



GLORIOUS NEMESIS

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Translated from the Czech by Marek Tomin

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When Sider travelled through the Alpine town of Cortona for the first time, the majestic landscape made such a strong and peculiar impression on him that he got off the train at the next stop and went back. The three days he then spent there were the most enchanting of his entire life. A poetic, golden shimmer such as he had never known before constantly suffused his soul; ever more mysterious, monumental sensations surged from his soul against his will, and though indistinct, it was just this lack of clarity that made them so immensely exhilarating. He often felt that these presentiments were about to reveal their essence – but at that very moment they always took flight with lightning speed to unattainable distances. The entire world intoxicated him, existence itself was his lover, songs erupted from his inner being, and at night he was embraced by magical dreams . . . Yet there was something darkly and powerfully horrifying about it all; in the deepest depths he was certain the most terrible abyss gaped beneath all this radiance.

Was all this being drawn out of him by the exterior surroundings? He was unable to come up with an answer. Although the views of the vast, glacier-lit mountains on all sides, the footpaths snaking over them, and of the town's diverse houses sparked within him miraculous flashes of monstrous sentiments, he always had to ask: Is this not after all my inner being overflowing with light that is casting its rays onto these objects so that their reflections, as if alien gifts, might be reabsorbed into the maternal All-Womb? This entire exterior world seemed so mystically familiar to him – yet again he had to ask himself: Do the depths of the soul not know everything, everything? Is there anything that has for all eternity not been the property of the soul? How else could it even see and hear? Isn't all seeing merely the flight back to the soul of all the mysterious birds that have ever left the eternal nest?

He left that bewitching place only because circumstance forced him to . . . , and as soon as it had disappeared from his eyes, so did the mysterious shimmer at once vanish from his soul, giving way to a singular despondency and revulsion. But even now he had to pose himself the question: Isn't it just coincidence that at this very moment I am experiencing an inevitable mental drain? Perhaps some form of deep autosuggestion is also at work, though there's nothing supernatural, nothing miraculous about what has so enticed me. –

He made a firm resolution to take up permanent residence in Cortona as soon as the possibility arose

–

After a year dominated by dull yet delightful recollections of those three days, he was able to make good on his decision. –

It was May, and Sider was twenty-eight years old. He had a delicate, enigmatic, handsome, manly face, beneath whose strength writhed something fractured, profoundly ominous, which to a perceptive soul spoke of predestination to a terrible fate. He was well off and entirely independent. –

When he arrived in Cortona, jaded by the long journey but also excited by expectation, the sky was gloomy, the mountains almost invisible.

Later he would blame these circumstances for the fact that there was no hint his mood from the previous year might return, and during the days that followed, his frame of mind was such that it was impossible to imagine anything worse. Disappointment, the greyest disgust. Such often happens when something is anticipated with inflated expectations; but Sider felt that the extent of his disillusionment was in no way proportional to his hopes, even though they had been considerable . . . The whole of May was abominable: clouds, rain, snow, windstorms, mud, cold, virtually unabated. And when the sun did come out, it was as if it were only for its light to enhance the ugliness of the countryside. How dead everything was, how spiritless the mountains! They grimaced just like the lifeless mementos of a dead life, like reproaches for something irretrievably lost: Sider felt a growing nausea, a kind of fear crept into his soul and seemed to be rapidly setting down permanent roots. Two things in particular continued to infuse him with mystical dread. Stag's Head, a mountain looming directly over the town – 2500 metres above it, 3500 metres above sea level – from whose broad crown protruded several thin, cone-shaped rock massifs like small horns. And an ancient, almost black two-floor cottage at the end of a lane that ran into a narrow ravine, a steep cliff poised directly above it –

Otherwise, his life flowed by, tediously. He met with no one, he understood very little of the local language. The place was still deserted, the summer visitors yet to arrive, but one thing still managed to vividly colour the greyness of his days.

His fantasies had always nurtured the striking image of a woman. Indistinct, flickering, and yet powerful, promising him a peculiar lucidity of mind and warming his soul with furtive delights. Often appearing in his dreams, the images of Her were contradictory, though after waking he would never doubt it had been – Her. And now he had dreamt that he'd suddenly glimpsed Her high up on Stag's Head, a dream so lucid that even after waking in the morning he momentarily had the impression She was standing before him, so intense the phantasm and the onrush of mystical forebodings that his soul shuddered in its innermost depths. But in the blink of an eye he was no longer able to conjure up the vision again in his soul.

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The first day of June was rainier than any before. Sider decided to leave Cortona forever on the following day. In the early evening, having made everything ready for his departure, he went out for a walk in the forest that lined the foot of Stag's Head just beyond the small town.

Half an hour later he was on his way back in a foul mood, his clothes and boots soaked through. The sky, however, was finally beginning to turn blue. The mountains to the east were illuminated by a yellow setting sun. He was walking through a rocky ravine, sparsely covered with trees and bushes. The place was wild and romantic and created the illusion of being far, far away from the places inhabited by people, though paradoxically he could hear dogs barking, cocks crowing, and children shouting.

He was coming to a bend in the path when – suddenly – two women emerged, approaching him. Absorbed in thought, he didn't raise his head until they were three paces away. He first looked at the woman farthest from him – dressed in red – and his body gave a jolt.

She was about twenty-five, beautiful, pale, and had an interesting face that harboured a noticeable

restlessness – from a distance she reminded him of his vision. Though overall she was not very similar to Her, she still mysteriously evoked his dream image so powerfully that he unwittingly came to a halt.

That's when his eyes fell upon the other woman, wearing a cerulean blue dress, just as his elbow nearly brushed hers on the narrow path. And . . . – at once he staggered, his eyes went dim, he felt as if a hammer had struck his head. Only his embarrassment before the women prevented him from collapsing. It seemed to him that the woman in red made a movement to support him; he frowned and hurried on unsteadily. He did not turn round, but felt certain that they had stopped and were standing there observing him.

He finally recovered his wits only when he reached the garden of a restaurant. "After them!" was the thought that came to him. He looked round; he could not see them. He remained standing there for some time, uncertain of what to do. Then he took a seat in the garden and waited late into the night, hoping they would come back that way. They did not.

In all his life his soul had never felt so strange, so blissful, so horrified. The woman in blue was entirely, entirely the epitome of his dream vision, as if his phantasm had metamorphosed into a hallucination – –

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He gave no thought to leaving. Moreover, the sky had cleared up for good and the beauty of spring finally erupted with full force. Sider's soul also brightened – and was revisited by some of the previous year's enchanting radiance. Once again, the terrible mountains and hospitable forests spoke to his soul in their mysterious dark tongue. For Sider was now – in love . . . – But what was the strange dread that, like a bass line, underscored the song in his soul? . . . Yet nothing in music save the somber beating of a drum has such a monumental effect as the powerful black tones of a bass, nothing in the world is more beautiful than horror.

He spent his entire days crisscrossing the town and its surroundings, searching for his women. He did not find them. Nor was he able to discover anything about them. A week had passed since that wet, yellow-hued dusk, and Sider said to himself painfully: They were obviously foreigners, only passing through Cortona, – I'll never set eyes on them again!

As if everything a human sees, everything desired, everything thought must not necessarily become manifest and visualized and realized over and over, as if the force animating all things were not desire and yearning and Will . . .

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It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon, 8 June. Sider was sitting in the garden of the restaurant that backed onto the forest. A band was playing to entertain the numerous guests – many summer visitors had gathered during the week. The music had lulled Sider into a deep dreaming . . .

Suddenly he caught sight of both his acquaintances entering the garden from the forest. His shock was overwhelming, frightful, abysmal. He felt as though even the music had been affected, taken aback, reduced in volume by half, as if a kind of icy breath had drifted over all things and people nearby.

The women came closer. He was unable to find the strength to look at them. They sat down at a table about twelve paces away.

He was regaining his senses. The music radiantly surged once more to the heights, and his eyes rested on their faces.

Their resemblance to one another, though remote, was uncanny. Something palpitating and delicate,

demonically ethereal veiled both their pallid visages, something he had not seen in a woman's face before. But from the face of the younger woman in blue it glared, thundered incomparably more powerfully . . . She was about twenty years old, tall, slim. Pretty? Something too chilling emanated from her too pale, thin, yet entirely classically formed features, predatory and yet affectionate, horrifying in their spectral ghastliness and ferocity and also – an inhuman, a superhuman, tenderness. Perhaps she was more than pretty – in other words, to the ordinary eye she was not beautiful – every magnificent beauty is darkened by her own excessive splendour.

Yet none of the marvellous peculiarities of her face could explain the devastating and eerie impression she imparted – – –

They did not look at him and seemed not to be paying attention to anything else around them, confusion, fear even, so apparent in the face of the lady in red. They conversed very little and quietly even when the music died down, Sider could not hear their voices.

Finally, the older woman's eyes regarded him. She said something to her companion. Now their conversation became livelier . . . and then the younger of the two looked intently at Sider for a long time, for an almost indecent length of time. He was the first to avert his eyes, as they had grown dim and his head had started to spin. After a while he raised them again – Her eyes were still fixed on him and the look was so ghastly it was as though they were made of glass. He kept hold of himself. "This calls for a staring match!" he said to himself and did not look away. After a good two minutes She lowered her eyes and slowly concealed Her face with the palm of Her hand – –

He exhaled deeply; exquisite pleasure flooded his soul. "She has some feelings for me, that is certain . . . But clearly She is very eccentric, to the highest degree, no doubt. Maniacal even? Ugh! On what am I basing this judgement except the fact that She stared at me for an unusually long time? Perhaps Her eyes really are made of glass? Ugh! Her behaviour generally does not indicate blindness, though surely this enigmatic creature had some purpose in mind when She glared at me. If She was trying to intoxicate me, She succeeded – but don't forget, lassie, that besides my senses, which You have hypnotised, I also have a will, and it is forever vigilant."

He had been entirely unaware that something was happening around them, that all the patrons had become somehow subdued, alarmed, feverishly talking among themselves, albeit in hushed tones, forming small huddles at each table, that a crowd had gathered at the entrance to the garden.

Everyone's eyes were directed only at the table where the strange ladies were sitting.

The music started up again, yet so haltingly and out of tune it was as if the musicians were distracted. The women were no longer conversing. Confusion and fear now increasingly marked the face of the elder of the two. She grew paler, quivering noticeably, constantly looking around. Only then did Sider find the public's behaviour conspicuous . . .

That's when the lady in blue stood up, uttered several words to Her companion with a smile, bowed politely and proudly, and walked away quickly in the direction of the forest. Reaching the gate, She turned around and again fixed Her gaze on Sider, now for just a moment, but how telling! As if it were acknowledging him, commanding, alluring and promising, caressing, threatening. –

"What should I do?" Sider said to himself. "Run after Her, introduce myself to Her? I absolutely lack the courage for that now. But what if I don't see Her again? Nonsense! She won't leave, after all I mean something to Her . . . Or maybe I should –?"

He watched as She walked out the garden – and how the crowd by the gate parted almost too rapidly before Her . . . "Ah, now I know! She is a lady of very high standing, a duchess perhaps? a princess? maybe even a sovereign? No, I cannot run after Her as if chasing a harlot . . . For that matter, it's always more shrewd for a man to be nonchalant towards a woman. She'll come to me, She'll turn up again somewhere where I will also happen to be – of this I feel quite certain."

For a long time his eyes were fixed on the forest thickets into which She had disappeared. Then it

occurred to him: "Well, I can at least speak to the other lady; I get the impression she's not too highbred. I'll find out what I need from her."

He cheered up at once, but when he glanced around he could not see the other woman either. He was suddenly seized by a frightful, half-joyful, half-terrifying restlessness. He ran out of the garden. He noticed that everyone was now discussing something all the more passionately and loudly but he was unable to understand any of what was being said.

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Several days passed. He renewed his inquiries and learnt that the older woman had been staying at a hotel in Cortona for three weeks, having signed in as Mrs Errata S., rentier – she was by all accounts wealthy widow – and that on Monday she had suddenly departed, leaving her belongings behind in her room. He discovered nothing about her companion. Although many people had seen Her on Sunday in the company of Mrs S., what they said of Her was so oddly evasive and nebulous Sider did not know what to make of it.

He spent his entire days scampering around on the surrounding mountains, consumed by a demonic desire. Then on 16 June he received a telegram that provided a categorical imperative for him to leave Cortona: his entire fortune was at risk.

Though seething with rage, something told him it was a good idea to put an end to this adventure of his. He resolved to return to Cortona as soon as possible. He got everything ready for departure, which he'd set for the following day at nine in the morning.

He got up at around eight, opened the shutters. It was a magnificent, resplendent day, already hot for that hour! As if refreshed by sleep, the mountains towered up towards the dark blue sky more powerfully than ever before. Stag's Head was the nearest, the highest, the most beautiful. He had walked up it two days before, all the way to the glacier beneath its highest rocky horns, hoping foolishly to set eyes on Her there in reality as he had seen Her there in his dream. It was to no avail. He gazed at the mountain for a long time, bidding it farewell. He was just turning away his eyes when . . . – he shuddered.

At a height of about 900 metres, at the very point where the lower forest gave way to rocky ground, he spotted two dots, blue and red . . . Frantically he grabbed his field glasses. It was the women, slowly ascending.

Without deliberating he threw on some clothes, seized his walking stick, and rushed out the door. "No departing today," he said to himself decisively, practically flying towards the restaurant. "If I incur huge financial losses, so be it, it's not as if my life were at stake. Whatever awaits me up there is much more important, just as the soul is more important than the wallet. Despite my timidity, I must speak with them! But will I find them there? Certainly; they no doubt intend to go to the summit of Stag's Head, otherwise they wouldn't be so high up so early in the day. I cannot miss them – there is only one path up the mountain, and even though it forks beneath the summit, one trail is clearly visible from the other. I'll probably catch up with them right on the peak. They are way ahead of me, but they're women. It's normally an eight-hour climb, if I put my mind to it I can make it in five." He was beside himself with excitement and joy. Once in the forest he took off at a gallop up the gentle rising trail and continued apace with short breaks for almost an hour until he was out of the forest, 800 metres above the valley. The path now wound steeply up the rocky slope, dotted with patches of mountain scrub. Flustered, he looked upwards to see if he could catch a glimpse of the coloured spots. He could not. He climbed higher and higher, passing the point where he had seen them from his room an hour and a half before . . .

"Just another 100 metres up to that overhanging rock! The slope is too curved at this point for me to

be able to get a good view. Up there I'll surely see them – I don't think they should be more than 600 metres above me. It's so hot, I'm more soaked than if I'd been drenched by rain, and I'm shamefully tired to boot. I'll rest once I get up there; they can't get away from me, if it's really even them."

Reaching his destination – and sure enough he spotted them not more than 600 metres above him. He lay down, contented, lit a cigar, and fantasised blissfully about what might be waiting for him on the summit. Twenty minutes later he was once again ascending rapidly.

They disappeared from his sight. When he saw them again, he was surprised at how high up they were; it looked as though they'd almost reached the glacier. "No, they couldn't have climbed almost 1000 metres in half an hour. In the Alps, heights and distances are often deceptive!"

Again they vanished. He walked up the steep, relatively safe path as quickly as possible for the better part of an hour. He couldn't see them now, and though this was not out of the ordinary, it exasperated him to no end. He reached the point where the path forked in two, rested for a moment, and hurried up the left path.

He was about 800 metres below the summit. He was walking swiftly for it had occurred to him that they might go down the opposite slope, to the hamlet on the other side of the mountain. "Come what may I'll surely catch up with them at the top, or at least I'll catch sight of them, they won't have been able to get too far down."

When he saw them a little while later, he was overcome with joy! With his field glasses he could clearly make out that they were still about 200 metres below the ridge. Victory! Not only could he now distinguish the characteristic pallor of their cheeks, but also some of their features.

He slackened his pace. Once more they disappeared from view, and for the first time that day the sun also vanished, dropping behind a small cloud. A cold wind blew sharply from the glacier, howling menacingly . . . Then suddenly Sider heard a cry from above, very faint, yet quite audible . . .

"An accident!" He froze, stupefied, yet a moment later he was off at a trot. "Has one of them fallen? Or have they been waylaid? Ah! Some good may come of it yet! At least I'll show them that they need me!"

Although his legs felt leaden, he kept running upwards. But in a short while he stopped, stupefied once more.

Several hundred paces to the right, on the other path, he saw the lady in red running down so swiftly it was a wonder she didn't trip and fall . . .

"What's happened? Might I be of assistance?" he shouted.

The woman stopped in her tracks – she cried out once more and continued running. His repeated shouts to her had no effect; she didn't stop, she didn't look back.

"The other lady must have plummeted – She! . . . and Her companion is running down to get help . . . But why didn't she at least turn to me for assistance? Clearly she was totally deranged with terror. Whatever the case, the mere chance that something untoward may have befallen Her is enough – I have no other choice – upwards!"

The path led higher and higher. The clouds in the sky grew in number and size, thickening, growing more grey and brown; the wind blew colder and louder, howling all the more. Running, Sider reached the spot where they had recently rested and slumped down, feeling he'd collapse if he didn't lie down. But in a minute he was back on his feet. He shouted several times. No answer. Or was there? . . . Yes

But was it not coming from below? He looked around. Another barely audible cry. And then, through his field glasses, he saw the lady in red once again, far, far below him, standing, waving her arms, waving her shawl. She seemed to be beckoning him. He stood there, indecisive, confused. "What does it all mean? Does she want me to help her look for someone, or something? Or is she warning me?

About robbers? Is it possible that her guide had been a bandit disguised as a woman? . . . Silly questions! Should I heed her wishes? Yet – She must be close; a chance to replace the uncertain with

the certain . . . maybe the woman below is just acting on some foolish impulse, female apprehension . . . Even so – at least she knows something, while I know nothing –”

Again the cries from the depths below reached his ears – and made up his mind for him. He started back down. All at once he heard louder cries, this time from above:

“Here, up here!”

He looked up. At the very edge of the glacier about 50 metres below the summit he saw – Her. She wasn’t moving, just a blue dot, even with his field glasses he couldn’t tell if She were sitting, lying down, or standing upright. But what he saw was enough. He ran up the path, taking no heed of the renewed cries from below.

A hundred metres further up – the blue figure remained immobile. Fifty – now it disappeared behind a crag – a minute later it emerged again and quickly continued upwards.

“What’s going on here? She probably isn’t injured, at least not seriously, otherwise She would head down. Perhaps She’s made up her mind to reach the summit despite a light injury. No doubt this demonic woman is awfully headstrong. No matter, I can be all the more of service to Her – given all that’s happened, it would not be considered intrusive for me to join Her.”

She reached the summit plateau and vanished from his eyes when he was still 50 metres below it. He had to rest. He’d never felt so exhausted. He had completed the climb in record time. His watch showed noon. The sun hid itself completely behind a vast, thick layer of cloud.

Finally he stood on the mountaintop. He did not see an enchanting panorama, he only saw a thin figure about 400 paces further on against a blue patch of sky, as if it were a diaphanous shadow, an outline barely discernable, spectral, moving towards the highest of the cone-shaped rocks towering another 150 metres or so above the high plateau. She clearly intended to climb that as well. Three days before Sider had walked to its base. He’d not had time to go any higher since it would have meant getting home in the middle of the night, so he’d given up grudgingly, even though he knew from guidebooks to the Alps how dangerous it was. A very narrow path wound its way up the cone-shaped rock, coiling round it like a whip, yet in places it almost vanished among the virtually sheer rock faces.

“At least now I’ll make the climb, and with Her,” he thought and followed after Her as quickly as possible. To his astonishment, however, She pressed on, without looking back, at an even faster pace than his. He started running over snow, glacial boulders, and sloughs. But she had already disappeared behind the first of the cone-shaped rocks.

Running, he reached the same spot. Hardly had he placed his foot on the steeply rising path when he was overcome by something indescribable. A recollection, a monster emerging from the depths like the gruesome Leviathan from the dreaded abyss of the ocean; . . . and though it immediately submerged again, it long reverberated in his soul. “How horribly familiar this place seems to me . . . I’ve seen it before, I’ve been here before, a long time ago – and something immense transpired here . . . When, oh when? Surely it was in a dream; in my dreams I used to see Her here, too, this much is clear – but what is a dream except the continuation of reality, or is reality the continuation of the dream? The dream is the depth of the waking state to which we are blind when awake, and the falsehood and deceptiveness and illogical nature of the dream – merely the concentration of all the rays of this World-Phantasm.”

He was now in the grips of a dread so powerful it nearly drowned out his desire. He felt inclined to turn back. A chill wind blew from the lowering sky, all the time growing colder, its bellowing becoming an increasingly high-pitched howl, as if spirits were warning him, lamenting his fate. Snow started to fall, becoming heavier and heavier, as if intending to form his burial mound. Spurred on now only by momentum, he dragged himself onwards, and a faintness that was as much physical as it was mental weighed him down.

There was a constant danger of falling into the ever-growing chasm below. Progress was very slow,

but he had already passed the halfway point.

Then, having just avoided plummeting to his death, he was overcome with such despondency he stopped and abruptly decided to head back.

And then he caught sight of Her once more. Only about 60 paces ahead of him. So suddenly . . . She waved him onwards, beckoning him, and disappeared where the path curved behind a rock.

Surrendering his will, Sider staggered after Her, after Her. He did not know whether he was asleep or awake, or whether he was in the netherworld. "Even if She's the devil incarnate," he whispered to himself dully, "and that could easily be the case, – I must, I must."

He reached the bend – and froze in fright. The path before him was no more: a small rock fall had torn it away. Something resembling a path continued about a metre and a half further on. It required a leap. It was impossible to walk around the rift as above and below there was nothing but smooth, sheer rock face. A leap might succeed, though it was much more likely to end with a plunge into the chasm about 30 metres below, for the path onto which the foot should land was so narrow there wasn't even room for the other foot, and there was nothing whatsoever to grab hold of on the other side. Salto mortale. He was now so exhausted his legs were shaking, and when a more forceful gust of wind might knock him off his feet and send him plummeting – could he dare attempt such a leap . . . ?

He stood there, unable to make up his mind, his heart pounding terribly. Fear struggled savagely with shame, with pride. She had done it! He could not see Her, and certainly She had not plummeted into the abyss – he would have heard a scream, or at least the thud of a body below. A woman had pulled off, and he, a man, should –? He found the thought unbearable!

He took as much of a run-up as the place allowed, but stopped at the edge of the precipice. He shuddered and realised he didn't have the courage . . . ; he knew the leap would result in death. He looked down, his limbs turned to ice. What was it again that screamed at him so transcendently, so eerily from the abyss?

The struggle was over. In shame he retraced his steps like a whipped dog. To cheer himself up he resolved to make the leap no matter what on another occasion, when his body would be in better shape to serve his intentions. He had only gone twenty paces when an appalling, ghastly cry rang out from somewhere above:

"You coward! You wimp!"

He saw Her at the very top of the cone-shaped rock. He seemed to be able to make out Her infernal countenance, burning with fury and hate – –

"You scoundrel, vile abomination, your cowardice is as great as your wretchedness, you dog, you dog!" – the Valkyrie-like voice roared once more, and the blue apparition vanished. –

Under different circumstances such affronts from a woman he worshipped would have prompted Sider to attempt the impossible, even to go and meet his death voluntarily. Yet absolute exhaustion, an unnatural dread, and the weather now made all action unthinkable. Numbly he descended as far as the glacier and lay down . . . Snow was still falling heavily, monster-like clouds had descended and were hurtling towards Sider with terrifying speed from all sides like a hydra. All of a sudden he was enveloped in the thickest fog.

"What now?" he said to himself indolently after a moment. "I suppose it's my duty to wait here for Her to start back down. But do I dare to stand before Her? . . . She might take the path on the other side of Stag's Head. But who could be sure of anything in this situation? She's the devil, no doubt She's expert in magic, She has no need of a miserable wretch like me . . . Brr, how cold it is here, and I can't even see two steps in front of me! Going down is impossible right now, even though the path is no longer very dangerous. Nothing to be done about it, I'll have to wait it out until the fog clears. How unbearable it all is!"

He waited, calling out often, hoping to alert the weird hiker to his presence on Her way down.

Nothing. It took two hours for the fog to lift – flashes of sun but not a single living soul to be seen anywhere – the deepest silence. Slowly, not thinking about anything, Sider dragged his feet down the mountain. The stars were already starting to shine as he entered the garden restaurant like a sleepwalker.

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Early the next morning he went to the hotel to inquire after Mrs Errata S. He learnt that she had returned to Cortona two days before, and on the following day she had gone for a walk in the forest behind the restaurant, as was her custom, and did not appear again until late afternoon in a most peculiar state; and thereupon she settled her entire bill without further ado and left Cortona for good before the day was out. –

Sider spent the morning on the slopes of Stag's Head, hoping in trepidation that he might see Her . . . That afternoon he departed.

The one day postponement of his departure was enough to cause Sider to lose almost his entire fortune. He was forced to give up his independence, to work, to struggle against destitution. And this went on for a long, long time . . .

Even so, She filled his soul entirely for many years. He loved Her – absent, unknown, phantasmagorical – wildly. The horror and flights of superstition soon left his stout heart, transforming into simple love and desire. The mysterious nature of the whole affair only served to kindle his feelings. He became firm in his conviction that his beloved was an extraordinarily unique woman, a genius, eccentric to the point of being half-mad, and that all Her actions had been governed solely by a mysteriously engendered love for him, that while the motives behind Her entire course of action were momentarily shrouded in impenetrable mystery, there was no reason to view them any differently than a detective does a seemingly inexplicable crime.

At first, he would often have the urge to set off for Cortona, and would have done so if external circumstances had not always prevented it, making it all the harder as the years went by – – But as time passed his love waned, as do all things; his memories faded, absorbed by grim reality. Eventually he could hardly remember the incident at all . . . Oddly, the Mysterious Woman would appear more and more often in his dreams. Yet after ten years even these dreams petered out – – Then his material situation changed. He received a small inheritance and said to himself: “I’ll try my luck at gambling; I’ll sacrifice half my inheritance, but not one heller more!” Within three days he’d made more money in gambling houses than a normal person earns in a lifetime.

He could now leave for the Alps whenever he wished – but the whole affair was so far behind him he was unable to stir himself to action. – He resolved to devote his life to thought and creativity, and at the same time to live it up just a little. The two, however, are incompatible, for every higher aspiration entails asceticism. And fate had ordained a different path for wretched Sider than for him to become conqueror of the realm of the Spirit. Hedonism soon gained supremacy over all noble pursuits, slowly pressing him closer and closer to the ground. But debauchery can never fully satisfy even the lowbrow, let alone a spirit reaching for the heights. Sider was in the grips of over-satiation and overexcitement at one and the same time; the emptiness of his soul became more profound, calling on something to fill it.

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Two years passed from the time he had acquired a new fortune. He was now forty. He was walking down the busiest street of a metropolis far north of the Alps. It was a late, as yet sweltering evening in August. The shimmer of electric streetlamps made the last remains of a red sunset almost imperceptible. His soul was immersed in a deep sleep; once again it dwelled in the Alps. “I wonder what She’s up to? What was She up to before? Will I ever lay eyes on Her again? . . . It was so magnificent and glorious . . .” Sublime tears fell from his eyes. “Is it possible that I might never see Her again? . . .”

Suddenly Her image burst from his soul like a flash of lightning so horrifically vivid that for a moment he doubted whether it was a phantasm or reality . . . He shook violently, stopped and – – suddenly he saw Her in reality! Just like that first time in the ravine, though now Her magical countenance passed by even closer, almost touching his cheek. But She did not glance at him. Later he was surprised that he hadn’t sunk to his knees, that he’d been able to hold himself up by grabbing onto a streetlamp . . . How long had he stood there? . . . Three seconds or three minutes? . . .

He'd hurried after Her, driven by blind instinct. He could not locate Her in the crowd. "What was it?" he said to himself afterwards as he trod along aimlessly. "Hallucination or reality? At the very moment when my entire soul seized Her whole being, I also saw Her with my eyes. Was it just my overly vivid vision condensing into matter? Or is it the other way round: the reason I thought about Her so intensely before was because She was close by, and after so many years She was drawing nearer and nearer to me once again? . . . To hell with all these theories! If not a hallucination, was it really Her? After all, some faces are astonishingly similar . . . But no, no one else resembles Her, I know that with absolute certainty! But – She didn't appear to have aged at all in twelve years . . . But haven't there been quite a few cases of people who seem not to age? Ach, this is going nowhere! I must do something!"

He now came to that street daily, as it had become a shrine for him, at that same time, as well as at other times of day. Frantically he scoured the entire town and sought Her out in other ways, too. Without the least result. Yet his faded love had flared up once more, and more forcefully than before. His soul burst into flames, its void avidly filled with mystical light, the past resurrected from its grave. For a second time he fell in love. With what exactly? . . . Time, which is but the unfurling of thought, flows slowly, ever so slowly, more than enough of it in Eternity. And the Sublime creeps towards every human, every animal, sometimes as a pleasant tingling sensation, at others in the form of the greatest delight; more commonly it is as the most intense horror, creeping closer and closer like a tiger silently on the prowl . . . , so that the people of today, who are animals through and through, may one day become – God.

He did not find Her. At the end of October he left for Cortona. He stayed for one week only. He did not see Her, even though he climbed all the way to the place where the path was broken. He would not have been inclined to make the leap even had She beckoned him with open arms. His soul was as dead as decayed nature at All Hallows, unstirred by the slightest tremor of light the whole time he was there . . . Even the search for the Unknown Woman and Her companion remained fruitless. "Home, home! That's where I saw Her, maybe that is where I'll find Her!"

He did not. Nothing whatsoever transpired during the winter. He worked and got drunk, he got drunk and worked, and in the end he just got drunk. Winter passed, spring timorously crept in, and for a second time Sider's strange love receded from his mind.

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One early evening in April he was standing in front of a shop window. Its back was lined with a mirror, and in front of it were pictures of mountain scenery, one of Cortona among them. His entire soul became absorbed in the contemplation of Stag's Head. He felt as though he were climbing it again, he could see the blue and red dots as he had done on that beautiful, that dreadful, day – and there Her on that monstrous, severed path . . . – and suddenly, with terrible clarity, he saw Her face in the mirror at the back of the window! Her! Her eyes eerily staring into his.

He turned round with lightning speed. Two men and two young women were standing behind him, and there was as little resemblance between their round chirpy red faces and Hers as there can possibly be between human faces. Not a single other human being was in the vicinity.

"A hallucination? That would be the first time in my life. But no: I must also have been hallucinating that evening in August, and even in Cor–, but how nonsensically our illogical mind immediately starts to blow things out of proportion! In August it was something else; it could have been real, just as surely as it could have been an illusion – and in Cortona, at least in the garden, She was seen by almost a hundred people. It does not follow that having seen Her in reality it's impossible for me to see Her as a hallucination at another time. If, for example, this bust of Dante in the shop window were

to appear before my eyes on my bed sheets while I was gripped by fever, it would not mean that the one here does not exist in reality . . . So I'm being visited by Her phantom. Is it because = She is dead? Did She die on that very evening in August? Could it be that I was suddenly compelled to contemplate Her so intensely at that moment, and thus also to see Her with my eyes, because at that very minute Her soul was leaving Her body? It's been known to happen. All this is just mere conjecture, though, nothing scientific. The worst of it is the uncertainty. I feel it could even turn to madness . . . Hah! How horridly those abysmal eyes stared at me again in the mirror just now! As if I were actually seeing them once again – –”

He rightly felt the situation was becoming extremely perilous. For a third time his passion had ignited – without the prospect of fulfilment – he had become Tantalus – condemned always to lose his beloved the moment She appeared to him . . . But the hallucinations had made matters more complicated and had added something new, something horrifying. No matter where he was, he saw only Her, Her, Her and Her terrible mirrored glare, piercing his eyes and soul with a funereal chill. Now its recurrence, its repetition, was horrid: even the constant intrusion of a single, entirely banal word into the mind can drive one insane. The matter at hand was decidedly not mundane. This was not the sweet face of a lover, but the transcendently terrible visage of a dragon. And almost every night She visited his dreams, hideous, stifling, chaotically maniacal dreams, a diabolical gorgon forever sharing his bed. On the verge of succumbing to the terror of it all, he felt himself slipping into “superstition”; but his bright, logical mind put up a powerful defence against the temptation of seeing in it anything “supernatural.” Almost all of today's educated men are “unsuperstitious” in their minds while in their hearts they're as superstitious as old women. Sider was the opposite: his sceptical intellect allowed for the possibility that anything may exist in the world; his intellectualised inner being, however, indomitably denied the potential existence of anything spectral. He still believed that the Mysterious Woman was as real a being as he was himself. The question for him now was: is She still alive, or is She dead? And this uncertainty was unhinging his mind, just as the ghastly turmoil of dark emotions was doing to the whole of his inner being.

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Then something happened that changed this awful state of affairs. On 22 May he was walking down a bustling street in a different part of the city than the previous August. Once again it was evening, but the red sunset still blazed in full splendour. Exceptionally, he was in a fairly cheery mood. Then all of a sudden he saw Her. Facing the other way, She was just crossing the street a few paces ahead of him. It was Her! She was well lit by the crisp red sky! Even the two moles on the left side of her face were visible. This time his fright was not as great – and immediately he headed towards Her. Yet at that very moment She stopped next to a police officer at the intersection and spoke to him. Backing off a little, Sider waited. Some time elapsed before the police officer gave Her a parting salute. Sider rushed after Her as She hurried away. Suddenly She disappeared behind an electric streetcar. He started running, and was almost run over by an automobile hidden by the streetcar. A moment later, having recovered from the shock, he could no longer see Her. He rushed into the throng of cars and people where She had just disappeared. His entire soul transformed into eyes. Futile. In a desperate rage, just about to break down in tears, he remembered the police officer. He ran up to him wildly. “Did a woman dressed in blue, very pale, with little moles right here, speak to you just now?”

“Well yes, and what's it to you?”

“She did!” he shouted joyfully. “So She was real?”

“Hmm – hmm,” muttered the policeman, his eyes bulging out of his head in an expression of severity

and stupidity.

“And what did She want?”

“What business is that of yours?”

“Oh, dear sir, but it is my business!” And he gave the policeman three ducats. They served as ample proof that it was indeed his business. He learnt that the lady had inquired how to get to Cliff Street, that She had readily told him She was a stranger in the city and had been living in that street for several days but was at that moment having trouble locating it. – In answer to Sider’s question if his heart had felt odd when he looked at Her, the policeman shook his head with his mouth agape and gravely nodded his head in pity as the generous gentleman walked off – –

Sider knew one thing with absolute certainty: when the automobile was hurtling towards him, Her supercelestial eyes had rested on his for an instant, though no longer ghastly, but kind, smiling, alluring, kissing, sonorously inviting. He was enlivened by the certitude that his Radiance still dwelt on the earth. He now saw everything in the most beautiful earthly light. “My love is alive! She is weird in the extreme, mystical powers at Her command, as is my love for Her! And She loves me, loves me!” His faith now resided in these three things: “She will now finally provide the purpose I have lost; She will fill my emptiness; She will give me life!” Never before had he felt so happy, so alive, so sprightly, so divine.

Over the days that followed he expended more energy trying to find Her in Cliff Street than on anything he had ever done in his life. He conducted his search with no care for pride or shame. He searched every house in the street, systematically, from cellar to attic, indeed from cellar to dovecote and he also visited many apartments and asked every person in the street if they knew anything about the pale lady with moles. Eventually, the local boys shouted at him “lunatic!” “moron!” – Cliff Street was long; it took its name – incidentally – from the limestone cliffs that towered along its length. It took him three days to search the entire street, and still he came up with nothing, nothing . . .

By the evening of the third day he had covered the street’s length. Only one small house remained, standing apart from all the rest some two hundred paces further on. He could see that it was impoverished, almost black, dilapidated. “Surely She cannot be living there, but just to be thorough, now that I’ve searched everywhere else, I’ll take a look there as well.”

The back of the little edifice leant directly against a high cliff, jagged, as if pieces of it had broken off. The house had two floors and was dismally derelict. Standing before it, Sider now regarded it in the evening twilight and froze with fear. It looked exactly like, in fact it was identical to, the mysterious cottage in Cortona by the entrance to the ravine with the rock suspended above it like the sword of Damocles, as if its doppelgänger . . .

He sat on the baulk opposite the house for half an hour. “Only here, here could She live . . . Ugh! Merely coincidence! I’m starting to see ghosts in everything! I need to free myself of this once and for all! For – spectres and the belief in them contradict the Will! Not the ‘external world’ – that is always tame and subservient to it –: it is spectres that kill the Will! Time to have a look!”

It was now night. Sider took a step towards the house, he looked it over once more – his whole body shook . . . “No, not today! I won’t manage. My legs are shaking so much I can hardly stand. Cursed matters of physiology! Tomorrow, the morning will be more favourable!”

He returned home, lay down on his bed. – Without even knowing how, he suddenly found himself in front of the mysterious little house. Automatically he entered. He briskly walked through the hallway on the ground floor, his steps absolute and sure, without even having to light a match, as if walking through his own house. He went to the upper floor, which was also in complete darkness. He extended his hand – and felt a handle. He found himself in a room, which in contrast to the ragged exterior of the house was furnished with striking elegance, by all appearances the bedroom. The full moon glaring at him through the window nearly dazzled him; what poured from the moon into his soul was not light

but the words: “Don’t you know me? Ah, you know me well! Try to remember!” He took a better look around. He saw = rocks, bricks, chunks of wood scattered over the carpets = and the conjugal bed in the corner smashed to pieces, a large boulder protruding from its wreckage, embedded in the floor. He drew nearer, inquisitive and absolutely calm, and saw a young woman in a nightshirt amid the wreckage. Her face – covered in blood, her nose crushed, both legs draped in blood. “What happened here?” he said to himself; “it seems I should know . . . , how witless I am today!” He was trying to solve the mystery as coolly as he would an ordinary rebus. In the meantime the girl had begun to move weakly, moaning, but without opening her eyes. Suddenly he felt a cold draft on his head; it was coming from above. He looked up: a hole in the roof; several stars and the silhouette of the cliff peered through the opening. “Well, well, look at that . . . ; but I still don’t know anything, though first I should get this injured woman to a doctor.” He grabbed hold of her and then felt his hands somehow sinking disgustingly into her flesh. He looked at his fingers, they were coated with red-brown dust, reeking pungently. “Well, well!” he said to himself calmly, and vigorously squeezed her thigh. It crumbled into lumps of repugnant stuff. And then a dark horror flared within him – at once the moon’s radiance transformed into a windstorm of light that hurtled towards him, intensifying into the most frightful black hurricane, – the silently motionless hurricane of Eternity, and at that moment the woman opened her eyes. – It was Her! . . . And a monstrous, ghastly thought thundered in him, a thought from the very heart of insane All-Mystery – a mere waft of this thought could rip apart the pathetic human soul more effectively than a cannon ball could a spider’s web – –

But Sider was not yet destined to quit his second of His Life eternal, to which the microbe calling itself “human being” gives the appellation life. At the last moment an alien, providential power flung his soul out of the reach of the Most Terrible into the sphere of superficiality and blindness that is known as the waking state. He saw the table lamp by his bedside, saw himself in the wall mirror, and he raised his body up from the pillows, his hair standing on end, his face white as the sheets.

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On the following morning he entered the house. When he closed the front door behind him he stood in complete darkness. He struck a match, nearby was a door; he stood in front of it, listening. There was a profound silence. Suddenly he felt as though something were churning inside him . . . He continued to stand there listlessly – for a long time, for a short time, he didn’t know. Then he heard a weak, very weak rustle from inside, as though made by shuffling steps coming from far off. The rustling grew louder, the steps long drawing near, as though an enormous number of rooms lay concealed behind the door. Overcome with horror, he wanted to flee, when suddenly a dreadful laugh rattled from inside, transfixing him to the spot. And very slowly, like the hands on a clock, the door opened, and just as slowly, a woman holding a burning candle shuffled through it. Her face left him dumbstruck. It seemed to be two hundred years old, as if belonging to a corpse, yet this was not the only thing he found astonishing – –

She shone the light at him, and again the inhuman laugh rattled. “Hoy there, handsome laddie, don’t be afraid, don’t be afraid! I know you, I know why you’ve come, I’ve been expecting you. You’ve come to see the lady in blue, haven’t you, eh, eh?”

“Yes, the one with the two little moles – is She here?”

“She was here, stayed here for a whole week, nice of a lady like that to remember Old Barbora again. She left yesterday, but, hee hee, She left a photograph with a few words for you, wrote them Herself, handsome laddie, wrote them Herself, hee hee!”

“For me? How do you know it’s for me – –”

“Hee hee, She described you to me, though no need to, no need! Even if She hadn’t, I would’ve

known! Old Barбора knows everything.”

“Then She is = alive?”

“Hee hee, everything is alive, silly boy! So here you go, take it.”

She took an envelope out of the pocket of her apron and handed it to him. He read his name on it, opened it. The portrait resembled the original, breathtakingly, incredibly, and on the other side he read: “Meet me on Stag’s Head in June! Orea.”

Orea! . . . Where had he heard that sweet name before? . . . Suddenly he had the feeling that he had whispered it himself at some point in the past and – it had been here, in this ghastly house . . .

“She loves you, laddie,” the old crone grunted and laughed, “but take care that the tigress doesn’t tear you apart with Her love. You whipped Her brutally, and She hasn’t forgotten, hasn’t forgotten.”

“What are you talking about? When did I –? I did what to Her –? In a dream –?”

“Of course in a dream. Everything’s a dream, hee hee.”

“She wants to take revenge on me?”

“She wants to love you, but She knows She won’t be able to until you’ve been punished, until accounts have been settled between you two. Go now, laddie, you’ve heard enough, go meet your destiny, your destiny, hee hee.”

“Wait! Before I go, can you show me the upper floor?”

“But what’s to see there? The boulders were cleared away long ago, long ago.”

“Boulders? How do you know about them? Am I asleep or have I gone mad?”

“Asleep and mad, laddie, and awake as well, and of sound mind you are! Every human is all that. Now go!” – And very slowly she turned to leave.

“Please, before you leave, tell me, who is this Orea?!” he cried out, grabbing her by the shoulder with one hand and placing a pile of ducats into her palm with the other.

“You ask too much, laddie, too much! Wait three years, then you’ll see! Put away your little flakes of gold! What good are they to me? Hee hee hee!”

With a terrifying sluggishness she trudged back to the chamber. And Sider, his soul transformed into chaos and yet so full of joy, ran out of that darkest night to be dazzled by the full radiance of the morning sun.

He remained standing in front of the house. He could not see, hear, think. For how long? . . . Finally he was roused by a blow to the face.

“Loony! Idiot! Nitwit!” only now he heard the shouting of the boys forming a wide circle around him. One of them had just struck him in the head with a ball of horse dung. –

“Was this all a dream again, as in the night?” he said to himself as he was being driven away in a hackney cab where he had found refuge from the raucous horde of pygmies hounding him. “Oh, will I ever know? But – even so – good God! . . .”

Never in his life had he been in such an agitated state as now when he put his hand into his breast pocket. “It won’t be there, I’m certain of that!” he whispered to himself through chattering teeth . . .

Never in his life had he done anything as slowly as now, as he opened his billfold – –

He yelled out so loudly that the coachman turned around in the driver’s box . . . The staggering beauty of the perfect portrait thundered towards him; he had the distinctly ghastly impression that the real Orea was sitting opposite him. And he kissed, kissed Her sharp, most peculiar handwriting . . .

“She is alive! It was real!” he exulted with joy as they drove through increasingly lively streets.

“Finally I have proof! Something real from Her! . . . But am I not dreaming even now? Yet – nonsense, to think I can’t distinguish my current state of mind from a dream? It would be easier to mistake that cat over there for a zither!” He took out the portrait once more. “I still have it! – And having it means I’m richer than all the kings in the world! Oh, with this picture and this handwriting I’ll be happy forever! . . . She lives! And She loves me . . . All the horrid strangeness of this my tale o

romance makes it all the more beautiful and beguiling. Who can boast of such a fantastical, poetic Romance as mine? . . . All that is murky will be illuminated in June . . . Today is just the 23rd of May – I can't wait . . . I can't bear all this happiness . . . All is good and beautiful. To Cortona, Orea, my dear Orea! – –”

On the first of June at two o'clock in the afternoon Sider was already disembarking from the train at the station in Cortona. It was one of those rare, ghastly days at the end of an ageing spring when the entire sky is covered by a single dense cloud, not thick enough to completely obscure the sun, not thin enough to allow it even a faint radiance; the sun appeared like a slightly brighter cloud. The sky a desert, the earth, a hue indescribably hideous, a desert, everything solemnly, sultrily, chokingly, appallingly dead. Awful in the plains, even more awful is such a day in the mountains.

"Brr, what a pleasant welcome from Stag's Head," he shivered "it glares at me like the corpse of someone who's died of horror. What is it saying to me today? . . . What monstrosity has flown so chillingly from it into my soul?" He had an inexplicable feeling that the joy of the previous days had evaporated, that permanent dread and misfortune would take its place, that he was standing on the threshold of a new era.

He checked into a hotel. Tired from the journey, he lay down and fell asleep. He did not wake until nightfall, his mood subdued and chaotic.

"Today – I'll just go to the garden restaurant," he decided. "Tomorrow – I'll call on the black house in the ravine. And the day after – Stag's Head. Yes, that's the plan."

In the garden he caught sight of the doctor from Cortona with whom he'd conversed on several occasions during his stay the previous year, an intelligent man – with that specific intelligence of doctors that, in its most important respects, is closer to idiocy than even the most extreme obtuseness – and somewhat of a pig. Sider sat down at his table; the doctor was drinking heavily and diligently, enjoying the company of his own corpulence, and he immediately diverted the conversation to the only theme that interested him.

"Today I have some news for you," said the doctor, "for over a year now Mrs Errata S. has been interned in a lunatic asylum." He named the town it was in.

Something made Sider shudder. A foreboding that a similar fate awaited him? The sense that his destiny was mystically bound up with hers? Or compassion and love? Errata was never indifferent to him, and even though his feelings towards her could not be compared to his love for Orea, there had been moments in the past when he had felt that his love for her exceeded even that for the woman whose portrait he now carried in his breast pocket.

"Really? . . . Could you give me any more details? Please!"

"Several months ago I received an official letter from the psychiatrist there," the doctor said and spat "who is treating her. He requested I give him a medical report on her mental state. That deranged woman had told him that she'd had several consultations with me twelve years ago about her 'nervous disposition,' and she said that's when her mental illness started. I wrote back that Mrs S. suffers from dementia praecox, but this psychiatrist person did not agree with me, the idiot, and let me know, between the lines, that the one suffering from dementia praecox is more likely to be I than she. Such is the nature of some of those in our field of science, pooh!" and he poured a large glass down his throat.

"Her illness originated back then? Could you tell me anything else about it?"

"According to my dear colleague, the cretin, the cause is that this woman fell head-over-heels in love with some other female individual, but the love affair was, ha ha, most ill-fated, because the terror Mrs Errata felt for her idol outweighed any erotic pleasure she derived. But this is all nothing more than symptoms of dementia praecox, even a cretin like that should be able to see as much."

"Has Errata had relations with her beloved since the time they were seen together here?"

"How should I know, my boy? Well in fact – that idiot – ahem, said that she often saw her in hallucinations. And that's just the dementia praecox again. Yes – and well – yes, she talked often

about you, too. Perhaps she fell in love with you, ha ha, you can go there and marry her.”

“Do you know anything more about the other one?”

“What could I know, my boy? But I know everything. Hmm, what was it I wanted to . . . people talk a lot about her round here, but it’s all just old wives’ tales. They say she’s a –”

“Doctor, Doctor,” shrieked a woman running towards them, “I beg you to come with me, quickly, my husband is dying, he fell off a cliff and his head’s completely broken!”

“To hell with it!” the doctor muttered, reaching slowly for his glass. “One doesn’t get a moment’s respite! What an idea, falling off a cliff. And so late in the evening! Why couldn’t he wait till morning to have his bit of fun?” He slowly emptied his glass. “I bet he was drunk, wasn’t he?”

“Oh no, Doctor, for God’s sake please hurry, maybe his life can still be saved –”

“Let go of my sleeve – you – you unsavoury person – I – what was it I wanted? Hey, waiter, my bill – tally up what I owe for today – no, for the whole week!” Standing up, he staggered noticeably. “I’m – damn it –”

Sider tossed a few gold coins on the table. “I’m paying – does that cover it?” He took hold of the doctor under his arm. “Let’s go, quickly, I’ll accompany you. I might be of some assistance – I studied medicine for a time.”

“You – medicine, a cretin like you? Ha!”

He listed so much that Sider only just managed to keep his heavy body upright as he dragged him towards the exit.

“Could you,” he made a final attempt to exploit the situation, “tell me in one word what the locals say about the mysterious lady?”

“A tramp is what! And a hallucination to boot, that is, a nexus – actually a pexus polaris, solaris in fact, – damn it all, I’ve forgotten everything, dementia praecox. Gaudeamus igitur –” he started shouting. Extricating himself from Sider’s grasp, he staggered and fell flat on his face with an almighty crash.

Sider went off on his own with the whimpering woman to tend to the injured man. He was already dead.

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The night was a long string of dreadful, hellish dreams. In the morning rain fell from a dark sky. At around ten o’clock Sider set out for the ravine. He was in a pathologically gloomy and agitated mood almost to the point of skittishness. The previous day’s conversation had left him with a vague feeling of horror, for which he could not satisfactorily account. “After all, that drunkard didn’t tell me anything specific, besides the valuable information of Errata’s whereabouts. Of Orea I know as little as ever. But he’ll tell me the rest tonight – a doctor surely cannot be as drunk as that day in, day out.”

On seeing the black cottage, its similarity to the house in Cliff Street, not the similarity of a twin, but that of a double, again sent a shudder through him. But here the cliff loomed directly above the house – a boulder weighing several tons threatened to fall straight down on it at any moment. “I would not want to live here.” He shuddered again. It required a great surge of will for him to enter.

This time he left the door open behind him. He saw the same hallway he’d seen before in the light of Barbora’s candle. Even the door on the right was in the same place.

He stood there. He did not dare knock on the door. Silence, only the soft murmur of the rain and the increasing pounding of his heart . . . “Will I again hear steps as if coming from rooms infinitely distant, maniacally shuffling closer and closer and closer? . . .”

No. Suddenly the door opened slightly – an old woman . . . In some respects she resembled Barbora, but it wasn’t her, neither her features, nor her age. Although she was very old, in her nineties by all

appearances – she had nothing of the paradoxical, transcendently animated deathliness of the old crone from Cliff Street.

“What do you want?” she asked in a voice that was still quite sonorous.

“Excuse me, what? Oh – yes, do you have a room to let?”

“Yes, yes, and not one, but two. No one wants to stay here, would you have the courage?”

“Why courage?”

“Because they say the place is haunted. And because that cliff looms right over the house. But we’re not afraid, what do old people have to fear?”

“Who else lives here besides you?”

“My mother.”

“You still have – a mother?”

“Yes I do, one of God’s miracles it is. I don’t know what she did wrong that God is taking so long to call her to Him. She’s one hundred and thirty seven years old and I’m –”

“May I see her?”

“Well, if you really want to. But I wouldn’t advise it, you’ll be seeing her in your dreams for years to come. She’s been bedridden for twenty years now, she can’t move, she’s blind, deaf, and doesn’t talk. Her throat just rattles the whole time. She simply won’t die.”

“Take me to her!”

She led him through the kitchen into the adjoining room, dark as nightfall. There Sider beheld – – his acquaintance from Cliff Street. She seemed to him even more horrible than before; he very nearly fainted.

Her blind eyes were fixed glassily on the ceiling, a quiet and dreadful rattle issuing without interruption from her gaping mouth . . . slowly gaining in strength, starting to resemble words – and suddenly, this was distinctly audible:

“Have you finally come, you devil’s spawn? I’ve held on long enough to cross paths with you again, ha ha, ha ha! Be cursed, cursed, you dirty bleeding cur!”

“Jesus Christ, she’s talking again after twenty years,” the daughter clasped her hands together.

“Why are you cursing me?” he inquired frantically, yet firmly.

“She can’t hear.”

“Because you killed my daughter, you scoundrel of scoundrels, my sweet child whom I suckled. I’ve been waiting for you, I’ve waited a long time, finally I get to set eyes on you again. Be forever cursed you Satan’s miscarriage! Hah, death is already hurrying towards you, black is God’s judgement! You will be crushed, crushed like her, my dear daughter –”

While uttering these words in an unnaturally powerful voice, she lurched violently, her body – no, a mere skeleton – raised itself up and then fell back again with a terrible rasping . . .

“A miracle!” her daughter dropped to her knees. “She hasn’t moved her arms or spoken in twenty years, she’s blind – and now before you – You, you are a murderer, go away!”

“What daughter were you talking about? I know nothing! Speak!” he said in a voice that was so commanding he almost blacked out from the effort.

Silence.

“Was it you who gave me the portrait of Orea in Cliff Street?”

Silence. “For God’s sake, she’s not rasping any more – she must have died!” screamed the daughter – she leaned over the bed. “She’s no longer breathing!” she shrieked in a strange voice. “You murdered her, just like you did the other, you cutthroat! – Oh, my beloved mummy!” she howled unnaturally after a while.

“What ‘other’? I haven’t a clue . . .”

“Nor do I, but Mummy knew! God spoke through her! Get away from here, you Belial! Help,

murderer!”

Reeling, Sider ran outside. “Murderer, murderer!” she screeched after him. “He killed my mother! Catch the murderer!”

But the black cottage stood on its own, the nearby lane devoid of people . . . Eventually Sider was no longer pursued by the old woman’s cries.

He ran around Cortona aimlessly for some time before he was able to think more clearly. “Diabolical! Incredible! I feel as if I’m becoming more and more susceptible to the old crone’s belief that I’m in the clutches of some infernal power . . . I’m beginning to feel genuine fear – and – now I really feel like – putting all this behind me and leaving this accursed nest at once. But – no! That would be cravenly rash! –”

Still he dithered. It was not his decisiveness that led to a decision.

He soon became aware that everywhere little groups of people were forming, talking excitedly. He heard the words: “Murder – Old Barbora – strangled – murderer – unknown foreigner – the police and gendarmes are now searching –”

Initially Sider found it ludicrous. But that soon passed. “Damn it all, surely I’ll be arrested if they catch me now. They’d soon release me – but is that so certain? Everyone knows how the courts work. Who knows how long I’d have to spend in custody. What’s more – hasn’t judicial murder been committed on many an occasion? . . . The most sensible thing to do is flee as quickly as possible. But Orea? . . . I can make my way back here again – June is long. If I were to be imprisoned for longer, wouldn’t that make it impossible for me to meet Her? Yes! I’ll cross the border, wait until I see the newspapers report that the old woman died of natural causes, and then I’ll return. I’d be certifiably insane to view that as cowardice.” He looked at his watch. “A train is leaving in ten minutes.

Excellent. I must hurry!”

He rushed to the hotel. Since he’d not yet unpacked his luggage he could leave without delay. The clusters of people he met on the way to the station were increasingly numerous and agitated. He, too, was extremely vexed, but since it was now in no way metaphysical this had a salutary effect on him. He caught the train on time, departed in a good mood, and happily crossed the nearby border. For the time being he was safe.

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The mental institution where Errata was interned was near the border crossing. “I’ll go there first,” he decided. “I’ll visit her and at the same time wait there for news from Cortona. I’ll be killing two birds with one stone.”

On 4 June the asylum administrators informed him that Errata was incurably mentally ill, that although her mania every now and then manifested lucida intervalla, she would often erupt into fits of rage, that the primary cause was a “poor upbringing” by eccentric parents who had inculcated her with superstitious beliefs from an early age, and that it was absolutely impossible for him to speak with her.

A few gold coins placed in the palm of one of the orderlies naturally made the absolutely impossible possible. And on that very day Sider entered Errata’s cell.

She was sitting in an armchair that had been nailed to the floor, her hands bound together with rope. She was staring catatonically at the ceiling; she did not look over at Sider. His initial thought was that he’d been taken to the wrong patient. At first glance, the formerly beautiful young lady looked almost like an old woman. Her cheeks were terribly emaciated, furrowed not so much with wrinkles as with suffering, their whiteness having turned sallow – like snow in late spring; her eyes had become dull and shifty at the same time, constantly moving in a ghastly manner. Most of her hair had gone white.

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