

The Dream of Eternity

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When I was still very young, I believed with complete certainty that I had an immortal soul. I considered this a holy and valuable gift, and I was pleased and proud of it.

Often I said to myself:

“The life I live is a dark and confused dream. One day I will wake up to another dream that is closer to reality and has a deeper meaning than this one. From that dream I will wake up to a third and then to a fourth, and every new dream is closer to the truth than the one before. This journey toward truth is the meaning of life and it is profound and deep.”

And joyful in knowing that I owned in my immortal soul a capital that could not be lost at cards and not claimed for payment of debt, I lived an exorbitant life and strewed around like a prince what I owned and what I did not own.

But one evening I found myself with some of my companions in a large room that glittered of gold and electric light, and where, from between the cracks in the floorboards, there emanated a smell of decay. Two young girls with painted faces and an old woman with wrinkles filled with plaster danced there on a platform, accompanied by the whine of the orchestra, the hoots of the men, and the sound of broken glass. We watched these women, drank a lot, and spoke about the immortality of the soul.

“It is crazy to believe,” said one of my companions, who was older than I, “that there would be any happiness in possessing an immortal soul. Look at that old woman dancing over there, whose head and hands shake when she stands still for a moment. One sees at once that she is evil and ugly and completely worthless, and that she becomes more and more so every day. How ridiculous wouldn’t it be to imagine that she had an immortal soul! But it is exactly the same regarding you and me and all of us. What a bad joke it would be to give us eternity!”

“What displeases me most in what you say,” I replied, “is not that you deny the immortality of the soul, but that you derive pleasure from denying it. People are like children playing in a garden surrounded by a high wall. Time after time a door is opened in the wall and one of the children disappears through that door. One says to the others that they are taken to another garden that is bigger and prettier than this one. They listen silently for a moment and then continue to play among the flowers. Assume now, that one of the boys is more curious than the others and climbs up on the wall to see where his friends are going, and when he comes down again, he tells the others what he has seen: Outside the door sits a giant. He eats up all the children led through the door. And they will all be led through the door one after one! You are that boy, Martin, and I find it indescribably ridiculous that you talk about what you think you have seen, not out of despair, but proud and happy to know more than the others.”

“The youngest of those girls is very pretty,” replied Martin.

“It is terrible to be annihilated and it is also terrible not to be able to be annihilated,” said another of my friends.

Martin continued his train of thought:

“Yes,” he said, “one ought to find a middle way. Gird your loins and go out and seek the median between time and eternity. He who finds it can found a new religion, for then he has in his power the best bait that ever a fisher of men has had.”

The orchestra stopped with a screech. The room’s gold glimmered more dimly through the tobacco smoke, and the floorboards still emanated the smell of decay.

We got up to leave and scattered each in his own direction. I wandered for a long time

back and forth through the streets. I came to streets that I did not recognize and which I have never seen again, strangely deserted and empty streets, whose buildings seemed to open their ranks to make room for me, no matter which direction I chose, and then close again behind my back. I did not know where I was until I suddenly stood in front of my own door. It was wide open. I went through the doors and up the stairs. I stopped by one of the stairwell windows and looked at the moon. I had not noticed before that the moon was shining that night.

But I have never before or after seen such a moon. One could not say that it shone. It was ash gray and pale and unnaturally large. I stood for a long time and stared at that moon, although I was terribly tired and longed to sleep.

I lived on the fourth floor. When I had climbed two flights of stairs, I thanked God that I only had one left. But when I had climbed that flight of stairs, it struck me that the landing was not dark, like it usually was, but rather faintly illuminated like the other landings, where the moon was shining through the stairwell windows. But there were only four floors to this building, except for the attic. That is why the top floor was always dark.

"The door to the attic is open," I said to myself. "The light is coming from the stairs to the attic. It is indefensible for the help to leave the attic door open. Thieves can get up into the attic." But there was no door to the attic. There was only an ordinary flight of stairs, just like the others.

I must have counted wrong. I had one flight of stairs left.

But when I had climbed that flight of stairs and stood on the landing I had to keep myself from screaming out loud. Because even that landing was illuminated, and neither was there an attic door open, but a new staircase led upwards as before. And through the stairwell window the moon shone in, and it was ash gray and dull and unnaturally large.

I rushed up the stairs. I could no longer think. I stumbled up another flight of stairs, and another. I no longer counted them.

I wanted to scream. I wanted to wake up this bewitched building and see people about me, but my throat was seized shut.

Suddenly it occurred to me to try and read the names on the doors. What people could live in this tower of Babel? The moonlight was too weak. I lit a match and held it up to a brass nameplate. I read there the name of one of my friends, who was dead. Then my tongue was loosened and I screamed: "Help! Help! Help!"

That cry was my salvation, for it woke me up from the terrible dream of eternity.