

after Huck Finn

2063

*"Our concern was speech, and speech impelled us
To purify the dialect of the tribe
And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight."*

aftersight and foresight
the sound is dull
in the ear
like a bruise
on fruit
or the passage
of bland taint
in strong
meat

So curious a man
this Eliot
exquisite, forceful, superb
but dimmed in his climax
No wonder he caught
the spirit of an age

aftersight and foresight
hole upon hole
is the dead
of poetry
as a scheme in rhyme

v 3

2004

you break
up your
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I am looking
for the
fish who
swim in the
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ee likes the
herbs
in the
letters

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ette

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The Dinner Party
from Ancient Evenings

The Dinner Party

from Ancient Evenings

Ancient Evenings
175-232

~~175-232~~
~~175-232~~
1000 B.C.
a.k.a
1987

EIGHT

The Dinner Party



ON our walk through the gardens to the chamber where we would dine with the Pharaoh, my mother began to think of a conversation she did not wish to recall. Yet, once commenced, there was nothing but to remember all of it. How could one not? A few days ago, my father, knowing how the news would chew on my mother's heart, had told her the Pharaoh said that Menenhetet ate the dung of bats. To which my mother replied, "He takes it as a medicine," only to hear my father reply, "No, it is not so. He takes it for the contentment of his palate. The Pharaoh heard it most reliably from Khem-Usha. It was a long time ago but He cannot get it out of His mind. I think that is why there has been no invitation to Menenhetet for so long a time."

"Nor have I been invited," my mother could not restrain herself from saying.

"He would hardly think of you," said my father, "without remembering Menenhetet."

More recently, my father had begun to speak of Ptah-nem-hotep's interest in pigs. He talked about them constantly. "Did you know," Ptah-nem-hotep would say, "if a nobleman touches pig, he must go into the river immediately, and with his clothes on, no matter how good they are. That's to wash off the taint."

"I have, Good and Great God, never touched the beast," said Nef-khep-aukhem. "I have heard that leprosy may be caused by drinking pig's milk."

"No one I know has tried it," said Ptah-nem-hotep. He added: "Of course, it's not the sort of thing that would give your relative, Menenhetet, much pause." Which my father made a point of telling my mother.

Two days later, Ptah-nem-hotep was bemused again by the pig. "I spoke to Khem-Usha," He told Nef-khep-aukhem. "As I sus-

pected, it is true. Swineherds, on pain of the removal of their nose, are forbidden from entering any temple. 'How would you know,' I asked Khem-Usha, 'if they came in disguise?' 'We would know,' he told Me. There is a priest for you. It is the perfect remark for a High Priest."

At this point, Ptah-nem-hotep took off His wig, handed it to Nef-khep-aukhem, inclined His head to receive another, studied the polished surface of His bronze mirror (or such, at least, was the view my mother imagined) and then said to my father, "I'm going to celebrate the Feast of the Pig this year." At the look in my father's face, He added, "Yes, we will eat of pig's flesh, you and Me, just like every other Egyptian at the fires in the markets guzzling on fat and tasty pieces, and, yes" — He paused — "I've not had your family here in a long time. Let's have a small dinner that night. Tell Menenhetet" — here, Ptah-nem-hotep gave His delicious smile — "to bring one of his bats."

"It would give me greater happiness, Good God, if it were You to tell him."

Ptah-nem-hotep smiled. "There'll be surprises. I wish to delight your wife and child on the Night of the Pig."

I did not know what to expect. When my parents or my great-grandfather gave a feast we had many musicians who not only played at harps and lyres but knew guitars and the cithara and the barbiton, and after the banquet would come many surprises. Jugglers would appear, acrobats, and wrestlers. Skilled slaves would throw knives at painted wooden blocks, and once, my great-grandfather even brought his guests down to the river and there, by his embankment, boatmen decorated with colored ribbons and wearing feather headdresses had used their oars like poles to try to knock each other into the water, a dangerous sport, I heard the guests whisper. In the excitement a good boatman could be drowned. None perished that night, and my great-grandfather had salts sprinkled on the torches so that we stood among fires of green and scarlet and in the midst of purple flames while the din rolled back across the water. That had been a great feast.

Tonight would not be the same. My mother said we would be only five for dinner. Still, the thought she passed to me was clear: Our Pharaoh, having given many lavish parties, would find more amusement in our small evening where we might linger over the exquisite refinement and brilliance of His conversation. I could al-

ready hear her speaking like this to friends in days to come. Yet, by the light in her eye, gleaming with marvels of anticipation, I knew she did not lie. The Feast of the Pig, no matter what my father had told her, was going to be wondrous.

It was. On this night I learned almost as soon as we began that I would eat food I never tasted before and hear conversation on topics unfamiliar to me. Indeed, I soon learned something on the secrets of purple contained in the snail, as well as how to put a letter in a dead person's hand, and was given hints of the virtues of cannibalism. And much else. And much else again.

As the dinner went on, and one strange food followed another into my stomach, my spirits played through perfumed fires, and my thoughts became inflamed. What my mother had told me about the hour I was made might as well have become a seed growing in the silence of my heart. The cheeks of my face were red, the conversation of my parents — was I to look to Menenhetet or Nef-khepaukhem as my father? — squirmed in my stomach like sun-heated snakes, and I was feeling that wild merriment peculiar to childhood when every moment can bring a new, incalculable pleasure or, as easily, a clap of disaster. Since I could not begin to cry out with the uproar I would have liked to put forth, stimulation built fever upon fever in me, and I passed from hardly tasting the food to moments when I was trembling to recover from all the directions in which my senses were scattered by each flavor.

We reclined by a low table of ebony on which were golden plates so thin they weighed less than my mother's alabaster, and the room was like a forest on fire and lit by so many great candles it brought us near to feeling the presence of the sun in the middle of the night; yet we were only inside a chamber of wood panels of a grain like the fur of a leopard, and I noticed that the Pharaoh, having changed His costume to another of pleated white linen that left His chest bare but for one shoulder, wore less ornament than any of us, indeed He wore no decoration except a leopard's tail attached to the rear of his skirt. He would reach about from time to time and catch the stem of this tail by His hand in order to thump the tip on the table, as though to indicate His excitement at something my mother or Menenhetet had said, and once, in the high vigor of amusement with which He did this, having struck the tail several times on the table and flung it back with a whoop — for He seemed in as much of a fever of laughter as myself — He succeeded in lash-

ing that leopard's tail up into the middle of a great ostrich fan on a stand behind His seat, and the fan tottered and would have fallen if a servant had not caught it.

There were two behind each of us, and five or more for the Pharaoh, and their murmur, "Life, Health, Strength," to every service they gave, whether to fill a goblet, remove a plate, serve a new plate, or present us with a little more of the same dish, became so constant and reassuring as the sound of crickets in my family's garden. Again I knew that all was safe, as at home, where I had come to know that I could sleep so long as the ringing of insects did not cease, for their onslaught upon the silence was nonetheless a sign that nothing was worse than it had been the night before, and therefore the power of sleep which hovered in the darkness could settle down again on me. So did I enjoy the constant smacking of servants' lips, as if they would like to put themselves into the gusto of the flavors.

There were snails to begin, not larger than any I had seen before, but with a sauce of onion and garlic and some green herb so aromatic that I could smell the perfume of the Pharaoh's pines. I felt the herb ooze up my nose and leave the inside of my head agog with hollows, but then that was to be expected: my mother had told me that the name for all such herbs was *ooze-up*, even as frying onions could be called *ooze-out* when the smell traveled from room to room, and red-pepper was *ooze-spice* to some and *ooze-in* to others.

I liked the snails. We ate them on little pointed sticks of ivory with a tiny ruby on the end shaped like a Pharaoh's hat, and, cut with five small lines into the thin and precious stick, were two eyes, two nostrils, and a curved line for the mouth that did not look unlike the face of Ptah-nem-hotep if His face had been very thin, a jest I realized, a comic face for the Pharaoh. Seeing my surprise, He said, "These are used only for the Feast of the Pig. Tonight, you may laugh at Me. Tonight is your night."

"My night?" I felt bold enough to answer.

"On the night of the Feast of the Pig, the youngest child of the Princes comes first. Speak when you wish, dear child."

I giggled. The meal was only begun but the *ooze-up* had cleared my head until I felt as old and wise as my great-grandfather, a great empty wise head was what I felt between my ears, and the touch of the toothpick entering the shell and piercing the flesh of the snail made me feel like a warrior stepping forward into a cave where fires

were burning and the meat of the beast waited for the flash of my spear.

"Do you like these snails?" asked Ptah-nem-hotep, and Night of the Pig or no, my parents replied instantly, both at once, to assure the Good God that never had they tasted meat of the shell so succulent. To which, Ptah-nem-hotep replied that the snails in the oval pond at the end of the Ramses II Promenade in the Long Garden were carefully sheltered by date-palms on one side from the sun, yet the pond was open at night to the moon, and thereby were the snails bathed in moonlight. Perhaps that is why they were eminently flavorful.

"Yes, they are so good, I would think your servants might steal them," said my great-grandfather, even as a few more were laid on his plate.

Ptah-nem-hotep shook His head. "The penalties are severe. Once, a maid took a few, and My father had one of her nipples cut off."

On any other night, my mother could probably not have spoken, but now she gasped. "Surely, You wouldn't do the same?"

"I detest the thought, but expect I would have to enforce such punishment."

"For one snail?" Hathfertiti persisted.

"I was a child at the time," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "yet I have not forgotten how My father opened His palm to show Me the punishment. She was a young girl, and her nipple was no larger than my little fingernail. I was ready to blubber in misery, but My father merely flicked it off His finger into the pond. Later, He told Me such severe justice had been required to remove the pall of theft from the place. Otherwise, the snails could have sickened. As you see, they're robust little creatures today, and oh, the lovely flavor of oil and onions and ooze-up. I sometimes think I can't have enough, but then I'm just a poor fellow on the Night of the Pig." He gave a merry laugh that made His fine curved lips look as alive for an instant as the flash of a horse galloping by. Or, was it a hawk coming down in a swoop? Animal and bird both raced through my head on the ooze-up. I tried to look at my mother but my eyes turned away from the boldness of the look she gave back into His eyes. If Ptah-nem-hotep carried no jewelry this night, my mother did not come near to doing the same. While she wore only a saffron-colored gown with no pleats and only one strap so that her right breast, the larger and more beautiful, was exposed, and had colored her nipple

red, a rose-red from a rare scarlet dye, of a madder root I think, to match the narrow cloth of madder-red she wore about her throat in the style of a girl of the markets, she also wore a ring on every one of her nobly provocative fingers, and a light gold crown in the shape of a snake curled around her head with two green gems for eyes. How beautiful did that look against her black hair and her dark oiled shoulders. Now she turned her dark eyes on the Pharaoh.

Receiving the full bounty of her look, Ptah-nem-hotep seemed pleased. "Men-ka, My pet," He said to me, "do you know the first duty of a host?"

"How could Men-ka know?" protested my mother, but I noticed she took the Pharaoh's name for me, even though my pet name, until this moment, had always been Meni.

"Men-ka," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "the duty of a host is to amuse one's guests. So I wish to entertain you with an explanation of each dish set before us." He pointed to the empty shells in my plate. "As for example, these little palaces."

I nodded comfortably. I did not know what He meant, but it was the Night of the Pig, and everything made sense.

"You are a deliciously intelligent boy," He said. "Now follow Me with care, or I will cut off your nose." My father laughed at this remark. It was the first sound any of us had heard from him.

"Yes," said the Pharaoh, "I will cut off your nose and give it to your mother's husband."

My father laughed prodigiously.

"Do you like the color of purple?" Ptah-nem-hotep asked of me.

I nodded again.

"It is the color worn by the Kings of Syria and the Hittite Kings, and some of the Hebrews, and many of the Assyrians. In Egypt we think they are absurd in their passion for this color. There is even one town they fight over all the time. That is because the only good purple dye comes from there. Do you believe this?"

I nodded.

"It is the town of Tyre, and famous for a spiny snail. The inside of the shell has a purple that makes a superb dye when crumbled into powder. In Tyre, therefore, everybody collects snails. Little girls, and men half as old as your great-grandfather which is very old indeed, and midgets and giants all collect snails. They bring them in, and they crush them, and they pay no attention to the snail meat."

"Why not?" I asked.

"I don't know. Maybe they are tired of the taste. I suspect it is because it takes so long to pluck the meat out of each shell and the dye is worth much more. They are too rich and greedy in Tyre, you see, to take the time. They just squash the snails between stones, and wash them, and squash them again, until the purple begins to run. That purple settles in the vats and still has slimy little bits of snail left in it."

My mother gave vent to one of her sounds of disgust.

"Yes, it is revolting," said the Pharaoh. "Yet they extract a purple that brings ecstasies to the eyes of Eastern Monarchs. They call it royal purple. That is the color of Kings, they say in the East, but we are wiser and know it is the color of madmen." The Pharaoh roared in delight and thumped the leopard tail. "Bring on the next dish," He said.

His eyes were full of lights at the surprise in my face when only one servant came back bringing two metal bars, not as long as my hand, not as wide as two of my fingers, nor as thick as one, and Prah-nem-hotep set them apart on a lovely alabaster plate.

"Look at this," said Prah-nem-hotep. "It is black-copper-from-heaven." He handed the plate to my great-grandfather.

Menenhetet's dignity was too perfect, however, to allow him to serve his own curiosity. Quietly, he passed the plate to me.

"Let the boy have it first," he said.

"You do not know the pleasure you will miss," remarked Prah-nem-hotep.

I, on my side, did not know how to touch this black-copper-from-heaven. Was it warm or cold? My fingers flickered up to the surface of one bar, danced away — it felt like any other metal, red copper for example. I lifted the bar and laid it down. It was heavier than copper, and somehow I knew it was harder. I slid it about on the plate.

"Try both bars," said Menenhetet.

"Why do you tell him that?" asked Prah-nem-hotep.

"If all that my Pharaoh wishes to show us can be found in one bar, He would not have them bring us two."

Prah-nem-hotep nodded in approval, and I felt enough courage to pick up each piece by my separate hands. Then I smelled the first bar. It had a cold odor that came from far away. As I brought the other up to my cheek, I felt again this cold stirring into the breath I took through my nostrils. Some life like none I had known before

began to tremble in the metal. It was as if I listened to the quivering of a heart in each piece. That life was in the tips of these small bars of metal as they came near my nostrils, and then I cried out in fright and in joy, for I heard the Gods speak. Their silent command must have been uttered since the two pieces of black-copper-from-heaven pulled my hands together, and met with a click. They were married, and now stuck to each other although there was nothing to keep them together that I could see.

My father took both from me on the instant, then was obliged to surrender his prize to Menenhetet. Hathferti cried out with delight as she watched. "You are a magician," she murmured to Ptah-nem-hotep.

"I do nothing," He said. "The magic is in the metal itself."

"But where does black-copper-from-heaven come from?" she asked.

"A shepherd saw a ball of fire fall through the sky. It lay in the desert like a dead horse. He found it too heavy to move, but there were ragged pieces he could break off. These bars have been made from those pieces. Who knows what speaks in them?"

"Can You silence their force?" asked Menenhetet.

"For a time. These bars had to be heated in order to be beaten into shape. Then they were inert. But when an unshaped piece of black-copper-from-heaven which came from the same ball of fire was laid next to our bar, and the two were kept together, why, like members of a family, they must have prayed in the same direction. I can tell you that the bar gained such life from the rough piece it can now give life to other pieces that have been beaten."

They went on speaking of these peculiarities of black-copper. Ptah-nem-hotep told how a drop of water, left on the bar, dried with an orange-red spot. The water had not turned to blood, however. It was rather that the surface of the black copper changed into a weak red copper powder that could be scraped from the bar. Who could comprehend why the Gods desired that?

I ceased to listen. I had heard about the Gods every day of my life and had seen Them everywhere — in the tail of a cat for instance, since only a cat can listen with her tail. I saw a God in the eye of a horse when it galloped by, and the same God was in every beetle, for their movements were faster than my thoughts. There was certainly a God in any cow. Where else could one come close to such a powerful knowledge of peace? There were Gods in flowers, in trees, and the Gods could always be found in statues for

Their strength could rest in the stone. There was even a God in the wild boar. I could feel the God Set and know proper respect for His wrath when I smelled the wild boar in its cage. Such Gods were, however, not so frightening to me as this black-copper-from-heaven which moved past my nose. I had come near a God — or was it two Gods? — Who lived between the flash of lightning and the silence before thunder, and I was not at ease. My stomach still shivered from the touch of one metal on the other, yet I felt hungry.

Now, the servants returned with a small purple fruit for each of us. That is, I thought it was a fruit, but as it was set down in its small golden bowl I saw it was cabbage instead, a purple cabbage — I did not know there were such — and it smelled very sour.

"Beware of the vinegar," said Ptah-nem-hotep. "That is sour enough to give wrinkles to the mouth, but perfect for clearing your thoughts of the ooze-up." He raised His cabbage and took a bite as from a pomegranate. "A dreadful food," He commented.

"Why do you serve it?" asked Hathferti.

"Pigs thrive on cabbage. I thought we should acquaint ourselves with the habits of the friend we shall soon meet." Now He played with a few leaves. "Actually," He said, "this is superior vinegar and made from the best of My wine. I like a good vinegar, don't you?"

"Yes," said my father.

"No," said Hathferti.

"Small reason for you to like it," Ptah-nem-hotep stated. "Vinegar appeals to those who are full of pity for themselves."

"How can that be so?" asked my mother.

"It speaks of its disappointments. Just think of some poor wine that nobody drinks. It is obliged to sit in its jar until boredom makes it sour. What fury I taste in such vinegar."

"You have a fine palate," remarked my great-grandfather.

"An exceptional palate. I have a talent for eating, no, not for eating, for tasting. Here, take this cabbage away. It's sluttish."

"You are in an exceptional spirit tonight," said Hathferti.

"I am like this once a year."

"Once a year," said my father devoutly.

"Do you enjoy the vinegar?" asked Ptah-nem-hotep.

"It is powerful, but true to Your description," said my father.

I had not liked the cabbage and did not eat from it; and liked the next dish less, for it was quail and uncooked. The skin had been removed, and the bird seasoned, then the skin put on again as a

blouse, but when I ate it — perhaps it was the salt, a garlic salt with a fierce ooze-in from another spice — the cold life not yet cooked out of the bird managed to fly up one nostril and out the other. I had to close my eyes. Then I could see twenty quail, like twenty black dots in a cloud who became twenty white dots in a cave, now they were black again. I began to laugh at the thought my nose wanted to pee, then I sneezed.

The roe of fish came next, served on a plate with a curious egg whose shell was not speckled but white, and my mother cried out, "Is this the egg from the bird of Babylon?"

"Most certainly it is," said Ptah-nem-hotep.

"The bird that does not fly?" asked my father.

"Yes. The Babylonian bird that does not like water and does not fly."

"What does it do?" asked my mother.

"It makes noise, and is stupid, filthy, and useless, but for its eggs."

"Are they as good as duck eggs?"

"Only if you are from Babylon," said Ptah-nem-hotep and everyone laughed. He told us then of how He had had these creatures brought to Him by ship. A tame bird, He kept repeating, but they made such a din of cackling and strutting and crying out that the oarsmen thought the birds were calling to their Babylonian Gods. So the crew was ready to slaughter their cargo at the first sign of a storm. "Fortunately, no big winds came. Now, I have the birds in a corner of My garden, and they take to the soil of Egypt. They multiply. Soon I will be able to send you some. In fact — I whisper to you — I like these filthy little cacklers. Their eggs seem good for My thoughts."

I was feeling gloomy, however. The heat of the great candles, the war of spices in my nose, my chest, and my belly, and the sad salty taste of the roe sat in me with sorrow. I did not know what to make of the egg from Babylon. It was raw and yellow in the yolk, not green, and it had a taste like cheese and wet walls and sulphur and flour-paste and I even thought it smelled a little like ca-ca on certain mornings, yet even as I could like such a smell on one day or another — if it came from me — so did I like the egg. It was as yellow as the Pharaoh's own butter that the servants were passing out now on sweet little cakes of the finest flour.

Still, the combination of fish eggs and bird eggs had certainly affected my mother for she began to talk to Ptah-nem-hotep of the

day of my birth as if I were not there, speaking of how she had kept my birth back by holding her knees together, and said this with her bare breast leaning toward the Pharaoh. "I would not have him born," she said, "until the lucky hour was there. I did not want Meni, my Men-ka, to see the day until the sun was at its height and yellow as this egg," but when the Pharaoh merely nodded, and did not seem wholly rescued from the boredom that surrounded Him (the way death is always near a man who is wasting) my mother pushed away her roe and cried out, "You don't mean to tell me that these red little jellies might all have become fish."

"All," said my father. "There are always enough fish in the sea."

There was now a pause, not so much for the rebuke to my mother, as for the solemnity of my father's remark. We had eight or ten sayings such as "one thread saves seven stitches," "right-thinking is the husband of right-doing," or "enough fish in the sea," as my father had just observed. Such comments never asked for a reply, and so there was now, as I said, a pause, but it did not seem to leave any animosity against my father. It was as if everyone knew that he must have stopped the conversation for a reason. Since he thought only of the Pharaoh's wishes and knew them even as they were forming, everyone assumed, including the Pharaoh, that our Good God must have some desire to pause. In truth, He did.

"It is time," Ptah-nem-hotep said, "for *rep* and *repi*," and to the laughter of everyone, He stood up, and left the room. I knew my parents were shocked. *Repi* had been the word taught to me as a polite way of announcing that I must urinate. But, *rep*, at least in the way Ptah-nem-hotep had spoken it, could only suggest an ugly beast breathing hot wind in every direction. In truth, *rep* was our most awful word for ca-ca, and the two together, *rep* and *repi*, were so terrible that no one, not even the Pharaoh, would care to say it on any night other than the Feast of the Pig. I suppose it was His way of reminding us that on this night not only could we speak of matters considered improper on all other nights, but indeed, were supposed to.

Once Ptah-nem-hotep had left, however, we were on guard against the servants for we could feel their ears come alive. Hath-fertiti became conspicuously silent, and Menenhetet and Nef-khep-aukhem had a conversation about the best kind of throwing-stick to take out in the swamps for ducks. But their talk lapsed. I could hear my mother whisper to my father.

"Is He never like this on other nights?"

My father looked up from the last of his conversation with Menenhetet and shook his head.

Now, a dark and bearded Syrian in a heavy woolen ill-smelling garment was allowed to enter and he bowed profoundly before each of us, and poured out a liquid from a heavy vat barrel he carried in his arms, his own body reeking of the beer he served. So soon as he had filled our mugs, he was gone, but I could see the servants found the smell of his wet beer, old body-oil, sweat and damp wool altogether ferocious. The beer, however, to my parents' surprise, was exceptionally good, or, at least, so they declared, since they would not let me drink any. Then Prah-nem-hotep returned, and related to us, as if there had been nothing exceptional in His departure, a charming story about the brewer.

"One night, I told Overseer of the Royal Kitchen to bring Me the best beer in Memphi, and next day he groveled on the floor at what he had to confess, but it seems our best brewer in all of this city is a filthy fellow named Ravah, the same one you saw, and he declared he would not send his beer to Twin-Gates unless he could accompany it. 'Didn't you flog the fool?' I asked. 'I did,' Overseer told me, 'and Ravah poured his beer on the ground. I could beat him half to death, he said, but there would be no beer unless he could serve the Pharaoh himself.' Well, it made Me curious. I told Overseer to bring the fool. Had to keep him at a distance because of his stench, but what a beer! Ravah claims it is his vat that makes it special, and I must say the drink gets better all the time. He says that since I have been sharing his beer, the cracks in his vat have more power than ever to flavor well. 'Joy-Bringer' he calls his filthy stuff, but it is good."

"He speaks of You, Divine Two-House, as sharing his beer?" asked my mother.

"Yes. Ravah says the power of the brew is promiscuous, and must be shared by all. That is the center of its strength. Do you know, I believe him? I sip this stuff and feel close to My people. I never feel that while sipping Unguent of the Heart" — he pointed to one amphora of wine — "or" — pointing to another — "Cel-lared in this Preserve. No," said Prah-nem-hotep sadly, "then I feel close only to the priests."

"I do not know how you can speak that way," my mother said to Him in an intimate voice, as if at last, comfortable with her new manners on the Night of the Pig, she could scold Him just so nat-

urally as if they had been married for ten years or more. "You are renowned for the quality of Your wine." Here she smiled a little drunkenly, as if she knew she was going to reveal her pet name for my father — "Why our good friend, Nef, has eyes as dull as muddy water when he speaks to me. But when he speaks of You" — she paused as if taking a dare with herself — "his eyes look like diamonds."

She gave a hiccup without covering her mouth, an act she would never have allowed on other nights, and said, "You may adore the snail, but I adore the Night of the Pig. You see, I think there is pig enough in each of us to make one feast a year. Of course," she smiled deliciously, "on this night we have a fear that restrains us. We fear we are nothing but pigs, whereas You are a God as well, Great-are-Your-Two-Houses-of-the-Pig!"

I felt an immense commotion in my ears, yet not a sound was uttered. The attention of the servants was equal to the silence of fish after one of their number has been pulled from the sea. My father's mouth did not close: so I had the first look of my life at the full size of his tongue — he had an immense tongue! Even Menenhetet stirred in disbelief. "You may not speak that way," he said sharply to Hathferti.

Ptah-nem-hotep, however, saluted her with the last of His beer. "I have been called Two-Lions, Two-Trees, and once I was called Two-Divine-Hippopotami. I have been termed Son of Horus and Son of Set, as well as Prince of Isis and Osiris, I have even been named as heir to Thoth and Anubis, but never, dear company, has anyone had the wit to think of My Double-House as the Pig-Sty of the North and the Pig-Sty of the South. I must only ask: where is the pig? You can bring it to us," He said over His shoulder to the servants, and gave back my mother something of the same delicious smile she had offered to Him. Yet each of His cheeks had a touch of red no larger than the pinch of a cruel finger, a red just so bright as blood in a boil beneath the skin, and anger rocked through the air. I felt as if the space between them had a red hue different from the air between others. The power of my mother and Menenhetet to glare at each other out of the very depths of their blood was equalled now as my mother stared into the face of the Pharaoh. While the heat of the great candles in the room became greater, the flame rose and my mother and Ptah-nem-hotep sat motionless.

Then she looked away. "Not even on the Night of the Pig may a woman gaze into the eyes of the Good God."

"Look into them," cried Ptah-nem-hotep. "On this night, the God is gone."

To me, He seemed at this instant more like a God than He had appeared all day. When my mother did not reply, He made a harsh and barking sound of triumph. "This is a marvelous night," He said, and took up His leopard's tail to hold the tip before His nose. "The tail of the leopard," He added, "was worn first by My great ancestor, Khufu, who taught the people of Egypt how to raise the weight of great stone. To the Pyramids!" and He pounded His tail on the table, as if pulling into Himself the strength of the stones. I thought I had never seen Him look so alive.

Nor so attractive to my mother. I knew jealousy again. Like a lover climbing a wall, so did my thoughts climb my mother's dark hair, my jealousy taking me through all of her reluctance to let me in — but then she could hardly keep me out. She was in more of a hurry to protect herself from the desire of the Pharaoh to enter.

She had cause not to let Him know what she thought. Intimate as I expected to be, I was not prepared to feel so quickly the carnal breath of her true mind, and knew in an instant why she had spoken — incredible still was the ring of those sounds in my memory: Two-Houses-of-the-Pig! — but then the words, high on the wave of the last swallow of Joy-Bringer, had only broken out of a sudden disturbance between her legs. My mind being in her mind, my body was in her body, and my legs among hers — so did I know that she had one thumping exchange of meat with Ravah in the passing of her thoughts. That way, I learned again what I had known before: not only servants like Eyaseyab, but ladies like my mother could take Sweet Finger in their mouth, except that Ravah did not have a Sweet Finger, for by way of my mother I saw a warty club, heavy-veined as a forearm, and as red in color as the spots on Ptah-nem-hotep's cheeks. She was still thinking of her mouth on Ravah, her nostrils breathing in his pubic hair, her head overtaken by old sweat, old beer and Syrian wool while through her thoughts went Ptah-nem-hotep's words on cabbage — "sluttish!" — and she shivered in recollection, and saw the genitals of other men as well, Bone-Smasher for the first, even as she had glimpsed his groin through the parting of his breechcloth on the boat that morning, and I knew Ravah was a handle to the jug, no more, of her great recollection of Fekh-futi and how as a child, tickled at every recollection that his name was Shit-Collector, she used to sit on his lap and try to catch a whiff of the old trade — gardens being the root and breath of childhood

pleasures. She had a moment when she passed through an orgy of embraces, taken by every hole in her body, a roar of sensations bloody as meat, and so she had cried the words aloud (furious at Ptah-nem-hotep for allowing the beer of Ravah to be laid on her tongue) had then, yes, indeed, said, or so I heard it now: "Great Double Pig-Sty."

Yes, I had much to learn about my mother. If I could feel the Pharaoh's pleasure that Hathfertiti had cast down her eyes after trying to stare into His, I also knew His anger at what she had said, and so must she, for now, as if His only wish were for the pleasures of quiet conversation to absorb His new pleasures and calm His anger, so she said in her very best voice, "Were You only jesting when You spoke of wine as inferior to beer?"

"Oh, not inferior," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "but priestly. I'm too much of a priest Myself, you see."

"Not at all," said my mother.

"Your kindness is voluptuous," said Ptah-nem-hotep. He reached forward and touched the tip of His middle finger to the tip of her bare breast. "Here comes the entertainment," He said cheerfully.

NINE



A BEAUTIFUL girl, nude but for a girdle around her hips, entered with a three-stringed lyre. Taking no pause, she began to play a love song.

"How beautiful is my prince
"How beautiful is his destiny."

Ptah-nem-hotep gave her no attention, other than to tap the table in time to the music. An Ethiopian with a bony body, and a flute longer than I was tall, came in behind the girl and began to play as well. While the girl sang, three other girls started to dance. Like the lute player, they were naked but for the girdle that concealed the hair at the head of their thighs. I could not keep from looking at their navels and the beauty of their exposed breasts. How bright were their black eyes in the brilliant reflection of the great candles. The lute-player sang:

"Place sweet oils and good odors in my head
"Lay flowers on my limbs
"Kiss the body of your sister
"For she lives in your heart
"Let the walls fall down."

"Let the walls fall down," sang Hathferti in refrain, and patted the buttock of the servant nearest her, even as the girl was laying flower petals around my mother's plate. "You are darling," said my mother to her, and the girl, reaching into a basket she carried at her hip, passed over to my mother a ball of wax with a delightful smell — roses and lotuses were in its perfume.

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I began to understand that we were all to be covered with wreaths of lotus flowers, and that petals of roses would surround our new plates of alabaster, large and clear and milky-white, and I also understood that all of this, the girls, the flowers, the songs, and the intimacies of the servants — “You are so beautiful,” whispered the serving girl to my mother even as her hip was being caressed, while my serving girl whispered to me, “You are not old enough to know where I could kiss you!” — yes, these agreeable conversations (which I had heard at more than one feast) were not unusual, but tonight they offered a fine fever at just the moment when the pig was brought out to us by two black eunuchs, nude but for their cloths. Yet, tonight, these breechclouts had been studded with precious stones that could come only from the Pharaoh’s linen. The male servants carried the body on a great black serving dish and set it in the center of our table in the midst of a quick movement by the dancing girls that had much beating of feet, much undulating of their bellies, and a scintillating play of notes from the three-string lyre, the sounds coming in all the quick multitude of some altercation between the birds in the Pharaoh’s garden. I was now aware of animals crying out all over the place, a dog first.

Here was the pig. I was not ready for the sight. He looked alive and fierce and like a man. I had seen wild boars in their cage, and they were ugly and full of spiky hair matted with filth and litter. Their snouts made me think of the stumps of thieves’ arms after the hands had been cut off or would have, if not for the two holes of the nostrils, as dull and stubborn as any two holes you could poke in the mud with your fingers. This pig, however, had had his hair shaved off, no, he was peeled, I saw, as I looked at him, and his under-skin, now nicely cooked, was pink. His two fangs were covered with gold leaf, his paws had been manicured, then fixed with silver leaf, his nose had been scraped, and painted pink, the buds of white flowers were in his nostrils, a pomegranate in his mouth, and the servants, revolving the platter to show all sides of this decorated beast to all of us, I was given a view of the spiral of his tail, yet before I could demonstrate my cleverness by commenting that the spiral reminded me of the snail, I was treated to another surprise: a small roll of papyrus had been inserted into the pig’s well-scrubbed anus.

“It is for you to pluck it forth,” said Ptah-nem-hotep to Hathferti. With a sweet wash of giggles from the servants, full of the

delight that they were witnessing the rarest of sights, Hathfertiti gave a kiss to her left hand, and with a flick of her fingertips plucked the papyrus from its place.

"What does it say?" asked Ptah-nem-hotep.

"I promise to read it before the meal is done," Hathfertiti answered with a droll look, as though to give the papyrus time to breathe.

"No, read it now," said our Pharaoh.

So she broke its seal of perfumed wax, unrolled it, gasped with delight as a ruby scarab fell into her plate — then touched it for luck to the tip of her nipple before she set it down. She read to all of us: "Just a slave on the Night of the Pig, but may you seek My freedom," to which my father and Menenhetet laughed. Prah-nem-hotep and Hathfertiti did not. They stared back and forth with a tenderness so agreeable I wished to sit between them. It was as if there could be no end to the fascinating conversations they might have. All the while, my father looked on with pride, a happy, even a boyish look on his face as if by these attentions given to his wife, he was receiving an honor he had not wholly earned, while my great-grandfather kept a firm smile on his face until the corners of his mouth looked like two short fenceposts, and contented himself by rotating the great round black plate on which the pig rested, as though in this animal there were other messages to read.

That also gave me an opportunity to study our roasted monster, who looked like a pink hippopotamus just born, or some swollen dwarf, or now, turned so his head was toward me, looked human for certain, a priest, I thought to myself. I also began to giggle, for although dead, the pig-eye near me was open and almost transparent. It was like looking into a murky hall of marble, then worse — somewhere in the hall of marble, a beast stirred. Maybe it was the light of the candles reflecting from those pale dead green eyes, maybe the frozen straining gusto with which the jaws bit on the pomegranate, or even the voracious thrust of the nose, as if that painted snout were capable of breathing in not only the worst but the most powerful of smells — at any rate something in the immense calm and greed of this dead pig made me think of the High Priest Khem-Usha. I felt most peculiar, not a doubt.

"Cut the creature, and serve us," said Ptah-nem-hotep.

I could hardly swallow at first. My throat was numb with awe. The others, however, would show many expressions. My father, after the first bite, had an absurd glint in his eye as if he were trapped

between pleasure and exposure — I had seen that look on his face once when I came into his room with my mother, for at that moment, he had his hands on a servant, one to the front, one to the rear, and both below her navel. In turn, my mother now showed a troubled expression as if fearful of dire consequences in all the comforts she tasted. Then I was so bold as to look at my Pharaoh, and He betrayed something like disappointment as if expecting a good deal more from the meat on His tongue. The music was playing loudly, but He silenced it. The dancers left, as did the lyre player, and the black slave with the long flute.

My great-grandfather had another expression altogether. He chewed the food slowly in his strong teeth, strong even for a man of sixty — I did not dare to think of one hundred and eighty! — and, as always, he took the measure of what he did, eating with strong regular motions of his jaws that produced the same soothing effect upon me as the rocking of my cradle and thereby brought back the kindness that lives in sleep side by side with the most terrible dreams. So I felt lulled by the way he ate as if no force could shift the center of his heart. That encouraged me to take a bite of my own food, but I almost gagged. For the meat was fat and soft and surprisingly intimate in its taste — something like the confidence of Eyaseyab's tongue was in my mouth. The pig knew me better than I knew the pig!

I wanted more at once, more of this low and fatty meat, and recollected by way of a little shiver how I had felt once when tasting an atrocious medicine, its ingredients all secret — the worst taste and smell of anything I had ever known, and it made me vomit endlessly. I had nonetheless known in the peace that followed a smell that lived in my nostrils, soft and warm and sly, even a little dirty, but it was like the taste of the pig in my mouth now, and so I felt as if I were in communion with the Gods of wet corn, spoiled barley, moldering weeds, even the odor of roses when they are dead was near to me as I ate the pig and so I wondered if the pig was an animal not as alive as other animals or at least lived closer to death, or to say what I really thought, was stuck in its shit.

"Chew more slowly," said my mother.

Now, with the redolence of my nose, I watched and admired the delicacy with which the Pharaoh ate, and took instruction from His movements on how to use my hands. His fingers flew over the food like birds' tongues, and when He chose to pick up a piece of meat before Him, it was with one light precise pointing of His fin-

gers. "I think," He said, "we have had enough of this creature." One of the servants made a sign. "Yes," Prah-nem-hotep declared, "it has the most contrary taste, Horus found the pig an abomination, and Set, of course, adored it. I find Myself ripped in two by such disagreement among our Lords."

Now, black servants came in to remove our alabaster plates and what was left of the pig; I became intrigued with the deft fingers of these servants and the humor of their movements. It was then I recollected how furious our Syrian servants had become when my father acquired six black slaves trained for use at the table. It meant — even then I understood the importance — that my mother and father were now at a level of splendor equal to the Pharaoh's near family, a few high Officials, and two or three of our outstanding Generals. We could afford Syrians to bring the food, and blacks to take it away.

By way of my mother's teachings, I knew of course that the right hand was to be treated like a temple. (Indeed, as she said with a pout, I would never see a drawing of a noble Egyptian whose right hand crossed his body — that was only for workers and wrestlers.) No, the right hand was reserved for bearing arms and touching food, and therefore was to be washed in oil of lotus before every meal, whereas the left hand could perform those tasks we would not wish others to observe, particularly the wiping of oneself, in which practice I was not to linger. So I could see that this separation we made between servants who brought food and removed it was connected to the right and left hand. I knew our blacks were not happy in their share of the task. Often I would hear arguments with the Syrians, although such dispute could come to no more than grumbling since, sooner or later, the Overseer of the Kitchen would shrug and say, "It is the Master's orders." Still, I used to think the blacks were remarkable for the depth of the bad mood they could present, and sometimes I would even decide that the poorest black servant had more ability to call upon the foul humor of his Gods than anyone but Menenhetet, Khem-Usha, or my mother (who was kin to both in the power of her worst temper).

Tonight, however, the blacks were surprisingly cheerful, and soon burst into giggles. At one moment, I knew no reason for their mirth; at the next instant, I could have told it all. The Pharaoh was eating the very last of His pig using His left hand. How the blacks smirked.

"They love pig," He cried aloud as they left the room. "They

love pig in the lands south of us," and He laughed and added, "yes, the blacker the skin, the sweeter is the taste of the pork, they say," and He looked around the table. "Tell me stories about black people," He demanded abruptly, "for I am fascinated with them. Their customs offer light." He thumped His tail for emphasis, as if to tell us that the time had most certainly come to entertain Him, and for this I was prepared since my mother had already informed me that when the Pharaoh wished to be amused, we should be ready with our stories. They must gleam like swords or be as beautiful as the flowers of the garden.

"I have heard," said my father, "that when an agreement is made on the exchange of property between black chieftains, one spits in the other's mouth, bows, opens his mouth and receives the other's spit in return. That is how they make the bargain legal."

"Can you see?" asked the Pharaoh, "Khem-Usha and I in such a practice?"

He was certainly in a most peculiar mood, in misery, yet most excited. While no one spoke, the air was full of conversation, or so it felt. My thoughts were drawn to His thoughts, and never did I enter more easily into His mind. But He had only one word in His head: Poison!

He looked at us, and shook His head. "Let us," He said, "speak of poison." He smiled at my great-grandfather. "Tell Me, learned Menenhetet, of its nature."

My great-grandfather smiled carefully. "It is a purity that does not cease," he said to the surprise of all of us. Until now he had returned few attempts to bring him into the conversation.

"I like," said our Pharaoh, "the manner in which you bring clarity to difficult matters. The purity-that-does-not-cease. Could one describe love in such a manner?"

"I could," said Menenhetet. "I have often thought that poison and love may come from the same place."

"Your remark is malignant," said Hathfertiti.

"Not at all," said Ptah-nem-hotep. "There is something poisonous about the act of love."

"The pig has put You, Good and Great God, into a foul mood," said my mother.

"Oh, not foul," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "poisonous!" He thumped His tail once more, one sharp thump to reward the precision of His humor. "Yes," He said, "poison is everything that we are not."

"Remarkable," murmured Menenhetet. "I must say Your mind is remarkable."

"A compliment," said the Pharaoh. "A true compliment from the old dog. Listen to Me, you ancient man, you've known them all, known My ancestors better than anyone, so tell us, was there one whose mind proved better than your humble Prah-nem-hotep's?"

"None quicker," said Menenhetet.

"But stronger in mind?"

"My King of Upper Egypt and my King of Lower Egypt is the strongest in mind," said Menenhetet through the thinnest lips his mouth could form.

"Oh, let us talk of something else," said the Good God. "Let us" — He looked about — "speak of moon-blood."

"But that's awful," said my mother.

"Have you heard the views of black people on such a matter?" He asked.

It was obvious she did not wish to accept the subject. "I think children know little of the views and habits of people who live in the lands to the south," she said with a nod of her head at me.

Eyaseyab having slept with no clothing in my room on many a night, there was little about the occurrence of moon-blood I had yet to learn. Once a month, as regularly as the first passing of the full moon, she would come to bed for a few days with a girdle around her hips, and an odor, no matter how often she bathed, which made me think, if I awakened suddenly, that the river had made a turn in the night and was flowing past our room. I did not dislike the odor so much as I was curious about it. For I had heard the children of our servants whisper to me that all women during the fourteen days of the coming of the moon and the fourteen days of its going were (at one time or another) deep in moon-blood, and some women were even steadfast on such a course, and always of the same day.

I had asked if this were also true for my mother, and my playmate, the son of the blacksmith in our stables, acted as if he were in much trouble, for he dropped to his knees and kissed my toe — a disagreeable sensation since his lips were as chapped and rough (from the glare of his father's fires) as a lizard's skin. Then he told me that my mother was the relative of a Goddess and so could not have moon-blood. I nodded, as if both of us knew this for certain, but in fact I was puzzled since I was always hugging my mother's hips and burying my nose above her knees, higher and higher above

her knees as I grew older, and I never knew such happiness as then. Certainly, my mother smelled of the best oil from the petals of the lotus, but she had other odors as well, and now and again, faint as the scent of one departed fish, there was a hint of the climate of Eyaseyab on the fifteenth night of the moon when I felt as if I lived in those lands I had never seen to the south where all the blacks were born and trees half as high as the Great Pyramid of Khufu grew foliage to cover the sky while the plants grew in such heat one could not breathe next to them — so would I feel on the fifteenth night of the moon if Eyaseyab was in pain, and I wondered how its light could lay such a wound upon women.

It can be seen that the conversation from which my mother wished to shield me could hardly be new to my ears, and Ptah-nem-hotep not only chose to ignore her protest, but gave a smile to me. "Remarkable children must never be protected from what we say," He said, and added, "don't you think?" to which I replied with a nod, as if the thought were between the two of us. In fact I agreed. I always felt as if something dreadful would happen if I could not hear every word at every feast.

"I had a black slave," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "who told Me that in the village of his grandfather, they did not allow women full of moon-blood near the cattle. I cannot tell you how dangerous they believe a woman to be at such a time. If she touches one of her husband's weapons, he is convinced he will find himself dead in the next battle."

"They are barbarians," said my mother.

"I'm not so certain," said Ptah-nem-hotep. "There is much to learn from them."

"Even their temples are made of mud. They do not know how to cut a piece of stone. Nor how to write," my mother said. "Did You ever notice how a slave acts when a scribe is at his palette? He whimpers like a monkey and breaks into a sweat."

"Yes," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "but they know of matters we do not know." He paused. "From Memphi, should I wish to send a message to Thebes, how quickly could I get it there?"

"Why, by horse," said my father, "if there are changes of horse, and the riders are fresh and do not sleep, it could be done in two days and two nights."

"More like three days," said the Pharaoh. "But no matter. Further to the south, beyond Cush and Nubia, the same message can be passed through the jungles and from the summit of one great hill

to the peak of the next mountain, and down through the great bush of the valleys across the rivers — all of this has been described to Me — yes, across distances equal to the seven days of drifting and rowing down the Nile from Thebes to Memphi, or the two or three days by horse, yes, across all of such distance can the black people send a message in no more than the time it takes for our sun to pass from overhead in the middle of the day to its setting in the West by evening. That is how fast the black people may send a message over such a distance and without roads or trails. I do not call that barbaric."

"How do they do it?" asked my mother.

"By their drums," said Ptah-nem-hotep. "They do not know how to write, nor do they know the secrets and skills of our temples."

"Nor our tombs," said Menenhetet.

"No, not the cunning work of our tombs. But the black people know how to speak with their drums, and very well. They send messages rapidly."

"They are barbarians," said my mother. "We do better. We pluck a silent thought from the air."

"Yes," said my father. "Our Divine Two-House hears many such thoughts."

"My messages are usually incorrect," Ptah-nem-hotep answered. He began to laugh with sufficient force to thump His tail, yet, so soon as He was done, His face became curious and cruel. "At this moment, for instance, a butcher from the market of Ptah has killed his wife in a drunken fit — I see it clearly. Even as he is waiting for his neighbors to seize him, he appeals to Me for mercy. I hear him, but I choose to ignore his voice. He is guilty and a brute. The coarseness of his thought displeases Me."

"Yet, You have heard him?" asked Hathferti.

"Tomorrow, if I make inquiries, I will discover that a murder did take place, but not near the market of Ptah. Rather it was in the poor quarter behind the wall back of the Avenue of Amon. The murderer was a brick-maker, I will discover, not a butcher, and it was his brother he killed, not his wife. Or maybe it was his mother. You see, I receive thoughts from My people, but at what a great rate. And in such a din! If I open My ears!" He proceeded to open His eyes instead with a look of pain as if all His senses, ears first, had been assaulted by a clap of sound. "No, I do not often care to

listen with all that is best in Me. It is too exhausting. Thoughts, after all, do not travel like arrows, but flutter like feathers, and come up one side or the other. So, I respect the blacks and their drums. They speak clearly to each other across great distances."

My mother said, "I, too, have a story on how to send a message. ~~But~~ It concerns a woman who was married to an Egyptian officer, but she is now dead. He is alive and wishes to pass on a few words to her." I heard something delicious in my mother's voice. "One needs more than drums for that," she said.

She was terribly pleased with herself, as if she had learned at last how to make Ptah-nem-hotep — even in His drear mood! — follow her inclination.

"Go on," He said.

"The officer is in love with a charming woman. Yet he feels cursed. His dead wife will not forgive him. At night, in the arms of his new beloved, his member will not stay firm."

"Poor cursed fellow," said Ptah-nem-hotep.

"I expect the same would happen to me," said my father.

"It could never, old friend Nef," said my mother.

"Do go on," said Ptah-nem-hotep.

"Like most army officers," my mother said, "he can't stand priests. Yet he is desperate. So this officer goes to the High Priest."

"Do you know the officer?"

"I cannot say."

Ptah-nem-hotep began to laugh with true pleasure. "If you were a Queen, I would not know what to believe."

"You would never be bored," said my mother.

"Nor could I run My affairs properly."

"I would try to be good for such a reason alone," said Hathferti, "that the people of Egypt not suffer."

"Your wife is charming," the Pharaoh said to my father.

"She is blessed by Your presence," said Nef-khep-aukhem.

"Hathferti," our Pharaoh said, "what did the High Priest advise the officer?"

"He said to write a letter to the departed wife, and put it in the hand of any good person who had just died."

"Well, what happened?"

"The letter was sent in just such fashion, and the dead woman stopped haunting her husband. His member is firm once more."

"Only with great difficulty can a live woman forgive a man,"

Ptah-nem-hotep remarked. "I should think a dead woman cannot. Tell me what the officer wrote. It must have been a remarkable letter."

"I do not know what was in the letter."

"That is not enough for Me," said Ptah-nem-hotep. "What would you have said?" He asked Nef-khep-aukhem.

Now, I was amazed by my father. "I would have written to my dead wife that I miss her very much," he said. "Then I would declare that I feel close to her when I make love to other women. 'For I do not think of the other woman then,' I would say, 'only of you. Therefore, restore my strength. Let it come forth that I may be near you.'"

"I think we can appreciate such a speech more than the dead," said my great-grandfather.

"Why, what would you have told her?" asked Hathfertiti.

"I would speak to her as to a subordinate. The dead do not share our strength, you see. They are to us as one part in seven. So their curses can be blown away. We need only concentrate on the one part in seven. That is, after all, why few of us look forward to dying. In my letter, therefore, I would list the amulets I could employ against her, and the prayers purchased for me in the Temple. That should be enough to frighten her."

"Cold treatment of a dead mate," said Ptah-nem-hotep.

"I do not think we should allow anyone to weaken our member," said Menenhetet.

We were silent after this remark.

"You do not ask me what I would have written," said Hathfertiti.

"I am afraid to," said Ptah-nem-hotep.

"I will tell You later," my mother said. "The moment has passed." She paused, and looked at me, and for the first time I felt the point of her cruelty. "Ask my son," she said. "He has been listening."

"I would," I said, "I could write . . ." I did not know how to finish. Something of the same woe that came over me when I looked into the eyes of the dog was in my heart again, and finally I said, "It may be the most terrible story I ever heard," and I began, not to weep — I was determined not to weep before the servants — but I sat with my head down and the tears rolling over my face.

For I heard my mother's thought. I heard the letter she would

write. "If you do not restore my strength, I will kill our child," was what she would have said.

In the time that passed, conversations did not take place, but their silence rose and fell. In this uncertainty, much bruised by the cruelty of the letter my mother would have written, I tried to enter her mind again in the hope she would treat me more tenderly, but was given instead the peculiar sensation of looking out on everyone in this room from the eyes of the Pharaoh. Thereby I saw my mother, my father, Menenhetet, and even myself from the Pharaoh's seat. That seemed natural, if most peculiar, and I realized that in trying to slip into my mother's head, I had entered — with obvious success! — into the Pharaoh's thoughts. It could only be due to my mother making her own attempt — at the same moment! — to pass into Ptah-nem-hotep's mind. And succeeding! Looking out through His eyes, it was not hard to comprehend that my mother's powers were hardly smaller than my own.

Next instant, this peculiar, agreeable and natural sensation was gone. Like the noble who touched pig, I was dipped into the river of the Pharaoh's misery. Indeed, it was not misery He felt but an emotion for which I hardly knew the word, kin to the feeling I could fear on awakening that a wretched event was certain to occur in the day to come. So did I feel the meat of the pig rest like wax in the Pharaoh's chest — not even to His stomach had the food descended — and some oppression in this room weighed upon Him, some woe before the presence of all things to come, as if indeed He could only keep all troubles from Himself until His strength was gone. Feeling as if I had entered a cave where every hue was dark as the purple dye that came from the snails of Tyre, so did I also have the incomparable experience of studying my mother, my father and my great-grandfather through the Pharaoh's eyes, and my family was not as I knew them, indeed their expressions were not the same to Him as to me. Portrayed on my father's face was a fine cunning I would never have supposed him to have, and Menenhetet showed an obduracy as merciless as the power of stone to crush one's flesh. Indeed, no matter how little my great-grandfather had said at dinner, the man Ptah-nem-hotep saw was more mysterious than stone, a boulder, in truth, that might shatter in a great fall to reveal at its center a gem — or would it be a live scorpion? With just such awe and just such doubt did Ptah-nem-hotep look at Menenhetet.

As for my mother, but for the story she had just told, I would not have recognized her. She looked more beautiful and more murderous than my mother. As for myself, looking on myself through His eyes, I was startled not by my good features but because I was the brightest little animal I had ever seen, and more alive than I could ever suppose. Yet my face knew such sorrow and horror! I had not expected that. Nor was I ready for the love I felt in the Pharaoh's heart when He looked at me. Nor for the sudden extinction of such love beneath the awful oppression of the pig's meat in His belly, and I, on this shift of attention, was put back into myself as abruptly as I had left.

Ptah-nem-hotep began to speak. Like an oarsman whose instinct was quick, He began to talk of matters that could carry me away from such turbulence. The servants began to put out the great candles one by one, and the Pharaoh had time to say many things between the closing of one candle's flame and the long guttering of another. As we descended into darkness, I felt the room become like a cave.

He commenced by remarking that my mother's story had an echo of our great kingdom and made Him think of times that had passed. For while my mother, He said, had only spoken of people dwelling among us, or not long dead, yet He found sentiments of such intensity, particularly on the part of the dead wife, reminded Him of the great ancestors who had built the Pyramids.

I could hardly believe it was the voice of Ptah-nem-hotep. He spoke in the solemn measure of Khem-Usha, a slow voice to make me impatient if it were not that the spell of these long sonorous remarks most certainly calmed the uproar of my emotions. After a while, I even began to count how many voices had come out of our Pharaoh on this evening, some shrill, some deep, others coarse, or quick. I had heard reflections, in no more than the turn of a word, of accents that belonged to Bone-Smasher or Ravah, plus hints of a voice from many a province — I could recognize how fit it was that our Good God could, like a God, carry more than one man's voice. All the same, I had no expectation He might also speak like Khem-Usha. It was then I realized that Ptah-nem-hotep could not listen to a voice He did not like without feeling a desire to purge all reverberations of that sound. So we heard the tones of the High Priest, but so skillfully that Khem-Usha, wherever he was, must now feel a disturbance of his august calm, and be drawn like a piece of black-

copper-from-heaven toward the imitation of himself by the Pharaoh.

In such a voice, Ptah-nem-hotep told the story. "Of My ancestor, Khufu," He began, "it is said that His eye rested on every stone in the Great Pyramid as it was set in place. It is also said that He dismissed His little queens of the harem and kept only one wife. To Her, Neter-Khent, He gave the same loyalty as to His own person. For in fidelity, He believed, was His power. Sharing His body with one woman, and no other, would give Khufu the goodness of two noble souls, each with its seven parts. Thereby, They would not merely add their force to one another, but multiply it. Khufu, on the consequence, possessed seven times seven manifestations of strength.

"That," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "is the strength we have forsaken. We do not have the desire to build one Great Pyramid. We spend our lives on a hundred matters. We even conclude that we have chosen wisely. For how can there be a greater risk than to trust someone completely? Khufu may have been seven-by-seven times stronger than any other Pharaoh, but so, too, was His terror of losing His strength. Because of this, He could not go forth from His Palace without fearing that Ra would enter His wife's body, and steal His power. Khufu even built a tomb in the very center of the Pyramid so that the light of Ra could never reach Him. He also left words with His guards that if He should be killed on a visit to the works, Neter-Khent was to be stoned to death. He grew so distrustful of Her fidelity that soon He began to suspect His officers. At last He issued one order. No one in Memphi was to make love without His permission. The populace were obliged to obey. Which common man could trust his neighbors when every sound is heard on the street, and who could depend on the loyalty of his servants to be discreet? All, rich or poor, were obliged to be celibate. This mighty Emperor, His tomb greater than a mountain, commanded the loins of men and the womb of women." Ptah-nem-hotep coughed delicately into His hand. "So, even as Khufu was on His deathbed, He believed that He would never die since he was now wholly a God."

Ptah-nem-hotep paused and looked at each of us in turn, even giving me a full share of His eyes, as if my attention were as valuable as the others. "I have looked for the wisdom," He said, "and have come to the conclusion that a Pharaoh being in part a man,

and, in part a God, must never err too much to one side, or madness becomes His only choice. Khufu erred by seeking all the powers of a God. Whereas I may be seeking too few."

Now the Pharaoh was silent. He moved His lips as if to speak to us again, hesitated, and was truly silent. I knew a change in the evening was on us. All that had been strange yet harmonious, full of little terrors and odd delights, would now be disturbed. Waves were rolling across my thoughts from all directions. Indeed, in the next instant, without a servant to announce him, Khem-Usha came in.

As I had not seen him before, I could not have known that he must be not only the Vizier but the High Priest as well. For he entered with enough assurance to have been a great foreign Prince, I, who shared with the Pharaoh a beauty that only the birds may know, which is that our songs—if we had had voices—would quiver at every note in the air, where the Mountain's first sound had been as well measured as the beating of a drum.

The High Priest passed by me like a Royal Eagle. I could have been no more than a cub or puppy watching in his wake. He was not a man of great size, but his head was huge, and his shaven scalp, being anointed with oil, made for great waves of hair his head gleamed. He was also dressed in a short tunic that showed his healthy thighs, and his shoulders were covered with a wide cape of a stuff I never learned—since my mother's first greeting to the High Priest was to whisper about it—had been worn on two occasions by the priests of older times. It put me ever more in awe of him than before.

"There may be food from the house left for you," said our Pharaoh.

"I have had my evening meal," replied Khem-Usha in his deep, deep voice. Then, he added, "I do not observe the Night of the Pig."

Pharaoh's face said, "Let us pray no Gods are offended by such restraint."

"I do not consider my abstention as much as any food," the vizier suggested that he could avoid sacrifice by the current custom of his race, and as if to show his displeasure he did not sit down when our Pharaoh gestured as a sign, but remained standing in his deep voice, "I would ask for an audience with Your Fair."

"It is the Night of the Pig. You may speak before all of us," Khem-Usha was answered.

TEN



If I had not seen him before, I would still have known that he must be not only the Vizier but the High Priest as well. For he entered with enough assurance to have been a great foreign Prince. I, who shared with the Pharaoh a breath that only the birds may know, which is that our wings — if we had had wings — would quiver at every shift in the air, knew my Monarch's bad mood had been as well placed as the hinge of a door.

The High Priest passed by me like a Royal Barge. I could have been no more than a raft of papyrus undulating in his wake. He was not a man of great size, but his head was huge, and his shaven scalp, being anointed with oil, made me most aware of how his head gleamed. He was also dressed in a short skirt that showed his heavy thighs, and his shoulders were covered with a wide cape of a sort I soon learned — since my mother's first greeting to the High Priest was to inquire about it — had been worn on rare occasions by the priests of olden times. It put me even more in awe of him than before.

"There may be food from the beast left for you," said our Pharaoh.

"I have had my evening meal," replied Khem-Usha in his slow, deep voice. Then, he added, "I do not observe the Night of the Pig."

Ptah-nem-hotep said: "Let us pray no Gods are insulted by such restraint."

"I do not consider my abstention an insult to any God." His manner suggested that he could annul sacrilege by the correct tones of his voice, and as if to show his displeasure, he did not sit down when our Pharaoh pointed to a seat, but instead said in his deep voice, "I would ask for an audience with Your Ear."

"It is the Night of the Pig. You may speak before all of us."

Khem-Usha was again silent.

"Our little feast has been altered," said the Pharaoh, "by your desire to visit. Yet you do not wish to sit with us. You have something to tell Me, therefore, and it is miserable. Khem-Usha, I was enjoying a merry evening. Do you often see Me when I am merry? No, you may agree with Me, you do not. Thereby, the people of Egypt suffer, don't they? For people can only play when the Gods are merry. You know that?"

Khem-Usha nodded, but with a look of weary patience.

"Tell me, has the King of Byblos killed the Egyptian envoys he is holding?"

"No," said the High Priest, "I did not come to speak of the King of Byblos."

"Nor is it about the Prince in Elam who imprisoned the chief-tain favorable to Our interest?"

"It is not," said Khem-Usha.

"Then, I would ask you, Khem-Usha. What new and unhappy matters are before Us?"

"The Chief Scribe of the Vizier's office in Memphi just came to me with a message from the Chief Scribe in Thebes. It arrived by courier this evening. It tells me that two days ago, the metalworkers and the carpenters of the Necropolis of Thebes went on strike."

"Two days ago. Then why could this not wait for morning?"

Where others would have knelt at the rebuke, or even tapped their head seven times to the ground, Khem-Usha merely pursed his lips. "Divine Two-House," he said, "I came to see You tonight because the situation is onerous, and I am much occupied tomorrow. We must discuss it now."

"Yes," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "you have chosen the only moment that is possible." He was pleased by the droll look with which my mother supported His remark.

"It could be said," Khem-Usha stated, "that these Necropolis workers have been treated with much consideration. For two months no heavy work has been laid out for them. Yet these seventy light days of labor were credited to their account for the standard ration. Despite our generosity, they have still gone on strike."

"Khem-Usha, have they been given the ration, or merely credited?"

"The payments were ordered but delayed. All through Phame-noth, the corn, I am afraid, has been a week late. During Pharmuti, the oil and beer have been forthcoming, but, unhappily, not

the corn." He paused. "And a shortage of beans. Then the fish could only be given half-ration. So they went on strike."

"How can your Officials allow such short measure?" Prah-nem-hotep asked.

Now Khem-Usha looked as if there had been good reason why he wished to be alone with the Pharaoh. "The Chief of the Metalworkers and Carpenters in the City of the Dead at Thebes," he said, "is Nam-Shem. He was selected by You. If You recall, Great Two-House, I asked You not to choose our petty Officials. The sympathies of Your godly nature allow You to see the gifts of our people more quickly than their deceits. Nam-Shem owes more than a few gamblers and pimps. So he has sold fifty sacks of corn that belong to the Necropolis workers, and much else. When they did not receive their ration this week, they went on strike."

"Get the food to them," Prah-nem-hotep said, "from your temple supplies."

Khem-Usha shook his head. "I fear," he said finally, "that is not a wise solution."

"One hundred and eighty-five thousand sacks of corn went to the Temple of Amon last year from the Royal Treasury," Prah-nem-hotep replied. "Why do you begrudge fifty sacks to these workers?"

"They are well paid," said Khem-Usha. "My priests are not."

Prah-nem-hotep looked at my great-grandfather, and repeated, "My priests are not!" Then He began to speak with a mockery in His voice that would have proved withering to any man who was less composed than Khem-Usha. "Do you know," He said, "in thirty-one years of His Reign, My Father gave more than one hundred thousand slaves to the temples, half a million head of cattle, and over one million plots of ground. Not to mention His little gifts. One million charms, amulets, and scarabs. Twenty million bouquets of flowers. Six million loaves of bread! I go over His records — I would not believe the amounts if I did not know that I, year by year, have been paying out nearly as much to Khem-Usha and his temples, and our Royal Treasury is not nearly so rich. Perhaps our festivals do not bring the river to the right height. Too much or too little — usually too little. Either I am not near enough to Amon, or you, Khem-Usha, do not say the prayers well enough. In any case, we are certainly low on grain. All the same, I do not know how you can begrudge fifty sacks of corn. My Father gave the temples half a million fish in thirty years and two million jars

of incense, honey, and oil. A great Pharaoh was My Father, Ramses the Third, but not great enough to say no to the demands of the Temple on the Treasury. And I am only in His shadow. All the same, I tell you, Khem-Usha, give the Necropolis workers their share of grain. Put that situation in order. If I have made a mistake with Nam-Shem, do not take pride in it."

"I must do as You say," said Khem-Usha, "but I will also remark that Your gift will encourage these workers to strike again, and for less."

"Put the situation in order," Ptah-nem-hotep repeated.

Khem-Usha's face was without expression. He answered, "It has been, Divine Two-House, another occasion to live in the subtlety of Your heart. Yet, before I go, I must still ask for an audience alone. There is another matter, and I can speak of it before no one."

"As I have said, it is the Night of the Pig. So, tell it to all."

Khem-Usha, in disobedience of the Pharaoh, bent forward, however, and whispered into His ear. Then they looked into each other's eyes. I felt something in my balance waver. Ptah-nem-hotep said, "Yes, perhaps I will walk with you through the garden," and with a quick smile in our direction for so suddenly removing Himself, left with His High Priest and Vizier.

ELEVEN



WHILE He was gone, my parents did not speak. Nor did Menenhetet utter a sound. A torpor came over me, full of the taste of the pig.

Stuffed, and a little confused by what had just taken place, I felt close to sleep. Like a bruise whose pain turns at last into tenderness, I was ready to forgive my mother. Maybe it was the golden light of the last candles reflecting in my gold goblet, but I soon began to mystify myself with the loveliness of the thought that the light in this room once lived in an abode of honey. For my mother had told me that the wax to make these candles came from the beehives of the Pharaoh. By such a light, I looked again at my parents, especially at the beauty of my mother, and thought I had never witnessed as many faces within her as I glimpsed tonight. Steeped in their thoughts, my heart now felt as mellow as any fifty-year-old, and I was so filled with cynicism (the first time ever to feel such superiority!) that I had to smile at how my mother, when at home, showed little of whatever tact she had offered tonight. Alone among us, she would display no respect nor patience when speaking to my father. Whatever was her own mood became the mood of our house. Her bad humors, quite the equal, as I say, of any black servant, used to leave me with the feeling that the day had grown intolerably hot. I used to believe she had the power to affect our weather; after long burning afternoons, her bad humor, if atrocious enough, was ready to spoil the sunset, and I remember suffocating evenings when the last clouds were black over the western hills.

When Menenhetet was present, however, another side of my mother would come forth. She could look as demure then, as a girl of eighteen, and I did not feel like her son so much as her younger brother, both of us there to worship Menenhetet, or so I used to think until the glimpse of them together last night which, if taken

with her boldness tonight, made me think with some fear: "She has given everything to raising me. But now she wants more for herself."

I was also aware that our Pharaoh had been gone too long. My family was stirring uneasily. Just before the sight of His empty seat would most definitely spoil the pleasure of the evening, He came back. But in a peculiar state. I felt much unhappiness in Him, yet He was bright in His manner and even more feverish than before.

At once, He made a sign with His hand to the servants, and four Syrians brought us gifts.

A headrest of silver was given to my father, and Menenhetet received a small doll, carved in ivory, of a man dressed in fine linen. When one pressed the hips of this gift, as my great-grandfather soon did, a pale yellow phallus stood up, at which my father giggled uncontrollably for it had a red painted tip.

My mother was presented a grasshopper made of colored glass, and the head, which had two small rubies for eyes, was removable. Now, the loveliest odor of perfume wafted forth.

"Do not open it," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "for soon we will leave this room. Save it, I implore you, to sweeten the air of the next. Oh, dear, the boy," He said and made a gesture with His hand as if He had forgotten me, but of course He hadn't, and the servants brought out a fine small box in which rested the two pieces of black-copper-from-heaven. I was so delighted I forgot everything at once in playing with my bars and their pull seemed more mysterious than before, indeed when I closed my eyes, I could no longer know for certain what was up and down, so strangely were my hands drawn about. Ptah-nem-hotep looked then at my great-grandfather and said, "Explain this wonder to Me."

"I have seen nothing like it before," said Menenhetet. "This is not a piece of amber to draw to itself a few snips of cloth. Nor is it the charm of one eye upon another. This attraction has true weight."

"Would you suppose," asked our Pharaoh, "that there is desire in one piece of metal for the other?"

"I would say it is more than desire, and like a bend in the nature of things."

I could hear the curiosity in Ptah-nem-hotep's voice when He replied: "Where would you find this bend? In the river? In the sky?"

"I would be so bold as to speak of a bend in the passage of time," my great-grandfather murmured.

"I do not know what you mean. One could speak as easily of a knot or a cramp. Perhaps, dear doctor, you mean an inflammation of time?"

I wished to cry out to the Pharaoh, "Do not mock my great-grandfather or harm will come to all of us," but I did not dare.

Menenhetet, however, was as powerful as stone in the force of his silence. Only when all of us were looking at him, would he speak. "I wonder if such attraction is not a summons from the past that calls upon the future?"

Ptah-nem-hotep touched His tail most delicately to the table. "Fine," He said, "Wonderful. Each of us must know one eye of Horus. Between us, we ought to find the truth. For I would say: all-that-is-yet-to-come may be weighing upon what-has-passed." He nodded, He exhaled His breath, and stood up. We stood up. Our feast was over.

The servants led us out of the dining room, up some marble stairs, across many fountains and palms to a covered patio on which were sofas to recline. At the commencement of our view stood pillars of marble as noble as any on the facade of a temple, and beyond were the buildings of the Palace and many courtyards and gardens and walls, even a view of the river. I was so intent on what could be glimpsed in the distance that I hardly noticed how the servants had begun to bring in, one by one, a number of small covered boxes, set on stands, and the Pharaoh nodded as each was set in place. I had learned enough about Ptah-nem-hotep to know that a marvel you could encounter only in His Presence was soon to be revealed.

As the last torch was extinguished, each of the eight blacks came to stand by one of the hooded cages. In the darkness, we were unable to see each other's faces. Now, Ptah-nem-hotep clicked His tongue, and on that sound, the hoods were removed.

The darkness began to glow. Slowly we could see what He had prepared. Each cage was covered with a transparent linen. From the interior, behind each veil, appeared the lights of little stars who flitted back and forth, a myriad of lights in every cage. We gasped in pleasure, then applauded. What untold difficulty to capture so many hundreds of fireflies! How soft were the features of my mother by such a light, and, oh, the wealth of her love. We sat in a darkness lit by golden stars.

TWELVE



"By the light of these fireflies," said my mother, "what is Your request?"

"But I have none," said Ptah-nem-hotep.

"In our family," replied my mother, "we look to return a delight for a delight. What would You desire of us? It is Yours." I could not bear the boldness in her eyes as she looked at Him.

"I can think of many pleasures," said Ptah-nem-hotep, but He laughed as if to turn her away. "Let Me content Myself with expressing one desire. I would say I have contemplated it for years." As if, on reflection, this was certainly true, He nodded, and said, "The light of these mites makes Me think of the campfires of ancient armies." There was a quick exclamation from my father at the charm of this thought. Ptah-nem-hotep nodded again. "Yes," He went on, "I would ask of the General, your own grandfather Menenhetet who has much impressed Me with his thoughts on time, that he tell us the story of the Battle of Kadesh."

"I do not know," said Menenhetet slowly, "when last I have spoken of that day."

"I can only inform you," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "that I see this battle often. The heroism of My ancestor, Ramses the Second, appears in My dreams. So, I say, should you wish to return a delight for a delight, yes, tell Me of the Battle of Kadesh."

My great-grandfather took a pause, and bowed. "As Hathfer-titi says, it is the custom of our family." He looked no happier, however, than a thundercloud.

When he did not say another word, my mother's voice came forth. "Speak of the battle," she said, and there was an annoyance in her tone as if Menenhetet would spoil much if he did not take care.

Then we were all silent before the current of ill-will in my great-grandfather. His face had the unspoken clamor of the sky before a storm, and I could feel the force of this bad feeling pass directly into my mother. Ugly as I knew his thoughts would be, I was not prepared for such bitterness. "The degenerate who sups on bat shit has been invited to spill a few secrets," were the unspoken words that went from my great-grandfather to my mother.

"Know that I take pleasure to see you in My house," said Prah-nem-hotep into the silence.

Menenhetet bowed again.

"I can speak," he said, "in four voices. I can address You as the young peasant who became a charioteer and rose to be General-of-All-the-Armies, commanding the Divisions of Amon, Ra, Prah, and Set during the reign of Ramses the Second; I can inform you how in my second life I was the youngest High Priest of Thebes during the old age of the same Ramses the Second. Equally, I can speak of the third Menenhetet, who became the wealthiest of the wealthy. Born in the reign of Merneptah, he lived through Siptah, Seti the Second, and other such Pharaohs as Setnacht. Now, if You desire, I can speak as I am here, *Your* Menenhetet, a nobleman, a General, and later a doctor of renown. I can tell, should You wish to hear, of the plot against Your Father, or of the brief and miserable thrones of Ramses the Fourth, Ramses the Fifth, Ramses the Sixth, Ramses the Seventh, and Ramses the Eighth, who have all been lost to us in twenty-five years, even as Your Majesty may reign longer than all of Them together."

I had often been told that the greatest mark of respect a man could give himself was to speak in a full voice on the worth of his rank and achievements. But my great-grandfather's speech was so short, it seemed rude, and then he startled us even more by his next words. They departed from every custom on how to address the Pharaoh. He now said: "Twice-Divine House, You speak of being happy to see me. This is, however, the Night of the Pig. So I will dare to say that until tonight, You have not invited me to Your Court in the seven years of Your Reign. Yet, now, You inform me that Your finest pleasure would be to hear an account of Your ancestor, Ramses the Second, at the Battle of Kadesh. My tongue is sour in my teeth. I waited for seven years with more in my heart than any man in Your realm. My ruler never called on me."

Hathfertiti made a choked sound.

A clear tone came, however, into our Pharaoh's voice, as if at last He had before Him a man who spoke his thoughts. "Say more," He commanded.

"Good and Great God, You will abhor what I say."

"I wish to hear it."

"Of those in Your Court who laugh at me, You are the first."

"I am not."

"Not tonight."

"No, it is true, I do not laugh at you tonight. I have laughed at you on other evenings."

"The echoes," said Menenhetet, "of such good humor have come back to me."

Ptah-nem-hotep nodded. "I know no one in My Court," he said, "who does not in some manner respect you. They certainly fear you. Nonetheless, you are the source of much derision. Do you have no idea why this is so?"

"I would like to hear Your voice give me the reason."

"The secret habits of our esteemed Menenhetet have been described as disagreeable."

"They are revolting," my great-grandfather replied. "I am known as the degenerate who sups on bat shit."

"There," said my mother, "he has spoken it aloud."

"Bats," said Menenhetet, "are filthy creatures, hysterical as monkeys, restless as vermin."

"Who can disagree?" said our Pharaoh. "It may be easier to speak of you with derision than comprehend your habit."

They looked at one another in the silence of men who have been saying too much.

"Do you do this," asked the Pharaoh, "in the practice of magic?"

Menenhetet nodded. "I wished to use what was learned in other lives."

"And did you succeed?"

"There was a time when I could not give up the pursuit of curious questions. So I refused to draw back from the voice that told of revelations to be found in the unspeakable odium of bats."

"You went forward?"

"For a few weeks, many years ago, I pursued the question, yes. I supped once, then twice on that loathsome paste. It offends me now to speak of it, but I found it necessary then, and I was given the answer I was looking for. It was smaller than I hoped, and that

should have been the end of it, but the trusted servant who aided me in the preparation of the ceremony saw fit to tell one friend. No man can be trusted altogether. By the next night, all of Memphis was agog. I do not think there was a noble lad who did not hear of it. I, who wished to use what I had learned . . ."

"To what purpose?"

"To enrich," said Menenhetet, "the marrow of our failing lands." When our Pharaoh looked at him in some surprise, my great-grandfather held up his hand as if he were for a moment our Monarch. "I do not speak," he said, "of prayers that ask the river to rise to a good height. That is for priests. I speak of matters I do not wish to explain. It would take a knowledge of my four lives to begin to comprehend certain ceremonies" — here, at the look of displeasure on Ptah-nem-hotep's mouth, as cruel in its curve as the edge of a sword (so that I realized at once and forever how the desire to torture others came quickest to our Pharaoh when His curiosity was aroused, then balked) my great-grandfather shifted in the confidence of his manner long enough to say, "A man who would deal in strange ceremonies, and employ words of power, finds that he must address himself to one God more than others. To that God is sent not only the large part of his rituals, but his thoughts. So I sought to be the agent of Osiris, since He has spoken to me in the Land of the Dead. Only He, I believed, could enrich the marrow of our failing lands."

Now, no one was able to say a word, and the dignity of my great-grandfather was like the composure of a statue.

Who but Ptah-nem-hotep could enter such a silence? "I," He said, "am the Pharaoh Who reminds you most of Osiris?"

"Yes," my great-grandfather replied, "I would say it is so." He was watching the light of our Pharaoh's eyes (for even in the soft glow of the fireflies, a light was there to see).

"That is interesting. Please go on. I would like to hear of the injuries done to you by My Court."

"I do not wish to complain in Your Presence, but I will say that the little treachery of my servant went far. The desired effect of the ceremonies I undertook was undone by the derision of Your nobles. To my intolerable shame, I knew much but could do little."

"A magician," said Ptah-nem-hotep, "ought to be able to overcome much ridicule."

"The Gods listen to mean thoughts. They are obliged to. None of us is without magic when we speak to the Gods in a dream."

"Yet no more than one faithless servant, you say, is the reason for these terrible stories."

"I would not make that claim," said Menenhetet. "I have done many things of which pious people — and those who are less than pious — would not approve. But in the public mind, two foul suppers equal all the rest. It is a great pity. There is so much I would teach."

"Yes, I believe that. You may have been much slandered. Although I wonder, is it," asked Ptah-nem-hotep, "no more than these stories about the bats that stick to you, or is it — and I will be as frank as the license of this night — is it not the subject of excrement itself that captures your thoughts? I have also heard it said that as a doctor, your cures were extreme."

"I have led," said Menenhetet, "by my own understanding of such matters, an upright life. I have no fear of any subject, not when I can speak to a Pharaoh as wise in His understanding as Yourself. No," he said, "No, I feel no shame in telling of these mysteries. It is others who cannot bear to listen."

"I know I cannot," Hathfertiti told him. "The evening will be marred." She said it in so strong a voice that my great-grandfather looked at her with all the force of his eyes, and the strength of his will went back and forth with hers until she could stare at my great-grandfather no longer. It was his hour.

"If you would speak," said Ptah-nem-hotep.

"I will," said Menenhetet, and inclined his head to Hathfertiti. "We do not know," he said, "how such thoughts came to Egypt, but for a long time we have concocted our medicines of monkeys' dung, the pellets of snakes, goat balls, the manure of horses, cow flop, bird droppings, even the matter of our own honey-pots." He paused. "There came a time when I was obliged to ponder the qualities of the food we eat. Not only do we take our strength from it, but what we cannot use, or what we do not wish to use, is cast out. Excrement is full of all that is too despicable for us, but it also may contain all that we cannot afford to take into ourselves — all that is too rich, too courageous, or too proud for our bearing. If this is the Night of the Pig, then I say to You that more honesty, generosity, and loyalty to Your service is going to be found in the turds of Your nobles, grand ladies, and Your High Priest, than comes from the words in their mouths. For whichever food will nourish hypocrisy is quickly absorbed by Your royal friends, but every virtue You might wish them to guard for You is passed through."

"Well said," said Ptah-nem-hotep. "None of this is wholly strange to my ear." Indeed, His voice was so thin that he must have shared some of my great-grandfather's bitterness. There, in the lovely light of the fireflies, He argued, however, with the question. "Can you," He asked, "ignore the wisdom of the common people? They certainly regard clean linen as a sign of rank. Whoever is immaculate can take a stick to a fellow who is filthy. We even speak of a man we do not respect as equal to dung. Yet, your logic intrigues Me all the same. I cannot dispute it instantly. It is so curious. If our excrement carries away not only the worst of us but also the best, how could you find any virtue in the bowels of a man of noble character? By your argument, the meanest poisons ought to come out of him first. In that case, is the reverse not also true? Doesn't the poor man offer gold by way of his rear end? Why has the common wisdom of Egypt not brought everyone rushing to the meanest latrines of the foulest beggars? Think what wealth, bravery and generosity has to be found in the evacuations of such wretches."

Now, Hathfertiti roared with laughter.

My great-grandfather was, however, undisturbed. "Yes," he said, "like the Lady Hathfertiti, we laugh at shit — but then, we always laugh when a truth is suddenly disclosed and as quickly concealed. The Gods have tickled us with the truth. So we laugh."

"You do not answer the question, my great-grandfather," I burst out suddenly.

"Are you interested?" asked the Pharaoh.

I nodded profoundly. The room rang with laughter, and I wondered of which truth I had just given them a glimpse.

"Yes," said Ptah-nem-hotep when everyone was silent again, "I, too, want an answer."

"I would agree," replied Menenhetet, "that a noble man would reject every foul temptation in his food. So, indeed, his leavings can offer nothing but mean poisons, and that would always be true if it were not that some noble men live with a terrible shame. When offered the opportunity to take a great chance, they do not dare. After all, one cannot welcome every trial presented by life, or the bravest of us would soon be dead. Yet, on the consequence we must recognize that each time a difficult choice is avoided, the best part of a noble man chooses to depart by way of his buttocks."

Ptah-nem-hotep looked again at my great-grandfather. "I still do not understand," He said in a voice that mocked the subject as much as it betrayed His interest, "why the turds of riffraff are not

covered then by My Councillors? How could anything, according to you, be more invigorating for such people than a bath in the worst slops?"

"Your Councillors know better. The poor and wretched have the power to put a curse on their excrement. Otherwise, not even shit would belong to them."

"I am most impressed," said Prah-nem-hotep, "by this last remark."

"It was so well said, my Lord," said Hathfertiti. Her voice had turned coarse, and I wondered whether it was the conversation, the wine, the beer, the pig, or all of it. She was certainly less respectful to my great-grandfather, and wanton when she looked at the Pharaoh. Several times I tried to enter her head but could see little more than an uproar of naked bodies as bawdy as wrestlers in a pit. Then I recognized the face of Ravah in the swarm, and Prah-nem-hotep, and my father, and great-grandfather, were also there, my mother among them naked and with her mouth open.

THIRTEEN



EVEN by the pale light of the fireflies, I could see that Prah-nem-hotep was not calm. If at first I thought the cause for His disturbance was equal to mine, and neither of us could forgive my mother for her outrageous inclinations, I soon recognized that my great-grandfather's conversation must have had as much effect on Him. In either case, my Pharaoh's mind was now concerned with buttocks. In His thoughts, they were all about Him. Then they became one great pair that turned into the face of Khem-Usha.

At this moment, my Pharaoh stood up, and, to everyone's surprise, beckoned to my great-grandfather. "Come," He said, "there is a room I would show you." For a moment, I even thought He would invite me as well. His eyes seemed to stare again into mine with great love — or so I believed — but then He stepped out with my great-grandfather, and, much to my mother's vast annoyance at so sudden a departure, was gone.

She stood up as soon as they had passed between the pillars, and walked about like a panther tethered to a stake. I had once seen such an animal in my great-grandfather's gardens, and on the instant he was thrown a piece of meat, the beast would snatch it in the air. So was my mother ready to tear at my father in the moment he said, "I speak not to upbraid you . . ."

"Do not speak," she said.

"I must tell you."

"Is the child asleep?" asked my mother.

I gave a sad whimper, as from a dream, which was not so false, for I always felt sorrow larger than myself when they would fight.

"You do not see," said my father, "how women throw themselves before Him every day. He is bored by such excessive attentions."

"I do not throw myself. I offer myself. And I do it to delight

you. For if I succeed, what will give you more pleasure than to know for the rest of your life that every time you come forth into me, He will also be there?" She came to a stop in her pacing. "Doesn't that moisten your little heart? Say you do not want the Pharaoh to know me for a night."

"Please be silent. The air has echoes."

"Everyone knows I am prodigiously faithful to you." My mother gave her coarse laugh.

My father whispered. "I tell you to remember that you are a lady. I do not recognize the woman I see tonight. You laugh so crudely."

"Is that your true speech? I may do what I want, but until I do, please act like a lady."

"I do not think that is what I wish to say."

"Yes, it is. You say it very well. You speak as well as I used to speak when we were first married. You see, old friend Nef, you stole my good manners, and left me yours — which come from your father — that horrible man. If I am too crude for your taste, it is because I, a Princess, made the mistake, when young, of liking you."

After such a speech, my father was silent; indeed, he was always silent after their quarrels. They ended with my mother victorious and carrying herself like a Queen, but then, my father was so sly in his defeat that I often wondered if he did not make himself indispensable to my mother. Could she ever feel so powerful with anyone else?

Still, on this night, my father surprised me. He returned to the quarrel after it was lost. "I think you are stupid," he burst out. "You are doing it all wrong. Admit, at least, that I know Him well. He is a Good and Great God, but He lives with many burdens. So He is not drawn to women who are much pleased with themselves. Such women are overbearing in His eyes."

"You are wrong. He has no Queen, and wants one. He has not even an attractive mistress. In His heart, and I have lived in His heart on this night, He is raw. There is no Goddess to be the sole of His foot, to kiss His thigh and anoint His sword. He is a Pharaoh without a Crook . . ."

"Be silent."

". . . or a Flail. I would be His cunt and His rudder, His precious stone and His slave. I need to hear no more from you about my manners, you son of a shit-collector."

"You are a fool," said my father. "You want Him so much

that you will push Him away. Then He will look at me and think, 'I have felt fear before the woman of My Overseer.' He will never forgive me for that."

"I will have Him," said my mother, "before this night is over."

"It will turn out badly," said my father. "If I lose my position, we will be seen as the servants of Menenhetet, and not much more."

She did not reply, but I could feel such a large greed live next to such great fear in her, that I did not wish to be near them any longer. Since I could not discover Ptah-nem-hotep nor my great-grandfather in my thoughts, nor have any idea of where they had gone, so did I slip down the first steps into sleep, but my eyes had barely closed before I met in my wanderings no one other than the High Priest Khem-Usha, and he drew close, and his face was as large and round as the moon. He smelled like the incense that is laid into a winding cloth. Although, by opening my eyes, I could still see my parents, they were not in my dream. Instead, the Pharaoh now came forth and stood beside Khem-Usha.

"Speak to us of spells," said the High Priest to me.

A small force, felt as clearly as a finger pushing on my forehead, brought my eyes up into the large round face of Khem-Usha, and I said, "To set a spell, one must walk around the walls. One must encircle the foe."

"Hear the child," said Ptah-nem-hotep. "You will learn much from him, Khem-Usha."

I do not know why what I had said was worthy of praise, but I spoke the next thought so soon as it came to me. "After you have made a tour of the walls," I said, "you may look for a way to enter them." I did not know what I meant so much as I understood that I was now, and most certainly, in some kind of spell. For by its power, Khem-Usha disappeared and I saw my great-grandfather and Ptah-nem-hotep in a strange room, and listened to their conversation.

Of course, I could not be certain whether my Monarch and Menenhetet had been silent during my parents' quarrel and only began to speak now, or whether all that I would soon hear should have been lost, if not for the power of my spell to bring back their voices.

I do know that I could still see the fireflies in their cages, and my parents lay apart, reclining on separate sofas, the sense of disagreement between them as still as a wall. I continued to lie on my couch but could barely keep before me the pillars of this patio, for

I was seeing another room more clearly and it was like the place where painted fish had swum along the floor beneath my feet. Here, however, were paintings of the fields in time of sowing, and the faces of many peasants leading their cattle. I even saw the hooves of these animals spattered with mud, and among them, leopard's tail in His left hand, the golden crook in His right, was Prah-nem-hotep standing with His golden sandals on a field of mud, but I knew the mud was painted for His feet remained immaculate.

"You spoke," He said to Menenhetet, "with such clarity that I decided to take you here. Since no noble other than yourself has entered this chamber, you will be the first to witness what I have brought forth. Come, I will show you," and He took my great-grandfather by the elbow, a most exceptional courtesy, and led him over to the dais on which was a golden throne. Beside it was a golden trough, and above, a golden shaduf. Now Prah-nem-hotep lifted the golden seat of the throne to reveal a seat of ebony beneath and it had a hole.

"You were not as alone in your thoughts," He said to Menenhetet, "as you supposed. You could not know it, but each morning it has been My habit to meditate while I sit on the Golden Bowl. For years, I have been contemplating the afflictions of My Two-Lands, yes, our lack of rain and our beneficent flood (on those rare years, at least, when it chooses to be beneficent!). I brood upon our valley so deep in its black soil, so incomparable in its fertility, and so narrow, such a little strip of cultivation between the desert of the East and the desert of the West. Then I sometimes think that our Egypt is not unlike the crack between two great buttocks. Do you know, that curious thought enabled Me to feel a little veneration for the custom of the Golden Bowl. As you know, everyone says of Me that I am lacking in sufficient piety to be a good Pharaoh, but a wise leader does not look to feel false respect. Each morning when the Overseer would take that little golden pot with its contents — My contents — out to My herb garden, I would be cheered by the observation that the Gods know how to take care of many matters through one Pharaoh. So They would employ My leavings as carefully and usefully as My thoughts, My words, the grace of My gestures, or My decrees. As you spoke, it therefore became clear to Me — and most agreeably, most warmly — that My thoughts which had always seemed so curious to Me, so near to unacceptable (even if I am a Pharaoh) were shared by you. I felt stronger in all that I

already believed. Each morning, you see, I had told Myself that whatever in Me was failing to serve the interests of the Two-Lands, whatever I might lack in dedication, piety, raw bravery; and martial spirit — for, alas, I am a prudent man — were, nonetheless, all present in My stool. By that path could My gardeners bring forth the most splendid herbs and vegetables and flowers and spices to enrich those priests, officers, and overseers I consider most devoted to the Life-Health-Strength of our Egypt. For years that has been a most reassuring thought. I have made lists of particular men and women who deserve to receive this produce. Even today, I told a scribe to send eight tomatoes to Rut-sekh, that worthy rock-cutter. Contemplate, then, My horror when I discovered in this last year that the Overseer of the Golden Bowl was a thief. On torture, he confessed that he was selling to sorcerers. My garden had been receiving *his* excrement in substitute for *Mine*!

"These are the years when no one in Egypt can be trusted. We do not speak of it, but there are more tomb robberies than ever before — I have studied the records. The grain accounts are calculated by corrupt officials. Theft in high places is frequent. That is bad enough. But the Overseer of the Golden Bowl was stealing from My person. It convinced Me more than any raids on our frontiers that the Two-Lands are weak. I have not gained the respect of the Gods. Not at least as other Pharaohs. They have been able to speak to Them better than I." He was silent, but when Menenhetet said nothing, He went on.

"It was then I decided to entrust Myself to the old artificer, Prah, My namesake. If no Overseer could be trusted, then so be it, only the waters raised by a shaduf, pumped by Me, could carry away My leavings. I had the pipes laid out in the garden cleverly by different workmen, piece by piece, and the troughs put in here. No one saw it all. Now the waters incline to My garden outside this wall and, do you know, it serves. My plots, furrow by furrow, receive the trickle of this small river. Whenever there is need of more inundation, I pour another bucket down," which He did, and a fly leaped up from the hole in the throne and agitated the air between them. "This all calls for perfume, I promise you, and those blind blacks who clean it all are perplexed by so much sweet air. They know this chamber receives no guests. Yet My herbs and vegetables have never been better. They were served to all of you tonight. You could feel it: those onions and cabbages cast a spell."

"They did," said Menenhetet.

"Tell Me, to your knowledge: Have you ever heard of such a sluiceway as I have brought forth?"

"Not once."

"I knew it was Mine alone. Otherwise, I would not have felt such fear at making the change. I want to ask: Do you approve of what I have done?"

"I do not know."

"Your reply is worthy of Khem-Usha."

"I must say I fear bad luck. It may weaken all that there is." My great-grandfather bowed. "When I was appointed by Ramses the Second to the service of His Great Queen, Nefertiri, She showed me a fine mirror. It was the first true mirror into which I ever looked, and I said, 'This will change all that there is.' I was right. Egypt is weak today. I think Your sluice will stir too many pots."

"No, you do not like what I have brought forth." Ptah-nem-hotep sighed. "Well, you have the courage to tell Me so. But I would prefer that you had liked it. I feel like a prisoner. So much am I bound by the habits of My ancestors. Sometimes I think that the ills of our Two-Lands begin with these customs that bind Me. Then I say to Myself, 'Perhaps I am not fit to be a Pharaoh.'"

Softly, my great-grandfather replied, "Do You wait for me to say that You are?"

"You are right. I am the one who does not think well of this Pharaoh. But then there are nights when I do not believe that the Gods are indeed My ancestors. At such times I do not feel near to Them, nor do I feel that My people love Me. Do you?"

"You call upon me," said my great-grandfather, "after seven years of neglect, and wish me to love You. I do not know if I can. One must serve a Pharaoh to express true devotion. One must be trusted by Him."

"And I trust no one?"

"I cannot say."

Ptah-nem-hotep touched His finger to the side of His nose. "I see," He said, "that My candor must equal yours. I did not think I would, but I will talk to you. I must speak to someone. For I have kept My tongue to Myself all these years, and My heart is like a room that is never opened. I fear that behind the door all is ready to wither."

FOURTEEN



Now, even as He had promised, the Pharaoh spoke for a long time, or so, within the turns of my spell, did it seem long. My parents did not speak, and only the fireflies danced, but with such close response to the Pharaoh's voice that in truth I saw Him and my great-grandfather most clearly.

"I cannot bear Khem-Usha," said the Pharaoh. "You may ask — why then did I leave My guests to go with him? What could he have said to take Me out of My chair, and away from you and your family? Well, that, I cannot speak of yet. Say it is a matter between Khem-Usha and Myself, a call on a boyhood friendship — except we never liked each other. Now, however, it is worse. I cannot bear priests. They inhabit My thoughts. They are like ants upon the very food of My thought. And he is My High Priest. When I visit Thebes, he upbraids Me for not coming to the Temple of Amon more often, then he dares to scold Me here for not attending the Temple of Ptah. 'Don't you realize,' I said to him, 'that I spent part of My boyhood in the Hat-Ka-Ptah, right here in Memphi. Let Me remind you, Khem-Usha,' I told him, 'that when I was a child, I caught the eye of the King, My Father, and it created such jealousy in the harem that My mother was terrified one of the other little queens would do away with Me. Don't you remember, Khem-Usha?' I said to him, and of course he did. His mother was the little queen of whom My mother was so frightened. There could not have been a harem prince with poorer prospects than My own in those days. There were all those half brothers ahead of Me, and everybody was certain I would become a priest. Nobody knew My kinsmen would die so quickly, did they then?" Now He struck the leopard's tail across His own thigh. "I tell you too much," He said.

"Yes," my great-grandfather replied. "Tomorrow, You will not forgive me for all you have said tonight."

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"I will. You would do well to trust Me. I have decided to trust you, My friend."

"You are confident that I am Your friend?" asked Menenhetet.

"At the least, you are the enemy of My enemy." Ptah-nem-hotep gave His short laugh.

My great-grandfather bowed.

"I wish to talk more than you can realize," the Pharaoh said. "I feel a great wrath toward Khem-Usha. I would end his influence upon Me. I do not understand him. Tonight, while we were alone, he spoke for longer than I have ever heard him go on in My presence. I could not believe it! Khem-Usha, the imperturbable. Can there ever have been a High Priest so calm as Khem-Usha? But tonight, he was full of complaints. He is not so indifferent to the Feast of the Pig as he pretends. On all other nights he may act as if his fingers are in the honey of Maat, and he alone knows the sweetness of eternal calm, but tonight I must have roused him more than I thought. He certainly acted as if it were the Night of the Pig." Ptah-nem-hotep smiled. "Once he was alone with Me, a few of his complaints came forth. The true ones. I could welcome that. Kings are lied to by all people, so the truth is air to Me and fresh blood. The Night of the Pig feels like the Night of the Blessed Fields. I come to know the mind of others more quickly. That enables Me to rule with justice, not vanity. And if I rule with justice, then, respect Me or not, the Gods still have to offer Their support. That must be true. So I encouraged Khem-Usha to speak. To My surprise, he complained that his duties were too many. That was a most unusual remark. I have never seen any other man take so many tasks upon himself. Khem-Usha understands piety: Duty brings power. So I did not believe it when he said that he could not continue to act as My Vizier.

"Why, after the last Vizier died, Khem-Usha employed every means to be appointed as acting Vizier. He would, he promised, fulfill the task for Me until I could find a truly suitable man. Of course, he knew there were not many able people in the Court any more. While I did not like him much, I chose him. He did the work. Now he is complaining that the task is too hard. Too hard, he means, unless he is given the full title of Vizier as well. So I decided to tease him. 'That is true,' I told him. 'I think you might give up trying to be both High Priest and Vizier.'

"Do you know, he only nodded when I said this. Then he enumerated his duties as if I were not familiar with them. He just

about whined through this speech. I did not appreciate what he was doing. I did not understand how clever he is. On every other day of the year he will never say a word unless he can say it slowly. He has no feelings that are small. His manner looks to move you aside — like a hippopotamus! If I give him a rebuff, he merely adds it to his weight — all the better to bulk him up — one is dealing with a hippopotamus!" Now Ptah-nem-hotep stopped and gave such a curious look to my great-grandfather that I did not know if His mouth was twisted by derision or by anguish, but then I realized He was speaking once more in the exact voice of Khem-Usha, and in his manner as well, that same voice which went on much too steadily for anyone to interrupt. "Each morning," He began, "after prayers are conducted at dawn, I must unseal the heavy doors of the Court so that the office of the Royal Estate may open. Without me, no day of governing can begin. So, there is no morning when I do not read every report that comes from the authorities of the Crown in each nome of the forty-two nomes. Even the most petty official is required to write to me three times a year — on the first day of Sowing, of Harvest, and of Inundation. By this means am I able to see into many lies these same officials have forgotten, for they contradict themselves, or tell the truth today where yesterday they did not. So I am alert to the seed of upheaval in a modest discontent, and can sniff the beginnings of treason in the smallest reluctance to follow orders. In that manner, no nome can stir without my knowledge. As Minister of War, I review each month the disposition of our troops within the Two-Lands, and abroad. As Minister of Ecclesiastical Affairs, I oversee the scribes who tally the gifts given to the temples. As Minister of Economic Affairs, I must know when to proclaim the cutting of timber and the irrigation of the canals. As Minister of Justice, I review the decisions of all judges in all courts, and I not only perform these tasks daily but each season pay a visit to the nomes, and meet Your Officials, so that I may recognize whether they are to be trusted. And these are but a few of my tasks as Your acting Vizier. Yet, as High Priest, I must meet each afternoon with the Treasurer of the Sanctuary, the Scribe of the Sacrifice, the Superintendent of Property of the Temples of Amon, the Scribe of the Corn Accounts, the Superintendent of the Meadows, of the Cattle, of the Storehouses, of the Painters and Goldsmiths, and I do not even speak of my greater duties, yet which of the holiest rituals in the Temple of Amon at Karnak can take place without my person? At dawn, and again at midday, I serve as

proxy for Your Person, inasmuch as You so rarely appear in Thebes. Then I must do it again at evening. In the Temple, I am obliged to serve both as High Priest, and as Pharaoh. How much could go wrong unless I am there to instruct the priests in clearness-of-voice, correct gesture, the divine order of the words, and the sequence of the prayers.

"Yet, with the accomplishment of all these duties — and this is my true pain — I find that each day I have failed to instruct You, for on those rare days when You are in Thebes beside me, I can see, as I offer my sermon, that You do not listen. Nor does it matter to You that in Memphi Your day is spent enjoying musicians, or reading from Your favorite love poems, while ignoring the maxims and deeds of great ancestors. Nor that You spend the afternoon speaking to Your cook, plucking flowers in Your garden, or drinking with officers of the King's Guard. Or, to the greater glory of the Two-Lands, You entertain, on rare occasion, a visiting Prince. It does not matter that You are renowned in the gossip of Memphi as a Pharaoh Who cannot wait for night, but visits His harem by day to watch His little queens dance, and — by what I hear — hardly more than that. Yet none of this would matter if You could listen to me and know my words, for then You could stand as Master of the Earth — in Your own Person! — there to fortify Egypt with the Will of Your ancestors. I see a great breastplate on my Pharaoh, and the Crown of the White Land and the Crown of the Red rests upon His head, yet within the robes, no man sits but Yourself, and Your voice is small!"

"He did not say those last words," exclaimed my great-grandfather.

In response to this interruption, the voice of the High Priest left the throat of my Pharaoh, and His own voice came forth. "No," he said it. I was not prepared. His wit was so weak, his feelings were so pompous. I was even sorry for him. To think, he dared to say, "Your voice is small!"

"How," asked my great-grandfather, "did You respond?"

"I told him he was an ox and built for burden, and that the fate of Egypt depended more upon the tenderness with which I hold a flower, than upon the reports of a thousand of his scribes. Yet all the while I spoke, I did not believe Myself. My Gods had most certainly deserted Me. I had been chided by Khem-Usha, then insulted, but the walls of his temple most certainly did not crash.

"To My horror, I now began to talk too much. It is due to that

unhappy business between us as boys. I said to him, 'I may be no more than the eleventh son of My Father, but My mother had one splendid virtue in His eyes, Khem-Usha, she was loyal through all those terrible times in the harem when His little queens, most certainly including your mother, tried to assassinate Him. That is why I was brought into the line of succession. Of course, that by itself does not bring Me very near to Amon, does it? Yet, this I will say, Khem-Usha, I am the Pharaoh, and your duties exist to no better purpose than to allow Me as many hours as I require each day to meditate upon the needs of the Two-Lands.' Yet all the while I was scolding him, I kept feeling the point of his rebuke. My voice was too small! 'Declare,' I wished to say to him, 'that I am not a good King. Say My third leg is as weak as Horus the boy. Dare even to say that I watch My little queens, but rarely join them. But do not tell Me that My voice is small. For I can speak in all the voices of Egypt, and most certainly your own.' Then I rose in My anger and said aloud to him, 'Let your duties as Vizier be given to another. Serve only as My High Priest.' He was much agitated at what I said, especially when I added, 'Menenhetet may be just the Vizier for Me.' He was aghast, I assure you, and soon left."

"You spoke of me as Your Vizier," said my great-grandfather.

"I did."

"You meant each word?"

"I do not know. At the moment I spoke, it made great sense to Me."

"For if you did not mean it," said my great-grandfather, "we may all be dead." He gave a shrug as if the foundation of pride was to live lightly with such thoughts.

"I believe I know what you mean. Still, I would hear you say it."

"I will not deny," said Menenhetet, "that I have thought of being Your Vizier. If the wisdom acquired in four lives cannot serve a vast purpose, then of what use is it? So I came here with the hope that we could talk of such serious matters. Yet, I cannot say I have been confident. For weeks I have heard that You will depose Khem-Usha as Vizier and replace him with Your Chief Scribe, Nes-Amon."

"Do you believe such rumors?"

"He is a Libyan," said my great-grandfather, "but then, Nes-Amon has been with You for many years. You have raised him to the rank of Prince. He is an able man."

"I have discussed the post with him. The Libyan does not have your knowledge."

"Still," said my great-grandfather, "You can depend on his loyalty. If I were Your Vizier, there would not be a day when someone did not murmur to You that I am no longer to be trusted."

"That is a judgment I reserve for Myself. My judgment of men — if I am given the opportunity to listen — is faultless. Of course, few men dare to speak to a Pharaoh. You do. Indeed, I have just decided to tell you the truth. Until tonight, I was ready to choose Nes-Amon as My next Vizier. He is, indeed, an able man. But there is a place in every servant's heart where he is not to be trusted. I will admit to you that Khem-Usha, when he whispered to Me, was not speaking of our boyhood together — far from it! Rather, he said word had come to him that Nes-Amon was ready to march upon the Palace. The influence of Nes-Amon is large with My charioteers."

"When did Khem-Usha say this would take place?"

"He told Me there was a good chance it would take place tonight. I laughed. 'You do not have a nose for military matters,' I told him. 'No army likes to move under a full moon, and when it is the Night of the Pig — all would get lost.' I convinced him. I said: 'If My Palace were open to you, Khem-Usha, you still would not dare to take it. Not tonight. Depend on it. Nes-Amon feels no more confident than you.' I believe Khem-Usha agreed. He certainly became less agitated about Nes-Amon, and it was then he began to scold Me about the extent of his duties — I think he was trying to frighten Me by demonstrating the extent of his influence over the Two-Lands. Yet I do not know why he dared to speak to Me so at the end. He was taking a terrible chance. He understands how unhappy I am already with the situation. Why double the jeopardy of his position by insulting Me?"

"I think Khem-Usha wants You to dismiss him," said my great-grandfather. "Many are loyal to him now but not so devoted that they will dare to move against You. You are the Pharaoh. But if You take away his powers, then those who serve him closely have also lost all they possess. So then they must move with him."

"What would you advise Me to do?"

"I would encourage Nes-Amon to think that he will certainly replace Khem-Usha, and I would convince Khem-Usha that You will soon make him full Vizier. At the proper moment, appoint a Vizier over both of them. Leave Thebes and Upper Egypt to Khem-Usha, and Memphi and Lower Egypt to Nes-Amon. They can each be called Vizier-to-the-High-Vizier."

"You would be the High Vizier?"

"It would take every skill I possess."

"I should think so." Ptah-nem-hotep gave a cough, rueful as despair itself. "I do not know what to do," He said. "Your enemies will never allow any quality in you more noble than bat shit."

"That is what I fear the least," said Menenhetet. "A man with a dreadful reputation who has just been given terrible powers is treated with great respect. All hope he will not act like a tyrant."

"Then, what is your fear?"

"That you will lose everything tonight. I would raise my guard to man the walls."

"I do not trust My officers. The half who are not close to Nes-Amon may be loyal to Khem-Usha." Now, Ptah-nem-hotep gave a sweet smile to Menenhetet. "My situation is as follows: I detest Khem-Usha, no longer trust Nes-Amon, and do not know you at all. Yet, at this moment, I feel happy. My belief is that the Pharaoh, if He is wise enough to think only of what is before Him, whether it be His Crook, His Flail, or no more than the flower in His hand, is the greatest force in the Two-Lands. No army can move against Him when His thoughts have no fear. Do you believe this?"

"I do not know."

"I will tell you. I do not have the wisdom one needs. But I am drawn to you. If you are wise enough not to deceive Me, and tell Me all that I wish to know, then I cannot fail to increase in strength and wisdom. Of course, it is hard not to suppose that you would deceive Me."

"There are nights," said Menenhetet, "when I would seek to deceive the Lord Osiris Himself."

Ptah-nem-hotep laughed with true merriment. "I want you to tell Me," he said, "of My ancestor, Ramses the Second. He is the one whose strength I will need in the hours and years to come. I want to know what took place at the Battle of Kadesh, and all that followed upon it."

"To tell you might take every moment that is left in this night."

"I am awake until morning." He hesitated. "Will you speak of the Battle of Kadesh?"

"If I think on this matter, I want to be Your Vizier."

"After listening to you, I may have no other choice."

My great-grandfather laughed. "When I tell My story truly, You will learn so much that You will have no further need of me. You will be a Pharaoh greater than others, and Master of the Se-

crets. Who, but myself, has known the Great Pharaoh, Ramses the Second?"

"You make Me grateful before you begin."

My great-grandfather gave a smile that showed the strength of his face and the youth of the sixty years of his fourth life. "The story of my first life will certainly take us through the night. That is much more certain than that I shall be Vizier. But if this — as I feel with every breath I take — is a night when much comes to an end, and much is ready to change, then let us go back to the patio. I will offer a story far better than any father ever gave a son, but I would like to tell it by the light of the fireflies. You saw them truly. They bring back thoughts of campfires after the roar of the day is done. And I would like my granddaughter to listen as well. And my great-grandson. They are now the nearest to my flesh of all four lives."

1989

A Folly Repeated

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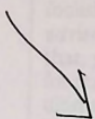
By my limited comprehension of the Muslim religion, martyrdom is implicit in the faith. While all faiths sooner or later suggest that a true believer may have to be ready to die for the governing god, it is possible that the Muslims, of all religions, have always been the most dedicated to this stern test. Now it seems as if the spiritual corruption of the 20th century has entered Islam's ranks as well. Any Muslim who succeeds in assassinating Salman Rushdie will be rewarded with the munificent sum of \$5,000,000. This must be the largest hit contract in history. Islam, with all its mighty virtues and vices, equal at the least to the virtues and vices of every other major religion, has now introduced a novel element into the history of theology. It has added the logic of the syndicate. One does not even have to be long to the family to collect. One has only to be the hit man. Of course, the novelist in me insists on thinking how I would hate to be that hit man trying to collect \$5,000,000. Now that the deed was done, I might be looked upon as an infidel. "Oh, you see," my Iranian paymaster might say, "we really

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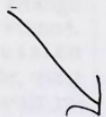
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cannot afford the five million. We lost so many men in the war with Iraq. There are so many widows in need of alms, and we have our orphans, and our veterans who are now missing a limb. Tell you, kind killer, we think you might wish to make your charitable contribution."

This is but a novelist's speculation. That is what we are here for — to speculate on human possibilities, to engage in those fantasies, cynicisms, satires, criticisms, and explorations of human vanity, desire and courage that the blank walls of mighty corporations like to conceal from us. We are scribblers who try to explore what is left to look at in the interstices. Sometimes we make mistakes and injure innocent victims by our words. Sometimes we get lucky and make people with undue worldly power a bit uncomfortable for a short time. Usually, we spend our days injuring each other. We are, after all, a fragile resource, an endangered species. It is not untypical of the weak and endangered to chew each other up a little on the way down. But now the Ayatollah Kho-



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meini has offered us an opportunity to regain our frail religion, which happens to be faith in the power of words and our willingness to suffer for them. He awakens us to the great rage we feel when our liberty to say what we wish, wise or foolish, kind or cruel, well-advised or ill-advised, is endangered. We discover that, yes, maybe we are willing to suffer for our idea. Maybe we are even willing, ultimately, to die for the idea that serious literature, in a world of dwindling certainties and choked-up ecologies, is the absolute we must defend.

We have had the example of our largest corporate chain of booksellers in America, Waldenbooks, withdrawing *The Satanic Verses* from their bookshelves in order to secure the safety of their employees. Immediately, they were followed by B. Dalton. Both had honest motives, doubtless. What is the use of being upwardly mobile in one's job in a massive corporate chain if security cannot be guaranteed? Get killed selling a book? The end of the world has come.

Worse! One could get killed buying a book. Who would ever forgive the corporate chain?

Of course, the option of assessing such danger calmly, and informing employees and customers of the real odds was never engaged—though both chains did eventually change their stance. In Russian roulette, using the classic re-

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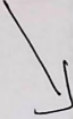
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volver, there is one chance in six you will kill yourself each time you pull the trigger. I am happy to say I have never played Russian roulette, but if I had, I am certain the odds would have felt much more like even money. I would have needed one part of my brain to explain to the other, over and over, that the odds were really 5 to 1 in my favor.

Waldenbooks has something like a thousand outlets. In one working week from Monday to Saturday, if one terrorist succeeded in making one successful attack on one store, the odds that it would not be the store you worked in would be 6,000 to 1 in your favor. If, as a customer, you spent half an hour in any one of these thousand stores, while it was in the course of being open for eight hours a day for six days, the odds in your favor would increase to 16 times 6,000, or close to 100,000 to 1 on your side. I think such odds, if loudly promulgated, would have brought in as many prospective customers looking for the spice of a very small risk as would have been frightened away; for the employees, a 10% increase for temporary combat pay could have been instituted. What are contingency funds for?

No, the answer to why Waldenbooks shut down *The Satanic Verses* is that they sell their product like soup

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cans. Only the homeless will ever endanger themselves over a can of soup. The largest purveyors of our books do not care about literature, whether serious, half-serious, or failed. The purveyors see books as a commodity that rots into the very spirit of the circulation of money if the books stay too long on the shelf. So, they hire clerks who tend to reflect their own mores. If Saul Bellow were to purchase one of his own novels in a chain where he did not normally shop, and paid for it with his own credit card, the odds that the clerk would recognize his name are about the same as the odds in Russian roulette—one in six. Saul Bellow could walk in and out of a chain bookstore like a ghost. So could I. So could any other established serious writer who has been around 30 or 40 years. Tom Wolfe might be recognized, but then Tom, for this year anyway, is the fastest selling can of soup around.

No surprise, therefore, if retail chains of American booksellers seem to have more respect for terrorists than for culture. How, then, can they not help to accelerate the latest mega-farce down the media road?

A serious book which may or may not have been irresponsible in part, as most serious books are—I cannot pretend to define the issue more closely



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since I, I fear, in company with the people issuing the death threats, have not yet read it, although I certainly intend to—yes, this serious yet possibly irresponsible contribution to serious literature, if it had been treated like other serious novels which are almost always in part sacrilegious, blasphemous, and secretly against the state, would, if it had encountered no formal outrage, have suffered the fate of other serious books. It would have received good, even hearteningly good, but still modest sales, it would have been discussed, and taken its small place on the shelf of serious works to be picked up again by a few devoted readers. Islam might have been injured by one part in one hundred thousand. Now, Islam is injured vastly more. Oceans of publicity have been given to the sacrilege. I say the act of attracting such attention to a book despised was a willful chosen act by the Muslim leaders. The wise men of Iran know that the Western moral conscience is dulled, and no one in our monotonous Yuppie overlay of skillful surface floating above incalculable horrors such as drug wars and acute poverty is ready to die for any idea, other, conceivably, than receiving a big payoff in cash. So the Ayatollah may have wished to show the great length of the whip he can crack, the whip whose secret name is found in our bottomless pit of terrorism. If we believe in nothing, how can we bear to die? The wise men of Islam know that about us.

One would have to respect the incisiveness of such understanding, if not for the fact that the wise men of Iran are also wholly indifferent to the fate of our literature, and are savagely opposed to those freedoms of expression we wish to believe we hold dear.

In this period of turmoil, we can now envision a fearful time in the future when fundamentalist groups in America, stealing their page from this international episode, will know how to apply the same methods to American writers and bookstores. If they ever succeed, it

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will be due to the fact that we never found an honest resistance to the terrorization of Salman Rushdie.

I would suggest, therefore, that it is our duty to form ranks behind him, and our duty to state to the world that if he is ever assassinated, it will then become our obligation to stand in his place. If he is ever killed for a folly, we must be killed for the same folly, and we may indeed be, since we will then vow to do our best to open all literary meetings with a reading of the critical pages in *The Satanic Verses*. A folly repeated is no longer a folly but a statement of intent. If what Salman Rushdie wrote was grave folly, then by killing him you will be obliging us to immortalize that same grave folly. For if one writer can be killed on a hit contract, and all concerned get away with it, then we may be better off being hit each of us, one by one, in future contracts, until our chiefs in the Western world may be finally aroused by the shocking spectacle of our willingness, even though we are selfish creative artists, to be nonetheless martyred.

I will not, however, put my name on such a list alone. Like others, I have my family, my projects, my life to see through to its conclusion. Join with me, rather, ten good American authors, male and female, or twenty, or a hundred in such a vow, and we are relatively safe. At least, we are safer to a considerable degree, and can feel honorable to ourselves. We will have struck a real blow for freedom. For the wise men of Iran will know then that we possess our spiritual wisdom, too. Certain acts count for more than others in the defense of freedom and the willingness to embrace an idea at perilous cost to our inner calm may be at the center of what the Western World is all about. If we would ask bookstore clerks to stand and serve, then we must demand more than that of ourselves. ■

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