

HEIMITO VON DODERER

Seven Variations On A Theme By
Johann Peter Hebel (1760-1826)

Translated by Vincent Kling

Theme

Once, when the family friend was walking past the churchyard with Doctor von Brassenheim, the doctor pointed out a fresh grave and said, "That very man's another one who gave me the slip. His friends dispatched him."

In the tavern, where all the town scribes were sitting together in lively controversy, one man pounded on the table. "There are not such things!" he said, meaning ghosts and specters. "And any man who gets scared by them," he continued, "is an old woman." Another took him at his word and said, "Bookkeeper, do not presume. I'll wager six bottles of Burgundy wine that I can make your flesh creep, even though I'm telling you so beforehand." The bookkeeper went in on the bet. "Done."

The other scribe now went to the surgeon. "Doctor, the next time you have a corpse for dissection, I should like you to remove one of the forearms at the elbow for me, if you would." After some time the surgeon came to him. "We have received the corpse of a suicide, a sievemaker. The miller found him by the dam." And so he brought the man's forearm to the scribe. "You still say there are no specters, bookkeeper?" "No, there are no such things."

Now the scribe crept secretly into the bookkeeper's bedchamber and lay under the bed, and when the bookkeeper had laid himself to rest and fallen asleep, the scribe ran his own warm hand over the man's face. The bookkeeper started up, and being a man of genuine courage and resolution, he said, "What pranks are these? Do you think I'm not bearing in mind that you're trying to win the wager?" The scribe was as quiet as a mouse. When the bookkeeper had again fallen asleep, he ran a hand over his face once more. The bookkeeper said, "That'll be enough. Stop, or you better watch out what I do when I catch you." The scribe stroked his face for the third time, slowly now, and when the bookkeeper hurriedly snatched at him, wanting to say, "I've got you," he was holding a cold, dead hand and the severed stump of an arm in his hands, and cold, killing horror thrust deep down into his heart and his life. When he'd recovered, he said in a weak voice, "You have won the wager; to God be it lamented." The scribe laughed and said, "Let's drink the Burgundy on Sunday." But the bookkeeper replied, "I will nevermore drink it with any man." In short, he had a fever the next morning, and on the seventh morning he was a corpse. "Early yesterday," said the doctor to the family friend, "they bore him to the churchyard; he lies buried in the grave I showed you."

("Death from Fright", from Tales of the Rhenish Family Friend, volume for 1814)

Variation I

Talk in the tavern. Are there ghosts and specters? "Come now, such things are stories for old women, and any man who gets scared by them is an old woman." Suddenly, one who's been sitting quietly is visited with an inspiration, with an inspiration that nearly makes his brain explode. Splendid! Just wait! "Want to wager that I can make your flesh creep, all the way to your bones, tonight, even though I'm telling you so beforehand?" The wager is made for wine. He leaves right away and procures through his friend, the district surgeon, a forearm just removed during the autopsy on a suicide found by the dam not long before. Quick now, climb through the window, open in summer, into his room and under the bed - wonderful! It's a long wait, endless even; it's not very comfortable, either. If this were the bedroom of a beautiful young woman - ah, that would be better; the outlook would be more attractive, so to say. Now! The stairs are creaking. Good enough! He curls up under the bed. Light now, and a long clearing of the throat - ahem, ahem - now, just don't throw a boot at my head, my good sir! Dark. Footsteps groping through the room. Crash - the bed. Aha - he's sawing logs already. Gently now. He slides out from under the bed, holding the stump of the arm in his left hand, reaches out with his right, finds the face, and quickly runs his hand over it, starting from below and moving up to the nose. Then he ducks down. A small twitch. "You fool, you're not going to win the wager this way!" Bravo, not bad; good boy, pretty brave! Again. Go ahead and curse away! Now for the third time. "Just you wait!" comes a strong voice from the bed - thump - I mean stump - out of the sack - suicide front and center! - ha! - he's holding it. Silence. "Well, how do you feel now?" Silence. It seems to have had a powerful effect, but enough is enough.

And just as he strikes a light, and just as he's preparing to savor his complete success, and just as he's about to say, "Indeed yes, one should not be so presumptuous" - he sees on the pillows a bloodless face out of which two crazed eyes are staring at him, so that he himself is gripped with horror. For the man in the bed hasn't let go of the forearm; rather, he's continuing to hold it in a fearsome clenching grip, and the pale flesh with the red end where the arm had once sat in its joint is staring straight up out of the pillows.

A few days later the terrified man died.

Variation II

Talk in the tavern. Are there ghosts and specters? "Come now, such things are stories for old women, and any man who gets scared by them is an old woman." "Want to wager that I can make your flesh creep, all the way to your bones, tonight, even though I'm telling you so beforehand?" The wager is made for wine; the man who proposed it leaves not long afterward. The other one stays and sits with his comrades, longer and longer. They drink and smoke and drift in their talk to entirely different topics, God only knows what. So he reaches home late, terribly sleepy, and lies down to rest. After a while - his last images and thoughts are dissolving and mingling together as he drifts off - there is a jerk; something warm has passed over his face, upwards to the nose. Ah, bravo! That's right, it looks as if someone wants to win the wager, all fair and square and harmless, and to get a few bottles of wine! No, you're wasting your time, you ninny, you'd have to do better than that, and it wouldn't get you anywhere even so. "You fool, you're not going to win the wager this way!" He doesn't move; he's probably thinking that he can still save the situation somehow. Damn it to hell! Now you're getting a little too carried away. There! "Just you wait!" He makes a quick grab, and just as he's already thinking about how they'll be laughing at the other man tomorrow, there suddenly comes into being beneath him an open chasm into which he plunges; the whole dark room tips and slides deep downward. He falls, falls and holds the dead, cold hand in a clenching embrace, rushing with it down, down into the darkness, while above him a few last fleeing points of light must suffocate without mercy in the gloom. Then it grows lighter in the room, but how thin and weak is this light compared to the darkness that was as thick as tar. Someone is there, bending over him, tearing something out of his hands. "Here! What's wrong with you? It was only a joke! Look here, the doctor let me borrow the forearm of a dissection subject, and that's what you were holding, that's what you grabbed. Come on now, snap out of it!" Yes, his room and his comrade are there - now he understands everything. But just as he's pulling himself together and starting to feel ashamed of being taken in, and just as things all around him are becoming familiar to him again, he feels a deep weakness, and he can't reach for them even though he keeps reminding himself that it was all just a joke and a hoax. "Could I please

have a glass of water? There's the pitcher," he says - to hide his weakness, to be saying something. The light in the room seems feeble to him. He's forced to lie back down on the pillows. The darkness returns. This is ridiculous! Ridiculous! The word is swimming somewhere high above him like a fleeing point of light, a tiny point suffocating in the gloom. He comes awake again, recites this and that - a void, words trickling away, nothing answering them from life, from the heart: deep inward the cold, killing horror has thrust, sitting inside, safe from groping reason that would like to turn it back onto its usual course. It is pale, this thing called reason, weak, powerless; but the horror, strongly nourished, has a deep, tenacious life. No, he cannot, cannot reach that point in himself, that turning point that would have to be reached in order to come to life, the resilient spring - yes, the pivot and axle around which everything would need to hinge, to turn, to tilt over from horror into jest, which is reality after all. No, he can never again come back up to this elevation; it is too smooth, and already locked tight - door slammed shut, no point of contact any more. He is already forgetting freedom and reason and is turning back fully into the dark.

A few days later the terrified man died.

Out of the stream in which they'd been fishing there had emerged, instead of a wager won and vanity gratified, death in full raiment.

Variation III

A gentleman who owns an orchard goes one autumn evening to visit a family with whom he's friendly and brings as a present a basket of pears of the most varied sorts. Proud of the products of his horticultural solicitude, he invites everyone to try each different kind - these yellow ones, those brown ones. As a joke there was also one piece of fruit made of marzipan, very deceptive in its fidelity to nature. They sample; they discuss the differences. "But you still must try this kind!" the friend says to the lady of the family. "These are the best ones, even if they do look plain - no, don't cut it, it's extremely juicy; just bite right in heartily" (and he hands her the one made of marzipan). The good-natured lady lays aside her fruit knife, and just as she's already biting cheerfully into the fruit, awaiting the trickling juice with her chin extended over the plate a little, and just as she's wanting to show in her eyes her astonishment and her recognition of how well the fruit has turned out - just then her teeth sink into the dry, mealy, sweet marzipan. The previous expression still remains on her face, but

underneath it is like an open chasm. This mask, grown useless now, breaks open like a sheet of ice under which the water has sunk; she finds her way into the joke and into her own new facial expression as well - and she laughs. All those around her now laugh as well, but without knowing what about; the play of her features alone aroused them to it.

Variation IV

He worked in an insurance office in Vienna and lived with his sister, a pretty young woman who also had a job somewhere (I knew them both well). It was a very charming home in a neighborhood one otherwise didn't get to very often, far outlying, on a street with a bright-sounding name that had two a's in it. They always had a very cozy tea in the evening, and in winter you could go visit them. Once he was somewhat late getting home from the office, and he made a detour besides to look at something in an antique shop; they were always doing things by way of redecorating or remodeling their apartment, and in this instance a certain small old chest had been under consideration for some time. That evening he decided to buy it and went to make an offer; on that very day he'd received an unexpected payment. (The evening was somewhat smoky, misty.) Now he comes into his street, turns in, climbs the stairs, and just as he's wondering whether his sister is already at home and what she'll say now that he's finally bought the chest - just then the door opens slowly and she steps out in her hat and coat, stands leaning on the door post, and looks at him. Her lower lip and chin are hanging; her eyes are empty and tired. She lifts her arm and points inside and lets her arm fall back sluggishly so that it strikes against her hip. He goes inside. All is light.

The apartment is empty, totally and completely empty. He hurries, suddenly accelerated, through all the rooms.

The apartment is empty; not even the saltbox is hanging on the kitchen wall. Not a curtain, not a picture; even the hooks have been taken out of the walls; not a table, not a chair (it occurs to him how large these rooms really are); everything gone, everything taken away - walls, floors, ceiling, flat, bare - in the middle the light bulb is hanging from its cord; it's still there, but the globe has disappeared, too. He hurries back and asks questions. She knows just as little as he; she came home only two minutes before, right ahead of him.

He senses that they're going to have to open up to all this, to have to acknowledge it as a fact. To have to? Yes. It's as though an open chasm had come into being in him, one into which the rubble of his earlier composure and good spirits (as when he'd been walking up the stairs and thinking about his sister) comes crashing like a collapsing arch into the room below. It stays this way and becomes still more unnerving, indeed altogether incredible, when the building superintendent tells them: yes, that's right, a moving van, two o'clock this afternoon; he'd wondered a little himself at their moving away so suddenly, but the van and the movers had been ordered by them, the such-and-such company. Of course the brother and sister get on the telephone at once: of course the people at the moving company know nothing whatever about it.

There it is, then - larceny with stunning audacity.

The hubbub soon made its way through the building; people came out to the stairway landings, asking questions, calling, talking.

Still, they had to get on with living, these two, so they went for the time being to the nearest hotel.

But out on the street it assailed him (the evening was smoky and misty) - what hands are rummaging around in our lives? The matter no longer seemed to him to be standing there by itself; now a quite general indignation filled him, as though this one instance were really a general instance, as though all people had their apartments emptied out from time to time in this way, by invisible hands - which was nonsense and not true. "What hands are rummaging around in our lives? Out of what darkness do such hands come?"

So he walked along next to his sister and watched the two clouds of vapor from their breath mingling in front of them. What was more, they'd made a fool of him. They'd made him buy a chest, absurdly enough. What was he supposed to say to comfort her, keeping silent beside him and grieving? He was very near to saying, "Recently I've had a constant foreboding of something like this," but that was pure nonsense, so he couldn't possibly say it.

For the rest, no one was ever able to discover the culprits, in spite of all the best efforts of the police.

Variation V

Even the smallest course of events, when we observe it carefully, becomes strange and stands in a new light if we hold its uniqueness up before our eyes. One meaning to which even the most meaningless matter can lay claim is that nothing comes back again, just as that's exactly what it takes to bestow on the truly meaningful episode its full dark and painful background. But this is leading too far - and yet just think: your hand on the tavern table, somewhere, three years ago; or your foot, the day before yesterday, on the forest path.

The same here, then, where there won't be very much to report. When spring is bordering on summer and the nights grow warm, the benches in all the different parks and public gardens enter people's minds again in Vienna, as in every large city - in winter they're mostly disowned and disdained, often cushioned with snow, completely undisturbed and unperturbed - they reenter the minds of different segments of the public, and those include, among others: lovers in the broadest or narrowest sense; insomniacs (of different provenance); home-goers and debaters after the cafés close; purely pensive types (occurs seldom); finally and most important, the shelterless, ladies and gentlemen without lodging. Those are the ones around whom it would be most difficult to stick it out; they're very tough, though it's true they often tough it out only until the next policeman appears on the scene, often only until their arms and legs grow stiff; but at times they tough it out till broad daylight, if they have any luck.

Teddy, by contrast, was a young gentleman, which is to say one of those whose usual syndrome of problems persists long enough for its patronage to furnish them with a place to stay and for it to become high time for them to take up a life suitable to their station, which begins with their budgeting a month's wages on clothes and other such social necessities while living out of their parents' pockets for everything else. For Teddy, though, who didn't yet have any place to stay, the usual syndrome of problems was still resolutely persisting, and since (as his friends would have it) he's a thoroughly peculiar person, it might be that this condition will persist right up to the point of that rich marriage we're hoping will ultimately ensue. So, in any event, this case isn't entirely innocuous, and therefore we have a right to expect something from it.

With Rosa, on the other hand, matters stood as follows: she'd left service as a cook, toward evening, and wasn't due to report for her new job until the following morning. Her previous employer, however, concerned about an immediate replacement, scarcely made it possible for her to remain overnight. Her successor had already slid in under the door, so to speak, and it appeared that the new girl wasn't willing to share the room, not even for one night. Rosa

was a little proud; her departure had been in no way inglorious - Rosa was acting hastily now; she just took her things and left - but she didn't turn to her new employer. As it grew dark, the thought came to her that saving the cost of a night's lodging would be a very good thing. So it came about that she was now sitting on a bench on the Ring Strasse, a slender figure in a fall coat; she'd placed her suitcase beside her. Ah yes, so it was and so it went for a poor soul from the country without relatives in the city! She grew a bit dejected in spirit and was quite nervous besides lest someone accost her or something along that line. Time was heavy; she thought the situation over and realized she hadn't thought the situation over. But now, at eleven o'clock, she couldn't demand admission anywhere, say at a hotel - how would that look? (she thought). So she kept on sitting there.

The Ring Strasse - dark rows of trees, and, in the middle, light from the arc lamps burst onto the pavement. Shifting points of light near and far, honking sounds from cars, coming up and passing by. Dark and empty expanse, for the most part, and at the edge a café spreads out a row of light. On summer nights young people are always expecting something when they walk through the city, but they're not exactly expecting anything definite. It all depends - the night is a free time in every respect; we walk along with our sorrows, worries, thoughts, doubts, but we're also glad to be distracted, and whatever it is, we're inclined to seize upon it.

So Teddy goes up to the bench when he sees our Rosa just sitting there in the dark, a slender figure. However people strike up a conversation, that's how he did it (incidentally, he seems to be expecting something more definite already, even if embellished with trimmings that we'll be looking at later on). She takes a rather brusque attitude, "curt," one would say, but he does bring her a certain warmth and diversion, that she really must confess, and she's less anxious now; he's very friendly, speaks a choice and winsome language, smells good too, she notes, as he slides closer. After a while she's brought out bit by bit the state of affairs connected with her sitting here at night, expressing herself somewhat reticently, of course, even a little cryptically, but Teddy doesn't ask questions. The trees rustle, shadows change, in the soft gust of wind there falls through the foliage now and then a ray from the more feeble street lights of the late hours. He sees that she's wearing quite a pretty cloche hat. And now Teddy turns all paternal, saying oh, it's nothing really, he just wants her to find a place to stay, in a nice hotel - well, it's practically his duty (then he talks about the dangers of a large city, pontificating a little, being quite matter-of-fact, quite impersonal) -

no, he concludes, it just won't do at all for her to stay here the whole night. Naturally she doesn't want to, remains obstinate, refuses, says she'd be better off here, and she keeps on saying it. Then she goes with him, and he even carries her suitcase - a very fine young man, she thinks. It turns out that she's much shorter than he. They walk for a little while, turn into narrower streets; he chats jovially, like an old uncle, placing a layer of calmness, innocence, and indifference over his somewhat excited and tense expectation: in every respect he's conducting himself on the outside exactly like a person who's doing and planning on nothing more than the fulfillment of his duty toward his fellow man, in this one case helping to create order when it's right there staring him in the face and when he can do it with not too much trouble. He chooses a small hotel well known to him; he could guarantee she'd be well taken care of there, and she'd also be given a good breakfast in the morning.

They walk in; there's a light on at the registration desk. Teddy speaks with the desk clerk (who knows him) and arranges everything, while Rosa stands somewhat farther back and waits. Now then, just as he's thinking, "Well, here we go," and just as he's turning around, wanting to offer her his arm and see her to her room, and just as he's feeling the expectation in himself a little - just then he catches sight of a face that has to be called ordinary, worn-out, and almost old. The desk clerk has rung for the chambermaid and is now leading the way the few steps to the elevator and opening the grille-work door. It's as though an open chasm had come into being in Teddy; his whole earlier composure and good spirits threaten to go crashing down like rubble into this chasm of disappointment. He suddenly feels an urge to be crude to someone, but he sees that his previous attitude is the only (even though uncertain) bridge leading over and away from this moment. He had stepped back from the grille-work door. "Won't the gentleman be going up?" asks the desk clerk. "No," says Teddy. "That's right; the lady has to have her breakfast tomorrow." Then he quickly brings order to the moment; he shakes hands with her, barely looking at her, so that just before it's all over he successfully resists the whole situation - and says quite expansively and patronizingly and apparently filled with good humor, "Well now, you see, you've got a good place to stay; I wish you a pleasant rest," and he raises his hat. She says something like "Thank you"; then she glides upward and he leaves.

Teddy's happy; he can still hear himself saying, "Well now, you see, you've got a good place to stay." He says it again, differently, out on the street. "Poor girl. Well, it's something you just have to do; it was practically my duty - didn't hurt

anything, anyway - it would've been pretty strange, but why not?" Then he suddenly stopped and stood there - yes, as he's standing there on the dark street like that, he actually goes a few steps back in his thoughts. And then into the nearest café.

The elevator eases up to Rosa's floor; the chambermaid unlocks the door, room number such and such. "There still are decent people; there really still are such people," thinks Rosa repeatedly. The room is quiet, and nothing is moving next door, either; only the footsteps of the maid are growing distant in the corridor. Rosa sits down on the edge of the bed, gazes a while straight ahead - and then suddenly she weeps.

Variation VI

City and its night-shining refuse. The larger streets approach in leaps from lamp to lamp out of their light-foggy depth and lunge into distant squares, losing themselves in one another there; still more lights quiver and wander here.

City and its night-shining refuse, feelers of light reaching out from warm rooms easily and softly receiving; this is commonly called "night life." This night life is sociable, but one finds loners and outsiders there too: young people, let's say, who have stopped doing something, perhaps not before late evening, put it aside, let it lie, let it be - their textbooks or their office or a worry, a letter, a quarrel - perhaps they'd no longer had their minds on these concerns for the past half an hour; perhaps during this time they'd already, in their thoughts, been slipping into the sleeves of their winter coats, turning up their collars, pushing their hats down on their foreheads, and reaching for the keys in their pockets.

And so on the dark street then, and you finally land somewhere; you come onto some track or other when you're released this way, just drifting along. Right from the start there can rise up in you an inclination toward that wide road into which so many possible, dimly-lighted paths lead. You find yourself in extremely plentiful company if you keep going in this direction; so plentiful is it, in fact, that it can be distasteful and can provide a motive for getting off the road. So you leave the wintry street and step into an easily and softly receiving room. Here it can happen that your glance, within a rippling swirl of color and light, bumps into a sharp edge, as it were. It doesn't have to be much; even a mouth can be enough if it no longer beautifies the face when smiling but makes it ugly. The result can be that the same glance penetrates the stage-front flats of

this little theater, grasps everything with broader compass, with sympathy for these women here, though not for their charms as such. Meanwhile, there's a militant counterthrust that doesn't allow you to go too far! It's a known fact - we're perfectly well aware of it - what outright rejects all these "night people" always are, the women along with the men, the chanteuse as well as the leader of the gypsy band - lying, money-grubbing, dishonest, all these so-called "characters." Suddenly you see yourself in a desirable situation, namely being outside and walking past (parting the slow-falling snow), with your back to it, having no part of it, independent of it to a degree; and it would actually cost only a slight tug to get into such a situation. But then that's not why you went out this evening - or is it?

At any rate, young Herr Milan left the place quite soon, got his coat at the check room, and now he was standing on the street. Some last snowflakes were slowly settling on his arms and shoulders; it had stopped snowing. So he walked on past outside and crossed the feelers of light coming out onto the street from the place he'd just left - not much was missing to make for a desirable situation. Now he turned a corner and quickly walked over to some women who stepped out of the semi-darkness, and he let them know by his quick way of walking past them that they'd sized him up wrong. After an hour Milan still found himself on the street; for the second or third time - and with blatantly purposeful, hurried footsteps - he'd walked the same way, then suddenly stepped into a coffee bar as though getting to just this place in a hurry had been his business all along. Met none of his friends here, incidentally, though he'd been hoping to find some; this idea had just been lending his rapid pace a sort of justification. After another half hour it was quite apparent even to him that he was looking for something and was thereby on a wide road into which a great many possible, dimly-lighted paths lead, tunnels and shafts in this dark mine of lust that the city changes into at night. The plentiful company of other miners in the wider or narrower tunnels no longer disturbed him much. Here and there a profile of a face or figure that enticed him - even so, Milan still found himself on the street after yet another whole hour had passed, and he was beginning to grow tired.

Then two girls accosted him - it was getting awfully late, so they'd charge less and would both go with him. He didn't really like them. Others, ones from earlier this evening, he really had liked. He said he had only as much money with him as they were asking for and otherwise no more than would be enough for a place to stay - they'd have to be satisfied with that, they'd get nothing more out of him tonight, and if that was good enough, well. . . . So the three went on

together. It started with the desk clerk in the small hotel charging far more for a room than the girls had estimated. They went up; it was a fairly large room with double beds, but there didn't seem to be any heat. The girls boasted about all the tricks they knew how to do, took the money first, asked for more, were reminded by Milan of their agreement and then got something extra after all, since he wanted them in a good mood. If he more or less liked either one, then it was the smaller; she was sitting beside him on the edge of the bed while her friend was already starting to undress. Now then, just as he was watching and thinking about all that the girls had promised, and just as he was wanting to put his arm around the waist of his neighbor on the edge of the bed, draw her to him, and ask her to hurry and do what her friend was doing, and just as he was already feeling the girl's plump body through her clothes (why was she sitting so still there beside him and not doing any of those things?), and just as he was already wanting to unbutton her dress - just then his glance fell on something. It wasn't much, only a little thing, on which his eye stayed riveted, as on a sharp ledge - the girl next to him there on the edge of the bed was missing the tip of a finger. At almost the same instant Milan noticed other little things: the white night stand beside the bed burned brown in many places by cigarettes that other miners before him had laid on the edge; char mark after char mark, as good as mottled. He now noticed too, incidentally, that his neighbor had a downright bulbous nose and that the hand with the missing fingertip looked really pathetic, still all red from the cold outside. He makes a sign for the other girl to wait, frees himself from his neighbor (who's just yawning and holding the back of her hand up to her mouth), and he says, "Listen, girls, how about if we just let it go? You're tired and it's late; let's just talk a little while and then leave." "Look what a nice guy he is!" the smaller one says to her friend, and then to Milan, "Got a cigarette, honey?" Milan holds his case out to her; she looks in but doesn't help herself. Instead, she reaches for her little purse and takes out a better brand than Milan has in his case. "Yes, girls," Milan now says (it's as though an open chasm had come into being within him, one into which all the rubble of his demolished expectation has fallen), "I'm not really in the mood; it's just that I was so alone out on the street with my thoughts, and I'm glad I have a little company. I often go with a girl just for that. So now - I know you girls don't have anything to laugh about; it's a hard life - tell me all about yourselves and how you get along" (there's only one bridge left across the open chasm that's come into existence; he must at once proceed to a different level, to another base that's been prepared in advance as a safety precaution, so to speak, and that constitutes at least a

pedestal for him to stand on - but with rather comfortable footing, come to think of it). He now hears all sorts of stories from the girls, the usual tales that are more or less universally told - and in addition to them, the praises, brought forth with truly genuine warmth, of some fellow, some "friend." "All I can say is the police are more afraid of him than he is of them - oh no, they can't touch him. One time ten of them came after him, ten men to one, such chickens, but he showed them! Three stabs in the belly - no, I'm telling you," she cuts her girlfriend off, "they have not caught him, I know for sure!" "The way they torment us girls, you just wouldn't believe, but listen, I've got a good story about it."

Then he hears about how they live out in the factory district and come into the center of the city every night when it's beginning to grow dark. Just as a joke, he now lifts up the one girl's dress (it's a kind of resonance and recurrence in him) and sees her panties full of blood. "You're having your period!" he cries out. "But yet you're going around. . ." (at this moment he really believes his glance is now penetrating this entire foreground and becoming more encompassing).

"Well, that's why there are two of us!" says the other one. "We work well together." In Milan there's a sort of resolution that does him much good; now for the first time he feels his back turned to things, having no part of them, independent of them. He gives the girls more money; they dig around a bit in his pockets, take out the various objects he's carrying, and look them all over. Then they all leave together, and down on the street Milan says goodbye to the girls.

On the street, just walking along alone. Very well, so there it is, then, this desirable situation, even if bought for a rather high price. He's more or less bought himself off. But now, just as he's wanting to enjoy his new independence, to feel out to the end his state of having his back turned, of having no part of things, to walk with real serenity past the women who are still here and there stepping out of the semi-darkness; and just as he's wanting to turn in, drink a cup of coffee and think over in peace and safety what he's gained - just then he suddenly misses something; he feels an empty place there on one side and realizes that the girl who'd taken out his mechanical pencil hadn't put it back, but had kept it (as a souvenir?), of course without asking. It's a small matter, nothing at all, to be sure, but it's enough to undermine his whole newly-won composure and good spirits and to make them collapse. But he lands on a base that's already been prepared as a precautionary measure. These lowlife types always have to be stealing, too! There's literally a militant counterthrust in him against all that's gone before: rejects and scum, all these night people! He'd

been - well, duped, if you want to be precise about it! Because first of all that one girl wouldn't have been able to do anything anyway; and then, how much money had they weasled out of him in spite of their agreement? How much? He added it up - such-and-such an amount! But the cigarettes he smoked weren't as expensive as hers! "You're just a stupid ass," he rebuked himself. "Ha, I should feel delighted to pay through the nose for such valuable experience, shouldn't I? Why, you can't even put a price on it, can you? I mean it's practically a gift at this ridiculously low figure!" He suddenly felt as though he had to find help in confronting his own anger; now that what was done couldn't be changed, he'd simply have to. . .but he's already been doing. . .then his disgust broke loose again. "Gathered valuable insights into life in a large city; too bad I'm not a poet or novelist, or else I might be able to use them. What I'd like better is to have my money back!" And just as he's wanting to give a short laugh and a crooked, sideways grin of contempt, as if making faces at himself, and just as he's wanting to lend expression to his mood and to the truth he's found (as he believes), just then both his contemptuous, insulting glance and his crooked grin squarely encounter the face of a young woman in a headcloth and a long coat who was coming along on a cane with some difficulty. He wasn't able to apply the brakes and quickly withdraw what his face was crying out; he noticed at the same moment that this woman was in the final weeks of pregnancy, that her body was protruding very much under the coat. In his shock, Milan checked his steps, while on his face the contemptuous look, grown pointless now, began slowly breaking open like a sheet of ice under which the water has sunk. With flaming rage in her features the young woman rebuffed the glance this man was laying onto her inelegant figure; in helpless rancor she raised her fist and made a threatening gesture with it while she dragged herself past him.

"Verily this is the hour of wrath," Milan thought, full of horror but at the same time irritated over the absurdly formulated words that had risen up in him. But suddenly, filling him with happiness, he sensed a wide, free room in himself, one that took in all the rubble of his earlier composure and good spirits on this botched-up night, making it disappear and balancing it out in reconciliation; and then Milan landed on a level that's been prepared for everyone and behind everything - as a precautionary measure, so to speak. He stood there and looked up into the dark, city-distant sky; out of it were now coming down to him single snowflakes, faster and faster and more and more, hurrying downward. Now the snow was falling thick, softening every sound, blurring all edges, settling pure and white everywhere. An enclosed silence came into being around Milan, who

walked on as if dreaming, parting the slow-falling snow; but now in fact so much turned with his back to things, so much not a part of things, that he was no longer conscious of the desirability of this situation of his.

Variation VII and Coda

On the country road that splits the horizon into two semi-circles, a wanderer - his head lowered, shoulders hunched forward, eyes in the dust before his feet, face morosely tense. After walking for a long stretch, his back, shoulders, and neck ache in this unchanging position. Now, just as he's wanting to stand erect and straighten his shoulders, and just as he's wanting to send a bleak and tired glance out to the edge of the sky, just then it seems to him that the land all around is brighter, that the sun has now broken through, making the distance more open and pouring friendliness over the nearby hills. But in truth nothing at all has changed in the sky or in whatever else is visible all around; the gray cloud banks are hiding the sun exactly as before. Even so, the man walking is a different wanderer. It couldn't be the same one - his face is radiant, his glance ranges happy and strong, near and far, hands in pockets, footstep all buoyant. Oh our astonishing soul, that often needs nothing implanted from outside but a pivot and an angle to turn on - or no, for it can do that from out of itself at some few moments; it builds the angle itself, it affixes the pivot and axle itself and tilts and swivels all around it and works just like the tilled land outside that is constantly and playfully changing its features - now beaming in the sun, now paling under passing cloud-shadows. But what do those shadows mean, what can they ever be except just shadows, and of the same fleeting, ephemeral, varied appearance as the clouds. The sun shines for us in only one way, though; it stays powerful and strong behind all the cloud banks and breaks through when its time has come again.

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