

Chapter 1

Iris had always been in awe of individuals who stood out from the crowd by way of intellectual or artistic greatness. On occasions, she found herself whole-heartedly admiring some strong personality who made a valuable contribution to society and whose name deserved an inscription in history. Early on in her life she had learnt that time itself could not erase the memory of these people. On the contrary, it was as if time tried to curb its arrogance and bow its head in surrender. Within the human memory, such gifted individuals' defects are forgotten or else overlooked with commiserating tolerance. At other times, what had been considered unforgivable during their lives takes on an almost praiseworthy connotation after their death. All traces of eccentricity are totally engulfed in their greatness.

Iris too had sometimes yearned to be special, to be outstanding on her own merits; but she knew that she could not easily satisfy such a wish. Even if, in her dreams, she was capable of soaring above the everyday life that anyone could lead, her reality held different meanings. To enhance her self-image, and beguiling herself into believing she had fallen in love, she had married young, investing her hopes in the union she had entered into, of her own free will.

Marrying before other girls her age had given her a sense of pride. Her family could not object to her choice. The man who had, more than once, declared his love to her,

enjoyed a privileged position in society and was endowed with an attractive personality that charmed all who met him. He would definitely bring her no dishonour. Rather she should count herself lucky that he had chosen her and not someone better. She could not deem herself equal to him in terms of finances and education, and her choice to marry young quashed her dream to continue studying, as she had once dreamt and planned to do before she met him. Aaron showed no interest in Iris taking up a university course and did his best to discourage her from making such plans to further her education. He had a vast life experience, was ten years older and, as he had often reminded her, he knew quite well what the world has to offer.

He had always feared that, were his wife to be engaged in a career that she held dear, his prominence in her life would wane. Aaron could not bear being downgraded to second place, toppled from being his wife's centre of attention. Justifying his reasoning was the fact that the business he inherited from his father would suffice for even ten people to live in luxury. Iris's financial contributions would be unnecessary. In the wonderful future envisaged for them, she could lead a tranquil life looking after her husband and their future children. According to Aaron, there was no need for her to bother with study and theories that were, after all, only of relative importance in daily life. She could live comfortably, while doing what was expected of her. It was not befitting that the wife of a man of his social class should go to work, not even if her career was

prestigious and a source of personal fulfilment. At that time Iris had acquiesced to his reasoning.

It was a long time before Iris began to realise how lacking she was in love for her husband during the first phase of their marriage. Not the superficial love that at times manages to convince the protagonists even more than authentic love. Of superficial love she possessed an abundance, enough to convince not only Aaron of her supposedly true love, but even herself. As for him, his response to her every sentimental mood was always the right one and now she dared to surmise that at that time he really loved her, definitely much more than she loved him.

From the very beginning, Iris realised that her husband was a generous man. He bore no abhorrence towards sharing his wealth and gave freely without expecting anything in return. He was always delighted to see her happy and enjoying the life he had planned for them both. She had become accustomed to thinking that she lacked for nothing. Coupled with the realisation that it was the best way to face life without faltering, she learnt how to play the role he had assigned to her. But without understanding what exactly was going on in her life, her success in marriage started going to her head. Like a frivolous actress who constantly needs to hear the applause of the audience, she expected him to congratulate her every step. Aaron's efforts to gratify her every wish appeared without bounds, but his love could not compensate for the burgeoning struggle against that seed of frustration which sprouted in her and

made its presence felt on occasions, especially when time passed and there was still no offspring.

At first they took everything lightly. She was still young and there was no particular hurry. Aaron's business had prospered and he had a thousand things to think of. Meanwhile, she had every chance to live in the lap of luxury and enjoy herself in the wide, dazzling circle she had surrounded herself with. She knew that she was supposed to lack for nothing. Whenever she took stock of her situation, she always emerged the winner, especially when she compared herself to other women her age. She had love, protection and money in abundance and, though work did rob her somewhat of her husband's company, she could not fault him.

So why was her life becoming tinged with monotony? She started thinking that perhaps she was a difficult person, that what she obtained with no trouble or effort on her part did not satisfy her. Or was she perhaps falling victim to some disease that, at one time or another, strikes every individual, whatever his circumstances? The more she pondered, the worse her situation became. She no longer doubted that her life had become monotonous and, having never experienced such monotony before, it began to frighten her.

But Iris never admitted too freely to fear. At that time she flinched away from fear, equating it with weakness. She perceived the person who allows himself, at some point in his life, to be overcome by fear, as a coward who deserved everyone's contempt. She had never seen Aaron afraid.

And probably Aaron was unaware of her fear. She began to think that a baby might occupy her time and stop her from stumbling into this pitfall. She wished to have a child simply to occupy her time and to prove herself to others, not out of any particular yearning to become a mother. By nature, Iris was not attracted to what she did not understand, and she was not even attempting to understand what a mother's lifetime vocation entailed. But still she wanted a child and this deep longing on her part sharpened Aaron's desire for paternity.

Many a time he had tried to explain that they must take life as it comes, that they had better accept what they didn't like but could not change. But he was not as resigned as he wished to appear. The impatience she herself was instilling in him made her more highly strung. All the luxury surrounding her, constantly accumulated to make her happy, seemed to be mocking her.

Every new object she bought to add to the aesthetic of their villa and give her pleasure bored her too quickly. The more objects she bought, the more she wanted. She had no doubt that she had lost all that simplicity of life she had been brought up in, although she still treasured it in her subconscious. She could not cope with this contradiction in her life and, unexpectedly, it revealed another aspect of her character that she had, to date, kept under control and concealed from all.

Where before Iris had never let her quick temper overcome her, she now began to lose her patience and get

angry about every minor issue. It was as if she had grown tired of playing the same role for such a long time when she was not cut out to be an actress. Iris herself could not understand what was happening to her. She had changed from a honey-tongued partner to a shrew with a stinging tongue. At first Aaron would start and turn speechless. Probably he was trying to understand what was happening and why, without knowing, he was beginning to irritate her with his actions. Woe betide if he were to be even ten minutes late or forget his daily phone call from the office. Woe betide if he were to compliment another woman in her presence ... and so many other trivialities that she would keep on nagging at and, against her very wishes, needlessly, irk him and herself.

Gradually, Aaron came to his senses, and to her surprise, he caught up with her in the ability to hit back and, like her, seemingly emerge victorious. After a long phase of bitter quarrelling, Iris could feel him distancing himself from her. And the further he distanced himself from her, the more she loved him. In that period of psychological turmoil, she discovered that she had really grown to love him. But perhaps it was already too late. She had revealed to him her very soul with open wounds discharging pus and Aaron was unable to endure such a nauseating sight.

Even after many years had passed, Iris still recoiled from the day when she got to know that he was cheating on her with Clara, his best friend's sister. She got a hint from one of her neighbours who made her swear that for no

reason must she reveal her identity, because all she wanted was to put her wise to what was happening.

“I don’t expect you to believe me and to rely solely on my words,” she said, softly. “Find out for yourself, carefully. And then believe what is proven true. Careful! Don’t let anyone fool you. I am a housewife like you and I feel for you.”

That day she wished the very ground to open up and swallow her, erasing her existence from the face of the earth. In the best days of her youth, she had reached the acme of despair because of the man she had really grown to love at the very time when he had lost all his love for her. She no longer doubted his unfaithfulness. That very evening she sought to verify what her neighbour had told her and Aaron himself provided the main evidence.

“Whoever told you all this doesn’t wish you well. I can’t understand why you’re taking it so badly. You know as well as I do that you don’t love me. You have become fixated on quarrelling with me and keeping me at arm’s length. I should have long realised that you find my very presence disagreeable. But you have nothing to worry about; you will still have all the money and luxuries that you are so attached to.”

“What you’re saying is not true. I love you more than you dare think; than I myself ever imagined. If I ever led you to understand otherwise, we are both at fault and we should both carry the burden of the guilt and do our best to begin anew. Tell me that what I heard is untrue and that the person who tried to poison me against you is a liar.”

Aaron remained silent. It was as if he did not want to compromise himself with an answer. But his silence was answer enough for Iris. The noose of despair started tightening her heart with a maddening power. How much more than her could his new partner love him? How was she better than her? Overcome by mental and physical tiredness, she was unable to take any step that she might regret later when she was more composed. She could hardly speak.

“You coward! Are you afraid to answer? So you know you’re doing wrong!” Her voice, though hoarse and cracked, could still be heard clearly.

“Who am I to be afraid of? Haven’t I been trying hard enough to understand you, to share my life with you? Naturally I couldn’t succeed because it wasn’t you I married. I didn’t even know that this prevailing you existed ... how could I have married you? And take my advice ... if you want to hold on to any man, control your viper’s tongue.”

“I don’t need your advice. Just tell me what you want me to believe about you ... and beware ... afterwards, no one will be able to erase your confessions from my mind.”

“Believe whatever you like! Isn’t that what you’ve always done? And go and congratulate whoever opened your eyes and saved you. It must have been someone as clever as you are.”

Fuming, Aaron put on his jacket and went out. From that day onwards their relationship never improved or reverted to what it had once been. Iris was not ready to

give up even an iota of her dignity and lead the way to reconciliation. Aaron barely showed any interest. Without really understanding why, she preferred tormenting herself with the scourges of doubt and futile arguments, rather than try to understand and bring back the man whom she loved as much as she perhaps had come to hate. Love and hate took hold of her by turns if not simultaneously.

It was too late when she realised how much precious time she had lost in their married life. They still lived together though they were as apart as two strangers who hardly knew each other.

Taken up as she was by her ever-widening circle of friends, Iris was unaware that Aaron's health was declining. Her priority was to destroy the monotony in her life by every means possible. She needed the company of people who, like her, had nothing special to do, and playing cards and bingo together with long sessions of gossip seemed to be helping her to do so.

Among her friends there was Aaron's aunt. Aaron's aunt treated her as if she was her niece, rather than her nephew's wife. Although Aunt was some thirty years older, they were as close as two sisters. A rich, childless widow, who had lost her husband eight years before, she had no ties with any man. Neither did she have any special interests in life except to spend time in the best way possible for her. Like Iris she feared solitude and, like her too, she felt weak and powerless confronted by this faceless monster. What she liked best was playing cards and bingo. Besides

satisfying her social character, she often boasted that the excitement induced by gambling made her forget all that she did not wish to remember. In a short time, the niece not only started following in her path, but became as eager to attend every single social occasion that promised some form of enjoyment. Aunt's exuberance ensured them several lasting friendships and, without knowing how, Iris became dependent upon her presence rather than on her husband's.

Whenever she told her something about Aaron's unfaithfulness and their fraught relationship, Aunt was able to calm down her fears and always tried to convince her that there was no need to worry too much.

"I know Aaron better than you do," she told her more than once. "Don't imagine that he will ever leave you unless you cheat on him with another man. Be patient. I assure you that Aaron is a much better man than my husband was and we managed to put up with each other till the end. Today I don't regret it. He left me a rich woman capable of taking care of myself. Did you ever ask him for something which he did not buy you? Or does he deprive you of anything?"

"No. Where money is concerned, I lack nothing."

"Then eat, drink and enjoy yourself. Don't take life too seriously and you won't be sorry."

She liked Aunt's words and there was no need for anyone to try and convince her to follow the older woman's advice. In the meantime, Aaron's health kept on deteriorating. One day he was too weak to get out of bed. It was the maid

who drew Iris's attention. Alarmed, she told Iris that the master could not go to the office because he felt unwell. He did not usually malingering or try to gain her sympathy by pretending to be ill. Iris knew that he no longer expected anything from her and he never tried to make her think otherwise. It was a long time since he had spoken openly to her. Probably they had both forgotten how to share their feelings and personal experiences.

The maid's expression revealed that Aaron was feeling very unwell. Iris sprang out of bed, dressed hastily and quickly went to the other bedroom which Aaron had been using as his room. His appearance stunned her. Lying face upwards in bed, weak and with his eyes half open, he seemed to be seeing her and not noticing her presence at the same time. She slowly approached the bed. For a brief moment, her impression was of some other man, not her husband. She always held Aaron to be handsome. Never before had she seen him so pale and drained. His cheeks seemed to have caved in and his cheekbones jutted out an inch. His health could not have declined so much all of a sudden. She could not believe how she had not noticed the gradual change in him. Or had she perhaps grown used to closing her eyes to what she did not like to see? Something clutched at her heart, almost making her breathless. She plucked up courage and got hold of his right hand. His cold sweat seemed to smear her fingers. Though she had no medical knowledge, she realised that Aaron was seriously ill.

“What happened, Aaron?”

“Phone our doctor. He knows everything.” His voice could hardly be heard and the effort he made to speak to her seemed to rob him of the little strength he had left.

She could not ask him any more questions. What did the doctor know that she did not? With this disturbing thought wrecking her mind, she phoned him immediately. Thankfully, she found him at home. On the phone he asked her nothing about Aaron. He advised her to remain calm and said he would be coming at once. At that moment she wished the doctor could sprout wings, or at least that he lived next door. The few minutes until his arrival seemed like hours to her. She could do nothing to help Aaron. Neither could she believe that her presence would offer him any relief.

The doctor wasted no time. As soon as he finished examining Aaron, he phoned for an ambulance. Then he made Iris swallow a pill he had brought with him, and told her that it wasn't the right time to answer her many questions. It was as if he wished to tell her that it was now too late for her to start intruding in what was not her business anymore. The doctor was a good friend of Aaron's and he was probably aware of what had happened in their marriage.

Overwhelmed as she was by the dire circumstances, Iris was ready to suffer some more humiliation because of her impotence in the face of illness and suffering. It was in vain that she wished to be part of her husband's deliverance. She had learnt at her expense that the physical distance between two people, when enforced wilfully, couldn't easily be bridged.

Iris soon confirmed that it was Aaron's wish that she remained ignorant of the fact that he had been ill for about three years. She could not understand why he had to hide such things from her in this way. If she had known that he was ill, and that there was no cure for him, she would surely have dedicated more time to him. She would then have, perhaps, felt his presence close to her even after his death, and the void of separation would have been filled with memories of intimacy which their last years together would have brought.

He died just four days after he was taken to hospital. While he was there, he was never unconscious. She tried more than once to make him understand, through her caring behaviour, that she was ready to forget all the troubles of their marriage. Even when Clara, the woman who had robbed her of her rightful place by his side, visited him, Iris behaved like a woman who was also able to forgive. Above all, sometimes she doubted how far their friendship had progressed; had her husband really cheated on her with Clara? Clara was a nurse and it could be that Aaron, as a sick man, wished to confide in a woman who could understand him and knew how to help him. But even she would have been able to help him had he plucked up courage and approached her. She did not even dare imagine that Aaron was afraid of her; that he perhaps thought that if she knew about his cancer, she might recoil from him and perhaps even find his body repulsive. If that was the case, she would have to admit to herself that he treated her more like a child than as a responsible woman.

Iris took Aaron's death badly. It came upon her too suddenly and immediately robbed her of the remnants of hope that clung to her life. She had never completely lost hope that someday she and her husband would rediscover themselves, in a future that would obliterate the past and smooth out the bumps of the present. But the many obstacles in her life became part of the reality she took on board and behind which she hid, thus finding comfort in the protection they offered against her nakedness. At that time, she never knew how death could destroy in one instant the past, present and future of their union and leave her alone struggling, without strength, against the emptiness surrounding her. She had suffered a complete loss and in a matter of months, the effects of the chill within her aged her by more than ten years.

In her first six months of mourning, her aunt's presence was a great help. The loss of her only nephew devastated her. Perhaps her behaviour towards Iris was a way of making up for her shortcomings with Aaron. She too felt that she should have been informed earlier about his illness. But not even she had noticed the change in him. If Aaron wanted to hide the truth from his wife, he would surely not have confided in his aunt. She had always been a talker, eager to tell everyone what she heard and considered sensational. Her life was an open book to everyone but, together with her life, she was ready to lay bare the lives of all those who came in contact with her.

After Aaron's death, Iris was the only close relative she had left, and Aunt wanted not only to strengthen their existing friendship, but also to show her clearly that she wished to relate to her as both niece and daughter. With utmost patience, she tried to bring Iris out of the shell she had isolated herself in. She knew that Iris could do nothing to bring Aaron back and that the time for mourning was drawing to an end. So she sincerely felt that Iris had to do all she could to regain her old self and start living once again to the full.

"Your husband left you as rich as mine did. In myself I see your future. You don't need to worry about earning money. Our friends often ask for you. You've kept yourself shut inside your house far too long. I wish you'd realise that it's high time now for us to start living again. If we go on like this, resembling two mummies always in search of quiet, we'll become more depressed and anxious."

Aunt was losing her patience. She was becoming impatient with the tediousness of reading and walking in the garden, and her niece's company was not enough for her. She wanted her usual bevy of friends intent on forgetting life and encouraging each other to do the same. But Iris had no intention to restart the endless cycle of her past life which always led her back to where she began. The bitter experience she had just faced presented her with another reality; a reality she had never glimpsed before. She had no desire to remember those puffed up faces, yawning in the idleness of mental laziness and sniggering with the forced

laughter of the double-faced. Aunt's friends, unknowingly, found comfort in mocking themselves and others, hoping that their companionship would keep on allowing them this solace. They were not ready to lose such an important member as Aunt from their group. Iris was sure that her company was not as much in demand as her aunt's. But Aunt would feel more at ease having Iris with her. She would not dare burden herself with a new guilt for neglecting her niece when Iris probably needed her most. Aunt was a very generous woman, but she always performed her first act of charity with herself before showing benevolence to others. And she had no intention to break her rule now. In fact, she had put up with Iris for much longer than the latter had expected. She only gave up and stopped frequenting Iris when she could not do otherwise.

After she lost Aaron, every other loss seemed trivial to Iris. She did feel her aunt's loss. She had got used to Aunt's imposing presence that dominated every gathering she attended. But Iris was doing well without her. She needed quiet around her to reconcile with her real self and discover what she really wanted to do with her life. It was in this period of silence that she learnt how to hear the profound voices of nature and smell the green fields full of life. Earlier on in her life she had realised the importance of seeing and appreciating the beauty and power of nature, but she had never known how to use her other senses to become one with this source that nourishes life and engenders it in its abundant womb. It was silence that taught her how to hear, smell, taste and feel the presence of a thousand other existences

that together with hers entwined themselves up with a strength that overcomes the transience of many of them.

Her recent passion for reading continued to increase. In a short time she got acquainted with a number of writers whose names she had known previously, but whose ideas she had never set out to unfold. This communication with those members of the human race who could think, opened wide the doors of her mind and planted within her the desire to participate actively in the life around her. Iris could also share some of her experiences with other people, especially now that she was getting to know herself better. She could now understand how in the past her egocentricity, grafted on to her very being, had transformed her into a leech - a leech that sucks, instead of blood, the attention and will of those it settles on. She expected too much, when considering how little she gave. It was time for her to venture out and move far beyond the mass of needs, more fictitious rather than real, that had become the fulcrum of her life. She was afraid that, if she remained stuck to her protective shell, she would lose, not only her mind but also her will to go on living. It was this fear that drove her on forcefully to overcome every urge to look back even if just to pity the dark image that was part of her and which required effort to leave behind.

This new zeal that she gradually injected into herself was no longer the result of immaturity. Rather, it was the timely expression of the individual who wishes to live life even though life is marred by death. Soon she began to feel

interested in philanthropic organisations. Meeting people who were completely different from those she went around with before Aaron's death was, for Iris, like a cool breeze in a humid, muggy day. Although she was now a widow, with all her illusions burst like soap bubbles on hitting the dry ground, she still had not yet lost her youth as she might have dared think. In the company of young people of her age or younger, she managed to find again her real self, the self whose very existence she had forgotten. And the more she accepted herself, the more could she forget her own shortcomings and those of others. She felt convinced that if her aunt were to meet her again, she would not recognise her. But there was no chance of this ever happening.

The news of her death struck Iris like a bolt from the blue. Aunt had hardly ever been ill but a sudden heart attack proved fatal. Iris was shocked. Her aunt's friendly character had always been agreeable to her, even when they had not met for some time. For all her obvious flaws, there was not much one could say against her. It was perhaps because her intentions were always sincere and whenever, thoughtlessly, she did some disservice to herself or to others, it was not entirely her fault. And she would not admit to any wrongdoing even if she did her best to repair the damage done. She was a real character, as Aaron sometimes said. Her death, unexpectedly, revived in Iris the memories of her husband's death. Once again, she had to fight against the emptiness that surrounded her. But this time she was stronger in her resistance and she soon emerged with her wounds half healed.

To her surprise, Aunt had left her all her wealth. Never had Iris thought that she loved her so much. She had never spoken to her about inheritance or what she intended to do with her money and property. Iris had, somehow, found it unbelievable that her aunt would die. Whenever she had tried to encourage her to face life bravely, Iris had a habit of forgetting that the old lady was as fragile as her, or even more so. In the younger woman's eyes, she seemed to have seven lives.

Only for this reason had Iris sometimes envied her and longed to have her strength. As for her wealth, Iris was never interested in it. Neither of them doubted that, financially, they did not need each other.

"I wish to leave you everything to do whatever you like with it. Hopefully you'll be able to lead a better life than I did and succeed in making your dreams come true in your lifetime. Do not do what I did. Do not be afraid to see the world from your own perspective. Do not rely all the time on what you're told by others. You have the means to journey afar. But as you always wished, remain in full control." The notary told Iris that her aunt's will and her message to her had been written some two months before she died. It was as if she had a premonition that her life was nearing its end. Iris asked herself repeatedly why Aunt did not contact her and tell her what she intended to do. If she had, Iris might have been able to care for her and help her during her last days. But someone told her that her aunt had continued with her old life up to the very end, surrounded by friends and playing cards.

“Do not be afraid to see the world from your own perspective.” Iris knew she was right. Aunt knew how to read one’s inner feelings as swiftly as she could read a book with illustrations. It was not easy for the niece to hide anything from her, not even fear. And now, that she was dead, she was still offering Iris the medicine that she herself trusted most, even though it hadn’t healed her. For Aunt, money was the remedy for every mishap, or, at least, the best way to soften the blows of every misfortune. This time too, her intention was sincere. Iris could not approve of Aunt’s devised philosophy but she could not discard the new advice that she had left her at the notary’s.

Iris had nothing to keep her from seeing other countries with their traditions and different lifestyles. She was imaginative, had more than enough money and many connections that her husband had made through his business. So she could definitely journey afar as her aunt had inspired her to do. The beginning would be hard, she knew. She would first have to overcome her tension every time she faced a new experience without knowing where it would lead her. But this fear of the unknown would not quench her new determination, fuelled as it was by her curiosity and her longing to learn more about life. So it was with this mixture of contradictory feelings, which for the first time in her life she did not try to understand, that she started preparing herself for a long journey that would take her away from the world of dreams and from the reality that she knew.

Chapter 2

She took Martha with her. Ever since Aaron died, Iris had started treating her as a friend rather than a maid. She trusted her completely. A reserved woman, she was prudent and frugal, never creating trouble for anyone. Martha had started working for them when they got married. Years passed and she remained the same woman, hard-working and loyal, just as she had been in the first days of her employment. She had not even lost that unsophisticated frankness that Aaron had so admired in her. Now that she was over forty, she kept on living her simple, unpretentious life.

When she first got to know her, Iris sometimes pitied her especially when she still considered Martha to be inferior to her. There were times when the maid's gratitude, exaggerated according to Iris, irked her and provoked a rebellion which would not be quenched easily. Perhaps this was because Iris, who often admitted her belief in the equality of mankind, felt her own thoughts accusing her of hypocrisy. At that time Iris treasured her superiority over the maid and Martha's total resignation made her feel more guilty.

Then in the midst of her marital troubles, Iris lost all interest in her. In her mind, Martha became an anonymous presence who served her without making her aware of her existence. Iris never thought of her and never needed her human presence around her.

Aunt had often tried to praise her to Iris. She loved Martha though she too had no time for her and never really cared about any hidden needs Martha might have. Probably she liked her because, as a maid, she knew how to keep her distance and not bother anyone. Aunt felt a great respect, which almost verged onto love, for whoever lived within her proximity but never bothered her. She would even go to the length of paying them well in one way or another. But Iris needed no one to make her appreciate the maid's work. She would immediately tell Aunt that, had she not been satisfied with Martha, she would not have retained her in her service. And the subject of the conversation would immediately change. The maid was not interesting enough as a topic of conversation.

At that time Iris had learnt how to justify, very cleverly, some prejudices that she had nurtured within her. Many times she wondered about the real reason for the transformation of her indifference towards the people around her and why she began to see them in a new light. Was it the effect of the pain of separation brought about by Aaron's death? Or was it her effort to overcome the disillusion caused by the unexpected change in her circumstances? Whatever the reason, her transformation, which could have taken so long, had been considerably hastened. In the midst of her psychological turmoil, she managed to, somehow, find a silver lining; she discovered true friends whom she could rely on. Martha was one of them.

Since Martha was reserved and kept herself to herself, it was difficult for Iris to really decipher what she would be thinking. Such a character as Martha's, at once free of all life-burdening complications and at the same time deeply enshrouded in impenetrable reticence, is almost self-contradictory. But Iris was sure that she could trust this particular friend blindly. Whatever she told her, Iris knew, would never reach anyone else. Perhaps Martha was apprehensive about talking or had been born reluctant to talk. Otherwise, she had taught herself to be reticent; this would have made her gain in self-respect and in the personal satisfaction that made her life worth living.

Any advice she was asked to give was always timely and beneficial. Her natural wisdom seemed to have grown in proportion to her experience of life and the ordeals she passed through. But where could such a woman with no ambitions and living such a simple life obtain all the experience needed to sustain wisdom? Or is it perhaps that wisdom does not need personal experience to sustain it? Iris often wished to ask Martha these questions. But she always held back. She feared that her curiosity might embarrass Martha and make her withdraw even further into her shell. Above all she believed that friendship gave no automatic right to friends to probe into each other's life, especially when a friend like Martha chose to live a maid's life twenty-four hours a day.

As soon as Iris made up her mind to go on a long voyage, she immediately informed Martha of her decision. She

also told her that if she had no objection to going abroad, she would be ready to take her with her. The choice was totally hers. If Martha preferred to remain living where she was, Iris would be ready to find her another employment. Iris was sure that Martha had made some good money during the years she worked with Aaron and herself. With some courage and determination, Martha could lead an independent life. Iris did not wish to lose Martha's company and support, especially now that she was going to start living in a foreign environment. However, she did not want to impose upon Martha a choice that she might not understand fully and that would perhaps be unsuitable for her. But Martha did not need any help. Neither did she need anyone to push her into making a decision. With the speed of lightning, she made up her mind as if the future was there to take full control of, without her presenting any obstacles.

“Madam, are you sure I won't be a burden on you if I decide to come with you?”

“As you know, money is no problem and the help you always gave me is priceless. In the future I'll probably need it more than ever. But I must be sure that you won't regret it afterwards. I don't know what kind of situations we shall find ourselves in. Besides, I cannot promise you it will all be plain sailing.”

“Why should I remain here? I have no parents and my brothers and sisters live far away. They are all married and settled in their homes ... they can hardly be expected to care

about me. I feel I am too old to start working in a factory. I don't feel like starting to compete with workers who are so much younger than me ... and to start working for someone else ... I'm sure I won't find anyone like you."

"Thank you, Martha. But if you wish to remain here, I will do my utmost to see that you will be well off wherever you start working. Don't base your decision to accompany me on the assumption of having no other choice. In a faraway country we'll have many new things to get used to. There will be changes in more than one aspect of our lives."

"Madam, I'm not frightened of travelling abroad. True, I haven't ever been abroad. But that doesn't mean anything. One has to start somewhere. You too have not been abroad for quite a time. You never travelled on your own. And still you have no qualms about it. Like you I wish to see new lands. They say there's so much to see in the world. Distance does not scare me as long as I'm not alone ... and I'm not a burden on you."

In a few days Martha was brimming with enthusiasm to travel. Her one thought was to help Iris prepare all that would be needed for the trip and see that she forgot nothing. On her part, she did not have much to carry with her. Her room, though spacious, was not overloaded with striking decorations. The few objects she held dear, four old family photographs and some other small mementoes could fit anywhere. If she could, Martha would have flown as lightly as a bird, with no luggage at all.

Iris often thought about Martha in the last days before they left. Was she perhaps like her, still waiting for that complete liberation which could come about in some far off land? It was true that this liberation had reached a certain limited peak here where they had been living for so many years. But it was far from that highest peak which meant complete redemption. But then what if complete redemption is only reached through death? However, in Martha's case there seemed to be something different in the way things were going, something that couldn't be understood. Looking forward, Martha had no apprehensions about the unknown future just as she had no fears about the present. Had Iris not known her well, she would have been certain that Martha had already found her full liberation because of lack of thinking, or rather, because she did not know how to think. But the reality was otherwise. Perhaps her friend had absolute control over her thoughts. She never allowed them the possibility of spreading beyond the present and, in no way did she allow them to take full control. It could also be that this very repression of her thoughts had compelled her to remain a maid with no wish or hope of moving on in life, yet still free and much happier than so many people.

Iris thought that, in spite of her modest social status, Martha could be considered fortunate. Though not outstandingly attractive, and though she never made any special effort to improve her appearance, Martha looked strong and healthy. And her appearance was genuine. As

strong as a horse, she never refused any hard work. She worked at a consistent pace, never wasting time, never needing to stop and rest. Sometimes Iris wished she were as strong as Martha. She too was untouched by disease, but her store of physical energy could not be compared with Martha's. She was of a different build and had never done any hard work in her life. While she was married to Aaron, she had tasted idleness which eventually she started enjoying; idleness had transformed her life. It was difficult for Iris, now, to work without thinking of relaxation, and this was not completely her fault. It was also partly Martha's fault. The maid's presence and total commitment to work had made Iris lose all initiative to persist in whatever work she was doing without getting tired, and almost causing her to lose heart. At such moments Iris would envy Martha. But for no reason did she wish to change roles with her if ever there could be the possibility of such a choice. For Iris, social status now came far above physical health, if not above happiness, too. And happiness was something she valued highly, something she could neither buy nor exchange for anything.

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The journey they thought they had prepared themselves well for, was much longer than they had ever imagined. The first hours crept by slowly and for the rest it was as if time stood still. It was not that Iris was afraid of flying. But the very thought that she was suspended high above solid ground would not let her rest and travel as comfortably as

she wished. She had no appetite for food and she would nibble at something merely to while away the time rather than to fill her stomach which seemed sealed. Martha was different. She refused nothing and ate everything that they served. This was her first flight and she experienced more satisfaction than intimidation. She had never imagined she would ever fly so high and she was sure that one fine day she would appreciate her courageous enterprise. But she was also eager to land and to get nearer the destination she had grown used to dreaming about.

“Is it far from the airport to the town where we’re going to live?”

“Quite. We have a long train journey. We won’t make it before tomorrow morning.”

Iris had already explained all the details of the journey to Martha. She could either have forgotten them, Iris thought, or perhaps she was asking so many familiar questions to assert normality in these unusual circumstances where time seemed to be standing still.

“I imagine the train has to pass through huge areas of countryside. I never tire of looking at fields and trees. The quiet farmhouses in remote areas remind me of when I was young and my mother and father were still alive. I spent days on my grandfather’s farm, working and playing non-stop.”

“We would be travelling all night, Martha. We won’t be able to see much of the scenery. Why don’t you try to sleep? Your eyes are half-closed.”

“How much longer do we have on the plane?”
“Two hours.”

Two hours seemed too long. Iris had grown bored browsing through the magazines the air hostess had brought her. She had also grown tired of staring at the clouds from every angle and in her trivial conversation with Martha, there was nothing further to say. Nor did she wish to remember her last flight. On that day Aaron was sitting next to her, constantly occupied with her needs. She had left everything in his hands. Now she was responsible not only for herself but also for Martha, and the journey was much longer and the future shrouded in mystery. At moments like these she could feel most sharply her early loss of Aaron's love for her. Moreover, these memories would not help her face this inertia she felt caught up in. Iris wished Aaron was sitting next to her instead of Martha.

Finally, the flight came to an end and they left the airport in a broken down taxi. Very soon they found themselves in a dark train compartment where they had to spend quite a lot of time.

Inhaling the characteristic smell of train stations and the inside of trains, Iris could not help feeling nostalgic for the home she had left behind her. But now she could not turn back. She flinched from the thought of the long flight back. It seemed as if she had just crossed a bridge which she saw catch fire behind her and turn to ashes. Martha was too tired to read her thoughts. With her head leaning against the seat and with a light smile on her lips, she was staring out of the window next to her.

“Who knows what she’s thinking?” Iris thought to herself. Martha did not seem to mind the movement of the train, its rattling and the smell that got stuck in your nostrils.

“Martha, do you want to eat something? I hardly ate anything on the plane and now I’m feeling hungry.”

“At the moment I’m not hungry. I’ll eat later.”

Martha did not want to move from her place. It was as if she wanted to cling to her present situation. She seemed stuck to her seat and her eyes were fixed on the grimy window pane. But she had already eaten on the plane. Iris would not eat now just to while away the time. The train was different from the aeroplane and the sense of security travelling by land gave you, especially after a long flight, overcame every other effect that would make her stomach turn against food.

Their sleeping compartment, though not bad, was not as comfortable as she had imagined. There were four bunk beds, two on top of each other. As they were the first to enter it, they were able to choose the best and they chose the two below. Iris thought that probably they would have to share the compartment and, considering the lack of space, she was sure to hate this. Imagine having two strangers with them, with all their luggage. They would hardly be able to move.

She had just finished eating when a man with thick hair and moustache peeped into the compartment. Iris started. That’s the last thing they needed here with them! She was

wondering whether they should leave and find somewhere else to stay when she suddenly realised he was a guard.

“You can come in here,” she heard him say hurriedly in a foreign language. Immediately, she saw an old travelling bag in the compartment. He had pushed it in with his foot and, without another word, had continued on his way to the end of the wagon.

The two women who entered their compartment were elderly, much older than Martha and herself. They looked around them, nodded at Iris, and started discussing, in a low voice, how they were going to settle themselves. Martha had not changed her position; she sat as if no one had entered the narrow compartment which was now so crowded.

“Madam, which side have you chosen?” asked the more vivacious of the two ladies. It was clear that she was the decision-maker. Iris was not sure that she had understood her. Her pronunciation was unintelligible and her words indistinct.

“Pardon?”

“Which side do you prefer to stay?”

She left Iris with no doubt that she had understood her. The lady was expecting either her or Martha to climb the narrow ladder at the side of the compartment to sleep in one of the bunk beds above. Martha had never openly admitted it, but Iris knew that her companion suffered from claustrophobia and it would be hell for her to spend

a night with her face glued to the top of the wagon. She herself felt dizzy at the thought of having to spend a night without moving, full of fear that she might tumble down. Wasn't the flight enough? She had hardly recovered and didn't want to have to face this snag now. She did not intend to bow her head to the foreigner's order. Neither would she allow Martha to give up her place even if she was tempted to do so to avoid disagreement.

"We're going to remain where we are. We tried very hard to find an empty compartment to be more comfortable. We've just come from another long journey and we're exhausted. I can't stand heights myself. If you yourselves, like us, do not feel comfortable up there, find somewhere else."

The foreigner was rendered speechless at first. She had not expected such an answer from Iris. But she soon recovered and, looking peeved, she muttered something to her companion while they tried to put their things in their place.

Iris was trying to imitate Martha. Her inaction in circumstances which could easily make you lose your temper was admirable although, probably, it was inspired by exhaustion rather than submission.

"You're still young, but I won't be intimidated. I will get up there. I'm still strong enough to climb up."

She was addressing Iris, but this time Iris said nothing. She had almost begun to feel guilty when she saw her swinging on the narrow ladder and trying to get her leg on

the bunk bed which was probably higher than the old lady had envisaged, angry as she was. Iris would have got up to help her, if her companion had not been there to give a hand, even though she knew her help would most likely have been refused. But at least, she would not go on feeling so guilty.

This guilt was robbing her of the rest she needed so much. She was doing her best to find a justification for her actions. But the thought that she would not be able to endure a night in a situation that she had done her best to avoid weighed strongly against all forms of altruism that she wished to attribute to herself.

Finally, everyone seemed to have settled down and they were all ready to sleep. Martha too had managed to look away from the darkness outside the window and soon dozed off. There was no sound from the two women in the bunk beds above. Face up with her eyes wide open, Iris was now watching the black sky from over the grimy glass of the window which she had half-opened to get some air into the compartment. No stars were visible, as if they had all been frightened off by the incessant sounds of the train. But at least there was some light coming from the train corridor. She would not have been able to remain in pitch darkness. Whatever the other three said, she would have had to switch on the small bulb nearby. Iris thought that she had completely overcome the phobia she once had for complete darkness. But now, unfortunately, she could not help remembering this characteristic of her childhood.

The warm breeze coming in through the window slowly changed to a cool one and the sweltering heat in the wagon faded away completely. Iris drew on a jacket lying nearby to relieve the cold which, like the heat before, would not let her sleep. Her mind was on the three other women.

Were they really asleep? Or were they just pretending to rest in the hope that they would, eventually, manage to sleep? She was determined not to spend another night on a train all her life.

At that moment any other means of transport appeared more attractive. Iris was convinced she could have planned this inevitably long journey better. She started thinking of her aunt. Surely Aunt had not imagined such exertion when she had told her to see the world! Or perhaps she had foreseen it all and that was the reason why she herself had never gone anywhere. And yet Aunt still did not feel happy and felt she had been a failure in life. Who knows whether Aaron felt he had succeeded in life - especially when he was away from her and managing things on his own. His business which he had treasured was now in someone else's hands. He had never allowed her to share in the running of their interests. He had only wanted her to enjoy the benefits of his hard work. Now, after his death, she could not do anything else. At least she was trying to make good use of the wealth he had left her. What would he tell her were he to come and speak to her right now? Was he able to follow what she was doing from where he was?

The turbulent rush of thoughts in her mind came to an abrupt end. The brakes screeched and the train suddenly came to a halt in an unknown station. Tired as she was, she blamed the foreign woman. It was all her fault that she was going over her past and present, all tangled up together. It was because of her that she felt burdened with guilt and this kept sleep and rest away. Iris wished to get up and look out of the window to see where they were. But she did not wish to wake up the others and show them that she was not asleep. After all, none of them seemed to be keen to stay awake with her!

Perhaps, if she had more positive thoughts, these would have filled the void of her loneliness. But usually it was loneliness itself that swept her into a whirlpool of thoughts that offered her no solutions. However tired she was, she needed to get out of the vicious circle she had found herself in. She needed to move forward at the same pace, the same rhythm of the train when it set off again.

The train did not stop for long at the station. It was probably a remote train station and was only used by the people who lived there. There were hardly any sounds of train doors opening and closing or of people carrying heavy luggage eager to start or finish their journey. She was getting more curious. Who knows what kind of life these people led? Were their problems different from those of other people? Iris was sure that her problems were not unique. To her of course, they had no counterpart, but they were surely not so special that they cut her off from the rest of humanity.

The train was now going faster than before, and she felt the distance separating her from her destination decreasing. Sleep was slowly overpowering her and her eyelids were getting heavier with no effort on her part. The dim light from the corridor was no longer necessary. The presence or absence of stars in the black sky was immaterial. Rest and sleep were no longer necessarily related. Whether she slept deeply or not, what was important for her now was to have one of her wishes come true, to reach her destination.

Chapter 3

Iris could never decide whether the town she started living in merited that designation. Perhaps Alfa deserved to be seen more as a hybrid between a town and a big sprawling village. But, as such hybrids had never been given a name, Alfa was always considered one of the country's towns. Surrounded by green hills on one side and with a wide stretch of sea on the other, the town appeared at first glance to be nestling in the cradle of the world. However, for those who participated in the everyday life of its inhabitants, reality soon prevailed over any fantastical notion that attempted to take root. Alfa was completely cut off from the rest of the world. For the greater part of its inhabitants, no other world existed.

Iris had been welcomed very cordially by one of Aaron's greatest friends and his wife. They made it clear from the beginning that they were ready to consider her one of the family and it would give them pleasure and great satisfaction to do anything for her. That was how they felt, in this way they could honour Aaron's memory and repay him for the friendship he showed them when they needed him.

For Amos and Mira, Iris's presence was the sequel to an episode which they did not want to come to an end. The very house which they found for her was clear evidence of this dedication to their duty to her; a duty which they had imposed upon themselves freely without any expectations

on her part. Although her new house was rather far away from her friends', its grandeur was nothing less. If she had to make her own choice, she would have chosen a smaller and more snug house to shelter her thoughts, but she would never, for any reason, refuse her friends' choice. Even Martha soon got used to the new house. The size of the house did not bother her. In fact, it was probably the only link with the bond between her and the house they had left behind and which she had grown used to live in as if it was her own. This time Iris was determined that, whatever Martha thought, she would hire someone to help her with the housework. She deserved the best for her loyalty even though perhaps only Martha knew what this best was.

Life in Alfa was much cheaper than Iris expected. Wages were all low and the rates of payment for housemaids were nothing if not flexible. The employee would take whatever the employer offered, especially if the housemaid found shelter and good food in the house where she was employed.

"Do these people accept everything?" At first Iris's question seemed to confuse Mira. But when she had found an answer that satisfied her, Mira kept on repeating it unhesitatingly whenever her friend expressed her concern.

"You need to get used to the people of Alfa. They live from day to day. They are not lazy. They just work and eat without creating problems. They prefer to have someone else taking care of them. They're ready to leave responsibility in the hands of others. The person who takes

care and carries responsibility deserves a much higher pay than the one who just does the work.”

“But have these people never been given the chance to take responsibility for themselves? If they are not helped to make the first step, no one would know what they can do.”

“How can you give a chance to people who do not want it? You need to get used to the people of Alfa.”

Iris was not convinced by Mira’s words. She had come so far to see things for herself and not rely on the words of others. But she needed time to make up her own mind about the town of Alfa. During her first days in the town, when she was still full of the excitement of her journey, she had thought she would soon get used to the new environment. But it was not easy; the environment was so different. One of the main problems that she and Martha had to face was the language. They started experiencing this when, with Mira’s help, two housemaids arrived to help Martha with her work. They were two sisters, one sixteen and the other nineteen years old, with a cheerful and keen disposition to do whatever was expected of them. Iris soon let them see that she was pleased with them and that they would be well received in her house. She knew they came from a family of thirteen who lived in two rooms on the other side of town. Their older sister worked for Mira and was always considered to be trustworthy. The indications were that this new addition to the household in Iris’s big house would be welcome to all. Perhaps even Martha, who at first seemed very much put out, would slowly get used to them.

“Madam, I would have preferred it if you had let me do the housework myself. I never grumbled or complained about the time and you would have saved the money.”

“Martha, I’ve already told you many times. Call me by my name.”

“That’s impossible. Now more than ever. Now that we have these two around I must show them how they should behave with you. Did you need to get two other maids?”

“This house is very big and you’ll exhaust yourself doing all the work on your own. I wish you would stop considering yourself a servant. Whoever works in this house must respect you as much as they respect me. Did you notice any unpleasantness in their behaviour?”

“No. But it’s so difficult to communicate with them. It’s just signs and it makes me breathless. I’m wasting more time than if I were doing the work myself.”

“You’re right. It won’t be easy until we learn their language. But we’ll soon make it. Mira promised me that she’ll give me some lessons. I want you to come, too. We’ll learn the language and then you’ll see how easy it will be for us to communicate with these people. To learn the language, we need to practise it and our best chance would be to do so with them.”

Iris did not find it easy to convince Martha to accept the two sisters. She never treated them badly and probably, during the first months, she was as patient with them as they were with her. But an abyss separated them and this difference was like a burden that they had to carry.

The younger girl was livelier than the older one and she used to mimic Martha behind her back to vent her annoyance. She was open-hearted and friendly and loved joking. Iris often caught her acting funny and making her sister laugh at Martha but she pretended she did not see anything. She hoped that with time the girl would get to know Martha better and perhaps start appreciating her good qualities. Although, superficially, they appeared so completely different, Martha and the girl were basically genuine people and Iris felt that they were more similar than the two sisters were. On her part Iris was doing her best to learn the new language. They needed to communicate better with the people of the town. Mira was a great help and, though she had never been a teacher, she never got discouraged when everything seemed to stall and learning was not taking place. She was patient and it was patience that was needed. Martha was not used to reading and studying, and it was not easy to start at her age. She would have stopped at the very start had she not been pushed. She felt disheartened every time she touched a book but Iris and Mira would not let her give up. If Martha wanted to lead a proper life in Alfa, she had no other choice but to live with the people around her and not isolate herself. Iris had no intention of acting as a bridge between her companion and the rest of humanity. She could not even imagine seeing Martha lose her independence and become like the majority of the inhabitants of Alfa. Though not lazy people, they were not responsible for their lives because they used to give up easily.

Martha was not as stubborn as she seemed sometimes. As time passed, though she still found it hard to trust the two sisters, she began, little by little, to say a word here and there to them. However broken the language, words were still better than signs, and necessity together with Iris's determination to make her learn the language, were encouraging her further. At first the younger sister had a field day and, though she kept a straight face in Martha's company, Iris was afraid that a new barrier would go up between them and Martha would fall silent and not utter another word. Iris made up her mind to explain to the young maid the difficulties one faces when learning a new language. She was intelligent enough to understand her. She knew how to read and write and one day her older sister had shown Iris some rhymed verses by the younger girl. Iris was determined to be patient and help her as far as she could. The young maid needed someone to make her see reason, rather than to scold her for her lively sense of humour.

Iris spent every Saturday morning in the kitchen, where she would cook and try to adapt some recipe that Mira gave her or that she found in some cookery book. She preferred to stay alone to avoid the obligation to talk or to listen to anyone talking. Her experiments in cooking, alone in the kitchen without interference, had become a pastime that allowed her to relax and gave her satisfaction, especially when her friends congratulated her on her creative culinary skills.

Martha had grown used to this and on Saturday morning she would not venture towards the kitchen unless it was necessary. She and the two maids had enough to do with the cleaning of the big house that could take twenty people. She had the kitchen to herself for the rest of the week. Now that she had the two maids to help her, Martha could dedicate more time to cooking, especially native recipes which offered her a constant challenge.

As usual Iris had prepared everything she needed to start cooking. But this time she made up her mind not to remain alone in the kitchen. She intended to find the younger maid and ask her to help her. Then, quietly, she would discuss the maid's future with her and tell her about the efforts Martha was making to learn their language. Whatever the maid's reaction, Iris was prepared for her. The older maid's thin voice came from the inner yard. While doing the housework, she would sing the four songs she knew by heart without stopping. She would sing them one after the other and when she finished them all, she would start again. Always the same. Never changing, as if her tongue and hands were tied with some invisible string so that they had no option but to move together. Probably her repetitive repertoire reflected the unchanging monotony of her work. Iris knew that the older maid had some agreement with Martha to keep the same housework that she had grown used to even if she could have new, lighter chores that would take up less time. She did not like change and monotony did not bother her, unlike

her sister who was always on the go, always looking for something new.

The bursts of laughter Iris could hear coming from upstairs led her to the stairs, curious to know what was happening. She had never heard Martha laughing so heartily. Together with Martha she could hear the younger sister's voice. She hurried to the room leading to the corridor. She herself would appreciate a hearty laugh. It would help her start the day in a cheerful mood. She was so curious to know what was happening. Martha was sitting in an armchair holding her sides, laughing, and the younger sister was bent over the broom. As soon as they saw Iris coming in, both tried to put on a straight face ... but they could not!

“What happened?”

“I'll tell you someday.” Martha could hardly say a word and, wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes, she got up to go on with her dusting.

“Can't I share your joke?”

“Oh no! It's nothing special, Madam.” The younger sister's face was beetroot red. With her head bent and, looking as if she was going to explode with laughter, she started sweeping again.

“I don't want to interrupt anything. Don't let me stop you.”

She had hardly left the room before she once more heard them laughing out loudly. It was not the right time to speak to the younger maid about her future. And she

had nothing to worry about Martha any more. She had no doubt that they had overcome the language barrier once they had managed to take things with so much laughter.

That day, like every other Saturday, Iris spent the morning alone in the kitchen. But her mind was not on cooking. It was more than six months since she had arrived in the city of Alfa and she was as isolated from the people as she was in her first days there. Except for Amos and Mira and a few friends of their social class, she had not met any other inhabitants. She had once more become ensnared in a closed circle of friends, a circle which she was finding it harder to get out of as time passed. Martha had done better than her. Now that Martha had overcome the barrier between her and the other two, she would probably find it easier to mingle with the people of Alfa. She had already started to go shopping alone from different shops and became acquainted with several new people. It did not seem that she would be facing any special problems to make herself understood and to understand others.

Iris recalled how, when she accepted her aunt's suggestion, she had surely not intended to travel so far simply to bury herself once more within the same kind of elite circle that she had once belonged to. She could have remained there. She had been as comfortable in her previous home as she was now. Nor had she lacked any amenities.

So why had she come here? The window nearby, overlooking the garden, was wide open. With every slight breeze, the scent of the flowers mixed with the smells of her

cooking. But the big garden that surrounded the house was not being properly cared for. Mira's gardener could hardly cope with the two gardens. He often grumbled, saying he was getting tired. He was an elderly man and not particularly strong. At that moment she lamented her tendency to always wait for others to take the first step. She should have long since employed another gardener to do the necessary work in her garden. Mira's gardener had enough to do and, if she were to ask him for advice about employing a new gardener, he would be more than willing to help her find one. He knew many people of all ages and, though he was not one to pay compliments, he respected her.

Iris wasted no time. Thoughts were to be acted upon, otherwise she would find no peace. It was as if something inside was propelling her to do whatever she had made up her mind to do. She was fully aware of this characteristic of hers. Sometimes it proved of benefit to her, but she had always considered it an insurmountable imperfection in her character. She was a slave to the very ideas that her mind generated. If she liked the ideas and accepted them, she would do everything, and immediately, to see that they were put into practice. She would do this even if it was not the right time and it would have been better to wait. But the garden had waited too long for her attention and any time she saw it come to life again was the right time for her.

"Don't worry, Madam. Leave it in my hands. A garden like this needs a pair of young arms, not arms burdened by age like mine. If it weren't for my need to earn money to

live, I would have retired even from my work for Madam Mira. I am no longer the man I was. But I have a nephew who is strong and likes gardening very much. Hard work doesn't frighten him. In his hands this garden will become worth its weight in gold. This is very fertile land and will give the best fruit."

Mira's gardener kept his word and within the week he had passed on his work to his nephew. He had only made Iris one condition. The new gardener had to be paid more than the previous one. He would only be working as her gardener and he was still young, not like him. His nephew deserved to earn more to be able to live better than him. Iris found no objection. She had often thought that Mira's wages to her employees were too low. She treated them well enough, though not when it came to their wages. When Iris once brought up the subject, Mira did not like it. She told her that she paid her workers as much as everyone else, that she respected them and that in her house they lacked for nothing. She also told her that the fact that they had all been working with her for such a long time was proof enough of all this. None of them ever expressed the wish to leave and look for work elsewhere. That day Iris did not argue. She would never win an argument with Mira. But now that she had a new gardener who did not obtain the job through Mira, she could pay him as she thought best. Moreover, she would not feel guilty about compromising her friend.

Cosmo did not let his uncle down and very soon he confirmed all the old man's praise. Not only did he not

neglect his work, but also in a very short time he had drawn up a system that allowed him to cope with all the gardening and transform it, almost, into a game. What took the older man half a day, he would complete in an hour and he found the time to plant new trees and shrubs and clear away and uproot those which had become sick or sapless. The garden was acquiring new life. For the first time, Iris could appreciate the remarkable land which was her property. Mira and Amos both knew about her love for nature and they had seen to it that she could find this in Alfa and live happily in her house. But it had to be Cosmo who led her to realise the full potential for beauty and abundance that lay all around her.

To look at him, one would not say he was cut out for gardening work. Tall and rather thin, he had the appearance of an ascetic, living by thought rather than bread. He did not look like a farmer or gardener. But he had strong arms and he was used to working tirelessly for a long time. He had been brought up in a big family like many others in Alfa. As his father was a sickly man and he was one of the oldest siblings, he had, early on in his life, shouldered the responsibility of the family. At a young, tender age he started working in a carpenter's shop where his employer treated him as a child only when it came to payment.

In Alfa schooling was not compulsory and the majority of children who reached adulthood were unable to read and write. Iris was astonished by the new gardener.

Cosmo not only knew how to write, but he liked reading as much as he liked gardening. In his free time he would sit reading under one of the big trees that gave shelter in the back of the garden. When the stormy weather prevented him from working outside, Iris was sure that the gardener was reading and writing in the shed where he kept his gardening tools. Martha too had come to the conclusion that Cosmo was an avid reader. Although they were not special friends, Cosmo seemed to appreciate Martha's efforts to speak his language and she considered him erudite.

"How he loves reading! I don't know how he finds time for everything." Whenever, very rarely, Martha said something about someone of her own volition, she talked softly as if unsure of whether she wished her comments to be heard. She and Iris were in the sitting room from where, through the window, they could observe Cosmo weeding a big flower bed.

"He never wastes time. Ever since he came, the garden has taken on a new lease of life. Martha, do you think that he will keep on working here?"

"He seems to like it here. And you know how difficult it is to find work in this town. He is rather reserved. He doesn't socialise with the other two either. Yesterday, the younger one was complaining about his unfriendliness. You know how quickly she makes friends!"

"Perhaps he hasn't yet got used to life here. Besides, he is not her age. I imagine he must be nearer thirty years old."

“According to her he is twenty-eight. But more than the age difference, I think that Cosmo has other things on his mind.”

“I don’t imagine his brothers and sisters still depend on him. Martha, here they seem to grow up quickly and marry early.”

“Some of his brothers and sisters still live at home and his mother is still alive. He is the only one of the older siblings who is still unmarried. The young maid told me that, although they are not neighbours, they live somewhere near them. In those neighbourhoods all families know each other.”

Martha bent her head and concentrated once again on the cardigan she was knitting. She had observed how Iris had not stopped looking at the gardener and she did not want her to note this observation. But Martha’s action was explicit enough to Iris. Still she kept her eyes on Cosmo.

The scene in front of her would not have been complete without him, just as it would not have been complete without the colourful garden. But Cosmo stood out of the surrounding environment as much as he formed part of it. Just as his constant work embellished the fertile land, so did his personality offer an equally effective contribution. Both when he was working and when he was reading under some tree, life in the garden seemed fuller. Were he to threaten her with an intention to leave and go to work elsewhere, she would be ready to increase his wages and pay him as

much as he wanted. She had no wish to let him destroy, through his absence, the aesthetics of that picture which she considered to be so original.

But Iris had no need to worry. As Martha had said, Cosmo seemed happy and never indicated the slightest desire to leave. Perhaps in this job he felt freer because he worked independently with little or no interference. Iris saw from the beginning that he treasured freedom and needed to feel free. She had no doubt that it was in fact his personal pride that made him work so hard and feel as much interest in the garden as if it was his own property. And while he found this fulfilment in his work, she felt more ready to give him control over the gardening. He set and abided by his own rules. Iris's mind was at rest and, like Martha, she soon began to admire him.

In Alfa time did not seem to fly by as in big cities, which are exposed to every current, both external and internal. But, like everywhere else, time passed and waited for no one. Still, the gardener found it as hard to initiate a conversation with Iris as he found it easy to get used to his new work. Days passed and they did not utter a word to each other. It was as if their morning greeting when he began his work, and their evening salutation before he left, were more than enough. Even when he seemed inclined to proceed with some discussion she had purposely started, he would immediately withdraw.

He did not seem to trust her and preferred to remain silent not to get into trouble. She was totally different. She

had shown him from the start that she had full trust in him. Probably, his uncle's recommendation had led to this trust. She respected the old man and relied on his judgement. But the nephew was a different person altogether and their family connection was surely not enough to make him win her regard. It sometimes crossed her mind that she was doing wrong to trust, so quickly, an outsider whom she did not know. But in such cases her instinct was rarely wrong.

She could sense people from afar, and she either trusted a person from the very beginning or never trusted him at all. Time after time she had been proved right, and this time she felt sure that she could trust Cosmo. Now it was her job to make him trust her. Knowing that such a man held her in high esteem would enhance her own self-respect.

It was another hot day like so many others during that long season that knows no change. Martha and the younger maid had gone out together, determined to spend a whole half day in the town centre. Every week they would wander through the many small shops to buy all that Iris had set down in her usual long shopping list. In that way, they could free themselves from their daily routine. Iris knew that both of them waited eagerly for her list. For the younger maid this half day in the town centre spelled enjoyment and Martha enjoyed seeing her happy. From one week to the next, the shopping list became longer and the outing to the town centre was gradually becoming a long and varied excursion.

That day Iris's mind had been on Cosmo ever since the morning. She was determined to find an opportunity

to speak to him, hoping that she would at last manage to sow the seeds of some understanding between them. With Martha and the younger maid away, taken up with their shopping, there was less chance of prying and interruption. The older maid had vanished to the top floor, cleaning and singing to herself. Iris knew that on a day like this, the maid would never approach her if she did not call her herself. The only evidence of her presence was her thin, tremulous voice that could sometimes be heard out of some open window.

Iris was feeling anxious because of Cosmo. She began wondering why he had remained working on the other side of the garden. The flowerbed on the side of the house would do well with some watering. He could have kept such a piece of work for this time. If he had, she would have known exactly when to come out and speak to him. But probably Cosmo was not thinking of her at all. As usual he had determined his own schedule. Iris was hoping that, as soon as he finished what he was doing, he would do something in her vicinity, where she could reach him without making it too obvious.

She waited for more than two hours. She went out a couple of times to pick some flowers for the small vases she had on one of the window sills in the sitting room. Then, after slowly arranging the flowers, she tried to read the recipe book that Mira had lent her. But her mind was not on what she was doing. The reading intervals between her strolls to the kitchen to eat or drink something were too short. Then, becoming impatient, she began asking herself several questions. Did Cosmo know what

she was thinking? Was he keeping away from the house because he didn't want to meet her? Did she frighten people? Could his uncle, possibly, have told him to watch out for her? But watch out for what? She had no other choice but to find out the truth ... if there was any truth to find out. Since Cosmo had kept his distance and had not sought her out, she would have to approach him herself. After all, she had every right to get to know what he thought and what his opinion of her actually was.

Quickly she changed her shoes, put on a sun hat and walked off in the direction where she could see Cosmo working tirelessly and without the slightest intention of stopping for a short rest. The man had his back to her and could neither see her nor realise that she was in such a hurry to reach him. The two were like two single athletes in two different and highly competitive races.

“You haven't stopped once today.”

He started and, for a minute, did not seem to know how to answer her. Iris wanted to believe that his suspicious look was the result of the way she startled him rather than a sign of his mistrust.

“Sometimes there's too much work to be done - quickly.”

“That's true, but you are your own boss here. You can take a rest whenever you wish.”

“The work is my boss. It's a big place.”

He was about to stop talking and go on with his work. Without saying anything, he wished to show her that he

had no time for her whims. But this was not a whim! In spite of everything, she wanted to get to know the man who worked all day on her property. He lived so near and his personality was influencing her life even if unintentionally.

“What are you reading at the moment?”

Cosmo seemed surprised. He had not expected such a question. He had never tried to conceal his love for reading and he was sure that this was nothing to be ashamed of. So what had led to this foreigner’s curiosity? He knew that she would not be the first in Alfa to dare think that a gardener and a book do not go together.

“It depends.”

“I’m asking you because I enjoy reading too, especially literature. I like historical novels a lot, and psychological ones too. Do you ever read novels?”

“Yes, also.”

“Are you reading any at the time?”

“Yes.”

“What are you reading?”

“*The Idiot* by Dostoevsky.”

“In what language are you reading it?”

“In English.”

“So you know English too!”

“Reasonably well.”

She congratulated herself silently. So she had been right. Cosmo's personality was not limited to the life of a gardener. Why was he hiding himself from her, behind the mask of silence? Once Aaron had also used this type of mask and had concealed himself from her for ever. But now that she could comprehend silence, she could not see it as her enemy. If she were ever to allow someone else to use it as a weapon against her, it would not be the fault of silence, but hers.

“For a time Dostoevsky was my favourite author. I read *The Idiot* quite some time ago now. I don't exactly remember the story line, but I remember clearly what a great impact the book had on me. I used to believe in capital punishment. I believed that whoever kills deserves to be killed and that a person who shows no mercy deserves no mercy himself. It wasn't the first time I discussed this with my friends but no one had managed to make me change my opinion until I read *The Idiot*. This book changed it completely. It made me realise what a person who is condemned to death feels. Life is too dear, for everyone.”

Cosmo stared into her eyes. It seemed as if he wanted to prove the truth of what he had heard her say and which he wished to be true. He was not looking as suspicious as he had been some minutes before.

“Do you know that in this country we have capital punishment?”

“Yes. I'm sorry, Cosmo.”

“I feel sorry about many things that are done and others that should be done but are not. This is a cowardly nation;

people don't know what's good for them. They accept everything and don't dare raise a finger to improve their situation."

"Isn't there anyone to help them?"

The people are more accustomed to individuals who thwart them rather than give them a helping hand. If the nation wants to raise itself from its present state of inertia, the people need to help themselves. Help must come from the inside not from outside."

"But are there enough human resources to bring about change from the inside?"

"Why not? Aren't we like other people? Why should we linger behind in areas where other nations have made gigantic steps forward? We'll get nowhere if we just lie back and leave everything in the hands of destiny. Sometimes I even pity myself. I am part of a nation that is too afraid to inscribe its own history. It wants to breathe through others, and like a body with no soul, is unable to move by itself."

"I understand what you mean."

Iris did not wish Cosmo to stop talking. Out of his large dark eyes shone the depth of a character torn apart by a reality he could not accept. His eyes flashed out an inner strength that was more powerful than Cosmo himself. She had never seen him like this and she wished she could make him go on with his confessions. But it was clear that Cosmo had said enough for the day. She would not dare be the reason for him to feel sorry about having shared

his thoughts with her. It was also time for Martha and the younger maid to return, if they hadn't already done so without her knowing. It was not the time to reveal her feelings. She did not know why, but her every interaction with Cosmo, even if this turned out to be a most trivial one and merely led to a simple greeting, was becoming very personal to her. And when it came to personal matters, Iris never allowed spectators, whoever they were.

“Goodbye, Cosmo. I wish you a good day.”

“Good day to you, too.”