**The Curse of the Ninth Symphony**

In the early afternoon of October the 14th, 1909, the composer Gustav Mahler drew the last quarter note of what he knew would be his last symphony. The work complete, there was no sense of joy. Instead, he felt as if a blind spider had crawled out of his large intestine on trembling, sticky legs and had scurried over to his lungs to hide and probe its surroundings. Gustav was in the study of his New York apartment. A medium-sized room. Heavy red curtains. Composition paper covering all visible surfaces. Notes on the small upright piano, notes on the sofa, notes sticking out of every drawer of the heavy rolltop desk at which he sat. On top of the desk, a large bronze bust of Beethoven, hair wild, eyes flashing with genius. Gustav leaned against the back of his chair and let out a long sigh. He then straightened his back, checked his watch, and reached for his cigarette case. He knocked a cigarette against the silver of the case and stared into the space in front of him, the wallpaper behind his desk. “The ninth,” he muttered. The number haunted Gustav. He brushed his hand back through his dark, thinning hair, fixed the pince-nez on his hawkish nose and stood. Minutes later, the crisp October air of Fifth Avenue embraced him as he marched towards Central Park.

He walked down the street at a sharp angle, the folds of his three-piece working hard to contain the thin man. He was going to visit his old conservatory friend, Rudolf Vorinsky. Rudolf had immigrated to America years ago. Gustav had been thrilled to reignite their friendship when he came to New York to conduct the Philharmonic of the maddening and wondrous city. Gustav entered the park and marched west. He was lost in thought, his gaze blank. He did not see the grass that grew in cheerful patches, with dirt and garbage here and there. Nor the trees in their happy red and yellow coats. The leaves crackling under his feet, the smell of apple cider, the parasols, the bowler hats, the children trying to coax kites off the ground, puffing on their cold fingers – all this passed him by. He walked down the little path, taking deep drags of his long Austrian cigarette. When he reached Sheep’s Meadow, the world came into focus. He looked at the skyscrapers on the south side of the park and at the sheep grazing in the field. Since he had come to New York, several months ago, the contrast never failed to amaze him. “Don’t worry, my darlings, no one is going to eat you,” he whispered, smiling to himself and the animals in the field. A lamb with an ear bent to the side looked up at him. “There you are,” said Gustav. He looked around to see if anyone was watching him talking to the animals. That was when Gustav first saw him. The gentleman in black.

The man was tall and rather pale. His hair was brown. He wore an elegant, well-cut black dandy’s coat that accentuated the waist. His outfit was, in fact, impeccable, if a little out of fashion. His pants without a single wrinkle, creased down the middle of each leg as if the fabric were folded paper. Intricate carvings covered the white walking stick he carried, striking against the black of his attire. The gentleman was admiring a rose bush. He stared at it, then leaned in to smell a flower. Gustav looked at him, turned and proceeded along the meadow. He always felt self-conscious when walking in front of somebody and he listened for the sound of footsteps behind him. He didn’t hear the fall of the man’s feet. But just in case, he turned to look. To his surprise, the gentleman was right behind him. There was something strange about his eyes. They were blue, with a burst of amber around the irises. His gaze pierced Gustav the way a needle pierces cotton. Behind Gustav’s ribcage, a lost bird slammed its body against a glass door. A flock of pigeons took flight inside his stomach and beat their wings against the moldy ceiling. Without knowing why, he turned and tried to run. He felt dizzy and each step was a struggle. He hobbled along for fifty paces and glanced back. The blue-eyed gentleman was gone. Gustav stopped. He pulled out a cigarette and tried to light it. The lighter sparked but the flame wouldn’t catch. Again and again Gustav turned the little wheel. Finally, fire. Gustav filled his lungs and headed for the park’s exit. Soon, he was walking into the safety of Rudolf Vorinsky’s apartment.

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“It’s all finished,” said Gustav, shaking his friend’s hand. “You finished it?” cried Rudolf, his eyebrows rising. He smiled his full-faced smile and crushed Gustav’s hand in his grip. Rudolf was a large man, with a happy, sweaty face and hairy arms. “No, no – I mean, yes, it’s finished. But I mean everything. The symphony, my life – all of it.” “What are you on about?” They walked through a hallway into the little kitchen, “Let’s have some tea.” His friend believed in coziness. His home was a kaleidoscope of furry carpets, couches a man could drown in and pillows that weighed more than people. In the kitchen, a wooden picnic table, complete with benches, rested against a wall. Embroidered red flowers danced along the white tablecloth. Little sunshine bunnies snuck into the room through the window and played tag between the jam, cookies and tangerines. The whole place smelled of sliced apples and flour. “You won’t believe what just happened to me,” said Gustav, sitting down and brushing his hand through his hair. Rudolf came up to the stove, picked up some matches, struck one and lit a burner. “I think I just saw the angel of death.” Rudolf placed a little pot of water onto the stove and came over to the table. “Well, if you don’t mind me saying so,” he smiled, “You look like shit so I wouldn’t be surprised.” “No, listen,” Gustav touched Rudolf’s arm, “I just *saw* the angel of *death*.” His face was pale. His forehead was lined and shiny with sweat and oil. “All right, all right. You saw the angel of death. What do you want me to say? First of all, have a cookie.” Gustav took one. “He was tall. He wore black. He had a white cane. And he looked at me, how to say it? With pity in his eyes.” Rudolf reached for Gustav’s cigarette case, pulled one out and lit it. “You know, I had really hoped that in the years we hadn’t seen each other you’d outgrow this - mysticism.” He took a long drag of the cigarette. “I hate to see you like this though, old man. Let’s take it from the top.” Another drag. “What is this new madness?” Gustav stood from the table, adjusted his pince-nez and ran his fingers through his hair. “All right. From the top. The facts. One – Beethoven died after writing his ninth symphony.” “Right.” “Two – Spohr died after writing *his* ninth symphony.” Gustav began to pace the little kitchen. “Sure, yes.” “Three – Schubert, Dvorak and Bruckner died after writing *their* ninth symphonies.” “All right...” “And four – Mahler will die having written *his* ninth symphony.” Gustav stopped his pacing and stared at his friend. “All right.” Rudolf stood from his chair. “Let’s talk about this.” He walked over to the boiling pot. “But why don’t you sit down and let me make the tea.” Gustav obeyed and Rudolf busied himself with the kettle and cups. “So you think that just because a couple of old farts died after writing their ninths, you will too.” “It’s the limit! Beethoven set the limit!” Rudolf shook his head while keeping an eye on the hot mugs he carried to the table. “Here, you crazy bastard - maybe it’ll help clear your mind a little, for heaven’s sake.” He set the cups down. “And let me give you these incredible jam preserves a lady friend of mine made. Where’s the symphony, anyway?” “I left it at home.” “You left it at home. Here – have a taste of this jam.”

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Gustav felt much better by the time he left his friend’s apartment. Even when they had been students at the conservatory, Rudolf had a marvelous way of calming him down. Whether it was a recital or a girl, Rudolf was able to make everything seem workable. Thinking this way, Gustav reentered Central Park. *Maybe he’s right and I’ve overexerted myself*, he thought. *I’ve been working so hard for so many years. Maybe I need a vacation*. *Maybe Alma and I need a vacation together.* He thought of his young, beautiful wife and reached for his cigarettes. Lost in thought, he didn’t stop to wave to the sheep but walked straight around Sheep’s Meadow, ambling back to his apartment. He kicked wet piles of yellow, red and brown leaves as he walked. When he noticed a little pile ahead of him, he made a direct line for it and sent the leaves flying. He loved their smell and the sound they made as he disturbed their little hills. Nearby, a fat chap in a peacoat sat on a bench and played the accordion for his two daughters. The girls jumped up and down, spun with their arms stretched out and ran in circles around their father. It was a German melody, *Leben auf der Strasse.* Gustav knew it and he whistled as he walked under the elm trees that lined the path. A horrible ripping sound, like a thousand bones breaking all at once, tore him from his reverie. Gustav jerked his head up and saw a great branch snapping off the thick trunk of an elm. The branch came undone from the tree. It landed on another branch and teetered, balanced for a moment. Then, it changed the angle of its flight and headed straight for the composer’s head. Gustav dashed forward. He squeezed his head into his shoulders and threw his hands above his head as he ran. With a terrible thud, the branch hit the concrete just behind him, all of its leaves and limbs shuddering from the impact. Gustav stared at it wide-eyed, swallowing deep, thirsty gulps of air. He looked around to see if anyone had witnessed what had happened. The man in the peacoat had gotten up. He stood there with his two children, all three of them staring at the composer. “Daddy, did you see that?” “You all right, mister?” yelled the accordion player over to Gustav. Gustav didn’t reply. He was staring at a little hill, beyond the fence that lined the path he walked. There, the gentleman he had seen earlier was bending down to smell a rose. Gustav jerked his head, as if trying to get water out of his ear, turned, and ran toward Fifth Avenue. He twisted his head around as he ran to see if he was being followed, but the man remained crouched by the flower.

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Gustav had been doing everything in his power to put off the completion of the Ninth. The day before, however, knowing that he could put it off no longer, he invited his wife to dine with him, to celebrate the completed work. The reservations were for that evening at seven and it was already close to the hour. Their chauffeur would be driving Alma to the restaurant, Julien’s. Gustav’s every nerve hummed out of tune. His body felt like a beat-up harp. A cloud of cigarette smoke propelled him forward. He glanced back over his shoulder as he walked, ran across crosswalks and stared in fear at the ziggurats around him. At a quarter to seven, he was in front of the restaurant. “Welcome, maestro,” said the old doorman, tipping his hat. Julien’s was an establishment to Gustav’s liking, warm and cozy. It stood on Fifth and Fifty-fourth. The doorman in his livery, the weighty brass of the door handle, the creaky polished oak of the floors – everything spoke of tradition and time. The paintings were from the workshops of the Old Italian Masters. The large fireplace whizzed, cracked and sang. The velvet burgundy wallpaper could have belonged to a provincial French count, retired from the court to his reading, his walks and his pipe. The chandeliers, the cutlery, the crystal - all whispered to Gustav, *the World that once was, still is*. “Maestro!” The walrus-like maitre d’ was shaking hands with Gustav and leading him towards his favorite table, close to the fireplace. The amaretto soon came and helped the pitch of his nerves. His body still felt like a canvas bag stuffed with broken glass, but the drink breathed a light mist onto the shards. His mind flickered between the gentleman in black and Alma. Before they were married, Alma had been a hummingbird, flittering from tree to tree, from fashionable ball to earth-shattering opera. Every salon, every new exhibition, she was there, always in the company of established artists, always the object of desire. She was twenty-two when they met. He was forty-one. He was, at the time, conducting the greatest opera house the world had ever seen. Vienna could not comprehend their marriage. “She is a celebrated beauty, used to a glamorous social life. You are utterly unworldly and you worship loneliness!” his closest friend Bruno Walter had told him. She loved Schubert and Schumann. But above all, she revered Wagner. Gustav realized he was in love with her at the opera, as they listened to Tristan and Isolde. Afterwards, he found a little beat-up edition of Gottfried Von Strassburg’s *Tristan*, the poem Wagner had based his work on, and the two would take turns reading the tragedy out loud. Alma was a fervent composer herself and had been studying composition since she was thirteen. As Gustav stared into the amaretto, he remembered the letter he wrote several days before proposing to her. "How do you imagine both wife and husband as composers? Do you have any idea how ridiculous and subsequently how much such an idiosyncratic rivalry must end up dragging us both down? How will it be if you happen to be just "in the mood" but have to look after the house for me, or get me something I happen to need, if you are to look after the trivialities of life for me?” Gustav felt a breeze, looked up from his glass and there was Alma, walking through the doors. Notes of gray lace arranged her dress. Black thread detailed the matching suede of her gloves. She wore a gray shawl over her shoulders and a black, wide-brimmed hat, adorned with a single black feather. She listened as the maitre d’ expressed his joy at having her at the restaurant, gave a small nod and followed him to Gustav’s table. They had been married for seven years. Gustav still marveled at the lines of her figure. He stood as they approached. “Hello,” Alma said. “Hello darling.” Gustav adjusted his pince-nez. “So?” Alma settled in and took off her gloves, the blue of her veins bright against her wrists. “Yes, it’s done.” “Well, that’s wonderful, isn’t it?” Alma sat straight in her chair, a cold, marble Artemis. “It’s wonderful, yes. I feel relieved but,” Gustav leaned forward, “It’s already begun.” “What? Oh, you’re not talking about-” Just then their waiter approached. He reeled off the day’s specials and the couple placed their orders. “So veal tarragon with black truffles for the lady, and for you, Herr Mahler, the pine nut and pomegranate tilapia. Shall I ask the chef to remove the bone?” “I’ll take it boneless.” “Splendid.” The waiter left but the couple remained silent. Gustav lit a cigarette. The wine was brought and poured. “But as I was saying, it’s begun. The curse,” Gustav finally said. Alma turned her head away from her husband and took a deep breath. “Please don’t say that,” she said, her fingers tight around the stem of her glass. “You have no idea how ridiculous it sounds.” “That’s what Rudolf said too. But the two of you don’t know what happened to me today as I was walking here.” Alma raised the wine to her lips. “There was a man following me today, dressed in black. I don’t quite know how to explain it.” Gustav took a long drag and blew the smoke away from his wife. “He wasn’t an ordinary man.” “Oh no?” Gustav looked away. “Actually, there’s no point in me telling you.” “No, you’ve begun – tell me. What kind of a man was he?” “All right, if you really want to know, I think he wasn’t a man at all. I think he was the angel of death. And what’s more, he’s begun his work. A branch fell on me in the park today, almost took my life.” Alma sat with perfect composure while her husband was speaking. When he was finished, she looked away. “You don’t believe a word I’m saying,” Gustav said. “How can I? Your fears have turned into outright hallucinations!” “I don’t-” Gustav stopped himself short. “Let’s just drop it,” he said. They were silent again, looking around for their food and at the other tables. Soon, they saw the waiters carrying big, steaming silver trays. Gustav loved the tender care and yearning for perfection that went into each meal served at Julien’s. The sprig of mint on the roasted veal in the shape of a heart. Meat that parted before the blade as water parts before a skillful oar. Gustav’s tilapia surrounded by saffron-colored basmati rice, imported from the East Indies. The couple escaped each other’s company into the meal. Forks scraped plates. The tilapia was disappearing. Gustav broke off little pieces with his fork, scooted them over to the rice, combined the two and devoured them together. Alma was taking a sip of her wine when she noticed there was something wrong with her husband. He put his hand, tightened in a fist, next to his mouth as if to cough. A dry sound came from the back of his throat. He turned his head to the left and raised his eyebrows. He furrowed his brow, narrowed his eyes and hit himself a couple of times in the chest, releasing two more dry little coughs. Then he turned to the right, opened his eyes wide in surprise and tried to breathe in deep through his nose. “Darling, are you all right?” Gustav nodded and lifted an index finger in the air. He tried to cough again, but couldn’t. He opened his eyes wide and sprang up from his chair, knocking it over. His face turned red. He began hitting himself in the chest and taking short little gasps of air. The entire restaurant hushed as the chair hit the ground. Everyone turned to face him. “Darling!” cried Alma, rising in her chair. “Somebody help – he’s choking!” The maitre d’ ran over. “Herr Mahler!” he said. “Herr Mahler, are you all right?” Gustav looked at him with tears in his eyes, his hands on his throat. “Ladies and gentlemen, is there a doctor in the house?” the maitre d’ said, turning towards the other guests. Silence. “The man is *choking*,” he said, pointing to Gustav. What happened next happened quickly. The doors to the kitchen swung open. The gentleman in black emerged. He wore black pants as before, but a crisp waiter’s shirt had replaced his jacket. With long and graceful steps, he marched over to Gustav. Gustav’s eyes seemed to bulge out of their sockets. He backed away, holding his hands out as if to defend himself. As he did so, he knocked into the chair behind him. The gentleman ran around Gustav and pushed the chair out of the way. He placed his hands in front of the composer, locked his fingers, and pulled, lifting Gustav off of the ground. A piece of fish bone flew out of his mouth and, wet and putrid, landed on the table, right in front of Alma. Gustav bent himself over a chair and began to vomit. “Oh God, thank you! Darling, are you all right?” The restaurant came alive as everyone gazed at Gustav and his savior. The gentleman, meanwhile, reached into his pocket, pulled something out and slipped it into Gustav’s jacket. Then, with sure and rapid steps, he walked to the exit, pushed the door open and was gone.

Later, in the car, Gustav tried to make sense of things. If this man was the angel of death, why had he saved his life? Gustav reached for the comfort of his cigarette case. There, by the case, was a hard piece of paper. A card. He pulled it out. An unusual design. Swirls of white upon beige. Milk poured into coffee. A name:

**Gabriel**

Below, in a rich black ink and an ornate cursive, it read: *At noon tomorrow – the Bethesda Fountain****. –****G*

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The next day it rained. Gustav was in his study. He was dressed to go out and held an umbrella in his hands. Several locks of hair clung to his perspiring forehead. A lit cigarette dangled from his mouth. He pressed a button on the umbrella and the handle detached itself revealing the rapier hidden inside. He pulled it out and examined it against the dull light that seeped in through the window. Gustav noticed that his hand was trembling, tried to steady it but couldn’t. He stood there, puffing his cigarette, looking at his hand. Finally, he shook his head and sheathed the weapon. He then opened a desk drawer, took out a small Smith and Wesson and put it in the inside pocket of his jacket. He knew the rapier and pistol wouldn’t do much good. Still, he preferred to have them. Hands shaking, he restocked his cigarette case and set out. In the park, few souls braved the rain. A man was hanging on to his bowler hat to keep the wind from knocking it off. A father, his son dressed as a little sailor, ran with the boy in search of shelter. Greasy newspapers smelling of fish lay on the grass, heavy raindrops beating against them. Gustav heard the rumble of thunder. He placed his hand by his heart, feeling the contours of his gun. In order to have the higher ground, he approached the fountain from the south side, the Bethesda Terrace. He clutched the sandstone rail, scared to descend the granite steps that cascaded to the fountain from both sides of the stone balcony. Just beyond, above the pool, above the four cherubs that hid beneath the upper basin, beautiful in her bronze grace, stood the Angel of the Waters, a lily in one hand and a blessing in the other. And by the edge of the fountain itself, stood Gabriel. As usual, he wore black. He was smiling. Gustav stood there watching him. Gabriel held his hand out, palm up, collecting raindrops. He grinned as the drops hit his skin. He brought the water to his face and let it trickle down his cheeks. Gustav pressed the button that unlatched the rapier, slid the blade out several inches and snapped it back into place. He rechecked his pistol and descended the stairs.

“Hello,” said Gabriel with a smile and extended his hand. The hand was still wet. A strange warmth flowed through it. “Hello.” Gustav tried to make his voice deep and assured, but the notes stumbled on their way out. There were those eyes again, deep blue with a burst of amber around the black iris, a little eclipse in each eye. The rain beat against the umbrella of each man and Gustav realized they were all alone. “Thank you for last night,” said Gustav, “I-” “Please don’t mention it, Gustav Mahler.” As Gustav heard his name, a raindrop flew under his umbrella and struck his neck, sliding down his back. He shivered. “How do you know-” “Gustav, Alma, Anna, Maria. All names, all births, all deaths – they are mine to know.” The man’s voice was regal, but also light. Like a king talking to an old friend. “Who are you?” Gustav took a small step back. “You know me, I’m Gabriel.” “The angel?” “You could say that, yes.” Something sank inside of Gustav. He felt as if a big wooden spoon had been turned upside down inside his stomach, a thick, red medicine dripping onto the intestines. A swallow landed in the fountain and began to drink. “And what do you want with me? Are you here to take me?” “No. No – not at all. Would you like to walk a bit?” Gabriel nodded toward the lake behind the fountain, and the two began to make a slow circle around the structure. “I am not here to take you,” Gabriel said, looking straight ahead as he walked. “I am here to warn you.” Gustav reached for his cigarettes. “You see, you have done a phenomenal job with your nine symphonies. And, if I may,” Gabriel stopped, turning towards Gustav, “I especially liked the Sixth.” The angel smiled. Gustav began patting his pockets, searching for a lighter. “Here,” Gabriel said, and extended his hand, palm up. In the middle of the palm danced a little green flame. Gustav stared at it, running a hand through his hair. “Light it.” Gustav obeyed. He brought his face down toward Gabriel’s hand. The cigarette quivered in the composer’s fingers and the flame rose up to meet it.. “There,” said Gabriel. “Thank you,” said Gustav, inhaling as deep as his lungs would allow. “Not at all. As I was saying, you did such wonderful work with your symphonies.” Here he turned again to face Gustav. “But now,” the angel was silent for a moment. He looked at some geese that flew in formation above the lake. “Now they will have to stop.” “How do you mean, stop?” Gustav came to a halt and stared at the angel. “I mean stop,” said Gabriel. “You’ve worked very hard all your life. Now, take a break. Spend time with your wife, time with your daughter. Conduct. You are doing fantastic work at the Philharmonic – by all means. But no more symphonies. There will be no tenth.” Gustav stared at the angel. “Why would-” “His ways are a mystery,” said Gabriel, giving a light nod to the sky. “But, as I understand it, the ninth is the limit. You are standing on a precipice, Gustav Mahler. In front of you is an abyss.” “I don’t understand. Why would God not want me to write? What is-” “There are things in the tenth for which you are not ready. For which mankind is not ready.” Gustav turned away from Gabriel and looked at the ground. A bottle of Coca-Cola lay there, in a little puddle by their feet. “I don’t quite know what to-” “There is nothing you *can* say. Take cheer, take a vacation – lay down your burden.” The angel smiled and looked around. Then he looked back at Gustav. “But also, know this – He can call you back at any time He wishes. So take heed. You have seen how easily the thread is cut. A fish bone, a falling branch... You are still young. You have a beautiful wife, a lovely daughter, a brilliant career – the entire world is at your feet. Why spoil things? To write yet another symphony?” Gustav looked away, toward some trees that surrounded the lake. He always imagined trees to be instruments, played by the wind. “You know, I already have fragments of the main theme.” “Oh yes?” “Yes – it’s going to be quite lovely, actually-” ` “*Was* going to be quite lovely, you mean to say.” “Was. Yes.” Gustav looked towards the lake. “But why is He doing this?” “If you’ll excuse me for saying so, it is the tendency of your race to think in circles. Our conversation has come to an end, Gustav Mahler.” Gustav continued to stare at the gray water. Gabriel looked at him. The angel’s features shifted. The smile left his face. He reached out and touched Gustav’s shoulder, that strange warmth coursing from his fingers. “Gustav,” he said, “Your life is a candle. And God - God is this wind,” The angel lifted his hand against the breeze. “Now tell me, do you want Him to draw near?”

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Gustav stumbled into the foyer of his apartment. He threw his wet umbrella into the corner and walked to the study. He slammed the door behind him. There again was wild-haired Beethoven. Composition paper everywhere. Quarter notes, eighths, sixteenths. He walked to his desk, opened a drawer and brought out a bottle of Scotch and a glass. He poured it and raised the glass before Beethoven. “Cheers,” he said, took three burning gulps and poured himself another. Then, he lit a cigarette, sat down at his desk and buried his face in his hands.

Gustav fortified himself in his study. He spent the next seven days drinking, smoking, reading Schiller, taking naps, playing nocturnes on the piano and drinking some more. Clara, the family servant, brought him food and fresh bottles of Scotch. Alma came several times to see what the matter was. He said it was nothing. That he needed time to himself. On the eighth day after meeting Gabriel, Gustav had difficulty getting up. The idea of another day of cigarettes and drink terrified him. He brought the black wool blanket over his head and tried to bury his face in the crevice where the back of the sofa met the seat. His face felt oily and his whole body ached from the alcohol and the sofa he slept on. Gustav had fallen asleep in his shirt and trousers again and had sweated half the night through. The clothes clung to his body and he suspected they smelled bad. He was unshaven and his hair stuck out at odd angles. Gustav let out a groan and threw the wool blanket to the floor. He leaned over the side of the couch and grabbed his cigarettes. There he lay, looking at sunrays separate themselves as they streamed through the smoke. It must have been towards noon. A familiar crackle outside the room pulled his gaze to the door of the study. The gramophone needle striking a record. And there was the faint hiss of a disc in spin. The first notes were enough. Wagner’s Tristan and Isolde. Ground-breaking use of chromaticism, tonality and harmonic suspension. Gustav got up and began pacing the room. The notes broke through the door, ran around the pile of rotten wood that was his body and set a hundred little fires. The fires caught, climbed his limbs, ignited nerves and united into larger flames. He put out his cigarette. He ran his fingers through his hair to comb the wildness out, fixed a button on his shirt and walked to the living room.

Alma was standing by a window, looking out. She turned as he entered. “I thought this might get you out of there,” she said, a small smile on her lips. “I really haven’t been myself these last couple of days, have I?” “You really haven’t.” A large, square Persian carpet covered the floor, its flowers and arabesques in blue and white, with little sparks of red and orange burning here and there. Alma walked across the room to Gustav, who stood by the glowing jaws of the fireplace. “Remember how we used to-” “I was just thinking about that,” Gustav said. Alma nodded toward the French couch that stood by a coffee table. They walked over and sat down. On the table itself was a book. Gustav looked at the cover - Gottfried von Strassburg’s *Tristan*. “Where did you find this?” he said, reaching for it. “I had it shipped from Germany. I was going to wait until your birthday… But I thought maybe now would be better.” “What a beautiful edition.” Gustav was turning the book in his hands, admiring the gold letters against the brown cloth. “Remember that part, your favorite, where is it?” He was flipping through the pages. “You mean where they drink the love potion?” “Right, and the old nurse is telling Tristan that his love for Isolde will mean his death...” “Yes.” Alma seemed to be enjoying Gustav’s delight in the little book. “Oh – here it is. Do you want to read it?” “Let’s take turns.” “All right. So the nurse tells Tristan that this love potion and his illicit love for Isolde will be his death.” “Of course.” “And he says…” Gustav gave a little dramatic cough and straightened his back. The notes poured from the gramophone. “If by 'my death' you mean this agony of love - that is my life!" Alma laughed at the deep drama in Gustav’s voice. “Well read, well read,” she said, taking the book from him. She also gave a little dramatic cough. She looked at the page, smiled, looked up at Gustav and back to the page. “If by my death you mean the punishment that we are to suffer if discovered - I accept that!” she said. “Oh, how brave,” Gustav said, taking the book. “That’s right,” said Alma. “All right,” Gustav said, and looked at the page. He ran his fingers through his hair. “All right,” he said again. “Here it is: And if by my death, you mean eternal punishment in the fires of hell - I accept that too.” “How romantic!” said Alma. Gustav didn’t answer. He leaned forward, a hand on his forehead, rereading the words. “And if by my death you mean eternal punishment in the fires of hell, I accept that too,” he said. Gustav stood from the couch, book in hand. He remained still for a moment and then walked over to the fireplace. He leaned against the wall and looked into the fire. “You know what always struck me about those words?” he said. “Tell me.” “Well, Tristan, he really believed in hell, didn’t he? When they were written, everybody believed it.” “They did.” “Right. And his adulterous love for Isolde would place him right in those flames, wouldn’t it?” “That’s what makes it so very romantic,” Alma smiled. “Right.” Gustav was silent as he stared into the flame. Then he shook his head and turned toward Alma. He looked down at his shirt. “God, I’m filthy,” he said. “You really are.” He closed the book, turned it over and looked at the back cover. He looked up at Alma. “Thank you so much. This is a really wonderful present.” “Well – good.” “I should go change my clothes.” “That would be nice, yes.” Alma smiled again. “All right. Well - very good then. I suppose I’ll be off.” He took several steps toward the couch where Alma was sitting. He wanted to take her hand and kiss her. Half way to the couch though he hesitated, felt awkward and stopped. “Right. Well then,” he said. “I’ll be off, I suppose.” He gave her a small bow, turned and set off for the bedroom. Just before going into the hall, he stopped and turned around. “Also,” he said. “Yes?” “Well, what I want to say is that,” he rubbed his nose and looked away. “Well, what I want to say is just - thank you for being so kind.” “Go change your clothes, darling.” “Right. Of course.” With those words, Gustav left the room. As he walked to the bedroom, he hummed a faint little melody that had been floating in the back of his mind all morning. For the life of him, he couldn’t figure out where he had heard it before.

[*The End*]