

**Supplement
to
1965 SOWER**



March Night

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condensed and translated from Danish
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The events of this story--the death of Martin A. Hansen's father--took place in occupied Denmark during the Second World War.

Some living thing--a sparrow perhaps--chirps once in the top of the willow tree. It is cold; the creature sighs; it is dark.

The day's wind retires with the darkness. The old willow tree stands shrouded in silence beside me. She is a witch-wife, the willow, whispering, always full of the gossip of gloom, but good in her dry-rot interior, good up in her black head, where there dwells a creature in the mouth of her. In past ages one made a nest below and sat there and read the Norwegian history of the world for the people. He looked down as did Simon Stylites, down on earth, and he saw the nations pass beneath his pinnacle of knowledge. But long ago he came down to earth again and perhaps now the willow will be acknowledged by someone. For many years I have only given the tree a fleeting glance during my visit and thought: only dry-rot and wretched, it will fall soon! Now we shall be parted, but the willow-woman is silent.

The lapwing calls out in the meadow. Below where the field vanishes in the darkness of the hollow. Come again some evening a month from now and all the voices below will persuade you to believe that you are standing on the outskirts of the lost garden. Beloved, calls the darkness. Here am I, it calls. You can only stand and listen.

Only the lapwing calls out in the meadow. I have not heard you before; I come from the city; I drove through Zealand today against the wind, bit by bit, straw by straw. Too late, too late, said each straw. Lapwing, you mean well; now you should be glad. Come to see my young, you call. But your mood and your errand penetrate me and it sounds as if you cried: my little ones are murdered, my little ones are dead. Yes, there is something unnatural about the fields here; I realize that. They are gentle to look upon, but in them I am overcome by despair.

Silence. It comes out of the green earth. It was the wild hen's laughter. It calls once, but the call stirs something bloody up in me, and it seems as if a creature has emerged from the green earth and now stares at me. Have I known this creature better before, in distant days, in an indistinct time? But in there--in the room-- he didn't hear the partridge in the night, which he had heard spring after spring, and his father before him and his father also and all the tillers of the earth, who have received signs of the seasons from the birds. The last one, the only one, who can hear, plows now with a plow.

Let me cut a finger-thick branch off the willow tree--it has certainly been done before--make a scratch around it and tap on the cold bark with a knife-handle. No, the bark won't loosen properly from the white wood. The sap has only come up sporadically in this old tree and I will never again get a whistle here, whittled as I once learned to from him.

My fingers hesitate over the willow trunk's gnarled bark, which is as full of noteworthy things as the Old Testament. Here I wept over a misdeed once with my forehead pressed so hard against the tree, that afterwards I actually bore the mark of Cain. But as I stood there depressed and stared into the grey bark, it occurred to me that so it must appear to the Great One, when He bends over the earth and His eyes seek out the Alps or some other mountainous country. I say ants and midges travel in the willow bark's magnificent mountain-land, and it was good for my heart. My father didn't laugh when I hesitantly revealed my vision. He leaned against the tree and told about avalanches, glaciers and tunnels. He had never been in a foreign land, but he had read and thought.

My hand passes along the bark's lines and valleys down to the willow tree's roots, and down here, where I can see nothing, my fingers feel several rough and wormish shoots. It is the hopvine, the climber, which will rise into the air. And here is the slender goatweed, which smells of Zealand, of pungent summer. There are also violets; I feel the spot where they were last--more than twenty years ago.

Out on the field to feel. Let me examine a clod. Yes, it speaks well of the entire field. It crumbles in my hand, the top soil falls

finely, and the smell of it--it is the smell which torments captives in their exile. What do you do with yourself, when the rain falls over the camp and the hated earth within the barbed wire smells like the fields at home?

So then I can tell him that the wind has made the earth ready for use. For alternation I can see dimly the prints of his wooden-shoes. They are from yesterday. Tomorrow they will be gone; a stranger comes to see them. The earth may not be detained and the sun does not stand still at Gideon. But here by the hedge I find a forgotten fork, cold and dew on its shiny handle. I may take it in. No, let it stay here in the night with me.

From the courtyard I can see the lights through the black-out curtains. I must stand and search my heart a while. Is it honest to take in the violets' fragrance and the lapwing's cry, to feel a clod of earth - now - when the cold descends on the coffin, when man drowns in horror, when the monster oppresses the land, when - yes, all that we know?

Be quiet and listen to what is happening high up in the darkness. The light comes. The spring never had more strength. High, high up move the messengers on rushing wings. A large flight of birds beats northward through the church of the night.

In the room several candles burn. Through the long winter the two in the house have had to see by a little, poor light. The large, gleaming candles burn at night for the one who no longer has any need to see. And the draft from the door makes the flames leap from each wick, as a young lamb who tests the tether for the first time.

There is silence. It is late. The clock stops and I am not aware of time. The wax now rises up around the candle flames, fizzing and trembling gently, so that the corner shadows are never at rest, so that life's fine changes still seem to go over the sleeping features of the lifeless one.

They are alone, the man in the flower-covered coffin and the man who was not in time. Thirty years ago, also a night in March, it was the one now dead who watched over me. He had not come quite in time. The fall suddenly. But man to man, they have met through the years and are two together one night, one dead and

one living, witness to birth and witness to death. The father lies silent, but when day dawns, his words weigh heavy on the son.

Had he come in time and stood in the room, where the dying eyes met his, what would he have done then, what would he have said then? "The winter crops are better here than where I come from." And the father smiles a little: "Was the wind dead against you?" "Yes, but it is a drying wind."

What else have these two to talk about before the Great Threshold? Land and weather. Embarrassment forbids anything else. They are as strangers, but they became strangers first if one of them began to speak of the unspeakable, which a wife can say to her husband and he to her, when he is weak. For that between father and son there is no word for fear, none for consolation, none for faith, none for joy in one another. Language, as it fully lives, emotional, vigorous and affectionate, is your mother's language. Your father's secret conceals itself as well as the marrow in the bones. But when they meet the last time at night, the one laid in Charon's barge, while the other stands and looks on him, as he could never look on him before, then they are free. Cradle and coffin, they set free, in them there is refuge from habit. Now we can almost be as we were that time you sat me as a little boy upon your shoulders and turned into a run-away horse.

Now the sustainer is helpless. Another shall take charge of him, choose the day, choose the grave. His existence is in the hands of the survivors, and he can correct nothing, explain nothing, add nothing. What he himself thinks has disappeared; all that is left is what others think. When he died he went back through all his years quickly, and took with him out into that strange state all those personal things which make each memory tremble in anticipation of what one once more shall give this flesh and blood.

The large and the small in life's path seem to lie naked before the glance of the watcher. But when the great mystery, death, lifts the finished fate from him, so that he can pass judgment on it, then the apprehension grips him in his marrow and bones, that he himself shall be sentenced. The helpless one in the coffin is powerful, and it is the living who shall be weighed.

Somewhere in the quiet house there is a stirring. She tosses on her bed, sleepless perhaps, who was awake last night and was left alone when it happened. Then let sleep come and with it the forty-year old vision, that first meeting, the young farmhand, who pulled a barley straw loose, so that it cried in the sheath, and bit the straw, while he thought on what he should say to her.

And tonight he appears young, handsomely wrinkled and grey. Stretched and big, bigger than in life. Tight about his chest is the white athletic shirt, which he wore in his youth when his team won a new shield for the flagstaff in distant parishes. Yes, fair as a man, you are ferried away.

But over his face pass folds and furrows. The wrinkles, the kind heart, the pure character. But they remind me also of the country's furrows and paths, which you were so expert in. Where you had gone only once before when young, you never lost your way when old, by night or by day. Strange how the paths loved you, indulged you, twisted wherever you wanted, even if they saw you for the first time. But you assessed everything, which they offered. No way was so sad and unknown, that you didn't have time to stop a while here and there. You could see the conditions of the poor, although a barren year you have never seen, for nothing in the land was poor for you. What there was outside of your island you saw only once, but then step by step. This peace-loving went heavily armed over Fyn and Jutland. Come to defend. The infantryman impressed each path, each field, each church steeple, into his memory.

Why then should the room lie in darkness the last night, you are at home? Shall they have the power to prevent your funeral candles from shining out over field and path? You and your father and his father and his father, we all bore arms in our youth to prevent that, which since has happened. Then we were free, and as a freeman you shall lie here the last night. Oh, that black on the windows! You will never see peace, but field and path shall see the lights shine from your house.

The darkness seems thicker outside. I wonder if the lapwing calls? Fresh cold comes in through the open door, and the flames flicker on the candle wicks. But I must stop as I step over the threshold, I remember that I heard a slight cough the moment

before, and I turn suddenly in the doorway and look back. Of course not. It is certainly unavoidable. Merely this foreboding of smell. But it occurred to me to say something about the wild geese I heard pass before and I coughed slightly. And my cough I have known since I was little.

I walked out in the field a ways. The light can be seen from afar in this great, deep night. The lapwings call infrequently now, and only a single flight passes over, eastward along the beach. Or am I mistaken? Occasionally I can hear swells mount up in the beach's shallow water.

When I come into the room from the fresh night-air, I notice it more.

Yes, I had thought to tell you that the fog is closing into the trees. During the day I saw a birchtree, where the sap flowed from a saw cut. And the earth is ready for use, so it can be sown by Easter. I wanted to say that I heard a large migration go north in the evening. It was probably geese. When I was a boy, I remember, we two once lay in the snow behind the cabbage stalks and watched the grey geese, who went over the meadow. There was severe frost, but we lay there a solid hour.

But you don't hear the geese pass. You don't hear me. I shall not tell. I shall rather ask; who are you and who am I?

Earlier I was taken up by a childish hope, which had hidden itself beneath my reason. I believed, that you had coughed slightly. Well finally! Now I can breathe again. Also, I had not gotten to the bottom of it. Now I ought to sit quietly and let the cold from your blind, deaf, dumb body chill me and frost-bite the violets and other small plants of sentiment which hide the world's horror under their flowers.

My departure is yours, I go as you. But the likenesses, are they only realized in the flesh? Is there, in spite of them, a wall between the souls of the living? And is there sea and darkness between the living and the dead?

A good man's life and a good man's death. The grain harvested, the yield measured. This dead body, adorned for burial with flowers and linen and candles, which freely shine over the fields--it is worthy of the man. An honest man, who didn't yield in order

to settle: the one day passes judgment on the other and the last on them all. Therefore it would not be like him to let emotionalism fill the speeches. Trembling, the candles illuminate the dead man's beauty. Light and meaningful is death's peace, for this man's life was full of meaning. But behind the head of the coffin are the deep, black shadows. Here under the ferry's dark bow I see all that which has made Charon's eyes raw.

Yes, from this meaningful death thought may turn to the meaningless, which he often did, to Europe's enormous harvest of children's corpses, the hung piles, the burnt ashes, to Maidanek's pits, to all that one knows. And now don't let us believe that we have thoughts, theories, ideas powerful enough to keep us on our feet, when the storm of questions come: Where is the meaning in all that and what is it?

Chase the demagogue from you, show exigency away. There are answers enough, they flutter and they stretch everywhere, but they will be as cobwebs, when the questions come. But here is your learning place: You stand in the pit, in the ashes, in the piles of dead bodies, which shall chill and infect you, till you have a realization of it. It is through the heart's horror that it can come; with the heart you can comprehend.

One thing is certain--now they are identical, the Moslem's shoveled-out remains and this tenderly adorned corpse. Matter, in which putrification occurs, the truth of flesh. Your dearest is dead, the one whom you caressed, child, woman, man. You touch them for the last time and you go out to wash your hands, for they are defiled.

Is that all? Yes, they say, that is all. Call the dead! Call and call. Call again.

No answers. Perhaps it is, as they say. And so don't hide the fact of flesh under flowers' affectionate hypocrisy, under a faith of violets draped over the beloved form's restful sleep in the earth, under the consolation of flowery lyrics: of matter's fertile transformation and the body's resurrection into a rose on the grave. Nature has no sensitivity. First come the worms.

One places a meal of vegetation on the crude coffin-boards of mankind. Spring will come again and again, without end, the

lapwing will nest and the violets will be fragrant and the earth will turn green in the light, even when we are gone, when all are gone. Is the consolation of nature comfort enough for you? Yes, perhaps even for you, in manly resignation. But what does it say to you, when you notice the stench from the bodies of murdered children, which are in the process of decaying?

Is that all? That you and I are the highest animals, and as corpses we are nothing. So nature's consolation adds insult to injury. Nature loves the living creature as well as she loves the dying one. The child and the scorpion which stings it, are loved equally. It is impartial.

Then can we pass judgment justly and how are we to judge? Then is that which we found steadfast and true at an early, innocent age, and which we called the spirit--is it then only a fever in this flourishing flesh, gone before it--how then are we to judge justly and to be judged? The most noble is not only rare, but also an unhealthy trait in the multitude of creatures, if naturalness has its destiny in the deep. The most erect savage animal cannot pass judgment, however hairless, ungainly, and evil-smelling is the terror of his fellow creature. It can only take vengeance. It cannot be judged and uplifted. It can only be tortured and put to death. Maidanek is its nature.

And so I may honestly say to the one, who already has been laid in the grave's barge: I hoped that you could help me understand before you were placed in the earth. I must believe that one's nobility of mind is a candle in the darkness. Therefore, with your value as the candle, I turned my thoughts towards the meaningless in the hope that, in spite of everything suspected, I could glimpse a meaning in it. But if the final, eternal truth about mankind is dim, tomorrow only perceptible vapour, which already dilutes itself with the fragrance of flowers, then I see the meaninglessness from Maidanek also overshadow your life.

The candles have become short. In the middle of the blue gate of each flame stands a little black man with bent head and shining face. It is the wick.

Where is my knowledge? Vanished with the lights. When I entered here my knowledge remained behind on the door-step.

Experiences remained on the threshold. Ignorance is deep and great, greater than that of a child and different. A child's ignorance is irresponsible. This ignorance increases the weight of responsibility.

The tapers have become shorter and glimmers and shadows do not fall as before. The still, resting form seems only finished and full of life. A likeness to life, which perhaps could startle. Or again rouse a wild, deceptive expectation. But the coldness of facts has pierced the observer; in cheerless, but still serenity he can see the trembling light bring life to the stiff features and anticipate, what would happen, if the motionless face once more stirred, if the dead form rose and entered the familiar surroundings of memory, where I should see him walking, working, absorbed in thought, glancing at the clouds to determine tomorrow's weather.

Then is that all? One can call. Nothing answers. But if one calls inwardly in his responsible ignorance, doesn't one hear an answer? Yes, strangely near, as if behind one's back, strangely authoritative. Listen in your ignorance and you will hear the seriousness of the answer. The accused calls and the juror answers.

Can you make this experience valid to others? Will they only say that the answer may be an echo of your own call?

Proofs for, proofs against, they are all cobwebs. But I have a duty to let ignorance ask. And it will not ask: Is it possible to live again? It asks: Is it possible to die?

How can I recognize death? The deceased stirs not, breathes not, eats not, the body decomposes. Those are the symptoms. They don't lie. But they are external signs. Life has the corresponding external signs, both positive and negative. And they confirm both Plato and the earth-worm. But within we have stronger, mightier, worthier symptoms of life. Here all is life. Here the symptoms of death and the experience of death are not equal. The concept of death is whirled away in the thought-stream along with other concepts. Dogma about death, fear of death, demand for death--it is all life.

Borrow wings and seek them out? Flying out over the dark sea, where Dante and Theresa's spirits rush. From whence a Maeterlinck comes back with a fragile knowledge of the dead, written on a tablet, which is dashed to pieces against the earth. From whence they come back with a straw, a mud clod in their beaks, wretched answer from the spirits.

The structure, which supports the swinging bridge over the deep, is not proof. But when you call, the jurors answer; they come on the bridge.

At one point in the depth of night the late becomes early. It must be early now. When I open the door, the fresh air comes in, and the flames leap from the tether. The night is somehow greying. In a little while I shall hear the birds. Now they steal their last sleep.

There is ringing far off. The bell sounds four times, or was it only three? Didn't count them. But it was the bells. First they will toll for him. Then they shall ring up. Easter. He has risen.

Maidanek. Be merciful to a sinner. Among one's thoughts there is the executioner.

A large draft passes over. It roars up there in the dawn. Without having turned, I know that he stands here and hears it. He has his hands in his pockets, his hat as always down over his eyebrows, and he looks up.

"It was geese."

"And they are flying northward."

"So the time approaches."