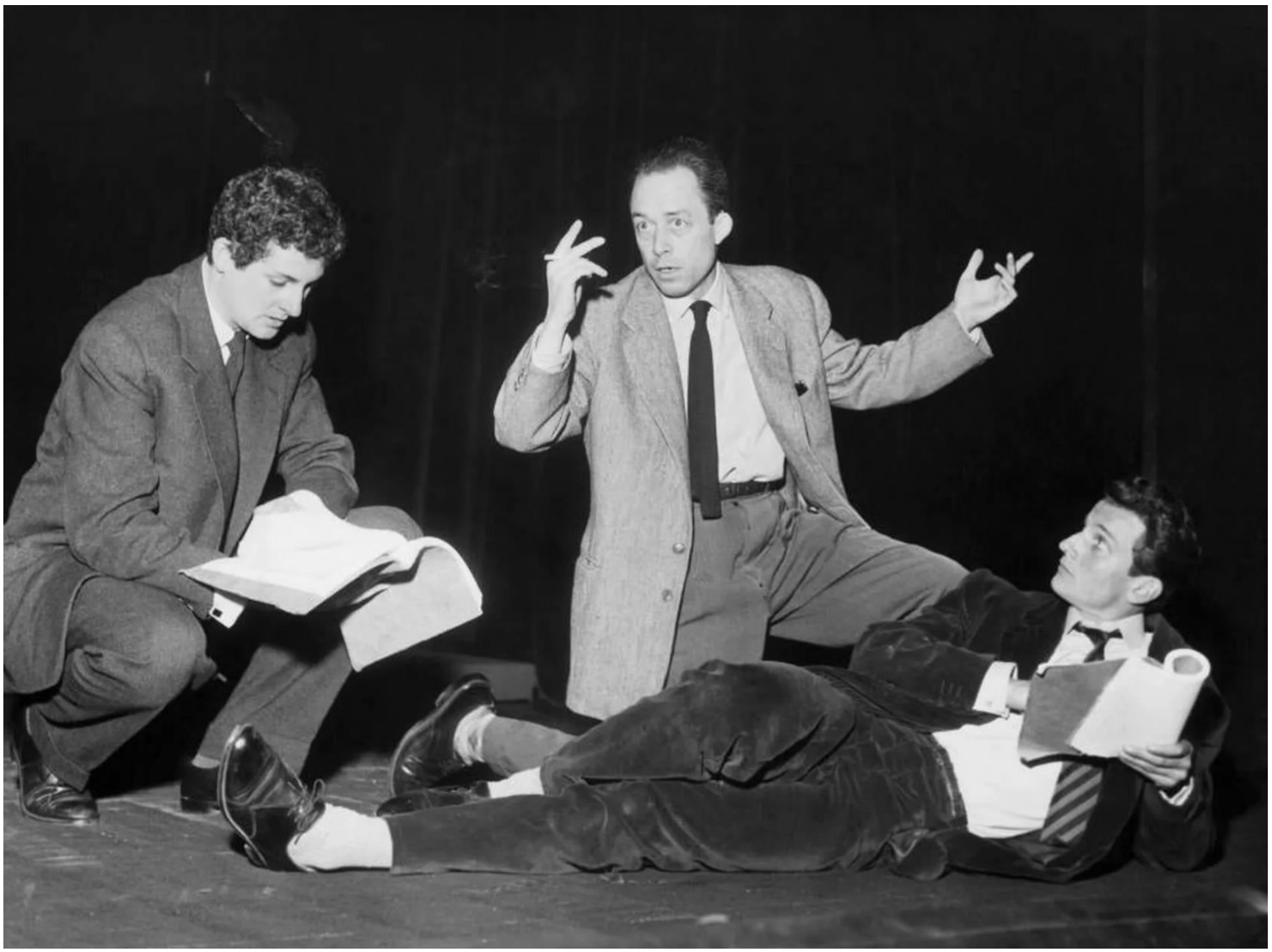

Cross Purpose, The Misunderstanding
Albert Camus

The Misunderstanding

Characters in the Play
Act I
Act II
Act III

THE MISUNDERSTANDING

A PLAY IN THREE ACTS

To my friends of the THÉÂTRE DE L'ÉQUIPE

CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY
THE OLD MANSERVANT
MARTHA
THE MOTHER
JAN
MARIA

Cross Purpose, LE MALENTENDU (THE MISUNDERSTANDING) was presented for the first time at the THÉÂTRE DES MATHURINS, Paris, in 1944

ACT I

Noon. The clean, brightly lit public room of an inn.
Everything is very spick and span.
THE MOTHER: He'll come back.
MARTHA: Did he tell you so?
THE MOTHER: Yes.
MARTHA: Alone?
THE MOTHER: That I can't say.
MARTHA: He doesn't look like a poor man.
THE MOTHER: No, and he never asked what our charges were.

MARTHA: A good sign, that. But usually rich men don't travel alone. Really it's that makes things so difficult. You may have to wait ages when you're looking out for a man who is not only rich but quite alone.
THE MOTHER: Yes, we don't get so many opportunities.
MARTHA: It means, of course, that we've had many slack times these last few years. This place is often empty. Poor people who stop here never stay long, and it's mighty seldom rich ones come.

THE MOTHER: Don't grumble about that, Martha. Rich people give a lot of extra work.
MARTHA [looking hard at her]: But they pay well. [A short silence.] Tell me, mother; what's come over you? For some time I've noticed that you weren't quite … quite your usual self.
THE MOTHER: I'm tired, my dear, that's all. What I need is a long rest.

MARTHA: Listen, mother. I can take over the household work you're doing now. Then you'll have your days free.
THE MOTHER: That wasn't quite the sort of rest I meant. Oh, I suppose it's just an old woman's fancy. All I'm longing for is peace—to be able to relax a little. [She gives a little laugh.] I know it sounds silly, Martha, but some evenings I feel almost like taking to religion.
MARTHA: You're not so very old, mother; you haven't come to that yet. And, anyhow, I should say you could do better.

THE MOTHER: Of course I was only joking, my dear. All the same … at the end of one's life, it's not a bad idea to take things easy. One can't be always on the go, as you are, Martha. And it isn't natural for a woman of your age, either. I know plenty of girls who were born the same year as you, and they think only of pleasure and excitements.
MARTHA: Their pleasures and excitements are nothing compared to ours, don't you agree, mother?
THE MOTHER: I'd rather you didn't speak of that.
MARTHA [thoughtfully]: Really one would think that nowadays some words burn your tongue.

THE MOTHER: What can it matter to you—provided I don't shrink from acts? But that has no great importance. What I really meant was that I'd like to see you smile now and again.
MARTHA: I do smile sometimes, I assure you.
THE MOTHER: Really? I've never seen you.
MARTHA: That's because I smile when I'm by myself, in my bedroom.
THE MOTHER [looking closely at her]: What a hard face you have, Martha!
MARTHA [coming closer; calmly]: Ah, so you don't approve of my face?
THE MOTHER [after a short silence, still looking at her]: I wonder … Yes, I think I do.

MARTHA [emotionally]: Oh, mother, can't you understand? Once we have enough money in hand, and I can escape from this shut-in valley; once we can say good-by to this inn and this dreary town where it's always raining; once we've forgotten this land of shadows—ah, then, when my dream has come true, and we're living beside the sea, then you will see me smile. Unfortunately one needs a great deal of money to be able to live in freedom by the sea. That is why we mustn't be afraid of words; that is why we must take trouble over this man who's come to stay here. If he is rich enough, perhaps my freedom will begin with him.
THE MOTHER: If he's rich enough, and if he's by himself.
MARTHA: That's so. He has to be by himself as well. Did he talk much to you, mother?
THE MOTHER: No, he said very little.
MARTHA: When he asked for his room, did you notice how he looked?

THE MOTHER: No. My sight's none too good, you know, and I didn't really look at his face. I've learned from experience that it's better not to look at them too closely. It's easier to kill what one doesn't know. [A short silence.] There! That should please you. You can't say now that I'm afraid of words.
MARTHA: Yes, and I prefer it so. I've no use for hints and evasions. Crime is crime, and one should know what one is doing. And, from what you've just said, it looks as if you had it in mind when you were talking to that traveler.

THE MOTHER: No, I wouldn't say I had it in mind—it was more from force of habit.
MARTHA: Habit? But you said yourself that these opportunities seldom come our way.

THE MOTHER: Certainly. But habit begins with the second crime. With the first nothing starts, but something ends. Then, too, while we have had few opportunities, they have been spread out over many years, and memory helps to build up habits. Yes, it was force of habit that made me keep my eyes off that man when I was talking to him, and, all the same, convinced me he had the look of a victim.
MARTHA: Mother, we must kill him.
THE MOTHER [in a low tone]: Yes, I suppose we'll have to.
MARTHA: You said that in a curious way.

THE MOTHER: I'm tired, that's all. Anyhow, I'd like this one to be the last. It's terribly tiring to kill. And, though really I care little where I die—beside the sea or here, far inland—I do hope we will get away together, the moment it's over.
MARTHA: Indeed we shall—and what a glorious moment that will be! So, cheer up, mother, there won't be much to do. You know quite well there's no question of killing. He'll drink his tea, he'll go to sleep, and he'll be still alive when we carry him to the river. Some day, long after, he will be found jammed against the weir, along with others who didn't have his luck and threw themselves into the water with their eyes open. Do you remember last year when we were watching them repair the sluices, how you said that ours suffered least, and life was crueler than we? So don't lose heart, you'll be having your rest quite soon and I'll be seeing what I've never seen.

THE MOTHER: Yes, Martha, I won't lose heart. And it was quite true, what you said about "ours." I'm always glad to think they never suffered. Really, it's hardly a crime, only a sort of intervention, a flick of the finger given to unknown lives. And it's also quite true that, by the look of it, life is crueler than we. Perhaps that is why I can't manage to feel guilty. I can only just manage to feel tired.

[The OLD MANSERVANT comes in. He seats himself behind the bar and remains there, neither moving nor speaking, until JAN'S entrance.]
MARTHA: Which room shall we put him in?
THE MOTHER: Any room, provided it's on the first floor.
MARTHA: Yes, we had a lot of needless trouble last time, with the two flights of stairs. [For the first time she sits down.] Tell me, mother, is it true that down on the coast the sand's so hot it scorches one's feet?
THE MOTHER: As you know, Martha, I've never been there. But I've been told the sun burns everything up.
MARTHA: I read in a book that it even burns out people's souls and gives them bodies that shine like gold but are quite hollow, there's nothing left inside.
THE MOTHER: Is that what makes you want to go there so much?

MARTHA: Yes, my soul's a burden to me, I've had enough of it. I'm eager to be in that country, where the sun kills every question. I don't belong here.
THE MOTHER: Unfortunately we have much to do beforehand. Of course, when it's over, I'll go there with you. But I am not like you; I shall not have the feeling of going to a place where I belong. After a certain age one knows there is no resting place anywhere. Indeed there's something to be said for this ugly brick house we've made our home and stocked with memories; there are times when one can fall asleep in it. But, naturally it would mean something, too, if I could have sleep and forgetfulness together. [She rises and walks toward the door.] Well, Martha, get everything ready. [Pauses.] If it's really worth the effort.
[MARTHA watches her go out. Then she, too, leaves by another door. For some moments only the OLD MANSERVANT is on the stage. JAN enters, stops, glances round the room, and sees the old man sitting behind the counter.]

JAN: Nobody here? [The old man gazes at him, rises, crosses the stage, and goes out. MARIA enters. JAN swings round on her.] So you followed me!
MARIA: Forgive me—I couldn't help it. I may not stay long. Only please let me look at the place where I'm leaving you.

JAN: Somebody may come, and your being here will upset all my plans.
MARIA: Do please let us take the chance of someone's coming and my telling who you are. I know you don't want it, but—[He turns away fretfully. A short silence. MARIA is examining the room.] So this is the place?

JAN: Yes. That's the door I went out by, twenty years ago. My sister was a little girl. She was playing in that corner. My mother didn't come to kiss me. At the time I thought I didn't care.

MARIA: Jan, I can't believe they failed to recognize you just now. A mother's bound to recognize her son; it's the least she can do.
JAN: Perhaps. Still, twenty years' separation makes a difference. Life has been going on since I left. My mother's grown old, her sight is failing. I hardly recognized her myself.
MARIA [impatiently]: I know. You came in; you said "Good day"; you sat down. This room wasn't like the one you remembered.
JAN: Yes, my memory had played me false. They received me without a word. I was given the glass of beer I asked for. I was looked at, but I wasn't seen. Everything was more difficult than I'd expected.

MARIA: You know quite well it needn't have been difficult; you had only to speak. On such occasions one says "It's I," and then it's all plain sailing.
JAN: True. But I'd been imagining—all sorts of things. I'd expected a welcome like the prodigal son's. Actually I was given a glass of beer, against payment. It took the words out of my mouth, and I thought I'd better let things take their course.

MARIA: There was nothing to take its course. It was another of those ideas of yours—and a word would have been enough.
JAN: It wasn't an idea of mine, Maria; it was the force of things. What's more, I'm not in such a hurry. I have come here to bring them my money, and if I can, some happiness. When I learned about my father's death I realized I had duties toward these two women and now, as a result, I'm doing what it's right for me to do. But evidently it is not so

easy as people think, coming back to one's old home, and it takes time to change a stranger into a son.

MARIA: But why not let them know the truth at once? There are situations in which the normal way of acting is obviously the best. If one wants to be recognized, one starts by telling one's name; that's common sense. Otherwise, by pretending to be what one is not, one simply muddles everything. How could you expect not to be treated as a stranger in a house you entered under false colors? No, dear, there's something … something morbid about the way you're doing this.

JAN: Oh, come, Maria! It's not so serious as that. And, mind you, it suits my plan. I shall take this opportunity of seeing them from the outside. Then I'll have a better notion of what to do to make them happy. Afterwards, I'll find some way of getting them to recognize me. It's just a matter of choosing one's words.
MARIA: No, there's only one way, and it's to do what any ordinary mortal would do—to say "It's I," and to let one's heart speak for itself.
JAN: The heart isn't so simple as all that.

MARIA: But it uses simple words. Surely there was no difficulty in saying: "I'm your son. This is my wife. I've been living with her in a country we both love, a land of endless sunshine beside the sea. But something was lacking there to complete my happiness, and now I feel I need you."
JAN: Don't be unfair, Maria. I don't need them; but I realized they may need me, and a man doesn't live only for himself.
[A short silence. MARIA looks away from him.]

MARIA: Perhaps you are right. I'm sorry for what I said. But I have grown terribly suspicious since coming to this country where I've looked in vain for a single happy face. This Europe of yours is so sad. Since we've been here, I haven't once heard you laugh, and, as for me, I feel my nerves on edge all the time. Oh, why did you make me leave my country? Let's go away, Jan; we shall not find happiness here.

JAN: It's not happiness we've come for. We had happiness already.

MARIA [passionately]: Then why not have been satisfied with it?
JAN: Happiness isn't everything; there is duty, too. Mine was to come back to my mother and my own country. [MARIA makes a protesting gesture and is about to answer. JAN checks her. Footsteps can be heard.] Someone's coming. Do please go, Maria.

MARIA: No, I can't, I can't! Not yet, anyhow!
JAN [as the footsteps approach]: Go there. [He gently pushes her toward the door at the back. The OLD MANSERVANT crosses the room without seeing MARIA, and goes out by the other door.] Now, leave at once. You see, luck is on my side.
MARIA: Please, let me stay. I promise not to speak a word, only to stay beside you till you're recognized.
JAN: No. You'd give me away.

[She turns away, then comes back and looks him in the eyes.]
MARIA: Jan, we've been married for five years.
JAN: Yes, almost five years.
MARIA [lowering her eyes]: And this will be the first night we spend apart. [He says nothing and she looks up, gazing earnestly at him.] I've always loved everything about you, even what I didn't understand, and I know that really I wouldn't wish you to be other than you are. I'm not a very troublesome wife, am I? But here I'm scared of the empty bed you are sending me to, and I'm afraid, too, of your forsaking me.
JAN: Surely you can trust my love better than that?

MARIA: I do trust it. But besides your love there are your dreams—or your duties; they're the same thing. They take you away from me so often, and at those moments it's as if you were having a holiday from me. But I can't take a holiday from you, and tonight [She presses herself to him, weeping], this night without you—oh, I shall never be able to bear it!
JAN [clasping her tightly]: But this is childishness, my dear!
MARIA: Of course it's childish. But … but we were so happy over there, and it's not my fault if the nights in this country terrify me. I don't want to be alone tonight.

JAN: But do try to understand, my dear; I've a promise to keep, and it's most important.
MARIA: What promise?
JAN: The one I made to myself on the day I understood my mother needed me.
MARIA: You've another promise to keep.
JAN: Yes?

MARIA: The promise you made me on the day you joined your life to mine.
JAN: But surely I can keep both promises. What I'm asking of you is nothing very terrible. Nor is it a mere caprice. Only one evening and one night in which to take my bearings here, get to know better these two women who are dear to me, and to secure their happiness.
MARIA [shaking her head]: A separation always means a lot to people who love each other—with the right kind of love.
JAN: But, you romantic little creature, you know quite well I love you with the right kind of love.
MARIA: No, Jan. Men do not know how real love should be. Nothing they have can ever satisfy them. They're always dreaming dreams, building up new duties, going to new countries and new homes. Women are different; they know that life is short and one must make haste to love, to share the same bed, embrace the man one loves, and dread every separation. When one loves one has no time for dreams.

JAN: But, really, dear, aren't you exaggerating? It's such a simple thing I'm doing; trying to get in touch again with my mother, to help her and bring her happiness. As for my dreams and duties, you'll have to take them as they are. Without them I'd be a mere shadow of myself; indeed you'd love me less, were I without them.
MARIA [turning her back to him abruptly]: Oh, I know you can talk me round, you can always find good reasons for anything you want to do. But I refuse to listen, I stop my ears when you start speaking in that special voice I know so well. It's the voice of your loneliness, not of love.

JAN [standing behind her]: Let's not talk of that now, Maria. All I'm asking is to be left here by myself, so that I can clear up certain things in my mind. Really it's nothing so very terrible, or extraordinary, my sleeping under the same roof as my mother. God will see to the rest and He knows, too, that in acting thus I'm not forgetting you. Only—no one can be happy in exile or estrangement. One can't remain a stranger all one's life. It is quite true that a man needs happiness, but he also needs to find his true place in the world. And I believe that coming back to my country, making happy those I love, will help me to do this. I don't look any farther.

MARIA: Surely you could do it without all these … these complications? No, Jan, I'm afraid you are going the wrong way about it.
JAN: It's the right way, because it's the only way of finding out whether or not I did well to have those dreams.
MARIA: I hope you'll find that you did well. But I have only one dream—of that country where we were happy together; and only one duty—toward you.
JAN [embracing her]: Let me have my way, dear. I'll find the things to say that will put everything right.
MARIA [in an access of emotion]: Then follow your dream, dear. Nothing matters, if only I keep your love. Usually I can't be unhappy when you hold me in your arms. I bide my time, I wait till you come down from the clouds; and then my hour begins. What makes me so unhappy today is that, though I'm quite sure of your love, I'm no less sure you will not let me stay with you. That's why men's love is so cruel, so heart-rending. They can't prevent themselves from leaving what they value most.

JAN [holding her face between his hands, and smiling]: Quite true, my dear. But come now! Look at me! I'm not in any danger, as you seem to fear. I'm carrying out my plan, and I know all will be well. You're entrusting me for just one night to my mother and my sister; there's nothing so alarming about that, is there?
MARIA [freeing herself]: Then—good-by! And may my love shield you from harm. [She goes to the door, and holds out her hands.] See how

poor I am; they're empty! You—you're going forward to adventure. I can only wait.

[After a momentary hesitation she goes out. JAN sits down. MARTHA enters.]
JAN: Good afternoon. I've come about the room.
MARTHA: I know. It's being made ready. But, first, I must enter you in our register.
[She goes out and comes back with the register.]
JAN: I must say, your servant is a very queer fellow.
MARTHA: This is the first time we've had any complaint about him. He always carries out his duties quite satisfactorily.
JAN: Oh, I wasn't complaining. I only meant that he seemed a bit of a character. Is he dumb?
MARTHA: It's not that.
JAN: Ah! then he does speak.

MARTHA: As little as possible and only when really necessary.
JAN: Anyhow, he doesn't seem to hear what one says.
MARTHA: It's not so much that he doesn't hear; only he hears badly. Now I must ask you for your name and Christian names.
JAN: Hasek, Karl.
MARTHA: Only Karl?
JAN: Yes.
MARTHA: Date and place of birth?
JAN: I'm thirty-eight.
MARTHA: Yes, but where were you born?
JAN [after a brief hesitation]: Oh, in … in Bohemia.
MARTHA: Profession?
JAN: None.

MARTHA: One has to be very rich, or very poor, to travel, when one does no work.
JAN [smiling]: I'm not very poor and, for several reasons, I'm glad it's so.
MARTHA [in a different tone]: You're a Czech, I suppose?
JAN: Certainly.

MARTHA: Your usual residence?
JAN: In Bohemia.
MARTHA: Have you come from there?
JAN: No, I've come from the south. [She looks at him questioningly.] From across the sea.
MARTHA: Ah, yes. [A short silence.] Do you go there often?
JAN: Fairly often.

MARTHA [she seems lost in thought for some moments before continuing]: And where are you going?
JAN: I've not decided. It will depend on a lot of things.
MARTHA: Then do you propose to stay here?
JAN: I don't know. It depends on what I find here.
MARTHA: That doesn't matter. Is no one here expecting you?
JAN: No, I couldn't say anyone's expecting me.
MARTHA: You have your identity papers, I suppose?
JAN: Yes, I can show you them.
MARTHA: Don't trouble. I've only got to write down whether you have an identity card or a passport.
JAN [producing a passport from his pocket]: I've a passport. Here it is. Will you have a look at it? [She takes it, but her thoughts are obviously elsewhere. She seems to be weighing it in her palm; then she hands it back.]

MARTHA: No, keep it. When you're over there, do you live near the sea?
JAN: Yes.
[She gets up, seems about to put the book away; then, changing her mind, holds it open in front of her.]
MARTHA [with sudden harshness]: Ah, I was forgetting. Have you a family?
JAN: Well, I had one once. But I left them many years ago.
MARTHA: No, I meant, are you married?

JAN: Why do you ask that? I've never had the question put to me in any other hotel.
MARTHA: It's one of the questions on the list given us by the police.

JAN: You surprise me.… Yes, I'm married. Didn't you notice my wedding ring?
MARTHA: No, I didn't. It's none of my business to look at your hands; I'm here to fill in your registration form. Your wife's address, please.
JAN: Well, she … as a matter of fact, she's stayed behind, in her country.
MARTHA: Ah! Very good. [Closes the book.] Shall I bring you a drink now, while your room's being made ready?
JAN: No, thanks. But, if you don't mind, I'll stay here. I hope I won't be in your way.
MARTHA: Why should you be in my way? This is a public room, for the use of our customers.
JAN: Yes, but someone by himself can be more of a nuisance than a crowd of people.

MARTHA [busying herself about the room]: Why? I presume you don't intend to waste my time with idle chatter. I've no use for people who come here and try to play the fool—and you should have guessed that. The people hereabouts have learned it, anyhow, and you'll very soon see for yourself that this is a quiet inn, and you'll have all the calm you want. Hardly anybody comes here.

JAN: That can't be very good for business.
MARTHA: We may lose some, but we make up for it in peace, and peace is something for which you can't pay too high a price. And don't forget that one good customer is better than a roaring trade; so that's what we are out for—the right kind of visitor.
JAN: But.… [He hesitates.] Isn't your life here a bit dull at times? Don't you and your mother find it very lonely?

MARTHA [rounding on him angrily]: I decline to answer such questions. You had no business to ask them, and you should have known it. I can see I'll have to warn you how things stand. As a guest at this inn you have the rights and privileges of a guest, but nothing more. Still, don't be afraid, you will have every attention you're entitled to. You will be very well looked after and I shall be greatly surprised if you ever complain of your reception here. But I fail to see why we should go out

of our way to give you special reasons for satisfaction. That's why your questions are out of place. It has nothing to do with you whether or not we feel lonely; just as you need not trouble yourself whether you cause us inconvenience or ask too much of us. By all means stand upon your rights as a guest. But do not go beyond them.

JAN: I beg your pardon. Nothing was further from my intention than to offend you; I only wanted to show my good will. I had a feeling that perhaps we weren't quite so remote from each other as you seem to think; no more than that.

MARTHA: I can see I must repeat what I was saying. There can be no question of offending me or not offending me. Since you seem determined to adopt an attitude that you have no right to adopt, I prefer to make things clear. I can assure you I'm not in the least vexed. Only it is in our interest, yours and mine, that we should keep our distance. If you persist in talking in a manner unbecoming a guest, there's no alternative; we must refuse to have you here. But if you will understand, as I cannot doubt you will, that two women who let you a room in their hotel are under no obligation to treat you as a friend into the bargain, all will go smoothly.

JAN: I quite agree; and it was inexcusable, my giving you an impression that I failed to understand this.
MARTHA: Oh, there's no great harm done. You are not the first who's tried to take that line. But I always made it pretty clear how we felt about such matters, and that settled it.
JAN: Yes, you certainly have made it clear, and I suppose I'd better say no more—for the present.
MARTHA: Not at all. There's nothing to prevent your talking as a guest should talk.
JAN: And how should a guest talk?

MARTHA: Most of our guests talk about all sorts of things: politics, their travels, and so forth. Never about my mother or myself—and that is as it should be. Some of them even talk about their private lives or their jobs. And that, too, is within their rights. After all, one of the services

for which we're paid is listening to our customers. But it goes without saying that the charges made for board and lodging don't oblige hotelkeepers to answer personal questions. My mother may do so sometimes, out of indifference; but I make a principle of refusing. Once you've grasped this, we shall not only be on excellent terms, but you'll discover you have many things to tell us, and that sometimes it's quite pleasant to be listened to when one's talking about oneself.

JAN: I'm afraid you won't find me much good at talking about myself. But, really, that won't be necessary. If I stay here only a short time, there will be no point in your getting to know me. And if I make a long stay, you'll have plenty of opportunity of knowing who I am, without my speaking.

MARTHA: I hope you will not bear me any malice for what I've told you. There'd be no reason for it, anyhow. I've always found it better to be quite frank, and I had to stop your talking in a tone that was bound to lead to strained relations. Really, I'm asking nothing out of the way. Until today there was nothing in common between us, and some very special reasons would be needed for our suddenly becoming intimate. And you must forgive me if I fail to see, so far, anything in the least resembling a reason of that kind.

JAN: I'd forgiven you already. Indeed, I quite agree that intimacy isn't come by at a moment's notice; one has to earn it. So, if you now consider that everything's been cleared up between us, I can only say I'm very glad of it.

[The MOTHER enters.]
THE MOTHER: Good afternoon, sir. Your room is ready now.
JAN: Thanks very much, madame.
[The MOTHER sits down.]
THE MOTHER [to MARTHA]: Have you filled in the form?
MARTHA: Yes, I've done that.
THE MOTHER: May I have a look? You must excuse me, sir, but the police here are very strict.... Yes, I see my daughter's not put down

whether you've come here on business, or for reasons of health, or as a tourist.
JAN: Well, let's say as a tourist.

THE MOTHER: To see the monastery, no doubt? It's very highly thought of, I'm told.
JAN: Yes, indeed; I've heard a lot about it. Also I wanted to see this place again. It has very pleasant memories for me.
THE MOTHER: Did you ever live here?
JAN: No, but a long time ago I happened to come this way, and I've never forgotten that visit.
THE MOTHER: Still, this is just an ordinary little country town.
JAN: That's so. But I'm much attached to it. In fact, ever since I came here I've been feeling almost at home.
THE MOTHER: Will you be staying long?

JAN: Really, I don't know. I imagine that surprises you, but it's the truth. I don't know. To stay in a place you need to have reasons—friendships, the presence of people you are fond of. Otherwise there'd be no point in staying there rather than elsewhere. And since it's hard to know if one will be made welcome, it's natural for me to be uncertain about my plans.
THE MOTHER: That sounds a little vague, if I may say so.

JAN: I know, but I can't express myself better, I'm afraid.
THE MOTHER: Anyhow, I expect you'll soon have had enough of this place.
JAN: No, I've a faithful heart, and I soon build up memories and attachments, if I'm given a chance.
MARTHA [impatiently]: A faithful heart, indeed! Hearts count for mighty little here!

JAN [seeming not to have heard her; to the MOTHER]: You seem terribly disillusioned. Have you been living long in this hotel?
THE MOTHER: For years and years. So many years that I have quite forgotten when it began and the woman I was then. This girl is my daughter. She's kept beside me all through those years, and probably

that's why I know she is my daughter. Otherwise I might have forgotten her, too.
MARTHA: Really, mother! You've no reason to tell him all that.
THE MOTHER: You're right, Martha.

JAN [hastily]: Please don't say any more. But how well I understand your feelings, madame; they're what one comes to at the end of a long, hard-working life. Yet perhaps it might have been quite different if you'd been helped, as every woman should be helped, and given the support of a man's arm.
THE MOTHER: Oh, once upon a time I had it—but there was too much work to do. My husband and I, together, could hardly cope with it. We didn't even have time to think of each other; I believe I had forgotten him even before he died.

JAN: That, too, I can understand. But [He hesitates for a moment.]—perhaps if a son had been here to give you a helping hand, you wouldn't have forgotten him?
MARTHA: Mother, you know we've a lot of work to do.

THE MOTHER: A son? Oh, I'm too old, too old! Old women forget to love even their sons. Hearts wear out, sir.
JAN: That's so. But he, I'm sure, doesn't forget.

MARTHA [standing between them; peremptorily]: If a son came here, he'd find exactly what an ordinary guest can count on: amiable indifference, no more and no less. All the men we have had here received that, and it satisfied them. They paid for their rooms and were given a key. They didn't talk about their hearts. [A short silence.] That simplified our work.
THE MOTHER: Don't talk about that.

JAN [reflectively]: Did they stay here long?
MARTHA: Some of them, a very long time. We did all that was needed for them to stay. Those who weren't so well off left after the first night. We didn't do anything for them.

JAN: I've plenty of money and I propose to stay some little time in this hotel—if you're willing to keep me. I forgot to mention that I can pay you in advance.
THE MOTHER: Oh, we never ask people to do that.

MARTHA: If you are rich, so much the better. But no more talk about your heart, please. We can do nothing about that. In fact your way of speaking got so much on my nerves that I very nearly asked you to go. Take your key and make yourself comfortable in your room. But remember you are in a house where the heart isn't catered to. Too many bleak years have passed over this little spot of Central Europe, and they've drained all the warmth out of this house. They have killed any desire for friendliness, and, let me repeat it, you won't find anything in the least like intimacy here. You will get what the few travelers who lodge with us are used to getting and it has nothing to do with sentiment. So take your key and bear this well in mind: we're accepting you as a guest, in our quiet way, for interested motives, and if we keep you it will be in our quiet way, for interested motives.
[JAN takes the key and watches her go out.]

THE MOTHER: Don't pay too much attention to what she says. But it's a fact there's some things she never could bear talking about. [She starts to rise. He comes forward to help her.] Don't trouble, my son; I'm not a cripple yet. Look at my hands; they're still quite strong. Strong enough to hold up a man's legs. [A short silence. He is gazing at the key.] Is it what I just said that you're thinking about?

JAN: No. I'm sorry, I hardly heard it. But, tell me, why did you say "my son" just now?
THE MOTHER: Oh, I shouldn't have done that, sir. I didn't mean to take liberties. It was just … a manner of speaking.
JAN: I understand. Now I'll have a look at my room.
THE MOTHER: Certainly, sir. Our old manservant is waiting for you in the passage. [He gazes at her, on the brink of speaking.] Is there anything you want?
JAN [hesitantly]: Well … no, madame. Except that I'd like to thank you for your welcome.

[He goes out. Left to herself, the MOTHER sits down again, lays her hands on the table, and contemplates them.]

THE MOTHER: That was a queer thing I did just now, talking about my hands. Still, if he had really looked at them, perhaps he'd have guessed what he refused to understand in Martha's words. But why must this man be so much bent on dying, and I so little on killing? If only he'd leave—then I could have another long night's rest! I'm too old. Too old to lock my hands again on a man's ankles and feel the body swaying, swaying, all the way down to the river. Too old for that last effort when we launch him into the water. It will leave me gasping for breath, and every muscle aching, with my arms hanging limp, without even the strength to wipe off the drops that splash up when the sleeping body plunges into the eddies. Too old, too old!… Well, well, since I must, I must! He is the perfect victim and it's for me to give him the sleep I wanted for my own night. And so …
[MARTHA enters abruptly.]

MARTHA: There you are, daydreaming again! And yet—we've much to do.
THE MOTHER: I was thinking of that man. No, really I was thinking of myself.
MARTHA: You'd do better to think about tomorrow. What good was it, not looking at that man, if you can't keep your thoughts off him? You said yourself, it's easier to kill what one doesn't know. Do be sensible.

THE MOTHER: That was one of your father's favorite words, I remember. But I'd like to feel sure this is the last time we'll have to be … sensible. It's odd. When your father used that word it was to drive away the fear of being found out, but when you tell me to be sensible it's only to quench the little spark of goodness that was kindling in my heart.
MARTHA: What you call a spark of goodness is merely sleepiness. But, only postpone your languor till tomorrow, and then you'll be able to take things easy for the rest of your days.
THE MOTHER: You're right, I know. But why should chance have sent us a victim who is so … so unsuitable?

MARTHA: Chance doesn't enter into it. But I admit this traveler is really too confiding, his innocence is too much of a good thing. What would the world come to if condemned men started unbosoming their sentimental troubles to the hangman? It's unsound in principle. But it aggravates me, too, and when I'm dealing with him, I'll bring to bear some of the anger I always feel at the stupidity of men.

THE MOTHER: That, too, is unsound. In the past we brought neither anger nor pity to our task; only the indifference it needed. But tonight I am tired, and you, I see, are angered. Are we really obliged to go through with it under these conditions, and to override everything for the sake of a little more money?

MARTHA: Not for money, but for a home beside the sea, and forgetfulness of this hateful country. You may be tired of living, but I, too, am tired, tired to death of these narrow horizons. I feel I couldn't endure another month here. Both of us are sick of this inn and everything to do with it. You, who are old, want no more than to shut your eyes and to forget. But I can still feel in my heart some of the absurd desires I had when I was twenty, and I want to act in such a way as to have done with them forever—even if, for that, we must go a little further with the life we want to leave. And really it's your duty to help me; it was you who brought me into the world in a land of clouds and mist, instead of a land of sunshine.
THE MOTHER: Martha, I almost wonder if it wouldn't be better for me to be forgotten, as I've been forgotten by your brother, than to hear you speaking to me in that tone, the tone of an accuser.

MARTHA: You know well I did not mean to wound you. [A short silence; then passionately] What could I do without you? What would become of me if you were far away? I, anyhow, could never, never forget you, and if at times the strain of this life we lead makes me fail in the respect I owe you, I beg you, mother, to forgive me.
THE MOTHER: You are a good daughter, Martha, and I can well believe that an old woman is sometimes hard to understand. But, I feel this is

the moment to tell you what I've been trying all this time to say: "Not tonight."

MARTHA: What! Are we to wait till tomorrow? You know quite well you've never had such an idea before; and it would never do for him to have time to meet people here. No, we must act while we have him to ourselves.

THE MOTHER: Perhaps. I don't know. But not tonight. Let him be for this one night. It will give us a reprieve. And perhaps it's through him we shall save ourselves.
MARTHA: Save ourselves? Why should we want to do that, and what an absurd thing to say! All you can hope for is to gain by what you do tonight the right to sleep your fill, once it's over.
THE MOTHER: That's what I meant by "saving ourselves." To retain the hope of sleep.

MARTHA: Good! Then I swear it's in our hands to work out our salvation. Mother, we must have done with indecision. Tonight it shall be; or not at all.

CURTAIN

ACT II

A bedroom at the inn. Dusk is falling. JAN is gazing out of the window.

JAN: Maria was right. This evening hour tells on the nerves. [A short pause.] I wonder what her thoughts are, what she is up to, in that other hotel bedroom. I picture her huddled up in a chair; she's not crying, but her heart's like ice. Over there the nightfall brought a promise of happiness. But here.... [Looks round the room.] Nonsense! I've no reason for feeling this uneasiness. When a man starts something, he has no business to look back. It's in this room everything will be settled. [A sharp rap on the door. MARTHA comes in.]

MARTHA: I hope I'm not disturbing you. I only wanted to change the towels and fill your jug.
JAN: Oh, I thought it had been done.

MARTHA: No. The old man who works for us sometimes forgets things like that.
JAN: They're only details, anyhow.... But I hardly dare to tell you that you're not disturbing me.
MARTHA: Why?

JAN: I'm not sure that's allowed for in our … our agreement.
MARTHA: You see! You can't answer like any ordinary person, even when you want to make things easy.
JAN [smiling]: Sorry. I shall have to train myself. Only you must give me a little time.
MARTHA [busy with the room]: Yes, that's the whole point. [He turns and looks out of the window. She studies him. His back is to her. She continues speaking as she works.] I'm sorry, sir, that this room is not as comfortable as you might wish.

JAN: It's spotlessly clean, and that is something one appreciates. Unless I'm much mistaken, you had it done up not very long ago.
MARTHA: Quite true. But how can you tell that?
JAN: Oh, by some details.

MARTHA: Anyhow, many of our guests grumble because there isn't running water, and I can hardly blame them. Also, there should be a lamp above the bed; for some time we've been meaning to have one installed. It must be rather a nuisance for people who're used to reading in bed to have to get up to switch the light off.
JAN [turning toward her]: That's so. I hadn't noticed. Still it's not a very serious drawback.

MARTHA: It's kind of you to take it like that. I am glad the defects of our hotel don't trouble you; in fact you seem to notice them less than we do. I've known people whom they'd have been enough to drive away.

JAN: I hope you'll let me make a remark that goes beyond our pact—and say that you're a very surprising person. One certainly doesn't expect hotelkeepers to go out of their way to point out defects in the accommodation. Really it almost looks as if you wanted to make me leave.

MARTHA: That wasn't quite what I had in mind. [Coming to a sudden decision.] But it's a fact that mother and I are rather reluctant to have you here.
JAN: I must say I noticed that you weren't doing much to keep me. Still, I can't imagine why. You have no reason to doubt my solvency, and I hardly think I give the impression of someone with a crime on his conscience.

MARTHA: Certainly not. If you must know, not only don't you look in the least like a criminal, but you produce the opposite effect—of complete innocence. Our reasons were quite different from what you think. We intend to leave this hotel shortly and we've been meaning every day to close down, so as to start preparing for the move. That had no difficulties, as we get so few visitors. But we could never quite make up our minds. It's your coming that has made us realize how thoroughly we'd abandoned any idea of going on with the business.
JAN: Am I to understand you definitely want to see me go?

MARTHA: As I said, we can't decide; I, especially, can't decide. Actually everything depends on me and I haven't made up my mind yet, one way or the other.
JAN: Please remember this; I don't want to be a burden on you and I shall behave exactly as you wish. However, I'd like to say that it will suit me if I can stay here for one or two days. I have some problems to thrash out before moving on, and I counted on finding here the peace and quietness I need.
MARTHA: I quite understand your desire, I assure you, and, if you like, I'll reconsider the matter. [A short silence. She takes some steps hesitantly toward the door.] Am I right in thinking you'll go back to the country from which you've come?

JAN: Yes—if necessary.
MARTHA: It's a pretty country, isn't it?
JAN [looking out of the window]: Yes, a very pretty country.
MARTHA: Is it true that there are long stretches of the coast where you never meet a soul?
JAN: Quire true. There's nothing to remind you that men exist. Sometimes at dawn you find the traces of birds' feet on the sand. Those are the only signs of life. And in the evenings …
MARTHA [softly]: Yes? What are the evenings like?
JAN: Marvelous, indescribable! Yes, it's a lovely country.

MARTHA [in a tone she has not used before]: I've thought of it, often and often. Travelers have told me things, and I've read what I could. And often, in the harsh, bleak spring we have here, I dream of the sea and the flowers over there. [After a short silence, in a low, pensive voice] And what I picture makes me blind to everything around me. [After gazing at her thoughtfully for some moments, JAN sits down facing her.]

JAN: I can understand that. Spring over there grips you by the throat and flowers burst into bloom by thousands, above the white walls. If you roamed the hills that overlook my town for only an hour or so, you'd bring back in your clothes a sweet, honeyed smell of yellow roses.
[MARTHA, too, sits down.]

MARTHA: How wonderful that must be! What we call spring here is one rose and a couple of buds struggling to keep alive in the monastery garden. [Scornfully] And that's enough to stir the hearts of the men in this part of the world. Their hearts are as stingy as that rose tree. A breath of richer air would wilt them; they have the springtime they deserve.
JAN: You're not quite fair; you have the autumn, too.
MARTHA: What's the autumn?

JAN: A second spring when every leaf's a flower. [He looks at her keenly.] Perhaps it's the same thing with some hearts; perhaps they'd blossom if you helped them with your patience.
MARTHA: I've no patience for this dreary Europe, where autumn has the face of spring and the spring smells of poverty. No, I prefer to picture those other lands over which summer breaks in flame, where the winter rains flood the cities, and where … things are what they are. [A short silence. JAN gazes at her with growing interest. She notices this and rises abruptly from the chair.] Why are you looking at me like that?

JAN: Sorry. But since we seem to have dropped our convention for the present, I don't see why I shouldn't tell you. It strikes me that, for the first time, you've been talking to me with—shall I say?—some human feeling.

MARTHA [violently]: Don't be too sure of that. And even if I have been, you've no cause for rejoicing. What you call human feeling is not the nicest part of me. What is human in me is what I desire, and to get what I desire, I'd stick at nothing, I'd sweep away every obstacle on my path.
JAN: I can understand that sort of violence. And I have no cause to let it frighten me, as I'm not an obstacle on your path, and I've no motive for opposing your desires.
MARTHA: Certainly you have no reason to oppose them. But it's equally true you have no reason for furthering them, and, in some cases, that might bring things to a head.
JAN: Why be so sure I have no reason for furthering them?
MARTHA: Common sense tells me that; also my wish to keep you outside my plans.
JAN: Ah! That means, I take it, that we've returned to our conventions?

MARTHA: Yes, and we did wrong to depart from them—you can see that for yourself. Now it remains for me to thank you for having spoken of that country where you lived, and I must excuse myself for having, perhaps, wasted your time. [She is on her way to the door.] Still, let me tell you, the time was not wholly wasted. Our talk roused desires in me that were beginning to fall asleep. If you're really bent on staying here

you've won your case without knowing it. When I entered this room I had almost decided to ask you to leave, but, as you see, you've played on my human feelings; now I hope you'll stay. And so my longing for the sea and sunshine will be the gainer by it.

[He gazes at her without speaking for a moment.]
JAN [thoughtfully]: You have a very strange way of talking. Still, if I may, and if your mother, too, has no objection, I'll stay on.
MARTHA: My mother's desires are weaker than mine; that's only natural. She doesn't think enough about the sea and those lonely beaches to make her realize you have got to stay. So she hasn't the same motives for wanting to keep you. But, at the same time, she hasn't any really strong motive for opposing me; and that will settle it.

JAN: So, if I've not misunderstood, one of you will let me stay for the sake of money, and the other through indifference.
MARTHA: What more can a traveler expect? But there's truth in what you said.
[She opens the door.]
JAN: Well, I suppose I should be glad of that. Still perhaps you'll let me say that everything here strikes me as very strange; the people and their way of speaking. Really this is a queer house.
MARTHA: Perhaps that's only because you are behaving queerly in it.
[She goes out.]

JAN [looking toward the door]: Maybe she's right. I wonder, though. [Goes to the bed and sits down.] Really the one wish that girl has given me is the wish to leave at once, to return to Maria and our happiness together. I've been behaving stupidly. What business have I to be here?… No, I have a reason, a good reason; I owe a duty to my mother and sister. I've neglected them too long. It's up to me to do something for them, to atone for my neglect. It's not enough in such cases to declare oneself: "It's I." One has to make oneself loved, as well. [He rises.] Yes, this is the room in which all will be decided. A wretchedly cold room, by the way. I can't recognize anything in it. Everything's been changed, and now it might be a bedroom in any one of those commercial hotels where men by themselves stay a night in passing.

I've had experience of them, and I always used to think there was something they had to say—something like an answer or a message. Perhaps I shall get the answer here, tonight. [He looks out of the window.] Clouding up, I see. It's always like this in a hotel bedroom; the evenings are depressing for a lonely man. I can feel it again, that vague uneasiness I used to feel in the old days—here, in the hollow of my chest—like a raw place that the least movement irritates.... And I know what it is. It's fear, fear of the eternal loneliness, fear that there is no answer. And who could there be to answer in a hotel bedroom? [He has moved to the bell; after some hesitation he puts his finger on the bell push. For a while there is silence; then one hears approaching footsteps, a knock. The door opens. The OLD MANSERVANT is standing on the threshold. He neither moves nor speaks.] It's nothing. Sorry to have disturbed you. I only wanted to see if the bell was working and anyone would answer. [The old man stares at him, then closes the door. Receding footsteps.] The bell works, but he doesn't speak. That's no answer. [He looks at the sky.] The clouds are banking up still. A solid mass of darkness that will burst and fall upon the earth. What should I do? Which is right: Maria or my dreams? [Two knocks on the door. MARTHA enters with a tray.] What's this?

MARTHA: The tea you ordered.
JAN: But—I didn't order anything.

MARTHA: Oh? The old man must have heard wrong. He often understands badly. Still, as the tea is here, I suppose you'll have it? [She puts the tray on the table. JAN makes a vague gesture.] It won't go on the bill.
JAN: No, it isn't that. But I'm glad you brought me some tea. Very kind of you.
MARTHA: Please don't mention it. What we do is in our interests.

JAN: I can see you're determined not to leave me any illusions! But frankly I don't see where your interest comes in, in this case.
MARTHA: It does, I assure you. Sometimes a cup of tea's enough to keep our guests here.
[She goes out. JAN picks up the cup, stares at it, puts it down again.]

JAN: So the prodigal son's feast is continuing. First, a glass of beer—but in exchange for my money; then a cup of tea—because it encourages the visitor to stay on. But I'm to blame, too; I cannot strike the right note. When I'm confronted by that girl's almost brutal frankness, I search in vain for the words that would put things right between us. Of course, her part is simpler; it's easier to find words for a rebuff than those which reconcile. [He picks up the cup, is silent for some moments, then continues in a low, tense voice] O God, give me the power to find the right words, or else make me abandon this vain attempt and return to Maria's love. And then give me the strength, once I have chosen, to abide by my choice. [He raises the cup to his lips.] The feast of the returning prodigal. The least I can do is to do it honor; and so I shall have played my part until I leave this place. [He drinks. Loud knocking at the door.] Who's there?
[The door opens. The MOTHER enters.]

THE MOTHER: I'm sorry to disturb you, sir, but my daughter tells me she brought you some tea.
JAN: There it is.
THE MOTHER: Have you drunk it?
JAN: Yes. Why do you ask?
THE MOTHER: Excuse me, I've come to fetch the tray.
JAN [smiling]: I'm sorry this cup of tea is causing so much trouble.
THE MOTHER: It isn't quite that. But, as a matter of fact, that tea was not meant for you.
JAN: Ah, there's the explanation. It was brought without my having ordered it.

THE MOTHER [wearily]: Yes, that's it. It would have been better if.… Anyhow that hasn't any great importance, whether you've drunk it or not.
JAN: [in a puzzled tone]: I'm exceedingly sorry, I assure you, but your daughter insisted on leaving it, and I never imagined.…
THE MOTHER: I'm sorry, too. But please don't excuse yourself. It was just a mistake.
[She puts the cup and saucer on the tray and moves toward the door.]

JAN: Madame!
THE MOTHER: Yes?

JAN: I must apologize again. I've just come to a decision. I think I'll leave this evening, after dinner. Naturally I'll pay for the room, for the night. [She gazes at him in silence.] I quite understand your looking surprised. But please don't imagine you are in any way responsible for my sudden change of plan. I have a great regard for you, a very great regard. But, to be candid, I don't feel at ease here, and I'd rather not stay the night.

THE MOTHER: That's quite all right, sir. Of course you can do exactly as you wish. Still, perhaps you may change your mind between now and dinnertime. Sometimes one yields to a passing impression, but later on things settle themselves and one gets used to new conditions.

JAN: I doubt it, madame. However, I would not like you to believe I am leaving because I'm dissatisfied with you. On the contrary, I am very grateful to you for welcoming me as you have done. For, I must say, I seemed to notice you had a certain … friendliness toward me.

THE MOTHER: That was only natural, sir, and I'm sure you understand I had no personal reasons for showing any ill will.
JAN [with restrained emotion]: That may be so—I hope so. But, if I told you that, it is because I want us to part on good terms. Later on, perhaps, I'll come back. In fact I'm sure I shall. And then things will certainly go better, and I've no doubt we shall find pleasure in meeting again. But just now I feel that I have made a mistake, I have no business being here. In a word—though this may strike you as an odd way of putting it—I have a feeling that this house isn't for me.

THE MOTHER: I know what you mean, sir. But usually one feels that sort of thing immediately; you have been rather slow, it seems to me, to discover it.
JAN: I agree. But just now I'm rather at sea. I've come to Europe on some urgent business, and it's always a bit disconcerting, returning to a country after years and years of absence. I trust you understand what I mean.

THE MOTHER: Yes, I do understand, and I'd have liked things to turn out as you wished. But I think that, as far as we're concerned, there's nothing more we can do about it.
JAN: So it seems, I admit. Still, really, one never can be sure.
THE MOTHER: Anyhow, I think we have done everything needed to have you stay with us.
JAN: Indeed you have, and I've nothing to complain of. The truth is that you are the first people I have met since my return, so it's natural my first taste of the difficulties ahead should come when I'm with you. Obviously I alone am to blame for this; I haven't found my feet yet.

THE MOTHER: It's often like that in life; one makes a bad start, and nobody can do anything about it. In a way it's quite true that what has happened vexes me as well. But I tell myself that, after all, I've no reason to attach importance to it.
JAN: Well, it's something that you share my discomfort and that you try to understand me. I can hardly tell you how touched I am by your attitude, and how much I appreciate it. [He stretches his hand toward her.] Really I …
THE MOTHER: Oh, what you call my attitude's quite natural, really. It's our duty to make ourselves agreeable to our guests.

JAN [in a disappointed tone]: That's so. [A short silence.] So it comes to this: all I owe you is an apology and, if you think fit, some compensation. [He draws his hand over his forehead. He seems exhausted and is speaking less easily.] You may have made preparations, gone to some expense; so it's only fair.…
THE MOTHER: The only preparations we've made are those we always make in such cases. And I can assure you that you owe us no compensation. It was not on our account that I was regretting your indecision, but on yours.
JAN [leaning against the table]: Oh, that doesn't matter. The great thing is that we understand each other and I won't leave you with too bad an impression of myself. Personally I shall not forget this house—be sure of that—and I hope that when I return I'll be in a better mood to appreciate it. [She goes to the door without speaking.] Madame! [She

turns. He speaks with some difficulty, but ends more easily than he began.] I'd like.... Excuse me, but my journey's tired me. [Sits on the bed.] I'd like anyhow to thank you for the tea, and for the welcome you have given me. And I'd also like you to know that I won't leave this house feeling like a stranger.
THE MOTHER: Really, sir, being thanked for something due to a mistake is always embarrassing.

[She goes out. JAN watches her, makes as if to move, but one can see he is feeling limp. Then, leaning his elbow on the pillow, he seems to abandon himself to his growing lethargy.]
JAN: Yes, I must handle it quite simply, quite straight forwardly. Tomorrow I'll come here with Maria and I shall say "It's I." There's nothing to prevent my making them happy. Maria was right; I can see that now. [He sighs and leans back on the pillow.] I don't like the feel of this evening; everything seems so far away. [He stretches himself full-length on the bed, murmuring almost inaudibly.] Yes, or no? [After tossing about a little, JAN falls asleep. The room is in almost complete darkness. A long silence. The door opens. The two women enter with a lamp.]

MARTHA [after holding the lamp above the sleeping man; in a whisper]: All's well.
THE MOTHER [in a low voice at first, but gradually raising it]: No, Martha! I dislike having my hand forced like this. I'm being dragged into this act; you began it so that I'd have no chance of drawing back. I don't like your way of riding roughshod over my reluctance.

MARTHA: It is a way that simplifies everything. If you had given me any clear reason for your reluctance, I'd have been bound to consider it. But as you couldn't make up your mind, it was right for me to help you by taking the first step.

THE MOTHER: I know, of course, that it does not greatly matter; this man or some other, today or some later day, tonight or tomorrow—it had to come to that. None the less, I don't feel pleased about it.

MARTHA: Come, mother! Think of tomorrow instead, and let's get busy. Our freedom will begin when this night ends.
[She unbuttons JAN'S coat, extracts his wallet, and counts the notes.]
THE MOTHER: How soundly he's sleeping!
MARTHA: He's sleeping as they all slept.… Now let's start.

THE MOTHER: Wait a little, please. Isn't it strange how helpless and defenseless men look when they're asleep?
MARTHA: It's an attitude they assume. They always wake up eventually.…
THE MOTHER [meditatively]: No, men aren't quite so remarkable as you seem to think. But of course you, Martha, don't know what I mean.
MARTHA: No, mother, I don't. But I do know that we are wasting time.
THE MOTHER [with a sort of weary irony]: Oh, there's no such hurry. On the contrary, this is the moment we can relax, now that the main thing's done. Why work yourself up like this? Is it really worth while?

MARTHA: Nothing's worth while, the moment one talks about it. It's better to get on with the work in hand and ask no questions of oneself.
THE MOTHER [calmly]: Let's sit down, Martha.
MARTHA: Here? Beside him?
THE MOTHER: Certainly. Why not? He has entered on a sleep that will take him far, and it's not likely he will wake up and inquire what we're doing here. As for the rest of the world—it stops short at that closed door. Why shouldn't we enjoy this little breathing space in peace?
MARTHA: You're joking, and it's my turn to tell you I don't appreciate your way of talking.

THE MOTHER: You're wrong. I don't feel in the least like joking. I'm merely showing calmness, while you are letting your nerves run wild. No, Martha, sit down [She gives a curious laugh] and look at that man who's even more innocent in sleep than in his talk. He, anyhow, is through with the world. From now on, everything will be easy for him. He will pass from a dreamful sleep into dreamless sleep. And what for others is a cruel wrench will be for him no more than a protracted rest.

MARTHA: Innocence has the sleep that innocence deserves. And this man, anyhow, I had no reason for hating. So I'm glad he is being spared any pain. But I've no reason, either, for looking at him, and I think it a bad idea of yours, staring like that a man whom presently you'll have to carry.

THE MOTHER [shaking her head; in a low voice]: When the hour comes we shall carry him. But we still have time in hand and perhaps it won't be such a bad idea—for him at any rate—if we look at him attentively. For it's not too late yet; sleep isn't death. Yes, Martha, look at him. He is living through a moment when he has no say in his fate; when his hopes of life are made over to indifferent hands. Let these hands stay as they are, folded in my lap, until the dawn, and without his knowing anything, he'll have entered on a new lease of life. But if they move toward him and form a hard ring round his ankles, he will lie in an unremembered grave for ever.

MARTHA [rising brusquely]: Mother, you're forgetting that all nights end, and we have much to do. First, we must look through the papers in his pockets and carry him downstairs. Then we'll have to put out all the lights and keep watch in the doorway as long as need be.

THE MOTHER: Yes, there is much for us to do, and that is where we are in a different case from his; he, at least, is free now of the burden of his life. He has done with the anxiety of making decisions, with thoughts of work that must be done, with strain and stress. A cross is lifted from his shoulders; the cross of that inner life which allows of no repose, no weakness, no relaxing. At this moment he exacts nothing of himself, and old and tired as I am, I almost think that there lies happiness.

MARTHA: We've no time for wondering where happiness lies. When I have kept watch as long as need be, there will still be much to do. We shall have to go down to the river and make sure some drunk man isn't sleeping on the bank. Then we'll have to carry him down there as quickly as we can—and you know the effort that means. We shall have to do it in several stages and, once we are on the bank, swing him out as far as possible into midstream. And let me remind you again that nights don't last for ever.

THE MOTHER: Yes, all that lies before us, and the mere thought of it makes me tired, with a tiredness that has lasted so long that my old blood can't cope with it. And, meanwhile, this man has no suspicion; he is enjoying his repose. If we let him wake he'll have to start life again, and from what I've seen of him, I know he is much like other men and cannot live in peace. Perhaps that is why we must take him there and hand him over to the mercy of the dark water. [She sighs.] But it's a sad thing so much effort should be needed to rid a man of his follies and put him in the way of peace.

MARTHA: I can only think, mother, that your wits are wandering. I repeat, we have much to do. Once he's thrown in, we shall have to efface the marks on the riverbank, blur our footsteps on the path, destroy his clothes and baggage—make him vanish from the face of the earth, in fact. Time's passing and soon it will be too late to carry all this out with the composure that it needs. Really I cannot understand what has come over you, to be sitting at that man's bedside and staring at him, though you can hardly see him, and persisting in this absurd, useless talk.
THE MOTHER: Tell me, Martha. Did you know that he meant to leave this evening?
MARTHA: No, I didn't. But if I'd known, it wouldn't have changed anything, once I had made up my mind.
THE MOTHER: He told me that just now, and I didn't know how to answer him.

MARTHA: Ah! So you had a talk with him?
THE MOTHER: Yes, when you said you'd brought his tea, I came here. I'd have stopped him from drinking it, if I had been in time. As it was, once I knew the beginning had been made, I felt we'd better let things take their course; really it hadn't much importance.

MARTHA: If you still feel like that, there's no reason for dawdling here. So please get up from that chair and help me finish off this business—which is getting on my nerves.

THE MOTHER [rising]: Yes, I suppose I'll end by helping you. Only you might allow a few minutes more to an old woman whose blood doesn't flow as fast as yours. You've been on the rush ever since this morning, and you expect me to keep pace with you! Even that man there couldn't manage it; before he had framed the thought of leaving, he'd drunk the tea you gave him.
MARTHA: If you must know, it was he who made up my mind for me. You talked me into sharing your reluctance. But then he started telling me about those countries where I've always longed to go, and by working on my feelings hardened my heart against him. Thus innocence is rewarded.
THE MOTHER: And yet he'd come to understand. He said he felt that this house was not his home.

MARTHA [violently and impatiently]: Of course it is not his home. For that matter it is nobody's home. No one will ever find warmth or comfort or contentment in this house. Had he realized that sooner, he'd have been spared, and spared us, too. He would have spared our having to teach him that this room is made for sleeping in, and this world for dying in. Come, mother, and for the sake of the God you sometimes call on, let's have done with it.
[The MOTHER takes a step toward the bed.]
THE MOTHER: Very well, Martha, we'll begin. But I have a feeling that tomorrow's dawn will never come.

CURTAIN

ACT III

The public room. The MOTHER, MARTHA and the MANSERVANT are on the stage. The old man is sweeping and tidying up the room; MARTHA, standing behind the bar, is drawing back her hair. The MOTHER is walking toward the door.

MARTHA: Well, you see that dawn has come and we've gotten through the night without mishap.

THE MOTHER: Yes. And tomorrow I'll be thinking it's a good thing to have done with it. But, just now, all I feel is that I'm dead tired and my heart's dried up within me. Ah, it was a hard night indeed!

MARTHA: But this morning is the first for years when I breathe freely. Never did a killing cost me less. I almost seem to hear the waves already, and I feel like crying out for joy.
THE MOTHER: So much the better, Martha. So much the better. As for me, I feel so old this morning that I can't share anything with you. But perhaps tomorrow I'll be in a better way.
MARTHA: Yes, and everything will, I hope, be better. But do please stop complaining and give me a chance of relishing my new-found happiness. I'm like a young girl again this morning; I feel my blood flowing warm, and I want to run about and sing!… Oh, mother, may I ask you something?… [Pauses.]

THE MOTHER: What's come over you, Martha? You're like a different person.
MARTHA: Mother.… [Hesitates; then in a rush.] Tell me, am I still pretty?
THE MOTHER: Yes, I think you're looking really pretty this morning. Some acts seem to have a good effect on you.

MARTHA: Oh, no! Those acts you mean lie on me so lightly. But this morning I feel as if I'd been born again, to a new life; at last I'm going to a country where I shall be happy.
THE MOTHER: No doubt, no doubt. And, once I've got over my tiredness, I, too, shall breathe freely. Even now, it makes up for all those sleepless nights of ours, to know they'll have brought you happiness. But this morning I must rest; all I'm conscious of is that the night has been a hard one.

MARTHA: What does last night matter? Today is a great day. [To the servant.] Keep your eyes open when you're sweeping; we dropped some of his papers on the way out and I couldn't stop to pick them up. They're on the floor somewhere. [The MOTHER leaves the room. Sweeping under a table, the old man comes on JAN'S passport, opens

it, runs his eyes over it, and hands it, open, to MARTHA.] I don't need to see it. Put it with the other things; we'll burn them all together. [The old man goes on holding the passport to MARTHA. She takes it.] What is it? [The old man goes out. MARTHA reads the passport slowly, without showing any emotion; then calls in a voice that sounds completely calm.] Mother!

THE MOTHER [from the next room]: What do you want now?
MARTHA: Come here. [The MOTHER returns. MARTHA gives her the passport.] Read!
THE MOTHER: You know quite well my eyes are tired.
MARTHA: Read!
[The MOTHER takes the passport, sits at the table, spreads it open, and reads. For a long while she stares at the page in front of her.]
THE MOTHER [in a toneless voice]: Yes, I always knew it would turn out like this one day—and that would be the end. The end of all!
MARTHA [coming from behind the bar and standing in front of it]: Mother!

THE MOTHER: No, Martha, let me have my way; I've lived quite long enough. I have lived many years more than my son. That isn't as it should be. Now I can go and join him at the bottom of the river, where the weeds already have covered up his face.
MARTHA: Mother! Surely you won't leave me alone?

THE MOTHER: You have been a great help to me, Martha, and I am sorry to leave you. If such words have any meaning left for us, I can honestly say you were a good daughter, in your fashion. You have always shown me the respect you owed me. But now I am very weary; my old heart, which seemed indifferent to everything, has learned again today what grief means, and I'm not young enough to come to terms with it. In any case, when a mother is no longer capable of recognizing her own son, it's clear her role on earth is ended.

MARTHA: No. Not if her daughter's happiness remains to be ensured. And, no less than my heart, my hopes are shattered when I hear you

speaking in this new, amazing way—you who had taught me to respect nothing.
THE MOTHER [in the same listless tone]: It only proves that in a world where everything can be denied, there are forces undeniable; and on this earth where nothing's sure we have our certainties. [Bitterly] And a mother's love for her son is now my certainty.

MARTHA: So you are not sure that a mother can love her daughter?
THE MOTHER: It's not now I'd want to wound you, Martha, but love for a daughter can never be the same thing. It strikes less deep. And how could I now live without my son's love?
MARTHA: A wonderful love—that forgot you utterly for twenty years!

THE MOTHER: Yes, it was a wonderful love that outlasted twenty years of silence. Say what you will, that love is wonderful enough for me—since I can't live without it. [She rises from her chair.]

MARTHA: It's not possible you can talk like that, without any thought for your daughter, without the least stirring of revolt!
THE MOTHER: Hard as it is on you, it is possible. I have no thought for anything; still less any feeling of revolt. No doubt this is my punishment, and for all murderers a time comes when, like me, they are dried up within, sterile, with nothing left to live for. That's why society gets rid of them; they're good for nothing.

MARTHA: I can't bear to hear you talking like that, about crime and punishment; it's … despicable!
THE MOTHER: I'm not troubling to pick my words; I've ceased to have any preference. But it's true that by one act I have ruined everything. I have lost my freedom and my hell has begun.
MARTHA [going up to her mother; fiercely]: You never spoke like that before. During all these years you've stood beside me, and your hands never flinched from gripping the legs of those who were to die. A lot you thought of hell or freedom in those days! It never occurred to you that you had no right to live, and you went on—doing as you did. What change can your son have brought to that?

THE MOTHER: I went on with it; that's true. But what I lived through then, I lived through by dint of habit, which is not so very different from death. An experience of grief was enough to change all that, and my son's coming has brought that change. [MARTHA makes a gesture and seems about to speak.] Oh, I know, Martha, that doesn't make sense. What has a criminal to do with grief? But I'd have you notice that my grief is not the wild grief that mothers feel; I haven't raised my voice as yet. It's no more than the pain of feeling love rekindle in my heart; and yet it's too much for me. I know that this pain, too, doesn't make sense. [In a changed tone.] But then this world we live in doesn't make sense, and I have a right to judge it, since I've tested all it has to offer, from creation to destruction.

[She walks resolutely toward the door. MARTHA slips in front of her and bars the way.]
MARTHA: No, mother, you shall not leave me. Don't forget that it was I who stayed beside you, and he went away. For a whole lifetime I have been with you, and he left you in silence. That must come into the reckoning. That must be paid for. And it's your duty to come back to me.
THE MOTHER [gently]: That's true enough, Martha. But he, my son, was killed by me.
[MARTHA has half turned away and seems to be gazing at the door.]

MARTHA [after a short silence, with rising emotion]: All that life can give a man was given him. He left this country. He came to know far horizons, the sea, free beings. But I stayed here, eating my heart out in the shadows, small and insignificant, buried alive in a gloomy valley in the heart of Europe. Buried alive! No one has ever kissed my mouth and no one, not even you, has seen me naked. Mother, I swear to you, that must be paid for. And now, when at last I am to get what's due to me, you cannot, must not desert me on the vain pretext that a man is dead. Do try to understand that for a man who has lived his life death is a little thing. We can forget my brother and your son. What has happened to him has no importance; he had nothing more to get from life. But for me it's different, and you are defrauding me of everything, cheating me of the pleasures he enjoyed. Why must that man deprive

me of my mother's love as well and drag you down with him into the icy darkness of the river? [They gaze silently at each other; MARTHA lowers her eyes. She speaks now in a very low voice.] I ask so little, so very little of life. Mother, there are words I never could bring myself to use, but—don't you think it would be soothing if we started our life again just as it used to be, you and I together?

THE MOTHER: Did you recognize him?
MARTHA: No, I didn't. I had not the slightest recollection of what he looked like, and everything happened as it was bound to happen. You said it yourself; this world doesn't make sense. But you weren't altogether wrong in asking me that question. For I know now that if I'd recognized him, it would have made no difference.

THE MOTHER: I prefer to think that isn't true. No soul is wholly criminal, and the wickedest murderers have moments when they lay down their arms.
MARTHA: I have such moments, too. But I would not have lowered my head to a brother whom I did not know and who meant nothing to me.

THE MOTHER: To whom then would you lower your head?
[MARTHA lowers her head.]
MARTHA: To you.
[A short silence.]

THE MOTHER [quietly]: Too late, Martha. I can do nothing more for you. [Half averting her eyes.] Oh, why did he keep silence? Silence is fatal. But speaking is as dangerous; the little he said hurried it on. [Turns toward her daughter.] Are you crying, Martha? No, you wouldn't know how to cry. Can you remember the time when I used to kiss you?
MARTHA: No, mother.

THE MOTHER: I understand. It was so long ago, and I forgot so soon to hold out my arms to you. But I never ceased loving you. [She gently thrusts aside MARTHA, who gradually makes way for her.] I know it now; now that your brother's coming has brought to life again that intolerable love which I now must kill—together with myself.

[The doorway is free for her to pass.]
MARTHA [burying her face in her hands]: But what, oh, what can mean more to you than your daughter's grief?
THE MOTHER: Weariness, perhaps … and my longing for rest.

[She goes out. MARTHA makes no effort to detain her. Once her mother has left she runs to the door, slams it to, and presses herself against it. She breaks into loud, fierce cries.]
MARTHA: No, no! What concern of mine was it to look after my brother? None whatever! And yet now I'm an outcast in my own home, there is no place for me to lay my head, my own mother will have none of me. No, it wasn't my duty to look after him—oh, the unfairness of it all, the injustice done to innocence! For he—he now has what he wanted, while I am left lonely, far from the sea I longed for. Oh, how I hate him! All my life was spent waiting for this great wave that was to lift me up and sweep me far away, and now I know it will never come again. I am doomed to stay here with all those other countries, other nations, on my left hand and my right, before me and behind; all those plains and mountains that are barriers to the salt winds blowing from the sea, and whose chatterings and grumblings drown its low, unceasing summons. [In a lower tone] There are places to which, far as they may be from the sea, the evening wind brings sometimes a smell of seaweed. It tells of moist seabeaches, loud with the cries of seagulls, or of golden sands bathed in a sunset glow that has no limit. But the sea winds fail long before they reach this place. Never, never shall I have what's due to me. I may press my ear to the earth but I shall not hear the crash of icy breakers, or the measured breathing of a happy sea. I am too far from all I love, and my exile is beyond remedy. I hate him, yes, I hate him for having got what he wanted! My only home is in this gloomy, shut-in country where the sky has no horizons; for my hunger I have nothing but the sour Moravian sloes, for my thirst only the blood that I have shed. That is the price one must pay for a mother's love!

There is no love for me, so let her die. Let every door be shut against me; all I wish is to be left in peace with my anger, my very rightful anger. For I have no intention of rolling my eyes heavenward or

pleading for forgiveness before I die. In that southern land, guarded by the sea, to which one can escape, where one can breathe freely, press one's body to another's body, roll in the waves—to that sea-guarded land the gods have no access. But here one's gaze is cramped on every side, everything is planned to make one look up in humble supplication. I hate this narrow world in which we are reduced to gazing up at God.

But I have not been given my rights and I am smarting from the injustice done me; I will not bend my knee. I have been cheated of my place on earth, cast away by my mother, left alone with my crimes, and I shall leave this world without being reconciled. [A knock at the door.] Who's there?
MARIA: A traveler.
MARTHA: We're not taking any guests now.
MARIA: But my husband's here. I have come to see him.
[MARIA enters.]

MARTHA [staring at her]: Your husband. Who's that?
MARIA: He came here yesterday evening and he promised to call for me this morning. I can't understand why he didn't come.
MARTHA: He said his wife was abroad.

MARIA: He had special reasons for that. But we'd arranged to meet this morning.
MARTHA [who has kept her eyes fixed on MARIA]: That may be difficult. Your husband's gone.
MARIA: Gone? I don't follow. Didn't he take a room here?
MARTHA: Yes, but he left it during the night.

MARIA: Really, I can't believe that. I know his reasons for wanting to stay in this house. But the way you speak alarms me. Please tell me frankly whatever you have to tell.
MARTHA: I have nothing to tell you, except that your husband is no longer here.

MARIA: I simply cannot understand; he would not have gone away without me. Did he say that he was going for good, or that he'd come back?
MARTHA: He has left us for good.

MARIA: Please listen. I can't bear to be kept in suspense any longer. Since yesterday I've been waiting, waiting, in this strange land, and now my anxiety has brought me to this house. I will not go away before I have seen my husband or been told where I can find him.
MARTHA: Your husband's whereabouts is your concern, not mine.

MARIA: You are wrong. You, too, are concerned in this, and closely. I don't know if my husband will approve of my telling you this, but I'm sick and tired of this futile game of make-believe. The man who came here yesterday is the brother you'd heard nothing of for years and years.
MARTHA: That's no news to me.
MARIA [violently]: Then—what can have happened? If everything has been cleared up, how is it Jan's not here? Did you not welcome him home, you and your mother, and weren't you full of joy at his return?
MARTHA: My brother is no longer here—because he is dead.

[MARIA gives a start and stares at MARTHA for some moments without speaking. Then she takes a step toward her, smiling.]
MARIA: Ah, you're joking, of course. Jan's often told me that when you were little you loved mystifying people. You and I are almost sisters and—
MARTHA: Don't touch me. Stay where you are. There is nothing in common between us. [Pauses.] I can assure you I'm not joking; your husband died last night. So there's no reason for you to stay here any longer.

MARIA: But you're mad, stark staring mad! People don't die like that—when one's arranged to meet them, from one moment to the other, all of a sudden. I can't believe you. Let me see him and then I may believe what I can't even imagine.

MARTHA: That impossible. He's at the bottom of the river. [MARIA stretches her hand toward her.] Don't touch me! Stay there. I repeat; he is at the bottom of the river. My mother and I carried him to the river last night, after putting him to sleep. He didn't suffer, but he is dead sure enough, and it was we, his mother and I, who killed him.

MARIA [shrinking away]: It must be I who am mad. I'm hearing words that have never before been said on this earth. I knew that no good would come to me here, but this is sheer craziness and I will not share in it. At the very moment when your words strike death into my heart, it seems to me that you are talking of some other man, not of the man who shared my nights, and all this is a tale of long ago, in which my love never had a part.

MARTHA: It's not for me to convince you; only to tell you the truth. A truth which you will have to recognize before long.
MARIA [in a sort of reverie]: But why, why did you do it?
MARTHA: What right have you to question me?
MARIA [passionately]: What right?… My love for him.
MARTHA: What does that word mean?

MARIA: It means—it means all that at this moment is tearing, gnawing at my heart; it means this rush of frenzy that makes my fingers itch for murder. It means all my past joys, and this wild, sudden grief you have brought me. Yes, you crazy woman, if it wasn't that I've steeled my heart against believing, you'd learn the meaning of that word, when you felt my nails scoring your cheeks.

MARTHA: Again, you are using language I cannot understand. Words like love and joy and grief are meaningless to me.
MARIA [making a great effort to speak calmly]: Listen, Martha—that's your name, isn't it? Let's stop this game, if game it is, of cross purposes. Let's have done with useless words. Tell me quite clearly what I want to know quite clearly, before I let myself break down.

MARTHA: Surely I made it clear enough. We did to your husband last night what we had done to other travelers before; we killed him and took his money.
MARIA: So his mother and sister were criminals?

MARTHA: Yes. But that's their business, and no one else's.
MARIA [still controlling herself with an effort]: Had you learned he was your brother when you did it?
MARTHA: If you must know, there was a misunderstanding. And if you have any experience at all of the world, that won't surprise you.

MARIA [going toward the table, her hands clenched on her breast; in a low, sad voice]: Oh, my God, I knew it! I knew this play acting was bound to end in tragedy and we'd be punished, he and I, for having lent ourselves to it. I felt danger in the very air one breathes in this country. [She stops in front of the table and goes on speaking, without looking at MARTHA.] He wanted to make his home-coming a surprise, to get you to recognize him and to bring you happiness. Only at first he couldn't find the words that were needed. And then, while he was groping for the words, he was killed. [Weeping.] And you, like two madwomen, blind to the marvelous son who had returned to you—for marvelous he was, and you will never know the greatheartedness, the noble soul, of the man you killed last night.... He might have been your pride, as he was mine. But, no, you were his enemy—oh, the pity of it!—for else how could you bring yourself to speak so calmly of what should make you rush into the street, screaming out your heart, like a wounded animal?

MARTHA: You have no right to sit in judgment without knowing all. By now my mother's lying with her son, pressed to the sluice-gate, and the current is beginning to gnaw their faces, and buffeting them against the rotting piles. Soon their bodies will be drawn up and buried together in the same earth. But I cannot see what there is even in this to set me screaming with pain. I have a very different idea of the human heart, and, to be frank, your tears revolt me.

MARIA [swinging round on her fiercely]: My tears are for the joys I've lost for ever; for a life's happiness stolen from me. And this is better for you than the tearless grief I shall have presently, which could kill you without the flutter of an eyelid.

MARTHA: Do not imagine talk like that affects me; really it would make little difference. For I, too, have seen and heard enough; I, too, have resolved to die. But I shall not join them; why, indeed, would I want their company? I shall leave them to their new-found love, to their dark embraces. Neither you nor I have any part in these; all that is ended and they are unfaithful to us—forever. Luckily I have my bedroom and its roof-beam is strong.

MARIA: What does it matter to me that you die or the whole world falls in ruins, if through you I have lost the man I love, and henceforth I am doomed to live in a dark night of loneliness, where every memory is a torture?

[MARTHA comes behind her and speaks over her head.]
MARTHA: Let's not exaggerate. You have lost your husband and I have lost my mother. We are even. But you have only lost him once, after enjoying his love for years and without his having cast you off. My lot is worse. First my mother cast me off, and now she is dead. I have lost her twice.

MARIA: Yes, perhaps I might be tempted to pity you and share my grief with you, if I did not know what was awaiting him, alone in his room last night, when you were plotting his death.
MARTHA [her voice has a sudden accent of despair]: I'm even with your husband, too, for I have suffered as he suffered. Like him, I thought I had made my home sure for always; I thought that crime had forged a bond between me and my mother that nothing could ever break. And on whom in all the world should I rely, if not on the woman who had killed beside me? I was mistaken. Crime, too, means solitude, even if a thousand people join together to commit it. And it is fitting that I should die alone, after having lived and killed alone. [MARIA turns toward her, tears streaming down her cheeks. MARTHA moves back,

her voice grows hard again.] Stop! I told you not to touch me. At the mere thought that a human hand could lay its warmth on me before I die; at the mere thought that anything at all resembling the foul love of men is dogging me still, I feel the blood pulsing in my temples in a fury of disgust.

[MARIA has risen to her feet. The two women now are face to face, standing very near each other.]
MARIA: Have no fear. I shall do nothing to prevent your dying as you wish. For with this hideous pain that grips my body like a vise, I feel a sort of blindness falling on my eyes and everything around me is growing dim. Neither you nor your mother will ever be more to me than vague, fleeting faces that came and went in the course of a tragedy which can never end. For you, Martha, I have no hatred and no pity. I have lost the power of loving or hating anybody. [Suddenly she buries her face in her hands.] But then—I have hardly had time to suffer or to rebel. My calamity was … too big for me.

MARTHA [who has taken some steps toward the door, comes back toward MARIA]: But still not big enough; it has left you eyes to weep with. And I see that something remains for me to do before leaving you for ever. I have yet to drive you to despair.
MARIA [gazing at her, horror-stricken]: Oh, please leave me alone! Go away, and let me be!

MARTHA: Yes, I am going, and it will be a relief for me, as well. Your love and your tears are odious to me. But before I go to die, I must rid you of the illusion that you are right, that love isn't futile, and that what has happened was an accident. On the contrary, it's now that we are in the normal order of things, and I must convince you of it.
MARIA: What do you mean by that?
MARTHA: That in the normal order of things no one is ever recognized.
MARIA [distractedly]: Oh, what do I care? I only know that my heart is torn to shreds, and nothing, nothing matters to it except the man you killed.

MARTHA [savagely]: Be silent! I will not have you speak of that man; I loathe him. And he is nothing to you now. He has gone down into the bitter house of eternal exile. The fool! Well, he has got what he wanted; he is with the woman he crossed the sea to find. So all of us are served now, as we should be, in the order of things. But fix this in your mind; neither for him nor for us, neither in life nor in death, is there any peace or homeland. [With a scornful laugh] For you'll agree one can hardly call it a home, that place of clotted darkness underground, to which we go from here to feed blind animals.

MARIA [weeping]: I can't, oh, no, I can't bear to hear you talk like that. And I know he, too, wouldn't have borne it. It was to find another homeland that he crossed the sea.
MARTHA [who has walked to the door, swings round on her]: His folly has received its wages. And soon you will receive yours. [Laughing as before] We're cheated, I tell you. Cheated! What do they serve, those blind impulses that surge up in us, the yearnings that rack our souls? Why cry out for the sea, or for love? What futility! Your husband knows now what the answer is: that charnel house where in the end we shall lie huddled together, side by side. [Vindictively] A time will come when you, too, know it, and then, could you remember anything, you would recall as a delightful memory this day which seems to you the beginning of the cruelest of exiles. Try to realize that no grief of yours can ever equal the injustice done to man.

And now—before I go, let me give a word of advice; I owe it to you, since I killed your husband. Pray your God to harden you to stone. It's the happiness. He has assigned Himself, and the one true happiness. Do as He does, be deaf to all appeals, and turn your heart to stone while there still is time. But if you feel you lack the courage to enter into this hard, blind peace—then come and join us in our common house. Good-by, my sister. As you see, it's all quite simple. You have a choice between the mindless happiness of stones and the slimy bed in which we are awaiting you.

[She goes out. MARIA, who has been listening in horrified amazement, sways, stretching out her arms in front of her.]

MARIA [her voice rising to a scream]: Oh, God, I cannot live in this desert! It is on You that I must call, and I shall find the words to say. [She sinks on her knees.] I place myself in your hands. Have pity, turn toward me. Hear me and raise me from the dust, O Heavenly Father! Have pity on those who love each other and are parted.
[The door opens. The OLD MANSERVANT is standing on the threshold.]

THE OLD MANSERVANT [in a clear, firm tone]: What's all this noise? Did you call me?
MARIA [gazing at him]: Oh!… I don't know. But help me, help me, for I need help. Be kind and say that you will help me.
THE OLD MANSERVANT [in the same tone]: No.

CURTAIN

The End