ANCIENT EVENINGS EVENINGS NORMAN MAILER

上册



ANCIENT EVENINGS

I would like to express my appreciation to Ned Bradford, Roger Donald, Arthur Thornhill, Scott Meredith, and Judith McNally for their assistance and encouragement on this work.

> Copyright © Norman Mailer 1983 All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without permission.

ISBN 0 333 34025 6

First published in the United Kingdom 1983 by Macmillan London Limited London and Basingstoke

Associated companies in Auckland, Dallas, Delhi, Dublin, Hong Kong, Johannesburg, Lagos, Manzini, Melbourne, Nairobi, New York, Singapore, Tokyo, Washington and Zaria.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Mailer, Norman Ancient evenings. 1. Title 813'.54 [F] PS3525.A4152 ISBN 0-333-34025-6

The extract from *Ideas of Good and Evil* by W. B. Yeats, © Mrs. W. B. Yeats, 1961, is reprinted by permission of A. P. Watt Ltd., and Michael and Anne Yeats.

Designed by Susan Windheim

Printed in Hong Kong

To my daughters, to my sons, and to Norris

THE NAKED AND THE DEAD BARBARY SHORE THE DEER PARK ADVERTISEMENTS FOR MYSELF DEATHS FOR THE LADIES (AND OTHER DISASTERS) THE PRESIDENTIAL PAPERS AN AMERICAN DREAM CANNIBALS AND CHRISTIANS WHY ARE WE IN VIETNAM? THE ARMIES OF THE NIGHT MIAMI AND THE SIEGE OF CHICAGO Of a Fire on the Moon THE PRISONER OF SEX EXISTENTIAL ERRANDS ST. GEORGE AND THE GODFATHER MARILYN THE FIGHT GENIUS AND LUST THE EXECUTIONER'S SONG OF WOMEN AND THEIR ELEGANCE

PIECES AND PONTIFICATIONS

ANCIENT EVENINGS NORMAN MAILER





THE BOOK OF ONE MAN DEAD

CRUDE thoughts and fierce forces are my state. I do not know who I am. Nor what I was. I cannot hear a sound. Pain is near that will be like no pain felt before.

Is this the fear that holds the universe? Is pain the fundament? All the rivers veins of pain? The oceans my mind awash? I have a thirst like the heat of earth on fire. Mountains writhe. I see waves of flame. Washes, flashes, waves of flame.

Thirst is in the rivers of the body. The rivers burn but do not move. Flesh — is it flesh? — lies beneath some heated stone. Lava rises in burned-out fields.

Where, in what cavern, have such disruptions taken place? Volcanic lips give fire, wells bubble. Bone lies like rubble upon the wound.

Is one human? Or merely alive? Like a blade of grass equal to all existence in the moment it is torn? Yes. If pain is fundament, then a blade of grass can know all there is.

A burning number came before me. The flame showed an edge as unflickering as a knife, and I passed into that fiery sign. In fire I began to stream through the clear and blazing existence of the number 2.

Pain entered on a pulse. Each rest between each pang was not enough — oh, the twisting of hope, the tearing of fiber. My organs had surely distorted, yes, and the shriek of bone when it cracked. Doors opened into blasts.

Pain took abode in the most brilliant light. I was exposed to burning rock. Demonic, the heat of the sun, and blood boiling in the veins. Would it never be blood again? The current of the highest fires told me then — by the intensity itself — that I would not be

destroyed. There had to be some existence on the other side. So I let go of my powers as they charred in my heart. These dying powers might yet give life to other parts of me. For I could see a thread quivering in the darkness, a tendril alive in the smoked-up carbon of my meats, fine as the most exquisite nerve, and through each pain, I looked for this filament in every refinement of anguish, until pain itself took on such radiance that I knew a revelation. The filament was not one thread, but two, wound about each other in immaculate delicacy. They twisted together during the most intolerable spasms, yet were quick to draw apart at the first relief, and with such subtlety of movement that I was certain I witnessed the life of my soul (seen at last!) dancing like a dust-tail above the flame.

Then all was lost again. My bowels quaked with oceanic disruption, ready to jettison whole fats, sweetmeats and gravies of the old pleasure-soaked flesh, frantic as a traitor springing his leaks under torture. I would give up anything to ride lighter in the next wave of odium, and in the darkness of waves of flesh smacking raw waters of sound, I labored.

I could not bury myself in such sulphurs. It was not the fumes, but the terror of suffocation; not death by fire, but the soil burying me. It was the clay! A vision came forward of clay sealing the nostrils and the mouth, my ears, and into the sockets of my eyes — I had lost all vision of the double filament. There was only myself in these buried caves and the hammering of my gut. Yet if I were to be buried in the murk of these screaming scalding wastes, I had gained a vision with which to torment myself. For I comprehended the beauty of my soul at just the moment I could not reach its use. I would perish with such ideas even as I gained them!

A moment of peace arrived then in this storm and tumult of the pipes. I knew the solemn desolation of the subsided center of the hurricane, and in that calm I saw with sorrow that I might now be wise without a life on which to work my wisdom. For I had a view of old dialogues. Once I had lived like master and slave—now both were lost to each new seizure—oh, the lost dialogue that had never taken place between the bravest part of me and the rest. The coward had been the master. Something came apart then in the long aisles of my pride, and I had a view into the fundament of pain, the view as beautiful as it was narrow. But now the mills of vituperation were turning again. Like a serpent whose insides have blown apart, I gave up, sued for peace, and gave birth to my bloody clotting history of coiled and twisted eviscerate. Some total-

ity of me went out of my belly, and I saw the burning figure of the 2 dissolve in flame. I would be no longer what I had been. My soul felt pained, humbled, furious at loss, and still arrogant as beauty itself. For the pain had ceased and I was new. I had a body again.

. .

5

ONE

The darkness was deep. Yet I had no doubt. I was in an underground chamber ten paces in length by half in width, but empty. Stone was the surface of the walls and the floor. As if I could see with my fingers, I had only to wave an arm to feel the size of the space beyond my reach. It was exactly so remarkable as to hear voices by the hairs of one's nose. For that matter, I could smell the scent of stone. Say that an absence was in the air, some hollow that dwelt within another hollow. Now I was aware of a granite coffer near to me, as aware, indeed, of its presence as if my body had walked within - it was huge enough to be my bed! But a step away, as if on guard, were some aged droppings on the floor, pellets from a small fierce animal who had managed like myself to find its way here, and left its deposit and gone. For there was no skeleton to speak of the beast. Just the scent of some old urinecursed dung - But where was the passage by which the animal could have entered? I breathed in the horror that comes when the air is close with an animal's mean excrement. That has its own message to give!

Yet, I could also recognize a pure bouquet of fresh night air that had chosen to enter this chamber. Had it come from a shaft in the rock used by the cat?

In the dark, between two blocks of stone, my fingers soon found a niche not much greater in width than a man's head. Still, by its fresh breath, it must lead outside. The air that arrived through the shaft was only a whisper, not strong enough to stir one hair on a feather, but it offered the cool of the desert when the sun has been down for much of the night. Toward that cool murmur, I stretched, and to my surprise was able to follow my arm up the niche. It was a long shaft between great blocks of stone, and in places seemed no

wider than my head, but it went in a straight line at a steep angle upward, a filthy trip. The dead shells of countless beetles cluttered my way. Ants went by my skin. Rats piped in high terror. Still, I climbed with no panic, only in surprise at the narrow dimensions of this passage. Surely I was not able to make my way through it was hardly larger than the burrow of a snake - yet I might as well have been without shoulders or hips. Cunning was in my touch as if, like a snake, there was no fear of being caught in the passage ahead. I was capable of becoming narrower. But that is no better than to say I traveled with my thoughts through the long narrow shaft, my body sufficiently supple to obey — a most peculiar sensation. I felt altogether alive. The whisper of the air before me had phosphorescence. Particles of light glowed in my nose and throat. I was more alive than I could ever remember and yet felt no yoke of muscle and bone. It was as if I had been reduced to the size of a small boy.

When I lay at last near the mouth of the passage, my view was of the sky at the end of the shaft and moonlight slanted over the edge. As I rested, the moon passed full into view and anointed me. From orchards in the distance came a scent of date and fig trees, and the clear refreshment of the vines. The air on this night gave intimations to me of gardens where once I made love. I knew again the smell of rose and jasmine. Far below, by the riverbank, the palms by the shore would be black in outline against the silver water of the river.

So I came out at last from the end of the shaft in that great hill of stone. I stuck my head and shoulders into the open night, pulled through my legs, and gasped. Beneath the light of the moon was a long white slope of stone with the earth far below, but out there on the plateau of the desert, mute as a mountain of silver, there at the end of my gaze, was a Pyramid. Beyond it, another. Nearer to me, all but covered in sand, was a stone lion with the head of a man. I was perched on the slope of the Great Pyramid! I had just been — it could be nowhere else — in the burial chamber of the Pharaoh Khufu.

Harsh as the sound of a man's snore was the name of Khufu. He was gone a thousand years, and more. Yet, at the thought of having been in His tomb, my body was too weak to move. The sarcophagus of Khufu had been empty. His tomb had been found and robbed!

I thought my heart would strike its last sound. My stomach

had never felt so pure a slop of cowardice. Yet I was a man of valor, as I seemed to remember, perhaps a soldier, renowned for something — so, I could swear — all the same, I could not move a step. In shame I shivered beneath the moon. There I was, on the slope of our greatest Pyramid, moonlight on my head and heart, the statue of the immense lion below, and the Pyramids of the Pharaoh Khaef-ra and the Pharaoh Men-kau-ra to the south. To the east, I saw the moon on the Nile and far to the south, I even saw the last of the lights in the lamps of Memphi where mistresses were waiting for me. Or were they waiting for another by now? I was so reduced as to think it did not matter. Had I ever had a thought like this before? - I, whose first fear used to be that I was too ready to kill any man who looked at my woman? How exhausted I felt. Was this the price I paid for entering the tomb of Khufu? In gloom, I began to make my way down, sliding from crack to crack in the limestone, and knew some foul change had taken place in me already. My memory, which had given every promise (in the first glow of moonlight) that it would return, was still a sludge. Now the air was heavy with the odor of mud. That was the aroma of these lands, mud and barley, sweat and husbandry. By noon tomorrow, the riverbank would be an oven of moldering reeds. Domestic animals would leave their gifts on the mud of the bank - sheep and pigs, goats, asses, oxen, dogs and cats, even the foul odor of the goose, a filthy bird. I thought of tombs, and of friends in tombs. Like the plucking of a heavy string came a first intimation of sorrow.

TWO

I was in the most peculiar situation. I still did not know who I was, nor how old I might be. Was I mature and powerful, or young and in the beginning of my strength? It hardly seemed to matter. I shrugged, and began to walk, taking, for whatever reason, a path through the Necropolis, and as I meandered, I began to explain to myself what I saw, or so I would put it, for I felt in the oddest position, and like a stranger to my own everyday knowledge.

Before me, I must say, was no more to see than the straight streets of this cemetery in the moonlight, a view without great charm, unless there is charm to be found in high value. Cubit for cubit, the city of the dead had the dearest plots in all of Memphi, or at least that is what I certainly remember.

Wandering down the alleys of our monotonous Necropolis, sauntering past the shuttered door of one tomb, then another, I began — for no reason I could give — to think of a friend who had died recently, the dearest of my friends, this memory seemed to say, and the most absurd and violent death. Now, I had no more than to wonder whether his tomb was anywhere near about, and was visited with more recollections. My friend, I was ready to think, came from a powerful family. His father, if I could recall, had once served as Overseer of the Cosmetic Box — I would die, I thought, before lusting after such titles myself. Still, that was not a career to be sneered at altogether. Our Ramses, if I remembered correctly, was as vain as a beautiful girl, and detested any flaw in His appearance.

Of course, with such a father, my friend (whose name, I fear, still eluded me) was certainly wealthy and noble. Poor entombed bugger! He must be, at the least, a descendant of the great Ramses, yes, the one, I could recall, who died something like a hundred years ago, our own Ramses the Second. He had ended as a very old man

with a great many wives and more than a hundred recorded sons and fifty daughters. They produced ancestors in such numbers that today you cannot begin to estimate how many officers and priests are Ramessides by at least half of their line. For truth, hardly a rich woman in Memphi or Thebes will fail to offer one bona-fide cheek of her buttocks, royal as the Pharaohs, and she will not fail to let you know. To be descended from Ramses the Second may not be exceptional, but it is indispensable - at least if she wants a family plot in the Necropolis. Then, she had better be, at least by half, a Ramesside. In fact, you cannot even buy a tomb in the Western Shade if you are not, and that is only the first requirement in such commerce among Memphi matrons. There are not enough plots. So they go to great lengths. For instance, the mother of my dead friend, the matron Hathfertiti, was always prepared to trade. If the price was good enough, the sarcophagus of an ancestor could be transferred to an inferior tomb, or even shipped downriver to another necropolis. Of course one had to ask: Who was the deceased? How substantial was his curse? That was the unspoken part of the transaction — you had to be ready to take on a few malevolent oaths. But some were ready to welcome them if they were terrible enough to bring the price down. For example, Hathfertiti had been bold enough to sell the tomb of her dead grandfather. Concerning this dead relative, her husband's grandfather (who happened incidentally to be her own grandfather since she was certainly her husband's sister) it was told to the buyer that old man Menenhetet had been the kindest and most benign of men. His vice was that he could not harm his enemies. His curse need hardly be feared. What torture of the truth! In secret, it was whispered that Menenhetet had been known to eat fried scorpions with bat dung - just so great was his need to protect himself against the curses of the powerful. He had had a mighty life, I seemed to remember.

Now the buyer to whom Hathfertiti was selling this plot, an ambitious little official, was not untypical. He knew the best protection against any evil spell was for a petty Ramesside like himself to own a fine tomb. So long as he had none to offer his family, every visit of his wife and daughters to the better homes of Memphi was bound to fail. They simply had no position in the ranks of the dead. So they were living already with a curse — they were snubbed. For what is a curse but an unfair theft of strength? (Whatever is attempted in the way of improving your position brings back less than the effort exerted.) This Ramesside's wife and daughters began

to weep so often that he was ready to take his chances with the wrath of the dead grandfather. Maybe if he knew more about the old man, Menenhetet, he would have waited, but he felt the awe of acquiring a possession that is beyond one's means but absolutely fashionable.

My recollections of these transactions seem to have had a purpose. Now I remember my friend's name! It is Menenhetet the Second. (The name is, by the way, a typical example of family affectation — Menenhetet the Second — as though his mother were a queen.) Yet I do not know if he was so royal as that. All I remember is that he was a hellion among us, his friends, and on certain nights was so full of wild impulses that he could have summoned demons. I think some of us began to regret the nickname, Ka, that we gave him. It seemed clever at the time, since it not only means twice (for Menenhetet Two) but is also our good Egyptian name for your Double when you are dead, and the Double has a changeable personality, it is said. So it fit him. With our friend Ka, you could never know when he would take on a lion, but then he also liked to swear vile things against the Gods and that left us uneasy. There was not much piety among us, far from it, and part of our pride was to be man enough to take the name of a God in vain, but Ka went too far. We did not like to share his blasphemies when they were uttered, after all, for no better reason than ungovernable rage at his mother. For when Hathfertiti sold the tomb of Menenhetet the First to the petty Ramesside, Ka soon learned that it had been his tomb as well. At least by the terms of the will of his great-grandfather, Menenhetet the First.

Now, standing in the moonlight of the Necropolis, full of a sorrow I could hardly comprehend for the death of Menenhetet the Second, I do not know if I was there when Hathfertiti spoke to him about the tomb — although I would suppose that Ka was left nothing. All the same, the details are not clear to me. It is better to state that this is what I seem to recall. Should we say I was like a boat poling my way into the harbor through the openings of a fog? Now, even as I took stock of my position here on one of the meanest alleys of the Necropolis, I had the impression that I was not far from the cheap plot Hathfertiti had had to purchase in a great hurry after his sudden death. Recollections came again of a pious funeral but a mean tomb. Into my ear now came the sound of Hathfertiti's voice telling all who would listen that Ka's desire was to be on the lowest edge of the Western Shade. That was a scandal. As everyone

knew, Hathfertiti was simply too stingy to pay the price for a decent chamber. Still, Hathfertiti kept to the same sad tale: Meni had kept having a dream, she said, that he must rest at first in a mean abode. But when he was ready to move, she would receive a message in her sleep. Then she would shift him to a fine property. All this was uttered in such loud lamentation that those who heard her were repelled. It was no part of our etiquette, after all, to encourage any of the seven souls, shades, and spirits of a dead man to pay visits back to the living. The aim, supposedly, of a funeral is to send all seven off with comfort to the Land of the Dead. So we had a natural fear of a man who had gone out violently. His ghost could keep up an obstreperous relation to his family. It is precisely at such funerals that the bereaved must take great pains to placate the dead man rather than scorn him. It was foolhardy, in that case, for Hathfertiti to avow that she would soon shift her son's coffin to her best crypt. Everyone knew she was keeping that tomb for herself. We even wondered if her real intent might be to goad our Menenhetet Two into the tormented journeys of a ghost! Worse! The funeral might have been lavish, but the tomb itself was so mean that grave robbers would hardly fear to break it open. (The curse that robbers take on themselves at the door of a poor tomb is, after all, rarely forceful. That is because the greater malevolence is between the poor departed and the relatives who left him so poor!) One had to wonder then if Hathfertiti was making certain that the vault of her son would be defiled.

I had come to the head of the alley that led to Meni's vault, and from there had a view. Many of these tombs were no larger than shepherds' huts (although only in the Necropolis do you find such huts of marble) but each roof was a miniature pyramid with a hole on the steep front. By that alone you could know you were in the Necropolis since the hole was the window for the Ba. If every dead man had a Double and we knew it as his Ka, he also had his own intimate little soul, the Ba, the most intimate of the seven powers and spirits. This Ba had the body of a bird and the face of the deceased. That was the reason I remembered now for the arched little window in these steep little pyramids. An exit for the Ba. Yes, it was coming back to me. Of course! Any bird I could see in a tower window here would be the Ba of whoever was in the sarcophagus below. For which common bird was likely to come near when Necropolis ghosts were about? And I shivered. Necropolis ghosts were hideous — all those unappeased officials and unrewarded warriors, priests unjustly punished and noblemen betrayed by near relatives, or, even more common, the ghost of robbers killed in the act of violating a tomb. Worst of all, the victims of the robbers — all those mummies whose wrappings had been violated while the thieves poked about for jewels. Such mummies proved to smell the worst. Think of what vengeful corruption has to be present in any well-wrapped corpse that succumbs eventually to rot, after rot has been prevented. That has to double the effect. Whatever!

I now met a ghost. He was not three doors from Meni's tomb, and I must say he had a malignity to leave me faint. Close to the worst kind, he was recognizable by his rags as a grave robber. He was also proprietor of a stench beyond measure. It now descended on me.

In the moonlight, I saw a wretch with no hands and a leper's nose collapsed into three tatters. A misery, that nose, a mockery of the triple phallus of Osiris, Lord of the Dead, yet a nose still able to twitch beneath his wild yellow eyes. He was certainly a full ghost. I could see him as clearly as my hand, yet I could see through him.

•

"For whom do you look?" he cried out, and his breath, if it had consisted of dead crabs rotting in the worst mud of the Nile, would have been a fragrance compared to the horrors that lived on his wind

I merely lifted my hand to drive him away. He scuttled backward.

"Do not go into the tomb of Menenhetet One," he said.

He should have terrified me but did not. I could not understand why. If he had failed to retreat and I had been obliged to drive him away, it might have been worse than plunging my fist into a thigh gone on gangrene. He was a pale of repulsion into which you did not dare advance. Yet he was afraid of me. He would not approach any closer.

All the same, I had hardly escaped without cost. His words entered my head with his reek. I did not know what he meant. Had Menenhetet One also been moved into this cheap tomb bought for Menenhetet Two? Was that a new event? Or was I in the wrong street? But if my memory had a foundation, this was the narrow alley to which the mourners had marched on that high sun-filled day when prize white oxen with their horns gilded gold and their white flanks decorated in green and scarlet paint had pulled the golden sledge of Meni Two to his last appalling home. Was this ghost attempting to mislead me?

"Do not enter the tomb of Menenhetet One," he intoned again. "Too much disturbance will result."

That he, this invader of graves, was now ready to warn others, made me laugh. In the moonlight, my merriment must, however, have stirred the shadows, for the ghost recoiled. "There is more I could tell you," he blurted out, "but I cannot bear your stench," and he was gone. The subtlest punishment he had suffered was to think his own odor came from others. So he would go blundering through every encounter.

Now, right on his disappearance, I saw the Ba of Meni Two. It appeared at the window. The Ba was not even the size of a hawk, and its face was as small as a newborn child, yet it was Meni's face, the most handsome I had ever seen on a man. Now reduced, his features were exquisite, as if an infant had been born with the intelligence of a full-grown adult. What a face! If it now gazed on me, it looked away immediately. Then the Ba of Menenhetet Two opened its wings and with a doleful sound, ugly as a crow in its full funds of pessimism, cawed once, cawed twice, and flew away. Depressed by such indifference to me, I moved to the door of the tomb.

As I stood in the portal, I was drenched in the most sudden and lamentable sorrow, huge and simpleminded, as though his own grief came to me from my dead friend Meni. I sighed. My last memory of this place was the slattern appearance of the entrance, and that had not changed. I remember thinking it would be easy to violate, and once again I felt that sense of accommodation which allowed me earlier this night to pass out of the narrow shaft from Khufu's chamber. Now, my finger flowed, or so it felt, into the grooves of the wooden keyhole. When I turned my hand, the prong rose, and with it, the bolt.

I stepped into the tomb. It made me aware of my skin as if a fingernail had touched my scalp. A cat's tongue could have been scraping the soles of my feet. They tingled. I had a frightful sense of disorder and stink. The moon was shining through the open door, and by that light I could see that any offerings of food which had been left were long ago gorged by robbers. Valuables were broken or gone. The thieves' passion to besmirch was evident all over the place. What an outpouring of the coffers of the gut! Full payment! I was in a fury. The slovenliness of the caretakers! In that instant, my eye saw a charred stick in a bronze sconce on the wall and on the full rise of my rage I glared at it so fiercely that I was hardly surprised when smoke unfolded, the charcoal at the tip began to

gleam, and the torch was lit. I had heard of priests who could concentrate their wrath enough to start a fire by the light of their eye, but rarely believed such tales. Now, it seemed, if anything, more natural than striking sparks on dried wood.

What a waste! Floods of future chaos lived in the discontents of these unruly thieves. Beware of those who live at the bottom of the kingdom! They had smashed as much as they had stolen. It obliged me to think of how exquisite Meni's apartment had been in the last years of his life, and, on the instant, I could recollect Hathfertiti sobbing even as she tried to consult me on which of his alabaster vases and collarplates, his bracelets and jeweled girdles were to be buried with him. Should she inter his long box of ebony or his chest of redwood, his blond wig, his white wig, his red, his green, his silver, or his black wig, his cosmetic case, his linen loincloths, his full linen skirts, even his ebony bed (which I knew she was desperate to keep for herself, and did). Then, how to choose among the weapons, the gilt bow and gold-painted arrows, the spear with the jewels in the shaft - were all these delightful items to accompany him to the tomb? In the middle of such reveries, she would cry out, "Poor Meni!" and added pious lamentations that would have sounded absurd in any voice less deep than her own. "The fruit of my eye has been eaten," she would scream at the white walls in this serene wing of their villa, his superb wing, his eye for the finest works he could afford never more evident than by his absence, and she, a picture! debauched by her sense of loss, her heart twisted by the obligation to bury so many of these jeweled prizes and golden beauties. She wept over his baby chair, a masterpiece of bronze with gold foil laid in, wept so long she kept it. Even his knives, his palette box, and brushes she could hardly bear to entomb, while his axe blade - a treasure from the reign of Thutmose the Third with a hollow grillwork within the blade to depict a wild dog eating a gazelle from behind - well, Hathfertiti's nose began to bleed before she could recognize that this, having been a gift to her son, could not be taken back. Of course, this enabled her to keep other objects, particularly his crown of feathers, his leopard skin, and his scarab of green onyx with all six of the beetle's legs in gold. Be certain that whichever part of Meni's collection was finally sent to the tomb turned out to be the true ratio between Hathfertiti's greed (eight parts) and Hathfertiti's belief in the power of an after-world (five parts). But then she would never allow herself to succumb altogether to greed. That could leave a hole through which demons would pour. Once, she had even given me a lecture on Maat, predictably the most pious sermon you could receive. For Maat was right-thinking, and never cheating one's neighbor. Maat was the virtue of balance, yes, Hathfertiti in the midst of the roaring waters of her greed could still speak respectfully of Maat. Without it, what is there she would not have kept for herself?

Yet with the torch in my hand, I would never accuse Hathfertiti of any excess of right-thinking. Witness the scatter on the floor! At the least, she had given a welcome to robbers who had no sense of Maat at all. Their urine was on the food, and do not speak of what was caked on the gold plates they left behind.

The next room proved worse. The burial chamber had not even been dug beneath, but was merely a continuation of this room. There was no more for partition than a wall of mud-brick. Cheap! There was no barrier to passing from the offering chamber right into the burial chamber. Still, I hesitated. I did not want to go in.

The air was different as I crossed the second threshold. There was the faintest suggestion of an odor so fearful I came to a stop. My torch was not steady and shook with twice the upheaval I expected. Of course. Not one sarcophagus but two. Both smashed. The outer coffins had their covers thrown into a corner. The lid of each inner coffin was also torn off. And the mummy cases, now exposed, revealed the thefts. Wherever a gem had been plucked, the high patina of the surface was marred with a small crater of plaster. All the collars and amulets were gone. Of course. And the painted face and chest of Meni (the portrait as beautiful as he had once been beautiful) was scarred. Three vertical slashes distorted the nose. Some crude attempt had been made to knife through the wrappings on the chest.

Such damage was small compared to the feet! The robbers had started to undo the windings there. A hopeless tatter of linen wrappings covered the floor, some in bandages of endless length, others in squares and scraps. A litter underfoot. An animal might have been collecting materials for a nest. Even the bones of a chicken. The robbers had eaten in here. If my nose was true, they had not dared to defecate as well, not in here with the wrapped bodies! Still, the origin of that faint but unsettling odor was clear. One of the exposed feet was beginning to molder.

In a corner, the other sarcophagus was equally disturbed. It could belong only to Menenhetet One. He had been moved here by Hathfertiti in time to be violated. My legs, however, were not about

to take me in his direction. No. I did not dare to go near the mummy of the great-grandfather.

Near to me, however, was Meni, his feet uncovered and his tomb despoiled. The food for his Ka had been gobbled by the thieves. That infuriated me. I could see his aura well, and its three bands of light were of a pale violet hue as near to invisible as three ridges of hills behind one another on a misty evening.

I did not like to look at it. There was every message to be read in the color of an aura. Hathfertiti in a rage had an unmistakable separation of orange, blood-red, and brown, whereas the former Pharaoh, they said, had an aura of pure white, pure silver, and gold. This pale violet light about my friend's wrapped body spoke, however, of exhaustion, as if what little was left of him might be trying to maintain some calm among many horrors. Be it said, the first of these had to be the presence of the other sarcophagus. At the thought of looking at the great-grandfather's remains, I put my torch down in confusion. Immediately, it went out. I had a sense of how much strength must be used by Meni Two merely to withstand the presence of the other.

Yet now this oppression seemed to ease. I do not know if it was due to my effort — suddenly, I felt very tired — but in any case, Meni's aura brightened. The air eased. I felt an impulse to study what was left of his poor foot.

That was the worst choice I could have made. In the hole at the toe was a feast of worms. In those pullulations who could know how much of his foot was gone? The aura was absent here. Near the toes, no glow was left but for the faint pale-green light that rose from the body of the maggots themselves.

Then, as I watched, the aura swelled again. I saw a snake crawl into the doorway of the burial chamber. Seizing the torch, I struck one overhead blow at its head, then another, and caught it. The body whipped in a final dance. Right after the last quiver, my torch began to burn. Nor did I hesitate to carry the light back with me. I had an impulse to look again at the worms.

But studying the cavity of Meni's foot, that white and feeding mill, I was aware suddenly of a bruise on the ball of my own foot. To what length must friendship be pursued that I must now limp in company with my old companion? A detestation rose in me against the corruption of his body. I was ready to put my torch to the hole in his foot, fry his worms, seal the putrefying flesh. In fact, I started to do so, but drew back from the fear I might suffer a scorched foot

myself. Now I was hungry, suddenly and maniacally hungry. I clamped my jaws against the beginning of this prodigious desire for it would have had me sniffing like a dog at the Canopic jars beside the coffin, those four jars of the Sons of Horus each the size of a fat cat, but the carved head of Hep, the ape, held the carefully wrapped small intestines of the dead man, and the jar watched over by Tuamutef, the jackal, could offer the same for the heart and the lungs, while Amset, with the head of a man, now owned the stomach and large intestines, even as Oebhsenuf, the hawk, carried the liver and the gall bladder. To my horror, thoughts of a broth to be boiled out of these preserved organs would not leave my head, no matter how I drew back from so hideous a temptation. On the other hand, I had to satisfy my hunger. I could hardly leave the tomb, cross the Necropolis, walk all the way to the Nile, then find a food shop with a fire and some old witch to feed me, no, not at this hour. Food had to be found here. Near to panic from the onslaught of such obscene desires, I found myself on my knees and I was praying. The wonder was that I remembered. But, oh, those worms in the unwrapped and swarming hole of the foot. They provided the prayer.

"When the soul has departed," I said softly, the light from my torch casting shadows on the ceiling, "a man sees corruption. He becomes a brother to decay and he sinks into a myriad of worms, he becomes nothing but worms. . . .

"Homage to Thee, Divine Father Osiris. Thou did not wither, Thou did not rot, Thou did not turn into worms. So will my members have being everlasting. I shall not decay, I shall not rot, I shall not putrefy, and I shall not see corruption."

My eyes were closed. I looked within myself deep into the darkness of the blackest earth I had ever seen, black as the Land of Kemt, our Egypt, and in that blackness I heard my words reverberate, as in the tolling of a large bell at the tithe-taker's gate below Memphi, and knew these words had a buoyancy greater than the ascension of prayers on odors of incense. The echo reverberating in the closed darkness of my eyes, I could contain my hunger no longer, and held up my arm with all five fingers extended as if to say, "With these five fingers, I would eat," and turned in a circle, committing myself to Gods or demons I did not know.

In reply, five scorpions came in file out of the hawk-faced jar of Qebhsenuf, God of the West, the liver, and the gall bladder, and crossed the floor from the bier of Menenhetet One up to the hole in the wrappings of Menenhetet Two. There, they began, I assume — for I was not ready to look — to devour the worms. Did they go on to the flesh of Two? I do not know, but my sore foot burned with the fiery spice of a nest of ants.

THREE

As IF to mock me for my desperation in this dreadful place, I thought of an evening in Memphi full of food and wine and the sweetest conversation. I did not know if it was a day ago, or a year, but I was visiting with a priest at his sister's house, and in that month — what a lively month for me! — I had been the sister's lover. The priest — did I remember him truly as a priest? — had been (like many another good brother) her lover for years. How we talked. We discussed every subject but which one of us should make love to the sister.

She was, of course, excited by our appearance together -- did she not have every right to be? When he left the room, she whispered for me to wait and watch her brother and herself. A girl from a good family! At just the right moment, she said, she would put herself into position above him. She hoped I would be ready then to mount her. She promised to be able to receive us both. What a wife she would make! Since I had already had her by other mouths, so to speak, I was pleased at what she planned to save for me this lady's buttocks were the equal of a panther (a plump panther). But then if you were lucky, you could get a sniff of the sea by any of her ports. Or catch the worst swamp. She could give you the sweet and subtle stink that was in the best of the mud - the smell of Egypt, I swear - or be as fragrant as a young plant. A lady with gifts enough for both of us, and I did as she said that night, and soon proved to the priest that the living could find their double as quick as the dead (because he soon lost all sense of who was more of a woman, his sister or himself - except that he alone was completely shaved of hair - a way to learn where we were in the middle of this embrace).

Glimpsing such memories, however, certainly made my hunger worse. Like a wound that throbs, its fury was now increasing with

every breath. It was not love I wanted to make, but food I needed to gorge upon.

I had to be in some fatal fever — it was certain I had never felt a hunger like this before. My stomach felt drawn down a long dark hall and pictures of food danced before me. I thought of that instant at the Beginning when the God Temu created all of existence with one word. The kingdom of silence had come to life in the gathering of sound from the heart of Temu.

Ergo, I raised my arm once more, fingers pointing to the unseen sky above this ceiling, and I said, "Let there be food."

But there was nothing. Only a small whimper reverberated into the empty space. I was faint with the emptiness of the effort. My fever burned. Before my closed eyes, I saw a small oasis. Was deliverance being offered? I trudged through the litter on the floor, as if crossing an imaginary desert - how real it was: the sand stung my nostrils! Now I was in the corner, and by the light of my torch, saw lovely paintings on the sides of Meni's broken coffin. They were portraits of food. All the rich food that the Ka of Meni Two might request when hungry was there, a dinner for a dozen friends with tables and bowls, vessels and jars, vases and animal joints, thighs hanging from hooks, all painted on the wall of this broken coffin. What a masterpiece of offerings! Domestic fowl and winged wild game I could see, ducks and geese, partridge and quail, tame meats and meats of the wild bull and wild boar, loaves of bread and cakes, figs and wine and beer and green onions and pomegranates and grapes, melons and the fruit of the lotus.

It was painful to look. I did not dare to search my mind for the words of power (which I must once have learned) that could now bring to me a portion of this painted food, bring it out where I might sup upon it, no, the food painted here was for Meni Two, a resource to be used by him if his other gifts of game and fruit were stolen.

Then I had the thought of betraying Meni, and was surprised to realize — given my damnable and fragmentary memory — that he must be a true friend to me. For I discovered that I had no wish to raid this store of painted provisions; on the contrary, my voracity seemed quieted by my scruple. As I stared at the painted food, hunger softened into that more agreeable state when appetite is about to be satisfied. Lo! With no effort at all, my jaws were working, and a piece of duck, or so it tasted (neatly broiled upon well-managed embers) was in my mouth, and juices — no longer was I rav-

enous — of its meat ran agreeably down the empty corridor to my stomach. I was even tempted to take the food away from my lips and look at it, but curiosity was no folly to be tolerated by the satisfaction of a moment like this. Besides I was overcome by the generosity of my friend Meni. He must have taken full recognition of his own need for food, yet had given me some (by way I suppose of his influence in the Land of the Dead).

More food came, flavors in plenty, ox-meat and goose, figs and bread, one taste of each. It was amazing how little food was required to satisfy what had been such a huge hunger. In my stomach, for instance, was the sensation of a full tankard of beer I had not knowingly swallowed. But I felt so nice as to be mildly drunk, and even burped (with a taste of copper from the tankard) and found myself saying the end of the prayer that accompanies the petition for food. So heavy was the desire for sleep that like a child I complained aloud because there was no place on the floor to lie down in all the distasteful litter of these wrappings. It was then I reasoned that if Meni were kind enough to offer me food intended for his Ka, he would hardly mind if I slept by his side, and so I put my torch in a sconce, and got up next to his mummy case, not even worried (thus deep were my limbs already out on slumber) that my foot lay near his foot and scorpions were nesting in the exposed hole. But I was settling in and had time once to burp and think that the meat I had eaten while good was hardly from the kitchens of the Pharaoh for it smacked of the garlic cheap restaurants were ever ready to employ. Then, on the edge of the world of sleep which began so near and went so far away, I thought of Meni and his kind heart and his love for me, and sorrow powerful as a river of tears flooded my heart. Slowly, hearing my own sigh, I returned to sleep, and he, in the deepest communion of friendship, from the domain of the grave, received me. And we went out together, he in the Land of the Dead, and I, by my half in the land of the living, and I knew that I must be feeling all that he had felt in the hour of his death.

FOUR

WITHIN such sleep, I believe I journeyed through the shade that passes over the heart when the eyes close for the last time, and the seven souls and spirits make ready to return to heaven or go down to the underworld.

Cold fires washed behind my sightless eyes as they prepared to leave. Nor did they take sudden flight, but departed with the decorum of a council of priests, all but one, the Ren, one's Secret Name, who left at once, even as a falling star might drop through the sky. That is as it must be, I concluded. For the Ren did not belong to the man, but came out of the Celestial Waters to enter an infant in the hour of his birth and might not stir again until it was time to go back. While the Secret Name must have some effect on one's character, it was certainly the most remote of our seven lights.

I passed then through a darkness. The Name was gone, and I knew the Sekhem was next. A gift of the sun, it was our Power, it moved our limbs, and I felt it begin to lift from me.

With its absence, my body grew still. I knew the passing of this Sekhem and it was like the sunset on the Nile that comes with the priest's horn. The Sekhem was lost with the Ren, and I was dead, and my breath went out on the last glory of the sunset. The clouds in such a sky gave their carmine light. But with evening, dark clouds remained in view, as though to speak of storms before morning. For the Sekhem would have to ask its dire question. Like the Name, it had been a gift of the Celestial Waters, yet unlike the Ren, it would, as it left, be stronger or weaker than when it first entered me. So this was the question: "Some succeed in using Me well. Can you make that claim?" That was the question of the Sekhem, and in that silence, my limbs stiffened, and the last of the power to give some final shake of the skin gripped itself and was done. Extinction might have been complete but for the knowledge that I was awake.

I waited. In such a darkness, void of light, no move in the wind, no breath to stir a thought, the inquiry of the Sekhem persisted. Had I used it well? And time went by without measure. Was it an hour, or a week before the light of the moon rose in the interior of my body? A bird with luminous wings flew in front of that full moon, and its head was as radiant as a point of light. That bird must be the Khu — this sweet bird of the night — a creature of divine intelligence loaned to us just so much as the Ren or the Sekhem. Yes, the Khu was a light in your mind while you lived, but in death, it must return to heaven. For the Khu was also eternal. Out of the hovering of its wings, there came to me a feeling, yes, of such tenderness as I had never known for any human, nor received in return — some sorrowful understanding of me was in the hovering of the Khu. Now I knew it was an Angel, and not like the Power and the Name. For the return of my Khu to heaven would be neither effortless nor unhindered. Even as I watched, it was clear that one of its wings was injured. Of course! An Angel could not feel such concern for me without sharing a few of my injuries and blows. Just as such understanding returned to me, however, so must the Khu have come to recognize its other duties because the bird began to ascend, limping through the sky on its bad wing until it passed beyond the moon, and the moon passed behind a cloud. I was alone again. Three of my seven lights had certainly departed. The Name, the Power, and the Angel, and they would never die. But what of the other souls and lights, my Ba, my Ka, and my Khaibit? They were not nearly so immortal. Indeed, they might never survive the perils of the Land of the Dead, and so could come to know a second death. There was gloom within my body after this thought came to me, and I waited with the most anxious longing for the appearance of the Ba. Yet, it gave no sign it was ready to show. But the Ba, I remembered, could be seen as the mistress of your heart and might or might not decide to speak to you, just as the heart cannot always forgive. The Ba could have flown away already - some hearts are treacherous, some can endure no suffering. Then, I wondered how long I must wait before seeing my Double, but if I recalled, the Ka was not supposed to appear before the seventy days of embalming were done. At last, I was obliged to remember the sixth of the seven lights and shadows. It was the Khaibit. The Khaibit was my Shadow, imperfect as the treacheries of my memory — such was the Khaibit — my memory! But I made a count. Ren, Sekhem, and Khu, the Ba, the Ka, and the Khaibit. The Name, the Power, and the

Angel, my Heart, my Double, and my Shadow. What could be the seventh? I had almost forgotten the seventh. That was Sekhu, the one poor spirit who would reside in my wrapped body after all the others were gone — the Remains! — no more than a reflection of strength, like pools on the beach as a tide recedes. Why, the Remains had no more memory, and no less, than the last light of evening recollects the sun.

With that thought, I must have swooned for I entered a domain separated from light and sound. It is possible I was away on travels because the passage of time was what I knew least of all. I waited.