

Ants · Yitzhak Orpaz

Chapter I: Slight postponement of a divorce—The Ledger and the Book—An original way of celebrating the Sabbath—An ant excites my wife, and I take revenge on the ant.

WE DECIDED to divorce. I knew for some time that we'd have to do it. My wife never actually said "yes" in so many words, but when I said "Come," she was already dressed and ready to go.

It was difficult to explain why to the rabbi. A man goes to the doctor with a fly buzzing in his ear, and the second he arrives the buzzing stops. Our apartment is small, one room and a hall on the roof, and we run into each other a lot and get embarrassed a lot. If my wife was like all other women, she'd have children. But my wife doesn't let me have my way with her like a man has with a woman. I'm a first-class builder; I can split a scaffolding plank with my hands if it's necessary. But I can't handle Rachel roughly. What a wonderful flower the calla lily is. It's a flower I've always been afraid to touch. White as snow, noble, unaffected by sun or rain. Rachel has a proud stature, a soft gait, and brown hair that she pins up on the back of her head. Her body is white, as white as alabaster. She can lie in the sun for hours and her body will remain as white as it was before she lay down.

The rabbi waited. Neither of us knew what to say. Suddenly I stood up, went to my wife, and pressed my lips against hers. She bit my lips till they bled, my wife did. Then she spit into a snow-white handkerchief with which she then wiped her lips.

The rabbi asked Rachel if I disgusted her. She answered, "Not particularly." He asked her if she loved me, and she again answered, "Not particularly." He asked her if she had loved other men before me, and she said she didn't remember. Her look was innocent and open. Once, while she was answering the rabbi, she rubbed with her long, beautiful fingers under her breast, as though she were scratching. After we had left the rabbi's office, I asked her why she had made such a rude gesture in the rabbi's presence. She had felt, she said, as though ants were crawling over her body. The rabbi told us to come back in two months' time. Meanwhile, he advised that we should think of changing apartments.

"Change your place, change your luck," the rabbi said.

The idea of changing apartments caught hold of me. To build a house, a home for Rachel and me. Perhaps a new house would mean a new start. And after all, I am a builder.

As soon as we came home, I went to the calendar that hangs in our little kitchen, turned over a few leaves, and on a suitable date after waving away a little ant that was scurrying across the date I had selected I wrote the words, "New House." The writing was clear and carefully shaped, with a heavy line under the word "New." Above was

colored landscape—all the leaves of the calendar had colored landscapes of historical sites—a rock fortress with ancient stone walls at the top that had been burned and had now been restored. I told my wife that I was going to build a house for us. “Good,” said my wife, and she looked the other way.

Now that I was about to build a new house for us, it became easier to put up with the shortcomings of the old one. Our apartment is small, on the top floor of an old house, with a small living room and a hall. The hall leads into the living room, the living room leads into a tiny kitchen, the tiny kitchen into a very small washroom, where the shower—there is no bathtub—and the toilet stand close together. All the doors run in a straight line from the roof entrance, and we can’t help bumping into each other again and again. Rachel and I bump into each other constantly and are embarrassed. When we were first married, Rachel would giggle and then escape. Now she scratches, not ungracefully, under her arm, between her breasts, or just above her belly—and hurries to the shower. When I suddenly embrace her, the sound of her laughter rings out magnificently until I let her go, but it is a laughter as cold as glass.

At night Rachel wraps herself in sheets, and looks like a statue draped within them. White, impervious walls.

The house is always very clean. When I come home from work, I undress on the roof and go to the shower in slippers.

When I want to lie down she lays a coarse cover over the green bedspread. When I want to lean my elbows on the table, she says, “Excuse me,” and spreads a gray but clean napkin under my elbows. She serves our meals dressed in a white smock, like a nurse’s, and after we have eaten and I want to hold her hand, she escapes into the shower. I wash the dishes and listen to the water in the shower running down and caressing her body. Once I asked her why she showers so often. “The house is crawling,” she answered. I heard the budding of a strange, consciously suppressed laughter in her voice.

I can of course keep myself busy in other ways, for instance with the ledger. I’m careful about the ledger—that’s a matter of business. But it’s enough if I add it up and balance it on Saturday mornings. The rest of the week I open it when I come home from work just to enter, in carefully shaped letters, a line or two of expenses for building materials, wages, and such. I hardly read books. I think I have lost the taste for reading for entertainment. Sometimes I look at the newspaper during breakfast on the job, when I eat the sandwiches that have been wrapped in it. Apart from that, I read the Book. I read it every Friday night after dinner, and sometimes on other nights, too, before going to bed. A matter of tradition. There was a time when I used to put my heart into it and read with devotion. Now I hear myself reading it out loud while I think about something else. Perhaps I am becoming lazy. I have never read the Book systematically, just a little here, a little there, where it happens to fall open. There is one place I read often, because my wife likes to hear it, particularly on Friday night after dinner, when she lights a cigarette from the flame of the candle. Sometimes I read it to her on other nights as well, in bed, when her eyes are closed. “Carry on,” she says, when I close the Book thinking she has fallen asleep.

“For a nation is come upon my land, strong, and without number, whose teeth are the teeth of a lion, and he hath the cheek teeth of a great lion.” Here I stop, and my wife says “Carry on,” and I skip a bit and read, “Alas for the day! for the day of the Lord is at hand, and as a destruction from the Almighty shall it come.”

Sometimes my wife stops me while I am reading this part and says, “Tickle me!” Keenly I put down, almost throw down the Book and draw my fingers along the soles of her feet, first one foot and then the other, so that my wife Rachel laughs. That is the closest contact there is between us. No wonder that my heart weeps inside of me when she laughs.

The tickling ceremony is our Sabbath pleasure. We are both tired when it is over. I fall asleep and dream that she-leopards are embracing me and scratching me with their claws; when I wake up, my wife Rachel is in the shower.

How much time does my wife Rachel spend in the shower? There is no absolute rule. In the winter she dries her body by the fire of the stove; in the summer, by the heat of the sun. Many times I have asked my wife Rachel why she does not wipe her body with a towel, and each time her answer is different. Once she answered from the sun-drenched roof: “Have you ever seen a tree or a bird wipe itself?” Fascinated and full of admiration I stand and look at her nude, pulsating body. The virginal white burning with icy fire, she walks on the blazing roof as though she is floating, spreading and folding her arms, the water on her body dripping down in golden stripes.

The Sabbath and its enjoyments were over. When I opened my eyes and was free of the clawing of the she-leopards, with their hot and pounding bellies, I saw the milky light of the morning spilling through the window.

“To build us a house,” I said to myself and got up from the bed. “I have to get up early to build us a new house.”

Behind me, from the bed, there suddenly came noises of rustling and creaking. I turned my head and what did I see? My wife Rachel, with her eyes closed, throwing her head from side to side, her nostrils trembling, her thighs twitching, and her feet kicking. What has shaken that body so, what has taken it out of its glorious iciness?

A little ant, it seems, little, but full of energy, it had emerged from a fold in the sheet and onto the lower end of the curve of my wife Rachel’s thigh. It climbed fast along the delicate curve, and stopped there for a moment to raise its head and rub its antennae one against the other. I looked at the uncovered, sleeping bit of thigh where the ant had crossed, and I felt an evil feeling well up in my eyes and heart. For thirteen years I have constructed houses, hundreds of floors, thousands of tons of building material, and I have not succeeded in exciting my wife the way a little ant can.

The palm of my hand is big, criss-crossed with countless furrows from timber and steel and concrete, many furrows from very dead matter. I caught the ant between my finger and thumb and hurried to the roof. I rubbed my rough fingers over it, and what was left of it, I crushed with my bare feet. As I did this, the tar of the roof showed from under the thin layer of whitewash, and on it—a trail of ants, dark as bronze grains, marching in slow procession to the front door.

NOTHING special happened the next day. I worked harder, and I made my gang work harder, too, carried along by the exciting idea that it was our house I would be building—mine and Rachel's. Neither of us mentioned the visit to the rabbi. Actually we did not talk much at all. Only once, almost incidentally, I hinted about the house I was going to build, and then I saw her eyes widening a little and the olive-green brown of her irises grew deeper.

This is how things went that day. I came home from work at half past four, and Rachel wasn't there. She was probably with her girlfriend—our neighbor Bilha. We have an unspoken agreement: when I come home from work, Rachel is at Bilha's. Pulling off boots, peeling off socks, rubbing caked feet, rolling the work clothes into a bundle of sour-salty smells—Rachel does not like to watch this. To tell the truth—I can't bear this routine either, not when Rachel is standing in front of me, all pure and clean. In our new house I'll arrange a special, screened-off corner for getting out of my work clothes. And for now, Rachel is at Bilha's, and I shave, shower, and lie down to sleep till about six.

That day, as I woke up from my siesta, a small chunk of mortar the size of a beetle was lying under my nose, exactly at the center of my moustache. That's the way my wife Rachel tells me off for two grains of sand or a little lump of mortar that I have carried along from the scaffolding. I smiled. I didn't know what to smell first in this little chunk of matter, the touch of Rachel's hand or the smell of the moist cement. I haven't said yet that on the way home, I had picked up the groceries, as I did every day, according to a list my wife had written.

Then supper, washing the dishes, a couple of chores about the house, a pipe—and the ledger. I am careful with the accounts, for my own wages depend on it, and those of the boys of my gang, too. Generally, Saturday morning is enough time for this. But now, since I must keep my eyes wide open so that I don't get too deep into debt so that I can take on the expenses of building our house, I have taken to looking it over on weekday evenings as well. Not that I have anything to enter or delete; everything was entered every Saturday. But I really found nothing else to do. Read the Book, you'll say; but that was something I couldn't do while Bilha was in our home. And Bilha was with us that evening (what evening wasn't she?)—very much with us.

They're laughing, the two of them. I am sitting at my desk in the hall and the door to the room is open—and they're laughing. My wife Rachel's laughter is very fine, almost inaudible; Bilha's is heavy and dull. My wife is dressed in white; Bilha is in black. Bilha looks at me laughingly, and in her eyes Rachel is peering at me—that is how I feel. There are four corners in the room and only one of them faces my seat in the hall. And that is the corner they have settled down in. I could have closed the door, but I was afraid that my wife would whisper into Bilha's ear and Bilha would

say in an angry voice: “Why do you close it, there’s no air in the room.” Bilha had put a restlessness in my belly I had felt her knees under the table at suppertime. Bilha shared most of our meals with us—she cooked them—and she did not know what she was doing with her life, apart from serving Rachel.

Bilha on Rachel’s knees, they were amusing themselves, or at least that was the way it looked in the darkness, behind the curling smoke of my pipe, from the corner of my troubled eye. Their lips smacked, their tongues clicked. They passed a blue cup filled with fluffy custard from hand to hand. They licked the custard and extended syllables of pleasure poured forth from their lips. Bilha knew how to prepare a thousand and one candies that tasted of honey and Rachel liked them all. But, more than anything she loved real honey, bees’ honey. “Want something nice?” Bilha calls out to me, and Rachel’s laughter ripples behind Bilha’s back.

Then she looked at me over Bilha’s shoulder. Her eyes were an olive-green, only lighter, much lighter. The eyes of the tigresses of my dreams. I spat out the last puff of my pipe before I put it out, and went out to the roof to look at the many houses, the twisting streets, the entrances to the buildings, the windows, to breathe the smell of flesh, the real smell. I was perturbed.

At night, in the deep of the night, I can’t say exactly at what hour, perhaps at two, or three, I woke up and heard a strange noise. I thought it was my imagination and I tapped my ear to get rid of the noise. But the noise persisted. A kind of growling or dripping from deep down, but drier, like stones rolling down, but duller, like what I used to hear long ago, as a child, when I would press my ear to the ground near the railroad tracks about fifteen minutes before the train would come. There were, of course, the street sounds of that hour: the rush of a passing car, a far off cough, a laugh, a shutter being closed, a cat or a baby wailing, and all the rest, and the sound of the sea. And suddenly, very near, just under the window, some man in the street calling, in a clear, exact, colorless, matter-of-fact voice—like someone calling in the full of day—“Yankele, come on now,” and someone called Yankele, passing by with a patter of footsteps, hurrying after the voice. I knew those sounds very well. Often enough I had run out to the roof, away from the torture of my bed, tired of circling again and again the white walls of my wife. There on the roof I stood listening to those sounds with closed eyes, and then I relaxed and fell asleep.

This sound was different. I remembered. Once I had heard a similar sound just before the collapse of a wing of a house in the Old City that we were repairing. I was not in the wing that collapsed. I was in another part of the house at the time. But I could hear the sound of the noise. Millions and millions of grains of dust and stone moving from place to place . . . What a wonderful feeling.

Suddenly silence. The noise had stopped. I went to the bathroom and rinsed out my ear. Then I sat down on the toilet seat and looked at a cockroach being given its funeral.

Chapter III: Ants dismember a half-alive cockroach—
Praise of the cockroach's antennae and of
the beauty of its armor.

WHEN I first saw them, busy, miserable little things whose length is measured in millimeters, gray, inflexible creatures with their bodies composed of round sections of which the smallest, such as those of the belly, are no larger than fly-specks; when I first saw them milling around that brown, quivering mountain—the cockroach—it looked to me like a coronation or some other kind of rite, centering on that rounded, exalted, and so sensitive entity. Soon I realized I was wrong: the ants were busy dismembering the cockroach.

Slowly, slowly they dissected it into sections. The cruel and disgusting aspect of it all was that that brown mountain was still alive. Turning the cockroach on its back (only the god of the ants knows how they managed that), they did strange things to it. Some seemed to be sucking its marrow, clamped to it as pincers, motionless, with all the tremors of the big body unable to shift them. I would long ago have made an end of this disgusting sight of torture if my eye had not been drawn by the ants' dedicated handling of the cockroach's antennae. The antennae are no doubt the crowning glory of this attractive class of insect: their antennae are very long, elastic, and extremely sensitive. One can easily imagine their being in great demand in antland, perhaps as long-range communications aeriels. But the way the ants held on to them, God! What a ballet of forms and movement! It looked as if it was the game they were looking for, those little ants, until I wondered whether there was any truth in the legend of their efficiency, industriousness, and purposefulness, which even the Book helps to perpetuate.

One ant grabs the end of the antenna, which is perhaps a dozen times as long as itself or even more. And do not forget that even an ant is eight cubits long by its own cubit, as the saying goes. The antenna rises and passes waves of twisting tremors from its tip to its end, which is held tightly between the sharp jaws of the ant. The ant pulls the antenna sideways, and not without considerable effort, as one may observe from the twists of its body, and the antenna follows in movement, as though surrendering, and slowly forms a perfectly arched rainbow. And just at the point where you would expect the bow to explode in a shower of colors or let a deadly arrow fly, the antenna pulls free, lifts the ant into the air in a wide arch, straightens out in the air, and lands linear and smooth on the ground. And there is a wonder for you—the ant is still holding on there, at the end of the antenna, and is pulling again.

I confess that my irritated nerves did not allow me to follow through and see where this ugly, unjust, often-repeated and unimaginative game of the ants would end. But from the industry that the little creatures exhibited in digging out the cockroach's eyes and sucking its tasty marrow, the end was not hard to guess. Slowly the cockroach was emptied, like a barrel with open spigots. But what a barrel! A barrel made of

rounded gold leaf, a kind of decorated royal suit of armor—with no body inside it—and you wonder that those antennae still have the strength to move so majestically. And then you see that one of the golden sheets of the royal covering, what I would call the greave, for instance, of Goliath's armor, has already been dismantled completely. Let it be said to the praise of these disgusting ants that they preserve those treasures in their chambers, and also that they are careful about cleaning up the battlefield. By tomorrow, nothing will be left on the bathroom floor, neither of them nor of that glorious creature they have dismembered.

Not without disgust I took hold of one of those ugly angels of destruction between my thumb and forefinger and laid it on the drain board in the kitchen, next to the cup of honey-flavored custard that Rachel and Bilha had left. Perhaps I intended to study this creature a little longer, through the magnifying glass that I still had from the days when I collected stamps. At any rate, I forgot about it and lay down to sleep beside Rachel, who was wrapped up in pure white sheets, ah, white as snow.

Chapter IV: Small-scale invasion of ants—I subdue them
with boiling water and poisons—I subdue
my wife to my lust—A crack in the wall.

I HAD hardly returned from work when I heard Rachel's voice from the darkness of the kitchen. She stood there, staring at the bottom of the cup, tears running out of her eyes. A long, dense stream of ants stretched from the cup to the tiled part of the wall—with barely an opening in the wall to be seen. They marched in two-lane, multi-lane processions, an army of strippled lines, and they filled the bottom of the cup. I understood that that was what pained my wife so: she dearly loved the products of Bilha's culinary imagination.

But my wife Rachel was not exactly crying. There were big drops of tears on her cheeks but her eyes were already dry. She stared. Where did she stare? At what? What was on my wife's mind now?

There she stood, almost bending over, with her graceful hands held out in front, as though she were defending herself, as if there were some third being among us.

The next day I did not go to work and waged war against the ants. I thought them rather disgusting, and I was not reluctant to do all I could to banish the plague from our home, I say our home, for in the course of the extermination I discovered a few more of their hiding places: under the kitchen window sill, around the door-posts of the kitchen, at almost all the corners of the glazed tiles in the bathroom, and also one place in the room itself, at the corner of a floor tile. I worked with boiling water. For several hours I treated the cracks to streams of boiling water. Here and there, a rustling started and in most cases was soon elsewhere. Quite a few corpses marked the trails now. But at such moments their inferior nature became evident: general confusion, running about in all directions at once, a hurried, graceless, even hysterical touching

of each other as they ran into one another in the haste of their rush. Still, they took pains to remove the cadavers of their comrades. I do not know whether to their larders or to their cemeteries. And yet, I must say one word to their credit.

I operated of course in a logical manner, and now, as I add up the moves in this little battle, I cannot but confess that here and there my higher order met with their lower order. For example, at the openings to the cracks. Perhaps they were just curious, perhaps they were sentries or lookouts—but they would not abandon their posts until the stream of boiling water caught them. Then again, the single ones I came upon. They may have been adventurers or scouts—but could it be that some law of chivalry forbade them to disguise themselves as corpses? A few drops of boiling water were enough for those single ones, whose misfortune, or perhaps orders, had put them in my way, on the wall, the drain board, the floor, outside their hidden fortresses. In short, as that day had drawn to its end, I felt entitled to rub my hands together in pleasure. The drain board, the tiles, the corners of the woodwork—all were clear of ants, and the kitchen sink was full of them, heaps upon black heaps of little cadavers.

In light of this achievement there was, to say the least, something odd about the reaction of my wife, who had been dozing in the sun most of the day:

“Sure there aren’t any left?”

The next day I worked with poison. That very same night, Rachel had stepped on live ants. They were on their way from the room to the little hall—straight through the door, the insolent creatures. Rachel jumped to her feet and giggled. What her laughter meant, I did not understand. I switched on all the lights in the house. The ants carried on their traffic as if nothing had happened, bypassing the place of the slaughter, where some of them were now busy with what looked like removing the corpses. That did not frighten me, though, to tell the truth, it made me a little ashamed: there was something stubborn, arrogant about their movement. I almost accused them of conceit. After all, it was obvious that they would seek new burrows after I had uprooted them from their old ones. At any rate, that was one thing I could count to my credit. It was a definite tactical victory.

I told Rachel so; she only nodded.

I did not go to work the next day either, for I was determined to finish the job. Systematically I filled all the gaps and cracks, in short, anything that could have served as access to an ant nest. And I improved on the tools of war at my disposal as well as I could by putting down ingestion poisons and inhalation poisons in alternating layers.

Friday morning I ended the work of extermination, put the rest of the corpses in the garbage pail, checked all the weak spots once again to be on the safe side, and in my quiet, undemonstrative way, without a trace of boastfulness, informed my wife of the successful completion of the operation.

Rachel nodded.

It was Sabbath eve. The night I had anxiously awaited and feared. I wanted to be worthy of it. I was happy that the ant plague had come my way towards the end of the week so that I could wipe it out and purify my home again. I was pleased that

Bilha was ill and could not share our Sabbath meal. I saw it as a good omen. I deserved a greater share of this Sabbath than I had enjoyed on previous Sabbaths. I was angry with Rachel for lighting a cigarette from the Sabbath candles and exhaling curling smoke with closed eyes. But I did not tell her so. After all, she does it every Sabbath and I never take offense. I did not look her in the eyes. Rachel went to bed without asking me, as she did every Sabbath, to tickle the soles of her feet. Instead she lay down between the double, very white sheets, like a queen in an ice palace.

I took up the ledger, but I did not know what to do with it now. For three days I had not been to work, and I had no idea what monies had come in and what had gone out, what to add and what to subtract to my accounts. I let the ledger drop and opened the Book. I read Genesis, and a joy bordering on jubilation filled my heart and aroused my loins. I mounted my wife's bed completely naked and called solemnly, like a battle cry:

"Rachel, today we have completed the entire work. Tonight you escape from your white sheets like a butterfly from the cocoon—and I shall possess you!"

Rachel wrestled with me the greater part of the night and I wrestled with her and with her white sheets and then—her breath stopped, her lips clamped together, her hands pressed her two breasts, wrinkles furrowed her brow as I worked my will on her. Ah, the sleep of the shamed! I dreamed that I was crawling along on my six short legs with an empty glass in my mouth and I did not know what to do with the glass and I was afraid that it would come to pieces in my mouth.

I woke to the sound of something cracking. I switched on the light and jumped off the bed. Rachel was on her knees, all dripping with water, before the kitchen wall of the room, her hands crossed over her chest and her eyes glued to the wall. About two and a half feet above the floor a crack had opened in the wall like a gaping sphincter, with ants grey as the cement bricks marching in and out.

"Dragon's teeth," Rachel whispered and did not look at me.

A long dull groan was rising out of the crack in the wall, which looked as if a row of four triangular teeth had bitten into it.

I fell into a sleep that was a bottomless pit.

Chapter V: The honey trap—A new race of ants appears, hasty and strong—Description of the mandibles and their many uses.

I ROSE about noon and immediately sat down to work. I must put my little hurts to the side and bring order into the ledger, which for three or four days had been lying on my desk open at a half-balanced page. My attention had been distracted from it. I had no receipts or invoices for the last few days, and a man feeling his way in the darkness would have had an easier time of it than I, what with adding estimated figures in brackets only to save myself the shame. I know them, the men of my gang. They

do not say a word, they draw silently on their cigarettes, and all they do is give me a sharp look between draws. I tried to settle my confused mind by smoking a pipe, and also by revenging myself a bit on those little creatures, two or three of whose representatives were holding a little businesslike procession inside the brackets, fingering the figures here and there as if they were checking up on me. Into the glowing coal of my pipe I pushed their tiny bodies. I executed them by burning. Then I heard laughter from the kitchen, a kind of playful giggle. I recognized my wife's laugh. My wife was amusing herself. Rachel's inventiveness in amusing herself is shockingly broad. I approached on the tips of my bare toes—I had left my slippers beside my desk—and spied on her. A green curtain was spread across the kitchen doorway. I pressed my body to the wall and kept my eye at the opening of the curtain.

Two ants, one and then another, dropped that very moment into a small, half-full jar of honey. They had come from nowhere, or from the air. As the third one dropped into the jar, I raised my head and suddenly saw how the fourth one detached itself from the kitchen ceiling and quickly dived through two yards of air, straight into the jar of honey. And my wife, wrapped in a crocus-yellow flower-patterned dressing-gown, stood there eating honey out of a small cup—I have already said that my wife Rachel likes honey—and the bowl of the spoon slid about over her tongue as she laughed in nonchalant self-indulgence.

In the course of observing this brief spectacle, a plan was being formulated in my brain. I had discovered two highly meaningful particulars. First, the bottom part of the jar was immersed in a dish filled with water, and that was apparently the reason why those greedy ants had no alternative but to choose this roundabout raid on the honey; second, as they dropped to their destination, the ants enthusiastically furrowed their way into the soft honey and so, before dying, they made certain there would be room for the ants that were to come after them.

"Wife," I called to Rachel, "I have discovered the ultimate weapon!"

"Shshsh," Rachel gestured at me over the teaspoon as she saw me emerging from my hiding place behind the wall. The laughter was round her eyes, and the eyes themselves were as a stream of congealed honey.

I decided to act quickly. I took all the jars of "Choice Honey" from Rachel's secret store and opened them. I poured the contents into every glass and cup and saucer and jar I could find in the house. Rachel, when she understood the idea of the trap, also did her share enthusiastically, and placed them more or less equidistant on the floor, on the armchair, on the table, approximately one container per square yard, with the bottom quarter of each of the containers immersed in a little bowl of water. I could, of course, have laid down the containers of honey without the bowls of water, but I did not do so for two reasons. First, without the water screen the ants would come the direct way, and then we would find the floor and the carpet and our few pieces of furniture and crockery and clothes all crawling with ants. The method of honey jars protected by moats promised to be a "clean" method, with the launching pad of the ants confined to the ceiling only.

Second—and this was what convinced me—the indirect route was daring (a jump into space) and clever (circumventing an obstacle), which—probably—only the strong would attempt, so that the elite of the race would be annihilated; the weak remnants, having no leaders or guides, would degenerate and die by the thousands in their nests in the walls. This major and final argument I did not reveal to Rachel. Why, I do not know myself. Perhaps it was an insight of the heart.

It was a shocking and at the same time terrifying and majestic sight. The strong moonlight that flooded the ceiling through the upward slanting slats of the shutters and left us in the half-dark, me and my wife Rachel, each hunched up in a different corner of the bed, tensely expectant, revealed all their activities. They did not all come at once. Some, perhaps the scouts, came from different directions at the same moment. They circled around, searching perhaps, made many sudden stops, groped about, and then dispersed and disappeared.

But then the sound of the goings-on in the wall suddenly stopped and a drawn-out groan, like a horn signal, gradually replaced the sound of gnawing. The cracks did not widen as the ants appeared in broad columns. First dives—trial dives into the gaping mouths of the jars leaving almost no trace. The honey did not even bubble at the touch of the tiny bodies.

I do not know all the ants' media of communications. I suppose that in addition to such ordinary means as light waves that are received through thousands of little eyes, sound and smell waves that are intercepted and broadcast through the appropriate sections of antennae, emergency measures such as warning, control, and coordination centers were brought into action. But however much I sharpened my senses, they did not perceive anything certain. Thus, I am forced to indulge in suppositions, so as not to feel like a useless bystander among the giant movement that lines up within the walls, moves in the veins of the tunnels, suddenly reveals itself behind the drift of dust from a cracking wall, and flows between the patches of light on the ceilings. Multitudes of tiny ants, heads between antennae as if they cared only about what lies ahead, turning incessantly left and right as if repeating some password. Very possibly the smell of the open tubs of honey maddens their senses. They start as stippled black lines, then the lines grow heavier, thicker, twist on the wall like eels, their tails evasive, their heads spreading out and disappearing. Where? Into the open jaws of the traps, of course. Like twisted roots they emerge and rise from the walls.

I do not know how much time passed as I looked on. I do not know how long I had slept, how often I had waked up in the dark with my ears full of groaning.

I do not know how often I met my wife's eyes.

I must have gone down to the grocer's on the corner, in my slippers, to buy more jars of "Choice Honey." I kicked the neighbor's dog who ran under my feet; he looked a rather pitiable sight to me for all his proud bark. My wife Rachel sipped honey from a glass, that I am sure of; she crooked her tongue like a spoon. I am sure I must also have eaten something of what Bilha had put down at the entrance to the roof, but I do not remember what. I dreamed that a very wide tongue, like a boxer's, slid over

my face, and I was melting away with pleasure and was sure it was my wife Rachel's tongue.

Suddenly it was morning, I cannot say of which day, and with it came a great silence. The light was dim like that of a neon lamp. My wife sat in her corner, her arm on the bed, her head on her arm, and her hair all around. The flesh of her bare arm was as white as alabaster.

The jars were black with ants. Their corpses lay in the surrounding water, too. The room looked like a battlefield after the battle. The ceiling was smooth, like a dead man's forehead; in the walls there were cracks like gaping lips, furrows like cuts in flesh, breaches like rows of rotten teeth—but clean, clean of ants. Suddenly the cracks in the wall looked to me like scars of strength. Suddenly I believed in the strength of the house. I had saved the house, I had routed the enemy.

I approached Rachel with tears of victory in my eyes. I laid my hand on her bare shoulder. Her shoulder was cold. I let my hand slide over her hair, I raised it and stroked her neck. The flesh of her neck was soft and smooth and solid and elastic all at once—but cold.

I looked at my wife Rachel's head and thought about the proper way to announce my victory to her. Her smooth long hair with its coppery shine lay loose around her head like a diadem. When the business of the trap had started and we had sat hunched up looking at what was going on, her hair had been gathered on the back of her head; now it was loose. I remembered that I had seen her dancing naked between the jars of honey without stumbling over the jars, with her loose hair fluttering like a wing round her head, set on fire whenever it was caught in a ray of light.

I insisted on plaiting her hair into a kind of wreath around her head. My hesitating hands (ever since I had come to her bed by force, the skin of her body shrank at the touch of my hand and I did not dare touch her) trembled, and to distract myself I thought of the wreathed head of the Roman soldier on the calendar.

"A golden fillet I am plaiting for your hair," I said soundlessly, "as a charm."

"No," I suddenly heard her voice from among the locks of hair.

Her voice was tired and self-indulgent—and strange.

I grunted something that might be taken as a question.

"You're making me dirty."

"I'll wash my hands."

"I want honey. I'm thirsty."

"There's no honey and no—ants."

"Sure?"

"Yes." I try to make her sense the tone of victory in that monosyllabic word. I try to tell her: I am the victor, but the wreath of victory I wind round your head.

"No," Rachel says in the same tired, self-indulgent, strange tone, and her fingers unravel what I have already finished plaiting.

"Why?"

"You're making me dirty."

I went to wash my hands.

When I came back with a glass of water in my hands, Rachel was lying on her back, laughing a lazy spoiled laugh. I held out the glass to her but Rachel looked neither at me nor at the glass; her feet, covered to the ankles by a nightgown white as a wedding dress, were drumming on the bed like they do when I tickle their soles. And I had not tickled the soles of her feet for many days now. Not since before that night when I had come to her bed by force.

How charming Rachel was then, with her playfulness, her laughter, and her joyful drumming feet. My heart ached, the glass trembled in my hand, and I did not know what to do. I went down on my knees and tried to kiss the soles of her feet.

My wife's laughter turned to silence. She withdrew her feet from me, withdrew them and enfolded them within her gown, and her pure white gown danced where her feet were kicking in excitement. What had excited her feet?

"Ants." I heard my frightened voice, and I looked around.

The honey jars were again crawling with life. Bridges of live ants spanned the moats, a raft of live ants holding each other by means of their mandibles. And black, very quick ants, the likes of which I had not yet seen in our house, were galloping across. They crossed and without wasting a minute, climbed up into the honey jars, dashed over the layers of the drowned, collected as much honey as they could manage and disappeared by way of the living bridge of ants that hung across the water.

"Very powerful ants," I said to myself. "Nothing stops them, not even the honey, not even the honey."

I caught one ant—with difficulty—and while I was biting back the pain of the sting, I studied its head through the magnifying glass. It was clear from the head and the appendages of the snout that we were dealing with a new, very powerful race. The head flowed towards the snout in perfect conical shape. It seemed as though a great, invisible force was being compressed into the narrow place the entomologists call the proboscidal style. At that point the snout splits into two limbs, pointed and bent like horns. One sees immediately that each of those pointed limbs may serve its owner as a saw, or as a file, by the use of the perforated and ridged skin on its back. The edge of the limb, the curve of the edge and its pliability—the limb can be turned through ninety degrees in each direction—indicate its many possible uses. As a levering tool, as a drilling tool, as a penetrating tool, as a hollow needle for injecting venom—I had felt its sting in the flesh of my finger—and also as a sucking tool, all according to need. Add to that the use of both horns as a lifting fork, or, when turned to face each other, as a pair of pincers. In war, we can envisage their conical, flexible head turning into a propellant neck for swinging the pair of horns like a crushing two-edged sword. I called it the bronze ant.

"And it can even resist the temptation of the honey," I said to my dismayed self.

THE NAIVE, weak, and even somewhat submissive laxity with which Rachel was lying, nude and white, in the sun on the roof, only increased my feeling of debasement. I knew I must act, I must mend the injury with deeds.

“Be a man,” I silently encouraged myself.

But what turned my determination into warlike wrath was the seemingly harmless fact that the new race of ants did not conceal its intentions at all. They destroyed openly, rushed by and destroyed, disregarding all the rules of camouflage. That disdain I could not tolerate. It was just an indifferent, careless disdain—amusing, I would have said, if I had not been on the receiving end of the joke. As it happened, a thin nylon handkerchief—Rachel’s—was dragged inside the wall; I just managed to see its end slipping in and disappearing.

“Be a man,” I told myself, and went to work.

I planned two parallel lines of defense. One tactical: stopping the cracks in the wall as soon as they appeared. The other, a long-term strategic project: brick walls on the inside of the house walls. If the ants should manage to ruin the middle walls—the ones that divided the kitchen from the room and the one between the room and the hall—which contained part of the building’s concrete skeleton, other walls would stand ready to take over the full weight of the ceiling.

I had no illusions about the other walls, the supporting walls, due for a different fate than the first, but meanwhile, during the time the ants would need to gnaw through the second walls, I would build new walls again and so on—and between one wall and the other I would, for all the murderous industry of those ants, find a little time to rest and recover my strength.

I am a builder. The materials I needed were neither many nor expensive. White plaster, white cement, broken concrete bricks, fired bricks, ordinary cement, a pail, a level, and trowels. I stacked them all properly, in an attempt to keep a minimum of order and cleanliness among the fine dust that sifted incessantly from the cracks, splits, and breaches that increased continually. First I intended to stack the materials on the roof, but I soon realized that in order to keep up with the murderous pace of the ants, I would have to stay in the room all the time, with my eyes on the wall and my hands on the tools. Even so, I had very little time left for building the retaining walls. I tried to gain time by disregarding the narrow cracks—like shallow scratches, not too dangerous really, that must have been caused by the movements in the wall. I filled only the wide gaps, those the size of a hand or larger, by pushing pieces of brick into them and plastering them over with a mixture of plaster and cement. I learned that strengthening the plaster with cement could fortify the wall for as much as a whole day before being broken down again by the angry ants.

These little tricks of the trade, and also my skilled builder's hands, won me short pauses in which I washed my hands and face, ate something, and caught a nap.

Deep in her heart, my wife Rachel must have respected my work. She did not interrupt me with talk, complaints, or demands. She kept Bilha out of the room completely, and amused herself with her friend on the rush mat on the roof. I could tell from the way they held back their laughter. We stopped eating cooked food or setting the table. There was just no time. At irregular intervals I would snatch a sandwich or two that my wife Rachel would send in to me with Bilha. The rest of the time I ate olives. My pockets were full of them. Rachel and Bilha would drag out their wailing laughter like cats, but when they would pass through the room, they would walk on tiptoe and keep silent, Bilha with a handkerchief pressed to her lips, Rachel with her lips open and her eyes attentive.

Once my wife asked me:

"How is the new house?"

I did not know whether she was asking in earnest. She was eating honey. And when my wife Rachel eats honey, who knows what goes on in her mind. I told her that I would not entrust the building of our house to others for long. I told her that as soon as I had repelled the ant invasion, I would work day and night on the new house. I swore to her that she must not doubt it, and as she stuck out her tongue full length to lick the saucer, I did not know whether her eyes were gleaming with the taste of honey or with the vision of the new house.

I told her that the date for finishing the house was written on the calendar, and we must on no account be late. Rachel rubbed her tongue against her cheek and said in a self-indulgent voice, "Good," and again I did not know what she meant.

Chapter VII: My wife admires the ants—She decorates the cracks and splits and makes them look like dragons—I suspect my wife Rachel of maintaining secret contacts with the ants—My wife Rachel brings me to my knees.

ONCE I SAW my wife Rachel standing at the wall that divides the room from the kitchen—the first that I expected would give trouble—with the palms of her hands on her breasts and her eyes staring at a file of ants.

"Isn't it wonderful!" That is what she said.

A file of ants in close order came up out of the crack and attacked the wall from the outside—something that had never happened in our house before. One might explain it as follows: While this file of ants was attacking the wall from the outside, a corresponding file of ants was chewing the wall up on the inside—and there's a pincer movement for you, operated from the inside of the wall, with the jaws closing in on it from both sides. Apparently, we had just discovered a new and highly dangerous ant tactic.

“Wonderful,” Rachel whispered, enchanted.

“What’s wonderful about it?” I shouted in a voice like thunder. “They’re ruining our house.”

“Yes,” Rachel said very quietly.

“Disgusting saboteurs,” I hissed.

“Disgusting saboteurs,” Rachel repeated after me, and then added with the same strange quiet, her voice enchanted like her eyes:

“Wonderful.”

Their insolence cost them dearly. I crushed them against the wall by the score, I trod dozens underfoot, and the few that ran off I caught and cracked like lice. A couple of hours later, when the wall cracked in exactly the same spot from the inside, accompanied by a dull rolling sound, not a single ant was to be found in the opening of the wall.

Was it a reprisal?

At any rate, Rachel sat on the bed, her eyes on the crack in the wall. Then something like a smile flitted over her thin lips—and she took herself to decorating the house.

What decorating means in a house where the walls are cracked and crumbling and fine dust sifts down from them is hard to say. Perhaps we had better call it rearranging the house—an attempt to make it look suitable for the new reality, the reality of the ants.

She wore a long dressing gown, a kind of kimono covered all over with trees and little streams, ancient castles, rocks, and dragons. The breaches I stop up, she covers; the cracks I do not touch, she decorates; and there are many of those little cracks. Round the breaches they crowd by the score, like the furrowed wrinkles around an old man’s eyes. A few strokes of lipstick alternating with eyebrow pencil are enough to make the network of wrinkly cracks look like a castle with sloping roofs on the head of a promontory, with scaly dragons posted like sentries at the entrance. The entrance, naturally, being the opening of the breach in the wall—the dangerous opening of the crack I was in such a hurry to stop up.

There were, of course, also single cracks, and if they were linked with other cracks according to some plan, I knew nothing about it. Rachel would camouflage them. She covered them over with pictures or with colored ribbons. The pictures from the large calendar in the kitchen, the Colosseum, the Arch of Titus, the antiquities of Pompeii, a couple of Jupiters and Etna belching orange smoke—it was an Italian calendar—the wonders of the ancient world covered the cracks. One ant nimbly cut out the gateway of Titus’ Arch and disappeared with it inside the crack.

I followed her fingers at work—they moved, twisted like transparent pink eels. I neglected my own work and observed hers, and in doing so I discovered something that, by my reckoning, would have a far-reaching effect on our war strategy.

I saw Rachel putting up a picture in a place where there was no crack, and I asked her about it.

“Sure there isn’t?” Rachel said.

The words were still on her lips when there was a sound of cracking, and already fine, sandy dust was sifting down from the new crack.

Now I understood not only why she had decorated that spot that looked undamaged, but also something else—something which somehow neither surprised nor annoyed me, though in other circumstances it would have made me see red and suspect treason—that my wife Rachel was not only able to hear the sound of the gnawing inside the walls but also to guess its location and direction. A kind of mysterious radar. I had to cast off suspicion and fear, and to put my mind to exploiting this power.

But my eyes lusted and my hands lay still. The mortar was dry on the trowel and I could not turn my eyes from the enchanting movements of Rachel’s body at work. Her dressing gown was tied with a blue sash whose ends danced as she moved. Her knees, white buds, swung alternately between the fold of her dressing gown, her heels went, up-and-down, up-and-down, alive, sentient, graceful, as if they, not the hands, were doing the work.

To say that I felt something seething up in me is to say nothing. Something seething to burst out, like a jet of venom. What could I do?

One leap, and like a suicide, with the trowel toylike in my hand, I buried my head in Rachel’s belly, almost to the neck, waiting for the humiliation that was to come, that had to come.

“On your knees,” Rachel commanded.

I knelt, head lowered, eyes closed. Then Rachel laid her hand on my forehead, and when I opened my eyes, I saw her murmuring something with her lips, her eyes staring into space.

I did not know what her lips were murmuring. I did not know whether it was a blessing or a curse, and I did not know either what connection there was between the murmuring of her lips and the humming that rose suddenly from inside the walls of the house, rose and died down. Her hand on my forehead was a gift of grace, more than I could contain.

For a while, even after she had taken her hand from my forehead, I was deprived of all power to fight. I admonished myself in a long speech, the long and the short of which was: No time to wallow in emotions, time for war, be a man! Fully conscious of my duty, I wanted to jump to my feet, but I could not. For a long while I went on persuading my legs, until they straightened out and rose from the ground.

Chapter VIII: In my imagination, my wife Rachel looks like a daughter of Israel and a Roman Legionary—I study the ways and tactics of the ants—What form my wife Rachel’s help takes—My ration of sleep is cut—Bilha pulls me to the floor—My wife Rachel and I reject Bilha’s offer to come and

live with her temporarily to escape the danger of our house's collapse—First touch of understanding between my wife Rachel and me.

IT IS A miracle how often my wife Rachel crosses my path within the four square yards of our house without seeing me. I am not exactly elastic, but even when there is only a hand's width between me and the doorpost, my wife Rachel gets by without touching me. And her look is like that, too: she floats and glides and does not see, like light.

Perhaps Rachel does not see me, but I cannot take my eyes off her. When she stops decorating the walls, she puts on a white smock, like a nurse's, and goes out into the sun. The smock is clean white, but the neck that buds from it is whiter, almost blueish with whiteness. Strange that the fine dust that drifts down incessantly does not turn her smock grey. Even the ants, that are everywhere in our house, do not climb on her white smock. But then they dwell in her bosom, or so I suspect whenever I see the apples of her breasts dancing inside the lapels of her white smock, her lower lip turning down and her hand spread out like a sentry at the gateway to her breasts.

When she does not wear the kimono for decorating or the white smock for other activities, Rachel wraps herself in a sheet. As she comes out of the shower on her way to the roof, naked and dripping, she is trailed by an escort of thirsty ants. When she comes back from the roof, from the sun, wrapped in a sheet with a white scarf on her head, half the sheet trails behind her like a royal train. Her walk is a dance, her posture proud, noble, and virginal. Where have I seen her before?

In my imagination, with the aid of the large calendar in our kitchen, I saw my wife in a double shape. Wearing a white gown and presented in profile, from one side of a fortress on a rock or what remains of it, there gazes a Daughter of Israel, one of those who goes out to the vineyards to be abducted—and is not abducted. And why is she not abducted? So as not to crumple or stain her pure, smooth virgin's gown so that she may continue going to the vineyards to be abducted, and so forth. And a young man in a toga stands there, a boy almost, and I swear that Rachel looks like that, like that Roman boy, clean-faced, clear-faced, a boy forever, perhaps because time has worn away his eyes, and in the picture, presented in profile, he, wearing a toga, faces the Daughter of Israel dressed in white, with two hollows for eyes, clean and clear-skinned, and also merry. And I imagine Rachel as a Roman boy in a white virgin's gown dancing between the ruins of the rock, terraces, stones, cracked walls, beheaded columns, relics of decoration, all in cheerful colors.

"Careful," my wife said in a worried voice, and she removed a curious bronze ant that was wandering over the ruins of the rock on the calendar picture. She put it on the drain board. Proud, cold, practical, the ant immediately turned to the nearest opening in the wall. The ant says nothing, but there is no better preacher, says the proverb. I took its example and went back to my work.

The trouble is, the rate at which the bronze ant spreads is so fast that sometimes my mind gives way. Of course, there are entire parts of the apartment which the ants, as far as one can see from outside, have not yet touched. The center wall (between the room and the hall), the frame of the long window, the part of the floor on which the bed stands, the entire ceiling, and the corners of the ceiling—anyone who knows anything about building knows that while all that is sound, there is no danger of a real collapse. On the other hand, if you want to bring the house down, there is no need to chew up the ceiling: You need only destroy its supports. Actually, the thicker and more solid the ceiling the more murderously crushing its collapse—and one must say one thing in favor of this old house: the people who built it did not keep closely to the engineers' specifications; believing as they did that houses should be built forever, they spared no effort in providing excellent materials. Now the ceiling of the house is heavy and very sound—and woe the day when it will collapse.

I do not think there is any need as yet for panic. If I gather together all those little lumps of fine, yellowish dirt the ants have raked out from under the tiles and inside the walls, I doubt whether it would come to a single pailful. I know, of course, that the main danger is within the walls themselves. They grind and gnaw the walls up from the inside. But, as I have said, that danger is not immediate. First, I check two or three times a day, knock with the knuckle of my finger on every place on the wall that is suspect and mark the places that sound hollow. This regular marking allows me to follow the progress of the ants inside the wall and to calculate their pace.

My wife was angry about the crooked marks I made on the wall with a thick carpenter's pencil, but to my great surprise, she did not ask me to erase them. On the contrary, she laughed a great deal in her quiet, muffled way, and took an interest in every added line. And when there came to be very many of them, my wife added a line here and a line there until we found ourselves turning out all kinds of ceremonial shapes, candelabra, ram's horns, lions, snakes that looked like illuminations, their eyes without guile and their mouths gaping from the breaches in the wall. Rachel found the sight harmless and entertaining.

Second, I hear them at their manifold operations within the walls of the house. I had learned to distinguish the different sounds: the scratching sound of the scrapers, whose job is grinding down the hard edges; the clinking sound of the drillers, who use their sharp mandibles to burrow in from the outside and out from the inside; the pounding of the hammerheads, who were the first to start the breaches and whose work is sometimes accompanied by dull plopping sounds; the sawing sound of the sawed-edge-bearers, whose work produces the humming background tune that absorbs all the other sounds. It is a sound one must be particularly careful of, because of its relaxing and sleep-inducing quality. Only at times of deep silence outside and great awareness inside could I distinguish between the different components of this giant army at work. Unfortunately, those times were rare.

I also had to allow for the possibility that the vanguard might be camouflaged by shrewd diverting and misleading devices, such as silencers, frequencies the human ear

cannot receive, and also maliciously exaggerated noises in one place, usually at the center, to cover unnoticed advances on the flank. Against that there was no easy solution. Only alertness, alertness. I reduced my ration of sleep to a couple of hours a day. And I tried—yes—to enlist my wife's hearing for the campaign.

My wife has slightly protruding, funnel-shaped ears—perhaps the only flaw in the harmony of her features. But it seems to have given her a very fine sense of hearing. When the ant invasion became worse, Rachel put another two hairpins at the sides of her head and so kept her ears free. I still do not know whether it was her ears that heard, or her raised eyebrows, or the slightly open mouth, or the quivering of her nostrils, or her lap that would suddenly freeze as the olive tint of her eyes lightened and her hands gathered in her lap as if moved by a hidden force. The first time I saw her like that I was alarmed and called out in a voice that sounded strange:

“What do you hear, Rachel?”

But Rachel did not react; not a muscle moved in her radiant face. I had not the slightest doubt: Rachel was hearing something I could not hear. That reassured me: One more vile weapon they could not use. But it also embarrassed me. What was that sound she was hearing? Why did she glow all over on hearing some sound or sounds I was entirely incapable of hearing? Did she have something in common with those sounds? Were not my enemies my wife's enemies as well?

It was easy enough to suspect my wife, but what was the good? If my wife had betrayed me and was in league with my enemies, then all that was left to me was to bundle myself up in a corner and wait for the collapse. When a man is in trouble, he interprets everything in his favor—and is saved.

So when I discovered the marks of my wife's tongue in the remains of the honey confection which contained ants' corpses by the score, I told myself that Rachel's tongue had been at the candy before the ants had been there; and if you say that my own eyes had seen the candy crawling with ants before it was eaten by Rachel, still it was possible that both Rachel and the ants had eaten from the same candy without their touching her or her touching them. And even assume that Rachel had eaten the candy with the ants on it, surely she had not eaten them from love—one does not eat one's ally. In short, I felt somewhat relieved. Still, I was not at ease until I had laid out the cadaver of an ant on the drain board and had examined it.

It was lying on its back now, arched towards the legs. Its legs, antennae, and mandibles all pointed towards each other, as though examining one another; were they of any use? When the ants realized they were not, they died, apparently so as not to be a burden to the others and hold up their work.

I was involved in studying the antennae of the bold ant—unfortunately, I had not yet been able to examine one of them alive, so fast, active and supple were they—when I felt the thick, moist breath of our neighbor Bilha on my face. I do not know what Bilha was looking at, but her face was very close to mine, and I believe that other parts of her body were not far away either. Let us leave her for a moment in this embarrassing situation, and before we allow her to whisper two hard words in my ear, let us say a few things about her.

The black clothes Bilha wears are widow's weeds. Years ago, they say, she was married to her half-stepbrother and they were not allowed to have any children, in case they should turn out to be monsters. She was very beautiful and her stepbrother, that is to say, her husband, imagined that she was cheating on him all the time and he often beat her. Strangely enough, the beatings did not spoil her looks and even made her eyes and limbs appear more sensual. Finally, her brother-husband accused her of having an affair with some old, lonely bachelor who was living nearby. Then he tied a rope to a hook in the ceiling, and hanged himself.

The story of her affair with the old man was absolutely true. Bilha loved to help people. That was her greatest passion—perhaps her only one. Her widow's weeds were very becoming to her. She was a little chubby, but not like those fat women whose bodies spread every which way when they walk. Her flesh was firm, only her curves curved more, so that draped in black—all her dresses were black—they looked like restrained impulses, and that made her attractive to many men. But Bilha only went where she could help. Where a wife was barren and the husband demanded a child, Bilha would turn up and become pregnant, give birth, and leave. Where the blood groups of a husband and wife were incompatible, the husband would go to Bilha, and she in the course of time would give his wife a baby. Her babies were good-looking and healthy, and both parties were better off for it. Bilha was paid well—though she never asked for anything, since she regarded her help as a good work that brings its own reward—and with that the babies were no longer hers. Even now there was no black widow's gown, tight or loose, in which Bilha did not look imprisoned. When Bilha walks, you hear a couple of pairs of shoes in her walk. If I had not heard the patter of two or three pairs of shoes, it was because she had taken them off, and there she was beside me, barefoot. All I saw was her left eyebrow, so close was her pleasant face to mine. But the eyebrow was ugly, arched with a fat black crayon, and below it a couple of hairs that remained from the natural brow.

"Your wife is barren," Bilha said to me. As if I did not know. My wife would not tolerate a foreign body inside of her. She would expel it and add something of her own—some retchings of disgust, so to say. That was how it had been on our wedding night, and that was how it had been on the Sabbath when I had taken her by force. For hours she had washed herself in the shower. Her wedding nightgown hung in the wardrobe with the stain of shame on its seam. She did not wear that nightgown, but she did not throw it away either. For years it had been hanging in the closet since our wedding night. These little things we had not told even to the rabbi. Only we two knew them. At least, that was what I had thought until now.

"Mrs. Gal," I whispered angrily, "Why do you suddenly say such things about my wife?"

"I am not Mrs Gal," Bilha said in that same dull voice of hers that sounded as if it squeezed itself out of the flesh. "I am Rachel's friend."

"Perhaps you are my friend, too?" I said to annoy her.

"If you like, if you like," she said.

"You're Mrs. Gal, that's what you are," I said and felt my knees trembling.

"I'm Bilha, I'm Bilha," she whispered. "I only want to help."

"If you're not Mrs. Gal, then you are an old maid. There, that's what you are. You're just an old maid."

"Call me a widow, please."

"All right, an old widow."

"Not old—experienced. Please. Only experienced."

The big chest nearly muzzled me, and her voice was the kind of panting voice, accompanied by such whispered laughs, as I had only heard when she and my wife were at their little games. And I could not bear it. Though I kept silent. The years had taught me to suffer in silence. I kept silent, but my bowels turned over inside me: any foreign presence between my wife and me was hateful to me. Inside me, in my mind, I spilled their blood for jealousy of my wife. Otherwise, what would have made me rise to wage war so uncompromisingly against the black ant?

"An old maid," I insisted. "Yes, an old maid and not Mrs. Gal and not an experienced widow. And if you don't like it, there is the door, Mrs. Gal." I wanted to point at the door, but the floor was in the way.

"You tell me to go?" She said straight out of her breast and into my mouth. "I believe that it's not me who is holding you, but the other way round."

It is true that the two of us were bundled up on the floor like a ball of string, but she was lying, of course, shamelessly. The floor of our kitchen is all of a yard and a half long and half a yard wide, and all she needed was to play her shabby little game of pretending to lose her balance, hold on to my shoulders that were bending over the ant, and drag me after her onto the floor. Easy to fall, but hard to get up. And there she was, all groans and panting laughter, and me—nothing but anger.

"Rachela, Rachela," Bilha called from the floor, "come and listen to something nice."

As I got to my feet, shaking the dust from my trousers—a silly thing to do, there was no longer any place in our house free from that dust—and trying to get my breath under control, I saw Rachel's pleasant head rising slowly from behind the opening of the hall, her eyes shining and questioning. Bilha smoothed her dress and gave Rachel a shy laugh, as if to say: "I tried, but . . ."

"There, that's what you are," I shouted in a sudden outburst of nerves and tore the broach—an enamel beetle—from Bilha's chest, like cashiering an officer in public, and threw it at Rachel's feet.

Bilha wanted to cry but laughed. Then she covered her chest with her hands, as though ashamed of those breasts that had been of no avail, and hurried out of the house.

Not an hour had passed when Bilha returned, her face made up, wearing another black dress, holding a bottle of wine and a pyrex bowl with all kinds of food. The sense of hunger had grown a little dull in me lately, while my sense of danger had grown more acute. I would willingly have done without the chicken and the mashed potatoes and the pickles and the cold white wine on this terribly hot day, so as not to stop the work of shoring the house up.

But as the food was there, and Rachel was eating, and the table was laid, I also sat down to dinner.

First Bilha offered to lay the table in her house. We refused the offer. Then she proposed that we eat on the roof. I said that I did not object to Rachel and Bilha eating on the roof, but that I had to stay in the house—and actually I was surprised that Mrs. Gal did not understand by herself that it would be pure madness to leave the inside of the house and abandon it to the ants.

We ate in silence, listening for any sign of ants working. Our table was not set in the usual sense. It was covered with brown-white dust, like everything else in the house. But since we regarded that merely as a temporary situation, we did not go to any trouble, and since we used no knives and forks, but our hands, we could do also without the rest of the tableware, like napkins and all that. Rachel and I sat facing each other on stools on two sides of the table, and Bilha sat on the bed. Even though she was sitting opposite me, Rachel did not look at me; her eyes were elsewhere. She sat straight, proud, sparing of movement, her nose widening a little as she put some chicken into her mouth, but for all that she finished her portion well before we finished ours. She sat without moving and listened. Suddenly her eyes sparkled. I could not say from what place in the wall it came, that dull roll of thunder that almost congealed my blood. When my wife's eyes sparkle, the olive-green turns lighter and floods the pupils and leaves nothing of them but two fading vertical lines. Bilha was frightened, her look jumped from Rachel to me and from me to Rachel; she shook a single ant from the heights of her bosom and cried:

“The walls are coming down!”

“Yes, yes” Rachel said, wonderfully quiet.

“The house is crawling with ants . . . crawling . . . crawling . . .” Bilha said, and disgustedly shook a few of them off her widow's gown.

“Oh yes,” said Rachel proudly. “They get everywhere, everywhere.”

“We're moving to another house soon,” I said, and thought, what business do they have in the pleats of Bilha's dress?

“When?” Bilha asked. I told her the date. Rachel listened indifferently, her glance hanging on Bilha's fingers that were shaking ants from the pleats of her dress.

“But,” Bilha cried worriedly, “Until then something might happen . . . even . . .” she slapped her hand over her mouth so as not to say what might happen. Confused, she rose and went to Rachel and fell on her knees before her:

“Rachela, Rachela, I'm worried. Come to me, both of you. I have two rooms. They are at your disposal. Stay with me until your house is finished. I beg you . . .” She embraced Rachel's legs—a curse on her!—as I had wanted to do so often and had never done. Bilha's hands were bare, and Rachel's legs were also bare under her white smock, and Bilha's bare, fleshy hands twisted round Rachel's legs—four limbs, like twisting adders.

Yet, the wonder of it—Rachel did not look at her. She looked at me. At first there was a look of greenish bright ice in her eyes, that armored look in which she

entrenched herself whenever I—her lawful wedded husband—tried to touch her. Now, Rachel's legs were frozen, numb to the touch of Bilha's imploring hands.

"Only to help," Bilha moaned between tears. "Me, I only want to help . . ." She was desperate, hysterical. She wanted to demonstrate her readiness to help and for lack of anything else caught a coal black ant on Rachel's white thigh—poor woman. Immediately she gave out a shriek, took her hands off Rachel's legs, and put her bitten, burning finger, throbbing with venom, into her mouth, moaning part from pain, part from worry.

"Impossible," Rachel said in a whisper. "Impossible," I said too at the same moment, soundlessly, whisper for whisper, accent for accent together with Rachel. I looked at Rachel and Rachel looked at me. We had never looked at each other that way, Rachel and I. It seems that we even smiled the same smile. How otherwise explain the fact that Bilha now looked at me and Rachel alternately, with an expression of astonishment and fear, and could find no words as she rose, the stung finger forgotten in her mouth, and withdrew from the room, walking backwards?

"Look," Rachel called to me while she squatted down and held out her open hand to me, and on it a bronze ant, a horse of an ant, one of those which I had just now examined under the magnifying glass.

Rachel was a real genius in everything that had to do with delicate sensations. While I discovered it under the magnifying glass, Rachel had discovered it with her ears, her nostrils, or perhaps with some sense I did not know of. She touched her hands to mine, and the ant rapidly crossed over to my hand and climbed my forearm. I touched my forearm to hers, and the ant crossed her forearm and climbed on to her upper arm. Her upper arm touched on mine, and suddenly we found ourselves arm in arm and Rachel looked at me, not with desire, but not with repulsion either, with something new that I find very hard to define or even to understand—but my heart grew wider within me.

At any rate I felt clearly that Rachel and I now shared a secret.

Chapter IX: A visit from my assistant that ends badly—
I lose the ledger and Bilha.

THE VERY NEXT day Bilha returned to us, a dressing on her sore finger, and a combination of goodness and reproof in her eyes. She did not come alone. With her came the assistant foreman of our builders' gang, Moshe Kattan, a big fellow with steady hands and a slow mind, and wholly dedicated to his work. That was the reason I had made him my assistant. What Bilha wanted from Moshe, or what Moshe, who is married to a dumpy, bothersome wife, wanted from Bilha, I do not know. Perhaps they had met in front of our door. At any rate, as they came in they did not pause: Bilha ran to Rachel, and Moshe bared his strong teeth to me.

I stood embarrassed. I did not know whether his teeth were exposed in a threatening grin or in a friendly smile. I wanted to be polite and friendly but did not remember why or for what reason I should be. After all, this man who had been working with me for years deserved a clap on the shoulder; unfortunately, I could not clap him on the shoulder without soiling his white shirt—he must have put it on specially for this visit—with my mortar-covered hands.

Moshe looked at me and looked at the room and blinked and wiped his forehead with the back of his arm, then let his eyes rest on me and said:

“So what about it?”

A new hole had opened up in the wall and I had been about to stop it with a brick and mortar just as he had come in. The wall was not repaired, and there he was standing and waiting for an explanation, and I had not even offered him a chair to sit down on. I wanted to put that right, but Moshe was already standing there, feet apart, as though planting himself there, with his lips curving down slightly—just like when he saw me putting up a scaffolding with split planks and wanted to draw my attention to it without looking up at me, so as not to embarrass me in front of the whole gang.

“Sit down, sit down,” I said to him, “an important guest like you,” but with my exaggerated politeness I only complicated the situation, for there was nowhere to sit down. On the bed, the only thing that stood a little apart from the heaps of bricks, sand and mortar, there was not a hand’s breadth free of Rachel’s sheets, smock and all that—for while Rachel had been as careful as always about keeping her body clean and decorating the walls, now she had begun to be a little careless about her clothes, which she used less and less and which she shed with the indifference of a reptile shedding its old skin.

Moshe sat down on the bed, sank into a heap of woman’s things, and fixed his eyes on me severely.

“We have been worried about you,” he said finally. “The contractor says, what do I care, Jacob or no Jacob, the job must get done, and on time.” I ran to the kitchen to the calendar, leafed through it hurriedly, and called out:

“There’s the date, you see, it’s written down here.”

“So what if it’s written down?”

“Of course it’s written down, there.”

“I say,” Moshe insisted, “So what’s the good if it’s written down?”

“Of course it is. Would it be any good not having it written down?”

“I didn’t say that . . .”

“You’d better remember what you’ve said and what you haven’t, Moshe Kattan.”

I wanted to put him in his place, or actually, I wanted him to go away and leave me alone. Thank God there was more than enough to do here without any contractors’ errand-boys.

“All right,” Moshe said after he had thought it over for a while. “So how much time do we have left?”

“How much time? I’ll tell you in a minute . . .” Again I ran to the large calendar

in the kitchen and leafed through it hurriedly. I could not remember whether I had torn off last week's leaf. And Rachel, how many had Rachel torn off for decorating the walls? Could I help it that the pace of those creatures in the walls did not keep time with the calendar in the kitchen?

Or how could I know how many days and nights had passed since the ants had started their invasion and how many were still left? I did not know what to tell Moshe. But it was he who helped me out:

"There! You see? Only a couple of weeks."

"A couple of weeks, sure," I said.

"And how do you imagine anything can get done if everybody is busy with his own house? He says he's been sending you notes and you haven't even taken the trouble to reply."

"Maybe." I made an effort to remember. His look encouraged me to do so; there was a somewhat friendly shrewdness in it. "Yes. I've even put them in the ledger. Everything is there."

"Thank God, thank God." Moshe stood up from the bed and shook his pants. Then he stretched and yawned, and his hand flew up to his mouth and raked a single black ant from the corner of his lips. I saw its perfect antennae beat uselessly in the air—an embarrassing situation for an ant—but its jaws were stuck in the thick skin of Moshe the builder.

"Just a moment," I shouted and snatched the ant from his fingers and laid it on the little heap of sand.

Moshe burst out in a big laugh, caught my hand, and gave it a strong shake. "I told the contractor, as long as Jacob is alive, I am Jacob's assistant. And now, I told him, now that Jacob isn't here, I take his place."

"Thank you, thank you," I said. I drawled on purpose, so even a deaf man would not have missed the irony of my gratitude. From the first moment, I knew that Moshe had come only to see how the wind was blowing. I laughed to myself and made my voice sound careless:

"I'm no longer foreman. You're the foreman instead of me."

My guest tried to smile and tried to be angry at the same time, but the two attempts tangled and deprived him of his speech. He had walked into the trap I had set for him. If he rejected my statement, he would commit himself, so to say, to eternal servitude to his master—namely, me. If he accepted it, he would as much as admit my right to appoint him as foreman in my place. For a while he stood speechless, then he hesitated, and then he said in a whisper:

"We thought you were reliable."

"Yes," I answered. My mind was on the outside wall of the room, that was swelling, right under my eyes, near the window frame.

"All my life I have never heard of a foreman leaving his gang in the middle of a job, not for all the money in the world. We thought you were reliable."

"Sir," I could not hold myself back any longer, "you're talking to me about

reliability? Who has kept the ledger to the last decimal? Who has guarded it like the apple of his eye? Reliable, you say, but who, if you please, assistant foreman Kattan, has used that word more often than I? Perhaps you remember, Mister Kattan—if your memory has not been muddled up by some base, indecent ambition, of course—perhaps you remember what is written on the little brass souvenir I gave you when I made you my assistant? Reliability. And why reliability? Because with reliability you build a house, and without reliability you destroy it. That's it. You destroy it. Hhh"—a snort of pleasure escaped from within me—"here they come. Do you hear them coming? First with a whispering, creeping, rubbing sound, a few grains dripping, a chance gnawing, then a continuous chewing with sounds of grinding and drilling in it, and crrrack—the first blast, and then a disturbing hum, day and night, then millions of little grains shift from place to place to make room for trillions of little grains that shift from place to place to make room . . ."

Rachel, from the roof, from the sun, stopped the flow of my words with a gesture of her hand—both of us, Moshe and I, had been moving step by step, face to face, with me pushing him back all the time, till we reached the door to the roof—while her other hand held a sheet that barely covered her breasts and belly.

"Mr. Kattan wants to say something," Bilha's voice rose from behind the sheets—she must have been naked, too, abandoned to the sun, tanning. Moshe did not even look at them, his face was glued to me and he repeated perhaps for the tenth time, enunciating exactly but in an incongruous whisper:

"Give me the ledger."

"A man should defend his house," I cried and looked at Rachel over Moshe's shoulder. I looked angrily, reprovingly, but did not know how to say a harsh word to her without making Moshe turn his face. "And that too is being reliable."

"Give me the ledger," Moshe repeated.

"As you wish," I told him, not without a touch of formality. "The ledger is a very important book. Everything is written down in it, Mr. Kattan, and you can tell the contractor, whatever his name is, Kerzenbaum, so too. There is nothing missing there. every spare hour of my life I've put into keeping it. Next to the Book I keep it, Mr. Kattan. It has its place of honor on the bookshelf . . ."

It was not on the bookshelf. The Book was lying there, in its place—covered by a thin layer of dust that had sifted down from the walls—but the ledger was not there. I tried to remember where I had put the ledger. When had I last held the ledger? What had I done with the ledger? Not of course, that I let Moshe notice my confusion. On the contrary, I told him all the while: Here, here is the ledger, in a minute you'll get the ledger, just a moment, just a moment. I walked up and down the room with my eyes on the floor. The room was not large and there was really nowhere to look. But I troubled myself so as not to meet Moshe's eyes. I pushed my head under the bed, came upon a main ant path, all of a sudden, and made a note of it in my mind. But I did not see the ledger there. I looked for it under the armchair, under the easy chair, under the night table. Suddenly I remembered, and crawled to the tile skirting around

the kitchen floor. There—I recalled—I had used it as a footstool to stand on while plugging up a particularly high crack in the wall. First I came across the book mark of the ledger. I sniffed at the book mark, and guided by its smell I started to dig with both hands—as I had seen the ants do—in a little heap of sand mixed with mortar. I had prepared that little heap in the middle of the room, so that I could run fast to wherever a crack might appear, and I shifted it now, not without some misgivings. The ledger was lying under the heap, its binding ragged, some of the pages sticking out, crumpled and dirty with mortar. “I knew I’d find it,” I declared.

Moshe caught hold of the ledger, and without a thought for the filth that was getting on the sleeves of his white shirt, cradled it in his arms as though he were saving a child from a burning house. Bilha was waiting for him at the door to the roof, all dressed.

“Wait, Mr. Kattan,” Rachel said, “I’ll wrap it in a sheet.” She meant the ledger. I did not see how she could wrap the ledger in a sheet without exposing her body to Mr. Kattan’s eyes, unless she wanted to make fun of him. Fortunately, Kattan is a serious man, and now he was running down the stairs, with his heavy shoes bumping—surrounded by the light but close patter of Bilha’s three or four pairs of shoes—and coughing dry coughs. I had not heard him coughing when he came in.

Rachel laughed.

“I wonder whether he has taken a couple of these ants along in his throat,” I said to myself, and hurried to my post.

Chapter X: My wife Rachel’s little tribute to the ants—
I trick the ants that trick me—Brief sur-
ceases—My wife Rachel suckles and I
suck—Man’s advantage over the ant.

TWO, THREE, perhaps four days after that visit, in the middle of the day, I suddenly awoke with my left hand on the supporting wall I was just then building and my right hand on my knee. For a moment I panicked; I hurriedly picked up half-bricks and ran to stack them in the corners of the room, ready to stop up the dangerous cracks. But soon I relaxed; I even smiled to myself. What had frightened me was the sudden silence. I had imagined the dangerous possibility that I might have lost my sense of hearing.

But I had just imagined it. After all, my sense of hearing was what had waked me the moment the sounds had stopped and the silence began. And the silence was nothing but a slight pause, two blinks perhaps, in the work—a stage completed, a change of shift, or something of the kind—and immediately the walls were humming with activity again. The direction and sound of some undertones helped me to calculate the location of the vanguard: about three arms’ lengths from the concrete column that runs through the kitchen wall. That column and the one in the wall of the hall are actually the two main pillars on which the roof of our house rests. To judge by those concealed

sounds, there was no reason for immediate worry. My hearing had become so acute and fine that I think I could have told the overseers exactly in what sector of the wall the ants were wasting precious public time in forbidden antenna-gossip.

All in all, things were not too bad; one might even say they were fairly okay. There was no urgency about the work and we could take long rests. And since we did not work much and allowed ourselves to sleep for extended periods, it was only rarely that we would feel hungry. Then my wife would run on tiptoe—not without first giving me a questioning look, and my encouraging her with a lift of eyebrows—across the sunny roof, pick up the dish our neighbor Bilha, who had not forgotten us, good soul that she was—had pushed under the door, and return blinking to the comforting twilight of the room. And we would eat cheese sandwiches and leave the dessert in the cups. I did not ask what my wife did with those cups of dessert. But I knew. She put them in the kitchen on the drain board and the ants ate the dessert—that was her little tribute. And I could only smile.

It made them—the ants—remarkably broad-minded. They did not climb on the bed while I was lying on it. They did not attack me during my short naps. They walked around my feet even if it meant they had to detour, and that is no small matter when it is a question of runners. Those runners or couriers move only by the shortest paths. Thus, they climb up my bare foot on one side and down the other. I did not interfere with that—no, not me. That much I had learned from my experience with this efficient, strong race. (Their efficiency, in particular, I am sure, does not have its like in the animal world. They even turn obstacles to their advantage. Two ants hurrying about their business might suddenly meet on a narrow path, crash into each other, and tie themselves and their loads into a knot, and then suddenly you see them forge ahead side by side, pulling and carrying their joint load at great speed, like a well-trained team of mules.) Actually, I was grateful in a way that they did not make use of my naps to burrow a straight—that is to say, more economical—passage right through my foot.

So there was actually a kind of unspoken agreement between us, a negative one, you might say, about what not to do, but an agreement all the same. In all other respects I had to be very careful.

Those cracks, now. I realized that here there was room for cooperation with the ants. After all, they did not want it to be seen on the outside how far they had progressed with their work, and every crack, crevice, gap was information, valuable information. They understood this perfectly well; they were so cautious, in fact, that though their tunnels led straight to the drain board, the only way they would come to eat their dessert, to grease their armor with its fat, and to gain new strength, was by a long, roundabout route, through a visible slit below the rotting frame of the kitchen window.

I pretended that I did not catch on to the trick. That was why I did not stop up that crack below the kitchen window. On the other hand, I am not careless about filling other cracks. And this is how: as I hear the sound of crumbling growing louder

somewhere in the wall, I provide myself with a piece of brick, moist mortar, and a trowel and wait for the breakthrough. The moment the wall cracks, I stand ready to close it up with the rapid movements of a skilled builder, and so the ants that patrol inside the wall do not have a chance to notice that I have learned the location of one of their reconnaissance squads . . . It is a life full of interest.

My wife helps me. From time to time she draws my attention to a fissure, crack, or gap that is about to develop. Not with words—for some time now we have no longer been communicating with words, so as not to dull the sharpness of our hearing. Nor is there need for them: I read the movements of her lips and follow the direction of her look.

The two of us, my wife Rachel and I, even have long moments of refreshing relaxation. When the lines of light between the slats of the closed shutters fade, I give a little pull at the shutter cord and the intervals of light widen and become lookout slits. The two of us, my wife and I, each stand on a brick—the window is high—and press our eyes to one of the slits and look out at the sea. And we speak from the fullness of our hearts, like poets, but with proper pauses between the words:

“The sea—on fire—”

“The sea—in flood—”

“The sea—on fire—on fire—”

“The sea—in flood—in flood—”

We scan the words, with proper pauses, with modulation of voice, so as not to allow the tension of listening to slacken, which in our situation would mean suicide. Then I go away from the window, my heart breaking, I kneel down, embrace my wife’s knees and press my head into her groin. And my wife goes down on her knees opposite mine and places the nipples of her breasts in my mouth—this is now the closest contact between me and my wife—and I suck greedily at her hard, dry breasts. Nothing moves in my wife’s body. She kneels frozen on her knees, beautiful, icy, dripping cold mercy unselfishly into my mouth, my throat, the sinews of my body, filling me with the venom of life. Her ears are listening—only in her ears does the blood pulse. She listens. I know that she listens; that is why I can indulge in the mercy of sucking for a while.

“God,” I said to myself, “You have given man feeling. And what have You given the ant? Only labor, labor. It is a lie to say that the ant makes itself a kingdom in one cubit of soil. Even at this moment they are burrowing ahead, scraping, breaking, drilling, and crumbling, conquering yet a little more space within the walls of my house . . .”

At that thought I jumped to my feet, and so did my wife. And amid the darkness that suddenly filled the room, we hurried to light a candle.

INTERLUDE

Why do the flying ants not fly high? Let me propose an answer of my own to that question, an answer in the form of a question: Why should they? What does Don Quixote, knightliest of all knights, say? Ants' wings bode ill for ants. The question resembles another: Why do the ants not raise their heads to see the world? They do not need to, as I have already explained, and we would be greatly surprised to see those ants, whose beauty is wholly functional, waste their time on beauty of a different order. Thus the wings help the two sexes meet for coupling; afterwards, they fall off. Which, it is said, also relates to an ancient tradition.

When God created the ants, he gave them long wings. And so, the ants flew near the sun, enjoying the radiance and beauty of creation. But having radiance and beauty in abundance, they began to despise it and lapsed into dreary idleness and terrible boredom. Up rose the Queen of the Ants and with her own mouth trimmed her wings, leaving only about one third for the coupling flight. Seeing this, the other ants followed suit; and since then, say the wise men who know the tongues of all alike, there are no longer synonyms for "idleness" and "boredom" in the ant language.

Chapter XI: The ant that was out of line, and its end—
My wife as executioner—The many uses
of the mortal remains—Some legends and
traditions

THE GLANDS of my heart must not yet have dried up. They still secrete strange feelings, humanistic poisons—relics of the milk age. It can't be helped: we have been suckled on milk instead of steel, for our sins. I beat my breast in penitence, but I cannot deny my heart—and my heart aches for that ant and its frightful end. I should pass over this story, but I cannot. So I will tell about the ant that found itself out of line.

I came through the kitchen and saw a great commotion on the drain board. On the flat square of the drain board, which has an area of a billion square heads in ants' measure, something like a parade or a procession or a demonstration seemed to be taking place. I did not see the reviewing stand, but it was easy to guess that it was inside the wall, in one of the arched approaches. But on the great square—aside from those powerful-looking ants with bent heads, apparently the ushers, that were posted, each in its place, all around the field of the spectacle, antennae up and jaws bared—everything else was in motion.

And what motion! Ranks upon ranks of ants flowing out of an arched opening in

the wall, passing over the marble expanse and flowing into another opening in the wall. It was marvellous to see the strange and yet economical order of their motion. Regiments, brigades, camps, while trotting along in unison, block by block, loading sugar without breaking their well-tempered steps. Clearly, an organizing feat of high degree. For every file of runners there was a file of lifters. Grains of sugar were strewn in abundance all over the drain board—I do not know who had strewn them there, perhaps my wife!—and this was the order in which they worked:

The hosts of runners, moving in columns, advance through stationary columns; at some signal, the moving columns, as one, grasp white, glistening sugar in their jaws and continue their precise flow. Shortly afterwards, at some signal that escapes my senses, the stationary columns in turn grasp sugar granules, as one, and load them on the backs of the running ants—an enormous army forging ahead with divine confidence and geometrical precision, with each of its units carrying two large grains of sugar. One can easily imagine that that is the ants' salute—sugar between the jaws and a white grain of sugar on the back—which the group on the hidden stand demands.

From time to time, once every few seconds, the columns of runners come to a dead halt; the lifting ranks have already assumed the same confident steady flow, while the columns that have halted take over the abrupt cadence of lifting and loading; and so on, and so forth.

I did not manage to discover whether it was a huge army marching on and on, with the vanguard not knowing of the rear, and while the first brigades were already back at work, butting and cutting, cracking and grinding in the twisted cavities of the wall, the brigades in the rear were still parading their serried ranks, or whether it was perhaps a single corps marching around in a circle, part inside the wall and part outside on the marble square.

I could not find out; it is not easy to distinguish one ant from another. But how glorious was that whole army! A thousand two-way gears, a giant grinding machine of serrated strips moving against each other, a black river set with silver blades—my heart overflows with fear and admiration . . . Enough! I shall never be able to describe so great a spectacle. A judgment in motion! My eyes cannot encompass it. For relief I turned to an ant I suddenly discovered out of line, alone, miserable, but so wonderful, so small in its loneliness and so great in its hurried, confused movements . . .

How had it dropped out of line? I do not know. Suddenly there it was outside. Perhaps it had lost step, got entangled in its legs, and was not admitted again by the closed ranks. Perhaps it had tried to return and the proud ushers had pushed it out.

The ant looked here and there. For a while it ran round about the parade ground, with its legs brushing against each other—taught to run in the ranks, it did not know where to make its legs go now that it was alone. It almost twisted its back, poor little thing, as it bent its head until the joints cracked, left and right, in a hopeless search—and the sugar head pressed down on its back joints.

At last it recovered a little and came to the end of the marble square. And there it stood and saw in the middle of a giant canyon—a kind of square crater with steep

sides—a tiny hill of soil with its slopes dipping into some small lakes of water divided by tongues of glazed earth. Out of the hill a cactus proudly grew, with dark green, juicy, fleshy leaves, one leaf growing from the other and reaching up and sideways, a coarse plant that had given up thin lacy fronds and pliant branches weaving in the wind. Instead, it grew thick leaves like common working hands, their skin all wrinkles and thorns.

A cactus in the sink—how come? Rachel, of course. One day she had seen a thin stalk rising from a crack in the run-off. Apparently it had taken root somewhere in the U-bend below the sink. Some of the dust the ants had chewed up must have lodged there; in any case, the sink could no longer be used. It was clogged with dust. Not that we needed it. The little food we used Bilha gave us, sometimes in a covered dish under the door, sometimes, when Rachel consented, from Bilha's own hands. So my wife had collected a little of the dust the ants had ground in the sink and laid a cactus leaf on it. Again my wife had been right when she thought the ants' dust was highly fertile. The tap dripped perhaps at the rate of a drop an hour. But that was enough for a many-leaved cactus to grow within a few days—juicy, angry, but beautiful. Rachel looked at it from time to time. It seemed to grow under her looks. I never understood why she had wanted a cactus. The top leaf bent sideways, flat like an altar. It was like an altar. It was very prickly. Its hooked tip pointed upward. The ant ran down the smooth white wall of the crater, hurried to the tongue of dry land that separated the lakes, did not halt to rest in the giant shadows of the cactus that floated in them, and immediately started on the climb, with the two sugarheads still loaded on its body. Some internal maturation, enthusiasm perhaps, seemed to propel its legs which did not get in each other's way now, and hovered rapidly, as if they carried neither body nor load.

It clambered up the first leaf, then up the second. Stung all over its body, it stopped to rest on the third leaf, near its goal, trying to pull the thorns from its body and to lick its wounds. But when it was high up on the third leaf and saw the whole wide crater lying there, the shadows of the leaves bathing in the lakes and the bank of the drainboard plain sloping down, it immediately stopped treating its wounds and climbed on. The sugar-heads weighed it down, but it carried them, a prisoner of habit, one between its mandibles and the other on its back. From time to time it disappeared among the twisting paths of the cactus, and I thought, not without worry, that I might not see it again. High on the next leaf it reappeared, bruised and full of energy, and there it raised its head high like a charger lifting its proud neck.

The crater was already far away; the giant camp whose movements seemed from that distance like a loom at work, warp into woof, occupied only a corner of the wide space. Then the ant dropped the white sugar-head from its jaws.

With the mandibles free, the little body leaped ahead, drawn upward with new strength, looking as though it would never tire. Between poisonous spearheads it ran over hills, jumped over pits, and there it was finally on the flat, altar-like leaf. Swiftly it ran across and at its end, high up on the erect finger, it stopped; its head straightened

and stretched out. What the ant saw there, I do not know. The lines of the landscape, the low hills, the lakes, the walls of the crater, the warp and woof of the armies on the marble square, the rough, cold, wide walls riven by the splits, their bowels in tunnels and cracks, and beyond the glass planes bands of blue blinking with distant lights. It stood dead still; its rounded head, glistening in the light, stretched as though to inhale the sights.

Then it dropped the second sugar head from its back and its body leaped forward in a magnificent, free, glorious leap, its hind legs last to leave the pinnacle of the altar; and as it drew an arc through the air, its head shone, glowed high up on the arc.

Yes, that was how the little ant that got out of line looked, before it fell to the ground. Or rather, in the little muddy lake. The ant did not die. The alert messengers of the army did their duty and pulled it out of the water. They also carefully collected the two sugar-heads the unruly ant had dropped.

Yes. The unruly ant—its fate was sealed. They laid it at the end of the drain board square on the edge of the crater.

It did not even resist. Harsh is the vengeance of the ant tribe, but the life of the rebel is not outside the law. No one took private revenge. Harsh is the vengeance of the ant tribe, but not wasteful.

There was the pulling method. According to this method, the ant is pulled from both ends, like the rope in a tug-of-war, until it is torn apart, or rather disjointed—for the ant's body, as we know, is all joints—at the weakest places, namely where the different joints are connected. The parts of the body come in useful, each in its own way; the head as a sledge, the jaws as extension levers, the belly as a mobile honey laboratory; what the intermediate joints, the antennae, and the legs are used for, I did not see—I am sure they do not go to waste either.

There was the pecking method. This method is divided into different degrees of severity, from pecking out part or all of the eyes to amputating the antennae—which deprives the ant of all its senses except those of pain and hunger. But since it no longer has any means of orientation, it runs about for a while until it dies of hunger. And here it should be noted that no one touches it until it dies a natural death. Then its parts are used in the same way as with the pulling method. Harsh is the vengeance of the ant tribe, but orderly.

Harsh is the vengeance of the ant tribe, but not lacking in a sense of humor. Meaning, of course, organized humor, or entertainment. An ancient tradition—I forget where I have read it—tells of an ancient ant ruler who ordered the lateral, sideways looking eyes of his own body to be pecked out for all the people to see. This spectacle became so popular that the day was proclaimed eye-pecking day for all time to come. Another ruler gave orders—and this became a main rule of architecture—to pave the gates of the tunnels and passages with rebels' heads, thereby achieving three lofty ends with one single stroke:

Punishment of rebels,
Strengthening of the gates,

Architectural beauty.

But back to our ant, whom we left lying, alone and trembling, on the edge of the great crater, awaiting its fate, but still whole, yes, whole in all its limbs. The great moment, the moment of the flight, still quivered in its limbs. Had they forgotten it? Had they forgiven it?

As these thoughts went through my head, I already knew that they made no sense. But the solution of the riddle came from an unexpected direction. My wife Rachel. She came, dressed in black glistening net, stepped straight to the drain board, caught the ant between two fingers, did something with two other fingers, and when she put the ant back on the drain board—all this with breath-taking speed—it was already deprived of its mandibles and antennae, and my wife hissed furiously: “Parasite, parasite.”

We know the ant’s fate already. Now while we mourn its fate, let us ask what is done with its body after its death.

Let us turn over the leaves of the calendar—one of the few objects the ants do not destroy, even though I often find them walking between its leaves. Not many more leaves are left till the one with the fort that rises proudly above the chasm, with the face of a Roman boy on one side, beautiful as Rachel, and on the other side a maiden dancing in the vineyards, clothed in white, also like Rachel. Well then, there is a wall on that picture, half breached. And in front of the breach, a row of fellows dressed in togas are pushing and pulling at a black iron beam hanging on ropes—the famous ram for shaking and breaching ramparts. I do not know whether the ants saw it here and imitated it. What they use for a ram is the body of an ant with the honey drained out, hardened in a mixture of secretions of which the formula, for all I know, has not yet been unriddled by science.

A sharp eye will immediately discern the ant shape of the ram. This leads us to the hypothesis that the Romans, outstanding technicians and organizers that they were, had indeed learned to cast the ram in a form copied from the ant, which has always been an example of solid and at the same time an economically streamlined structure. The possibility cannot be excluded that the Romans—whom history knows as poor in original inventiveness in comparison with their great talent for adopting the ideas and discoveries of others—also learned the art of the ram from the ants.

For this is how the ant looks: the perfect ovality of its body segments; its large, solid head—a natural sledge head; the central segments that extend the leverage and offer natural hand-holds; and finally, the long-drawn belly which in movement converts the whole body into one mass of energy. I have not seen the ants butting with those hard black bodies of theirs against the last of the concrete blocks and brick barriers that remain in the walls of my house. But I have heard them. I have heard the concrete blocks crumbling, the brick barriers splitting, cracking and falling away, and the walls of our house opening, gap after gap, onto ultimate ruin. The sound of the ram I have heard.

What did the rebel ant think in its last moments? I am sure it did not think with

proper pride of how its nice, solid body would turn into a battering ram. Probably, it thought about the wide open spaces it had seen in that very fleeting moment.

INTERLUDE

With my own eyes I have seen an ant rear up and with a lunge of its mandible that would have put a fencing champion to shame, behead a spider that had tried to enter one of the ants' openings in the wall. I did not see any preparations for this. I did not see the mandible brought into position, and yet the severed head was already stuck on its point, was quickly being carried to its destination while being sucked dry of any nourishing juice that it contained.

The facts force me to confess our limitations. For how can I catch the movements of the ant's jaw that cuts, decapitates, chews, chops, perforates, bores, and cracks—and those are only a few of its activities—if my eye does not discern a movement that is shorter than the sixteenth part of a second; how can I hear the sound of call and alarm, the sound of assembly and dismissal, the sound of song and hymn, the sound of judgment and condemnation, the sound of law and commandment, if my ear can only receive a frequency of sixteen to twenty thousand vibrations per second, something even the most degenerate lapdog would regard as inferior? With bowed head I join all the others, scientists great and small, and call it the ants' secret language—which is merely an admission of failure.

Chapter XII: Metamorphosis of Rachel—A madcap game my wife plays makes the supporting wall collapse. The game excites me—We now have a dream in common—“Ants over you, Jacob!” I whet a knife to slaughter my wife Rachel.

MY WIFE RACHEL did not seem upset at all. The white of her flesh peeped innocent and pure through the little squares of the black netting that covered her body.

She stood and looked at me with a cold, mysterious, hypnotizing stare, half a second or half a minute, just long enough for her to invent a new naughty trick. Then she burst into a barefoot gallop from the kitchen to the room, with her voice ringing like the window pane of the room when the sea wind knocks on it. I ran after her, of course. I wanted to do something to her, to punish her. My flesh was full of scars of humiliation. Even the netting on her flesh, which she had pulled on like a stocking from the soles of her feet to her shoulders, had become a manifesto of insult and

treason. Ants by the dozen scurried between the threads of the net that barred her so painfully desired body from me, her husband. Just when it seemed that her heart had turned, however little, in my favor, her behavior now rent my flesh even more deeply.

Perhaps it had something to do with the swelling of the walls.

It started like the smallpox. A few blisters came up on the kitchen wall, next to where the concrete pillar presumably runs through it, and I immediately saw them everywhere, some large as a bean, others like water bubbles about to burst. But amazingly, they did not burst; what is more, they stretched and spread sideways, clutched each other, merged, and disappeared into each other, and there we had whole sections of wall, perforated and blistered, with a bright grey color like quicksilver. I knew, this was how my heart had guessed it, this was the beginning of the end. I do not know what Rachel thought, but the change in her was rather quick.

As the walls began to swell, her half-asleep, devout-dreamy mood changed into a kind of strange nightmarish vitality; like a tigress that is weaned and suddenly feels the strength of her teeth, like a virgin nun who discovers one day that the God over the altar is male. Her flesh seemed to awake to life, but not to me. She would suddenly get a fit of the gallops, as if she was being stung, or tickled, by those ants who were strolling through the thousands of gateways of the black netting with a familiarity that made me jealous. In vain I would run after her, chase after her, something at which I had never been any good and which more than once had brought me to the floor with a thump, accompanied by peals of laughter from my wife and the mortification of my aching flesh.

What to do to Rachel in her net armor? All my tense desire melts and I drag myself to the large calendar in the kitchen, look at the magic leaf and read on it: "New House." Some ancient promise returns a little strength to my loins, I lower my eyes before Rachel, and Rachel, perhaps she is tired, perhaps she must rest a little from her wild galloping, closes her eyes for a few poor miserable caresses, disgusting leavings from the ants' table. Ah, what hope was there in that devils' game!

Now, after seeing with my own eyes how my wife Rachel, in cold blood, executed a sentence of death by torture on that poor ant, a deadly anger flared up in me. This time, I said to myself, I will make her pay. So eager was I that I heard a knights' gallop in the stamping of my heavy feet. They kicked up great clouds of dust, my feet, and this only increased the concealing screen of dust in which Rachel moved, in which she held back her laughter, letting out a peal from time to time, like a misleading call in a game of hide and seek. I have not yet explained. It was the dust from a collapse, but not of one of the house walls, not yet—they meanwhile exhaled denser and denser clouds of fine dust that looked as transparent as silk when a sudden ray of light from the shutter hit them. The screen of dust in which my wife maneuvered rose from the collapse of the supporting wall I had hurriedly built with the bare minimum of mortar between the bricks, so that it could take the weight of the ceiling when the hall wall, through which one of the concrete pillars that held up the house ran, would finally be chewed up.

I ran into it with the whole weight of my body, without hesitating, and the force with which the wall hit me back was no less than that of my assault—you may imagine the restrained, disciplined satisfaction of the ant army as their enemy did their work for them—I galloped to the bed from below which the sounds of my wife Rachel's laughter were coming, and just managed to catch hold of her heel and tear some of the netting off her body, and perhaps some flesh of the heel as well.—She rose in the air like a flame. “You're hurting me,” she screamed, half with pain, half with laughter, as she landed in the corner of the room, where she tried to raise a dust screen between us by scratching at the wall with her nails; as I ran, it had not escaped me how the dragons' teeth, that clever interplay between a crooked crack in the wall and the lines of my wife's paint brush, were grinding dust, filtering a shield of dust over the body of my rebel wife.

“Now even the dragon's teeth will not save her from me,” I said to myself. Suddenly, I felt the exultation of a beast of prey smelling blood. I grasped the flesh of her thigh and tore the netting off it, while four wild legs—Rachel's and mine—stamped from the room to the hall, from the hall to the roof and from the roof again to the hall and on to the room; the bed caught us up like an altar of lust.

Rachel fell on the bed, clasping the pillow, wailing and laughing, and her body, scalding in its sweat, rising under me in flame. I threshed, trod, twisted the sinews of her white flesh, stretched her neck, bruised her thighs—in short, I did all that lust reinforced by terrible anger can do . . . Ah, God! You know how many good reasons I had for it. Suddenly, my face felt her eyes.

One point needs explaining. True, I was taking my wife Rachel by force. But there all resemblance between what was happening now and what had happened that Sabbath night ended. Then, her body had been dead and her heart all disgust. For hours the water had run down on her body and it had seemed there was not water enough in the pipes to rinse off the dirt. This time it was a battle, a battle which had been preceded by battle cries and hellish challenge; this time, her flesh was not wholly indifferent.

Which made the defeat still more painful.

Yes. Rachel was not with me even now. I beat the air. Her eyes told me of my humiliation. Her eyes, wide, alert, but elsewhere; a light-greenish glow, icy cold, the look of the tiger in the jungle (a light pregnant with danger and mystery, within which the pupil grew long in a narrow slit) yes, it could not be doubted—and mocked.

And what did not mock, listened. There was an unusual silence. All traffic in the walls must have come to a halt. Even when the work was resumed, I heard that threatening silence. Were the ants listening? All the time I was kneading my wife Rachel's body to my will, were the ants listening to my wife and was my wife listening to the ants? Perhaps they were conversing? I would not be surprised if the large stinging ant I just had removed carefully from the corner of my mouth had come to gather a little lover's foam to test it in the laboratory inside the wall . . . I had no strength left for laughter, let alone for anger. My wife was already changing: throwing her old dress away and putting on a new one, a whole set of black netting she pulled out from under the heap of sheets she no longer needed in the corner of the wardrobe.

It would be wrong to think that I did not get a certain pleasure out of this new situation. I must have: I returned with renewed energy to building the supporting walls—after neglecting them for a while in a wretched mood of defeatism—only so that my wife Rachel might rise against them to destroy them and that I might pursue her in red-hot anger until I could again slake my lust on her. This little hellish game that slowly exhausted my body also exhausted my attention and my fighting conscience. Hours passed, whole hours, in which I was unaware of the sounds of the ants' work. In sudden alarm I tested the sharpness of my hearing and found, to my joy, that I had exaggerated a good deal. My ears, trained to receive and record from the fine sound of the gnawing of the youngest recruit chewers to the drilling and cracking sound of the ants with the enormous jaws, and the whole scale of intermediate sounds, had lost nothing to their sensitivity. But the sounds did not reach my exhausted, sleepy consciousness. It was an easy but dangerous state.

One day I could not take any more and called to my wife, who was immersed in some lethargic swoon with her eyes wide open:

"Rachel, on what side are you, on mine or theirs?"

Rachel remained silent and did not blink.

"Answer me!" I shouted at her.

Then I saw her stare come alive. She looked at me with far, clear, transparent but not bottomless eyes. I saw inside them. I drowned in their depth, as in a lake of liquid ice—but I could not see through them. Suddenly, there was her voice, soft and caressing:

"How will the house be, Jacob?" Those words, the sound of them alone, was enough to make me happy. I was moonstruck.

"With a glass dome," I day-dreamed.

"Make it tall, Jacob, tall."

"And I'll make it wide, Rachel, wide."

"Why make it wide, Jacob, why make it wide?"

"Half on the hillside and half on the sea, Rachel."

"How will the house be, Jacob?"

"With a glass dome, Rachel, with a glass dome," I daydreamed.

This brief dialogue robbed me of my strength and wakefulness. Dazed, paralyzed, sleepy, and surrendering to all ruin, I would sink into sleep for whole hours, days perhaps. I do not know how often this dialogue was repeated between us, but I know that after it I was always, inevitably, overcome by sleep. I lost the sense of day and the sense of night. Our two watches had stopped; the fine dust that seeped in everywhere must have halted their hands. I did not remember when I had last asked the time. If a feeling of discomfort overcame me in a moment of dreamy wakefulness, some troublesome reminder of something I had to do, it only made me sink back faster into lethargy. Till one day my wife Rachel frightened me with a shout of alarm!

"Ants, Jacob, the house is falling!"

Thunderstruck, I jumped off the bed. After I had come to myself and saw that the

house was still standing, I hurried to the cracks to stop them, and in maddened haste I built a support wall. A wall. Let there be something solid in the house. And then Rachel would start the catch game again, and the wall would come down, and the galloping would raise shivers of desire in my flesh. And eat my strength.

My wife Rachel, when she saw that this game of hers—the terrifying midnight cry of “Ants over you” and all that followed from it—caught hold of me, terrified me, roused me from every sleep, must have decided to improve on it. Mainly by making me actually aware of the ants when I woke in fright. What did she do? On the same spot where she used to put a crumb of mud while I slept, in days past—namely, between the upper lip and the nostrils—she now put a dozen ants, strong and spoiling for fight like tigers, as an overture to her nightly alarm cries. As I ran to save what I could, the ants were eating my lips, my nose, and already I saw the terror of annihilation before my eyes; I ran and ranted all over the room, pulling down and ruining more than I had built and reinforced. Till I decided to put an end to it.

It was a little tool that put the idea into my head. A scout knife. It was lying quietly, almost waiting, on a shelf in the tool chest, and my hand jumped to grip it. There was a dark stain on its curved blade, not rust, perhaps old blood. I wondered why I had not thought about it before. Below my wife Rachel’s tiger eyes her neck was as thin as a swan’s. I do not know how everything built up to this terrible sentence:

I must cut her throat on the support wall.

It made hope rush to my heart. Suddenly I knew that her blood would strengthen the support wall. Perhaps it would demoralize the ants. Perhaps it would frighten them off, perhaps, who knew, it would push back the invasion entirely.

I whetted the knife under Rachel’s eyes. I got much pleasure from that. I spat lavishly on the flat top of the support wall and drew the blade of the knife over it. The blade was fairly sharp, but I got a great deal of pleasure from the actual whetting. Rachel stared at the knife bewitched, wordless. Its blade was slightly curved, its edge thin, you could split a hair in the air with it. And still I did not stop whetting it. Except for the pauses. In the pauses I put the knife in its sheath and the sheath in the belt of my trousers. There was some difficulty in finding the right moment. It was a powerful weapon, perhaps my last. I had to obtain the maximum effect with it. And it seemed as though my wife Rachel was doing all she could to make things easy for me.

She literally offered me opportunities. Often she dozed with her throat free before my eyes, rising only to arouse my anger with her provocative galloping, destroying the support wall on the way. She would wake me in perfect fits of fright, and as I drew the knife from its sheath in a frenzy of murder, I would see that the support wall, which I had sworn to make the altar of her sacrifice, had turned into a heap of ruins. Again I would build the wall, again I would whet the knife on it, and she, my wife Rachel, would again stare betwitched at the knife.

Once, after I had forced her to my lust, and her eyes were far away, and a sudden silence worked its evil in the wall, and a slit of mockery was in her eyes, I said to

myself: This is the moment. Her throat, her uncovered, bent throat, was soft as down. Her open eyes did not move as I passed my hand over her throat, with the knife already glistening in my other hand—as her voice rose, soft and caressing, pouring out sweet drunkenness:

“How will the house be, Jacob?”

I was moonstruck: “With a glass dome,” I daydreamed.

“Make it tall, tall, Jacob.”

“I’ll make it wide too, Rachel, wide.”

“Why make it wide, Jacob, why make it wide?”

“Half on the hillside and half on the sea, Rachel.”

“How will the house be, Jacob?”

“With a glass dome, Rachel, with a glass dome.”

INTERLUDE

Let me try to describe in all its beauty the bronze ant’s head. Its shape is oval. It rises and swells from the place where it is joined to the dorsal segment, in a smooth, strong line gleaming like hammered, beaten steel, silent in its broad curve, storing strength in silence, resting on its energy, and suddenly, out of the stillness of the restrained strength, a free flow of slanting lines, convex, severe, bursts forth strong, and encloses the mandibles. It is a head that rises in battle like a horse’s neck, gleaming in the light like a mane. As the ant uses a jaw as a sword or battering ram, the head stretches like a lever that terminates at the sharp jaws’ horn. As it rears, the head vibrates as though to contain a mighty neigh. Then it resembles a horse about to fly; but having no wings, the head swells in jubilant quivers as if it wanted to imbibe the air of the whole universe in one breath. In those moments the ant, whose black body glistens like basalt, resembles lava: congealed without and red-hot within . . .

Hell! I have meant to describe an ant and have described instead a kind of godlike horse.

Chapter XIII: I raise the knife against Rachel and drive it into a piece of wood—I carve a sculpture of an ant—The ants cut off the current—Questions I did not ask—Rachel lights candles—The ant sculpture looks at our love—Sweet dreams of perdition.

I CARVED a man—that was how he looked from the back—and he had six legs.

I have never carved wood or done handicrafts. My hands are not good for fine work: ten houses of concrete and not a single swan's neck. My fingers recoil, perhaps even in fear, from the delicate touch. They trembled on my wife Rachel's neck. They were strong, though, on the thick, rough wooden handle of the knife.

I sat on the support wall I had just built again and looked at Rachel. Rachel was dozing. She did not look at me and her eyes did not mock. I drew the knife from its sheath and moved toward Rachel. Her eyes were open, perhaps even attentive, but her rhythmic breathing, which sounded like a whispered charm or litany, showed that she was asleep. I passed my fingers over her long neck without touching it. It looked endless. I was afraid to touch it with my fingers. The sound of the ants from the walls was confident, sometimes drawn out like a trumpet call that reverberates all at once in many places. That call roused my hands to action. I swung it forcefully and drove it—the knife—into a thick, short wooden beam that caught my eye. This piece of wood that I had taken along for casting girders and had never used, had split and revealed veins upon veins of white timber free of knots, grains, or other faults. The wall that was designed for my wife Rachel's throat now served me as a workbench. I worked as in a fever. But I did not as yet know what I was making.

"What is that?" asked Rachel, her eyes on the object in my hand.

"A horse," I said. I was annoyed and said: "A horse." She looked at me and said: "No." But there was no mockery in her eyes, rather a surprise, wonderment—I had almost said of mercy, but that could not be. Perhaps it was mercy that she did not destroy the support wall again, playing catch or some other prank, of which there seemed to be no end in my wife's mind.

But my wife was right. It was no horse. From the wooden block, six legs had already begun to take shape and emerge. Perhaps a horse with its rider. I did not know. I worked on the back of the wood. The top of the head was human, a human skull, shorn of ears, suspicious, listening, thinking in terror, but the neck was long and curved like a horse's, a horse whose neck is thunder and whose neighing is terror, as the Book says. But Rachel said it was not a horse. I believe I ate a plate of rice my wife Rachel put before me on the support wall, and as the shadows began to hide between the curves of the wood, I knew it was night.

"What is it?"

"A horse."

My wife lit candles, and as the light began caressing the leg joints and belly folds of the wood, she said:

"No horse."

There was no electricity in the house now—the ants' work, probably. With a few drilling and cracking exercises they had no doubt turned the protective tin conduit and the copper wires into useless slivers of metal. The fact that they had not done it thus far must not be ascribed to laziness or thoughtlessness. Very likely they had chosen their time. This seemed the right time to them, as witness their cutting: the lighting wires and the appliance wires at the same moment. In the dense darkness of the night

the support wall turned into ruins without my knowing who had brought it down. Rachel? The ants? The walls of our house were alive with the sound of dull explosions. I stood naked in the center of the room and imagined myself dreaming the hollow of a giant mountain that was about to collapse.

Is it coming, Rachel, is it coming?

Suddenly I saw Rachel, with a lit candle in each hand. She held the candles like a priestess, before her eyes, and the candles shone in her eyes and her mouth was slightly open, perhaps for reciting a charm. Would it catch us on a gloomy, dark day? Perhaps in the deep of night? Perhaps in sleep? And if in sleep—would it be fair? Perhaps this is a last rehearsal! Perhaps a “severe warning.” But if it is a “severe warning”—is it not already written, or rather being written on the walls of our house in crooked lines of cracks and splits? Your eyes shone, Rachel, while all else was cloaked in darkness—how did your eyes shine, Rachel? Do you see in the dark, like the ants? How did you know to have candles ready, Rachel, how did you know? All those questions I did not ask.

Rachel attached the candles to the wall that divides the room from the hall. She let a drop of wax fall and attached a candle to it, let another drop fall and attached another candle, both in cracks in the wall, each candle in its crack.

And suddenly, in this flickering light, I saw that the carving was indeed neither horse nor man. It was black and gleaming. I put fire to the cuttings and splinters that were left of the beam, and with the ash I rubbed the magnificent wooden body that now turned grey and gleamed with a solid gloss.

“It is an ant,” my wife said. And I saw that it was truly an ant.

Her eyes glowed and deepened. The slits of the pupil widened and exuded honey of mercy as she went down on her knees and placed my broad, rough hand, the hand that had worked the wood, on her forehead. Her eyes were on the dark wooden sculpture and she intoned: “Pray!” I murmured something. Rachel slowly rose from her knees, pulled a thread out of the netting she wore, and used it to tie the ant sculpture to the cord of the unlit lamp above the headboard of the bed, so that the proud, magnificent head of the ant would not stop looking aslant at the place where we were to celebrate our ultimate union.

Rachel took off her netting. Her body turned toward me, her breasts swelled like two skins of water sweet and deadly. Three candles burned with leaping flames, little tongues of fire that grew brighter and paler, rose and fell. The magnificent sculpture swung like a pendulum, to and fro, the jaws of its mouth gleamed, radiated laughter, radiated fear, melted the candlewax.

A sudden, foreign light, which obviously would immediately wane and disappear, burst between the slats of the closed shutter. It lit up veils upon veils of shining dust. And after the light—a sound like the galloping of horses on mountain rock, like the far-off clatter of trains.

I awoke from a sweet dream of perdition and saw the Book dropping from Rachel’s hand. I picked the Book up and it fell open at the place where a hairpin from Rachel’s

head was stuck for a marker. I read in a quiet voice that rose as I read on. Tiny grains of dust beat incessantly on the open page:

The appearance of them is as the appearance of horses; and as horsemen, so shall they run. Like the noise of chariots on the mountains shall they leap, like the noise of a flame of fire that devoureth the stubble, as a strong people set in battle array. Before their face the people shall be much pained; all faces shall gather blackness. They shall run like mighty men; they shall climb the wall like men of war; and they shall march every one on his way, and they shall not break their ranks: neither shall one trust another; they shall walk every one in his path; and when they fall upon the sword, they shall not be wounded. They shall run to and fro in the city; they shall run upon the wall, they shall climb up on the houses; they shall enter in at the windows like a thief. The earth shall quake before them; and the heavens shall tremble.

My wife did not sleep. She looked at the ant sculpture and listened. Then, suddenly, she opened her mouth, widened her lips—and what first looked like a yawn to me turned into a grin. We were both naked and without any shame.

INTERLUDE

I tied a long, thin nylon thread to an ant's belly and let it run into a cavity in the wall. I wanted to find out whether the armies worked together, or separately, each in its own tunnel system.

After perhaps half a minute the ant emerged, and the thread with it, from another crack in the wall. And then, like a joke at my expense, it appeared, with the thread, every two blinks of my terrified eyes in every split, every crack, every hole in the house. What had I wanted to know—and what did I learn? That a thin shell of plaster protects our house—the roof is heavy and the walls of our house are hollow.

Chapter XIV: How shall the voice sound?—The ants' attention to finish impresses me—We do not eat and are not hungry—"One grain is all that holds each wall"—We are waiting for the sound; so are the ants—We are happy.

HOW SHALL the voice sound?

Both of us, Rachel and I, are waiting for the sound. We know it is not far off. For some time now they have been working busily, but with less and less noise, as the pockets of resistance shrink, on breaking down the last joints. The sounds of the explosions are no longer dull, silenced by the twisting tunnels; clear as horn calls, their echoes make the walls or what remains of them resound—from within.

"How shall the voice sound?" We keep ourselves busy guessing. We know the breaking point is no longer far off, and the guessing keeps me from being distracted. Rachel's eyes, as she asks, are transparent green, almost peaceful.

"Like an earthquake," I suddenly say.

"Ssst," Rachel giggles subvocally. From the palm of her hand she feeds grains of sugar to a group of ants that gambol at her feet like tiger cubs. Elastic, playful, they move their strong heads at off angles, pass the rolling grains of sugar to each other in the dust and neigh like young war horses. Rachel stretches her hand out and the cubs run out of it, strong and hungry for play. She produces them by the handful, without magic, from the bushes under her arms, from the shady path between her breasts. Suddenly her eyes widen and she says:

"How shall the voice sound?"

I try to frighten her with a dull, drawn-out sound like a ram's horn that I make with my windpipe and nose. I trumpet the sound into her bare belly—for some time now we have been doing without clothes—and we intertwine in abrupt, muted laughter. We are very careful. Gripping each other with our teeth and nails we listen, so it shall not come suddenly. Inflamed but weak, we crawl along the walls in the brown dust, throw ourselves against the walls, and with dull groans we scratch at the walls, scratch at the walls.

The dust falls, fine as transparent cloth. Rachel moves within it as in a veil of royalty. Now they are grinding the stuff of the wall thoroughly, fine unto spirit. Before, they worked a little roughly, impatiently, against time, now they are careful—and as an old builder I appreciated it—and do all the fine finishes. The sounds of the gnawing, too, are well blended, rise and fall in a cheerful but not frivolous beat, strong but not proud, like a hymn. Rachel's eyes are listening. "That is not the sound," Rachel whispers.

Rachel's eyes are large, clinging, burning with wonder. Her skin is transparent, stretched over her bones like an eardrum. Our sexual unions have become very long. It must not catch us at the moment of ecstatic forgetfulness. We barely have flesh on

our bones to escape from into ecstatic forgetfulness. Our eyes burn, our bones flutter below the skin.

I am not hungry—and I do not remember when we last ate. From time to time my wife puts one grain of sugar on my tongue and one on hers, and each of us tries, using our tongues alone, to capture both grains for himself, until they melt. A wonderful game! And so restraining. The fine dust, when an afterglow of light catches it, is spread all over our naked, clinging bodies like a cloak of transparent gauze, highlighting our wonderful, shameless nakedness. The pages of the Book—which have been torn out and crumpled between the contortions of our bodies and surround us by the dozen, insisting on covering our shame with their meaningless rustle, their gross touch—we wave them away, everywhere, anywhere. Then we hold still and look at the ant sculpture. I count Rachel's ribs through her white, smooth, silky, transparent skin. Like the insides of the walls through the shells of plaster. I count them with my lips, with my nose, with my tongue. They push at the skin like bursts of air, like bubbles of sound burning inside the shell of the house. I drink from Rachel's breasts, which swell and swell as her body shrinks and shrinks.

"Do you hear . . . Jacob? . . ." Yes, the rattle of wheels comes clambering up, and trrrrack, the rattle of wheels is cut off.

"How shall the voice sound?" I ask in a burst of fright.

Rachel lays two fingers on my lips to silence me, and her voice falls strangely into what sounds like ragged words from an old worn-out song:

"How will . . . the house be? . . ."

"What house . . . Rachel? . . ." my lips murmur.

"What did you ask . . . Jacob? . . ."

"A dome . . . a dome . . ."

"Of glass . . . of glass . . ."

"What did you say . . . Rachel? . . ."

"The voice—Jacob—how shall the voice sound?" Rachel crossed her hands over her breast.

I jumped up and ran to the walls. I did not run, I folded up, went down to the ground, crawled. I no longer had the strength to run. I crawled fast, listening, from wall to wall. Rachel's eyes followed me, very large, filling half her face. I came back and reported to Rachel in a triumphant voice:

"One grain is all that holds each wall."

"One grain?" Rachel asked in a whisper—and the light-green of her eyes flared up in a green fire. We rose and sang in unison:

One grain is all that holds each wall,

One grain is all that holds each wall.

And as we shouted "Wall," we ran, holding each other, against the kitchen wall. Nothing happened. Perhaps we scratched a little whitewash off, perhaps not; we had grown very weak, our bodies barely obeyed us. We dragged ourselves back to the bed. There we knealt, facing the bronze sculpture with the bronze face, terrible behind its

kindness, marvellously arbitrary. Rachel laid her hand on my forehead and murmured something. I laid my hand on her forehead and murmured with her in unison. In response came the murmur of the ants, and a flaming sunset, like one of the vividly-colored pictures of the kitchen calendar, broke between the slits of the shutter. Something moved faintly in my brain, and as far as my weakened limbs allowed, I crawled to the kitchen and tore off the picture of the rock.

“The sea . . . the sea . . .” my wife whispered, her eyes far away.

Through the glistening ashes—that was how the drifting dust looked in the dying light—before we mounted our couch of expectation, we still saw the tail end of the calendar leaf, with “NEW HOUSE” on it in dust-covered capitals, rolled into a tube like a ram’s horn, being dragged into the wall.

Tonight we will not have candles to give us light. There are no candles left. We had imagined that candle-light helped us to hear; now we realize that we do not even need the candle-light to see. The dust that sifts down incessantly looks in the dark of the night like glowing ash. Our eyes have set it alight. Rachel’s eyes shine on my face, the pupils like mirrors. I see myself inside her eyes. We sit motionless and listen. A rolling echo sends a shiver through our flesh, an echo that grows into a horn call.

But the horn call does not come yet. “What are they waiting for?” “For the call,” whispers Rachel.

We wrapped ourselves together. The skin of Rachel’s body is snow white, white and smooth and transparent, like a wedding gown. Above us hangs a canopy of glowing ashes. Rachel’s eyes burn. And inside her eyes, she and I—on our knees, embracing, heads raised, skin crawling, bones shivering under the skin, fluttering, as in prayer, our eyes gleaming—waiting for the call.

At last we were happy.

Translated by David Zaraf.