

Forests

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# The Continuing Silence of a Poet:

THE COLLECTED  
STORIES OF  
A. B. YEHOSHUA



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Facing the Forests, Flood Tide, and A Long Hot Day*  
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## Facing the Forests

ANOTHER winter lost in fog. As usual he did nothing; postponed examinations, left papers unwritten. He had completed all his courses long ago, attended all the lectures, and the string of signatures on his tattered student card testified that all had fulfilled their duty, silently disappeared, and left the rest of the task in his own limp hands. But words weary him; his own, let alone the words of others. He drifts from one rented room to another, rootless, jobless. But for an occasional job tutoring backward children he would starve to death. Here he is approaching thirty and a bald spot crowns his wilting head. His defective eyesight blurs many things. His dreams at night are dull. They are uneventful; a yellow waste, where a few stunted trees may spring up in a moment of grace, and a naked woman. At student revels he is already looked at with faint ridicule. The speed with which he gets drunk is a regular part of the programme. He never misses a party. They need him still. His limp figure is extremely popular and there is no one like him for bridging gaps between people. His erstwhile fellow students have since graduated and may be seen carrying bulging briefcases, on their way to work every morning of the week. Sometimes, at noon, returning from their office, they may encounter him in the street with his just-awake eyes: a grey moth in search of its first meal. They, having heard of his dissipations, promptly pronounce the unanimous, half-pitying half-exasperated decree: "Solitude!"

Solitude is what he needs. For he is not without talent nor does he lack brains. He needs to strengthen his will power.

He, as a rule, will drop his arms by his sides in a gesture of pious despair, back up against the nearest available wall, languidly cross his legs and plead in a whisper: "But where? Go on, tell me, where?"

For look, he himself is craving solitude. He plainly needs to renew his acquaintance with words, to try to concentrate on the material that threatens ever to wear him down. But then he would

have to enter prison. He knows himself (a sickly smile): if there should be the tiniest crack through he would make it a tunnel of escape at once. No, please, no favours. Either—or.

Some content themselves with this feeble excuse, shrug their shoulders wryly and go their way. But his real friends, those whose wives he loves as well, two budding lecturers who remember him from days gone by, remember him favourably for the two or three amazingly original ideas that he had dropped at random during his student days—friends who are concerned for his future—these two are well aware that the coming spring is that much more dangerous to him, that his desultory affairs with women will but draw zeal from the blue skies. Is it any wonder then if one fine day they will catch hold of him in the street, their eyes sparkling. “Well, your lordship, we’ve found the solution to your lordship’s problem at last.” And he will be quick to show an expectant eagerness, though cunning enough to leave himself ample means of retreat.

“What?”

The function of forest scout. A fire watcher. Yes, it’s something new. A dream of a job, a plum. Utter, profound solitude. There he will be able to scrape together his crumbled existence.

Where did they get the idea?

From the papers, yes, from a casual skimming of the daily papers.

He is astonished, laughs inordinately, hysterically almost. What now? What’s the idea? Forests . . . What forests? Since when do we have forests in this country? What do they mean?

But they refuse to smile. For once they are determined. Before he has time to digest their words they have burned the bridges over which he had meant to escape, as usual. “You said, either—or. Here is your solution.”

He glances at his watch, pretending haste. Will not a single spark light up in him then? For he, too, loathes himself, doesn’t he?

And so, when spring has set the windows ajar he arrives early one morning at the Afforestation Department. A sunny office, a clerk, a typist, several typists. He enters quickly, armed with impressive recommendations, heralded by telephone calls. The man in charge of the forests, a worthy character edging his way to old age, is faintly amused (his position permits him as much), grins to himself. Much ado about nothing, about such a marginal job. Hence he is curious about the caller, considers rising to receive him, even. The

plain patch of wilderness on top of the head of the candidate adds to his stature. The fellow inspires trust, surely, is surely meant for better things.

“Are you certain that this is what you want? The observation post is a grim place. Only really primitive people can bear such solitude. What is it you wish to write? Your doctorate?”

No, sad to say, he is still at the elementary stages of his study.

Yes, he has wasted much time.

No, he has no family.

Yes, with glasses his vision is sound.

Gently the old manager explains that, in accordance with a certain semi-official agreement, this work is reserved for social cases only and not for how-shall-I-put-it, romantics, ha-ha, intellectuals in search of solitude . . . However, he is prepared, just this once, to make an exception and include an intellectual among the wretched assortment of his workers. Yes, he himself is getting sick of the diverse social cases, the invalids, the cripples, the cranks. A fire breaks out, and these fellows will do nothing till the fire brigade arrives but stand and stare panic-stricken at the flames. Whenever he is forced to send out one such unstable character he stays awake for nights thinking what if in an obscure rage, against society or whatever, the fire watcher should himself set the forest on fire. He feels certain that he, the man in front of him here, though occupied with affairs of the mind, will be sufficiently alive to his duty to abandon his books and fight the fire. Yes, it is a question of moral values.

Sorry, the old man has forgotten what it is his candidate wishes to write? A doctorate?

Once more he apologizes. He is still, sad to say, at the elementary stages of his study. Yes, he has wasted much time. Indeed, he has no family.

A young secretary is called in.

Then he is invited to sign an inoffensive little contract for six months: spring, summer (ah, summer is dangerous!), and half the autumn. Discipline, responsibility, vigilance, conditions of dismissal. A hush descends while he runs his eyes cursorily over the document. Manager and secretary are ready with a pen, but he prefers to sign with his own. He signs several copies. First salary due on the 5th of April. Now he eases himself into his chair, unable to rise, tired still. He is not used to waking so early. Meanwhile he tries to establish some sort of contact, display an interest. He

inquires about the size of the forests, the height of the trees. To tell the truth—he runs on expansively, in a sort of dangerous drowsiness—the fact is that he has never seen a real forest in this country yet. An occasional ancient grove, yes, but he hardly believes (ha-ha-ha) that the authorities in charge of afforestation have anything to do with that. Yes, he keeps hearing over the radio about forests being planted to honour this, that, and the other personage. Though apparently one cannot actually see them yet . . . The trees grow slowly . . . don't gain height. . . Actually he understands . . . this arid soil . . . In other countries, now . . .

At last he falters. Naturally he realizes, has realized from the start, that he has made a bad blunder, has sensed it from the laughter trembling in the girl's eyes, from the shocked fury colouring the face of the manager who is edging his way to old age. The candidate has, to use a tangible image, taken a careless step and trampled a tender spot in the heart of the man in charge of forests, who is fixing him now with a harsh stare and delivering a monologue for his benefit.

What does he mean by small trees? He has obviously failed to use his eyes. Of course there are forests. Real forests. Jungles, no, but forests, yes, indeed. If he will pardon the question: What does he know about what happens in this country anyway? For even when he travels through it on a bus he won't bother to take his head out of his book. It's laughable, really, these flat allegations. He, the old man, has come across this kind of talk from young people, but the candidate is rather past that age. If he, the manager, had the time to spare, he could show him maps. But soon he will see for himself. There are forests in the Hills of Judaea, in Galilee, Samaria, and elsewhere. Perhaps the candidate's eyesight is dim after all. Perhaps he needs a stronger pair of spectacles. The manager would like to ask the candidate to take spare spectacles with him. He would rather not have any more trouble. Goodbye.

Where are they sending him?

A few days later he is back. This time he is received not by the manager, but by an underling. He is being sent to one of the larger forests. He won't be alone there but with a labourer, an Arab. They feel certain he has no prejudices. Goodbye. Ah yes, departure is on Sunday.

Things happen fast. He severs connections and they appear to come loose with surprising ease. He vacates his room and his landlady is

glad of it, for some reason. He spends the last nights with one of his learned friends, who sets to work at once to prepare a study schedule for him. While his zealous friend is busy in one room cramming books into a suitcase, the prospective fire watcher fondles the beloved wife in another. He is pensive, his hands gentle, there is something of joy in his expectations of the morrow. What shall he study? His friends suggest the Crusades. Yes, that would be just right for him. Everyone specializes in a certain subject. He may yet prove to be a little researcher all in his own right just so long as he doesn't fritter his time away. He ought to bring some startling scientific theory back from the forests. His friends will take care of the facts later.

But in the morning, when the lorry of the Afforestation Department comes to fetch him out of his shattered sleep, he suddenly imagines that all this has been set in motion just to get rid of him; and, shivering in the cold morning air, he can but console himself with the thought that this adventure will go the way of all others and be drowned in somnolence. Is it any wonder that Jerusalem, high on its hills, Jerusalem, which is left behind now, is fading like a dream? He abandons himself to the jolts and pitches of the lorry. The labourers with their hoes and baskets sit huddled away from him in the back of the car. They sense that he belongs to another world. The bald patch and the glasses are an indication, one of many.

Travelling half a day.

The lorry leaves the main road and travels over long, alien dirt roads, among nameless new-immigrant settlements. Labourers alight, others take their place. Everyone receives instructions from the driver, who is the one in command around here. We are going south, are we? Wide country meeting a spring-blue sky. The ground is damp still and clods of earth drop off the lorry's tyres. It is late in the morning when he discovers the first trees scattered among rocks. Young slender pines, tiny, light green. "Then I was right," he tells himself with a smile. But further on the trees grow taller. Now the light bursts and splinters. Long shadows steal aboard the lorry like stowaways. People keep changing and only the driver, the passenger and his suitcases stay put. The forests grow denser, no more bare patches now. Pines, always, and only the one species, obstinately, unvaryingly. He is tired, dusty, hungry, has long ago lost all sense of direction. The sun is playing tricks, twisting around him. He does not see where he is going, only what he is leaving behind. At three

o'clock the lorry is emptied of labourers and only he is left. For a long time the lorry climbs over a rugged track. He is cross, his mouth feels dry. In despair he tries to pull a book out of one suitcase, but then the lorry stops. The driver gets off, bangs the door, comes around to him and says: "This is it. Your predecessor's already made off—yesterday. Your instructions are all up there. You at least can read, which makes a change."

Laboriously he hauls himself and his two suitcases down. An odd, charming stone house stands on a hill. Pines of all sizes surround it. He is at a high altitude here, though he cannot yet see everything from where he is. Silence, a silence of trees. The driver stretches his legs, looks around breathes the air, then suddenly he nods goodbye and climbs back into his cab and switches the engine on.

He who must stay behind is seized with regret. Despair. What now? Just a minute! He doesn't understand. He rushes at the car, beats his fists against the door, whispers furiously at the surprised driver.

"But food . . . what about food?"

It appears that the Arab takes care of everything.

Alone he trudges uphill, a suitcase in each hand. Gradually the world comes into view. The front door stands open and he enters a large room, the ground floor. Semi-darkness, dilapidated objects on the floor, food remnants, traces of a child. The despair mounts in him. He puts down the suitcases and climbs absent-mindedly to the second floor. The view strikes him with awe. Five hills covered with a dense green growth—pines. A silvery blue horizon with a distant sea. He is instantly excited, forgetting everything. He is even prepared to change his opinion of the Afforestation Department.

A telephone, binoculars, a sheet covered with instructions. A large desk and an armchair beside it. He settles himself into the chair and reads the instructions five times over, from beginning to end. Then he pulls out his pen and makes a few stylistic corrections. He glances fondly at the black instrument. He is in high spirits. He considers calling up one of his friends in town, say something tender to one of his ageing lady-loves. He might announce his safe arrival, describe the view perhaps. Never has he had a public telephone at his disposal yet. He lifts the receiver to his ear. An endless purring. He is not familiar with the proceedings. He tries dialling. In vain. The purr remains steady. At last he dials zero, like a sober citizen expecting a sober reply.

The telephone breaks its silence.

The Fire Brigade comes on with a startled "What's happened?" Real alarm at the other end. (Where? where? confound it!) Before he has said a word, questions rain down on him. How large is the fire? What direction the wind? They are coming at once. He tries to put in a word, stutters, and already they are starting a car over there. Panic grips him. He jumps up, the receiver tight in his hand. He breaks out in a cold sweat. With the last remnant of words in his power he explains everything. No. There is no fire. There is nothing. Only getting acquainted. He has just arrived. Wanted to get through to town. His name is so-and-so. That is all.

A hush at the other side. The voice changes. This must be their chief now. Pleased to meet you sir, we've taken down your name. Have you read all the instructions? Personal calls are quite out of the question. Anyway, you've only just arrived, haven't you? Or is there some urgent need? Your wife? Your children?

No, he has no family.

Well, then, why the panic? Lonely? He'll get used to it. Please don't disturb us unnecessarily in the future. Goodbye.

The ring closes in on him a little. Pink streaks on the horizon. He is tired, hungry. He has risen early, and he is utterly unused to that. This high commanding view makes him dizzy. Needless to add—the silence. He picks up the binoculars with a limp hand and raises them to his eyes. The world leaps close, blurred. Pines lunge at him upright. He adjusts the forest, the hills, the sea on the horizon to the quality of his eyes. He amuses himself a bit, then lets go of the binoculars and eases himself into the chair. He has a clear conception of his new job now. Just watching. His eyes grow heavy. He dozes, sleeps perhaps.

Suddenly he wakes—a red light is burning on his glasses. He is bewildered, scared, his senses heavy. The forest has caught fire, apparently, and he has missed it. He jumps up, his heart wildly beating grabs the telephone, the binoculars, and then it occurs to him that it is the sun, only the sun setting beyond the trees. He is facing west. Now he knows. Slowly he drops back into the chair. His heart contracts with something like terror, like emptiness. He imagines himself deserted in this place, forgotten. His glasses mist over and he takes them off and wipes them.

When dusk falls he hears steps.

An Arab and a little girl are approaching the house. Swiftly he rises

to his feet. They notice him, look up and stop in their tracks—startled by the soft, scholarly-looking figure. He bows his head. They walk on but their steps are hesitant now. He goes down to them.

The Arab turns out to be old and mute. His tongue was cut out during the war. By one of them or one of us? Does it matter? Who knows what the last words were that stuck in his throat? In the dark room, its windows ablaze with the last light, the fire watcher shakes a heavy hand, bends to pat the child, who flinches, terrified. The ring of loneliness closes in on him. The Arab puts on lights. The fire watcher will sleep upstairs.

The first evening, and a gnawing sadness. The weak yellow light of the bulbs is depressing. For the time being he draws comfort only from the wide view, from the soft blue of the sea in the distance and the sun surrendering to it. He sits cramped on his chair and watches the big forests entrusted to his eyes. He imagines that the fire may break out at any moment. After a long delay the Arab brings up his supper. An odd taste, a mixture of tastes. But he devours everything, leaves not a morsel. His eyes rove hungrily between the plate and the thick woods. Suddenly, while chewing, he discovers a few faraway lights—villages. He broods awhile about women, then takes off his clothes, opens the suitcase that does not hold books and takes out his things. It seems a long time since he left town. He wraps himself in blankets, lies facing the forests. A cool breeze caresses him. What sort of sleep will come to one here? The Arab brings him a cup of coffee to help him stay awake. The fire watcher would like to talk to him about something; perhaps about the view, or about the poor lighting perhaps. He has words left in him still from the city. But the Arab does not understand Hebrew. The fire watcher smiles wearily in thanks. Something about his bald crown, the glint of his glasses, seems to daunt the Arab.

It is half-past nine—the beginning of night. Cicadas strike up. He struggles against sleep engulfing him. His eyes close and his conscience tortures him. The binoculars dangle from their strap around his neck, and from time to time he picks them up, lifts them to his eyes blinded with sleep, glass clicking against glass. He opens his eyes in a stare and finds himself in the forest, among pines, hunting for flames. Darkness.

How long does it take for a forest to burn down? Perhaps he will only look every hour, every two hours. Even if the forest should start to burn he would still manage to raise the alarm in time to save

the rest. The murmur downstairs has died down. The Arab and his child are asleep. And he is up here, light-headed, tired after his journey, between three walls and a void gaping to the sea. He must not roll over on to his other side. He nods, and his sleep is pervaded by the fear of fire, fire stealing upon him unawares. At midnight he transfers himself from bed to chair; it is safer that way. His head droops heavily on to the desk, his spine aches, he is crying out for sleep, full of regret, alone against the dark empire swaying before him. Till at last the black hours of the first night pass; till out of the corner of his eye he sees the morning grow among the hills.

Only fatigue makes him stay on after the first night. The days and nights following revolve as on a screen, a misty, dream-like screen lit up once every twenty-four hours by the radiant glow of the setting sun. It is not himself but a stranger who wanders those first days between the two storeys of the house, the binoculars slung across his chest, absently chewing on the food left him by the unseen Arab. The heavy responsibility that has suddenly fallen upon his shoulders bewilders him. Hardest of all is the silence. Even with himself he hardly manages to exchange a word. Will he be able to open a book here? The view amazes and enchants him still and he cannot have enough of it. After ten days of anguish he is himself again. In one brief glance he can embrace all the five hills now. He has learned to sleep with his eyes open. Lo, a new accomplishment; rather interesting, one must admit.

At last the other suitcase, the one with the books, gets opened, with a slight delay of but a fortnight or so. The delay does not worry him in the least, for aren't the spring, the summer, and half the autumn still before him? The first day is devoted to sorting the books, spelling out titles, thumbing the pages. One can't deny that there is some pleasure in handling the fat, fragrant, annotated volumes. The texts are in English, the quotations all in Latin. Strange phrases from alien worlds. He worries a little. His subject—"The Crusades". From the human, that is to say, the ecclesiastical aspect. He has not gone into particulars yet. "Crusades," he whispers softly to himself and feels joy rising in him at the word the sound. He feels certain that there is some dark issue buried within the subject and that it will startle him, startle others in him. And it will be just out of this drowsiness that envelops his mind like a permanent cloud that the matter will be revealed to him.

The following day is spent on pictures. The books are rich in

illustrations. Odd funny ones. Monks, cardinals; a few blurred kings, thin knights, tiny, villainous Jews. Curious landscapes, maps. He studies them, compares, dozes. On the hard road to the abstract he wishes to linger awhile with the concrete. That night he is kept off his studies by a gnat. Next morning he tells himself: "Oh wondrous time, how fast it flies upon these lonely summits." He opens the first book on the first page, reads the author's preface, his grateful acknowledgements. He reads other prefaces, various acknowledgements, publication data. He checks a few dates. At noon his mind is distracted from the books by an imaginary flame flashing among the trees. He remains tense for hours, excited, searching with the binoculars, his hand on the telephone. At last, towards evening, he discovers that it is only the red dress of the Arab's little daughter who is skipping among the trees. The following day, when he is all set to decipher the first page, his father turns up suddenly with a suitcase in his hand.

"What's happened?" the father asks anxiously.

"Nothing . . . Nothing's happened. . ."

"But what made you become a forester then?"

"A bit of solitude . . ."

"Solitude . . ." he marvels. "You want solitude?"

The father bends over the open book, removes his heavy glasses and peers closely at the text. "The Crusades," he murmurs. "Is that what you're engaged on?"

"Yes."

"Aren't I disturbing you in your work? I haven't come to disturb you. . . I have a few days' leave."

"No, you're not disturbing me."

"Magnificent view."

"Yes, magnificent."

"You're thinner."

"Could be."

"Couldn't you study in the libraries?"

Apparently not. Silence. The father sniffs around the room like a little hedgehog. At noon he asks his son:

"Do you think it is lonely here? That you'll find solitude?"

"Yes, what's to disturb me?"

"I'm not going to disturb you."

"Of course not. What makes you think that!"

"I'll go away soon."

"No, don't go. Please stay."

The father stays a week.

In the evening the father tries to become friendly with the Arab and his child. A few words of Arabic have stuck in his memory from the days of his youth, and he will seize any occasion to fill them with meaning. But his pronunciation is unintelligible to the Arab, who only nods his head dully.

They sit together, not speaking. The son cannot read a single line with the father there, even though the father keeps muttering: "Don't bother about me. I'll keep myself in the background." At night the father sleeps on the bed and the fire watcher stretches himself out on the floor. Sometimes the father wakes in the night to find his son awake. "Perhaps we could take turns," he says. "You go to sleep on the bed and I'll watch the forest." But the son knows that his father will see not a forest but a blurred stain. He won't notice the fire till it singes his clothes. In the daytime they change places—the son lies on the bed and the father sits by the desk and tries to read the book, which lies open still. How he would like to strike up a conversation with his son, stir up some discussion. For example, he fails to understand why his son won't deal with the Jews, the Jewish aspect of the Crusades. For isn't mass suicide a wonderful and terrible thing? The son gives him a kindly grin, a non-committal reply, and silence. During the last days of his visit the father occupies himself with the dumb Arab. A host of questions bubbles up in him. Who is the man? Where is he from? Who cut his tongue out? Why? Look, he has seen hatred in the man's eyes. A creature like that may yet set the forest on fire some day. Why not?

On his last day the father is given the binoculars to play with.

Suitcase in hand, back bent, he shakes his son's hand. Then—tears in the eyes of the little father.

"I've been disturbing you, I know I have. . ."

In vain does the son protest, mumble about the oceans of time still before him—about half the spring, the whole long summer, half the distant autumn.

From his elevated seat he watches his lost blind father fumbling for the back of the lorry. The driver is rude and impatient with him. When the lorry moves off the father waves goodbye to the forest by mistake. He has lost his bearings.

For a week he crawls from line to line over the difficult text. After every sentence he raises his head to look at the forest. He is still awaiting a fire. The air grows hot. A haze shimmers above the sea



on the horizon. When the Arab returns at dusk his garments are damp with sweat, the child's gestures are tired. Anyway you look at it, he himself is lucky. At such a time to be here, high above any town. Ostensibly, he is working all the time, but observing could hardly be called work, could it? The temperature rises day by day. He wonders whether it is still spring, or whether perhaps the summer has already crept upon the world. One can gather nothing from the forest, which shows no change, except thorns fading to yellow among the trees perhaps. His hearing has grown acute. The sound of trees whispers incessantly in his ears. His eyes shine with the sun's gaining strength, his senses grown keen. He is becoming attached to the forest in a way. Even his dreams are growing richer in trees. The women sprout leaves.

His text is difficult, the words distant. It has turned out to be only the preface to a preface. But, being as diligent as he is, he does not skip a single passage. He translates every word, then rewrites the translation in rhyme. Simple, easy rhymes, in order that the words should merge in his mind, should not escape into the silence.

No wonder that by Friday he can count but three pages read, out of the thousands. "Played out," he whispers to himself and trails his fingertips over the desk. Perhaps he'll take a rest? A pensive air comes over the green empire before him each Sabbath eve and makes his heart contract. Though he believes neither in God nor in all his angels, there is a sacredness that brings a lump to his throat.

He combs his beard in honour of the holy day. Yes, there is a new beard growing here along with the pines. He brings some order into the chaos of his room, picks a page off the floor. What is this? The instruction sheet. Full of interest he reads it once more and discovers a forgotten instruction, or one added by his own hand, perhaps.

"Let the forest scout go out from time to time for a short walk among the trees, in order to sharpen his senses."

His first steps in the forest proper are like a baby's. He circles the observation post, hugging its walls as though afraid to leave them. Yet the trees attract him like magic. Little by little he ventures among the hills, deeper and deeper. If he should smell burning he will run back.

But this isn't a forest yet, only the hope and promise of one. Here and there the sun appears through the foliage and a traveller among the trees is dappled with flickers of light. This isn't a rustling forest but a very small one, like a graveyard. A forest of

solitudes. The pines stand erect, slim, serious; like a company of new recruits awaiting their commander. The roaming fire watcher is pleased by the play of light and shadow. With every step he crushes dry pine needles underfoot. Softly, endlessly the pines shed their needles; pines arrayed in a garment of mingling life and death.

The rounded human moving among trees whose yearning is so straight, so fierce. His body aches a bit, the ache of cramped limbs stretching; his legs are heavy. Suddenly he catches sight of the telephone line. A yellowish wire smelling of mould. Well, so this is his contact with the world. He starts tracing the yellow wire, searching for its origin, is charmed by its pointless twists and loops between the trees. They must have let some joker unwind the drum over the hills.

Suddenly he hears voices. He wavers, stops, then sees the little clearing in the wood. The Arab is seated on a pile of rocks, his hoe by his side. The child is talking to him excitedly, describing something with animated gestures. The scout tiptoes nearer, as lightly as his bulk will permit. They are instantly aware of him, sniff his alien being and fall silent. The Arab jumps up, stands by his hoe as though hiding something. He faces them, wordless. It is the Sabbath eve today, isn't it, and there is a yearning in his heart. He stands and stares, for all the world like a supervisor bothered by some obscure triviality. The soft breeze caresses his eyes. If he did not fear for his standing with them he would hum them a little tune, perhaps. He smiles absently, his eyes stray and slowly he withdraws; with as much dignity as he can muster.

The two remain behind, petrified. The child's joy has shrivelled halfway through her interrupted story, the Arab starts weeding the thorns at his feet. But the scout has retreated already, gone forth into the empire. He has been wandering in the woods for all of an hour now and is still making new discoveries. The names of donors, for example. It had never occurred to him that this wouldn't be just some anonymous forest but one with a name, and not just one name either. Many rocks bear copper plates, brilliantly brushed. He stoops, takes off his glasses, reads: Louis Schwartz of Chicago, the King of Burundi and his People. Flickers of light play over the letters. The names cling to him, like the falling pine needles that slip into his pocket. How odd! The tired memory tries to refresh itself with these faceless names. Name after name is absorbed by him as he walks, and by the time he reaches the observation post he

can already hold a little rehearsal. He recites the assorted names, a vacuous smile on his face.

Friday night.

A wave of sadness wells within him. His mind happens to be perfectly lucid at the moment. We'll clear out on Sunday, he whispers suddenly and starts humming a snatch of song; inaudibly at first, the sound humming inside him, but soon trilling and rising high to the darkening sky. A hidden abyss behind him echoes in reply. The light drips, drips. Strings of light tear the sunset across and he shouts song at it, shrills recklessly, wanton with solitude. He starts one song, stops, plunges into another without change of key. His eyes fill with tears. The dark stifles his throat at last, he hears himself suddenly and falls silent.

Peace returns to the forest. Relics of light linger. Five minutes pass and then the Arab and the girl emerge from the cover of the underbrush and hurry to the house with bent heads.

The Sabbath passes in a wonderful tranquillity. He is utterly calm. He has begun counting the trees for a change. On Sunday he is on the verge of escaping but then the lorry brings him his salary, a part of the job he had forgotten. He is amazed, gushes his thanks to the mocking driver. So there's a prize in the whispering world, is there? He returns to the books.

Hot summer. Yes, but we have forgotten the birds. Presumably the observation post stands on an ancient crossroads of bird trajectories. How else to explain the mad flocks swooping in from the forest to beat their wings against the walls, drop on the bed, dive at the books, shed grey feathers and green dung, shatter the dull air with their restlessness—and vanish on their circuitous flight to the sea. A change has come over him. Sunburned, yes, but there is more to it than that. The heat wells up in him, frightens him. A dry flow of desert wind may rouse the forest to suicide; hence he redoubles his vigilance, presses the binoculars hard against his eyes and subjects the forest in his care to a strict survey. How far has he come? Some slight twenty pages are behind him, thousands still before. What does he remember? A few words, the tail end of a theory, the atmosphere on the eve of the Crusades. The nights are peaceful. He could have studied, could have concentrated, were it not for the gnats. Night after night he extinguishes the lights and sits in darkness. The words have dropped away from him like husks. Cicadas. Choruses of jackals. A bat wings heavily across the gloom. Rustlings.

Hikers start arriving in the forest. Lone hikers some of them, but mostly they come in groups. He follows them through the binoculars. Various interesting ages. Like ants they swarm over the forest, pour in among the trees, calling out to each other, laughing; then they cast off their rucksacks all at once, unburden themselves of as many clothes as possible and hang them up on branches, and promptly come over to the house.

Water is what they want. Water!

He comes down to them, striking them with wonder. The bald head among the green pines, the heavy glasses. Indeed, everything indicates an original character.

He stands by the water tap, firm and upright, and slakes their thirst. Everyone begs permission to go upstairs for a look at the view. He consents, joyfully. They crowd into his little room and utter the stock formulae of admiring exclamations. He smiles as though he had created it all. Above everything, they are surprised by the sea. They had never imagined one could see the sea from here. Yet how soon they grow bored! One glance, a cry of admiration, and they grow restless and eager to be away. They peep at his notes, at the heavy books, and descend the staircase brimming with veneration for him and his view. The group leaders ask him to give some account of the place, but there is no account to give. Everything is still artificial here. There is nothing here, not even some archaeology for amateurs, nothing but a few donors' names, inscribed on rocks. Would they be interested in the names? Well, for instance . . .

They laugh.

The girls look at him kindly. No, he isn't handsome. But might he not become engraved on one of their hearts?

They light camp-fires.

They wish to cook their food, or to warm themselves. A virtuous alarm strikes him. Tiny flames leap up in the forest, a bluish smoke starts blowing gaily about the tree-tops. A fire? Yes and no. He stays glued, through his binoculars, to the lively figures.

Towards evening he goes to explore his flickering, merrymaking empire. He wishes to sound a warning. Softly, soundlessly he draws near the camp-fires, the figures wreathed in flames. He approaches them unnoticed, and they are startled when they discover him beside them. Dozens of young eyes look up at him together. The leaders rise at once.

"Yes? What do you want?"

"The fire. Be careful! One spark, and the forest may burn down."

They are quick to assure him. Laying their hands on their young hearts they give him their solemn promise to watch, with all their eyes shining in a row before him. They will keep within bounds, of course they will, what does he think?

He draws aside. Appeased? Yes and no. There, among the shadows, in the twilight of the fire, he lingers and lets his eyes rove. The girls and their bare creamy legs, slender does. The flames crackle and sing, softly, gently. He clenches his fists in pain. If only he could warm his hands a little.

"Like to join us?" they ask politely. His vertical presence is faintly embarrassing.

No, thanks. He can't. He is busy. His studies. They have seen the books, haven't they? Now there is nothing for it but to withdraw with measured tread. But as soon as he has vanished from their view he flings himself behind the trees, hides among the needle branches. He looks at the fire from afar, at the girls, till everything fades and blankets are spread for sleep. Giggles, girls' affected shrieks, leaders' rebukes. Before he can begin to think, select one out of the many figures, it will be dawn. Silence is still best. At midnight he feels his way through the trees, back to the observation post. He sits in his place, waiting. One of the figures may be working its way in the darkness towards him. But no, nothing. They are tired, already sleeping.

And the same the next day, and all the days following.

Early in the morning he opens his book and hears wild singing in the distance. He does not raise his eyes from the page but his hand strays to the binoculars. A dappled silence. Flashes of light through branches. His eyes are faithful to the written page, but his thoughts have gone whoring already. From the corner of his eye he follows the procession threading through the forest—sorting, checking ages, colours, joys of youth. There is something of abandonment about them from afar, like a procession of Crusaders; except that these women are bare. He trembles, choking suddenly. He removes his glasses and beats his head against the books. Half an hour later they arrive. Asking for water to drink and the view to look at, as usual. They have heard about the wonderful view to be seen from up here. Perhaps they have heard about the scholar as well, but they say nothing. The group leaders take them, a batch at a time, into his room turned public property. No sooner have they scattered about the forest than the camp-fires leap up, as though that were their prime necessity. In the evening he rushes over the five hills, from

fire to fire, impelled by his duty to warn them or by an obscure desire to reveal himself. He never joins any of the circles though. He prefers to hide in the thicket. Their singing throbs in his heart, and even more than that—the whisperings. Warm summer nights—something constantly seeping through the leaves.

Gradually the groups of hikers blend. One excursion leaves, another arrives. By the time he has managed to learn a few outstanding names their owners are gone and the sounds alone survive among the branches. Languor comes over him. No longer does he trouble to caution against fire. On the contrary. He would welcome a little conflagration, a little local tumult. The hikers, however, are extremely responsible. They themselves take care to stamp out every dying ember. Their leaders come in advance to set his mind at rest.

The birds know how much he has neglected his studies; the birds whom he watches constantly lest they approach his desk. A month has passed since he last turned a page and he is stuck squirming between two words. He says: let the heat abate, the hikers be gone—then I shall race over the lines. If only he could skip the words and get to the essence. From time to time he scribbles in his notebook. Stray thoughts, speculations, musings, outlines of assumptions. Not much. A sentence a day. He would like to gain a hold upon it all indirectly. Yet he is doubtful whether he has gained a hold even upon the forest in front of his eyes. Look, here the Arab and the girl are disappearing among the trees and he cannot find them. Towards evening they emerge from an unforeseen direction as though the forest had conceived them even now. They tread the soil softly. They avoid people, choose roundabout ways. He smiles at them both but they recoil.

Friday. The forest is overrun, choking with people. They come on foot and by car, crowds disgorged by the faraway cities. Where is his solitude now? He sprawls on his chair like a dethroned king whose empire has slipped from his hands. Twilight lingers on the tree-tops. Sabbath eve. His ears alone can catch, beyond the uproar of voices, beyond the rustling, the thin cry of the weary soil ceaselessly crushed by the teeth of young roots. A hikers' delegation comes to see him. They just want to ask him a question. They have argued, laid wagers, and he shall be their arbiter. Where exactly is this Arab village that is marked on the map? It ought to be somewhere around here, an abandoned Arab village. Here, they even know its name, something like . . . Actually, it must be right

here, right in the forest . . . Does he know anything about it perhaps? They're simply curious.

The fire watcher gives them a tired look. "A village?" he repeats with a polite, indulgent smile at their folly. No, there is no village here. The map must be wrong, the surveyor's hand must have shaken.

But in the small hours of the night, somewhere between a doze and a slumber, in the face of the whispering, burgeoning forest, the name floats back into his mind of a sudden and he is seized with restlessness. He descends to the ground floor, feels his way in the dark to the bed of the Arab, who lies asleep covered with rags. Roughly he wakes him and whispers the name of the village. The Arab does not understand. His eyes are consumed with weariness. The fire watcher's accent must be at fault. He tries again, therefore, repeats the name over and over and the Arab listens and suddenly he understands. An expression of surprise, of wonder and eagerness suffuses all his wrinkles. He jumps up, stands there in his hairy nakedness and flings up a heavy arm in the direction of the window, pointing fervently, hopelessly, at the forest.

The fire watcher thanks him and departs, leaving the big naked figure in the middle of the room. When he wakes tomorrow, the Arab will think he has dreamed it.

Ceremonies. A season of ceremonies. The forest turns ceremonial. The trees stand bowed, heavy with honour, they take on meaning, they belong. White ribbons are strung to delimit new domains. Luxurious coaches struggle over the rocky roads, a procession of shining automobiles before and behind. Sometimes they are preceded by a motorcycle mounted by an excited policeman. Unwieldy personages alight, shambling like black bears. The women flutter around them. Little by little they assemble, crush out cigarettes with their black shoes and fall silent—paying homage to the memory of themselves. The fire watcher, too, participates in the ceremony, from afar, he and his binoculars. A storm of obedient applause breaks out, a gleam of scissors, a flash of photographers, ribbons sag. A plaque is unveiled, a new little truth is revealed to the world. A brief tour of the conquered wood, and then the distinguished gathering dissolves into its various vehicles and sallies forth.

Where is the light gone?

In the evening, when the fire watcher comes down to the drooping ribbons, to the grateful trees, he will find nothing but a

pale inscription saying, for example: "Donated by the Sackson children in honour of Daddy Sackson of Baltimore, a fond tribute to his paternity. End of Summer Nineteen Hundred and . . ."

Sometimes the fire watcher, observing from his heights, will notice one of the party darting troubled looks about him, raising his eyes at the trees as though searching for something. It takes many ceremonies before the fire watcher's wandering mind will grasp that this is none other than the old man in charge of afforestation, who comes and repeats himself, dressed always in the same clothes, at every ceremony.

Once he goes down to him.

The old man is walking among his distinguished foreign party, jesting with them haltingly in their language. The fire watcher comes out of the trees and plants himself in front of him for the inevitable encounter. The distinguished party stops, startled. An uneasy silence falls over them. The ladies shrink back.

"What do you want?" demands the old man masterfully.

The fire watcher gives a weak smile.

"Don't you know me? I'm the watchman. That is to say, the fire watcher . . . employee of yours . . ."

"Ah!" fist beating against aged forehead, "I didn't recognize you, was alarmed, these tatters have changed your appearance so, this heavy beard. Well young man, and how's the solitude?"

"Solitude?" he wonders.

The old man presents him to the party.

"A scholar . . ."

They smile, troubled, meet his hand with their fingertips, move on. They do not have complete faith in his cleanliness. The old man on the other hand, looks at him affectionately. A thought crosses his mind and he stays behind a moment.

"Well, so there *are* forests," he grins with good-natured irony.

"Yes," admits the scout honestly. "Forests, yes . . . but . . ."

"But what?"

"But fires, no."

"Fires?" the old man wonders, bending towards him.

"Yes, fires. I spend whole days here sitting and wondering. Such a quiet summer."

"Well, why not? Actually, there hasn't been a fire here for several years now. To tell you the truth. I don't think there has ever been a fire at all in this forest. Nature itself is harnessed to our great enterprise here, ha-ha."

"And I was under the impression . . ."

"That what?"

"That fires broke out here every other day. By way of illustration, at least. The whole machinery waiting on the alert, is it all for nothing? The fire engines . . . telephone lines . . . the manpower . . . For months my eyes have been strained with waiting."

"Waiting? Ha-ha, what a joke!"

The old one hurries along. The drivers are switching on their engines. That is all he needs, to be left overnight in this arboreal silence. Before he goes he would just like to know the watchman's opinion of the dumb Arab. The lorry driver has got the idea into his head that the fellow is laying in a stock of kerosene . . .

The watchman is stirred. "Kerosene?"

"Daresay it's some fancy of that malicious driver. This Arab is a placid kind of fellow, isn't he?"

"Wonderfully placid," agrees the fire watcher eagerly. Then he walks a few steps around the old man and whispers confidentially: "Isn't he a local?"

"A local?"

"Because our forest is growing over, well, over a ruined village . . ."

"A village?"

"A small village."

"A small village? Ah—(Something is coming back to him anyway.) "Yes, there used to be some sort of a farmstead here. But that is a thing of the past."

Of the past, yes, certainly. What else . . . ?

One day's programme as an example.

Not having slept at night, he does not wake up in the morning. Light springs up between his fingers. What date is today? There is no telling. Prisoners score lines on the walls of their cell, but he is not in prison. He has come of his own free will, and so he will go. He could lift the receiver and find out the date from the firemen bent over their fire engines, waiting in some unknown beyond, but he does not want to scare them yet.

He goes down to the tap and sprinkles a few drops of water over his beard to freshen it up. Then he climbs back to his room, snatches up the binoculars and makes a pre-breakfast inspection. Excitement grips him. The forest filled with smoke? No, the binoculars are to blame. He wipes the lenses with a corner of his

grimy shirt. The forest clears up at once, disappointingly. None of the trees has done any real growing overnight.

He goes down again. He picks up the dry loaf of bread and cuts himself a rough slice. He chews rapidly, his eyes roving over a torn strip of newspaper in which tomatoes are wrapped. It is not, God forbid, out of a hunger for news but so as to keep his eyes in training lest they forget the shape of the printed letter. He returns to his observation post, his mouth struggling with an enormous half-rotten tomato. He sucks, swallows, gets smeared with the red trickling sap. At last he throws a sizeable remnant away. Silence. He dozes a bit, wakes, looks for a long time at the treetops. The day stretches out ahead of him. Softly he draws near the books.

Where are we? How many pages read? Better not count them or he will fall prey to despair; for the time being he is serene, and why spoil it? It isn't a question of quantity, is it? And he remembers what he has read up to now perfectly well, forwards and backwards. The words wave and whirl within him. For the time being, therefore, for the past few weeks, that is, he has been devoting his zeal to one single sheet of paper. A picture? Rather, a map. A map of the area. He will display it on this wall here for the benefit of his successors, that they may remember him. Look, he has signed his name already, signed it to begin with, lest he forget.

What is he drawing? Trees. But not only trees. Hills too, a blue horizon too. He is improving day by day. If he had coloured crayons he could have added some birds as well; at least, say, those native to the area. What interests him in particular is the village buried beneath the trees. That is to say, it hasn't always been as silent here. His curiosity is of a strictly scientific nature. What was it the old man had said? "A scholar." He strokes the beard and his hand lingers, disentangles a few hairs matted with filth. What time is it? Early still. He reads a line about the attitude of the Pope to the German Kaiser and falls asleep. He wakes with a start. He lights a cigarette, tosses the burning match out into the forest, but the match goes out in mid-air. He flings the cigarette butt among the trees and it drops on a stone and burns itself out in solitude.

He gets up, paces about restlessly. What time is it? Early still.

He goes in search of the Arab, to say good-morning. He must impress his own vigilant existence upon the man, lest he be murdered some morning between one doze and another. Ever since the fire watcher has spoken the name of the vanished village in his ears the Arab has become suspicious, as though he were being

watched all the time. The fire watcher strides rapidly between the pines. How light his footstep has grown during the long summer months. His soundless appearance startles the two.

"Shalom," he says, in Hebrew.

They reply in two voices. The child—a voice that has sweetness in it, the Arab—a harsh grunt. The fire watcher smiles to himself and hurries on as though he was extremely busy. Chiselled stones lie scattered among the trees, outlines of buildings, ruins and relics. He searches for marks left by humans. Every day he comes and disturbs a few stones, looking for traces.

A man and a woman are lying here entwined, like statues toppled from their base. Their terror when the bearded head bends silently over them! Smile at them and run, you! A couple slipped away from a group hike, no doubt.

What is he looking for? Relics of thoughts that have flitted here, words that have completed their mission. But what will he find one fine day, say even the day that we have taken for a sample? Small tins filled with kerosene. How wonderful! The zeal with which someone has filled tin after tin here and covered them up with the girl's old dress. He stoops over the treasure, the still liquid on whose face dead pine needles drift. His reflection floats back at him together with the faint smell.

Blissfully he returns to the house, opens a tin of meat and bolts its contents to the last sliver. He wipes his mouth and spits far out among the branch-filled air. He turns two pages of a book and reads the Cardinal's reply to a Jew's epistle. Funny, these twists and turns of the Latin, but what a threat is conveyed by them. He falls asleep, wakes, realizes he has nearly missed an important ceremony on the easternmost hill. From now on the binoculars stay glued to his eyes and he mingles with the distinguished crowd from afar. He can even make out the movements of the speaker's lips; he will fill in the missing sound himself. But then the flames of the sunset catch his eye and divert his attention, and with a daily returning excitement he becomes absorbed in the splendour, the terrible splendour.

Afterwards he wipes the dust off the silent telephone. To give him his due—he bestows meticulous care on the equipment that belongs to the Afforestation Department, whereas his own equipment is already falling apart. The loose buttons shed among the trees, the frayed shirt, the ragged trousers.

A private outing of joyriders arrives with a loud fanfare to spend

the night in the forest. Wearily he chews his supper. Nightfall brings the old familiar sadness.

The Arab and his daughter go to bed. Darkness. The first giggle that emerges from the trees is a slap in his listening face. He turns over a few dark pages, swats a gnat, whistles.

Night. He does not fall asleep.

Then it is the end of summer. The forest is emptying. And with the first autumn wind, who is blown to him like a withered leaf but his ageing mistress, the wife of the friend who sent him here. Clad in a summer frock she comes, a wide-brimmed straw hat on her head. Then she clicks her high heels around his room, rummaging through his drawers, bending over the books, peering through the papers. She had gone for a brief vacation by herself somewhere in this neighbourhood and had remembered him. How is it when a man sits solitary, facing the forest night after night? She had wanted to surprise him. Well, and what has he come up with? A fresh crusade perhaps? She is awfully curious. Her husband speaks well of him too. In this solitude, among the trees, says the husband, he may yet flower into greatness.

The fire watcher is moved. Without a word he points at the map on the wall. She trips over to look, does not understand. Actually she is interested in texts. What has he written? She is very tired. Such a time till she found this place and she's more dead than alive. The view is pretty, yes, but the place looks awfully neglected. Who lives downstairs? The Arab? Is that so! She met him on the way, tried to ask him something and suddenly—the shock! Dumb, his severed tongue. But the Afforestation Department—hats off to them. Who would have imagined such forests growing in this country! He has changed, though. Grown fatter? This new beard of his is just awful. Why doesn't he say something?

She sinks down on to the bed.

Then he rises, approaches her with that quiet that is in his blood now. He removes her hat, crouches at her feet, unbuckles her shoes; he is trembling with desire, choking.

She is shocked. She draws back her bare tired feet at once with something of terror, perhaps with relief. But he has already let go, stands holding the binoculars and looks at the forest, looks long, peering through the trees, waiting for fire. Slowly he turns to her, the binoculars at his eyes, turns the lenses upon her mischievously, sees the tiny wrinkles whittled in her face, the sweat drops, her

fatigue. She smiles at him as in an old photograph. But when the moment drags, her smile turns into protest. She draws herself together crossly, holds up a hand: "Hey, you! Stop it!"

Only towards sunset does he finally manage to undress her. The binoculars are still on his chest, pressed between their bodies. From time to time he coolly interrupts his kisses and caresses, raises the binoculars to his eyes and inspects the forest.

"Duty," he whispers apologetically, sending an odd smile to the nude, ashamed woman. Everything mingles with the glory of the crimson sun—the distant blue of the sea, the still trees, the blood on his cracked lips, the despair, the futility, the loneliness of the act. Accidentally her hand touches the bald crown and flinches.

When the Arab returns it is all over. She is lying in the tangle of her clothes, drowsy. A beautiful night has descended on the world. He sits by his desk, what else should he do? The dark transforms her into a silhouette. The forest bewitches her. Suddenly she rouses herself. The soft voice of the little Arab girl sends a shiver through her. What is she doing here? She dresses rapidly, buttons, buckles. Her voice floats on the darkness.

Actually, she has come out of pity. No one had thought he would persist so long. When does he sleep anyway? She has been sent here to deliver him, deliver him from this solitude. His silence rouses suspicions. Her husband and his friends have suddenly begun to wonder, have become afraid, ha-ha, afraid that he may be nursing some secret, some novel idea, that he may outshine them all with some brilliant research.

A sudden dark breeze bursts into the room through the gap where there is no wall, whirls around for a little and dies out in the two corners. He is kindled. His eyes glow.

"Pity? No, unnecessary. When do I sleep? Always . . . though different from the city sleep. Leave here now, just like that? Too late. I haven't finished counting the trees yet. Novel ideas? Maybe, though not what they imagine . . . not exactly scientific . . . Rather, human . . ."

Does she wish him to accompany her on her way back through the forest, or would she go by herself perhaps?

She jumps up.

They cut diagonally across the hills. He walks in front, she drags behind, staggering over the rocks in her high heels, hurt and humiliated. Though thickset, his feet are light and he slips through the foliage swift as a snake, never turning his head. She struggles

with the branches whipping back behind him. The moonlight reveals them on their silent trip. What do you say now, my autumn love? Have I gone completely out of my mind? But that was to be expected, wasn't it? Out of my round of pleasures you have cast me into solitude. Trees have taken the place of words for me, forests the place of books. That is all. Eternal autumn, needles falling endlessly on my eyes. I am still awaiting a conflagration.

Wordless they reach the black main road. Her heels click on the asphalt with a last fury. Now he looks at her. Her face is scratched, her arms bloodstained. How assertively the forest leaves its mark. She contains the thin cry rising in her. Her silence grants her dignity. After some minutes a sleek car driven by a lone grey-templed man halts at her waving hand. She joins him in the car without a parting word. She will yet crumble between his fingers on the long road.

He turns in his tracks. After a few paces the Arab pops up in front of him. He is breathing heavily, his face is dull. And what do you have to say, mister? From where have you sprung now? The Arab holds out her forgotten hat, the straw hat. The fire watcher smiles his thanks, spreads his arms in a gesture of nothing we can do, she's gone. But how amazing, this attention. Nothing will escape the man's eye. He takes the hat from the Arab and pitches it on top of his own head, gives him a slight bow and the other is immediately alarmed. His face is alert, watching. Together, in silence, they return to the forest, their empire, theirs alone. The fire watcher strides ahead and the Arab tramples on his footsteps. A few clouds, a light breeze. Moonlight pours over the branches and makes them transparent. He leads the Arab over roads that are the same roads always. Barefoot he walks, the Arab, and so still. Round and round he is led, roundabout and to his hideout, amid chiselled stones and silence. The Arab's steps falter. His footfalls lag, die and come alive again. A deathly cold grips the fire watcher's heart, his hands freeze. He kneels on the rustling earth. Who will give him back all the empty hours? The forest is dark and empty. No one there. Not one camp-fire. Just now, when he would like to dip his hands in fire, warm them a little. He heaps up some brown needles, takes a match, lights it, and the match goes out at once. He takes another and cups his hands around it, strikes, and this one too flares up and dies. The air is damp and traitorous. He rises. The Arab watches him, a gleam of lunatic hope in his eyes. Softly the fire watcher walks around the pile of stones to the sorry little hideout, picks up a tin of clear liquid

and empties it over the heap of pine needles, tosses in a burning match and leaps up with the surging flame—singed, happy. At last he, too, is lit up a little. Stunned, the Arab goes down on his knees. The fire watcher spreads his palms over the flame and the Arab does likewise. Their bodies press in on the fire, which has already reached its highest pitch. He might leave the flame now and go and bathe in the sea. Time, time wasting here among the trees, will do his work for him. He muses, his mind distracted. The fire shows signs of languishing, little by little it dies at his feet. The Arab's face takes on a look of bitter disappointment. The bonfire fades. Last sparks are stamped out meticulously. Thus far it was only a lesson. The wandering mind of the fire watcher trembles between compromises. He rises wearily and leaves. The Arab slouches in his wake.

Who is sitting on the chair behind the book-laden desk? The child. Her eyes are wide open, drinking in the dark. The Arab has put her there to replace the loving fire watcher. It's an idea.

Strange days follow. We would say: autumn; but that means nothing yet. The needles seem to fall faster, the sun grows weaker, clouds come to stay and a new wind. His mind is slipping, growing unhinged. The ceremonies are over. The donors have gone back to their countries, the hikers to their work, pupils to their study. His own books lie jumbled in a glow of dust. He is neglecting his duties, has left his chair, his desk, his faithful binoculars, and has begun roving endlessly about the forest, by day and by night; a broken twig in his hand, he slashes at the young tree trunks as he walks, as though marking them. Suddenly he slumps down, rests his head against a shining copper plaque, removes his glasses and peers through the blurring foliage, searches the grey sky. Something like a wail, suddenly. Foul fantasies. Then he collects himself once more, jumps up to wander through the wood, among the thistles and rocks. The idea has taken hold in his dim consciousness that he is being called insistently to an encounter at the edge of the forest, at its other end. But when he plunges out of the forest and arrives there, whether it be at night or at noon or in the early dawn, he finds nothing but a yellow waste, a strange wadi, a kind of cursed dream. And he will stand there for a long time, facing the empty treeless silence and feeling that the encounter is taking place, is being successful even though it happens wordlessly. He has spent a whole spring and a long summer never once properly sleeping, and

what wonder is it if these last days should be like a trance.

He has lost all hope of fire. Fire has no hold over this forest. He can therefore afford to stay among the trees, not facing them. In order to soothe his conscience he sits the girl in his chair. It has taken less than a minute to teach her the Hebrew word for "fire". How she has grown up during his stay here! She is like a noble mare now with marvellous eyes. Unexpectedly her limbs have ripened, her filth become a woman's smell. At first her old father had been forced to chain her to the chair, or she would have escaped. Yes, the old Arab has grown very attached to the negligent fire watcher, follows him wherever he goes.

Ever since the night when the two of them hugged the little bonfire the Arab, too, has grown languid. He has abandoned his eternal hoe. The grass is turning yellow under his feet, the thistles multiply. The fire watcher will be lying on the ground and see the dusky face thrusting at him through the branches. As a rule he ignores the Arab, continues lying with his eyes on the sky. But sometimes he calls him and the man comes and kneels by his side, his heavy eyes wild with terror and hope. Perhaps he too will fail to convey anything and it will all remain dark.

The fire watcher talks to him therefore, quietly, reasonably, in a positively didactic manner. He tells him about the Crusades, and the other bends his head and absorbs the hard, alien words as one absorbing a melody. He tells him about the fervour, about the cruelty, about Jews committing suicide, about the Children's Crusade; things he has picked up from the books, the unfounded theories he has framed himself. His voice is warm, alive with imagination. The Arab listens with mounting tension and is filled with hate. When they return at twilight, lit by a soft autumnal glow, the fire watcher will lead the Arab to the tree-engulfed house and will linger a moment. Then the Arab explains something with hurried, confused gestures, squirming his severed tongue, tossing his head. He wishes to say that this is his house and that there used to be a village here as well and that they have simply hidden it all, buried it in the big forest.

The fire watcher looks on at this pantomime and his heart fills with joy. What is it that rouses such passion in the Arab? Apparently his wives have been murdered here as well. A dark affair, no doubt. Gradually he moves away, pretending not to understand. Did there used to be a village here? He sees nothing but trees.



More and more the Arab clings to him. They sit there, the three of them like a family, in the room on the second floor. The fire watcher sprawling on the bed, the child chained to the chair, the Arab crouching on the floor. Together they wait for the fire that does not come. The forest is dark and strong, a slow-growing world. These are his last days. His contract is drawing to an end. From time to time he gets up and throws one of the books back into the suitcase, startling the old Arab.

The nights are growing longer. Hot desert winds and raindrops mingle, soft shimmers of lightning flash over the sea. The last day is come. Tomorrow he will leave this place. He has discharged his duty faithfully. It isn't his fault that no fires have broken out. All the books are packed in the suitcase, scraps of paper litter the floor. The Arab has disappeared, has been missing since yesterday. The child is miserable. From time to time she raises her voice in a thin, ancient lament. The fire watcher is growing worried. At noon the Arab turns up suddenly. The child runs towards him but he takes no notice of her. He turns to the abdicating fire watcher instead, grabs him between two powerful hands and—feeble and soft that he is and suffering from a slight cold—impels him towards the edge of the observation post and explains whatever he can explain to him with no tongue. Perhaps he wishes to throw the abdicating fire watcher down two storeys and into the forest. Perhaps he believes that only he, the fire watcher, can understand him. His eyes are burning. But the fire watcher is serene, unresponsive; he shadows his eyes with his palm, shrugs his shoulders, gives a meaningless little smile. What else is left him?

He collects his clothes and bundles them into the other suitcase.

Towards evening the Arab disappears again. The child has gone to look for him and has come back empty-handed. Gently the hours drift by. A single drop of rain. The fire watcher prepares supper and sets it before the child, but she cannot bring herself to eat. Like a little animal she scurries off once more into the forest to hunt for her father and returns in despair, by herself. Towards midnight she falls asleep at last. He undresses her and carries the shabby figure to the bed, covers it with the torn blanket. What a lonely woman she will grow up to be. He muses. Something is flowing between his fingers, something like compassion. He lingers awhile. Then he returns to his observation post, sits on his chair, sleepy. Where will he be tomorrow? How about saying goodbye to the Fire Brigade? He picks up the receiver. Silence. The line is dead. Not a purr, not

a gurgle. The sacred hush has invaded the wire as well.

He smiles contentedly. In the dark forest spread out before him the Arab is moving about like a silent dagger. He sits watching the world as one may watch a great play before the rising of the curtain. A little excitement, a little drowsing in one's seat. Midnight performance.

Then, suddenly—fire. Fire, unforeseen, leaping out of the corner. A long graceful flame. One tree is burning, a tree wrapped in prayer. For a long moment one tree is going through its hour of judgment and surrendering its spirit. He lifts the receiver. Yes, the line is dead. He is leaving here tomorrow.

The loneliness of a single flame in a big forest. He is beginning to worry whether the ground may not be too wet and the thistles too few, and the show be over after one flame. His eyes are closing. His drowsiness is greatest now, at this most wonderful of moments. He rises and starts pacing nervously through the room in order to walk off his fatigue. A short while passes and then a smile spreads over his face. He starts counting the flames. The Arab is setting the forest on fire at its four corners, then takes a firebrand and rushes through the trees like an evil spirit, setting fire to the rest. The thoroughness with which he goes about his task amazes the fire watcher. He goes down to look at the child. She is asleep. Back to the observation post—the forest is burning. He ought to run and raise the alarm, call for help. But his movements are so tranquil, his limbs leaden. Downstairs again. He adjusts the blanket over the child, pushes a lock of hair out of her eyes, goes back up, and a blast of hot air blows in his face. A great light out there. Five whole hills ablaze. Flames surge as in a frenzy high over the trees, roar at the lighted sky. Pines split and crash. Wild excitement sweeps him, rapture. He is happy. Where is the Arab now? The Arab speaks to him out of the fire, wishes to say everything, everything and at once. Will he understand?

Suddenly he is aware of another presence in the room. Swiftly he turns his head and sees the girl, half naked, eyes staring, the light of the fire playing over her face. He smiles and she weeps.

Intense heat wells up from the leisurely burning forest. The first excitement has passed. The fire is turning from a vision into a fact. Flames are mobilizing from all the four winds to come and visit the observation post. He ought to take his two suitcases and disappear. But he only takes the child. The lights of the neighbouring settlements have become so pitiful, so plain. They are no doubt

sure, over there, that the fight against the fire is already in full swing. Who would imagine that the fire is still being nourished here, brooded over? Hours will go by before the village watchmen come to wake the sleepers. The nights are already cold and people not disposed to throw off their blankets. He seizes the trembling child by the hand, goes down and begins his retreat. The road is lit up till far into the distance. Behind his back the fire, and in his face a red, mad, burning moon that floats in the sky as though it wished to see the blaze as well. His head feels heavy, the road stretches ahead. They drag along, dipping in light and in darkness. In the lanes the trees whisper, agitated, waiting. A fearful rumour has reached them.

The observation post can be seen from afar, entirely lit up. The earth is casting its shackles. After a long walk the trees start thinning out at last, they grow smaller, then disappear. He arrives at the yellow waste, the wadi, his dream. A few dry, twisted trees, desert trees, alien and salty; trees that have sprung up parched, that the fire has no hold over. He sits the barefoot girl on the ground, slumps beside her. His exhaustion erupts within him and covers them both.

With sleeping eyes he sees the shining fire engines arrive at last, summoned by another. They too know that all is lost. In a dream the Arab appears—tired, dishevelled, black with soot, his face ravaged—takes the child and vanishes. The fire watcher falls asleep, really asleep.

At dawn, shivering and damp, he emerges from the cover of the rocks, polishes his glasses and lo, he is the little scholar once more who has some kind of future before him. Five bare black hills, and slender wisps of blue-grey smoke rising from them. The observation post juts out over the bare landscape like a great demon grinning with white windows. For a moment it seems as though the forest had never burnt down but had simply pulled up its roots and gone off on a journey, far off on a journey, far off to the sea, for instance, which has suddenly come into view. The air is chilly. He adjusts his rumpled clothes, does up the last surviving button, rubs his hands to warm them, then treads softly among the smoking embers, light of foot. The first rays of the sun hit his bald patch. There is a sadness in this sudden nudity, the sadness of wars lost, blood shed in vain. Stately clouds sail in the cold sky. Soon the first rain will fall. He hears sounds of people everywhere. Utter destruction. Soot,

a tangle of charred timber, its wounds still smoldering, and a residue of living branches unvisited by fire. Wherever he sets foot a thousand sparks fly. The commemorative plaques alone have survived; more than that, they have gained lustre after their baptism of fire. There they lie, golden in the sun: Louis Premington of Chicago, the King of Burundi and his People.

He enters the burnt building, climbs the charred stairs. Everything is still glowing hot. It is as though he were making his way through hell. He arrives at his room. The fire has visited it in his absence and held its riot of horror and glee. Shall we start with the books burnt to ashes? Or the contorted telephone? Or perhaps the binoculars melted to a lump? The map of the area has miraculously survived, is only blackened a bit at the edges. Gay fire kittens are still frolicking in the pillow and blankets. He turns his gaze to the fire smoking hills, frowns—there, out of the smoke and haze, the ruined village appears before his eyes; born anew in its basic outlines as an abstract drawing, as all things past and buried. He smiles to himself, a thin smile. Then abruptly it dies on his face. Directly under him, in the bluish abyss at the foot of the building, he sees the one in charge of forests who is edging his way to old age, wrapped in an old windbreaker, his face blue with cold. How has this one sprung up here all of a sudden?

The old one throws his grey head back and sends up a look full of hatred. Looking down upon the man from his high post, his own eyes would be faintly contemptuous in any case. For a few seconds they stay thus, with their eyes fixed on each other; at last the fire watcher gives his employer a fatuous smile of recognition and slowly starts coming down to him. The old man approaches him with quick mad steps. He would tear him to pieces if he could. He is near collapse with fury and pain. In a choking voice he demands the whole story, at once.

But there is no story, is there? There just isn't anything to tell. All there is, is: Suddenly the fire sprang up. I lifted the receiver—the line was dead. That's it. The child had to be saved.

The rest is obvious. Yes, the fire watcher feels for the forest too. He has grown extremely attached to it during the spring, the summer and half the autumn. So attached, in fact, that (to tell the truth for once) he hasn't managed to learn a single line.

He feels that the old man would like to sink to the ground and beat his head against some rock, would tear out the last of his white hair. The late fire watcher is surprised. Because the forests are

insured, aren't they (at least they ought to be, in his humble and practical opinion), and the fire won't be deducted from the budget of the old man's department, will it? Right now (this morning has found him amazingly clearheaded), he would very much like to be told about other forest fires. He is willing to bet that they were quite puny ones.

Except that now, ghost-like through the smoke, the firemen appear, accompanied by some fat and perspiring policemen. Soon he is surrounded by uniforms. Some of the men drop to the ground with exhaustion. Though the fire has not been completely tracked down as yet, they have already unearthed a startling piece of intelligence.

It has been arson.

Yes, arson. The smell of morning dew comes mingled with a smell of kerosene.

The old man is shattered.

"Arson?" he turns to the fire watcher.

But the other smiles gently.

The investigation is launched at once. First the firemen, who are supposed to write a report. They draw the fire watcher aside, take out large sheets of paper, ornate ballpoints, and then it appears that they have difficulty with the language, with phrasing and spelling. They are embarrassed. Tactfully he helps them, spells out words, formulates their sentences for them. They are very grateful.

"What have *you* lost in the fire?" they inquire sympathetically.

"Oh, nothing of importance. Some clothes and a few textbooks. Nothing to worry about."

By the time they are through it is far into the morning. The Arab and the child appear from nowhere, led by two policemen. If he will be careful not to let his glance encounter those burning eyes he may possibly sleep in peace in the nights to come. Two tough-looking sergeants improvise a kind of emergency interrogation cell among the rocks, place him on a stone and start cross-examining him. For hours they persist, and that surprises him—the plodding tenacity, the diligence, page upon written page. A veritable research is being compiled before his eyes. The sun climbs to its zenith. He is hungry, thirsty. His interrogators chew enormous sandwiches and do not offer him a crumb. His glasses mist over with sweat. A queer autumn day. Inside the building they are conducting a simultaneous interrogation of the Arab, in Arabic eked out with gestures. Only the questions are audible.

The old forest manager dodges back and forth between the two interrogations, adding questions of his own, noting down replies. The interrogators have their subject with his back against the rock, they repeat the same questions over and over. A foul stench rises from the burnt forest, as though a huge carcass were rotting away all around them. The interrogation gains momentum. A big bore. What did he see, what did he hear, what did he do. It's insulting, this insistence upon the tangible—as though that were the main point, as though there weren't some idea involved here.

About noon his questioners change, two new ones appear and start the whole process over again. The subject is dripping with sweat. How humiliating, to be interrogated thus baldly on scorched earth, on rocks, after a sleepless night. The tedium of it. He spits, grows angry, loses his temper. He removes his glasses and his senses go numb. He starts contradicting himself. At three o'clock he breaks in their hands, is prepared to suggest the Arab as a possible clue.

This, of course, is what they have been waiting for. They had suspected the Arab all along. Promptly they handcuff him, and then all at once everything is rapidly wound up. The police drivers start their cars. The Arab is bundled into one of them and there is a gratified expression in his eyes now, a sense of achievement. The child clings to him desperately. Autumn clouds, autumn sadness, everything is flat and pointless. Suddenly he walks over to the forest manager and boldly demands a solution for the child. The other makes no reply. His old eyes wander over the lost forest as though in parting. This old one is going mad as well, his senses are growing confused. He stares at the fire watcher with vacant eyes as though he, too, had lost the words, as though he understood nothing. The fire watcher repeats his demand in a loud voice. The old man steps nearer.

"What?" he mumbles in a feeble voice, his eyes watery. Suddenly he throws himself at the fire watcher, attacks him with shrivelled fists, hits out at him. With difficulty the firemen pull him back. To be sure, he blames only this one here. Yes, this one with the books, with the dim glasses, with that smug cynicism of his.

The policemen extricate the fire watcher and whisk him into one of their cars. They treat him roughly, something of the old man's hostility has stuck to them. Before he has time to say goodbye to the place where he has spent nearly six months he is being borne away at a mad pace towards town. They dump him on one of the side streets. He enters the first restaurant he comes to and gorges himself

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to bursting point. Afterwards he paces the streets, bearded, dirty, sunburnt—a savage. The first dusty rain has already smirched the pavements.

At night, in some shabby hotel room, he is free to have a proper sleep, to sleep free from obligations for the first time, just sleep without any further dimensions. Except that he will not fall asleep, will only go on drowsing. Green forests will spring up before his troubled eyes. He may yet smart with sorrow and yearning, may feel constricted because he is shut in by four walls, not three.

And so it will be the day after, and perhaps all the days to come. The solitude has proved a success. True, his notes have been burned along with the books, but if anyone thinks that he does not remember—he does.

Yet he has become a stranger now in his so familiar town. He seems to have been forgotten already. A new generation is breaking into the circles. His waggish friends meet him, slap him on the back, and with ugly grins say, "We hear your forest burned down!" As we said, he is still young. But his real friends have given him up in despair. He drops in on them, on winter nights, shivering with cold—wet dog begging for fire and light—and they scowl and ask: "Well, what now?"