FLANDERS LITERATURE

The Danger

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Talking with Poplars

The houses stand in monotonous rows right up to the bridge. They seem to be seeking consolation and support in one another's presence. The road makes a sharp curve. Automobiles brake or blow horns before making the turn to the country lane. The clamorous laughter of their horns bubbles across the roofs like balloons. On the other side lie the woods, and silence dwells there. Wide roads spin like clean white ribbons through the hazy landscape among the red roofs of the Research Center for Nuclear Fission. The laboratories, technical services, the square block with the first nuclear reactor, the medical division, the thick round body of the second nuclear reactor, the physics division, the refectory, the dining room. Buildings, roads, trees. A tall factory chimney like a pure, extended finger. And above, a breath of twinkling lights.

The silence has flowed outward, dark green, lying like molten lead on the roofs. Cars inhabit the large parking lot, motionless, sleeping insects with hard, glistening carapaces.

An ambulance stands in front of the entrance to the Medical Center. The driver is reading his newspaper, bored, yawning and waiting. Waiting is his real occupation. A sprinkler rains on the lawn. Colorful sparks spring from the jets of water. A man walks silently by on the road. The sun rests lazily on the trees. There are no birds, no natural movements or sound. The world is locked in a glass dome of secret silence. Smooth round boulders lie in their stone shells under the lawn, as they have lain for centuries. Is there any place left in the world where there is music? Or where a bird simply sings?

He has been here before, but then it was not as important as today. Today the doctors and technicians look depressed and far fewer people are present than usual. Everyone keeps a safe distance. At other times, during routine monthly checkups, no such fearful tension burdens the air. Usually the people here are jocular. The one who is being examined undresses, puts on a dark blue training suit, and disappears for fifty minutes in the bunker.

But today everything is different, and full of sad solemnity. Whisps of unrest float through the white rooms of the Medical Center. The mold of great doubt suddenly flowers on the wall. Many termites race around each other, startled and murmuring as though an anteater had drilled his baton-like snout into their fortress.

Dr. Polak, always a calm and steady man, walks in and out. In an adjacent room he carries on a hurried conversation. The young doctor, Corsmit, comes over to stand next to the bunk. He has a childlike face and a thin fringe of beard to pull on when he is uncertain. He pulls it. He wears his protective suit. "How are you doing now, Benting?" he asks. Alfred Benting says, "So-so, doctor, so-so. " But really he feels miserable. He cannot locate his oppressive feeling. It lives all through him. It walks around inside of him. It laughs. It

cries. It calls. It does not hurt. It is just a very unpleasant feeling of being indisposed. A moment ago he had to vomit. It was a wretched spasm, just as if he had been drinking whiskey mixed with beer all night. His stomach threatened to burst. Somebody grabbed his feet and swung him around. He was terribly seasick. When he was a little boy, he felt this kind of unpleasantness on the merry-go-round at the fair. But he went on the ride over and over again. Thinking, maybe it will get better. But he could never succeed in avoiding the feeling ...

It feels as if somebody is walking through his intestines, someone knocking on the walls here and there, or grumbling about the chaos. Perhaps it is anxiety. Doctor Corsmit examines him again with the counter. His hands, his face, his hair. Especially the places most exposed to the danger.

Benting himself looks at the equipment as if seeing the apparatus today for the first time. They stand in the room like large, heavy men. They have angled, pleasant shoulders, and peeping distrusting eyes. The little lamps click on and off. A green light draws serrated lines on a calculator board. Somewhere a long ribbon of paper with grid lines extrudes like a lazy tongue out of a machine mouth.

There is a soft sonorous zooming in the volume of the room. Small red lights blink with their eyes. Red rabbit eyes, quiet. He reads strange names on mechanisms and on dials. The names have an uncanny sound. He tastes the sound within himself. Lower level, upper level, toggle 1, toggle 2, toggle 3. These are strange words. He lets them move him like a poem. It rains inside of him, the rain of a soft summer evening. He likes that. The words: Display, Delayed Incidence, Print, Channel Width. He feels like reading them aloud. He says: "Delayed Incidence."

One of the technicians knits his brows and examines him guardedly. He asks, "Is there something wrong?" Benting shakes his head in denial. He has to smile. He is the protagonist in an ancient tragedy. The supernumeraries look at him with admiration. They stand ready at his slightest signal to show that they are there to serve him. Will he die at the end of the play? That would fit the spirit of the classical drama. Or like a costumed operatic hero singing an aria with touching chords? That breaks people's hearts. They can cry. It is good drama.

He breathes in soap and the penetrating scent of chemicals and salves. They washed him thoroughly in the first room. First they put him in a large bathtub. They soaped him and then rinsed him with clean water several times. It was an enormous cleaning campaign. He had been cleaned from top to toe. They scratched the dirt from under his nails. They blew his nose, they swabbed inside his ears with cue tips.

At one point he asked himself whether it was his body they were working on. All he had to do was to follow the manipulations like some casual observer. The doctor stood with his measuring instruments like an arbiter. Or rather like the owner of an object that is being delicately dismantled. He kept finding that the radioactivity had hardly diminished. He did not say anything, he just looked depressed. They had dried Benting as if he were a baby, and had worked on him with chemical solutions. But it hardly made any difference. The Geiger counter could not lie.

He had been in the bathtub once before, after a light exposure restricted to one part of his body. On that occasion, they had washed the contagious spot, and soon no trace was left of any danger.

But now it is different. Today is another day, a day which had been waiting patiently for its turn in the line of days. Aware of its importance, of its moment that would come. Now we are so far, Benting.

Stubbornly the radioactivity has resisted water, soap, salves, and chemicals. This time it is no simple, innocent contamination. This time it is serious, the bitter gravity of the truth, of the invisible danger, that they all know, but that they usually do not have to face directly. The danger is so well locked up daily that it hardly exists any longer. But it does exist, that they well know. They feel it from time to time somewhere in their unconscious, a kind of warning, a small red light, a little bell.

Before Benting, they had handled Martin Molenaar in the bathtub. With equally little success. Martin now lies in the bunker where they are measuring the seriousness of his exposure. Benting is waiting his turn. After that Dupont will lie here. He is now in the bathtub. Benting waits passively for the investigation in the big bunker. This afternoon he suffers all those events with a certain apathy.

Close by, a small light starts up next to the word "focus". He asks himself whether the word and the lamp have something in common. They behave like individuals, even haughtily denying each other's presence. They exist in cold isolation. Benting looks at them with interest. The investigators stand with the apparatus. They don't seem to be happy with it. The machine now yields the results of Martin's test. It probably doesn't look so good. Dr. Polak comes in. He speaks nervously to Benting. The others keep their distance. "Benting," he says, "I want to test you before you go in the bunker."

Fred Benting gets up and goes to the machine. He places his feet in the places provided. He must stick his hands straight out in the two openings under the words "left hand/right hand". The words are in English. It is an American apparatus. In the middle is a round dial. A lamp lights up. Lamps are everywhere. This is a world of white, red, and green eyes. Little lamps govern this domain in anger. The hands begin to move and rapidly climb higher. Dr. Polak nods his head tiredly. He is suddenly a pitiable old man in a protective suit that is too large for him. He moves in the borderland of human impotence. He can no longer hide his thin, long hair, his creases and his shaking hands. He is very old and very tired.

Alfred Benting knows these machines well, and how they work. He realizes that he is in a desperate condition. He stretches out again on the cot. Waiting. You always have to wait.

Waiting. Society is really only a large waiting room. People spend their lives waiting for one another. He hears Dr. Polak becoming abusive. All this damned irresponsibility that is the cause of this accident. Benting can guess at what Dr. Polak means. To whom he refers. The reactor always obeys like a slave. Its servility is suspiciously docile. It stands like a dinosaur in the hall. It has round brown spots on its body. These are the channels running through the graphite shell. It is a large, secretive animal. Small people peep at it day and night. If it has some evil in mind, the pilots and the wardens are immediately warned. The safety measures are so perfect and extensive that, theoretically, almost nothing can happen.

Unless someone were incomprehensibly negligent or purposely created danger, or displayed criminal irresponsibility. Someone like Martin Molenaar for instance? He is usually a quiet boy. Sometimes a bit frivolous and rash in his judgment and in his choice of a place to stand. But otherwise not bad. Possibly he is too young to bear constantly such a great responsibility. When the dinosaur in the hall sees someone take his eyes away, if only for a moment, or grow absentminded, he becomes dangerous. His intestines start to glow. He will burst his meters-thick hide of suppressed fury and untamed energy. If he spies a small outlet, a channel that by an incomprehensible misunderstanding remains open.

Martin is brought out of the bunker. He looks tired-out, worried to death. As if he had been working with no sleep for a long time. He closes his eyes. They push the wagon out. Benting is taken to the bunker. He sits down in the fiery red armchair. The apparatus above his body is carefully adjusted. He smells soap. The door turns shut, heavily and slowly. He sees the window facing the outside world, and in the corner the air vent. His body slowly melts away into space. He flows over the things that surround him. There is a strange clarity in his head. Narrow tubes cut through space. Aluminum cartridge cases shoving back and forth with their uranium charge. An eternal movement. The pendulum of a clock. An hourglass. Snow. It is as if a train cleaves through space, a glowing isotope train. He hears the grumbling sound. He sees the blinking points, the purple ripples. And always again the smell of soap.

After the long examination, they put Martin Molenaar quickly into an ambulance, and he is taken away. He is nauseated. He puked again and again. He is sick as a dog.

Cases of exposure to light doses or ordinary on-the-job accidents are never taken away. They are treated in the Medical Center, which is excellently equipped. All that can be done locally for contamination with radioactive substances, however is first aid and a thorough examination. The victims must then be taken immediately to a special division of the Academic Hospital. Molenaar is the first person to travel that route. It appears that Dupont, Benting, and Molenaar are contaminated. Dr. Polak and his assistants were correct in their marked alarm after their observations of the three patients. After an hour Molenaar arrives in the Academic Clinic. They examine him again and treat him. He has to swallow certain tablets and afterwards he is taken to a separate hall. There are three empty hospital beds. It is a separate wing of the building. The sheets are cold. It is a spacious cold volume, away from the sun. There are four small

windows. It is clearly an old pavilion that has been slightly modernized. Through the window he sees in front of him the low dark evening sky and trees.

Unfeeling time flows over him. He is unaware of the day and the hour. Perhaps it is already very late, perhaps this nightmare has already lasted many days? They bring Benting in. They put him in the second bed. Lying down, he suddenly looks much larger, much taller than usual. He looks around, scared like a frightened bird. He is not aware how frightened he looks or he would try to hide his fear. He doesn't like to have anyone see his cards. He hides his fears and his passions. But he is afraid and disoriented, an observer could see his concern at once. It is as though he were suddenly called upon to address a large gathering and found that he had lost the ability to speak. He is unusually pale, and his movements are as wooden as those of a marionette in a puppet show. He stares out of the window.

Anyone who knew Dupont would have expected him to say something amusing. But Dupont doesn't say a word either. He doesn't even laugh. His face is taut; it gives an impression of frozen stiffness. He is a man from the physics division. He only visits the reactor a few times a week. He came just for today. Like a moth, tempted by the danger. He is a noisy man, a bit older than most of the men in the nuclear reactor center. His thick, mouse-colored hair, with pearl grey here and there through it, lies in a dark ball on the pillow. Dupont doesn't say anything. He stares at the ceiling. His thoughts are elsewhere. He reconstructs the dramatic afternoon at the center. Molenaar downstairs at first, later upstairs near the apparatus in the control room. Benting to the left side, lower, near the reactor. Himself a bit higher on the platform near the side wall. He had taken off his jacket because it was so warm there. He had hung it carelessly over one of the counters.

Someone enters the room. A voice says: "It is Professor Wens." Dupont, tired, closes his eyes. Outside it is darker, the way ivy grows over windows. "There are many trees," Molenaar says in a low voice. Benting turns his head a bit. "Poplars," he says. This is the night of the trains.

Now everybody has left the room. Suddenly a dull, continuous rumble can be heard. One of the windows is open a bit so that the noise (it must be endless trains) penetrates unobstructed.

Behind the hospital is a railway yard, or something like that. Perhaps it is not nearby, maybe even a kilometer away. But the air there is a continual trembling with a loud and heavy drone, a strange rumbling that is in the ground as well and creeps in the walls. It must be trains. The wheels compose their drone song on the rails. The night is carved by steel sounds.

Benting looks in the half-darkness at Molenaar, who seems to be asleep. Then there is the voice of Dupont, pushing the sound of the trains into the background. "Do you hear it too, Benting?"

"It is the trains. There is a railway near us somewhere. Or a station."

"Do you think so? I was anxious."

"Why?"

"I thought that I was the only one who heard it. That it was a noise that came from in my head."

"Rest assured, it is trains."

They are silent. Martin Molenaar makes a restless movement. He starts to toss about. Perhaps the conversation has disturbed his sleep. Or he is having bad dreams, perhaps.

"Is it possible for so many trains to go by? " Dupont asks, softly.

"It must be a very busy line, international," Benting speculates. "Probably many freight trains pass, and maybe international express trains as well. It must be that."

"I find it so strange that trains run so close to a hospital."

"Oh, it may be that they aren't even so close. They may be a kilometer away from here, but the wind may be unfavorable and that's why we hear the noise so clearly."

"I ask myself how a patient can sleep here, with that damned rumble in the air. "

"You'll soon get used to it. Probably by tomorrow you won't even hear it any more."

"Do you think so?"

Dupont could be so happy in a naive way. At bottom, he had always remained a grown-up child. His mother probably had always thought of him as her little boy. And after that he obviously had found a motherly wife, who never allowed him to develop a manly character. That is why he can be so unaffected

and boyish on the one hand, but also so unreliable and childish when serious matters are concerned. He can still make plans as fantastic as when he was fifteen years old. And now he is forty-five. He goes to pieces as quickly as a child if he is disappointed, or if he feels the slightest bit ill. And in a naive way, he can be light-hearted, as he is now. A little Negro with a ribbon of tinfoil or a big shiny marble, or a small, young bird. But he suddenly turns depressed.

"How long are they going to keep us here? "

"That I don't know. Until we are cured. "

"Do you think it will take long?"

"I really don't know, I have no way of knowing."

"Do you hurt anywhere?"

"No, not really hurt. I am just somewhat indisposed and unsettled. "

"Me, too. And Molenaar, is he asleep?"

"Yes, but he is restless. I think he is the worst off."

Silence falls like a curtain at the end of a performance. Once again, in the distance, there is the far sound of trains. Trains pushing ceaselessly through the nights, peering with their one eye at the world. They are king in the land of the blind. Molenaar talks in a murmur. It is incomprehensible, he is delirious. I shall ring the bell for the nurse, thought Benting. There were two of them. They looked freakish in their isolation uniforms. One was large and sharp with sloping shoulders and pendulous arms. The other was stocky and peasantlike. It is a vain illusion for a man to always expect some lovely, attractive nurse. During the night she may come, full of care, to watch beside his bed. To your bed, or in bed, Benting thinks with a faint smile. But these are all illusions. There are also ugly nurses, whom you would not want in your bed for all the money in the world. And who would probably not think of being there. Especially not now. He pushes on the bell.

Molenaar has half raised himself. He complains of thirst. I won't close an eye, Benting thinks sadly. In a curious way he feels sorry for himself.

Dupont is wide awake, but he does not say a word. He listens to the nocturnal sounds. And to the trains. In the morning, Molenaar's moaning wakens Benting and Dupont from their light slumber. Almost at the same instant, they push their bells. Somewhere in the distance, at the end of the passage, a clatter begins, which develops in approaching steps. The door opens and the night nurse comes in the room. She walks directly to Martin's bed and stands on the side nearest the door. She gives him something to drink and lets him swallow a tablet. After that she leaves hastily.

Martin has to vomit. Benting crawls out of his bed and helps him. He holds his hand against the forehead of the patient, who is lightly moaning while continuing to vomit in a shocking way. When it is over, he lies there shivering. He is cold all over. His eyes are wide open. He stares at his two comrades and shakes his head as if he wishes to indicate that he feels very sick.

"My tongue," he says to Benting. He opens his mouth and Benting sees that it is swollen and shows a strange color. "Do you see something?" whispers Martin. "My mouth is all sour inside.'

Benting nods, concurring, but now he also suddenly notices hundreds of small blisters which have developed on Martin's hands and face. He looks at his own hands, and sees that he he has them too, but not so many. In his case, it is under his skin. His observation scares him, and he shows the blisters to Dupont.

"I know already," says Dupont. "In the night I already felt it coming."

The professor comes in, with the tall, nurselike woman in his wake. Benting crawls back into bed. The professor examines Molenaar and takes his temperature. The examination takes a long time. He stands with his back to the two others. He makes a movement with his head. The nurse makes everything ready to give Martin an injection. She hands the small instrument to the professor who, with a quick movement, performs the injection. Molenaar clamps his mouth together momentarily, but nothing else happens.

The professor now examines Benting, and gives him an injection too. After that Dupont, who looks at the sharp needle with dislike, and subjects himself to the treatment with a pale face. The reactions and the general condition of the three patients are recorded on cards by the nurse. After that is done they are

rubbed with an ointment. The skin of the face, neck and hands is covered with a thick layer of yellow cream. It is to counteract the blisters. The parts of the body that were bare suffered most from the severe radiation. The treatment is elaborate. Benting follows with full attention the ceremony of this medical study and the work of the physician and the nurse. The woman now stands bent forward near Martin's bed. She has thin, white legs, and large, badly-formed feet. She is a cold, unapproachable woman, with useful hands as soft as dough.

Alfred asks her to give him something to drink. She immediately goes to a closet and gives him some soda water. He, too, now feels sour pickles on his tongue, and they disturb him. The professor has his counter in his hand to measure the radiation again. He reads off numbers to the nurse, who is writing everything down. Benting looks at his bitter mouth that does not betray emotion. His movements are very soft, as if he wanted to chase away invisible birds.

This is a strange world, this world where the three patients now live. They have no chance to decide their fate, they are lived by the others. To the extent that you could call this stay in the hospital living.

The patients are completely isolated in a world that is practically separate. From time to time they see one of the two nurses, or the professor, who scrutinizes the development of the symptoms minutely. They eat very little. Their appetite is entirely gone. Every physical desire seems extinguished. Dupont has already asked himself what his wife will think about that. A ridiculous question. As if at this moment it still matters what that woman thinks about it. He says, "We may not receive any visitors here. We are dangerous individuals, Dupont. We are rotten with radioactivity."

"My wife is probably worried," says Dupont. "I hope they have been cautiously informing her of everything?"

"Don't worry, the social service runs perfectly. Your wife will only learn bit by bit that she must slowly prepare herself for widowhood."

Dupont is irritated by Alfred's ironic answer. "Benting, you must not take it so lightly, I don't appreciate such jokes."

Benting considers it useless to continue the conversation. That Dupont who says my wife this and my wife that. As if she were the center of the universe. She is the nucleus and he circles around it like an electron. But now that atom has been split, Dupont suddenly seems unmanageable and capable of anything.

Alfred Benting himself is married too. Fourteen years now. He seldom thinks about his wife. They have one child. In his marriage, Benting has always remained a singular "I". His wife and he have different spheres of interest. Their inner "I's" are hermetically sealed from their counterparts. Somewhere there is a door, but it seldom stands open. The child is spoiled. And the woman too. He has always been left outside of the domestic realm. Perhaps it's been his own fault. He is a difficult man to live with. Sometimes there were squabbles, and many unnecessary incidents which grew out of a mutual lack of understanding; words can inflate unimportant things into angry outbursts. Afterwards everything would be straightened out, but to a cheap solidarity. And Benting is well aware that he can only raise a lukewarm feeling for his family, and that he is certainly not indispensible there.

Martin Molenaar is the youngest of them, in his early twenties. At that age Benting got married, rather hurriedly, but with no pressing necessity. Martin is still a bachelor. They know very little about him. He has not been working as long in the nuclear reactor center. He comes from the capital. Now he is the worst off. Apparently he was exposed longest to the radiation. Dupont has hinted that perhaps Molenaar carries a great responsibility in this whole dramatic event. And Benting, who does not know exactly what happened that afternoon near the reactor and in the control room, recalls that Dr. Polak also said something about incomprehensible carelessness and nonchalance that went too far. Dupont knows that too. That is why he has developed a silent animosity towards Molenaar. He does not forgive Martin for the possibility of guilt. Dupont is an energetic man with a temperament that quickly tempts him into anger or gaiety. Benting considers what happened an accident. Their daily association with danger, even though it was so well restrained, involved a risk. He considers the events with a sense of resignation, a somewhat fatal

acceptance. He is sober enough to realize that their fate has now been taken out of their hands, and that others will try to lead or determine now. For the time being, anyway, and as far as possible.

Alfred Benting is much more business-like and intelligent than his two companions. He can analyze the situation coolly. One moment he can regard the ceiling in a dreamy way, and then quite suddenly and unexpectedly make some bitter and ironical remark. He is irritated that they are serving as laboratory rabbits. He knows it isn't meant like that, but nonetheless the experience of being an unusual case is not pleasant. Suddenly they have become interesting medical objects on which – albeit in a carefully and well-considered manner – experiments can be made. The results will benefit future victims. In every place and at every time there will be victims. At sea, ships go down and people drown. Underground, in coal mine shafts, there are groundfires and miners bum. In the sky, planes explode and pilots, stewardesses, and passengers scatter in the air. It is happening all over, it is common, normal, a daily risk.

Just so, and from now on, this new danger will demand its toll, even the nuclear reactor, with its innocent face. It is as inevitable as nightfall or old age.

That is not the way Dupont thinks about it. For him, something could always have been avoided. Perhaps he is right, but that is not the way it was. Dupont does not accept fatality. Instead he is rebellious and restless as a wolf trapped in a deadfall.

Martin Molenaar does not improve during the next two days. He continues to vomit and constantly suffers from the sour prickling feeling on his tongue. He hardly eats, and his general health is failing visibly. The development of his sickness is watched and recorded. Meanwhile Martin's eyesight fades rapidly as well. He talks little. It is probably difficult for him to say even a few words. The blisters on his skin have burst, and show frightening symptoms of rot. The ointments and injections do not seem to stop the disease. His whole physique appears to be unraveling. The doctors observe ever-increasing signs of internal bleeding. The doctors cautiously protect themselves from the radioactivity.

"The poor boy is a fine observation field," Benting says to Dupont. In addition to heavy vomiting of mucus and bile, Martin suffers from horrible diarrhea, which makes him even more feeble, and leaves him without resistance. In a few days his physical condition has become pitiable. Mentally, he seems to react very little. It is as if he has no self-confidence; his condition is inwardly doomed.

Benting, who lies in the next bed, is occasionally able to read the doctors' complicated code-language and hidden hints. He thinks he heard that Martin had absorbed a fatal dose of some 500 Roentgen. If that is correct, Martin has very little chance left.

It is curious that meanwhile Benting and Dupont are getting a little better. The formation of blisters on their skin is less severe. They suffer from diarrhea and vomiting too, but less than Martin does.

For Dupont the enforced imprisonment is a torment. He talks about it with Benting, who accepts the situation more easily. Sometimes Benting slides out of bed, walks around the room, and stands in front of the window. He can stand there for a very long time, without saying a word, like some sort of oriental priest. He stares at the outside, where the world is ordinary. From where he stands it is all amazing and improbable. He sees cars in the distance, looking like beetles crawling along the road. He hears a man whistling in the garden, a blue sky filled with piles of white clouds. An airplane draws a white line from east to west. In the meadow indifferent cattle stand, eternally grazing. Poplars stand obediently in a row, like quiescent monks. It is terribly quiet and ordinary. It is hard to believe that there can still be so much quiet in the world. That such a state can still exist, that there can still be such ordinary things.

Martin Molenaar tosses in his bed and moans. Dupont wraps himself in a cloak of bitter silence, hour after hour. He is enervated by the way that Benting just stands and looks out without saying anything. Once he got up and went to stand next to him at the window, but there is nothing to be seen. There is the world outside, free and disorderly as children's stories. All of it makes him feel sicker still. He wants to stand along the road, like one of the trees, walk through the town, ride the escalator in a department store, drink a glass of beer, make noise. His need for space and freedom rises like a fever inside him. He feels nervous tremblings in his belly; he must not think of it, it will drive him mad.

At this moment he can no longer understand anything about Benting. How can he stand there so quietly absorbing everything? Listening to the whistling of a man. Looking at the shade of a small plane, a

silver mosquito. "Why do you always stand in front of the window, Fred?" he says. His words hold back anger. "I just look a bit," says Benting indifferently.

"It would be better if you talked a bit," says Dupont. "Then we might forget this gloomy situation and our miserable condition. Why don't you talk more?" "I do talk," says Benting, "I do talk. And I ponder."

"What nonsense! With whom do you talk?" .

"With the poplars," says Benting. "Believe me, Dupont, they listen attentively, much better than you could." He is crazy, thinks Dupont. That's what we have come to. One of them is almost dead and the other has gone mad. What a terrible room. He rings for the nurse. He will tell her. Suddenly he is overcome by a horrible unrest. He is about to ask them to put him somewhere else. A crazy man and a man who is half dead. He finds it terrible here. He does not want to stay in this hell, this damned place, no he certainly does not want to stay here. He must get away from here immediately.

The nurse comes in. "Did you ring?" she asks.

"Yes," says Dupont. "I am parched with thirst, and I have a pain in my head."

Benting gives him a friendly nod and crawls back into bed. Dupont swallows a tablet, drinks greedily, and lets himself slide back down. It is all so useless. It is a tower, a mountain, a stone wall, a sea. You cannot get over it. You can only lie here like a dog and wait.

In the evening, looking through the window you can see a red glow hanging over the big city a few kilo meters away. It seems to be a large fire burning and pushing its red smoke against the dark underside of the clouds. It fascinates Benting. He can lie for a long time with his forehead against the window glass, staring out at the red glow against the sky. It is quiet all around, there are no nocturnal sounds other than the rumble of trains. It is strange that they don't hear the trains any more. That first night they could not sleep because of the droning disturbance. Now they don't hear it any longer. It has been brought down to an ordinary, nightly breathing. Strange how one becomes accustomed to discomforts.

Today Dupont received a letter from his wife. He tore it open nervously and then turned onto his left side, with his back to the two others. Benting has not heard anything from his wife yet. One of these days she will probably write too, asking for news. He wonders what she is doing right now. (The child is sleeping. She is looking at the television. Does she think of him? Does she ever think?) But immediately he has to admit that his feelings on the subject are indifferent. For a long time they have not been able to love each other.

Today, one at a time, they have been taken into another room for an examination. Blood samples and X-rays were taken again. It was another extensive consultation and afterwards a drawn-out treatment. It is all fatiguing, especially because you never find out what you are up against. You don't know whether any of it will help. Maybe the professors themselves don't know. They try all kinds of treatments, and do everything within their power in the examinations. They want to find an opening in the shield of this disease. Martin Molenaar grows ever worse. He complains that his vision is dimming. His constitution is totally undermined. His skin is moldy and the blisters have begun to rot. He is usually still. You can't tell whether he is in pain. If you ask him, he shakes his head in denial. Perhaps they give him something to block the pain, to relieve his suffering. Meanwhile it is strange that Benting and Dupont feel pretty well. They show the same symptoms, but their condition seems somewhat improved. They have been here for four days already. No one can imagine how slowly these four days have dragged by.

Dupont remains restless and hurried. Benting is calm. He is sure of one thing: for him and for Dupont the green lamp of hope continues to burn ...

This same night – it is the night between the fourth and fifth days – Dupont begins to complain of worse symptoms. "I feel terribly sick," he says to Benting. "Wretched, rotten, miserable, as if I were very drunk. Everything turns and spins around me."

"The discomfort will probably pass," says Benting quietly. "Sometimes you have a crisis just before the cure begins." He does not know if that is true, but saying it has made Dupont feel visibly better.

"Fred," he says, "it is strange, but I feel just as if I were drunk. I am really drunk, not my usual, plain drunk; I don't laugh, I don't cry, I don't go and lie along the road. Have you ever been plastered on a sweltering afternoon?"

"Perhaps I have," says Benting, "but I can't really remember."

"Then it certainly has never happened to you, or you would not have forgotten. It is much worse than normal drunkenness. The sun, the heat and the alcohol together. You almost burst; you start to ferment inside. You feel awful. The back of your head aches. Everything is blue and hazy and translucent. At first it seems agreeable, subtle, but it is really wretched. You are powerless against the strange boiling things in your body."

Benting listens attentively. Within himself, he must admit that he has not felt so good since this night came down like a dark bird between him and the poplars. He looks at Dupont, who has small drops of sweat on his forehead. They glimmer like little pearls in the lamp light. "There is a lot of hair on your pillow. Are you losing so much hair? " asks Benting. It startles Dupont. "Hum, what did you say?" He rubs with his left hand over his sweating forehead, and back over his wild head of hair. He has thick, dark hair. The greasy hair of a man from the south. He looks at his hand, which is sticky and shiny with sweat. "Do you see that, Fred?" he calls out, frightened. His sweaty hand is full of hair. He looks at it with disgust. "Do you see that? I am suddenly losing my hair. It is falling out in bunches!" "It's not really that bad," Benting says, consoling him, but Dupont does not hear him. He only looks at his hands, his pillow, and feels with fumbling fingers along his scalp. "What the Hell have they done to us, Benting? Have they played a trick on us? I feel as if all my bones had been broken." He carries on a monologue, full of self-pity and curses. Benting sits upright and listens, patient as a statue.

"Perhaps it is just because of the heavy sweating," he says. "I always sweat a lot, always have. Or perhaps it is due to the medication. Do you think? Damn them, let them swallow their own pills and capsules. I just want to get out of here, do you hear, Benting? Just as well as I ever was. They have to try everything to cure us. Do you think they are trying their best?"

"Of course they are doing their best, you don't need to doubt that. But it may be that they don't know what is best for us. If you have a wounded leg, they can simply amputate it, but we are damaged inside."

"Wouldn't you say we were also damaged on the outside?" Dupont says angrily. "Do you see these blisters on my hands, on my neck, on my face? You have them on yourself as well. They are getting larger again, and are beginning to burst." He taps furiously with his finger on his hand. "We will turn out the way Molenaar did. You'll see, Fred. His skin began to rot. Let them try to graft patches on it. Will that help?"

"I really don't know," says Benting. He signals to Dupont to speak more softly. Martin bangs his head back and forth. His mouth strains open, but no sound comes out. Just hissing of the breath, and saliva.

"You don't know. That may be true, but they don't know either. And the fact that they don't know is serious business for us. But they have to help us, Benting, they must help us."

"Surely they will do that. Don't worry, we will make it." Benting closes his eyes, tired. Dupont's voice builds a desperate igloo out of useless words. He does not wish to falter here, he wants to jump away like a grasshopper. He fights against doubt. We are weak dolls, made of straw, Alfred Benting thinks.

He sits straight up in bed. Dolls, which can say 'Papa' and 'Mama', open their eyes, close their eyes, laugh and coo. Sounds cut through us with sharp bayonette thrusts. We are defenseless straw dolls, laughable, there for anyone to attack. Until we are merely tatters, the ashes that cling to cigar ends, and puff, we blow away on the wind. Where to? Yes, please tell me where! Nobody knows that. So you can always go on asking, and getting hopeful answers.

There is no more wick in the green lamp of hope, and no oil to bum. The glass is broken. The key is missing. We will always go on looking, and like children, hurt our fingers on the shreds. And we will never be wise, our understanding will be no more than a cheap, transparent smile.

That same night - it is still the night between the fourth and fifth days - Professor Wens stands beside Martin's bed. The patient has had a crisis and has been taken to the hemotology department for a special examination. Now he is under anesthesia. The professor draws some blood from his earlobe with a pipette, then mixes it with a thinning fluid. The assistant shakes the pipette for some minutes and then takes a few

drops of the blood into the laboratory.

It is still in the laboratory. Professor Wens waits before starting to count the white blood corpuscles. He talks with his assistants, their voices like insects crawling in the room. The sounds flow on, smooth as water.

Professor Wens makes his calculations. The assistant bends over beside him, and both look at the counter and the figures. Their voices alight, as cautiously and gingerly as birds on a wheat field. The professor puts down his fountain pen. "Still low," he says, "less than one quarter normal."

"How much exactly?" asks the assistant.

"Less than fifteen hundred."

"So?"

"You know what that means?"

"Yes, he no longer has a chance."

"No, every day the number of white corpuscles has decreased. We have not been able to prevent it. It is fatal."

"And the other two?"

"Not much better. Perhaps another eight days or so. Certainly not more. We have to wait."

Martin lies on the infirmary table, motionless, as if life had already left him like a sound. He has less than fifteen hundred white blood corpuscles per milliliter of blood. In good health he had seven thousand. The chance of his living is gone. The radioactive stuff has worked destructively on the organs of his body that manufacture blood. The marrow of his bones no longer generates white corpuscles that are the body's guardians against decay. Bacteria have begun their undermining work.

Martin Molenaar is a dead creature in the jungle. Over unbeaten roads a gluttonous army of ants travels to the carcass. Thousands of scurrying legs beat out the end. Millions of eyes throw sparks in the night. Somewhere wild horses run through the fallow land of recognition. At the border of awakening, men run with flags. Voices call out slogans.

On the pavement of the street marches a downhearted insurrection. Wolves howl between the shores of the empty houses. White spots push by carelessly, smiling. There is always someone who smiles. Perhaps only a child. Or an idiot. Or perhaps only a dead creature.

"What are you going to do with him?" asks the assistant. The professor thinks about it. "At first I wanted to put him into a separate room," he says. "But on second thought, it is better that he stay here With the other two until tomorrow morning. If he didn't come back they would have a restless night. It is better that he return to the special room with the others. As far as tomorrow is concerned, we will invent some kind of explanation. He will make it until morning."

The assistant pushes the hospital table away. He is hot under his isolation suit. His eyes are strange, black marbles. It is not far. In this special wing, everything is close to everything else. No one ever meets anyone. It is the most quiet part of the Academic Hospital. Visitors never come there. Professor Wens, the two nurses, the assistant, and the three patients form the whole strength. The assistant pushes the door open. Immediately he feels Dupont and Benting staring at him. He knows that they are m the dark looking hard at him. He turns on the switch, and light falls like a sudden rain inside the room.

Benting and Dupont are lying with their faces turned to the door. They follow his movements without any reaction. He takes Martin to his place. Asks if all is in order. They nod confirmation. Silence. He turns off the switch. Leaves. Darkness.

Benting leaves the nightlamp on. He looks at the motionless Martin, who lies like a dead bird on a lawn. His left arm like a shot and broken wing on his body. The infected hand red as the leg of a heron.

Towards morning movement starts in Martin's body. They hear him moaning. He shivers from the cold. Benting gives him a swallow of water.

"Is that you, Fred?" asks Martin. He feels with his red supporting hand over Benting' s arm.

"Yes," says Benting. He does not know what else to say.

Martin talks softly. The words are butterflies leaving his mouth. Benting must exert himself to understand him. "I feel that I am done for, Fred. They have tested my blood again."

He speaks slowly. Each word stands for a moment trembling in the open space between the swollen lips. Like a parachutist in the open door of a plane. Waiting a moment before jumping into space. "They had given me anesthesia. But I felt everything. I believe the anesthesia did not take. That was strange. They didn't know it. I heard it. I am finished, you know. Perhaps one more day. You and Dupont still have eight days. If you are lucky."

Alfred Benting is scared. He suddenly notices now that Dupont is also standing, still, listening.

"What is that that he says?" asks Dupont, anxiously. "You have eight more days," repeats Martin. "Certainly not more. I have heard all that." Suddenly he speaks louder. Then he lies still and rests for a moment.

"Where do you get all that, Martin?" asks Benting. Unrest sways inside of him like an enormous water plant. "The doctor said it," says Martin. "The doctor says it. He knows it."

Silence enters the room like a person.

Dupont shuffles to his bed. Benting feels the cold around his knees. Diarrhea is troubling him again. Every day it gets worse. The discomfort of the disease takes sharper forms. Eight days yet, he thinks. One week. He tries to convince himself that it is incorrect. He will not believe it.

Dupont lies cross-wise on the bed. Like a cut down tree. In the forenoon of the fifth day, Martin Molenaar is taken away. He has not said much more. They had the impression that he had become completely blind. His physical condition had approached the zero point.

Dupont and Benting lie and wait. Hours ripen and rot away. Martin does not come back. The day ambles heavily to the evening. "Now he won't come back." Benting says it.

Voices break the hymen of hope. Despair walks into the room, shows hands covered with blood, and says: 'I am innocent.'