

The Death
of
Walter Benjamin

A Play

By

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Characters

WALTER BENJAMIN: Was one of the foremost cultural scholars of his time. A German Jew, from a wealthy family in Berlin (his father was an Art dealer), who spent years hiding out in Paris in the late thirties. He died of suicide by morphine poisoning at Port Bou, Spain, near the French border, on his way to America with a small group of Jewish refugees. All of whom were aged in the 30 to 50 range, except for JOSEPH, who was 13. BENJAMIN was 48 when he died.

HENNY GURLANDER: A German member of the refugee party.

JOSEPH: Her son. Limp with an injury to his leg.

GRETE FREUND: A famous Academic, originally from Austria, and an old friend of Benjamin's.

LISTER: A former Spanish Republican Army Colonel, has recently joined the refugees on their march to the frontier.

KARINA BIRMAN: A notable left-wing scholar, well acquainted with Benjamin and his thought.

LISA FITGO: Organizer and guide for the group. The fixer, with contacts in England and America.

SPANIARD: Assigned by the Hotel to deal with the refugees.

Authors note: *Although the events described in this play, and the names of the known characters who were with Walter Benjamin at the time of his death, are true, the spoken dialogue and movements, including the character of the SPANIARD, are invented by me. I have also used certain excerpts taken from Walter Benjamin's own work. This play is an homage to him, and to all those like him, who were murdered, not that long ago, for being Jews.*

Scene: *A small hotel guesthouse on the French/Spanish border. 1940. It's the middle of the night.*

BENJAMIN: Where is my Dora? She was with us. She was one of us. Where is she now?

LISA: You know they took her away, Walter.

BENJAMIN: When? When did they take her?

LISA: A month ago? Near Paris, I think.

KARINA: No, this was in Paris, near the train station.

HENNY: No, no.

KARINA: She's gone.

GRETE: She's gone!

BENJAMIN: Oh, my Dora! My dear sister!

KARINA: You've known this for days, Walter.

LISA: Quiet, please. (*Enter SPANIARD*)

SPANIARD: Try and keep as quiet as possible, *por favor*. Thank you.

LISA: We'll try.

SPANIARD: Thank you.

LISA: Do you have any more news for us?

SPANIARD: Yes. They will not take international passports, only National passports. This is what I have heard. Persons with French passports will be returned to France.

LISA: This must mean the exit stamps as well?

SPANIARD: That is correct.

HENNY: How does he know?

SPANIARD: This is what I have heard from the border authorities.

LISA: Check on it again.

SPANIARD: I will check on it.

KARINA: They have told us three or four different plans already.

LISA: Tell them to make up their minds.

GRETE: Not so harsh, Lisa.

SPANIARD: I'm sure you understand – the political situation changes hourly. We are dealing with the French and the Germans and Spain, even the Portugese.

HENNY: What do they say?

GRETE: Things change all the time.

SPANIARD: And we must make arrangements with the locals.

KARINA: Don't these people know what we are trying to do here? We are fleeing for our lives.

SPANIARD: Yes, Madam, they do know.

LISTER: *(To SPANIARD)* Do you?

SPANIARD: Yes, I do, sir.

BENJAMIN: Shut up, Lister, you stupid Stalinist asshole. *(A shocked pause)*

LISTER: No, you shut up, Benjamin. I can say what I please.

SPANIARD: I am of no particular party, sir.

KARINA: Of course. He's just doing his job.

LISTER: What is his job, Madam?

KARINA: He's watching us. He's guarding us.

LISTER: Exactly. We don't know the man. So, leave it alone.

KARINA: No. *(To the others)* I agree with Walter Benjamin. I'm sick of this Stalinist putz. *(Another shocked pause)*

LISA: Easy, Karina.

LISTER: You don't know me, Woman.

KARINA: *(To SPANIARD)* I'm sorry. Excuse me.

SPANIARD: Please. No offense taken.

LISTER: No offense? That's absurd. You should be offended, sir. As I am.

SPANIARD: No. I don't take it personally.

LISTER: In your position, I should be deeply offended, sir. Presiding over the deaths of innocent people.

LISA: Stop it, Lister.

LISTER: No.

KARINA: Why the uniform, Lister?

LISTER: People like uniforms. Especially around here.

LISA: We are trying to save the Jewish Artists and Intellectuals of Europe. As Karina is trying to say. And we're not doing so well at it.

KARINA: So far. But we must keep trying. Whose side is this Spaniard on?

LISTER: Not on mine. That's for sure. He 's on his own side.

KARINA: Then what are you doing here?

LISTER: I am a Jew, like you, on the run for my life.

KARINA: Again, why the uniform? It puts us all in danger.

LISTER: It has no markings, no insignia. During the civil war, we dressed in all kinds of uniforms. Some with none. We had many different colors. Those who are supposedly saving us will recognize the uniform.

LISA: Not "supposedly."

KARINA: *(To LISTER)* You're a fake. They don't want Communists.

LISTER: Half the Jews in Europe are Communists. Ask your friend over there, Mr. Benjamin.

BENJAMAN: I am a Marxist. But I have nothing to do with these Bolshevik brigands. I was in the Soviet Union in 1927, long before you ever heard of Stalin. And I saw

what I saw there. And I'll be glad to tell you about it. And the Spanish policeman, too.

SPANIARD: As you please. But I'm not a policeman. I work for the Hotel.

LISTER: Sure, you do.

BENJAMAN: It's a police state, a fascist state, and there was famine. And they made a pact with Hitler. People were sleeping in the streets. People were eating rotten potatoes. And they are sending the Jews to Siberia.

LISTER: Better than killing them off.

BENJAMIN: And the Cossacks are on their annual pogroms. Raiding the villages.

LISTER: Many Jews are running away, to the West.

JOSEPH: Why don't they fight back?

LISTER: With what? Menorahs? Hannukah candles? Torah scrolls?

HENNY: Don't be absurd, Joseph.

JOSEPH: I'm not absurd. You are absurd.

HENNY: Don't talk to your mother like that.

JOSEPH: Fine. I won't talk at all.

HENNY: Good. And remember, you have a bad leg. You can't run.

JOSEPH: No, but I can shoot.

LISTER: Shoot what?

BENJAMIN: Shoot his mouth off.

KARINA: Eventually, we'll fight.

LISTER: When?

LISA: Of course. Now, we are lucky. We have a head start. We have compatriots. We have friends. We just need to get out of Europe.

KARINA: And we will.

LISA: We have made all the appropriate arrangements. Including the money and the papers. They should let us across the border in the morning.

KARINA: When we have arms. When we have a state.

LISTER: When will that be?

KARINA: I don't know. Soon.

BENJAMIN: See? She's a Zionist. Never been able to talk her out of it. Smart woman like her.

KARINA: Because you have no argument.

BENJAMIN: I am a European!

LISA: Meanwhile we have to get out of here.

SPANIARD: But you destroyed your French papers. With their exit stamps. Why did you do that?

KARINA: Ridiculous mistake. Who talked us into doing it? Was it the Colonel?

GRETE: No. We decided together. No one wants to go back to France.

BENJAMIN: They wanted to put us on a train for Poland! Direct! I will not go to Poland! I will not die in Poland!

GRETE: Stop. You're making him scream again.

BENJAMIN: I am not screaming!

GRETE: I'm sorry.

BENJAMIN: I am not screaming. I do not scream.

SPANIARD: Now things are more difficult for you.

LISA: We were misinformed.

KARINA: No, the Spanish change their minds all the time. Fascists! Anti-Semites! Like the rest of Benjamin's Europeans.

LISA: Quiet, Karina.

LISTER: You have to keep us informed, Spaniard. It's your duty.

SPANIARD: You must cooperate. I'm doing the best I can.

BENJAMIN: Do you want to find dead bodies lying around in here?

SPANIARD: No.

BENJAMIN: Then you must keep us informed.

SPANIARD: I will keep you informed. Don't wander. Stay here in the hotel. Later, in the morning, there will be a boat.

LISA: Well, of course, sir. Many thanks. *Muchas Gracias!*

SPANIARD: *De nada. (Exits.)*

LISA: Good. We must be nice to these people.

BENJAMIN: Yes. But what are they going to do with us now? I don't trust them.

HENNY: We have no choice, Walter.

JOSEPH: Have we any food left?

HENNY: Water and crackers. We each have a ration.

JOSEPH: I have nothing left.

HENNY: Here, take this. *(Hands JOSEPH a bisquit.)* I can't keep anything down anyway.

GRETE: We are almost in our graves. We must be careful. We musn't alienate the man.

LISA: Yes. I agree. We're lucky to be still alive. We've come far. And we are prepared for emergencies. *(Whispering)* Karina?

KARINA: Yes.

HENNY: *(Overhearing)* You have gold?

KARINA: *(Whispering)* Yes. On the other side. Speak nothing of it. If worse comes to worse....

LISTER: Gold?

LISA: Do not speak of it, please.

LISTER: I will not. But tell your mouthy boy and the famous hysterical professor.

BENJAMIN: What did you say?

LISTER: Never mind.

HENNY: Imagine them coming after us like that – the intelligentsia, the *crème de la crème*. Hunting us down like criminals.

LISTER: That's the whole point, you fool.

JOSEPH: Don't call my mother a fool.

LISTER: Ah, the teenager has spoken. I can have you shot, you little prick.

JOSEPH: By whom?

LISTER: By the Spanish. As a spy.

JOSEPH: They won't think of a kid as a spy.

GRETE: How old are you?

JOSEPH: I'll be thirteen.

GRETE: I'd be careful if I were you.

LISTER: The *Bar Mitzvah* boy. They make no distinctions of age around here. During the Civil War, children carried messages, grenades and ammunition.

HENNY: Not my boy, Lister. Not Joseph.

LISTER: I'm just telling you how it was. Yes, they'll kill us all if we provoke them. Including you and your son. There was lots of killing. Women and children and poets and circus freaks, they killed them all.

LISA: Please don't provoke the Spanish gentleman again.

KARINA: Gentleman? He 's no gentleman. He's a porter, a bellhop.

LISTER: No, he's more than that.

BENJAMIN: We must recognize our situation.

KARINA: We do recognize it.

BENJAMIN: What did I mean by it, the Messiah? What was I trying to understand?

LISA: The what?

KARINA: What's he talking about?

BENJAMIN: *(Stares at the ceiling.)* Historically. Here we are. We are actually here. How did this happen? What does it mean? Ah! A mighty Army is on it's way. We can hear them coming down for us through Time.

HENNY: *(To the others.)* That's how he was. That's what he did when he was lecturing. He stared at the ceiling. And spoke in a monotone.

LISA: He's ranting and raving.

GRETE: He must have a fever.

HENNY: No, that's how he was. He stared at the ceiling when he spoke to his classes.

LISA: But he makes no sense.

JOSEPH: Why was he doing that?

HENNY: He couldn't quite face the situation.

LISA: He must learn, if he is to make a new life in America.

GRETE: He can do it. He's not well just now. He can barely keep up anymore.

LISTER: You know this Walter Benjamin, I take it?

HENNY: I know his work. All of us do. We knew him in Berlin. In Paris.

LISTER: I don't think he'll do so well in America.

BENJAMIN: It's pointless. I will not live in America. It is a bastard country, ruled by capitalist pigs and bigots. I will not live there. How can they abide someone like me? A Jew who panics. Who can't speak English. A Jew on the run. A Jew who thinks too much. In German! An intellectual who does nothing! They will throw me into an insane asylum where I will die like a dog. No!

JOSEPH: What's wrong with him, Mother?

HENNY: Another panic attack. Don't fret.

JOSEPH: Give him a pill.

LISA: We have no pills for panic. Only morphine, for death.

JOSEPH: Not me.

HENNY: All right. Not you.

JOSEPH: I'm not ready to die yet.

HENNY: None of us are ready to die, Joseph.

LISTER: Except him, Benjamin.

HENNY: Don't say that, Lister. He believes in the Idea of History.

KARINA: His own version. Practically Messianic. The Angel of History, he calls it.

HENNY: I mean, he has projects. He wants to see them through. He wants to live. Let him be.

BENJAMIN: *(To himself)* Another crazy fucking Jewish intellectual! Yes! That's right! Stop shaking, Walter. We'll get out of here tomorrow morning. *(To himself)* Stop shaking.

LISTER: Will we, Benjamin? What does your Angel tell you?

BENJAMIN: I can't stop shaking, I feel poisoned by the air. The Americans will put a quota on the Jewish people. If they haven't done it yet, they'll do it soon. One day they'll put a massacre on. America! They'll kill the blacks and whatever is left of the Indians, and the crazies, and then they'll kill the Jews. No, they'll do the Jews first. There's a model. The teutonic giants have shown them how to do it. One step at a time!

LISA: You -- do you have the morphine?

BENJAMIN: I have the morphine.

LISA: How much?

BENJAMIN: Enough.

GRETE: Ah! The Morphine! You sure you have enough?

BENJAMIN: How can I be sure? Don't ask stupid questions.

JOSEPH: None for me.

HENNY: No, not you.

GRETE: Me, I want to be sure I can die if the time comes. No doubt about that. I mean by choice. My own choice. Quickly.

LISTER: This poisoned Spanish air will do it, if they keep us here like this.

LISA: What do you mean, "poisoned?"

LISTER: By treachery.

LISA: Don't be stupid. We're in Spain. Near the water.

GRETE: We should start walking. Let's walk. Sooner or later, we'll get somewhere safe. Spain, Portugal, Majorca. Somewhere. I don't know where. I don't care. Let's walk, Lisa. Soon we'll be in Spain.

LISA: I think we ARE in Spain, Grete.

LISTER: No, I think we're in France. It says HOTEL FRANCAISE.

LISA: Where?

LISTER: It says so on the awning.

HENNY: That doesn't mean anything.

BENJAMIN: Fuck the fucking Spanish. The lousy Fascists. They'll kill us for being Reds. They're waiting for us now. Look at the Colonel. In his plumage. First torture, then the Rack!

KARINA: No. We have friends. They are waiting for us.

GRETE: Who are they?

LISA: People who are on our side. Anarchists. Communists. Those who are left up here in the mountains. They wanted the Colonel in his old uniform.

BENJAMIN: That doesn't make sense.

LISA: So we can be welcomed and recognized.

BENJAMIN: That doesn't make sense either.

LISA: Then I don't know why.

BENJAMIN: Because he's a peacock, that's why. He feels important with a uniform on.

LISTER: I do what I'm asked to do, because, unlike you, Benjamin, I want to live.

BENJAMIN: I'm sick of waiting around like this. And I'm sick of the uniform. What are you really, Lister?

LISTER: I'm a teacher in High School. I've been offered a job in America.

GRETE: Where?

LISTER: In a Modern Orthodox high school in Los Angeles.

HENNY: No wonder he's kosher.

LISA: Teaching what?

LISTER: I don't know. History, maybe. You could end up one of my students, Joseph.

HENNY: We'll be in New York City, Lister, the other side of the continent, thank God, and we're not religious. It's a joke. Let's get out of here.

GRETE: I'm ready, we'll walk. Let's walk.

JOSEPH: I can't walk. Remember?

LISTER: Ironic, isn't it? Historically, we had to walk this way before.

JOSEPH: When was this?

LISTER: During the Middle Ages.

JOSEPH: What was in the Middle Ages?

BENJAMIN: The expulsion from Spain. 1492.

GRETE: It's still the Middle Ages.

BENJAMIN: Carriages of Jews lined up from Gibraltar to Palestine. Men, Women, Children. Precious objects. Art. Horses, dogs and cattle.

GRETE: And some of them ended up in Germany.

BENJAMIN: There was no Germany. It was an association of dukedoms and city-states. You could make a living there, loaning cash to the princes and the barons. Tutoring their children. Collecting their taxes.

LISTER: I don't understand you, Benjamin. Sometimes you sound reasonable. The rest of the time, you're not in your right mind.

BENJAMIN: Too bad. Yes, collecting the taxes. Yes. A good Jewish job to have in those days. Listen. In a hundred years there 'll be mass migrations, because there'll be no food and water and the black masses will be moving to the North and there'll be massacres and atrocities. People will drown and burn to death.

LISTER: Tell him to shut up.

GRETE: I agree with Henny. Let's get out of here. Let's walk.

LISA: Let's wait, Grete, there are friends coming for us, guides who will take us forward to safety. We can't find our way without them. And we need the boat.

GRETE: How do you know?

LISA: That's what we were told by the Agency.

BENJAMIN: Yes, the Anarchists and the Communists.

LISA: I believe them.

GRETE: We've been told all kinds of crap. No, let's walk.

LISA: Let's wait.

GRETE: I can't wait.

LISA: We must wait. Remember Joseph, and Walter. They can't walk anymore.

GRETE: Then maybe they'll have to stay behind. Oh! I'm sorry. Forgive me!

LISTER: No, this is entirely possible.

LISA: It's out of the question, Lister. We stay together. *(Pause)* Joseph? A game of chess?

JOSEPH: No, I don't feel like it.

LISA: Walter?

BENJAMIN: No, I can't concentrate. Leave me alone. Try Joseph.

JOSEPH: I just said "No."

BENJAMIN: There's a deadline for the papers. I don't understand it. Why don't they accept our papers? Are we too early or too late? Can we cross the border or not? Why don't they let us through?

KARINA: The French don't want any more Jews escaping over the border. It's as if they want us returned to them.

LISTER: It's so we can be killed, Woman.

KARINA: I know that. Cattle trains straight to Poland.

LISTER: Jews and Communists.

HENNY: No, mainly Jews. They've already killed all the Communists they could catch.

LISTER: Jews.

GRETE: Well, we can walk then.

LISA: You walk. You can go anytime.

HENNY: We should go together, stick together.

BENJAMIN: The French! The French! The civilized French!

JOSEPH: He's yelling again.

HENNY: Please don't yell, Walter.

BENJAMIN: The Spanish are no better, and the Germans are worst of all, and the most stinking of all are the Americans!

LISTER: What are you yelling about, Benjamin?

BENJAMIN: I'm talking about Mankind, you Stalinist jerk! What else could I be talking about? And they can steal our money and our paintings and our businesses and our apartments and houses and estates and banks and whatever else they can get their hands on, and that's where Mankind is. That's what we've come to, that's where we are, worse than ever, worse than before the Egyptians, worse than before Moses, and they will kill our children!

LISA: Don't talk to us about Moses now.

LISTER: I agree. He knows nothing. No one knows who Moses was or where he came from or if he even existed.

KARINA: He was an Egyptian. He brought Egypt to Canaan.

JOSEPH: You mean Lebanon.

HENNY: Lebanon. Palestine.

BENJAMIN: Who cares? I don't want to go to Palestine! I am not a Zionist like you Karina! I am a free man, a thinker, not Palestine and not America! Not for me!

HENNY: So where will you go?

BENJAMIN: There is no place for me.

LISA: Well, you can't stay here. Calm down and think it over.

BENJAMIN: No!

LISA: Think about America.

BENJAMIN: No!

LISA: We have a chance. There are people helping us. On both sides of the border.

LISTER: I don't know if I can believe you or not.

BENJAMIN: Can we believe you, Lisa?

LISA: We need to be patient and keep our senses. As it is, we are a small group in this crossing, as it is, we can sneak through. There's still a good chance.

GRETE: So why are they holding us up here?

LISA: Confusion, it has to be confusion somewhere along the line. Bureaucratic confusion.

GRETE: More reason to start walking.

LISA: No. We've been over this. Enough. We need to wait for daylight.

BENJAMIN: I can't. It's true that I can't walk anymore. I feel like my blood is boiling. My head is full of rocks, and my feet are like open sores. I don't think I can stand it anymore.

KARINA: He may be right. Let's go easy. I've known Walter for many years. He tends to tremble and be upset at things, and this is too much for him. But in a little while I think he can move with the rest of us.

BENJAMIN: Don't talk about me as though I weren't here.

GRETE: It's all right. Wait. We won't walk. I'll go along with Lisa.

LISA: Thank you.

GRETE: Did you bring pills, Walter? For the headaches?

BENJAMIN: No.

GRETE: Nothing?

BENJAMIN: Only the morphine.

GRETE: God bless.

LISTER: Don't say "God bless" please. God is not blessing now. God is cursing, God is punishing. It's the Old Testament God telling you what's what and what you can do with it.

GRETE: You're right.

LISTER: So don't say "God bless."

GRETE: Excuse me for living, Colonel. It's just a saying.

LISA: It's you who's losing his mind, Lister.

JOSEPH: Jesus.

LISTER: And don't bring that Christian shit up, either.

LISA: He didn't mean anything by it, Colonel.

BENJAMIN: Now they've mechanized mass murder. The machines have taken over. They know how to throw their arms in the air and walk like ducks. Not ducks. Like pieces of steel armor.

JOSEPH: Ha!

LISTER: No joke.

GRETE: It's the Germans. It's not everybody.

BENJAMIN: It's everybody. The Germans are showing the way. A purified, efficient mechanized system of happiness and satisfaction.

KARINA: And then you die anyway.

LISA: Yes, but not like dogs.

GRETE: Then what?

LISA: Like Gods.

BENJAMIN: It's beyond belief. But you must get rid of the Jews first, because they think too much and conscience is in their breathing and in their brains and they breed like rabbits. And they're ugly and greedy and a subspecies. Something like that. They've worked it out.

LISTER: I agree. And they got paid for it.

GRETE: Let's get out of here!

LISTER: We are racially inferior is the idea. Some smart people actually thought that up and got paid for it.

KARINA: We know that. They want to get rid of us and have a God-like race.

LISTER: How does a God die? I wonder.

KARINA: Singing Wagner!

LISTER: Ha! Don't make me laugh.

KARINA: I can't laugh.

LISA: Fucking sentimental shitheads. What are they trying to do?

GRETE: It can't last. It's too crazy to last. Who are we talking about? All of Europe?

BENJAMIN: Europe! Stupid men will wipe out the cities. Men even stupider than Hitler or Mussolini or Franco. Men with no conscience, no plan to save the Earth, and then the Earth will be turned to cinder by explosions and fire.

JOSEPH: Mother, tell him to stop.

HENNY: Stop, Walter. Get some sleep.

BENJAMIN: Sleep? I'm talking about the cretins who will take control of the cities of the North. How can one sleep?

LISTER: We know who we're talking about. The fascists. Germany, and now Belgium and France, and who knows who 's next? Italy, and Spain are already there.

KARINA: They evoke the Gods, the Norse Gods. Blondes with blue eyes and muscles and swords.

GRETE: Only in Germany. That is not Religion. That is fantasy.

LISTER: And the Jews?

GRETE: We argue a lot about philosophy and still try to obey the ancient rules of ethics and morality. It's a paradox and a contradiction.

KARINA: You can't have both. It's a patadox or a contradiction.

GREYE: What did you say?

KARINA: Never mind.

BENJAMIN: There'll be none of us left by then. The Earth will have lost its Chosen.

LISTER: Let us hope not.

KARINA: Joseph, tell us about the synagogue. Joseph? What's it like now?

JOSEPH: No, let the philosopher tell you.

BENJAMIN: Not me.

LISTER: You're the only one who knows anything.

JOSEPH: We stand up and praise God, then we sit down, then we stand up again and praise God. We study the writings. We stand up, praise God, and sit down.

HENNY: (*Proudly*) He does know his *haftorah*.

LISTER: (*Ironic*) Well, good for him.

JOSEPH: I forgot it already, Mother. They tell you the Hebrew but they don't say what it means.

BENJAMIN: I have a friend, Gershom, he says that's not all.

LISA: What's "not all?"

BENJAMIN: He lives in Palestine.

LISA: So what? They're no good to us here.

LISTER: People retire into the desert.

GRETE: I'm ready. I'm ready to go right now.

LISA: You'll walk to Palestine? Are you out of your mind?

GRETE: No, I'm sorry.

BENJAMIN: She's no more a Zionist than I am.

GRETE: Why not?

BENJAMIN: You belong to Europe, like me.

GRETE: I could change my mind.

BENJAMIN: You know Gershom is there. He studies the mystics. In Kabbalah, they say God lives his life through Man. He knows Himself through Man.

KARINA: What could that possibly mean?

BENJAMIN: At the far end of real thinking, real study, real attention, there is a Presence.

HENNY: Is that Being? Is that Heidegger's Being?

JOSEPH: I don't know. I don't know who Heidegger is.

HENNY: It's nonsense!

LISA: Henny, I thought you were trying to sleep.

HENNY: I'm not. Who can sleep in this lousy situation?

GRETE: I put it wrongly.

LISTER: I don't think she knows what she's talking about. Do you, Walter?

BENJAMIN: Who are you speaking of?

LISTER: Grete.

BENJAMIN: She didn't say anything.

LISTER: Oh. Excuse me.

BENJAMIN: I don't know. I don't think so. I don't know. I have a friend, he must be in America by now. Bertholt Brecht. He thinks much better than the Colonel.

LISA: Good. Think about him. Look forward to the future.

BENJAMIN: I don't agree with him necessarily, but he is a very intelligent man. Too intelligent for America.

GRETE: Then what are you thinking?

BENJAMIN: People want to know what's happening tomorrow, that they will be safe. That's all they want to know, and you can't blame them, can you?, or you're worse than the worst Tyrant, who will kill you for questioning that belief, or faith, or whatever you want to call it -- that certainty about reality, which can never be true, and can never be given, even by the richest, cruelest man in the world -- that you will always be made safe, and even may be offered guidance by Him in your personal beliefs.

GRETE: So lies are told.

BENJAMIN: Yes, lies that are believed willingly, by the people. I was always told, for example, that I could think these things through, that I had a right to my own opinion, that I had a right to say my say, that I was as intelligent as I am, more intelligent than most men, which comes with a responsibility to speak out, because the lying devils will take your last penny, your last candle, your last light, your last breath. And cause you pains of conscience.

KARINA: I don't know if I followed you there, Walter.

BENJAMIN: People are stupid. That's the problem. Stupid and fearful. A man comes along as stupid as they are, who likes power, who is charismatic, who mesmerizes, and they give him power. WHERE IS MY DORA? *(He suddenly starts weeping. GRETE goes to him and holds him.)*

GRETE: There, there, Walter. We don't know. We don't know where she is. *(He flings her away from him.)*

BENJAMIN: SHE 'S DEAD! *(Sobs as the others stay silent. Calms himself.)* Sorry. I'm alright now. *(Pause)*

LISA: Good, Walter. Still, we must perservere. *(Another pause)*

JOSPH: Say something, Mom.

HENNY: *(With an eye on Benjamin)* Hiedigger had no experience of Being, aside from thought, and yet they called him Existential. Another lie.

KARINA: Words.

LISTER: How do you know?

KARINA: I agree with Henny.

BENJAMIN: How do you know? Being is the name of the Jewish God, the secret name, incomprehensible to Man. Man must beg for his bread of Being, otherwise he has none. That's what *Job* is all about, and the sacrifice of Isaac. I AM THAT I AM. Am I right, Grete?

GRETE: Yes, that seems right.

KARINA: What was it you said, Walter – at the end of concentration, is what? – Presence?

LISA: That makes no sense, no sense at all.

BENJAMIN: I'm trying to remember now what I said.

GRETE: At the end of deep meditation, or prayer, there at the end -- is a Presence. That's what you said.

BENJAMIN: It's impossible to talk about here, in these conditions, in this situation, it's impossible, when they are hunting us down as animals, civilized persons, here at the border in time, in time, in time, I mean time is running out on us. The Angel of History is running us down.

LISA: Bear up, Walter. We'll be out of here soon.

BENJAMIN: I am bearing up. What can you be talking about? I lost my manuscript! Do you have any idea what that means – to a man like me --- a writer like me - a foremost intellectual of his time, a European genius and a Jew! A Jew! Me! Who has

never been to synagogue, who is not a Zionist fool! On the run! On the Spanish border! Pissing in his pants!

LISTER: It's in your briefcase. Your manuscript. It's under the chair.

BENJAMIN: Oh. Thank God.

LISA: Quiet! Please. There are guides. There are strangers. Just above us. Upstairs.

BENJAMIN: Fuck off, I say! They mean nothing! To have devoted one's life to meaning! The possibility of meaning! The reasoning that creates meaning! Who cares anymore about these things? Not them! Not these shit-eaters and shitheads!

LISA: Stop it.

LISTER: You're making a racket, sir.

BENJAMIN: Fuck you.

GRETE: (*Quietly*) You went to synagogue, Walter. I know, because I was there.

BENJAMIN: Yes, at my *bar mitzvah* -- listening to a language I couldn't understand. The language of the Fathers. I had no inkling, not a clue, and yet I sang like an Angel and I thought it was beautiful. What was the story? I'm trying to remember -- was it about Love? King Solomon? No, it's impossible. I don't think they do that. I'll never know now. It was in my book. I could remember then. It was the sound, the sound of the Hebrew, and the chanting.

GRETE: The idea there is that we can talk to God.

LISA: We cannot talk to God. Only a mute would say that.

BENJAMIN: Excuse me. I don't want to argue.

LISA: Sorry. That was stupid.

GRETE: Where is Buber when we need him?

BENJAMIN: He's in the Negev. Gershom knows him.

KARINA: Buber was talking about something else.

BENJAMIN: No, he wasn't.

KARINA: He was talking about the Word of God.

GRETE: No, he wasn't.

LISA: Please. Don't argue.

GRETE: Of a dialogue! I and Thou!

HENNY: That's why he 's in the Negev. For the silence. Another stupid joke.

GRETE: Maybe it's not such a joke, Henny. *(Pause)*

JOSEPH: Well, when are they coming for us? The papers are good for another day, are they not? And what good would a Jew do for them in France? Why don't they let us go on to Spain and America?

LISTER: They want to kill us, Joseph. Did you forget? I just told you all about it.

JOSEPH: I won't be killed. I'll run. I'll run or I'll fight.

HENNY: You can't run and you can't fight.

LISTER: You'll be killed.

HENNY: Don't say that, Lister.

LISTER: You just said it yourself. *(To JOSEPH)* You'll be killed, with all the rest of us.

HENNY: Patience, Joseph. We have no choice. You're doing great. Get some rest now.

KARINA: Lie down. *(JOSEPH tries to lie down, doesn't quite succeed.)* Very good, Joseph.

JOSEPH: Why are you so condescending?

KARINA: I don't mean it that way.

JOSEPH: You make me sound like a child.

LISTER: You are a child.

JOSEPH: I'll kick you!

LISTER: Go ahead!

HENNY: That's enough. Go over there and use the blanket, Joseph.

JOSEPH: No!

HENNY: As you wish. But no more fighting.

LISA: No. It's time to think. And be quiet. And be patient. *(Pause)* They want to take our lives and our property and our pride. But mainly, they want our money. I believe we ARE in Spain already, Joseph.

JOSEPH: Let's go, then!

LISA: We're waiting for the boat. And then we'll go.

BENJAMIN: I have no money! I have only my books! And now one of them is lost! No, here it is. In my briefcase. Thank God.

LISA: We just told you about your briefcase. You weren't listening.

GRETE: Does it have a title?

BENJAMIN: No.

LISTER: Clip it to your pants.

BENJAMIN: No.

LISTER: That way you won't lose it.

BENJAMIN: No.

GRETE: What's it about?

BENJAMIN: *Theses to Adorno.*

LISTER: What's it about?

BENJAMIN: I can't explain it right now because I can't think straight and you wouldn't understand it anyway. It's for intelligent people. Not pig-eaters like you.

LISTER: Thanks very much, but I keep kosher, you know. I don't eat pig. And we're all very intelligent here.

BENJAMIN: Kosher? You must be kidding. You're lying. You're not kosher, I can tell by looking at you. You're a phony. *(To the others)* I can see right through him. *(Pause)* He's got scabs in his head.

LISTER: I'll get you for that, Mister.

LISA: Don't be that way, Benjamin.

BENJAMIN: But I am that way.

LISA: Apologize.

BENJAMIN: No.

KARINA: You don't have to apologize, Walter. It's absurd.

BENJAMIN: I won't! *(A pause)* Fucking phony. High School teacher, indeed. Not my cup of tea. You can't see those marks in his brain, but I can.

KARINA: He 's hallucinating.

BENJAMIN: No, I'm not.

KARINA: Say something, Grete, before he loses himself entirely.

GRETE: Think of the future, Walter. There's the New School, in New York. They'd love to have you. On your concept of History alone. On your ideas about the meaning of Messiah. On theater and Brecht. The Arcades. There's so much you can teach about.

KARINA: I quite agree with Grete, Walter.

BENJAMIN: Not anymore. Let him do it. Lister.

KARINA: Not Lister, the kosher Army man. He knows nothing but War. And nothing about Kosher.

JOSEPH: Ha! And nothing about High School. *(He curls up in his blanket.)*

LISTER: True. So true. And I'm no Zionist, either. I'm going to be nice to you, Professor, because, as you say, you don't quite know what you're doing. Like that boy over there.

BENJAMIN: I was definitely a Professor.

GRETE: And an important one.

BENJAMIN: And I don't know what I'm going to do.

LISTER: You're a lucky fellow, Benjamin. You can write. You can teach. And you still have your mind, as far as I can tell, which you must keep alive. And you will write many books.

LISA: That was kind of you, Lister.

BENJAMIN: No. I'm finished.

KARINA: Don't think that way.

BENJAMIN: I do think that way.

GRETE: And what do we do now? Do we still wait? Do we not go on?

JOSEPH: (*Getting up*) I can't rest. It's impossible. Let's do something. Cards or something.

BENJAMIN: I can't concentrate.

JOSEPH: Not you. My mother.

HENNY: I can't either.

JOSEPH: Then, never mind.

GERTE: What kind of hotel is this, anyway? It's hard to get anything here – a glass of wine, a *shnapps*. A loaf of bread. A sausage. A bit of soup.

LISA: Be quiet about the food. There'll be food there when we cross.

LISTER: This place is called the *Hotel Francia*. The Hotel France.

LISA: We are only guests here. We have no rights.

KARINA: Well, it's warm here by the fire. How much time do we have, Lisa?

LISA: Sunrise.

BENJAMIN: Astonishing. One more day. Another day in the *Inferno*. What did he know about the Messiah? Dante. I think he knew something. He knew the connection with Time. Which is incomprehensible. This is only a theory.

LISTER: Spare us, Benjamin.

BENJAMIN: A yellow-studded star...three months of walking...chopping stones in the transit camps...the mind shudders.

GRETE: We can't follow you, Walter. Where are you?

BENJAMIN: I know where I am.

GRETE: Where are you?

BENJAMIN: We're on the border now. Between France and Spain.

GRETE: Yes. But they say the border is closed. We're too late.

BENJAMIN: One day?

GRETE: One day too late! How many times do I have to tell you? We have to move! We have to go! We have to start walking!

LISTER: I agree with her.

JOSEPH: And so do I!

BENJAMIN: Where? How?

GRETE: We walk!

BENJAMIN: I can't walk anymore!

HENNY: And neither can Joseph!

LISA: Calm down. We musn't call attention to ourselves.

KARINA: It's a mix - up. A bureucratic error.

BENJAMIN: No, it's a trap!

LISA: Quiet.

BENJAMIN: Ha! What will they do with us in America! America! Land of the Boobies, the ignorant, the rabid, the believers! We, who created German Culture, who are the Avatars of the German consciousness, we, in America! Just think of it! It's a joke!

LISTER: Then don't go.

BENJAMIN: I have to go. It's ironic, don't you think? Truly ironic, that I, a Jewish philospher of very high standing, whom no one bothers to read, is on his way to

America! Think of Kafka! Kurt Weil! Arthur Koestler! Hannah Arendt! Walter Benjamin! Think of it!

GRETE: I'm not sure what you're getting at, Walter.

BENJAMIN: I won't give them the satisfaction! We know how to think!

LISTER: Typical Jewish Pride, while they hunt us down in these cold mountains like sheep.

LISA: What would you have us do?

LISTER: Fight. Fight our way out of here.

JOSEPH: I'm ready!

HENNY: Shut up. You're too young. You must hide, not fight.

LISA: And then what, Colonel?

LISTER: I take it back. We are unarmed. It's a fantasy. They'll throw us into a dungeon and forget about us.

LISA: We are safer here. We must wait. But those of you who want to go, can go. I won't stop you. God bless. *(No one moves.)*

GRETE: Will nobody go? *(A silence)*

KARINA: The rest of us will make do. We have no choice.

GRETE: Benjamin?

BENJAMIN: Not me. I won't make do. Whatever that means. But I'm not leaving this room.

GRETE: And you wouldn't go with Gershom to Palestine. Remember?

BENJAMIN: I am a European.

GRETE: He begged you to come and put down roots.

BENJAMIN: I am a European.

KARINA: I agree with Grete. You'll get a job in a University. I heard that they're hiring us over there now. Jewish writers and thinkers.

BENJAMIN: Where? At the Hebrew University?

KARINA: Not only there. In New York, Chicago, California.

BENJAMIN: And teach Adorno? And the Frankfurt School? They've never heard of it.

LISA: Yes, they have. They know who you are. They know Adorno.

BENJAMIN: Do they?

LISA: Of course.

BENJAMIN: I can't believe it.

LISA: You'll need to get your English.

BENJAMIN: My English?

LISA: Yes.

BENJAMIN: They should learn German.

KARINA: Some do, you know.

BENJAMIN: Really?

KARINA: Yes. Give it a chance. Einstein is there. At Princeton. And many others.

LISA: There's no more hope for us in Europe.

LISTER: There is no more Europe.

BENJAMIN: There's no Europe without its Jews, I can tell you that.

LISTER: Hitler will give it a try. We'll go to America and show them there what we can do.

BENJAMIN: No! Not America! And not Palestine!

GRETE: Why not?

BENJAMIN: And we don't need to show anyone what we can do. We have done it.

GRETE: Answer me, Walter.

BENJAMIN: Because we have created a culture in Europe, it is ours as much as the Germans or the French or the Swiss or the English! There is no culture in America. We will have to do it from scratch. And I'm tired and I'm not in my right mind. I can't think!

GRETE: Leave him alone for a minute.

BENJAMIN: Leave me alone.

GRETE: You're terrified when you're alone. You know that.

BENJAMIN: Yes. Let's take the morphine now! What are we waiting for?

LISA: No. Wait. That would be foolish. They said we can leave in the morning.

KARINA: They?

LISA: The guides and the Border Officials.

GRETE: When did they say this?

HENNY: The Spaniard went to check, remember?

BENJAMIN: I don't believe them. They contradict themselves. The situation is in Chaos.

LISTER: How long has Benjamin been trembling like this?

GRETE: Since we left France. By some lucky break he was not interned. He hid in his apartment and never went out. Somehow he got on the right list. Sheer luck. He walked from Paris to Meaux and then he walked with us to the border. He is not a well man.

BENJAMIN: Who is a well man now? How is that possible? You're out of your minds. They are trying to kill us. All of us.

GRETE: You are alone too much, Walter.

BENJAMIN: I must study. "The Origins of German Tragic Drama," yes, that was my first. Very interesting. Now? A throw of the dice. Baudelaire. Women in Love. "The Transit Camp as a Moment in Time." Yes, something like that.

GRETE: You are alone too much, Walter. Even now.

BENJAMIN: What do you mean?

GRETE: You're not making sense.

KARINA: His biggest fear is bombardment.

BENJAMIN: Why are you telling people things, Karina?

KARINA: I'm sorry, Walter. That was stupid of me.

LISTER: What does that have to do with anything?

KARINA: Nothing. Nothing at all. I'm sorry I said it. It's just interesting. A man living alone, afraid of bombs from the sky.

BENJAMIN: And you? You are not? Are you too dumbfounded?

KARINA: Apparently, I am.

LISTER: I begin to understand. It's odd.

HENNY: It's insane. The man is a genius.

LISTER: But, according to Goebbels, as a Jew, he is poisoning the well of the Nazi Empire.

HENNY: You're as crazy as he is.

LISTER: And so are you.

HENNY: No, I'm not. I never really understood what he was talking about, anyway.

LISTER: What does he talk about?

HENNY: So what if Art is mechanically reproduced? Who cares about the Paris Arcades? And his ideas about the Messiah and History are way too dense and opaque.

BENJAMIN: For you, maybe.

JOSEPH: For anyone with a brain.

BENJAMIN: How would you know, you little twisted shithead?

HENNY: I didn't mean anything, Walter. I have total respect. Your work is just hard to understand sometimes.

BENJAMIN: I really don't care what you think. When I think of Art, I think of my father, who had taste and originality.

GRETE: His father was an Art dealer. In Berlin.

KARINA: Art. Art doesn't matter anymore.

LISA: Not in Germany, but elsewhere.

LISTER: Where?

LISA: In America.

GRETE: But will we have students in America?

KARINA: Let's get there first.

LISA: Of course. We have sponsors. We have countrymen. We are not abandoned. You hear me, Walter?

BENJAMIN: No.

GRETE: Can you imagine? He had no idea what was going to happen to him. Where is it he was going? What papers would he have. We thought international papers would be enough. Then they changed their minds. Only National passports, French passports. He doesn't have those. We destroyed those for some stupid reason, along with the exit stamps.

KARINA: What was he doing in his apartment?

GRETE: I don't know. He was working. But it's quite horrible. Hiding there alone. Once in a while, he'd go out into the streets. Buy Smokes. Newspapers. Food. Giving away candy. Then cringing in his apartment.

BENJAMIN: Vermin. They call us vermin. Stinking up the planet. I can understand that. The secret stink, the hidden knives. I gave away all my chocolate. All my bread. The species, not just us, was finished. It was clear as a Hebrew letter. No mistake. A creature that will roast its own. Here, a piece of meat. Enjoy. Die now, die tomorrow. The time is coming. Today it's all right, everything is all right. Then the O sound and the tongue sticking out like a cockroach. The last horror.

JOSEPH: Ugh! What does he mean by that?

HENNY: Nothing. Rigor Mortis.

JOSEPH: Rigor Mortis?

HENNY: Yes. What happens to the dead. When they die. Don't think about it.

JOSEPH: Don't think about it?

LISTER: That's why we must live, Boy. We have sworn our humanity to God.

JOSEPH: How can you not think about it?

KARINA: Interesting.

HENNY: What's interesting about it?

LISTER: I've never sworn my humanity to God. I should do it now.

KARINA: I've never heard Colonel Lister talk like that.

BENJAMIN: The kosher Communist Colonel.

LISTER: Merely to behave like men. *Menchen*.

HENNY: Those ones from the East. They were not clean.

JOSEPH: No, and they smelled.

HENNY: Polish and Russians and Litvaks, sleeping in the streets.

GRETE: Then let's do as we promised. These could be our last hours. (*No one moves. WALTER takes a large number of pills in a bottle out of his pocket.*) Here we are, let's take them now. (*No one responds, he puts them back.*) There! You see? We can't do it! We're too afraid.

LISA: We want to live.

GRETE: We still have a chance.

LISA: Say something from the Bible, Colonel.

LISTER: What for?

LISA: For luck. I don't know why. You seem rabbinical all of a sudden. Most of us here are secular academics. You'll give us courage.

LISTER: I don't know it. I don't know anything from the Bible.

LISA: Never mind, then. Where are you from?

LISTER: Germany.

LISA: What part?

LISTER: From the North. From Danzig.

BENJAMIN: Come on, Lister – say something!

LISA: He doesn't know anything. He's no more a Rabbi than I am.

LISTER: I never said I was a Rabbi.

BENJAMIN: And I never said I wanted to hear anything Rabbinical.

LISTER: "And The Lord God created the Heavens and the Earth." And I can say the *Shema*. That's all I know. *Hear O Israel, King of the Universe, the Lord is One*. That's all I know.

BENJAMIN: That's wrong, I think.

LISA: That's the best you can do, eh, Rabbi?

LISTER: Yes, I'm afraid so.

BENJAMIN: You left out *King of the Universe*.

GRETE: Walter. Say something from *Arcades*.

BENJAMIN: No, I won't. It's lost. It's a lost book. I never finished it. And I don't believe in it anymore. I don't remember anything, to be honest. It's all about Paris and Human culture. The buildings. The department stores. The gates and walls and sewers and shit. Who wouldn't be interested in that? Now that we are worms.

GRETE: Say more.

BENJAMIN: About markets and prices and human intercourse. Now that we are worms?

GRETE: No more about worms. Something positive.

BENJAMIN: There's nothing more I can say.

GRETE: From the Angel of History.

BENJAMIN: I can't!

GRETE: Try!

BENJAMIN: I'll try. *A storm is blowing in from Paradise...his wings are caught...the Angel can't close his wings...the storm blows him into the future...That's all I can remember now. I'm sorry.*

HENNY: Who could blame you?

BENJAMIN: *(To himself)* Notes from the Underground of European thought. Connecting all the dots of a criminal world that is coming into being, as we speak, a storm of murder and iniquity rising into History.

GRETE: See how he stares at the ceiling? I'm not sure of what you said, Walter. What did you just say?

HENNY: I'm not sure now either, Walter, of what you said.

KARINA: Yes, who can explain? The Storm is the Future?

BENJAMIN: I thought that was well-said, though, well-said. Thank you. You don't have to run naked in the streets.

LISTER: To what?

BENJAMIN: To know what's going on. To attract the attention of the authorities. To attract attention. To get put away in a hospital. To study sewers and ancient gates. And so on. *(Pause)*

GRETE: That's what has always impressed me so, if you don't mind, Walter, it's your interest, your interest in the reality of things, and how you could find the thoughts, the words. It's your most remarkable attribute of all.

BENJAMIN: In German, no less.

GRETE: In German.

BENJAMIN: And I like to gamble, and sit in cafes and talk to my friends.

JOSEPH: Walter Benjamin, he 's so much the brilliant intellectual, Mother. Fine. But think of all the Jewish comedians and clowns and theater people flooding into America now. Think of them, too. I do, and it gives me hope.

HENNY: Yes, and there'll be plenty of German actors and directors and plenty of *Yiddish*, and plenty competition. You could go into show business.

JOSEPH: I could! I can't wait. German clowns, German actors. A German circus! Who knows?

LISTER: What does that have to do with you, kid?

HENNY: He wants to perform.

LISTER: We're acting like we believe we're going to make it out of here.

JOSEPH: We are going to make it!

LISTER: Why, because your Mama wiped your ass? She fed you chicken soup? She walked you to school? Encouraged your fantasies?

BENJAMIN: *(To himself)* Everything disappears. Underneath the Tree of Life is Nothing.

LISTER: What are you talking about, Benjamin?

BENJAMIN: *Ein Sof.*

JOSEPH: What is that?

LISTER: Never mind, Joseph. Benjamin, the super intellectual. He 's talking *Kaballah*.

HENNY: He's hysterical, that's all.

BENJAMIN: I don't think so.

HENNY: You can't see yourself.

BENJAMIN: I do see myself. And I see him, the kosher charlatan from Danzig.

HENNY: What do you mean, "Everything disappears?" Are you talking *Kaballah* now?

BENJAMIN: I'm talking Reality.

LISA: It's better to be positive.

BENJAMIN: Why?

LISA: Because it's better that way.

BENJAMIN: Why?

LISA: Be positive. They don't know what they're doing. Not the guards, the police, the Nazis, no one.

BENJAMIN: Then no one knows anything. History drives them like gravity, a random Angel, deformed and destructive, a magnetic wheel. An energized nothingness, like a wave, or a current.

GRETE: Yes, I think so.

KARINA: I think so, too.

BENJAMIN: What? What do you think?

LISTER: Does Lisa know what Benjamin is talking about? The Fixer? The *macher*?

LISA: Yes, I do know. He has his own way of thinking. Some of it is *Kabbalah*, certainly.

LISTER: Yes, I'm sure of that.

BENJAMIN: There is a bureaucratic monster eating its robots. What do you think of that? That was good, I thought. Here 's another one: There is no such thing as Fate. But there is a movement, a motion, a surge through Time -- we can call it the Messiah. *(Pause)* What did I say? Just now?

HENNY: It doesn't matter. Don't worry about it.

LISA: Yes. I agree. You didn't think it through. I didn't either. It seems we have these unconnected parts in our heads.

BENJAMIN: I have no idea what you mean by that or what I meant.

HENNY: You did when you spoke.

BENJAMIN: No, I didn't.

HENNY: I think it's understandable. We're not in our right minds. Wait. There 's someone at the door.

LISA: Who 's there? *(Enter SPANIARD)*

HENNY: It's the Spaniard.

SPANIARD: I came to inform you: The deadline is the same as I told you before.

LISA: When was the deadline?

SPANIARD: Yesterday, at six o'clock.

HENNY: Then the deadline has passed!

LISA: That's impossible!

LISTER: He doesn't know what he's saying.

LISA: We should prepare. Prepare to leave in the morning. At all costs.

HENNY: And the passports?

SPANIARD: The same.

HENNY: We gave up our exit stamps.

SPANIARD: The same. Be ready to go back to France.

HENNY: But if the deadline is passed, what then?

SPANIARD: The deadline is passed. That's all.

HENNY: But how are we to move?

SPANIARD: Pardon me, but I don't know.

LISTER: Pardon you?

LISA: Be quiet. He obviously doesn't know.

SPANIARD: Excuse me.

LISTER: Which side were you on? In the Civil War? Which side?

SPANIARD: The right side. *(Starts to go.)*

LISTER: Very funny.

SPANIARD: Consider. Would I help you now if I was a friend of the State?

HENNY: Let him go.

LISA: You can go, *Senior*.

SPANIARD: The answer is, No. But I would prepare if I were you, like the Lady said. Just in case. *(Exits)*

HENNY: What does he mean by that?

LISA: Be calm. Be prepared to walk.

GRETE: That's what I've been saying.

BENJAMIN: It's ridiculous. I have been walking for weeks. I see houses and windows and the streets are full of strangers and garbage and machines. The same slogans, the same photos, the same faces, everything the same, like he said, like the Spaniard said, and there was no me, no "I", no thinking, only dreams, no new sensations, no impressions, no character in anyone's eyes, only fear and confusion.

LISTER: Tell him to be quiet.

LISA: Be quiet.

BENJAMIN: No.

GRETE: He has a point. What could I have been thinking? When I was looking?, when I was walking?, when I was watching? Nothing has remained of it all. I am like a ghost.

HENNY: You are tired. We're all tired.

LISTER: I'm exhausted.

JOSEPH: So am I.

HENNY: Maybe we should clean ourselves up?

LISTER: How?

HENNY: There is a fountain, just outside. We'll go one at a time.

JOSEPH: But I like what this man said!

LISTER: Lister.

JOSEPH: I like what you said, Mr. Lister. What is perceiving? What is remembering?

LISTER: We are running like prey. Something we know in our bones.

BENJAMIN: I have a friend who is in Palestine, and they are preparing an army, they are preparing to fight an Arab Army, maybe in four, five years, a Jewish Army, not him, not my friend, he doesn't believe in violence, but he will support an Army.

LISTER: How precious. He doesn't believe in violence.

BENJAMIN: A Jewish Army, to fight for the State. What I am wondering, is this: How are his thoughts? What are his impressions? Does he look up or down when he walks? Is he aware of nature? Does he see the clouds? The Sun appearing on the mountain? The woods! The flowers! The wife? The daughter? The son preparing for War?

JOSEPH: Which question should we answer?

GRETE: I want to wash my face. Excuse me. *(Exits)*

LISA: Good. One at a time.

LISTER: Don't give orders.

LISA: I'm not giving orders.

LISTER: You just did.

LISA: I'm only saying – this is it. We might as well be clean. And have some potatoes, and a sense of dignity.

LISTER: And a glass of wine.

LISA: Who knows? These people are making it up as they go along.

BENJAMIN: My God, the things we took for granted The phone! The radio! The evening stroll! The typewriter!

LISA: Enough, Walter.

HENNY: He was a brilliant student. Francois. I don't know why he killed himself.

LISTER: Are you an imbecile or what?

LISA: His name was not Francois. He made it up.

HENNY: I don't want to talk about that. I don't think that's a good idea.

LISTER: Why not?

HENNY: Because of Walter. He was very impressed. Shocked, really.

LISTER: That Francois killed himself?

LISA: Yes. That he actually did it.

HENNY: The boy had lost his entire family. Nineteen years old.

LISA: We don't know. He didn't say much. Francois.

HENNY: Walter was very taken with him. An Eastern Jewish genius. *A Hasid*. A quiet, thoughtful person who didn't make a big deal about his troubles.

GRETE: (*Re-entering*) He was going to meet his Maker.

BENJAMIN: I heard all that. What is it with you people? The boy had courage to do what he had to do. He had no interest in giving up one life for a worse life in some foreign country where even the air is not kosher. I admire that. He made a decision. He carried it out. Not like me, who rants and raves and foams at the mouth.

HENNY: I asked you not to talk about the boy.

LISA: We were on our way. We had a chance. He should have taken his chance.

GRETE: For what?

LISA: For a chance to live a life.

BENJAMIN: No. I don't blame him. It's like going to Hell. This way, he had a chance to cleave to his Faith.

LISTER: "Cleave to his Faith?"

BENJAMIN: Yes, damn it! Listen to the "Rabbi."

LISTER: Your attitude is all wrong, Benjamin. You don't appreciate what you have. You don't appreciate what you had. You don't appreciate what you can have. And you have no faith.

BENJAMIN: Appreciate what?

LISA: Like a family, like a career. The normal life of a normal individual. A scholar. A teacher.

BENJAMIN: Impossible. Where the air is poisoned by slavery and genocide and crime.

LISTER: And the air here? Poisoned by Fascist thought.

GRETE: And you are not a religious man.

BENJAMIN: No, I am not. It's true, I have no Faith. Francois – that wasn't his real name, by the way -- took it quietly and with no fuss. What could he have been thinking a that moment?

GRETE: He had a fever.

HENNY: I think you have one now, Walter.

BENJAMIN: True. I can't think straight. I feel like my hands and feet are bleeding.

HENNY: They are not.

BENJAMIN: They are bleeding for all the Martyrs.

HENNY: Oh, stop it.

BENJAMIN: Like stigmata. Here, feel my head.

HENNY: It's warm, but not too warm. You'll live.

BENJAMIN: I don't want to live.

LISA: Let's be quiet for a minute. *(Pause)*

BENJAMIN: Are there bears?

LISA: Bears?

BENJAMIN: Bears in the mountains?

LISTER: Of course, there are bears, and wolves, too!

BENJAMIN: How would I know?

LISTER: You wouldn't know? You, who have read entire city libraries. *(Re-Enter the SPANIARD)*

LISA: All 's well? Stupid question. Excuse me.

SPANIARD: As far as I know, Ma'am.

LISA: You made a face.

HENNY: It's the way you put the question.

LISA: How else should I put it?

HENNY: Considering we could all be dead in the morning.

BENJAMIN: Don't make her cry.

SPANIARD: I apologize.

HENNY: I'm not crying.

BENJAMIN: I'm thinking – Death -- what would it mean? Darkness, blackness, no sensation, no breath. Nothing. What does it mean? No one knows.

LISA: Don't think about it too much.

BENJAMIN: Don't be a moron. You, Spaniard – what do you think? What does it mean, Death? Do you have an opinion?

SPANIARD: I follow the Catholic Church, sir.

BENJAMIN: That means nothing to me.

SPANIARD: It means you are not here anymore.

BENJAMIN: And nowhere else, either.

SPANIARD: I wouldn't know, sir.

LISTER: *(To SPANIARD)* Maybe we asked you this already – but whose side were you on during the civil war?

SPANIARD: *(Whispers)* I was on the side of the Government, Sir.

LISTER: And so were we. Most of us. *(To the others)* He could be lying. Why are you whispering?

SPANIARD: They're still around, sir. Just above us. The authorities.

LISTER: Excuse me.

SPANIARD: It was the legitimate Government, sir. And we could have won.

BENJAMIN: Yes, if the fucking Communists hadn't pulled their support. Am I right?

SPANIARD: You could be right.

BENJAMIN: Liars and traitors. What do you want?

SPANIARD: I've come to check on you. See to your needs.

GRETE: We need food and drink, obviously.

LISTER: We need rest.

LISA: Peace of mind.

GRETE: We could use some wine.

SPANIARD: I can bring you nothing. The fountain is just outside. You can drink, wash. You should try to get some sleep.

LISTER: Yeah, yeah.

SPANIARD: Have a good night. (*Exits*)

LISTER: What do you make of that human specimen?

LISA: I don't know what to make of it.

HENNY: He 's lying.

LISTER: They all lie.

LISA: We have no choice but to do what they say. So act right.

BENJAMIN: The fucking Reds. We can't trust them. We don't know these people or what they want or anything about them. They could be holdovers from the war. Anarchists with revenge on their minds against the leftist Jews who betrayed them.

LISA: Who are you talking about?

BENJAMIN: Our saviors, the ones supposedly waiting for us to cross.

HENNY: Calm down, Walter. Now is not the time to panic.

BENJAMIN: I'm not panicking. I'm asking a rational question.

LISA: It's been arranged by trustworthy people. In America and elsewhere. Stop carping. Drink some water. Wash your face.

BENJAMIN: I can't help but agree with Francois.

GRETE: His real name was Herschel.

BENJAMIN: Correct. Herschel. I don't give a damn. He didn't want to go to America. It's *treyf*. Unclean. I like the way he put it.

GRETE: That's the way he put it.

BENJAMIN: Seething, as it is, with greed and lying and ambition and primitive murder – no, I don't want to go there.

GRETE: That's not you talking, Walter.

BENJAMIN: Who is it, then?

GRETE: Someone who is afraid of America, for no reason. You can go elsewhere.

BENJAMIN: Then where?

GRETE: Canada. South America.

BENJAMIN: No. Back to The Paris Arcades, into whose fantastic illusions one can lose oneself and find oneself.

LISA: Nonsense, Walter. They're run by the Germans now. Gestapo watchers stand in every arcade. On both ends. We're caught. Vicious French Fascists on one side, the Nazis on the other. Anti-Semites all.

BENJAMIN: Fascists – they're all the same, and so they will remain, forever, throughout time -- they will pop up and tell you what's right and what's good and who is better than whom – they are the idiot caste of humanity, those who can't see the difference between the true and the false, the narcissists and egoists who seem to be in our nature, our destiny, our foolishness as a species. So, I say, fuck 'em all, and I'm not kidding – no loss there to Nature or to the Supernatural – let them die – one at a time or all at once – and I must add here, in all honesty – my aim is to relieve myself of the pain and suffering of having to endure their stinking presences among us. So let them all die. Now.

SPANIARD: (*Re-Entering*) I'm sorry to hear you talk like that, sir.

BENJAMIN: No, you're not. You couldn't care less.

LISTER: It's him again. *L'Espagnol. (To SPANIARD)* Go fuck yourself.

HENNY: Wait! Don't alienate him, Colonel!

LISTER: Why not?

HENNY: He may save our lives.

SPANIARD: There's always a chance, Madam.

JOSEPH: I agree with my mother.

BENJAMIN: Our lives are not worth living.

HENNY: Why not?

BENJAMIN: We bow and scrape and humiliate ourselves before these idiots. I am much to blame for all that crawling and complaining.

LISTER: As if *you* were to blame, you alone.

BENJAMIN: I'll take the blame!

LISTER: Sheer sophistry. The Spaniard doesn't even know who you are.

BENJAMIN: He should know. Spaniard! Wake up!

SPANIARD: I'm not asleep.

BENJAMIN: Yes, you are.

SPANIARD: What do you want?

BENJAMIN: Do you know who I am?

SPANIARD: Another wandering Jew, sir, whose death is imminent.

BENJAMIN: You know nothing of my fame? My importance to the community?

SPANIARD: No, sir. And I don't much care.

LISTER: He's not famous and he's not important to the community.

BENJAMIN: I want the morphine! Give me relief! Give me pleasure and sleep, that's all I want! No more of all the rest of the torture – eating and fucking and killing and fearing, and lording it over the people and all the rest of it!

SPANIARD: I don't have the capsules. You have them, Sir.

BENJAMIN: Of course. I know I have them.

HENNY: No. Wait.

LISTER: How could you forget, Benjamin? They belong to all of us.

BENJAMIN: I didn't forget.

LISTER: Don't forget to hand them out.

BENJAMIN: I won't.

JOSEPH: Not to me.

HENNY: You don't know that yet.

GRETE: You're a child, like Hershel.

JOSEPH: I'm not like Herschel. I want to live. I'll start running now.

LISA: No. Wait.

HENNY: Please wait.

JOSEPH: I'll wait a little while, and then I'll run.

SPANIARD: I wouldn't do that if I were you. You are surrounded, and you'll lose your way.

JOSEPH: I'll run through the woods and come back and kill you.

SPANIARD: I don't think so, boy. You don't have the strength. And keep this in mind: The ones who are coming for you, they gave you the capsules as a gesture, a gesture of solidarity.

GRETE: But we don't have the exit stamps.

LISA: Still, we must keep to our end of the bargain, and hope for the best. And I think the Spaniard is right. We have the capsules. What are your plans now, *Senior*?

SPANIARD: My orders are to watch and wait till dawn, Ma'am.

BENJAMIN: What happens then, Spaniard?

SPANIARD: I don't know, sir. There may be a boat.

BENJAMIN: I don't like that tone. It's not promising.

SPANIARD: I can't promise you anything.

LISTER: You'd better stay here with us, Joseph.

BENJAMIN: You were right about the Communists, Lister. At least they had an idea.

LISTER: A senseless idea. People are animals. They won't change.

HENNY: I don't want to hear such talk, Lister!

BENJAMIN: It's true, Colonel. The Communists are just as bad. But at least they had an ideal that one can live with.

LISTER: One cannot live with it. I'm sorry, Mrs. Gurland. Joseph. What do you think, Spaniard?

SPANIARD: I have no opinion, sir.

BENJAMIN: Tell me: What do you wish for, Spaniard?

SPANIARD: Peace and bread, sir.

BENJAMIN: Long life?

SPANIARD: Yes.

BENJAMIN: Very worthy, Spaniard. Long life. Traditional and worthy.

LISTER: And you?

BENJAMIN: Me?

LISTER: What are you searching for?

BENJAMIN: Meaning.

LISTER: And have you found it?

BENJAMIN: There's always something missing, Colonel.

LISTER: Yes, very strange, really. And you, Spaniard, what do you think?

SPANIARD? Nothing much, sir. It's a waste of time. I've come here only to tell you this: When all is ready, I'll come down again to get you. So, be ready. *(Exits)*

LISA: Well, I think that sounds more optimistic! Yes?

GRETE: Could be.

LISA: I think it is.

LISTER: Unless he's lying. He has an opinion all right, deep in his thick skull.

LISA: We need to bribe them some more. Next time he comes down, I'll make another offer.

HENNY: Good!

LISTER: That's the third or fourth time he's come down here.

BENJAMIN: Stalin. He believes in an Idea, and that's all he believes. He would sell us for soap. For an imaginary Utopia, where everyone is happy. A happy Worker's Paradise! Can you imagine that? Can anyone imagine that?

HENNY: No.

GRETE: He will send us to Siberia, where we are like microbes.

LISTER: Yes, microbes or slugs.

HENNY: And the French will send us to Aushwitz, where we are nothing.

LISA: And what does anyone else have to offer?

BENJAMIN: A quick death, a morphine death, in dreams. There is no other escape from this situation, and you all know it.

(JOSEPH suddenly makes a run for it. Yelling and screaming, he is caught by HENNY and LISTER and thrown to the floor. BENJAMIN is astonished.)

BENJAMIN: What do you think you are doing, Boy?

JOSEPH: I'm getting out of here!

HENNY: No, you're not.

LISA: Shut his mouth. Stop that yelling. *(A brief struggle as LISTER holds JOSEPH down and HENNY clamps a hand over his mouth. Gasping, etc. The SPANIARD appears at the door.)*

SPANIARD: What's going on?

LISA: Nothing, sir. The boy had a fit.

SPANIARD: A fit?

LISA: He's frightened. He lost control.

SPANIARD: We can't have it. No more noise.

LISA: Of course. We understand.

SPANIARD: *Nada. Silencio. Comprende?*

LISA: *Si, Senior.*

HENNY: He'll be fine. He's fine now. *(JOSEPH sobs.)*

SPANIARD: No noise. No noise at all. You understand?

LISA: We understand completely. *(A silence. HENNY holds her hand over JOSEPH'S mouth. A moment, then the SPANIARD turns and leaves.)*

LISTER: We must be quiet.

LISA: We must be quiet. Hold on to the boy.

LISTER: Hold on to him or we'll gag him.

GRETE: Hold on to him or we'll kill him. *(Pause)* I'm sorry.

KARINA: Shut up.

GRETE: I'm sorry.

KARINA: He'll be quiet now. Joseph?

JOSEPH: I'll be quiet.

KARINA: Good. Good boy.

GRETE: Man is meant to suffer and to overcome his difficulties.

KARINA: Shut up.

BENJAMIN: Oh, for God's sake, Grete. Where did that come from?

GRETE: I don't know. We have done our best.

LISTER: She's singing a different tune now. Preparing for death, Grete?

GRETE: Yes. Aren't you?

LISTER: Yes.

GRETE: Walter?

BENJAMIN: Yes.

LISA: Don't do anything, either of you. Stick with us.

BENJAMIN: The Angel of History moves inexorably on. He is looking backward. He is a moving catastrophe. The past is piling up bodies. The future awaits them mindlessly.

LISA: Right. We've had enough of your negativity, Walter. Think of all the nice things that can happen to you if we can only cross here. If we can get in that boat...

KARINA: "Negativity?" What the hell are you talking about, Lisa?

BENJAMIN: Yes, to cross. Cross here. *(Makes the sign of the cross.)* What does it mean? Is it the same as *dahvening*? Bowing to the Power? The horizontal line is History.

LISTER: Don't do that – it's sacreligious.

HENNY: It's bad luck, Walter.

BENJAMIN: The vertical line is the way out. The mind.

GRETE: We are Jews, Walter.

LISTER: We bow and praise, bow and praise.

BENJAMIN: Negativity! Stupid word! Where is my sister? Dora! Where is my brother?

LISA: New malls! New Arcades! New cities! New vistas!

BENJAMIN: Where are they? My brother was killed in Matthausen! Or some other filthy death camp! I'm sure of it! And we've lost my sister! Dora! Where is she now?

HENNY: We don't know. We've lost her.

BENJAMIN: We've lost her!

HENNY: But we're here, alive. On our way.

JOSEPH: Yes!

BENJAMIN: What reason do I have for going with you, wherever you're going, which you don't know, you know nothing, you could be shot on the next turn of the road. I have no use in being with you.

GRETE: Because you represent us, you stand for us and what we believe in! Ideas! Argument! Fidelity!

BENJAMIN: Oh, horseshit!

HENNY: Your ideas are brilliant, Walter and you connect the dots.

BENJAMIN: What dots? What are the dots?

GRETE: Architecture and design, sociology and religion, history and culture.

LISA: And you --

BENJAMIN: I believe in nothing. We will all end the same way, in the crevices of the Earth, American or otherwise. Useful as fertilizer.

LISTER: I disagree.

BENJAMIN: I know you do.

LISA: So let's make the best of it, like Lister says. We'll bribe them some more, on the other side.

BENJAMIN: No!

LISTER: What choice do we have?

BENJAMIN: Death.

LISA: No.

BENJAMIN: Interesting, eh? Have we given it enough thought? Like the famous dots? Eh? What do you think? I don't think so. What actually happens? We're painfully burst out of our mothers and slapped into breathing. Until we breathe our last. And then what happens? The death agony. And to think that our fellow man wants us to speed it up and get out of the way. I think we should take it seriously. I know I do. I believe in morphine. You go out easily, smiling at the Angel of History.

LISA: You're hysterical!

BENJAMIN: What happens? The flesh is eaten by bugs and the bones remain to be found by the living, or lost forever. What does that mean?

LISA: Shut up, Walter. I don't want to hear anymore.

JOSEPH: He's been doing this all day, since we started climbing the mountain up to this hotel.

LISTER: We shouldn't have destroyed our French passports.

HENNY: No, but we did.

LISTER: We can't get them back. That's it.

HENNY: Maybe they'll relent.

LISTER: They won't relent.

BENJAMIN: I have a letter to a Dominican Abbot. (*Searches his pockets.*) It's here somewhere...

JOSEPH: What abbot?

BENJAMIN: I can't remember his name just now.

LISA: A lot of good that will do you, Benjamin. But I'll make the Spaniard another offer.

LISTER: It will do no good at all. We're finished. We should prepare to die. You have the morphine, Walter?

BENJAMIN: Yes, I have the morphine.

LISTER: Let me have a few now.

HENNY: No, we have to stay together.

LISTER: No, let me have them now.

HENNY: Lisa?

LISA: Let him have them. And I'll take a few myself.

BENJAMIN: Here. *(Hands out capsules from a bottle.)* Joseph?

LISA: Not now. Wait.

HENNY: I agree. Wait, Joseph.

JOSEPH: I'll wait.

LISTER: No, I just want to have them. But I'll wait.

LISA: Give some to Grete.

BENJAMIN: All right. *(Hands some to GRETE)*

GRETE: Thank you. Dawn is coming.

LISTER: Let it come. Should we pray?

HENNY: No.

BENJAMIN: Not me.

GRETE: Not me.

LISTER: I will pray for us all. *(Dahvens quietly.)*

BENJAMIN: I honored the traditions of everyone, with Bertolt, and Gershom, and Adorno, but I don't know if I can pray. I don't know what prayer is, or what it's for.

LISTER: It's for you.

BENJAMIN: It's for nothing. I can't do it.

LISTER: Here's the typical Jewish brat, son of a dealer, who doesn't know how to suffer, how to pray. That's how they rouse themselves against us. The Jewish

genius, the Mama's boy, who reads and studies and does well in school, a smart-ass school boy, neurotic as any Freud patient, so everybody hates him.

GRETE: I disagree. The men must study and keep the flame.

HENNY: And let the women do the work.

GRETE: I disagree. I disagree wholeheartedly.

LISA: It's not his fault. He has a brain.

BENJAMIN: I have a mind, and I use it. That's what it's for. We studied Torah for a thousand years until we were released to study secular things, and they're not wrong, these things, not *treyf*. They are the Sciences! I applied myself, with all my Being, with the conscience of the ancestors in search of Understanding.

LISTER: Like a monk. Like a Gentile.

BENJAMIN: I resent that. I played my part in the Jewish Intelligentsia, and I'm not ready to die. It's idiotic. I examined and explained the architecture of Paris. I corresponded with the greatest Jewish minds of the time. I have a complete theory of Art. I'm not ready to die for stupid reasons. I have too much yet to do. Where is my manuscript? Ah. Here. Of course. Excuse me!

LISA: Why didn't you marry?

BENJAMIN: I did marry. It didn't work out.

LISA: Sorry. I didn't know.

HENNY: *(To GRETE)* He liked his triangles.

GRETE: Yes, I'm afraid so.

JOSEPH: What does that mean?

HENNY: Three instead of two.

JOSEPH: I don't know what that means.

HENNY: Never mind.

GRETE: It's not about sex. It's about relationships. You understand?

JOSEPH: Not really.

GRETE: It was about friendships. All these high-powered German-Jewish intellectuals. Walter would play them off each other. One day you're the favorite, next day it's the other guy.

BENJAMIN: It's none of his business! Spinoza did not marry. The greatest genius of all and you rejected him like the dummies you are! Pharisees!

LISA: Enough, Walter.

BENJAMIN: I don't think so. I wonder what it was with him. Spinoza. He lived alone. He stayed alone. He had portraits of women. No cameras. Something I've always wanted to write about, how we get our images of women from the magazines and the movies, and I was always shocked at how a woman actually tastes, and how she smells, what her body is really like. As opposed to the images on the screen. Does anyone...?

LISA: *(Noises off)* Here comes the Spaniard.

BENJAMIN: Realize? We are all oppressed. All mankind is oppressed by his biology. Think about that!

LISA: Not now, Walter. *(Enter SPANIARD)* What's the verdict, Spaniard?

HENNY: We are not on trial!

LISA: We are on trial. What do they say upstairs? The border guards and the bureaucrats?

SPANIARD: You must go back to France.

BENJAMIN: No!

GRETE: We cannot go!

LISA: We've given you all our money, but there is more on the other side, with our friends. If only we can get there, you'll get more!

BENJAMIN: I will not go!

SPANIARD: Those are my orders. You don't have the right papers to cross. It's unfortunate. Pack your things and prepare to walk back to France.

LISTER: We will all die there.

LISA: Perhaps not. You don't know.

BENJAMIN: No! Not back to France. I die here now. *(He steps forward and takes a bunch of capsules.)*

LISA: Walter!

(A pause. WALTER BENJAMIN falls to the ground. The others rush to him, as the SPANIARD holds himself steady, head in hands.)

BENJAMIN: Ah, the Angel of History. Stupid face. What are you smiling about? Dora! Dora? No, she's not here. No more pain. Nice. I do want to vomit, but I won't. Don't worry. Let me lie here, quietly. Ah, sweet. Sweet. I am melting into the Earth. I sink into the earth. Now, I'm gone. *(Breathes his last.)*

SPANIARD: Oh, my God! *(He kneels and takes Walter's pulse. A pause.)* He's dead. Now I must go. Wait here, please.

GRETE: Oh, Walter! *(Sobbing and Terror. A long moment. The SPANIARD hurriedly returns.)*

SPANIARD: You may cross. To Spain. Now. Leave this one here. Go. Get in the boat. *(The others rush offstage, carrying JOSEPH. The SPANIARD steps downstage.)* This is the Hotel Francaise, near the town of Portbou, Catalonia. Walter Benjamin was buried nearby in a Roman Catholic cemetery, despite his suicide. The manuscript he was carrying in his briefcase was never found.

THE END

2/6/18

Murray Mednick