

Minuet

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THE REFRIGERATING CHAMBERS

A FARM LABORER FOUND A NAKED GIRL TIED TO A TREE IN A SNOW-COVERED FIELD. HER CLOTHES WERE LYING SEVERAL FEET AWAY. HE FREED THE GIRL WHO OFFERED NO EXPLANATION BUT IMMEDIATELY GOT DRESSED AND WALKED AWAY / ON THURSDAY AFTERNOON SIX BOYS DECIDED TO GO DOWN INTO

My work in the refrigerating chambers was rather monotonous: checking temperatures which had to remain at freezing point day and night. It was not a difficult job, but few people could stand being at the North Pole for eight hours day after day. On the walls, whitewashed with a tinge of blue, hung a hostile glaze of speckles cold. In the dead silence there was perhaps only the fading echo, like a ghost, of one of my footsteps. It was a different world, an artificial world. In springtime the town was still half dark when I descended into the chambers. I never knew what spring or summer weather it was in the streets. My winter clothes hung in the metal cupboard. A heavy vacuum door brought me instantly into an icy darkness which seized my heart. For a moment I panted – it was a sensation close to fear, perhaps even closer to grief, but it was simply a physical reaction caused by the sudden drop in temperature. I never had enough time to think about it – that same moment my work had begun, I had to turn the massive switch, bringing about an unreal light, and put the ventilation machine into action, and when this was done, that feeling almost resembling panic or irrational grief, was gone and forgotten. Waves of cold cut sharply into my bones.

THE QUARRIES EQUIPPED WITH CANDLES AND PARAFFIN LAMPS IN ORDER TO EXPLORE THE EXTENSIVE CORRIDORS WHICH ARE FLANKED BY DEEP RAVINES – IT WAS DUSK BEFORE THE PARENTS BECAME WORRIED AND A RESCUE TEAM AIDED BY THE FIRE BRIGADE BEGAN TO SEARCH THE CORRIDORS, BLARING SIRENS IN

The world outside fell away from me, for eight clock-hours I was a ghost, prowling all on my own through acres of hollow chambers. For eight hours I would open a tap by a fraction here, tighten another there, write down some frozen figures, daydream, or hold long conversations with myself. At noon I would climb the iron stairs to a narrow landing which gave access to a smaller, remote chamber – my favorite spot to eat my lunch, which consisted of a few sandwiches, and again, like yesterday and the day before, a bar of chocolate. Only because my daydreams became filled with

hot steaming food did I know that noon was near. I don't much care for chocolate, and the rustling silver paper in the chilly electric light hurt me, I am not exactly sure where. But I bought chocolate because there was a picture with each bar – removing the hostile silver paper which crackled in the desolation, I was recompensed by the emergence of the picture underneath – one could build up a collection of these pictures, thus coming into the possession of all the flowers of mountains and forests – one could even send for an album in which to stick them. Sometimes, when another two or three age-old hours had crawled by toward the hole into which all outlived hours must fall, I would go back to that furthest chamber to gaze again at my latest acquisition: a wild wood-

AN ATTEMPT TO ATTRACT THE CHILDREN'S ATTENTION – FURTHER NEWS IS
AWAITED LAST NIGHT THIRTY TONS OF RAT POISON WERE STOLEN FROM THE
SUPPLY DEPOT, IT WOULD SEEM THAT THE THIEVES MISTOOK THE RAT POISON FOR
FLOUR – THE RAILWAYS HAVE APPEALED TO THE PUBLIC ON THE

anemone – in a virtually impassable forest I wander about and then, in a clearing, I suddenly come upon the wild wood-anemone. One day, a long, slow Sunday, I shall stick these pictures into the album I intend to buy – perhaps this Sunday will come soon. For now, my legs close to my body, dozing on the narrow landing, and then the signal for one o'clock: in chamber B the temperature tends to rise above zero, so that I am obliged to re-start the ventilation machine, and then I feel the artificial white material of the serpentine which is neither snow nor ice but technical, dead matter. The skin of my finger tips freezes very slightly, tackily against it. In this morning's paper there was an item about a girl who had been found tied to a tree, naked. Perhaps I ought to have cut it out – can one collect newspaper clippings and stick them into a book like pictures – why not? Field flowers and mountain flowers, wild wood-anemones, artificial ice and newspaper clippings. So she had been tied naked to a tree in a snow-covered field. A farmer had found her. She got dressed and walked away without offering a word of explanation. Daydreams. Endless conversations with myself.

Going home was a blessing and a torment every day. I made the longish journey on foot, through lukewarm streets, the lukewarmth of a town in early

RADIO AND THROUGH THE PRESS NOT TO BUY FLOUR OTHER THAN THROUGH
NORMAL OUTLETS / AN 18-YEAR OLD FARM LABORER INFORMED THE GUARDS AT THE
CASTLE OF A TERRIBLE ACCIDENT HE HAD WITNESSED: THE CARETAKER'S FIVE YEAR
OLD FOSTER CHILD HAD FALLEN INTO THE POND IN THE PARK;

April – it was impossible to continue the conversations with myself and, in order to avoid slipping into daydreams with my eyes open, I counted my steps. Once I counted up to about four thousand, but there must have been more, for the children playing by the fence interrupted me, as usual. I forgot to go on counting as soon as the multicoloured billboards came into sight at the street corner. Yes, there they were, the little girls, hanging from the metal bar which served as a barrier. They stuck to it like flies. They would hold onto the bar with their hands, place their feet on it, and then let themselves fall – but they never fell, they always remained suspended while turning over and over, one moment with their hair floating loose like seaweed, and the next moment with their skirts fluttering as their feet shot up above their heads. My eyes hooked themselves into this scene, but I forced myself to look indifferent. More and more frighteningly did my blood withdraw from my strengthless wrists – where I felt my veins aching – I have often asked other people about this; they know nothing about their organs which silently, unobtrusively carry out their functions. But in me there was always a constant flashing of signals to and fro, throughout my whole body. I felt my kidneys doing their work, I heard my heart give a violent lurch and then resume

THE MAN ALLEGED THAT HE HAD TRIED TO RESCUE THE GIRL BUT HAD ONLY SUCCEEDED IN RETRIEVING THE DEAD BODY FROM THE WATER – IT SOON EMERGED? HOWEVER, THAT THIS MAN WAS A NOTORIOUS CHARACTER WHO IS THOUGHT TO HAVE REPEATEDLY RAPED A GIRL OF 9, ALSO FOSTERED BY THE

its quitter beat, I was aware of my seed accumulating, my brain clutching to a thought or losing itself in a daydream. The closer I came to the playing girls the thinner became my veins and the more powerless my hands. My eyes filled drunkenly, but between my legs a small frightened bird hid in the shrubs. Last week I read in the paper that a child had not returned home by dusk and that the body had been found in a sack in the river several days later. But here, on my way home, the girls landed with their feet on the ground and looked with surprised, glad eyes at the world which was back in its usual place – a moment earlier the earth had shifted, the houses, the roofs, the multicolored fence, all shooting away up high, while the sky was a pale April sky below them. They were still laughing at it and then noticed the man who was slowly and gravely walking past them, looking into their eyes – a trifle too deeply to be accidental, I saw their childlike smiles die away on their already full lips and their heads turn aside to hide the triumph, irony, and fear in the corners of their eyes. A moment later they had forgotten and returned to their play, as if nothing had happened. From then on the streets were merely lukewarm and I realized I had forgotten to count my steps. At one point there was an unusual number of people, jostling each other, I had

CARETAKER AND HIS WIFE. THE MAN WAS ARRESTED AT THE STATION JUST AS HE WAS ABOUT TO BOARD A TRAIN. HE WAS IMMEDIATELY ESCORTED TO THE PARK WHERE THE CHILD'S BODY WAS STILL LYING BESIDE THE POND. PROLONGED INTERROGATIONS LED TO A COMPLETE CONFESSION: AFTER MEETING

to push my way through them, an explorer lost in the jungle. Fragments of conversation broke from mouth to mouth – a woman had dropped dead and they were all craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the body. The arms and legs of this crowd were lianas obstructing my path. I hacked a way through them, accidentally knocking against the soft breast of a girl, a vulnerable fruit, she did not feel it. An uncomfortable smell hung about them, slow and cloying – a warm smell of decay. Then I could breathe again, without the fear of catching their germs. Nearer home I began to visualize my wife more clearly: I saw her shoving the supper on to the table. The thought of large dishes with plenty of food made the image of my wife fade again. For weeks I had longed for an hors-d'oeuvre with lots of different colors – lettuce, sardines, chopped meat, and radishes – the abundant red of radishes in a green salad. As I pushed the front door open the atmosphere of desolation hit me – my wife had no doubt gone out again on one or another of her countless activities, or perhaps she had gone to see her mother, or was chatting with the neighbors. She was always busy with this and that, always doing things that would never have occurred to me. Where can she be? I thought sometimes. And then she would turn up

THE CHILD BY THE POND HE HAD GRABBED AND ASSAULTED HER BUT AS HE WAS UNABLE TO STOP HER SCREAMING AND KICKING HE GAGGED HER AND TIED HER UP WITH A STRING – AFTER RAPING HER HE THREW HER INTO THE WATER AND WAITED FOR TEN MINUTES, HIS CYNICISM SEEMED BOUNDLESS FOR

hours later, having achieved miracles – miracles which rendered me speechless and which at the same time drove me deeper into myself, as if into an air raid shelter. The table had been laid only for me – there was coffee, bread and cheese. Cheese did not interest me, it was merely a different sort of bread, a food one puts in one's mouth and chews – the stomach, a machine which has to be filled with a certain substance in order to overcome a certain uncomfortable feeling. The other day

I read about a man who had eaten a twelve-year old child and said he had done it because he was hungry. Because he was hungry, so it wasn't merely to get something inside him – not just to silence that feeling of discomfort. The coffee was cold, the bread dry, the cheese even drier. I ate in silence, and yet with a strange emotion. My wife was out, but the girl was there. The girl was there to sew buttons on shirts, to scrub the stairs, to serve as my wife's messenger. She did those small, unimportant chores which in every other household are done by the wife, while my wife did the jobs which I ought to have done. She was very energetic, my wife. Most of all, she was categorical. She would tell you that something was so, and it would never occur to her that she might be wrong. She tolerated no contradiction – no, she did not even recognize that someone might have a different

WHEN ASKED WHY HE INTENDED TO BOARD THE TRAIN HE SAID HE WANTED TO INFORM THE PARENTS OF THEIR DAUGHTER'S DEATH / A WOMAN WAS SEEN ACTING SUSPICIOUSLY IN A LARGE DEPARTEMENT STORE – AFTER LINGERING BY THE COUNTERS WITHOUT PURCHASING ANYTHING SHE WAS SEEN TO RE-

Opinion. Meanwhile, the girl moved about the house. As far as I know she never did anything particularly useful – she only tried to repair what had gone wrong. Sometimes she would sit for hours, evening after evening, ripping seams. This ripping apart of what had previously been sewn together was her duty. It was essential to her existence. At this moment, she was crouching by the cupboard, groping under it. I looked at her, in order not to disquiet her with the knives of my eyes. She was groping under the cabinet, picking up pins. Probably she or my wife had dropped a box of them. That was her function in this house: to drop something and then to squat for hours, fumbling under the cabinet. Her body still lacked flesh, she still had the flat thighs of a girl not fully grown, and the panties high between them were always immaculately white. My wife's panties were always rancid, stained, and slightly brownish where the thighs joined. My wife was always rushing around, talking and organizing, but she didn't take her femininity too seriously. She hardly gave it a thought. If she discovered that her panties were getting smelly she would kick them off and put on clean ones. She would stand with her legs astride, hoisting up her panties, and was no woman – she was more like a swimmer, hell-bent

MOVE AN ARTICLE AND PUT IT INTO HER BAG – WHEN STOPPED BY A STORE DETECTIVE AND ASKED FOR HER IDENTITY PAPERS SHE SUDDENLY COLLAPSED AND DIED INSTANTLY / A CANNIBAL WAS ARRESTED EARLIER THIS WEEK. AFTER LURING A TWELVE YEAR OLD GIRL INTO HIS HOUSE AND CUTTING HER UP INTO

on doing the hundred meters. But a few hours later her panties smelled unclean again. I think she never had enough time to go to the lavatory. The girl was shuffling about, still squatting. I was hoping she would turn toward me as she reached further under the cabinet. I had finished my coffee but was still sitting by the table to read the paper. It would be best for me to sit as still as I could, so as to distract her as little as possible from her futile activity. My eyes, gasping fishes, wandered past the newspaper toward the cavern under her skirt. She must have been aware that she was open to my gaze – but she went on smiling hesitantly, allowing the white snow of her panties to shimmer before my eyes. I talked to her – about the pictures in the bars of chocolate, the wild wood-anemone. She asked me to swap that one for the wild columbine. I collect only white flowers, she said.

When I got up to go to my little workshop, she was busy cleaning the stairs. There was one step which she seemed to be avoiding as if there were something there, an obstacle which troubled her. I know I could go on talking forever about the girl's hands and about the strangely individual,

hesitant life these hands led – but now they were moving around an obstacle, like water in a stream flowing around a stone. Water is fragile and frivolous, it

PIECES HE ORDERED HIS WIFE TO ROAST THE MEAT AND SERVE IT FOR DINNER. IN HIS DEFENSE HE CLAIMED TO HAVE ACTED OUT OF HUNGER / A DANCING TEACHER POSING AS A MEDIUM AND HIGH PREIST OF A SECRET SECT CLAIMED TO BE IN POSSESSION OF A MAGIC SECRET – HE HAD FOUNDED THE SECT, WHICH

breaks apart, it would not dream of moving the stone. Murmuringly, it falls apart and then joins up again and flows on without memory, without pain. In the same way, these hands moved round the obstacle which was lying on one of the stairs. I looked at it, it was a sanitary towel left there by my wife. On the days when my wife had the curse (as people in our area call it) she would hoist up her skirts and pin a towel between her legs. She did it in the way a motorist puts on a spare tire. She would leave a trail of those towels all over the house, behind a door, on the stairs, sometimes in a place where she could easily see it, to remind he to throw it in the wash tub before long. She was irritable on such days. A woman! she would say, with bitterness, aggrieved because she was only a woman. She resented nature being nature. It exasperated her that a man discharges semen, that a woman has periods, and that children pee on the floor. She vaguely believed in a god and went to church regularly, according to the rules. And if any of her busy plans did not turn out the way she wanted, she would light a candle in front of a plaster saint. But she was embittered and would throw aside a soiled towel, anywhere, out of her sight – in the bedroom even, and on my side of the bed at that. In those days, the girl did not yet have periods, she crouched on the

AIMED AT TOTAL CHASTITY, AND HAD RECRUITED NEARLY 150 PERSONS OF BOTH SEXES AS MEMBERS – HOWEVER, HE APPEARED TO BE CHIEFLY INTERESTED IN YOUNG GIRLS TO WHOM HE GAVE LESSONS IN RHYTHMIC DANCING – FROM AMONG THESE GIRLS, WHOSE AGES RANGED FROM 12 TO 15 YEARS? HE SE-

stairs, and let her hands run past the obstacle like water. She looked down at me as I stood at the bottom of the stairs, about to go up. Again, I saw between her legs those immaculate panties, like a snowy field, like a clear moonlit night. Our eyes looked past the obstacle, like fragile, frivolous water. She smiled, with something at the back of her eyes, something scornful, something disdainful. I... yes, how? I walked past her and shut myself off from her in my workshop – something broke in me like thin ice, not because of the silver-white moonscape between the girl's legs, but because of my own chilly thoughts, because of my blood which I felt creeping through my veins, too thinly. My mother said once, long ago: But... how strange he is becoming! How indifferent!