

THE PLAGUE

Persons:

HE Man 30 – 50 years
SHE Woman 30 – 50 years

Café at the sea and tables with coloured umbrellas. Chairs. Stripy cloth. Flags. Strong sunshine. From time to time you can hear the cries of seagulls and light music from a distant orchestra.

(**HE** enters carrying a small bag and a paper. He sits down at the table, takes out a thermos and cups from the bag and put them on the table. He begins to browse the paper. Reads. When he is reading **SHE** enters and sits down at the same table. She is carrying a flyer. Both of them are wearing summer clothes.)

HE Is it warm enough for you? The temperature will reach 35 degrees today they are saying.

SHE We don't need such weather. Why doesn't the temperature fall to minus 35 degrees to kill the cockroaches and the fleas? It's just this kind of weather that helps them to multiply...

HE They didn't stop you?

SHE They cordoned off around the station, but I showed my identity card, so they let me pass.

HE Obviously they are expecting another full train from the north.

SHE I suppose so, but why are they fleeing to us? It's not healthier at the seaside than on the countryside. Less in fact because of the rats from the ships.

HE It's simply that people are beginning to panic and think about escaping. The seaside always looks more attractive, more healthy than the countryside... The disorder is increasing, isn't it? People stroll around and spread the infection. God knows what will happen if they don't find an antidote real soon... Perhaps they will shoot people in the streets like rambling dogs... In the end the Health authorities will arrest everybody who attracts attention to himself... (**HE** pours coffee.) And we are sitting in the sunshine having coffee with orchestra music in the distance, while the plague ravages around us. Explain to me how the body can enjoy the coffee while the mind understands how the plague works.

SHE I don't know, but I do know you must be sure the water has been boiled! ... Is there any alternative? We are incapable of changing anything, so what alternative is there to us than going on living as normal as possible?

HE You and I think that way, but most people don't (think so). More and more people are starting to give up. Denounce the neighbours to hide their symptoms... The children even report their parents to the authorities. Everybody gets nervous. Things develop

so that anybody who draws attention to himself, also draws suspicious. Perhaps in the end they are lynching people just because they wear red hair or a blue shirt!

SHE Yes you are right... and such a lot of cults and rites and ceremonies ... Every day something new pops up. Because of the current situation it is understandable, but what good does it do?. Why do you need to look for mysterious signs in the sky, when the only necessity is to find an antidote?

HE Did you read the paper this morning? About the events in the north? These scourges. They are not satisfied just standing in the streets scourging themselves with nails and whips. Now they think that they aren't ordinary beings who pay for their sins, but they are an army of saints ... saints who intend to take over governing the country at the new millennium. They presume to have supernatural abilities. They say they can cast the devil out of people, cure illnesses and revive dead people. One of them even says that he himself has risen from the dead! ... And not just that, they are wandering around from place to place attracting lots of people and this way they are even more effectively transmitting the infection. The military should make more of an effort to get hold of the followers.

SHE Look at this! (Shows a flyer.)

HE (Reads out loud.) "The Avengers of the Saints of God now exist amongst us as punishers. The rage of God reaches every sinner equally. Be ready to meet the Avenger, who God has determined for you. It might be the man or woman who sits beside you while you read these words." ... Totally insane are these people ... Let's hope that they won't become too powerful.

(Soft music from a distant orchestra.)

SHE One of my colleagues ceased to work at the library because she had to help organize a twenty-four hour praying session to pray for our salvation ... Yes, I suppose that if you are hit by a deadly illness against which there is no medication or even hope to find any, then however you behave will be more or less normal ... In the present situation everything is reduced to the lifestyle, isn't it? You can choose ... to let you be drawn to the edge of the well crying out protests against the injustice in your life and then you will be thrown into the well head first ... or you can all by yourself walk to the edge of the well and climb down into the darkness on a ladder, silent, without complaining and preserving a bit of dignity. The result will be the same ... The difference is the style.

HE You are right! I suppose that what distinguishes us from rabbits and horses is the fact that we think that it's the style that is important ... (Pause. Drinks coffee.) I tried to buy your favourite honey cakes, but they were sold out. I came a bit too late.

(Pause. In the distance you can hear an ardent speech in a loudspeaker. You can't distinguish the words.)

HE Listen to that! Another one who is pleading about Judgement Day ... People who can't tolerate life and get angry that they can't forget they are still alive.

(Pause)

HE Do you remember that day, when we met? There on the island? What a beautiful day! We sat at the same table laid with a blue and white cloth. Then we managed to get honey cakes... I remember how the sun reflecting on the sea nearly dazzled us.

SHE Yes ... And that happened just six months ago. Then both of us tried to accept the news about our families ... I thought then I would never survive never seeing my children again.

HE Now at least you know they are safe abroad, even if you can't see them. In the present situation it's better to stay away from those you love, isn't it?

SHE Yes, you are right. The plague doesn't stay just in one place. Perhaps it will reach them too someday. I can't help thinking about it ... In one way it's easier for you, you have already lost everyone.

(Pause. The distant voice and music are still to be heard.)

SHE Do you remember our discussions about what we would do when the plague would reach us? Then everybody thought the only protection was to run away.

HE Yes. Would you stay to meet it, face to face? Or resist it? Resist the annihilation? Resist the destruction of everything that is human ... consciousness ... tenderness ... the capability to wonder? Yes, I remember.

SHE Yes, we already then anticipated that everything human would be destroyed by a soulless bacteria ... that nothing of our families or of anything that is precious in life would last ... science ... literature ... music ... everything disappear in chaos ... destroyed by strolling madmen, who live like rats with the plague in rooms where once people watered flowers and had birthday parties for children ... We anticipated that ... and now it has happened.

(Pause)

HE (Greets someone outside the stage.)
How do you do! ... Yes ... It's very hot today ... Yes ... Let's hope so! ...
Goodbye!

(Pause while they're waiting for the person to pass.)

HE It's her. Every day she climbs up to the graveyard carrying that basket.

SHE Is it she, who everyday walks to the cemetery, to sit the whole afternoon at her husband's grave?

HE Yes. In that basket she is carrying hot water, teapot, a cup and saucer. She sits down at the grave, sometimes on it and has her tea. She sits there every afternoon for three or four hours.

SHE What is she doing?

HE Communicates with the dead ... she is doing that everyday since her husband died ... and that happened more than a year ago ... Then you could still get a coffin. Today they can't produce coffins quick enough.

SHE What does she have to say to the dead that would take so much time?

HE 'Inconsolable conflict' they call it. Another name is 'inextinguishable anger'. Now she is pouring out onto his grave all the contempt and irritation that have been accumulated for the last forty years. Irritation because she assumed that he wanted her to form her life according to his wishes, and contempt of herself because she let it happen ... Nevertheless, now she settles the accounts. She must bring the accounts out, put them on the table and then discuss them in detail. It remains a lot to do for her. Probably enough to fill every afternoon for the rest of her life.

SHE How do you know that it is like that?

HE According to me a good relationship wouldn't leave so much unfinished work. A good relationship would permit the other one to rest in peace after death. Those two have left so much unexpressed life behind that it's hanging in the air over them like energy, energy that somehow must be let out. Well, at least it helps her pass her days ... Like sitting here drinking coffee. Before the plague came you enjoyed drinking coffee and that was it. But now we drink coffee 'as usual'. It is that 'as usual' that is important now. It's not about to stand up to the plague. How can you stand up to the inevitable? It's simply so that 'as usual' is the only thing that remains for us.

(Sound from a distant orchestra.)

SHE Yes ... that's the only thing that remains. When everything falls to pieces the only defence is the custom. I'm continuing my work at the library ... arrange the books, revise the subject index, buy new books for the stock, even if no one is coming anymore to borrow them, because the books are infected by the plague. And you continue with your translation work, even if the words will never be printed and nobody will read them. You could argue that it's meaningless, absurd. But exactly those are the right kind of occupations for people like us in the present situation.

(The distant talking cease.)

HE The plague aims to make us refugees who run from place to place always looking back over our shoulder to check if it has caught up with us. You and me have found something better than that. Simply sitting quietly at the table talking to each other.

(Pause)

SHE Yesterday they were speaking at the library about some aromas that would help against the plague ... jasmine, incense, rosemary, juniper bush.

HE That doesn't impress the plague! But I agree that the scent of juniper is something unforgettable. The scent of just a little twig fills up the room.

SHE Juniper bushes always look so meagre and thin, don't they? If you embrace them, they push you away with their thorns. They need space.

HE Yes, they need space. You go out into the forest and see nothing else but rocks and poor, infertile ground. But there are the juniper bushes growing out of the rock.

(Sound from a distant explosion. He looks at his wristwatch.)

HE Right! Dead on time! Another thing they still succeed to do! ... Shoot a cannon-shot every hour, because they think that gunpowder cleans the air!

SHE You shouldn't be surprised about that. People hold on to the smallest little hope, even if they know it has no effect.

HE Yes, the local council kindly do all those things, even the strangest things to avoid chaos ... anything to avoid panic.

HE (Speaks to another person passing outside the stage.)
How do you do ... How is your wife? good ... yes thank you. Yes, it is very hot today ... too hot for me ... thank you ... same to you ... all the best! ... Goodbye!

SHE On his way to the post-office?

HE Yes. He's still doing that. Everyday he goes to the post-office to check if there is any news about his application for a patent for his invention. Imagine that! These days when all government authorities are fully occupied with crisis planning. He can't accept that no one is interested in him and in the result of his life-long work ... Not even now can he give that up. He can't put away the heaviness of his invention. He must always carry the weight of it on his back till the end of his life.

SHE Naturally, isn't it?

HE Of course.

SHE The own life history can weigh down your back more and more while you approach the end, if you don't understand how to release yourself ... When I now look back at my life before the time of the plague, I remember that feeling of weight. Everything in that life had its own heaviness. And everything throws its own shadow ... But now in the time of the plague everything gets incredibly sharp contours, but nothing casts a shadow. You don't ask the meaning of anything. You don't ask about anything that is in front or behind. Everything is obvious. Behind the obvious is nothing but oblivion. The plague promises us nothing. Gives nothing. The plague is two-dimensional. You can choose ... you can decide to look superficially at life and no more than that, or you can examine and penetrate the life by microscope to permeate to the abyss and expose the secrets of Nature ... in both ways the result will be the same. Not knowing and knowing lead to the same result ... During my life I haven't understood that. But now when I understand it, I feel much less burdened than I ever felt before ... so light ... so liberated ... as a butterfly fluttering in the mild summer breeze.

HE For me the plague creates space. I was born one kilometre from here ... there, by the church ... When I turned twenty I went out into the world to seek my fortune, so to

say, and I didn't come back until six months ago, after the death of my family ... Just after I came back I walked along the hills to look at the yellow flowers of the gorse and listen to the songs of the swallows. One day I walked up the hill, passed the mill and walked along the country road. Beside it was a high stone wall, a wall taller than me. That wall must have stood there for centuries. It was built of sallow from the beach, like many walls in this part of the country. As a child I often stood in front of that wall and followed with the eyes the irregular lines between the stones. While I was away I often thought of that wall ... Well, as I said, I went up the hill ... I stood in front of the wall, maybe two metres away, stood looking at it, as I did when I was a child ... and suddenly, without anything else happening, the wall fell down. No one was there except me. The wall just fell ... It was frightening ... but for the first time in my life I saw what was behind it.

(Pause)

SHE Yes ... to be able to see things you have to take away something else that is in the field of vision. It may be that you have to drain a whole ocean. That's exactly what I've been doing during the last six months ... Drained a whole ocean. And while the roaring of the waves quietened, I could for the first time in my life listen.

HE And what did you hear when you listened?

SHE What I heard was an awfully loud cry ... A loud cry that I called 'my life'. That what I called 'my life' was actually an incessant cry, that no one, not even myself had ever heard before. But now I hear it. That cry was the voice of a child ... that child, who was destined to be me, but who wasn't allowed to be born. And now that cry is flowing. I let it out to fill the universe. The plague let it come out. This child's anger and horror is already on its way to the most distant planets and no one is able to stop it, not even if the plague would kill me tomorrow ... This cry is the opposite of death. The child, who was meant to be that child was finally born. And it was the plague that gave birth to it.

(Sound from a distant orchestra.)

(Pause)

HE Look ... at that hawk... It stays in the same spot in relation to the ground, despite the wind blowing so unpredictably. How could that be?

(Pause)

The plague isn't something that comes to us from outside. The death and the sickness that we see around us are only fire that burns away dry branches. The real plague is something within ourselves. The only way to face it is to ascertain that and understand it. To be able to do that you need space. In the normal life there is little space. The past and the future squeezes us from both sides like in a vice. You can hardly move arms and legs. It hurts, but we can't picture any alternative ... It happens from time to time in life that something destroys the foundation ... like the plague now does to us ... and the vice loosens. Both the past and the future vanish and suddenly there is only the present left. We don't have a lot of time left, but we get space ... space without border, in which we can explore. And if we look we will find. And because the space doesn't relate to the past or the future, the death is not in it ...

SHE Did you find anything in your search?

HE Yes, I found that everything that exists, every deed, every event that happens is unique. The shadow of your arm on the table, the shape of those small stones on the pavement, the sun's reflection on a particular wave on the sea. All that happens once and only once in the history of the universe and you and me are the only persons in the universe who are aware of them. And I understand that my life, because I understand this, is remarkably successful and perfect.

(Ship siren blasts.)

HE Another ship is coming. It will be chaos at the wharf. People will be swarming like ants. We better go home. Perhaps the Health authorities will soon start to patrol searching for immigrants. The authorities are getting more and more nervous. It's safer at home when the ship arrives.

(He puts away the thermos and cups.)

HE Well ... we'll meet tomorrow at the same time as usual.

SHE No, I won't be here tomorrow. We won't meet anymore. It's about a little spot on the skin.

(Pause when he becomes aware about the meaning of her words.)

HE I understand ... Yes, I understand.

SHE Yes ... it's a pity ... but that's how it is.

HE That means that it doesn't remain much time for me either.

SHE Probably.

(Pause)

SHE We don't speak more ... We understand each other. You can't ask more of life than this.

HE You are right ... you can't ask for more than this ... let's walk back along the beach and look at the sea. The tide is just receding, I think.

SHE Yes ... let's do that. Let's look at the sea.

(They walk out together.)

THE END

Translation from Esperanto: Kerstin Rohdin & Pär-Johan Goody Rohdin