I

The girls were sitting on high stools along both sides of a narrow bench, divided in half by a slowly moving conveyor belt. One metal ring, a second ring, a third ring, a little metal disc, another metal disc, a little insulating plate and down goes the lever. On goes the chassis, on to the belt then again, one ring, a second ring, a third ring, all day long one ring, a second ring, a third ring. Down goes the lever, from seven in the morning until five at night, little disc, little disc, down with the lever, insulating plate and fifteen minutes for morning tea, then off again: down goes the lever, down, and half an hour for lunch, a quick, hasty meal out of a tin bowl, hot, cold, quick and off again, ring, ring, little disc, little disc, and all the time trams passed by in front of the window. They came from the left and from the right and off they went to the left again and to the right, off to their respective terminal stations where there were allotments and the allotments on the right-hand side stretched out into the hill country adorned with forests which encircled the city in a wide sweep. People walked their dogs right past the windows, beautiful long-legged animals and ugly little mongrels that brushed up against the crippled trunks of the few trees in the street to have a good sniff.

A loudhailer shrieked out its musical message from the end of the hall *You are making the world a better place, a better place, a better place...* The melody slowly morphed into a shrill whine and a piercing whistle, then died away, leaving a soft background humming. For the women and girls, only one thing existed during all this time, one ring after another, little disc after little disc, and even if one of them took up the tune and sang along, her hands continued to work away automatically.

Katharina sat at the third machine, where she had a good view of the street behind Frau Fink. Not all the time of course, she couldn't always look away from her work, but every now and then, she knew it off by heart by now anyway, little disc, little disc, one ring, another ring. She wasn't interested in the dogs, nor in the people walking

them, nor in the shaggy, wind-torn trees, nor in the trams, no, Katharina had never once wondered what was at the ends of the lines that the rattling carriages clattered along each day, she had never wondered where forest began, or if the meadows were full of wild flowers, dandelion and sage, goat's beard, cock's foot and marguerites. Over and over again she would hum the tune, *You are making the world a better place...* over and over, even when the loudspeaker made sounds as if a sack of chestnuts was being emptied onto a shed roof. Sometimes there was a voice speaking a foreign language, sometimes it was their own language, but no one took any notice of the words spoken.

Katharina had been fitting little discs to other little discs every day for several years now. A few months after she'd left school, she'd gone for an interview at the factory and was hired as a labourer. Her father had wanted her to learn a trade. Dressmaking or something like that. But Inge had her fingernails manicured and Helga had her hair dyed, and all the girls had beautiful new dresses, while she had never had a new dress, only blouses and skirts which her mother had stitched together, and they never ever fitted properly, and she was only allowed to go to the cinema once a week while all the other girls her age went at least twice. She wasn't even allowed to use the mascara which one of her friends (who could afford everything) had given her. That friend wore makeup and had her hair permed and already had a boyfriend. She and the other girls in the neighbourhood hung out on the street corners with the girls from school and the girls from dancing class, or they went to the cinema or the park and they talked about the latest news.

Katharina... Kathy... Kathrin, are you coming to the cinema with us today? Franzi's got blue shoes, you know, the ones with snakeskin and Ferdinand is wearing a tie, you've got to see it. By the way, I'm going to buy some new shoes tomorrow, the ones with metal heels, you know the ones I mean? Remember when our teacher told Mimi off for wearing ones just like them? Silly old cow, do you remember the way her false teeth used to shake whenever she yelled at anyone? I knew that the emperor's name was Karl anyway, the third or fourth or fifth, well, it was quite a while ago now. We saw him in a film. Not bad looking! And the shoes they wore in those days. Franzi's are nothing compared to them.

When the girl looked up after the crackling had changed into a whistling again, she saw a light-blue car approach and pull up opposite the factory. An engineer from the research division got out.

The girl watched him closely. It was Herr Leidemit. About ten years older than Katharina, he was a focused, dedicated man, who had no time for any of the women in the factory. He had probably never even noticed Katharina. But she'd noticed him. She knew quite a few men in fact, which in itself was the cause of frequent disagreements with her mother. Her mother was a simple woman from the country who always called her daughter Kathy, actually it was more like Kaaathy. The girl didn't like that anymore, especially since she'd started work at the factory. Everyone called her Kitty here, which was much more interesting. Kathy, that sounded so provincial!

He must be on a pretty good income to own a car like that, thought the girl, I've heard he's quite the angler too.

She had overheard two men from the construction department talking about the engineer. It seemed that on Saturdays he liked to drive up to a spot on a little river before it flowed into the main current a few kilometres north of the capital city. Teeming with fish it was. Kitty had never been there, but she'd heard there wasn't a lot to see, little country villages and small dreamy towns. She'd gone out to the Weinviertel once, with Heini. They'd gone on his motorcycle. At least it was fun there, there were people singing in the pubs, and another time they'd gone to a wine cellar where there was gypsy music playing.

Another new car, thought Kitty to herself, as she watched the engineer get out of his vehicle. But she said nothing to her workmates, even though it was hardly the done thing among the women at the table, to keep news like that a secret.

The whining and whistling started up again. A man sitting at the end of the hall behind a glass wall fiddled with the fine-tuning knobs. There were clusters of speakers set up along the narrow bench and each one should have had the same reception. Everyone should have been able to hear the same tone at the same point on the dial. Everyone ought to have been hearing the melody with exactly the same clarity *You are making the world a better place, a better place...* But for a moment there was no melody, only the sound of a male voice filling the room. *Forgive us our trespasses,* said the voice. Then the whining began again, and no one took any notice. Frau Fink, who

sat opposite Kitty, was telling them all about how she'd given birth to her first daughter as she connected the axle of an adjustable disk condenser to the little plates which had been assembled by her neighbour, and Lizzie, who was the youngest there, almost forgot to attach the washer, and pushed more firmly than usual on the lever which operated the small press.

Kitty wasn't really listening. She was thinking about the way she had adjusted her stocking on the staircase as the engineer was coming up behind her on his way to the third floor. He had been thumbing through a book of tables and had noticed neither her knee nor her beautiful red hair which had swung across and covered her face as she bent down. Everyone ought to be able to hear to same sounds out of the same speakers... *a better place a better place.* Whistling and whining and... *as we forgive those...* The little discs all had to be exactly the same distance apart, sometimes the lever went down too far. Whistling and crackling. Frau Fink put in a new axle and continued on from the point where she'd been wheeled into the delivery room. Kitty was listening now for a brief moment as she continued to slip one ring, a second ring, a third ring on to the appliance, adding a little metal disc and a small insulating plate. Frau Fink fell silent.

The foreman, Feuchtinger, an elderly man, was walking along one side of the bench. Lizzie made a mistake and produced a faulty piece. She set it to one side. The loudspeaker on the wall behind crackled. Feuchtinger had passed the women, he heard nothing about the delivery room, he had already reached the third window - the hall had enormous windows, divided by iron frames and set close to one another - when he turned back towards the workers. He eyed the different groups in turn, and then approached Kitty's one. He informed the women that a new worker was to join their group, and that one of them, someone who knew her way round the factory better, was to be transferred to the laboratory. In the laboratory, the foreman explained, they needed a worker for general duties and the assembling of small, simple parts.

Feuchtinger was addressing the whole group, but gradually focused more and more on Frau Fink, who was the most senior of them. Finally, he asked her to report to him by midday with the name of the worker who was prepared to transfer to the laboratory. The horn which also marked the beginning and the end of the working day

suddenly sounded a few times, long and short tones, not unlike Morse code, and in between, the voice behind the glass wall spoke, *Beloved in the Lord!* And then there was a humming and droning and although the women ignored it, every now and then they would pick up a word or a recognisable melody and some sort of impression, however hidden or distorted, remained with them. The horn signals, however, were totally incomprehensible to them. Someone was being called or someone was looking for someone else. Most of them didn't even hear the signals any longer, after all, they weren't meant for them.

The foreman strode off. He seemed to understand the signal. The group of women remained at the table, deep in discussion.

It was relatively easy for Kitty to get herself nominated by Frau Fink. Frau Fink didn't want to give up her position as the most senior member of the group, Lizzie hadn't been in the factory long enough and didn't know her way round the other departments and the two other women were only familiar with condenser assembly. Kitty had already worked in three different departments and had a reasonable knowledge of the rest of the factory. Besides, the other women didn't really fancy a change. The piece-work they were doing at the belt was potentially far more profitable than being paid by the hour, so long as little Lizzie didn't make too many blunders and slow production down too much. As it turned out, they were all quite glad when Kitty volunteered for the position, which, of course, didn't prevent any of them from making nasty remarks about her the very next day when the new girl had replaced her, and Frau Fink declared that she knew for a fact that Kitty was having a relationship with the lift attendant, Immervoll. After all, she had seen Kitty go off with him on his motorbike after work with her very own eyes. And more than once too, no doubt about it.

At first the change to the laboratory wasn't much fun for the girl. She found herself working under an engineer by the name of Pohanka, and this Pohanka always had something for her to do. The very first day she arrived, her workbench was already piled high with parts for her to dismantle.

The engineer asked her name, and as Kitty wasn't good enough for him, she became known by her surname, Mislowitsch. The chief engineer Leidemit worked right at the other end of the room, and the

fact that a new assistant had been hired seemed to have escaped him completely.

Herr Pohanka wasn't particularly happy with the girl's work, but he comforted himself with the hope that she would get used to her new job quickly. There was perhaps something else behind his willingness to give her the benefit of the doubt. When he watched Kitty - surreptitiously, of course, or so he thought - he completely forgot his flabby wife with her double chin and her little piggy eyes and the three healthy girls she had given birth to, who were already taking after their mother and her tendency to voluptuousness.

Here Kitty scarcely noticed the noise which emanated from the assembly hall. The large laboratory was almost frighteningly quiet. The continuous thumping and hammering of the huge press banging away in the cellar shuddered like a pulse through the building, but the vibrations only seemed to intensify the quietness in the laboratory. Papers were rustled, and the sound of muttered words drifted by whenever two engineers bent over a large diagram or leaned over the benches to speak to one another, monotonous, quiet, inaudible.

The work was complicated and there was a lot she didn't know. She kept having to ask Herrn Pohanka to give her instructions. But even then she still made mistakes. Finally the man ended up finding it more efficient to stand beside her, showing her every move.

The work had been so much easier back in the condenser department, one little disc after another little disc and you could chat with your workmates. You hardly ever heard a conversation about anything but work here. Even Herr Pohanka only ever talked about work-related matters with her. At first Kitty thought that the situation might change after a few days or so, but to her disappointment, it never did.

She had been in her new job for over a month. One day, late in the afternoon, she'd begun to put away her tools, and was thinking of the cinema - Ferdinand, Heini, in the back row, I hope he's better shaved than last time - Herr Pohanka suddenly asked her, quite out of the blue, "Fräulein Mislowitsch, would it be possible for you to stay a little longer today? We have some very important work to finish."

Kitty wanted to refuse straight away. Heini would wait for me, but then, that's none of his business. I can't wait to get out of here... Mother would tell me off - that might work, I've got strict parents, what could he say to that? And why should I anyway? Don't I leave here later and later every day, it's just hassle after hassle, and for

what? The others will be waiting at the door already, freshly washed, make-up on, ready to rush outside the second the signal sounds the end of work, Heini laughing at me, now I'll have to take the tram home anyway. His motorcycle will have disappeared before I even finish washing my hands.

As Kitty looked up at Pohanka, she suddenly saw Leidemit speaking to a man she didn't know, four or five work-stations away. The stranger had no lab-coat on. Surely Heini will wait for me at the cinema, surely it won't take all that long, I wonder which film he'll have tickets for? *The Invisible Man.* The back row is best for making out. If the film's exciting enough, your neighbours don't even notice a thing. *You are making the world a better place, a better place...* Where did that melody come from? Sometimes you get a tune like that stuck in your head and you can't get rid of it, sometimes for weeks. "All right. I can stay if you really need me," she said finally. Why? Why did I say that? Now I just feel frustrated, angry even. God, he really is good-looking. Am I angry? Angry, no, a good-looking man, it's not going to take too long. Why not? I don't know.

"Excellent," said Herr Pohanka, "take your soldering-iron please, and follow me."

They passed close to the other two men as they walked through the room. Herr Leidemit and the man in the grey-blue suit were in the midst of a lively discussion. Kitty couldn't understand a word, the two men were talking in English.

Pohanka stopped in front of a large switchboard. Wires stuck out every which way, bound together in thick bundles. Metal clips fixed them to iron girders and they extended out in all directions, up and down, left and right, interspersed with a myriad of different components, condensers, rheostats, relays; tin, bakelite, glass, tar, paper, and then more and more wires, wires in green, red and blue insulation casing, a confused network of wires, a yellow cord with orange and green stripes, and silver dots covering one surface: all those soldered joints, twenty, forty, sixty altogether! How was she supposed to find her way among this multitude of colours, shapes, connections, light bulbs, wires, wires and more wires?

Pohanka told Kitty to solder together all the wires of such-and-such a colour and then he checked the connections with a multi-meter. The girl stood quietly next to him, the needle moved about, she watched it swing back and forth. Pohanka noted down some figures.

Leidemit accompanied the strange man to the door, then stopped for a moment at the switchboard on his way back to his workbench. "Are you finding your way around all right?" he asked Pohanka.

"I certainly hope so," came the reply.

Kitty stood next to the switchboard with her soldering iron, watching the man as he stood there, so close, the tanned, relaxed face, the quiet brown eyes, the slim hands. Is that what she was thinking about? Was she thinking at all, could she see anything at all? Perhaps all she was conscious of was the smell of his skin, or the air which his words set in motion. Everything else, the relaxed face, the quiet brown eyes, the slim hands, merely existed. But it only lasted for a moment and Leidemit had vanished and Pohanka was standing next to her, telling her to solder red to yellow and she rearranged the cord which carried the electricity from the power point to the soldering iron as she searched out all the red and yellow stripes, five, eight, twenty, twenty-four strands, red and yellow stripes. The slim hands were beside her, the quiet brown eyes, the relaxed face. But it seemed that Pohanka was having trouble finding his way round after all. It wasn't the soldering iron, that almost imperceptibly curved copper rod encased within a heat cylinder and finished off with a wooden handle, which the girl held in her hand, it wasn't the soldering iron which was confusing him. Red with yellow stripes, to solder all the red wires with yellow stripes Kitty had to climb up onto a little step next to the switchboard. The first joint was high up, on the upper-most edge of the iron girder. In order to reach it, Kitty had to stretch out, and then there was a cluster of joints in the middle of the panel, they were easy to do, but others were almost at floor level and the girl had to crouch right down.

The signal sounded the end of the working day. Kitty glanced out the big window. Down there, on the street, round the crippled trees, where only the occasional pedestrian with a shaggy dog ever passed, everything had suddenly come alive. Motorcycles were revving their engines, the noise level rose dramatically, peaked and then declined, lingering in the air from afar. Dark clusters, like swarms of bees, moved towards the tram stop.

After a few moments it became quiet again. Only the ceaseless monotonous pounding of the hydraulic presses in the cellar continued on into the night, more clearly than before.

The other men left the room after about an hour. It was as if the whole floor had mysteriously died. The girl began to feel as if there was something strange, almost forbidden, about what she was doing. She was used to working in the company of her co-workers, or at least in the vicinity of other people. Now it was so very quiet around her that she could hear Pohanka's every movement, his every step, the rustling of his papers, the scrawling of his pencil. In a spy film at the cinema, the music was almost always suspended at moments like this. There would be a close-up of a writing hand, and then a cut to the recipient of the message, a foreign agent, a meeting place at a lonely river bed in the middle of some deserted fields... Herr Leidemit is an angler...speaks English... a new car.

Pohanka finally discovered the problem. Kitty had to re-solder all the joints all over again. Pohanka's job was over. He could have left. He could have said, here, see this yellow and black wire, you have to solder it to joint 542, and the blue one which used to be connected to 452 needs to be soldered to the condenser K2/23. Then he could have washed his hands and gone home. Kitty would have done everything he told her and the next morning all he would have needed to do was to check whether she had done everything correctly. But no, he stayed there, standing at the switchboard, watching her. It was only now that he could look at her properly. He hadn't had time before. He watched her, climbing up the small step, stretching out, crouching down.

She could tell that he was watching her. She could have left as soon as she finished, but instead she waited while he checked all the critical connections again. Then they put her instruments away together and walked through the long deserted room, crossing the assembly hall on their way to the cloakroom to wash their hands. They had spoken only a few necessary words to each other the whole evening, but now Pohanka broke the silence. "Ten to seven. It took longer than I thought. Did you have any plans for this evening, Fräulein Mislowitsch?"

"I wanted to go to the cinema," she said.

He had never asked her about her personal life before, and to tell the truth, he wasn't the least bit interested, even now. But here he was, walking next to her through the long bright assembly hall, through a dimly-lit corridor, past the time-clock where the factory workers clocked in, towards the cloakroom and the washroom, and he felt that he couldn't very well walk beside her in silence. He could have waited for her to leave, and then gone to the washroom by

himself, a little later. But he had been watching her as she soldered, crouching down at the bottom of the girder, her copper-red hair falling across her forehead. He had watched her as she stretched up on tip-toe to reach the uppermost joints. She had been working beside him for several weeks now, and today he had been alone with her for a few hours. It was already nearly seven o'clock, and the sun was still shining outside. The days were getting longer and the weather was beautiful, even though it was only the end of May. His wife, with her piggy eyes and her plump shiny skin, had already taken her three children and moved out to their holiday house, near a former tributary of the Danube. It had no direct connection with the river anymore and had developed into a large still lake, which in summer was filled with people bathing, sailing and canoeing. But he wasn't thinking about her, he wasn't thinking about his three little piglets when he asked, "Which film did you want to see?" He opened the door to the washroom and let the girl go in front of him.

They had passed the lift door and Kitty's thoughts flicked briefly to Immervoll. His big, strong hand would have jammed a cigarette in his mouth and then he'd have gone off home or seen the film by himself - or with another girl. But so what. It was all the same to her.

So while Kitty told him about some silly film which she wanted to see, which would have probably been sold out by now, Pohanka quietly watched the path of the dirty lather as it dripped its way into the basin and the way the girl rinsed her hands with water and the way she dried them. It was the end of May, and she thought nothing of it, but had Pohanka thought about it at all he would have felt childish, perhaps he would have left even earlier.

But Kitty was still disappointed. She took the tram home by herself. It was already growing darker and there were only a few passengers in the normally overcrowded carriages. She sat in a window seat with a cheap paperback in her hand, looking at the well-thumbed pages. But she couldn't concentrate. She tried to work out what she had done wrong but had to admit she had no idea. There were two men sitting behind her. One of them was talking. "Many are called but only a few are chosen," he said. Kitty could hear him clearly, but she took no notice. She merely heard the sounds, without any sense of comprehension. Round and round in her head went the thoughts, what did I do wrong? What? The other man was talking now. "But what about free will?" The tram curved round a bend, the wheels shrieked and

screamed. What did I do wrong? thought Kitty. She hadn't done anything wrong. It was Herr Pohanka, he had watched the dirty water flowing away for too long, the greyish-white lather dripping from her rotating hands.

But when Herr Pohanka asked her again, two weeks later, whether she could work overtime, Kitty said "Yes, of course I can," in spite of her sense of disappointment.

To Pohanka, her answer sounded somehow provocative, but he could have been mistaken. Maybe he was being too sensitive. Last time, he'd arrived home oddly dissatisfied with himself. The apartment had been empty and quiet, he'd made himself a cold supper and worked for a couple of hours on several radios which he repaired for a shop-keeper he knew, just to earn a bit of money on the side. His wife wouldn't be put off again this year, she needed a new summer dress and, of course, the girls needed some too and they needed an umbrella, a new colourful sun umbrella for the veranda as well, because the Müllers opposite had already had one since last year and the two elder girls wanted a ping-pong table, balls and paddles, it always made him laugh to imagine the two plump little things with paddles, hopping after the ball, knowing in advance that they'd hardly ever play, they'd find it far too tiring. And he found himself filled with a growing sense of anger, as he sat on his half of the marital bed. His wife's half didn't have linen on it during the summer, and the sight of that naked mattress juxtaposed with the white sheet always gave him that same strange feeling he'd had during the war whenever he saw a house hit by a bomb, and half the rooms were still there and the other half had disintegrated into a heap of rubble, but the half which remained intact stood there, quite useless, three, four stories above ground, a bed in which no one slept, a pot-bellied stove which no one used for heating, a block of flats, destroyed by the casual push of a button opening up the bomb flaps. He certainly hadn't been thinking of the dirty, soapy lather, of the lather which dripped from her hands into the basin, but now he remembered it and told himself that today he would let her go to the washroom by herself, what could he talk to her about anyway? But then he thought about how he had sat on the edge of his bed and yawned. His naked feet had touched the ground and he'd been angry about the noise which drifted up from the street. But on his street, just two doors further along, there was a cinema. People pushed out on to the street as the picture finished. A

few young men gave noisy opinions of the film for the benefit of the small crowd which milled about.

This time Kitty had to assemble and then dismantle several parts of some piece of machinery. Herr Pohanka was spending more and more time with Leidemit and in the last two weeks Kitty had learned that the two had been at school together and were old friends. Leidemit left later than the other employees, bid farewell to Herrn Pohanka and herself, and she was left with the impression that he had noticed her for the first time. Some time later she saw his blue car driving off. She didn't have to concentrate so hard this time. The large parts were impossible to confuse with one another and she managed to assemble them quite quickly. She didn't have to think much, it was almost as easy as it had been back in the assembly hall, little disc fits to little disc, one screw here and another screw there, one screw, another screw, all day long, screw after screw. But the trams passed by in front of the window, they came from the left and from the right and off they went to the left and the right and at their respective terminal stations there were allotments and the allotments on the right-hand side stretched out into the hill country adorned with forests which encircled the city in a wide sweep.

But Kitty had never been there, she always went the other way, and in the evenings she went to the cinema. She put the different parts together and didn't know what they were supposed to do, what they were for, she had no idea what use they were. She just tightened one screw after another. She knew all the latest hits, she knew why Fräulein Bartosch was so fascinated by the dark-skinned guitar player, she knew that the actress N. N. had a magnificent four-room apartment and of course the gorgeous fur coat. Sometimes she thought about what a different life it would be compared with hers in her parents' dreary one-room flat, where her father spent most of his time snoring, when he didn't happen to be at work, and her mother, slightly irritated whenever she came home late, told her off because of the mascara she used and all the magazines she bought. A bathroom clad in black tiles where she could lie back up to her neck in foam, it would be quite different to their chipped wash-bowl which was used by the whole family, one after the other, washing themselves from head to toe in the kitchen, either next to, or on the coal-box, depending on which part you were washing. Father would scrape off his stubble at the table that they used for meals, while she sat in the wash-bowl on the

floor. Screw after screw, one component after another. Someone had spoken of free will, she didn't know who it was or what the context had been. It was definitely quite a while ago, maybe when she was still at school. Herr Pohanka passed behind her. Not another thing to dismantle! She looked at her watch, it was about time for her to finish. "Kathy," her mother always called her, and she held on to the "a" for a long time, "Kaaaathy" and all the tenants in the block of flats called her "Kaaaathy" too because her mother talked about her to everyone, and all the worries she caused her as well. But she didn't care about the tenants. Not even Ernstl Eichberger was of any interest to her and he really was a first-rate dancer.

She began putting away her tools.

And Egon? Well he had a certain presence, he even looked a bit like Bing Crosby. He was into sports as well. He had taught her to swim, down there in the Pinozza swimming hole. She used to go there with Gerti and Leo and Pauli. But then she'd stopped. She wasn't interested anymore. Sometimes she still ran across Egon, maybe he still thought he was in with a chance. But he couldn't talk about anything but the most recent rowing records, and lately he was into boxing as well. She much preferred Heini. He was always elegant, even in the lift he wore a tie, the latest design of course. Only sometimes he got a bit too boisterous. Once they'd gone out on his motorcycle to the Burgenland to a wine tasting or something like that. He was really nice. But men, what did she care about men? They shouldn't flatter themselves she even noticed them.

Pah, she would have said, had anyone asked her. Pah, don't kid yourself, and she would have added, I'm not as silly as Frau Fink who got her Elfi when she was only nineteen. No, I know how the world works.

But no one asked her.

Herr Pohanka was entering data into a table, and when Kitty had finished putting away her tools, she came up behind him and asked him whether there was anything else. Suddenly, he found he couldn't concentrate. He looked past the piece of paper, through the window, and could feel her presence, tangible, close to him. She stood quietly behind him for a moment. Perhaps she didn't want to disturb him. Her head was right above his and she could look down on his close-cut hair.

Pohanka looked out the window. There were the grey blocks of rental flats adorned with flourishes of plasterwork, and the curious old people who peered out of the windows all day long, watching the street, observing every movement, taking note. The light of the setting sun was reflected in the closed windows, red, lilac, the yellow of forsythia flowers and a pale, cold green The sun had already disappeared behind the mountains. Pohanka could see the dark silhouettes of the trees on the hills. It all happened so quickly, so very quickly, he said to himself. Everything became green so quickly and the forsythias were already all in full bloom. He loved those yellow flowering twigs and he decided to bring some from the garden on Monday. He could put them on the window-sill, right in front of his desk.

"I've finished, Herr Pohanka, what should I do now?" Kitty finally broke the silence.

"Thank you, Fräulein, that will be all for today." He turned towards her.

I won't bring the forsythias after all, Eveline would probably think I was bringing them for another woman, he thought for a moment, and saw his wife in the grey dress she wore in the garden - a faded old summer dress - standing on their veranda, her curly hair straggling across her forehead. Of course, for your office window, he heard her say, and he saw her purse her mouth ever so slightly, enough to reveal the gap in her teeth on the right-hand side. She said it as if she almost believed it, or at least wanted to believe it, but no, she did believe it, well, part of her did anyway, but there was also part of her that didn't and this mistrust ate into her, like a festering boil along her neck, her body, her hands, until her whole body was covered in pustules of suspicion. It was terrible, he couldn't look at her any longer. No, there was no point. Even if he were to put the flowers on his window-sill, they wouldn't make him happy. No, I won't bring any forsythias in. And he continued on a completely different train of thought, she's got a new dress, almost a summer dress.

Kitty had unbuttoned her lab-coat. She had counted on being allowed to go home. She was waiting just one more moment.

He was looking at her neck now, at the curve of her shoulders. The skin was smooth and slightly tanned, only ever so slightly, there hadn't been many sunny days yet.

"Auf Wiedersehen, Fräulein Kitty," said Pohanka, and turned back to his work. There was his piece of paper with the numbers on it, four, five, six figures, some with and some without decimal places. Black symbols on white paper, black symbols, lines, lines full of black symbols. That tanned neck, so delicate, and the black symbols.

She had expected a different reaction. She had thought he might ask her whether she had any plans for the evening again. But why? For a moment she hesitated, and then she said: "Auf Wiedersehen, Herr Pohanka," and quickly left for the cloakroom. It wasn't until she was outside that she realised that he had said Fräulein *Kitty* instead of Mislowitsch. But it was probably just a mistake.

Pohanka sat hunched over his table, and in between the long columns and black lines, he saw the dirty water dripping from the delicate child-like hands, saw the red hair trailing over her face, her comb and lipstick, but when he glanced up over the edge of his paper, there was that same red hair and the same red mouth down on the street.

Kitty was walking to the tram stop and looking up at his window. He rose and moved towards the glass, but at that very moment the girl glanced elsewhere. What large bright eyes she has, he thought. He moved his hand, as if about to wave, glad that Kitty could no longer see it.

He kept on working in the office for another hour or so, bought himself a portion of sausage with mustard at a kiosk on the way to the radio shop, repaired four radios at home and then carried them - he had to make two trips - from his flat back to the dealer. In the meantime, night had fallen and it had started to rain softly. Pohanka finished off the day down in the vault of a wine cellar, where he bought himself a glass of cheap wine and some bread and cheese. The room was smoky and lit by small, bare electric light-bulbs hanging from the ceiling of the vault. No one down there would have guessed that outside a warm refreshing spring rain was falling, unless he had just come in off the street.

Pohanka took his time. He watched the other customers. Couples were sitting in the booths, laughing and caressing one another. Pohanka enjoyed four cigarettes in a row, with a small interval between each one. At last he finished his drink, paid the benignly smiling waiter who was well-versed with the idiosyncrasies of his regulars, and went home.

Sitting on the edge of his bed once more, glancing from his hairy legs, as they stuck out of his nightgown, across the floor to the windows which were blacked out by venetian blinds to prevent the people who lived in the building opposite from peering in, he cursed the whole day. He looked at the lamp which filled the room with its dim light, and his bedside table beside the lamp, and he looked at the alarm clock on the surface of the table. Pohanka felt a sudden urge to smash the clock to the ground. But what would that achieve? He would still wake up the next morning at exactly the right time, even without the alarm. He would go to the office again, everything as usual, everything as usual. And that evening he would even buy a new alarm clock. He looked up at the wall behind the beds. It was covered in a gleaming, silvery pattern, maple leaves, the relief almost the same tone as the base colour. Pohanka didn't notice the leaves anymore. He didn't see the flies either, which were sitting on the wall just above the bed. Then suddenly they were swooping round each other, humming and buzzing. It was quite rare for the man to sit and brood like that, but for some reason he couldn't fall asleep tonight. He was tired. But he couldn't sleep. He watched the flies, without being conscious of them. He had three strong, healthy children, a wife who was a good mother to them, he had a beautiful garden out on the outskirts of Vienna with a little weekend house and a big, spacious apartment in the city. The flies were quiet for a moment. Pohanka noticed that something was missing. He couldn't hear the buzzing. He looked for the two black spots on the silvery wall, but could only see one, motionless above the bed. Pohanka put on his slippers and got up again. He put on his long dressing gown and walked over to the living room. The two flies flew off when he got up. One of them perched on the wire of the light fitting, the other one on the net curtain. They were busy cleaning their wings, their bodies, and their delicate legs. Pohanka opened one of the windows in the living room and looked down on the street. It was a side street, not very busy, every now and then a car would drive past, the only sign of life was out in front of the cinema a few blocks away, where a group of people were standing around. Pohanka could see the reflection of the bright lights of the showcases in their faces. Men and women were standing there, along with a few girls, still children really. The houses were tall and dark, a black gorge, a long line of gloom extending left and right from Pohanka's window. High above, far away, he could see a small strip

of a light July-night sky, the rain had stopped, he could even see some stars. For a moment it was quiet, and he lit a cigarette and blew the smoke out over the street. He had a beautiful apartment. He looked out onto the street and saw the reflection of the settee and the record player, the kidney-shaped table and the Persian rug underneath it. Beyond all that, in his workroom, things were a bit of a mess, wires, soldering iron, tools, spare parts, shelves with measuring instruments and pieces of metal and wood. He sat at that kidney-shaped table with his mother-in-law for birthday celebrations, on special days, and every now and then when people came to visit. He saw Josef Leidemit, and Josef said, "You've got it nice here." That praise meant a lot to him. But it wouldn't be more than about fifteen times a year he pondered, the rest of the time the room wasn't used at all, once or twice a day someone passes through, dust settles on the furniture, on the large rubber tree, a magnificent specimen, make sure it's well-watered and polish the leaves once a week, Eveline had said.

He was tired, he had worked hard today and it was late, but he couldn't sleep. He blew the cigarette smoke out over the street and watched the people out in front of the cinema, some were still holding umbrellas in their hands, he thought of the radios which had passed through his hands today, his school friend Leidemit (he had bought himself a car, drove out to Laa every weekend, right out towards the northern border, then somewhere towards South during his holidays), for a moment piggy eyes and then his mother-in-law, God knows how she came into it, the people out on the street so late, children, girls, three little piglets, the childrens' room, Persian rug, the window-sill, the mother-in-law, the kidney-shaped table, the marriage beds, the cinema showcases and suddenly there were the hands, the hands with the soapy, dripping lather. Of course. Mislowitsch. They were her hands.

Angrily he threw the end of his cigarette down to the street below. A narrow red arc gleamed in the dark, then everything was as before.

In a filthy mood, Pohanka turned back to his bedroom, took off his dressing gown and got into bed. But on his quilt, his little holiday house danced up and down and built itself up out of radios, a blue car drove through the door and out through the window right into a pool of bluish-whitish water covered in enormous floating soap bubbles, soap bubbles which reflected the holiday house, red, yellow and blue, dancing up and down in a multitude of colours, opalescent, but Kitty

Mislowitsch was sitting on the roof of the house, huge, covering the whole roof with her bottom, the switches and knobs digging into her flesh. Her legs were crossed and one of her feet was pushing down on Pohanka's chest.

That was on Thursday night. The next morning, Pohanka avoided speaking to Mislowitsch any more than was absolutely necessary. He watched her. He had to admit that the girl had found her way around quite quickly. She could work pretty much independently now and didn't have to ask him questions nearly so often. The engineer was at liberty to do his calculations and work on his wiring plans, quite uninterrupted.

Kitty was dismantling a large prototype, which consisted of a multitude of wires and switches, valves and condensers. She removed the solder with her soldering iron and took the components apart, then sorted them into the appropriate sections of the partitioned drawers. Every now and then she would glance over at Pohanka or Leidemit. Both appeared absorbed in their work, so Kitty took her time. Herr Pohanka had told her to report to the engineer next to him when she had finished her work. The engineer was a grumpy old man, always impatient if things weren't done exactly the way he wanted them. And he always, so the girl thought, talked in such a confusing way, you never knew what he wanted. Now she rummaged through the drawer of parts and could see that Herr Leidemit had crossed over to Pohanka's bench, and that they were both discussing something. She got up and walked in their direction, passing close enough to hear that they were having a conversation about something personal. Herr Pohanka was saying something about his garden. Kitty went through the drawer next to them. She didn't quite know what she was looking for. The two men took no notice of her. She could have easily closed the drawer without taking anything from it.

On Saturday, Pohanka went out to see his family in their holiday house by the Old Danube. Large marguerite daisies flowered to the right and the left of the path which led from the gate to the house, and in front of the veranda there was a climbing jasmine covered over and over in flowering white stars. The forsythias which grew along the fence were already showing their green leaves and for a moment the man was struck by the thought that he couldn't take their flowering twigs to the office anyway.

The children ran towards him and pounced on him. His wife came down the steps from the veranda, she was smiling. He kissed her on the mouth. It was a well-rehearsed ceremony and none of them thought anything of it. He had brought fruit for the children and a block of chocolate for the youngest one. They showed him all the new flowers, and Siegrid, the eldest, produced her doll and the new dress she had made for it out of odd scraps of material. He examined everything, praised it duly, and while the younger ones were sitting on his knee, glanced down to the water where the rowers splashed past and sail-boats glided quietly along the shoreline. The children laughed and shrieked, in between the bursts of music from a radio in a neighbouring house. In between it all he heard the children clamouring Papa, Papa, Papa, a thousand times Papa and his wife too, a hundred times Papa this, Papa that. It was quite warm, he had taken off his jacket when he arrived. Now he was sitting on one of the steps and the children were clamouring: Papa, Papa, Papa, the cherry tree, the sand box, the lawn mower, the fence (by the way it needs a new coat of paint) the red robin.

"Papa, the robin built a nest in the skylight." A round child's face looked up into his. Her eyes were almost squashed by her plump cheeks, her hair straggled over her forehead. He looked up at the skylight and then even further up into the high, silky-blue sky covered in fine translucent clouds, like delicate lace.

The children already sported a tan from the first warm sun on their backs, chests and sturdy thighs. They were dressed in nothing but pink knickers, stained by the grass, the sand and the soil. They jumped off his knee and ran off into the garden. His wife called out to them, but Pohanka took no notice, even though she was standing right in front of him on the first of the five steps. She was looking out at the children in the garden, with her back towards her husband. She too was scantily dressed. She wore an apron made of a flowery material over a blue petticoat, every now and then the straps would slide down her shoulders where they would hang, sad and dreary round her pudgy upper arms and only be restored to their proper place when the woman found she couldn't move properly. She was standing so close to her husband that he could see the outline of her underwear through the thin material of the petticoat, the apron not quite making it all the way round her body. Just below the gathered edge of her knickers he could see a several-centimetre wide strip of wobbly upper thigh, and

below that, the bluish-white hollows of her knees. Yet close by, about a foot away, white lilies were flowering gorgeously, and their intense scent melted into that of the jasmine.

The man stretched out his legs. It was good to be able to sit like that after a hard week's work, to sniff the air and inhale all that wonderful scent and to enjoy the stainless white of the lilies. The loose skin wrinkling over the pudgy flesh? He didn't look at it. The jasmine sent out its scent, the intoxication of spring. When was it? Ten years ago, fifteen years ago when he had first touched that skin with his hand? Papa! Papa! The children called to him from the garden and showed him a flower, picked up a snail and pointed towards a rising lark. He nodded, smiled.

His wife told him the news of the last week, told him about the next-door neighbour, the shopkeeper, and Herrn Deutschberg, whose garden was right opposite Frau Muschik's garden, and who used his run-down old cottage as a cheap little love-nest for his gallant adventures. Pohanka sat on the uppermost step and stretched his legs. The whole world seemed to exude relaxation. He could listen or not listen. Everything was so wonderfully unimportant.

"Papa, Papa!" The children were all pointing in the same direction. He couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. But he nodded anyway.

The woman had turned back towards him again.

"You just have to see the little dresses. I just ironed them," she said.

"Which little dresses?" the man asked.

"The white little dresses for the Corpus Christi Day procession, of course."

"Oh, yes," he said, "you must have been working on them all week."

"Of course! The children are really looking forward to it."

"Really?" he said. Last week he'd thought they weren't looking forward to it in the slightest, or maybe the oldest one was, just a little. She had asked whether Mimi, shopkeeper Kubicek's daughter, was taking part and whether she'd be allowed to carry the velvet cushion again, the one with the embroidered red heart and silver sword. And when she learned that Mama had already arranged everything with the nun, and that she would even be allowed to carry the big cushion with the crown of thorns made of green wire-gauze, she was satisfied. The

other two children would carry flowers and strew petals along the path.

The man got up, and before he followed the woman, he looked across to the three children. They were playing on the shoreline, digging water channels and baking sand cakes.

"These are the baskets for the two little ones," she said and pointed at two new green baskets which she had bought a few days ago. "I'm going to fill them with peony petals. I've been saving all the dropped petals for the last two weeks. You know how they are, they don't last for very long once their buds open up."

He was quite happy for the two older ones to join the procession. It was the done thing. They attended Mass on Sundays, and Evensong too, during May. But the youngest was still too small. The long procession would make her tired. He made some comment to that effect, but his wife was vehement that of course Frieda should join in. They argued for a while, while the man looked rather listlessly at the dresses, gloves, stockings and shoes. It wasn't really much of an argument. Pohanka didn't really have any strong feelings one way or the other. He didn't take much of an interest in what his family did. He worked hard, every day and all day. His parents were Roman Catholics and he'd been brought up in that faith. It was only natural that his children should also be brought up in that faith. He observed all the rules and customs of the Church. Granted, he didn't observe them all that strictly, the fact that he hadn't received Holy Communion for a number of years hardly kept him awake at night but every now and then he accompanied his children to church, he paid his Church taxes and when there was a special day in the Church calendar he even went to Mass with his family. After all he was a moral sort of person, and didn't do anything that could be considered really sinful.

He looked out the window. "All right," he said, "let them all go."

The sun was shining and the light was reflected many times on the constantly-moving surface of the water. I'll paint the fence, he thought. It will be fine for the rest of the day and by tomorrow the paint will be dry.

"Lovely, just lovely," he said to his wife. "They'll look lovely in those dresses, like pretty little dolls." He searched his brain for a way to change the topic. Ah, yes the baskets! "Those baskets remind me, I

need to paint the fence. Eveline, would you be able to find me my overalls please."

The woman brought him the overalls and a little while later he was standing out on the path with a brush in his hand, painting plank after plank with an intense green paint. Up and down he moved the brush, stopping now and then in order to look critically at the fence, to get the brush stroke right, or just to look out over the water. When his wife approached him from the inside of the fence, she pointed out that he wouldn't be finished by evening if he carried on that way. She was right. He had to hurry up.

"Eveline, Josef might come to visit tomorrow," he remarked to his wife across the fence.

"Tomorrow?" she asked. The planks seemed to cut off part of her body on the left and on the right. Her figure seemed quite slim, as slim as, as - yes who did she remind him of?

"What were you thinking of," she scolded him. The man watched closely as her face went all red, he noticed the gap in her teeth on the right-hand side, clear as day. "We won't be back until late tomorrow, it will be almost lunchtime. I won't have time to cook properly. What are we going to give him? But you don't care. It's always me who has to deal with all the work and the embarrassment."

He managed a hesitant reply, Leidemit was a bachelor and wouldn't have any expectations. But the woman refused to hear a thing he had to say and continued on with her scolding.

She finally turned away, and he watched her as she headed back to the house - the apron swinging with each step, and her bottom in its blue stretched petticoat protruding between the blue, pink and green rose petals of her apron and he thought to himself that he had chosen tomorrow on purpose. He could be sure that tomorrow, of all days, his wife and children would at least be properly dressed, properly washed and combed.

But his wife's nagging had got on his nerves. He had been by himself all week and now here he was, painting the fence with green paint, plank by plank and he didn't need this kind of treatment. He was used to soldering, assembling and changing radio parts until late at night. It was so satisfying when he got everything working again. Most of the time things were pretty straightforward, hardly any faults that could be called challenging really. He painted the fence green, plank by plank, enjoying the smell of the wet paint, it was his fence,

behind it lay his land, the fruit trees, the flowers and above all his children. And then there was his wife too, yesterday and today during his journey out he had almost been looking forward to seeing her again, just a little. But now he would have almost preferred to have been back in the city. It was all too familiar to him. After she'd had Siegrid things weren't as bad. Shorts, green, not too fat, a nice little blouse, not empty of course, but her thighs were firm, her skin, naturally, the children, but a blouse, a skirt, other women have children too, and she had never spoken like that. Finished soon, a few more planks, planks, planks. That hair. Why didn't I accept the job on the transmission station? Weekends away at the site. Blue sky, the water has a calming effect, another human being, so why, but the children. Of course, I'm nothing but a piece of shit, I just put up with it again and again, a piece of shit. Pohanka looked between the planks across to the house. He could hear the woman rattling the dishes. He continued painting, plank by plank. He kept thinking of the young girls standing next to him in the tram, pressed up against him in the crowd, plank by plank, on went the green paint. He hadn't much more to do. They'd been pressed so firmly up against him, one of them especially firmly, what incredibly smooth skin she'd had. He'd been able to feel it through the material, light summer material, not heavy of course, not much underneath. At the terminal station. They left the carriage right in front of me. Off to the municipal baths. The way her skirt moved with each step. Pure nonsense in their heads, laughing and chattering about nothing at all. Of course, nothing wrong with looking is there? Well, all right, very young then. He painted one plank after another, nearly finished now. Would they have already done it? There aren't any really innocent ones any more. But they looked quite respectable. He peered through the fence again. He was holding the brush vertically in his hand, every now and then a drop fell to the ground. Green paint. It wasn't right and proper to think like that. He hurried on with his fence. No, no, he'd never do anything like that. No, not him, he'd never act on his desires, give way to his baser instincts. All he was doing was savouring the possibility, so what if sometimes his fantasies were vivid? He knew that he would withstand temptation when the moment of truth finally came. Or did he?

Was it because of Eveline? No. There were only a few planks left to paint and he glanced down at the water. A few boats were passing by. One of them was one of those new little craft, with an electric

motor that produced a minimum of noise and swell, and in it was a bald man, his chest covered in hair. In his gorilla-like arms lay a tanned girl clad in a tiny bathing costume, her head of black curls pressed up against the man's grey hairy chest. They both sat motionless, one behind the other, a bland, sweet smile on their faces.

Pohanka swept the brush up against one of the unpainted planks. There was Eveline, his wife, the mother of his children Siegrid, Sieglinde and Frieda. The children? Was it because of them?

Pohanka looked up. The children were playing with the wet sand.

Pohanka quickly painted the last of the planks. Then he got a piece of paper and fixed it to two planks on the newly painted fence, warning people not to touch it. Beware, Wet Paint!

He looked at his hands. They were mottled green. He cleaned them off with turpentine. The sky was blue. The sun had already died away on the tops of the distant mountains.

II

The crowd filled both sides of the street. It was hot and the people were sweating. Branches of birch and beech had been laid along the edges of the street and up against the walls of the houses as well, where they formed a long green alley. The leaves were already drooping tiredly, even though the branches had only been cut a short while ago. The flowers too, were hanging their heads as they sat sadly in the windows and doors and in amongst the arrangements of greenery which framed the pictures of the saints. The saints in turn were set out in front of the houses, partly to decorate the procession's path, and perhaps more importantly, to ensure that they got their fair share of blessings from the Most Holy Sacrament, which they could then pass onto the family who had set them here.

A woman with a huge bunch of balloons was passing up and down in front of the people lining the street, praising her goods in a booming voice. Like a gigantic bunch of flowers, the globes hovered above the woman's head in all sizes and colours. Her head looked rather like a small, shrivelled-up balloon itself, as it bobbed about over her amorphous body in its simple blue cotton-print dress. The children looked longingly at the bright, gleaming balls and those whose parents bought them one were the envy of all the others. Again and again, a small boy, or a girl clad in a white dress like a little princess, would point them out to their fathers, over and over and over, until the grown-up finally gave in and bought one.

Pretzels! Salted bread sticks! Pretzels, come and get them! Salted bread sticks! A man carrying a large basket came up behind the woman selling balloons, followed sometime later by a woman with a tray of sweets. Some of the crowd, elderly ladies in particular, had their umbrellas open to protect them from the sun's rays, others had brought little folding stools with them.

From a distance came the sound of singing and the ringing of bells, the sound of trombones and horns. The man with the pretzels passed

by. *Salted bread sticks, come and get them!* The sound of the music and the ringing and tinkling was getting louder.

Pohanka was standing in the middle of the crowd, waiting for the procession to pass by. He had found himself a spot right up the front, so that his wife would be able to see him when she passed. To his left there were two little boys, and a tall girl of about sixteen who seemed to be looking after the younger ones. *Salted bread sticks, come and get them!* From the looks of things, the girl was unlikely to have any money in that little handbag of hers. The children looked longingly at the man and his basket. To Pohanka's right stood a few old women and a married couple with a small child. The man carried her in his arms for most of the time. The sky was blue, a very light blue, and seemed very far away. *Acid drops! Chocolate wafers!* The woman with the sweets was passing by. The two boys were getting agitated. The girl was bending over them, trying to make them calm down. Pohanka gazed at the low neckline of her dress. He could see the outline of two small but firm breasts. He stared at them. The bells were ringing and the tinkling was getting nearer and nearer. There was a swell in the sound of the singing. The head of the procession was coming round the corner. A crowd of children, led by a man in a white surplice, carrying a cross on a long pole. People carrying flags crowded in on his left and his right. The girl straightened up again. Still a child, thought Pohanka. The sun was very high now. Sweat flowed freely across the man's forehead. He wiped it off with a handkerchief. The woman with the acid drops approached him hopefully. No, he hadn't made any sign to her. But then, well, if she was right in front of him... He paid for two rolls of acid drops and asked the woman to give them to the little boys. The girl was embarrassed, thanked him, bent down to the little ones and said: "What do you say?"

Pohanka glanced down at her low neckline and smiled. "That's quite all right, Fräulein," he said. She'd like that, me calling her Fräulein, still pert, almost a handful. The way they roll their eyes and smile knowingly. Their sister? Maybe a neighbour, or a young girl from the parish, a kindergarten teacher, no, too young, a future kindergarten teacher maybe, and a very nice occupation too. But Eveline doesn't want them to, the children are better off left with me! Delicate figure, blond. Parish kindergarten, blond kindergarten, kindergarten children. Gardener.

The girl had straightened up again.

"Your brothers?" asked Pohanka and pointed at the boys.

"One of them," said the girl and pointed at the little blond boy. The other one had dark, almost black hair.

Solemn singing was heard again in the distance and the flags fluttered against the blue sky. They were made of dark-red cloth, fastened along one edge to a cross-beam and tapering out into three long, fiery tongues which swung to and fro with every step the flag bearers took. A faded picture on light-blue cloth had been sewn into the middle of the red. It shone almost like vellum and showed Saint Florian, larger than life, dressed in silver armour and bending over a house with a bucket of water. From out of the windows of the building, red flames licked into the faded light-blue of the background.

"The other one's his friend, I suppose?" Pohanka asked.

"Yes," said the girl, and looked out at the approaching procession. She scarcely heard the man's words.

The flag bearers wore long, white surplices over their cassocks. The intricate lace-work gleamed against the dark background. You could just see their shoes underneath, covered in dust. The procession had already covered quite some distance. Pohanka looked up at the flags and could see a long tassel swinging from a cord on each side of the material. The Law for the Protection of Children and Young People, he thought. Of course, we need it, couldn't do without it. Wonder if she knows anything about it? Still innocent, surely! The little bells rang out brightly, ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling. Now the first flags had appeared, and the first group of children. A group of older girls was leading the younger ones. The girls were wearing marguerites in their hair, woven into chaplets, more daisies in their baskets and their arms. Peonies, peonies red as blood, huge blooms, roses of Saint Anthony, tinged with pink, otherwise almost completely white, but scented, so intensely scented that the crowd lining the road could smell them. Pohanka too could smell the flowers, how glorious. Roses, yes there were roses too in the girls' baskets, some carried white lilies, some sweetly scented jasmine, little sprigs of it, buds, flowers. Pohanka could smell it all. Roses, jasmine, lilies, children, virgins, virgins with lilies, white lilies, six years old, white translucent nylon dresses, virgins' dresses, guaranteed virgins, wreaths in their hair, brides, untouched brides of Christ. The two boys were enjoying it as well. As well? Why 'as well'? The others, the

adults, the grown-ups, why would they be here otherwise, why do they dress their children up like that? Flowers in their hair, spring, summer, fertility, she's still got plenty of time for fertility, even if they are a handful already and very firm too, a very child-like face though. Kitty's got a child-like face too, but she wouldn't be one still, a white dress, who can tell? The girls are all so clever and tease the boys, but what about Kitty, why Kitty? A handful, no there's bit more than that already, the smell of those lilies, sweet, too sweet, penetratingly innocent. They may be clever, but they've got their worries too. The boys in their blue suits or long white pants with creases, a tie with their shirts and looking somewhat bewildered and stupid in such finery, gloves, ha, because it's so cold, blue sun, no, sky, sunstroke! Blue suit sky. Did the heathens torture their children like this at their religious festivals? The Greeks celebrated fertility rites too. No children allowed. Suffer the little children come unto me! Law for the Protection of Children and Young People. Gloves are certainly very elegant.

The girl had bent down to the boys again and was pointing with her stretched-out arm towards the passing children, speaking earnestly to her little brother. He pressed his head against her cheek and followed her gaze. They had recognised some children they knew. They waved. The children, a little girl and a little boy amidst all the others, waved back. Pohanka couldn't hear what the girl said to the boy. The little boy's head was just in the way of the top of her dress.

The old women got up off their folding chairs. The ones from further back pushed towards the curb.

Now a group of older girls was marching past. Four of them, perhaps twelve years old, were carrying a metre-high statue of Mary on a small litter. Above the statue there was a framework of wire, covered in white crepe paper. Four long white ribbons hung down from the canopy and these were held by four more girls, walking in front and behind the litter-bearers. The girls all wore white dresses, white stockings and white gloves. Their hair was artfully arranged in ringlets. In front of this group there were another four girls, and four more behind, all in white.

Pohanka was looking out for his daughters. They were nowhere to be seen. There must be another group of smaller girls still to come. Hard to know how they organised this sort of thing.

The next group was singing a hymn. Pohanka couldn't understand the words, maybe he wasn't concentrating hard enough. A policeman was accompanying the procession, he was sweating hard. Drops of sweat glinted on his forehead. Four girls were carrying a cross made of flowers and green branches.

Pohanka watched the policeman plod off. Poor chap, not even allowed to open his collar, and that dark uniform, dark colours are particularly hot. The children wearing white are much better off. They deserve it mind you. Beautiful dresses, baskets with flowers, red, white, yellow, blue, but most of all red and white, so many flowers, so many gardens, everyone here has a gardens. How lovely, to get all decorated up with flowers like that, and to strew everything else with flowers too. A procession of flowers, joy in flowering, thanksgiving of course, virgins decorated in flowers. Flowers to be strewn over the path, that's still to come, up at the altar. The Incas, or was it the Mayas, brought offerings of flowers, among other things, of course, they sacrificed people as well, the heart, the precious stone, the precious flower. But flowers are beautiful and innocent, in the South Pacific ritual dances, decorated with flowers, that little blond one there would look good wearing nothing but garlands, initiation rites, fertility, it was with Cain and Abel that it all started to get bloody, the bloodthirsty God. Why is there such a distance these days? Pohanka looked at his young neighbour. She was watching the next group, boy scouts, marching on in a measured tread. A boy with a drum was marching along the side of the group, beating time. Here came the small boys too, the cub-scouts, with their round caps and their grass-green shirts, marching in front, followed by the older ones with their big lemon-squeezers and olive-green uniforms. Three leaders, in real uniform shirts with ten-centimetre strips of colourful ribbing hanging from their shoulder-straps, marched out in front. Behind them, three older boy scouts were carrying a green flag. A policeman walked along the edge of the street, an older officer this time. A collection of high school boys came next. They were all wearing different styles of dark suits, with colourful student caps on their heads.

I didn't take part in the procession one year, and my school report was ruined, a bad mark for religious instruction, Professor Mayer, bald, big belly, after that I always took part, right up to when I left school. I quite enjoyed it when I got older, I used to see Liselotte. She

sang in the choir, very pretty choir girl she was. Those were the days. Here come the nuns. My children are probably with them.

Several rows of nuns were marching past now, all in groups of four. They formed a compact block of black, strangely morbid after all the bright caps and the abundance of white. The sickly pale complexion of the older women did nothing to help matters. All had their hands folded and were continuously reciting the rosary, the beads gliding through their fingers and their mouths forming the words, over and over, "Blessed be the fruit of thy womb." They were praying loudly, all chanting the same rhythm together, all at the same pitch and with the same intonation. But no one could really hear them. A noise, a sound, nothing more, the train going past, of course, the railway is a useful thing, but it's gone, away, the water which washed up against the bridge, always the same, again and again, "Blessed be the fruit of thy womb." The hydraulic press, the continuous crackling, amplified by the valves in the loudspeaker, "Blessed be the fruit of thy womb."

Pohanka was thinking of the womb. Blessed be the fruit of thy womb. The beautiful curve of a woman's swollen body, the smooth skin expanding across the high balloon-shaped belly, "Blessed be the fruit of thy womb." Whenever he heard those words, it always made him think of one of those pictures, the slightly curved back, the upper torso with the full, ripe breasts, and the small, almost bony hands resting against the swell of the abdomen. When he was a young man, he'd seen a medieval relief in some castle, portraying the meeting of the Virgin Mary with the Virgin Elizabeth. Pregnant women covered in beautiful drapery, the outlines of their bodies clearly visible. There was nothing offensive in portraying holy women like that, in all their glorious corporeality. It was natural, and therefore proper, pleasing to the Lord. The body was blessed. The body. And that Joachim, he did it all his life and they had their pleasure, and the woman never got pregnant, only when she was old, she mightn't have wanted it anymore. Blessed be the fruit of thy womb.

The nuns had spongy faces. They all had wombs, had bodies, and the mouths which belonged to those bodies kept on reciting, over and over, "Blessed be the fruit of thy womb." They were fat, but their skin was flabby, tired, puckered, their bellies were ill-shaped and wrinkly, their fingers like little sausages.

Two younger nuns, they too had faded faces, were leading the next group of children, girls carrying cushions with holy symbols. A white ribbon extended out from the end of each cushion, and was held by another child walking somewhat off to the side. Pohanka saw his daughters. The older one was carrying a cushion and the other two, walking next to the group, were carrying their almost empty flower baskets. The children were oblivious to the onlookers. They didn't see their father, although he tried hard to capture their attention by waving vigorously with his hat. They walked past, earnestly, not at all child-like. A few more nuns brought up the rear.

Now men were marching by in dark suits, bespectacled, clean-shaven and blessed with respectable bellies, some bald, striding on with an obvious sense of ceremony. Pohanka hardly noticed them. The girl was busy with the children again, she was speaking to them earnestly. He hardly knew anyone, only the shopkeeper and Herrn Deutschberg who had the garden opposite. People told nasty stories about the shopkeeper, about the way he ran his business and his inflated prices, much as they would do about any shopkeeper, and then that Herr Deutschberg, apparently he uses his run-down old garden house as a cheap love nest for his amorous adventures. But that wasn't really his, Pohanka's, business and it didn't actually interest him, no, sometimes he even envied Herrn Deutschberg secretly, but otherwise... Now this man was marching in the procession, along with the stream of virgins, boy scouts and revered nuns, and was singing a hymn. His head was bent down over the sheet of music, just like all the other men, the singing was sad, like saying goodbye to a dead person. Some of then weren't even singing, they just glared at the music and moved their lips every now and then in silence. Pohanka wondered why all these men were so sad. Actually, come to think of it, all the people in the procession were very serious, even the otherwise unruly children seemed to be troubled by something, as if someone had taken their favourite toy away. Yes, it took an occasion like this to make them behave so quietly. Unintentionally, Pohanka's thoughts drifted to a death in the family some time ago, the children hadn't been the slightest bit affected by it. They'd gone on playing and shouting as usual. But here, no one was being buried. A band came along, playing very loudly, especially the gold-gleaming trumpets, the horns and trombones droning on out in front, but even

here Pohanka felt a certain melancholy. Wasn't it supposed to be a celebration of joy and fertility?

Students were marching along now, their black boots highly polished, mirroring the scene, a cap with a fox-tail on each head, a glittering drawn sabre in each right hand, and cords and ribbons and more cords on each chest, Frederic Wilhelm, where is that impudent waxed moustache? Brazen scars, plush moustaches, wax works, not St. Francis, he gave all his earthly possessions away and dressed in the habit of a monk, but please, Herr Doktor, that is not fitting for a person of your rank, please, merely the whim of a strange and unusual man, there are other ways to become a saint you know, some saints wear purple robes. Pohanka's attention was drawn back to the two little boys again, he had heard quite clearly the way one of them clapped and exclaimed loudly, "Aren't they pretty! I want one for my birthday!" Pohanka had to smile. What about it? he thought and looked back at the procession. Hanging over the cot with a long piece of string between the legs for the boy to pull on and instantly the little shiny boots would shoot up and the white-gloved arms would shoot up, the sabre too, up, and up, and up.

But they were the guard of honour for the Lord. Was it the same God of Vincent who joined the galley-slaves, the same who made himself flesh in the womb of a carpenter's wife?

Sacristans carrying church flags marched past, heavy, fragile, dark-red cloth, on the one a picture of the Holy Mother of God, on the other, St. Joseph. Mary wearing the crown of heaven, the saint carrying a saw and other tools of his earthly profession. The tassels on the long ropes swung back and forth.

Sacristans with little chiming bells. Their job was to prepare the waiting crowd for the appearance of the Most Holy Sacrament. A collection of God's servants followed closely, simple white surplices over their black cassocks. Then, under a large brocade canopy embroidered in gold and silver and carried by four men, came a priest in ceremonial vestments, holding high in his hands the golden monstrance, blessing the people to his left and his right. White and pure shone the holy wafer amidst the golden circle of rays.

The blessing with the holy bread, it was fertility after all and not a circus, even if the guard of honour looked more like lion-tamers with their cords and ribbons, highly polished boots and glittering sabres,

finally. Blessed be the fruit, the wheaten bread, shining, white and pure.

The men took off their hats, some of the women knelt down, many bowed their heads and made the sign of the cross as the sacrament was carried past. Pohanka too, lowered his gaze. By doing so, he looked straight down the top of the young girl's dress.

Only just a handful and still so firm, hard, you can tell just by looking. But what am I thinking of? God is on his way past! Pure wheaten bread, they're pure too, two little untouched buds. There's the incense, penetrating the nose, that scent, to honour the pure, flowers strewn along the path, flowers along the path of the bread, the holy bread, flowers, blossoms. Jesus was walking through a ripe cornfield surrounded by his disciples, and he blessed the ripe fruit, golden, golden ears, golden beard, beautiful, with flowing robes, over countless marriage beds, landscape-format, with an expanse of dark-blue sky surrounded by a wide, gilded frame, marriage beds, half empty at my place. What a pity. Deutschberg is marching in the pious procession too, just behind the revered nuns. I wonder if Kitty's are as firm as hers. Bigger, of course! Great God we praise thee! What am I thinking of? In the sight of the Most Holy Sacrament! Not another one of these mournful hymns. And here next to me, right under my very nose, and everywhere else as well, life is sprouting and multiplying.

Pohanka looked up. The girl too was standing up again. The women all got up. Pohanka saw Eveline, Eveline saw Pohanka. There was a large group women behind her, they were singing loudly with trembling voices and sometimes even in tune. There seemed several other groups of them still to come. Pohanka could see them in the distance. His wife had moved on, her head with its mass of curly hair had disappeared in between the remaining waving heads. Enough, the man was satisfied.

"Goodbye, Fräulein," he said to his neighbour and touched her gently on the back.

She looked after him, somewhat bemused.

He walked through a small park and sat down on a bench, under a flowering linden tree. The band which followed the women could still be heard in a muffled way and the singing sounded almost like the humming of the bees above his head in the top of the tree. He looked across the large empty space down to the water, which shone in the gaps between the lilac shrubs and the delphiniums, the mallows, tiger-

lilies and wild roses. People were walking past him, some wearing their good Sunday-clothes, others dressed much more casually. Many of them were heading towards the water, to the boat hire and the baths. Some were in a hurry, perhaps they had a date with someone and had been held up by the procession. Pohanka found himself sitting next to an old man with a white moustache, whose hands were trembling slightly. There was no one else nearby. The old man had watched the procession for a while, before retiring to this place in order to rest.

Pohanka sniffed the air. The linden trees were heavily scented.

His neighbour smiled. "Well, they put out quite a smell, don't they?" he said. "This year is a good year for blossoms. There'll be a lot of honey."

"Oh, yes, the bees," said Pohanka, and looked up into the crown of the tree.

"Linden blossom honey," said the other one.

"Yes," said Pohanka.

"The tea brewed from those blossoms is very good for you," said the old man and he bent his head back and looked up into the leaves.

"Yes, of course," said Pohanka.

"I always pick some, to last me through the winter," said the old man.

"Here?" Pohanka asked.

"No, across from here, near the dam, there are a couple more trees there, I can reach up to their branches better," replied the other.

"I see," Pohanka nodded his head.

"It's very good for you."

"Yes, of course."

"It makes you sweat."

"Yes."

"Didn't you know that?"

"Oh yes, yes I did."

"And the smell of it."

Pohanka breathed in the air and nodded.

"Yes, it's good for you all right," the old man repeated.

"Yes," said Pohanka absentmindedly.

"You know, when I pick the flowers myself, at least I know what I've got. Genuine linden tree blossoms!"

"Of course," said Pohanka.

"All through the winter I have the scent with me, and the sun, and the energy. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes," said Pohanka, "I understand perfectly." His eyes followed the boys and girls who were walking over to the boat shed, laughing and joking. The old man shook his head slightly, looked at Pohanka sideways and kept quiet. For a while it was silent.

Pohanka didn't feel the slightest need to continue the conversation.

Need. Need. What did he need, really? Did he need to sit here quietly, watching the coming and going of people, did he need to inhale the scent of the linden blossoms, to stare into the blue sky? He needed ... needed ... he didn't know what he needed.

The old man next to him was watching him, sizing him up from the cut of his clothes.

Pohanka didn't notice. He was thinking about yesterday, the day before yesterday, about Wednesday, about tonight, the procession, the nuns in their black habits, the large white surplices, the firemen's band, the red faces of the wind players, that's got to be hard work, especially when they're marching at the same time. Eveline will be off chatting with some women somewhere, God knows how long she'll be, everything is so terribly significant and important, the children will be running about. Some exercise will do them good. But they'll be tired from the long walk in the procession. The paint should be dry by now. I didn't check this morning. Everything was in such a mess, the children, Eveline, they were all so exited, but why?

He undid the top button underneath his tie.

A few children ran past, women in their good Sunday dresses followed, the first groups of people from the procession were heading off on their way home. Many had broken off a little sprig of greenery from the branches and were carrying it home. The bells of the nearby church rang out across the roofs. You are dismissed, they intoned, and the people seemed to receive the message with relief. The children were tired, the women exhausted, they walked slowly past Pohanka, from left to right. But crowds of visitors to the public baths were arriving from the other direction. They were in a hurry. The men had their sleeves rolled up, the woman were all scent and fluff. A girl came from that direction too, stopped in front of Pohanka and greeted him, "Guten Tag, Herr Pohanka."

Pohanka had been watching out for his family among the crowds of people returning from the procession, and he hadn't noticed the girl's

approach. Now he looked up. It was Kitty. She stood in front of him, wearing a white summer dress, her red hair gleaming above it, her skirt swaying gently over her hips, her large eyes shining. Pohanka was confused. "Guten Morgen, Fräulein Kitty," he said, finally.

"Are you off for a swim?" he asked, glancing at her bag.

"Yes, what about you? Or are you waiting for someone?"

"For my family."

"I see." Kitty was disappointed. She had been thinking of someone else.

"We've got a little summer house out here," he said.

"And you commute out here every day?" the girl inquired.

"No, only at weekends."

"What a pity! It's so beautiful out here. If it were me I'd come out every day."

Pohanka smiled. "But it's a long way from here to the next cinema."

She didn't understand. "You don't go to the cinema," she said.

"No, I work most evenings."

The poor man, thought the girl, most likely it's his wife who needs all that money. She's going to turn up soon and he might get into trouble if she sees him talking to me. She'll be an ugly, nagging wife of course. How many children has he got? It's always the way, all the good men get the worst women, and so for her sake he has to work until late at night, day after day, of course, that's why he works overtime at the factory, she's the sort who'd never be satisfied, but it wouldn't matter what she wore, nothing would suit her anyway. She had to have children so he couldn't escape, a man like him, he's got character, doesn't he get sick of her? Boring, no, no way she'd be beautiful, a three-room apartment and an expensive fur coat most likely, Frau Pribilek admits quite freely that she uses her husband, she makes fun of him behind his back. But I really need to get going now.

"Oh, it's not so bad in town. I'm alone at home and it's nice and quiet," Pohanka had said, but the girl had stopped listening.

"Well, auf Wiedersehen," she said, "have a good Sunday, Herr Pohanka."

"Auf Wiedersehen, Fräulein Kitty," he replied.

She walked off.

Pohanka watched her go. The old man watched too, then he turned towards Pohanka again.

"Ah, the young people these days," he said.

Pohanka didn't make a reply.

But the old man persisted. "When I was young, everyone went along to the procession, *that* nonsense didn't even exist back then." With a finger of his right hand he pointed towards the water, and the baths. "And the military took part too. Those were the days. You should have seen them, such handsome blokes those chaps were then. The girls couldn't get enough of them."

Oh well, thought Pohanka, nothing was all that different really, even in those days. Has it always been that way? Back in Delphi, in Karnak, in Uruk? Always the same? The yellow and blue wires leading on to the valves and the condensers filtering out all the static and in Lisbon, the great concert by Casals is being broadcast, on every station, to every part of the world, New York, Cairo, New Delhi, Stiksneusiedel and La Paz, one thin little wire, and yet always the same.

"Cavalry, sir, number two dragoons, oh yes, they looked fine in their red trousers, dashing lads, every one. They all had moustaches, of course."

Pohanka felt himself growing irritated by the conversation. He tried to change the topic back to the linden blossoms. "How much do you have to pick to last you through the winter?"

"A whole sack," said the old man, and sketched half a metre in the air with his trembling hands. Then it was back to the days of his youth again.

Nuns, members of the congregation, virgins in white dresses with bright red cheeks passed by in groups. Pohanka gazed off in the direction that Kitty had been headed.

Pity she had had to leave so quickly, he thought.

"Onkel Josef, Onkel Josef, Onkel Josef!" Each of the children had something to tell Herrn Leidemit, something different to show him. The little ones liked him. Although he didn't come to visit very often, he always brought little presents with him, sweets or a little toy, a cat-and-mouse game for instance, a small tin with glass on top and a tiny mouse-like figure inside which you had to move around into its little tin house. Sometimes he brought tiny dolls' furniture made of bakelite and for the youngest one it was always books, *Struwwelpeter* or *Max and Moritz.*

This time Leidemit had brought something for all three of them, a real live tortoise. The children immediately carted the animal off to their sandpit and let it crawl about. Three little heads bent over the reptile, watching it closely. Every now and then they came running back to report what their new friend was up to.

Eveline told Josef how happy she was that he had come to visit. She couldn't seem to stop reproaching him for not having visited in so long, pursing her lips up into a sweet sickly smile and telling him how delighted she'd been when her husband had told her yesterday that they could expect the pleasure of his company on Sunday.

The woman spread a tablecloth out on the table, set plates and napkins in place, arranged the cutlery, and when Leidemit protested that she shouldn't have gone to so much trouble on his behalf, she assured him silkily that they had always a properly set table and that it was only right and proper to put out a new tablecloth and linen napkins to honour such a dear guest as he was, of course, the children usually spoil the tablecloth the first day it's out, but for him it was a pleasure, no trouble at all, and she smiled at him as she spoke, of course, a real pleasure.

Her husband was standing close by, and the planks of the fence were green, all he could see was green, green planks, up and down, green, then a gap, and green, of all colours green, and up and down again, and it had to be this Sunday of all days, a gap, inconsiderate, but even a different Sunday would have been this Sunday, and there was no Sunday which wouldn't have been this Sunday and the planks were shifting to the right and then to the left. In some places the paint had flowed down to meet the dark earth like a large tear, off on an unfathomable path. And it was not only the planks which were shifting constantly, to and fro, to and fro, there was also the apron over the blue petticoat, to and fro, over and over, and while the forks were set next to the plates with the softest of clangs, while Eveline's plump hand put the neatly folded napkins in their places and Joseph Leidemit told his hostess how grateful he was for all the care and love she had put into her preparations, Pohanka could hear that shriek reverberating in his ears, Inconsiderate! Inconsiderate! But the hands were folded, and the mouth was singing a different tune now, pious hymns, church hymns, the hands were opening and putting the salt cellar on the table, setting a beautiful round loaf of bread next to it. Gloria tibi Domine!

In the garden a thrush was singing its piercing song without pause, the same sequence of melting sounds, over and over again.

Albert Pohanka was sitting on the edge of the bed again and the flies were humming above him in the dark, he could hear the clattering of the motorbikes in the narrow street below, the movie had finished and the water was running down its dirty, lathery path into the plug hole, the forsythias had spent their blossoms, the peonies had just opened their petals, fleshy, dark, mysteriously deep. And there were all these wires, green, yellow, black with red stripes and blue ones, light and dark, everything was covered with these wires, the bedroom, the window, the walls, and while the girls were called and told to wash their hands before sitting up to the table, and while Josef Leidemit admired the lovely, clean, well-behaved children, Pohanka's thousand radios, which didn't belong to him, shrieked and screamed into the late lonely hours of the night. He sat on the edge of the bed, staring out into the nothingness in front of him, and the flies hummed above him in the dark.

At the table (the children were very hungry and had good appetites, though of course the youngest one made a bit of a fuss) Leidemit spoke of his travels. The woman wanted to hear more and more, what it was like here and there, looking across to her husband every now and then, and here we are, in this boring garden as usual, all summer long, Frau Pribil to the left and Herr Deutschberg opposite and then the shopkeeper, we never go anywhere, was what these looks told him, and her husband understood them perfectly. But after all, they had three children and perhaps he was even glad that she was locked up behind the green fence with her three little ones, and only could venture as far as the next shop and the church on Sundays. Perhaps this was his consolation for the raggedy apron, the straps hanging mournfully down the flabby upper arms and the wobbly thighs. But if it was, he wasn't conscious of it. Instead he said, "Ah, but you see, old friend, we've got all of that right here, a beautiful beach and the blue sea, much smaller of course, but lovely all the same." He couldn't resist adding, "We can relax here, there's no need to dress up, we can wear whatever we like and no one minds."

His wife looked angrily at him, but seemed not to grasp his meaning, "Albert, you can't even begin to compare the two, you heard what Josef said, the beach there is so out of this world, and you can go out in the evening and meet all sorts of interesting people."

Herr Leidemit had been telling them about all the different people who came from foreign countries, just like him, and with whom he'd had dinner at the restaurant.

Of course, it would be just like her to show off in front of them, thought Pohanka, parade the children up and down. They would all have to behave like trained poodles. She used to give them all sorts of instructions whenever Josef came to visit, but she couldn't seem to be bothered anymore. Had she noticed that he wasn't impressed by it? No, more likely she'd just let things slip, even when he was here, she didn't need to try anymore, in a few years' time she wouldn't be putting a new tablecloth on when he came to visit any more, it would be an old oil-cloth with little red roses, maybe we'll eat straight from the pot, in the garden, no strict etiquette, the apron shifting to and fro, the blue petticoat, at lunch, at dinner, the children with dirty faces, that's what playing does, that's what children do, let them be, it's just us, let's relax.

Out loud all he said was, "I'm not sure we'd fit in with that sort of people." He had used the plural on purpose, but to no avail, his wife replied immediately. "You might not, you like to hide yourself away inside your four walls, you lock yourself up in your study whenever you can."

Leidemit made an attempt at reconciliation, "but Albert, how can you say such a thing? Why wouldn't you fit in there? With a charming wife like this? Of course you would," and with these words he turned back towards Eveline. "I could understand if you didn't want to leave this spot. It's all so beautiful, the flowers, the green lawn, the little beach. For the children especially, it must be ideal, so quiet."

Too quiet for her taste, thought Pohanka. She's always preferred a big audience. What she'd like is to have a procession like the one today every day, where she could show off. Everyone knows that that's Frau Pohanka, wife of the engineer, and those are her children, how lovely and well-behaved they are, must take after their mother. There would be some sense in being well-dressed and having a proper hairstyle.

"Ah yes, the children," she sighed. For an instant (but it had been happening more and more often lately) it occurred to her what a burden they were, but then she pulled herself together and said proudly, "Oh yes, our children, they can be little nuisances and

trouble-makers sometimes, but after all, they're everything to us, our greatest blessing."

Leidemit stroked the hair of the oldest girl as she sat next to him, drinking the glass of raspberry drink she was allowed as a reward for finishing her dinner.

Pohanka knew his wife's words and her tone of voice backwards. He didn't even hear her voice anymore, he heard a stuck record, the voice of some priest or nun, the voice of a person who didn't have any children. The girls in white dresses with white garlands in their hair marching row after row behind the Madonna decorated in white paper flowers, the little boys in their long white trousers or white socks, little white shirts, and all with white gloves on. They held each others hands and were careful not to lose their neighbours. And the nuns repeated it, again and again, "Blessed be the fruit of thy womb." They didn't go off to Italy nor to France, they worked in the schools and kindergartens and during the holidays they went off to their convents for spiritual renewal.

For a moment there was a curious silence, only the children giggled and prattled on. The grown-ups stared past each other out to the nearby beach, to the glittering, shining water, to the boats sailing past, to the white sail carving a great wedge into the blue, then out into the distance, where the silhouettes of the mountains were vanishing in the slight haze of midday. The birds in the garden were silent too, the only sound came from the water, where the horn of a large tug was sounding.

"What's that lovely smell?" asked Leidemit, and raised his head. The table was set out on the veranda and the wind was blowing in from the direction of the water.

"Linden blossoms," said Pohanka.

The children were getting fidgety. They had eaten their dinner and wanted to go back out to the garden now, and to their tortoise. Their mother gave them permission and the girls ran off.

"Ah yes. There are a few trees over on the other side of the river," the woman added.

Pohanka told them about the old man. He thought he might pick himself a sack of linden blossoms too. They might come in handy for the children.

He's a hoarder, thought the woman, he never has enough, he just has to have everything, has to work until late at night, taking on all

those radios to repair, he never thinks he's got enough, he once had time for other things as well, of course, we never did all that much in the way of travelling, the Tyrol, a holiday in the Ötz-valley, beautiful that was, the boat trip in the Salzkammergut, dancing in the evening at the Weiße Rößl, no, that's not it, but it's not at home either, there's no time, he's always off in his study and I've got the children, jam-jars and bottling, cherries, sour cherries until the autumn, pears, the more the better, our neighbour sells those plums so cheaply, still the same old summer dress. She looked across at the children. It's a pity they're wearing their good dresses, they'll spoil them. Leidemit followed her gaze. God, look at them now, he thought. His eyes wandered back to the woman. He had been admiring her elegance as she set the table, the ease and skill with which she took care of everything that needed to be done. Now, sitting opposite her, he could take his time and look at her properly. She was a tall, pretty woman. Her blond hair was arranged in waves, forming a bright halo around her head. The skin on her face was smooth, glowing, the line of her chin was soft, with a tendency to replicate itself near her neck. Her small ears were almost hidden by hair, all that could be seen were the two dangling gold ear-pendants, tiny drops hanging from even tinier spheres. Her nose had an ever so slight tendency to turn upwards, a feature which might have given the young girl a certain attractiveness, but now, on the older woman, it seemed to have spread a little wider, along with the whole face. That gap between her teeth, well, you couldn't see it when her mouth was shut anyway. Her dress was certainly not the latest fashion, with its bold pattern of blue and violet flowers, but to Leidemit's eye, it seemed to somehow suit her. The short, tight sleeves cut into her strong upper arms a little, and the material across her full, round bosom didn't hang properly, but bunched into a collection of folds and wrinkles. Did it have to look like that? Leidemit didn't give it a second thought. Neither did he notice her plump hand, or the mannered way that she stuck her little finger out whenever she was drinking. She wore a thick band with a large agate stone on her ring finger, and on the same finger of her left hand she wore one crowned with a bright clear stone, which glittered in the sunlight. Leidemit looked at Eveline, and even when his gaze settled on her hips, he still saw in her the wife of his friend he'd been at school with, all those years ago, fishing for the first time, holidays at the farmhouse where they'd helped with the harvest. He had arranged

it all so that they could earn some money, bonfires with baked potatoes, little adventures, ridiculous and harmless, nights with thunder and lightening in huts up in the Alps, long distances with bicycles, many, many kilometres. Leidemit had to smile. They might have been dusty and sweaty, back then, but all in all they were happy. Now all that was over of course, the time of youth and all that enthusiasm, irrecoverable.

The woman smiled too, maybe she thought Leidemit was smiling at her.

The wind blew a warm breeze across the veranda. The birds in the garden started singing again and the white sails of the boats moved gracefully through the glassy sky. A wasp hovered round the empty plates and bowls and for a moment Pohanka saw himself again, sitting on the edge of his bed, staring into the dim room.

"You wanted to have a go in a boat, Josef?" Pohanka finally asked.

"Ah yes. I'd love to."

"I'll take a paper bag with us, and we'll stop by the linden blossoms. Then we'll go through that long narrow part round the island as far as the bridge and back again. What do you think?"

"Sounds perfect! Are we taking the children too?"

"No," said the woman, "they need to have a sleep for an hour or so. They'll be tired after the long procession. In fact, I'd better go get them now and see them off to bed. You don't have to hurry back. They can sleep for a while. They won't be able to settle if they know someone is here."

Don't worry, thought Pohanka, we won't be hurrying back any time soon, you can have your little nap with your piglets, soak the dishes along with the ones from yesterday, the brown, brown gravy, fat little eyes, but of course, there's no time, the children can't sleep, the children won't go to sleep by themselves, well, well, very well then, we'll row along by the municipal baths, the pretty girls - what for? Tonight I'll be here again, lying with that body, it's the same of course, but she's bored, I can tell she's bored. Be careful not to get anything dirty, everything else is more important. I wonder whether those girls are bored of it too, those silly, giggling creatures, the last thing they'd do is ask how much a new stocking cost if one got torn, or anything else for that matter, everything forgotten, completely in the moment, yes in the moment, completely the opposite to her approach, she's indifferent, so indifferent she doesn't even notice that

it hurts me, it hurts me that all I get is her body, just a body, something alien, distant, a thing, not my wife, not a human being I can connect with, meld with intimately, no, just a body, a little stiff, like a piece of timber, or a brown oilcloth, or a workbench filled with complicated mechanical instruments, torture, condemned to suffer this torture over and over, blessed be the fruit of thy womb, thy womb, thy womb. He looked across to Leidemit, who had also risen. How does he deal with it all? Of course, I'm a piece of shit, a weakling, but all week alone, those nights with all their noises. He saw himself again, sitting on the edge of his bed, looking at the empty bed next to his and then walking over to the window. The movie's finished, Saturday, Sunday, it's all the same to me, I don't look at her anyway, the frogs croak all night long.

Pohanka went to the bedroom to change.

"I could lend you some casual trousers," he shouted.

Leidemit didn't have any with him and accepted the offer gratefully. But he wanted to help the woman clear away the dishes first. She however, insisted that she could manage perfectly by herself. When the guest had disappeared into the bedroom, she put all the dishes in the bath, which was already half filled with the dirty dishes from yesterday and covered them with water. Then she went out into the garden to fetch the children.

Beds, three smaller ones for the children along the walls, all covered with rumpled stained bedding, grey sheets, underwear flung over the only two chairs in the room, that was the sight which met Leidemit when he entered the bedroom.

The moment the two men pushed the boat off from the shore, the summer house behind them disappeared in the haze and the tall blond woman who had remained at the door, holding the children by the hand and looking after the men, was gone. With every oar-stroke the vessel moved further into a crystalline reality which was infinitely far from the one surrounded by green paint. It was the sort of reality which two men could experience walking together through a dense forest, crossing wide plains or climbing lonely mountains.

They sat next to each other on the back bench of the boat, each lowering the oar on his side into the water. They watched the glittering drops dripping down from the timber and saw the gentle waves

moving up and down. Vermilion blossoms on emerald waters, up and down, up and down.

Neither spoke a word, they looked up into the sky and off into the distant flickering horizon and each of them knew what the other one was thinking. They used to talk about it all the time when they were younger, but now they remained silent for a long time and when Pohanka looked across to his companion, he saw Leidemit's eyes lingering on his dressed-up children with their baskets and garlands.

Do you believe in all that? his eyes were asking.

Believe! In a different way to those sad mournful women, and different from those men with their drooping heads, different from those children with their candy-floss, all silk and lace and long white trousers. But still believing nevertheless, wanting to believe.

Up and down the boat rocked. And again the shimmering drops dripped down from the emerging oars.

Unless you have the heart of a little child.

Yes, but are they still children, where are the real children these days? Those living dolls, those miniature grown-ups, are they really children?

But children have always been like that, think of. Velasquez, Tintoretto, Van Dyck, we can still see them.

Children? Children? So much knowledge in their eyes, so few dreams, toy rockets, miniature telephones and televisions, cars of all brands, Fiats, Opels, Lloyds, no, Volkswagens still, the tongue doesn't forget so easily and what about Punch and Judy? Hopscotch? Ball games? Nothing - but "nothing" is nothing, no dreams, no miracles, no fairy-tales.

Silent stroke after silent stroke, one man on the left, the other on the right and an expanse of blue sky arching up above, very light and very far away. The flowers gleamed from the shore. Flowers!

Children are like flowers in the field.

Yes and how we like to break their stems, arrange them in a vase and then, when they are spent, throw them out onto the compost or burn them. Lost seed, thousands of grains of seed, wasted, spoiled.

But the very hairs of your head are all numbered!

And thousands of grains of seed lost! How does it all work out?

White foam, white spray, parting hesitantly as the boat glided through, covering the surface of the water for meters around, keeping

the green passage open, before slowly closing up, poplar seeds, a voyage through foam, a dark green line through the gleaming white.

The scent of the linden trees wafted across the boat.

Linden blossoms, the power of spring, cupid on the highest branch and fish deep down under the water. That's what I believe in!

And the big ones eat the little ones.

Yes, the big ones eat the little ones, that's the law of nature, and my job is to do my best to make sure I get to swim with the big ones.

Even the prophet Jonah was eaten by the great fish, the whale. We're in that stomach too, and can't get out. Only those poplars, those linden trees, the thousand nodding blossoms on both sides of the shore, left and right, they're on the outside, they melt away, the wind carries their love far off, their life, their seeds, all the gleaming butterflies, all the bees and bumblebees come, are intoxicated by that power. But we're in the darkness of that great beast, inside it, fodder to be broken down, or not, as the case may be.

Locked in? Eaten up? Only the little ones? Ever increasing knowledge and insight makes me free. Am I worse off than the trees, the insects or fish?

Insight and knowledge? Yes, but for everyone, the fruit of our labours, with every sound emanating from our radios we are broadcasting light, the fragrance of flowers, a thousand seeds.

Nonsense! *You are making the world a better place, a better place...* and most likely during those most ordinary times of the day, when you're washing dishes, soaking your feet and peeling potatoes. *You are making the world a better place, a better place...* Those magnificent blossoms! No, they're always inside, somewhere deep down in the gut, you can't get them out, nor will anyone else.

But still it is our task. You are making the world a better place...as is the world of the poplars, which let their pollen fly, those white flakes we're rowing through, they float on the water and die off, wasted, useless as a symphony during the washing of dishes, soaking of feet and peeling potatoes. But some will fall on fertile ground, on dark soil and some will sprout and become trees, poplars. Some people have ears and actually use them to hear with.

The boat rocked slowly along the long rope fixed between the brightly-coloured buoys which separated the municipal baths from the rest of the water. The men remained silent, staring straight ahead into the water. Had they actually said a single word since they started their

journey? Green shone the trough of the waves and the crests of the waves gleamed silver. The line of the rope's reflection was interrupted many times, twenty centimetres up, twenty centimetres down, to and fro it moved. Other boats glided past Pohanka's. The men took no notice of them. Again and again they dipped the oars into the water, raised them and dipped them again. The drops shone in many colours as they glided along the timber before finally dripping down again.

Kitty was lying on a wooden raft which was anchored at the end of the public bathing area. She was lying on her stomach and had her face resting on her crossed arms. The steel rope stretched out from the float to the buoys to the left and right.

Every now and then, the girl would blink across the surface of the water. To the north you could see the slightly curved ridge of the mountain tops through the haze, olive grey with a touch of violet, while to the north-east, the air in front of the pointed spire of the nearby church seemed to flicker in the heat of the day. A brimstone butterfly criss-crossed the surface of the water. Kitty watched it, her chin placed on her beautifully curved upper arm.

Three boys climbed up onto the raft near the girl's legs. Their feet paddled in the water. The oldest one seemed about twenty and had something to say about everything. One of the others backed him up. Kitty glanced at them, making sure they didn't notice. The twenty-year old had a face disfigured by acne, a broad nose and a large mouth.

Why hadn't Heini shown up? She'd been avoiding him lately, what a stupid thing to do. Was she expecting someone else to turn up? It was just a coincidence, meeting "her" engineer here. Who else would he be expecting but his family? Wonder what she looks like, is she fat, is she still pretty? There are some women who don't even begin to look attractive until after they've had their first child. Who knows what those two were talking about. No, it was stupid to come here by myself. He's not coming and the other man was only there to wait for his family, no one else, no one else. Kitty saw herself closing the tool-drawer, the men next to her talking to each other, taking no notice of her. She hadn't taken anything from the drawer. But then, "Of course I'll come, with pleasure!" And, "the procession will be finished at about eleven." She couldn't stay next to the drawer a moment longer.

Of course she had already planned to spend her weekend at the baths, been planning it the whole week long.

The twenty-year-old laughed and his companions joined in. Kitty didn't know what they were talking about. She looked up. Over there at the diving-board, circles, foam and bubbles were forming in the water. The boys were still laughing. A head emerged from the water, coughing and spluttering. A couple was lying on the other end of the raft, their heads very close to each other. The young man had placed his arm around the girl's neck, while she playfully tried to hook her raised right leg into his raised left one. The two were whispering.

She could be lying like that with Heini, thought Kitty. Near the diving-board, a small, bald man climbed out of the water, puffing away. His chest and his belly were as red as a lobster. The boys on the raft laughed and cast bets that he would land on his belly again the next time. They boasted about their diving prowess. They had all jumped off the seven metre board before. Kitty didn't hear any more, she was annoyed with herself that she had walked off so quickly. She would have liked to have seen the woman. But it might have been embarrassing for him. Perhaps she could have seen where their house was. But what on earth for? What was it to her? A summer house and a beautiful flat in town. He had once mentioned three rooms. No doubt there would be a bathroom too. And last time he had called her *Fräulein Kitty*. Surely in the washroom that time he had wanted to ask her something else besides what she was doing that evening, you could see he wanted to, but of course he couldn't do it just like that, after all, he was her superior! Alone all week, every evening. You can't help but feel sorry for him. It must be difficult for a man. What does he do? Does he go to the cinema? But I don't think so, he doesn't know a single actor, even when I mentioned the best-known name he asked, Who's that then? What's the matter this time, why are they laughing like that?

She raised her head slightly and looked across the water, over there, by the diving-board, there was nothing special going on. The bald man was still standing on the shore. He seemed to be in no hurry to land on his belly again. Kitty followed the direction of the boys' gaze. They were looking in the other direction, where two boats had collided with each other and the occupants were trying to pull them apart. Apparently all three of the boys had already been in a collision with another boat. Kitty looked across to the two lovers, neither of

them had seen or heard a thing. Heini, that scoundrel, he must have taken another girl out today, otherwise he would have been here by now. The way he looked at me, and said *Fräulein Kitty* again, it can't be a coincidence. Look at them, showing off, trying to outdo each other, as if I hadn't noticed a long time ago. One of them doesn't actually look too bad. But what do they want these silly boys, not even Heini knows what he wants, earn a pile of money, yes, but how? Of course, he was taking part in that procession and his family too. How many children would he have? Two is a good number, yes, I'd like to have two, but it must hurt so terribly, and afterwards, imagine how you must look. But it passes. Mimi up on the third floor has already had two girls and you'd never even know. She's as slim as she was before. And the children look so sweet in their white dresses, sweet, like two little dolls, the bows, where did I see them? Ah, yes, at the procession. I always wore a white dress too actually, Mother's always been the old-fashioned type. It's the custom out in the country. How can one person have so many pimples, he should do something about it, jumping from a seven-metre diving-board isn't enough, wonder what his home looks like? Same as Heini's, same as mine, one room, a kitchen, bicycle perched up on the wardrobe, the accordion up on top of the kitchen cupboard, a single washbasin balanced on a stool, neighbours who can hear every single laugh and anything else through the walls, *he's* got a three-room apartment with a bathroom, that blue car, so nice, and he's blond like what's-his-name in that film the other day. What would he want for it? Heini, what's he got? One room, a kitchen, desolate, depressing, just like our place, yes, and what will he want in the end?

Again she looked over at the boys. Her glance caught a boat which was gliding a few metres in front of the steel rope which marked the swimming area. Herr Pohanka and Herr Leidemit were sitting next to each other on the back bench of the boat, slowly rowing in unison.

Kitty got up and waved at them. The boys fell silent. They eyed the girl's body. Kitty waved vigorously, called "Halloo!" The boat missed the raft by no more than a few metres, but the men didn't look up. The boat passed by. Again and again the two men dipped the oars into the water in a slow steady rhythm, apparently oblivious to their surroundings. The boys laughed and shouted a few times themselves, "Halloo! Halloo!"

Kitty was embarrassed by their shouting.

The whole family stood behind the fence and waved as Josef Leidemit's blue car rolled slowly down the little lane between the garden sections out on to the main road. The youngest girl clasped her mother's hand, while the two older ones ran a couple of steps behind the car. Leidemit could see all five of them in his rear vision mirror, the two older children larger than all the others as they stood in front of their parents. Then came the bend in the road and the turn-off to the main street. Leidemit couldn't see exactly what happened, he had to watch the road and the traffic, but it seemed to him that Albert was the first to turn back towards the house and the garden.

How simple it all is, thought Leidemit, serenity and contentment just radiates out from that family. Happiness is in the simple things, as they say. Maybe Albert hasn't had the success I have, but actually, he's succeeded much more than I ever shall. The soothing rocking of that boat, the vivid green of that lawn, yes even the fence. What's this person doing on the wrong side of the road? Leidemit pressed lightly on his horn. Another car which had slightly crossed over the centre line approached him. He slowed down. The ETW is very interested of course, they'll pay handsomely. Oh yes, and that woman, so capable, so caring! The car hugged the shoreline for a while, until trees and fields moved in, separating the road from the water. Blue-green patches gleamed between the tops of the trees for a little longer. Leidemit overtook a small car. He saw two people sitting in it, a woman and a man. The woman was leaning against the man's shoulder. The car was going very slowly. Leidemit could see it in his rear vision mirror, getting smaller and smaller. The speedometer of the blue car showed ninety kilometres per hour, the trees on the side of the road flew past, a sequence of swishing sounds in Leidemit's ears. Then gardens, trees and shrubs all grew scarcer, you could see far into the distance. Leidemit eased his foot off the accelerator and the needle of the speedometer swung back to eighty, seventy-five.

Every now and then the man at the wheel took a glance over at the stream on the left, a wide silver gleaming ribbon. Hills and mountains formed an even flat silhouette against a light orange sky. The sun had already set behind the tops of the mountains and their colours had changed from light greys and greens to a delicate violet. Tonight, at eight o'clock, Rubnicek would be waiting for him at Café Reinharth. An interesting man, good to talk to, not just about work-related matters either, that too, of course. His knowledge was vast and he

could tell you all about his own discoveries and insights in the most interesting, even entertaining way. By all means my dear woman, whatever takes your fancy, overtake me. A big American luxury car drove past Leidemit. A well-groomed young woman was driving, while on the back seats, three children, even younger than Albert's, were romping about. What an old-fashioned dress she'd been wearing, thought Leidemit, and saw Eveline sitting at the table opposite him, and that hairstyle! Of course, that's the fashion with women of her class they all wear their hair like that. But I think he's neglecting her. The reflections on the water. Leidemit's car was going even slower now, the road climbed uphill to the crest of a bridge which spanned the river in a wide arc. The sky was reflected in the water in long green bands. On the opposite side of the river, dark cranes were roosting like long-beaked cormorants in front of pyramids of coal. The car had already reached the crest of the bridge. A tug went by underneath the bridge, pulling a couple of hulks behind it and puffing out clouds of dark black smoke. People were standing at the railings and looking down at the ships, little crowds of children waved at the passing boats.

More and more vehicles surrounded Leidemit now, he had to watch the traffic properly. The air was filled with minute particles of dust and petrol fumes, the many engines sang a monotonous melody together, drowned out every now and then by the growling and revving of the motorbikes. Their crescendo would swell over the all-encompassing hubbub for a while, until it was swallowed up by the even roar of the rest of the traffic. This was how it always was on Sundays when the weather was warm enough for swimming, but Leidemit wasn't used to it. His free weekends were usually spent in a little village, and it's nearby castle, whose restaurant provided him with all the culinary delights a man could wish for.

Why hadn't he gone there today? Of course, he had been promising for a long time, Albert is always so happy when people come to visit him, I wonder why, I wonder why? I wouldn't invite anyone, I'd enjoy it all by myself, that green lawn, that woman, why doesn't he commute every day, what does she do out there on weekdays, I'd commute, that dress did nothing for her, not by any standards, and Rubnicek is expecting me, the marble topped tables, an espresso, a cigarette and Rubnicek's stories about Romania, before the war in Bucharest. Of course, that was another reason why he wasn't out

fishing today, enjoying his peace and quiet. But Albert of all people! Damn it, that was a close shave!

Leidemit had to brake suddenly. The wheels locked up, and the body of the vehicle careered dangerously back and forth. A girl was crossing the road. Leidemit's car almost ran over her. The engineer could still see her legs disappearing between the other pedestrians and thought he saw a flash of gleaming red. But it wasn't the red of a traffic light, it was the red of a lock of hair. Then the horn of the car behind him sounded. You couldn't just stop wherever you liked around here. A stream of vehicles was building up behind him already, threatening a major traffic jam. Leidemit's car moved on. The engineer accelerated slowly, and, although he had to watch the traffic, he couldn't help but steal a glance at the crowd of pedestrians on his right-hand side every now and then.

He hadn't seen them until now. Before he had been forced to concentrate on the traffic, he had watched the peculiarly beautiful cloud formations in the sky and their reflections in the water. Now he was suddenly noticing the pedestrians too. Something had drawn his attention to them, he didn't know what.

The tables were already set out on the street underneath a large canopy in front of the Café Reinharth. After parking his car in a little side street, Leidemit entered the café. He sat down in a quiet corner from which he could observe the other patrons in peace. There were not yet many people present.

The head-waiter greeted him as he entered the way one might greet an old acquaintance. He was about sixty, almost bald and somewhat portly, yet still agile and alert in his immaculate black tails. A mixture of respect and familiarity combined themselves in his voice together.

"What can I do for you this evening, Herr Leidemit?"

Leidemit thought for a moment, then ordered an espresso with a couple of rolls, as he had already eaten at Pohanka's. The waiter passed on the order, fetched a selection of newspapers, and remained for a while at the table. He asked whether Herr Leidemit had caught many fish and when he learned that Leidemit hadn't been in the Waldviertel today, he said he had suspected as much for, after all, Herr Leidemit was very early today.

"It was such a beautiful day today," said the waiter, "I thought you mightn't come in at all."

Sometimes Leidemit would stay out in the country until Monday, then drive straight to the factory in the morning.

"I might have stayed," he said now. "But I was visiting a colleague at his summer house out, on the outskirts of town, he's got a garden there. He's been here with me, two or three times, about my age, do you remember? Short hair, brushed upwards."

"Ah yes, I know the man, the one who has a habit of leaving whenever Herr Rubnicek joins you at the table."

"That would be him." Leidemit knew that Pohanka didn't like Rubnicek.

The waiter smiled. He looked through the window at the small park opposite and the white monument in the middle. But he didn't really seem to see any of it, for he continued, "I have a garden too, you know, a few fruit trees and some flowers." He began to talk about his success in grafting pears, until it gradually seemed to Leidemit that the world was becoming more and more surreal and impossible. That his image of this man in black tails, whom for a number of years he had been seeing almost daily, whose face he only knew as clean-shaven and smiling over a freshly starched white shirt-front, should suddenly be replaced with a vision of rolled-up sleeves and hedge-clippers grasped in earth-stained hands! While he was at work, making sure that all his patrons were well looked-after, talking with the retired general about the good old days, evaluating the most recent critiques of the latest production of Carmen with Frau Kammersänger, and discussing the ups and downs of the stock exchange with the Herrn Kommerzialrat, while he was doing all of this, there was a good chance that he was waiting for the graft of his "Madame Verté" to take. How much do we really know about our neighbours, about the people we work with, about the people we sleep under the same roof with, eat with daily at the same table, or have lunch with in the same restaurant? Nothing, we know absolutely nothing, and then find ourselves amazed to learn that Herr Franz has a life beyond the marble table-tops, that he has also smoothed the soil with a rake, heaped compost under trees, stamped on the odd mole.

Do I feel better, Leidemit's train of thought continued on, knowing that Herr Franz has a garden too, that he digs the earth and puts down fertiliser? Or does it somehow shatter the image I have built up of him, my image of Franz, the Head-Waiter? Of course, there's no way he would have told me, unless he'd known me for as long as he has,

but nonetheless, it still shatters my image of him. There are all sorts of things I do, that I don't tell anyone about. I make sure I preserve my image. I wonder whether other people do that too? Albert, where does Albert keep his intimate, unknown side, where, what part of him?

The waiter was called to another table. Leidemit watched him leave. Had he ever seen him fed-up, tired or irritable? Someone like Albert, even when he has to stay in his office, long into the evening, it doesn't seem to worry him. He almost seems to enjoy it. It's as if the longer he has to stay, the happier he'll be. How do these people do it? But then, if the truth be known, they've never seen me really irritable either.

A waiter brought the coffee and a basket of bread rolls. The silver tray chimed against the marble tabletop, the spoon clinked against the water glass and the papers, which the man moved aside, rustled. It was very quiet in the large room. The only sound was a slight humming noise, which entered through the open door. The curtains were drawn and the lights switched on.

Leidemit concentrated on reading the newspapers. One article was of special interest to him, The son of one of the country's wealthiest families had committed suicide. Leidemit had known him personally, had met him a few times at parties and dinners where he'd been sent to represent his firm. He remembered a lively young man and felt a deep sense of shock at the news. While he drank his coffee sip by sip, he re-read the report, which wasn't overly sensationalised. Albert's lawn is perfectly manicured and the fence newly painted, green, a bright lively green, the trees are pruned and Herr Franz grafts "Madame Verté," in the evenings he repairs radios, three children and a good wife, her wardrobe would be impossible at society parties though, I wonder whether Herr Franz has children? I must ask him some time, but then again, do I really want to know? No, I won't ask, the week must seem so terribly long for that woman, of course there's no mention of a reason, I'm surprised that they call it a suicide and not an accident, probably it's too well known, the neighbours would see for sure and the children would tell their father on Sunday, no, it couldn't stay secret for long, Uncle Josef, Uncle Josef! Albert has always been my friend, exploring the country on bicycles together, strange how it's always the same things one comes back to, I think he's an only son, I think there might be two more daughters, the youngest was said to have been engaged.

He looked up from his paper every now and then. He had reached the business section by now, which he studied carefully. He glanced over at the door. It was getting dark outside, one could just catch a glimpse of the velvet-blue sky over the high-pitched roof. A halo-like border blended the blue with the shadowy contour of the building.

Leidemit had looked up and returned to his reading several times now. The moment he disappeared behind the black and white paper wall again, someone tapped him on the shoulder.

"Guten Abend, my dear colleague," he heard a voice.

It was Rubnicek.

"Guten Abend," said Leidemit. He set the newspaper in front of him on the table and made preparations as if to get up, but instead merely stretched his upper torso perpendicular and offered his hand to the new arrival.

Herr Rubnicek shook it and sat down opposite Leidemit.

He was a well-dressed man, about fifty, with thick, wavy grey hair and dark-rimmed spectacles which drew attention to themselves. As his eyes examined Leidemit, he noticed that the other man, the angler, as he called him, sported a fresh suntan. He talked about horseracing. Leidemit should come with him some time, he would enjoy it. Herr Franz, who had come to the table, took his order and Rubnicek continued to talk to Leidemit. It was not quite clear whether his invitation was sincere, or whether it was just a pleasantry. Nonetheless, his companion began to ask him questions about horses and race-related matters. When Rubnicek's order was served, the waiter could hear racing-talk in full flow.

he was joking with a pretty alpine dairy maid who sat on a bench and smiled at him. Above the wall hanging and the head in the mirror there was a picture in a delicate golden frame. It was of a little girl walking on a narrow wooden plank across a deep gully, while a large golden-haired angel dressed in long white robes flew beside her, protecting her all the way. It was one of those clichéd pictures, bought by the thousand in Catholic countries all over the world, and hung over the beds of children in memory of their first Holy Communion.

"Well, it seems to me that Heini has certain expectations," said her mother. "By the way, you can come and eat now."

Kitty put her toiletries away in a colourful nylon bag, got up, and took one last good look at herself. She was obscuring the angel now, but she didn't notice that either, she hadn't seen the picture for a long time, otherwise she might have taken it down. A few red strands of hair fell down across her forehead. She buttoned up her blouse. Then she smoothed her skirt, tugged at the hem-line a little to get at least half her knees covered and walked into the kitchen to her mother.

The blond, fragile woman of about sixty had cut up a few pieces of bread, smothered them with lard and set them on a plate. She had put a pot of tea and two cups on the table too. The cups had a pattern of alpine flowers, and were chipped in places, the edges especially were a little jagged. Kitty sat down on one side of the table. The white paint on her chair had completely worn away in places. Frau Mislowitsch sat down on the coal box against the wall behind the table.

"He's got quite a good job at this factory of yours, hasn't he."

"Hmm, not bad." Kitty saw the blue car driving along the county roads, and saw Herrn Pohanka unlocking his three-room apartment. There was a beautifully tiled bathroom, and carpets were covering the floors of all the rooms.

"He seems fairly careful with his money too. He doesn't smoke."

Kitty made no reply. She was rocking on her chair, drinking tea and chewing her bread.

"I think there must be someone else, no one seems to be good enough for you Kathy! Just be careful nothing happens to you." And while she chewed her own bread and lard, biting off large pieces and chewing some more, she said, "In any case, Heini would marry you."

Marriage, thought Kitty. Yes, look at Mam's example, a thrifty, hard-working man! This kitchen! The girl's eyes carried out an unintentional survey of the room as she sipped her tea. Her glance stopped

at the chimney flu which ran along the wall to the chimney opening. The black pipe, or rather the heat which emanated from it, had tinted the wall behind dark as well. Kitty noticed neither. Her eyes were fixed on the pipe and the brown line which ran parallel to it, but her optic nerve somehow only carried this information up as far as a certain point in her brain where, like at a closed gate, the image seemed to be barred entry. Behind it there was another image, that of a photograph, a beautiful blond girl in country clothes, hands on her hips, a tight-fitting bodice covering her young body and a face with a pouting red mouth and two lovely dimples, a dear, sweet-looking girl. It was Kitty's mother forty years ago. Kitty had loved to look at that picture when she was a little child. This was what her mother used to look like! And today, how completely different she looked today! Her mouth had become nondescript, narrow and hard, her hair thin and faded and the blossoming upright figure had given way to a shrivelled, withered, jaded body. Her hands were rough and the her veins had become knotted.

Kitty stopped her rocking, got up and switched on the little transistor radio which sat up on top of the dresser between the bread tin and the large jar of gherkins. "Don't worry, Mami," she said, "you'll be rid of me soon enough."

The sounds of the national anthem squeezed their way out of the tiny speaker.

The girl looked for another station.

Leidemit looked at the small Chinese glass vase on his bookshelf. He had brought three sprays of flowers with him from Pohanka's and was pondering over where he should put them.

They would go rather well with the milky glass of the vase and its black pattern, especially in front of the brick-coloured red wall which contrasted so nicely ... but no, that would be no good. The slightly raised pattern was one of flowering branches with birds perched in between. They wouldn't go together. Leidemit thought for a moment. But what did the Chinese put in it? Didn't they love flowering branches like these ones? Leidemit tried them in the vase. He put both vase and flowers on the bookshelf, took a step back and looked at the arrangement. He liked it. Strange, he hadn't wanted to buy that vase at all at first, it wasn't really to his taste. But the antique dealer, who had sold him a few good pieces in the past, and whom he had known for

some years, had assured him of the glass's value. When Leidemit still hesitated, he even told him that it had been offered to him at a very favourable rate by the son of the late baron Neuberg (who was completely ignorant when it came to anything touching art) and so he could let him, Leidemit, have it for a good price. Leidemit was satisfied. He had found out that the period of Chien-lang, to which the glass belonged, corresponded with the Western Baroque age, and when he thought of the voluptuousness of form in baroque works of arts, he found the few, simple lines almost Spartan, severe. Over the years, he had surrounded himself with a number of beautiful, hand-selected pieces of art, which gave his modern, well-equipped bachelor apartment a warm homely atmosphere, aided by a collection of beautiful rugs, some of which hung on the walls, others covered the floor.

Leidemit sat down on his bed and was filled with pleasure as he looked at the dark picture which hung on the wall opposite him. They don't understand what life's all about, he thought. Pohanka - all around him, everything is in flower and he buries himself in work, only travels out there on Sundays. Why did they have to have three children? They're very nice children of course, but can he really afford them? Granted, the seed disperses wherever it wants to, yes, but I'm a human being, so much more than a tree or a shrub, my seed is available to me all year round and I want to enjoy my everlasting spring. Always in flower and always experiencing lust, as long as I want, and with whomever I want.

He looked across to the small chest of drawers on which a beautiful silver Renaissance cup, about twenty centimetres tall, was sitting. Those people knew how to live! The lid was crowned with a little raised mound, which depicted Cupid riding on a dolphin. From the mouth of the dolphin, a little man, swallowed up to his waist, hung out over the edge. The prophet Jonah again. But those earthy, vital Renaissance people had him as this small and insignificant little thing, struggling from the mouth of the fish, he couldn't do them any harm, he cried and shouted, but on top of the beautiful body of the animal this buxom boy was sitting, overflowing with energy, a god of life, Cupid, bringer of pleasure.

Leidemit took his pyjamas and went to the bathroom. As the warm water filling the bathtub flowed up around his body, he thought of Rubnicek. His colleague had been quite impressed with his knowledge of high frequencies, he'd made a generous and tempting offer

for the new technique as well. He must have a lot of money at his disposal, thought Leidemit, but it almost seems to me as if he doesn't know how to live with it either. Why else would he still be so hung up with the wellfare of those people, from morning till night? Nothing but a drawing-room-Bolshevik! Tomorrow, in fifty years, in a hundred years, who care? I'm alive now, and that's enough for me. He got up and showered himself off. The plug was difficult to get out of the plug-hole and it distracted the man from his train of thought. When Leidemit climbed out of the bathtub he was humming a happy little tune to himself*: Life's really only worth living, if you've got a bit of money.* He dried himself, put on his pyjamas and returned to the living room.

When he turned back again at the chest of drawers, the large crucifix, a valuable medieval piece, caught his eye. Leidemit was holding a comb in one hand, a jar of face cream in the other. He stopped and looked across at the man on the cross. I shouldn't have got it after all, he thought for a moment, there are too many memories connected with it, childhood with all those forbidden things, and, *Thou shalt not*, over and over. But then again, why not? He shrugged his shoulders, ridiculous, what's the problem? It's a work of art, a man who died for his convictions. Well, that was his problem, and there have always been people like him. Leidemit set the comb and the tin down on the chest of drawers. Who needs him? What can we really say has changed because he was alive? A little more lying in the world, maybe a little more deceit, because those who profess to believe in him don't live according to his word. Leidemit went back to the bathroom, rinsed the bathtub and switched off the light. When he re-entered the living room his eyes were drawn back to the large Christ figure. Your way was only your way, you should never have said, "Follow me." Leidemit stared in front of him. Maybe it's really the best way, to die at the age of thirty, at the height of one's powers, free from the bitterness of old age. And with such a grand gesture too! Hadn't he been reading about an early death today, about the death of the son of that wealthy family? A death like that, and no faith. Faith? But I do have faith. Of course, I've got faith in the way. And you were right when you said, "I am the way." I too, am the way. We are the way! All of us are the way, there is nothing else besides us. A goal? Leidemit moved towards his bed. A goal? He turned back the duvet and sat down. Death, nothing but death. But if you missed the right

moment for that jump into nothingness - what else could it be? Then you just had to get along as best you could. The man stretched out and switched off the light. While he pulled up his duvet he looked into the darkness, out in the direction of the crucifix. A great human being, I'll grant him that much, he thought, but a god? One shouldn't overdo it. Leidemit turned towards the wall. Why not? Maybe that too. But then, I am a god too, or nearly a god. He added the qualification hastily. Superfluous questions!

The scent of the flowering chestnut trees wafted in through the open windows. The house was part of a quiet estate, with very little traffic. Sometimes you could hear a humming noise from afar. It was very quiet in the room, only the ticking of a clock was clearly audible.

Eveline poured coffee into a cup and set a plate of cake down in the middle of the table. She was wearing an old, faded dressing gown, once covered in a colourful pattern, now no longer recognisable. Her hair was still uncombed and it fell down into her face.

"Do you want more sugar?" she said to her husband and moved the tin towards him. He took two cubes, put them into his coffee and stirred vigorously.

"Careful," said the woman. "You'll spill it, and stain the tablecloth with coffee, you know how difficult it is to get out."

The saucer in front of Pohanka was indeed already showing a faint brown ring. His wife stared at it while she crammed cake into her mouth. He didn't notice. He stared blankly in front of him and saw himself sitting in the smoky wine bar, eating bread and cheese and then listening for the humming of flies on the edge of his bed. Or was it some insect here round the breakfast table, humming somewhere behind the window, reminding him of the nights on the edge of his bed. He couldn't differentiate between them and he didn't even try. All those radios, invoices, formulae, and on Monday, on the edge of the bed; short circuits and anode potential and resistors, and on Tuesday, on the edge of the bed; and the cinema has changed its film and the young people whistle and sing on the street, dust is settling, in the room and a pair of young lovers kiss and hug each other in the doorway on the opposite side of the street, again and again, it is quiet in the room, very quiet, and on Thursday, more radios to be repaired, the flies are there again, humming, and on Friday the flies are humming unbearably, the movie has finished, people head off home

or as far as the doorway on the opposite side of the street, behind him is the room, the dust, and the sad ruin of a bed. A ruin, yes a ruin. Once upon a time, things were different. Once upon a time even the smoothing of the sheets was an almost sacred ritual. But, of course, he could understand. Those never-changing games, they bored her. But her body still attracted him. How often had he told himself, no! And again and again he would come crawling back, like a dog. Crawling back, again and again. He felt a deep revulsion.

He brought the cup up to his mouth.

"It's dripping!" cried the woman. "Can't you be more careful!"

He winced slightly, put the cup back on the saucer and wiped its lower edge before he took it back to his mouth. No, not this time, he wouldn't come crawling back, never ever, never ever. He'd take the contract for the weekend outdoor construction work, at least for the coming few weeks. Let the frogs croak, just like they did last night.

He had been hearing them for a very, very long time.

We haven't been devoured by a whale or anything else for that matter. We can't just sit around and take things easy. Work is all that remains of us! Whatever it may be, painting fences green, repairing radios for some dealer or making calculations for a large switchboard, we need to leave something behind us, how else could one find comfort? And yesterday, those conversations in the boat? Was that really what he thought? He sounded even more unstable than the boat. How could he have said those things? Of course, everyone has different faces for different people, one for Josef, one for Eveline, one for the colleagues at work, one for the children, but then what remains of me in all that? The frogs croaked all night long, nothing, nothing! Nothing! was their answer.

"Weren't they sweet, Albert?" his wife asked him.

He had just taken his second piece of cake. Sweet? The frogs? The cake? Albert looked up at his wife bewildered. She didn't notice. She was looking at the bottom of his cup. Coffee stains were so very hard to get out.

But he had to make some sort of a reply. "Yes, oh yes, very sweet." He carefully wiped the cup before he took it up to his mouth again.

"Frau Zapletal thought they were sweet too, she said that they were the most beautiful girls in the whole procession." She took a little sip from her cup, stretching her little finger out into the air. "You should

have seen them together with the other children, the way they twirled around and moved so daintily, the others thought they were so pretty."

But why am I telling him this, she thought before the words were even out, he has no understanding of children whatsoever. Yes, well, if they were boys it might be different! They're still very small, of course, Sigrid notices already, she knows how lucky she is to have me for a mother at least.

"Albert, you're crumbling your cake up, don't you like it?"

"Of course I do, it's very good, delicious," he hastened to assure her. Every evening, bread and cheese or sausage and in the morning the reheated coffee and yesterday's bread rolls. "Delicious, delicious," he said again. And because he knew that he would be leaving soon, he felt a sudden urge to please his wife, and said: "They really stood out from all those other children." But at the same time he thought to himself, dear God, those poor creatures, they were just as ridiculously dressed-up as all the others, and there was nothing child-like about them, not at that moment when they twirled and turned about in front of the others, wanting to be admired, that's a typical adult behaviour, it's no different with the animals, only the pubescent peacock spreads his tail and insists on being admired. No. When children dress up in old rags and play kings and queens, they really do become kings and queens. But when they get all dressed up in tinsel and silk like that, well then they're neither king nor child.

Is it ever healthy, telling the young people about God in such a distant sort of way? But they have to learn somehow. For a moment he stared at his wife. Busy with the jam, she didn't notice. If only we could all be as happy as the children, by today they'll have forgotten their white dresses and all the other finery, he thought. They'll be out playing in the sand, dressed in nothing but their dirty underthings, building their castles, making their pies and constructing marvellous gardens, gardens, a paradise, and the grown-ups will make sure they bring about their expulsion soon enough.

In the tram he could still see the woman standing there between trees, and the trees were in flower and all the flowers below were in bloom as well. The woman was wearing a faded dressing gown and her hair was uncombed.

The sun had warmed up things quite early this morning, and the windows of the laboratory were open. As Kitty approached, Pohanka looked up from his papers and, after his eyes had fleetingly touched

on the girl's red hair he glanced over at the building opposite. On the third floor he could see the man with the pipe in his mouth looking out his window, he seemed to be there whenever Pohanka looked, all hours of the day and night, and one floor down, two windows to the right, were the two equally old women, with their black cat. The cat was rubbing gently round their shoulders with its tail held stiffly upright.

"I saw you again yesterday, with the head engineer," said the girl.

"Really?" said Pohanka absentmindedly. His thoughts were on his work. His eyes followed the movement of the cat. The animal usually lay quietly on the window-sill, dozing just like the two old women.

"You were going past in a boat. I called out to you. But you didn't see or hear me." For an instant she thought he didn't take any notice, but then suddenly she had his whole attention.

"With Herrn Leidemit, and we didn't see you?" he asked and looked right into her grey eyes. How does she keep her tail so straight, constantly rubbing her way from one shoulder to the next, I've never seen her so agitated, he thought, she probably knows it's spring too. He could still see the black cat arching her back and walking from one woman to the other.

"No, you didn't," said the girl, "and the boys were shouting pretty loudly."

He had heard the shrill voices of some loudmouth or other at some stage during the boat trip. So, that was the kind of company she kept. Just what you'd expect. But what business was it of his? That animal! Something was really up with it today!

"I'm sorry your friends' help was of no avail," he said, mockingly, wanting to end this discussion. But she replied quickly, as if he had given her offence: "My friends? Those boys! Not a chance! They just happened to be on the same raft and saw me waving."

So, not her friends after all, he thought, but what would we have talked about, then Josef and me and her all in the same boat. Josef wouldn't have liked it. It would have interrupted our conversation.

Pohanka's glance slipped from Kitty's face, across her body, down to her hands. It lingered awhile on the rise of her chest.

"Pity," the man said finally.

Then he turned back to his work. But before the girl returned to the engineer she'd been assigned to today he asked, "Are you in a hurry

this evening, or could you stay a little later? I might need you for some overtime."

Kitty wasn't in a hurry.

But Herr Pohanka couldn't manage to get his work finished that day. There were still some calculations and diagrams outstanding and when she passed him that afternoon, he told the girl that he wasn't yet ready and that she could go home on time today after all.

He sat there, bent over his papers, Kitty was standing behind him once again. He didn't want to see the red hair, the grey eyes and the dress which fitted the young body so snugly. He looked across at the black cat instead.

"I'm sure that I'll be needing you tomorrow, Fräulein. Would it be possible for you to work longer tomorrow? Mind you, it might be quite late," he added finally.

All day long he had been working and calculating, thinking and writing. All day long he had been working out where the lines of force ran along, had been considering the induced currents and had been watching himself sitting on the edge of his bed looking at the flies, had seen the black cat walking to and fro, the green eyes gleaming, the green wire, ah yes, the green wire led to the anode heater and the yellow one to switch S 3, the red, red hair, for a long time he saw the red hair and the red lips and Eveline's pink flesh in between the black cords leading to the relays, he had to fit a resistor in somewhere, would it be powerful enough? He would have to calculate it all very carefully. The black cord was insulated and the frogs croaked all night long, the whole black night long, blackness surrounding the loving couples in the cinema, why didn't he go to the cinema for a change, why not have some illusions set in front of you, was he that far gone yet? The old man with his pipe was still there in the window opposite, and the scent of the linden blossoms, spring the whole year long he'd said, and when the girl had disappeared behind the bridge he'd sighed, the dirty stockings hanging over the wicker garden chair, the dirty dishes in the bathtub, brown leads to R 2, that was the heating, the anode, the relay, the brown rim of the coffee cup, crumbled pieces of cake.

Crumbled, crumbled were his thoughts, scattered crumbs, and he didn't notice Herrn Leidemit's approach.

"What's this I've been hearing? You're going to take on the outdoor construction project?" he asked.

"Yes," said Pohanka, somewhat subdued. He had been afraid that Josef might ask him about that. He wouldn't understand. Explanations? No, there was no way he could explain himself, not to him.

"What does your wife think of that," Leidemit asked. He saw the fair-haired Eveline in her old-fashioned summer dress, sitting out on the veranda, her new perm shining in the sun and the children running outside to play in the sandpit. What could you possibly spend your money on out there? The children? Same old story. Other people have children too and don't have to work on Sundays, they don't have such well-paid jobs either, but it's none of my business. They run around in their underthings all day long, and their Papa paints the fence, paints the house, the furniture, installs the water and electricity, Papa to prunes the trees and sprays them all for bugs. Luxury? I don't understand why he wants to take on all this on top of everything else. Mind you, it's none of my business.

"She doesn't know yet," replied his friend. "Could you do me a favour? I was wondering if you wouldn't mind dropping by and telling her next week, when you drive out to our offices in Franzensdorf. It wouldn't be much of a detour. It's practically on the way, you needn't stay for long. It's only for a few weeks and most of the work in the garden has already been done. You know how it is, no one could make up their minds today, and no one wanted to do it, so I agreed to take it on. It's a pleasant enough job, and it's an important one too. That new transmission station has been exceptionally well designed. It's obvious that you had a hand in it."

The new station! That was precisely the reason why Leidemit didn't want his friend to have any part in it. Pohanka knew Rubnice.k. He was the only one of his colleagues who knew Rubnicek and knew who he was. Why would he be chasing money like that? No, he just couldn't understand it. It didn't make sense. Why on earth had Albert volunteered?

The two men walked along the work-benches. "There must have been other people, unmarried, no children. If you like I could get the decision reversed, have a talk with one of the others. Rakocan, for example, he wouldn't say no, I'm sure of it."

"No thank you! Thanks, Josef, but don't," said Pohanka quickly. "I feel like I've a personal interest in this job now, you know how it is."

The door of the laboratory had been opened. The sound of a loudspeaker floated through the assembly hall. In amidst the buzz of

rattling and banging, the faint sounds of a melody could almost be heard. A woman was singing a song. Every now and then you could even understand a word or two, the woman was singing about love and happiness and of the deepest betrayal of all. The door was being closed again. Kitty, who had been to fetch something, came back into the room.

"She saw us yesterday, in the boat," said Pohanka. His gaze followed the girl as she walked back towards her workstation. Leidemit followed his example. For a second he remembered the little traffic jam yesterday, on his way back into town, the sunset and the stream of pedestrians on the bridge crossing the river. Then he thought back to the boat trip.

"Did she now," said Leidemit. "She's been working for you for quite a while now. How's she doing, any good? None too smart, I'd imagine," he said, eyeing her figure up and down. "They're pretty much always dumb, pretty girls like that. They think it's enough to wear short skirts." She might be a danger for someone else, he thought, beautiful hair, I noticed it once before, but not Albert, surely not, all he thinks about is his work.

"She's keen to learn. And seems to be doing her best to fit in," said Pohanka.

What's the real reason, why does he really want that construction work, Leidemit asked himself, over and over. Then he thought of Eveline and the fact that it was his job to tell her. Very well, I'll drive out and go and see her then. Rubnicek will get impatient, but he'll just have to understand that under the circumstances, well, it's just not possible, that's all there is to it.

The two men had reached Leidemit's desk by now. He was separated off from the rest of the laboratory, singled out by a large table which was set at right angles to the others in the room. Piles of paper were strewn about, along with pencils and books and small measuring implements whose glass glittered in the light. Leidemit pointed to a diagram. All the resistors were set in precisely the right positions, every last eventuality had been calculated and considered. That was Leidemit for you, always the star pupil, the teacher's pet. Pohanka bent over the paper, the red wires were red wires, the black wires were black ones, and while his friend next to him pointed to this and that with his pencil and explained what was going on, Pohanka didn't even notice that his other colleagues had left the laboratory,

that Kitty had already left, that the cat in the window opposite had disappeared and that even the old man with the pipe had retired for the night.

The people in the laboratory were very busy the next day too. Kitty and Pohanka were not the only ones who stayed on longer in the large workroom. It was obvious that some big, important and extensive project had to be finished, because there were another two men and a new assistant in the room. Everyone worked with special concentration, even Kitty who usually simply did what was required of her with no particular enthusiasm, found herself infected by the general eagerness. So Pohanka and the girl became conscious of each other only when they found themselves facing each other in the washroom.

The man had entered the room a moment after her, and stood opposite her while she rinsed the dirty lather from her hands. But this time they were not alone. An engineer and an assistant, a woman of about forty, were also washing their hands. The engineer asked Pohanka a few technical questions. He answered absentmindedly. His eyes were watching the lather. Everything seemed quite different to him from last week, and even the girl, Kitty, seemed different to him, her facial expression and her bearing were altered somehow. Maybe he was wrong, only seeing what he wanted to see, but then again, perhaps the different working atmosphere and the constant challenges really were having an influence on the girl's appearance. Since she had escaped the monotony of the conveyor belt, her facial features seemed more full of character and even her hairstyle didn't seem so pretentious to him anymore. It seemed to him only natural that he should wait for the girl on the steps when he heard the heels of her shoes clicking along him.

It was too late now to go to the radio dealer and collect his work for the next couple of days, and there were also the flies, those irritating flies, which filled the evenings with their humming. He could conjure up no image of the summer house at all, absolutely nothing, but he sensed the brutal and naked picture of the ruin of his bed emerging like a threatening shadow somewhere in his subconscious.

A certain tension, no doubt the result of the stress of the day's work, was still noticeable when he spoke to Kitty: "Late today, isn't it."

Yes," the girl replied. She stopped next to him and they walked side by side down the steps.

"Could I invite you for a bite to eat?" asked Pohanka. "I usually go to a wine cellar in the city at this time of day. But maybe you are expected at home," he added, as if he suddenly wanted Kitty to refuse.

The girl looked at her watch. Father had already left for work, Mother for church. "All right," she said, "but I mustn't be too late."

They walked past stacks of boxes and the parked trucks in the courtyard, and Pohanka asked: "Do you go to those baths often?" He was thinking about their chance meeting on Sunday.

"Yes, when the weather's nice."

"I suppose you were meeting your friends, or a boyfriend, weren't you?"

"No, I was by myself. I used to go with a few girls I know, but you know, they all have boyfriends now." Kitty made some vague gesture with her hand.

"And you?" Pohanka looked her in the eye. They walked through the large gate out on to the street. "You're a pretty girl. Surely you know some young men, have a boyfriend yourself."

The girl made the same gesture with her hand. "Oh, they're all so silly." As she spoke, she thought fleetingly of Egon and Heini. There was always laughter and joking in the rowing clubrooms, but afterwards you could never really remember what it was all about. Girls she didn't know at all, with strong muscular arms and legs - not very pretty really, did exercises on the horizontal bar and the parallel bars, while she couldn't even manage the simplest trick. She didn't really understand what most of the conversations were about. But in the cinema, with Heini, in the lift, kissing and cuddling and when they'd gone on that trip on the motorbike, they had lain in the meadow and no one could see them because the grass was high.

Pohanka remembered Leidemit's words. Everyone always thinks that it's everyone else who is stupid, and so on and so on, but is that really true? Were there even sillier ones? Josef had always been the best student in class. While the other boys were out kicking a ball around, he was reading Horace and while the other boys were having their first amorous adventures with the girls from the neighbouring school, Josef had been drafting them drawings for their exams and earning his first money for his studies. He'd always been good at drumming up money, in ever increasing amounts. But did he really have any idea how to live? How long had it taken to convince him that there might be advantages to dressing according to the prevailing

taste, and how long had it taken him to decide to rent a nice apartment for himself. Come to think of it, he'd never had any financial worries. He'd always been careful. He'd always been clever too, of course, cleverness, there's something to be said for being clever, but the football matches and all those little liaisons during the student years, wasn't there something to be said for all of that as well?

Kitty and the engineer sat next to each other in the tram. The tram was almost empty. It was late already and very few people were still travelling home from work at this time of day. Pohanka stared quite openly at Kitty's knees. Her skirt had ridden up as she sat down, and her knees remained uncovered. He asked her whether she read a lot. She told him about a novel which was appearing in instalments in one of the magazines.

Short skirts, a pretty face and beautiful red hair were enough, after all. Pohanka looked at those knees and heard Leidemit's voice. What had he expected? The girl next to him told him about a love affair some actress or other was having and he asked himself again, what had he expected from her?

Had he expected anything at all? He was astonished to find himself sitting next to this Kitty and was astonished too that they had found something to talk about, secretly afraid all the while that in a moment he mightn't know what to say to her anymore. Suddenly it seemed to him an ill-considered thing to have done, to have invited her on the spur of the moment like that. Ill-considered? It had been ill-considered for weeks, but he'd considered it anyway, over and over, those knees and the shins which went with them, the hair and the young, slim body. Why should a person with knees and a figure like that know anything about Melville, Rilke or Sartre? Graham Greene or John Knittel paled in insignificance. But what about him, what could he do? Could he deny his knowledge of Hegel, Kierkegaard or Ortega y Gasset? He was sitting next to this body, a mere twenty centimetres away from this body, a light dress, flimsy material, some underwear perhaps, and his jacket, the linen of his shirt, that was all that separated the two bodies, and the tram was rolling through the city, through the streets, passing houses where the approaching twilight mingled with the darkness of the rooms in the windows of each floor.

The conductor announced the stations, *"Nordbahnhof,"* he called, and for a second Kitty thought of Herrn Leidemit, that place where he

spends his weekends, they say it's on the northern rail line. She saw his face and his hair and she heard the door of a car closing. But Pohanka hadn't heard the announcement, he was pondering over whether he dared to put his hand on one of those knees without the girl objecting.

"If you're interested, I own a small library, you could borrow some books," he heard himself say. There he went, surprising himself again. Was he concerned about her education, or did he just want to say something right, offer her something which she could accept easily, or then again, did he just want to change the topic, find an opportunity to make some progress, maybe it wasn't any of those things, perhaps it was a little of all together.

But Kitty seemed interested. She wanted to know what those books were about. Could he suggest a few that wouldn't be too difficult or too boring for her? Of course, she would have probably been interested in just about anything he had chosen to talk about, interested? She just wanted to impress him really. He was an educated man, he might despise her if she couldn't convince him that she had at least heard about this and the other. Ironically, whether he knew about all those things was questionable at best. And suddenly she regretted not taking more notice of things like that at school, she had always paid more attention to Irene's new nail polish and Gerda Penzenböck's hairdresser, and the magazines which were passed from girl to girl and read under the desks during lessons, describing all the film stars' love affairs, all the juicy details! Of course, she couldn't remember it all now, in fact she couldn't remember much about her school days full stop. But it was just a passing impulse! A moment later she was strong and in control again. She had only just turned eighteen. She wasn't really conscious of it, but she knew that this was her greatest asset. An asset which had begun to decrease of course, imperceptibly, but steadily. But it didn't worry her yet, she didn't really believe it anyway, would have dismissed it as ridiculous if anyone had pointed it out to her.

In the small wine cellar the two of them managed to find a small table in one of the booths, as Pohanka had hoped they might. He had been to this cellar several times before, but he'd never chosen one of those tables. They were usually all occupied, but sometimes, as on that evening, a spare table in a booth was to be had. In the past, he'd always chosen another one, in the middle of the room, or near the

staircase leading to the exit, or opposite the bar. He didn't feel, well, 'competent' enough to occupy one of those quiet and hidden places. He left them to the young lovers. He often watched them secretly from his table as they caressed and kissed each other or talked to each other for hours over one small jug of wine.

Now he was sitting at one of those tables with Kitty sitting next to him, and he could have put his arm around her waist and whispered sweet nothings to her for hours, the same way the young man at the table next to theirs had put his arm round the waist of his girl and was whispering continuously into her ear. But Pohanka didn't know where to start or what to say. They started off talking engineering, their work meant they had that much in common at least.

But suddenly, he didn't know himself how the words strung themselves together so quickly, chance lent him a helping hand. Kitty had mentioned in passing that she had seen *Cleopatra* at the cinema and, that Anthony, she thought, was a handsome-looking man. Of course, she said, that was in the movie, who knows what this king or emperor or whatever he was, looked like in real life.

Pohanka was digging up memories of long-past history lessons. He could still remember a few things, hadn't thought about them in decades, the triumvirate, Antony, Octavius and Lepidus. He had read Plutarch at high school too, all about his beautiful wife Octavia, Caesar's sister and the virtuous mother of Antony's children, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* as well of course. It was all a long time ago now, and he had forgotten quite a bit, but compared to the girl's his knowledge seemed vast and he delivered an extended lecture on Roman history. He tried to put everything as clearly and succinctly as he could. Kitty listened to him and heard the things she wanted to hear, the beauty and potency of the queen and the total devotion of the great, powerful and infinitely wealthy man.

Pohanka finally ran out of things to say on the topic of Cleopatra. Kitty made some remark which showed him that she hadn't understood any of his clever explanations. She was still thinking in terms of the silly clichés in her film and it irritated him. The conversation became laboured again. Only very slowly, after the two of them had had something to eat and to drink, did he begin his first hesitant enquiries into the life of the girl sitting opposite him. How could the young people at the tables around them open up to one another so easily, or at least pretend to do so, allowing the other

person to enter into their innermost being. Or was it that their innermost being was just an empty space, a vacuum which sucked at anyone near in order be filled with their existence, other existences, even if they consisted of tinsel, transient baubles. They might gleam and glitter splendidly in the diffuse light of the cellar bar, but later, when two human beings had to set out to find a roof for their free spirits in the harsh light of the first cold winter day, all the tinsel would turn to inconsolable emptiness and helplessness, helplessness and emptiness. The emptiness and helplessness of one joining to that of the other, offering no relief, incapable of giving relief, capable only of infinitely increasing it, so that each could only stammer the other's words, sometimes even only think with the other's thoughts.

For Pohanka it cost him a great effort to put his hand on Kitty's shoulder, the collar bone, the shoulder blade, the joint where arm and shoulder met. He could feel the structure of the bones through the layers of clothing. His fingers glided nervously along her shoulder, finishing up on her neck and resting on the uncovered skin they found there.

His hands had felt this girl's body in his dreams, every day and every night of the past week. His finger-tips had caressed the velvet skin and his cheeks had rubbed against the silky hair. But now, as he actually felt her collarbone under the gentle pressure of his hand, he knew that this wasn't what he was really after. This skeleton, with all the thousands of proteins and cells which surrounded it, this wasn't all there was. Granted, they had happened to form a healthy, well-proportioned unit in this particular case, a unit which corresponded precisely with the prevailing taste of the times, but these cells were hiding something. There was something in there that would not sit so quietly and demurely, allowing itself to be felt by his hands, something that hovered about like a shy bird, a bird searching for a nest but careful at the same time not to stray into a cage, something which was longing for the security and direction a strong power could provide, yet at the same time fretting that it might be forced to give up its freedom, even if that freedom was one of spirit only.

He had moved his chair very close to hers, and was trying to sketch a plan of his garden for her on a piece of paper from his notebook. It was this that had given him the excuse to put his hand on her shoulder.

But reasons were irrelevant as far as she was concerned, she had been waiting forever for him to take her arm or press his knee against hers, like Heini did. But she had also been expecting him to show her how much he liked her face, her hair and her legs in a more sophisticated way perhaps. Why had he invited her here if all he wanted was casual conversation and all he was going to do was spin his glass around in front of him? How boring could you get, she might as well have gone straight home, to her ribbed earthenware plate with its soup and poppy-seed dumplings to follow, all kept warm in the oven for her by her mother. She wished that something exciting would happen, knowing exactly how far she would go, convinced that she was totally in control of any further course the game might take. Because they were all games to her, these relationships between men and women. Her mother, for instance, had lost the game. But had her father won it? She'd never thought about that before. In the factory, in the laboratory, she had been feeling the tension for days now, knew that this man liked her, that she impressed him, that her appearance impressed him and now she had expected a bit more attention from him. She had expected some sort of amplification of the game from a man of his experience, some sort of refining of the rules from the sort of person who would take her to a place like this, had expected something she hadn't known before.

She looked at her watch.

"You don't have to go home yet, do you?" asked Pohanka.

But as she continued to behave as if she really had to leave soon, his advances came fast and furious, advances? They clinked glasses together and he called her Kitty.

Half an hour later, they both got up. Pohanka had taken the girl's arm. The lines of force, the anode heating and one resistor, he had calculated everything, the red wire led to an automatic switch and the resistor was fixed on the yellow-black wire. The frogs croaked, all night long. Of course, he knew that it was not the whole of her that he could feel under the pressure of his hand, knew that this counter-pressure, this strength which responded to his muscles was not the whole of Katharina Mislowitsch, but he knew quite a lot and wasn't thinking about any of it. He was thinking of taking this girl home, to his lonely flat, to his lonely bed.

It was dark and quiet in the large, high-ceilinged chapel, a small red light gleamed at one end and a host of candles flickered along one of

the side walls, almost hidden by the fat pillars. Lost and aimless, the weak rays of light lingered in the wide central aisle of the church, climbed up the plinths with their dusty, frozen-faced smiling saints, ran along a grey-and-white tiled floor, shone briefly on a painting of the stations of the cross, flicked to another chrome-lithograph of women wringing their hands as if on an operatic stage, with a somewhat paunchy Christ turning up his eyes, swung down to the floor again and disappeared into a distant corner in the fissured timber of a confessional box. There, at the end of the aisle, was a little altar with a small Pietà, which might have originated from another church or an old chapel which preceded this one, or perhaps from a late well-to-do parishioner. It was certainly the only piece in the whole room with any artistic value. Behind it, the wall was covered in names, the names of the dead of two world wars. One name was just like another, one beside the other, starting with Franz Abel, ending with August Zorinek. The new parson had given his consent to the construction of this simple monument, with the proviso that no distinctions and no titles be used. Even the relatives of the dead who had initially objected to this condition got used to it, came frequently to the little Pietà and lit a candle for their dead on candelabra provided for the purpose. A number of pews had been placed at a respectful distance from the altar and it was on one of these that Frau Mislowitsch was sitting. The beads of a rosary hung between her fingers, she moved her lips silently and gazed with an empty stare across at Our Lady of Sorrows enthroned on the small altar, encircled by the candle light. She knew that somewhere in this confusion of names behind the figure, right after Meinhardt, Otto Meinhardt, son of Doctor Meinhardt, her ophthalmologist, was the name Mislowitsch, Johann Mislowitsch and next to it Richard Mislowitsch and then Anton Rustler after that, that was the husband of the dairywoman, she had remained a widow although she had still been young and pretty. But the two Mislowitschs were her sons, Hansi and Richard, and Richard had been killed during the very first battle and Hansi, poor Hansi, still a child, he had been killed shortly before the end of it all. Everything seemed to her grey and without any meaning, eternal grey, each new day she had thought that this time she might not be able to survive. But then there was little Kathy, and the fragile child had demanded all her attention. "*Hail, Mary! full of grace,*" the woman uttered silently for the twenty-fifth time and moved the next bead along between her

fingers. Hans, their father, was always off on the trains, butter, eggs, things that were rationed he brought then home with him every now and then. What could she cook tomorrow? Of the boys, of the boys he had never ever spoken again. "Full of grace, the Lord is with thee." What had he ever spoken about? In their first months together, perhaps forty years ago, so long, so short, it had been about plans to get a flat and how to furnish it. And they'd gone to the cinema together, Henny Porten, the woman saw the face of the famous star next to the one of the Holy Virgin or above it, no behind it, or was one hiding the other? She couldn't tell exactly, maybe it was just an illusion, and then there was Richard dressed in his little jumpsuit, running back and forth between her and her husband, and then there was the pain! She felt as if she had to bear all the pain herself, and then when Hansi arrived, it was such a difficult birth, he didn't want to come out, alone in the hospital, no familiar faces near, everyone was so far away, such a distance, no one was there to comfort her or hold her hand. "*The Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women.*" The job with the railways. They were both glad when the news came, for a few days they talked of nothing else, but then he was gone. The pay was meagre but it was a secure job, invaluable in those days. Of course, the Holy Virgin had helped. Tomorrow, yes, she would cook mashed potatoes and pig's tongue. The candles flickered. Someone had come in or gone out and the opening of the church door had caused a slight draft to waft down the whole aisle. Light and shadow danced round the figures of the saints. She had brought a beautiful thick candle for the Holy Virgin, eighty Groschen it cost her - quite something in those days! Had she suffered that much too, when she gave birth to her son and had the holy Joseph stood beside her? Ah well, men are so hopeless. At the deciding moments we women are always alone. "*Holy Mary, pray for us sinners.*" Always alone, you up there, I down here, your twelve-year old abandoned you back in the temple, joined up with the scholars. Richard was always out in the evenings, went to all the political meetings, what did I ever get out of him? You've got yours back again. But how does one get one's children back? They're different to the others we lose. Get them back? Get them back? Who? Who can you get back? Who can you keep? You're always alone. "*Now and in the hour of our death. Amen!*" Hansi, poor Hansi, a panzer-fist, I've been told, it didn't help him though, he was found alone in his trench, by himself, rolled up,

his knees at his chin. How terrible, if only I could have been with him. "*Amen.*" Amen? Amen? Where had she got to in her prayer? She was absent-minded today. She looked up to Our Lady of Sorrows, she had planned to pray to this woman for Katharina's protection, for Katharina, the careless child, for the last one, so different from the others, going her own sweet way. But there was the mother with the dead, stiff body of the bloodied man on her lap, poor Hansi and the distant Richard and all the other stages of her loneliness had come to mind, while her lips kept on forming the same well-known words. How many deeply-felt words ever passed these lips these days, when had they become so very narrow? How difficult it was for her to say things. She wanted to say I love you but she said is your bed comfortable, oh, but Hansi had understood her anyway, just like the Holy Virgin understood her when she said her *Hail, Mary*, over and over.

The woman was looking at the beads in her hand. Forty beads, forty beads black as ebony had passed through her fingers. No, actually there were more, after every ten beads came a larger one, which she didn't count.

The prayers on those beads were not addressed to the Holy Virgin, but to an unfathomable distant Father in Heaven. Did the woman ever think of him? No, almost certainly not, she hardly ever thought of him. But it was somehow comforting for her to know that she still had a father. Unfathomable. She had no image of him, just as she never thought of him. But every tenth bead was for him. When she was a little girl he was the old man with the white beard, but the priest had said that that was only a childish image and that God was actually quite different. But how he was different, he had never explained that either. But she didn't think of him, although there might well have been an infinitely vague, very distant, very dim image of a nice old man with a white beard lurking somewhere in a very hidden corner of her consciousness whenever she prayed: "*Our father...*". Every tenth bead belonged to him.