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Eugène Ionesco

HUNGER
AND
THIRST
and other plays

Translated from the French by Donald Watson

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HUNGER AND THIRST

Three Episodes

CHARACTERS

JEAN
MARIE-MADELEINE
AUNT ADELAIDE
FIRST KEEPER
SECOND KEEPER
THE BROTHER SUPERIOR
FIRST BROTHER (*or* BROTHER TARABAS)
SECOND BROTHER
THIRD BROTHER
FOURTH BROTHER
FIFTH BROTHER (*who will also play the part of the clown* TRIPP)
SIXTH BROTHER (*who will also play the part of the clown*
BRECHTOLL)
MARTHE

I

THE FLIGHT

THE SET

The stage represents a rather dark room. A door on the audience's left; an old chimney-piece in the rear wall, which is grey and somewhat dirty, with two windows or fan-lights high up. Facing the fireplace, a well-worn sofa. An old squat armchair front of stage, a cradle to one side. There is an old mirror on the right-hand wall. A plain table. A dilapidated chair. In the fireplace at the centre of the rear wall a blazing coal fire will appear and disappear, and later, a luminous garden.

JEAN *to Marie-Madeleine*]: I can't begin to understand you!

Why come back to this place? We were better off where we were, in that new building. Windows all round, open to the sky . . . the light coming in from North, South, East, West, and all the other cardinal points. We used to go out on the gilded balcony. It was gold, remember? Space stretching all round us! No, no, I can't begin to understand. Why come and live here again?

MARIE: You used to complain there too! You said there was too much space. If it's not agoraphobia, it's claustrophobia!

JEAN: We were lucky to get away from this funereal ground-floor flat! It's not even that, it's a basement. As soon as we found a healthier place, we left.

MARIE: That's what you say now. But there, you didn't like the district. Here, at least, they don't rob you. They're

respectable people. Small shopkeepers. They all know you and all our friends are still here.

JEAN *continuing his own line of thought*]: It's an absolute nightmare. *My* nightmare. I've always known it, since I was a child. I often woke up in the morning choking with fear. Because I've been dreaming of some ghastly house half sunk in the ground, half under water, oozing with mud. And look at this! Mud everywhere!

MARIE: It'll be all right. I'll dry it out. We'll have the plumbers in. They're easy to get hold of round here.

JEAN: Home sweet home! The water seeps into your boots, you shiver with cold, catch rheumatism and feel permanently out of sorts. Just what I wanted to avoid. I swore I'd never live in a basement again. Nightmares may be warnings, but I never thought they'd come true. Or perhaps I did have a vague idea. It *would* happen to *me*! I told you this before. I said I didn't want to come back.

MARIE: I didn't bring you here by force.

JEAN: I said I didn't want to come back. A lot of good that did me. The moment I let my mind wander, you take advantage. Sometimes it happens that I forget and think of other things. You can't hold everything in your mind all at the same time. The brain has its limits. So the moment I forget . . . And I swore I'd never come back. I just can't get over it. You must have known how I loathed the idea. But when my mind's on something else, you pounce. And while I'm dreaming of God-knows-what, you take me by the hand and ask me if I'll go with you. Absent-mindedly I say yes. You bring me here, with my head still in the clouds, and settle me in. You settle *us* in. All of a sudden I realise where I am. Where *you* had decided to bring me. The very place my nightmares had warned me not to go back to. And you knew, you knew, you knew . . .

MARIE: But we lived here a few years ago. For quite a long time. You weren't unhappy then.

JEAN: The place is not the same. You can see it's different now. In the old days, even if there wasn't much light, it *was* on the ground floor. Now it's sunk. It started sinking before we left. That's why we went, when the water seeped up through the floor. And to think there was no need for you to come back to this. Feel, the sheets are damp.

MARIE: I'll put warming-pans in the beds.

JEAN: The walls are damp! There's mildew round the skirting! It's dirty, it's greasy, it's cramped, and it's sinking all the time.

MARIE: You're making it up. What gives you the idea the house is sinking?

JEAN: Don't you ever notice anything?

MARIE: You always look on the black side. It's morbid. All imagination.

JEAN: It sticks out a mile! And it's always happening! Streets and towns, whole civilisations get swallowed up.

MARIE: It happens so slowly . . . so gradually . . . you don't realise . . . If it's as common as that we'll just have to put up with it. One day these buildings will be uncovered, disinterred. They'll see the light of day again and open out in the sun.

JEAN: Meanwhile we're sinking. This is the kind of place I hate.

MARIE: Most people live like this.

JEAN: They enjoy wallowing in the mire, they thrive on it. If they prefer the shadows or the dark, that's their lookout. But you could have spared *my* feelings. I suppose it's destiny. There's no escape for me. The only houses I like have roofs and walls you can see through. Or no roof and walls at all. Where the fresh air and the sunshine come

sweeping through in waves. Oh, for an ocean of sunshine!
. . . Oh, for an ocean of sky!

MARIE: But sometimes you used to say you wanted to leave the new house. That's why I started looking round.

JEAN: It was the last thing I had in mind. Unless we'd found another still more luminous, sky blue through and through. A house perched up in the mountains. There are such things, you know. Or even on some river. Not right *in* the river, but built out over the water, with flower-faces at the windows, flowers with their roots and stalks out of sight, just the top of them showing, flowers you can stretch out and touch. There are flowers that weep, of course, but also some that laugh. Why not choose flowers that shoot up in the world and smile?

MARIE: Gardens and houses like that are beyond our means, not within *our* reach.

JEAN: A wobbly armchair! Rotten old doors, a worm-eaten commode . . .

MARIE: It's an antique.

JEAN: With mud in the drawers.

MARIE: That proves it's genuine. You're never satisfied!

JEAN: I know people who live on magical hilltops, glistening mountain peaks. And it's absurd how low their rents are. They pay less than we do, and some pay nothing at all.

MARIE: They inherited those from their parents. We didn't have their luck. But so long as I've a bed, a glimmer of light, and I've got you still at my side—it all seems beautiful.

JEAN: Darkness and gloom for us! And all I long for is the dawn!

MARIE: Some people have to live under bridges. You don't know when you're well off.

JEAN: They're the lucky ones! They've got streets and

squares, gardens and fields, and the seaside: the whole world is theirs. You forget the rheumatism this house will give us.

MARIE: Listen. This is a perfectly ordinary flat, with rooms, beds, books and a kitchen. We're in our own home.

JEAN: . . . in sopping slippers and soaking wet clothes . . .

MARIE: I'll get them all dry in the little room next door.

JEAN: It always rains in the drying room. I won't live in this place any more, I won't be consoled, or make the best of it.

I'm cold. There's no central heating!

MARIE: I'll warm the house with my heart.

JEAN: No electricity. Old oil lamps!

MARIE: I'll light it with my eyes.

JEAN: Some houses are like tombs. But if you can see the sky, you forget. That's a consolation for living . . . and for dying.

MARIE: This is a house of habit.

JEAN: Looking forward to something is all that keeps me going. Even the postman doesn't come down this street.

MARIE: So you'll get no more irritating letters! Nasty insulting letters and letters of thanks. All those begging letters.

JEAN: Not even the telephone.

MARIE: You can't stand the telephone. You wanted to get rid of it!

JEAN: It's when I've got it, I want to get rid of it. When I haven't got it, I've got to have it. You've got to have it before you can get rid of it. Now I can't even get rid of the telephone! There's nothing to look forward to, nothing to do any more.

MARIE: You never could live like everyone else. For you, there's always something missing!

JEAN: There always is. I only live in the hope something fantastic will turn up. Even at school I could hardly wait for Wednesdays to come round, and the Christmas

holidays. I'd look forward to the toys and the chocolates. I still remember the smell of the oranges, the tangerines. And then I lived in the hope that you would love me.

MARIE: And I do. So now, of course, you're after something else!

JEAN: Then, in the winter, I'd live in expectation of the spring. I'd dream of the summer holidays. And when they came I'd fix my thoughts on the autumn and going back to town. I've always longed for the snow, and the sea, and the mountains across the plain, and the clear water of the lakes. Above all I've looked forward to the ever-changing seasons. Here, it's a mixture of autumn and winter—one long grim season all the year round.

MARIE: It'll be quiet and restful. Nothing to disturb our peace.

JEAN: It's not peace I want, not mere contentment. It's boundless joy and ecstasy for me. And in these surroundings ecstasy is out. We've hardly been here more than twenty minutes. And now I look at you, you've aged already. Your first wrinkles. White hairs you didn't have before. Time goes faster than you think. Your head's drooping, a flower too heavy for its stalk.

MARIE: What's it matter how fast it goes? What's the difference, whether it takes ten minutes or an hour, a fortnight or a year? We all get there in the end.

JEAN: The ceiling will soon fall in. The plaster's crumbling. I can feel the weight on my shoulders already. Those patches on the walls are getting bigger. Is all this an image of time? Everything disintegrates before our very eyes.

MARIE: So long as I'm with you, I'm not afraid to die. If by taking one step I can touch your hand, or hear your voice from the next room when I call . . . then I'm happy. And *she's* here too [*she indicates the cradle*]. I know you love us.

Not enough, perhaps. Maybe you don't dare? Or you don't realise? But you *do* love us, I know you do. You've no idea the hold we have on your affections. Yes, in a way you do know. But not deep down. If only you could *really* know.

JEAN: Your hold on me is *great*. But the universe is greater, and what I need is greater still.

MARIE: She and I, we're all you need. One day, you'll understand. [*Aside:*] If only he knew how much he loves us!

JEAN: Who can make me forget I'm alive? I can't bear my own existence.

MARIE: You should get outside yourself more often and have a good look round. These walls with their patches of damp and mildew may appear old to you, but have you really *seen* them? Look at the beautiful shapes!

JEAN: Everything's so old.

MARIE *taking Jean by the hand to show him the marvels of the house*: Not old. Antique. I thought you were a connoisseur. You can't really prefer that modern stuff! These shapes speak volumes, they're so expressive in their silence. I can see islands. Look: an ancient city, friendly faces to welcome us. Look again! Lips that smile, hands held out to us. And trees. You wanted flowers, you've got them on these walls, in lovely vases.

JEAN: However hard I look, all I can see is mildew, dilapidation . . . Oh yes, I can see . . . but not what you see. To me they look like bleeding carcasses, heads bowed in sorrow, frightened people dying, mutilated bodies, with no head, no arms, fabulous monsters, prostrate, in pain, gasping for breath . . .

MARIE: They must be harmless then, not dangerous any more.

JEAN: Their sufferings have been handed on to us. And there,

you see the head of that old man? Yes, an old Chinaman, with a wrinkled face. How sad he looks, in his coolie hat. He's sick, of course... He's being attacked by rats! They're up on his shoulders, they're going to devour his face!

MARIE: You're wrong: he's a serene old man, he's beaming at us, he's going to speak to us.

JEAN: And the rats on his shoulders, ready to pounce?

MARIE: Pet rats: on their hindlegs, gently sniffing his face.

JEAN: His chest is covered in blood from the gaping wounds.

MARIE: Why no, dear, it's not that at all! It's a red cloak he's wearing, with gold braid on it . . . I'm sure he's the wise man of the house, its guardian. Old houses are full of moving memories. All the ghostly tenants of the past live on: nobody dies.

[Enter AUNT ADELAIDE through the door on the audience's left. Before she enters, she can be seen arriving in the mirror. She comes in and sits down quite naturally on the old sofa. She is dressed in long veils, which give her the look of a great lady in decline, poverty-stricken, almost a down-and-out.]

JEAN: Aunt Adelaide!

MARIE: Oh yes, it's Aunt Adelaide!

ADELAIDE *she seems annoyed*]: I've come to pay you a visit.

JEAN *to Aunt Adelaide*]: I can't think *why* you've come, Aunt Adelaide. What do you want with us?

ADELAIDE: I bother you, don't I? Upset you?

JEAN: You don't upset us, we're fond of you, you know we are. [*Aunt Adelaide shrugs her shoulders and laughs bitterly.*]
You don't appear to believe me, but it's true.

MARIE: She doesn't believe you. She can't understand you. Even in the past, she never really understood. It's not her fault.

ADELAIDE: I understand everything. Sometimes I pretend I don't, so you'll think I'm stupid. But I understand all

right. I understand everything.

JEAN: Then you should realise you've no business to be here, sitting on that sofa.

ADELAIDE: I have come to pay you a visit. Is this how you welcome me? Like this? The family never appreciated me. No-one's a prophet in his own family. Strangers respect me. *They* kiss my hand and say "Please don't go. *Do* stay to dinner". But I always say no. I don't upset *them*, I only bother *you*. You hate me because I'm famous. Since that's the way you feel, I shall leave. [*She stands up, then sits down again.*] No, I'm not hungry, thank you. I never drink coffee. Never touch wine. Never, never, never. I've always led a sober life. I never gave up my work. I was an inspiration to my husband, the great doctor. Most of the treatises on medicine and surgery that bear his name were in fact written by me. He owed his brilliant career to me. And I never told a soul, not a soul. I'm so-modest. Still, the other professors knew. They guessed *I* was the author. They never *said* so. It was a *tacit* understanding. Conveyed by winks, and signs and insinuations. I used to tell them he wrote his books himself, so as not to betray him. His colleagues, hospital consultants and members of the Medical Council, would look at me and smile. I'd smile back. Oh yes, I'd return their smiles. They were handsome men. They used to come courting me. And it still goes on, even now. I get so pestered by my admirers, I often have to lock my door. They write me letters I tear into little pieces and throw in the wastepaper basket. I don't wish to marry again.

MARIE: She hasn't changed!

JEAN *to Aunt Adelaide*]: When they're chasing you, these admirers, where do they find you?

ADELAIDE: At home, of course, in my own home . . . If I

don't let them in, they watch for me on the stairs. Then I have to go out by the servants' door. One or two will be lying in wait for me there as well. Yes, they come to my house.

JEAN: Think carefully, Aunt Adelaide! Where is your home?

ADELAIDE: Where it always was.

JEAN: Where's that?

ADELAIDE: My flat. I've been living there for years. You know!

JEAN: Don't you remember? You left it.

MARIE to Jean]: Be quiet!

JEAN to Aunt Adelaide]: There's been another family there for some time now.

MARIE to Jean]: Don't remind her of *that*.

ADELAIDE: Poor unfortunate people who had nowhere to go!

They were out on the streets. They kept me a room I can use whenever I like. I've the key of the house to prove it. Look! This one. In the daytime I work, I give courses at the University. Then I go to the library to study. No need to show my credentials. They know me. In the evening I attend lectures put on for the staff. Then, tired but happy, I go home for the night. If my lodgers wake up to welcome me, I tell them to go back to bed. They appreciate that. "Can we get you anything, Madame?" they ask. "Anything you need, Doctor?" "Don't worry about me", I say, "don't you worry about me! I don't want to be a nuisance when I come home. It'll never do to wake the baby!" I step out of my shoes and tactfully tiptoe off to my own little nest. I always consider other people, and never think of myself. Quietly I close the door and then I get into bed. Eight hours of sleep. I drop off straightaway. Next day I wake up fresh as a daisy, and carry on as before. You know that little room of mine, don't you?

At the end of the passage, on the left? That's where you used to sleep when you were small. The window looks out on the Boulevard where the Metro runs above ground.

JEAN: It's not true. You should face the facts. That story's not true at all.

MARIE to Jean]: Don't cross her . . . There is *some* truth in what she says.

ADELAIDE to Jean]: You used to like to hear the trains go by. The rumbling would rock you off to sleep. Your mother always sent you to stay with me when she meant you to have a bath. There was no bathroom at your place. The apartments you lived in were never very grand. I paid the rent and I couldn't afford a larger flat. You weren't at all pleased. But it's not that I was mean, I had too many commitments. I used to support the whole family: *your* mother, *my* father and mother. You used to live with your grandparents, the two of you. Wasn't I the one who paid for everything? Your uncle was a consul, always abroad. *He* didn't look after you. And your poor mother! Oh dear! Your father had gone off and left her. She said it was all my fault, that he'd divorced her because of me. Are these lies I'm telling you now?

JEAN: I did sleep in that room when I was small. Often. And later too, when I came to Paris.

ADELAIDE: You see.

JEAN: Yes, it's true. In the evenings I used to lean out the window to watch the trains go by. They were all lit up, and you could see the heads of the people inside.

ADELAIDE: Then why do you lie? You see, I am telling the truth, I'm not mad.

JEAN: There's one thing that *isn't* true. Come on, make an effort, think! Do you really go home every evening to sleep?

ADELAIDE: Every evening. Yes, Jean.

JEAN: To your own home? And stay with the people there?

They really see you come in? And you talk? Answer me!

ADELAIDE *evading an answer to the question*]: I don't walk about dressed in this way, like a pauper, just to go begging. I've lost all my money. Given everything away. To everybody. But I've not been abandoned. I *am* being helped. Other people help me: *other* people are grateful to me . . . not the family. Oh, the family! I ask nothing of the family . . .

JEAN: That's not the point.

ADELAIDE *continuing*]: . . . When I go out for an evening stroll, it's because I need the air. When I hold out my hand by the entrance to the big department stores and stand for hours pretending to queue up at the bus-stops, it's not to beg for alms. Oh no! I don't want charity. It's so I can observe the passers-by: I write books . . .

JEAN: *We've* never seen them.

MARIE *to Jean*]: Let her talk . . . It does her good.

ADELAIDE: *You* never see anything. Well, it's a fact. Books about life, about the streets, about society, and morality to-day, about our schools. I write the true biographies of famous men. Heads of state. I know them personally. They've explained everything to me and I'm the only one who knows their secrets. I make out reports on scientific subjects. Only yesterday I read a paper to the Institute. They said I was brilliant. You didn't come, of course, you or your wife. The professors from the Sorbonne, the College of France and the Academy of Science all turned up in force.

JEAN: You know quite well you're inventing all this. But that's not the question.

ADELAIDE: You'll both find out one day who I am. Then you'll be sorry. You don't *want* to believe me. Look at the

decorations I've had!

JEAN: I tell you that's not the point. Look here, Aunt Adelaide, I'm asking you to make an effort. Give me an answer: yesterday evening, did you really sleep at home? Were you in your flat?

MARIE *to Jean*]: You'll never get a straight answer.

ADELAIDE: I always have a good night's rest. I work all day, so I *need* rest. I sleep like a top. I'm not ill. I'm in very good health.

JEAN: Right. Where have you come from now?

ADELAIDE: From home . . . from my *home*, I tell you. I got up a bit later than usual. It's a holiday today, it's Sunday.

MARIE: Maybe she pretends not to know. Maybe she's forgotten.

JEAN: You never can tell with her. We never could. She's always been like this. Sometimes she knows she's playing a part, sometimes she doesn't. And at times she tells the truth. In a way what she says is true, surprising as it may seem. She's often surprised us. You can never be sure with her.

ADELAIDE: These decorations I've been awarded, you don't think they're genuine, do you? I have the citations in my bag. I'll show you. Though I didn't bring them all. I've got dozens of medals and crosses and ribbons.

MARIE: We believe you. There's no need to show us!

ADELAIDE: Oh, but I must! Look! I've got some here! [*She takes from her bag a handful of medals and ribbons:*] Look, children! Now you can see who I am! [*She puts the decorations back in her bag, which she closes again.*]

JEAN: You always change the subject. But you know what I'm getting at. Remember? You set your house on fire. Set light to the drawing-room curtains. The fire brigade had to turn out.

ADELAIDE: My next-door neighbour did it to spite me.

JEAN: How could she get in?

ADELAIDE: She'd had a key made. She spies on me, I see her peeping behind the curtains. As soon as I go out, she runs in. If I've any flowers around, she pulls them about. But she's cunning: she tears off the petals just one at a time. Then the flowers die. I have to drop them in the dustbin. Once, when I'd had a skirt made for me, I went out for a quarter of an hour, so I could come back and catch her. But she saw me, and got away in time. I went in and there was the skirt on the bed, where I'd left it. But it wasn't lying in the same position. I knew she'd been up to something. She'd put another skirt in its place, an identical one, the same colour. But made of nettles. She'd dyed the nettles to match the skirt. If you don't believe me, just look at her when she walks past! Wicked creature! You'll see! It's the *real* skirt she's wearing.

JEAN: You lost all your furniture. So you had no bed. It was destroyed in the fire. They took you off to hospital.

ADELAIDE: That's a lie. You're on *their* side. I've many enemies, who want their revenge. So they persecute me and tell stories about me.

JEAN: What have they got against you?

ADELAIDE: It's not true. I've never been ill. Never, never been ill. I know the chief consultant in the hospital. He's an old friend of mine. Since he was a student. I was his "Professor". He warned me. He said: "You have enemies, Madame. They envy you." I've never been in hospital. Do you think I'm mad?

JEAN: When you left the hospital, where did you go?

ADELAIDE: I wasn't in the hospital.

JEAN: Yes, you were. Do you want me to say where they took you next?

MARIE *who has gone to sit near the cradle, interrupting her rocking for a moment*]: Don't tell her that!

ADELAIDE *standing up*]: You're both making a mistake. I'm not a ghost. Look! I move, I speak, I can talk, I have arms, I have legs, I can walk. Anywhere I choose. I have a beautiful bosom, in spite of my years. [*She opens her bodice, takes off her brassière and shows her breasts:*] Your wife can look too. Are hers as lovely as mine? That's why they came courting me. These are not the breasts of a ghost. My thighs are beautiful too. My flesh is firm. Almost too muscular: gymnastics, you know. To keep fit.

MARIE: You'd better go, Aunt Adelaide. Calm yourself! Cover yourself! [*Adelaide covers herself again with her cloak.*] If I ask you nicely: please go now! You can come back another time. We'll invite you to lunch.

ADELAIDE: I've got blood in my veins. Ghosts haven't. Look! Lovely red blood! [*After taking off her hat, overloaded with artificial flowers and grapes, she takes out a knife and slits her skull:*] That's my blood flowing!

JEAN: Seems true enough. It's flowing all right.

ADELAIDE *to Marie-Madeleine, indicating her opened skull*]: Put your hand here, you'll see! [*Marie-Madeleine refrains. To Jean:*] Feel! There's your proof. You've never believed me, always accused me of lying. [*Adelaide has taken Jean's hand almost by force and made him touch the wound. Jean withdraws his hand and looks at Marie-Madeleine.*]

JEAN *looking at his hand*]: It's not real blood. It's not liquid. And then it's too dark to be blood. It's like jelly. Gelatine! Sticky! And it doesn't stain! [*He looks at his hand*]: A moment ago I had it all over my fingers: now it's vanished. But if it was powdered blood . . . you'd have to . . . blow it away . . . No, Aunt Adelaide, it's definitely not real blood. You're trying to mislead us.

MARIE to Jean]: She's giving another performance.

ADELAIDE: I am an artist, but this is not a performance.

You're mad, the two of you. Poor things. You've always, always, always, accused me of lying. I'm going to see my professors. They respect me, they do, they believe me. *They* don't tell me I'm mad. They *know* I'm not. I shall never visit you again. Never. I'm sorry. Not for you. But for the baby in her cradle. In the whole family she's the only one I love. It's for her sake I come, in spite of your jibes. [*She goes out. For a few moments you can still see her reflection in the mirror.*]

JEAN while she is leaving]: It's a shame! Anyway, I didn't kill Aunt Adelaide!

MARIE: How *could* you have killed her? You weren't even at the funeral!

JEAN: It's only *here* she's able to find us.

MARIE: She won't come back again now, when she's realised what's happened to her. Still, you shouldn't have let her go in that condition, without a friendly word. You get so worked up. Why aren't you more tolerant? You never get on with anyone these days.

JEAN: She's not herself any more. Why do people like that come and visit us here? Why?

MARIE: Don't puzzle your head about that! Think about her too, and the state she's in! You should have been more sympathetic, more understanding. She's a near relation. Don't we all avoid facing facts? You should have tried to explain. But now forget it! You're shivering, you're cold. Come and sit here. No . . . Let's walk up and down together.

JEAN: I really can't stay in this house any more. I can't stand it . . .

MARIE *tired*]: I know, I know . . . You're neurotic. There's a cure for that.

JEAN: I see things as they are. And that's incurable. X

MARIE: Even if you do have your reasons, ignore them! Forget them! Take life as it comes! You always want to do something about it. Don't! Shall I open the drawers of this old desk? Look at these old photos, a pageant from the past, people from the last century, a thousand years ago, photos of every period, from Ancient Times till now, all the people who ever lived here. What kind faces they've got! The whole of the past is here.

JEAN: I don't care for other people's memories.

MARIE: A photo of you as a child . . .

JEAN: My own are a dead-weight already: like these walls, or this ceiling weighing us down.

MARIE: We'll bear it, as best we can, on our shoulders . . .

JEAN: If only I could have those other memories!

MARIE: Which ones?

JEAN: The memories we've forgotten. No! I don't mean those. Different ones . . . The memories of a life I never lived. No, that's not what I mean: memories I've never had, impossible memories . . .

MARIE: You're asking too much.

JEAN: That's all I ask.

MARIE: Your teeth are chattering, you're shivering. I'll light the fire.

[*A chimney-piece appears against the back wall, on the right, with a blazing fire; or in the mirror.*]

JEAN: No, don't! Put it out! I can't stand the sight of that woman in the flames. Look at her hair! That's how I always see her, desperate, holding out her arms, in agony. Then she vanishes in smoke and leaves a heap of ashes at my feet. But next time the fire is lit, there she is again, rising like a phoenix, an eternal reproach. And never, never have I dared to brave the flames. [*Addressing*

the woman he sees in the flames:] Yes, I know you're frightened, I know you are in pain. If only I could help you. But I can't. Forgive me.

MARIE *to the imaginary woman in the flames*]: It's not his fault, my dear. He couldn't save you. He was ready to attempt the impossible. But that was more than impossible. It's not his fault. Believe me, it's not his fault! Go away! Please, please go away! [*The chimney-piece and the flames disappear. To Jean:*] Is that better?

JEAN: This house has weird visitors.

MARIE: You'll get used to it. It doesn't frighten *me*. Now you're cold again.

JEAN: I'm cold. And I'm too hot. And I'm hungry. I'm thirsty too. I've lost my appetite. No taste left for anything.

MARIE: You'll get used to it, I tell you. I'll help you, you'll see. You can make a nest out of anything and find refuge in nostalgia. Feed on desire and quench your thirst with hope. Wishful thinking's a waste of time. Harsh memories can be muted, made a source of entertainment. Turn despair into sadness: sadness into regret. Feed on your melancholy. Parents and friends who are dead can live on in the mind, remain in constant touch. They're a world in themselves. A restful night absorbs the shadows of the past. The sun will shine today, the sky will be clear tomorrow: if you wish hard enough. If your eyesight's good you can see through walls that block your view of the horizon . . . Turn your failures into rest and relaxation. Look forward in the morning to the evening that brings peace: without fail it will come. At night dream of the spectacle of dawn. That too will come. And so it is with all things.

JEAN: I have such a feeling of emptiness!

MARIE: Come to terms with it, and find fulfilment!

JEAN: Impossible! Sentimentality! That's not the answer!

[*Marie-Madeleine sits down, with her back to the audience, still rocking the child in the cradle. Jean is standing up, facing the audience, on the spectators' left, not far from the door. Both characters are talking to themselves.*]

JEAN: I won't be frightened! No, I'll never be scared again! I don't care who comes to haunt me in this subterranean slum. I'm not afraid of these eccentrics any more! I know who sends them, Marie-Madeleine, I know! They won't catch me, never again, they've lost their power over me. They'd like me to be bitten by remorse, crippled by repentance, they want pity to draw blood from my heart: but I know their game and I'm not playing any more. Their teeth are not so keen, their claws no longer tear my flesh. I've done away with pity and regret. I've killed all feeling for the sufferings of mankind. I've shared the torments of my fellows far too long: I've cast that millstone off. I'll be as light as air and celebrate my new-found liberty in song. I'll drown all cares and dance for joy.

MARIE: We'll fix the place up. I'll repair that old desk and re-cover the sofa. [*To the child she is rocking:*] Go bye-byes, sleepy-pies, grow big and strong, sleepy-eyes. [*Then, to herself:*] If only he knew what he wanted! What he wants is already within his grasp, staring him in the face. Where else does he hope to find it? You see, Jean, she's smiling, soon she'll be able to talk.

JEAN: I can't stand the sight of myself any more. An ugly reflection in a cracked mirror.

MARIE: If he could *really* see himself, he'd know how beautiful he is. He'd stop hating himself. I've known him so long, since the world began. And I'm joined to him for all eternity. Why do these bonds seem like chains to him? All I want is to call his name and hear him answer. He's there,

and that's enough.

JEAN: I'll turn a deaf ear to appeals for help, ignore the grey voices of resignation.

MARIE: We'll bar the door and put a new lock on, with a nice big key, to keep us safe from burglars and disaster.

JEAN: I'll go away.

MARIE: We won't travel any more. Where else can we go? We've reached our destination. Outside this house, outside us two, outside us three, anywhere else is nowhere.

JEAN: I'm so tired . . . fatigue holds me back, my legs are like jelly, my head's like lead. I'm frightened to death again.

MARIE: I've hung the baby's nappies up to dry. And her little dress. Isn't it sweet? It's your birthday today. Every day's a birthday. The anniversary of something. I've brought you some pretty pictures, chocolate and cigarettes. Every day I bring you a heart new-born.

JEAN: Every day's a birthday. Every day reminds me of old age, every morning fills me with despair. Soon I shall disintegrate. Lassitude can kill and so can fear.

MARIE: If you're sick with fear, you're scared wherever you are. When he's far away and all alone, he'll be more frightened than ever. And he wants to go roaming around like a mad thing! He's got all he needs, he's got everything here, but he wants to go roaming about!

JEAN: Is it too late? I'll conquer my fears. Is this the last chance, is there still time? Everyone knows my address. If I stay, they'll surround the house and mount guard: at any moment they'll be here to stop me going. I don't want to be like them, I won't get stuck in a rut or just drift along like the rest. Their destiny's not mine, my life is somewhere else.

MARIE *to the child*]: Yes, darling! Yes, my little pink baby! He loves you. He loves us both, more than words can tell.

JEAN: Fatigue wonders what's the point of going. Old age suggests I stay where I'm well off. Caution warns I'll do myself no good, and goodness says I'll do harm to others. And duties? Obligations? Deep-rooted affections? And reason? They won't catch me with their arguments. They bore me stiff with their "experience". Because *they* never dared, they want *me* to stick in the mud. I'm meant for something better.

MARIE: I love you, you love me, you love her. We love one another so much. You'll always be here, always always be. Even if you go to the ends of the world, even if you *think* you're alone, I am and shall be with you. But will you be able to go? Will he be able to go? He's not used to walking. He over-estimates his strength, he doesn't know how tired he'll feel. He can't last out two hundred yards on foot. He's out of training. Not to speak of the hardships and the dangers.

JEAN: I'll take my boots, my stick, and my hat. I need healthy surroundings. The clean air will wake me up, give me back my strength. I must have mountain air, somewhere like Switzerland, a hygienic country where nobody dies. A land where the law forbids you to die. When you enter that land, you must make a declaration. A promise not to die. You have to sign it. Death is not allowed. Attempt it, you get a fine and a prison sentence. That way you're forced to exist.

MARIE: If he's set his heart on a change of air, he might as well go. But he'd better take his big greatcoat. Don't get cold, don't catch a chill, be careful! Spring only lasts a few hours. And summer a couple of days. Then comes the dreary season, stretching endlessly over the plains.

JEAN: I'll get some colour back in my cheeks. Everything will turn green again. I'll turn green again too.

MARIE: I was thinking of having the house done up in gay colours. We'll be so nice and cosy in our armchairs once they've been renovated. For coffee, and a snooze . . . and a baby in arms. And me. Not forgetting me.

JEAN: Once upon a time I was strong, I was a great weight-lifter. What's the increase, as you grow older, in your own weight in pounds?

MARIE: But how is it he won't put down roots? Why doesn't he want to be like an old wall, or an oak, covered in moss or ivy? An old oak with its roots deep in the earth. A tree doesn't move around. Why is he so unhappy? Why is he so obtuse? It's moving around that upsets things.

JEAN: If I'm to harden my heart, I'd better steep it in the sorrows of others. I am tired. What an effort to move my arm. Or even my thumb! Chin up! Fresh unfailing energy will bring me back to life.

MARIE: He thinks this house is a tomb. Why does he get in a state? All houses are tombs. In ours it's hot in winter, cool in summer, nice and warm in the spring.

JEAN: I'll loosen the knots and slip my bonds. I'll bury my past, lest it buries me. I banish memory. I'll keep just enough to know who I am, and remember only this: that I am nothing but myself and must myself remain.

MARIE: Were you really able to pull up the roots, my love? Can you really tear out the roots of love, the love you feel, the love you have for us? Could you uproot love without leaving a wound, could you tear love out, that love in your heart? Could you rip it out, from your heart that love, that love that lies in your heart . . . What garden is it you hope to find? You can't really go. You know *we're* here, you know *I'm* here. You're joking aren't you, you're staying aren't you, pretending aren't you? From your heart you cannot tear out love, the wrench would be too

great, no-one could heal that wound. You can't pull up the roots of love, you can't tear love from your heart, the love in your heart, from your heart. It's a game you're playing, isn't it?

[*Jean, standing on the audience's left, listens facing the auditorium. Marie-Madeleine, seated, rocking the cradle, with her back to the auditorium. At the end of this kind of refrain Marie-Madeleine is chanting Jean turns round and tiptoes out behind the back wall.*]

MARIE: Are you there? Where are you? [*A game of hide-and-seek. Jean reappears at the other side of the stage.*]

JEAN: Here I am!

MARIE: I knew you were there, I saw you. [*Jean disappears again*]. Where are you going? Where are you? Now, that's enough! [*Reappearance of Jean, or of his head.*]

JEAN: I'm in the house.

MARIE: Of course you're in the house.

JEAN: I'm in the house.

MARIE: I know you are. Where are you? [*She stands up.*]

JEAN *who has disappeared*: In the house.

MARIE: Don't hide! [*She looks round for him.*]

JEAN's voice: Look for me, I'm not far away! Look, I'm quite close!

MARIE *shouting*: Well, come closer, come on now! Come and look at baby in her cradle! Come and see how she smiles! [*Jean reappears behind a piece of furniture.*]

JEAN: Here I am! I'm coming! [*He disappears.*]

MARIE: Where's here?

JEAN *appearing at some other place on the stage, where you can only see him from the waist up*: Here!

MARIE *seeing him*: Why have you got your hat on? Why have you put on those gloves? Why are you getting into that old jacket? What's that old coat of yours doing over your arm?

It's got no buttons. I'll have to sew them on.

JEAN: Here I am! Here I am! [*Continual disappearances and appearances.*]

MARIE: Stop dressing up! Take off that balaclava! Come along, my love, listen! Don't hide your face behind that black handkerchief! Come along, please!

JEAN *disappearing*]: I'm coming!

MARIE: Where are you?

JEAN's voice: Here! Can you still see me? Here!

MARIE: Show yourself, Jean!

JEAN's voice: Cooee! Cooee!

MARIE: Stop playing hide-and-seek! Still the same stupid old games! You might invent some new ones, you're not a child any more!

JEAN's voice: Here I am! Here I am! Cooee!

MARIE: That's enough, I tell you! That's quite enough now! All this playing about upsets me. I can't help it, it gets on my nerves! Come along now, come and look at her, come and sit down beside me! She wants you, she's trying to say Dada!

JEAN's voice: Here I am!

MARIE *looking for him in the room*]: Jean! Cooee! Jean, I'm tired. Stop playing about! Where are you?

JEAN's voice: Here! Cooee!

MARIE: Cooee!

JEAN's voice: Cooee!

MARIE: Now Jean, dear, that's enough! Please stop this game!

JEAN's voice: Here I am! Cooee!

[*Marie-Madeleine is frantically looking for him, behind the furniture, behind the walls, at the door. She appears and disappears leaving the stage empty for a moment, while you can still hear their "cooees". She reappears and disappears behind a piece*

of furniture: once or twice more you can see Jean's head appearing when Marie-Madeleine is no longer visible on stage. She looks for him everywhere, even in the cupboard. She swings round suddenly in the hope of catching him, as though he were there beside her, invisible. Distracted, she starts off all over again, still shouting her "cooees" and weeping.]

MARIE: I'm trying to find you! Yes, I'm trying so hard, really I am! Do you want me to come and touch you? Now I'm really getting cross! Come on now, where are you? Come along! Come along! Will you come! Be sensible! Cooee! Cooee! You might at least tell me if I'm getting warm!

JEAN's voice: Cooee! Cooee!

MARIE *searching*]: Jean, my little dear, my darling, my Jeannot! Are you there? Are you here? Cooee! Cooee! Are you behind the wardrobe? In the cupboard, the sideboard, the passage, the kitchen? Over in *this* corner? Over in *that* one? Where are you? Tell me! Where are you? Cooee!

JEAN's voice: Cooee!

MARIE: He must be here if he answers. Please, Jean! *Please!*

JEAN's voice *very distant*]: Cooee!

MARIE: No, you'll never be able to tear love from your heart, the love that binds us, you and me. [*Chanting away, she is still looking for him in the most unlikely places.*] From your heart you cannot tear this love, you can't tear love from your heart. This love from your heart you cannot tear, you can't tear it out, you can't rip it away. Cooee! Cooee! Which room are you in? Not in the kitchen, nor in the bathroom, or under the bed either. Which chest have you climbed into? Show yourself! Please! You'll get all dirty and hurt yourself if you're up the chimney! Cooee! Cooee! Don't be such a child! Where are you? Behind the door?

No. Are you calling me from the next house?

JEAN's voice *very far away*]: Cooee!

MARIE: Is his voice coming from the cellar? Are you in the cellar? Is he on the roof? Is his voice reaching me from the roof? Cooee! Cooee! No, he can't tear this love from his heart. He can't rip it out without leaving a wound, this love, this love so deep in his heart, he can't tear it up from his heart. He's not gone! He's not gone, I can hear him. He's answered. Cooee, Jean! Cooee! [*Wildly she searches the whole stage, rather like a marionette, a bit like a child.*] That's enough, for goodness' sake! The baby's holding her arms out to you. Answer! Cooee! Answer, can't you! Answer! Cooee! Answer! *Please*, I can't find you anywhere. I used to know all your old hiding-places, but not this one. You can't have disappeared, you can't have gone out. I'll go on playing just for one minute more, I don't mind looking for one minute more, but at least let me hear your voice! Say Cooee! Cooee! [*She goes on looking for him under the table, behind the chair, under the tablecloth, under the chair, under the sideboard, in the drawer. She uses her spectacles and a magnifying glass. She is panic-stricken and goes on calling.*] Cooee! Cooee! You answered just now. Jean, you can't have gone out, can you? You can't have gone away, can you? You'd have told me, wouldn't you? Answer! Cooee! I can hear him. No. I can't hear him. This is a cruel game. Do you understand what I'm saying? Can you hear what I'm telling you? This is a cruel game. Much too cruel! [*She goes on looking for him automatically, with less and less conviction, not looking too hard, slowing the pace down.*] No, he can't tear this love from his heart. [*She goes out for a few seconds and while she is chanting this sort of refrain, Jean appears. He violently tears from his heart a branch of briar rose, his face screwed up with pain, wipes the drops of blood from his fingers on his shirt; puts the branch down on the*

table, carefully buttons his jacket and then tiptoes out. He disappears behind the back wall. As he tears the branch out, he says:)

JEAN: Now for it! . . . Ouch! . . . Way above the wintry valleys . . . Ouch! . . . And the fields . . . Ouch! And the hills . . . On the highest spur . . . *there* stands the princess's palace . . . in the middle of a sunlit park. Ouch! . . . From there you can see the ocean meet the sky . . . I must go . . .

MARIE's voice *at the same time, rather muffled*]: This love he cannot from his heart tear out, from your heart you cannot tear out love, the love in your heart can't be ripped away . . .

MARIE *re-appearing*]: How can he have disappeared? He's not there! Not there and not here either. He's just not here! How empty the house is. What a great emptiness! It was bound to happen some day, of course. I knew it. He was too fond of playing that game. He just got carried away. We often used to play. And I warned him what it would lead to, though we always came together in the end. I'll call, I'll call him again. Cooee! Cooee! I can't play this game all alone, you need two to play. He used to try and find me too. But now I'm all alone. And that's why I can't find him. That's it, of course. Of course it is. Which way can he have gone? How can he have slipped away? The doors and windows were shut. [*She goes to the rear of the stage and comes back.*] No, I don't want to go through that mouldy passage again, full of spiders and woodlice. Everyone will ask what was wrong with him. A hopeless case of nostalgia. That's what I'll say. But I'll go on looking, in every nook and cranny, though I know he's not here any more. I won't be able to stop myself. I'll reach out to touch him, but there'll be no head on his pillow. Each morning I'll take him his dressing-gown. Though I know he won't be having his bath. How frightened he'll

be, wherever he is. He's not the type to go wandering off through those grey deserted plains. How can he have left me? How ever did he make up his mind? Where did he find the courage to go off on his own? [*She sees the branch on the table, takes it in her hand and looks at it.*] He really has torn out the flower of love, pulled it up by the roots. How can he have ripped it out of his heart, how can he from his heart have ripped it? Poor Jean! How he must suffer! My poor little Jean's been hurt. He's leaving a trail of blood, behind him on the road. [*She sits down near the cradle which she starts rocking, her back turned to the audience. In her other hand she is holding the branch.*] We're alone now, little one. How can I lose the habit I've got of touching him, expecting him. Can I get used to not hearing his answering voice? [*She takes up the refrain again:*] If you could tear this love from your heart, if you could tear this away, if you could tear this love from your heart, from your heart, from your heart . . . [*The back wall, which she is looking at, vanishes. You can see a garden: trees in blossom, tall green grass, a very blue sky.*] Oh! [*She half rises, then sits down again. By some movement of her shoulders and her back she must convey to the audience the wonder she herself feels. Then, on the left of this landscape, which is also on the audience's left, you can see a silver ladder appear, hanging in the air, the top of it out of sight. The joy and astonishment of Marie-Madeleine, who is contemplating the landscape, is still conveyed, perceptibly but discreetly, by certain movements of the shoulders. She stands up very quietly:*] He didn't know that was here! He couldn't have seen that. I thought the garden was here. I suspected it was. Though I wasn't absolutely sure. If only he'd seen, if only he'd known! If he'd had a little patience, he wouldn't have gone, he wouldn't have left us behind!

CURTAIN

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II

THE RENDEZVOUS

THE SET

A terrace that appears to be hanging in mid-air. A dark sky. Later, when Jean arrives, the sky will clear. The light, however, will be cold, an empty brilliance, without shadow and without sun. In the background and as far as possible all round, arid mountains. Jean enters.

JEAN: What wonderful light! I've never seen anything so pure! Those mountains could seem too stark. But I like clarity. [*Discreet appearance, on the right, of the First Keeper, with cap and moustache.*] Good morning. I love the light in this part of the world. I like the dust too. These stone buildings and the altitude. Especially after roaming through so many wet countries: gloomy plains, marsh-land and rain. See how these mountains stand out against the sky, they look almost alive. It's all so new to me.

1ST KEEPER: Have you travelled down from the North?

JEAN: From the North? Well, you know, really I'm not too sure . . . I've no sense of direction. Countries where it rains anyway. Dark and dusky lands. This is the kingdom of light.

1ST KEEPER: I suppose so. Rather an empty brilliance, though. A bit bleak, perhaps. If that's what you're after, help yourself.

JEAN: This is the entrance to the museum, isn't it? Are there still lots of visitors?

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