

THE MISUNDERSTANDING (Le Malentendu)

by

Albert Camus

translated by Graham Ley

Act One

(Noon. The reception hall of a small boarding-house. It has a clean and tidy appearance.)

Scene one

MOTHER He's coming back. He wants to stay.

MARTHA Are you quite certain?

MOTHER That's what he said. After you'd gone out.

MARTHA Alone?

MOTHER He didn't say.

MARTHA Did he seem well-off? Lot's of money with him?

MOTHER He wasn't worried by the price.

MARTHA If he's rich, then so much the better. But he must be on his own. That's the most important thing.

MOTHER (with a sigh) Yes, I suppose it is. That's it, then. That's the start of it.

MARTHA Yes, it is. That's the start of it. But don't you worry. We'll be paid for our trouble.

(Silence. Martha looks at her mother.)

What's the matter, mother? You haven't been the same for some time now. There's something wrong. I know there is.

MOTHER There's nothing wrong. I'm just tired, that's all. I think I need a rest.

MARTHA A rest? That's easy. I'll take on all the housework, yours as well as mine. The days can be all yours. All the day, and every day.

MOTHER That's not what I meant. Not that kind of rest. No, it's just an old woman's dream. I just want a bit of peace, the chance to let things slide. (She gives a weak laugh.) I know. It all sounds very stupid. I wonder if religion has anything to do with it. It may be catching up with me, at long last. You never know. It has its attractions.

MARTHA You're not that old, mother. You don't need that. You've got better things to do.

MOTHER Oh, I was only joking. But after all, why not? When you reach my time of life you ought to be able to let things slide. I

can't be as hard as you. I'm much too old. It's almost unnatural the way you do it. Other girls are different. They like to have a good time, every now and then. In fact, I know plenty who think of nothing else.

MARTHA We have our good times. Every now and then. You know that. And theirs can't compare with ours, can they?

MOTHER There's no need to bring that up.

MARTHA (with some concern) What's all this? Words never used to frighten you.

MOTHER Leave me alone. You've no cause to complain. I still do my part of it. Anyway, what does all that matter? All I meant to say was that I'd like to see you smile sometimes.

MARTHA I do smile. I promise you.

MOTHER I've never seen it.

MARTHA I smile in my room. When I'm on my own. That's the way I like it. To keep my smiles for myself.

MOTHER (taking a long look at her) You've got a hard face, Martha.

MARTHA (coming up to her, calmly) But loveable ? To you at least?

MOTHER (still looking at her, and after a moment of silence) Yes, loveable. I think so. Hard or not.

MARTHA (with emotion) Oh, mother, mother! All we need is the money! With money in our hands there's an end to grey skies and damp, dripping roofs! We'll put the boarding-house behind us and leave this town for good. And in their place we'll have the open sea before us, the sea I have dreamed of for so many years! That's when you'll see me smile. But not before then. And remember. We'll need a lot of money if we're to live by the sea. So we mustn't be afraid of words, and we must give this man who's coming here our closest attention. If he has money on him, and plenty of it, then my freedom may begin with him. Did he have much to say, when you saw him?

MOTHER No. Not much.

MARTHA What was his expression when he asked for his room?

MOTHER I can't say I noticed. My eyes are bad, and besides, I wasn't looking. Not very closely. I know from experience that it's

better not to look at them. It's easier to kill when you don't know the face. (Pause.) There. That should please you. I'm not afraid of words. Not any more. The moment has passed.

MARTHA It's better that way. I prefer plain speaking. A crime is a crime. The only thing that matters is to know what you want. As you did, when you answered him.

MOTHER I didn't think of that. I answered out of habit.

MARTHA Habit? That's a strange word to use. You've hardly had the chance to pick up the habit.

MOTHER You may be right. But as far as I'm concerned habit begins with the second crime. Just as something else ends with the first. The occasions may have been few and far between, but habit gains its strength from time. Memory plays its part in all these things. So I have had the chance. Habit made me answer him, and habit kept me from looking at him closely. His was a victim's face. It was bound to be.

MARTHA He has to die, mother.

MOTHER (quietly) Yes. He has to die. Of course he does.

MARTHA That was a strange way to say it. Are you sure there's nothing wrong?

MOTHER The truth is, Martha, that I'm worn out. It would be a great relief to think he was the last. Killing has exhausted me. I don't care where I die. In the middle of the plain, or beside the sea. It really doesn't matter. Not to me. But the one thing I do want to know is if we are going.

MARTHA Of course we are! That's just the point. It's getting nearer all the time. Pull yourself together, mother. There's hardly very much to do. Besides, you know as well as I do that killing doesn't really come into it. What happens, after all? He drinks his tea and falls asleep, and we carry him down to the river. Still breathing, mind. Then he'll be found at some stage, fairly soon, stuck against the iron bars of the grid, down by the weir. There'll be others with him. But they won't have been so lucky. They'll have thrown themselves in, with their eyes wide open. You remember. You said so yourself. The day we helped to clear the grid. "Ours suffered less. We're kinder than life." That's what you said. So don't be miserable. Pull yourself together. You'll have the rest you want when we get out of here.

MOTHER Yes, I'll pull myself together. It is some consolation, I must admit, to think they never suffered. When you think of it like that, it hardly seems a crime. Almost like lending a hand. A light touch to turn the scale. You're quite right. Life is much more cruel. Perhaps that's why I always found it difficult to feel a sense of guilt.

(The Old Man comes in and sits behind the desk without a word. He stays there without moving until the end of the scene.)

MARTHA Where shall we put him?

MOTHER I can't see it matters. But it must be on the first floor.

MARTHA Yes, you're right. We had a lot of trouble, last time, managing the stairs. One flight is quite enough. (She sits down for the first time.) Tell me, mother, is it true that over there in Africa the sand is so hot that it burns your feet?

MOTHER How should I know? I've never been there. But they do say that the sun is so fierce that it devours everything.

MARTHA I read in a book that it eats right through, right to your soul. The glow on the bodies hides the emptiness inside.

MOTHER Is that what you dream about?

MARTHA Yes. I want a land where the sun kills questions. That would be a home for me. Living here, I feel as though I've got a soul, and I want to be rid of it.

MOTHER Well, we must make a move. Time's getting on, and there's a lot to do. If everything goes right, I'll be coming with you. That needn't worry you. But as for a home... When you reach my age, you don't bother any more with the thought of a home. You count yourself lucky that you've got a house. One of these pathetic places, built of bricks and mortar, with memories for furniture and where, if you're lucky, you sometimes get the chance to sleep. But on the other hand, to sleep and to forget, to be free of all questions ...The way you put it, it could sound attractive.

(She gets up and makes her way to the door.)

Make sure it's all ready, Martha. (Pause.) That is, if you really think that it's worth all the trouble.

(Martha watches her go out and then leaves herself, by another door.)

Scene two

(The Old Man goes to the window, sees Jan and Maria, and moves out of sight. He remains alone on stage for a few seconds. Jan comes in. He stops, looks round the room, and sees the Old Man standing by the window.)

JAN Anyone at home?

(The Old Man looks at him, crosses the stage, and goes out.)

Scene three

(Maria comes in. Jan turns round quickly to face her.)

JAN You followed me.

MARIA I'm sorry, I couldn't... I won't stay long. Just a look. It's not much to ask, if I'm to leave you here.

JAN Do you realise that if anyone comes in then everything is lost?

MARIA But that's our only chance. If I'm still here, I'll make you tell them who you are. Whatever you may say.

(Jan turns away. Pause.)

MARIA (Looking round the room) So this is it ?

JAN Yes, this is it. I walked through that door twenty years ago. My sister was a little girl. She was playing in that corner. My mother never came to kiss me goodbye. I remember that at the time I didn't care.

MARIA Jan, I just can't believe that they failed to recognise you when you came here just now. A mother always knows her son.

JAN But she hasn't seen me for twenty years. And anyway, I was very young then, hardly more than a boy. She's an old woman. Her sight is not too good. Why, I hardly knew her myself.

MARIA (impatiently) Oh, yes, I've heard all that. You came in, you said 'good-morning', and sat down. Nothing was the same.

JAN I don't know. It was just that nothing seemed to be how I remembered it. They took me for granted. Not a word was

spoken. The beer came to order. They looked, and I looked, but they looked right through me. It was all a lot more difficult than I had imagined.

MARIA You know perfectly well that it wasn't difficult at all. All you had to do was to open your mouth. On such occasions, any normal person says "Here I am, it's me!" and everything falls into place. Reality asserts itself.

JAN Yes, yes, I know. But all sorts of things were flooding through my mind. I'd expected some sort of welcome -you know, the return of the prodigal son, killing the fatted calf, and so on -and there I was, taking a glass of beer for money. I felt moved by it all, but couldn't find a thing to say.

MARIA One word would have been enough.

JAN But I couldn't find the right one! And anyway, what's the hurry? I came here with money in my pockets, and if I can I want to make them happy. When I heard that father was dead, I realised that I was now in some respects responsible for both of them. Knowing that, I did what I had to do. But perhaps coming home isn't quite as easy as it sounds. It takes a bit of time to make a son out of just another man.

MARIA But why not tell them you were coming? There's a case to be made for conventional behaviour, at certain times. If you wanted to be recognised you couldn't have done better than to introduce yourself. That, I would have thought, was obvious. If you start out pretending to be something you're not you'll end up in a mess. How on earth can you expect to receive more of a welcome than any passing stranger when you act just like one? In your own home ~ No, I'm sorry, but none of this makes sense.

JAN Come on, Maria, it doesn't matter that much. Besides, it all suits my purpose. I'll take advantage of the delay, see them, as it were, a little from the outside. If I play my cards right I'll have a much stronger sense of what they really need to make them happy. And after that... well, I'll find some way to make myself known. It is, after all, only a matter of finding the right words.

MARIA You'll find some way... ? There is only one way that I can think of, and that's to do what you should have done the moment you stepped through the door. To say "Here I am" and let your heart speak for you.

JAN Yes. I know. But when the heart really is involved, it isn't that simple.

MARIA That's where you're wrong. Words that come from the heart are always simple. It couldn't have been that difficult to stand up and say "I am your son. This is my wife. Up until now we've been living together in a land that we both loved, in the sunshine, by the sea. But I needed something else to make me truly happy. In fact, I needed you. So here I am."

JAN Don't be unkind, Maria. That's not fair. It wasn't that I needed them. I just knew without asking that they must be in need of me, and that a man should never let himself believe that he stands completely on his own. In this world or the next.

 (Pause. Maria turns away.)

MARIA I'm sorry. Perhaps you're right. But I've felt myself on the defensive ever since we arrived. I've searched in every passing face for some faint signs, the slightest suggestion that people were happy. And all to no purpose. This Europe of yours is a miserable place. Come to that, I haven't heard you laugh since we stepped ashore, and as for myself ...there's something I don't like. I feel... apprehensive. Oh, Jan, why did you bring me here? I wish I'd never left. Come back with me, Jan. There's nothing for us here, nothing that will make us happy.

JAN We didn't come here to look for happiness. We had that already.

MARIA (with passion) Then why not enjoy it! Wasn't that enough for you?

JAN No. Happiness isn't everything. Men have their obligations, too. Mine was to find my mother, and my country. To be where I belong again...

 (Maria is about to protest but Jan stops her, as footsteps can be plainly heard. Outside, the Old Man walks past the window.)

JAN Someone's coming. Leave me, Maria. Please go.

MARIA Not like this. I can't.

JAN (as the footsteps come closer) Quickly, over there. (He pushes her behind the door.)

Scene four

(The door at the back opens. The Old Man walks across the room without noticing Maria and leaves by the door to the outside.)

JAN And now you must go. Quickly, while I still have the chance.

MARIA I want to stay. I'll wait here, by your side. I won't say a word, I promise. Not until they've found out who you are.

JAN No. You'll give me away. I know it.

(She turns away, and then comes back to him. They stand face to face.)

MARIA Jan. It's five years since we were married.

JAN It will be. Soon.

MARIA (lowering her eyes) And this will be the first night that we've slept apart. (Jan remains silent. She looks up at him again.) I have always loved everything about you. Even what I didn't understand. And I have always known that, at heart, I would have you no different. I'm not the kind of wife who likes to be awkward, but today I'm frightened, Jan! I can see that empty bed in front of me, and I feel as though you're deserting me, sending me away like this.

JAN Maria! How can you doubt my love?

MARIA I don't, I don't! It's not that. But your love is one thing, and your dreams are another. Or your obligations, as you would say. It doesn't matter. It comes to the same thing. You've drifted away so many times. It's as if you grew tired of me from time to time, and were in need of a rest. But there's never any rest for me. I'm never tired of you, and the thought of this evening (she throws herself against him in tears)... is more than I can bear!

JAN (holding her tightly) This is all very childish.

MARIA I know ~ I am very childish ~ But we were so happy together before we came here, and how can I help it if the nights in this country make me feel nervous? It's all so different. I don't want to be left on my own. Not here, not without you.

JAN But I shan't be away for long. You must understand, Maria. I have to keep my promise.

MARIA Your promise?

JAN Yes. My promise to myself. I made it on the day when I learned that my mother had need of me.

MARIA There's another one to keep.

JAN What do you mean?

MARIA The one you made to me on the day you said that you would live with me.

JAN But there's no conflict between them. I'll take care of everything. I'm not asking much. Am I? Really? And I'm not doing this for fun. All it means is one evening and one night apart. In that short time I can find my feet here, get to know them better, and find out how to make them happy.

MARIA (shaking her head) It's much more than that. Any separation is something to be feared when two people are really in love with each other.

JAN Now that is cruel. You know I love you as much as anyone could.

MARIA No. Only as much as any man could. But men don't know how to love. Nothing is enough for them. They must have their dreams. It's the only thing they do well. Dreaming. They dream up obligations. New ones every day. They long for undiscovered countries, fresh demands, another call. While we women are left with the knowledge that love can never wait. A shared bed, a hand in yours, that's the only thing that matters. The worst thing of all is fear. The fear of being alone. Love can never wait. There's no time for dreams, if you're in love.

JAN Now what prompted all of that? All I'm asking for is the chance to find my own mother and to give her the help she needs with a little happiness thrown in. If that's what you mean by dreams and obligations, then I can only say that you'll have to take them as they are. I'd be nothing without them, and you wouldn't love me if I didn't have them.

MARIA (turning her back on him sharply) I know you have your reasons. You always do. And they're always so very, very good. So good, that I'm not listening any more. I'm deaf. I can't listen when you put on that voice of yours. I know it too well. It's the voice of your private world, not the voice of love.

JAN (coming up behind her) Don't start that, Maria, please don't. The only reason that I'm asking you to leave me on my own is that I want to see this place more clearly. It's not a lot to ask. One night, under the same roof as your mother? There's nothing very terrible in that, and the rest will lie in God's hands. He'll bear me witness that I shan't let the thought of you slip from my mind for a single moment all the time I'm here, But if you want to remain happy you can't expect to stay away from home for ever and forget everything you left behind. This is my land, and I must make those I love happy. I can't see further than that.

MARIA But it's at your fingertips: All you have to do is to use a few simple words that others could understand: But the way you're going about it... It's all wrong.

JAN It's not all wrong. Can't you see? It's the only way I'll know for certain if these dreams of mine have any substance.

MARIA Well, I hope they do. For my own part, the only dream I have is of a land where we were happy, and my only obligation is to you.

JAN (taking her to him) Please let me go. I'll find the right words. I promise you. It'll sort itself out.

MARIA (giving way to her feelings) There you are ~ Dreams again! Oh, Jan, I don't care what you do so long as I can keep your love. It's the same as ever. I can't be miserable when your body's close to mine. I'll wait patiently until the clouds have cleared, and then you'll be mine again. If I'm unhappy now, it's only because I know you love me. And I also know, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you'll make me go away. They say that a man's love is torture, and it's true. They can't stop themselves. They must always leave behind them what they want most of all..

JAN (He takes her face in his hands, and smiles.) It's certainly true in this case. But look at me, Maria. Do I seem like a man who feels danger all around him? I'm doing what I want to do and it will put my mind at rest. Can't you trust me to someone else for just one night? Remember. It's my sister and my mother that we're talking about. There can't be much to frighten you in that.

MARIA (stepping from his embrace) Good-bye, then. God be with you, and my love. I hope it protects you as well as I would. (She walks to the door, and stops. She turns, and shows him her empty hands.) But look. See? You've left me with nothing. Your

voyage of discovery leaves me alone. I'll be waiting for you.
(She hesitates, and then goes out.)

Scene five

(Jan sits down. The Old Man comes in, holds the door open for Martha to pass him, and then goes out again.)

JAN Good afternoon. I've come for the room.

MARTHA Yes. I know. We're getting it ready for you. I must take your particulars for our register. (She goes out for the register, and comes back in with it.)

JAN That old man is rather odd.

MARTHA I've never had a complaint about him before. He always carries out his duties to the letter.

JAN Oh, no complaint. But he's a bit out of the common run. Is it because he's dumb?

MARTHA Not exactly.

JAN So he can speak, then?

MARTHA Yes. But only when it's absolutely necessary. He prefers to say nothing if at all possible.

JAN Well, one way or the other, the impression I got was that he doesn't hear a thing you say.

MARTHA Well, that's wrong. He listens. But his hearing isn't very good. Anyway, if you'll forgive me I must ask you for your surname and your Christian names.

JAN Hasek, Karl.

MARTHA Just Karl?

JAN That's all.

MARTHA Date and place of birth?

JAN I'm thirty-eight.

MARTHA And where were you born?

JAN (hesitating) In Bohemia.

MARTHA Your profession?

JAN No profession.

MARTHA No profession? Only the very rich, or the very poor, have no profession.

JAN (smiling) Well, I'm not too badly off myself. In fact, I'm very comfortable. For a number of reasons.

MARTHA (in a different voice) You're Czech, then, by birth?

JAN Correct.

MARTHA Country of residence?

JAN Bohemia.

MARTHA Is that where you've come from?

JAN No. From Africa. (As she seems puzzled...) Across the water.

MARTHA Yes, I know. (Pause.) Do you go there frequently?

JAN From time to time.

MARTHA (caught momentarily in a dream, but coming sharply back to reality) And where are you heading ?

JAN I'm not sure. That could depend on a number of things.

MARTHA Are you thinking of staying here permanently from now on ?

JAN I'm not sure. It depends on how I find it.

MARTHA It's of no importance. Is anyone expecting you?

JAN No. Not really. No-one.

MARTHA I imagine that you have some form of identification on you?

JAN Yes. Do you want to see it?

MARTHA No, don't bother. But I must make a note of whether it's a passport or an identity card.

JAN (hesitating) It's a passport. Here you are. Take a look at it. (She has it in her hands, and is about to read it, when the Old Man appears in the doorway.)

MARTHA It's all right. I didn't call. (He goes out. Martha hands the passport back to Jan without looking at it. Her thoughts seem to be elsewhere.) When you're in Africa, do you stay by the sea?

JAN Yes.

(She gets up, starts to shut the desk, and then changes her mind. It remains open in front of her.)

MARTHA (abruptly, with an unfamiliar edge to her voice) Ah, I was forgetting! Do you have any family?

JAN I did once. But I left them behind a long time ago.

MARTHA No. I meant "Are you married?".

JAN Why ask that? I've never had that question put to me before, not in any hotel.

MARTHA It's one of the questions laid down by the local authority.

JAN That's very odd. Yes, I am married. But in any case, you must have seen my wedding ring.

MARTHA I hadn't noticed it. Could you give me your wife's address?

JAN She stayed at home. In Africa.

MARTHA I see. Excellent. (She shuts the book.) Can I get you anything to drink? The room's not quite ready for you yet.

JAN No, I'm fine. I'll wait here, if I may. But I do hope I'm not in your way.

MARTHA How could you be? This room is set aside for guests.

JAN Yes, but you know what I mean. One person on his own can sometimes be more of a nuisance than a whole crowd of people.

MARTHA (who is tidying the room) I can't see how. Unless you're after entertainment. I'm afraid that if you are, you've come to the wrong place. We don't go in for that round here. As you'll soon see, you've picked a very quiet spot. Very few people pass this way at all.

JAN That can't be very good for business.

MARTHA No, I suppose it's not. But we gain by it, too. We have our peace and quiet, and you can't expect things like that to pay very well. I'd rather have the occasional, really satisfactory guest than a lot of fuss and bother all to no purpose. My mother feels the same way.

JAN But...(He hesitates.) Don't you ever feel the need of a bit of life? It must be very dull here. Don't you ever feel lonely?

MARTHA (swinging round sharply to face him) Look, I'd like to get some things straight, if you don't mind. Once you step inside that door, you become a guest. As a guest you have your rights. And I think I can say that you won't be displeased. You'll find the service good, and at the end of the day there'll be little that you'll want to complain about. But as for certain other things - the question of whether or not we're lonely, for example, or your concern about getting in the way and being a nuisance to us - don't let them worry you. We'll look after them. Remember, you're the guest. Enjoy what's on offer. But please don't ask for more.

JAN I see I must apologise. I didn't mean to give offence. I simply wanted to show a little interest. I didn't want to annoy you. It was just that the thought had crossed my mind that we might have more in common than had met the eye.

MARTHA I'm sorry, I'll have to repeat myself. How can I best put it to you? "Give offence", "annoy" - there you are, you see? The way you are talking is simply not appropriate. And that cuts both ways. It would be just as bad if I was the culprit. I do hope you'll understand. I'm sorry to have to spell it out like this. I can assure you that the last thing I am is annoyed, in any way at all. But I really must encourage you to appreciate the benefits we both would gain from keeping our distances. And unfortunately, if you refuse to behave as a guest should, I'm afraid that we shall have to ask you to leave. It's as simple as that. Two women who offer you the standard bed and board can hardly be expected to open their arms to you as well, to welcome you into the family circle. That really would be asking much too much. I do hope that's clear. If it is, we'll get on very well.

JAN It is quite clear, and I'm sure we will. It's completely my fault for giving you the impression that I didn't know the rules. I shan't break them, I assure you.

MARTHA There's nothing to worry about. It's not the first time that someone's tried to go too far. There've been others before you.

JAN There is no confusion. The trouble is, I can't think of anything to say. Not now. At least, not for the moment.

MARTHA Oh, but there's no need for that. There are plenty of things that a guest can talk about with full confidence.

JAN Name some of them.

MARTHA Well, most of our guests talk about most things, from their travels all the way through to politics. But they don't talk about us. That's all we ever ask. Once or twice it's even come to the point where they talked about their own lives, the kind of people they were. I don't object to that. It's part of the job. We're paid to do many things, and one of them must be to listen. But there's no way in which the price of board and lodging could be seen to include an obligation on the landlady to answer personal questions. My mother has done so, on occasions, as I'm willing to admit. But that's because she doesn't care one way or the other. But I do. I refuse on principle. So if that's thoroughly understood, then there's going to be no need for awkwardness of any kind. You needn't worry. You'll soon discover that you've quite a lot to say to us. Most people like to have an audience, if only to talk about themselves.

JAN Unfortunately, I'm not very good at that. And anyway, I doubt if there'll be an opportunity. If I don't stay long, you won't have the chance to get to know me. And if I do, you won't need my help. You'll find out for yourselves.

MARTHA Well I only hope that what I've said hasn't made you feel hostile. That really would be pointless. But it's always been policy to clear away any possible source of confusion. If I'd let you carry on the way you were going it was bound to end up in embarrassment for all of us. If you look at it from that point of view you'll see I was thoroughly justified in speaking out when I did. After all, before today we had nothing whatsoever in common. To assume a tone of familiarity on the spur of the moment would have been rather foolish.

JAN There's no need to apologise. You're quite right. Familiarity doesn't spring from nowhere. It takes time to establish itself. But if in your opinion everything is, as you would say, now quite straight between us, then I have every reason to be thankful. Or so it seems.

(The mother comes in.)

Scene six

MOTHER Good evening, sir. Your room's ready now.

JAN Thank you very much.

(The mother sits down.)

MOTHER (to Martha) Did you fill out the form?

MARTHA I did.

MOTHER Do you mind if I look at it ? I hope you'll excuse me, sir, but the police round here are very strict. There you are! What did I tell you? My daughter has forgotten to note down whether you came here for health reasons, on business, or as a tourist.

JAN I suppose tourism would be the best description.

MOTHER It'll be the monastery that's brought you, I expect. I gather it's very well thought of.

JAN Yes I have heard of it. But I was actually thinking of looking round the whole area. I used to know it very well, some time ago. Good memories.

MOTHER You've lived here before?

JAN No. But I passed through once, a long time ago. I haven't forgotten it.

MOTHER And yet it's only a little village.

JAN True. But I had a good time here. And since I've been back, I could almost say that I've felt at home.

MOTHER Do you intend to stay long?

JAN I don't know. I expect that seems a bit strange, but I'm afraid it's the way I feel. You have to have a reason for staying in a place. Some friends there, personal ties, something like that. Otherwise, there's no real incentive to stay there rather than anywhere else. And until you know what kind of reception you're going to get, you can't be sure what you're going to do. That's only natural.

MARTHA I don't think I follow you.

JAN No. I dare say you don't. But I can't think of a better way or putting it.

MOTHER Well, I expect you'll soon get tired of it here.

JAN Oh I don't know. I'm a man of warm feelings, and I'll soon find something to remember, if I'm given the chance.

MARTHA (with impatience) This isn't a place for 'warm feelings'.

JAN (who doesn't seem to have heard her, to the mother) You seem very disillusioned with the area. Have you been in this hotel for so very long?

MOTHER Time comes and goes. It's been many years now, so long that I can't remember when it started, and I've forgotten what I was like before. This is my daughter.

MARTHA There's no call for a family history, mother.

MOTHER No, of course there isn't, Martha.

JAN (very quickly) Let her go on. I think I understand the point you are making. At the end of a working life that's the way you feel. But things might have been very different if you'd had a man to help you. A strong right arm is something every woman needs.

MOTHER Oh, I've had help, in my time. But there was always too much to do. At best we managed, my husband and myself. But we never had the time to give each other a moment's thought. Why, I think I'd almost forgotten who he was before he was in his grave.

JAN Yes. I can understand that too. But... (he hesitates for a second or two) perhaps a son? A son who'd have lent you a hand? You wouldn't have forgotten him, would you?

MARTHA We've a great deal to do, mother.

MOTHER A son? Oh, there have been too many years. When it comes down to it, we old women lose the habit of love, even for our own sons. The heart wears out, young man, like the rest of you.

JAN Yes that's true. But I know it never forgets.

MARTHA (stepping between them decisively) A son who came in here would be assured of the same treatment as any other guest: he would be offered the usual standard of impersonal

consideration. Every man who has ever come to stay with us has accepted those terms and never asked for more. Each one of them has paid the price of a room and received a key in exchange. And none of them, ever, spoke of his feelings. (Pause.) It was that above all that used to keep our work free of complications.

MOTHER Martha!

JAN (thoughtfully) And did they stay long? On those terms?

MARTHA Some of them did. For a very long time. We did what was necessary to make them stay. Others, who were less well-off, left the next day. We did little for them.

JAN Well, I have plenty of money, and if it's all right with you I should like very much to stay here, in your hotel. I had forgotten to tell you that I can pay in advance.

MOTHER Oh, we don't ask for that.

MARTHA If you're not short of money, then everything will be fine. But please don't mention your feelings. We can do nothing for them. In fact, I was getting so tired of that approach that I had almost asked you to leave. Here's your key. The room is yours. But remember. This house holds nothing for the feelings. Too many grey years have hung upon its walls and on us, and gradually the chill has spread. Blame them, if you must, for our lack of fellow-feeling. But you must expect no familiarity. I've already told you that. You'll have at your disposal everything we keep in store for our very few visitors. But sympathy is not included. Take your key (she holds it out to him), and don't forget: if we have offered you a quiet welcome, we have done so out of self-interest. And if we choose to maintain that relationship then that, too, will be because in its own quiet way it will be serving our best interests.

(He takes the key, and watches her as she goes out.)

MOTHER Don't let her worry you, sir. I'm afraid there have always been some things she could never bear to talk about.

(She starts to get up out of the chair, and he makes an effort to help her.)

That's all right, my boy, I'm not a cripple yet. Look at these hands. They're strong enough, aren't they? Strong enough at any rate to lift a man's weight.

(Pause. He looks at the keys)
A penny for your thoughts. Was it something I said?

JAN No, not at all. You'll have to excuse me. I wasn't really listening. But why did you say "my boy"?

MOTHER Oh, don't give it a second thought. I was just a bit confused, that's all. I can assure you that it wasn't familiarity, if that's what's worrying you. It was just an expression.

JAN I see. (Pause.) May I see my room?

MOTHER Of course, sir. Go on up. The old man will show you where it is. He's waiting in the corridor.
(He looks at her, as if he has something that he wants to say.)

Is there anything you need?

JAN (hesitating) No, not at all. But ...I would like to thank you for taking me in. For the welcome you have given me.

Scene seven

(The mother is left alone in the room. She sits down again, puts her hands on the table, and stares at them.)

MOTHER Now what was I doing, talking to him about my hands? Still, he might have understood Martha a little bit better if he'd bothered to look at them. And if he'd understood, he might well have left. But he didn't. And that means he's going to die. It's his choice. But I wish he'd gone. If he stays, I get no sleep. It's as simple as that. I'm too old, much too old. I know what's in front of me. I'll have to clasp my hands round his ankles and keep the body balanced as we stumble down the road. And when we reach the river, that last effort that tips him in the water. A swing of the arms, and then it's all over. A splash from the body and the sound of someone who has to gasp for breath. A tired, old woman, whose muscles are burning, and who hasn't got the strength to wipe away the water that drips from her face. And him? He'll sink down slowly, sleeping like a baby. Oh, I'm much too old! Why must he be such a perfect victim? Why let him have the sleep that you want for yourself? There's just no sense...

(Martha comes in suddenly.)

MARTHA Still sitting there dreaming? You know how much there is to do.

MOTHER I was thinking of that young man. Or, rather, I was thinking of myself.

MARTHA You'd do better to think of tomorrow. Be positive.

MOTHER That's what your father used to say, Martha. How I remember it! Yes, positive. But this must be the last time. I must be sure of that. Positive! Strange. He used to say it when he wanted to shake off his fear of the police. And you? You make use of it at the very moment when I'm trying to find a reason to avoid another crime.

MARTHA But you wouldn't want to avoid it if you didn't want to sleep. And that can be postponed. When tomorrow comes, you can let yourself go.

MOTHER You're right. Of course. But you must admit that he's not like the others.

MARTHA No. He's too self-conscious. He will put on that air of innocence. He almost makes it seem attractive. What would happen to the world if every condemned man insisted on confiding all his heartaches to the hangman? It's not a very sound principle. I can't stand the way he won't keep to the rules. I've had enough of him. I want it over and done.

MOTHER That's what's wrong. It's never been like that before. Anger or compassion never affected our work. We made sure we didn't care. It was always impersonal. But today I'm tired and you're annoyed. That much is obvious. So why bother, if things aren't right? Why walk rough-shod over everything for just a little more money?

MARTHA We're not doing it for the money. Not in itself. We're doing it to put this country behind us once and for all. And if you're tired of life then I'm sick to death of a land which closes in on you more and more all the time. I can't live here another month. I feel that in my bones. We've both had quite enough of this boarding-house. You're old. All you want to do is to close your eyes and forget. But I'm still young, and I know what I want. There's enough life left in me to make me determined to leave this place for ever. But we still have work to do. A few steps more, and then we'll be free of it. And that's where I need you. You brought me into the world, and now you must help me. You gave your child a grey pall of cloud, and now she wants the sun.

MOTHER I don't know, Martha. I think I'd rather be forgotten, as I have been by your brother, than hear you talk of me like that.

MARTHA I didn't mean to hurt you. Please accept my apologies. (Pause. A note of anger and embarrassment enters her voice.) What would I do, after all, if you weren't there? I could never forget you. Not like him. It's just that the strain of living here is sometimes too much for me. I owe you a lot. But I can't always show it.

MOTHER You're a good girl, Martha. It must be very difficult to understand an old woman and her ways. But I'm going to take the chance you've offered me. I've been trying to say this ever since you came in. Let's not go through with it, not tonight at any rate.

MARTHA Not tonight? But we can't wait until tomorrow! We've never done that before. You know as well as I do that he mustn't be allowed the time to meet anyone. Mother, we must go through with it, while he's still in our hands.

MOTHER Yes. I know. But not tonight. Let's have a breathing space~ Give him another day. You never know, he might be the means to our salvation.

MARTHA How can you talk like that? Our salvation lies in action, and that's your only hope. The right to sleep comes after work. Tonight's work.

MOTHER That's all I meant by salvation. Sleep.

MARTHA Mother, I swear to you that what we both long for lies within our reach. We must make up our minds. It's tonight, or never.

End of Act One

Act Two

(The bedroom. Jan is looking through the window. It is early evening,
and darkness slowly fills the room.)

Scene one

JAN Maria was right. This is the difficult time. (Pause.) I wonder what she's doing now? Sitting in her room? Huddled in a chair? Crying? No, not crying. Thinking, then? Feeling? Anything? Oh, these evenings! Where's that promise of happiness that evening ought to bring? There's no suggestion of it here. In fact... (He looks round the room.) Come on, now what's all this about? You're where you want to be. So why worry? This room holds all the answers.

(There is a sharp tap at the door, and Martha comes in.)

MARTHA I hope I'm not disturbing you. I've brought you clean towels, and some fresh water.

JAN I thought someone had already done it.

MARTHA No. It's the old man's job, but on some occasions he has other things to do.

JAN It's of no importance, anyway. But perhaps I shouldn't say that you're really not disturbing me.

MARTHA Why not?

JAN I'm not at all sure that it's included in the terms of our agreement.

MARTHA There you are again. Never a straight answer.

JAN (smiling) I'll pick up the habit. But it will take a little time.

MARTHA (still busy) You won't have the time. You won't be here that long.

(He turns away and looks out of the window. While he has his back to her, her eyes never leave him. As she talks, she carries on working.)

MARTHA I do hope you won't mind if the standard of accommodation isn't quite what you're used to.

JAN By no means. It's very clean, and that's the most important thing. Am I right in thinking that it's only recently been converted?

MARTHA How did you know?

JAN Oh, one or two little things.

MARTHA Yes, I'm afraid it's not altogether satisfactory. For example, the lack of running water. Some guests object to that, and I really can't blame them. A light above the bed would be another thing. We've been meaning to have that done for a very long time. If you're reading at night, it's extremely annoying to have to get out of bed to switch off the light.

JAN (turning round) I hadn't noticed that, to be quite honest. But it can't rate as a major inconvenience.

MARTHA That's very kind of you. I find your attitude encouraging. Our boarding-house suffers from a number of deficiencies, and I'm pleased to see they don't worry you. They've been enough before now to make others look elsewhere.

JAN If I might risk putting our agreement on one side for a moment, I must say that your approach seems very odd. I've never thought of it as part of a landlady's job to give a complete inventory of the short-comings of her own establishment. An impartial observer might be tempted to say that you were trying to get rid of me.

MARTHA That's not what I had in mind. (Then, as if she has suddenly taken a decision) But it would be true to say that both of us, my mother and myself, did have second thoughts about taking you in.

JAN It had, in fact, come to my attention that you weren't doing a great deal to keep me here. But I can't see why. There's no question of my ability to pay. That needn't worry you. And I wouldn't have thought that I give the impression of a man with a shady past, or anything like that.

MARTHA No, it's not that. There's nothing shady about you. But there is another consideration. We have to move out of here at some stage fairly soon, and for the past few months we've been thinking every day that we would close down to make our final preparations. There's never been much to stop us. Guests here have always been few and far between. But it was only with your arrival that we realised just how far we had come from any real interest in persevering with our former line of business.

JAN So. You'd rather see me go?

MARTHA As I just said, we had second thoughts. Since it all depends on me, I might as well tell you that I'm still not sure exactly how I feel.

JAN Well, I'll do whatever you like. I've no wish to be a burden to you, but I must say that it would be extremely convenient for me to be able to stay here for one or two days. I've some things I'd like to see sorted out before I move on, and I had hoped to find the peace and quiet I was after in your care.

MARTHA I can quite understand that, believe me, and if you like I'll think about it again.
(Pause. She takes a few steps towards the door, and then stops.)
Are you going back there? To Africa?

JAN I may do.

MARTHA It's a very beautiful country. Isn't it?

JAN (looking through the window) Yes. Very beautiful.

MARTHA They say that in that part of the world the beaches are deserted.

JAN Yes. They are. There's no trace of man anywhere. Just the criss-cross patterns stretching out along the sand early in the morning where the sea-gulls have left their mark. The only signs of life. And as for the evenings... (He breaks off.)

MARTHA (quietly) Yes? The evenings?

JAN They take your breath away. It's a very beautiful country.

MARTHA (a new note in her voice) I've often dreamed about it. Travellers have told me a bit, and I've read what I could. But all I can do is dream. Springtime in this country is as mean as the winter. When I think of the open sea and all those flowers... (Pause, then with feeling) What fills my imagination makes me blind to everything.

(He looks at her with increasing interest, and sits down quietly in front of her.)

JAN I can see how you feel. Where I come from springtime takes you by the throat. Flowers spread open by the thousand in the white glare of shining walls. If you walk for an hour in the hills that surround the town you bring back with you, caught in your clothes, the sweet scent of honey that drifts from countless yellow roses.

(Martha sits down in turn.)

MARTHA I can hardly believe that. What we call the spring is one small rose and two buds that struggle for the light in a garden by the monastery. (Contemptuously.) And that's quite enough for the people of this country. Their hearts are as tightly closed as those two buds. They'd choke on a stronger scent. They deserve what they get. The spring is mean, and so are they.

JAN Is that really fair? You've forgotten the autumn.

MARTHA Have I ?

JAN Yes. It's almost a second spring, with all the leaves like flowers. (His eyes have never left her face.) Human beings change, too, if you're willing to be patient. If you care for them a bit.

MARTHA But why should I care? This Europe of autumns like springs, and springs that smell of misery, has exhausted all my patience. My imagination craves another scene. A land where the summer sun falls on you and crushes you, where the winter rains stream across the towns, and where everything is just as it should be.

(Silence. He is fascinated. She notices, and gets up sharply.)

MARTHA Why are you looking at me like that?

JAN I'm sorry. No offence. I'd forgotten our agreement. But you can hardly blame me. It's been a pleasure to hear you talking in a way I understand. It's a lot more human, if I may say so.

MARTHA (in a violent outburst) Well, that's where you're wrong! The human side of me is not my better part. You wouldn't be so pleased if I had shown you that. The only thing I share with the rest of the human race is my determination to get what I want. To shatter and destroy absolutely anything that stands in my way.

JAN (smiling) That kind of violence is something I can understand. It never has frightened me. And I can't see why it should. After all, there's nothing to suggest that I shall prove to be an obstacle as far as you're concerned. What could be my motive for standing in your way?

MARTHA You don't need a motive. It would be quite enough if you had no good reason to help me. In certain circumstances, that can be decisive.

JAN Who told you that? That I had no reason to help you.

MARTHA Common sense, as usual. And my firm intention to keep all my plans completely to myself. To keep them private.

JAN I think we've come full circle. We seem to be back inside the terms of our agreement.

MARTHA Yes, we are, and it was a great mistake ever to leave them in the first place. That much must be obvious. But I'm very much obliged to you for all the information. It's been a pleasure to speak to an authority, and I can only hope that you'll forgive me if I've been guilty of wasting your time.
(She has reached the door.)
But perhaps it's only right for me to say that from my point of view it hasn't been a waste of time. Not by any means. In fact, our conversation could be said to have awoken certain feelings in me that were up to now in some real danger of remaining permanently dormant. So if you had, as you say, set your heart on staying here, I can now reassure you that you have obtained your objective, perhaps without knowing it. When I came up to this room, I had almost made up my mind to ask you to leave. But as you can see, your appeal to my 'humanity' has been remarkably successful. I now find that I'm very keen for you to stay. My taste for the sea, and a land where the sun shines, has gained the upper hand.

(He looks at her for a moment in silence.)

JAN I find your choice of words very strange. But I shall stay, if I may, and if your mother has no objection.

MARTHA My mother's feelings are not as strong as mine, as you might expect. She won't have the same reasons for wanting you to stay. The sea? Deserted beaches? They mean nothing to her. She won't feel the need for your presence in the way that I do. But at the same time, she won't oppose me. There's no reason why she should. So the question is settled.

JAN So, if I've got it right, the one wants me to stay out of self-interest, and the other doesn't mind because she doesn't care?

MARTHA Who could ask for more, in a hotel? (She opens the door.)

JAN Well, I suppose I should be pleased. Delighted, in fact. But you must forgive me if I say that I find it all very strange. Strange people, strange terms, and a very strange way of talking. Not the kind of things to make you feel at home.

MARTHA Perhaps not. I But what can you expect, when you insist on behaving in such a strange way yourself?

Scene two

JAN (gazing at the closed door) Perhaps after all... (He moves across the room, and sits down on the bed.) But all she's done is make me want to leave. What am I doing here? It's all so stupid. I'd be happy with Maria. But on the other hand... she is my sister and she is my concern. And so is my mother. They've been out of my mind for much too long. (He gets up.) Yes. It's this room that holds all the answers.

But why is it so cold? So very cold. Nothing looks the same. It's all been changed. Nothing to distinguish it from any other hotel room in any other town where a traveller might pass the night a long way from home. That all sounds familiar. So what was I doing here, in those small rooms? Looking for an answer! And I perhaps I'll find it here. So there is some hope. (He looks out of the window.) The sky's getting dark. And as you might have known, the pain is on its way. Taking hold slowly, throbbing like a wound that every movement agitates and that never seems to heal, come what may. But you can't hide from fear. There's no escape from the fear of being alone. It lives on inside us from the moment we are born. And what would happen if we ever discovered that there was no answer? It would turn into terror. But who could give an answer, in a room like this, in some small hotel?

(He walks over to the bell-button, stops, and then presses it. It makes no sound. Silence. Then footsteps, and a knock. The door opens, and the Old Man can be seen standing in the doorway, motionless and silent.)

Nothing. I'm sorry. I just wanted to know if the bell was working. If anyone would answer.

(The Old Man looks at him, and then shuts the door. The footsteps die away.)

Scene three

JAN So, the bell works. But he says nothing. Not much of an answer.
(Two taps at the door. The sister comes in with a tray.)

Scene four

JAN What's that?

MARTHA The tea that you asked for.

JAN I didn't ask for anything.

MARTHA Oh. There must have been some misunderstanding. The old man. He sometimes gets things wrong. (She puts the tray on the table. Jan makes a movement with his hand.) Shall I take it away?

JAN No, no. On the contrary, I was thanking you for it.

(She looks at him, and goes out.)

Scene five

JAN A glass of beer. Cash down, to order; and a cup of tea, by mistake. (He picks up the cup and holds it poised for the moment, in silence. Then, heavily) Oh, my Saviour! My Lord God! Help me find the words I need! Or make me give up this hopeless task and go back to Maria and the warmth of her love. Give me the strength, Lord, to make up my mind, to know what I want, and to keep to it. (He laughs.) Well, here's to the prodigal son! Long life and happiness!
(He drinks. A loud knock at the door.)
Hello?

(The door opens, and the mother comes in.)

Scene six

MOTHER I beg your pardon, sir, but my daughter told me that she'd brought you some tea.

JAN As you can see.

MOTHER Have you drunk it?

JAN Yes, I'm afraid I have.

MOTHER Then if you'll excuse me, I'll remove the tray.

JAN (smiling) I'm sorry if it's put you out.

MOTHER It doesn't matter. But actually, it wasn't meant for you.

JAN Oh, I see. I didn't ask for it. But your daughter brought it in and...

MOTHER (rather wearily) Yes. I know. It might have been better...

JAN (surprised) I'm extremely sorry, believe me, but your daughter seemed quite keen to leave it, and I never thought...

MOTHER I'm sorry, too. But please don't apologise. It's just one of those mistakes.

(She puts the things on the tray and turns to go.)

JAN Excuse me!

MOTHER Yes.

JAN I've just come to a decision. I shall in fact be leaving this evening after dinner. I'll pay you for the room of course.

(She looks at him in silence.)

JAN I can see you're surprised. But please don't think that it's anything you've done that's prompted my decision. That would be quite wrong. My feelings towards you are as warm as they could be. Every bit as warm. But to be quite frank, I don't feel at ease here, and I'd rather not prolong my stay.

MOTHER (slowly) There's nothing wrong with that, sir. You must do as you like. The freedom's all yours. But you might possibly have a change of heart between now and dinner. First impressions are always very persuasive, I know, but they're not always right. Things may seem very strange, but after a while you often settle down and get used to them.

JAN I don't think so. Not in this case. It's not that I'm dissatisfied. Rather the opposite. I've been extremely grateful for the welcome that you've given me. (He hesitates.) In fact, I've even come to feel that I can expect a certain degree of consideration at your hands.

- MOTHER I'm pleased to hear it, sir. But it's hardly surprising. There's nothing personal involved. I had no reason to make you feel uncomfortable.
- JAN (with contained emotion) Perhaps you're right. But I'd like to feel that we're parting on good terms. Mainly because I may come back again. It's at least a possibility, and I think I could even say I'm sure of it. But just for the moment I can't escape the feeling that I've made a mistake. That there is nothing for me here. Nothing for me to do. To sum it up, I don't feel at home here. And it's not a sensation I like.
- (She continues to stare at him.)
- MOTHER No, but it's not uncommon, and it usually comes on people the moment they arrive.
- JAN Yes, I know it does. But as you can see, I'm not quite myself. And you must understand that it's never very easy to come back to a country that you left a long time ago. I'm sure you'd acknowledge that.
- MOTHER Of course. I had hoped that things would sort themselves out for you. But as far as I can see, there's nothing more that we can do.
- JAN No, no. Certainly not. I've no complaints on that score. It's simply that you're the first people I've met since I've been back, and difficulties such as these are bound to arise. But it's my problem, not yours. I haven't settled down yet, that's all.
- MOTHER When things go badly, there's not much you can do. In a certain sense, I find your decision slightly upsetting. But there again, there's no particular reason why I should make very much of it.
- JAN You've already made a great effort to understand me, and I have no wish to make any more demands on you. But what you have just said has touched a chord in me, and I should find it very difficult to describe the pleasure it gave me to hear you talk like that. (He tries to express his feelings.) Perhaps if I ...
- MOTHER But it's part of our job to be pleasant to our guests.
- JAN (discouraged) Of course it is. (Pause.) Well, then, I must make my apologies, and if you'll permit me, a small compensation for your...
(He passes his hand across his forehead, and begins to look

very tired.) You must have taken some trouble, incurred some expenses, and it's only reasonable...

MOTHER Oh, no compensation. We wouldn't ask for that. We've lost nothing by all of this uncertainty. But I'm afraid that it may well have cost you something.

JAN (leaning on the table) Oh, don't trouble yourself on my account. Just so long as there's no confusion. That's all that matters. I should like to feel that you'll remember me with some affection. I shan't forget the two of you, I assure you, and I only hope that when I return I'll be in a better state of mind.

(She walks over to the door without another word.)

JAN One last thing!
(She turns round. His speech is halting, but the words come with greatest fluency towards the end.)
I would very I much like to ...(He stops.) Forgive me. I must apologise. The journey's left me very tired. (He sits on the bed.) At the very least, I must clearly offer you my thanks... But I should also like you to know that my feelings as I leave will be substantially different from those of any other guest you may have entertained. They will not be so impersonal.

MOTHER It's very kind of you to say so.

(She goes out)

Scene seven

(He watches her leave. He makes some attempt at movement, but exhaustion is visibly taking its toll. Giving in to weariness, he sits on the bed, with his elbow on the pillow.)

JAN I'll come back tomorrow. Maria will be with me, and this time I'll say "It's me". I'll make them both happy. Maria was right. It's all very simple. (He yawns, and pulls his legs up onto the bed.) What's the matter with me this evening? I seem miles away from anywhere. (He is more or less lying down by now. He mouths a few words which are inaudible. Then) Yes or no ?

(He turns over and is asleep. The room is almost completely dark. There is a long silence. The door opens and the two women come in with a lamp. The Old Man follows them.)

Scene eight

- MARTHA (in a whisper, looking at the body in the light of the lamp)
He's asleep.
- MOTHER (in a similar voice, but louder all the time) No, Martha, no!
I don't like this! You're forcing my hand. You started it, and
now I'm supposed to finish. You're dragging me into this to
get round my doubts, and I don't like it!
- MARTHA I was trying to make the whole thing easier for you. With the
mood you were in, I had to get things started. You gave me no
choice.
- MOTHER All right. I suppose we had to finish it. But that doesn't
make it any better. I still don't like it.
- MARTHA Come on! Think of tomorrow, and let's get it done.
- (She searches through his jacket pockets, and pulls out a
wallet. She counts the notes. She empties all his other
pockets. During this operation the passport falls on to the
floor behind the bed. The Old Man picks it up without either
of the women noticing, and moves back out of the way.)
- MARTHA There. Everything's ready. In a few moments the river will
have reached its height. We'll come back for him when we hear
the water running over the weir. Come on.
- MOTHER (calmly) No. I'm fine where I am. (She sits down.)
- MARTHA But... (She looks at her mother. Then, defiantly) You needn't
imagine that this is going to frighten me. Let's wait here.
- MOTHER Yes. I don't I mind waiting. It's good to have a rest. We've
got a long night ahead of us, carrying that body all along the
road, down to the river. It would be bad enough even if I
wasn't tired. As it is, I can't remember when I didn't feel
this way. My old blood has nothing left to give. That's the
real trouble. (She is swaying to and fro on the chair, as if
half asleep.) While all the time his mind's at rest. Fast
asleep, and finished with the world. No more worries. He'll
slip without knowing from a sleep filled with shadows to a
sleep free from dreams. No struggle for him. Not like the rest
of us. He's spared that torment. He'll just sleep on, with no
interruption. Sleep and death. He won't know the difference.

MARTHA (defiantly) Well, that's one relief! I'm glad he's spared any suffering. I've no reason to hate him and... (She listens, and then smiles.) Mother, I think I can hear the water rising. Not long now. It'll soon be over.

MOTHER (in the same attitude) Yes, it'll soon be over, now the water's rising. He won't know the difference. He's fast asleep. His mind's at rest, free from decisions, free from all cares, from all that useless effort to get something finished before it's too late. And now it is too late...? No more strain. An end to all the pushing. No repetition of that senseless demand to give a little bit more. He's shaken off the cross of life. Those stern commandments that rule us all our lives: put aside all thought of rest, forget all your weaknesses, and never waste your time. Asleep, with nothing on his mind. No more obligations and nothing more to do. Oh, how I envy him! I'm old and I'm tired and I should like nothing better than to fall asleep like him, and then be allowed to die. (Silence.) You're very silent, Martha.

MARTHA Yes. I'm listening. For the sound of the water.

MOTHER It'll come, soon enough. In one short minute. And while that minute lasts, happiness is in our grasp.

MARTHA Happiness comes after, not before.

MOTHER Did you know, Martha, he was going to leave tonight?

MARTHA No, I didn't. But it wouldn't have made any difference. I'd still have gone ahead. I'd made up my mind.

MOTHER He told me just now. I didn't know what to say.

MARTHA You saw him, then?

MOTHER I came up here to stop him drinking the tea. But I was too late.

MARTHA Yes, much too late. I might as well tell you. He made the decision for me. I still wasn't sure. But he started to talk of the land I've been waiting for, and he gave me the weapons I was wanting. He touched my heart, and that was enough. Innocence has its reward.

MOTHER And yet, Martha, by the end I think he knew. He said to me himself that he didn't feel at home here.

MARTHA (with growing impatience, in a strong voice) Well he was right, wasn't he ? This isn't his home. It isn't anyone's home. No-one could ever find warmth or satisfaction here. And if he'd understood that a little bit sooner, he'd have spared us the trouble of teaching him a lesson. He'd have known for himself that a room like this is made for sleeping in, and a world like this for dying. But that'll do for now. We've got a ... (The sound of the river can now be heard in the distance.) Listen! The water's running over the weir! It's time to move, mother. And for the love of that God that you call on now and then, let get it over with.

(The mother moves towards the bed.)

MOTHER You're right. We'd better move. There's a long night ahead. And the way I feel, it seems to me that the dawn may never come.

End of Act Two

Act Three

(The mother, Martha, and the Old Man are all on stage. The Old Man is cleaning and tidying. The sister stands behind the desk, putting up her hair.)

Scene one

(The mother walks across the stage towards the door.)

MARTHA You see? The dawn has arrived.

MOTHER Yes. Tomorrow I'll appreciate what a fine thing it is to have the whole thing behind us. But for the moment, I just feel tired.

MARTHA What have I been doing for all these years? This morning I can breathe! I could almost imagine that I can hear the sea already. It makes me want to shout for joy.

MOTHER I'm glad for you, Martha. Glad for your sake. But I'm too old to share it with you. Much too old. I'll feel better tomorrow.

MARTHA I hope you will. But don't be such a misery. I want to indulge myself. Why shouldn't I be happy? I feel like the girl I was. My body's on fire. I must do something. Run somewhere... Mother... (She breaks off.)

MOTHER What is it, Martha? I hardly know you now.

MARTHA Tell me something. (She hesitates, and then, with pride) Am I still as attractive as I was? Am I beautiful?

MOTHER Yes, you are. This morning you are. Crime has its own beauty.

MARTHA What's crime to me now? That's all past. This is the morning of another life. Happiness is waiting. I'm going back where I belong.

MOTHER Good. I'm going to have a rest. But it's good to see that life has begun again. If only for you.

(The Old Man appears at the top of the stairs and comes down towards Martha. He hands her the passport, and then goes out. He doesn't say a word. Martha opens the passport and reads, with no visible reaction.)

MOTHER What is it?

MARTHA (calmly) His passport. Read it.

MOTHER My eyes are tired, you know that...

MARTHA Read it! You'll recognise the name.

(The mother takes the passport, and sits down at the table. She spreads it open and reads. She stares at the pages in front of her for a very long time.)

- MOTHER (in a voice empty of emotion) There you are. I knew this would happen. I knew we should have stopped.
- MARTHA (coming round to stand in front of the desk) Mother!
- MOTHER (in the same voice) It's no good, Martha. I've lived too long, longer than my son. I didn't know who he was and so I killed him. The only thing left to do is join him, at the bottom of river, where the weeds are winding round his face.
- MARTHA Mother! You can't leave me on my own!
- MOTHER You've been a great help to me, Martha. I'll be sorry to leave you. If it still means anything to say this, I should like to put it on record that in your own way you've been a good daughter. I couldn't have asked for more. But I'm worn out. I'm much too old to take more sorrow. I was his mother. And when a mother fails to know her son, her function in this life has come to an end.
- MARTHA No, it has not! She still has a part to play in her daughter's happiness. What are you saying? I can't understand this! You of all people, who taught me not to care for anything.
- MOTHER (in the same voice, devoid of all personality) Yes, I did. But I've just learnt that I was wrong, and that in this world where nothing can be guaranteed some things are certain. (With bitterness.) And the love of a mother for her son is one of those certainties.
- MARTHA And is there no other? What of a mother's love for her daughter?
- MOTHER I don't want to hurt you at this moment, Martha, but the truth is that it's not the same thing. It's much less strong. How could I have strayed so far from the love of my own son?
- MARTHA (in an outburst) You call that love? He never gave you a moment's thought in all of twenty years!
- MOTHER Yes. That's love. Anything that could last through twenty years of silence deserves the name of love. But none of this matters. Love or not love, it's good enough for me, since I can't face living without him.

(She gets up.)

- MARTHA This isn't possible. I don't believe it. Is there no fight left in you? You can't say all of that without a thought for your daughter!
- MOTHER I've no thought for anything, and no desire to fight. This is punishment, Martha. Our punishment. This is the moment that comes to all murderers, when they stand like me, empty inside, sterile, with no possible future. That's why we put them down. They're no good for anything.
- MARTHA I've never heard you speak like this. It's contemptible. I can't bear to hear you talk of punishment and crime.
- MOTHER I'm speaking as I feel. It's as simple as that. I've lost my freedom, and hell has begun.
- MARTHA (coming up to her, passionately) You've never spoken like this before. For all these years you've kept close to me and held in your hands the weight of the bodies that were destined to die. You never hung back. You never thought then of freedom and hell. You kept on going. How can your son change all of that?
- MOTHER I kept on going. That's true. But it was only out of habit. Like a living death. One touch of sorrow was enough to convert me. That's the change my son has brought.
(Martha tries to interrupt her.)
I know, Martha, I know. None of it is reasonable. What has a criminal to do with sorrow? But you see, it's not really a mother's sorrow. Where are the tears? No, it's just the pain of giving birth again to love and watching as it leaves you. Another kind of suffering that can't be called reasonable. (In a changed voice.) But the world itself isn't reasonable. And I can say it, if anyone can. Because I've tasted all of it, from creation to destruction.
- (She turns decisively towards the door, but Martha steps in front of her and bars her exit.)
- MARTHA No. Mother, you can't leave me. You won't leave me. Don't forget, I'm the one who stayed. He deserted you. You've had me near you all your life, while he left you in silence. That's a debt that must be paid. It must count in the reckoning. The movement you make must be towards me.
- MOTHER (quietly) I can't deny any of it, Martha. But he's dead, and I killed him.

(Martha turns slightly, and stands downcast, with her head inclined towards the door.)

MARTHA (after a long silence, with increasing passion) All that life can give he had given to him. He left this country. He knew the feel of open space, he knew the sea. The people that he lived with passed their lives in freedom. And I stayed here. A tiny child, caught in the heart of a continent that smothered her as she grew. No-one ever kissed my lips. And no-one has ever seen me naked. That creates a debt. You can't walk out on me, mother. Not now it's due. No man's death can give you an excuse for that. Death has no significance for a man who has lived. You must see that. My brother can be forgotten. Nothing important has happened to him. He ran through experience and came to the end. He had nothing more to live for. But I have. I've been denied everything. And now I have the chance to seize the things that gave him joy. You can't take that away. You won't, will you? You won't let him win at the last, and strip me of my mother's love? He would draw you down for ever to the depths of his frozen stream. But you won't let him. (They look at each other in silence. The sister lowers her eyes.)

(in what is almost a whisper) I ask for so little, mother. There have always been some things I couldn't bring myself to say. But let me offer this. I believe that kindness could play a part in the life that we've shared, if only you would stay.

(The mother comes up to her.)

MOTHER You knew who he was!

MARTHA (raising her head abruptly) No! I had no idea. My memory had nothing to play with. It was bound to be like that. You said so yourself: the world isn't reasonable. But you were right to ask. Because if I had known who he was, it would have made no difference. I feel sure of that now.

MOTHER I'd like to think that isn't true. There must be limits, even for murderers.

MARTHA And I know mine. But I wouldn't feel obliged to kneel to a brother that I never knew.

MOTHER So who would you kneel to?

MARTHA (kneeling) To you. And only you.

(Silence.)

MOTHER (slowly) It's too late, Martha. I can do nothing for you. (She turns round to face her daughter.) You're not crying, are you? No. Of course not. You wouldn't know how. Do you remember the time when I used to hold you?

MARTHA No, mother.

MOTHER It's not surprising. It's a very long time ago, and I soon forgot to open my arms to you. But I've never stopped loving you. (She moves Martha gently aside, and little by little she yields to pressure.) I can say that now. My heart has found its voice at last. Well after time. And at the very moment when I can't face the thought of it, life has begun again.

(The doorway is now clear.)

MARTHA (putting her face in her hands) Could anything be stronger than a daughter's despair ?

MOTHER Exhaustion could be. And the need for rest.

(She goes out. Martha makes no attempt to stop her.)

Scene two

(Martha runs to the door and slams it viciously, pressing herself against it. She screams like an animal.)

MARTHA Why me ? How could I have known? Why should I have cared? He's stolen my future, and stripped me of a mother's love, left me alone in a land I could never call my own. But how could I have known? Why must innocence always be answered with the blast of injustice? He had everything, and I have nothing. A life spent in waiting for the wave that would sweep me away. And now it will never come. I'll never get away. I'm stuck here forever. The wind blows off the sea. But it's blocked by the mountains. The constant call of thudding waves is lost in the confusion as each state and every race adds its contribution to the swirling mass of murmurings that surrounds me on every side. (In a calmer voice.) Others are luckier. The evening breeze reaches them and carries with it in its journey far from the shore a light scent of happiness in the smell of the sea. It speaks to them of streaming sands, of screaming seagulls wheeling above them, and of beaches stained with sun as the shadows grow longer in the slow hours of evening. But the wind is drained of sense before it reaches me. The debt owed to me will never be paid. I shall never feel the pulse of a sea without sorrow. I'm too far from what I love, and there's no remedy for that. What could I do? Put my ear to the ground? Would the waves speak to me across such a distance.

Oh, how I hate him! I hate him for having what he wanted. The only home I'll ever know is this sullen land of walls. My hunger must be satisfied by the sickly fruit that ripens under this small patch of sky, and there's nothing for my thirst. The blood I have spilt will have to serve for that. And all for a mother who had to love her son!

Well, let her die if she can't love me! The doors can close around me. I'm left with my anger, my one, proud possession! I shan't pray. The prospect of death won't turn my eyes to heaven. A land of freedom and escape knows no gods! There's no place for them where the sea stands guard as you surge through the waves or sink beneath the pressure of a body thrust on yours. But here... the eyes meet walls, and the shape of the country conforms to a design that forces you to search the sky in a servile gasp for grace! How I hate a world which wears us down until we scream for salvation! But I shan't kneel. The blast of injustice won't shatter me. I'll stand alone, surrounded by my crimes. I've been denied everything, and stripped of my mother's love. I have no home. But I shan't capitulate. I'll leave this world the alien that I have always been!

(There is a knock at the door.)

Scene three

MARTHA Who is it ?

MARIA A traveller.

MARTHA We're closed for business.

MARIA I've come to find my husband. (She comes in.)

MARTHA (looking at her) And who is your husband?

MARIA He came here yesterday, and was due to rejoin me this morning. But he hasn't. I don't know what's happened.

MARTHA He said his wife wasn't with him.

MARIA He had his reasons. But it's high time we were together again.

MARTHA (who is still looking at her) That might be difficult. Your husband isn't here.

MARIA Are you sure? I thought he'd taken a room with you?

MARTHA He did. But he left. Last night.

MARIA I can't believe it. He had a great many reasons for wanting to stay here. I don't like the sound of this. Tell me everything you know.

MARTHA I know very little. Just that he's no longer here.

MARIA But he couldn't have left without me. I don't understand. Did he leave for good, or was he coming back?

MARTHA He left for good.

MARIA Look, ever since yesterday I've been waiting patiently, alone and in a foreign country. But now my patience is running out. I was worried enough to come here, and I don't intend to leave until I've seen my husband, or found out where he is. I must have him back.

MARTHA I'm afraid it's none of my business.

MARIA Well that's where you're wrong. It's very much your business. I don't know if my husband would approve of this, but I'm sick of all this mystery. The man who came to stay with you yesterday morning was your own brother. You'd been out of touch for a long time, I know, but he was your brother.

MARTHA I knew that already.

MARIA (losing her self-control) Then what on earth has happened? If he's your brother and this is your house, why isn't he here? You knew who he was. Weren't you both pleased to see him? Delighted he'd come back?

MARTHA Your husband isn't here because he's no longer with us. Because he's dead.

(Maria spins round and stands for a moment speechless. Her eyes never leave Martha's face. Eventually she makes a movement in her direction, and smiles.)

MARIA I presume you're joking. Jan said you liked to do that, even as a little girl. That you liked upsetting people. Now, we're the next best thing to sisters...

MARTHA Don't touch me. Stay where you are. We have nothing in common. (Pause.) Your husband died last night. I'm not joking, I assure you. There's nothing more to keep you here. Not now.

MARIA You must be mad. Stark, staring mad. All right. Show me the body. Then I'll believe you. But I can't, I won't! You just can't mean it.

MARTHA That's not possible. To show you the body. Where he is no-one can see him.

 (Maria makes another move towards her.)

 I told you not to touch me and to stay where you were ...**He's** at the bottom of the river. We gave him a drug to make him sleep. Then we carried him down to the river. His mother and myself. He's dead and we killed him. But at least he didn't suffer.

MARIA (taking a step back) No, no... it must be me that's mad. No-one talks like this. No-one has ever talked like this. And no-one can ever, ever, have heard anything like... I knew this place had nothing good in store for me, but I am by no means ready to play a part in this madhouse. I just don't understand. There must be something I don't understand.

MARTHA All I can do is to tell you the facts. The rest is up to you. The evidence is there, and you'll come to it in time.

MARIA (She is on the verge of breakdown.) But what could have made you do it ? Why, why ?

MARTHA What gives you the right to question me ?

MARIA What gives me the right...? Love gives me the right, if nothing else.

MARTHA What does that mean?

MARIA It means this. It means that something is eating into me, some kind of madness that could turn my hands to murder. Only one small thing - my obstinate refusal to believe a word of this - lies between you and the moment when my nails tear at your face. You must be mad. If you weren't, you'd know yourself what love meant.

MARTHA I can't understand you. Joy, love, sorrow. It's like another language. It means nothing to me.

MARIA (with a great effort) Look, let's stop this. Playing with words won't do us any good. If we are playing. Tell me what I want to know. As clearly as you can, and before I go out of my mind.

- MARTHA I've been as clear as I can. Already. We killed your husband last night. We were after his money. We've done it several times before.
- MARIA So. You were criminals. His mother and his sister. Both of you. Criminals.
- MARTHA That's right.
- MARIA (Still with the same effort.) And did you know at the time that you were killing your own brother?
- MARTHA If you must know, there was in fact a slight misunderstanding. Nothing out of the ordinary. It's the kind of thing that happens. Even you should know that.
- MARIA (turning to the table, her face sunk in her hands, and in a deadened voice) Oh, my God, I knew it would end like this. In blood. It was all a mad farce and this is our reward, our punishment for ever getting mixed up in it. I should have known. The sky itself was threatening. (She stands by the table, and speaks without looking at Martha.) All he wanted was to come home again, to make himself known to you, and to bring you both happiness. He was looking for the right words. But before he found them you had to kill him. (She starts to cry.) You two. You must be inhuman. Couldn't you tell? Couldn't you see the kind of man he was? A son who came back. An extraordinary man, a man of warmth and of spirit. He could have been your pride and joy, as he was mine. But you had to kill him. You had to be his enemy. And you still are. You stand there as cold as ice, talking calmly of something that should make you want to run out into the street, screaming like an animal in pain!
- MARTHA Don't judge anything until you know it all. While we have been speaking my mother will have found her son. The water will be rolling them together. They'll be taken from the river and buried side by side. But I can't see why I should scream like an animal, even knowing that. I have a different idea of the human heart, and to tell you the truth, your tears disgust me.
- MARIA (turning to face her, in an outburst of hatred) They are the tears of a joy you've destroyed. And you should be pleased to see them. Because when they stop, I shall be quite capable of killing you without a moment's thought.
- MARTHA Perhaps you will. It's of no concern to me. I've made my decision. I've seen enough and heard enough to make me want to take my own life. But I'll keep well away from them. Their dark and dismal longing has no place for me. Don't you see?

Their re-discovered love has made them unfaithful. To both of us, forever. Luckily, I have my room. The last taste of happiness. To die there on my own.

MARIA Why tell me? Why should I care? Die if you want to, and take the world with you! The man I loved has left me alone, and I can't face the memory of all that I have lost.

(Martha comes up behind her, and speaks over her shoulder.)

MARTHA Let's keep things in proportion. You've lost your husband, and I've lost my mother. So we stand even. But he only left you once. Think of all those years when you had him to yourself, And you were never rejected. I was. By my own mother. And now she's dead. So that makes twice.

MARIA All he wanted to do was to share his happiness with you. That's what he was thinking of, up there in that room, while you were down here getting ready to kill him.

MARTHA (with a sudden note of desperation) I am even with your husband, too! I have known his despair. I thought, like him, that I had a home. I believed that crime was its foundation, that crime had bound us both together, my mother and myself, in a bond that would never be broken. She was my companion. She had killed at the same time as me. And I was wrong. Crime's just another form of loneliness, even if you're one in a thousand. I've lived alone and killed alone, and now I must die alone.

(Maria turns to face her. She is still crying.)

MARTHA (taking a step backwards, in her hard voice) I told you not to touch me! All the violence in my blood floods to my brain at the thought of a human hand forcing its warmth on me before I die. It makes me shudder to think that I shall never escape from the grasp of human kindness.

(They are face to face, and very close to each other.)

MARIA Never fear. You can die as you wish. I don't care. I can't even see you any more. Neither you nor your mother will ever be more to me than shadows. I can't feel hatred for you. I no longer have the will to love or to despise anyone. (She buries her face in her hands.) To be quite honest, I've hardly had the time to feel any pain, or to make a fight against it. The horror of it all has crushed me flat.

- MARTHA But you still have the strength to cry. Even after this. So there is something left to do. My task isn't over. Before I die I must cure you of hope.
- MARIA (staring at her in terror) Leave me alone! Go away, and leave me alone!
- MARTHA Don't worry. I'll be going soon. Your love and your tears are more than I can take, and it'll be a great relief to be rid of them forever. But I refuse to die while you still believe that you are right and I am wrong, that love is never futile, and that all of this is some kind of accident, a ghastly mistake. It isn't. It's simply the final revelation of how things really are, and you must come to terms with it.
- MARIA With what?
- MARTHA With reality. With an arrangement that guarantees that no one person ever knows another
- MARIA (almost frantic) What does it matter? What does any of it matter? I don't care! I can't take any more. My heart is broken in two. What do you want? What can you hope to find? There is nothing left which interests me. Nothing, do you hear? You've killed the man I loved.
- MARTHA (violently) That's enough of him! I won't hear another word. I despise him. How can he matter to you now? He's left you forever and the doors have closed behind him. He has his home, and much good may it do him. The fool! He's found what he was looking for. Reality has us all firmly in its grip. It's time you understood that this waits for all of us. None of us, in life or in death, finds any peace. There is no land where we can feel at home. (With a scornful laugh) Take a look around you! Could this be it? This dark, sullen clay that swallows us up as food for sightless worms?
- MARIA (in tears) Oh, my God! How can you talk like that? I can't stand it. Nor would he. The land he was looking for, his own land... it was never like that.
- MARTHA (who has reached the door, turning round sharply) Well he was a fool, and he has his reward. And you'll soon have yours. (With the same laugh) We've all been fooled. We hear the summons, we obey the call. It might be love, it might be the sea. And all for what? What good does it do us? The whole thing's ridiculous. Laughable. Your husband knows that now. He has his answer. There's only one home for all of us. And that's unspeakable. But we all end up there, lined up together. (With hatred in her voice) The same answer waits for

you. And when you understand that, if you have any strength left you'll look back with longing on a day when you suffered that inconsequential deprivation that we call loneliness. Can't you see? Injustice is decreed. For all of us. And by its side your sorrow is trivial. Insignificant. Listen to me. I'll give you some advice. Take it, in place of your husband. I owe you something. I killed him. You have a god. Pray to him. Ask him to turn you into stone. It's the only true happiness. And he knows it. That's why he keeps it for himself. So do what he does. Turn yourself into stone. Be deaf to all cries. There isn't much time. Do it while you can. But if it proves too much for you - an unbroken silence, the only peace on earth - come and join us. You'll know where we are. We share the same house. Goodbye, sister. I'll leave you with your god. It's all very simple. You have a choice to make. The senseless bliss of a pebble on the beach, or the clammy embrace of the bed that welcomes everyone. We'll be there. And we'll be waiting for you.

(She goes out and Maria, who has listened with horror, stands there swaying, with her hands held up in front of her.)

MARIA (with a cry of desperation) Oh, my God! I can't live in this desert. My Saviour, my Lord! Hear my prayer! You must hear me! (She falls on her knees.) I turn to you and put my trust in you, Lord! Have pity on me and stretch out your hand! Hear my prayer, and turn your face to me! Have mercy on us! On those who love each other, and are driven apart!

(The door opens, and the Old Man appears.)

Scene four

OLD MAN (in a firm, clear voice) Were you calling for me?

MARIA (turning to him) Oh, no. Perhaps. I don't know. But help me, please. Someone must help. Have pity on me! I need your help. Please help me!

OLD MAN (in the same, clear voice) No.

Curtain