

useless language; French was her everyday language, her only language, so it was quite natural for her to impose it on her Swede. This linguistic choice had determined their roles: since Gustaf spoke French poorly, it was she who led the talk within the couple; she grew giddy with her own eloquence: heavens, after so long she could finally speak, speak and be heard! Her verbal superiority balanced out their relative strengths: she was entirely dependent on him, but in their conversations she ruled, and she drew him into her own world.

Now Prague was reshaping their language as a couple; he spoke English, Irena tried to persist with her French, to which she felt ever more attached, but with no external support (French no longer held much charm for this previously Francophile city), she wound up capitulating; their interaction turned around: in Paris, Gustaf used to listen attentively to an Irena who thirsted for the sound of her own words; in Prague he turned into the talker, a big talker, a long talker. Knowing little English, Irena understood only half of what he said, and as she didn't feel like making much effort, she listened to him rather little and

spoke to him still less. Her Great Return took a very odd twist: in the streets, surrounded by Czechs, the whiff of an old familiarity would caress her and for a moment make her happy; then, back in the house, she would become a silent foreigner.

Couples have a continuous conversation that hurls them, its melodious stream throwing a veil over the body's waning desires. When the conversation breaks off, the absence of physical love comes forward like a ghost. In the face of Irena's muteness, Gustaf lost his confidence. He came to prefer spending time with her in the presence of her family, her mother, her half-brother and his wife; he would dine with them all at the villa or at a restaurant, looking to their company for shelter, for refuge, for peace. They were never short of topics because they could only broach so few: their common vocabulary was limited, and to make themselves understood everyone had to speak slowly and keep repeating things. Gustaf was on the way to recovering his serenity; this slow-tempo babble suited him, it was restful, agreeable, and even merry (they were constantly laughing over their comical distortions of English words).

Irena's eyes were long since empty of desire, but from habit they still set their wide gaze on Gustaf and discomfited him. To cover his tracks and mask his erotic withdrawal, he took pleasure in good-naturedly dirty stories and mildly ambiguous allusions, all delivered loudly and with laughter. The mother was his best ally, ever quick to support him with smutty remarks that she would pronounce in some exaggerated, parodic manner, and in her puerile English. Listening to the two of them, Irena got the sense that eroticism had once and for all turned into childish clowning.

## 27

From the moment she ran into Josef at the Paris airport, she's been thinking of nothing but him. She constantly replays their brief encounter long ago in Prague. In the bar where she'd been sitting with friends, he was older and more interesting than the others, funny and seductive, and he paid attention only to her. When they had all gone out into the street, he saw to it that they were left to

themselves. He slipped her a little ashtray he'd stolen for her from the bar. Then this man she had known for only a couple of hours invited her home with him. She was engaged to Martin, and she couldn't work up the nerve; she'd refused. But immediately she had felt such an abrupt, piercing regret that she has never forgotten it.

And so, when she was preparing to emigrate, sorting out what to take with her and what to leave behind, she had stuck the little ashtray into a valise; abroad, she often carried it in her purse, secretly, like a good luck charm.

She recalls that in the airport lounge he had said in a grave, strange tone: "I'm a completely free man." She had the sense that their love story, begun twenty years earlier, had merely been postponed until the two of them should be free.

And she recalls another of his remarks: "It's pure chance that I'm going through Paris"; "chance" is another way of saying "fate"; he had to go through Paris so that their story could take up at the point where it had been interrupted.

With her cell phone in hand, she tries to reach him from wherever she is—cafés, a friend's apartment, the street. The hotel number is correct, but

he's never in his room. All day long she thinks about him and, since opposites attract, about Gustaf. Passing a souvenir shop, she sees in the window a T-shirt showing the gloomy face of a tubercular, with a line in English: KAFKA WAS BORN IN PRAGUE. A magnificently stupid T-shirt, it enchants her, and she buys it.

Toward evening she returns to the house meaning to phone him undisturbed from there, because on Fridays Gustaf always comes home late; against all expectations he is on the ground floor with her mother, and the room resounds with their Czech-English babble over the voice of a television anchorman no one is watching. She hands Gustaf a little package: "For you!"

Then she leaves them to admire the gift and goes up to their rooms on the second floor, where she shuts herself into the bathroom. Sitting on the rim of the toilet, she pulls the telephone out of her purse. She hears his "Finally!" and, overcome with joy, tells him, "Oh, how I wish you were with me—right here, where I am"; only after she speaks those words does she realize where she's sitting, and she blushes; the unintended indecency of what she's said startles her

and instantly arouses her. At that moment, for the first time after so many years, she has the sense that she's cheating on her Swede, and takes a vicious pleasure in it.

When she goes back down to the living room, Gustaf is wearing the T-shirt and laughing raucously. She knows the scene by heart: parody seduction, overbroad witticisms: a senile counterfeited of burned-out eroticism. The mother is holding Gustaf's hand and she announces to Irena: "Without your permission I went ahead and dressed up your boyfriend. Isn't he gorgeous?" She turns with him toward a great mirror hanging on the wall. Watching their reflection, she raises Gustaf's arm as if he were a winner at the Olympics, and, going along with the game, he swells his chest for the mirror and declares in ringing tones: "Kafka was born in Prague!"

She had separated from her first boyfriend with no great pain. With the second it was worse. When she heard him say, "If you go, it's the end between us. I swear—the end!" she could not utter a single word. She loved him; and he was flinging in her face a thing that, only a few minutes earlier, she would have thought inconceivable, unspeakable: their breakup.

"It's the end between us." The end. If he's promising her the end, what should she promise him? His words contain a threat; so will hers: "All right," she says slowly and evenly. "Then it will be the end. I promise you that, too, and you won't forget it." Then she turned her back on him, leaving him standing right there in the street.

She was wounded, but was she angry with him? Perhaps not even. Of course, he ought to have been more understanding, for clearly she could not pull out of the trip, which was a school requirement. She would have had to feign an illness, but with her clumsy honesty, she could never have pulled it off. No question, he was over-

doing it, he was unfair, but she knew it was because he loved her. She understood his jealousy: he was imagining her off in the mountains with other boys, and it upset him.

Incapable of real anger, she waited for him outside school, to explain that with the best will in the world, she really couldn't do what he wanted, and that he had no reason to be jealous; she was sure he would understand. From the doorway he saw her and dropped back to fall into step with a friend. Denied a private conversation, she followed behind him through the streets, and when he took leave of the friend she hurried toward him. Poor thing, she should have suspected that there wasn't a chance, that her sweetheart was caught up in an unremitting frenzy. She had barely begun to speak when he broke in: "You've changed your mind? You're cancelling?" When she started to say the same thing again for the tenth time, he was the one who spun on his heel and left her standing alone in the middle of the street.

She fell back into a deep sorrow, but still without anger at him. She knew that love means giving each other everything. "Everything": that

word is fundamental. Everything, thus not only the physical love she had promised him, but courage too, the courage for big things as well as small ones, which is to say even the puny courage to disobey a silly school requirement. And in shame she saw that despite all her love, she was not capable of mustering that courage. It was grotesque, heartbreakingly grotesque: here she was prepared to give him everything, her virginity of course, but also, if he wanted it, her health and any sacrifice he could think up, and still she couldn't bring herself to disobey a miserable school principal. Should she let herself be defeated by such pettiness? Her self-disgust was unbearable, and she wanted to get free of it at any cost; she wanted to reach some greatness in which her pettiness would disappear; a greatness before which he would ultimately have to bow down; she wanted to die.

To die; to decide to die; that's much easier for an adolescent than for an adult. What? Doesn't death strip an adolescent of a far larger portion of future? Certainly it does, but for a young person, the future is a remote, abstract, unreal thing he doesn't really believe in.

Transfixed, she watched her shattered love, the most beautiful piece of her life, drawing away slowly and forever; nothing existed for her except that past; to it she wanted to make herself known, wanted to speak and send signals. The future held no interest for her; she desired eternity; eternity is time that has stopped, come to a standstill; the future makes eternity impossible; she wanted to annihilate the future.

But how can a person die in the midst of a crowd of students, in a little mountain hotel, constantly in plain view? She figured it out: she'll leave the hotel, walk far, very far, into the wild, and, someplace off the trails, lie down in the snow and go to sleep. Death will come during slumber, death by freezing, a sweet, painless death. She

will only have to get through a brief stretch of cold. And even that, she can shorten with the help of a few sleeping tablets. From a vial unearthed at home she poured out five of them, no more, so Mama wouldn't miss them.

She laid plans for her death with her usual practicality. Her first idea was to leave the hotel late in the day and die at night, but she dropped that: people would be quick to miss her in the dining room and even more surely in the dormitory; she wouldn't have time enough to die. Cunningly she decided on the hour after lunch, when everyone naps before heading back to ski: a recess when her absence would worry nobody.

Could she not see a blatant disproportion between the triviality of the cause and the hugeness of the act? Did she not know that her project was excessive? Of course she did, but the excess was precisely what appealed to her. She did not want to be reasonable. She did not want to behave in a measured way. She did not want to measure, she did not want to reason. She admired her passion, knowing that passion is by definition excessive. Intoxicated, she did not want to emerge from intoxication.

Then comes the appointed day. She leaves the hotel. Beside the door hangs a thermometer: minus ten degrees Celsius. She sets out and realizes that her intoxicated state has been succeeded by anxiety; in vain she seeks her previous enthrallment, in vain she calls for the ideas that had surrounded her dream of death; in vain, but nonetheless she keeps walking the trail (her schoolmates are meanwhile taking their required siestas) as if she were performing a chore she'd set herself, as if she were playing a role she'd assigned herself. Her soul is empty, without emotion, like the soul of an actor reciting a text and no longer thinking about what he's saying:

She climbs a trail glistening with snow and soon reaches the crest. The sky above is blue; the many clouds—sun-drenched, gilded, lively—have moved down, settled like a great diadem on the broad ring of the encircling mountains. It is beautiful, it is mesmerizing, and she has a brief, very brief, sensation of happiness, which makes her forget the purpose of her walk. A brief, very brief, too brief sensation. One after the other she swallows the tablets and, following her plan, walks down from the crest into a forest. She steps along

a footpath; in ten minutes she feels sleep coming on, and she knows the end has come. The sun is overhead, brilliant, brilliant. As if the curtain were suddenly lifting, her heart tightens with stagefright. She feels trapped on a lighted stage with all the exits blocked.

She sits down beneath a fir tree, opens her bag, and takes out a mirror. It is a small round mirror; she holds it up to her face and looks at herself. She is beautiful, she is very beautiful, and she does not want to part from this beauty; she does not want to lose it, she wants to carry it away with her, ah, she is already weary, so weary, but even weary she rejoices in her beauty because it is what she cherishes most in this world.

She looks in the mirror, then she sees her lips twitch. It is an involuntary movement, a tic. She has often registered that reaction of hers, she has felt it happening on her face, but this is the first time she is seeing it. At the sight she is doubly moved: moved by her beauty and moved by her lips twitching; moved by her beauty and moved by the emotion wracking that beauty and distorting it; moved by her beauty that her body laments. An enormous pity overtakes her, pity for

her beauty that will soon cease to be, pity for the world that will also cease to be, that already does not exist, that is already out of reach, for sleep has come, it is carrying her away, flying off with her, high up, very high, toward that enormous blinding brilliance, toward the blue, brilliantly blue sky, a cloudless firmament, a firmament ablaze.

## 30

When his brother said, "You got married over there, I believe," he answered "Yes" with no further remark. His brother might merely have used some other turn of phrase, and rather than saying, "You got married," asked, "Are you married?" In that case Josef would have answered, "No, widowed." He hadn't meant to mislead his brother, but the way the query was phrased allowed him, without lying, to keep silent about his wife's death.

During the conversation that followed, his brother and sister-in-law avoided any mention of her. That must have been out of embarrassment:

for security reasons (to avoid being questioned by the police) they had denied themselves the slightest contact with their émigré relative and never even realized that their forced caution had soon turned into authentic lack of interest: they knew nothing about his wife, not her age or her given name or her profession, and by keeping their silence now they hoped to disguise that ignorance, which showed up the terrible poverty of their relations with him.

But Josef took no offense; their ignorance suited him fine. Since the day he buried her, he had always felt uncomfortable when he had to inform someone of her death; as if by doing so he were betraying her in her most private privacy. By not speaking of her death, he always felt he was protecting her.

For the woman who is dead is a woman with no defenses; she has no more power, she has no more influence; people no longer respect either her wishes or her tastes; the dead woman cannot will anything, cannot aspire to any respect or refute any slander. Never had he felt such sorrowful, such agonizing compassion for her as when she was dead.

Jonas Hallgrímsson was a great romantic poet and also a great fighter for Iceland's independence. In the nineteenth century all of small-nation Europe had these romantic patriot-poets: Petöfi in Hungary, Mickiewicz in Poland, Preseren in Slovenia, Macha in Bohemia, Shevchenko in Ukraine, Wergeland in Norway, Lönnrot in Finland, and the like. Iceland was a colony of Denmark at the time, and Hallgrímsson lived out his last years in the Danish capital. All the great romantic poets, besides being great patriots, were great drinkers. One day, dead drunk, Hallgrímsson fell down a staircase, broke a leg, got an infection, died, and was buried in a Copenhagen cemetery. That was in 1845. Ninety-nine years later, in 1944, the Icelandic Republic declared its independence. From then on events hastened their course. In 1946 the poet's soul visited a rich Icelandic industrialist in his sleep and confided: "For a hundred years now my skeleton has lain in a foreign land, in the enemy country. Is it not time it came home to its own free Ithaca?"



Flattered and elated by this nocturnal visit, the patriotic industrialist had the poet's skeleton dug out of the enemy soil and carried back to Iceland, intending to bury it in the lovely valley where the poet had been born. But no one can stop the mad course of events: in the ineffably exquisite landscape of Thingvellir (the sacred place where, a thousand years ago, the first Icelandic parliament gathered beneath the open sky), the ministers of the brand-new republic had created a cemetery for the great men of the homeland; they ripped the poet away from the industrialist and buried him in the pantheon that at the time contained only the grave of another great poet (small nations abound in great poets), Einar Benediktsson.

But again events rushed on, and soon everyone learned what the patriotic industrialist had never dared admit: standing at the opened tomb back in Copenhagen, he had felt extremely discontented: the poet had been buried in a paupers' field with no name marking his grave, only a number and, confronted with a bunch of skeletons tangled together, the patriotic industrialist had not known which one to pick. In the presence of the stern, impatient cemetery bureaucrats, he

did not dare show his uncertainty. And so he had transported to Iceland not the Icelandic poet but a Danish butcher.

In Iceland people had initially tried to hush up this lugubriously comical mistake, but events continued to run their course, and in 1948 the indiscreet writer Halldor Laxness spilled the beans in a novel. What to do? Keep quiet. Therefore Hallgrímsson's bones still lie two thousand miles away from his Ithaca, in enemy soil, while the body of the Danish butcher, who although no poet was a patriot as well, still lies banished to a glacial island that never stirred him to anything but fear and repugnance.

Even hushed up, the consequence of the truth was that no one else was ever buried in the exquisite cemetery at Thingvellir, which harbors only two coffins and which thereby, of all the world's pantheons, those grotesque museums of pride, is the only one capable of touching our hearts.

A very long time ago Josef's wife had told him that story; they thought it was funny, and a moral lesson seemed easily drawn from it: nobody much cares where a dead person's bones wind up.

And yet Josef changed his mind when his wife's

death became imminent and inevitable. Suddenly the story of the Danish butcher abducted to Iceland seemed not funny but terrifying.

## 32

The idea of dying when she did had been with him for a long time. It was due not to romantic grandiosity but rather to a rational consideration: if ever his wife should be struck by a fatal illness, he had determined he would cut short her suffering; to avoid being indicted for murder, he planned to die as well. Then she actually did fall gravely ill, and suffered terribly, and Josef no longer had a mind for suicide. Not out of fear for his own life. But he found intolerable the idea of leaving that very beloved body to the mercy of alien hands. With him dead, who would protect the dead woman? How could one corpse keep another one safe?

Long ago in Bohemia, he had watched over his mother's dying agony; he loved her very much, but once she was no longer alive, her body ceased

to interest him; to his mind her corpse was no longer she. Besides, two doctors, his father and his brother, took care of the dying woman, and in the order of importance he was just the third family member. This time everything was different: the woman he saw dying belonged to him alone; he was jealous for her body and wanted to watch over its posthumous fate. He even had to admonish himself: here she was still alive, lying in front of him, she was speaking to him, and he was already thinking of her as dead; she was gazing up at him, her eyes larger than ever, and his mind was busy with her casket and her grave. He scolded himself for that as if it were a shocking betrayal, an impatience, a secret wish to hasten her death. But he couldn't help it: he knew that after the death, her family would come to claim her for their family vault, and the idea horrified him.

Contemptuous of funeral concerns, in writing their wills sometime earlier he and she had been too offhand; their instructions on disposing of their possessions were very rudimentary, and they hadn't even mentioned burial. The omission obsessed him while she was dying, but since he

was trying to convince her that she would beat death, he had to hold his tongue. How could he confess to the poor woman who still believed she would recover, how could he confess what he was thinking about? How could he talk about the will? Especially since she was already slipping into spells of delirium, and her thinking was muddled.

His wife's family, a prominent and influential family, had never liked Josef. It seemed to him that the struggle ahead for his wife's body would be the toughest and most important he would ever fight. The idea that this body would be locked into an obscene promiscuity with other bodies, unknown and meaningless, was unbearable to him, as was the idea that he himself, when he died, would end up who knew where and certainly far away from her. To let that happen seemed a defeat as huge as eternity, a defeat never to be forgiven.

What he feared came about. He could not avoid the shock. His mother-in-law railed against him: "It's my daughter! It's my daughter!" He had to hire a lawyer, hand over a bundle of money to pacify the family, hastily buy a cemetery plot,

act more quickly than the others to win this final combat.

The feverish activity of a sleepless week fended off his suffering, but something even stranger occurred: when she was in the grave that belonged to them (a grave for two, like a two-seat buggy), in the darkness of his sorrow he glimpsed a feeble, trembling, barely visible ray of happiness. Happiness at not having let down his beloved; at having provided for their future, his and hers both.

An instant earlier she had been drenched in the radiant blue! She was immaterial, transmuted into brilliance!

And then, abruptly, the sky went black. And she, fallen back onto the earth, turned into heavy dark matter. Scarcely understanding what had happened, she could not tear her gaze away from up there: the sky was black, black, implacably black.

One part of her body chattered with cold, the other was numb. That frightened her. She stood up. After several long moments she remembered: a hotel in the mountains; classmates. Dazed, her body shaking, she looked for the path. At the hotel they called an ambulance, and it took her away.

Over the next days in her hospital bed, her fingers, her ears, her nose, which at first were numb, gave her terrific pain. The doctors reassured her, but one nurse took delight in reciting all the conceivable effects of freezings: a person could end up with his fingers amputated. Stricken with terror, she imagined an ax; a surgeon's ax; a butcher's ax; she imagined her fingerless hand and its severed fingers lying beside her on an operating table, for her to see. At night, for supper, they brought her meat. She could not eat. She imagined chunks of her own flesh on the plate.

Her fingers came painfully back to life, but her left ear turned black. The surgeon, an elderly, sorrowful, compassionate man, sat on her bed to tell her it must be amputated. She screamed. Her left ear! My God, how she screamed! Her face, her lovely face, with an ear cut off! No one could calm her.

Oh, everything had gone the opposite of what she'd intended! She had meant to become an eternity that would abolish the whole future, and instead, the future was back again, invincible, hideous, repugnant, like a snake writhing in front of her and rubbing against her legs and slithering ahead to show her the way.

At school the news spread that she had got lost and had come back covered with frostbite. People blamed her as a headstrong girl who skipped the required program and went wandering stupidly off with not even an elementary sense of direction for finding her way back to the hotel, which could actually be seen from a distance.

Home from the hospital, she refused to go outdoors. She was terrified of running into people she knew. In despair her parents arranged a quiet transfer to another high school, in a nearby town.

Oh, everything had gone the opposite of what she'd intended! She had dreamed of dying mysteriously. She had done her best so no one could tell whether her death was an accident or a suicide. She had meant to send him her death as a secret sign, a sign of love transmitted from the beyond, comprehensible to no one but him. She

had anticipated everything except, perhaps, the number of sleeping tablets; except, perhaps, the temperature, which as she was drowsing off had gone up. She had expected that the freeze would plunge her into sleep and into death, but the sleep was too weak; she had opened her eyes and seen the black sky.

Those two skies had divided her life into two parts: blue sky, black sky. The second sky was the one she would walk beneath to her death, her true death, the faraway and trivial death of old age.

And he? He was living beneath a sky that had nothing to do with her. He no longer sought her out, she no longer sought him out. Recalling him awakened neither love nor hatred in her. At the thought of him, she was as if anesthetized—with no ideas, no emotions.

### 34

A human lifetime is 80 years long on average. A person imagines and organizes his life with that span in mind. What I have just said everyone

knows, but only rarely do we realize that the number of years granted us is not merely a quantitative fact, an external feature (like nose length or eye color), but is part of the very definition of the human. A person who might live, with all his faculties, twice as long, say 160 years, would not belong to our species. Nothing about his life would be like ours—not love, or ambitions, or feelings, or nostalgia; nothing. If after 20 years abroad an émigré were to come back to his native land with another hundred years of life ahead of him, he would have little sense of a Great Return, for him it would probably not be a return at all, just one of many byways in the long journey of his life.

For the very notion of homeland, with all its emotional power, is bound up with the relative brevity of our life, which allows us too little time to become attached to some other country, to other countries, to other languages.

Sexual relations can take up the whole of adult life. But if that life were a lot longer, might not staleness stifle the capacity for arousal well before one's physical powers declined? For there is an enormous difference between the first and the

tenth, the hundredth, the thousandth, or the tenthousandth coitus. Where lies the boundary line beyond which repetition becomes stereotyped, if not comical or even impossible? And once that boundary is crossed, what would become of the erotic relationship between a man and a woman? Would it vanish? Or, on the contrary, would lovers consider the sexual phase of their lives to be the barbaric prehistory of real love? Answering these questions is as easy as imagining the psychology of the inhabitants of an unknown planet.

The notion of love (of great love, of one-and-only love) itself also derives, probably, from the narrow bounds of the time we are granted. If that time were boundless, would Josef be so attached to his deceased wife? We who must die so soon, we just don't know.

### 35

Memory cannot be understood, either, without a mathematical approach. The fundamental given is the ratio between the amount of time in the

lived life and the amount of time from that life that is stored in memory. No one has ever tried to calculate this ratio, and in fact there exists no technique for doing so; yet without much risk of error I could assume that the memory retains no more than a millionth, a hundred-millionth, in short an utterly infinitesimal bit of the lived life. That fact too is part of the essence of man. If someone could retain in his memory everything he had experienced, if he could at any time call up any fragment of his past, he would be nothing like human beings: neither his loves nor his friendships nor his angers nor his capacity to forgive or avenge would resemble ours.

We will never cease our critique of those persons who distort the past, rewrite it, falsify it, who exaggerate the importance of one event and fail to mention some other; such a critique is proper (it cannot fail to be), but it doesn't count for much unless a more basic critique precedes it: a critique of human memory as such. For after all, what can memory actually do, the poor thing? It is only capable of retaining a paltry little scrap of the past, and no one knows why just this scrap and not some other one, since in each of us the choice

occurs mysteriously, outside our will or our interests. We won't understand a thing about human life if we persist in avoiding the most obvious fact: that a reality no longer is what it was when it was; it cannot be reconstructed.

Even the most voluminous archives cannot help. Consider Josef's old diary as an archival document that preserves notes by the authentic witness to a certain past; the notes speak of events that their author has no reason to repudiate but that his memory cannot confirm, either. Out of everything the diary describes, only one detail sparked a clear, and certainly accurate, memory: he saw himself on a forest path telling a high-school girl the lie about his moving to Prague; that little scene, or more precisely that shadow of a scene (for he recalls only the general tenor of his remark and the fact of having lied), is the sole scrap of life that is still stored away, asleep, in his memory. But it is isolated from what preceded it and what followed it: by what remark, what action of her own had the high-school girl incited him to invent that phony story? And what happened in the days after that? How long did he keep up his deception? And how did he get out of it?

If he should want to recount that recollection as a little anecdote that made sense, he would have to insert it into a causal sequence with other events, other acts, and other words; and since he has forgotten them, all he could do was invent them; not to fool anyone but to make the recollection intelligible; which is exactly what he did automatically for his own sake when he rethought that passage in the diary:

The little snot was in despair at finding no sign of ecstasy in the love of his high-school girl, when he touched her rump, she lifted his hand away; to punish her he told her that he would be moving to Prague; pained, she let him pet her and declared that she understood the poets who stayed faithful unto death; so everything turned out blissfully for him, except that after a week or two the girl deduced from her boyfriend's plans to move that she ought to replace him soon with someone else; she began looking around; the little snot got wind of it and was uncontrollably jealous; taking as pretext a school excursion she was required to join without him, he threw a tantrum; he made a fool of himself; she dropped him.

Although he meant to get as close as possible to

the truth, Josef could not claim that his anecdote was identical with what he had actually experienced; he knew that it was only the plausible plastered over the forgotten.

I imagine the feelings of two people meeting again after many years. In the past they spent some time together, and therefore they think they are linked by the same experience, the same recollections. The same recollections? That's where the misunderstanding starts: they don't have the same recollections; each of them retains two or three small scenes from the past, but each has his own; their recollections are not similar; they don't intersect; and even in terms of quantity they are not comparable: one person remembers the other more than he is remembered; first because memory capacity varies among individuals (an explanation that each of them would at least find acceptable), but also (and this is more painful to admit) because they don't hold the same importance for each other. When Irena saw Josef at the airport, she remembered every detail of their long-ago adventure; Josef remembered nothing. From the very first moment their encounter was based on an unjust and revolting inequality.

When two people live in the same apartment, see each other every day, and also love each other, their daily conversations bring their two memories into line: by tacit and unconscious consent they leave vast areas of their life unremembered, and they talk time and time again about the same few events out of which they weave a joint narrative that, like a breeze in the boughs, murmurs above their heads and reminds them constantly that they have lived together.

When Martin died, the violent current of worries carried Irena far away from him and from the people who knew him. He vanished from conversations, and even his two daughters, who were too young when he was alive, took no further interest in him. One day she met Custaf, and to prolong their conversation, he told her he had known her husband. That was the last time that Martin was with her, a strong, important, influential presence serving as a bridge to the man who was soon to be her lover. Once Martin had fulfilled that mission, he withdrew for good.



Long before, in Prague, on their wedding day, Martin had settled Irena in his villa; his own library and office were on the second floor, and he kept the street level for his life as husband and father; before they left for France he transferred the villa to his mother-in-law, and twenty years later she gave Gustaf that second floor, by then entirely refurbished. When Milada came there to visit Irena, she reminisced about her former colleague: "This is where Martin used to work," she said, reflective. But no shade of Martin appeared after those words. He had long ago been dislodged from the house, he and all his shades.

After his wife's death Josef noticed that without daily conversations, the murmur of their past life grew faint. To intensify it, he tried to revive his wife's image, but the lackluster result distressed him. She'd had a dozen different smiles. He strained his imagination to re-create them. He failed. She'd had a gift for fast funny lines that would delight him. He couldn't call forth a single one. He finally wondered: if he were to add up the few recollections he still had from their life together, how much time would they take? A minute? Two minutes?

That's another enigma about memory, more basic than all the rest: do recollections have some measurable temporal volume? do they unfold over a span of time? He tries to picture their first encounter: he sees a staircase leading down from the sidewalk into a beer cellar; he sees couples here and there in a yellow half-light; and he sees her, his future wife, sitting across from him, a brandy glass in hand, her gaze fixed on him, with a shy smile. For a long while he watches her holding her glass and smiling; he scrutinizes this face, this hand, and through all this time she remains motionless, does not lift the glass to her mouth or change her smile in the slightest. And there lies the horror: the past we remember is devoid of time. Impossible to reexperience a love the way we reread a book or resee a film. Dead, Josef's wife has no dimension at all, either material or temporal.

Therefore all efforts to revive her in his mind soon became torture. Instead of rejoicing at having retrieved this or that forgotten moment, he was driven to despair by the immensity of the void around that moment. Then one day he forbade himself that painful ramble through the cor-

ridors of the past, and stopped his vain efforts to bring her back as she had been. He even thought that by his fixation on her bygone existence, he was traitorously relegating her to a museum of vanished objects and excluding her from his present life.

Besides, they had never made a cult of reminiscence. Not that they'd destroyed their private correspondence, of course, or their datebooks with notes on errands and appointments. But it never occurred to them to reread them. He therefore determined to live with the dead woman the way he had with the living one. He now went to her grave not to reminisce but to spend time with her; to see her eyes looking at him, and looking not from the past but from the present moment.

And now a new life began for him: living with the dead woman. There is a new clock organizing his time. A stickler for tidiness, she used to be irritated by the disorder he left everywhere. Now he does the housecleaning himself, meticulously. For he loves their home even more now than he did when she was alive: the low wooden fence with its little gate; the garden; the fir tree in front of the dark-red brick house; the two facing easy chairs

they'd sit in at the end of the working day; the window ledge where she always kept a bowl of flowers on one end, a lamp on the other; they would leave that lamp on while they were out so they could see it from afar as they came down the street back to the house. He respects all those customs, and he takes care to see that every chair, every vase is where she liked to have it.

He revisits the places they loved: the seaside restaurant where the owner invariably reminds him of his wife's favorite fish dishes; in a small town nearby, the rectangle of the town square with red-, blue-, yellow-painted houses, a modest beauty they found enthralling; or, on a visit to Copenhagen, the wharf where every evening at six a great white steamship set out to sea. There they could stand motionless for a long time watching it. Before it sailed music would ring out, old-time jazz, the invitation to the voyage. Since her death he often goes there; he imagines her beside him and feels again their mutual yearning to climb aboard that white nocturnal ship, to dance on it and sleep on it and wake up somewhere far, very far, to the north.

She liked him to dress well, and she saw to his

wardrobe herself. He hasn't forgotten which of his shirts she liked and which she did not. For this visit to Bohemia, he purposely packed a suit she'd had no feeling for either way. He did not want to grant this journey too much attention. It is not a journey for her, or with her.

### 37

Completely focused on her next-day's rendezvous, Irena means to spend this Saturday in peace and quiet, like an athlete on the eve of a match. Gustaf is working in the city, and he'll be out for the evening as well. She takes advantage of her solitude, she sleeps late and then stays in their rooms, trying not to run into her mother; downstairs she can hear the woman's comings and goings, which end only around noon. When finally she hears the door slam hard and is sure her mother has left the house, she goes down to the kitchen, absentmindedly eats a little something, and takes off as well.

On the sidewalk she stops, enthralled. In the

autumn sunshine this garden neighborhood scattered with little villas reveals a quiet beauty that grips her heart and lures her into a long walk. It reminds her that she had wanted to take just such a walk, long and contemplative, in the last days before her emigration, so as to bid farewell to this city, to all the streets she had loved; but there were too many things to arrange, and she never found the time.

Seen from where she is strolling, Prague is a broad green swath of peaceable neighborhoods with narrow tree-lined streets. This is the Prague she loves, not the sumptuous one downtown; the Prague born at the turn of the previous century, the Prague of the Czech lower middle class, the Prague of her childhood, where in wintertime she would ski up and down the hilly little lanes, the Prague where at dusk the encircling forests would steal into town to spread their fragrance.

Dreamily she walks on; for a few seconds she catches a glimpse of Paris, which for the first time she feels has something hostile about it: chilly geometry of the avenues; pridefulness of the Champs-Élysées; stern countenances of the giant stone women representing Equality or Fraternity;

and nowhere, nowhere, a single touch of this kindly intimacy, a single whiff of this idyll she inhales here. In fact, throughout all her years as an émigré, this is the picture she has harbored as the emblem of her lost country: little houses in gardens stretching away out of sight over rolling land. She felt happy in Paris, happier than here, but only Prague held her by a secret bond of beauty. She suddenly understands how much she loves this city and how painful her departure from it must have been.

She recalls those final feverish days: in the confusion of the early months of the Russian occupation, leaving the country was still easy to do, and they could say goodbye to their friends without fear. But they had too little time to see all of them. On a momentary impulse, two days before they left they went to visit an old friend, a bachelor, and spent some emotional hours with him. Only later, in France, did they learn that the reason this man had been so attentive to them over time was that the police had selected him to inform on Martin. The day before they left, she rang a friend's doorbell without having phoned ahead. She found her in a deep discussion with another

woman. Saying nothing herself, she listened for a long time to a conversation of no concern to her, waiting for some gesture, an encouraging word, a goodbye, in vain. Had they forgotten she was leaving? Or were they pretending to forget? Or was it that neither her presence nor her absence mattered to them anymore? And her mother. As they were leaving, she did not kiss Irena. She kissed Martin, but not her. Irena she squeezed hard on the shoulder as she uttered in her resonant voice: "We don't go in for displaying our feelings!" The words were supposed to sound gruff and manly, but they were chilling. Remembering now all those farewells (fake farewells, worked-up farewells), Irena thinks: a person who messes up her goodbyes shouldn't expect much from her reunions.

By now she's been walking for a good two or three hours in those leafy neighborhoods. She reaches a parapet at the end of a little park above Prague: the view from here is of the rear of Hradcany Castle, the secret side; this is a Prague whose existence Gustaf doesn't suspect; and instantly there come rushing the names she loved as a young girl: Macha, poet at the time when his

nation, a water sprite, was just emerging from the mists; Jan Neruda, the storyteller of ordinary Czech folk; the songs of Voskovec and Werich from the 1930s, so loved by her father, who died when she was a child; Hrabal and Skvorecky, novelists of her adolescence; and the little theaters and cabarets of the sixties, so free, so merrily free, with their sassy humor; it was the incommunicable scent of this country, its intangible essence, that she had brought along with her to France.

Leaning on the parapet, she looks over at the Castle: it's no more than fifteen minutes away. The Prague of the postcards begins there, the Prague that a frenzied history stamped with its multiple stigmata, the Prague of tourists and whores, the Prague of restaurants so expensive that her Czech friends can't set foot in them, the belly-dancer Prague writhing in the spotlight, Gustaf's Prague. She reflects that there is no place more alien to her than that Prague. Gustaf's Prague. Gustaf's Prague. Gustaf's Prague.

Gustaf: she sees him, his features blurred through the clouded windowpane of a language she barely knows, and she thinks, almost joyfully,

that it's fine this way because the truth is finally revealed: she feels no need to understand him or to have him understand her. She pictures his jovial figure, dressed up in his T-shirt, shouting that Kafka was born in Prague, and she feels a desire rising through her body, the irrepressible desire to take a lover. Not to patch up her life as it is. But to turn it completely upside down. Finally take possession of her own fate.

For she has never chosen any of her men. She was always the one being chosen. Martin she came to love, but at the start he was just a way to escape her mother. In her liaison with Gustaf she thought she was gaining freedom. But now she sees that it was only a variant of her relation with Martin: she seized an outstretched hand, and it pulled her out of difficult circumstances that she was unable to handle.

She knows she is good at gratitude; she has always prided herself on that as her prime virtue; when gratitude required it, a feeling of love would come running like a docile servant. She was sincerely devoted to Martin; she was sincerely devoted to Gustaf. But was that something to be proud of? Isn't gratitude simply another name for

weakness, for dependency? What she wants now is love with no gratitude to it at all! And she knows that a love like that has to be bought by some daring, risky act. For she has never been daring in her love life, she didn't even know what that meant.

Suddenly, like a gust of wind: the high-speed parade of old emigration-dreams, old anxieties: she sees women rush up, surround her and, waving beer mugs and laughing falsely, keep her from escaping; she is in a shop where other women, salesgirls, dart over to her, put her into a dress that, once on her body, turns into a straitjacket.

For another long while she goes on leaning on the parapet, then she straightens up. She is suffused with the certainty that she will escape; that she will not stay on in this city; neither in this city nor in the life this city is weaving for her.

She moves on, and she reflects that today she is finally carrying out the farewell walk she failed to take last time; she is finally saying her Great Farewells to the city that she loves more than any other and that she is prepared to lose once again, without regret, to be worthy of a life of her own.

When Communism departed from Europe, Josef's wife kept pressing him to go see his country again. She intended to go with him. But she died, and from then on all he could think about was his new life with the absent woman. He tried hard to persuade himself that it was a happy life. But is "happiness" the right word? Yes; happiness like a frail, tremulous ray gleaming through his grief, a resigned, calm, unremitting grief. A month earlier, unable to shake the sadness, he recalled the words of his deceased wife: "Not going would be unnatural of you, unjustifiable, even foul"; actually, he thought, this trip she had so urged on him might possibly be some help to him now; might divert him, for a few days at least, from his own life, which was giving him such pain.

As he prepared for the trip, an idea tentatively crossed his mind: what if he were to stay over there for good? After all, he could be a veterinarian as easily in Bohemia as in Denmark. Till then the idea had seemed unacceptable, almost like a betrayal of the woman he loved. But he wondered:

would it really be a betrayal? If his wife's presence is nonmaterial, why should she be bound to the materiality of one particular place? Couldn't she be with him in Bohemia just as well as in Denmark?

He has left the hotel and is driving around in the car; he has lunch in a country inn; then he takes a walk through the fields; narrow lanes, wild roses, trees, trees; oddly moved, he gazes at the wooded hills on the horizon, and it occurs to him that twice in his own lifetime, the Czechs were willing to die to keep that landscape their own; in 1938 they wanted to fight Hitler; when their allies, the French and the English, kept them from doing so, they were in despair. In 1968 the Russians invaded the country, and again they wanted to fight; condemned to the same capitulation, they fell back into that same despair again.

To be willing to die for one's country: every nation has known that temptation to sacrifice. Indeed, the Czechs' adversaries also knew it: the Germans, the Russians. But those are large nations. Their patriotism is different: they are buoyed by their glory, their importance, their universal mission. The Czechs loved their country not because it was glorious but because it was

unknown; not because it was big but because it was small and in constant danger. Their patriotism was an enormous compassion for their country. The Danes are like that too. Not by chance did Josef choose a small country for his emigration.

Much moved, he gazes out over the landscape and reflects that the history of his Bohemia during this past half century is fascinating, unique, unprecedented, and that failing to take an interest in it would be narrowminded. Tomorrow morning, he'll be seeing N. What kind of life did the man have during all the time they were out of touch? What had he thought about the Russian occupation of the country? And what was it like for him to see the end of the Communism he used to believe in, sincerely and honorably? How is his Marxist background adjusting to the return of this capitalism that's being cheered along by the entire planet? Is he rebelling against it? Or has he abandoned his convictions? And if he's abandoned them, is that a crisis for him? And how are other people behaving toward him? Josef can hear the voice of his sister-in-law who, huntress of the guilty, would certainly like to see N. handcuffed in court. Doesn't N. need Josef to tell him that

friendship does exist despite all of history's contortions?

Josef's thoughts return to his sister-in-law: she hated the Communists because they disputed the sacred right of property. And then, he thought, she disputes my sacred right to my painting. He imagines the painting on a wall in his brick house in Copenhagen, and suddenly, with surprise, he realizes that the working-class suburb in the picture, that Czech Derain, that oddity of history, would be a disruption, an intrusive presence on the wall of that place. How could he ever have thought of taking it back with him? That painting doesn't belong there where he lives with his dear deceased. He'd never even mentioned it to her. That painting has nothing to do with her, with the two of them, with their life.

Then he thinks: if one little painting could disrupt his life with the dead woman, how much more disruptive would be the constant, unremitting presence of a whole country, a country she never saw!

The sun dips toward the horizon; he is in the car on the road to Prague; the landscape slips away around him, the landscape of his small

country whose people were willing to die for it, and he knows that there exists something even smaller, with an even stronger appeal to his compassionate love: he sees two easy chairs turned to face each other, the lamp and the flower bowl on the window ledge, and the slender fir tree his wife planted in front of the house, a fir tree that looks like an arm she'd raised from afar to show him the way back home.

When Skacel locked himself into the house of sadness for three hundred years, it was because he expected his country to be engulfed forever by the empire of the East. He was wrong. Everyone is wrong about the future. Man can only be certain about the present moment. But is that quite true either? Can he really know the present? Is he in a position to make any judgment about it? Certainly not. For how can a person with no knowledge of the future understand the meaning of the present? If we do not know what future the pres-



ent is leading us toward, how can we say whether this present is good or bad, whether it deserves our concurrence, or our suspicion, or our hatred?

In 1921 Arnold Schoenberg declares that because of him German music will continue to dominate the world for the next hundred years. Twelve years later he is forced to leave Germany forever. After the war, in America, laden with honors, he is still convinced that his work will be celebrated forever. He faults Igor Stravinsky for paying too much attention to his contemporaries and disregarding the judgment of the future. He expects posterity to be his most reliable ally. In a scathing letter to Thomas Mann he looks to the period "after two or three hundred years," when it will finally become clear which of the two was the greater, Mann or he! Schoenberg dies in 1951. For the next two decades his work is hailed as the greatest of the century, venerated by the most brilliant of the young composers, who declare themselves his disciples; but thereafter it recedes from both concert halls and memory. Who plays it nowadays, at the turn of this century? Who looks to him? No, I don't mean to make foolish fun of his presumptuousness and say he overesti-

mated himself. A thousand times no! Schoenberg did not overestimate himself. He overestimated the future.

Did he commit an error of thinking? No. His thinking was correct, but he was living in spheres that were too lofty. He was conversing with the greatest Germans, with Bach and Goethe and Brahms and Mahler, but, however intelligent they might be, conversations carried on in the higher stratospheres of the mind are always myopic about what goes on, with no reason or logic, down below: two great armies are battling to the death over sacred causes; but some minuscule plague bacterium comes along and lays them both low.

Schoenberg was aware that the bacterium existed. As early as 1930 he wrote: "Radio is an enemy, a ruthless enemy marching irresistibly forward, and any resistance is hopeless"; it "force-feeds us music . . . regardless of whether we want to hear it, or whether we can grasp it," with the result that music becomes just noise, a noise among other noises.

Radio was the tiny stream it all began with. Then came other technical means for reproduc-

ing, proliferating, amplifying sound, and the stream became an enormous river. If in the past people would listen to music out of love for music, nowadays it roars everywhere and all the time, "regardless whether we want to hear it," it roars from loudspeakers, in cars, in restaurants, in elevators, in the streets, in waiting rooms, in gyms, in the earpieces of Walkmans, music rewritten, reorchestrated, abridged, and stretched out, fragments of rock, of jazz, of opera, a flood of everything jumbled together so that we don't know who composed it (music become noise is anonymous), so that we can't tell beginning from end (music become noise has no form): sewage-water music in which music is dying.

Schoenberg saw the bacterium, he was aware of the danger, but deep inside he did not grant it much importance. As I said, he was living in the very lofty spheres of the mind, and pride kept him from taking seriously an enemy so small, so vulgar, so repugnant, so contemptible. The only great adversary worthy of him, the sublime rival whom he battled with verve and severity, was Igor Stravinsky. That was the music he charged at, sword flashing, to win the favor of the future.

But the future was a river, a flood of notes where composers' corpses drifted among the fallen leaves and torn-away branches. One day Schoenberg's dead body, bobbing about in the raging waves, collided with Stravinsky's, and in a shamefaced late-day reconciliation the two of them journeyed on together toward nothingness (toward the nothingness of music that is absolute din).

## 40

To recall: when Irena stopped with her husband on the embankment of the river running through a French provincial town, she had seen felled trees on the far bank and at the same moment was hit by a sudden volley of music loosed from a loudspeaker. She had clapped her hands over her ears and burst into tears. A few months later she was at home with her dying husband. From the next apartment music thundered. Twice she rang the doorbell and begged the neighbors to turn off the sound system, and twice in vain. Finally she

shouted: "Stop that hideous racket! My husband is dying! Do you hear? Dying! Dying!"

During her first few years in France, she used to listen a lot to the radio, for it acquainted her with French language and life, but after Martin died, because of the music she had come to dislike, she no longer took pleasure in it; the news did not follow in sequence as it used to, instead the reports were set apart by three seconds, or eight or fifteen seconds, of that music, and year by year those little interludes swelled insidiously. She thereby grew intimately acquainted with what Schoenberg called "music become noise."

She is lying on the bed alongside Gustaf, overexcited at the prospect of her rendezvous, she fears for her sleep; she already swallowed one sleeping tablet, she drowsed off and, waking in the middle of the night, she took another two, then out of despair, out of nervousness, she turned on a little radio beside her pillow. To get back to sleep she wants to hear a human voice, some talk that will seize her thoughts, carry her off to another place, calm her down, and put her to sleep; she switches from station to station, but only music pours out from everywhere, sewage

water music, fragments of rock, of jazz, of opera, and it's a world where she can't talk to anybody because everybody's singing and yelling, a world where nobody talks to her because everybody's prancing around and dancing.

On the one side the sewage-water music, on the other a snore, and Irena, besieged, yearns for open space around her, a space to breathe, but she stumbles over the pale inert body that fate has dropped into her path like a sack of sludge. She is gripped by a fresh surge of hatred for Gustaf, not because his body is neglecting hers (Ah, no! she could never make love with him again!) but because his snores are keeping her awake and she's in danger of ruining the encounter of her life, the encounter that is to take place soon, in about eight hours, for morning is coming on, but sleep is not, and she knows she's going to be tired, edgy, her face made ugly and old.

Finally the intensity of her hatred acts as a narcotic, and she falls asleep. When she wakes, Gustaf has already gone out, while the little radio by her pillow is still emitting the music become noise. She has a headache and feels worn out. She would willingly stay in bed, but Milada said she

would be coming by at ten o'clock. But why is she coming today? Irena hasn't the slightest desire to be with anyone at all!

41

Built on a slope, the house showed just one of its stories at street level. When the door opened Josef was assailed by the amorous onslaught of a huge German shepherd. Only after a while did he catch sight of N., laughing as he quieted the dog and led Josef along a hallway and down a long stairway to a two-room garden apartment where he lived with his wife; she was there, friendly, and she offered her hand.

"Upstairs," N. said, pointing to the ceiling, "the apartments are much roomier. My daughter and son live there with their families. The villa belongs to my son. He's a lawyer. Too bad he's not home. Listen," he said, dropping his voice, "if you want to come back here to live, he'll help you. He'll take care of things for you."

These words reminded Josef of the day forty

years earlier when, in that same voice lowered to indicate secrecy, N. had offered his friendship and his help.

"I told them about you," N. went on, and he shouted toward the stairwell several names that must have belonged to his progeny; when Josef saw all those grandchildren and great-grandchildren coming down the stairs, he had no idea whose they were. Anyhow, they were all beautiful, stylish (Josef couldn't tear his eyes off a blond, the girlfriend of one of the grandsons, a German girl who spoke not a word of Czech), and all of them, even the girls, looked taller than N.; among them he was like a rabbit caught in a tangle of weeds visibly springing up around and above him.

Like fashion models strutting a runway, they smiled wordlessly until N. asked them to leave him alone with his friend. His wife stayed indoors, and the two men went out into the garden.

The dog followed them, and N. remarked: "I've never seen him so excited by a visitor. It's as if he knows what you do for a living." Then he showed Josef some fruit trees and described his labors laying out the grassy plots set off by narrow pathways, so that for some time the conversation

stayed distant from the subjects Josef had vowed to raise; finally he managed to interrupt his friend's botanical lecture and ask him about his life during the twenty years they had not seen each other.

"Let's not talk about it," said N., and in answer to Josef's inquiring look, he laid an index finger on his heart. Josef did not understand the meaning of the gesture: was it that the political events had affected him so profoundly, "to the heart?" or had he gone through a serious love affair? or had a heart attack?

"Someday I'll tell you about it," he added, turning aside any discussion.

The conversation was not easy; whenever Josef stopped walking to shape a question better, the dog took it as permission to jump up and set his paws on Josef's belly.

"I remember what you always used to say," N. remarked. "That a person becomes a doctor because he's interested in diseases; he becomes a veterinarian out of love for animals."

"Did I really say that?" Josef asked, amazed. He remembered that two days earlier he had told his sister-in-law that he'd chosen his profession as

a rebellion against his family. So had he acted out of love, and not rebellion? In a single vague cloud he saw filing past him all the sick animals he had known; then he saw his veterinary clinic at the back of his brick house, where tomorrow (yes, in exactly twenty-four hours!) he would open the door to greet the day's first patient; a slow smile spread across his face.

He had to force himself back to the conversation barely begun: he asked whether N. had been attacked for his political past; N. said no; according to him, people knew he had always helped those the regime was giving trouble. "I don't doubt it," Josef said (he really didn't), but he pressed on: how did N. himself see his whole past life? As a mistake? As a defeat? N. shook his head, saying that it was neither the one nor the other. And finally Josef asked what N. thought of the very swift, harsh reestablishment of capitalism. Shrugging, N. replied that under the circumstances there was no other solution.

No, the conversation never managed to get going. Josef thought at first that N. found his questions indiscreet. Then he corrected himself: not so much indiscreet as outdated. If his sister-

in-law's vindictive dream should come true and N. were indicted and tried in court, maybe he would reassess his Communist past to explain and defend it. But in the absence of any such trial, that past was remote from him these days. He didn't live there anymore.

Josef recalled a very old idea of his, which at the time he had considered to be blasphemous: that adherence to Communism has nothing to do with Marx and his theories; it was simply that the period gave people a way to fulfill the most diverse psychological needs: the need to look nonconformist; or the need to obey; or the need to punish the wicked; or the need to be useful; or the need to march forward into the future with youth; or the need to have a big family around you.

In good spirits, the dog barked and Josef said to himself: the reason people are quitting Communism today is not that their thinking has changed or undergone a shock, but that Communism no longer provides a way to look nonconformist or obey or punish the wicked or be useful or march forward with youth or have a big family around you. The Communist creed no longer answers any need. It has become so unusable that everyone drops it easily, never even noticing.

Still, the original goal of his visit was unfulfilled: to make it clear to N. that in some imaginary courtroom he, Josef, would defend him. To achieve this, he would first show N. that he was not blindly enthusiastic about the world that had sprung up here since Communism, and he described the big advertisement on the square back in his hometown, in which an incomprehensible acronym-agency proposes its services to the Czechs by showing them a white hand and a black hand clasped together: "Tell me," he said: "Is this still our country?"

He expected to hear a sarcastic response about worldwide capitalism homogenizing the planet, but N. was silent. Josef went on: "The Soviet empire collapsed because it could no longer hold down the nations that wanted their independence. But those nations—they're less independent than ever now. They can't choose their own economy or their own foreign policy or even their own advertising slogans."

"National independence has been an illusion for a long time now," said N.

"But if a country is not independent and doesn't even want to be, will anyone still be willing to die for it?"

"Being willing to die isn't what I want for my children."

"I'll put it another way: does anyone still love this country?"

N. slowed his steps: "Josef," he said, touched. "How could you ever have emigrated? You're a patriot!" Then, very seriously: "Dying for your country—that's all finished. Maybe for you time stopped during your emigration. But they—they don't think like you anymore."

"Who?"

N. tipped his head toward the upper floors of the house, as if to indicate his brood. "They're somewhere else."

42

During these remarks the two friends came to a halt; the dog took advantage of it: he reared up and set his paws on Josef, who petted him. N. contemplated this man-dog couple for a time, increasingly touched. As if he were only just now taking full account of the twenty years they hadn't seen each other: "Ah, I'm so happy you came!"

He tapped Josef on the shoulder and drew him over to sit beneath an apple tree. And at once Josef knew: the serious, important conversation he had come for would not take place. And to his surprise, that was a comfort, it was a liberation! After all, he hadn't come here to put his friend through an interrogation!

As if a lock had clicked open, their conversation took off, freely and agreeably, a chat between two old pals: a few scattered memories, news of mutual friends, funny comments, and paradoxes and jokes. It was as if a gentle, warm, powerful breeze had taken him up in its arms. Josef felt an irrepressible joy in talking. Ah, such an unexpected joy! For twenty years he had barely spoken Czech. Conversation with his wife was easy, Danish having turned into a private jargon for themselves. But with other people he was always conscious of choosing his words, constructing a sentence, watching his accent. It seemed to him that when Danes talked they were running nimbly, while he was trudging along behind, lugging a twenty-kilo load. Now, though, the words leaped from his mouth on their own, without his having to hunt for them, monitor them. Czech was no longer the unknown language with the

nasal timbre that had startled him at the hotel in his hometown. He recognized it now, and he savored it. Using it, he felt light, like after a diet. Talking was like flying, and for the first time in his visit he was happy in his homeland and felt that it was his.

Stimulated by the pleasure beaming from his friend, N. grew more and more relaxed, with a complicitous grin he mentioned his long-ago secret mistress and thanked Josef for having once served as an alibi for him with his wife. Josef did not recall the episode and was sure N. was confusing him with someone else. But the alibi story, which took N. a long time to tell, was so fine, so funny, that Josef ended up acquiescing in his supposed role as protagonist. He sat with his head tilted back, and through the leaves the sun lighted a beatific smile on his face.

It was in this state of well-being that N.'s wife surprised them: "You'll have lunch with us?"

He looked at his watch and stood up. "I've got an appointment in half an hour!"

"Then come back tonight! We'll have dinner together," N. urged warmly.

"Tonight I'll already be back home!"

"By 'back home' you mean—"

"In Denmark."

"It's so strange to hear you say that. So then this isn't home to you anymore?" asked N.'s wife.

"No. It's there."

There was a long silence and Josef expected questions: If Denmark really is your home, what's your life like there? And with whom? Tell about it! Tell us! Describe your house! Who's your wife? Are you happy? Tell us! Tell us!

But neither N. nor his wife asked any such question. For a moment, a low wooden fence and a fir tree flickered across Josef's mind.

"I must go," he said, and they all moved toward the stairs. As they climbed, they were quiet, and in that silence Josef was suddenly struck by his wife's absence; there was not a trace of her here. In the three days he'd spent in this country, no one had said a single word about her. He understood: if he stayed here, he would lose her. If he stayed here, she would vanish.

They stopped on the sidewalk outside, shook hands once again, and the dog leaned his paws on Josef's belly.

Then the three of them watched Josef move away until he vanished from their sight.



When after so many years she saw Irena at the restaurant among other women, Milada was overcome by tenderness for her; one detail in particular enchanted her: Irena recited a verse by Jan Skacel. In the little land of Bohemia, it is an easy thing to meet and approach a poet. Milada had known Skacel, a thickset man with a hard face that looked chipped out of rock, and she had adored him with the naiveté of a very young girl from another time. Now his collected poems have just been published in a single volume, and Milada has brought it as a gift to her friend.

Irena leafs through the book: "Do people still read poetry these days?"

"Hardly at all," says Milada, and then she recites a few lines by heart: "*At noon, sometimes, you can see the night moving off toward the river...*" Or listen to this: "*... ponds, water laid flat on its back.*" Or—there are some evenings, Skacel says, when the air is so soft and fragile that *'you can walk barefoot on broken glass.'*"

Listening to her, Irena remembers sudden

apparitions that used to spring without warning into her head during the early years of her emigration. They were fragments of that very landscape.

"Or this image: '*... on horseback, death and a peacock...*'" Milada recited the words in a voice that trembled faintly: they always called up this vision: a horse moving across fields; on its back a skeleton with a scythe in hand, and behind, riding pillion, a peacock with tail unfurled, splendid and shimmering like vanity eternal.

Irena gazes gratefully at Milada, the one friend she has found in this country; she gazes at her round pretty face made rounder yet by her hairstyle; because Milada is silent now, lost in thought, her wrinkles have vanished in the immobility of her skin and she looks like a young woman; Irena hopes she will not speak, not recite poetry, will stay motionless and beautiful for a long while.

"You've always worn your hair that way, haven't you? I've never seen you with any other hairstyle."

As if to sidestep the topic, Milada said: "So, are you finally going to make a decision someday?"

"You know very well that Gustaf has offices in Prague and Paris both!"

"But as I understand it, Prague is where he'd like to live."

"Listen, commuting back and forth between Paris and Prague is fine with me. I have my work in both places, Gustaf is my only boss, we manage, we improvise."

"What is it that holds you in Paris? Your daughters?"

"No. I don't want to cling to their lives."

"Have you got somebody there?"

"Nobody." Then: "My own apartment." Then: "My independence." And again, slowly: "I've always had the sense that my life is run by other people. Except for a few years after Martin died. Those were the toughest years, I was alone with my children, I had to cope by myself. Complete poverty. You won't believe this, but nowadays when I look back, those are my happiest years."

She is shocked, herself, at having called "happiest" the years after her husband's death, and she corrects herself: "What I mean is, that was the one time I was master of my own life."

She stops. Milada does not break the silence, and Irena goes on: "I married very young, solely to escape from my mother. But for just that reason, it was a decision that was forced, not really free. And on top of it, to escape my mother I married a man who was an old friend of hers. Because the only people I knew were her crowd. So even married, I was still under her watchful eye."

"How old were you?"

"Just turned twenty. And from then on, everything was determined once and for all. I made one mistake then, a mistake that's hard to define and impossible to grasp, but one that determined my entire life and that I never managed to repair."

"An irreparable mistake committed at the age of ignorance."

"Yes."

"That's the age people marry, have their first child, choose a profession. Eventually we come to know and understand a lot of things, but it's too late, because a whole life has already been determined at a stage when we didn't know a thing."

"Yes, yes!" Irena agrees, "even my emigration! That was also just the consequence of my earlier decisions. I emigrated because the secret police

wouldn't leave Martin alone. He couldn't go on living here. But I could have. I stood by my husband, and I don't regret it. But still, my emigrating wasn't my own doing, my decision, my freedom, my fate. My mother pushed me toward Martin, and Martin took me abroad."

"Yes, I remember. The decision was made without you."

"Even my mother didn't object."

"Quite the contrary, it suited her fine."

"What do you mean? The house?"

"Everything's a matter of property."

"You're turning back into a Marxist," says Irena with a slight smile.

"Have you noticed how after forty years of Communism, the bourgeoisie landed on its feet again in just a few days? They survived in a thousand ways—some of them jailed, some thrown out of their jobs, others who even did very nicely, had brilliant careers, ambassadors, professors. Now their sons and grandsons are back together again, a kind of secret fraternity, they've taken over the banks, the newspapers, the parliament, the government."

"You really still are a Communist."

"The word doesn't mean a thing anymore. But it's true I am still a girl from a poor family."

She pauses, and various images go through her head: a girl from a poor family in love with a boy from a rich family; a young woman looking to Communism to find meaning for her life; after 1968 a mature woman who embraces the dissident movement and suddenly discovers a world far broader than before: not only Communists turning against the Party, but also priests and former political prisoners and downgraded members of the high bourgeoisie. And then after 1989, as if waking from a dream, she turns back into what she was when she started: an aging girl from a poor family.

"Don't be offended at my asking," says Irena, "you've told me before, but I forget: where were you born?"

Milada names a small city.

"I'm having lunch today with someone from there."

"Who's that?"

Hearing his name, Milada smiles: "I see he's still jinxing me. I was hoping to take you to lunch myself. Too bad."

He arrived on time but she was already waiting for him in the hotel lobby. He led her into the dining room and sat her down across from him at the table he had reserved.

After some talk, she breaks in: "Well, how do you like it here? Would you stay on?"

"No," he says; then in turn he asks: "What about you? What's holding you here?"

"Nothing."

The response is so trenchant and so like his own that they both burst into laughter. Their agreement is sealed thereby, and they set to talking with gusto, with gaiety.

He orders the meal, and when the waiter hands him the wine list Irena takes it herself: "You do the meal, I'll do the wine!" She sees some French wines on the list and selects one of those: "Wine is a matter of honor with me. They don't know a thing about wine, our countrymen, and you dulled by your barbaric Scandinavia, you know even less."

She tells him how her friends refused to drink

the Bordeaux she provided them: "Imagine, a 1985 vintage! and to make a point, to teach me a lesson in patriotism, they drank beer! Later on they felt sorry for me, they were already drunk on the beer and they kept on drinking, with the wine!"

She tells the story, she's funny, they laugh.

"The worst thing is, they kept talking to me about things and people I knew nothing about. They refused to see that after all this time, their world has evaporated from my head. They thought with all my memory blanks I was trying to make myself interesting. To stand out. It was a very strange conversation: I'd forgotten who they had been; they weren't interested in who I'd become. Can you believe that not one person here has ever asked me a single question about my life abroad? Not one single question! Never! I keep having the sense that they want to amputate twenty years of my life from me. Really, it does feel like an amputation. I feel shortened, diminished, like a dwarf."

He likes her, and he likes her story, too. He understands her, he agrees with everything she's saying.

"And what about in France?" he says. "Do your friends there ask you any questions?"

She is about to say yes, but then she thinks again; she wants to be precise, and she speaks slowly: "No, of course not! But when people spend a lot of time together, they assume they know each other. They don't ask themselves any questions and they don't worry about it. They're not interested in each other, but it's completely innocent. They don't realize it."

"That's true. It's only when you come back to the country after a long absence that you notice the obvious: people aren't interested in one another, it's normal."

"Yes, it's normal."

"But I had something else in mind. Not about you, or about your life—not you as a person. I was thinking about your experience. About what you'd seen, what had happened to you. Your French friends couldn't have any conception of that."

"Oh, the French, you know—they have no need for experience. With them, judgments precede experience. When we got there, they didn't need any information from us. They were already

thoroughly informed that Stalinism is an evil and emigration is a tragedy. They weren't interested in what we thought, they were interested in us as living proof of what they thought. So they were generous to us and proud of it. When Communism collapsed all of a sudden, they looked hard at me, an investigator's look. And after that something soured. I didn't behave the way they expected."

She drinks a little wine; then: "They had really done a lot for me. They saw me as the embodiment of an émigré's suffering. Then the time came for me to confirm that suffering by my joyous return to the homeland. And that confirmation didn't happen. They felt duped. And so did I, because up till then I'd thought they loved me not for my suffering but for my self."

She tells him about Sylvie. "She was disappointed that I didn't rush home the first day to man the barricades in Prague!"

"What barricades?"

"Of course there were none, but Sylvie imagined there were. I wasn't able to come to Prague until a few months later, after the fact, and I did stay for a while then. When I got back to Paris, I

had a terrific need to talk to her, you know, I really loved her, and I wanted to tell her all about it, discuss it all, the shock of going back to your country after twenty years, but she wasn't so eager to see me anymore."

"Did you quarrel?"

"Oh no. Just, I wasn't an émigré anymore. I wasn't interesting anymore. So, gradually, amicably, with a smile, she stopped calling."

"So who've you got to talk with? Who thinks the way you do?"

"No one." Then: "You."

## 45

They fell silent. And she repeated, her tone almost grave: "You." And she added: "Not here. In France. Better yet, somewhere else. Anywhere."

With these words, she offered him her future. And although Josef has no interest in the future, he feels happy with this woman who so visibly desires him. As if he were way back in the past, back in the years he used to go picking up girls in Prague. As if those years were inviting him now to

take up the thread where he broke it off. He feels young again in the company of this stranger, and suddenly it seems unacceptable to cut short the afternoon for an appointment with his stepdaughter.

"Will you excuse me? I have to make a phone call." He gets up and walks toward a booth.

She watches his slightly stooped figure as he lifts the receiver; from that distance she sees his age more clearly. At the Paris airport he had looked younger; now she sees that he must be fifteen or twenty years older than she; like Martin, like Gustaf. That doesn't dishearten her; on the contrary it gives her the reassuring sense that however daring and risky it may be, this adventure fits the pattern of her life and is less mad than it seems (I note: she feels encouraged the way Gustaf did, years back, when he learned Martin's age).

He has barely given his name on the phone when the stepdaughter attacks him: "You're calling to say you're not coming."

"That's right. After all these years, I have so many things to do. I don't have a minute to spare. Do excuse me."

"You leave when?"

He is about to say, "Tonight," but it occurs to him that she might try to find him at the airport. He lies: "Tomorrow morning."

"And you have no time to see me? Even between two other appointments? Even late tonight? I can get free whenever you say!"

"No."

"I'm your wife's daughter, after all!"

The emphatic way she nearly shouts that last line reminds him of everything that used to drive him wild in this country. He hardens his stance and looks for a biting retort.

She beats him to it: "You're not talking! You don't know what to say! Just so you know, Mama warned me not to call you. She told me what an egotist you are! What a filthy little egotist!"

She hangs up.

Walking back to the table, he feels spattered with filth. Suddenly, illogically, a thought crosses his mind: I've had a lot of women in this country but no sister. He is startled by the line and by the word "sister"; he slows his step to breathe in that peaceful word: "sister." It's true, in this country he had never found any sister.

"Something unpleasant happen?"

"Nothing important," he replied as he sat down. "But unpleasant, yes."

He is quiet.

She too. Her fatigue reminds her of the sedatives from her sleepless night. Hoping to fight it off, she pours the last of the wine into her glass and drinks it. Then she lays her hand on his: "We're not happy here. Let me buy you a drink."

They move into the bar, where music is playing, loud.

She recoils, then gets hold of herself: she does want some alcohol. At the counter they each drink a glass of cognac.

He looks at her: "What's the matter?"

She nods toward the speakers.

"The music? Let's go to my room."

Learning of his presence in Prague through Irena was quite a remarkable coincidence. But by a certain age, coincidences lose their magic, no longer surprise, become run-of-the-mill. The memory of

Josef does not disturb her. With bitter humor she merely recalls that he used to enjoy scaring her with the threat of loneliness and that here he had just condemned her to eating her midday meal alone.

The way he talked about loneliness. Perhaps the reason the word lingers in her memory is because at the time it seemed so incomprehensible: as a girl with two brothers and two sisters, she detested crowds; for studying, or reading, she had no room of her own and had a hard time finding even a corner to withdraw to. Clearly they had different concerns, but she understood that in her boyfriend's mouth the word "loneliness" took on a more abstract, a grander meaning: going through life without drawing anyone's interest; talking without being heard; suffering without stirring compassion; thus, living as she has in fact lived ever since then.

In a neighborhood far from her house, she's parked her car and starts looking for a bistro. When she has no one to lunch with, she never goes to a restaurant (where, on an empty chair across the table, loneliness would sit down and watch her), but instead eats a sandwich at a

counter. Passing a shopwindow, she catches a glimpse of her own reflection. She stops. Looking at herself is her vice, perhaps the only one. Pretending to look over the merchandise, she takes a look at herself: the brown hair, the blue eyes, the round outline of the face. She knows she is beautiful, has always known it, and it is her sole good fortune.

Then she realizes that what she is seeing is not only her vaguely reflected face but the window display of a butcher shop: a hanging carcass, severed haunches, a pig's head with a friendly, touching muzzle, and, farther into the shop, the plucked bodies of poultry with their claws lifted, impotently and humanly lifted, and suddenly horror shoots through her, her face crumples, she clenches her fists and strains to banish the nightmare.

Today Irena asked her the question she hears from time to time: why she has never changed her hairstyle. No, she never has changed it and she never will change it because she is beautiful only if she keeps wearing her hair the way it is arranged around her head now. Knowing the chatty indiscretion of hairdressers, she found her-



self one in a suburb where there wasn't a chance any of her friends would come wandering through. She had to guard the secret of her left ear at the cost of enormous discipline and an elaborate system of precautions. How was she to reconcile men's desire with the desire to be beautiful in their eyes? At first she had tried for a compromise (desperate journeys abroad, where nobody knew her and no indiscretion could betray her); then, later on, she had gone radical and sacrificed her erotic life to her beauty.

Standing at a bar, she slowly sips a beer and eats a cheese sandwich. She does not hurry; there is nothing she must do. All her Sundays are like that: in the afternoon she'll read, and at night she'll have a lonely meal at home.

## 47

Irena felt the fatigue still dogging her. Alone in the room for a few minutes, she opened the minibar and took out three tiny bottles of various liquors. She opened one and drank it down. She slipped

the other two into her purse, which she laid on the night table. There she noticed a book in Danish: *The Odyssey*.

"I thought about Odysseus too," she tells Josef when he returns.

"He was away from his country like you. For twenty years."

"Twenty years?"

"Yes, twenty years exactly."

"But at least he was pleased to be back."

"That's not certain. He saw that his countrymen had betrayed him, and he killed a lot of them. I don't think he can have been much loved."

"Penelope loved him, though."

"Maybe."

"You're not sure?"

"I've read and reread the passage on their reunion. At first she didn't recognize him. Then, when things were already clear to everyone else, when the suitors were killed and the traitors punished, she put him through new tests to be sure it really was he. Or rather to delay the moment when they would be back in bed together."

"That's understandable, don't you think? A

person must be paralyzed after twenty years. Was she faithful to him all that time?"

"She couldn't help but be. All eyes on her. Twenty years of chastity. Their night of lovemaking must have been difficult. I imagine that over those twenty years, Penelope's organs would have tightened, shrunk."

"She was like me!"

"What?"

"No, don't worry!" she exclaims, laughing. "I'm not talking about mine! They haven't shrunk!"

And, suddenly giddy with the explicit mention of her sex organs, her voice lower, she slowly repeats the last sentence translated into dirty words. And then yet again, in a voice lower yet, in words yet more obscene.

How unexpected! How intoxicating! For the first time in twenty years, he hears those dirty Czech words and instantly he is aroused to a degree he has never been since he left this country, because all those words—coarse, dirty, obscene—only have power over him in his native language (in the language of Ithaca), since it is through that language, through its deep roots,

that the arousal of generations and generations surges up in him. Until this moment these two have not even kissed. And now thrillingly, magnificently aroused, in a matter of seconds they begin to make love.

Their accord is total, for she too is aroused by the words she has neither said nor heard for so many years. A total accord in an explosion of obscenities! Ah, how impoverished her life has been! All the vices missed out on, all the infidelities left unrealized—all of that she is avid to experience. She wants to experience everything she ever imagined and never experienced, voyeurism, exhibitionism, the indecent presence of other people, verbal enormities; everything she can now do she tries to do, and what cannot be done she imagines with him aloud.

Their accord is total, for deep down Josef knows (and he may even want it so) that this erotic session is his last; he too is making love as if he hopes to sum up everything, his past adventures and those that will no longer happen. For each of them it is a tour through sexual life at high speed: the daring moves that lovers come to only after many encounters, if not many years, they

accomplish in a rush, the one stimulating the other, as if they hope to compress into one single afternoon everything they have missed and are going to miss.

Then, winded, they lie side by side on their backs, and she says: "Ah, it's years since I've made love! You won't believe me, it's years since I've made love!"

That sincerity moves him, strangely, deeply; he shuts his eyes. She takes advantage of the moment to lean over to her purse and slip a tiny bottle out of it; swiftly, discreetly, she drinks.

He opens his eyes: "Don't drink, don't! You'll be drunk!"

"Leave me alone!" she defends herself. Feeling the fatigue that won't be driven off, she'll do whatever it takes to hold onto her fully awakened senses. That is why, even though he's watching, she empties the third little bottle and then as if to explain herself, as if to excuse herself, she repeats that she hasn't made love for a long while, and this time she says it in dirty words from her native Ithaca and again the magic of the obscenity arouses Josef and he begins again to make love to her.

In Irena's head the alcohol plays a double role: it frees her fantasy, encourages her boldness, makes her sensual, and at the same time it dims her memory. She makes love wildly, lasciviously, and at the same time the curtain of oblivion wraps her lewdnesses in an all-concealing darkness. As if a poet were writing his greatest poem with ink that instantly disappears.

The mother set the disk into a big player and pressed several buttons to program the pieces she liked, then she plunged into the bathtub, and, with the door left open, she listened to the music. It was her personal selection of four dance pieces, a tango, a waltz, a Charleston, a rock-and-roll, which through the machine's technical prowess played over and over endlessly with no further intervention. She stood up in the tub, washed at length, stepped out, toweled herself down, slipped on her robe, and walked into the living room. Then Gustaf arrived after a long lunch

with some Swedes passing through Prague, and he asked her where Irena was. She answered (mixing bad English with some Czech, simplified for his sake): "She phoned. She won't be back till late tonight. How was lunch?"

"Much too much!"

"Have a digestive," and she poured some liqueur into two glasses.

"That's something I never turn down!" Gustaf exclaimed, and he drank.

The mother whistled the tune of the waltz and undulated her hips; then, without a word, she laid her hands on Gustaf's shoulders and did a few dance steps with him.

"You're in a magnificent mood!" said Gustaf.

"Yes," the mother answered, and she went on dancing, her movements so overdrawn, so theatrical, that with short awkward bursts of laughter Gustaf executed some exaggerated steps and gestures himself. He went along with this parodical performance both to prove that he didn't want to spoil the fun and to recall, with bashful vanity, that he used to be an excellent dancer and still was. As they danced, the mother led him toward the great mirror on the

wall, and the two of them turned their heads to watch themselves.

Then she let go of him and, without touching, they improvised routines facing the mirror; Gustaf was making dancing gestures with his hands and, like her, never took his eyes off their reflection. So he saw the mother's hand come to settle on his crotch.

The scene taking place illustrates an immemorial error of men: having appropriated for themselves the role of seducers, they never even consider any women but the ones they might desire; the idea doesn't occur to them that a woman who is ugly or old, or who simply stands outside their own erotic imaginings, might want to possess them. Sleeping with Irena's mother was to Gustaf so thoroughly unthinkable, fantastical, unreal that, struck dumb by her touch, he has no idea what to do: his first reflex is to lift her hand away; yet he does not dare; a commandment is graven in him since his childhood: thou shalt not be crude with a woman; so he goes on making his dancing motions and staring in stupefaction at the hand placed between his legs.

Her hand still on his crotch, the mother rocks in

place and keeps watching herself in the mirror; then she lets her robe gape open and Gustaf glimpses her opulent breasts and the dark triangle below; embarrassed, he feels his member swelling.

Without taking her eyes from the mirror, the mother finally lifts her hand away, but only to slip it into his trousers and grasp the naked member in her fingers. It grows harder and, still continuing her dance movements and gazing at the mirror, she exclaims admiringly in her vibrant alto voice: "Oh, oh! Unbelievable! Unbelievable!"

49

As he is making love, from time to time Josef looks discreetly at his watch: two hours left, an hour and a half left; this afternoon of love is fascinating, he doesn't want to miss any part of it, not a move, not a word, but the end is drawing near, ineluctable, and he must watch the time running out.

She too is thinking about the waning time; her

lewdness is growing the more reckless and fevered, her talk leaps from one fantasy to another as she senses that it is already too late, that this delirium is about to end and that her future lies empty. She says another few dirty words, but she says them in tears because, racked with sobs, she can't go on, she ceases all movement and pushes him away from her body.

They are lying side by side, and she says: "Don't go today, stay awhile."

"I can't."

She is still for a long time, then: "When will I see you again?"

He does not answer.

With sudden determination, she leaves the bed; she is not crying now; on foot facing him, she says without sentiment, abruptly aggressive: "Kiss me!"

He lies still, uncertain.

Motionless, she waits, staring at him with the whole weight of a life that has no future to it.

Unable to stand up to her gaze, he capitulates: he rises, approaches, sets his lips on hers.

She tastes his kiss, gauges the degree of his coldness, and says: "You're a bad man!"

Then she turns to her purse where it lies on the

night table. She pulls out a small ashtray and shows it to him. "Do you recognize this?"

He takes the ashtray and looks at it.

"Do you recognize it?" she repeats, harsh.

He does not know what to say.

"Look at the inscription!"

It is the name of a Prague bar. But that tells him nothing and he does not speak. She observes his discomfort with attentive, increasingly hostile mistrust.

He feels uneasy beneath her gaze, and just then, very briefly, there flickers the image of a window ledge with a bowl of flowers beside a lighted lamp. But the image vanishes, and again he sees the hostile eyes.

Now she understands everything: not only has he forgotten their meeting in the bar, but the truth is worse: he doesn't know who she is! he doesn't know her! in the airplane he did not know whom he was talking to. And suddenly she realizes: he has never addressed her by name!

"You don't know who I am!"

"What?" he says, sounding desperately awkward.

Like a prosecutor she says: "Then tell me my name!"

He is silent.

"What's my name? Tell me my name!"

"Names don't matter!"

"You've never called me by my name! You don't know me!"

"What?"

"Where did we meet? Who am I?"

He wants to calm her down, he takes her hand, she thrusts him away: "You don't know who I am! You picked up a strange woman! You made love with a stranger who offered herself to you! You took advantage of a misunderstanding! You used me like a whore! I was a whore to you, some unknown whore!"

She drops onto the bed and weeps.

He sees the three empty liquor vials scattered on the floor: "You've had too much to drink. It's stupid to drink so much!"

She isn't listening. Stretched flat on her belly, her body twitching spasmodically, all she can think of is the loneliness ahead.

Then, as if stricken with exhaustion, she stops crying and turns onto her back, unaware as her legs spread carelessly apart.

Josef is still standing at the foot of the bed; he

gazes at her crotch as if he were gazing into space, and suddenly he sees the brick house, with a fir tree. He looks at his watch. He can stay a half hour longer at the hotel. He has to get dressed and find a way to make her dress as well.

50

When he slid out of her body they were silent, and the only thing to be heard was the four pieces of music repeating endlessly. After a long while, in a distinct, almost solemn voice, as if she were reading out the clauses in a treaty, the mother said in her Czech-English: "We are strong, you and I. But we are good, too. We won't be harming anyone. Nobody will know a thing. You are free. You can whenever you want. But you're not obligated. With me you are free."

She said it this time without any hint of parody, in the most serious tone possible. And Gustaf, serious too, answers: "Yes, I understand."

"With me you are free," the words echo in him

for a long while. Freedom: he'd looked for that in her daughter but did not find it. Irena gave herself to him with all the weight of her life, whereas he wanted to live weightless. He was looking to her for an escape, and instead she loomed before him as a challenge; as a puzzle; as a feat to accomplish; as a judge to face.

He sees the body of his new mistress rise from the couch; she is standing, showing her body from the back, the powerful thighs padded with cellulite; that cellulite enchants him as if it expressed the vitality of an undulating, quivering, speaking, singing, jiggling, preening skin; when she bends to pick up her discarded robe from the floor, he cannot contain himself and, from where he lies naked on the couch, he strokes those magnificently rounded buttocks, he fingers that monumental, overabundant flesh whose generous prodigality comforts and calms him. A feeling of peace envelops him: for the first time in his life, sex is located away from all danger, away from conflict and drama, away from persecution, away from any accusation, away from worries; he has nothing to take care of, love is taking care of him, love as he's always wanted it and never had it:

love-repose; love-oblivion; love-desertion; love-carefreeness; love-meaninglessness.

The mother has gone into the bathroom, and he is alone: a few minutes ago he thought he had committed an enormous sin; but now he knows that his act of love had nothing to do with a vice, with a transgression or a perversion, that it was an utterly normal thing. It is with her, the mother, that he makes up a couple, a pleasantly ordinary, natural, suitable couple, a couple of serene old folks. From the bathroom comes the sound of water; he sits up on the couch and looks at his watch. In two hours he is expecting the son of his most recent mistress, a man, young, who admires him. Gustaf will introduce him this evening among his business friends. His whole life he's been surrounded by women! What a pleasure, finally, to have a son! He smiles and begins to look for his clothes where they're scattered on the floor.

He is already dressed when the mother returns from the bathroom, in a robe. The situation is very slightly solemn and thus embarrassing, as are all such situations when after the initial love-making, the lovers confront a future they are suddenly required to take on. The music is still

playing, and at this delicate moment, as if it hoped to rescue them, it shifts from rock to tango. They obey the invitation, they come together and give over to that indolent monotone flood of sounds; they do not think; they let themselves be carried along and carried away; they dance, slowly and at length, with absolutely no parody.

## 51

Her sobs went on for a long time, and then, as if by a miracle, they stopped, followed by heavy breathing: she fell asleep; this change was startling and sadly laughable; she slept, profoundly and irretrievably. She had not changed position, she was still on her back with her legs spread.

He was still looking at her crotch, that tiny little area that, with admirable economy of space, provides for four sovereign functions: arousal, copulation, procreation, urination. He gazed a long while at that sad place with its spell broken, and was gripped by an immense, immense sadness.

He knelt by the bed, leaning over her gently snoring head; he felt close to this woman; he could



imagine staying with her, being concerned with her; they had promised in the airplane not to inquire into each other's private life; he knew nothing about her, therefore, but one thing seemed clear: She was in love with him; prepared to go off with him, to give up everything, to begin everything over again. He knew she was calling on him for help. He had a chance, certainly his last, to be useful, to help someone, and among the multitude of strangers overpopulating the planet, to find a sister.

He began to dress, discreetly, silently, so as not to wake her.

## 52

As on every Sunday evening, she was alone in her modest impecunious-scientist studio apartment. She moved about the room and ate the same thing she had at noon: cheese, butter, bread, beer. A vegetarian, she is sentenced to such alimentary monotony. Since her stay at the mountain hospital, meat reminds her that her body could be cut

up and eaten as easily as the body of a calf. Of course, people don't eat human flesh, it would terrify them. But that terror only confirms that a man can be eaten, masticated, swallowed, transmuted into excrement. And Milada knows that the terror of being eaten is only the effect of another more general terror that lies at the foundation of all of life: the terror of being a body, of existing in body form.

She finished her dinner and went into the bathroom to wash her hands. Then she looked up and saw herself in the mirror above the sink. This gaze was entirely different from the earlier one, when she was observing her beauty in a shopwindow. This time the look was tense; slowly she lifted the hair that framed her cheeks. She looked at herself, as if spellbound, for a long, a very long time; then she let the hair fall back into place, arranged it around her face, and returned to the room.

At the university she used to be seduced by the dreams of voyages to distant stars. What pleasure to escape far away into the universe, someplace where life expresses itself differently from here and needs no bodies! But despite all his amazing rockets, man will never progress very far in the

universe. The brevity of his life makes the sky a dark lid against which he will forever crack his head, to fall back onto earth, where everything alive eats and can be eaten.

Misery and pride. "On horseback, death and a peacock." She was standing at the window, gazing at the sky. A starless sky, a dark lid.

## 53

He put all his belongings into the suitcase and glanced around the room so as not to leave anything behind. Then he sat down at the table, and on a hotel letterhead sheet he wrote:

"Sleep well. The room is yours till tomorrow at noon. . . ." He would have liked to say something very tender besides, but at the same time he was determined not to leave her a single false word. Finally, he added: ". . . my sister."

He laid the sheet on the rug beside the bed to make sure she would see it.

He picked up the DO NOT DISTURB card; as he left he turned to look again at her as she slept,

and, in the corridor, he closed the door silently and hung the card on the knob.

In the lobby from all around him he heard Czech being spoken and again now it was flat and unpleasantly blasé, an unknown language.

Settling his bill, he said: "There's a woman still in my room. She will leave later." And to ensure that no one would give her an unpleasant look, he laid a five-hundred-korun note on the counter before the receptionist.

He climbed into a taxi and left for the airport. It was evening already. The plane took off toward a dark sky, then burrowed into clouds. After a few minutes the sky opened out, peaceful and friendly, strewn with stars. Through the porthole he saw, far off in the sky, a low wooden fence and a brick house with a slender fir tree like a lifted arm before it.