

## The Masterpiece

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There is almost no spring in the province of Quebec. One fine day, the abundant snows of winter, which lie welded to the ground for half the year, disappear, and during the days that follow the naked trees stand ready to don their new leafy dresses. Before long, the trees welcome the world clad in flickering green, as if flocks of tiny green birds were resting on them. And so spring makes its short-lived appearance like a lackey preceding his mistress, the Queen of Summer, in order to announce her imminent arrival. In no time at all summer arrives and the hot days begin.

Such is the climate of Quebec, which cheats on spring in order to pay back double in fall with the splendor of Indian summer. It is then that the trees, bushes, and shrubs begin to glow with the colors of sunset, a blazing array of yellow, orange, red, brown, but mainly gold. The towns and villages with their gardens, as well as the city of Montreal, with its parks, its long avenues, and narrow residential streets adorned with rows of trees, bask in the sunshine as if dipped in a painter's palette, or as if someone had hung them with garlands of gold. The falling leaves circle in the air like dancing gold coins. They accumulate on the sidewalks in golden heaps. Pedestrians stir up the gold dust with every step.

When Indian summer is at its peak, the Laurentian Mountains, which begin north of Montreal as rolling hills dotted with cool, clear lakes and endless tracts of forest, take on the magic of a fantasyland. Nature lovers come from near and far to admire the marvelous colors

of the foliage. For the inhabitants of Montreal, the Laurentians are a favorite year-round vacation spot, because during the winters the mountains assume an altogether different kind of beauty, one that is both dramatic and soothing. There is drama in the contrasting interplay of the black trees and the icy, unblemished whiteness. And there is something pleasing to the eye and soothing to the soul in the white stillness spreading beyond the horizon.

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Sonia and Victor were born in Lodz, the Polish Manchester. Both were concentration-camp survivors who had lost their families, friends, and neighbors during the war. They had arrived in Canada carrying the substantial psychic baggage of horrific nightmares and tragic recollections, but aside from these, they had—in a manner of speaking—nothing else to declare.

In their memories, the prewar childhood vacations that they had taken in the sub-Carpathian regions of Poland stood out like images of a paradise lost. The Laurentian Mountains reminded them of those enchanted spots, and so, even at a time when they could scarcely afford it, when their children were still small, Victor and Sonia had rented a cottage in the Laurentians when the summer heat made Montreal unbearable. They had borrowed money and renounced small luxuries so that they could rent a small cottage near *Le petit lac mirage*, which was located in a remote area far from the bustle of the more fashionable vacation spots, an hour and a half drive from Montreal.

Later, when their financial situation improved, they bought the cottage. Victor, who was a Yiddish writer, had been offered a teaching position at the Jewish Teachers' Seminary in Montreal, while Sonia, also a teacher, was hired by a Jewish high school. It was then that they began to spend not only their summer vacations but also their weekends in the Laurentians.

During all the years that they owned the cottage they invested little money in renovating it, and it remained the same old wooden

shack it had been when they first rented it. After all, how much time did they actually spend inside the cottage? Didn't they really go there to enjoy the splendors of nature? The main thing was that the roof of the cottage did not leak, the stove and the fireplace functioned well, and there was never a lack of firewood. And perhaps both Sonia and Victor harbored a subconscious wish to retain as much as possible of the cottage's resemblance to those ramshackle huts in which they had spent their childhood holidays.

Every visit that the entire family paid to the cottage was a festive occasion. Sonia and Victor felt themselves infused with a sense of gaiety and renewal, which was largely attributable to the feeling of freedom that the generous beauty of the location gave them. The open sky, like an enormous canopy, unfurled an ongoing spectacle of colors and cloud formations, while the surrounding mountains, covered with dense forests of maple and fir trees, whispered of enchanting secrets buried in the womb of the crystalline lake. They kindled a craving in Sonia and Victor's hearts to fit themselves into the harmony of nature and to come in direct contact with everything alive and present in God's magnificent world. In order to recapture their own simplicity and innocence, the couple tried to emulate the friskiness of their children as they frolicked around the cottage like young squirrels.

Of course, more often than not, both Sonia and Victor failed in their attempts to be joyful. The burden of their city cares, the weight of their pasts, and the aftertaste of recurrent nightmares were not always easy to discard, not even in the country, not even in the company of their carefree children. And yet, despite these hindrances, the very fact of being at the cottage at *Le petit lac mirage* had a refreshing effect on them.

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When Sonia and Victor's children reached their teens, they stopped accompanying their parents to the country house. They had grown tired of always spending their holidays in the same place and so were

packed off to summer camps in various locations throughout Canada and the United States.

Only the youngest son, Danny, continued to feel an attachment to the cottage. Danny had been a sickly child. But during puberty, when physical prowess is so important to boys, he had ambitiously taken up swimming and racing with a self-discipline matching that of his father. In this way he had managed to build up his strength. He grew in height and weight and developed into a good-looking young man.

While still a child, Danny had loved music and had talked his parents into funding violin lessons. Violin playing became the passion of Danny's life. His love of music made his father feel an affinity with him that he shared with none of the other children. Father and son were bound to each other by a shared sensibility, a shared spirituality, and by their love of things artistic. At the age of fourteen Danny was accepted into the Montreal Youth Orchestra.

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Sonia and Victor had triumphantly maintained their love for each other through all the years of turmoil, hope, and despair after the Second World War, and they were both proud of it now.

Sonia was a charmer. She had a dark complexion and an abundance of glistening dark hair that framed her open, smiling face. Her eyes were lively, curious, even mischievous, although in their darkest depths there smoldered a barely discernible reflection of a never-healed pain. Her figure was both shapely and sturdy. She had successfully conquered tuberculosis and typhus, the illnesses of a concentration camp inmate, and was now in perfect health. Blessed with a sharp mind, she had both a practical sense and a fine critical taste that went hand in hand with her great vitality and *joie de vivre*. She overflowed with such energy and zest for life that the very air about her seemed to vibrate with her restlessness. She craved compensation for the youth she had lost to the war; each day had to have the value of two, at least as far as achievement and enjoyment were concerned.

Victor, on the other hand, was a perfectionist, punctilious, a grinder, both in his teaching and in his writing. With a judicious eye he weighed and measured every step he took, both in his literary and in his day-to-day life. A skillful observer of human nature, he knew how to winnow the genuine and sincere from the pretentious and superficial. He was capable of forgiving people their weaknesses but only up to a point. Yet he was hardest on himself.

Along with his self-imposed discipline, which seemed to have found its expression in his tall, lanky figure and pale rabbinic face, went an inborn softness of heart, which was reflected in his warm, dark, glistening, sad Jewish eyes. His orderliness and self-control were a form of armor that he had forced upon himself in order to contain his inner fire and protect it from the destructive forces of reality. Perhaps this was his way of defending his mad optimism, his faith in the redemption of the human spirit through love, a faith the brutality of war had not had the power to destroy, a faith without which—or so he believed—he could never have been a teacher or a writer.

Sonia and Victor had five children, four boys and a girl. They had planned to have more. Victor would sometimes remark with a regretful smile, "The Jewish people need children. As a good Jew I must satisfy that need to the best of my ability." It seemed to him that the more children he had, the more his home deserved to be called a home. He was a committed family man, the more so since neither he nor Sonia had any other surviving relatives.

Sonia, for her part, shared Victor's desire to have a large family. She was an enthusiastic mother. She felt best and looked best when she was pregnant. To her, the pregnancies, the caring for the children and the home, had an additional significance. They expressed her own effort at self-discipline, at taming her unquenchable passion for life. She looked on her family as an exercise in harnessing her greed for experience and adventure. And so she and Victor, despite the differences in their personalities, harmonized with each other and led a life of peace and contentment.

Every day for sixteen years Victor rose at the first light of dawn and worked for two to three hours at his desk before eating breakfast

and leaving for work at the Teachers' Seminary. He often wrote in the evenings as well as on the weekends in the Laurentians, where some of his most inspired pages were written. He was writing a novel, an epic about the Jewish tragedy in Europe during the Second World War. The backbone of the plot was the love between a man and a woman. Sonia and he served as his models.

When he worked on the novel—which had begun to look as though it would never come to an end—Sonia never disturbed him. On the contrary, she did all that she could to put him in the right frame of mind and to give him some peace and quiet. She watched over him like a guardian angel. She had the necessary qualities of mind to appreciate his undertaking, to grasp the vastness of the literary panorama that he was painting, and she valued his artistic achievements.

She had come to appreciate the importance of Victor's work because she had, in a manner of speaking, sinned against him throughout all the years that he had been writing his novel. Whenever Victor was not at home, she would sneak into his room and read the chapter that he had just written. She read it with a frisson of guilty pleasure, as if she were tasting a forbidden fruit. Victor, the perfectionist, was reluctant to show the unfinished product of his labor, even to her.

But she was so overcome by curiosity that reading his chapters as they were being written became a compulsion that she could not subdue. She was particularly thrilled by the manner in which Victor described the character of his female protagonist, since she knew that this character was modeled on herself. She was fascinated by the way in which this character developed over the course of hundreds of pages into a magnificent portrait of a woman. She was flattered by the light in which Victor saw her and adored the reflection of herself in the book—although at the same time she was also greatly ashamed of herself. Sometimes, in her enthusiasm, she was beset by an attack of spasmodic laughter that brought tears to her eyes, so ludicrous did the situation seem.

When the children grew older and left in the evenings for their various activities—Danny, for instance, to his music lessons—Sonia and Victor remained alone in the house. These were the most peaceful

hours of their day, when they forgot their cares and devoted themselves to their own activities, taking delight in each other's presence. Victor sat down to work at the desk in his small office, while Sonia, still full of energy, threw herself into her housework, cleaning, sewing, and fixing whatever needed to be fixed. When she was done with that she corrected her students' papers and then devoted herself to reading various books related to her current interests. Sometimes these interests were in the field of zoology, at other times in the fields of history, or music, or medicine, or psychology, or Buddhism, or even astrology. She wanted to know everything, to devour everything, as if she were still on the threshold of her life, ready to discover the world. Rarely did she have the patience to sit down to watch television. When her restlessness became uncontrollable, she grabbed her coat and rushed off to spend some time with a girlfriend, or she went to see a movie. Once a month she attended a ballet performance. This was an especially festive occasion for which she dressed as elegantly as if she were going to a ball.

Victor accumulated a great deal of remorse on account of his neglect of Sonia, of her being forced to go everywhere alone. Still enamored of her fiery temperament, he regretted every moment that he was not in her company, taking delight in her vitality, in her bubbling intelligence and charm. He always felt torn between Sonia and his desk, and he looked forward to the day when he would complete his novel and be drawn only to her, his eternal beloved.

When she entered his room to say goodbye before leaving for the ballet, she would be dressed in her most elegant attire, her feet encased in high-heeled shoes and her purse and gloves held in a manicured hand. Enveloped by the delicate fragrance of her perfume, he would look at the black wavy hair that framed her dark, radiant face, drink in her hot, dark look, and his heart would ache at the sight of her beauty. He was jealous of the many strangers' eyes that would be glancing at her, and he kissed her greedily, guiltily, and gratefully.

"Do you forgive me, Sonichka?" he whispered on one such occasion. "I have only a few more episodes to write, and I'm afraid that if I don't do it tonight, I will forget them and they will be lost forever."

Sonia's ringing laughter sounded no different than her laughter from the times after their liberation from the camps. "It's I who must ask your forgiveness, Victor, for not being able to help you in any way."

"What do you mean by not being able to help me? You help me all the time." He took her hand into his. "Can you imagine my undertaking this project without you? This is our joint endeavor, darling. That's what it is. It belongs to both of us. Just let me get this text into some kind of order . . ." She left. He turned back toward the desk. The dog, Lord, made himself comfortable at his feet.

When Sonia returned late in the evening and the children were already asleep, Victor forced himself to push away the piles of paper. He insisted that Sonia, tired and sleepy though she was, go out with him for a walk. They took the dog along. As they walked they talked about their home and children, discussed their teaching projects, and made plans for their forthcoming trip to the Laurentians.

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The day of Danny's first solo performance with the Montreal Youth Orchestra was approaching, and the entire family anticipated the event, making whatever arrangements were necessary to be present. Even the eldest of the children, who was studying at Columbia University in New York, came home for the occasion. Danny was everyone's darling.

But two days before the performance Masha, the only daughter, came home with the news that she had broken up with her boyfriend, and the atmosphere in the house changed to something resembling that of *tisha b'av*, the day of mourning over the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem. This had been the girl's first love, a great love, and Masha was devastated to the point of making herself sick. She refused to eat and wandered about the house in her housecoat, sobbing. Sometimes she stared out the window, oblivious to what was said to her, as if a wall had risen between herself and the rest of the world so that nothing could reach her. Sonia, silent, absent-minded, looking somewhat guilty, hovered near her constantly.

There could be no talk of Masha's attending her brother's concert. Then, on the very day of the concert, Sonia declared that she too would stay home in order to keep her daughter company.

"I feel the hand of fate in this," she said to Victor and Danny. "It has not been granted to me to hear you play, Danny. But I have no doubt that, no matter what, you'll surpass yourself tonight."

Neither Victor nor Danny understood Sonia's decision. After all, Masha was not in danger. True, she was suffering the pains of a great loss, but time would heal the wound, and Masha would resume her normal life. She took after her mother. She was a strong, active person, a true fighter. Moreover, Masha's closest friend had volunteered to spend the evening of the concert with her, and Masha herself believed that her mother should attend the concert—for Danny's sake.

But Sonia stubbornly persisted in her decision. Victor patted Danny on the shoulder, a half-hearted grin on his face. "What do the French say? The human heart has its reasons that the reason does not know. That's especially true when you're talking about a mother's heart."

Victor told himself that he understood the heart of this particular mother and accepted Sonia's decision without much protest. But deep in his heart he knew that the evening was spoiled for him as well. He had been eagerly anticipating the pleasure of sitting beside Sonia in the concert hall and sharing with her his pride in the achievement of their son. As a rule, his pleasure doubled whenever she joined him at a concert, or theater performance, or an exhibition. This would have been especially true tonight.

But his son the musician, warm-hearted, lovable Danny, smiled at his mother and pretended that he was only slightly upset by the turn of events. "Not to worry," he said to her in an overly loud tone of voice. "Your and Masha's ticket will still be valid for my real concert, next year at Carnegie Hall!"

Victor remarked thoughtfully, "A waste of two tickets. We could have offered them to somebody."

Sonia, busying herself at the open refrigerator, said, "That's exactly what I did. I gave our tickets to Berger."

“Why to him?” Victor asked, astonished.

“So that he could appraise Danny’s playing,” she answered.

Simon Berger was a musicologist, the conductor of the choir of which Sonia had been a member for many years. He was a passionate chess player, and years earlier he had been a frequent guest at Sonia and Victor’s apartment. This was at the time when Sonia had set her heart on becoming an accomplished chess player and had studied chess manuals written by the masters. Until late into the evening Berger would sit with her in the kitchen, explaining the intricacies of various strategies. When Sonia transferred her interests to anthropology and mythology, Berger stopped his visits.

Sonia was not overly fond of Berger. She considered him conceited, an arrogant boaster. Victor, although influenced by Sonia’s dislike of the man, nonetheless defended him against her criticisms, minimizing Berger’s shortcomings while stressing his intellectual ability. Had not Sonia herself raved about Berger’s unusual talents both in the field of music and of chess?

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Hours later Victor found himself sitting in the concert hall. Three of his children sat to his right, while Berger and his wife—a svelte, flashy middle-aged matron—sat to his left. Berger was a corpulent man with an elongated, deeply creased face. Unruly strands of graying black hair stood out from his head, pointing in all directions. He had greeted Victor with a firm, friendly handshake. But after they had run through the standard questions and answers—they had not seen each other for a number of years—a silence fell between them, which Berger interrupted just before the beginning of the concert.

“How is the masterpiece coming along?” he asked Victor. “Sonia told me the other day at choir rehearsal that you’re about to finish the first draft. How many drafts do you intend to write?”

Victor noted the sarcasm in Berger’s question. He smiled, more to himself than to his neighbor. Accustomed to the respectful disdain of

noncreative people, especially those intelligent and gifted who tried to conceal their envy behind such acerbic remarks, he replied amiably, “Very soon you’ll see how it is coming along.”

“What do you mean?” Berger asked.

“Danny is my real masterpiece.”

Berger’s face flushed a sudden red. He tried to answer Victor with a smile of his own, but instead his mouth twisted into an ugly grimace. He gave Victor a strange look, then turned his head away and began to chat with his wife.

The concert began. During Danny’s solo, Victor was so tense, so acutely attentive, that his ear lost its discernment, and he could no longer make out the shades of tone in Danny’s playing. His heart hammered in his chest and he missed the feel of Sonia’s hand in his during the moments of almost unbearable joy that overflowed his heart. When Danny’s violin began to ascend the final crescendo, Victor cast a triumphant glance at Berger and, to his amazement, noticed that the man’s wide-open eyes were overflowing with tears. That moment Victor forgave Berger for everything. He felt closer to him than to a brother.

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There was still a considerable amount of work to do before Victor could finish the first draft of his novel. Masha had long since been cured of her broken heart and had left for Toronto to continue her studies. Her departure had been preceded by a period of much discussion at the dinner table of the various universities and their respective merits. Victor and Sonia’s other two sons were also within a year or two of applying to university. Sonia, vivacious and cheerful as ever, continued with her daily routine. She had just started on a new interest. This time it was botany. And as usual when her enthusiasm for a new passion reached its peak, she would expound on it for hours. This time she went on and on about the development of plants, their “moods,” and their sensitivity to such things as music.

The day finally came when Victor completed the first draft of his

novel. In order to celebrate the end of this important phase of his work, he and Sonia decided to play hooky for a day and drive out to their cottage in the Laurentians. They took along Lord, the dog, who had grown up along with the children and had been everybody's best friend, but whose primary attachment had always been to Victor, whom he followed everywhere.

Golden autumn reigned in the mountains; the forest surrounding the cottage was ablaze with color. The road down to *Le petit lac mirage* was covered with a carpet of leaves in all shades of gold. On the mirrorlike lake, the fallen leaves sailed about like tiny golden gondolas in an imaginary Venice.

No sooner had they arrived at the cottage than Victor busied himself with his usual country chores, which gave him the opportunity to move his limbs and put him in a leisurely frame of mind. He chopped wood for the kitchen stove and prepared thick logs for the fireplace to be lit that evening, since he and Sonia had decided to stay overnight and return to town early in the morning. Humming a little tune to himself, he raked up the piles of leaves in front of the cottage and gathered them into large stacks. He tried not to think about his work but to give his mind a rest in order to fully enjoy the peaceful moments. He was also determined to concentrate his attention on Sonia. Such solitude à deux would strengthen their bond, contribute to their intimacy, and bring them still closer together.

Sonia too seemed to be in a cheerful frame of mind. Nevertheless she was preoccupied, walking about absent-mindedly. She was silent and her languorous smile seemed not her own. She observed every tree and shrub with a mystical tenderness bordering on piety. Victor, as he watched her, ascribed her strange behavior to her absorption in her botanical studies. But he detected a vague nervousness in the air about her. He asked her whether there was anything troubling her.

After a moment of silence she responded, "You know very well that I hate being completely cut off from the children. Every year we talk about installing a telephone, and we never do anything but talk."

"I give you my word of honor as an absent-minded professor," Vic-

tor playfully pounded his chest like Tarzan, "that come next summer, it shall be done. If you like," he added softly, "we could walk over to the village this evening and call the children."

"And I will keep on reminding you . . ." She smiled back at him with that same enigmatic smile. "Because once you set your mind to forgetting something, Victor, no amount of reminding you will have any effect. Don't we both know that?"

"When did I ever set my mind to forgetting anything having to do with a wish of yours?"

She pretended to think hard, as if she were trying to remember. They laughed. In truth, when it came to Sonia or the children, Victor was never stubborn or forgetful. If he was, it was only in matters regarding himself. But it was also true that he was not too enthusiastic about installing a telephone in their cottage. He considered the telephone a scourge, even in the city, but he had to tolerate it there. In the country, however, he preferred to be completely isolated from the rest of the world. When it was absolutely necessary to call, it was always possible to walk over to the village. What was more, the farmer who lived fifteen minutes away also had a telephone, and in an emergency the children could always get in touch with their parents.

Sonia and Victor took their lunch on the veranda, which was draped around its borders by the climbing vines that grew over the entire cottage. This meant that on a fall day the cottage appeared to be immersed in flaming gold and red, while the veranda seemed to be surrounded by walls of fire.

The veranda was free of vines only on one side, the side facing the lake. As Victor and Sonia sat at their rustic table consuming their lunch, they looked out on the dazzling panorama of the mountains and the lake. A light haze rose slowly from the placid surface of the lake. Sonia's eyes were just as misty as the lake. There was a strange and unfamiliar something lurking inside her gaze as she listened to Victor talk about his feelings for her. He was capable of formulating these feelings with admirable precision. She could not detect a single banal note. His words moved her so that she stopped eating.

That day Victor's words of love were exceptionally beautiful. He was composed and satisfied with himself after the completion of his first draft, the first stage of his work. At last he had the entire novel laid out on paper. No longer was it in danger of being threatened by the vagaries of uncertain memory, no longer could any scenes fade into oblivion and slip out of his grasp. He could now visualize his work in its entirety as a reality that had not existed before and was now present. This gave him a great sense of relief, almost of bliss.

He considered the moment ideal to finally talk freely to Sonia about his work. He could question her about her approach to certain issues and compare her answers with the views of the most important female character in his book. He also told her which incidents in their life together had inspired some of the scenes in his book and why and how he had transformed them in his narrative. The character of his female protagonist was not intended as a faithful reproduction of Sonia, as Sonia doubtless knew. What he was trying to do was to capture the essence of her personality.

"My purpose," he remarked, "is not to portray our lives during the war as they were but to place them in an altogether different context. How should I put this? I wanted to come closer to the meaning of our tragedy's meaninglessness . . ."

They had finished eating and were now sitting at the veranda table, sipping hot coffee from their cups, as Victor continued with his monologue. He was totally absorbed in what he was saying. Her cheeks aglow, Sonia listened to him. She was aware that he was presenting her with the gift of his soul balanced on the palm of his hand, that he was offering her all that his intellect possessed, as if he were clearing out the most hidden recesses in the workshop of his mind and revealing all the secrets he had been hiding inside.

Sonia looked up at Victor from beneath the strands of wavy black hair that dangled over her forehead and eyebrows. Her eyes were strangely troubled, and sparks of acute suffering shot up from their depths. She could not tolerate the frequent allusions he continued to make to his love for her. They made her ache all over.

"How well I understand Hemingway," Victor continued, "when he says that he writes best when he is in love. Without my love for you, Sonitchka, I would never have dared to aim so high. It was the power of my feelings for you that gave me wings."

"You're exaggerating, as usual." She frowned impatiently. "Do you realize how long we have been living together? Do you keep count? It's been ten years since I began dyeing my hair to cover the gray."

"You talk nonsense, darling." He moved closer to her. "A love such as mine for you takes no account of years. As far as I'm concerned time has made no changes in you, and I'm not joking when I say that you are a partner in my work just as you are a partner in my life."

She sipped her coffee, and he wondered whether it was the steam from the cup that moistened her face or whether those were tears.

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In the afternoon they went for a walk around the lake, following a path carpeted with yellow leaves. The dog ran ahead, chasing squirrels. He pounced on the heaps of leaves and barked playfully. Every few minutes he raised his leg to pay his respects to a tree trunk or a pile of leaves that he had disturbed and then raced on, leaping into the air with great abandon. The vacation cottages that dotted the road at a considerable distance from one another were almost all vacant.

A solitary boat sat in the middle of the lake; the person inside was catching fish. From the distance the contours of man and boat resembled the anchor of a large invisible ship. An air of something primeval and mythical hovered over the lake, as if the story of its genesis were still in its making. As if purposely disturbing the silence, Victor and Sonia held hands and trod noisily over the leaves. In their free hands each held a walking stick that Victor had fashioned out of dry branches. They talked very little. Sonia seemed so deeply immersed in her thoughts that her dark eyebrows were arched and her forehead was wrinkled. Victor was reluctant to disturb her. He assumed that she was mulling over what he had told her at lunch.



As a matter of fact, Sonia was thinking about what Victor had said over lunch. She was thinking about him, about herself, about their life together. She felt particularly sensitive to her surroundings this day and found herself drawn to Victor by the secluded intimacy of the lake and the forest. She was grateful to him for the words of love he had said to her—grateful and at the same time deeply ashamed.

She had not been happy with Victor for a very long time. She was glad he was so absorbed in his work that he had failed to notice how false her good cheer had been, how he bored her to tears, and how torn she felt. She was not really troubled by the fact that she cheated on him every now and again. Once he had ceased to touch her soul, she no longer felt any bond with him. She had lost interest in him, and she did not in the least care for what he had to say outside the framework of his novel. It had all been an act she had put on for the sake of convenience. And yet she was constantly troubled by a sense of betrayal. It ate into her like poison. It aroused in her a feeling of guilt toward him, a guilt that had corroded her life for many years. Her natural vitality enabled her to mask it all with an air of assumed candor, but not even her vitality could erase the self-disgust from her heart. And for that she could forgive neither herself nor Victor.

Today, however—she did not know why or how, perhaps because the magic of the autumn landscape moved her so deeply—her heart suddenly recaptured the love she had felt for Victor during the first years of their life together, during that time after the liberation, when she had been a very young woman. Now she conceived a passion for him at the same time as she experienced a great need to merge with the atmosphere of their surroundings and partake of the innocence and honesty of nature. She had to recapture her purity of heart. She was exhausted from the effort of decorating her external self with all manner of artifice; she was even tired of her artificial hair color and of the makeup that enhanced her false, golden smile. Just as Victor had finished a phase of his work, so she longed to finish this phase of her life and to start a new chapter along with him, her husband and lover. He would rewrite his work while she would redo her life. She needed

this remodeling in order to save herself, save her soul, and be rid of the devastating hatred that she felt for herself.

She walked on, her face lowered over the heaps of dry leaves as she punctured them with her walking stick. Then, with sudden decisiveness, she stopped and turned to him. "I must tell you something, Victor. And please forgive me for doing it today, such an important festive day for you."

"For both of us," he corrected her softly.

"First I must tell you," she continued, "that I love you . . ." He raised her hand to his lips to kiss, but she jerked it away. "I never loved you as much as I do now . . ." She was about to proceed, but suddenly she recalled a scene from a war film that she had recently seen: a Nazi aiming his rifle at a child who laughed playfully as it gamboled through a pasture full of flowers. Sonia recoiled from the memory. Her head still lowered, she moved slightly away from Victor and neglected to take the hand he held out to her. "But I must tell you this . . ." She broke off for a moment to catch her breath. Her heart pounded violently.

"Go ahead," he smiled encouragingly.

She flung up her head and stared straight into his eyes. His smile pierced her heart, but she held straight to her course. "This is going to hurt," she warned him. "I hope you're strong enough. I hope you'll forgive me."

"Shoot!" He spread his arms theatrically.

She waited for him to drop his arms. "Danny is not your son!"

The smile did not leave his face. "What do you mean, not my son?"

"I mean to say that you are not his father."

"Then who is?"

"Berger is."

"You're crazy."

"This is my first moment of sanity, Victor. I've been leading a double life for the last fifteen years. You were so deeply buried in your mountains of paper that no suspicion ever entered your mind. What did you expect me to do? I needed some intimacy, a soulmate, or even just a companion. I wanted to live, to enjoy myself, to go places after the daily

drudgery at work and at home. You were always at your desk, always scribbling away, day in and day out, week after week, year after year. What did you expect? I'm not an angel. I wanted a little happiness for myself, just as you got yours for yourself. You found your thrills in your work, while I found mine in other men. You made love to paper people, and I made love to people of flesh and blood. Yes, you deceived me too. You forgot that I really existed outside the confines of your imagination, as a living woman who loves life—real life, Victor!" She had not intended to hurl reproaches at him. She was not certain that even if her reproaches were not true, she might not still have deceived him. Yet the only way that she could defend herself was to make an attack.

His face had grown gray. He looked helplessly in all directions, then leaned his shoulder against the nearest tree. She hovered near him. They stood face to face. She continued talking as she observed her victim wince and writhe against the tree trunk like a snake in agony. Soon she would revive him with all the loving words that overflowed her heart. Soon she would tell him how powerfully her love for him had returned to repossess her soul. Soon she would throw herself into his arms and kiss the despair from his pale face, kiss the protruding eyes that stared at her blindly and full of despair. Soon she would smother him with the most transporting caresses and reinstate herself in his heart, where she would reign forever. She could achieve this so easily. He would never be able to live without her. But first she had to drain the last drops of venom that had accumulated in her heart over the years. She had to mitigate her own guilt by accusing him. They had sinned, both of them. They were partners. He had said that she was a partner to his work; then let him be a partner to her guilt.

"I could have gotten rid of the pregnancy, Victor," she continued in her hard, metallic voice while struggling to dam the tears that welled up behind her eyes. "But then you would have found out everything, and I was not yet prepared to let you know. I wanted to protect our home and the children, and that's how it happened. Now I don't regret it at all. I have Danny. You have Danny. You are his father. Can you imagine our life without Danny? And Victor, later on . . ." The tears

finally overflowed her eyes, but her voice remained clear and sharp. "In later times, when the children were grown, and I felt so unhappy in our relationship, I did not leave you—not because of the children, and not because I did not want to break up our home, but because of you. I wanted to spare you; I wanted you to continue with your work, your great work. I wanted you to succeed, to become famous. I sacrificed myself for you more than you can imagine."

"But . . ." he mumbled. "How could you have found . . . have found . . ."

"How could I have found the time to have affairs? Is that what you want to know? Ask the blood in my veins. My compulsion was so strong; my craving was so powerful . . ." She ran out of breath, and she too failed to complete her sentence.

Victor said nothing more. He slumped down to the foot of the tree. After a long silence he said to her, "Go back to the cottage. Let me sit here for a while." The dog snuggled up beside him, and Victor patted him with rapid, mechanical strokes. His dull gaze followed Sonia's figure as it edged away from him through the sea of golden leaves.

"My beautiful Sonia, my beloved, my only one," he muttered aloud, his voice hoarse. "You are so powerful, more powerful than the Nazis. They tortured my body, but they could never reach my soul. You alone managed that. You have destroyed me, and destroyed the image of yourself within me . . . Danny!" He let out a prolonged howl and burst into sobs.

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As he followed Sonia's receding figure through misty eyes, he suddenly recalled how they had met for the first time. He saw vividly the infirmary of the Neuengamme concentration camp. It was a gray, rainy afternoon. A salty sea wind danced between the infirmary walls, penetrating his bones to the marrow. That day he had been assigned to scrub the floor in the corridor of the infirmary. There he noticed a young female inmate sitting on a bench, shivering in her striped camp

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 naive 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 disgorging 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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outfit—a scrawny, ugly creature whose skeletal face, twisted with cold and suffering, seemed to consist only of a pair of fierce black eyes overflowing with tears of pain and rage. She had been brought to the infirmary from another smaller camp that had no infirmary. Her feet were wrapped in wet rags, and she held a pair of wooden clogs on her lap. She had stubbed her toes so badly during the marches to and from her workplace that her toes had become infected and covered with boils.

As he knelt with the scrubbing brush in hand, Victor felt that the girl's eyes were calling to him in desperation from her corner. He glanced at the SS guard who stood at the door, his rifle at the ready. Moving his scrubbing brush vigorously back and forth over the floor, he managed surreptitiously to move closer to the girl. As a member of the inmates' underground at the camp, he was used to doing forbidden things under the noses of the SS men.

The moment he was within an arm's length of the girl, he heard her rasp out between chattering teeth, "Have you got anything to eat?"

Yes, he did. He had on him the second half of his daily bread ration, which he had put aside to eat in his bunk that night, so that the pangs of hunger would not keep him from falling asleep. He carried the small chunk of bread around with him so nobody would steal it from him. He kept it inside his striped pants, wrapped in a rag, tied with a string, and attached to the cord of the pants. He got it out and placed it quickly in her palm. Saliva dripped from her mouth onto his hand like a kiss, like a hot seal. As soon as the SS guard turned away, Victor managed to tell her that he came from Lodz. She said, "So do I." He told her his name, she told him hers. He asked whether she had met any women inmates with his name. She asked the same about her male relatives. That moment they knew everything there was to know about one another; their bond was sealed.

The next time they met was after the liberation, in the displaced persons camp in Feldafing in Bavaria. She recognized him among a crowd of survivors. From then on they were inseparable. Both of them were alone; they had no one in the world but each other. They moved in together into a tiny cubicle in a mansion that had formerly housed

the SS brass. The mansion was crowded with DPs. Victor and Sonia slept on the same cot since there were no extra cots available. It was not a question of love at that time. It was fate.

It did not take long before Sonia recovered from her various illnesses and blossomed into a beautiful, life-loving charmer, bubbling with energy and greedy for pleasure. Victor's demeanor changed in the opposite direction. In the concentration camp he had been sociable, active, involved with his comrades in various dangerous activities. Now, as he began to write, a distance sprang up between himself and his comrades. Sonia would often run off alone to meet her friends while he stayed in their tiny room whose window faced one of the most beautiful lakes in Bavaria. It was during this time, surrounded by the most romantic landscape imaginable, that Victor and Sonia's passion for each other took root.

It was Sonia who supplied them both with food. She organized escapades into the countryside, sneaking into German farmhouses and making off with delicious, freshly baked bread, rolls, and succulent chunks of ham. She would bring them back to their cubicle for their mutual delectation. It was she who also organized their illegal crossing of the border into France and from there, assisted by the UNRRA, arranged their departure for Canada. They were married just a few days prior to boarding a cargo ship called *Patagonia* and set out on the long, stormy sea voyage across the Atlantic.

As he slumped against the tree, Victor could not tear his eyes from Sonia's disappearing form. As he looked at her, he had the impression that the cottage, whose roof was visible in the distance, was receding, floating away from him like a boat that he had failed to board. He knew that when he saw Sonia's face again it would no longer be the same face he had loved.

A few hours later they returned to the city.

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Victor lacked the capacity to forgive Sonia, although he tried to understand her. Sonia was right; he must have been a terrible bore. He made