

王安憶：小城之戀

Love in a Small Town: excerpts

By Wang Anyi

Translated by Eva Hung

THEY HAD BEEN TOGETHER since they were very young, dancing in the same ballet troupe. They both danced in “The Red Detachment of Women”; she was in the “Dance of the Little Soldiers” and he the “Dance of the Children Brigade”. She excelled on pointe because of the amount of training she had in the propaganda team at school; she had worn through several pairs of ordinary cloth-shoes practising her pointe work, and when she finally switched over to flat-topped ballet shoes, she felt ever so light and sure-footed, as if she had been doing weight-training and had just discarded the sandbags tied to her feet. His waist and legs were particularly pliant and strong because he used to study with a teacher who was also knowledgeable in the martial arts; he could do *tours jetés*, somersaults, anything required of him. Bending backwards, he could stretch till his head touched his feet; in his *balancé* to the back, the tip of his foot would touch the back of his head. He was really good. She was then only twelve, and he a few years older, just sixteen.

Two years have passed. The excitement over “The Red Detachment of Women” has subsided, and the troupe is rehearsing “On the Yimeng Mountains”. A teacher from the Dance Department of the Provincial Performing Arts School has come to conduct a day’s class with the troupe, and in just one day’s time has found out that they have destroyed their physiques through incorrect training. They don’t have muscles, just flesh with neither flexibility nor strength. The teacher even pulls her to the middle of the studio, and turning her around, points out to

“Love in a Small Town” was first published in Shanghai wenxue 1986 No. 8. It is the second of three novellettes, now popularly known as San lian 三戀, written by Wang Anyi between 1985 and 1986. The other two stories are entitled “Love on a Barren Mountain” 荒山之戀 (Shiyue 1986 No. 4) and “Love in Beauteous Valley” 錦綉谷之戀 (Zhongshan 1987 No. 1).

everyone her typically deformed legs, hips and shoulders. And the problems are indeed serious; she has thick legs, thick arms, a thick waist and very broad hips. Her breasts are twice the normal size, protruding like small hills, hardly like a fourteen-year-old's. The whole troupe, under the prompting of the Provincial School dance teacher, scrutinizes her body, and it makes her feel awful. Naturally she is ashamed, and to overcome this sense of shame she puts on a proud and disdainful look, holding her head high, throwing her chest out, and looking at others out of the corners of her eyes as though they were beneath her.

At this time she is half a head taller than him. Something must have gone wrong with his body; he has just stopped growing, and though he is eighteen, he still looks very much a child. He can only perform children's roles, and yet when he is in costume as a child, his face is obviously that of a grown-up. In fact he looks much older than his real age. If he weren't such a good dancer, the leaders of the troupe would probably have to think twice about retaining him.

Though neither of them is a principal dancer, they both work hard. In the early mornings and late evenings they are the only people in the studio. Even in cold weather they strip down to flimsy practice clothes, and they don't have to come near to smell each other's sweat and odour, at once sweet and repellent. His odour is strong, hers no less so. Her room-mates, young girls with limited knowledge of such matters, all say she has B.O. and refuse to sleep in the bed next to hers. She doesn't care, and even thinks: "Well, even if it is B.O., you haven't got it. It's the things few people have that are really precious!" But this is just a thought. She nevertheless feels a little sad, and a little inferior. What she doesn't know is it has nothing to do with B.O., just a strong natural odour. Sometimes when they take a break during practice to catch their breath, they will look at each other and, breathing deeply, she will say out of curiosity: "Oh, you smell like watermelon." Then he will lower his head to one side, raise his arm and sniff at his armpit, and reply with a laugh: "My sweat is sweet; that's why in summer all the mosquitoes come after me." And sure enough, there are tiny brown scars all over his fair skin; traces of summer left there, never to go away. And then he will exclaim in a surprised tone: "You smell like steamed dough!" She, too, will raise her arm and sniff at her armpit, and reply: "My sweat is sour; mosquitoes don't like me." And her dark skin really is smooth, without even the tiniest mark. They will both laugh, a little short of breath, and then resume their practice.

They mostly practise on their own, but sometimes they also help each other out. Her legs are not very turned out, and he helps her loosen up. She lies on her back on the floor, draws her feet up towards her buttocks and he pushes her knees down until they touch the floor on either side. When she finally gets up, a damp human shape is left on the red-painted floor, its legs bent outwards exactly like a frog's. It takes a while for this silhouette to evaporate. He practises pirouettés round and round the silhouette, as if encircled by an invisible wall, stopping only when the silhouette disappears into the floor-boards.

He wishes that he could grow a few centimetres taller, and has the notion that the elasticity of the tendons is crucial to this, so he tries hard to loosen up. He stands on one leg with his back against the wall and, stiffening the other leg, asks

her to push it towards his head. She pushes hard, her face against the curve of his calf. He always stands against the wall at one end of the bar as they do this, and with time there appears on the white-washed wall a yellowish human form standing on one leg, never to go away. When she stands at that end with one leg on the bar to loosen up, she is face to face with this one-legged man, and she thinks it's fun to trace a line from one footmark to the other.

They practise diligently, he no taller for it, and she much rounder and fleshier. She's tall all right, yet far from slim. Time passes, and they are one year older.

This is a small town bounded by three or four rivers, with a very narrow road leading to the railway. The best things about it are its trees—elms, willows, poplars, cedars, peach, plum, apricot, date and persimmon—all fresh and green. If you travel on a ferry coming downriver, you'll see this green delta with its luxuriant vegetation a long way off; as you come closer, you will see the houses of grey and red bricks; and coming still closer, you will hear the water-men singing their work songs in a quite unaffected manner. People in this town are used to drinking river water, and get diarrhoea every time they drink well water. The water-men's business is to deliver river water to the town folks. The water is transported in oil drums on large carts, and spills over now and then as the carts jolt along the bumpy paths. Ruts left by the cartwheels, some shallow, some deep, criss-cross the paths along the banks. As the carts rumble from one rut to another, the wheels hit against the sides of the ruts and the water-man's voice lingers on one trembling note, very rhythmical. Just as one cart trembles off into the distance, another announces itself as it comes along, and so it continues, as much a part of the town as the luxuriant woods. And then the ferry resumes its journey, leaving behind several dozen passengers and a dozen or so pedlars carrying baskets on shoulder poles. They cross the wobbly gangway to the bank, and then follow the earthen path to the main street.

Most streets in town are paved with stone slabs, polished by the feet of pedestrians, baked warm in the sun. It's really comfortable walking on them wearing cloth-soled shoes and feeling the heat under your feet. The shoulder poles bob up and down as the pedlars' feet flap on the stone slabs, each step evoking an echo. When the pedlars reach the main street, they put down their baskets, filled with chives, the first harvest of the year, so fresh that the morning dew is still shining on them. That day, nine out of ten households in town eat dumplings stuffed with chives, and the fragrance fills the streets. The baskets, emptied of chives, are filled up with fried snacks, and leisurely the pedlars carry them away.

A horse-cart rattles along the street, heading south to buy hay. On the cart a bed sheet is hoisted as a sail. The old horse labours on, head down, while an unbridled pony gallops alongside, joyfully shaking its head and flicking its tail, lifting its slim legs ever so high. At times it runs ahead, at times it lags behind, and at times it heads off in all directions. It knocks over an old lady's black-jelly stall, but nobody minds. They all make way for it and let it get on with its antics.

On some walls the white-wash has peeled off, leaving bare the grey bricks underneath. Big posters are pasted on these walls, billing films shown in the cinema

and plays put on in the theatre. A cinema ticket costs ten cents, a theatre ticket thirty cents. In the cinema things are just projected onto the screen, though the actors are really good; in the theatre you see real people performing, but they are less accomplished, so the pricing is fair. In the evenings both play to a full house, just the right number of people to fill up both places, so it's quite perfect.

At night, when all the pedlars are gone and all the shops are shut, the street is pitch black; only the stones shine in the crystal-clear moonlight. Doors are shut, then windows are shut, and then even the lights are extinguished. Children begin to dream about the days when they will be grown-ups; old timers sit thinking, or relive the memories of their younger days. Those who are neither old nor young have another kind of pleasure, moving in the dark, planting the seeds of life. This time next year, the town will hear the wailing of new inhabitants.

Now, there is nothing but pitch black silence.

In the cinema, only the screen is lit up, and human images move on it, enacting the joys and sorrows of life. In the theatre, the stage glitters and dazzles, and real people take on fictional roles.

They never stop practising; they can't even if they want to. If they stopped, she would get even fatter and thicker, and he, because his body has refused to grow even one centimetre taller, cannot afford to gain the slightest weight as that would make him look even shorter. And so they continue to practise relentlessly.

But actually it's not all hard work; sometimes it can even be fun. Her figure has developed in such a way that she looks awful whatever she wears, and is clumsy whatever she does. It's only when she takes her clothes off, leaving only the leotard, that her proportions become more pleasing. When she is engaged in dance movements, movements uncalled for in daily life, a good feeling surges inside her. She looks into the mirrors around her, and thinks to herself: it's unfair to say I'm ugly, and it's unfair to say I'm clumsy. Drops of sweat roll down her satin-smooth skin, like pearls. Her hair, all wet, sticks to her long thick neck. It grows down low, extending almost to the point where the neck is joined to the back. The short hairs on her neck are always getting wet, then drying off, and as a result become all curly. When the sun shines on this curly hair, in profile she looks like a little lamb.

He, too, looks more lithe when he's in practice clothes. Besides, since he's technically superior to most people, what does it matter if his physique isn't perfect? When he tries out some really difficult steps, he experiences a sense of elation. He takes off his vest, revealing his extremely white but coarse back. Acne spreads profusely all over his face and his body; it is as though the nutrition he absorbs must have an outlet, and since he gains neither height nor weight, all the nutrition and energy go towards nurturing his spots, which are like small red beans, a sign of his youthful vigour. When the spots gradually subside, they leave behind small brown hollows like wells. His back, in particular, is full of such hollows, and strongly resembles the rough surface of a rock. Each brown well is filled with a drop of sweat, clear and transparent.

Sweating is like taking a shower; it cleanses the dirt from even the deepest recesses of the body. After sweating, one feels extremely relaxed and carefree.

There is only a small room with a cement floor for having a wash down. It's right next to the pantry, and the pantry is right next to a water pump, so they can mix the right amount of hot and cold water and then carry it into the wash-room and put it on a small cement platform. Under the platform there is a drain, and at the back of the door hooks for hanging clothes. That's all there is for furnishing. Both men and women use this room, and if the door is closed, one has to shout: "Anyone in there?" and the person inside shouts back: "Occupied." If it's a woman's voice from inside, the man outside turns back and waits till she finishes, and vice versa. Otherwise the person inside unhooks the lock and stands behind the door, and then locks up again when the person outside has entered.

When the weather is hot, this room is quite crowded, and arguments frequently arise. But in winter it's deserted. Since it is a windowless, north-facing room with no sunlight all day and nothing to keep it warm, it can be very cold. The unpainted wooden door is half open, revealing the naked cement floor, whitened with constant washing. If it weren't for the little pools of water left on the floor by the two of them taking turns to shower every day, the room would be even more desolate. He always lets her have her wash first, while she is still sweating from the exercise, so that she won't feel too cold, but still she dares not stay too long for she will soon feel the piercing cold. While he is waiting, to keep his body warm he continues practising, doing *grand jetés* around the room. Every time he comes to the north windows he seems to hear the sound of water splashing in the wash room. He can't help but see, in his mind's eye, water flowing down her smooth, broad back, then diverging into two streams, running down her elephantine legs until it reaches the ground and runs over the cement floor.

One day she didn't shift her feet throughout her wash down, and when he carried his water into the room he saw that, amidst the little pools of water on the floor there were two footprints, completely dry, left there by a pair of feet wearing soft rubber slippers. He stared at the footprints, and gradually he traced a pair of ankles, calves, knees, thighs, and up he went, until it seemed that the whole person was standing in front of him. Before he realized it, his water had turned cold.

The next day he bought her an apple-green plastic bucket, remembering that she had complained about the basin being too small, saying even two basins of water weren't enough for a good wash. A bucketful should be quite enough, he thought.

Maybe with more water, she enjoys her wash more, and no more dry footprints appear on the wet floor. All the footprints are drowned.

The bucket, filled with boiling water, flattens into an oval as she carries it in her hand. Sunlight shines through the apple-green sides, turning the water a tender shade of green, with a layer of pale green steam hovering over it. The water in the bucket shakes as she enters the small, dark room and disappears behind the unpainted and half-rotted wooden door. The room is extremely dark, with neither window nor lamp; only a narrow band of light seeps through from underneath the door. But there is some light on the bucket of water, luminous, a most tender green. The water is scalding. A dry, stiff towel gets soaked in no time. She lifts this towel, saturated with hot water, and puts it over her shoulder. She can feel the water

running down her chest and back, like hundreds of needles pricking her skin. She sucks in her breath with a "schusch" and repeatedly dips the towel into the bucket, and splashes water over her body. The water in the bucket gradually diminishes, and the light dims. Now she starts to put on her clothes. She pushes the door open; the sunlight hurts her eyes like the touch of a passionate and violent lover. She is so happy! The sight of him sweating and still engaged in a continuous series of *grand jetés*, a dirty knee-band wrapped around his blackened leg, moves her to pity, and she generously lends him the bucket.

The next day, she takes the bucket he has returned to fetch water, but finds that he has not cleaned it after he used it. There is a little greyish water left at the bottom of the bucket, and on the sides a film of greyish particles. She is just about to tell him off, and then stops herself and stands in a daze. She tilts the bucket and looks around inside it. There are tiny particles in the greyish water too, and she can't help speculating what they might be—can these be flecks of his skin? She knows that not only sweat comes from the skin, but also that tiny flecks of skin are sloughed off; not dust or dirt, just flecks of skin. When she thinks of this she can't help resenting it. She fills the bucket with clean water, pours it away, and then half-fills it again before she starts cleaning the sides. The plastic bucket seems rough to the touch somehow; something which she can't wash away titillates her palm. No matter how dark the room is, every time she scoops water up in her palms she sees tiny particles in it, particles swimming about like playful fish. On this day, even after her wash down, she still feels unclean, and her back feels itchy. So she keeps moving her shoulders and back muscles about in some rather unseemly gestures. Her roommates resent her the more for it; some probably suspect that she has lice or something, though she washes every day while they only go to the public bath once a week.

The women's public bath is exactly like the men's. It's a big pool, and bathers lower themselves into it much as dumplings are put into boiling water to cook. By afternoon the water becomes murky. Since the theatrical troupe enjoys a special status in town, on Saturday mornings, before the villagers come into town, the public bath is open to the troupe for two hours so the actors and actresses can have their wash first. The girls all bring their own wash basins and scoop water from the pool to wash themselves. When they are done, they walk out with their hair wet and hanging down, their faces glowing, and their dirty clothes in the basins which they balance on one hip much as the renowned ancient beauty Xishi did after she finished washing silk by the river. At the door of the public bathhouse the villagers are queuing, their faces dirty, their eyes gluey and their bodies shivering. They look at the girls in wonder and admiration, trying hard to imagine what a blessed, royal life they lead.

On winter afternoons, there are always men and women walking about the streets, their faces glowing from the heat of the public bath.

The men and women with glowing faces, carrying baskets on shoulder poles or in their hands, or pulling carts, are satisfied, and hurry along the roads leading out of town. One of these roads leads to the pier, another goes north across the flood-gate. In the evening the sun gradually sinks behind the three high red flags

cut in the earth on top of the flood-gate, and turns these discoloured flags a deep red. This is the noisiest hour here below the gate; carts rumble past, interspersed with the solitary ringing of bicycle bells, and women wearing home-made shoes walking on the dusty cement road leave behind clear imprints of the even or uneven sewing on their soles. They hurry on while the sun is still shining. When they reach a dirt track, their footprints are lost in the shifting dust.

It is the dry season; it hasn't rained for three consecutive months. On the main road the loosened earth is a full inch thick, completely covering your feet as you walk. The fields are cracked, the ponds dry, the water from the wells murky, and the water level of the river below the dam has gone down, laying bare dark green moss. The setting sun is fiery. After sinking behind the flood-gate it stays, as if by magic, behind a small green wood in the distance. Every small wood is a village you can see but can't reach, like a mirage.

Deep in the night when all is quiet the dogs start barking in the distance. The dogs in town don't bark, but then hundreds of cats create a commotion. At times like this their screeching shakes the whole town; they seem to be crying, or laughing, or panting, or sighing, and no one is able to sleep. Some bachelor jumps out of bed, grabs a shoulder pole and hits at two cats blindly, trying to separate them, but they seem to have been glued together since birth. On closer look he finds they're two silent dogs. The cats have all gone and are continuing their heart-rending cries elsewhere. The next morning the bachelor gets up with blood-shot eyes, curses the cats, then curses the dogs, and then looks up at the sky. It doesn't look like it's going to rain; he curses heaven. Lastly, he thinks of the couple from out of town who are staying in the secondary school; they actually wear pants with stripes and floral patterns. Though they only do it in the house, at bedtime, still pants are pants; how can you have stripes and flowers on them? It's just not right.

They have worked diligently through a severe winter, and have now seen the coming of a dry spring. Her body is so rotund that it's impossible for it to grow anymore; it's like a ripened fruit, but the proportions are wrong. And his body seems as stubborn as his will; it is fixed, refuses to grow. Though she looks like an adult she is still very childish. She never hides her feelings. She will be laughing one minute, crying the next, as changeable as the summer weather, and yet you don't feel that she's abnormal or affected, simply naïve. When a group of girls goes on and on teasing a boy in the courtyard, and finally gets him to say: "At night my dad bites my mum's mouth", the others all laugh to themselves but pretend not to have heard and change the subject, while she falls about with laughter, completely losing control of herself. It's not only that she doesn't cover up for herself, she nullifies the others' efforts at evasion. They all turn red and try to stop her, but then she says, seemingly very knowledgeable: "The child knows nothing." The others just don't know what to make of her, and can only call her "Silly girl!" But she won't even put up with that, saying in protest: "Who says I'm silly? I know everything." All they can do is ignore her. As she grows more and more like a woman, her childishness and clumsiness become more apparent.

She still asks him to help her turn out her legs and loosen her joints. just as

she used to when she was young. Though this task has become more and more difficult for him, he can't turn her down, and it has become a torture for him.

She lies before him, her legs bent in front of her chest, and slowly parts them to either side. He can't control the turmoil in his heart. He is panting loudly, almost suffocating with the effort to suppress himself. Sweat pours down from his head, his face, his shoulders, his back and from the inside of his thighs. As though to compensate for his child-like body, he has matured mentally with unusual speed, and he feels like a completely adult man. When he helps her to loosen up an evil thought takes hold of him; he wants to hurt her, so he pushes hard. She screams; a scream like the siren on a ferry.

It frightens him; his hands weaken, letting go of her knees. She brings her knees together, and holds them in her arms in front of her chest, still screaming. Then she starts to revile him, using a whole series of dirty words which only men would have used, such as "fuck you". She doesn't really know what it means, just that it's a strong word and gives vent to her anger. This, however, works on his imagination and makes him more agitated, so he throws the same vulgarity back at her, only he means it. She still doesn't understand its meaning, and still lies on the floor holding her knees in her arms. Nor does she hold them properly; she holds onto one knee and stretches the other leg, and then she holds onto the other knee while stretching this one. Every time she stretches or bends her legs her well-developed waist and chest vibrate in response. As he swears back at her, her anger mounts, and a string of dirty words such as "fuck your brother-in-law" come out of her mouth, illogical and unfit for any ear. He gets worked up, and counter-attacks in even coarser language, meaning every word of it. She won't let him speak anymore, just continues her abuse in a loud, shrill voice, trying to drown him out. His voice is deep and strong; it comes through gradually. When she thinks she has won and stops to catch her breath, his voice is still resounding in the room. Only then does she realize that he has not stopped cursing, but has kept up with her. His voice is like the bass in an orchestra; it may not carry much of the melody, but it always has a part to play. She doesn't even have time to catch her breath before she starts cursing afresh, trying to best him. He doesn't give up, and follows her shrill clamour with his deep, deliberate voice until she is finally exhausted and starts to cry, rolling all over the floor. He then stops, and stares at her gloomily.

Her whole body is blackened with dirt, and she rubs her eyes with her blackened hands so that her tears become black too, and roll all over her dirty face. Suddenly he feels sad. He takes her bucket, fills it with warm water and tells her to have a wash. She refuses to listen and goes on crying; this show of sympathy makes her cry even more pitifully and she feels even more heart-broken. All he can do now is go forward and pull her up. Though she's heavy and is deliberately clinging to the floor, he is extremely strong, and has no trouble getting her on her feet and pushing her into the washroom. When he hears her locking up and then sobbing in the midst of splashing water, his heart is suddenly filled with love and tenderness.

Her heart feels lighter as she splashes water on her body and feels the dirt and sweat wash away like a layer of unwanted skin. By now her tears have dried, but she goes on sobbing as though in protest. Yet at the same time a strange feeling of

warmth fills her heart, gradually spreading throughout her body, like the gentle touch of someone very intimate. She is almost happy, but she doesn't want to stop sobbing, for this, too, seems a consolation.

From this day on they stop talking to each other; they are enemies.

Though they don't talk, they still practise. He practises on his own, she on her own; he doesn't help her turn out, she doesn't help him loosen up his legs, they just practise by themselves. They both look very grave, over-serious, as though attending a solemn occasion. There is no more conversation or laughter in the studio. When they laughed in the studio there used to be a slight echo, but now the only sound is the thump of their feet as they land on the floor, and the echo sounds empty, emphasizing the solitude and the monotony.

In contrast to this hushed atmosphere are the excitement and tension in their hearts. In her heart she is still contending fiercely with him, cursing him with hundreds of dirty words she doesn't understand. After that, she feels she is the one who has been abused, she who is pitiful and helpless, so she is even more self-pitying than ever. Every movement is carried out in a long-suffering and dignified manner, and she doesn't realize her own affectation. All she feels is that there seems to be a fresh goal in practising, that it has become more meaningful. It is no longer just self-entertainment, nor just self-improvement, it seems to have taken on the added dimension of a performance. Thus she practises harder than usual, and becomes extremely demanding of herself. When she fails to execute a step she just lets go of her body and lets it flop heavily to the ground. The pain often makes her want to cry out, but she always holds back. She will struggle to get up and make a second, hopeless attempt. It seems that by doing so she hopes someone will be moved; actually she moves herself to the point of tears.

He, in the meantime, is also torturing himself, bending and folding his body into inconceivable shapes. He bends down, his head touching his feet, but he isn't satisfied with that. He sticks his head out between his feet and holds it erect so he can look at the world from the usual angle. The shape of his body becomes most perplexing; one can't even tell his trunk from his legs. But as a result of this 360-degree inversion, his eyes survey the world with greater equanimity. He can hold this position for twenty minutes. He seems to hate his body and is intent on punishing it; as if his body has an existence independent of and antagonistic to his soul, which is meting out the punishment. The punishment is so harsh that it becomes a little pretentious. Each, for untellable reasons neither of them understands, strives for excellence. Thus it comes to the time of the first spring rain.

The rain comes like this:

The prelude is hot, July-like weather. People haven't even had time to take off their sweaters before it becomes so hot that they don't want to keep their T-shirts on. Skirts appear in the courtyard, yet they don't have the courage to go outside; they just flaunt themselves ruefully on the premises of the theatrical troupe. All of a sudden the sky darkens; it remains dark for a whole day before it pours down, each drop of rain the size of a bean. Cool air descends as though time has reversed its journey. In a split second the colourful skirts are gone and the quilts laid out to air in the courtyard all collected, exposing the wet cement floor. The floor is

Material not available
due to copyright restrictions.

Material not available
due to copyright restrictions.

Dancing in Chaos
by Fang Zi

Opposites
by Hui Hong

uneven, the depressions hold water, and rain falling on these small pools ripples successive circles outwards. It is now evening, and a rainy evening gives one a feeling of warm desolation, or is it a cool warmth? The rain flows down along the tiles on the roof of the studio, clumsily following a circuitous route to the eaves. Soon there is a curtain of water hanging from the eaves.

There is a curtain of water in front of every house. People leave their doors half-open and, leaning on the door frames, separated by the water curtains, start chatting. The talk is all about the drought and the rain this spring. They eat as they chatter on, a big bowl of rice in the left hand, a pair of warped wooden chopsticks in the right, picking up the rice in the congee with the chopsticks. The congee looks a little brownish-red because of the sodium added, and seems the more tasty for it. There are a few salted beans and pickles in the bowl, smelling of mould; but once you're used to it the smell becomes quite delectable. The rain falling on the pebbled pavement makes a surprisingly loud noise, drowning out any other sound, so people have to shout. There is one house with its door locked; whoever lives there hasn't come home yet, and the clothes hanging out in front of the house have not been taken in. There is a pair of pants with floral patterns, all wet, and the flowers look exceptionally colourful.

It has turned cool again, and sweaters are called for. Villagers who have no sweaters wear quilted jackets, nearly all of them black. After the rain the streets actually seem a little desolate and cold. The pebbled pavement has been thoroughly washed; the earth looks darker and the pebbles brighter, as though outlined in ink. The water in the river has risen, and looks crystal clear, covering the moss on the banks. The cement path beneath the dam appears whiter than before, but the dirt track looks darker. The scattered woods are all fresh and green, like villages made up of trees. In some village, a child has died during the heavy downpour; he was going to the lake for weeds to feed the pigs, and slipped when he was walking by a catchwater. The story has spread over several miles and then vanished, as if scattered by the wind. The townsfolk still say that the rain has been timely, making the weather more pleasant, and the villagers are also singing its praises, for the green wheat in the fields has all brightened up.

They still don't talk to each other, as though they're deadly enemies. Others all notice it and think it strange. Yet after a while they become used to it and are no longer surprised. But after they've been used to it for a while, they once more feel that there's something strange about it. Since the animosity has lasted so long, there must be an unusual reason, and they can't just let the two of them be enemies forever. They have asked her, but she won't talk; they have asked him, and he won't talk either. They go back to question her again, and because they seem so serious, she can't help taking it seriously too, reacting in a stiff and stubborn manner. Her reaction draws even more attention, as they think that she is about to open up her heart, and they become even more persistent in their questioning. This rouses her feeling of having been wronged, which is further exaggerated because of their seriousness, and she bursts into tears. The fact that she is crying strengthens the confidence of others to get at the root of the matter, but she shakes her head in

tears: "I don't want to say anything; I have nothing to say." It is the truth, but it sounds as though there is much behind it. They keep on questioning her, but then she refuses to speak anymore, just keeps crying as if she's heart-broken. She is crying partly because she feels she has been wronged, but more because she is puzzled and embarrassed as she knows for a fact that nothing has happened. Nothing has actually happened, and yet the situation looks so serious; she feels responsible, and therefore a little afraid. Her reaction at least partially satisfies the others. They feel that now they are justified in going to question him again.

Cornered, all he can do is hit back at them verbally. He is all tensed up, cursing ferociously; he doesn't know what he is saying or why he is saying it. He feels rather ridiculous but he simply can't stop. Everyone is shouting at him, telling him to stop, telling him to apologize to her. Apologize for what? They all seem to know; the two of them are the only ones who don't understand, and yet actually the two of them are the ones who do. But they don't realize this; they think that they understand nothing, and feel that they have been wronged, the victims of a terrible joke.

They are surrounded by the others, and the leader of the dance section grabs each by one hand, trying hard to make them shake hands and be friends again. Both of them are struggling fiercely and it takes the combined effort of everyone to hold them. She is crying, he cursing; both are angry and frustrated because they are struggling to no end. At last their hands touch; they are still struggling to avoid touching one another, but now the aversion seems a little false. Their hands touch, and they suddenly seem moved, the struggle to free themselves has obviously weakened. Their hands are at last brought forcibly together by the section leader, palm to palm. He has never felt more strongly about her body before, nor she his. Their hands touch for a split second, like lightning, and in the midst of everyone's resounding laughter their hands part, and they both turn to escape. But that split second seems so long, long enough for them to experience and savour for a lifetime. It is as though in that split second when they touch, he realizes that this is the hand of a woman, and she that this is the hand of a man. They escape, so ashamed that they can't look each other in the face, let alone talk to each other.

So it is that they still don't talk to each other. But now their silence has everyone's approval, and they are left alone. They practise as usual, and as hard. She throws herself violently on the floor; the physical pain gives her such a wonderful sense of satisfaction that she has become almost addicted to it. The more painful it is, the more she sympathizes with herself, and the more determined she becomes. He tries his utmost to twist his body into unrecognizable shapes, for that is the only way he can calm down; he is proud of his severity to himself. When either one of them leaves the studio, the other's determination and confidence in this self-torture will disappear, the physical tension and excitement vanish all of a sudden. They torture themselves because they want to show something off. It is a pity that they are concentrating so hard on themselves that they can't spare ten per cent, or even one per cent, of their attention for the other's performance. Their effort is completely wasted. Their need for the other person originates in themselves. There is satisfaction and meaning in hardship and endurance only if the other person is present. Yet ultimately both are showing off to themselves, hoping thereby

to gain their own trust and sympathy.

But young and ignorant as they are, it is only natural that they don't realize this. They simply take delight in practice, and feel that they need each other's presence during practice. Because of this inexplicable need, they have a tacit understanding: they won't practise alone, but if one of them comes to the studio, the other will turn up unbidden, and once there, neither will leave without the other.

After three heavy downpours, the weather becomes hotter every day; it is summer. The cicadas sing from before daybreak until night. The sun penetrates the thin tiles of the studio roof and the heat surrounding the room pours in through the open door and windows. Every day they give the floor a thorough wash with their sweat, and the red paint gradually fades, revealing the original pale colour. It is wonderful to feel the sweat exuding through every pore. Her wet leotard sticks to her body. She is practically naked, the hints are so blatant, though not the tiniest part of her body is bare. These hints, much more strongly than nakedness, stimulate thoughts and desires. She is not well-proportioned; every part of her body is exaggerated or distorted, like the creation of a cartoonist. The curves thrust in and out without restraint. Yet once you are accustomed to it, normal, well-proportioned bodies actually seem flat and dull.

He is wearing nothing but a pair of athletic shorts and a shabby knee-band round his left knee. He is so thin that his bones seem to stick out of his pale, coarse skin; as he dances, one can see his bones moving under his skin. His ribs are clearly visible, two neat columns of them, giving the impression that the skin here has disappeared. His ribs, strong as steel, obstruct the flow of his sweat, which either streams down from rib to rib, or gets caught between the ribs, casting a pattern of shadows on his body. Her body is as smooth and shiny as velvet, with sweat pouring down. The two of them, dripping wet, now turn their attention to each other and really see each other for the first time. Before this the one has never looked at the other; each only saw, admired and loved himself or herself. Now, while they try to catch their breath, they suddenly have a chance to look at each other, and in the other's dripping body they seem to see their own naked image. They feel shy, and can't help avoiding each other's eyes. They are still resting; it is too hot and the cicadas are too noisy.

At mid-day, the only noise is that of the cicadas' song. Every front door along the street is open, yet no sound comes from the houses. People don't even snore during their afternoon naps; just trickles of saliva, still warm, shine and even steam on the pillows. The shopping hall in the department store looks especially deserted; there are only flies buzzing and tracing out circles in the air. The shop assistants are bent over the counters, fast asleep, the glass surface of the counters cooling their faces, and their faces warming and moistening the glass. Occasionally an untimely customer will hesitate in the shopping hall and glide noiselessly across the marble floor. No ferry calls at the pier; under the red-hot sun the river reflects a blinding light. Naked children walk a long distance along the banks and put their feet into the river to test the water; it's boiling. There are several water-carts lying around, with planks raised, and the water-men sleeping underneath them.

She tries a *grand jeté* in which one foot is supposed to touch the back of her head, but she fails, and falls heavily onto the floor. It seems as if it is the floor which rises up to meet her and strikes her a heavy blow. The feel of the warm floor boards suddenly makes her weak. She turns over, and lying on her back, arms outstretched, stares at the triangular roof of the studio. A thick strut points down at her body as though it is going to come crashing down. The shady ceiling is wide and deep, a sanctuary. She feels calm and untroubled. Her eyes follow the ceiling's dark edge downwards, and come up against the unexpected glare of the sun; the sun's rays are particularly bright just beneath the eaves, and it makes her sad, almost hopeless. She lies on the floor, motionless, time flowing by her side, and stopping by her side. There is a tall, old scholartree in the courtyard, its leaves casting pale shadows on the window. She almost catches a glimpse of that ever-singing cicada spreading and folding its wings.

Just at this moment, two steely thin legs appear by the crown of her head; the leg bones stick out and all the muscles seem to recede rapidly toward the back. She cranes her neck backwards to look at these legs; there are some sparse, coarse hairs, pitch black against his snowy skin. She stares at them quietly, and finds them ridiculous. But now the leg bones are leaning towards her. He is squatting in front of her, looking into her eyes. He asks all of a sudden:

“Want me to give you a hand?”

“No!” She wants to shout, but her voice is hoarse and she can't raise it. With a quick push she sits up, but his hands are already under her arms, and before she can steady herself he has pushed her up to a standing position. She wobbles, but his hands grip her arm-pits like iron wrenches and force her to stand steadily. With his hands still under her arms, she feels the burning heat there, while other parts of her body have cooled down. The heat from these two places is overwhelming. She doesn't feel hot anymore, and the sweat flows down pleasantly, like a song. When she is firmly on her feet he takes his hands away and lowers them until they reach his thighs. His palms and wrists are all wet from the sweat in her armpits, and the warmth of her armpits envelops his hands. Now, his hands, hanging by his side, seem lonely and desolate. He can't help stretching his fingers, trying to catch something, but there is nothing there.

She is back on her feet now, and walks straight towards the bar where she starts to do *balancé*, the tip of her foot drawing empty semi-circles in the air. Bright sunlight catches on her foot and throws half a halo in mid-air. The movements of her protrusive, almost deformed buttocks seem so extraordinarily displeasing to the eye that he really wants to kick at them. She is conscious of his stare, and it makes her happy. His eyes are warmly fondling her thick legs, legs which have lost their elegant curve, and yet have an innocent appeal in their ugliness. She continues her series of *balancés*, and feeling her tendons stretch and relax she is so light-hearted and so happy that she can't hold back the urge to glance at him. To her surprise he has already gone back to his own routine. Her spirits plummet; though her legs are still swinging back and forth, her heart is not in it anymore. He is doing a side-split, and as his legs form a straight line on the floor, he bends his torso slowly to the front, with his arms touching the ground, parallel to his legs, and his hands

clasping his flexed feet. He senses her attacking him with her stare, aimed at his weakest and most sensitive spot. He can't help shivering, and folding up his limbs he crouches on the ground. She has withdrawn her stare. Dispirited, he curls up on the floor for a long while before standing up again. Plucking up his spirits, he walks to her side. He stands there struggling with himself, blushing. Finally he mumbles:

"What is it that you dislike about me?"

She doesn't expect him to speak, let alone about something so serious, so she too is embarrassed. She gradually lowers her leg, her face turning red. She answers: "Nothing," and laughs as though it is funny.

"We'd better stop this," he says. "We should help each other out."

"That's all right with me," she replies, her heart pounding. She feels this is something unusual.

And so they begin to talk to each other again. Yet somehow they feel that it was more wonderful when they were not on speaking terms. As soon as they talk to each other, the tension is gone, and then the sense of excitement, the inexplicable agitation and curiosity in anticipating the outcome of these events, and the secret flow of ideas by tacit understanding are completely gone, too. But still, they both feel that a weight has been lifted from their minds. The tension was just too great, and too dangerous. They did not realize what kind of danger it was, but they both felt the sense of adventure.

Their relationship has returned to normal, but they no longer have a clear conscience. Each seems to be harbouring secret designs; they avoid each other and no longer help each other practise. They talk, but only briefly and awkwardly. When he wants to tell her that the canteen has started serving and that if she's late she won't get any good dishes, he means well of course, but his words sound like a warning: "Meal's served!" And she answers angrily: "Who needs to be told!" When she has finished showering and wants to tell him it's his turn, she speaks as though it's an ultimatum: "I've finished, I'm telling you." And he replies, seemingly irritated: "Who needs to be told you've finished!" It seems that this is the only way in which they can talk to each other; they have forgotten how pleasant and natural conversing with each other used to be. Though they use angry words, they don't really quarrel because neither of them wants to do so. They don't want to be enemies again. Coming out of that embarrassing situation wasn't easy, and they treasure the break-through. But they both seem a little regretful that the embarrassment is over. Originally they thought that something extraordinary was going to happen, and they were full of expectations, a little afraid, a little hesitant. But now everything has returned to normal; nothing extraordinary will ever happen, or rather, something started to happen and then stopped, so that their expectations have fallen through and they feel strangely resentful of each other. The stiff way in which they talk to each other is thus not all pretense, there is some real cause for it. She frequently glares at him sideways for no reason at all, the whites of her eyes showing even more distinctly against her dark complexion, which makes the glare more effective. He looks as though he is always brooding; his face seems overcast, and since his complexion is pale this sense of gloom is all the more obvious. Sometimes it really scares her, and she dares not give full rein to her temper.

But still, they are on speaking terms again. Ever since they started talking again they seem less dedicated in their practice. Self-torture has lost its meaning, and when they look for a new way to communicate and to fight they can't find it. They are both at a loss. For a period of time they seem to have lost their goal in life and have become dispirited. Besides, the weather is extraordinarily hot. In the mid-day sun someone breaks an egg on a paving stone in the street and watches it cook. Almost a hundred people come to watch, their faces all sweaty and oily, but they are so amazed by the sight that they completely forget about the heat. Only the children keep on crying loudly because the prickly heat on their heads, all pus now, is hurting terribly. At night, though the sun is gone, the earth pants for breath from the heat it has soaked up, and exhales it in gasps, steaming the bamboo beds and straw mats lying all over the streets. Actually it is as hot outdoors as it is indoors; so hot that even mosquitoes don't come out.

Yet in the countryside the crops are growing particularly luxuriantly; the leaves of the beans are a delightful green and tender pods have appeared. Old villagers, like dogs, stick their tongues out in the heat but they still keep saying: "It's hot when it should be hot and cold when it should be cold; that's the way for the weather to be." The melons are growing nicely too. A small watermelon—thin-skinned, with red pulp and black seeds—only costs three cents. A pedlar carries them through the lanes and streets, shouting as he goes along. Even in the early morning one feels greasy because of the heat, so someone in the troupe beckons the pedlar into the courtyard and everyone sits around his basket eating melons. After they have eaten their fill they ask the accountant to pay the pedlar and charge it to the "heat-prevention" account.

The pedlar takes a rest in a shady corridor at the back of the kitchen, where there is actually a little breeze. He feels good and it makes him talkative, so he starts telling stories about the melon fields. These are all scandalous stories, such as the one about a farmer catching a couple fornicating while he was keeping watch in the melon fields, or a young girl who wet her pants from eating too many melons. Someone reports this to the troupe leader, and the pedlar nearly has to forfeit his earnings from the melons. Yet on the whole he has had an easy day; he has sold two basketfuls of melons without having to endure much of the heat. Now he has finished a good day's work he ambles out of town leisurely, carrying his empty baskets on a shoulder pole. On his way back there is a well every mile or so, the water is sweet and cool, and a drink of it drives the heat away. The pedlar thinks: there's no reason why people living on the main street should suffer so—crowding together under this heat, without even the shade of a tree where they can catch the breeze, and working strict hours whether the sun is high up in the sky or not. But the girls in town are really nice, with such fair complexions and soft skin; the men in town are fortunate indeed.

The townsfolk, on the other hand, pity the villagers who cannot even find a place to hide under the burning sun. Their shoulders and legs are covered in blisters, and their skin peels off layer after layer. The sun also makes the colour of their clothes fade and they never wear anything the least colourful. What a monotonous life! But the melons are really something. The inexplicable thing is why

the couple at the middle school keep their door shut even in this burning weather. It would be understandable if it were only at night, but is it necessary to keep the door shut in the middle of the day too? Not unless they can't hold out until night-fall; imagine doing that when the sun is high, it must be excruciatingly hot! And yet though they are at it day and night, there is never any sign of them having a baby. The woman looks like an unmarried girl, her tummy flat, her waist and buttocks narrow, and her skin soft and supple.

Even after the hottest period is over and the calendar says that it is autumn, the heat lasts another eighteen days.

After these eighteen burning days, the theatrical troupe sends some of its members to a major company in a southern seaside city to learn new routines. Since only principal dancers and actors are allowed to go, the two of them are left behind, still practising every day, and still doing things the wrong way. She has grown even taller and bigger, and in comparison he, who has not grown at all, looks as though he has actually shrunk. She feels that she is becoming too big, that her body has become a burden. When she takes a wash and looks at her unusually full breasts, she is shocked and worried. She doesn't know why they have grown so big, and she doesn't know what will happen if they go on developing. She even suspects that this may be a strange illness. The thought makes her head swell, and she is so scared that she wants to cry. She studies every single part of her body, all so big, and she becomes afraid of herself. She knows that she is too big, but there is no way she can make herself smaller. In the company of the troupe's slim and refined girls she can't help feeling lowly and inferior because of her size. Besides, she never thinks before she speaks and so her words always seem incoherent or out of place. Her intelligent companions all call her Big Soppo. Fortunately she is someone who doesn't think much, so her feelings of inferiority and fear do not affect her health in the slightest. She is energetic, and her appetite is huge. At night when she climbs into bed, she hugs herself with her own arms, feeling extremely fond of herself. And then she falls soundly asleep, like a baby, without the least care in the world. In her sleep she frequently makes noises with her mouth, the sounds of a pampered child.

The burden for him is his maturity. At heart he seems a fully grown man, filled with shameless desire so mean and base that it frightens him. At first he did not know which part of his body was the seat of such desire; if he did, he would surely be determined to destroy that part of himself. And then one night he wakes up at an inappropriate time, and it suddenly dawns on him where his sin originates; to him it is all sin. But by this time he has realized how impossible it is to destroy that part of himself, and what's more, because it is such an important part he begins to treasure his desires as well. He does not understand why this is so.

And now the ones who had gone to learn new routines have come back, wearing stylish clothes and carrying the latest in travelling bags. They get off the ferry, step onto the unsteady gangway and make their way to the bank. Both of them have come to welcome the returning team. She has not succeeded in pushing her

way to the front, and so has not been able to lay her hands on a single bag, but she's excited and happy all the same. She either walks in front of the group as if she is clearing the way for an army, or walks at the back as though to make sure that everything is all right, all the while babbling about irrelevant things. No one answers her; no one hears her. Yet if it were not for her and her prattle the occasion would not have been so lively.

He walks in the centre of the group, next to the principal dancer who always plays the male lead in dance dramas. The principal dancer puts one arm round his shoulders. Though he never attracts much attention he and the principal dancer are the best of friends, and the latter confides in him. On the way from the pier to the theatre, the principal dancer says to him:

"You'll get a new role."

The role is the young Red Army soldier in the *pas de deux* "Hard Times". It is impossible to find someone as small as him and technically as brilliant. In other troupes this role is always danced by a woman. The role seems custom-made for him; it suits him so perfectly that no questions are raised and he is cast for it. It is all smooth sailing except for one thing—there are many lifts in the dance, and in one particular section the old soldier is required to carry the young one on his back while performing difficult steps, showing his robustness and strength. At this point his major defect is revealed. Though he looks small he is incredibly heavy. The "old soldier" just does not have the strength to carry him; he bends under his weight, unable to perform a single step. Moreover, neither of them has had practice in lifts in *pas de deux*, and as a result they do not know how to make the lifts easier. He clings to his partner's back with all his might, and though he feels embarrassed and apologetic it doesn't help. When he clumsily jumps off his partner's back time and again, his partner can't help complaining:

"You really are too heavy."

He turns red, countering: "You're just chicken!"

Anger darkens his partner's face, and a confrontation seems unavoidable. The principal dancer tries to smooth things over, saying:

"I'll have a go."

The principal dancer walks through the steps carrying him on his back, but though he succeeds in doing this he can't catch his breath afterwards. Then all the others come up to him and take turns walking around with him on their backs, laughing. Finally he has had enough, and struggles to get back on the ground, giving the person under him a hard push. This at last puts an end to the joke on him.

In the evening he skips dinner, staying in the studio to improve his *baloné*. He knows that the initial jump is all-important; if he could get on to his partner's back with ease, what follows would be no problem at all. But if he were to exhaust himself trying to cling to his partner and fail to coordinate his breathing with the steps, there'd be trouble. Besides, he also wishes that he could take things more easily.

After a short while, she, too, comes to practise. She practises every day after dinner as if she thinks it's good for digestion. Thus she can eat more; she loves eating and has a great appetite. Today she is wearing a new, peach-coloured leotard,

one of those the travellers have brought back with them for distribution to the troupe. This is one of the regular leotards used by the big companies, with a very low neckline, especially at the back where it reaches almost down to the waist. The elasticized welts around the legs are too tight, and cut deeply into her thighs.

All of a sudden he asks her amicably to help him rehearse the lifts in the dance. She has not heard him speak so mildly to her for a long time, and besides, she has had a stupid urge to show off since that afternoon, so she readily consents. First of all he takes her through the paces; but that afternoon she had stood on one side watching them rehearse and taken note of every movement, so now she does every step correctly. He then goes to the electrician for a tape-recorder and the music tape, speedily locates that section of the music and starts the tape. He climbs onto her back, and strangely, she doesn't feel burdened at all. On the contrary, the exuberant music makes her very happy. He performs his movements on her back, feeling secure; he had not thought that her back would be so broad, firm and strong. They go through the paces like a dream, and at the end of it she's panting only a little, as is normal. Before he speaks she says eagerly:

"Let's do it one more time!"

This time they take it from the top. She has learned all the old soldier's steps and her rendering is none too bad; she actually expresses the heightened emotions rather well. When it comes to the lift, he gets on to her back with perfect ease. She has strong, powerful arms. Since she makes light of the burden, his confidence increases and his movements become bolder and more adroit, thus making it even easier for her. Gradually they become familiar with the way each other moves, and he finds that the understanding between them is better than what he had achieved with his original partner. After going through the dance five or six times, they become at ease with the movements and dance without hesitation, forgetting the technical difficulties and the need for mental preparation before the lift. Every gesture of the arm and every movement of the leg seem second nature to them. And the music is uplifting; every repetition makes it more intimate and more beautiful. She has forgotten that her role is that of an old Red Army soldier, and thinks that she is just playing herself; he has also forgotten that his role is a young soldier, and thinks that he is just playing himself. Every movement has become their own, an expression of their feelings and instincts. They have forgotten themselves in the dance; their images flash across one mirror onto another until they are surrounded by images of themselves. They actually feel that they are beautiful, and they never feel better about themselves than when they dance. Besides, there is also the music.

As he climbs on her back once again he smells the heavy odour of sweat; he feels the firmness of her back on his chest, exposed by the low-cut leotard, naked, warm and wet. His equally warm, wet chest rubs against her back, making a noise, and the friction hurts a little. He can feel the strong movements of her waist with his knees and her rounded muscular shoulders and thick neck with his hands. As she pants, her neck alternately tenses up and relaxes. Her hair, soaked in sweat, is plaited and fixed to the back of her head with hairpins. The tip of her plait brushes against his nose, and he can smell the strong odour of oil and sweat while

a cool hairpin pricks his cheek. All his senses are aroused, freed from the dance techniques, and he tenses up once again. But this is a different kind of tension; instead of suppressing all physical and emotional sensations, now every sense and every feeling is strained, fine-tuned and activated. Dancing has become for him just mechanical movements, unworthy of the slightest attention. He is carried on the back of a burning body; a burning body is moving energetically under him. Even the tiniest breath is communicated to his most sensitive nerve, igniting his hope which is erupting like lightning and fire.

The light and heat are passed on to her. She cannot feel anything besides the scorching brazier of red-hot coal on her back. The heat has become unbearable; and yet when he gets down and the burning sensation disappears, she feels an emptiness on her back and yearns for him to be up there again. When he gets back up on her back she feels that her heart and lungs are all on fire and wishes to roll on the ground to extinguish the flames scorching her body. But the music and the dance won't let her lie down. She seems to be controlled by a mighty and invisible will, repeating the routine over and over again, lifting him on to her back, then casting him to the ground. Suddenly she feels completely at ease; her panting stops and her breathing is synchronized with the tempo of her movements. Her body moves of its own accord.

The movements of their bodies are perfectly co-ordinated. He feels easy and confident jumping on to her back, never making the slightest mistake, as though that is the place where he truly belongs and the jumps which he performs on the ground are just expressions of his impatience to be up there again. Her mind is only at ease when he is on her back; the heavy burden pressed tightly against her gives her great pleasure. They seem glued together in all their movements, inseparable and intimate. He rolls on her back, jumping up and getting off, and the friction is dear to him, quenching the thirst of his flesh and soul. And the weight of his whole body, with all the rolling, jumping and rubbing is but a caress to her. His movements obviously hurt her; her back bends under the weight and her legs shake, but the dance goes on without a single missed step. The music is repeated continuously, interminably, and becomes more and more exuberant, never allowing a moment's rest.

It is now late into the night, and someone roars at the studio, cursing them for disturbing his sleep; someone else opens and shuts a window with a loud bang. But they are oblivious to all these noises. The music envelops their world, an exuberant world totally out of control.

Finally someone turns off the electricity mains. The light suddenly goes off and the music stops; around them all is dark. The lights in the courtyard are turned off too, and there is no moon in the sky. It is pitch black, like the bottom of an abyss. He was on her back when their movements stopped with the music, frozen. Thirty seconds pass before he lands on the floor. Without uttering a single word, they run away in fear. The strange thing is they manage not to run into each other or fall down in this darkness, but just disappear like puffs of smoke. ☐