

On Gratitude

Before Maria left, she had to promise Olga and Attila that she would visit again soon. They arranged to see each other again on Saturday, in three days time. Maria finished work at twelve on Saturdays. She preferred to come by the hotel at that time, rather than later in the evening. Everything was still relatively quiet in the early afternoon, and there were virtually no people in the bar. A thin trickle of customers came in between three and six, but those who came were mostly quiet people who came quietly and left equally quietly, people who carefully avoided other people on the staircase or in the corridor, and who held their partners' hands awkwardly.

But when Maria turned up at Pokorni's flat the next evening, she found a large parcel for the Horvaths. Albert had sent it to them because he didn't know the refugees' address.

Pokorni was already waiting for her impatiently. He told his wife that his boss had written to him telling him that he wasn't satisfied with his work, and that he'd been told to go and look after his customers in the provinces, probably for a week or so.

Maria had no objection to that. The journey would distract the man from playing cards. She was pleased too, at the prospect of a week to herself, without setting eyes on his puffy face and smacking lips.

"I hope he packed something decent to eat," said Ferry, pointing to the parcel. "He was never that generous when he invited us round, that Herr Professor. I'm amazed that he sent us anything at all. When did you visit him?"

"Yesterday," said the woman. "I thought that Holländer would let them stay at his place. But he couldn't."

"I could have told you that right away, people like that are all talk," replied Ferry. He prodded the parcel on the bed. "Feels soft. Probably old rags. Used, worn-out underwear." He made a dismissive gesture with his hand and accompanied it with a depreciative comment about intellectuals in general and scholars in

particular.

They had been standing up while they spoke. Now Ferry knelt down, pulled a suitcase from under the bed, blew the dust off it and opened the lid. He rummaged about amongst elastic bands and braces, sighed finally, groaned, went out into the entrance-way, put on his coat, came back into the room and closed the lid of the suitcase, and finally put his hat on. He stopped once more at the door, pushed the hat back off his forehead, and looked at Maria, who had taken a few oranges from the cupboard, sugar and coffee from a box and had arranged everything on the table. "Good," he said, "take them some decent food. What does she look like? Have you seen her yet?"

"Yes, I saw her yesterday," she replied. "She still looks like a child really. And she's pretty weak, with deep hollows in her cheeks." Maria pressed the thumb and index finger of her right hand into her cheeks.

"Well, I'm sure that the two of you will fatten her up," said Ferry, straightened his hat, waved half-heartedly with his right hand and smiled foolishly. "Well then, goodbye. And give them my regards." He opened the door and left the room without looking back.

The two of you? Who does he mean? Are Attila and I already some sort of unit in his thoughts? What on earth could have given him that idea? Well, if that's what he thinks! He can think whatever he likes. Maria put the food parcel together, wrapped it in thick paper and wound a rough piece of string around it.

Finally, she got a cab from the next taxi stand. After receiving his tip, the driver reluctantly helped her carry the parcels. She set off for the Golden Apple.

It was already dark, the streets were damp, scraps of paper stuck to the asphalt. The reflected lights of the large shop windows sent a constant stream of morse code into the dark interior of the car as they passed by, short, long, long, long, then short, short, long, long again, never-ending, a code Maria couldn't decipher, broadcast from some mysterious transmitter. They hadn't passed many intersections, when all of a sudden the car was forced to stop at one. Maria looked out from her dark seat at the passing people.

Somewhere out there, she thought, Ferry was out walking too, off to the railway station with his little suitcase, so that he can arrive in some country town early tomorrow morning when the shops open, and then he'll go from street to street, from place to place, open his suitcase, close his suitcase. Christ, what a job! Always travelling. Then Albert came to mind. He's probably on board his ship already, across the ocean, beating his way through the jungle, wading through impassable swamps. Creatures in little glass phials, in tin boxes. Skeletons. Feathers. Skins. God, what a life! She saw once again the braces and elastic bands in his suitcase, the green order-book, the carbon paper peeping out from between the pages. She saw the boxes with the scientific instruments, the medicines and maps. An assistant collecting the material for films. With a sudden jerking movement, the taxi started off again. She suddenly noticed that they had stopped at the very junction where she and Attila had been walking just a few days ago.

I wonder what he's sent, she thought. I thought he wasn't listening to me and that all he could think about was himself. But maybe he really can't have visitors in his house. There are so many manuscripts, so many specimens, so many...

The taxi stopped in front of the hotel. The driver helped Maria to carry the parcels into the foyer. Then she stood alone in the vestibule for a moment. The duty manager had left his desk and his voice could be heard from one of the small staff bedrooms on the ground floor, whose windows faced the courtyard. From the bar, the loud blaring sounds of the jukeboxes could be heard, every now and then there was a pop like a beer bottle being opened, every now and then came the sound of a man's laughter.

To get to the bar you had to go down a few steps beside the staircase that led to the hotel rooms. There were a few young men hanging around, as there were every night, making stupid comments, as they did every night. A few people were dancing in the bar. Every now and then, the door was pushed open and the dancing couples came into view. Waves of sound kept wafting out into the stairwell and the hallways. Maria pushed the parcels back in behind the front desk. She looked down the corridor again, but couldn't see the duty manager anywhere. He must be out looking

for someone. The men on the staircase were ogling her.

When she stepped out of the lift a few minutes later, the noises were only just audible in the distant background. She walked towards the door that led to the Horvaths' room. She was about to knock, when she heard a peculiar sound coming from behind the door. She stopped. At first she didn't know what it was. It sounded strangely soft, a sound that lingered for a long time and then another one. But then all of a sudden, she realised what it was. A bow was being drawn across the strings of a violin, back and forth, back and forth. An instrument was being tuned. Then, after a little pause, she heard the beginnings of a melody. She stood outside the door, with her hand on the door-handle, and was silent.

After a few moments, Maria carefully pushed the door-handle down and opened the door quietly. She entered quickly and paused in the semi-darkness.

Attila was sitting near the window at a small table. There was a lamp on the table, but his figure was the only thing it illuminated, and the rest of the room lay in deep shadow. His fingers gleamed in the lamp-light. His head was moving in time with the music and his right foot was tapping the ground. His lips twitched slightly, and seemed to be murmuring words of some sort. Olga was sitting upright in her bed, with Trixi crouched on the end.

Maria's entrance went unnoticed. Attila played a few pieces and the two girls watched him as he played. After a while, Olga closed her eyes. She seemed to be concentrating solely on the sounds of the music. Trixi sat there, her mouth slightly open, her teeth shining white between her dark-coloured lips. She had her arms round her knees and her chin rested on them.

The sight of the girl surprised Maria.

The bow made a squeaking noise. Attila shot a smile towards his two listeners. But then he immediately launched into a series of fast runs, soft and agile. He played from memory. Finally he put the instrument down and bowed in the direction of the two girls.

Maria couldn't help herself, she clapped her hands and exclaimed out loud: "Bravo. Bravo!"

Everyone looked at her. Trixi got up and brushed a lock of her dark-red hair back from her face. She grabbed Olga's hand. Attila

put the instrument on the table and moved a few steps towards Maria.

“Oh Maria, it’s you! How nice of you to come,” he said. “Look, I’ve bought myself a violin. I got it at the pawnbrokers, really cheap. I had to repair it a bit first.”

Olga whispered to Trixi and then everything was silent for a moment. Attila’s left hand stroked the brown body of the violin. Trixi’s eyes moved from Attila to Maria and back again. Olga smiled at the woman like a child. But Maria’s gaze was fixed on the other girl.

“What do you think?” asked Attila, as he took Maria’s hand and pulled her towards the table.

Now she looked at the instrument. “Not a bad tone,” she said. How old was the thing, she wondered. Reddish-brown. His fingers on its neck. Those long fingers. He likes it a lot, that’s clear. He hadn’t mentioned it at all yesterday. Weren’t there other things he needed more urgently? Other things? Yes of course, other things. And she continued her thoughts aloud: “I’ve got two parcels for you downstairs in the foyer. Could you come and help me carry them up? Professor Holländer sent them. I think there might be a few things you could use.”

“Stay here. I’ll get them,” said Attila.

“I’ll help,” offered Trixi. They both left the room.

Her clothes were a mess. And that tangled hair. Maria watched them as they left the room. Now she looked more closely at the violin. It was obviously a cheap sort of instrument, one of those mass-produced fiddles for young people to scrape their first halting melodies on.

Olga, wearing a crumpled, not quite clean night-dress, crawled from her bed, put on a dressing gown and joined Maria at the table. She put her arm round the other woman’s shoulder. Maria flinched. Olga stammered a few disconnected words. Maria could only just understand that she was talking about the other girl. She concluded from the mixture of the two languages that she was a cleaner in the hotel, that she didn’t have any relatives, that she was poor.

Poor, thought Maria. They’re all poor. Of course, I’m wearing a

good coat, a decent dress and I got myself a good job. It's the others who are all poor. And why are they poor? Is she poor because of the way she dresses? Or because she has to work here? I'd quite like a change myself really, from dealing with those impatient people in the office very day, who for some inexplicable reason think they've just got to travel all over the world.

Olga helped the woman off with her coat, put it on the coat-stand and pushed a chair into place. Maria asked after Olga's health. She tried to speak slowly and clearly, and at times it seemed almost as if Olga could understand what she was saying. But then the conversation stopped. She just couldn't seem to concentrate. At that moment, the two women, the same two who just the day before had managed to communicate with a mere glance, with a smile, somehow found it intensely difficult to overcome that gulf of alienation that separates people from each other. The knock at the door came as a welcome distraction, and Maria went to open it for Attila. He had come back alone, carrying both parcels.

"Did you have to carry both of them at once?" asked Maria.

"It's all right, I don't mind," said Attila. He heard only the words, not what was lurking behind them, left unsaid.

But Olga seemed to sense it. She spoke to her brother. It sounded like the nervous chirping of a little bird. Every now and then, the man interrupted her with a question. He smiled as he did so. He put the parcels on the floor and went to open one of them straight away.

"Open the other one first," said Maria. "It's from Professor Holländer."

Olga switched on the main light. The room was filled with a cold, dimmish gleam. Attila moved the parcel onto a chair and started to untie the string. As he did so, he explained that Trixi couldn't help him carry them up, because the duty manager had been looking for her for some time. "She had to go to see the Herr Direktor," he said. "I don't think they like her spending time with us, but we just feel so sorry for her. She's trying to find herself some contacts to get herself out of this sad trap that she lives in. I don't even think she's got a real home."

At last Attila had undone the string. Now he unwrapped the

paper from the parcel. "You can imagine the sorts of things she sees and hears around here." Now he had removed all the paper wrappings. He took out a long winter coat. And then more items of clothing, almost new. Each item he unpacked seemed to delight him. His sister was pleased too, even though the parcel didn't contain anything for her.

Maria remembered Albert, the way he'd stood at the window, and the way he'd abruptly changed the subject after her question, had started talking about his journey again, about capturing lizards and the difficulties of transporting them. She felt almost as if she ought to apologize to him.

Attila put the coat on and looked in the mirror. His sister admired him. She's a pretty girl, thought Maria, and at that moment she wasn't quite sure herself whether she meant Olga or Trixi. Then she thought of Holländer again. Saint Martin had given half his coat away and Holländer had given a whole one. But the saint might well have only owned one and Holländer, well, never mind. Not too small and not too large, it fitted him perfectly. Red hair. Maybe the buttons could be moved a little, but that was all. Still so young and so sentimental, believes everything he's told. Well, would you look at that, the jacket fits too. The trousers might be a bit long. He's just holding them up against his legs, of course. Mind you, what else could he do? He must be a couple of years younger than I am and then too, I'm Frau Pokorni, Ferry's wife. That glass cage. Yesterday, that short walk from the restaurant back to here! What was that? What did it mean? But maybe it was just him being grateful. Of course, that's all it was: gratitude. But I don't want his gratitude. I don't need it. In fact, his gratitude is intensely irritating. He is grateful, I am grateful, she will be grateful! Gratitude! Our whole lives are lived under this damned shadow of gratitude! I'm grateful to Ferry that he gave me security here. I'm grateful to Georg that he rescued me from those unsophisticated surroundings and introduced me to society. I'm grateful to my colleague who shares her flat with me. Grateful, grateful, always grateful. But what use is my gratitude to them? They're all alone. My gratitude leaves them just as alone and isolated as they always were, have always

been. Oh yes, I'm grateful to all of them as well. Sometimes, with a few of them, the gratitude alone can take you a fair way. With some of them it might even be more than gratitude. But when I have time to think about it I know that the one will keep on drinking no matter how grateful I am to him, and that the other will keep on guzzling, possibly with a few more manners, but that's all. That's when I realise that people are always leaving each other, that they disappear from each other like objects that were never even related in the first place. I suddenly realise that the hand on my arm is an alien hand, I feel that nothing has any point anymore. Those arms are still rough hairy ape's arms and that fat face covered in pimples still disgusts me. And finally we begin to persecute each other with our secret hate. And finally we frighten even ourselves with that hate. We get frightened, and so we turn our thoughts to thoughts of gratitude. But that's not what I want. No! No, I don't want his gratitude. It's just an obstacle, that's all it is, a stone round the neck of a swimmer in the ocean of the other self.

Attila had been talking to her earnestly, but, occupied with her own thoughts, she hadn't been listening. But when he asked her for the second time when Professor Holländer was leaving and she still didn't reply, he stopped his unpacking and looked up at her. His mouth hung slightly open like that of an amazed child. He held his head to one side. The crumpling of the paper had stopped. For a moment there was silence again. Olga's constant stream of questions had also ceased. She had been standing behind her brother, about to open the second parcel. Now she crouched down and looked up at Maria.

Why are they staring at me like that? thought Maria. And then, as she looked at Attila: Dressed just like Albert, but with nothing of his appearance or his bearing.

"What don't you want?" asked Attila.

"What don't I want? What do you mean, what don't I want? Did I say that there was something I didn't want?" asked Maria, somewhat confused.

Brother and sister both nodded.

Was I thinking aloud? wondered Maria to herself.

"I don't want, I don't want," she murmured. "What was I going

to say, what didn't I want. Oh yes, I know. I was thinking that I didn't really think it was a good idea for you to just go off with him like that." And she explained to them now that the professor had offered to take Attila with him on his journey. Her explanations were rushed, she spoke quickly and her train of thought was disjointed. There was a demand for musical instruments over there in Middle and South-America, and Holländer had lots of contacts among influential people who would be able to find a good position for a young violin maker. She had presumed that he could make not only violins but guitars and mandolines too, as these were played a lot in those countries. But Maria also stressed the unreliability of promises of this kind. She advised him to sit back, to wait and see. She thought that the professor should really find out what sort of possibilities there might be for Attila first, and then write back and tell them.

Attila crossed over to the table. He sat down on a chair and put his head in his hands. The light of the table lamp irritated him. He held his hand out in front of his forehead. What should I do, he thought? Should I take the chance? It could be a great opportunity! But what about Olga? I couldn't take her the way she is right now. And then there's this woman. Could I leave her? Yesterday evening, walking back from the restaurant to here, there was something. I could feel it. But maybe she just wanted to comfort me. Maybe all she feels is pity for me and the situation I'm in. But I don't want her pity. I'm not a little boy any longer.

As he thought about all these things, Maria continued to talk about the professor and how they could best take advantage of his overseas connections.

Olga kept on asking her brother what Maria was saying. She could hardly understand a word of the other woman's rapid, disjointed speech. Attila didn't tell her much. He wanted to figure things out for himself before he worried his sister.

He was totally immersed in his thoughts, when Olga was suddenly shaken by a coughing fit. Her frail body shook violently. Maria and Attila urged her back to bed. Only after some time had passed, and the girl's body was wrapped back up in the blankets again, did the fit cease. All Attila's concerns and arguments seemed

all of a sudden to have disappeared, seemed to have found their answer.

Maria and Attila had finally sat down at the small table and begun to prepare supper when there came a knock at the door. Attila got up and opened it.

It was Trixi, bringing a letter from the manager. Attila asked her to come in, but she just looked miserable and told him that she had to go again straight away. She'd spent too much time in the building today, and had been reprimanded.

Attila opened the envelope and glanced over the letter. He turned to Maria: "He wants to get rid of us! Oh, he expresses himself most elegantly, the Herr Direktor! He can't be expected to forgo the full tariff indefinitely, that's what he's written." He passed the sheet of paper over to Maria.

I almost think she had tears in her eyes, he thought. I'm sure she knew what was in the letter. He saw Trixi's face before him, framed by her tangled hair. She's a good girl all right, she feels so deeply for other people, but at the same time she's so helpless, just like all the other young ones.

From her bedstead, Olga asked what was in the letter. All she'd understood was that it was from the Herr Direktor and that it wasn't particularly good news. Maria calmed her down. She offered to go and see the manager immediately and sort the misunderstanding out for them herself. She got up and looked around the room. Attila wanted to help her on with her coat. But she refused his help. These grey walls here, she thought to herself, this horrible, ugly furniture and then to top it all off, this kind of treatment! When I think about the length of time we stayed here. And all those memories that are forever tied up with all this ugliness.

She was wearing a close-fitting grey two-piece suit. Attila eyed her figure up and down.

"I'll come with you. I need to get a few things," he said. He took his coat from Dr Holländer, put it on as if it had always been his, glanced quickly in the mirror again, put a plate of sandwiches on his sister's bedside table, and joined Maria outside in the corridor.

The floor of the narrow, dimly-lit hallway was covered in a red

strip of coconut matting. Attila stopped. "I know of a room that's free," he whispered. He didn't want his sister to hear.

Maria didn't understand at first. She frowned.

"How do you mean? What are you talking about?" she asked and took a step away from him. Of course, I like him, but that's just horrible. That's plain insensitive. What does he think I am? Can't he think of anything else right now?

Attila took a step towards her and told her the condensed version of the story of his meeting with Hartmut and his wife, of the vermin, and his escape. And he really should take up the offer, he concluded. Even if she could get the eviction notice reversed again. Once more he saw the splashes of blood on the floor and the terribly pale, bearded moon jumping and dancing above the vast dome of the woman as she bent over the bed. He grabbed Maria's shoulders: "It was foul. You wouldn't think things like that could exist. But you, my God, you're beautiful!" He pressed her body up against his and gazed into her eyes.

I won't be able to hold her like this again, he thought. I won't be able to come this close to her, once I live there. When those amorphous, trembling, gleaming bulges of fat are prancing about in front of my eyes every day. I'll be haunted by those horrible shapes whenever I see a female body.

He sensed a delicate wave of Maria's perfume wafting towards him. She had put her hands around his neck and he could feel her fingers on the back of his head.

Finally, they separated.

She was off to try and make Direktor Schmidt change his mind, and he was running downstairs, across the foyer, out onto the street. He thought he could vaguely remember the direction he'd taken with Hartmut two days ago, as he searched for the way to his house. Across the road at the yellow postbox and past the big department stores. There were the brightly lit shop-windows again, the neon signs, the flashing on and off, the thousands of bulbs, the colours, the loudspeakers, the posters, a cascade of words in letters and sound. Always the same words, now red, now yellow, now blue, in a major key and a minor. Words, words, words. It had been almost dark in the corridor. Neither of them had said another word. Now

they all jumped out at him: LOTTERY TICKETS, FOOTBALL POOL, MILLIONS TO BE WON! And from the other side: CLOTHING WAREHOUSE! CLOTHING WAREHOUSE! And again: LAST CHANCE DON'T MISS OUT! Millions to be won, millions in red, millions in yellow, millions in blue. Clothing warehouse! Had he even noticed a clothing warehouse last time? No, he couldn't remember one. But he knew that he'd been along this way before. He was forced to stop and wait at an intersection, for a continuous stream of cars passed by. Heavy vapour hugged the asphalt. That was it, he had to turn down that side street over there. There was a cinema in the building on the corner. He hadn't taken much notice of it the day before yesterday, but he'd probably been distracted by Hartmut or something. Now there was a collection of young people standing in front of the windows, looking in at the photographs on display under the bright neon lights. The young men all kept their hands in their coat pockets and had their collars turned up. One of them was whistling. Attila could hear it from the other side of the road. The others tapped rhythmically in time with the beat. A pole of neon light, curving into a capital letter L at the end, rolled continuously in and out over their heads. LUX it said. LUX CINEMA. Attila stepped out onto the road for a moment. Some of the cars switched their lights onto full beam. LUX! LUX! shouted the bright script from across the road. Finally, he managed to get across. The young men were still standing in front of the photos. Attila could hear now that the other young people were whistling and humming too. The sounds they made were short, clipped and low, followed by long high-pitched ones. Their feet tapped the pavement. Behind the glass panes were pictures of the lead actress in the latest movie. There was a shot of her in profile and a frontal shot, she was shown from behind and with her partner. One picture showed her with a small tiara nestling in her blond hair, in another she was wearing a huge hat with a wide brim. In one shot she wore long white gloves and in another she was riding a horse side-saddle. Officers and men, elegantly dressed in the fashion of the last century, rode alongside her. The young men were standing in front of these pictures, and their whistling had become even louder. Every now and then, one of them would make a remark that Attila couldn't

quite hear. THE HAPPY YEARS OF THE YOUNG EMPRESS read the title behind the glass pane. The young men were scruffily dressed, and even if their words couldn't be heard, it was clear that they were jeering at something.

When Attila turned into the side street, he found three more lighted show-cases, and spotted Trixi in front of one, looking at the pictures. Behind him he could hear the young men, following him. "Hey, good-looking!" shouted one of them. But when Attila stopped near the girl and they started talking to each other, the four moved on. They kept stealing glances backward, and one of them was still whistling. "Very nice!" said another one. They ambled diagonally across the alleyway and stopped in front of a hat shop. Attila and Trixi could still hear them laughing. Attila didn't take any notice. "What are you doing here?" he asked. "Are you seeing a film?"

Trixi seemed somewhat confused. She didn't answer immediately. She kept looking at Attila. She seemed amazed at the difference his new coat made to him.

"No," she said at last, "not today anyway, I've seen that film twice already. I was just looking at the photos of the next trailer. But what are you doing here, Herr Horvath?" Her eyes were large and stared at him. The perfectly sized oval of her face was framed by the hood of a duffle coat, which hid her hair. A few stray strands crossed her forehead. "Are you thinking of leaving us?" she asked suddenly.

"Probably," he replied. I'm just on my way to look at a room right now. He looked into her face. They were suddenly deaf to the laughing and whistling of the young men across the road. "Have you got plans, or would you like to keep me company for a while?" he asked.

They walked on silently, side by side. Finally Attila spoke. "He needs the room. We don't pay enough. I mean, I can understand it from his point of view. He can earn three times the amount from the other guests, and they stay half as long." After a short pause he added: "But I'd thought that we'd be able to stay there for the winter. Pity!"

"Yes, it's a great pity," said the girl too. "You were the only

person in that whole place that I could really talk to.”

They crossed a small courtyard. The street lamps swung on their high poles. There were a few cars parked in the middle of the square. Attila had taken the girl’s elbow with his right hand, and was guiding her though the streets.

“Where are you taking me now?” asked Trixi. “Is your flat somewhere around here? It must be pretty expensive. Where is it?”

“I don’t remember exactly.”

“So why are you going this way then?”

“I went there once with the landlord, and didn’t take much notice of where it was. But I think we have to turn down that street over there.”

“You’ve already been there? Then why didn’t you take it straight away? You’d have had your own room there, wouldn’t you? Or weren’t there two single beds? A girlfriend of mine, we went to school together, she didn’t have her own bed either. She had to share with her sister who was older than she was. She always liked it when her sister didn’t come home at night.” Trixi giggled.

Attila thought of the pale bearded man cavorting around in his ecstatic dance before the mountain of flesh, and thought about what it must feel like to share a bed with that thing. He thought of Rhodes, Casablanca, neolithic mother cults and deep dark caverns, blood along the walls, and the moon, pale and ghost-like before the entrance to the underworld, the jaws of hell.

All he said out loud was, “No, that’s not it.” He thought of the three specks climbing the wall. “It’s a lovely room, with two beds. They didn’t mention the price. The man was very obliging and helpful. But they had vermin there. Bed bugs!”

“Oh that’s all right,” said the girl innocently. “If that’s all it is. You can get rid of them no problem. I’m surprised that they’re still around. We had lots of bed bugs in our apartment. But we got an exterminator in.”

The houses in the street where they were walking now had a run-down appearance. There’d be no cleaning staff here, thought Attila, just a general caretaker. He stopped.

“This isn’t the right street,” he said. “Let’s go back.” They

went back to the courtyard with the cars, and further to the side street and back again to the cinema. Trixi told him the name of each street in turn. But to no avail. He couldn't find the house.

The young men in front of the cinema had disappeared. In their place were two old people looking at the pictures in the show-case. The man was pointing at the photographs with his stubby fingers. He jabbed at each photo in turn, and each time the woman nodded her head. The photos were advertising the next film. THE DEATH OF THE TRAVELLING SALESMAN, read the title between the photos. Attila noticed it for the first time. Pokorni! he thought suddenly. Why Pokorni? Dead? Our good old benefactor Pokorni? Absurd! He was Maria's husband. She belonged to him. Even more absurd! What the hell was that supposed to mean: 'belongs to him'? How can she 'belong to him'? How can anyone belong to anyone else? The only person you can belong to is yourself. And Maria? Could I take her away from him? Why had he chosen those particular words: 'take her'? The death of the travelling salesman, the death of Pokorni, the travelling salesman? Attila was confused and unsettled by his jumbled train of thought. Maria!

"That film is supposed to be pretty good," he heard Trixi say.

As they passed the building, Attila noticed a photo of the lead actor. He was pictured just entering the foyer of a big hotel. There was not the slightest connection between it and the shabbiness of the Golden Apple. He was carrying a fine leather case in one hand and raising his hat with the other. Another picture showed the same case ripped open, the lock forced. It lay amongst scattered objects and the tortured body of the dead salesman.

They passed the cinema and Attila couldn't see any more. He had to pay attention to the street they were in. He didn't want to take yet another wrong turn. All those objects that were scattered around the dead man, how senseless, how disconnected they all were. Had they belonged to him when he was alive? They must have all played some important role in the film, surely. The death of the salesman! The death of the travelling salesman! Gambling... Gambling? Oh I see, of course, in the film. Trixi had mentioned it. Attila thought of the large cartons under the beds in Pokorni's room.

The red neon sign of a large garage shone brightly from the first side-street. But surely there wasn't a garage in the street where Pokorni lived. Pokorni? But he wasn't trying to get to Pokorni's. He was trying to find his way to Hartmut's. So why was he thinking of Pokorni again?

The two of them walked on. Trixi was still talking about the film. A girlfriend of hers, an apprentice at the hairdressing salon opposite the Golden Apple Hotel, had already seen the film last week, in another district. Attila wasn't really listening. Maybe the next street would be the right one. And the death of the travelling salesman didn't interest him in the slightest. Not in the slightest? No, he couldn't have cared less. He didn't want to hear about it, he didn't want to know about it, if only for Maria's sake. He didn't even want to think about things like that. He certainly didn't want to be reminded of them.

"This isn't the right one either," he said, disappointed at the next street. Then he hesitated and pointed towards two dark buildings: "What kind of houses are those?"

The girl had been leaning slightly on the arm that was supporting her elbow, and now she followed his glance. "Oh, those are just the old ruins. From the last war. One of them was almost completely destroyed. But there are a couple of people living in the other one. They've repaired the rooms, tacked a few boards up around them and covered them with tar-paper. I used to play in the ruins with my girlfriend on our way home from school." Trixi described some of the empty rooms they'd used to sneak into. Up there on the second floor there was even a room with its walls intact. The bigger windows were broken, of course. Yes, and one wall, if she remembered rightly, was a bit damaged. Cracks and that sort of thing.

There were lighted windows in all the buildings. But those in the two ruins were dark. Only from the lowest floor of one of them, did thin threads of light filter through the boarded-up windows.

"Couldn't someone live in one of those empty rooms?" asked Attila. "Surely one of them could be repaired with boards, just temporarily even."

"Maybe," said Trixi. "But who's going to do it for you? And

then what happens if it's impossible to heat?"

"I don't know, I could improvise. You could put the chimney flue out through the window if it was just going to be for one winter."

Trixi shook her head: "I'm not so sure it would work. But maybe it would. In any case, you'd have to talk to the caretaker and ask him to show you the rooms. But let's go and have a close-up look first."

The two of them walked along the other side of the street till they were opposite the dark front door.

He didn't really want to do it. But he felt the strange limbs so close to his, he saw the shining eyes near his shoulder, he heard a slight tremble in the speech of the girl beside him. He didn't want to do it, but he did it nonetheless. He put his arm round her shoulders. From that moment, until the time when they had almost reached the main door, they didn't say a word. Every now and then, a ray of light from one of the flats downstairs would brush the pair, every now and then they were hit by the headlights of an approaching vehicle. As they passed through yet another beam of light, Attila thought he could see tears in the girl's eyes. He bent down to her face, which was heavily shaded by her hood, and looked at her. Now Trixi wept openly. He felt the shaking of her body on his arm. Attila stopped.

"What's the matter?" he asked. He took his handkerchief from the pocket of his coat and tried to dry her eyes and cheeks. "What's the matter with this determined wee girl here? What is it? What's wrong?" Again and again, he tried to wipe her cheeks with his handkerchief. Trixi escaped his hand and buried her face in his chest. His hand was stroking her back now. The other one was still holding the handkerchief. What had happened? Had he inadvertently said something to hurt her?

But no, now it all trickled out slowly from the girl's lips: "I've got no-one. No-one. I'm so lonely. And now you're leaving too."

She had dug her fingers into his upper arm. He could feel them distinctly. Even through Dr Holländer's thick winter coat he could feel them. Oh God, he thought, the poor girl. The things she's exposed to, that place where she works. Wasn't it inevitable that

she'd end up as a prostitute herself?

He raised the girl's face up to his. It was just like in one of those films dripping with noble sentiments and happy-ever-after love-affairs, but neither of them thought about that: he kissed her on her forehead and wiped the tears from her face. They were standing in a shadowy corner of an entrance-way, and the people who walked past took no notice of them. A few young men on motorcycles roared noisily through the street. One of them stood up from his seat and shouted a cowboy song, the others played about with their accelerators. There was a rattling noise, as if machine guns were being fired in the quiet street.

"You've got to be brave," said Attila finally, into the silence that followed. "I can help you Trixi! You'll see, it'll all be right." He had completely forgotten by now that he was looking for a place to live. "Come on, Trixi, you're not all that lonely." He stroked her back soothingly. "We'll help you, you'll see. We'll keep in touch."

The girl had quietened down for a moment. She had put her arms around Attila's neck, pressed her face against his chest and whispered: "Oh, you're so good. So good to me. You're so good to me, a stupid stupid girl, a dumb cow, whore, bastard child..." She started weeping again.

"But Trixi, you're not any of those things." Attila tried again to calm her down. "What sort of nonsense do you think you're talking there. You know you're none of those things. You've got a heart of gold. You've always helped Olga, and she loves you. I'm sure Olga wouldn't understand what you were talking about if you spoke to her like that. Come on, pull yourself together girl!"

"Oh yes, you and Olga! You're so good to me. You're so different from anyone else I've ever met. You're... you're like people from another world."

Attila felt the young girl in his arms. But he wasn't thinking about her body. He wasn't thinking about sex. Only half an hour ago, in a similar situation with Maria, his mind had drifted back to Frau Hartmut's horrible bulges of fat, and in spite of that the thought of her body had possessed him, just like on the day they'd first met, when he'd accidentally put his hands on her hips. He'd

smelled that skin, had longed to feel its smoothness under his fingers, had pressed his thighs against hers, had desired her. But strangely enough, he could stroke this girl, soothe her, could feel her next to him with every fibre of his body, without experiencing any of that urgent desire he felt with Maria. Was he just trying to be good? Did he just feel sorry for Trixi? Did he love her? Perhaps. But in a different way than the way he loved Maria.

There was a smell of damp and mould, and when Attila looked past Trixi's head to the wall of the house, he could see large grey-green patches where the plaster had detached itself in great bubbles from the brickwork. His eyes registered them the same way they registered the chalk drawings some adolescents had scribbled on the closed double-doors of the house. But his nerves somehow wouldn't transmit this data properly, they left it lying in some section of his brain, ready perhaps to free itself at some other time and float into his consciousness again.

At last, after he had talked to the girl for some time, she calmed down again. They walked on, supporting each other. The two ruined buildings were on the other side of the road. "In that first one," said Trixi and pointed to the house. "There, can you see, that soft light down on the ground floor? That's the caretaker. He'll be able to tell you who owns the house. And up there, first floor, to the left, near the middle, someone lives there too. There's even glass in the windows on that left-hand side. But there on the right, the windows are covered over with wood. And just above it, there's another room with two windows, can you see? No glass, no window frames. They'd need to be covered up somehow."

Attila hardly heard her. He was watching the house. There really wasn't a single window left intact up there amongst all the dark caverns, but it looked to him as if some of the frames might still be in one piece. He thought it would be better to come back during daylight to assess the situation.

The two of them stood there a few minutes longer in front of the bombed buildings. Attila thought of Olga. He knew she would already be waiting for him impatiently. He took Trixi's hand. Only when they had reached the street leading to the cinema did he put his arm round her shoulders. The girl stopped in front of a shop

window to look at the dresses on display. They were elegant dresses, almost as elegant as the ones the women in the movies were wearing. Attila felt strangely uneasy. What use were goods like that to him? What use, he thought for a moment, were they to Trixi? When would she ever wear dresses like that, on what sort of occasion? And in spite of that, they seemed to have some sort of magical attraction for her. Just because some film star had worn an identical one for half an hour? Young people always tried to imitate the stars A and B, others the racing driver C. Why did nobody want to be themselves?

Attila didn't really want to look at the shop windows. He'd come out wearing Dr Holländer's coat. He'd talked to the professor for some time and had shown interest in his research. But he would have much rather been building violins, if only he knew where he could find a job in his trade. He was wearing Dr Holländer's coat in much the same way he would have worn any coat, the same way he would have worn his own.

They passed a baker's shop. The goods were displayed in the window here too, round loaves, long loaves, bread rolls and plaited loaves. But there was nobody looking longingly in at these goods.

"I think it would probably be better if you didn't walk up to the Golden Apple with me," he said to Trixi.

She agreed.

New Glass Cages

When Maria left Attila and entered Direktor Schmidt's office, she knew immediately that she wouldn't be able to leave again quite so quickly.

"I knew that you wouldn't refuse my invitation. I'm so glad that you've come." Georg welcomed her in. He wore a clean suit, a white shirt and a fashionable tie. His face was closely shaven. His skin shone as if waxed, and smelt of aftershave. The room looked clean and tidy. The ashtray, full of burnt matches and a collection of cigarette butts when Maria last visited, had been emptied. The small table was covered in a clean, white cloth, plates of sandwiches and wine glasses were set out on the table.

"Please," said Georg, and gestured invitingly with his hand, "take a seat."

"But the Horvaths will be expecting me and I have to..." Maria tried to interrupt. But the man waved her objections aside.

She sat down in one of the low armchairs. "All right," she said. "Let's talk sensibly to each other. I suppose I'm glad we've got the opportunity."

"So am I," said Schmidt.

"I'm glad that everything worked out the way it did."

"How's that?" asked the man. For a moment he paused next to her chair and his glance wandered across the face which was turned up towards him.

"You don't believe me?" She grasped his hand which was resting on the back of her chair.

"Ferry?"

"We're leading our own lives now. Neither of us interferes with the other any more, he's finally understood that there's no point. We both know that the other person is there and we both know that we need each other to some extent. But we don't have expectations any more. Not even Ferry. I take care of his housekeeping. You know how important that is to him, but other than that... No, I don't want anything else at all really. So neither of us interferes with the

other.”

“And you don’t live with him anymore?” asked Georg. “So where is your home these days?”

“My home?” she asked. “My home?” She sounded hesitant. Georg got the impression that she was avoiding the question.

“Would you consider this office to be your ‘home’ perhaps? Or do you think Ferry’s tiny room is his home, that cupboard he squeezes back into after his unsuccessful journeys out to the provinces? Or do you think that Dr Holländer’s flat crammed with all his specimens is his home? By the way, he’s off again on one of his expeditions. Did you know?”

Georg hadn’t known. At that moment he wasn’t particularly interested either. He had the feeling that the woman wanted to change the topic to a more general one. She had taken her hand away from his and was telling him the details of Dr Holländer’s project. Georg let her talk. He walked around the table and sat down in a chair opposite her. He poured red wine into two glasses, and even when Maria’s chatter had moved on to other things, he could still hear her words echoing: Your home? Is this your home?

He raised the glass and saw across its rim the two windows with the dusty curtains, the desk with the telephone, and the door to his bedroom, covered with a wall-hanging. Had he not thought that this was his home once upon a time? Back in those days, years ago, when they had attended the opera together, gone to concerts and taken part in Albert’s soirees? But now? She was right, wasn’t she? Could anyone, alone like he was, be at home anywhere?

He raised his glass and interrupted Maria’s report of Dr Holländer’s journeys. “Maria. Please, let’s raise our glasses,” he said and held his up against the light. And he thought, she’s quite right of course, what’s the use of rugs, crystal chandeliers, this hotel here even. Today I’m happy and then tomorrow, no, probably in a few hours time, I’ll get so drunk that everything around me will dissolve and darken, until there’s nothing left, nothing at all.

Maria too had raised her glass.

“What shall we drink to?” asked Georg.

Maria’s large eyes looked long and silently into his, which seemed pale and faded by comparison. It was quiet in the room.

The express train rattled past on the bridge outside. The music from the rooms downstairs filtered thinly through the door, as if ground to dust. "To good friendship," the woman said at last.

"To friendship?" asked the man.

"Yes," answered Maria, "to friendship, as we used to know it."

"It's always been more than that for me. You know that," he replied. "And now that you don't even live with him any more, I can't really see any reason why..." He didn't finish the sentence.

Maria put down her glass without drinking. "I've already told you, it's better this way," she said. "In spite of everything, we belong together, Ferry and I. Okay, so he doesn't demand any more than food on the table. You might say that any maid could do that, and sometimes I do feel a little as if I'm nothing more than his personal maid. But then other times, I think perhaps that there is something more to it after all. Just to have someone there, thinking of him. You know, the fact that someone comes when he calls, that someone gives him some sort of acknowledgement, that gives him security, lets him cope with his life. You said yourself last time, that without me, he'd have gone under long ago." She was silent for a moment, looked up at Georg and continued softly: "We wouldn't want him to come to any harm would we?" She took up her glass again.

Curious, she thought, a few moments ago, when I had my arms around Attila's neck, did it cross my mind then that Ferry needed me? Am I just making up excuses now? No, I really believe what I just said. But then why does it only apply to Georg and not the other man? I shouldn't have done it. She raised her glass. I didn't think of it before! But will I ever think of it when I'm with Attila, will I ever think at all?

"Well?" she asked. "To friendship."

And while Georg silently clinked her glass with his, she wondered why it was that Ferry never crossed her mind when she was together with Attila. Was it because Georg knew the true nature of her relationship with Ferry, and seemed to want to bind her to himself in such a calculating manner? It was almost as if the prospect of their union was simply the end result of an utterly logical progression of thought. Whereas this other man accepted that she

was bound to Pokorni, and desired her purely as a woman, unclouded by any issues of sympathy or gratitude, distance or admiration. Without inhibitions. He didn't ask whether she was clever, or a good housewife, whether she worked for the Tourism Office or how good her connections were.

"You're always thinking of others," said Georg. "The future of someone like this Pokorni fellow, a man who gave up on himself long ago, even the future of some foreign immigrant like that is more important to you than your own." They had put the glasses back down on the table after having drunk. "You should be a bit more selfish," he continued. "Your altruism is unnatural. I wish you'd realise that, once and for all." He offered her the plate of sandwiches. "Please."

She took one of them and put it on her plate next to her glass.

"Everyone," he continued, "needs a certain amount of egoism."

Is that really how it is? thought Maria, is it really so altruistic of me to stay with Pokorni? Altruism? Isn't it more like fear? Who am I frightened of? I'm safe here, aren't I? Didn't I plunge right into the midst of the crowd, disappear into that anonymous mass which remains quiet and unnoticed, until it starts to bubble and ferment? Why this mistrust? What is it now, is it fear after all, or what? Do I keep seeing Pokorni for his sake or for mine? Strange, did I ever really think that he needed me, like I said before, that without me he wouldn't have survived? Is it just habit that takes me back there again and again?

While she was thinking, Georg kept on talking about egoism and altruism. Although Maria was listening to him, she wasn't very attentive to his train of thought and sometimes lost the thread of conversation entirely. Somehow Georg's explanations reminded her of the parties at Dr Holländer's, where all the guests discussed questions of principle and morality, even if they themselves were unwilling to take much notice of the results, which generally seemed to be the case. But today she was concentrating much less than she had on those occasions. She let Georg do the talking. Every now and then, she took a sip of wine from her glass. She began to relax, and was glad that he was talking about more general

things, that he had forgotten her personal request, at least for the moment, that he spoke intelligently and cleverly. She was pleased that once again he seemed to be that dear old friend that he used to be, back when she and Ferry had lived there.

As he sat opposite her and expounded his ideas, a well-groomed man in his best years, his hands somehow didn't seem ape-like to her anymore, the way they had the last time, when they were trembling because of the drink, and when his bloodshot eyes had been swimming in that silvery liquid. Her glance wandered from his hands to his face and from his face back to his hands, resting on the table by the glasses, and gliding on across the floor to the wall behind the desk. She noticed that Georg had acquired two new expensive-looking rugs, and that he had exchanged the painting that she had never liked for another one.

Finally he finished his speech: "You want to help everyone," he said. "Oh I believe it, that means everyone, maybe even me," he added the latter in a flippant sort of way. "You want to be there for everyone. But can anybody really be there for everyone? Can it actually be done?"

"I don't know," answered Maria. "I don't really know whether it was out of what you'd call selflessness either, that I did whatever I might have done for this person or that, maybe I was just driven by one of those other motives you were just talking about." Every meeting with Ferry was getting increasingly disagreeable, she thought. Those smacking lips, the constant smell of alcohol and cigarettes, the grease-spotted braces, the gambling debts, the this that and the other. He was neglecting himself more and more. His business in the provinces. And why not? But then came the call, again and again: Maria! Maria!

"But Ferry really needs me," she said. Again she looked across at the beautiful rug.

"And you?" the man asked.

"What about me?"

"Don't you need any help? Not from anyone?"

Maria remained silent and thought back to the last few days. She thought of her inner restlessness, her insecurity. She thought of the

strange hands on her arm, of the leather straps in the tram on the way to the Zoology Department, the repetition of all the information in four languages, the microscopes, the drawn blinds and the voices in the room, the first-class hotel accommodation for the conference guests, of the swaying movement around the bend and the way everyone was thrown in one direction, of the cage, yes of the glass cage. And her thoughts lingered on the latter, even when other ideas flared up in her head, like brief signals: The telephone conversation! The hotel bill! The violin playing! The worn shoes! There were glass tanks, glass cages in front of her eyes, and she herself was sitting in one of those cages, and was somehow outside it at the same time, and then inside it again and was running along a long alleyway, inside and outside.

"I think I'm beyond help," she said, after a long pause.

Georg grabbed her hand which she had rested on the table next to her wine glass. "You shouldn't talk like that! It's not true," he said.

"All right," she said, "let's talk about something else instead then. When did you get this gorgeous rug? You didn't have it last time I was here."

"If you say so," said Georg. He made a dismissive gesture. "It's still just a boring office," he replied.

In the meantime, Attila had returned to his room and was surprised to learn from his sister that Maria hadn't yet returned. When the woman finally came in, she was distracted. She told the two of them that they didn't need to worry. She had fixed everything and they wouldn't have to move at any time in the foreseeable future.

Attila's response was monosyllabic. He indicated that he hadn't found what he was looking for. No-one really knew what they should talk about. Just hours ago, they hadn't been able to find enough words for all they'd wanted to say, now they had nothing to say, and so many words at their disposal. They were each occupied with their own thoughts, and uncertain about their own selves.

Maria decided to leave. As Pokorni was away, she decided to go back to the little room. It would be quiet there now.

She took her coat from the coat-stand and Attila helped her on with it. After she had said goodbye to his sister, he accompanied

her down to the front door. They walked silently along the corridor and down the staircase. Only once did Attila try to stop her. He grabbed her hand. But she continued walking, without altering her step, so he said nothing. Strange, he thought, only a few hours ago this corridor had looked quite different. Has the lighting been changed? Have enough people passed through in the meantime to make the coconut-fibre runner this dirty? And the smell. It smells so musty. Was that a trace of Eau de Cologne in the air?

Journey through the Night

The faces of the people sitting opposite him were only dimly visible through a thin veil which fluttered around, sometimes higher up, sometimes lower down. The red dot of a cigarette-end glowed on and off, sometimes there were two or three.

Pokorni leaned back in his corner and dozed. Through the sound of the rhythmic rattling, he could hear the voices of his travelling companions, as if from a great distance. Sometimes, when the train rumbled over the points, or when the wheels shrieked around a curve, they seemed suddenly swallowed up, a change Pokorni noted with satisfaction. But a few minutes later their voices were audible again and continued their even, monotonous conversation in time with the even, monotonous rhythm of the journey. Pokorni hardly took any notice of it. He always felt sad when he heard the sound of wheels on the rails underneath him, at those times when the world outside suddenly ceased to exist, because all that could be seen outside the dark square of the compartment-window were some solitary will-o'-the-wisps, disintegrating, vibrating and disappearing into a deep blackness, like the traces of fireworks. All of a sudden, he had nothing on which to fix his thoughts. The silver veil of the cigarette smoke got thicker and thicker. Only the red dots were left, and from these his thoughts drifted back to the sealed carriage rolling across the heavily guarded border. No, he didn't like travelling by train, and this might even have been the reason why he neglected his job. Maria. Maria was with him in the sealed carriage, and there was that ridiculous account of Auntie Kathi's illness coming from the person opposite, it was enough to make you sick yourself, stupid stories like that were infectious. And then those interminable dirty jokes! He didn't object to dirty jokes, but not here, here they seemed inappropriate. He often told dirty jokes himself. Why not? He'd tell them to some customer or other. But he would never have told them in front of Maria, no, in spite of everything, never in front of Maria. But it was all being spoken into the darkness, among the swirl of smoke and

vapour, in the darkness of a previous life, a life which faded away on the steel track below the rolling wheels. Those voices, the smoke and the red dots were torture to him. All he needed was to get up and walk up and down the corridor outside for a while, perhaps it would have made him feel better, but he leaned back in his corner and dozed off, and the red light of the cigarettes flared up over and over again, the red light. But each red light was a painful station on the way to Calvary. Guards with machine guns passed by outside. Steps, the indistinct sound of voices shouting. But even worse was the silence, the boundless silence, endless drips, until finally the redeeming whistle of the engine sounded. Red, red specks on the body of the trout. It was always trout when the old man had guests. And he loved having guests. Ladies in evening dresses and gentlemen in black-tie. Slim bodies, speckled red, lay on the silver plates. Cook with a scarf round her head. Josef serving. The scarf was light in colour and covered in red spots, red specks. Good old Mirka. She was fat, like a cook should be. The way she wept when they came for father. She had red blotches all over her face. She was the last one left in the whole house. You see all sorts of things when you're sixteen! Red posters for instance. Father under the rattling wheels. And the man over there, that brainless idiot, still telling his dirty jokes. Father under the steel tracks. Track running alongside track, a rhythmical jump. Up, go go. Jump! Go! Go! And those red rings around his mother's eyes. The ration books were red. We had no red. We had no bread. We were not worthy to be red. We were not worthy to have ration books. The trout were swimming in the brook. Maybe Father was dead, maybe he was under the rattling wheels, maybe he was down the shaft with the rattling pneumatic hammer. Thick smoke, up and down, torturous jokes, Father. Sixteen years old. Smoke everywhere. Only the red spots, red, Mother, and no bread. Once the former clerk from the office had come by and secretly brought Mother some food. Frau Direktor, he'd said, but Mother had pressed her hand over his mouth. The clerk was an old man, and the young people didn't even greet us. Red light. Flash after flash, specks in the night sky. Boom, boom, boom said the light artillery, and spat out one round after the other. Boom, boom, boom, you could hear it up there and

the flying red specks exploded. It was dark again. FOR FREEDOM, FOR WORK AND BREAD, read the posters. Mother was hungry. The body needs a lot of nourishment at seventeen. Yes, but for freedom, for work and bread.

His legs were hurting from sitting in the same position for so long. But there were his neighbour's legs in the way, no they belonged to the man opposite. "Sorry!" said Pokorni.

Sorry? Sorry? A kick up the arse! Die, enemy of the people. Did you know you could be an enemy of the people at eighteen. The trout with the red specks lay again on the silver plates, silver smoke was wafting up and down, only now it was the Party Officials and their Comrades who were eating them.

"I'm so sorry, your foot again!"

Where was the the old man's belly back then? In a threadbare pair of sackcloth trousers down the coalmine? Mother, why aren't you eating? Again and again: I've already eaten. You eat!

Spotlights shone into the compartment. A road crossed the railway tracks, a car stood there, a second one, a third one. Specks of dust shimmered in the air in the rays of the spotlight. A row of droplets shimmered on the red, white, red white bar. It might have been dew.

The man opposite had his head thrown back and was sleeping with his mouth half open. His teeth were bad. Pokorni could see them very clearly in the spotlight. The man next to him was still talking to his neighbour. He was talking about a slimming programme now, detoxification he called it. The window was dark again, a dark square, and the compartment was a room dissolving into indistinct lines and animated by grotesquely diffuse figures. There was fog again, and the haze, and the rattling, always the same, always the same. Eight people in amongst the haze and fog. Eight people, just like at the funeral. Just eight, no more. She starved to death, said one of the eight in the fog, after everything was over and done with. They were all dodderly old figures, and the fog had affected their chests that day. They'd seen better days, all of them. Well, no use thinking about it now. Quiet, careful! Betrayal of the people! This is the happiest day of my life, no, each new one is going to be even happier, even better! To the sun, to the future!

Eight people: his mother's sister and her husband, now assigned to a detail of street sweepers and made a 'voluntary official' in the civil defence brigade. He was charged with keeping the records and looking after the correspondence of the district, for during the time of the Reactionary Rape of the Country, he had become too familiar with unproductive work and was now being given the opportunity to put it right, for the good of the people, of course. Then there was father's brother, seventy-five years of age. He'd been a bit easy-going before, as one used to say, but nevertheless he had built up two spinning factories in the province near the border, everyone knew how he'd managed it of course! But today he was a familiar sight at all the church-doors and then there was that strange man who went with him, old too, and dressed in shabby, unwashed clothes. And then there was the woman who had been mother's landlady. She was about fifty years of age but in the last few years she'd been retrained for work in a large tractor factory. The fog, the fog and the rattling. The train must have gone over another set of points. For a moment the tail movement of the carriages broke their monotonous rhythm. The red dots shifted through the curtain of cigarette smoke. Yes, and the priest was the sixth. But who else had been there? There were eight people, weren't there? Of course, the former office-boy. Loyal soul. God knows how he'd found out. And the man on the bench was still talking about his slimming regime. Pokorni changed the position of his legs again. This time he didn't touch the legs of the man opposite him. He'd become fat too. He liked eating. Should he get a little something out of his suitcase? He considered it. All he'd have to do was stand up. But it was so dark in the compartment. He leaned back in his corner and dozed. A cigarette! Yes, a cigarette! He reached into his pocket and took out a packet. Matches. He wondered what sort of food he'd packed. What was he carrying with him, apart from elastic, suspenders and braces? Braces, extra long, of course, for Maierbär, with genuine leather trimmings of course, would he take all that time again just to choose a couple of things and then order only one of each? Grippenkern in his horrible hole was much better, he buys his rolls, three of them, three rolls of elastic and then, goodbye, and off you go. Elastic. Yes, then there was little Lizzi in

the inn. Couldn't manage it last time. But maybe this time. Does she do it with the other salesmen too? It doesn't really matter. She's good at it anyway. And the next day in Libenau, old Brzenovsky will keep you waiting forever to deal with some measly little complaint, keeps you waiting as if you were a beggar. He's a louse, needs to be squashed between forefinger and thumb. The wheels, the wheels. The wheels are always rattling and the tracks don't ever seem to end. It's good to have a doze in the corner. The cigarette was finished, the butt thrown to the floor. Why not? So much gets trodden on, those Horvaths and whatever their names are, the Beneschs, and the people at home, why not a stinking bloody fag-end too? Mile after mile of track, always the same distance, fog, smoke, those glowing red dots, elastic, sitting on the upholstered seat, in the fog, across the sealed border, in the sealed carriage, over and over, dirty jokes the whole time, sick aunts and the slimming programme for company. Wheels, wheels. The end.

Pokorni had finally fallen asleep. It was quieter in the compartment. It was late. Sometimes someone would sigh in his sleep, sometimes someone groaned. Would it never end?

The train passed through hill-country, through villages, roared through valleys, thundered through tunnels, across bridges and stopped in dimly-lit stations. Pokorni sat in his corner, his chin sunken on his chest, pushing his breath evenly through his nostrils.

He woke up in a small station. Bleary-eyed, he looked through the window. FESTIVAL he read on the billboard directly in front of the carriage. He stared at the announcement and thought of the theatre performances, operas and concerts in the capital city. He thought of Maria.

Maria will be going, he thought. She's always been interested in that sort of thing. Father, oh yes, Father was too. Every week he'd be off to a theatre or concert performance. Not sure whether it was just because of his business friends though. And me? I wasn't even allowed to finish school, and to this day no-one has ever told me what to make of that Shakespeare fellow or of Goethe. All I know is that quotation from Götz von Berlichingen. Of course, my mother, Mama, she was horrified at first, but then she just resigned herself.

This festival here! There'll be thousands of people who won't be in anything resembling a festive mood, they'll haggle all week long, cheat each other, there'll be thousands of them in all the cheap little bars, in the brothels, in the stinking little flats. Festival! Provincial music-hall entertainment, with obscene jokes and smutty innuendoes. All-in wrestling in the Town Hall in the afternoon and that same evening, a huge concert with a thousand singers in the very same place. My poor father! My mother! Maybe I would have gone to those concerts too, and the performances of Shakespeare, yes of course I would have gone, and then I would have been able to look down on all those who didn't know what to make of it all with a superior smile. But now? I've joined the ranks of the disinherited! What's any of that to me now? I am the disinherited, and as such I hang about in common pubs, at tables covered with greasy oilcloths, sleep with some trollop on worn bed linen in small hotels and am forever travelling from place to place in cramped railway compartments. The eternal pedlar. When is it going to end? Father was off on the hunt and I was the one being hunted. Why did I ever come over here? Over there I would have probably perished before now. But then, so what? Wouldn't that have been better than this constant useless travelling? What's it for anyway? What's the point? A few nights with this woman or that, the smooth thighs, the following immersion, the intoxication, the gluttony. What else is there? There's nothing else. It's despicable. And always the same. It's the same for everyone. You jam yourself into the crevice, there's the same intoxication, the same mucous secretion, the same nausea, over and over, for as long as the world's been turning.

He got up and opened the window.

Fresh air streamed into the fuggy, smoky compartment. One of his fellow travellers blinked into the light. His sleep had been disturbed. Another one asked why the stop was so long. Pokorni didn't know either. He pushed his head through the window. The air was cool and agreeable.

Maria, Pokorni thought. The posters in front of him. She'll definitely be going off to some of those concerts and plays. But what good would it do her, in the end? When all the mystery is over, she'll still be overcome by the animal urges inside her, just like

everyone else, or even worse, the vast emptiness. Just like me. Like me when I leave the hotel room in the morning, leaving a few spots behind on the sheet. He looked along the platform. The posters were dirty and had been scribbled over by children. But wasn't it all quite nice sometimes too? But when? The sooty posts of the platform roof looked like mouldy tree trunks. The benches were faded and grey. The ground was littered with discarded chocolate wrappers, beer cups and paper plates covered in yellow-brown mustard. Pokorni tried to remember some moments of beauty. He knew he had experienced some, but however hard he thought, he couldn't recall any of them right then. The wastepaper on the platform was all he could see, and he thought about waste, about trash and dirt.

"I can't see anything," he told the man who'd asked him why they'd stopped.

He had boarded one of the last compartments of the last carriage and was now looking along the whole train. He always boarded the last carriage. You sometimes heard of train accidents in which the last carriages got squashed and crushed. He always put all his eggs in one basket. Even back then, in the sealed goods train. What else could there be but an end to it all? Of course he could have done it himself. But he was a passive type. Sometimes it seemed to him as if that would be against the rules. If they had caught him, they would have pumped a pound of iron from a machine gun into his body, okay, but that wouldn't have been his fault. An accident! It happens. Very often it's nobody's fault. Mechanical failure is what they called it in the investigatory reports. But he'd been travelling on this line for a long time and fairly frequently, and nothing had ever happened yet. Mechanical failure! His mechanics were still bearing up.

A fair way in front, up beside the first carriage, a little man was walking along the train. Pokorni couldn't yet see what he was doing, for the gleam of the reddish lights which were supposed to light up the station, seemed to reinforce the darkness rather than disperse it. Pokorni saw only that the man stopped at every window where there was someone looking out and talked to the passengers. There was no-one to be seen on the whole platform except for this

little man. Over there, where the ticket offices were, someone with a good imagination might fancy they could make out the outline of a railway employee. From the waiting room came the jingling and clinking of beer glasses, which meant there must have been people in there. But the hissing of the locomotive was the clearest of all.

As the dwarf approached Pokorni's window, he could make out a few more of his features. He'd been quite right in calling him a dwarf, if only to himself. He was a wizened-up picture of deformity. An enormous head, with a large, red nose covered in warts, perched on a body that had stopped developing at the age of fourteen, and was further burdened by a badly misshapen hump. The eyes, protruding from their sockets, seemed, like those of a snail, to draw away from the head, further and further with each passing moment. And now Pokorni could see what the man was actually doing. He was begging. He held his hat with both hands and lifted it up at each window in a begging gesture. When the beggar came closer towards Pokorni's carriage, he could see that the man didn't have any hands, only smooth stumps. The hat was balanced between these two stumps. There weren't many people looking out of the train windows. It was late at night and not everyone put money in the hat. He came rather rapidly to the last carriage.

Pokorni put his hand in his pocket in order to draw out a coin. I never saw that kind of thing over there, he thought. People like that were probably just disposed of somehow. Just like it is with animals, where the sick and weak are disposed of by the strong and healthy. But you can't do that here. Everyone is free here. Some freedom! The freedom to beg! He felt sarcastic, and at the same time, very sad. Did this thing still even count as a human being? he thought. He looks so ridiculous! No hands, a hump and this crooked, dwarfish figure. What's he good for? Begging?

Now the dwarf was standing in front of the poster with the large letters FESTIVAL. Pokorni didn't take any notice. He kept thinking, over and over: What's it for? What's it all for?

The beggar held his hat out in front of him and said his little piece. Pokorni tossed a largish coin into the battered head-gear.

"God bless you," said the cripple, "God bless you, Master." Then he turned away from the train and limped towards the station

building.

God bless you? thought Pokorni. God? What on earth had he been thinking of when he sent a human being like that down into the world? He must have been playing a bad joke. Yes, yes, God was playing a bloody bad joke when he sent you down with a body like that, a bloody bad joke.

The cripple had already passed the poster when Pokorni called him back. The creature hesitated, perhaps he was afraid that the passenger had only just noticed the value of the coin he'd put in the hat. But then he turned around and limped back to Pokorni's window.

Pokorni looked at him. God bless you? he thought. I suppose we're out in the country here! Clichés! But no, people like that are usually genuinely pious. The church door stands right next door to the door to heaven. The constant begging, begging for everything, for bread, for wine, for sleep, for a bed, always begging. Master! He said master. It's always master. Who says master these days. You might have been spared all this. Where is he now, your master, your father who sent you into the world like this? Cleared off long ago no doubt, with the worms! He could have spared you all this! For the sake of one bloody night, you have to beg for the rest of your life and master, master to everyone! What good is that night to him now anyway. Rot. Mould. Worms! Just like mine. God?

The small man stood beneath the window and turned his head upwards. His eyes protruded even further. "Master has a wish?" he asked. His speech was thick and unclear, and he seemed to swallow most of his consonants.

"Do you know why we've been waiting here so long?" Pokorni asked.

The beggar seemed relieved. "The express train," he stuttered. "The express train is late and your train has to wait for it. The express train passes through the station, Master. I'm afraid the express train has to pass right through!"

"Rubbish," said Pokorni. "If the express train is this late, we might as well have waited for it to pass through at the next stop. We could have been there by now in the time we've been waiting right here."

“Oh God, that could cause a catastrophe, a tragedy!” said the dwarf. “No, it’s good that they stopped the train. You can’t be too careful!” He had manoeuvred the hat onto his head with both stumps, after first emptying its content into one of the large pockets of his coat.

“Which platform does the train pass through on?” asked Pokorni.

“Over there I think, on number two,” answered the other man.

“Thank you,” said Pokorni. “Goodbye.”

The small deformed creature returned the farewell, and turned to go again. The man who’d been sitting opposite Pokorni got up and watched the beggar as he left. He had been watching him from his corner. Now he said to Pokorni: “He never misses a train. I travel this way every day. He’s always here, day and night. I wonder when he sleeps.”

“He has trouble speaking too, did you see how he dribbled down his chin with every word,” remarked Pokorni.

“The community offered to put him into a nursing home, at their own expense. But he didn’t want to go. He’s afraid of it. He’s even afraid to travel on a train. Nothing can make him leave the village. He always says he thinks he might meet with an accident,” said the man at the window.

Pokorni stared after the cripple.

Finally, he lit up a cigarette and threw the match angrily in the direction of the track that the express train was supposed to use. The express train. The express train was the way to travel. Then there wouldn’t be any unscheduled halts, no frequent stops, no delays. You’d reach your destination quickly, you’d get there even if everyone else had to go through multiple detours first. You wouldn’t have to set eyes on an imbecile like that either. Afraid of bad luck. Luck! Bad luck! Like a blind man talking about colour! It’s just like the whole business with God, no-one seems to know anything much about it. Luck? Bad luck? But then again, what do I of all people know about it?

At that moment the express train thundered and hissed, rattled and rumbled through and passed them. Railway employees

appeared on the platform. Shortly afterwards, their train moved on too. Pokorni closed the window.

A Futile Call

Attila had hardly finished delivering all his newspapers the next day and returned to his sister, when she told him that Trixi had come to see her, talking about some ruins. Olga was feeling fresh and strong today. She sat at the table and busied herself mending some of Attila's clothing.

He decided then to go and find out more about the house and about the possibility of living in some of the damaged rooms. First, he telephoned Maria's office. She wasn't there and he decided to go to Pokorni's flat. The only person he met there was a strange woman. It was obviously the landlady. She looked him up and down with distrust and was blunt and unfriendly, so he left almost immediately. In a telephone box, he searched for the address of the real estate agency Trixi had told him about.

He was standing in front of the front door when he saw a beautiful brass plate with the inscription DOKTOR GRUBER-WALDEGG - REAL ESTATE. There was a similar plate on the second floor. He knocked, rang the bell and finally opened the door himself. It was unlocked, and Attila stepped into a kind of waiting room, with a table in one corner and a number of chairs set around it. There was a kind of window set into the wall on his right, and someone raised a partition as he entered.

An elderly woman put her head through. "Can I help you?" she asked.

Attila stepped towards the window: "My name is Horvath. I've come to ask about the house at number 12 Böcklinstraße. You know it don't you? I mean, you know which one I mean?"

When the woman heard the name of the street and the number of the house she said: "One moment please! I'll announce you straight away. It'll just take a moment. Please, take a seat." She pointed towards the chairs. "I'm very sorry, but the Herr Doktor has someone with him at present. How could we have known that you were going to come by, I'm so very sorry, it won't take long."

Attila was surprised. Of course they couldn't have known that he

was coming. How could they? Why this friendliness? Strange.

He sat down at the table and looked over the magazines. He glanced from one cover to the next. The greasy, well-thumbed, crinkled copies looked unappealing. He avoided touching them. Of course, she couldn't have known that I was coming, he thought, and even if she had known, why would she have waited for me? All the faces were smiling at him. One of the cover girls reminded him of Trixi. She was smiling too. But the girl on the title page was a well-known actress and she was wearing her hair in the same style as the little maid. Attila heard the woman pick up the phone again. Trixi? No, this girl here, she didn't look like her at all actually. It was only the memory of the ruins and the fact that he was about to meet the owner that had put these ideas in his head.

The waiting room ended in a long corridor, at the end of which there had to be a door, because Attila could hear as two men walked into the room from that direction and approached him. They were talking about building materials and scaffolding hire and while the one addressed the other constantly as Herr Doktor, the other man called his partner Herr Architekt. When they reached Attila they said goodbye to one another and the architect took his leave. Then the other man turned towards Attila.

"I am so very sorry, Herr von Horvath, that you had to wait, but I was having a little discussion with our architect. It never ends you know, never. It's a great surprise, of course, that you've come to see us in person. We've been thinking of you a lot lately of course, we even suspected that you might possibly take advantage of the opportunity to come and visit us." The man offered his hand to Attila. "Dr Gruber von Waldeck," he introduced himself. "It is a great pleasure to meet you in person."

"Horvath," said Attila, and shook the hand offered to him.

"Come, come, Baron. Of course, we do live in a republic here, quite right, of course. Quite right, well, please, come with me." The solicitor slipped past Attila and turned towards the narrow corridor. "If I may lead the way." He guided Attila through the narrow part of the room, opened a door at the end of it and invited his guest through into a large room.

There was antique satin-upholstered furniture, heavy tapestry

curtains, a large grand piano in one corner with a huge Chinese porcelain vase sitting on top, in another corner there was an old-fashioned German stove, and in the middle, on a large dark-red Persian rug, a table with very ornate intarsia and four chairs grouped round it. Everything looked a little dusty, as if the room wasn't used very much, and the furniture hardly ever touched.

Attila felt dizzy. The sudden change from the depressingly impersonal waiting room, which had been no different from thousands of others at dentists, tailors, accountants and fortune-tellers, to the intimate atmosphere of this room here caught him off guard. Baron! Von Horvath! We've been expecting you! These and other related thoughts that had overwhelmed his mind in the small corridor leading from the waiting room, suddenly all vanished.

He noticed the large oil paintings on the walls, framed in ornately-carved wood with dark matt finishes, the mirrored glass cabinet where the array of glasses reflected light from their many facets, where delicate goblets with long thin stems were arranged alongside engraved Renaissance chalices decorated with coats of arms, richly coloured Venetian tumblers, and delicate, pale figurines of Meissen porcelain in pink and light-blue. He noticed the old majolica German stove and the Rococo sideboard next to it, with a collection of old rare books bound in matching brown leather on top. It wasn't that these items exactly depressed him, in their strange serenity. No, he just took note of them, much as people might take note of saints hidden high up in the ceiling of a gothic church, or some mythical monster in the intricate capitals of a Romanesque crypt or the distant heavenly ecstasy in the eyes of Byzantine mosaics. They were fragments of another life. Shards from a sacred vessel of a strange cult, jetsam, washed up here from a great, silent ocean. Attila looked at the honey-yellow parquet floor and the ornate plaster ceiling, framed by its delicately decorated border. He came in from the dark corridor, from the twilight of the grey waiting room with the heavily made-up faces of movie stars on the round, worn table. He took one or two steps into the room and stopped.

The voice of Dr Gruber-Waldegg brought him back to earth. "Please, wouldn't you prefer to take off your coat?" he asked and

as Attila declined he added, "yes, it is cool in here. We almost never heat this room. We keep to the offices back there during the day, and I've been living with my family in the suburbs for some time now. A modest little house, dear God, what can I say? One has to make do." They both took a seat on the old-fashioned upholstered furniture, Attila with his back to the window. That way he could look into the room and see the pictures. He had time to observe them in detail because Dr Gruber-Waldegg wouldn't let him get a word in. "You probably haven't gone past your house yet? Well, hardly a house! It's a ruin really. It's expensive, extremely expensive to renovate a building like that, as I'm sure you can imagine. I'm sure you can appreciate too, that house owners who are naturalised citizens get priority when it comes to subsidies. We've tried very hard, believe me. It's in our interests to get the house repaired as well. But, unfortunately... I can understand that in your present circumstances you might want to contemplate selling your local property off, I'm sure you weren't able to take much with you. You'll be needing money, I know. But - and this is the catch - who's going to buy a run-down old ruin? And I'm sure that you don't just want to dump your property?"

Attila made a helpless gesture. He wanted to explain that he wasn't a baron and that his name wasn't von Horvath either, but simply Horvath and that he had no claim whatsoever on this house, but just wanted to find some accommodation in some roughly repaired room of the ruin. But the other man kept talking on and on, in a continuous stream. He spoke of Grandfather Horvath who was easy-going in spite of his advanced age, and who had also acquired some estate or another, some house or another. He spoke of the old Herrn Baron. "Good God, what good company that man was! How many times would he invite me in for a glass of wine from one of his little vineyards. Things were so different in those days..."

Attila slouched down in his chair, hidden in his coat and his anonymity, hidden deep in the soft upholstery of the furniture. He looked across at the two men in the gold frames opposite him. They were beautiful, elegant men, with noble, narrow hands and fingers which glittered with large, valuable precious stones, as if to

balance the glint of the light in their eyes. Maybe the paintings had darkened with time, maybe they had been painted that dark. Attila couldn't see much more than the reflected light in the eyes and that in the stones, and the two kinds of light seemed to him to be somehow related.

Now Dr Gruber-Waldegg was talking of the hunt. His tired old eyes took on a friendly gleam and all the hundreds of tiny wrinkles round his eyes furrowed into a collection of finely-drawn shadows. Attila didn't quite know how they'd got on to that subject. He'd been staring at the paintings, at the flat sheen of the canvas, had been following the contours of the figures as they melted gently into the background, had discovered a series of delicate red runes in the midst of the brown and the mysterious dark green, which he was now tracing with his eyes. He let the white bearded man with the bushy eyebrows do all the talking. He had given up trying to interrupt and tell him the truth about himself. He sat quietly, a captive inside the fictional world spun by Dr Gruber-Waldegg. The old gentleman's words drizzled down on his head in a light rain, and just as one can stare into the rain for hours, so too could Attila have listened to the old man's narration indefinitely. He felt strangely melancholic. There before him was the large river, whose banks he used to sit beside, and all the while, as the other man dredged up more and more reminiscences from seemingly inexhaustible reservoirs, Attila got smaller and smaller, until he dissolved, like one of the thin red lines in the dark paintings.

He only came to himself again when he found himself standing out in front of the house, with the noise of the street wafting around him. But behind him stood the tall figures of the von Waldeggs, women with dozens of children, men in all the inherited offices and positions of the noble-born. Beautiful horses, carriages, castles, shiny silver cutlery: everything was taken for granted and their relationships with everything around them seemed so natural, as if it couldn't possibly be any other way. The glass cabinets in the large room clinked softly, the heavy curtains scarcely moved. The old gentleman had the soft, pliant voice of his forebears.

No, Attila didn't even try to argue with him. You can't argue

with the rain.

He went back to the hotel. He walked slowly, deep in thought, and he thought as he walked about how he had never been on a hunt, that his parents and grandparents had never travelled in a carriage, he thought about how he and his coughing sister would have to return to the refugee camp again. He thought about how he had crossed the border, in fear of his life, and about how, although he'd had so little over there, back home, to abandon, he had managed to lose his home, while here he had nothing, no house, no possessions. He thought about the Baron von Horvath he had been mistaken for.

When he entered the hotel room, Olga was still by herself, busy tidying their few possessions. Sometimes she went to the mirror, looked at her pale face and her slim hands, at her figure covered in its faded dressing gown. Attila saw the images of the Waldegg women dripping with their heavy jewellery and thought about the fact that all that poor figure needed was a bit of air, sun and warmth. But even that was out of the question. It got dark early, and you could see that winter was not far away, especially on a day like this. When Attila stepped up to the window he saw dark clouds drifting along, like long streamers. The distant mountains were hidden behind them and large flocks of black birds flew through the storm, towards the darkness.

He'll not build now, who has no house awaiting

Attila told his sister that he'd been to see Maria but hadn't found her at home, and about how little he'd achieved at the real-estate agent's.

The girl didn't like the thought that Dr Gruber-Waldegg had taken Attila for Baron von Horvath. She thought he had taken advantage of an old man's credulity.

Attila only laughed. He hadn't forced this Dr Gruber-Waldegg to think what he had. He hadn't even done anything to encourage it. He hadn't been able to get a word in edgeways to explain the situation. Neither had he derived any advantage from the misunderstanding. He sat down at the table, lit a cigarette and thumbed through a book he had bought a few days ago. He read a few lines. No, he thought, she's right, I didn't tell him who I was. But if I'd wanted to, I could have used the misunderstanding to my advantage. Couldn't I still do that? 'As befits my rank?' Absurd!

He put the book back on the table. He couldn't concentrate. He got up and walked to the bedside table, opened a drawer, looked in and realised that he didn't know what he was looking for. He closed the drawer again and went to the window. His sister was still sitting in front of the mirror and, with his back to the room, he began to talk to her.

She thought that maybe the real von Horvath might visit Dr Gruber-Waldegg and he, Attila, would then be revealed as an imposter. Foreigners were always watched much more closely than locals as it was.

Attila had to laugh. Who knew anything about him anyway? After he had closed the door of the building which housed the real-estate agent's offices, he had disappeared as far as Dr Gruber-Waldegg was concerned, completely disappeared. He thought he could recall the solicitor telling him something about his property in London. His property! Yes, and that it would make more sense to turn it into money as quickly as possible. He looked across the roof-tops. The dark wall of cloud which had been covering the

mountains was moving gradually towards the city. Long low-lying wedges of cloud moved ahead of them, unravelling as they went.

"He'll not build now, who has no house awaiting."

Where were those words from? Of course, he'd read them just now, in that book. He loved that poem. Even back home he had loved that poem.

"Lord: it is time. The summer was most glorious."

He looked out the window and thought: Was it really 'most glorious', my summer? Where's my glorious summer been hiding all this time? Hadn't he been waiting for it, year after year, and then came those days of rebellion and of escape. That was certainly no summer, it was a hail storm in springtime. In spring? In autumn? What had they really hoped for, he and his friends, when they'd marched through the streets, waving the tricolour? *Freedom!* Freedom? That's what we called it anyway! Did we really think about what it meant? What did we think it meant? What sort of an image did we have of it, if we had an image at all? Freedom like it is here, in a free country. No more iron bars in front of us. *"His weary glance, from passing by the bars, has grown into a dazed and vacant stare."* Wasn't that somewhere in that book as well? But there are no iron bars here, here there's a pond to bathe in, artificial cliffs, tree-trunks for the animals to scratch their backs on, a wide ditch between them and the world. So what is it that makes my gaze so tired here? Or is that not the way it is after all? Oh, but it is! The ditch just can't be jumped. *"But there are times the pupils of his eyes dilate."* When have I ever experienced that here? And in the end, it's always the same: *"It seems to him there are a thousand bars and out beyond those bars the empty air."* What sort of an exchange was this? Where was the glorious summer of these people here? Attila looked out the window. The clouds were coming closer and closer, and the wind greedily dragged the smoke with it, almost before it had even left the chimney pots, dissolved it and discharged the minute particles into the dark sea of the sky. Attila thought of home, thought of his friends, of Joseph, Stephen and Thomas, he thought of their belief in freedom and the way this belief had united them.

"Who's alone now, for long will so remain."

Of course, that was written in the book too. And while he repeated the words to himself, he turned around and looked into the face of his sister, observing him from the mirror. Alone. Was he really alone? He had met this Pokorni, and found Maria, and there was little Trixi too, and above all there was his sister, who needed his care.

Attila turned towards the wardrobe, took out his violin, arranged a few sheets of music in front of him and, after plucking the strings for a while, attempted to play a violin sonata.

Olga leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. It seemed to make her happy that her brother was playing his violin.

Attila played better than the last time. After a few strokes with the bow, the door opened, and Trixi tiptoed into the room. She stood behind Olga, put her arms round her shoulders and smiled at the girl's face reflected in the mirror. Attila raised his eyes from the music briefly, nodded, and continued playing.

"That was a sonata," he said, after he had executed the last stroke of the bow and had put the instrument down.

"That was beautiful too," said Trixi, "but that thing you played last time, the fast one, I think I liked that one better."

Attila laughed. "They were dances. The kind of dances we always played at home." He was pleased that the girl liked music. Many of his friends were people who interested in music. She'd get on well with those people if she had a feeling for music herself, he thought. But then he shook his head, wondering at himself. How had he arrived at an idea like that? The question exploded into his thoughts: "Have you found anything out about the old house?"

He put the violin into the case and said only: "No." Olga was still humming the melody of the main subject and seemed not only not to have understood, but not even to have heard Trixi's question in the first place. She asked her brother whether he could still remember the performance that time when he had first taken her to a concert. There had been chamber music on the programme. They had walked home silently. The wind had roared in the tree-tops. Autumn had been near.

Of course he remembered. They had walked next to each other like a pair of lovers, drunk with the music. Now he turned to Trixi:

“Did you hear me playing through the door?”

“Yes,” said the girl, “I thought that you’d come back fairly soon, because you couldn’t have found Frau Pokorni at home. She’s here in the hotel you know.”

“Here, in the hotel?” asked Attila.

“Yes, she’s up with Herrn Direktor Schmidt,” the girl replied.

“Direktor Schmidt?”

“Of course Direktor Schmidt! She’s an old friend of the boss.” She sounded a little surprised.

Attila was taken aback. He hadn’t known that. Why hadn’t Maria told him? Was his and his sister’s accommodation dependent on this relationship of hers? What sort of relationship did she have with this Schmidt man anyway? Attila tried to remember if he had ever seen the hotel manager. No, he hadn’t seen him once since they’d been there. He had often passed his office, might have even heard noises behind the door, but he’d never actually met the manager. He hadn’t thought any further about him either. The manager was part of the hotel and that was it. Now he suddenly found himself interested in him. Why?

In the meantime it had grown dark. The first drops of rain were falling outside, you could hear them clearly, knocking against the window pane. Olga switched on the light.

“How do you know?” Attila asked Trixi.

“The staff who’ve been here longest sometimes talk about it. They know Herrn Pokorni too, and some of them say that he pushed his wife in the manager’s direction. But you know how people gossip.”

Schmidt? Schmidt? Attila wondered where he’d heard the name before. He had heard it before, hadn’t he?

Olga started to prepare the evening meal.

Trixi sat down at the table: “Did you go and see the real estate agent?”

Schmidt? Schmidt? Attila was still thinking. “Yes I visited him and had a talk with him,” he said, “and believe it or not, he took me for the owner of the house. Isn’t that funny?”

“How do you mean, the owner? What gave him that idea?”

“Well, the house, you showed me, it belongs to a Horvath too.”

As he spoke he tried furiously to recall where he had heard the name Schmidt before.

"But that's brilliant!" said the girl.

Attila thought of the discussions he'd had with Maria, with Pokorni. No, they'd never mentioned the name. He tried to remember what he had talked about with Hartmut. No, surely there'd been no mention of a Schmidt. "Why brilliant?" he asked, absent-mindedly, "we're from quite different Horvath families."

"But you could have used it to your advantage. Didn't you try and make the most of it?"

Oh, yes, now he remembered: it was at Dr Holländer's that someone had mentioned the name Schmidt. When they'd been discussing old acquaintances. Yes, that's right, they'd been talking about literature and music. A cultivated conversation. But that sort of thing always deteriorates into talk about affairs around here. Because they can't think of anything else of course. But then again, what would I know?

"Well, did you take advantage of it?" the girl asked again.

"Oh Trixi! What could I do? I can't pass myself off as a 'von Horvath' when I'm not one."

Now the girl laughed: "Oh I see, he's even an aristocrat. But you didn't tell him that you weren't his Horvath, did you? You don't have to hit him up for money or anything, but he might let you live in your house."

Hadn't he himself thought along similar lines, just for a moment? Was that bad of him? He heard the droplets splashing against the window. It was dark outside, very dark. Olga was cutting bread and salami on a small board. The light only illuminated her hands. The book which Attila had been reading was still sitting at the other end of the table.

"I didn't tell him," the man replied. He listened to the rain.

"Bravo, good work!" said Trixi, pleased like a child. Then she reported that she had asked a bricklayer where you could get cheap building materials, and what sorts of things would be needed to repair the sort of damage they would be looking at. Attila was surprised at the girl's eagerness, felt as if this whole thing was far away, very far away, fantastic somehow. His hand rested on the

table and fiddled with the book. He thought of Maria, and he thought of the way he had called her in vain at her office, and that he hadn't found her at home. She must have been up there with this Schmidt man for some time now. Beethoven and Bartok, that was all they'd talked about, the whole evening long. And on their way home that evening, they'd gone to that little restaurant, they'd discussed the problem of form in Expressionism. Did this Schmidt person know anything about that kind of thing?

Trixi had finally realised that her talk of repairing the ruins was being received with little interest. She watched Attila for a while and finally her instinct led her to the right conclusion. She thought he must be thinking about Maria. She remained silent. And as Attila was still absentmindedly playing with the book, she took it off him and thumbed through it. Nothing but poems. She looked disappointed.

Olga spread butter on the bread. It was quiet. You could hear the rain rushing down.

Trixi thumbed casually through the book. She stopped randomly at one particular page and read a few lines. She didn't read because she was interested, she read letter by letter, the way that people on the street automatically read the signs of the shops, the announcements on the billboards and perceive thousands more letters and signs without bothering much about the meaning of them. She held a book in her hands, stared at the paper, stared at the black symbols on the white background, her eyes transmitted the shapes, some cells in her brain reported back automatically "*It seems to him there are a thousand bars.*" But then those cells which were supposed to co-ordinate the word 'thousand' with the concept of a number, the ones which were supposed to build the bars into a cage, they failed to register. She read only letters. When the letters were combined to make words they didn't make any sense; all that remained was a litany, an empty clatter.

"Was she still there when you came to see us?" asked Attila.

Immediately her ability to perceive meaning changed, she knew exactly who he was talking about, the meaning of the question was crystal-clear to her. "Yes, she's still in Schmidt's room," came the

answer.

“She wouldn’t have left in this weather. I hope she’ll come and see us. I want to ask her a few things.”

Olga put the pot of water on the small electric cooker. She got the teacups ready.

Trixi had pursed her lips but didn’t say any more. She was really reading now. Words took shape and formed themselves into images. A blind beggar was standing there on a bridge, the water was flowing beneath him, and crowds of people were walking past him. But why was all this written down here? And what about all these other lines? What did it all mean? Yes, okay, it rhymed, but what was the point of that? None for the beggar, that was for sure! Whoever wrote it down obviously didn’t have a clue about the misery of the old man. Otherwise he wouldn’t have written it like that. No, the fate of this beggar didn’t touch her at all, it was too distant from her, he was so well-groomed and clean, as clean as the white paper of the book, as proper and structured as the metre and rhyme of the lines. And why did it all have to rhyme at all? She supposed it sounded quite nice, and when she read the last lines again, she observed the metre as she spoke, just as she’d been taught at school. It grabbed her, like the drum beat of a march. But she could have rhythm from the radio, every night at eleven o’clock. And that rhythm flowed through her limbs much more readily than this one in the book, you could feel it instantly, move your whole body to it immediately.

Then all three sat up at the table and ate and drank. Olga spoke of her school days and how she had liked poetry. She also talked about what she had read back then and what she liked better now. Trixi listened and was bored. To have to learn poems by heart had always seemed a torture to her. That Schiller with all his verses! She had always trembled that she might be ‘called upon’, which meant that she would have to continue where her classmate had been interrupted by the teacher. She had hated those poems. So she was only vaguely paying attention, and finally looked at her watch, got up with a fright and declared that she had to go immediately. She wasn’t allowed to stay so late in the hotel. The manager didn’t like it.

Attila replied that the bad weather would be a good excuse. But the girl wouldn't stay a minute longer. She explained that she had a coat and an umbrella in the hotel. She wouldn't like to lose her job, nor her good reputation, which, as she mockingly added, nobody believed in anyway.

The Horvaths were sorry that Trixi had to leave.

Attila stepped towards the window and looked down at the street. The glinting water droplets shone in the gleam of the street-lamp. Trixi crossed over to him and put her left hand on his shoulder. Then she rested her head on it. They remained that way for a moment. Attila could sense the warmth and the scent of the other body. The pressure of the hand on his shoulder increased for a moment, then the girl turned away, stepped towards Olga and said goodbye. Attila remained for a second at the window. Something, a mysterious stream of some kind, seemed to have been interrupted, and at the same time intensified. Outside, it was pouring down. Then he walked to the door. Couldn't you stay, he wanted to say. But when she shook hands with him, all he could manage was: "I'll walk you downstairs."

But Trixi refused that too: "Please, don't. There's no need for so many people in the building to see us together. They always start stupid rumours." She pressed his hand and left.

When the girl was gone, Olga voiced her surprise that Maria was in the hotel and hadn't visited them.

Maria! That was it! Attila had a strange feeling, as if Maria's face had somehow always been there, lurking behind everything. An inflexible, immovable face, with large, unfathomable eyes. He wondered if he should go and check whether the woman was still in the hotel? It was raining, he thought and he listened to the monotonous drumming coming from the direction of the window. He thought of Maria. There was the room in the Department of Zoology. There was Dr Holländer, he had spoken of a Georg Schmidt and had asked this and that about him and Maria had talked about people that he, Attila, hadn't known. Everything was cloudy and unclear. All that was clear were the glass cages. They were placed next to each other and on top of each other on the table and each contained a different animal. There was the quiet,

resting lizard with the beautiful eyes of his sister, the misshapen frog with its wide legs, ugly warts and the melancholy look of Pokorni, and a small shrew which reminded him of Trixi. Attila tried to get some order into his thoughts and make himself concentrate. She won't leave in weather like this, he said to himself, but then again, maybe she'd already left before the rain started. I'll go down and ask the duty manager.

The cages had disappeared again and he talked the matter over with his sister. Finally he went down to reception.

No, the duty manager hadn't seen her leaving.

Attila asked him if he could speak to the Herrn Direktor. The man stepped out from behind his glass partition and pointed towards the telephone.

First of all he heard a humming sound which was interrupted at regular intervals, then he heard a click and finally a man's voice shouting "Hello!"

Attila was surprised. It always came as a surprise to him when a human voice talked to him out of a pakelite apparatus like this which had been silent only a moment before. He didn't answer immediately.

The man on the other end said "Hello!" again, and added "Schmidt here." In between, Attila could hear a female voice asking from a distance: "Don't you think of Ferry at all?"

"Please, may I talk to Frau Pokorni?" said Attila at last. He had to struggle to keep his voice calm.

Direktor Schmidt mumbled something unintelligible and then Attila heard him say: "Maria, someone wants to speak to you." He heard a rumbling noise. Obviously the receiver had been laid down on the table. There was the sound of steps fading away and a chair being moved. Then a male voice said, but from far away, and Attila had to listen very hard to hear it, "He's not really your husband. You don't have to pretend to me."

Other steps came closer. Again the rumbling noise and then Maria's voice came on the line. "Hello?" she said

At first, all Attila could ask was "Maria?" He was so shaken by what he had involuntarily heard. What did it all mean?

Maria recognised his voice immediately. "Yes, what's the mat-

ter? Has something happened?" she asked.

In between, Attila heard the man say something, but he could only understand the words when Maria stopped speaking. "...not staying away for long, otherwise..." then he heard a hissing sound. Then everything was quiet.

The duty manager was standing right next to Attila. He wasn't looking at him, but he could hear every word. Attila had to make some sort of answer. But he couldn't very well say that he had only wanted to hear her voice, or had wanted to make sure she was still there. "No, no, Maria," he said finally. "Nothing's happened. I just want to ask you... I just wanted to ask you whether you... whether you could maybe come and see us before you leave?" At last it was out.

The woman hesitated for a moment, then she said she would come but asked him to be patient.

"What does he want?" asked Georg, after she had replaced the receiver.

What does he want? thought the woman. I'm sure there must be something he wants. But what? Then she thought for a moment: What does he want? What all men want. But what about me? Is that what I want too? Maybe it is.

However, "I don't know," was all she said. What else could she say? "I don't know," she repeated. Then she remembered that Georg couldn't have known who she'd been talking to, and had obviously assumed it was Pokorni. So she said: "It wasn't Pokorni though."

"Wasn't Pokorni?" asked the man. "So who was it then?"

"Horvath, you know, the refugees here in the hotel. He's been looking for another flat again, ever since you gave him such a shock with your notice a while ago."

"Oh, him," the man said. "I can do without guests like him. He hasn't paid the rent for last month yet and today is the eighth already. What do you want to have anything to do with him for? I didn't even think you came from the same country."

Maria told him a little about the two young people, and compared their situation with that of hers shortly after she had arrived here. She pointed out that her introduction to society had been made

easier through the help of several people and told him how she planned to do something similar for the Horvaths.

They sat down at a beautifully laid table and drank wine. There were flowers in a little vase at Maria's place and Georg looked very elegant and distinguished today. They talked about the hotel business, about various technical, financial and organisational matters, and the man enjoyed being able to talk to Maria in such detail about his plans to revitalise the hotel. He didn't try to pressure her for an immediate decision any more. He thought that it couldn't take much longer. She wasn't a silly girl any more. She'd realise soon enough that them living together was a real possibility. She'd realise that they could support and complement each other. He'd be able to sort that Pokorni fellow out. If only she would make the first move, and initiate a separation.

They drank to the future, although neither of them really knew quite what they meant by it.

Schmidt was thinking about his hotel, about the prospect of a restructured, solid business. But he was also thinking about this woman, her slim legs. They had always fascinated him. Now it would make sense to put in a bit of effort again. The way he looked today in his dark suit, he almost even liked himself. He even thought of the possibility of going to the opera and to concerts with this woman, and started to talk about music.

Maria's thoughts had been even vaguer when they drank to the future, but she was pleased that he had preserved his enthusiasm for music and perhaps for other beautiful things as well. They talked for a long time, and it was late when the woman left. She looked out the window. It was still raining. The drops hung on the round casings of the street lamps like glass beads, and the wet asphalt reflected the lights.

"Could you lend me an umbrella?" asked Maria when she turned back towards the room again. Her eyes slid over the set table, over carpets, paintings, curtains, the crystal chandelier, rested on the upholstered chair where she'd been sitting.

Georg was standing behind it. "But Maria," he said, "I can't let you go alone, and certainly not with a man's umbrella. I'll go with you."

“Thank you Georg, but not today,” she replied. “You’ve been so lovely today. I didn’t really expect it after your aggressiveness at our first meeting. Now you should really leave me alone. I have to go and see those poor Horvaths too. And then he can walk me home and return the umbrella to you.” But she saw immediately that this suggestion was insensitive on her part and added quickly: “I think it would be better if none of your staff came to any premature conclusions. Don’t you?”

Premature conclusions! That hit home. He was surprised. All he had registered was the word ‘premature’. He was satisfied. She was right. There was no need for anyone else in the hotel to know what his plans were.

After having fetched the umbrella from the next room, he accompanied the woman to the door and kissed her hand.

What a perfect evening! Maria promised to come again soon. Then he was alone. He walked up and down the room, which suddenly seemed larger, stopped finally in front of the mirror next to the bedroom doorway, and examined his appearance. A handsome man. He really was a handsome man. Admittedly, his temples were greying slightly, but when he thought about the times he had stared into the glass with bulging eyes, sagging lips, dressed in a greasy shirt without a tie and a cigarette drooping from one corner of his mouth! Just don’t give up! No, he was still a handsome man! What was that about a cigarette in the corner of his mouth again? He took a cigarette from the table and lit it, sat down and watched the smoke rise.

It will turn out all right, he thought.

Olga was already asleep when Maria came in. Attila didn’t quite know how to begin. It was quiet in the room. Maria held the umbrella in front of her body with both hands. She watched the sleeping girl. They could hear the rain drumming on the window panes. Attila stepped towards the woman and made motions as if he wanted to help her off with her coat.

“Thanks,” she said. “But it’s quite late. I have to go again, straight away really. But I wondered if you’d be kind enough to walk me home and return the umbrella to the manager?”

Attila put on his coat. They'd been talking quietly, so as not to wake Olga. But the whispering made for a certain sense of familiarity. Leaving the small lamp on the bedside table on, they left the room. As they went down the stairs, Maria asked herself for a moment what it was that she wanted. Where did she want to go? She had surrendered the umbrella into Attila's hands, and had managed to clasp his in hers as she did so. They had looked at each other without saying a word and said nothing about all the problems facing him and his sister. As if those problems hadn't been the reason for his phone call in the first place.

The bar was quieter today. The weather obviously kept many patrons from visiting the place. The duty manager was busy in the corridor leading to the staff quarters as they crossed the foyer. He had his back to them and didn't notice as they left the hotel. Attila opened the umbrella under the little awning outside and held it over Maria. He offered her his arm but she seemed not to notice. They crossed the lane, walked in the direction of the main street and turned down it.

Suddenly Maria grabbed Attila's arm and said: "Say something."

Now Attila was even more at a loss to find the right words. He could only squeeze her fingers and put his head nearer to hers. After a while he said: "I like this, you know. The two of us walking here like this, together, in the rain." He paused. "Have you noticed those drops, they look like they're dancing on the asphalt. I could walk with you like this for hours." He pointed to the water droplets as they splashed onto the pavement. They sprang up, before forming bubbles or small circles in the puddles.

She laughed quietly and said: "Thanks, but the journey to my flat is quite long enough for me."

They stopped every now and then, watched the falling drops, stared at the lights in the puddles, the violet grain of the granite paving stones and the intertwining purple, orange and gold arabesques on the oil-stained street.

When they reached the building where the Pokornis lived, Maria opened the door. Attila closed the umbrella and they stepped into the entrance hall. They both hesitated for a moment, then the

woman closed the door silently behind them and they went up the stairs.

It was dark, and they had to feel their way. Maria had taken his hand and had to guide him. When she opened the door to the flat, she didn't switch on the light, but led him straight to Pokorni's room. Only once they were there did she turn the light on. Although the only bulb which lit the room was a weak one, they were both blinded by the sudden brightness. Their faces looked cold and edged and seemed strange to one another. They would have both preferred to switch the light off again. Maria took the umbrella from him. They took off their coats and hung them up on hooks on the door.

If the two of them had said very little to each other on the way there, Maria now tried to begin a conversation about his worries regarding a permanent place to live and finding work. They were alone, and it was quiet around them, and they were facing each other. Attila looked at her in disbelief. He put his left hand over her mouth. She leaned against the table where he had sat when he had first visited. Today the table was empty, and the whole room seemed larger. Maria's dark eyes stared into his. He felt the hard edges of the table against his thigh and Maria's soft lips on the palm of his hand. His glance strayed along the walls: there were the pictures, the man playing the flute, the wedding photo, the praying hands, then the wardrobe, the door, the pecking birds of the wallpaper pattern and next to the door, the light switch.

"Those droplets are still shining in your eyes. It looks like pearls on a string," he said, as his glance returned to Maria's face, to her large eyes.

She smiled.

He took his hand from her mouth, took a step towards the door and switched off the light.

The only light in the darkened room now came from the street lamps. The contents of the room drew long shadows and the large bottles on the windowsill gleamed mysteriously, red and green. The pictures on the walls dissolved into regular-shaped stains, the wallpaper with the bird pattern had disappeared. Only the beds stood between them and the dull shine of the glass panes, with the

rain pattering behind it. The beds stood there, like wide little boats. The eyes of the woman were still resting in his and when he pushed her towards the bed she allowed him to do so. Was this not what she had expected? Just hours ago, when Georg had reminded her that she was free and had no obligations towards Ferry, she had contradicted him. I'll stay with him, she had thought then. Now she was putting her arms round Attila's neck.

His eyes were very close to hers and his lips were searching for hers. As they stood next to the table, Attila had the feeling he could see Pokorni sitting on the chair raising his glass towards him, and could hear Schmidt's voice saying: But you're not really married to him. But in that moment when her body sank down onto the bed beneath his, all the pictures were gone, the ones outside and the ones inside. Only the two bottles still shone dimly, ruby and emerald. Deep in the shadow of the pillows, his hands sought a path through the woman's dress. Her hands guided his as she helped him find the way. The silence around them sang its own melody. Ruby, emerald, ruby, emerald, thought Attila several times. But then he didn't even think of that anymore.

It was still dark when Attila left the house. Maria accompanied him down to the front door which she had to unlock. She didn't take the time to get dressed properly, she just put on her coat. It was cold and their goodbye was short. They talked about seeing each other again and they both meant the same thing.

Then Attila returned to the hotel, slowly, by himself.

The rain had stopped. Large puddles shone in the guttering. The air was cold and clear. Attila breathed deeply.