

an effort to justify her in his mind. He had been wrung dry, devoid of liveliness. He had nothing to offer her. All the riches of his soul had been invested in his work. Whatever sense of adventure, whatever flights of fancy and sparks of humor were left in him, he had kneaded into his text in order to render more digestible the essential brutality of his story.

But despite his best intentions, he found himself unable to live with Sonia any longer. What was more, he felt himself incapable of going on with his life at all. All the scaffolding that had supported his existence seemed to have collapsed. Like an automaton he went about his daily routine. When he was at home, he no longer sat down at his desk. He wandered about the house, chatted with the children or even with Sonia, but he did not really see them. A dull pain nagged at him, as if he had taken too weak a dose of chloroform. When he felt himself choking in the apartment, he went out into the street. Several times he considered visiting a brothel or just calling up one of his literary women friends. But he had no taste for women. He loathed the very idea of touching them. He desired no one, desired nothing. Every impulse within him was dead. He walked about like a sleepwalker.

Danny was the first of the children to notice the strangeness in his father's behavior. He tried to strike up a conversation with him; he volunteered to play Victor's favorite pieces of music on his violin. He proposed that they go somewhere together. But Victor was unable to look at Danny without tears coming to his eyes. The sight of the boy made him feel weak. He avoided him even more than he avoided Sonia.

As for Sonia, he talked to her about practical matters, about the children, the home and expenses, but he looked at her as if she were a stranger and treated her as if she were a neighbor with whom he was obliged to discuss certain necessary housekeeping details.

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Sonia comported herself with no particular pride. Nor was she more humble or servile than before. She could not change what had happened, but she was willing to change what she could in the future. She

was tormented by guilt for the suffering she had caused Victor but knew that she could not alleviate it. She too suffered. She came to realize that much as she wanted to she could not shake off her feelings of guilt toward Victor, and she began to think that she was doomed to carry them to the end of her days. But if it was not given to her to win Victor back, she still preferred the present situation to continuing with a life of lies.

It never entered her mind that Victor might leave her. She knew him too well, and knew the power of his love for her, even if he never again acknowledged it. She also knew how strong his sense of responsibility to his family was and how attached and devoted he was to their home.

So she kept herself composed and patiently waited for a change in Victor's attitude. In the meantime she abandoned her scientific pursuits. She lost interest in them but promised herself to take them up as soon as Victor came back to her. Every once in a while, when she and Victor happened to be alone, she would whisper softly to him, "Remember, Victor, that I love you." Or she would reprimand him: "For heaven's sake, Victor, cheer up. You're exaggerating the whole thing, as usual. Times have changed. Your rigid puritanical approach toward infidelity was outdated even at home, before the war."

He did not react to her words, as if he had not heard them. He continued to sleep with her in the same bed. After all, during the war, he had slept in the same bed with total strangers. He was as unresponsive as a rock. Nothing mattered to him. Whatever he did was transitory, temporary—he was certain about that. Not that he intended to commit suicide, although he thought of it quite often. But these thoughts of suicide, detached and logical though they were, brought him always to the conclusion that he must not grant the Nazis such a victory.

Finally the day came when Victor knew clearly what he had to do. He told Sonia that she should prepare to live her life without him, that he could no longer stay in the house, that they ought to make certain practical decisions. The main thing was not to upset the children any more than was necessary.

"When?" she asked.

"I don't know yet," he answered woodenly.

Sonia did not believe him. She was convinced that he would not have the courage to go through with his plan. She could not imagine him packing a valise and walking out of the house never to return. Even if he were capable of such an act on her account, he would never have the strength to walk out on the children. His conscience, the severe and rigorous demands he made on himself, would never permit this to happen. His home was sacred to him. This was not a pose, nor a pretense.

She was, however, convinced of another thing as well: that he would not go back to work on his great book, of which their mutual love had been the backbone. This she deeply regretted. She regretted it not only because she knew that his work was a masterpiece in the making but also because she loved his work just as sincerely as she had hated his continual absorption in it, and she loved herself in the image that he had created of her. She wanted to have his work at her side for her own pleasure to admire at will, as she would when looking into a mirror, regardless of the outcome of their marital upheaval. She wanted to be able to refresh her heart with the image of the magnificent Sonia of the book. She so detested the real Sonia.

And so, gradually, without Victor's knowledge, Sonia took each chapter to be copied. When it was all done, she put the huge manuscript into a cardboard box, put the box into the car, and drove alone up to the cottage at *Le petit lac mirage* in the Laurentians. There she wrapped the copy of Victor's work in many layers of silver foil, put them in cellophane bags, and stacked them in a metal safe she had bought for that purpose. She hid the safe in the cellar between the piles of firewood that were stacked in a corner. She intended to come up to the cabin whenever she felt like reading the book.

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Sonia was correct in her assumption that Victor would never resume his work on the novel. Coming home from work one afternoon, she was confronted on the landing by a disheveled Victor, his shirt unbuttoned,

throwing the last of his manuscript into the incinerator.

"What are you doing?" she cried, pretending to be both angry and desperate. Inwardly, she congratulated herself on her foresight in predicting Victor's behavior. This strengthened her conviction that he would never leave her. Moreover, she was glad that she had saved his work, and she was convinced that Victor himself would thank her for it one day.

"It's gone! Burned! Burned!" he exclaimed in a frenzy. Instead of returning to the apartment, he ran down the stairs and out the door. He stayed away for many hours. Soon after this incident Victor rented a room, packed a trunk of his personal belongings, and went to live on his own.

The first sleepless night he spent in his rented room he told himself that this was the beginning of a new, long night in his life. Thereafter he went to work as usual, and as usual contributed to the support of Sonia and the children, but he never again set foot in the apartment. He met with the children, but after the initial shock of their parents' separation had worn off, they concealed their confusion and resentment, claiming to be too busy with their lives and with their plans for the future to devote much time to their father. At length Victor remained close only to Danny, who was very attached to him. The two of them maintained the same affectionate contact that they always had, although Victor could hardly look at Danny without tears coming to his eyes.

When Danny learned from his mother that Victor was not his real father, their relationship, despite their genuine love for each other, underwent a change caused by the uneasiness of diverging emotions and thoughts. Danny, the gifted young musician, was the most innocent victim of his parents' frailties. His soul was forever scarred by the sins of the two adults who were responsible for his well-being. This truth peered out from his bewildered, questioning eyes. Victor felt he should sink to his knees before Danny and beg his forgiveness for not being his father.

Fortunately Danny had his violin. This was his salvation. Before

long, he was accepted at the Juilliard School in New York, and with the beginning of the school year he left Montreal.

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Victor's physical and emotional disintegration continued. He sank deeper into depression, became lackadaisical in his professional work, negligent in his appearance, and ever more eccentric in his habits. Neither his students nor his colleagues at the Teacher's Seminary could restrain the inclination to make jokes at his expense by recounting anecdotes about his absent-mindedness. Victor knew he was being mocked behind his back, but he did not care.

He regarded his experience with Sonia as the pivotal point in the dark night that engulfed him. There was now a total absence of light, of hope, in his outlook on life. One day, when he found himself in the very depths of despair, on the verge of a complete breakdown, he had a sudden impulse to leave for the cottage in the Laurentians. He and Sonia each had a key to the cottage. It was the beginning of winter. The first heavy snow had fallen.

When he got to the cottage he went for a walk. Thick snowflakes dotted the air between the trees. The snow descending on the lake brought to mind the image of a continuous fall of white curtains sprinkled with small, white cotton balls. The stillness was occasionally broken by a bird's cry. In the whirling whiteness, Victor watched the flapping wings of birds, black as inkblots, sawing through the air.

As he plowed through the snow, he felt as if he were a black rock frozen in one spot, while the snow whirling through the air seemed to be moving slowly ahead. He smiled at himself. A black rock? And why not a black bird about to rise into the air? He was only weary and exhausted. All he needed was to rest for a while before soaring into the flight that Destiny had decreed was his.

All of a sudden a craving began to stir in his heart. He wanted to write! "In spite of yourself, you must write!" he called out in the white stillness.

Writing was his destiny, his assigned function in life. This was how he was meant to contribute to the singing of the birds, to the slashing hum of waterfalls, to the howl of the wind and to the soundless fall of the snowflakes. It must be so! It was for the sake of his calling that he had needed this tremendous crash in his life. What a wealth of suffering he had discovered in the dark abyss of his soul! Too soon had he forgotten the suffering that he had endured in the depths of a former horror. He had abused the entire supply of knowledge he had gleaned from his former trials. He had squandered it almost entirely with a naivete of heart that bordered on stupidity! Only now, enriched by a completely new kind of torment, did he see himself standing one rung higher on the ladder of experience. Now he had a better view of the panorama of human fate, of the human comedy. During the time between that other storm and this new one he had become fossilized, stagnant in his fool's paradise; he had lost contact with reality.

He was spoiled. Writing had become a game for him. True, it was a serious game, but it was a game nonetheless. Having described people starving from hunger, he had sat down to a feast at his dinner table. Having described a character's terrifying loneliness, he had gone to bed with his wife. Having describing executions by firing squad, he had plunged into the lake to frolic with his children. Only now did he have his finger on the pulse of life's mystery. Only now did he taste the sting of its simultaneous banality and brutality. Now was the time to sit down and write his book. He must! This was his calling!

Although there were no particular ideas forming in his mind, he was overcome by the longing to write—just to sit down and write. He felt himself possessed by this passion. He forgot that he had barely any strength left as he marched through the forest at a quick, heavy pace in order to catch up with the swiftly running currents of his mood. Suddenly he turned back.

Two hours later he was sitting at his small writing table in his little room in Montreal. On top of the table he had placed a sheaf of clean, white, lined writing paper. Each sheet was a field waiting to be sown. The perfectly straight parallel lines were furrows; they were elongated

mouths ready to swallow the seeds. The pen in Victor's trembling hand swept forward toward the top line on the first sheet of paper, and before long he was racing along the lines like a farmer rushing to sow his field before the sun set behind the horizon.

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From that day on Victor worked feverishly in his room, writing with a quick hand. He wrote in the gray hours of dawn and during the late evening until long after midnight. He went to work as usual but hurried home every day like a mother racing home to nurse her baby. He ate while writing, drank while writing. He clung frantically to his pen. The first draft of the novel he burned had had a well-organized plot as its backbone. How ludicrous and false! Life was devoid of backbone. It resembled a coiled snake, rings collapsed inside rings. This being the case, he would represent life in these pages in just such a haphazard form. As far as Victor was concerned the disjointedness of life was none of his business. His business was to allow the ink to flow from under his pen in time to the flow of blood in his veins, to let words, like leeches, suck the pain from his soul. That was all he had to do.

Occasionally he stopped to check himself. What about his pain? Was it gone, or was he still drowning in it? What did it matter as long as he was himself again. He had his dignity.

And so he continued to write, not rereading what he had written, not knowing what he was writing about, not once glancing back. The crooked mirror in his mind had to remain crooked. His memory had to be cleared of the refuse of words in order to be refilled with new clutter, with new mountains of words. He had to pile them higher and higher. They would divide themselves into paragraphs on their own according to the tempos, to the tides and ebbs, of his passion. Let the words fall where they would. The only thing he would permit himself was to number the pages, number the chapters, and divide them into sub-headings. This was the only concession he would make to conventional form.

His pen sped on. Eight hundred pages lay in front of him, densely

covered with the black pepper grains of his handwriting. He put a clean sheet on top of the pages and wrote "Volume One." He pushed away the pile and reached for a new sheet of paper. The second volume was begun.

He still had not read what he had written. He would read it later. Now he had to grab his inspiration by the hair. It was enough for him to know that he was writing a work of art. He was an artist. He felt it in his bones, felt it in the intoxicating intensity of his moods, in the ferocity of the blaze that roared within him—an all-consuming fire, the rage of a tormented, creative spirit. He was not conceited. He had never suffered from any megalomaniacal tendencies. But neither ought he to be overly modest. He was fully aware that what he was now creating breathed the breath of eternity. Only now, after he had found the strength to destroy his previous work with its deceitful construction, had he reached true greatness.

"Hemingway was a dwarf of a writer. That's why he needed to be in love in order to write at his best," Victor mumbled to himself. "But I'm not like that. I write best when my soul is sick, just as the world is sick. I write best when my soul hurts, just as life hurts."

Onward he galloped with his pen. He must not stop. He had a routine to which he must submit. Every free moment of his time must be crammed with words. He must pile them up, allow them to speak, to sing, scream, mumble, and groan so that the knottiness of existence should find its reflection not within them but between them, around them, in the chaos that they create as they hit against each other. James Joyce wanted to achieve this with his *Ulysses*, with his *Finnegan's Wake*. But Joyce did not go far enough. He lacked the courage, lacked the experience, lacked the trials of horror.

"I," Victor mumbled to himself. "I have survived the camps. I have faced the unspeakable, the inexpressible . . . and I've got the courage. I certainly have!"

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A year went by. Sonia and Victor had not seen each other for a very long time. The cottage in the Laurentians was their only point of con-

tact. But they never met there. Sonia drove out mostly during the week, when she had a morning free from work, while Victor drove up for the weekend. She knew that he had been there by the mess that he left behind. He, however, knew nothing of her visits, never noticing the order she restored to the cottage. But he sensed her presence nonetheless. It permeated the air.

They had still not made any formal arrangements with regard to their separation. He refused to bother about it. He did not care about such matters. He fulfilled his financial obligations as usual. Sonia, for her part, did not abandon hope that he might come back to her. She continued with her free way of life just as she had always done and derived even less pleasure from her adventures than before. She yearned for the warm and intellectually stimulating atmosphere that Victor had created in their home, despite his constant preoccupation with his work. She would have gladly reverted to the life she had led before she told Victor the truth about Danny. Obviously, in life, just as in art, the truth was not always the best choice.

Time went on. One winter's day Victor found to his amazement that the thread of his narrative was running out. He took it as a sign that he was about to finish the last volume of his work. A dybbuk seemed to have entered his mind in order to tease him. "You're coming to the end of the line," it squeaked. "The thread is breaking. Soon you'll have nothing to hold on to!"

He stopped writing. Glancing at the tabletop, he saw that it was covered with piles of paper filled with his handwriting. There was only a small space left for his arm, for the hand holding the pen, and for a sheet of paper. He could not understand how he had come to fill all these sheets of paper. Here were the completed volumes arranged all in one row, paginated in perfect order. The drive to make order is no doubt innate in human nature. It cannot be avoided. That was why he had to make the meaningless concession of paginating. Now all that was left was to add the conclusion, and number that as well. Perhaps there was something intrinsically positive about numbering?

The little devil sitting in his head teased him. "Soon you'll have

nothing to number but blank pages . . . blank days."

Victor chuckled wisely. "But I have to start writing all over again—from the beginning! I must rewrite! There is no writing without re-writing! That is the writer's duty and his privilege! It is only life that happens once and cannot be repeated. You cannot restart it from the beginning. But the work about life can be started over and over again. That's why the Romans said '*Ars longa, vita brevis.*' Art is eternal, life is short."

Once again he was zealous. He wanted to keep his mind fresh for the conclusion of his book and forced himself to get up from the table. It was the end of the week. A thick snow had fallen outside. Never mind. One way or the other he would make it out to the cottage in the Laurentians. There he always rested best.

He looked at the table once again. His entire work lay there unprotected. He turned down the heating, checked if the burners on the gas stove were turned off, and unplugged all the electric appliances so that no spark could chance to fall on his work. At the foot of the bed lay a heap of newspapers. He never read newspapers, but bought one every day in order to glance at the headlines. Now he clipped those articles he thought might help him relax in the country. He carried the remainder down to the garbage dump. Once back in his room he put on his winter jacket and boots. He was still worried, fussing like a mother who was forced to leave her child alone for a little time. After he locked the door, he checked to make certain that it was well locked.

He drove as quickly as he could through the snow-covered highway. Soon the mountains loomed ahead, the snow on their peaks undulating like puffed-up blankets of white eiderdown. He began to feel calmer. What a peaceful world!

The countryside was hushed, quiet. A wall of snow covering half of the window had transformed the cottage at *Le petit lac mirage* into a small fortress. Victor began to dig a passage for himself to the front steps. Exhausted, he climbed onto the snow-covered veranda and shook the clumps of snow off his clothes and boots. He kicked away the snow from the door and entered the cottage. The first thing he did was light

a fire in the fireplace. Then he took off his heavy, wet winter jacket and hung it up to dry on the back of a chair so that it faced the fire. He threw himself on the cot that stood nearby. It was already late afternoon. Soon night would fall and trap the world in darkness. Tomorrow morning he would go for a long walk on the frozen lake. There it was the easiest to walk. He stared at the snowshoes that hung on the wall near the door. He would put them on tomorrow.

He lay on the cot with his eyes open and saw the night slowly creeping down the frozen windowpanes. Soon the melting panes would begin to weep. The fireplace was loaded with wood. The room was warming up quickly. Before long the panes, completely cleared of frost, would let the darkness of the night invade the entire room. Victor did not think of his work. It was enough for him to know that he would not stop writing it. The flights of his imagination would never cease. It did not matter that at that very moment he was too tired to do any work. It occurred to him that it must already be late. The wind howled inside the chimney. The wolves howled outside. Or perhaps this was the sound of Danny's violin wafting through the room? Victor wondered how it would feel to write to the accompaniment of the wind's laughter, to the accompaniment of the howls of the wolves, and to the sobbing of Danny's violin. But he had no energy to get up from the cot and sit down at the table. In any case, he had to have his entire work beside him when he wrote. There had been a time when he had worked well in this cottage no matter what. Then he had been surrounded and supported by his family, by Sonia and the children—at least he had thought that they supported him. Now the piles of paper filled with his own handwriting had become his family. Their presence strengthened him. They supplied him with spiritual fortitude. But he had left them in his small room in Montreal. So now he had no option but to lie on the cot and dream—just dream.

He drifted off to sleep. His winter jacket hung on the back of the chair very close to the fire in the fireplace. The rolled-up newspaper articles that he had brought along to read poked out from the pocket.

He snored heavily. Outside, the wind's fierceness increased. The

wolves howled. The fire in the fireplace gorged on the wind and gagged, its flames flailing as if they were arms. A long red tongue shot out to the chair and licked it avidly. Another tongue reached the jacket pocket and wound itself around the protruding roll of newspaper. At first it licked the paper, as if just to get a taste, then the flaming mouth clamped down until it had got the entire jacket in its craw. Crackling triumphantly, it swallowed chair and jacket in one fiery gulp

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That was the last night of Victor's life and of his and Sonia's cottage in the Laurentians. The fire burned the cottage to the ground. It also entered the cellar, and through the cracks between the stacks of wood, slipped into the place where Sonia had negligently hidden the metal safe containing the copy of Victor's manuscript. She had often come out to the cottage. She felt that this cottage and Victor's work complemented each other in some way. She had more than once grown so immersed in her reading of the novel and wept over it for so long that it had grown late and she had had to hurriedly hide the safe.

The flames had a difficult job with the metal safe. But eventually they broke through. Fortified by their consumption of the cottage, the fire melted the thin metal of the safe until it yielded, causing a crack that permitted access to the stacks of papers hidden within. In a wink the flames swallowed them all, down to the last white page, which had held only two words written in Victor's hand: *The Epilogue*. And so his creations shared the fate of Victor, their creator.

When, for the first time after his death, Sonia entered Victor's small, one-room apartment in Montreal, she was struck by the sight of the stacked sheets of paper covered with Victor's handwriting that were piled on the table in neatly arranged, numbered volumes. The first thing that occurred to her was that Victor, whose death had devastated her, had played a trick on her; that he had discovered the copy of the manuscript negligently hidden in the cellar of the cottage in the Laurentians and had made a second copy of it without letting her know.

This would have been an indication that he still loved her and that he had begun the definitive version of his novel.

Everything had happened as she had foreseen it. He had not been able to stop loving her. She had known it all along. In his heart he had never left her. This awareness alleviated Sonia's sorrow at the same time as it deepened the pain of her loss. She congratulated herself for foresight in saving his masterpiece for posterity by copying it. She noticed that there was no title on the cover page of the first volume and thought that Victor had probably wanted the two of them together to think up a title. Now she would have to do it alone. Now more than ever was she a partner to his work, and she would remain his partner forever. This work would become their joint offering to the world. She now had a purpose to live for; it might perhaps awaken in her a renewed zest for life.

A number of times Sonia felt an impulse to glance at Victor's work. But she did not dare do it so soon. She feared that this might lead to her complete breakdown. So, with trembling hands, she tied all the volumes of the manuscript with string, packed them into a large cardboard box, and took them home. Before long the box assumed a presence of its own in her apartment. It seemed to be calling her, tempting her to open it. Immersed in her mourning as she was, it occurred to her that the soul of the living Victor was to be found inside the box, between the lines of his novel; that inside, in that box, she could also rediscover her own soul, the soul of the real Sonia, the beautiful and innocent.

One autumn day, nearly a year after Victor's death, when Danny was home on vacation, Sonia proposed to him that they drive out to the ruins of their cottage in the Laurentians. She wanted to take Victor's manuscript along and there introduce Danny to Victor's work. But Danny would not hear of it. Ever since Victor's death a change had come over him. He was his own man now. He answered her with such a categorical "No!" that it sounded like a clap of thunder. Sonia did not dare to broach the subject again. So, after Danny's return to New York, she carried the box with Victor's manuscript by herself down to the car. For a moment she thought how good it would have been to take along

the dog, Lord. But Lord had died not long after Victor.

And so Sonia left alone for the Laurentians. After she arrived at the ruins of the cottage she spread a blanket on the grass amid the nearby pine trees, facing *Le petit lac mirage*. She removed the box from the trunk of the car, placed it on the blanket, and laid out all the volumes stacked inside, arranging them neatly in front of her. She had the feeling that this was the most suitable place for her first thorough reading of Victor's work.

With a reverential tremor she reached for the first sheets of the first volume. She was stunned by their strange appearance. The handwriting was unrecognizable and barely legible. It took her a while before she realized that the thousands of handwritten pages were full of thousands of nonsensical disjointed paragraphs—a meaningless scribbling without beginning or end, a hodgepodge, a mess, a diarrhea of phrases, a disgoring of words . . . words . . . words . . . a heap of garbage.

She wondered if Victor had gone mad. This, at least, provided an explanation for his suicide at the cottage. His insanity had prompted him to destroy himself along with the sole copy of his earlier work as well as the cottage where he, Sonia, and the children had spent the happiest moments of their lives.

In the distance, the contours of the mountains resembled a chain of question marks hooked into each other, seeming to guard a mystery locked in their midst. A curtain of haze fell over the mirror of *Le petit lac mirage*. Golden leaves of autumn soundlessly detached themselves from the trees and slowly circled in the air before they touched the ground. There was stillness in the air, such a great stillness!

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