

On the Shunting Track

Pokorni's suitcase sat in the waiting room in the station. It was a dingy room, filled with the sour smell of cold cigarette smoke, and there were only a few passengers waiting there. There was still time until the train left. Its official arrival time was only a few minutes away, but delays had already been announced. A few old workers with calloused, dirty hands and hollow chests slept leaning against each other on a bench; workers from the nearby coal mine, on their way to the early shift perhaps. On another bench sat two old women and a man with crutches.

Pokorni's suitcase sat amongst it all. A battered old thing, containing only samples of elastic, garters and braces. One of the women watched Pokorni as he left the room. She probably assumed that he was going to the toilet and would be back soon.

But that didn't happen. Outside, on the platform, Pokorni walked up and down. He stared into the dark sky, at the tracks and at the heaps of grey-brown dirty, wet snow which still lay between the sleepers from a snow storm the day before, the first harbinger of the approaching winter. Why had he come on the early train? It was just an old habit, the way he used to do things, the way he'd had to do things when he was travelling. But he hadn't had to catch this train today, no-one was expecting him and there was no reason for him to be in such a hurry. The orders - there weren't all that many really, he'd been neglecting his customers for far too long - he had posted them to the firm. All things considered, the orders for elastic weren't so bad, he told himself. Of course, garters are passé. Who wears garters these days? Braces sell a bit better. He'd done the best he could. But of course those idiots in the factory wouldn't be satisfied. Should try it themselves some time, come out to see old Bernstein and have to listen to all his stupid rubbish before he buys a single solitary roll of elastic. He was getting angry. But finally he looked up at the mountains.

There was snow already on some of the higher peaks, others were hidden by the darkness of the clouds and the night. Coniferous

trees were growing on the slopes and Pokorni could distinguish between the firs and the spruces and could even see the bare trunks of the larches higher up. The smell of the needles, he thought. In summertime, when the sun is roasting the forest. You'd be able to smell the scent even down here. But what use is that to me? Quickly on to the next village. Wollnigg was already expecting a visit there, and Bauer, and Kramer and there was that unpleasant smell of kerosine and insecticide in the shop. The women used to talk endlessly about the price increases and the hard times they were living in, about the last murder and the latest robbery and their daughter's first Holy Communion. We were only ever in a forest like that once, Maria and I, he thought, only once and we hadn't been together for long back then. Well, it didn't last long as it was.

He plodded back the length of the platform on his bandied legs and gazed along the tracks.

Would he be able to live quietly for a few days on his commission? Novak. He shouldn't gamble any more. He didn't entertain the idea seriously for very long. Maybe the money would last a week, maybe two or three, but perhaps only a few days. He'd stopped trying to work it all out. He used to worry about it when he started, and he'd watched his colleagues in the train, in the waiting room or in the pub do the exact same thing. He didn't bother any more. It had become all the same to him, however much he earned in any one place.

The sky's getting grey, he thought. Over where the tracks led into the mountains, there was a milky, indefinable colour hanging in the sky above the uneven silhouette of the forests.

His whole existence seemed to him just as grey and indefinable. He'd been thinking more and more recently, that these journeys didn't pay for themselves. He didn't make a profit anywhere. His father - he'd been thinking about his father a lot recently, sometimes he even secretly envied him - had been in a different situation, he'd thought that he'd known what he was working for. But for him, Pokorni, all work seemed to be was some sort of activity which legitimised his existence, without it he wouldn't have got a visa in the first place. As time went by, it had become a habit. A sort of a game, a little absurd and, in the end, boring into the bargain.

That shopkeeper Kominek's wife is getting fat too, he thought. He turned around again and walked in the opposite direction, noticing a few lights from the small city beside the railway line. Only a few windows were lit. From the distance the bright lights looked warm and happy. But Pokorni was familiar with many of the rooms in which they shone. There was a cold wind. He turned up the collar of his coat. Two years ago she'd been one of the wildest. In the store room, on the bolts of fabric. But there was no sense in thinking about it and calculating whether it had all been worthwhile or not. Whatever he did, the calculation was going to work out wrong. Even Father's calculations had worked out wrong. Surely he would have imagined it all differently, if he'd imagined anything at all, back then when he fathered me. Yes, I think he would have. He was a thoughtful, maybe even a wise man. Surely he would have thought about it. A wise man, who would have thought it all through. Did I ever think it through? To hell with it, I didn't need to. I always had a condom on hand. Much better than having to think it through. What did a father's deliberations amount to anyway? Pokorni snorted scornfully. They amounted to nothing, nothing real in any case. He's been exterminated and I've been driven into exile.

Pokorni looked at his watch. He could see the headlights of an engine coming into view. But it was still too early, it couldn't be his train. Maybe a goods train, he thought and watched the headlights. But maybe I could start all over again. Maybe my grandson or great grandson would become wise and respected, just like my father was. A pretty far-fetched scenario, if his own case was anything to go by. A very far-fetched scenario. And what if it turned out otherwise, if those grandchildren and great grandchildren ended up hawking goods just like me, restless and dissatisfied, just like me, some sort of welcome stud for all those hussies? But she does have firm thighs, that Kominek woman, you have to give her that. Yes, it's a goods train. Over there, coming around the large bend, you can see it quite clearly. Lots of carriages. And it's always the same, in bed, on the sofa or outside in the haystack, always the same but you do it over and over again anyway. Until there comes a time when you can't get it up any more, like the time with that

black-haired Kitty, then it's just humiliating and you ask yourself what was the point of it all? Those are straw bales there, all threshed and bundled up, two, three, four carriages full of them. A crooked worm, tired and slow, it can hardly stand up. Pokorni had reached the end of the platform again. He watched the goods train. The engine was puffing audibly and when it reached the city limits - the track went continuously up hill - it whistled, long and mournful. Thick black clouds of smoke rose towards the sky, formed round, bulging bales and then dissolved into the general grey of the sky.

Two people had stepped out of the waiting room and were looking for the train. One of them went back inside immediately. The windy platform was obviously too cold for him. Every now and then a railway employee came out one of the doors of the building, then disappeared back inside after having done something along the track, or to the switch-box or to one of the stationary carriages, which must have seemed incomprehensible to the uninitiated.

Father was at peace now. Surely he never experienced that sort of humiliation. No, not him, not him, thought Pokorni. Beneath the sleepers, beneath the earth. The tracks had already started to sing. In the prime of life he was, when he was laid beneath the earth. Swinging and rattling? That would mean nothing to him anymore. Nothing. Nothing. There's the whistling again. Empty straw, totally dry, threshed to death. The shiny, cold tracks leading into the dark hole in the earth. I got one for my birthday, my fifth, it ran on batteries, and I had all the equipment to operate it with and the nursery became a shunting yard. I was the pointsman, I switched things on and off, shifted points, switched them on and off. Now I'm the one being shifted, I'm being switched on and off, rejected, cast aside, a plaything, playthings which aren't wanted any more are cast aside, thrown away. I wrecked most of it. The engines! The lights, there are more now than there were before. The wind hasn't eased off at all. Winter's coming. What's it all for? What's it for? Cast aside and thrown away. Another, better toy comes along. Look at it wriggling, a worm spitting out dirty grey bubbles. It's getting bigger and bigger, bigger and bigger, now you can see the bales of straw, sharp and clear. What's the point of it all? I've settled things with my company. To hell with them. Let the boss go and visit old Pock-

stein. It's not going to get light today at all. The headlights are red. There are red sparks flying. Dissolving in the air, like the grey smoke. Smoke. Smoke. Pokorni watched the goods train as it approached the station. It'll arrive on platform five he said to himself. That much he'd worked out from experience. Goods trains always came in on platform five. The siding track, thought Pokorni. No, that's not for me, not me! There had to be an end to the everlasting pushing around, then being shunted about yourself. Who benefits from all the pushing anyway? Who are you supposed to push around yourself? That black-haired Kitty, young Frau Wollnig? No more, it's over. Why keep going, if there's nothing in it for me? For other people? The others are only flesh and blood too, lust, nerves and desire.

Pokorni stepped down from the platform and slowly walked from one pair of tracks to the next. He lit a cigarette, inhaled the smoke swiftly and looked towards the goods train. He stood and leaned back against one of the tall lamp-posts, whose small electric lights were swinging in the wind. He was scarcely distinguishable from the grey metal. Grey was the large engine as it moved closer and closer, the carriages followed it grey upon grey, Pokorni watched the grey sparks as they fell into the milky sky, dull and without strength. Grey were the beams of the headlights pushing past him. The train rattled across the first switch. There had been no mistake on Pokorni's part, the tracks which ran along beside platform five trembled, and the engine moved past him, hissing and puffing on the shunting track. The cigarette was no longer alight. Pokorni hadn't taken a drag since the train had roared in, and the strong wind had extinguished the glowing end. A meaningless, cold roll of paper lay between the grey, pinched lips. For a moment Pokorni thought of Maria; maybe she had cooked something special for him. But then he dismissed that idea too. Nobody did anything special for him, not even Maria anymore, nobody thought about him, nobody, nobody. Nobody was standing on the fifth track. There was no fifth track, no fifth commandment, no fifth carriage. Beneath the fifth carriage there was nothing, nothing, nothing.

No Security

The next day, Attila was in a particular hurry to deliver his newspapers. He really needed to speak to Maria. That Schmidt manager had given him notice again.

He had delivered the news with a cynical smile when Attila returned his umbrella. He had also assured him that any intercession by Frau Pokorni would not make him change his mind this time. But as he was - these were his words - a humane person, he was giving him fourteen days notice, the rent of course was to be paid up till then.

Attila rushed off to find Maria. He went to her office and asked several times where he could find her in the large building. He was a foreigner, the employees could hear that much, and they thought he had some business to discuss with Frau Pokorni.

When Attila entered the large room, the woman was sitting at one of the many desks, talking on the telephone. Her landlady was telling her that the postman had an official telegram for her, and that seeing as she wasn't at home, he'd left a message that the cable could be picked up from the post office at any time.

Maria felt uneasy. Curious as to what the authorities could possibly want with her, asked the woman whether she had seen who the sender was. She'd only snatched a glimpse, said the landlady, but she thought it might have been a message from the police station. She'd seen something about some head office or something like that. The postman had taken the message off her as soon as he learned that she wasn't the intended recipient.

Maria put the receiver down. Worried, she glanced in Attila's direction. A thousand scenarios entered her head. Had anything about her background come to light? Could that Schmidt perhaps have...? He was the only person except for Pokorni, who had any inkling of her true situation. But no, she didn't believe that, not even when Attila told her about the most recent notice he'd been given. It was, of course, clear to her that Georg would have come to his own conclusions when Attila returned the umbrella the next

morning and not before. But that he would turn directly against her, that she didn't believe.

She asked Attila to come with her, saying they could discuss it all on the way. She grabbed a few important letters, which had been put out for urgent delivery.

As they left the building and walked towards the post office, she told Attila about the telegram and how she couldn't imagine what it was all about. He was only half listening to her. Neither did he notice her nervousness. He kept thinking about the notice Schmidt had given him again, and Maria's assurances that she would sort it out didn't help much.

It was a cool day, and they both had the collars of their coats turned up. People were hurrying along the streets. They all seemed somehow shrivelled up, as if they'd sunk into their clothing. At the post office there was a continuous coming and going. Once she had found her bearings in the large hall, Maria posted the letters at the counter, waited for the receipt and turned to the next counter where she could pick up her telegram. Attila followed her. She identified herself, and the clerk handed over the message. She checked the sender, shook her head, walked back into the hall a little way and opened it. Her eyes glanced along the lines. She stopped, grabbed Attila's arm and handed him the paper. Her face was oddly changed, rigid and strange.

"What's the matter?" asked Attila.

"Read it," she whispered.

Attila read the short message. The authorities hereby informed Frau Pokorni that early this morning, at the Bruck railway station, her husband had thrown himself in front of a train, with the intention of committing suicide. He was dead.

The big hall with its counters grew suddenly hazy, the tables and counters, all the waiting people, the constant rattling of the sliding doors, they were all covered by a thick fog. Maria heard herself say to Georg, "surely you wouldn't want him to come to any harm," and she saw Pokorni's bed in the middle of the large hall, Pokorni's bed, just as she had last night. It was his bed that Attila had pushed her down on. She had forgotten him in his very own bed, annihilated him, let go of him. And he'd gone, God only knows

where to. He wasn't her husband, but she was his wife.

"We killed him," she whispered to Attila. Her hand was still on his arm. Her fingers pushed themselves deeper and deeper into the material of his coat. "We killed him." Her wide eyes stared into his. The people around them took no notice of them. Some collided with them on their way past, apologised and were as aware of their presence as they were of the tables or the large lamp fittings, the wastepaper baskets and all the other inanimate objects in the hall.

"Us?" asked Attila. He had no idea how she had come to that conclusion.

"Last night," said Maria.

Attila looked through her eyes into the small room with the two beds. Pokorni was sitting at the table and drinking his health. He could feel the grip of the handshake as he left. But at the same time he heard the words: "But he's not even your husband!" Had he thought of those words last night? No, they hadn't even crossed his mind. Rubies and emeralds. Rubies and emeralds. That smooth body under his. It had felt good, relaxing to be resting on that warm body, afterwards as well, that long embrace. Killed him? No, never, I'm innocent! Innocent of the blood of that righteous man. You can't kill someone like that! He was still looking into the woman's eyes. There, in the depths, deep behind those eyes, was it fear he could read?

"No," he said quite firmly. "No, it wasn't us!"

But the conviction that she was guilty of his death had already taken possession of Maria. It was a plump fruit, and was growing riper and riper within her. And when she saw that he was not prepared to share this guilt with her, an anger towards him sprang up, without her knowledge. The pressure of her hand eased, and her eyes, which until now had stared into his, looked suddenly at a thousand other things for comfort. Her glance wandered aimlessly around until it found its way back to Attila's face. It seemed to her a strange face, just like the face of the postal clerk, or one of the people in the crowded post office. She kept saying to herself: I killed him! And she told herself twenty times, fifty times, a hundred times, continuously, like a stuck record, over and over again.

She had released his arm. They walked slowly over towards the exit. "I want you to go to my office and tell them. I can't right now. Please leave me alone," said the woman. And when he dumbly acceded to her wish, took her hand and sought her eyes with his, she added: "I think it would be best if we both had a careful think about our situation."

Attila bent over her hand, but Maria withdrew it. Only when the woman was fifty steps or more away from him did she turn around to look at him, and then after a while again, and again, but Attila didn't look back once.

Maria walked through the streets, as if in a trance. The sun set quite early at this time of year. It went down like a large orange, rolling down from the sky with its long wind-blown threads of cloud, into the enormous plate-glass windows of the large stores, bursting in the constantly moving windows of the trams and drowning in the last remaining puddles of rain. After she had left Attila, she set off through the city. She didn't know how long she walked through the narrow streets with their smell of ammonia and sulphur. She wanted to think, wanted to think about Pokorni, about herself, about Attila. But she couldn't do it. Some of the connections in her tangled nervous system must have been adjusted wrongly. All she could think was: dead, dead, dead.

In the darkness under the black iron beams of a railway bridge, two men tried to pick her up. She could have kept on walking like that. Just anywhere. But now she realised that she was only walking for the sake of walking, that she was wandering along aimlessly. She made sure that she turned down an alleyway to find her way back. It was already getting dark. The long threads of light from the street lamps were spinning their webs. Where did she want to go? To the Golden Apple?

The man at reception greeted her from his enclosure. She nodded and pointed upwards with her hand. The lift was somewhere in the upper levels of the building. She didn't mind. She walked up the flight of stairs. It took a little longer that way. She didn't mind it taking a little longer. It's going to be hard, she thought, and then the doubts returned.

Finally she was on the first floor, outside Georg's room. She

stopped for a moment, listened for Georg's step, or his voice. There was nothing, she hesitated, and finally opened the door without knocking.

Georg was sitting at his desk, had his arms planted in front of him and his fists pressed against his head. He was staring at a newspaper. Beside it was a one-litre bottle. It held only the remnants of a clear liquid. The room was filled with blue threads of cigarette smoke.

Schmidt hadn't noticed Maria's entrance at first, only when she closed the door did he look up. He got up somewhat clumsily. Maria had stopped. She was still holding the door-handle in her hand. He reached for the bottle, thought better of it and said instead: "What a pleasure." The whites of his eyes were bloodshot. His voice had a biting edge to it, sounded hoarse and rough. "Well well well, did madam have a good night?"

Maria didn't reply.

Georg looked around. There were several items on his desk. He seemed to be looking for something. He spotted a water tumbler on the windowsill. He crossed over towards it, put it on the desk and half filled it with the clear liquid. Maria watched him without saying a word. He spilled a little. Then he raised the glass towards Maria. "Let's drink," he said, "to your conquest."

"Put the glass down," the woman said at last. Her voice was hard and abrasive. She walked towards him. She stopped when she got close, took the glass from his hand, put it on the table. She looked into his bleary eyes. "Pokorni is dead," she whispered. "Suicide! Do you understand me?"

He didn't understand at all. He had been drinking and before that, Attila had been to see him to return the umbrella. And before that, before that he had stood at the window and had looked into the rain and hadn't seen the strange man return.

"And the best you could do was console yourself with that Horvath man?" he asked.

Maria felt almost sick. Then she reached out with her right hand and slapped him across the face.

He stood rigid and motionless for a moment while she stood there, trembling. Then she walked towards the door.

It was very quiet in the room. Schmidt had half raised his hand towards his face and was looking at the floor.

What was that?

"Here," said Maria and pulled the telegram from the pocket of her coat. She had tears in her eyes and turned away again after Georg had taken the sheet of paper. She didn't know whether they were tears of anger, of sadness or tears of inconsolable abandonment.

In her desperation she'd come to this person, to this horrible drunken person. But then again, didn't she deserve this pain, and wasn't it really her own face that was smarting from the slap?

Georg read the lines of text. They floated before his eyes.

"Today," said Maria! "Today! Oh God!"

Georg read it again. Yes, this morning. Just this morning, he thought. He was all of a sudden totally sober.

He stepped towards Maria. "I'm sorry," he said. "Forgive me, I didn't know what I was saying." For a moment he remained silent. Maria didn't say anything either. Then he asked: "What are you going to do? Can I help you make the arrangements?" He was completely calm. His face was as if transformed. For once he had understood what tormented her and showed the delicacy not to mention Attila. He talked about the necessary formalities with the authorities and the funeral director. He offered to arrange everything for her, and if necessary to drive his car to the place where it all happened. The Horvaths weren't mentioned again by either of them and Schmidt might well have let them live in his hotel forever, without paying a penny more in rent.

Attila, of course, had no idea about these developments. On the contrary, everything seemed to him even sadder, even more hopeless than before. His first disappointment came from the duty manager. This man told him, when he was about to leave the hotel, that Frau Pokorni had gone to the scene of the accident - of course he didn't know any details - and that she'd asked him to pass the news on to Herrn Horvath. He added - in strict confidence of course - that he thought she'd gone with the manager, as he'd got his car from the garage.

All day long Attila thought about the blame he and Maria were apparently supposed to carry for Pokorni's death. He couldn't find the connection between their actions and Pokorni's.

Love and death, love and death, birth and death! Those seemed to him to be concepts which could be seen in relation to each other. But this suicide and their love? No, he couldn't see any connection at all.

Their love! Had he ever told her: I love you? Had she ever said: I love you? Did he know that she loved him? Did he know that he loved her? Could you ever be certain about anything in love? Might the whole thing not have just been a game, a game played by her dark eyes? Or maybe it all came down to physics, maybe it was just some kind of electrical field that he'd been drawn into with each touch of her skin, and whose force had gripped him with an almost primeval power of increasingly greater intensity, the more fleeting her touch. Was there any more to the whole business than the mere smell of the other sex? Was it really the whole person he felt attracted to? Would he have felt the same if she hadn't looked the way she did, if she'd been ugly? His thoughts kept turning back to last night. He kept asking himself these same questions, over and over. Questions he didn't know the answers to.

Where was certainty?

On the Edge of the Pond

Trixi had been by to see Olga a few times now, and had come to the conclusion that Attila was always out. She asked the girl about Frau Pokorni, and while their communication was still fairly complicated and frustrating, she finally pieced together the story of Herr Pokorni's death and gathered that Frau Pokorni hadn't been in town since the day he died. As the manager was away too, the girl put two and two together.

You're not so alone, Attila had said to her, and now she hadn't seen him for four days. I'm here for you, I'll help you, he'd said, and now he had probably forgotten her already.

She would listen for noises, or even footsteps from the Horvaths' floor whenever she was cleaning the corridors and staircases. Now she was prepared to wait until Attila returned. She sat with Olga and the two of them, who had so often sat together in this room and felt like sisters, didn't know what to do any more. Finally, Olga fetched a dictionary. Trixi liked to pronounce single words over and over and to say little sentences to the other girl. Here was someone who knew even less than she did. The hidden tension disappeared, and when Attila came home, he found the two of them in the lamp-light, bent over a book, pronouncing words and gesticulating with their hands.

Trixi looked at him.

"What a rare pleasure," said Attila. He watched her as she knelt on one of the chairs, bent over the table. Her loose hair had fallen down over her face, her body was stretched out, her bottom scarcely covered by her skirt.

Trixi got up. "What do you mean?" she asked. "I've been here every day. But you, you're never at home." There was an undercurrent of accusation in her voice. "You must be very busy, I suppose?"

"Yes," he said. "I've finally got a job with an instrument maker. I start on the first of the month and there's the old problem with this room again. You know what I mean?"

But she didn't know. She was hardly listening. Her mind was on other things.

Attila could tell. "We were given notice again a few days ago," he whispered.

Olga watched them. She looked closely at their mouths. Attila hadn't told her about his most recent encounter with the hotel manager. He didn't want to scare her. He had preferred to tell her about his chance of employment instead, and she was happy for him, and seemed somehow strengthened by the news.

"If it's all right with you," said Attila now to Trixi, "I'll walk you home and tell you about it on the way."

Trixi nodded.

Attila didn't bother to take off his coat. He put some groceries on the table, talked a few things over with his sister and promised her not to stay away for too long. But he did tell her not to keep dinner waiting for him.

The girl nodded. She knew: He'd be late.

And she was right.

Trixi didn't want to leave the hotel in Attila's company. They met up with each other out in front of the cinema. While other people went inside the theatre, the two of them walked slowly along the wide street. It was just as it always was at that time, just before darkness fell. People were milling about in front of the shop windows, cars were rushing past, some with their lights on already, trams were rattling along, bells ringing. Trixi and Attila walked silently for a while, side by side. The girl had taken her hood off. Attila looked at her thick red hair with approval. Trixi had taken his hand, and allowed him to guide her like a little child. And he didn't even know where he wanted to go. It was all the same to him anyway, all he wanted to do was tell her about the eviction notice. He wanted to prepare her for the time when they'd have to leave the hotel. They went down the long, sloping street, and in the distance, Attila could see the high pillars of the Ketten-bridge which spanned the river. The shop windows became more scarce, less elaborate and increasingly smaller. The people here seemed to be in more of a hurry. As they approached the bridge, the shops stopped altogether on one side, and on the other side, the tracks of

a goods station ran along between huge piles of coal and storage facilities for machinery. It was all half-hidden behind a low, dirty brick wall, which was covered in posters and the slogans of various political parties. Old trees stretched their ghostly bare branches high up above the wall and into a sky streaked with the rusty lights of the city.

Attila now told her of the most recent eviction notice he'd been presented with, without of course mentioning the reason. He himself could only guess at what it might be.

Trixi asked if there was nothing Frau Pokorni could do to help. Her tone was almost belligerent, but Attila refused to take the bait.

No, she couldn't, or didn't want to help. He hadn't seen her since the death of her husband. She was obviously so absorbed in her own affairs that she didn't have time for anything else. Attila told Trixi about Pokorni's suicide and she was surprised. Up till now, all she'd heard about the death of Maria's husband was through Olga, and that was of course only fragmentary because of the language barrier. Now when she learned the cause of his death, she became thoughtful. For a while, the two walked in silence beside the dirty wall. Men in overalls, sooty and covered in coal dust, came towards them. They were talking loudly and the two had to almost flatten themselves up against the wall in order to let the group pass.

"I can see how it could have happened," said Trixi, a few moments later. "He was probably alone most of the time. She probably didn't care about him all that much."

"I thought," said Attila, "that it was the other way round. He didn't care much about her. Maria, she looked after him, she cared for him, without her he probably would have gone under much earlier."

There was a medium-sized square between them and the bridge. A policeman was standing there in the middle of the intersection, directing traffic. The two of them looked ahead to the dark stream beyond the side street, and to the chain of lights which meandered across the river in a high arc.

"Well," said Trixi, "That's possible, I suppose, but most likely she didn't love him." She said it in the same sort of voice she

would use to ask about a movie or about the new goalkeeper of some football team.

Attila was surprised. "I don't know," he side-stepped the issue, "maybe before." He didn't really believe what he was saying himself, and feared that it was obvious in his voice.

"But what about recently? He must have been alone by himself pretty often."

"Maybe, but I got the impression that he quite liked it. It wasn't as if he lived cheaply or anything. I went there a couple of times, and I'd never have expected it."

Attila told her about his first visit to Pokorni's.

Trixi didn't find it strange at all. They crossed the side street and reached the bridge. There were train-tracks and mooring-docks beneath them for the first few metres, but soon they had a view of the water.

"How terrible would it be," said Attila finally, "if all those people who weren't loved any more all went and committed suicide."

"I'd do it," replied Trixi, impulsively.

They stood at the vertex of the bridge, leaned side by side over the railing and looked down at the water.

"You wouldn't do it," he said. "And it would be different for you anyway. You're still young and don't think like a fifty-year old. For him it would have been blasphemy."

"Why do you say that?" she asked. She had no idea what the word blasphemy meant, but she didn't want to ask. All that was important to her was that he believed her now. And she thought it was a good time to let him know that he should take what she said seriously.

"You're too healthy to think of things like that," said Attila.

"Was Pokorni sick?"

"Maybe. You know, not physically, the other kind. Why else would he have needed to drug himself up all the time."

"I'd still do it," said Trixi stubbornly. "I'd jump into the river, right here."

He followed the movement of the waves beneath them with his eyes. It crossed his mind that the very same water flowed in exactly the same way back in his homeland. He thought back to those last

days of autumn. The traffic noises, the haze hanging over the houses, the round lights and the whole city were all forgotten. He looked across to the other bank. It was dark there. The nearest streets and houses were all some distance from the river. A large meadow stretched out in between. A few tall poplars were planted along the street and isolated groupings of old elm trees were recognisable in the dark, amongst the ditches and channels. Attila put his arm round Trixi's waist. He knew that she'd only talked about suicide in the river to provoke him. He could see that she'd been waiting for some sort of gesture like this from him. He could see that she was just waiting to be embraced and comforted.

The wind blew into their faces, pulled Trixi's hair this way and that. Attila's coat flapped around his legs. This horrible loneliness, thought Attila, as he looked towards the city lights, remembered the evening with Trixi in the doorway, remembered the accusations she'd made against herself. No, none of them were true. But she had the potential to become those things. She wouldn't jump into this river right here. But she was about to jump into a far more dangerous river. Attila pressed the girl's body close to his. Trixi had put her hand on his shoulder, her head on his arm. For a while they remained standing like that, leaning over the railing, while behind them, trams and heavy lorries thundered across the bridge. The ground trembled slightly under their feet. They could feel the tremors and vibrations. How unstable everything is, he thought. But the large trees and bushes along the gentle curve of the river bank stood firm, and even the continuous flow of water under them seemed to him more calm and steady than their place by the railing on the bridge. Eventually he took up the girl's last words.

"No, Trixi, you wouldn't, and besides you've got no reason to do anything like that anyway. Just look at the way things have turned around for me and my sister, is that a good reason for you to despair or give up hope? We had to leave our homeland, Trixi, do you know what that feels like? No, it's something you can't possibly understand. Our homeland. And what a homeland, Trixi!" His voice had become quieter towards the end, as if he was talking to himself. Now he was silent. Then he straightened himself up and the girl who leaned on him did likewise and the two of them kept

on walking along the bridge as he continued: "Wouldn't you say I had pretty good reason to finish it all, just like Pokorni did? And you, Trixi," he said with a slight smile, "you'd have to find someone else to walk across this bridge with."

"No," she said, "I'd never do that."

He smiled. "And I'd never jump off a bridge in the first place either. I'll never give up." He had spoken the last sentence very quietly. Now his voice became firmer again. "Don't you ever give up, Trixi. As long as this heart of mine is still beating, it'll be beating for something or someone, for myself, for you, for my sister, my friends back home." He fell silent, thought about the last hours before their escape, thought about the burning houses and the rumbling tanks in peacetime, thought about the machine guns firing into the demonstrators as they waved their red flags. No, it can't end like that, he told himself. Not like that!

Later, when the two of them were sitting at the edge of a pond in the middle of a dark meadow, the girl tried to insist again that she'd jump in the river. But Attila didn't let her get a word in. He told her about the friends he'd sat with, beside this very river, just like he was doing with her now. But of course the river back home was even more beautiful and majestic and ran right through the middle of the city. Sometimes it seemed to him as if he had already told Maria the exact same things. But then he noticed that the same words he had used with Maria took on a different meaning now, conveyed a different sense, and had a different effect.

Trixi was listening to him, and at the same time not listening to him. Perhaps that was the reason the words were suddenly very different. He might just as well have been saying the complete opposite. He could have been talking about how to build a violin, or, if he had known anything about it, about the construction of the first steam ship to travel along this river. Trixi heard his voice and felt his warmth and his breath. That was enough for her. She completely enveloped herself with them. At that moment she needed nothing more, and Attila seemed to realise it.

When he stopped talking, they could both hear the hissing and rattling of the traffic noise at the edge of the pond, and a low

rumbling every now and then, when a tram crossed the bridge. But finally these noises too merged into a distant abstraction, like the lights of the city and the rushing of the river. All the complicating factors of the differences in their education, age and experience were wiped out, yesterdays and tomorrows were united, the endlessly tangled paths through the maze of streets, the strange faces, the dark staircases which always led only to other strangers, all that was obliterated and the universe itself seemed suddenly far closer, the stars circled around them, and the stars circled inside them and the eternal darkness, which at the same time is eternal light, was all around them.

Only a few days ago Attila had pressed the body of another woman to his, and thought he had found a home. But Maria was homeless herself, just like he was. Maria was a strangely beautiful lizard from a sunny country, locked up in a glass cage. Maybe he'd shattered the cage, broken it, just for a few moments. But Maria was strong, she never let herself go for more than a few moments at a time, she didn't allow herself to drift. She took her fate into her own hands, and built her own glass walls.

Here, the young girl next to him, far away from the hectic buzz of the city, on the river bank, here everything seemed somehow different. Here, they shared a common clarity and helplessness, a surrender to the endless moment, with no thought about afterwards. Here, the passion of another life overwhelmed him, swept him along, much as the waves of the river take everything along with them which lies within their reach.

When he and Trixi returned across the bridge later on to the brightly lit city, he didn't flatten himself up against the dirty brick wall when they met people. He walked arm in arm with the girl, and here and there they stopped in front of the lit shop windows, looked at things which they didn't need, and he heard the singsong of her voice next to him talking about beautiful dresses and shoes, and he had no idea whatsoever what he was up against.

Ode to Joy

Olga rang the doorbell. She waited at the door. It seemed half an eternity before she finally heard the sound of footsteps. She always felt uncomfortable when she had to wait so long in front of a closed door. She felt as if she were a beggar or something. At last Attila opened the door.

“Oh, it’s you!” he said. “Come on in.”

He led her through the narrow, dark entrance hall with a collection of coat-hooks on its right-hand wall. They brushed against the hanging coats as they walked past. He pushed through the half-closed door into a small room, and invited his sister in. “Good to see you again,” he said. “Take a seat. Trixi will bring us out something to eat in a moment.”

Olga had changed a lot. In the two years they’d lived in the city, she’d grown stronger, had developed a womanly figure and begun to dress well. But there was something tired, something slightly strained about her face. “I haven’t come for the food, Attila. I just can’t stand it with those Schmidts any longer. It’s this job, every day till late. They make me do everything. So they pay overtime, what good is that to me? I can’t ever spend the money. The shops are all shut by the time I finish work.”

She would have continued if Attila hadn’t interrupted her. “You know what, we’re having roast pork today, with dumplings of course. Wouldn’t you rather stay and eat with us? You haven’t been looking well lately. You need a little cognac to start off with, as a sort of foundation so to speak, it will calm you down.”

Attila fetched the bottle and two glasses from one of the two cupboards in the room, filled the glasses and smacked his tongue against the roof of his mouth: “That’s a nice drop all right. Here you go! Napoleon! It will calm you down,” he repeated. “Have you talked this over with Schmidt yet? He’s a nice enough man; knows his cognac too.”

“No, I’ve been too shy.”

“There you are. Talk to him.” He handed Olga a full glass,

raised his, and with a "Prost," emptied his in one gulp.

Olga took little sips as she continued to complain that she hardly had a life of her own. She sat down on one of the two chairs and looked around the room, while Attila filled up both the glasses again, without her noticing. The walls were newly decorated with a roll-on pattern of irregular lines, the windows were newly painted, the beds were arranged the same way as the Pokornis had had them, but with clean linen and lace bed-spreads. Above them on one wall was a reproduction print of a portrait of Franz Liszt, and on the other side, a small etching behind glass of a draw-well and horses drinking at a water trough.

"It's a bit cramped here, but at least it's quiet," said Olga. "No, don't bother filling up my glass again. I can't drink any more."

"Rubbish," said Attila and pushed the full glass over to her. "Course you can."

"What I want to know was what was the point of them giving me a room with a bath? I have to be on call day and night, and if anything goes wrong, the catchphrase is always Fräulein Horvath knows what to do, Fräulein Horvath will sort it out, Fräulein Horvath... They're just using me."

Attila raised his glass. "My God, you've got smart, haven't you. Who would have thought it possible a year ago, and then to think that the hotel has become a respectable place too, with an international clientele. Oh well, that's what Father always said I suppose: just let her grow up, let her dream away for a while and then she'll start a career. She's not my daughter for nothing." Attila emptied his glass again, while Olga took only a tiny sip from hers.

"The two of them are out nearly every evening, and I'm completely responsible for everything that happens in the building," Olga continued.

"Really smart," repeated Attila. "Where's that Trixi got to?"

At that moment the door opened, and the girl entered the tiny room. She was carrying a tray with crockery. "Nice to see you again, Olga," she said, put the tray down on the table, hugged her friend and kissed her on both cheeks.

"Another place setting," said Attila, "bring another setting for Olga."

Trixi disappeared with the empty tray. While the girl busied herself in the kitchen, Olga asked: "Isn't she eating with us?"

"No," replied Attila. "She worries about her weight. You know I told her about my visit to see that Frau Hartmut. She's a bit paranoid now. You know what I mean? That's why we hardly ever eat together. But she's an amazing cook. You'll see for yourself in a minute. God only knows where she gets it from. She must be a natural. In any case, ever since she's had that cleaning job at Professor Holländers, she's been cooking amazingly well. Maybe she learnt it off him? I wouldn't have thought so, but then again, why should I care, it makes no difference to me where she picked it up from."

"And would you believe it," said Olga, "they want me to take a course in accountancy now, they want me to learn all about that kind of stuff as well. What do you make of that?"

"There's nothing wrong with that. Nothing you learn is ever wasted. Who's supposed to pay for it?" He arranged the plates, glasses and cutlery.

"They want to pay for it, of course."

"Well then, it's a unique opportunity for you. Soon you'll know more about the business than they do. I hope Trixi has made dessert."

The girl came back with the tray. She laid another place, set a plate of meat in the middle of the table, a bowl of dumplings and another bowl of fresh lettuce. She must have heard his last words because she said: "Of course, my little sweet-tooth." And to Olga she said: "Please, help yourself! Enjoy. I have to check the oven."

"You're not going to eat with us?" asked Olga.

"No, really, if I ate every day... I wouldn't fit into any of my dresses any more." Trixi ran her hands round her hips.

"But Trixi, you're so slim," said Olga. "You don't need to worry about getting fat. Come on." But the girl was already on her way back to the kitchen.

"The wine! You've forgotten the wine," Attila cried after her, slapped a slice of meat down on Olga's plate, poured some gravy over it and added a dumpling. "Well, what do you think, she's a good cook, isn't she? We wouldn't have thought it when she used to spread that butter on the bread back in our hotel room, would

we?"

Olga, who had started eating, just nodded as Trixi entered the room with a wine bottle.

"Can I fill your glasses?" she asked, and did so without waiting for a reply.

"But you'll have a drink with us, won't you?" asked Olga.

"Yes, later on," said Trixi. "I've got to get back to the kitchen just now."

"Prost," said Attila and raised his full glass towards his sister. She clinked his glass with hers and took a little sip, while he took a gulp, ran his tongue around his lips and turned his attention back to his meal again.

"I can't go on like this you know," said Olga. "I've decided I'm going to start coming to concerts with you again. You've still got a subscription, haven't you?"

Attila was in the process of emptying his glass. He just shook his head and filled it up again.

"What, you don't go to concerts any more?" asked Olga.

"No," said Attila, "we've got to save money you know. It's the rent here, the landlady is a real profiteer. She's always complaining about things. What business is it of hers if we're married or not? I'm sure Pokorni only paid half the price we do for this miserable hovel." He took another mouthful of wine.

"And I had imagined the three of us would go together."

"Drink up. Or don't you like the wine?"

"No, it's fine," said Olga. She sounded as if her thoughts were elsewhere.

"Well then, Prost," again Attila raised his glass towards her and as she was still looking quizzically at him he added finally: "You know perfectly well that I'm surrounded by music all day long. I need to relax a bit in the evenings. And being at home with Trixi is the best way to do that." He laughed.

Olga had taken a mouthful and put her glass back on the table.

"Yes, I know," said Attila, "it's not as good as ours back home of course. But it still has a pleasant enough bouquet."

"It's just that I imagined it all differently."

“What?”

“Well, everything. This whole life!”

She thought about all the discussions they'd had back home. One cup of mocha after another, with cigarette after cigarette. Off they'd go, from Joseph's to Laszlo's, from Laszlo's to Ernő's, and there was mocha and cigarettes everywhere and hour-long discussions everywhere too. There were quotations everywhere: Marx, Lenin, Gramsci, Kropotkin, Lucács. Quotations coming out your ears.

She hadn't been able to keep up with them. The other women all seemed to be well up with the play, got excited at all the discussions, argued with the men and they all seemed to know all the different theories, knew who had said what and how everything had to go on from here, could map out the exact path to a better future. They'd gone home to their little flat in the small hours of the morning. Attila had only slept for a few hours. She was supposed to be on holiday. But she'd gone about all day with a buzzing head anyway. Why did everything have to be so complicated! Everything had been so easy at her aunt's, where she'd lived for the first six months after their parents died. Geese and chickens in the small yard, the two cows in the barn, the little field of corn, the potatoes, the plump, ripe plums on the small trees along the rotten fence-planks which enclosed the yard. Of course, there was no bath, and the beautiful dress that she was wearing now wouldn't have stayed beautiful for long. She wouldn't have been able to take ten steps in that yard in her high-heeled shoes. And there were no concerts either, like there were later on in the city. Yes, her aunt was a simple woman and she was happy if she could sit on a bench in front of her house on a Saturday evening to watch the swallows feed their young, or arrange a few dahlias from her garden in a vase. Her aunt was a bit old-fashioned.

“What more do you want?” said Attila, as he filled the glasses again. “We're not so badly off. When I think back to how we first arrived, with nothing! And the way we ended up in that camp, you sick and me with no job, all those other people around us. Everything's turned out for the best. We should be pretty happy, I think.”

Exactly, so true! But was that all there was to it? thought Olga. We came here because we couldn't stand all those lying slogans, didn't we? Because we were against all that pressure and the constant deadening repression. Our aunt? She had no idea whatsoever about materialism or class-struggles. She didn't even know which underprivileged class she belonged to. She was a pushover in anyone's book. She liked eating and didn't think much further than her little piece of land and life in the village, and yet, and yet... "I thought it would all be different," she said again. "Didn't you?"

Attila mopped up his gravy with a piece of dumpling. "Christ, Olga, what more do you want?"

"It wasn't just because of... It wasn't just the higher standard of living that made us..."

"All that's happened is that we've just grown up a bit," her brother interrupted her, without looking up. He raised his glass: "Prost, Olga! But if you'd like to go to some concerts, I can get you a subscription. That's no problem, piece of cake." He took another big gulp from his glass.

Olga had only been taking tiny sips. She had put her knife and fork back down on her plate. No, she couldn't, she'd had enough! They'd always been dissenters of some kind or another. There had always been those whose convictions had been stronger, and thus in some sense better than Attila's, or so it was thought,. Granted, there had always been those who had served the greater good with more strength of purpose than he had. The greater good! There'd been no agreement about what that was supposed to mean either. She'd been too young still, too silly, she'd have found anything convincing if it was portrayed convincingly enough. Everything. It only had to be phrased the right way. Attila had told her that you could make free decisions here, that here people were judged by their actions and not their beliefs. He had always talked about the ideals that he expected to find here, not the material things. And now he was sitting there in front of her, drinking too much, and not even interested in the music which they used to love so dearly together. She remembered one expression which had always come up in those vigorous discussions, an expression whose meaning she never quite understood. It was *systemimmanent*, or that which was inher-

ent in the system. Was that what it all came down to in the end? Whatever the system had to offer was what you got? Did you just have to resign yourself over here to being content with this brash surface materialism? And what about the other system, which called itself a 'materialistic' system? Was there no way out of the inherent intellectual discontent, did you have to be in a permanent state of doubt?

Attila filled his glass again. "Maybe we could come with you every now and then. Trixi could probably do with the break. Right now we never have the time. You know, we've got so much to do. I don't know where the time goes."

Olga looked into his face. It had become bloated. His eyes had shrunken down to two narrow slits. His skin was red and shiny. Attila's appearance had changed a lot in the years since Pokorni's death and since he'd been living with Trixi.

The girl came in again. She put a walnut gateau on the table.

"But now you'll stay with us for a while, won't you," said Olga.

"Yes, I'll just go and get the plates."

"And a glass for yourself!" called Olga. "And a chair."

Attila had grabbed the knife and started to divide the gateau up into large slices.

"Don't cut it all up," said Olga, "who's going to eat it all?"

"You'll see," replied Attila, "I'm sure you'll like it."

No, thought Olga, I'm sure I won't. There's nothing that I like any more. It's all so absurd. Is this any kind of life? Any kind of life worth living?

She hadn't noticed Trixi come in with a new glass. She hadn't brought a chair. Where would she have put it anyway? The room was far too narrow. There was just room to squeeze past the small narrow table with Olga on the one side and Attila on the other. Trixi had done just that, before pausing next to Attila to fill the glasses again. Attila pulled her down on his knee. The two of them raised their glasses. Olga had no choice but to do the same.

"Prost," they all said.

"You've got a new dress," said Trixi when she put her glass down. "It suits you. Where did you get it?"

"Well, there's this little shop in Milchstraße, in the city. I was just

passing it by chance one day and saw that they had some nice things there.”

Attila had pulled his dessert plate towards him and every now and then he took a mouthful of wine from his glass, sucking the liquid in through the corners of his mouth with loud gulps and slurps. “Not bad at all,” he murmured to himself.

The women carried on talking about clothes, but Olga was only half-listening. She asked herself whether it was in some sense enough for the girl to be absorbed in the process of becoming a good little housewife? Was it enough for Attila to be resting on the laurels of his good deed of having saved this human being from the dens of iniquity? Here was this little girl, sitting on her brother’s knee, leaning back against his shoulder. A purring little pussy cat, thought Olga. She seemed to like it the way Attila moved his hand to and fro on her thigh. They can hardly wait for me to leave, she thought. I’m just about to. I’m just about to.

But she didn’t leave after all.

He’s my brother, she thought. We spent such a long, short childhood together. We’ve shared so many experiences together the swimming lessons and our first ever long-distance swim in the river, the nights in the tent by the lake and all those evenings playing music with friends.

For her, even those discussions in the last months before their escape, in which she’d been at most a silent participant, felt like some sort of bond to him. Yes and the way he’d taken care of her during the march across the border and during her illness, and the trouble he’d taken to teach her this language and the search for a place to live in the city, and his repeated negotiations with the Schmidts until she’d got this position, this damned job which made her so happy but seemed at the same time to swallow her up, which took so much of her attention that she was hardly able to think about anything else but foreign guests and staffing problems, the deliveries, the tourism office and the bus companies.

“You mustn’t think that we eat like this every day,” said Attila, “we wouldn’t be able to afford it, it’s only on Saturdays and Sundays. After all, we still have to pay Maria for that lot,” and he waved towards the beds with his half-empty glass. Again he took a

mouthful, put the glass back on the table and continued, "I know you'd give us the money, you earn a good wage, but I'm sure you understand that we can't live at my little sister's expense. What would our dear old father have said to that?" Then he turned towards Trixi: "Olga wanted to go to a concert with us."

"Oh," said Trixi "but this evening we were going to..."

"But not today," Attila interrupted her, "anyhow, she thought we still had a subscription."

"I see," said Trixi slowly. "Well, that would be nice. We should really get another one."

Olga was pleased. Look, she said to herself, she wants to go. It's just him. He's got lazy.

And as if to confirm it, Attila said: "Yes yes, Trixi we'll see. But as you know, you have to go and clean for Professor Holländer three times a week, and most of the subscription concerts are on those days, and anyway, you seem to be forgetting that we've got all sorts of things planned." As he spoke, he moved his hand up and down on Trixi's thigh.

I have a fair idea what sort of plans those are, thought Olga, but all she said as she got up was "pity!"

Trixi slipped from Attila's lap, squeezed past the table again and put her arm round Olga's shoulder.

"Do you have to go already?" asked Attila, but Olga could tell he was just being polite.

"Yes," she said. "I can't stay away from the hotel for too long today. The other two have gone out and didn't say when they'd be back. I just wanted to ask about the concerts."

"I see," sighed Attila. He sounded relieved. "Do you want me to get you a subscription?"

"Thanks," said Olga, and stretched her hand across the table. "It's not so much fun by myself. Maybe later, when you've got time to go again as well. Goodbye, Attila." Her voice sounded hesitant.

He got up too, patted her hand and said "Come by again some time. You know we're always pleased to see you." Trixi accompanied Olga out through the entrance hall to the door. "It's such a shame you're always in such a hurry!" she said.

Olga was thinking about her aunt and her small backyard. When she's old, Trixi will sit and stare straight in front of her, just like her aunt. She'll look out the window, watch the pedestrians and the pigeons, maybe she'll dust Attila's photographs, and in the summertime, she'll travel somewhere, oh anywhere. Olga thought about the well-dressed widows in their organised tour-parties who were brought to the hotel in regular intervals and then shunted about from sight to sight, from the dinosaur skeletons today to the shrivelled bodies of Egyptian mummies tomorrow. "Oh, leave it Trixi. That's not the problem."

"No, no, I understand," said the younger girl, "I know you think our lifestyle's not sophisticated enough."

"Oh Trixi!"

"No, it's okay. I've noticed it. But you'll see, once we find another flat, everything will be different."

"Are you going to leave?"

"Of course, it's hardly an ideal place to live. There's no space to move."

For a moment Olga thought about the bombed-out building Trixi and Attila had wanted to move into. Her brother had showed it to her on one of their first walks after she'd recovered. No, they wouldn't be satisfied with a place like that anymore. But maybe that was a good thing. They had a goal which was worthwhile working towards. They always had some new goal in front of them. They? I don't know. He's changed. It is all the same to him whether he gets on top of her in that small room or in some spacious flat.

"I thought it was all the same to Attila, that he was happy anywhere, as long as you were there," she said.

Did that sound contrived? Surely Trixi must have noticed how fake she sounded.

But no, she didn't seem to. On the contrary, she seemed pleased. "You're right, Olga, I think it is all the same to him. But for my sake, you know, for my sake, he's already applied for a new flat."

Olga was surprised. "What, already?"

"Yes," whispered Trixi, obviously she didn't want Attila to hear her back in the small room. "You know, in that area next to the

bridge, the city council is building a huge apartment complex and we've already gone and registered."

"There? Isn't that expensive?"

"Well, it's not exactly cheap, but we're both on incomes now. That's why I go to Professor Holländer's to clean."

Olga was still amazed. The things this silly little girl was capable of, she thought. "Good luck," was all she said. "I hope you'll be able to move in soon. Goodbye Trixi. Take care."

The door closed behind her. She could hear the lock fall into place. She thought she could hear the door to the small room close too, as she walked down the stairs.

On the one side was the wall and on the other the deep stairwell. When she bent over the bannister, she could see right down to the paving-stones of the ground floor. It was a narrow well. Anyone who tried to jump would get stuck by the time they reached the floor below them. On the other side, the wall along the hand-rail was scratched and marked with graffiti and covered with symbols engraved with some sharp instrument. Olga didn't take much notice of them, but they were there nonetheless, and they created a certain atmosphere in the stairway. The further down she walked, the more dingy the staircase became. The shadows of the houses opposite grew deeper and deeper.

He's taking it too easy, thought Olga. It can't go on like that forever. She opened the front door and stepped outside. The narrow street lay in shadow. Here too, she was enveloped by a certain coolness. The houses formed a deep gully. Involuntarily, she looked up to the window of the flat where she knew Attila and Trixi were. It was dirty and dusty. The paint on the window frame was peeling. He drinks too much, she thought. Is he trying to escape his responsibilities? Responsibility for whom, for what? For what? For whatever we do and whatever we don't, of course. For whom? She didn't know the answer to that one.

She walked on towards the main street. It was warmer there, the other side of the road was bathed in sunshine. She was quickly swallowed up by a stream of people, but she hardly took any notice of her surroundings. Whatever we do? she thought. Is it better then,

to go off to a concert or a play, where you can occupy your mind with so-called higher things? Her aunt in her small house in the village had never set foot in a concert-hall, and would have been in a theatre maybe twice or three times in her life. The geese, the chickens, the two cows in the barn and the corn, the potatoes and onions. Of course she had her problems and her troubles too, rheumatism, and her teeth falling out and her neighbours who couldn't understand that she didn't want to build a new house and mocked her careful housekeeping. They called her old-fashioned and superstitious. Why didn't I stay with her? Stay in the village? Me, with geese and chickens! Oh it was quite clear that it was no life for a young person. A young person needs to see things, experience things, get to know the world. Her aunt knew that too. For the world was far from idyllic, it was a challenge which you had to struggle to master. She kept thinking about all the discussions during the weeks and months before their escape. The poverty some countries suffered, and the luxury enjoyed by others, the inequitable distribution of goods.

She stood at an intersection and waited for the light to turn green. Over there, beyond the stream of traffic, was a large park, the sun was shining there, and there were tall chestnut trees. She could hear the call of the tom-tits rising above the noise of the traffic. The bright, persistent sound of their chirping carried through the air. Of course, a young person needs to see things, needs to experience things, needs to get out in the world. Her aunt was an old woman. She was over fifty. That calling of those tom-tits. She could remember back to how she'd once been so upset when she'd found the dead young tom-tits on the ground next to the tree where the birds had had their nesting cave, and seen that instead of the little songbirds, a pair of wrynecks were darting in and out. She'd almost been in tears. Her brother had come to fetch her. You're stagnating here, he'd said. You need to get to know what life's all about, he'd said! And in the city where she'd gone with her brother, it was true, life was so much more interesting, so much richer. There were always new experiences to be had. She'd felt it immediately; everyone was part of a greater community and she felt in touch with it all. You felt in touch with everything, everywhere. And going to

concerts or theatres felt like celebrations of this unity, like some sort of social ritual.

The traffic lights changed to green and Olga crossed the street. She entered the park. Above her, the white candle-like flowers of the chestnut trees spread their scent. She inhaled the smell. And there was the smell of lilac too! Suddenly, everything was just as it used to be at her aunt's, so close and direct to her senses and absorbed by her whole body. Her whole body.

For a moment she thought about Trixi and Attila, about their two bodies in one of the beds. That's how it is, her aunt had said. That's life, that's nature, the wryneck likes to use the nesting places of others. It had sounded so matter-of-fact. She'd no doubt experienced similar things many times and had come to terms with the way things were. But not us! No, we haven't come to terms with things. Not us! At their friends' places, at Joseph's, Laszlo's and Ernő's, where they met in the city, they'd discussed the Economic Problems of Socialism. But really, she'd been much more occupied with making tea and spreading lard on bread. There'd been discussions about the events in Berlin on the 17th of July, 1953. She could remember it all so clearly: Elizabeth helping her memorize Latin vocabulary lists in the kitchen. The students! The students in Prague. The death sentence for Slánsky in 1952, and a year later, the workers' uprising in Pilsen. The workers' strikes in Posnania. None of the really passionate speakers had been around, but you heard everyone talking about it. Attila was her big brother, he always knew best. And now all he could say was: It's a unique opportunity for you to get ahead, and: We've just grown up a bit. As if it was an excuse! How old was Gandhi when he was still running around with his goat on a leash? That damned need to get ahead! Get ahead to where? Away from her aunt, away from her homeland, from her childhood, further and further away. No! she told herself. Why does it always have to be further away? America perhaps! No! Back! Back to the land of my childhood. Can you ever do that, return to the land of your childhood? No, you can't. There's no way back. And while she was thinking like that, still thinking no way back, she stopped under a flowering chestnut tree, looked across to the large pond where there were ducks swimming

and two white swans circling around, where children threw pieces of bread for the animals, and without thinking, or even wanting to do so, she turned around and marched back with her eyes lowered.

But she'd only gone two or three steps when she bumped into another woman.

"Olga," cried Maria. "You nearly ran me down. Where are you off to in such a hurry?" Maria had grabbed her arm.

Olga was confused. Since Maria had been her boss, the cordial, easy relationship they'd had in those days when Olga had been a sick, homeless girl, lying in a shabby hotel room and Frau Pokorni had come to visit, bringing little care-parcels, only surfaced now on very rare occasions. Now she was Frau Direktor Schmidt, even if she didn't like the title much herself, and the two were still on a first name basis.

"I've been at Attila's," said Olga.

"Really," Maria's voice slowed down. "How is he?"

"Good, as far as I can tell."

"Everything still all right with his little girlfriend?"

Olga fancied she could hear a tone of melancholy in the other woman's words. But in spite of that she said: "They seem to be getting on pretty well together."

"And now you're on your way home? I saw you back at the intersection and thought we could walk together. And then you turn around suddenly and almost flatten me." She laughed gently.

"Yes, I wanted to go home," said Olga and looked into Maria's face. The tone of her voice was suddenly altered, sounded as if it was coming from an enclosed space, very far away.

"Come on," said Maria, "let's sit down for a moment." She pulled Olga on to one of the empty benches which had a view of one of the flowering magnolias across the green lawn. "You're disappointed. I can see it in your face. You were expecting something different from this visit of yours."

"Well," Olga shrugged her shoulders. "Actually, all I wanted was to ask him whether they still had their subscription to the concert series, and whether he could get me one too. I don't seem to get out anywhere any more."

Maria could feel the reproach. "Which series did you want to go

to?" she asked, to change the subject.

Olga remained silent for a moment. She stared straight in front of her, but saw neither the green lawn nor the flowering magnolia. She didn't even notice the strutting peacock preening himself in front of his peahen. She saw her brother, and Trixi on his lap, and watched as her brother's hand gently stroked his girlfriend's thigh.

"We've got a subscription too," said Maria, when she didn't receive a reply. "We go to the chamber music series, and we've got a subscription at the theatre too."

"They've given up everything," said Olga finally. "I think they're saving for a bigger flat. Trixi said something along those lines."

"I see! So that's why you're upset," said Maria. "But what about coming with us? I can have a talk to Schmidt. I'm sure he'll be able to arrange something."

"No, it's all right, I don't want to be a nuisance," replied Olga. But what she really thought was: I don't want to become even more dependent.

Maria laughed. "Well I think you'd be much less of a nuisance to us than your brother and his girlfriend. And Schmidt can be very charming. Especially to young ladies." She laughed again, dryly.

Olga suddenly noticed the peacock over there next to the magnolia. A few pedestrians, tourists perhaps, had stopped to watch the bird's display. "You've done us so many favours already, Maria," said Olga.

"And you're sick and tired of it," Maria interrupted her rather shortly.

Olga tugged at her lower lip with her teeth. "Maria! How can you say that?" She laid her hand gently on the other woman's arm.

"It's quite all right, Olga. I know exactly what you mean. We all need the freedom to live our own way, need space for our own individual decisions. Even if those individual decisions lead straight down a dead-end road. It's just the way it has to be. Attila has found his own life. He's managed to integrate himself very quickly. You're still swinging aimlessly between yesterday and tomorrow."

row. I know just what that's like. Only all too well."

Attila, integrated? thought Olga. Is that all there is to it? Is that the way you become integrated?

"You know, it was the same with Ferry. But I couldn't decide for a long long time," continued Maria.

"And now, with Schmidt, have you decided now?" Olga's question came out impulsively, sounded perhaps a little sharp.

Maria couldn't quite work out what lay behind the other woman's words. "It's not the material security, Olga. Trust me," she said. "I could live by myself very easily. I had to take care of Ferry financially before he died, he was hardly earning anything any more. No, it's more... yes, how shall I put it? Maybe it's kind of like a task that I've set myself."

"You love Schmidt that much?" Olga interrupted her.

"Love?" Maria's face, which had been tensing up as they talked, relaxed again. "I don't really know. We're not all that young any more, either of us. He's a decent person and he's committed to me."

"Wasn't Ferry committed?"

Maria smiled a bit. "Maybe he was," she said thoughtfully. "He was committed to himself all right. You know, men are a lot like children. They always need someone to admire them, so that they can have some sort of success to talk about, even if it's only imaginary. Ferry was just the same. If you take that point of reference away from them, they don't know what to do. Just existing from day to day, the way we do, they're just not capable of it."

The way we do? thought Olga. Me? I can't do that either! I can't! We! Who does she mean? Us women? But I'm a woman too, aren't I? And what about all those people who met evening after evening for those discussions, weren't they women too? Even if I didn't understand what they were arguing about so passionately, I could still share their concern and their need to question things. Existing from day to day? All very well for someone like my aunt in the country. That poor old soul in her old hut! Resigned! Superstitious! Just existing from day to day! What kind of person could do that forever? Surely Maria couldn't really do that either. And then, what about that lipstick and the little bottle of perfume she

gave me back in the old days. Her first present, when we owned nothing in all the world. Frivolous things! Really. Just like that, for pleasure and nothing else. Amazing how they stuck in the memory! Frivolous! Just for fun. Attila felt at home here more easily. He knew what we needed straight away. He tried to establish contacts. His way of thinking was much more practical. Integrated! Perhaps she was right.

“Well, do you want to come to the chamber music concert with us?” asked Maria.

“Yes, if Schmidt doesn’t mind. But then there’ll be no-one to look after the hotel!”

“So what. All we need in the evenings is someone at the reception desk. And we’re going to have to cut back a bit on bookings over the next few weeks anyway, we’re having the façade painted. The painters are already booked. We’re going to have it painted blue, violet-blue. Gorgeous! Don’t you think?”

“No,” whispered Olga. “No, it can’t be!”

“But why not? It will be a nice bright contrast with the awful grey surroundings, don’t you think.”

“Violet-blue?” asked Olga.

“Yes, that’s it!” Maria was suddenly very animated. “It’s the colour of spring, it’ll be a breath of fresh air, a touch of youth about the place.”

Maria couldn’t say enough about how nice and bright the house would look with its new coat of paint. She talked about the matching colour of the window-shutters too, even the window-sills and frames were going to be painted in matching colours. As she plunged into the details with great enthusiasm, she didn’t notice that Olga was becoming more and more thoughtful.

The lipstick, and the little bottle of perfume, and now the hotel is going to be painted violet-blue, thought Olga, The peacock, she thought of how the feathers of his spread tail gleamed in that gorgeous harmony of colours! green and black, she thought, they go together so well, I wouldn’t have thought so without seeing them, and then that shining blue as well, incredible colours! But then, isn’t it all just really part of a frivolous superstructure, an

unnecessary diversion from the underlying reality, a dream, and in reality, it's the scratching, pecking peahens that are the ones on the right track? Poverty in Africa, the luxury in the industrialised countries, chamber music, she thought, violet-blue, of course, the chamber music is violet-blue as well, it's all just a matter of courage, grey houses to the left and right, as far as the eye can see and she's going to have it painted violet-blue, the courage to buy a lipstick and a little bottle of perfume before a warm winter coat and sturdy shoes, to enjoy the enjoyable, to enjoy the frivolous, the saturated shining blue in the peacock feathers, eyes not for seeing with, but to be seen with, is all that as frivolous, as unnecessary as it seems? Is it really frivolous and unnecessary to paint a house violet-blue? What if you're one of those people lucky enough to be conscious of those hidden lights, those lights which usually live in realms that are closed off to us, but which we can make visible, because in the end, it all comes down to us, we paint the houses in our lives with our own imagination and our own initiative, we can open the doors and switch on the lights, no matter where we are, this city or another. Light on the Christmas tree, on a birthday cake? Light for us and for our fellow human beings.

"What about Attila?" asked Olga suddenly, out of the blue.

"Attila?" Maria repeated the question. She was in the midst of explaining all her plans. "What about Attila?"

"You said a while ago, that you thought Attila had become integrated," replied Olga.

"Did I say that? Why do you suddenly ask?"

"I don't know. I only thought... I only thought, well, he doesn't even play the violin any more, he'd find it unnecessary, frivolous even, to paint a house violet-blue."

Maria made a dismissive gesture. "Well, maybe. Even Schmidt just leaves it all over to me. "You know best," is all I can get out of him.

"And what about you?" insisted Olga, "have you become integrated here or not?"

Maria remained silent.

The two women looked across the well-groomed lawn to the magnolia on the other side of the park. The peacock had turned

around and folded his tail-feathers into a long train which he pulled behind him with a slight swaying motion. The onlookers moved away. The peahens pecked at the grass, as if the peacock had never displayed his feathers in the first place.

Maria had suddenly become very serious. "This is the only way I can do it," she said, "and only a little at the time. I can only integrate myself when I'm doing something I like doing, and which I think others will like too, something which is maybe not absolutely essential, perhaps even unnecessary. Perhaps even just a game."

To integrate, to fit in, it's a goal, a task, for everyone and forever! thought Olga. And the ones who think they've reached it - she saw Attila again, sitting at the table with a wineglass in his hand - will never ever reach it.

The two women got up and walked arm in arm in the direction of the hotel.