

Iván Mándy

On the balcony

Selected short stories

Translated by Albert Tezla

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INTRODUCTION

Iván Mándy, now seventy, belongs to that generation of Hungarian authors who came into prominence in the years immediately following the Second World War. Like many writers of that time, he participated vigorously in the liberal literary atmosphere that prevailed from 1945 to 1949 only to be deprived of the opportunity to publish his works when the Rákosi government came to power and, despite the Thaw forced on the regime from 1953-1956 by an increasingly restless intelligentsia, was compelled, because of his rejection of official literary dicta, to wait until after the revolt of 1956 and the time of consolidation that ensued for the ban to be lifted. He first gained national recognition in 1948 when he received the Baumgarten Prize, the most distinguished literary award at the time. He did not receive his next award until twenty years later when he was presented with the prestigious Attila József Prize. This was followed by the Tibor Déry Award in 1986 and the Kossuth Prize in 1988, which is considered by many to be the highest honor the Hungarian nation bestows an author.

Throughout his long career Mándy has based his writings exclusively on his life in Budapest, his birthplace: “In fact, that in itself contains my biography. I got everything from this city. My own world as well as the way I perceive the world of others.” He depends on the physical objects of Budapest to convey his perception of the general condition of humankind. He writes about the suburbs, the hotels, the fleamarket that once existed on Teleki Square - where he lived until recently - the cafés, the soccer fields, and the world of radio and journalism to which his father, a journalist, introduced him, journalism being a profession which Mándy himself served as a sportswriter for a time in his early years. These places are peopled mainly by drifters, derelicts, and social castoffs struggling to survive in an underworld of established society and by failed, unfulfilled professionals and intellectuals doomed by the capriciousness of human relations and the vicissitudes of contemporary conditions to make their way through each day as best they can. His deep concern with such “insignificant human beings” led some of his critics in the 1950s to accuse him of being interested in trivial subjects, wastrels, and useless persons and of failing to promote in his works the “successes of socialism and the new opportunities for development that it proffers to humanity.” He has also evoked the fantasy world of the films and movie stars of the twenties and thirties in two books of fictionalized accounts of the old silents and the early talkies. Most recently, he has written about life in Hungary from 1949 through the Thaw, particularly the conditions that affected the creative life of writers, and about events occurring during the revolt of 1956, especially their impact on the private lives of common people. And lately, he has begun to write about himself as well, about his development as a writer and his views of life.

In presenting the world of Budapest that he knows so intimately, Mándy uses narrative techniques as distinctive in Hungarian literature as his “insignificant” characters are. Though a deeply involved observer of the life around him, he does not lapse into omniscience; instead, he projects details of sight and sound that depict objectively the inner life of his characters, always quite realistically but often suggestively. His techniques reveal, not only a departure from conventional formulations of plot and character long dominant in Hungarian fiction but also the influence of his life-long love affair with the cinema. Even the structure of most of his novels attests, not only to his commitment to the short story but also to his use of film techniques, in the sense that they are, in their effect, short stories strung together as “garlands” rather than knit together by “logically” developed plots. He is a painstaking craftsman who increasingly distills and compresses details into short, often fragmentary sentences, to express

with lyrical symbolism the psychological conflicts of his characters. And scenes roll by as if flashed on the silver screen, sometimes as glimpses to be instantly melded into the flow of images. Individual scenes often evolve as if they were being viewed through the lens of a moving camera, and the frequent use of the dream technique of surrealism, though in a realistic manner, clearly marks his break with conventional narration and probably best indicates the individuality of his style.

His stories contain no basic philosophic view; such speculation is, he claims, alien to his temperament. He sees his characters as struggling, suffering beings who, despite their unhappiness, preserve a measure of optimism, though not, he says, “the monotonous optimism of imbeciles.” Certainly, his works reflect some influence of existentialism, but he is probably correct when he states that his concept of reality is closer to Dostoevsky’s than Sartre’s or Camus’s. He emphasizes the need for individuals to discover their distinctive traits and then to live by them without extending themselves to the point of worsening their personal plight. His unrelenting, merciless observations of human beings have sometimes given rise to the criticism that he has little love for mankind. The contrary is the case. His compassion for the troubled, the trapped, the abandoned, the lonely, however ignoble they are - this compassion, often ironically and grotesquely expressed, is omnipresent in the tone of his stories to bind his lifework ultimately into a unified whole.

The selections included in this anthology supply only glimpses of Mándy’s world and art. Still, it is hoped, they will give the reader a sense of his imaginative power, his compassionate vision of humanity, and his stylistic characteristics. The opening story presents the effect of Second World War on two children playing house in a bombed-out ruin. The next story is an expressionistic portrayal of the social underworld that engaged his attention early in his career. “Rank-and-File Member” deals with the relations between a former member of the Arrow Cross Party, which was a fascist organization in Hungary during the war, and a lonely woman forced by circumstances to share the same flat, and “A Summer Holiday” with the generational gap between a mother and her son rooted in politically different times. “In the Spotlight” depicts a frequent character in his stories, the intellectual who is never quite able to hold on to anything firmly or nurture a fulfilling relationship with any human being. The next four pieces are representative of the important role old-time movies play in his work. The autobiographical “At the Movies with Father” is followed by an usherette’s night encounter with King Kong, a boy’s fanciful account of Greta Garbo and her relations with her leading men, and an old projectionist’s recounting of the relations between Zoro and Huru, the Hungarian names of the world-famous Danish comedians, whose popularity peaked in the 1920s and who were known as Fy and By in Denmark, Pat and Patachon in Italy and Germany, and Long and Short in the British Isles.

The remaining writings indicate Mándy’s increased involvement in the simple objects of his world, a turning to recent historical events, and a readiness to write directly about himself. The several short pieces from “Furniture” evoke the physical and social milieu he knows so well through bits and remnants of furniture. “Lecturer Goes Home,” “Lecturer on Castle Hill,” and “On the Balcony” reveal some of the uncreative ways in which many intellectuals and authors were forced, by political circumstances, to make a living during the Rákosi period. Next comes “Cemeteries,” a story about the effect of the 1956 uprising on the personal life of a married couple who are swept up by the events around them. The last four pieces, more autobiographical and essayistic in nature, touch upon literary topics and personal associations.

Albert Tezla

Albert Tezla (b. 1915) is Professor Emeritus of English at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. He edited and contributed translations to *Ocean at the Window: Hungarian Prose and Poetry Since 1945* (University of Minnesota, 1981). He is the author of *An Introductory Bibliography to the Study of Hungarian Literature* (Harvard University, 1964) and *Hungarian Authors: A Bibliographical Handbook* (Harvard University, 1970). He has contributed essays on Hungarian authors to several important reference works. His collection of documents concerned with the life of Hungarian immigrants in the United States, *Valahol túl Meseországban*, was published by Európa Kiadó, Budapest, in 1987. He translated a volume of Ferenc Sánta's short stories (*God in the Wagon*, Corvina, 1985) and his novel *The Fifth Seal* (Corvina, 1986). He is currently working on an anthology of recent Hungarian plays.

KITCHEN WALL

There in the wall was the faucet, undamaged. Just as if it were still surrounded by kitchen utensils and pitchers, just as if a hand were still reaching for it.

Around it was a yard with yellow-green grass and a lone bare wall. Next came another yard. One dead yard crossed over the debris of some stairs to another dead yard. Jagged bricks led upward only to end abruptly at the vacant opening of a door.

Two children ran into the yard, holding hands. Then they let go of each other as if they intended to encircle the faucet from two sides. The girl, in red rompers, disappeared into a pit only to pop up again an instant later. The boy, wearing a cap with flaps and a pair of baggy pants, stood in front of the faucet and stared into the blackened washbasin.

“Funny that this stayed here,” he said to her over his shoulder.

The girl pirouetted once in the middle of the yard and then danced over to him. “This is the kitchen.” She stretched her hand toward the faucet, with a familiar gesture, as if she always drew water from it. She even asked: “Shall I heat a pan of water for you?”

The boy laughed. “What do you mean, just one pan!”

She didn’t laugh. Soberly, with concern, she passed her hand over his face. “You must shave. After all, you can’t go calling looking like this.” She bent closer to him. “Just think what they would say.”

He flung his hands out and looked around the empty yard. “But who?... Who must I present myself to?”

She made a single swishing motion in the air.

“The tenants. You don’t think this is just an ordinary apartment house, do you?” She drew a line on the ground with her heel.

“The room, this room. Be sure to wipe your feet carefully when you come in. I’ll be very displeased if you get the floor dirty.”

She was drawing lines and circles. Out of these lines and circles, rooms developed. She pointed into the air, and suddenly the corridor railing was there. The first floor, the second, the third...

The boy shrugged his shoulders and passed his hand over his chin as if stroking his beard. He followed the girl, who was by now drawing different kinds of squares with a stone.

“The bedroom. Put the calendar in the dining room. Don’t look so stupid. You know I bought a 1945 calendar yesterday. Do you like the blue curtains?”

The boy nodded it was pretty, pretty. He went from the bedroom into the dining room and then into the kitchen again. Doors opened in a row in front of him.

“I think the water is warm already. I shall commence my shaving.” That was the way he expressed himself: I shall commence my shaving.

The girl spoke up from the bedroom. “Just don’t spill any water on the way to the bathroom.” She twirled from one room to another, sometimes straightening something on a table, sometimes a curtain. She shouted into the bathroom. “You know, I really don’t mind living on the ground floor. There’s always trouble with the elevator, and then there are your legs.

The boy, in the bathroom, didn’t really know what was wrong with his legs, but he didn’t say anything. After shaving, he went into the dining room. The girl passed her hand over his face again.

“There, that’s better. Now I can take you among humans.”

They went out the door.

“Lock it carefully,” she said. “Turn the key in the upper lock, too.” She heaved a sigh. “You are always so careless.”

They were standing in front of their flat. The boy spread his hands out. “If I just knew why we have to introduce ourselves to the other tenants. If you would just tell me why.”

She cast a withering look at him, a really withering look.

“Something can always go wrong. Stop and think. We aren’t young any longer, so who will go out and do the shopping, who will bring us things if we don’t know a soul?”

“Yes, that is so,” he hemmed and hawed.

The girl looked around the yard and pointed to a corner. “The Bakoses with five children. Just think, five children!”

He looked at the corner where the Bakoses with five children...

The girl thought they should visit there first. True, Mrs. Binder, you know, the councillor’s widow on the third floor, will be mortally offended, but she will eventually be mortally offended anyway.

“See her?” she whispered, pointing upward.

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Greet her,” she said. “She is standing at the railing. Up there at the railing. She spends the whole day standing there.”

He pulled his head into his shoulders slightly, as he nodded to Mrs. Binder.

“Good day.”

“We’ll be over soon,” the girl waved to her, “we are dropping in on the Bakoses first.”

On the third floor, Mrs. Binder didn’t even seem to notice them. Only her nose trembled with offense as she sniffed the air. “Go ahead, just go to the Bakoses.” That was about what her face expressed.

“An unpleasant female,” whispered the girl. “Maybe we can skip her,” whispered the boy.

She shook her head. “No, no... But let’s get started now. I have no desire to dawdle in the courtyard.”

The visiting began. The first visit was with the Bakoses.

The girl rang. Bakos answered the bell.

“You see,” the girl whispered, “he is wearing his railroad uniform.”

The boy nodded his head and was already greeting Bakos, who was dressed in his railroad uniform. In the first instant, Bakos seemed a bit surprised, but then he smiled as if asking their pardon.

“The new tenants. Of course. My wife said you would definitely look in on us. Do come in...” He pointed toward the room, and then again with that apologetic smile, he said: “We are a little crowded, but you know, with five children...”

And they were quite cramped for space. His damp-faced wife was patching a shirt. The smallest child was shrieking, a sharp-eyed girl was rocking her. Nándi, the oldest boy, was studying in a corner. “He’s going to be an engineer,” his mother said. “This is his last year.”

The girl thanked them for the chairs they offered. As she was sitting down, she glanced at Nándi. “An engineer... that is very nice. Our son wanted to be a doctor, but...” Her voice broke.

A pall descended upon the room. Mrs. Bakos immediately stood up and put her arm around the girl’s shoulders. And the boy said: “Come now, calm down...”

The girl looked up. “Excuse me for starting things this way... for spoiling everything immediately.”

“Just have a good cry, my dear,” Mrs. Bakos said. “A good cry always helps.”

Tea and pastry were brought in. The girl wondered if the neighborhood wasn’t too noisy. “We are really getting along in years.”

“The bus stops at the corner,” Bakos said, “but otherwise it is quiet.”

Bakos talked about how long he has been working for the railroad. The guests spoke about their retirement pension.

At the end the Bakoses saw them to the door. From there Mrs. Bakos said: “If you have a shirt or two to mend, I would be glad to do them. You know, with so many children...”

“Every penny counts,” the girl kept nodding her head. “I’ll think of you if there’s anything.”

“Goodbye.”

“Goodbye.”

“Nice people,” the boy observed when they were by themselves in the courtyard.

“She talks a little too much,” the girl said.

They didn’t dare look up. They knew Mrs. Binder was still standing at the railing.

“My dears, come up,” Mrs. Binder said. “Come right up.”

They started up the stairs, wheezing like elderly people because, after all, they were barely able to manage the steps.

Mrs. Binder didn’t show them into her flat. She stopped at the kitchen window and said:

“My roomer is in. He is cooking, he burns the gas all day. At night he doesn’t shut the faucet off, he leaves the water running. Oh, I put down everything, but even then...” She resumed after a short pause. “I won’t invite you in, my dears, because I don’t feel safe whenever he’s around.”

“How terrible!” said the girl.

“Who is he?” the boy asked.

“An insurance agent,” Mrs. Binder replied, nodding. “Once in a while he gathers his friends together and they carouse. I have already given him his notice, but he won’t leave. In fact, he threatened to throw me out! Understand? Me, out of my own flat!”

Her voice failed, her chin trembled. Then she said: “Let’s stick together, we are from a higher class. “ She looked down into the courtyard with deep scorn. “The rest of them in this building... it’s not even worth mentioning them! What can I expect of them?” Mrs. Binder wailed. “What can a poor widow expect? I asked this murderer,” she poked her finger at the kitchen window, “to wash my back. What do you think his answer was?”

She looked at the girl, at the boy. They didn’t say anything. They stood at the railing without saying a thing.

“He laughed in my face!” Mrs. Binder waved her hand. “A journalist lives here in Number 4, they say he’s a cultured man. I rang his bell. Please wash my back. He looks at me and shuts the door. The cultured man!” Again a waving of the hands in the air. A pause. “I go up to the fourth, to Iván Kellér. Please... Oh, but why should I go on...”

Mrs. Binder stared down into the courtyard. Then unexpectedly:

“But if I were to ask you two...”

“Certainly!” groaned the boy.

“Very gladly,” whispered the girl.

They said goodbye. As they were descending the stairs, the boy asked: “Do you think she’ll come and ask us to...?”

The girl didn’t reply.

A back was following them, a back was walking the length of the building. Maybe it is already down in their flat, sitting in the tub waiting for...

Doors and windows accompanied them along the length of the floors. At some places they didn’t even have to ring the bell. Rózsika, the postwoman, seemed to have been waiting for them behind the door. No sooner had she begun to speak when the conversation turned to Mrs. Binder.

“I gave her two baths,” Rózsika said. “Then she spread the word that I wanted to kill her. I wanted to drown her in the tub so I could lay my hands on her money.”

“How awful!” the girl said, horrified.

They learned that Mrs. Binder had hounded her roomer’s bride out of the flat. They learned that Mrs. Binder wanted the roomer to marry her. They learned that...

“We won’t let Mrs. Binder in,” the boy said after they left Rózsika.

They visited a bachelor, who played the piano for them. They visited the journalist, who showed them all kinds of books.

At some places nobody opened the door when they rang.

“No problem,” the girl said, “we don’t have to know everybody.” When they reached the courtyard, she grabbed the boy’s arm. “Look, some musicians are coming!”

“I see them,” the boy nodded.

They were some sort of tramps. They go from one courtyard to the next and play the very same song everywhere. It seemed as if the courtyards themselves passed the song on from one to the next.

“There are two of them,” the girl said, “but only one plays. What a hawk-face he has!”

“He plays the violin nicely,” nodded the boy.

“I can imagine something better,” she said.

The other musician was no more than a hat turned upside down as he walked around the courtyard.

“I can imagine something better,” she repeated. “Still, everybody has come outside.”

The boy looked up.

Indeed, everybody was out in the corridors. Leaning forward, Rózsika was listening to the music. Mrs. Binder was a single offended wrinkle. “I have to listen to this... this scraping.” But she didn’t move from her place.

Money kept plopping into the hat.

The girl touched the boy’s arm. “What shall we give them? We didn’t bring any money with us. And they are now coming toward us.”

The hat was approaching them slowly. Suddenly the girl beamed.

“A good glass of cold water! I think that would please them greatly in this warm weather.”

The boy agreed it was a good idea. Then they would have them sit down in the kitchen and they would have a chat.

The girl went to the hat. “Please come into our place.” She went ahead to open the door.

She was in the kitchen in front of the faucet. “Fresh water... there’s nothing better than that.”

She moved as if she wanted to turn the faucet on. But as she looked at the old, rusted faucet, her arm suddenly drooped.

“Fresh water,” she mumbled.

She kept looking at the faucet, but already there was nothing in back of her. The musicians had vanished, the kitchen, the flat had vanished.

“Come on, let’s go!” the boy said behind her.

She leaned over the blackened washbasin under the faucet and stared into it as if searching for the tenants who had vanished down the drain.

“Come on!”

She still leaned over the washbasin. Then she raised up. Her face was sharp and vicious as she laughed at the boy.

“Come on!”

She kicked the kitchen apart, then the whole flat. She leaped over to the neighbors and kicked the Bakoses’ flat apart. She dashed up the bricks and yelled into the empty door.

“Nobody! There is nobody here!”

For an instant she stood there high, then flung herself down. She whirled and flitted around in the dust.

“Nobody! Nobody!”

She stood in front of the faucet again. She looked at it with narrowed eyes.

“Why did you stay here? Tell me why!”

She picked up a stone and hurled it at the faucet. Then she snatched the boy’s hand, and they ran out of the yard.

THE WATERMELON EATERS

A face was ascending the stairs, a face so long and stony it seemed to be borne on a platter. Its eyes closed, its mouth a straight, hard line. On this blinded face was visible the restaurant with its cold mirrors, tiny tables, and guests who failed to notice the face. The outstretched, dead hand then rose into view, trailing an invisible veil. A blue-gray greatcoat, closed at the neck, held the entire man together like a sack. He passed by the boxes and stopped in the middle under a chandelier. He raised his head in the glittering light; his face and hands glistened, but his tunic remained dark. He stood there wordless, motionless, his face flung open to the light, his hands thrust out. Slowly, slowly, as if searching for someone, he turned to one of the boxes.

Three persons were sitting in the box: two women with a pimply-faced youth. The woman with gray hair lifted her fork, then put it down, and said: "Poor thing." The girl ate and didn't look up from her plate. She had thick blonde hair, her arms were firm and darkly tanned as if she were sitting on the edge of a swimming pool.

The boy groped in his pocket.

The girl looked up.

"I will!"

The blind man caught the coin with a sweep of one hand, but by then he was being held by the arms. A waiter with a trimmed mustache was standing behind him; he pushed him forward slowly. The blind man opened his mouth wide, he became an astonished black hole.

"You know that's not permitted," and the waiter shoved him down the stairs. The beggar tripped and his hand banged against the banister. He remained there hanging on to it, his head slumped forward lifelessly. The waiter grabbed his shoulders and stood him up on his feet like a rag doll. "Don't be such an ass!"

Half risen, Károly, the pimply-faced boy, was observing him. His head slumped forward again, and meantime his dark, gaping mouth seemed to sneer. His sister touched his hand.

"Why are you staring?"

Ágnes's taut, impassive face, with two blue earrings, shut out everything in front of her. She lit a cigarette with lazy, prolonged movements. Singing sounded from below. The blind man was already halfway out on the street; he was singing, meanwhile turning around.

He was now surrounded by several persons acting as if they were snatching newspapers from under his arms. For an instant, his face rose above the crowd. "Let me go!" Then he disappeared from the door.

A woman with a bent back and wrapped in a shawl entered from the street.

"Why did you have to hit a blind man?"

"Beat it, old lady, beat it!"

She tottered at the door for an instant and then went out.

"Don't even mention Rudy Etlinger! That fortune hunter, that vulgar fortune hunter!" Ágnes's round, haughty shoulders jerked. "Shall I marry someone who is interested only in my money? But of course, that makes no difference to you."

Her mother raised her sharp-featured face, seeming to look at the girl from an old picture frame.

“There are times when I simply don’t understand you, Ágnes. You can say such terrible things. Etlinger is a distinguished lawyer, his name is on everybody’s lips.”

“Drop the subject!” Ágnes opened her mouth slightly and waved her hand. “Just to get married like you isn’t really worth it.”

“What do you mean ‘like me’? Everybody knows your late lamented father courted me for years, and not for my money, absolutely not!”

They both were so remote from Károly that he didn’t receive as much as a word or glance from them. So this was his sister, this sparkling, blonde, deeply suntanned girl. “A cute gal,” a classmate had said. One can feel the beach under her as she lolls about on the sand in the torrential sunlight, then gets up, and enters the water with slothful, slack strides. Their mother is watching her from a bench in the shade; she doesn’t go into the water with her skinny, dry body. Now, what’s all this about Etlinger, this whole conversation?

Downstairs shadows seemed to float past the door. A bearded fluff of hair stuck his shapeless, tuberous head inside just like a package.

“Of course, there’s never a policeman around at a time like this,” someone said.

“It is really easy to understand why nobody wants to take a beggar for a wife. After all, the man is making a start in life. When he sets out, the foundation is very important. The financial foundation!” She sounded triumphant. “I can understand that very well!”

“Just relax, Mother!”

A spoon tapped the dish, then silence. Her mother grew silent, Ágnes toyed with the salt shaker, smiling.

A waiter stood at the door, directing an explanation toward the street.

“Nobody wanted to hit him, he’s the one who caused the rumpus. Listen, Mackó, don’t make a hullabaloo, don’t make a row!”

Ágnes leaned her head back. She waited. Anticipation spread over her hair, face, arms; her cheeks glowed, her shoulders trembled as if a finger had touched it, her lips gaped strangely, dreamily, and her fan-like rows of teeth flashed. She looked at her mother without seeing her. Expiring, crumbling, she sat like a martyr waiting to be captured and carried off, to be set on her feet and led away.

“...and if you want to say your father married me for my money, then you must realize you are wrong, I say wrong!” Her mother’s voice faltered; suddenly she jerked her head up. “What in the world is that sound?” She looked at Károly, but he disregarded her.

“We must phone the police.” Downstairs a gray-haired man was drumming on the counter with two fingers; he blinked toward the street and then at a scrawny woman attired in yellow.

Károly pushed his chair aside and went down the stairs. A waiter galloped past him, and he heard the lisping voice of the woman attired in yellow.

“They should all be rounded up! All of them!”

Next he was standing out on the street in front of the restaurant in the cool evening breeze. He saw the row of watermelon eaters: the long line, the interwoven hands and faces, the outstretched blackened feet. Prickly mugs plunged into the plump watermelon, gobbled it, bit into

it, and, already steeped in slush, stuck to, fused with the watermelon. Half the sidewalk was filled with filthy, trampled rinds. A face parted from the row, a hand dropped from the wall. A little girl, with wrinkled face and clad in rags, ran forward brandishing a melon rind, behind her two howling children. And just like in a sharply cut line moving quickly above them came carts, hand-carts, enormous plump-bellied carts rumbling furiously. Next to a poster kiosk the blind youth in the tunic shouted: "They kicked me!"

The row was moving as if the wall were going to collapse, the street to split open. A beggar rose up out of his beard and seized the blind youth's hand.

"Well then, let's get going!"

Behind Károly the restaurant vanished together with his mother and sister. He was standing all alone in front of the watermelon eaters now heading toward him. There's nothing else, only the living, moving wall with faces, and beards... they are coming, he thought, to call him to account for something.

He was yanked inside from behind, and a melon rind immediately whacked the restaurant floor.

"Police, police!"

"Oh, that'll take some time."

A broad-shouldered, grinning character in the doorway, some kind of blanket around his shoulders as if he were walking about in his bed, his shapeless, worn-out coverall a nightgown. The blind youth appeared behind him; his two rigid arms came forward, leaving his face behind.

"They kicked me in the kidneys!"

"It's rotten to hurt a blind man."

Károly retreated to the counter. He heard a sickly, shivering voice. "I have already phoned but who knows when they will arrive... this damned place, damned place. Lord, just this once..." The woman dressed in yellow was praying behind him at the till. Above, however, as if a row of plates were sweeping forward, a small bundle of rag slid down the banister - into the arms of the waiter.

"You guttersnipe!"

"What do you want with my brother?"

The guy in the blanket leaped at the waiter and grabbed his arm. A slap in the face, someone shrieked sharply.

Károly leaped behind the counter, the woman dressed in yellow seemed to fly over his head.

The blind youth still stood alone, entirely by himself, two hands stretched out before him. All of a sudden, he reached into his pocket and lit a cigarette.

"It was your idea to come here!"

This was his mother - it struck him strange that he actually has a mother and a sister.

"Just lie still, my child," said the woman in yellow. "The police are bound to come. Oh, the cost! the cost!" She began weeping.

Károly looked up. A prophet emerged from the side door: wavy gray hair, emaciated red face. Meekly, piously, he carried a meat platter - he stuck it under his coat. A spoon fell out of his pocket.

“Pardon me,” he said and reached for it.

The stone tiles of the restaurant swam in sticky watermelon juice, the scattered rinds like scalps.

“What do you want?”

His mother again. The boy sprang from behind the counter, ran up the stairs. A woman wearing a shawl, smoking a pipe, long gray bristles hanging from her wrinkled face, appeared before him. She stood stooped over but still looked very tall and immovable, like the arch of a gate. She began speaking from somewhere amid the dense wrinkles.

“What about the watch, you nice boy?”

“What watch?”

“The one you bought from me on Klauzál Square in the doorway. You know very well which one, and you forgot to pay me for it.”

He looked and looked at her, and almost seemed to remember the watch, the doorway on Klauzál Square, the horribly bristly, familiar face he had cheated.

A man wearing pince-nez dashed past them in a torn vest, holding a crushed derby in his hand.

“Damn it! Damn it!”

Above, up high he spotted his mother, Ágnes, between them the stocky fellow with the blanket around his shoulders. The three were standing there. The boy was seeing them as in a mirror between opening doors, the mirror of a distant chamber and the depths of a dream. Every feature of his mother’s face was leaping about separately. She was bending toward the man as if wanting to pluck him up.

“What do you want from me?”

He didn’t want anything from her. He was looking at Ágnes, her jutting breasts, her muscular arms, her half closed eyelashes, her wavy hairdo - and he already possessed them all. With a single movement he lifted up her breast. Ágnes’s face was fixed as if she were rising above the waves.

His mother hiccupped once.

“A bust! The cops! Let’s get the hell out of here!”

The guy in the blanket tore down the stairs, whirling the woman with the pipe along with him. A fat man climbed out from, behind an overturned table and dusted his trousers off.

“Barbarians, lousy barbarians!”

Ágnes still stood as if the man were beside her - stood and waited. Her mother clutched her arm and shouted to Károly.

“Come, for God’s sake!”

She practically flew with Ágnes. She almost slipped on a rind and hung on to her even harder. Behind them, always behind them, Károly deserted them like someone suddenly cutting into a sidestreet. He watched his mother, and he almost broke into a roar of laughter at the panic-stricken way she was waddling... afraid, she is still afraid! Police were standing at the squad car, the blind youth between them.

“They beat me up,” he said very clearly.

Then the whole affair was over. Just a dark street with a galloping mother, who suddenly stopped at a corner, raised her frightened little hand, and struck Ágnes in the face twice.

“Whore!”

RANK-AND-FILE MEMBER

No matter how you look at it, she is here in the flat. I hear her rattling around in her room like a bug in a box, because I have to. She crawls, stops, and starts again. She clatters as if she were throwing buttons on top of each other. Is this how she entertains herself? Playing with buttons? They left her here, and now she plays with buttons.

The former owner of the flat went to the West after the war. As his lawyer, I looked after his affairs. The task wasn't easy, but eventually it was crowned with success. An engineer with three children tried to get hold of the flat, a husky, dark-complexioned man who came from Rumania, I think. When we met once he said: "I'm fighting for my family like a patriot. Do consider that you are all by yourself." I shrugged my shoulders: why should I consider anything? I said something like I am getting married soon. I could tell he didn't really believe me. So what? He is fighting for his family like a patriot, and I have my own ways too. When I got the flat, he filed an appeal. "It is only the injustice that bothers me," and he brought up his family again. Very probably, he has been filing complaints ever since. I had heard from the start about an old female member of the family, a distant relative they had taken in, who didn't go to the West. They didn't take her with them there. The first time I saw her I tried to make her understand it would be better for her if she moved. She sat in the corner of the sofa with her hands in her lap. She smiled as if she were deaf. I listed my reasons: "I am getting married soon and then you know..." She stood up and said: "We will visit a lot." I got my hat and left.

How should I know what she is like?

She is like all old women. Wrinkled and deaf, and everything on her sags and hangs. And she's there... there... I can't get rid of her.

At first she actually did visit me. I had someone in, and she knocked on the door. She stuck her head in like some cactus. "Oh, your fiancée! I'm really very glad to..." I could barely hustle her out.

Once I tried to make her useful. "I'm having some friends in " I said, "bring some snacks and a bottle of beer." When she showed up, I almost fainted: "Momma! You brought ham? Have you lost your mind? Do you think I'm giving a fancy feast to two women I've picked up on the street? You should have brought bologna or liver sausage, not a fine ham!" She gasped: what kind of women? what will my fiancée say? "That's none of your business! Go back to your room!" She stood, overcome by giddiness. I had to throw her out. Besides, the doorbell was ringing, the two women had arrived. While they were with me, I heard a scraping on the wall, and once the floor in the vestibule creaked so loud I thought she was standing in front of the door. If she comes in, if she just dares to...!

But she didn't. And from that time on I hardly ever saw her. I could always hear her, though. Hear her light coughing, her steps as she kept tossing buttons from one box to the other. How long must I listen to this clattering?

I thought, it just won't last forever. She can't work any more, and she doesn't have a pension. Then I found out she's getting things from abroad and selling them one by one.

She can't be evicted. She was in the flat first. They forgot this bug on the floor, this...

No, things just can't go on like this. I must find some way to smoke her out of here.

One day I collared her in the vestibule. I shouted at her: "Come here!" She continued toward her room. "Please come here!" She stopped. For a time she stood with her back to me, then turned slowly. She eyed me cunningly, and as she started toward me, her wrinkles sagged.

We stood at the door. I pointed to it, directly under the latch. I pushed her nose there - she cocked her eyes upward.

"Scratches," I said. "Fresh scratches."

She leaned slightly sideways and took quick breaths. She rubbed the door with her elbow, then asked unexpectedly:

"Would you like some tea?"

"Don't be silly, I don't have the time." I bent over her. "What do you have to say about these new scratches?"

She began to cackle like a hen.

"Children... children..." This was all I could make out.

I was still bent over her. "Come now! you know there aren't any children around here." I paused for a moment. "Well, who did it then?" I pointed to the door again.

By now she'd stopped cackling. She clung to the door, meanwhile seeming to want to slip out under my arm.

"Don't you want to tell me? I ask you one more time..."

When the bell rang for the garbage, I was alone in the vestibule.

"Good day, sir," Katica said. "Is it you who is handling the garbage?"

I stood in the door, smiling.

"The dame's quite old."

Katica skated away with the garbage pail and then was at the door again.

"Here you are, sir."

"Thank you, Katica."

I took the pail. I stood in the vestibule for a time in front of the old woman's door. No sounds came from her room.

This was the first slap.

I slapped her face every day. Sometimes I cornered her in the vestibule, or in her room if she couldn't slip in quickly enough. She slid along the wall like a frightened bug. I didn't hit her very hard, just enough so she would feel it. And not always the same way. Sometimes I just barely touched her face, which she could've taken merely as a friendly provocation. At other times, I hit her a little harder. One thing was important - that she get what's coming to her every day.

"You are the enemy within doors! Look what you did to the vestibule carpet."

"Why do you crawl around in the kitchen during the night?"

"Why do you keep rattling your buttons like a collection bag in church?"

She mumbled something, but I didn't bother to make it out. As I laid one on her, she would draw her head back and whimper. Or she would stand in one place and hang her arms down. She could have screamed. Nobody would have come in. We were left to ourselves.

In the beginning I would give her a good dressing-down. Later this stopped. Just slaps in the face.

Of course, I expected her to complain to the tenants eventually. Maybe she would even report me. I took precautions.

First of all, the slaps must not leave marks. So I always wore gloves. Second, the tenants of the apartment house...

Mrs. Kiss, from the third floor, who stuck her nose into everything, caught me in the staircase.

"Oh, what lovely flowers! Must be for your fiancée... of course, of course..." She blinked her eyes like someone not quite sure about that fiancée, for by then there was talk in the apartment house about all the women I was taking up and how, if maybe I did have a fiancée, I had sent her packing a long time ago.

"No," I said, "they're not for her." I held the bouquet down a little as if shaking water off it. "They're for Auntie Kovács's name day." I turned the flowers up. "It's Margit Day."

"Ooh!" Mrs. Kiss pursed her lips, completely. Her face shut like a gate.

I went on with my flowers to present them to the old woman. Later, I also favored her with gifts. Chocolate bonbons, fancy chocolates, fruit candy slices.

"At her age you find very little pleasure in life," I said to Gyárfás, the professor. "She is so happy when she gets a few sweets."

"Second childhood," nodded Gyárfás. He furrowed his brows and leaned toward me. "You know, I didn't believe that nonsense for a moment." He looked at me as if waiting for a reply.

I just stood there with the fine chocolates.

Then he whispered into my ear what I had been preparing for a long time. I threw my head back and laughed.

"That I... the old woman!... No, professor, you must be joking."

"That's what they are saying."

"That I slap her!"

"I said myself, that's impossible." He flung his arms out. "She is spreading it, Mrs. Kovács is. Yesterday she visited Rózsika, who shares my flat, and they talked about it. I don't care for eavesdropping, but they talked very loud."

The smile vanished from my face, I bowed my head.

"Poor thing, she makes up all kinds of things. We must understand her. On the one hand, at this age... and she is always alone." I was silent for a while, then very softly I said: "Is this what becomes of us? She must have gone to social gatherings, she must have had suitors, and yet, in the end, this is all that is left of everything. Ah!..." I waved my hand and started away.

I could still hear Gyárfás say: "You are really very understanding."

Galvác intercepted me before the landing to the third floor.

“You are even taking some pastry to her! To that senile old hag! Do you know what is being said about you?”

I stopped him with a wave.

“Enough, please! Let’s respect the trials of old age!”

Galvács stuck to the wall and stammered.

I also happened to bump into Mrs. Kovács herself in the courtyard or staircase. She wanted to slip by me, but I stopped her.

“My, my, we didn’t get out in the air today! It’s not good to sit in the room all the time.”

She mumbled something like she is quite tired and finds it hard to walk. Meantime, she looked at me as if expecting something. Her eyes grew alarmingly large.

“We can help with this if momma is tired.” I took a chair down to the courtyard. “Look how nicely the sun is shining here.” I took her by the shoulder and sat her down.

Later, when I went down for something, she was still there. The sun had spent itself beside her, but she still sat with shoulders dropping and arms hanging down limply. In the end, I had to take her upstairs. I held her arm with one hand and dangled the chair with the other.

I once offered her some fish. I was expecting an engineer’s wife for dinner, but she wasn’t able to come. She phoned she would come the next day, but I waited for her in vain again. The fish lay under the faucet. I would have gladly thrown it against the wall. I gave it to her instead. It still had only a slight odor. “Here, momma, it’ll make a good supper for you.”

“I beg your pardon.” She picked up the fish.

“It died.” I shrugged my shoulders.

She disappeared, pressing the fish against her body with both hands and staring at me in the meanwhile.

“She likes fish,” I said next day to Galvács at the gate. “So why not?... I can have supper in a restaurant. I even gave her a little wine. She won’t turn down anything like that, you know.”

“You mean she tipples?” Galvács asked.

“Well, you can’t really put it that way.”

When I reached the flat, I went in to her. She wasn’t expecting me. She was sitting on the sofa rattling her buttons.

“Put them away,” I said on my way out. “Put those buttons away.”

She got what was coming to her every day. How long will she be able to take it? When will she finally leave?

One time I got home later than usual. I’d had a rotten day, an inheritance case. It was not really certain my client would get his share. So many relatives come out of the wall at a time like this! There was one who came from abroad, and he didn’t even remember the deceased’s name correctly. And then they also threw in my face that I was in the Arrow Cross. But did I ever harm anybody? A rank-and-file member... I arrived home like a wrung-out rag. On the way I had gulped down something in a snack bar. So, quickly into bed. I was just about to undress when I heard somebody knock.

It was her, the old woman. I stood in front of her with my necktie in my hand.

“Yes?”

I didn't say anything. She slipped by the door sideways. As if wanting to slide farther along the wall. But she just stood there in front of me, in a narrow-necked, faded dress, her head bowed. I had the strange and uncomfortable feeling that a cross from a grave in a cemetery was standing before me.

“Well?”

She came a little closer. She took a couple of steps, but they seemed to cause her pain. Then she raised her head slightly and turned her face toward me. She stood like that in the lamplight falling on her. I caught my breath. She... she... she certainly did not come for...?

She was there in front of me. She turned her face toward me. One of her eyes slipped up into her forehead. Half her face was swollen as if she'd been caught in a draft. For an instant she seemed to stand on tiptoes, then as if suspended from above like a puppet.

I don't know how long I looked at her. I grabbed her by the shoulders and actually flung her out.

“Beat it!”

When in bed, I kept listening to the floor creaking outside. Why doesn't she go away? And why didn't I finally lay one on her?

The next day she was standing in the vestibule, stuck to the wall as if she had been waiting for me a long time. She was adjusting the carpet with her foot, straightening the fringes.

She didn't look up. She just kept tugging at the fringes so attentively she seemed to be speaking to them about something.

In an instant I was in my room. I locked the door.

I had a few people in. Several women and a friend or two. I invited them over after supper for some pastry and coffee. My friends brought the liquor. One of the women, the wife of a country lawyer, brought some kind of crispy cake.

While I was brewing coffee in the kitchen, I felt her standing behind me. Yes, she was standing there - behind me - the old woman, watching my every movement.

I crouched down to the boiling flask. (I really should have a regular espresso maker by now.)

“You are very mistaken if you think I am going to invite you in.”

The kitchen stool creaked as she sat down.

“Are you waiting for me to ask you to join my guests?” She didn't say anything. She opened the door as I carried the coffee in. She fluttered about in front of me and then she disappeared.

“Careful, you will drop the tray,” said one of my friends.

“Really, how awkwardly he holds it,” laughed a plumpish, blonde woman. She had on all kinds of scarves, as if she had hung a tablecloth on herself.

“I know somebody,” I said later, “ who has inherited an old woman with his flat.”

By that time we had drunk quite a lot. The lawyer's wife was twisting the radio dial, and a couple was dancing in the smoke. In short, nobody was paying much attention, and I really don't know why I told them the story. There was silence when I ended. Apparently they had turned down the radio. The two dancers hanging on to each other stared at me. The tableclothed woman fell on to a chair behind the radio!

“You have good records too, I tell you!”

“That man,” said someone in the corner, “he should be strung up. For being able to bash someone in the face every day! So methodically!”

“Worse than a murderer.”

“But the old woman...” I bent into the smoke. “What do you say to that?”

“Shame on you!” The attorney’s wife staggered across the room and poured wine into the glasses. “Please don’t amuse us with such stories.”

“Still, this is important to her.” A bald man was leaning against the window sill. His head was hanging down quite low.

“Getting slapped?” I asked him. “Getting slapped every day?”

“Yes, even that.” He lowered his head even farther. “If there is nothing else, nothing else left in the world.”

“Stop or I will leave,” the lawyer’s wife said.

Someone touched my shoulder. “Hey, where did you read this rot?”

I was solely interested in the man at the window. “But tell me, how can this be possible?”

Someone turned up the volume on the radio.

The next day the old woman was hanging around the railing of the outside corridor. I turned back from the courtyard. I went to a friend. Then I sat in a café. I finally had to go home.

And now this is the way we are. I hear her coming and going in the other room, then she rattles her buttons. She keeps tossing the buttons from one box to the other. In the meantime, she sits on the corner of the sofa - waiting.

A SUMMER HOLIDAY

The mother leaned with her bony, sharp-featured face into the lamp. She was mending a shirt collar with short, nervous movements. Next to her on the sofa were some shirts folded very properly. Beside them, some shorts and handkerchiefs.

Blinking her eyes, she looked up as if searching for something beyond the reach of the lamplight.

“Bandi,” she said. A chair creaked in the corner. “I think this shirt is in good shape too.”

More creaking came from the darkness.

“Thank you, Mother.”

Still staring straight ahead, she spoke into the darkness.

“My son, I think we should still get a couple of things... a shirt and, you know, things like that.” After a slight pause: “At least a couple of things.”

“At least a couple of things,” echoed the corner. Then a knee rose from the dimness, and a thin, swarthy face also leaned forward. “What else do you think we should buy?”

There wasn’t the slightest hint of irony in the voice. Rather an expectation of: fine, Mother, please draw up a list, everything needed.

She lowered her head.

“I know you have lots of expenses. After all, you are helping Éva too...”

“Let’s drop that!” A creaking again. Then almost like a thick, dark cloud of smoke rolling in, the young man was standing in front of her.

“I honestly don’t understand why you insist on talking about it, Mother. Believe me, it is completely unnecessary.”

She looked up. Her hand started searching for his. “Don’t get angry.”

“That’s not the point.”

Her hand touched his for an instant, then it fell back into her lap.

She fumbled about among the shirts, shorts, and handkerchiefs, and by the time she looked up at her son again, a smile was on her face.

“You won’t need a thing at Füred.” Her eyes sparkled. “And, you know, I won’t either... I’ve put my gray dress into excellent condition, and yesterday... yes, it was yesterday... Giza lent me her sunglasses.”

“I’m really delighted.”

He fished out a paper from somewhere in the corner. Still standing, he began reading it.

His mother kept on talking.

“Of course, she didn’t want to give them to me at first, and I really had to promise to take care of them. But you know I take good care of everything, and it will be good, after all, for me to sun myself a bit.”

The newspaper crackled, then landed on the sofa. He took hold of his mother’s shoulders.

“You can go swimming too.”

“Oh no... no! But I can watch you swimming from the shore.” She heaved a happy sigh. “It’s nice we can vacation together... that they arranged accommodation for me, too, at the resort.” She looked up at her son. “It is so very nice of them, after all.”

He bent down for the paper but didn’t start reading it again. He walked about the room holding it in his hand. Occasionally he moved far into the darkness, then once again was beside the lamp. He stopped short.

“Mother...”

Her shoulder flinched. “If you think I’ll be in your way, I honestly...”

“That’s not it you’re no bother, why would you be?” He paused. “But I would like to ask a favor of you.”

She looked up at him. Her thin, parchment-colored skin tightened on her face. Something could be expected to burst inside her in the next instant.

He touched her shoulder. “Now... now...” He also smiled at her.

Her face obediently adopted the smile, but the smile faded immediately, congealing in the wrinkles.

“I would like to ask you a favor,” he repeated. He sat down next to her. He didn’t look at her as he began. “You well know that this is a resort... there are all sorts of people, from factories and everywhere. So, don’t announce as soon as we arrive that your husband was a Magistrate of the Judicature.”

“But Bandi...”

“Will you please hear me out!” He looked at his mother sideways. “Forget about father!” His hands swept the air. “Let’s drop it! Drop it! And I’d be pleased if you would not mention that the two of you used to vacation in Fiume, and at times made trips down there just for the weekend.”

“Sonny,” she bent forward, “you know your father had a railroad pass, and besides the whole thing didn’t cost very much.”

He didn’t relent.

“Not a single word about Fiume. Or, I beg you, about how different things were there. The meals, the service... and above all...,” his voice seemed to take on an imploring tone, “the people! Yes, the people you vacationed with.”

His mother smiled at the lamp.

“Now, who was it that invited us to go sailing? Some Austrian count... You know he was acquainted with your father. His books... yes... and he was the one who came over to our table...”

The young man’s feathery hair began to tremble. His voice also trembled as he addressed his mother again:

“Nothing about Austrian counts! or sailing! or invitations! Please, please.” He took hold of her hand.

“Why, that never even entered my mind!”

“I know,” he retorted, “like the other day on the bus.”

His mother shook her head.

“All I said was how rude people are these days...” She glanced shyly at him. She stopped and then went on a little more boldly. “And it’s true! They don’t give you a seat, they elbow you, the ticket collector tells me to move forward, then asks what I am doing standing in the door if I’m not getting off.”

“And then you immediately started in. That you have known people other than ticket collectors...”

“But believe me, only so he won’t insult me!”

“In the end we had to get off the bus,” he said. “And the same thing happened again on the streetcar.”

“What happened on the streetcar?”

“Forget it, Mother!” The young man sighed. “And it’s not necessary to mention we used to have lots of servants.”

“But they really seemed like members of our family. Only their smell... You know, Bandi, I never said anything to them, but I think every one of them has some kind of smell.”

“I don’t know about that, Mother. But forget the servants even if they were like members of our family. And don’t call the women working there “my dear woman.””

“What should I say instead?”

“Well... well... ‘comrade’. Please say comrade.”

“Comrade,” his mother repeated.

“Not like that!” He made an impatient motion. “Not in that kind of tone!”

“Well, what kind then?”

He waved his arm and went on.

“And in the dining room, don’t pick up the spoon and inspect it as if it had been used by some sick person.”

“Oh no, no, Bandi!”

“And when you make friends with someone...”

“I won’t make friends with anybody.”

“That’s because you have such grand airs!”

“But son...”

“You must see that if you don’t converse with anyone, they will say...” He jumped up and started walking around and around the room again.

His mother, resting her hands in her lap, stared straight ahead. Suddenly she felt the sofa groan next to her. She heard the voice again.

“Please... Mother...”

An enormous park with trees and shrubs. Red benches on the promenades. The brown building of the resort behind the trees. The mother was looking at it. She had just got up from a bench to speak to someone. That chubby-faced man who sat beside her in the little dining room. But for some reason she didn't know what to say. And so she simply smiled and let him leave with the woman dressed in blue. She should have greeted her too. But how?... Once a woman snapped at her privately: "Don't call me 'comrade'!" Then what is left to say? How should she address the girl who does the cleaning? The woman with the black hair in the library? The one approaching her now?... If she stops and starts a conversation...

She took a couple of steps. Then she sank back on the bench and stared at the gravel. She remained that way until the steps receded. Then she stood up, and tottering uncertainly, she started out for the resort.

Like someone who has just remembered something, she sank back on the bench again. She just sat there, lost in the park, like an old umbrella left behind.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT

He stopped in the doorway. Hat and coat on, he looked back at his flat before leaving. At the two rooms opening on each other.

He went over to a chair and took hold of its back. He lowered the shutters a little and adjusted a tablecloth. He looked out on the snow-covered square. He passed by the sofa. He paused for a moment. The unstimulating silence of the rooms. It enveloped him. He liked this silence. He really enjoyed dawdling about the empty flat.

He pulled the chain in the toilet. He checked the soap in the bathroom. For a while he sat on the edge of the bathtub. He took off his hat. If he smoked, he would now be lighting up a cigar. That is, if he smoked at all. His father smoked cigars. Rather cheap ones. Fájintos, Cigarillos. Near the end he smoked cigarettes, though seeming ashamed of doing so. His mother smoked cigarettes. She gave them up. She gave up many things.

And I? I never smoked.

He was strolling about in the hallway as if on a promenade. He stopped in front of the mirror.

Have I ever accomplished anything at all? He turned all the lights on. In the two rooms, the bathroom, the kitchen. He rolled a lemon on the kitchen table. A hardened, grumpy old lemon.

I ought to leave.

He turned the lights off. The flat plunged into darkness. He stood at the bedroom window and looked out on the square.

A meeting with the public.

A card is in his pocket. The Cultural Center's invitation. An open forum on the movie, on that movie. The leading lady has a show on tonight, the director is abroad. "You must come at least." The girl from the center appeared before him. "At least you mustn't leave us high and dry."

He turned around. He called over to the dining area.

"There's a discussion of my film." He waited a bit. "Do you hear, Father? I've written a film script."

He lingered in front of the dining area for a little while. Finally he set out. He locked the door to the flat, but stood in front of the door pane. He peered into the darkened hallway. Like a visitor getting ready to ring the door bell. He thrust the key into his pocket and threw himself down the stairs.

The flat was left on its own. The brown dining table with scattered empty ashtrays. Chairs around it. A studio couch worn with use. An easy chair beside it. A dark patch on the threadbare upholstery of its back. The outlines of a head. Exactly as if someone were sitting there leaning back in the darkness and silence.

After getting off the bus, he went past gardens, past little, tiny yards covered with snow. In one a washbasin half buried in the snow. Shutters and curtains closed.

A gloomy gray building on the corner. As if just pushed forward from somewhere. Dull glass sliding doors, a long empty corridor behind them. Two boys in gym shoes came running down the steps. When they spotted Zsámboky, they ran back up. They disappeared upstairs, on the second floor.

“Why don’t you come in?” The young woman, a thin brunette, pushed the glass doors aside. One of her shoulders dipped slightly, as if someone had struck it. She smiled, but very hesitantly.

By now the two of them were standing in the corridor. Stamping sounded from the second floor; perhaps they were jumping on a footstool. A piano was playing.

“The ballet,” she said.

A small office with bookshelves. In the corner a table with coffeemaker and cups. The young woman took a bottle and glasses from one of the cabinets.

“A little cognac. You must’ve got chilled. I always get chilled to the bone.”

Later, as she prepared the coffee: “Don’t you want a poster? You can take it with you.”

“What kind of poster?”

“The forum’s announcement.” She tossed one rolled-up onto the table. “Not very many are going to show up.”

“Klári Rotter!” Zsámboky stabbed at a name. “Why, she said she is doing a show.”

“We didn’t know that when the posters were printed. Or that the director was going to be away.”

“My director!” Zsámboky barked.

The woman looked out into the corridor.

“We’ll wait a bit longer.”

They drank a little cognac again. Zsámboky discovered a page from a notebook on the table. He began reading it in an undertone.

“It was a big surprise to Julis that city men supported her so readily and did not send her away...”

“I have to translate it into English.” She peered out again.

“...like a featherless crow, to soar if she could.” He looked at the girl over the sheet. “Shall we continue to wait?”

Both were there. Mother was lying on the sofa covered by a greenish-gray blanket. Father was sitting in the chair next to the door in pajamas and high-crowned hat. His long white hands lay in his lap. He was stroking his fingers with long drawn-out movements.

“You could take your hat off,” said Mother from under the covers.

“I can’t because of my hairdo.”

“Hairdo! Now, what kind of hairdo do you have?”

Father didn’t trouble to reply. He looked around. “He’s on the run, always on the run.”

“János receives countless invitations. Performances... forums... He is also invited abroad.”

“He is not invited abroad.” Father gestured. “He’d like to be, but nobody does.”

“What about that society in Vienna?”

“Oh that, that was some sort of activity. Knitted sweaters, shawls, and things like that for the poor.”

“What kind of shawls are you talking about?” She raised herself slightly.

“Well, if they’re not exactly like shawls, in any case they’re...” He stood up like someone preparing to go on a trip. “Books, let’s say, books. They sent him some philosophical works. Philosophical works in German.”

“Why shouldn’t they?”

Father was still standing next to the chair. “Let’s not mention he never learned German. Not German or any other language for that matter. If only he had taken a serious book into his hands somewhere along the way!” He slowly started away from the chair, from the furniture. “How I kept pounding into his ears to read Bölsche at least!”

“Anyway, he achieved a position in life.”

Father turned around. “Just tell me what!”

Mother fell silent. She huddled up under the covers and said nothing.

Father, on the other hand, seemed to look back at her from some faraway place. Some remote province. He shrugged his shoulders and moved on. Suddenly he stopped.

“What do you say to this, Ilonka?”

She stuck her head out from under the covers. “To what?”

“Television!” He was circling around the set. “No matter what, this here is a television set. A TV.”

Mother sat up, wrapped in a blanket: “Why not?”

“He never wanted anything like this.” He pointed at the TV. “It never even occurred to him.”

“How do you know that?”

“He was perfectly satisfied with the little radio you bought for him. Television... TV.” He looked out on the square. He held the edge of the curtain. “This must have been that woman’s idea.”

“What woman?”

“That teacher, she visits him frequently these days.”

“A teacher visited him often before too.”

“That one worked in a café.”

“It couldn’t have been a serious affair.”

“It was quite serious. Only, she left him. She ditched him.”

“What do you mean!”

He left the window. He walked over to the bedroom. “In any case, they threw out your little radio. And they also threw out that big bed.”

“My son was never interested in such nobodies.”

“They were the only kind. Waitresses, nurses, conductors.”

“Conductors!”

“The armchair is still here.” He took hold of the old torn arms and eased himself into the chair. “Fortunately, it’s still here.”

The young woman stole a glance at Zsámboky over her shoulder. “Maybe we can take a look now.”

Zsámboky felt as if he’d been standing behind the girl a very long time. So familiar was her neck with its fine dark down. One movement and his hand would instantly close on it.

They were out in the corridor, standing next to each other as if pressed together. By then the piano no longer sounded from the second floor. The dark line of the street showed behind the large glass door.

“We got out the posters far enough in advance.” She was whispering as if afraid she might wake somebody up.

The lighted buffet counter in the depths of the corridor. A stocky man with gray hair was eating a salami sandwich. “What’s going on, Magda?” He gestured toward the girl. “Has Rakonczai arrived?”

“Not yet.”

The man with the sandwich turned away.

“Who is this Rakonczai?” Zsámboky asked the girl.

She was staring at a pillar. Her shoulders shook now and then.

Can she be crying? It would be better to leave, to turn around nicely and leave. But he remained beside her. “Do you always fall asleep on the bus?” burst from him unexpectedly.

“Do I what?”

“A little while ago you said that you always fall asleep on the bus. You don’t even know when you’ve arrived.”

She continued looking at him with that strange frozen expression. Then very quietly, virtually syllable by syllable, she said:

“Anikó Lánzos’s night didn’t come off either. What can I do? They don’t come, they simply don’t come.”

“What about the hall?”

“What hall?”

“Well, where this would be held... this...” He fell silent.

They stood around among the gray-black pillars as if in some sort of waiting room. It was quiet. Then children on the stairs, children in gym shirts and satin pants. Strewn around like so many matchsticks.

“The ballet,” Zsámboky said.

She nodded at him.

“And you also said,” Zsámboky stepped a little closer to her, “your shoe once got stuck in asphalt. It was so hot your shoe got stuck.” Since she remained quiet, he added: “You came barefoot with your shoes in your hand.”

“Let’s go.” The girl broke into a smile of alarm. “Maybe somebody’s come after all.”

They started off.

“Once an elderly lady fell asleep in the toilet,” she related on the way. “We came upon her the next day.”

“Then occasionally somebody does show up.”

“To get warm. And of course, when Béla Szente was here!”

“Béla Szente?”

“The singer. Don’t you know him? He simply couldn’t get into the center. The crowd mobbed his car. We had to call the police.”

“You don’t have to this time.”

Flags in the corner. Rolled-up flags. Dusty windowpanes, blackened walls.

“Well...” She stopped at the door.

Zsámboky smiled uncertainly.

She pressed down on the latch. It bounced back.

“Why, it’s locked.” She looked at him. “Shall I get the key?”

“Oh, why bother.”

She was still holding on to the latch.

“Shall I show you our movie theatre?”

“He’s making really good money these days.” Father was again standing beside the television set.

“They appreciate his work,” said Mother.

“They appreciate all kinds of things nowadays. But to buy a TV!... Only a car is missing.”

“And why shouldn’t he have one?”

“He’ll turn into an idiot, a complete idiot.”

“You wretch!” she said in an angry, hurt voice. “Just because you never...”

“What do you know about it!” Father moved away, sliding his hand along the wall. “This is what I read Andersen to him for... He spent the tuition money I scraped together out of my last pennies. It’s for this I lugged his junk, those stories around. Nobody wanted to publish them anywhere, but I lugged them around until...”

“You always pocketed the money if he got any.”

“But I got his career going.” He stopped. “Your picture is here. You are sitting in a straw hat in a spinach bush.”

“That’s not a spinach bush. It’s a garden, the Valkays’ garden.”

“I know where Gábor Valkay painted it. Pure rot!”

“Valkay has had a one-man show, and he kicked you out when you tried to put the touch on him.”

His hand was sliding along the wall. “Not a single picture is left, not an etching anywhere. General Görgey has been tossed out. Well, he didn’t suit somebody.”

“They weren’t even pictures. You cut them out of magazines, then you pasted them. You cut and pasted them.”

“Even so, they were worth more than this spinach bush.” He sat down in the corner of the sofa.

“He’ll be putting spoons away one by one.”

“What kind of spoons, Gyula, if I may ask?”

“Silver spoons. By then he will own silver spoons. He will put them from one drawer into the other over and over again. Silver spoons, knives, and forks. He will dump them all on the table and just look at them.”

“You don’t know what you are saying any more!”

“What do you mean!” A brief silence. “He forked over twenty forints a week. When things were going really quite well for him. Twenty forints per week! True, he later raised it a little.”

“He shouldn’t have.”

“He went regularly to the Pool, to that part of the restaurant where the writers... He strutted around among all the other pompous blockheads. While I ate rice pudding in the gallery.”

“He used his own money.”

“I could easily see from up there what he ordered. He began with consommé. Then came the rest. Last a glass of wine and a demitasse. And when I wound up in the hospital...”

“Forget the hospital!” She sat up, the blanket slipped off her. “Don’t talk about the hospital!”

“Why not? Of course, he took you everything you needed.”

“Please, Gyula!”

“Idiocy!” Mother wrapped the blanket around her shoulders. “Pure idiocy!”

They sat silently beside each other on the sofa.

“He was always hauling me off to the motorcycle races.”

They were in the small movie theatre. Rows of empty seats beneath the screen. They were walking in the rows as if trying to find seats for themselves.

Zsámboky was in the first row. He was staring at the screen. He sat down for a moment, then stood up again. The young woman was bumping about somewhere behind him. She had been expounding about a boyfriend for who knows how long.

“Never a concert! Never a play! Well, I wasn’t that interested in the races.”

“I can imagine.”

“Besides, I couldn’t even see any of them. Somehow it always turned out that I couldn’t.”

Zsámboky made a turn to the left. He swung into one of the rows. He came upon her unexpectedly. They smiled at each other somewhat wearily.

“Did your film get abroad?” she asked.

“Yes, I think so.”

“What was the reaction?”

“Reaction? What reaction?”

She sat down. Her face became taut. “After all, I couldn’t go with a character like that, a cyclist.”

Zsámboky sat down. For a time they just sat quietly, as if waiting for the performance to begin.

“I was always completely covered with dust. From the cycles going by. I could see nothing, but I practically filled up with dust. My hair, eyes, skin.”

She jumped up. She was walking about in front of the screen. She shouted to Zsámboky from there.

“We were already on the motorcycle early in the morning!”

“Did he take part in those...?”

“Like so much. Long before each race we would cut along the track to wind up at the spot where we could see best. Or so he thought! In the end we settled on a hillside. We waited until ten, at least until ten, for the race to start. I sat there hanging on to a bush. Every half hour there was a beastly rumble. Huge clouds of dust.”

“As they whizzed by.”

“You put it well: as they whizzed by. For days dust kept pouring out of me.” She stopped. She squinted at the screen stealthily. “He was a nice fellow. I must say. And from a certain viewpoint...”

Zsámboky leaned forward, interested.

She sat down in one of the rows with her back to him.

“My girlfriend knows you.”

“She does? Who?”

She didn’t reply. She leaned her head back and stretched her legs out.

“I kicked him out.”

“The cyclist?”

“The cyclist.”

She remained like that, head leaning back and legs stretched out.

Zsámboky gazed at the empty screen attentively. As if he were seeing the girl seated on the hillside clutching a bush.

Steps sounded outside. Coughing, hacking. The steps stopped right in front of the door.

“He will ring right away,” Father said.

“No, he won’t. It’s Temunovich, the pharmacist. He is now going over to Mrs. Gyergyai.”

“Oh, yes. But Mrs. Gyergyai threw him out once. Mrs. Gyergyai only likes the directors of the army choruses. After all, a chorus director is really something else! Listen, somebody seems to be filing iron.”

“That is Mrs. Somogyi’s mother.”

“Yes, of course. She puts paper on the railing and slides her hand down it that way. But she is no longer able to go out.”

“You see, occasionally she still...”

Silence. Then Mother in a peculiar, girlish voice: “One thing for sure, he always brought me something. If nothing else, a piece of chocolate. He never stayed long because he was terribly busy, but he always brought me something.”

“What do you mean by that?” He glanced at her. “Now what do you exactly mean?”

Mother in that slightly singing, dreamy voice: “He came every visitor’s day, even if he didn’t stay long.”

“Yes, he barely looked in. ‘How are things, Father?’ And he was gone.”

“That shouldn’t surprise you. Given the pressures of his work.”

“The pressure of his work...!”

She took no notice. She didn’t even hear the gloomy laugh.

She merely spoke, spoke her own thoughts.

“He brought me a banana once in a while even though they are hard to get. An orange, a banana, a piece of chocolate. He talked with the doctors, with the chief himself.”

“If only I knew what you mean by all this.” Father stood up. He began strolling again.

“They really cleared the pictures out of here. At least they could have left the Görgey here.”

“He brought me a nightgown and a robe, and he even saw to a fresh slip for the little pillow. They didn’t provide any. They provided bedlinen except for the little pillow.”

He was standing at the window, looking at the snowy, slushy balcony.

“How was it in your ward? Did you get a slip for the little pillow?”

“Excuse me, Ilonka, I just can’t remember.”

Suddenly she got up from the sofa and went over to him. “Did he view you?”

“View me? When?”

They were standing alongside each other. She sort of cuddled up to him. “They showed me to him.”

“What bliss!” He left the window and made his way into the room.

“When he came down into the basement, into the little chamber, they showed me to him.” She left the window and followed after him. “At first he didn’t want to look at me, but then he did.”

“Why don’t you stop? Don’t you find it a bit in poor taste?”

“My, how finicky you have become, Gyula.” She laughed mockingly. “How finicky you have suddenly become!”

Father sat down in a chair, he kept bending the lid of his hat up and down. Mother stopped beside him.

“He was concerned about their dressing me properly... for that occasion.”

“That occasion!”

“He brought in a dark blue dress with a crocheted collar. He brought in a pair of black stockings.”

“You don’t say! Really?”

“He also brought in a little white handkerchief, but the one who dressed me sent it back.”

“Don’t talk to me about the dresser.”

“What did he bring in for you?” She practically leaned into his face.

He was bending his hat brim even more furiously. “These pajamas, if you must know! He had nothing clean ready, no suit, no shirt! Just these pajamas. They put them on me, that’s what they dressed me in! For that occasion!” He choked up. By now he couldn’t speak a word, he just kept crumpling the brim of his hat.

She stood beside him. She wouldn’t move away.

“But surely you got a pair of stockings! Gyula, tell me, you did get some stockings, didn’t you?”

The small office again.

The young woman pushed an envelope in front of Zsámboky. He shrugged his shoulders: “But...”

“Never mind,” she said. “You showed up.”

“What if I did!” He stuck the envelope into his pocket.

A form had to be filled out. Name, address, and the like. Meanwhile, the room seemed to be shriveling. Dark stains from leaks on the ceiling. They will slowly engulf the room.

“Well then...” Zsámboky looked at her. They will certainly rake her over the coals for the program. The program that never took place.

“I am leaving too.” She took her coat off the rack.

They started out. She turned in the key at the porter’s cubicle. Then, as they got outside the building, she said:

“I am leaving. I am quitting this...”

“You are quitting?” He also turned toward the center.

Rows of dark windows. Among them a few lighted squares.

“You don’t really think I would stay here, do you?”

They ambled toward the bus stop. The girl stuck her hands in her pockets.

Her thin face with its slightly pointed nose was barely visible from the coat collar, from the shawl. A long red shawl wound around her neck.

“This was in style a long time ago.” Zsámboky took hold of the edge of the shawl. “At the beginning of the twenties and earlier.”

“They’ve promised me something, of course, but nothing’s definite yet.”

“Derby hats... derbies are in again.”

“It’s possible I’ll wind up in a film studio.”

“A film studio?” He suddenly let go of the shawl. He looked askance at her. These words seemed to transform him.

“As an assistant. Second assistant. I know I’ll have to scurry around a lot, they will foist everything on me from makeup to extras, but even so...”

“And then.” Zsámboky’s voice verged on exasperation. “What will come of it all? I know someone who has been a second assistant for thirty years. For thirty years he has scurried around with stupid scripts under his arms, for thirty years he has been yelling at extras.”

“Maybe it won’t take me thirty years.”

They were standing in front of the bus. In front of the empty, dark bus. Someone boarded it and promptly vanished in the darkness. It started to snow. It wasn’t snow really, but tiny, stinging sleet. In an instant it coated their faces.

“One thing for sure, I won’t stay here. Either there’s a fight and I have to call the police or there’s nothing!” She began shouting: “I won’t stay here, you understand?”

Zsámboky grabbed her arm and pushed her on to the bus. Suddenly, some faint light went on. It fell on a back and the empty driver’s seat.

She emerged from the shawl. “Where are you actually going?”

“We still have time for a cup of coffee.”

They sat on in the parked bus.

When Zsámboky stepped out of the elevator, he bumped into an old gentleman. The skinny man in a black coat apparently had been waiting for him for a long time.

“You don’t resemble your father at all, but there is something about your eyes.”

Zsámboky nodded and sent the elevator down.

“Letters.” The old man behaved as if he wanted to descend after the elevator. “I have to get certain letters back.”

“Letters?” He took out his key but didn’t unlock the door. Somehow the old man didn’t even expect him to. He had stationed himself quite comfortably at the door. “Your father and I carried on an extensive correspondence. You know, on the Kossuth emigration. We both agreed that during his emigration Kossuth matured into the role of...”

“But my father is...”

“We miss him terribly. The Monday Circle. You know, we met every other Monday in the Simplon Café.” He broke into a smile. “Pardon me, the Simpli! Your own father expressed it like that: “Let’s go to the Simpli! Bearing: the Simpli!” Your father had a certain gaiety... a liveliness about him.” He headed for the stairs but immediately turned back. “The press has got wind of it.”

“Really?”

“They have detected that I am throwing light on the Kossuth emigration from an entirely new angle. The possibility of publication has presented itself.”

“I understand.”

“That is precisely why I must have the letters.”

“I don’t even know if...” He looked at the old man and slowly grew numb. He could not conceive of opening the door. Nor, for that matter, the old man’s departure. “Honestly, I don’t know if my father...”

“My friend Gyula stowed everything away.”

“You think so?”

“Oh absolutely! They must be in a special drawer in a box. If you permit me, I shall help you, we shall search for them together.”

“Together, yes.” The key slipped into the lock. The old man stood behind him.

“Gyula didn’t like Kossuth. He valued him but didn’t like him.” He started to wipe his feet, practically scrubbing them. “I should have given a speech at the service.”

“What kind?” He looked at the old man as if he would just as soon push him down the stairs.

“In the name of the Monday Circle. But the state of my health...” He stopped wiping his feet. When the door opened, he asked: “Was there a cremation?”

“Yes, a cremation.”

He let the old man go ahead of him, and then he also entered.

AT THE MOVIES WITH FATHER

He didn't turn toward him as they sat in seats eight and nine on the left. He simply observed the boy out of the corner of his eye in the drizzling incandescence. He touched his shoulder for an instant and asked:

“Can you see all right, old fellow?”

KING KONG

“... and if you really must know, King Kong is still alive today, and he is constantly walking about, but only at night, and he is lifting roofs off and peering in everywhere because he won't rest until he finds the Blonde Wonder.”

“Or Mrs. Rabnec?”

“Mrs. Rabnec?”

“Mrs. Szecsey.”

“Mrs. Szecsey?”

“Mrs. Tivadar Nagy.”

“Mrs. Tivadar Nagy?”

“Mrs. Glemcsák.”

“Mrs. Glemcsák?”

The usherette was lying in the cold, keen moonlight. She didn't know when she had woken up. She heard her husband's heavy breathing from far away, as if not from the same house.

Nothing was moving in the moonlight. Nothing was moving in the night.

Then in one swoop the roof of the house across the street was pushed aside and King Kong appeared. The gigantic apeman stood in front of the house like someone who has been searching for something for a long time and has finally found it.

“Oh!” said the usherette, and she sat up in bed.

King Kong was standing in front of her bed. He gave a shove to the room with every movement. The room billowed around her like an accordion.

The usherette was already lying in the palm of King Kong's hand. “But you are hunting for the Blonde Wonder!”

The apeman shifted her to his other palm.

The usherette trembled and closed her eyes. “You've got the wrong house. Everybody knows you have smashed several skyscrapers because you can't find the Blonde Wonder anywhere.”

The apeman put her from one palm into the other palm.

“You've got the wrong house!”

The usherette fell speechless. King Kong strode over the window with her. Above the houses - out into the night.

CO-STARS

They were all there.

He was entering in his notebook every single one who at some time played opposite Greta Garbo. The name on one side, the film title on the other.

Lars Hansen *Flesh and the Devil*

Nils Asther *Wild Orchids*

There were quite a few of them. At times Greta Garbo seemed about to settle on someone, but then a new name popped up again.

No, thought the boy, Greta Garbo, it seems, never finds the right man. Nils Asther played opposite her in two films, Gavin Gordon came next, then Conrad Nagel. Gavin Gordon played the part of a minister alongside her, Conrad Nagel that of a private tutor.

Notebook bound in blue paper, torn label, Károly Bonaja, arithmetic-geometry. The edge of the label curled-up. The boy licked it underneath, then tried smoothing it down. Meanwhile, he was thinking that Greta Garbo might take up with Nils Asther again.

“No,” Nils Asther shook his head, “she’ll never take up with me again. She can throw somebody aside in such a way... Ah, I don’t even like to talk about it.”

“She told me there is only one man in the world for her, and I was that man.” The pale-blond Lars Hansen shrugged his shoulders. “After *Flesh and the Devil* she would have nothing to do with me. We were to appear in another picture together, but she threw herself on the floor and kicked up a storm.”

“The divine Garbo!” nodded Gavin Gordon, who once played a minister opposite her.

“She wrings a man out and then throws him aside.” Nils Asther was silent for a moment. “If I add that ever since I haven’t been able to work with anybody else, that ever since there has been no other woman for me... well, you can just imagine!”

“It’s the same with me,” said Lars Hansen, “because one thing must be admitted: Garbo is a unique personality...”

“Yes, she is!” Nils Asther passed his hand over his face despondently. Names, names, one name after the other. The old partners vanished to yield their place to new ones.

“Keep them coming!” Nils Asther waved his hand. “None can do as well with her as I did in *Wild Orchids*.”

“Or I in *Flesh and the Devil*.”

But they were already through, finished. No new movie ever appeared again beside their names. Meanwhile, Lars Hansen spoke about Stiller, the director who discovered Garbo and brought her over to Hollywood from the North.

“Actually, they only invited Stiller, because at the time nobody had even heard of Garbo. Then there was no divine Garbo, just a big girl with bony hands and skinny legs who drove everybody to despair. At least film people. ‘Dear Stiller, I hope you don’t really mean this.’ But Stiller did mean it very much. He fought for Garbo until she got her first small role.”

“She didn’t create any particular sensation,” Conrad Nagel interjected. “Besides, at the time everyone was eclipsed by Asta Nielsen.”

“That’s exactly why Stiller had to keep fighting for her. ‘Maurice, I will never forget this,’ Garbo said to him. But once she felt a bit more confident...!”

“Stiller might just as well have given himself up as lost.”

“By then she was already picking and choosing her directors the same way she did her partners, and she preferred to work with anybody but Stiller.”

“That’s just like her.” Nils Asther was plucking his mustache. “Really like her.”

They fell silent. For a time, Garbo’s old co-stars remained practically speechless. A new name had cropped up: John Gilbert.

The boy was barely able to write down all the movies next to John Gilbert’s name. Apparently Garbo had found the right man at last.

“Haha!” Nils Asther broke into a laugh with scathing mockery.

Lars just smiled, but Gavin Gordon said: “My blessings on them.”

The boy, perhaps in real tribute to John Gilbert, tore the blue cover off the notebook and rebound it. He put a new label on it. He licked and smoothed. Then he very carefully inscribed on it: Károly Bonaja, motion picture book.

He turned the pages back like someone suddenly remembering something.

Rhombus and rhomboid. There they were in back, slightly smeared, not completed. The boy merely looked at them. What’s this? They really think I’m still bothering with them.

He erased the two geometric figures. Simply erased them. There’s absolutely no place for them in the notebook. Especially now that the eternal partner has made his appearance.

“Haha!” Nils Asther laughed heartily. “The eternal partner.”

Lars just smiled, but Gavin Gordon said: “My blessings on them.”

“But he will be Garbo’s destiny after all,” said the boy.

“Her destiny!” Nils Asther laughed heartily. “Garbo has just one destiny, and that’s Garbo herself.”

He could say whatever he wished, but now only John Gilbert could be seen beside Garbo.

The boy simply couldn’t understand the situation. “John Gilbert’s mustache can’t match Ronald Colman’s!”

“Or mine either!” Nils Asther’s voice was exasperated.

Mustaches around Garbo. John Gilbert’s mustache quite close, Nils Asther’s quite far away. Between them Lewis Stone’s and Conrad Nagel’s. Conrad Nagel’s wasn’t real, though. Just a one-role mustache. It really looked strange on that callow face.

Mustaches around Garbo. Then only John Gilbert remained.

Sometimes John appeared as a painter in a velvet jacket, sometimes as a slightly debauched young prince.

“A real Mickey Mouse!” Nils Asther nodded.

“No personality,” said Lars Hansen. “And let’s keep a sharp eye out because sooner or later he might even ruin Garbo.”

He didn’t ruin her.

Garbo’s fixed, pained look drew away from John Gilbert’s side.

“Incredible!” Gavin Gordon shook his head. “Everybody was saying they would marry.”

“Marriage!” John Gilbert’s face darkened. “Garbo and marriage! Do you know what she said to me after all those?”

“After all those what?” asked Nils Asther rather sharply.

John didn’t hear him. He just talked and talked and plucked his mustache. Just like Nils Asther earlier.

“She’d sooner enter a convent than... She just kept yelling convent.”

“I can understand why,” nodded Nils Asther.

“That’s how she will wind up anyway,” nodded Gavin Gordon.

John Gilbert was plucking his mustache, exactly like Nils Asther earlier. “Do you know who her co-star is? The newest one? A midget!”

“A midget?”

“What tales you tell!”

“We all know him. Ramon Novarro!”

For a moment startled silence. Then a voice: “No, that’s ridiculous.”

“Take my word for it. They are shooting *Mata Hari* together.”

“But Ramon Novarro was Ben Hur,” the boy said, “and when he licked Messala in the Roman chariot race...”

They all held their sides from guffawing. “He couldn’t even peep out of the helmet.”

The boy wanted to say something like nobody in the Roxy Theatre roared with laughter, they almost tore the place apart instead, and he even forgot about the candy he’d bought at the counter.

Gavin Gordon in a quiet, thoughtful voice: “What’s wrong is not that he is so short but that he is such a lousy actor.”

“Stiller would never have worked with him, he wouldn’t have cast him even as a walk-on.”

Gilbert: “That’s exactly what Garbo wants, it seems. So she can shine all the more brightly.”

Nils Asther very sarcastically: “Lately she has shined quite brightly enough.”

John Gilbert didn’t hear him. He was saying he made himself less than he was for Garbo. His talent, that is.

“Do you think that required much effort?”

This was Nils Asther again, naturally. Nils Asther, it appears, was determined to torment John Gilbert to death.

Gilbert’s nose grew longer, just like a pencil sharpener, and kept repeating one name.

“Garbo... Garbo...”

The boy entered it in his notebook.

Ramon Novarro *Mata Hari*

A couple more film titles appeared alongside Ramon Novarro's name. But only a couple. Ramon disappeared through the trapdoor like the rest of them.

John Gilbert lived in the hope that maybe it would now be his turn.

"Garbo can truly shine only beside me."

"Because you're a backdrop!" nodded Nils Asther.

John allowed this to pass by his ear too. He waited, full of hope that perhaps... after all... Then something happened, something that... Garbo simply stated she wanted to play Anna Karenina again.

"But this time, it seems, you won't be her partner, dear Gilbert." Nils Asther stroked his mustache with short sly movements. "Some Frederic March. Yes, I remember now, Frederic March."

John was silent.

"Or rather, not just some Frederic March. The Man of the Century. That's what the newspapers are writing about him. Dear Gilbert, I don't remember, but did they say anything like this about you?"

And Frederic March, the Man of the Century, played that role with Garbo which John Gilbert formerly had.

Then the Man of the Century also vanished. New mustaches followed.

The boy entered every last one of them in the notebook. Name on one side, title on the other.

Then he no longer wrote anything. No name, no title.

"Embarrassing," said Nils Asther. "Garbo used up everybody."

They were silent, as if expecting something. Maybe for someone to crop up. Nobody did.

Suddenly the boy began drawing. A pair of glasses, enormous dark glasses.

"Yes, we know," nodded Lars Hansen. "Garbo put on dark glasses and withdrew. From everything, from everybody."

"Who can understand it?" asked Gavin Gordon. "When she had achieved everything... everything."

"The point is, it didn't mean anything to her." Lars paused for a bit, then blurted! "Stage fright."

"Stage fright? Surely you don't mean to say that..."

"She continually suffered from stage fright. Even success didn't help. Stiller had already said she'd have it as long as she lived."

"And now because of this?"

"This or something else."

They guessed, they kept trying to guess why Garbo withdrew behind dark glasses. Nils Asther also reported she is living in a place nobody can get to. Among cliffs, in some kind of bay. Occasionally an old girlfriend can visit her. On one condition: she can't talk about movies.

John Gilbert, who, it was thought, would become the right man, the eternal partner, suddenly exclaimed:

“If only I could perform with her just once more! As a supporting actor... even as an extra.”

Then he fell silent because the boy erased him.

The boy also erased Nils Asther, Lars Hansen, and the others.

Nothing remained, just the dark glasses.

THE DEATH OF ZORO

Two jolly fellows in the movie foyer. Zoro and Huru, the two staunch companions who never so much as take a single step without each other.

The boy stopped in front of them. He put his hand out as if he wanted to pat the cardboard cutout Zoro and the cardboard cutout Huru.

It was morning. He was alone in the foyer. Around him on the walls were photographs of film actors and actresses and scenes from next week's attractions. But all these vanished beside the life-sized Zoro and Huru. They were standing at the cashier's window. Somewhat offended at being left all by themselves in the dim foyer.

Perhaps the others are sitting in the darkened theatre this forenoon. Rudolph Valentino, Vilma Bánky, Barbara La Marre, Richard Dix... They are sitting there in front of the curtain drawn over the screen, staring straight ahead silently. No noise of any kind reaches them, only the beating of a carpet from a distant courtyard. They are sitting there in the long rows of seats. Rudolph Valentino, Vilma Bánky, Barbara La Marre, Richard Dix...

Zoro and Huru in the foyer. The gangling, mustached Zoro and the merry, chubby Huru. The buttons were torn off their coats long ago, and were held together by some sort of string. Little satchels in their hands. What can possibly be in those satchels?

The wall is covered with pictures from their film.

"Beach Photographers."

The two noble companions are in striped swimsuits in one picture. Zoro's head is stuck under the camera's black cloth, while Huru poses women from the beach for a shot.

"I bet," the boy thought, "Zoro and Huru are playing tricks on the beach. Maybe Zoro won't even take his head out of the camera, and Huru is only interested in the girls. He positions the arm of one, the chin of another, meanwhile promising to marry them. It's quite possible Huru is proposing to more than one girl. It's quite possible he will bamboozle the whole beach".

"Beach Photographers."

Photos from the film, captions next to the photos.

Zoro and Huru, who had already tried their hand at so many different things, decided to sally forth as photographers. They packed up their nonexistent belongings and set off alongside the Northern Express.

Zoro and Huru were trotting between empty tracks. Huru was looking ahead confidently, Zoro with a vague distress in his eyes. His long mustache hung down droopily.

Zoro and Huru, the two inseparable friends, arrived a couple of days later than the Northern Express at the bathing resort, where as beach photographers they again underwent ever funnier situations.

Ever funnier situations...

Huru's face so plump, Zoro's stiff as if benumbed with cold.

"It all started with his eyes," spoke up someone behind the boy.

The boy didn't turn around. He knew it was the old projectionist. He had left the projection booth and climbed down. Once in a while he would climb into the booth early in the morning and inspect the projector and reels. Or he would start showing the film, just to himself.

Now he was standing in front of Zoro in his loose-fitting coveralls and round cap.

"One thing's sure, he'd stood before the klieg lights for many more years than the other, this chubby one. He was already a famous actor when this other one..."

"Didn't they begin as a team? Zoro and Huru?"

"How could they have!" The projectionist looked at Zoro as if wanting to ask his forgiveness. "Oh, we still remember very well when pudgy here dropped in on Zoro to ask for some kind of work. Maybe not even in pictures, just so he has something. Meanwhile he told heart-breaking stories about his dear mother who is ill and must be provided for. Everybody knew, that's exactly what Zoro was a pushover for."

"You mean, somebody just starts in on his mother and Zoro...?"

"The thing is, Zoro lost his own mother very early. His house is full of his mother's portraits and statues."

Then the old projectionist said that Huru got hold of this tip. He got hold of it and faked everything. It came out much later that Huru never gave so much as a penny to his mother. Not even when he was a world-famous movie star.

They were standing next to the cashier's window. Zoro who lost his mother very early and Huru who never gave so much as a penny to his mother.

"The old lady died in a poorhouse. Neighbors took up a collection to pay for her funeral. I don't have to tell you, you would've looked in vain for Huru at the funeral."

At first, Huru got just bit parts beside Zoro, and nobody had confidence in him. But it is also true that Huru worked the public hard.

Huru visited schools and joked with the children. He sat at a desk (in his sailor suit, of course) and acted awfully nervous about being called on to answer questions. And he was called on (prearranged, of course), and he hemmed and hawed at the blackboard so much they made him stand in the corner.

Somehow Huru forgot to take Zoro along on these excursions. True, Zoro wouldn't have gone with him. Zoro told him off. He said he also likes children but doesn't care at all about playing the fool. Huru just grinned and fell silent. Then newspapers began publishing reports that Zoro has contempt for his audience, especially children. And between the lines, yes, between the lines, was slipped the hint that Zoro was jealous of Huru's ever-growing popularity. At that point, Zoro stuck the item under Huru's nose. "What is this?" Huru protested he didn't know anything about it.

The boy leaned on the railing at the cashier's booth. The window closed. A sign above it: balcony, stalls, easychair...

"There's no doubt Huru mounted a real campaign against Zoro... on the sly, naturally. By then he had frequently been warned to be on guard, but he still didn't want to believe the vague rumors. It never occurred to him how strange it was that after several film previews school children marched ahead of Huru carrying their little pennons. Ahead of Huru! Not Zoro and Huru together! Not even what the children were shouting roused his suspicions: 'Don't be afraid, Huru! We are with you!'"

“Huru swore he knew nothing about it, and that was enough for Zoro.”

The boy swung himself over the railing.

“In the meantime, Huru invaded Zoro’s married life.” The projectionist whipped his hat off and dug his fingers into his hair. “This is what nobody can figure out to this very day. Zoro married a Danish actress of astonishing beauty, Dalma Dagmarson. Their marriage was unclouded until... Yes, even now Zoro didn’t want to believe the whispers. He threw the unsigned letters away.”

Zoro was pacing in his room, wearing a lounging robe that reached his ankles. He held an unsigned letter in his hand. Occasionally he would glance into it: “... your wife and your partner are seen together very frequently these days. I must note that lately they don’t even care about keeping up appearances.” Zoro took a step toward his wife’s room, but then he tore up the letter.

He didn’t want to believe the gossip, the slander, the whispers. He didn’t want to believe his wife when one day she walked up to him.

Dalma stood squarely in front of Zoro and looked into his eyes.

“We can’t live together any longer.”

She also told him the why of it, namely the who of it.

Zoro grasped the edge of the table, his head slumped forward.

The ravishing Dalma and Huru! How in the world was he able to sweep her off her feet?

The boy whirled around on the railing at the cashier’s window. Huru above him. “By hook or by crook I swept the ravishing Dalma off her feet.”

“Zoro didn’t stand in the way of the lovers. He let his wife go. He continued to make movies with Huru. It’s true, he hardly spoke to him outside the studio. At this time he was being racked by terrible headaches. Headaches and insomnia. When he wasn’t working, he lay behind closed shutters with a cold pack on his forehead. Or he walked. He walked from one room to another with long, drawn-out strides. But his eyes grew weaker and weaker, he saw with increasing difficulty. At his friends’ advice he turned to a doctor.”

Examination followed upon examination. They had him read letters from a chart, they stuck different kinds offences before his eyes. “Is this better? Can you see more clearly now?” They took him into a dark room where he had to lie for a long time. Robed figures moved around him. For an instant his wife seemed to stand beside him. Huru’s round face seemed to pop into view. A lamp’s small sphere in the dark came closer and closer, like a klieg light. At the end of the examination, they announced: “Surgery is unavoidable.”

The projectionist walked back to the double-door where the public is admitted. He opened it for an instant. The long passageway with its columns and buffet counter could be seen.

“They threw Zoro on the operating table.”

The projectionist said this.

The boy slipped off the railing. He didn’t get up right away, he stayed on the tile floor for a while.

“A famous professor of ophthalmology operated on Zoro. Not quite free of charge. He touched him for a tidy little sum. I must add that by this time Zoro wasn’t in exactly the best

situation. You can bet his wife didn't leave him in just the clothes on her back. The operation... ah yes. As they say, it was successful. Only, Zoro couldn't see a bit better."

"Did they operate on both his eyes?" The boy had hoisted himself back on the railing again.

The old projectionist disappeared behind the double-door. When he returned, he was striking an empty pipe against his palm.

"They kept Zoro in the hospital for a long time after the operation. Did he have any visitors? Of course he did. But he was waiting for only a certain somebody."

Zoro lay with bandaged eyes in the darkened room. He waited for a particular voice, for someone to touch the covers and sit down beside his bed. He waited in vain. Not once did Dalma Dagmarson, who had left him for Huru, open the door and enter.

Huru, he was something else.

Huru really tuned the hospital upside down. He came at the head of a merry company. In the corridor he pinched nurses, passed out autographs, opened bottles of champagne. It was only natural that he was accompanied by a pack of reporters, it was only natural that the newsreel was also with him. The Eye of the World.

As he entered Zoro's room, he stopped in the doorway. For a moment he just stood there motionless. Then he spread his arms out wide and threw himself on Zoro's bed. 'How awful to meet under such circumstances!'

The newsreel camera whirred, and during the following week, everybody could see there was no more faithful friend than Huru. The Eye of the World also showed Huru weeping. 'I won't leave until I can take Zoro with me.'

The Eye of the World didn't show Huru slipping out of the hospital that very same day.

Zoro stayed there.

The operation was successful, though. But the doctor decided to try his hand at a new surgery. They took a crack at it. They experimented with at least three different operations.

The projectionist was now poking his pipe with a little piece of wire. Then he struck it against his palm again. He looked up at the boy, the pipe remaining in his hand.

"The result was that he left the hospital with a glass eye."

Dark glasses, scarf, topcoat, small bag. Zoro stood like that in the hospital entrance. The Eye of the World wasn't on him. No reporters paid any attention to him when the nurse took him by the arm and led him out of the hospital grounds. For some reason, even his friends, those few who still remained from the old days, forgot to come.

Leaves circled listlessly on the hospital grounds. He stopped and reached for a leaf hesitantly. He would have liked to linger in the yard for a bit; perhaps he would even have sat under a tree. But the nurse led him on.

A small stubby-nosed taxi waited at the entrance. The hospital had hailed it. They still did that for him.

The nurse straightened his scarf, gave the driver his address, and then squeezed him into the back seat of the taxi.

His housekeeper shrieked. She clapped her hands together when she saw her master with his little bag from the window. She rushed out to the gate.

“Dear sir! Oh, my dear, dear sir!”

Zoro allowed her to lead him in, he allowed her to set him down for some tea with her. He asked her to open the mail and read aloud the letters that had arrived during his absence.

She couldn't open any, none had come. Not from the studio or anywhere else either. Later she finally brought forth a letter. Zoro's bank wrote that they regret to inform him of the unwelcome news that his shares had fallen, not just fallen but crashed, and that the funds on deposit, which had already greatly declined...

He waved his hand to say it's enough, she should stop. He wanted to be left alone. All he wanted to do was curl up in the corner of the sofa.

He could curl up there all he wanted to.

If he had few visitors in the hospital, now he had...

The boy was perched on the railing.

The projectionist was standing in front of him, seeming to want to leap instantly on the railing too. But he merely shrugged his shoulders as he said:

“The day came when Zoro went to the studio. Don't think they sent a car for him. He had to tap his way to the studio, he who was one of its founding members. The porter greeted him but didn't come out of his booth, he seemed to retreat even more into the corner. It was the same with the others he encountered in the courtyard or the corridors. They muttered confusedly and then stepped aside. He even came across some who wanted to stop him: ‘Stop! We're shooting!’ But he continued on anyway among the cameramen, makeup people, and extras.”

Sad was Zoro's passage through the cameramen, makeup people, and extras. Suddenly he did come upon someone, and then he really had to stop.

A long-legged fellow with a mustache hanging down the sides of his mouth and a sour countenance. A sailor's cap on his head unlike any in the world, with a long ribbon hanging down.

They stood in the corridor, Zoro and the one with the sour countenance.

Suddenly shouting was heard.

“We're starting to shoot! Shooting!” They didn't stir for a while. Then suddenly Huru appeared. He also had a sailor's cap on.

“Don't you hear we are shooting?”

With that he pushed sourface onto the set.

Zoro drew into the collar of his topcoat and didn't say a word.

Huru caught his breath and straightened his sailor's cap.

“The boy is working out splendidly and the public is already used to him.”

“Used to him,” nodded Zoro.

“Putting it more correctly, they didn't even notice that I had started a new Zoro on his way, that I had launched a new Zoro.”

“Launched?”

Huru spread his arms out. "Old chap, we couldn't wait for you. The public - this thousand-headed Caesar - is impatient. You know that as well as I do. You know what the audience is like. In short, you still need time to pull yourself together."

"I must pull myself together..."

"Besides," Huru bent closer to him, "that glass eye... The public notices such things. You know how it is. But come now, take a look at the new Zoro!"

"I am Zoro!"

Huru grinned and nodded. "You are... you are!" He seemed to sing it: "You are... or somebody else is!"

Huru vanished. Zoro remained alone in the corridor.

"I am Zoro!"

Suddenly he collapsed. A pain stabbed him in the head so hard he fell against the wall. Someone took hold of him, led him into the courtyard, and sat him down in a chair.

He sat on a little chair in the courtyard. He pulled his shoulders up and spread his hands out. He could still hear the hubbub on the set, the horn, as the clapboard slapped. Then he got up and left. But he didn't go home. He went to the Film Cemetery.

The boy slid off the railing next to the cashier's window. He is now going to hear something the old man has never related to anyone else. Something he will pass on to Gyuri Streig and the others in the evening on the square or in front of the street door.

"Lots of people think the Film Cemetery is in California, somewhere in Film City. Well, that's a big mistake! The Film Cemetery is up North, in Zoro's native land. From all parts of the world travel to this place those stars who can't keep up anywhere but still don't want to wind up in an old people's home. In greatest secrecy they travel to this place, in greatest secrecy they make their way across the suburb toward the Grove. The first stop is a shabby little movie theatre. No picture is ever shown in it. Its walls are covered with old posters. Every movie star finds the one bearing his name in the biggest letters. He rolls his poster up and takes it with him."

Don't think you will find crosses and gravestones in this cemetery. Broken klieg lights, twisted cables, rusted derricks mark the route. Caved-in studios with discarded props.

A room with crumbled walls, with split-legged tables and broken chairs from a baron's house. Rows of burned-out suburban streets, collapsed floors, abandoned arbors and promenades where nobody ever walks. Only an actor or actress grown too old. He walks the length of a promenade. He is in the studio again. He walks and walks until he reaches a room. On the wall are photos of his greatest roles. The room itself is the set of his most successful film. By then he has nothing more to do than sit down in an old easy chair. To look at the pictures on the wall, to gaze into the air. Meanwhile, he can even light up a cigar or a cigarette and also find some beverage in one of the corners. There still remains a bottle left behind from takes of *Hussars in Ingolstadt*.

Hither came Pearl White, the most elfish gamin, when they froze her out of the silver screen. Theda Bara, the true vamp, and Milton Sills, the pirates' captain, the old sea wolf. Pearl White found her old ball and jumping rope, Theda Bara her feather headdress and the divan on which she could stretch out full length, and Milton Sills the shipwreck with its tattered pirate flag.

Hither came Zoro. He crossed the suburb, the Grove. To the movie theatre, the theatre where he chose his poster. The one in which he is fighting the windmills with lance in hand. The poster of *Don Quixote*.

Zoro rolled it up and took it with him.

He carried the poster with him among shattered klieg lights, corroded cables, blinded lamps, burned-out searchlights. Torn ribbons of zigzagging streets, collapsed stairs of caved-in houses marked his route. Shattered statues, headless statues, armless statues, crushed heads, split foreheads. A hollow-ringing rail area with a broken glass roof, an unstocked department store, crumbling columns and balustrades.

The Cemetery for Sets was left behind.

He arrived at a barren, empty field. A kind of whinnying sounded. The outlines of a horse appeared, the outlines of a yellowish, impossibly scraggy horse. His bones running into one another at the slightest movement. Next to it on the ground were a lance and shield.

Zoro knelt down and bowed his head on his palm. He remained like that for a time. He slowly straightened up. And then he was soon sitting on the horse with his lance and shield.

Windmills off in the distance.

Zoro's scarf became untied, the tails of his topcoat fluttered as the horse started out with him.

The windmills were turning. They were waiting to fly him into the air to pass him on from one to the other, from one to the other.

The wind blew, Zoro's topcoat fluttered as he headed for the windmills with his lance held high.

The shadow of a horse, the shadow of a horseman on the broad, empty field as he rides toward the slowly receding windmills.

There was silence. One couldn't tell when the projectionist had fallen silent, but now silence reigned in the foyer at morning-time. Pictures of actors and actresses on the walls, pictures of the movies appearing the following week. Zoro and Huru beside the cashier's window. The two staunch companions who never so much as take a single step anywhere without each other.

It was silent in the theatre at morning-time. Then the projectionist spoke:

"It seized him while he was shaving. Yes, they found him like that, with his throat cut." He took hold of Zoro's shoulder. "They had been watching him for some time, he had already aroused suspicion at the studio, and then while shaving... They say he couldn't forget that day when the old Zoro, the real Zoro, stood in front of him in the studio corridor. From that time on, they say, he practically begged for them to give him something else, even if it is a worthless bit part. He would rather be an extra, just so he won't be Zoro! As for the one who came after him, something happened to him too..."

The projectionist's hand slipped off Zoro's shoulder.

The boy hoisted himself onto the railing at the cashier's window.

"What's wrong with all the Zoros, that they always...? Please tell me what's the matter with the Zoros. Please tell me!"

No reply came.

He flopped down from the railing. He looked up once more at the figure with the blank look and the long mustache; then the theatre door slammed shut behind him.

FURNITURE

In the Room

He was standing in the room. In the bedroom. He had crawled out of bed half asleep. He threw on the terry-cloth robe and scurried out of the bedroom. He shut the door behind him without making a sound. Suddenly he was in the dining room.

The furniture disregarded him. They were aware of him, but they simply didn't bother with him. Let's just let him stand there at the door.

Moonlight shined through the curtains. Silence and this strange white light engulfed the room.

The immobility of the furniture. The way the chairs surrounded the dining table. Maybe they had just discussed something. They were holding a conference. The dining table told them of a piece of news. The chairs passed it on to the cupboard. The cupboard to the large chest of drawers and the small chest of drawers. They conferred in whispers. But everything stopped when he entered.

Profound silence. The huffiness of the table. And the chairs. He is here! He has the nerve to show his face here!

The man kept twisting the sash of his robe. He pulled it very tight and then loosened it. He was waiting for a sound. A crackle. He looked at the chairs leaning slightly forward on the table. Slowly, almost without moving, they will droop over it.

They know, of course they know!

He began to walk around the table. He touched the back of one of the chairs. As if he wanted to explain something, or more exactly, to make excuses. Listen to me. Who knows when the time will come for that... you could possibly stay here for months, maybe even for a year. And believe me, I'm not the one who concocted the whole thing.

They paid absolutely no attention to him. They ignored him completely as he strolled behind them. What a ridiculous character! He wants to lay the blame for it all on someone else.

He walked around them. He passed his hand along their shoulders. He abruptly pulled back one of the chairs. He sat stiffly, motionless. Go ahead! Let's talk.

But they had no inclination whatsoever to do that.

He bent forward. He slid his palms along the surface of the table.

"The truth is..."

"What is the truth? Let's hear it!"

"...I should have sold you a long time ago."

He said it! He finally said it! He remained bent forward. He looked the company over. The members of the society.

They didn't say anything. Maybe they were waiting for him to resume. Please! Out with everything! We are rickety second-hand goods! There is no place for us in the flat! That upper-crust flat!

He wrapped himself up in his robe. For a moment he turned the neighboring chair toward him. He pushed it back. He again looked the chairs over. As if wanting to sit on each of them for an instant out of some mistaken sense of tact.

Shade swung to and fro on the curtains. It swung forward. It threw itself into the darkness.

Breathing could be heard. Even, deep breathing. Low mocking laughter. A barely audible voice.

“You won’t accompany me! I don’t need an escort anywhere!”

Who can this be? A girl? What girl?

He waited, listened. But the voice fell silent. Maybe she is standing behind him. And the others who occupied the room at night.

Occupied it?

That is ridiculous. It always belonged to them.

Meanwhile a male voice. As if he had been talking a long time, a little plaintively, reproachfully.

“But I always accompanied you to Auntie Gizi’s! Ever since you began playing the violin. I’m the one who introduced you to her.” A pause. “And don’t you forget that I talked you into it. You would never have thought of learning to play the violin. Tell me, isn’t this so?”

The rest was frantic whispering.

Silence. The silence of expectation. And again the mocking laughter. The girl as if lying in bed. She turns from one side to the other. She lies on her stomach. She pats her pillow. She laughs into it. You will never again accompany me anywhere!

Voices flew through the room.

As if several were talking at the same time. Scolding someone.

He raised himself halfway. They are scolding Father! For having squandered everything. (Squandered... my God!) You could never trust him with anything. He even frittered his belongings away.

A woman’s voice. “You left everything out! Scattered them all over the place! You left the teacup on the table! The bologna skins!”

He now stood up. He clung to the shoulder of the chair. Whose voice is this? He couldn’t even remember his mother’s voice. Well then? What woman? How did she get here? And does Father warn her to desist? Does he give a rejoinder?

Father didn’t even speak up. Another woman’s voice, choking. “Why can’t you stay with me? Why do you always have to go?”

Silence settled on the room. The endless sadness of the night.

A man’s voice burst from this silence.

“Your memories are deeply rooted in the past.”

“The past! The things you can say!”

The rest was again only whispers.

Who is this woman? Who is this man? And the others? Who are sitting at the table?

He stood clutching the chair. His hand passed over its back. It slipped off. He felt the chair heave a sigh of relief. It relaxed. The exasperation of the pieces of furniture. That hostile exasperation.

He left the room.

At the door he still turned around. Maybe he wanted to say something or just say goodbye.

“Unnecessary, sir! Completely unnecessary!”

As he closed the door behind him, they started in.

“What a hypocritical character!”

“What in the world did he want here?”

“As if he is the one to be pitied.”

“He wants to be pitied. How wonderful!”

Vexed, surly crackles.

Silence. The silence of furniture.

The Deceased

They got along quite well together. The furniture and the deceased. He lay slumped in the room opening on the garden. His face resting on the carpet very peacefully, like someone who has finally found refuge. A cheerful red-and-white sprinkling can next to his outstretched arm. He probably started this way for the garden early in the morning. But he fell headlong and the water spilled from the can on to the flowers in the carpet.

The furniture stood around him. The dining table covered with a green cloth, the high-backed, faintly touchy chairs, the snuff-colored cupboard.

The aroma of toasted bread could be sensed from somewhere toward the kitchen.

The damp glitter of the sunlight streamed in through the open door. The translucent blue sky. The cosy summer morning. Tranquility itself.

Then a door slams shut, stamping steps, screams, shouts, sobs, a woman throws herself on the deceased, shakes his shoulders madly.

Ringling telephone, the room fills with various figures, ambulance siren, and they again shake and tug at the deceased.

A Wardrobe

They found him in the wardrobe. He was hanging there, strung up, like an overcoat. He meant it as a joke, a last black joke. He was to leave the hotel the next day. Leave? He was thrown out! Evicted! He hadn't been able to pay rent for a long time, and there was no hope of... Oh, by then he had been fired by every newspaper. He had worn out his welcome everywhere. It could have been something in his behavior. In his nature. If you said something to him, he simply stared and kept nodding. And you suddenly bristled with fury. You got a fit of rage.

He looked down on everybody. He was condescending.

He got in a row with an undersecretary of the foreign ministry. They would have overlooked that somehow. I say it was, instead, because of his nature... there was something in his nature.

I don't think there was anything else in that hotel wardrobe. No coat, no shirts.

He hung in it all alone.

The morning maid found him. Something must have looked suspicious. Perhaps the wardrobe's half opened door. She peeped in. She looked inside. And there he was, hung up carefully.

What kind of face did she make? Did she faint? I don't think so. They are so used to seeing things. They are hardened. Just like wardrobes, hotel wardrobes. At least those in the outskirts and in the vicinity of railroad stations.

It is possible, though, that a pair of old shoes run down at the heels and a shabby coat were also found in that wardrobe. In any case, he hung from that brown rod. The editor.

Interior. Detail

Why were the drawers pulled out? The drawers of that puny little brown chest?

Was he looking for a letter? One written to him? Or one he had written to somebody but didn't mail? In the morning, he suddenly remembered the woman. That letter. He jumped out of bed and attacked the wardrobe. He began with the first drawer. Slips of paper, bills, commuter passes invalid for years, receipts. Letters also turned up, of course. But that certain one didn't. Not from the upper drawer or the middle one or the lower one. Photographs with impossibly age-worn faces, coffee-stained name lists, cultural programs, invitations, pages from calendars torn to bits, nail scissors, bandaids, a hardened lemon, an empty spectacle case - all these turned up. But that letter! That didn't, not for anything. He reached under the bottom drawer. As if there was a drawer there too. Only he didn't see it. His fingers combed the air. The empty air.

He pushed the drawers back. Only to pull them out again. He really tore them out. The handkerchief appeared in his hand again and again. That ancient lemon. The commuter passes, the notices, penalties for delinquent taxes.

But that letter!... If he sends it, everything can turn out all right. Olga will reply in a couple of days, a week at the most. Then they will meet. They'll go to the island or somewhere else. Just so he finds that letter.

He straightened up for an instant. He passed his hand over his unshaven face. If he were to rewrite it... No, you can't write a letter like this a second time... Dear Olga! No, that's out of the question.

He flung himself against the drawers again. He ransacked all three. Then he kept jerking the wardrobe itself, he dragged it to the center of the room. He shook it by the shoulders.

The top drawer suddenly fell out. He didn't pick it up. He seemed to look at it with some satisfaction as it lay there on the floor. Go ahead! Now the next one! Then the next!

Suddenly he grew tired.

Those drawers on the floor among all kinds of odds and ends. A real pile of rubbish. He bent down as if wanting to gather it all together. Or rather, to climb into the pile himself.

He jumped up. He dashed out of the room.

The wardrobe remained there, ransacked.

In the Cellar

An empty window frame at the wall.

The dead-gray screen of a discarded television.

A chandelier in the depth of the cellar. An exiled chandelier, its lights extinguished.

In the Attic

They threw it out.

They sent it packing. Two people nabbed it from two sides. They gripped its arms and carried it up into the attic. Occasionally they stopped to catch their breath. Meanwhile, they took stock of the old thing. That stooped back! The moldy-green cover in tatters. One arm half broken. They looked at each other. *Don't you want to sit down in it? Please, have a seat. Now, really!* And they snickered. They picked it up and carried it on.

It is possible it left the flat on its own. This gray-bearded, haughty old man. When they looked at it very disapprovingly. When certain observations had already been heard. How long do we have to look at it? What is this flat? A junkyard? One night it left. It hurled itself against the stairs, stumbling along uncertainly.

It knew where its place is.

In the attic. Yes, among the odds and ends. Its broken arm now in its lap. It is even haughtier, more distinguished-looking like that. Even in its ruined state, it stood out among the others.

That assembly.

It wasn't as if he wanted to complain, not so much as a word, but really!

Suitcases held together with twine turned black. Baskets half collapsed, stuffed with yellowed newspapers and magazines. An old jacket atop one of the baskets, carefully folded. Boxes with lids slipped sideways. A rake without teeth. How did this get here? Suitcases, baskets, shabby clothing, all right. But a rake?

This made it furious.

Oh well, no matter. It must be put up with. Just as everything has to be put up with.

Still, sometime down below they will realize whom they have ejected. When they will want sometime to really stretch out. Really and truly stretch out! The way you never can on a stylish, filigreed little piece of junk. Yes, then they will think of it.

Let's not deceive ourselves, they won't send a delegation. No! It will never get back to the flat again. That would mean they'd have to admit they had really blundered. They don't have the fortitude to do that. The cowardly rabble! In short, let's not count on anything like that. That's not in the cards.

They will slip up one by one. Warily, secretly. They will sit in the armchair. Among suitcases, chests, baskets, finally in a real armchair. They will mend the broken arm. A minor operation. Not much has to be sacrificed. Certainly they can't recoil from this. Then they can stretch out comfortably.

Whenever someone below disappears from the flat, the rest of them screw up their eyes. We know where he has gone. We know where he has hidden.

We'll have to wait for that to happen!

A Picture

It lay on a step of the staircase. A small watercolor. It could have slipped out of the back of an armchair when they threw the old thing out of the flat and carried it up to the attic. Nobody bent down for it. Or if anyone did, he just glanced at it. A fleeting glance. A picture, a little picture.

A forest scene. The setting sun paints the three leaves in a golden-brown light. The forest brook. The stag at the brook. He is looking back at the trees. He waits for his mate. Come! Come! We have nothing to fear.

A forest landscape at dusk.

A name in small letters in the lower left corner: Adolf Hitler.

On the Street

They were standing at the edge of the sidewalk beside an old tree with a thick trunk. The little brown table and the chair. So skinny the autumn sunlight seemed to shine through them. An old couple, the door to their flat being closed to them. They wound up on the street. But here, too, they know how to behave. They aren't beggars!

Someone pulled the drawer out of the table. He walked off with it. He took it away. The table remained there, ransacked. And maybe even haughtier. Please do! If there is still something worth taking away from us! If there is still...

The slender chair as if restraining it. Stop, old fellow! It's not worth bothering with them.

And why should they bother with them. The passersby. The onlookers. Who stopped for a minute or two beside them. A boy rapped on the surface of the table and disappeared thereupon. A bristly-faced man rapped on it for a long time. He simply couldn't stop. He rapped and rapped. Maybe some piece of music. The monotonous, melancholy music of the street.

A girl sat down on the chair. She dangled her legs. She jumped up and ran away, laughing.

An old gentleman in black clothes got a coughing spell. The spell broke on him abruptly as he lolled there. Choking, he embraced the back of the chair. He literally flopped into it. Resigned, the chair put up with that. The old man staggered away. He looked back for a moment rather reproachfully. As if he owed it all to the chair.

There were some who would pick up the chair. They would hold it in the air for an instant. They would put it down.

...some who would lift the table up. They would put it under their arm and start off with it. They would take it back. They would put it down.

...some who would stick their hand where the drawer had been. They would feel about in the empty air as if searching for an important document. Or just for a letter.

...and then some who just stared at them.

“Those two old fogies!”

They didn't explain themselves. They didn't strike back, saying *he brought us to this, we can thank him for this* and the like. They didn't use abusive language, and they didn't complain.

What happened happened.

They stood outside in the autumn sunshine next to the old tree. Down-at-the-heels, translucently thin. And with some sort of profound superiority.

LECTURER GOES HOME

“We thank you for the very valuable lecture.”

The lights were turned off in the narrow, dusty hall. The sign above the platform plunged into darkness: GARBAGE COLLECTORS. The wobbly scrap table was lost in the darkness, the scrap ashtray also vanished, and so did the long scrap bench and the hotplate on the side. Signs on the two sides of the hall: GIVE EVERYTHING TO THE GARBAGE COLLECTOR! THE GARBAGE COLLECTOR IS COMING!

A man with a gray mustache came down from the platform, moving sluggishly. He shook Kürti's hand.

“Excellent, most excellent!”

Kürti stood in front of the table, looking like a mouse with a dusty face. Bits of fur and little pieces of velvet stuck out of his tattered overcoat. The coat sleeves were trimmed in velvet as if he were wearing a woman's coat under them. Kürti hung on to his nice yellow summer gloves.

“One does his best,” Kürti said, and headed for the exit.

A plump, white-haired lady grabbed his arm. “Did Gorky marry that woman? Tell me, comrade, did he eventually marry her?”

Kürti frowned. His imposing nose became tremendously threatening.

“He married her. Of course he did!”

Kürti reached the street. He cut across to the other side, to the front of a photographer's shop. Steps pattered behind him.

“A true orator! He didn't use any notes.”

“He's got real grit!”

Kürti grinned modestly into the shop window. Then he almost fell into the pane when he heard:

“He really gave it to the Americans! He stuck it to them good!”

All was silent, but he still didn't move away from the shop window. Good god, what did I say? Oh yes, when Gorky went to America. Ah, they forget such things, nobody ever remembers them. Heaven knows! One day the Voice of America will sound off: Now we reply to Béla Kürti's vile vilifications!

A policeman with an oval face and a mustache smiled at him from among the pictures. For a moment Kürti forgot about the Voice of America. He looked at the photographs. Did these people ever live at any time? Within, behind the narrow black door, a slender garden path leads to the stall. Within is the gray pillar, a part of the garden. (Or do you wish to have the boating scene?) Vili, Vili Hudák, embraces the girl with an arm on the seashore, at the Roman monument. Then the plates, Vili's face and the girl's soak in the dark green water.

Kürti left the window. If only he could talk about these things: the shops in the suburbs, the houses, the windows. That woman next to the window didn't applaud at the end of the lecture. She scowled when I mentioned America. That's the dangerous type, they keep an eye on you. If something happens, she'll squeal on me, she won't forget me.

He could already see that pale face turning slowly toward him at the hearing and saying directly to him:

"I heard what an anti-American lecture you gave, I heard you myself, Béla Kürti, at the Garbage Collectors."

He stretched his neck out of his overcoat. "Distinguished Council President! Distinguished Royal Tribunal! All I said was that they did not let Gorky into the hotel because he was not married to her, that is all I said, and I got thirty forints per lecture, I lived out of that, while others..."

A bony, unfriendly finger rose. "I warn you, dear Kürti..."

"Dear Kürti" mopped his brow. A nice mess, I say... He bought some popcorn on the corner. A wind rose, a sharp, rude wind. It blew his overcoat up, and bits of fur began to flutter. He looked at the church standing on a little square. I should go in and sit down on a bench in back. Just stretch my legs out and sit in the empty church.

Popcorn was falling out of the paper bag.

"I could go into the Sobbing Monkey for a shot of rum. Ambrus must be back by now from Kispest, where he gave a talk on atomic energy. Since when did he know anything about physics? And what do I know about it? Next week I take on the atom, then Gorky again. Csulak is expounding on the Constitution in Sashalom, and some place in Angyalföld, Alpár..."

He threw the empty bag away.

The street lamp blinked drowsily. On the other side, the shops were getting ready to retire, just as in Sashalom, Kispest, and Angyalföld, where the lecturers are returning home from. Nobody remembers the lectures. The apprentices, the janitors, and the washerwomen, they have all forgotten them.

"It's a good thing nobody pays any attention to them. For instance, to this America thing. Oh, maybe I should say something to that woman who sat by the window. But where is she? What would I say? Come now. But it's true, I always get carried away. The other day it was the church. 'We demand an agreement with our working people-and if not... (a sallow geezer in the first row was startled)... and if not, the Vatican has only itself to blame! It has forfeited its role in Hungary!' I shouldn't have said that. What do I care about the Vatican? I also said something about the pope's robe. That nobody can hang on to the pope's robe any longer! What is the pope's robe actually like? And the pope's garden? And this time America. I point out that they could have let Gorky into that hotel. My god, so she isn't his wife - did they have to make such a big thing out of it? No, ladies and gentlemen, it is wrong to think like that. Excuse me, but what does that lead to? So we should not be amazed that having such an attitude, they beat Negroes up."

"Did I talk about that too? Lynching? Mother of God!"

Kürti boarded a streetcar. He stood on the platform, next to the motorman. He looked into the car. A man with a wrinkled face stared at him from the corner. A shapeless sack between his legs. Suddenly he spoke up. "It's good to see you, really good to bump into each other like this. Because, tell me, comrade, what is it about the color green? Yes, green?"

A few passengers turned toward Kürti. He didn't know if he should enter the car and...

The man with the sack came out to the platform.

"Green harms the eyes. So does pink. Blue is good for them. Right? Blue is good for them."

"How?" Kürti asked.

"Comrade said when you were with us at the Soapmakers and talked about colors, how they unhinge our disposition. Let's not sit too long in the Red Corner because that will stir us up. That's the way you put it: Stir us up."

Kürti stepped close to the motorman. The motorman disappeared under his big black fur cap.

A woman stuck her head out. "They never explain anything. A lecturer at our place..."

"Please," said Kürti, "I cover mostly literary topics."

The man wearing the fur cap waved his hand. "I remember you, I remember you quite well. You drank a lot of water at the table, you gulped it down."

Black sky rushed past the streetcar. No stops. A few scattered houses in the distance. An unfamiliar wild area.

Kürti withdrew into the corner. "Mostly books, comrades."

"They remold nature," came from the car. "Plowed fields replace streams."

"And tell me now, how are we going to conquer space? How?"

The streetcar stopped. Kürti jumped off.

The streetcar rattled on. But he couldn't move. His knees shook. "Who could have talked about colors? About nature? That beast Alpár for sure!"

He cut across the tracks, then a dark meadow.

He caught sight of the apartment house. Its second floor leaning a bit sideways as if dangling from a long iron bar. The three walls of a burned-out room to the side.

He stopped at the gate. Inside, in the staircase, members of the audience are waiting. The man who is stirred up by the Red Corner and the others. They are sitting on the steps waiting for him.

A skinny man wearing a black hat was standing in front of the wall newspaper. The light illuminated his nose and his protruding chin. He was leaning toward an article. He turned to Kürti.

"Ah, the editor! Do come here. Do you see it, my article here, down here. Peace rally in Britain. That's its heading."

"Oh, yes."

"It is a breezy, sarcastic little article on why they didn't let the peace delegation enter Sheffield. I pinch Churchill and company a bit. Not hard, just a little nip. I rap them just a little. My name is below Gyula Erős. I admit I didn't want to sign it, but they told me to. Now please bend over here... closer, closer."

Kürti bent closer. "Beware!"

"Yes, Beware! They scrawled it there so I..." His voice faltered.

They looked at each other. An underwater silence filled the stairway. The building and its burned-out stories were immersed. Just the two of them, like two fish that have bumped into each other.

"They ordered me to write it, the building super. My son is a priest in Pécs. Sir, you know that. He is back home now, and he gets everything at the market. Milk, sugar. Sugar disappeared again two weeks ago, but they give him some. We send him to do the shopping. And now this: Beware! This is how they threaten me!"

"Who can it be?"

"I don't know, but certain kinds turn up in this place who..."

"The Voice of America?"

"What are you saying, sir? We just have a little radio, and besides... I didn't mean to trouble you, sir. Do pardon me."

Kürti looked back from the stairs. Erős was still standing in front of the wall newspaper.

The wall disappeared at the fourth-floor landing, and Kürti stepped into the sky. All life had ceased below. He was accompanied on his way by darkly swirling clouds. He opened a gray-green door on the fifth floor. As the key grated in the lock, someone in the flat gave a groan. A kitchen followed, where the faucet was propped up with a stick. Then came a little room.

A wizened shaving brush sat on the window sill, next to it bread wrapped in newspaper and a cut-up tube of toothpaste on a paperback from the Bargain Library Series.

He put his hand on the stove.

"No heat today either, and that bicycle is still here."

A knocking on the wall, then a female voice groaning.

"Béla, aren't you going to look in on me?"

Béla knocked back. "There is no heat again, and what is my room, a storehouse?"

A short silence, then the groaning: "What can I do, a poor widow all alone. The stove isn't working."

"But you charge me for heat!"

"Béla, a glass of water..."

"Your brother keeps his bicycle and his boots here. He brings his girlfriend up - the other day I couldn't get in..."

"I can't stand your talking like this. What a shame... That tone."

"What about the room, the room?"

"Do you think I'm not freezing in this dirty hole too? Dear God, what do I get out of life? I even gave you my husband's shoes."

"Those bots!"

"Béla, aren't you going to come over?"

Next door the bed groaned, then it seemed as if the widow was skating on the wall. Silence finally came.

“I really should go see her,” thought Kúrti. “She brought me soup when I was sick and ran out for medicine. I’ll go-like hell I will!”

He undressed. Then he put his clothes on again. He pulled a sweater over his wool shirt. He turned off the light. He spread the overcoat over himself. His nose was cold - his nose and forehead were cold. Something plopped on his face. “Bugs, bugs again? I’ll get up and pour kerosene on the walls! I’ll set the bed, the room on fire. No, it’s the plaster. It’s crumbling. This is something new, it didn’t happen before. The plaster is crumbling. I’ll turn the light on.”

But he no longer had the strength. He muttered something about the plaster crumbling, then fell asleep. In his dream he was standing in the center of a circle he couldn’t escape from no matter how hard he tried. Faces passed before him again and again. One of the men had a sack on his back. “We remember, we remember everything,” they droned away like a chorus. “We listen to everything and we remember everything.” A raspy voice broke through the chorus. “The president has ordered the use of the atom bomb. We will drop the first atom bomb on America’s number-one enemy: Béla Kúrti!”

Kúrti was already racing along. Suddenly he rose up and flew, how long he himself didn’t know.

He was standing on a sandy beach. The sand glittered in the sunlight. Cabanas lay scattered on the beach, the ocean some distance away. Two men came from the direction of the cliffs. He recognized them. The president and Gorky. They were walking arm-in-arm, tremendously friendly.

Kúrti waved to them.

“Wonderful, wonderful!”

When the cleaning woman entered the room in the morning, she found a grizzled old man in the bed. He lay wheezing under the covers, and bits of plaster pelted his face.

LECTURER ON CASTLE HILL

Lecturer: Béla Kürti; respondent: Endre Ambrus. That's what the note said. Mrs. Ferenc pushed it toward Kürti awkwardly. She adjusted her gray wrap, looking at him almost tearfully.

"You see, I have already written it down. The library is sponsoring the event. For the construction workers. They have never had anything like this before."

s Kürti looked at the books on the long shelves. The woman's face, her dog-like look. (She wants to score some good points with these lectures.)

Then he said:

"I have never spoken to construction workers."

"All the better! You will face new people... just think of the responsibility. They came from the villages when workers were recruited. You should see how they live! Shiny, clean bathrooms. A library with a radio. This lecture was their idea, they requested it themselves."

"I have never spoken to construction workers."

"Haven't you ever been to a village?"

"A long time ago."

"Your parents?"

"My mother owned a dairy store on Szondy Street."

Mrs. Ferenc stared out the window at the inky sky. A fly buzzed against the pane, bounced, and bounded back again.

"Some members of the Council will also be present, Comrade Kürti. The lecture must be held. You won't let me down, will you?"

"A fifty note?"

"And we will also pay Ambrus, the respondent. Shall I expect you on Friday then? At five? We'll go up to Castle Hill from here." She glanced at the clock. "The library is opening immediately. It is good we could talk without being disturbed."

She escorted Kürti through a dim corridor.

"Did you hear, Comrade Kürti, that they are going to publish my novel? What do you think of that, after all the trouble I had! One reader pushed it on to another... The things they did! Have you read my story about the girl student who comes into the library?"

"Of course I read it! See you on Friday, comrade."

Kürti threw himself down the stairs. He stopped for a moment in front of the building. He looked toward the Castle. From this angle only the capriciously winding, rusty-colored walls could be seen. "The construction workers will be there. What shall I tell them about reading? So will some members from the Council, they already have it in for me."

At home, the landlady, the widow of a Magistrate of the Judicature, brewed some tea for him. Then the thin-faced, grayhaired woman sat down beside him on the sofa.

"September 6, Béla."

“September 6? What’s so important about that?”

“That’s when something will happen, you’ll see. A war.”

“Come now, forget about your dates. But why September 6 precisely?”

“An angel appeared in my cousin’s dream. A sign in its hands. September 6. This was on it. She had the same dream twice. Also, in a séance at the major’s wife’s...”

“Now a séance!”

“I know you don’t believe in them, Béla, but the spirit of Franz Liszt appeared...”

“And he also said September 6?”

“He did.”

“Splendid!”

“What did you say, Béla?”

“Could you give me a slice of buttered bread?”

“I’ll butter it right away, Béla. Just don’t get nervous, you are always so nervous. Do you think it would be all right for me to go to that lecture on Castle Hill? I’d really like to hear you sometime.”

Ambrus was sitting next to the window in the café, translating Rilke. He leaned his high forehead on his palm and stared at the little square pieces of paper. He dipped into the Rilke book. Then his hand hung for an instant between the book and the manuscript. He didn’t even look up when Kürti sat down beside him.

Kürti flicked one of the sheets toward himself. Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes and underneath: Rainer Maria Rilke.

“Why don’t you translate ‘The Cornetist’?”

“That’s still not the real Rilke... it’s Art Nouveauish.”

“Art Nouveauish! Art Nouveauish! I just love this pomposity.” Kürti shook his head. He got up and ordered coffee and soda water. Then he sat down next to Ambrus again.

“Who are you doing it for?”

“Good question!”

“Ah yes... Listen. We have a lecture on Friday. On Castle Hill. For construction workers.”

Ambrus emerged from Rilke.

“You listen to me, old chap. Yesterday I spoke in a movie theatre. I appeared with the unemployed entertainers during the intermission. I did Mikszáth. Why do they need two lecturers?”

“It’s going to be a big show. Members of the Council are coming.”

“What is the topic?”

“Reading. How beneficial reading is.”

“I’ve already talked on that at a poorhouse and to the conductors.”

“No film is more exciting than reading. That’s how I’d begin. The protagonists of a novel live with us long after we have closed the book.”

“Reading leads us into the jungle of the soul...”

“Have you lost your marbles, Ambrus? The jungle of the soul? Is that what you want to say?”

“Why not? I also spoke to the conductors about the great inner adventure, about the magnificent emanation...”

“That’s why nobody understands you.”

“What do you mean they don’t?”

“Definitely not. And the social system has to be worked into the presentation.”

“You take up the social system! I’ll talk about childhood as the time when the soul suddenly awakens to the...”

“Suddenly awakens!”

“What’s wrong with that? The other day somebody asked me at the Thermos Bottle Works...”

“Stop. We can’t do it like this. On Thursday we will sit down together and talk the whole matter over seriously.”

They were silent. Kúrti took hold of his friend’s arm.

“Listen. My landlady wants to attend the lecture. She can’t stay at home.” He paused for a moment. He stared stonily at the table, then said: “Because she is always waiting for the time when...”

“How close have they got? Have you heard?”

“The Ninth District and Újpest. That’s where they’re now rounding them up.”

“And Buda?”

“They’re always working it over.”

Kúrti passed his hands over the table. He looked quite small, sitting next to the window. The sun shined on him, it shined under his thinning hair. He badly wanted to say something. That he has nobody, just this widow. No parents, no one who cares about him, who says a few words... And this woman is such a... such a... No, he can’t say this to him. Not to Ambrus or anybody else.

Ambrus tossed down a shot of rum at the bar.

“Hey, old man!”

Still another respondent showed up for the Friday program. Pali Boniváth, the colonel’s son. The colonel’s pension had been withdrawn long ago, but he said:

“We will hold our ground in the face of all circumstances!”

And held his ground he did. He worked for a coffin maker. He was sent to take measurements at better families.

In his spare time Colonel Boniváth played chess in the Harlequin Café and toward May on the benches in the Park or on the street. He spent his spare time compiling a list of the names and addresses of former officers. He used phone books and name directories at apartment house entrances. “I have to locate everyone of them. We might still have use for it.”

His son agonized. “Father, where do you think all this will lead to?”

Pali was now on his way to the library, just after another of these conversations. He asked his father to hide the list of names. The colonel smiled. With the board under his arm, he was going to the park to play chess. He accompanied his son to the library.

Pali went up to Mrs. Ferenc. There were several people ahead of him. From the window he saw his father's tall, slightly bent figure as he made his way to the Park, the chessboard under his arm. A man stepped alongside him and spoke to him.

Pali's hand slid to the windowpane. He felt the floor might drop from under him.

No, no problem! The two men sat down on a bench at the edge of the sidewalk, and Colonel Boniváth opened the chessboard.

"We haven't seen you for a long time, Pali."

Mrs. Ferenc was standing before him in her gray wrap, her lips badly chapped, as if she had walked across a windswept meadow.

"I've been chasing around, looking for a job. I'll take one as a laborer." He looked at her. "Any kind of job?"

She leaned her head to the side.

"You know that my son, Déneske, is working in Inota. He is writing a novel about it. How gifted he is! Much more gifted than I... he really is. My novel is being published. What do you say to that?"

"That's really wonderful."

"What about the theatre, Pali? After all, you are at the National Theatre."

"Just as an extra. That's not enough, not even for car fare."

"You once told me you want to become a director."

"Well..." Boniváth made a motion. His raincoat rustled. Then he thrust his hands in his pockets and looked at the floor very hard. "I don't believe that's possible."

"You don't? A young man, and you say that?"

Boniváth didn't answer. (What does she want? Of course, they are publishing her novel. She's been beating everybody over the head with that for a year.)

Mrs. Ferenc spoke about writing again, about the experience it calls for. You have to know life.

"Yes, you have to know life," nodded the colonel's son. In the meantime, he squinted out the window. His father was still playing chess on the bench.

"That's what you need. A little turmoil, a little experience."

"I'd like to borrow Hebbel's dramas."

Mrs. Ferenc went behind the counter. "Hebbel? It's not in, I believe. You always ask for something like that. But a few new titles have arrived. Do you want to look at them?"

"Thank you, but..."

He was already on his way out, but Mrs. Ferenc spoke after him. There would be a lecture on Castle Hill on Friday. On a book. Another respondent is needed.

“You know, doing a book is a heavy responsibility. For construction workers. I have two lecturers, two fine comrades. Kürti and Ambrus. Do you know them?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“They are such eager boys. They are exactly the kind we need here. I can’t bring just anybody along.”

“Of course, not just anybody.”

“I’ll see you at five, Pali. At five, here in the library. Then I’ll get hold of that...”

“Hebbel!”

The four of them started out for Castle Hill from the library. The four of them marched up to the presentation. Kürti and Mrs. Ferenc in front, Ambrus and Boniváth in back. Ambrus had already met the colonel’s son somewhere. In some café, thought Kürti.

Mrs. Ferenc spoke up.

“It’s possible some people will show up from the motion picture studio.”

“What!”

“The program is being filmed for the news, for the newsreel.”

They were going up some steps. Kürti looked at the stunted woman walking in her yellow coat beside him. How she is smiling. At having the filming come as such a big surprise. She didn’t want to tell them about it in advance.

The air turned heavy, suffocating. Everything became very hollow. Mrs. Ferenc sounded like a clacker.

“We’ll go see it at the movies. How exciting it will be!”

Kürti felt himself turning red. I’ll kick her! I’ll kick her down the steps! The pig, the dirty climber. All the strings she had to pull to get on film! And she did it, in the end she did it”

He looked back at Ambrus and Boniváth.

“Hebbel has the most dramatic temperament.”

Boniváth said this, then stopped. Ambrus did too. Both looked at Kürti, who had turned and was descending the steps.

“What’s up?”

“There’s going to be some filming. The lecture is being filmed for the news.”

Kürti stood there on the steps, his slight body hovering between Mrs. Ferenc and Ambrus and Boniváth. Below him the city with its streetcars, churches, cafés, and above, up high, the gutted, blinded Castle in its ramshackle boredom.

Up high, above them, Mrs. Ferenc spoke up.

“What did you say, Comrade Kürti?”

Kürti still stood facing Ambrus and Boniváth. If I could only run away or rush down. I will never squeak through that newsreel. That’s all I need! Everyone will see it, abroad too.

“What did you say, Comrade Kürti?”

Kürti turned around like a take in slow motion. He continued up the steps. He could still hear Ambrus:

“We don’t have to go on the platform.”

“Of course not, respondents don’t have to.”

All they think of is themselves! They are saving their own hides. So that at the hearing... They were just respondents... voices from the audience... they really didn’t know what would happen. But Ambrus will still pocket the fifty forints.

“You should highlight today’s novels, Comrade Kürti. You know that’s essential. Do your very best!”

“I definitely will!” (You just wait, you rotter, I’ll do my very best for you, don’t worry, I will! I’ll spill everything! She wants the lecture and filming so they will take notice of her and she can get somebody else into trouble. I don’t have a single piece of proper clothing, then in the newsreel, like a minister, I...)

Ambrus behind him: “I am not so sold on Mauriac and, in general, on the Catholic novel.”

(Now it’s Mauriac! What snobs! The Catholic novel, beautiful... Ambrus talks about this, he can talk about this when I... He never was my friend.)

The stairs carried Kürti ever closer. He felt as if somebody was already filming him from somewhere.

They reached Úri Street. A wind rose with dust and sand.

Ambrus stepped alongside Kürti and took his arm.

“The wind is transporting dust from the Royal Castle and the street. Cities are flying in the wind with houses and gardens. Trees are growing in the wind, shrubs are bursting into bloom.”

“What is this? Is there something?”

“I think I’ll write it down. Look at the street! The Street of Colonels. Isn’t that so? It seems retired colonels are living in every house with their bottles of smelly mineral water.”

“You and your colonels!”

Construction workers came in overalls, coats thrown over their shoulders, clay and mud on their shoes. Pale faces blended together. At first sight you couldn’t tell the men from the women. The old from the young. Then you could make out the hardened face of a woman, next a youth with a blond mustache and a package under his arm. Every one of them with a package under their arms as if carrying all their belongings with them.

The youngsters! With dull, old faces, stained shirts or sunbaked bodies naked to the waist. A torn peaked German soldier’s cap on the head of a boy, his shirt the tiger skin of a tank trooper, which could once have also been a woman’s nightgown. He was blowing smoke from rolled-up paper. Smoke flew in clouds.

Mrs. Ferenc stopped him.

“Don’t you know smoking isn’t good for you?”

The boy seemed to want to flee between her legs. But he stopped, with his head hanging down.

“What do your parents say about that? Your father...?”

The boy jerked his head up. “Ask him! Go after him. He is in Pentele, if you must know.”

“What does he do?”

“Drink! He is already drinking up next month.”

His face grew even darker. Mrs. Ferenc stopped. The lecturers didn’t speak either.

The boy turned to Boniváth. “Give me a cigarette!

Boniváth had two cigarettes. He pushed one, still in his wallet, toward the boy. A crumpled tenner with bits of tobacco clinging to it was also visible.

The boy stared at the wallet. Boniváth took out one of the cigarettes.

“Here, please.”

The boy stuck the cigarette behind an ear and galloped away. Suddenly he turned around. He cocked his arm toward Mrs. Ferenc. She gasped for breath.

“Such things do happen... yes, they do.”

Boniváth lit his last cigarette.

“Still, it’s good there are such people in this street. And in old Ruszwurm café too... There’s a picture among the old engravings on its wall. Lenin and Gorky playing chess.”

Mrs. Ferenc was looking at a low, little building. Its green entrance seemed to be shored up with sandbags.

“You won’t be able to recognize the Castle. There will be a college in it, Béla, a people’s college.”

“I know.”

She led the group onward. Up to one of the buildings, the party office. The porter didn’t know anything about them. As Kürti looked at the narrow little booth and the dingy wall, he thought, maybe the filming won’t take place after all. If he could just squeak through.

In the party office the secretary was making a phone call. He signaled to Mrs. Ferenc from the corner of his eye. She and her three lecturers stood around the table. Finally the secretary hung up.

“Comrade?”

Mrs. Ferenc talked about the lecture. And how she has brought her boys along. No, that can’t be expressed any other way. After all, her boys - the lecturers - came so enthusiastically.

“Boys,” Ambrus said.

“Yes, comrade?”

Ambrus spread his arms out before the party secretary. No, he really doesn’t have anything to say.

The “boys” stood in front of the low-browed, plumpish secretary. He leaned toward Mrs. Ferenc.

“A lecture, comrade? Here? Now?”

Mrs. Ferenc looked alarmed. "People are coming from the film studio, from the Council." Nobody heard her. She burst out: "What does that 'now' mean, Comrade Spányik, what do you mean 'now'? Didn't we clear it with the trade union? Do you want to postpone it again? For the third time? Yes, for the third time? Maybe you didn't take the steps required to organize the audience?"

"Didn't take steps! The loudspeaker blared all morning: Lecturer Béla Kürti, Lecturer Béla Kürti!"

Lecturer Béla Kürti winced. (All morning... damn it... But it doesn't really matter. They don't take note of a man's name here.)

"Bread coupons came today."

"I know that. Everybody knows that."

"But the workers weren't able to exchange them. You can't after six. They don't have any bread, they didn't get any bread. Understand, comrade?"

"But..."

"A lecture for them? Do you know what is going on here? A revolution! Do you know what happened here this morning? They stormed the office! They pounded on the door! The straw sacks are rotting!"

"Straw sacks?"

"That they sleep on. The toilets are plugged up. And there is no bread, no bread! They got doughnuts for lunch. They almost wrecked the place... they don't want doughnuts. Give us a plate of beans... And some bread! Bread!" The party secretary turned to the young men. "I have enough trouble with them. This is all I need. You and your lecture!"

Mrs. Ferenc grabbed his arm.

"That's what we will talk about. Bread coupons!"

Silence fell. A lecture about bread coupons! The lecturers stepped back as if clearing a path for somebody. Then Kürti stood in front of Mrs. Ferenc. He passed his hand through his long, thin hair. His voice quivered as he spoke.

"No, I don't think so, not about bread coupons. Maybe I won't after all."

Beside him, on two sides, Ambrus and Boniváth:

"We can't give a lecture when they are hungry."

"They won't pay attention anyway."

Kürti again: "I won't talk about bread coupons! I've been to swimming pools, saying sports are the real defense of the homeland. I have lectured in morgues. Where else are you going to send me, what more will I have to...?" He choked up.

"You can't to hungry people."

"There is no point to it "

Mrs. Ferenc could barely talk. "What happened, boys? What do you want? I sent you to the swimming pool, Comrade Kürti? Didn't you ask me to do that? You needed money? And are you now leaving me in the lurch? Ditching me? What if they come from the Council and the film studio? What a disgrace! You can't abandon me, boys, you just can't!"

The party secretary leaned over Mrs. Ferenc. He grabbed her shoulders.

“I don’t give a damn about the Council, about the film studio. Report me wherever you like. There won’t be a lecture here today. Understand? Now get the hell out of here!”

The four of them were descending Castle Hill. Mrs. Ferenc and Béla Kürti in front, Ambrus and Boniváth in back. Sometimes she spoke to Kürti, sometimes she turned around to the other two.

“This is all your fault! Yes, you are the only ones to blame! You can’t behave like this, I am going to enter it in the report. I won’t permit it. You planned it all in advance... I am positive you did!”

“She has gone berserk,” Ambrus thought. “She will really backbite us, maybe even...”

“I’ll never get Hebbel’s dramas, why bother to go to the library at all,” Boniváth thought. “All I need is for her to stir things up a bit... that my father... That list of names must be hidden, the list of officers’ names, it will have to be buried tonight!”

Not one of them spoke. They walked behind Mrs. Ferenc, and they themselves couldn’t understand why they didn’t just leave her.

She became increasingly infuriated by the silence.

“You don’t talk? You don’t converse? I know very well what is going on in your minds. What you are speculating about. I know you well! I know you very well, Comrade Kürti!”

Kürti stopped. Shame and bitterness burned in him. Now, right now, he should throw in her face how much he despises the whole dirty mess! But he just kept reeling off with some kind of shuddering terror as if he had forgotten everything else:

“I will not lecture on that! Never! Never!”

ON THE BALCONY

He was watering the plants. Sprinkling them. Rather half-heartedly. Without conviction. The plants sensed it, the plants on the balcony. They were coated with dust in the faded-green box. The climbing plant crept up the worn, crumbling mortar wall, and yet... It was barely possible to stir on the tiny balcony. He cautiously turned around. He looked down at the street, at the square. Trucks below the window. People walking dogs on the pathways of the square. A girl in jeans with two dogs. One a gloomy-looking bulldog. An over-aged detective. The other distinguished, long-haired. They never speak to each other. A black-haired boy with a black dog heaved into sight behind the girl. Thank God!

And he must be on this rickety balcony.

Yes, on the balcony with the shattered, blackened stone facing. A piece of its ledge is missing. As if a bite had been taken out of it. The whole thing is falling into decay, just like the building itself.

He splashed a little water on the deck. Then he just stood there holding the empty can.

This balcony could give way at any time. A girl actually said: "Listen, I wouldn't go out there if I was you."

Some day he will fly away with the balcony. Stones, stone fragments plopping around him. He'll fly over the trees. Across the square.

The night is a sweat-soaked shirt.

This appeared before him. This was on the slip on the writing desk inside. One single perplexing line.

The night is a sweat-soaked shirt.

What is he getting at? What kind of story is he getting entangled in? Come now! He isn't getting entangled in anything. There is no story. Moreover, his stories! Just that night from the years of the Fifties. From the depth of the Fifties.

I couldn't sleep. It would have been very important to get some sleep. At least for a couple of hours. But it was hopeless! I tossed and turned in the tangled covers. I adjusted the pillow time and time again. Maybe I had a fever. I didn't dare take my temperature. My throat was scratchy, it twinged and burned. I went to the window, stared out into the darkness. The yellowish light of a window across the way. The only light. They are sitting up with a sick person. He will never die and never get up. Those keeping vigil take turns. The light is always on. The house of sickness.

I watched this for a time.

Back to bed.

I lay motionless. My eyes closed, my hands clasped on my chest. I sleep. Actually, I am already asleep. I sat up. I hurled the little pillow into the darkness.

The morning's uncertain grayness. The hurled pillow in the corner.

Getting up. Setting out for the railroad station. Then the journey to Pereszlény. A lecture on a book at the student hostel. Popov's *Steel and Slag*. We salute the comrade author!

The comrade author had not authored anything for a long time. He had lost out everywhere. Actually, no place was left for him to be lost out of. The periodicals in which formerly some of his stories had appeared also ceased publication.

How many of us could have been in the smoke-filled compartment? It's odd, but again I saw only the pillow tossed into the corner. The absurdly crumpled bedsheets.

Railroad workers were playing cards. One took off his heavy railroad coat, another just unbuttoned it. A woman was drinking. She sat in her shabby fur coat. She leaned her head back and drank. Or rather, she was plied with drinks. A man was bending over her with the bottle. She laughed barely audibly. She put her hand on her mouth, only to pull it away immediately.

“Why are you doing that?”

He heard the quiet voice very clearly. As if someone had just now spoken up from the square. Or simply from the air.

An old man in the compartment:

“Tell me, why are you doing that? Don't you see she is...?”

Then immediately an old woman:

“Stop! Stay out of it!”

They sat huddled together in the corner.

I took out the Popov. I tried dipping into it. Balázs is traveling on Mikszáth somewhere to Kecskemét. And I on Popov.

The muddy floor. The doddering seats. Aren't they heating at all?

The two old people huddled together. The railroaders played cards. The woman wearing the fur coat slept.

I couldn't imagine we would ever arrive anywhere.

The train ran through the fog. Ran! Crawled. Jolted. Stopped, winded.

Several passengers got off.

A mailman went through the compartment with an enormous black bag hanging from his shoulder. He was heading toward me. What's this, a letter? Is he bringing me a letter? Maybe from Adrienne Fiam?

The permit! The entry permit!

I didn't attack my pockets right off. I didn't turn them inside out right off. Instead, cautiously with the tips of my fingers. This is my Army Reserve Status card. Temporarily unfit. What is this “temporarily” bit? What do they mean? My fingers stopped for an instant, then moved on... The Writers' Association membership card. They haven't ejected me yet. They just called me in. They chatted with me. A woman with pale blue eyes sat on the other side of the table. We haven't seen anything from you for a long time, Comrade Zsámboky. She fastened her eyes on me. Are you working on something? I am working on... yes. A novel... a kind of novel. What is it about? About a soccer team. A flabbergasted face. A soccer team? And how are you coming with it? Good lord! How am I coming with it? Anyway, I said something. She just looked at me. Rather drearily. We haven't given up on you yet, Comrade Zsámboky.

They hadn't given up on me yet.

Meanwhile, the searching went on. A card. It could be an invitation. Who is inviting me? And where? The Army Reserve Status thing again. But the permit! To enter the border zone! I will have to get it stamped. And again on departure. Arrival and departure. Except I won't get there because... But why don't I have a wallet. A miserable wallet in which...

“Lose something?”

“No, nothing.”

The old gentleman leaned toward me for a little while. His wife pulled him back.

And I in front of them with the police permit. Completely exhausted!

I got up. I gazed out.

Fog-choked houses. Ghostly houses.

I went into the corridor.

A forsaken, frozen field. Mounds of dirty snow.

Back to the compartment.

They stared at me. The two old people. Who is this character? He gets up, sits down, gets up again. He gropes through all his pockets. He rummages through his briefcase. He leafs through a book. He shuts it immediately.

The others like in a dream.

That character in a brownish-purple coat gets off the train. She totters around the station with her ridiculously little bag. She asks someone something.

The police?

The police station on the side of the hill. A family house. In years past it welcomed guests warmly. The host came out to the gate.

A fat policeman stamped on the document in some kind of hall.

“It must be stamped on the way back!”

“Yes, on the way back.”

When will this “on the way back” take place? In any case, I will have to get up at dawn again. Until then a bed or a chair.

Now to the hostel. But how do I get there?

I should have asked at the police station. Well, there I didn't ask about anything.

Now, however: “How do I get to the hostel? The vocational students? Please, which way is it?”

Please, which way...?

Please, which way...?

A narrow bridge above a narrow creek. A girl in a blue wrap on the railing, her knees drawn up. A schoolbag under her arm.

No bridge of any kind! No girl of any kind! That must have been some other place. Some other trip, some other town.

Down on the square a white-maned man embraced a tree with one arm. As if taking it to dance. He eased himself slowly to the ground with a serene intimacy. He reposed beside the tree. He gazed up with a rosy smile. He beckoned toward Zsámboky. Zsámboky drew farther back.

There wasn't a creek. There wasn't a bridge. And there wasn't a girl.

Gardens. Desolate gardens giving way to each other. Fallen leaves. Yellow, yellowish green, pale green, rust-red leaves in listless piles. When did they fall? This autumn? Last year? Or longer ago? The gardens overflow with them. They overflow with hatred. The hatred of the dead leaves.

“Have you ever thought of joining the party?”

Where did that voice come from?

From a room again. From the other side of the table again. I could barely make out the woman's face. She pulled back from the range of the lamplight. Maybe only when her chin moved.

Actually, I had long expected this question. For it to be delivered in a room during a conversation. Still, I could just barely utter: “I haven't reached that point yet.”

“You haven't yet?”

I looked at that chin, at the mouth's faintly visible outline. Then it tumbled out of me: “God... (the woman gave a start) I believe in Him.”

She stiffened.

I repeated it: “I believe in Him.”

Then we just sat sunk in silence.

A hand rose from the other side. It reached across. It brushed mine barely perceptibly.

“I do too.”

Rotting benches in the garden. Seats broken. Or already gone. Only those arms rising into the air. Unexpectedly a willowy yellow bench. Almost elegant. Yes indeed, elegance itself. Listen, sir! You are really holding your own well. But be careful because one of these days... In short, I'd better be careful.

The gardens were left behind.

The houses receded. Just like the Danube in its own sulkiness. Suddenly I found myself on the bank. So unexpectedly that I nearly walked into it.

A prison-gray building. Solitary, ominous. The hostel. A sign on the gate. I didn't read it. If I am asked sometime where I'd been, in which hostel. I don't know, I don't remember.

Dogs escorted me across the courtyard. Shaggy, sleepy-looking dogs. And a lanky young man with a stooped back. Is he the one who checked my identification at the gate? Or did he just now appear? Join me now? With a scarf, without a coat. The scarf carefully wrapped around his throat. His throat is sensitive.

“Well, yes... I also have a lot of trouble with my throat.”

He didn't hear me. He just walked beside me bundled up in his scarf. Go and choke!

“We are going to the office.”

The dogs followed us silently. They didn't even let out an occasional yelp. At times they stopped for a moment. They turned toward me. Did they want to ask me something?

Boys dressed in blue overcoats crossed the courtyard. Faces of iron filings. Of fallen wood shavings.

The dogs bowed their heads low. As if scrubbing the pavement. These were humiliated at some time. Badly humiliated.

The light was on in the office.

Portraits on the wall. The very same portraits always and everywhere. In offices, schools, rooms, corridors. And now here.

I didn't look up. I didn't want to see those faces.

An older woman in a pink sweater in the range of the lamplight. The sore throat behind me as he delivered me.

"The comrade lecturer."

The woman glanced up as she took me over.

"Comrade Jávör?"

"János Zsámboky."

Her glance died away.

"I don't know why Mrs. Morvai does this to me! I can never get Dezső Jávör."

The escort was silent.

I was silent also. Well, naturally. After all, Dezső Jávör is something else. A model lecturer. You just can't get him from the Society.

She examined my papers. The escort had not moved yet. Who knows, he may have to take me back.

The woman with a sigh:

"All right!"

She pointed for me to take a seat. She became absorbed in some sort of ledger.

The escort disappeared.

I sank into my coat. My briefcase beside me.

She made notes. She twisted her hair with a finger. Her pencil glided across a sheet.

"You still have to wait."

I nodded.

Maybe I should take off my coat. At least unbutton it. But I only loosened my scarf.

Whispering behind my back. Someone entered, someone left.

The door opened again. Papers were put on the table.

The woman, as she looked at them:

"I say, enough of this matter!"

She went out. I was left to myself with the lamp and the faces on the wall.

Matter? What matter? Did they get a new principal? Did somebody escape? They caught and brought him back?

My fingers began moving on my coat buttons. They moved and drew back.

A man in the lamplight. An indifferent back bending forward. He was scribbling in a notebook. He leaned back. He stared into the air. Behaving as if absolutely alone.

Maybe there really isn't anyone else in the room. Just a coat thrown on a chair. A briefcase beside a chair.

"May I have a cup of tea?"

He looked at me a trifle offended. Offended and suspicious. He sat there motionless for a while. He stood up and went out. He returned with a tin mug and a little porcelain plate.

"Thank you."

He nodded and left. Somehow this business about the tea had irritated him.

The tea was tepid, watery. Stale, broken crackers on the plate. Crushed pieces of a sugar wafer. Where did he scrape them up? In any case, he vanished. Just like the woman. They won't ever come back again. Maybe they are talking about me in a room.

I slipped out of my coat. I sipped the tea.

Steps resounding in the corridor. A marching column. The marching of a brigade.

Someone will enter in a moment.

I stood up. They must not catch me off guard.

Nobody came in. The steps died away.

For a few minutes I remained standing facing the door.

Darkness outdoors. Only light from lamps in the courtyard. The dogs are circling each other. Occasional sharp barks. Deep, throaty sounds.

Some singing in a distant room? No, nothing.

"We can go!"

A man in the doorway? His face invisible in the darkness.

I took Popov out of my briefcase. I tried to smile.

"Well then..."

A cold stone corridor. Greenish gray doors. Schoolrooms? Workshops?

My guide descended on metal stairs.

"If you will permit me, I will go ahead."

"This way, comrade!"

What is this? A prison corridor? A cellar?

He suddenly turned toward me.

"I will give just a few words of introduction. What is the comrade's name?"

"János Zsámboky."

Suddenly I stood before them. As if abruptly pushed into the large room. Into that large room under ground.

The boys in a semicircle. In blue coats, overalls. Such tired faces! If they could sit down, they would fall asleep. But they can't sit down.

After a few short steps I stopped in front of them.

The introductory words were delivered. Silence. But not the silence of expectation.

I heard my voice:

"Steel and Slag..."

This voice came from a distance. Ill at ease, dusty. At times it rasped unexpectedly.

"In this novel... in this great novel about building..."

Again the voice lapsed into nothingness.

I tried to capture a glance. Hopeless. But somebody is watching closely. Somebody in the rows. Then he will write the report.

"...faces rise before us. We recognize them... these resolute..." Don't let me say exemplary, at least not that!

The shoes! The shoes lined up before me! I should say, hobnailed boots. Heavy, cumbersome boots. When do they clean them? At night, before going to bed? How often do they get a new pair? Annually? Once every year?

"Because this novel has its power... its significance in..."

A rat scurried across the room. With the furious haste of latecomers. It stopped in front of me. It looked at me sideways. Well, what's this? What can it say to me? Immeasurable mockery in its look. And it seems a bit tipsy. The author of polemical essays. Polemical essays dripping with mockery. It shook itself irritably. Don't get mad, but you aren't a partner in the controversy. Then it disappeared.

And we remained in numb immobility.

I heard my voice again. Then nothing... I stood and waited. For what? Questions? What sort of questions?

I bowed.

"Thank you for your kind attention."

Someone stepped up to me, shook my hands.

The rows moved. The brigades marched out. They left the room.

That guffawing outside! The faces they must have made! That character, old chap! Did you watch him? Standing there, just grinding away. He didn't have an inkling of what he was talking about. He never opened the book. He never had it in his hands. They doubled up with guffaws.

No, they didn't guffaw. They didn't make faces either. They simply marched off.

Zsámboky leaned over the stone parapet.

He raised the sprinkling can. He shook it. He shook nothing out of it.

And then? Did I have supper? Surely they gave me some supper! Or did they take me right to that upstairs room?

I came upon my coat several times. Somebody always brought it after me. They took it by the collar like some slippery character. Like someone wanting to make a getaway. Or to look around a bit. Not so fast! No, not that! Let's keep moving along, buddy!

The room upstairs. In a deserted corner of the upstairs. Alone with my coat and my briefcase. Someone spoke from the outside.

"When do you head back, comrade?"

"In the morning. On the 6:10."

"Do you have a watch?"

"A watch? No, I don't."

"Then I will call you."

With that he left.

I went to the bed. I tested it a few times. It didn't take umbrage. It had no umbrage in it at all. An iron bed. An army cot. A discharged army cot. A veteran. The covers not the most reassuring. Probably thin. Well, then the coat.

Thrown over a chair for the time being. But it knows what to expect.

Maybe I won't lie down. They won't wake me up anyway. No one will knock. Why wouldn't they? They really don't want to get saddled with me. They've had enough of me. On the other hand, it's not such a bad idea... If I strolled into that office. To that woman who expected Dezső Jávör.

In the morning I will cross the garden again. The desolate garden.

But first the night. They don't heat the room very much. Really, what kind of room is this? A guestroom? They certainly won't stick an important guest in here. A tiny washbasin next to the wardrobe. I take the toothbrush out of my briefcase. Toothbrush, toothpaste, soap.

A hurried ablution, an extremely hurried ablution.

Throaty barking from the courtyard.

The guards, the hostel's guards. It seems there is nobody around but them. Just them. And me in this room. They know about me, about my every movement. My turning off the light. My undressing. I spread my coat over the bed. I get under the covers. Under the prickly covers.

I don't hear them any more.

Have they slipped into the building? Are they roaming the corridor? In front of the door?

The chair. The solitary chair beside the table. For an instant it vanished. Then it rose again out of the darkness. And now they also could be seen.

Those two old people. The ones on the train that I... And now here in this room. Beside each other on this chair. Huddled together. They sit holding hands. The man seeming to smile, the woman more frightened somehow. But madam, you have nothing to fear. You can sit here as long as you like.

The door opened soundlessly. A woman spoke from outside:

“Sanyika knows ‘Childe John’ by heart.”

She stopped. She waited for me to say something. She stood outside and waited.

“Should I send him in?”

I wanted to raise my head. To shout at her. Shut her door and go away!

“Don’t you want to hear him?”

“No! No!”

With great agony I raised my head.

“He will recite it all by heart.”

“No! No!”

I sank back. I lay motionless. They are here... beside me. The mother and Sanyika. They huddle together on the edge of the bed. But the mother immediately gives the sign. She gives Sanyika’s arm a yank. And he promptly begins ‘Childe John.’

What do I care! Let him recite ‘Childe John’. Let him recite whatever he wants to.

I was standing on a street in the sunlight. In the sharp sunlight of early spring. For a time I just gazed at the rooftops. Then I began to stroll. Without a coat.

A tall, dark woman from the other side:

“Listen! You are getting careless.”

“Oh, come on, Adrienne. I never wear an overcoat in March.”

“You will catch cold. You know how much trouble you have with your throat.”

I broke into a laugh.

“Adrienne, don’t worry about my throat.”

I looked up at the sky. At the cold blue sky. I shivered a little. Then a waiter emerged from a café. An old flat-footed waiter. “We’ll put the tables out in the terrace immediately.”

I nodded. I called over to the other side:

“Adrienne, did you hear? They are putting the tables out on the terrace right away.”

“But that’s not so sure yet.”

“Not so sure? What do you mean?”

But she had already vanished. Just like the waiter. I shivered, but gloomily this time. Better to sit down inside.

Where is it?

A dark hole between two lowered shutters. A dark hole in the hollow of the wall. Still, someone is moving around inside.

I called in: “When will you open?”

No answer.

They banged the shutters ever more furiously.

Then only that banging.

I sat stiffly in bed. Darkness around me. The banging from the outside.

“Five-fifteen!”

“Yes... thank you!”

The knocking stopped. Receding steps in the corridor.

The covers half slid down. The coat at the end of the bed.

I raised the covers. I lay back for an instant. As if wanting to really sleep right now.

I stood in my pajamas at the table. I leaned over it.

“Adrienne Fiam!”

How long had I been standing like this? Suddenly terror tore through me. Icy terror. Have I lost my mind? What am I waiting for? It must be at least five-thirty already. And the police! The railroad station! How do I get out of here? Surely somebody will come.

Nobody came.

Dressed in the room. Hand on the briefcase. For some reason I felt very sticky. Something stuck on me that already...

Keep brooding, you beast. Meanwhile, you will miss the train.

I held the briefcase. I looked back from the door. Maybe I wanted to say goodbye to the room.

Lost in the darkness of the corridor.

The stairs! I must find the stairs!

A small point of light somewhere in the depth. The dorm rooms must be that way. The washrooms. In a moment the place will be stirring. The boys must be up by now. They are sleepily tottering to the washrooms. They are opening the faucets. The sneezing of the faucets. Giggling, cussing. As they jostle each other in the showers.

Nothing could be heard. But I found the stairs. I grabbed that brown banister very gratefully.

The point of light like a lamp choked by fog.

I stopped on a landing. My hand on the banister. One more step and I'll sit down on the floor. And then just sleep, sleep! I looked down into the depth. One or two more floors and then...

Sharp, cold air.

The courtyard.

Ghosts came toward me. The ghosts dispersed.

Muffled growling. Short, angry yapping. Somewhat longer. Long drawn-out howling.

The dogs.

They surrounded me. They circled around me. They stopped barking. They kept stalking me. They sniffed nervously. Nervously and intensely. They gave a growl at each of my movements. Others came out of the darkness trotting feverishly. Their fervor abated slightly when they came close. Still, they didn't leave.

Flickering yellow eyes. Their breath lashed at my face. Their reeking breath.

I didn't move. I couldn't.

Pressed against the wall beside the climbing plant. Rooftops before him. Closed and open windows. Trees on the square. Pathways.

Broken-off twigs and branches on the pathways. Entangled like antlers.

It was growing dark.

He didn't move. As if there wasn't a room behind him. Nothing at all!

All of a sudden he picked up the sprinkling can. He went into the room. He circled the table. He walked the circles maniacally. He kept striking the can against his knee.

He stopped.

He bent over the table. Before him the slip with the lone single line.

The night is a sweat-soaked shirt.

CEMETERIES

She entered the flat as if unfamiliar with the place. The motion of fishing out the key was unfamiliar, and the sound of the key clicking in the lock strange. She wasn't carrying a thing, but her arms nearly gave way, as if the chair and the blanket she had carried down into the cellar were still hanging from them. Behind her the staircase whirled and wheeled. Steps, voices, clattering dishes from the fifth floor to the cellar. Silence suddenly, then shots firing in the distance. Rifles? Machine guns?

She stood in the hallway, she didn't shut the door. A chilly voice from the outside: "Are they starting it again?" Faltering steps; a hand slid along the iron railing, then it stopped. "Should I go down?"

She didn't reply or even turn around. For a moment she felt the other person might follow her into the flat. Then her look fell upon a picture, also very unfamiliar... A woman reclining on a sofa. Old bills fluttered from the top of the gas meter.

The autumn sun gave a yellow cast to the room's window. Motors backfiring, shouting inside.

She stiffened. Of course, the window is left open in case something happens. But why isn't the door open? Did someone shut it? Is someone here?

The room was cold. Cold and dusty. Dust had settled on the table, the chairs, the radio stand, and the yellowish-green leaves of the flowers. The whole place gave the impression of having been abandoned long ago.

She didn't dare move. She might disturb the stillness, the stillness of desolation. She moved only when a motor began whirring outdoors. Behind the square, on the corner stood a truck with a rumpled tri-colored flag. Men jumped onto it; they shouted but they couldn't be made out. Then a clear voice: "Is Zsiga in?" They flung a man up, the truck started off.

"Zsiga... who is this Zsiga?" She shut the window and turned toward the room again. She drew her finger along a yellow leaf, then flicked the radio on. "Oh, if you were only beautiful for a minute!" She turned it off.

Meanwhile, she looked at her nails, they were chipped. She reached for the bottle of lacquer. She applied the brush to her nails listlessly.

She sat and looked at the room. The sun shined on the flowers. Pityu and Györgyi are coming. Györgyi has a new pullover and has dyed her hair. Kálmán sat among them playing solitaire with an unearthly rosy smile on his face.

"Gizi!"

She jerked her head up.

A brown-haired girl in gray trousers stood before her. Her hands in her pockets as she came closer.

"You left the door open." She tapped her feet, made a dance movement, then threw herself down on the sofa. "Imagine, my parents don't want to come up." She suddenly sat up. "Tamás's father slapped him and ordered him home, even though he still had fifty good cartridges left." She waved her hand. "He is going to leave anyway."

"Leave?" Her chair creaked.

The girl kept on talking.

“The Roszners marched again, and they were fired on, and you know that blond boy who was here on New Year’s Eve... Gizi! What’s the matter?”

“Nothing!” She stood up and smoothed her dress down. “Maybe I’m a little dizzy.”

“Uncle Kálmán?” the girl whispered. Laughter. “Uncle! He really would be mad if he heard that. At the party on New Year’s Eve, he told me to drop the ‘uncle’ but it’s hard to get used to that. You remember how long I kept calling you ‘Auntie Gizi,’ for a time I greeted you both ways.”

Gizi stared out at the empty street. Just so she doesn’t ask me... just so she doesn’t begin it again.

Warm breath struck her face.

“But where did Kálmán go?”

The brow of the balcony riddled from end to end... it caught a volley. They had half whipped off the roof of an apartment house on the other side of the street.

“He is out. He said he is going to look around a bit.” She turned around and smiled at the girl. “You know how restless he is.”

The girl looked up at her, her face, mouth, and forehead oval.

“Gizi, your hair! A pure Gina Lollo hairdo... will you take me to your hairdresser? You will, won’t you?”

Creaking sounded from below. Slow, sluggish creaking.

Two movements - Gizi pulled the shutter down. They stood in the darkened room. By then the creaking came from the depth of the street.

“Tanks!” The girl backed toward the door. “They are coming again!”

“Just go down, Olgi.”

In the next minute they were both out in the corridor. Dull, angry rounds.

“A close call.” Olgi clutched the banister.

A pan tottered above them. “I cooked enough for two days.” A blast. The pan trembled.

“Them? Us?” someone asked from the stairs.

“Gizi, come!” Olgi stretched her hand back, but she ran ahead so fast that Gizi could not even grab her fingertips. She disappeared on a landing.

Gizi seemed to be treading air. To the side was the outside corridor of the apartment house next door, the line of its black railing. Behind the railing a figure wrapped in a wool rug. For an instant it was quite close, floating on its stool next to Gizi, then it vanished together with the floor.

“You made it?”

Shapes stood before the cellar door, cigarettes glowed. Gizi sensed that more shapes were standing next to the wall. Kálmán? Maybe he is here, too. She searched for a face to speak to.

She went into the air-raid shelter and sat down on the end of a long bench. Someone was sitting in front of her, someone behind her, as if they were traveling without moving.

“Hasn’t your husband returned yet?”

Gizi shook her head.

“What a card he is!” came from the wall. “A couple of days ago he told me he had tramped around the city a lot and his toes are very grumpy.”

“His toes?” Gizi raised her head.

“Yes, grumpy because they are covered with ashes. Human ashes.”

Gizi started to smile. “He said that? Covered with human ashes?” Kálmán appeared before her rambling around the room in stocking-feet, then sitting down on the rug and cracking his toes. He never says anything to her, just to them.

Gizi waited, attentively.

“He wanted to paint my little girl,” someone said.

The building seemed to be tossing about.

The cellar shook. A fat woman beside her took off like an open umbrella.

“What if it crashes here!”

Lamplight skidded on the wall and went out. For an instant it spread out its pale wings, then sank again. A gray-blue light glimmered above Gizi as if only the wall was shining. Ungainly sacks rose up and set off in the darkness.

“This one’s over too.”

Outdoors the dry grinding of tanks slowly moving away.

“They got bored.”

Impatience seized her. How long...? How much longer...? And how long has it been going on? Three days? Three weeks?

Kálmán is upstairs. She was very sure about that now. He is upstairs in the room, he has put his packages down. (He always brings something home.) Maybe he has already taken his shoes off and is walking around in stocking-feet. He lights the stove or puts on some food.

“Where are you going?”

Gizi started off through the benches. An endless path to the cellar door, then up the stairs.

Meanwhile, a giant fist struck the side of the apartment house, the window rattled. She stopped, but only for an instant.

“They’ve come back,” someone whispered from the stairs.

Silence.

Gizi stood in front of the gray door again, but by then she didn’t know why she had come. She dragged out, delayed every movement. She dredged up a candle from the drawer of the kitchen table. She put a pan on the table and cut off a slice of bread. A razor blade fell out of the bread wrapper. How did it get here? How could he put it here. “Shaving is a terribly tedious task,” Kálmán used to say. When I met him he had a beard, a red beard, and I didn’t dare have him meet my parents.

She pounded along the length of the room.

She wet a curl with her fingers in the mirror. Olgi will look good in this hairdo. She is a real Gina Lollo... her mother says she wants to wear pedal pushers, and she isn't even fifteen... a real Gina Lollo. I'll take her to Karcsi and have him do her hair like this.

She started undressing slowly.

"Gizi! But they are shelling us!"

A tall brunette stood in the doorway.

Gizi looked at her and continued undressing.

The brunette was in trousers and a pullover. She passed her hand over her face. "I haven't even dusted since it began." Then she suddenly asked: "Your husband?"

Gizi crawled under the covers and suddenly began to shake. She thrust her hands under the covers and grasped her ankles.

"That Kálmán!" The brunette smiled. "Do you remember when he didn't come home for Christmas? When was that?"

"I don't know." The shivering passed, but she didn't let go of her ankles.

"Oh God, do you know Olgi wants to go away!"

"Where?"

"She says she can't stay at home while the others..." She shook her head. "All we need is to have her bring a gun home!" She stopped talking and looked at Gizi. "I must take a pill, I have a splitting headache." At the door she looked back. "Aren't you afraid?"

Gizi didn't reply. She curled up in the bed and wanted to shout. Boring! Boring! Boring! The shelling and Mrs. Bárdi and Olgi.

The room sank into darkness. The shelling stopped, but was she aware of it? That Christmas... Kálmán went to his parents in Gyula, and somehow he got stuck there and didn't drop her so much as a line.

She began shivering again this time from rage. Why does a man like him get married at all? "I don't like it when people count on me," Kálmán said.

"I don't like, I don't like..." Gizi gasped. "And I don't like it when..."

A din sounded from below. Are they pounding on the gate? Then steps on stone as if they were running up the stairs. Noises surrounded the room.

What's going on? Olgi's voice? Who is it?

The door was flung open.

She wanted to jump out of bed, but she couldn't move, she was so gripped by paralysis.

They had already poured in. A beam from a flashlight leaped onto the wall. For an instant Olgi's face could be glimpsed and the rifle hanging from her shoulder all the way to the floor. A face smoky with gunpowder loomed.

"To the window!"

They dashed across the room and were swiftly there. They flung the shutters up, leaned out, whispered. Then one of them turned around.

"No, this won't work." A face met hers for an instant. "Are you sick?"

Gizi stared at the rifle. The one wearing the boyscout cap has a machine gun. And what is a conductor doing here? She mumbled something, but those carrying arms had already rushed out.

“Gizi?”

“Olgi.” Gizi’s voice failed her.

The bed moved, the quilted coverlet moved as if a cat and not a human was creeping under it.

“Did you see him, Gizi? That boy who was leading them?” Olgi slid alongside Gizi. “He was terribly handsome.”

Olgi’s body was like a redhot little stove.

“I have seen him somewhere before.” She didn’t say anything for a while, then whispered: “One of them said they can’t attack because then they are as good as dead. You know, they don’t have the weapons.”

“Olgi! Olgi!” was heard outside. A candle flame approached, then Mrs. Bárði stood in front of the bed with a candle in her hand.

“Olgi, did you call them here?”

Olgi, next to Gizi, sat up in the bed, looked at her mother, and simply said:

“Mom, you are crazy!”

The candle flame quivered.

“Your father will beat the life out of you.”

“Come on,” Olgi said, waving her hand, “he is afraid to poke his head out of the cellar.”

She climbed out of bed and departed with the candle. The flame slowly moved away, then vanished.

The bed and Gizi plunged into bottomless darkness.

Shots! Or is she just hearing them in her head by now? It is morning: waking up with a nausea. Two yellow slanting streaks on the wall. She was hanging out of bed in a half faint. The window rattled, the firing grew louder and louder. Now she knew this had gone on all night and would go on all day.

“My dear, are you still all alone?”

A thin-faced, white-haired woman in front of the bed. What did she crawl out of? What kind of hole? Maybe she has lived here a long time, but I just don’t know about her. Why does she keep bowing? Suddenly she will pirouette and start dancing. “I know your husband.” She came a little closer. “He is a dependable, decent man. But you know what the others in this building are like... they say all kinds of things.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, never mind, it’s not important.” A short pause. “Well that he’s left the country.”

Gizi jumped out of bed. The old woman pulled to the side as if fearing a shoe would be thrown at her. But then she just pattered alongside Gizi.

“He couldn’t have left without you... he certainly wouldn’t leave such a darling little wife behind.” She crawled after her to the bathroom, then kept on from the outside:

“Come to think of it, the young couple on the fifth floor left, but they went together...”

Water flowed in the bathroom, the floor creaked outside.

“If I was younger, no way would I stay here... and what do you say about the electricity being on again? Your husband is such a decent man. True, he never said hello to me in the staircase, but still, he would never leave such a pretty young wife here!”

I’ll go out and hit her with the washbasin. The creaking, the tiny, wicked little crackling of the floor.

She hurried out, wrapped in a towel. Even then, the creaking pursued her.

“The Pártoses already have an eye on your flat. They say you are alone, but a woman like you will have someone soon enough. Oh God, one hears so many shocking things!”

Gizi snatched the towel from her face. The old woman was already gone. As she was warming tea in the kitchen, she jerked her head up. A face flitted away from the window, then for a while, then thin, bent figure tottered before the pane.

In the kitchen she sipped her tea noisily, her face buried in the steam. Suddenly Kálmán appeared before her, standing in a strange flat and spitting sunflower seeds. Meanwhile, he smiles that rosy smile. “Come, old chap, let’s go and stretch our legs a bit... we’ll bum around!” That is how he put it. “Bum around!” Someone rises in the room, and Kálmán is now crawling with him. Tanks creep forward, buildings crash down. Kálmán spits sunflower seeds out and stares.

“Do whatever you want to!” Gizi snapped at the distant rosy smile. “I don’t care what happens to you... They will pick you up on the street and lug you here... here... to me. ‘Here is Mr. Koltai.’ There is no doctor, there is nothing, you lie tumbled over on the sofa and smile... but I won’t stay with you!”

Kálmán, smiling rosily, lay half-tumbled over on the sofa and didn’t reply.

And she in front of him as if wanting to hit him in the face.

“You don’t talk! You never talk... You never care about what I want. Do you think I wanted to marry you? But you didn’t care about that. Did I want to be yours? But you marched on me. And now a corpse to top it off? No! No!”

Steam rose from the empty cup.

Quite unexpectedly, she started down to the cellar. A man wearing glasses stopped her.

“Madam,” he pulled her next to the wall and said, “could you by any chance give me some old clothes?”

“Old clothes?”

“Your husband’s, if you possibly can.” He looked at her. “We need it for one of ours.”

She almost tumbled down the stairs, but she started back ahead of the man for the flat.

They stood before the open wardrobe. Kálmán’s clothes... But he will wear them again, she wanted to say; he will come back and put them on.

A rust-brown suit rose from the wardrobe, fluttered as if preparing to fly somewhere into the distance.

“Thank you.”

The man folded the suit up and left.

She continued to stand in front of the open wardrobe. Who was that? The one who moved in on the groundfloor this summer? No matter, I gave him the suit and that's that... and it's better if you don't say a word, Kálmán, because then I will give him your very last shirt!

She went out into the corridor. She descended into the cellar and ascended again like an elevator.

She stood in the corridor. Darkness surrounded her and rain fell in torrents.

"Gizi," said someone beside her.

She didn't turn. She knew it was Olgi's mother. But why is she silent? Why doesn't she say something?

"They are saying Olgi called them in." A hand started to move on the banister.

Gizi looked only at the hand.

"Those boys who came here, the ones with guns. You know, you were here too."

Gizi wanted to shout at her. Take your hand off the banister! Take it off! But she simply said: "Come on now..."

One finger rose slightly, moved inward, and began to tremble oddly.

"Of course it's stupid!" The voice was a simple entreaty. "But you know what people are like."

The hand disappeared from the banister.

"Shall I take Olgi away? Away from this place?"

"For a time... maybe."

Olgi's mother now leaned closer to her.

"Tamás has left."

"That strapping fat boy?"

"The other day his father beat him to get him off the streets. Now he has left." She stopped, then almost inaudibly: "Gizi... what will come of it all?"

The rain fell in torrents, the voice slowly moved away.

"Kálmán?"

The door creaked, then silence. Only the rain...

Somewhere on the street a bundle is getting drenched. He is nothing more than a bundle beside a wall. He lies there face down, but even now, stuck to the pavement, he keeps smiling.

This smile flew across the dark rainy courtyard, and to this smile she spoke.

Now you just stay where you are.

The next day she set out to find him.

First she lingered in front of the mirror. She pasted two little curls to her face. "I should use the sun lamp. And this mole at my nose..." She slipped into her penguin coat and set out.

The rain had stopped, and shots were no longer heard.

“They say potatoes are being handed out on the corner,” someone said as she emerged from the gate.

She looked back at the apartment house one more time. Flags above the entrance: one national, the other black, twisted together, soaked.

She headed off. She burned and bristled with rage. “To think I have to crawl after him, that I have to...”

She stopped. She had to. A beard on the sidewalk ahead of her. Then she saw it was an old man lying there covered with wrapping paper. A milk can beside him. Just as if he had got tired.

Signs appeared in the sky, endless white circles. What is flying out of them?

She began running alongside the wall. Then she started walking again.

Demolished buildings accompanied her, clutching each other, holding each other up. Flags, national and black. The wounds of shop windows. Holes growing into smoldering black courtyards. A row of courtyards, their buildings gone. Walls were pushed ever farther back.

The street dangled from a single naked rod. Fallen cables, tracks leaping high, and dust... dust...

“Is this what you wanted to take a look at?”

Kálmán didn’t answer.

A picture among the shattered walls. A bearded man with a woman wearing a string of pearls in a quaint old brown frame.

“They will call me up right away,” she thought. A woman was pushed past her in a two-wheel cart. She simply sat in the cart with unseeing eyes. A soldier ran past her without a weapon, without a cap. His face quivered in his steaming breath as he darted along like the last survivor of a defeated army.

A greenish-gray tank at the end of the street. It turned its barrel forward and headed off sluggishly, awkwardly.

Gizi ran into a sidestreet. She didn’t know how far, but suddenly she was standing at a wall, shaking from weariness and rage.

“I tell you, we are getting divorced!”

“My pet!” Kálmán smiled.

“Don’t call me ‘my pet’! Cut out that silly ‘my pet!’”

A streetcar on the corner. A burned-out car half on its side. Did anyone ever actually board this sometime? The tram stop sign bent forward like the smokestack of a sinking ship.

A scene from an old newsreel: a street after the war. “Look, that house also collapsed, there is a streetcar done in... and that woman, look how she is hurrying along.”

The woman began hurrying. She passed a small house. The house had a gray little garden. A couple of steps and you could just barely turn around in it.

Gizi clutched the railing. A little mound in the garden with a wooden cross. You can even make out the name. József Bokor. He moved down under the burial mound and is now just lying in the garden. The resident making his home there.

Gizi could not leave the railing.

“They won’t write your name on your grave, Kálmán, they won’t even scratch out a grave for you.”

She started off. Her fingers carried the fence railing with them. The burial mound also escorted her to next house. Only the name was different.

Only the names were different on the graves on the square. Six small mounds, one of them completely lost among the boughs. A pan with holes on another. Some were unmarked, not much time was taken with them.

Gizi bent down and spoke to him again:

“Do you think it matters to me that you are there?”

Someone moved above her, she heard voices.

“They shot her down on the corner.”

“They said she had a rifle, but still, a girl?”

Gizi looked up, but no one was there. She stared into the air. She stopped quarreling, she had no more words for him. He isn’t anywhere, and the house he set out from is gone too. Smoky dust is rising from the flat.

There were cemeteries on every piece of land. Crosses were soaring all over the city, and faces under the ground. The man was sitting on a little stool in the garden, the young girl had a rifle in her hand, sand and stones in her hair.

And the smile, that rosy smile!

Gizi was kneeling beside a stunted tree, scraping the earth.

“Your face is a lump of mud! sludge... ooze, nothing more!”

Her voice broke. For a time she remained there, slumped forward.

Then she stood up and ran across the empty square.

PILINSZKY

That strange broken laugh! While he is almost running along the row of barren, wintry trees. Meanwhile smoking a cigarette. Now and then he glances over his shoulder. Is he expecting a voice? What kind of voice? He stops. He stares into the silent line of trees. A look numb and full of amazement. Where did I get to? What kind of city?

I was telling him about dreadful matters. At that time: the Fifties. With a mournful face, with somber, hearty laughs. János! They are throwing us out everywhere. Throwing us out? They aren't even letting us in! Doors are closing! (Like this, very dramatically.) What doors? There aren't any. There aren't any editors, any periodicals. There is absolutely nothing.

He stared at me. With that numb look.

"That's terrible!"

That is all he said. But he wasn't terrified. Somehow I sensed this in his eyes. He had no sense of terror. Though I did as well as I could. It wasn't pleasant running into me in those days. And yet... I felt that down deep, in the depth of his soul some kind of belief existed. A belief surviving on its own, orphaned. And compassion too. The way he touched my arm.

"But maybe not! They can't do this!"

"Oh yes they can!"

He looked at me with profound sympathy.

Another scene. The Lengyels' flat. Time: the same. 1951. Characters: Ágnes Nemes Nagy, Balázs Lengyel, János Pilinszky, and I. We were drinking coffee. We talked, we were silent. The outcasts. (Solemnly.) The washouts. (Less solemnly.) Our writings had not been published for a long time. Only our rewritings. The Great Age of Rewriting! We rewrote everything. Everything and everybody. We didn't even spare the classics. Few escaped adaptation. I even came to hate Mark Twain. Just as I did the radio plays of Paula T. Forgách.

I stared over the cup into space.

"Bumbi Balogh!"

"What's this? What are you saying?" (Balázs)

"He can't express a thing! Simply unable!"

"Dear Iván, why should he have anything to say?" (Ágnes's worried voice.) "And would you please enlighten us as to who this Bumbi Balogh is?"

"A soccer player."

"But Iván, you really like these types."

"Not in a radio play. In the old days... on the field."

Balázs (to Pilinszky): "Now comes the Ferencváros team! He'll now reel off the old Ferencváros line-up."

I didn't. Crestfallen silence above the cup.

"Oh, I see! Somebody wrote a radio play, and you have to revamp it," Ágnes said.

"Do you know how long I've been at it? Days! Weeks! and still nothing!"

Silence around me. Pilinszky's soft, remote voice:

"There will be a dictionary."

"There will be what, János?"

"Someday there will be a dictionary of literature." He lit a cigarette, blew some smoke. A strange half light. Like someone about to do something. Then that broken laugh. "Yes, everything will be in it. Every periodical we ever wrote something for." He slowly turned toward Ágnes: "*Hungarian Star. Silver Age. Vigil.*"

"*Hungarians.*"

"*New Moon.*"

He kept nodding and blowing smoke.

"And then nothing," Balázs said.

"Not at all. Now the Golden Age will dawn! Playbills! Price lists! Shop signs! Advertisements! And then the crowning achievement! An Easter egg! Our latest piece on an Easter egg!"

"What? What was that, János?"

"An inscription on an Easter egg."

He shook with laughter. We all did. Balázs collapsed over the table. Ágnes applauded.

"Easter egg! Maybe with a little verselet! (singing) Verselet! Verselet!"

"And prose! Is there no prose? At least one line on that egg."

I grew dizzy with laughter. Weak. I slipped off the chair. Down, onto the floor. I couldn't stop laughing. Tears poured from my eyes.

Pilinszky repeated it. The history of our careers. Our careers in ascendancy.

Hungarian Star!

Silver Age!

Vigil!

Hungarians!

New Moon!

Playbills!

Price Lists!

Shop Signs!

An Egg!

An Easter Egg!

How long did this go on? How did I get up? What did I hold on to? A chair? The table? How did I get going? Tottering in a half-faint. A drenched face. How did I get going? Where to?

He performed one of my pieces. Yes, yes! One of my plays. At the Lengyels of course.

Scene: A room. A man is sitting on an old, tattered armchair. It is the only piece of furniture in the room. It is not as if the furniture had been sold. Definitely not. There had always been only the armchair. And the man in the chair. A barren palm behind them. It is not inconceivable that it has never been watered. The man is motionless. He gazes into space with a timeless look. Perhaps he is time itself. One of his hands moves. Is he signaling to someone? The hand drops back on the armrest.

The man stares into space.

The curtain descends slowly.

Suddenly he rises to his feet. What is this? Is he standing up? Is he going somewhere? Is he leaving the chair? The room with the palm?

The curtain is almost down.

The stage is a tiny slit.

The only thing still visible is the man sitting down again.

Curtain.

Pilinszky took a short cut across the street. Across another one. Then on and on. A dark green musette bag hanging from his shoulder. A discharged soldier. Or the wanderer of the world himself.

Where has he come from? Warsaw? London? Paris? By that time he had been all over the world. He was known everywhere. He and his writings too. (The years of the Fifties, the years of the Great Age of Rewriting had passed.)

How did fame affect him? Did he enjoy it? Or was he frightened by it all, instead?

Once he blessed me on the boulevard.

He caught a glimpse of a passerby in the hubbub on the boulevard. A fallible human being.

He raised his hand. He blessed him.

SYLVIA PLATH

Why does she mean so much to me? Maybe the most since Dostoevsky? It would be hard to explain. Besides, like all explanations in general, it's not necessary to do so. So? *The Bell Jar* is on my shelf. I could never part with it, not even for a day. Actually, I don't have lots of books. I am likely, at any time, to give a book to anyone, and I don't make a fuss if I don't get it back. I'll never lend this book to anybody. Does it give me strength? Encouragement? I hardly think so. It isn't some sort of nutrient. Do I read it every day? Or at least dip into it? I don't take it into my hands for months. I feel its presence, though, its constant presence. Even so, whenever I look up at the shelf, an icy terror grips me.

Let's pause here.

Icy terror.

A drama like hers had never overwhelmed me before. One so sincere and without an ounce of self pity. And yes, so true. A life of torment. And all with such great humor. Once, some time ago, I thought humor was a good protective. Maybe work is. That also kills. But at least it's a worthy death.

It's very significant, too that Sylvia Plath never invents anything. She's not given to speculation. She's not even concerned about where literature stands in her time. All the while, she is fundamentally modern, however. Such a true, opulent, lively modernity. This noble, aloof talent protects her from being fashionable. No, she won't be fashionable. Still, she permeates into our lives.

I doubt anyone had any influence on her. Of course, that in itself isn't a virtue. But what irony and self irony! And so her humor again! For instance, in one of her attempts at suicide. She wants to hang herself, but her body resists. *At such a time my body always leaves me in a lurch.* We could call this catastrophic humor. But why should we? What's the point of pasting little labels on things? This is certain: this humor is entirely her own, and inimitable.

What could her weekdays have been like?

I received that book of letters put together by her mother. Unfortunately, I don't know English. (This is quite depressing.) And so I gaze at the pictures. I turn the pages, I stare at each picture. Just like an old detective trying to track down something. An old detective who no longer has connections anywhere and now just works on his own.

The endpapers are strewn with childhood pictures. The little girl is smiling in nearly all of them. The smile expectant but still a bit anxious. At times her face clouds over and hardens in an odd way. Behind her a garden, a veranda with white columns, a beach, an ocean. Yes, it would be possible to live. The ocean and the beach are recurring backgrounds. The sandy beach in a blazing sun. This is a considerably later picture. Blonde and apparently bronze-brown, Sylvia Plath lies stretched out on the ocean beach. Again, she's just smiling. She rises to her knees and puts her hands on them. A vision incarnate. (There you go! This time like a country pharmacist trying to court someone.) Next, standing in front of the house with her coat tossed over her arm. A book in her hand, a suitcase beside her. She's just come home from college. A few moments and she'll enter the house. She settles into her life at home.

She is bending over the typewriter. She is sitting on the veranda in sunlight. The paper is threaded in the typewriter. Her fingers touch the keys. An anxious suspense on her face, on her shoulders, on her back. Her fingers don't budge, they are practically rigid. They quickly slip off the typewriter. She stands up, walks around for a little while. *Maybe it's better if we take a walk now.*

But, there on the veranda, the typewriter waits for her to return. The threaded paper, the blazing-white blank sheet of paper. (Who says paper is our friend?) She has to return to this typewriter, she has to sit down to it. She rolls the paper up a little, down a little. Then there's no more movement. The veranda steams in the heat. By this time everything is so inimical.

Later... yes, later she could still write. But the moment of defeat can never be forgotten. Victory (if there is such a thing) can't be sensed. But defeat...!

The nights came. She couldn't sleep. Piercing, distrustful dawns after agonizing nights. Then she could only flee from everything, everyone.

An arm, a shoulder sought their way down into the cellar. She withdrew there to find refuge. She dug her elbows into the hollows of the wall. Maybe to bore into the wall to be among the broken fragments. And then, there are no nights any more, no dawns any more. Nobody asks her questions of any kind. She doesn't have to answer anything.

How could this happen? And everything that followed?

Writing is her life. That's all right so far. But maybe she could have escaped some of the suffering. One time, she was late for a shortstory contest. A college's or a magazine's? No matter. Well, she needn't have been so concerned about this. Who could the jury members have been? In any case, they were looking for a very correct story. One with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Probably that's not the kind they received.

Maybe it wasn't a contest. It was a course! Yes, she submitted the story for a course. A shortstory course. (What a nightmare!) She was rejected. (What good luck!)

Who could it have been who wrote "contrived" on one of her stories?

I don't know the story, of course. Maybe it was good, maybe not. But "contrived," never!

Then there's that fawning idiot. I don't remember his name I'd rather not! At times he looks a bit clumsy, but he's really very calculating. Somehow he even turns his TB to his advantage. He always knows exactly what he is after. Like marrying Sylvia Plath. At least while S. P. is such an "enchanted woman". Successes at the university, in sports, and also in literature. He eyes the last somewhat suspiciously. But with his keen scent he immediately senses danger. She has trouble with her nerves, an over-sensitivity. Later they talk about some mental hospital. About treatment. In short, it's better to make an exit. And he does, of course.

No matter how you look at it, it's an ugly story.

It's better to be rid of such a character.

But enough said! The whole thing's hopeless and unnecessary. Besides, it could look like an act of stupid familiarity.

What could have wounded this sensitive temperament?

What got caught in the net of her nervous system? What rent it asunder? Who knows! Everything lacerates a human who sees everything as an adventure, who shoulders everything. Very deeply, indeed.

Meanwhile, she could rejoice in so many things. The childhood house, the garden, swimming, boating, some good conversation. Later, a poem, a piece of prose now and then. After all, these could still mean something to her. The success of her husband's poetry, Ted Hughes's, that his book was published in London and he had already received a contract for the next one. The children... She is an attentive, conscientious mother. Also, every sort of Bohemian behavior is alien to her. But she never had a life of great emotional ease. She rose early, drank coffee. She built her own scaffold and sat down to write.

The pictures again for a moment, those in the book.

The slip of a girl calls on two women writers: the poet Marianne Moore and the writer Elizabeth Bowen. She interviews them for a newspaper. She is sitting there in the room, talking with them with an air of gentle curiosity.

Those two tired wise old birds! On Marianne Moore's face a trace of suspicion, with slightly wicked humor. The other the personification of understanding. What could they have talked about? Literature, of course. The writer's life. But maybe about other things too. About childhood, old streets, humans. I think the reporter on assignment must have felt good. I hope they met again later, that she received some understanding from them. I'd like to think they saw something in her.

And I would like to keep her in my memory this way. Sitting in a room and chatting.

She gave us much. Too much, perhaps, and in doses far too large, perhaps.

After all, words can't do justice to her drama.

She may be the symbol of a deeply anguished generation.

WHAT CAN A WRITER WANT?

Above, in an upstairs room, is the head of the family. For years he hasn't come down to the rest of them, for years he hasn't wanted to see them. They have lived their own life downstairs. Meanwhile, they kept hearing the old man walking around upstairs. At such times their eyes met, but they didn't speak a word.

I was reading Ibsen at the time, *John Gabriel Borkman* among others. This was the one that was living within me quite vividly when I wanted to write a concluding episode on the grand old man of the family.

I was strolling on the back promenade of Kálmán Tisza Square. I was tormenting myself about how to bring the old man down on some occasion to this family in spite of everything that had happened. Then the great scene will take place. Some sort of squaring of accounts.

Weeks passed, months. Lilacs bloomed on the promenade, but the family's grand old man couldn't descend. The plot of the play wouldn't budge. Those living downstairs broke away completely from the old man, who paced back and forth ever more solitarily, ever more savagely upstairs.

And he is still walking there to this very day. Until time eternal.

For by then something had become clear to me. I can't plot the action. I can't even commence it. This I must admit.

I started a fairy play. This bogged down as well. My imagination simply wouldn't budge.

(Meanwhile, to fix the time: I had just then left the fifth form of grammar school. I had nothing other than a notebook with a double cover, the Ibsen volume, the Classical Fiction series, and Kálmán Tisza Square.)

So, already from the very beginning I had to realize that my imagination wasn't operative either. Decisive matters emerge quickly.

The power of observation remained.

I heard something about Maupassant. Maybe it was actually Flaubert who gave the advice to the young Maupassant. Observe a tree until it differs from all the other trees in the world.

I took matters seriously. (I still take matters seriously today.)

I dropped anchor in front of a tree. It was an ordinary, sturdy little tree on the square. In no way did it want to be different from the others. I continued looking at it for a long time. I slowly began to hate it. I could no longer see anything at all, I simply stared off into space.

When I got home, I took out my notebook with the double cover. I tried to describe the tree. I couldn't.

Sometime later. I saw someone. A fellow completely wrung out. Then the tree appeared in front of me. This was worth more than every observation. From that I sensed something I now call inner reality.

I was that way with the street too. I wanted to describe the street on which the little hotel where I was living at the time was situated. Accurately, in detail. Therefore faithfully, I thought. I looked out the window, I scrutinized the houses.

By the time I returned to the table from the window, everything had fallen out of me. It was as if I had never seen the street. Sometime afterwards, I stopped in front of an old store, and then I sensed the street.

No action, no imagination, no observation.

The inner world remained. And whatever flowed into it from experience.

The wonder of an old store, of a damaged firewall, of a human face.

About the last. I once saw an actress' face during a rehearsal. She wasn't acting, she was left alone, her face was also left alone. A tired, lonely face. Sick, aged parents tottered across this face. They can no longer be forced out; they may die, but they will wander about that face forever.

Landscape...

Once, out of sense of duty I took a stab at description. I didn't get very far with that either. Some time passed before I realized that to me a cellar window, a puddle is landscape. At best, an empty meadow with discarded cheap washbasins.

A person discovers his own laws, and then he can attempt something.

The tone, that particular individual style, is a matter of luck. One has it or one doesn't.

Influence? The streets and squares exerted a great influence on me. And the movies. In them I felt something that is generally called condensed delineation. There are no evasions. Literary influences occur, of course. There is a trend in Hungarian literature. Krúdy, Gelléri... A certain looser, more lyrical prose. It has absolutely no connection with foolish, festering "poetic" prose. So I feel I belong to this trend. This isn't altered by the fact that at times Krúdy downright infuriates me. His heroes and female characters are, I feel, so false that they will turn me into a sick and bedridden person. But his minor characters, street scenes, his ever-dripping water faucets are unforgettable.

And Hemingway. Who is much more sensitive than is commonly thought. He isn't so much of a pugnacious fellow. Otherwise, I read Faulkner much more gladly, who is completely foreign to both him and me.

What do I want?

Géza Ottlik wrote in one of his studies: What does a novelist want? He hopes to write a novel.

With a modest alteration: What can a writer want? No matter how surprising, to write.

According to the laws of his talent.

GOD

I've been getting ready for our chat a long time. Sometime, somewhere we'll sit down together. Maybe at a table in an old café. (There must still be a table like that somewhere!) In a quiet little tavern. Maybe on a terrace around the end of summer or in the fall. At such times the weather is cooler, and maybe no other guests will turn up besides ourselves. In a movie vestibule. Under a deserted football stand. On a secluded back pew in a church on the outskirts of town. Maybe we'll bump into each other on the street. Two passersby. Two rather weary passersby who even so keep expecting something.

It'll make no difference where. He won't turn away. He'll recognize the child who prayed so fervently. The praying stopped suddenly, but He won't be terribly angry about that. Silence is still more bearable than rattling off lessons in meaningless repetition. Silence can always bring forth something worthy.

But maybe now we might break the silence. It's certain I'd begin with some stupid complaint. My lament would be a faint melody. What if He took a crack at it!

I wouldn't ask Him anything. I wouldn't grill Him about wars, plagues, famine, floods. If He wants to say something, let Him say it on His own.

Just so He doesn't want to put my fears to rest, because then I'll...

Is it possible we'd quarrel? That a big fight is in the air that could suddenly explode? That wouldn't be such a great problem either. I can have a real good fight only with those I love.

But there is something I'd ask Him, after all.

His humor, what's happened to it?

What a sense of humor He had! He created the braying of Balaam's ass before Balaam's ass. Joseph's coat before Joseph himself.

I say, I'd ask Him this. Otherwise, I'd leave Him in peace. Just let Him sit at the table in the café, in the tavern, on the terrace, in the movie vestibule, under the football stand, in the church on the outskirts.

If He doesn't want to talk, I'll understand that too.

After a time we'll say goodbye. He'll go his way, and I'll go mine.

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