

The Excursion

The Lake

We walked along the path, you and I, happy it seemed, as if we had nothing better to do than what we were doing. How we enjoyed everything around us! To our left were the mountains. They were covered with green trees, but somehow looked gray as we gazed at them from a distance. Above was the sky. The sun was hidden from our view, yet everything was bright. To our right was the lake. The blueness of the sky matched the blueness of the water. The lake stretched endlessly to an unknown horizon. Waves rippled gently across the surface.

It seemed as if the world itself had grown in its dimensions. Everything had its unique significance. Green tufts of grass grew on either side of the path. The path itself was a rich brown thread of hard-packed earth.

All of this we saw with our own eyes. We were walking along a ridge, dizzy as we looked over it to the lake below. Rocks protruded dangerously from the foam splashing over them.

I remember that as we paused looking over the cliff, trying to find our images mirrored in the lake below, a malicious thought came to mind. I saw your reflection in the water and imagined I had pushed you over the edge. I watched your body tumble over the rocks and into the water. I will not deny that I was tempted to take you by the arms and hurl you into the lake, even though I loved you more than anything else in the world. I wanted to watch you suffer. I wanted to hear your cries, to see your anxious and questioning face. Most of all, I wanted to pity you and to have you accept my pity.

But I did nothing. We continued our slow but steady descent down the path as it sloped gently towards the lake. We paused at a spot where the ledge was still quite high. I was distracted by some birds soaring far above us and looked up to see them. Suddenly I heard a loud splash. To my horror I realized that you had fallen off the cliff.

“I have killed you!” I thought.

My wicked imagination had caused you to jump into the lake. But then I saw your laughing head bobbing in the water.

“The water’s fine!” you assured me. Then I noticed your clothes lying beside a tree. You invited me to join you. I took off my shirt and trousers and jumped in.

How long we swam I can’t remember. We floated up and down with the waves, splashing water at each other. We were enjoying ourselves too much to become tired. Yet at last, as the sun set and night began to blacken the water, we decided we’d had enough and began looking for a place to ascend the cliff—

But there was no way back up.

Leaping down had been simple. But now we could only look with apprehension at the jagged wall of stones before us. The water was getting chilly. We found a rock sticking up out of the water not far from the shoreline. We pulled ourselves on top. There was barely enough room for the two of us.

As we sat on the rock, thinking about what we would do, people began to appear in the water, swimming around us like sharks. The rock began drifting towards the center of the lake, with the swimmers following us. I put my arm around you as we huddled together, looking across the black water at the rapidly receding shoreline.

The Cave

At dawn the lake was glistening with pink sunlight. We were still on the rock, alone now in the middle of the lake. We spotted a beach on the opposite side, dove in and swam towards it. We spent the entire day walking naked around the lake to where we had left our clothes. The stones on the path pierced our feet. The blue sky turned gray and by mid-afternoon it began to rain heavily. We both were cold, shivering and wet from the rain. Water sloshed around in the bottom of my shoes.

The rain stopped. It was already dark when we finally reached the cave. Fluorescent lights cut the night with an ominous steely glow.

A bearded guard with a long spear was standing watch at the entrance to the cave. Two elderly ladies paused in front of him, hesitant about going in. They held a short conference in hushed tones, deliberating over what to do. Finally, reaching an agreement, they stepped feebly over the threshold and disappeared inside. We followed at a distance. I glanced down at you. You looked back at me with

apprehension.

The first chamber of the cave was reached by descending four or five stone steps and passing through a thick wooden door. Torches were placed at each of the chamber's corners. Their soft, warm light was a welcome relief from the icy fluorescence outside. I noticed that the guard with the spear had followed us inside, but he seemed to be paying us little attention.

The two women had a brief look around and then, having decided they'd seen enough, walked outside again. Something about the chamber seemed to interest you, though. You were eagerly looking into this crevice and that. I was soon bored. I noticed a passageway which seemed to lead deeper underground. I decided to see where it went. Without speaking I left you alone and began walking.

The passageway was cold and dark. There were no torches and I had to feel my way ahead. Each step took me further downward. Suddenly I saw a dim light in the distance. The passageway broadened and opened out into a second chamber. This chamber was also lit with torches, but it was much larger than the chamber above. I heard footsteps behind me and then realized that the guard with the spear had been following me. There seemed to be no possibility of escape.

Inside the chamber was a long table. A group of men were seated at it. There was one empty chair to the left. As I stood there wondering what it was all about, the guard with the spear said, "This chair is for you." He motioned for me to sit in the vacant chair.

"I prefer to stand," I said.

"As you wish," he replied, taking the chair himself.

There were several moments of silence while the men scrutinized me. They looked like miners. Their faces and clothes were black with soot. It seemed that they had just finished work and had been waiting for my arrival. I stood there for quite some time, anxious about what would happen. It never occurred to me that I wasn't actually being held prisoner. I could have simply left the room and run back up the unguarded passageway any time I wanted.

Finally the man in the middle—a man with long-flowing soot-streaked hair, quite a bit older than the others—began to speak:

"I see you've made it here on your own, without us having to go out and look for you."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean," I said.

"Don't play innocent!" he snapped. "You know very well why you're here."

"We know what you did," one of the other men said. "All of it—down to the last sordid detail."

I began to stammer a protest, knowing deep in my heart that I had nothing to confess, but I was quickly shouted down.

"Don't try to cover it up," a man said.

"We *know*," said another.

"We have all the evidence we need. You must simply acknowledge your actions."

They went on like this until finally the man in the middle interrupted them. "Well, do you have anything to say for yourself?"

I sat there silent, unable to answer.

"Speak!" he commanded. "It's your only chance!"

At last I cried, "You're right. I admit to everything. The fact that I cannot remember what I have done does not excuse me!"

The man in the middle smiled triumphantly.

"Gentlemen," he said. "Our business here is concluded."

He stood up. Brushing past me, he disappeared into the black hole of the passageway. There others followed him one by one. The guard with the spear was the last to depart. He snuffed out the torches, leaving me in total darkness.

The Village

That night I remained in the cave. I was able to crawl back through the passageway to the upper chamber but discovered that the thick wooden door was bolted fast. I sat down beside it completely alone, thinking about what had happened to you. Would I ever see you again?

I slept. When I awoke, I was surprised to see sunlight pouring into the cave. The door had been unlocked. The light hurt my eyes.

Cautiously I went outside. The guard with the spear had fallen asleep a few steps from the entrance. I walked carefully past him and then began running. I cannot tell you where or for how long I ran. All

I remember is that I ran hard. My body was covered with sweat and my heart throbbed madly.

Soon I was lost. The paths seemed unfamiliar. I could not get my bearings. Stopping for a moment, I sat down on a tree stump by the trail and attempted to catch my breath.

While pondering what to do, I suddenly caught sight of the guard with the spear. He hadn't seen me yet. He was still some distance away, but he was running straight towards me. There was no place to hide. I got up and started running again, harder. I stumbled. He saw me. I got up again. I couldn't run any faster. He was gaining on me.

The trees became sparser and open fields began to appear on either side of the trail. The distance between us was getting shorter and shorter. I noticed with relief that we were running in the direction of a little village. I thought of going straight to the authorities, but I knew they would never believe me.

The trail broadened into a road. In no time I was within the hamlet's walls. I raced through the side streets and alleys, trying to shake off my pursuer. When I was just about to fall from exhaustion I found myself at the very center of the village, in the square. I noticed an unattended wagon laden with apples, parked on a cobblestone street near a fenced off stretch of grass. I was hungry and the apples were tempting. Hoping no one would notice, I plucked one of them off the cart and began to eat. The apples were sweet. I ate one right after another.

I stood there nonchalant, watching the villagers as they went about their daily tasks, bustling from here to there, stopping occasionally to chat with each other. Their movements were swift and jerky—like an old silent movie running on a modern projector.

Suddenly I felt a light tap on my arm. It was the owner of the cart, I thought, furious at me for stealing his apples. But no, it was the guard with the spear. Before I could get away he grabbed me by the arm and pointed his spear at my side.

"Let's go!" he whispered urgently, looking about to see if anyone was watching us.

I tried to break away, but the guard grabbed me even harder. A touch of surprise appeared on his face.

"You don't understand," he said. "It's the only way. I'm here to help you."

"How can I be sure?" I asked.

"You can't," he said smiling. "You must simply trust me."

The guard led me away. All the time I was thinking: Where are you now? Whatever has happened to you?