

## **Old and Lonely**

Gerard Reve

*To Mary, Mother of God*

*For Joop Schafthuizen*

## **Alone**

Edgar Allan Poe

From childhood's hour I have not been  
As others were—I have not seen  
As others saw—I could not bring  
My passions from a common spring—  
From the same source I have not taken  
My sorrow—I could not awaken  
My heart to joy at the same tone—  
And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—  
Then—in my childhood—in the dawn  
Of a most stormy life—was drawn  
From ev'ry depth of good and ill  
The mystery which binds me still—  
From the torrent, or the fountain—  
From the red cliff of the mountain—  
From the sun that 'round me roll'd  
In its autumn tint of gold—  
From the lightning in the sky  
As it pass'd me flying by—  
From the thunder, and the storm—  
And the cloud that took the form  
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)  
Of a demon in my view—

## **Prologue**

As I take up my pen at five past two on the afternoon of June 7th in the Year of Our Lord 1976 to begin writing this book, one could reasonably assume that I have reflected on what it should contain and come to some conclusion about which details are essential to include and which others, by contrast, are too insignificant or trivial to mention. And to be sure, I have reflected on such things, but any conclusion on the matter remains elusive: I find myself unable to determine which moments in my life have been essential and decisive and which have not. Now, as is so often the case, my own life strikes me as inconsequential and meaningless, and nowhere in all those years can I find anything that could be called great or heroic, anything that might possess the clarity and dramatic impact of a symbol that could confer some meaning or justification on my life.

What I describe here is likely true of the life of any person. Human life can only acquire meaning and justification through divine grace, and this grace lies beyond the control and knowledge of man. Thus I do not know and shall never know whether this meaning and justification might one day be discovered and revealed, whether by me or someone else.

Why then do I choose to write about a life in which I can find no justification or meaning? I could not venture to say, unless it is in the hope that that Grace might reveal itself through my pen.

## **In Memoriam**

Name and title have always been matters of the highest importance in my family. At one time my surname must have been different from what it is today, and possibly spelled *Rebe* or *Reben*. My parents, who were cousins, had descended from an old line of minor, unrecognized landed Russian gentry. A distant ancestor of theirs, Konstantin Nikolayevich Rebe, general of the imperial artillery, who had evidently distinguished himself in the battle of Borodino, was promised by his commanding officer, who was also a boyhood friend in good standing at the imperial court, that his noble title would be confirmed by the czar. From then on he would be allowed to call himself Prince Rebe of Borodino. Nothing came of this, however. Countless missives were exchanged, and the old war-horse traipsed from one ministry to the other, but the only tangible result was that the quantity of useless paperwork in the family's possession swelled to the size of a small library. Every subsequent generation took up the issue with fresh vigor, and little by little it appeared that the matter was nearing resolution.

The last person who took an active interest in the struggle for our title was my paternal grandfather, who was, oddly enough, also general of the artillery and also named Konstantin: in his French correspondence he styled himself Constantin Petrovitch Reve, perhaps because this spelling seemed vaguely French and thus more elegant. From the stories my mother told me, he looms in my imagination as a hot-tempered, sometimes cantankerous, yet sensitive and fundamentally decent man: on his estate, near a hamlet of approximately three hundred souls in the vicinity of K., he founded a school for the village children entirely at his own expense, which acquired great renown in the region and which was twice given a special commendation in the annual reports of the Ministry of Education. He was not stupid, but he must have been the sort of man who envisioned himself as a born leader and a success, without realizing that all the while everyone was mocking him behind his back and robbing him blind. Whatever didn't fall into the hands of crooked estate managers was lost in futile lawsuits that only served to fill his lawyers' coffers. His persistence seems to have been limitless, however, and persistent people can sometimes, however tactless and stupid their actions, achieve the odd minor success: in the fall of 1916 it appeared that the issue of the noble title, which by then had dragged on for more than a century and had consumed a modest fortune, was finally approaching its dénouement: the relevant minister was in agreement; the head of the Imperial Cadaster of Name, Estate, and Title was in agreement; and in the 1917 edition of the yearbook of the Russian nobility,

anyone who opposed this was called upon to voice his objections by a certain deadline. After that, all that remained was the signature of the Tsar of all the Russias.

In 1917 the tsar was forced to renounce his throne by the liberal opposition under Kerensky, after which a Provisional Government was formed, which released all political prisoners and announced radical reforms. For the present it was uncertain whether noble titles would remain valid and how far the reform of property rights would go. For the first few months the official mills of the ministries continued to turn more or less undisturbed, but for the first time in almost a century and a half there was no new edition of the yearbook of Russian nobility: during the war there were shortages of nearly everything, and the freedom of the press proclaimed by the Provisional Government made the lack of paper so dire that it was rationed by the state, which made its use permissible only for "urgent publications of matters of public interest," and the yearbook did not fall into this category. Amid the steady stream of reports about strikes, insurrections and looting, and the sight of crowds of deserters, shamelessly strolling through the streets, my grandfather's health declined visibly. He slept badly, ate with difficulty, and the family had to keep newspapers with certain stories away from him in order to spare him. However, the old man was not yet completely broken and apathetic, and in the midst of the growing chaos he continued to devote himself to the matter of his title, even after Lenin's *coup d'état* in November. One day, probably in late November or early December 1917, he trudged through the snow – the winter had set in unusually early – from his house on the southern bank of the Neva to the Imperial Cadaster of Name, Estate, and Title, which was located in the northernmost section of St. Petersburg, where a cousin of his held a senior position. Upon his arrival the influential cousin did not appear to be there: a few days before, he had been brought home following a nervous breakdown. Inside the building an indescribable chaos reigned. There was no longer any concierge or doorman to hold anyone back, and, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world, all sorts of unsavory types were leaving the building with a chair, a rug, a leather briefcase under their arm, or a pocket full of bronze paperweights, intended for the scrap metal dealer. Thousands of portfolios filled with documents, some of them hundreds of years old, were being thrown out of the top floor window and burned on the street. The fire department simply stood by, without lifting so much as a finger to help, and appeared only to be there to supervise the conflagration. On the estate of Prince Voronezh, which was on opposite side of the street, a number of young men in military uniforms from which the emblem with the imperial eagle had been torn off, were busy chopping down a fruit orchard of a half hectare in size, loading the puny little saplings, which could hardly provide any fuel, onto sleds.

"What in God's name do you think you're doing, you brood of vipers?" my grandfather cried out to them. "Who gave you the right to destroy everything?"

"Calm down, grandpa," called back the most brazen among them. "We do what we want now! God is dead!"

When the old man returned home, more dead than alive, it looked as if he had aged at least ten years. Slumped down in a chair, he said nothing at all for a long time. Then he uttered a sort of croak and called out suddenly, mimicking the coarse urban accent of the audacious lumberjack with harrowing accuracy – it was, my mother said later, "as if his voice was coming from somewhere very far away" – "God is dead!"

Those were his last words. That night he had a stroke. Doing the best she could in the circumstances, my mother tended to the mostly unconscious man in the only room in the house that was slightly warmed by a little, old pot-belly stove – it had been impossible to fire up the central heating for some time due to the lack of fuel – but his condition quickly worsened, and on the fifth day following the stroke he died without ever showing sign of recognizing anything or anyone. Arranging a proper funeral had become so difficult – the undertakers demanded payment in potatoes, flour, cooking oil or spirits – that they had to decide on a temporary burial in the rear garden of the house, and it was there that the body, without a coffin and wrapped only in a few sheets, was committed to the earth.

In the main house, the scarce fuel that remained would last only a few weeks, and the end of the food supply was in sight as well. (As befit members of the "bourgeoisie," my family was excluded from food distribution by Lenin's government.) With no servants left, there remained only my father, my mother, and a niece, Natasha Pavlovna, who had been orphaned at a young age and subsequently taken in by my parents.

The plan to try to leave the country had been mooted before, but this had now become a matter of life and death. The ruble had started to plummet at a dizzying speed, but before it had become completely worthless in the foreign currency market, my father managed to purchase a considerable amount of Swiss francs, probably because of our close relations with the Swiss Consul General. The house and its contents were left to the care of neighbors, while all important family papers were consigned to an iron box at the Swiss embassy, which would send it on to Bern by diplomatic post. Then, with a minimum of luggage my parents and the eighteen year old Natasha, like thousands of others, set off on the desperate journey through Finland to neutral Sweden. The hardships endured by the refugees must have been unimaginable, and it has been estimated that approximately two-thirds of them – fleeced by unscrupulous swindlers or robbed by actual thieves, or simply too weak to go on, due to some combination of hunger, exhaustion, and disease – perished

in the endless snowfields of Karelia. My father was the only one to mention the horrors of the journey, and then only when my mother was not present: dragging up any memory of that time was more than my mother could bear.

In Sweden there was just enough left of the Swiss money, some of which they had sewn into their clothing – to book passage on a Dutch freighter with accommodation for passengers, which took them to Rotterdam. Once they arrived there, they had to wonder how much sense it made to continue on to Switzerland. They had escaped with their lives, but nothing remained of the money. My mother's health was giving her trouble, and doctors advised her against resuming their journey for the time being. Through the intervention of the Swiss diplomatic and commercial circles, my father was offered a modest, but respectable position at a Dutch shipping company. He did not hesitate to accept the offer. The journey to Switzerland was postponed for the time being, and they moved into a simple apartment in Kralingen. My father continued to hope – like most Russian exiles – that Lenin's police state would crumble under opposition from the liberal forces. No one could have imagined that this sojourn in the Netherlands, which was intended to be temporary, would last the rest of their lives.

After taking various circuitous detours over the globe, the iron trunk with documents and family papers finally arrived in Rotterdam, and in time the question arose of what name and title my father should give when having himself entered in the Dutch civil registry. The concept of "prince" was unknown in the Netherlands for anyone who was not the son of a monarch. The Dutch Council of Nobility advised my father to present his – still unconfirmed – claims to his noble title at the most modest level possible, for example, marquis.

According to my mother, my father spent long evenings poring over the contents of the iron box, sometimes assisted by my cousin Natasha, who emerged as a clever girl in these stories. Had the whole affair become nothing more than a puff of smoke and a chimera? There seemed to be nothing to prevent my father from assuming the title of marquis, but as Natasha pointed out, such a title was of decidedly limited value.

"Uncle, dear," she said to my father one evening, "the marquisate has never been *realized* in the Netherlands."

"What do you mean by that, turtledove?" my father asked.

"Gerard Ivanovich," answered my cousin after a slight hesitation and with tears in her eyes, for it pained her to discourage my father, "it means that in the Netherlands anyone can call himself a marquis!" The iron box was closed and not opened again for some time.

Likely my cousin's sober insight spared my father a lot of useless effort, legal proceedings and a great deal of humiliation and ridicule. Unfortunately, she was not equally wise in all respects: ever more consumed by homesickness for the country of her youth, she returned to Russia after a year. My parents never heard anything from her directly again; according to never confirmed but probably reliable information, which they obtained via diplomatic channels, she was denied admittance to the family home, and like so many millions of her fellow countrymen along with her, she met her end in one of Lenin's death camps.

My parents had become the only survivors of a famous, cultured, and eminent family of some two hundred people, and now, after their deaths, I am the only one left. Title and prestige lost any real meaning for me long ago; if someday I should decide to carry the title, I do so in reverent homage to the dead.

## Chapter Five

I still cannot remember how it all came about. When I think back on the past, I cannot help but conclude that my life has always proceeded more or less blindly, feeling its way along, without any system, a state of affairs which has at times led me into the most utterly bizarre situations.

I have few memories that are not shameful or absurd. When did I first begin to suspect that there was nowhere I belonged and there never would be? Perhaps it was during an episode in my life which is now twenty-two or twenty-three years behind me, but whose memory still often intrudes into my consciousness with an irresistible force.

The events to which I refer must have taken place during a rainy autumn or summer in the mid-fifties, when I was living in London in straitened circumstances. My first address was a basement room, at 54 Chepstone Road, perhaps in SW4. The second was on the second floor of the same building: an exceptionally dreary room that faced the street. A few months later I lived in a miniscule rented room on Regent Park Square, perhaps in W1, close to Russell Square, in a block of tenements, which, I understand, was torn down some time ago.

(It is curious that I have always lived among lowlifes and paupers, never gaining access to the world of the well-to-do or wealthy or those with some measure of social status.)

At the time, I had no regular income other than an extremely modest allowance allotted to me by the Countess van B. on the grounds of my, in her opinion, "unmistakable talent." This allowance was actually a small fraction of the sum she had originally intended to give me, but a possibly unwarranted sense of modesty impelled me to reject her initial offer and request that the amount be lowered to 150 guilders a month. Lacking as I did a permit from the immigration service, I worked odd hours as an apprentice grave-digger, as a mortician and as an assistant at a London embalmer's, where the air was so heavy with tension and where each person who entered and exited brought such immeasurable sorrow that it never occurred to anyone to tip me, despite my very convincing uniform, which was easily the equal of that of any cinema usher's. I would whisper, smile slightly, nod, cautiously hold out my hand, but to no avail. In the embalmer's aboveground tomb, no crumbs ever fall from the table: it was the great crocodile himself, with his yellow fangs and coal-black top hat, who caught everything. You have been warned.

After six months, despite the hospitality which is considered a character trait of the English, I had not made more than perhaps a dozen acquaintances. Without exception they

were men of the homosexual persuasion, about my age or younger, all of whom lived in almost respectable rented rooms – with a landlady ‘who mustn’t find out’, a mother who mustn’t find out, a sister who often dropped by unexpectedly and mustn’t find out, and a boss who mustn’t find out – and who invariably kept a small stack of magazines full of pictures of masculine or youthful beauty hidden behind an ugly pink wardrobe.

One of these lavender acquaintances was Jacky Beskeen, a 22-year-old television actor who was occasionally, by the grace of God, lucky enough to be given a tiny speaking part in a film. When I first met him – no doubt during one of my wanton nocturnal rambles through London’s West End – I was living at yet another address, on a side street off Kensington High Street, of which I can recall neither the name nor the number. Jacky Beskeen lived a short walk away from me, in South Kensington, in a flat that looked out on a dusky garden, which was full of weeds and paper and which was hemmed in on four sides by tall buildings. Humble though the flat was, the rent was so high that he had to share the place with Jane Raleigh, a stage actress of about 25 about whom we will hear more later.

The main thing I remember about the summer and autumn of that year is the rain. On that point I must remark that abundant rainfall is a feature common to all my memories. In recounting my life’s story, I would like to begin at the beginning, but where is that to be found? “It was enshrouded in mist,” or so goes the cliché, but in my case it would seem that the beginning of the story evades observation by cloaking itself in rain. I can hardly remember anything about my early childhood other than rain, and it has often struck me that my life has been marked by different meteorological circumstances than those of most mortals. At the very least, I could expect a drizzle, but there were also no shortage of full-blown downpours, pounding against the rooftops and leaking through every crevice, for entire afternoons and days on end, with naught in the attic to play with but an old zither with half its strings missing and one’s own manhood (or boyhood, as the case may be) – I hardly know any different. I think that God, with a zither in one hand and his manhood with the other, must have created the world from under a black south-wester. In the beginning was rain, but after that, it just kept on raining: at school, on my way to school, on my way home from school, during my travels, and later too, during every life event that could be termed significant or which required a special setting. I can remember few moments of importance that were not accompanied by copious precipitation. I crossed the sea, and the rain followed, lashing against the portholes and drumming on the decks. It never rained as

much in a particular place as when I decided to settle there, whether in the Netherlands, or in the midst of foreign lands and peoples.

As I grew older, I stopped playing in attics, and in the meantime, I was living in London, I was in my thirties, and still the rain kept on falling. The dusty attic of my younger years was now a grimy rented room in a prim neighborhood in Kensington, and here too, the rain lingered.