

The Blind Owl

A novella by Sadeq Hedayat

Translated by Iraj Bashiri

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In life there are certain sores that, like a canker, gnaw at the soul in solitude and diminish it.

Since generally it is the custom to relegate these incredible sufferings to the realm of rare and singular accidents and happenings, it is not possible to reveal them to anyone. If one does talk or write about them, people pretend to accept them with sarcastic remarks and dubious smiles, while adhering either to prevalent beliefs or to their own ideas about them. The reason is that as yet man has not found a remedy for these sores; the only remedy now is forgetfulness induced by wine or, artificial sleep induced by opium and other narcotics. It is a pity, however, that the effect of these drugs is transitory and that after a while, instead of soothing, they add to the pain.

Will it come to pass one day that someone will penetrate the secrets of these supernatural happenings and recognize this reflection of the shadow of the soul which manifests itself in a coma-like limbo between sleep and wakefulness?

I shall only describe one such incident which happened to me and which has shocked me so much that I shall never forget it; its ominous scar will poison my life throughout—from the beginning to the end of eternity where no man's understanding can fathom. Did I say poisoned? Well, I meant to say that I am scathed by it and will remain so for the rest of my mortal life.

I shall try to put down whatever I recall, whatever has remained in my memory of the relations that connect the events. Perhaps I can make a universal judgment about it. No. I want merely to become sure, or else to believe it myself, because it is immaterial to me whether other people believe me or not. Simply, I am afraid that I may die tomorrow but still not know myself, because in the course of life experiences I have realized that a

frightful chasm lies between others and me. I also have realized that I should keep silent as much as possible and that I should keep my thoughts to myself. If I have decided that I should write, It is only because I should introduce myself to my shadow--a shadow which rests in a stooped position on the wall, and which appears to be voraciously swallowing all that I write down. It is for him that I want to do an experiment to see if we can know each other better, because since the time I severed my relations with the others, I have wanted to know myself better.

Absurd thoughts! It may be so, but they torture me more than any reality. Are not these people who resemble me, and who seemingly have the same needs, whims and desires as I do--are they not here to deceive me? Are they not shadows brought into existence merely to mock and beguile me? Isn't that which I feel, see and measure imaginary throughout and quite different from reality?

I write only for my shadow which is cast on the wall in front of the light. I must introduce myself to it.

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In this base world, full of poverty and misery, for the first time I thought a ray of sunshine had shone on my life. But alas, it was not a sunbeam, rather it was only a transient beam, a shooting star, which appeared to me in the likeness of a woman or an angel. And in the light of that moment, lasting only about a second, I witnessed all my life's misfortunes, and I discovered their magnitude and grandeur. Then this beam of light disappeared again into the dark abyss into which it was destined to disappear. No. I could not keep this transient beam for myself.

It was three months, no, it was two months and four days since I had lost her, but the memory of her enchanting eyes, no, the attractive malice of her eyes, remained in my life forever. How can I forget one who is so pertinent to my life?

No, I will not call her by name, because she, with that ethereal body, slim and misty, with those two large, wonder stricken, sparkling eyes behind which my life was gradually and painfully burning and melting away, she no longer belongs to this base, fierce world. No, I should not disgrace her name with earthly things.

After seeing her I withdrew from the circle of people. I

withdrew completely from the circle of the fools and the fortunate; and, for forgetfulness, I took refuge in wine and opium. I passed, and still pass, my life daily within the four walls of my room. My whole life has passed within the confines of four walls.

My daily occupation was the painting of pencease covers; my entire time was dedicated to the painting of pencease covers and to the consumption of alcohol and opium. I had chosen the ridiculous profession of pencease-cover painting to kill the time.

By a lucky chance my house is located outside the city, in a quiet and restful spot, away from the hustle and bustle of people's lives. Its boundaries are well defined and around it there are some ruins. From beyond the ditch, however, some low mud-brick houses are visible and the city begins there. I do not know which madman or which ill-disposed architect built this house in forgotten times, but when I close my eyes, not only all its nooks and crannies materialize before my eyes but I feel its pressure on my shoulders. It is a house that could have been painted only on ancient penceases.

I must write about all these events to assure myself that they are not figments of my imagination. I must explain them to my shadow which is cast on the wall. To begin with, before this incident there had remained for me only one source of cheerfulness or of content. I used to paint on pencease covers within the confines of the four walls of my room, and I used to pass the time with this ridiculous amusement; but after I saw those two eyes, and after I saw her, every work, every movement lost its inherent value and meaning entirely. What is strange, however, and what is incredible is that, for some reason, the subjects of all my painted scenes have been of the same type and shape. I always used to draw a cypress tree under which an old man, wrapped in a cloak, hunching his shoulders in the manner of the Indian yogis, sat in a squatting position. He wore a shalma around his head, and he put the index finger of his left hand on his lips as a sign of astonishment. Opposite him a girl, wearing a long, black dress, was bending to offer him a lily. She was bending because a brook intervened between them. Had I seen this image before, or was it inspired in a dream? I do not know. I only know that whatever I painted revolved around this scene and this same subject; my hand drew this scene involuntarily. And still more incredible than this is the fact that there were customers for this picture. I even used to send some of these pencease covers to India in care of my uncle, who used to sell them and

return the money.

I do not recall it correctly, because this picture used to appear to me to be distant as well as close by at the same time. Now I recall an incident. I said that I must write down my recollections; but the writing of these notes occurred much later. It has no relevance to the subject at hand. Although it was to devote myself to writing that I abandoned pence-cover painting. Two months ago, no two months and four days ago, was the thirteenth day of Farvardin. Everybody had rushed to the countryside. In order to paint undisturbed, I had shut the window of my room. Around sunset, when I was busy painting, the door suddenly opened and my uncle entered-- that is to say, he said he was my uncle. I had never seen him before because from his early youth he had been on a distant journey. Perhaps he was a ship captain. I thought he had some mercantile business with me, because apparently he was a merchant as well. In any case, my uncle was a stooped old man who wore an Indian shalma around his head and a yellow torn cloak on his shoulders. He had covered his head and face with a scarf. His collar was open and his hairy chest could be seen. One could count the hairs of his thin beard as it protruded through his scarf. With his red, fistular eyelids and leprous lip, he bore a very distant and ridiculous resemblance to me, as if my reflection had fallen on a magic mirror. I had always imagined my father as looking something like that. Upon entering, he retired to the corner of the room and sat there in a squatting position. Thinking that I should prepare something and offer it to him, I lit a light and entered the closet of my room. I searched everywhere for something that would be suitable for an old man to eat. This I did though I knew there was nothing in the house. There was neither any opium nor any wine left for me. Suddenly the built-in niche below the ceiling caught my eye. As if inspired, I recalled an ancient wine flask that I had inherited. I think they had made the wine on the occasion of my birth. The wine flask was in the niche. I had never thought of this wine before. In fact I had forgotten that such a thing existed in the house. To reach the niche, I put a nearby stool under my feet. But as soon as I tried to pick up the wine flask, I was distracted by the following scene through the air inlet in the niche: In the field behind my room a bent, stooped old man was squatting under a cypress tree, and a young girl, no, a heavenly angel was standing in front of him, bending to give him a black lily with her right hand. The old man was chewing on the index finger of his left hand.

Although the girl was located exactly opposite me, it seemed that she did not pay attention to what was happening around her. She was looking without seeing anything, and an unconscious, involuntary smile had dried to the corner of her lips; it seemed as though she was thinking of an absent person. It was from the stool that I saw her dreadful charming eyes, eyes which were enchanting and reproachful at the same time. It was to the shining and dreadful balls of those worried, threatening and inviting eyes that my single beam of life was attracted, and it was to the depth of those same eyes that my life was drawn and in them annihilated. This attractive mirror drew my whole being to itself in a way unthinkable to any human being. Her curved Turkmen eyes with their intoxicating supernatural beam frightened as well as attracted. She seemed to have witnessed, with those eyes, supernatural happenings beyond those any mortal could witness. Her cheeks were high, her forehead wide, her eyebrows thin and connected and her lips meaty and half open. Her lips seemed to have just finished a long, warm kiss with which they were not yet satisfied. A tress of her disheveled, uncontrolled black hair which framed her silvery face was stuck on her temple. The tenderness of her limbs and the heedlessness of her ethereal movements bespoke her transient nature. Only a dancing girl at an Indian temple could have her harmonious gait.

Her placid form and her sorrowful happiness distinguished her from normal human beings. Her beauty was not normal at all. She appeared to me like an image in an opium hallucination. She induced the heated love of the mandrake in me. She had a slim, tall body with a line symmetrically dividing her shoulders, arms, breasts, buttocks and shins--it was as though she was separated from her mate.

She wore a wrinkled, black dress which, fitting her well, stuck to her body. When I saw her, she was about to jump over the brook which separated her from the old man. She failed. The old man laughed hysterically. He had a dry and repulsive laughter, a hybrid mocking laughter, which made one's hair stand on end. His facial expression did not change. It was the resonance of a laughter emerging from the depth of a hollow.

With the wine flask in my hand, I jumped off the stool out of fright. For some reason I was shaking: a shiver in which fright and enjoyment were intermingled. I felt as if I had jumped up from a pleasantly nightmarish dream. I rested the wine flask on the ground and held my head

between my hands. How many minutes--hours? I don't know. When I came to, I took the wine flask and reentered the room. My uncle had gone and the door of my room, like the open mouth of a corpse, was left ajar. The ring of the old man's laughter still echoed in my ears.

Even though it was getting dark, and the lamp was smoking, the effect of the pleasant and frightful shiver that I had felt was not wearing off. From this moment my life's direction changed. One glance was enough to bring about the change, because that heavenly angel, that ethereal girl, touched me more deeply than any human being would be able to comprehend.

I was not in full control of myself, and it seemed that I knew her name from before. The evil in her eyes, her color, her scent and her movements were all familiar to me. It was as though my souls, in the life before this, in the world of imagination, had bordered on her soul and that both souls, of the same essence and substance, were destined for union. I must have lived this life very close to her. I had no desire to touch her; the invisible beams that emanated from our bodies and mingled were sufficient for me. Isn't this terrifying experience which seemed so familiar to me quite the same as the feelings of two lovers who feel that they have known each other before and that a mysterious relationship has previously existed between them? Was it possible that someone else could affect me? The dry, repulsive and ominous laughter of the old man, however, tore our bonds asunder.

I thought about this throughout the night. Several times I wanted to go to the hole in the wall and look, but I was afraid of the old man's laughter. The next day I was still thinking of the same thing. Was it possible for me to give up seeing her entirely? The day after that, eventually, with such fear and trepidation I decided to put the wine flask back in its place. But when I pushed aside the curtain which covered the entrance to the closet, and looked in front of me, I saw a dark, black wall, as dark as the darkness which shrouds my whole life. I could not see any opening, crevice or hole to the outside. The square hole in the wall was completely closed and it had become part of the wall, as if it had never existed. I pulled the stool to me, but no matter how hard I struck my fists against the wall and listened, or how hard I looked at the wall in the light of the lamp, there was no trace of a hole in the wall. My blows had little effect on the thick, massive wall, now like a wall of lead.

Could I give all this up permanently? Yes, but everything was out of my control. Like a soul under torture, no matter how much I waited, guarded, or searched for her, it was all to no avail. Like the murderer who returns to the scene of his crime, or like a chicken with its head cut off, I walked all around outside our house, not for one day, but for two months and four days. I walked around our house so much that I could recognize every rock and pebble around there. I did not, however, find even a trace of the cypress tree, the stream of water, or of the people I had seen there. For nights on end I knelt on the ground in the moonlight, I wept and sought redress from the trees, from the stones and from the moon which she may have looked at, but I did not see any sign of her. On the contrary, I realized that all these activities were useless, because she could not be related to the substance of this world. For instance, the water with which she washed her hair must have come from a unique and unknown spring, or from a magical cave. Her dress was not made of the warp and woof of ordinary wool and cotton, or sewn by hands made of natural elements, like ordinary human hands. She was a distinguished creature. I realized that the lilies also were not ordinary lilies. I became certain that if she were to wash her face in ordinary water, her face would wither and if she were to pluck ordinary lilies with her long and delicate fingers, like flower petals, her fingers would wither as well.

I learned all these things. I found this girl, not this angel, to be a source of astonishment and indescribable inspiration for me. Her substance was delicate and intangible. It was she who created the sense of worship in me. I was certain that the gaze of a stranger, or of an ordinary person, would make her look shabby and withered.

Since the time when I lost her, since the time when a heavy wall, a solid, moist dam as heavy as lead, was created between her and me, I have felt that my life has become useless and confounded. Although her kind look, and the deep pleasure that I drew from seeing her, were universal--she would have no answers for me because she did not see me--nevertheless, I needed those eyes, and only one glance from her was sufficient to solve all philosophical difficulties and theological enigmas for me. After one glance from her, there would remain no mystery or secret for me.

From this time on, I increased my drinking, I smoked more opium. But alas, despite these remedies for hopelessness,

which were meant to paralyze and numb my thoughts, making me forget the thought of her, her figure and her face materialized in front of me more strongly daily, hourly, by the minute.

How could I forget? When my eyes were open, or when I closed them, in sleep and wakefulness, she was in front of me. Through the hole in the closet of my room--as through a hole in the night that enshrouds people's thought and logic--through the square hole which opened to the outside, she was constantly in front of me.

I was not allowed to rest; how could I rest? I formed the habit of taking promenades quite late--at sunset. For some reason I wanted, I felt I had to find the stream of water, the cypress tree and the lily plant. In the same way that I had become addicted to opium, I became accustomed to these promenades; it was as though some force compelled me to them. All along the way, all the time, I was thinking of her, recalling my initial glimpse of her. I wanted to find the place where I saw her on the thirteenth day of Farvardin. Were I to find that place, and if I could sit under that cypress tree, surely some tranquility would appear in my life. But, alas, there was nothing there but refuse, hot sand, the ribcage of a horse, and a dog sniffing the top of the trash. Had I really met her? Never. I only saw her stealthily, while hidden, through a hole, through an ill-fated hole in the closet of my room. I was like a hungry dog who sniffs the garbage, who searches, but who, as soon as people appear with more trash, runs away and hides himself out of fear. Later he returns to seek his favorite pieces in the new trash. I was in a similar situation, but for me the hole had been blocked up. To me she was a fresh and tender bouquet of flowers thrown on top of a trash pile.

The last evening that, like other evenings, I went on a walk, it was dark and it felt like rain, A thick mist covered everything. In the rainy weather which decreases the sharpness of colors, and diminishes the rudeness of the lines of objects, I felt free and relaxed, as though the raindrops were washing my black thoughts away. During this night, that which should not have happened came to pass. During these lonesome hours, during those minutes the duration of which I cannot recall exactly, I walked about involuntarily. In spite of the fog, her vague and shocking face--like the picture on pence covers emerging from behind the clouds and smoke--her motionless, expressionless face continued to materialize before my eyes much more powerfully than ever before.

It was quite late at night when I returned. A dense fog was hanging in the air, and I could not see the way clearly. But out of habit, and through a special sense which was awakened in me, I arrived at my doorstep, where I perceived that a black-clad figure, the figure of a woman, was sitting on the platform of my house.

I struck a match to find the keyhole, but for some reason my eyes involuntarily caught sight of the black-clad figure, and I recognized the two oblique eyes--two large, black eyes amid a silvery thin face--the same eyes which stared at a man's face without actually seeing. And I would have recognized her, even if I had not seen her before. No. I was not deceived. This black-clad figure was she. I stood there. I was petrified and felt like someone who is dreaming, and who knows that he is asleep, but who cannot wake up when he wants to. The match burnt itself, and then my fingers. Suddenly I returned to reality, turned the key, opened the door, and drew myself aside. Like someone familiar with the way, she got off the platform and crossed the dark corridor. She opened the door of my room and entered. I, following her, entered my room. Hurriedly I lit the lamp and saw that she had retired to my bed and was now lying on it. Her face was in the shade. I did not know whether she could see me or hear me. Her outward appearance showed no trace of fear or of desire to resist me. It seemed as though she had come here involuntarily.

Was she sick? Had she lost her way? She had come here unconsciously, quite in the same way that a sleep-walker would. No living creature can imagine the mental state I experienced at this moment. I felt a pleasant, yet indescribable, pain. No. I was not deceived. That lady was this same girl who had entered my room without being astonished, without uttering a word. I had always imagined our first meeting to be like this. This state was like a deep sleep, endless sleep for me; one has to be in a very deep sleep to have such a dream. The silence was like an eternal life for me, because one cannot speak at the beginning, or at the end of eternity.

To me she was a woman, and she had something supernatural about her. Her face reminded me of the confounding oblivion of other people's faces so strongly that upon seeing her my whole body began to shake, and my knees gave way. At this moment, I saw the whole painful story of my life behind her large eyes, her extremely large eyes, wet and glistening eyes, like black diamond balls thrown into tears. In her eyes, in her black eyes, I found the eternal night, the dense darkness I had been

searching for, and I plunged into its awesome, enchanting darkness. I felt as though some force was being extracted from my being; the ground was shaking underneath my feet. Had I fallen to the ground at that moment, I would have drawn an indescribable pleasure from that fall.

My heart stopped. Fearing that my breath might make her disappear, as if she were a piece of cloud or a puff of smoke, I restrained myself from breathing. Her silence was like a miracle. It was as though a glass wall intervened between us. This Moment, this hour, this eternity was choking me. Her weary eyes, as if witnessing something extraordinary which others cannot see--as if seeing death--were gradually closing. Eventually, her eyelids closed. The intensity of the moment shook me as if I were a drowning man coming to the surface for air. I wiped the perspiration from my forehead with the edge of my sleeve.

Her face had the same calm and motionless expression but it looked smaller and thinner. As she reclined she was chewing on the index finger of her left hand. Her face was the color of silver, and through her thin, black garment which fit her tightly one could see the outline of her legs, arms, the two breasts, and all the rest of her body.

Since her eyes were closed, I bent in order to see her better. But no matter how closely I observed her, it seemed that she was quite distant from me. Suddenly I felt that I had no information whatsoever about the secrets of her heart, and that there existed no relationship between the two of us.

I wanted to say something, but I was afraid that her ears, accustomed to some distant, heavenly and soft music, might become hateful because of my voice.

It occurred to me that she might be hungry or thirsty. I entered the closet of my room in order to find something for her, although I knew that there was nothing to be found in the house. But then, as if inspired, I recalled that above, in the niche, I had a flask of old wine which I had inherited from my father. I used the stool and brought the flask down. Tiptoeing carefully, I went to the side of the bed. She was sleeping like a tired, exhausted child. She was in a deep sleep and her long eyelashes, like velvet, were closed. I took the cap off the flask and through her locked teeth, gently poured a cup of wine down her throat.

For the first time in my life a feeling of sudden tranquillity had appeared, because those eyes were closed. It seemed that the canker that tortured me, and the nightmare that pressed my insides with its iron claws, had somewhat subsided. I brought my own chair, placed it beside the bed and stared at her face. What a childish face, and what a strange disposition! Was it possible that this woman, this girl, or this angel of torture (because otherwise, I didn't know what to call her), was it possible that she could have a double life? To be so quiet, and to be so unceremonious?

Now I could feel the warmth of her body, and I could smell the damp scent that rose from the heavy, black locks. My hand was not under my control, but yet I raised it and caressed a lock of her hair with it, the lock that was always stuck to her temple. Then I sank my fingers in her locks. Her hair was cold and damp, cold, absolutely cold. It was as though she had died several days ago. And I was not mistaken she was dead. I passed my hand in front of her chest and placed it on her breast and her heart. There was no sign of a heartbeat. Then I brought the mirror and held that in front of her nose. There was not even a trace of life in her...

Intending to make her warm with the heat of my own body, to give her my warmth and receive the coldness of death from her, hoping that in this way I could possibly blow my own soul into her body, I took off my clothes, climbed onto the bed and lay down beside her. We became stuck like the male and female mandrake. To be exact, her body was like the body of the female mandrake severed from its mate, and it had the same burning love of the mandrake. Her mouth, acrid and bitterish tasted like the bitter end of a cucumber. Her whole body had become cold, as cold as hailstones. I felt my blood freezing in my veins, and the cold penetrating to the depths of my heart. All my efforts being useless, I climbed off the bed and put my clothes back on. Not it was not a lie. She had come here to my room, to my bed and surrendered her body to me. She gave me her body, and she gave me her soul--both!

While she was still alive, while her eyes were brimful with life, only the memory of her eyes tortured me, but now, devoid of feeling and motionless and cold, with eyes already closed, she came and surrendered herself to me. With closed eyes!

This was the same creature that had poisoned my entire life; or maybe my life was originally susceptible to being poisoned, and I could not have had any life beside

a poisoned life. Now here in my room she gave me her body and her shadow. Her brittle, transient soul, which had no relation to the world of earthly beings, slowly came out of her black, wrinkled dress--the body that tortured her--and went away to the world of wandering shadows. Perhaps it took my shadow with it as well. Her body, however, devoid of any feeling or motion, was lying there. Her soft, lax muscles, her veins, tendons and bones were waiting to rot. A delicious feast was prepared for the worms and rats who dwell under the ground. In this adversity-stricken, miserable room itself a grave, amidst the darkness of the eternal night which was surrounding me, and which was sinking into the walls. I had to pass an endless, long, dark and cold night beside a corpse-- beside her corpse. It occurred to me that from the beginning to the end of eternity, since the beginning of my creation, a dead body, a cold, feelingless, motionless corpse had shared my dark room with me.

At this moment my thoughts froze. A unique, singular life was created in me, because my life was bound to all the existences that surrounded me, all the shadows that trembled around me. I felt an inseparable, deep relation with the world, with the movement of all creatures and with nature. All the elements of myself and of nature were related by the invisible streams of some mind-disturbing, agitating current. No thought or image was unnatural for me. I could understand the secrets of the ancient paintings, the mysteries of difficult, philosophical treatises, and the eternal foolishness of forms and norms, because at this moment I was participating in the revolution of the earth and the planets, in the growth of the plants, and in the activities of the animal world. The past and the future, far and near, shared my sentient life and were at one with me.

At such times everyone takes refuge in a strong habit, or in a scruple that he has developed in his life: the drunkard becomes drunk, the writer writes, the stone-cutter cuts stones, each giving vent to his anxiety and anger by escaping into the strong stimulant of his own life. And it is in moments like these that a real artist can create a masterpiece. But I, I who was devoid of talent and who was poor, a painter of pence covers, what could I do? With these dry, glistening and lifeless pictures, all of which were the same, as models, what could I paint that would become a masterpiece? But in my whole being I felt an excessive upsurge of talent and warmth; it was a special agitation and stimulus. I wanted to draw those eyes, which were now closed forever, on a

piece of paper and keep them for myself. This sensation forced me to realize my wish, that is, I did not do this voluntarily--one does not when one is imprisoned with a corpse. The thought of being imprisoned with a corpse filled me with a special joy.

Eventually, I extinguished the lamp which was giving off smoke, brought two candlesticks and lit them over her head. Against the flickering light of the candle, her face assumed more repose, and in the interplay of the light and darkness in the room, it acquired a mysterious, ethereal air. I took some paper along with my working tools and went to the side of her bed--this was her bed now. I wanted to copy this form, which was condemned to a slow and very gradual disintegration, this form which seemed to be devoid of motion and expression, without being disturbed. I wanted to record its fundamental lines on paper. I wanted to choose from this face those lines which would affect me. No matter how sketchy and simple a painting may be, it must have an impact, and it must have soul. But I, who was accustomed to printed paintings on pence covers, now had to begin to think: I had to materialize in front of me my own fancy, that is, that aspect of her face which had influence upon me. I wanted to look at her face once, close my eyes, and then draw on the paper those lines of her face that I would choose. In this way, perhaps, using my own intellect, I could find a respite for my tortured soul. In short, I took refuge in the world of lines and shapes.

This subject was quite relevant to my lifeless method of painting--painting with a corpse as a model. I was a painter of corpses. But her eyes, her closed eyes--did I need to see them again? Was their imprint on my thought and mind tangible enough?

I do not recall exactly how many times I copied her face, but none of my reproductions was satisfactory. I tore them up as I finished painting them. I neither felt tired because of doing this, nor did I feel the passage of time.

It was about daybreak. A dull light had entered my room through the windowpanes. I was busy working on a picture which, in my own opinion, was better than the rest. But the eyes? The eyes, which had assumed a reproachful expression as if I had committed unforgivable sins--I could not put those eyes down on paper. Then suddenly, all the life and the memory of those eyes disappeared from my mind. My efforts were useless. No matter how intensely I looked at her face, I still could not recall

its expression. At this same time, I suddenly saw that her cheeks were reddening; they were a liver-red color like the color of the meat in front of a butcher shop. She came to life. Her exceedingly wide and astonished eyes, eyes in which all the brightness of life was gathered and glimmering in a sickly light, her sick, reproachful eyes very slowly opened and looked at my face. This was the first time that she was aware of my presence. She looked at me and then, once again, her eyes gradually closed. This event did not take more than perhaps a moment, but it was enough time for me to capture the expression of her eyes and put it on paper. I drew this expression with the sharp point of the brush, and this time I did not tear up the picture.

Then I got up from where I was painting, walked slowly to her and stood near her. I thought she was alive, that she had come back to life, and that my love had invested my spirit with her body; but as I drew near, I sensed the smell of a dead body--the smell of a decomposed, dead body. Small worms were wiggling on her body, and two flies, the color of golden bees, were circling her in the light of the candle. If she were completely dead, then how did her eyes open? I don't know if I had seen this in a dream, or if this was happening in real life.

I do not wish anyone to ask why, but my main concern was her face, no, it was her eyes, and now these eyes were in my possession. I had the essence of her eyes on paper. Her body, a body that was condemned to destruction, to nourishing the worms and rats that dwell under the ground, was no longer of any use to me. From now on she was under my control; I was no longer her vassal. Every minute that I so desired, I could look at her eyes. I took the painting with the utmost care, and put it into my own tin can, where I keep my profits, then I hid the tin can in the closet of my room,

The night was moving on, tiptoeing stealthily. It seemed that it had sufficiently recovered from its weariness. Soft, distant sounds, like the sound of a fowl or a passing bird's dream or perhaps the whisper of the growth of the plants, could be sensed. The pale stars were disappearing behind the mass of clouds. I felt the gentle breath of the morning on my face, at the same time I heard the crow of a rooster from afar.

What could I do with her body? It had already started to disintegrate First it occurred to me to bury her in my room; then I thought of taking her out and throwing her in a certain well around which black lilies have grown.

But all these plots, to prevent other people from seeing, entailed much thought, labor and dexterity. Furthermore, since I did not wish any stranger to look at her, I had to do all this alone and with my own hands. I was not thinking of myself, because, after her, what else was there in living? But as far as she was concerned, no ordinary human being, no one except myself, should ever glance at her body. She came to my room, and she surrendered her cold body and her shadow to me, in order to prevent others from seeing her; in order not to become defiled by the looks of strangers. At last a thought crossed my mind: if I were to chop her body up and put it in a suitcase--my very own old suitcase--then I could take the suitcase out with me to a distant place, far away from people's eyes, and bury it there.

This time I no longer hesitated. I fetched a bone-handled knife which I had in the closet of my room and, very carefully, I first tore the thin black dress which, like a spider's web, had imprisoned her within itself; or should I say, I tore the only thing that covered her body. It seemed to me that she had grown taller. Then I severed her head. Drops of cold, coagulated blood poured out of her throat. I cut off her arms and legs, then I arranged her whole body, torso and limbs, in the suitcase. As for her dress, I covered her body with the same black dress. Finally, I locked the suitcase and put the key in my pocket. When the job was complete, I felt relieved. I picked up the suitcase and weighed it: it was heavy. Never before had I felt so fatigued. Definitely no. I would never be able to carry that suitcase out by myself.

It was cloudy once again, and a light rain was falling. I left the room to look for someone who would help me carry the suitcase away. Not a soul was to be seen anywhere near. When I paid more attention, a little farther away from where I was, through the fog, I saw an old man who had hunched his shoulders and who was sitting under a cypress tree. His face, over which he had wrapped a wide scarf, could not be seen. Slowly I approached him, but before I could utter a word, a hybrid, dry and repulsive laughter which made my hair stand on end issued from the old man; then he said, "If you are looking for a porter, I can help you. Were you looking for a porter? I also own a carriage that I use as a hearse. Everyday I carry corpses to Shah Abdul Azim and bury them there. I also make coffins. I have coffins for every person's perfect measurements, not a hair off. I am ready myself--right now!..."

He laughed so hysterically that his shoulders shook. With my hand, I pointed in the direction of my house. Without giving me an opportunity to utter a word, he said, "It's not necessary. I know where you live. Right now. Shall we go?"

He got up from where he was sitting, and I started to walk towards my house. I entered my room and, with great difficulty, brought the "dead" suitcase to the front of the door. There, I saw a ramshackle old hearse to which a pair of thin, black, skeleton-like horses were hitched. The old man, shoulders hunched, was sitting up there on the driver's seat. He had a long whip in his hand, and he did not turn to look at me. With difficulty I placed the suitcase in the carriage, in the middle of which there was a special place for putting coffins. Then I climbed into the carriage and laid myself down in the middle of the place intended for coffins. I placed my head on the edge of this place so that I could see the surrounding scenery. Finally I slid the suitcase towards me, rested it on my chest, and held it tightly with both hands.

The whip whistled through the air, and the horses, whose labored breath issued through their nostrils like columns of smoke in rainy weathers began to move with long but gentle leaps. Their slim forelegs, like the hand of a thief severed of its fingers by law and plunged into hot oil, struck the ground gently and noiselessly. In the damp air, the sound of the bells on their necks had a special ring. An indescribable relief, the cause of which I did not know, had filled me from head to toe so thoroughly that I could barely feel the movement of the hearse. The only thing that I felt was the weight of the suitcase on my chest.

Her dead body, her corpse. It seemed as though this weight had always been pressing on my chest. A thick fog covered the scenery on the sides of the road. The hearse was passing mountains plains and rivers with a special speed and comfort. Around me now a new and unique scene, one that I had seen neither in a dream nor in wakefulness, came to view. On both sides of the road there were mountains with serrated, jagged tops and strange, suppressed, cursed trees. From among the trees grey, triangular, cubic and prismatic houses with dark, low windows lacking any panes, were visible. These windows resembled the giddy eyes of one who is experiencing a delirious fever. I don't know what these walls had in them which enabled them to transfer their coldness and chill into a man's heart. Since no living being could ever dwell in those houses, they could only

have been built to accommodate the shadows of ethereal beings.

Apparently either the carriage driver was taking me along a special road or he was taking a by-road. In some places the road was surrounded only by hacked tree trunks and crooked, bent trees. Behind the trees there were high and low geometrical houses--some conic, others in the shape of truncated cones. All the houses had narrow, crooked windows--from within which black lilies grew, clinging to the doors and walls. Then, suddenly, the whole scene disappeared under a thick fog. Pregnant, heavy clouds were hugging and pressing the mountain peaks, and drops of rain, like wandering particles of dust, were floating in the atmosphere. After traveling for quite some time, the hearse stopped near a high, arid mountain. I slid the suitcase away from my chest and got up.

Behind the mountain there was a secluded, quiet and pleasant spot, a place that even though I had not seen or recognized it, seemed to be quite familiar--it was not beyond my imagination. The surface of the ground was covered with scentless black lily plants as if until now no mortal had set foot on that ground. I put the suitcase down. The old carriage driver, turning his face away from me, said, 'This place is near Shah Abdul Azim. There is no place better for you than here. Not even a bird can be found here. Isn't that right!...'

I put my hand into my pocket to pay the carriage driver, but all the money I had in my pocket was two qerans and one 'abbasi. The carriage drivers, uttering a disgusting laugh, said, 'Forget it. Pay me later. I know where you live. Anything else I can do for you? Let me tell you--as far as digging graves is concerned, I am quite experienced, you understand? Don't be shy! Let's go right over there near the river, by that cypress tree. I shall dig a ditch the size of the suitcase for you, and then I will leave.'

The old man, with an agility the like of which I could not imagine, jumped down from his seat. I picked up the suitcase and together we walked to a tree trunk, on the edge of the dry riverbed. Then he said, 'Is this place good?'

Without waiting for an answer, he began digging the ground with his pick and shovel. I put the suitcase on the ground and watched him with astonishment. The old man was going about his job with the agility and dexterity of an expert. While digging, he found something resembling a

glazed jar. He wrapped the jar in a dirty handkerchief then he got up and said, 'And here is the ditch. It is exactly the size of the suitcase, not a hair off!'

I put my hand in my pocket to pay him. All I had was two gerans and one 'abbasi. The old man uttered a ghastly laugh and said, 'Don't bother. Forget it. I know where you live. Besides--for my wages I found a jar. It is a Raq jar from the ancient city of Ray.'

Then he laughed so hard that the hunched shoulders of his doubled-up body shook. He put the jar, wrapped up in a dirty handkerchief, under his arm, walked towards the hearse, and with a special agility climbed up onto the seat. The whip sounded through the air, the panting horses began to walk. In the damp air, the sound of their bells had a special ring. The carriage gradually disappeared into a dense fog.

Once alone, I felt relieved, as though a heavy burden had been removed from my chest. A pleasant tranquility enveloped me from head to toe. I looked around. I was in a small area, confined by pitch black hills and mountains. On one mountain range there were some ruins and ancient buildings made of thick bricks. A dry riverbed could also be seen in that vicinity. It was a cozy, secluded and quiet place. I was extremely happy, and I thought that when those large eyes woke from their earthly slumber, they would find this place suitable to their structure and mood. Besides, this girl had to be away from other people's dead, in the same way that she lived her life away from other people.

I picked up the suitcase carefully and put it in the middle of the ditch. The ditch was exactly the size of the suitcase, not a hair off. Then, for the last time, I wanted to look into it--into the suitcase--one more time. I looked around. Not a soul could be seen. I took the key out of my pocket and opened the suitcase. But when eventually I pushed the edge of her black dress aside, there, amid the coagulated blood and wiggling worms, I saw two large black eyes, two expressionless eyes, fixed on me. My life had sank to the depths of those eyes. Hastily, I closed the suitcase and covered it with dirt; then I walked on the dirt until it was well packed. Next, I fetched some of those scentless black lilies and placed them on her grave. Then I fetched some rocks and sand and strewed them on the grave to obliterate all traces completely so that no one could distinguish it. I accomplished this task so well that even I could not distinguish her grave from the rest of the ground.

When my work was finished, I looked at myself. To my clothes, which were soiled and torn, a black piece of coagulated blood was stuck. Two flies, the color of golden bees, were flying around me, and small worms, wiggling among themselves, were stuck to me. Then I tried to clean the bloodstain off the tail of my garment. The more I wetted my sleeve with saliva and rubbed it onto the stain, the more the bloodstain expanded assuming a darker color. Soon the stain covered my whole body, and I felt the chill of the coagulating blood on me.

It was near sunset. A light rain was falling. Involuntarily, I began to walk, following the tracks of the hearse; but as soon as it grew dark I lost trace of the carriage tracks. Aimlessly, thoughtlessly and involuntarily I walked slowly in a thick, tangible darkness towards an unknown destination. I had lost her, I had seen those large eyes amid the coagulated blood, and, I was walking in a dark night, in the deep darkness that had shrouded my entire life, because the two eyes that had served as my life's beacon were extinguished forever. It was thus immaterial whether I would arrive at a place or an abode; perhaps I would never arrive at any destination.

An absolute hush covered everything. I felt that everyone had abandoned me. I took refuge in the lifeless universe. Among the cycle of nature, the deep darkness which had descended on my soul, and me, a relationship was established. This silence was a language incomprehensible to mortals. The intensity of the intoxication made me dizzy; I felt like vomiting. My feet began to give out and I felt extremely weary. I walked into the graveyard which was on the side of the road and sat on a tombstone there. I took my head in my hands, puzzled about my own situation. Suddenly the echo of a dry, repulsive laughter jolted me back into reality. When I turned in the direction of the sound and looked, I saw a figure whose head and face were wrapped in a scarf. The figure, who was sitting beside me, was carrying an object wrapped in a handkerchief under his arm. He turned his face toward me and said, 'I bet you were going to town, and you lost your way, huh? Perhaps you are asking yourself what I am doing in the graveyard this late at night! But rest assured, my calling is dealing with the dead. I am a gravedigger by profession, huh? I know every inch of this place. For instance, right today I went to dig a grave, and I uncovered this jar. Do you realize that this is a Raq jar, that it is from the ancient city of Ray, huh? Let's assume it's a useless jar. I give it to you to keep

as a souvenir from me, o.k.?

I put my hand in my pockets took out two qerans and one 'abbasi to offer him. The old man, with a repulsive, dry laugh, said, 'No, forget it! I know you. I know where you live. Look, I have a hearse right around the corner. Let me take you home, Huh? It's only a couple of steps away.'

He placed the jar in my lap and rose. He laughed so violently that his shoulders shook. I picked up the jar and began to follow that old man's doubled-up figure. At the turn in the road, a ramshackle hearse with two meager black horses was standing. With amazing agility, the old man climbed up the hearse and sat down on the seat. As for me, I entered the carriage and lay down in the special place made for coffins. I placed my head on the high edge so that I could see the scenery. I put the jar on my chest and held it tightly.

The whip whistled through the air, and the horses, panting, began to move with long and gentle leaps. Their hooves touched the ground softly and noiselessly. In the damp air, the sound of the bells on their necks had a special ring. From behind the clouds, the stars, like the balls of some glistening eyes emerging from amid clotted blood, watched over the earth. A pleasant relief filled me; only the jar, like the weight of a corpse, pressed on my chest. In the darkness, fearing that they might slide and fall, the intertwined trees with their twisted branches seemed to be holding each other by the hand. Along the side of the road, there were some strange houses with distorted geometrical shapes and a few black windows. An evil, dull radiance like the light from a glowworm, emanated from the walls of these houses. In an awe-inspiring scene, the trees were passing by in groups and clumps, escaping one after the other. It seemed, however, that the lily stalks became tangled in their legs and feet and made them fall to the ground. The smell of dead bodies, the smell of decomposed flesh, had filled my soul as if that smell had always been penetrating my body and as if I had passed all my life lying in a black coffin, being carried about amid mist and hovering shadows by a stooped, old man whose face I could not see,

The hearse came to a halt. I picked up the jar and jumped down. I was in front of my house. I hurried into my room, put the jar on the table, picked up the tin can, the same can which served as my piggy bank and which I had hidden in the closet of my room. I came to the door to give the tin can to the old carriage driver instead of a reward. But he had disappeared. There was no sign of either him

or his carriage. Disappointed, I returned to my room, lit the lamp, took the jar out of the handkerchief and, using my sleeve, cleaned the dust off of it. The jar had an ancient, transparent purple glaze which had been transformed into the color of a crushed bee; on one side of its body, in the form of a diamond, there was a border of black lilies, and in the middle of it her face was in the middle of the diamond frame. It was the face of a woman whose eyes were black and large, eyes larger than normal; her eyes reproached me as if I had committed some unforgivable crime of which I was not aware. She had spell-binding eyes which were simultaneously worried, perplexed, threatening and hope-inspiring. Her eyes were timid, yet attractive; an intoxicating, supernatural light shone from their depths. She had prominent cheeks, a wide forehead, slender and connected eyebrows, full, half-open lips, and disheveled hair, a strand of which was stuck to her temple.

I took the picture that I had painted of her the previous night out of the tin can and compared the two; my picture was not even slightly different from the picture on the jar --they were pictures of each other, you could say. They were identical and they were both painted by an unfortunate painter of pence covers. Perhaps, at the time of the painting, the spirit of the painter of the jar had entered my body and taken possession of my hand. The paintings were not distinguishable; however, my picture was on a piece of paper, while the painting on the jar had a transparent ancient glaze which imparted a mysterious air, an unusual, strange soul, to that picture. In the depths of her eyes, the flames of an evil soul were glowing. No, it was incredible. She had the same large, thoughtless eyes, the same secretive disposition; she, however, was free! No one could comprehend my feelings at this moment. I wanted to run away from myself. Could such a thing really happen? Once more all of my life's misfortunes materialized in front of my eyes. Weren't the eyes of one person enough in my life? Now two people were looking at me. Two people were looking at me through her eyes. No, this was absolutely unbearable. The eyes which were buried near the mountain, by the trunk of the cypress tree on the edge of the dry riverbed the eyes which were underneath black lilies, amid thick blood, in the middle of the feast of the beasts and insects; the eyes which before long, plant roots would penetrate and suck; these same eyes, brimful of vigorous life, were looking at me!

I had never imagined myself to be so unfortunate and damned. Nevertheless, at the same time, because of a

latent guilt, I felt an unjustifiable, strange sense of pleasure, for I realized that I had an ancient fellow-sufferer. Wasn't this painter of ancient times, who hundreds or perhaps thousands of years ago had painted this picture on this jar, wasn't he a fellow-sufferer of mine? Had he not passed these same stages that I am passing? Until this moment I had thought myself to be the most wretched of all creatures, but now I realized that at some time on those mountains, in those ruined houses and habitations built of heavy brick, among those people whose bones have rotted and whose limbs have turned into particles of living black lily plants--I realized that among them there had lived an afflicted painter, a damned painter; perhaps among them an unfortunate painter of pencease covers had lived--one exactly like me. I realized this. Only I could understand that he, too, had been burning and dissolving amidst two large, black eyes, exactly like me. This realization comforted me.

Finally, I put my painting beside the painting on the jar. Then I went out of the room and prepared my own special pot of fire. When the charcoal turned red, I brought the pot of fire inside and placed it in front of the paintings. I gave several pulls to the opium pipe, and in a state of ecstasy I stared at the pictures; I was trying to concentrate, and only the ethereal smoke of opium could concentrate my thoughts and create a relief from them.

I smoked all my remaining opium so that this strange narcotic agent would dispel all the difficulties and would push aside the veils which covered my sight; could it dispel all these dense, distant, grey recollections? The state I was expecting appeared; it was beyond my expectations. Gradually my thoughts grew exact, large and enchanting, and I entered a state of half-sleep, half-coma.

Soon, I felt that the pressure and the weight on my chest were removed, as if the law of gravity no longer existed for me. I was flying freely in pursuit of my thoughts, which were now large, delicate and precise. A profound, indescribable pleasure filled my being from head to toe, and I was relieved from the burden of my binding body. I was in a world that was quiet but full of enchanting and delectable shapes and colors. Then the train of my thoughts was interrupted and the remainder was dissolved in these colors and shapes. I was drowning in waves,, waves which were caressing and ethereal. I could hear my heart beat, and I could feel the blood moving in my veins. This was a very meaningful and intoxicating moment

for me.

From the bottom of my heart I wanted and wished to give myself up to the inactivity of oblivion. If such an oblivion were available; if it could be enduring; if when my eyes closed, beyond sleep, they would enter utter nothingness so that I could not feel my existence; if it were possible for my existence to become dissolved in a black stain, in a musical note, or in a colorful beam of light; if these colors and shapes would become larger and expand until they disappeared--then my wishes would be fulfilled.

Gradually, a state of sluggishness and numbness overtook me; it was like a pleasant fatigue or like delicate waves flowing from my body. I felt that my life was passing in reverse. Gradually, the stages and events of the past, and my own obliterated, forgotten childhood reminiscences, advanced before my eyes. I was not only observing, I was participating in these events; I could feel them. I was rapidly growing smaller and younger; then suddenly my thoughts grew dark and vague. It seemed as though all my existence hung at the end of a thin hook; I was suspended at the bottom of a deep, dark well. Then I was unhooked. I was sliding and falling down without encountering any obstacles. It was a never ending abyss in an eternal night. After that, some vague and obliterated veils took shape in front of my eyes, and I experienced a moment of utter oblivion. When I came to, suddenly, I found myself in a small room, in a special position, a position which seemed strange, yet at the same time, natural.

The new world to which I awoke, with its environs and its modes of life and activity, was thoroughly known and close to me. This world was so familiar that I could even say I felt more at home in it than I had in my previous life and its environs. In a way this was an echo, or a reflection, of my previous life. Although a different world, it was so near and relevant to me that I thought I had returned to my original environment. I was reborn in an ancient world which was both closer and more natural to me.

Dawn was breaking. A tallow burner was burning on the mantle in my room, and a quilt was spread in the corner. I was not asleep, however. I felt that my body was hot and that blood stains were stuck to my cloak and scarf.

My hands, too, were stained with blood. But in spite of restlessness and excitement, a feeling stronger than the desire to obliterate the traces of blood, even stronger than the thought of being picked up by the magistrate, was generated in me. Besides, I had been waiting to be picked up by the magistrate for a long time now. I decided, however, to finish the poisonous wine from the cup in the niche with one gulp. The need to write had now become a compulsion. I wanted to drag out the fiend which tortured my soul. I wanted to record all that I had wanted to say but had refrained from saying. At last, after a moment of hesitation, I pulled the tallow burner closer and began to write as follows:

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I always thought forbearance from speech was the best of things. I thought that one should, like a bittern, spread his wings on the shore of the sea and, sit alone there. But now I am no longer in control, because that which should not have happened has come to pass. Who knows? Perhaps immediately, or perhaps an hour from now, a group of drunken night watchmen will come to apprehend me. I have no desire whatsoever to save my carcass. Even if I obliterate the blood stains, there is little room left for denial. Before they lay their hands on me, however, I will drink a cup of the wine in that wine flask; a cup of my own inherited wine which I placed in the niche.

Now I want to press my entire life, as if it were a bunch of grapes, in my hands; and I want to pour its essence, no, its wine, drop by drop, like water containing the holy dust of Mecca, into the dry throat of my shadow. All I want to do before I go is to record on paper all the sufferings which have, like consumption or leprosy, eaten away at me in the corner of this room. In this way, I think, I will be able to arrange and organize my thoughts better. Do I intend to write a will? Never. I do not own any property that the government can confiscate, nor do I profess a faith which Satan can take away. Besides, what on earth is there that could have the least value for me? That which is usually referred to as "life" I have already lost; I allowed this, and I wanted it to be lost. And after my departure, what the hell, I don't give a damn if anyone does or does not read my tattered notes! I am writing only because this drive to write has become a necessity for me. I am in need--I am in need more than ever before to relate my thoughts to my imaginary creature, to my shadow: that same ominous shadow which is bending on the wall in front of the tallow burner and

which seems to be reading, carefully swallowing whatever I write. This shadow definitely has a better sense of perception than I. Only with my shadow can I hold a meaningful conversation. He is the one who makes me talk. Only he can know me. I am certain that he understands... I want to pour, drop by drop, the essence, no, the bitter wine of my life into my shadow's dry throat and say to him, "This is my life!"

Whoever looked at me yesterday saw a distressed, ailing youth; but if he looked at me today, he would see a stooped old man with white hair, sore eyes and a leprous lip. I am afraid to look out of the window of my room or to look at myself in the mirror, because everywhere I see a multiplicity of my own reflections. To be able to describe my life for my stooped shadow, I must narrate a story. Oh, there are so many stories about childhood days, loves, acts of copulation, weddings and deaths and not a grain of truth in any of them. I am tired of telling stories and of fanciful phraseology.

I shall try to press this cluster, but whether there will be the slightest bit of truth in it, I do not know. I do not know where I am; I do not know whether the patch of sky above my head, or the few spans of ground on which I sit, belongs to Nishapur, to Balkh or to Benares. Anyway, I trust nothing.

In the past, I have seen so many contradictory things and have heard so many inconsistent speeches; my sight--this thin yet hard substance behind which the soul abides--has rubbed itself over so many surfaces that now I do not believe anything. I doubt the weight and the permanence of objects as well as the visible and manifest facts that relate to this very moment. For example, if I were to touch the stone mortar in the corner of our yard and ask it, "Are you stationary and firm?" and it were to respond in the affirmative, I am not sure whether I should believe it or not.

Am I a distinct, singular being? I don't know. However, when I looked into the mirror just now, I did not recognize myself. No, that "I" of previous times is dead; it has disintegrated. Between us, however, there exists no physical obstruction or obstacle. I know I should narrate my story, but I don't know where to begin. All of life is made up of stories and tales. I must press the cluster of grapes and pour its essence, spoon by spoon, down the dry throat of this old shadow.

It is difficult to know where to begin, because all my

restless thoughts at this moment belong to this moment. They know no hour, minute or history. For me, something that happened yesterday might be more ancient, or less effectual, than an event which took place a thousand years ago.

Perhaps the reason for the appearance of all these reminiscences is the fact that all my relations with the world of the living are now severed--past, future, hour, day, month and year are all the same to me. These stages would be meaningful for the ordinary people, for the rabble--yes, that is exactly the word I was looking for--rabble with two b's. These stages apply to the rabble whose lives have recognized seasons and limits, such as the divisions of the year, and who live in the temperate zone of life. My life, on the other hand, my entire life, has had one season and one state. Even though a constant flame burns in the center of my body and melts me away like a candle, my life seems to have passed in a cold zone and in an eternal darkness.

My life is gradually melting away in the middle of the four walls that create my room, amid the strong fortification that is built around my life and thoughts. No, I am mistaken. My life is like a fresh stump of wood lying at the side of a tripod: it is scorched and charred by the fire of burning wood, but it neither burns thoroughly nor stays fresh and green--the smoke and the fumes suffocate it.

Like all other rooms, my room, made of sun-dried and baked bricks, is built on the ruins of thousands of ancient houses. It has a whitewashed interior with a strip of inscription. It is exactly like a grave. The smallest details of my room, like the spider in the corner, for instance, are sufficient to occupy my thoughts for many long hours. Since the time that I have become bedridden, they do not pay very much attention to me. The horse-shoe nail which is hammered into the wall is the supporting nail of my cradle and possibly the cradles of many other children. A short distance below this nail, a piece of the plaster has fallen off the wall. From this exposed crevice the smell of objects and creatures who previously occupied this room can be scented to such an extent that no current or breeze has been able to dispel the stink of these stagnant, lazy and dense odors: the smell of bodily sweat, the smell of past sicknesses, the smell of bad breath, the smell of rancid oil, of rotting mats, of burnt omelettes, the smell of mallow, the room-smell of a boy just beyond puberty, smells that have come in from the outside as well as dead

smell or dying smells--all these smells are fresh and have retained their distinctive qualities. There are, however, many other smells which, although their sources are now unknown, have left their imprint on this room.

My room has one dark closet and two windows to the outside--to the world of the rabble. One of the windows opens onto our own courtyard, the other onto the street. Through this window and that street I am connected with the city of Ray, the city which they call the bride of the world and which has thousands of streets, alleys, unpretentious houses, madrasahs and caravaneries. This biggest city of the world breathes and lives behind my room. Here, in the corner of my room when I close my eyes, the scrambled shadows of the city, those which have affected me, including its mansions, mosques and gardens, all materialize before my eyes.

These two windows connect me with the outside world, the world of the rabble; but in my room there is a mirror on the wall in which I look at my own face. Considering how limited my life is, a mirror is much more important to me than the world of the rabble, a world with which I have no business.

Of all the scenery of the city, in front of my window there is a butcher shop which uses two sheep a day. Each time I look out of the window I see the butcher. Early every morning, two black, gaunt packhorses--consumptive horses who cough heavily and whose skeleton-like forelegs end in hoofs as though, following some severe natural order, their forelegs had been cut off and the stumps plunged into boiling oil--these horses, with carcasses hanging on each side, are brought to the front of the shop. The butcher strikes his hennaed beard with his greasy hand, then, with a buyer's eye, he appraises the carcasses, chooses two of them, weighs their fat tails in his hand and takes them and hangs them on the hooks in his shop. Breathing heavily, the packhorses move on. The butcher rubs and caresses the bloodstained, slit-throated bodies whose eyes are transfixed and whose bloodstained eyelids seem to emerge from the middle of their black skulls. He takes a bone-handled knife, carefully cuts their bodies up into pieces and sells the lean meat to his customers with a smile. And with what pleasure he performs all this! I am certain that he draws special pleasure and intoxication from this. The burly yellow dog who has dominated our locale, and who constantly begs the butcher with submissive and innocent-looking eyes, that dog also knows all this. He, too, knows that the butcher enjoys his profession

A little distance farther away, under an archway, there sits a strange old man who has spread a display cloth in front of him. On display he has placed a sickle, two horseshoes, several types of colored beads, a long-bladed knife, a mousetrap, a rusted pair of pliers, a dropper for adding water to inkpots, a gap-toothed comb, a trowel and a glazed jar covered by a dirty handkerchief. I have watched this old man for hours, days and months. He always wears a dirty scarf and a cloak made in Shushtar; his collar is open and through it the white hair of his chest protrudes. With a talisman attached to his arm, and fistular eyelids afflicted by some stubborn, shameless disease that eats at them, he sits in that same position day after day. But on Thursdays, in spite of his yellow or missing teeth, he recites the Qur'an. This seems to be how he makes his living, for I have never seen anyone buy anything from him. It seems that this man's face has been a part of every nightmare I have ever had. What stubborn, foolish thoughts, like weeds, emanate from behind his narrow forehead or from his close-cropped head, on which there is a protuberance and around which he wraps a yellowish turban? There seems to be a special relationship between the old man's life and the assortment of wares displayed in front of him. Several times I decided to go and talk with him or to buy something from his display, but I did not dare.

According to my nanny, this man, in his youth, had been a potter. Now that he earns his living as a retailer, however, he has kept only this one jar for himself.

These were my links to the outside world. Now the world inside: the only people left for me were a nanny and a whore of a wife. But nanny is her nurse as well. She is the mother of the two of us. For not only were my wife and I close relatives, but granny breastfed us together. In principle, her mother was my mother as well, because I never saw my own parents. It was her mother, that tall lady with grey hair, who brought me up. I loved her mother like my own, and it was because of this love that I married her daughter.

I have heard several different stories about my parents. Only one of them, however, the one that nanny told me, do I imagine to be true. Nanny told me that my father and uncle were twins; both of them had the same face, the same physiognomy and the same disposition; even the quality of their voices was similar, so much so that they could not easily be distinguished from each other. Furthermore, such an intrinsic bond and sense of mutual

sympathy existed between them that if one became ill, the other became ill as well. They were, as they say, the spitting image of one another. Anyway, they both chose to be merchants and, at the age of twenty, they went to India. They took Ray goods such as different types of material, shot silk, printed cloth, cotton cloth, jobbas, shawls, needles, ceramic bowls, fuller's earth and pencase covers to India and sold them there. Apparently my father stayed in the city of Benares, and he sent my uncle to the other cities of India for commercial enterprises: after some time my father fell in love with a virgin, a Bugam Dasi girl, a dancer at the temple of the Linga. This girl's profession required that she perform religious ritual dances in front of the large Linga as well as take care of the temple. She was a warm-hearted girl with olive-colored skin, lemon-shaped breasts, large, slanted eyes, and narrow connected eyebrows between which she wore a red beauty-mark.

Now I can imagine Bugam Dasi, that is to say my mother, dancing with measured and harmonious movements to the tune of sitars, drums, lutes, cymbals and horns. She is wearing a gold-embroidered, colorful silk sari; her dress is open at the neck; her heavy, black tresses, over which she wears a brocaded headband and which are as dark as the eternal night, are knotted at the back of her head; she wears bracelets on her wrists and ankle, and a golden ring for which her nostril is pierced. Her eyes are large, black, languid and slanted; her teeth are brilliant. She is dancing to a soft and monotonous melody played by naked men wearing only shalmas; she is dancing to a meaningful melody in which all the mystery, magic, superstitions, lusts and sufferings of the people of India are summarized and secured. Depending on appropriate movements and lustful gestures-holy movements, Bugam Dasi opens up like flower petals, shimmies her shoulders and arms, bends, and once again returns to normal. What effect must these movements of special import, eloquent without the use of words, have had upon my father? The acrid, pepperish smell of her sweat, mingled with the scent of champac and sandalwood oil, especially increased the lustful consequence of this scene. I mean that scent which smells of the sap of the trees of distant lands, which revives all those suppressed, distant sensations: the smell of a medicine chest, of Indian drugs kept in nurseries, of unidentified oils from a land full of meaning, tradition and ancient rituals--perhaps a smell like the smell of my homemade concoctions. All of these must have revived my father's latent and suppressed memories. Now, my father became so ensnared in the love of Bugam Dasi that he embraced the

dancing girl's religion and joined the cult of the Linga. As soon as the girl became pregnant, however, they expelled her from the service of the temple.

I have just been born when my uncle returns from his travels. His taste and his sense of love apparently being the same as my father's, he too falls deeply in love with my mother and seduces her--his external and intrinsic resemblance to my father facilitates his task. When the affair is exposed, my mother threatens to abandon both, unless my father and uncle undergo the trial by a Nag-serpent; she will belong to the survivor of the trial.

The trial requires that my father and uncle be isolated in a dark room, like a dungeon, in which a Nag-serpent has been released. It is assumed that whoever is stung by the serpent will scream; then the snake charmer will open the door of the room and save the other. Bugam Dasi will belong to the survivor.

Before being confined to the dungeon, my father asks Bugam Dasi to perform the sacred ritual of the temple and dance one more time before him. She agrees to his request and, in the light of the flame, dances to the tune of the snake charmer's flute. With the meaningful, harmonious and wanton movements of a Nag-serpent, she twists and turns. Then my father and my uncle are confined in a special room with a Nag-serpent, but instead of the expected shriek of anguish, a moan amid a hair-raising peal of laughter, the laughter of a madman, is heard. When the door is opened, my uncle walks out of the room. To everyone's astonishment his face is aged and anguished. He has heard the snake's hiss and the sound of its coils sliding upon one another; he had seen the snake's round, evil eyes, its poisonous fangs; and he has seen its body: a small head and a long neck, terminating in a spoon-shaped pustule. Aged and deranged from dread and fright, my uncle walks out of the room with his hair turned white.

According to the condition and the promise, Bugam Dasi is given to my uncle. There remains the frightful fact, however, that this man could be either my father or my uncle. The survivor is deranged; he has lost his memory completely, and he does not recognize the child. Based on this lack of recognition, nevertheless, everyone imagines him to be my uncle. Isn't the totality of this story related to my life? Or, hasn't the resonance of that hideous laughter, or the terror of that trial influenced me? Doesn't all this affect me?

Henceforth, I am nothing more than an extra mouth to feed. At last my uncle, or father, accompanied by Bugam Dasi, returns to the city of Ray pursuing his own mercantile affairs. He brings me along and entrusts me to the care of my aunt.

Nanny claimed that my mother, when saying goodbye, entrusted my aunt with a purple wine flask for me; in this wine poison from the fangs of Nag, the Indian serpent, is dissolved, she said. What better keepsake than purple wine, the elixir which bestows eternal tranquillity, can a Bugam Dasi leave behind for her child? Perhaps she, too, squeezed her life like a cluster of grapes and bestowed its wine upon me--some of the same poison that killed my father, Now I recognize the value of her gift to me!

Is my mother alive? Perhaps at this very moment she is dancing; twisting and turning her body like a serpent in the light of a torch in the meydan of some remote Indian town; she twists and turns as though a Nag-serpent has bitten her. She is surrounded by women, children and curious naked men, while my father or uncle, white haired and stooped, sits in the corner of the meydan and watches her. Looking at her he recalls the dungeon, the hissing and the sound of the angry snake's body as it slides, holding its head high up; the snake's eyes glitter, its neck assumes the shape of a hood, with a gray line resembling a pair of spectacles at the back of the neck.

In any case, I was a nursing child when I was put in the arms of nanny who nursed my cousin, this same whore who is now my wife. I grew up under the supervision of my aunt, the tall lady with grey hair on her temple. I grew up in this house with her daughter, the whore.

Ever since I have known myself I have looked upon my aunt as though she were my mother, and I have loved her. I loved her so much that later on I married her daughter, that is, my own foster-sister, because she resembled her. Maybe I should say I had to marry her. This girl gave herself to me only once. I shall never forget that; it happened at the bedside of her dead mother. It was quite late at night when I, in my pajama, entered the dead woman's room to pay my respects for the last time. Everyone else in the house was asleep. In the room I saw two camphor candles burning at her bedside. To prevent Satan from entering her body, a Qur'an was placed on her abdomen. When I pushed the cloth that covered her face aside, I saw my aunt with her usual dignity and attraction. It seemed that her face had abandoned all

earthly concerns; it had assumed an expression that inspired reverence in me. At the same time death appeared to be a normal and natural event. A sarcastic smile had dried on the corner of her lips. I kissed her hand and began to leave the room when upon turning my head, to my astonishment, I saw this same whore, who is now my wife, enter the room. She pressed herself as hard as she could against me, pulled me to herself and kissed me passionately right in front of the dead mother, her dead mother. I was so ashamed of this that I wanted to sink into the floor. I didn't know what to do. The dead body with its protruding teeth seemed to be mocking us. It seemed to me that its quiet smile changed. Involuntarily, I embraced the whore and kissed her. At this moment the drapes of the adjacent room were drawn and my aunt's husband, the whore's father, entered. His shoulders were hunched and he wore a scarf.

He burst into hideous laughter that made my hair stand on end; his shoulders shook violently. He did not look at us; I wished I could sink into the ground. Had I been able to, I would have slapped the dead body for looking at us like that. What a disgrace! I ran from the room. I ran out for the sake of this same whore. Perhaps she had created this scene so that I would have to marry her.

In spite of our being foster brother and sister, and in order to uphold the family reputation, I had to marry her; it was rumored that she was not a virgin, a fact that I did not, and never could, know. On our wedding night when we were left alone, no matter how much I implored and begged her, she did not give in to me and did not take off her clothes. All she said was "wrong time of the month." She did not admit me in any way, but put out the light and retired to the other end of the room and slept there. She shook like a willow tree, or as if she were thrown into a dungeon with a dragon. No one believes this, and it is incredible; she did not allow me even to kiss her on the cheek. The next and the following nights, like the first night, I slept on the floor, on the same spot as the first night; I did not dare do otherwise. In short, I slept on the other side of the room from her for many nights. Who believes this? For two months, no, for two months and four days, I slept away from her and did not dare approach her.

She had already fixed a virginity token by sprinkling a pigeon's blood on a kerchief. I don't know. Or maybe it was the handkerchief that she had used on the night of her first lovemaking; she had kept it all along and was now showing it to ridicule me. Those who were

congratulating me exchanged winks. I am certain in their hearts they were saying, "Last night he must have discovered", but I pretended that I didn't hear any of that. They laughed at me; they laughed at my stupidity. I decided that one day I would write all this down.

After I discovered that she had all sorts of lovers, and thinking that she did not like me because a mullah, reciting a couple of Arabic verses, had taken away her freedom and put her under my authority, I decided to possess her by force. I carried out my decision. But after much struggle she left and I had to be satisfied with rolling all night in her bed which had her warmth and scent. And that is the only time that I have ever had a satisfying sleep. After that night she slept in another room.

In the evenings, when I came home, she would still be out. I never knew whether she was in or out; I didn't want to know, because I was condemned to loneliness and to death. This is incredible, but I tried at all costs to establish contact with her lovers. When I discovered that she had taken a fancy to someone, I would, with much humility and disgrace, watch, follow, cajole and flatter him, until eventually, I would make his acquaintance and bring him to her. Do you know who her lovers were? A tripe-peddler, a jurist, a liver-peddler, the chief magistrate, a judge, a trader and a philosopher. Although their names and titles were different, they all had learned their professions from the man who sells boiled sheep's head. She preferred all these men to me. Fearing that I might lose my wife, I belittled myself to an unbelievable degree; I even went as far as aping the manners, ethics and attractive behaviors of her lovers, but I ended up a sorry pimp mocked by fools. How could I learn the ways of the rabble anyway? But now I know that she loved them because they were shameless, smelly fools. Her love was inseparable from dirt and death. Was I really willing to sleep with her; was it her apparent beauty that attracted me; was it her hatred towards me; was it her coquettish gestures; was it my life-long love for her mother, or was it a combination of all these things that attracted me to her? No--I don't know. I know one thing, though. This woman, this whore, this witch had poured some poison into my soul, into my existence, a poison that not only made me want her but made all the atoms of my body need the atoms of her body, they shrieked for her atoms. I had a great desire to be on a lost island where there were no people. I wished that an earthquake, a storm or a tornado would strike all the rabble who breathed outside my door, who raced around

having fun, so that only she and I would remain.

Even then wouldn't she prefer an animal, an Indian serpent, or a dragon to me? I wished that we might spend one night together and die in each other's arms. This seemed to be the sublime culmination of my existence--of my life.

As though the sufferings that consumed me were not sufficient, at last I became disabled; like a moving corpse, I gave up all activity and was confined to the house. My aged nanny, the companion of my gradual death, took sides with the whore and reproached me. I used to hear, "How does this poor woman put up with this lunatic husband?" all around me and behind my back. And they were right, because the degree of my helplessness was incredible.

I wasted away daily; when I looked at myself in the mirror my cheeks were red, the color of meat at the butcher shop. My body was feverish and my eyes had assumed a languid and sorrowful expression. This newly acquired state intoxicated me, and in my eyes I could see the messenger of death; it was evident that I was dying.

At last they sent for the physician; the healer of the rabble. He was the family doctor who, in his own words, had "brought us up." He wore a yellowish turban and a long beard. He took pride in administering a drug for strengthening my grandfather's virility, in pouring rocket seed and rock candy down my throat and in making my aunt take cassia extracts. Anyhow, sitting at the side of my bed, taking my pulse, and looking at my tongue, he prescribed ass's milk and barley juice and advised that I fumigate twice a day with mastic and arsenic. He also wrote several lengthy prescriptions containing weird and strange extracts and oils like hyssop, oil of bay, extract of licorice, camphor, maiden's hair, chamomile oil, goose oil, linseed, fir-tree seed and other such trash.

I grew worse. Only my nanny, who was her nanny, too, grey-haired and old, sat in the corner of the room at the side of my bed, pressed cold cloths on my forehead, brought me herbal extracts and talked to me about the facts and events of my childhood and of the whore's as well. For instance, she told me that my wife's habit of chewing on the nails of her left hand until they are sore goes back as far as the cradle. Sometimes she told me stories, too. Since these stories were related to my childhood, I recall that they minimized my age, making me

feel like a child again. She talked about when I was very small and my wife and I slept in the same cradle, a large, double-sized cradle. Now some of the incredible episodes of these stories are more natural to me.

I felt the change of events in these stories with an indescribable anxiety and intoxication, because the illness had created a new world for me, an unrecognizable, vague world full of pictures, colors and desires unimaginable to a healthy person. I felt that I had become a child, a feeling that I am experiencing at this very moment. These feelings belong to the present, not to the past.

The actions, thoughts, desires and habits of the ancients bequeathed to later generations through these tales are, apparently, among the necessities of life. For thousands of years men have said these things, performed these sexual acts and faced these childish predicaments. Isn't all of life a comical story, an incredible, foolish tale? Am I not writing my incredible account: the story of my own past? Tales are means of avoiding the real, unfulfilled, unattainable desires imagined by various storytellers, each according to his own mentality and hereditary traits.

I wish I could sleep as in the days when I was an innocent child--I mean comfortable, tranquil sleep--and I wish that when I woke up the surface of my cheeks would be red, the color of meat at the butcher's, that my body would be hot, and that I would be coughing--horrificing, deep coughs--coughs which could not be traced to any known recesses of my body, like the coughs of the packhorses that brought the sheep carcasses to the butcher shop early in the morning.

I recall clearly that it was completely dark; I was in a coma for several minutes and, before going to sleep, I talked to myself. At this moment I felt--I was sure--that I had become a child and that I was lying in a cradle. Then, even though everyone in the house was asleep, I felt that someone was at my side. It was around daybreak, the time when life seems to transcend the limits of this world; my heart was beating hard but I was not afraid at all; my eyes were open but because of the density of the darkness I could not see anyone. Several minutes passed, then an unpleasant thought occurred to me. I said to myself, 'Perhaps it is she! At this very moment I felt the chill of a hand as it touched my feverish forehead.

I shuddered. Two or three times I asked myself, "Wasn't

that the hand of the Angel of Death?"; then I went back to sleep. When I awoke in the morning, my nanny said that her daughter (I mean my wife, that whore) had come to my bedside, placed my head on her knee and rocked me like a child. Perhaps a sense of maternal love had been awakened in her. I wish I had died at that moment. Or perhaps the child she was carrying had died. Had her child been born yet? I did not know.

In this room which steadily grew narrower and darker than the inside of a tomb, I was constantly waiting for my wife, but she did not come. Isn't my current situation of her making? This is not a joke. For three years, no, for two years and four months, but what are days and months? Time loses its significance for one who lives in a grave. This room was the grave of my life and thought. All the activities, the sounds, the pretentious life of the others, the life of the rabble who are bodily and mentally molded alike, was strange and meaningless to me. Since I had been bedridden, I awakened in a strange and incredible world in which there was no need for the world of the rabble. I was a world unto myself, a world full of mysteries, a world every nook and cranny of which I felt compelled to examine.

During the night when I wallowed at the edge of the two worlds, moments before I sank into a deep and empty sleep, I dreamed. In the twinkling of an eye, I was living a life different from my own; I breathed in a different atmosphere, distant from myself, as though I intended to escape from myself and change my destiny. When I closed my eyes, my real world, whose imaginary pictures had a life of their own, returned to me. These pictures appeared and disappeared at random, as though my will had no influence on them. But I cannot be too sure about that either; the scenes which materialized before me were not normal dreams, because I was not asleep yet. In silence and with composure, I could separate these pictures from each other and make comparisons between them. As a result it was becoming apparent that until then I had not known myself, and that the world did not have the force and the meaning that I thought it did; such force and power was now over-ruled by the darkness of the night. If only I had been taught to look at the night and enjoy and love it!

I am not sure whether at this time my arm was under my control; I thought that if I were to leave my hand to itself, following some unknown and unidentifiable stimulus, without my influencing it in any way, it would begin to move by itself. If I was not constantly and

consciously controlling it, my body, too, was capable of doing unexpected things. For a long time now I had the feeling that I was undergoing a process of living degeneration. Not only my body, but my soul, too, contradicted my heart; they were constantly in disagreement. I was constantly undergoing some sort of strange dissolution and disintegration. Sometimes I thought of things that I myself could not believe; at other times I experienced a feeling of pity. In every case my intellectual faculty reproached me. Often when holding a conversation, or when working, I would lose sight of the main subject and take up other subjects that were not relevant to the conversation; my attention was elsewhere and I was thinking of something else while, at the same time, blaming myself for being inattentive. I was a mass undergoing a process of degeneration and disintegration. Apparently, I have been and shall continue to be like this: a strange, incompatible mixture...

The unbearable fact was that I felt myself quite detached from the people whom I saw and lived with; only a superficial resemblance, a vague and remote, yet close, resemblance united me with them. Indeed, it was the mutual necessities of life, like resemblance, that diminished my astonishment. The resemblance which tortured me most was that between the love of the rabble for this whore, my wife, and my love for her. She, however, was more inclined towards them, reassuring me that some flaw existed in her or in my character.

I refer to her as the whore because no other designation suits her as accurately as this word does. I don't want to use "my wife," because the wife-husband relationship did not exist between us; thus, if I were to use such a term, I would be deceiving myself. From the beginning of eternity I have referred to her as the whore. This title, in addition, held a special attraction for me. I married her because she approached me first, not because she loved me in any way, but because this, too, was part of her cunning and duplicity. How could a sensual woman, who needs one man for lust, another for love and still another for torture, fall in love with only one man? I am not sure whether all her men could be subsumed under one or another of these categories, but I am sure that she had chosen me for torture. Indeed, she could not have made a better choice, for in spite of all problems, I still married her because she resembled her mother and because I do not wish to hide my true feelings under the fanciful blanket of love, fondness, and theosophy. I felt that an emanation or an aureole, like those one paints

around the head of a saint, was seated in the middle of my body; and that this sickly and unpleasant aureole desired the aureole in the middle of her body and strove with all its might to attract it,

When I felt better, I decided to leave. Like a damned, leprous dog, or like birds who hide themselves away to die, I decided to disappear and lose myself. I got up early in the morning, picked up the two cookies in the niche and, making sure that nobody saw me, I ran away from the house; I escaped from the affliction that had enmeshed me. Without any predetermined destination, I passed through many streets and distraughtly walked by the rabble who, with greedy faces, were in pursuit of money and lust. In fact, I did not need to see them to know them; one was enough to represent the rest. They were all like one big mouth leading to a wad of guts, terminating in a sexual organ.

Suddenly I felt more agile and lighter; my leg muscles were operating with a special momentum and rapidity that was beyond my imagination. I felt that I had been cut free from the fetters of life. I raised my shoulders, a natural movement dating back to my childhood days when I did the same thing upon being freed from a task or a responsibility.

The rising sun was burning hot. I reached some quiet and empty streets. On my way there were some grey houses designed in strange, singular, geometric shapes: cubic, prismatic and conic houses with low, dark windows; the windows did not have any shutters and the houses seemed to be temporary and abandoned. No living being, apparently, could live in those houses.

Like a golden knife, the sun sheared the edges of the shades and took them away. The streets, confined between old, whitewashed walls, were adding to their own length. Everything was quiet and speechless, as though the elements of nature were obeying the sacred law of the quietude of the burning atmosphere, the law of silence. Every place harbored so much mystery that my lungs did not dare inhale the air.

Suddenly I realized that I had left the city gate behind. With a thousand sucking mouths, the heat of the sun was drawing sweat from my body. Under the blazing sun, the desert bushes had assumed the color of turmeric. From the depths of the sky, like a feverish eye, the sun bestowed its burning heat on the silent, lifeless scene. The soil and the plants of this area, however, had a special

aroma, an aroma so strong that upon inhaling it I was reminded of my childhood. I clearly recalled not only the activities and the words but the whole time as if it had happened only yesterday. As though reborn in a lost world, I felt an agreeable giddiness. This feeling, which had the intoxicating quality of an ancient, sweet wine, penetrated my veins and sinews, reaching my very existence. I could identify with all the thorns, rocks, tree trunks and the tiny shrubs of wild thyme. I recognized the almost human-like scent of the vegetation. I began to think of my past--of my own far and distant days--but all those recollections, as if through some magic, sought distance from me; they were living together and had an independent life of their own. I was no more than a detached, helpless witness with the feeling that there existed a deep whirlpool between me and those recollections. Compared to those days, today my heart was empty, the shrubs had lost their magical fragrance, the distance between the cypress trees had increased and the hills were dryer. I was no longer the creature that I used to be, and if I could materialize that creature and speak to him, he would not hear me, nor would he understand my words. He would have the face of an acquaintance but he would not be mine or part of me.

The world appeared like an empty and depressing mansion. A special agitation filled my chest as though I were compelled to investigate all the rooms in this mansion with bare feet. I passed through interconnected rooms, but at the end of each, I was confronted by the whore. One by one the doors, of their own accord, closed behind me. And the trembling shadows of the walls with their obliterated corners, like some female and male black slaves, stood guard around me.

When I reached the Suren river, a dry and barren mountain confronted me. The dry and hard figure of the mountain reminded me of my nanny, although I could not establish a point of comparison between the two. I passed by the side of the mountain and reached a small, pleasant spot surrounded by mountains. The ground was covered with black, lily plants, and above the mountain there was a high fort made of hefty mud bricks.

Feeling fatigued, I retired to the bank of the Suren river and there I sat on the sand beneath an ancient cypress tree. This enclosure was a quiet and secluded spot, one in which no one had walked before. Suddenly I noticed that a small girl emerged from behind the trees and walked in the direction of the fort. She wore a black dress of very thin and light warp and woof, apparently of

silk. Biting the index finger of her left hand she moved freely, as if sauntering in a carefree mood. It seemed to me that I had seen her before, and that I knew her; but because of the distance between us, and because she was directly under the intense light of the sun, I could not recognize her and she suddenly disappeared.

I was petrified; unable to move even slightly. This time, however, I had seen her with my own bodily eyes as she passed in front of me and disappeared. No matter how hard I tried I could not recall whether she was real or imaginary, or whether I had seen her in a dream or in wakefulness. I felt a special tremor in the column of my spine and it seemed to me that all the shadows in the fort on the mountain had come to life and that that girl was one of the ancient citizens of the city of Ray.

Suddenly, the scene became familiar, I recalled that as a child, on a thirteenth day of Farvardin my mother-in-law, the whore and myself had come here. I don't recall exactly for how long the whore and I ran after each other that day and played behind these cypress trees; but I recall that later on a group of other children joined us. At one time when I searched for this same whore, I found her by the side of the same Suren river. She slipped and fell into the river. She was pulled out and taken behind the cypress tree to change her clothes. I followed. They held a prayer veil in front of her so that she could not be seen, but stealthily I saw her whole body from behind the tree. She smiled as she chewed on the index finger of her left hand. They then clad her in a white cape and spread the black silk dress, made of very delicate warp and woof, on the ground to dry in the sun.

At last, I lay down on the fine sand at the foot of the cypress tree. The sound of the water, like a discontinuous, unintelligible speech murmured in a dream, reached my ear. Involuntarily, I sank my hands in the warm, damp sand; I pressed the warm and moist sand in my fist: it felt like the firm flesh of the body of a girl who was just pulled out of the water and whose clothes were changed.

I don't know how much time passed in between, but when I left that place, I began to walk involuntarily. Everywhere was quiet and still. I walked without seeing my surroundings; a force beyond my control made me go. Although all my attention was concentrated on my feet, I was not walking; rather, like the girl in black, I was sliding on my feet. When I came to, I found myself in the city in front of my father-in-law's house. His small son,

my brother-in-law, was sitting on the platform. Was he the spitting image of his sister? He had slanting eyes, prominent cheeks, a wheat-colored complexion, a lustful nose and a thin, strong face. As he was sitting there he had put the index finger of his left hand in his mouth. Involuntarily, I approached him, took the cookies out of my pocket and gave them to him, saying, "Shajun sent these for you"--he used to call my wife Shahjan instead of calling his own mother by that name. He cast a curious glance, with his slanted Turkmen eyes, at the cookies that he held doubtfully in his hand. I sat on the platform, put him on my lap and hugged him tightly. His body was warm, the calves of his legs were like those of my wife and he had the same unceremonious disposition. His lips, however, resembled his father's but, that which in the father evoked a sense of disgust in me was attractive and charming in the son. It seemed that his half-open lips had just finished a long, warm kiss. I kissed him on his open lips which resembled my wife's; his lips tasted like the end of a cucumber--bitterish and acrid. Probably that whore's lips, too, have the same taste.

At this very moment I saw his father, the stooped old man who wore a scarf, leave the house. He went on his way without looking in my direction. He laughed convulsively, a dreadful laughter that made his shoulders shake and caused one's hair to stand on end. I was so ashamed of what I was doing that I wished I could sink into the ground. It would soon be time for the sun to set. I got off the platform as though trying to run away from myself and involuntarily headed for home. I did not see anything or anyone; it was as if I were traveling in some unknown and unidentifiable town. I was surrounded by scattered, geometrically designed houses with only a few black, deserted windows. It seemed that no living creature could inhabit those white-walled houses from which a faint light emanated. The incredible thing is that whenever I stood between the moon and one of these walls, I cast a very large and dense shadow, but the whole time my shadow was headless. My shadow did not have a head. I had heard that those whose shadow is headless die before the year's end.

Frightened, I entered my house and took refuge in my room. I had a bloody nose and after losing much blood, I fell unconscious on my bed. My nanny began tending me.

Before going to bed, I looked at myself in the mirror; my face was distressed, vague and lifeless, so vague that I did not know myself. I climbed into bed, pulled the quilt

over my head, rolled over and faced the wall. Then I curled up, closed my eyes and continued my ruminations about those delicate images which form my dark, depressing, dreadful, yet intoxicating destiny. I entered the realm where life becomes death and death becomes life, where distorted images take shape, and where past, slain, obliterated and suppressed desires, shrieking for vengeance, are revived. At moments like this, I withdrew from the world of matter, ready to be annihilated in an eternal flux. Several times I murmured to myself, "death, death ... where are you?" This calmed me down and my eyes gradually closed.

Upon closing my eyes, I found myself in the Muhammadiyeh Square. There a high gallows was set up and the odds-and-ends man who sits in front of my room had been strung up. At the foot of the gallows several drunken watchmen were drinking wine. I saw my mother-in-law, her face glowing with anger--like my wife's face when she becomes angry: her lips pale and her eyes become round--plowing among the crowd trying to attract the attention of the hangman who wore a red garment. She was shouting, "String this one up, too!..." Terrified by this nightmare, I jumped up from sleep; I was extremely feverish. My body was drenched with sweat and a consuming heat glowed on my cheeks. To save myself from the clutches of this nightmare, I got off the bed, drank some water and sprinkled some more on my face and head and returned to bed. I could not make myself go back to sleep.

In the shadowy light of the room, I was staring at the water jar in the niche. It seemed to me that as long as the water jar was in the niche I would not go to sleep. I was overwhelmed by a groundless fear that the jar was going to fall down. To prevent this, I got off the bed to secure the jar but, in response to some unknown stimulus, my hand purposefully struck the jar; it fell down and broke into pieces. Anyway, when I pressed my eyelids together to make myself go back to sleep, it struck me that my nanny was up and was looking at me. I clenched my fists under the quilt, but nothing out of the ordinary happened. In a coma-like state I heard the front door open, then I heard the sound of nanny's slippers as she went out and bought bread and cheese.

Now I heard the cry of a vendor from afar, shouting, "Mulberries are good for bile!" Yes, as usual, tiresome life had started all over again. The amount of light was increasing. When I opened my eyes, I saw a trembling reflection of sunlight thrown onto my ceiling by the water in the pool; it had entered my room through a hole

in the wall.

Now my previous night's dream appeared distant and vague, as though I had seen it as a child many years ago. When nanny brought my breakfast, her face had assumed an incredible and comical form. It was thin and elongated as if it had fallen on a magic mirror or was pulled down by some weight.

Nanny knew well that the smoke of the hooka was detrimental to my health; nevertheless, she smoked in my room. She had to smoke or she wouldn't be herself. Nanny had spoken so much about her house, her daughter-in-law and her son that she had made me a partner in her own lustful pleasures. How foolish! Sometimes, for no reason, I would think about the lives of the people at my nanny's, but for some reason everything related to the life-style and the joys of others nauseated me.

What relationship could exist between the lives of the fools and healthy rabble who were well, who slept well, who performed the sexual act well, who had never felt the wings of death on their face every moment--what relationship could exist between them and one like me who has arrived at the end of his rope and who knows that he will pass away gradually and tragically?

Nanny treated me like a child; she wanted to see every phlegm in the basin, combing my hair and beard, putting my nightcap straight whenever I entered the room. I did not feel shy with my nanny in any way. Why should this woman, who bore no relationship to me at all, involve herself so deeply in my life? I recall how when, as children, the whore and I used to sleep under a korsi that was set up on the cistern. Nanny slept with us under the korsi. In the morning light, when I opened my eyes, the design on the embroidered curtain hanging in front of the doorway came to life. What a strange, terrifying curtain it was! Depicted on it was a stooped old man resembling the Indian yogis. He wore a turban and he sat underneath a cypress tree. In his hand he held an instrument which looked like a sitar. In front of him stood a beautiful young girl, like a Bugam Dasi or a dancer at the Indian temples. Her hands were in chains and it seemed that she was being forced to dance in front of the old man. I used to think to myself that the outward appearance of the old man and the white color of his hair and beard must be the result of his having been thrown into a dungeon in which a Nag-serpent had been released.

It was one of those gold-embroidered curtains which my father or my uncle had probably sent us from far-off lands. When I stared at this picture for a long time, it frightened me. I would then awaken my nanny, who with her bad breath and coarse, black hair rubbing against my face, would hug me tightly. This morning when I opened my eyes, she seemed to be exactly the same as then except for the wrinkles on her face which appeared to be deeper and harder now.

Often, in order to forget, to run away from myself, I would recall my childhood. This was to help me feel the same as I did before the sickness, to make me feel that I was healthy. I still felt that I was a child and that there was a second being who would pity me, who would pity this child who was about to die. In my moments of distress and fear, the quiet face of my nurse--her pallid complexion, her dull, motionless, sunken eyes, her thin nostril wings and her wide, bony forehead--revived those memories in me. Perhaps some mysterious rays emanating from her brought me comfort. On her temple, nanny had a fleshy mole covered with hair. I believe this is the first time I saw that. Usually I did not look so closely at her face.

Though nanny's outward appearance had changed, her thoughts had not. Her attachment to life had increased; so had her fear of death. She reminded me of the flies which take refuge in the room at the beginning of the fall season. My life, however, was changing daily, even by the minute. It seemed that the many years necessary to introduce changes in a normal human being's life were speeded up a thousand times for me. But the pleasures that such changes brought me, instead of being manifold, were nil, less than nil. There are those who begin to struggle with death when they are twenty years of age, while others die in a moment, a very quiet and peaceful death; they die in the same way that a tallow burner which has run out of fuel is extinguished.

When at noon my nanny brought me my lunch, I upset the soup bowl and shrieked; I shrieked with all my might. All those living in the house gathered in front of my door. The whore, too, came, but she did not stay. I looked at her belly. It was swelled up. No, she was still carrying the child. They sent for the physician. It pleased me inwardly that I had created some trouble for this foolish lot.

The physician, who wore a long beard, arrived and had me smoke opium. What a valuable drug opium was for my

suffering-ridden life! As I smoked, my thoughts grew large, subtle, magical; they soared. At such times I traveled in a world beyond the ordinary. My thoughts and my imagination, free from the attraction and the weight of earthly things, rose toward an empyrean tranquility and stillness. It was as though I sat on the wings of a golden bat and roamed in a radiant, empty world unimpeded. This experience was so profound and so delightful that it surpassed even the intoxication induced by death.

When I left the pot of fire where I was smoking opium, I walked to the window which opens onto our courtyard. My nanny was sitting in the sunlight cleaning vegetables. I heard her say to her daughter-in-law, "We all have lost our hearts. I wish God would kill him and put him out of his misery!" I knew then that the physician had told them that my disease was incurable.

As for me, I was not surprised at all. How foolish people are! She said all this, then an hour later she brought my herbal extracts. Her eyes were swollen and blood shot because of excessive weeping; nevertheless, she forced herself to smile in front of me. They were play-acting for me, but they were quite clumsy at it. Did they think that I did not know about it? Anyway, why was this woman so very fond of me? Why did she think of herself as the companion of my sufferings? All that she had done was to thrust her bucket-like, black, wrinkled nipples into my mouth for pay. I wished her breasts were struck by leprosy. Now, looking at her breasts, I am nauseated even to think of having sucked the sap of her life through those breasts and that our body temperatures met and became one. She treats me now with the boldness of a widow, because when I was a child she used to rub my body all over; she still regards me as a child, because at some time in the past she held me over the latrine. Maybe she even used me as her lesbian partner, or her adopted sister, as some women choose to call them.

She indeed "took care of me," as she put it, with a great deal of curiosity and attention. If my wife, that whore, attended me, I would never allow nanny to touch me, because in my estimation, my wife's dominion of thought and her sense of beauty were vaster than nanny's, or else lust has created a sense of shyness and bashfulness in me.

For reasons such as these I felt less shy with my nanny, and that is why only she took care of me. Perhaps my nanny believed that fate, or her star, had arranged

things in this way. Using my sickness as an excuse, she told me all the intimate details of her family's life: their joys, their quarrels; she revealed every corner of her own simple, cunning and beggar-like soul. She told me that she was not happy with her daughter-in-law, as if that woman were a second wife, encroaching on her son's love and lust for her. She said all this in a most indescribable, vengeful tone! Her daughter-in-law must be a beautiful girl. I have seen her through the window that opens onto the yard. She has hazel-colored eyes, blond hair and a small, straight nose.

Sometimes my nanny talked to me about the miracles of the prophets. She thought that by so doing she would console me, while in reality I was merely envious of her low level of thinking and of her foolishness. Sometimes she came to me to gossip. For instance, several days ago she told me that her daughter (the whore, that is), at an auspicious hour, had been sewing a resurrection garment for the child, for her own child. Then, as if she knew well what she was talking about, she comforted me. Sometimes she goes to the magician, to the fortune-teller, to the cupper and to the augur and discusses my situation with them. On the last Wednesday of the year she went eavesdropping; she returned with a bowl full of onions, rice and some rancid oil. She said that she had begged these for the sake of my health--later she fed all this to me stealthily. In between I had to take the herbal extracts that the physician had prescribed; those same unholy concoctions: hyssop, extract of licorice, camphor, maidenhair, chamomile, oil of bay, linseeds, fir-tree seeds, starch, London-rocket seeds, and a thousand other kinds of trash...

Several days ago she brought me a prayer book with a layer of dust on top of it. But neither the rabbles' prayers nor any of their books, writings or thoughts was useful for me. What use did I have for their nonsense and their lies? Wasn't I myself the result of many succeeding generations, and weren't their hereditary sufferings inherent in me? Wasn't the past in myself? Never has any of these--the mosque, the call to prayer, the ablutions, the noisy spitting, the bowing and prostration in front of the Almighty or absolute Creator with Whom one could converse only in Arabic--none of these has ever had any effect upon me.

Even when I was healthy and attended a mosque several times, in spite of my efforts to harmonize my thoughts and feelings with those of others, I found my eyes scanning the glazed tiles and the intricate designs on

the walls, designs which relieved me from the obligations of the mosque and transported me into a realm of delightful dreams. While praying, I closed my eyes and hid my face in the palms of my hands. In this self-created night, I uttered my prayers as if they were some irresponsible words spoken in a dream. My pronunciation of the words of the prayer was devoid of inner meaning because I preferred to speak to a friend, or an acquaintance rather than to God or to an all powerful One--God was too much for me!

Inasmuch as I was lying in a warm, damp bed, none of these problems was of the slightest interest to me. I did not wish to know whether God existed, or whether as an embodiment of the wishes of the rulers of the earth He was created to confirm their divinity and to facilitate their robbing of their subjects. In other words, was God an imaginary picture of the ills of this world projected onto the heavens? At this stage of my life I wished to know if I could make it through the night. In comparison with death, I found creed, faith and belief to be weak and childish, like a kind of entertainment for the healthy and fortunate. Compared with the frightful reality of death and my state of degeneration, all my education on the subjects of spiritual reward and punishment and the Resurrection Day was nothing but a tasteless, deceitful notion. The prayers I had learned were wholly ineffectual in warding off the fear of death.

No, the fear of death had dominated me and would not leave me alone. Those who have not experienced suffering do not understand the meaning of these words. The urge to live had been intensified so much that the smallest moment of pleasure compensated for long hours of palpitation and anguish. I recognized the existence of suffering, but, having no tangible manifestation, I could not describe it. Among the rabble I had become an unknown and unrecognizable breed, so much so that they had forgotten that I had ever existed in their world. The dreadful thing is that I did not feel either completely alive or totally dead; I was a moving body who, thrown out of the world of the living, had no recourse other than the oblivion and tranquillity of the dead.

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Early in the evening I left the pot of fire where I smoke my opium and looked out of the window. I saw a black tree and the shuttered entrance door to the butcher shop. Many

dark shadows blended into each other, lending everything an aura of emptiness and transience. The pitch dark sky above looked like an ancient black tent pierced by innumerable shining stars. And at this moment I heard the call to prayer; an untimely call to prayer--perhaps a woman, maybe that whore, was on the bricks giving birth to a child. Interspersed with the call was the barking of a dog. I thought to myself, "If there is any truth in the saying that everyone is assigned a star in the sky, my star must be remote, dull and insignificant; perhaps I never had a star!"

At this time I heard the voices of a group of drunken watchmen who passed in the street and played practical jokes on one another. Then, altogether, they sang in chorus:

Let us go and drink mey--
The wine of the kingdom of Ray;
If not today, then what day?

Frightened, I pulled myself aside. Their singing echoed in a peculiar way in the air until gradually it grew distant and faint. No, they were not looking for me; they did not know... Once more darkness and silence returned, covering everything. I did not light the tallow burner in my room because I felt like sitting in that dense liquid which permeates everything--in darkness. I was accustomed to darkness. There, in darkness, my lost thoughts, my forgotten fears and my terrifying and incredible recollections, hidden in the unknown recesses of my brain, all came alive, moved about and mocked me. These threatening, formless figures and thoughts lurked everywhere; in the corner of the room, behind the curtain and at the side of the door.

Right there, beside the curtain, there was a frightening figure. It was not moving, it was not gloomy and it was not cheerful. Every time I turned my head in its direction, it stared right at me. The face was familiar, as if I had seen this very face when I was a child. It was on a thirteenth day of the month of Farvardin. I was playing hide-and-seek with some children on the bank of the Suren river. There I had seen this face appear to me along with other ordinary faces. But this face was the same as the face of the butcher across from my room. This man was obviously involved in my life and I had seen him quite often. Possibly this shadow was my twin, a creature bound to the limited boundaries of my life...

As soon as I got up to light the tallow burner, the

figure disappeared automatically. I walked to the mirror and concentrated on my own face but the picture in the mirror seemed to be that of a stranger. It was incredible and terrifying; my reflection was stronger than myself and I had become like the reflection in the mirror. It seemed that I could not remain in the same room with this reflection. I was afraid that if I ran, my reflection would chase me, like two cats facing each other to fight. Instead, I covered my eyes with the palm of my hand to create an eternal night for myself. Often these moments of fright were accompanied by a special intoxication; I felt giddy, my knees gave way and I felt nauseated. Then suddenly I realized that I was standing on my feet. Standing like that was like a miracle for me. How could I be standing on my feet? I felt that if I moved one of my legs I would lose my equilibrium; I was feeling quite dizzy. The earth and the creatures thereon were away from me. Vaguely I hoped for an earthquake or a tornado, so that I could be reborn in a quiet, bright world.

When I wanted to enter the bed, several times I said to myself, "death... death..."; my lips were closed but still I was afraid of my own voice. I seemed to have lost the courage that I once had; I was like the flies that invade the house at the onset of fall: lean, lifeless flies afraid of the buzz of their own wings. They cling to the wall and remain motionless until they realize that they are alive; then they ricochet wildly against the doors and windows until their dead bodies fall to the floor.

As soon as my eyes closed, a vague world materialized before me, a world wholly of my own making, compatible with my thoughts and observations. Anyway, it was a world of wakefulness, as though no obstacles or impasses barred my thoughts and imagination. This lust-purged feeling, produced in the depth of my being, a product of my latent needs, created some incredible, but natural, shapes and events before me. When I woke up, I was still doubtful of my existence and had no sense of place and time. It seems that my dreams were all of my own making and that I was already familiar with their interpretation.

It was quite late at night when I fell asleep. I found myself walking and breathing freely in the streets of an unknown city, the houses of which were built in strange geometrical shapes: prismatic, conic and cubic; they had dark, low windows with lily plants clinging to the doors and windows. All the inhabitants of this city, however, had died strangely; they were all literally petrified in their places and two drops of blood had run from their

mouth to their clothes. I tried to touch one; his head broke off and fell down.

I came to a butcher shop. There I saw a man who resembled the odds-and-ends man who sits in front of our house. He wore a scarf and was carrying a long-bladed knife in his hand; he stared at me with red eyes, the lids of which seemed to have been cut. When I tried to take the knife away from him, his head came off and tumbled down. Overcome with fright, I escaped. I ran through the streets. Everyone that I saw was petrified in the same way. I was afraid to look behind me. When I reached my father-in-law's house, I saw my brother-in-law, that whore's little brother; he was sitting on the platform. I took two cookies out of my pocket to give to him, but when I touched him, his head, too, came off and fell down. I shrieked and woke up.

It was still dusk. I was suffering from palpitations of the heart. The ceiling seemed to be pressing on my head. The walls were extremely thick and my chest seemed about to burst open. My sight was dim. For a while I stared at the rafters, counting and recounting the beams. When I pressed my eyes shut, I heard the door open. It was my nanny. She wanted to sweep my room. She had taken my breakfast upstairs to the upper chamber. I went upstairs and sat in front of the sash-window on the balcony. From there I could not see the odds-and-ends man who sits in front of my room, but I could see the butcher to my left. His activities, however, which had seemed frightening, grave and measured from my window, seemed comical and poor from up here. Apparently he was not a real butcher, but was only play-acting. They brought in the lean black packhorses who coughed heavy, dry coughs and on whose sides two sheep carcasses were hung. The butcher stroked his mustache with his greasy hand, appraised the sheep with a buyer's eyes; then with difficulty he carried two of them to his shop and hung them on the hooks there. He rubbed his hand over the legs of the sheep as if caressing them. At night, too, when he plays with his wife's body, who knows that he does not remember the sheep; he may even think of the profit she might bring if he were to sell her.

When the cleaning was finished, I returned to my room and made a decision; a frightening decision. I fetched the bone-handled, long-bladed knife from the tin can in the closet of my room, cleaned the blade with the tail of my shirt and put the knife under my pillow. I had made this decision a long time ago, but something in the activities of the butcher, in his chopping, weighing and appraising

the legs of the sheep revived a sense of imitation in me. It was necessary for me to experience this pleasure. Looking at the sky through my window, among the clouds I saw a patch of absolutely deep blue. It seemed that to reach there I must climb a very high ladder. The horizon was covered with thick, yellow and deathly clouds which weighed heavily on the city.

The weather was horrible yet intoxicating. For some reason, I found myself bending toward the floor. In weather like this I always thought of death but only now, now that death with its bloodstained face and bony hands had me by the throat, did I want to carry out my decision. I had decided long ago to take that whore along with me so that later on, after my death, she wouldn't say, "May God have mercy on him. He suffered enough!"

At this time they were carrying a coffin in front of my window. The coffin was covered with black drapes and on top of it two candles were burning. The sound of la ilaha il-allah, there is no god but God, drew my attention to the procession. The tradespeople and the passersby halted their activities and walked seven steps behind the coffin before continuing their business; even the butcher, for the sake of having performed a ritual good deed, followed the coffin for seven steps before returning to his shop. The odds-and-ends man, however, did not move from where he sat at his display. Everyone had assumed a stern, serious face! Perhaps this procession had reminded them of the philosophy of death and of the other world. When my nanny brought herbal extracts to me, she was frowning. She was passing the large beads of a rosary through her fingers and praying to herself; then she said her prayer aloud in a contemptible way, reciting, allahomma, sallahomma...

She behaved as though I was in charge of the forgiveness of the sins of the living! But none of this buffoonery had the slightest effect on me. On the contrary, I was pleased to see that, even though temporarily and deceitfully, the rabble were living several seconds in my world. Was not my room a coffin? Was not my bed colder and darker than a grave? The same ready-made bed constantly inviting me to sleep! Several times the thought that I was in a coffin had occurred to me. At night my room seemed to shrink and press in on me from all sides. Isn't the experience of pressure a feature of the grave? Is anyone informed about the condition of the senses of the deceased?

Although at the time of death the blood ceases to

circulate, and although after twenty-four hours some parts of the body begin to decompose and disintegrate, for quite some time the hair and the nails continue to grow. Do senses and thoughts also cease when the heart stops, or do they continue a vague life using what blood remains in the smaller vessels? The feelings surrounding the thought of death are frightening in themselves; thus, by extension, the feeling that one is actually dead must be most terrifying and unbearable. There are some old people who die so quietly that one could say they go from one sleep to another. They are like tallow burners which quietly burn themselves out. But what are the feelings of a robust youth who dies suddenly--one whose bodily powers put up a fight with death--what are his feelings? I had often thought about death and about the disintegration of my body. I was accustomed to these thoughts--so much so that they no longer frightened me. On the contrary, I wished earnestly to die, to cease existing. I was afraid, however, that the particles of my body might blend with those of the rabble, an idea which I could not bear. Sometimes I wished that I had long hands and long sensitive fingers so that I could gather the particles of my body carefully and prevent them from getting mixed with those of the rabble.

Sometimes I thought that my observations were very similar to those of people in their death throes; the zeal for life, as well as anxiety, awe and fear, had abandoned me. The rejection of all indoctrinations imposed on me produced a special sense of tranquility. The hope for nonexistence after death was the only thing that consoled me. The thought of a second life frightened me and made me tired. I was still not used to this world in which I was living; what good would another world do me? I had a feeling that this world was not made for me but for a group of pseudo-intellectuals: a group of shameless, diabolical, rude, beggarish mule-drivers who lack insight and wisdom. It was made for those who were created to suit it, those who, like the hungry dog in front of the butcher shop wagging its tail for a bit of offal, are used to flatter the mighty of the earth and of the sky. Yes, the thought of a second life frightened me and made me tired. I had no need to see all these nauseating worlds and those repulsive figures. Had God acquired his worlds so recently that he wished to intimidate me by exhibiting them? I cannot tell lies. Were I to have a second life, I should wish for dull and blunt thoughts and feelings; I would like to breathe freely and without feeling fatigued; and lastly I would like to continue my life in the shade of the columns of a Linga temple--a world in which I could run around freely

without the sun hurting my eyes or people's voices and the bustle of life hurting my ears.

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I was growing inward incessantly; like an animal that hibernates during the wintertime, I could hear other peoples' voices with my ears; my own voice, however, I could hear only in my throat. The loneliness and the solitude that lurked behind me were like a condensed, thick, eternal night, like one of those nights with a dense, persistent, sticky darkness which waits to pounce on unpopulated cities filled with lustful and vengeful dreams. My whole being could now be summed up in my voice--an insane, absolute record. The force that, out of loneliness, brings two individuals together to procreate has its roots in this same insanity which exists in everyone and which is mingled with a sense of regret, tending gradually toward death...

Only death does not tell lies!

The presence of death annihilates all that is imaginary. We are the offspring of death and death delivers us from the tantalizing, fraudulent attractions of life; it is death that beckons us from the depths of life. If at times we come to a halt, we do so to hear the call of death... throughout our lives, the finger of death points at us. Has not everyone experienced a moment of sudden yet absolute concentration of thoughts for which one cannot find a focus but which distorts the reality of time and space, a concentration broken only through great effort? And after one is jolted back into reality, does he not need to become reacquainted with the real world? At this time it is the call of death to which we respond.

In this damp bed which smelled of sweat, when my eyelids grew heavy and I was about to surrender to nonexistence and eternal night, all my lost memories and forgotten fears came to life: fear that the feathers in the pillow might turn to blades of daggers, that the button on my bed-clothes might grow as big as a millstone, that the piece of bread which falls to the floor might shatter like a piece of glass. I was apprehensive that should I fall asleep, the oil in the tallow burner might spill over and cause the whole city to go up in flames. I dreaded the devilish thought that the sound of the dog's paws in front of the butcher shop might echo like the sound of hoofs on a pavement. My heart was filled with trepidation for fear that the odds-and-ends man sitting

at his display might suddenly begin to laugh, a laughter that he could no longer control. I was afraid that the worm in the footpath of our pond might become a serpent, that my quilt might become a tombstone with hinges that would slide and lock its marble teeth and bury me alive. I was afraid that I might lose my voice and no matter how much I screamed, nobody would hear me...

I wished I could recall my childhood; when my wish came true and I felt as I did in those days, it was as difficult and painful now as it had been then.

There was much to be afraid of: coughs that resounded like the coughs of lean black packhorses in front of the butcher shop; spitting your phlegm with the fear that you may see traces of blood in it--blood, that tepid, salty liquid, the essence of life which emerges from the depths of the body and must be vomited--the constant threat of death which irrevocably tramples over all thought and which leaves no trace of hope. All these were sources of fear.

Life, coolly and dispassionately, reveals to each person his own reflection, as if everyone carried several masks with him. Some, the thrifty, constantly use the same mask. Naturally this mask becomes dirty and wrinkled. Others save their masks for their children, and there are still others who constantly change their masks. It is only when they begin to age that they realize they have run out of masks; their real faces then emerge from behind that last mask.

There was some kind of lethal influence in the walls of my room which poisoned my thoughts. I was certain that a condemned criminal, a chained lunatic, had occupied this room. And the walls of my room alone were not responsible for creating these thoughts in my mind; the view outside, the butcher, the odds-and-ends man, my nanny, that whore and all that I saw, including the bowl from which I ate my soup, and my clothes; all these were responsible for creating these thoughts in my mind.

Several nights ago in the cloakroom of the bathhouse, when I took my clothes off, my thoughts were changed. Later on when the bath-attendant poured water on my head, I felt as though my black thoughts were washed away. In the bathchamber I looked at my shadow on the steamy wall. I noticed myself to be delicate and brittle as I was ten years ago when I was a child. And I recalled that my shadow used to fall on the steamy wall just like that. I looked closely at my body, at my thigh, my calf and at

the middle of my body. It was a disappointing, lustful sight; the shadow of these, too, was like it was ten years ago when I was a child. I felt that my entire life was a meaningless, aimless show, just like the flickering shadows on the wall of a bathhouse. Perhaps the others who were sturdy, heavy and robust cast a bigger and denser shadow on the steamy wall of the bathhouse; a shadow that left a permanent trace of its existence, while my shadow disappeared instantaneously. In the cloakroom when I was dressing, my appearance and my thoughts, once again, changed. It was as though I had entered a new world; as if I were reborn in the very world that I hated. In any event, since somehow miraculously I did not dissolve like a chunk of salt in the bathing pond of the bathhouse, I was certain that I had acquired a second life.

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My life appeared to me as unnatural, uncertain and incredible as the design on the pence I am using at this moment. It seems that a painter who has been possessed, perhaps a perfectionist, has painted the cover of this pence. Often, when I look at this design, it seems familiar; perhaps it is because of this design that I write or perhaps this design makes me write. Depicted on the cover of the pence is a cypress tree underneath which a stooped old man, like an Indian yogi, is squatting, wrapped in a cloak and wearing a turban. He has placed the index finger of his left hand on his lips in astonishment. Opposite him, a girl wearing a long, black dress and assuming an unnatural posture--perhaps a Bugam Dasi--is dancing before him. She is holding a lily. A brook separates the two.

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At the side of the opium brazier, I dispersed all my dark thoughts in the delicate and heavenly smoke. Now it was my body that thought, it was my body that dreamed, it was my body that was gliding as if it were freed from the gravity and pollution of the air; it was soaring in an unknown world full of unknown colors and shapes. The opium had inspired in me a vegetable soul, a sluggish vegetable soul, and I was traveling in the world of the plants. Had I become a plant? As I was wrapped in my cloak, dozing off in front of the pot of fire, for some reason I thought of the odd-and-ends man; he, too, sits before his display with hunched shoulders as I sit. This

thought frightened me. I got up, took off the cloak and walked to the mirror. My glowing cheeks were the color of meat at the butcher shop; my beard, though disheveled, lent me an expression of attractive spirituality. The look in my sickly eyes was offended and childish, one of fatigue, as though all that was terrestrial and human had abandoned me. I liked my face; it made me lustfully intoxicated. Looking at my reflection in the mirror I said to myself, "Your suffering is so profound that it is caught at the bottom of your eyes... even if you cry, it is not certain that you will be able to shed tears!...'

Then again I said, "You are a fool, why don't you finish yourself? What are you waiting for?... What more is there for you to desire? Isn't the wine flask in the closet of your room?...Take a slug and there you go!... fool!...you are a fool..."Then I realized that I was addressing the empty air!

The different thoughts that converged in my mind were not related to each other. I could hear my voice in my throat, but I could not understand the meaning of my words. In my mind these sounds blended with other sounds and lost their identity. My fingers seemed to be longer now, like the time when I was feverish; my eyelids, too, were heavy, and my lips had become thick. Upon turning away from the mirror I saw my nanny standing in the doorway. I burst into laughter, but my nanny's motionless face showed no expression; her lifeless eyes stared at me, but they showed no trace of surprise, anger or sorrow. Generally one laughs at a foolish act, but my laughter was more profound than that; I was laughing at the grand folly, and at all that man has failed to solve and the comprehension of which is beyond his reach; I laughed at that which is lost in the darkness of the night and at death--a superhuman force. My nanny picked up the pot of fire and, with measured steps, walked out of the room. I wiped the sweat off my brow; the palms of my hands were covered with white flecks. I leaned against the wall and placed my head upon it. I seemed to feel better. Then I began to whisper this tune, the origin of which is not known to me:

Let us go and drink mey--
The wine of the Kingdom of Ray;
If not today, then what day?

Occurring to me before a crisis, this tune always made me agitated and uneasy; like a knot around my heart, it was a depressing sign, the calm before the storm. At such times the real world abandoned me and I lived in a luminous world immeasurably distant from the terrestrial

one.

At such times. I was afraid of myself; I was afraid of everyone. This fear was undoubtedly related to my sickness, which had weakened my thoughts as well as my body. I was afraid even when I looked at the odds-and-ends man and the butcher through the window of my room. There was something frightening in their actions and in their appearance, but I could not say exactly what. My nanny told me something that frightened me. She swore by the holy prophets that she had seen the odds-and-ends man visit my wife's bed-chamber at night; she had even heard the whore's own words through the door, saying, 'Take off your scarf!' And this is even more incredible: the day before yesterday or the day before that, when I shrieked and my wife appeared behind the half-open door of my room, with my own eyes I saw the traces of the old man's dirty, yellow and decayed teeth, teeth from between which Arabic verses of the Qur'an, flow, on my wife's cheek. To begin with, what prompted this man to appear in front of our house and remain there since my marriage? Did he forsake the world for the sake of this whore? I recall that on that same day I went over to his display and asked him the price of the jar. Through his scarf, two decayed teeth and leprous lip, and laughing hysterically, with laughter that made one's hair stand on end, he said to me, "Don't you look at what you buy? This jar is not worth much, young man. Take it! I hope it brings you luck!" His voice had a peculiar tone as he said, 'This jar is not worth much. I hope it brings you luck!' I put my hand in my pocket, took out two derhams and four peshizes and placed them on the corner of his display. He laughed again; hideous laughter that made my hair stand on end. I could have sunk into the ground with shame. Covering my face with my hands, I returned home.

The entire display spread before him had the rusty smell of dirty things refused by life, as if he intended to blame people for what life has refused, or perhaps he intended merely to display them. Wasn't he himself old and dejected? The articles in his display were all lifeless, dirty and worn out; nevertheless, the display had a persistent life as well as profoundly meaningful forms! The effect of these articles on me was greater than the effect of living human beings.

Nanny gave me the news of the old man's visits to my wife's bed-chamber; she told everyone else as well. Sleeping with a dirty beggar! Nanny also told me that my wife had become infested with lice and that she went to the bathhouse. What kind of a shadow did she cast on the

steamy wall of the bathhouse? Perhaps a lustful shadow quite confident of itself. On the whole, this time I did not disapprove of my wife's taste, because the odds-and-ends man was not a commonplace, vulgar and colorless man like the stud-males who attract foolish women with an inordinate desire for coition. The layers of misfortune encrusted on the old man's head and face, along with the misery that emanated from him, marked him as a demi-god; and even though the old man was not aware of this, he was a manifestation and a representative of creation itself.

In any case I saw the traces of two decayed teeth, from behind which Arabic verses came forth, on my wife's cheek, on the cheek of this woman who did not admit me, who humiliated me and whom I loved despite all this--even though she had not allowed me to kiss her on the cheek even once!

When I heard the plaintive sound of the kettle-drums the sunlight was yellowish and pale; it was like the sound of entreaty and supplication which revives all inherited superstitions and the fear of darkness. The moment of crisis, the foretold moment for which I had been waiting, arrived. My body was burning from head to toe, and I was suffocating. I went to my bed, lay down and closed my eyes; the intensity of the fever had distorted my vision in such a way that everything seemed bigger and had fuzzy margins. Instead of sinking, the ceiling seemed more elevated. My clothes pressed against my body. Without any reason, I sat up in my bed and murmured, "This is the limit... it is unbearable..." Suddenly I became silent. Then mockingly, but loudly and clearly enunciating, I said to myself, "It is the..." and added, "I am a fool!" I was not paying any attention to the meaning of what I said; I was merely amusing myself with the vibrations of my voice. Maybe I talked to my shadow to dispel loneliness. Then I saw something incredible: the door opened and that whore entered my room. Obviously, every now and then, she thought of me. I should be grateful for it because it showed that she too was aware that I am alive, that I suffer and that I shall undergo a gradual death. This was good grounds for being thankful; however, I wished to know if she were aware that I was dying because of her; if she were, I would die peacefully and happily--I would be the happiest man on the face of the earth. Upon the whore's entrance, all my evil thoughts vanished. Some rays emanating from her being or some blessing in her gestures comforted me. This time she was healthy; she was plump and mature. She wore a cloak made of Tusi gusset material, her eyebrows were plucked and darkened with woad, and she wore a mole; to her face she

had applied some white facial powder and rouge and she had added collyrium to her eyelashes. In short, she entered my room all made up. She seemed content with her life. Involuntarily, she placed the index finger of her left hand in her mouth. Was she the gentle lady, the delicate, ethereal girl who wore a wrinkled black dress, who played hide-and-seek with me on the bank of the Suren river, the childish, transient and free girl whose provocative, sexy calves were visible through her skirt? Until now, whenever I looked at her, I was not aware that she was that same ethereal girl, but now, as if a curtain was removed from before my eyes, for some reason I was reminded of the meat in front of the butcher shop and she resembled a lump of lean meat. All the traces of her inherent attractiveness had totally abandoned her. She was a mature, grave, made-up woman--my wife! With fear and dread I realized that while my wife had grown up and was an adult, I had remained a child. To tell the truth I felt ashamed to look her in the face; I felt ashamed especially of her eyes. She yielded herself to everyone except me; my only consolation was the vague memory of her childhood when she had a simple childish face and had been a vague, transitory being, when there had been no trace of the odds-and-ends-man's teeth on her face--no, she was not the same person.

"How are you feeling?" She asked sarcastically.

"Are you not free? Are you not doing whatever you wish to do? What's my health to you?" I snapped at her.

She slammed the door and left; she didn't even turn to look at me. I had forgotten how to communicate with the people of the world, with the living. This woman whom I thought had no feeling whatsoever took offense at my act! Several times I wished to go to her and throw myself at her feet, cry and ask for forgiveness. Indeed, I wanted to cry because I thought if I were able to cry, it would decrease the intensity of my remorse and I would feel better. Several minutes, hours, or maybe even several centuries passed--I don't know. I was not keeping track of time--I was like a lunatic who becomes intoxicated with his own suffering. The state of ecstasy that I experienced is beyond human conception; I was the only one who could experience such a state, a state even beyond the reach of gods if they actually existed... At that moment I discovered that I was indeed superior; I was above the rabble, above the phenomenal world, and I even felt that I had surpassed those gods who are the offspring of human lust. I was a god, even bigger than a god, because within me I felt an eternal, infinite flux.

... But she returned. She was not as cruel as I had imagined. I rose, kissed her skirt and, coughing and crying, threw myself at her feet. I rubbed my face against her calf and several times called her by her real name--her real name seemed to have a special ring to it. But as I embraced her legs, which were bitter, soft and acrid, like the taste of the bitter end of a cucumber, in my heart--at the bottom of my heart, that is--I repeated "whore ... whore!" and I cried and cried. I lost all track of time, but when I came to, she was gone. As I sat before the smoking tallow burner in the same position in which I sit before the opium brazier--like the odds-and-ends man who sits at his display--for an instantaneous moment, I experienced the full impact of the intoxicating pleasures, caresses and sufferings of mankind. I was bending over the tallow burner immobile, gazing at the soot which, like black flakes of snow, was covering my face. When my nanny, carrying a bowl of barley-broth and some chicken pilaff, entered my room and saw me, she screamed in terror and backed away, dropping the tray and my dinner. It pleased me that at least I was able to frighten her. I got up, cropped the wick with a pair of snuffers and walked to the mirror. I rubbed the soot into my face--what a horrible face! I began to pull my eye and tug the corners of my mouth, I puffed out my cheeks, I pulled the tip of my beard up and twisted the ends, I made all kinds of faces; my face was capable of assuming all manner of frightening and comical expressions, although I recognized these expressions and I could feel them, they still struck me as funny. All these were my faces and they were in me; they were murderous, horrible and comical masks which I could transform, one into another, using the tip of a finger. In myself, I saw the reflections of the old Qur'an reciter, the butcher, and my wife; it was as though an image of each existed within me, but none of them belonged to me. Are not the substance and the expressions of my face responses to an undefined stimulus created by the cumulative doubts, copulations, and disappointments inherent in my ancestors? And that I, the custodian of this burdensome inheritance, due to some insane and humorous inclination, have involuntarily allowed my thoughts to assume these formal and rigid expressions! Only at the time of my death, perhaps, will these doubts abandon me, and I may be allowed to assume the expression naturally meant for me.

Even at that last minute, however, couldn't the expressions that my ridiculous desire has engraved on my face prove too deeply incised to be obliterated? In any

event, I had gained insight into my capabilities and I realized my potential. Suddenly, I burst into laughter. It was a hideous frightening laughter which, because I did not recognize my own voice, made my hair stand on end. The same outside sound, the same laughter that for a long time I had attributed to an outside source, was now resounding in my ear. Suddenly, I began to cough and a clot of bloody phlegm, a piece of my liver, fell onto the mirror. I moved the phlegm around on the surface of the mirror with my finger; then I turned and looked behind me. I saw a terrified nanny staring at me; her face was pale, her hair was disheveled and her eyes were lifeless; she was holding a bowl of barley broth like the one she had brought me earlier. I covered my face with my hands and hid myself behind the closet curtain.

When I tried to go to sleep, a fiery ring pressed on my head from all around. The smell of the sandalwood, which I had put into the tallow burner, filled my nostrils; it smelled like my wife's leg muscles. The mildly bitter taste of cucumber ends was still in my mouth. I rubbed my hand against my body and in my imagination I compared my body (my thigh, my calves, my arms) with my wife's; again the outline of my wife's thigh and buttocks, and the warmth of her body, materialized before me. It more than materialized because it fulfilled a need. I desired her body near me. To dispel this lustful temptation, I needed to make a move, to make a decision, but the fine and scalding ring around my head soon plunged me into a vague and confused sea to struggle amongst frightening figures.

It was still dark when the voices of a group of drunken watchmen passing in the alley woke me; playing practical jokes on each other they sang in unison:

Let us go and drink mey--
The wine of the Kingdom of Ray;
If not today, then what day?

I recalled, no, upon a sudden inspiration I remembered that I had a flask of wine in the closet of my room. A cup of this wine in which poison from the fang of a Nag was dissolved could dispel all the nightmares that life could create... but that whore...? This word intensified my jealousy towards her and made her appear livelier and more energetic than before.

Could I imagine anything better than this: to give a cup of that wine to her, to gulp one down myself and to die together with her in the throes of a convulsion? What is love? For the rabble love is a kind of variety, a transient vulgarity; the rabble's conception of love is

best found in their obscene ditties, in prostitution and in the foul idioms they use when they are halfway sober, such as "shoving the donkey's foreleg in mud," or "putting dust on the head." My love for her, however, was of a totally different kind. I knew her from ancient times--strange slanted eyes, a narrow, half-open mouth, a subdued quiet voice. She was the embodiment of all my distant, painful memories among which I sought what I was deprived of, what belonged to me but somehow I was denied. Was I deprived forever? This possibility produced a most frightening sensation in me--a pleasurable sense of temptation which compensated for my disappointed sense of love.

For some reason I continued to think of the butcher in front of the window of my room who rolls up his sleeves, says besmellah and cuts the meat. His expression and attitude were constantly before my eyes until finally I, too, made a decision--a frightful decision. I got out of my bed, rolled up my sleeves and picked up the bone-handled, long-bladed knife from where I had put it under my pillow. I hunched my shoulders and threw a yellow cloak across my back; then I wrapped a scarf around my head and face. I felt that I had acquired a composite attitude, one that blended the characteristics of the butcher with those of the odds-and-ends man.

Then I tip-toed in the direction of my wife's room. Her room was dark. I opened the door quietly. As though muttering to herself in a dream, she said aloud, "take off your scarf!" I approached her bed and held my face against her mild, quiet breath; she had an incredibly pleasant and life-giving warmth! It occurred to me that if I breathed in this warmth for some time, I would become alive again. Her breath was not scalding, although for a long time now I had been of the opinion that everyone's breath was hot and scalding like mine. I concentrated all my senses to perceive if there were another man in her room--that is if any of her lovers were present--but she was alone. I realized that all those things people said about her were absolute lies and slanders. How could one be sure that she was not still a virgin? I felt ashamed to have attributed so many fanciful acts of wrongdoing to her. My contrition, however, did not last more than a moment, because right away I heard someone sneeze outside; this was followed by stifled, mocking laughter which made my hair stand on end, as if someone had pulled all my veins out of my body. If I had not heard this sneezing and this laughter, if Providence had not willed that I wait, then, following my decision, I would have cut her flesh into pieces and I

would have given it to the butcher in front of our house to sell to the public. I personally would have taken a piece of her thigh to the old Qur'an reciter as a piece of sacrificial meat; then I would return to him the next day and say, "The meat that you ate yesterday, do you know whose flesh it was?"

Were it not for his laughter I should have done this at night when I did not have to look her in the eyes. I felt ashamed of the expression in her eyes as she reproached me. Anyway, I picked up a piece of material which was impeding me and hastily ran from the room. I tossed the knife on the roof since it was this long-bladed knife which had created all these murderous thoughts in me. I discarded the long-bladed knife that resembled the butcher's, and rid myself of it.

In my room, in the light of the tallow burner, I saw that I had picked up her dress, a dirty dress which had been in contact with her flesh, a soft, silk dress made in India which smelled of her body and of champac perfume; these scents had remained in the dress because of her warmth--because of her existence. I smelled it, placed it between my legs and went to sleep. I had not spent a night as comfortably as this before. Early the next morning I awakened to the sound of my wife's clamors; she was making a fuss about the loss of her dress, saying repeatedly, "It was a brand-new dress!" though I knew it had a tear in the sleeve. Even if it meant bloodshed, I was not about to give it up. Wasn't I entitled to my wife's old dress?

When nanny brought ass's milk, honey and bread for me, I noticed she had put a bone-handled, long-bladed knife at the side of my breakfast tray as well. She said she saw it on the odds-and-ends-man's display and bought it. Then, raising her eyebrows indicating my wife's room, she said, "It might come in handy!" I picked up the knife and examined it. It was my own knife. Then, like one who is offended and who has a complaint, she said, "Well, my daughter (that whore, that is), at this early hour of the morning is accusing me of stealing her dress last night! Now, would I tell you a lie... but yesterday your wife saw streaks of blood... we knew that the child... her explanation is that she became pregnant in the bathhouse. One night I massaged her back; her arm was all black and blue. She showed her arm to me and said, 'I went into the cellar at the wrong time and the you-know-who pinched me!...' Did you know that your wife has been pregnant for a long time?" I laughed and said, "And the child looks like the old Qur'an reciter, no doubt. She must have been

thinking of him when the child first moved in her womb!" Then nanny left the room in a storm as though she was not expecting such an answer. I got up right away and with shaking hands picked up the bone-handled, long-bladed knife, took it to the closet, placed it in my souvenir box and closed the lid.

No, it was impossible for the child to be mine; it certainly belonged to the odds-and-ends man!

In the afternoon, my door opened and her small brother-- the whore's little brother-- entered chewing his nails. It was impossible not to recognize immediately that they were brother and sister. They were that much alike! He had a small, narrow mouth, meaty, wet and lustful lips, languid eyelids, slanted, astonished eyes, prominent cheeks, disheveled, date-colored hair and a wheat-colored complexion. He was a replica of that whore; he even showed a trace of her satanic temperament. He had an insensitive Turkmen face devoid of any spirit, a face designed for life's combats, a face that validated anything that assured survival. It seems that nature has taken some precautions; it seems that the forefathers of this pair lived at the mercy of sunshine and rain and that they fought the elements, giving them not only their shape and expression (with certain modifications), but their endurance, lust, greed and hunger as well. I knew what the taste of his mouth would be: the mildly bitter taste of the stem end of a cucumber.

When he entered the room, he looked at me with his astonished Turkmen eyes and said, "Shajun says the physician said that you are about to die and take your troubles with you. How do people die?"

I said, "Tell her I died a long time ago. "

"Shajun said, 'If I had not lost the child, the whole house would be ours.'"

I burst into laughter involuntarily; it was dry, hideous laughter that made one's hair stand on end, laughter in which I could not recognize my own voice. The child ran from the room in terror.

At this moment I knew why the butcher wiped the bone-handled, long-bladed knife on the leg of the lamb with pleasure. It was the pleasure of cutting lean meat, meat which had lost its blood either in the form of dead, silt-like coagulated blood or in the form of bloody water dripping off the windpipes of the sheep. The yellow dog

in front of the butcher shop knew it, so did the dimmed, staring eyes of the severed head of a cow thrown on the floor of the shop, and so did the sheep heads with eyes on which the dust of death rested--they all knew the reason!

Finally I realized that I was a demi-god and that I was beyond all the low, petty desires of mankind. I felt the eternal flux within me. What is eternity? Eternity for me was playing hide-and-seek with that whore on the banks of the Suren river; it was a momentary closing of my eyes when I hid my head in her lap.

Suddenly I seemed to be talking to myself; I was talking to myself in a strange way; to wit, I intended to talk to myself, but my lips were so heavy that they would not budge. I was talking to myself with immobile lips and with an inaudible voice!

In this room which, like a grave, grew narrower and darker each moment, night and its horrible shadows surrounded me. In front of the smoking tallow burner, my shadow--wearing my sheepskin, the cloak which I wrapped around me, and my scarf--was mutely cast on the wall.

My shadow was more profound and more exact than my real being. It seemed that the old odds-and-ends man, the butcher, nanny, my whore of a wife were all my shadows, shadows which held me prisoner. At this moment I resembled an owl. My laments, however, were caught in my throat and I spat them like clots of blood. Perhaps the owl, too, is sick and because of the sickness it thinks as I do. My shadow on the wall was exactly like an owl; hunched over, it carefully read my writings. Doubtless it understood them well; it was the only one who could understand them. When I looked at my shadow from the corner of my eye, it terrified me.

It was a dark, silent night, like the night which surrounded my life, a night with frightful figures mocking me from the door, the wall and from behind the curtain. Sometimes my room became so narrow that I felt I was in a coffin. My temples burned and my limbs refused to move. A weight, like the weight of the carcasses carried to the butcher on the back of black, gaunt pack-horses, pressed against my chest.

Quietly, like a mute who must repeat each word and who must read a verse many times, death murmured its song. It sounded like the reverberations of a saw cutting into flesh; it shrieked and then suddenly it choked.

I hardly closed my eyes when a group of drunken night watchmen passed my room swearing at each other and singing in unison:

Let us go and drink mey--
The vine of the Kingdom of Ray;
If not today, then what day?

I said to myself, "Now my arrest is inevitable!" Suddenly I felt an upsurge of superhuman force within me. My forehead cooled. I got up, threw my yellow cloak over my shoulders, wrapped my scarf a couple of times around my head, hunched my shoulders, picked up the bone-handled, long-bladed knife from the closet where I had hidden it in my souvenir box, and tip-toed in the direction of the whore's room. When I reached the threshold, I saw that her room was plunged in utter darkness. As I listened attentively, I heard her voice saying, "Are you here? Take off your scarf!" Her voice had a pleasure-inducing ring to it; she sounded as she did when she was a child--as if unconsciously murmuring in a dream. I had heard this voice once before in a deep sleep. Was she dreaming? Her voice was muffled and deep; it had changed to the voice of the small girl who played hide-and-seek with me on the banks of the Suren river. I stopped for a moment and heard her repeat, "Come in and take off your scarf!"

Quietly I entered the dark room, took off my cloak and scarf, took off my clothes; but for some reason I entered the bed still holding to the bone-handled, long-bladed knife. The warmth of her bed gave me a new life. I embraced her pleasant, damp and sensual body in memory of the slim girl with a pale face and innocent, large Turkmen eyes who played hide-and-seek with me on the banks of the Suren river. No--I attacked her like a savage, hungry beast loathing her from the bottom of my heart. My feelings of love and hatred for her were mixed. Her cool, silvery body, my wife's body, like a Nag-serpent which tightens her coils around a victim, enveloped me. The fragrance of her bosom was intoxicating; the flesh of her arm, coiled around my neck, felt pleasantly warm. I wished my life would end that instant, because at that moment all my feelings of hatred and vengefulness towards her had disappeared. I tried to keep from crying. I did not even feel the locking of her legs behind mine, nor did I feel her hands clasping the nape of my neck; we were stuck together like a mandrake. I felt the pleasing warmth of live and fresh flesh. All the particles of my burning body drank this warmth. I felt like a prey being gradually swallowed. My

senses of fear and pleasure were blended in each other. Her mouth tasted acrid like the bitter end of a cucumber. Sweating amidst this agreeable pressure, I lost consciousness,

My body, along with all the particles of my being sang a song of victory. Condemned and helpless, I surrendered to the whimsical waves of this boundless sea. Her hair, which smelled of champac, was stuck to my face. Mutual cries of anguish and joy issued from the depth of our beings. Suddenly she bit my lip violently, cutting it open in the middle. Did she bite her own finger like this too, or had she discovered that I was not the old man with the leprous lip? I tried to cut myself loose, but I could not move even slightly; my struggles got me nowhere. Our flesh was welded together.

I thought she had gone mad. Amidst the struggle, automatically, I moved my hand and felt the long-bladed knife enter some part of her body. A warm liquid poured over my face. She shrieked and drew away from me. I held the warm liquid in my fist and threw the long-bladed knife away. This action freed my hand which I rubbed across her body. It was utterly cold--she was dead. At the same time I began to cough, but it was not really coughing; it was the echo of that dry, hideous laughter that made one's hair stand on end. Hurriedly, I threw my cloak over my shoulders and returned to my room. I opened my hand in the light of the tallow burner. Her eye lay in the palm of my hand. My whole body was soaked with blood.

I walked to the mirror, but out of fear I held my hands in front of my face. I resembled, no, I had become the odds-and-ends man. The hair of my head and beard, like the hair on the head and face of one who survives a confrontation with a Nag-serpent, was white. My lip, like the old man's, was split open, my eyelids were without lashes, and a clump of white hair protruded from my chest--a new soul descended upon me. My thinking changed, my feelings changed and I could not free myself from the clutches of the fiend that was awakened in me. Covering my face with my hands I burst into an involuntary peal of laughter, a laughter more violent than ever before, one that shook my entire being, a deep laughter which could not be traced to any known recess of my body, a hollow laughter that reverberated in my throat and emerged from the depths of nothingness. I had become the odds-and-ends man.

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I felt the anguish of one who is awakened from a long, deep sleep. I rubbed my eyes. I was in my old room. The light was dim and a wet fog covered the window panes. The crow of a rooster came from afar. The red charcoal in the pot of fire, turned to ashes, could hardly withstand a single breath. I had the feeling that, like the red pieces of charcoal turned into hollow ashes, my thoughts, too, could not withstand the blow of a single breath.

The first thing I looked for was the Raq jar that the old carriage driver had given me in the graveyard, but it was not before me. Then, I saw someone with a stooped shadow, no, a stooped old man who had covered his head and face with a scarf and who carried something like a jar wrapped in a dirty handkerchief under his arm, in the doorway of my room. He was laughing: a hideous, hollow laughter that made my hair stand on end.

The moment I moved, he left my room. I stood up, intending to pursue him and recover the jar which was wrapped in a dirty handkerchief; but with a peculiar agility, the old man disappeared. I returned to my room and opened the window that gives to the street. He was carrying the bundle under his arm and his maniacal laughter made his shoulders shake violently. He trudged along until he disappeared into the mist. I returned from the window and looked at myself. My clothes were torn, and I was covered from head to toe with coagulated blood. Two flies the color of golden bees were flying around me and small, white worms were wriggling on my body; a dead weight pressed against my chest...

THE END