ADVENTURES IN IMMEDIATE IRREALITY

MAX BLECHER

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL HENRY HEIM

"A MASTERPIECE."
—HERTA MÜLLER

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A NEW DIRECTIONS EBOOK

“I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire.”
—Percy Bysshe Shelley

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Max Blecher’s Adventures

This is a book that soothes without sentimentality. Blecher chronicled his dying from both the interior of his body and the outside of nonexistence. He made that veil permeable: his words are vehicles traveling through the opaque membrane that surrounds the seemingly solid world. These are the “adventures” of the inside and the outside exchanging places, while being somehow exactly the same in the light of Blecher’s extraordinary sensibility. Nobody knows how to die. Max Blecher, because he was young and a genius, suggests a way that investigates, rediscovers life, and radiates beauty from suffering.

“Ordinary words lose their validity at certain depths of the soul.”

Max Blecher’s soul was a fearless journalist who reported what his hypersensitive senses and immense intelligence uncovered about the world we think we know. “The world as definitively constituted had lain waiting inside me forever and all I did from day to day was to verify its obsolete contents.” After the discovery that this is not the real world, he finds it to be the projection of a text that tells a story which erases the world as it appears to be: “All at once the surfaces of things surrounding me took to shimmering strangely or turning vaguely opaque like curtains, which when lit from behind go from opaque to transparent and give a room a sudden depth. But there was nothing to light these objects from behind, and they remained sealed by their density, which only rarely dissipated enough to let their true meaning shine through.”

This is not Surrealism, as critics sometime saw it, but hyper-realism. Blecher corresponded with André Breton, and was chronologically situated in a string of Jewish-Romanian geniuses: Tristan Tzara (b. 1886), Benjamin Fondane (b. 1898), Victor Brauner (b. 1903), and Gherasim Luca (b. 1913). Each of those writers launched a precocious revolution related to Surrealism, with an urgency prompted by an imminent and cataclysmic future. Yet, unlike his peers, for Blecher the urgency of Time unfolds with a rigorous diagnostic probity that will not yield to any unreflecting words. The games of language so beloved by Surrealists are there only to be disposed of.

Glossing the nonsense conversation he enjoys with a friend:

“What I found in that banter was more than the slightly cloying pleasure of plunging into mediocrity; it was a vague sense of freedom: I could, for instance, vilify the doctor to my heart’s content even though I knew—he lived in the neighborhood—that he went to bed every night at nine … We would go on and on about anything and everything, mixing truth and fancy, until the conversation took on a kind of airborne independence, fluttering about the room like a curious bird, and had the bird actually put in an appearance we’d have accepted it as easily as we accepted the fact that our words had nothing to do with ourselves … Back in the street, I would feel I had emerged from a deep sleep, yet I still seemed to be dreaming. I was amazed to find people talking seriously to one another.

Didn’t they realize one could talk seriously about anything? Anything and everything?”

This is the “nothing” that is acquiring mass and is already heading for the world that Blecher feels becoming nothing but the mere traces of a once “serious” life. In the unfolding researches of his childhood, he has time to uncover in dusty attics the faded remains of gone worlds: letters, photographs, and paintings more substantial than the present, which evanesces as he writes, “like a scene viewed through the wrong side of a binocular, perfect in every detail but tiny and far off.”

There is an inverted nostalgia here, a nostalgia for the present that has already taken hold of the writer who is composing both his own and his decade’s epitaph. Blecher, like Proust, endows places and objects from the past with the ability to project an independent existence more real than the present. This world hides another, open only to the genius of child-wonder and adolescent desire. *Adventures in Immediate Irreality* is not a memoir, a novel, or a poem, though it has been called all those names, and compared rightly with the works of Proust and Kafka. Blecher belongs in that company for the density and lyrical force of his writing, but he is also a recording diagnostician of a type the twentieth century had not yet fully birthed, but the twenty-first is honoring in the highest degree.

The place of these “adventures” is probably Roman, the provincial Romanian city where he was born in 1909, a place small enough to explore, and conventional enough to grasp. The time is childhood and adolescence in the still new twentieth century. The probing instrument is his body rushing to work for as long as the liberty of his age and his vitality allow. Blecher didn’t outlive his unfettered genius. In 1928, while still in medical school in Paris, he was diagnosed with spinal tuberculosis. He was treated at sanatoriums in Berck-sur-Mer in France, Leysin in Switzerland, and Techirghiol in Romania. For the last ten years of his life, he was confined to bed, immobilized by the disease. Despite his condition, he wrote and published his first piece in 1930, a short story called “Herrant” in Tudor Arghezi’s literary magazine *Bilete de papagal*, contributed to André Breton’s literary review *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* and corresponded with Breton, André Gide, Martin Heidegger, Ilarie Voronca, Geo Bogza, and Mihail Sebastian. In 1934, he published *Corp transparent*, a volume of poetry. In 1935, he was moved to a house on the outskirts of Roman where he wrote and published his major works, *Întâmplări în irealitate imediată* (Adventures in Immediate Irreality) and *Inimi cicatrizate* (Scarred Hearts), as well as short prose pieces, articles, and translations. In 1938 he died, at the age of twenty-eight.

Blecher’s genius is also the genius of his disease, and the timing of his death: “I envied the people around me who are hermetically sealed inside their secrets and isolated from the tyranny of objects. They may live out their lives as prisoners of their overcoats, but nothing external can terrorize or overcome them, nothing can penetrate their marvelous prisons. I had nothing to separate me from the world: everything around me invaded from head to toe; my skin might as well have been a sieve. The attention I paid to my

surroundings, nebulous though it was, was not simply an act of will: the world, as is its nature, sank its tentacles into me; I was penetrated by the hydra's myriad arms. Exasperating as it was, I was forced to admit that I lived in the world I saw around me; there was nothing for it." Those "hermetically sealed" people, in their healthy bodies and apparently fortunate longevity, were going to go on living in the coming decade. Max Blecher, whom nothing separated from the world, had the good luck to die in 1938, freed into the "outside" before the 1940s.

Vizuina luminată: Jurnal de sanatoriu (The Lit-Up Burrow: Sanatorium Journal) was published posthumously in part in 1947 and in full in 1971. Beginning in the mid-1970s his books were translated into French, German, Spanish, Czech, Hungarian, Dutch, Swedish, Italian, Polish, and English. The twenty-first century is even more wildly receptive to Max Blecher.

"For a moment I had the feeling of existing only in the photograph." Max Blecher wrote this sentence while Roman Vishniac was capturing a multitude whose members ceased to exist soon after he photographed them. Those images of people, whose provincialism was nearly absolute, later toured the world. This sentence by Blecher resonated for Walter Benjamin, himself in the grip of reproductive extinction—what the twentieth century already had inscribed in its DNA. It is a fountain-sentence, a *boca de leone* from which reality spews the bile of immediate irreality. The magnificent paragraph that opens with that sentence, rests on another photograph, a Victorian portrait taken at a fair, of the photographer's dead child, and concludes with the century's epitaph: "At fairs, therefore, even death took on sham, nostalgic-ridden backdrops, as if the fair were a world of its own, its purpose being to illustrate the boundless melancholy of artificial ornamentation from the beginning of a life to its end as exemplified by the pallid lives lived in the waxworks' sifted light or in the otherworldly beauty of the photographer's infinite panoramas. Thus for me the fair was a desert island awash in sad haloes similar to the nebulous yet limpid world into which my childhood crises plunged me."

Blecher foresaw the irreality of the "real" world and the substance of "irreality," now main quandaries of our time as we struggle between the "real" and the "virtual."

"One day the cinema caught fire. The film tore and immediately went up in flames, which for several seconds raged on the screen like a filmed warning that the place was on fire as well as a logical continuation of the medium's mission to give the news, which mission it was now carrying out to perfection by reporting the latest and most exciting event in town: its own combustion. Cries of 'Fire! Fire!' broke out all over the room like revolver shots. In no time there was such a racket that the audience, until then seated quietly in the dark, seemed to have been storing up great wailing and ululation, like batteries, silent and inoffensive unless suddenly overcharged and then explosive."

When hyper-realist ultra-hearing is so acutely accurate it becomes a timeless metaphor: "And suddenly a clicking noise rang out. It was neither the grate of sheet metal nor the far-

off jangle of a bunch of keys nor the rasp of a motor; it was the click—easily discernable amidst the myriad everyday sounds—of the wheel of fortune."

Like the fair, Blecher's world is still a world in good order, loosely tethered to the nineteenth century's long fin-de-siecle with its tendencies to dematerialize, slip away, and turn illegible. The educated classes of his time, who thought that "being illegible" was the greatest threat facing the human race, had no idea what a colossal loss of order was around the corner: the world and its humans would soon become illegible, unintelligible, irreparable. But Blecher's senses saw far. He grasped the incoming scrambled text of matter, tuned to the disintegration of his body. The "adventures" of his evanescence are suspenseful, like those in a novel, beautiful like passages from a European, pessimistic Whitman, a Whitman *à rebours*, who is not Baudelaire, and these adventures are also news, our news.

There is no trace of God. But there is an ecstasy in knowing mud. And wonder at the fact that the world is *full*: "I was surrounded by hard, fixed matter on all sides—here in the form of balls and sculptures, outside in the form of trees, houses, and stone. Vast and willful, it held me in its thrall from head to foot. No matter where my thoughts led me, I was surrounded by matter, from my clothes to streams in the woods running through walls, rocks, glass … I met hay carts and, now and then, extraordinary things, like a man in the rain carrying a chandelier with crystal ornaments that sounded like a symphony of hand bells on his back while heavy drops of rain dripped down the shiny facets. It made me wonder what constitutes the gravity of the world."

It is the question that Michael Henry Heim—the great translator who brought into English some of Central Europe's finest writers—heard in his own body. Heim was himself ill when he translated Blecher, for the sake of whom he learned Romanian. This translation is a special event in the complex geography of literature: it represents the meeting of a young Romanian genius racing the imminent destruction of his body, with Michael Heim, a master of the superb English sentence. Heim's translation of Blecher's *Adventures in Irreality* vibrates in tune with the mysterious filaments of death connecting them in this text. This is why, despite two decent previous translations into English, Heim's *Adventures in Immediate Irreality* is definitive.

ANDREI CODRESCU

“Every Object Must Occupy the Place It Occupies and I Must Be the Person I Am”

I’d like to introduce you to a book, an impressive book that no one read when it first came out in Romania in 1936 or later when it was reissued in 1970: *Adventures in Immediate Irreality* by M. Blecher. And when the first German edition appeared, which wasn’t until 1990 in a translation by Ernest Wichner, no one read that either, even though few books published in Germany since 1990 could compare with Blecher’s novel for sheer literary intensity. But perhaps that’s why the book never attracted a wider audience?

In order to convince you, I’d like to let the book speak for itself.

“The crowds, making the rounds, would pass from zone to zone, bright lights to darkness, like the moon in my geography book” is how Blecher describes people visiting a fair. And no other sentence better describes his own text. The external plot isn’t easy to describe—it’s really the ongoing reflection of an interior narrative, a manic inner monologue written in the first person, in which the narrator’s striving for self-assurance becomes a confession. This narrator is a nameless adolescent roaming through the summer heat of a small town. He has no goal whatsoever, he is searching, as Blecher says, for the correspondence between himself and the waxwork panopticon of places, people, and objects set in the world. The search produces emotional upheavals that he calls *crises*, which all come from the “terrible question of who I actually am”—a question whose answer “requires a lucidity more basic and profound than that of the brain.” In the words of Blecher’s narrator: “And I have returned implacably to the surface of things… . Never, under no other circumstances, have I felt so clearly as in moments like these when every object must occupy the place it occupies and I must be the person I am.”

Places, persons, objects—and this vagabond narrator that speaks of himself so perplexingly and so intriguingly that it goes far beyond being “a complete stranger” to himself. Because what this person says about himself goes beyond what even a person might say who feels split into two persons. And his powers of observation are so ruthless it’s as though one person of flesh and blood were peering outside his body, along with a second person in his head, and along with a third or fifth person passing in and out of his own skin at will. Blecher’s protagonist turns the “crises” into a kind of equilibrium: “I was tall, thin, and pale. My spindly neck rose awkwardly out of my tunic. My long arms hung from my sleeves like newly skinned animals. My pockets so bulged with papers and objects that I could scarcely extract a handkerchief to wipe the dust off my shoes when I arrived in the ‘city center.’” And about a suicide attempt with over thirty white tablets he says: “Since nothing could go on as before, I had to make a clean break.” And: “It was as if it were an everyday task I needed to do. All I could find were things of no use to me: buttons, string, thread of various colors, notebooks—all strongly redolent of naphthalene

and none capable of causing a man's death."

In the end, the happiness being sought culminates in catastrophe, which unfolds with drafting-table clarity but has obscure, inscrutable consequences. The lifeless material of objects and the vegetative matter of plants stimulate the nerves to the point of breaking. The "boundless melancholy" of the objects remains outside, while the brain is flooded with hallucinatory images:

> I dreamed I was walking through a town steeped in dust but very sunny and full of white houses, an oriental town perhaps. There was a woman at my side, a woman in black, in mourning, her face veiled. Oddly enough, the woman had no head. The veils were tastefully arranged where the head should have been, but she had only a gaping hole there instead, an empty sphere running down to the nape of the neck. We were both in a hurry, following a cart with red crosses on the sides: it was carrying the corpse of the woman's husband.
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> I realized there was a war going on, and in fact we soon came to a station… . Suddenly a man came out of a first class compartment; he was portly and well dressed, had a decoration in his buttonhole, and was wearing a monocle and white shoes. His bald spot was poorly hidden by several strands of silver hair. In his arms he held a white Pekinese, its eyes like two agate marbles in oil.
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> For a while he paraded up and down the platform looking for something. Finally he found it: a flower-girl. He chose several bouquets of red carnations from her basket and paid her for them, taking the money out of an elegant wallet of soft leather with a silver monogram. Then he went back to the train and I could see him putting the Pekinese on the table by the window and feeding it the red carnations one by one. The animal ingested them with obvious relish.

Blecher threads his observations into every page of this book just as densely and accurately. The details go clicking by. Tiny filaments of hair, little balls of agate, small tables, miniature dogs, petite bouquets—within the sweet substance of the diminutive, the details head into the monstrous.

M. Blecher—in letters he sometimes wrote Max or Marcel, but as an author he only appeared with the anonymizing initial M.—was a Romanian Jew, born in 1909 in Botoşani in the northeastern part of the country. His family owned a small ceramic factory on the edge of town and a ceramics and porcelain shop in the center. He traveled to Paris to study medicine. When he was nineteen he contracted osteal tuberculosis, and spent the rest of his short life in sanatoria. When his parents ran out of money for his treatment abroad, he had to return to Romania, where he died at the age of twenty-eight.

When you read his books it's hard to believe your eyes. The author of this masterpiece was a twenty-five-year-old already weakened by disease.

Romanian literati lived in fear of Eugène Ionesco's scathing reviews. But when Blecher's *Adventures in Immediate Irreality* appeared in a limited edition in 1936, he praised the book. Unfortunately it never achieved commercial success. And then came the years of fascism. And in 1945, after the annihilation of the Jews, came Stalinism. And after that came the home-grown variety of socialism, which entrenched itself behind a fraudulent ideology, never faced up to its own connivance in the barbarity, and even had anti-Semitism built into the system as a matter of course. Until the collapse of the dictatorship, national provincialism made it impossible for a Romanian Jew to be recognized as one of the best Romanian authors. And after 1989 the anti-Semites felt even

more empowered, and anti-Semitism, having hatched out of socialism, is now allowed the same blatant free expression, and the same language, as in the fascist era. Once again the so-called intelligentsia is busy picking up the pieces and hammering them into a narrow-minded “national remembrance,” a little plywood box where someone like Blecher doesn’t fit. Most likely they’re afraid of this book, because it addresses a nightmarish truth and couldn’t care less for “national remembrance.”

“The certitudes I lived by were separated from the world of incertitudes by only the flimsiest of membranes,” says Blecher’s protagonist. What makes the author’s view so radical is the eroticism that lurks in every ordinary object, waiting to ensnare a person. The narrator interacts with objects in a way one can really only interact with people. His observations charge his surroundings with an eroticism otherwise only possible between skin and skin. His flesh seems to creep into the substance of the things, there’s a kind of promiscuity with inanimate ornaments. And the substance responds with a similar promiscuity, coupling with the flesh of its observer. Something forbidden pulsates between the person and the object, something that smacks of incest, of overindulgence, of pleasure, and of sinful intensity. Time and again, the search for the self ends in an exaggeration of identity. Time and again it is driven to a new extreme until it is suddenly called off as though too spooked to continue. The objects themselves, their features, become surrogates. They offer no answer, yet they usurp the place of everything the narrator wants to discover about himself.

Here is a description of a gypsy’s ring: “The extraordinary embellishments used by birds, animals, or flowers for purposes of sexual attraction … the hysterical lace of petunia petals… . It was made of marvelous tin—fine, grotesque, and hideous. Yes, hideous more than anything. It got at love in its deepest, darkest regions.” In an office with leather chairs and subdued lighting, “the screen of an enormous pewter spittoon in the shape of a cat stood gleaming in a dark corner.” “The glass windowpanes wobbled a bit in their frames like loose teeth.” And inside the crystal coffin of a wax figure cabinet is “a woman with a pale, yet luminescent face, lying in a glass box and sheathed in black lace, a striking red rose between her breasts, her blond wig coming undone at the forehead, the rouge in her nostrils aquiver… . It remained lodged inside me, still vague, like a word I wished to recall.”

The adolescent vagabond falls for the objects, because he’s fallen for the eroticism of sensory perception. And as the things themselves become increasingly transparent through his close observation, he becomes less and less transparent to himself. Particular details inflame or cool his ardor: his body is now attracted, now repelled by the things. His flesh is a magnet. His organs alone are insufficient, they need something else, and they lie in wait for the objects, which are likewise in need. Their features entice the body, wresting away its feelings which they then consume. The internal and the external engage in mutual indecent assault, and in the end it’s impossible to say which side instigated the voracious encounter—whether the person assailed the object to the point of breakdown, or vice

versa. The paths beneath the feet are constantly hoisted into the head. And roaming through the space that exists between feet and mind inevitably leads to lonely realizations. The differences between the beautiful and the ugly, the anguished and the elated, are no longer possible in this book. The intensity of perception climbs right through the skull, the "melancholy of existence" and the "normally organized torture" render all the usual registries unfit. Here only extremes combine to form completely new properties. To be sure, the objects retain their familiar names, but their looks and features get reinvented. The newly perceived sweeps away the familiar. And there's no use opposing it, because in the act of reading, the shrewdness of every observation acquires greater validity than anything you might recall from your own observations of the familiar objects. In the words of Blecher's protagonist: "I had the vague feeling that nothing in the world can come to fruition." Nothing is ever completed. And this narrator is concerned with much more than completion.

Blecher's eroticism of perception requires the constant comparison of one thing with a hitherto unimaginable other. In this eroticized world things venture into the outrageous: "When I got to the marketplace, I found men unloading meat for the butcher shops, their arms laden with sides of red and purple beasts glistening with blood, as tall and proud as dead princesses… . They were lined up along the porcelain-white walls like scarlet sculptures carved from the most diverse and delicate material. They had the watery, iridescent shimmer of silk and the murky limpidity of gelatin." Or: "There were always nuts in a bowl, and Samuel Weber, who was especially fond of them, would swallow them slowly, peacefully, bit by bit, his Adam's apple bouncing up and down like a puppet on a rubber band." And Samuel Weber's son Ozy has "flute-like arms." Or: "I felt the silence in me smiling calmly, as if someone were blowing soap bubbles there." While taking a temperature "the slender glass lizard of a thermometer" glides under the arm. And of the doctor who is treating the malaria stricken protagonist, Blecher writes: "His small velvet eyes, fitful gestures, and thrust-forward mouth made him look like a mouse. The impression was so immediate and so strong that I thought it perfectly natural that he should give his *r*'s a long and sonorous roll as if he were munching something in secret as he spoke. The quinine he gave me only increased my conviction there was something mouse-like about him." Behind the sewing machine shop was a small room referred to as "the green room"—when no customer is around the ailing protagonist hastily makes love with Clara. On one such occasion he spots a mouse out of the corner of his eye, perched on Clara's powder compact:

> It had paused next to the mirror on the edge of the trunk and was staring at me with its tiny black eyes. The lamplight had given them two gleaming golden spots, which pierced me deeply and peered into my own eyes for several seconds with such intensity that they seemed to penetrate my brain. Perhaps the creature was searching for a curse to call down on me or perhaps for a mere reproach … I was certain the doctor had come to spy on me.
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> This supposition was confirmed that very evening as I took my quinine… . I found it perfectly acceptable: the quinine was bitter. The doctor had seen the pleasure Clara could give me in the back room and to get even he had prescribed the nastiest medicine on earth… .
>
> A few months after he first treated me, he was found dead in his attic: he had put a bullet through his brain.

> The first thing I asked myself when I heard the gruesome news was, ‘Were there mice in the attic?’ I needed to know. Because if the doctor was well and truly dead, a band of mice would have to set upon his corpse and extract all the mouse matter he had borrowed during his lifetime to be able to carry on his illegal human existence.

“All imitations make an analogous impression on me,” says the narrator. From the incest with the things, we learn from Blecher that the objects owe their existence to the imitation of themselves, that they need nothing apart from the ready, knowing material in order to make us totally besotted. And we are by no means spared by the fact that they are imitation, “artificial ornamentation,” filled with “boundless melancholy.” Because precisely therein lies their guile. The place where they reside and the time in which we behold them make us vulnerable. The things have “a perfidious sign of furtiveness and complicity.” And in the moment of the confrontation we have no choice but to adapt, the external world is thrust under our skin, we must bear its inert or lasciviously vegetating material, even though we’re not made for that. The world’s imitation of itself is a trap set to ensnare its own intricate originality. The things have the advantage, because unlike us, they don’t need to protect their flesh when they spring the trap. “It was what was most humdrum and familiar in the objects that disturbed me most. The habit of being seen so many times must have worn out their thin skins, and they sometimes looked flayed and bloody to me—and alive, ineffably alive.”

One rainy day the vagabond hero wanders to the edge of town, where he succumbs to the glistening mire of the wasteland. He steps into the slime, plunges his hands into the muck, smears mud in his hair, on his face, with no care for his clothes. It’s an intoxicating rush but that soon becomes a bitter disgrace when the glistening dries on his body as mere cold filth. The usual disgrace when, after the act of incest, the things quit the body so abruptly and return to themselves. “Such is what I had to struggle with, what implacably opposed me: the ordinary look of things.” And “the world was so limited by its petty passion for precision.”

In Blecher’s book the word *KNOWLEDGE* appears in italics. And this *KNOWLEDGE* is not achieved by reason, but by *SENSATION*. It is thought by means of the flesh. For Blecher, *KNOWLEDGE* is a trace left by the body. What’s astounding about Blecher’s language is the mixture of words laden with feelings and phrases so technical they sound like machines. Every sequence is infected by a form of mechanization. The emotional upheavals are stretched across a geometric frame. Reading the book we get the impression that Blecher’s words don’t merely describe the objects—they dig their talons into the things and hoist them high, straight into the sentences. About the suitability of a particular word, Blecher has his protagonist say: “It would have to contain something of the stupefaction I feel watching a person in reality and then following his gestures in a mirror, of the instability accompanying the falls I have in my dreams and the subsequent unforgettable moment of fear whistling through my spinal chord, or of the transparent mist inhabited by the bizarre decors of crystal balls I have known.”

There are three times in this book where relationships to women are compared with the effect of words. With Clara from the sewing machine shop the act of vice “involves a complicity more profound and immediate than any verbal communication.” The second woman is the dead woman mentioned above, lying in the glass coffin of the wax figure gallery, whose image “remained lodged inside me, still vague, like a word I wished to recall.” And the third woman is Edda. Newly married to the Webers’ rakish son, she moves into the family’s house. Because the narrator has been visiting there for years, and knows every nook and cranny, Edda becomes “one more object, a simple object whose existence beleaguered and tormented me like a word repeated many times.” The sexual arousal that she stirs inside the narrator intimidates him, while on the outside it petrifies his body like wood.

Precisely because words are elevated to the rank of love for women, the dialogues in this book are so tight they couldn’t be any shorter. The tone is gruff. All the conversations have a hint of reluctance, because the talking comes too late. Either the words sat too long on the tongue, or else they were swallowed too often. Speech comes as a last resort, long after the reason for speaking in the first place has passed. For every person in the book, sentences shrink whenever feelings take the upper hand. Communication follows this rule: the more feverish the feeling, the colder the word. This reduction condenses the dialogues to their most rudimentary, giving them the pithiness of sayings, aphorisms that pepper the entire text. The author can leave out the dialogues because they are repeated unwritten throughout the text, and constantly enter the mind of the reader.

Blecher’s question “Who am I” leads to a world eroticized by inner chafing. *Adventures in Immediate Irreality* is a study in observation. And it takes the reader where one generally arrives when one looks at things impartially—to a place of calm and composed resignation. In his words: “All things and all men were hemmed in by their petty, pathetic obligation to be precise, nothing more than precise.” “Exasperating as it was, I was forced to admit that I lived in the world I saw around me.”

HERTA MÜLLER

(translated by Philip Boehm)

ADVENTURES IN IMMEDIATE IRREALITY

Chapter One

Staring at a fixed point on the wall, I occasionally have the feeling I no longer know who or where I am. At such times, I experience the loss of my identity from a distance: I feel for a moment that I have become a complete stranger, this abstract personage and my real self vying for authenticity with equal strength.

In the following moment my identity returns. It is like a stereoscopic slide in which the two images, separated by mistake, suddenly give the illusion of three dimensionality once the projectionist brings them back together. My room seems fresher than ever. It reverts to its former consistency, its objects finding their proper places, as when a crushed lump of earth in a glass of water settles in layers of various well-defined and parti-colored elements. The elements of the room take back their own contours and the colors of the old memory I have of them.

The feeling of distance and solitude during the moments when my everyday person has dissolved into amorphousness differs from all other feelings. When it persists, it turns into a fear, a dread of never finding myself again. A vague silhouette of myself surrounded by a large luminous halo looms somewhere in the distance like an object lost in fog.

Then, the terrible question of who I actually am comes alive in me like a totally new body with unfamiliar skin and organs. The answer requires a lucidity more basic and profound than that of the brain. Everything in my body capable of stirring stirs, struggles, and revolts more intensely, more fundamentally than in everyday life. Everything begs for a solution.

Several times I find the room as I know it, as if I had opened and shut my eyes, but each time the room is clearer, as a landscape in field-glasses comes together when, adjusting the focus, one penetrates the veils of intermediary images.

Eventually I recognize myself and find the actual room again. It gives me a slightly intoxicated feeling. The room is extraordinarily dense in terms of matter, and I have returned implacably to the surface of things: the deeper the wave of obscurity, the higher its crest. Never, under no other circumstances, have I felt so clearly as in moments like these when every object must occupy the place it occupies and I must be the person I am.

My struggles with uncertainty no longer have a name; all that remains is the simple regret that I found nothing in their depths. I am surprised that a total lack of meaning should be so closely linked to my intimate being. Now that I have found myself again and am trying to express my reaction, that being seems completely impersonal: a mere exaggeration of my identity arising from its own substance, a medusa tentacle that has strayed too far and, groping exasperated through the waves, finally finds its way back to the gelatinous sucker. Thus during several moments of disquiet I have passed through all

the certitudes and incertitudes of my existence only to return—painfully and definitively—to my solitude.

Each solitude is of a purer and more elevated nature than the one before. The feeling of people banished is clearer and more intimate, a limpid, mellow melancholy like a dream recalled in the depth of night. It alone still reminds me of the vaguely sad mystery and magic of my childhood "crises." In that sudden disappearance of identity I find anew my descents into the cursed spaces of those early days, and in the moments of lucidity that return immediately after I resurface I see the world in the curious atmosphere of futility and obsolescence that forms about me when my hallucinatory trances cast me down.

It was always the same places in the street, the house, or the garden that gave rise to the crises. Whenever I entered their space, I would feel dizzy and swoon. Genuine invisible traps placed here and there in the town, in no way distinguishable from the air surrounding them, they would lie in wait for me, ferocious: I was to fall prey to the special atmosphere they exuded. One step, a single step into a "cursed space" like that and a crisis was inevitable.

One of the spaces was in the town park in a small clearing at the end of a tree-lined path no one used anymore. The only gap in the dogrose and acacia bushes surrounding it opened onto a desolate piece of wasteland. There was no sadder or more forsaken place on earth. Silence lay heavy on the dusty leaves in the stagnant summer heat. From time to time the echoes of the bugles of a regiment filtered through, long-drawn-out cries in the wilderness, heartbreakingly sad. Far off the air baked by the sun quivered vaporously like the transparent steam hovering over a boiling liquid.

It was a wild, isolated spot, as lonely as could be. The heat of the day felt more enervating there, the air I breathed more dense. The dusty bushes blazed yellow in the sun in an atmosphere of utter solitude. A bizarre feeling of futility hovered over the clearing, which existed "somewhere on earth," a place where I myself would end up quite by chance on a summer afternoon with no rhyme or reason of its own, an afternoon that had lost its chaotic way in the heat of the sun amidst bushes fixed in space "somewhere on earth." At that time I felt more deeply and painfully that I had nothing to do in this world, nothing to do but saunter through parks, through dusty clearings burnt by the sun, desolate and wild. But the saunter would turn into a heart-rending experience.

There was another cursed place at the other end of town on the high, loose banks of the river where my friends and I would go to bathe. At one point the bank had caved in. Just above it there was a factory that made oil from sunflower seeds. The workers would throw the discarded seed husks into the section of the bank that had caved in, and over time, the pile grew so high that it formed a slope of dry husks extending from the top of the bank to the water's edge.

My playmates would descend to the water along that slope, cautiously, holding one

another by the hand, sinking their feet deep into the carpet of rotten matter. The walls of the high bank on either side of the slope were steep and full of outlandish irregularities—long, fine channels sculpted by the rain, arabesque-like but as hideous as poorly healed scars, veritable tatters of the clay's flesh, horrible gaping wounds. It was between these walls, which made such an impression on me, that I too climbed down to the water.

Long before I reached the riverbank, my nostrils would fill with the odor of rotten husks. It would prepare me for the crisis like a brief period of incubation. It was an unpleasant smell, yet sweet. Like the crises.

Somewhere inside me my olfactory perception would split and the effluvia of putrefaction would reach different destinations: the gelatinous odor of decomposing husks was separate, quite distinct from—yet concomitant with—its pleasant perfume, the warm and homely scent of toasted hazelnuts. The moment I smelled it, the perfume would transform me, circulating throughout my body, dissolving, as it were, my inner fibers and replacing them with a more airy, less uncertain material. From that moment, the end was inevitable. A pleasant, heady feeling would arise in my chest, a dizziness pushing me toward the riverbank, the place of my ultimate defeat.

I would race down the husk pile to the water at breakneck speed, the air setting up a fierce opposition, cutting into me like a sharp blade, and space collapsing chaotically into an immense hole with an unexpectedly strong force of attraction. My playmates would watch my wildly precipitous descent in horror. The pebble beach below was very narrow, and the slightest misstep would have sent me sprawling into the water, whose surface whirlpools betokened great depths.

But I was not fully aware of what I was doing. Having reached the water, I would run past the husk pile at the same speed and continue downstream to a hollow in the bank. The hollow formed a small cave, a cool, shaded grotto like a room carved out in the rock. I would go in and fall to the ground, drenched in sweat, dead tired, and trembling from head to toe.

Having recovered a bit, I would enjoy the grotto's familiar and enormously pleasant decor. There was a spring bubbling forth from the rock, running along the ground, and forming a pool of perfectly limpid water in the middle of the pebbles. I would never tire of leaning over the pool and gazing at the delightful lace of green moss on the bottom, the worms caught on slivers of wood, the scraps of rusty old ooze-covered metal, the myriad animate and inanimate objects in the fantastically beautiful water.

Outside those two cursed places, the town sank into a uniform and banal mass of houses easily interchangeable and trees exasperatingly immobile, of dogs, vacant lots, and dust.

In closed rooms, however, crises took place with greater ease and frequency. I could not tolerate being alone in a strange room. When forced to do so, I would, within a very few minutes, fall into a sweet but terrible swoon. The room itself prepared the way: a warm,

welcoming sense of intimacy would filter down from the walls and spread over all the furniture, every object. All at once the room was sublime and I felt happy there. Yet that was nothing but a ruse on the part of the crisis: a subtle, perverse little trick it played. After this moment of bliss things went topsy-turvy and confusion reigned. I would peer around me wide-eyed, but things had lost their usual meaning: they were awash with their new existence. It was as if someone had removed the fine, transparent paper they had been wrapped in till then, and suddenly they looked new beyond words. They seemed destined to be put to new, superior, fantastic uses beyond my power to divine.

But there was more: the objects were seized by a veritable frenzy of freedom, and the independence they declared of one another went far beyond simple isolation to exultation, ecstasy. Their enthusiasm for living in a new light encompassed me as well: I felt powerful bonds linking me to them, invisible networks making me every bit as much of an object, a part of the room, as they were, the way an organ grafted onto a living organism goes through subtle physical metamorphoses until it becomes one with the body once foreign to it.

Once during a crisis the sun sent a small cascade of rays onto the wall like a golden artificial lake dappled with glittering waves. I also saw the corner of a bookcase of large, leather-bound volumes behind glass. And in the end these true-to-life details, perceived from the distance of my swoon, stupefied and stunned me like a last gulp of chloroform. It was what was most humdrum and familiar in the objects that disturbed me most. The habit of being seen so many times must have worn out their thin skins, and they sometimes looked flayed and bloody to me—and alive, ineffably alive.

The climax of the crisis would occur when I began floating above the world, a condition at once pleasant and painful. At the first sound of footsteps the room reverted to its original state: things fell back into place, and I noted an ever so slight, all but imperceptible reduction in its exaltation, which gave me to believe that the certitudes I lived by were separated from the world of incertitudes by only the flimsiest of membranes.

I would awake in my old familiar room, bathed in sweat, exhausted, and fully aware of the futility of the things surrounding me but observing new details in them, as we sometimes discover a novel feature in something we have used every day for years. The room retained a vague memory of the catastrophe, like the smell of sulfur after an explosion. Gazing at the bound books behind the bookshelf glass, I somehow took their immobility for a perfidious sign of furtiveness and complicity: the objects around me never gave up the secretive attitude fiercely guarded by their impassivity.

Ordinary words lose their validity at certain depths of the soul. Here I am, trying to give an exact description of my crises, and all I can come up with are images. The magic word that might convey their essence would have to borrow from the essences of other aspects of life, distill a new scent from a judicious combination of them. It would have to contain something of the stupefaction I feel watching a person in reality and then following his

gestures in a mirror, of the instability accompanying the falls I have in my dreams and the subsequent unforgettable moment of fear whistling through my spinal chord, or of the transparent mist inhabited by the bizarre decors of crystal balls I have known.

I envied the people around me who are hermetically sealed inside their secrets and isolated from the tyranny of objects. They may live out their lives as prisoners of their overcoats, but nothing external can terrorize or overcome them, nothing can penetrate their marvelous prisons. I had nothing to separate me from the world: everything around me invaded from head to toe; my skin might as well have been a sieve. The attention I paid to my surroundings, nebulous though it was, was not simply an act of will: the world, as is its nature, sank its tentacles into me; I was penetrated by the hydra's myriad arms. Exasperating as it was, I was forced to admit that I lived in the world I saw around me; there was nothing for it.

The crises belonged as much to the places where they occurred as to me. True, some places had their own "personal" evil, but even those that did not were in a trance long before I appeared. In some rooms, for example, I felt the crises to be the crystallization of the melancholy caused by their immobility and boundless solitude.

However, the conviction that objects could be inoffensive—which arose as a kind of truce between me and the world (a truce that plunged me even more hopelessly into the uniformity of brute matter)—came to pass off a terror equal to the terror the objects themselves at times imposed upon me: their inoffensiveness came from a universal lack of strength. I had the vague feeling that nothing in the world can come to fruition, that it is impossible to accomplish anything. Even the ferocity of objects runs its course. It was thus that the idea of the imperfection of all phenomena in the world, natural or supernatural, took shape in me.

In an internal dialogue that I believe never ceased I would defy the evil powers around me one day and flatter them basely the next. I would indulge in certain odd rites, though not without motivation.

Whenever I went out and took different streets, I would retrace my steps on the way home. I did so to avoid making a circle in which trees and houses would be inscribed. In this respect, my walks were like a thread which, once unwound, I needed to rewind along the same route, and had I not done so the objects caught in the loop would have forever been closely attached to me.

Whenever it rained, I would be careful not to touch the stones in the path of the streams of water. I did so to add nothing to the water's activity and to enable it to exercise its elemental powers unimpeded.

Fire purifies all. I always had a box of matches in my pocket, and when I felt particularly sad I would light a match and pass my hands through the flame, first one, then the other.

All this bespoke a melancholy of existence, a kind of normally organized torture in the course of my life as a child. In time the crises disappeared by themselves, though not without leaving behind a powerful memory. And although they were gone by the time I reached adolescence, the crepuscular state preceding them and the deep sense of the futility of the world coming after became, so to speak, my natural state.

Futility filled the hollows of the world like a liquid spreading in all directions, and the sky above me—eternally correct, absurd, and obscure—turned its own color of despair. Surrounded by that futility and beneath that sky, I wander eternally cursed to this day.

Chapter Two

The doctor I consulted about my crises pronounced a strange word: “paludism.” I was amazed that my secret and intimate afflictions could have a name, and a name so bizarre to boot. The doctor prescribed quinine—another cause for amazement. I could not comprehend how an illness, *it*, could be cured with quinine taken by a person, *me*. But what disturbed me most was the doctor himself. Long after he examined me, he continued to exist and bustle about my memory with those minute, automatic gestures I could not stop him from making.

He was a short man with an egg-shaped head, the pointed end of the egg lengthening into a black beard continually in motion. His small velvet eyes, fitful gestures, and thrust-forward mouth made him look like a mouse. The impression was so immediate and so strong that I thought it perfectly natural that he should give his *r*’s a long and sonorous roll as if he were munching something in secret as he spoke. The quinine he gave me only increased my conviction there was something mouse-like about him, and the confirmation of said conviction proved so strange and touched on facts so central to my childhood that I believe the incident worthy of recounting.

Not far from our house there was a shop that sold sewing machines. I spent hours there every day. The owner was a young man by the name of Eugen who had just completed his military service and hoped to earn a living from the shop. He had a sister, Clara, who was a year younger than he. They lived together on the outskirts of town and spent all day in the shop, having neither friends nor relatives.

It was a rented room and had never served as a place of business. The walls had not been repainted and were covered with garlands of violets and faded rectangles where pictures had once hung. A bronze lamp, also left from before, hung from the middle of the ceiling. It had a dark-red majolica lampshade decorated along the rim with green porcelain acanthus leaves in relief. It was highly ornamented, old and old-fashioned, but imposing. It looked something like a gravestone or a retired general wearing his former uniform in a parade.

The sewing machines stood in three rows separated by broad aisles running to the back of the room. Every morning Eugen took pains to wet the floor with water using an old tin he had made holes in. He deftly coaxed the dribble that emerged into clever spirals and figure eights and occasionally signed his name or wrote out the date. The paint on the wall clearly called for such finesse.

At the far end of the room a wooden screen separated the shop proper from another, smaller area, the entrance to which was covered by a green portière. Eugen and Clara spent much of their time in this back room and always had lunch there so as not to leave the shop unmanned. They called it “the green room,” and I once heard Eugen say, “It

really is like the room where actors await their entrances. When you go out into the shop and spend a half hour selling a sewing machine, are you not playacting?" Then, using a more learned inflection, he added, "Life as a whole is pure theater."

Behind the portière Eugen would play the violin. He laid the music out on the table, then bent over it, patiently deciphering the staves of complicated notes as if trying to unravel a skein of knotty thread into one long, slender strand, the thread of the melody. A small petroleum lamp on a trunk would burn all afternoon, filling the room with a dull light and throwing the violinist's distorted shadow on the wall.

I went there so often as to become part of the furniture, so to speak, a kind of extension of the old oil-cloth sofa I would sit on, motionless, heeded by and bothering no one. I went because Clara would make her afternoon toilet in the back room. She kept her wardrobe in a small armoire and looked at herself in a broken mirror that she leaned against the lamp on the trunk. The mirror was so old that the polish had completely worn off in places and actual objects showed here and there through the back of the mirror, merging with the reflected images as in a double exposure.

Sometimes she took off nearly all her clothes and rubbed cologne into her armpits, lifting her arms with no embarrassment, or between her breasts, sticking her hands between her shift and her body. The shift was short, and when she leaned over I had a full view of her shapely legs tightly encased in their black stockings. She looked very much like a half-naked woman I had seen on a pornographic postcard that the park pretzel vendor had shown me. She aroused the same vague swoon as the obscene picture, a kind of vacuum in the chest and a fierce pang of desire in the groin.

I always sat in the same place—behind Eugen on the back-room sofa — waiting for Clara to complete her toilet, because then, on her way into the shop, she would have to pass between her brother and me in a space so narrow that her calves could not help rubbing against my knees. I looked forward to that moment every day with the same impatience and the same torment. It depended on any number of trivial circumstances that I observed with a combination of exasperation and acute sensitivity. All that had to happen was that Eugen should feel thirsty or tire of playing or that a customer should come into the shop and he would abandon his place, thereby leaving Clara room to pass without touching me.

Every afternoon as I approached the door of the shop, my long, quivering antennae would come out and test the air for the sound of the violin. The moment I heard Eugen playing, I breathed a sigh of relief. I would enter slowly and shout out my name from the threshold so he would not think I was a customer and interrupt his piece. If he paused so much as a second, it might check the flow and magic of the melody and induce him to put down the violin for good that afternoon. But this was not the only unfavorable adventure possible. All kinds of things could go wrong in the back room …

As long as Clara was still at her toilet, I kept an ear out for the faintest of noises, an eye out for the slightest of movements. Eugen might give a cough, for instance, and, swallowing a bit of saliva, announce that he was off to the café for a pastry. A trifle like that, a single cough, could herald the monstrous calamity of a wasted afternoon. Indeed, the whole day would have gone to waste, and that night in bed, instead of turning over leisurely in my mind (and pausing over each detail to "see" and savor it as it deserved) the moment when my knees touched Clara's stocking, instead of delving, molding, and caressing the thought, I would toss and turn feverishly in the bedclothes, unable to sleep and impatiently awaiting daybreak.

One day something totally out of the ordinary occurred. The adventure presaged disaster at first, but had a surprise ending, one so sudden and dependent on such a minor incident that the pleasure it subsequently gave me was like a construction made of incongruous objects that only a prestidigitator could hold together. In one fell swoop Clara radically altered the tenor of my visits, gave them a new meaning and new titillations. It was rather like the famous chemistry experiment in which a crystal dropped into a red liquid instantly transforms it to a bright green.

I was sitting on the sofa in the usual place, waiting with my usual impatience, when the door to the shop opened and in came a customer. Eugen immediately left the back room. All appeared to be lost. Clara proceeded with her impassive toilet while the conversation in the shop dragged on interminably. The question was whether Eugen would return before Clara had finished dressing. I found it painful to follow the two events, Clara's toilet and Eugen's conversation, realizing that they would run parallel to each other until Clara went out into the shop or they came together in the back room like trains in a film racing madly toward each other, about to crash or speed past depending on whether a mysterious hand intervenes to shunt one of them onto a siding at the last moment. Meanwhile, the conversation kept on its course and Clara kept powdering her face.

I tried to help fate by pushing my knees close to the table, but to reach it I would have had to perch at the very edge of the sofa—an awkward position or, at the very least, comic. I had the feeling that Clara was looking at me in the mirror and smiling.

Shortly thereafter she finished rounding her lips with lipstick and gave her cheeks a final dab of powder. The perfume floating through the room made me dizzy with desire and despair. It was when she walked past me that the thing I least expected took place: she rubbed against my knees as she did every other day (or perhaps even a bit more, though surely that was only my imagination) with an air of indifference implying there was nothing between us.

Vice involves a complicity more profound and immediate than any verbal communication. It suffuses the body instantaneously like an inner melody, completely transmogrifying mind, flesh, and blood. In the fraction of a second that Clara's legs touched mine, vast new hopes, vast new expectations were born in me.

With Clara I understood it all from the first day, the first instant. She was my first complete and normal sexual adventure. It was an adventure full of torments and misery, fears and the gnashing of teeth, yet it could have come close to love had it not also been a long, painful bout with impatience. Clara was as calm and capricious as I was bold and impulsive. She had a violent way of provoking me and took a sordid joy in watching me suffer, a joy that always preceded the sexual act and was part of it.

The first time the thing I had so long awaited came to pass, the provocation was of a simplicity so elementary (brutal almost) that the words she used—especially the anonymous verb—retain much of the virulence they had then. All I need do is think back on them and my present indifference is eaten away as if by acid.

Eugen was away on errands. The two of us were alone and silent. Clara—in her afternoon dress, her legs crossed, her back to the shop window—was knitting away at something. Several weeks had passed since the back-room adventure, which had immediately created an icy atmosphere between us, and the ensuing tension found expression in utter indifference on her part. We would sit facing each other without exchanging a word for hours, yet hovering above the silence was a secret accord, a perfect understanding threatening to explode. All that was wanting was the mysterious word to break through the cloak of convention. At night I would make dozens of plans, and the next day they would come up against the most basic obstacles: she had to finish her knitting, the light was wrong, the shop too quiet, the set-up of the sewing machines too important to be disturbed, even for motives of sentiment. I kept my jaws clenched the whole time: the silence was terrible, a silence that for me had all the force and shape of a scream.

It was Clara who broke it. Speaking in what was nearly a whisper and never lifting her eyes from her knitting, she said, “If you had come earlier today, we could have *done it*. Eugen left right after lunch.”

Until that point there had been no trace of sexual allusion between us, and from those few words a sudden new reality burst forth. It was as extraordinary, as miraculous as if a marble statue had sprung up out of the floor in the midst of the sewing machines.

I was at her in a flash. I grabbed her hand and stroked it violently, kissed it. She pulled it away. “Let me go,” she said, annoyed.

“Come to me, Clara. Please …”

“It’s too late. Eugen is on his way back. Let me go, let me go.”

I touched her feverishly all over—her shoulders, breasts, legs …

“Let me go,” she protested.

“There’s still time,” I begged.

“Where?”

“In the back room. Come on. It’s perfect.”

As soon as I said the word “perfect,” my chest welled with hope. I kissed her hand again and pulled her off the chair by force. She let me drag her along the floor.

From that day on, our afternoon “habits” underwent a change. There was still the same Eugen, still the same Clara, still the same sonatas (though I could no longer stand the violin and could hardly wait for Eugen to leave); I was in the same room, but my concerns were different. It was if I were playing a new game on a board designed for a game I had outgrown.

Each time Eugen left, a period of waiting began, one much more arduous than what I had known till then. The silence in the shop was like a block of ice. Clara would sit by the window, knitting. This was the “beginning” to each day, the beginning without which our adventure could go no further. Sometimes Eugen left when Clara was in the back room half-naked, and at first I thought that would speed things along. I was wrong: everything had to begin in the shop. I had to wait until she put her clothes on and went over to the window so she could open the afternoon book to page one.

I would sit opposite her on a stool and talk to her, beg her over and over, implore her. I knew it was in vain: Clara did consent but rarely, and even then she would resort to a ruse to rob me of complete acquiescence. “I’m going into the back room to take an aspirin. I’ve got a splitting headache. Please don’t follow me.”

I swore I wouldn’t and immediately ran after her. A veritable battle would ensue, but Clara was clearly inclined to yield: she would fall on the sofa in a heap as if she had just tripped over something, then put her hands behind her head, close her eyes, and pretend she was going to sleep. It was impossible for me to move her body so much as an inch. I had to pull her dress down over her legs before I could press against her. She put up no resistance, nor did she give me any assistance: she remained as immobile and indifferent as a piece of wood, and had it not been for her intimate, secret warmth I would never have known that she “knew.”

It was about this time that the doctor who prescribed quinine was called in. The impression I received during the visit, the impression of his resemblance to a mouse was confirmed, as I mentioned above, by a freakish, totally absurd incident.

One day I was lying next to Clara, feverishly tugging at her dress, when I had a feeling there was something out of the ordinary in the room. It came more from the vague yet acute intimation of the extreme pleasure I was anticipating and could not share with a foreign presence than from anything tangible, but I was under the impression that we were being watched by a living being.

Alarmed, I turned my head, and what did I see on the trunk, just behind Clara’s powder compact, but a mouse. It had paused next to the mirror on the edge of the trunk and was staring at me with its tiny black eyes. The lamplight had given them two gleaming golden

spots, which pierced me deeply and peered into my own eyes for several seconds with such intensity that they seemed to penetrate my brain. Perhaps the creature was searching for a curse to call down on me or perhaps for a mere reproach, but its fascination soon ran its course and it suddenly disappeared behind the trunk. I was certain the doctor had come to spy on me.

This supposition was confirmed that very evening as I took my quinine. Illogical though my reasoning was, I found it perfectly acceptable: the quinine was bitter. The doctor had seen the pleasure Clara could give me in the back room and to get even he had prescribed the nastiest medicine on earth. I could just hear him ruminating over his verdict: “The grrreater the pleasure, the more bitter the rrremedy.”

A few months after he first treated me, he was found dead in his attic: he had put a bullet through his brain.

The first thing I asked myself when I heard the gruesome news was, “Were there mice in the attic?” I needed to know. Because if the doctor was well and truly dead, a band of mice would have to set upon his corpse and extract all the mouse matter he had borrowed during his lifetime to be able to carry on his illegal human existence.

Chapter Three

I was, I believe, twelve years old when I first met Clara. But no matter how far back my childhood memories go, they are always linked to sexual awareness. I find my early experiences of sexuality every bit as nostalgic and pure as my early experiences of night, fear, or friendship, and in no way dissimilar to other melancholy phenomena such as the tedious wait to “grow up,” which I measured concretely each and every time I shook hands with someone older than myself, trying to determine to what extent the weight and size of my tiny hand, lost in a mass of gnarled fingers, differed from the enormous one pressing it.

Not for a moment in my childhood did I disregard the difference between man and woman. There may have been a time when all living beings coalesced into one clear whole of motion and inertia, though I have no precise memory of it: the “secret” of sex was always present, a secret as concrete as an object, a table or chair.

Yet when I examine those distant memories carefully, I find that what relegates them to the past is my misconception of the sexual act at the time. I had a completely false picture of the female organs and imagined the act itself to be much more ceremonious and strange than what I experienced with Clara. All my interpretations — from the erroneous to the increasingly accurate—had an ineffable air of mystery and bitterness about them, gaining slowly in consistency like a painting made on the basis of rough sketches.

I can picture myself as a small child wearing a nightshirt that comes down to my heels. I am weeping desperately, sitting on a doorstep that leads into a sun-drenched courtyard with an open gate and an empty square beyond, a hot, sad, noonday square with dogs sleeping on their stomachs and men stretched out in the shade of their vegetable stalls. The air is rife with the stench of rotten produce, and large purple flies are buzzing loudly in my vicinity, alighting on my hands to sip the tears that have fallen there, then circling frenetically in the dense, scorching light of the courtyard. I stand and urinate in the dust. I watch the earth avidly drink up the liquid. It leaves a dark spot, like the shadow of a non-existent object. I wipe my face with the nightshirt and lick the tears from the corner of my lips, savoring their salty flavor. I resume my seat on the threshold, feeling very unhappy: I have been spanked.

My father had just given me a few slaps on my bare backside in my room. I don’t quite know why. I am thinking it through. I was lying in bed next to a girl my own age. We were supposed to be taking a nap while our parents were out walking. I didn’t hear them come in and don’t know what I was doing to the girl under the quilt. All I know is that when my father suddenly tore off the quilt the girl was beginning to acquiesce. My father turned red, lost his temper, and spanked me. End of story.

So I sat on the doorstep in the sun and had a good cry and now I am drawing circles and

lines in the dust. I have moved over to the shade and am sitting cross-legged on a rock. I feel better. A girl has come for water in the courtyard. She is cranking the rusty pump wheel. I listen to the old iron grating away and watch the water gush into her bucket like the magnificent tail of a silver horse. I look at the girl's big, dirty feet—yawning because I didn't sleep a wink that night—and try to catch a fly now and then. Life is returning to normal after the tears. The sun is still pouring its oppressive heat onto the courtyard.

Such was my first sexual adventure and my earliest childhood memory.

Thereafter I began feeling vague instincts that now burgeoned, now buckled, and eventually found their natural limits. What should have been an ever increasing fascination, however, was for me a series of renunciations and cruel reductions to an absurd banality. My evolution from boyhood to adolescence was attended by a continuous diminution of the world: as things took their place around me, they — like a shiny surface that has misted over—lost their ineffable features. Only the miraculous, the ecstatic figure of Walter retained its fascinating brilliance and does so to this day.

The day we met he was sitting in the shade of a locust tree reading an installment of Buffalo Bill. A luminescent morning sun was filtering through the dense green foliage to the swish of refreshing shadows. His attire was most unusual: he wore suede trousers, a deep-purple jacket with ivory buttons, and a pair of sandals made of fine strips of white leather. Whenever I feel like reliving the extraordinary sensation of our first meeting, I gaze upon the yellowed cover of a Buffalo Bill installment.

The first thing he did was to leap to his feet as gracefully as an animal. We immediately made friends. We had barely exchanged a few words before he made a sudden, stupefying proposal: that we should eat the blossoms on the tree. It was the first time I had met someone who ate flowers. Before I knew it, Walter was up in the tree gathering an enormous bunch of blossoms. Then he climbed down and demonstrated the delicate operation of removing the corolla and sucking its tip. I tried it. The flower burst between my teeth with a pleasant little pop, and a sweet, refreshing flavor I had never tasted before spread through my mouth.

We had been standing there for a while, silently eating locust blossoms, when all at once he grabbed my hand and said, "Want to see where our tribe holds its meetings?"

His eyes were sparkling. It frightened me a bit.

"Well, do you or don't you?" he asked again.

I hesitated a second, then answered "I do" with a voice no longer mine and a sudden willingness to take a risk quite alien to me.

Still holding my hand, Walter led me through the little gate at the end of the courtyard. We came out on a vacant lot teeming with weeds. The nettles burnt my legs, and we had to pull the thick hemlock and burdock stems apart to pass through. At the far end there was a

dilapidated wall with a deep pit just before it. Walter jumped into the pit and called up to me to follow. The pit tunneled under the wall, and we climbed out of it into an abandoned cellar. The steps were in ruins and overgrown with grass, the wall oozed water; the darkness ahead of us was complete. Walter squeezed my hand hard and drew me after him. We made our slow, cautious way down ten or so steps and came to a halt.

“This is where we stay,” he told me. “You can’t go any farther. If you do, you come to these iron men, men with hands and heads of iron, who grew out of the earth. You can’t see them in the darkness, but they’ll wring our necks if they catch us.”

I threw a desperate glance back at the hole leading into the cellar and the light coming from a clear and simple world where there were no men of iron and where there were plants and houses and ordinary people as far as the eye could see. Walter had found a board somewhere and the two of us sat on it for several moments in silence. It was pleasant in the cellar, cool, and there was a heavy aroma of moisture in the air. I wouldn’t have minded spending hours there alone, away from the steamy streets and sad, boring town. The cold walls felt good beneath an earth sweltering in the sun. The futile afternoon hum coming through the hole in the cellar was no more than a distant echo.

“This is where we bring the girls we catch,” said Walter.

I vaguely understood what he was referring to, and the cellar took on a new attraction.

“What do you do with them?”

“You mean you don’t know?” Walter said, laughing. “We do what all men do with women. We lie down next to them … and then we take our feather …”

“Your feather? What sort of feather? What do you do with it?”

Walter laughed again.

“How old are you anyway? Don’t you know what men do with women? Here, have a look at mine.” He took a small black feather from his jacket pocket.

Just then I felt my usual crisis coming on. If Walter had not taken the feather from his pocket, I might have been able to endure the atmosphere of complete and utter isolation to the end, but all of a sudden my isolation there in the cellar was deeply painful to me. Only now did I realize how cut off I was from the town and its dusty thoroughfares. It was as if I had cut myself off from myself, alone as I was deep down under the ordinary summer day. The shiny black feather Walter had shown me meant that nothing more existed in the world as I knew it: everything had fallen into a swoon, while the feather gave off an anomalous brilliance in the middle of this odd room with its moist grass and cold-mouthed darkness avidly drinking up what little light there was.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” Walter asked. “Don’t you want me to tell you what we do with the feather?”

The sky visible through the hole grew whiter and whiter, hazier and hazier. The words ricocheted against the walls, flowing down me as if I were a fluid. Walter went on talking, but he was so far from me and so ethereal that he seemed no more than a pool of light in the dark, a patch of mist in the murk.

“First you stroke the girl with the feather,” I heard him say, as if in a dream. “Then you stroke yourself … You’ve got to know these things …”

He came up to me and started shaking me, waking me up, and slowly, ever so slowly, I came to. When my eyes were fully open, I saw Walter leaning over my pubis, his mouth pressing against my member. I could not for the life of me comprehend what was going on.

He stood and said, “There, you see? That felt good, didn’t it … That’s the way Indians woke their wounded on the battlefield. Our tribe knows all the Indian spells and cures.”

I felt drunk and exhausted. Walter took flight, disappeared. Then I trudged cautiously up the stairs.

For a few days I sought him everywhere. In vain. There was nothing for it: I would have to go back to the cellar. But the vacant lot looked totally different when I got there: there were piles of rubbish everywhere and dead animals putrefying in the sun; the stench was horrible. I hadn’t noticed anything of the sort with Walter. I decided not to go to the cellar anymore. I never saw Walter again.

I got myself a feather, wrapped it in a scrap of newsprint, and kept it well hidden in my pocket. There were times when I thought I had made up the whole feather incident and Walter had never existed. Now and then I unwrapped the feather and stared at it. Its mystery was impenetrable. I would brush its soft, silky surface over my cheek and shudder slightly at the touch. It was as if an invisible but real person were caressing me with his fingertips. Then one fine evening, under quite extraordinary circumstances, I used it on someone else.

I liked staying outside as late as possible. That evening there was the heavy, oppressive feeling of a storm in the air. All the heat of the day was compressed into a stifling atmosphere beneath a black sky rent with lightening. I was sitting on the doorstep, watching the play of electric light on the houses—the streetlamps swaying in the wind, the concentric circles of the globes flitting along the walls, splashing like water in a swinging bucket—and the long sashes of dust that swept through the road and spiraled upward.

In the midst of all this turbulence I thought I saw a white marble statue rise into the air. No, I was as certain as I could be of anything: I had seen a block of white stone climbing rapidly, at an angle, like a balloon that had escaped from the hand of a child. In no time the statue was a simple white speck in the sky, no bigger than my fist. I also saw two white figures holding hands and gliding through the sky like skiers. My mouth and eyes must have been wide open because at that moment a girl stopped in front of me and asked me

what I was looking at up there in the sky.

“See that statue flying through the air?” I said. “Look quickly! It’s about to disappear …”

The girl screwed up her eyes and looked long and hard but told me she couldn’t see it. She was a local girl, a chubby little thing with eternally scrubbed red-rubber cheeks and sweaty hands. Until that evening I had barely spoken to her.

“I know why you tried to fool me,” she said, standing there and laughing in my face. “I know what you’re after.”

And off she hopped. I stood and followed her. I called out to her from a dark alley, and she came of her own accord. There I lifted her dress. She let me have my way, docilely holding onto my shoulders. She may have been less conscious of the impropriety of the deed than surprised at what it consisted of.

I myself was in fact more surprised at the outcome of the adventure, which took place a few days later in the marketplace. Some masons were slaking a batch of lime in a vat, and I was watching it bubble when all of a sudden I heard my name called out and a loud voice saying, “A feather, was it? Is that what you used?”

It came from a sturdy red-haired fellow of about twenty, a loathsome character. I think he lived in a house in that dark alley. I caught sight of him shouting at me from behind the vat through the steam of the quicklime, a ghost-like figure, an infernal apparition holding forth amidst fire and brimstone. Perhaps he said something else and I gave his words a meaning close to my preoccupations of the previous few days: it was hard for me to believe he could have seen anything in the pitch darkness of the alleyway (though the more I thought about it, the more I wondered whether it had been as dark as it seemed, whether I hadn’t been standing in a patch of light). I concluded that during the sexual act I had been possessed by a dream that muddled my sight and senses. I determined to be more circumspect in the future. Who knew what aberrations I was capable of? Under the spell of arousal I might well react unconsciously, like a sleepwalker, even in broad daylight.

Closely connected with the feather is another memory, that of a book—small, black, and highly disturbing. I came across it one day on a desk and leafed through it with great interest. It was a banal novel by André Theuriet. *Frida* was the title. It was profusely illustrated with drawings of the two main characters: a boy sporting curly blond locks and a velvet jacket and a plump girl in a flounced dress. The boy looked like Walter. Sometimes they appeared together, sometimes separately. Their encounters always seemed to take place in the nooks and crannies of a park or beneath the walls of a ruin. What did they do there? That is what I wanted to know. Did the boy have a feather like mine in his jacket pocket? I didn’t see anything like it in the drawings, nor did I have time to read the book, and in a few days it vanished without a trace. I began to look for it everywhere. I asked for it in the bookshops, but no one seemed to have heard of it. It must have been full

of secrets because it was nowhere to be found.

One day I took the bull by the horns and went to the public library. Standing on a chair in the back of the room, a tall, pale man wearing spectacles that seemed to tremble ever so slightly saw me coming. There was no turning back, nothing left but to proceed to the table and pronounce the sensational word clearly and distinctly—Frid-da—thereby confessing to the myopic gentleman all my secret vices. But by the time I reached him I could muster no more than a mumble. The librarian's spectacles started trembling more noticeably, and he closed his eyes the better to search his memory. Then he told me he had "never heard of it." To my mind, however, the trembling spectacles betrayed a certain inner turmoil, and I was now certain that *Frida* contained mysterious and sensational revelations.

Many years later I ran across it again on a bookshop shelf. It was not the black cloth edition I had seen; it had a humble, dreary paper binding and yellow covers. My first impulse was to buy it, but I changed my mind and placed it back on the shelf: I wanted to keep its image intact, the image of a small black book with a whiff of the authentic perfume of my youth.

Chapter Four

In small insignificant objects—a black feather, a banal little book, an old snapshot of frail, long-forgotten figures with the suffering that comes of serious internal ailments written all over them, a dainty ashtray made of green porcelain in the form of an oak leaf and forever smelling of dead ashes—in the plain, simple memory of old man Samuel Weber's thick spectacles, in such domestic gewgaws and trifles I find the melancholy of my childhood and the nostalgia of the futility of a world that engulfed me like a sea with petrified waves. Brute matter—in the deep, heavy masses of earth, stone, sky, or water, or in its least understood forms: mirrors, paper flowers, painted statues, glass marbles with their enigmatic internal spirals—has always kept me a prisoner bumping painfully against its walls, yet spurred me on to share in the strange and senseless adventure of being human.

Wherever my thought turned, it ran into rampart-like objects and inertias that brought me to my knees. Contemplating the infinite forms of matter, terrorized by their diversity, I twisted and turned for nights on end, distressed by the endless series of objects filing through my memory like an escalator with thousands upon thousands of unremitting steps.

To keep the flow of things and colors inundating my brain, I would picture the evolution of a single object or even no more than its contour, or, attempting to inventory the world, imagine a chain of all the shadows on earth, the strange, uncanny, gray realm that lies sleeping at the feet of life, a black man stretched veil-like over the earth, his spindly legs poured out like water and arms of dark iron, or wandering through the downcast branches of horizontal trees: The shadows of ships skimming the sea, shadows unstable and aqueous, brief intimations of sadness, here now, then gone, racing the foam.

The shadows of birds in flight, jet black, as if out of the depths of the earth and into a darkling aquarium.

And the lone shadow, lost somewhere in space, of our sphere of a planet.

At other times I thought of vertiginous mountain chasms, of caves and grottos, and of the warm, supple, ineffable cavern that is the cavern of sex. I had somehow managed to procure a small flashlight and, crazed with insomnia and the onslaught of objects filling the room, I would plunge under the covers and conduct an intimate, intricate, yet arbitrary study of the creases in the sheets and the miniature valleys they formed. Without a precise, demanding occupation of the sort I would never have been able to calm down. My father once came in at midnight and caught me poking my flashlight under the pillow. He took it away, but made no remonstration; indeed, he said not a word. I believe he found the discovery so aberrant that he lacked the vocabulary and moral category to apply to it.

Several years later I saw a picture of a wax casting of the inner ear in an anatomy book. Every canal, sinus, and cavity was filled in, forming a positive image. I cannot describe

the impression that picture made on me. I all but fainted at the sight of it. In a flash I divined that the world could exist in a reality more real than ours, a positive cavern structure where everything hollow would be filled in and the prevailing reliefs hollowed out into identical spaces completely devoid of content like the strange, delicate fossils that reproduce the traces of a shell or leaf left over the ages to carve out the deep, fine imprint of its contours in stone. In such a world we humans would no longer be fleshy, gaudy excrescences full of complex, putrescible organs; we would be pure voids floating—like air bubbles in water—through the warm, soft matter of the universe.

It was in fact an intimate, painful sensation I had experienced many times over during adolescence when in the course of endless wanderings I would suddenly find myself terribly isolated. It was as if the people and houses around me had suddenly been glued into a thick, uniform paste in which I existed as a mere void moving hither and yon with no rhyme or reason.

Objects, on the whole, I perceived as backdrops. The notion of the world as stage accompanied me everywhere: life seemed to unfold in the midst of some sad, artificial performance. Indeed, the only way out of the tedious vision of a lackluster world was to see it as theater, bombastic and passé.

Within the framework of this grand theatrical scheme I was attracted by certain unusual genres because their artificiality seemed to enable the actors presenting them to comprehend the mystification of the world involved. They alone knew that in a world which is all theater, all backdrop, life must be portrayed in a false, ornamental fashion. I have in mind the cinema and the waxworks.

Oh, Cinema B, as long and dark as a sunken submarine. The main doors, which consisted of mirrors, reflected a section of the street and thus gave a free show before you even entered. They made an unusual screen in which the street appeared in a greenish, dreamlike light and vehicles and people wended their somnambulant way through its waters.

Inside it had the pungent, acidic heat of the public bath. The floor was cement. Every time the chairs moved, they creaked with sharp, desperate cries. In the cheap seats near the screen a group of pretzel vendors and assorted riffraff provided a running commentary on the film while cracking their sunflower seeds, and several dozen voices sounded out the title cards as if they were texts for an adult literacy class.

Just below the screen, there was an orchestra made up of a pianist, a violinist, and an old Jew sawing away at a bass. The old man was also charged with making sound effects at the appropriate moments. He would call out “cock-a-doodle-doo” when the rooster mascot of the film company flashed on the screen before the title, and once, during a picture about the life of Jesus, I recall his rapping the bow frenetically against the sound box of the double bass to imitate celestial thunder when the time came for the resurrection.

I experienced the action on the screen with great intensity, feeling I was an integral part of the drama, a veritable character. I was often so involved in a film that I thought I was actually strolling through the grounds of an estate or leaning on the balustrade of a terrace in Italy while Francesca Bertini paced up and down with great pathos, her hair streaming, her arms flapping like scarves in the wind. After all, there is no well-established difference between our actual person and the various inner personages we create for ourselves.

The room seemed to have returned from a voyage when the light came on between reels. There was something precarious, artificial in the air, something much more tenuous and ephemeral than the story on the screen. I would close my eyes and wait for the projector's mechanical rattle to announce the continuation of the film, then open them and peer into the darkness at the people around me lit indirectly by the screen, pale and transfigured like a gallery of marble statues in a moonlit museum at midnight.

One day the cinema caught fire. The film tore and immediately went up in flames, which for several seconds raged on the screen like a filmed warning that the place was on fire as well as a logical continuation of the medium's mission to give the news, which mission it was now carrying out to perfection by reporting the latest and most exciting event in town: its own combustion. Cries of "Fire! Fire!" broke out all over the room like revolver shots. In no time there was such a racket that the audience, until then seated quietly in the dark, seemed to have been storing up great wailing and ululation, like batteries, silent and inoffensive unless suddenly overcharged and then explosive.

Within minutes—and before half the cinema had been evacuated—the "fire" had been put out, yet the audience went on howling, as if compelled to exhaust the energy released. A young woman, her face powdered to a gypsum white, was screaming shrilly while looking me straight in the eye and not making a move in the direction of the door. A muscular pretzel vendor, convinced of the value of his strength in such situations but not knowing what to do with it, grabbed one chair after another and flung them at the screen. Suddenly a great crash rang out: a chair had hit the old man's double bass. One never knew what one would see at the cinema.

In summer I would go to the matinée and emerge only at nightfall: I was waiting for the light outside to change, for the day to end. I would thus ascertain that in my absence an important thing, an essential thing had taken place: the world had assumed the sad responsibility of carrying on—by growing dark, for example—its regular, intricate, theatrical obligations. Again I had to accept a certainty whose rigorous daily return made me infinitely melancholy. In a world subject to the most theatrical of effects, a world obliged every evening to produce an acceptable sunset, the poor creatures around me seemed pitiful in their determination to keep themselves busy and maintain their naive belief in what they did and felt.

There was only one person in our town who understood these things and for whom I felt admiration and respect: the town idiot. She alone among all the rigid townsfolk, their

heads brimming with prejudices and conventions, she and she alone retained the freedom to shout and dance in public whenever she pleased. She would roam the streets in rags, filthy, gap-toothed, her red mop disheveled, maternally cradling an old box full of bread crusts and dustbin treasures. She would show her sex to passersby with a panache which, were the intention different, would have been called “a model of elegance and style.”

How wonderful, how sublime to be mad, I would tell myself, noting with profound regret how far the powerful, stupid conventions I had been brought up on and the oppressive, rational education I had been subjected to had removed me from the freedom of a madman’s existence. I believe that anyone who has failed to experience such a feeling will never know the world in all its glory.

My basic, elemental impression of the world as stage took on a frightening intensity whenever I entered a wax museum, but the fright was laced with a vague pleasure and to some extent with the strange sensation everyone experiences at one time or another—that of having lived in a certain setting before. Should I ever sense the impulse for a goal in life and should such an impulse require a link to something truly profound in me, something absolutely essential to my nature, I believe my body would have to become a statue in a waxworks and my life a simple and never-ending contemplation of its exhibits.

In the mournful light of the carbide lamps I felt I was truly living a life all my own in a manner unique and inimitable. All my daily activities could be shuffled like so many cards: I cared for none of them. Man’s lack of responsibility for even his most conscious acts was perfectly obvious to me. What did it matter that I or somebody else performed them given that the diversity of the world engulfed them in the same, uniform monotony.

In a waxworks—and only in a waxworks—there was no contradiction between what I did and what happened. Wax figures were the only authentic thing on earth: they alone flaunted the way they falsified life, and their strange, artificial immobility made them part of the true spirit of the world. The bullet-riddled, blood-stained uniform of a sad, sallow Austrian archduke was infinitely more tragic that any real death. A woman with a pale, yet luminescent face, lying in a glass box and sheathed in black lace, a striking red rose between her breasts, her blond wig coming undone at the forehead, the rouge in her nostrils aquiver, her glassy blue eyes staring motionlessly up at me—how could she fail to hide a deep and troubling, unfathomable message. The more I contemplated it the clearer its sense seemed to be, though it remained lodged inside me, still vague, like a word I wished to recall. All I could catch was a distant rhythm.

I have always had a weakness for female frills and cheap, artificial ornaments. A friend of mine used to collect all sorts of such trumpery and hide it away. He kept a strip of black silk fringed with fine lace and spangled with sequins. It had been obviously been torn off an old ball gown and had begun to mold in places. I would give him stamps and even money for a look at it, and he would take me into a small, old-fashioned sitting room when his parents were asleep and show it to me. There I stood, holding the piece of silk,

speechless with wonder and bliss, my friend keeping watch at the door to make sure nobody saw me. After a few moments he would come in, take the silk, put it back in its box, and say to me, “That’s it. Enough. Over and done with,” the way Clara did when I dawdled in the back room.

Another object that disturbed me inordinately the first time I saw it was a gypsy ring. I thought it the most fantastic object a man could come up with to adorn the finger of his lady. The extraordinary embellishments used by birds, animals, or flowers for purposes of sexual attraction—the stylized and ultramodern tail of the bird of paradise, the ocellated feathers of the peacock, the hysterical lace of petunia petals, the unlikely blue of the simian pouch—are but pale attempts at sexual ornamentation compared with the stunning gypsy ring. It was made of marvelous tin—fine, grotesque, and hideous. Yes, hideous more than anything. It got at love in its deepest, darkest regions; it was a veritable scream of sex.

There can be no doubt that the artist who fashioned it was inspired by a waxworks vision. The stone, a piece of plain molten glass the size of a lentil, bore a close resemblance to the magnifying glasses used at fairs to enlarge miniature scenes of sunken ships, battles with the Turks, or assassinations of kings and queens. There was a bouquet of flowers carved in the tin setting and colored with all the garish hues of waxworks paintings—the violet of strangled cadavers alongside the pornographic red of women’s garters, the leaden pallor of wild waves in a macabre glow like the semi-darkness of a frost-covered cave—surrounded by small copper leaves and mysterious signs. It was a hallucination.

All imitations make an analogous impression on me. Artificial flowers, for instance, and funeral wreaths, particularly funeral wreaths, dusty and forgotten in cemetery chapels, enveloping anonymous old names with outdated delicacy in their oval glass cases, enmeshed in an eternity with no resonance. Or the pictures children cut out and play with or the cheap statuettes sold at fairs. In time the latter lose a head or hand and their owner repairs them by surrounding the neck with scrofulous blobs of plaster. The bronze of the statue thus acquires the significance of a tragic but noble suffering. Or the life-size Jesus in Catholic churches, the stained-glass windows suffusing the altar with the dying rays of a red sunset, the late-in-the-day lilies exhaling the plenitude of their heavy, lugubrious perfume at Christ’s feet. In this atmosphere of ethereal blood and odoriferous swooning a pale young man draws the final chords of a desperate melody from the organ. And all this has emigrated to life from the wax museum. In the waxworks one can see at any fair I find the repository of all the nostalgia in the world that, brought together, constitutes its very essence.

I have only one supreme desire left in life: to watch a waxworks on fire, to observe the slow, scabrous melting of the wax bodies, to look on, rooted to the spot, while the beautiful yellow legs of the bride in the glass case begin to twist and turn, a very real

flame making its way up between them to her sex.

Chapter Five

The August fair offered me many ups and downs in addition to the waxworks. It was a prodigious performance, a swelling symphony from the prelude of individual booths that came early and set the general tone—like a series of long notes at the beginning of a piece announcing the theme of the composition as a whole—to the grandiose finale, all blasts, blares, and fanfares followed by the immense silence of the abandoned site.

The few early wax-figure booths contained the whole of the fair in a nutshell; they represented it to a T. The instant the first of them was set up, all the color, the glitter, the carbide aroma spread through the town. And suddenly a clicking noise rang out. It was neither the grate of sheet metal nor the far-off jangle of a bunch of keys nor the rasp of a motor; it was the click—easily discernable amidst the myriad everyday sounds—of the wheel of fortune. Toward evening the darkening boulevard would come alive with a diadem of colored lights, the first constellation to appear, the constellation of the earth. Others soon followed, turning the boulevard into a glittering corridor that I walked along, dazzled, like a boy of my age I had once seen in an illustrated edition of a Jules Verne novel, glued to the porthole of a submarine, peering through the ocean's murky depths at its marvelous, mysterious phosphorescent spectacle.

Within a day or two the rest of the fair would be up, the semi-circle of booths having been laid out, put together, and given final shape. It was divided into well-established zones of sun and shade—the same year in and year out. First came a row of restaurants with dozens of strings of colored lights, then the sideshows, their façades bathed in light, and finally the dark, humble photography booths. The crowds, making the rounds, would pass from zone to zone, bright lights to darkness, like the moon in my geography book, which alternated between white and black typographical regions.

We spent most of our time in the small, poorly lit, occasionally even roofless sideshow booths, where my father could negotiate a reduced rate for our large family with the barker. There every exhibit looked improvised and unsure of itself. The night wind would blow cold over the heads of the audience, and we could see the stars twinkling in the sky. Lost in the chaos of the night, we had wandered into a sideshow on this tiny point of the planet, and on this tiny point of the planet men and dogs were performing on stage, the men tossing various objects into the air and catching them, the dogs jumping through hoops and walking on two legs. And where was it all taking place? The sky above seemed vaster still …

Once, in one of these miserable booths, a performer offered a prize of five thousand lei to anyone who could do the sensational yet perfectly simple stunt he was about to demonstrate. There were only several people in the audience. A heavy-set man, whose reputation as a miser in trade was peerless, moved several seats closer to the stage:

intrigued by the unprecedented possibility of earning so enormous a sum of money in a simple sideshow, he was determined to follow the performer's slightest movement with the greatest of attention, the better to imitate him and win the prize.

After several moments of anxious silence the performer went up to the edge of the stage and said in a hoarse voice, "Ladies and gentlemen, the trick is to exhale the smoke of a cigarette through the neck." He lit a cigarette, took his hand down from his collar, where it had been until then, and released a fine stream of bluish smoke through an orifice in an artificial larynx, clearly the result of an operation. The man in the front row was taken aback: he blushed to the ears and, returning to his former seat, mumbled, loud enough for people to hear, "Of course if you've got a gadget like that, it's no trick at all."

Unfazed, the performer responded from the stage. "What do you mean? Just do as I did." Perhaps he really would have given a prize to a fellow sufferer. In booths like these, pale, withered old men swallowed soap and stones, young girls contorted their bodies, anemic, hollow-cheeked children left off chewing corn kernels to mount the stage and dance to the jangle of the bells on folk costumes—and all to earn their keep.

After the midday meal, when the sun burned like blazes, a feeling of utter desolation came over the fairgrounds: little wooden ponies standing inert, their bulging eyes and copper manes exuding the dire melancholy of a petrified life, the hot odor of food wafting over from the booths, and a lone hurdy-gurdy in the distance doggedly churning out its asthmatic waltz, an occasional fluty metallic tone gushing out of the chaos like a thin, lofty *jet d'eau* from a fountain.

I spent many happy hours outside the photographers' booths, contemplating strangers, alone or in groups, standing motionless and smiling against gray landscapes of waterfalls and far-off mountains. The common backdrop made them all look like members of a single family who had gathered at a picturesque spot to have their pictures taken. Once I found my own picture outside such a booth. The sudden encounter with myself forced into a static pose at one edge of the fair depressed me no end. Before ending up in our town, it had surely made the rounds of places unknown to me. For a moment I had the feeling of existing only in the photograph.

I experienced this sort of mental shift often and in the most varied circumstances. It would sneak up on me and make an abrupt turnabout in my inner state. I would, say, happen upon an accident and stand about gawking for a time like the rest of the spectators when all at once my perspective would change—it was like a game I used to play: I would make out a strange animal in the paint on my wall and then one day I was unable to find it, its place having been taken by a statue or a woman or a landscape composed of the same decorative elements—and although everything about the accident remained the same, I suddenly saw the people and objects around me from the point of view of the victim, as if I were the one lying there, viewing the whole thing up from below and out from the center and feeling the blood pouring down my body.

And just as at the cinema—without any effort on my part, as a mere corollary to the fact that I was watching a film—I would imagine myself intimately involved in the action on the screen, so when outside a photographer's booth I would see myself instead of the person in the print staring down at me. I would suddenly find my own life, the life of the person standing in flesh and blood outside the display case, indifferent and insignificant, just as the living person inside the display case regarded the travels of his photographic self from town to unknown town as absurd. And just as my picture traveled from place to place contemplating new vistas through the dirty, dust-laden glass, so I myself went from one place to the next, constantly seeing new things, yet never understanding them. The fact that I could move, that I was alive, was merely a matter of chance, a senseless adventure, because just as I existed inside the display case I could exist outside it and with the same pale cheeks, the same eyes, the same lackluster hair that made such a sketchy, bizarre, unfathomable image in the mirror.

I thus received a number of signs from without aimed at immobilizing me and cutting me off from everyday understanding. I was dumbfounded by them, pulled up short: they encapsulated the vanity of the world. Whenever one came, I sensed chaos all around me. It was like listening to a brass band with your hands over your ears: when you opened your fingers for a second, what had been music became pure noise.

I would spend days wandering about the fairgrounds and adjacent fields where the freaks and performers from the booths gathered around a pot of porridge, dirty and unkempt, having descended from their exotic sets and shed their nocturnal acrobatic existence of bodiless women and sirens for the common mush, the incurable misery of their humanity. What in front of the booths seemed admirable, jaunty, even pompous, here behind them, in the light of day, retreated into a petty laxity devoid of interest, the laxity of the world as a whole.

One day I attended the funeral of the child of one of the itinerant photographers. The door of the booth was ajar to reveal an open coffin resting on two chairs before the cloth backdrop. The backdrop showed a magnificent park with an Italian-style terrace and marble columns. In this dreamlike setting the tiny corpse, dressed in Sunday suit with silver-threaded button holes, hands folded over chest, seemed submerged in ineffable bliss. The child's parents and assorted women surrounded the coffin weeping disconsolately, while the circus band, lent free of charge by the ringmaster, played the serenade from "Intermezzo," the saddest piece in its repertory. During moments such as these—in the intimacy of the profound peace, in the infinite silence of the plane trees—the corpse was doubtless happy and serene. Before long, however, it was snatched from the solemnity in which it lay and loaded onto a cart to be taken to the cemetery and the cold, wet grave that was its destiny. Thereafter the park was all desolation and void.

At fairs, therefore, even death took on sham, nostalgic-ridden backdrops, as if the fair were a world of its own, its purpose being to illustrate the boundless melancholy of

artificial ornamentation from the beginning of a life to its end as exemplified by the pallid lives lived in the waxworks' sifted light or in the otherworldly beauty of the photographer's infinite panoramas. Thus for me the fair was a desert island awash in sad haloes similar to the nebulous yet limpid world into which my childhood crises plunged me.

Chapter Six

The upper story of the Weber house, which I often visited after Etla Weber died of old age, was like nothing so much as a genuine waxworks. All afternoon its rooms were bathed in sun, and dust and heat floated along windows full of antiquated junk that had been tossed onto shelves at random. The beds had been moved to the ground floor, leaving the bedrooms empty. Samuel Weber (Mercantile Agency) together with his two sons, Paul and Ozy, had moved downstairs as well.

The front room, however, was still occupied by the office. It had a musty smell and was crammed with ledgers and envelopes of grain samples. The walls were papered with out-of-date fly-spotted posters, several of which, having held on for years, formed an integral part of family life.

One, an advertisement for mineral water hanging above the safe, showed a tall, svelte woman in diaphanous veils pouring the curative elixir over the ailing creatures at her feet. Ozy Weber, he of the flute-like arms and the turkey-breastbone of a hump emerging from his clothes, must have drunk from this miraculous spring in the deep dark hours of night.

Another was a poster for a shipping establishment, and its steamer, plying the whorly waves, rounded off the image of Samuel Weber by supplying the third maritime element to his captain’s hat and thick-lensed spectacles. When old salt Samuel closed a ledger, placed it under the press, and twisted the iron bar, he really did seem to be piloting a ship through unknown waters, and the pink cotton he stuffed into his ears, its long strands dangling, seemed a clever hedge against the ocean currents.

Ozy, ensconced in an armchair in the room next door, read popular novels, holding the volume high enough to catch the feeble light making its way in from the street. The screen of an enormous pewter spittoon in the shape of a cat stood gleaming in a dark corner, and the mirror on the wall reflected an eerie grayish square, a ghost-like reminder of the day outside.

I went to see Ozy much as dogs wander into courtyards: because the gate is open and there is no one to chase them away. What took me there mostly was a peculiar game I don’t know which of us invented or in what circumstances. It consisted in making up dialogues and delivering them with the utmost gravity. We had to remain straight-faced till the end, avoiding all indication that the things we were talking about had no basis in reality. I would enter and Ozy—dry as dust, never taking his eyes off his book—would say, “That pill I took last night to help me breathe has given me a frightful cough. I tossed and turned until daybreak. Matilda came just now at long last (there is no Matilda) and gave me a rubdown.”

The things Ozy came up with were so stupid, so absurd that they were like hard hammer

blows to the head. I should perhaps have left the room on the spot, but I couldn't help indulging in the pleasure, minor but voluptuous, of lowering myself to his level, so I responded in the same terms, which was the secret of the game: "Well now, I myself have caught a cold (it was July)," I said, "and Dr. Caramfil (who did exist) has given me a prescription. A pity, though, that this morning—have you heard?—he was arrested."

Ozy would look up from his book. "You see? I told you he was involved in counterfeiting. Has been for ages."

"Of course he has. How else could he have afforded those music-hall floozies?"

But what I found in that banter was more than the slightly cloying pleasure of plunging into mediocrity; it was a vague sense of freedom: I could, for instance, vilify the doctor to my heart's content even though I knew—he lived in the neighborhood—that he went to bed every night at nine.

We would go on and on about anything and everything, mixing truth and fancy, until the conversation took on a kind of airborne independence, fluttering about the room like a curious bird, and had the bird actually put in an appearance we'd have accepted it as easily as we accepted the fact that our words had nothing to do with ourselves.

Back in the street, I would feel I had emerged from a deep sleep, yet I still seemed to be dreaming. I was amazed to find people talking seriously to one another. Didn't they realize one could talk seriously about anything? Anything and everything?

Sometimes Ozy did not feel like talking, and then he would take me upstairs to rummage. During the few years since the space had been abandoned, old man Weber had deposited anything he considered useless "up there," with the result that it housed the most varied and extraordinary objects. The rooms were suffused with the sun blazing through the dusty, curtainless windows. As we walked along the old floor, the glass windowpanes wobbled a bit in their frames like loose teeth. A bead portière served as a door between the rooms.

I would come downstairs slightly woozy from the heat of the day and muddled by the utter desolation of the rooms. It was as if I lived in a world well known to everyone but me. My body always felt detached, but the feeling intensified when I came into contact with those two rooms separated by the bead portière.

Our favorite pastime was searching through drawers for old correspondence and peeling the stamps off the envelopes. Together with the cloud of dust rising from the bundles of letters came the scamper of tiny insects racing for shelter. Every once in a while a letter fell out of its cover and opened to reveal a masterful, old-fashioned hand in faded ink. There was always something sad and resigned about those letters, a kind of tired end to the period that had passed since they were written, a peaceful eternal sleep of the funeral-wreath variety.

We would also find outdated photographs—ladies dressed in crinolines or gentlemen lost in contemplation, a finger on the forehead, an anemic smile on the lips. Beneath each photograph were two angels carrying a basket of fruit and flowers and then the word *Greetings* or *Souvenir*. Like the pictures and objects we saw in shop windows—a pink fruit bowl with a fluted rim, velvet reticules empty but for their moth-eaten silk linings, plus any number of items with anonymous monographs—they exuded an air of perfect harmony, of a life all their own. The life they represented, when the people in the pictures were living, moving beings, was life on a smaller scale, in a space more constrained. It was like a scene viewed through the wrong side of a binocular, perfect in every detail but tiny and far off.

When, as evening fell, we made our way downstairs, we often met Paul Weber on his way up: his wardrobe was in one of the upstairs rooms and he was going up to change. Paul was a red-faced lad with large hands and disheveled hair. He had large, thick lips and the nose of a clown, but his eyes betrayed an indescribably serene and tranquil purity that made everything he did seem distant and impassive.

I loved him dearly, though in secret, and my heart would pound whenever I met him on the stairs. I liked the simplicity with which he spoke to me, smiling all the while, as if whatever words we might exchange had an esoteric, ephemeral meaning behind them. He retained his smile even in the most serious of conversations, even when talking business with old man Weber.

I also loved him for the secret life he led outside the rounds of daily life, a life whose echoes came to me only as the scandalized whispers of grownups: Paul spent all the money he earned at the music hall, on women. There was something incurably fatalistic about his debauchery. Old man Weber was powerless to oppose it. At one point the whole town was buzzing about his having unharnessed the horses from the hackneys in the main square and taken them to the music-hall, where with the help of the town’s most eminent drunkards he had improvised a kind of circus. Then there was the rumor about his bathing in champagne with a woman. And that was only scratching the surface.

I found it impossible to define my feelings for Paul. All around me I saw people wasting their lives in tedious pursuits—young girls in the park grinning inanely; businessmen casting wily, self-important glances; my father hamming up his role as father; beggars, half-dead with fatigue, sleeping in filthy nooks and crannies — merging one and all in their banality. It was as if the world as definitively constituted had lain waiting inside me forever and all I did from day to day was to verify its obsolete contents. Only Paul stood outside it all in a life so tightly-knit as to be absolutely inaccessible to my understanding. I would preserve every movement he made, every gesture, not so much to fix them in my memory as to grant them a double existence. I would force myself to walk the way he did, study the way he used his hands and rehearse the pattern in front of the mirror until I could reproduce it precisely.

Paul was the most sophisticated, most enigmatic figure in the Webers' upstairs gallery waxworks, which till then had consisted of ship's captain Samuel Weber and the delicate, sickly infant Ozy in addition to himself. And then he brought in the woman it had lacked: with her pale face and mechanical gait she made the waxworks complete.

Chapter Seven

We could find additional melancholy antiques in another abandoned upstairs room, this one in my grandfather's house. Its walls were lined with strange paintings in large gilt wooden frames or smaller pink plush ones. There were also frames made of tiny seashells assembled with meticulous care. I could gaze on them for hours. Who had pasted the shells? Who had made the tiny, agile movements that brought them together? Dead works like these gave instant rebirth to whole existences lost in the mists of time like images in parallel mirrors sunken in the greenish depths of dream.

In one corner there was a gramophone—its horn twisted upward and painted in beautiful pink and yellow stripes like an enormous portion of ice-cream and roses—and a table strewed with prints including one of Karol 1 and his queen Elizabeta. These had long since caught my fancy. I thought the artist highly gifted because he had a good, sure stroke, though I could not understand why he had used a grayish, faded paint that made the paper look as if it had been soaked in water.

One day I made an amazing discovery: what I had taken for watered-down paint was nothing other than an accumulation of miniscule letters decipherable only with the aid of a magnifying glass. There was not a single pencil- or brushstroke; it was a string of words telling the story of the King and Queen. Now that the misunderstanding about the paint was cleared up, my admiration for the artist's skill was boundless. Indeed, I was embarrassed at having missed the work's essential quality the first time round and began to harbor grave doubts as to my ability to see anything at all. Having contemplated the drawings for years without discerning the very material from which they were wrought, was I not prey to so great a myopia as to misapprehend everything around me, misapprehend meanings inscribed in things perhaps every bit as clearly as the letters that constituted the drawings?

All at once the surfaces of things surrounding me took to shimmering strangely or turning vaguely opaque like curtains, which when lit from behind go from opaque to transparent and give a room a sudden depth. But there was nothing to light these objects from behind, and they remained sealed by their density, which only rarely dissipated enough to let their true meaning shine through.

The upstairs room had other peculiarities of its own. The view it gave of the street, for instance. The walls of the house were very thick and the windows were deeply embedded in them, forming a series of alcoves spacious enough to stand in. I would settle into one, making believe I was in a tiny glass chamber, and open the window. The intimacy of the alcove and the pleasure of viewing the street from so delightful a vantage point gave me the idea of traveling the world in a carriage of similar proportions with soft pillows to lean back on while gazing through the windows at new cities and landscapes.

Once, when Father was reminiscing about his childhood, I asked him what his most fervent secret wish had been and he told me that what he had longed for most of all was a miraculous carriage that would take him around the world. I knew that as a child he had slept in one of the upstairs rooms, and I asked him whether he ever settled into an alcove, opened the window, and looked down into the street. Amazed, he told me that in fact every evening when he went up to bed he would spend hours in an alcove, often falling asleep there. His carriage dream most likely came to him in the same place and under the same conditions as mine came to me.

Beyond bedeviled places teeming with fits and vertigo, therefore, the earth has its benevolent places, places whose walls are lined with lovely images. The walls of my alcove would seem to have harbored the dream of a carriage roaming the world, and whosoever took refuge there was eventually impregnated with it as with so many fumes of hashish …

Above the room there were two garrets, one of which gave access to the roof via a small window. I often climbed through it and stood on top of the house. The entire city spread out before me, amorphous and gray, and beyond it the fields, where miniature toylike trains crossed a fragile bridge. What I wanted most of all was to feel free of vertigo, as stable as if my feet were planted on the ground; I wanted to lead my “normal” life on the roof, to move about in the fresh, bracing air of the heights without fear or awareness of the void. I felt that if I succeeded I would make my body lighter and more supple and, thus transformed, I would have turned into a kind of bird-man.

I was convinced that only the fear of falling weighed me down, and the niggling thought that I was high off the ground ran through me like a pain I wished to pluck out by the roots. To make everything up there seem natural, I would force myself to do something banal but precise: read, eat, sleep. For example, I would climb onto the roof with the cherries and bread my grandfather gave me, dividing each cherry in four and eating each piece in turn to make my “normal” activity last as long as possible. Each time I finished one, I would throw the pit into the street, aiming at a large pot that stood in front of a shop.

The moment I came down I would run and see how many points I had scored. There were always three or four pits in the pot, but I was terribly disappointed by the fact that I could only find three or four more in the vicinity. I had thus eaten very few cherries, yet I thought I had spent hours on the roof. When I checked the time on the green porcelain dial of the clock in Grandfather’s room, I saw that in fact only a few minutes had passed since I had gone upstairs. I concluded that time grew more concentrated the higher it “went on.” There was nothing I could do to draw it out and stay longer. Each time I came down, I had to admit I had spent less time on the roof than I had imagined, and that reinforced the strange sensation of being indefinite and incomplete that I had on the ground. Down here time was looser than in reality; it contained less matter than in the heights and hence took part in the fragility of things, which seemed so concentrated around me yet at the same

time so unstable, ready at any moment to shed their meanings and temporary outlines and appear in the exact form of their existence …

After Grandfather's death the upstairs fell apart piece by piece, object by object. He died in the tiny, humid room facing the courtyard, having chosen it to shelter his old age and unwilling to abandon it but for the final journey. It was there I went to see him every day as death approached; it was there I attended the last rites, at which he himself said the prayers, his voice trembling but completely emotionless, after putting on a new white shirt to make them more solemn; and it was there, several days later, that I saw him on a tinplate table waiting to be laid out.

Grandfather had a brother who was several years younger than he and his spitting image: they both had the same perfect sphere for a head, the same shiny white mane, the same lively, penetrating eyes, the same beard with hair as sparse as a foam full of holes. Now this great-uncle of mine requested the honor of washing the deceased and, old and infirm that he was, took to the task with great gusto. Trembling from head to toe, he carried buckets of water from the courtyard pump to the kitchen for heating. When the water was hot, he took it into the room and began washing the corpse with detergent dipped in straw. Rubbing away, he choked back his tears and, as if Grandfather could hear what he was saying, talked to him in a whisper punctuated by bitter sighs: "So this is what I've come to. This is what old age brings. You are dead, and here I am washing you. Woe is me! To think I've lived to see so sad a sight …" And after wiping his cheeks and wet beard with his coat sleeve, he resumed his task with even greater vigor.

So alike were the two brothers—the one dead, the other rubbing—that they made a hallucinatory picture. The men from the cemetery, who usually saw to the washing of the corpse and collected tips from every member in the family for their pains, stood in a corner smoking, spitting all over the floor, and looking on scornfully at this intruder who was usurping their vocation. When after an hour or so Grandfather had completed the task, the corpse lay face down on the table.

"Are you done?" one of the men asked, cracking his fingers nervously. He was a little man with a red goatee and a malicious look about him.

"I am," the brother of the deceased answered. "Now let's get his clothes on."

"Aha! So you're done," the little man said, his voice dripping with irony. "Is that what you call done? Is that any way to put a man in the ground? Filthy like that?"

The old man stood there amazed, a batch of straw in his hand, looking around the room in a mute plea for one or another of us to come to his defense. He was certain he had done a good job and did not deserve the insult.

"And now let me show you why you shouldn't do what you've got no business doing," the man said cockily and, snatching the straw out of the old man's hand, he stalked over to the table, inserted it into the dead man's anus with a sure twist, and came out with a large

piece of excrement.

“Now you see you don’t know how to wash a corpse?” he said. “You’d have buried him with that filth inside him!”

Grandfather’s brother gave a violent shudder and burst into tears.

The funeral took place on a sultry summer day. There can be nothing so sad or solemn as a funeral in the heat of the day and the rays of the sun, when the vapor makes people and things appear a bit larger than life, as if under a magnifying glass. What else can people do on such a day but bury their dead?

In the torpid, searing air their every move seemed to have been made hundreds of years before—the same as then, the same as always. The grave sucked the dead man into its dark, damp cold, which doubtless imbued him with supreme happiness. Then lumps of earth fell heavy on the coffin and the tired, sweaty men in dusty coats went on living the only lives they knew.

Chapter Eight

Several days after Grandfather's funeral Paul Weber was married. Though a bit tired at the wedding, he kept smiling a sad, forced smile containing the seeds of devotion. His bare, red neck twisted and turned in the wing collar, his trousers seemed longer and tighter than usual, and the tails of his frock coat dangled like a clown's. All the absurd gravity of the ceremony was concentrated in his person. I represented a more secret, intimate absurdity: I was the little clown nobody sees.

The bride was waiting in an armchair on a dais in the back of the room. Her face was covered with a white veil, and it was not until she came back from the canopy and lifted it that I saw the face for the first time.

The tables for the guests stretched in a series of white patches along the courtyard; all the town's vagabonds had gathered at the gate; the sky was an indecisive hue of clay yellow; the pale maids of honor in dresses of blue and pink silk were handing out small sweets wrapped in silver: it was a wedding. The musicians scraped away at a sad old waltz, which occasionally swelled and grew and seemed to be coming to life but then lost the momentum of its melody and grew thinner and thinner until in the end all that remained was the metallic thread of the single flute.

It was a terribly long day, too long for a wedding. I was the only one at the far end of the courtyard near the hotel stables. I observed the proceedings from afar, standing on a mound and surrounded by chickens as they pecked for grains among the blades of grass and the strains of the sad waltz from the courtyard intermingling with the fresh smell of wet hay from the stables. From my post I could see Paul talking to Ozy. He must have told him a joke or some such thing, because the invalid began to laugh and, turning purple, all but choked under the bulging dickey of his starched shirt.

Night finally came. The few trees in the courtyard sank into darkness, scooping a mysterious, invisible park out of the gloom. The bride was still standing next to Paul on the dais of the dimly lit hall, cocking her head in his direction whenever he whispered something to her and yielding her soft arm to his fingers, which caressed it along the white gloves.

Several cakes were brought out. The most impressive was a monumental castle complete with pink-frosting ramparts and buttresses. The sugar florets topping it all gave off a dull, oily glow. Each time a knife pierced a rose, it crunched under the blade, breaking into dozens of tiny splinters like glass. The old ladies made a majestic promenade of their velvet dresses and the jewels on their breasts and fingers, advancing slowly and solemnly like walking altars. Little by little the room clouded over and everything I saw looked fuzzier and more and more absurd … I fell asleep looking down at my burning red hands.

The room in which I woke up smelled of acrid smoke. A mirror opposite the window reflected the dawn as a perfect square of blue silk. I was lying on an unmade bed strewn with pillows. There was a dim noise in my ears like the whoosh in a shell, and wisps of smoke still floated through the air. When I tried to sit up, my hand slipped into one of the bed's wooden sculptures, some of which seemed made for my fingers, while others stuck out from the bed, growing in the pale light of the room and burrowing into endless crenels, holes, and jagged patches of mildew. In a few moments the room filled with all sorts of curlicues, which, though incorporeal, I had to push through to make my way to the door. My head still throbbed with the whoosh, which all the caves in the air now seemed to take up. The white light in the corridor gave my cheeks a bracing wash and roused me once and for all. I ran across a man in a long nightgown, who gave me a nasty scowl as if to reproach me for being dressed so early in the morning.

There was no one else present. The tables had remained in the courtyard, their spruce boards now exposed. The dawn was sullen and cold. The wind blew the colored chocolate wrappers through the deserted yard. How had Paul's bride held her head? Had she leaned it on his shoulder? Some waxworks had female figures with a device that enabled them to bend their heads to one side and close their eyes.

The streets of the town had lost all semblance of reason. The chill had got under my coat: I was cold and sleepy. When I closed my eyes, I could feel the wind placing its colder cheek against mine and from inside my eyelids it felt like a mask, the mask of my face, whose inside was as dark and cold as the back of an actual metal mask. Which house along my way was due to explode? Which lamppost was about to twist like a rubber truncheon into a grimace directed at me? Nowhere in the world, under no circumstances, did anything ever happen.

When I got to the marketplace, I found men unloading meat for the butcher shops, their arms laden with sides of red and purple beasts glistening with blood, as tall and proud as dead princesses. The air was redolent with flesh and urine. The butchers hung each beast head down, the black, globular eyes fixed on the ground. They were lined up along the porcelain-white walls like scarlet sculptures carved from the most diverse and delicate material. They had the watery, iridescent shimmer of silk and the murky limpidity of gelatin. The gaping stomachs were edged with the lace of muscles and the weighty necklaces of beads of fat. The butchers stuck their red hands in and extracted the precious innards — round, broad, rubbery gobbets of hot flesh—which they spread out on a table. The fresh meat had the velvety sheen of a monstrous, hypertrophic rose.

The dawn had turned a steel blue; the brisk morning sang a deep organ stop. The carthorses observed the humans with their ever tearful eyes; a mare let loose a hot stream of urine onto the cobblestones. The sky made deep, dark inroads into the now foamy, now pellucid bog, and everything became distant, desolate. It was morning. The men were unloading the meat; the wind was piercing my clothes; I was trembling with cold and lack

of sleep. What sort of world did I inhabit?

I raced through the streets like a madman. The sun had appeared, already red, at the edge of the woods, but darkness still reigned in the streets lined with buildings, and only at intersections did the glistening light burst through as through doors ajar along a deserted corridor.

I passed the Webers' house. The heavy upper-story shutters were closed; everything looked abandoned and sad: the wedding was over.

Chapter Nine

With Edda's arrival the upper story of the Weber house was brightened with cool air and shadows, as clearings in a deep wood are burnished by a green light deepened by the foliage. The first thing she did was to curtain the windows and carpet the floors, thereby dampening all the echoes the empty rooms had been prey to. The entire story took on an ineffable scent that altered its content, as an essence added to an alcoholic beverage alters its taste.

I spent every morning up on the terrace, making an inventory of myriad strange, bogus items from various glass-fronted cabinets. Ozy and I would wipe them off conscientiously only to toss them into a box or the rubbish. Edda came and went, wearing a blue dressing gown and slippers whose heels clicked with every step. Sometimes she rested her elbows on the balustrade and, half closing her eyes, gazed up at the sky. The perfection of the light was always about to burst open like a bud that must break through its integument to breathe fresh air.

All these changes made so unforeseen and abrupt an appearance in my life, and were so isolated by their contours from the past, that I was unable to fathom them. Edda became one more object, a simple object whose existence beleaguered and tormented me like a word repeated many times, a word that becomes more and more unintelligible even as the need to understand it increases urgently.

There was something going on during those summer mornings on the terrace, and I strained every part of my being to get at it. In preparation for the encounter with Edda I had armed myself with all the bitterness, humiliation, and ridicule required for an adventure.

One day, the Weber residence underwent a sea change: white linen bound with bright ribbons made its way into the glass-fronted cabinets—a four-character pantomime came to revolve around Edda: Paul turned earnest and steadfast; old man Weber bought himself a new cap and a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles; Ozy would wait, panting, for Edda to summon him upstairs, and I would simply stand there, my watery gaze lost in the void.

Every Saturday we gathered in the front room, where the gramophone played the oriental melodies of *Kismet* and Edda served us half-sweet, half-bitter pastries made with honey and almonds. There were always nuts in a bowl, and Samuel Weber, who was especially fond of them, would swallow them slowly, peacefully, bit by bit, his Adam's apple bouncing up an down like a puppet on a rubber band. He would keep his legs crossed, which was totally incongruous with the profession of grain merchant and more like an actor on stage, and when he spoke he would purse his lips to hide his gold teeth. He was afraid to rest his hand on the smallest thing, and when he walked through the bead portières he would turn and quietly bring the two halves together to avoid the slightest

clicking noise. Ozy's deformity was heightened by the constant tension he was under: his hump seemed to stick out more, as if going into contortions to catch her every word, to be there in advance. Only Paul strode back and forth with equanimity and self-confidence, with economy and grace, and when he took her in his arms we were all perfectly happy: he did it better than any of us.

As for me, I don't know what was going on in me at the time. On one of those afternoons I was reclining in an armchair, my head weighing heavily on the material, its tiny prickles gouging my face and producing a rather painful sensation. I suddenly felt a burning desire—as absurd as it was sublime—for heroism, one of those ridiculous thoughts that surges into one's mind only on a lazy Saturday afternoon when one is listening to music on the gramophone. I pressed my head down even harder, and as the pain grew more intense my desire to withstand it grew more tenacious.

Perhaps there exist other forms of hunger and thirst than the organic ones, and something inside me was seeking relief in a simple, acute pain. Deeper and deeper I ground my cheek into the material, grinding it into the hard bristles, tormenting myself with a suffering that was becoming excruciating.

Suddenly Edda, who was walking past with a record in her hand, stopped and stared at me, stupefied. The silence enveloping us made me extremely uncomfortable.

"What in the world has happened to him?" she asked.

I looked in the mirror. I looked ridiculous, utterly ridiculous: I had a purple patch on one cheek with drops of blood oozing out here and there. Staring at my bleeding cheek in the mirror, I could not help thinking of how I allegorically resembled a representation of the Russian tsar on the cover of a popular book: the victim of an assassination attempt, he was shown pressing his hand to his cheek. More than the pain in my cheek it was the miserable destiny of my heroism that plagued me now: it had ended up as an episode in *The Mysteries of the Petersburg Court.*

Edda dipped a handkerchief in alcohol and wiped my face with it. I shut my eyes, the better to withstand the smart. My skin felt as though it were in flames.

I went downstairs in a daze, and the avid streets welcomed me back into their dusty monotony.

Summer had filled the park, trees, and air with a chaos reminiscent of a madman's drawing, its hot, heavy breath monstrously swelling the already thick, exuberant foliage. The park seemed to be flowing, like a lava bed, its every stone red hot. My hands were red as well, and heavy.

In my soft, scorching seclusion I kept passing Edda's image before my eyes, multiplying it over and over into ten, a hundred, a thousand Eddas, one beside the other in the summer heat—identical, haunting statues.

There was a brutal yet lucid despair in everything I saw and felt. Parallel to my simple, elementary life a phantasmagorical internal leprosy of seething, secret, and much cherished intimacies. I would compose imaginary scenes with the most minute details. I pictured myself in hotel rooms with Edda lying at my side while the twilight filtered in through thick curtains, their fine shadows tracing a circular pattern on her sleeping face. I saw the pattern of the carpet where she had left her slipper, a corner of her handkerchief protruding from a half open reticule on the table, the mirror in the wardrobe door reflecting half the bed and the painting of flowers on the wall. It left quite a bitter taste in my mouth.

In the park I would trail women I did not know, following at their heels until they arrived home, where I stood staring at the closed door, broken and despondent. One evening I ended up at a door separated from the street by a small garden feebly lit by a single bulb. On a sudden impulse—I did not know I had in me—I pushed open the gate and slipped into the garden. In the meantime the woman had entered the house without having noticed me, and I was left on my own. Then a strange idea came into my head.

In the middle of the garden there was a round bed of flowers. On the spur of the moment I knelt at its center and placed my hand on my heart as if in prayer. My intention was to remain there as long as possible, immobile, a monument in stone. For a long time I had been plagued by a desire to commit an absurd act in a totally strange place, and here the opportunity had presented itself spontaneously, without effort, a true windfall. I felt an enormous satisfaction at having taken so courageous a decision and, as the evening hummed warmly about me, I resolved not to move an inch, unless forced to do so, until the next morning. Slowly I felt my arms and legs stiffen and my inner world take on a shell of infinite calm and serenity.

How long did I remain thus? At one point I heard a commotion in the house and the outside light went off. The darkness made me more aware of the evening breeze and my isolation in the garden of a strange house. Several minutes later the light went on, then off again. Someone in the house had turned it on and off to observe the effect on me. I remained motionless, my hand on my heart, my knees on the ground. I was determined to confront reactions more drastic than the light game.

Suddenly the door opened and a figure appeared in the garden, while a coarse voice inside called out, “Let him be! Leave him in peace and he’ll go away by himself!” The woman I was following came up to me. She was now wearing a dressing gown and slippers, and her hair was down. She looked me in the eye for a few seconds and said nothing. We were both silent. Finally she placed her hand on my shoulder and said gently, “That’s enough now,” as if wishing to show me she had understood my gesture and had waited a while in silence to let it play itself out.

Her insight disarmed me. I rose and brushed the dirt off my trousers.

“Don’t your legs hurt?” she asked. “I’d never be able to kneel for so long.”

I wanted to say something, but succeeded only in muttering “Good night,” and departed in haste.

Once more all my miseries took to howling inside me.

Chapter Ten

I was tall, thin, and pale. My spindly neck rose awkwardly out of my tunic. My long arms hung from my sleeves like newly skinned animals. My pockets so bulged with papers and objects that I could scarcely extract a handkerchief to wipe the dust off my shoes when I came back from the “city center.”

The simple, elementary things in life were taking place all around me. If a pig scratched itself against a fence, I would stop and stare: nothing could surpass the grate of the bristles against the wood; I found something immensely satisfying in it, a calming assurance that life went on.

I would also spend a good deal of time in a folk sculpture studio in an outlying street. It was filled with a myriad of flat white objects in the midst of the curly shavings that fell from the plane, filling the room with their stiff, resinous foam. As the pieces of wood beneath the tool grew thinner and paler, their veins appeared clearly and well defined as beneath a woman’s skin.

On a nearby table there were balls made of wood, stolid, heavy balls that filled every inch of my hands with their smooth, ineffable weight. Then there were the chess pieces redolent of fresh varnish and the walls covered with flowers and angels. At times the materials revealed sublime eczemas with lacey painted or sculpted suppurations.

In winter, the heavy water turned into long, slender icicles; in summer, flowers gushed forth in thousands of tiny explosions, their petals flames of red, blue, and orange. And throughout the year the master carpenter with the monocle extracted smoke rings and Indian arrows, conches and ferns, peacock feathers and human ears from his supply of wood.

In vain did I follow his painstaking work to catch the moment when the wet and jagged block of wood was reborn as a rose; in vain did I attempt to work such miracles myself. I would begin with a rough-hewn chunk of fir, splintery and hard as a rock, and what emerged from under the plane was something slippery and limp.

Perhaps the moment I started fashioning the wood, I would fall into a deep sleep and extraordinary tentacular forces would fill the air, entering the wood and causing the cataclysm. Perhaps everyone closed down at that moment and lost track of time passing. Yes, the master carpenter must have been in a deep sleep when he sculpted the lilies on the wall and the voluted violins.

When I awoke, the wood would show me the lines of its age, as a palm shows the lines of its destiny, and I would pick up one object after another, dazed by their diversity. I would pick up a ball and slowly run my fingers around it, rub it against my cheek, spin it, and let it roll. In vain, in vain. It was of no interest.

I was surrounded by hard, fixed matter on all sides—here in the form of balls and sculptures, outside in the form of trees, houses, and stone. Vast and willful, it held me in its thrall from head to foot. No matter where my thoughts led me, I was surrounded by matter, from my clothes to streams in the woods running through walls, rocks, glass …

From every nook and every cranny the lava of matter flowed out of the earth, taking shape upon contact with the air, turning into houses with windows, into branches reaching upward to prick the void, flowers filling curved volumes of space with their fragility and color, churches urging their cupolas higher and higher to the thin cross on top, where matter, powerless to proceed, is forced into submission. Everywhere it had infested the atmosphere, erupting and populating it with the encysted abscesses of its rocks, the wounded hollows of its trees …

Things I saw that were destined not to escape drove me mad. Yet in my wanderings I did occasionally come across an isolated spot where I could find repose, and when I did I would regain my balance and calm down. I once discovered such a refuge in the strangest and most inauspicious part of the city. So strange that I never would have dreamed it would make the perfect hideaway. What led to the adventure was an ardent desire to fill the void of my days.

Passing the Municipal Music Hall one day, I screwed up my courage and went in. It was a calm and sunny afternoon. I crossed a dirty courtyard. All the doors were closed except for one, which was located at the far end and led to a staircase. There I found a woman washing clothes. The corridor smelled of lye. I started up the stairs. At first the woman said nothing, but when I was halfway up she turned in my direction and muttered, more to herself than to me: “So you’ve come,” clearly taking me for someone she knew.

When, thinking back on the adventure, I recalled this detail, the women’s words no longer appeared so simple: they perhaps heralded the tribulations to come, an augury from the mouth of a washerwoman that the very site of the adventure was predestined and I had no choice but to fall into it the way one falls into a skillfully laid trap. “So you’ve come,” said the voice of destiny, “you’ve come because you had to, because there was no way out.”

I soon reached a long corridor, stifling hot from the sun streaming in from the courtyard through the windows. The doors to the rooms were shut, and not a sound was to be heard but the incessant drip of a tap in a corner, the drain absorbing each drop as if sipping a drink too cold for it.

At the far end of the corridor a door opened onto a loft, where I found some laundry hung up to dry. Passing through it, I came to a series of small rooms, clean and newly whitewashed, each with a trunk and a mirror. They were obviously the performers’ dressing rooms. I also found a staircase, and following it down I ended up on the stage.

There I was, standing on an empty stage facing an empty hall, my every step producing

a strange resonance. All was ready for the next performance. The set behind me was of a forest. I felt the need to open my mouth, to say something out loud, yet could not bring myself to break the silence.

It was then I noticed the prompter's box. I bent and peered into it. At first I could discern nothing, but little by little I made out a few broken-down chairs and some props. I lowered myself into the box as prudently as I could.

Everything was covered by a deep layer of dust. In one corner I saw a pile of stars and crowns made of gold-backed paper, the remains of some extravaganza; in another, a set of rococo furniture: a table and some chairs with broken backs; and in the middle of the room, a majestic armchair, more throne than chair. Exhausted, I sank deep into it. I had finally found a neutral space where no one could know a thing about me. Resting my arms on the arms of the chair, I plunged into the blissful state of solitude.

The darkness around me had dissipated somewhat, giving way to a dusty, dirty daylight that filtered through a series of double windows. I was remote from the world, from the hot, exasperating streets, in a cool and secret cell in the center of the earth. An ancient, musty silence hovered above me. No one could conceive of me in that place, the most curious place in the city, and I felt a calm joy at the thought of my presence here. The crooked seats, the dusty beams, the abandoned props—it was the space of my every dream. I remained there for several hours in a state of perfect bliss.

It was late in the day when I finally abandoned my hideaway and left by the route I had come. Oddly enough, I met no one this time either. The corridor seemed ablaze with the flames of the setting sun. The drain was still ingesting water, sip by regular sip.

Once outside I had the momentary impression that none of it had happened. Yet my trousers were covered with dust, and I did not brush it off, leaving it there as proof of the wonderful intimacy I had now left far behind.

The next day at the same hour of the afternoon I was suddenly overcome with a nostalgia for my subterranean hiding place, but I was nearly certain I would meet someone this time either in the corridor or in the hall. For a time I tried to resist the temptation to sally forth again, but I was so tired and too inflamed by the heat to be frightened at the prospect of the risk. Come what may, I had to return.

I entered from the courtyard by the same door and climbed the same staircase. The corridor was just as deserted, and no one was in the attic or downstairs in the hall. Thus in no time I was back at my place, in my armchair, in my delicious solitude. My heart was pounding: I was terribly excited by the extraordinary success of my escapade. In my ecstasy I began stroking the arms of the chair. I wanted the state in which I found myself to course through every fiber of my body, penetrate my depths, crush me with its weight, and thereby impress its truth upon me. I remained thus for quite some time, then left without meeting anyone …

I started visiting my hideaway on a regular basis. As if nothing could be more natural, the corridors were invariably empty. I would fall into my armchair, overwhelmed with rapture. And always the same blue, cellar-cool light filtering through the dirty windows, the same covert atmosphere of perfect solitude reigning. I could not get enough of it.

Then, one day, these daily excursions to the bowels of the theater came to an end in as strange a manner as they had begun.

As I entered the corridor from the attic at twilight, I found a woman taking water from the tap. I passed her quietly, fearing she would ask me what I was doing there. But she went on with her task with that air of indifference and self-defense a woman will assume when she suspects a stranger wishes to accost her. I paused at the top of the stairs, desirous by now of entering into conversation with her: I had hesitated too long, and the pouting woman clearly seemed to expect it. The murmur of the water from the tap divided the cold silence into two highly distinct domains.

I turned and went up to her. On a whim I asked her whether she knew of anyone willing to pose as model for some sketches. I pronounced the word “anyone” as jauntily as I could, not wanting to give the impression I simply wanted an excuse to see a naked woman; no, all I cared about was the purely artistic desire to draw.

A few days earlier a student—hoping to shock me, no doubt—had told me that in Bucharest he would invite young girls to his house under the pretext of drawing them and would then sleep with them. I was certain there was no truth to the matter, having detected in his tale the unnatural quality that comes of retelling an adventure one has heard rather than experienced. Yet it had remained imprinted in my mind, and I now had the perfect opportunity to make use of it. Thus did an adventure experienced by a remote stranger prove fruitful enough, by passing through the seemingly barren field of another, to return to reality.

The woman failed to understand or pretended not to, so I was forced to explain the matter in plain terms. While I was doing so, a door opened and out came another woman. The two deliberated in whispers.

“Why don’t we introduce him to Elvira,” said one of them. “She’s got nothing to do.”

They took me to a small, dark, low-ceilinged room next to the attic. I had not noticed it before. For windows it had two holes in the wall, and a current of cold air was blowing in. It was the projection box used in summer to show films in the theater’s garden. The cement stand on which the projector had stood was barely disguised. In one corner I saw a woman lying in bed, a blanket pulled up to her chin. Her teeth were chattering. The other women departed, leaving me standing in the middle of the room.

I went up to the bed. The woman took a hand out from under the blanket and held it out to me. It was shapely, delicate, and ice-cold. I mumbled an apology, told her in few words that there had been a misunderstanding, I had been sent to her by mistake, I had needed

help with a competition I was entering. All she seemed to grasp was the word “help,” and in a feeble voice she replied, “Yes … Fine … I’ll be glad to help you … as soon as I’m well … I have nothing now …”

She had assumed I was in need of financial assistance. I gave up trying to explain things to her and simply stood there embarrassed, not knowing how to take my leave. She for her part launched into an unpretentious lament, an attempt to apologize for being unable to come to my aid.

“As you can see, I have ice on my stomach … I’m hot … oh so hot … I feel terribly ill.”

I left, depressed, never to return.

Chapter Eleven

Autumn came with its red sun and misty mornings. The houses in the outlying districts, crowded together in the light, smelled of fresh whitewash. There were lackluster days as well, with clouds like dirty laundry, days when the rain pattered endlessly in the deserted park, heavy curtains of water swaying through the paths as if in a vast empty hall, streaming in torrents down my hair and arms as I waded through the wet grass.

The doors in the dirty back streets would shut the moment the rain began, and the houses gasped for air. Their rooms were humbly furnished with wardrobes fresh from the lathe, bouquets of artificial flowers on the dressers, plaster statuettes painted bronze, and snapshots of relatives in America. I knew nothing of the lives wasted in those musty, low-ceilinged rooms, lives sublime in their indifference and resignation. I would have liked to live in those houses, get to the root of their most intimate secrets, let my dreams, my bitter dreams dissolve in their atmosphere like a powerful acid.

What I would have given to enter one or another of those rooms as if I belonged there, flinging myself exhausted onto the old sofa's floral-patterned cretonne pillows, to breathe another air, acquire another inner intimacy, become a completely different person, to contemplate the street I had been walking along stretched out on the sofa, from the inside, from behind the curtains (I tried to conjure up as accurate a picture as I could of the way the street looked from the sofa through the open door), suddenly discovering memories in myself, memories I had not lived, strange memories of a life I perpetually carried with me and belonging to the intimacy of bronze statues and an old light bulb with its blue and purple butterflies. How good I would have felt in the confines of that cheap, indifferent decor which knew nothing of me …

The dirty street's muddy paste still stretched out before me. Some houses spread like fans, others resembled cubes of white sugar, and others small, their roofs pulled down over their eyes, clenching their jaws like boxers. I met hay carts and, now and then, extraordinary things, like a man in the rain carrying a chandelier with crystal ornaments that sounded like a symphony of hand bells on his back while heavy drops of rain dripped down the shiny facets. It made me wonder what constitutes the gravity of the world.

The rain washed the flowers and withered plants in the gardens. Autumn had lit them with copper, red, and blue fires, flames flaring up just before they died. The water and mud in the marketplace was flowing wantonly down enormous stacks of vegetables, the deep red blood of the soil suddenly appearing in the slash of the beets, docile potatoes lying side by side with the split heads of swollen cabbages, and off in a corner an exasperatingly beautiful pile of bloated and repulsive pumpkins, their skins riddled with cracks from the sun they had imbibed all summer.

Clouds grouping together in the middle of the sky only to disperse left corridors leading

off into infinity or immense holes setting off the heart-rending void forever hovering above the town. Then the rain would fall from afar, from this sky with no end. I liked the new color of the wood when wet and the water trickling down the rusty gates in front of the prim, well-kept gardens swept by a wind mixed with torrents of water like a horse's tail.

Sometimes I wished I were a dog so I could see this sodden world from an oblique animal perspective—from below, closer to the ground—or fix my eyes on that ground, at one with the purple color of its mud. This desire, which I had long since harbored, broke loose one autumn day and somersaulted across the wasteland.

On that day my walk had taken me all the way to the edge of town, to the field where the cattle market was held. The sun was setting against a tattered backdrop of gold and purple. The field stretched out before me, a vast muddy swamp, sopping wet, warm and soft, its manure exhaling an acrid urine smell. What could fill my heart with joy if not this pure, sublime mass of filth?

I hesitated at first, the last traces of good upbringing doing vehement battle within me like so many dying gladiators, but all at once they coalesced into a dark night and I lost all *knowledge* of myself. I stepped into the mud first with one foot then with the other, my shoes sinking pleasantly into the viscous, elastic slime. I was now one with it: I had sprouted from, gushed forth from that earth. Nor were the trees anything but coagulated mud fashioned of the earth's crust. Their color made that abundantly clear. And not only the trees. The houses too, and the people. The people above all. All mankind. And, rest assured, this was no simple-minded legend of the "dust thou art and to dust thou shalt return" variety. That is too vague, too abstract for the wasteland, inconsistent with its mud. People and things came forth from the very dung and urine into which I had sunk my very concrete shoes.

In vain did man wrap himself in white silky skin and dress in raiments of cloth. In vain, in vain … Implacable, imperious, elemental mud lay inside him, warm, slimy, putrid mud. The tedium and stupidity with which he filled his life made this amply clear.

As for me, I was a special creation of the mud, a missionary it had sent into this world. Such moments awoke its memory in me; I revisited my nights of torment and dark fever when my essence, my mud, seethed with futile attempts to break through the surface. As long as I kept my eyes shut, it would continue to churn its incomprehensible sputterings into the dark.

The wasteland stretching all around me was my true flesh—stripped of clothing, stripped of muscle, stripped *to the mud*. Its dank elasticity and crude odor reached deep into my innards because deep down I wholly belonged to them. Only some purely accidental external features—the few gestures I am capable of, for example, or the fine, gossamer-like hair on my head or my moist, glassy eyes—separated me from its

primordial immobility. But they were little, precious and little, in the face of the immense majesty of muck.

I walked in every direction, my feet sinking to the ankles. The rain was gentler now, and the sun was setting in the distance behind a curtain of bloody, purulent clouds. I suddenly bent down and plunged my hands into the manure. Why not? Why not? I felt like howling.

The slime was lukewarm and soft: my hands had no difficulty moving through it. When I made a fist, the muck oozed through my fingers in beautiful, black, shiny slices. What had my hands been doing till then? Where had they been wasting their time? I had been gallivanting about with them to my heart's content. What had they been all the while but prisoners, pitiful birds chained to my arms and shoulders by the formidable bonds of skin and muscle, birds taught to fly in stupid patterns of what passed for good taste. Now they had gradually grown wild again and were enjoying their old freedom by rolling their heads in the dung, cooing like doves, beating their wings, happy … happy …

I too was so happy I began waving them above my head, making them fly. Large splotches of mud ran down my face and over my clothes. Was there any reason to wipe them off? What for? It was only a beginning. My deed had had no serious consequences: the sky had not fallen nor had the earth trembled. The next thing I did was smear a handful of mud across my face. I suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of joy. It was ages since I had felt so exhilarated. I placed my hands on my face, then on my neck, then ran them through my hair.

All at once a fine yet heavier rain began to fall, but the sun continued to illuminate the field like a gigantic lamp in the rear of a hall of gray marble. It rained by the light of the sun; it rained a rain of gold; it rained a rain of the scent of newly washed linen.

The field was empty. Here and there lay a pile of the dried corn stalks used for cattle fodder. I picked one up and attempted to take it apart. I was shivering with cold and had trouble getting my mud-caked fingers to do the peeling, but I found it interesting. There was ever so much to see in a dried corn stalk.

In the distance I spied a rush-roofed hut. I ran to it and took shelter under the eaves. The roof was so low my head nearly touched it. The ground along the wall was perfectly dry. I lay down. I propped my head up on some old sacks, crossed my legs, and gave myself up to a minute analysis of the stalk.

I was glad to be able to engage in such fascinating research. The grooves and canals of the stalk filled me with enthusiasm. I undid it with my teeth and found a soft, smooth down inside. It was the perfect lining for a corn stalk. If people had arteries lined with soft down like that, the darkness inhabiting them would be less harsh, easier to bear. As I inspected the stalk, I felt the silence in me smiling calmly, as if someone were blowing soap bubbles there.

The rain sparkled in the sun, while in the distant mist the town smoked like a dunghill.

Scattered roofs and steeples glowed eerily in the damp twilight. I was so happy I could not decide which petty project I should attend to first: go back to my stalk, stretch, or gaze at the distant town.

Not far from my feet, where the mud began, a frog took a few sudden jumps. At first it moved in my direction, then changed its mind immediately and set off for the field. “Farewell, fair frog,” I called out to him. “Farewell. You’re breaking my heart leaving me so soon … Farewell.” I improvised a long speech, and when I had finished I threw the corn stalk at the frog, aiming as best I could. Then, having stared for some time at the beams above my head, I closed my tired eyes and dozed off. Sleep had soon penetrated the marrow of my bones.

I dreamed I was walking through a town steeped in dust but very sunny and full of white houses, an oriental town perhaps. There was a woman at my side, a woman in black, in mourning, her face veiled. Oddly enough, the woman had no head. The veils were tastefully arranged where the head should have been, but she had only a gaping hole there instead, an empty sphere running down to the nape of the neck. We were both in a hurry, following a cart with red crosses on the sides: it was carrying the corpse of the woman’s husband.

I realized there was a war going on, and in fact we soon came to a station where a convoy of wounded soldiers had just arrived and nurses scurried about on the platform with baskets of cherries and pretzels, distributing them to the invalids in the train. Suddenly a man came out of a first class compartment; he was portly and well dressed, had a decoration in his buttonhole, and was wearing a monocle and white shoes. His bald spot was poorly hidden by several strands of silver hair. In his arms he held a white Pekinese, its eyes like two agate marbles in oil.

For a while he paraded up and down the platform looking for something. Finally he found it: a flower-girl. He chose several bouquets of red carnations from her basket and paid her for them, taking the money out of an elegant wallet of soft leather with a silver monogram. Then he went back to the train and I could see him putting the Pekinese on the table by the window and feeding it the red carnations one by one. The animal ingested them with obvious relish …

I was awakened by a violent shudder.

It was pouring by now. The drops were pattering down next to me, and I had to press against the wall. The sky had gone black, and I could no longer see the town. I was cold, yet my cheeks were burning. I felt the fever in them just beneath the crust of coagulated mud. When I tried to stand, an electric shock ran through my legs. They had fallen asleep, and I had to unfold each of them separately. My socks were cold and wet.

I had thought I would take shelter in the hut, but the door was locked and the only window was a boarded hole in the wall. The wind was blowing the rain in all directions,

and there was nowhere I could turn for refuge.

Meanwhile evening had come on, and before long the field was dark. At the far end, where I had come from, a light went on in a tavern. I was there in the twinkling of an eye, my intention being to go in, order something to drink, and bask in the warmth of the crowd and the fumes of the alcohol. I rummaged through my pockets but found not a single coin. There, at the entrance, the rain was mixing cheerfully with the curtain of smoke and vapors coming from within, and I would have to leave. Go home, for example. Yet how could I, covered in filth as I was? Besides, I had no desire to relinquish the filth.

I was overcome by an inexpressible bitterness, the kind that comes when one sees one can do absolutely nothing, achieve absolutely nothing. I started running through the streets, through the darkness, leaping over some puddles and landing up to my knees in others. At first I sensed despair welling up in me, and I felt like knocking my head against the trees, but a moment later it recoiled into a calm, soothing thought. I now knew what to do: Since nothing could go on as before, I had to make a clean break. What was I leaving behind? An ugly world in a gentle rain.

Chapter Twelve

I went in by the back door and slipped through the rooms, avoiding all mirrors. I was looking for a quick, effective means of discharging everything at once, everything I saw and felt, as one unloads stones from a cart by removing a board.

I rummaged through the drawers in search of a strong poison. I thought of nothing as I looked; I had to get it over with as quickly as possible. It was as if it were an everyday task I needed to do.

All I could find were things of no use to me: buttons, string, thread of various colors, notebooks—all strongly redolent of naphthalene and none capable of causing a man's death. Buttons, thread, and string—that is what the world contained at this most tragic of moments.

Then at the back of one drawer I came across a box of white pills. They could have been dangerous though they could just as easily have been a benign palliative. They might be lethal if I took enough of them, I thought.

I placed one of them on my tongue. It tasted slightly salty, though bland. I bit into it. The powder absorbed my saliva and my mouth was suddenly dry.

The box had many pills, more than thirty. I went out to the tap in the courtyard and slowly, patiently set to swallowing them. I filled my mouth with water for each pill so it took a long time to finish the box. The last few refused to go down: my throat must have swollen.

The courtyard was completely dark. I sat on the stairs and began to wait. My stomach was soon seething terribly, but I was otherwise fine and the patter of the rain made me feel inordinately serene. It seemed to understand my condition, and tried to help by going deep inside me.

The courtyard became a kind of sitting room, and I felt light there, lighter and lighter. Everything was making desperate attempts to keep from drowning in the darkness. I suddenly noticed I was having a hard time breathing. I slipped my hand under my shirt; it was wet when I pulled it out. The void around me was growing vertiginously fast. I dragged myself into the house. By the time I reached my bed, I was dripping with sweat.

It was a beautiful head, extraordinarily beautiful. About three times the size of a human head and revolving slowly on a bronze axis that pierced it from the crown to the neck. At first I could see only the back. What could it be made of? It had the matte finish of old porcelain with ivory highlights. The surface was covered with tiny blue drawings, a kind of filigree reproducing itself geometrically like a linoleum pattern. From a distance it looked like a fine script on silk paper. It was unimaginably beautiful.

The moment the head started moving, turning on its axis, my own head began to spin: I knew that in a few seconds the other side of the skull would appear, its frightful, dreadful face. It was in certain respects a perfectly well-formed face with all the normal human contours: eyes in proper sockets, a prominent chin, and a triangle excavated below each cheekbone such as one sees on thin men. The skin, however, was phantasmagorical, made up of fine slices of meat, one next to the other, like the brown folds on the undersides of mushrooms. There were so many folds and they were so close together that when I looked at the head with my eyelids half closed it did not appear at all abnormal, the tiny striae resembling the hatched shading used in engravings.

Chestnut trees laden with leaves in summer sometimes give the impression, from afar, of being enormous heads thrust upon their trunks, heads with deeply sunken cheeks like mine. When the wind blows through the leaves, the face undulates like the waves of a field of grain. This was how the head in question moved when its pedestal wobbled.

All I had to do to confirm that the head was made of folds was to insert my finger ever so slightly into its flesh. The finger met no resistance, as if entering a soft, moist dough. As soon as I withdrew my finger, the folds returned to their place, leaving no trace of it.

Once, as a child, I was present at the exhumation of a corpse, a woman who had died young and had been buried in her wedding gown. The silk bodice was a mess of long filthy rags, and what remained of the embroidery had mixed with the soil. Her face was more or less intact, however, and one could make out nearly all her features even if the head had turned purple and seemed modeled out of cardboard that had been soaked in water.

Someone ran his hand over the face as the coffin was being raised out of the ground. All present were in for a terrible surprise: what we had taken for a well-preserved face was nothing but a layer of mold about two inches thick. The mold had replaced its skin and flesh down to the bones, thus reproducing its form. There was nothing but the bare skeleton underneath.

The head I saw was similar except it was covered with folds of flesh instead of mold, and through them I reached the bone with my finger. Moreover, hideous as it was, the head was a refuge against the air.

Why against the air? Though viscous and heavy and trying to coagulate into ugly black stalactites, the air in the room was forever in motion. It was in that air that the head first appeared, creating a void all around it like an ever growing halo. I was so thankful and happy to see it that I felt like laughing. But how could I laugh in bed, in the dark?

I soon loved the head with all my soul. It became the dearest, most precious thing I owned. It came from the world of darkness, a world from which only the faintest echo made its way to me like a continuous boiling in the brain. What other things were to be found there? I would open my eyes and peer into the dark—to no avail: nothing ever came

but the ivory head.

I began to wonder with a certain apprehension whether the head would not become the center of all my preoccupations, gradually replacing everything else until in the end all that remained was it and the darkness. True, life would then take on a clear-cut meaning, but for the time being the head was growing like a fruit about to mature. It was my joy, my repose; it belonged to me and me alone. Had it belonged to the world at large, it might have caused a terrible disaster: a single moment of utter bliss could have brought the universe to a standstill.

It was constantly opposed, though ever more feebly, by the viscous air flow. Now and again my father appeared alongside it, but as a vague, indistinct apparition, a mass of white steam. I knew he was going to put his hand on my forehead; his hand was cold. I would try to explain the battle between the head and the air to him, and I could feel him unbuttoning my shirt and slipping the slender glass lizard of a thermometer under my armpit. There followed a disconcerting activity around the head, like a flag fluttering. Nothing could stop it: the flag kept waving.

I recalled the time—we were having tea upstairs—when Paul had let his arm hang down along the chair and Edda, who was on the bed, tried in jest to reach over and touch his hand with her slipper. Each time I thought about it, the gesture grew more virulent. This time the slipper scratched frenetically at Paul’s hand, so much so that a small wound appeared and then a hole in the flesh. The slipper strayed not an instant from its irritating mechanical pursuit, hollowing out first the hand, then the arm, and proceeding to the entire body …

The flag activity had begun in the same manner. Everything in the room was now in danger. I might be devoured whole. Drenched in sweat, I let out a desperate scream.

“Temperature?” came a voice from the shadows.

“A hundred and two,” my father responded and left, leaving me prey to the rising storms.

Chapter Thirteen

Convalescence was announced one morning by the extreme fragility of the light. It entered the room where I slept through the rep curtains of the skylight, oddly depriving the room of its density. The clarity of things made them lighter, and no matter how deeply I inhaled, I still had a large void in my chest, as if an important part of myself had disappeared.

Some crumbs had slipped under my calves in the warm bedclothes. My foot sought out the iron frame of the bed, and the iron pierced it with a cold knife. I was trying to get down. Everything was as I had suspected: the air was too inconsistent to support me. I took a few tentative steps in it. It was like moving through a hot, steamy river.

I sat down on a chair underneath the skylight. The light around me robbed things of their contours. They seemed to have been washed many times over to remove their shine. The bed in its corner was buried in darkness. How did I manage to make out every grain in the plaster during my fever?

Slowly I began to dress. My clothes too were lighter than usual. They hung on my body like strips of blotting paper and had the lye-like smell that comes of repeated washing and ironing.

Floating through waters ever more rarefied, I went out into the street. I was immediately stunned by the sun. Huge spots of its yellow and greenish rays covered just emerged from a high fever. There was something unusual about the way the gray, lop-sided carriage horses moved: now dragging, ponderous and unsteady, now racing, breathing heavily through their nostrils lest they collapse in the middle of the asphalt. The long column of houses shook slightly in the wind. A strong scent of autumn was wafting from afar. “A fine autumn day!” I said to myself. “A splendid autumn day!”

Strolling leisurely past the dusty houses, I came to a bookshop with a mechanical toy performing in the window. It was a small red-and-white clown banging two tiny brass cymbals. There it stood, shut up in its shop-window of a room amidst books, balls, and inkwells, playing joyfully away. I was so moved I could not hold back my tears. It was so wholesome, so refreshing, so attractive, the best spot in the world to stand peacefully and play your cymbals in your party clothes. At last something simple and pure after all that fever. The autumn light was all the more pleasant and intimate in the shop window. How nice it would have been to change places with that happy little clown, to stand there on a sheet of blue paper surrounded by those nice clean books and balls. Bam! Bam! Bam! How nice, how nice to be in the window! Bam! Bam! Bam! Red, green, blue. Balls, books, paints. Bam! Bam! Bam! What a fine autumn day! …

Slowly and imperceptibly, however, the clown’s performance began to wind down; first the cymbals failed to come together, then they halted in mid-air. I was horrified to realize

that the clown's game was over; I was dumbfounded, painfully so. A beautiful and joyful moment had frozen in mid-air. I moved quickly away from the window in the direction of a small park in the center of town.

The chestnut trees had shed their yellow leaves. The old wooden restaurant was closed, and a number of broken benches were strewn in front of it. I dropped into one of them. It was in such bad repair that I nearly landed on my back looking up at the sky. The sun was sending a gleam of tiny crystals through the branches.

For a while I stayed as I was, my eyes lost in the heights, and weak, indescribably weak. Then up came a strapping lad and sat down beside me. A pair of large dirty hands came out of rolled-up sleeves, a powerful red neck out of an open collar. After giving his head a good scratch with all ten fingers, he took a book out of his pocket and began to read. He held the pages close together to keep the wind from turning them and muttered loudly as he read. From time to time he ran his hand through his hair to aid his understanding of the text.

I gave a meaningful cough, then—my back still diagonal, my eyes still on the branches—asked, "What are you reading?"

The lad thrust the book into my hands as if I were blind. It was a long tale in verse about highwaymen. The book was filthy, covered with grease spots and dirt; it had clearly gone through many hands. While I was perusing it, he got up and stood there towering over me, sure of himself with his rolled-up sleeves and bare neck. Yet I found it as pleasant and calming as the cymbal playing in the shop window.

"And … Well, doesn't reading give you a headache?" I asked, returning the book to him.

He seemed not to understand.

"Why should it?" he asked. "Not in the least."

He sat down again and went back to his reading.

So there was a category of things in the world I was destined never to be part of: carefree mechanical clowns, strapping lads undisturbed by headaches. A broad and vigorous river, full of life and purity, was flowing past me—in the trees, in the sunlight—and I, all darkness and frailty, was fated to remain on its banks.

I stretched out my legs on the bench and, propping my back against a tree, made myself comfortable. What prevented me from being strong and detached, I wondered, from feeling the fresh, vibrant sap circulating in all these branches and leaves, and circulating in me, from standing straight, tall, and unencumbered by thought in the light of the sun, sober, my life clearly laid out in front of me, self-enclosed, as in a trap?

The first step in that direction might be to breathe more slowly and more deeply. I was

not good at breathing: my chest was either too full or too empty. I began inhaling with confidence. Within a few minutes I felt better. A fluid of perfection, weak at first but gaining in intensity moment by moment, had begun to flow through my veins. The noise of the street recalled the presence of the city, which was now revolving around me slowly like a gramophone record. I had become in a way the center and axis of the world. The most important thing was not to lose my equilibrium.

One morning I happened to be at a circus when the performers were rehearsing, and I witnessed a scene that came back to me now. A fan, a regular member of the audience with no circus training whatsoever, had, without blinking an eye, scrambled to the peak of the table-and-chair pyramid that an acrobat had just descended. Like all those present I admired the precision with which he scaled the rickety construction. The exaltation that came of surmounting the first obstacles imbued the amateur with what one might call a science of equilibrium, which pointed his hands to the exact place they needed to be and enabled his feet to gauge the minimal weight required to hoist himself onto the next step. Encouraged, exhilarated by the sureness of his progress, he reached the top in a matter of seconds. But there something very strange occurred: he suddenly became aware of the fragility of his position and the audacity of his undertaking. His teeth chattering, he begged the acrobats for a ladder and pleaded with them over and over to hold it steady. The once bold amateur came down step by step with great caution, covered with sweat from head to toe, amazed and upset at having had the idea to make the climb.

My position in the park at that time was like the peak of that flimsy pyramid: I felt a fresh and powerful sap circulating through me but had to make an enormous effort to keep from falling from the heights of my certitude. It occurred to me that this was how I should be when I saw Edda: calm, sure of myself, full of light. It was a long time since I had been to their place. For once in my life I wanted to put on a firm, unbending front.

Placid and magnificent as a tree. Just so—a tree. I filled my lungs with air and addressed a warm, comradely salute to the branches above my head. There was something rough and simple in a tree, something that went perfectly with my new strength. I stroked the trunk as if patting a friend on the back. “My friend the tree!” The more closely I observed the branches in its crown reaching out to infinity, the more I felt my flesh divide and let the fresh air from outside circulate through the spaces. And my blood, majestic and mixed with sap, rose in my veins, foaming from the percolation of the simple life.

I stood up. My knees buckled at first, unsure of themselves, as if wishing to compare my strengths and weaknesses in a moment of hesitation. Then I strode off to see Edda.

The heavy wooden door leading to the terrace was closed. Its immobility disturbed me. All my ideas vanished into thin air. I leaned on the handle. “Chin up!” I said to myself but immediately took it back: only the timid need to keep their chins up to do something; the strong—normal people—know neither courage nor cowardice. They simply open doors.

The cool darkness of the first room enveloped me in its calm and cheerful mood. It seemed to have been waiting for me. This time the bead portière coming together after I had passed through it made a strange click that gave me the impression I was alone in an empty house at the edge of the world. Was that the sense of extreme equilibrium the man felt at the peak of the chair pyramid?

I knocked loudly on Edda's door. Frightened, she told me to come in.

Why did I go in so slowly? Did I go in slowly? I thought that the presence of a person such as myself or, rather, of a tree should be perceptible from far off, yet I could tell that it caused neither surprise nor excitement nor any emotion whatever.

For several seconds my thoughts ran ahead of me, depicting a perfect, dignified entrance: I saw myself advancing with self-confidence, aloof, and taking a seat at the foot of the bed in which Edda was lying. My actual person was as incapable of realizing these beautiful projects as a broken down old trailer: when Edda asked me to sit, I went to a chair on the other side of the room.

The grandfather clock between us made an annoyingly loud ticktock, and strange to say, it would crescendo and diminuendo with the ebb and flow of the tides, rolling away in a wave in Edda's direction until I could scarcely hear it and returning as a breaker so violent that I thought my eardrums would burst.

"Edda," I began, interrupting her silence, "I have something very simple to tell you."

Edda made no response.

"Do you know what I am, Edda?"

"No, what are you?"

"I'm a tree, Edda, a tree …"

Of course this brief conversation took place entirely in my imagination; not a word of it was actually uttered.

Edda pulled her dressing gown over her legs and nestled further into the bed. Then she put her hands under her head and looked at me attentively. I would gladly have parted with anything I owned to turn her gaze anywhere else in the room. Suddenly I saw the large bouquet of flowers in a vase on a shelf. That saved me.

How is it I had failed to notice it before? I looked all over the room when I entered. To verify it really existed, I looked away for a moment, then looked back. There they were, exactly where they had been: large, red … Then how had I failed to see them? I began to doubt my arboreal certitude: an object had appeared out of nowhere in the room. Was my sight still good? Perhaps there were remains of weakness and darkness circulating in my body amidst my new luminosity like clouds in an otherwise sunny sky, obstructing my sight as they passed my eyes as a haze might suddenly screen the sun and throw a part of

part of the landscape into shade.

“Aren’t those flowers beautiful!” I said to Edda.

“What flowers?”

“The ones over there, on the shelf …”

“What flowers?’

“Those beautiful red dahlias …”

“What dahlias?”

“What do you mean ‘what dahlias’?”

I stood and rushed over to the shelf. I found a red scarf thrown over a pile of books. As I reached out to verify it was in fact a scarf, something within gave me pause. It was like the wavering courage of the amateur acrobat at the peak of the pyramid hovering between skill and dilettantism: I too had arrived at my peak. Now the problem was how to come down and return to my chair. And what to do after that, what to say.

For a few seconds I was so preoccupied with the problem that I could not make the slightest move. Just as flywheels seem motionless because of the great speed at which they turn, my profound distress gave me the rigidity of a statue. The nails of sound that were the clock’s powerful ticktock kept me in place. It was with great difficulty that I managed to break the spell.

Edda was in the same position in her bed, watching me with the same cool surprise. One would have thought that a malicious power had made things look as ordinary as could be to make me as uncomfortable as possible. Such is what I had to struggle with, what implacably opposed me: the ordinary look of things.

In a world so precise any initiative was superfluous if not downright impossible. What made the blood pound in my head was that Edda could not be other than a woman with well-groomed hair, violet-blue eyes, and a smile at the corners of her lips. What could I do with a precision so severe? How, for instance, could I make her understand that I am a tree? I would have had to send its giant, magnificent crown with all its branches and leaves through the air using immaterial, formless words. How might I have done that?

I went up to the bed and leaned against the wooden frame. My hands radiated a certitude that seemed to come from their having suddenly been made the nexus of all my concerns. What now? The intoxicatingly limpid air separating Edda and me, impalpable, yet palpably inconsistent, contained all the forces within me that could lead nowhere: procrastinations weighing tens of kilograms, pauses lasting hours on end, trials and tribulations of the flesh and the blood—they all fit easily into that miserable space without revealing the black tints and shadowy matter it contained. Distances in the world were not as I saw them with my eyes, small and easily overcome; they were invisible, populated by

monsters and timid midgets, fantastic projects and undreamed-of gestures which, if reincarnated in the matter that had originally constituted them, would impose a terrifying cataclysm upon the world, an extraordinary chaos fraught with cruel misfortune and ecstatic bliss.

The materialization of the thoughts running through my head as I gazed at Edda at that moment would have resulted in the simple gesture haunting me: I would have picked up the paperweight on the desk (I could see it out of the corner of my eye, a medieval helmet resting on a pile of paper) and hurled it at her. The immediate consequence would have been a formidable stream of blood—vigorous as a torrent from a tap—issuing from her breast and filling the room little by little until my feet, then my knees would be sloshing through a warm, sticky liquid, and finally—as in those American horror movies where a character ends up in a hermetically sealed room with the water level constantly rising—I would feel it entering my mouth and I would drown in its pleasant, salty taste …

My lips started moving impulsively, and I gulped.

“Are you hungry?” Edda asked.

“I … No … no … not hungry. I was just thinking of something absurd. Utterly absurd.”

“Tell me what it is. Please. You haven’t said a word since you’ve come, and I haven’t asked you to. But now I am. Please.”

“Well,” I began, “it’s actually quite simple, couldn’t be simpler … I hope you won’t mind my telling you, but …”

What I wanted to say was “I am a tree,” but it no longer meant anything now that I was in the mood for blood. It was now lying dead and buried in the recesses of my soul, and I could scarcely believe it had ever had any importance.

I began again.

“The thing is, I wasn’t well. I was feeling weak and miserable. Being with you always does me good. All I have to do is see you … Does it bother you to hear that?”

“Not at all,” she answered, and started to laugh.

Now I really felt like committing some absurd, bloody, violent act. I quickly picked up my hat. “I’ll be going,” I said. And in no time I was running down the stairs.

What was now clear was that the world I had fallen into by mistake would never let me be a tree or kill anyone, nor would there be any waves of blood. All things and all men were hemmed in by their petty, pathetic obligation to be precise, nothing more than precise. What good did it do me to see a vase full of dahlias when the only thing there was a scarf? If the world was so limited by its petty passion for precision that it could not permit itself the luxury of taking that scarf for a vase of flowers, then it lacked the ability to undergo the slightest change.

I suddenly felt as if my head had been crammed into my cranium and held prisoner there. A painful captivity.

Chapter Fourteen

That autumn Edda fell ill and died. All those days of aimless wandering and agonizing, debilitating questions were compressed into the pain and misery of a single week just as several ingredients mixed together in a solution may suddenly condense into a powerful poison.

The silence in the upper story increased another notch. Paul had come upon an old overcoat and a threadbare tie in one wardrobe or another. He knotted the tie around his neck like a string. It was purple, like a thin veil left on his face by sleepless nights.

“She had a terrible night,” he told me. “Yesterday I again asked the doctor what he thought, and he told me everything, the whole truth. ‘It’s as if her kidneys had exploded,’ he said. ‘It is extremely rare for the disease to be so acute and to come on so abruptly. It usually insinuates its way into the system, making its presence known by this or that symptom long before it becomes serious. What we have here is an explosion, a veritable explosion.’” Paul spoke fast but with long pauses, as if he wanted to leave time for the terrible pain he felt to flare up and die down.

The downstairs office was as dark as a cave, but old man Weber, his nose in the accounts, feigned work. Every morning the doctor came to the house and tiptoed through the rooms with the three Webers in tow. I would follow, engaging Ozy in conversation. It had been a long time since we played the game we invented, and now we had the perfect opportunity, though how much better it would have been if we could have talked about Edda’s illness as though nothing had happened.

Going up the stairs, I began to think this might merely be one of our games, directed by Ozy and including the doctor, Paul, and the old man: the hunchback might merely have made the whole thing up. By the time I had reached the top, I felt like crying out, “Enough! It’s over now. Paul’s mask was impressive, and old man Weber was the picture of suffering, but we’ve had enough. The game is over. Tell them, Ozy. Tell them you don’t want to go on with it …” But things had gone too far for them to stop at the top of the stairs …

When the doctor entered Edda’s room, old man Weber, Ozy, and I went next door. It may have been the first time old man Weber had tried to keep a major emotion under control. Leaning back into the armchair, he looked out of the window with the vague, detached stare of someone who knew nothing and expected nothing. Then, like an actor embellishing a role, he went over to a picture on the wall to have a better look at it. And like the actor who, raising the volume of his voice for a tragic tirade, overshoots the mark and produces a howl worthy of even the gallery’s disdain, he spoiled the effect by drumming a finger angrily on the back of a chair while supposedly lost in the picture.

Paul took me by the hand and said, “Edda wants to see you. Follow me.”

Edda was lying in the white sheets, looking in the direction of the window. Her hair was spread out over the pillows, blonder and finer than before: an illness can trigger subtle changes. The room was imbued with a kind of white decomposition of things, its light so radiant that Edda’s face had disappeared in it.

Suddenly she turned her head.

So it was true … At that moment I had made a discovery so surprising yet so plain that it could have been a truth come from without: Edda’s head was identical with the ivory head of my feverish nights. Stunned by how obvious it was, I almost thought I had devised the precise form of the porcelain head there and then, as one contrives an episode in a dream with the speed of a pistol shot. Now I was certain that something violent and evil was soon to befall Edda, or did I imagine it only later? In matters concerning Edda I was unable to distinguish what came from me and what from her.

She tried to meet my eyes but, exhausted, soon closed her own. As her hair was brushed to the side, I could see the block of yellow wax her forehead had become. Again I was hermetically enclosed in her presence, in what she represented now and during my nights of delirium. In not one of my walks, not one of my meetings, had I thought of anything but myself. It was impossible for me to conceive of another’s sufferings or even another’s existence. The people I saw around me were purely decorative, ephemeral, and as material as any object, as houses or trees. But in Edda’s presence I felt for the first time that my concerns could move beyond me, resonate in new depths and a new existence, to return in disturbing and enigmatic echoes.

Who was Edda? What was Edda? The one who, because the meaning of my life resided in her presence, enabled me for the first time to see myself from the outside. And in the moment of her death she moved me in the most profound and genuine way: her death was my death, and everything I do now, the life I live now, is a projection of my future death and its cold, dark immobility as I perceived it in Edda.

I arose that day at dawn, stone-heavy, ruffled by the presence of someone at my bedside. It was my father, waiting silently for me to awake. When I opened my eyes, he walked across the room and returned with a crock of water and a white basin. My heart was gripped by a painful convulsion: I realized what this meant.

“Wash your hands,” my father said. “Edda is dead.”

It had begun to drizzle. The rain went on unabated for three days. On the day of the funeral the mud was more aggressive and more filthy than ever. The wind hurled gusts of water upon the roofs and windows. All night one window remained lit in the Webers’ upper story, the room where the candles were burning.

Old man Weber’s study was in shambles: everything had been pushed aside to make

room for the coffin to pass through. Mud had made a triumphal entrance into the office, insinuating its way like a hydra with myriad tentacles: spreading over the walls, climbing up the people, even attempting to scale the coffin. When the oilcloth on the floor was taken up, the wood showed long wrinkles of dirt resembling the black wrinkles that furrowed Samuel Weber's cheeks. The mud—sticky, heavy, filthy—rose slowly but tenaciously around his elasticized shoes, penetrating skin and, doubtless, soul. It was mud and nothing more, the floor and nothing more, candles and nothing more. "My funeral," Edda had once said to me, "will be a succession of objects."

Something deep inside me was struggling to find confirmation of a truth—as distant as it might be—superior to mud or even merely different. In vain. My identity had long been established and was now, as usual, simply reaffirming itself: there was nothing in the world other than mud. What I perceived as pain was nothing but a weak bubbling of mud, its protoplasmic prolongation in words and thought.

The rain poured down over Paul as if he were a bottomless barrel. It covered his clothes, his heavily dangling arms; it bent his back; it mixed with the tears running down his dirty cheeks in rivulets like the raindrops on the windows.

Swaying slowly on the men's shoulders, the coffin passed Samuel Weber's steamer, the old ledgers, and any number of ink and medicine bottles that had come to light when the office was being tidied up. The funeral was a mere succession of objects . . .

Later a few incidents connected with the life here below occurred. In the cemetery, for example, when the corpse in its white shroud was lifted from the coffin, the shroud showed a large patch of blood. Such was the last and least significant episode before the coffin descended to the hold of the cemetery, its warm, moldy basement full of yellow, gelatin-like, purulent bodies.

Chapter Fifteen

Whenever I return to these matters, trying in vain to fuse them with what I might call my person; when I revive them in my memory and old man Weber's office suddenly becomes the room I am in, inhaling the musty odor of old ledgers, only to vanish in a flash and leave me to ponder the painful age-old problem of how people spend their lives: living in rooms, for instance, or—like strange bodies with the ramified fronds of a fern or the inconsistency of smoke— sniffing an unusual odor like the deeply enigmatic odor of mold; when people and events open and close within me like fans; when my hand attempts to write these strange and incompressible simple truths, then for an instant, like a man condemned to death who unlike everyone surrounding him has a quick glimpse of the death in store for him (and hopes that his struggle is unlike any other in the world and will lead to his release), I feel that one day an authentic new truth will emerge from all this, a truth warm and intimate, capable of summarizing me clearly, like a name, and striking an entirely new, unique note in me, and it will be the meaning of my life …

Why else does this fluid—intimate yet hostile, proximate yet jealous of its freedom —persist in me, turning capriciously into the vision of Edda, into Paul Weber's hunched shoulders or the over-precise detail of the tap in a hotel corridor? Why does the memory of Edda's last days revisit me with such clarity? Or why, to put it another way (and questions can go off chaotically in thousands of directions as in a game we played as children—folding a piece of paper with an ink spot in the middle and leaning down heavily on it to make the ink spread, then opening it to find the most fantastic, never before imagined contortions of a design bizarre to begin with), why, to put it, I repeat, in another way, does *this* memory come back to me and not another?

Each memory, incomprehensible yet precise, demands my complete attention. Like a sharp pain it pushes all minor inconveniences—the pillows' lumping together, a pill's bitter taste—into the background and, encompassing all my doubts and worries, demands my complete attention, petty and vague as it might be. For every memory is unique in the poorest sense of the word: it is only one in a linear series of events in my life, each with its precise character and lacking the possibility of change, of departing in the slightest from that precision. "That is your life, that and nothing else," it says, a statement replete with nostalgia for a world, hermetically sealed as it is in its lights and colors, from which no life is allowed to extract anything but the precise image of its banality, a statement redolent of the melancholy of being alone and limited in a world of solitude, pettiness, and aridity.

There are nights when I awake from a terrible nightmare, my simplest and most frightening dream. I am lying in a deep sleep in the bed I lay down in that evening. The setting and time are the same as the actual setting and time. If the nightmare begins at

midnight, for instance, it places me in precisely the degree of darkness and silence reigning at that hour. I can see and feel my position; I know the bed and room I am sleeping in. My dream stretches like a fine skin over my body and over the state of my sleep at the moment. One might even say I am awake. I am awake though asleep and dreaming my wakefulness at the same moment I am dreaming my sleep.

Suddenly I feel the sleep growing heavier, trying to drag me down. I would like to wake up, but it weighs heavy on my eyelids and hands. I dream that I am tossing, flailing, but it is stronger than I am and after battling it for a while, I feel it, tenacious, taking hold. I begin to scream; I want to resist, want someone to awaken me; I slap myself as hard as I can: I am afraid sleep is going to drag me too far down, to a place from which there is no return; I beg for help, for someone to shake me awake …

My last scream, the most powerful, finally rouses me. I am suddenly in my actual room, which is identical to the room in my dream, and in the position I dreamed I was in while struggling with the nightmare. What I now see around me differs little from what I saw a second ago, but there is a feeling of authenticity in the air— about objects, about myself. It is like a sudden winter frost that magnifies the sound of things …

What does the feeling of my reality consist of? That the life I shall live until my next dream has returned. Current memories and sorrows weigh heavily on me, and I wish to resist them, to avoid falling into their sleep, a sleep from which I might never return.

Now I am struggling with reality. I scream, I beg to be awoken, to awaken into another life, my true life. True, it is broad daylight and I know where I am, I know I am alive, but there is something missing, as there was in my nightmare.

I struggle. I scream. I flail. Who will awaken me?

That precise reality around me is dragging me down, trying to sink me. Who will awaken me?

It has always been like this. Always. Always.

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