficult for him though. To have built up plans for so long only for things to end like that.”

“But that’s all in the past now,” said Mrs Fujiwara. “We’ve all had to put things behind us. You too, Etsuko, I remember you were very heartbroken once. But you managed to carry on.”

“Yes, but I was fortunate. Ogata-San was very kind to me in those days. I don’t know what would have become of me otherwise.”

“Yes, he was very kind to you. And of course, that’s how you met your husband. But you deserved to be fortunate.”

“I really don’t know where I’d be today if Ogata-San hadn’t taken me in. But I can understand how difficult it must be — for your son, I mean. Even me I still think about Nakamura-San sometimes. I can’t help it. Sometimes I wake up and forget. I think I’m still back here, here in Nakagawa ...”

“Now, Etsuko, that’s no way to talk.” Mrs Fujiwara looked at me for some moments, then gave a sigh. “But it happens to me too. Like you say, in the mornings, just as you wake, it can catch you unawares. I often wake up thinking I’ll have to hurry and get breakfast ready for them all.”

We fell silent for a moment. Then Mrs Fujiwara laughed a little.

“You’re very bad, Etsuko,” she said. “See, you’ve got me talking like this now.”

“It’s very foolish of me,” I said. “In any case, Nakamura-San and I, there was never anything between us. I mean, nothing had been decided.”

Mrs Fujiwara went on looking at me, nodding to some private train of thought. Then across the forecourt a customer stood up, ready to leave.

I watched Mrs Fujiwara go over to him, a neat young man in shirt-sleeves. They bowed to each other and began chatting cheerfully. The man made some remark as he buttoned his briefcase and Mrs Fujiwara laughed heartily. They exchanged bows once more, then he disappeared into the afternoon rush. I was grateful for the opportunity to compose my emotions. When Mrs Fujiwara came back, I said:

“I’d better be leaving you soon. You’re very busy just now.”

“You just stay there and relax. You’ve only just sat down. I’ll get you some lunch.”

“No, that’s all right.”

“Now, Etsuko, if you don’t eat here, you won’t eat lunch for another hour. You know how important it is for you to eat regularly at this stage.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

Mrs Fujiwara looked at me closely for a moment. Then she said: “You’ve everything to look forward to now, Etsuko. What are you so unhappy about?”

“Unhappy? But I’m not unhappy in the least.”

She continued to look at me, and I laughed nervously.

“Once the child comes,” she said, “you’ll be delighted, believe me. And you’ll make a splendid mother, Etsuko.”

“I hope so.”

“Of course you will.”

“Yes.” I looked up and smiled.

Mrs Fujiwara nodded, then rose to her feet once more.

The inside of Sachiko's cottage had grown increasingly dark — there was only one lantern in the room — and at first I thought Mariko was staring at a black mark on the wall. She reached out a finger and the shape moved a little. Only then did I realize it was a spider.

“Mariko, leave that alone. That's not nice.”

She put both hands behind her back, but went on staring at the spider.

“We used to have a cat once,” she said. “Before we came here. She used to catch spiders.”

“I see. No, leave it alone, Mariko.”

“But it's not poisonous.”

“No, but leave it alone, it's dirty.”

“The cat we used to have, she could eat spiders. What would happen if I ate a spider?”

“I don't know, Mariko.”

“Would I be sick?”

“I don't know.” I went back to the sewing I had brought with me. Mariko continued to watch the spider. Eventually she said: “I know why you came here tonight.”

“I came because it's not nice for little girls to be on their own.”

“It's because of the woman. It's because the woman might come again.”

“Why don't you show me some more drawings? The ones you showed me just now were lovely.”

Mariko did not reply. She moved over to the window and looked out into the darkness.

“Your mother won't be long now,” I said. “Why don't you show me some more drawings.”

Mariko continued to look into the darkness. Eventually, she returned to the corner where she had been sitting before the spider had attracted her attention.

“How did you spend your day today, Mariko?” I asked.
“Did you do any drawing?”

“I played with Atsu and Mee-Chan.”

“That’s nice. And where do they live? Are they from the apartments?”

“That’s Atsu” — she pointed to one of the small black kittens beside her — “and that’s Mee-Chan.”

I laughed. “Oh, I see. They’re lovely little kittens, aren’t they? But don’t you ever play with other children? The children from the apartments?”

“I play with Atsu and Mee-Chan.”

“But you should try and make friends with the other children. I’m sure they’re all very nice.”

“They stole Suji-Chan. He was my favourite kitten.”

“They stole him? Oh dear, I wonder why they did that.”

Mariko began stroking a kitten. “I’ve lost Suji-Chan now.”

“Perhaps he’ll turn up soon. I’m sure the children were just playing.”

“They killed him. I’ve lost Suji-Chan now.”

“Oh. I wonder why they did a thing like that.”

“I threw stones at them. Because they said things.”

“Well, you shouldn’t throw stones, Mariko.”

“They said things. About Mother. I threw stones at them and they took Suji-Chan and wouldn’t give him back.”

“Well, you’ve still got your other kittens.”

Mariko moved across the room towards the window again. She was just tall enough to lean her elbows on the ledge. For a few minutes she looked into the darkness, her face close to the pane.

“I want to go out now,” she said, suddenly.

“Go out? But it’s far too late, it’s dark outside. And your mother will be back any time now.”

“But I want to go out.”

“Stay here now, Mariko.”

She continued to look outside. I tried to see what was visible to her; from where I sat I could see only darkness.

“Perhaps you should be kinder to the other children. Then you could make friends with them.”

“I know why Mother asked you to come here.”

“You can’t expect to make friends if you throw stones.”

“It’s because of the woman. It’s because Mother knows about the woman.”

“I don’t understand what you’re talking about, Mariko-San. Tell me more about your kittens. Will you draw more pictures of them when they get bigger?”

“It’s because the woman might come again. That’s why Mother asked you.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Mother’s seen the woman. She saw her the other night.”

I stopped sewing for a second and looked up at Mariko. She had turned away from the window and was gazing at me with a strangely expressionless look.

“Where did your mother see this — this person?”

“Out there. She saw her out there. That’s why she asked you.”

Mariko came away from the window and returned to her kittens. The older cat had appeared and the kittens had curled up to their mother. Mariko lay down beside them and started to whisper. Her whispering had a vaguely disturbing quality.

“Your mother should be home soon,” I said. “I wonder what she can be doing.”

Mariko continued whispering.

“She was telling me all about Frank-San,” I said. “He sounds a very nice man.”

The whispering noises stopped. We stared at each other for a second.

“He’s a bad man,” Mariko said.

“Now that’s not a nice thing to say, Mariko-San. Your mother told me all about him and he sounds very nice. And I’m sure he’s very kind to you, isn’t he?”

She got to her feet and went to the wall. The spider was still there.

“Yes, I’m sure he’s a nice man. He’s kind to you, isn’t he, Mariko-San?”

Mariko reached forward. The spider moved quite slowly along the wall.

“Mariko, leave that alone.”

“The cat we had in Tokyo, she used to catch spiders. We were going to bring her with us.”

I could see the spider more clearly in its new position. It had thick short legs, each leg casting a shadow on the yellow wall.

“She was a good cat,” Mariko continued. “She was going to come with us to Nagasaki.”

“And did you bring her?”

“She disappeared. The day before we were leaving. Mother promised we could bring her, but she disappeared.”

“I see.”

She moved suddenly and caught one of the spider’s legs. The remaining legs crawled frantically around her hand as she brought it away from the wall.

“Mariko, let that go. That’s dirty.”

Mariko turned over her hand and the spider crawled into her palm. She closed her other hand over it so that it was imprisoned.

“Mariko, put that down.”

“It’s not poisonous,” she said, coming closer to me.

“No, but it’s dirty. Put it back in the corner.”

“It’s not poisonous though.”

She stood in front of me, the spider inside her cupped hands. Through a gap in her fingers, I could see a leg moving slowly and rhythmically.

“Put it back in the corner, Mariko.”

“What would happen if I ate it? It’s not poisonous.”

“You’d be very sick. Now, Mariko, put it back in the corner.”

Mariko brought the spider closer to her face and parted her lips.

“Don’t be silly, Mariko. That’s very dirty.”

Her mouth opened wider, and then her hands parted and the spider landed in front of my lap. I started back. The spider sped along the tatami into the shadows behind me. It took me a moment to recover, and by then Mariko had left the cottage.

Chapter Six

I cannot be sure now how long I spent searching for her that night. Quite possibly it was for a considerable time, for I was advanced in my pregnancy by then and careful to avoid hurried movements. Besides, once having come outside, I was finding it strangely peaceful to walk beside the river. Along one section of the bank, the grass had grown very tall. I must have been wearing sandals that night for I can remember distinctly the feel of the grass on my feet. As I walked, there were insects making noises all around me.

Then eventually I became aware of a separate sound, a rustling noise as if a snake were sliding in the grass behind me. I stopped to listen, then realized what had caused it; an old piece of rope had tangled itself around my ankle and I had been dragging it through the grass. I carefully released it from around my foot. When I held it up to the moonlight it felt damp and muddy between my fingers.

“Hello, Mariko,” I said, for she was sitting in the grass a short way in front of me, her knees hunched up to her chin. A willow tree — one of several that grew on the bank — hung over the spot where she sat. I took a few steps towards her until I could make out her face more clearly.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“Nothing. It just tangled on to my foot when I was walking.”

“What is it though?”

“Nothing, just a piece of old rope. Why are you out here?”

“Do you want to take a kitten?”

“A kitten?”

“Mother says we can’t keep the kittens. Do you want one?”

“I don’t think so.”

“But we have to find homes for them soon. Or else Mother says we’ll have to drown them.”

“That would be a pity.”

“You could have Atsu.”

“We’ll have to see.”

“Why have you got that?”

“I told you, it’s nothing. It just caught on to my foot.” I took a step closer. “Why are you doing that, Mariko?”

“Doing what?”

“You were making a strange face just now.”

“I wasn’t making a strange face. Why have you got the rope?”

“You were making a strange face. It was a very strange face.”

“Why have you got the rope?”

I watched her for a moment. Signs of fear were appearing on her face.

“Don’t you want a kitten then?” she asked.

“No, I don’t think so. What’s the matter with you?”

Mariko got to her feet. I came forward until I reached the willow tree. I noticed the cottage a short distance away, the shape of its roof darker than the sky. I could hear Mariko’s footsteps running off into the darkness.

When I reached the door of the cottage, I could hear Sachiko's voice from within, talking angrily. They both turned to me as I came in. Sachiko was standing in the middle of the room, her daughter before her. In the light cast by the lantern, her carefully prepared face had a mask-like quality.

"I fear Mariko's been giving you trouble," she said to me.

"Well, she ran outside ..."

"Say sorry to Etsuko-San." She gripped Mariko's arm roughly.

"I want to go outside again."

"You won't move. Now apologize."

"I want to go outside."

With her free hand, Sachiko slapped the child sharply on the back of her thigh. "Now, apologize to Etsuko-San."

Small tears were appearing in Mariko's eyes. She looked at me briefly, then turned back to her mother. "Why do you always go away?"

Sachiko raised her hand again warningly.

"Why do you always go away with Frank-San?"

"Are you going to say you're sorry?"

"Frank-San pisses like a pig. He's a pig in a sewer."

Sachiko stared at her child, her hand still poised in the air.

"He drinks his own piss."

"Silence."

"He drinks his own piss and he shits in his bed."

Sachiko continued to glare, but remained quite still.

“He drinks his own piss.” Mariko pulled her arm free and walked across the room with an air of nonchalance. At the entryway she turned and stared back at her mother. “He pisses like a pig,” she repeated, then went out into the darkness.

Sachiko stared at the entryway for some moments, apparently oblivious of my presence.

“Shouldn’t someone go after her?” I said, after a while.

Sachiko looked at me and seemed to relax a little. “No,” she said, sitting down. “Leave her.”

“But it’s very late.”

“Leave her. She can come back when she pleases.”

A kettle had been steaming on the open stove for some time. Sachiko took it off the flame and began making tea. I watched her for several moments, then asked quietly:

“Did you find your friend?”

“Yes, Etsuko,” she said. “I found him.” She continued with her tea-making, not looking up at me. Then she said: “It was very kind of you to have come here tonight. I do apologize about Mariko.”

I continued to watch her. Eventually, I said: “What are your plans now?”

“My plans?” Sachiko finished filling the teapot, then poured the remaining water on to the flame. “Etsuko, I’ve told you many times, what is of the utmost importance to me is my daughter’s welfare. That must come before everything else. I’m a mother, after all. I’m not some young saloon girl with no regard for decency. I’m a mother, and my daughter’s interests come first.”

“Of course.”

“I intend to write to my uncle. I’ll inform him of my whereabouts and I’ll tell him as much as he has a right to know about my present circumstances. Then if he wishes, I’ll discuss with him the possibilities of our returning to his house.” Sachiko picked up the teapot in both hands and began to shake it gently. “As a matter of fact, Etsuko, I’m rather glad things have turned out like this. Imagine how unsettling it would have been for my daughter, finding herself in a land full of foreigners, a land full of Ame-kos. And suddenly having an Ame-ko for a father, imagine how confusing that would be for her. Do you understand what I’m saying, Etsuko? She’s had enough disturbance in her life already, she deserves to be somewhere settled. It’s just as well things have turned out this way.”

I murmured something in assent.

“Children, Etsuko,” she went on, “mean responsibility. You’ll discover that yourself soon enough. And that’s what he’s really scared of, anyone can see that. He’s scared of Mariko. Well, that’s not acceptable to me, Etsuko. My daughter comes first. It’s just as well things have turned out this way.” She went on rocking the teapot in her hands.

“This must be very distressing for you,” I said, eventually.

“Distressing?” — Sachiko laughed — “Etsuko, do you imagine little things like this distress me? When I was your age, perhaps. But not any more. I’ve gone through too much over the last few years. In any case, I was expecting this to happen. Oh yes, I’m not surprised at all. I expected this. The last time, in Tokyo, it was much the same. He disappeared and spent all our money, drank it all in three days. A lot of it was my money too. Do you know, Etsuko, I actually worked as a maid in a hotel? Yes, as a maid. But I didn’t complain, and we almost had enough, a few more weeks and we could have got a ship to America. But then he drank it all. All those weeks I spent scrubbing floors on my knees and he drank it

all up in three days. And now there he is again, in a bar with his worthless saloon girl. How can I place my daughter's future in the hands of a man like that? I'm a mother, and my daughter comes first."

We fell silent again. Sachiko put the teapot down in front of her and stared at it.

"I hope your uncle will prove understanding," I said.

She gave a shrug. "As far as my uncle's concerned, Etsuko, I'll discuss the matter with him. I'm willing to do so for Mariko's sake. If he proves unhelpful, then I'll just find some alternative course. In any case, I've no intention of accompanying some foreign drunkard to America. I'm quite happy he's found some saloon girl to drink with him, I'm sure they deserve one another. But as far as I'm concerned, I'm going to do what's best for Mariko, and that's my decision."

For some time, Sachiko continued to stare at the teapot. Then she sighed and got to her feet. She went over to the window and peered out into the darkness.

"Should we go and look for her now?" I said.

"No," Sachiko said, still looking out. "She'll be back soon. Let her stay out if that's what she wants."

I feel only regret now for those attitudes I displayed towards Keiko. In this country, after all, it is not unexpected that a young woman of that age should wish to leave home. All I succeeded in doing, it would seem, was to ensure that when she finally left — now almost six years ago — she did so severing all her ties with me. But then I never imagined she could so quickly vanish beyond my reach; all I saw was that my daughter, unhappy as she was at home, would find the world outside too much for her. It was for her own protection I opposed her so vehemently.

That morning — the fifth day of Niki's visit — I awoke during the early hours. What occurred to me first was that I could no longer hear the rain as on previous nights and mornings. Then I remembered what had awoken me.

I lay under the covers looking in turn at those objects visible in the pale light. After several minutes, I felt somewhat calmer and closed my eyes again. I did not sleep, however. I thought of the landlady — Keiko's landlady — and how she had finally opened the door of that room in Manchester.

I opened my eyes and once more looked at the objects in the room. Finally I rose and put on my dressing gown. I made my way to the bathroom, taking care not to arouse Niki, asleep in the spare room next to mine. When I came out of the bathroom, I remained standing on the landing for some time. Beyond the staircase, at the far end of the hallway, I could see the door of Keiko's room. The door, as usual, was shut. I went on staring at it, then moved a few steps forward. Eventually, I found myself standing before it. Once, as I stood there, I thought I heard a small sound, some movement from within. I listened for a while but the sound did not come again. I reached forward and opened the door.

Keiko's room looked stark in the greyish light; a bed covered with a single sheet, her white dressing table, and on the floor, several cardboard boxes containing those of her belongings she had not taken with her to Manchester. I stepped further into the room. The curtains had been left open and I could see the orchard below. The sky looked pale and white; it did not appear to be raining. Beneath the window, down on the grass, two birds were pecking at some fallen apples. I started to feel the cold then and returned to my room.

“A friend of mine's writing a poem about you,” said Niki. We were eating breakfast in the kitchen.

“About me? Why on earth is she doing that?”

“I was telling her about you and she decided she’d write a poem. She’s a brilliant poet.”

“A poem about me? How absurd. What is there to write about? She doesn’t even know me.”

“I just said, Mother. I told her about you. It’s amazing how well she understands people. She’s been through quite a bit herself, you see.”

“I see. And how old is this friend of yours?”

“Mother, you’re always so obsessed about how old people are. It doesn’t matter how old someone is, it’s what they’ve experienced that counts. People can get to be a hundred and not experience a thing.”

“I suppose so.” I gave a laugh and glanced towards the windows. Outside, it had started to drizzle.

“I was telling her about you,” Niki said. “About you and Dad and how you left Japan. She was really impressed. She appreciates what it must have been like, how it wasn’t quite as easy as it sounds.”

For a moment, I went on gazing at the windows. Then I said quickly: “I’m sure your friend will write a marvellous poem.” I took an apple from the fruit basket and Niki watched as I began to peel it with my knife.

“So many women”, she said, “get stuck with kids and lousy husbands and they’re just miserable. But they can’t pluck up the courage to do a thing about it. They’ll just go on like that for the rest of their lives.”

“I see. So you’re saying they should desert their children, are you, Niki?”

“You know what I mean. It’s pathetic when people just waste away their lives.”

I did not speak, although my daughter paused as if expecting me to do so.

“It couldn’t have been easy, what you did, Mother. You ought to be proud of what you did with your life.”

I continued to peel the apple. When I had finished, I dried my fingers on the napkin.

“My friends all think so too,” said Niki. “The ones I’ve told anyway.”

“I’m very flattered. Please thank your marvellous friends.”

“I was just saying, that’s all.”

“Well, you’ve made your point quite clearly now.”

Perhaps I was unnecessarily curt with her that morning, but then it was presumptuous of Niki to suppose I would need reassuring on such matters. Besides, she has little idea of what actually occurred during those last days in Nagasaki. One supposes she has built up some sort of picture from what her father has told her. Such a picture, inevitably, would have its inaccuracies. For, in truth, despite all the impressive articles he wrote about Japan, my husband never understood the ways of our culture, even less a man like Jiro. I do not claim to recall Jiro with affection, but then he was never the oafish man my husband considered him to be. Jiro worked hard to do his part for the family and he expected me to do mine; in his own terms, he was a dutiful husband. And indeed, for the seven years he knew his daughter, he was a good father to her. Whatever else I convinced myself of during those final days, I never pretended Keiko would not miss him.

But such things are long in the past now and I have no wish to ponder them yet again. My motives for leaving Japan were justifiable, and I know I always kept Keiko’s interests

very much at heart. There is nothing to be gained in going over such matters again.

I had been pruning the pot plants along the window ledge for some time when I realized how quiet Niki had become. When I turned to her, she was standing in front of the fireplace, looking past me out into the garden. I turned back to the window, trying to follow her gaze; despite the mist on the pane, the garden was still clearly discernible. Niki, it seemed, was gazing over to a spot near the hedge, where the rain and wind had put into disarray the canes which supported the young tomato plants.

“I think the tomatoes are ruined for this year,” I said. “I’ve really rather neglected them.”

I was still looking at the canes when I heard the sound of a drawer being pulled open, and when I turned again, Niki was continuing with her search. She had decided after breakfast to read through all her father’s newspaper articles, and had spent much of the morning going through all the drawers and bookshelves in the house.

For some minutes, I continued working on my pot plants; there were a large number of them, cluttering the window ledge. Behind me, I could hear Niki going through the drawers. Then she became quiet again, and when I turned to her, she was once more gazing past me, out into the garden.

“I think I’ll go and do the goldfish now,” she said.

“The goldfish?”

Without replying, Niki left the room, and a moment later I saw her go striding across the lawn. I wiped away a little mist from the pane and watched her. Niki walked to the far end of the garden, to the fish-pond amidst the rockery. She poured in the feed, and for several seconds remained standing there, gazing into the pond. I could see her figure in profile; she looked very thin, and despite her fashionable

clothes there was still something unmistakably childlike about her. I watched the wind disturb her hair and wondered why she had gone outside without a jacket.

On her way back, she stopped beside the tomato plants and in spite of the heavy drizzle stood contemplating them for some time. Then she took a few steps closer and with much care began straightening the canes. She stood up several that had fallen completely, then, crouching down so her knees almost touched the wet grass, adjusted the net I had laid above the soil to protect the plants from marauding birds.

“Thank you, Niki,” I said to her when she came in. “That was very thoughtful of you.”

She muttered something and sat down on the settee. I noticed she had become quite embarrassed.

“I really have been rather neglectful about those tomatoes this year,” I went on. “Still, it doesn’t really matter, I suppose. I never know what to do with so many tomatoes these days. Last year, I gave most of them to the Morrisons.”

“Oh God,” said Niki, “the Morrisons. And how are the dear old Morrisons?”

“Niki, the Morrisons are perfectly kind people. I’ve never understood why you need to be so disparaging. You and Cathy used to be the best of friends once.”

“Oh yes, Cathy. And how’s she these days? Still living at home, I suppose?”

“Well, yes. She works in a bank now.”

“Typical enough.”

“That seems to me a perfectly sensible thing to be doing at her age. And Marilyn’s married now, did you know?”

“Oh yes? And who did she marry?”

“I don’t remember what her husband does. I met him once. He seemed very pleasant.”

“I expect he’s a vicar or something like that.”

“Now, Niki, I really don’t see why you have to adopt this tone. The Morrisons have always been extremely kind to us.”

Niki sighed impatiently. “It’s just the way they do things,” she said. “It makes me sick. Like the way they’ve brought up their kids.”

“But you’ve hardly seen the Morrisons in years.”

“I saw them often enough when I used to know Cathy. People like that are so hopeless. I suppose I ought to feel sorry for Cathy.”

“You’re blaming her because she hasn’t gone to live in London like you have? I must say, Niki, that doesn’t sound like the broadmindedness you and your friends seem so proud of.”

“Oh, it doesn’t matter. You don’t understand what I’m talking about anyway.” She glanced towards me, then heaved another sigh. “It doesn’t matter,” she repeated, looking the other way.

I continued to stare at her for a moment. Eventually, I turned back to the window ledge and for some minutes worked on in silence.

“You know, Niki,” I said, after some time, “I’m very pleased you have good friends you enjoy being with. After all, you must lead your own life now. That’s only to be expected.”

My daughter gave no reply. When I glanced at her, she was reading one of the newspapers she had found in the drawer.

“I’d be interested to meet your friends,” I said. “You’re always welcome to bring any of them here.”

Niki flicked her head to prevent her hair falling across her vision, and continued to read. A look of concentration had appeared on her face.

I went back to my plants, for I could read these signals well enough. There is a certain subtle and yet quiet emphatic manner Niki adopts whenever I display curiosity concerning her life in London; it is her way of telling me I will regret it if I persist. Consequently, my picture of her present life is built largely upon speculation. In her letters, however — and Niki is very good about remembering to write — she mentions certain things she would never touch upon in conversation. That is how I have learnt, for instance, that her boyfriend's name is David and that he is studying politics at one of the London colleges. And yet, during conversation, if I were even to enquire after his health, I know that barrier would come firmly down.

This rather aggressive regard for privacy reminds me very much of her sister. For in truth, my two daughters had much in common, much more than my husband would ever admit. As far as he was concerned, they were complete opposites; furthermore, it became his view that Keiko was a difficult person by nature and there was little we could do for her. In fact, although he never claimed it outright, he would imply that Keiko had inherited her personality from her father. I did little to contradict this, for it was the easy explanation, that Jiro was to blame, not us. Of course, my husband never knew Keiko in her early years; if he had, he may well have recognized how similar the two girls were during their respective early stages. Both had fierce tempers, both were possessive; if they became upset, they would not like other children forget their anger quickly, but would remain moody for most of the day. And yet, one has become a happy, confident young woman — I have every hope for Niki's future — while the other, after becoming increasingly miserable, took her own life. I do not find it as easy as my husband did to put the blame on Nature, or else

on Jiro. However, such things are in the past now, and there is little to be gained in going over them here.

“By the way, Mother,” said Niki. “That *was* you this morning, wasn’t it?”

“This morning?”

“I heard these sounds this morning. Really early, about four o’clock.”

“I’m sorry I disturbed you. Yes, that was me.” I began to laugh. “Why, who else did you imagine it was?” I continued to laugh, and for a moment could not stop. Niki stared at me, her newspaper still held open before her.

“Well, I’m sorry I woke you, Niki,” I said, finally controlling my laughter.

“It’s all right, I was awake anyway. I can’t seem to sleep properly these days.”

“And after all that fuss you made about the rooms. Perhaps you should see a doctor.”

“Maybe I will.” Niki went back to her newspaper.

I laid down the clippers I had been using and turned to her. “You know, it’s strange. I had that dream again this morning.”

“What dream?”

“I was telling you about it yesterday, but I don’t suppose you were listening. I dreamt about that little girl again.”

“What little girl?”

“The one we saw playing on the swing the other day. When we were in the village having coffee.”

Niki shrugged. “Oh, that one,” she said, not looking up.

“Well, actually, it isn’t that little girl at all. That’s what I realized this morning. It seemed to be that little girl, but it wasn’t.”

Niki looked at me again. Then she said: “I suppose you mean it was her. Keiko.”

“Keiko?” I laughed a little. “What a strange idea. Why should it be Keiko? No, it was nothing to do with Keiko.”

Niki continued to look at me uncertainly.

“It was just a little girl I knew once,” I said to her. “A long time ago.”

“Which little girl?”

“No one you know. I knew her a long time ago.”

Niki gave another shrug. “I can’t even get to sleep in the first place. I think I only slept about four hours last night.”

“That’s rather disturbing, Niki. Especially at your age. Perhaps you should see a doctor. You can always go and see Dr Ferguson.”

Niki made another of her impatient gestures and went back to her father’s newspaper article. I watched her for a moment.

“In fact, I realized something else this morning,” I said. “Something else about the dream.”

My daughter did not seem to hear.

“You see,” I said, “the little girl isn’t on a swing at all. It seemed like that at first. But it’s not a swing she’s on.”

Niki murmured something and carried on reading.

PART TWO

Chapter Seven

As the summer grew hotter, the stretch of wasteground outside our apartment block became increasingly unpleasant. Much of the earth lay dried and cracked, while water which had accumulated during the rainy season remained in the deeper ditches and craters. The ground bred all manner of insects, and the mosquitoes in particular seemed everywhere. In the apartments there was the usual complaining, but over the years the anger over the wasteground had become resigned and cynical.

I crossed that ground regularly that summer to reach Sachiko's cottage, and indeed it was a loathsome journey; insects often caught in one's hair, and there were grubs and midges visible amidst the cracked surface. I still remember those journeys vividly, and they — like those misgivings about motherhood, like Ogata-San's visit — serve today to bring a certain distinctness to that summer. And yet in many ways, that summer was much like any other. I spent many moments — as I was to do throughout succeeding years — gazing emptily at the view from my apartment window. On clearer days, I could see far beyond the trees on the opposite bank of the river, a pale outline of hills visible against the clouds. It was not an unpleasant view, and on occasions it brought me a rare sense of relief from the emptiness of those long afternoons I spent in that apartment.

Apart from the matter of the wasteground, there were other topics which preoccupied the neighbourhood that summer. The newspapers were full of talk about the occupation coming to an end and in Tokyo politicians were busy in argument with each other. In the apartments, the issue was discussed frequently enough, but with much the same cynicism as coloured talk concerning the wasteground. Received with more urgency were the reports of the child murders that were

alarming Nagasaki at the time. First a boy, then a small girl had been found battered to death. When a third victim, another little girl, had been found hanging from a tree there was near-panic amongst the mothers in the neighbourhood. Understandably, little comfort was taken from the fact that the incidents had taken place on the other side of the city: children became a rare sight around the housing precinct, particularly in the evening hours.

I am not sure to what extent these reports worried Sachiko at the time. Certainly she seemed less inclined to leave Mariko unattended, but then I suspect this had more to do with other developments in her life; she had received a reply from her uncle, expressing his willingness to take her back into his household, and soon after this news, I noticed a change come over Sachiko's attitude to the little girl: she seemed somehow more patient and relaxed with the child.

Sachiko had betrayed much relief about her uncle's letter, and at first I had little reason to doubt she would return to his house. However, as the days went by, my suspicions grew about her intentions. For one thing, I discovered some days after the arrival of the letter that Sachiko had not yet mentioned the matter to Mariko. And then, as the weeks went on, not only did Sachiko make no preparations for moving, she had not, so I discovered, sent a reply to her uncle.

Had Sachiko not been so peculiarly reluctant to talk about her uncle's household, I doubt if it would have occurred to me to ponder such a topic. As it was, I grew curious, and despite Sachiko's reticence I managed to gather certain impressions; for one thing, the uncle was not, it seemed, related by blood, but was a relative of Sachiko's husband; Sachiko had never known him prior to arriving at his house several months earlier. The uncle was wealthy, and since his house was an unusually large one — and his daughter and a housemaid the only other occupants — there had been plenty of room for Sachiko and her little girl.

Indeed, one thing Sachiko did mention more than once was her recollection of how large parts of that house had remained empty and silent.

In particular, I became curious about the uncle's daughter, who I gathered to be an unmarried woman of roughly Sachiko's age. Sachiko would say little about her cousin, but then I do recall one conversation we had around that time. I had by then formed an idea that Sachiko's slowness in returning to her uncle had to do with some tension which existed between herself and the cousin. I must have tentatively put this to Sachiko that morning, for it provoked one of the few occasions upon which she talked explicitly about the time she had spent at her uncle's house. The conversation comes back to me quite vividly; it was one of those dry windless mornings of mid-August, and we were standing on the bridge at the top of our hill, waiting for a tram to take us into the city. I cannot remember where it was we were going that day, or where we had left Mariko — for I recall the child was not with us. Sachiko was gazing out at the view from the bridge, holding up a hand to shield her face from the sun.

“It puzzles me, Etsuko,” she said, “how you ever managed to get hold of such an idea. On the contrary, Yasuko and I were the best of friends, and I'm greatly looking forward to seeing her again. I really don't understand how you could have thought otherwise, Etsuko.”

“I'm sorry, I must have been mistaken,” I said. “For some reason, I supposed you had some reservations about returning there.”

“Not at all, Etsuko. When you first met me, it's quite true, I was in the process of considering certain other possibilities. But a mother can't be blamed for considering the different options that arise for her child, can she? It just so happened that for a while there seemed an interesting option open to us. But having given it further consideration,

I've now rejected it. That's all there is to it, Etsuko, I've no further interest in these other plans that were suggested to me. I'm glad everything has turned out for the best, and I'm looking forward to returning to my uncle's house. As for Yasuko-San, we have the highest regard for each other. I don't understand what could have made you suppose otherwise, Etsuko."

"I do apologize. It's just that I thought you once mentioned a quarrel of some kind."

"A quarrel?" She looked at me for a second, and then a smile spread over her face. "Oh, now I understand what you're referring to. No, Etsuko, that was no quarrel. That was just some trivial tiff we had. What was it about now? You see, I don't even remember, it was so trivial. Oh yes, that's right, we were arguing about which of us should prepare the supper. Yes, really, that's all it was. You see, Etsuko, we used to take it in turns. The housemaid would cook one night, my cousin the next, then it would be my turn. The housemaid was taken ill on one of her nights, and Yasuko and I both wanted to cook. Now you mustn't misunderstand, Etsuko, we generally got on very well. It's just that when you see so much of one person and no one else, things can get out of proportion at times."

"Yes, I do understand. I'm sorry, I was quite mistaken."

"You see, Etsuko, when you have a housemaid to do all the little jobs for you, it's surprising how slowly the time goes by. Yasuko and I, we tried to occupy ourselves one way or another, but really there was little to do other than sit and talk all day. All those months we sat in that house together, we hardly saw an outsider the whole time. It's a wonder we didn't really quarrel. Properly, I mean."

"Yes, it certainly is. I obviously misunderstood you before."

“Yes, Etsuko, I’m afraid you did. I only happen to remember the incident because it occurred just before we left and I haven’t seen my cousin since. But it’s absurd to call it a quarrel.” She gave a laugh. “In fact, I expect Yasuko’s thinking of it and laughing too.”

Perhaps it was that same morning, we decided that before Sachiko went away, we would go together on a day’s outing somewhere. And indeed, one hot afternoon not long afterwards, I accompanied Sachiko and her daughter to Inasa. Inasa is the hilly area of Nagasaki overlooking the harbour, renowned for its mountain scenery; it was not so far from where we lived — in fact it was the hills of Inasa I could see from my apartment window — but in those days, outings of any sort were rare for me, and the trip to Inasa seemed like a major excursion. I remember I looked forward to it for days; it is, I suppose, one of the better memories I have from those times.

We crossed to Inasa by ferry at the height of the afternoon. Noises from the harbour followed us across the water — the clang of hammers, the whine of machinery, the occasional deep sound from a ship’s horn — but in those days, in Nagasaki, such sounds were not unpleasing; they were the sounds of recovery and they were still capable then of bringing a certain uplifting feeling to one’s spirits.

Once we had crossed the water, the sea-winds seemed to blow more freely and the day no longer felt so stifling. The sounds of the harbour, carried in the wind, still reached us as we sat on a bench in the forecourt of the cable-car station. We were all the more grateful for the breeze, for the forecourt offered scant shelter from the sun; it was simply an open area of concrete which — being peopled that day largely by children and their mothers — resembled a school playground. Over to one side, behind a set of turnstiles, we could see the wooden platforms where the

cable-cars came to rest. For some moments we sat mesmerized by the sight of the cable-cars climbing and falling; one car would go rising away into the trees, gradually turning into a small dot against the sky, while its companion came lower, growing larger, until it heaved itself to a halt at the platform. Inside a small hut beside the turnstiles, a man was operating some levers; he wore a cap, and after each car had come down safely, he would lean out and chat to a group of children who had gathered to watch.

The first of our encounters that day with the American woman occurred as a result of our deciding to take the cable-car to the hilltop. Sachiko and her daughter had gone to buy the tickets and for a moment I was left sitting alone on the bench. Then I noticed at the far end of the forecourt a small stall selling sweets and toys. Thinking I would perhaps buy some candy for Mariko, I got to my feet and walked over to it. Two children were there before me, arguing about what to buy. While I waited for them, I noticed among the toys a pair of plastic binoculars. The children continued to quarrel, and I glanced back across the forecourt. Sachiko and Mariko were still standing by the turnstiles; Sachiko seemed to be in conversation with two women.

“Can I be of service, madam?”

The children had gone. Behind the stall was a young man in a neat summer uniform.

“May I try these?” I pointed to the binoculars.

“Certainly, madam. It’s just a toy, but quite effective.”

I put the binoculars to my face and looked towards the hill-slope; they were surprisingly powerful. I turned to the forecourt and found Sachiko and her daughter in the lenses. Sachiko had dressed for the day in a light-coloured kimono tied with an elegant sash — a costume, I suspected, reserved only for special occasions — and she cut a graceful figure

amidst the crowd. She was still talking to the two women, one of whom looked like a foreigner.

“A hot day again, madam,” the young man said, as I handed him the money. “Are you riding on the cable-car?”

“We’re just about to.”

“It’s a magnificent view. That’s a television tower we’re building on the top. By next year, the cable-car will go right up to it, right to the top.”

“How splendid. Have a nice day, won’t you.”

“Thank you, madam.”

I made my way back across the forecourt with the binoculars. Although at that time I did not understand English, I guessed at once that the foreign woman was American. She was tall, with red wavy hair and glasses which pointed up at the corners. She was addressing Sachiko in a loud voice, and I noted with surprise the ease with which Sachiko replied in English. The other woman was Japanese; she had noticeably plump features, and appeared to be around forty or so. Beside her was a tubby little boy of about eight or nine. I bowed to them as I arrived, wished them a pleasant day, then handed Mariko the binoculars.

“It’s just a toy,” I said. “But you might be able to see a few things.”

Mariko opened the wrapping and examined the binoculars with a serious expression. She looked through them, first around the forecourt, then up at the hill-slope.

“Say thank you, Mariko,” Sachiko said.

Mariko continued to look through the binoculars. Then she brought them away from her face and put the plastic strap over her head.

“Thank you, Etsuko-San,” she said, a little grudgingly.

The American woman pointed to the binoculars, said something in English and laughed. The binoculars had also attracted the attention of the tubby boy, who previously had been watching the hill-slope and the descending cable-car. He took a few steps towards Mariko, his eyes on the binoculars.

“That was very kind of you, Etsuko,” said Sachiko.

“Not at all. It’s just a toy.”

The cable-car arrived and we went through the turnstiles, on to the hollow wooden boards. The two women and the tubby boy, it seemed, were to be the only other passengers. The man with the cap came out of his hut and ushered us one by one into the car. The interior looked stark and metallic. There were large windows on all sides and benches ran along the two larger walls.

The car remained at the platform for several more minutes and the tubby boy began to walk around impatiently. Beside me, Mariko was looking out of the window, her knees up on the bench. From our side of the car, we could see the forecourt and the gathering of young spectators at the turnstiles. Mariko seemed to be testing the effectiveness of her binoculars, holding them to her eyes one moment, taking them away the next. Then the tubby boy came and knelt on the bench beside her. For a little while, the two children ignored each other. Finally, the boy said:

“I want to have a look now.” He held out his hand for the binoculars. Mariko looked at him coldly.

“Akira, don’t ask like that,” said his mother. “Ask the little lady nicely.”

The boy took his hand away and looked at Mariko. The little girl stared back. The boy turned and went to another window.

The children at the turnstiles waved as the car began to pull away. I instinctively reached for the metal bar running

along the window, and the American woman made a nervous noise and laughed. The forecourt was growing smaller and then the hillside began to move beneath us; the cable-car swayed gently as we climbed higher; for a moment, the treetops seemed to brush against the windows, then suddenly a large dip opened beneath us and we were hanging in the sky. Sachiko laughed softly and pointed to something out of the window. Mariko continued to look through her binoculars.

The cable-car finished its climb and we filed out cautiously as if uncertain we had arrived on solid ground. The higher station had no concrete forecourt, and we stepped off the wooden boards into a small grass clearing. Other than the uniformed man who ushered us out, there were no other people in sight. At the back of the clearing, almost amidst the pine trees, stood several wooden picnic tables. The near edge of the clearing where we had disembarked was marked by a metal fence, which separated us from a cliff-edge. When we had regained our bearings a little, we wandered over to the fence and looked out over the falling mountainside. After a moment, the two women and the boy joined us.

“Quite breathtaking, isn’t it?” the Japanese woman said to me. “I’m just showing my friend all the interesting sights. She’s never been in Japan before.”

“I see. I hope she’s enjoying it here.”

“I hope so. Unfortunately, I don’t understand English so well. Your friend seems to speak it much better than I do.”

“Yes, she speaks it very well.”

We both glanced towards Sachiko. She and the American woman were again exchanging remarks in English.

“How nice to be so well educated,” the woman said to me. “Well, I hope you all have a nice day.”

We exchanged bows, then the woman made gestures to her American guest, suggesting they move off.

“Please may I look,” the tubby boy said, in an angry voice. Again, he was holding out his hand. Mariko stared at him, as she had done in the cable-car.

“I want to see it,” the boy said, more fiercely.

“Akira, remember to ask the little lady nicely.”

“Please! I want to see it.”

Mariko continued to look at him for a second, then took the plastic strap from around her neck and handed the boy the binoculars. The boy put them to his face and for some moments gazed over the fence.

“These aren’t any good,” he said finally, turning to his mother. “They aren’t nearly as good as mine. Mother, look, you can’t even see those trees over there properly. Take a look.”

He held the binoculars towards his mother. Mariko reached for them but the boy snatched them away and again offered them to the woman.

“Take a look, Mother. You can’t even see those trees, the near ones.”

“Akira, give them back to the little lady now.”

“They aren’t nearly as good as mine.”

“Now, Akira, that’s not a nice thing to say. You know everyone isn’t as lucky as you.”

Mariko reached for the binoculars and this time the boy let go.

“Say thank you to the little lady,” said his mother.

The boy said nothing and started to walk away. The mother laughed a little.

“Thank you very much,” she said to Mariko. “You were very kind.” Then she smiled in turn towards Sachiko and

myself. "Splendid scenery, isn't it?" she said. "I do hope you have a nice day."

The path was covered with pine needles and rose up the side of the mountain in zig-zags. We walked at an easy pace, often stopping to rest. Mariko was quiet and — rather to my surprise — showed no signs of wishing to misbehave. She did however display a curious reluctance to walk alongside her mother and myself. One moment she would be lagging behind, causing us to cast anxious glances over our shoulders; the next moment, she would go running past us and walk on ahead.

We met the American woman for the second time an hour or so after we had disembarked from the cable-car. She and her companion were coming back down the path and, recognizing us, gave cheerful greetings. The tubby boy, coming behind them, ignored us. As she passed, the American woman said something to Sachiko in English, and when Sachiko replied, gave a loud laugh. She seemed to want to stop and talk, but the Japanese woman and her son did not break their step; the American woman waved and walked on.

When I complimented Sachiko on her command of English, she laughed and said nothing. The encounter, I noticed, had had a curious effect upon her. She became quiet, and walked on beside me as if lost in thought. Then, when Mariko had once more rushed on ahead, she said to me:

"My father was a highly respected man, Etsuko. Highly respected indeed. But his foreign connections almost resulted in my marriage proposal being withdrawn." She smiled slightly and shook her head. "How odd, Etsuko. That all seems like another age now."

"Yes," I said. "Things have changed so much."

The path bent sharply and began to climb again. The trees fell away and suddenly the sky seemed huge all around us. Up

ahead, Mariko shouted something and pointed. Then she hurried on excitedly.

“I never saw a great deal of my father,” Sachiko said. “He was abroad much of the time, in Europe and America. When I was young, I used to dream I’d go to America one day, that I’d go there and become a film actress. My mother used to laugh at me. But my father told me if I learnt my English well enough, I could easily become a business girl. I used to enjoy learning English.”

Mariko had stopped at what looked like a plateau. She shouted something to us again.

“I remember once,” Sachiko went on, “my father brought a book back from America for me, an English version of *A Christmas Carol*. That became something of an ambition of mine, Etsuko. I wanted to learn English well enough to read that book. Unfortunately, I never had the chance. When I married, my husband forbade me to continue learning. In fact, he made me throw the book away.”

“That seems rather a pity,” I said.

“My husband was like that, Etsuko. Very strict and very patriotic. He was never the most considerate of men. But he came from a highly distinguished family and my parents considered it a good match. I didn’t protest when he forbade me to study English. After all, there seemed little point any more.”

We reached the spot where Mariko was standing; it was a square area of ground that jutted off the edge of the path, bound in by several large boulders. A thick tree trunk fallen on to its side had been converted into a bench, the top surface having been smoothed and flattened. Sachiko and I sat down to recover our breath.

“Don’t go too near the edge, Mariko,” Sachiko called. The little girl had walked out to the boulders and was looking at the view with her binoculars.

I had a rather precarious feeling, perched on the edge of that mountain looking out over such a view; a long way down below us, we could see the harbour looking like a dense piece of machinery left in the water. Across the harbour, on the opposite bank, rose the series of hills that led into Nagasaki. The land at the foot of the hills was busy with houses and buildings. Far over to our right, the harbour opened out on to the sea.

We sat there for a while, recovering our breath and enjoying the breeze. Then I said:

“You wouldn’t think anything had ever happened here, would you? Everything looks so full of life. But all that area down there” — I waved my hand at the view below us — “all that area was so badly hit when the bomb fell. But look at it now.”

Sachiko nodded, then turned to me with a smile. “How cheerful you are today, Etsuko,” she said.

“But it’s so good to come out here. Today I’ve decided I’m going to be optimistic. I’m determined to have a happy future. Mrs Fujiwara always tells me how important it is to keep looking forward. And she’s right. If people didn’t do that, then all this” — I pointed again at the view — “all this would still be rubble.”

Sachiko smiled again. “Yes, as you say, Etsuko. It would all be rubble.” For a few moments, she continued to gaze at the view below us. “Incidentally, Etsuko,” she said, after a while, “your friend, Mrs Fujiwara. I assume she lost her family in the war.”

I nodded. “She had five children. And her husband was an important man in Nagasaki. When the bomb fell, they all died except her eldest son. It must have been such a blow to her, but she just kept going.”

“Yes,” said Sachiko, nodding slowly, “I thought something of that nature had happened. And did she always

have that noodle shop of hers? ”

“No, of course not. Her husband was an important man. That was only afterwards, after she lost everything. Whenever I see her, I think to myself I have to be like her, I should keep looking forward. Because in many ways, she lost more than I did. After all, look at me now. I’m about to start a family of my own. ”

“Yes, how right you are. ” The wind had disturbed Sachiko’s carefully combed hair. She passed her hand through it, then took a deep breath, “How right you are Etsuko, we shouldn’t keep looking back to the past. The war destroyed many things for me, but I still have my daughter. As you say, we have to keep looking forward. ”

“You know, ” I said, “it’s only in the last few days I’ve really thought about what it’s going to be like. To have a child, I mean. I don’t feel nearly so afraid now. I’m going to look forward to it. I’m going to be optimistic from now on. ”

“And so you should, Etsuko. After all, you have a lot to look forward to. In fact, you’ll discover soon enough, it’s being a mother that makes life truly worthwhile. What do I care if life is a little dull at my uncle’s house? All I want is what’s best for my daughter. We’ll get her the best private tuition and she’ll catch up on her schoolwork in no time. As you say, Etsuko, we must look forward to life. ”

“I’m so glad you feel like that, ” I said. “We should both of us be grateful really. We may have lost a lot in the war, but there’s still so much to look forward to. ”

“Yes, Etsuko. There’s a lot to look forward to. ”

Mariko came nearer and stood in front of us. Perhaps she had overheard some of our conversation, for she said to me:

“We’re going to live with Yasuko-San again. Did Mother tell you? ”

“Yes,” I said, “she did. Are you looking forward to living there again, Mariko-San?”

“We might be able to keep the kittens now,” the little girl said. “There’s plenty of room at Yasuko-San’s house.”

“We’ll have to see about that, Mariko,” said Sachiko.

Mariko looked at her mother for a moment. Then she said: “But Yasuko-San likes cats. And anyway, Maru was Yasuko-San’s cat before we took her. So the kittens are hers too.”

“Yes, Mariko, but we’ll have to see. We’ll have to see what Yasuko-San’s father will say.”

The little girl regarded her mother with a sullen look, then turned to me once more. “We might be able to keep them,” she said, with a serious expression.

Towards the latter part of the afternoon, we found ourselves back at the clearing where we had first stepped off the cable-car. There still remained in our lunch-boxes some biscuits and chocolates, so we sat down for a snack at one of the picnic tables. At the other end of the clearing, a handful of people were gathered near the metal fence, awaiting the cable-car that would take them back down the mountain.

We had been sitting at the picnic table for several minutes when a voice made us look up. The American woman came striding across the clearing, a broad smile on her face. Without the least sign of bashfulness, she sat down at our table, smiled to us in turn, then began to address Sachiko in English. She was, I supposed, grateful for the chance to communicate other than by means of gestures. Looking around, I spotted the Japanese woman nearby, putting a jacket on her son. She appeared less enthusiastic for our company, but eventually she came towards our table with a smile. She sat down opposite me, and when her son sat beside her, I could see the extent to which mother and child shared the same

plump features; most noticeably, their cheeks had a kind of fleshy sagginess to them, not unlike the cheeks of bulldogs. The American woman, all the while, continued to talk loudly to Sachiko.

At the arrival of the strangers, Mariko had opened her sketchbook and begun to draw. The plump-faced woman, after exchanging a few pleasantries with me, turned to the little girl.

“And have you enjoyed your day?” she asked Mariko. “It’s very pretty up here, isn’t it?”

Mariko continued to crayon her page, not looking up. The woman, however, did not seem in the least deterred.

“What are you drawing there?” she asked. “It looks very nice.”

This time, Mariko stopped drawing and looked at the woman coldly.

“That looks very nice. May we see?” The woman reached forward and took the sketchbook. “Aren’t these nice, Akira,” she said to her son. “Isn’t the little lady clever?”

The boy leaned across the table for a better view. He regarded the drawings with interest, but said nothing.

“They’re very nice indeed.” The woman was turning over the pages. “Did you do all these today?”

Mariko remained silent for a moment. Then she said: “The crayons are new. We bought them this morning. It’s harder to draw with new crayons.”

“I see. Yes, new crayons are harder, aren’t they? Akira here draws too, don’t you, Akira?”

“Drawing’s easy,” the boy said.

“Aren’t these nice little pictures, Akira?”

Mariko pointed to the open page. "I don't like that one there. The crayons weren't worn in enough. The one on the next page is better."

"Oh yes. This one's lovely!"

"I did it down at the harbour," said Mariko. "But it was noisy and hot down there, so I hurried."

"But it's very good. Do you enjoy drawing?"

"Yes."

Sachiko and the American woman had both turned towards the sketchbook. The American woman pointed at the drawing and uttered loudly several times the Japanese word for "delicious".

"And what's this?" the plump-faced woman continued. "A butterfly! It must have been very hard to draw it so well. It couldn't have stayed still for very long."

"I remembered it," said Mariko. "I saw one earlier on."

The woman nodded, then turned to Sachiko. "How clever your daughter is. I think it's very commendable for a child to use her memory and imagination. So many children at this age are still copying out of books."

"Yes," said Sachiko. "I suppose so."

I was rather surprised at the dismissiveness of her tone, for she had been talking to the American woman in her most gracious manner. The tubby boy leaned further across the table and put his finger to the page.

"Those ships are too big," he said. "If that's supposed to be a tree, then the ships would be much smaller."

His mother considered this for a moment. "Well, perhaps," she said. "But it's a lovely little drawing all the same. Don't you think so, Akira?"

“The ships are far too big,” said the boy.

The woman gave a laugh. “You must excuse Akira,” she said to Sachiko. “But you see, he has a quite distinguished tutor for his drawing, and so he’s obviously much more discerning about these things than most children his age. Does your daughter have a tutor for her drawing?”

“No, she doesn’t.” Again, Sachiko’s tone was unmistakably cold. The woman, however, appeared to notice nothing.

“It’s not a bad idea at all,” she went on. “My husband was against it at first. He thought it was quite enough for Akira to have home tuition for maths and science. But I think drawing is important too. A child should develop his imagination while he’s young. The teachers at school all agreed with me. But he gets on best with maths, I think maths is very important, don’t you?”

“Yes, indeed,” said Sachiko. “I’m sure it’s very useful.”

“Maths sharpens children’s minds. You’ll find most children good at maths are good at most other things. My husband and I were in no disagreement about getting a maths tutor. And it’s been well worth it. Last year, Akira always came third or fourth in his class, but this year he’s been top throughout.”

“Maths is easy,” the boy announced. Then he said to Mariko: “Do you know the nine times table?”

His mother laughed again. “I expect the little lady’s very clever too. Her drawing certainly shows promise.”

“Maths is easy,” the boy said again. “The nine times table is easy as anything.”

“Yes, Akira knows all his multiplication now. A lot of children his age only know it up to three or four. Akira, what’s nine times five?”

“Nine times five make forty-five!”

“And nine times nine?”

“Nine times nine make eighty-one!”

The American woman asked Sachiko something, and when Sachiko nodded she clapped her hands and once more repeated the word “delicious” several times.

“Your daughter seems a bright little lady,” the plump-faced woman said to Sachiko. “Does she enjoy school? Akira likes almost everything at school. Apart from maths and drawing, he gets on very well with geography. My friend here was very surprised to find Akira knew the names of all the large cities in America. Weren’t you, Suzie-San?” The woman turned to her friend and spoke several faltering words of English. The American woman did not appear to understand, but smiled approvingly towards the boy.

“But maths is Akira’s favourite subject. Isn’t it, Akira?”

“Maths is easy!”

“And what does the little lady enjoy most at school?” the woman asked, turning again to Mariko.

Mariko did not answer for a moment. Then she said: “I like maths too.”

“You like maths too. That’s splendid.”

“What’s nine times six then?” the boy asked her angrily.

“It’s so nice when children take an interest in their schoolwork, isn’t it?” said his mother.

“Go on, what’s nine times six?”

I asked: “What does Akira-San want to do when he grows up?”

“Akira, tell the lady what you’re going to become.”

“Head Director of Mitsubishi Corporation!”

“His father’s firm,” his mother explained. “Akira’s already very determined.”

“Yes, I see,” I said, smiling. “How wonderful.”

“Who does *your* father work for?” the boy asked Mariko.

“Now, Akira, don’t be too inquisitive, it’s not nice.” The woman turned to Sachiko again. “A lot of boys his age are still saying they want to be policemen or firemen. But Akira’s wanted to work for Mitsubishi since he was much younger.”

“Who does *your* father work for?” the boy asked again. This time his mother, instead of intervening, looked towards Mariko expectantly.

“He’s a zoo-keeper,” said Mariko.

For a brief moment, no one spoke. Curiously, the answer seemed to humble the boy, and he sat back on his bench with a sulky expression. Then his mother said a little uncertainly:

“What an interesting occupation. We’re very fond of animals. Is your husband’s zoo near here?”

Before Sachiko could reply, Mariko had clambered off the bench noisily. Without a word, she walked away from us, towards a cluster of trees nearby. We all watched her for a moment.

“Is she your eldest?” the woman asked Sachiko.

“I have no others.”

“Oh, I see. It’s no bad thing really. A child can become more independent that way. I think a child often works harder too. There’s six years’ difference between this one” — she put her hand on the boy’s head — “and the eldest one.”

The American woman produced a loud exclamation and clapped her hands. Mariko was progressing steadily up the

branches of a tree. The plump-faced woman turned in her seat and looked up at Mariko worriedly.

“Your daughter’s quite a tomboy,” she said.

The American woman repeated the word “tomboy” gleefully, and clapped her hands again.

“Is it safe?” the plump-faced woman asked. “She might fall.”

Sachiko smiled, and her manner towards the woman seemed to grow suddenly warmer. “Are you not used to children climbing trees?” she asked.

The woman continued to watch anxiously. “Are you sure it’s safe? A branch may break.”

Sachiko gave a laugh. “I’m sure my daughter knows what she’s doing. Thank you all the same for your concern. It’s so kind of you.” She gave the woman an elegant bow. The American woman said something to Sachiko, and they began conversing again in English. The plump-faced woman turned away from the trees.

“Please don’t think me impertinent,” she said, putting a hand on my arm, “but I couldn’t help noticing. Will this be your first time?”

“Yes,” I said, with a laugh. “We’re expecting it in the autumn.”

“How splendid. And your husband, is he also a zoo-keeper?”

“Oh no. He works for an electronics firm.”

“Really?”

The woman began to give me advice concerning the care of babies. Meanwhile, I could see over her shoulder the boy wandering away from the table towards Mariko’s tree.

“And it’s an idea to let the child hear a lot of good music,” the woman was saying. “I’m sure that makes a lot of difference. A child should hear good music amongst his earliest sounds.”

“Yes, I’m very fond of music.”

The boy was standing at the foot of the tree, looking up at Mariko with a puzzled expression.

“Our older son doesn’t have as fine an ear for music as Akira,” the woman went on. “My husband says this is because he didn’t hear enough good music when he was a baby, and I tend to think he’s right. In those days, the radio was broadcasting so much military music. I’m sure it did no good at all.”

As the woman continued to talk, I could see the boy trying to find a foothold in the tree-trunk. Mariko had come lower and appeared to be advising him. Beside me, the American woman kept laughing loudly, occasionally uttering single words of Japanese. The boy finally managed to hoist himself off the ground; he had one foot pressed into a crevice and was holding on to a branch with both hands. Although only a few centimetres off the ground, he seemed in a state of high tension. It was hard to say if she did so deliberately, but as she lowered herself, the little girl trod firmly on the boy’s fingers. The boy gave a shriek, falling clumsily.

The mother turned in alarm. Sachiko and the American woman, neither of whom had seen the incident, also turned towards the fallen boy. He was lying on his side making a loud noise. His mother ran to him and kneeling beside him began to feel his legs. The boy continued his noises. Across the clearing, passengers waiting for the cable-car were all looking our way. After a minute or so, the boy came sobbing to the table, guided by his mother.

“Tree-climbing is so dangerous,” the woman said, angrily.

“He didn’t fall far,” I assured her. “He was hardly on the tree at all.”

“He might have broken a bone. I think children should be discouraged from climbing trees. It’s so silly.”

“She kicked me,” the boy sobbed. “She kicked me off the tree. She tried to kill me.”

“She kicked you? The little girl kicked you?”

I saw Sachiko cast a glance towards her daughter. Mariko was once more high up the tree.

“She tried to kill me.”

“The little girl kicked you?”

“Your son just slipped,” I interrupted quickly. “I saw it all. He hardly fell any distance.”

“She kicked me. She tried to kill me.”

The woman also turned and glanced towards the tree.

“He just slipped,” I said again.

“You shouldn’t be doing such silly things, Akira,” the woman said, angrily. “It’s very very dangerous to climb trees.”

“She tried to kill me.”

“You’re not to go up trees.”

The boy continued to sob.

In Japanese cities, much more so than in England, the restaurant owners, the teahouse proprietors, the shopkeepers all seem to will the darkness to fall; long before the daylight has faded, lanterns appear in the windows, lighted

signs above doorways. Nagasaki was already full of the colours of night-time as we came back out into the street that evening; we had left Inasa in the late afternoon and had been eating supper on the restaurant floor of the Hamaya department store. Afterwards, reluctant to end the day, we found ourselves strolling through the sidestreets, in little hurry to reach the tram depot. In those days, I remember it had become the vogue for young couples to be seen in public holding hands — something Jiro and I had never done — and as we walked we saw many such couples seeking their evening's entertainment. The sky, as often on those summer evenings, had become a pale purple colour.

Many of the stalls sold fish, and at that time of the evening, when the fishing boats were coming into the harbour, one would often see men pushing their way through the crowded sidestreets, carrying on their shoulders baskets heavy with freshly caught fish. It was in one such sidestreet, filled with litter and casually strolling people, that we came across the *kujibiki* stand. Since it was never my habit to indulge in *kujibiki* and since it has no equivalents here in England — except perhaps in fairgrounds — I might well have forgotten the existence of such a thing were it not for my memory of that particular evening.

We stood at the back of the crowd and watched. A woman was holding up a young boy of around two or three; up on the platform, a man with a handkerchief tied around his head was stooping forward with the bowl so the child could reach. The boy managed to pick out a ticket, but did not seem to know what to do with it. He held it in his hand and looked emptily at the amused faces all around him. The man with the handkerchief bent lower and made some remark to the child which caused the people round about to laugh. In the end, the mother lowered her child, took the ticket from him, and handed it to the man. The ticket won a lipstick, which the woman accepted with a laugh.

Mariko was standing on her tip-toes, trying to see the prizes displayed at the back of the stall. Suddenly she turned to Sachiko and said: "I want to buy a ticket."

"It's rather a waste of money, Mariko."

"I want to buy a ticket." There was a curious urgency in her manner. "I want to try the *kujibiki*."

"Here you are, Mariko-San." I offered her a coin.

She turned to me, a little surprised. Then she took the coin and pushed her way through to the front of the crowd.

A few more contestants tried their luck; a woman won a piece of candy, a middle-aged man won a rubber ball. Then came Mariko's turn.

"Now, little princess," — the man shook the bowl with deliberation — "close your eyes and think hard about that big bear over there."

"I don't want the bear," said Mariko.

The man made a face and the people laughed. "You don't want that big furry bear? Well, well, little princess, what is it you want then?"

Mariko pointed to the back of the stall. "That basket," she said.

"The basket?" The man shrugged. "All right, princess, close your eyes tight and think about your basket. Ready?"

Mariko's ticket won a flowerpot. She came back to where we were standing and handed me her prize.

"Don't you want it?" I asked. "You won it."

"I wanted the basket. The kittens need a basket of their own now."

"Well, never mind."

Mariko turned to her mother. "I want to try once more."

Sachiko sighed. "It's getting late now."

"I want to try. Just once more."

Again, she pushed her way to the platform. As we waited, Sachiko turned to me and said:

"It's funny, but I had a quite different impression of her. Your friend, Mrs Fujiwara, I mean."

"Oh?"

Sachiko leaned her head to see past the spectators. "No, Etsuko," she said, "I'm afraid I never saw her in quite the way you do. Your friend struck me as a woman with nothing left in her life."

"But that's not true," I said.

"Oh? And what does she have to look forward to, Etsuko? What does she have to live for?"

"She has her shop. It's nothing grand, but it means a lot to her."

"Her shop?"

"And she has her son. Her son has a very promising career."

Sachiko was looking again towards the stall. "Yes, I suppose so," she said, with a tired smile. "I suppose she has her son."

This time Mariko won a pencil, and came back to us with a sullen expression. We started to go, but Mariko was still looking towards the *Kujibiki* stand.

"Come on," Sachiko said. "Etsuko-San needs to be getting home now."

"I want to try once more. Just once more."

Sachiko sighed impatiently, then looked at me. I shrugged and gave a laugh.

“All right,” said Sachiko. “Try once more.”

Several more people won prizes. Once a young woman won a face-compact and the appropriateness of the prize provoked some applause. On seeing Mariko appear for the third time, the man with the handkerchief pulled another of his amusing faces.

“Well, little princess, back again! Still want the basket? Wouldn't you prefer that big furry bear?”

Mariko said nothing, waiting for the man to offer her the bowl. When she had picked out a ticket, the man examined it closely, then glanced behind him to where the prizes were exhibited. He scrutinized the ticket once more, then finally gave a nod.

“You haven't won the basket. But you have won — a *major prize!*”

There was laughter and applause all around. The man went to the back of the stall and returned with what looked like a large wooden box.

“For your mother to keep her vegetables in!” he announced — to the crowd rather than to Mariko — and for a brief moment held up the prize. Beside me, Sachiko burst into laughter and joined in the applause. A gangway formed to allow Mariko through with her prize.

Sachiko was still laughing as we came away from the crowd. She had laughed so much that small tears had appeared in her eyes; she wiped them away and looked at the box.

“What a strange-looking thing,” she said, passing it to me.

It was the size of an orange box and surprisingly light; the wood was smooth but unvarnished, and on one side were two sliding panels of wire gauze.

“It may come in useful,” I said, sliding open a panel.

“I won a major prize,” said Mariko.

“Yes, well done,” Sachiko said.

“I won a kimono once,” Mariko said to me. “In Tokyo, I won a kimono once.”

“Well, you’ve won again.”

“Etsuko, perhaps you could carry my bag. Then I could carry this object home.”

“I won a major prize,” said Mariko.

“Yes, you were very good,” said her mother, and laughed a little.

We walked away from the *kujibiki* stand. The street was littered with discarded newspapers and all manner of rubbish.

“The kittens could live in there, couldn’t they?” Mariko said. “We could put rugs inside it and that could be their house.”

Sachiko looked doubtfully at the box in her arms. “I’m not sure they’d like it so much.”

“That could be their house. Then when we go to Yasuko-San’s house, we could carry them in there.”

Sachiko smiled tiredly.

“We could, couldn’t we, Mother? We could carry the kittens in there.”

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Sachiko. “Yes, all right. We’ll carry the kittens in there.”

“So we can keep the kittens then?”

“Yes, we can keep the kittens. I’m sure Yasuko-San’s father won’t object.”

Mariko ran a little way ahead, then waited for us to catch up.

“So we won’t have to find homes for them any more?”

“No, not now. We’re going to Yasuko-San’s house, so we’ll keep the kittens after all.”

“We won’t have to find owners then. We can keep them all. We could take them in the box, couldn’t we, Mother?”

“Yes,” said Sachiko. Then she tossed back her head and once more began to laugh.

I often find myself recalling Mariko’s face the way I saw it that evening on the tram going home. She was staring out of the window, her forehead pressed against the glass; a boyish face, caught in the changing lights of the city rattling by outside. Mariko remained silent throughout that journey home, and Sachiko and I conversed little. Once, I remember, Sachiko asked:

“Will your husband be angry with you?”

“Quite possibly,” I said, with a smile. “But I did warn him yesterday I might be late.”

“It’s been an enjoyable day.”

“Yes. Jiro will just have to sit and get angry. I’ve enjoyed today very much.”

“We must do it again, Etsuko.”

“Yes, we must.”

“Remember, won’t you, to come and visit me after I move.”

“Yes, I’ll remember.”

We fell silent again after that. It was a little later, just as the tram slowed for a stop, I felt Sachiko give a sudden start. She was looking down the carriage, to where two or three people had gathered near the exit. A woman was standing there looking at Mariko. She was around thirty or

so, with a thin face and tired expression. It was conceivable she was gazing at Mariko quite innocently, and but for Sachiko's reaction I doubt if my suspicions would have been aroused. In the meantime, Mariko continued to look out of the window, quite unaware of the woman.

The woman noticed Sachiko looking at her and turned away. The tram came to a stop, the doors opened and the woman stepped out.

“Did you know that person?” I asked, quietly.

Sachiko laughed a little. “No. I just made a mistake.”

“You mistook her for someone else?”

“Just for a moment. There wasn't even a resemblance really.” She laughed again, then glanced outside to check where we were.

Chapter Eight

In retrospect it seems quite clear why Ogata-San remained with us for as long as he did that summer. Knowing his son well enough, he must have recognized Jiro's strategy over the matter concerning Shigeo Matsuda's magazine article; my husband was simply waiting for Ogata-San to return home to Fukuoka so the whole affair could be forgotten. Meanwhile, he would continue to agree readily that such an attack on the family name should be dealt with both promptly and firmly, that the matter was his concern as much as his father's, and that he would write to his old schoolfriend as soon as he had time. I can see now, with hindsight, how typical this was of the way Jiro faced any potentially awkward confrontation. Had he not, years later, faced another crisis in much the same manner, it may be that I would never have left Nagasaki. However, that is by the way.

I have recounted earlier some details of the evening my husband's two drunken colleagues arrived to interrupt the chess game between Jiro and Ogata-San. That night, as I prepared for bed, I felt a strong urge to talk to Jiro about the whole business concerning Shigeo Matsuda; while I did not wish Jiro to write such a letter against his will, I was feeling more and more keenly that he should make his position clearer to his father. As it was, however, I refrained from mentioning the subject that night, just as I had done on previous occasions. For one thing, my husband would have considered it no business of mine to comment on such a matter. Furthermore, at that time of night, Jiro was invariably tired and any attempts to converse would only make him impatient. And in any case, it was never in the nature of our relationship to discuss such things openly.

Throughout the following day, Ogata-San remained in the apartment, often studying the chess game which — so he told

me — had been interrupted at a crucial stage the previous night. Then that evening, an hour or so after we had finished supper, he brought out the chess-board again and began once more to study the pieces. Once, he looked up and said to my husband:

“So, Jiro. Tomorrow’s the big day then.”

Jiro looked up from his newspaper and gave a short laugh. “It’s nothing to make a fuss about,” he said.

“Nonsense. It’s a big day for you. Of course, it’s imperative you do your best for the firm, but in my view this is a triumph in itself, whatever the outcome tomorrow. To be asked to represent the firm at this level, so early in your career, that can’t be usual, even these days.”

Jiro gave a shrug. “I suppose not. Of course, even if tomorrow goes exceptionally well, that’s no guarantee I’ll get the promotion. But I suppose the manager must be reasonably pleased with my efforts this year.”

“I should think he has great faith in you, by all accounts. And how do you think it will go tomorrow?”

“Smoothly enough, I should hope. At this stage all the parties involved need to co-operate. It’s more a case of laying the groundwork for the real negotiations in the autumn. It’s nothing so special.”

“Well, we’ll have to just wait and see how it goes. Now, Jiro, why don’t we finish off this game. We’ve been at it for three days.”

“Oh yes, the game. Of course, Father, you realize however successful I am tomorrow, that’s no guarantee I’ll be given the promotion.”

“Of course not, Jiro, I realize these things. I came up through a competitive career myself. I know only too well how it is. Sometimes others are chosen in preference who by all rights shouldn’t even be considered your equals. But you

mustn't let such things deter you. You persevere and triumph in the end. Now, how about finishing off this game. ”

My husband glanced towards the chess-board, but showed no sign of moving nearer it. “You'd just about won, if I remember,” he said.

“Well, you're in quite a difficult corner, but there's a way out if you can find it. Do you remember, Jiro, when I first taught you this game, how I always warned you about using the castles too early? And you still make the same mistake. Do you see?”

“The castles, yes. As you say. ”

“And incidentally, Jiro, I don't think you're thinking your moves out in advance, are you? Do you remember how much trouble I once took to make you plan at least three moves ahead. But I don't think you've been doing that. ”

“Three moves ahead? Well, no, I suppose I haven't. I can't claim to be an expert like yourself, Father. In any case, I think we can say you've won. ”

“In fact, Jiro, it became painfully obvious very early in the game, that you weren't thinking your moves out. How often have I told you? A good chess player needs to think ahead, three moves on at the very least. ”

“Yes, I suppose so. ”

“For instance, why did you move this horse here? Jiro, look, you're not even looking. Can you even remember why you moved this here? ”

Jiro glanced towards the board. “To be honest, I don't remember,” he said. “There was probably a good enough reason at the time. ”

“A good enough reason? What nonsense, Jiro. For the first few moves, you were planning ahead, I could see that. You actually had a strategy then. But as soon as I broke that

down, you gave up, you began playing one move at a time. Don't you remember what I always used to tell you? Chess is all about maintaining coherent strategies. It's about not giving up when the enemy destroys one plan, but to immediately come up with the next. A game isn't won and lost at the point when the king is finally cornered. The game's sealed when a player gives up having any strategy at all. When his soldiers are all scattered, they have no common cause, and they move one piece at a time, that's when you've lost. ”

“Very well, Father, I admit it. I've lost. Now perhaps we can forget about it. ”

Ogata-San glanced towards me, then back at Jiro. “Now what kind of talk is that? I studied this board quite hard today and I can see three separate means by which you can escape. ”

My husband lowered his newspaper. “Forgive me if I'm mistaken, ” he said, “but I believe you just said yourself, the player who cannot maintain a coherent strategy is inevitably the loser. Well, as you've pointed out so repeatedly, I've been thinking only one move at a time, so there seems little point in carrying on. Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to finish reading this report. ”

“Why, Jiro, this is sheer defeatism. The game's far from lost, I've just told you. You should be planning your defence now, to survive and fight me again. Jiro, you always had a streak of defeatism in you, ever since you were young. I'd hoped I'd taken it out of you, but here it is again, after all this time. ”

“Forgive me, but I fail to see what defeatism has to do with it. This is merely a game ...”

“It may indeed be just a game. But a father gets to know his son well enough. A father can recognize these unwelcome traits when they arise. This is hardly a quality I'm proud of

in you, Jiro. You gave up as soon as your first strategy collapsed. And now when you're forced on to the defensive, you sulk and don't want to play the game any more. Why, this is just the way you were at nine years old."

"Father, this is all nonsense. I have better things to do than think about chess all day."

Jiro had spoken quite loudly, and for a moment Ogata-San looked somewhat taken aback.

"It may be very well for you, Father," my husband continued. "You have the whole day to dream up your strategies and ploys. Personally, I have better things to do with my time."

With that, my husband returned to his paper. His father continued to stare at him, an astonished look on his face. Then finally, Ogata-San began to laugh.

"Come, Jiro," he said, "we're shouting at each other like a pair of fishermen's wives." He gave another laugh. "Like a pair of fishermen's wives."

Jiro did not look up.

"Come on, Jiro, let's stop our argument. If you don't want to finish the game, we don't have to finish it."

My husband still gave no sign of having heard.

Ogata-San laughed again. "All right, you win. We won't play any more. But let me show you how you could have got out of this little corner here. There's three things you could have done. The first one's the most simple and there's little I could have done about it. Look, Jiro, look here. Jiro, look, I'm showing you something."

Jiro continued to ignore his father. He had all the appearance of someone solemnly absorbed in his reading. He turned over a page and carried on reading.

Ogata-San nodded to himself, laughing quietly. "Just like when he was a child," he said. "When he doesn't get his own way, he sulks and there's nothing to be done with him." He glanced towards where I was sitting and laughed rather oddly. Then he turned back to his son. "Jiro, look. Let me show you this at least. It's simplicity itself."

Quite suddenly, my husband flung down his newspaper and made a movement towards his father. Clearly, what he had intended was to knock the chess-board across the floor and all the pieces with it. But he moved clumsily and before he could strike the board, his foot had upset the teapot beside him. The pot rolled on to its side, the lid fell open with a rattle, and the tea ran swiftly across the surface of the tatami. Jiro, not sure what had occurred, turned and stared at the spilt tea. Then he turned back and glared at the chess-board. The sight of the chessmen, still upright on their squares, seemed to anger him all the more, and for a moment I thought he would make another attempt to upset them. As it was, he got to his feet, snatched up his newspaper, and left the room without a word.

I went over quickly to where the tea had spilt. Some of the liquid had begun to soak into the cushion Jiro had been sitting on. I moved the cushion and rubbed at it with the edge of my apron.

"Just like he used to be," Ogata-San said. A faint smile had appeared around his eyes. "Children become adults but they don't change much."

I went out into the kitchen and found a cloth. When I returned, Ogata-San was sitting just as I had left him, the smile still hovering around his eyes. He was gazing at the puddle on the tatami and looked deep in thought. Indeed, he seemed so absorbed by the sight of the tea, I hesitated a little before kneeling down to wipe it away.

"You mustn't let this upset you, Etsuko," he said, eventually. "It's nothing to upset yourself about."

“No.” I continued to wipe the tatami.

“Well, I suppose we might as well turn in fairly soon. It’s good to turn in early once in a while.”

“Yes.”

“You mustn’t let this upset you, Etsuko. Jiro will have forgotten the whole thing by tomorrow, you’ll see. I remember these spells of his very well. In fact, it makes you quite nostalgic, witnessing a little scene like that. It reminds me so much of when he was small. Yes, it’s enough to make you quite nostalgic.”

I continued to wipe away the tea.

“Now, Etsuko,” he said. “This is nothing to upset yourself about.”

I exchanged no further words with my husband until the following morning. He ate his breakfast glancing occasionally at the morning newspaper I had placed beside his bowl. He spoke little and made no comment on the fact that his father had not yet emerged. For my part, I listened carefully for sounds from Ogata-San’s room, but could hear nothing.

“I hope it all goes well today,” I said, after we had sat in silence for some minutes.

My husband gave a shrug. “It’s nothing to make a fuss about,” he said. Then he looked up at me and said: “I wanted my black silk tie today, but you seem to have done something with it. I wish you wouldn’t meddle with my ties.”

“The black silk one? It’s hanging on the rail with your other ties.”

“It wasn’t there just now. I wish you’d stop meddling with them all the time.”

“The silk one should be there with the others,” I said. “I ironed it the day before yesterday, because I knew you’d

be wanting it for today, but I made sure to put it back. Are you sure it wasn't there?"

My husband sighed impatiently and looked down at the newspaper. "It doesn't matter," he said. "This one will have to do."

He continued to eat in silence. Meanwhile, there was still no sign of Ogata-San and eventually I rose to my feet and went to listen outside his door. When after several seconds I had not heard a sound, I was about to slide open the door a little way. But my husband turned and said:

"What are you up to? I haven't got all morning, you know." He pushed his teacup forward.

I seated myself again, put his used dishes away to one side, and poured him some tea. He sipped it rapidly, glancing over the front page of the newspaper.

"This is an important day for us," I said. "I hope it goes well."

"It's nothing to make such a fuss about," he said, not looking up.

However, before he left that morning, Jiro studied himself carefully in the mirror by the entryway, adjusting his tie and examining his jaw to check he had shaved efficiently. When he had left, I went over once more to Ogata-San's door and listened. I still could hear nothing.

"Father?" I called softly.

"Ah, Etsuko," I heard Ogata-San's voice from within. "I might have known you wouldn't let me lie in."

Somewhat relieved, I went to the kitchen to prepare a fresh pot of tea, then laid the table ready for Ogata-San's breakfast. When he eventually sat down to eat, he remarked casually:

"Jiro's left already, I suppose."

“Oh yes, he went a long time ago. I was just about to throw Father’s breakfast away. I thought he’d be far too lazy to get up much before noon.”

“Now, don’t be cruel, Etsuko. When you get to my age, you like to relax once in a while. Besides, this is like a vacation for me, staying here with you.”

“Well, I suppose just this once then, Father can be forgiven for being so lazy.”

“I won’t get the opportunity to lie in like this once I get back to Fukuoka,” he said, taking up his chopsticks. Then he sighed deeply. “I suppose it’s time I was getting back soon.”

“Getting back? But there’s no hurry, Father.”

“No, I really have to be getting back soon. There’s plenty of work to be getting on with.”

“Work? What work is that?”

“Well, for a start, I need to build new panels for the veranda. Then there’s the rockery. I haven’t even started on it yet. The stones were delivered months ago and they’ve just been sitting there in the garden waiting for me.” he gave a sigh and began to eat. “I certainly won’t get to lie in like this once I get back.”

“But there’s no need to go just yet, is there, Father? Your rockery can wait a little longer.”

“You’re very kind, Etsuko. But time’s pressing on now. You see, I’m expecting my daughter and her husband down again this autumn, and I’ll need to get all this work finished before they come. Last year and the year before, they came to see me in the autumn. So I rather suspect they’ll want to come again this year.”

“I see.”

“Yes, they’re bound to want to come again this autumn. It’s the most convenient time for Kikuko’s husband. And Kikuko’s always saying in her letters how curious she is to see my new house.”

Ogata-San nodded to himself, then carried on eating from his bowl. I watched him for a while.

“What a loyal daughter Kikuko-San is to you, Father,” I said. “It’s a long way to come, all that way from Osaka. She must miss you.”

“I suppose she feels the need to get away from her father-in-law once in a while. I can’t think why else she would want to come so far.”

“How unkind, Father. I’m sure she misses you. I’ll have to tell her what you’re saying.”

Ogata-San laughed. “But it’s true. Old Watanabe rules over them like a war-lord. Whenever they come down, they’re forever talking about how intolerable he’s getting. Personally I rather like the old man, but there’s no denying he’s an old war-lord. I expect they’d like some place like this, Etsuko, an apartment like this just to themselves. It’s no bad thing, young couples living away from the parents. More and more couples do it now. Young people don’t want overbearing old men ruling over them for ever.”

Ogata-San seemed to remember the food in his bowl and began to eat hurriedly. When he had finished, he got to his feet and went over to the window. For a moment he stood there, his back to me, looking at the view. Then he adjusted the window to let in more air, and took a deep breath.

“Are you pleased with your new house, Father?” I asked.

“My house? Why, yes. It’ll need a little more work here and there, as I say. But it’s much more compact. The Nagasaki house was far too large for just one old man.”

He continued to gaze out of the window; in the sharp morning light, all I could see of his head and shoulders was a hazy outline.

“But it was a nice house, the old house,” I said. “I still stop and look at it if I’m walking that way. In fact, I went past it last week on my way back from Mrs Fujiwara’s.”

I thought he had not heard me, for he continued to gaze silently out at the view. But a moment later, he said:

“And how did it look, the old house?”

“Oh, much the same. The new occupants must like it the way Father left it.”

He turned towards me slightly. “And what about the azaleas, Etsuko? Were the azaleas still in the gateway?” The brightness still prevented me from seeing his face clearly, but I supposed from his voice that he was smiling.

“Azaleas?”

“Well, I suppose there’s no reason why you should remember.” He turned back to the window and stretched out his arms. “I planted them in the gateway that day. The day it was all finally decided.”

“The day what was decided?”

“That you and Jiro were to be married. But I never told you about the azaleas, so I suppose it’s rather unreasonable of me to expect you to remember about them.”

“You planted some azaleas for me? Now that was a nice thought. But no, I don’t think you ever mentioned it.”

“But you see, Etsuko, you asked for them.” He had turned towards me again. “In fact, you positively ordered me to plant them in the gateway.”

“What? — I laughed —” I ordered you?”

“Yes, you ordered me. Like I was some hired gardener. Don’t you remember? Just when I thought it was all settled at last, and you were finally to become my daughter-in-law, you told me there was one thing more, you wouldn’t live in a house without azaleas in the gateway. And if I didn’t plant azaleas then the whole thing would be called off. So what could I do? I went straight out and planted azaleas.”

I laughed a little. “Now you mention it,” I said, “I remember something like that. But what nonsense, Father. I never forced you.”

“Oh yes, you did, Etsuko. You said you wouldn’t live in a house without azaleas in the gateway.” He came away from the window and sat down opposite me again. “Yes, Etsuko,” he said “just like a hired gardener.”

We both laughed and I began to pour out the tea.

“Azaleas were always my favourite flowers, you see,” I said.

“Yes. So you said.”

I finished pouring and we sat silently for a few moments, watching the steam rise from the teacups.

“And I had no idea then,” I said. “About Jiro’s plans, I mean.”

“No.”

I reached forward and placed a plate of small cakes by his teacup. Ogata-San regarded them with a smile. Eventually, he said:

“The azaleas came up beautifully. But by that time, of course, you’d moved away. Still, it’s no bad thing at all, young couples living on their own. Look at Kikuko and her husband. They’d love to have a little place of their own, but old Watanabe won’t even let them consider it. What an old war-lord he is.”

“Now I think of it,” I said, “there *were* azaleas in the gateway last week. The new occupants must agree with me. Azaleas are essential for a gateway.”

“I’m glad they’re still there.” Ogata-San took a sip from his teacup. Then he sighed and said with a laugh: “What an old war-lord that Watanabe is.”

Shortly after breakfast, Ogata-San suggested we should go and look around Nagasaki — “like the tourists do”, as he put it. I agreed at once and we took a tram into the city. As I recall, we spent some time at an art gallery, and then, a little before noon, we went to visit the peace memorial in the large public park not far from the centre of the city.

The park was commonly known as “Peace Park” — I never discovered whether this was the official name — and indeed, despite the sounds of children and birds, an atmosphere of solemnity hung over that large expanse of green. The usual adornments, such as shrubs and fountains, had been kept to a minimum, and the effect was a kind of austerity; the flat grass, a wide summer sky, and the memorial itself — a massive white statue in memory of those killed by the atomic bomb — presiding over its domain.

The statue resembled some muscular Greek god, seated with both arms outstretched. With his right hand, he pointed to the sky from where the bomb had fallen; with his other arm — stretched out to his left — the figure was supposedly holding back the forces of evil. His eyes were closed in prayer.

It was always my feeling that the statue had a rather cumbersome appearance, and I was never able to associate it with what had occurred that day the bomb had fallen, and those terrible days which followed. Seen from a distance, the figure looked almost comical, resembling a policeman conducting traffic. It remained for me nothing more than a

statue, and while most people in Nagasaki seemed to appreciate it as some form of gesture, I suspect the general feeling was much like mine. And today, should I by chance recall that large white statue in Nagasaki, I find myself reminded primarily of my visit to Peace Park with Ogata-San that morning, and that business concerning his postcard.

“It doesn’t look quite so impressive in a picture,” I remember Ogata-San saying, holding up the postcard of the statue which he had just bought. We were standing some fifty yards or so from the monument. “I’ve been meaning to send a card for some time,” he continued. “I’ll be going back to Fukuoka any day now, but I suppose it’s still worth sending. Etsuko, do you have a pen? Perhaps I should send it straight away, otherwise I’m bound to forget.”

I found a pen in my handbag and we sat down on a bench nearby. I became curious when I noticed him staring at the blank side of the card, his pen poised but not writing. Once or twice, I saw him glance up towards the statue as if for inspiration. Finally I asked him:

“Are you sending it to a friend in Fukuoka?”

“Well, just an acquaintance.”

“Father’s looking very guilty,” I said. “I wonder who it can be he’s writing to.”

Ogata-San glanced up with a look of astonishment. Then he burst into loud laughter. “Guilty? Am I really?”

“Yes, very guilty. I wonder what Father gets up to when there’s no one to keep an eye on him.”

Ogata-San continued to laugh loudly. He was laughing so much I could feel the bench shake. He recovered a little and said: “Very well, Etsuko. You’ve caught me. You’ve caught me writing to my *girl-friend* — he used the English word. “Caught me red-handed.” He began laughing again.

“I always suspected Father led a glamorous life in Fukuoka.”

“Yes, Etsuko” — he was still laughing a little — “a very glamorous life.” Then he took a deep breath and looked down once more at his postcard. “You know, I really don’t know what to write. Perhaps I could just send it with nothing written. After all, I only wanted to show her what the memorial looks like. But then again, perhaps that’s rather too informal.”

“Well, I can’t advise you, Father, unless you reveal who this mysterious lady is.”

“The mysterious lady, Etsuko, runs a small restaurant in Fukuoka. It’s quite near my house so I usually go there for my evening meals. I talk to her sometimes, she’s pleasant enough, and I promised I’d send her a postcard of the peace memorial. I’m afraid that’s all there is to it.”

“I see, Father. But I’m still suspicious.”

“Quite a pleasant old woman, but she gets tiresome after a while. If I’m the only customer, she stands and talks all through the meal. Unfortunately there aren’t many other suitable places to eat nearby. You see, Etsuko, if you’d teach me to cook, as you promised, then I wouldn’t need to suffer the likes of her.”

“But it would be pointless,” I said, laughing. “Father would never get the hang of it.”

“Nonsense. You’re simply afraid I’ll surpass you. It’s most selfish of you, Etsuko. Now let me see” — he looked at his postcard once more — “What can I say to the old lady?”

“Do you remember Mrs Fujiwara?” I asked. “She runs a noodle shop now. Near Father’s old house.”

“Yes, so I hear. A great pity. Someone of her position running a noodle shop.”

“But she enjoys it. It gives her something to work for. She often asks after you.”

“A great pity,” he said again. “Her husband was a distinguished man. I had much respect for him. And now she’s running a noodle shop. Extraordinary.” He shook his head gravely. “I’d call in and pay my respects, but then I suppose she’d find that rather awkward. In her present circumstances, I mean.”

“Father, she’s not ashamed to be running a noodle shop. She’s proud of it. She says she always wanted to run a business, however humble. I expect she’d be delighted if you called on her.”

“Her shop is in Nakagawa, you say?”

“Yes. Quite near the old house.”

Ogata-San seemed to consider this for some time. Then he turned to me and said: “Right, then, Etsuko. Let’s go and pay her a visit.” He scribbled quickly on the postcard and gave me back the pen.

“You mean, go now, Father?” I was a little taken aback by his sudden decisiveness.

“Yes, why not?”

“Very well. I suppose she could give us lunch.”

“Yes, perhaps. But I’ve no wish to humiliate the good lady.”

“She’d be pleased to give us lunch.”

Ogata-San nodded and for a moment did not speak. Then he said with some deliberation: “As a matter of fact, Etsuko, I’d been thinking of visiting Nakagawa for some time now. I’d like to call in on a certain person there.”

“Oh?”

“I wonder if he’d be in at this time of day.”

“Who is it you wish to call on, Father?”

“Shigeo. Shigeo Matsuda. I’ve been intending to pay him a call for some time. Perhaps he takes his lunch at home, in which case I may just catch him. That would be preferable to disturbing him at his school.”

For a few minutes, Ogata-San gazed towards the statue, a slightly puzzled look on his face. I remained silent, watching the postcard he was rotating in his hands. Then suddenly he slapped his knees and stood up.

“Right, Etsuko,” he said, “let’s do that then. We’ll try Shigeo first, then we could call in on Mrs Fujiwara.”

It must have been around noon that we boarded the tram to take us to Nakagawa; the car was stiflingly crowded and the streets outside were filled with the lunch time hordes. But as we came away from the city centre, the passengers became more sparse, and by the time the car reached its terminus at Nakagawa, there were only a handful of us left.

Stepping out of the tram, Ogata-San paused for a moment and stroked his chin. It was not easy to tell whether he was savouring the feeling of being back in the district, or whether he was simply trying to remember the way to Shigeo Matsuda’s house. We were standing in a concrete yard surrounded by several empty tram cars. Above our heads, a maze of black wires crossed the air. The sun was shining down with some force, causing the painted surfaces of the cars to gleam sharply.

“What heat,” Ogata-San remarked, wiping his forehead. Then he began to walk, leading the way towards a row of houses which began on the far side of the tram yard.

The district had not changed greatly over the years. As we walked, the narrow roads twisted, climbed and fell. Houses, many of them still familiar to me, stood wherever the hilly landscape would permit; some were perched precariously

on slopes, others squeezed into unlikely corners. Blankets and laundry hung from many of the balconies. We walked on, past other houses more grand-looking, but we passed neither Ogata-San's old house nor the house I had once lived in with my parents. In fact, the thought occurred to me that perhaps Ogata-San had chosen a route so as to deliberately avoid them.

I doubt if we walked for much more than ten or fifteen minutes in all, but the sun and the steep hills became very tiring. Eventually we stopped halfway up a steep path, and Ogata-San ushered me underneath the shelter of a leafy tree that hung over the pavement. Then he pointed across the road to a pleasant-looking old house with large sloping roof-tiles in the traditional manner.

"That's Shigeo's place," he said. "I knew his father quite well. As far as I know, his mother still lives with him." Then Ogata-San began to stroke his chin, just as he had done on first stepping off the tram. I said nothing and waited.

"Quite possibly he won't be home," said Ogata-San. "He'll probably spend the lunch break in the staff room with his colleagues."

I continued to wait silently. Ogata-San remained standing beside me, gazing at the house. Finally, he said:

"Etsuko, how far is it to Mrs Fujiwara's from here? Have you any idea?"

"It's just a few minutes' walk."

"Now I think of it, perhaps it may be best if you went on ahead, and I could meet you there. That may be the best thing."

"Very well. If that's what you wish."

"In fact, this was all very inconsiderate of me."

“I’m not an invalid, Father.”

He laughed quickly, then glanced again towards the house. “I think it might be best,” he said again. “You go on ahead.”

“Very well.”

“I don’t expect to be long. In fact” — he glanced once more towards the house — “in fact, why don’t you wait here until I pull the bell. If you see me go in, then you can go on to Mrs Fujiwara’s. This has all been very inconsiderate of me.”

“It’s perfectly all right, Father. Now listen carefully, or else you’ll never find the noodle shop. You remember where the doctor used to have his surgery?”

But Ogata-San was no longer listening. Across the road, the entrance gate had slid open, and a thin young man with spectacles had appeared. He was dressed in his shirtsleeves and held a small briefcase under his arm. He squinted a little as he stepped further into the glare, then bent over the briefcase and began searching through it. Shigeo Matsuda looked thinner and more youthful than I remembered him from the few occasions I had met him in the past.

Chapter Nine

Shigeo Matsuda tied the buckle of his briefcase, then glancing about him with a distracted air came walking over to our side of the road. For a brief moment he glanced our way but, not recognizing us, went walking on.

Ogata-San watched him go by. Then when the young man had gone several yards down the road, he called out: "Ah, Shigeo!"

Shigeo Matsuda stopped and turned. Then he came towards us with a puzzled look.

"How are you, Shigeo?"

The young man peered through his spectacles, then burst into cheerful laughter.

"Why, Ogata-San! Now this is an unexpected surprise!" He bowed and held out his hand. "What a splendid surprise. Why Etsuko-San too! How are you? How nice to meet again."

We exchanged bows, and he shook hands with us both. Then he said to Ogata-San:

"Were you by any chance about to visit me? This is bad luck, my lunch break's almost over now." He glanced at his watch. "But we could go back inside for a few minutes."

"No, no," said Ogata-San hurriedly. "Don't let us interrupt your work. It just so happened we were passing this way, and I remembered you lived here. I was just pointing out your house to Etsuko."

"Please, I can spare a few minutes. Let me offer you some tea at least. It's a sweltering day out here."

"No, no. You must get to work."

For a moment the two men stood looking at each other.

“And how is everything, Shigeo?” Ogata-San asked. “How are things at the school?”

“Oh, much the same as ever. You know how it is. And you, Ogata-San, you’re enjoying your retirement, I hope? I had no idea you were in Nagasaki. Jiro and I seem to have lost touch these days.” Then he turned to me and said: “I’m always meaning to write, but I’m so forgetful.”

I smiled and made some polite comment. Then the two men looked at each other again.

“You’re looking splendidly well, Ogata-San,” Shigeo Matsuda said. “You find Fukuoka to your liking?”

“Yes, a fine city. My hometown, you know.”

“Really?”

There was another pause. Then Ogata-San said: “Please don’t let us keep you. If you have to hurry away, I quite understand.”

“No, no. I have a few minutes yet. A pity you weren’t passing a little earlier. Perhaps you’d care to call in before you leave Nagasaki.”

“Yes, I’ll try to. But there’s so many people to visit.”

“Yes, I can understand how it is.”

“And your mother, is she well?”

“Yes, she’s fine. Thank you.”

For a moment, they fell silent again.

“I’m glad everything’s going well,” Ogata-San said, eventually. “Yes, we were just passing this way and I was telling Etsuko-San you lived here. In fact, I was just remembering how you used to come and play with Jiro, when you were both little boys.”

Shigeo Matsuda laughed. "Time really flies by, doesn't it?" he said.

"Yes. I was just saying as much to Etsuko. In fact, I was just about to tell her about a curious little thing. I happened to remember it, when I saw your house. A curious little thing."

"Oh yes?"

"Yes. I just happened to remember it when I saw your house, that's all. You see, I was reading something the other day. An article in a journal. The *New Education Digest*, I think it was called."

The young man said nothing for a moment, then he adjusted his position on the pavement and put down his briefcase.

"I see," he said.

"I was rather surprised to read it. In fact, I was quite astonished."

"Yes. I suppose you would be."

"It was quite extraordinary, Shigeo. Quite extraordinary."

Shigeo Matsuda took a deep breath and looked down at the ground. He nodded, but said nothing.

"I'd meant to come and speak to you for some days now," Ogata-San continued. "But of course, the matter slipped my mind. Shigeo, tell me honestly, do you believe a word of what you wrote? Explain to me what made you write such things. Explain it to me, Shigeo, then I can go home to Fukuoka with my mind at rest. At the moment, I'm very puzzled."

Shigeo Matsuda was prodding a pebble with the end of his shoe. Finally he sighed, looked up at Ogata-San and adjusted his spectacles.

"Many things have changed over the last few years," he said.

“Well, of course they have. I can see that much. What kind of answer is that, Shigeo?”

“Ogata-San, let me explain.” He paused and looked down at the ground again. For a second or two, he scratched at his ear. “You see, you must understand. Many things have changed now. And things are changing still. We live in a different age from those days when ... when you were an influential figure.”

“But, Shigeo, what has this to do with anything? Things may change, but why write such an article? Have I ever done something to offend you?”

“No, never. At least, not to me personally.”

“I should think not. Do you remember the day I introduced you to the principal at your school? That wasn't so long ago, was it? Or was that perhaps a different era too?”

“Ogata-San” — Shigeo Matsuda had raised his voice, and an air of authority seemed to enter his manner — “Ogata-San, I only wish you'd called in an hour earlier. Then perhaps I'd have been able to explain at greater length. There isn't time to talk the whole thing over now. But let me just say this much. Yes, I believed everything I wrote in that article and still do. In your day, children in Japan were taught terrible things. They were taught lies of the most damaging kind. Worst of all, they were taught not to see, not to question. And that's why the country was plunged into the most evil disaster in her entire history.”

“We may have lost the war,” Ogata-San interrupted, “but that's no reason to ape the ways of the enemy. We lost the war because we didn't have enough guns and tanks, not because our people were cowardly, not because our society was shallow. You have no idea, Shigeo, how hard we worked, men like myself, men like Dr Endo, whom you also insulted in your

article. We cared deeply for the country and worked hard to ensure the correct values were preserved and handed on. ”

“I don’t doubt these things. I don’t doubt you were sincere and hard working. I’ve never questioned that for one moment. But it just so happens that your energies were spent in a misguided direction, an evil direction. You weren’t to know this, but I’m afraid it’s true. It’s all behind us now and we can only be thankful. ”

“This is extraordinary, Shigeo. Can you really believe this? Who taught you to say such things? ”

“Ogata-San, be honest with yourself. In your heart of hearts, you must know yourself what I’m saying is true. And to be fair, you shouldn’t be blamed for not realizing the true consequences of your actions. Very few men could see where it was all leading at the time, and those men were put in prison for saying what they thought. But they’re free now, and they’ll lead us to a new dawn. ”

“A new dawn? What nonsense is this? ”

“Now, I must be on my way. I’m sorry we couldn’t discuss this any longer. ”

“What is this, Shigeo? How can you say these things? You obviously have no idea of the effort and devotion men like Dr Endo gave to their work. You were just a small boy then, how could you know how things were? How can you know what we gave and what we achieved? ”

“As a matter of fact, I do happen to be familiar with certain aspects of your career. For instance, the sacking and imprisoning of the five teachers at Nishizaka. April of 1938, if I’m not mistaken. But those men are free now, and they’ll help us reach a new dawn. Now please excuse me. ” He picked up his briefcase and bowed to us in turn. “My regards to Jiro, ” he added, then turned and walked away.

Ogata-San watched the young man disappear down the hill. He continued to stand there for several more moments, not speaking. Then when he turned to me, there was a smile around his eyes.

“How confident young men are,” he said. “I suppose I was much the same once. Very sure of my opinions.”

“Father,” I said. “Perhaps we should go and see Mrs Fujiwara now. It’s time we ate lunch.”

“Why, of course, Etsuko. This is very inconsiderate of me, making you stand about in this heat. Yes, let’s go and see the good lady. I’ll be very pleased to see her again.”

We made our way down the hill, then crossed a wooden bridge over a narrow river. Below us, children were playing along the riverbank, some with fishing poles. Once, I said to Ogata-San:

“What nonsense he was speaking.”

“Who? You mean Shigeo?”

“What vile nonsense. I don’t think you should pay the slightest attention, Father.”

Ogata-San laughed, but made no reply.

As always at that hour, the shopping area of the district was busy with people. On entering the shaded forecourt of the noodle shop, I was pleased to see several of the tables occupied with customers. Mrs Fujiwara saw us and came across the forecourt.

“Why, Ogata-San,” she exclaimed, recognizing him immediately, “how splendid to see you again. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

“A long time indeed.” Ogata-San returned the bow Mrs Fujiwara gave him. “Yes, a long time.”

I was struck by the warmth with which they greeted each other, for as far as I knew Ogata-San and Mrs Fujiwara had never known one another well. They exchanged what seemed an endless succession of bows, before Mrs Fujiwara went to fetch us something to eat.

She returned presently with two steaming bowls, apologizing that she had nothing better for us. Ogata-San bowed appreciatively and began to eat.

“I thought you’d have forgotten me long ago, Mrs Fujiwara,” he remarked with a smile. “Indeed, it’s been a long time.”

“It’s such a pleasure to meet again like this,” Mrs Fujiwara said, seating herself on the edge of my bench.

“Etsuko tells me you reside in Fukuoka these days. I visited Fukuoka several times. A fine city, isn’t it?”

“Yes, indeed. Fukuoka is my hometown.”

“Fukuoka your hometown? But you lived and worked here for years, Ogata-San. Don’t we have any claim on you in Nagasaki?”

Ogata-San laughed and leaned his head to one side. “A man might work and make his contribution in one place, but at the end of it all” — he shrugged and smiled wistfully — “at the end of it all, he still wants to go back to the place where he grew up.”

Mrs Fujiwara nodded understandingly. Then she said: “I was just remembering, Ogata-San, the days when you were the headmaster at Suichi’s school. He used to be so frightened of you.”

Ogata-San laughed. “Yes, I remember your Suichi very well. A bright little boy. Very bright.”

“Do you really remember him still, Ogata-San?”

“Yes, of course, I remember Suichi. He used to work very hard. A good little boy.”

“Yes, he was a good little boy.”

Ogata-San pointed at his bowl with his chopsticks. “This is really marvellous,” he said.

“Nonsense. I’m sorry I have nothing better to give you.”

“No, really, it’s delicious.”

“Now let me see,” said Mrs Fujiwara. “There was a teacher in those days, she was very kind to Suichi. Now what was her name? Suzuki, I think it was, Miss Suzuki. Have you any idea what became of her, Ogata-San?”

“Miss Suzuki? Ah, yes, I recall her quite well. But I’m afraid I’ve no idea where she could be now.”

“She was very kind to Suichi. And there was that other teacher, Kuroda was his name. An excellent young man.”

“Kuroda …” Ogata-San nodded slowly. “Ah yes, Kuroda. I remember him. A splendid teacher.”

“Yes, a most impressive young man. My husband was very struck by him. Do you know what became of him?”

“Kuroda …” Ogata-San was still nodding to himself. A streak of sunlight had fallen across his face, lighting up the many wrinkles around his eyes. “Kuroda, now let me see. I ran into him once, quite by accident. That was at the start of the war. I suppose he went off to fight. I’ve never heard of him since. Yes, an excellent teacher. There are so many from those days I never hear of now.”

Someone called out to Mrs Fujiwara and we watched her go hurriedly across the forecourt to her customer’s table. She stood there bowing for several moments, then cleared some dishes from the table and disappeared into the kitchen.

Ogata-San watched her, then shook his head. "A great pity to see her like this," he said, in a low voice. I said nothing and continued to eat. Then Ogata-San leaned across the table and asked: "Etsuko, what did you say was the name of her son? The one who's still alive, I mean."

"Kazuo," I whispered.

He nodded, then returned to his bowl of noodles.

Mrs Fujiwara came back a few moments later. "Such a shame I don't have something better to offer you," she said.

"Nonsense," said Ogata-San. "This is delicious. And how is Kazuo-San these days?"

"He's fine. He's in good health, and he enjoys his work."

"Splendid. Etsuko was telling me he works for a motor car company."

"Yes, he's doing very well there. What's more, he's thinking of marrying again."

"Really?"

"He said once he'd never marry again, but he's starting to look ahead to things now. He has no one in mind as of yet, but at least he's started to think ahead."

"That sounds like good sense," Ogata-San said. "Why, he's still quite a young man, isn't he?"

"Of course he is. He still has all his life ahead of him."

"Of course he has. His whole life ahead of him. You must find him a nice young lady, Mrs Fujiwara."

She laughed. "Don't think I haven't tried. But young women are so different these days. It amazes me, how things have changed so much so quickly."

“Indeed, how right you are. Young women these days are all so headstrong. And forever talking about washing-machines and American dresses. Etsuko here’s no different.”

“Nonsense, Father.”

Mrs Fujiwara laughed again, then said: “I remember the first time I heard of a washing-machine, I couldn’t believe anyone would want such a thing. Spending all that money, when you had two good hands to work with. But I’m sure Etsuko wouldn’t agree with me.”

I was about to say something, but Ogata-San spoke first: “Let me tell you,” he said, “what I heard the other day. A man was telling me this, a colleague of Jiro’s, in fact. Apparently at the last elections, his wife wouldn’t agree with him about which party to vote for. He had to beat her, but she still didn’t give way. So in the end, they voted for separate parties. Can you imagine such a thing happening in the old days? Extraordinary.”

Mrs Fujiwara shook her head. “Things are so different now,” she said, and sighed. “But I hear from Etsuko, Jiro-San is getting on splendidly now. You must be proud of him, Ogata-San.”

“Yes, I suppose that boy’s getting on well enough. In fact, today he’ll be representing his firm at a most important meeting. It appears they’re thinking of promoting him again.”

“How marvellous.”

“It was only last year he was promoted. I suppose his superiors must have a high opinion of him.”

“How marvellous. You must be very proud of him.”

“He’s a determined worker, that one. He always was from an early age. I remember when he was a boy, and all the other fathers were busy telling their children to study harder, I

was obliged to keep telling him to play more, it wasn't good for him to work so hard. ”

Mrs Fujiwara laughed and shook her head. “Yes, Kazuo's a hard worker too,” she said. “He's often reading through his paperwork right into the night. I tell him he shouldn't work so hard, but he won't listen. ”

“No, they never listen. And I must admit, I was much the same. But when you believe in what you're doing, you don't feel like idling away the hours. My wife was always telling me to take it easy, but I never listened. ”

“Yes, that's just the way Kazuo is. But he'll have to change his ways if he marries again. ”

“Don't depend on it,” Ogata-San said, with a laugh. Then he put his chopsticks neatly together across his bowl. “Why, that was a splendid meal. ”

“Nonsense. I'm sorry I couldn't offer you something better. Would you care for some more? ”

“If you have more to spare me, I'd be delighted. These days, I have to make the best of such good cooking, you know. ”

“Nonsense,” said Mrs Fujiwara again, getting to her feet.

We had not been back long when Jiro came in from work, an hour or so earlier than usual. He greeted his father cheerfully — his show of temper the previous night apparently quite forgotten — before disappearing to take his bath. He returned a little later, dressed in a kimono, humming a song to himself. He seated himself on a cushion and began to towel his hair.

“Well, how did it go? ” Ogata-San asked.

“What’s that? Oh, the meeting, you mean. It wasn’t so bad. Not so bad at all.”

I had been on the point of going into the kitchen, but paused at the doorway, waiting to hear what else Jiro had to say. His father, too, continued to look at him. For several moments, Jiro went on towelling his hair, looking at neither of us.

“In fact,” he said at last, “I suppose I did rather well. I persuaded their representatives to sign an agreement. Not exactly a contract, but to all purposes the same thing. My boss was quite surprised. It’s unusual for them to commit themselves like that. He told me to take the rest of the day off.”

“Why, that’s splendid news,” Ogata-San said, then gave a laugh. He glanced towards me, then back at his son. “That’s splendid news.”

“Congratulations,” I said, smiling at my husband. “I’m so glad.”

Jiro looked up, as if noticing me for the first time.

“Why are you standing there like that?” he asked. “I wouldn’t mind some tea, you know.” He put down his towel and began combing his hair.

That evening, in order to celebrate Jiro’s success, I prepared a more elaborate meal than usual. Neither during supper, nor during the rest of the evening, did Ogata-San mention anything of his encounter with Shigeo Matsuda that day. However, just as we began to eat, he said quite suddenly:

“Well, Jiro, I’ll be leaving you tomorrow.”

Jiro looked up. “You’re leaving? Oh, a pity. Well, I hope you enjoyed your visit.”

“Yes, I’ve had a good rest. In fact, I’ve been with you rather longer than I planned.”

“You’re welcome, Father,” said Jiro. “No need to rush, I assure you.”

“Thank you, but I must be getting back now. There’s a few things I have to be getting on with.”

“Please come and visit us again, whenever it’s convenient.”

“Father,” I said. “You must come and see the baby when it arrives.”

Ogata-San smiled. “Perhaps at New Year then,” he said. “But I won’t bother you much earlier than that, Etsuko. You’ll have enough on your hands without having to contend with me.”

“A pity you caught me at such a busy time,” my husband said. “Next time, perhaps, I won’t be so hard pressed and we’ll have more time to talk.”

“Now, don’t worry, Jiro. Nothing has pleased me more than to see how much you devote yourself to your work.”

“Now this deal’s finally gone through,” said Jiro, “I’ll have a little more time. A shame you have to go back just now. And I was thinking of taking a couple of days off too. Still, it can’t be helped, I suppose.”

“Father,” I said, interrupting, “if Jiro’s going to take a few days off, can’t you stay another week?”

My husband stopped eating, but did not look up.

“It’s tempting,” Ogata-San said, “but I really think it’s time I went back.”

Jiro began to eat once more. “A pity,” he said.

“Yes, I really must get the veranda finished before Kikuko and her husband come. They’re bound to want to come

down in the autumn. ”

Jiro did not reply, and we all ate in silence for a while. Then Ogata-San said:

“Besides, I can’t sit here thinking about chess all day. ” He laughed, a little strangely.

Jiro nodded, but said nothing. Ogata-San laughed again, then for several moments we continued to eat in silence.

“Do you drink sake these days, Father? ” Jiro asked eventually.

“Sake? I take a drop sometimes. Not often. ”

“Since this is your last evening with us, perhaps we should take some sake. ”

Ogata-San seemed to consider this for a moment. Finally, he said with a smile: “There’s no need to make a fuss about an old man like me. But I’ll join you in a cup to celebrate your splendid future. ”

Jiro nodded to me. I went to the cupboard and brought out a bottle and two cups.

“I always thought you’d go far, ” Ogata-San was saying. “You always showed promise. ”

“Just because of what happened today, that’s no guarantee they’ll give me the promotion, ” my husband said. “But I suppose my efforts today will have done no harm. ”

“No, indeed, ” said Ogata-San. “I doubt if you did yourself much harm today. ”

They both watched in silence as I poured out the sake. Then Ogata-San laid down his chopsticks and raised his cup.

“Here’s to your future, Jiro, ” he said.

My husband, some food still in his mouth, also raised his cup.

“And to yours, Father,” he said.

Memory, I realize, can be an unreliable thing; often it is heavily coloured by the circumstances in which one remembers, and no doubt this applies to certain of the recollections I have gathered here. For instance. I find it tempting to persuade myself it was a premonition I experienced that afternoon, that the unpleasant image which entered my thoughts that day was something altogether different — something much more intense and vivid — than the numerous day-dreams which drift through one’s imagination during such long and empty hours.

In all possibility, it was nothing so remarkable. The tragedy of the little girl found hanging from a tree — much more so than the earlier child murders — had made a shocked impression on the neighbourhood, and I could not have been alone that summer in being disturbed by such images.

It was the latter part of the afternoon, a day or two after our outing to Inasa, and I was occupying myself with some small chores around the apartment when I happened to glance out of the window. The wasteground outside must have hardened significantly since the first occasion I had watched that large American car, for now I saw it coming across the uneven surface without undue difficulty. It continued to come nearer, then bumped up on to the concrete beneath my window. The glare on the windscreen prevented me from seeing clearly, but I received a distinct impression the driver was not alone. The car moved around the apartment block and out of my vision.

It must have been just then that it happened, just as I was gazing towards the cottage in a somewhat confused state of mind. With no apparent provocation, that chilling image intruded into my thoughts, and I came away from the window with a troubled feeling. I returned to my housework, trying to put the picture out of my mind, but it was some minutes

before I felt sufficiently rid of it to give consideration to the reappearance of the large white car.

It was an hour or so later I saw the figure walking across the wasteground towards the cottage. I shaded my eyes to see more clearly; it was a woman — a thin figure — and she walked with a slow deliberate step. The figure paused outside the cottage for some time, then disappeared behind the sloping roof. I continued to watch, but she did not re-emerge; to all appearances, the woman had gone inside.

For several moments, I remained at the window, unsure what to do. Then finally, I put on some sandals and left the apartment. Outside, the day was at its hottest, and the journey across those few dried acres seemed to take an eternity. Indeed, the walk to the cottage tired me so much that when I arrived I had almost forgotten my original purpose. It was with a kind of shock, then, that I heard voices from within the cottage. One of the voices was Mariko's; the other I did not recognize. I stepped closer to the entrance, but could make out no words. For several moments I remained there, not sure what I should do. Then I slid open the entrance and called out. The voices stopped. I waited another moment, then stepped inside.

Chapter Ten

After the brightness of the day outside, the interior of the cottage seemed cool and dark. Here and there, the sun came in sharply through narrow gaps, lighting up small patches on the tatami. The odour of damp wood seemed as strong as ever.

It took a second or two for my eyes to adjust. There was an old woman sitting on the tatami, Mariko in front of her. In turning to face me, the old woman moved her head with caution as if in fear of hurting her neck. Her face was thin, and had a chalky paleness about it which at first quite unnerved me. She looked to be around seventy or so, though the frailness of her neck and shoulders could have derived from ill-health as much as from age. Her kimono was of a dark sombre colour, the kind normally worn in mourning. Her eyes were slightly hooded and watched me with no apparent emotion.

“How do you do,” she said, eventually.

I bowed slightly and returned some greeting. For a second or two, we looked at each other awkwardly.

“Are you a neighbour?” the old woman asked. She had a slow way of speaking her words.

“Yes,” I said. “A friend.”

She continued to look at me for a moment, then asked: “Have you any idea where the occupant has gone? She’s left the child here on her own.”

The little girl had shifted her position so that she was sitting alongside the stranger. At the old woman’s question, Mariko looked at me intently.

“No, I’ve no idea,” I said.

“It’s odd,” said the woman. “The child doesn’t seem to know either. I wonder where she could be. I cannot stay

long. ”

We gazed at each other for a few moments more.

“Have you come far?” I asked.

“Quite far. Please excuse my clothes. I’ve just been attending a funeral. ”

“I see. ” I bowed again.

“A sorrowful occasion, ” the old woman said, nodding slowly to herself. “A former colleague of my father. My father is too ill to leave the house. He sent me to pay his respects. It was a sorrowful occasion. ” She passed her gaze around the inside of the cottage, moving her head with the same carefulness. “You have no idea where she is?” she asked again.

“No, I’m afraid not. ”

“I cannot wait long. My father will be getting anxious. ”

“Is there perhaps some message I could pass on?” I asked.

The old woman did not answer for a while. Then she said: “You could perhaps tell her I came here and was asking after her. I am a relative. My name is Yasuko Kawada. ”

“Yasuko-San?” I did my best to conceal my surprise. “You’re Yasuko-San, Sachiko’s cousin?”

The old woman bowed, and as she did so her shoulders trembled slightly. “If you would tell her I was here and that I was asking after her. You have no idea where she could be?”

Again, I denied any knowledge. The woman began nodding to herself once more.

“Nagasaki is very different now, ” she said. “This afternoon, I could hardly recognize it. ”

“Yes,” I said. “I suppose it’s greatly changed. But do you not live in Nagasaki?”

“We’ve lived in Nagasaki now for many years. It’s greatly changed, as you say. New buildings have appeared, even new streets. It must have been in the spring, the last time I came out into the town. And even since then, new buildings have appeared. I’m certain they were not there in the spring. In fact, on that occasion too, I believe I was attending a funeral. Yes, it was Yamashita-San’s funeral. A funeral in the spring seems all the sadder somehow. You are a neighbour, you say? Then I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance.” Her face trembled and I saw she was smiling; her eyes had become very thin, and her mouth was curving downwards instead of up. I felt uncomfortable standing in the entryway, but did not feel free to step up to the tatami.

“I’m very pleased to meet you,” I said. “Sachiko often mentions you.”

“She mentions me?” The woman seemed to consider this for a moment. “We were expecting her to come and live with us. With my father and myself. Perhaps she told you as much.”

“Yes, she did.”

“We were expecting her three weeks ago. But she has not yet come.”

“Three weeks ago? Well, I suppose there must have been some misunderstanding. I know she’s preparing to move any day.”

The old woman’s eyes passed around the cottage once more. “A pity she isn’t here,” she said. “But if you are her neighbour, then I’m very glad to have made your acquaintance.” She bowed to me again, then went on gazing at me. “Perhaps you will pass a message to her,” she said.

“Why, certainly.”

The woman remained silent for some time. Finally, she said: "We had a slight disagreement, she and I. Perhaps she even told you about it. Nothing more than a misunderstanding, that was all. I was very surprised to find she had packed and left the next day. I was very surprised indeed. I didn't mean to offend her. My father says I am to blame." She paused for a moment. "I didn't mean to offend her," she repeated.

It had never occurred to me before that Sachiko's uncle and cousin would know nothing of the existence of her American friend. I bowed again, at a loss for a suitable reply.

"I've missed her since she left, I confess it," the old woman continued. "I've missed Mariko-San also. I enjoyed their company and it was foolish of me to have lost my temper and said the things I did." She paused again, turned her face towards Mariko, then back to me. "My father, in his own way, misses them also. He can hear, you see. He can hear how much quieter the house is. The other morning I found him awake and he said it reminded him of a tomb. Just like a tomb, he said. It would do my father much good to have them back again. Perhaps she will come back for his sake."

"I'll certainly convey your feelings to Sachiko-San," I said.

"For her own sake too," the old woman said. "After all, it isn't good that a woman should be without a man to guide her. Only harm can come of such a situation. My father is ill, but his life is in no danger. She should come back now, for her own wellbeing if for nothing else." The old woman began to untie a kerchief lying at her side. "In fact, I brought these with me," she said. "Just some cardigans I knitted, nothing more. But it's fine wool. I'd intended to offer them when she came back, but I brought them with me today. I first knitted one for Mariko, then I thought I may as well knit another for her mother." She held up a

cardigan, then looked towards the little girl. Her mouth curved downwards again as she smiled.

“They look splendid,” I said. “It must have taken you a long time.”

“It’s fine wool,” the woman said again. She wrapped the kerchief back around the cardigans, then tied it carefully. “Now I must return. My father will be anxious.”

She got to her feet and came down off the tatami. I assisted her in putting on her wooden sandals. Mariko had come to the edge of the tatami and the old woman lightly touched the top of the child’s head.

“Remember then, Mariko-San,” she said, “tell your mother what I told you. And you’re not to worry about your kittens. There’s plenty of room in the house for them all.”

“We’ll come soon,” Mariko said. “I’ll tell Mother.”

The woman smiled again. Then she turned to me and bowed. “I’m glad to have made your acquaintance. I cannot stay any longer. My father, you see, is unwell.”

“Oh, it’s you, Etsuko,” Sachiko said, when I returned to her cottage that evening. Then she laughed and said: “Don’t look so surprised. You didn’t expect me to stay here for ever, did you?”

Articles of clothing, blankets, numerous other items lay scattered over the tatami. I made some appropriate reply and sat down where I would not be in the way. On the floor beside me, I noticed two splendid-looking kimonos I had never seen Sachiko wear. I saw also — in the middle of the floor, packed into a cardboard box — her delicate teaset of pale white china.

Sachiko had opened wide the central partitions to allow the last of the daylight to come into the cottage; despite that, a dimness was fast setting in, and the sunset coming

across the veranda barely reached the far corner where Mariko sat watching her mother quietly. Near her, two of the kittens were fighting playfully; the little girl was holding a third kitten in her arms.

“I expect Mariko told you,” I said to Sachiko. “There was a visitor for you earlier. Your cousin was here.”

“Yes. Mariko told me.” Sachiko continued to pack her trunk.

“You’re leaving in the morning?”

“Yes,” she said, with a touch of impatience. Then she gave a sigh and looked up at me. “Yes, Etsuko, we’re leaving in the morning.” She folded something away into a corner of her trunk.

“You have so much luggage,” I said, eventually. “How will you ever carry it all?”

For a little while, Sachiko did not answer. Then, continuing to pack, she said: “You know perfectly well, Etsuko. We’ll put it in the car.”

I remained silent. She took a deep breath, and glanced across the room to where I was sitting.

“Yes, we’re leaving Nagasaki, Etsuko. I assure you, I had every intention of coming to say goodbye once all the packing was finished. I wouldn’t have left without thanking you, you’ve been most kind. Incidentally, as regards the loan, it will be returned to you through the post. Please don’t worry about that.” She began to pack again.

“Where is it you’re going?” I asked.

“Kobe. Everything’s decided now, once and for all.”

“Kobe?”

“Yes, Etsuko, Kobe. Then after that, America. Frank has arranged everything. Aren’t you pleased for me?” She smiled quickly, then turned away again.

I went on watching her. Mariko, too, was watching her. The kitten in her arms was struggling to join its companions on the tatami, but the little girl continued to hold it firmly. Beside her, in the corner of the room, I saw the vegetable box she had won at the *kujibiki* stall; Mariko, it appeared, had converted the box into a house for her kittens.

“Incidentally, Etsuko, that pile over there” — Sachiko pointed — “those items I’ll just have to leave behind. I had no idea there was so much. Some of it is of decent enough quality. Please make use of it if you wish. I don’t mean any offence, of course. It’s merely that some of it is of good quality.”

“But what about your uncle?” I said. “And your cousin?”

“My uncle?” She gave a shrug. “It was kind of him to have invited me into his household. But I’m afraid I’ve made other plans now. You have no idea, Etsuko, how relieved I’ll be to leave this place. I trust I’ve seen the last of such squalor.” Then she looked across to me once more and laughed. “I can see exactly what you’re thinking. I can assure you, Etsuko, you’re quite wrong. He won’t let me down this time. He’ll be here with the car, first thing tomorrow morning. Aren’t you pleased for me?” Sachiko looked around at the luggage strewn over the floor and sighed. Then stepping over a pile of clothes, she knelt beside the box containing the teaset, and began filling it with rolls of wool.

“Have you decided yet?” Mariko said, suddenly.

“We can’t talk about it now, Mariko,” said her mother. “I’m busy now.”

“But you said I could keep them. Don’t you remember?”

Sachiko shook the cardboard box gently; the china still rattled. She looked around, found a piece of cloth and began tearing it into strips.

“You said I could keep them,” Mariko said again.

“Mariko, please consider the situation for a moment. How can we possibly take all those creatures with us?”

“But you said I could keep them.”

Sachiko sighed, and for a moment seemed to be considering something. She looked down at the teaset, the pieces of cloth held in her hands.

“You did, Mother,” Mariko said. “Don’t you remember? You said I could.”

Sachiko looked up at her daughter, then over towards the kittens. “Things are different now,” she said, tiredly. Then a wave of irritation crossed her face, and she flung down the pieces of cloth. “Mariko, how can you think so much of these creatures? How can we possibly take them with us? No, we’ll just have to leave them here.”

“But you said I could keep them.”

Sachiko glared at her daughter for a moment. “Can’t you think of anything else?” she said, lowering her voice almost to a whisper. “Aren’t you old enough yet to see there are other things besides these filthy little animals? You’ll just have to grow up a little. You simply can’t have these sentimental attachments for ever. These are just … just *animals* don’t you see? Don’t you understand that, child? Don’t you understand?”

Mariko stared back at her mother.

“If you like, Mariko-San,” I put in, “I could come and feed them from time to time. Then eventually they’ll find homes for themselves. There’s no need to worry.”

The little girl turned to me. “Mother said I could keep the kittens,” she said.

“Stop being so childish,” said Sachiko, sharply. “You’re being deliberately awkward, as you always are. What

does it matter about the dirty little creatures?" She rose to her feet and went over to Mariko's corner. The kittens on the tatami scurried back; Sachiko looked down at them, then took a deep breath. Quite calmly, she turned the vegetable box on to its side — so that the wire-grid panels were facing upwards — reached down and dropped the kittens one by one into the box. She then turned to her daughter; Mariko was still clutching the remaining kitten.

"Give me that," said Sachiko.

Mariko continued to hold the kitten. Sachiko stepped forward and put out her hand. The little girl turned and looked at me.

"This is Atsu," she said. "Do you want to see him, Etsuko-San? This is Atsu."

"Give me that creature, Mariko," Sachiko said. "Don't you understand, it's just an animal. Why can't you understand that, Mariko? Are you really too young? It's not your little baby, it's just an animal, just like a rat or a snake. Now give it to me."

Mariko stared up at her mother. Then slowly, she lowered the kitten and let it drop to the tatami in front of her. The kitten struggled as Sachiko lifted it off the ground. She dropped it into the vegetable box and slid shut the wire grid.

"Stay here," she said to her daughter, and picked the box up in her arms. Then as she came past, she said to me: "It's so stupid, these are just animals, what does it matter?"

Mariko rose to her feet and seemed about to follow her mother. Sachiko turned at the entryway and said: "Do as you're told. Stay here."

For a few moments, Mariko remained standing at the edge of the tatami, looking at the doorway where her mother had

disappeared.

“Wait for your mother here, Mariko-San,” I said to her.

The little girl turned and looked at me. Then the next moment, she had gone.

For a minute or two, I did not move. Then eventually I got to my feet and put on my sandals. From the doorway, I could see Sachiko down by the water, the vegetable box beside her feet; she appeared not to have noticed her daughter standing several yards behind her, just at the point where the ground began to slope down steeply. I left the cottage and made my way to where Mariko was standing.

“Let’s go back to the house, Mariko-San,” I said, gently.

The little girl’s eyes remained on her mother, her face devoid of any expression. Down in front of us, Sachiko knelt cautiously on the bank, then moved the box a little nearer.

“Let’s go inside, Mariko,” I said again, but the little girl continued to ignore me. I left her and walked down the muddy slope to where Sachiko was kneeling. The sunset was coming through the trees on the opposite bank, and the reeds that grew along the water’s edge cast long shadows on the muddy ground around us. Sachiko had found some grass to kneel on, but that too was thick with mud.

“Can’t we let them loose?” I said, quietly. “You never know. Someone may want them.”

Sachiko was gazing down into the vegetable box through the wire gauze. She slid open a panel, brought out a kitten and shut the box again. She held the kitten in both hands, looked at it for a few seconds, then glanced up at me. “It’s just an animal, Etsuko,” she said. “That’s all it is.”

She put the kitten into the water and held it there. She remained like that for some moments, staring into the water,

both hands beneath the surface. She was wearing a casual summer kimono, and the corners of each sleeve touched the water.

Then for the first time, without taking her hands from the water, Sachiko threw a glance over her shoulder towards her daughter. Instinctively, I followed her glance, and for one brief moment the two of us were both staring back up at Mariko. The little girl was standing at the top of the slope, watching with the same blank expression. On seeing her mother's face turn to her, she moved her head very slightly; then she remained quite still, her hands behind her back.

Sachiko brought her hands out of the water and stared at the kitten she was still holding. She brought it closer to her face and the water ran down her wrists and arms.

"It's still alive," she said, tiredly. Then she turned to me and said: "Look at this water, Etsuko. It's so dirty." With an air of disgust, she dropped the soaked kitten back into the box and shut it. "How these things struggle," she muttered, and held up her wrists to show me the scratch-marks. Somehow, Sachiko's hair had also become wet; one drop, then another fell from a thin strand which hung down one side of her face.

Sachiko adjusted her position then pushed the vegetable box over the edge of the bank; the box rolled and landed in the water. To prevent it floating, Sachiko leaned forward and held it down. The water came almost halfway up the wire-grid. She continued to hold down the box, then finally pushed it with both hands. The box floated a little way into the river, bobbed and sank further. Sachiko got to her feet, and we both of us watched the box. It continued to float, then caught in the current and began moving more swiftly downstream.

Some movement caught my eye and made me turn. Mariko had run several yards down the river's edge, to a spot where the bank jutted out into the water. She stood there watching the box float on, her face still expressionless. The box caught

in some reeds, freed itself and continued its journey. Mariko began to run again. She ran on some distance along the bank, then stopped again to watch the box. By this time, only a small corner was visible above the surface.

“This water’s so dirty,” Sachiko said. She had been shaking the water off her hands. She squeezed in turn the sleeve-ends of her kimono, then brushed the mud from her knees. “Let’s go back inside, Etsuko. The insects here are becoming intolerable.”

“Shouldn’t we go and get Mariko? It will be dark soon.”

Sachiko turned and called her daughter’s name. Mariko was now fifty yards or so away, still looking at the water. She did not seem to hear and Sachiko gave a shrug. “She’ll come back in time,” she said. “Now, I must finish packing before the light goes completely.” She began to walk up the slope towards the cottage.

Sachiko lit the lantern and hung it from a low wooden beam.

“Don’t worry yourself, Etsuko,” she said. “She’ll be back soon enough.” She made her way through the various items strewn over the tatami, and seated herself, as before, in front of the open partitions. Behind her, the sky had become pale and faded.

She began packing again. I sat down at the opposite side of the room and watched her.

“What are your plans now?” I asked. “What will you do once you arrive in Kobe?”

“Everything’s been arranged, Etsuko,” she said, without looking up. “There’s no need to worry. Frank has seen to everything.”

“But why Kobe?”

“He has friends there. At the American base. He’s been entrusted with a job on a cargo ship, and he’ll be in America

in a very short time. Then he'll send us the necessary amount of money, and we'll go and join him. He's seen to all the arrangements. ”

“You mean, he's leaving Japan without you? ”

Sachiko laughed. “One needs to be patient, Etsuko. Once he arrives in America, he'll be able to work and send money. It's by far the most sensible solution. After all, it would be so much easier for him to find work once he's back in America. I don't mind waiting a little. ”

“I see. ”

“He's seen to everything, Etsuko. He's found a place for us to stay in Kobe, and he's seen to it that we'll get on a ship at almost half the usual cost. ” She gave a sigh. “You have no idea how pleased I am to be leaving this place. ”

Sachiko continued to pack. The pale light from outside fell on one side of her face, but her hands and sleeves were caught in the glow from the lantern. It was a strange effect.

“Do you expect to wait long in Kobe? ” I asked.

She shrugged. “I'm prepared to be patient, Etsuko. One needs to be patient. ”

I could not see in the dimness what it was she was folding; it seemed to be giving her some difficulty, for she opened and refolded it several times.

“In any case, Etsuko, ” she went on, “why would he have gone to all this trouble if he wasn't absolutely sincere? Why would he have gone to all this trouble on my behalf? Sometimes, Etsuko, you seem so doubting. You should be happy for me. Things are working out at last. ”

“Yes, of course. I'm very happy for you. ”

“But really, Etsuko, it would be unfair to start doubting him after he's gone to all this trouble. It would be quite unfair. ”

“Yes. ”

“And Mariko would be happier there. America is a far better place for a young girl to grow up. Out there, she could do all kinds of things with her life. She could become a business girl. Or she could study painting at college and become an artist. All these things are much easier in America, Etsuko. Japan is no place for a girl. What can she look forward to here?”

I made no reply. Sachiko glanced up at me and gave a small laugh.

“Try and smile, Etsuko,” she said. “Things will turn out well in the end. ”

“Yes, I’m sure they will. ”

“Of course they will. ”

“Yes. ”

For another minute or so, Sachiko continued with her packing. Then her hands became still, and she gazed across the room towards me, her face caught in that strange mixture of light.

“I suppose you think I’m a fool,” she said, quietly. “Don’t you, Etsuko?”

I looked back at her, a little surprised.

“I realize we may never see America,” she said. “And even if we did, I know how difficult things will be. Did you think I never knew that?”

I gave no reply, and we went on staring at each other.

“But what of it?” said Sachiko. “What difference does it make? Why shouldn’t I go to Kobe? After all, Etsuko, what do I have to lose? There’s nothing for me at my uncle’s house. Just a few empty rooms, that’s all. I could sit there in a room and grow old. Other than that there’ll be nothing.

Just empty rooms, that's all. You know that yourself, Etsuko. ”

“But Mariko,” I said. “What about Mariko?”

“Mariko? She'll manage well enough. She'll just have to.” Sachiko continued to gaze at me through the dimness, one side of her face in shadow. Then she said: “Do you think I imagine for one moment that I'm a good mother to her?”

I remained silent. Then suddenly, Sachiko laughed.

“Why are we talking like this?” she said, and her hands began to move busily once more. “Everything will turn out well, I assure you. I'll write to you when I reach America. Perhaps, Etsuko, you'll even come and visit us one day. You could bring your child with you. ”

“Yes, indeed. ”

“Perhaps you'll have several children by then. ”

“Yes,” I said, laughing awkwardly. “You never know. ”

Sachiko gave a sigh and lifted both hands into the air. “There's so much to pack,” she murmured. “I'll just have to leave some of it behind. ”

I sat there for some moments, watching her.

“If you wish,” I said, eventually, “I could go and look for Mariko. It's getting rather late. ”

“You'll only tire yourself, Etsuko. I'll finish packing and if she still hasn't come back we could go and look for her together. ”

“It's all right. I'll see if I can find her. It's nearly dark now. ”

Sachiko glanced up, then shrugged. “Perhaps you'd best take the lantern with you,” she said. “It's quite slippery along the bank. ”

I rose to my feet and took the lantern down from the beam. The shadows moved across the cottage as I walked with it towards the doorway. As I was leaving, I glanced back towards Sachiko. I could see only her silhouette, seated before the open partitions, the sky behind her turned almost to night.

Insects followed my lantern as I made my way along the river. Occasionally, some creature would become trapped inside, and I would then have to stop and hold the lantern still until it had found its way out.

In time, the small wooden bridge appeared on the bank ahead of me. While crossing it, I stopped for a moment to gaze at the evening sky. As I recall, a strange sense of tranquillity came over me there on that bridge. I stood there for some minutes, leaning over the rail, listening to the sounds of the river below me. When finally I turned, I saw my own shadow, cast by the lantern, thrown across the wooden slats of the bridge.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, for the little girl was before me, sat crouched beneath the opposite rail. I came forward until I could see her more clearly under my lantern. She was looking at her palms and said nothing.

“What’s the matter with you?” I said. “Why are you sitting here like this?”

The insects were clustering around the lantern. I put it down in front of me, and the child’s face became more sharply illuminated. After a long silence, she said: “I don’t want to go away. I don’t want to go away tomorrow.”

I gave a sigh. “But you’ll like it. Everyone’s a little frightened of new things. You’ll like it over there.”

“I don’t want to go away. And I don’t like him. He’s like a Pig”

“You’re not to speak like that,” I said, angrily. We stared at each other for a moment, then she looked back down at her hands.

“You mustn’t speak like that,” I said, more calmly. “He’s very fond of you, and he’ll be just like a new father. Everything will turn out well, I promise.”

The child said nothing. I sighed again.

“In any case,” I went on, “if you don’t like it over there, we can always come back.”

This time she looked up at me questioningly.

“Yes, I promise,” I said. “If you don’t like it over there, we’ll come straight back. But we have to try it and see if we like it there. I’m sure we will.”

The little girl was watching me closely. “Why are you holding that?” she asked.

“This? It just caught around my sandal, that’s all.”

“Why are you holding it?”

“I told you. It caught around my foot. What’s wrong with you?” I gave a short laugh. “Why are you looking at me like that? I’m not going to hurt you.”

Without taking her eyes from me, she rose slowly to her feet.

“What’s wrong with you?” I repeated.

The child began to run, her footsteps drumming along the wooden boards. She stopped at the end of the bridge and stood watching me suspiciously. I smiled at her and picked up the lantern. The child began once more to run.

A half-moon had appeared above the water and for several quiet moments I remained on the bridge, gazing at it. Once, through the dimness, I thought I could see Mariko running along the riverbank in the direction of the cottage.

Chapter Eleven

At first, I was sure someone had walked past my bed and out of my room, closing the door quietly. Then I became more awake, and I realized how fanciful an idea this was.

I lay in bed listening for further noises. Quite obviously, I had heard Niki in the next room; she had complained throughout her stay of being unable to sleep well. Or possibly there had been no noises at all, I had awoken again during the early hours from habit.

The sound of birds came from outside, but my room was still in darkness. After several minutes I rose and found my dressing gown. When I opened my door, the light outside was very pale. I stepped further on to the landing and almost by instinct cast a glance down to the far end of the corridor, towards Keiko's door.

Then, for a moment, I was sure I had heard a sound come from within Keiko's room, a small clear sound amidst the singing of the birds outside. I stood still, listening, then began to walk towards the door. There came more noises, and I realized they were coming from the kitchen downstairs. I remained on the landing for a moment, then made my way down the staircase.

Niki was coming out of the kitchen and started on seeing me.

“Oh, Mother, you gave me a real fright.”

In the murky light of the hallway, I could see her thin figure in a pale dressing gown holding a cup in both her hands.

“I'm sorry, Niki. I thought perhaps you were a burglar.”

My daughter took a deep breath, but still seemed shaken. Then she said: "I couldn't sleep very well. So I thought I might as well make some coffee."

"What time is it now?"

"About five, I suppose."

She went into the living room, leaving me standing at the foot of the stairs. I went to the kitchen to make myself coffee before going to join her. In the living room, Niki had opened the curtains and was sitting astride a hard-backed chair, looking emptily out into the garden. The grey light from the window fell on her face.

"Will it rain again, do you think?" I asked.

She shrugged and continued to look out of the window. I sat down near the fireplace and watched her. Then she sighed tiredly and said:

"I don't seem to sleep very well. I keep having these bad dreams all the time."

"That's worrying, Niki. At your age you should have no problems sleeping."

She said nothing and went on looking at the garden.

"What kind of bad dreams do you have?" I asked.

"Oh, just bad dreams."

"Bad dreams about what, Niki?"

"Just bad dreams," she said, suddenly irritated. "What does it matter what they're about?"

We fell silent for a moment. Then Niki said without turning:

"I suppose Dad should have looked after her a bit more, shouldn't he? He ignored her most of the time. It wasn't fair really."

I waited to see if she would say more. Then I said: "Well, it's understandable enough. He wasn't her real father, after all."

"But it wasn't fair really."

Outside, I could see, it was nearly daylight. A lone bird was making its noises somewhere close by the window.

"Your father was rather idealistic at times," I said. "In those days, you see, he really believed we could give her a happy life over here."

Niki shrugged. I watched her for a little longer, then said: "But you see, Niki, I knew all along. I knew all along she wouldn't be happy over here. But I decided to bring her just the same."

My daughter seemed to consider this for a moment. "Don't be silly," she said, turning to me, "how could you have known? And you did everything you could for her. You're the last person anyone could blame."

I remained silent. Her face, devoid of any make-up, looked very young.

"Anyway," she said, "sometimes you've got to take risks. You did exactly the right thing. You can't just watch your life wasting away."

I put down the coffee cup I had been holding and stared past her, out into the garden. There were no signs of rain and the sky seemed clearer than on previous mornings.

"It would have been so stupid," Niki went on, "if you'd just accepted everything the way it was and just stayed where you were. At least you made an effort."

"As you say. Now let's not discuss it any further."

"It's so stupid the way people just waste away their lives."

“Let’s not discuss it any further,” I said, more firmly. “There’s no point in going over all that now.”

My daughter turned away again. We sat without talking for a little while, then I rose to my feet and came closer to the window.

“It looks a much better morning today,” I said. “Perhaps the sun will come out. If it does, Niki, we could go for a walk. It would do us a lot of good.”

“I suppose so,” she mumbled.

When I left the living room, my daughter was still sitting astride her chair, her chin supported by a hand, gazing emptily out into the garden.

When the telephone rang, Niki and I were finishing breakfast in the kitchen. It had rung for her so frequently during the previous few days that it seemed natural she should be the one to go and answer it. By the time she returned, her coffee had grown cold.

“Your friends again?” I asked.

She nodded, then went over to switch on the kettle.

“Actually, Mother,” she said, “I’ll have to go back this afternoon. Is that all right?” She was standing with one hand on the handle of the kettle, the other on her hip.

“Of course it’s all right. It’s been very nice having you here, Niki.”

“I’ll come and see you again soon. But I’ve really got to be getting back now.”

“You don’t have to apologize. It’s very important you lead your own life now.”

Niki turned away and waited for her kettle. The windows above the sink unit had misted over a little, but outside the

sun was shining. Niki poured herself coffee, then sat down at the table.

“Oh, by the way, Mother,” she said. “You know that friend I was telling you about, the one writing the poem about you?”

I smiled. “Oh yes. Your friend.”

“She wanted me to bring back a photo or something. Of Nagasaki. Have you got anything like that? An old postcard or something?”

“I should think I could find something for you. How absurd” — I gave a laugh — “Whatever can she be writing about me?”

“She’s a really good poet. She’s been through a lot, you see. That’s why I told her about you.”

“I’m sure she’ll write a marvellous poem, Niki.”

“Just an old postcard, anything like that. Just so she can see what everything was like.”

“Well, Niki, I’m not so sure. It has to show what *everything* was like, does it?”

“You know what I mean.”

I laughed again. “I’ll have a look for you later.”

Niki had been buttering a piece of toast, but now she began to scrape some butter off again. My daughter has been thin since childhood, and the idea that she was concerned at becoming fat amused me. I watched her for a moment.

“Still,” I said, eventually, “it’s a pity you’re leaving today. I was about to suggest we went to the cinema this evening.”

“The cinema? Why, what’s on?”

“I don’t know what kind of films they show these days. I was hoping you’d know more about it.”

“Actually, Mother, it’s ages since we went to a film together, isn’t it? Not since I was little.” Niki smiled, and for a moment her face became child-like. Then she put down her knife and gazed at her coffee cup. “I don’t go to see films much either,” she said. “There’s always loads on in London, but we don’t go much.”

“Well, if you prefer, there’s always the theatre. The bus takes you right up to the theatre now. I don’t know what they have on at the moment, but we could find out. Is that the local paper there, just behind you?”

“Well, Mother, don’t bother. There’s not much point.”

“I think they do quite good plays sometimes. Some quite modern ones. It’ll say in the paper.”

“There’s not much point, Mother. I’ll have to go back today anyhow. I’d like to stay, but I’ve really got to get back.”

“Of course, Niki. There’s no need to apologize.” I smiled at her across the table. “As a matter of fact, it’s a great comfort to me you have good friends you enjoy being with. You’re always welcome to bring any of them here.”

“Yes, Mother, thank you.”

The spare bedroom Niki had been using was small and stark; the sun was streaming into it that morning.

“Will this do for your friend?” I asked, from the doorway.

Niki was packing her suitcase on the bed and glanced up briefly at the calendar I had found. “That’s fine,” she said.

I stepped further into the room. From the window, I could see the orchard below and the neat rows of thin young trees. The calendar I was holding had originally offered a

photograph for each month, but all but the last had been torn away. For a moment, I regarded the remaining picture.

“Don’t give me anything important,” Niki said. “If there isn’t anything, it doesn’t matter.”

I laughed and laid the picture down on the bed alongside her other things. “It’s just an old calendar, that’s all. I’ve no idea why I’ve kept it.”

Niki pushed some hair back behind her ear, then continued packing.

“I suppose,” I said, eventually, “you plan to go on living in London for the time being.”

She gave a shrug. “Well, I’m quite happy there.”

“You must send my best wishes to all your friends.”

“All right, I will.”

“And to David. That was his name, wasn’t it?”

She gave another shrug, but said nothing. She had brought with her three separate pairs of boots and now she was struggling to find a way of putting them in her case.

“I suppose, Niki, you don’t have any plans yet to be getting married?”

“What do I want to get married for?”

“I was just asking.”

“Why should I get married? What’s the point of that?”

“You plan to just go on — living in London, do you?”

“Well, why should I get married? That’s so stupid, Mother.” She rolled up the calendar and packed it away. “So many women just get brainwashed. They think all there is to life is getting married and having a load of kids.”

I continued to watch her. Then I said: “But in the end, Niki, there isn’t very much else.”

“God, Mother, there’s plenty of things I could do. I don’t want to just get stuck away somewhere with a husband and a load of screaming kids. Why are you going on about it suddenly anyway?” The lid of her suitcase would not shut. She pushed down at it impatiently.

“I was only wondering what your plans were, Niki,” I said, with a laugh. “There’s no need to get so cross. Of course, you must do what you choose.”

She opened the lid again and adjusted some of the contents.

“Now, Niki, there’s no need to get so cross.”

This time, she managed to close the lid. “God knows why I brought so much,” she muttered to herself.

“What do you say to people, Mother?” Niki asked. “What do you say when they ask where I am?”

My daughter had decided she need not leave until after lunch and we had come out walking through the orchard behind the house. The sun was still out, but the air was chilly. I gave her a puzzled look.

“I just tell them you’re living in London, Niki. Isn’t that the truth?”

“I suppose so. But don’t they ask what I’m doing? Like that old Mrs Waters the other day?”

“Yes, sometimes they ask. I tell them you’re living with your friends. Really, Niki, I had no idea you were so concerned about what people thought of you.”

“I’m not.”

We continued to walk slowly. In many places, the ground had become marshy.

“I suppose you don’t like it very much, do you, Mother?”

“Like what, Niki?”

“The way things are with me. You don’t like me living away. With David and all that.”

We had come to the end of the orchard. Niki stepped out on to a small winding lane and crossed to the other side, towards the wooden gates of a field. I followed her. The grass field was large and rose gradually as it spread away from us. At its crest, we could see two thin sycamore trees against the sky.

“I’m not ashamed of you, Niki,” I said. “You must live as you think best.”

My daughter was gazing at the field. “They used to have horses here, didn’t they?” she said, putting her arms up on to the gate. I looked, but there were no horses to be seen.

“You know, it’s strange,” I said. “I remember when I first married, there was a lot of argument because my husband didn’t want to live with his father. You see, in those days that was still quite expected in Japan. There was a lot of argument about that.”

“I bet you were relieved,” Niki said, not taking her eyes from the field.

“Relieved? About what?”

“About not having to live with his father.”

“On the contrary, Niki. I would have been happy if he’d lived with us. Besides, he was a widower. It’s not a bad thing at all, the old Japanese way.”

“Obviously, you’d say that now. I bet that’s not what you thought at the time though.”

“But Niki, you really don’t understand. I was very fond of my father-in-law.” I looked at her for a moment, then

finally gave a laugh. "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps I was relieved he didn't come to live with us. I don't remember now." I reached forward and touched the top of the wooden gate. A little moisture came away on my fingers. I realized Niki was watching me and I held up my hand to show her. "There's still some frost," I said.

"Do you still think about Japan a lot, Mother?"

"I suppose so." I turned back to the field. "I have a few memories."

Two ponies had appeared near the sycamore trees. For a moment they stood quite still, in the sunshine, side by side.

"That calendar I gave you this morning," I said. "That's a view of the harbour in Nagasaki. This morning I was remembering the time we went there once, on a day-trip. Those hills over the harbour are very beautiful."

The ponies moved slowly behind the trees.

"What was so special about it?" said Niki.

"Special?"

"About the day you spent at the harbour."

"Oh, there was nothing special about it. I was just remembering it, that's all. Keiko was happy that day. We rode on the cable-cars." I gave a laugh and turned to Niki. "No, there was nothing special about it. It's just a happy memory, that's all."

My daughter gave a sigh. "Everything's so quiet out here," she said. "I don't remember things being this quiet."

"Yes, it must seem quiet after London."

"I suppose it gets a bit boring sometimes, out here on your own."

“But I enjoy the quiet, Niki. I always think it’s so truly like England out here.”

I turned away from the field, and for a moment looked back towards the orchard behind us.

“All those trees weren’t here when we first came,” I said, eventually. “It was all fields, and you could see the house from here. When your father first brought me down here, Niki, I remember thinking how so truly like England everything looked. All these fields, and the house too. It was just the way I always imagined England would be and I was so pleased.”

Niki took a deep breath and moved away from the gate. “We’d better be getting back,” she said. “I’ll have to be going fairly soon.”

As we walked back through the orchard, the sky seemed to cloud over.

“I was just thinking the other day,” I said, “perhaps I should sell the house now.”

“Sell it?”

“Yes. Move somewhere smaller perhaps. It’s just an idea.”

“You want to sell the house?” My daughter gave me a concerned look. “But it’s a really nice house.”

“But it’s so large now.”

“But it’s a really nice house, Mother. It’d be a shame.”

“I suppose so. It was just an idea, Niki, that’s all.”

I would like to have seen her to the railway station — it is only a few minutes’ walk — but the idea seemed to embarrass her. She left shortly after lunch with an oddly self-conscious air, as if she were leaving without my approval. The afternoon had turned grey and windy, and I

stood in the doorway as she walked down to the end of the drive. She was dressed in the same tight-fitting clothes she had arrived in, and her suitcase made her drag her step a little. When she reached the gate, Niki glanced back and seemed surprised to find me still standing at the door. I smiled and waved to her.

双语版石黑一雄作品

小夜曲

音乐与黄昏五故事集

Nocturnes Five Stories of Music and Nightfall

二〇一七年诺贝尔文学奖获奖作家

Kazuo Ishiguro



〔英〕石黑一雄

著

张晓意

译

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献给黛博拉·罗杰斯

伤心情歌手

我发现托尼·加德纳坐在游客当中的那天早上，春天刚刚降临威尼斯这里。我们搬到外面广场上来刚好一个星期——跟你说，真是松了口气，在咖啡厅的最里面演奏又闷又挡着要用楼梯的客人的路。那天早上微风习习，崭新的帐篷在我们身边啪啪作响，我们都觉得比平时更加愉悦和精神，我想这种心情一定反映在我们的音乐里了。

瞧我说得好像我是乐队的固定成员似的。事实上，我只是那些个“吉卜赛人”中的一个，别的乐手这么称呼我们，我只是那些个奔走于广场、三个咖啡厅的管弦乐队里哪个缺人，就去哪里帮忙的人中的一个。我主要在这家拉弗娜咖啡厅演奏，但若遇上忙碌的下午，我就要先和夸德里的小伙子们演奏一组，然后到弗洛里安去，再穿过广场回到拉弗娜。我和这三支乐队都相处得很好——和咖啡厅的服务生们也是——在别的哪个城市，我早就有固定职位了。可是在这里，传统和历史根深蒂固，事情都倒过来了。在其他地方，吉他手可是受人欢迎的。可是在这里？吉他手！咖啡厅的经理们不自在了。吉他太现代了，游客不会喜欢的。去年秋天，我弄来了一把老式椭圆形音孔的爵士吉他，像强哥·莱恩哈特⁽¹⁾弹的那种，这样大家就不会把我当成摇滚乐手了。事情容易了些，可经理们还是不喜欢。总之，实话告诉你吧：倘若你是个吉他手，就算你是吉他大师乔·帕斯，也甭想在这个广场找到一份固定工作。

当然了，还有另外一个小小的原因：我不是意大利人，更别说是威尼斯人。那个吹中音萨克斯风的捷克大个子情况和我一样。大伙儿都喜欢我们，乐队需要我们，可我们就是不符合正式要求。咖啡厅的经理们总是告诉你：闭上你的嘴，只管演奏就是了。这样游客们就不会知道你不是意大利人了。穿上你的制服，戴上你的太阳镜，头发往后梳，没有人看得出来，只要别开口说话。

可是我混得还不错。三支乐队都需要吉他手，特别是当他们与竞争对手同时演奏的时候，他们需要一个轻柔、纯净，但是传得远的声音作背景和弦。我猜你会想：三支乐队同时在一个广场上演奏，听起来多混乱啊。可是圣马可广场很大，没有问题。在广场上溜达的游客会听见一个曲子渐渐消失，另一个曲子渐渐大声，就好像他在调收音机的台。会让游客们受不了的是你演奏太多古典的东西，这些乐器演奏版的著名咏叹调。得了，这里是圣马可，游客们不想听最新的流行

音乐。可是他们时不时要一些他们认得的东西，比如朱莉·安德鲁斯⁽²⁾的老歌，或者某个著名电影的主题曲。我记得去年夏天有一次，我奔走于各个乐队间，一个下午演奏了九遍《教父》。

总之就是在这样一个春天的早晨，当我们在一大群游客面前演出的时候，我突然看见托尼·加德纳，独自一人坐在那里，面前放着一杯咖啡，差不多就在我们的正前方，离我们的帐篷大概只有六米远。广场上总是能看见名人，我们从来不大惊小怪。只在演奏完一曲后，乐队成员间私下小声说几句。看，是沃伦·比蒂⁽³⁾。看，是基辛格。那个女人就是在讲两个男人变脸的电影里出现过的那个。我们对此习以为常。毕竟这里是圣马可广场。可是当我发现坐在那里的是托尼·加德纳时，情况就不一样了，我激动极了。

托尼·加德纳是我母亲最喜爱的歌手。在我离开家之前，在那个共产主义时代，那样的唱片是很难弄到的，可我母亲有他几乎所有的唱片。小时候我刮坏过一张母亲的珍贵收藏。我们住的公寓很挤，可像我那个年纪的男孩子有时就是好动，尤其是在冬天不能出去的时候。所以我就从家里的小沙发跳到扶手椅上这样玩，有一次，我不小心撞到了唱片机。唱针“嗞”的一声划过唱片——那时还没有CD——母亲从厨房里出来，冲我大声嚷嚷。我很伤心，不是因为她冲我大声嚷嚷，而是因为我知道那是托尼·加德纳的唱片，我知道那张唱片对她来说多么重要。我还知道从此以后，当加德纳轻声吟唱那些美国歌曲时，唱片就会发出“嗞嗞”的声音。多年以后，我在华沙工作时得知了黑市唱片，我给母亲买了所有的托尼·加德纳的唱片，代替旧的那些，包括我刮坏的那一张。我花了三年才买齐，可我坚持不懈地买，一张张地买，每次回去看望她都带回去一张。

现在你知道当我认出托尼·加德纳时为什么会那么激动了吧，就在六米以外啊。起初我不敢相信，我换一个和弦时一定慢了一拍。是托尼·加德纳！我亲爱的母亲要是知道了会说什么啊！为了她，为了她的回忆，我一定要去跟托尼·加德纳说句话，才不管其他乐手会不会笑话我，说我像个小听差。

但是我当然不可能推开桌椅，朝他冲过去。我还得把演出演完。跟你说，真是痛苦极了，还有三四首歌，每一秒钟我都以为他要起身离开了。可是他一直坐在那里，独自一人，盯着眼前的咖啡，搅呀搅，好像搞不清楚服务生给他端来的到底是什么东西。他的装扮与一般的美国游客一样，浅蓝色的套头运动衫、宽松的灰裤子。以前唱片封面上又黑又亮的头发如今几乎都白了，但还挺浓密，而且梳得整整

齐齐，发型也没有变。我刚认出他时，他把墨镜拿在手里——他要是戴着墨镜我不一定能认出来——但是后来我一边演奏一边盯着他，他一会儿把墨镜戴上，一会儿拿下来，一会儿又戴上。他看上去心事重重，而且没有认真在听我们演奏，让我很是失望。

这组歌曲终于演完了。我什么也没有对其他人说，匆匆走出帐篷，朝托尼·加德纳的桌子走去，突然想到不知如何与他攀谈，心里紧张了一下。我站在他的身后，他的第六感却让他转过身来，看着我——我想这是出于多年来有歌迷来找他的习惯——接着我就介绍自己，告诉他我多么崇拜他，我在他刚刚听的那个乐队里，我母亲是他热情的歌迷等等，一古脑儿全都说了。他表情严肃地听着，时不时点点头，好像他是我的医生。我不停地讲，他只偶尔说一声：“是吗？”过了一会儿我想我该走了，转身要离开，突然听见他说：

“你说你是从波兰来的。日子一定不好过吧？”

“都过去了。”我笑笑，耸了耸肩。“如今我们是个自由的国家了。一个民主的国家。”

“那太好了。那就是刚刚为我们演奏的你的同仁吧。坐下。来杯咖啡？”

我说我不想叨扰他，可是加德纳先生的语气里有丝丝温和的坚持。“不会，不会，坐下。你刚才说你母亲喜欢我的唱片。”

于是我就坐了下来，接着说。说我的母亲、我们住的公寓、黑市上的唱片。我记不得那些唱片的名字，但我能够描述我印象中那些唱片套子的样子，每当我这么做时，他就会举起一根手指说“哦，那张是《独一无二》。《独一无二的托尼·加德纳》”之类的。我觉得我们俩都很喜欢这个游戏，突然我注意到加德纳先生的视线从我身上移开了，我转过头去，刚好看见一个女人朝我们走来。

她是那种非常优雅的美国女人，头发优美，衣服漂亮，身材姣好，不仔细看的话不会发现她们已经不年轻了。远远地看，我还以为是从光鲜的时尚杂志里走出来的模特儿呢。可是当她在加德纳先生身旁坐下，把墨镜推到额头上时，我发现她至少五十了，甚至不止。加德纳先生对我说：“这位是我的妻子琳迪。”

加德纳太太朝我敷衍地笑了笑，问她丈夫：“这位是谁？你交了个朋友。”

“是的，亲爱的。我们聊得正欢呢，我和……抱歉，朋友，我还不知道你的名字呢。”

“扬，”我立刻答道。“但朋友们都叫我雅内克。”

琳迪·加德纳说：“你是说你的小名比真名长？怎么会这样呢？”

“别对人家无礼，亲爱的。”

“我没有无礼。”

“别取笑人家的名字，亲爱的。这样才是好姑娘。”

琳迪·加德纳无助地转向我说：“你瞧瞧他说些什么？我冒犯你了吗？”

“不，不，”我说，“一点也没有，加德纳太太。”

“他总是说我对歌迷无礼。可是我没有无礼。我刚刚对你无礼了吗？”然后她转向加德纳先生，“我很正常地在跟歌迷讲话，亲爱的。我就是这样讲话的。我从来没有无礼。”

“好了，亲爱的，”加德纳先生说，“别小题大做了。而且，这位先生也不是什么歌迷。”

“哦，他不是歌迷？那他是谁？失散多年的侄子？”

“别这么说话，亲爱的。这位先生是我的同行。一位职业乐手。刚刚他在为我们演奏呢。”他指了指我们的帐篷。

“哦，对！”琳迪·加德纳再次转向我，“刚刚你在那里演奏来着？啊，很好听。你是拉手风琴的？拉得真好！”

“谢谢。其实我是弹吉他的。”

“弹吉他的？少来了。一分钟之前我还在看着你呢。就坐在那里，坐在那个拉低音提琴的旁边，手风琴拉得真好。”

“抱歉，拉手风琴的是卡洛。秃头、个大的……”

“真的？你不是在骗我？”

“亲爱的，我说了，别对人家无礼。”

加德纳先生并没有提高音量，可是他的声音突然变得严厉和气愤，接着，出现了一阵异样的沉默。最后，是加德纳先生自己打破了

沉默，温柔地说：

“对不起，亲爱的。我不是有意要训你的。”

他伸出一只手去拉妻子的手。我本以为加德纳太太会推开他，没想到她在椅子上挪了挪身子，好靠近加德纳先生一点，然后把另一只手搭在他们握紧的手上。一时间他们就那么坐着，加德纳先生低着头，他妻子的视线越过他的肩膀，出神地看着广场那头的大教堂。她的眼睛虽然看着那里，但却好像并没有真的在看什么。那几秒钟，他们好像不仅忘了同桌的我，甚至忘了整个广场的人。最后加德纳太太轻声说：

“没关系，亲爱的。是我错了。惹你生气了。”

他们又这样手拉着手对坐了一会儿。最后她叹了口气，放开加德纳先生的手，看着我。这次她看我的样子和之前不一样。这次我能感觉到她的魅力，就好像她心里有这么个刻度盘，从一到十，此时，对我，她决定拨到六或七，可我已经觉得够强烈的了，如果此时她叫我为她做些什么——比如说到广场对面帮她买花——我会欣然从命。

“你说你叫雅内克，是吗？”她说。“对不起，雅内克。托尼说得对。我不应该那样子跟你说话。”

“加德纳太太，您真的不用担心……”

“我还打扰了你们的谈话。音乐家之间的谈话，我想。好吧，我走了，你们继续聊。”

“你用不着离开，亲爱的，”加德纳先生说。

“用得着，亲爱的。我很想去那家普拉达专卖店看看。我刚刚过来就是要跟你说我会晚一点。”

“好，亲爱的。”托尼·加德纳第一次直了直身子，深吸了一口气。“只要你喜欢就好。”

“我在那家店里会过得很愉快的。你们俩，好好聊吧。”她站起来，拍了一下我的肩膀。“保重，雅内克。”

我们看着她走远，接着加德纳先生问了我一些在威尼斯当乐手的事情，特别是夸德里乐队的事，因为他们刚好开始演出。他好像不是特别认真在听我回答，我正准备告辞时，他突然说道：

“我要跟你说一些事，朋友。我想说说我心里的事，你不想听的话我就不说了。”他俯过身来，降低了音量。“事情是这样。我和琳迪第一次到威尼斯来是我们蜜月的时候。二十七年前。为了那些美好的回忆，我们没有再回到这里来过，没有一起回来过。所以当我们计划这次旅行，这次特别的旅行时，我们对自己说我们一定要来威尼斯住几天。”

“是你们的结婚周年纪念啊，加德纳先生？”

“周年纪念？”他很吃惊的样子。

“抱歉，”我说。“我以为，因为您说是特别的旅行。”

他还是吃惊地看着我，突然大笑起来，高声、响亮的笑。我突然想起我母亲以前经常放的一首歌，在那首歌里加德纳先生有一段独白，说什么不在乎恋人已经离他而去之类的，中间就有这种冷笑。现在同样的笑声回荡在广场上。他接着说道：

“周年纪念？不，不，不是我们的周年纪念。可是我正在酝酿的这件事，也差不多。因为我要做一件非常浪漫的事。我要给她唱小夜曲。地地道道威尼斯式的。这就需要你的帮助。你弹吉他，我唱歌。我们租条刚朵拉，划到她的窗户下，我在底下唱给她听。我们在这附近租了一间房子。卧室的窗户就临着运河。天黑以后就万事俱备了，有墙上的灯把景物照亮。我和你乘着刚朵拉，她来到窗前。所有她喜欢的歌。我们用不着唱很久，夜里还是有点冷。三四首歌就好，这些就是我心里想的。我会给你优厚的报酬。你觉得呢？”

“加德纳先生，我荣幸至极。正如我对您说的，您是我心中的一个大人物。您想什么时候进行呢？”

“如果不下雨，就今晚如何？八点半左右？我们晚饭吃得早，那会儿就已经回去了。我找个借口离开房间，来找你。我安排好刚朵拉，我们沿着运河划回来，停在窗户下。不会有问题的。你觉得呢？”

你或许可以想象：这就像美梦成真一样。而且这主意多甜蜜啊，这对夫妇——一个六十几岁，一个五十几岁——还像热恋中的年轻人似的。这甜蜜的想法差点儿让我忘了刚才所见的那一幕。可我没忘，因为即便在那时，我心里深知事情一定不完全像加德纳先生说的那样。

接下来我和加德纳先生坐在那里讨论所有的细节——他想唱哪些歌，要什么音高，等等之类。后来时间到了，我该回帐篷去进行下一场演出了。我站起来，和他握了握手，告诉他今天晚上他完全可以信任我。

*

那天晚上我去见加德纳先生时，漆黑的街道十分安静。那个时候，一到离圣马可广场较远的地方我就会迷路，所以尽管我早早出发，尽管我知道加德纳先生告诉我的那座小桥，我还是晚了几分钟。

加德纳先生站在路灯底下，穿着一件皱皱的深色西装，衬衫敞到第三四个扣子处，所以能看见胸口的毛。我为迟到的事向他道歉，他说道：

“几分钟算什么？我和琳迪已经结婚二十七年了。几分钟算什么？”

他没有生气，但似乎心情沉重——一点儿也不浪漫。他身后的刚朵拉轻轻地在水里摇晃，我看见刚朵拉上的船夫是维托里奥，我很讨厌的一个人。他当着我的面总是一副友好的样子，可是我知道——我知道在我背后——他到处说些难听的话，说像我一样的人的闲话，他把我们这种人称为“新国家来的外地人”。所以那天晚上，当他像兄弟似的跟我打招呼时，我只是点点头，静静地看着他扶加德纳先生上船。然后我把我的吉他递给他——我带了一把西班牙吉他，而不是有椭圆形音孔的那把——自己上了船。

加德纳先生在船头不停变换着姿势，然后突然用力地坐下去，船差点翻了。可是他似乎并没有注意到。我们开船了，他一直盯着水面。

我们静静地在水上漂着，经过黑色的建筑，穿过低矮的小桥。就这么过了好一会儿，加德纳先生从沉思中回过神来，说道：

“听着，朋友。我知道下午我们已经说好了今晚要唱哪几首歌。但是我在想，琳迪喜欢《当我到达凤凰城的时候》这首歌。我很久以前录的一首歌。”

“我知道，加德纳先生。以前我母亲总说你唱的版本比辛纳特拉⁽⁴⁾的，或者那个家喻户晓的格伦·坎贝尔⁽⁵⁾版的都好听。”

加德纳先生点点头，接着有一小会儿我看不见他的脸。维托里奥吆喝了一声，船转弯了，吆喝声在墙壁间回响。

“以前我经常唱给她听，”加德纳先生说。“所以我想今晚她一定乐意听到这首歌。你记得调子吗？”

此时我已经把吉他拿出来了，我就弹了几小节。

“高一点，”他说。“升到降E调。我在唱片里就是这么唱的。”

于是我就用降E调弹了起来，弹了差不多整个主歌的部分以后，加德纳先生唱了起来，很轻很柔地，像是只记得一部分歌词。可是他的声音还是清晰地回响在安静的运河上。而且真是太好听了。一时间我仿佛又回到了童年，回到了那个公寓，躺在地毯上，而我母亲坐在沙发上，筋疲力尽，或者伤心无比地听着托尼·加德纳的唱片在房间的角落里旋转着。

加德纳先生突然停下来，说道：“很好。《凤凰城》我们就用降E调。然后是《我太易坠入爱河》，如我们计划的那样。最后是《给我的宝贝》。这样就够了。她不会想听再多的了。”

说完，加德纳先生又陷入了沉思，我们在黑暗中慢慢地往前漂去，只听见维托里奥轻轻泼溅起的水声。

“加德纳先生，”我终于忍不住问道，“希望您别介意我这么问，可是加德纳太太知道今晚的表演吗？还是说这会是个惊喜？”

他深深地叹了口气，说道：“我想应该是属于惊喜这一类的。”他停了一下，又说道，“天晓得她会有什么反应。兴许我们唱不到《给我的宝贝》。”

维托里奥又转了一个弯，突然传来了音乐声和笑声，我们正漂过一家灯火通明的大餐厅。好像客满了，侍者忙碌地穿梭其间，食客们都很开心的样子，尽管那时运河边上还不是非常暖和。我们刚刚一直在宁静和黑暗中行驶，现在看见餐厅显得有些纷乱。感觉好像我们是静止不动的，站在码头上，看着这只闪闪发光的开着派对的船驶过。我注意到有几张脸朝我们这里看了看，可是没有人太在意我们。把餐厅甩在身后以后，我说道：

“真有意思。要是那些游客发现一条载着著名的托尼·加德纳的船刚刚开了过去，不知他们会有什么反应？”

维托里奥英语懂的不多，但是他听懂了这句话的大意，笑了一下。而加德纳先生却没有反应。直到我们又驶入黑暗，驶进一条狭窄的河道，驶过沿岸灯光昏暗的门口时，他才说道：

“我的朋友，你是从波兰来的，所以你不知道是怎么一回事。”

“加德纳先生，”我说，“我的祖国现在是自由的民族了。”

“抱歉。我没有侮辱你们国家的意思。你们是勇敢的民族。我希望你们赢得和平和繁荣。可是朋友，我想告诉你的是。我想说的是从你来的地方，自然还有很多东西是你不明白的。正如在你们国家也有很多事情我不会明白。”

“我想是这样的，加德纳先生。”

“我们刚刚经过的那些人。要是你过去问他们：‘嘿，你们还有人记得托尼·加德纳吗？’也许当中一些人，甚至是大部分人，会说记得。谁知道呢？但是像我们刚才那样子经过，就算他们认出了我，他们会兴奋不已吗？我想不会。他们不会放下他们的叉子，不会停下他们的烛光晚餐。为什么要呢？只不过是一个已经过时的歌手。”

“我不相信，加德纳先生。您是经典。就像辛纳特拉或者迪安·马丁⁽⁶⁾一样。一些一流的大师是不会过时的。不像那些流行歌星。”

“谢谢你这么说，朋友。我知道你是好意。可是唯独今晚，不要开我的玩笑。”

我正想反驳，但加德纳先生举止里的某些东西让我放开了这个话题。于是我们继续前进，没有人说话。说实话，我开始纳闷自己是不是搅和进了一件什么事，这整个小夜曲到底是怎么回事。他们毕竟是美国人啊。说不定当加德纳先生开始唱时，加德纳太太会拿着枪走到窗前，朝我们开火。

也许维托里奥跟我想到了一块儿，因为当我们驶过一面墙上的路灯下时，他朝我递了个眼色，像是在说：“他真是个怪人，不是吗，朋友？”可是我没有理他。我不会跟他那种人一起反对加德纳先生的。在维托里奥看来，像我这种外地人，成天敲诈游客，弄脏河水，总之就是破坏了这座该死的城市。哪天遇上他心情不好，他会说我们是强盗——甚至是强奸犯。有一次，我当面问他是不是真的说过这样的话，他赌誓说全是一派胡言。他有一个他敬如母亲的阿姨是犹太人，他怎么可能是个种族主义者呢？可是一天下午幕间休息的时候，我靠在多尔索杜罗的一座桥上打发时间，一条刚朵拉从桥下经过。船

上有三名游客，维托里奥摇着桨站在他们身后，高谈阔论，讲的正是这些垃圾。所以他尽可以看着我，但别想从我这里得到伙伴情谊。

“我来教你一个秘诀，”加德纳先生突然说道。“一个表演的小秘诀。给同行的你。很简单。你要多少了解你的观众，不管是哪个方面，你得知道一点儿。一件让你心里觉得今晚的观众跟昨晚的不同的事。比如说你在密尔沃基演出。你就得问问自己，有什么不同，密尔沃基的观众有何特别之处？他们跟麦迪逊的观众有何不同？想不出来也要一直想，直到想到为止。密尔沃基，密尔沃基。密尔沃基有上好的猪排。这就行了，当你走上台时心里就想着这个。不用说出来让观众知道，你唱歌的时候心里知道就行。你面前的这些人吃上好的猪排。他们对猪排非常讲究。你明白我的意思吗？这样观众就成了你知道的人了，成了你可以为之演出的人。这就是我的秘诀。给同行的你。”

“谢谢，加德纳先生。我以前从没这样想过。像您这样的人的指点，我永生难忘。”

“那么今晚，”他接着说，“我们是为琳迪表演。琳迪是我们的观众。所以现在我要告诉你一些琳迪的事情。你想听吗？”

“当然，加德纳先生，”我说。“我很想听听她的事情。”

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接下来二十分钟左右的时间，我们坐在刚朵拉里，顺着水流漂，听加德纳先生讲。他的声音时而低得近乎耳语，像是在自言自语。而当路灯或者沿途窗户的灯光照到船上时，他就会突然想起我，提高音量，然后问“你明白我的意思吗，朋友？”之类的。

他说，他妻子来自美国中部明尼苏达州的一个小镇。中学时，学校的老师让她的日子很不好过，因为她老看电影明星的杂志，不学习。

“老师们不知道琳迪有远大的计划。看看现在的她。富有、美丽、周游世界。而那些学校里的老师呢，他们如今有什么成就？过得怎么样呢？他们要是多看些电影杂志，多些梦想，也许也能够拥有一些琳迪今日的成就。”

十九岁时，她搭便车到了加州，想进好莱坞，却在洛杉矶郊外的一家路边餐厅当起了服务生。

“意想不到啊，”加德纳先生说。“这家餐厅，这个高速公路旁不起眼的小地方，却成了她最好的去处。因为这里是所有野心勃勃的姑娘来的地方，从早到晚。她们在这里见面，七个、八个、十来个。她们吃啊喝啊，坐在那里聊上好几个钟头。”

这些姑娘都比琳迪大一些，来自美国的四面八方，在洛杉矶待了至少两三年了。她们聚在餐厅里聊八卦，聊倒霉事，讨论计策，汇报大家的进展。可是这里最引人注目的是一个叫梅格的女人，一个四十多岁的女招待。

“梅格是这群姑娘的大姐头，智囊袋。因为以前她就和她们一样。你得明白，她们是一群正经的姑娘，野心勃勃、意志坚定的姑娘。她们是不是和其他女孩子一样谈论衣服、鞋子、化妆品？是，她们也谈这些。但是她们只关心哪些衣服、鞋子、化妆品能帮助她们嫁给明星。她们谈不谈论电影？她们谈不谈论歌坛？当然了。但是她们谈的是哪个电影明星或者歌星还是单身，哪个婚姻不幸，哪个离了婚。而所有这些，梅格都能告诉她们，还有其他很多、很多的东西。梅格走过她们要走的路。她知道钓到大腕的所有规矩和门道。琳迪和她们坐在一起，一字不落地听着。这家小小的热狗店就是她的哈佛、她的耶鲁。明尼苏达来的一个十九岁的小姑娘？现在想想她可能会变成什么样，都让我哆嗦。可是她是走运的。”

“加德纳先生，”我说道，“请原谅我打断您。可要是这个梅格这么神通广大，她干吗不自己嫁个明星？她干吗还在餐厅里端盘子？”

“问得好，可你不太明白这些事情到底是怎么一回事。好，这位女士，梅格，她自己没有成功。可是重点是，她看过别人是怎么成功的。你明白吗，朋友？她曾经和这些姑娘一样，她目睹谁成功了，谁失败了。她见过圈套陷阱，也见过阳光大道。她把所有的故事都讲给她们听，而其中一些人学进去了。琳迪就是其中一个。就像我说的，这里是她的哈佛。这里成就了后来的她。这里给了她日后需要的力量，天啊，她确实需要。她等了六年才交了第一次好运。你想象得到吗？六年的处心积虑，六年的如履薄冰。一次次地遇到挫折。可是就跟我们的事业一样。你不能因为最初的一些小挫折就打退堂鼓。大部分人做不到，这样的姑娘随处可见，在默默无闻的地方嫁给默默无闻的人。而有一些人，有一些像琳迪这样的人，她们从每一次的挫折中吸取经验教训，变得越来越坚强，她们屡败屡战，却越战越勇。你以为琳迪没有蒙过羞？像她这么漂亮，这么有魅力的人？人们不明白美

丽不是最主要的，一半都不到。用得不对，人们就视你为娼妇。总之，六年之后，琳迪终于有了好运。”

“她遇到您了是吗，加德纳先生？”

“我？不，不是。我没有这么快出现。她嫁给了迪诺·哈特曼。没听说过迪诺？”说到这里加德纳先生微微冷笑了一下。“可怜的迪诺。我想他的唱片没有流传到共产主义国家去。不过那时他很有些名气。当时他频频在维加斯演出，出了几张金唱片。我刚才说了，琳迪交了好运。我初次见到琳迪时，她是迪诺的妻子。这种情况老梅格早跟她们解释过了。诚然有的姑娘能第一次就撞了大运，一步登天，钓上辛纳特拉或者白兰度这样的人。可是这种事情并不多见。姑娘们得准备好在二楼就出电梯，走出来。她得习惯二楼的空气。也许将来有一天，她会在二楼这里遇见一个从顶楼公寓下来的人，也许是下来取一下东西。这人对她说，嘿，要不要跟我一起回去，一起上顶楼去。琳迪清楚游戏规则。她的战斗力没有因为嫁给了迪诺而减退，她的雄心也没有因此而大打折扣。迪诺是个正派人。我一直都喜欢他。所以虽然我第一次见到琳迪就深深地爱上了她，但我没有采取行动。我是个绝对的绅士。后来我得知琳迪因此而更加下定决心。啊，你应该钦佩这样的姑娘！我得告诉你，朋友，我那个时候非常非常红。我猜你母亲就是在那个时期听我的歌的。然而迪诺却开始迅速走下坡路。那段时期很多歌手的日子都不好过。时代变了。孩子们都听披头士、滚石。可怜的迪诺，他的歌太像平·克劳斯贝⁽⁷⁾了。他尝试做了一张巴萨诺瓦⁽⁸⁾的唱片，却被大家耻笑。这时琳迪肯定不能再跟着他了。当时的情况没有人能指责我们。我想就是迪诺也没有真的责怪我们。所以我行动了。她就这样到了顶楼公寓。

“我们在维加斯结了婚，我们把酒店的浴缸装满香槟。今晚我们要唱的那首《我太易坠入爱河》，知道我为什么选这首歌吗？知道吗？新婚不久，有一次我们在伦敦。吃完早饭以后我们回到客房，女佣正在打扫我们的套房。可是我们欲火烧身。于是我们进了房间，我们可以听见女佣在用吸尘器打扫客厅的声音，可是我们看不见她，隔着隔板墙。我们踮着脚尖偷偷地溜进去，像孩子似的，你瞧。我们悄悄地溜回卧室，把门关上。我们看得出卧室已经打扫完了，所以女佣应该不用再回到卧室来了，但我们也不是很肯定。管他呢，我们才不在乎。我们脱掉衣服，在床上大干起来，女佣一直都在隔壁，在套房里走来走去，不晓得我们已经回来了。我说了，我们欲火烧身，可是过了一会儿，我们突然觉得整件事情太好玩了，我们开始笑个不停。后来我们完事了，躺在床上拥抱着对方，女佣还在外面，你知道

吗，她居然唱起歌来了！她用完吸尘器，开始放声高歌，天啊，她的声音太难听了！我们笑个不停，当然是尽量不发出声音。你猜接下来怎么着，她不唱了，打开收音机。我们突然听见切特·贝克⁽⁹⁾的声音，在唱《我太易坠入爱河》，优美、舒缓、柔和。我和琳迪躺在床上，听着切特的歌声。过了一会儿，我也唱了起来，很轻地，跟着收音机里的切特·贝克唱，琳迪偎依在我怀里。事情就是这样。这就是为什么今晚我选了这首歌。我不知道她会不会想起这件事。天晓得。”

加德纳先生不说了，我看见他擦去眼泪。船又转了个弯，我发现我们第二次经过那家餐厅了。餐厅似乎比先前更加热闹，有个人，我知道他叫安德烈亚，正在角落里弹钢琴。

当我们再次驶入黑暗之中时，我说道：“加德纳先生，我知道这不关我的事，可我看得出眼下您和加德纳太太的关系不是很好。我想让您知道我是明白这些事的。以前我母亲经常悲伤，大概就和您现在一样。她以为这次她找到了一个好人，她高兴极了，告诉我这个人要做我的新爸爸了。头几次我相信了。可后来，我知道事情不会尽如人意的。可是我母亲从来没有停止相信。每当她伤心的时候，大概就像您今晚这样，你猜她怎么着？她会放你的唱片，跟着唱。那些漫长的冬天，在我们住的小公寓里，她坐在那里，蜷起膝盖，手里头拿着一杯喝的，轻轻地跟着唱。有时候，我还记得，加德纳先生，楼上的邻居会用力地敲天花板，特别是当你放一些大声的快歌时，比如《希冀》、《他们都笑话》之类的。我仔细地注视着母亲，可是她好像什么也没听见，专心地听着你的歌，头跟着拍子一点一点，嘴唇跟着歌词一张一合。加德纳先生，我想说的是，您的音乐帮助我母亲度过那些伤心的日子，也一定帮助了其他成千上万的人。所以也一定能帮助您自己的。”说完我笑了笑，本想作为鼓励，没想到笑得大声了点。

“今晚您可以信任我，加德纳先生。我会全力以赴。今晚我的演出不会输给任何一个管弦乐队的，您等着瞧吧。加德纳太太听了以后，天晓得？也许你们就会重归于好。夫妻间都会有不愉快的时候。”

加德纳先生微微一笑。“你是个好孩子。我很感激你今晚的帮助。但是我们没有时间再聊了。琳迪回到房里了。我看见灯亮了。”

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说话间我们正经过一座我们至少已经路过两次的公寓。现在我明白了为什么维托里奥带着我们兜圈子。加德纳先生在等某个窗户的灯光，每次他看见灯还没亮，我们就再绕一圈。但是这一次，三楼的窗

户亮了，百叶窗打开着，从我们这里可以看见屋里的一小块带黑色木梁的天花板。加德纳先生示意维托里奥停下，维托里奥早已经停下桨，让船慢慢漂到窗户的正下方。

加德纳先生站起身来，又一次把船弄得激烈地摇晃起来，维托里奥赶紧把船稳住。加德纳先生朝上面轻轻地喊道：“琳迪？琳迪？”然后他终于大声叫道：“琳迪！”

一只手推开百叶窗，接着一个身影出现在狭小的阳台上。虽然公寓墙上不远的地方有一盏灯，但是灯光昏暗，看不清加德纳太太的样子。然而我依稀看出她把头发梳起来了，和上午在广场上不一样，大概是为了刚刚的晚餐。

“是你吗，亲爱的？”她靠在阳台的栏杆上问。“我还以为你被绑架之类了呢。你害我担心死了。”

“别傻了，亲爱的。在这种地方会出什么事呢？再说，我给你留了纸条。”

“我没有看见什么纸条，亲爱的。”

“我给你留了纸条。让你别担心。”

“纸条在哪儿呢？上面写什么？”

“我不记得了，亲爱的。”加德纳先生生气了。“只是张普通的纸条，说我要去买烟之类的。”

“你现在在那里就是干这个吗？买烟？”

“不是，亲爱的。这是另外一件事。我要唱歌给你听。”

“是在开什么玩笑吗？”

“不，亲爱的，不是开玩笑。这里是威尼斯。这里的人就是这么干的。”说着指了指我和维托里奥，像是要证明他的话。

“我觉得外面有点冷，亲爱的。”

加德纳先生重重地叹了口气。“那你进屋里去听吧。进屋里去，亲爱的，舒舒服服地坐好。只要把窗户开着就能听得很清楚。”

加德纳太太仍旧低头看着他，他也抬头往上看，两个人都没有说话。片刻后，加德纳太太进屋里去了，加德纳先生好像很失望的样

子，即便是他自己劝她这么做的。他低下头，又叹了口气，我能感觉到加德纳先生正在犹豫还要不要做。于是我说道：

“来吧，加德纳先生，我们开始吧。第一首《当我到达凤凰城的时候》。”

我轻轻地弹了几个开始的音符，拍子还没有出来，只是一些音符，可以是歌曲的导入，也可以就这么渐渐退去。我试着弹得美国一点，伤心的路边酒吧，长长的高速公路。我还想起了我母亲，想我以前是怎么走进屋里，看见她坐在沙发上，盯着唱片的封面，封面上画着一条美国公路，或者一个歌手坐在一辆美国车里。我的意思是，我试着要弹得让我母亲能听出就是那个国家，她唱片封面上的那个国家。

还没等我反应过来，还没等我弹出什么连续的拍子来，加德纳先生就唱了起来。他站在摇摇晃晃的刚朵拉上，我担心他随时会掉下去。然而他的声音和我记忆里的一模一样——温柔、近乎沙哑，但是集结了全身的力量，像是从一个看不见的麦克风里传出来的。而且和所有一流的美国歌手一样，他的声音略带疲倦，甚至是丝丝的犹豫，仿佛他并非一个惯于如此敞开心扉的人。所有的大师都是这样。

我弹着，他唱着，一首充满漂泊和离别的歌。一个美国人离开他的情人。歌曲一节节，城镇一座座，凤凰城、阿尔伯克基、俄克拉何马，他一路不停地思念着情人。车子沿着大路一直开，这是我母亲永远不可能做到的。要是我们能像这样子将事情抛在身后——我猜母亲听这首歌的时候是这么想的。要是我们能像这样子将悲伤抛在身后。

这首歌结束了，加德纳先生说：“好，直接唱下一首吧。《我太易坠入爱河》。”

这是我第一次为加德纳先生演奏，我小心翼翼地弹每一个音，结果我们配合得还不错。听了他给我讲的这首歌的故事以后，我不停地抬头看窗户，然而加德纳太太那里一点儿反应也没有，没有动静，没有声音，什么都没有。歌唱完了，宁静和黑暗包围了我们。我听见不远处有人推开百叶窗，估计是住在附近的人想听得清楚些。可是加德纳太太的窗户什么情况也没有。

我们慢慢地唱起了《给我的宝贝》，慢到几乎没有拍子，然后一切又归于平静。我们一直抬头看着窗户，过了许久，大概足足有一分钟的时间，我们终于听见了。声音若隐若现，但是绝对错不了，是加德纳太太在啜泣。

“我们成功了，加德纳先生！”我轻声说。“我们成功了。我们打动她了。”

可是加德纳先生的样子并不高兴。他疲倦地摇摇头，坐了下来，朝维托里奥摆了摆手。“把船划到另一边去吧。我该进去了。”

当船再次开动时，我觉得加德纳先生一直在避开我的眼睛，几乎像是在为今晚的事情感到羞愧。我不禁想到这整件事情也许是一个恶作剧。因为就我我我我我所知，这些歌对加德纳太太都有讨厌的含义。于是我收起吉他，坐在那里，或许有点儿闷闷不乐，我们就这么往前划去。

船到了开阔一些的水面，突然一艘观光游艇迎面从我们身边疾驶而过，在刚朵拉边溅起不小的波浪。然而我们快到加德纳先生公寓的门口了。维托里奥把船慢慢靠近岸边时，我说道：

“加德纳先生，您是我成长过程中重要的一部分。今晚对我来说太特别了。如果我们就此告别，以后我不会再见到您，那么我余生都会一直琢磨。所以加德纳先生，请您告诉我。刚才，加德纳太太是因为喜悦而哭泣，还是因为伤心？”

我以为他不会回答我。昏暗的灯光下，我只能看见船头加德纳先生弓着背的身影。可是当维托里奥系缆绳时，加德纳先生静静说道：

“我想我以这种方式唱歌给她听，她很高兴。但当然了，她很伤心。我们俩都很伤心。漫长的二十七年，这次旅行之后，我们就要分开了。这是我们最后一次一起旅行了。”

“听您这么说我真的很难过，加德纳先生，”我轻轻地说。“我想很多婚姻最后都走到了尽头，即便是一起过了二十七年。但至少你们能以这种方式分开。一起到威尼斯度假，在刚朵拉上唱歌。很少有夫妻能这么友好地分手。”

“我们为什么不友好呢？我们仍然深爱着对方。这就是她为什么哭了。她还像我爱着她一样地爱着我。”

维托里奥已经上岸了，可是加德纳先生和我都还坐在黑暗里。我等着他往下讲，果然，过了一会儿，他接着说道：

“就像我说的，我对琳迪一见钟情。可是她也爱我吗？我想她根本没考虑过这个问题。我是个明星，她只关心这一点。我是她梦寐以求的，是她在那家小餐厅里处心积虑想要得到的。她爱不爱我不是问

题。可是二十七年的婚姻会发生很多有趣的事情。很多夫妻，他们渐渐地越来越不喜欢对方，厌倦对方，最后憎恨对方。而有时候情况刚好相反。过了很多年，琳迪逐渐慢慢地开始喜欢我。一开始我不敢相信，可是后来没什么可怀疑的了。离开餐桌时轻轻碰一下我的肩膀。在房间那一头莫名其妙地微微一笑，没什么好笑的事，只是她自己不知道在乐什么。我敢说她自己也很惊讶，但事实如此。五六年后，我们发现我们在一起非常惬意。我们关心对方，在乎对方。总而言之，我们爱对方。而如今我们仍旧爱着对方。”

“我不明白，加德纳先生。那您和加德纳太太为什么要分开呢？”

他又叹了一口气。“你怎么可能明白呢，朋友，从那样的国家来的？但是今天晚上你对我太好了，我试着解释给你听吧。事实是，我的名声已经不如从前了。你尽可以反对，但在美国，这是不可否认的事实。我不再是大明星了。如今的我可以接受现实，慢慢隐退，生活在过去的荣誉之上。但我也可以说，不，我还没玩完呢。换句话说，我的朋友，我可以重返歌坛。很多像我这样的人，甚至还不如我的人，都这么做了。但是重返歌坛并非易事。你得做好做出种种改变的心理准备，有些改变是很困难的。你得改变你的做法，甚至改变一些你喜欢的东西。”

“加德纳先生，您的意思是，因为您要重返歌坛，您和加德纳太太不得不分开？”

“看看其他人，看看那些成功重返歌坛的人，看看那些至今仍活跃在歌坛的我这一辈人。他们每一个，每一个都再婚了。两次，甚至三次。他们每一个都牵着年轻的妻子。我和琳迪会成为笑柄的。而且，现在有一个我看上眼的姑娘，她也看上了我。琳迪明白这其中的道理，比我还早明白，也许在餐厅里听梅格讲各种奇闻轶事时就明白了。我们商量过了。她明白我们该各走各的了。”

“我还是不明白，加德纳先生。您和加德纳太太来的地方不会和其他地方相差到哪儿去。所以，加德纳先生，这些年来您唱的歌能感动各个地方的人。甚至是我生长的地方。这些歌里头都唱些什么呢？两个人不再相爱了，只好分开，所以伤心。可要是两人还彼此相爱，就应该永远在一起。这就是那些歌里唱的。”

“我明白你的意思，朋友。我知道你很难明白这件事情。但事实如此。而且，这对琳迪也好。我们现在就分开对她来说最好。她还

老。你见过她，她依旧美丽动人。她得趁现在还来得及的时候抽身。还来得及再找一个爱人，再结一次婚。她得趁还为时未晚赶紧抽身。”

我不知道该回答什么，加德纳先生突然问道：“我猜你母亲始终没能再找到一个好人吧。”

我被这个问题吓了一跳。我想了想，轻声说：“没有，加德纳先生。她始终没能再婚。她没能活着看见我们国家的变化。”

“太遗憾了。我相信她是个好女人。如果真像你所说的那样，我的歌真的让她感到幸福，那对我而言意义重大。很遗憾她最终没能再找到一个好人。我不希望我的琳迪会这样。不，我的琳迪不会的。我要我的琳迪再找到一个好人。”

刚朵拉轻轻地敲打着河岸。维托里奥轻声唤着，伸出一只手，几秒钟后，加德纳先生站起来，爬上岸去。等我也拿着吉他爬上岸时——我不想求维托里奥让我白搭一程——加德纳先生已经掏出了钱包。

看来维托里奥对自己的酬劳非常满意，他带着一贯的彬彬有礼，说着一贯的恭维话，回到刚朵拉上，划走了。

我们看着船消失在黑暗之中。加德纳先生往我手里塞进一大把钞票。我对他说太多了，而且今晚是我极大的荣幸。可他一点儿也不肯收回去。

“不，不，”他边说边在眼前摆了摆手，像是要了结这件事，不仅是钱，还包括我、包括这个夜晚，或许还包括他人生的这整个阶段。他迈步朝公寓走去，可才走了几步，他就停下来，回头看着我。我们所在的小街，运河，一切都很安静，只有远方模糊的电视的声音。

“今天晚上你弹得很好，我的朋友，”他说。“你的指法很好。”

“谢谢您，加德纳先生。您唱得也很好，和以前一样好。”

“也许在我们离开之前我会再到广场去一次。去听听你和同事们的演出。”

“我希望如此，加德纳先生。”

可是我没有再见到他。几个月后，秋天的时候，我听说加德纳先生和加德纳太太离婚了——弗洛里安的一个侍者在哪里看到，告诉我的。那天晚上的情景再次浮现在我的脑海里，而且回想起这件事情，我黯然神伤。因为加德纳先生看上去是个很正派的人，不管你怎么看，无论复出与否，他都是伟大的歌手之一。

[\(1\)](#) 二十世纪欧洲爵士吉他巨匠，吉卜赛人，出生于比利时。

[\(2\)](#) 英国著名电影和舞台剧演员、歌唱家。

[\(3\)](#) 美国著名演员、导演。

[\(4\)](#)[\(5\)](#) 均为二十世纪享有盛誉的美国流行歌手。

[\(6\)](#) 二十世纪美国著名歌手、演员。

[\(7\)](#) 二十世纪美国著名歌手、演员。

[\(8\)](#) 一种融合巴西桑巴节奏与美国酷派爵士乐的新派音乐，被视为拉丁爵士乐的一种。

[\(9\)](#) 美国爵士乐号手、歌手。

不论下雨或晴天

埃米莉和我一样喜欢美国百老汇的老歌。她比较喜欢节奏快一点的曲子，像欧文·伯林⁽¹⁾的《脸贴着脸》、科尔·波特⁽²⁾的《当他们跳起比津舞》，而我倾向于半苦半甜的伤心情歌——《今天下雨天》啦、《我从未想到》啦。但还是有很多歌是我们都喜欢的，而且在那个时候，在英格兰南部的大学校园里，发现有人跟你一样喜欢百老汇算得上是奇迹。现在的年轻人什么歌都听。我侄子今年秋天开始上大学，最近喜欢上了阿根廷探戈。他也喜欢最新的独立乐队的随便什么歌，还喜欢艾迪特·皮雅芙⁽³⁾。可是在我们那个时候，口味比较单一。我的同学分为两大阵营：嬉皮士型的，留着长发，穿着飘逸的衣服，喜爱“前卫摇滚”；另一类穿着整齐、高雅，认为古典音乐以外的东西都是可怕的噪音。偶尔也会碰到声称喜欢爵士乐的人，但你每每会发现这种人都是半途出家型的——只知道即兴，不懂得应该从认真打造优美的歌曲开始。

所以发现有人也喜欢美国爵士金曲，还是个女生，真是欣慰。和我一样，埃米莉也喜欢收集敏感、坦率的声音翻唱的经典曲目的唱片——这类唱片要么在旧货店里慢慢贬值，要么被父辈们丢弃。她喜欢萨拉·沃恩⁽⁴⁾和切特·贝克。我偏好朱莉·伦敦⁽⁵⁾和佩吉·李⁽⁶⁾。我们俩都对辛纳特拉或埃拉·菲茨杰拉德⁽⁷⁾不太感冒。

第一年埃米莉住在学校里，她的宿舍里有一台便携式唱片机，当时很常见的那种。长得像个大帽盒，浅蓝色人造皮的面，一个内嵌式喇叭。打开盖子以后才能看见里面的唱机转盘。按今天的标准来讲，它发出来的声音够原始的，可我记得我们常常一连几个小时愉快地蹲在唱片机旁，把一张唱片拿下来，再小心翼翼地把唱针放到另一张上面。我们喜欢放同一首歌的不同版本，然后争论歌词或歌手的演绎。那句歌词是应该唱得这么讽刺吗？唱《乔治亚在我心》这首歌应该把乔治亚当作个女人还是美国的一个地方？若发现一首歌——比如雷·查尔斯⁽⁸⁾演唱的《不论下雨或晴天》——歌词本身是快乐的，而演唱成十分悲伤，我们会特别高兴。

埃米莉太喜欢这些唱片了，每次我无意中撞见她在和别的同学讲某个自命不凡的摇滚乐队或某个空虚无物的加利福尼亚创作歌手，我都会吓一跳。有时，她会像在和我说格什温⁽⁹⁾或哈罗德·阿伦⁽¹⁰⁾那样开始谈论一张“概念”唱片，我得咬紧嘴唇才不把愤怒表现出来。

那时候的埃米莉苗条、漂亮，要不是她早早就和查理在一起，我相信会有一大堆人追求她。可她从来不风骚、放荡，所以她和查理在一起后，其他追求者就撤退了。

“所以我才把查理留在身边，”有一次她一脸严肃地这样对我说，看见我很吃惊的样子她扑哧笑了出来。“开玩笑的，傻瓜。我爱他，爱他，爱他。”

查理是我大学时最好的朋友。一年级时我们成天在一起，因此我才认识了埃米莉。第二年，查理和埃米莉在城里找了间房子同居。虽然我常常去他们那，但是那些与埃米莉在唱片机旁的交谈已经成为往事。一来，我每次去，都有几个其他同学坐在那里又说又笑。再者，如今有了一台漂亮的立体声音响大声地播放着摇滚乐，说话都得用喊的。

这些年来查理和我还是好朋友。确实我们不如以前那样常见面，但这主要是因为距离太远。我在意大利、葡萄牙，还有西班牙这里待了好几年，而查理则一直待在伦敦。要是这么说让你觉得好像我是个空中飞人，他是个宅男，那就好笑了。因为查理才是整天飞来飞去的人——得克萨斯、东京、纽约——参加一个个高端会议，而我则年复一年困在潮湿的房子里，安排拼写测试，或者重复着一成不变的慢速英语谈话：“我叫雷。”“你叫什么？”“你有孩子吗？”

大学毕业后我选择了教英语，刚开始貌似还不错——很像大学生活的延伸。语言学校在欧洲如雨后春笋般涌现。若说教书很无聊、课酬很低，那个年纪的你不会太在乎。你泡在酒吧里，很容易就交到朋友，感觉自己是一个遍布全球的巨大网络的一部分。你会遇见刚从秘鲁或泰国教了一阵子书回来的人，你会觉得只要你愿意就可以满世界跑，就可以利用你的关系在哪个你向往的遥远的角落找到一份工作。而且你永远是这个舒适的巡回教师大家庭的一分子，一边喝酒一边聊着以前的同事、神经质的学校主管、英国文化协会里的怪人。

八十年代末期听说去日本教书很赚钱，我认真地计划要去，但最终没去成。我还想过去巴西，甚至读了一些介绍那里的文化的书，要了申请表。可不知为什么我从来没有去那么远的地方。我只去意大利南部、葡萄牙教了一阵子书，又回到西班牙。不知不觉就到了四十七岁，身边共事的人早就变成了聊不同话题、嗑不同药、听不同音乐的另一代人。

与此同时，查理和埃米莉结了婚，在伦敦定居下来。有一次查理对我说，等他们有了孩子以后，要我做一个孩子的教父。可到现在都还没有。我的意思是他们一直没有孩子，我想如今要孩子已经太迟了。我必须承认，我一直觉得有点失望。也许我一直幻想给他们的孩子做教父能让他们在英国的生活与我在这里的生活有了正式的联系，不管这种联系多么微小。

总而言之，今年初夏，我去了伦敦待在他们那里。事情已经事先安排妥当，动身前两天，我打电话确认时，查理说他们俩都“很好”。所以我一心只想着在经历了肯定不是我人生最美好的几个月后好好休息、放松一下，根本没想到别的。

事实上，那个阳光灿烂的早晨，当我走出伦敦地铁站时，脑子里想着：不知自从我上次来了以后，他们会对“我的”房间做怎样的改进。这些年来，几乎每次都有不一样的东西。有一次，房间的角落里摆着一个闪着光的电子小玩意儿；还有一次，整个房间都重新装修过了。但不管怎样，几乎有一条基本原则，他们按着高级旅馆的样子为我布置房间：摆好毛巾，床头放着一小罐饼干，梳妆台上备着几张CD。几年前，查理带我走进房间，若无其事地炫耀着打开各种开关，各种巧妙地隐藏起来的灯开了关、关了开：床头板后面、衣橱上面等等。还有一个开关按了以后，隆隆隆，两扇窗户上的百叶窗慢慢放了下来。

“查理，我要百叶窗干吗？”那一次我问道。“醒来的时候我想看见外面。窗帘就可以了。”

“这些百叶窗是瑞士的，”他这么回答，好像这就说明了一切。

可是这一次带我上楼时，查理一直小声咕哝着，等到了我的房间，我才明白他是在道歉。眼前的景象我从未见过。床上空荡荡的，床垫污渍点点、歪歪斜斜。地上一堆堆的杂志、书和旧衣服，还散落着一支曲棍和一个喇叭。我吃惊地站在门口，查理则清理出一个地方放下我的包。

“你那样子好像要见经理，”他挖苦地说。

“没有，没有。只是这里看上去和以前不太一样。”

“乱糟糟的，我知道。乱糟糟的。”他在床垫上坐下，叹了口气。“我以为清洁工会来打扫。结果没有。鬼知道怎么没来。”

他好像很沮丧，可突然他腾地站了起来。

“走，我们去外面吃午饭吧。我给埃米莉留个信。我们慢慢吃，等我们回来，你的房间——这整间公寓——就都收拾好了。”

“可我们不能叫埃米莉收拾。”

“哦，她不会自己收拾的。她会去叫清洁工。她知道怎么烦他们。我，我连他们的电话都没有。午饭，我们吃午饭吧。点它三道菜，来瓶红酒什么的。”

查理所说的公寓其实是一栋四层楼高的排屋的最顶上两层，位于一条繁华而忙碌的大街上。一出大门就是川流的人群和车辆。我跟着查理走过一家家商店、办公室，到了一家小巧的意大利餐厅。我们没有订座，但餐馆的招待像朋友一样招呼查理，领我们到了一张桌子。我看了看四周，发现周围都是西装领带的商务人士，所以很高兴查理和我一样一副脏兮兮的样子。他好像猜到了我在想什么，我们坐下时，他说道：

“哦，你真是乡巴佬，雷。如今都变了。你离开这个国家太久了。”接着他突然提高音量，很大声地说：“我们看上去才是成功人士。这儿的其他人看上去都像中层管理。”说完他倾向我，轻声说：“听着，我们得谈谈。我要你帮我一个忙。”

我不记得上一次查理叫我帮忙是什么时候，但我装作随意地点点头，等他开口。他摆弄了一会儿菜单，然后放下。

“是这样的，我和埃米莉正在闹别扭。事实上，最近，我们完全避开对方。所以刚刚她没有来迎接你。如今恐怕你得从我们两个中选一个。有我就没有她，有她就没有我。有点像戏里一人分饰两角。很幼稚，是不是？”

“显然我来的不是时候。我走，吃完午饭就走。我去芬奇利找我姑妈凯蒂。”

“你说什么啊？你没有在听我说话。我说了，我要你帮我一个忙。”

“我以为你指的是……”

“不是，你这个白痴，该离开的人是我。我得去法兰克福开会，今天下午的飞机。两天以后回来，最迟星期四。而你留在这里善后，让一切恢复原样。等我回来的时候，我愉快地说声‘哈罗’，亲吻亲爱的妻子，就当过去的两个月没发生过，我们又和好如初。”

这时服务生过来点单，她走了以后，查理似乎不愿接着刚才的话茬，而是开始一个劲儿地问我西班牙过得怎么样。每次我说了什么事情，不管好事坏事，他都会微微地苦笑一下，摇摇头，好像我说的都验证了他最担心的。我正说到我的厨艺大有进步——我几乎是独自一人四十多名师生准备了一顿圣诞自助餐——他打断我的话。

他说：“听我说，你这样子下去不行。把工作辞了。但辞职之前你得先找到新工作。用那个愁眉苦脸的葡萄牙人当中间人。保住马德里的职位，然后丢掉那个公寓，另找一个。好，你要这样，首先。”

他扳起手指头，开始一条条罗列应该做些什么。我们的菜来了，他还没数完，可他不管，接着数到完。开始吃饭时，他说道：

“我敢说你一条都不会去做。”

“不，不，你说的每一条都很有道理。”

“你回去以后还是一切照旧。一年以后我们再见时，你又抱怨一模一样的事情。”

“我没有在抱怨……”

“要知道，雷，别人只能建议你这么多。到了一定的时候，你得学会自主自己的生活。”

“好，我会的。我答应你。但是刚才你说有事要我帮忙。”

“啊，对。”他若有所思地嚼着嘴里的食物。“说实话，这才是我叫你来的真正目的。当然，我也很想见到你什么的。但是最主要的是，我想请你帮我一个忙。毕竟你是我认识最久的朋友，一辈子的朋友……”

突然他又低头吃饭，我惊讶地发现他在轻声啜泣。我伸手去拍拍他的肩膀，但他只是低着头、一个劲儿地往嘴里塞意面。就这样过了一分钟左右，我又伸手去拍拍他的肩头，但跟第一次一样没有什么效果。这时服务生微笑着走过来问我们今天的菜怎么样，我俩都说菜好极了。她走了以后，查理好像情绪稳定了一些。

“好，雷，听着。我要你做的事简单得不得了。我要你这几天跟埃米莉待在一起，在我们家好好做客。就这样。直到我回来。”

“就这样？你要我在你不在的时候照顾她？”

“没错。或者说，让她照顾你。你是客人。我给你找了些事做，看戏什么的。我最迟星期四就回来了。你的任务就是让她一直保持好心情。这样当我回来的时候，我说‘哈罗，亲爱的’，拥抱她，她就回答说，‘哦，哈罗，亲爱的，欢迎回来，这几天好吗？’然后拥抱我。这样我们就和好如初。如同当初噩梦开始以前。这就是你的任务。很简单。”

“我很乐意尽我所能，”我说。“可是，查理，你确定她现在有心情招待客人？你们显然出现了什么危机。她一定和你一样心烦意乱。老实说，我不理解为什么你这个时候叫我来。”

“你不理解？什么意思？我叫你来是因为你是我认识最久的朋友。对，没错，我有很多朋友。可是在这件事情上，我想来想去，发现只有你能行。”

我承认听了他的话我很感动。但同时，我能察觉到里头有什么事不对劲，有什么事他没有告诉我。

“要是你们俩都在这里的话，我能理解你叫我来住，”我说。“我能理解那样做的用意。你们互相不说话，找个客人来转移目标，你们俩都拿出最好的表现来，事情就慢慢缓和了。可现在不是这样的，你不在这里。”

“帮帮我吧，雷。我想能行的。你总是能让埃米莉开心起来。”

“我让她开心？查理，你知道我想帮你。可是你肯定哪里搞错了。因为我印象中，说实话，我根本不能让埃米莉开心，即便是在最美好的时候。最近几次我到这里来，她……呃，她显然对我不耐烦。”

“听着，雷，相信我。我知道自己在做什么。”

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我们回去时，埃米莉在公寓里。我得承认我被她的老态吓了一跳。她不仅比我上次见到她时胖了许多：她过去那张自然而美丽的脸，如今赘肉明显，嘴角上还挂着怒气。她正坐在客厅的沙发上阅读《金融时报》，看见我进来，闷闷不乐地站了起来。

“见到你真好，雷蒙德。”她说，敷衍地吻了吻我的脸颊，然后又坐了下去。她的这种态度让我忍不住想说抱歉，深深地抱歉在这个

时候打扰他们。可不等我开口，埃米莉就拍了拍身旁的沙发，说：“来，雷蒙德，坐这里，回答我的问题。我想知道你所有的近况。”

我坐了下来，她开始不停地问我问题，跟刚刚查理在饭馆里一样。而这时候查理在收拾他的行李，在屋子里进进出出，找这找那。我注意到他们避开对方的视线，可并没有像查理说的那样，因为待在同一个屋子里而感觉不自在。他们没有直接交谈，但是查理用一种奇怪的、间接的方式参与谈话。比如说，当我在跟埃米莉解释为什么很难找到一个室友分担房租时，查理在厨房里大声说道：

“他住的地方不适合两人合住！适合一个人住，一个比他收入高一些的人住！”

埃米莉没有回答，但她显然是听进去了，因为她接着说道：“雷蒙德，你不应该找那样的公寓。”

接下来至少二十分钟，我们都是这样子交谈。查理在楼梯上或者要去厨房时说上几句，通常是大声地从第三者的角度说说我的事情。讲着讲着，埃米莉突然说道：

“哦，说真的，雷蒙德。你处处被那所可恶的语言学校剥削，傻傻地让房东多收你的钱，而你做了什么？跟爱喝酒、还没有工作的傻姑娘混在一起。你好像故意要跟这些还关心你的人过不去！”

“这些人不多了！”查理在走廊里大声说道。我听见他已经把箱子拖到外面去了。“你二十几岁时像个愣头青没有问题。可你都已经快五十了还这样！”

“我只有四十七……”

“什么叫你只有四十七？”埃米莉嚷了起来，虽然我就坐在她身边。“只有四十七。就是这个‘只有’毁了你的人生，雷蒙德。只有，只有，只有。只不过尽力了。只有四十七。很快你就只有六十七，只不过在到处找一个安身之处！”

“他得振作些才行！”查理在楼梯上吼道。“别人把他逼急了他才会努力！”

“雷蒙德，难道你不曾停下来问问自己是什么人？”埃米莉问道。“想想你的潜力，你不觉得羞愧吗？看看你现在过的是什么生活！这种生活……这种生活怎么让人受得了！简直欺人太甚！”

查理穿着雨衣出现在门口。一时间，他们两个同时朝我开火，各骂各的。最后查理先收声，说他要走了——像是因为讨厌我似的——接着就离开了。

查理的离开使埃米莉的谩骂暂告一段落。我利用这个机会站起来，说：“抱歉，我去帮查理拿行李。”

“我干吗要你帮我拿行李？”查理在走廊里说。“我只有一个包。”

可他还是让我跟他下了楼，我看着包，他自己到路边去拦的士。路上没有一辆的士，他担心地探出身去，举着一只胳膊。

我走上前去，说：“查理，我想行不通。”

“什么行不通？”

“埃米莉绝对是讨厌我。她见了我几分钟就这个样子，三天以后会成什么样呢？你到底凭什么觉得你回来的时候会雨过天晴呢？”

说着说着，我心里好像豁然开朗，我不做声了。查理发觉到不对劲，转过身来，仔细地打量着我。

我终于说道：“我想我知道你为什么选我，而不选别人了。”

“啊哈。雷突然开窍了？”

“对，可能是。”

“但是那又怎么样？没有变，我要你做的事没有变。”这时他的眼睛里又有了泪水。“雷，你还记得以前埃米莉常说她相信我时的模样吗？她说了一年又一年。我相信你，查理，你前途无量，你那么有才华。直到三四年前，她都还一直这么说。你知道这话变得多让人难受吗？我混得不错。现在还混得不错。很不错。可她以为我应该成为……天晓得，成为这个世界的总统，天晓得！我只是一个混得不错的普通人。可她不这么认为。这就是核心，所有问题的核心。”

查理开始沿着人行道慢慢往前走，陷入沉思。我赶忙转回身去拿他的箱子，拖动轮子。街上人还很多，我很难一面跟上他，一面注意不让箱子撞到行人。可查理还是一步步朝前走去，全然不顾我的难处。

“她觉得我不够努力，”他边走边说。“可我没有。我做得很不错。年轻时有无尽梦想是好的。可是到了我们这个年纪，你就

得……你就得现实点了。每当埃米莉实在不可理喻时，我脑子里都这么想。现实，她应该面对现实。我一直对自己说，看，我做得不错。看看其他人，我们认识的人。看看雷。看看他过得像什么鸟样。埃米莉应该面对现实。”

“所以你就把我叫来了。来当‘现实先生’。”

查理终于停下脚步，回过头来看着我。“别误会，雷。不是说你真的一无是处。你既不是瘾君子也不是杀人犯。可实话实说，跟我比起来，你不像是最成功的。所以我叫你来，叫你来帮帮我。我们的关系快完了，我已经无计可施了。我需要你的帮助。而且老天啊，我叫你做什么？只不过是做你自己。你平时怎么样，现在还怎么样。不多也不少。帮帮我吧，雷蒙德。帮帮我和埃米莉。我们还没结束，我知道还没有。我不在这几天好好在我们家做客。这个要求不过分吧？”

我深吸了一口气，说：“好，好，要是你觉得这样能行。可埃米莉迟早都会发现的，不是吗？”

“发现什么？她知道我要去法兰克福开一个很重要的会。对她来说，这事再简单不过了。她就是接待一个客人。她很乐意，她喜欢你。啊，的士。”他拼命挥手，车朝我们开过来。这时，他抓住我的手臂。“谢谢你，雷。你要替我们扭转局面，我知道你能行。”

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我回到公寓，发现埃米莉的态度全变了。她像欢迎一个年老体衰的亲戚一样把我迎进屋。她面带和蔼的微笑，轻轻地拍拍我的手臂。她问我要不要喝茶，我说好，她就带我进了厨房，让我在桌子旁坐下，然后站在一旁关切地看了我一会儿。末了，她轻声说道：

“我很抱歉刚才那样子说你，雷蒙德。我没有权利那样子说你。”她转过身去泡茶，接着说：“我老是忘记我们已经离开大学好多年了。我做梦也想不到我会那样子说其他的朋友。可如果是你，咳，我想我看见你就以为又回到了过去，回到了从前，忘了早就离开大学了。你千万别往心里去。”

“没，没有。我根本没放在心上。”我还在想着刚才查理说的话，有点心不在焉的样子。我想埃米莉以为我在生气，她的声音更温柔了。

“很抱歉我惹你生气了。”她仔细地把一排排饼干摆在我面前的盘子里。“记得吗，雷蒙德，以前我们对你几乎是想说什么就说什

么，你只是笑笑，我们也笑笑，什么事情都是玩笑一场。我真是太傻了，以为你还可以像从前那样。”

“啊，其实我现在还和以前差不多。我一点儿也不介意。”

她显然没有听见我的话，接着说：“我没想到现在的你不一样了。你已经快走投无路了。”

“听着，埃米莉，说真的，我还没有到……”

“我想这些年的生活已经把你折磨得够呛了。你像个到了悬崖边的人，再轻轻一推就会崩溃了。”

“你是说掉下去吧。”

她刚刚在摆弄水壶，这会儿再次转过身来注视着我。“别这样，雷蒙德，别说这种话。开玩笑也不要。我永远不要听见你说这种话。”

“不，你误会了。你说我会崩溃，可要是我站在悬崖边，我应该掉下去，而不是崩溃。”

“哦，可怜的人儿。”她好像还是没有理解我的话。“只剩下一副外壳。”

这次我决定还是别应的好，我们就静静地等水开。一会儿，水开了，她给我泡了一杯茶放在面前，没有给自己也倒一杯。

“很抱歉，雷，我得回办公室去了。有两个会我一定得去。我要是知道你会这样，我是不会把你一个人留下的。我会另做安排的。可现在我得回去。可怜的雷蒙德。你一个人在这里怎么好呢？”

“我没问题的，真的。其实我在想，你不在时我干吗不来准备晚餐呢？你可能不信，可是我最近厨艺大有长进。事实上，圣诞节前我们的自助餐……”

“你想帮忙真是太好了。但我想你还是休息吧。毕竟在一个不熟悉的厨房很容易会手忙脚乱。你就把这里当作自己家，泡个药澡，听听音乐。我回来以后再来做晚饭。”

“可是你工作了一整天不会想再操心晚饭的事。”

“不，雷，你就休息吧。”她拿出一张名片，放在桌上。“这上面有我的直线电话和手机。我得走了，但你随时可以打电话给我。记住，我不在时别给自己找难题。”

*

一段时间以来，我发现我在自己家里没办法好好休息。我要是一个人在家就会越来越焦躁不安，总觉得外头有什么重要的邂逅在等着我。可我要是一个人在别人家里反而常常能得到安宁。我喜欢窝在陌生的沙发里，随手拿本书来看。这正是埃米莉走了以后我做的事情。或者说，我至少看了两章《曼斯菲尔德庄园》才打了个二十来分钟的盹。

一觉醒来，午后的太阳正照进公寓。我从沙发上起来，开始东看看西看看。可能是清洁工在我们外出吃午饭的时候真的过来了，也可能是埃米莉自个儿打扫了，总之现在偌大的客厅看上去一尘不染。客厅不仅是干净，还很有品位，摆设着时髦的家具和艺术品——虽然刻薄的人可能会说太做作了。我扫了一眼摆着的图书，然后是CD。基本上全是摇滚和古典乐，可经过一番搜寻，我在角落里找到了几张弗雷德·阿斯泰尔⁽¹¹⁾、切特·贝克和萨拉·沃恩的CD。我奇怪埃米莉怎么没有把其他她珍爱的唱片也换成CD，但我没有在CD这里停留太久，而是溜达去了厨房。

我打开碗橱找饼干、巧克力什么的，突然看见厨房的桌子上有一本小记事本。带衬垫的紫色封面在光滑而极其简洁的厨房里特别显眼。刚刚我喝茶时，埃米莉匆匆忙忙地准备出门，把包里的东西统统倒到桌子上，再重新装进去。一定是那个时候落下的。可马上另一种念头出现在我脑子里：这个紫色的小本子是一本私密日记，是埃米莉故意留下来要我看的；出于某种原因，她无法公开表达她的感受，于是用这种方式来倾诉她内心的混乱。

我站在那儿盯着记事本。过了一会儿，我走上前去，把食指伸进记事本当中，小心翼翼地翻开。埃米莉挤挤挨挨的字映入我的眼帘，我一下子把手收了回来，离开餐桌，告诉自己我不应该偷看埃米莉的本子，不管她一时昏了头想干什么。

我回到客厅，在沙发上坐下，又看了几页《曼斯菲尔德庄园》。可现在我集中不了精神。我的脑子一直回想着那个紫色的记事本。那会不会不是一时冲动，而是她计划了好几天的呢？她会不会认真地写了一些东西要我读呢？

十分钟后，我又回到厨房，盯着紫色记事本。然后，我在刚刚喝茶的椅子上坐下来，把本子拉到面前，打开。

很快我就弄清楚了一个问题：埃米莉要是有一本记录内心深处秘密的日记本的话，一定在别处。我面前的这个本子顶多只是一本顶漂亮的日志，每天埃米莉都潦草地记着些提醒自己记得去做的事情，有些字写得超大。比如有一条用粗的毡头墨水笔写着：“还没给马蒂尔达打电话，怎么又忘了？？？记得打！！！”

还有一条写着：“他妈的菲利普·罗斯读完了。还给马里恩！”

我一页页地翻过去，突然，我看见：“雷蒙德星期一来。痛苦啊，痛苦。”

我又翻了两页，发现：“雷明天就来了。怎么活？”

最后，在今天早上刚记的几件琐事中有一条：“牢骚王子要来了，记得买酒。”

牢骚王子？我犹豫了好一会儿才不得不承认这个称呼指的是我。我设想了种种可能——客户？水管工人？——可是最后，看看日期，看看前前后后，我不得不承认不可能有其他更靠谱的候选人了。突然间，一股无名的怒火涌了上来：她怎么可以给我安一个如此不公平的头衔？我一气之下把那张讨厌的纸捏成一团。

我的动作并不是很用力：连纸都没有撕下来。我只是一把捏紧了拳头，转眼我就恢复了理智，可是当然了，为时已晚。我放开手，发现不单单那张纸被我一气之下捏坏了，连底下两页也遭了殃。我拼命把纸张弄平，可它们还是皱起来，好像它们就是很想被捏成一团垃圾。

尽管如此，我还是继续固执地想把被我捏坏的纸张弄平，心里忐忑不安。正当我准备放弃的时候——我现在不管做什么都掩盖不了我的失误——我听见屋子里有电话在响。

我决定不理睬电话，继续想搞清楚我刚刚的失误会有什么后果。但是不一会儿电话答录机响了，我听见查理在留言的声音。也许我觉得抓到了救命稻草，也许我只是想找人倾诉一下，总之是我发现自己冲到了客厅，抓起玻璃咖啡桌上的电话听筒。

“哦，你在啊。”查理好像有点生气我打断了他的留言。

“查理，听着。我刚刚做了一件蠢事。”

“我在机场，”他说。“飞机晚点了。我想给要在法兰克福接我的汽车服务公司打个电话，可我没带他们的电话。所以我要你给我念

一下。”

接着他开始指示我到哪里去找电话本，但是我打断他的话，说道：

“听着，我刚刚做了一件蠢事。我不知道怎么办才好。”

几秒钟的沉默后，查理说道：“你可能在想，雷。你可能在想有第三者。想说我现在是要飞去见她。我猜你是这样想的。跟你看到的一切对得上。刚刚我出门的时候埃米莉的样子，等等。可是你错了。”

“是，我知道你的意思。可是你听着，我有事要跟你说……”

“承认吧，雷。你错了。没有第三者。我现在是要去法兰克福开一个有关更换我们波兰代理的会。我只是要去干这个。”

“是，我知道。”

“从来就没有什么第三者。我是不会看其他女人的，起码不会正经地看。是真的。是他妈的真的，没有第三者！”

他说着说着就嚷了起来，可能是因为出发大厅里太吵了。现在他不说话了，我仔细听他是不是又哭了，但是只能听见机场里的嘈杂声。突然，他说道：

“我知道你在想什么。你在想，好吧，没有其他女人。但会不会是其他男人呢？你就认了吧，你是这么想的，对吧？快说！”

“没有。我从没想过你会是同性恋。即便是那次期末考以后，你喝得酩酊大醉，假装……”

“闭嘴，你这个白痴！我是说其他男人，埃米莉的情人！会不会有一个他妈的埃米莉的情人？我是这个意思。而我的回答是，根据我的判断，没有，没有，没有。在一起这么多年，我很了解她。可问题就在于，就因为我太了解她了，我还能看见些别的。我能看出她开始想找个情人了。没错，雷，她在物色男人。比如说大卫·科里！”

“大卫·科里是谁？”

“大卫·科里是一个虚情假意的饭桶，一个混得不错的律师。我知道怎么不错，因为她告诉我怎么不错，很他妈的详细。”

“你觉得……他们看上了？”

“没有，我说了！还没有，什么都没有！大卫·科里根本不会理她。他娶了一个在康泰纳仕出版集团工作的漂亮妞儿。”

“那你不用担心……”

“我要担心，还有个迈克尔·艾迪生。还有美林银行的新星罗杰·范德伯格，年年都参加世界经济论坛……”

“听着，查理，听我说。我有麻烦了。不是大麻烦，可总归是个麻烦。你听我说。”

我终于把刚才的事情讲给他听，尽量忠实地叙述一切，虽说我把我觉得埃米莉给我留了秘密信息的想法轻轻带过。

“我知道我很蠢，”末了，我说道。“可本子就放在那里，在厨房的桌子上。”

“是。”查理现在听上去冷静了许多。“是。你有麻烦了。”

突然他笑了。我受到鼓舞，也跟着笑了。

“我想我反应过度了。”我说。“毕竟那不像是她的私人日记什么的。只是个记事本……”我说不下去了，因为查理还在笑，笑声有点歇斯底里。他不笑了，冷冷地说：

“她要是知道了，会把你的蛋蛋割下来的。”

一阵短暂的沉默，我只听见机场里的嘈杂声。然后，他接着说道：

“大概六年前，我自己翻过那本子，应该说是当年的那本日记本。很偶然，我坐在厨房里，她在做饭。你瞧，就是边说话边无意间随手翻开。她马上就发现了，说她不喜欢人家看她的东西。就是那次她说她要把我的蛋蛋割下来。那时她挥着根擀面杖，我说用擀面杖可不好干她威胁的那件事。她就说擀面杖是蛋蛋割下来以后用的。蛋蛋割下来以后她要用擀面杖碾碎。”

电话那头通报了一则航班信息。

“那我该怎么办？”我问。

“你能怎么办？把纸弄平呗。她可能不会注意到。”

“我试了，就是不行。她不可能不会注意到……”

“听着，雷，我要操心的事多着呢。我要告诉你的是埃米莉梦想的这些男人不是真的可能的情人。她只是觉得这些人很不错，那么有成就。她没有看见他们的缺点。他们根本就是……畜牲。总之这些人跟她不是一路的。关键是，这个关键既让人痛心又讽刺，关键是，归根结底，她爱我。她还爱我。我知道的，我知道。”

“查理，这么说你没有什么办法咯。”

“没有！我没有什么他妈的办法！”他又开始大嚷起来。“你自己想办法！你坐你的飞机，我坐我的。我们看看哪架会掉下来！”

说完，查理把电话挂了。我倒进沙发里，深深地吸了一口气。我告诉自己要理智，可是我心里一直感到隐隐的害怕。我想了各种各样的办法。一种办法是就这么溜之大吉，几年都不再跟查理和埃米莉联系，几年以后我会写一封措词谨慎的信来。即便事已至此，我也觉得这么做太绝望了。好一点的办法是我把他们柜子里的酒一瓶瓶喝掉，等埃米莉回来的时候就会发现我烂醉如泥了。那时我就告诉她我看了她的日记，在酒精的作用下把纸张给捏了。而且，我还可以借着酒疯扮演受害者的角色。我可以冲她嚷嚷，指指点点，告诉她看了她写的话我受了多么深的伤害。我是多么珍视她的爱意和友谊，是她支撑我在孤独的异乡度过那些最难过的日子。可她却那样子说我。虽然这个计划挺可行的，但我隐隐觉得这里头——在这个计划的底下，有什么东西是我不敢去碰的——所以这个计划对我来说也行不通。

过了一会儿，电话响了，答录机里又传来查理的声音。我拿起电话，查理的声音显然比刚才平静了许多。

“我到登机口了，”他说。“很抱歉我刚刚的胡言乱语。我到了机场就这样。要在登机口坐下来才能觉得安稳。听着，雷，我突然想到一件事情。关系到我们的计划。”

“我们的计划？”

“对，我们的全盘计划。当然了，你也已经发现现在不是粉饰形象、让埃米莉对你改观的时候。绝不是掩盖缺点、炫耀你自己的时候。不是，不是。你还记得我当初为什么会选你吧。雷，我全靠你在埃米莉面前做真实的你。只要你做到这点，我们的计划就没有问题。”

“咳，听着，我现在很难成为埃米莉的大英雄了……”

“是，你明白目前的情况，我很感激。可我刚刚想到一件事情。就一件事情，你的条件里有一件小事，跟目前的计划有出入。是这样，雷，埃米莉觉得你很有音乐品位。”

“啊……”

“只有一次，只有一次她说我不如你，就是音乐品位。除了这一条，你就是这个任务十全十美的人选了。所以，雷，你得答应不提音乐。”

“哦，天啊……”

“答应我吧，雷。这个要求不过分。不要提起那些……那些她喜欢的抒情老歌。要是她提起了，你别搭腔。我就要求这一点。剩下的你只要跟平时一样就可以了。雷，你能做到这点，对不对？”

“这个，我想可以。反正这些都只是理论上说说而已。我想我们今天晚上不会聊什么天。”

“很好！那就没事了。现在来说说你那个小问题。我想了一下你那事儿，你高兴吧。而且我想出了一个办法。你在听吗？”

“在，我在听。”

“有一对夫妇经常到我们家来。安杰拉和索利。他们人还行，可要不是因为是邻居我们不会跟他们打交道的。反正就是他们经常到我们家来。不事先打招呼就过来喝杯茶。然后关键点，他们经常是白天什么时候带亨德里克斯出来时，顺便过来。”

“亨德里克斯？”

“亨德里克斯是一只臭烘烘、脾气暴躁，甚至可能杀人的拉布拉多猎狗。当然了，对安杰拉和索利来说，那畜牲就像他们的孩子。他们没有孩子，可能他们还不算太老，还能生孩子。可他们更喜欢亲爱、亲爱的亨德里克斯。每次过来，亲爱的亨德里克斯都会像个很不爽的小偷一样尽力搞破坏。砰，落地灯倒了。哦天啊，没关系，亲爱的，你吓到了吗？你明白吧。听好了。大约一年以前，我们买了一本放在咖啡几上摆设的大画册，花了不少钱，是一帮年轻的男同性恋在北非城堡拍的艺术照片。埃米莉就喜欢翻开那页，觉得跟沙发很配。你要是翻到别页去她会很生气。反正就是大约一年以前，亨德里克斯过来的时候把那照片啃了个精光。没错，就这么把它的牙齿伸到蜡光

纸里去，啃啊啃，总共啃了二十来页它妈咪才让它停下来。知道我为什么跟你说这些吧？”

“是。我知道你说的办法了，可……”

“很好，我来给你解释清楚。你这样跟埃米莉说。有人敲门，你开了门，那对夫妇牵着亨德里克斯站在门口。他们跟你说他们是安杰拉和索利，是我们的好朋友，来喝杯茶。你让他们进来了，亨德里克斯胡闹起来，咬了日记本。能混过去的。怎么了？你怎么不谢我？你不满意？”

“我很感激，查理。我只是在考虑。你瞧，比如说，要是他们真的出现怎么办？我是说在埃米莉回来以后？”

“我想有这个可能。我只能说若真的是这样，你真的是太背、太背了。我说他们经常过来，意思是顶多一个月一次。所以别挑刺了，快谢我。”

“可是查理，那狗只咬那本日记本，还刚好咬到了那几页，是不是太牵强了？”

我听见他叹了一口气。“我以为不用说得这么详细的。你当然要把整个地方都弄一弄啦。把落地灯弄倒，洒点糖到厨房的地板上。你要弄得好像亨德里克斯把那里弄得乱七八糟的。听着，在叫登机了。我得走了。我到了德国再跟你联系。”

听查理说话让我感觉像在听一个人絮絮叨叨地讲他做过的梦，或者讲他的车门是怎么被撞到的。他的办法很好——甚至可以说是天才——可是我看不出这跟埃米莉回来以后我想说的或做的有什么关系，我越听越不耐烦。但是挂了电话以后，我发现查理的话对我有一种催眠的作用。尽管我脑子里觉得他的办法很白痴，但我的手脚却开始把他的“办法”付诸实践。

我把落地灯放倒，小心不撞到其他的东西。我先把灯罩拿掉，把灯放倒，再把灯罩歪歪斜斜地放回去。然后我从书架上拿下一个花瓶，把它放到地毯上，把里面的干草洒在旁边。接着我选了咖啡几旁的一个好地方把垃圾桶“撞倒”。我做这些的时候感觉很奇怪，很不真实。我不相信这样做能有什么用，可我发现做这些事让我觉得心里好过一些。突然我想到我搞这些破坏都是为了那本日记。于是我走进厨房。

我想了想，从碗柜里拿出一罐糖，放在桌子上日记本旁边，慢慢倾斜，让糖倒出来。我本来还想让罐子从桌子边掉下去，但最后没有这么做。因为这个时候，一直折磨着我的害怕的感觉挥发殆尽了。我并不是恢复了平静，而是觉得这样做实在是太傻了。

我回到客厅，在沙发上躺下，拿起简·奥斯丁的书，读了几行，感觉累得不行，不知不觉又睡着了。

*

我被电话吵醒。听见埃米莉的声音出现在答录机里，我坐起来接电话。

“哦天啊，雷蒙德，你在啊。你还好吗，亲爱的？现在感觉怎么样？有好好休息吗？”

我告诉她别担心，我很好，刚刚正在睡觉。

“哦对不起！你可能已经几星期没好好睡觉了，可是你好不容易睡着了，我又把你吵醒！太对不起了！还有一件事我也很抱歉，雷，我要让你失望了。公司里出了要紧的事情，我没办法早回去。我至少还得再过一个钟头。你能坚持一下吧。”

我重申我现在很好，很舒服。

“是啊，听你的声音确实挺好。太对不起了，雷，我得挂电话去做事情了。你想要什么就拿什么吧。再见，亲爱的。”

我放下电话，伸了伸胳膊。天色渐暗，我起来打开公寓里的灯。我看着被我“破坏”了的客厅，越看越觉得不自然。害怕的感觉再次涌上心头。

电话又响了，这次是查理。他说他现在在法兰克福机场的行李传送带旁。

“真他妈的慢。到现在一件行李都没有。你那里怎么样了？女主人还没回来吗？”

“还没。听着，查理，你的办法行不通。”

“你说行不通是什么意思？不要告诉我你到现在还没动手，还在犹豫。”

“我照你说的做了。我把房间弄乱了，可是看着不像那么回事。不像有狗来过，倒像个艺术展。”

他没有说话，可能是在注意看行李来了没有。过了一会儿，他说道：“我理解你的顾虑。因为是别人的东西，你一定会缩手缩脚。听好了，我点名几样东西我衷心希望你把它们砸个稀巴烂。你在听吗，雷？我要你把这些东西砸烂。那个垃圾瓷牛。在CD机旁边。那是王八蛋大卫·科里从拉各斯回来的时候送的。你就从那个开始。事实上，我不在乎你砸什么东西。统统都砸了吧！”

“查理，你要冷静。”

“好，好。但那个房子里的东西全是破烂。就像我们现在的婚姻。全是一堆破烂。那个红色海绵沙发，你知道我说哪个吧，雷？”

“是。我刚刚还在上面睡觉来着。”

“早就该扔到垃圾桶里去了。把外面的皮撕开，把里面的海绵统统翻出来。”

“查理，冷静一下。你这根本不是在帮我。你只是把我当作发泄你的愤怒和沮丧的工具……”

“别胡说八道了！我当然是在帮你。而且我的办法很好。我保证能行的。埃米莉恨那条狗，恨安杰拉和索利，她抓住一切机会更恨他们一点。听着。”他的声音突然变成近乎耳语。“我教你这个最大的秘诀。用这个秘密配方一定能让埃米莉相信。我早该想到了。你还有多少时间？”

“大约一个小时……”

“很好。仔细听好了。味道。没错。在房子里弄出狗的味道。她一进门就会察觉到，即使只是下意识地。然后她走进房间，看见亲爱的大卫的瓷牛在地上摔成粉碎，看见那个破沙发里的海绵到处都是……”

“听着，我没有说我……”

“别插嘴。她看见屋子里乱七八糟的，马上就会有意无意地联想到狗的气味。你什么都还没说，她就会想到是亨德里克斯干的。太漂亮了！”

“瞎说，查理。那好，我怎么把你家弄出狗的味道来呢？”

“我知道怎么弄。”他的声音还是低低的，但很兴奋。“我清楚得很。以前我和托尼·巴顿在中学六年级时干过。他弄了个配方，我改进了一下。”

“为什么？”

“为什么？因为他的配方更像臭白菜，而不是狗，这就是为什么。”

“不是，我是说你们为什么……好了，算了。你告诉我吧，只要不用出去买一套化学品就行。”

“很好。你转过弯来了。拿支笔来，雷。记下来。啊，行李终于来了！”他一定是把手机放到口袋里了，我听见一阵窸窣窸窣的声音。然后他重新拿起电话说道：

“我没时间多说了。记下来。准备好了吗？中等大小的长柄锅一只。可能灶子上已经有了。放入一品脱左右的水和两块牛肉浓缩汤块、一小勺孜然、一大勺辣椒粉、两大勺醋、一大把月桂叶。记下来了吗？然后放进一只皮鞋或皮靴，底朝上，别让鞋底完全浸在水里，这样就不会有烧焦橡胶的味道。接着就可以打开煤气，把这堆东西放上去煮了，让它慢慢炖。很快就会有味道出来了。不是很难闻。托尼·巴顿原来的配方里还加了鼻涕虫，可我这个更像狗的臭味。我知道你要问我去哪里找这些材料。所有的香料什么的都在厨房的柜子里。楼梯底下的储物柜里有一双旧靴子。不是那双高筒靴，拿破破烂烂的那双，有点像加长的鞋子。我以前常穿去散步。已经不能穿了，该扔掉了。拿一只。怎么了？听着，雷，就这么做，好吗？救救你自己。因为我告诉你，发飙的埃米莉可不是闹着玩的。我得挂电话了。哦，对了，记住不要卖弄你的音乐学问。”

也许是因为得到了一系列清楚的指示，不管这些指示多么荒唐，我放下电话时，刚才害怕的感觉没有了，变得干劲十足。我很清楚自己该做什么。我走进厨房，打开电灯。炉子上确实有一只“中等大小的”长柄锅等着执行任务。我装了半锅水，然后放回炉子上。我虽忙活着，但心里清楚，在我往下做之前得先确认一件事：即我到底有多少时间来完成这些事情。我走回客厅，拿起电话，拨通埃米莉办公室的号码。

助理接的电话，告诉我埃米莉在开会。我半是亲切半是坚决地要把埃米莉从会场叫出来，“看看她是否真的在开会”。不一会儿，埃米莉来了。

“怎么了，雷蒙德？什么事？”

“没事。我只是想看看你怎么样了。”

“雷，你怪怪的。怎么了？”

“什么叫我怪怪的？我只是想确认你什么时候会回来。我知道你觉得我是个懒人，但我还是想要个时间表什么的。”

“雷蒙德，没必要生气嘛。我想想。还要一个小时……也可能是一个半小时。我真的很抱歉，公司里出了非常要紧的事情……”

“一个到一个半小时。好的。我就想知道这个。那我们一会儿见。你回去工作吧。”

埃米莉可能还想说些什么，但我已经把电话挂了，大步走进厨房，决心不让我现在坚定的心情很快消失。事实上，我现在慢慢地越来越兴奋，想不通之前怎么会让自己那么绝望。我搜遍厨房的柜子，把我需要的香料和调味品在炉子旁整整齐齐地摆成一排。然后我各取适量倒进水里，很快地搅拌一下，开始找靴子。

楼梯底下的储物柜里藏着一大堆破破烂烂的鞋子。我搜寻了一番，发现确实有一只查理方子里的靴子——有一只特别破烂的靴子，脚后跟的边上结着陈年泥土块。我用指尖捏住鞋，拿到厨房里，小心翼翼地底朝上放进锅里。接着我打开炉子，开到中火，然后就坐下来，等水开。当电话再次响起时，我真不愿意离开我的锅，但我听见查理在答录机里说啊说，最后我还是把火关小，去接电话。

“你刚刚说什么呢？”我问。“听起来一副可怜样。我很忙，没听清。”

“我到旅馆了。只有三星级。你能相信这种厚颜无耻的事吗！那么大一家公司！房间也小得要命！”

“可你就住两三个晚上……”

“听着，雷，之前我没有完全说实话。我觉得对你不公平。毕竟你是在帮我，在尽全力帮我，帮我弥补和埃米莉的关系。而我却没有对你诚实。”

“你要是想说狗气味的配方，已经太迟了。我已经全都弄下去了。我想也许还可以再加一种香料什么的……”

“我之前没有对你诚实是因为我没有对自己诚实。可现在离开了家，我的脑子清楚多了。雷，之前我跟你说不说没有第三者不完全正确。有这么个女生。没错，年轻女生，顶多三十出头。她很关心发展中国家的教育，关心更加公平的全球贸易。她吸引我的不是性，那只能说

是副产品。是她还未失去光泽的理想主义，让我想起以前的我们。记得吗，雷？”

“对不起，查理，我不记得你以前特别理想主义。说实话，你一直很自私，喜欢享乐……”

“好吧，也许以前我们都是一群没用的笨蛋，我们这些人。可是在我心里一直有另一个我想要跳出来。这就是她吸引我的地方……”

“查理，这是什么时候的事？什么时候开始的？”

“什么什么时候开始的？”

“婚外情。”

“没有什么婚外情！我没有和她性交，没有。连一起吃饭都没有。我只是……我只是喜欢看见她。”

“什么意思，喜欢看见她？”我边说边踱进厨房，盯着那锅东西。

“啊，我喜欢看见她，”他说。“我总是找机会见她。”

“你是说她是应召女郎。”

“不是，不是，我说了，我们没有性交。不是，她是个牙医。我老去找她，说这里痛，那里不舒服，能多去几次就多去几次。当然，最后埃米莉怀疑了。”说到这里，查理好像在强忍着不哭出来。但大坝还是决堤了。“她发现了……她发现了……因为我老用牙线清洁牙齿！”他现在几乎是在叫嚷。“她说，你从来没有这么勤快地清洁牙齿……”

“可这说不通啊。你越保护你的牙，就越没有理由去找她了……”

“谁管它说得通说不通？我只想取悦她！”

“听着，查理，你没有跟她约会，没有跟她性交，那有什么问题？”

“问题就在于，我太想要这么一个人，一个能把关在我心里的那个自我放出来的人……”

“查理，听我说。接了你上一次的电话以后，我就大大地振作了。老实说，我觉得你也应该振作起来。你回来以后我们可以把这整

件事好好地谈一谈。可埃米莉再过大概一个小时就回来了，我得把一切都布置好。我这儿正忙着呢，查理。我想你可以从我的声音里听出来。”

“笑死人了！你正忙着呢。很好！他妈的什么朋友……”

“查理，我想你是不喜欢那个旅馆才会这么心烦意乱的。但你应该振作起来。理智一些。打起精神。我这儿正忙着呢。我得先解决狗的事，然后我会尽全力帮你。我会对埃米莉说：‘埃米莉，看看我，看看我多没用。’其实，很多人都和我一样没用。可是查理他不一样。查理比我们优秀。”

“你不能这样说。太假了。”

“我当然不是照这样说了，白痴。听着，交给我吧。一切都在我的掌握之中。你要冷静。好了，我得挂电话了。”

我放下电话，查看锅里的东西。锅里的液体已经沸腾了，不断冒着蒸汽，可是还没有什么味道。我把火开得再大一点，锅里开始不停冒泡。这时，我突然很想呼吸一下新鲜空气，而我又还没去过他们的天台，于是我打开厨房门，走了出去。

对于六月初的英国，今晚特别暖和。只有微风中的少许凉意提醒我现在不是在西班牙。天还没有全黑，但已经布满了星星。越过天台尽头的那堵墙，我能望见数英里内的窗户和几码内邻居屋里的家具。很多人家的窗户都亮了；眯起眼，远处的窗户就像星星的延伸。天台不大，却很有情调。你可以想象一对夫妇在繁忙的都市生活中，在一个温和的夜晚，到天台上来，手挽着手，漫步于盆栽的小树丛里，交换彼此一天的故事。

我本可以再多待一会儿，但我怕我的干劲消失，就回到厨房里，走过冒着泡的锅，走到客厅的入口，端详着我之前的布置。突然，我意识到我犯了一个大错，我完全没有从亨德里克斯的角度来想问题。现在我明白了事情的关键是把自己当作亨德里克斯。

这么一来，我发现不仅我之前的努力全是白费，而且查理的建議大多都没有用。一只精力过剩的狗怎么会从音响中间把一只小瓷牛拔出来砸碎呢？割开沙发、掏出海绵这事儿也太不现实了。亨德里克斯得有剃刀般的牙齿才能做到。厨房里弄翻糖罐的主意还行，可是我发现客厅得完全重新布置。

我弯着腰走进客厅，以便更好地从亨德里克斯的视角来看东西。我一眼就看见咖啡几上的那堆杂志是最明显的目标。于是我一把把书扫了出去，就像一只畜牲用嘴甩出去的一样。书掉在地板上的样子看起来很真实。我受到了鼓舞，跪下来，翻开一本杂志，揉碎其中的一页，希望能模仿日记本的效果，但结果并不理想：一看就是人手弄的，不像狗的牙齿弄的。我又犯了之前的错误：我还没有完全把自己当作亨德里克斯。

这次我四脚着地，低下头，把牙齿伸进同一本杂志。味道香香的，不是很糟。我翻开另一本掉在地上的杂志，翻到中间，重复同样的动作。我渐渐领悟到，最理想的动作跟在露天市场里玩不用手咬起浮在水里的苹果的游戏类似。轻轻地咀嚼、下巴不停地轻盈摆动，效果最好：这样书页就会变得乱糟糟、皱巴巴的。相反，咬得太用力只会把书页都“钉”在一起，没有明显效果。

我想我太在意这些细节，才没有早点发现埃米莉站在走廊里，就在门口，看着我。看见她，我的第一反应不是害怕或者尴尬，而是受伤：她居然就那么站在那里，不告诉我说她回来了。想到几分钟前我为了避免现在这种情况还特意打电话给她，我觉得自己被骗了。这大概就是为什么我的第一个动作只是疲惫地叹了口气，仍旧四脚着地跪在地上，没有起来。我看着埃米莉走进屋子，一只手很温柔地搭在我的背上。我不确定她有没有跪下来，但她说话时，脸离我很近。

“雷蒙德，我回来了。我们坐下来吧，好吗？”

说着，她扶我起来，我强忍着不把她推开。

“真奇怪，”我说。“几分钟前你才说要去开会。”

“没错。可是接到你的电话以后，我发现有必要提早回来。”

“有必要？什么意思？埃米莉，你不用这样抓住我的胳膊，我不会摔倒的。你说有必要提早回来是什么意思？”

“你的电话。我后来明白你为什么打电话。你打电话找我求救。”

“没有的事。我只是想……”我停住了，因为我发现埃米莉正好奇地打量着客厅。

“哦，雷蒙德，”她轻声说，几乎是自言自语。

“我刚刚不小心把这里弄乱了，正在收拾，想不到你提早回来了。”

我弯下腰去捡倒在地上的落地灯，但是埃米莉拉住我。

“没关系，雷。真的没关系。待会儿我们可以一起收拾。你先坐下来休息。”

“埃米莉，我知道这儿是你家什么的。可是刚刚你为什么一声不响偷偷地进来？”

“我没有偷偷地进来，亲爱的。我进门时叫你了，可你好像不在。我就赶紧去了下厕所，出来时，咳，发现你在。好了，别说这些了。有什么关系呢？现在我回来了，我们可以一起过个轻松愉快的夜晚。坐下来吧，雷蒙德。我去泡茶。”

说着，她朝厨房走去。我正在摆弄落地灯的灯罩，过了一会儿才记起厨房里在煮什么——可为时已晚。我侧耳倾听她的反应，可是没有什么声音也没有。最后，我放下灯罩，朝厨房门口走去。

长柄锅还在均匀地冒着气泡，蒸汽从靴子周围冒出来。而且味道出来了，在外面没注意，厨房里就很明显。那味道闻起来自然很辛辣，有点像咖喱。但最主要的是像你走了很长时间的长路以后，把臭汗淋漓的脚从靴子里拔出来时的味儿。

埃米莉站在离炉子几步远的地方，伸长脖子，从一个安全距离看清锅里的东西。她好像完全被眼前的景象迷住了，我苦笑了一声表明我在，她没有转移视线，更没有转身。

我从她身边挤过去，在桌子旁坐下。最后，埃米莉终于亲切地微笑着转向我说：“这主意真是太可爱了，雷蒙德。”

说完，她的视线又不由自主地回到了炉子上。

我看见面前放着被我弄倒的糖罐——和日记——突然感到一股巨大的疲惫。一切都完了，我唯一的出路就是放弃所有的把戏，如实交待。我深吸了一口气，说道：

“是这样的，埃米莉。事情好像有点古怪，但一切都是因为你的日记本。就这本。”我翻开被我捏烂的那一页给她看。“我真的很对不起，我真不该这样做。我顺手翻开了你的本子，然后，然后不小心弄坏了这一页。像这样……”我轻轻地把先前的动作又做了一遍，然后看着她。

出人意料的是，她只匆匆扫了一眼本子，就又看着炉子，说：“哦，那只是一本记事本。没有什么隐私。不用担心，雷。”说完她向前走了一步，好把锅里的东西看得更清楚些。

“什么意思？不用担心？你怎么能这样说？”

“怎么了，雷蒙德？那本子只是用来记一些我怕忘记的事。”

“可是查理跟我说你会发飙！”看来埃米莉全忘了她写了我什么，我更生气了。

“真的？查理跟你说我会生气？”

“是！他说有一次你跟他说，他要是敢看这小本子，你就把他的蛋蛋割下来！”

我不确定埃米莉一脸的疑惑是因为听了我的话，还是还没从那锅东西中缓过来。她在我旁边坐下，思索起来。

“没有，”过了好一会儿，她说道。“是别的事。我现在想起来了。去年大概这个时候，查理为了什么事情很沮丧，问我要是他自杀了，我会怎么办。他只是在试探我，他那么胆小，根本不可能去做那种事。可是他问了，我就回答他说要是他自杀了，我就把他的蛋蛋割下来。我就只有那次跟他说了这个。我意思是，这又不是我的口头禅。”

“我不明白。要是他自杀了，你要割他的蛋蛋？死了以后？”

“这只是一个比方，雷蒙德。我只是想说要是他自杀了，我会多讨厌他。我想让他自信起来。”

“你没明白我的意思。死了才割不算是阻止他吧？也许你说得对，这样会……”

“雷蒙德，别说这些了。我们别说这些了。我们昨天吃羊肉砂锅，还剩大半锅。味道很不错，今天再炖一炖味道会更好。我们还可以开瓶上好的波尔多。我很高兴你动手准备晚餐，但是我们今晚吃砂锅吧，你说呢？”

如今我不想再解释了。“好，好。羊肉砂锅。很好。行，可以。”

“那……把这些扔了吧？”

“嗯，对。扔了吧。”

我站起来，走进客厅——客厅还是一团糟，但我没有力气收拾了。我一屁股躺倒在沙发上，盯着天花板。过了一会儿，我听见埃米莉也到客厅里来了，我以为她要到走廊去，但她走到客厅的另一头，蹲下来摆弄音响。不一会儿，屋里响起了优美、忧郁的管弦乐声，然后是萨拉·沃恩的《爱人》。

我突然感到无比轻松、宽慰，和着缓缓的拍子，闭上眼睛，想起许多年以前，在埃米莉的宿舍里，我们俩争论说这首歌比利·霍利迪是不是每次都唱得比萨拉·沃恩好，争论了一个多小时。

埃米莉碰了碰我的肩膀，递给我一杯红酒，自己手里也拿着一杯。她的套装外系着一条镶边围裙。她在沙发的另一头、我的脚边坐下来，抿了一口酒。然后用遥控器把音量关小。

“乱糟糟的一天，”她说。“不单单是工作，今天公司里一团糟。还包括查理离开什么的。别以为我不难过，我们还没和好他就这么出国去。最后，你又这个样子。”她长长地叹了口气。

“不，不是的，埃米莉，没有那么糟。首先，查理很爱你。至于我，我很好。真的很好。”

“胡说。”

“是真的。我感觉很好……”

“我是说你说查理很爱我。”

“哦，这个。你要是觉得我是胡说，那你就大错特错了。事实上，我知道查理比以前更爱你。”

“你怎么知道，雷蒙德？”

“我怎么知道……首先，中午吃饭时，他就是这个意思。就算他没有直说，我也看得出来。你瞧，埃米莉，我知道现在事情是不太如意，但你应该记住最重要的一点，那就是查理仍旧非常爱你。”

她又叹了一口气。“知道吗？我好几年没听这张唱片了。都是因为查理。我一放这些唱片，他立马反对。”

我们都不说话，静静听着萨拉·沃恩的歌声。歌曲间奏的时候，埃米莉说道：“雷蒙德，我想你更喜欢她的另一个版本。只有钢琴和贝司伴奏的那个。”

我没有回答，只是坐直了些，喝了一小口酒。

“肯定是，”她说，“你更喜欢那个版本，对不对，雷蒙德？”

“这个嘛，”我说，“我不知道。老实说，我不记得那个版本了。”

我能感觉到埃米莉在沙发那头动了动。“开玩笑，雷蒙德。”

“真好笑，可我最近不大听这些东西了。老实说，我已经忘得差不多了。我都记不得现在这首是什么歌了。”说完，我笑了笑，但可能笑得有点奇怪。

“你那是什么话？”埃米莉突然生气了。“太荒唐了。除非你把脑子给切了，不然你是不可能忘记的。”

“啊。过去好多年了。变了。”

“你那是什么话？”这次她的声音里透出丝丝的恐惧。“不可能变那么多。”

我实在不想再说下去，就转移话题：“工作不顺利真是够呛。”

埃米莉根本不理睬。“那你是什么意思？你是说你不喜欢这个？你要我把它关掉，是不是？”

“不，不是，埃米莉，别这样，很好听。而且……而且勾起我的回忆。拜托，让我们回到刚才，一分钟以前安安静静、轻轻松松的样子。”

埃米莉又叹了一口气。当她再次开口时，又变得很温柔了。

“对不起，亲爱的。我忘了。你最不希望我朝你大嚷大叫。我很抱歉。”

“不，不，没关系。”我坐了起来。“要知道，埃米莉，查理是个好人。很优秀的人。而且他爱你。你不可能找到比他更好的了。”

埃米莉耸耸肩，喝了口酒。“也许你说得对。而且我们不年轻了。事情变成这样我们双方都有责任。我们应该觉得自己是幸运的。可是我们似乎从来不满意。我不知道为什么。因为每当我静下来细想，我知道除了他我不是真的想要其他人。”

埃米莉不说话了，只是喝着酒，听着音乐。过了一会儿她接着说：“雷蒙德，就好像你参加派对、舞会。正慢慢地跳着舞，跟你最想在一起的人在一起，房间里的其他人就会消失。可不知为什么，不是这样的。不是。你很清楚其他人都比不上你怀里这个。可是……可

是，房间里都是人。这些人让你不得安宁。不停叫啊喊啊，招呼你啊，做各种蠢事吸引你的注意。‘哦，你怎么能这样就满足了呢？！你可以找到更好的！看看我！’他们好像一直在朝我喊这样的话，越来越让人受不了，结果你没法安安静静地跟你喜欢的人跳舞。你懂我的意思吗，雷蒙德？”

我想了想，才答道：“我没有你和查理幸运。我没有像你们一样找到一个挚爱。但从某些方面来说，我懂你的意思。人很难知道哪里可以安身，何以安身。”

“太对了。我希望这些不请自来的人走开。我希望他们走开，让我们过我们自己的。”

“要知道，埃米莉，我刚刚说的不是在开玩笑。查理很爱你。跟你闹得不愉快他也很伤心。”

此时埃米莉几乎是背对着我，而且很久都没有说话。萨拉·沃恩缓缓地唱起优美的超慢版《四月的巴黎》。这时，埃米莉突然站了起来，好像萨拉喊了她的名字。她转向我，摇摇头。

“我不相信，雷。我不相信你不再听这些歌了。以前我们常常一起听这些唱片。用妈妈在我上大学前给我买的那台小电唱机。你怎么可以忘记了昵？”

我站起来，拿着酒杯，走到落地窗前。我往天台上望去，发觉眼睛里充满泪水。于是我打开窗子，走了出去，想趁埃米莉不注意把眼泪擦掉。但是她跟了出来，不知道她是不是看到了。

那晚温暖宜人，萨拉·沃恩的歌声和乐队的伴奏声飘到了天台上。星星比刚才更亮了，邻居家的灯光依旧像夜空里的星星一样眨着眼睛。

“我喜欢这首歌，”埃米莉说。“我想你连这首也忘了吧。但就算你不记得了，我们还是可以跟着音乐跳支舞，对不对？”

“是。我想可以。”

“我们可以像弗雷德·阿斯泰尔和金洁·罗杰斯⁽¹²⁾一样。”

“是，我们可以。”

我们把杯子放在石桌上，开始跳舞。我们跳得不是很好，老撞到对方的膝盖，但是我把埃米莉紧紧地抱着，全身心地感觉着她的衣

服、头发、肌肤。这样抱着她再次提醒我她胖了不少。

“你说得对，雷蒙德，”她在我耳边轻声说道。“查理是个好人。我们会好起来的。”

“是。当然了。”

“有你这个朋友太好了，雷蒙德。没有你我怎么办？”

“我很高兴我是个好朋友。除此之外我一无是处。老实说，我真的很没用。”

我感到肩膀被重重地拍了一下。

“别说这种话，”埃米莉轻声说道。“不许说这种话。”过了一会儿，她又说了一遍：“有你这个朋友真是太好了，雷蒙德。”

埃米莉放的是萨拉·沃恩1954年版的《四月的巴黎》，克利福德·布朗演奏的小号，所以我知道这首歌很长，至少有八分钟。我很高兴，因为我知道歌曲一结束，我们就不会再跳舞了，而是进去吃砂锅。而且我知道，到时埃米莉就会重新考虑日记本的事，这次她不会再觉得不是什么大不了的事了。谁知道呢？可是至少还有几分钟我们是安全的，我们就这么在星空下跳舞。

[\(1\)\(2\)](#) 美国著名作曲家。

[\(3\)](#) 法国著名女歌手。

[\(4\)](#) 美国著名爵士乐女歌手。

[\(5\)](#) 美国著名女歌手。

[\(6\)](#) 美国爵士乐女歌手、作曲家、演员。

[\(7\)](#) 美国著名爵士乐女歌手，被誉为“爵士乐第一夫人”。

[\(8\)](#) 美国黑人盲歌手，被誉为“灵魂乐之父”。

[\(9\)](#) 美国作曲家。

[\(10\)](#) 美国爵士乐、音乐剧作曲家。《不论下雨或晴天》即是他的作品。

[\(11\)](#) 美国演员，被誉为歌舞之王。

[\(12\)](#) 百老汇两位著名舞蹈家，银幕上最受欢迎的一对舞伴，两人在电影里的合作被称为世界上“最佳交际舞”。

莫尔文山

春天，我在伦敦度过。总的来说，虽然我没有完成所有的预定任务，但这段日子还是相当激动人心的。然而，随着日子一天天过去，夏天临近，以往的烦躁不安又回来了。比方说，我隐隐地害怕再遇见以前的大学同学。当我在卡姆登区闲逛时，当我搜寻着我在西区大商场买不起的CD时，总能遇见以前的同学，问我自从离开学校出来“追求功名利禄”以后，混得怎么样。我不是不好意思告诉他们我的现状，而是他们没人——除了极少数的几个例外——能理解对现在的我来说，什么才叫“成功的”数个月。

我说了，我没有完成所有的预定任务，但这些任务更像是长期的奋斗目标。所有的这些试音，就算是最无聊的，也是很宝贵的经验。几乎每一次我都不会空手而归，我都能了解到一些伦敦，甚至全世界乐坛的事情。

有的试音挺正式的。你到一个仓库或改装的车库里去，有经理或者乐队成员的女朋友记下你的名字，端茶给你，叫你等一会儿，这时隔壁传来很大声的、乐队时断时续的演奏。但是大部分试音则很随便。事实上，看了大多数乐队行为处事的方式之后，你就会明白为什么伦敦乐坛每况愈下。我一次次穿梭于伦敦郊区不知名的街道间，带着我的原声吉他走上楼梯，走进散发着霉味的公寓。屋子里的地板上垫子和睡袋扔得到处都是。乐队的人嘴里一直嘀咕着，几乎不看你的眼睛。我弹唱的时候他们只是两眼空洞地看着你，直到其中一个人叫我停下来，说：“噢，可以了。谢谢你来试音，但这跟我们的风格不太一样。”

我很快就发现这些人其实很多都很害羞，对试音这事儿很不自在。若我和他们聊些别的，他们就放松多了。我就是这样收集到各种有用的信息的：哪儿有有意思的夜总会，哪个乐队需要吉他手。或者只是推荐你听听哪里的乐队。我说了，我从来不会空手而归。

基本上大家都觉得我吉他弹得不错，很多人还说我的声音很适合和声。但我很快就发现有两个因素对我不利。一是我没有装备。很多乐队都希望找到一个自带电吉他、扩音器、喇叭，最好还有交通工具的人，能够马上开始和他们一起表演。我只有两条腿和一把破破烂烂

的原声吉他。所以不管他们多喜欢我的演奏或声音，都不得不叫我走人。公平得很。

另一主要障碍才让人难以接受——而且我得说，这一点是我完全没有预料到的。我自己写歌竟然成了问题。真不敢相信。我在某个乱糟糟的公寓里，对着一群面无表情的脸孔演奏，弹完了以后，经过十五、甚至三十秒钟的停顿，会有一个人疑惑地问道：“这是谁的歌？”我说是我自己的歌，刷的一声，窗子关上了。耸肩的耸肩，摇头的摇头，还诡异地互相笑一笑，然后送上他们打发人的那套说辞。

在这种情况下发生到第无数次的时候，我实在生气了。我说：“我不明白。难道你们想永远做一支翻唱乐队？就算是这样，你们以为那些歌打哪儿来的？当然是有人写的！”

可是听我说话的那个人一脸茫然地看着我，说：“没有冒犯之意，伙计。只是写歌的浑球儿太多了。”

似乎整个伦敦乐坛都是这种傻瓜论调。正是这一点使我相信：在这里，就在最根部，有一种就算不是完全腐烂，但至少也是极其肤浅、极其虚伪的东西在蔓延；这种现象无疑直达最上层，反映了整个音乐界的现状。

这一发现，加上夏天临近，使得我再没有地方可以寄居，我决定：虽然伦敦魅力四射——我的大学生活跟它一比，真是暗淡无光——我还是离开一阵子的好。于是我打电话给家姐玛吉。她和丈夫在莫尔文山经营一家小餐厅。就这样，我决定这个夏天和他们一起住。

*

玛吉比我大四岁，而且老是为我担心，所以我知道她一定赞成我到她那里去。其实，我还知道她很高兴有人帮她。我说她在莫尔文山开小餐厅，并不是指在大莫尔文镇或一级公路上，而是确确实实在山上。餐厅是一栋维多利亚时期的老房子，面朝西独自屹立在山上，因此天气晴朗时，可以把茶和蛋糕拿到店外的露台上去，俯瞰整个赫里福郡的景色。冬天的时候只得关门大吉，但夏天则总是忙得不可开交。客人主要是本地人——他们把车停在山下一百米的“西英格兰”停车场，穿着凉鞋和花花绿绿的衣服，气喘吁吁地沿着小路爬上来——有时也有手拿地图、穿戴整齐、徒步登山的游客。

玛吉说她和杰夫没钱付我工资，这正合我意，因为这样我就不必做得很辛苦。但是既然我在这里吃、在这里住，大家自然把我当作第

三名店员。一开始的时候事情有点乱，特别是杰夫，有时很想揍我一顿，因为我干得太少，有时又不好意思叫我做事情，好像我是客人。但情况很快就步入了正轨。工作很简单——我特别会做三明治——但我得时不时提醒自己不要忘了最初决定来乡下的主要目的，是为了写一批新歌，秋天回伦敦的时候用。

我天生就是个早起的人，但是我很快就发现店里的早餐时间真是噩梦：客人要的蛋要做成这样、面包要烤成那样，东西常常煮过头。于是我决定十一点之前不出现。当楼下吵吵嚷嚷的时候，我打开房里的凸窗，坐在宽大的窗台上，面向绵延数英里的山丘弹奏吉他。我刚来的时候，一连几个早上都是大晴天，感觉好极了，景色一望无际。我随意拨弄琴弦，琴声好像能传遍整个英国。只有当我把脑袋伸出窗外，才会看见底下餐厅的露台，看见人们牵着狗、推着婴儿车进进出出。

我对这个地方并不陌生。玛吉和我就在离这里只有几英里的珀肖尔长大，父母经常带我们到山上散步。可是那时候我不喜欢这里，等我长大一点，我就不跟他们一起来了。但是那年夏天，我感到这里是世界上最美的地方；感到从许多方面说来，我来自并且属于这片山丘。这种感觉也许跟我们的父母已经离异有关，多年来，理发店对面的那间灰色小屋不再是“我们的”家了。不管是什么原因，现在我对这里的感受不再是童年印象中的幽闭、可怕，而是亲切，甚至是怀念。

我几乎每天都到山上去走一走，要是确定不会下雨的话，还会把吉他带上。我特别喜欢位于山脉北端的桌山和尾山，当天来、当天回的人一般不会到这里来。有时候，我在这里坐上好几个小时，独自思考，一个人影也见不到。感觉就好像我是第一次发现这里，有无数的新旋律在我脑子里冒出来。

然而在店里帮忙就是另一回事了。做三明治的时候，总有一个熟悉的声音或面孔，朝柜台这边过来，把我猛地拉回到过去。父母的老朋友会过来盘问我的近况，我只好瞎扯一通，直到他们不再烦我。离开之前他们常常会一边看我切面包、切西红柿，一边点点头，说“啊，至少你现在有事可做”之类的话，才拿着杯子、碟子蹒跚地回到座位上去。有时是遇见我的老同学，操着一副新学来的“大学”腔跟我搭话，对最新的蝙蝠侠电影评头论足一番，或者侃侃而谈世界贫困的根本原因。

我不是真的介意这些事，有些人我很高兴见到他们。可是那年夏天，当这个人走进店里时，我一看见她浑身就僵掉了。等我想到我应该躲到厨房里去时，她已经看见我了。

这个人就是弗雷泽太太——或者按照以前我们的叫法：哈格·弗雷泽。当她牵着一只脏兮兮的小斗牛犬进来时我一眼就认出了她。我真想告诉她不可以带狗进来，虽说很多人进来点餐时都会把狗带进来。哈格·弗雷泽是我在珀肖尔读书时的一个老师。谢天谢地，她在我上中学六年级以前就退休了，可是她的阴影却留在了我整个读书阶段。除她之外，学校里的日子并不坏，可是她从一开始就讨厌我、处处为难我，面对她这种人，一个十一岁的小孩子只能逆来顺受。她所用的伎俩是变态老师常用的那种，比如上课时专挑我不会的问题叫我来回答，让全班同学笑话我。后来就更高明了。记得有一次，我十四岁那年，一个新来的老师，特拉维斯先生，在课堂上跟我互相开玩笑，不是挖苦我的笑话，而是好像我们是朋友，同学们都笑了，我感觉挺好。可是两天后，我下楼梯时，碰巧特拉维斯先生和她一起说着话，迎面走来。我走过去时，哈格·弗雷泽把我叫住，说我迟交作业还是什么的，把我臭骂一顿。她这么做的目的是让特拉维斯先生知道我是个“捣蛋学生”；要是特拉维斯先生以为我是个值得他尊敬的孩子，就大错特错了。或许是因为她年纪大，我说不准，但是其他老师好像从来都不怀疑她，都把她的话当真。

那天哈格·弗雷泽进来时显然认出了我，但她既没有笑一笑也没有叫我的名字。她要了一杯茶和一包奶油夹心饼干以后就到露台去了。我以为事情就这样了，没想到过了一会儿，她又进来，把空茶杯和空碟子放到柜台上，说：“我想你不会去收拾桌子，就自己拿进来了。”她还是用以前那副“真想揍你”的眼神看我，目光在我身上多停留了两三秒钟才离开。

我对这个老妖婆的仇恨一下子又回来了。几分钟后玛吉下来时，我已经是怒不可遏。她一眼就看出来，问我怎么了。那时只有几个客人在露台上，屋里没人，我就大喊大叫起来，把哈格·弗雷泽骂得狗血淋头。玛吉要我冷静下来，然后说：

“她不再是谁的老师了，只是一个丈夫离她而去的可怜的老妇人。”

“活该。”

“可你应该稍微同情她一下。正当她准备享受退休生活时，她的丈夫却为了一个比她年轻的女人而抛弃了她。如今她只得自己一个人经营旅馆，人们都说那个地方一天不如一天了。”

玛吉的话让我高兴了不少。我很快就把哈格·弗雷泽抛到了脑后，因为来了一群人，要很多金枪鱼沙拉。几天以后，我在厨房里和杰夫闲聊时，知道了更多的细节：比如说她结婚四十多年的丈夫怎么跟他的秘书跑了；又比如他们的旅馆最初经营得还可以，可是后来谣传客人们都要求退钱，或者刚住进去没几个小时就退房。我亲眼见过那地方一次，一天我帮玛吉去采购东西时开车路过。哈格·弗雷泽的旅馆就在埃尔加路⁽¹⁾上，是一栋挺大的花岗岩房子，特大的牌子上写着“莫尔文旅馆”。

可是我并不想多说哈格·弗雷泽的事。我对她或她的旅馆不感兴趣。我在这里说到她是为以后的事——蒂洛和索尼娅的出现——做交待。

那天杰夫到大莫尔文镇上去了，只有我和玛吉坚守岗位。午饭的客流高峰已经差不多过去了，但是“德国佬”进来时，我们还挺忙的。一听到他们的口音我脑子里马上就想到“德国佬”。不是种族歧视，而是当你站在柜台后面，要记住谁不要甜菜、谁多要一份面包、谁又多点了什么时，就不得不把客人都区别开来，给他们取外号、记住他们的外貌特征。那个驴子脸要一份面包、腌菜配奶酪和两杯咖啡。温斯顿·丘吉尔和他老婆要金枪鱼配蛋黄酱的法式长棍三明治。我就是这么记的。因此，蒂洛和索尼娅就成了“德国佬”。

那天下午很热，可是大多数客人——都是英国人——还是想坐在外面的露台上，有些还不用遮阳伞，想把皮肤晒得通红。那两个“德国佬”却决定坐在里面乘凉。他们穿着普通的宽松驼色裤子、运动鞋和T恤衫，但看上去挺聪明，欧洲大陆来的人常给人这种感觉。我猜他们四十多岁，或者五十出头——那时我没太在意。他们一边吃饭一边轻声交谈，跟大多数欧洲来的和蔼的中年夫妇没什么两样。过了一会儿，那个男的站起来，在店里头溜达，走到玛吉挂在墙上的一张褪色老照片前时停下来欣赏，那是这所房子1915年时的照片。然后他伸展了一下胳膊，说道：

“你们这儿的景色真漂亮！瑞士也有很多漂亮的山，可你们这儿的不一樣。瑞士是高山，你们这儿是小山，但平缓、亲切，有自己独特的魅力。”

“哦，您是从瑞士来的，”玛吉礼貌地说。“我一直想去瑞士。阿尔卑斯啊、缆车啊，听上去很棒。”

“是啊，我们国家有很多美景。但是这里，这个地方，有一种特殊的魅力。我们很早以前就想到这里来了。说了那么久，现在终于来了！”说着他开怀大笑。“真高兴啊！”

“太好了，”玛吉说道。“祝愿你们玩得开心。你们会在这里待很久吗？”

“我们还可以再待三天，然后就得回去工作。很多年前我们看了一部关于埃尔加的纪录片，从那以后就一直想来这里。显然埃尔加热爱这些山，骑着自行车把这些山都走遍了。如今我们终于来了！”

接下来的几分钟，玛吉和他聊起了他们到过的英国景点，在这里哪些地方值得一看，就是你常跟游客聊的那一套。这些话我听了无数遍了，自己也能不假思索地说一遍，所以渐渐把注意力移开。我只听见这两个德国佬其实是瑞士人，正在租车旅游。那男的反复赞美英国是个很棒的地方，英国人都很友好，有时玛吉插几句玩笑话，他都会哈哈大笑。可是我说了，我把注意力移开了，觉得他们只是一对挺无趣的普通夫妇。过了一会儿我又开始注意他们，因为我发现那男的一直想把他妻子带到谈话里来，可他妻子就是不说话，眼睛直盯着旅游指南，好像根本不知道有人在跟她说话。这让我留意他们。

他们两个的皮肤都被晒黑了，肤色自然、均匀，不像外面那群满头大汗、皮肤红得活像龙虾的当地人。尽管上了年纪，两人身材还都很好，身体健康的样子。男的头发灰白，但是浓密，梳得很整齐，虽说有点阿巴乐队⁽²⁾的感觉。女的是金黄头发，差不多褪成白色的了，表情严肃，嘴角有几道小皱纹，要不然这会是一张美丽的中年女人的脸。而那个男的就像我刚说的那样，一直想把他妻子带到谈话里来。

“当然了，我妻子很喜欢埃尔加，很想去看看他出生的房子。”

沉默。

或者：“我得承认我不太喜欢巴黎。我更喜欢伦敦。可是索尼娅她喜欢巴黎。”

没有回答。

每次他说这些话时，都要转头看看坐在角落的妻子，玛吉只好也朝她那里看一看。可他妻子只顾看书，头也不抬一下。那男的似乎不

觉得有什么不对，仍旧兴高采烈地说个不停。然后他又一次伸展了一下胳膊，说：“请原谅，我想我要出去欣赏一下你们这里的美丽景色！”

他走了出去。起先我们看见他在露台上溜达，后来就不见了。他妻子仍旧坐在角落里读旅游指南。一会儿，玛吉过去擦桌子。那女的完全没有理睬玛吉，直到我姐姐要把还剩一小块面包卷的盘子收拾走时，她突然啪地放下书，挺大声地说：“我还没吃完呢！”

玛吉向她道歉，放下盘子，走开了——而我看她根本没有去动那盘子。玛吉从我身边走过去时看了我一眼，我耸耸肩。过了一会儿，我姐姐很客气地问那女的还要不要别的。

“不，不要了。”

我能听出来那女的不想别人去吵她，可是对于玛吉来说，她条件反射地问道（好像她真的想知道）：“食物什么的都还好吗？”

那女的只是看书，好像没有听见。过了五六秒钟，她才放下书，看着我姐姐，说：

“既然你问了，我就告诉你。食物很好，比附近其他鬼地方的好多了。可是，我们只不过要了三明治和沙拉，却等了三十五分钟。三十五分钟。”

突然间我意识到这个女人满腔怒火。不是突然间来了气，等下就会没了。不是，我看得出这个女人已经憋了一肚子火了。她是那种一旦生气就不会轻易消气的人，怒气会维持在一个固定的水平，类似严重的头痛，不会达到顶点，但也不想发泄出来。玛吉一向脾气好，不会察觉到这些征兆，大概以为对方只是在合情合理地抱怨。玛吉向她道歉，然后说：“可是您看，刚才客人太多了……”

“肯定每天都这样咯？不是吗？不是这样？到了夏天，天气好的时候，才会有这么多客人？是吗？那你们为什么不能提前准备好呢？每天都有这么多客人超出你们的预料了，你是想这么说吗？”

那女人本来看着我姐姐，我从柜台后面走出来站在玛吉旁边，她就目光转移到我身上。可能是因为我脸上的表情，我感觉她的怒气又增加了两度。玛吉转头看我，轻轻把我推开，可我没动，一直看着那个女人。我要她明白这不单单是她和玛吉之间的事。谁知道事情可能变成什么样，可就在这时，她丈夫回来了。

“这儿的风景太棒了！很棒的风景，很棒的午餐，很棒的国家！”

我等着他明白这会儿的情况，可就算他注意到了，也没太在意的样子。他微笑着对他妻子说（或许是因为我们的缘故他说英语）：“索尼娅，你真该去看看。就沿着那边那条小路一直走到头！”

他妻子则用德语回答他，然后又埋头看书。他往里走了些，对我们说：

“本来我们今天下午要继续开车到威尔士去的。可是你们这儿的莫尔文山太漂亮了，我真想剩下这三天就都待在这里得了。要是索尼娅同意，那就太好了！”

他看看他妻子，对方耸耸肩，又说了几句德语。说完，男的开怀大笑。

“太好了！她同意！那就这么定了。不去威尔士了。接下来这三天我们就都待在你们这里！”

说完朝我们笑了笑，玛吉应了几句客套话。看见他妻子把书收起来准备离开，我松了口气。那男的也走回餐桌，提起一个小背包，搭在肩上。这时他问玛吉：

“我在想不知你能不能介绍一家附近的小旅馆给我们？不用太贵的，但要舒适、整洁。带点英国味儿的就更好了！”

玛吉一时不知怎么回答，净问些没有用的问题，比如：“你们想要什么样的旅馆？”而我马上说道：

“这附近最好的旅馆是弗雷泽太太的。就在去伍斯特郡的路上。叫莫尔文旅馆。”

“莫尔文旅馆！好像正是我们需要的！”

玛吉不以为然地转过头去假装继续擦桌子，我则把旅馆的位置详细地告诉他们。然后这对夫妇就离开了，那男的满面笑容感谢我们，那女的没有回头看一眼。

我姐姐疲惫地看了我一眼，摇摇头。我却笑了笑，说：

“你得承认，那女的和哈格·弗雷泽真是天生一对。机不可失。”

“你倒好，给自己找乐子，”玛吉推开我，走到厨房里去。“我可得住在这里。”

“那又怎么样？听着，你再也不会见到那两个德国佬了。而要是哈格·弗雷泽知道我们把她的旅馆介绍给过路的游客，她还有什么好抱怨的？”

玛吉摇摇头，可是这次不再板着一张脸了。

*

德国夫妇走了以后店里安静了许多，后来杰夫回来了，我觉得自己已经做了超出我应做的份儿，就上楼去了。我回到房间，拿出吉他坐在窗台上，开始全神贯注地继续想一首写到一半的歌。可后来——好像才没过多久——我就听见楼下来喝下午茶的客人渐渐多起来了。若又像平时一样客人太多，玛吉肯定会叫我下去的。我决定我最好偷偷溜出去，到山上继续写歌。

我从后门出去，没有遇到一个人，一出来就感到到外面来太好了。天还很热，特别是我背着吉他箱，但是微风习习、沁人心脾。

我朝上周发现的一处地方走去。这个地方在餐厅后面，要先爬一段陡峭的小路，再走一段较平缓的斜坡，走几分钟，就来到了这条长椅跟前。我精心挑选了这个地方，不单单因为这里风景好，还因为这里不在山路的交界处，没有大人带着筋疲力尽的小孩气喘吁吁地走过来坐在你旁边。但另一方面，这里也不是完全看不见人，偶尔会有散步的人经过，随意地跟你打声招呼，有时还会拿我的吉他开个玩笑，但都不会停下脚步。对此我并不介意。这样好像有听众，又好像没有，给了我所需的想象空间。

我在长椅上待了大约半个小时，突然感觉到刚刚有人像平常一样打了声招呼走过去，但现在站在几码远的地方不动了，看着我。我恼了，略带讥讽地说：

“好了，你们不用给我钱。”

只听一阵熟悉的开怀大笑，我抬起头来，看见那对德国夫妇朝长椅这折回来。

我马上想到可能他们去了哈格·弗雷泽的旅馆，发现我骗了他们，现在回来找我算账。可我又看见不仅是那个男的，连那女的也笑嘻嘻的。他们走回到我面前，那时太阳快落山了，所以有一会儿我只

能看见他们的轮廓，身后是一轮巨大的落日。他们又走近了些，我看见两个人都惊喜地看着我的吉他——我还在弹着——像在看着一个婴孩。更令人吃惊的是，那女的跟着我的节拍点着脚。我突然觉得不好意思，便把手停下。

“嘿，接着弹！”那女的说。“你弹得真好听。”

“是啊，”男的说，“太好听了！我们远远地听到了。”他指了指。“刚才我们在那里，在那个山脊上。我对索尼娅说我听见弹琴的声音。”

“还有唱歌的声音，”女的说。“我对蒂洛说，听，有人在唱歌。我说对了，不是？刚刚你还唱了一小段。”

我一时无从接受面前这个面带微笑的女人就是中午刁难我们的那一个。我把他俩又仔细地打量了一番，生怕认错了人。可是错不了，他们还穿着刚才那身衣服，虽然那男的阿巴头型被风吹得有点乱。不管怎样，只听那男的说道：

“我想你是中午给我们做了好吃的那家餐厅里的那位先生？”

我说是。那女的又说：

“你刚刚唱的那首曲子。我们隐隐约约远远地听到了。我特别喜欢每一小节结束时的调子。”

“谢谢，”我说。“这是我的新歌，还没写完。”

“你自己写的歌？真是天才！请把你的歌再唱一遍，像刚刚那个样子。”

“知道吗？”男的说，“你录这首歌的时候，一定要告诉制作人你要这首歌听起来是这种感觉。像这样！”他转身指了指我们面前一望无际的赫里福郡。“你一定要告诉他你要像这样的音响环境。你要听众像我们今天这个样子听到这首歌，下山的时候，在风中隐约听见……”

“不过当然要清楚些才行，”女的说。“不然听众就听不清歌词了。但蒂洛说得对。一定要让人联想到户外、空气、回声。”

两个人越说越激动，仿佛在山上遇到了又一个埃尔加似的。虽然我刚刚怀疑他们是来找我麻烦的，但现在禁不住热情以待。

“这个嘛，”我说，“既然我这首歌大部分时间是在这里写的，歌里有些这里的感觉也不奇怪。”

“没错，”两人一齐点点头说道。那女的又说：“别不好意思。把你的歌拿出来跟我们分享。很好听。”

“好吧，”我随意拨弄着琴弦，说。“好吧，你们真想听的话，我就给你们唱一首。不唱这首还没写完的。唱另外一首。但是，你们这样子站在我面前我没法唱。”

“当然了，”蒂洛说。“是我们失礼了。我和索尼娅经常要在很多奇奇怪怪的场合表演，都忘了要替别的乐手着想了。”

他在小路旁找了块矮草地坐下，背对着我，面朝风景。索尼娅给了我一个鼓励的微笑，在他身旁坐下。她一坐下，蒂洛就把手搭在她的肩膀上，两人偎依在一起，好像当我不存在了，只是一对情意绵绵的夫妇在一起欣赏乡村的黄昏。

“那好，我唱了，”说完，我弹起了试音时经常唱的那首歌。我对准远处的地平线唱歌，但眼睛不停地去瞅他们两个。虽然我看不见他们的脸，但看到他们一直紧紧地靠在一起，没有丝毫不自在，我知道他们很享受我的音乐。唱完以后，他们转过来，笑容灿烂，还鼓起了掌，掌声在群山间回荡。

“太好听了！”索尼娅说。“真是天才！”

“太棒了，太棒了，”蒂洛说。

我有点不好意思，假装忙着摆弄吉他。当我再次抬起头来时，他们还坐在那里，但把身子转了过来，好跟我说话。

“那么说你们是乐手咯？”我问。“我是指职业乐手？”

“对，”蒂洛说，“我想你可以说我们是职业的。索尼娅和我表演二重奏。在旅馆啦、酒店啦、婚礼上啦、宴会上表演。满欧洲跑，但还是最喜欢在瑞士和奥地利演出。我们以此为生，所以，对，可以说我们是职业的。”

“但是首先在于，”索尼娅说，“我们干这行是因为我们相信音乐。我看得出你也一样。”

我答道：“若有一天我不再相信音乐，我就撒手不干了，就这样。”说完我补充道：“我也想成为职业乐手。那种生活一定很棒。”

“是啊，是很棒，”蒂洛说。“我们很庆幸自己能干这一行。”

“对了，”我有点唐突地说道，“你们去了我说的那家旅馆了吗？”

“我们真是太失礼了！”蒂洛惊呼道。“我们被你的音乐吸引住了，压根儿忘了要谢谢你。是，我们去了，正是我们想要的旅馆。幸好还有空房间。”

“那旅馆正合我们的意，”索尼娅说。“谢谢你。”

我又假装忙着摆弄琴弦。然后尽量装出很随意的样子，说道：“我突然想到我还知道一家旅馆，比莫尔文旅馆好些。我想你们不妨换一下。”

“哦，可是我们已经安顿下来了，”蒂洛说。“我们已经把行李都拿出来了，而且，那旅馆正是我们想要的旅馆。”

“是啊，但是……但是，之前，你们问我有没有旅馆的时候，我不知道你们是乐手。我还以为你们是银行职员什么的。”

两个人都大笑起来，好像我说了一个很好笑的笑话。接着，蒂洛说道：

“不，不，我们不是银行职员。虽说我们常常希望自己是银行职员！”

“我意思是，”我说，“有其他的旅馆更适合，嗯，搞艺术的人。很难跟一个你完全不了解的陌生人推荐合适的旅馆。”

“多谢你费心，”蒂洛说。“可是请别再为我们操心了。我们现在这样很好。再说了，人与人的差别没那么大。银行家也好，音乐家也罢，我们对生活的基本需求是一样的。”

“我想你说的不全对，”索尼娅说道。“我们这位年轻朋友，你瞧他没有到银行里去谋职。他的梦想很不一样呢。”

“也许你说得对，索尼娅。总之，我们觉得现在这个旅馆很好。”

我低头随意弹了几个小节，一时间没有人说话。过了一会儿，我问：“那你们演奏什么类型的音乐呢？”

蒂洛耸耸肩。“索尼娅和我都会几种乐器。我们都会弹键盘。我喜欢单簧管。索尼娅善于拉小提琴，还很会唱歌。我想我们最喜欢演

奏的是传统的瑞士民歌，但是是用现代的方式来演绎。有时都称得上是激进的了。我们从类似这样做的大作曲家那里吸取灵感。比方说扬纳切克。你们英国的沃恩·威廉斯⁽³⁾。”

“但是我们现在不常表演这些了，”索尼娅说。

他们递了一下眼色，我想这是紧张的暗示。但转眼蒂洛一贯的笑容又回到了脸上。

“是啊，就像索尼娅说的，在这个现实的世界，大部分时候，我们得演观众想听的东西。所以我们多演一些热门歌曲。披头士啦，卡彭特啦。也有新一点的歌。观众们很喜欢。”

“那阿巴乐队呢？”我脱口而出，马上就后悔了。但蒂洛好像并没有听出我话里的调侃。

“啊，我们也唱阿巴的。《舞会皇后》，这歌永远受欢迎。其实，在《舞会皇后》里我还自己唱上一段，和声的部分。索尼娅会告诉你我的嗓音有多难听。所以我们一定得在听众吃饭吃到一半的时候唱这首歌，这样他们才不会跑掉。”

说完他哈哈大笑起来，索尼娅也笑了，但没有他笑得厉害。这时，一个穿着像是黑色潜水衣、职业打扮的自行车手从我们旁边飞驰而过，我们默默地看着他剧烈运动的背影渐渐远去。

“我去过瑞士一次，”我打破沉默。“两年前的夏天。我去了因特拉肯，住在当地的青年旅社。”

“啊是，因特拉肯，漂亮的地方。一些瑞士人瞧不起那儿，觉得那里只是给游客观光用的。可索尼娅和我都很喜欢在那里表演。其实，夏天的夜晚，在因特拉肯给来自全世界的欢欢喜喜的人们演出，是一件非常棒的事。你在那里玩得开心吗？”

“是，很开心。”

“我们每年夏天都要去因特拉肯的一个餐厅表演几个晚上。我们坐在帐篷里表演，面对餐桌，这种晚上餐桌当然是在外面啦。我们表演时能看见所有的游客在星空下一边吃着一边有说有笑。游客的身后是一大片空地，白天用来给滑翔伞降落，到了晚上就被何维克街的灯火照亮了。如果你还能看得更远，可以看见远处耸立的阿尔卑斯山。艾格尔峰、门希峰、少女峰。而且空气温暖宜人，还洋溢着我们演奏

的音乐。每次在那里演出我都觉得是特别的荣幸。我心想，啊，干这行真是太好了。”

“去年，那家餐厅的经理叫我们演出时穿上全套的传统服装，”索尼娅说。“可天热得不得了，很不舒服。我们说有什么差别呢？为什么一定要穿上大大的马甲、围围巾、戴帽子？我们就算只是穿衬衫也一样很像瑞士人，又整洁。可是餐厅经理说我们要么穿上全套衣服，要么走人，自己选，说完就走了，就这样。”

“可是索尼娅，哪个工作都一样，都有制服，老板都要求你一定要穿。在银行工作也一样！而人家要我们穿的至少是我们所相信的。瑞士的文化。瑞士的传统。”

这时我又一次隐隐感觉到他们之间有什么不愉快，可这种感觉只持续了一两秒钟，他们看着我的吉他，就又都露出了微笑。我觉得自己该说点什么，就讲道：

“我想到不同的国家去表演一定很有趣。你得保持敏感，了解你的听众。”

“是，”蒂洛说，“我很高兴我们能给各种各样的人表演。不单单在欧洲。总而言之，我们因此得去了解很多的城市。”

“比如说杜塞尔多夫，”索尼娅说。她的口气变了——变的有些硬——我仿佛又见到了中午餐厅里的那个人。可蒂洛似乎并没有察觉到什么异常，愉快地说道：

“我们的儿子现在就住在杜塞尔多夫。他跟你差不多大，可能比你大一些。”

“今年初，”索尼娅说，“我们去了杜塞尔多夫。有人邀请我们去表演。不是常有的事，是表演我们自己真正的音乐的机会。所以我们给儿子打了电话，我们的独子，告诉他我们要去他的城市。他没有接电话，我们就留了言。我们留了好几次留言。没有回音。我们到了杜塞尔多夫又给他留言，说我们到了，到你这里了。还是没有回音。蒂洛说别担心，也许他那天晚上会来，来看我们表演。可是他没有来。我们表演完了又去了别的城市，进行下一场演出。”

蒂洛咯咯地笑了。“我想彼得大概是受够了我们的音乐，从小听到大！可怜的孩子，不得不听我们排练，日复一日。”

“我想又要带孩子又要搞音乐挺难的。”我说。

“我们只有一个孩子，”蒂洛说，“所以还不算太难。当然我们是幸运的。我们外出表演不能带着他，他的祖父母总是很乐意帮忙。等他长大一点，我们就把他送到一家很好的寄宿学校。他的祖父母又帮了我们大忙，不然我们付不起那么高的学费。所以说我们是幸运的。”

“是，我们很幸运，”索尼娅说。“除了彼得讨厌那所学校。”

很显然之前的愉快气氛正在流逝。为了活跃气氛，我赶忙说：“不管怎么说，看样子你们很喜欢你们的工作。”

“哦，没错，我们很喜欢这个工作，”蒂洛说。“工作就是我们的一切。但即便如此，我们也很想放个假。知道吗？这是我们这三年头一次像样的假期。”

蒂洛的话又一次让我觉得特别不好受，我想再次劝他们换旅馆，但我知道这么做很可笑。我只能希望哈格·弗雷泽对他们好一点。我心里想着这个，嘴上却说：

“瞧，要是你们喜欢的话，我可以把刚刚那首歌再唱一遍给你们听。那歌还没写完，我不常演唱还没完成的作品。可既然你们已经听到了一些，我不妨把已经写出来的部分唱给你们听。”

索尼娅的脸上又露出了笑容，说：“好啊，快唱来听。那歌儿太好听了。”

我准备演唱的时候，他们把身子转回去，像刚刚那样面对着赫里福郡，背对着我。但是这次他们没有拥抱在一起，而是坐得异常的笔直，一只手放在眉毛上挡太阳。我弹的时候他们一直是这个姿势，一动不动，在草地上留下两道长长的夕照的影子，像两尊塑像。我慢慢地结束这首还没写完的歌。歌唱完了，他们仍旧一动不动，过了一会儿才放松身子，鼓了鼓掌，虽然没有前一次那么热烈。蒂洛一面称赞着一面站起来，然后扶索尼娅起来。看着他们站起来的样子我才意识到他们的年纪确实不小了。也有可能他们只是累了。就我所知，遇到我之前他们已经走了不少的路。总之就是我觉得他们起身的时候挺吃力的。

“你的演出太精彩了，”蒂洛说。“今天我们是游客，别人唱歌给我们听！调了过来，多有意思啊！”

“歌写完了以后要唱给我听，”索尼娅说，很认真的样子。“说不定有一天我会在电台里听到呢。”

“是啊，”蒂洛说，“到时索尼娅和我就可以翻唱给客人们听！”他洪亮的笑声在空气中回荡。接着他礼貌地微微鞠了一躬，说：“今天我们总共欠了你三次人情。可口的午餐，舒适的旅馆，还有美妙的山上音乐会！”

分别的时候，我很想告诉他们真相。告诉他们我故意给他们推荐了这里最烂的旅馆，希望他们趁还来得及赶紧搬出来。可是看着他们欢欢喜喜地跟我握手道别，我真是说不出口。就这样，他们下山了，又剩我一个人坐在长椅上。

*

我从山上下来时餐厅已经关门了。玛吉和杰夫看上去都累坏了。玛吉说这是他们最忙的一天，挺高兴的样子。可是晚餐上——我们的晚饭是店里各种各样的剩菜——杰夫说到同一件事时却是一脸的不高兴，像是在责怪我：他们累得半死的时候，我不帮忙跑哪儿去了？玛吉问我下午干什么去了，我没有提起蒂洛和索尼娅——说起来太复杂了——只是告诉她我到山上写歌去了。她又问我可有进展，我说有，大有进展。这时杰夫闷闷不乐地走了出去，盘子里的东西还没吃完。玛吉假装没看见，也对，几分钟后杰夫拿着一罐啤酒回来，坐下看报纸，一声不吭。我不希望他们俩为了我吵架，便很快离开了餐桌，回到楼上继续写歌。

白天我的房间很可以给人灵感，但到了晚上就不那么吸引人了。首先，窗帘不能把整个窗子遮住。大热天的时候，我把窗户一打开，数英里以内的蚊虫看到灯光，就会蜂拥而入。其次，房里只有一只赤裸裸的灯泡从天花板的灯线盒垂下来，投下昏暗的灯光，原本简陋的房间看起来更加不堪。那天晚上，我本想开灯把脑子里想到的歌词写下来。可是天实在太热了，最后我关掉灯，拉开窗帘，把窗子开得大大的，像白天那样抱着吉他坐在窗台上。

我就这样坐了大约一个小时，试验着各种桥段，突然听见敲门声，玛吉的头探了进来。房里漆黑一片，但是楼下露台的安全灯亮着，所以我能依稀辨认出她的脸。她的脸上挂着不自然的微笑，我心想她又要叫我下去帮忙干活了。她走到房间里，关上身后的门，说：

“对不起，亲爱的。今天实在把杰夫累坏了。他说他现在想安安静静地看电影？”

她的语气像是在发问。我过了一会儿才反应过来她是要我别再弹琴了。

“可我正写到关键的地方呢，”我答道。

“我知道。可是杰夫今天真的累坏了。他说你的吉他让他没办法休息。”

“杰夫应该知道：他有他的工作，我也有我的。”我说。

玛吉像是在掂量我的话，过了一会儿重重地叹了一口气。“我想我不该把这话告诉杰夫。”

“为什么？为什么不该告诉他？他应该知道。”

“为什么？因为他会不高兴，这就是为什么。而且我想他会认为你的工作跟他的工作根本不是同一个档次。”

一时间我看着玛吉，说不出话来。“你胡说八道什么啊。你说什么蠢话呢？”

玛吉疲惫地摇摇头，没有说什么。

“我不明白你为什么说这种蠢话，”我说。“而且是正当我进展得很顺利的时候。”

“你进展得很顺利，是吗，亲爱的？”昏暗中她一直看着我，过了好一会儿，她说道，“好了，我不跟你吵。”她转身打开门。“你愿意的话就下来跟我们一起看电影吧，”离开前她说道。

我看着在她身后关上的门，气得整个人都僵掉了。楼下隐隐约约传来电视的声音。即便是正在气头上，大脑深处仍旧有一个声音告诉我：我不应该朝玛吉发火，我应该气的人是杰夫，是他从我一到这里就有计划一步步地想要搞我。但我还是生我姐姐的气。我在她家待了这么久，她从来没有像蒂洛和索尼娅那样要我唱首歌给她听。这个要求对自己的姐姐来说不过分，而且我突然想到，她十几岁的时候也热衷于音乐。可现在，她在我想专心写歌的时候打断我，说些愚不可及的话。我一想到她说“好了，我不跟你吵”的样子，气又上来了。

我从窗台上下来，收起吉他，躺倒在床上，盯着天花板。如今我总算明白了他们叫我来是有目的的，是在旺季找一个廉价的，甚至不用付工资的帮手。而玛吉不懂得我现在奋斗的目标比她那个笨蛋老公大得多。我真应该明天就离开这里回伦敦去，让他们自己收拾烂摊子。我就这么胡思乱想了大约一个小时以后，冷静了一些，决定脱衣服睡觉。

第二天早上，我像往常一样在早餐的高峰过后下楼去，没有怎么跟玛吉和杰夫说话。我烤了几片面包，泡了咖啡，还吃了些剩下的炒鸡蛋，然后在店内的角落坐下。吃早饭的时候，我脑子里一直在想今天会不会在山上再次遇到蒂洛和索尼娅。虽说见到他们我可能得面对旅馆的事情，但我发现我还是想再遇到他们。再说，就算哈格·弗雷泽的旅馆真的很糟糕，他们也不会想到我是故意耍他们的。我有好些理由替自己开脱。

玛吉和杰夫可能想要我在午餐的时候帮忙，但我决定应该给他们一个教训，他们不应该不把别人当一回事。于是吃完早饭，我回到楼上，拿上吉他，从后门溜走了。

又是一个大热天，我爬上通往长椅的小路，汗不停地从脸上流下来。虽说早饭的时候我一直在想着蒂洛和索尼娅，但这会儿早把他们抛在了脑后，所以当我爬上最后一段斜坡，看见索尼娅独自一人坐在梯田上时，不禁吓了一跳。索尼娅一眼就看见了我，朝我挥手。

我对她仍旧有点提防，特别是蒂洛不在这里，我不是很想跟她坐在一起。可是她给了我一个灿烂的微笑，还往旁边挪了挪，像是给我让位，我别无选择。

我们互相打了招呼，并排坐在一起，彼此都不说话。一开始这样并不奇怪，一方面是因为我还气喘吁吁，一方面是因为眼前的景色。今天的天气没有昨天晴朗，云也比较多，但是你注意看的话，还是可以看见威尔士境内的布莱克群山。风挺大的，但不会感觉不舒服。

“蒂洛呢？”我终于开口问道。

“蒂洛？哦……”她把手罩在眼睛上。然后她指着远处说：“在那。看见了吗？那里。那个就是蒂洛。”

远远的我看见一个人影，隐约穿着绿色T恤衫、戴着白色太阳帽，朝着伍斯特郡的比肯山往上爬。

“蒂洛说他想去散步，”索尼娅说。

“你不和他一起？”

“不。我想留在这里。”

虽说她现在不是那个在店里发飙的顾客，但也不是昨天那个对我那么热情和鼓励的人。肯定出了什么事，我心里准备着对哈格·弗雷泽旅馆的说辞。

“对了，”我说，“昨天那首歌我又写了一点。想不想听听看？”

她想了想，说：“你要是不介意，恐怕现在不太合适。蒂洛和我刚刚发生了口角，或者可以叫做争吵。”

“哦，好吧。很抱歉听你这么说。”

“所以他散他的步去了。”

我们又不说话了。过了一会儿，我叹了口气，说道：“我想都是因为。”

索尼娅转过来看着我。“因为你？为什么？”

“你们吵架，你们的假期搞砸了，都是因为我，因为那旅馆，不是吗？那旅馆不是很好，对吧？”

“旅馆？”她一脸困惑。“这个嘛，那旅馆是有些毛病。可它就是个旅馆，跟其他的旅馆一样。”

“可你注意到了是吧？你注意到所有的毛病了。一定注意到了。”

她像是想了想我的话，才点点头，说：“没错，我注意到了旅馆的毛病。可蒂洛没有。他当然是觉得旅馆很好。他老说我们运气很好。很幸运能找到一家那样的旅馆。然后，今天早上吃早饭的时候，蒂洛说早饭真不错，是他吃过的最好的早餐。我说蒂洛，别傻了，这早饭不怎么样，这旅馆也不怎么样。他说不，不，我们很幸运。我生气了，向女主人投诉所有的问题。蒂洛把我拉开，说，我们去散步吧。走一走你就会感觉好些了。于是我们就到这儿来了。他说，索尼娅，看看这些山，不漂亮吗？我们能到这种地方来度假不是很幸运吗？他说，这些山比他听埃尔加的时候想象的还要美丽。他问我，不是吗？我可能是又生气了，说，这些山不怎么样，不是我听埃尔加的时候想象的那个样子。埃尔加的山雄伟、神秘，这儿只不过像个公园。我这么跟他说的，这回轮到他生气了。他说既然这样，他要自个儿去散步。他说我们完了，如今我们什么都说不到一块儿去了。他说，没有错，索尼娅，你和我，我们完了。说完他就走了！事情就是这样。这就是为什么他在那里，我在这里。”说完她又把手罩在眼睛上，追随着蒂洛的身影。

“真的很抱歉，”我说。“当初我要是没有推荐你们到那里去……”

“别这么说。旅馆不重要。”她往前探了探身子，好把蒂洛看得清楚些。然后转过来对我微微一笑，我想她的眼睛里噙着些许泪水。她说：“说说你今天是不是打算再写几首歌？”

“我是这么打算的。或者至少把还没写完的那首写完。昨天你们听的那首。”

“那首歌很美。你在这里写完这些歌以后要做什么呢？有什么计划吗？”

“我要回伦敦去组建一支乐队。这些歌需要一支合适的乐队，不然就没有用了。”

“多令人兴奋啊。我衷心地祝你好运。”

过了一会儿，我轻声说：“也有可能我不会去费这个劲。你知道组建一支乐队不是那么容易的。”

她没有回答，我想她可能没听见，因为她又转过头去看蒂洛了。

“知道吗？”过了好一会儿她说道，“以前没有什么事情会让我生气。可现在我老是生气。我不知道我为什么会变成这个样子。这样不好。咳，我想蒂洛不会回这边来了。我回旅馆等他吧。”她站起来，视线没有离开远处的身影。

我也站了起来，说道：“真遗憾你们在度假的时候吵架。昨天我弹琴给你们听的时候，你们看上去是那么幸福的一对。”

“是啊，多美好的时刻。谢谢你的歌。”她突然伸过手来，亲切地笑着。“认识你真好。”

我和她轻轻地握了握手。她转身准备离开，突然又停下来，看着我。

“如果蒂洛在这，”她说，“他会对你说，永远别灰心。他会说你一定要回到伦敦试着组建自己的乐队。你一定会成功的。蒂洛会这么说的。因为他就是这么一个人。”

“那你会说些什么呢？”

“我也会这么说。因为你既年轻又有才华。可是我不那么肯定。生活总是有很多不尽如人意的地方。但如果那是你的梦想……”她又

笑了笑，耸耸肩。“可我不应该说这些。我不是你的好榜样。而且，我看得出来你跟蒂洛比较像。假设真的遇上困难，你也不会放弃。你会跟他一样，说我太幸运了。”她盯着我看了几秒钟，像是要记住我的模样。微风吹动了她的头发，使得她看上去比平时老。“我衷心地祝你好运，”她最后说道。

“也祝你好运，”我说。“希望你们能重归于好。”

她最后一次挥了挥手，走下坡去，不见了。

我从盒子里拿出吉他，坐回到长椅上，并没有马上弹起来，而是看着远方，看着伍斯特郡的比肯山和斜坡上蒂洛细小的身影。也许是太阳照射在山上的角度的问题，现在蒂洛的身影比刚才清楚多了，虽然他离得更远了。他在小路上驻足了片刻，似乎在环顾四周的山峰，就好像是想重新评价它们。然后他的身影又开始移动。

我继续写歌，可老是开小差，老是在想早上索尼娅去找哈格·弗雷泽理论时，哈格·弗雷泽会是什么表情。我看了看天上的白云，又看了看脚下广袤的大地，然后把思绪重新拉回到我的歌上，拉回到还没写好的桥段上。

(1) 伍斯特郡为纪念当地名人、英国著名作曲家爱德华·威廉·埃尔加爵士（1857—1934）而将与其生平有关的四十多个地方连在一起，组成一条约四十英里的环形公路。

(2) 瑞典流行乐队名（1973—1982）。

(3) 列奥西·扬纳切克（1854—1928），捷克作曲家。沃恩·威廉斯（1872—1958），英国作曲家。两人都热衷于收集本国的民歌，并将人民的音乐语言融入自己的创作，形成独树一帜的风格。

小夜曲

两天前，琳迪·加德纳还住在我的隔壁。好吧，你会想，要是琳迪·加德纳住在我隔壁，那是不是说我住在贝弗利山；我是个电影制片人、演员或者音乐家。没错，我是个乐手。但虽说我在一两个你听说过的艺人身后表演过，我并不是什么大明星。我的经纪人布拉德利·史蒂文森，同时也是我多年的好友，说我有成为大明星的潜质。不只是成为在录音室里替人灌制唱片的大牌录音乐手，而是成为抛头露面的大腕。谁说萨克斯手再也成不了腕儿了，他说，然后开出一串名单。马库斯·莱特富特，西尔维奥·塔伦蒂尼，他们都是爵士乐手，我指出。“你不是爵士乐手，是什么？”他说。然而只有在我梦想的最深处我才是一个爵士乐手。在现实生活中——在我像现在这样把整张脸都缠上绷带之前——我只是一个打零工的萨克斯手，在录音室里讨生活，或者给乐队补缺。他们要流行歌曲，我就吹流行歌曲。节奏布鲁斯？没问题。汽车广告，脱口秀的进场音乐，我都做。只有在我自己的小卧室里我才是一个爵士乐手。

我更想在客厅里吹萨克斯，可是我们的公寓是造价低廉的那种，整条走廊上的邻居都会抱怨。于是我就把最小的房间改造成一间练习室。说是房间，其实也只不过就一个厕所那么大——在里面放把办公椅就满了一一可是我用泡沫、鸡蛋托和布拉德利从办公室寄来的旧加垫信封把这里隔了音。我妻子海伦，以前还和我住在一起的时候，看我拿着萨克斯要去那个房间时，就会笑着说，我像是要去厕所，而有时候感觉就是这样。也就是说，我坐在那间阴暗、不通风的房间里，做着自己的事，没人会想要来打扰。

你已经猜到琳迪·加德纳不可能住在我说的这么一个公寓隔壁。她也不可能是我在隔音室外面吹萨克斯就来“乒乒”敲门的邻居。我说她住在我的隔壁是另有所指，我现在就来解释给你听。

两天前，琳迪还住在这家豪华酒店的隔壁，而且和我一样，整张脸都缠着绷带。琳迪当然在这附近有一所舒适的大房子，还有帮佣，所以鲍里斯医生就让她回家了。事实上，从严格的医学角度来讲，她大概早就可以回去了，但很明显还有其他原因。比如说，回到自己家里就不那么容易躲开照相机和八卦专栏作者了。再者，我的直觉告诉我鲍里斯医生名声好是因为他的做法不是百分百合法，所以他把病人藏在酒店里极其隐秘的这一层，普通员工和客人是找不到这里的，他

也嘱咐我们不到万不得已不要离开房间。要是你能透视这些纱布，你在这里待上一个星期比你在夏特蒙特酒店住上一个月更能发现名人。

那么像我这种人怎么会跟这些大明星和大富翁住在一起，让全城最顶尖的医生给我整容呢？我想这事儿是我的经纪人布拉德利起的头。他自己也不是什么大腕，也不比我长得更像乔治·克鲁尼。他第一次提起这事儿是在几年前，半开玩笑地，后来再提起的时候，一次比一次认真。他的大意就是我太丑了。正是这一点阻碍我成名。

“看看马库斯·莱特富特，”他说。“看看克里斯·布戈斯基，或者塔伦蒂尼。他们哪一个能吹出你这么有特色的声音？没有。哪一个有你的温柔、你的想象力？哪一个有你一半的技巧？没有。可人家长得端正，所以大门一直为他们敞开。”

“那比利·福格尔呢？”我说。“他丑得不行，可他混得不错。”

“比利是很丑。可他是性感的、坏坏的丑。而你，史蒂夫，你是……咳，你是平庸的、失败者的丑。不对路子的丑。听着，你有没有想过对你的容貌做点什么？我是指外科手术方面的？”

回家以后我把这些话原原本本地讲给海伦听，因为我想她会和我一样觉得太滑稽了。刚开始确实是这样，我们把布拉德利好好地嘲笑了一番。接着海伦不笑了，伸手搂住我，说，至少对她来说，我是世界上最帅的。然后她后退了一步，不说话了。我问她怎么了，她说没什么。接着她说，也许，只是也许，布拉德利说得对。也许我是应该考虑一下改变我的容貌。

“没必要这么看着我！”她喊道。“大家都这么做。而你，你这么做是出于职业需要。想要当好司机的人就得去买一辆好车。你也一样！”

然而那个时候我没有细想这件事，虽说我开始接受这个说法：我是“失败者的丑”。一方面，我没有钱。实话告诉你，海伦说什么好司机的那会儿，我们欠债九千五百美元。这就是海伦。就很多方面而言她是个好人，可是这种全然忘记我们实际的经济状况、开始幻想大笔新的花销的能力，这就是海伦。

除了钱以外，一想到要被人切来划去的，我就满心的不喜欢。我受不了这类事情。我刚开始和海伦拍拖时，有一次，她叫我跟她一起跑步。那是一个寒冷而干燥的冬天的早晨，我自己从来不怎么跑步，

但是那时我被她迷住了，急于想表现自己。于是我们就绕着公园慢跑，一开始我稳稳地跟在她后面，突然我的鞋踢到了地上凸出来的什么硬物，脚疼了一下，但不太厉害。可是当我脱掉运动鞋和袜子一看，大拇指上的趾甲翘了起来，像在做一个希特勒式的敬礼。我感到一阵恶心，昏了过去。我就是这个样子。所以你瞧，我对整容这事儿不感冒。

此外，当然了，还有原则问题。好吧，像我刚才说的，我并不坚持只做什么类型的音乐。为了赚钱，我什么都演。但整容就是另外一码事了，我还是有点尊严的。布拉德利说对了一件事：我的才华是这座城市里大多数人的两倍。然而如今这个不重要了。重要的是形象好、有市场、上杂志、上电视、去派对，还有你和什么人吃饭。这些统统让我恶心。我是个音乐家，我为什么要加入这个游戏呢？我为什么不能按照我心中最理想的方式演奏我的音乐，并且不断进步呢？即使只是在我的小卧室里，也许有一天，只是也许，真正喜欢音乐的人会听见并且欣赏我的演奏。我为什么要整容呢？

刚开始海伦像是站在我这边的，有一段时间没有再提起这件事。就是说，直到她从西雅图打电话来，说她要离开我去跟克里斯·普伦德加斯特在一起。这个普伦德加斯特她从高中起就认识，如今在华盛顿拥有成功的连锁餐厅。这些年我见过这个普伦德加斯特几次——他还来吃过一次晚饭——可是我从来没有怀疑过。“你那个隔音的碗柜，”那时布拉德利说道，“作用是双向的。”我想他说得对。

然而除了说明他们跟我现在在这里有什么关系以外，我不想多说海伦和普伦德加斯特的事情。你大概在想我立马北上，找那快乐的一对算账，在与情敌进行了一番男子汉大丈夫的争吵过后，整容就是自然而然的了。很浪漫，可惜你错了，事实不是这样的。

事实是：打电话来几个星期以后，海伦回来收拾她的东西。她伤心地在公寓里走来走去——毕竟我们在这里有过美好的时光。我以为她要哭出来了，可是她没有哭，只是继续整理东西，把所有的东西整整齐齐地打包好，说这一两天会有人过来取走行李。我手里拿着萨克斯往小卧室走时，她抬起头来，静静地说：

“史蒂夫，求你了。别再去那里了。我们得谈谈。”

“谈什么？”

“史蒂夫，看在上帝的分上。”

于是我把萨克斯放回盒子里，我们走进小厨房，在桌子旁面对面坐下。她开口了。

做了这个决定她不会回头了。她和普伦德加斯特在一起很开心，她在学校的时候就暗恋他了。可是离开我她感到难过，特别是在我事业不如意的时候。所以她考虑了以后，和她的新欢谈了谈，那人也替我难过。他的原话是：“史蒂夫得为我们的幸福买单真是太不幸了。”于是就这么定了。普伦德加斯特愿意为我出钱到全城最好的外科医生那里做整容手术。“是真的，”发现我茫然地看着她，她说道。“他说真的。费用他全包。医院的费用、康复的费用、所有费用。全城最好的外科医生。”一旦我整了容，就没有什么能阻止我前进了，她说。我会一飞冲天，我怎么可能会失败呢，以我的才华？

“史蒂夫，为什么这样看着我？机会难得。天晓得半年以后他还愿不愿意。现在就答应下来，好好地对待自己一回。只需忍耐几个星期，然后，嗖！你就一炮而红了！”

十五分钟后，在门口，海伦用严厉得多的语气说道：“你说的是什么话？什么叫做你愿意一辈子都在那个小房间里吹萨克斯？什么叫做你喜欢做一个大失败者？”说完，她走了。

第二天，我走进布拉德利的办公室，看看他有没有活给我，碰巧提起了这件事，原以为他会和我一起笑一笑，没想到他根本没有笑。

“这家伙很有钱？而且他愿意给你找最好的外科医生？也许他会给你找克雷斯波，甚至是鲍里斯。”

现在又多了个布拉德利，劝我要抓住这次机会，若我错过了这次机会，我这辈子就永远是个失败者。我生气地离开他的办公室，但是那天下午，他打电话给我，不停地劝我。他说，如果是因为我不想打这通电话；如果是因为拿起电话对海伦说，好，求你了，我愿意，求你让你的男朋友开那张大支票吧，会挫伤我的自尊心；如果是这个原因阻止了我，那么，他，布拉德利，愿意替我进行所有的交涉。我叫他吃屎去吧，挂断了电话。可一个小时后他又打过来，说他已经把事情都想通了，说我自己没想明白真是个傻瓜。

“这可是海伦精心策划的。想想她的处境吧。她爱你。可说到相貌，咳，你真的长得很抱歉。你不是靓仔。她希望你采取一点行动，但是你拒绝了。所以她能怎么办呢？啊，她这一步真是壮举。处心积虑。作为一名职业经纪人，我不得不佩服她。她跟这个人走了。好吧，也许她一直对这个人念念不忘，但其实她根本不爱他。海伦利用

他来为你的脸出钱。一旦你手术成功，她就会回来，看见帅气的你，她就会想要你这个人，迫不及待地想让人看见跟你出入宾馆……”

说到这里，我打断了他。我说，虽然这几年我习惯了他出于自身的职业利益编各种故事出来说服我做这个做那个，但是这次扯得太远了，扯到不见天日的深谷里去了，热气腾腾的马粪在那里也会瞬间冻结。说到马粪⁽¹⁾，我说我理解他出于本能忍不住每次都要胡扯一通，但是我还是不相信他的话，这只不过是他说出来的、希望能暂时把我忽悠成功的东西。说完，我再次挂断他的电话。

接下来的几个星期，工作似乎比以前少了。每次我打电话给布拉德利，问他有没有活，他都会说：“你自己都不帮自己，别人怎么帮你。”最后，我开始更加务实地考虑整件事情。我不得不面对这个事实：我得吃饭。还有，若这么做意味着最后会有更多的人听到我的音乐，这样的结果也不错啊？还有，我不是希望有朝一日能组建自己的乐队吗？什么时候能够实现呢？

最后，大概在海伦提议后六个星期，我随口跟布拉德利说到我重新考虑了这件事情。有我这句话就够了。他立马行动，打电话、做安排、又喊又叫，兴奋得不得了。说句公道话，他说到做到：所有的中间协商他全包了，我一次也不用跟海伦进行丢脸的谈话，更不用说跟普伦德加斯顿了。有时候布拉德利甚至能够制造出这种假象，感觉他在替我谈一桩生意，感觉有东西可卖的人是我。即便如此，我还是每天都要怀疑好几次。当事情真的来临的时候，来得很突然。布拉德利打电话来说鲍里斯医生突然临时取消了原定计划，我得自己一个人拿着行李在当天下午三点半之前到达指定地点。大概那个时候我临阵退缩了，因为我记得布拉德利在电话里冲我大嚷，叫我振作起来，说他会亲自送我去。接下来，经过九拐十八弯，我被载到了好莱坞山上的一所大房子，打了麻药，就像雷蒙德·钱德勒小说里的人物。

两天以后，我被送到了这里，贝弗利山上的一家酒店，在夜色的掩护下从后门进来。我被推到了走廊的深处，这里十分隐蔽，与酒店的正常营业完全隔绝。

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第一个星期，我的脸疼得要命，体内的麻药让我觉得恶心。我得把枕头立起来靠着才能睡，也就是说我根本睡不着。护士坚持二十四小时都把窗帘拉得严严实实的，所以我不知道到了什么钟点。然而，我一点儿也不觉得坏。事实上，我感觉好极了，兴奋、乐观。我

对鲍里斯医生充满信心，多少电影明星把自己的前程交到他的手里。再者，我知道我将是他的杰作；看见我这张失败者的脸，激起了他内心最深处的雄心壮志，让他想起了当初为什么选择了这个职业。他会百分之两百地全力以赴。解开绷带以后，我会看见一张精心雕琢过的脸，有点野性但又很有味道。毕竟像他这么有名望的人，会认真思考一个严肃的爵士乐手的各种需求，不会把爵士乐手跟其他人，比如说，电视上的新闻主播混为一谈。他甚至有可能还给我加了点那种似有似无的忧郁气质，有点像年轻时的德尼罗，或者吸毒前的切特·贝克。我畅想着我要做的专辑，要请哪些明星来助阵。我感觉得意洋洋，不敢相信曾经迟迟不愿整容。

到了第二个星期，药物的作用慢慢退去，我开始觉得消沉、孤独、可鄙。我的护士格雷西让一点阳光透进屋子里来——但她顶多是把百叶窗放了一半下来——还允许我穿着晨衣在房间里走动。于是我把CD一张接一张不停地放进B&O⁽²⁾，并在地毯上走来走去，时不时在梳妆台的镜子前停下，审视着镜子里那个只露出两只小眼睛的缠着绷带的怪物。

就是在这期间，格雷西第一次告诉我琳迪·加德纳住在隔壁。她要是早点告诉我这件事，在亢奋期的时候，我听了会很开心，甚至把它当作我美好新生活的首个标志。可我偏巧在这个时候听说这件事，在我跌入低潮的时候，听了这个消息我讨厌得又是一阵恶心。若你是琳迪众多的崇拜者之一，我说声抱歉。但事实就是，那时，如果有这么一个人能代表世上所有肤浅和恶心的东西，非琳迪·加德纳莫属：一个一无是处的人——实事求是吧，她已经证明她不会演戏，也不假装有什么音乐才能——可她还是照样能走红，电视和杂志争相报道她，怎么拍都拍不够她的笑脸。之前，我路过一家书店，书店外大排长龙。我以为是斯蒂芬·金什么的来了，结果是琳迪在签售她最新的口述自传。她是怎么做到的？当然是靠老一套。适时的绯闻，适时的结婚，适时的离婚。这样她自然而然就上了应景的封面、脱口秀，或者是像最近她在广播上做的那个节目，我不记得节目的名字了，她在节目里教大家离婚后的首个重要约会应该如何着装打扮，抑或是如果你怀疑你丈夫是同志，你该怎么做，等等。你会听见人们谈论她有什么“明星气质”，但其中的秘诀再简单不过了。就是不断地在电视和杂志封面上抛头露面，不停地出席各种首映礼和派对，把自己的手搭到名人的胳膊上。如今她就在这里，在隔壁，和我一样接受了鲍里斯医生的面部手术，在休养中。没有什么比这件事更能反映出现在我堕落了什么地步。一个星期前，我还是一个爵士乐手。如今我成了又

一个可怜的骗子，妄图通过整容跟在琳迪·加德纳们的后面，爬进空虚的名流堆。

接下来的几天，我试着用看书来打发时间，却无法集中精神。绷带之下的脸有的地方生疼地抽动，有的地方痒得要命。还有一阵一阵的发热和被关久了的幽闭感。我渴望吹萨克斯，一想到还要过好几周我的面部肌肉才能承受萨克斯的压力，我就更加沮丧。最后，我发现最好的打发大白天的做法不是听CD，而是盯着活页乐谱——我把小卧室里装和弦谱和乐谱的文件夹带来了一一哼些即兴的调子。

第二个星期快过去的时候，我肉体上和精神上的情况都开始好转。就在这时，我的护士递给我一个信封，神秘地笑了笑，说：“这可不是天天都有的。”信封里是一张酒店的便笺纸。这张纸现在就在我手边，我转抄如下：

格雷西告诉我说你厌倦了这种安逸的生活。我也是。你过来看看我，如何？今晚五点喝鸡尾酒会不会太早了？鲍医生说我不能喝酒，我猜你也是。所以看来只有苏打水和矿泉水了。去他的！五点见，不然我会伤心的。琳迪·加德纳。

也许是因为我那个时候实在是无聊至极；或者是我的心情又好起来了；或者是觉得有个一起被关的伙伴能聊聊天、说说话很不错。又或者是我并不是对美女完全免疫。总之，虽然我对琳迪·加德纳有种种成见，看了这封信以后，我还是感到兴奋，叫格雷西转告琳迪，我五点过去。

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琳迪·加德纳脸上的绷带比我还多。我至少头顶上还留了一块，我的头发就像沙漠里的棕榈树那样露在外面。可鲍里斯把琳迪的整个脑袋都包得严严实实的，活像一个椰子的形状，只在眼睛、鼻子和嘴巴的地方开了条槽。她那头浓密的金发怎么了，我不得而知。她的声音倒是没有受到绷带的影响，我在电视上看见过她几次，听得出她的声音。

“你现在感觉怎么样？”她问道。我回答说感觉还不错。她说：“史蒂夫。我能叫你史蒂夫吗？我从格雷西那里听说了你所有的事情。”

“哦？但愿她略过了不好的地方。”

“嗯，她说你是个乐手。很有前途的乐手。”

“她说的？”

“史蒂夫，你在紧张。我希望你和我在一起时不要紧张。我知道有些名人喜欢崇拜者见到他们时觉得紧张。这让他们更加觉得自己与众不同。可我讨厌这样。我希望你把我当成普通朋友。你刚才说什么？你说你不太在意这些。”

她的房间比我的大很多，这里只是套房的客厅。我们面对面地坐在一对白色沙发上，中间隔着一张矮矮的烟色玻璃的咖啡桌，能看见玻璃底下垫着的大块浮木。桌上放满了光鲜的杂志和一只未拆掉玻璃纸的水果篮。和我一样，她的空调也开得很大——裹着绷带是很热的——百叶窗也放得低低的，挡住窗外的夕阳。一个女佣给我端来了一杯水和咖啡，两杯里面都浮着吸管——我们喝什么都得用吸管——然后就离开了。

为了回答她的问题，我说我最痛苦的地方是不能吹萨克斯。

“可是你应该明白鲍里斯为什么不让你吹，”她说。“试想一下。你还没完全康复之前就去吹那管子，你脸上的肉会飞得屋里到处都是的！”

她好像被逗乐了，朝我挥了挥手，好像说那俏皮话的人是我。她说：“好了，你笑得太厉害了！”我也笑了，然后用吸管吸了几口咖啡。接着她聊起了最近整了容的朋友，聊他们都说了些什么、他们身上发生了什么好笑的事。她提到的人要么是名人，要么是跟名人结婚的人。

“这么说你是个萨克斯手咯，”她突然改变了话题。“选得好。萨克斯是种好乐器。知道我对所有年轻的萨克斯手说什么吗？我叫他们多听听前辈的作品。我认识一个萨克斯手，和你一样刚刚崭露头角，只听那些喜欢标新立异的人的。韦恩·肖特⁽³⁾之类。我对他说，从老一辈人那里你可以学到更多的东西。他们也许不是特别创新，但是他们的技术是一流的。史蒂夫，介不介意我放点东西给你听？好让你明白我的意思？”

“不，我不介意。可是加德纳太太……”

“哦，叫我琳迪。在这里没有辈分之分。”

“好吧。琳迪。我想说，我不年轻了。事实上，我快三十九了。”

“哦，真的？那也不老。不过你说得对，我没想到你年纪这么大了。鲍里斯给我们戴上这些一模一样的面具就看不出来了，是不是？听格雷西说的，我以为你是个刚刚崭露头角的孩子，被父母送来这里准备飞黄腾达。对不起，我搞错了。”

“格雷西说我‘刚刚崭露头角’？”

“别难为她。她说你是个音乐家，我就问她你的名字。我说我没听过这个名字，她说：‘那是因为他刚刚崭露头角。’就是这样。好了，听着，你多大又有什么关系呢？你还是可以从老一辈乐手那里学到东西。我想让你听听这个。我想你会喜欢的。”

她走到一个柜子前，不一会儿拿出了一张CD。“你会喜欢这个的。这首歌里的萨克斯太棒了。”

和我那边一样，她的房里也有一套B&O的音响。不一会儿，房里就响起了悦耳的弦乐声。几小节过后，一个懒洋洋的、本·韦伯斯特⁽⁴⁾式的次中音萨克斯响了起来，接着整个乐队也跟了进来。对这类东西不熟的人会以为是纳尔逊·里德尔⁽⁵⁾在为西纳特拉吹奏歌曲的引子。但最终传来的是托尼·加德纳的声音。这首歌的歌名——我刚刚想起来——是《当时在卡尔弗城时》，一首不是非常流行的民谣，如今也没什么人演了。托尼·加德纳唱着，萨克斯则一路跟着他，一行行地应和着。整首歌平淡无奇，而且太甜了。

不久，我的注意力从音乐上面转移到了琳迪身上。她在我面前缓缓地随着歌曲起舞，自我陶醉了。她动作轻盈、优雅——显然手术没有影响到她的身体——而且她身材苗条、匀称。她穿着一件半是睡衣半是晚礼服的衣服，也就是说，看上去既像病人但又迷人。与此同时，我努力在搞清楚一件事。我印象中琳迪最近刚刚和托尼·加德纳离了婚，但说到演艺圈的八卦，我是全国最差的一个，所以我渐渐地怀疑是我搞错了。要不然她怎么会这样跳着舞，沉醉在音乐里，一副很陶醉的样子？

托尼·加德纳的声音停了下来，弦乐器在桥段达到高潮，最后只剩下钢琴独奏。这时，琳迪好像回到了人间，停止摇摆，用遥控器关掉音响，然后走过来在我对面坐下。

“是不是很棒？明白我刚才说的话了吗？”

“是，很美，”我说道，心想不知道现在是不是还只谈论萨克斯。

“对了，你的耳朵没有骗你。”

“什么？”

“那个歌手。正是你想的那个人。并不因为他不再是我丈夫了我就不能放他的唱片，不是吗？”

“啊，当然不是。”

“而且歌里的萨克斯很美。现在明白我为什么要你听这个了吧。”

“是，很美。”

“史蒂夫，你有唱片吗？我指你自己演奏的？”

“当然有了。事实上隔壁就有几张CD。”

“亲爱的，你下次过来时把它们拿过来。我想听听你的演奏。好吗？”

“好的，但愿你不嫌弃。”

“哦，不，不会的。可我希望你不要觉得我多管闲事。托尼总说我爱多管闲事，我不应该干涉别人的事。可你知道，我觉得他那是势利。很多名人认为他们应该只对其他名人感兴趣。可我从不这么想。我把每个人都当作可能的朋友。比如说格雷西。她就是我的朋友。我家里所有的用人，他们也都是我的朋友。再比如在派对上。其他人都相互聊着他们最新的电影什么的，只有我和女服务员或者吧台的男招待聊天。我不觉得这是多管闲事，你觉得呢？”

“不，我丝毫不觉得那是多管闲事。不过，你瞧，加德纳太太……”

“请叫我琳迪。”

“琳迪。你瞧，跟你聊天真是太愉快了。可是这些药物真的把我搞得很累。我想我得回去躺一会儿。”

“哦，你不舒服？”

“没什么。只是这些药。”

“太糟了！你感觉好一些的时候一定要再过来。把那些唱片带来，你演奏的唱片。说定了？”

我不得不再次向她保证我今天聊得很愉快，我一定会再来。我正要出门时，她突然说道：

“史蒂夫，你下象棋吗？我是全世界下象棋下得最糟的，可我有一副很可爱的象棋。上周梅格·瑞安⁽⁶⁾带来给我的。”

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回到房里，我从迷你冰箱里拿了瓶可乐，在写字桌前坐下，看着窗外。窗外是一大片粉红色的夕阳。我们住得很高，我能看见远处高速公路上来来往往的汽车。几分钟后，我打电话给布拉德利。他的秘书让我等了很长时间，但他最后终于来听电话了。

“脸怎么样了？”他担心地问，好像在询问一只他放在我这里托管的心爱的宠物。

“我怎么知道？我仍旧是个隐形人。”

“你还好吧？你听上去……无精打采的。”

“我确实无精打采。这整件事都错了。我现在看明白了。事情不会成的。”

一阵沉默。接着他问道：“手术失败了？”

“我肯定手术没问题。我是说其余的部分，这事的发展。这个计划……事情的结果不会是像你所说的那个样子。我真不应该被你打动。”

“你是怎么了？你听上去情绪低落。他们给你灌什么了？”

“我很好。事实上，现在我的头脑比以前清楚多了。所以麻烦就来了。现在我看明白了。你的计划……我真不应该听你的。”

“你说什么呢？什么计划？听着，史蒂夫，事情很简单。你是个很有天赋的艺术家。等这件事过了，你还和以前一样该做什么做什么。你现在只是在清除一个障碍，没别的。没有什么计划……”

“听着，布拉德利，这里糟透了。不只是肉体上的难受。我现在意识到我在对自己做什么了。整件事都错了。我应该更看得起自己一些。”

“史蒂夫，什么事让你突然想说这些？出了什么事？”

“是他妈的出事了。所以我才给你打电话。我要你把我从这里弄出去。我要你给我换家酒店？”

“换家酒店？你以为你是谁？阿卜·杜拉王储啊？那家酒店他妈的怎么了？”

“怎么了？就是琳迪·加德纳住在我隔壁。她刚刚请我过去，叫我以后还要去。就是这么了！”

“琳迪·加德纳住在隔壁？”

“听着，我受不了再去一次。我刚刚去了，耐着性子待在那里。现在她说我们要玩她那副梅格·瑞安的国际象棋……”

“史蒂夫，你是说琳迪·加德纳住在隔壁？你还去看了她？”

“她放她丈夫的唱片！妈的，我想她现在又在放另一张。我现在堕落到这种地步了。跟她那种人。”

“打住，史蒂夫，把事情从头说一遍。史蒂夫，你他妈的闭嘴，把整件事解释给我听。解释一下你怎么会去看琳迪·加德纳。”

这时我确实暂时冷静下来了。我就简要地告诉他琳迪怎么请我过去，后来又发生了什么事。

“那么你没有对她无礼？”我一说完他就这么问道。

“没有，我没有对她无礼。我一直忍着。可是我不会再去了。我要换酒店。”

“史蒂夫，你不能换酒店。琳迪·加德纳？她缠着绷带，你也缠着绷带。她就住在你隔壁。史蒂夫，这是一个绝好的机会。”

“没有的事，布拉德利。这里是名流地狱。她那副梅格·瑞安的国际象棋，我的老天！”

“梅格·瑞安的国际象棋？什么意思？棋子长得像梅格·瑞安？”

“她还要听我演奏！她要我下次一定带CD过去！”

“她要你……天啊，史蒂夫，你还没把绷带拆掉就已经撞大运了。她想听你演奏？”

“我要你摆平这件事，布拉德利。我现在真是麻烦大了，我做了手术，你说动我做的，我居然傻到相信了你的话。可我用不着忍受这个。我用不着接下来两个星期都得和琳迪·加德纳在一起。我要你马上把我搬出去！”

“我不会把你搬出去的。你知不知道琳迪·加德纳是多重要的人物？你知不知道她都和哪些人往来，她打个电话就能替你做什么事？没错，如今她是和托尼·加德纳离婚了。可这没有影响。拉拢她，加上你的新面孔，大门就为你打开了。你会成为大明星的，只要一眨眼的工夫。”

“没有什么大明星，布拉德利，因为我不会再过去了，我也不要什么门为我打开，除非是因为我的音乐。我不相信你以前说的那些话，我不相信什么计划不计划的……”

“你别讲得这么激动。我很担心你脸上的线。”

“布拉德利，很快你就不用再担心我脸上的线了，知道为什么吗？我要把这副木乃伊面具拆下来，我要把手指伸到嘴里去，使劲拉我的脸，能拉成什么样就拉成什么样。你听到了吗，布拉德利？”

我听到他叹了口气，然后说：“好吧，冷静。冷静。你最近压力太大。我可以理解。如果你现在不想见到琳迪，如果你想让这么好的机会白白溜走，好吧，我理解你的立场。但是要礼貌，好吗？找个好借口。别断了后路。”

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跟布拉德利通完电话以后，我感觉好多了，过了一个相当惬意的晚上，看了半部电影，然后听比尔·埃文斯⁽⁷⁾的CD。第二天早餐过后，鲍里斯医生和两个护士过来，看似很满意就离开了。不久之后，十一点左右，有人来看望我——一个叫李的鼓手，几年前我在圣地亚哥的一支室内乐队里和他共事过。布拉德利也是他的经纪人，让他过来看我。

李是个不错的家伙，我很高兴见到他。他待了一个小时左右，我们交换彼此都认识的朋友的新闻，谁在哪个乐队，谁收拾行李去了加拿大或者欧洲。

“好多老队友都走了，不在了，太可惜了，”他说。“大家本来相处得很愉快，可转眼你就不知道对方身在何处了。”

他聊了聊他最近接的活，我们回忆了在圣地亚哥的一些时光，聊得很开心。就在他的来访接近尾声时，他说道：

“那杰克·马弗尔呢？你怎么解释？世界真奇怪，不是吗？”

“是很奇怪，”我说。“可话说回来，杰克一直是个好乐手。他现在的成就是他应得的。”

“是，可还是奇怪啊。记得那时候的杰克吗？在圣地亚哥时？史蒂夫，你随便哪一天晚上都有可能把他赶下台去。现在看看他。纯粹是运气还是其他？”

“杰克一直是个好人，”我说，“就我而言，看见任何一个萨克斯手得到认可都是好的。”

“认可是没错，”李说。“而且还就在这家酒店。我找找，我带着呢。”他在包里找了一通，掏出一份皱巴巴的《洛杉矶周报》。“找到了，在这里。西蒙——韦斯伯里音乐奖。年度最佳爵士乐手。杰克·马弗尔。看看，什么时候举行？明天在楼下舞厅。你可以溜达下去参加颁奖仪式。”他放下报纸，摇了摇头。“杰克·马弗尔。年度最佳爵士乐手。谁想得到呢，啊，史蒂夫？”

“我想我是不可能下楼的，”我说。“但我会记得举杯祝贺的。”

“杰克·马弗尔。天啊，这世界是不是疯了？”

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午饭后大约一个小时，电话铃响了，是琳迪。

“棋盘摆好了，亲爱的，”她说。“过来玩吧？别说不行，我无聊得快发疯了。哦，别忘了带CD过来。我太想听你的演奏了。”

我放下电话，坐在床边，想不通刚才为什么没有更加坚定自己的立场。我甚至连暗示说“不”都没有。也许我就是没有骨气。也有可能我虽然嘴上不承认，但其实认同了布拉德利的话。可是现在没时间想这些了，我得赶紧决定我的哪些CD最有可能感动她。前卫的是肯定不行的，比如去年我在旧金山跟一群电子乐手合录的那些。最后，我选了一张CD，换上干净的衬衫，再把晨衣披上，到隔壁去。

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琳迪也穿着晨衣，可她穿着这身衣服去参加个电影首映礼也没多大问题。棋盘确实已经在矮矮的玻璃桌上摆好了。我们像上次那样面对面坐下，开始下棋。大概是因为有事可做，这次的气氛比上次轻松多了。我们边下棋边东聊西聊：电视节目啦、她最喜欢的欧洲城市啦、中国菜啦。这次没有像上次那样提到很多人的名字，她似乎也比上次安静许多。下着下着，她突然说道：

“你知道我怎么没让自己在这个地方待到疯掉吗？我的秘诀？我来告诉你，可你不能说出去，对格雷西也不能说，好吗？我的秘诀就是半夜出去散步。只在这栋楼里，但是楼很大，可以走个不停。而且夜深人静的时候真是太不可思议了。昨天晚上我走了有一个小时？你也得当心，还是一直都有工作人员在走来走去，但是我从来没有被人撞见。我一听到动静就跑开躲起来。有一次清洁工瞥见了，但是我马上躲到阴影里去了！太刺激了。整个白天你是个囚犯，到了晚上，你就好像完全自由了，真的是太好玩了。哪天晚上我带你一起去，亲爱的。我带你看好东西。酒吧、餐厅、会议室，还有很棒的舞厅。一个人也没有，又空又黑。我还发现了一个最有意思的地方，一间顶层公寓，我想以后是总统套房？建了一半，可被我找到了，我还进得去。我待在那里，二十分钟，半个小时，在那里想事情。嘿，史蒂夫，这样对吗？我可以这样走，吃掉你的皇后吗？”

“哦。对，我想是。我没看见。嘿，琳迪，你说你不会下棋，可实际上你挺行的嘛。现在我要怎么走呢？”

“好吧，听我说。你是客人，而且听我说话确实让你分心了。我就假装没看见。我是不是很好？对了，史蒂夫，我不记得问没问过你。你结婚了吧？”

“结了。”

“她对这件事怎么看？我的意思是这不便宜。用这些钱她可以买好几双鞋。”

“她同意这件事。事实上，这事最初是她的想法。看看现在是谁不专心了？”

“哦，该死。反正我下得很臭。我不是要多管闲事，可她经常来看你吗？”

“她一次也没来过。可这是我们的共识，在我来这里之前。”

“哦？”

她好像没听懂，我就说：“是挺奇怪，我知道。可我们说好了要这样。”

“好吧。”过了一会儿，她说道：“那是不是说没人来看你呢？”

“有人来看我。其实今天早上就有。我以前共事的乐手。”

“哦，是吗？那太好了。亲爱的，我一直都搞不清楚马怎么走。你要是发现我走错了就告诉我，好吗？我不是有意要作弊的。”

“好的。”然后我说道，“今天来看我的那家伙给我带来一条新闻。有点奇怪。挺巧的。”

“嗯哼？”

“几年前我们认识了一个萨克斯手，在圣地亚哥，一个叫杰克·马弗尔的人。你可能听说过他。如今他是个明星了。可那个时候，我们认识他的时候，他还默默无闻。但他其实是个骗子、冒牌货。从来都找不着调。最近我也听过他的演出，好几次，没有比以前进步。可他交了几次好运，如今成了红人了。我向你发誓他没有比以前好到哪儿去，一点也没有。可你知道是什么新闻吗？就是这家伙，杰克·马弗尔，明天要参加一个盛大的音乐奖颁奖礼，就在这家酒店。年度最佳爵士乐手。真是疯了，你知道吗？那么多的有才华的萨克斯手，他们却决定要把奖给杰克？”

我停了下来，抬头看着棋盘对面的琳迪，笑了笑，用平静了些的语气说道：“你能怎么办？”

琳迪坐了起来，把注意力全都放在我身上。“太糟了。你说这个人根本不优秀？”

“对不起，我有点失态了。他们想颁给杰克一个奖，有什么不可以呢？”

“可要是他根本不优秀……”

“他不比其他人差。我说说而已。对不起，你不用搭理我。”

“嘿，对了，”琳迪说道。“你把你的唱片带来了吗？”

我指了指身旁沙发上的CD。“不晓得你会不会有兴趣。你用不着非得听……”

“哦，可我要听，一定要。来，给我看看。”

我把CD递给她。“这是我在帕萨迪纳市时共事的一支乐队。我们演奏经典曲目，老派的摇摆乐，有点巴萨诺瓦。没什么特别的地方，只是你要我带我就带了。”

她端详着CD封面，先拿近了看，又拿开，又拿近，说：“你在封面上吗？我很好奇你长什么样。或者我应该说，你以前长什么样。”

“右边第二个。穿着一件夏威夷衬衫，拿着烫衣板。”

“这个？”她看了看CD，然后又看着我，说，“嘿，你长得很可爱。”可是她的声音很轻，一点儿都不让人信服，我甚至能清楚地感觉到有丝丝的怜悯。然而她马上回过神来。“好，我们来听听看！”

她朝音响走去，我说道：“第九首，《你在身旁》，是我的特别曲目。”

“《你在身旁》来了。”

我是经过一番思考才选了这首歌的。这支乐队里的成员水平很高。作为个人我们都有更加激进的理想，但是我们组了这么个乐队，专门演奏一些优秀的主流作品，晚餐食客们喜欢听的那种。我们演奏的《你在身旁》——我的萨克斯贯穿整首歌——并非完全颠覆托尼·加德纳的版本，但是我总是引以为豪。你可能会想这首歌的各种版本你都听过了。好吧，听听我们的。比如说，听听副歌第二段。或是中间的八个小节，乐队从III-5和弦升到VI x-9和弦时，我的萨克斯一直高上去，期间的跨度是你无法想象的，然后停留在那甜蜜的、非常温柔的降B大调。我觉得我的演绎赋予了歌曲不一样的味道，渴望、悔恨，你以前一定没有听过。

因此可以说，我有信心这首歌能让琳迪满意。头一两分钟，她似乎很享受。把CD放进去以后她就站在原地，像上次放她丈夫的唱片时那样开始随着缓缓的节拍恍恍惚惚地摇摆起来。可是渐渐地，她的动作越来越小，最后站在那里不动了，背对着我，低着头，像是在专心思考。一开始我并不觉得这是什么坏兆头。可歌还没播完，她就走回来坐下，这时我才意识到哪里不对了。隔着绷带，我当然没办法看到她的表情，可是她跌倒在沙发里的样子可不好看，像个紧绷绷的模特衣架。

歌播完了，我拿起桌上的遥控器，把音响整个儿关掉了。琳迪还是那么坐着，姿势僵硬、难看。似乎过了很久，她才稍微振作起来，伸手抚弄一颗棋子。

“很好听，”她说。“谢谢你给我听这个。”很客套，而她似乎并不在意她的话说得这么没有诚意。

“这首歌大概不合你的胃口。”

“没有，没有。”她的声音变得阴沉、冷淡。“很不错。谢谢你给我听这个。”说着她走出手里的棋子，说道，“轮到你了。”

我看着棋盘，努力回忆我们下到哪里。片刻后，我轻声问道：“也许那首歌，那首歌让你产生特别的联想？”

她抬起头来，我能感觉到绷带后面的怒气。可她还是用冷冷的声音说道：“那首歌？没有什么联想。没有。”突然她笑了起来——短促的、冷酷的笑。“哦，你是说有关他的联想，有关托尼的？没有，没有。他从没唱过那首歌。你吹得很好。很专业。”

“很专业？什么意思？”

“意思就是……就是很专业。我是在表扬你。”

“专业？”我站了起来，走过去把碟从音响里拿出来。

“你生什么气？”她的声音仍旧冷冰冰的。“我说错话了？抱歉。我没有恶意。”

我走回桌子边，把碟放进盒子里，但没有坐下。

“棋还下吗？”她问。

“你若不介意，我有一些事情得处理。电话啦，文件啦。”

“你生什么气？我不明白。”

“我没有生气。时间晚了，就这样。”

她终于站起来，送我到门口。我们冷冷地握手道别。

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我说过手术以后我的睡眠规律被打乱了。那天晚上我突然觉得累，早早睡觉，酣睡了几个小时，半夜醒来，就睡不着了。我躺了一会儿就起来开电视。我发现一部小时候看的电影，就拖了把椅子过来，声音开得小小的，把剩下的看完。看完了以后，我又看两名传教士在一群叫嚣怂恿的看客面前吵来吵去。总的说来我很满意。我感觉惬意，觉得自己远离了外面的世界。所以当电话响起时，我的心脏都快跳出来了。

“史蒂夫？是你吗？”是琳迪。她的声音怪怪的，像是喝了酒。

“是我。”

“我知道很晚了。可是我刚才路过的时候看见门缝底下有光。我想你和我一样睡不着。”

“我想是吧。如今很难正常起居。”

“是啊。肯定。”

“没事吧？”我问道。

“没事。都好。好得很。”

此时我听出来她并没有喝醉，可我仍搞不清楚她是怎么了。她也不一定就是喝醉了——可能只是睡不着，有话想跟我说，所以兴奋。

“真的没事？”我又问了一遍。

“没事，真的，可是……听着，亲爱的，我有个东西，我有个东西想给你。”

“哦？是什么呢？”

“我不想说。我要给你一个惊喜。”

“有意思。我什么时候过去拿吧，嗯，早饭以后？”

“我希望你现在就过来拿。我是说，东西在这里，而且你醒着，我也醒着。我知道很晚了，可是……听着，史蒂夫，今天白天，下午的事，我觉得我欠你一个解释。”

“忘了吧。我不介意……”

“你以为我不喜欢你的音乐，所以生我的气。不是的。不是这样的，恰恰相反。你给我听的，那个版本的《你在身旁》，我怎么也不能把它赶出脑海。不，我指的不是头脑，我指的是心。我怎么也不能把它赶出心扉。”

我不知道该说什么，不等我回答，她又说道：

“你过来吗？现在？我好好地解释给你听。而且最重要的是……不，不，我现在不能说。我要给你一个惊喜。你过来就知道了。把你的CD再带过来。好吗？”

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琳迪一开门就把CD从我手里拿过去，好像我是送货的，可是接着她就抓住我的手腕，把我拉进去。她还穿着那件漂亮的晨衣，但是看起来没有之前那么完美了：衣服一边高一边低，后脑勺领口附近的绷带钩住了一团绒毛。

“我想你刚刚夜游回来。”我说。

“你醒着我太高兴了。我不知道我是不是能等到早上。好了，听着，就像我刚刚说的，我要给你一个惊喜。我希望你会喜欢，我想你会喜欢的。可我要你先坐下来。我们再听一遍你那首歌。我看看，是第几首？”

我在老地方坐下，看着她摆弄音响。屋里的灯光柔和，空气凉爽宜人。接着《你在身旁》的音乐高声响了起来。

“不会吵到别人吗？”我说。

“管他的。我们付了这里一大笔钱，其他人不关我们的事。好了，嘘！听，听！”

她开始像之前那样随着音乐摇摆，只是这次她没有中途停下来，而且随着音乐的进行，她似乎越来越陶醉，张开手臂，像是在与一个假想的舞伴共舞。音乐停止以后，她关掉CD，一动不动地背对着我站在房间的尽头。她那样子站了似乎很长一段时间才朝我走过来。

“我不知道该说什么，”她说道。“太出色了。你是个很棒、很棒的乐手。你是个天才。”

“呃，谢谢。”

“我第一次听就知道了。是真的。所以今天下午我才会有那样的反应。假装不喜欢，假装讨厌？”她坐了下来，看着我，叹了口气。

“以前托尼总叫我别这样。我老是这样，怎么也改不掉。我遇见一个，你知道，一个真正的天才，一个天资过人的人，我就忍不住，我的第一反应就是像我今天下午对你的那样。这就是，我不知道，我想是嫉妒吧。就好像有时候一群女人，姿色平庸，一个漂亮的女人走了进来，就会遭到其他人的憎恨，想把她的眼睛挖出来。我遇见像你这样的人时就是这样。特别是不期而遇时，像今天这样，我没有准备。我是说，一分钟前我以为你只是一个普通人，突然间你……你不再是普通人了，你变成另一个人了。你明白我在说什么吗？总之我试着跟你解释为什么今天下午我会表现得那么坏。你完全有理由生我的气。”

一时间我们都没有说话，午夜的寂静笼罩下来。过了许久，我说道：“啊，谢谢，谢谢你跟我说这些。”

琳迪突然站了起来。“现在，我要给你的惊喜！在那里等着，别动。”

她走进隔壁的房间，传来开、关抽屉的声音。她回来的时候，胸前双手握着一件东西，然而她用丝手帕把东西盖着，我不知道她拿的是什么。她在房间的中央站住了。

“史蒂夫，我要你过来领。这是一个颁奖仪式。”

虽然不知道她要干什么，我还是站了起来，走过去。她揭开手帕，伸手递给我一个亮晶晶的铜像。

“你完全配得上这个奖。这个奖是你的了。年度最佳爵士乐手。也许是史上最佳。恭喜你。”

她把铜像放到我手中，透过纱布轻轻地亲了亲我的脸颊。

“啊，谢谢。确实是个惊喜。嘿，真好看。这是什么？鳄鱼吗？”

“鳄鱼？拜托！是一对可爱的小天使在接吻。”

“哦，是，我看出来了。啊，谢谢你，琳迪。我不知道该说什么。真的很漂亮。”

“鳄鱼！”

“对不起。只是这个小家伙把腿伸得这么老长。可现在我看出来了。真的很漂亮。”

“啊，奖是你的了。你应该得到这个奖。”

“我很感动，琳迪。真的。这下面写什么？我没戴眼镜。”

“写着‘年度最佳爵士乐手’啊。不然还能写什么？”

“真的？”

“是啊，当然是真的。”

我握着铜像走回沙发，坐下来想了一会儿，说：“告诉我，琳迪。你刚刚给我的东西。不可能是你在夜里散步的时候碰巧拿到的吧？”

“是啊。当然可能了。”

“这样。那不可能是，是真的奖杯吧？我指他们要颁给杰克的那个奖？”

琳迪没有马上回答，而是静静地站了一会儿才答道：

“当然是真的了。给你一个旧破烂有什么意义呢？本来会发生一件不公平的事，如今公正得到了伸张。这才是关键。嘿，亲爱的，好了。你知道你才应该得到这个奖。”

“你这么说我很感激。只是……啊，这有点像偷窃。”

“偷窃？不是你自己说那家伙一点儿都不优秀吗？是个冒牌货？可你是个天才。是谁偷了谁的？”

“琳迪，你到底是在哪里拿到这个东西的？”

她耸耸肩。“一个地方。我去的一个地方。可能是个办公室。”

“今天晚上？你今天晚上拿的？”

“当然是今天晚上拿的。昨天晚上我又不知道这个奖。”

“没错，没错。那么是一个小时前，对吗？”

“一小时。也有可能是两小时。谁知道？我出来了一段时间，去了一会儿我的总统套房。”

“天啊。”

“听着，谁会在意？你担心什么呢？他们丢了一个奖杯可以再去拿一个。说不定他们有一整柜的奖杯。我给你一个你应得的东西。你不会不要吧，史蒂夫？”

“我不是不要，琳迪。这份好意，这份荣誉，等等，我都接受，我真的很高兴。可是这个，这个真的奖杯，我们得还回去。我们得把它放回原处。”

“见鬼！谁会在意？”

“琳迪，好好想想。事情被发现了你会怎么样？你能想象得到媒体对这件事会怎么说吗？你的崇拜者们会怎么说？快点。我们现在就还回去，在大家还没起来之前。告诉我你在哪里找到这个东西的。”

她突然像个做错事的小孩，叹了口气，说：“我想你是对的，亲爱的。”

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说好了还回去以后，琳迪变得对这个奖杯特别恋恋不舍，一直把铜像紧紧地捏在胸前。我们匆匆地走过寂静的走廊，偌大的旅馆都在沉睡中。琳迪带着我走下隐蔽的楼梯和员工通道，走过桑拿浴室和自动贩卖机。我们一个人也没有看见或者听见。走着走着，琳迪突然小声说道：“这边。”我们推开厚厚的门，走进一个黑咕隆咚的地方。

我确定周围没有人后就打开从琳迪房里拿的手电筒，照了照四周。我们在一个舞厅里，可是如果你打算这时候跳舞的话，会发现餐桌碍事。每张餐桌上都铺着白色亚麻桌布，摆着相应的椅子。天花板上有一盏华丽的中央吊灯。房间的最里面有一个凸起的台子，幕布遮着，但挺大的，应该可以进行一场相当规模的演出。房间的中央搁着一架活动梯子，一台真空吸尘器竖直靠在墙边。

“看来要举行一个派对，”琳迪说。“四五百人？”

我往里面走了走，又用手电筒照了照。“可能就是这里了。就在这里给杰克颁奖。”

“当然是了。我发现这个地方”——她举起铜像——“还有其他铜像。最佳新人，最佳年度R&B专辑，等等这类东西。是个大活动呢。”

虽然手电筒不是很亮，可我的眼睛适应了这里的光线，能把这个地方看得更清楚了。刹那间，我站在那里看着舞台，能想象这个地方明天会是什么样子。我想象着所有的人穿着盛装，唱片公司的人、知名的活动赞助商、演艺圈的各路明星，大家有说有笑，互相恭维。每当主持人提到某个赞助商的名字，大家奉承地鼓鼓掌；而当得奖人登台时，大家就认真鼓掌了，还夹杂着欢呼声和喝彩声。我想象着杰克·马弗尔站在台上，手握奖杯，脸上挂着一副自鸣得意的微笑，就像在圣地亚哥他独奏完、接受观众鼓掌时的那种微笑。

“也许我们错了。”我说道。“也许没必要把这个还回来。也许我们应该把它扔到垃圾堆里去。和你找到的其他奖杯一起。”

“哦？”琳迪糊涂了。“你这样想的，亲爱的？”

我叹了口气。“不，不是。可是这样做……很痛快，不是吗？把所有的奖杯都扔进垃圾堆里。我敢说所有的得奖人都是冒牌货。我敢说他们那群人连个热狗面包都做不来。”

我等着琳迪接我的话，可是她什么也没说。而当她开口时，她的声音里有一丝与先前不同的语气，严厉的语气。

“你怎么知道有些得奖人不行？你怎么知道有些人不配得到他们的奖？”

“我怎么知道？”我突然很生气。“我怎么知道？想想看吧。一个认为杰克·马弗尔是年度最杰出的爵士乐手的评审团，他们会把奖给什么样的人呢？”

“可是你怎么知道其他人怎么样？甚至是这个杰克。你怎么知道他取得这个奖不是他努力来的？”

“这算什么话？难不成现在你成了杰克最大的粉丝了？”

“我只是说说我的想法。”

“你的想法？这是你的想法？我想我不应该这么惊讶。我差点忘了你是什么人了。”

“你这话是什么意思？你怎么敢这么跟我说话？！”

我突然意识到我情绪失控了，赶紧说道：“好了，我失态了。对不起。我们开始找那间办公室吧。”

琳迪没有做声。我转过去看着她，光线太暗，我猜不出她在想什么。

“琳迪，办公室在哪儿？我们得找到那里。”

最后，她终于用拿着雕像的手指向舞厅的后面，然后在我前面穿过那些桌子，仍旧没有说话。我们走到舞厅的后面，我把耳朵贴在门上听了几秒钟，没有声响，我小心地打开门。

我们到了一个似乎与舞厅平行的狭长的地方。不知哪里有盏昏暗的灯开着，所以我们不用手电筒就能依稀看得见。这里显然不是我们要找的办公室，而像是个餐厅连着厨房的地方。墙的两边摆着长长的工作台，中间留着一条仅供工作人员取食物的过道。

然而琳迪好像认识这个地方，大踏步朝走道里面走去。走到半中间突然停下来，研究起留在台子上的一个烤盘。

“嘿，是饼干！”她的情绪好像恢复了平静。“真可惜都包着玻璃纸。我饿扁了。看！我们看看这底下是什么。”

她又往前走了几步，打开一个穹顶状的大盖子。“看啊，亲爱的。真是诱人！”

出现在琳迪面前的是一只又肥又大的烤火鸡。她没有把盖子盖上，而是小心翼翼地放在火鸡的旁边。

“我扯条腿他们会不会介意？”

“我想他们会很介意，琳迪。可管他呢。”

“这腿真大。你要和我分吗？”

“不要白不要。”

“好。来吧。”

她把手伸向火鸡。可是突然间她直起身子，转向我。

“刚才到底是什么意思？”

“什么什么意思？”

“你刚才说的话。说你不应该惊讶。对我的想法。什么意思？”

“对不起。我不是有意冒犯。我只是自言自语。”

“自言自语？干吗不再多自言自语一些？我说也许有些人配得到他们的奖。这有什么好笑的？”

“我的意思只是这些奖颁错了人。可是你好像不这么认为。你觉得不是这样……”

“其中一些人可能很努力才取得今天的成就。他们需要一点认可。像你这样的人问题就在于，就因为上天赋予了你们特殊的才华，你们就觉得你们应该应有尽有。你们比我们其他人优秀，你们每次都应该排在前面。你们没有看见还有很多其他人不如你们幸运，可是他们很努力赢得社会的认可……”

“那你觉得我没有努力咯？你觉得我整天游手好闲？我费尽千辛万苦才做出有价值的、优美的音乐，可到头来谁受到认可？杰克·马弗尔！你这样的人！”

“你该死的敢这么说！我跟这件事有什么关系？我今天得奖了吗？谁给我颁过他妈的什么奖？我得到过什么？就是在学校，有没有什么唱歌、跳舞还是其他什么玩意的证书？没有！什么都没有！我总是看着别人，看着你们这些讨厌的家伙上台领奖，你们的父母在台下鼓掌……”

“没得过奖？没得过奖？看看你！谁是名人？谁住漂亮房子……”

就在这时，啪的一声，开关开了，我们俩在刺眼的强光下对视。两名男子从我们刚才进来的地方进来，朝我们走过来。过道刚好够他们两个人并排走。其中一个黑人大个儿穿着酒店的保安制服，一开始我以为他手里拿着枪，后来看清那是一部对讲机。另一个是个小个子白人，穿着浅蓝色西服，一头黑亮的头发。两个人看起来都不怎么友善。他们在我们面前一两码的地方停下，小个子从上衣里掏出证件。

“洛杉矶警局的摩根，”他说。

“晚上好，”我说。

那个警察和保安一言不发地看着我们。过了一会儿，那个警察问道：

“酒店的客人？”

“是的，”我说。“我们是酒店的客人。”

我感觉到琳迪柔软的睡袍擦过我的后背。接着她拉住我的胳膊，我们肩并肩站着。

“晚上好，警官。”她用和平时不一样的、懒洋洋、甜滋滋的声音说道。

“晚上好，夫人，”警察说道。“你们这会儿不睡觉是不是有什么特殊原因？”

我们俩马上抢着回答。我们笑了，但另外两个人可一点笑容也没有。

“我们睡不着，”琳迪说。“所以出来散步。”

“出来散步。”警察借着刺眼的白光环顾了一下四周。“还是找吃的。”

“是，警官！”琳迪还是尖着嗓门说。“我们饿了，我相信您晚上有时候也会肚子饿。”

“我想客房服务不够好，”警察说道。

“是不怎么好，”我说。

“尽是些稀疏平常的东西，”警察说。“牛排、比萨、汉堡、三明治。我刚刚自己从通宵营业的客房服务那里点了一份，所以知道。不过我想你们不喜欢这些东西。”

“嗯，您知道的，警官，”琳迪说道。“只是好玩。偷偷下来吃点东西，明知不允许。您小时候也干过吧？”

那两个人都没有软化的迹象。可是那个警察说道：

“抱歉打扰二位，可是要知道这里不对客人开放。而且刚刚丢了一两件东西。”

“真的？”

“是的。二位今晚看见什么奇怪、可疑的东西了吗？”

琳迪和我对视了一下，然后她朝我使劲地摇摇头。

“没有，”我说。“我们没有看见什么奇怪的东西。”

“什么都没有？”

说话间保安慢慢走上前来，他的大块头挤过我们身边的餐台，走到我们身后。我明白了他们的策略是保安上前来检查我们，看看我们有没有把什么东西藏在身上，而他的同伴不停地跟我们说话。

“没有，什么都没有。”我说。“你们觉得有什么呢？”

“可疑的人。不寻常的举动。”

“警官，您的意思是，”琳迪惊恐地说，“房间遭盗窃了？”

“不算是，夫人，可是确有一些重要的东西不见了。”

我能感觉到保安在我们身后晃动。

“所以您才会在这里，”琳迪说道。“来保护我们的人身和财产安全。”

“是的，夫人。”那个警察的视线微微动了一下，我感到他和我们身后的那个人交换了一下眼神。“好了，要是你们看见什么奇怪的东西，请马上联系保安。”

看来盘问结束了，警察让开道让我们出去。我松了一口气，准备离开，可是琳迪说道：

“我想我们太调皮了，跑到这里来吃东西。我们本想吃些那里的奶油蛋糕，可是我们想那蛋糕可能是有特殊用途的，糟蹋了可惜。”

“酒店里有很好的客房服务，”警察说。“全天候的服务。”

我想把琳迪拽走，可她好像突然中了邪，变成人们常说的那种莽撞、不知死活的罪犯。

“您刚刚自己点了东西，警官？”

“是的。”

“东西好吗？”

“挺不错的。我建议二位也这么做。”

“让先生们继续他们的调查吧，”我拽着琳迪的胳膊说，可她仍不走。

“警官，您介不介意我问您一个问题？”她问道。

“请问。”

“您刚才说看见什么奇怪的东西。您自己不就看见什么奇怪的东西了吗？我是指，我们两个？”

“我不明白你的意思，夫人？”

“比如说我们两个脸上都缠满绷带？您没注意到吗？”

警察仔细地看了看我们，像在验证琳迪说的最后一句话，然后说道：“事实上，我注意到了，夫人。可是我不想过问私事。”

“哦，这样啊。”琳迪说道，然后转向我，“他是不是很体贴？”

“走吧，”我说道，这次用力地把她拽走了。我能感觉到那两个人一直盯着我们的后背，直到门口。

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我们故作镇定地穿过舞厅。可一走出那扇双开式弹簧大门，我们就害怕得几乎跑起来了。我们一直搭着胳膊，所以一路上跌跌撞撞。琳迪领着我往前走，最后把我拉进了一架货运电梯。当电梯的门关上、我们开始往上升时，琳迪才放开我的手，背靠在金属墙上，发出一阵奇怪的声音，是透过绷带传来的歇斯底里的笑声。

走出电梯以后，她再次把手搭在我的胳膊上，说：“好了，我们安全了。现在我带你去一个地方。很特别的地方。看这个？”她拿出一张钥匙卡。“看看它能干什么用。”

她拿着卡片打开一扇写着“私人禁地”的门，然后又打开一扇写着“危险，禁止入内”的门。最后我们来到一个充满油漆和石灰味的地方。墙上、天花板上都垂着电线，冷冰冰的地板上满是水渍和污渍。我们能看清楚是因为房间有一面整个儿是玻璃——还没有挂上窗帘或者百叶窗——外面所有的亮光在这里投下淡黄色的斑点。这里比我们的房间还要高：看窗外的高速公路和周围的区域，我们像是从直升飞机上往下看。

“这里要建新的总统套房，”琳迪说道。“我喜欢来这里。还没有电灯，没有地毯。可正渐渐成形。我第一次来的时候比现在粗糙得多呢。如今你可以看出形状来了，甚至还多了这张睡椅。”

屋子的中央有一大团黑影，被床单完全盖住了。琳迪像看见老朋友一样走过去，疲惫地一屁股坐了下去。

“虽然这是我的想象，”她说，“可是我相信他们建这房间是为了我。所以我能到这里来。这一切。因为他们在帮我。帮我塑造我的未来。这里以前乱七八糟的。可是看看现在。它在渐渐成形。这里以后会很漂亮。”她拍了拍身旁的垫子。“来吧，亲爱的，休息一下。我累坏了。你一定也是。”

想不到这睡椅——抑或床单底下是其他什么东西——这么舒服。我一坐下去就感觉一阵阵的疲惫朝我袭来。

“天啊，我困了，”琳迪说道，把全部的重量压在我的肩膀上。“这里是不是很棒？我在狭缝里发现了钥匙，第一次来的时候。”

有一会儿我们都不说话，我自己也困了。可是我突然想到什么事情。

“嘿，琳迪。”

“哼？”

“琳迪。奖杯哪儿去了？”

“奖杯？哦，对了。奖杯。我藏起来了。不然还能怎么样？要知道，亲爱的，你真的配得那个奖。我希望这事儿对你有意义，我把奖杯颁给你，像今晚这样。不是我一时心血来潮。我考虑过，很认真地考虑过。我不知道这样做对你意义大不大，也不知道十年、二十年后你还会不会记得。”

“我当然会记得。而且这件事对我意义重大。可是琳迪，你说你藏起来了，藏在哪里？你把铜像藏到哪里去了？”

“哼？”她又昏昏欲睡了。“藏在我唯一能藏的地方。我把它放到火鸡里去了。”

“你把它放到火鸡里。”

“跟我九岁的时候一模一样。我把妹妹的荧光球藏在火鸡里。就想到了。反应够快吧？”

“是，确实。”我累得不行，可我强迫自己集中精神。“但是琳迪，你藏得很好吗？我是说那些警察现在会不会已经发现了？”

“我想不会。没有角露出来，如果你是指这个。他们怎么会想到找那里呢？我在背后塞的，像这样。一直塞。我没有转头去看，不然那两个人就会怀疑了。不是心血来潮。决定给你那个奖。我想过，很认真地想过。我真的希望这事儿对你有意义。天啊，我得睡了。”

她倒在我身上，不一会儿就打起呼噜来了。考虑到她动的手术，我小心翼翼地移动她的脑袋，以免她的脸颊压在我的肩膀上。接着，我也渐渐入睡。

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我猛地醒过来，看见面前的大窗户外天快亮了。琳迪还在熟睡，所以我小心翼翼地离开她，站起来，伸了伸胳膊。我走到窗户前，看着灰白的天空和底下远远的高速公路。我拼命回忆我睡着之前想到了一件什么事，可是我的脑子累得不行、迷迷糊糊的。突然间我想起来了，我走回睡椅，摇醒琳迪。

“什么事？什么事？你要干吗？”她闭着眼睛说。

“琳迪，”我说。“奖杯。我们把奖杯忘了。”

“我告诉过你了。奖杯在火鸡里。”

“是，所以你听着。那些警察可能不会想到去看火鸡里面。可是迟早会有人发现的。说不定现在就有人在切火鸡了。”

“那又怎么样？他们发现奖杯在里面。那又怎么样？”

“他们发现奖杯在里面，他们会报告这一重大发现。那个警察就会想起我们。他会想起我们曾经在那里，站在火鸡旁。”

琳迪好像清醒多了，说道：“是，我明白你的意思了。”

“只要奖杯在火鸡里，他们就会怀疑我们跟这一罪行有关。”

“罪行？嘿，什么罪行？”

“随便你怎么说。我们得回去把东西从鸡里拿出来。然后随便放哪里都可以，就是不能放在那里。”

“亲爱的，我们真的非这样做不可吗？我现在累死了。”

“我们非这样做不可，琳迪。奖杯放在那里，我们会有麻烦的。而且记住，对于记者来说，这可是一条大新闻啊。”

琳迪想了想，然后稍微直了直身子，看着我说：“好吧，我们回那里去吧。”

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这一次走廊里有做清洁和人说话的声音，但我们还是安全地回到了那个舞厅，没遇见一个人。光线也好多了，琳迪指了指双开门旁边的告示。上面用塑料的字母拼块写着：J. A. 普尔清洁剂公司早餐会。

“难怪昨晚找不到放奖杯的办公室，”她说，“不是这个舞厅。”

“这没关系。现在我们要的东西在这里面。”

我们穿过舞厅，小心翼翼地走进餐厅。和昨天晚上一样有盏昏暗的灯开着，现在又多了些气窗照进来的自然光。没有看见人，可我沿着长长的工作台扫了一眼，发现我们有麻烦了。

“看来有人来过，”我说道。

“是啊。”琳迪往过道里走了几步，看看两边。“是啊。看那里。”

之前我们看见的罐子、盘子、蛋糕盒、有银色穹顶盖子的大盘子统统不见了。取而代之的是一堆堆间隔整齐地摆放着的盘子和餐巾。

“得，他们把食物都搬走了，”我说。“问题是，搬到哪儿去了？”

琳迪又往过道里走了几步，然后突然转过来。“记得吗，史蒂夫，上次在这里，在那两个人进来之前，我们在讨论一个问题。”

“是的，我记得。可又提起它干吗？我知道我失态了。”

“是啊，不提了。那只火鸡到底哪儿去了？”她又左右看了看。“知道吗，史蒂夫？小时候我十分渴望成为舞蹈家或歌唱家。我努力啊努力，老天知道我努力了，可人们只知道笑话我，我觉得这个世界太不公平了。但是后来我长大一些，我发现这个世界也不是那么不公平。即使是像我这样的人，没有什么天赋的人，也仍然是有机会的。你仍旧可以在天底下找到自己的位置，不一定只能是个默默无闻的人。要做到不容易。你得十分努力，不理睬别人怎么说。可机会一定有。”

“啊，你似乎干得不错。”

“世界上的事真奇怪。知道吗，我觉得这是非常明智的。我指你妻子，叫你来做这个手术。”

“我们别提她。嘿，琳迪，你知道那扇门通向哪里吗？那边那扇？”

房间的尽头，餐台的末端，有三个台阶通向一扇绿色的门。

“干吗不去看看？”琳迪说。

我们像刚刚一样小心翼翼地打开门，一时间我完全找不着北了。这里很暗，我每次想转身都会碰上帘子或防水布之类的东西。琳迪拿着手电筒在我前面，似乎没有我这么狼狈。接着我终于踉跄地走到了一个黑咕隆咚的场子，琳迪正等着我，手电筒照着我的脚。

她低声说道：“我发现你不喜欢谈到她。我指你妻子。”

我也低声回答她：“没有的事。我们这是在哪儿？”

“她没来看过你。”

“那是因为我们现在不在一起。既然你非得知道。”

“哦，对不起。我不是要多管闲事。”

“你不是要多管闲事？！”

“嘿，亲爱的，看！就是这个！我们找到了！”

她用手电筒照着不远处的一张桌子。桌子上铺着白色桌布，并排放着两个银色穹顶盖子。

我走到第一个穹顶前，小心地打开。一只肥肥的烤火鸡端坐在里面。我摸索着它的腹腔，伸了根指头进去找。

“什么都没有，”我说。

“你得伸到里面去。我塞得很里面。这些鸡比你想的要大。”

“我说了里面什么都没有。手电筒照那里。我们试试另一只。”我小心地掀开第二只的盖子。

“你知道，史蒂夫，我觉得这样不对。你不应该觉得说这件事是丢脸的。”

“说什么事？”

“说你和妻子分开了。”

“我说我们分开了？我那样说了吗？”

“我以为……”

“我说我们不在一起。两码事。”

“像一回事……”

“啊，不是。只是暂时的，试验性的。嘿，我摸到什么东西了。这里面有东西。找到了。”

“把它拽出来，亲爱的。”

“不然你以为我在干吗？天啊！你非得塞这么里面吗？”

“嘘！外面有人！”

一开始很难判断外面有几个人。接着声音近了，我听出来只有一个人，在不停地打电话。我也明白我们在哪里了。我本以为我们到了一个什么后台，但其实我们就站在舞台上，我面前的帘子是把我和舞厅隔开的唯一东西。打电话的男子正穿过舞池，朝舞台走过来。

我轻声示意琳迪关掉手电筒，灯熄了，一片漆黑。她在我耳边说道：“我们离开这里。”说完我听见她悄悄地离开。我再次试图把铜像从火鸡里拿出来，可现在我不敢弄出声音，而且我的手指头没法抓牢铜像。

声音越来越近，最后那家伙像是就在我面前。

“……那不是我的问题，拉里。菜单上得印上公司标志。我不管你们怎么印。好吧，那你就自己印吧。对，你自己印，自己送过来，我不管你怎么做。只要在今天早上送过来，最迟七点半。我们这里要那些东西。桌子很好。桌子很多，相信我。好好。我会确认的。好，好。对。我马上就确认。”

那男的边说最后一句话，边走到了房间的另一头。他一定是按了墙上的什么开关，一道强烈的光线从我头顶上直射下来，同时传来类似空调的嗡嗡的声音。只是我意识到发出声音的不是空调，而是我面前的帘子在慢慢打开。

在我职业生涯中我总共上台过两次进行独奏表演，突然间我不知道从何开始，不知道要用哪个调，不知道怎么换弦。那两次我都僵住了，像电影里的定格，直到乐队里有个人上来救我。我入行二十年这种事情只发生过两次。总之，这就是头顶的聚光灯打开、幕帘慢慢掀开时我的反应。我僵住了。而且我突然感觉自己置身事外，有点好奇帘子拉开以后会看见什么。

我看见了舞厅，而且从舞台上更能看出桌子从头到尾被排列成整齐的两排。头顶的灯光在舞厅里投下了些许阴影，可我还是能看见大吊灯和华丽的天花板。

打电话的男子是个秃头的胖子，穿着灰色西服、开领衬衫。他一定是按了开关以后就走开了，如今他几乎和我平齐。他的电话贴在耳朵上，看他的表情你以为他在专心听对方讲话。可是我想他没有，他的眼睛死死地盯着我。他瞪着我，我也瞪着他，我们会这样子永远瞪下去，要不是他又接着打电话，可能是对方问他为什么突然不说话了。

“没事。没事。是个人。”他停顿了一下，接着说，“我刚刚以为是什么东西。没想到是个人。头上包着绷带，穿着睡衣。就是这样，现在我看清楚了。他手里抓着一只鸡什么的。”

我突然清醒过来，下意识地开始甩动手臂。我右手手腕以下还在火鸡里，我用力的甩动弄得整张桌子哐当作响。可至少现在我不用担心被发现了，因此我不管三七二十一，拼了命努力把手和铜像拿出来。而那个男的继续打他的电话。

“不，我没有骗你。现在他把鸡拿掉了。哦，他从里面拿出了什么东西。嘿，老天，那是什么？鳄鱼？”

他平静地说出最后那几个字，真是令人佩服。铜像拿出来了，火鸡嘭的一声掉到地板上。我急忙走进身后漆黑的地方，听见那个男的对他的朋友说：

“我怎么知道？可能是什么魔术吧。”

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我不记得我们是怎么回到我们住的地方了。离开舞台后我又被一堆帘子搞得晕头转向，好在琳迪抓住我的手。然后，我们急匆匆地奔回房间，再也不管我们弄出了多少声响，或者撞见了谁。路上，我把铜像放在某个房间外客房服务的盘子上，不知谁吃剩的晚餐旁。

回到琳迪的房间，我们一屁股坐到沙发上，大笑起来，一直笑到我们两个倒成一团。琳迪站起来，走到窗户旁，打开百叶窗。天已经亮了，虽说是阴天。她走到橱子前调起饮料——“世界上最棒的无酒精鸡尾酒”——然后递给我一杯。我以为她会在我旁边坐下，可她又走回窗前，小口喝着自己的饮料。

过一会儿她问道：“你期待吗，史蒂夫？期待绷带拆下来？”

“我想是吧。”

“上周我都还没怎么想这件事。觉得事情还远着呢。可现在不远了。”

“是啊，离我也不远了。”说完我轻声叫道，“天啊。”

琳迪抿了一口酒，看着窗外。然后我听见她说：“嘿，亲爱的，你怎么了？”

“我很好，只是得睡一觉。”

她看了我好一会儿，说道：“听我说，史蒂夫，会好起来的。鲍里斯是最棒的医生。你瞧着吧。”

“是。”

“嘿，你是怎么了？听着，这是我第三次整容。第二次找鲍里斯。会好起来的。你会变帅，很帅。而你的事业，从此以后蒸蒸日上。”

“可能吧。”

“不是可能！会焕然一新的，相信我。你会上杂志，上电视。”

我没有回答。

“嘿，好了！”她朝我走了几步。“打起精神来。你不是还生我的气吧？在下面我们不是搭档得很好吗？我还要告诉你，从今以后我就是你的搭档。你是个天才，我来助你一臂之力。”

“行不通的，琳迪。”我摇摇头。“行不通的。”

“谁说行不通。我去找人，能帮你大忙的人。”

我仍旧摇头。“我很感激。可是没有用。行不通的。从来就行不通。我不应该听布拉德利的。”

“嘿，好了。没错，我不再是托尼的妻子了，可我在城里还有很多好朋友。”

“这我知道，琳迪。可是没有用。是这样的，是布拉德利，我的经纪人，说动我来做手术的。我真是个白痴，听了他的话，可我没办法。我无计可施了，而他想出了这么套理论。他说是我妻子海伦想出了这个计划。她不是真的离开我。不是，这只是她计划的一部分。她那么做都是为了我，为了让我能做这个手术。绷带拆掉以后，我有了张新面孔，她就会回来，一切就又会好起来。布拉德利这么说的。他说的时候我就不相信，可我能怎么样呢？至少还有希望。布拉德利利用了这个，他利用了这个，他就是这样，你知道。他是个卑鄙小人，整天只想着生意，还有什么大腕。他怎么会关心她会不会回来？”

我不说了，琳迪也没有出声。过了好一会儿，她说道：

“听着，亲爱的，听着。我希望你妻子回来。真的。可如果她不回来，你也应该向前看。她也许是个好人，可是生活不单单只是爱一个人。你得振作起来，史蒂夫。像你这样的人，你们不属于普通人一类的。看看我。绷带拆掉以后，我会回到二十年前吗？我不知道。而且我已经很久没有在男人们之间周旋了。可我还是要去，去试一试。”她走过来，推了推我的肩膀。“嘿，你只是累了。睡一觉就会

感觉好多了。听着，鲍里斯是最棒的。他会搞定的，我们俩都是。你瞧着吧。”

我把杯子放到桌子上，站起来。“我想你说得对。就像你说的，鲍里斯是最棒的。而且在下面我们搭档得很好。”

“在下面我们搭档得很好。”

我往前把手搭在她的肩上，亲了亲她两个缠着绷带的脸颊，说：“你自己也好好睡一觉。我很快会再过来，我们再来下棋。”

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可是那天早上以后，我们很少再见面。事后想想，那天晚上我说了什么话本应该道歉，或至少是给个解释的。可是那时，回到她房间的时候，我们在沙发上大笑的时候，似乎没有必要，甚至是不应该旧事重提。那天早上道别的时候，我以为我们俩都已经不再想那件事了。即便如此，我已经见识了琳迪的反复无常。没准后来她回想起来，又生我的气了。谁知道？总之，我以为那天她会打电话给我，可是没有，第二天也没有。相反，透过墙壁，我听见托尼·加德纳的唱片高声播放着，一张接一张。

当我终于又过去的时候，大概是四天以后，她欢迎我，但有点冷淡。和第一次一样，她侃侃而谈她的名人朋友——虽然没有一个跟帮助我的事业有关，可是我不介意。我们下了棋，可是她的电话响个不停，她老得去卧室接电话。

后来，大前天晚上，她过来敲门说她要离开酒店了。鲍里斯对她的情况很满意，同意她回家拆绷带。我们友好地道别，可是似乎我们真正的道别已经说过了，就在那次大冒险过后的早上，当我上前亲吻她的两个脸颊的时候。

这就是琳迪·加德纳住在我隔壁的故事。我祝她顺利。至于我，我还要六天才能拆绷带，还要很久才能吹萨克斯。可现在我已经习惯这种生活了，我安心地过着每一天。昨天我接到海伦的电话，问我怎么样了。当我告诉她我认识了琳迪·加德纳时，她十分震惊。

“她还没再婚吗？”她问。当我把事情说给她听，她说：“哦，好吧。我一定是把她跟什么人混起来了，她叫什么名字来着。”

我们尽谈些无关紧要的事——她看了什么电视，她的朋友带着孩子顺道去看望她。接着她说普伦德加斯特向我问好，她说这句话的时

候语气明显变紧张了。我差点要说：“喂？我是不是听见你说情人的名字时没好气？”可是没有。我只说向他问声好，她没有再提起他。也有可能是我自己想象出来的。说不定她是希望我感激一下他。

她准备挂机的时候，我用夫妻间打完电话时那种快速、例行公事的语气说：“我爱你。”几秒钟的沉默，然后她也用同样例行公事的语气说“我也爱你”，就挂了。天知道她什么意思。我想如今我没什么可做的了，只能等着拆绷带。然后呢？也许琳迪说得对。也许像她说的，我应该向前看，生活确实不单单只是爱一个人。也许这次真的是我的转折点，我的明星梦不远了。也许她说得对。

(1) 英语里“马粪”也有“胡说八道”的意思。

(2) 丹麦皇家视听品牌。

(3) 美国黑人爵士乐手。

(4) 美国萨克斯演奏家。

(5) 美国作曲家。

(6) 美国女演员。

(7) 美国爵士乐钢琴家。

大提琴手

这是午饭后我们第三次演奏《教父》了，我扫视了一下坐在广场上的游客，想看看大概有多少是听过之前一次的。经典的歌曲人们不介意多听一遍，但不能太频繁，不然他们就会怀疑你是不是没有其他节目了。每年到了这个时候，重复一些曲目通常没什么问题。渐起的秋风和贵得离谱的咖啡总是让客人换了一批又一批。总之，这就是为什么我会去注意广场上的面孔，意外地发现了蒂博尔。

他正挥舞着手臂，一开始我以为他是在跟我们挥手，后来发现他是在招呼服务生。他看上去比以前老，还胖了些，但不难认出来。我用胳膊肘轻轻地推了推身边拉手风琴的费边，摆头示意他注意那个年轻人，因为当时我没法从萨克斯上腾出手来指给他看。就在这时，当我环顾乐队时，突然间发现：我们认识蒂博尔的那年夏天，当时在乐队里的那群人就只剩下我和费边了。

没错，那是七年前的事了，可我还是感到不小的震撼。像这样天天在一起演出，渐渐地你会把乐队当作家，把乐队里的其他成员当作你的兄弟。当时不时有人离开的时候，你就会想他们会一直保持联系，从威尼斯、伦敦或其他地方寄明信片回来，抑或是寄一张目前所在乐队的照片——就像给老家写信一样。因此想到以前的乐队就剩我们两个人，不禁令人感慨世事无常。今日的知己明日就变成失去联络的陌路人，分散在欧洲各地，在你永远不会去的广场和咖啡馆里演奏着《教父》或者《秋叶》。

这支曲子奏完了，费边狠狠地瞪了我一眼，怪我在他的“特别小节”推了他——算不上独奏，却是一段小提琴和单簧管难得下来的时候，我的萨克斯以柔和的音符给他伴奏，由他的手风琴把持调子。我跟他解释，把蒂博尔指给他看，这会儿蒂博尔正在阳伞下搅动着咖啡。费边想了好一会儿才认出他来，说：

“啊，对了，那个拉大提琴的小子。不知道他是不是还跟那个美国女人在一起。”

“当然不在了，”我说。“你不记得了？事情那个时候就结束了。”

费边耸耸肩，把注意力放到他的乐谱上，不一会儿我们开始演奏下一首歌。

我很失望费边对蒂博尔的出现不怎么感兴趣，不过我想他跟其他人不一样，从来就不曾对这个年轻的大提琴手有特别的兴趣。是这样的，费边只是个在酒吧和咖啡厅里演出的乐手，不像詹卡洛，我们当时的小提琴手，或者欧内斯托，当时的贝司手，他们是受过专业训练的，所以对蒂博尔这样的人总是很感兴趣。也许是有一点点的嫉妒在里面——嫉妒蒂博尔受过顶级的音乐教育，嫉妒他还有大好的前途。但平心而论，我觉得他们只是想保护像蒂博尔这样的人，给他们一些帮助，甚至让他们对未来做好准备，这样，当事情不尽人意的時候，他们就不会太接受不了。

七年前的那个夏天异常炎热，即便在这个城市有时也感觉像是在亚得里亚海。我们要在室外演出四个多月——在咖啡店的遮阳篷底下，面对着广场和所有的桌子——告诉你吧，干这活儿热得不得了，就算有两三台电扇在你旁边呼呼地吹。可是这倒带来了好生意，游客熙熙攘攘，很多是从德国和奥地利来的。本地的居民也跑到沙滩上来乘凉。那年夏天我们还开始留意到俄国人。如今看见俄国游客不稀奇，他们和其他游客没什么两样。可当时俄国人还很罕见，让人不禁停下来看几眼。他们穿着古怪，像学校里新来的小孩子一般不自在。我们第一次见到蒂博尔是在幕间休息的时候，我们在一旁咖啡馆为我们准备的一张桌子旁休息喝饮料。他就坐在旁边，不停地起来摆弄琴箱，不让太阳照到。

“瞧他，”詹卡洛说。“俄国来的穷音乐学生。他在这儿做什么呢？打算把所有的钱都扔在中央广场的咖啡上吗？”

“准是个傻瓜，”欧内斯托说。“但是个浪漫的傻瓜。为了在广场上坐一下午宁可饿肚子。”

他瘦瘦的，浅褐色头发，戴着一副老土的厚框眼镜，活像只熊猫。他每天都来，我不记得究竟是怎么起的头，只记得过了一段时间我们开始在幕间休息时和他坐在一起聊天。有时他在我们晚上演出的时候过来，演出结束以后我们会把他叫来，请他喝杯酒，或者吃烤面包片什么的。

不久我们就知道了蒂博尔不是俄国人，是匈牙利人；他的实际年龄要比长相大一些，他在伦敦的皇家音乐学院学习过，然后在维也纳待了两年，师从奥列格·彼得罗维奇。经过一开始痛苦的适应期后，

他学会了应付大师出了名的坏脾气，信心满满地离开维也纳——应邀到欧洲一些不大、但是很有名的地方演出。可是后来由于演出市场不景气，音乐会逐渐被取消；他开始被迫演奏一些他讨厌的音乐；住的地方不是贵就是脏。

于是乎我们这里精心组织的文化艺术节——那年夏天他正是为此而来——就成了他最需要的助推器。当皇家学院的一个老朋友愿意夏天把运河旁的一间公寓借给他时，他毫不犹豫就答应了。他说他很喜欢我们的城市，可是钱永远是个问题，虽然他偶尔有些演出，但现在他不得不好好考虑下一步怎么走了。

听说了蒂博尔的烦恼以后不久，詹卡洛和欧内斯托决定：我们应该为他做些事情。就这样蒂博尔见到了阿姆斯特丹来的考夫曼先生，詹卡洛的一个远房亲戚，在酒店界有点关系。

我仍然清楚地记得那个晚上。那时还是初夏，考夫曼先生、詹卡洛、欧内斯托，还有乐队里其他所有的人，我们坐在咖啡馆的里屋，听蒂博尔拉琴。年轻人一定是知道这是考夫曼先生的试听，所以那天晚上表演得特别卖力，现在回想起来真是有意思。他显然很感激我们，当考夫曼先生答应回阿姆斯特丹以后会尽力帮助他的时候，他的喜悦之情溢于言表。大家说那年夏天蒂博尔开始走下坡路，说他头脑发热、不知好歹，说都是因为那个美国女人，咳，也许不无道理。

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一天，蒂博尔喝着第一杯咖啡，注意到了那个女人。那时广场上还挺凉快——早上大部分时候咖啡馆的尽头都照不到太阳——洒过水的石块路面还湿湿的。蒂博尔没有吃早饭，所以眼红地看着隔壁的女人点了好几种混合果汁，后来又要了一盘蒸贻贝——肯定是一时兴起点的，因为那时还不到十点。他隐约觉得那女的也在偷偷看他，可他没有放在心上。

“她长得不错，甚至算得上漂亮，”那时蒂博尔这么对我们说。“可你们瞧，她比我大十、十五岁。所以我干吗要胡思乱想呢？”

不久蒂博尔就把她给忘了，准备回去，在邻居回家吃午饭、开起收音机前练两个小时琴。突然那女的站到他面前。

女人笑嘻嘻地看着他，那样子好像他们认识似的。只不过蒂博尔天性害羞，才没有跟她打招呼。女人把一只手搭到他的肩上，像是在原谅一个考试不及格的学生，说：

“几天前我看了你的独奏会。在圣洛伦佐。”

“谢谢，”他答道，但心里知道自己的回答傻乎乎的。看见那女的还是低头朝着他笑，他又说道：“哦，是的，圣洛伦佐教堂。没错。我确实在那里演出过。”

那女的笑了一声，突然在他面前坐了下来。“说得好像你最近演出很多似的，”女人略带讥讽地说道。

“如果您这么觉得，恐怕我给了您错误的印象。您看的那场独奏会是我最近两个月唯一的一次演出。”

“可是你才刚开始，”女的说。“有演出就是好事。而且那天观众不少。”

“观众不少？那天才二十四个人。”

“那是下午。下午的独奏会能有那些人算不错了。”

“我不应该抱怨。可是观众实在不多。都是些没有其他事可做的游客。”

“哦！别这么瞧不起人。毕竟我在那里。我也是游客之一。”蒂博尔脸红了——因为他无意冒犯——这时那女的拍了拍他的手臂，微笑着说道：“你才刚开始。别在意有多少观众。你不是为了这个演出的。”

“哦？若不是为了观众，那我为了什么演出呢？”

“我不是这个意思。我想说的是在你事业的这个阶段，二十个观众还是两百个观众，没有关系。为什么？因为你行！”

“我行？”

“没错。你行。你有……这个潜力。”

蒂博尔差点儿很没礼貌地笑出声来。他不怪那女的，更多的是怪他自己。他本以为对方会说“天赋”，或至少是“才能”，可马上转念想到：他希望对方这么评价自己是多么的愚蠢。然而那女的继续说道：

“现阶段，你要做的是等有人来听见你的音乐。这个人很可能就在周二那天的那间屋子里，在那二十个人里面……”

“是二十四个人，不包括组织者……”

“二十四，随便。我的意思是目前观众的人数不重要。重要的是那一个人。”

“您是指唱片公司的？”

“唱片公司？哦，不，不是。用不着操心那个。不，我指能挖掘你潜力的人。听了你的音乐，知道你不是又一个训练有素的平庸之才的人。知道虽然你现在还只是一枚茧，但只要些许帮助，就可以破茧成蝶。”

“我懂您的意思了。您是不是碰巧就是那个人？”

“哦，拜托！我看得出来你是个自尊心很强的年轻人，可我不觉得会经常有导师主动来找你。至少不是我这个级别的。”

这时，蒂博尔突然意识到自己可能在犯一个大错。他仔细端详着那个女人的脸。那女的已把墨镜摘下，她的脸温柔友善，但带着失望，甚至是些许愤怒。蒂博尔直盯着她看，脑子里拼命在想她是谁，但最后他只能说道：

“很抱歉。您大概是位著名的音乐家？”

“我叫埃洛伊丝·麦科马克，”她微笑着说道，伸出一只手来。可惜这个名字对蒂博尔来说毫无意义，他不知该如何是好。他的第一反应是假装惊讶，他说：“真的。太惊讶了。”可他马上就振作起来，知道这种谎话既不诚实，而且几秒钟内就会被揭穿的，那样更加尴尬。于是他坐直了身子，说道：

“麦科马克小姐，很荣幸见到您。我知道您一定会觉得不可思议，然而就是这样，我还年轻，而且是在冷战时期的东欧、在铁幕下长大的，很多西欧人家喻户晓的电影明星和政治人物，我至今还一无所知。所以请您原谅，我并不知道您是谁。”

“呃……真是诚实可嘉。”虽然她嘴上这么说，但显然觉得受到了冒犯，没有了之前的热情。两人尴尬地沉默了片刻，蒂博尔接着说道：

“您是著名音乐家，没错吧？”

她点点头，目光游移到广场上。

“我再次向您道歉，”蒂博尔说。“像您这样的人会来看我的演出真是我的荣幸。请问您演奏什么乐器？”

“和你一样，”那女的很快地说道。“大提琴。所以我才会进去听。即便是那天那种不起眼的小音乐会，我也忍不住要去听，不能走开。我想我有一种使命感。”

“使命感？”

“我不知道还有别的什么叫法。我希望每个大提琴手都能拉好琴。拉出优美的琴。他们的演奏方法常常被误导了。”

“抱歉，是只有我们大提琴手犯有这个毛病，还是指所有的音乐家？”

“其他乐器可能也有。但我是一个大提琴手，所以我也听其他大提琴手的。当我听出毛病的时候……你瞧，有一次，我看见一群年轻人在科雷尔博物馆的大厅演奏，大家都从他们身边匆匆走过去，我却停下来听他们演奏。我极力控制住自己没有走到他们面前去跟他们说。”

“他们拉错了？”

“不算是。但……咳，就是没有。就是少了。不过你瞧，我要求太高了。我知道我不应该要求每个人都达到我给自己定的水平。我想他们还只是音乐学院的学生。”

那女的第一次靠到椅背上，看着在中央喷泉泼水嬉闹的孩子们。最后蒂博尔打破沉默，说道：

“星期二那天您大概也有这种冲动吧。想过来找我把您的意见说出来。”

她微笑了一下，但马上变得非常严肃。“没错，”她说道。“我确实想。因为当我听你演奏的时候，我听见了以前的我。恕我直言，你现在的路子不对。当我听你演奏的时候，我很想帮你走上正轨。宜早不宜迟。”

“我必须声明，我接受过奥列格·彼得罗维奇的指导。”蒂博尔平静地说道，等着对方的反应。他惊奇地看见那女的强忍着没笑出来。

“彼得罗维奇，是，”对方说道。“彼得罗维奇在他的鼎盛时期是一位非常令人尊敬的音乐家。我也知道在他的学生心里，他一定仍然是一位重要的人物。可是对我们很多人来说，如今他的想法，他那整套方法……”她摇摇头，两手一摊。一时间蒂博尔气得说不出话

来，只是瞪着她。那女的又一次把一只手搭在他的胳膊上，说：“我说得够多了。我没有权利。我不再打扰你了。”

她站了起来，这个动作平息了蒂博尔的怒火；蒂博尔天生一副好脾气，从不会对别人耿耿于怀。再者，那女人刚才说的关于他旧日老师的那番话触到了他内心深处一根隐隐作痛的心弦——一些他一直不敢面对的想法。因此，当蒂博尔抬头看着那女人时，他脸上更多的是迷惑。

“瞧，”那女的说道，“我这么说你一定很生气。可我想帮你。要是你决定想谈一谈，我就住在那里。怡东酒店。”

这家全城最好的酒店坐落在广场的另一头，与咖啡店相对。那女的微笑着指给蒂博尔看，然后迈步朝酒店走去。蒂博尔一直看着她，快到中央喷泉时，那女的突然转过身来，惊起一群鸽子。她朝蒂博尔挥挥手才继续往前走。

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接下来的两天，这次会面在蒂博尔的脑海里挥之不去。他又想起当他那么自豪地说出彼得罗维奇的名字时她嘴角的冷笑，心里的怒火又烧了起来。回想那时的情景，蒂博尔知道他并不是为他旧日的老师感到生气，而是他已经习惯认为彼得罗维奇这个名字一定会产生效果，他可以依靠彼得罗维奇这个名字得到关注和尊敬：换句话说，他把这个名字当作向世人炫耀的证书。让他感到如此不安的是这个证书也许并不像他原来想的那么有分量。

他还念念不忘那女的临别时的邀请。当他坐在广场上时，他的视线不时游移到广场的另一端，怡东酒店的大门口，出租车和豪华轿车在门口不停地迎来送往。

终于，那次会面后的第三天，蒂博尔穿过广场，走进酒店的大理石大堂，请前台拨打那女人的分机号。前台拨通电话，问蒂博尔名字，说了几句以后就把话筒递给他。

“对不起，”蒂博尔听见那女人的声音说。“那天我忘了问你的名字，一下子没想起来你是谁。可我当然没有忘记你。其实我一直在想你。我有好多话想对你说。但是要知道，我们得把这事儿给做对了。你带着琴吗？没有，当然没有了。你一个小时以后再过来吧，一个小时整，到时把琴带上。我在这里等你。”

当蒂博尔带着乐器回到怡东酒店时，前台马上把电梯指给他看，告诉他麦科马克小姐在等他。

想到在大下午进她的房间，蒂博尔觉得很不好意思，好在麦科马克小姐的房间是一间大套房，卧室锁着，看不见。高大的落地窗外装有两扇木质遮阳板，此时打开着，所以蕾丝窗帘随风摇摆。蒂博尔发现走到阳台上就可以俯视广场。房间里粗糙的石墙和深色的木地板，感觉非常朴素，只有花、垫子和古典式家具作为装饰。相反，女主人穿着T恤衫、田径裤和运动鞋，像刚跑步回来。她什么招待也没有——没有茶也没有咖啡——就说：

“拉琴给我听。拉些你在独奏会上拉的曲子。”

她指了指端正地摆放在屋子中央的一把光亮的直椅，蒂博尔坐下来，拿出琴。那女的则在一扇大窗户前坐下，整个人侧对着蒂博尔，让人感觉不太自在。蒂博尔调音的时候，那女的一直都看着窗外。他开始拉了，那女的姿势也没有改变。第一支曲子拉完了，女人不发一言，于是他紧接着演奏下一首，然后又是一首。半个小时过去了，然后一个小时过去了。昏暗的房间、简陋的音效、飘动的蕾丝窗帘掩映下的午后阳光、远远传来的广场上的嘈杂声，但最主要的是那个女人的存在，使他的音符有了新的深度和含义。快一小时的时候，蒂博尔深信他的表现超出了对方的预期。然而当他演奏完最后一曲时，两个人默默地坐了好一会儿，那女的才终于转向他，说道：

“是，我知道你现在是什么样一个情况了。这事儿不容易，可是你做得好。你一定做得好。我们从布里顿⁽¹⁾开始吧。那一曲再拉一遍，第一乐章就好，然后我们聊聊。我们一起努力，每次进步一点。”

听了她的话，蒂博尔真想马上收拾东西走人。可是另一种本能——也许仅仅是好奇，也许是其他更深层次的东西——压过了他的自尊心，迫使他开始重新演奏那女的叫他拉的曲子。他刚拉了几小节，那女的就叫他停下来，开始讲。蒂博尔再次想起身走人。出于礼貌，他决定对这自来的指导最多再忍五分钟。可是他发现自己没有离开，多待了一会儿，然后又多待了一会儿。他又拉了几小节，那女的又接着说。她的话一开始总是让人觉得狂妄又很抽象，但当他试着把她的意思表现在音乐里的时候，他发现效果惊人。就这样，不知不觉又一个小时过去了。

“我突然间看见了什么东西，”蒂博尔这么跟我们说。“一座我没进去过的花园。就在那里，在远处。有东西挡着我的去路。可第一次有这么一个花园。一个我从来没见过的花园。”

当他终于离开酒店，穿过广场来到咖啡馆的时候，太阳已经快落山了。他犒赏了自己一份攒奶油杏仁蛋糕，喜悦之情一览无余。

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接下来的几天，蒂博尔每天下午都到酒店去，回来的时候，虽不像第一次那样有茅塞顿开之感，但至少是精神焕发、信心满满。麦科马克小姐的评论越来越大胆，旁观者（若有这么个旁观者的话）也许会觉得她的话太过分了，可是现在当她打断他的演奏时，蒂博尔再也不会这样想了。如今他害怕的是麦科马克小姐什么时候会离开这个城市。这个问题开始在他心里萦绕，让他睡不好觉，在每一次愉快的交流过后，当他走出酒店、走进广场时，在他心头投下一层阴影。可是每次蒂博尔试探地问她的时候，她的回答总是含含糊糊，不能让蒂博尔安心。“哦，等天凉到我受不了的时候，”一次她这么说道。还有一次：“我想我会一直待到我觉得烦为止。”

“可她自己呢？”我们一直问他。“她的琴拉得怎么样？”

我们第一次问他这个问题的时候，蒂博尔并没有好好地回答我们，只是说“她一开始就跟我她说她是一个大师”之类的话，然后就把话题转到别的地方去了。可我们揪着问题不放，他只好叹了口气，跟我们解释。

事实是，从第一次指导开始，蒂博尔就想听麦科马克小姐演奏，可是不好意思开口。他看了看麦科马克小姐的房间，没有大提琴的影子，心里有些生疑。可毕竟度假时没把琴带着是很正常的。而且，也有可能确有一把琴——可能是租来的——在关着的卧室的门后。

然而随着他一次次来到这里练琴，这种疑问越来越强烈。蒂博尔努力不去想这些，因为他原本对他们的会面还有所保留，现在统统没有了。麦科马克小姐只听不拉，似乎给了蒂博尔想象的空间。在不去麦科马克小姐那里的时间里，蒂博尔发觉自己常常在脑子里准备着曲子，想象着她会怎么评论，想象着她摇头、皱眉，或者肯定地点点头。可最让人开心的还数看到她陶醉在自己的音乐里，闭着眼睛，手跟着他假装拉起来。然而，他心里的疑问一直挥之不去。一天，他走进麦科马克小姐的套房，卧室的门半掩着。他看见房间里的石墙、一张中世纪风格的四柱床，可没有大提琴的影子。一个大师就算是在度

假，也这么久不碰她的乐器吗？可蒂博尔同样把这个问题赶出了脑海。

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夏日一天天过去，渐渐地，他们练习完了以后还要到咖啡厅里来继续交谈。麦科马克小姐给他买咖啡，买蛋糕，或者三明治。如今他们不仅仅谈论音乐——虽然每每都会回到音乐上来。比如，麦科马克小姐会问蒂博尔与他在维也纳相好的德国女孩的事。

“可您要知道，她不是我的女朋友，”蒂博尔说。“我们从没正式交往。”

“你的意思是你们从来没有亲密的肢体接触？这并不代表你不爱她。”

“不，麦科马克小姐，不是的。我当然喜欢她。可是我们没有相恋。”

“可是昨天你拉拉赫玛尼诺夫的时候，你想起了一段感情。是爱，罗曼蒂克的爱。”

“不，太荒谬了。我们是好朋友，但不是恋人。”

“但是你拉那一段的时候就像在回忆一段恋情。你还这么年轻就已经知道抛弃、离别。所以你会那样演奏第三乐章。大多数大提琴手演奏那一段时都是喜悦的。但是在你看来，那不是喜悦，而是追忆一去不复返的快乐时光。”

他们的交谈就像这样子。蒂博尔也很想回问她的事。可是就像他跟着彼得罗维奇学习的时候，他不敢问老师一个私人问题一样，如今他也没有勇气问她的私事。蒂博尔只是问些她无意中提到的小事——她现在怎么会住在俄勒冈州的波特兰，三年前她怎么从波士顿搬到那里，为什么她“因为有不好的回忆”而讨厌巴黎——但从不深究。

如今麦科马克小姐的笑容比他们刚认识的时候自然得多。她还养成了走出酒店时挽着蒂博尔的手走过广场的习惯。我们就是这样开始注意他们的，奇怪的一对，男的长相比实际年龄年轻许多，女的有时像个母亲，有时又像个“风骚的女演员”（欧内斯托语）。认识蒂博尔之前，我们总爱拿他们俩来嚼舌根。看见他们手挽着手从我们面前信步走过，我们交换一下眼神，说道：“你们觉得呢？他们好上了吧？”可是乐完了以后，我们还是耸耸肩，承认不像：他们没有恋人

的感觉。认识蒂博尔以后，听了他给我们讲他每天下午在她套房里的事，我们就不再消遣他，或者拿他开玩笑。

一天下午，他们坐在广场上喝着咖啡、吃着蛋糕，她讲起了一个想跟她结婚的男子。那人名叫彼得·亨德森，在俄勒冈州做高尔夫器材生意，做得很成功。他聪明、亲切，受到邻里的爱戴。他比埃洛伊丝大六岁，但这点年龄差不算大。他跟前妻生有两个孩子，但事情已经妥善解决了。

“现在你知道我在这里干什么了吧，”她说道，不安地笑了笑，蒂博尔还没见过她这样子笑。“我在躲他。彼得不知道我在哪里。我想我很残忍。上周二我给他打了电话，告诉他我在意大利，但没说在哪个城市。他很生我的气，我想他有权生气。”

“这么说，”蒂博尔说道。“这个夏天你在考虑你的未来。”

“不算是。我只是在躲着他。”

“您不喜欢他？”

她耸耸肩。“他是个好人。再说，我也没其他什么人可选。”

“这个彼得。他喜欢音乐吗？”

“哦……在我现在住的地方，他当然算是喜欢音乐的。至少他去听音乐会。然后到餐厅吃饭的时候，他会就刚刚听的东西大加赞美。所以我想他是喜欢音乐的。”

“可是他……欣赏您吗？”

“他知道跟一个音乐大师一起生活不容易。”她叹了口气。“我一辈子都有这个问题。你也一样。可是你和我，我们别无选择。我们有我们的路要走。”

她没有再提起彼得。可是从那以后，他们的关系又加深了一些。当他演奏完、她陷入沉思的时候，当他们一起坐在广场上，她看着旁边的阳伞默不做声的时候，蒂博尔一点儿也不会觉得不自在。他知道麦科马克小姐不是不理睬他，反而是感谢有他在。

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一天下午，蒂博尔拉完一曲后，麦科马克小姐叫他把接近尾声的一个八小节再拉一遍。他照做了，然后看见麦科马克小姐仍旧微微地皱着眉。

“拉的不是我们，”她摇摇头，说。麦科马克小姐和平常一样坐在落地窗前侧对着蒂博尔。“其他部分都很好。剩下的全部都是我们。可是这一小段……”她轻轻地哆嗦了一下。

他用不同的方法又演奏了一遍，但其实并不清楚他到底应该怎么拉，所以看见麦科马克小姐再次摇头他不奇怪。

“请原谅，”蒂博尔说道。“请您说得明白一点。我不明白您说的‘不是我们’是什么意思。”

“你是要我示范给你看吗？你是这意思吗？”

她的语气平静，转过脸来看着蒂博尔，蒂博尔感到气氛紧张。她目不转睛地看着他，近乎挑战，等着他回答。

最后，蒂博尔说道：“不是，我再试一次。”

“可你在想我为什么不示范给你看，对不对？为什么不借你的琴来说明我的意思。”

“没有……”蒂博尔摇摇头，努力装作若无其事的样子。“没有。我觉得现在这样很好。您口述，我拉琴。这样我才不是在模仿、模仿、模仿。您的话给我打开了一扇扇窗子。要是您来拉，窗子就不会打开。我就只是在模仿。”

麦科马克小姐想了想，说：“也许你说得对。好吧，我尽量解释得明白一点。”

接下来的几分钟，麦科马克小姐跟他解释乐曲的尾声与桥段的差别。然后蒂博尔把那一小段又拉了一遍，麦科马克小姐笑了笑，赞许地点点头。

然而这个小插曲以后，他们的下午时光就蒙上了一层阴影。也许阴影一直都在，只不过现在不小心从瓶子里跑出来，萦绕着他们。又有一次，他们坐在广场上，蒂博尔说起他的大提琴的前一任主人怎么在苏联时代用几条美国牛仔裤换得这把琴。故事讲完以后，麦科马克小姐似笑非笑地看着他，说：

“这是把好琴。声音不错。可我碰都没碰过，说不准。”

蒂博尔知道她又在试图闯入那个领域，马上把目光转向别处，说道：

“它不适合像您这种地位的人。就算是我，现在也感觉不太够用了。”

蒂博尔发现他再也不能无忧无虑地与麦科马克小姐交谈了。他害怕麦科马克小姐重新提起这件事，又回到那里。即便是在他们交谈甚欢的时候，蒂博尔大脑的一部分也在提防着，她一想从别的突破口转到那里去，蒂博尔马上把门关上。即便如此，蒂博尔也不是每一次都能把话题转开，于是当她说：“哦，要是我能示范给你看就容易多了！”之类的话时，他只能装作没听见。

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九月下旬——风渐渐转凉——詹卡洛接到考夫曼先生从阿姆斯特丹打来的电话：在市中心的一家五星级饭店里一支小型室内乐队需要一个**大提琴手。乐队在一个俯瞰餐厅的音乐席上演奏，一周演出四次。除了演出，乐手们在酒店里还有其他“与音乐无关的、轻松的工作”，包食宿。考夫曼先生马上想到蒂博尔，把空缺给他留着。我们立即把这个消息告诉蒂博尔——就在考夫曼先生打来电话的当晚，在咖啡馆里——我想大家都被蒂博尔的冷淡反应吓了一跳。与之前我们安排考夫曼先生对他进行“试听”时判若两人。尤其是詹卡洛非常生气。

“你还有什么好考虑的？”他质问蒂博尔。“你想要什么样儿的？卡内基音乐厅？”

“我不是不领情。可我总得考虑一下。给在吃饭聊天的人演奏，还有酒店的其他工作，是不是真的适合我？”

詹卡洛是个容易冲动的人，我们大家赶紧拦住他，不让他抓住蒂博尔的衣服，冲他大嚷。我们当中的一些人帮蒂博尔说话，说毕竟这是他自己的事，他没有义务接受他觉得不合适的工作。事情终于平静下来，这时蒂博尔也说这份工作若作为一份临时工作，也是有诸多优点的。他冷冷地指出，这座城市过了旅游旺季就是一潭死水，阿姆斯特丹好歹是个文化中心。

“我会好好考虑的，”最后他说道。“麻烦你转告考夫曼先生，我会在三天之内给他答复。”

詹卡洛对这个结果一点儿都不满意——他原本期望蒂博尔会对他感恩戴德——可他还是去给考夫曼先生打了电话。整个晚上，没有人

提起埃洛伊丝·麦科马克，然而大家都清楚蒂博尔会说那些话都是因为她。

“那个女人把他变成了一个不知天高地厚的小笨蛋，”蒂博尔离开以后欧内斯托说。“让他就这副德性去阿姆斯特丹吧。很快他就会尝到苦头了。”

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蒂博尔从未跟埃洛伊丝提起考夫曼先生的试听。他好几次想把事情说出来，却总是开不了口。他们的友谊越深，蒂博尔就越觉得若他接受了这份工作就像是背叛了埃洛伊丝。因此蒂博尔自然不会把事情的最新进展与埃洛伊丝商量，甚至都没有让她知道。可是蒂博尔从来就不善于隐藏秘密，他决定不让埃洛伊丝知道这件事，却发生了意想不到的事。

那天下午异常暖和。蒂博尔像往常一样来到酒店，开始把他准备的新曲子演奏给埃洛伊丝听。但是刚拉了三分钟，埃洛伊丝就叫他停下，说道：

“你有心事，你一进来我就看出来。我现在很了解你了，蒂博尔，我几乎从你敲门的声音就能听出来。听你拉琴以后，我更肯定了。没用的，你瞒不过我。”

蒂博尔沮丧地放下琴弓，正准备和盘托出时，埃洛伊丝举起一只手，说道：

“这件事我们逃避不了。你一直在回避这个问题，没用的。我想谈一谈。这一个星期以来，我一直想谈一谈。”

“真的？”蒂博尔惊讶地看着她。

“对，”她说道，并且把椅子转过来，第一次正对着蒂博尔。“我从没有要骗你，蒂博尔。过去这几周，我很不好受，你是这么好的一个朋友。若你觉得我是个无耻的骗子，我会非常非常难过的。不，求你，别再拦着我了。我要说出来。如果现在你把琴给我，叫我拉，我只能说不行，我拉不了。不是因为那把琴不好，不是的。要是你现在觉得我是一个骗子、我是一个冒牌货，那我要告诉你，你错了。看看我们一起取得的成绩。难道还不足以证明我是货真价实的？没错，我跟你说我是一个大师。好吧，我来解释一下我这么说的意思。我天生拥有非常特殊的天赋，像你一样。你和我，我们拥有其他大多数大提琴手没有的东西，这种东西不管他们怎么努力练习，都没

法得到。我在教堂里第一次听你演出时，就在你身上看见了这种东西。而你一定也从哪里看出我身上的这种东西，所以你当初才会决定到酒店来找我。

“像我们这种人不多，蒂博尔，而我们认识了彼此。就算我还没学会拉琴，又有什么关系。你得明白，我确实是一个大师。只是我的才能还没得到挖掘。你也一样，你的才能还没有被完全挖掘出来。这就是我这几周以来一直在做的事情，帮你剥去外面的表层。但是我从没有要骗你。百分之九十九的大提琴手表层下面没东西了，没有才能可挖。所以我们这类人应该互相帮助。当我们在一个拥挤的广场，还是别的什么地方发现对方时，应该主动伸出援手，因为像我们这样的人太少了。”

蒂博尔发现她的眼睛里噙着泪水，但声音却始终平稳。如今她不说话了，再次把脸转开。

“这么说您相信自己将来会成为一名特别的大提琴演奏家，”片刻的沉默之后蒂博尔说道。“一位大师。我们其他人，埃洛伊丝小姐，按您的话说，我们得鼓起勇气挖掘自己，却始终不确定能挖到什么。而您，您不在乎什么挖掘。您什么都不做。但您很肯定自己是个大师……”

“请别生气。我知道我说的像疯话。可我说的是真的，事实就是如此。我母亲在我很小的时候就发现了我的天赋。我至少很感激她这一点。可是她给我找的那些老师，我四岁的那个，七岁的，十一岁的，统统不好。妈妈不知道，可我知道。虽然我还只是个孩子，可是我有这种直觉。我知道我得保护我的天赋，不让别人给毁了，不管这些人多么好心。于是我把这些人统统赶走了。你也一样，蒂博尔。你的天赋很宝贵。”

“请原谅，”蒂博尔打断埃洛伊丝，但语气没有刚才那么冲了。“你是说你小时候拉过琴。可现在……”

“我从十一岁以后就再也没碰过琴了，从我向我母亲解释我不能跟罗斯先生学琴的那天起。她理解。她同意最好等等，先什么都别做。最重要的是不要破坏我的天赋。总有一天我的时机到。好吧，有时候我也觉得拖得太久了。我今年四十一了。可至少我没有破坏我与生俱来的那些东西。这些年来我遇到了多少自称能帮助我的老师，可是我把他们看透了。就算是我们，有时候也很难辨别出来，蒂博尔。这些人，他们太……太专业了，他们讲得头头是道，你听着，然

后就被骗了，以为，啊，终于有人能帮我了，他跟我们是一类。可后来你就知道他根本不是。这个时候你就得坚决地把自己关起来。记住，蒂博尔，宁可再等一等。有时候我也感到痛苦，我的才华还没被挖掘出来。可我也还没把它给毁了，这才是最重要的。”

蒂博尔终于把他准备的曲子拉了两首给麦科马克小姐听，但是两个人心情都不好，就早早结束了练习。他们来到广场上喝咖啡，很少说话，直到蒂博尔告诉麦科马克小姐他打算离开这里几天。他说他一直想到附近的乡村去走一走，所以给自己安排了一个短假。

“放个假好，”麦科马克小姐平静地说。“可别去太久。我们还有很多事要做。”

蒂博尔保证说他顶多一个星期就回来。可当他们分手的时候，麦科马克小姐的样子还是有些不安。

蒂博尔说他要离开不全是实话：他还什么都没准备。但是那天下午与埃洛伊丝道别以后，他回到家里，打了几通电话，最后在翁布里亚附近山区的一家青年旅馆订了一张床位。那天晚上他来咖啡馆看我们，同时告诉我们他准备去旅行——我们七嘴八舌地告诉他应该去哪里、应该看些什么——他还怯怯地请詹卡洛告诉考夫曼先生说愿意接受那份工作。

“不然我能怎么办？”他说。“等我回来就分文不剩了。”

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蒂博尔在附近的乡村度过了一个不错的假期。他没有告诉我们多少旅行见闻，只说和几个徒步旅行的德国游客交了朋友，在山坡上的小饭馆多花了一些钱。他去了一个星期，回来以后明显精神了许多，但也急于想知道埃洛伊丝·麦科马克是不是还在这里。

那时游客已经逐渐变少，店里的服务生也把室外暖气搬了出来、放在餐桌旁。蒂博尔回来的那天下午就拿着琴，在跟平时一样的时间，来到怡东酒店。他高兴地发现埃洛伊丝不仅在等他，而且看得出来还在想念他。埃洛伊丝热情地欢迎他，就好像一般人激动的时候会拿一大堆吃的或者喝的招待客人一样，埃洛伊丝一把把蒂博尔推到他平时坐的那把椅子上，迫不及待地打开琴盒，说：“拉琴给我听！快点！快拉吧！”

他们在一起度过了一个愉快的下午。来之前蒂博尔还在担心在她“坦白”了以后，在他们上次那样分手了以后，事情会变成什么样。

但是所有的紧张好像都消失了，他们之间的气氛比以前更融洽了。即便是在他拉完一曲，埃洛伊丝闭着眼睛，开始长篇大论、尖刻地批评他的演奏的时候，他也不觉得生气，只希望自己尽可能地理解她的意思。第二天、第三天都一样：气氛轻松，有时还开开玩笑。蒂博尔觉得自己的琴从来没拉得这么好过。他们没有再提起他离开之前的那次谈话，埃洛伊丝也没有问起他在乡下的旅行。他们只谈论音乐。

到了他回来以后的第四天，接二连三的小意外——包括他房里马桶的蓄水池漏水了——害他没法准时到怡东酒店去。等他从咖啡馆走过去的时候，天已经开始暗了，服务生已经把小玻璃碗里的蜡烛点亮了，我们也已经演奏了两个晚餐的节目。他朝我们挥挥手，穿过广场朝酒店走去，因为背着琴，走起路来看上去一瘸一拐的。

蒂博尔注意到前台在打电话给埃洛伊丝之前稍稍犹豫了一下。埃洛伊丝打开门，热情地欢迎他，但感觉跟平时不太一样。不等蒂博尔开口，埃洛伊丝就很快地说道：

“蒂博尔，真高兴你来了。我正把你的事说给彼得听呢。没错，彼得终于找到我了！”说完，她朝屋里喊道，“彼得，他来了！蒂博尔来了。还带着琴！”

蒂博尔走进房间，看见一个穿着浅色开领短袖衬衫、身材高大、步履蹒跚、头发灰白的男人微笑着站了起来。彼得紧紧地握住蒂博尔的手说：“哦，我听说了你所有的事。埃洛伊丝肯定你将来会是个大明星。”

“彼得不肯放弃，”埃洛伊丝说。“我就知道他迟早会找到我的。”

“别想躲着我，”说着，彼得拉来一把椅子请蒂博尔坐下，从壁橱上的冰桶里给他倒了一杯香槟。“来吧，蒂博尔，为我们庆祝重逢。”

蒂博尔抿了一口酒，注意到彼得给他的椅子刚好是他平时坐的那把“琴椅”。埃洛伊丝不知哪里去了，只剩蒂博尔和彼得一面喝酒一面聊天。彼得很友善的样子，问了很多问题。他问蒂博尔是怎么在匈牙利那样的地方长大的。他刚到西欧来的时候有没有感到震撼？

“会乐器真好，”彼得说。“你真幸运。我也想学。可我想有点迟了。”

“哦，永远不会太迟，亨德森先生，”蒂博尔说。

“说得对。永不言迟。说太迟了永远只是借口。不，事实是，我是个大忙人，我对自己说我太忙了，没时间学法语，没时间学乐器，没时间读《战争与和平》等等我一直想做的事。埃洛伊丝小时候拉过琴，我想她跟你说了。”

“是，她说过。我知道她很有天赋。”

“哦，没错。认识她的人都看得出来。她有对音乐的敏感。她就应该学音乐。至于我，我只是个香蕉手。”他举起手，笑了。“我想弹钢琴，可这手怎么弹？倒是很适合挖土，我家祖祖辈辈就是干这个的。可那位女士”——他用拿着酒杯的手指了指房门——“她有对音乐的敏感。”

埃洛伊丝终于从房里出来了，穿着一件深色晚礼服，戴着满身珠宝。

“彼得，别烦蒂博尔了，”她说。“他对高尔夫不感兴趣。”

彼得伸出手，恳求地看着蒂博尔。“告诉我，蒂博尔。我跟你提起过高尔夫一个字吗？”

蒂博尔说他得走了；他看得出来他耽搁他们去吃晚饭了。他的话遭到了两人的反对，彼得说：

“看看我。我这打扮像要去吃饭吗？”

虽然蒂博尔觉得彼得这样穿就很得体，但他还是会意地笑了。彼得又说道：

“你得给我们拉点什么才能走。我听说了很多你的琴技。”

蒂博尔不知如何是好，打开琴盒正准备把琴拿出来，突然听见埃洛伊丝坚定地說道，语气跟刚刚不太一样：

“蒂博尔说得对。时间不早了。这里的饭店你不准时去的话，他们不会给你留着位置的。彼得，去换衣服吧。也许把脸也刮一下？我送蒂博尔出去。我想和他单独谈谈。”

电梯里，他们脉脉地相视而笑，但没有说话。他们走出酒店，发现广场上已经华灯初上。放暑假回来的当地孩子们有的在踢球，有的在喷泉边追逐嬉戏。夜晚的行人熙来攘往，我想我们的音乐应该传到了他们的耳朵里。

“咳，就是这样了，”她终于开口说道。“他找到了我，所以我想他应该得到我。”

“他很有魅力，”蒂博尔说。“那您要回美国去了？”

“我想过几天就会回去了吧。”

“您要结婚？”

“我想是吧。”一时间埃洛伊丝严肃地看着蒂博尔，但马上把脸转开了。“我想是吧，”她重复道。

“我衷心地祝您幸福。他是个好人。而且喜欢音乐。这点对您来说很重要。”

“是的，很重要。”

“刚才您换衣服的时候，我们不是在聊高尔夫，我们在聊学音乐。”

“哦，真的？他学还是我学？”

“都有。不过我想在俄勒冈波特兰没有多少人能教您。”

她笑了一声。“就像我说的，我们这类人不好过。”

“是，我明白。经过这几周我更加明白这个道理。”蒂博尔停顿了一下，接着说道，“埃洛伊丝小姐，我们道别之前我有件事情要告诉您。我很快就要去阿姆斯特丹了。我在那里的一家大酒店里找到了一份工作。”

“你要去当门卫？”

“不是。我要在酒店餐厅的小乐队里演出。在客人吃饭的时候提供娱乐。”

蒂博尔凝视着埃洛伊丝，看见她的眼睛里闪过一道火花，然后慢慢褪去。她一手搭在蒂博尔的手臂上，笑了。

“那祝你好运。”她停顿了一下，又补充道，“那些酒店里的客人有耳福了。”

“希望如此。”

一时间他们俩默默地站在那里，站在酒店前门的灯光照不到的地方，硕大的提琴立在他们中间。

“我也祝愿您与彼得先生过得幸福。”蒂博尔说。

“我也希望如此。”埃洛伊丝说道，又笑了笑。接着她亲了亲蒂博尔的脸颊，给了他一个匆匆的拥抱，说道：“保重。”

蒂博尔道了声谢，不等他反应过来，就只看见埃洛伊丝走进怡东酒店的背影。

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不久之后蒂博尔就离开了这里。他最后一次跟我们喝酒时好好地感谢了詹卡洛和欧内斯托帮他找到这份工作，也感谢我们大家的友谊，但我不由得感觉他的态度有点冷淡。不只我，其他人也这么想，可是直性子的詹卡洛现在又站在蒂博尔一边，说他只是对人生的这下一步感到兴奋、紧张。

“兴奋？他怎么可能兴奋？”欧内斯托说。“整个夏天他都被别人叫做天才。到酒店工作是委屈了他。坐在这里跟我们聊天也是委屈了他。夏天刚到那会儿他还是个好孩子。可那女人对他做了那些事以后，我很高兴能看见他回来。”

我说过了，这是七年前的事了。詹卡洛、欧内斯托，当时乐队里的其他人，除了我和费边都走了。我很久没再想起我们这位年轻的匈牙利天才，直到那天偶然在广场上发现他。他没怎么变，只是胖了些，脖子粗了好一圈。他用手指头招呼服务生的动作——也许是我的想象——有些不耐烦，有些粗鲁，自然而然就有些愤恨。我这么说可能不公平，毕竟我只瞥了他几眼。但我还是觉得他似乎失去了年轻时的快活劲儿和以前认认真真的态度。你可能会说在这世上这不是什么坏事。

我本想过去跟他聊聊，可是等表演结束，他已经走了。据我所知，他只在广场上待了一个下午。他穿着西装——不是什么特别好的，普通西装而已——所以我猜他现在白天在哪里坐办公室。他可能是到附近办事，想起以前的时光，顺路到这里来一下，谁知道？要是他再到广场上来时我不在演出的话，我一定过去跟他聊聊。

[\(1\)](#) 本杰明·布里顿（1913—1976），英国著名作曲家。

浮世音乐家——代译后记

说到石黑一雄，中国读者大多会想到他是一名英籍日裔小说家，是“英国文坛移民三雄”之一，会想到他的那些获奖小说，想到那些发人深省的主题、简洁优雅的语言。石黑给人的感觉是一位温文尔雅的作家。很少人会想到他还是一个爵士乐迷（更多人知道村上春树是一个超级爵士乐迷），甚至算得上是半个音乐人。其实，音乐一直是石黑生活中的一个重要部分。

谁会把石黑跟大喊大叫的摇滚乐联系在一起呢？石黑的形象和作品很难让人想到他青少年时期曾经是个嬉皮，留着长发，带着吉他，背着背包在美国到处旅行，爱听流行音乐、爵士音乐。那时，他的梦想是当一名摇滚歌手，他不仅会弹吉他和钢琴，还寄了很多小样给唱片公司，当然都是石沉大海。直到二十八岁发表处女作获得成功，石黑才确定自己的才华在于写作，而不是搞音乐。但他也没有就此放弃或者远离音乐，虽然不嬉皮了，歌还可以照听，吉他还可以照弹。如今石黑家里就有很多的吉他。2007年，他还为爵士乐新星史黛西·肯特填写歌词，也算如愿以偿了。

石黑迄今已经出版了六部长篇小说，这是他的第一部短篇集，由五篇故事组成。为什么选择短篇小说这种体裁？石黑在采访中说，现如今很多叫做小说的书其实更像短篇集，如大卫·米切尔的《云图》和《幽灵代笔》、罗贝托·波拉尼奥的《2666》等，都是由几个不同的故事构成的。自己在构思小说时，也会先想到几个不同的方面，再把这些不同的方面发展、组织成一部小说。《小夜曲》的五个故事同样是全盘构思的结果。石黑把这五个故事比作一首奏鸣曲的五个乐章、一张专辑的五支单曲，既各自独立，又密不可分。他以音乐为线索，把不相关的人和事联系在一起，五个故事服务于同一个主题。但是五个故事也不是简单的同义反复，故事时而温馨感人，时而荒诞不经，时而令人捧腹，时而令人唏嘘。恰似奏鸣曲中由若干个相互形成对比的乐章构成主题的呈示、发展和再现。

书的标题很浪漫，故事发生的地点也很浪漫：水城威尼斯、优美的莫尔文山、好莱坞的豪华酒店等。可故事里的人和事一点儿也不浪漫。年过半百、风光不再的过气老歌手；连自己儿子都不搭理他们的瑞士老夫妇；人到中年仍一事无成的英语教师和萨克斯手；才能得不到挖掘、只能孤芳自赏的前“大提琴手”；遭遇婚姻危机的中年夫

妇；年轻有潜力但无处施展才能、对前途感到迷茫的大提琴手；一心想成为作曲家但处处碰壁的大学青年等。不管老的、年轻的，有钱的、没钱的，他们的生活都不如意，他们对生活都有“满腹牢骚”。

故事里的人都是音乐家或者音乐爱好者，但是故事的主题不限于音乐，仍是石黑一贯的对现代人的生存状态的反思：理想与现实的差距，满腹的才华得不到施展和认可，这些才华反而成了最折磨人的东西。在石黑的小说世界中，人物被庞大的社会机器所控制，无法掌握自己的命运，情感被压抑。《长日将尽》中盲目忠诚的管家、《莫失莫忘》中的克隆人皆是如此，成了环境的牺牲品。《小夜曲》比以前的作品都更接近普通人，也不因为篇幅减小而降低了深度。通过作者精心设计的人物对话和心理活动，读者能看出人物的悲剧是由外部环境原因和内部自身原因共同造成的。

书里反复出现一类人：郁郁不得志的打零工的餐厅乐队乐手（第一篇里的扬，第三篇里的瑞士夫妇，第五篇里的“我”和蒂博尔）。在浪漫的水城威尼斯，在风景如画的阿尔卑斯山脉，一般人都觉得在这种地方工作，而且是演奏音乐，太优美、太惬意了，可石黑偏偏不这么想。夏天热得要命，咖啡厅老板、经理不友善，队友今天来、明天去，“今日的知己明日就变成失去联络的陌路人”，为挣口饭吃，在食客们大快朵颐的时候演奏一些通俗歌曲娱乐大众，没有办法演奏自己喜欢的音乐。倒也不是说这份工作就这么坏，正如瑞士夫妇说的“我们干这行是因为我们相信音乐”，只是他们有更大、更远的理想和目标。餐厅乐队这个舞台对他们来说太小了。

第一篇讲述过气歌手托尼·加德纳为重返歌坛、重振事业决定与相爱的妻子离婚。夫妇二人来到蜜月之地威尼斯故地重游，托尼·加德纳心中充满感伤。怎样才算成功、幸福？是事业永远大红大紫，还是跟心爱的人共度此生？每个人有每个人的选择。当然，他的悲剧歌迷大众也有责任，明星结多少次婚都不稀罕，不离婚、再婚反而不正常了。名气大小不在于你的才华多少，更多的在于话题多少。这种现象现代人见怪不怪。

说到第二篇，很多评论家都用到“闹剧”一词。“我”为了伪装出狗弄乱朋友家客厅的效果，居然干出把鞋放到锅里煮、像狗一样在地上爬这样的荒唐事。因为可笑，所以也是最让人觉得可怜的。“我”得知埃米莉并不为日记的事生气，没有什么查理偷看了日记、埃米莉就要把他的眼珠挖出来的事，依旧帮查理说好话，还谎称自己不听爵士唱片了。查理这个人物最突出体现了石黑一贯的不可靠的第

一人称叙述，读者最后会发现他的话不能照单全收。表面上“我”是失败者，查理夫妇是成功人士，有收入丰厚的工作、有摆设高档的房子，但他们的家更像是个“艺术展”：

“查理，我要百叶窗干吗？”那一次我问道。“醒来的时候我想看见外面。窗帘就可以了。”

“这些百叶窗是瑞士的，”他这么回答，好像这就说明了一切。

一味追求物质，却不感到满足。能给埃米莉带来心灵慰藉的是那些查理不让她听的老唱片。

“天生我材必有用，千金散尽还复来。”为名也好，为利也罢，实现人生的自我价值是古今中外人们的共同理想。可幸运儿又有多少？理想与现实总是有差距的。就好像史蒂夫的朋友问的那样：“纯粹是运气还是其他？”史蒂夫（第四篇故事的叙述者）也不能把自己的不成功完全归咎于长得丑而没有机会。他是有机会的，但是他的两次登台表演都因为紧张而搞砸了，这能怪谁呢？假设他正常发挥，观众很可能就被他的音乐感动了，他不是对自己的音乐很有信心吗？观众也不总是以貌取人，这种例子现实生活中就有不少。与他相比，被他说得一无是处的琳迪按她丈夫的话说，就能处处留心、忍辱负重，并且抓住机会。虽然有情人眼里出西施之嫌，但应该也有几分是真的。

石黑的作品就是这样总是能引发读者的思考，书看完了以后仍然回味无穷。书里提及的大多数歌手、歌名都是真实的，均是二十世纪五十至八十年代的当红歌手和经典曲目。它们是小说的有机组成部分，请读者们务必把这些歌找来听一听，泡上一壶茶，放上一张经典爵士唱片，开始欣赏由石黑一雄谱写的《小夜曲》吧。

译者

KAZUO ISHIGURO

Nocturnes
*Five Stories of Music and
Nightfall*

Crooner

THE MORNING I spotted Tony Gardner sitting among the tourists, spring was just arriving here in Venice. We'd completed our first full week outside in the piazza - a relief, let me tell you, after all those stuffy hours performing from the back of the cafe, getting in the way of customers wanting to use the staircase. There was quite a breeze that morning, and our brand-new marquee was flapping all around us, but we were all feeling a little bit brighter and fresher, and I guess it showed in our music.

But here I am talking like I'm a regular band member. Actually, I'm one of the 'gypsies', as the other musicians call us, one of the guys who move around the piazza, helping out whichever of the three cafe orchestras needs us. Mostly I play here at the Caffé Lavena, but on a busy afternoon, I might do a set with the Quaddri boys, go over to the Florian, then back across the square to the Lavena. I get on fine with them all - and with the waiters too - and in any other city I'd have a regular position by now. But in this place, so obsessed with tradition and the past, everything's upside down. Anywhere else, being a guitar player would go in a guy's favour. But here? A guitar! The cafe managers get uneasy. It looks too modern, the tourists won't like it. Last autumn I got myself a vintage jazz model with an oval sound-hole, the kind of thing Django Reinhardt might have played, so there was no way anyone would mistake me for a rock-and-roller. That made things a little easier, but the cafe managers, they still don't like it. The truth is, if you're a guitarist, you can be Joe Pass, they still wouldn't give you a regular job in this square.

There's also, of course, the small matter of my not being Italian, never mind Venetian. It's the same for that big Czech guy with the alto sax. We're well liked, we're needed

by the other musicians, but we don't quite fit the official bill. Just play and keep your mouth shut, that's what the cafe managers always say. That way the tourists won't know you're not Italian. Wear your suit, sunglasses, keep the hair combed back, no one will know the difference, just don't start talking.

But I don't do too bad. All three cafe orchestras, especially when they have to play at the same time from their rival tents, they need a guitar - something soft, solid, but amplified, thumping out the chords from the back. I guess you're thinking, three bands playing at the same time in the same square, that would sound like a real mess. But the Piazza San Marco's big enough to take it. A tourist strolling across the square will hear one tune fade out, another fade in, like he's shifting the dial on a radio. What tourists can't take too much of is the classical stuff, all these instrumental versions of famous arias. Okay, this is San Marco, they don't want the latest pop hits. But every few minutes they want something they recognise, maybe an old Julie Andrews number, or the theme from a famous movie. I remember once last summer, going from band to band and playing 'The Godfather' nine times in one afternoon.

Anyway there we were that spring morning, playing in front of a good crowd of tourists, when I saw Tony Gardner, sitting alone with his coffee, almost directly in front of us, maybe six metres back from our marquee. We get famous people in the square all the time, we never make a fuss. At the end of a number, maybe a quiet word will go around the band members. Look, there's Warren Beatty. Look, it's Kissinger. That woman, she's the one who was in the movie about the men who swap their faces. We're used to it. This is the Piazza San Marco after all. But when I realised it was Tony Gardner sitting there, that was different. I did get excited.

Tony Gardner had been my mother's favourite. Back home, back in the communist days, it had been really hard to get

records like that, but my mother had pretty much his whole collection. Once when I was a boy, I scratched one of those precious records. The apartment was so cramped, and a boy my age, you just had to move around sometimes, especially during those cold months when you couldn't go outside. So I was playing this game jumping from our little sofa to the armchair, and one time I misjudged it and hit the record player. The needle went across the record with a zip - this was long before CDs - and my mother came in from the kitchen and began shouting at me. I felt so bad, not just because she was shouting at me, but because I knew it was one of Tony Gardner's records, and I knew how much it meant to her. And I knew that this one too would now have those popping noises going through it while he crooned those American songs. Years later, when I was working in Warsaw and I got to know about black-market records, I gave my mother replacements of all her worn-out Tony Gardner albums, including that one I scratched. It took me over three years, but I kept getting them, one by one, and each time I went back to see her I'd bring her another.

So you see why I got so excited when I recognised him, barely six metres away. At first I couldn't quite believe it, and I might have been a beat late with a chord change. Tony Gardner! What would my dear mother have said if she'd known! For her sake, for the sake of her memory, I had to go and say something to him, never mind if the other musicians laughed and said I was acting like a bellboy.

But of course I couldn't just rush over to him, pushing aside the tables and chairs. There was our set to finish. It was agony, I can tell you, another three, four numbers, and every second I thought he was about to get up and walk off. But he kept sitting there, by himself, staring into his coffee, stirring it like he was really puzzled by what the waiter had brought him. He looked like any other American tourist, dressed in a pale-blue polo shirt and loose grey trousers. His hair, very dark, very shiny on those record

covers, was almost white now, but there was still plenty of it, and it was immaculately groomed in the same style he'd had back then. When I'd first spotted him, he'd had his dark glasses in his hand - I doubt if I'd have recognised him otherwise - but as our set went on and I kept watching him, he put them on his face, took them off again, then back on again. He looked preoccupied and it disappointed me to see he wasn't really listening to our music.

Then our set was over. I hurried out of the tent without saying anything to the others, made my way to Tony Gardner's table, then had a moment's panic not knowing how to start the conversation. I was standing behind him, but some sixth sense made him turn and look up at me - I guess it was all those years of having fans come up to him - and next thing I was introducing myself, explaining how much I admired him, how I was in the band he'd just been listening to, how my mother had been such a fan, all in one big rush. He listened with a grave expression, nodding every few seconds like he was my doctor. I kept talking and all he said every now and then was: 'Is that so?' After a while I thought it was time to leave and I'd started to move away when he said:

'So you come from one of those communist countries. That must have been tough.'

'That's all in the past.' I did a cheerful shrug. 'We're a free country now. A democracy.'

'That's good to hear. And that was your crew playing for us just now. Sit down. You want some coffee?'

I told him I didn't want to impose, but there was now something gently insistent about Mr Gardner. 'No, no, sit down. Your mother liked my records, you were saying.'

So I sat down and told him some more. About my mother, our apartment, the black-market records. And though I couldn't remember what the albums were called, I started describing the pictures on their sleeves the way I remembered

them, and each time I did this, he'd put his finger up in the air and say something like: 'Oh, that would be *Inimitable*. *The Inimitable Tony Gardner*.' I think we were both really enjoying this game, but then I noticed Mr Gardner's gaze move off me, and I turned just in time to see a woman coming up to our table.

She was one of those American ladies who are so classy, with great hair, clothes and figure, you don't realise they're not so young until you see them up close. Far away, I might have mistaken her for a model out of those glossy fashion magazines. But when she sat down next to Mr Gardner and pushed her dark glasses onto her forehead, I realised she must be at least fifty, maybe more. Mr Gardner said to me: 'This is Lindy, my wife.'

Mrs Gardner flashed me a smile that was kind of forced, then said to her husband: 'So who's this? You've made yourself a friend.'

'That's right, honey. I was having a good time talking here with . . . I'm sorry, friend, I don't know your name.'

'Jan,' I said quickly. 'But friends call me Janeck.'

Lindy Gardner said: 'You mean your nickname's longer than your real name? How does that work?'

'Don't be rude to the man, honey.'

'I'm not being rude.'

'Don't make fun of the man's name, honey. That's a good girl.'

Lindy Gardner turned to me with a helpless sort of expression. 'You know what he's talking about? Did I insult you?'

'No, no,' I said, 'not at all, Mrs Gardner.'

'He's always telling me I'm rude to the public. But I'm not rude. Was I rude to you just now?' Then to Mr

Gardner: 'I speak to the public in a *natural* way, sweetie. It's *my* way. I'm never rude.'

'Okay, honey,' Mr Gardner said, 'let's not make a big thing of it. Anyhow, this man here, he's not the public.'

'Oh, he's not? Then what is he? A long-lost nephew?'

'Be nice, honey. This man, he's a colleague. A musician, a pro. He's just been entertaining us all.' He gestured towards our marquee.

'Oh right!' Lindy Gardner turned to me again. 'You were playing up there just now? Well, that was pretty. You were on the accordion, right? Real pretty!'

'Thank you very much. Actually, I'm the guitarist.'

'Guitarist? You're kidding me. I was watching you only a minute ago. Sitting right there, next to the double bass man, playing so beautifully on your accordion.'

'Pardon me, that was in fact Carlo on the accordion. The big bald guy . . .'

'Are you sure? You're not kidding me?'

'Honey, I've told you. Don't be rude to the man.'

He hadn't shouted exactly, but his voice was suddenly hard and angry, and now there was a strange silence. Then Mr Gardner himself broke it, saying gently:

'I'm sorry, honey. I didn't mean to snap at you.'

He reached out a hand and grasped one of hers. I'd kind of expected her to shake him off, but instead, she moved in her chair so she was closer to him, and put her free hand over their clasped pair. They sat there like that for a few seconds, Mr Gardner, his head bowed, his wife gazing emptily past his shoulder, across the square towards the Basilica, though her eyes didn't seem to be seeing anything. For those few moments it was like they'd forgotten not just me sitting

with them, but all the people in the piazza. Then she said, almost in a whisper:

‘That’s okay, sweetie. It was my fault. Getting you all upset.’

They went on sitting like that a little longer, their hands locked. Then she sighed, let go of Mr Gardner and looked at me. She’d looked at me before, but this time it was different. This time I could feel her charm. It was like she had this dial, going zero to ten, and with me, at that moment, she’d decided to turn it to six or seven, but I could feel it really strong, and if she’d asked some favour of me – if say she’d asked me to go across the square and buy her some flowers – I’d have done it happily.

‘Janeck,’ she said. ‘That’s your name, right? I’m sorry, Janeck. Tony’s right. I’d no business speaking to you the way I did.’

‘Mrs Gardner, really, please don’t worry . . .’

‘And I disturbed the two of you talking. Musicians’ talk, I bet. You know what? I’m gonna leave the two of you to get on with it.’

‘No reason to go, honey,’ Mr Gardner said.

‘Oh yes there is, sweetie. I’m absolutely *yearning* to go look in that Prada store. I only came over just now to tell you I’d be longer than I said.’

‘Okay, honey.’ Tony Gardner straightened for the first time and took a deep breath. ‘So long as you’re sure you’re happy doing that.’

‘I’m gonna have a good time in that store. So you two fellas, you have yourselves a good talk.’ She got to her feet and touched me on the shoulder. ‘You take care, Janeck.’

We watched her walk away, then Mr Gardner asked me a few things about being a musician in Venice, and about the Quaddri orchestra in particular, who'd started playing just at that moment. He didn't seem to listen so carefully to my answers and I was about to excuse myself and leave, when he said suddenly:

'There's something I want to put to you, friend. Let me tell you what's on my mind and you can turn me down if that's what you want.' He leaned forward and lowered his voice.

'Can I tell you something? The first time Lindy and I came here to Venice, it was our honeymoon. Twenty-seven years ago. And for all our happy memories of this place, we'd never been back, not together anyway. So when we were planning this trip, this special trip of ours, we said to ourselves we've got to spend a few days in Venice.'

'It's your anniversary, Mr Gardner?'

'Anniversary?' He looked startled.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I just thought, because you said this was your special trip.'

He went on looking startled for a while, then he laughed, a big, booming laugh, and suddenly I remembered this particular song my mother used to play all the time where he does a talking passage in the middle of the song, something about not caring that this woman has left him, and he does this sardonic laugh. Now the same laugh was booming across the square. Then he said:

'Anniversary? No, no, it's not our anniversary. But what I'm proposing, it's not so far off. Because I want to do something very romantic. I want to serenade her. Properly, Venice style. That's where you come in. You play your guitar, I sing. We do it from a gondola, we drift under the window, I sing up to her. We're renting a palazzo not far from here. The bedroom window looks over the canal. After dark, it'll be perfect. The lamps on the walls light things up just right.'

You and me in a gondola, she comes to the window. All her favourite numbers. We don't need to do it for long, the evenings are still kinda chilly. Just three or four songs, that's what I have in mind. I'll see you're well compensated. What do you say?'

'Mr Gardner, I'd be absolutely honoured. As I told you, you've been an important figure for me. When were you thinking of doing this?'

'If it doesn't rain, why not tonight? Around eight-thirty? We eat dinner early, so we'll be back by then. I'll make some excuse, leave the apartment, come and meet you. I'll have a gondola fixed up, we'll come back along the canal, stop under the window. It'll be perfect. What do you say?'

You can probably imagine, this was like a dream come true. And besides, it seemed such a sweet idea, this couple - he in his sixties, she in her fifties - behaving like teenagers in love. In fact it was so sweet an idea it almost, but not quite, made me forget the scene I'd just witnessed between them. What I mean is, even at that stage, I knew deep down that things wouldn't be as straightforward as he was making out.

For the next few minutes Mr Gardner and I sat there discussing all the details - which songs he wanted, the keys he preferred, all those kinds of things. Then it was time for me to get back to the marquee and our next set, so I stood up, shook his hand and told him he could absolutely count on me that evening.

The streets were dark and quiet as I went to meet Mr Gardner that night. In those days I'd always get lost whenever I moved much beyond the Piazza San Marco, so even though I'd allowed myself plenty of time, even though I knew the little bridge where Mr Gardner had told me to be, I was still a few minutes late.

He was standing right under a lamp, wearing a crumpled dark suit, and his shirt was open down to the third or fourth button, so you could see the hairs on his chest. When I apologised for being late, he said:

‘What’s a few minutes? Lindy and I have been married twenty-seven years. What’s a few minutes?’

He wasn’t angry, but his mood seemed grave and solemn – not at all romantic. Behind him was the gondola, gently rocking in the water, and I saw the gondolier was Vittorio, a guy I don’t like much. To my face, Vittorio’s always friendly, but I know – I knew back then – he goes around saying all kinds of foul things, all of it rubbish, about people like me, people he calls ‘the foreigners from the new countries’. That’s why, when he greeted me that evening like a brother, I just nodded, and waited silently while he helped Mr Gardner into the gondola. Then I passed him my guitar – I’d brought my Spanish guitar, not the one with the oval sound-hole – and got in myself.

Mr Gardner kept shifting positions at the front of the boat, and at one point sat down so heavily we nearly capsized. But he didn’t seem to notice and as we pushed off, he kept staring into the water.

For a few minutes we drifted in silence, past dark buildings and under low bridges. Then he came out of his deep thoughts and said:

‘Listen, friend. I know we agreed on a set for this evening. But I’ve been thinking. Lindy loves that song, “By the Time I Get to Phoenix”. I recorded it once a long time ago.’

‘Sure, Mr Gardner. My mother always said your version was better than Sinatra’s. Or that famous one by Glenn Campbell.’

Mr Gardner nodded, then I couldn’t see his face for a while. Vittorio sent his gondolier’s cry echoing around the

walls before steering us round a corner.

‘I used to sing it to her a lot,’ Mr Gardner said. ‘You know, I think she’d like to hear it tonight. You’re familiar with the tune?’

My guitar was out of the case by this time, so I played a few bars of the song.

‘Take it up,’ he said. ‘Up to E-flat. That’s how I did it on the album.’

So I played the chords in that key, and after maybe a whole verse had gone by, Mr Gardner began to sing, very softly, under his breath, like he could only half remember the words. But his voice resonated well in that quiet canal. In fact, it sounded really beautiful. And for a moment it was like I was a boy again, back in that apartment, lying on the carpet while my mother sat on the sofa, exhausted, or maybe heart-broken, while Tony Gardner’s album spun in the corner of the room.

Mr Gardner broke off suddenly and said: ‘Okay. We’ll do “Phoenix” in E-flat. Then maybe “I Fall in Love Too Easily”, like we planned. And we’ll finish with “One for My Baby”. That’ll be enough. She won’t listen to any more than that.’

He seemed to sink back into his thoughts after that, and we drifted along through the darkness to the sound of Vittorio’s gentle splashes.

‘Mr Gardner,’ I said eventually, ‘I hope you don’t mind me asking. But is Mrs Gardner expecting this recital? Or is this going to be a wonderful surprise?’

He sighed heavily, then said: ‘I guess we’d have to put this in the wonderful surprise category.’ Then he added: ‘Lord knows how she’ll react. We might not make it all the way to “One for My Baby”.’

Vittorio steered us round another corner, and suddenly there was laughter and music, and we were drifting past a large, brightly lit restaurant. Every table seemed taken, the waiters were rushing about, the diners looked very happy, even though it couldn't have been so warm next to the canal at that time of year. After the quiet and the darkness we'd been travelling through, the restaurant was kind of unsettling. It felt like we were the stationary ones, watching from the quay, as this glittering party boat slid by. I noticed a few faces look our way, but no one paid us much attention. Then the restaurant was behind us, and I said:

'It's funny. Can you imagine what those tourists would do if they realised a boat had just gone by containing the legendary Tony Gardner?'

Vittorio, who doesn't understand much English, got the gist of this and gave a little laugh. But Mr Gardner didn't respond for some time. We were back in the dark again, going along a narrow canal past dimly lit doorways, when he said:

'My friend, you come from a communist country. That's why you don't realise how these things work.'

'Mr Gardner,' I said, 'my country isn't communist any more. We're free people now.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to denigrate your nation. You're a brave people. I hope you win peace and prosperity. But what I intended to say to you, friend, what I meant was that coming from where you do, quite naturally, there are many things you don't understand yet. Just like there'd be many things I wouldn't understand in your country.'

'I guess that's right, Mr Gardner.'

'Those people we passed just now. If you'd gone up to them and said, "Hey, do any of you remember Tony Gardner?" then maybe some of them, most of them even, might have said yes. Who knows? But drifting by the way we just did, even if

they'd recognised me, would they get excited? I don't think so. They wouldn't put down their forks, they wouldn't interrupt their candlelit heart-to-hearts. Why should they? Just some crooner from a bygone era.'

'I can't believe that, Mr Gardner. You're a classic. You're like Sinatra or Dean Martin. Some class acts, they never go out of fashion. Not like these pop stars.'

'You're very kind to say that, friend. I know you mean well. But tonight of all nights, it's no time to be kidding me.'

I was about to protest, but something in his manner told me to drop the whole subject. So we kept moving, no one speaking. To be honest, I was now beginning to wonder what I'd got myself into, what this whole serenade thing was about. And these were Americans, after all. For all I knew, when Mr Gardner started singing, Mrs Gardner would come to the window with a gun and fire down at us.

Maybe Vittorio's thoughts were moving along the same lines, because as we passed under a lantern on the side of a wall, he gave me a look as though to say: 'We've got a strange one here, haven't we, *amico*?' But I didn't respond. I wasn't going to side with the likes of him against Mr Gardner. According to Vittorio, foreigners like me, we go around ripping off tourists, littering the canals, in general ruining the whole damn city. Some days, if he's in a bad mood, he'll claim we're muggers - rapists, even. I asked him once to his face if it was true he was going around saying such things, and he swore it was all a pack of lies. How could he be a racist when he had a Jewish aunt he adored like a mother? But one afternoon I was killing time between sets, leaning over a bridge in Dorsoduro, and a gondola passed underneath. There were three tourists sitting in it, and Vittorio standing over them with his oar, holding forth for the world to hear, coming out with this very same rubbish. So

he can meet my eye all he likes, he'll get no camaraderie from me.

'Let me tell you a little secret,' Mr Gardner said suddenly. 'A little secret about performance. One pro to another. It's quite simple. You've got to know something, doesn't matter what it is, you've got to know something about your audience. Something that for you, in your mind, distinguishes that audience from the one you sang to the night before. Let's say you're in Milwaukee. You've got to ask yourself, what's different, what's *special* about a Milwaukee audience? What makes it different from a Madison audience? Can't think of anything, you just keep on trying till you do. Milwaukee, Milwaukee. They have good pork chops in Milwaukee. That'll work, that's what you use when you step out there. You don't have to say a word about it to them, it's what's in your mind when you sing to them. These people in front of you, they're the ones who eat good pork chops. They have high standards when it comes to pork chops. You understand what I'm saying? That way the audience becomes someone you know, someone you can perform to. There, that's my secret. One pro to another.'

'Well, thank you, Mr Gardner. I'd never thought about it that way. A tip from someone like you, I won't forget it.'

'So tonight,' he went on, 'we're performing for Lindy. Lindy's the audience. So I'm going to tell you something about Lindy. You want to hear about Lindy?'

'Of course, Mr Gardner,' I said. 'I'd like to hear about her very much.'

For the next twenty minutes or so, we sat in that gondola, drifting round and round, while Mr Gardner talked. Sometimes his voice went down to a murmur, like he was talking to himself. Other times, when a lamp or a passing window threw some light across our boat, he'd remember me, raise his

voice, and say something like: 'You understand what I'm saying, friend?'

His wife, he told me, had come from a small town in Minnesota, in the middle of America, where her schoolteachers gave her a hard time because she was always looking at magazines of movie stars instead of studying.

'What these ladies never realised was that Lindy had big plans. And look at her now. Rich, beautiful, travelled all over the world. And those schoolteachers, where are they today? What kind of lives have they had? If they'd looked at a few more movie magazines, had a few more dreams, they too might have a little of what Lindy has today.'

At nineteen, she'd hitch-hiked to California, wanting to get to Hollywood. Instead, she'd found herself in the outskirts of Los Angeles, working as a waitress in a roadside diner.

'Surprising thing,' Mr Gardner said. 'This diner, this regular little place off the highway. It turned out to be the best place she could have wound up. Because this was where all the ambitious girls came in, morning till night. They used to meet there, seven, eight, a dozen of them, they'd order their coffees, their hot-dogs, sit in there for hours and talk.'

These girls, all a little older than Lindy, had come from every part of America and had been in the LA area for at least two or three years. They came into the diner to swap gossip and hard-luck stories, discuss tactics, keep a check on each other's progress. But the main draw of the place was Meg, a woman in her forties, the waitress Lindy worked with.

'To these girls Meg was their big sister, their fountain of wisdom. Because once upon a time, she'd been exactly like them. You've got to understand, these were serious girls, really ambitious, determined girls. Did they talk about clothes and shoes and make-up like other girls? Sure they

did. But they only talked about which clothes and shoes and make-up would help them marry a star. Did they talk about movies? Did they talk about the music scene? You bet. But they talked about which movie stars and singers were single, which ones were unhappily married, which ones were getting divorced. And Meg, you see, she could tell them all this, and much, much more. Meg had been down that road before them. She knew all the rules, all the tricks, when it came to marrying a star. And Lindy sat with them and took everything in. That little hot-dog diner was her Harvard, her Yale. A nineteen-year-old from Minnesota? Makes me shudder now to think what could have happened to her. But she got lucky. ’

‘Mr Gardner,’ I said, ‘excuse me for interrupting. But if this Meg was so wise about everything, how come she wasn’t married to a star herself? Why was she serving hot-dogs in this diner?’

‘Good question, but you don’t quite see how these things work. Okay, this lady, Meg, she hadn’t made it. But the point is, she’d watched the ones who had. You understand, friend? She’d been just like those girls once, and she’d watched some succeed, others fail. She’d seen the pitfalls, she’d seen the golden stairways. She could tell them all the stories and those girls listened. And some of them learned. Lindy, for one. Like I say, that was her Harvard. It made her what she is. It gave her the strength she needed later on, and boy, did she need it. It took her six years before her first break came along. Can you imagine it? Six years of manoeuvring, planning, putting yourself on the line like that. Getting knocked back over and over again. But it’s just like in our business. You can’t roll over and give up after the first few knocks. The girls who do, you can see them any place, married to nobodies in nowhere towns. But just a few of them, the ones like Lindy, they learn from every knock, they come back stronger, tougher, they come back fighting and mad. You think Lindy didn’t suffer humiliation? Even with her beauty and charm? What people don’t realise is that beauty isn’t the

half of it. Use it wrong, you get treated like a whore. Anyway, after six years, she finally got her break.'

'That's when she met you, Mr Gardner?'

'Me? No, no. I didn't come on the scene for a while longer. She married Dino Hartman. You've never heard of Dino?' Mr Gardner did a slightly unkind laugh here. 'Poor Dino. I guess Dino's records wouldn't have made it to the communist countries. But Dino had quite a name for himself in those days. He sang in Vegas a lot, had a few gold records. Like I said, that was Lindy's big break. When I first met her, she was Dino's wife. Old Meg had explained that's how it happens all the time. Sure, a girl can get lucky first time, go straight to the top, marry a Sinatra or a Brando. But it doesn't usually happen like that. A girl's got to be prepared to get out of the elevator at the second floor, walk around. She needs to get used to the air on that floor. Then maybe, one day, on that second floor, she'll run into someone who's come down from the penthouse for a few minutes, maybe to fetch something. And this guy says to her, hey, how about coming back up with me, up to the top floor. Lindy knew that's how it usually played out. She wasn't weakening when she married Dino, she wasn't cutting her ambition down to size. And Dino was a decent guy. I always liked him. That's why, even though I fell badly for Lindy the moment I first saw her, I didn't make a move. I was the perfect gentleman. I found out later that was what made Lindy all the more determined. Man, you've got to admire a girl like that! I have to tell you, friend, I was a bright, bright star around this time. I guess this would be around when your mother was listening to me. Dino, though, his star was starting to go down fast. It was tough for a lot of singers just around then. Everything was changing. Kids were listening to the Beatles, the Rolling Stones. Poor Dino, he sounded too much like Bing Crosby. He tried a bossa nova album folks just laughed at. Definitely time for Lindy to get out. No one could have accused us of anything in that situation. I don't

think even Dino really blamed us. So I made my move. That's how she got up to the penthouse.

'We got married in Vegas, we had the hotel fill the bathtub with champagne. That song we're gonna do tonight, "I Fall in Love Too Easily". You know why I chose that one? You want to know? We were in London once, not long after we got married. We came up to our room after breakfast and the maid's in there cleaning our suite. But Lindy and I are horny as rabbits. So we go in, and we can hear the maid vacuuming our lounge, but we can't see her, she's through the partition. So we sneak through on tip-toes, like we're kids, you know? We sneak through to the bedroom, close the door. We can see the maid's finished the bedroom already, so maybe she doesn't need to come back, but we don't know that for sure. Either way, we don't care. We tear off our clothes, we make love on the bed, and all the time the maid's on the other side, moving around our suite, no idea we've come in. I tell you, we were horny, but after a while, we found the whole thing so funny, we just kept laughing. Then we'd finished and we were lying there in each other's arms, and the maid was still out there and you know what, she starts singing! She's finished with the vacuum, so she starts singing at the top of her voice, and boy, did she have one lousy voice! We were laughing and laughing, but trying to keep it silent. Then what do you know, she stops singing and turns on the radio. And suddenly we hear Chet Baker. He's singing "I Fall in Love Too Easily", nice and slow and mellow. And Lindy and me, we just lay there across the bed together, listening to Chet singing. And after a while, I'm singing along, really soft, singing along with Chet Baker on the radio, Lindy curled up in my arms. That's how it was. That's why we're gonna do that song tonight. I don't know if she'll remember though. Who the hell knows?'

Mr Gardner stopped talking and I could see him wiping away tears. Vittorio brought us around another corner and I realised we were going past the restaurant a second time. It

looked even more lively than before, and a pianist, this guy I know called Andrea, was now playing in the corner.

As we drifted again into the dark, I said: 'Mr Gardner, it's none of my business, I know. But I can see maybe things haven't been so good between you and Mrs Gardner lately. I want you to know I understand about things like that. My mother often used to get sad, maybe just the way you are now. She'd think she'd found someone, she'd be so happy and tell me this guy was going to be my new dad. The first couple of times I believed her. After that, I knew it wouldn't work out. But my mother, she never stopped believing it. And every time she felt down, maybe like you are tonight, you know what she did? She put on your records and sang along. All those long winters, in that tiny apartment of ours, she'd sit there, knees tucked up under her, glass of something in her hand, and she'd sing along softly. And sometimes, I remember this, Mr Gardner, our neighbours upstairs would bang on the ceiling, especially when you were doing those big up-tempo numbers, like "High Hopes" or "They All Laughed". I used to watch my mother carefully, but it was like she hadn't heard a thing, she'd be listening to you, nodding her head to the beat, her lips moving with the lyrics. Mr Gardner, I wanted to say to you. Your music helped my mother through those times, it must have helped millions of others. And it's only right it should help you too.' I did a little laugh, which I meant to be encouraging, but it came out louder than I'd meant it to. 'You can count on me tonight, Mr Gardner. I'm going to put everything I've got into it. I'll make it as good as any orchestra, you just see. And Mrs Gardner will hear us and who knows? Maybe things will start going fine between you again. Every couple goes through difficult times.'

Mr Gardner smiled. 'You're a sweet guy. I appreciate you helping me out tonight. But we don't have any more time to talk. Lindy's in her room now. I can see the light on.'

We were going by a palazzo we'd passed at least twice before, and I now realised why Vittorio had been taking us round in circles. Mr Gardner had been watching for the light to come on in a particular window, and each time he'd found it still dark, we'd moved on to do another circle. This time, though, the third-storey window was lit, the shutters were open, and from down where we were, we could see a small part of the ceiling with its dark wooden beams. Mr Gardner signalled to Vittorio, but he'd already stopped rowing and we drifted slowly till the gondola was directly beneath the window.

Mr Gardner stood up, making the boat rock alarmingly again, and Vittorio had to move quickly to steady us. Then Mr Gardner called up, much too softly: 'Lindy? Lindy?' Finally he called out much louder: 'Lindy!'

A hand pushed the shutters out wider, then a figure came onto the narrow balcony. A lantern was fixed to the palazzo wall not far above us, but the light wasn't good, and Mrs Gardner wasn't much more than a silhouette. I could see though that she'd put up her hair since I'd met her in the piazza, maybe for their dinner earlier on.

'That you, sweetie?' She leaned over the balcony rail. 'I thought you'd been kidnapped or something. You had me all anxious.'

'Don't be foolish, honey. What could happen in a town like this? Anyway, I left you that note.'

'I didn't see any note, sweetie.'

'I left you a note. Just so you wouldn't get anxious.'

'Where is it, this note? What did it say?'

'I don't remember, honey.' Mr Gardner now sounded irritated. 'It was just a regular note. You know, saying I'd gone to buy cigarettes or something.'

'Is that what you're doing down there now? Buying cigarettes?'

‘No, honey. This is something different. I’m gonna sing to you.’

‘Is this some sort of joke?’

‘No, honey, it isn’t a joke. This is Venice. It’s what people do here.’ He gestured around to me and Vittorio, like our being there proved his point.

‘It’s kind of chilly for me out here, sweetie.’

Mr Gardner did a big sigh. ‘Then you can listen from inside the room. Go back in the room, honey, make yourself comfortable. Just leave those windows open and you’ll hear us fine.’

She went on gazing down at him for a while, and he went on gazing back up, neither of them saying anything. Then she’d gone inside, and Mr Gardner seemed disappointed, even though this was exactly what he’d suggested she should do. He lowered his head with another sigh, and I could tell he was hesitating about going ahead. So I said:

‘Come on, Mr Gardner, let’s do it. Let’s do “By the Time I Get to Phoenix”.’

And I played gently a little opening figure, no beat yet, the sort of thing that could lead into a song or just as easily fade away. I tried to make it sound like America, sad roadside bars, big long highways, and I guess I was thinking too of my mother, the way I’d come into the room and see her on the sofa gazing at her record sleeve with its picture of an American road, or maybe of the singer sitting in an American car. What I mean is, I tried to play it so my mother would have recognised it as coming from that same world, the world on her record sleeve.

Then before I realised it, before I’d picked up any steady beat, Mr Gardner started to sing. His posture, standing in the gondola, was pretty unsteady, and I was afraid he’d lose his balance any moment. But his voice came

out just the way I remembered it - gentle, almost husky, but with a huge amount of body, like it was coming through an invisible mike. And like all the best American singers, there was that weariness in his voice, even a hint of hesitation, like he's not a man accustomed to laying open his heart this way. That's how all the greats do it.

We went through that song, full of travelling and goodbye. An American man leaving his woman. He keeps thinking of her as he passes through the towns one by one, verse by verse, Phoenix, Albuquerque, Oklahoma, driving down a long road the way my mother never could. If only we could leave things behind like that - I guess that's what my mother would have thought. If only sadness could be like that.

We came to the end and Mr Gardner said: 'Okay, let's go straight to the next one. "I Fall in Love Too Easily".'

This being my first time playing with Mr Gardner, I had to feel my way around everything, but we managed okay. After what he'd told me about this song, I kept looking up at that window, but there was nothing from Mrs Gardner, no movement, no sound, nothing. Then we'd finished, and the quiet and the dark settled around us. Somewhere nearby, I could hear a neighbour pushing open shutters, maybe to hear better. But nothing from Mrs Gardner's window.

We did 'One for My Baby' very slow, virtually no beat at all, then everything was silent again. We went on looking up at the window, then at last, maybe after a full minute, we heard it. You could only just make it out, but there was no mistaking it. Mrs Gardner was up there sobbing.

'We did it, Mr Gardner!' I whispered. 'We did it. We got her by the heart.'

But Mr Gardner didn't seem pleased. He shook his head tiredly, sat down and gestured to Vittorio. 'Take us round the other side. It's time I went in.'

As we started to move again, I thought he was avoiding looking at me, almost like he was ashamed of what we'd just done, and I began thinking maybe this whole plan had been some kind of malicious joke. For all I knew, these songs all held horrible meanings for Mrs Gardner. So I put my guitar away and sat there, maybe a bit sullen, and that's how we travelled for a while.

Then we came out to a much wider canal, and immediately a water-taxi coming the other way rushed past us, making waves under the gondola. But we were nearly up to the front of Mr Gardner's palazzo, and as Vittorio let us drift towards the quay, I said:

'Mr Gardner, you've been an important part of my growing up. And tonight's been a very special night for me. If we just said goodbye now and I never saw you again, I know for the rest of my life I'll always be wondering. So Mr Gardner, please tell me. Just now, was Mrs Gardner crying because she was happy or because she was upset?'

I thought he wasn't going to answer. In the dim light, his figure was just this hunched-up shape at the front of the boat. But as Vittorio was tying the rope, he said quietly:

'I guess she was pleased to hear me sing that way. But sure, she was upset. We're both of us upset. Twenty-seven years is a long time and after this trip we're separating. This is our last trip together.'

'I'm really sorry to hear that, Mr Gardner,' I said gently. 'I guess a lot of marriages come to an end, even after twenty-seven years. But at least you're able to part like this. A holiday in Venice. Singing from a gondola. There can't be many couples who split up and stay so civilised.'

'But why wouldn't we be civilised? We still love each other. That's why she's crying up there. Because she still loves me as much as I still love her.'

Vittorio had stepped up onto the quay, but Mr Gardner and I kept sitting in the darkness. I was waiting for him to say more, and sure enough, after a moment, he went on:

‘Like I told you, the first time I laid eyes on Lindy I fell in love with her. But did she love me back then? I doubt if the question ever crossed her mind. I was a star, that’s all that mattered to her. I was what she’d dreamt of, what she’d planned to win for herself back in that little diner. Whether she loved me or not didn’t come into it. But twenty-seven years of marriage can do funny things. Plenty of couples, they start off loving each other, then get tired of each other, end up hating each other. Sometimes though it goes the other way. It took a few years, but bit by bit, Lindy began to love me. I didn’t dare believe it at first, but after a while there was nothing else to believe. A little touch on my shoulder as we were getting up from a table. A funny little smile across the room when there wasn’t anything to smile about, just her fooling around. I bet she was as surprised as anyone, but that’s what happened. After five or six years, we found we were easy with each other. That we worried about each other, cared about each other. Like I say, we loved each other. And we still love each other today.’

‘I don’t get it, Mr Gardner. So why are you and Mrs Gardner separating?’

He did another of his sighs. ‘How would you understand, my friend, coming from where you do? But you’ve been kind to me tonight, so I’m gonna try and explain it. Fact is, I’m no longer the major name I once was. Protest all you like, but where we come from, there’s no getting round something like that. I’m no longer a major name. Now I could just accept that and fade away. Live on past glories. Or I could say, no, I’m not finished yet. In other words, my friend, I could make a come-back. Plenty have from my position and worse. But a come-back’s no easy game. You have to be prepared to make a lot of changes, some of them hard ones. You change the way you are. You even change some things you love.’

‘Mr Gardner, are you saying you and Mrs Gardner have to separate because of your come-back?’

‘Look at the other guys, the guys who came back successfully. Look at the ones from my generation still hanging round. Every single one of them, they’ve re-married. Twice, sometimes three times. Every one of them, young wives on their arms. Me and Lindy are getting to be a laughing-stock. Besides, there’s been this particular young lady I’ve had my eye on, and she’s had her eye on me. Lindy knows the score. She’s known it longer than I have, maybe ever since those days in that diner listening to Meg. We’ve talked it over. She understands it’s time to go our separate ways.’

‘I still don’t get it, Mr Gardner. This place you and Mrs Gardner come from can’t be so different from everywhere else. That’s why, Mr Gardner, that’s why these songs you’ve been singing all these years, they make sense for people everywhere. Even where I used to live. And what do all these songs say? If two people fall out of love and they have to part, then that’s sad. But if they go on loving each other, they should stay together forever. That’s what these songs are saying.’

‘I understand what you’re saying, friend. And it might sound hard to you, I know. But that’s the way it is. And listen, this is about Lindy too. It’s best for her we do this now. She’s nowhere near old yet. You’ve seen her, she’s still a beautiful woman. She needs to get out now, while she has time. Time to find love again, make another marriage. She needs to get out before it’s too late.’

I don’t know what I would have said to that, but then he caught me by surprise, saying: ‘Your mother. I guess she never got out.’

I thought about it, then said quietly: ‘No, Mr Gardner. She never got out. She didn’t live long enough to see the changes in our country.’

‘That’s too bad. I’m sure she was a fine woman. If what you say is true, and my music helped make her happy, that means a lot to me. Too bad she didn’t get out. I don’t want that to happen to my Lindy. No, sir. Not to my Lindy. I want my Lindy to get out.’

The gondola was bumping gently against the quay. Vittorio called out softly, reaching out his hand, and after a few seconds, Mr Gardner got to his feet and climbed out. By the time I too had climbed out with my guitar - I wasn’t going to beg any free rides from Vittorio - Mr Gardner had his wallet out.

Vittorio seemed pleased with what he was given, and with his usual fine phrases and gestures, he got back in his gondola and set off down the canal.

We watched him disappear into the dark, then next thing, Mr Gardner was pushing a lot of notes into my hand. I told him it was way too much, that anyway it was a huge honour for me, but he wouldn’t hear of taking any of it back.

‘No, no,’ he said, waving his hand in front of his face, like he wanted to be done, not just with the money, but with me, the evening, maybe this whole section of his life. He started to walk off towards his palazzo, but after a few paces, he stopped and turned back to look at me. The little street we were in, the canal, everything was silent now except for the distant sound of a television.

‘You played well tonight, my friend,’ he said. ‘You have a nice touch.’

‘Thank you, Mr Gardner. And you sang great. As great as ever.’

‘Maybe I’ll come by the square again before we leave. Listen to you playing with your crew.’

‘I hope so, Mr Gardner.’

But I never saw him again. I heard a few months later, in the autumn, that Mr and Mrs Gardner got their divorce - one of the waiters at the Florian read it somewhere and told me. It all came back to me then about that evening, and it made me feel a little sad thinking about it again. Because Mr Gardner had seemed a pretty decent guy, and whichever way you look at it, come-back or no come-back, he'll always be one of the greats.

COME RAIN OR COME SHINE

LIKE ME, EMILY loved old American Broadway songs. She'd go more for the up-tempo numbers, like Irving Berlin's 'Cheek to Cheek' and Cole Porter's 'Begin the Beguine', while I'd lean towards the bitter-sweet ballads - 'Here's That Rainy Day' or 'It Never Entered My Mind'. But there was a big overlap, and anyway, back then, on a university campus in the south of England, it was a near-miracle to find anyone else who shared such passions. Today, a young person's likely to listen to any sort of music. My nephew, who starts university this autumn, is going through his Argentinian tango phase. He also likes Edith Piaf as well as any number of the latest indie bands. But in our day tastes weren't nearly so diverse. My fellow students fell into two broad camps: the hippie types with their long hair and flowing garments who liked 'progressive rock', and the neat, tweedy ones who considered anything other than classical music a horrible din. Occasionally you'd bump into someone who professed to be into jazz, but this would always turn out to be of the so-called crossover kind - endless improvisations with no respect for the beautifully crafted songs used as their starting points.

So it was a relief to discover someone else, and a girl at that, who appreciated the Great American Songbook. Like me, Emily collected LPs with sensitive, straightforward vocal interpretations of the standards - you could often find such records going cheap in junk shops, discarded by our parents' generation. She favoured Sarah Vaughan and Chet Baker. I preferred Julie London and Peggy Lee. Neither of us was big on Sinatra or Ella Fitzgerald.

In that first year, Emily lived in college, and she had in her room a portable record player, a type that was quite common then. It looked like a large hat box, with pale-blue

leatherette surfaces and a single built-in speaker. Only when you raised its lid would you see the turntable sitting inside. It gave out a pretty primitive sound by today's standards, but I remember us crouching around it happily for hours, taking off one track, carefully lowering the needle down onto another. We loved playing different versions of the same song, then arguing about the lyrics, or about the singers' interpretations. Was that line really supposed to be sung so ironically? Was it better to sing 'Georgia on My Mind' as though Georgia was a woman or the place in America? We were especially pleased when we found a recording - like Ray Charles singing 'Come Rain or Come Shine' - where the words themselves were happy, but the interpretation was pure heartbreak.

Emily's love of these records was obviously so deep that I'd be taken aback each time I stumbled on her talking to other students about some pretentious rock band or vacuous Californian singer-songwriter. At times, she'd start arguing about a 'concept' album in much the way she and I would discuss Gershwin or Howard Arlen, and then I'd have to bite my lip not to show my irritation.

Back then, Emily was slim and beautiful, and if she hadn't settled on Charlie so early in her university career, I'm sure she'd have had a whole bunch of men competing for her. But she was never flirty or tarty, so once she was with Charlie, the other suitors backed off.

'That's the only reason I keep Charlie around,' she told me once, with a dead straight face, then burst out laughing when I looked shocked. 'Just a joke, silly. Charlie is my darling, my darling, my darling.'

Charlie was my best friend at university. During that first year, we hung around together the whole time and that was how I'd come to know Emily. In the second year, Charlie and Emily got a house-share down in town, and though I was a frequent visitor, those discussions with Emily around her

record-player became a thing of the past. For a start, whenever I called round to the house, there were several other students sitting around, laughing and talking, and there was now a fancy stereo system churning out rock music you had to shout over.

Charlie and I have remained close friends through the years. We may not see each other as much as we once did, but that's mainly down to distances. I've spent years here in Spain, as well as in Italy and Portugal, while Charlie's always based himself in London. Now if that makes it sound like I'm the jet-setter and he's the stay-at-home, that would be funny. Because in fact Charlie's the one who's always flying off - to Texas, Tokyo, New York - to his high-powered meetings, while I've been stuck in the same humid buildings year after year, setting spelling tests or conducting the same conversations in slowed-down English. My-name-is-Ray. What-is-your-name? Do-you-have-children?

When I first took up English teaching after university, it seemed a good enough life - much like an extension of university. Language schools were mushrooming all over Europe, and if the teaching was tedious and the hours exploitative, at that age you don't care too much. You spend a lot of time in bars, friends are easy to make, and there's a feeling you're part of a large network extending around the entire globe. You meet people fresh from their spells in Peru or Thailand, and this gets you thinking that if you wanted to, you could drift around the world indefinitely, using your contacts to get a job in any faraway corner you fancied. And always you'd be part of this cosy, extended family of itinerant teachers, swapping stories over drinks about former colleagues, psychotic school directors, eccentric British Council officers.

In the late '80s, there was talk of making a lot of money teaching in Japan, and I made serious plans to go, but it never worked out. I thought about Brazil too, even read a few books about the culture and sent off for application forms.

But somehow I never got away that far. Southern Italy, Portugal for a short spell, back here to Spain. Then before you know it, you're forty-seven years old, and the people you started out with have long ago been replaced by a generation who gossip about different things, take different drugs and listen to different music.

Meanwhile, Charlie and Emily had married and settled down in London. Charlie told me once, when they had children I'd be godfather to one of them. But that never happened. What I mean is, a child never came along, and now I suppose it's too late. I have to admit, I've always felt slightly let down about this. Perhaps I always imagined that being godfather to one of their children would provide an official link, however tenuous, between their lives in England and mine out here.

Anyway, at the start of this summer, I went to London to stay with them. It had been arranged well in advance, and when I'd phoned to check a couple of days beforehand, Charlie had said they were both 'superbly well'. That's why I'd no reason to expect anything other than pampering and relaxation after a few months that hadn't exactly been the best in my life.

In fact, as I emerged out of their local Underground that sunny day, my thoughts were on the possible refinements that might have been added to 'my' bedroom since the previous visit. Over the years, there's almost always been something or other. One time it was some gleaming electronic gadget standing in the corner; another time the whole place had been redecorated. In any case, almost as a point of principle, the room would be prepared for me the way a posh hotel would go about things: towels laid out, a bedside tin of biscuits, a selection of CDs on the dressing table. A few years ago, Charlie had led me in and with nonchalant pride started flicking switches, causing all sorts of subtly hidden lights to go on and off: behind the headboard, above the wardrobe and so on. Another switch had triggered a growling hum and blinds had begun to descend over the two windows.

‘Look, Charlie, why do I need blinds?’ I’d asked that time. ‘I want to see out when I wake up. Just the curtains will do fine.’

‘These blinds are Swiss,’ he’d said, as though this were explanation enough.

But this time Charlie led me up the stairs mumbling to himself, and as we got to my room, I realised he was making excuses. And then I saw the room as I’d never seen it before. The bed was bare, the mattress on it mottled and askew. On the floor were piles of magazines and paperbacks, bundles of old clothes, a hockey stick and a loudspeaker fallen on its side. I paused at the threshold and stared at it while Charlie cleared a space to put down my bag.

‘You look like you’re about to demand to see the manager,’ he said, bitterly.

‘No, no. It’s just that it’s unusual to see it this way.’

‘It’s a mess, I know. A mess.’ He sat down on the mattress and sighed. ‘I thought the cleaning girls would have sorted all this. But of course they haven’t. God knows why not.’

He seemed very dejected, but then he suddenly sprang to his feet again.

‘Look, let’s go out for some lunch. I’ll leave a note for Emily. We can have a long leisurely lunch and by the time we come back, your room - the whole flat - will be sorted out.’

‘But we can’t ask Emily to tidy everything.’

‘Oh, she won’t do it herself. She’ll get on to the cleaners. She knows how to harass them. Me, I don’t even have their number. Lunch, let’s have lunch. Three courses, bottle of wine, everything.’

What Charlie called their flat was in fact the top two floors of a four-storey terrace in a well-to-do but busy street. We came out of the front door straight into a throng of people and traffic. I followed Charlie past shops and offices to a smart little Italian restaurant. We didn't have a reservation, but the waiters greeted Charlie like a friend and led us to a table. Looking around I saw the place was full of business types in suits and ties, and I was glad Charlie looked as scruffy as I did. He must have guessed my thoughts, because as we sat down he said:

'Oh, you're so home counties, Ray. Anyway, it's all changed now. You've been out the country too long.' Then in an alarmingly loud voice: '*We* look like the ones who've made it. Everyone else here looks like middle management.' Then he leant towards me and said more quietly: 'Look, we've got to talk. I need you to do me a favour.'

I couldn't remember the last time Charlie had asked my help for anything, but I managed a casual nod and waited. He played with his menu for a few seconds, then put it down.

'The truth is, Emily and I have been going through a bit of a sticky patch. In fact, just recently, we've been avoiding one another altogether. That's why she wasn't there just now to welcome you. Right now, I'm afraid, you get a choice of one or the other of us. A bit like those plays when the same actor's playing two parts. You can't get both me and Emily in the same room at the same time. Rather childish, isn't it?'

'This is obviously a bad time for me to have come. I'll go away, straight after lunch. I'll stay with my Auntie Katie in Finchley.'

'What are you talking about? You're not listening. I just told you. I want you to do me a favour.'

'I thought that was your way of saying ...'

‘No, you idiot, I’m the one who has to clear out. I’ve got to go to a meeting in Frankfurt, I’m flying out this afternoon. I’ll be back in two days, Thursday at the latest. Meanwhile, you stay here. You bring things round, make everything okay again. Then I come back, say a cheerful hello, kiss my darling wife like the last two months haven’t happened, and we pick up again.’

At this point the waitress came to take our order, and after she’d gone Charlie seemed reluctant to take up the subject again. Instead, he fired questions at me about my life in Spain, and each time I told him anything, good or bad, he’d do this sour little smile and shake his head, like I was confirming his worst fears. At one point I was trying to tell him how much I’d improved as a cook - how I’d prepared the Christmas buffet for over forty students and teachers virtually single-handed - but he just cut me off in mid-sentence.

‘Listen to me,’ he said. ‘Your situation’s hopeless. You’ve got to hand in your notice. But first, you have to get your new job lined up. This Portuguese depressive, use him as a go-between. Secure the Madrid post, then ditch the apartment. Okay, here’s what you do. One.’

He held up his hand and began counting off each instruction as he made it. Our food arrived when he still had a couple of fingers to go, but he ignored it and carried on till he’d finished. Then as we began to eat, he said:

‘I can tell you won’t do any of this.’

‘No, no, everything you say is very sound.’

‘You’ll go back and carry on just the same. Then we’ll be here again in a year’s time and you’ll be moaning about exactly the same things.’

‘I wasn’t moaning ...’

‘You know, Ray, there’s only so much other people can suggest to you. After a certain point, you’ve got to take charge of your life.’

‘Okay, I will, I promise. But you were saying earlier, something about a favour.’

‘Ah yes.’ He chewed his food thoughtfully. ‘To be honest, this was my real motive in inviting you over. Of course, it’s great to see you and all of that. But for me, the main thing, I wanted you to do something for me. After all you’re my oldest friend, a life-long friend . . .’

Suddenly he began eating again, and I realised with astonishment he was sobbing quietly. I reached across the table and prodded his shoulder, but he just kept shovelling pasta into his mouth without looking up. When this had gone on for a minute or so, I reached over and gave him another little prod, but this had no more effect than my first one. Then the waitress appeared with a cheerful smile to check on our food. We both said everything was excellent and as she went off, Charlie seemed to become more himself again.

‘Okay, Ray, listen. What I’m asking you to do is dead simple. All I want is for you to hang about with Emily for the next few days, be a pleasant guest. That’s all. Just until I get back.’

‘That’s all? You’re just asking me to look after her while you’re gone?’

‘That’s it. Or rather, let her look after you. You’re the guest. I’ve lined up some things for you to do. Theatre tickets and so on. I’ll be back Thursday at the latest. Your mission’s just to get her in a good mood and keep her that way. So when I come in and say, “Hello darling,” and hug her, she’ll just reply, “Oh hello, darling, welcome home, how was everything,” and hug me back. Then we can carry on as before. Before all this horrible stuff began. That’s your mission. Quite simple really.’

'I'm happy to do anything I can,' I said. 'But look, Charlie, are you sure she's in the mood to entertain visitors? You're obviously going through some sort of crisis. She must be as upset as you are. Quite honestly, I don't understand why you asked me here right now.'

'What do you mean, you don't understand? I've asked you because you're my oldest friend. Yes, all right, I've got a lot of friends. But when it comes down to it, when I thought hard about it, I realised you're the only one who'd do.'

I have to admit I was rather moved by this. All the same, I could see there was something not quite right here, something he wasn't telling me.

'I can understand you inviting me to stay if you were both going to be here,' I said. 'I can see how that would work. You're not talking to each other, you invite a guest as a diversion, you both put on your best behaviour, things start to thaw. But it's not going to work in this case, because you're not going to be here.'

'Just do it for me, Ray. I think it might work. Emily's always cheered up by you.'

'Cheered up by me? You know, Charlie, I want to help. But it's possible you've got this a bit wrong. Because I get the impression, quite frankly, Emily isn't cheered up by me at all, even at the best of times. The last few visits here, she was . . . well, distinctly impatient with me.'

'Look, Ray, just trust me. I know what I'm doing.'

Emily was at the flat when we returned. I have to admit, I was taken aback at how much she'd aged. It wasn't just that she'd got significantly heavier since my last visit: her face, once so effortlessly graceful, was now distinctly bulldoggy, with a displeased set to the mouth. She was sitting on the living-room sofa reading the *Financial Times*, and got up rather glumly as I came in.

‘Nice to see you, Raymond,’ she said, kissing me quickly on the cheek, then sitting down again. The whole way she did this made me want to blurt out a profuse apology for intruding at such a bad time. But before I could say anything, she thumped the space beside her on the sofa, saying: ‘Now, Raymond, sit down here and answer my questions. I want to know all about what you’ve been up to.’

I sat down and she began to interrogate me, much as Charlie had done in the restaurant. Charlie, meanwhile, was packing for his journey, drifting in and out of the room in search of various items. I noticed they didn’t look at each other, but neither did they seem so uncomfortable being in the same room, despite what he’d claimed. And although they never spoke directly to each other, Charlie kept joining in the conversation in an odd, once-removed manner. For instance, when I was explaining to Emily why it was so difficult to find a flat-mate to share my rent burden, Charlie shouted from the kitchen:

‘The place he’s in, it’s just not geared up for two people! It’s for one person, and one person with a bit more money than he’ll ever have!’

Emily made no response to this, but must have absorbed the information, because she then went on: ‘Raymond, you should never have chosen an apartment like that.’

This sort of thing continued for at least the next twenty minutes, Charlie making his contributions from the stairs or as he passed through to the kitchen, usually by shouting out some statement that referred to me in the third person. At one point, Emily suddenly said:

‘Oh, honestly Raymond. You let yourself be exploited left, right and centre by that ghastly language school, you let your landlord rip you off silly, and what do you do? Get in tow with some airhead girl with a drink problem and not even a job to support it. It’s like you’re deliberately trying to annoy anyone who still gives a shit about you!’

‘He can’t expect many of that tribe to survive!’ Charlie boomed from the hall. I could hear he had his suitcase out there now. ‘It’s all very well behaving like an adolescent ten years after you’ve ceased to be one. But to carry on like this when you’re nearly fifty!’

‘I’m only forty-seven ...’

‘What do you mean, you’re *only* forty-seven?’ Emily’s voice was unnecessarily loud given I was sitting right next to her. ‘*Only* forty-seven. This “only”, this is what’s destroying your life, Raymond. Only, only, only. Only doing my best. Only forty-seven. Soon you’ll be only *sixty*-seven and only going round in bloody circles trying to find a bloody roof to keep over your head!’

‘He needs to get his bloody arse together!’ Charlie yelled down the staircase. ‘Fucking well pull his socks up till they’re touching his fucking balls!’

‘Raymond, don’t you ever stop and ask yourself who you are?’ Emily asked. ‘When you think of all your potential, aren’t you ashamed? Look at how you lead your life! It’s . . . it’s simply infuriating! One gets so exasperated!’

Charlie appeared in the doorway in his raincoat, and for a moment they were shouting different things at me simultaneously. Then Charlie broke off, announced he was leaving - as though in disgust at me - and vanished.

His departure brought Emily’s diatribe to a halt, and I took the opportunity to get to my feet, saying: ‘Excuse me, I’ll just go and give Charlie a hand with his luggage.’

‘Why do I need help with my luggage?’ Charlie said from the hall. ‘I’ve only got the one bag.’

But he let me follow him down into the street and left me with the suitcase while he went to the edge of the kerb to hail a cab. There didn’t seem to be any to hand, and he leaned out worriedly, an arm half-raised.

I went up to him and said: 'Charlie, I don't think it's going to work.'

'What's not going to work?'

'Emily absolutely hates me. That's her after seeing me for a few minutes. What's she going to be like after three days? Why on earth do you think you'll come back to harmony and light?'

Even as I was saying this, something was dawning on me and I fell silent. Noticing the change, Charlie turned and looked at me carefully.

'I think', I said, eventually, 'I have an idea why it had to be me and no one else.'

'Ah ha. Can it be Ray sees the light?'

'Yes, maybe I do.'

'But what does it matter? It remains the same, exactly the same, what I'm asking you to do.' Now there were tears in his eyes again. 'Do you remember, Ray, the way Emily always used to say she believed in me? She said it for years and years. I believe in you, Charlie, you can go all the way, you're really talented. Right up until three, four years ago, she was still saying it. Do you know how trying that got? I was doing all right. I *am* doing all right. Perfectly okay. But she thought I was destined for . . . God knows, president of the fucking world, God knows! I'm just an ordinary bloke who's doing all right. But she doesn't see that. That's at the heart of it, at the heart of everything that's gone wrong.'

He began to walk slowly along the pavement, very preoccupied. I hurried back to get his suitcase and began pulling it along on its rollers. The street was still fairly crowded, so it was a struggle to keep up with him without crashing the bag into other pedestrians. But Charlie kept walking at a steady pace, oblivious to my difficulties.

‘She thinks I’ve let myself down,’ he was saying. ‘But I haven’t. I’m doing perfectly okay. Endless horizons are all very well when you’re young. But get to our age, you’ve got to . . . you’ve got to get some perspective. That’s what kept going round in my head whenever she got unbearable about it. Perspective, she needs perspective. And I kept saying to myself, look, I’m doing okay. Look at loads of other people, people we know. Look at Ray. Look what a pig’s arse he’s making of *his* life. She needs perspective.’

‘So you decided to invite me for a visit. To be Mr Perspective.’

At last, Charlie stopped and met my eye. ‘Don’t get me wrong, Ray. I’m not saying you’re an awful failure or anything. I realise you’re not a drug addict or a murderer. But beside me, let’s face it, you don’t look the highest of achievers. That’s why I’m asking you, asking you to do this for me. Things are on their last legs with us, I’m desperate, I need you to help. And what am I asking, for God’s sake? Just that you be your usual sweet self. Nothing more, nothing less. Just do it for me, Raymond. For me and Emily. It’s not over between us yet, I know it isn’t. Just be yourself for a few days until I get back. That’s not so much to ask, is it?’

I took a deep breath and said: ‘Okay, okay, if you think it’ll help. But isn’t Emily going to see through all this sooner or later?’

‘Why should she? She knows I’ve got an important meeting in Frankfurt. To her the whole thing’s straightforward. She’s just looking after a guest, that’s all. She likes to do that and she likes you. Look, a taxi.’ He waved frantically and as the driver came towards us, he grasped my arm. ‘Thanks, Ray. You’ll swing it for us, I know you will.’

I returned to find Emily’s manner had undergone a complete transformation. She welcomed me into the apartment the way

she might a very aged and frail relative. There were encouraging smiles, gentle touches on the arm. When I agreed to some tea, she led me into the kitchen, sat me down at the table, then for a few seconds stood there regarding me with a concerned expression. Eventually she said, softly:

‘I’m so sorry I went on at you like that earlier, Raymond. I’ve got no right to talk to you like that.’ Then turning away to make the tea, she went on: ‘It’s years now since we were at university together. I always forget that. I’d never dream of talking to any other friend that way. But when it’s you, well, I suppose I look at you and it’s like we’re back there, the way we all were then, and I just forget. You really mustn’t take it to heart.’

‘No, no. I haven’t taken it to heart at all.’ I was still thinking about the conversation I’d just had with Charlie, and probably seemed distant. I think Emily misinterpreted this, because her voice became even more gentle.

‘I’m so sorry I upset you.’ She was carefully laying out rows of biscuits on a plate in front of me. ‘The thing is, Raymond, back in those days, we could say virtually anything to you, you’d just laugh and we’d laugh, and everything would be a big joke. It’s so silly of me, thinking you could still be like that.’

‘Well, actually, I *am* more or less still like that. I didn’t think anything of it.’

‘I didn’t realise’, she went on, apparently not hearing me, ‘how different you are now. How close to the edge you must be.’

‘Look, really Emily, I’m not so bad . . .’

‘I suppose the passing years have just left you high and dry. You’re like a man on the precipice. One more tiny push and you’ll crack.’

‘Fall, you mean.’

She’d been fiddling with the kettle, but now turned round to stare at me again. ‘No, Raymond, don’t talk like that. Not even in fun. I don’t ever want to hear you talking like that.’

‘No, you misunderstand. You said I’d crack, but if I’m on a precipice, then I’d fall, not crack.’

‘Oh, you poor thing.’ She still didn’t seem to take in what I was saying. ‘You’re only a husk of the Raymond from those days.’

I decided it might be best not to respond this time, and for a few moments we waited quietly for the kettle to boil. She prepared a cup for me, though not for herself, and placed it in front of me.

‘I’m so sorry, Ray, but I’ve got to get back to the office now. There are two meetings I absolutely can’t miss. If only I’d known how you’d be, I wouldn’t have deserted you. I’d have made other arrangements. But I haven’t, I’m expected back. Poor Raymond. What will you do here, all by yourself?’

‘I’ll be terrific. Really. In fact, I was thinking. Why don’t I get our dinner ready while you’re gone? You probably won’t believe this, but I’ve become a pretty good cook these days. In fact, we had this buffet just before Christmas . . .’

‘That’s terribly sweet of you, wanting to help. But I think it’s best you rest just now. After all, an unfamiliar kitchen can be the source of so much stress. Why don’t you just make yourself completely at home, have a herbal bath, listen to some music. I’ll take care of dinner when I come in.’

‘But you don’t want to worry about food after a long day at the office.’

‘No, Ray, you’re just to relax.’ She produced a business card and placed it on the table. ‘This has got my direct line on it, my mobile too. I’ve *got* to go now, but you can call me any time you want. Now remember, don’t take on anything stressful while I’m gone.’

For some time now I’ve been finding it hard to relax properly in my own apartment. If I’m alone at home, I get increasingly restless, bothered by the idea that I’m missing some crucial encounter out there somewhere. But if I’m left by myself in someone else’s place, I often find a nice sense of peace engulfing me. I love sinking into an unfamiliar sofa with whatever book happens to be lying nearby. And that’s exactly what I did this time, after Emily had left. Or at least, I managed to read a couple of chapters of *Mansfield Park* before dozing off for twenty minutes or so.

When I woke up, the afternoon sun was coming into the flat. Getting off the sofa, I began a little nose-around. Perhaps the cleaners had indeed been in during our lunch, or maybe Emily had done the tidying herself; in any case, the large living room was looking pretty immaculate. Tidiness aside, it had been stylishly done up, with modern designer furniture and arty objects – though someone being unkind might have said it was all too obviously for effect. I took a browse through the books, then glanced through the CD collection. It was almost entirely rock or classical, but finally, after some searching, I found tucked away in the shadows a small section devoted to Fred Astaire, Chet Baker, Sarah Vaughan. It puzzled me that Emily hadn’t replaced more of her treasured vinyl collection with their CD reincarnations, but I didn’t dwell on this, and wandered off into the kitchen.

I was opening up a few cupboards in search of biscuits or a chocolate bar when I noticed what seemed to be a small notebook on the kitchen table. It had purple cushioned covers, which made it stand out amidst the sleek minimalist

surfaces of the kitchen. Emily, in a big hurry just before she'd left, had been emptying and re-filling her bag on the table while I'd been drinking my tea. Obviously she'd left the notebook behind by mistake. But then in almost the next instant another idea came to me: that this purple book was some kind of intimate diary, and Emily had left it there on purpose, fully intending for me to have a peek; that for whatever reason, she'd felt unable to confide more openly, so had resorted to this way of sharing her inner turmoil.

I stood there for a while, staring at the notebook. Then I reached forward, inserted my forefinger into the pages at the mid-way point and gingerly levered it up. The sight of Emily's closely-packed handwriting inside made me pull my finger out, and I moved away from the table, telling myself I had no business nosing in there, never mind what Emily had intended in an irrational moment.

I went back into the living room, settled into the sofa and read a few more pages of *Mansfield Park*. But now I found I couldn't concentrate. My mind kept going back to the purple notebook. What if it hadn't been an impulsive action at all? What if she'd planned this for days? What if she'd composed something carefully for me to read?

After another ten minutes, I went back into the kitchen and stared some more at the purple notebook. Then I sat down, where I'd sat before to drink my tea, slid the notebook towards me, and opened it.

One thing that became quickly apparent was that if Emily confided her innermost thoughts to a diary, then that book was elsewhere. What I had before me was at best a glorified appointments diary; under each day she'd scrawled various memos to herself, some with a distinct aspirational dimension. One entry in bold felt-tip went: 'If still not phoned Mathilda, WHY THE HELL NOT??? DO IT!!!'

Another one ran: 'Finish Philip Bloody Roth. Give back to Marion!'

Then, as I kept turning the pages, I came across: 'Raymond coming Monday. Groan, groan.'

I turned a couple more pages to find: 'Ray tomorrow. How to survive?'

Finally, written that very morning, amidst reminders for various chores: 'Buy wine for arrival of Prince of Whiners.'

Prince of Whiners? It took me some time to accept this really could be referring to me. I tried out all sorts of possibilities - a client? a plumber? - but in the end, given the date and the context, I had to accept there was no other serious candidate. Then suddenly the sheer unfairness of her giving me such a title hit me with unexpected force, and before I knew it, I'd screwed up the offending page in my hand.

It wasn't a particularly fierce action: I didn't even tear the page. I'd simply closed my fist on it in a single motion, and the next second I was in control again, but of course, by then, it was too late. I opened my hand to discover not only the page in question but also the two beneath it had fallen victim to my wrath. I tried to flatten the pages back to their original form, but they simply curled back up again, as though their deepest wish was to be transformed into a ball of rubbish.

All the same, for quite some time, I carried on performing a kind of panicked ironing motion on the damaged pages. I was just about coming to accept that my efforts were pointless - that nothing I now did could successfully conceal what I'd done - when I became aware of a phone ringing somewhere in the apartment.

I decided to ignore it, and went on trying to think through the implications of what had just happened. But then the answering machine came on and I could hear Charlie's voice leaving a message. Perhaps I sensed a lifeline, perhaps I just wanted someone to confide in, but I found myself

rushing into the living room and grabbing the phone off the glass coffee table.

'Oh, you *are* there.' Charlie sounded slightly cross I'd interrupted his message.

'Charlie, listen. I've just done something rather stupid.'

'I'm at the airport,' he said. 'The flight's been delayed. I want to call the car service that's picking me up in Frankfurt, but I didn't bring their number. So I need you to read it over to me.'

He began to issue instructions about where I'd find the phone book, but I interrupted him, saying:

'Look, I've just done something stupid. I don't know what to do.'

There was quiet for a few seconds. Then he said: 'Maybe you're thinking, Ray. Maybe you're thinking there's someone else. That I'm going off now to see her. It occurred to me that might be what you were thinking. After all, it would fit with everything you've observed. The way Emily was when I left, all of that. But you're wrong.'

'Yes, I take your point. But look, there's something I have to talk to you about . . .'

'Just accept it, Ray. You're wrong. There's no other woman. I'm going now to Frankfurt to attend a meeting about changing our agency in Poland. That's where I'm going right now.'

'Right, I've got you.'

'There's never been another woman in any of this. I wouldn't look at anyone else, at least not in any serious way. That's the truth. It's the bloody truth and there's nothing else to it!'

He'd started to shout, though possibly this was because of all the noise around him in the departure lounge. Now he went quiet, and I listened hard to work out if he was crying again, but all I heard were airport noises. Suddenly he said:

'I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, all right, there's no other woman. But is there another *mat*? Go on, admit it, that's what you're thinking, isn't it? Go on, say it!'

'Actually, no. It's never occurred to me you might be gay. Even that time after finals when you got really drunk and pretended to . . .'

'Shut up, you fool! I meant another man, as in Lover of Emily! Lover of Emily, does this figure bloody exist? That's what I'm getting at. And the answer, in my judgement, is no, no, no. After all these years, I can read her pretty well. But the trouble is, precisely because I know her so well, I can tell something else too. I can tell she's started to think about it. That's right, Ray, she's looking at other guys. Guys like David bloody Corey!'

'Who's that?'

'David bloody Corey is a smarmy git of a barrister who's doing well for himself. I know exactly how well, because she tells me how well, in excruciating detail.'

'You think . . . they're seeing each other?'

'No, I just told you! There's nothing, not yet! Anyway, David bloody Corey wouldn't give her the time of day. He's married to a glamourpuss who works for Condé Nast.'

'Then you're okay . . .'

'I'm not okay, because there's also Michael Addison. And Roger Van Den Berg who's a rising star at Merrill Lynch who gets to go to the World Economic Forum every year . . .'

‘Look, Charlie, please listen. I’ve got this problem here. Small by most standards, I admit. But a problem all the same. Please just listen.’

At last I got to tell him what had happened. I recounted everything as honestly as I could, though maybe I went easy on the bit about my thinking Emily had left a confidential message for me.

‘I know it was really stupid,’ I said, as I came to the end. ‘But she’d left it sitting there, right there on the kitchen table.’

‘Yes.’ Charlie was now sounding much calmer. ‘Yes. You’ve rather let yourself in for it there.’

Then he laughed. Encouraged by this, I laughed too.

‘I suppose I’m over-reacting,’ I said. ‘After all, it’s not like her personal diary or anything. It’s just a memo book. . .’ I trailed off because Charlie had continued to laugh, and there was something a touch hysterical in his laughter. Then he stopped and said flatly:

‘If she finds out, she’ll want to saw your balls off.’

There was a short pause while I listened to airport noises. Then he went on:

‘About six years ago, I opened that book myself, or that year’s equivalent. Just casually, when I was sitting in the kitchen, and she was doing some cooking. You know, just flicked it open absent-mindedly while I was saying something. She noticed immediately and told me she wasn’t happy about it. In fact, that’s when she told me she would saw my balls off. She was wielding this rolling pin at the time, so I pointed out she couldn’t very well do what she was threatening with a rolling pin. That’s when she said the rolling pin was for afterwards. For what she’d do to them once she’d cut them off.’

A flight announcement went off in the background.

‘So what do you suggest I do?’ I asked.

‘What *can* you do? Just keep smoothing the pages down. Maybe she won’t notice.’

‘I’ve been trying that and it just doesn’t work. There’s no way she won’t notice ...’

‘Look, Ray, I’ve got a lot on my mind. What I’m trying to tell you is that all these men Emily dreams about, they’re not really potential lovers. They’re just figures she thinks are wonderful because she believes they’ve accomplished so much. She doesn’t see their warts. Their sheer . . . *brutality*. They’re all out of her league anyway. The point is, and this is what’s so pathetically sad and ironic about all this, the point is, at the bottom of it all, she loves *me*. She still loves me. I can tell, I can tell.’

‘So, Charlie, you don’t have any advice.’

‘No! I don’t have any fucking advice!’ He was shouting full blast again. ‘You figure it out! You get on your plane and I’ll get on mine. And we’ll see which one crashes!’

With that, Charlie was gone. I slumped down into the sofa and took a deep breath. I told myself I had to keep things in proportion, but all the while I could feel in my stomach a vaguely nauseous sensation of panic. Various ideas ran through my mind. One solution was simply to flee the apartment, and have no contact with Charlie and Emily for several years, after which I’d send them a cautious, carefully-worded letter. Even in my current state, I dismissed this plan as being a touch too desperate. A better plan was that I steadily work through the bottles in their drinks cabinet, so that when Emily arrived home, she’d find me pathetically drunk. Then I could claim to have looked through her diary and attacked the pages in an alcoholic delirium. In fact, in my drunken unreasonableness, I could even adopt the role of the injured party, shouting and pointing, telling her how bitterly hurt I’d been to read

those words about me, written by someone whose love and friendship I'd always counted on, the thought of which had helped sustain me through my lousiest moments in strange and lonely countries. But while this plan had points to recommend it from a practical aspect, I could sense something there - something near the bottom of it, something I didn't care to examine too closely - that I knew would make it an impossibility for me.

After a time, the phone began to ring and Charlie's voice came onto the machine again. When I picked it up he sounded considerably calmer than before.

'I'm at the gate now,' he said. 'I'm sorry if I was a little flustered earlier on. Airports always make me that way. Can't ever settle until I'm sitting right by the gate. Ray, listen, there's just one thing that occurred to me. Concerning our strategy.'

'Our strategy?'

'Yes, our overall strategy. Of course, you've realised, this isn't the time for little tweakings of the truth to show yourself in a better light. Absolutely not the time for the small self-aggrandising white lie. No, no. You're remembering, aren't you, why you were given this job in the first place. Ray, I'm depending on you to present yourself to Emily just as you are. So long as you do that, our strategy stays on course.'

'Well, look, I'm hardly on course here to come over like Emily's greatest hero . . .'

'Yes, you appreciate the situation and I'm grateful. But something's just occurred to me. There's just one thing, one little thing in your repertoire that won't quite do here. You see, Ray, she's got this idea that you have good musical taste.'

'Ah . . .'

‘Just about the only time she ever uses *you* to belittle me is in this area of musical taste. It’s the one respect in which you aren’t absolutely perfect for your current assignment. So Ray, you’ve got to promise not to talk about this topic.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake . . .’

‘Just do it for me, Ray. It’s not much to ask. Just don’t start going on about that . . . that croony nostalgia music she likes. And if *she* brings it up, then you just play it dumb. That’s all I’m asking. Otherwise, you just be your natural self. Ray, I can count on you about this, can’t I?’

‘Well, I suppose so. This is all pretty theoretical anyway. I don’t see us chatting about anything this evening.’

‘Good! So that’s settled. Now, let’s move to your little problem. You’ll be glad to hear I’ve been giving it some thought. And I’ve come up with a solution. Are you listening?’

‘Yes, I’m listening.’

‘There’s this couple who keep coming round. Angela and Solly. They’re okay, but if they weren’t neighbours we wouldn’t have much to do with them. Anyway they often come round. You know, dropping in without warning, expecting a cup of tea. Now here’s the point. They turn up at various times in the day when they’ve been taking Hendrix out.’

‘Hendrix?’

‘Hendrix is a smelly, uncontrollable, possibly homicidal Labrador. For Angela and Solly, of course, the foul creature’s the child they never had. Or the one they haven’t had yet, they’re probably still young enough for real children. But no, they prefer darling, darling Hendrix. And when they call round, darling Hendrix routinely goes about demolishing the place as determinedly as any disaffected

burglar. Down goes the standard lamp. Oh dear, never mind, darling, did you have a fright? You get the picture. Now listen. About a year ago, we had this coffee-table book, cost a fortune, full of arty pictures of young gay men posing in North African casbahs. Emily liked to keep it open at this particular page, she thought it went with the sofa. She'd go mad if you turned over the page. Anyway, about a year ago, Hendrix came in and chewed it all up. That's right, sank his teeth into all that glossy photography, went on to chew up about twenty pages in all before Mummy could persuade him to desist. You see why I'm telling you this, don't you?'

'Yes. That is, I see a hint of an escape route, but . . .'

'All right, I'll spell it out. This is what you tell Emily. The door went, you answered it, this couple are there with Hendrix tugging at the leash. They tell you they're Angela and Solly, good friends needing their cup of tea. You let them in, Hendrix runs wild, chews up the diary. It's utterly plausible. What's the matter? Why aren't you thanking me? Won't quite do for you, sir?'

'I'm very grateful, Charlie. I'm just thinking it through, that's all. Look, for one thing, what if these people really turn up? After Emily's home, I mean.'

'That's possible, I suppose. All I can say is you'd be very, very unlucky if such a thing happened. When I said they came round a lot, I meant maybe once a month at most. So stop picking holes and be grateful.'

'But Charlie, isn't it a little far-fetched that this dog would chew just the diary, and exactly those pages?'

I heard him sigh. 'I assumed you didn't need the rest of it spelt out. Naturally, you have to do the place over a bit. Knock over the standard lamp, spill sugar over the kitchen floor. You have to make it like Hendrix did this whirlwind

job on the place. Look, they're calling the flight. I've got to go. I'll check in with you once I'm in Germany.'

While listening to Charlie, a feeling had come over me similar to the one I get when someone starts on about a dream they had, or the circumstances that led to the little bump on their car door. His plan was all very well - ingenious, even - but I couldn't see how it had to do with anything I was really likely to say or do when Emily got home, and I'd found myself getting more and more impatient. But once Charlie had gone, I found his call had had a kind of hypnotic effect on me. Even as my head was dismissing his idea as idiotic, my arms and legs were setting out to put his 'solution' into action.

I began by putting the standard lamp down on its side. I was careful not to bump anything with it, and I removed the shade first, putting it back on at a cocked angle only once the whole thing was arranged on the floor. Then I took down a vase from a bookshelf and laid it down on the rug, spreading around it the dried grasses that had been inside. Next I selected a good spot near the coffee table to 'knock over' the wastepaper basket. I went about my work in a strange, disembodied mode. I didn't believe any of it would achieve anything, but I was finding the whole procedure rather soothing. Then I remembered all this vandalism was supposed to relate to the diary, and went through into the kitchen.

After a little think, I took a bowl of sugar from a cupboard, placed it on the table not far from the purple notebook, and slowly tilted it until the sugar slid out. I had a bit of a job preventing the bowl rolling off the edge of the table, but in the end got it to stay put. By this time, the gnawing panic I'd been feeling had evaporated. I wasn't tranquil, exactly, but it now seemed silly to have got myself in the state I had.

I went back to the living room, lay down on the sofa and picked up the Jane Austen book. After a few lines, I felt a

huge tiredness coming over me and before I knew it, I was slipping into sleep once more.

I was woken up by the phone. When Emily's voice came on the machine, I sat up and answered it.

'Oh goody, Raymond, you *are* there. How are you, darling? How are you feeling now? Have you managed to relax?'

I assured her I had, that in fact I'd been sleeping.

'Oh what a pity! You probably haven't been sleeping properly for weeks, and now just when you finally get a moment's escape, I go and disturb you! I'm so sorry! And I'm sorry too, Ray, I'm going to have to disappoint you. There's an absolute crisis on here and I won't be able to get home quite as quickly as I'd hoped. In fact, I'm going to be another hour at least. You'll be able to hold out, won't you?'

I reiterated how relaxed and happy I was feeling.

'Yes, you do sound really stable now. I'm so sorry, Raymond, but I've got to go and sort this out. Help yourself to anything and everything. Goodbye, darling.'

I put down the phone and stretched my arms. The light was starting to fade now, so I went about the apartment switching on lights. Then I contemplated my 'wrecked' living room, and the more I looked at it, the more it seemed overwhelmingly contrived. The sense of panic began to grow once more in my stomach.

The phone went again, and this time it was Charlie. He was, he told me, beside the luggage carousel at Frankfurt airport.

'They're taking bloody ages. We haven't had a single bag come down yet. How are you making out over there? Madam not home yet?'

‘No, not yet. Look, Charlie, that plan of yours. It’s not going to work.’

‘What do you mean, it’s not going to work? Don’t tell me you’ve been twiddling your thumbs all this time mulling it over.’

‘I’ve done as you suggested. I’ve messed the place up, but it doesn’t look convincing. It just doesn’t look like a dog’s been here. It just looks like an art exhibition.’

He was silent for a moment, perhaps concentrating on the carousel. Then he said: ‘I can understand your problem. It’s someone else’s property. You’re bound to be inhibited. So listen, I’m going to name a few items I’d dearly love to see damaged. Are you listening, Ray? I *want* the following things ruined. That stupid china ox thing. It’s by the CD player. That’s a present from David bloody Corey after his trip to Lagos. You can smash that up for a start. In fact, I don’t care what you destroy. Destroy everything!’

‘Charlie, I think you need to calm down.’

‘Okay, okay. But that apartment’s full of junk. Just like our marriage right now. Full of tired junk. That spongy red sofa, you know the one I mean, Ray?’

‘Yes. Actually I fell asleep on it just now.’

‘That should have been in a skip ages ago. Why don’t you rip open the covering and throw the stuffing around.’

‘Charlie, you have to get a grip. In fact, it occurs to me you’re not trying to help me at all. You’re just using me as a tool to express your rage and frustration . . .’

‘Oh shut up with that bollocks! Of course I’m trying to help you. And of course my plan’s a good one. I guarantee it’ll work. Emily hates that dog, she hates Angela and Solly, so she’ll seize any opportunity to hate them even more. Listen.’ His voice suddenly dropped to a near-whisper.

‘I’ll give you the big tip. The secret ingredient that’ll

ensure she's convinced. I should have thought of this before. How much time do you have left?'

'Another hour or so ...'

'Good. Listen carefully. Smell. That's right. You make that place smell of dog. From the moment she walks in, she'll register it, even if it's only subliminally. Then she steps into the room, notices darling David's china ox smashed up on the floor, the stuffing from that foul red sofa all over . . .'

'Now look, I didn't say I'd . . .'

'Just listen! She sees all the wreckage, and immediately, consciously or unconsciously, she'll make the connection with the dog smell. The whole scene with Hendrix will flash vividly through her head, even before you've said a word to her. That's the beauty of it!'

'You're hawering, Charlie. Okay, so how do I make your home pong of dog?'

'I know exactly how you create a dog smell.' His voice was still an excited whisper. 'I know exactly how you do it, because me and Tony Barton used to do it in the Lower Sixth. He had a recipe, but I refined it.'

'But why?'

'Why? Because it stank more like cabbage than dog, that's why.'

'No, I meant why would you . . . Look, never mind. You might as well tell me, so long as it doesn't involve going out and buying a chemistry set.'

'Good. You're coming round to it. Get a pen, Ray. Write this down. Ah, here it comes at last.' He must have put the phone in his pocket, because for the next few moments I listened to womb noises. Then he came back and said:

'I have to go now. So write this down. Are you ready? The middle-sized saucepan. It's probably on the stove already. Put about a pint of water in it. Add two beef stock cubes, one dessertspoon of cumin, one tablespoon of paprika, two tablespoons of vinegar, a generous lot of bay leaves. Got that? Now you put in there a leather shoe or boot, upside down, so the sole's not actually immersed in the liquid. That's so you don't get any hint of burning rubber. Then you turn on the gas, bring the concoction to the boil, let it sit there simmering. Pretty soon, you'll notice the smell. It's not an awful smell. Tony Barton's original recipe involved garden slugs, but this one's much more subtle. Just like a smelly dog. I know, you're going to ask me where to find the ingredients. All the herbs and stuff are in the kitchen cupboards. If you go to the understairs cupboard, you'll find a discarded pair of boots in there. Not the wellingtons. I mean the battered-up pair, they're more like built-up shoes. I used to wear them all the time on the common. They've had it and they're waiting for the heave. Take one of those. What's the matter? Look, Ray, you just do this, okay? Save yourself. Because I'm telling you, an angry Emily is no joke. I've got to go now. Oh, and remember. No showing off your wonderful musical knowledge.'

Perhaps it was simply the effect of receiving a clear set of instructions, however dubious: when I put the phone down, a detached, business-like mood had come over me. I could see clearly just what I needed to do. I went into the kitchen and switched on the lights. Sure enough, the 'middle-sized' saucepan was sitting on the cooker, awaiting its next task. I filled it to halfway with water, and put it back on the hob. Even as I was doing this, I realised there was something else I had to establish before proceeding any further: namely, the precise amount of time I had to complete my work. I went into the living room, picked up the phone, and called Emily's work number.

I got her assistant, who told me Emily was in a meeting. I insisted, in a tone that balanced geniality with resolution, that she bring Emily out of her meeting, 'if indeed she is in one at all'. The next moment, Emily was on the line.

'What is it, Raymond? What's happened?'

'Nothing's happened. I'm just calling to find out how you are.'

'Ray, you sound odd. What is it?'

'What do you mean, I sound odd? I just called to establish when to expect you back. I know you regard me as a layabout, but I still appreciate a timetable of sorts.'

'Raymond, there's no need to get cross like that. Now let me see. It's going to be another hour . . . Maybe an hour and a half. I'm awfully sorry, but there's a real crisis on here . . .'

'One hour to ninety minutes. That's fine. That's all I need to know. Okay, I'll see you soon. You can get back to your business now.'

She might have been about to say something else, but I hung up and strode back into the kitchen, determined not to let my decisive mood evaporate. In fact, I was beginning to feel distinctly exhilarated, and I couldn't understand at all how I'd allowed myself to get into such a state of despondency earlier on. I went through the cupboards and lined up, in a neat row beside the hob, all the herbs and spices I needed. Then I measured them out into the water, gave a quick stir, then went off to find the boot.

The understairs cupboard was hiding a whole heap of sorry-looking footwear. After a few moments of rummaging, I discovered what was certainly one of the boots Charlie had prescribed - a particularly exhausted specimen with ancient mud encrusted along the rim of its heel. Holding it with

fingertips, I took it back to the kitchen and placed it carefully in the water with the sole facing up to the ceiling. Then I lit a medium flame under the pan, sat down at the table and waited for the water to heat. When the phone rang again, I felt reluctant to abandon the saucepan, but then I heard Charlie on the machine going on and on. So I eventually turned the flame down low and went to answer him.

‘What were you saying?’ I asked. ‘It sounded particularly self-pitying, but I was busy so I missed it.’

‘I’m at the hotel. It’s only a three-star. Can you believe the cheek! A big company like them! And it’s a poxy little room too!’

‘But you’re only there for a couple of nights ...’

‘Listen, Ray, there’s something I wasn’t entirely honest about earlier. It’s not fair on you. After all, you’re doing me a favour, you’re doing your best for me, trying to heal things with Emily, and here I am, being less than frank with you.’

‘If you’re talking about the recipe for the dog smell, it’s too late. I’ve got it all going. I suppose I might be able to add an extra herb or something . . .’

‘If I wasn’t straight with you before, that’s because I wasn’t being straight with myself. But now I’ve come away, I’ve been able to think more clearly. Ray, I told you there wasn’t anyone else, but that’s not strictly true. There’s this girl. Yes, she *is* a girl, early thirties at most. She’s very concerned about education in the developing world, and fairer global trade. It wasn’t really a sexual attraction thing, that was just a kind of by-product. It was her untarnished idealism. It reminded me of how we all were once. You remember that, Ray?’

‘I’m sorry, Charlie, but I don’t remember you ever being especially idealistic. In fact, you were always utterly selfish and hedonistic . . .’

‘Okay, maybe we were all decadent slobs back then, the lot of us. But there’s always been this other person, somewhere inside of me, wanting to come out. That’s what drew me to her . . .’

‘Charlie, when was this? When did this happen?’

‘When did what happen?’

‘This affair.’

‘There was no affair! I didn’t have sex with her, nothing. I didn’t even have lunch with her. I just . . . I just made sure I kept seeing her.’

‘What do you mean, kept seeing her?’ I’d drifted back into the kitchen by this time and was gazing at my concoction.

‘Well, I kept seeing her,’ he said. ‘I kept making appointments to see her.’

‘You mean, she’s a call girl.’

‘No, no, I told you, we’ve never had sex. No, she’s a dentist. I kept going back, kept making things up about a pain here, discomfort of the gums there. You know, I spun it out. And of course, in the end, Emily guessed.’ For a second, Charlie seemed to be choking back a sob. Then the dam burst. ‘She found out . . . she found out . . . because I was flossing so much!’ He was now half-shrieking. ‘She said, you *never, ever* floss your teeth that much!’

‘But that doesn’t make sense. If you look after your teeth more, you’ve less reason to go back to her . . .’

‘Who cares if it makes sense? I just wanted to please her!’

‘Look, Charlie, you didn’t go out with her, you didn’t have sex with her, what’s the issue?’

‘The issue is, I so wanted someone like that, someone who’d bring out this other me, the one that’s been trapped

inside . . . ’

‘Charlie, listen to me. Since the last time you called, I’ve pulled myself together considerably. And quite frankly, I think you should pull yourself together too. We can discuss all of this when you get back. But Emily will be here in an hour or so, and I’ve got to have everything ready. I’m on top of things here now, Charlie. I suppose you can tell that from my voice.’

‘Fucking fantastic! You’re on top of things. Great! Some fucking friend . . . ’

‘Charlie, I think you’re upset because you don’t like your hotel. But you should pull yourself together. Get things in perspective. And take heart. I’m on top of things here. I’ll sort out the dog business, then I’ll play my part up to the hilt for you. Emily, I’ll say. Emily, just look at me, just look how pathetic I am. The truth is, most people are just as pathetic. But Charlie, he’s different. Charlie is in a different league.’

‘You can’t say that. That sounds completely unnatural.’

‘Of course I won’t put it literally like that, idiot. Look, just leave it to me. I’ve got the whole situation under control. So calm down. Now I’ve got to go.’

I put the phone down and examined the pot. The liquid had now come to the boil and there was a lot of steam about, but as yet no real smell of any sort. I adjusted the flame until everything was bubbling nicely. It was around this point I was overcome by a craving for some fresh air, and since I hadn’t yet investigated their roof terrace, I opened the kitchen door and stepped out.

It was surprisingly balmy for an English evening in early June. Only a little bite in the breeze told me I wasn’t back in Spain. The sky wasn’t fully dark yet, but was already filling with stars. Beyond the wall that marked the end of the terrace, I could see for miles around the windows and

back yards of the neighbouring properties. A lot of the windows were lit, and the ones in the distance, if you narrowed your eyes, looked almost like an extension of the stars. This roof terrace wasn't large, but there was definitely something romantic about it. You could imagine a couple, in the midst of busy city lives, coming out here on a warm evening and strolling around the potted shrubs, in each other's arms, swapping stories about their day.

I could have stayed out there a lot longer, but I was afraid of losing my momentum. I went back into the kitchen, and walking past the bubbling pot, paused at the threshold of the living room to survey my earlier work. The big mistake, it struck me, lay in my complete failure to consider the task from the perspective of a creature like Hendrix. The key, I now realised, was to immerse myself within Hendrix's spirit and vision.

Once I'd started on this tack, I saw not only the inadequacy of my previous efforts, but how hopeless most of Charlie's suggestions had been. Why would an over-lively dog extract a little ox ornament from the midst of hi-fi equipment and smash it? And the idea of cutting open the sofa and throwing around the stuffing was idiotic. Hendrix would need razor teeth to achieve an effect like that. The capsized sugar bowl in the kitchen was fine, but the living room, I realised, would have to be re-conceptualised from scratch.

I went into the room in a crouched posture, so as to see it from something like Hendrix's eyeline. Immediately, the glossy magazines piled up on the coffee table revealed themselves as an obvious target, and so I pushed them off the surface along a trajectory consistent with a shove from a rampant muzzle. The way the magazines landed on the floor looked satisfyingly authentic. Encouraged, I knelt down, opened one of the magazines and scrunched up a page in a manner, I hoped, would find an echo when eventually Emily came across the diary. But this time the result was disappointing: too obviously the work of a human hand rather

than canine teeth. I'd fallen into my earlier error again: I'd not merged sufficiently with Hendrix.

So I got down on all fours, and lowering my head towards the same magazine, sank my teeth into the pages. The taste was perfumy, and not at all unpleasant. I opened a second fallen magazine near its centre and began to repeat the procedure. The ideal technique, I began to gather, was not unlike the one needed in those fairground games where you try to bite apples bobbing in water without using your hands. What worked best was a light, chewing motion, the jaws moving flexibly all the time: this would cause the pages to ruffle up and crease nicely. Too focused a bite, on the other hand, simply 'stapled' pages together to no great effect.

I think it was because I'd become so absorbed in these finer points that I didn't become aware sooner of Emily standing out in the hall, watching me from just beyond the doorway. Once I did realise she was there, my first feeling wasn't one of panic or embarrassment, but of hurt that she should be standing there like that without having announced her arrival in some way. In fact, when I remembered how I'd gone to the trouble of calling her office only several minutes earlier precisely to pre-empt the sort of situation now engulfing me, I felt the victim of a deliberate deception. Perhaps that was why my first visible response was simply to give a weary sigh without making any attempt to abandon my all-fours posture. My sigh brought Emily into the room, and she laid a hand very gently on my back. I'm not sure if she actually knelt down, but her face seemed close to mine as she said:

'Raymond, I'm back. So let's just sit down, shall we?'

She was easing me up onto my feet, and I had to resist the urge to shake her off.

'You know, it's odd,' I said. 'No more than a few minutes ago, you were about to go into a meeting.'

‘I was, yes. But after your phone call, I realised the priority was to come back.’

‘What do you mean, priority? Emily, please, you don’t have to keep holding my arm like that, I’m not about to topple over. What do you mean, a priority to come back?’

‘Your phone call. I recognised it for what it was. A cry for help.’

‘It was nothing of the sort. I was just trying to . . .’ I trailed off, because I noticed Emily was looking around the room with an expression of wonder.

‘Oh, Raymond,’ she muttered, almost to herself.

‘I suppose I was being a little clumsy earlier on. I would have tidied up, except you came back early.’

I reached down to the fallen standard lamp, but Emily restrained me.

‘It doesn’t matter, Ray. It really doesn’t matter at all. We can sort it all out together later. You just sit down now and relax.’

‘Look, Emily, I realise it’s your own home and all that. But why did you creep in so quietly?’

‘I didn’t creep in, darling. I called when I came in, but you didn’t seem to be here. So I just popped into the loo and when I came out, well, there you were after all. But why go over it? None of it matters. I’m here now, and we can have a relaxing evening together. Please do sit down, Raymond. I’ll make some tea.’

She was already going towards the kitchen as she said this. I was fiddling with the shade of the standard lamp and so it took me a moment to remember what was in there – by which time it was too late. I listened for her reaction, but there was only silence. Eventually I put down the lampshade and made my way to the kitchen doorway.

The saucepan was still bubbling away nicely, the steam rising around the upheld sole of the boot. The smell, which I'd barely registered until this point, was much more obvious in the kitchen itself. It was pungent, sure enough, and vaguely curryish. More than anything else, it conjured up those times you yank your foot out of a boot after a long sweaty hike.

Emily was standing a few paces back from the cooker, craning her neck to get as good a view of the pot as possible from a safe distance. She seemed absorbed by the sight of it, and when I gave a small laugh to announce my presence, she didn't shift her gaze, let alone turn around.

I squeezed past her and sat down at the kitchen table. Eventually, she turned to me with a kindly smile. 'It was a terribly sweet thought, Raymond.'

Then, as though against her will, her gaze was pulled back to the cooker.

I could see in front of me the tipped-up sugar bowl - and the diary - and a huge feeling of weariness came over me. Everything felt suddenly overwhelming, and I decided the only way forward was to stop all the games and come clean. Taking a deep breath, I said:

'Look, Emily. Things might look a little odd here. But it was all because of this diary of yours. This one here.' I opened it to the damaged page and showed her. 'It was really very wrong of me, and I'm truly sorry. But I happened to open it, and then, well, I happened to scrunch up the page. Like this . . .'

I mimicked a less venomous version of my earlier action, then looked at her.

To my astonishment, she gave the diary no more than a cursory glance before turning back to the pot, saying: 'Oh, that's just a jotter. Nothing private. Don't you worry about it, Ray.' Then she moved a step closer to the saucepan to study it all the better.

‘What do you mean? What do you mean, don’t worry about it? How can you say that?’

‘What’s the matter, Raymond? It’s just something to jot down stuff I might forget.’

‘But Charlie told me you’d go ballistic!’ My sense of outrage was now being added to by the fact that Emily had obviously forgotten what she’d been writing about me.

‘Really? Charlie told you I’d be angry?’

‘Yes! In fact, he said you’d once told him you’d saw his balls off if he ever peeked inside this little book!’

I wasn’t sure if Emily’s puzzled look was due to what I was saying, or still left over from gazing at the saucepan. She sat down next to me and thought for a moment.

‘No,’ she said, eventually. ‘That was about something else. I remember it clearly now. About this time last year, Charlie got despondent about something and asked what I’d do if he committed suicide. He was just testing me, he’s far too chicken to try anything like that. But he asked, so I told him if he did anything like that I’d saw his balls off. That’s the only time I’ve said that to him. I mean, it’s not like a refrain on my part.’

‘I don’t get this. If he committed suicide, you’d do that to him? Afterwards?’

‘It was just a figure of speech, Raymond. I was just trying to express how much I’d dislike him topping himself. I was making him feel valued.’

‘You’re missing my point. If you do it afterwards, it’s not really a disincentive, is it? Or maybe you’re right, it would be . . .’

‘Raymond, let’s forget it. Let’s forget all of this. There’s a lamb casserole from yesterday, there’s over half of it left. It was pretty good last night, and it’ll be even

better tonight. And we can open a nice bottle of Bordeaux. It was awfully sweet of you to start preparing something for us. But the casserole's probably the thing for tonight, don't you think?'

All attempts to explain now seemed beyond me. 'Okay, okay. Lamb casserole. Terrific. Yes, yes.'

'So ... we can put *this* away for now?'

'Yes, yes. Please do. Please put it away.'

I got up and went into the living room - which of course was still a mess, but I no longer had the energy to start tidying. Instead, I lay down on the sofa and stared at the ceiling. At one point, I was aware of Emily coming into the room, and I thought she'd gone through to the hall, but then I realised she was crouched in the far corner, fiddling with the hi-fi. The next thing, the room filled with lush strings, bluesy horns, and Sarah Vaughan singing 'Lover Man'.

A sense of relief and comfort washed over me. Nodding to the slow beat, I closed my eyes, remembering how all those years ago, in her college room, she and I had argued for over an hour about whether Billie Holiday always sang this song better than Sarah Vaughan.

Emily touched my shoulder and handed me a glass of red wine. She had a frilly apron on over her business suit, and was holding a glass for herself. She sat down at the far end of the sofa, next to my feet, and took a sip. Then she turned down the volume a little with her remote.

'It's been an awful day,' she said. 'I don't mean just work, which is a total mess. I mean Charlie going, everything. Don't imagine it doesn't hurt me, to have him go off abroad like that when we haven't made up. Then to cap it all, you finally go and tip over the edge.' She gave a long sigh.

‘No, really, Emily, it’s not as bad as that. For a start, Charlie thinks the world of you. And as for me, I’m fine. I’m really fine.’

‘Bollocks.’

‘No, really. I feel fine . . .’

‘I meant about Charlie thinking the world of me.’

‘Oh, I see. Well, if you think that’s bollocks, you couldn’t be more wrong. In fact, I know Charlie loves you more than ever.’

‘How can you know that, Raymond?’

‘I know because . . . well, for a start he more or less told me so, when we were having lunch. And even if he didn’t spell it out, I can tell. Look, Emily, I know things are a bit tough right now. But you’ve got to hang onto the most important thing. Which is that he still loves you very much.’

She did another sigh. ‘You know, I haven’t listened to this record for ages. It’s because of Charlie. If I put this sort of music on, he immediately starts groaning.’

We didn’t speak for a few moments, but just listened to Sarah Vaughan. Then as an instrumental break started, Emily said: ‘I suppose, Raymond, you prefer her other version of this. The one she did with just piano and bass.’

I didn’t reply, but just propped myself up a little more so as to sip my wine better.

‘I bet you do,’ she said. ‘You prefer that other version. Don’t you, Raymond?’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I really don’t know. To tell you the truth, I don’t remember the other version.’

I could feel Emily shift at the end of the sofa. ‘You’re kidding, Raymond.’

'It's funny, but I don't listen to this kind of stuff much these days. In fact, I've forgotten almost everything about it. I'm not even sure what song this is right now.' I did a little laugh, which perhaps didn't come out very well.

'What are you talking about?' She sounded suddenly cross. 'That's ridiculous. Short of having had a lobotomy, there's no way you could have forgotten.'

'Well. A lot of years have gone by. Things change.'

'What are you talking about?' There was now a hint of panic in her voice. 'Things can't change that much.'

I was pretty desperate to get off the subject. So I said: 'Pity things are such a mess at your work.'

Emily completely ignored this. 'So what are you saying? You're saying you don't like *this*? You want me to turn it off, is that it?'

'No, no, Emily, please, it's lovely. It . . . it brings back memories. Please, let's just get back to being quiet and relaxed, the way we were a minute ago.'

She did another sigh, and when she next spoke her voice was gentle again.

'I'm sorry, darling. I'd forgotten. That's the last thing you need, me yelling at you. I'm so sorry.'

'No, no, it's okay.' I heaved myself up to a sitting position. 'You know, Emily, Charlie's a decent guy. A very decent guy. And he loves you. You won't do better, you know.'

Emily shrugged and drank some more wine. 'You're probably right. And we're hardly young any more. We're as bad as one another. We should count ourselves lucky. But we never seem to be contented. I don't know why. Because when I stop and think about it, I realise I don't really want anyone else.'

For the next minute or so, she kept sipping her wine and listening to the music. Then she said: 'You know, Raymond, when you're at a party, at a dance. And it's maybe a slow dance, and you're with the person you really want to be with, and the rest of the room's supposed to vanish. But somehow it doesn't. It just doesn't. You know there's no one half as nice as the guy in your arms. And yet. . . well, there are all these people everywhere else in the room. They don't leave you alone. They keep shouting and waving and doing daft things just to attract your attention. "Oi! How can you be satisfied with that?! You can do much better! Look over here!" It's like they're shouting things like that all the time. And so it gets hopeless, you can't just dance quietly with your guy. Do you know what I mean, Raymond?'

I thought about it for a while, then said: 'Well, I'm not as lucky as you and Charlie. I don't have anyone special like you do. But yes, in some ways, I know just what you mean. It's hard to know where to settle. What to settle to.'

'Bloody right. I wish they'd just lay off, all these gatecrashers. I wish they'd just lay off and let us get on with it.'

'You know, Emily, I wasn't kidding just now. Charlie thinks the world of you. He's so upset things haven't been going well between you.'

Her back was more or less turned to me, and she didn't say anything for a long time. Then Sarah Vaughan started on her beautiful, perhaps excessively slow version of 'April in Paris', and Emily started up like Sarah had called her name. Then she turned to me and shook her head.

'I can't get over it, Ray. I can't get over how you don't listen to this kind of music any more. We used to play all these records back then. On that little record player Mum bought me before I came to university. How could you just forget?'

I got to my feet and walked over to the french doors, still holding my glass. When I looked out to the terrace, I realised my eyes had filled with tears. I opened the door and stepped outside so I could wipe them without Emily noticing, but then she was following right behind me, so maybe she noticed, I don't know.

The evening was pleasantly warm, and Sarah Vaughan and her band came drifting out onto the terrace. The stars were brighter than before, and the lights of the neighbourhood were still twinkling like an extension of the night sky.

'I love this song,' Emily said. 'I suppose you've forgotten this one too. But even if you've forgotten it, you can dance to it, can't you?'

'Yes. I suppose I can.'

'We could be like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers.'

'Yes, we could.'

We placed our wine glasses on the stone table and began to dance. We didn't dance especially well - we kept bumping our knees - but I held Emily close to me, and my senses filled with the texture of her clothes, her hair, her skin. Holding her like this, it occurred to me again how much weight she'd put on.

'You're right, Raymond,' she said, quietly in my ear. 'Charlie's all right. We should sort ourselves out.'

'Yes. You should.'

'You're a good friend, Raymond. What would we do without you?'

'If I'm a good friend, I'm glad. Because I'm not much good at anything else. In fact, I'm pretty useless, really.'

I felt a sharp tug on my shoulder.

'Don't say that,' she whispered. 'Don't talk like that.' Then a moment later, she said again: 'You're such a

good friend, Raymond. '

This was Sarah Vaughan's 1954 version of 'April in Paris', with Clifford Brown on trumpet. So I knew it was a long track, at least eight minutes. I felt pleased about that, because I knew after the song ended, we wouldn't dance any more, but go in and eat the casserole. And for all I knew, Emily would re-consider what I'd done to her diary, and decide this time it wasn't such a trivial offence. What did I know? But for another few minutes at least, we were safe, and we kept dancing under the starlit sky.

MALVERN HILLS

I'D SPENT THE SPRING in London, and all in all, even if I hadn't achieved everything I'd set out to, it had been an exciting interlude. But with the weeks slipping by and summer getting closer, the old restlessness had started to return. For one thing, I was getting vaguely paranoid about running into any more of my former university friends. Wandering around Camden Town, or going through CDs I couldn't afford in West End megastores, I'd already had too many of them come up to me, asking how I was getting on since leaving the course to 'seek fame and fortune'. It's not that I was embarrassed to tell them what I'd been up to. It was just that - with a very few exceptions - none of them was capable of grasping what was or wasn't, for me at this particular point, a 'successful' few months.

As I've said, I hadn't achieved every goal I'd set my sights on, but then those goals had always been more like long-term targets. And all those auditions, even the really dreary ones, had been an invaluable experience. In almost every case, I'd taken something away with me, something I'd learned about the scene in London, or else about the music business in general.

Some of these auditions had been pretty professional affairs. You'd find yourself in a warehouse, or a converted garage block, and there'd be a manager, or maybe the girlfriend of a band member, taking your name, asking you to wait, offering you tea, while the sounds of the band, stopping and starting, thundered out from the adjoining space. But the majority of auditions happened at a much more shambolic level. In fact, when you saw the way most bands went about things, it was no mystery why the whole scene in London was dying on its feet. Time and again, I'd walk past rows of anonymous suburban terraces on the city outskirts,

carry my acoustic guitar up a staircase, and enter a stale-smelling flat with mattresses and sleeping bags all over the floor, and band members who mumbled and barely looked you in the eye. I'd sing and play while they stared emptily at me, till one of them might bring it to an end by saying something like: 'Yeah, well. Thanks anyway, but it's not quite our genre.'

I soon worked out that most of these guys were shy or plain awkward about the audition process, and that if I chatted to them about other things, they'd become a lot more relaxed. That's when I'd pick up all kinds of useful info: where the interesting clubs were, or the names of other bands in need of a guitarist. Or sometimes it was just a tip about a new act to check out. As I say, I never came away empty-handed.

On the whole, people really liked my guitar-playing, and a lot of them said my vocals would come in handy for harmonies. But it quickly emerged there were two factors going against me. The first was that I didn't have equipment. A lot of bands were wanting someone with electric guitar, amps, speakers, preferably transport, ready to slot right into their gigging schedule. I was on foot with a fairly crappy acoustic. So no matter how much they liked my rhythm work or my voice, they'd no choice but to turn me away. This was fair enough.

Much harder to accept was the other main obstacle - and I have to say, I was completely surprised by this one. There was actually a problem about me writing my own songs. I couldn't believe it. There I'd be, in some dingy apartment, playing to a circle of blank faces, then at the end, after a silence that could go on for fifteen, thirty seconds, one of them would ask suspiciously: 'So whose number was that?' And when I said it was one of my own, you'd see the shutters coming down. There'd be little shrugs, shakes of the head, sly smiles exchanged, then they'd be giving me their rejection patter.

The umpteenth time this happened, I got so exasperated, I said: 'Look, I don't get this. Are you wanting to be a covers band forever? And even if that's what you want to be, where do you think those songs come from in the first place? Yeah, that's right. Someone writes them!'

But the guy I was talking to stared at me vacantly, then said: 'No offence, mate. It's just that there are so many wankers going around writing songs.'

The stupidity of this position, which seemed to extend right across the London scene, was key to persuading me there was something if not utterly rotten, then at least extremely shallow and inauthentic about what was going down here, right at the grass-roots level, and that this was undoubtedly a reflection of what was happening in the music industry all the way up the ladder.

It was this realisation, and the fact that as the summer came closer I was running out of floors to sleep on, that made me feel for all the fascination of London - my university days looked grey by comparison - it would be good to take a break from the city. So I called up my sister, Maggie, who runs a cafe with her husband up in the Malvern Hills, and that's how it came to be decided I'd spend the summer with them.

Maggie's four years older and is always worrying about me, so I knew she'd be all for my coming up. In fact, I could tell she was glad to be getting the extra help. When I say her cafe is in the Malvern Hills, I don't mean it's in Great Malvern or down on the A road, but literally up there in the hills. It's an old Victorian house standing by itself facing the west side, so when the weather's nice, you can have your tea and cake out on the cafe terrace with a sweeping view over Herefordshire. Maggie and Geoff have to close the place in the winter, but in the summer it's always busy, mainly with the locals - who park their cars in the West of England car park a hundred yards below and come panting up the path

in sandals and floral dresses - or else the walking brigade with their maps and serious gear.

Maggie said she and Geoff couldn't afford to pay me, which suited me just fine because it meant I couldn't be expected to work too hard for them. All the same, since I was getting bed and board, the understanding seemed to be that I'd be a third member of staff. It was all a bit unclear, and at the start, Geoff, in particular, seemed torn between giving me a kick up the arse for not doing enough, and apologising for asking me to do anything at all, like I was a guest. But things soon settled down to a pattern. The work was easy enough - I was especially good at making sandwiches - and I sometimes had to keep reminding myself of my main objective in coming out to the country in the first place: that's to say, I was going to write a brand-new batch of songs ready for my return to London in the autumn.

I'm naturally an early riser, but I quickly discovered that breakfast at the cafe was a nightmare, with customers wanting eggs done this way, toast like that, everything getting overcooked. So I made a point of never appearing until around eleven. While all the clatter was going on downstairs, I'd open the big bay window in my room, sit on the broad window sill and play my guitar looking out over miles and miles of countryside. There was a run of really clear mornings just after I arrived, and it was a glorious feeling, like I could see forever, and when I strummed my chords, they were ringing out across the whole nation. Only when I turned and stuck my head right out of the window would I get an aerial view of the cafe terrace below, and become aware of the people coming and going with their dogs and pushchairs.

I wasn't a stranger to this area. Maggie and I had grown up only a few miles away in Pershore and our parents had often brought us for walks on the hills. But I'd never been much up for it in those days, and as soon as I was old enough, I'd refused to go with them. That summer though, I

felt this was the most beautiful place in the world; that in many ways I'd come from and belonged to the hills. Maybe it was something to do with our parents having split up, the fact that for some time now, that little grey house opposite the hairdresser was no longer 'our' house. Whatever it was, this time round, instead of the claustrophobia I remembered from my childhood, I felt affection, even nostalgia, about the area.

I found myself wandering in the hills practically every day, sometimes with my guitar if I was sure it wouldn't rain. I liked in particular Table Hill and End Hill, at the north end of the range, which tend to get neglected by day-trippers. There I'd sometimes be lost in my thoughts for hours at a time without seeing a soul. It was like I was discovering the hills for the first time, and I could almost taste the ideas for new songs welling up in my mind.

Working at the cafe, though, was another matter. I'd catch a voice, or see a face coming up to the counter while I was preparing a salad, that would jerk me back to an earlier part of my life. Old friends of my parents would come up and grill me about what I was up to, and I'd have to bluff until they decided to leave me in peace. Usually they'd sign off with something like: 'Well at least you're keeping busy,' nodding towards the sliced bread and tomatoes, before waddling back to their table with their cup and saucer. Or someone I'd known at school would come in and start talking to me in their new 'university' voice, maybe dissecting the latest Batman film in clever-clever language, or else starting on about the real causes of world poverty.

I didn't really mind any of this. In fact, some of these people I was genuinely quite glad to see. But there was one person who came into the cafe that summer, the instant I saw her, I felt myself freezing up, and by the time it occurred to me to escape into the kitchen, she'd already seen me.

This was Mrs Fraser - or Hag Fraser, as we used to call her. I recognised her as soon as she came in with a muddy little bulldog. I felt like telling her she couldn't bring the dog inside, though people always did that when they came to get things. Hag Fraser had been one of my teachers at school in Pershore. Thankfully she retired before I went into the sixth form, but in my memory her shadow falls over my entire school career. Her aside, school hadn't been that bad, but she'd had it in for me from the start, and when you're just eleven years old, there's nothing you can do to defend yourself from someone like her. Her tricks were the usual ones twisted teachers have, like asking me in lessons exactly the questions she sensed I wouldn't be able to answer, then making me stand up and getting the class to laugh at me. Later, it got more subtle. I remember once, when I was fourteen, a new teacher, a Mr Travis, had exchanged jokes with me in class. Not jokes against me, but like we were equals, and the class had laughed, and I'd felt good about it. But a couple of days later, I was going down the corridor and Mr Travis was coming the other way, talking with *her*, and as I came by she stopped me and gave me a complete bollocking about late homework or something. The point is she'd done this just to let Mr Travis know I was a 'troublemaker'; that if he'd thought for one moment I was one of the boys worthy of his respect, he was making a big mistake. Maybe it was because she was old, I don't know, but the other teachers never seemed to see through her. They all took whatever she said as gospel.

When Hag Fraser came in that day, it was obvious she remembered me, but she didn't smile or call me by name. She bought a cup of tea and a packet of Custard Creams, then took them outside to the terrace. I thought that was that. But then a while later, she came in again, put her empty cup and saucer down on the counter and said: 'Since you won't clear the table, I've brought these in myself.' She gave me a look that went on a second or two longer than was normal - her old if-only-I-could-swat-you look - then left.

All my old hatred for the old dragon came back, and by the time Maggie came down a few minutes later, I was completely fuming. She saw it straight away and asked what was wrong. There were a few customers out on the terrace, but no one inside, so I started shouting, calling Hag Fraser every filthy name she deserved. Maggie got me to calm down, then said:

‘Well, she’s not anybody’s teacher any more. She’s just a sad old lady whose husband’s gone and left her.’

‘Not surprised.’

‘But you have to feel a bit sorry for her. Just when she thought she could enjoy her retirement, she’s left for a younger woman. And now she has to run that bed-andbreakfast by herself and people say the place is falling apart.’

This all cheered me up no end. I forgot about Hag Fraser soon after that, because a group came in and I had to make a lot of tuna salads. But a few days later when I was chatting to Geoff in the kitchen, I got a few more details from him; like how her husband of forty-odd years had gone off with his secretary; and how their hotel had got off to a reasonable start, but now all the gossip was of guests demanding their money back, or checking out within hours of arrival. I saw the place myself once when I was helping Maggie with the cash-and-carry and we drove past. Hag Fraser’s hotel was right there on the Elgar Route, a fairly substantial granite house with an outsize sign saying ‘Malvern Lodge’.

But I don’t want to go on about Hag Fraser too much. I’m not obsessed with her or with her hotel. I’m only putting this all here now because of what happened later, once Tilo and Sonja came in.

Geoff had gone into Great Malvern that day, so it was just me and Maggie holding the fort. The main lunch rush was over, but at the point when the Krauts came in, we still had plenty going on. I’d clocked them in my mind as ‘the

Krauts' the moment I heard their accents. I wasn't being racist. If you have to stand behind a counter and remember who didn't want beetroot, who wanted extra bread, who gets what put on which bill, you've no choice but to turn all the customers into characters, give them names, pick out physical peculiarities. Donkey Face had a ploughman's and two coffees. Tuna mayo baguettes for Winston Churchill and his wife. That's how I was doing it. So Tilo and Sonja were 'the Krauts'.

It was very hot that afternoon, but most of the customers - being English - still wanted to sit outside on the terrace, some of them even avoiding the parasols so they could go bright red in the sun. But the Krauts decided to sit indoors in the shade. They had on loose, camelcoloured trousers, trainers and T-shirts, but somehow looked smart, the way people from the continent often do. I supposed they were in their forties, maybe early fifties - I didn't pay too much attention at that stage. They ate their lunch talking quietly to each other, and they seemed like any pleasant, middle-aged couple from Europe. Then after a while, the guy got up and started wandering about the room, pausing to study an old faded photo Maggie has on the wall, of the house as it was in 1915. Then he stretched out his arms and said:

'Your countryside here is so wonderful! We have many fine mountains in Switzerland. But what you have here is different. They are hills. You call them hills. They have a charm all their own because they are gentle and friendly.'

'Oh, you're from Switzerland,' Maggie said in her polite voice. 'I've always wanted to go there. It sounds so fantastic, the Alps, the cable-cars.'

'Of course, our country has many beautiful features. But here, in this spot, you have a special charm. We have wanted to visit this part of England for so long. We always talked

of it, and now finally we are here!’ He gave a hearty laugh.
‘So happy to be here!’

‘That’s splendid,’ Maggie said. ‘I do hope you enjoy it. Are you here for long?’

‘We have another three days before we must return to our work. We have looked forward to coming here ever since we observed a wonderful documentary film many years ago, concerning Elgar. Evidently Elgar loved these hills and explored them thoroughly on his bicycle. And now we are finally here!’

Maggie chatted with him for a few minutes about places they’d already visited in England, what they should see in the local area, the usual stuff you were supposed to say to tourists. I’d heard it loads of times before, and I could do it myself more or less on automatic, so I started to tune out. I just took in that the Krauts were actually Swiss and that they were travelling around by hired car. He kept saying what a great place England was and how kind everyone had been, and made big laughing noises whenever Maggie said anything halfway jokey. But as I say, I’d tuned out, thinking they were just this fairly boring couple. I only started paying attention again a few moments later, when I noticed the way the guy kept trying to bring his wife into the conversation, and how she kept silent, her eyes fixed on her guidebook and behaving like she wasn’t aware of any conversation at all. That’s when I took a closer look at them.

They both had even, natural suntans, quite unlike the sweaty lobster looks of the locals outside, and despite their age, they were both slim and fit-looking. His hair was grey, but luxuriant, and he’d had it carefully groomed, though in a vaguely seventies style, a bit like the guys in Abba. Her hair was blonde, almost snowy white, and her face was stern-looking, with little lines etched around the mouth that spoiled what would otherwise have been the beautiful older

woman look. So there he was, as I say, trying to bring her into the conversation.

‘Of course, my wife enjoys Elgar greatly and so would be most curious to visit the house in which he was born.’

Silence.

Or: ‘I am not a great fan of Paris, I must confess. I much prefer London. But Sonja here, she loves Paris.’

Nothing.

Each time he said something like this, he’d turn towards his wife in the corner, and Maggie would be obliged to look over to her, but the wife still wouldn’t glance up from her book. The man didn’t seem especially perturbed by this and went on talking cheerfully. Then he stretched out his arms again and said: ‘If you will excuse me, I think I may for a moment go and admire your splendid scenery!’

He went outside, and we could see him walking around the terrace. Then he disappeared out of our view. The wife was still there in the corner, reading her guidebook, and after a while Maggie went over to her table and began clearing up. The woman ignored her completely until my sister picked up a plate with a tiny bit of roll still left on it. Then suddenly she slammed down her book and said, far more loudly than necessary: ‘I have not finished yet!’

Maggie apologised and left her with her piece of roll - which I noticed the woman made no move to touch. Maggie looked at me as she came past and I gave her a shrug. Then a few moments later, my sister asked the woman, very nicely, if there was anything else she’d like.

‘No. I want nothing else.’

I could tell from her tone she should be left alone, but with Maggie it was a kind of reflex. She asked, like she really wanted to know: ‘Was everything all right?’

For at least five or six seconds, the woman went on reading, like she hadn't heard. Then she put down her book again and glared at my sister.

'Since you ask,' she said, 'I shall tell you. The food was perfectly okay. Better than in many of the awful places you have around here. However, we waited thirty-five minutes simply to be served a sandwich and a salad. Thirty-five minutes.'

I now realised this woman was livid with anger. Not the sort that suddenly hits you, then drains away. No, this woman, I could tell, had been in a kind of white heat for some time. It's the sort of anger that arrives and stays put, at a constant level, like a bad headache, never quite peaking and refusing to find a proper outlet. Maggie's always so even-tempered she couldn't recognise the symptoms, and probably thought the woman was complaining in a more or less rational way. Because she apologised and started to say: 'But you see, when there's a big rush like we had earlier . . .'

'Surely you get it every day, no? Is that not so? Every day, in the summer, when the weather is fine, there is just such a big rush? Well? So why can't you be ready? Something that happens every day and it surprises you. Is that what you are telling me?'

The woman had been glaring at my sister, but as I came out from behind the counter to stand beside Maggie, she transferred her gaze to me. And maybe it was to do with the expression I had on my face, I could see her anger go up a couple more notches. Maggie turned and looked at me, and began gently to push me away, but I resisted, and kept gazing at the woman. I wanted her to know it wasn't just her and Maggie in this. God knows where this would have got us, but at that moment the husband came back in.

'Such a marvellous view! A marvellous view, a marvellous lunch, a marvellous country!'

I waited for him to sense what he'd walked into, but if he noticed, he showed no sign of taking it into account. He smiled at his wife and said, presumably for our benefit in English: 'Sonja, you really must go and have a look. Just walk to the end of the little path out there!'

She said something in German, then went back to her book. He came further into the room and said to us:

'We had considered driving on to Wales this afternoon. But your Malvern Hills are so wonderful, I really think we might stay here in this district for the remaining three days of our vacation. If Sonja agrees, I will be overjoyed!'

He looked at his wife, who shrugged and said something else in German, to which he laughed his loud, open laugh.

'Good! She agrees! So it is settled. We will no longer drive to Wales. We will hang out here in your district for the next three days!'

He beamed at us, and Maggie said something encouraging. I was relieved to see the wife putting her book away and getting ready to leave. The man, too, went to the table, picked up a small rucksack and put it on his shoulder. Then he said to Maggie:

'I wonder. Is there by any chance a small hotel you can recommend for us nearby? Nothing too expensive, but comfortable and pleasant. And if possible, with something of the English flavour!'

Maggie was a bit stumped by this and delayed her answer by saying something meaningless like: 'What sort of place did you want?' But I said quickly:

'The best place around here is Mrs Fraser's. It's just down along the road to Worcester. It's called Malvern Lodge.'

'The Malvern Lodge! That sounds just the ticket!'

Maggie turned away disapprovingly and pretended to be clearing away more things while I gave them all the details on how to find Hag Fraser's hotel. Then the couple left, the guy thanking us with big smiles, the woman not giving a backward glance.

My sister gave me a weary look and shook her head. I just laughed and said:

'You've got to admit, that woman and Hag Fraser really deserve one another. It was just too good an opportunity to miss.'

'It's all very well for you to amuse yourself like that,' Maggie said, pushing past me to the kitchen. 'I have to live here.'

'So what? Look, you'll never see those Krauts again. And if Hag Fraser finds out we've been recommending her place to passing tourists, she's hardly going to complain, is she?'

Maggie shook her head, but there was more of a smile about it this time.

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The cafe got quieter after that, then Geoff came back, so I went off upstairs, feeling I'd done more than my share for the time being. Up in my room, I sat at the bay window with my guitar and for a while got engrossed in a song I was halfway through writing. But then - and it seemed like no time - I could hear the afternoon tea rush starting downstairs. If it got really mad, like it usually did, Maggie was bound to ask me to come down - which really wouldn't be fair, given how much I'd done already. So I decided the best thing would be for me to slip out to the hills and continue my work there.

I left the back way without encountering anyone, and immediately felt glad to be out in the open. It was pretty

warm though, especially carrying a guitar case, and I was glad of the breeze.

I was heading for a particular spot I'd discovered the previous week. To get there you climbed a steep path behind the house, then walked a few minutes along a more gradual incline till you came to this bench. It's one I'd chosen carefully, not just because of the fantastic view, but because it wasn't at one of those junctions in the paths where people with exhausted children come staggering up and sit next to you. On the other hand it wasn't completely isolated, and every now and then, a walker would pass by, saying 'Hi!' in the way they do, maybe adding some quip about my guitar, all without breaking stride. I didn't mind this at all. It was kind of like having an audience and not having one, and it gave my imagination just that little edge it needed.

I'd been there on my bench for maybe half an hour when I became aware that some walkers, who'd just gone past with the usual short greeting, had now stopped several yards away and were watching me. This did rather annoy me, and I said, a little sarcastically:

'It's okay. You don't have to toss me any money.'

This was answered by a big hearty laugh which I recognised, and I looked up to see the Krauts coming back towards the bench.

The possibility flashed through my mind that they'd gone to Hag Fraser's, realised I'd pulled a fast one on them, and were now coming to get even with me. But then I saw that not only the guy, but the woman too, was smiling cheerfully. They retraced their steps till they were standing in front of me, and since by this time the sun was falling, they appeared for a moment as two silhouettes, the big afternoon sky behind them. Then they came closer and I could see they were both gazing at my guitar - which I'd continued to play - with a look of happy amazement, the way people gaze at a baby. Even

more astonishing, the woman was tapping her foot to my beat. I got self-conscious and stopped.

‘Hey, carry on!’ the woman said. ‘It’s really good what you play there.’

‘Yes,’ the husband said, ‘wonderful! We heard it from a distance.’ He pointed. ‘We were right up there, on that ridge, and I said to Sonja, I can hear music.’

‘Singing too,’ the woman said. ‘I said to Tilo, listen, there is singing somewhere. And I was right, yes? You were singing also a moment ago.’

I couldn’t quite accept that this smiling woman was the same one who’d given us such a hard time at lunch, and I looked at them again carefully, in case this was a different couple altogether. But they were in the same clothes, and though the man’s Abba-style hair had come undone a bit in the wind, there was no mistaking it. In any case, the next moment, he said:

‘I believe you are the gentleman who served us lunch in the delightful restaurant.’

I agreed I was. Then the woman said:

‘That melody you were singing a moment ago. We heard it up there, just in the wind at first. I loved the way it fell at the end of each line.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘It’s something I’m working on. Not finished yet.’

‘Your own composition? Then you must be very gifted! Please do sing your melody again, as you were before.’

‘You know,’ the guy said, ‘when you come to record your song, you must tell the producer *this* is how you want it to sound. Like this!’ He gestured behind him at Herefordshire stretched out before us. ‘You must tell him this is the sound, the aural environment you require. Then

the listener will hear your song as we heard it today, caught in the wind as we descend the slope of the hill . . . ’

‘But a little more clearly, of course,’ the woman said.

‘Or else the listener will not catch the words. But Tilo is correct. There must be a suggestion of outdoors. Of air, of echo.’

They seemed on the verge of getting carried away, like they’d just come across another Elgar in the hills. Despite my initial suspicions, I couldn’t help but warm to them.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘since I wrote most of the song up here, it’s no wonder there’s something of this place in it.’

‘Yes, yes,’ they both said together, nodding. Then the woman said: ‘You must not be shy. Please share your music with us. It sounded wonderful.’

‘All right,’ I said, playing a little doodle. ‘All right, I’ll sing you a song, if you really want me to. Not the one I haven’t finished. Another one. But look, I can’t do it with you two standing right over me like this.’

‘Of course,’ Tilo said. ‘We are being so inconsiderate. Sonja and I have had to perform in so many strange and difficult conditions, we become insensitive to the needs of another musician.’

He looked around and sat down on a patch of stubbly grass near the path, his back to me and facing the view. Sonja gave me an encouraging smile, then sat down beside him. Immediately, he put an arm around her shoulders, she leaned towards him, then it was almost like I wasn’t there any more, and they were having an intimate lovey-dovey moment gazing over the late-afternoon countryside.

‘Okay, here goes,’ I said, and went into the song I usually open with at auditions. I aimed my voice at the horizon but kept glancing at Tilo and Sonja. Though I couldn’t see their faces, the whole way they remained

snuggled up to each other with no hint of restlessness told me they were enjoying what they were hearing. When I finished, they turned to me with big smiles and applauded, sending echoes around the hills.

‘Fantastic!’ Sonja said. ‘So talented!’

‘Splendid, splendid,’ Tilo was saying.

I felt a little embarrassed by this and pretended to be absorbed in some guitar work. When I eventually looked up again, they were still sitting on the ground, but had now shifted their positions so they could see me.

‘So you’re musicians?’ I asked. ‘I mean, *professional* musicians?’

‘Yes,’ said Tilo, ‘I suppose you could call us professionals. Sonja and I, we perform as a duo. In hotels, restaurants. At weddings, at parties. All over Europe, though we like best to work in Switzerland and Austria. We make our living this way, so yes, we are professionals.’

‘But first and foremost,’ Sonja said, ‘we play because we believe in the music. I can see it is the same for you.’

‘If I stopped believing in my music,’ I said, ‘I’d stop, just like that.’ Then I added: ‘I’d really like to do it professionally. It must be a good life.’

‘Oh yes, it’s a good life,’ said Tilo. ‘We’re very lucky we are able to do what we do.’

‘Look,’ I said, maybe a little suddenly. ‘Did you go to that hotel I told you about?’

‘How very rude of us!’ Tilo exclaimed. ‘We were so taken by your music, we forgot completely to thank you. Yes, we went there and it is just the ticket. Fortunately there were still vacancies.’

‘It’s just what we wanted,’ said Sonja. ‘Thank you.’

I pretended again to become absorbed in my chords. Then I said as casually as I could: 'Come to think of it, there's this other hotel I know. I think it's better than Malvern Lodge. I think you should change.'

'Oh, but we're quite settled now,' said Tilo. 'We have unpacked our things, and besides, it's just what we need.'

'Yeah, but . . . Well, the thing is, earlier on, when you asked me about a hotel, I didn't know you were musicians. I thought you were bankers or something.'

They both burst out laughing, like I'd made a fantastic joke. Then Tilo said:

'No, no, we're not bankers. Though there have been many times we wished we were!'

'What I'm saying,' I said, 'is there are other hotels much more geared, you know, to artistic types. It's hard when strangers ask you to recommend a hotel, before you know what sort of people they are.'

'It's kind of you to worry,' said Tilo. 'But please, don't do so any longer. What we have is perfect. Besides, people are not so different. Bankers, musicians, we all in the end want the same things from life.'

'You know, I'm not sure that is so true,' Sonja said. 'Our young friend here, you see he doesn't look for a job in a bank. His dreams are different.'

'Perhaps you are right, Sonja. All the same, the present hotel is fine for us.'

I leant over the strings and practised another little phrase to myself, and for a few seconds nobody spoke. Then I asked: 'So what sort of music do you guys play?'

Tilo shrugged. 'Sonja and I play a number of instruments between us. We both play keyboards. I am fond of the clarinet. Sonja is a very fine violinist, and also a splendid

singer. I suppose what we like to do best is to perform our traditional Swiss folk music, but in a contemporary manner. Sometimes even what you might call a radical manner. We take inspiration from great composers who took a similar path. Janáček, for instance. Your own Vaughan Williams.'

'But that kind of music', Sonja said, 'we don't play so much now.'

They exchanged glances with what I thought was just a hint of tension. Then Tilo's usual smile was back on his face.

'Yes, as Sonja points out, in this real world, much of the time, we must play what our audience is most likely to appreciate. So we perform many hits. Beatles, the Carpenters. Some more recent songs. This is perfectly satisfying.'

'What about Abba?' I asked on an impulse, then immediately regretted it. But Tilo didn't seem to sense any mockery.

'Yes, indeed, we do some Abba. "Dancing Queen". That one always goes down well. In fact, it is on "Dancing Queen" I actually do a little singing myself, a little harmony part. Sonja will tell you I have the most terrible voice. So we must make sure to perform this song only when our customers are right in the middle of their meal, when there is for them no chance of escape!'

He did his big laugh, and Sonja laughed too, though not so loudly. A power-cyclist, kitted out in what looked like a black wetsuit, went speeding by us, and for the next few moments, we all watched his frantic, receding shape.

'I went to Switzerland once,' I said eventually. 'A couple of summers ago. Interlaken. I stayed at the youth hostel there.'

'Ah yes, Interlaken. A beautiful place. Some Swiss people scoff at it. They say it is just for the tourists. But

Sonja and I always love to perform there. In fact, to play in Interlaken on a summer evening, to happy people from all over the world, it is something very wonderful. I hope you enjoyed your visit there.'

'Yeah, it was great.'

'There is a restaurant in Interlaken where we play a few nights every summer. For our performance, we position ourselves under the restaurant's canopy, so we are facing the dining tables, which of course are outdoors on such an evening. And as we perform, we are able to see all the tourists, eating and talking together under the stars. And behind the tourists, we see the big field, where during the day the paragliders are landing, but which at night is lit up by the lamps along the Höhweg. And if your eye may travel further, there are the Alps overlooking the field. The outlines of the Eiger, the Mönch, the Jungfrau. And the air is pleasantly warm and filled with the music we are making. I always feel when we are there, this is a privilege. I think, yes, it is good to be doing this.'

'That restaurant,' Sonja said. 'Last year, the manager made us wear full costumes while we performed, even though it was so hot. It was very uncomfortable, and we said, what difference does it make, why must we have our bulky waistcoats and scarves and hats? In just our blouses, we look neat and still very Swiss. But the restaurant manager tells us, we put on the full costumes or we don't play. Our choice, he says, and walks away, just like that.'

'But Sonja, that is the same in any job. There is always a uniform, something the employer insists you must wear. It is the same for bankers! And in our case, at least it is something we believe in. Swiss culture. Swiss tradition.'

Once again something vaguely awkward hovered between them, but it was just for a second or two, and then they both smiled as they fixed their gazes back on my guitar. I thought I should say something, so I said:

‘I think I’d enjoy that. Being able to play in different countries. It must keep you sharp, really aware of your audiences.’

‘Yes,’ Tilo said, ‘it is good that we perform to all kinds of people. And not only in Europe. All in all, we have got to know so many cities so well.’

‘Düsseldorf, for instance,’ said Sonja. There was something different about her voice now - something harder - and I could see again the person I’d encountered back at the cafe. Tilo, though, didn’t seem to notice anything and said to me, in a carefree sort of way:

‘Düsseldorf is where our son is now living. He is your age. Perhaps a little older.’

‘Earlier this year,’ Sonja said, ‘we went to Düsseldorf. We have an engagement to play there. Not the usual thing, this is a chance to play our real music. So we call him, our son, our only child, we call to say we are coming to his city. He does not answer his phone, so we leave a message. We leave many messages. No reply. We arrive in Düsseldorf, we leave more messages. We say, here we are, we are in your city. Still nothing. Tilo says don’t worry, perhaps he will come on the night, to our concert. But he does not come. We play, then we go to another city, to our next engagement.’

Tilo made a chuckling noise. ‘I think perhaps Peter heard enough of our music while he was growing up! The poor boy, you see, he had to listen to us rehearsing, day after day.’

‘I suppose it can be a bit tricky,’ I said. ‘Having children and being musicians.’

‘We only had the one child,’ Tilo said, ‘so it was not so bad. Of course we were fortunate. When we had to travel, and we couldn’t take him with us, his grandparents were always delighted to help. And when Peter was older, we were

able to send him to a good boarding school. Again, his grandparents came to the rescue. We could not afford such school fees otherwise. So we were very fortunate.'

'Yes, we were fortunate,' Sonja said. 'Except Peter hated his school.'

The earlier good atmosphere was definitely slipping away. In an effort to cheer things up, I said quickly: 'Well, anyway, it looks like you both really enjoy your work.'

'Oh yes, we enjoy our work,' said Tilo. 'It's everything to us. Even so, we very much appreciate a vacation. Do you know, this is our first proper vacation in three years.'

This made me feel really bad all over again, and I thought about having another go at persuading them to change hotels, but I could see how ridiculous this would look. I just had to hope Hag Fraser pulled her finger out. Instead, I said:

'Look, if you like, I'll play you that song I was working on earlier. I haven't finished it, and I wouldn't usually do this. But since you heard some of it anyway, I don't mind playing you what I've got so far.'

The smile returned to Sonja's face. 'Yes,' she said, 'please do let us hear. It sounded so beautiful before.'

As I got ready to play, they shifted again, so they were facing the view like before, their backs to me. But this time, instead of cuddling, they sat there on the grass with surprisingly upright postures, each with a hand up to the brow to shield away the sun. They stayed like that all the time I played, peculiarly still, and what with the way each of them cast a long afternoon shadow, they looked like matching art exhibits. I brought my incomplete song to a meandering halt, and for a moment they didn't move. Then their postures relaxed, and they applauded, though perhaps not quite as enthusiastically as the last time. Tilo got to

his feet, muttering compliments, then helped Sonja up. It was only when you saw how they did this that you remembered they were really quite middle-aged. Maybe they were just tired. For all I know, they might have done a fair bit of walking before they'd come across me. All the same, it seemed to me they found it quite a struggle to get up.

'You've entertained us so marvellously,' Tilo was saying. 'Now we are the tourists, and someone else plays for us! It makes a pleasant change.'

'I would love to hear that song when it is finished,' Sonja said, and she seemed really to mean it. 'Maybe one day I will hear it on the radio. Who knows?'

'Yes,' Tilo said, 'and then Sonja and I will play our cover version to our customers!' His big laugh rang through the air. Then he did a polite little bow and said: 'So today we are in your debt three times over. A splendid lunch. A splendid choice of hotel. And a splendid concert here in the hills!'

As we said our goodbyes, I had an urge to tell them the truth. To confess that I'd deliberately sent them to the worst hotel in the area, and warn them to move out while there was still time. But the affectionate way they shook my hand made it all the harder to come out with this. And then they were going down the hill and I was alone on the bench again.

The cafe had closed by the time I came down from the hills. Maggie and Geoff looked exhausted. Maggie said it had been their busiest day yet and seemed pleased about it. But when Geoff made the same point over supper - which we ate in the cafe from various left-overs - he put it like it was a negative thing, like it was awful they'd been made to work so hard and where had I been to help? Maggie asked how my afternoon had gone, and I didn't mention Tilo and Sonja - that seemed too complicated - but told her I'd gone up to

the Sugarloaf to work on my song. And when she asked if I'd made any progress, and I said yes, I was making real headway now, Geoff got up and marched out moodily, even though there was still food on his plate. Maggie pretended not to notice, and fair enough, he came back a few minutes later with a can of beer, and sat there reading his newspaper and not saying much. I didn't want to be the cause of a rift between my sister and brother-in-law, so I excused myself soon after that and went upstairs to work some more on the song.

My room, which was such an inspiration in the daytime, wasn't nearly so appealing after dark. For a start, the curtains didn't pull all the way across, which meant if I opened a window in the stifling heat, insects from miles around would see my light and come charging in. And the light I had was just this one bare bulb hanging down from the ceiling rose, which cast gloomy shadows all round the room, making it look all the more obviously the spare room it was. That evening, I was wanting light to work by, to jot down lyrics as they occurred to me. But it got far too stuffy, and in the end I switched off the bulb, pulled back the curtains, and opened the windows wide. Then I sat in the bay with my guitar, just the way I did in the day.

I'd been there like that for about an hour, playing through various ideas for the bridge passage, when there was a knock and Maggie stuck her head round the door. Of course everything was in darkness, but outside down on the terrace there was a security light, so I could just about make out her face. She had on this awkward smile, and I thought she was about to ask me to come and help with yet another chore. She came right in, closed the door behind her and said:

'I'm sorry, love. But Geoff's really tired tonight, he's been working so hard. And now he says he wants to watch his movie in peace?'

She said it like that, like it was a question, and it took me a moment to realise she was asking me to stop playing

my music.

‘But I’m working on something important here,’ I said.

‘I know. But he’s really tired tonight, and he says he can’t relax because of your guitar.’

‘What Geoff needs to realise,’ I said, ‘is that just as he’s got his work to do, I’ve got mine.’

My sister seemed to think about this. Then she did a big sigh. ‘I don’t think I ought to report that back to Geoff.’

‘Why not? Why don’t you? It’s time he got the message.’

‘Why not? Because I don’t think he’d be very pleased, that’s why not. And I don’t really think he’d accept that his work and your work are quite on the same level.’

I stared at Maggie, for a moment quite speechless. Then I said: ‘You’re talking such rubbish. Why are you talking such rubbish?’

She shook her head wearily, but didn’t say anything.

‘I don’t understand why you’re talking such rubbish,’ I said. ‘And just when things are going so well for me.’

‘Things are going well for you, are they, love?’ She kept looking at me in the half-light. ‘Well, all right,’ she said in the end. ‘I won’t argue with you.’ She turned away to open the door. ‘Come down and join us, if you like,’ she said as she left.

Rigid with rage, I stared at the door that had closed behind her. I became aware of muffled sounds from the television downstairs, and even in the state I was in, some detached part of my brain was telling me my fury should be directed not at Maggie, but at Geoff, who’d been systematically trying to undermine me ever since I’d got here. Even so, it was my sister I was livid at. In all the time I’d been in her house, she hadn’t once asked to hear a song, the way Tilo and Sonja had done. Surely it wasn’t too

much to ask of your own sister, and one who'd been, I happened to remember, a big music fan in her teens? And now here she was, interrupting me when I was trying to work and talking all this rubbish. Every time I thought of the way she'd said: 'All right, I won't argue with you,' I felt fresh fury coursing through me.

I came down off the window sill, put away the guitar, and threw myself down on my mattress. Then for the next little while I stared at the patterns on the ceiling. It seemed clear I'd been invited here on false pretences, that this had all been about getting cheap help for the busy season, a mug they didn't even have to pay. And my sister didn't understand what I was trying to achieve any better than did her moron of a husband. It would serve them both right if I left them here in the lurch and went back to London. I kept going round and round with this stuff, until maybe an hour or so later, I calmed down a bit and decided I'd just turn in for the night.

I didn't speak much to either of them when I came down as usual just after the breakfast rush. I made some toast and coffee, helped myself to some left-over scrambled eggs, and settled down in the corner of the cafe. All through my breakfast the thought kept occurring to me I might run into Tilo and Sonja again up in the hills. And though this might mean having to face the music about Hag Fraser's place, even so, I realised I was hoping it would happen. Besides, even if Hag Fraser's was truly awful, they'd never suppose I'd recommended it out of malice. There'd be any number of ways for me to get out of it.

Maggie and Geoff were probably expecting me to help again with the lunch rush, but I decided they needed a lesson about taking people for granted. So after breakfast, I went upstairs, got my guitar and slipped out the back way.

It was really hot again and the sweat was running down my cheek as I climbed the path leading up to my bench. Even though I'd been thinking about Tilo and Sonja at breakfast,

I'd forgotten them by this point, and so got a surprise when, coming up the final slope, I looked towards the bench and saw Sonja sitting there by herself. She spotted me immediately and waved.

I was still a bit wary of her, and especially without Tilo around, I wasn't so keen to sit down with her. But she gave me a big smile and did a shifting movement, like she was making room for me, so I didn't have much choice.

We said our hellos, then for a time we just sat there side by side, not speaking. This didn't seem so odd at first, partly because I was still getting my breath back, and partly because of the view. There was more haze and cloud than the previous day, but if you concentrated, you could still see beyond the Welsh borders to the Black Mountains. The breeze was quite strong, but not uncomfortable.

'So where's Tilo?' I asked in the end.

'Tilo? Oh ...' She put her hand up to shield her eyes. Then she pointed. 'There. You see? Over there. That is Tilo.'

Some way in the distance, I could see a figure, in what might have been a green T-shirt and a white sun cap, moving along the rising path towards Worcestershire Beacon.

'Tilo wished to go for a walk,' she said.

'You didn't want to go with him?'

'No. I decided to stay here.'

While she wasn't by any means the irate customer from the cafe, neither was she quite the same person who'd been so warm and encouraging to me the day before. There was definitely something up, and I started preparing my defence about Hag Fraser's.

'By the way,' I said, 'I've been working a bit more on that song. You can hear it if you like.'

She gave this consideration, then said: 'If you do not mind, perhaps not just at this minute. You see, Tilo and I have just had a talk. You might call it a disagreement.'

'Oh okay. Sorry to hear that.'

'And now he has gone off for his walk.'

Again, we sat there not talking. Then I sighed and said: 'I think maybe this is all my fault.'

She turned to look at me. 'Your fault? Why do you say that?'

'The reason you've quarrelled, the reason your holiday's all messed up now. It's my fault. It's that hotel, isn't it? It wasn't very good, right?'

'The hotel?' She seemed puzzled. 'That hotel. Well, it has some weak points. But it is a hotel, like many others.'

'But you noticed, right? You noticed all the weak points. You must have done.'

She seemed to think this over, then nodded. 'It is true, I noticed the weak points. Tilo, however, did not. Tilo, of course, thought the hotel was splendid. We are so lucky, he kept saying. So lucky to find such a hotel. Then this morning we have our breakfast. For Tilo, this is a fine breakfast, the best breakfast ever. I say, Tilo, don't be stupid. This is not a good breakfast. This is not a good hotel. He says, no, no, we are so very lucky. So I become angry. I tell the proprietress everything that is wrong. Tilo leads me away. Let's go for a walk, he says. You will feel better then. So we come out here. And he says, Sonja, look at these hills, aren't they so beautiful? Aren't we fortunate to come to such a place as this for our vacation? These hills, he says, are even more wonderful than he imagined them when we listen to Elgar. He asks me, isn't this so? Perhaps I become angry again. I tell him, these hills are not so wonderful. It is not how I imagine them when I hear Elgar's music. Elgar's

hills are majestic and mysterious. Here, this is just like a park. This is what I say to him, and then it is his turn to be cross. He says in that case, he will walk by himself. He says we are finished, we never agree on anything now. Yes, he says, Sonja, you and me, we are finished. And off he goes! So there you are. That is why he is up there and I am down here.' She shielded her eyes again and watched Tilo's progress.

'I'm really sorry,' I said. 'If only I hadn't sent you to that hotel in the first place ...'

'Please. The hotel is not important.' She leaned forward to get a better view of Tilo. Then she turned to me and smiled, and I thought maybe there were little tears in her eyes. 'Tell me,' she said. 'Today, you mean to write more songs?'

'That's the plan. Or at least, I want to finish the one I've been working on. The one you heard yesterday.'

'That was beautiful. And what will you do then, once you have finished writing your songs here? You have a plan?'

'I'll go back to London and form a band. These songs need just the right band or they won't work.'

'How exciting. I do wish you luck.'

After a moment, I said, quite quietly: 'Then again, I may not bother. It's not so easy, you know.'

She didn't reply, and it occurred to me she hadn't heard, because she'd turned away again, to look towards Tilo.

'You know,' she said eventually, 'when I was younger, nothing could make me angry. But now I get angry at many things. I don't know how I have become this way. It is not good. Well, I do not think Tilo is coming back here. I will return to the hotel and wait for him.' She got to her feet, her gaze still fixed on his distant figure.

‘It’s a shame,’ I said, also getting up, ‘you having a row on your holiday. And yesterday, when I was playing to you, you seemed so happy together.’

‘Yes, that was a good moment. Thank you for that.’ Suddenly, she held out her hand to me, smiling warmly. ‘It has been so nice to meet you.’

We shook hands, in the slightly limp way you do with women. She started to walk away, then stopped and looked at me.

‘If Tilo were here,’ she said, ‘he would say to you, never be discouraged. He would say, of course, you must go to London and try and form your band. Of course you will be successful. That is what Tilo would say to you. Because that is his way.’

‘And what would *you* say?’

‘I would like to say the same. Because you are young and talented. But I am not so certain. As it is, life will bring enough disappointments. If on top, you have such dreams as this . . .’ She smiled again and shrugged. ‘But I should not say these things. I am not a good example to you. Besides, I can see you are much more like Tilo. If disappointments do come, you will carry on still. You will say, just as he does, I am so lucky.’ For a few seconds, she went on gazing at me, like she was memorising the way I looked. The breeze was blowing her hair about, making her seem older than she usually did. ‘I wish you much luck,’ she said finally.

‘Good luck yourself,’ I said. ‘And I hope you two make it up okay.’

She waved a last time, then went off down the path out of my view.

I took the guitar from its case and sat back on the bench. I didn’t play anything for a while though, because I

was looking into the distance, towards Worcestershire Beacon, and Tilo's tiny figure up on the incline. Maybe it was to do with the way the sun was hitting that part of the hill, but I could see him much more clearly now than before, even though he'd got further away. He'd paused for a moment on the path, and seemed to be looking about him at the surrounding hills, almost like he was trying to reappraise them. Then his figure started to move again.

I worked on my song for a few minutes, but kept losing concentration, mainly because I was thinking about the way Hag Fraser's face must have looked as Sonja laid into her that morning. Then I gazed at the clouds, and at the sweep of land below me, and I made myself think again about my song, and the bridge passage I still hadn't got right.

NOCTURNE

UNTIL TWO DAYS AGO, Lindy Gardner was my nextdoor neighbor. Okay, you're thinking, if Lindy Gardner was my neighbor, that probably means I live in Beverly Hills; a movie producer, maybe, or an actor or a musician. Well, I'm a musician all right. But though I've played behind one or two performers you'll have heard of, I'm not what you'd call big-league. My manager, Bradley Stevenson, who in his way has been a good friend over the years, maintains I have it in me to be big-league. Not just big-league session player, but big-league headliner. It's not true saxophonists don't become headliners any more, he says, and repeats his list of names. Marcus Lightfoot. Silvio Tarrentini. They're all jazz players, I point out. 'What are you, if you're not a jazz player?' he says. But only in my innermost dreams am I still a jazz player. In the real world - when I don't have my face entirely wrapped in bandages the way I do now - I'm just a jobbing tenor man, in reasonable demand for studio work, or when a band's lost their regular guy. If it's pop they want, it's pop I play. R & B? Fine. Car commercials, the walk-on theme for a talk show, I'll do it. I'm a jazz player these days only when I'm inside my cubicle.

I'd prefer to play in my living room, but our apartment's so cheaply made the neighbors would start complaining all the way down the hall. So what I've done is convert our smallest room into a rehearsal room. It's no more than a closet really - you can get an office chair in there and that's it - but I've sound-proofed it with foam and egg-trays and old padded envelopes my manager Bradley sent round from his office. Helen, my wife, when she used to live with me, she'd see me going in there with my sax and she'd laugh and say it was like I was going to the toilet, and sometimes that's how it felt. That's to say, it was like I was sitting in that dim,

airless cubicle taking care of personal business no one else would ever care to come across.

You've guessed by now Lindy Gardner never lived next to this apartment I'm talking about. Neither was she one of the neighbors who banged the door whenever I played outside the cubicle. When I said she was my neighbor, I meant something else, and I'm going to explain this right now.

Until two days ago, Lindy was in the next room here at this swanky hotel, and like me, had her face encased in bandages. Lindy, of course, has a big comfortable house nearby, and hired help, so Dr Boris let her go home. In fact, from a strictly medical viewpoint, she could probably have gone much sooner, but there were clearly other factors. For one, it wouldn't be so easy for her to hide from cameras and gossip columnists back in her own house. What's more, my hunch is Dr Boris's stellar reputation is based on procedures that aren't one hundred per cent legal, and that's why he hides his patients up here on this hush-hush floor of the hotel, cut off from all regular staff and guests, with instructions to leave our rooms only when absolutely necessary. If you could see past all the crêpe, you'd spot more stars up here in a week than in a month at the Chateau Marmont.

So how does someone like me get to be here among these stars and millionaires, having my face altered by the top man in town? I guess it started with my manager, Bradley, who isn't so big-league himself, and doesn't look any more like George Clooney than I do. He first mentioned it a few years ago, in a jokey sort of way, then seemed to get more serious each time he brought it up again. What he was saying, in a nutshell, was that I was ugly. And that this was what was keeping me from the big league.

'Look at Marcus Lightfoot,' he said. 'Look at Kris Bugoski. Or Tarrentini. Do any of them have a signature sound the way you do? No. Do they have your tenderness? Your

vision? Do they have even half your technique? No. But they look right, so doors keep opening for them. ’

‘What about Billy Fogel?’ I said. ‘He’s ugly as hell and he’s doing fine.’

‘Billy’s ugly all right. But he’s sexy, bad guy ugly. You, Steve, you’re . . . Well, you’re dull, loser ugly. The wrong kind of ugly. Listen, have you ever considered having a little work done? Of a surgical nature, I mean?’

I went home and repeated this all to Helen because I thought she’d find it as funny as I did. And at first, sure enough, we had a lot of laughs at Bradley’s expense. Then Helen came over, put her arms around me and told me that for her at least, I was the most handsome guy in the universe. Then she kind of took a step back and went quiet, and when I asked her what was wrong, she said nothing was wrong. Then she said that perhaps, just perhaps, Bradley had a point. Maybe I *should* consider having a little work done.

‘No need to look at me like that!’ she yelled back.

‘Everyone’s doing it. And you, you have a *professional* reason. Guy wants to be a fancy chauffeur, he goes and buys a fancy car. It’s no different with you!’

But at that stage I gave the idea no further thought, even if I was beginning to accept this notion that I was ‘loser ugly’. For one thing, I didn’t have the money. In fact, the very moment Helen was talking about fancy chauffeurs, we were nine and a half thousand dollars in debt. This was characteristic of Helen. A fine person in many ways, but this ability to forget completely the true state of our finances and start dreaming up major new spending opportunities, this was very Helen.

Money aside, I didn’t like the idea of someone cutting me up. I’m not so good with that kind of thing. One time, early in my relationship with Helen, she invited me to go running with her. It was a crisp winter’s morning, and I’ve never

been much of a jogger, but I was taken by her and anxious to impress. So there we were running around the park, and I was doing fine keeping up with her, when suddenly my shoe hit something very hard jutting out of the ground. I could feel a pain in my foot, which wasn't so bad, but when I took off my sneaker and sock, and saw the nail on my big toe rearing up from the flesh like it was doing a Hitler-style salute, I got nauseous and fainted. That's the way I am. So you can see, I wasn't wild about face surgery.

Then, naturally, there was the principle of the thing. Okay, I've told you before, I'm no stickler for artistic integrity. I play every kind of bubble-gum for the pay. But this proposition was of another order, and I did have some pride left. Bradley was right about one thing: I was twice as talented as most other people in this town. But it seemed that didn't count for much these days. Because it has to do with image, marketability, being in magazines and on TV shows, about parties and who you ate lunch with. It all made me sick. I was a musician, why should I have to join in this game? Why couldn't I just play my music the best way I knew, and keep getting better, if only in my cubicle, and maybe some day, just maybe, genuine music lovers would hear me and appreciate what I was doing. What did I want with a plastic surgeon?

At first Helen seemed to see it my way, and the topic didn't come up again for some time. That is, not until she phoned from Seattle to say she was leaving me and moving in with Chris Prendergast, a guy she'd known since high school and who now owned a string of successful diners across Washington. I'd met this Prendergast a few times over the years - he'd even come to dinner once - but I'd never suspected a thing. 'All that sound-proofing in that cupboard of yours,' Bradley said at the time. 'It works both ways.' I suppose he had a point.

But I don't want to dwell on Helen and Prendergast except to explain their part in getting me where I am now. Maybe

you're thinking I drove up the coast, confronted the happy couple, and plastic surgery became necessary following a manly altercation with my rival. Romantic, but no, that's not the way it happened.

What happened was that a few weeks after her phone call, Helen came back to the apartment to organise moving out her belongings. She looked sad walking around the place - where, after all, we'd had some happy times. I kept thinking she was about to cry, but she didn't, and just went on putting all her things into neat piles. Someone would be along to pick them up in a day or two, she said. Then as I was on my way to my cubicle, tenor in hand, she looked up and said quietly:

'Steve, please. Don't go into that place again. We need to talk.'

'Talk about what?'

'Steve, for God's sake.'

So I put the sax back in its case and we went into our little kitchen and sat down at the table facing one another. Then she put it to me.

There was no going back on her decision. She was happy with Prendergast, for whom she'd carried a torch since school. But she felt bad about leaving me, especially at a time when my career wasn't going so good. So she'd thought things over and talked with her new guy, and he too had felt bad about me. Apparently, what he'd said was: 'It's just too bad Steve has to pay the price for all our happiness.' So here was the deal. Prendergast was willing to pay for me to have my face fixed by the best surgeon in town. 'It's true,' she said, when I looked back at her blankly. 'He means it. No expense spared. All the hospital bills, recuperation, everything. The best surgeon in town.' Once my face was fixed, there'd be nothing holding me back, she said. I'd go right to the top, how could I fail, with the kind of talent I had?

‘Steve, why are you looking at me like that? This is a great offer. And God knows if he’ll still be willing in six months. Say yes right now and do yourself a big favor. It’s just a few weeks of discomfort, then whoosh! Jupiter and beyond!’

Fifteen minutes later, on her way out, she said in much sterner tones: ‘So what is it you’re saying? That you’re happy playing in that little closet for the rest of your life? That you just love being this big a loser?’ And with that, she left.

The next day I went into Bradley’s office to see if he had anything for me, and I happened to mention what had occurred, expecting us to laugh about it. But he didn’t laugh at all.

‘This guy’s rich? And he’s willing to get you a top surgeon? Maybe he’ll get you Crespo. Or even Boris.’

So now I had Bradley too, telling me how I had to take this opportunity, how if I didn’t I’d be a loser all my life. I left his office pretty angry, but he phoned later that same afternoon and kept on about it. If it was the call itself holding me back, he said, if it was the blow to my pride involved in picking up a phone and saying to Helen, yes, please, I want to do it, please get your boyfriend to sign that big check, if that’s what was holding me up, then he, Bradley, was happy to do all the negotiations on my behalf. I told him to go sit on a tall spike, and hung up. But then he called again an hour later. He told me he’d now figured it all out and I was a fool not to have done so myself.

‘Helen’s got this carefully planned. Consider her position. She loves you. But looks-wise, well, you’re an embarrassment when you’re seen in public. You’re no turn-on. She wants you to do something about it, but you refuse. So what’s she to do? Well, her next move’s magnificent. Full of subtlety. As a professional manager I have to admire it. She goes off with this guy. Okay, maybe she’s always had the hots

for him, but really, she doesn't love him at all. She gets the guy to pay for your face. Once you're healed up, she comes back, you're good-looking, she's hungry for your body, she can't wait to be seen with you in restaurants . . .'

I stopped him here to point out that though over the years I'd become accustomed to the depths to which he could sink when persuading me to do something to his professional advantage, this latest ploy was somewhere so far down in the pits it was a place no light penetrated and where steaming horseshit would freeze in seconds. And on the subject of horseshit, I told him that while I understood how he, on account of his nature, couldn't help shovelling the stuff all the time, it would still be sound strategy on his part to come up with the sort that had at least a chance of taking me in for a minute or two. Then I hung up on him again.

Over the next few weeks, work seemed scarcer than ever, and each time I called Bradley to see if he had anything, he'd say something like: 'It's hard to help a guy who won't help himself.' In the end, I began considering the whole matter more pragmatically. I couldn't get away from the fact that I needed to eat. And if going through with this meant that eventually a lot more people got to hear my music, was that such a bad result? And what about my plans to lead my own band one day? How was that ever going to happen?

Finally, maybe six weeks after Helen came up with the offer, I mentioned casually to Bradley that I was thinking it over again. That was all he needed. He was off, making phone calls and arrangements, shouting a lot and getting excited. To give him his due, he was true to his word: he did all the go-between stuff so I didn't have to have a single humiliating conversation with Helen, let alone with Prendergast. At times Bradley even managed to create the illusion he was negotiating a deal for me, that it was me who had something to sell. Even so, I was having doubts several times each day. When it happened, it happened suddenly. Bradley called to say Dr Boris had a last-minute cancellation

and I had to get myself to a particular address by three-thirty that same afternoon with all my bags packed. Maybe I had some final jitters at that point, because I remember Bradley yelling down the phone at me to pull myself together, that he was coming to get me himself, and then I was being driven up winding roads to a big house in the Hollywood hills and put under anaesthetic, just like a character in a Raymond Chandler story.

After a couple of days I was brought down here, to this Beverly Hills hotel, by the back entrance under cover of dark, and wheeled down this corridor, so exclusive we're sealed off entirely from all the regular life of the hotel.

The first week, my face was painful and the anaesthetic in my system made me nauseous. I had to sleep propped up on pillows, which meant I didn't sleep much at all, and because my nurse insisted on keeping the room dark all the time, I lost sense of what hour of the day it was. Even so, I didn't feel at all bad. In fact, I felt exhilarated and optimistic. I felt complete confidence in Dr Boris, who was after all a guy in whose hands movie stars placed their entire careers. What's more, I knew that with me he'd completed his masterpiece; that on seeing my loser's face, he'd felt his deepest ambitions stir, remembered why he'd chosen his vocation in the first place, and put everything into it and more. When the bandages came off, I could look forward to a cleanly chiselled face, slightly brutal, yet full of nuance. A guy with his reputation, after all, would have thought through carefully the requirements of a serious jazz musician, and not confused them with, say, those of a TV anchorman. He may even have put in something to give me that vaguely haunted quality, kind of like the young De Niro, or like Chet Baker before the drugs ravaged him. I thought about the albums I'd make, the line-ups I'd hire to back me. I felt triumphant and couldn't believe I'd ever hesitated about the move.

Then came the second week, when the effect of the drugs wore off, and I felt depressed, lonely and cheap. My nurse, Gracie, now let a little more light into the room - though she kept the blinds at least halfway down - and I was allowed to walk about the room in my dressing gown. So I put one CD after another into the Bang & Olufsen and went round and round the carpet, now and then stopping in front of the dressing-table mirror to inspect the weird bandaged monster gazing back through peephole eyes.

It was during this phase that Gracie first told me Lindy Gardner was next door. Had she brought this news in my earlier, euphoric phase, I'd have greeted it with delight. I might even have taken it as the first indicator of the glamorous life I was now headed for. Coming when it did though, just as I was falling into my trough, the news filled me with such disgust it set off another bout of nausea. If you're one of Lindy's many admirers, I apologise for what's coming up here. But the fact was, at that moment, if there was one figure who epitomised for me everything that was shallow and sickening about the world, it was Lindy Gardner: a person with negligible talent - okay, let's face it, she's *demonstrated* she can't act, and she doesn't even pretend to have musical ability - but who's managed all the same to become famous, fought over by TV networks and glossy magazines who can't get enough of her smiling features. I went past a bookstore earlier this year and saw a snaking line and wondered if someone like Stephen King was around, and here it turns out to be Lindy signing copies of her latest ghosted autobiography. And how was this all achieved? The usual way, of course. The right love affairs, the right marriages, the right divorces. All leading to the right magazine covers, the right talk shows, then stuff like that recent thing she had on the air, I don't remember its name, where she gave advice about how to dress for that first big date after your divorce, or what to do if you suspect your husband is gay, all of that. You hear people talk about her 'star quality', but the spell's easy enough to analyse.

It's the sheer accumulation of TV appearances and glossy covers, of all the photos you've seen of her at premieres and parties, her arm linked to legendary people. And now here she was, right next door, recovering just like me from a face job by Dr Boris. No other news could have symbolised more perfectly the scale of my moral descent. The week before, I'd been a jazz musician. Now I was just another pathetic hustler, getting my face fixed in a bid to crawl after the Lindy Gardners of this world into vacuous celebrity.

The next few days, I tried to pass the time reading, but couldn't concentrate. Under the bandages, parts of my face throbbed awfully, others itched like hell and I had bouts of feeling hot and claustrophobic. I longed to play my sax, and the thought that it would be weeks yet until I could put my facial muscles under that kind of pressure made me even more despondent. In the end, I worked out the best way to get through the day was to alternate listening to CDs with spells of staring at sheet music - I'd brought the folder of charts and lead sheets I worked with in my cubicle - and humming improvisations to myself.

It was towards the end of the second week, when I was starting to feel a little better both physically and mentally, my nurse handed me an envelope with a knowing smile, saying: 'Now that ain't something you'll get every day.' Inside was a page of hotel notepaper, and since I've got it right here beside me, I'll quote it just the way it came.

Gracie tells me you're getting weary of this high life. I'm that way too. How about you come and visit? If five o'clock tonight isn't too early for cocktails? Dr B. says no alcohol, I expect same for you. So looks like club sodas and Perrier.

Curse him! See you at five or I'll be heartbroken. Lindy Gardner.

Maybe it was because I'd become so bored by this point; or just that my mood was on the up again; or that the thought of having a fellow prisoner to swap stories with was extremely appealing. Or maybe I wasn't so immune myself to the glamor thing. In any case, despite everything I felt about Lindy Gardner, when I read this, I felt a tingle of excitement, and I found myself telling Gracie to let Lindy know I'd be over at five.

Lindy Gardner had on even more bandages than I did. I'd at least been left an opening at the top, from which my hair sprang up like palms in a desert oasis. But Boris had encased the whole of Lindy's head so it was a contoured coconut shape, with slots only for eyes, nose and mouth. What had happened to all that luxuriant blonde hair, I didn't know. Her voice, though, wasn't as constricted as you'd expect, and I recognized it from the times I'd seen her on TV.

'So how are you finding all this?' she asked. When I replied I wasn't finding it too bad, she said: 'Steve. May I call you Steve? I've heard all about you from Gracie.'

'Oh? I hope she left out the bad part.'

'Well, I know you're a musician. And a very promising one too.'

'She told you that?'

'Steve, you're tense. I want you to relax when you're with me. Some famous people, I know, they *like* the public to be tense around them. Makes them feel all the more special. But I hate that. I want you to treat me just like I'm one of your regular friends. What were you telling me? You were saying you don't mind this so much.'

Her room was significantly bigger than mine, and this was just the lounge part of her suite. We were sitting facing each other on matching white sofas, and between us was a low coffee table made of smoked glass, through which I could see

the hunk of driftwood it rested on. Its surface was covered with shiny magazines and a fruit basket still in cellophane. Like me, she had the air-conditioning up high - it gets warm in bandages - and the blinds low over the windows against the evening sun. A maid had just brought me a glass of water and a coffee, both with straws bobbing in them - which is how everything has to be served here - then had left the room.

In answer to her question, I told her the toughest part for me was not being able to play my sax.

‘But you can see why Boris won’t let you,’ she said. ‘Just imagine. You blow on that horn a day before you’re ready, bits of your face will fly out all over the room!’

She seemed to find this pretty funny, waving her hand at me, as though it was me that had made the wisecrack and she was saying: ‘Stop it, you’re too much!’ I laughed with her, and sipped some coffee through the straw. Then she began talking about various friends who’d recently gone through cosmetic surgery, what they’d reported, funny things that had happened to them. Every person she mentioned was a celebrity or else married to one.

‘So you’re a sax player,’ she said, suddenly changing the subject. ‘You made a good choice. It’s a wonderful instrument. You know what I say to all young saxophone players? I tell them to listen to the old pros. I knew this sax player, up-and-coming like you, only ever listened to these far-out guys. Wayne Shorter and people like that. I said to him, you’ll learn more from the old pros. Might not have been so ground-breaking, I said to him, but those old pros knew how to do it. Steve, do you mind if I play you something? To show you exactly what I’m talking about?’

‘No, I don’t mind. But Mrs Gardner . . .’

‘Please. Call me Lindy. We’re equals here.’

‘Okay. Lindy. I just wanted to say, I’m not so young. In fact, I’ll be thirty-nine next birthday.’

‘Oh really? Well, that’s still young. But you’re right, I thought you were much younger. With these exclusive masks Boris has given us, it’s hard to tell, right? From what Gracie said, I thought you were this up-and-coming kid, and maybe your parents had paid for this surgery to get you off to a flying start. Sorry, my mistake.’

‘Gracie said I was “up-and-coming”?’

‘Don’t be hard on her. She said you were a musician so I asked her your name. And when I said I wasn’t familiar with it, she said, “That’s because he’s up-and-coming.” That’s all it was. Hey, but listen, what does it matter how old you are? You can always learn from the old pros. I want you to listen to this. I think you’ll find it interesting.’

She went over to a cabinet and a moment later held up a CD. ‘You’ll appreciate this. The sax on this is so perfect.’

Her room had a Bang & Olufsen system just like mine, and soon the place filled with lush strings. A few measures in, a sleepy, Ben Webster-ish tenor broke through and proceeded to lead the orchestra. If you didn’t know too much about these things, you could even have mistaken it for one of those Nelson Riddle intros for Sinatra. But the voice that eventually came on belonged to Tony Gardner. The song - I just about remembered it - was something called “Back at Culver City”, a ballad that never quite made it and which no one plays much any more. All the time Tony Gardner sang, the sax kept up with him, replying to him line by line. The whole thing was utterly predictable, and way too sugary.

After a while, though, I’d stopped paying much attention to the music because there was Lindy in front of me, gone into a kind of dream, dancing slowly to the song. Her movements were easy and graceful - clearly the surgery

hadn't extended to her body - and she had a shapely, slim figure. She was wearing something that was part nightgown, part cocktail dress; that's to say, it was at the same time vaguely medical yet glamorous. Also, I was trying to work something out. I'd had the distinct impression Lindy had recently divorced Tony Gardner, but given I'm the nation's worst when it comes to showbiz gossip, I began to think maybe I'd got it wrong. Otherwise why was she dancing this way, lost in the music, evidently enjoying herself?

Tony Gardner stopped singing a moment, the strings swelled into the bridge, and the piano player started a solo. At this point, Lindy seemed to come back to the planet. She stopped swaying around, turned the music off with the remote, then came and sat down in front of me.

'Isn't that marvellous? You see what I mean?'

'Yeah, that was beautiful,' I said, not sure whether we were still only talking about the sax.

'Your ears weren't deceiving you, by the way.'

'I'm sorry?'

'The singer. That was who you thought it was. Just because he's no longer my husband, that doesn't mean I can't play his records, right?'

'No, of course not.'

'And that's a lovely saxophone. You see now why I wanted you to hear it.'

'Yeah, it was beautiful.'

'Steve, are there recordings of you somewhere? I mean, of your own playing?'

'Sure. In fact I have a few CDs with me next door.'

'The next time you come, sweetie, I want you to bring them. I want to hear how you sound. Will you do that?'

‘Okay, if it’s not going to bore you.’

‘Oh no, it won’t bore me. But I hope you don’t think I’m nosy. Tony always used to say I was nosy, I should just let people be, but you know, I think he was just being snobby. A lot of famous people, they think they should be interested only in other famous people. I’ve never been that way. I see everybody as a potential friend. Take Gracie. She’s my friend. All my staff at home, they’re also my friends. You should see me at parties. Everyone else, they’re talking to each other about their latest movie or whatever, I’m the one having a conversation with the catering girl or the bartender. I don’t think that’s being nosy, do you?’

‘No, I don’t think that’s nosy at all. But look, Mrs Gardner . . .’

‘Lindy, please.’

‘Lindy. Look, it’s been fabulous being with you. But these drugs, they really tire me out. I think I’m going to have to go lie down for a while.’

‘Oh, you’re not feeling well?’

‘It’s nothing. It’s just these drugs.’

‘Too bad! You definitely have to come back when you’re feeling better. And bring those recordings, the ones with you playing. Is that a deal?’

I had to reassure her some more that I’d had a good time and that I’d come back. Then as I was going out the door, she said:

‘Steve, do you play chess? I’m the world’s worst chess player, but I’ve got the cutest chess set. Meg Ryan brought it in for me last week.’

Back in my own room, I took a Coke from the mini-bar, sat down at the writing desk and looked out my window. There was a big pink sunset now, we were a long way up, and I could see

the cars moving along the freeway in the distance. After a few minutes I phoned Bradley, and though his secretary kept me on hold a long time, he eventually came on the line.

‘How’s the face?’ he asked worriedly, like he was inquiring after a well-loved pet he’d left in my care.

‘How should I know? I’m still the Invisible Man.’

‘Are you all right? You sound ... dispirited.’

‘I *am* dispirited. This whole thing was a mistake. I can see that now. It’s not going to work.’

There was a moment’s silence, then he asked: ‘The operation’s a failure?’

‘I’m sure the operation’s fine. I mean all the rest of it, what it’s going to lead to. This *scheme* . . . It’s never going to play out the way you said. I should never have let you talk me into it.’

‘What’s the matter with you? You sound depressed. What have they been pumping into you?’

‘I’m fine. In fact, my head’s straighter than it’s been for a long while. That’s the trouble. I can see it now. Your scheme . . . I should never have listened to you.’

‘What is this? What scheme? Look, Steve, this isn’t complicated. You’re a very talented artist. When you’re through with this, all you do is what you’ve always done. Just now you’re simply removing an obstacle, that’s all. There’s no *scheme* . . .’

‘Look, Bradley, it’s bad here. It’s not just the physical discomfort. I realise now what I’m doing to myself. It’s been a mistake, I should have had more respect for myself.’

‘Steve, what’s triggered this? Did something just happen over there?’

‘Damn right something happened. That’s why I’m calling, I need you to get me out of this. I need you to get me to a different hotel.’

‘Different hotel? Who are you? Crown Prince Abdullah? What the fuck’s wrong with the hotel?’

‘What’s wrong is I’ve got Lindy Gardner right next door. And she just invited me over, and she’s going to keep on inviting me over. That’s what’s wrong!’

‘Lindy Gardner’s next door?’

‘Look, I can’t go through that again. I’ve just been in there, it was all I could do to stay as long as I did. And now she’s saying we have to play with her Meg Ryan chess set’

‘Steve, you’re telling me Lindy Gardner’s next door? You spent time with her?’

‘She put on her husband’s record! Fuck it, I think she’s playing another one right now. This is what I’ve come to. This is my level now.’

‘Steve, hold it, let’s go over this again. Steve, just shut the fuck up, then explain it to me. Explain to me how you get to be with Lindy Gardner.’

I did calm down then for a while, and I gave a brief account of how Lindy had asked me over, and the way things had gone.

‘So you weren’t rude to her?’ he asked as soon as I was through.

‘No, I wasn’t rude to her. I kept it all held in. But I’m not going back in there. I need to change hotels.’

‘Steve, you’re not going to change hotels. Lindy Gardner? She’s in bandages, you’re in bandages. She’s right next door. Steve, this is a golden opportunity.’

‘It’s nothing of the sort, Bradley. It’s inner-circle hell. Her Meg Ryan chess set for God’s sake!’

‘Meg Ryan chess set? How does that work? Every piece looks like Meg?’

‘And she wants to hear my playing! She’s insisting next time I take in CDs!’

‘She wants to . . . Jesus, Steve, you haven’t even got the bandages off and everything’s going your way. She wants to hear you play?’

‘I’m asking you to deal with this, Bradley. Okay, I’m in deep, I’ve had the surgery, you talked me into it, because I was fool enough to believe what you said. But I don’t have to put up with this. I don’t have to spend the next two weeks with Lindy Gardner. I’m asking you to get me moved pronto!’

‘I’m not getting you moved anywhere. Do you realise how important a person Lindy Gardner is? You know the kind of people she’s pals with? What she could do for you with one phone call? Okay, she’s divorced from Tony Gardner now. That doesn’t change a thing. Get her on your team, get your new face, doors will open. It’ll be big league, five seconds flat.’

‘It won’t be big-league anything, Bradley, because I’m not going over there again, and I don’t want any doors opening for me other than ones that open because of my music. And I don’t believe what you said before, I don’t believe this crap about a scheme . . .’

‘I don’t think you should be expressing yourself so emphatically. I’m very concerned about those stitches . . .’

‘Bradley, very soon you won’t have to be concerned about my stitches at all, because you know what? I’m going to pull off this mummy mask and I’m going to put my fingers into the corners of my mouth and yank my face into every kind of stretchy combination possible! Do you hear me, Bradley?’

I heard him sigh. Then he said: 'Okay, calm down. Just calm down. You've been under a lot of stress lately. It's understandable. If you don't want to see Lindy right now, if you want to let gold go floating by, okay, I understand your position. But be polite, okay? Make a good excuse. Don't burn any bridges.'

*

I felt a lot better after this talk with Bradley, and had a reasonably contented evening, watching half a movie, then listening to Bill Evans. The next morning after breakfast, Dr Boris came in with two nurses, seemed satisfied and left. A little later, around eleven, I had a visitor - a drummer called Lee who I'd played with in a house band in San Diego a few years ago. Bradley, who's also Lee's manager, had suggested he come by.

Lee's okay and I was pleased to see him. He stayed for an hour or so, and we swapped news of mutual friends, who was in which band, who'd packed their bags and gone to Canada or to Europe.

'It's too bad how so many of the old team aren't around any more,' he said. 'You have great times together, next thing you don't know where they are.'

He told me about his recent gigs, and we laughed over some memories from our San Diego days. Then towards the end of his visit, he said:

'And what about Jake Marvell? What do you make of it? Strange world, ain't it?'

'It's strange all right,' I said. 'But then again, Jake was always a good musician. He deserves what he's getting.'

'Yeah, but it's strange. Remember how Jake was back then? In San Diego? Steve, you could have blown him off the

stage every night of the week. And now look at him. Is that just luck or what?'

'Jake was always a nice guy,' I said. 'And as far as I'm concerned, it's good to see any sax player getting recognition.'

'Recognition's right,' Lee said. 'And right here in this hotel too. Let me see, I've got it here.' He rummaged in his bag and produced a tattered copy of *LA Weekly*. 'Yeah, here it is. The Simon and Wesbury Music Awards. Jazz Musician of the Year. Jake Marvell. Let's see, when is this fucker? Tomorrow down in the ballroom. You could take a stroll down those stairs and attend the ceremony.' He put down the paper and shook his head. 'Jake Marvell. Jazz Musician of the Year. Who'd have thought it, eh, Steve?'

'I guess I won't make it downstairs,' I said. 'But I'll remember to raise a glass to him.'

'Jake Marvell. Boy, is this a screwed-up world or what?'

About an hour after lunch, the phone rang and it was Lindy.

'The chess set's all laid out, sweetie,' she said. 'You ready to play? Don't say no, I'm going crazy here with boredom. Oh, and don't forget now, bring those CDs. I'm just dying to hear your playing.'

I put down the phone, then sat on the edge of the bed trying to figure out how it was I hadn't stood my ground better. In fact, I hadn't put up even a hint of a 'no'. Maybe it was plain spinelessness. Or maybe I'd taken on board much more of Bradley's argument on the phone than I'd admitted. But now there wasn't time to think about it, because I had to decide which of my CDs were most likely to impress her. The more avant-garde stuff was definitely out, as was the stuff I'd recorded with the electro-funk guys in San Francisco last year. In the end, I chose just the one CD,

changed into a fresh shirt, put my dressing gown back over the top and went next door.

*

She too had on a dressing gown, but it was the kind she could have worn to a movie premiere without too much embarrassment. Sure enough, the chess set was there on the low glass table, and we sat down on opposite sides like before and began a game. Maybe because we had something to do with our hands, things felt much more relaxed than the last time. As we played, we found ourselves talking about this and that: TV shows, her favourite European cities, Chinese food. There was far less name-dropping this time round, and she seemed much calmer. At one point she said:

‘You know what I do to stop myself going crazy in this place? My big secret? I’ll tell you, but not a word, not even to Gracie, promise? What I do is go out for midnight walks. Just inside this building, but it’s so vast you can walk around forever. And in the dead of night, it’s amazing. Last night I was out there maybe a whole hour? You have to be careful, there’s still staff roving around all the time, but I’ve never been caught. I hear anything at all, I run away and hide somewhere. Once these cleaning guys saw me for a second, but like *that* I was away into the shadows! It’s so exciting. All day you’re this prisoner, then it’s like you’re completely free, it’s truly wonderful. I’m gonna take you with me some night, sweetie. I’ll show you great things. The bars, the restaurants, conference rooms. Wonderful ballroom. And there’s no one there, everything’s just dark and empty. And I discovered the most fantastic place, a kind of penthouse, I think it’s gonna be a presidential suite? They’re halfway through building it, but I found it and I was able to walk right in, and I stayed there, twenty minutes, half an hour, just thinking things over. Hey, Steve, is this right? I can do this and take your queen?’

‘Oh. Yeah, I guess so. I didn’t see that. Hey, Lindy, you’re a lot smarter at this than you let on. Now what am I supposed to do?’

‘All right, I tell you what. Since you’re the guest, and you were obviously distracted by what I was saying, I’m gonna pretend I never saw it. Isn’t that nice of me? Say, Steve, I can’t remember if I asked you this before. You’re married, right?’

‘That’s right.’

‘So what does she think of all this? I mean, this isn’t cheap. Quite a few pairs of shoes she could buy with this kind of money.’

‘She’s okay about it. In fact, this was her idea in the first place. Look who’s not paying attention now.’

‘Oh hell. I’m such a lousy player anyway. Say, I don’t mean to be nosy, but does she come visit you much?’

‘Actually she hasn’t been here at all. But that was always the understanding we had, before I came in here.’

‘Yeah?’

She seemed puzzled so I said: ‘It might sound odd, I know, but that’s the way we wanted to do it.’

‘Right.’ Then after a while she said: ‘So does that mean no one comes to visit you here?’

‘I get visitors. Matter of fact, someone called this morning. Musician I used to work with.’

‘Oh yeah? That’s good. You know, sweetie, I’ve never been sure how these knights move. If you see me do something wrong, you just say, okay? It’s not me trying to pull a fast one.’

‘Sure.’ Then I said: ‘The guy who came to see me today, he told me some news. It was kind of strange. A coincidence.’

‘Yeah?’

‘There’s this saxophone player we both knew a few years back, in San Diego, guy called Jake Marvell. Maybe you’ve heard of him. He’s big-league now. But back then, when we knew him, he was nothing. In fact, he was a phoney. What you’d call a bluffer. Never knew his way around the keys properly. And I’ve heard him recently, plenty of times, and he hasn’t gotten any better. But he’s had a few breaks and now he’s considered hot. I swear to you he’s not one bit better than he used to be, not one bit. And you know what this news was? This same guy, Jake Marvell, he’s getting a big music award tomorrow, right here in this hotel. Jazz Musician of the Year. It’s just crazy, you know? So many talented sax players out there, and they decide to give it to Jake.’

I made myself stop, and looking up from the chess board, did a little laugh. ‘What can you do?’ I said, more gently.

Lindy was sitting up, her attention fully on me. ‘That’s too bad. And this guy, he’s no good, you say?’

‘I’m sorry, I was kind of out of line there. They want to give Jake an award, why shouldn’t they?’

‘But if he’s no good ...’

‘He’s as good as the next guy. I was just talking. I’m sorry, you have to ignore me.’

‘Hey, that reminds me,’ Lindy said. ‘Did you remember to bring your music?’

I indicated the CD beside me on the sofa. ‘I don’t know if it would interest you. You don’t have to listen ...’

‘Oh, but I do, I absolutely do. Here, let me see it.’

I handed her the CD. ‘It’s a band I played with in Pasadena. We played standards, old-fashioned swing, a little

bossa nova. Nothing special, I just brought it because you asked. ’

She was examining the CD case, holding it close to her face, then away from her again. ‘So are you in this picture?’ She brought it up close again. ‘I’m kind of curious what you look like. Or I should say, what you *looked* like.’

‘I’m second from the right. In the Hawaiian shirt, holding the ironing board.’

‘*This* one?’ She stared at the CD, then over at me. Then she said: ‘Hey, you’re cute.’ But she said it quietly, in a voice devoid of conviction. In fact, I noted a definite touch of pity there. Almost immediately, though, she’d recovered. ‘Okay, so let’s hear it!’

As she moved towards the Bang & Olufsen, I said: ‘Track number nine. “The Nearness of You”. That’s my special track.’

‘ “The Nearness of You” coming up.’

I’d settled on this track after some thought. The musicians in that band had been top-notch. Individually we’d all had more radical ambitions, but we’d formed the band with the express purpose of playing quality mainstream material, the sort the supper crowd would want. Our version of “The Nearness of You” - which featured my tenor all the way through - wasn’t a hundred miles from Tony Gardner territory, but I’d always been genuinely proud of it. Maybe you think you’ve heard this song done every way possible. Well, listen to ours. Listen, say, to that second chorus. Or to that moment as we come out of the middle eight, when the band go III-5 to VIx-9 while I rise up in intervals you’d never believe possible and then hold that sweet, very tender high B-flat. I think there are colours there, longings and regrets, you won’t have come across before.

So you could say I was confident this recording would meet with Lindy's approval. And for the first minute or so, she looked to be enjoying herself. She'd stayed on her feet after loading the CD, and just like the time she'd played me her husband's record, she began swaying dreamily to the slow beat. But then the rhythm faded from her movements, until she was standing there quite still, her back to me, head bent forward like she was concentrating. I didn't at first see this as a bad sign. It was only when she came walking back and sat down with the music still in full flow, I realised something was wrong. Because of the bandages, of course, I couldn't read her expression, but the way she let herself slump into the sofa, like a tense mannequin, didn't look good.

When the track ended, I picked up the remote and turned it all off. For what felt a long time, she stayed the way she was, stiff and awkward. Then she hauled herself up a little and began fingering a chess piece.

'That was very nice,' she said. 'Thank you for letting me hear it.' It sounded formulaic, and she didn't seem to mind that it did.

'Maybe it wasn't quite your kind of thing.'

'No, no.' Her voice had become sulky and quiet. 'It was just fine. Thank you for letting me hear it.' She put the chess piece down on a square, then said: 'Your move.'

I looked at the board, trying to remember where we were. After a while, I asked gently: 'Maybe that particular song, it has special associations for you?'

She looked up and I sensed anger behind her bandages. But she said in the same quiet voice: 'That song? It has no associations. None at all.' Suddenly she laughed - a short, unkind laugh. 'Oh, you mean associations with *him*, with Tony? No, no. It was never one of his numbers. You play it very nicely. Really professional.'

‘Really *professional*? What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘I mean ... that it’s really professional. I mean it as a compliment.’

‘Professional?’ I got to my feet, crossed the room and got the disc out of the machine.

‘What are you so mad about?’ Her voice was still distant and cold. ‘I say something wrong? I’m sorry. I was trying to be nice.’

I came back to the table, put the disc back in its case, but didn’t sit down.

‘So we going to finish the game?’ she asked.

‘If you don’t mind, I’ve got a few things I have to do. Phone calls. Paperwork.’

‘What are you so mad about? I don’t understand.’

‘I’m not mad at all. Time’s getting on, that’s all.’

She at least got to her feet to walk me to the door, where we parted with a cold handshake.

*

I’ve said already how my sleep rhythm had been screwed up after the surgery. That evening I became suddenly tired, went to bed early, slept soundly for a few hours, then woke in the dead of night unable to go back to sleep. After a while I got up and turned on the TV. I found a movie I’d seen as a kid, so pulled up a chair and watched what remained of it with the volume down low. When that was over I watched two preachers shouting at each other in front of a baying audience. All in all, I was contented. I felt cosy and a million miles from the outside world. So my heart just about jumped out of my chest when the phone rang.

‘Steve? That you?’ It was Lindy. Her voice sounded odd and I wondered if she’d been drinking.

‘Yeah, it’s me.’

‘I know it’s late. But just now, when I was passing, I saw your light on under your door. I supposed you were having trouble sleeping, just like me.’

‘I guess so. It’s difficult keeping regular hours.’

‘Yeah. It sure is.’

‘Is everything okay?’ I asked.

‘Sure. Everything’s good. *Very* good.’

I realised now she wasn’t drunk, but I couldn’t put my finger on what was up with her. She probably wasn’t high on anything either – just peculiarly awake and maybe excited about something she had to tell me.

‘You sure everything’s okay?’ I asked again.

‘Yeah, really, but . . . Look, sweetie, I have something here, something I want to give to you.’

‘Oh? And what might that be?’

‘I don’t want to say. I want it to be a surprise.’

‘Sounds interesting. I’ll come and get it, maybe after breakfast?’

‘I was kinda hoping you’d come and get it now. I mean, it’s here, and you’re awake and I’m awake. I know it’s late, but . . . Listen, Steve, about earlier, about what happened. I feel I owe you an explanation.’

‘Forget it. I didn’t mind . . .’

‘You were mad at me because you thought I didn’t like your music. Well, that wasn’t true. That was the reverse of the truth, the exact reverse. What you played me, that version of “Nearness of You”? I haven’t been able to get it out of my head. No, I don’t mean head, I mean heart. I haven’t been able to get it out of my *heart*.’

I didn't know what to say, and before I could think of anything she was talking again.

'Will you come over? Right now? Then I'll explain it all properly. And most important . . . No, no, I'm not saying. It's gonna be a surprise. Come on over and you'll see. And bring your CD again. Will you do that?'

She took the CD from me as soon as she opened the door, like I was the delivery boy, but then grasped me by the wrist and led me in. Lindy was in the same glamorous dressing gown as before, but she looked a little less immaculate now: one side of the gown was hanging lower than the other, and a woolly dangle of fluff was caught on the back of her bandages near the neckline.

'I take it you've been on one of your nocturnal walks,' I said.

'I'm so glad you're up. I don't know if I could have waited till morning. Now listen, like I told you, I have a surprise. I hope you're gonna like it, I think you will. But first I want you to make yourself comfortable. We're gonna listen to your song again. Let me see, which track was it?'

I sat down on my usual sofa and watched her fussing with the hi-fi. The lighting in the room was soft, and the air felt pleasantly cool. Then "The Nearness of You" came on at high volume.

'Don't you think this might disturb people?' I said.

'To hell with them. We pay enough for this place, it's not our problem. Now shhh! Listen, listen!'

She began to sway to the music like before, only this time she didn't stop after a verse. In fact, she seemed to get more lost in the music the longer it went on, holding out her arms like she had an imaginary dance partner. When it finished, she turned it off and remained very still, standing at the end of the room with her back to me. She stayed like

that for what felt like a long time, then finally came towards me.

‘I don’t know what to say,’ she said. ‘It’s sublime. You’re a wonderful, wonderful musician. You’re a genius.’

‘Well, thank you.’

‘I knew it the first time. That’s the truth. That’s why I reacted the way I did. Pretending not to like it, pretending to be snotty?’ She sat down facing me and sighed.

‘Tony used to pull me up about it. I’ve always done it, it’s something I don’t ever seem to get over. I run into a person who’s, you know, who’s really talented, someone who’s just been blessed that way by God, and I can’t help it, my first instinct is to do what I did with you. It’s just, I don’t know, I guess it’s jealousy. It’s like you see these women sometimes, they’re kind of plain? A beautiful woman comes into the same room, they hate it, they want to claw her eyes out. That’s the way I am when I meet someone like you. Especially if it’s unexpected, the way it was today and I’m not ready. I mean, there you were, one minute I’m thinking you’re just one of the public, then suddenly you’re . . . well, something else. You know what I’m saying? Anyway, I’m trying to tell you why I behaved so badly earlier on. You had every right to be mad at me.’

The late-night silence hung between us for a while.

‘Well, I appreciate it,’ I said eventually. ‘I appreciate you telling me this.’

She stood up suddenly. ‘Now, the surprise! Just wait there, don’t move.’

She went through into the adjoining room and I could hear her opening and shutting drawers. When she came back, she was holding something in front of her with both hands, but I couldn’t see what the something was, because she’d thrown a silk handkerchief over it. She halted in the middle of the room.

‘Steve, I want you to come and receive this. This is going to be a presentation.’

I was puzzled, but got to my feet. As I went to her, she pulled off the handkerchief and held towards me a shiny brass ornament.

‘You thoroughly deserve this. So it’s yours. Jazz Musician of the Year. Maybe of all time. Congratulations.’

She placed it in my hands and kissed me lightly on the cheek through the crêpe.

‘Well, thanks. This *is* a surprise. Hey, this looks pretty. What is it? An alligator?’

‘An alligator? Come on! It’s a pair of cute little cherubs kissing each other.’

‘Oh yeah, I can see it now. Well, thanks, Lindy. I don’t know what to say. It’s really beautiful.’

‘An alligator!’

‘I’m sorry. It’s just the way this guy has his leg stretched all the way out. But I see now. It’s really beautiful.’

‘Well, it’s yours. You deserve it.’

‘I’m touched, Lindy. I really am. And what does this say down here? I don’t have my glasses.’

‘It says “Jazz Musician of the Year”. What else would it say?’

‘That’s what it says?’

‘Sure, that’s what it says.’

I went back to the sofa, holding the statuette, sat down and thought a little. ‘Say, Lindy,’ I said eventually.

‘This item you’ve just given me. It’s not possible, is it, you came across it on one of your midnight walks?’

‘Sure. Sure it’s possible.’

‘I see. And it’s not possible, is it, this is the real award? I mean the actual gong they were going to hand to Jake?’

Lindy didn’t reply for a few seconds, but kept standing there very still. Then she said:

‘Of course it’s the real thing. What would be the point, giving you any old junk? There was an injustice about to be committed, but now justice has prevailed. That’s all that matters. Hey, sweetie, come on. You know you’re the one who deserves this award.’

‘I appreciate your viewpoint. It’s just that . . . well, this is kind of like stealing.’

‘Stealing? Didn’t you say yourself this guy’s no good? A fake? And you’re a genius. Who’s trying to steal from who here?’

‘Lindy, where exactly did you come across this thing?’

She shrugged. ‘Just some place. One of the places I go. An office, you’d call it maybe.’

‘Tonight? You picked it up tonight?’

‘Of course I picked it up tonight. I didn’t know about your award last night.’

‘Sure, sure. So that was an hour ago, would you say?’

‘An hour. Maybe two hours. Who knows? I was out there some time. I went to my presidential suite for a while.’

‘Jesus.’

‘Look, who cares? What are you so worried about? They lose this one, they can just go get another one. They’ve probably got a closet full somewhere. I presented you with something you deserve. You’re not going to turn it down, are you, Steve?’

‘I’m not turning it down, Lindy. The sentiment, the honour, all of that, I accept it all, I’m really happy about it. But this, the actual trophy. We’re going to have to take it back. We’ll have to put it back exactly where you found it.’

‘Screw them! Who cares?’

‘Lindy, you haven’t thought this through. What will you do when this gets out? Can you imagine what the press will do with this? The gossip, the scandal? What will your public say? Now come on. We’re going out there right now before people start waking up. You’re going to show me exactly where you found this thing.’

She suddenly looked like a kid who’d been scolded. Then she sighed and said: ‘I guess you’re right, sweetie.’

Once we’d agreed to take it back, Lindy became quite possessive about the award, holding it close to her bosom all the time we hurried through the passageways of the vast, sleeping hotel. She led the way down hidden stairways, along back corridors, past sauna rooms and vending machines. We didn’t see or hear a soul. Then Lindy whispered: ‘It was this way,’ and we pushed through heavy doors into a dark space.

Once I was sure we were alone, I switched on the flashlight I’d brought from Lindy’s room and shone it around. We were in the ballroom, though if you were looking to dance just then, you’d have had trouble with all the dining tables, each one with its white linen cover and matching chairs. The ceiling had a fancy central chandelier. At the far end there was a raised stage, probably large enough to put on a fair-sized show, though right now the curtains were drawn across it. Someone had left a step-ladder in the middle of the room and an upright vacuum cleaner against the wall.

‘It’s going to be some party,’ she said. ‘Four hundred, five hundred people?’

I wandered further into the room and threw the torch beam around some more. 'Maybe this is where it's going to happen. Where they're going to give Jake his award.'

'Of course it is. Where I found this' - she held up the statuette - 'there were other ones too. Best Newcomer. R&B Album of the Year. That kind of stuff. It's going to be a big event.'

Now my eyes had adjusted, I could see the place better, even though the flashlight wasn't so powerful. And for a moment, as I stood there looking up at the stage, I could imagine the way the place would look later on. I imagined all the people in their fancy clothes, the record-company men, the big-time promoters, the random showbiz celebrities, laughing and praising each other; the fawningly sincere applause every time the MC mentioned the name of a sponsor; more applause, this time with whoops and cheers, when the award winners went up. I imagined Jake Marvell up on that stage, holding his trophy, the same smug smile he'd always have in San Diego when he'd finished a solo and the audience had clapped.

'Maybe we've got this wrong,' I said. 'Maybe there's no need to return this. Maybe we should throw it in the garbage. And all the other awards you found with it.'

'Yeah?' Lindy sounded puzzled. 'Is that what you want to do, sweetie?'

I let out a sigh. 'No, I guess not. But it would be . . . satisfying, wouldn't it? All those awards in the garbage. I bet every one of those winners is a fake. I bet there isn't enough talent between the lot of them to fill a hot-dog bun.'

I waited for Lindy to say something to this, but nothing came. Then when she did speak, there was some new note, something tighter, in her voice.

‘How do you know some of these guys aren’t okay? How do you know some of them don’t deserve their award?’

‘How do I know?’ I felt a sudden tide of irritation.

‘How do I know? Well, think about it. A panel that considers Jake Marvell the year’s outstanding jazz musician. What other kind of people are they going to honour?’

‘But what do you know about these guys? Even this Jake fella. How do you know he didn’t work really hard to get where he has?’

‘What is this? You’re Jake’s greatest fan now?’

‘I’m just expressing my opinion.’

‘Your opinion? So this is your opinion? I guess I shouldn’t be so surprised. For a moment there, I was forgetting who you were.’

‘What the hell’s that supposed to mean? How dare you speak to me that way?!’

It occurred to me I was losing my grip. I said quickly: ‘Okay, I’m out of line. I’m sorry. Now let’s go find this office.’

Lindy had gone silent, and when I turned to face her, I couldn’t see well enough in the light to guess what she was thinking.

‘Lindy, where’s this office? We need to find it.’

Eventually, she indicated with the statuette towards the back of the hall, then led the way past the tables, still not speaking. When we were there, I put my ear against the door for a few seconds, and hearing nothing, opened it carefully.

We were in a long narrow space that seemed to run parallel with the ballroom. A dim light had been left on somewhere, so we could just about make things out without the flashlight. It was obviously not the office we were after, but some kind of catering-cum-kitchen area. Long extended

work counters ran along both walls, leaving a gangway down the middle wide enough for staff to put final touches to the food.

But Lindy seemed to recognise the place and went striding purposefully down the gangway. About halfway along, she stopped suddenly to examine one of the baking trays left on the counter.

‘Hey, cookies!’ She seemed completely to have regained her equanimity. ‘Too bad it’s all under cellophane. I’m famished. Look! Let’s see what’s under this one.’

She went on a few more steps, to a big dome-shaped lid, and raised it. ‘Look at this, sweetie. This looks *really* good.’

She was leaning over a plump roast turkey. Instead of replacing the lid, she laid it down carefully next to the bird.

‘Do you think they’d mind if I pulled off a leg?’

‘I think they’d mind a lot, Lindy. But what the hell.’

‘It’s a big baby. You want to share a leg with me?’

‘Sure, why not?’

‘Okay. Here goes.’

She reached towards the turkey. Then suddenly she straightened and turned to face me.

‘So what was that supposed to mean back there?’

‘What was what supposed to mean?’

‘What you were saying. When you said you weren’t surprised. About my opinion. What was that about?’

‘Look, I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to be offensive. Just thinking aloud, that’s all.’

‘Thinking aloud? Well, how about thinking aloud some more? So I suggest some of these guys may have deserved their awards, why is that a ridiculous statement?’

‘Look, all I’m saying is that the wrong people end up with the awards. That’s all. But you seem to know better. You think that’s not what happens . . .’

‘Some of those guys, maybe they worked damn hard to get where they have. And maybe they deserve a little recognition. The trouble with people like you, just because God’s given you this special gift, you think that entitles you to everything. That you’re better than the rest of us, that you deserve to go to the front of the line every time. You don’t see there’s a whole lot of other people weren’t as lucky as you who work really hard for their place in the world . . .’

‘So you don’t think I work hard? You think I sit on my ass all day? I sweat and heave and break my balls to come up with something worthwhile, something beautiful, then who is it gets the recognition? Jake Marvell! People like you!’

‘How fucking dare you! What do I have to do with this? Am I getting an award today? Has anyone *ever* given me a goddamn award? Have I ever had anything, even in school, one lousy certificate for singing or dancing or any damn thing else? No! Not a fucking thing! I had to watch all of you, all you creeps, going up there, getting the prizes, and all the parents clapping . . .’

‘No prizes? No prizes? Look at you! Who gets to be famous? Who gets the fancy houses . . .’

At that moment someone flicked a switch and we were blinking at each other under harsh bright lights. Two men had come in the same way we had, and were now moving towards us. The gangway was just wide enough to let them walk side by side. One was a huge black guy in a hotel security guard’s uniform, and what I first thought was a gun in his hand was a two-way radio. Beside him was a small white man in a light-

blue suit with slick black hair. Neither of them looked particularly deferential. They stopped a yard or two away, then the small guy took an ID out of his jacket.

‘LAPD,’ he said. ‘Name’s Morgan.’

‘Good evening,’ I said.

For a moment the cop and the security guard went on looking at us in silence. Then the cop asked:

‘Guests of the hotel?’

‘Yes, we are,’ I said. ‘We’re guests.’

I felt the soft material of Lindy’s night-gown brush against my back. Then she’d taken my arm and we were standing side by side.

‘Good evening, officer,’ she said in a sleepy, honeydew voice quite unlike her usual one.

‘Good evening, ma’am,’ the cop said. ‘And are you folks up at this time for any special reason?’

We both started to answer at once, then laughed. But neither of the men laughed or smiled.

‘We were having trouble sleeping,’ Lindy said. ‘So we were just walking.’

‘Just walking.’ The cop looked around in the stark white light. ‘Maybe looking for something to eat.’

‘That’s right, officer!’ Lindy’s voice was still way over the top. ‘We got a little hungry, the way I’m sure you do too sometimes in the night.’

‘I guess room service isn’t up to much,’ the cop said.

‘No, it’s not so good,’ I said.

‘Just the usual stuff,’ the cop said. ‘Steaks, pizzas, hamburgers, triple-decker clubs. I know because I just

ordered from all-night room service myself. But I guess you folks don't like that kind of food.'

'Well, you know how it is, officer,' Lindy said. 'It's the *fun*. The fun of creeping down and taking a bite, you know, a little bit forbidden, the way you did when you were a kid?'

Neither men showed any sign of melting. But the cop said:

'Sorry to trouble you folks. But you understand this area isn't open to guests. And one or two items have gone missing just lately.'

'Really?'

'Yeah. You folks see anything odd or suspicious tonight?'

Lindy and I looked at each other, then she shook her head at me dramatically.

'No,' I said. 'We haven't seen anything odd.'

'Nothing at all?'

The security guard had been coming closer, and now he came past us, squeezing his bulk along the counter. I realised the plan was for him to check us over more closely, to see if maybe we were concealing anything on our persons, while his partner kept us talking.

'No, nothing,' I said. 'What kind of thing did you have in mind?'

'Suspicious people. Unusual activity.'

'Do you mean, officer,' Lindy said with shocked horror, 'that rooms have been broken into?'

'Not exactly, ma'am. But certain items of value have gone missing.'

I could sense the security guard shift behind us.

‘So that’s why you’re here with us,’ Lindy said. ‘To protect us and our belongings.’

‘That’s right, ma’am.’ The cop’s gaze moved fractionally, and I got the impression he’d exchanged a look with the man behind us. ‘So if you see anything odd, please call security right away.’

The interview seemed to be over and the cop moved aside to let us out. Relieved, I made a move to go, but Lindy said:

‘I suppose it was kind of naughty of us, coming down here to eat. We thought about helping ourselves to some of that gateau over there, but then we thought it might be for a special occasion and it would be such a shame to spoil it.’

‘This hotel has good room service,’ the cop said. ‘Twenty-four hours.’

I tugged at Lindy, but she seemed now to be seized by the oft-cited mania of criminals to flirt with being caught.

‘And you just ordered something up yourself, officer?’

‘Sure.’

‘And was it good?’

‘It was pretty good. I recommend you folks do the same.’

‘Let’s leave these gentlemen to get on with their investigations,’ I said, tugging at her arm. But still she didn’t budge.

‘Officer, may I ask you something?’ she asked. ‘Do you mind?’

‘Try me.’

‘You were talking just now about seeing something odd. You see anything odd yourself? I mean, about us?’

‘I don’t know what you mean, ma’am.’

‘Like we both of us have our faces entirely wrapped in bandages? Did you notice that?’

The cop looked at us carefully, as though to verify this last statement. Then he said: ‘As a matter of fact, I did notice, ma’am, yes. But I didn’t wish to make personal remarks.’

‘Oh, I see,’ Lindy said. Then turning to me: ‘Wasn’t that considerate of him?’

‘Come on,’ I said, pulling her along now quite forcefully. I could feel both men staring at our backs all the way to the exit.

We crossed the ballroom with an outward show of calm. But once we were past the big swing doors, we gave in to panic and broke into a near-run. Our arms stayed linked, so we did a lot of stumbling and colliding as Lindy led me through the building. Then she pulled me into a service elevator, and only when the doors closed and we were climbing did she let go, lean back against the metal wall and start up a weird noise, which I realised was how hysterical laughter sounds coming through bandages.

When we stepped out of the elevator, she put her arm through mine again. ‘Okay, we’re safe,’ she said. ‘Now I want to take you somewhere. This is really something. See this?’ She was holding up a key card. ‘Let’s see what this can do for us.’

She used the card to get us through a door marked ‘Private’, then a door marked ‘Danger. Keep Out.’ Then we were standing in a space smelling of paint and plaster. There were cables dangling from the walls and ceiling, and the cold floor was splashed and mottled. We could see fine because one side of the room was entirely glass – unadorned by curtains or blinds – and all the outdoor lighting was filling the place with yellowish patches. We were up even higher than on

our floor: there was in front of us a helicopter-style view over the freeway and the surrounding territory.

‘It’s going to be a new presidential suite,’ Lindy said. ‘I love coming here. No light switches yet, no carpet. But it’s slowly coming together. When I first found it, it was much rougher. Now you can see how it’ll look. There’s even this couch now.’

In the centre of the room was a bulky shape with a sheet draped completely over it. Lindy went to it like it was an old friend and flopped down tiredly.

‘It’s my fantasy,’ she said, ‘but I kind of believe in it. They’re building this room just for me. That’s why I get to be in here. All of this. It’s because they’re helping me. Helping me build my future. This place used to be a real mess. But look at it now. It’s taking shape. It’s gonna be grand.’ She patted the space next to her. ‘Come on, sweetie, have a rest. I’m feeling drained. You must be too.’

The couch - or whatever it was under the sheet - was surprisingly comfortable, and as soon as I’d sunk into it, I felt waves of tiredness coming over me.

‘Boy, am I sleepy,’ Lindy said, and her weight fell onto my shoulder. ‘Isn’t this a great place? I found the key in the slot, first time I came here.’

We were quiet for a while, and I felt myself falling asleep. But then I remembered something.

‘Hey, Lindy.’

‘Mmm?’

‘Lindy. What happened to that award?’

‘The award? Oh yeah. The award. I hid it. What else could I do? You know, sweetie, you really deserved that award. I hope it means something to you, my presenting it to you tonight, the way I did. It wasn’t just a whim. I thought

about it. I thought about it really carefully. I don't know if it means much to you. I don't know if you'll even remember it ten years, twenty years down the line.'

'I will for sure. And it does mean a lot to me. But Lindy, you say you hid it, but where? Where did you hide it?'

'Mmm?' She was falling asleep again. 'I hid it the only place I could. I put it in that turkey.'

'You put it in the turkey.'

'I did exactly the same thing once when I was nine years old. I hid my sister's glowball inside a turkey. That's what gave me the idea. Quick thinking, right?'

'Yeah, it sure was.' I felt so tired, but I forced myself to focus. 'But Lindy, how well did you hide it? I mean, would those cops have found it by now?'

'I don't see how. There wasn't anything sticking out, if that's what you mean. Why would they think to look up there? I was pushing it behind my back, like this. And kept pushing. I didn't turn around to look at it, because then those boys would have wondered what I was doing. It wasn't just a whim, you know. Deciding to give you that award. I thought about it, real hard. I sure hope it means something to you. God, I need to sleep.'

She slumped against me and the next moment she was making snoring noises. Concerned about her surgery, I adjusted her head carefully so her cheek wasn't pressing on my shoulder. Then I too began to drift off.

I woke with a jerk and saw signs of dawn in the big window in front of us. Lindy was still fast asleep, so I carefully extricated myself from her, stood up and stretched my arms. I went to the window and looked at the pale sky and the freeway far below. Something had been on my mind as I was falling asleep and I tried to remember what it was, but my brain was

foggy and exhausted. Then I remembered, and I went to the couch and shook Lindy awake.

‘What is it? What is it? Whaddaya want?’ she said without opening her eyes.

‘Lindy,’ I said. ‘The award. We’ve forgotten about the award.’

‘I told you already. It’s in that turkey.’

‘Okay, so listen. Those cops may not have thought to look inside the turkey. But sooner or later, someone’s going to find it. Maybe someone’s carving it right now.’

‘So what? So they find the thing in there. So what?’

‘They find the thing in there, they report the big find. Then that cop remembers us. He remembers we were there, standing next to that turkey.’

Lindy seemed to get more awake. ‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘I see what you’re saying.’

‘While that trophy stays in the turkey, they can link us to the crime.’

‘Crime? Hey, what do you mean crime?’

‘Doesn’t matter what you call it. We need to go back there and get that thing out of the turkey. It doesn’t matter where we leave it after that. But we can’t leave it where it is now.’

‘Sweetie, are you sure we have to do this? I’m so tired now.’

‘We have to do it, Lindy. We leave it the way it is, you’ll get in trouble. And remember that means a big story for the press.’

Lindy thought about this, then she straightened up her posture a few notches and looked up at me. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Let’s go back there.’

This time round there were cleaning noises and voices down corridors, but we still made it back to the ballroom without encountering anyone. There was also more light to see by, and Lindy pointed out the notice beside the double doors. It said in plastic mix-and-spell letters: J. A. POOL CLEANSERS ASSOCIATION LUNCH. ’

‘No wonder we couldn’t find that office with all the awards,’ she said. ‘This is the wrong ballroom.’

‘It makes no difference. What we want is in there now.’

We crossed the ballroom, then cautiously entered the catering room. Like before, a dim light had been left on, and now there was also some natural light from the ventilation windows. There was nobody in sight, but when I glanced along the long work counters, I saw we were in trouble.

‘Looks like someone’s been here,’ I said.

‘Yeah.’ Lindy took a few steps down the gangway, glancing about her. ‘Yeah. Looks that way.’

All the canisters, trays, cake-boxes, silver-domed platters we’d seen earlier had vanished. In their place were neat piles of plates and napkins positioned at regular intervals.

‘Okay, so they’ve moved all the food,’ I said. ‘Question is, where to?’

Lindy wandered further down the gangway, then turned to me. ‘Remember, Steve, the last time we were here, before those men came in? We were having quite a discussion.’

‘Yeah, I remember. But why go over that again? I know I was out of line.’

‘Yeah right, let’s forget it. So where’s that turkey gone?’ She glanced around some more. ‘You know what, Steve? When I was a kid, I so wanted to be a dancer and a singer. And I tried and tried, God knows I tried, but people just

laughed, and I thought, this world is so unfair. But then I grew up a little and I realised the world wasn't so unfair after all. That even if you were like me, one of the unblessed, there was still a chance for you, you could still find a place in the sun, you didn't have to settle for being just *public*. It wasn't going to be easy. You'd have to work at it, not mind what people said. But there was definitely still a chance.'

'Well, it looks like you did okay.'

'It's funny the way this world works. You know, I think it was very insightful. On the part of your wife, I mean. Telling you to get this surgery.'

'Let's leave her out of it. Hey, Lindy, do you know where that leads? Over there?'

At the far end of the room, where the counters came to an end, there were three steps leading up to a green door.

'Why don't we try it?' Lindy said.

We opened the door as cautiously as the last one, then for a while I became utterly disoriented. Everything was very dark and each time I tried to turn I found I was beating back curtain material or else tarpaulin. Lindy, who'd taken the flashlight, seemed to be doing better somewhere in front of me. Then I stumbled out into a dark space, where she was waiting for me, shining the torch at my feet.

'I've noticed,' she said, in a whisper. 'You don't like talking about her. Your wife, I mean.'

'It's not that exactly,' I whispered back. 'Where are we?'

'And she never comes to visit.'

'That's because we're not exactly together just now. Since you must know.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be nosy.'

‘You didn’t mean to be nosy?!’

‘Hey, sweetie, look! This is it! We’ve found it!’

She was pointing the beam at a table a short distance away. It had a white tablecloth on it, and two silver domes side by side.

I went up to the first dome and carefully raised it. Sure enough, there was a fat roast turkey sitting there. I searched out its cavity and inserted a finger.

‘Nothing here,’ I said.

‘You have to get right in there. I pushed it right up. These birds are bigger than you think.’

‘I’m telling you there’s nothing in there. Hold the flashlight over here. We’ll try this other one.’ I carefully took the lid off the second turkey.

‘You know, Steve, I think it’s a mistake. You shouldn’t be embarrassed to talk about it.’

‘Talk about what?’

‘About you and your wife being separated.’

‘Did I say we were separated? Did I say that?’

‘I thought ...’

‘I said we weren’t exactly together. That’s not the same thing.’

‘It sounds the same thing ...’

‘Well, it isn’t. It’s just a temporary thing, something we’re trying out. Hey, I’ve got something. There’s something in here. This is it.’

‘Then why don’t you pull it out, sweetie?’

‘What do you think I’m trying to do?! Jesus! Did you have to push it in so far?’

‘Sssh! There’s someone out there!’

At first it was hard to say how many of them there were. Then the voice came closer and I realised it was just the one guy, talking continuously into a cellphone. I also realised exactly where we were. I’d been thinking we’d wandered into some vague backstage area, but in fact we were up on the stage itself, and the curtain facing me was the only thing now dividing us from the ballroom. The man on the cellphone, then, was walking across the floor of the ballroom towards the stage.

I whispered to Lindy to turn off the flashlight and it went dark. She said into my ear: ‘Let’s get out of here,’ and I could hear her creeping away. I tried again to pull the statuette out of the turkey, but now I was afraid of making noise, and besides, my fingers just couldn’t get any purchase.

The voice kept coming closer until it felt like the guy was right there in front of me.

‘. . . It’s not my problem, Larry. We need the logos to be on these menu cards. I don’t care how you do it. Okay, then you do it yourself. That’s right, you do it yourself, bring them over yourself, I don’t care how you do it. Just get them here this morning, nine-thirty latest. We need those things here. The tables look fine. There are plenty of tables, trust me. Okay. I’ll check that out. Okay, okay. Yeah. I’m gonna check that out right now.’

For the last part of this, his voice had been moving over to one side of the room. He must now have flicked a switch on some wall panel, because a strong beam came on directly above me, and also a whirring noise like the air-conditioning had come on. Only I realised the noise wasn’t the air-conditioning, but the curtains opening in front of me.

Twice in my career I’ve had it happen when I’ve been on stage, I’ve had a solo to play, and suddenly it hits me I

don't know how to start, which key I'm in, how the chords change. On both occasions this happened, I just froze up, like I was in a still from a movie, until one of the other boys stepped in to the rescue. It's only happened twice in over twenty years of playing professionally. Anyway, this is how I reacted to the spotlight coming on above me and the curtains starting to move. I just froze. And I felt oddly detached. I felt a kind of mild curiosity concerning what I'd see once the curtain was gone.

What I saw was the ballroom, and from the vantage point of the stage, I could appreciate better the way the tables were laid out in two parallel lines all the way to the back. The spot above me was putting the room in shade a little, but I could make out the chandelier and the fancy ceiling.

The cellphone man was an overweight bald guy in a pale suit and open-neck shirt. He must have walked away from the wall as soon as he'd flicked the switch, because now he was more or less level with me. He had his phone pressed to his ear, and from his expression you'd guess he was listening with extra attention to what was being said at the other end. But I supposed he wasn't, because his eyes were fixed on me. He kept looking at me and I kept looking at him, and the situation might have gone on indefinitely if he hadn't said into the phone, maybe in response to a query about why he'd gone silent:

'It's all right. It's all right. It's a man.' There was a pause, then he said: 'I thought for a moment it was something else. But it's a man. With a bandaged head, wearing a night-gown. That's all it is, I see it now. It's just that he's got a chicken or something on the end of his arm.'

Straightening up, I instinctively started to stretch out my arms in a shrugging motion. My right hand still being inside the turkey beyond the wrist, the sheer weight brought the whole arrangement back down with a crash. But at least I'd no more worries about concealment, so I went right at it,

no holds barred, in an effort to extricate both my hand and the statuette. Meanwhile the man went on talking into his phone.

‘No, it’s exactly what I say. And now he’s taking his chicken off. Oh, and he’s producing something out of it. Hey, fella, what *is* that? An alligator?’

These last words he’d addressed to me with admirable nonchalance. But now I had the statuette in my hands and the turkey fell to the floor with a thud. As I hurried towards the darkness behind me, I heard the man say to his friend:

‘How the hell do I know? Some kind of magic show maybe.’

I don’t remember how we got back to our floor. I was lost again in a mess of curtains coming off the stage, then she was there pulling me by the hand. Next thing, we were hurrying through the hotel, no longer caring how much noise we made or who saw us. Somewhere along the way I left the statuette on a room-service tray outside a bedroom, beside the remains of someone’s supper.

Back in her room, we flopped down into a sofa and laughed. We laughed till we were collapsing into each other, then she got up, went to the window and raised the blinds. It was now light outside, though the morning was overcast. She went to her cabinet to mix drinks - ‘the world’s sexiest alcohol-free cocktail’ - and brought me over a glass. I thought she’d sit down beside me, but she drifted back towards the window, sipping from her own glass.

‘You looking forward to it, Steve?’ she asked after a while. ‘To the bandages coming off?’

‘Yeah. I suppose so.’

‘Even last week, I didn’t think about it so much. It seemed such a long way off. But now it’s not so long.’

‘That’s right,’ I said. ‘It’s not long for me either.’ Then I said quietly: ‘Jesus.’

She sipped her drink and looked out of the window. Then I heard her say: ‘Hey, sweetie, what’s the matter with you?’

‘I’m fine. I just need to get some sleep, that’s all.’

She kept looking at me for a while. ‘I tell you, Steve,’ she said eventually. ‘It’s gonna be fine. Boris is the best. You’ll see.’

‘Yeah.’

‘Hey, what’s wrong with you? Listen, this is my third time. Second time with Boris. It’s gonna be just fine. You’re gonna look great, just great. And your career. From here it’s gonna rocket.’

‘Maybe.’

‘No maybe about it! It’ll make such a difference, believe me. You’ll be in magazines, you’ll be on TV.’

I said nothing to this.

‘Hey, come on!’ She took a few steps towards me. ‘Cheer up there. You’re not still mad at me, are you? We were a great team down there, weren’t we? And I’ll tell you something else. From now on I’m gonna stay part of your team. You’re a goddamn genius, and I’m gonna make sure things go well for you.’

‘It won’t work, Lindy.’ I shook my head. ‘It won’t work.’

‘Like hell it won’t work. I’ll talk to people. People who can do you a lot of good.’

I kept shaking my head. ‘I appreciate it. But it’s no use. It won’t work. It was never going to work. I should never have listened to Bradley.’

‘Hey, come on. I may not be married to Tony any more, but I still have a lot of good friends in this town.’

‘Sure, Lindy, I know that. But it’s no use. You see, Bradley, that’s my manager, he talked me into this whole thing. I was an idiot to listen to him, but I couldn’t help it. I was at my wit’s end, and then he came out with this theory. He said my wife, Helen, she had this scheme. She hadn’t really left me. No, it was all part of this scheme she had. She was doing it all for me, to make it possible for me to get this surgery. And when the bandages came off, and I had a new face, she’d come back and it’d be all right again. That’s what Bradley said. Even when he was saying it, I knew it was bullshit, but what could I do? It was some kind of hope at least. Bradley used it, he used it, he’s like that, you know? He’s lowlife. All he thinks about is business. And about the big league. What does he care if she comes back or not?’

I stopped and she didn’t say anything for a long time. Then she said:

‘Look, sweetie, listen. I hope your wife comes back. I really do. But if she doesn’t, well, you’ve just got to start getting some perspective. She might be a great person, but life’s so much bigger than just loving someone. You got to get out there, Steve. Someone like you, you don’t belong with the public. Look at me. When these bandages come off, am I really going to look the way I did twenty years ago? I don’t know. And it’s a long time since I was last between husbands. But I’m going to go out there anyway and give it a go.’ She came over to me and shoved me on the shoulder. ‘Hey. You’re just tired. You’ll feel a lot better after some sleep. Listen. Boris is the best. He’ll have fixed it, for the both of us. You just see.’

I put my glass down on the table and stood up. ‘I guess you’re right. Like you say, Boris is the best. And we *were* a good team down there.’

‘We were a *great* team down there.’

I reached forward, put my hands on her shoulders, then kissed each of her bandaged cheeks. ‘You have yourself a good sleep,’ I said. ‘I’ll come over soon and we’ll play more chess.’

But after that morning, we didn’t see much more of each other. When I thought about it later, it occurred to me there’d been some things said during the course of that night, things I should maybe have apologised about, or at least tried to explain. At the time, though, once we’d made it back to her room, and we’d been laughing together on the sofa, it hadn’t seemed necessary, or even right, to bring all of that up again. When we parted that morning, I thought the two of us were well beyond that stage. Even so, I’d seen how Lindy could switch. Maybe later on, she thought back and got mad at me all over again. Who knows? Anyway, though I’d expected a call from her later that day, it never came, and neither did one come the day after. Instead, I heard Tony Gardner records through the wall, playing at top volume, one after the next.

When I did eventually go round there, maybe four days later, she was welcoming, but distant. Like that first time, she talked a lot about her famous friends - though none of it about getting them to help with my career. Still, I didn’t mind that. We gave chess a try, but her phone kept ringing and she’d go into the bedroom to talk.

Then two evenings ago she knocked on my door and said she was about to check out. Boris was pleased with her and had agreed to take the bandages off in her own house. We said our goodbyes in a friendly way, but it was like our real goodbyes had been said already, that morning right after our escapade, when I’d reached forward and kissed her on both cheeks.

So that’s the story of my time as Lindy Gardner’s neighbor. I wish her well. As for me, it’s six more days till

my own unveiling, and a lot longer still before I'm allowed to blow a horn. But I'm used to this life now, and I pass the hours quite contentedly. Yesterday I got a call from Helen asking how I was doing, and when I told her I'd gotten to know Lindy Gardner, she was mightily impressed.

'Hasn't she married again?' she asked. And when I put her straight on that, she said: 'Oh, right. I must have been thinking about that other one. You know. What's-her-name.'

We talked a lot of unimportant stuff - what she'd watched on TV, how her friend had stopped by with her baby. Then she said Prendergast was asking for me, and when she said that, there was a noticeable tightening in her voice. And I almost said: 'Hello? Do I detect a note of irritation associated with lover boy's name?' But I didn't. I just said to say hi to him, and she didn't bring him up again. I'd probably imagined it anyway. For all I know, she was just angling for me to say how grateful I was to him.

When she was about to go, I said: 'I love you,' in that fast, routine way you say it at the end of a call with a spouse. There was a silence of a few seconds, then she said it back, in the same routine way. Then she was gone. God knows what that meant. There's nothing to do now, I guess, but wait for these bandages to come off. And then what? Maybe Lindy's right. Maybe, like she says, I need some perspective, and life really is much bigger than loving a person. Maybe this really is a turning point for me, and the big league's waiting. Maybe she's right.

CELLISTS

IT WAS OUR THIRD TIME playing the *Godfather* theme since lunch, so I was looking around at the tourists seated across the piazza to see how many of them might have been there the last time we'd played it. People don't mind hearing a favourite more than once, but you can't have it happen too often or they start suspecting you don't have a decent repertoire. At this time of year, it's usually okay to repeat numbers. The first hint of an autumn wind and the ridiculous price of a coffee ensure a pretty steady turnover of customers. Anyway, that's why I was studying the faces in the piazza and that's how I spotted Tibor.

He was waving his arm and I thought at first he was waving to us, but then I realised he was trying to attract a waiter. He looked older, and he'd put on some weight, but he wasn't hard to recognise. I gave Fabian, on accordion right next to me, a little nudge and nodded towards the young man, though I couldn't take either hand off my saxophone just then to point him out properly. That was when it came home to me, looking around the band, that apart from me and Fabian, there was no one left in our line-up from that summer we'd met Tibor.

Okay, that was all of seven years ago, but it was still a shock. Playing together every day like this, you come to think of the band as a kind of family, the other members as your brothers. And if every now and then someone moves on, you want to think he'll always stay in touch, sending back postcards from Venice or London or wherever he's got to, maybe a polaroid of the band he's in now - just like he's writing home to his old village. So a moment like that comes as an unwelcome reminder of how quickly things change. How the bosom pals of today become lost strangers tomorrow,

scattered across Europe, playing the *Godfather* theme or 'Autumn Leaves' in squares and cafes you'll never visit.

When we finished our number, Fabian gave me a dirty look, annoyed I'd nudged him during his 'special passage' - not a solo exactly, but one of those rare moments when the violin and clarinet have stopped, I'm blowing just quiet notes in the background, and he's holding the tune together on his accordion. When I tried to explain, pointing out Tibor, now stirring his coffee beneath a parasol, Fabian seemed to have trouble remembering him. In the end, he said:

'Ah yes, the boy with the cello. I wonder if he's still with that American woman.'

'Of course not,' I said. 'Don't you remember? That all came to an end at the time.'

Fabian shrugged, his attention now on his sheet music, and then we were starting our next number.

I was disappointed Fabian hadn't shown more interest, but I suppose he'd never been one of those particularly concerned about the young cellist. Fabian, you see, he's only ever played in bars and cafes. Not like Giancarlo, our violin player at that time, or Ernesto, who was our bass player. They'd had formal training, so to them someone like Tibor was always fascinating. Maybe there was a tiny bit of jealousy there - of Tibor's top-drawer musical education, of the fact that his future was still in front of him. But to be fair, I think it was just that they liked to take the Tibors of this world under their wing, look after them a little, maybe prepare them for what lay ahead, so when the disappointments came they wouldn't be quite so hard to take.

That summer seven years ago had been an unusually warm one, and even in this city of ours, there were times you could believe we were down on the Adriatic. We played outdoors for over four months - under the cafe awning, facing out to the piazza and all the tables - and I can tell

you that's hot work, even with two or three electric fans whirring around you. But it made for a good season, plenty of tourists passing through, a lot from Germany and Austria, as well as natives fleeing the heat down on the beaches. And that was the summer we first started noticing Russians. Today you don't think twice about Russian tourists, they look like everyone else. But back then, they were still rare enough to make you stop and stare. Their clothes were odd and they moved around like new kids at school. The first time we saw Tibor, we were between sets, refreshing ourselves at the big table the cafe always kept aside for us. He was sitting nearby, continually getting up and re-positioning his cello case to keep it in the shade.

'Look at him,' Giancarlo said. 'A Russian music student with nothing to live on. So what does he do? Decides to waste his money on coffees in the main square.'

'No doubt a fool,' Ernesto said. 'But a romantic fool. Happy to starve, so long as he can sit in our square all afternoon.'

He was thin, sandy-haired and wore unfashionable spectacles - huge frames that made him look like a panda. He turned up day after day, and I don't remember how exactly it happened, but after a while we began to sit and talk with him in between sets. And sometimes if he came to the cafe during our evening session, we'd call him over afterwards, maybe treat him to some wine and crostini.

We soon discovered Tibor was Hungarian, not Russian; that he was probably older than he looked, because he'd already studied at the Royal Academy of Music in London, then spent two years in Vienna under Oleg Petrovic. After a rocky start with the old maestro, he'd learnt to handle those legendary temper tantrums and had left Vienna full of confidence - and with a series of engagements in prestigious, if small venues around Europe. But then concerts began to get cancelled due

to low demand; he'd been forced to perform music he hated; accommodation had proved expensive or sordid.

So our city's well-organised Arts and Culture Festival - which was what brought him here that summer - had been a much-needed boost, and when an old friend from the Royal Academy had offered him a free apartment for the summer down near the canal, he'd taken it up without hesitation. He was enjoying our city, he told us, but cash was always a problem, and though he'd had the occasional recital, he was now having to think hard about his next move.

It was after a while of listening to these worries that Giancarlo and Ernesto decided we should try and do something for him. And that was how Tibor got to meet Mr Kaufmann, from Amsterdam, a distant relative of Giancarlo's with connections in the hotel world.

I remember that evening very well. It was still early in the summer, and Mr Kaufmann, Giancarlo, Ernesto, all the rest of us, we sat indoors, in the back room of the cafe, listening to Tibor play his cello. The young man must have realised he was auditioning for Mr Kaufmann, so it's interesting now to remember how keen he was to perform that night. He was obviously grateful to us, and you could see he was pleased when Mr Kaufmann promised to do what he could for him on his return to Amsterdam. When people say Tibor changed for the worse that summer, that his head got too big for his own good, that this was all down to the American woman, well, maybe there's something in that.

Tibor had become aware of the woman while sipping his first coffee of the day. At that moment, the piazza was pleasantly cool - the cafe end remains shaded for much of the morning - and the paving stones were still wet from the city workers' hoses. Having gone without breakfast, he'd watched enviously while at the next table she'd ordered a series of fruit-juice concoctions, then - apparently on a whim, for it wasn't yet ten o'clock - a bowl of steamed mussels. He had

the vague impression the woman was, for her part, stealing glances back at him, but hadn't thought too much about it.

'She looked very pleasant, beautiful even,' he told us at the time. 'But as you see, she's ten, fifteen years older than me. So why would I think anything was going on?'

He'd forgotten about her and was preparing to get back to his room for a couple of hours' practice before his neighbour came in for lunch and turned on that radio, when suddenly there was the woman standing in front of him.

She was beaming broadly, everything in her manner suggesting they already knew each other. In fact it was only his natural shyness that stopped him greeting her. Then she placed a hand on his shoulder, as though he'd failed some test but was being forgiven anyway, and said:

'I was at your recital the other day. At San Lorenzo.'

'Thank you,' he replied, even as he realised how foolish this might sound. Then when the woman just went on beaming down at him, he said: 'Oh yes, the San Lorenzo church. That's correct. I did indeed give a recital there.'

The woman laughed, then suddenly seated herself in the chair in front of him. 'You say that like you've had a whole string of engagements lately,' she said, a hint of mockery in her voice.

'If that is so, I've given you a misleading impression. The recital you attended was my only one in two months.'

'But you're just starting out,' she said. 'You're doing fine to get any engagements at all. And that was a good crowd the other day.'

'A good crowd? There were only twenty-four people.'

'It was the afternoon. It was good for an afternoon recital.'

'I should not complain. Still, it wasn't a good crowd. Tourists with nothing better to do.'

'Oh! You shouldn't be so dismissive. After all, I was there. I was one of those tourists.' Then as he began to redden - for he hadn't meant to give offence - she touched his arm and said with a smile: 'You're just starting out. Don't worry about audience size. That's not why you're performing.'

'Oh? Then why am I performing if not for an audience?'

'That's not what I said. What I'm saying to you is that at this stage in your career, twenty in the audience or two hundred, it doesn't matter. Should I tell you why not? Because you've got it!'

'I have it?'

'You have it. Most definitely. You have ... *potential*.'

He stifled a brusque laugh that came to his lips. He felt more reproach towards himself than for her, for he had expected her to say 'genius' or at least 'talent' and it immediately struck him how deluded he'd been to expect such a comment. But the woman was continuing:

'At this stage, what you're doing is waiting for that one person to come and hear you. And that one person might just as easily be in a room like that one on Tuesday, in a crowd of just twenty people . . .'

'There were twenty-four, not including the organisers. . .'

'Twenty-four, whatever. What I'm saying is that numbers don't matter right now. What matters is that one person.'

'You refer to the man from the recording company?'

'Recording? Oh no, no. That'll take care of itself. No, I mean the person who'll make you blossom. The person who'll hear you and realise you're not just another well-trained

mediocrity. That even though you're still in your chrysalis, with just a little help, you'll emerge as a butterfly.'

'I see. By any chance, might you be this person?'

'Oh, come on! I can see you're a proud young man. But it doesn't look to me like you have so many mentors falling over themselves to get to you. At least not ones of my rank.'

It occurred to him then that he was in the midst of making a colossal blunder, and he considered the woman's features carefully. She'd now removed her sunglasses, and he could see a face that was essentially gentle and kind, yet with upset and perhaps anger not far away. He went on looking at her, hoping he'd soon recognise her, but in the end he was forced to say:

'I'm very sorry. You are perhaps a distinguished musician?'

'I'm Eloise McCormack,' she announced with a smile, and held out her hand. Unfortunately, the name meant nothing to Tibor and he found himself in a quandary. His first instinct was to feign astonishment, and he actually said: 'Really. This is quite amazing.' Then he pulled himself together, realising such bluffing was not only dishonest, but likely to lead to embarrassing exposure within seconds. So he sat up straight and said:

'Miss McCormack, it's an honour to meet you. I realise this will seem unbelievable to you, but I beg you to make allowances both for my youth and for the fact that I grew up in the former Eastern bloc, behind the Iron Curtain. There are many film stars and political personalities who are household names in the West, of whom, even today, I remain ignorant. So you must forgive me that I do not know precisely who you are.'

'Well . . . that's commendably frank.' Despite her words, she was clearly affronted, and her ebullience seemed to drain away. After an awkward moment, he said again:

‘You are a distinguished musician, yes?’

She nodded, her gaze drifting across the square.

‘Once again I must apologise,’ he said. ‘It was indeed an honour that someone like you should come to my recital. And may I ask your instrument?’

‘Like you,’ she said quickly. ‘Cello. That’s why I came in. Even if it’s a humble little recital like yours, I can’t help myself. I can’t walk by. I have a sense of mission, I guess.’

‘A mission?’

‘I don’t know what else to call it. I want all cellists to play well. To play beautifully. So often, they play in a misguided way.’

‘Excuse me, but is it just we cellists who are guilty of this misguided performance? Or do you refer to all musicians?’

‘Maybe the other instruments too. But I’m a cellist, so I listen to other cellists, and when I hear something going wrong . . . You know, the other day, I saw some young musicians playing in the lobby of the Museo Civico and people were just rushing past them, but I had to stop and listen. And you know, it was all I could do to stop myself going right up to them and telling them.’

‘They were making errors?’

‘Not errors exactly. But . . . well, it just wasn’t there. It wasn’t nearly there. But there you go, I ask too much. I know I shouldn’t expect everyone to come up to the mark I set for myself. They were just music students, I guess.’

She leaned back in her seat for the first time and gazed at some children, over by the central fountain, noisily soaking one another. Eventually, Tibor said:

‘You felt this urge also on Tuesday perhaps. The urge to come up to me and make your suggestions.’

She smiled, but then the next moment her face became very serious. ‘I did,’ she said. ‘I really did. Because when I heard you, I could hear the way I once was. Forgive me, this is going to sound so rude. But the truth is, you’re not quite on the correct path just now. And when I heard you, I so wanted to help you find it. Sooner rather than later.’

‘I must point out, I have been tutored by Oleg Petrovic.’ Tibor stated this flatly and waited for her response. To his surprise, he saw her trying to suppress a smile.

‘Petrovic, yes,’ she said. ‘Petrovic, in his day, was a very respectable musician. And I know that to his students he must still appear a considerable figure. But to many of us now, his ideas, his whole approach . . .’ She shook her head and spread out her hands. Then as Tibor, suddenly speechless with fury, continued to stare at her, she once again placed a hand on his arm. ‘I’ve said enough. I’ve no right. I’ll leave you in peace.’

She rose to her feet and this action soothed his anger; Tibor had a generous temperament and it wasn’t in his nature to remain cross with people for long. Besides, what the woman had just said about his old teacher had struck an uncomfortable chord deep within him - thoughts he’d not quite dared to express to himself. So when he looked up at her, his face showed confusion more than anything else.

‘Look,’ she said, ‘you’re probably too angry with me just now to think about this. But I’d like to help you. If you do decide you want to talk this over, I’m staying over there. At the Excelsior.’

This hotel, the grandest in our city, stands at the opposite end of the square from the cafe, and she now pointed it out to Tibor, smiled, and began to walk off towards it. He

was still watching her when she turned suddenly near the central fountain, startling some pigeons, gave him a wave, then continued on her way.

Over the next two days he found himself thinking about the encounter many times. He saw again the smirk around her mouth as he'd so proudly announced Petrovic's name and felt the anger rising afresh. But on reflection, he could see he had not really been angry on his old teacher's behalf. It was rather that he had become accustomed to the idea that Petrovic's name would always produce a certain impact, that it could be relied upon to induce attention and respect: in other words, he'd come to depend on it as a sort of certificate he could brandish around the world. What had so disturbed him was the possibility that this certificate didn't carry nearly the weight he'd supposed.

He kept remembering too her parting invitation, and during those hours he sat in the square, he found his gaze returning to the far end, and the grand entrance of the Excelsior Hotel, where a steady stream of taxis and limousines drew up in front of the doorman.

Finally, on the third day after his conversation with Eloise McCormack, he crossed the piazza, entered the marbled lobby and asked the front desk to call her extension. The receptionist spoke into the phone, asked his name, then after a short exchange, passed the receiver to him.

'I'm so sorry,' he heard her voice say. 'I forgot to ask you your name the other day and it took me a while to figure out who you were. But of course I haven't forgotten you. As a matter of fact, I've been thinking about you an awful lot. There's so much I'd like to talk through with you. But you know, we have to do this right. Do you have your cello? No, of course you don't. Why don't you come back in an hour, exactly one hour, and this time bring your cello. I'll be waiting here for you.'

When he returned to the Excelsior with his instrument, the receptionist immediately indicated the elevators and told him Miss McCormack was expecting him.

The idea of entering her room, even in the middle of the afternoon, had struck him as awkwardly intimate, and he was relieved to find a large suite, the bedroom closed off entirely from view. The tall French windows had boarded shutters, for the moment folded back, so the lace curtains moved in the breeze, and he could see that by stepping through onto the balcony, he'd find himself looking over the square. The room itself, with its rough stone walls and dark wood floor, had almost a monastic air about it, softened only partially by the flowers, cushions and antique furniture. She, in contrast, was dressed in T-shirt, tracksuit trousers and trainers, as though she'd just come in from running. She welcomed him with little ceremony - no offer of tea or coffee - and said to him:

'Play for me. Play me something you played at your recital.'

She had indicated a polished upright chair carefully placed in the centre of the room, so he sat down on it and unpacked his cello. Rather disconcertingly, she sat herself in front of one of the big windows so that he could see her almost exactly in profile, and she continued to stare into the space before her all the time he tuned up. Her posture didn't alter as he began to play, and when he came to the end of his first piece, she didn't say a word. So he moved quickly to another piece, and then another. A half-hour went by, then a whole hour. And something to do with the shaded room and its austere acoustics, the afternoon sunlight diffused by the drifting lace curtains, the background hubbub rising from the piazza, and above all, her presence, drew from him notes that held new depths, new suggestions. Towards the end of the hour, he was convinced he'd more than fulfilled her expectations, but when he had finished his last

piece, and they had sat in silence for several moments, she at last turned in her chair towards him and said:

‘Yes, I understand exactly where you are. It won’t be easy, but you can do it. Definitely, you can do it. Let’s start with the Britten. Play it again, just the first movement, and then we’ll talk. We can work through this together, a little at a time.’

When he heard this, he felt an impulse just to pack away his instrument and leave. But then some other instinct - perhaps it was simply curiosity, perhaps something deeper - overcame his pride and compelled him to start playing again the piece she had requested. When after several bars she stopped him and began to talk, he again felt the urge to leave. He resolved, just out of politeness, to endure this uninvited tutorial for at most another five minutes. But he found himself staying a little longer, then longer again. He played some more, she talked again. Her words would always strike him initially as pretentious and far too abstract, but when he tried to accommodate their thrust into his playing, he was surprised by the effect. Before he realised, another hour had gone by.

‘I could suddenly see something,’ he explained to us.

‘A garden I’d not yet entered. There it was, in the distance. There were things in the way. But for the first time, there it was. A garden I’d never seen before.’

The sun had almost set when he finally left the hotel, crossed the piazza to the cafe tables, and allowed himself the luxury of an almond cake with whipped cream, his sense of elation barely contained.

For the next several days, he returned to her hotel each afternoon and always came away, if not with the same sense of revelation he’d experienced on that first visit, then at least filled with fresh energy and hope. Her comments grew bolder, and to an outsider, had there been one, might have

seemed presumptuous, but Tibor was no longer capable of regarding her interventions in such terms. His fear now was that her visit to the city would come to an end, and this thought began to haunt him, disturbing his sleep, and casting a shadow as he walked out into the square after another exhilarating session. But whenever he tentatively raised this question with her, the replies were always vague and far from reassuring. 'Oh, just until it gets too chilly for me,' she had said once. Or another time: 'I guess I'll stay as long as I'm not bored here.'

'But what's she like herself?' we kept asking him. 'On the cello. What's she like?'

The first time we raised this question, Tibor didn't answer us properly, just saying something like: 'She told me she was a virtuoso, right from the start,' then changing the subject. But when he realised we wouldn't let it go, he sighed and began to explain it to us.

The fact was, even at that first session, Tibor had been curious to hear her play, but had been too intimidated to ask her to do so. He'd felt only a tiny nudge of suspicion when, looking around her room, he'd seen no sign of her own cello. After all, it was perfectly natural she wouldn't bring a cello on holiday with her. And then again, it was possible there was an instrument - perhaps a rented one - in the bedroom behind the closed door.

But as he'd continued to return to the suite for further sessions, the suspicions had grown. He'd done his best to push them out of his mind, for by this time, he'd lost any lingering reservations about their meetings. The mere fact that she was listening to him seemed to draw fresh layers from his imagination, and in the hours between these afternoon sessions, he'd often find himself preparing a piece in his mind, anticipating her comments, her shakes of the head, her frown, the affirming nod, and most gratifying of all, those instances she became transported by a passage he

was playing, when her eyes would close and her hands, almost against her will, began shadowing the movements he was making. All the same, the suspicions wouldn't go away, and then one day he came to the room and the bedroom door had been left ajar. He could see more stone walls, what looked to be a medieval four-poster bed, but no trace of a cello. Would a virtuoso, even on holiday, go so long without touching her instrument? But this question, too, he pushed out of his mind.

As the summer went on, they began to prolong their conversations by coming over to the cafe together after their sessions, and she'd buy him coffees, cakes, sometimes a sandwich. Now their talk was no longer just about music - though everything always seemed to come back to it. For instance, she might question him about the German girl he'd been close to in Vienna.

'But you must understand, she was never my girlfriend,' he would tell her. 'We were never like that.'

'You mean you never became physically intimate? That doesn't mean you weren't in love with her.'

'No, Miss Eloise, that is incorrect. I was fond of her, certainly. But we were not in love.'

'But when you played me the Rachmaninov yesterday, you were remembering an emotion. It was love, romantic love.'

'No, that is absurd. She was a good friend, but we did not love.'

'But you play that passage like it's the *memory* of love. You're so young, and yet you know desertion, abandonment. That's why you play that third movement the way you do. Most cellists, they play it with joy. But for you, it's not about joy, it's about the memory of a joyful time that's gone for ever.'

They had conversations like this, and he was often tempted to question her in return. But just as he'd never dared ask Petrovic a personal question in the whole time he'd studied under him, he now felt unable to ask anything of substance about her. Instead, he dwelt on the little things she let fall - how she now lived in Portland, Oregon, how she'd moved there from Boston three years ago, how she disliked Paris 'because of its sad associations' - but drew back from asking her to expand.

She would laugh much more easily now than in the first days of their friendship, and she developed the habit, when they stepped out of the Excelsior and crossed the piazza, of linking her arm through his. This was the point at which we first started noticing them, a curious couple, he looking so much younger than he actually was, she looking in some ways motherly, in other ways 'like a flirty actress', as Ernesto put it. In the days before we got to talking with Tibor, we used to waste a lot of idle chat on them, the way men in a band do. If they strolled past us, arm in arm, we'd look at each other and say: 'What do you think? They've been at it, yes?' But having enjoyed the speculation, we'd then shrug and admit it was unlikely: they just didn't have the atmosphere of lovers. And once we came to know Tibor, and he began telling us about those afternoons in her suite, none of us thought to tease him or make any funny suggestions.

Then one afternoon when they were sitting in the square with coffee and cakes, she began to talk about a man who wanted to marry her. His name was Peter Henderson and he ran a successful business in Oregon selling golfing equipment. He was smart, kind, well respected in the community. He was six years older than Eloise, but that was hardly old. There were two young children from his first marriage, but things had been settled amicably.

'So now you know what I'm doing here,' she said with a nervous laugh he'd never heard from her before. 'I'm hiding out. Peter has no idea where I am. I guess it's cruel of me.'

I called him last Tuesday, told him I was in Italy, but I didn't say which city. He was mad at me and I guess he's entitled to be.'

'So,' said Tibor. 'You are spending the summer contemplating your future.'

'Not really. I'm just hiding.'

'You do not love this Peter?'

She shrugged. 'He's a nice man. And I don't have a lot of other offers on the table.'

'This Peter. He is a music lover?'

'Oh . . . Where I live now, he would certainly count as one. After all, he goes to concerts. And afterwards, in the restaurant, he says a lot of nice things about what we just heard. So I guess he's a music lover.'

'But he . . . appreciates you?'

'He knows it won't always be easy, living with a virtuoso.' She gave a sigh. 'That's been the problem for me all my life. It won't be easy for you either. But you and me, we don't really have a choice. We have our paths to follow.'

She didn't bring Peter up again, but now, after that exchange, a new dimension had opened in their relationship. When she had those quiet moments of thought after he'd finished playing, or when, sitting together in the piazza, she became distant, staring off past the neighbouring parasols, there was nothing uncomfortable about it, and far from feeling ignored, he knew his presence there beside her was appreciated.

One afternoon when he'd finished playing a piece, she asked him to play again one short passage - just eight bars - from near the close. He did as asked and saw the little furrow remain on her forehead.

‘That doesn’t sound like us,’ she said, shaking her head. As usual, she was sitting in profile to him in front of the big windows. ‘The rest of what you played was good. All the rest of it, that *was* us. But that passage there . . .’ She did a little shudder.

He played it again, differently, though not at all sure what he was aiming for, and wasn’t surprised to see her shake her head again.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘You must express yourself more clearly. I do not understand this “not us”.’

‘You mean you want me to play it myself? Is that what you’re saying?’

She’d spoken calmly, but as she now turned to face him, he was aware of a tension descending on them. She was looking at him steadily, almost challengingly, waiting for his answer.

Eventually he said: ‘No, I’ll try again.’

‘But you’re wondering why I don’t just play it myself, aren’t you? Borrow your instrument and demonstrate what I mean.’

‘No . . .’ He shook his head with what he hoped looked like nonchalance. ‘No. I think it works well, what we’ve always done. You suggest verbally, then I play. That way, it’s not like I copy, copy, copy. Your words open windows for me. If you played yourself, the windows would not open. I’d only copy.’

She considered this, then said: ‘You’re probably right. Okay, I’ll try and express myself a little better.’

And for the next few minutes she talked - about the distinction between epilogues and bridging passages. Then when he played those bars once more, she smiled and nodded approvingly.

But from that little exchange on, something shadowy had entered their afternoons. Perhaps it had been there all along, but now it was out of the bottle and hovered between them. Another time, when they were sitting in the piazza, he'd been telling her the story of how the previous owner of his cello had come by it in the Soviet Union days by bartering several pairs of American jeans. When he'd finished the story, she looked at him with a curious half-smile and said:

'It's a good instrument. It has a fine voice. But since I've never so much as touched it, I can't really judge it.'

He knew then she was again moving towards that territory, and he quickly looked away, saying:

'For someone of your stature, it would not be an adequate instrument. Even for me, now, it is barely adequate.'

He found he could no longer relax during a conversation with her for fear she would hijack it and bring it back onto this territory. Even during their most enjoyable exchanges, a part of his mind would have to remain on guard, ready to shut her off if she found yet another opening. Even so, he couldn't divert her every time, and he'd simply pretend not to hear when she said things like: 'Oh, it would be so much easier if I could just play it for you!'

Towards the end of September - there was now a chill in the breeze - Giancarlo received a phone call from Mr Kaufmann in Amsterdam; there was a vacancy for a cellist in a small chamber group at a five-star hotel in the centre of the city. The group played in a minstrels' gallery overlooking the dining room four evenings a week, and the musicians also had other 'light, non-musical duties' elsewhere in the hotel. Board and accommodation terms were available. Mr Kaufmann had immediately remembered Tibor and the post was being held open for him. We gave Tibor the news straight away - in the cafe

the very evening of Mr Kaufmann's call - and I think we were all taken aback by the coolness of Tibor's response. It was certainly a contrast to his attitude earlier in the summer, when we'd fixed up his 'audition' with Mr Kaufmann. Giancarlo, in particular, became very angry.

'So what is it you have to think over so carefully?' he demanded of the boy. 'What were you expecting? Carnegie Hall?'

'I'm not ungrateful. Nevertheless, I must give this matter some thought. To play for people while they chat and eat. And these other hotel duties. Is this really suitable for someone like me?'

Giancarlo always lost his temper too quickly, and now the rest of us had to stop him from grabbing Tibor by his jacket and shouting into his face. Some of us even felt obliged to take the boy's side, pointing out it was his life, after all, and that he was under no obligation to take any job he was uncomfortable with. Things eventually calmed down, and Tibor then began to agree the job had some good points if viewed as a temporary measure. And our city, he pointed out rather insensitively, would become a backwater once the tourist season was over. Amsterdam at least was a cultural centre.

'I'll give this matter careful thought,' he said in the end. 'Perhaps you will kindly tell Mr Kaufmann I will give him my decision within three days.'

Giancarlo was hardly satisfied by this - he'd expected fawning gratitude, after all - but he went off all the same to call back Mr Kaufmann. During the whole of this discussion that evening, Eloise McCormack had not been mentioned, but it was clear to us all her influence was behind everything Tibor had been saying.

'That woman's turned him into an arrogant little shit,' Ernesto said after Tibor had left. 'Let him take that

attitude with him to Amsterdam. He'll soon get a few corners knocked off him.'

Tibor had never told Eloise about his audition with Mr Kaufmann. He'd been on the verge of doing so many times, but had always drawn back, and the deeper their friendship had grown, the more it seemed a betrayal that he'd ever agreed to such a thing. So naturally Tibor felt no inclination to consult Eloise about these latest developments, or even allow her any inkling of them. But he'd never been good at concealment, and this decision to keep a secret from her had unexpected results.

It was unusually warm that afternoon. He'd come to the hotel as usual, and begun to play for her some new pieces he'd been preparing. But after barely three minutes, she made him stop, saying:

'There's something wrong. I thought it when you first came in. I know you so well now, Tibor, I could tell, almost from the way you knocked on the door. Now I've heard you play, I know for certain. It's useless, you can't hide it from me.'

He was in some dismay, and lowering his bow, was about to make a clean breast of everything, when she put up her hand and said:

'This is something we can't keep running away from. You always try to avoid it, but it's no use. I want to discuss it. The whole of this past week, I've been wanting to discuss it.'

'Really?' He looked at her in astonishment.

'Yes,' she said, and moved her chair so that for the first time she was directly facing him. 'I never intended to deceive you, Tibor. These last few weeks, they haven't been the easiest for me, and you've been such a dear friend. I'd so hate it if you thought I ever meant to play some cheap

trick on you. No, please, don't try and stop me this time. I want to say this. If you gave me that cello right now and asked me to play, I'd have to say no, I can't do it. Not because the instrument isn't good enough, nothing like that. But if you're now thinking I'm a fake, that I've somehow pretended to be something I'm not, then I want to tell you you're mistaken. Look at everything we've achieved together. Isn't that proof enough I'm no fake anything? Yes, I told you I was a virtuoso. Well, let me explain what I meant by that. What I meant was that I was born with a very special gift, just as you were. You and me, we have something most other cellists will never have, no matter how hard they practise. I was able to recognise it in you, the moment I first heard you in that church. And in some way, you must have recognised it in me too. That's why you decided to come to this hotel that first time.

'There aren't many like us, Tibor, and we recognise each other. The fact that I've not yet learned to play the cello doesn't really change anything. You have to understand, I *am* a virtuoso. But I'm one who's yet to be *unwrapped*. You too, you're still not entirely unwrapped, and that's what I've been doing these past few weeks. I've been trying to help you shed those layers. But I never tried to deceive you. Ninety-nine per cent of cellists, there's nothing there under those layers, there's nothing to unwrap. So people like us, we have to help each other. When we see each other in a crowded square, wherever, we have to reach out for one another, because there are so few of us.'

He noticed that tears had appeared in her eyes, but her voice had remained steady. She now fell silent and turned away from him again.

'So you believe yourself to be a special cellist,' he said after a moment. 'A virtuoso. The rest of us, Miss Eloise, we have to take our courage in our hands and we unwrap ourselves, as you put it, all the time unsure what we will find underneath. Yet you, you do not care for this

unwrapping. You do nothing. But you are so sure you are this virtuoso . . . ’

‘Please don’t be angry. I know it sounds a little crazy. But that’s how it is, it’s the truth. My mother, she recognised my gift straight away, when I was tiny. I’m grateful to her for that at least. But the teachers she found for me, when I was four, when I was seven, when I was eleven, they were no good. Mom didn’t know that, but I did. Even as a small girl, I had this instinct. I knew I had to protect my gift against people who, however well-intentioned they were, could completely destroy it. So I shut them out. You’ve got to do the same, Tibor. Your gift is precious.’

‘Forgive me,’ Tibor interrupted, now more gently. ‘You say you played the cello as a child. But today . . . ’

‘I haven’t touched the instrument since I was eleven. Not since the day I explained to Mom I couldn’t continue with Mr Roth. And she understood. She agreed it was much better to do nothing and wait. The crucial thing was not to damage my gift. My day may still come though. Okay, sometimes I think I’ve left it too late. I’m forty-one years old now. But at least I haven’t damaged what I was born with. I’ve met so many teachers over the years who’ve said they’d help me, but I saw through them. Sometimes it’s difficult to tell, Tibor, even for us. These teachers, they’re so . . . *professional*, they talk so well, you listen and at first you’re fooled. You think, yes, at last, someone to help me, he’s one of *us*. Then you realise he’s nothing of the kind. And that’s when you have to be tough and shut yourself off. Remember that, Tibor, it’s always better to wait. Sometimes I feel bad about it, that I still haven’t unveiled my gift. But I haven’t damaged it, and that’s what counts.’

He eventually played for her a couple of the pieces he’d prepared, but they couldn’t retrieve their usual mood and they ended the session early. Down in the piazza, they drank their coffee, speaking little, until he told her of his plans

to leave the city for a few days. He'd always wanted to explore the surrounding countryside, he said, so now he'd arranged a short holiday for himself.

'It'll do you good,' she said quietly. 'But don't stay away too long. We still have a lot to do.'

He reassured her he'd be back within a week at the most. Nevertheless, there was still something uneasy in her manner as they parted.

He'd not been entirely truthful about his going away: he hadn't yet made any arrangements. But after leaving Eloise that afternoon, he went home and made several phone calls, eventually reserving a bed at a youth hostel in the mountains near the Umbrian border. He came to see us at the cafe that night, and as well as telling us about his trip - we gave him all kinds of conflicting advice about where to go and what to see - he rather sheepishly asked Giancarlo to let Mr Kaufmann know he'd like to take up the job offer.

'What else can I do?' he said to us. 'By the time I get back, I'll have no money left at all.'

*

Tibor had a pleasant enough break in our countryside. He didn't tell us much about it, other than that he'd made friends with some German hikers, and that he'd spent more than he could afford in the hillside trattorias. He came back after a week, looking visibly refreshed, but anxious to establish that Eloise McCormack had not left the city during his absence.

The tourist crowds were beginning to thin by then, and the cafe waiters were bringing out terrace heaters to place among the outdoor tables. On the afternoon of his return, at their usual time, Tibor took his cello to the Excelsior again, and was pleased to discover not only that Eloise was there waiting for him, but that she'd obviously missed him. She welcomed him with emotion, and just as someone else, in a

surfeit of affection, might have plied him with food or drink, she pushed him into his usual chair and began impatiently unpacking the cello, saying: 'Play for me! Come on! Just play!'

They had a wonderful afternoon together. He'd worried beforehand how things would be, after her 'confession' and the way they'd last parted, but all the tension seemed simply to have evaporated, and the atmosphere between them felt better than ever. Even when, after he'd finished a piece, she closed her eyes and embarked on a long, stringent critique of his performance, he felt no resentment, only a hunger to understand her as fully as possible. The next day and the day after, it was the same: relaxed, at times even jokey, and he felt sure he'd never played better in his life. They didn't allude at all to that conversation before he'd gone away, nor did she ask about his break in the countryside. They only talked about the music.

Then on the fourth day after his return, a series of small mishaps - including a leaking toilet cistern in his room - prevented him going to the Excelsior at the usual hour. By the time he came past the cafe, the light was fading, the waiters had lit the candles inside the little glass bowls, and we were a couple of numbers into our dinner set. He waved to us, then went on across the square towards the hotel, his cello making him look like he was limping.

He noticed the receptionist hesitate slightly before phoning up to her. Then when she opened the door, she greeted him warmly, but somehow differently, and before he had a chance to speak, she said quickly:

'Tibor, I'm so glad you've come. I was just telling Peter everything about you. That's right, Peter's found me at last!' Then she called into the room: 'Peter, he's here! Tibor's here. And with his cello too!'

As Tibor stepped into the room, a large, shambling, greying man in a pale polo shirt rose to his feet with a

smile. He gripped Tibor's hand very firmly and said: 'Oh, I've heard all about you. Eloise is convinced you're gonna be a big star.'

'Peter's persistent,' she was saying. 'I knew he'd find me in the end.'

'No hiding from me,' said Peter. Then he was pulling up a chair for Tibor, pouring him a glass of champagne from an ice-bucket on the cabinet. 'Come on, Tibor, help us celebrate our reunion.'

Tibor sipped the champagne, aware that Peter had pulled up for him, by chance, his usual 'cello chair'. Eloise had vanished somewhere, and for a while, Tibor and Peter made conversation, their glasses in their hands. Peter seemed kindly and asked a lot of questions. How had it been for Tibor growing up in a place like Hungary? Had it been a shock when he'd first come to the West?

'I'd love to play an instrument,' Peter said. 'You're so lucky. I'd like to learn. A little late now though, I guess.'

'Oh, you can never say too late,' Tibor said.

'You're right. Never say too late. Too late is always just an excuse. No, the truth is, I'm a busy man, and I tell myself I'm too busy to learn French, to learn an instrument, to read *War and Peace*. All the things I've always wanted to do. Eloise used to play when she was a kid. I guess she told you about that.'

'Yes, she did. I understand she has a lot of natural gifts.'

'Oh, she sure does. Anyone who knows her will be able to see that. She has such sensitivity. She's the one who should be having those lessons. Me, I'm just Mr Banana Fingers.' He held up his hands and laughed. 'I'd like to play piano, but what can you do with hands like these? Great for digging the

earth, that's what my people did for generations. But that lady' - he indicated towards the door with his glass - 'now she's got sensitivity.'

Eventually, Eloise emerged from the bedroom in a dark evening dress and a lot of jewellery.

'Peter, don't bore Tibor,' she said. 'He's not interested in golf.'

Peter held out his hands and looked pleadingly at Tibor. 'Now tell me, Tibor. Did I say a single word to you about golf?'

Tibor said he should be going; that he could see he was keeping the couple from their dinner. This was met by protests from both of them, and Peter said:

'Now look at me. Do I look like I'm dressed for dinner?'

And though Tibor thought he looked perfectly decent, he gave the laugh that seemed expected of him. Then Peter said:

'You can't leave without playing something. I've been hearing so much about your playing.'

Confused, Tibor had actually started to unfasten his cello case, when Eloise said firmly, some new quality in her voice:

'Tibor's right. Time's getting on. The restaurants in this town, they don't keep your table if you don't come on time. Peter, you get yourself dressed. Maybe a shave too? I'll see Tibor out. I want to speak with him in private.'

In the lift, they smiled affectionately at each other, but didn't speak. When they came outside, they found the piazza lit up for the night. Local kids, back from their holidays, were kicking balls, or chasing each other around the fountain. The evening *passaggiata* was in full flow, and I

suppose our music would have come drifting through the air to where they were standing.

‘Well, that’s it,’ she said, eventually. ‘He’s found me, so I guess he deserves me.’

‘He is a most charming person,’ Tibor said. ‘You intend to return to America now?’

‘In a few days. I suppose I will.’

‘You intend to marry?’

‘I guess so.’ For an instant, she looked at him earnestly, then looked away. ‘I guess so,’ she said again.

‘I wish you much happiness. He is a kind man. Also a music lover. That’s important for you.’

‘Yes. That’s important.’

‘When you were getting ready just now. We were talking not of golf, but of music lessons.’

‘Oh really? You mean for him or for me?’

‘For both. However, I don’t suppose there will be many teachers in Portland, Oregon, who could teach you.’

She gave a laugh. ‘Like I said, it’s difficult for people like us.’

‘Yes, I appreciate that. After these last few weeks, I appreciate that more than ever.’ Then he added: ‘Miss Eloise, there is something I must tell you before we part. I will soon leave for Amsterdam, where I have been given a position in a large hotel.’

‘You’re going to be a porter?’

‘No. I will play in a small chamber group in the hotel dining room. We will entertain the hotel guests while they eat.’

He was watching her carefully and saw something ignite behind her eyes, then fade away. She laid a hand on his arm and smiled.

‘Well then, good luck.’ Then she added: ‘Those hotel guests. They’ve got some treat coming up.’

‘I hope so.’

For another moment, they remained standing there together, just beyond the pool of light cast by the front of the hotel, the bulky cello between them.

‘And I hope also’, he said, ‘you’ll be very happy with Mr Peter.’

‘I hope so too,’ she said and laughed again. Then she kissed him on the cheek and gave him a quick hug. ‘You take care of yourself,’ she said.

Tibor thanked her, then before he quite realised it, he was watching her walking back towards the Excelsior.

Tibor left our city soon after that. The last time we had drinks with him, he was clearly very grateful to Giancarlo and Ernesto for his job, and to us all for our friendship, but I couldn’t help getting the impression he was being a little aloof with us. A few of us thought this, not just me, though Giancarlo, typically, now took Tibor’s side, saying the boy had just been feeling excited and nervous about this next step in his life.

‘Excited? How can he be excited?’ Ernesto said. ‘He’s spent the summer being told he’s a genius. A hotel job, it’s a comedown. Sitting talking to us, that’s a comedown too. He was a nice kid at the start of the summer. But after what that woman’s done to him, I’m glad we’re seeing the back of him.’

Like I said, this all happened seven years ago. Giancarlo, Ernesto, all the boys from that time except me and

Fabian, they've all moved on. Until I spotted him in the piazza the other day, I hadn't thought about our young Hungarian maestro for a long time. He wasn't so hard to recognise. He'd put on weight, certainly, and was looking a lot thicker around the neck. And the way he gestured with his finger, calling for a waiter, there was something - maybe I imagined this - something of the impatience, the off-handedness that comes with a certain kind of bitterness. But maybe that's unfair. After all, I only glimpsed him. Even so, it seemed to me he'd lost that youthful anxiety to please, and those careful manners he had back then. No bad thing in this world, you might say.

I would have gone over and talked with him, but by the end of our set he'd already gone. For all I know, he was here only for the afternoon. He was wearing a suit - nothing very grand, just a regular one - so perhaps he has a day job now behind a desk somewhere. Maybe he had some business to do nearby and came through our city just for old times' sake, who knows? If he comes back to the square, and I'm not playing, I'll go over and have a word with him.

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