Letters to God

> Lord, it is time. The summer has been very long . . .
> Drive the last sweetness into the heavy wine.
> Whoever has not yet found a home builds a home no more.
> Whoever is now alone will remain so for a very long time
> Will stay awake—will write long letters . . .

So wrote the poet Rainer Maria Rilke in "Autumn Day," a letter in verse addressed to you, dear God. So many letters have been written to you, so many people crying out to you with so many words, expressing their longing in prayers, in sighs and lamentations.

Why then do I regard my own writing to you as something tasteless and cynical? Is it because my summer has been devoid of the sweetness of heavy wine, or because I doubt your existence altogether? In my desolation and loneliness I clutch at you despite my perception of your nonexistence so that you might, at least, serve me as a companion, as a comrade, or—forgive the thought—as a crutch.

I read somewhere of the publication of a book of letters to God written by children. And what am I, after all? No more than a child—a child who has failed to learn how to write, a lost child with prematurely graying hair and a nervous heart, an adult child who still carries his immaturity around within him like a shield against life. Because it is false to think that You have created us in your image. It is we who have created You in our image, Immature God. Maybe this is why You come into my mind, Great Absent One, whenever I

think of fatherhood, whenever I think of my own father, or of myself as a father.

* * *

Tateshie, you are dying. I expire before the fact of your imminent desertion, right now, this very minute, even as you linger on your sickbed in the room on the other side of the corridor of my house.

I remember how you carried me on your shoulders when I was three years old. You twisted your head around to look up at me from between my small shoes. "How do you like riding on top of your father, my son?" you asked, laughing. You took me on outings to the amusement park. You held me on your lap, strapped us both into the seat of the carousel, and we flew round and round the globe. It was a familiar globe, embraced by your strong paternal arms. The word "loneliness" had not yet come into existence.

I also remember another day, Father, when you boarded the green streetcar with me and we set out for the Green Market to buy the raspberries that had just ripened on the shrubs growing in the fields near the villages. I remember the raspberries' cheerful dark-red color, their bittersweet taste, and I can still see in my memory your mustache spotted with grains of raspberry red as we sat in the tram on our way home, both of us picking raspberries from the basket and popping them into our mouths. The moment we entered the apartment, Mama smiled at us with her raspberry lips. She poured white cream from a white jug into the white bowl full of dark red raspberries and sprinkled white sugar on top so that the raspberries became still sweeter, tastier, juicier, and redder beneath the cream.

I also remember the day, Father, when like an avenging God you spanked me—for having told a lie instead of confessing to playing hooky from school on that day in early spring when I skipped classes and went to the park to watch the ice breaking up on the lake.

I remember many other days with you, Father—the good days and bad days of my childhood—when you were like God to me, and both

the bitter and the sweet days were happy ones. But what of that if I did not recognize them as such at the time?

* * *

You reproach me, Father, for not coming into your room often enough, for not sitting by your bed once in a while. "You cannot bear the sight of me . . . It's been taking too long, hasn't it?" your wise, faint smile seems to ask. You slide your pained, watery eyes along my right arm, trying to ascertain whether I've come in just to be with you for a while or whether I'm hiding the syringe with morphine behind my back to give an injection. You know as well as I do that the syringe is the head of a snake, that its prick is the snake's sharp tongue injecting you with deadly poison.

Should I tell you that I so rarely enter your room to sit by your side because I am too afraid of your suffering? I am afraid that in a moment of despair I will fulfill your secret wish and put an end to your life—out of pity, out of my own painful helplessness. I avoid coming in because I love you so much, and so childishly. It is the power of that love that chases me away from you. I am so attached to you, Father—*Tateshie!*—that the attachment feels like a rope wound tightly around my neck, choking me with such force that I feel I will lose my mind.

That is why I cling to you, you who know everything and nothing. You are my antigod, you who are so sick and helpless, you who are dying. That is why I cry out to you from the depths of my cursed confusion: help me now that there is no help to be had.

I haven't got the faintest notion why you planted this idea in me of trying to "write" to you the way Kafka wrote to his father, nor why I should feel the need to do so right now, from my bed, at this cold, nightmarish hour before the dawn. Don't you know that my inability to hold a pen in my hand means that I am unable to bring to the surface of my mind all the emotions boiling inside me? That is your fault. Or God's fault. Because a father must be obeyed. It was He who wanted me to become linguistically impotent. That is why I've never written anything. It just doesn't work. All the sluices have been slammed shut

inside me—for life. I know that this does not matter to you, Eternal One; my literary lameness has no meaning *sub specie aeternitatis*. But to me it is of primary importance. To be an unfulfilled writer means to choke on one's soul as if it were a bone that cannot be swallowed.

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Do you remember, Father, how you used to plan my future for me? According to your blueprint I was meant to become a famous scientist. I remember when I was eleven or twelve years old. We were on our way home from watching a soccer match in Polesie on the outskirts of town. You went from talking about the brilliant goalkeeper to speaking of a more important hero—me, the brilliant future benefactor of mankind. Yes, with dogged determination you tried to implant highly ethical ambitions in me. You encouraged and exhorted me; you overflowed with enthusiasm as you explained why knowledge is power. You told me about Kepler, about Newton, about Robert Fulton, about Edison, about Pierre and Marie Curie, and, of course, about Albert Einstein. You lit one cigarette after another, puffing with enthusiasm, pushing your cap back so far on your forehead that it almost fell off. And so, keeping your other hand on my shoulder, you talked to me.

"Remember, Yankele my son," you advised solemnly as the cigarette smoke spiraled out of your mouth, linking one word to the next. "If you're struck by an interesting idea, write it down. If you come across a clever thought in a book, copy it immediately. You never know from where a sudden spark of inspiration might come."

"But Papa," I tried to argue, "I want to become a writer, a poet, not a scientist."

"Of course." You patted my shoulder affectionately. "Becoming a scientist will make you a writer or a poet. The sciences are full of poetry. They penetrate the secrets of life and discover the basis of existence, they resonate with the music of the spheres, pointing toward the mystery of the beyond and toward a symbiosis with God Himself. It is not a coincidence that Albert Einstein is a first-rate violinist."

So we walked along the paths of the suburban fields engaged in this dreamlike argument until, suddenly, a gang of hooligans appeared from behind a cottage and began pelting us with stones. A stone struck my forehead and immediately raised a bump. I still have that bump. It has grown into my brain. No wonder that I carry no *tselem elokhim*, no sign of God on my forehead, but bear instead the mark of human hatred. Later I learned that those whom the Nazis did not permit to join the army, either for political reasons or because they were shlemiels, were called *Waffenunfähig*, which meant that they were unfit to bear arms. As for me, until I entered the concentration camp I was *Lebensunfähig*, unfit for life. Perhaps it is this shortcoming of mine that has attached me so powerfully to you, Father.

So powerfully attached to you was I that in order to spite you, when I reached my majority, I insisted on becoming a poet and not a scientist.

"Knowledge is not power but weakness," I argued. "Science knows nothing. Poetry knows all." This was how I explained my philosophy of life to you.

I liked to play with words. I derived great pleasure from the sounds produced by certain conjunctions of syllables and by the rhythmic harmony of certain lines when they were juxtaposed. And so I brought myself up on poetry, playing father to my own self. I grew up on literature. I sought refuge in literature from you and from your power over me, from your inescapable godliness. I ran to literature to escape my fear of life, my fear of the Gentiles. I lived more within the confines of books than in the real world.

I remember there was one particular day when I realized for the first time how liberating writing was. This happened on the morning when my high school teacher asked us to write a composition in class. "Walks with My Father" was the title of what I was supposed to write. Up to then my walks with you had been casual and leisurely, of no particular significance. But this very informality assumed an astonishing dimension once I set about transforming it into a literary text. Nothing came of the composition. I did not write it, because as soon as you entered my mind, I—pen in hand—made a broad, clumsy gesture over

the white sheet of paper and knocked over the inkstand. The black ink spilled all over the white sheet of paper, and the teacher threw me out of the classroom. Ever since then I have been an outcast, an outsider in the world of those who are able to manage with words. I grew up a frustrated writer.

* * *

We were wonderful comrades in those days, Father. And yet, during those first years of my manhood, I imperceptibly began to despise you, to hate you with a profound hatred for the sin of being imperfect. I could not forgive your weaknesses. I labeled them hypocrisy, double-facedness, narrow-mindedness. I believed that despite your liberal outlook on life and your lofty preaching about knowledge and science you remained intellectually undeveloped, that your intolerance of me matured along with my own physical and mental ripening. You made no effort to understand me. You did not even attempt, you were not even curious, to see the world through my eyes. I could not abide your dry practicality, your desire to clip my wings, your habit of disparaging my dreams. I could not accept the pettiness of your authority.

Moreover, you were the king who begrudged me my privileged position in the heart of the queen, my mother, whose crown prince I was. I was the light of her eyes—as she was of mine. With your insistent practicality you brought us both down to earth and kept us there; you trampled on the joy that existed between her and me. I could hardly bear the sight of you.

How ridiculous all this seems to me now, Tateshie, how senseless and silly. All my resentment has been voided before the gigantic shadow spreading its black wings over my world. I cannot find the slightest speck of meaning in the dazzling darkness that threatens to blind me as it descends upon us. During those green, hopeful years, when you accompanied me through life, it was easy for me to invent a purpose for myself, a destiny—whether in agreement with you or in opposition to you—and to cling to the illusion that my existence in this world had

significance. Even in the concentration camp I clung to this belief. But now, after so many golden, post-liberation autumns have passed, as you lie on your sickbed in the next room as if it were a raft about to depart while the rope that binds me to you slips from my hand, I feel hollow inside, empty throughout my whole being. The fear of your suffering, Father, is the only proof I have left that I am alive.

* * *

Which brings me finally to the truth about myself; namely, that I have become incurably neurotic. The psychotic neurosis of a schizophrenic personality is my diagnosis, formulated primarily by my wife, Malka.

I am shaking. I am attacked by spasms of terror that at any moment the door will burst open and the Doctor of the Universe, my wife, Malka, will make her appearance. She will pierce me with her burning and caressing green eyes and encircle me with the pitch-black strands of her silken hair. She will gather me into the embrace of her smooth, plump, viselike arms, which are so deceptively tender. I worship her. She is all that I have. She is my destiny, and there is no help for it.

Daylight is turning the sky gray. The first rays of sunshine have dappled the windowpane. I can see Malka approaching. She plants herself beside me and I can hear her say, "Good morning, my treasure. I am going to give you an injection so that you will not feel the electric shocks. Today is Friday. The electroshock therapy will bring you a peaceful Sabbath."

She ties the sleeves of my straitjacket and straps me in with the silk of her endlessly long black hair. She grips my shoulders with her soft hands, which have the clenching power of pincers; the loving eyes of her lovely face pierce me with the desire to destroy. She brings a deadly cure with her electroshocks. The electrodes press against my temples, my head is ringed with straps. She touches the switch. Save me, Father, save me!

* * *

Dr. Yacov Sapir woke with a scream and sat up on his bed. His wife, Malka, who slept beside him, also sat up with a start.

"What happened?" she asked.

Yacov fell back onto the pillow and emitted a deep sigh of relief. He rubbed his forehead with both hands.

"Nothing . . . nothing at all, sweetheart. I dreamt something, although I had the impression that I was awake. A nightmare. I dreamt that I was one of my patients." He stared at her absently for a while, as if he did not recognize her. Then he took her hand and laid it on his chest. Her face seemed to be floating above him. He looked up at her and smiled sadly. "You were in the dream too, my dearest. Your eyes were green instead of black." He caressed her fingers tenderly as her hand slowly crept over his hairy chest. "How is he doing?" he asked. "He's slept through the whole night, hasn't he?"

"He's still asleep," she whispered back. "After the injection you gave him last night . . ."

"As long as he's not in pain."

"I know. I also feel better when he's asleep. As soon as I hear him moaning I'm ready to run to the other end of the house."

Yacov searched the dark warmth of her eyes for a ray of encouragement to help him face the oncoming day. The black, silken strands of her hair were scattered, Medusa-like, over the bright skin of her neck and shoulders; they lay entangled in the shoulder straps of her nightgown, tempting his lips to a touch. For a moment he imagined himself gathering her passionately into his arms. Instead he gave her only a quick peck on the cheek and got out of bed.

As soon as he emerged into the corridor his youngest son, Sammy, barefoot and half naked, came running out to greet him. Grabbing hold of his father's knees, the four-year-old exclaimed in his ringing little voice, "Papa, I love you!"

Yacov gathered his son into his arms, then, raising him onto his shoulders, hopped around the corridor with him. He looked up from between the child's bare feet and repeated the question that his own father had used to ask him: "How do you like riding on top of your

father, my son?"

He glanced quickly down the corridor at the closed door of the sickroom, then turned back.

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Half an hour later he was dressed in the skin of Dr. Yacov Sapir, wearing his workday outfit of spotless white shirt, brown tie, and freshly ironed brown jacket and slacks. The shiny brown tips of his freshly polished shoes peeked out from beneath the cuffs of his slacks. He sat at the breakfast table in the kitchen hurriedly gulping down his cereal and milk. At his side sat Malka in her carelessly buttoned pink housecoat. Sammy sat on her lap, trying to construct something out of the teaspoons on the table. The spoons clinked loudly between his plump fingers. The other children had already left for school.

"You'll have to increase the dosage today," Malka said to Yacov as he wolfed down the spoonfuls of cereal. The grains cracked unpleasantly between his teeth. He was trapped in the same desperate tension that had not lifted since the day he had brought his father home from the hospital. "I thought I heard him groan a few times at dawn," Malka continued. "I know that you're pleased to have brought him home from the hospital, but if you want to know my opinion . . ."

Yacov had a vague sense that he was beginning to be afraid of her. Perhaps this was merely an aftertaste of his horrible dream of the night before. He pretended not to hear what she said and buried his face deeper in the bowl of cereal, eating faster. He sensed she was waiting for an answer and eventually felt himself obliged to speak.

"They refused to keep him any longer. You know this."

She nodded. "Of course. It made no sense. There's nothing they can do for him anyway."

It seemed to him that he had to appease Malka, as if she were a lioness ready to pounce. Any moment now he would put his arms around her and close her mouth with his lips. He softly stroked her arm, as if to pacify her.

"You are an angel, my love, to have agreed to it. You have no idea how grateful I am to you. I don't know how I would have managed without you. The children are taking his presence in the house better than I thought they would, don't you agree?"

"Yes, it might seem so on the surface."

Sammy clinked the teaspoons more loudly to keep up with the emphatic conversation he was having with himself. Malka continued in a whisper: "But what impact it's really having on them is hard to know. Even if they forget his presence, it doesn't necessarily mean that their subconscious doesn't register the atmosphere in the house."

"What's wrong with the atmosphere in the house?" Yacov asked, barely able to control his annoyance. "Aren't we carrying on with our normal routine?"

"How can you say such a thing? How can you speak about any kind of normalcy at all?"

"Perhaps you're right."

"Of course I'm right. The door of the sickroom is closed shut, but on the other side of that door it is deadly quiet . . . The whole thing horrifies me. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to bear it. I still think that it would have been much wiser to place him in the palliative care unit."

"Understand . . ." Yacov's voice caught in his throat and he coughed. He pushed away the bowl of unfinished cereal. "I cannot do this. I must not. He wants it this way."

"Which way? He hasn't got the faintest idea of what's happening to him."

"He knows, and so do I."

"But you don't have to obey him. You're not a child."

"He's my father."

"And he's still a despot."

"Don't talk like that."

"I'm sorry. But you'll inject him with a larger dose today, won't you?"

"Say something pleasant to me, Malka."

"I love you. Do it for me, Yacov, for the sake of my nerves. When he's asleep I feel calmer."

Yacov turned his head toward the window as if he were seeking an escape from the discomfort within him. A sumptuous maple tree with a wealth of leaves spread its regal branches over the entire backyard as if it were a dappled umbrella. The branches of the tree pressed against the kitchen window with the autumnal brightness of gold and red leaves—a cheerful announcement of decay—and blurred Yacov's view. The dull pain in his heart overwhelmed him.

"Autumn in full splendor," he declared, motioning with false cheer in the direction of the bright outdoors. "At least you, Malka, ought to be enjoying these last sunny days. Take Sammy and go to the park as soon as the nurse arrives. I have to hurry." He stood up, took both of Malka's hands in his, and made her stand too. He pulled her toward his chest. "Look at that autumn splendor outside. Just look at that tree."

They both observed the tree longingly until it seemed to Yacov that Malka's dark eyes were swimming toward the tree on tearful drops of sorrow. He was grateful to her for participating so deeply in his suffering. He embraced her more forcefully and desperately kissed her lips, as though determined to inhale hope from her mouth, or as if he were afraid that as soon as he removed his lips from hers she would open her mouth to plead with him, or to insist that he . . .

Hastily he detached himself from her. "I have a hard day ahead at the hospital," he said quickly.

She followed him into the corridor. "Don't come home late, please. I dread having to stay here alone all day. And give him the injection before you leave. Please, don't forget."

He nodded and entered his office to prepare the injection for his father.

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Days passed, and the scene in the kitchen was repeated every morning. This morning, too, Malka sat by Yacov's side at the breakfast table

while Sammy played on the floor. Yacov gulped down his breakfast cereal, trying to dull his private pain by concentrating on the public anguish reflected in the headlines that caught his eye from the front page of the newspaper. Now and then he raised his head and looked around. Sammy sat on the floor next to Malka's bare feet. A red velvet slipper dangled carelessly from her toe. The autumn sunlight shimmered through the entanglement of gold-and-red maple leaves and fell on Sammy's brown ringlets and on the shiny silk of Malka's black hair.

Yacov felt Malka's insistent eyes and glanced up from the paper. An expression of sadness and pain was etched into the net of fine, thin wrinkles on her face. He realized how poorly she looked. Her face seemed not to belong to the rest of her body, which radiated an attractive feminine warmth and freshness even now, as she sat with her disheveled hair spread in all directions over her carelessly buttoned pink housecoat. Without cosmetics, without powder, rouge, or lipstick, her face took on a pale yellow cast that seemed to change the color of her eyes from black to green. The deep furrows around her eyes and mouth pricked at his heart like the thin needles of a syringe. They seemed to inject a poisonous guilt into his bloodstream.

She put her hand on his knee. He covered her hand with his and they looked at each other silently. A multitude of inexpressible thoughts and feelings traveled between them. Then she moved her lips and he grew frightened at what she was going to say. He quickly covered her mouth with his hand.

"Hush, don't say a thing," he muttered. "Don't think that I don't know how unjust it is that I am away from home all day long while you carry the burden of this all alone. But, after all, he doesn't take up much of your time, and . . ."

"And what else, my dearest?"

"The nurse does everything necessary."

"That makes no difference. It is the atmosphere in the house, the fear, the . . . I don't know myself what to call it."

"I know what you mean."

"The children will be home from school very early today. It will be

hard. Give him a larger dose."

"Why? He's asleep all the time as it is for quite a few days now."

"Yes, but he wakes occasionally. I beg you."

"I mustn't."

"A slightly larger dose. Do it for me, dearest."

"He won't be able to take it."

Sammy jumped to his feet and ran out of the kitchen as if he sensed the nature of his parents' secrets. Malka seated herself on Yacov's lap. He stroked the long, black hair that flowed over her shoulders, highlighting by contrast her pale, anxious face. The morning sun cut like a narrow surgical scalpel into the pink housecoat that lay against her breast. She caressed his head and sighed as she whispered into his graying hair: "The sight of that closed door terrifies me. It tears my heart apart. I am ashamed to smile at the children."

There was a knock at the front door. Yacov straightened himself with a start.

"It's the mailman," Malka said in a tone meant to calm him.

She stood up and straightened her housecoat. She made this movement in graceful innocence, ignorant of its enticing effect. Yacov was startled. He recognized in her the witch he had seen in a dream not long before. Suddenly he realized how much he hated her. He could scarcely breathe in her presence. He was afraid of her, afraid of what he felt. No! It was impossible! This must not happen! He must love her! She was the only light in his life. He must not run away from her. She supported him with her love, so devotedly, so magnificently. How could he be so brutal, so ungrateful?

He went out to the mailbox and returned carrying a pile of letters in his hand, with which he entered his office. He opened the letters but did not read them. They did not interest him. He was thinking of Malka and looked about him as if he were looking for her. He remembered how much she liked his office. His father had liked it too.

The walls of his office were specially insulated so as to prevent any external sound from entering the room, which was divided by an Oriental screen. On the far side stood a comfortable, black leather sofa

with a matching black leather armchair and footstool nearby. Four evenings a week he conducted here his fifty-minute therapy sessions with his patients. On one side of the divider stood his mahogany desk, flanked on either side by two bookcases that stood against the walls. Nearby stood the locked glass cabinet with glass shelves upon which were arranged various medicines, including a small bottle of morphine.

From the very beginning Yacov had disliked the elegance of this room. It did not really suit his taste. But he had decorated it this way for the sake of his patients, since this was the style of the times. It conformed to the business side of his profession. This was the decor that his father and Malka had argued for when they assisted him in setting up his office. Actually his father never insisted but merely suggested what his son should do. He gave no orders to an adult son with a medical diploma; he was merely thinking aloud. So too Malka; she was only thinking aloud.

Yacov unlocked the door of the cabinet and prepared the injection for his father.

* * *

There was an unpleasant, acrid smell in the sickroom. The nurse who daily washed the bedsores on the sick man's body applied to them a soothing cream that left a heavy medicinal smell in the room. Yacov was used to the smell. He never minded it at the hospital, but here, in his father's room, he could hardly bear it.

"I have no relation to the man lying here on this bed. He's just another one of my patients, that's all," Yacov told himself, trying to believe in his self-imposed indifference. In fact there was no resemblance between the face he saw before him and the familiar face of his father. And yet the face was so familiar, so intimate, as if he himself were lying prostrate on the bed.

The sick man snored heavily. With careful movements, so as to avoid waking his father, Yacov removed the blanket that covered the sick man's body, revealing the yellowish pajama-clad torso that lay as

flat against the bedsheet as if it were a two-dimensional cardboard cutout. The wheezing snore seemed to be coming from somewhere deep inside the body. Yacov had the impression that he was snoring along with his father, that he had joined him on this voyage of no return.

Suddenly he felt an enormous desire to see his father's eyes open, to see his mouth move, to hear words issue from between the cracked, brownish lips. It had been many days since his father had been able to keep his eyes open or had uttered anything resembling a word. Yacov rolled up the sleeve that covered his father's arm and quickly jabbed the needle into the loose flesh. The body on the bed did not react, and yet the entire room was suddenly invaded by a stifling heat that buzzed with hissing, sizzling, never-expressed painful words.

Yacov's knees buckled. He sank into the chair beside the bed and allowed his eyes to rest on his father's scorched brown mouth, the source of the rasping, struggling breath—the only remaining sign of life.

* * *

"It seems to me, Father, that we are still in the concentration camp. I remember our relief that we had both survived the horrifying trial of the first selection. Now I see you going alone to the last selection—the one that awaits me too somewhere, sometime, at some future date. Of course there is a moral difference between a selection based on the brutal movement of a human being's hand and the selection conducted by a faceless fate. But the horror is the same, Tateshie, my brother in fate!

I see the two of us in the camp, and I recall how our roles changed. I began to act the father to you and in the process became your consoler and your consolation. In the camp it was impossible to argue with a treasure so miraculously saved as one's own flesh-and-blood father. We clung to each other. We nursed each other's wounds. We shared every crumb of food.

I remember how during the long marches in the winter I carried you on my back and shoulders like Jesus carried his cross to Golgotha. And that was how I got you across the river, followed by a spray of bul-

lets. In this way we escaped from the camp a day before the liberation. It was then that I repaid you, Father, for giving life to me.

How painful it is to recall our happiness after the liberation. It consisted of more than the mere fact that we were no longer hungry, and more than the simple fact that we were free, or that we could finally indulge our own painful memories, or argue freely about anything in the world, but mainly about politics. It consisted of an inexpressible sense of elation, as if the coming of the Messiah were at hand, an elation that, unfortunately, gradually evaporated—at least as far as I was concerned. Because you began again to cling to your prewar ideology about the infinite potential for human redemption, whereas I refused to hear such hogwash. I, the former dreamer, had sobered up for good—or so I thought. In truth, I began to see myself as suspended in a void—and, just as in prewar times, I waited in vain for the salvation of poetry, of a new kind of poetry, to open the dams of unshed, hopeful tears and bring about my redemption.

I recall how your salvaged life demanded, in time, that it should be lived, and you suddenly grew jealous of my youth. Here I look at you, Father, and I can hardly believe that you are the same man who was then so vernal, who had so much vitality and virility and craved so actively the bodies of my young girlfriends. You used to steal the letters that I received from my fiancée Malka in order to read them in secret. In your love for me you acted with the greed of King Saul who had grown afraid of the young David—while I began to feel that you had become a burden and an obstacle to me.

My former campmates, those who had survived the war, envied me for having saved my father, while I burned with shame that your devotion to me caused me discomfort. I was annoyed by everything you said. Every remark you made grated on my ears, driving me to the edge of distraction, just as Malka's words today irritated and exasperated me, making me feel two times, three times, a thousand times more disgusted with myself. I feel like a villain, like a Nazi.

Forgive my tears, Tateshie. This is the only place I can weep freely. I can see you carrying me on your shoulders toward that day when I

will be lying on such a bed as you are now—while my son Sammy says similarly distracted and distraught words of goodbye to me wordlessly in his mind.

I remember how triumphant you were, Father, when I decided to give in to you and become practical. I embarked on the study of medicine. How proud you were when I received my medical diploma! You even accepted with good cheer my specializing in psychiatry. That was my compromise choice. I told myself that psychiatry, like poetry, tackles the mystery of the human soul and heals its wounds in its own way. I deluded myself with the thought that I would be capable of alleviating the pain in the hearts of my former campmates, and I pretended ignorance of the fact that for the experiences of the camps there is no therapy, not even the passing of years.

You lived with my projects, Father; you identified with me. Thanks to me you imagined that you had finally lost your sense of alienation as an immigrant and become a co-participant in the strange tempo of life in Canada. Whenever you felt the urge to tease me a little, you, who could barely pronounce correctly a single English word, jokingly called me "Mister Shrink." To my ears this epithet, coming from your lips, sounded not like affectionate teasing but rather like a dismissive curse. "Mister Shrink!" It seemed to me that what you were really saying was "Don't grow so far beyond me; don't efface me so completely!"

Until this very day you have a weakness for Malka, Father. You love her. I know it. The harmony between the two of you used to both please and irritate me. You both took delight in my achievements, you boasting of your gifted son and she of her gifted husband. Together you worried about my working so hard, and together you made me feel eternally in your debt.

In debt? Here you are lying, your life dimming, ebbing away, my dear Tateshie, and I can do nothing for you—except to kiss your limp hand, except to avenge myself on you for the sin of having loved me with such devotion, except to liberate you from your suffering and curse myself for it—as your beloved Malka's pleading eyes demand. (Or does it only seem so to me?) Oh, God, how I hate her—and myself. How can

a person, especially someone who was an inmate of a concentration camp, flirt with such thoughts?

* * *

Yacov barely knew how he managed to steer the car through the traffic in the center of town as he drove to work. At the hospital he forced himself to act normally, a normality that required so much effort and concentration that he felt as if he had been hypnotized.

After work he could not bring himself to go home. Instead he went for a stroll in the park. The trees displayed the full splendor of Indian summer; each was a brown, red, orange, and yellow bouquet of color basking in the sunshine. Falling leaves floated like flakes of gold in the air and soundlessly fell upon the ground around the trunks of the trees. The paths and the grass were littered with piles of leaves that crackled pleasantly under every step. Solitary, bright leaves danced in the air, swaying on the arms of a light-footed breeze.

Yacov caught sight of the bright outfit of a young kindergarten teacher on an outing with her young charges. He approached the class and observed the youngsters burying themselves in the mountains of leaves, rolling with squeals of delight over the colorful heaps or skipping around them. The blonde teacher gathered armfuls of leaves and laughingly allowed them to fall over the heads of the children. Golden leaves stuck to the wool of her sweater and caught in her hair, where they sparkled like pieces of jewelry.

Yacov moved still closer to the group of children. The teacher stared at him with her blue eyes, dilated in surprise and apprehension. He bent down, picked up a pile of leaves, and copying the teacher's movements sprinkled the leaves over the children's heads.

"A golden rain of leaves," he said to her. And in order to relieve her anxiety he introduced himself as a doctor who worked at the neighboring hospital. He felt foolish, yet at the same time he was overcome by a feeling of playful intoxication. "Such a bright, radiant world!" he exclaimed.

The blonde teacher had obviously decided that the stranger posed no threat; her blue eyes cleared and she smiled back at him. He noticed the sparkle of her two rows of white teeth. The sight of them dazzled him. He was convinced that he was dreaming because only in a dream could everything around him appear so luminous. And in the midst of that luminosity shimmered the brilliance of the teacher's two rows of white teeth, like two rows of tiny lightbulbs lit by the sun.

As if in a trance, he began to recite Rilke's "Autumn Day" to her:

Lord, it is time. The summer has been very long.
Spread your shadow over the sun clocks
and let loose the winds over the plains.

"How beautiful!" the young teacher sighed when he had finished. The sigh was a sad, dreamy exhalation, as if he had enchanted her.

"My father is dying." He was surprised to hear himself proclaim this, as if the news were an additional line to the poem he had just recited.

The light from the young teacher's teeth was extinguished behind the pursing of her narrow lips. She looked at him with compassion. "Oh, I'm so sorry. . ." She whispered this with sincere regret.

"Do you love your father?" he asked her as one asks in a dream.

She shrugged her shoulders. "I have no father."

"What do you mean? How old were you when you lost him?"

"I never knew my father, never laid eyes on him. He abandoned my mother when she was pregnant with me."

"Then you don't know what it means to have a father, and you don't know what it means to lose one," he said as if to himself. "And you don't know the guilt trailing after you like a heavy weight."

"Why guilt?"

"For having sinful thoughts."

He felt himself incapable of absorbing the entire picture of the young woman with the children against the background of the golden garden. Yet he felt love streaming into all his limbs. A tender love of

spring, of youth, in the very middle of autumn. There was such a healing wisdom in life.

He felt a sting as he thought of Malka.

* * *

It was about nine o'clock in the morning. A gray, autumnal morning; there was no sunshine. Yacov left his breakfast unfinished and left the kitchen. For a while he listened to the children chattering with Malka at the breakfast table. It was a holiday. Thanksgiving. Yacov had no consultations that day, nor did he go to the hospital.

"No school today!" the childrens' joyful exclamations echoed in his ears.

"No school today!" he murmured to himself as he entered his office. He glanced at the other side of the divider. How glad he would be to stretch himself out on the couch right now, this very Thanksgiving morning, and make a confession before someone, before some nonexistent psychiatrist. But this he could not allow himself to do! He must not confess to anybody, not even to himself—because there was something he must do now despite his cowardice, despite the horror that engulfed him—he must do it . . . he must!

He was aware that a day more steeped in darkness than today would most likely never again occur in his life. The stifling darkness in his mind sank deeper and deeper into his body, into his limbs. But just as a cloud descending into a valley leaves behind a mountain peak basking in light, so from somewhere above him a thin ray of brightness forced its way through: the image of the kindergarten teacher with the children. The image established a relationship between light and darkness. He saw himself in the *katzet*, the name they gave to the concentration camp; he saw himself wearing an SS man's uniform over the striped rags of an inmate's clothing. From the other side of the fence Malka smiled consolingly, imploringly, promising, "Soon you will be free."

"Free? Idiot!" His face contracted with pain. "This is the moment

when I really put on my chains."

His loneliness howled so desolately within him that he had to rush back into the kitchen in order to have another look at his children and fortify himself with the sight of them, at least for a moment. There they were, sitting on the kitchen floor, playing dominoes. At the table sat Malka in her housecoat, her hair disheveled. Her glistening face looked sticky. Her tired eyes looked out at the maple tree, which stared back through the gray windowpanes. Without sunshine on it, the maple tree looked pale, less significant. As soon as Yacov entered the kitchen, Malka transferred her gaze to him.

"Get dressed and go down into the park with the children," he told her calmly. He looked at her intently. Did she understand? She did. Her eyes caressed him tenderly. She stood up from the table with what seemed to him an ugly smile of gratitude lighting up the corners of her mouth. He would never forgive her for this. He felt his fear—and his hatred. She was the snake. She sat inside him like a dybbuk, entangling him in the nets of her poisonous Medusa hair.

He drew near her, put his arm tenderly around her, and felt the warmth of her loose breasts through the thin fabric of her housecoat. "I love you, Malka, remember that," he whispered. He bent down to the children, and a longing overcame him to stretch himself out on the floor beside them.

"Papa! Papa!" Sammy clasped him by the sleeve. "Let me ride on you a teeny-weeny bit!"

Malka went to get dressed. Yacov hopped round and round the kitchen table with Sammy on his shoulders. Soon Malka was back, carrying the children's clothing. With determined haste she and Yacov dressed the children, after which she ushered them out of the house, closing the door behind her.

The house sank into frightful stillness. Yacov went back into his office, unlocked the cupboard with the medicines, and removed the small bottle of morphine and the syringe from the shelf. He prepared a package of cotton and started to fill the syringe, dipping the needle in the bottle. The glass tube of the syringe sucked in one centiliter af-

ter another. Slowly the fluid jumped the indicator lines on the glass, moving ever higher. For the last few weeks those lines had become the ladder that his fluttering heart had climbed toward the precipice of the present moment. His father's astonishingly strong heart had behaved normally for the past ten days, but four days ago the pulse had begun to show certain signs . . . The heart was starting to acknowledge the losing battle; it was beginning to surrender.

A strong heart is a matter of heredity. A strong heart is the heart of a giant. Yacov heard his own heart hammering against the walls of his veins, hammering in his temples. A huge heart beat inside the room, taking up the space of the entire world, dulling the senses. It pounded in Yacov's steps as he left the office and opened the door of his father's room.

* * *

The bed. Yacov's eyes take in the sight of it, along with the barely visible elevation in the middle of the blanket. His eyes travel along every fold in the blanket and finally up to the pillow, where the head is resting. The head is strangely bare and round; a pair of gray hairs protrude from the scalp. The color of the skin mixes with the gray light from the windowpanes; the face is like a yellow autumn leaf. The eyes are shut. Good that they are shut. The dark-brown mouth is the only living point. It rasps. It rattles. It fights for a breath of air.

The arm rests limply on top of the blanket. Blood of my blood, flesh of my flesh. Father's sickbed is suspended in space like a hammock. In the hammock lies a little boy of three, and his father is swinging him back and forth.

A boyish voice cries: "Papa . . . forgive me for the estrangement between us. Forgive me for the closeness . . . forgive me for having to be your liberator . . . forgive me for the sins that cannot be forgiven. Here am I, your son Yacov, watching with my eyes open—as I pierce your skin with the needle for the last time. I can see liberation trickling into your body while your illness trickles into me drop after drop. Jews

take leave of each other with the blessing 'Be well, go in good health, come back in good health.' Not we two, Papa, not we too. We don't take leave of each other. I am frightened. God, I am calling you from the depths of despair . . . I, your son Cain. I, your murderer who loves you, Tateshie."

He clasped the wrist of his father's hand in his. The pulse was gone. He kissed the hand, which was still hot with the life that was no more. It seemed to him that Sammy had thrown his little arms around Yacov's stiff legs. "I love you, Papa."

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