THE STREET OF CROCODILES

My father kept in the lower drawer of his large desk an old and beautiful map of our city. It was a whole folio sheaf of parchment pages which, originally fastened with strips of linen, formed an enormous wall map, a bird's-eye panorama.

Hung on the wall, the map covered it almost entirely and opened a wide view on the valley of the River Tysmenica, which wound itself like a wavy ribbon of pale gold, on the maze of widely spreading ponds and marshes, on the high ground rising toward the south, gently at first, then in ever tighter ranges, in a chessboard of rounded hills, smaller and paler as they receded toward the misty yellow fog of the horizon. From that faded distance of the periphery, the city rose and grew toward the center of the map, an undifferentiated mass at first, a dense complex of blocks and houses, cut by deep canyons of streets, to become on the first plan a group of single houses, etched with the sharp clarity of a landscape seen through binoculars. In that section of the map, the engraver concentrated on the complicated and manifold profusion of streets and alleyways, the sharp lines of cornices, architraves, archivolts, and pilasters, lit by the dark gold of a late and cloudy afternoon which steeped all corners and recesses in the deep sepia of shade. The solids and prisms of that shade darkly honeycombed the ravines of streets, drowning in a warm color here half a street, there a gap between houses. They dramatized and orchestrated in a bleak romantic chiaroscuro the complex architectural polyphony.

On that map, made in the style of baroque panoramas, the area of the Street of Crocodiles shone with the empty whiteness that usually marks polar regions or unexplored countries of
which almost nothing is known. The lines of only a few streets were marked in black and their names given in simple, unadorned lettering, different from the noble script of the other captions. The cartographer must have been loath to include that district in the city and his reservations found expression in the typographical treatment.

In order to understand these reservations, we must draw attention to the equivocal and doubtful character of that peculiar area, so unlike the rest of the city.

It was an industrial and commercial district, its soberly utilitarian character glaringly underlined. The spirit of the times, the mechanism of economics, had not spared our city and had taken root in a sector of its periphery which then developed into a parasitical quarter.

While in the old city a nightly semiclandestine trade prevailed, marked by ceremonious solemnity, in the new district modern, sober forms of commercial endeavor had flourished at once. The pseudo-Americanism, grafted on the old, crumbling core of the city, shot up here in a rich but empty and colorless vegetation of pretentious vulgarity. One could see there cheap jerry-built houses with grotesque facades, covered with a monstrous stucco of cracked plaster. The old, shaky suburban houses had large hastily constructed portals grafted onto them which only on close inspection revealed themselves as miserable imitations of metropolitan splendor. Dull, dirty, and faulty glass panes in which dark pictures of the street were wavyly reflected, the badly planed wood of the doors, the gray atmosphere of those sterile interiors where the high shelves were cracked and the crumbling walls were covered with cobwebs and thick dust, gave these shops the stigma of some wild Klondike. In row upon row there spread tailors’ shops, general outfitters, china shops, drugstores, and barbers’ saloons. Their large gray display windows bore slanting semicircular inscriptions in thick gilt letters:

CONFISERIE, MANUCURE, KING OF ENGLAND.

The old established inhabitants of the city kept away from that area where the scum, the lowest orders had settled—creatures without character, without background, moral dregs, that inferior species of human being which is born in such ephemeral communities. But on days of defeat, in hours of moral weakness, it would happen that one or another of the city dwellers would venture half by chance into that dubious district. The best among them were not entirely free from the temptation of voluntary degradation, of breaking down the barriers of hierarchy, of immersion in that shallow mud of companionship, of easy intimacy, of dirty intermingling. The district was an El Dorado for such moral desertsers. Everything seemed suspect and equivocal there, everything promised with secret winks, cynical stressed gestures, raised eyebrows, the fulfillment of impure hopes, everything helped to release the lowest instincts from their shackles.

Only a few people noticed the peculiar characteristics of that district: the fatal lack of color, as if that shoddy, quickly growing area could not afford the luxury of it. Everything was gray there, as in black-and-white photographs or in cheap illustrated catalogs. This similarity was real rather than metaphorical because at times, when wandering in those parts, one in fact gained the impression that one was turning the pages of a prospectus, looking at columns of boring commercial announcements, among which suspect announcements nestled like parasites, together with dubious notices and illustrations with a double meaning. And one’s wandering proved as sterile and pointless as the excitement produced by a close study of pornographic albums.

If one entered, for example, a tailor’s shop to order a suit—a suit of cheap elegance characteristic of the district—one found that the premises were large and empty, the rooms high and colorless. Enormous shelves rose in tiers into the undefined height of the room and drew one’s eyes toward the ceiling which might be the sky—the shoddy, faded sky of that quarter. On the other hand, the storerooms, which could be seen through the open door, were stacked high with boxes and crates—an enormous filing cabinet rising to the attic to disintegrate into the geometry of emptiness, into the timbers of a void. The large gray windows, ruled like the pages of a ledger, did not admit
daylight yet the shop was filled with a watery anonymous gray light which did not throw shadows and did not stress anything. Soon, a slender young man appeared, astonishingly servile, agile, and compliant, to satisfy one’s requirements and to drown one in the smooth flow of his cheap sales talk. But when, talking all the time, he unrolled an enormous piece of cloth, fitting, folding, and draping the stream of material, forming it into imaginary jackets and trousers, that whole manipulation seemed suddenly unreal, a sham comedy, a screen ironically placed to hide the true meaning of things.

The tall dark salesgirls, each with a flaw in her beauty (appropriately for that district of remaindered goods), came and went, stood in the doorways watching to see whether the business entrusted to the experienced care of the salesman had reached a suitable point. The salesman simpered and pranced around like a transvestite. One wanted to lift up his receding chin or pinch his pale powdered cheek as with a stealthy meaningful look he discreetly pointed to the trademark on the material, a trademark of transparent symbolism.

Slowly the selection of the suit gave place to the second stage of the plan. The effeminate and corrupted youth, receptive to the client’s most intimate stirrings, now put before him a selection of the most peculiar trademarks, a whole library of labels, a cabinet displaying the collection of a sophisticated connoisseur. It then appeared that the outfitter’s shop was only a facade behind which there was an antique shop with a collection of highly questionable books and private editions. The servile salesman opened further storerooms, filled to the ceiling with books, drawings, and photographs. These engravings and etchings were beyond our boldest expectations: not even in our dreams had we anticipated such depths of corruption, such varieties of licentiousness.

The salesgirls now walked up and down between the rows of books, their faces, like gray parchment, marked with the dark greasy pigment spots of brunettes, their shiny dark eyes shooting out sudden zigzag cockroachy looks. But even their dark blushes, the piquant beauty spots, the traces of down on their upper lips betrayed their thick, black blood. Their overintense coloring, like that of an aromatic coffee, seemed to stain the books which they took into their olive hands, their touch seemed to run on the pages and leave in the air a dark trail of freckles, a smudge of tobacco, as does a truffle with its exciting, animal smell.

In the meantime, lasciviousness had become general. The salesman, exhausted by his eager importuning, slowly withdrew into feminine passivity. He now lay on one of the many sofas which stood between the bookshelves, wearing a pair of deeply cut silk pajamas. Some of the girls demonstrated to one another the poses and postures of the drawings on the book jackets, while others settled down to sleep on makeshift beds. The pressure on the client had eased. He was now released from the circle of eager interest and left more or less alone. The salesgirls, busy talking, ceased to pay any attention to him. Turning their backs on him they adopted arrogant poses, shifting their weight from foot to foot, making play with their frivolous footwear, abandoning their slim bodies to the serpentine movements of their limbs and thus laid siege to the excited onlooker whom they pretended to ignore behind a show of assumed indifference. This retreat was calculated to involve the guest more deeply, while appearing to leave him a free hand for his own initiative.

But let us take advantage of that moment of inattention to escape from these unexpected consequences of an innocent call at the tailor’s, and slip back into the street.

No one stops us. Through the corridors of books, from between the long shelves filled with magazines and prints, we make our way out of the shop and find ourselves in that part of the Street of Crocodiles where from the higher level one can see almost its whole length down to the distant, as yet unfinished buildings of the railway station. It is, as usual in that district, a gray day, and the whole scene seems at times like a photograph in an illustrated magazine, so gray, so one-dimensional are the houses, the people, and the vehicles. Reality is as thin as paper and betrays with all its cracks its imitative character. At times
one has the impression that it is only the small section immediately before us that falls into the expected pointillistic picture of a city thoroughfare, while on either side the improvised masquerade is already disintegrating and, unable to endure, crumbles behind us into plaster and sawdust, into the storeroom of an enormous empty theater. The tenseness of an artificial pose, the assumed earnestness of a mask, an ironical pathos tremble on this facade.

But far be it from us to wish to expose this sham. Despite our better judgment we are attracted by the tawdry charm of the district. Besides, that pretense of a city has some of the features of self-parody. Rows of small one-story suburban houses alternate with many-storied buildings which, looking as if made of cardboard, are a mixture of blind office windows, of gray-glassed display windows, of fasciae of advertisements and numbers. Among the houses the crowds stream by. The street is as broad as a city boulevard, but the roadway is made, like village squares, of beaten clay, full of puddles and overgrown with grass. The street traffic of that area is a byword in the city; all its inhabitants speak about it with pride and a knowing look. That gray, impersonal crowd is rather self-conscious of its role, eager to live up to its metropolitan aspirations. All the same, despite the hustle and sense of purpose, one has the impression of a monotonous aimless wandering, of a sleepy procession of puppets. An atmosphere of strange insignificance pervades the scene. The crowd flows lazily by and, strange to say, one can see it only indistinctly; the figures pass in gentle disarray, never reaching complete sharpness of outline. Only at times do we catch among the turmoil of many heads a dark vivacious look, a black bowler hat worn at an angle, half a face split by a smile formed by lips which had just finished speaking, a foot thrust forward to take a step and fixed forever in that position.

A peculiarity of that district are the cabs, without coachmen, driving along unattended. It is not as if there were no cabbies, but mingling with the crowd and busy with a thousand affairs of their own, they do not bother about their carriages. In that area of sham and empty gestures no one pays much attention to the precise purpose of a cab ride and the passengers entrust themselves to these erratic conveyances with the thoughtlessness which characterizes everything here. From time to time one can see them at dangerous corners, leaning far out from under the broken roof of a cab as, with the reins in their hands, they perform with some difficulty the tricky maneuver of overtaking.

There are also trams here. In them the ambition of the city councillors has achieved its greatest triumph. The appearance of these trams, though, is pitiful, for they are made of papier-mâché with warped sides dented from the misuse of many years. They often have no fronts, so that in passing one can see the passengers, sitting stiffly and behaving with great decorum. These trams are pushed by the town porters. The strangest thing of all is, however, the railway system in the Street of Crocodiles.

Occasionally, at different times of day toward the end of the week, one can see groups of people waiting at a crossroads for a train. One is never sure whether the train will come at all or where it will stop if it does. It often happens, therefore, that people wait in two different places, unable to agree where the stop is. They wait for a long time standing in a black, silent bunch alongside the barely visible lines of the track, their faces in profile: a row of pale cutout paper figures, fixed in an expression of anxious peering.

At last the train suddenly appears: one can see it coming from the expected side street, low like a snake, a miniature train with a squat puffing locomotive. It enters the black corridor, and the street darkens from the coal dust scattered by the line of carriages. The heavy breathing of the engine and the wave of a strange sad seriousness, the suppressed hurry and excitement transform the street for a moment into the hall of a railway station in the quickly falling winter dusk.

A black market in railway tickets and bribery in general are the special plagues of our city.

At the last moment, when the train is already in the station, negotiations are conducted in nervous haste with corrupt railway officials. Before these are completed, the train starts, followed slowly by a crowd of disappointed passengers who accompany it a long way down the line before finally dispersing.
The street, reduced for a moment to form an improvised station filled with gloom and the breath of distant travel, widens out again, becomes lighter and again allows the carefree crowds of chattering passersby to stroll past the shop windows—those dirty gray squares filled with shoddy goods, tall wax dummies, and barber's dolls.

Showily dressed in long lace-trimmed gowns, prostitutes have begun to circulate. They might even be the wives of hairdressers or restaurant bandleaders. They advance with a brisk rapacious step, each with some small flaw in her evil corrupted face; their eyes have a black, crooked squint, or they have hare-lips, or the tips of their noses are missing.

The inhabitants of the city are quite proud of the odor of corruption emanating from the Street of Crocodiles. "There is no need for us to go short of anything," they say proudly to themselves, "we even have truly metropolitan vices." They maintain that every woman in that district is a tart. In fact, it is enough to stare at any of them, and at once you meet an insistent clinging look which freezes you with the certainty of fulfillment. Even the schoolgirls wear their hair ribbons in a characteristic way and walk on their slim legs with a peculiar step, an impure expression in their eyes that foreshadows their future corruption.

And yet, and yet—are we to betray the last secret of that district, the carefully concealed secret of the Street of Crocodiles?

Several times during our account we have given warning signals, we have intimated delicately our reservations. An attentive reader will therefore not be unprepared for what is to follow. We spoke of the imitative, illusory character of that area, but these words have too precise and definite a meaning to describe its half-baked and undecided reality.

Our language has no definitions which would weigh, so to speak, the grade of reality, or define its supleness. Let us say it bluntly: the misfortune of that area is that nothing ever succeeds there, nothing can ever reach a definite conclusion. Gestures hang in the air, movements are prematurely exhausted and cannot overcome a certain point of inertia. We have already noticed the great bravura and prodigality in intentions, projects, and anticipations which are one of the characteristics of the district. It is in fact no more than a fermentation of desires, prematurely aroused and therefore impotent and empty. It is an atmosphere of excessive facility, every whim flies high, a passing excitement swells into an empty parasitic growth; a light gray vegetation of fluffy weeds, of colorless poppies sprouts forth, made from a weightless fabric of nightmares and hashish. Over the whole area there floats the lazy licentious smell of sin, and the houses, the shops, the people seem sometimes no more than a shiver on its feverish body, the gooseflesh of its febrile dreams. Nowhere as much as there do we feel threatened by possibilities, shaken by the nearness of fulfillment, pale and faint with the delightful rigidity of realization. And that is as far as it goes.

Having exceeded a certain point of tension, the tide stops and begins to ebb, the atmosphere becomes unclear and troubled, possibilities fade and decline into a void, the crazy gray poppies of excitement scatter into ashes.

We shall always regret that, at a given moment, we have left the slightly dubious tailor's shop. We shall never be able to find it again. We shall wander from shop sign to shop sign and make a thousand mistakes. We shall enter scores of shops, see many which are similar. We shall wander along shelves upon shelves of books, look through magazines and prints, confer intimately and at length with young women of imperfect beauty, with an excessive pigmentation who yet would not be able to understand our requirements.

We shall get involved in misunderstandings until all our fever and excitement have spent themselves in unnecessary effort, in futile pursuit.

Our hopes were a fallacy, the suspicious appearance of the premises and of the staff were a sham, the clothes were real clothes, and the salesman had no ulterior motives. The women of the Street of Crocodiles are deprived to only a modest extent, stifled by thick layers of moral prejudice and ordinary banality. In that city of cheap human material no instincts can flourish, no dark and unusual passions can be aroused.
The Street of Crocodiles was a concession of our city to modernity and metropolitan corruption. Obviously, we were unable to afford anything better than a paper imitation, a montage of illustrations cut out from last year’s moldering newspapers.

COCKROACHES

It happened during the period of gray days that followed the splendid colorfulness of my father’s heroic era. These were long weeks of depression, heavy weeks without Sundays or holidays, under closed skies in an impoverished landscape. Father was then no more with us. The rooms on the upper floor had been tidied up and let to a lady telephone operator. From the bird estate only one specimen remained, the stuffed condor that now stood on a shelf in the living room. In the cool twilight of drawn curtains, it stood there as it did when it was alive, on one foot, in the pose of a Buddhist sage, its bitter dried-up ascetic face petrified in an expression of extreme indifference and abnegation. Its eyes had fallen out and sawdust scattered from the washed-out tear-stained sockets. Only the pale blue horny Egyptian protuberances on the powerful beak and the bald neck gave that senile head a solemnly hieratic air.

Its coat of feathers was in many places moth-eaten and it shed soft, gray down, which Adela swept away once a week together with the anonymous dust of the room. Under the bald patches one could see thick canvas sacking from which tufts of hemp were coming out.

I had a hidden resentment against my mother for the ease with which she had recovered from Father’s death. She had never loved him, I thought, and as Father had not been rooted in any woman’s heart, he could not merge with any reality and was therefore condemned to float eternally on the periphery of life, in half-real regions, on the margins of existence. He could not even earn an honest citizen’s death, everything about him had to be odd and dubious. I decided at an appropriate moment
to force my mother into a frank conversation. On that day (it was a heavy winter day and from early morning the light had been dusky and diffused) Mother was suffering from a migraine and was lying down on the sofa in the drawing room.

In that rarely visited, festive room exemplary order had reigned since Father's death, maintained by Adela with the help of wax and polish. The chairs all had antimacassars; all the objects had submitted to the iron discipline which Adela exercised over them. Only a sheaf of peacock's feathers standing in a vase on a chest of drawers did not submit to regimentation. These feathers were a dangerous, frivolous element, hiding rebelliousness, like a class of naughty schoolgirls who are quiet and composed in appearance, but full of mischief when no longer watched. The eyes of those feathers never stopped staring; they made holes in the walls, winking, fluttering their eyelashes, smiling to one another, giggling and full of mirth. They filled the room with whispers and chattering, they scattered like butterflies around the many-armed lamps; like a motley crowd they pushed against the matted, elderly mirrors, unused to such bustle and gaiety; they peeped through the keyholes. Even in the presence of my mother, lying on the sofa with a bandage round her head, they could not restrain themselves; they made signs, speaking to each other in a deaf-and-dumb language full of secret meaning. I was irritated by that mocking conspiracy hatched behind my back. With my knees pressed against Mother's sofa, absentmindedly touching with two fingers the delicate fabric of her housecoat, I said lightly:

"I have been wanting to ask you for a long time: is he, isn't it?"

And, although I did not point to the condor even with my eyes, Mother guessed at once, became embarrassed and cast down her eyes. I let the silence drag on for a long moment in order to savor her confusion, and then very calmly, controlling my rising anger, I asked her:

"What is the meaning then of all the stories and the lies which you are spreading about Father?"

But her features, which at first contracted in panic, composed themselves again.

"What lies?" she asked, blinking her eyes, which were empty, filled with dark azure without any white.

"I heard about them from Adela," I said, "but I know that they come from you; and I want to know the truth."

Her lips trembled lightly, she avoided looking me in the eye, her pupils wandering into the corners of her eyes.

"I was not lying," she said and her lips swelled but at the same time became smaller. I felt she was being coy, like a woman with a strange man. "What I said about the cockroaches is true; you yourself must remember . . ."

I was disconcerted. I did remember the invasion of cockroaches, the black swarm which had nightly filled the darkness with a spidery running. All cracks in the floors were full of moving whispers, each crevice suddenly produced a cockroach, from every chink would shoot a crazy black zigzag of lightning. Ah, that wild lunacy of panic, traced in a shiny black line on the floor! Ah, those screams of horror which my father emitted, leaping from one chair to another with a javelin in his hand!

Refusing all food and drink, with fever patches on his cheeks, with a grimace of revulsion permanently fixed around his mouth, my father had grown completely wild. It was clear that no human body could bear for long such a pitch of hatred. A terrible loathing had transformed his face into a petrified tragic mask, in which the pupils, hidden behind the lower lids, lay in wait, tense as bows, in a frenzy of permanent suspicion. With a wild scream he would suddenly jump up from his seat, run blindly to a corner of the room and stab downward with the javelin, then lift it, having impaled an enormous cockroach that desperately wriggled its tangle of legs. Adela would then come to the rescue and take the lance with its trophy from Father, now pale and faint with horror, and shake it off into a bucket. But even at the time, I could not tell whether these pictures were implanted in my mind by Adela's tales or whether I had witnessed them myself. My father at the time no longer possessed that power of resistance which protects healthy people from the fascination of loathing. Instead of fighting against the terrible attraction of that fascination, my father, a prey to madness, became completely subjected to it. The fatal consequences were quick to follow. Soon, the first suspicious
symptoms appeared, filling us with fear and sadness. Father's behavior changed. His madness, the euphoria of his excitement wore off. In his gestures and expressions signs of a bad conscience began to show. He took to avoiding us. He hid, for days on end, in corners, in wardrobes, under the eiderdowns. I saw him sometimes looking pensively at his own hands, examining the consistency of skin and nails, on which black spots began to appear like the scales of a cockroach.

In daytime he was still able to resist with such strength as remained in him, and fought his obsession, but during the night it took hold of him completely. I once saw him late at night, in the light of a candle set on the floor. He lay on the floor naked, stained with black totem spots, the lines of his ribs heavily outlined, the fantastic structure of his anatomy visible through the skin; he lay on his face, in the grip of the obsession of loathing which dragged him into the abyss of its complex paths. He moved with the many-limbed, complicated movements of a strange ritual in which I recognized with horror an imitation of the ceremonial crawl of a cockroach.

From that day on we gave Father up for lost. His resemblance to a cockroach became daily more pronounced—he was being transformed into one.

We got used to it. We saw him ever more rarely, as he would disappear for weeks on end on his cockroachy paths. We ceased to recognize him; he merged completely with that black, uncanny tribe. Who could say whether he continued to live in some crack in the floor, whether he ran through the rooms at night absorbed in cockroachy affairs, or whether perhaps he was one of those dead insects which Adela found every morning lying on their backs with their legs in the air and which she swept up into a dustpan to burn later with disgust?

"And yet," I said, disconcerted, "I am sure that this condor is he."

My mother looked at me from under her eyelashes.

"Don't torture me, darling; I have told you already that Father is away, traveling all over the country; he now has a job as a commercial traveler. You know that he sometimes comes home at night and goes away again before dawn."

THE GALE

During that long and empty winter, darkness in our city reaped an enormous, hundredfold harvest. The attics and storage rooms had been left cluttered up for too long, with old pots and pans stacked one on top of another, and batteries of discarded empty bottles.

There, in those charred, many-raftered forests of attics, darkness began to degenerate and ferment wildly. There began the black parliaments of saucepans, those verbose and inconclusive meetings, those gurglings of bottles, those stammerings of flagons. Until one night the regiments of saucepans and bottles rose under the empty roofs and marched in a great bulging mass against the city.

The attics, now freed from their clutter, opened up their expanses; through their echoing black aisles ran cascades of beams, formations of wooden trestles, kneeling on their knees of pine, now at last freed to fill the night with a clutter of rafters and the crash of purlins and crossbeams.

Then the black rivers of tubs and watercans overflowed and swept through the night. Their black, shining, noisy concourse besieged the city. In the darkness that mob of receptacles swarmed and pressed forward like an army of talkative fishes, a boundless invasion of garrulous pails and voluble buckets.

Drumming on their sides, the barrels, buckets, and watercans rose in stacks, the earthenware jars gaddled about, the old bowlers and opera hats climbed one on top of another, growing toward the sky in pillars only to collapse at last.

And all the while their wooden tongues rattled clumsily, while they ground out curses from their wooden mouths, and
AUGUST

1

In July my father went to take the waters and left me, with my mother and elder brother, a prey to the blinding white heat of the summer days. Dizzy with light, we dipped into that enormous book of holidays, its pages blazing with sunshine and scented with the sweet melting pulp of golden pears.

On those luminous mornings Adela returned from the market, like Pomona emerging from the flames of day, spilling from her basket the colorful beauty of the sun—the shiny pink cherries full of juice under their transparent skins, the mysterious black morellos that smelled so much better than they tasted, apricots in whose golden pulp lay the core of long afternoons. And next to that pure poetry of fruit, she unloaded sides of meat with their keyboard of ribs swollen with energy and strength, and seaweeds of vegetables like dead octopuses and squids—the raw material of meals with a yet undefined taste, the vegetative and terrestrial ingredients of dinner, exuding a wild and rustic smell.

The dark second-floor apartment of the house in Market Square was shot through each day by the naked heat of summer: the silence of the shimmering streaks of air, the squares of brightness dreaming their intense dreams on the floor; the sound of a barrel organ rising from the deepest golden vein of day; two or three bars of a chorus, played on a distant piano over and over again, melting in the sun on the white pavement, lost in the fire of high noon.
After tidying up, Adela would plunge the rooms into semi-darkness by drawing down the linen blinds. All colors immediately fell an octave lower, the room filled with shadows, as if it had sunk to the bottom of the sea and the light was reflected in mirrors of green water—and the heat of the day began to breathe on the blinds as they stirred slightly in their daydreams.

On Saturday afternoons I used to go for a walk with my mother. From the dusk of the hallway, we stepped at once into the brightness of the day. The passersby, bathed in melting gold, had their eyes half-closed against the glare, as if they were drenched with honey. Upper lips were drawn back, exposing the teeth. Everyone in this golden day wore that grimace of heat—as if the sun had forced his worshipers to wear identical masks of gold. The old and the young, women and children, greeted each other with these masks, painted on their faces with thick gold paint; they smiled at each other’s pagan faces—the barbaric smiles of Bacchus.

Market Square was empty and white hot, swept by hot winds like a biblical desert. The thorny acacias, growing in this emptiness, looked with their bright leaves like the trees on old tapestries. Although there was no breath of wind, they rustled their foliage in a theatrical gesture, as if wanting to display the elegance of the silver lining of their leaves that resembled the fox-fur lining of a nobleman’s coat. The old houses, worn smooth by the winds of innumerable days, played tricks with the reflections of the atmosphere, with echoes and memories of colors scattered in the depth of the cloudless sky. It seemed as if whole generations of summer days, like patient stonemasons cleaning the mildewed plaster from old facades, had removed the deceptive varnish revealing more and more clearly the true face of the houses, the features that fate had given them and life had shaped for them from the inside. Now the windows, blinded by the glare of the empty square, had fallen asleep; the balconies declared their emptiness to heaven; the open doorways smelt of coolness and wine.

A bunch of ragamuffins, sheltering in a corner of the square from the flaming broom of the heat, beleaguered a piece of wall, throwing buttons and coins at it over and over again, as if wishing to read in the horoscope of those metal discs the real secret written in the hieroglyphics of cracks and scratched lines. Apart from them, the square was deserted. One expected that, any minute, the Samaritan’s donkey, led by the bridle, would stop in front of the wine merchant’s vaulted doorway and that two servants would carefully ease a sick man from the red-hot saddle and carry him slowly up the cool stairs to the floor above, already redolent of the Sabbath.

Thus my mother and I ambled along the two sunny sides of Market Square, guiding our broken shadows along the houses as over a keyboard. Under our soft steps the squares of the paving stones slowly filed past—some the pale pink of human skin, some golden, some blue gray, all flat, warm and velvety in the sun, like sundials, trodden to the point of obliteration, into blessed nothingness.

And finally on the corner of Stryjska Street we passed within the shadow of the chemist’s shop. A large jar of raspberry juice in the wide window symbolized the coolness of balms which can relieve all kinds of pain. After we passed a few more houses, the street ceased to maintain any pretense of urbanity, like a man returning to his little village who, piece by piece, strips off his Sunday best, slowly changing back into a peasant as he gets closer to his home.

The suburban houses were sinking, windows and all, into the exuberant tangle of blossoms in their little gardens. Overlooked by the light of day, weeds and wildflowers of all kinds luxuriated quietly, glad of the interval for dreams beyond the margin of time on the borders of an endless day. An enormous sunflower, lifted on a powerful stem and suffering from hypertrophy, clad in the yellow mourning of the last sorrowful days of its life, bent under the weight of its monstrous girth. But the naive suburban bluebells and unpretentious dainty flowers stood helpless in their starched pink and white shifts, indifferent to the sunflower’s tragedy.
boredom; Touya chatters in a monotone, dozes, mumbles softly, and coughs. Her immobile frame is covered by a thick cloak of flies. But suddenly the whole heap of dirty rags begins to move, as if stirred by the scratching of a litter of newborn rats. The flies wake up in fright and rise in a huge, furious buzzing cloud, filled with colored light reflected from the sun. And while the rags slip to the ground and spread out over the rubbish heap, like frightened rats, a form emerges and reveals itself: the dark half-naked idiot girl rises slowly to her feet and stands like a pagan idol, on short childish legs; her neck swells with anger, and from her face, red with fury, on which the arabesques of bulging veins stand out as in a primitive painting, comes forth a hoarse animal scream, originating deep in the lungs hidden in that half-animal, half-divine breast. The sun-dried thistles shout, the plantains swell and boast their shameless flesh, the weeds salivate with glistening poison, and the half-wit girl, hoarse with shouting, convulsed with madness, presses her fleshy belly in an excess of lust against the trunk of an elder, which groans softly under the insistent pressure of that libidinous passion, incited by the whole ghastly chorus to hideous unnatural fertility.

Touya’s mother, Maria, hired herself to housewives to scrub floors. She was a small saffron-yellow woman, and it was with saffron that she wiped the floors, the deal tables, the benches, and the banisters which she had scrubbed in the homes of the poor.

Once Adela took me to the old woman’s house. It was early in the morning when we entered the small blue-walled room, with its mud floor, lying in a patch of bright yellow sunlight in the still of the morning broken only by the frighteningly loud ticking of a cottage clock on the wall. In a straw-filled chest lay the foolish Maria, white as a wafer and motionless like a glove from which a hand had been withdrawn. And, as if taking advantage of her sleep, the silence talked, the yellow, bright, evil silence delivered its monologue, argued, and loudly spoke its vulgar manicatal soliloquy. Maria’s time—the time imprisoned in her soul—had left her and—terribly real—filled the room, vociferous and hellish in the bright silence of the morning, rising from the noisy mill of the clock like a cloud of bad flour, powdery flour, the stupid flour of madmen.
In one of those cottages, surrounded by brown railings and submerged in the lush green of its garden, lived Aunt Agatha. Coming through the garden to visit her, we passed numerous colored glass balls stuck on flimsy poles. In these pink, green, and violet balls were enclosed bright shining worlds, like the ideally happy pictures contained in the peerless perfection of soap bubbles.

In the gloom of the hall, with its old lithographs, rotten with mildew and blind with age, we rediscovered a well-known smell. In that old familiar smell was contained a marvelously simple synthesis of the life of those people, the distillation of their race, the quality of their blood, and the secret of their fate, imperceptibly mixed day by day with the passage of their own, private time. The old, wise door, the silent witness of the entries and exits of mother, daughters, sons, whose dark sighs accompanied the comings and goings of those people, now opened noiselessly like the door of a wardrobe, and we stepped into their life. They were sitting as if in the shadow of their own destiny and did not fight against it; with their first, clumsy gestures they revealed their secret to us. Besides, were we not related to them by blood and by fate?

The room was dark and velvety from the royal blue wallpaper with its gold pattern, but even here the echo of the flaming day shimmered brassily on the picture frames, on doorknobs and gilded borders, although it came through the filter of the dense greenery of the garden. From her chair against the wall, Aunt Agatha rose to greet us, tall and ample, her round white flesh blotchy with the rust of freckles. We sat down beside them, as on the verge of their lives, rather embarrassed by their defenseless surrender to us, and we drank water with rose syrup, a wonderful drink in which I found the deepest essence of that hot Saturday.

My aunt was complaining. It was the principal burden of her conversation, the voice of that white and fertile flesh, floating as it were outside the boundaries of her person, held only loosely in the fetters of individual form, and despite those fetters, ready to multiply, to scatter, branch out, and divide into a family. It was an almost self-propagating fertility, a femininity without rein, morbidly expansive.

It seemed as if the very whiff of masculinity, the smell of tobacco smoke, or a bachelor's joke, would spark off this feverish femininity and entice it to a lascivious virgin birth. And in fact, all her complaints about her husband or her servants, all her worries about the children were only the caprices of her incompletely satisfied fertility, a logical extension of the rude, angry, lachrymose coquetry with which, to no purpose, she plagued her husband. Uncle Mark, small and hunched, with a face fell of sex, sat in his gray bankruptcy, reconciled to his fate, in the shadow of a limitless contempt in which he seemed only to relax. His gray eyes reflected the distant glow of the garden, spreading in the window.

Sometimes he tried with a feeble gesture to raise an objection, to resist, but the wave of self-sufficient femininity hurled aside that unimportant gesture, triumphantly passed him by, and drowned the feeble stirrings of male assertiveness under its broad flood.

There was something tragic in that immoderate fertility; the misery of a creature fighting on the borders of nothingness and death, the heroism of womanhood triumphing by fertility over the shortcomings of nature, over the insufficiency of the male. But their offspring showed justification for that panic of maternity, of a passion for childbearing which became exhausted in ill-starred pregnancies, in an ephemeral generation of phantoms without blood or face.

Lucy, the second eldest, now entered the room, her head overdeveloped for her childlike, plump body, her flesh white and delicate. She stretched out to me a small doll-like hand, a hand in bud, and blushed all over her face like a peony. Unhappy because of her blushes, which shamelessly revealed the secrets of menstruation, she closed her eyes and reddened even more deeply under the touch of the most indifferent question, for she saw in each a secret allusion to her most sensitive maidenhood.

Emil, the eldest of the cousins, with a fair mustache in a face from which life seemed to have washed away all expression,
was walking up and down the room, his hands in the pockets of his voluminous trousers.

His elegant, expensive clothes bore the imprint of the exotic countries he had visited. His pale flabby face seemed from day to day to lose its outline to become a white blank wall with a pale network of veins, like lines on an old map occasionally stirred by the fading memories of a stormy and wasted life.

He was a master of card tricks, he smoked long, noble pipes, and he smelled strangely of distant lands. With his gaze wandering over old memories, he told curious stories, which at some point would suddenly stop, disintegrate, and blow away.

My eyes followed him nostalgically, and I wished he would notice me and liberate me from the tortures of boredom. And indeed, it seemed as if he gave me a wink before going into an adjoining room and I followed him there. He was sitting on a small, low sofa, his crossed knees almost level with his head, which was bald like a billiard ball. It seemed as if it were only his clothes that had been thrown, crumpled and empty, over a chair. His face seemed like the breath of a face—a smudge which an unknown passerby had left in the air. In his white, blue-enamelled hands he was holding a wallet and looking at something in it.

From the mist of his face, the protruding white of a pale eye emerged with difficulty, enticing me with a wink. I felt an irresistible sympathy for Emil.

He took me between his knees and, shuffling some photographs in front of my eyes as if they were a pack of cards, he showed me naked women and boys in strange positions. I stood leaning against him looking at those delicate human bodies with distant, unseeing eyes, when all of a sudden the fluid of an obscure excitement with which the air seemed charged, reached me and pierced me with a shiver of uneasiness, a wave of sudden comprehension. But meanwhile that ghost of a smile which had appeared under Emil's soft and beautiful mustache, the seed of desire which had shown in a pulsating vein on his temple, the tenseness which for a moment had kept his features concentrated, all fell away again and his face receded into indifference and became absent and finally faded away altogether.

VISITATION

I

Already for some time our town had been sinking into the perpetual grayness of dusk, had become affected at the edges by a rash of shadows, by fluffy mildew, and by moss the dull color of iron.

Hardly was it freed from the brown smoke and the mists of the morning than the day turned into a lowering amber afternoon, became for a brief moment transparent, taking the golden color of ale, only to ascend under the multiple fantastic domes of vast, color-filled nights.

We lived on Market Square, in one of those dark houses with empty blind nooks, so difficult to distinguish one from the other.

This gave endless possibilities for mistakes. For once you had entered the wrong doorway and set foot on the wrong staircase, you were liable to find yourself in a real labyrinth of unfamiliar apartments and balconies, and unexpected doors opening onto strange empty courtyards, and you forgot the initial object of the expedition, only to recall it days later after numerous strange and complicated adventures, on regaining the family home in the gray light of dawn.

Full of large wardrobes, vast sofas, faded mirrors, and cheap artificial palms, our apartment sank deeper and deeper into a state of neglect owing to the indolence of my mother, who spent most of her time in the shop, and the carelessness of slim-legged Adela, who, without anyone to supervise her, spent her days in front of a mirror, endlessly making up and leaving everywhere
tufts of combed-out hair, brushes, odd slippers, and discarded corsets.

No one ever knew exactly how many rooms we had in our apartment, because no one ever remembered how many of them were let to strangers. Often one would by chance open the door to one of these forgotten rooms and find it empty; the lodger had moved out a long time ago. In the drawers, untouched for months, one would make unexpected discoveries.

In the downstairs rooms lived the shop assistants and sometimes during the night we were awakened by their nightmares. In winter it would be still deep night when Father went down to these cold and dark rooms, the light of his candle scattering flocks of shadows so that they fled sideways along the floor and up the walls; his task to wake the snoring men from their stone-hard sleep.

In the light of the candle, which Father left with them, they unwound themselves lazily from the dirty bedding, then, sitting on the edge of their beds, stuck out their bare and ugly feet and, with socks in their hands, abandoned themselves for a moment to the delights of yawning—a yawning crossing the borders of sensuous pleasure, leading to a painful cramp of the palate, almost to nausea.

In the corners, large cockroaches sat immobile, hideously enlarged by their own shadows which the burning candle imposed on them and which remained attached to their flat, headless bodies when they suddenly ran off with weird, spiderlike movements.

At that time, my father’s health began to fail. Even in the first weeks of this early winter, he would spend whole days in bed, surrounded by bottles of medicine and boxes of pills, and ledgers brought up to him from the shop. The bitter smell of illness settled like a rug in the room and the arabesques on the wallpaper loomed darker.

In the evenings, when Mother returned from the shop, Father was often excited and inclined to argue.

As he reproached her for inaccuracies in the accounts his cheeks became flushed and he became almost insane with anger. I remember more than once waking in the middle of the night to see him in his nightshirt, running in his bare feet up and down the leather sofa to demonstrate his irritation to my baffled mother.

On other days he was calm and composed, completely absorbed in the account books, lost in a maze of complicated calculations.

I can still see him in the light of the smoking lamp, crouched among his pillows under the large carved headboard of the bed, swaying backward and forward in silent meditation, his head making an enormous shadow on the wall.

From time to time, he raised his eyes from the ledgers as if to come up for air, opened his mouth, smacking his lips with distaste as if his tongue were dry and bitter, and looked around helplessly, as if searching for something.

It then sometimes happened that he quietly got out of bed and ran to the corner of the room where an intimate instrument hung on the wall. It was a kind of hourglass-shaped water jar marked in ounces and filled with a dark fluid. My father attached himself to it with a long rubber hose as if with a gnarled, aching umbilical cord and, thus connected with the miserable apparatus, he became tense with concentration, his eyes darkened, and an expression of suffering, or perhaps of forbidden pleasure, spread over his pale face.

Then again came days of quiet, concentrated work, interrupted by lonely monologues. While he sat there in the light of the lamp among the pillows of the large bed, and the room grew enormous as the shadows above the lampshade merged with the deep city night beyond the windows, he felt, without looking, how the pulsating jungle of wallpaper, filled with whispers, lisping and hissing, closed in around him. He heard, without looking, a conspiracy of knowingly winking hidden eyes, of alert ears opening up among the flowers on the wall, of dark, smiling mouths.

He then pretended to become even more engrossed in his work, adding and calculating, trying not to betray the anger which rose in him and overcoming the temptation to throw himself blindly forward with a sudden shout to grab fistfuls of those curly arabesques, or of those sheaves of eyes and ears which
swarmed out from the night and grew and multiplied, sprouting, with ever-new ghostlike shoots and branches, from the womb of darkness. And he calmed down only when, in the morning with the ebb of night, the wallpaper wilted, shed its leaves and petals and thinned down autumnally, letting in the distant dawn.

Then, among the twittering of wallpaper birds in the yellow wintry dawn, he would fall, for a few hours, into a heavy black sleep.

For days, even for weeks, while he seemed to be engrossed in the complicated current accounts—his thoughts had been secretly plumbing the depths of his own entrails. He would hold his breath and listen. And when his gaze returned, pale and troubled, from that labyrinth, he calmed it with a smile. He did not wish to believe those assumptions and suggestions which oppressed him, and rejected them as absurd.

In daytime, these were more like arguments and persuasions; long monotonous reasoning, conducted half-aloud and with humorous interludes of teasing and banter. But at night these voices rose with greater passion. The demands were made more clearly and more loudly, and we heard him talk to God, as if begging for something or fighting against someone who made insistent claims and issued orders.

Until one night that voice rose threateningly and irresistibly, demanding that he should bear witness to it with his mouth and with his entrails. And we heard the spirit enter into him as he rose from his bed, tall and growing in prophetic anger, choking with brash words that he emitted like a machine gun. We heard the din of battle and Father's groans, the groans of a Titan with a broken hip, but still capable of wrath.

I have never seen an Old Testament prophet, but at the sight of this man stricken by God's fire, sitting clumsily on an enormous china chamber pot behind a windmill of arms, a screen of desperate wrigglings over which there towered his voice, grown unfamiliar and hard, I understood the divine anger of saintly men.

It was a dialogue as grim as the language of thunder. The jerkings of his arms cut the sky into pieces, and in the cracks there appeared the face of Jehovah swollen with anger and spitting out curses. Without looking, I saw him, the terrible Demiurge, as, resting on darkness as on Sinai, propping his powerful palms on the pelmet of the curtains, he pressed his enormous face against the upper panes of the window which flattened horribly his large fleshy nose.

I heard my father's voice during the intermissions in these prophetic tirades. I heard the windows shake from the powerful growl of the swollen lips, mixed with the explosions of entreaties, laments, and threats uttered by Father.

Sometimes the voices quietened down and grumbled softly, like the nightly chatter of wind in a chimney; then again they exploded with a large, tumultuous noise, in a storm of sobs mixed with curses. Suddenly the window opened with a dark yawn and a sheet of darkness wafted across the room.

In a flash of lightning I could see my father, his nightshirt unbuttoned, as, cursing terribly, he emptied with a masterful gesture the contents of the chamber pot into the darkness below.

My father was slowly fading, wilting before our eyes.

Hunched among the enormous pillows, his gray hair standing wildly on end, he talked to himself in undertones, engrossed in some complicated private business. It seemed as if his personality had split into a number of opposing and quarreling selves; he argued loudly with himself, persuading forcibly and passionately, pleading and begging; then again he seemed to be presiding over a meeting of many interested parties whose views he tried to reconcile with a great show of energy and conviction. But every time these noisy meetings, during which tempers would rise violently, dissolved into curses, execrations, maledictions, and insults.

Then came a period of appeasement, of an interior calm, a blessed serenity of spirit. Again the great ledgers were spread on the bed, on the table, on the floor, and an almost monastic calm reigned in the light of the lamp, over the white bedding, over my father's gray, bowed head.
But when Mother returned late at night from the shop, Father became animated, called her and showed her with great pride the wonderful colored decals with which he had laboriously adorned the pages of the main ledger.

About that time we noticed that Father began to shrink from day to day, like a nut drying inside the shell.

This shrinking was not accompanied by any loss of strength. On the contrary: there seemed to be an improvement in his general state of health, in his humor, and in his mobility.

Now he often laughed loudly and gaily; sometimes he was almost overcome with laughter; at others, he would knock on the side of the bed and answer himself, “Come in,” in various tones, for hours on end. From time to time, he scrambled down from the bed, climbed on top of the wardrobe, and, crouching under the ceiling, sorted our old dust-covered odds and ends.

Sometimes he put two chairs back-to-back and, taking his weight on them, swung his legs backward and forward, looking with shining eyes for an expression of admiration and encouragement in our faces. It seemed as if he had become completely reconciled with God. Sometimes at night, the face of the bearded Demiurge would appear at the bedroom window, bathed in the dark purple glare of Bengal fire, but it only looked for a moment benevolently on my sleeping father whose melodic snoring seemed to wander far into the unknown regions of the world of sleep.

During the long twilight afternoons of this winter, my father would spend hours rummaging in corners full of old junk, as if he were feverishly searching for something.

And sometimes at dinnertime, when we had all taken our places at the table, Father would be missing. On such occasions, Mother had to call “Jacob!” over and over again and knock her spoon against the table before he emerged from inside a wardrobe, covered with dust and cobwebs, his eyes vacant, his mind on some complicated matter known only to himself which absorbed him completely.

Occasionally he climbed on a pelmet and froze into immobility, a counterpart to the large stuffed vulture which hung on the wall opposite. In this crouching pose, with misty eyes and a sly smile on his lips, he remained for long periods without moving, except to flap his arms like wings and crow like a cock whenever anybody entered the room.

We ceased to pay attention to these oddities in which Father became daily more and more involved. Almost completely rid of bodily needs, not taking any nourishment for weeks, he plunged deeper every day into some strange and complex affairs that were beyond our understanding. To all our persuasions and our entreaties, he answered in fragments of his interior monologue, which nothing from the outside could disturb. Constantly absorbed, morbidly excited, with flushes on his dry cheeks, he did not notice us or even hear us anymore.

We became used to his harmless presence, to his soft babbling, and that childlike self-absorbed twittering, which sounded as if they came from the margin of our own time. During that period he used to disappear for many days into some distant corner of the house and it was difficult to locate him.

Gradually these disappearances ceased to make any impression on us, we became used to them and when, after many days, Father reappeared a few inches shorter and much thinner, we did not stop to think about it. We did not count him as one of us anymore, so very remote had he become from everything that was human and real. Knot by knot, he loosened himself from us; point by point, he gave up the ties joining him to the human community.

What still remained of him—the small shroud of his body and the handful of nonsensical oddities—would finally disappear one day, as unremarked as the gray heap of rubbish swept into a corner, waiting to be taken by Adela to the rubbish dump.
Came the yellow days of winter, filled with boredom. The rust-colored earth was covered with a threadbare, meager tablecloth of snow full of holes. There was not enough of it for some of the roofs and so they stood there, black and brown, shingle and thatch, arks containing the sooty expanses of attics—coal black cathedrals, bristling with ribs of rafters, beams, and spars—the dark lungs of winter winds. Each dawn revealed new chimney stacks and chimney pots which had emerged during the hours of darkness, blown up by the night winds: the black pipes of a devil's organ. The chimney sweeps could not get rid of the crows which in the evening covered the branches of the trees around the church with living black leaves, then took off, fluttering, and came back, each clinging to its own place on its own branch, only to fly away at dawn in large flocks, like gusts of soor, flakes of dirt, undulating and fantastic, blackening with their insistent cawing the musty yellow streaks of light. The days hardened with cold and boredom like last year's loaves of bread. One began to cut them with blunt knives without appetite, with a lazy indifference.

Father had stopped going out. He banked up the stoves, studied the ever-elusive essence of fire, experienced the salty, metallic taste and the smoky smell of wintry salamanders that licked the shiny soot in the throat of the chimney. He applied himself lovingly at that time to all manner of small repairs in the upper regions of the rooms. At all hours of the day one could see him crouched on top of a ladder, working at something under the ceiling, at the cornices over the tall windows, at the counterweights and chains of the hanging lamps. Following the custom
of house painters, he used a pair of steps as enormous stilts and he felt perfectly happy in that bird's-eye perspective close to the sky, leaves and birds painted on the ceiling. He grew more and more remote from practical affairs. When my mother, worried and unhappy about his condition, tried to draw him into a conversation about business, about the payments due at the end of the month, he listened to her absentmindedly, anxiety showing in his abstracted look. Sometimes he stopped her with a warning gesture of the hand in order to run to a corner of the room, put his ear to a crack in the floor and, by lifting the index fingers of both hands, emphasize the gravity of the investigation, and begin to listen intently. At that time we did not yet understand the sad origin of these eccentricities, the deplorable complex which had been maturing in him.

Mother had no influence over him, but he gave a lot of respectful attention to Adela. The cleaning of his room was to him a great and important ceremony, of which he always arranged to be a witness, watching all Adela's movements with a mixture of apprehension and pleasurable excitement. He ascribed to all her functions a deeper, symbolic meaning. When, with young firm gestures, the girl pushed a long-handled broom along the floor, Father could hardly bear it. Tears would stream from his eyes, silent laughter transformed his face, and his body was shaken by spasms of delight. He was ticklish to the point of madness. It was enough for Adela to waggle her fingers at him to imitate tickling, for him to rush through all the rooms in a wild panic, banging the doors after him, to fall at last on the bed in the farthest room and wriggle in convulsions of laughter, imagining the tickling which he found irresistible. Because of this, Adela's power over Father was almost limitless.

At that time we noticed for the first time Father's passionate interest in animals. To begin with, it was the passion of the huntsman and the artist rolled into one. It was also perhaps a deeper, biological sympathy of one creature for kindred, yet different, forms of life, a kind of experimenting in the unexplored regions of existence. Only at a later stage did matters take that uncanny, complicated, essentially sinful and unnatural turn, which is better not to bring into the light of day.

But it all began with the hatching out of birds' eggs.

With a great outlay of effort and money, Father imported from Hamburg, or Holland, or from zoological stations in Africa, birds' eggs on which he set enormous brood hens from Belgium. It was a process which fascinated me as well—this hatching out of the chicks, which were real anomalies of shape and color. It was difficult to anticipate—in these monsters with enormous, fantastic beaks which they opened wide immediately after birth, hissing greedily to show the backs of their throats, in these lizards with frail, naked bodies of hunchbacks—the future peacocks, pheasants, grouse, or condors. Placed in cotton wool, in baskets, this dragon brood lifted blind, waddled heads on thin necks, croaking voicelessly from their dumb throats. My father would walk along the shelves, dressed in a green baize apron, like a gardener in a hothouse of cacti, and conjure up from nothingness these blind bubbles, pulsating with life, these impotent bellies receiving the outside world only in the form of food, these growths on the surface of life, climbing blindfolded toward the light. A few weeks later, when these blind buds of matter burst open, the rooms were filled with the bright chatter and scintillating chirruping of their new inhabitants. The birds perched on the curtain pelmets, on the tops of wardrobes; they nestled in the tangle of tin branches and the metal scrolls of the hanging lamps.

While Father pored over his large ornithological textbooks and studied their colored plates, these feathery phantasms seemed to rise from the pages and fill the rooms with colors, with splashes of crimson, strips of sapphire, verdigris, and silver. At feeding time they formed a motley, undulating bed on the floor, a living carpet which at the intrusion of a stranger would fall apart, scatter into fragments, flutter in the air, and finally settle high under the ceilings. I remember in particular a certain condor, an enormous bird with a featherless neck, its face wrinkled and knobly. It was an emaciated ascetic, a Buddhist lama, full of imperturbable dignity in its behavior, guided by the rigid ceremonial of its great species. When it sat facing my father, motionless in the monumental position of ageless Egyptian idols, its eyes covered with a whitish cataract which it
pulled down sideways over its pupil to shut itself up completely in the contemplation of its dignified solitude—it seemed, with its stony profile, like an older brother of my father's. Its body and muscles seemed to be made of the same material, it had the same hard, wrinkled skin, the same desiccated bony face, the same horny, deep eye sockets. Even the hands, strong in the joints, my father's long, thick hands with their rounded nails, had their counterpart in the condor's claws. I could not resist the impression, when looking at the sleeping condor, that I was in the presence of a mummy—a dried-out, shrunken mummy of my father. I believe that even my mother noticed this strange resemblance, although we never discussed the subject. It is significant that the condor used my father's chamber pot.

Not content with the hatching out of more and more new specimens, my father arranged the marriages of birds in the attic, he sent out matchmakers, he tied up eager attractive birds in the holes and crannies under the roof, and soon the roof of our house, an enormous double-rigged shingle roof, became a real birds' hostel, a Noah's ark to which all kinds of feathery creatures flew from far afield. Long after the liquidation of the birds' paradise, this tradition persisted in the avian world and during the period of spring migration our roof was besieged by whole flocks of cranes, pelicans, peacocks, and sundry other birds. However, after a short period of splendor, the whole undertaking took a sorry turn.

It soon became necessary to move my father to two rooms at the top of the house which had served as storage rooms. We could hear from there, at dawn, the mixed clangor of birds' voices. The wooden walls of the attic rooms, helped by the resonance of the empty space under the gables, sounded with the roar, the flutterings, the crowing, the gurgling, the mating cries. For a few weeks Father was lost to view. He only rarely came down to the apartment and, when he did, we noticed that he seemed to have shrunk, to have become smaller and thinner. Occasionally forgetting himself, he would rise from his chair at table, wave his arms as if they were wings, and emit a long-drawn-out bird's call while his eyes misted over. Then, rather embarrassed, he would join us in laughing it off and try to turn the whole incident into a joke.

One day, during spring cleaning, Adela suddenly appeared in Father's bird kingdom. Stopping in the doorway, she wrung her hands at the fetid smell that filled the room, the heaps of droppings covering the floor, the tables, and the chairs. Without hesitation, she flung open the window and, with the help of a long broom, she prodded the whole mass of birds into life. A fiendish cloud of feathers and wings arose screaming, and Adela, like a furious maenad protected by the whirlwind of her thyrsus, danced the dance of destruction. My father, waving his arms in panic, tried to lift himself into the air with his feathered flock. Slowly the winged cloud thinned until at last Adela remained on the battlefield, exhausted and out of breath, along with my father, who now, adopting a worried hangdog expression, was ready to accept complete defeat.

A moment later, my father came downstairs—a broken man, an exiled king who had lost his throne and his kingdom.