

# ***The Skin of Memory***

***by***

***Colin Pink***

'Auschwitz is so deeply etched on my memory that I cannot forget one moment of it. So you are living with Auschwitz? No, I live next to it. Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self. Unlike the snake's skin, the skin of memory does not renew itself.'

Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After*.

Running Time: Approx 65 minutes with no interval.

Cast:

John, an 84 year old man.

Mary, a middle-aged woman, cleaner/friend of John's.

Nigel, a neighbour in his late thirties.

Off Stage character:

Lucy, John's middle aged daughter. Voice by same actor playing Mary.

Note: Quotations from the poetry of Jaroslav Seifert are from 'Lost Paradise' and 'An Umbrella from Piccadilly', translated by Ewald Osers.

## ***The Skin of Memory***

Time - December 1992. Set: The sitting room of a comfortably furnished middle class home. Neat and orderly. Average taste. Bland. Homely. Unremarkable. claustrophobic feeling.

Mid-morning. John sits in an armchair. Distant sound of a dog barking.

John        Dogs. I don't like dogs. Especially when they bark.

There's a medieval joke about dogs. The Dominicans, those zealous exponents of the inquisition, were called the dogs of God - because of the Latin: *Domini Canis*. [Beat.] Dominicans. [mirthless laugh] It was probably funnier in the fourteenth century. Nothing ages so badly as jokes.

Do you know how long it takes me to get dressed in the morning? Forty minutes. Yes, forty minutes. It doesn't bear thinking about does it. When I was young I used to jump into my clothes in a few seconds. Not now. Buttons have assumed a complexity and stiffness they only had back in the days when I was five. It's all very difficult. And do you know what's the most difficult, the most difficult of all? Socks. Yes socks. You wouldn't believe how far away your feet could get. As you get older they get farther and farther away. When you're a baby they're right there when you need them, you can suck your toes as easily as you can suck your fingers; try doing *that* now.

[Frowns.] How did I get on to sucking toes? What a peculiar topic. People will be saying I've gone gaga. People probably *are* saying I've gone gaga for all I know. It makes you suspicious, being old. You have to watch out. People look at you that way; that way that means they're sizing you up. And then they say things like, [Imitating condescending tone.] 'How are you managing?' [Normal tone.] This sounds like a reasonable question, it sounds like an expression of concern, but it isn't; it's a trap. Because what if you aren't 'managing', what then?

It takes me half an hour to get dressed. If anything it takes me even longer to get undressed. It makes you wonder if it's worthwhile bothering. After all, I'm not going anywhere. But you have to keep up appearances. Appearances are all. It shows you're [Beat.] 'managing'.

If you're not 'managing' they want to put you in a 'home'. Put you away, out of sight, out of mind, that's how they 'manage' things. I advise you not to get old. But I suppose you might prefer it to the alternative.

I fell over the other day. It was so stupid. I don't know how it happened. I just seemed to over-balance. One moment I was on my feet the next I was on the floor. It could happen to anyone. Fortunately it was one of Mary's 'days' and when she came round she helped me up. But she told Lucy and it's got her worried. She rang me up and said, 'Dad, we have to talk.' She's coming to see me. She wants to talk about 'options'. I don't like the sound

of that. I can guess what kind of 'option' she has in mind.

I couldn't stand it if she put me in a 'home'. All that communal living. I like being on my own. All I want is my own place, my own place where no one can get at me.

People say to me, [Imitating condescending tone.] 'Are you lonely? Would you like to go to a day centre?' [Normal tone.] I say, no I'm not lonely. I don't want to sit around all day with a bunch of old people! Telling you all about their aches and pains and their operations; complaining how everything's worse than it used to be; telling you whose seat you're sitting on.

I tell them I'm not lonely. But, of course, I am, from time to time. But loneliness isn't a constant thing, it comes and goes [Beat.] like wind. Most of the time I'm quite happy on my own. I have plenty of visitors. Mary comes in every other day. Nigel, across the road, he pops in about once or twice a week. So I'm not on my own all the time. It's not as if I've forgotten the sound of my own voice.

In any case at my time of life I could do with a little peace. I've had enough of people, I've had people up to here. And it's hectic enough as it is.

Oh, it might not look like it now but you just wait. Pretty soon it'll be like Clapham bloody Junction. What is the time? [peers at the clock] There'll be

no peace when Mary gets here. Why is it, when people are cleaning, they always want to clean the bit of the place where you happen to be? She has the whole room but the fluff is always under my feet. It makes me feel I'm in the way.

Mary has been 'doing' for me for twenty five years. Ever since we came here. She 'did' for us when my wife was alive, and she still 'does' for me now. She won the pools ten years ago but she kept on 'doing' for us. I won't let it change me, she said. And it didn't. [Pause.] When my wife died she was the only person I could talk to. She understood.

[Pauses, thinking about wife and Mary; then says:]

Why do we say 'does', 'doing'? Why do we use a euphemism for cleaning; as if cleaning was somehow unclean? It doesn't make sense. When you get to my age you give up trying to make sense of things. When I was a young man I thought everything made sense. I knew what was what. I had the world sorted out. I knew exactly what everything meant. Then, when I got older, I began to have my doubts. Things weren't quite as clear cut as they had seemed. But I still thought things would make sense. I still thought everything 'added up'; I just wasn't sure what it was any more. Now I've given up. All my life I was on a fool's errand. I was searching for something that didn't exist. Things don't make sense. Things don't 'add up'.

You'll have to forgive me. I get philosophical occasionally. I can't help it. I

lapse into philosophy the way other people tell you the same story over and over again: even after you've told them: I've heard that one before. They still tell it, over and over again: as if they can't stop telling their story; as if, if they stopped, if they stopped . . . telling their story . . . they'd have to face up to something . . . face up to something which they can't [Beat.] face.

[Sound of key in the lock as Mary lets herself in.]

Mary [Mary enters in a flurry. Takes off her coat. Moves about the place in a proprietorial way. Tidies up and dusts as they speak in the following scene.]  
It's wicked out there.

John Good morning.

Mary Absolutely wicked. I don't know why God invented weather like that.

John It does look very grey. I was thinking I might have to put the lights on.

Mary Wind and rain. A lethal combination. You're lucky you don't have to go out in it.

John True. Very true.

Mary How're you feeling today?

John Okay.

Mary No dizziness?

John No, I'm all right. [Pause.] There's nothing wrong with me, I just tripped!

Mary Okay, I was just checking.

John When Lucy comes you will back me up, won't you?

Mary What?

John If she wants to put me in a home.

Mary She doesn't want to put you in a home.

John But if she does. You'll tell her I'm coping fine. You won't let her put me

away.

Mary How many times do I have to tell you? She isn't going to put you in a home.

John I don't know.

Mary Of course she isn't.

John Only, I couldn't stand it, you see. All that communal living. I like to be on my own. I don't want to be surrounded by people all the time.

Mary Don't get yourself worked up.

John Only, I'd die there, I'd die, I wouldn't last.

Mary Don't you worry. I'll tell her you're all right the way you are.

John Good. [Pause.] How's Peter?

Mary Oh, he's a bit better. I keep telling him it takes time to get over something like that but he's so impatient. It gets him down but he's all right really.

John It's only natural, I suppose.

Mary It might be only natural but there's nothing worse than an impatient patient. It's very trying. He gets agitated. But it's his own fault. That's what a lifetime of fried breakfasts does to you. You're looking well anyway.

John Am I?

Mary Yes, you've got that twinkle in your eyes.

John It must be my thoughts. They must be giving me a twinkle in the eye.

Mary Too much thinking is bad for you; and at your age you shouldn't be having thoughts that put a twinkle in your eye.

John I wasn't thinking about that sort of thing.

Mary I should hope not.

John In fact I've completely forgotten what I was thinking about. Two minutes conversation with you and I can't remember a thing.

Mary Don't worry about it, I'm sure it'll all come back.

John Yes.

Mary Especially if you stop trying.

John Eh?

Mary Stop trying to remember. That's when people remember the thing they'd forgotten. It happens all the time. I'm sure it'll come back to you if it's important.

John Yes; things have a habit of coming back in the end.

Mary They certainly do. When I've done the dusting I thought I'd give the kitchen a good going over today.

John That sounds fine.

Mary I thought I'd clean the oven.

John I thought they cleaned themselves.

Mary Not yours.

John Oh.

Mary No. Yours is a bit too long in the tooth for that kind of thing.

John I suppose it is.

Mary It's not what you'd call "Modern Technology". [Mary goes into the kitchen and continues the conversation from there.] It's best to catch these things before they get out of hand. That's what I say. Nip it in the bud.

John Very wise.

Mary You can never be too careful with appliances.

John Really.

Mary Oh yes. By the way, I saw Father Michael on Sunday.

John Did you.

Mary He asked after you.

John That was nice of him.

Mary I said you were getting on very well but you didn't get out much.

John True.

Mary I think he was wondering why he hasn't seen you at mass since your wife's funeral. He asked me to remind you he can have one of the congregation pick you up in their car and drop you home afterwards.

John That's very nice of him. But to tell you the truth, Mary, towards the end I only went to keep Rose company. So after she passed away there wasn't any reason to go any more.

Mary [Popping her head into the sitting room.] I'm sorry to hear that. I had no idea. [Back into the kitchen.] You must have faith. It's faith that keeps us all going. And besides, it'd get you out of the house.

John I don't want to get out of the house that badly. I like being in the house.

Mary It's not natural staying cooped up inside all the time. Lots of people ask after you. You're missed.

John Is that so?

Mary Yes. You should be flattered. People are always asking after you. [Comes back into the sitting room, wearing brightly coloured Marigold gloves.] You obviously made an impression. I'll tell Father Michael you'll think about it. Perhaps when the weather improves. It can be very chilly in the church at this time of year, it wouldn't do you any good. Of course, it depends where you sit. If you're too close to one of those portable heaters you could roast to death before the end of the sermon.

John Churches are tricky things to heat.

Mary        You don't have to tell me.

John        It must be all that chilly spirituality that does it. [Laughs.]

Mary        [Not seeing anything funny.] I always thought it was the high ceilings.

John        Yes. The architecture doesn't help.

Mary        Anyway. He said there'd always be a warm welcome for you any time you'd care to attend mass.

John        That's very kind of him. To tell you the truth it's not been the same for me since they stopped saying it in Latin. As soon as I could understand what was going on I lost all interest in it.

Mary        I know what you mean, but we must keep up with the times. People want to know what they're saying these days. Anyway, he offered to come round and see you.

John        Who?

Mary        Father Michael, of course.

John        I'm not on my death bed yet. He'll have to wait.

Mary        You are wicked.

John        I've had years of practice.

Mary.        Sometimes I feel I don't understand you at all.

John.        Me too. It's all rubbish. You know that, don't you?

Mary.        I beg your pardon.

John.        Religion. It's all rubbish.

Mary.        I find it a great source of strength.

John.        There's nothing there. Nothing at all. No heaven, no hell, nothing. No Creator looking down; above our heads only emptiness.

Mary.        You better not let Father Michael hear you talk like that. I don't know why

you've come over so pessimistic; it must be the weather.

John. Yes, the weather. There's always the weather.

Mary Well, I can't chat all day. I must get on. [Going back into the kitchen.] If I clean the oven you'll have to prepare your lunch on the hob. Will that be all right?

John Yes.

Mary Only I know how much you like those ready-made meals you just pop in the oven.

John I can have something else.

Mary I wouldn't want to put you out.

John It'll be all right.

Mary If you were planning to have one of your favourite ready-meals I could do it tomorrow.

John It's all right. I don't particularly like them anyway. It's just because I'm lazy.

Mary [Pops her head into the room from the kitchen.]

I thought you liked them.

John Well. I don't *dislike* them. They're fine. They're okay, you know.

Mary I could have sworn you liked them. [Goes back into kitchen.]

John They're nice and easy.

Mary What about that tagliatelle with a ham and mushroom sauce – you love that one.

John Yes. That one is very nice.

Mary So you do like them.

John Yes. I didn't say I didn't like them. I just meant I could survive a day without one.

Mary Fine. Just so long as I know.  
[Mary works in silence for a while. John reads the paper.]  
You've got an awful lot of tinned food. Are you expecting a siege?

John I like to be stocked up. I don't like to think I'm going to run out of food.

Mary I hope you rotate it. [Pause.] Have you seen the news?

John Yes.

Mary Isn't it dreadful.

John [Putting down paper.] What?

Mary The news from Bosnia. Isn't it dreadful. Those poor people in Bosnia.

John [Flat tone.] Yes. Appalling.

Mary It's shocking what's going on out there. [Walks in from the kitchen.] Have you seen the pictures?

John On television? Yes.

Mary [John gets increasingly uncomfortable as she speaks.] They look so thin. It doesn't bear thinking about. I thought we'd left all that kind of thing behind. I thought it was a thing of the past. After the last war I didn't think anything like that could happen again. You wouldn't think people could be so wicked. What do you think about it? Do you think it's as bad as they say or are they making it all up? Is it just propaganda?

John I don't know.

Mary They're probably all as bad as one another. It's difficult to know who's propaganda to believe. I think it's all exaggerated. Those refugees; they all come over here because they know we're soft.

John. If they can get out.

Mary. They're coming over by the truck load. They're all jumping out of trucks in

Folkestone. They come through the tunnel. I always knew that was a mistake. They think it's all rosy over here. They think everything's easy. Well, they've got another thing coming, they have. Well, all I say is, why can't they go somewhere else? It's not our problem. Why'd they have to come here?

John. Perhaps they're running away from something.

Mary Well that's a chilling thought. [Pause.] If it's all true it makes you think, doesn't it. Have people learnt nothing. All these years after the second world war and they're at it again.

John It's human nature.

Mary That's a very pessimistic way of looking at things.

John The twentieth century doesn't have a monopoly on mass murder, it just has a more efficient press.

Mary You're getting cynical in your old age.

John What else is old age for?

Mary Now I'm not going to continue this conversation. It'll only get us both depressed and we can do without that. [Looks at watch.] I must get back, Peter will be waiting for his lunch. He gets very irritable if he isn't fed regularly. [Putting on coat.] Now remember, don't use the oven. I'll be back later.

John Give Peter my regards, I hope he's feeling better.

Mary [Exiting.] Yes, I will. Look after yourself.

John And you. [Pause.] News. Bad news. People are always bringing bad news. I don't want to know. I don't want to hear what's going on. I've had enough 'news' for one lifetime. But people like Mary thrive on news: they

love to tell you all about it because it's never anything to do with them. It's always happening to somebody else.

[Sits in silence.]

Rose. [Pause, thinking.] Why do they name women after flowers? What's in a flower? No doubt we are supposed to be reminded of that gentle beauty; the fragile grace of flowers; and their delicate scent. Is that what women are like? Is that what we want them to be like? Rose. [Picking up a poetry book from the table.] Jaroslav Seifert, my favourite poet, wrote a poem about the beautiful meaning of women's names. [Leafs through and reads from the book.]

...how much tenderness is hidden in the names  
of Old Testament women.

Adah is Ornament and Orpah

is a Hind,

Naamah is the Pleasant

and Nikol the Little Brook.

Abigail is the Fount of Exultation.

...Jemima is the Dove and Tamar

a Palm Tree.

Tirzah is Pleasantness

and Zilpah a Raindrop.

and so he goes on. And of course they are all Jewish names. And he has a reason for this, because the poem is, after all, not about names but about

standing by and doing nothing, doing nothing as the Jews are rounded up,  
and we know where they're going even if we pretend to ourselves we don't.  
That is what he is really writing about; he's setting a trap so that he can snap  
it shut on our conscience.

But at the end of the poem he says: [reciting sadly]

Rhoda is the Rose.

And this flower perhaps is the only thing

that's left to us on earth

from ancient Paradise.

[Closes eyes.]

Rose.

[Opens eyes.]

My wife.

And when I sit and remember her I like to think that he was writing not just  
about a flower but also about my wife. The only thing left of paradise.

Gone - now.

But it's not all easy going with roses, is it? There are thorns as well as those  
secretively folded petals. And if you want to cultivate them you have to get  
through a lot of shit. But it's worth it; to gaze at them. If you look down into  
the heart of a rose, you can get lost in all those petals; so smooth and soft to  
the touch.

[Sits in silence. Turns the pages of the book. Reading from the book.]

All my life I have sought the paradise  
that used to be here,  
whose traces I have found  
only on women's lips  
and in the curves of their skin  
when it was warm with love.

[Closes eyes.]

Rose.

[Opens eyes.]

I miss you.

Do you miss me?

[Sits in silence.]

Who do I think I'm talking to? People will be saying I've gone gaga. When we go we go. That's it. Nothing. Just Nothing. Dust and ashes. That's all. When I was young I used to be religious. I believed everything. But the war put paid to that. Everybody believes that God is on their side. But God, He isn't on anybody's side. He's on His side.

[Closes eyes.]

Rose.

[Opens eyes.]

I met her after the war. In a Displaced Persons Camp. She was working for the red cross. She looked so beautiful in her uniform. When she looked at me her eyes were full of – Love. Like an angel. Supernatural. When I first

saw her I thought she was a vision. I thought she wasn't real, and that my mind was playing tricks on me. I had T.B., I was feverish and I thought I was going to die, and the doors of paradise had opened a fraction and enabled me to see inside. But I didn't die. I didn't get to paradise, which gets farther away every day, I got her instead. It wasn't a bad bargain.

We both liked poetry. We used to quote it to one another from memory. It sounds corny now, but it was very romantic, very . . . special. To be able to do that. To share something like that.

We got married in the camp. A lot of people did in those days. People didn't want to hang about. They wanted to start afresh. The war was over. I wanted a new life. I wanted to forget. Everyone was the same. Everyone walked around in a daze, as if they'd just woken from a nightmare and weren't sure if it had really ended or not. And to keep the nightmare at bay people would get very busy; they'd be full of schemes, wanting a new . . . a new life.

I didn't tell her everything. I thought that was the least I could do. I thought that was kind. Some people believe you should have no secrets. They think a married couple should tell one another everything. [With mock astonishment.] They must have led very uneventful lives!

Telling people everything is cruel, because you're telling them things they don't want to know; when you're doing that you're just being selfish; you're

telling them for yourself - to make you feel better. There is more honour in silence.

[Closes eyes.]

Nightmares.

[Opens eyes.]

So often things are the reverse of how they appear. Telling the truth, being honest, having no secrets, it sounds so virtuous, so noble: but it isn't.

If you have a secret you just have to live with it: for better or worse. It's yours; you can't get rid of it by giving it to someone else. You don't get rid of it that way, you just spread it around, and then it's stuck to them as well as stuck to you.

[John sighs, gets up, with difficulty, and goes to the kitchen. Returns carrying a tray with some sandwiches. He sits, starts to eat a sandwich. Using the remote he switches on the TV. Sound of a nature programme documentary. He watches, pulls a face, picks up the remote and switches off the television.]

Why is it that all nature programmes end up with everything eating everything else? You can guarantee that as soon as you see some cute little furry animal before long it's going to get eaten alive before your very eyes. Is that what nature consists of? Brief glimmerings of beauty snuffed out in a moments violence. How do they film those things? It's very clever. But it still puts you off your food.

[Knocking on the door. John momentarily startled, then gets up, with difficulty, and laboriously makes his way to the door.]

Coming.

Nigel It's only me.

John [Walking to the door, slowly.] Almost there.

Nigel Don't hurry.

John [John reaches door and opens it. Nigel stands on other side beaming.]

Hello, Nigel, come in.

Nigel [Enters. As they talk the man slowly returns to his armchair.]

How are you today, John?

John Can't complain. Nasty weather though.

Nigel Yes. Still, only to be expected at this time of year.

John True. How's Catherine?

Nigel Much better, thanks. She's started teaching part-time at Hillfield comprehensive. She got bored at home.

John Is she enjoying it?

Nigel I think so. I'm sure she's very good at it. But after a break it's always a bit hard to get back into the flow again, isn't it.

John Yes. Perseverance. That's what's required.

Nigel Oh, I'm not interrupting your lunch am I?.

John No, don't worry, I wasn't hungry anyway.

Nigel I could always come back later.

John No, no. I'm glad you're here. Do you think you could sort out my video? I

unplugged it by mistake the other day and ever since then it's just been sitting there blinking at me. [Nigel examines the VCR.] It's forgotten who it is. It doesn't know what day it is, or what time it is. You'd think the poor thing had gone gaga. I tried pressing a few buttons but it didn't do any good.

Nigel It's fatal unplugging these things.

John So I've noticed.

Nigel Do you have the instructions?

John They're on the table.

Nigel [Fetches the instructions and studies them.] They're all a bit different you see.

John It's all beyond me. The instructions might as well be written in Chinese, for all the good it does me. In fact, I think those ones are written in Chinese.

Nigel Yes. They can be hard to follow sometimes.

John I got this one because it's supposed to be easy to use.

Nigel Yes, most of them say that. [Fiddles with the control panel.] Ah yes. There we are. Year, month, day, hour, minute. Soon have this fixed.

John. How do you know which button to press?

Nigel. You hold down this one and press this.

John. Oh.

Nigel. What do you make the time? I make it one forty five.

John That sounds about right.

Nigel I could always check the talking clock.

John Don't bother. I'm sure your watch is accurate enough.

Nigel There we are. All done.

John Thank you, Nigel. I do appreciate it. It's a relief not to have the blasted thing

winking at me all the time. It quite got on my nerves.

Nigel You're back in action now.

John Thank you.

Nigel No problem. [Nigel sits on the sofa.] How've things been this week?

John All right.

Nigel Have you thought about the project?

John The project?

Nigel The Oral History project.

John Oh that. Well, to tell you the truth, Nigel. I don't think I can do it.

Nigel Oh, that's a shame.

John I don't think I can. You see I always clam up when I'm being recorded. And I haven't got anything important to say in any case.

Nigel Who knows what's important, John? Often it's just those things that people take for granted, things people overlook, that provide historians with the greatest insight. That's the whole idea behind this project. To record the experiences of ordinary people as an antidote to the V.I.P.s view of history.

John Mmm.

Nigel I'd do it very unobtrusively. It'd be just like the two of us having a chat. You know, the way we do, except you could go over it later.

John Mmm.

Nigel In my opinion you always have something interesting to say, John. That's why it would be a shame if you didn't participate. We could try it out. Do one, and if you don't like it, if it makes you too uncomfortable, we can stop. We could stop at any time.

John Mmm. I suppose so.

Nigel Great.

John But I don't want to talk about the war.

Nigel Oh.

John Not the war. I could talk about something else. I could tell you about my childhood or something.

Nigel Yes, that would be good. I'll just go and get my equipment.

John You're not going to do it now?

Nigel No time like the present.

John I'm not prepared. I'm not ready.

Nigel [While walking to the door and exiting.] Just relax and talk off the cuff like we always do. It doesn't have to be any different to our normal chats. I'll just get the equipment, I have it in the car.

John [To himself.] Always prepared. [Bitterly.] Must be a bloody boy scout. Never trust a boy scout. He's always doing something. He doesn't just sit in a chair and watch nature programmes. He has lots of hobbies. [With an air of suspicion.] And he volunteers for things.

He likes to make films. He's in this video club. Nothing seedy. He's married so he probably isn't a pervert. But it's hard to tell these days. It's a club for people who enjoy making videos. They show them to one another, and sometimes they enter them for competitions. He shows them to me, occasionally. [Pause, then emphatically.] They're very boring. [With resignation.] He seems to enjoy doing it; but it's not a spectator sport. I suppose it's harmless. He wants to make a video about me. Me . . . hah! He wants me to talk about my life. He wants to capture me for posterity. I'm

not keen. If you ask me there's too much History. Too much poking around in the past. He wants me to tell him all the things I've spent years trying to forget.

Nigel [Comes back carrying equipment and sets it up.] Here we are. Now. I think here would be a good place. Just pretend it isn't there. [Sets up tripod.] Once I've got it setup I'll leave it running. Then we can just sit and talk like we usually do. We can ignore it. It won't be in the way at all. Pretty soon you'll forget it's there.

John If you say so.

Nigel Trust me, John. I know about these things. As soon as we get talking you'll have forgotten all about it.

[Nigel finishes setting up the camera. John looks on sceptically.] There we are, all done. [Stands back proudly. Sits on chair facing the man.] Off we go. [Silence.] You can start whenever you like. [Silence.] Pretend it's not there. It's just an ordinary day and I've come round for a bit of a chat.

[Silence.] I think you were going to tell me about your childhood. [Silence.]

John I can't remember anything.

Nigel Just relax.

John All right.

Nigel I think once before you mentioned your father was a policeman.

John That's right.

Nigel Can you tell me a bit about him?

John He was a police detective.

Nigel That sounds interesting.

John Not really.

Nigel       What sort of things did he do?

John        [Glares at the camera.] I can't remember anything with that thing looking at me. It's not natural. To talk with that thing looking at me.

Nigel        It's just a machine, John. You don't have to worry about what you say in front of it. It's a blank, just a blank.

John        It makes me go blank.

Nigel        How about if I ask you some questions?

John        Oh all right.

Nigel        Um, when were you born?

John        I was born in 1908, 1st October 1908.

Nigel        And where were you born?

John        In Pilsen. When I was a child it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. That was before the war, the first war I mean. That put paid to Austro-Hungary. Lots of little nations grew from the ashes of the Empire. Where we lived became part of Czechoslovakia. Culturally we felt German but by Nationality we were henceforth Czech. To the Germans we seemed very Czech and to the Czechs we seemed very German.

Nigel        That must have been strange.

John        I suppose it was but we didn't think about it much. The Empire was a peculiar mixture of Nationalities. We took it for granted; it was just how things were. We spoke German at home, and at school, and Czech to the servants and in the street, at the shops, things like that. Czech was for practical everyday things and German was for home. At school I also learnt English and French. But not so well, of course. My father was a bit of an Anglophile; he admired the English with their stiff upper lip and their sense of fair play.

Nigel       What was your father like?

John        He was a respected citizen; well liked. I admired him and wanted to be like him. [Voice loosening up as he becomes absorbed in remembering his father.] He was a tall man, handsome, with a beautiful tenor voice. The women in the town found him irresistible. He had presence. Do you know what I mean? When he walked into a room the centre of attention would shift to him. I always admired that, the ability to announce your presence without having to say anything. I could never do that. When I walked into a room nothing was disturbed, everything carried on exactly as before. When I was a young man I sometimes wondered if I suffered from spontaneous attacks of invisibility, so little impression did I make on a gathering.

[With pride.] My father was a good singer, almost to a professional standard. There was a lot of singing in those days. He'd sing all the popular and more serious stuff too, Schubert lieder; Wolf. When I was older I used to accompany him on the piano. What a voice he had! A voice that could make anyone eat out of his hand.

I suppose he had charm. Great charm; not something you expect to find in a policeman, but there it was. He had an eye for the Ladies; and the Ladies had an eye for him. It made Mother nervous. Hardly surprising in the circumstances. And he was generous, generous to a fault.

Nigel       It sounds like you got on well with your parents.

John        I suppose so. But parents were very strict in those days. Mother was the really tough one. She was a real disciplinarian. Father had a gentle heart.

For instance, if I was very naughty; if I wouldn't do what I was told, Mother would tell Father to punish me when he came home. As soon as he got through the door she'd be on at him, demanding he thrash me for my misdemeanours.

[Conspiratorially, relishing the story.] Father would look stern and take me upstairs. When we were alone he would ask me what it was all about, I'd tell him, and he would see that it was something trivial; but to please Mother he would get out his cane, tell me to bend over, [with amusement] and then what he would do was beat a cushion with the cane, and I would pretend to scream. She never found out what was going on. It was our secret.

Nigel       Amazing. What was it like at school?

John        I was educated at the local Gymnasium. It was very strict. You had to do what you were told; that was the most important thing.

Nigel        Did you enjoy school?

John        No. It was just something you had to do. Something to get through. I wanted to be grown up. I was a mediocre student. I had no talent for knowledge. I just wanted to be grown up.

Nigel        What did you do after school?

John        I worked for an Insurance company. Just clerking. Accounts, that kind of thing. Not very interesting I'm afraid.

Nigel        Oh, I don't know.

John        I think I've had enough for one day. If you don't mind I think we'll stop now. I'm feeling a bit tired.

Nigel        Of course, we mustn't tire you out. [Gets up.] I thought that went very well.

Not as bad as you thought it would be, was it?

John No.

Nigel That's the spirit. There's no hurry. We can always continue tomorrow. Is it all right if I leave the camera here?

John I suppose it'll be all right.

Nigel In fact, I'm glad you asked to stop because I have to pick Sally up from the playgroup today, and listening to you I might have forgotten. You get fined if you're late picking them up.

John Really?

Nigel Yes. Twenty pounds. It's quite an incentive to be on time, I can tell you.

John What's Catherine doing?

Nigel Oh, they've got some staff meeting on today.

John You'd better get going, I wouldn't want to make you late.

Nigel Yes, I'd better be off. I'll pop in again tomorrow and perhaps we can record some more stuff.

John Perhaps.

Nigel I'll be off then. Look after yourself. [Goes towards door.]

John Yes. And you. Give my regards to Catherine.

Nigel I will.

John Let yourself out.

Nigel Okay. Cheerio.

John Cheerio.

[Exit Nigel. John peers out the window.]

I notice his wife hasn't looked too cheerful lately. She always used to. I wonder if motherhood doesn't suit her. It doesn't suit all women. I

sometimes wonder about Nigel. Is he as happy as he seems? Is his little life the ideal little life he had planned out for himself? If he really is happy why does he have to keep himself so busy?

I wonder when Lucy will get here? I will be firm. I will simply refuse to go. She can't make me. I have rights. Mary will back me up, I'm sure she will.

It's all different when your children grow up. Then they start bossing you around. Think they can tell you how to live your life. [Pause.] We were so happy when our daughter was born. I wanted to call her Lucia, light, but Rose said we couldn't have anything foreign sounding; English people are suspicious of anything foreign, she'd get teased at school; so we called her Lucy.

[Becoming emotional.] She was a beautiful baby; she brought the light into our lives. Something for the future, something better than the past, that's what I thought. We were so proud when we had Lucy. At first all we could do was gaze at her in disbelief, that here was this little being, this perfect little being which we had made. Astonishing. It seemed unbelievable. This brand new little life before us. Just there. Just there.

I'm a sentimental old fool. You needn't think I don't know it. It's getting old that does it. Don't think it won't happen to you. Tear ducts you thought had dried up forever long ago suddenly spring into life.

[Touch of emotion again.] But to have a child, when you thought long ago you never would, never would have the opportunity, that is something.

During the war there were many times I thought I wouldn't survive. And in some ways I wonder if I have. Oh, I don't doubt my existence, but what is it that has survived? What is it? What has been lost on the way?

And I still have nightmares, after all these years. The past comes back to haunt us. The camps haunt me. I see the people again. You never know when it's going to happen; when something triggers off a memory, things you thought you'd forgotten. The other day I was taking out the rubbish, the refuse collectors had forgotten to empty my bin the previous week, and when I opened it up the smell of rotting meat hit me; and I was back there again and I couldn't stop shaking.

[Nervous agitation in the voice.] Sometimes, when your head goes funny, you think you hear things, see things, but you don't, not really, it's not really there. It gets confusing. And I get nervous. I get more nervous lately, now I'm older, I don't know what it is; I just feel like everything is catching up on me. I jump at the slightest sound. If I hear the sound of boots coming up the path I always think they are coming for me. I freeze. I listen. I interrogate the sound for signs, holding my breath. There is a certain way of rapping on the door; a certain kind of knocking that persuades me they've come for me. That hammering on the door sets up a panic inside me: I want to flee, I want to find a place to hide, but there isn't anywhere to hide so I get up and go to

the door. And when I open it who should be standing there but a man from the Gas Board! He wants to read the meter. He wants to read the meter!

It's hard to get the fear out of one's system. I'm waiting. A lot of the time I feel I'm just sitting here waiting, waiting for them to come and get me. I know it's only a matter of time. I can feel the circle closing in; I can feel the net all around me. Will anybody understand?

Sometimes there's nobody there but I still hear them coming for me, and I am afraid. I cannot deny it. I fear for myself. I always have. I tell myself I'm an old fool. But it doesn't do any good.

Lucy will probably be here soon. On the phone she said she wants to 'sort things out'. That sounds a bit ominous. I can't say I like the idea of 'sorting things out'. Whenever people are 'sorting things out' it always causes a lot of disturbance. I can do without disturbances at my age. If only I hadn't fallen over! One silly mistake, that's all it takes.

[Sound of dog barking in the distance. John gets up and peers out of the window.]

There it is again. It's been barking all day, on and off. I can't make out where it's coming from. I could swear it's getting closer. I hate dogs. I hate barking. [Looks out the window apprehensively.] The weather's not so bad. Things have brightened up. [Looks anxiously at the camera. Pause. Gets

up and pulls a cloth from the table and puts it over the camera. Sits down again.] Better. That's better. [Looks at the newspaper.] More news. There's always news, even when there isn't any, they invent some. But there's plenty today. No need for invention today. No.

[Flat tone.] It says here: in Pale they loaded Muslims into trucks and forced them to sing the song 'Od Topole pa do Ravne Gore'. When a man in one of the trucks made an obscene gesture one of the soldiers climbed into the truck and cut off two of his fingers with a pair of scissors.

Nobody learns anything. [With more emotion.] According to this Chetniks and Serbian soldiers systematically killed most of the Muslim men and raped most of the women in occupied territories in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the camp known as Kod Sonje, in Vogo, they raped two girls, aged seven and thirteen in front of their mother. In Omarska they used power saws to cut off peoples' heads. In the meantime the United Nations argues amongst themselves what to do.

How do we learn to hate? How do we learn to treat other people as if they aren't other people? We pick it up, without conscious effort, from all around us. From all around it seeps into our minds, is absorbed through the skin, and sinks into us without us noticing, like a deadly nerve gas. But it's there all the same, waiting to come out; waiting for a trigger; something to light the fuse, give it permission to come out.

We live in a world of hate without even knowing it's there. We inherit our hatred. It comes from the things that are perceived to threaten us; the things we don't understand. But don't think because you've inherited your hatred it isn't yours. It's yours all right. It's closer than you think. You might not see it, but it's buried deep inside you. Just waiting to come out. I know.

[Gradually becoming enraptured.] When the German army moved into the Sudetenland we didn't feel we'd been invaded, we felt we'd been liberated. At last a part of Greater Germany, a Germany that should always have existed, a Germany that would show everyone else the way, that would show how life should be lived. We ran into the streets and waved and waved until we thought our arms would drop off. It was such a happy day, such a happy day. We didn't know how things would end up, we hadn't 'thought ahead', we didn't realise whose plan we were part of, we were just happy. It sounds stupid now. But we weren't stupid, perhaps we were naive; but everyone becomes naive when you tell them what they want to believe.

[With mounting sense of irony.] When the war broke out I joined up. I wanted to be part of the big adventure. I didn't want to sit in a boring office while the world exploded around me. Father wanted me to find a job in something safe. I told him I couldn't do that, I told him the Fatherland needed me; I actually said that; how embarrassing. I believed everything we were told, and it made me feel important. I was full of belief, full of certainty; and there is nothing so dangerous as certainty. Certainty makes us stop questioning things.

And it wasn't just the party. The church said the Jews murdered Christ. And I was stupid enough to believe them. I was literal minded. We were all literal minded. Subtlety eluded us, metaphor did not exist for us. Just the truth. Our truth. And resentment. Plenty of resentments bubbling in our minds. The look of them. The - superiority of them. Their success, their industriousness, their intelligence, mocked us.

I went out this morning, just around the garden, for a bit. The wind is icy cold. It whips around the corner like it wants to rip your ears off. It reminded me of the cold at Auschwitz. Of course, it was nothing like, not really; but it reminded me. [Muttering in a low quick tone.] Those bitter mornings; up before sunrise; the endless roll calls: counting, counting, forever counting: zehn, zwanzig, dreissig, vierzig, fünfzig. [Louder.] It had to add up. It all had to add up. Tally. The bodies had to tally. [Dogmatically.] It didn't matter if they were dead or alive but they must add up, you must end up with the same number of bodies you started out with.

I hate counting. I never want to count again. The whole day would be full of counting, in one form or another, counting and shouting. First Appell then marching out to the work site, out the gates, along the road, through the mud, [shouting as if on a parade ground] LINKS, ZWEI, DREI, VIER; LINKS, ZWEI, DREI, VIER; LINKS, ZWEI, DREI - VIER. [Feverishly.] And always at the double, as fast as possible, keep them moving: ALLES RAUS! Schnell, SCHNELLER! aber los!

[Calmer again.] And at the end of the day counting, keeping a tally: zehn, zwanzig, dreissig, vierzig, fünfzig. Get there in the end. Everything adding up - adding up. Everything had to add up.

And then the floggings: they had to add up, they had to count the lashes, better not lose count or it would start again at zero. [Gradually getting louder, intenser, as he counts.] Eins, zwei, drei, vier, fünf, **sechs**, SIEBEN, **ACHT**; at least up to fünfundzwanzig.

[Bewildered self-justification.] I seemed to spend all the war counting; or standing watching. Holding my gun and forever watching, witnessing. I didn't act. I spent the war not acting. I didn't act. I wasn't one of those who took pleasure in peoples' misery. I didn't look for victims, I didn't relish the punishments, lust after inflicting humiliations and pain and death. I didn't. I don't expect you to believe me. Who is there to believe me? I don't believe myself half the time. I can't believe it's true - but it is. It sometimes seems like then was another me, another person entirely; like I was doing things under hypnosis, not thinking, not feeling, just doing and not doing, acting and not acting.

[Calmer again.] But they say you can't get anyone to do something under hypnosis they wouldn't do in their conscious life. And though I don't believe it, it was me. It wasn't another person. I wish it was, but it wasn't. There's no use pretending. There's too much pretending. We all pretend to

ourselves we're better than we are. We like to think that we would behave well. It comforts us. We think we know these things. The lucky ones never have to find out. They never need to know. They can get through their lives without having to choose; taking credit for virtues that have never been tested. None of us is safe. We just like to think we are.

I often sit here: and I think, I'm waiting, I'm just waiting. I know I can't get away with it forever. In the newspapers they say they're setting up a committee, a committee to look into Nazi war criminals who may be living in Britain. There are questions in the House. Calls for Justice. Justice! There are debates; debates about whether, after all these years, there is any point in going after a handful of feeble old men.

But I'm waiting. There is no statute of limitations on war crimes. The clock is always ticking: [Gradually getting louder.] tick, tock, tick, tock, TICK, TOCK!

[Sinister tone.] People will be thinking I've gone gaga.

I have every right to it. I have every right to go gaga. I've earned my madness. YOU GET YOUR OWN! This is mine!

[Gradually becoming more feverish and intense.] There is no statute of limitations on memories. Memories are always with us. You might think they've died; but they have a way of resurrecting themselves; it might be a

smell, a sensation, a word, a phrase; a gesture. Anything can trigger a memory. And then there is Night. Night, when the mind rummages in the refuse of our minds; opens the lids on so many boxes, turns over old discarded bits and pieces, digs down into the pile - and pulls out, surprises; holds them before our eyes, things we thought we'd lost, things we thought we'd left behind, conveniently dropped, when nobody was looking, so nobody would know. And Lo! there it is - alive again, before your eyes again, twice as lively as before!

[As if trapped in a nightmare.] I remember it now. It was just another day. It was always just another day. We had recently received a shipment of Greeks. They'd come from the sunny south; and here they were on the bleak Polish plain. They'd been out of camp on a work Kommando; and when they came back the numbers didn't add up. They counted again, and they still didn't add up. There was one missing! So we searched, and we found the missing one, sleeping in a ditch. She was lying there, in the ditch, and she was just sleeping, just sleeping. She must have been exhausted and she had curled up and gone to sleep. No one had noticed. It seemed unbelievable. She was brought back to the camp. All the prisoners were still lined up on the Appellplatz; nobody could move until the numbers added up. Technically she had tried to escape. All she had done was fall asleep, but technically she had escaped. So they set the dogs on her. In front of all the assembled prisoners they set the dogs on her, as an example to the others. We were there to make sure they watched.

[Becoming more and more agitated.] And I had to watch too, as the dogs pounced on her, jaws snapping. They tugged at her flesh, rip and clawed. Around her they waddled, dragging her limbs, gnawing at her flesh, pulling a leg, an arm. And she screamed. She screamed and screamed. I prayed the dogs would bite her neck. Why didn't they bite her neck? That's what they were trained for. And she screamed and screamed. And her screams entered my body, they seemed to reverberate inside me. The screams. And I thought, I cannot bear this. She should die. Why doesn't she die and stop this. I could feel my finger arching around the trigger. I wanted to shoot. I wanted to stop it. Not the dogs, I didn't want to shoot the dogs; I wanted to shoot her. I wanted to make her stop. [Quaking with emotion.] Make her stop screaming. I wasn't going to shoot the dogs, the dogs were valuable, I was going to shoot her.

[Holding up hand, index finger hooked around an imaginary trigger.] I can still feel the trigger under my finger. Hard. Cold. Under my finger. I can feel my finger tightening. Pulling again the spring of the trigger. Fear growing. As my finger curls around the trigger the fear screams out inside me - you must not, must not!

I do nothing. I hold my rifle. I do nothing. I listen to the screams. I watch the prisoners. I watch the dogs. I don't shoot. I can't shoot. Orders. I have orders. How can I disobey? What will happen to me? [Whining.] What will happen to *me!* [Sobs.] In my dreams I hear the screams. In my dreams I always do nothing.

[Calmer.] We knew the end was coming. Of course we did. You'd have to be a fool not to know. But what could you do? You'd given up thinking of the future, only the present, and suddenly you had to start making plans again. What to do? What to do, how to get out. The whole thing was collapsing all around us and you just knew you had to get out or be destroyed with it.

We'd heard what the Russians were doing to captured German soldiers, even Wehrmacht, not just SS. We knew what to expect. So we headed west. Towards the Fatherland; and towards the Americans and the British, away from the Russians. With the Russians you knew what to expect; with the Americans and the British you might get lucky.

The first thing to do, when the time was right, was to get rid of your uniform. You couldn't afford to be found in an SS uniform. At the end everything was very confusing. Nobody knew for sure where the front was, it was all over the place. There were so many people wandering around, people who had escaped from death marches, Ka-Tzetniks, POWs, 'guest' workers. I posed as a Czech who had been forced to work in a munitions factory. Amongst the confusion my story got me through. I ended up in a Displaced Persons Camp. I didn't want to go back to Czechoslovakia. I knew it was in the Russian zone. But I didn't have to go back, by marrying Rose I could come here.

I got away. But in my dreams I never get away. I'm always there. It's just a matter of time. I know it is. I can feel it in my bones. You're never too old to be scared. And as you get older, as everything else fades away, the past gets more real than the present; but all my life I've been running from the past, running from the past into the present. And now I'm getting tired. My legs won't carry me very far. But in the camps we never pitied those whose legs wouldn't carry them any farther, we just beat them harder.

The things you know you always know too late. Worthless knowledge, after the event. [Bitterly.] And Nigel wants to know about Oral History. I'll give him 'Oral History'. I've got more History than he knows what to do with.

[Becoming agitated again.] But I'm waiting. I'm still waiting. Forever waiting. Doing nothing - as usual. Culpable nothings. Not acting is as bad as acting. I wish I could have pulled the trigger, just once, just once, do something. Instead I sit and wait. And nobody knows. Nobody knows how I sit and wait. Waiting out the days. But I know, I *do* know, that one day, [Sound of boots coming up the path, distorted.] one day they're going to come, they're going to come and get me, [Recorded sound, distorted slightly to indicate it is only in his head: Links, zwei, drei, vier; Links, zwei, drei, vier; Links zwei, drei, vier...] and I'll be waiting, I'll be here, I've stopped running, I'm too tired. [Sound of knocking on the door. John stares in terror at the door.]

Lucy [Voice off.] Dad. It's me. Let me in.

John [Cowering in fear, looking at the door. Hears sounds of marching, voices

shouting out orders, dogs barking, screaming, the chant Links,  
zwei,drei,vier... the barking and screaming gradually getting louder.]

Go away!

Lucy [Voice off.] Dad. Are you all right? You haven't fallen over again, have  
you? [John cowers, sobbing, trying to make himself smaller, quaking,  
peering anxiously towards the door. His sobs are gradually overwhelmed by  
the sound effects of the camp reverberating in his mind; sound of dog  
barking getting louder and louder, echoing.]

Fade to blackout.

END