

IV

“Waiter, two more cognacs please!” Herr Rubnicek shouted across the room.

Leidemit objected. “Thanks, but no thanks, I’ve had plenty.”

“Oh you haven’t had that much, don’t be ridiculous. And besides, we have to come to some sort of an agreement. It can’t go on like this, week after week of delays. You know as well as I do how urgent it is.” He lit up a cigar, a little pompously, with the flourish of an actor who is sure of his audience. “Why’s he doing it?” he asked.

Leidemit shrugged his shoulders.

“Money?”

“Most likely. But he lives fairly carefully.”

“Women perhaps?”

“No, I don’t think so. He’s got three children, he loves them dearly.”

“That doesn’t mean much, but maybe it’s the wife?”

“His wife?”

“Dresses, jewellery, make-up!”

Leidemit laughed for a moment, seeing Eveline sitting out on the veranda in her old-fashioned summer dress, with her newly permed hair. He had to laugh.

“A boyfriend?”

A boyfriend? Strange, but it had never occurred to Leidemit, because of the children of course. But what if he came when the children had gone to bed? It could be a possibility, they’re still too little, they don’t quite understand what the grown-ups are up to. Leidemit wondered for a moment whether he shouldn’t drive out there right now to tell her that Albert had to work this coming weekend and maybe the next one too. He looked at his watch. The children would be asleep by now. But would it be appropriate to turn up that late? A pattern of bold blue and violet flowers covering the full, round breasts, blossoms and the sweet scent of lilac.

His companion noticed his hesitation. "It's a man then," he said firmly. "Is she pretty?" he inquired further.

"I don't think so, I don't think she's got a boyfriend....no, surely not," Leidemit answered, "I was just thinking of something." He paused and saw before him the face of the woman surrounded by a halo of golden hair, clad in the blue and violet dress. "Pretty, well, depends what you mean by pretty?" he added. "She's a strong, healthy sort of woman."

"Yes, yes," said the other one, "she doesn't need to be pretty. What were you thinking about? Was it anything to do with our little problem?"

"I don't know. Maybe! He asked me to tell his wife that he'd be working weekends."

Rubnicek took a drag on his cigar and raised his eyebrows. His eyes gleamed behind the heavy spectacles: "Have you been out there yet?"

"No."

"Well, then, go, go on!"

"What good would that do?" asked Leidemit.

"What a stupid question. You will tell him our suspicions carefully and calmly, as a friend, and he'll give up this silly idea of working on the weekends like a flash. He'll want to surprise his wife."

"And what if he doesn't give it up?"

"Impossible. No man could behave rationally under those sorts of circumstances. I would have thought he'd be travelling out there the very next day."

"That would be tomorrow evening, and she'd know straight away who'd put the idea in his head. And he wouldn't travel on Sunday because by then he would have convinced himself how unfounded the allegations were. Besides which, he's a workaholic. He thinks that nothing is ever done properly when he's not around. He thinks his work is a gift to mankind."

The other man smiled, but sobered immediately: "I'd try it, if I were in your shoes." He sipped at his cognac. "We haven't got much time left, my dear colleague." His tone became hard. "Surely you could bring a little pressure to bear on him, using his wife?"

Leidemit couldn't even begin to countenance it. Again, there were all the years they'd spent together in their youth, Albert's willingness to help, his openness.

The other one was watching him. "Know what," he said, "I'm going to come with you." He blew out large clouds of cigar smoke, called for the waiter and asked for the bill.

Leidemit was still uncertain of what to do.

That was just what he needed. He didn't like it one bit. But what if the woman was alone, as she would be, he'd put money on it, she'd smiled at him in such a strange way on Sunday when she asked him to stay a bit longer, well, it wouldn't be the end of the world, the blue and violet pattern stretching across the full breasts, the sleeping children, the halo of golden hair, yes, around her head, golden hips, Danae, no, he's no Zeus, no ambitions in that direction either, a rain of gold perhaps, but Danae looked different, of course flesh can be powerful sometimes, all-powerful even, in fact, it might be quite good if Rubnicek came with him.

Second thoughts began to creep up on each of the men as they began their journey. It suddenly didn't seem such a good idea anymore for Rubnicek to meet Frau Pohanka. Leidemit didn't quite know whether he or Rubnicek suggested it first, but both of them wondered whether the woman might mention this visit to her husband. Pohanka didn't like Rubnicek, and might become suspicious. Rubnicek decided to remain in the car and wait until Leidemit came back.

He agreed. That meant he had a way out, he couldn't stay long because someone was waiting for him.

Rubnicek advised him not to drive right up to the gate, they could park in a side-street, no need to draw the neighbours' attention to them. And strangely, although Leidemit had only come on his friend's request, he liked that plan. He didn't know himself right then exactly why. He stopped at the beginning of the path between the gardens, on the main road. Rubnicek lit another cigar, told Leidemit there was no need to hurry and wished him luck as he disappeared between the flowering fruit trees. It was almost dark by now and the red amber glow of the cigar could be seen from some distance away. A careful observer would have seen it bobbing up and down, to the left and the right. It looked as if a large red-hot beetle were performing a strange dance. But there was no careful observer. The people living out there for the summer had all withdrawn into their houses and were busy with all sorts of things, and Leidemit headed straight for the gate to Pohanka's section. No one was there to see how Rubnicek system-

atically searched the glove box, then the back seats and finally the boot, which he opened with a key he somehow had cut. Each piece of paper was scrutinised carefully in the light of a small torch which he had taken from his jacket pocket.

Leidemit hesitated for a moment at the gate. Should he ring the bell, or should he just open the gate and go in? He tried the gate. It was locked. He had no choice but to ring the bell. Everything was quiet, there was no indication that his signal had been heard. The sound of radio music from one of the neighbouring houses wafted over, the distant silhouettes of the mountains were still clearly visible against the steadily darkening sky. Here and there, light glimmered through the fresh green and the blossom trees spread their heady scent. It's obviously not a good time, he thought and wondered whether he should turn back to the car. He searched his pocket for a piece of paper to leave a message in the letterbox, and decided to ring one more time. This time he heard the immediate opening of a door, and Eveline's steps coming closer and closer.

Still three or four metres away from the gate she cried out in surprise: "Oh, it's you, Josef!" She came to the gate. "Just a moment," she said, "just a moment, I'll go and fetch the key."

"Don't bother," said Leidemit, "I was just passing by. I only came to deliver a message from Albert." He looked closely at the woman. She'd obviously been getting ready for bed, or maybe she'd been in bed already. Been in bed. Leidemit thoughts flicked unintentionally back to Danae, and he had to smile. Eveline was wrapped in a threadbare dressing gown. There was a flash of naked leg as she walked. Then she was opposite him, they shook hands through the mesh of the gate and he said again: "Don't bother, I can't stay anyway."

"Is something wrong?" the woman asked.

"Wrong? What sort of wrong?" asked the man. He didn't quite know what she meant.

"Has anything happened to Albert, is that why you came?" asked Eveline and leaned over the gate.

"I see," the man smiled, "no, nothing's happened. He has to work next Sunday, that's all, and he asked me to tell you." He had grabbed hold of the iron bar of the gate and could now feel the gentle pressure of something smooth on the back of his hand.

"Wait a moment," said the woman, "we can't talk properly across the fence like this. I'll be back in a minute with the key." She rushed back to the door of the house and Leidemit watched her.

She's hurrying, he thought, she's got nothing to hide, not even her naked legs, and it's perfectly reasonable that a woman living by herself would lock the gate and not come out with the key when the bell rings. Typical of Rubnicek to believe that sort of thing, not this woman, no, not her, she lives for those children of hers, he wouldn't be able to understand a thing like that, but I saw it again last Sunday, so caring, and when she smiled at me, all it meant was that she was happy I was interested in the little ones, the way she talked to them about the tortoise ...

Eveline returned with the key and unlocked the gate. She looked down the garden path and asked, "Where's your car?"

"I parked it down the road. I didn't want to let the whole neighbourhood know I was here. I know how nosy people are, and how they like to gossip about the smallest thing. There's a colleague of mine waiting in the car too."

"Is there," said the woman. She sounded disappointed. "So you can't stay long."

"No," he said threading his arm through hers and walking towards the house. "The children are already asleep, I take it?"

"Have been for a while now."

"So we'd better sit down here on the steps, so we don't wake them up." He was about to sit down. But the woman held his arm tightly.

"No, come inside. Once they've fallen asleep it takes a lot to wake them." The sleeve of her dressing gown had ridden up a little, Josef's hand was resting on her bare arm. "I'm not wearing enough you know. The evenings are still quite cool," the woman went on. "I had no idea who'd be ringing at this time of night. I didn't even want to look at first. But please, sit down." She pushed him onto a bench in the corner of the veranda and sat down next to him.

Leidemit could see the blossoms in front of the window and further away, the gleam of the waves. A dim light still glowed dully in the western sky and reflected on the water's surface, dark and heavy was the body leaning next to him, and he could smell her hair, golden hair, a golden halo of hair, golden, Danae! No, not here, not here, not here.

"Oh Josef," whispered the woman, "I wanted so much to have someone to talk to, you know, he always leaves me alone with the

children, all week and now even on Sundays. The children need more of their malt extract, you know, he promised to bring some, but he forgets us, forgets me, just like that. Everything else is more important to him, his work, does he really have to? Wasn't there anyone else? You could have...."

"But I did! I suggested Rakocan, but Albert insisted. I put his name forward for promotion. He wasn't always like that you know. When I think back to how we were, at school."

"Yes, his work, it's the only thing that really means anything to him, these days, the only thing that seems to fulfil him. Nothing else interests him anymore, not even me."

"Surely not, Evi, you're exaggerating. He takes such good care of you! After all, it's you and the children he's working for. What does he get out of it?"

"And what do I get out of it?" asked the woman. It sounded bitter and angry.

"What do any of us get out of it, in the end?" asked Leidemit, while his right hand stroked the woman's soft, plump hand, soothing her. When he thought back to Sunday, it struck him that the signs of her disillusionment had been there even then. It was only after he had mentioned her beloved children that she had been able to pull herself together and make a half-way contented impression. She's quite right when you think about it, what does she get out of it? But he had to console her somehow. "So some people go to the theatre every day and head off to parties afterwards, or travel South for the summer, what does any of that really matter, Evie? When you really think about it, what does it matter?"

"It's easy for you talk, you've got everything," sighed the woman.

Just what have I got, he thought. Of course, she's right, from her point of view, of course it's easy for me to talk. If you're already rolling in it and so on and so forth. But they've only got themselves to blame. They wanted those children, and on Sunday she was very proud of the three of them.

"Just what have I got that you haven't?," he asked nevertheless. But he had to console her somehow. "Albert has you, Evie, isn't that as much as he could wish for?"

"Thank you," she said and shook her head. "You're an incorrigible flatterer. Because he's got me! I must be something very special."

He knew that he had to pay her another compliment and he did so, with plenty of charm and a smile which indicated that both of them understood the game.

The woman leaned against Leidemit's shoulder. She had put her right hand on his upper arm. He had completely forgotten what he was here for. All he could feel was the presence of the other body, all he could hear was the breathing next to him. He could feel the quietness around him, intensified by the distant noise of the vehicles rolling towards town, the thundering train going over the bridge, the music from a radio in one of the neighbouring houses. Surrounded by this quietness, he thought neither of Albert nor of Rubnicek, he simply felt a moment of perfect satisfaction. But then it was all gone again in an instant. He had noticed Eveline's thigh. She'd made some sort of movement, and her dressing gown had been pulled aside in such a way that one of her legs was uncovered. The weight of her body squeezed the flesh out into a bulging pancake on the hard seat of the bench. Leidemit could sense the gently reddened, pink skin gleaming. It was already too dark to make out any further details.

"I think I should be going," said the man. "I can't leave my friend alone much longer."

The woman straightened up, rearranged her dressing gown and sighed.

"Look," she said, got up and opened the door leading to the bedroom. Leidemit, who had followed her, put his head into the dark room. He could dimly make out the faces of the three little girls in their beds.

"Aren't they lovely?" the woman whispered.

Leidemit thought hard about how he could get her to dissuade Albert from working weekends before he had to leave. He saw three light circles, the heads of the children, lying there on their colourful pillows. "Three little angels," he said without thinking. He glanced round the room. There was another bed with the duvet folded back, an old couch next to the wall covered in children's clothes and two chairs strewn with the woman's dress, stockings and underwear.

An uncomfortable silence developed. No one said a word, no one did anything, the only noise was the sound of their breathing and that of the children. Neither knew what to expect. Then Leidemit turned back to the veranda.

Eveline was standing next to him. He put his arm round her shoulder and guided her out into the garden.

It's not going to happen this weekend, he thought, but maybe next time. Rubnicek will complain of course, but eight days are neither here nor there. He suddenly came back to reality and realised he had already reached the garden gate. "All right, well, if there's anything you could tell me which might persuade Albert not to work on Sunday, please, tell me. I really want to help you."

Eveline swayed a little. Did she really want Albert to come out and see her? What did he do when he was here? He did a little painting, pruned the trees, dug in the vegetable beds, he always found something to do. He's a good, hard-working man, her mother had said, he'll take good care of you, she'd said. Yes, she was well looked after, so well that she felt like an antique on a shelf in a huge store-room, which no one noticed anymore. But at least there was another human being around, someone she had so much in common with, not only the children, well, mostly the children, but there was also the shared knowledge of the other's weaknesses, the unwashed feet, the prickly beard when they went to bed and the cigarette shortly before.

"I'm sorry Josef, I can't think of anything off the top of my head. Something will probably occur to me as soon as you've gone, but by then it'll be too late of course." She paused, unlocked the door and moved closer to the man beside her. "Maybe you could come by again some time, you know, you could bring the malt extract with you, maybe I'll have had an idea by then." She stood opposite him and they shook hands. It was properly dark by now. Every now and then the headlights of a car flashed past. A car passed by out on the main road.

"All right then," he said, "I can't promise anything, but I'll try and make it back sometime over the next few days. The firm has a construction site out near Franzensdorf. If I find I've got business there, I'll make sure I come past your place." He leant towards her, and for a brief moment it seemed to each of them as if they might meet in a kiss, but then he shook her hand and turned away.

The woman locked the gate, and as he was standing on the other side, saying goodbye, Eveline reached through the bars, grabbed his hand, put it on her breast and whispered, "The children go to bed at seven o'clock." Then she turned around and ran back towards the house.

When Leidemit reached his car, he saw that it was empty. Rubnicek had disappeared. It was dark and there was no street lighting in the whole neighbourhood. Leidemit got into the driver's seat, switched on the headlights and started the car. Mosquitoes and beetles flickered and flashed in the bright beams and the thousands of falling blossoms gleamed like snow. Leidemit reversed and crossed over to the right side of the road, and he had started off in the direction of the city when he saw Rubnicek waving and heading towards him. He opened the door and let him in.

"It's such a beautiful evening" Rubnicek said apologetically, "I went for a short walk, you were such a long time. Any luck?"

"No," said Leidemit, with some hesitation. He accelerated and the car rolled off in the direction of the city. "She was alone, of course," he added after some time and as there was no response he continued, "There's nothing more we can do this week. Maybe next Sunday."

"You keep saying that: 'Next week, maybe next week'," Rubnicek complained. "It can't go on like this, you know, you've already had your down payment."

"So have you, haven't you?" Leidemit returned. His foot kept a steady pressure on the accelerator. The car was doing ninety kilometres an hour. The trees on the left and the right of the street blurred into a continuous wall.

"There's a hundred other ways I could have come by an insignificant little sum like that, you know that as well as I do," said Rubnicek.

"Of course," Leidemit stared at the road in front of him. The needle of the speedometer climbed up to one hundred. The lights of the city were approaching rapidly. "It would still have cost you something, though. Everyone's had a down payment, now we just have to wait and see how it all works out. Don't lose your nerve my dear colleague."

As he spoke, Leidemit thought of the thigh, delicate pink, and above it the stomach, pale as marzipan, arching in the glaring light of his headlights. His foot remained steady on the accelerator.

The next day was sunny and warm as well. Pohanka could once again sit and watch the people in the apartment block opposite. There, up on the third floor was the man with the pipe, and one floor down, two windows to the right, the two old women with their cat constantly

rubbing against their shoulders. The animal seemed even more restless today than the day before. In the end, one of the old women grabbed it firmly and hugged it tightly to her, so that only the constantly waving tip of its tail still betrayed its excitement.

Herr Pohanka had called Fräulein Mislowitsch over to him and was carefully tackling the subject of yesterday evening. He informed her that it would be preferable if they didn't use a familiar form of address when talking to each other here in the factory. Kitty agreed, of course. She had laughed, his circumspection amused her slightly. He then went over to Leidemit. They sorted out the papers he would need for the construction site. Pohanka divided the diagrams and the tables and all the other paperwork into several piles ready to assign to the different teams. When Leidemit asked him to recommend a reliable worker who could liase between the different teams, grasp things quickly, relay technical data, keep tables and perhaps even keep a subtle eye on the workers, he suggested Mislowitsch. Leidemit argued that she hadn't been in the laboratory for long enough and would find it difficult to find her way around. Frau Haumichel would be more suitable. Frau Haumichel was a manual worker who had been working in the laboratory for over twenty years. She was about fifty, which made her somewhat slow and fussy but she knew every nook and cranny of the large workroom and was familiar with all the technical terms. He didn't think much of the reliability of young girls in general either, but he let himself be persuaded by Pohanka to entrust Mislowitsch with the job. Maybe he was thinking about Rubnicek and the advantages of having an inexperienced beginner around him, a person who had to concentrate on her work, more so than someone more experienced who would know everything already and have had more time to notice what was going on around her. He didn't quite know himself what made him give in. Pohanka also mentioned that he'd had dinner with the girl in the same restaurant, quite by chance, of course, and that she'd shown an interest in technical things. He also remarked that while she'd seemed fairly uneducated, she was surprisingly quick on the uptake.

Leidemit jokingly inquired whether the "restaurant" had been his regular sausage stand. They both laughed, and the whole situation was forgotten.

Preparations for the construction site continued throughout the morning. Kitty, who was now working under Leidemit, hardly found

time to think about anything else but the tasks she was given. The engineer sent her on a continuous stream of errands, visiting this group and that, ordering all sorts of materials from the storeroom, filling in papers and lists and taking sets of instructions to the respective project foremen. She had to pass her former colleagues on the conveyor belt in the assembly hall, where they were still attaching one part to another part, disc to another disc, ring to another ring. The women called out to her, wanting to talk, while their busy hands continued in the familiar rhythm, but she stopped only for a few moments, eager to get back to the engineer, partly to demonstrate her efficiency, but also to be back close to him again. The women grumbled as she left, Frau Fink knew for a fact that the girl was having a relationship with one of the men from the laboratory, that she'd had an argument with Immervoll and that that stupid boy was still keen on her. She further pronounced that a girl who had a different boyfriend every month like that was no good at all, and that the young man should find himself another girl. The women all agreed that since Kitty had left their group she had become arrogant and full of herself.

Leidemit and Pohanka usually ate together in a small inn near the factory, and Pohanka asked his friend during lunch whether he had managed to see his wife yet. Leidemit hesitated for a moment before replying: "No, Albert, I'm sorry, I'll go this afternoon or tomorrow morning. What with all the preparations for the project, I haven't had a chance to get to Franzensdorf yet."

Pohanka found nothing strange in that.

Leidemit also wanted to take the opportunity to try to talk him out of his decision to work weekends.

"You realise, don't you Albert, that the construction will take about three or four weeks. You know you won't be able to see your family during all that time?"

The new transmission station. Pohanka had been working on it for weeks, now it was about to be completed. Finally, after all Josef's planning, the improvements, the chance to see the results - not in the laboratory - no, on site! At the station itself, he knew almost every single wire backwards. But all he asked was, "Who would you give it to instead?"

"Rakocan."

"I've got nothing against Rakocan. But I doubt that someone who joined the team at this late stage of the planning would have the necessary overview." You had a good overview of the bedroom from the old couch, especially if you looked out through the bright window at the distant mountains, but close by, between him and that window, that was where Eveline took off her underwear every night; and he, he turned towards the wall and pulled the worn duvet over his face to avoid having to see the shape of her body.

"Yes, yes," said Leidemit, "you're right, of course. But I'm on the team as well you know."

"True, but how can you be in two places at once, here in the laboratory and out at the station? To be honest, I'm really looking forward to it, to that moment when the electricity is switched on for the first time, and the first pictures appear on the screens." He saw the iron frames with their carefully ordered bundles of wires and all their marked connections, he saw the measuring instruments functioning, he heard voices, Eveline's voice was saying, "You shouldn't, that's impossible, be careful, take care," but he also heard the construction workers calling out measurements, inalterable measurements, all dependent on one other, he heard the frogs croaking and walked from station to station, sending workers here and there, watching carefully to see that nothing got mixed up, checking every last tiny part. Everything had been going so well until now, no mistakes! Everything was running smoothly. The next frame was being connected and the tension had been palpable when the first tests were done: Would the measurements correspond to the ones calculated on the tables?

"And you're prepared to leave your wife alone for all that time?"

The frogs croaked and his wife snored all night long, Pohanka had to weigh it up of course, there are the flies here, but work lasts until late into the night and everything I do is right. Reichenhaus has never found cause to complain when I take the radios back. "My wife?" he asked as if he didn't seem to quite understand the question. He kept looking around the room and finally called the waitress. When she approached the table he called out in her direction, "An espresso, please, Fräulein."

Leidemit ordered one too. "And the children," he added turning towards his friend.

"I'll go out there, Josef, next week perhaps, on Saturday evening. I'll bring something nice for the little ones. Eveline has been wanting

one of those garden sun umbrellas for a long time. Have you seen those colourful umbrellas? I'll bring one of them when I go, that will cheer her up, and then I'll take the last bus and tram back to make sure that I'll be fit for work on Sunday." I don't need to see that sour face if one little droplet should happen to hit the sheet, and ... God I hate that voice, the way it just destroys the most perfect moment with that "be careful!" I hate it, hate it, hate it.

The waitress served the espressos and took away the empty plates away with her. While Pohanka lit up a cigarette, Leidemit bent towards his friend, taking care to look to the left and the right, making sure that no one who wasn't supposed to hear what he was about to say was sitting at a neighbouring table and whispered, "You know, Albert, if it's the money," he paused for a while, no, it's not the money, he thought, but continued on anyway, "I've heard from a reliable source that you're up for promotion, they say you should be getting it in the very near future. You know what I mean, if it's because of money ... I could understand that, with three children, don't you want to build a proper house on that property of yours? I think you mentioned something like that once."

"No, Josef, well, yes, of course! Yes and no! It wasn't just the money that made me take this job, although it will come in very handy, I can't deny it. Of course I want to build, mind you, who knows if I'll ever manage? For the girls, to make sure they get something. But this information, you surprise me. I take it it has nothing to do with the project. It means rather a lot to me, as you well know."

And while Pohanka inhaled the smoke of his cigarette and Leidemit sipped his coffee, the dining room disappeared for both of them, the neighbouring tables disappeared, people and plates, the spooning of soup, the chewing of meat, the drinking of beer, it all disappeared.

Our work, the power to change the world, only our work will survive us, give witness to the people we once were. It is the only trace of our existence in the fullness of the vastness, the eternally repeating cycle of living and dying.

Change the world? Make it a better place? Murder and robbery and betrayal, they're still there, and forty million people starve to death on this earth every year.

Everyone's hungry for the best bit of the kill, just like those hunters back in the Ice Age, thousands of years ago. And each one who chooses a better portion for himself is in the right. Because we are

living now, each one for himself, and when you're dead, well, then you can't be helped anymore, not by even the most ingenious invention to improve the lot of humankind.

Quite right. Everyone has to die, and the few paltry years we spend alive are only a tiny fraction of the millions of years this planet has existed and the hundreds of thousands of years human beings have existed upon it. But the human race will survive eternally through its works, the simple Egyptian slave who helped to heave the huge blocks to the tops of the pyramids, as well as the unknown genius who drew those powerful bisons on the walls of the cave of Lascaux. They all made their contribution to the existence of humanity, just as each one of us is contributing to the humanity of the future.

Yes, everyone has to die, but before that happens everyone should learn to live, and more than anything life is supposed to be about pleasure, pleasure and the intoxication of existence, a dionysian *joie de vivre*.

Existence, pleasure, intoxication, ephemeral, all of them.

For me, perishable with me, just like the works of my hands and the thoughts of my brain. And even while I'm still alive, think of what could become of my works! One person makes a discovery to help mankind, the next one improves on that discovery and uses it to kill thousands in a single instant.

To be a foundation stone in a building like that? It's one thing if you're thrown onto the assembly line and have to join in, in order to avoid being crushed to pieces, but to actually *want* to be a small cog in that murderous mechanism, no thank you! Lying in the sun, gazing at meadows and fields, watching the rippling water, the fish, all the pointless games of childhood, that's really living. Your children are your best works of all.

The espresso exuded its fragrance from the cup and the smoke of the cigarette rose up from the hand of the man like a burnt offering from the altar of some deity.

How little do our children count as works of ours! One small droplet and what else comes from you? The soul? The flesh? It all comes from the female, and you find yourself astonished when, in spite of everything, you think you find one of your features on the little creature. And how quickly everything you had in common disappears, the process of isolation begins, the other being sinks into its own strangeness. No trace of that droplet remains, maybe not even the

mother's flesh and blood, another face, another spirit, another life, all strange, all foreign.

Pohanka looked at his watch. They had been here much too long. He signalled to the waitress, he wanted the bill. Leidemit wasn't in a hurry but paid at the same time anyway, and as the woman sorted the change, said he was going to Franzensdorf and asked whether he had any messages for Eveline.

No, Pohanka had no more messages for her.

"Well then, till tomorrow then," said Leidemit when they separated in front of the inn, "Any problems with the factory, I can be reached by telephone until half past six in Franzensdorf. But you've been well briefed anyway."

A crowd of construction workers were already waiting for Pohanka. Kitty too came to see him a number of times to ask him this and that. It was becoming increasingly clear that she was still new to the job after all, there were many terms she was unfamiliar with and Pohanka began to think of the burden he could have avoided by agreeing to Frau Haumichel instead. Of course, he could also see that the girl was trying very hard and once, when Kitty had come back to his desk yet again, she asked him whether he would really let her borrow one of his books.

"With pleasure," he said and looked at the girl's hands. What was she up to? The dark street in which she lived, the large block of flats with all those tenants, spies looking out of every window, her mother will have been told by now, an older man too, the way that girl carries on, he'll be married for sure. "What sort of book?" he asked. He'd been avoiding any form of direct address all day.

"I don't know. Could you maybe help me choose?" asked Kitty.

"Of course, but it would be best done there, with the bookcase in front of us, I can't think of anything right now. Nothing suitable comes to mind." Her hands would open the cover, turn page after page and her eyes would ask him whether this might be something a young girl would like. But what would a young girl like that like? Not the same things as he did, that's for sure. But what did he like? He liked this young person! Yes, that would be best. Kitty should come to his apartment and choose a book herself.

"Where do you live, Herr Pohanka?"

"The second street past the wine cellar we went to yesterday."

“Oh, then we almost walked right past your house,” said the girl, and looked astonished.

“Yes, I could have shown it to you, Kitty, I mean Fräulein Mislo-witsch. Or we could have gone up to my flat and made ourselves an espresso.” Sitting next to each other on the chaiselounge at the table, drinking coffee, smoking a cigarette, feeling the young body next to him, the large eyes, sensing inexplicable currents through his finger tips.

“It was late.”

“Of course, it was too late. I hope you didn’t have any problems at home.”

“No, no, I told my mother that I had to work overtime.”

Herr Rakocan came up and wanted to ask Pohanka something about the switchboard. Kitty went back to her work, and only shortly before the end of work did she find time again to spend a few minutes with Pohanka. They both agreed that the girl should come on Thursday evening at half past six (he wouldn’t be able to leave until much later than Kitty) to Pohanka’s flat and chose a book for herself.

The man didn’t have time that day to think about it, he didn’t even have time to look out the window. That was why he didn’t notice that the sun had disappeared, that grey clouds had covered the sky and that the women with the cat and the old man had withdrawn from their windows.

Of course, after his brief discussion with Kitty, he had thought of his talk with Josef at lunchtime again, had tried to sort out to what extent the presence of the young girl had influenced his arguments, and wondered critically whether he hadn’t taken on the outdoor project in part because of her. But he eventually absolved himself from that suspicion, because even if he was haunted by the red hair and swinging hips during the lonely hours of night, none of this had anything to do with his commitment to his work or him volunteering for the job.

But there wasn’t much time for all this reasoning and so everything remained a little imprecise and foggy. Pohanka’s thoughts were filled with figures, and the mass upon mass of those curious symbols developed by a century of engineers who wanted a language and script of their own, a universal tongue understood by all members of all nations and all races.

Her feet were hurting. There was an enormous pile of folded washing lying in the basket, waiting to be ironed. Her feet were hurting, the soles especially, but Frau Mislowitsch hardly even paused in her work. There's not all that much left, she kept telling herself whenever she looked at the waiting pile. And besides, she couldn't let Katharina wear a dirty lab-coat in the factory, especially now, when it had to be a white coat, out of the question! And all those blouses, so creased and crumpled and dirty, what did the girl do. in them? It was as if she had crawled through a couple of hedges backwards, the state that they were in, ah, those wide petticoats, like when I was young. To think of the way we all stood lined up along the long alleyway on those hot summer days, yes along the alley, and we waved when the emperor left the capital city for his hunting lodge after his duties were done. Lace was in then, it is again today, mind you, but our lace was handmade, very valuable, passed on from mother to daughter, the young people today laugh about that now, all machine-woven, Hans in his checked trousers! The thought of it made the woman smile. She finished another shirt. What a handsome young man he was. And Saint Anthony, with his gentle white face, wearing the brown robe of a monk and carrying the baby Jesus in his arms, how often had she paused in front of his statue. He had always helped her. There's a button missing again, and the collar looks a little threadbare too. Must make a new one. No, he'd never let her down yet, she carried him everywhere with her, small and slim, well-worn and smooth, just like women long ago used to carry a phallic idol about with them, but she didn't know anything about that, nor would it have ever occurred to her, no, she carried him in a tiny tin case in her purse anyway, not hanging round her neck. Hans wasn't so fussy anymore these days, but in the early days his shirts had to be starched properly, back then when he was working on the sleeping cars, international clientele in those days, and then that terrible accident, we have to be thankful that he didn't suffer more, yes, it was Saint Anthony, I've always said so.

What does that child do to her underwear! The woman shook her head indignantly. She doesn't take the least bit of care. If she would only come to her senses and decide on one, but that's what happens when you stop going to church, oh, the candles I've lit for her! Again she saw the man in the Franciscan monk's robe, with the baby Jesus in his arms. She's even had a raise, I wouldn't have believed it, Kitty, to think of the difficulties we had with her teacher at school, in the ninth class she called me into school because the girl was about to fail history, really, is history all that important? There were ten of us at home and none of us knew anything about history and we all turned out decent enough. Karl even owns a little shop.

As she ironed a towel, she saw her brother's shop in the main square of the village, scythes and jam, laundry powder and preserving jars, butter and milk cans in the window, small steps leading up to the entranceway. And Anna married a managing director in Neustadt, she's a proper lady now, history, geography, no, we didn't have a clue about any of that, but Kathy's not stupid, I've always known that and I said so to the teacher, yes, just look at how far she's come, in her white lab-coat, working in a laboratory, if that teacher could only see her now. I only hope she doesn't get careless, those men, it started with Leo and Pauli, I know, that was harmless enough, but Egon, sometimes I really thought she'd changed, all those late nights, gymnastics she said, they call it training, although Egon was a decent enough young man, no complaints here, pity, if she could only sort things out with Heini, give it time, she's very good, she's a good, hard-working child after all. She wants to buy a new summer dress now. Not another handkerchief, how many have I got left, there's no end to it, my feet hurt, that girl's still not home yet, but she's right of course, I didn't have it that good, when I was her age, I only had the one for years and years, it was beautiful, with pink frills, that was when I met Hans, dear God, if Father had only known, he would have beaten me half to death, but my guardian angel protected me, behind grandmother's lilac bush, it was the most beautiful summer dress I ever owned. Resurrection and the Corpus Christi procession and then the Feast of the Consecration of the Church. How long is it since he last played that clarinet of his? Five, six, no, it must be more than ten years since he last played. He was the youngest member of the band, oh, he could blow all right. The old woman hummed a song while she picked up item after item from the basket and smoothed each one out.

It was a long-forgotten song, a song she hadn't sung for a long time, the words of which she had long forgotten and even the melody was only half-remembered.

The woman stopped what she was doing and listened. From one of the other floors the clattering of a water-pitcher could be heard, and Frau Mislowitsch thought she could hear the voice of her daughter in between the clattering. She had heard correctly, quick short steps came from the direction of the staircase towards the door and her mother hardly had time to put down the iron, hurry to the door and push back the bolt, before the girl was opening the door and entering the kitchen with a "Guten Abend, Mama".

"Guten Abend, Kathy," said the woman, as she walked back to her ironing board. It was supported at one end by the kitchen table and the back of a chair at the other.

Kitty looked around, there was ironed laundry everywhere, here was her lab-coat and there her blouse. She'd wanted a new one for tomorrow. She thought of the bookshelves from which she was to chose a book tomorrow, and she thought of the beautiful apartment, of carpeted floors, of Pohanka's quiet voice and of his firm, strong hands. She could go to the man's apartment without the least worry, he might be disappointed, but there was no danger in it for her. Not this week!

"Did you have to work overtime again?" her mother asked.

"Yes," said Kitty. "It might go on like this for a couple more weeks. I think they're building some big new transmitting station or something. Most of our engineers are working overtime too, I heard that some of the teams are even working Saturdays and Sundays."

"What about you?"

"I don't know yet," replied the girl, knowing full well that she wouldn't have to go in to the factory on weekends. Of course, at that very moment, Kitty herself wouldn't have been able to say why she said what she did, maybe she wanted to have something just for herself, a scrap of knowledge, an insignificant little choice all of her own, maybe it was the joy of having a secret, perhaps it was a sort of rebellion against parental authority, even if by now it was an authority which had been watered down to benevolent advice and the odd question as to her whereabouts, to her it still seemed superfluous, a restriction on her personal freedom. "What treats have you got for us for dinner today?" she asked. She sniffed around the gas cooker.

"Mashed potatoes and pig's tongue. Just wait, I'll be finished in a moment, I'll dish it out for you." The woman turned back off to the remaining towels, handkerchiefs and dusting cloths.

Kitty went to the other room. Newly-ironed items of clothing covered the beds, the chairs and the table. She didn't take much notice of them, went to the mirror, combed her hair, looked critically at her face, opened a bottle and scrubbed at her skin with a small handkerchief. There's not even room to sit down, she thought and looked around. Every inch was covered, even the little stool in front of the dressing table was piled high with ironed laundry.

"Who walked you home yesterday?" called her mother from the kitchen.

Kitty could hear the iron being set down and the next item of laundry being smoothed out. Obviously she had been seen with Herr Pohanka yesterday evening, and someone had told her mother straight away. The apartment building had been staring at her with its sixty-two eyes. Sixty-two windows, some of them were always open, filled with bored people who didn't know what else to do, people who were already looking forward to the next day because, quite by chance, of course they would find themselves emptying their buckets into the toilet at the exact same moment that Frau Mislowitsch set off to fill her water pitcher from the communal tap in the corridor. The house was grey, and the women who gossiped in the corridor were grey and ugly grey prickles and thistles flowed from their mouths. Just as well we weren't walking arm in arm, thought Kitty, a man like that, he's such a contrast to the silly young boys. Tact and Experience, makes all the difference.

"That was one of our engineers," she said to her mother. "He had to work overtime as well. He doesn't live far from here, so he walked me home. He's nice. He's got three children, imagine that. He's not even all that old!"

Her mother muttered something that Kitty couldn't quite hear. The girl put all her bottles and jars back (impossible, there's no space here). It was quite dark by now. Kitty went out to the kitchen.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"I think it's raining," said her mother.

They stopped and listened. The plashing of raindrops on the windowpanes was clearly audible. Frau Mislowitsch switched on the light, put away the ironing-board and got the evening meal ready.

Her feet were really hurting, especially the soles.

Pohanka had just reached the shop when the downpour started. He was carrying a radio under each arm. Herr Reichenhaus was not very pleased to learn that he wouldn't be able to repair quite so many radios over the next few weeks, but Pohanka managed to put him off to a later date.

Back in his apartment, Pohanka was passing through the living-room on his way to the workroom, when the bookcase caught his eye. He stopped, put the radios down and studied the various spines. The gold-embossed letters gleamed dully, the colours were simple and elegant. The man leaned against the case. There was a whole shelf of classics, some of which he'd never touched, some of which he hadn't read in a long time. No, it wouldn't be a good strategy to start her off on the classics. Come to think of it, did he really want to invite her back to his apartment because of a book? Couldn't he just as easily choose one himself and take it to her? Leo Tolstoy, all ten beautiful, slim, black volumes, the golden letters caught his eye: *Resurrection*, *Anna Karenina*, *War and Peace*. No, he should just choose a book for her and take it to the factory tomorrow. That would give him more time to spend on Reichenhaus's radios. Grimmelshausen, Boccaccio, Ovid. Why? Hadn't she brushed herself against him as they went up the stairs from the wine cellar, hadn't she been longing for his company? She would stand here and he would stand behind her and put his arm around her body and draw her towards him. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, serene and serious, bound in leather. Hell? No, it didn't bother him at all, not those horribly detailed tortures in the fiery inferno, not the thousands of torturing devils dancing savagely round their victims, did they even exist anyway, and if they did, then it was only inside him, and then his arms would be round her body in spite of it all, pulling her towards him, and Sophocles here, that man in his lonely, awe-inspiring greatness, the man, the other. *Thou shalt not commit adultery*. No, it's none of his business, he hated her, commit what? Yes, there must be some sort of order, but he wasn't about to be controlled by the one his wife happened to believe in. The body, the young body in his hands, the flesh is weak, there were references to authorities, the utterances of some of the greatest examples of humanity, but why shouldn't he try and jump over that wall, that wall of strangeness between people, that wall which so few ever manage to

break down completely, ever collapses totally, which so rarely dissolves in the other, in nothingness, in the universe, who could say where he was in this exact moment, in this great moment, where was his essence, was it elevated by someone else? The true essence of man, when do we ever think about it, when do we acknowledge its presence, when are we ever really conscious of it? It's only in that moment when it rises, when we feel it dispersing, like water between our fingers, that we become conscious of it, in that moment when it leaves space and time, frees itself, then we recognise it. What about her? Doesn't she have an essence too? But what does she know about it? Absolutely nothing! Has she ever felt it, realised she has one or is it just wasted on her, allowed to go up in smoke, like fireworks, for nothing, for a single moment of lust? But how else is she supposed to experience herself, her essence, if she hasn't ever learnt to think or to notice, how else if not in wastefulness, in nothingness? She'll only become conscious of her existence for the first time when it's about to drift away from her. It's the only way that people ever come face to face with themselves. Pohanka turned away from the books and grabbed his radios. What about him, wasn't he wasting his essence too, his potential, daily, all those hours spent alone with those soulless radios? But then - could he ever be any more for her than a soulless radio? An appliance, not quite familiar, but the knobs and switches and buttons which turn on pleasure and lust are pretty much the same with everyone, the breasts, the beautiful hair, those thighs. Pohanka pushed open the door to his workroom, put the radios down and took one of the back panels off.

He was back in front of a familiar array of wires, switches and electronic parts, each cord bearing witness to their orderly arrangement. What was it that was pushing him towards that explosion into pyrotechnics, that dissipation into nothingness? Was it some unrelenting, irresolvable desire to overcome the restrictive Euclidean order, was it an inborn desire to free himself from the baser levels of existence? Sitting here, with these strictly ordered systems of wires and switches, resistors and condensers, it seemed impossible that he would ever escape his predestined future. Suddenly, sitting here, in front of these rigorous systems of mathematically calculated, mathematically proven power, he no longer believed in the possibility of being able to escape the order, didn't believe he would be allowed to escape any sort of order. Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Lao-tse, Confucius,

no, not the Bible either, not philosophical or religious systems, no, it was a system of figures and formulae that had brought him to this point. Figures and formulae, mystical incantations to the uninitiated, like the Kabbala, the red pigment they used to colour the runes, red, no, he didn't want to think of red. But what was behind those figures and formulae? Eveline, no, not her, all he could remember was the disgust of the last few nights in her bed and it seemed to him that the croaking of the frogs throughout the night had echoed like a triumphal song of victory. He had opened the radio casing. Easy! Of course, there's a loose wire. He plugged his soldering iron in and repaired the broken connection with the help of a small drop of solder.

It was all sorted out again, he could move on to the next one. Sorted out? Has she got everything sorted out too? Not her, not yet. It's only once you start thinking more of others that you stand a chance of becoming more than just a smoothly-functioning organism. He screwed the back panel of the radio back into place and set it to one side.

But before he started on the second one, he went out to the living-room, to the bookcase, where he selected a book. He carried it to the entrance hall and put it there so as to not forget to take it to the office the next day for Kitty. *Anna Karenina* glistened on the dark gleaming spine in gold lettering.

As he crossed back through the living-room, he could hear rain falling outside the window. Everything was very quiet inside, his every movement echoed clearly in the empty apartment. Pohanka started on the next radio. He worked until late into the night, so exhausted that he almost fell asleep over his work.

It was raining so heavily that the windscreen wipers had difficulty keeping up with the water hitting the windscreen. Leidemit stopped his car near the path and asked himself whether he should really go and see Eveline in weather like this. For safety's sake he had to park the car here. Further away would have been better but if he had to run up to the garden gate in this rain, he'd be completely soaked. Mind you, one more good reason to take something off, he thought. But the next moment he was thinking of the woman, she would have to run across the garden and would be soaked as well. That would hardly put her in a good mood, even supposing that she would come and open the gate for him in the first place.

He started the engine again, his headlights flashed into life, he switched them down to low beam, let the car roll slowly forward for about ten metres and stopped again. He reached for his jacket lying next to him, reached over to the back seat, rummaged about for the large tin of malt extract, put on the jacket, closed all the windows and locked the doors, took the tin and jumped out of the car. He slammed the door shut behind him, clutched his jacket closed in front of him, turned the collar up and ran through the pelting rain towards Pohanka's garden. He rang the bell once, very briefly and while he tried to make himself as thin as possible, drawing up his shoulders and almost standing on one leg, he could hear the door of the little house open and in a moment Eveline was with him. She had a overcoat wrapped around her body and was carrying a large umbrella in her left hand.

"I knew you'd come," she whispered, unlocked the gate and let him shelter under her umbrella.

As they lay side by side in the dark bedroom the only sound to be heard was the continuous drumming of the rain on the roof of the house. It was a rhythmical, monotonous drumming, like the sound of a huge, mysterious machine.

It must have been almost morning when the foul weather eased off, and at half past five, when Leidemit hurried across the garden, locked the door behind him and threw the key back over the fence, the sky was still covered in scurrying patches of cloud. The rain though had stopped, and a few blue holes with edges tinged rusty red the rising sun peeped through amidst the grey mountains of cloud. Thousands of glittering droplets were hanging on the mesh-wire fences. They hung on the wires like tears, and as Leidemit passed he bumped carelessly into a vertical post and the pearls of water dropped to the ground. The man didn't notice.

The traffic on the road was still very light. Soon Leidemit found himself driving across the huge bridge, the water foaming beneath, brown and dirty. Nothing reminded him of Sunday, when the car in front of him had had to break so suddenly. Soon his car was parked back in front of his apartment block. He hurried to his room and before he did anything else, ran a bath.

On the journey home, he'd been thinking hard about how he could keep Pohanka away from the construction site for a while. It seemed obvious that Eveline wouldn't be much help. She didn't seem to care

too much whether he was with her or not, it seemed enough that he provided for her and the children. But on Sunday, when he'd been telling them all about his travels, it was clear that she felt like some sort of incarcerated Cinderella. Ah yes, the children. They'd slept right through the night, not even a thunderstorm seemed to wake them, only every now and then did tiny Sieglinde turn around or little Sigrid move a childish leg in her dreams.

Leidemit took off his still-damp underwear, threw it across a drying line which spanned the bathroom from one end to the other and got into the bath. It felt so good to be submerged up to his neck in the effervescent warm water, to feel the sticky coldness of the early morning dissolve into a sea of cosy heat. A slow ripple spread itself through his body and almost took his breath away, the same feeling he'd had a few hours ago in the dark room, so dark that he'd scarcely been able to see the face beside him, just a hazy shape, a rough outline, a strange perspective. Perspective, he'd always been able to master it, better than all the others, that's why he'd done all their drawings too, they were none of them more than seventeen, and Albert only kissed her. I wonder what happened to her? But him, he'd done their drawings for them, and when she and Albert had gone off into the nearby forest, he'd seen them both from the window, seen them laughing as they kissed, laughing at him, at him, the one who did their drawings. Plink, plink, plink, drops kept falling from the tap into the water in the tub, the tiles on the wall were covered in thousands and thousand of water droplets, the normally glittering shiny chrome was dimmed by the vapour, so dim that he lay quietly listening to the distant sound of the thunderstorm and finally fell asleep, so dim that he wouldn't have been able to look out of the window without wiping the pane with his hand, covered in enough condensation to be the breath of five sleeping people. Now, as he looked at the fogged-up taps, at the tiles covered in droplets of steam, and at his drowsy limbs, his consciousness of everything was heightened. In the warm, pleasant water which enclosed his body in an even all-overness, he became clearly aware of one thing. *I am*. He became conscious of his whole self, his whole existence. It was now, in the warm water, and not during the thunderstorm and the bright flashes out there on the outskirts of town, that he knew himself for what he was. He moved his fingers, his toes, he examined each individual limb, his ankles, his knees, bent all his joints and stretched

them out again, they were all functioning, all moving, everything was wonderfully co-ordinated, all of this was him, each one of these movements gave him comfort, joy, he *enjoyed* his fingers, his toes and his knees. He bent every last joint up and down. It was all him, only him. He could have lain there for much longer, simply enjoying his existence, but when he glanced at his watch on the little shelf above the cupboard next to the bath, he realised that he couldn't stay there for much longer if he didn't want to be late for the office.

He stood up, let the water drain away and ran a cold shower. It was refreshing, it was strengthening and invigorating, it put an end to introspection and demanded activity. He had also developed an appetite. Scarcely had he finished drying himself when he was on the telephone ordering breakfast at the café, with two eggs. He was putting on fresh underwear and a different suit when the renaissance cup caught his eye again. He paused for a while, observing with satisfaction the little god clenching the fish between his strong thighs. They knew how to live, gold and silver and expensive materials, wall hangings and music and women, all centred around man, around me. We may have become a little more sober, a little more primitive, but we still know how to live. Every age has its Savonarolas and its Borgias, some say this man, other say that man, has the better life. I, for one, prefer life to death at the stake. He laughed at the idea, then, as he looked for his tie, the old crucifix came into view again. Damn it, I think I'll return it after all. It's a constantly irritating reminder! I'll exchange it for a painting. But which one? Ah yes, I saw a Baroque painting when I was there last, *Leda and the Swan*, it seemed a nice little painting, but I doubt it would be a good swap, the crucifix is almost certainly much more valuable, that old antique dealer will be laughing all the way to the bank.

Leidemit had found his tie and put it on. While he pushed one end through the loop he looked closely at the body. There was nothing aesthetically attractive about the tortured, bruised and violated body with its broken limbs. The scent of soap and bath salts wafted in through the door from the neighbouring room. To preach suffering, even glorify it eventually! It's suffering after all! But we've eradicated it, well, we're well on our way anyway. Who needs that sort of thing? We don't want it! Nobody wants it. All we want is a good life, nothing more, anyone who claims otherwise is either a liar or living in a dream-world. Albert? No, his is a masochistic kind of pleasure.

Most of the time they don't have the first idea, I am sure he doesn't either.

Leidemit tied the knot of his tie, looked in the mirror, and, satisfied with his appearance, left the apartment.

Herr Franz was already expecting him when he arrived. His breakfast was served immediately and the morning papers brought to him. As he flicked idly through the broadsheets, he noticed that the sky outside had become clear and bright again and that the puddles in front of the café were reflecting the occasional white cloud and that the song of a distant blackbird could be heard, piercing through the sound of the traffic.

VI

One metal ring, a second ring, a third ring, all day long, down goes the lever; from seven in the morning until five at night, a little metal disc, another metal disc, a little insulating plate and down goes the lever and one ring, a second ring, a third ring, all day long.

The women and girls sat on their high stools and the conveyor belt moved on slowly and relentlessly. Broken fragments of a song squealed from the loudspeaker, as they did every day. The speaker hissed and cut out. The women didn't take any notice. They talked about films, about fashion and the latest sensational crimes.

The first thing Herr Pohanka did was hand the book to Kitty. She was astonished, he didn't want her at his apartment after all, after all the conversations they'd had. Maybe she was even a little disappointed. She was still curious. What did his place look like? Carpets, furniture, pictures? She'd missed out on an adventure! The days went by so drearily! What a way for him to behave. She had a look at the book. She knew the title from a movie and she'd quite liked that. But so many pages - how long would it take her to read all that?

Herr Pohanka had said, however, that next time she could choose one for herself. He'd said that he'd chosen one for her this time because she'd be late home tonight as it was, given the amount of work there was to get through. There would no doubt be an opportunity to go out together again sometime. He sounded as if he was trying to console a child whose toy he had taken away. Then he went back to his desk and Kitty took the book to her locker.

Pohanka's explanation didn't quite ring true, and she was in a bad mood with him for some time afterward. But when she passed the women at the conveyor belt on her way to the locker room and Frau Fink asked her what dusty old moth-eaten book she was carrying there, some of her resentment towards the man left her.

Only a few weeks ago, she herself might have asked a question just like that, or at least she wouldn't have thought there was anything wrong with one of her work-mates asking something similar, but now

it annoyed her somehow (the engineer didn't have any dusty old moth-eaten books, ridiculous) but in spite of that she was happy to show the book to Frau Fink and let her read the title.

"I saw that one too," said the woman. She meant the film, of course. "It was a sad story, I think. I don't remember the details, but I think there was something about a postmaster, no, that was *The Postmaster's Daughter*, but it's by the same man." She put the next disc onto the ring, pulled down on the lever, then another lever, one more step and on to the belt with the chassis. Then the next one, three rings, disc, disc, down goes the lever, and again ring, ring, disc, disc, down with the lever.

"Really?" Kitty asked and looked at the spine of the book. "Tolstoy?"

She stood next to the group of women, a group to which, only a short while ago, she too had belonged. She heard conversations in which she had once participated, she stood next to them and looked at the spine of the book, and the voices of her former work-mates were vague and distant, "Yellow underwear with black lace is all the rage now... in the little bar at Petersplatz... Helga's going out with someone else now... in the Stadtpark..."

And all the time the loudspeaker emitted the same crackling and spitting noises, a melody emerged for a few seconds and then the words: "*Go to, let us go down and there confound their language that they may not understand one another's speech.*" Then a loud whistling shrilled through the speakers and all of a sudden a few bars of an energetic march. No one took any notice.

"Yes, yes, Tolstoy, that's it," said the woman. "I saw another film by him too, *The Idiot*."

The girls at the conveyor belt laughed again.

"What's so funny?" demanded the woman. "Don't you believe me?"

"Oh yes of course, of course, yes, yes, of course," cried the girls all at the same time.

Kitty didn't understand what the women were talking about, she didn't understand what they were laughing at. All she could do was stand there and feel that she was somehow the butt of their joke.

"Of course," said Frau Fink, apparently the cause of the eruption of laughter had suddenly dawned on her. "Just a moment ago we were talking about Immervoll," she explained to the girl. And when that

drew no response, she added: "He's still chasing after you, you know."

"So what?" asked Kitty and looked defiantly at the women.

"I'm only saying," said Frau Fink, "you'd think he would have grasped it by now, that you're after something better and all."

Again came the laughter from the crowd of girls at the conveyor belt and Kitty went bright red, turned away and stalked off towards the cloakroom.

A wave of laughter followed her.

She met Herrn Leidemit in the corridor on her way back to work. He must have seen her before as well, because he asked her what she was reading that was so interesting.

"Tolstoy," said Kitty.

It was not normally Leidemit's habit to engage in private conversation with the women who worked at the factory, but the two of them had to walk together for a short distance, and the girl had a pretty face, a good figure... Tolstoy was it?

"Which one?" he asked, without any great interest.

"*Anna Karenina*," said Kitty. She obviously took the subject very seriously.

Leidemit suppressed a yawn. They were entering the main construction hall by now, and as he gave the girl the folder with the work schedules she said: "I saw the film you see, and now I want to read the book. A film can't express everything as well as the writer can. So much is lost, you know."

Kitty had heard these words somewhere once before, maybe even from one of the engineers in the laboratory. It seemed the right time to repeat it. Leidemit held his hand in front of his open mouth. They passed the group of women. She would do better to concentrate on her work, he thought and gave Kitty a set of instructions concerning the schedules. She had to thumb through the folder as he did so, and ask a number of questions about things she didn't understand. Leidemit noted her uncertainty. Just as I thought! But he remained patient, talked her through all the papers, explained to her which person she had to hand this or that material over to, and the pair of them walked across the long construction hall in animated conversation.

The women looked meaningfully at each other. But the foreman Feuchtinger was just then passing their bench, so they were forced to continue working quietly, unable to badmouth their former work-

mate. A melody of sorts could be heard from the loudspeaker. Many of the women hummed along quietly.

While Kitty sorted the papers on the large table according to the location of the separate construction teams, (all the ones working on the first floor, those on the third floor, those from hall U and those out on the site) Leidemit continued on to his desk, where he found Pohanka waiting for him.

He was interested in me today, thought Kitty, as she sorted through the sheets. I'll ask Pohanka today whether he'll lend me the other two books only after I've read the first one, of course, hall U, what were they called? *The Idiot*, that's easy to remember, first floor, and the other one, outdoor site, the other one? third floor, the other one? *The Postmaster's Daughter*. I'll write that one down, hall U, he'll be surprised when he finds out that I know all that! Outdoor site, the smell of him, always freshly bathed, well, I'm sure he'll have them, outdoor site, all those Tolstoys, first floor, but imagine that! He's interested in them as well, I thought he was only interested in fishing, there's nothing written on this one, I'll have to tell him, maybe I'd be better to ask him whether he's got those books, this *Idiot* for example, but Pohanka is much easier to talk to, I'll deliver the ones for hall U first, blond, slim hands, they're talking now, I can't very well interrupt them, just like a woman, I wonder whether his flat is nicer than Pohanka's? Kitty collected up all the papers, took the mystery sheet and slowly approached Leidemit's desk.

Herr Leidemit had taken a plan from his briefcase and unfolded it on the large table. The men bent over it. "But I had already promised you," said Leidemit, "and apart from that I had to go out to bring them the malt extract."

"The malt extract?" Pohanka looked at Leidemit in surprise.

"Of course, the malt extract for the children."

Pohanka's gaze followed one of the many lines in the maze of lines in front of him; it came to rest on a very small remnant of ash, fine ash, in the fold of the plan. It looked rather like cigar ash. How could that be? Josef didn't smoke cigars. Where had the ash come from then? Maybe it wasn't really cigar ash after all. Maybe it was ash from a cigarette. "Malt extract for the children," he murmured, but he could just as well have mumbled "butterflies for the umbrellas," or anything else, for all his thoughts corresponded with the sounds his lips were forming. Certainly, another double espresso, he heard and

Herr Franz replying: "Very well, Herr Leidemit." It was cold and the difference in temperature between the room inside and the street outside had caused a host of tiny water droplets to collect on the inside of the café window. Outside it was raining and snowing. The force of the storm was causing the lights on the tall lampposts to shake, and their gleam jumped backwards and forwards across the street. Blue threads of smoke formed strange patterns in the air and Pohanka could discern the strong scent of cigar smoke form amidst the veritable melting-pot of smells in the café. Josef was sitting in the niche by the window, his regular table, and a man of about fifty, well groomed, and wearing dark-rimmed glasses, had taken the seat opposite him. When Pohanka had sat down at the same table, he'd caught a slight whiff of scent emanating from the stranger. He didn't particularly care for perfumed men. It was a prejudice. He knew it. But he'd felt some sort of aversion towards Rubnicek from the very first moment he'd met him. And indeed, Josef had hardly left his seat that evening to take a telephone call, when the stranger had began to ask him questions about his friend, questions with a peculiar bias towards his financial affairs. He showed no little skill in doing so, and first took care to start by praising Josef's good taste, before very slowly and casually moving the conversation round to where he wanted it. But as Pohanka himself was fairly reserved by nature, and observant too, he couldn't help but notice that there was an obvious subtext to all this apparent care and concern. Later he had discovered that this Rubnicek was employed by ETW, a foreign firm, under foreign leadership. "The malt extract for the children, the malt extract, I don't remember," he finally said. No, he couldn't for the life of him remember telling his friend about Eveline's little errand.

Leidemit, recognised that he had slipped up. and continued: "Don't you remember, you asked me to get some when we were at lunch together that time. A big tin, you said."

"Really, at lunch?" asked the other man and looked surreptitiously at the rest of the ash. The words were spoken slowly, drawn out, suddenly cold. He could have almost believed that he might have mentioned it during the conversation at lunch and then forgotten all about it, why not? But then Josef had said it was a big tin. That couldn't be true, he never bought a big tin. But he kept quiet. Maybe Josef was mistaken. Maybe.

"What did you pay for it?" he asked his friend.

"I can't remember," he answered.

"But you must have been given a receipt?" Albert insisted, taking his wallet out of his pocket and opening it.

The friend waved him away. "That's ridiculous, Albert, don't bother. It was for the children, wasn't it?"

"Of course. But you went out in that storm... You must have been soaked to the skin, I hope Eveline didn't leave you waiting at the gate too long."

"I rang the bell and waited in the car. At first I thought she wasn't going to come out at all and I was about to get out again and just throw the tin over the fence. Eveline would have found it, I'm sure. But then I remembered your message, that you weren't coming out that weekend, and that was more important. I rang again and then she hurried out in a raincoat with an umbrella."

"But you must have been completely soaked, by that stage."

"Well, you know, the things one does for a friend," laughed Leidemit. He wanted to appear light-hearted, carefree, even witty, but his tone sounded somewhat laboured. It was almost a relief to see Kitty slowly approaching the desk. He looked up at her.

"There's a piece of paper here, and I don't know which group it belongs to," said the girl, and showed him the paper.

Pohanka seized his opportunity. While Leidemit turned towards Kitty to explain things to her, he quickly bent down to the small pile of ash and sniffed at them. Cigar ash! he noted.

No one had noticed his movement.

Leidemit was shocked: How on earth could this piece of paper have got in between the work schedules? It was a classified master plan, he always kept it in his locked briefcase, and both briefcases had been locked in the boot of his car when he had left the site in Franzensdorf. He was utterly certain of it, he could still see himself locking the boot. He always locked the boot.

"That's mine," he told Kitty and took the paper off her.

"Can I deliver the other ones now?" asked the girl, looking at the engineer.

"Yes, and when you've finished that I've got something else for you to do," said Leidemit.

The two men watched as Kitty turned around and walked back to the table with the papers in her arms. Two pairs of eyes followed the every movement of her body.

Kitty almost bumped into Immervoll out in the corridor. He was in the process of moving a tray of newly assembled capacitors into the lift at the very moment that the girl left the laboratory.

“Hi,” he said and stopped his work immediately.

“Hi.” The girl wanted to pass.

But the young man didn’t move aside. He blocked her way and started to talk to her immediately, forcing her to stop.

“What have you been doing all this time?” he asked. “It’s as if you’re invisible or something. Why don’t you come to the pictures any more?”

“Well, you know, I’ve been busy, I’ve got such an interesting book to read, I don’t need anything else really.”

“Have you heard about the new film that’s on at the moment. I’m going to see it again, it’s so good.”

“Well, maybe, but I have to go up to the third floor now, otherwise they won’t be able to get on with their work.” She slipped past him and walked towards the staircase.

“Kitty!”

“What is it?” She turned around again.

“Wouldn’t you like to come with me?”

“Some other time!”

“That’s what you always say.”

“You know very well that I have to work overtime almost every evening at the moment.”

“So what happened on Sunday?”

“I was at the baths and you didn’t show.”

“You were at the baths? You never said a word about going there”.

“That’s not true, you asked me at the exit what I was doing on Sunday. You were already on your bike and I said that I was going to the baths. And that’s where I was, all day long, bored out of my mind. That’s not going to happen again, believe you me.”

Again she saw herself standing at the exit with Heini, talking to him. When her mother had asked her about him on Sunday, she’d had a vivid recollection of him inviting her on a trip with him and her answering that she might go to the baths, but now she was almost certain that they’d had a definite arrangement and that he had stood her up.

“But I was there too, I didn’t see you anywhere.” Heini unbuttoned his shirt. “Look at my tan.” He pointed at his big, broad chest.

“Yes, but who were you were with, that’s the question,” said Kitty, snapped her fingers and walked up the stairs to the next floor.

Immervoll was left standing with his tray of capacitors, his eyes following her every movement. Skirt swinging slightly, the girl climbed up the stairs near to the rail. He couldn’t take his eyes off her.

When Kitty returned, the lift was still at the same floor and the young man sprang straight out into the corridor to talk to her again.

“You don’t really believe that, do you?” he asked.

“Why not? Men are men.”

“I promise you!”

“Very well.” The girl hardly paused in her stride.

“What about this Sunday?”

“This Sunday? I don’t quite know yet what I’m going to be doing. Ask me on Friday.”

When Kitty crossed the courtyard on her way to U-Block, the sun was shining again and there was nothing but a couple of puddles in the hollows of the ground to remind her of the thunderstorm of last night. The girl thought it might be better to go out with Heini after all, (it wouldn’t be like she was committing herself or anything) than spend Sunday by herself again. Some things took time, and after all, she was already doing pretty well.

Immervoll collected the next tray-load on a specially constructed trolley which could carry fifty capacitors at a time. When he passed the group of women at the conveyor belt, Frau Haumichel was standing with them instead of Feuchtinger the foreman. She had been passing by when Frau Fink had called her over and asked how she was. She had praised her experience as the most senior worker in the laboratory and asked her whether everything was all right, care and concern oozing from her voice. She wanted to know whether the engineers were kind and then she happened to let slip that a girl from her group was working in the laboratory now and she just wanted to know whether there was any advantage to be had from working in the laboratory for as long as Frau Haumichel had? And could a young girl like Mislowitsch cope with everything that went on there? She couldn’t help but wonder whether it wouldn’t be too much for such an inexperienced worker.

Frau Haumichel was quite ready to answer all the questions. She thought that the young people nowadays had it much easier and no one needed to worry about Mislowitsch, because the eyes of every

male in the laboratory followed her whenever she pranced across the hall, the old ones and the young ones, and even Herr Leidemit, the head of department, who normally (and she had been in her position for over twenty years now) didn't favour anyone and didn't even care much for women in general. He'd even made her his personal assistant for the construction of the new transmission station.

Immervoll pushed a tray of fifty assembled capacitors on to his trolley. He could hear odd fragments of the discussion: "What did you expect, they're just as easy to trap... But no, not the old ones as well... It would have been unthinkable twenty years ago... Of course, red hair like that... You know the sort of girl, just look at the way she dresses... You'd think they'd all be smart, intelligent people... Short skirts, so that's what we need..."

The girls laughed.

They all wore short skirts too, of course, but they laughed anyway.

They kept on giggling when Frau Haumichel left and gossiped about her too, and they giggled when Immervoll pushed the trolley out of the hall.

The words boomed across the hall from the loudspeaker: "*...and the clothing around the bodies. Pawn them to save yourself from a worse fate. The proceeds will be spent on drink and women.*" The speaker fell silent for a moment, then it shrieked and spat out a few bars of organ music. The women and girls heard none of it, but, after a second interruption, when the old song "*When I am grown up, dear mother...*" started up, they got all sentimental and sang along.

It must have been about ten o'clock. Kitty had been back in the laboratory for quite some time and was tidying up Leidemit's desk when the telephone rang. The girl picked up the receiver. A Herr Rubnicek was on the other end, wanting to speak to Herr Leidemit urgently. He wasn't in the room just then, and Kitty asked Pohanka where the engineer was.

"Who is it?" asked Pohanka.

"I don't know him. Someone called Herr Rubnicek."

Pohanka thought for a moment, almost tempted to pick up the telephone himself. "He's not in the building, ask if you can take a message."

Kitty returned to the telephone. When she came back to Pohanka and he asked her what the caller had wanted, she told him that he hadn't left a message. He was going to call back later.

“Very well,” said Pohanka. The whole thing seemed irrelevant, not worth bothering about. A little while later, as Kitty was copying out a list of figures, he came over to her desk, stopped behind her and said very softly, so that none of the others could hear: “But don’t tell him that you asked me, he might take it as proof that you can’t work independently, or that you’re not discrete enough. He might replace you with someone else.”

Kitty was grateful for the hint. It was given just in time, for at that very moment Leidemit entered the laboratory and came over to them.

“You’re wanted in the manager’s office,” he said to Pohanka, “but before you go I need to tell you something.” He turned towards his desk but hesitated for a moment. Pohanka was waiting to follow him, but he paused and asked Kitty, “Fräulein Mislowitsch, did anyone ask for me?”

“Yes,” she said. She glanced fleetingly at Pohanka who was standing next to Leidemit. “An engineer from outside the firm, he wanted to talk to you in person and said that he would call you back.”

“What was his name? You must always ask for a name!” His last words came out irritated, almost angry.

Pohanka started slowly off towards Leidemit’s desk. He passed by the workstations of his fellow engineers, stopping to exchange a few words with one of his younger colleagues. He watched Kitty out of the corner of one eye.

The girl had moved closer to Leidemit and, glancing at Pohanka who was only a few steps away said in an undertone: “I’m sorry Herr Leidemit, I didn’t know whether you wanted me to mention it in front of Herr Pohanka.”

“Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of Herr Pohanka, we have no secrets. Who was it?”

“Herr Rubnicek.”

Leidemit was surprised. He looked around. Albert couldn’t have heard them. But why was the girl being so careful? “Did the gentleman tell you to keep his name a secret?” he asked searchingly.

Kitty looked at him, surprised and bewildered. What should she do now? She really didn’t care about the mystery engineer, all she wanted was to prove herself a good worker, worthy of her present position. “No,” she said truthfully, “but when I started here you told me that a good worker keeps quiet about everything they see and

hear.” The girl made her eyes go all innocent and frightened. Did I do something wrong? they seemed to ask.

The engineer was satisfied with both her answer and her face. “Excellent,” he said in an altered tone. “I’m glad you took what I said on board. You’ll be all right. I’ll be along later to look at the lists.”

He left. When he reached Pohanka he patted him on the back in a satisfied sort of way. The two men walked across the hall and sat down together at Leidemit’s large desk.

“I wanted to be the first to tell you.” Leidemit fiddled nervously with his pencil.

Pohanka looked at his friend. “What?”

“I’m leaving.”

“Why? Where to? What for?”

“I’m leaving the firm.”

Pohanka thought of the cigar ash, the telephone call, but said nothing

“I didn’t mention it on Sunday, it wasn’t quite decided then. But this project is the last one I’m going to work on here. You know that most of the ideas which are realised around here are mine, it’s me that works them out, plans them, someone else might have been able to do something similar for the firm, I don’t know. I can’t earn any more here in the position I’ve got, I understand that, and I’ve made suggestions as to how it could be rectified. I proposed you for my position and thought that head-office might go with my idea to establish a department for planning and research. But it turns out they don’t want to after all.”

“And you’ve proposed me for your position?”

“Yes. Mind you, that’s the only one of my proposals they actually accepted.”

“But I don’t understand.” Pohanka was confused. “You’re still here!”

“I’ve just been to tell them that I don’t intend to stay under the present conditions.”

“But where do you want to go?”

“There are plenty of other firms which can offer me more.”

“And you’re leaving, just like that?”

“Well, it’s not just something I cooked up yesterday or today, I made my proposal to management quite some time ago, at the same time that I started work on this present project actually. They’ve been

playing me along for some time, the work has been under construction and I could only leave after my part was completed. That was in my contract. But now I'm leaving."

"Josef," said Pohanka and a warm current of true friendship (the other man would have called it sentimentality) was in his voice, "I'm so sorry to hear that. All these years! My God, how long have we been working together?" At that moment, Pohanka thought neither of his prospects for promotion, nor of the tin of malt extract.

Leidemit smiled. "Cheer up," he said, without answering the question.

"No, Josef, I can't be cheerful, not when I'm losing a friend like this. Because in the end that's what it comes down to, you know. We might meet once, twice, three times, then we'll be off on our own separate paths. And we've had so much in common."

Leidemit raised his hand as if protecting himself. "That's all very well and good. And it is a pity, but none of that pays the bills, you know that as well as I do. Cheer up, if you get this position you won't have to repair those radios for Herrn Reichenhaus anymore."

He played with his pencil some more. "Eveline will be glad too."

"Yes, she will," replied Pohanka slowly. Then he suddenly remembered the tin of malt extract. "But then again, maybe not, you haven't visited us all that often, but I think she liked you."

"Do you think so?" asked Leidemit.

"Definitely. But I suppose I'd better be on my way to see the manager." He got up. "Have you got something else lined up yet?" he asked, offhand.

His friend stood up too. "Of course. I get a fifty percent rise, car and apartment provided."

Pohanka wanted to go on asking questions, but then he thought the better of it and left. As he walked along the corridor and down the stairs, he thought of Josef's elegantly furnished apartment and his blue sports car, and suddenly the photographs of several hotels at the Riviera passed his inner eye and he saw again the small, sparsely-furnished room which looked out at the tall, greenish wall opposite, the ugly, rickety furniture and the stained suits, and he saw Josef back in his old room, he saw him dressed in his stained suits, and he saw him riding that old clapped-out bicycle through the working-class district his parents lived in, he saw the young lieutenant, the technical officer, the prisoner of war with pencil and slide rule, tins, oranges,

whisky, the café, the accommodation office, the friendly clerk who owned one of the first post-war radios, the mayor of Hinterdorf during rationing, the paper-hanger, the plumber, the sycophantic colleagues, the foreman and the worker who were paid under the table, old Ellensohn who had to give up the directorship of the laboratory, the café, Herrn Franz, the trainee waiter, Herrn Rubnicek, fishing trips with or without women, the gynaecologist, the lawyer, the stern-faced nurse. But as he walked along in the bright sunlight - the sky was by now almost cloudless, the women and their cat were at the window, so was the old man. Across the yard to the manager's office, he saw Josef rising like a rare bird from a mountain of light, or was it a pile of white ashes? but then he recognised a modern airliner and Leidemit waving from the window.

Leidemit stood next to Kitty, checking the lists, his eyes scanning the pages swiftly. He knew each figure off by heart, he didn't need to look anything up.

"Good," he said, "except for this one here," he pointed his finger at a three-digit figure. "That can't be right. Look it up, Fräulein."

And in the time that Kitty took to find the right piece of paper and the right column with the correct figure, Leidemit had already written it down with his pencil.

"What do your parents do, Fräulein Mislowitzsch?" he asked.

"My father works for the railways and my mother stays at home." The girl felt honoured that the head engineer was asking her about her parents.

"Works for the railways, does he? What does he do there?"

"He's a conductor, on the night express trains. He's always off somewhere."

"He must see a lot of the world."

"I don't know, he never talks about it."

"He must get around."

"We never know where he is."

"Is he away for long?"

"I think it's been thirty years now."

"I mean, is he away for a long time?"

"Like I said, thirty years."

Leidemit sighed. "I thought your parents would be younger."

"They're over sixty."

"And you're by yourself?"

"I am now."

Leidemit smiled. "I mean at home, are you the only one?"

"When my mother is out, I am."

"You don't have any brothers or sisters?"

"I did have two brothers, but they were both killed in the war."

Kitty was confused. He'd been talking to her for such a long time. She didn't quite know whether she was giving the right answers. She couldn't work out what he was getting at and found the conversation a little disturbing. She was always thinking about what she'd just said, and the question before last. She knew that it couldn't just be out of curiosity or concern that the engineer was talking to her at such length, she had the feeling she always did when a man talked to her about everyday, insignificant things, and she knew he had quite different matters on his mind. Leidemit's slim fingers played with his pencil, his brown eyes stared at her curiously, only rarely, when a smile flitted briefly over his face did his expression change with the slightest flicker of a muscle. She had forgotten her body, she was no longer aware of its existence, she was all eyes, she was all ears, she could smell his fresh, clean breath, she could feel the almost tangible presence of a man next to her. But nevertheless, somewhere within her a tiny hidden alarm was vibrating nervously, subtly signalling to her, not quite letting the information rise into the fine network of her consciousness, but warning her that this game was much more dangerous than the game with Pohanka: a visit to the wine cellar...a trip out into the countryside...What was going to happen now?

But none of that seemed even remotely relevant just then. Herr Leidemit just nodded his head with satisfaction. Small people with a small income, the woman at home, perhaps they would come in handy one day. She's had three children. The girl will be happy to pass on requests. She'll be useful.

He gave her some instructions and walked back to his desk without wasting another word on personal matters.

Pohanka sat in a soft, wide leather chair, a small table with smoking utensils in front of him. Direktor Rothenstarker had taken a seat opposite him and the third person present was Dr Mühlfeld, head of personnel.

Everything had happened just as Leidemit had told him it would: Pohanka was offered the position of head laboratory engineer. No mention was made of why Leidemit had left the firm, only that it was

still strictly confidential and that the take-over could only occur after the present project was completed, which was to say in three weeks time, at the very earliest. There were negotiations over a few small details regarding the change of positions. Not that anyone was dissatisfied with the achievements of his predecessor, no, that was by no means the case, they were merely taking the opportunity to introduce some basic reforms which had been in the pipeline for some time. A six-page contract, prepared by Dr Mühlfeld, was read out to Pohanka at the end of it all, in which the benefits and the duties of the new head engineer were specified in great detail, with special emphasis given to the duties.

The room in which the men were sitting was furnished in a modern style and on the wall opposite Pohanka was a large painting which kept attracting the engineer's eye. The colourful splashes and peculiar strokes made him increasingly irritated, the more he looked at it. This painting, what was it of?

The background of the picture was painted a light, almost yellowish shade of ochre. Just above the centre of the canvas a bright red triangle had been positioned in such a way that one angle almost touched the edge, while the contours of the lower right angle were almost dissolved. A dark red random-looking splash hung beneath it, contradicting every geometric rule, but isolated from the triangle by a narrow light-blue stripe. Beside the stripe was a light-green splash extending down into the lower right corner, where it morphed into the same red of the triangle. In the very bottom of the right-hand corner, a flat blue, almost oblong shape, the same size as the triangle, finished off the composition. A little higher up, you could see a yellow smear, and even further above that, near the top of the painting, some larger, circular dots in varying shades of green. The left-hand side was left empty save for the delicate background tone, it was only in the lower half that two vague shapes of fluffy green seemed to merge into each other, finally being replaced by a fragile blue further down. A short, wide brushstroke, the same colour as the triangle, was daubed, not quite disturbingly, but out of place nonetheless, near the upper frame of the picture right in the middle of the bright background colour on the left side.

Perhaps it was the painting that stopped Pohanka from concentrating fully. How else could it have been that when the part about the confidentiality clause was read out he didn't think immediately of

Herrn Rubnicek's telephone call? Of course, there were some dark, almost black lines running zigzag through all the splashes as well. And on one of these lines, on the left above the red triangle, there was a blurred elusive something, a form which someone with a lot of imagination might think resembled a human figure. He couldn't be certain. Overlapping another of the dark lines, to the right of the triangle, even closer to the right-hand edge, two similar shapes lurked in the shadow.

Here, unlike the first shape, which was painted in a deep shade of sepia, the background shone through the semi-opaque forms and at those points where one might expect to find faces, there were some tiny red specks, as if the figures had red lips.

It couldn't have been said that Pohanka wasn't listening exactly, or that he didn't follow the manager's comments attentively, no, it all concerned his profession and he took everything connecting to his profession very seriously, but how else could it be explained that he was even now being reminded of the importance of document security, and yet he didn't think of the remnants of cigar ash on the master plan?

That brown figure was Josef, and the two transparent ones in the middle of the picture were Eveline and him and there, almost at the same level he saw, a little further to the right, almost running into the frame of the picture, another red splash and a gentle curve. Was that Kitty?

Above all, the management wished to request that the head engineer abstain from any private relationship with any of the workers, in order to be able to maintain a sense of objectivity when it came to his subordinates. This was especially important in the case of female workers. The manager paused at this point and praised his predecessor Leidemit's observance of this clause and said half-jokingly, half-seriously that he was sure that Pohanka, a father of three children, should have no trouble keeping that particular temptation at bay. The men laughed and the manager continued with his reading.

After page six there was a gap, that was where Pohanka had to put his signature to attest that he had understood it all and that he accepted it.

Of course the engineer was given the contract to read through again himself and time to consider everything carefully before he signed it.

But they were obviously eager to get some sense of his likely response before he left the meeting.

When Pohanka agreed in principal, both men congratulated him on this promotion and a few informalities were exchanged. The manager mentioned that they had chosen Pohanka out of all the others because of his tireless efforts for the firm and the fact that he didn't seem to care how hard he had to work to finish a project once he had started. It was certainly no bad omen that he had attended the same school as his predecessor and, as they had taken the liberty of finding out, that he had no major interests outside his profession which might interfere with his work.

Everybody stood up and as Pohanka moved around the table, he stepped up to the painting and looked at it more closely. But from this distance all he could make out was a hodge-podge of many-coloured brushstrokes, without any connection whatsoever. The other two smiled. Pohanka asked them what the painting was supposed to be of.

Direktor Rothenstarker shrugged his shoulders and looked at Dr Mühlfeld. He, a white-haired, experienced and benevolent-looking gentleman in his early sixties, was still smiling.

"*Composition*, the artist called it," he said. "I really don't know much more myself."

Direktor Rothenstarker explained further: "We had a well-known interior designer in to furnish our conference room and he recommended the paintings as well. All I can tell you is that it's by a very well-known painter. It cost us a small fortune."

The men were silent for a moment.

The manager was thinking of the Commerce-Bank and his meeting with their representatives in ten minutes, and of the insurance broker who was due in twenty-five minutes, and of the Member of Parliament who was due in thirty-five minutes and of the trade union secretary who was expected in an hour's time.

Dr Mühlfeld, on the other hand, who had been telephoning labour offices all morning and who had finally managed to employ at least a few qualified workers, was thinking hard about where he was going to get all the necessary workforce from, once the new project was up and running. The semi-detached houses in the new worker's housing estate were still under construction, the planned gardens which were to encircle the houses were still lumber yards for building materials. The competition had some very enticing offers.

As Herr Pohanka moved towards the two gentlemen, he saw dark lines running across fields, he thought of his work, the lines of the mains snaking through a network of countless coloured wires. Those wires, each leading to a different soldering point, each connecting different contacts, together creating the possibility of thousands of different combinations, diverse combinations, mistaken combinations.

"I don't understand these things," said Dr Mühlfeld. "Most likely I am just too old. A person would have to..."

"But my dear Doctor," interrupted Herr Rothenstarker, "I'm not that all old yet, and I don't understand them either. I don't think anyone understands them actually." He shrugged his shoulders again. "I purchased a little Brouwer recently," and turning directly to Dr Mühlfeld he continued, "for the living room, you know, the wall next to the fireplace. A lovely little piece, a typical Dutch landscape. That's what I call a painting."

Pohanka thought about the colour print above his marital bed, a Madonna by Egger-Lienz, he thought of the framed wedding photograph and the large picture in his living room with the two white seagulls circling the green waves below.

The three men had reached the door by now and Dr Mühlfeld had already put his hand on the handle. All three of them looked back at the painting one last time. Each man saw something different. But if the painter had seen the three men, or if the painting as it was had seen them from its perspective, from its reality, had seen the reality of these three men and if the painter or the painting had been required to express this momentary reality, what a peculiar painting that would have been, the red roofs next to a deep, helpless blue, nervous, white zigzags, lilac, white dots, plug, blue surfaces, windows, blue lines, K 3, W 5, silver dots, silver dots, green oblongs, contracts, soothing green, green lines leading to switch S 25, to and fro, to and fro, vertical stripes, horizontal stripes, rocket-shaped, swelling, blue blouses, lab-coats, vertical stripes, horizontal stripes, blue spaces turning brown, resistors, capacitors, green circles, trees on paper, green, green blotting paper, signature, red, trade union, a thick black line, main cables, like a snake winding sinuously along, the party, dark coils, a delicate vaporous blue pushed into a corner, the children, a bright red wide line, pushed aside, blood, yellow envy, grey insignificance, all those stained and smirched spaces, the naked background which not even the three of them together could fill.

Doctor Mühlfeld opened the padded door. They stepped out into the secretary's office. A lady wearing thick spectacles got up from behind her desk, grabbed a notebook which was placed next to the telephone and approached the three men. "You've had some calls, sir," she said.

"Many?" he asked.

"No," said the woman, while she glanced down at the notebook and turned a couple of pages. "Six," she said. "Do you want me to come and see you now?"

"Yes, please, come with me," the manager shook Pohanka's hand once more and disappeared with the secretary behind a door opposite the one the men had just emerged from. That was Rothenstarker's office. Two other ladies sitting in front of typewriters greeted Dr Mühlfeld and Herrn Pohanka, and their eyes trailed them as they left the large room by the middle door.

In the meantime, Leidemit had taken his seat at the small table where Pohanka used to sit. He was eating his lunch. A monotonous humming filled the room. There were a lot of people here at this time of the day. They were all hungry, they all wanted their hunger satisfied, fascinating to think that all these people were following one drive, one single drive, and not only here but in all the restaurants and kitchens and cafés in the city, in the country, on the planet. Fascinating to watch how all these people here could sit together in peace during these precious lunchtime minutes, the way they all wanted the same thing, the way they were all dominated by the need for physical comfort. The women hurried from table to table, busily carrying plates and bowls across the room, and the cutlery rattled on their serving trays. The most diverse scents wafted through the air, the biting odour of roasted onion, mixed with the sweetish scent of red capsicum, a whiff of stale beer, but fried fish too, liver, the hot fat of fried schnitzel, the delicate aroma of coffee or the sweet fragrance of puddings, all these smells hovered hazily across the dining room. Hardly anyone noticed. The light-blue clouds of cigarette smoke rose to the ceiling in lazy spirals. Feet scraped. Chairs moved.

Leidemit didn't notice either. A glass of wine was set next to his plate and he took a sip every now and then, rolling the liquid round his mouth for a moment before letting it run down the back of his throat.

He was in no hurry. He cut up the succulent roast meat with his knife, put a piece in his mouth and dipped part of the halved dumpling in the sauce, turned it to and fro, and after it had soaked up all the juices, sent it after the meat. He twirled the fork along its vertical axle and spooled long strands of cabbage round the prongs, he chewed thoroughly and every now and then he smacked his lips very softly and secretly. A caraway seed got caught between his teeth, he pushed against it with his tongue until he had dislodged it than he ground it into pieces. He sucked at some gristle before taking it out of his mouth and setting it on the edge of his plate. He was enjoying himself. He was enjoying everything. Each meal was a pleasure for him. He felt a sense of celebration and his mood became animated.

A white paper serviette with the logo of the firm which supplied the coffee to the restaurant printed on it had been set next to his plate and now and then he wiped his lips and chin with it. He had an air ticket in his valet and he dipped another bite of dumpling in the richly pungent sauce. His entire nervous system was being enveloped by the sense impressions the meal was making on his palate, nothing could prevent his enjoyment. They were wrong, those people who dismissed eating as an animal-like, primitive pleasure! What sort of animal could enjoy its food with such concentration, such subtlety? It was a refined process, a very human ingestion of meat, salt, spices, sauces, a harmonious combination which added up to a total, deep-seated satisfaction, and not only that, the epicure wasn't merely savouring the succulent meat he was eating right then, he seemed to think that he could discern several types of game mixed in with the finely chopped root vegetables and the spices, he succumbed to the pleasures of spicy tongue boiled in salt water and simmered with parsley and finely chopped anchovies, of grilled perch with celeriac salad, dotted with fresh mayonnaise. Together with the two crepes for dessert he ate horn-shaped Preßburg biscuits filled with walnuts, Linzer squares with red-currant jam and a delicious slice of maraschino tart. As he drank his wine he felt as if he was drinking in all the heat of the long summer and nothing, nothing could interrupt his pleasure.

That was why he was astonished, almost shocked when, towards the end of his meal, he heard Pohanka's voice close by.

"Bon appetite," said his friend. His lunch had been delayed by his meeting.

“Thank you,” replied Leidemit, a little confused, as if he had to recollect where he was.

Pohanka sat down, the waitress came and took his order. Leidemit was eating his last crepe and his friend was telling him about the conference with the directors. He asked Leidemit whether he too had had to sign a six-page contract and showed it to him. Leidemit took a mouthful of wine, looked fleetingly at the paper and shook his head. No. When he'd taken over the position all those years ago, he hadn't been asked to sign anything like that.

The waitress served the meal.

When she was gone, Pohanka asked whether Leidemit had seen the painting in the conference room. He began on his soup.

Of course he had seen it. It was one of those crazy modern pictures. No, he didn't know what it was supposed to mean either. But he had never given it a thought, the impressionists, those were the ones who deserved thinking about. But Pohanka was haunted by those lines and the sepia figure which was almost at the same level as the peak of the red mountain, the same way as the two transparent ones were at its foot, they haunted him like the red mountain (actually, it was a red triangle whose lower half was painted a quite different shade of red to the top half, and at the place where the two red colours would have blended, a small light-blue stripe had been inserted) which was strongly imprinted on his mind. Kitty's hair was a similar colour to the lower half of the mountain, the half below the blue stripe. There was to be no contact with the red hair below the light-blue stripe. It was there in the company rules, printed in black and white and the six-page contract had to be signed.

Eating the maraschino tart, he could definitely distinguish the bitter taste of the almonds from that of the cherries, indeed, Leidemit had a very well developed sense for such things, but some random detail of a painting which he had seen a hundred times (as head of department he had taken part in dozens of important meetings there) he couldn't remember at all. He couldn't understand how his friend could talk about some random black lines as he would about the main cables of a switchboard. But maybe Albert was just so obsessed with his work that he saw technical systems just about anywhere.

Leidemit put knife and fork aside and wiped his mouth with the paper serviette. He was about to order a strong cafe lack to keep him alert in the afternoon.

His beautiful old painting, rugs, the Renaissance cup, all the valuable pieces put together, should fit into two large crates. It all had to be organised within the next three weeks. But three weeks was a long time after all and Rubnicek had no cause to be impatient. Anyway, in a few weeks' time he would be seeing a lot more of him than today! Grilled perch. He had recommended grilled perch to him the first time they had met, a speciality of his home country.

The coffee wafted its inviting scent upwards and Leidemit sipped repeatedly from the small cup.

"Do you have a driver's licence?" he asked between two sips.

"No, why?" asked Pohanka and looked up from his plate.

"You'll need a car when you go out to visit the construction sites yourself. I recommend you get one. You can only rely on the reports of the separate foremen if they know that you could show up any moment and see for yourself how the work is progressing. They reimburse your petrol money. Didn't you discuss that at your meeting?"

"No, we only really talked in general terms. They concentrated mostly on questions regarding industrial espionage and security."

Leidemit put down his cup and looked searchingly at the other man. "Really," he said, "don't we have a security service? Isn't that enough? Or aren't they satisfied with the way it works? They never mentioned it to me."

Having emptied his soup plate, Pohanka leaned back and by chance got a whiff of the pungent cigar smoke. He remembered the cigar ash and then the paragraphs on espionage. They hadn't really been given more attention than any of the other things at the meeting, but for some reason, it was the only thing he mentioned now.

Leidemit finished the rest of his coffee in one gulp. "Very good, very good," he said and when Pohanka mentioned the secure storage of classified papers: "It's about time. I've been trying to make them see the importance of that since I started."

Pohanka's roast meat and vegetables arrived.

As he cut into the meat, he stole the odd glance at his friend. He knew it, Josef was just a bit careless, that was all. There was nothing more to it! That was why he added: "You ought to be more careful too."

"What do you mean?" the other man asked.

"It's just that I saw some cigar ash in the fold of the master plan this morning. You don't smoke. Don't you lock the papers away when you drive home from Franzensdorf?"

"Of course, I do," Leidemit blurted out. He felt a little uncomfortable.

"It's none of my business," said Pohanka, "I'm sure you know where the ash came from, maybe one of the engineers at Franzensdorf smokes cigars, I'm sure it's just a coincidence, but it made me think of Rubnicek."

The black contortions writhed pitilessly over the red mountain, over the green and ochre spaces and some of the offshoots branched (like the arms of a cephalopod) over the merging green and the pure blue of the square space. Every man who had seen the painting, technicians, leaders of industry, businessmen, they had all seen the painting hundreds of times, and had simply assumed that the lines were put there by chance, without any conscious intent, assumed that the whole picture didn't make any sense.

"What's it got to do with him?" asked Leidemit. And he put the question not only to his companion but also to himself. What did it have to do with him?

"I don't know. It just came into my head. I never liked him, you know that." Chewing his meat he added: "He smokes cigars too, you know."

Mislowitsch with the master plan sandwiched in between the timetables, the briefcases locked away in the boot, and after all, Rubnicek alone in the car, alone for half an hour at least, maybe longer, Eveline in her dressing gown, her upper thigh, but everything was always locked up properly, he had a special lock for the boot, but what would have been the point, it would be impossible for him to remember everything, all those hundreds of connections, so what would have been the point?

"I'll look into it," said Leidemit. It was too bad, five minutes to twelve and a mess like this, just what he needed. "But why Rubnicek, Albert? You know that we only ever meet in the café every now and then. Even when it's late and I have to drive straight from the site I make sure all papers are locked safely in the boot first."

Pohanka relented. His friend's voice was becoming a little hoarse, his tone was somewhat sharper than usual. "I'm sorry, I only wanted to make sure you didn't get into any trouble."

“I know, I know, thank you. I owe you for this!” He meant for his words to sound grateful, amicable, but they sounded more like a threat.

The red mountain loomed up between the sepia brown figure and the translucent shapes like a threat, almost squashing out the blue, the element of the perch.

Thick cigar smoke hovered above the small table. Herr Rubnicek laughed. “Of course there’ll be no inspections, no customs inspections. You can be assured, my dear colleague, that the crates will arrive at their destination without delay or interference of any kind. As he spoke, he ground his knuckles against the table. “By the way, we’ve made inquiries about you and we’re satisfied, you’ll see, as far as we’re concerned, everything will take place as arranged.”

Leidemit had been slightly angry and insecure when he entered the café, but Rubnicek was in good spirits and just laughed, both, at his reproaches that he shouldn’t have tried to contact him at the firm, and at his insistence that he would have come anyway even without the call. Leidemit grew increasingly suspicious. Rubnicek asked about the pretty little lady who’d answered the phone and Leidemit asked sharply how he knew that she was pretty. He could tell by her voice, answered his companion. And they exchanged some insignificant platitudes before getting down to business.

They had actually made inquiries. Leidemit knew now what sort of inquiries. But why? Did they doubt his competence, were they getting impatient, didn’t they believe he had all the documents, surely they realised he was only testing them?

“And how long until they arrive?” he asked now.

“Eight days, at the most,” said Rubnicek. “You’ll be notified immediately the crates arrive.”

“Right then. I’ll send them at the start of next week.”

“That should be all right.”

Leidemit was thinking. Should he mention the cigar ash? No, that wouldn’t be clever. All they’d done was make some inquiries, that was all right, as long as it wasn’t anything else, he was a little angry, a little afraid too, that there might be other problems. Anyway, the Chinese vase would have to be well wrapped up and packed carefully too, he couldn’t have seen much in that half hour when he was with Eveline, not even if he’d rummaged through everything. Couldn’t have seen much, the dressing gown, her upper thigh, or was it her

stomach, no, that wasn't that evening, her upper thigh yes, but her stomach, no that wasn't that evening, the rain had poured down all night long, all night and all day, right across the country, he was going to fly across the sea, but not quite yet, there was still time, the clock, it was going to be difficult to pack it, tomorrow evening, when the children were asleep, pack it, yes, she would love to come with him, just for the weekend of course, at the lake, sailing, or to Kamegg, fishing. Leidemit smiled. It would be easy, but quite impossible with children.

"They have fabulous horses down there, you can't imagine how jealous I am. There should be some great races," Rubnicek interrupted his stream of thoughts.

"You and your horses! I suspect I'll have other things to look forward to besides races."

"Ah, fish! Am I right?"

"Yes, fish too. They say there are some pretty big sturgeon in that part of the world. But I don't really understand why you're so into horse racing. It's such a bourgeois sort of interest."

"Nothing is bourgeois by nature, cars, planes, houses - they only exist because of people, which means they are there for all people to enjoy my dear colleague, even the racecourse."

"Really," said Leidemit. For some reason his thoughts drifted back to the war. His army unit had been billeted in a Tuscan castle. They'd taken everything that moved. They'd made the exquisite leather coverings of the chairs and sofas into letter-cases, after the paintings disappeared, the beautifully carved picture frames were cut up for firewood, the hand-forged iron roses on the stair-rails were smashed off and sent away as souvenirs and the richly-panelled octagonal music room with high, narrow doors leading out on to an ornate balcony with a view of the once-beautiful garden, well, they'd used that as a toilet. At first the men had gone out to the balcony, but then a week came when it rained for seven days straight and they did it inside, first along the walls and then all over the place. "Of course, I know what you mean," he said to Rubnicek, "but for certain things you need a sense of cultural tradition, of inheritance. People of musical genius like Bach or Mozart, they can only emerge from musical families, usually anyway, there are always exceptions of course. But you could hardly claim that everyone is endowed with

genius or that most of us could ever develop into anything approaching genius." All that genius, and the stench, horrible, he thought.

Rubnicek exhaled a cloud of cigar smoke. "No, of course not. In every social order there are some who stand out above the ordinary rank and file. I don't want to underestimate the importance of one's surroundings, but that doesn't mean that anything exists just for the benefit of a select few. There's a dialectical certainty that the bulk of mankind will, given time, develop into a state where they can take part in things which previously were only the domain of the aristocracy or of the privileged middle-class."

"Well then," said Leidemit, "I wish them all the best. My guess is that it's going to take a long time before that happens. And I doubt very much whether there will be anything left of that culture, of that sophisticated way of life. It wasn't just adopted by the hereditary aristocracy, you know."

"What do you mean by "sophisticated way of life"? You surely don't mean some decadent abstract art by artists who don't have the first clue what they're daubing on the canvas, or some piece of whining atonal music? Or do you just mean that Baron N. and Councillor P. know how to eat partridge and drink good wine?"

Leidemit didn't know anything about modern painting, he'd never understood the picture in the conference room, he'd never much bothered about it either, but he couldn't say he liked it and the same was true for atonal music. But he was in no doubt at all that Baron N. knew how to eat partridge and drink good wine. Come to think of it, the men in the Tuscan castle had eaten chicken too, usually they just ate out of their tin canteen and drank the wine out of the lid. One could justifiably say "boozed". They were not uneducated men who crapped in the octagonal room, who knows, there might have even been a hereditary baron amongst them. People adapt to their environment. They adapt to their circumstances, and adapting to the lowest common denominator just seems to be the easiest.

"Modern art is probably about as incomprehensible to me as it is to you. But I doubt very much that there would be many members of that crowd who own a car and live in a well-furnished house who would be able to appreciate treasures like my Renaissance cup or my Chinese vase."

“Just give it time, believe me, the museums and educational institutions in the socialist countries are already more highly frequented than those in other countries.”

Leidemit thought about the lectures and the art excursions during the war, they'd been very instructive, designed for the very crowd Rubnicek was talking about, but they were almost always structured in such a way that the ones being instructed got a fair amount of political dogma mixed in with the explanations of a work by Caravaggio, a poem by Rilke or an opera, by Richard Wagner, of course. But at least a lot of people who otherwise would never have heard of Caravaggio, Rilke or Wagner got a taste of them, a Wagner of the Nuremberg Race Laws and the *Cornet-Rilke* who celebrated military victory.

“Many workers have their own car these days, and they are free to travel. Once upon a time this was a privilege only the upper classes could enjoy.” Rubnicek continued to lecture “the more they travel, the more their intellectual horizon will expand, and they'll all adopt this ‘sophisticated’ way of life, as you call it and they'll do it because they want to, not out of some warped sense of inherited snobbery, but because they feel the need to experience a higher cultural plane.”

Which will come first, thought Leidemit, will all the music rooms get crapped in, or will there be instructions beforehand that they are expected to walk down to the latrine across the courtyard, even if it's less convenient?

But out loud he merely said: “I hope you're right! It just doesn't look as if it's about to happen any time soon, that's all. Even in those countries where cars and technology are affordable. You know, what I think? I think the only people who can really enjoy your ‘higher cultural plane’ as you call it are the ones who've been wealthy for decades, even centuries, or else unassumingly poor, like the gypsies or those Arabian fellahs. You yourself, you come from a family who's always been wealthy, you know how to enjoy the finer things in life but once envy enters into the equation, then it's all over. Envy never leads to enjoyment, believe you me.”

“A telephone call for you, Herr Leidemit.”

The head waiter had approached the table and addressed Leidemit, who excused himself, got up and went over to the telephone booth. When he returned - the other man had meanwhile buried himself in his newspaper - he was grinning with satisfaction.

Why should he discuss his ideological beliefs with Rubnicek, the man was irredeemably a bourgeois. What business was it of his anyway, what he thought of social improvement? A simple and convenient solution had just offered itself to him and he was willing to accept it, just as he was given to accept anything which was offered to him. What did he care whether people progressed or stagnated where they were? It made no difference to him. They could get on with living their lives of complacency or dash about madly like termites with no time to relax or contemplate the world. He was off to spend the rest of his life in safety and security, far from any hint of political unrest or upheaval.

He sat down again. "You can come and visit me at the factory next week," he said to his companion, who was still hidden behind the newspaper.

Rubnicek glanced briefly over the edge of the sheet of newsprint. He had obviously found something very interesting, something which required all his attention, for he didn't seem to fully appreciate Leidemit's offer. "So you said," he murmured, and turned back to his reading.

Leidemit looked at the paper. Judging by the page that was facing him, Rubnicek was reading the sports section. The racing pages, he thought. He just couldn't understand it. How could Rubnicek have such a good opinion of the masses. He, Leidemit, was a barbarian, as far as the complex knowledge of horses went, but this noble connoisseur believed in the good taste of the unwashed multitudes!

"All I need is a driving school which will give him lessons at a time convenient to us."

Rubnicek put the paper down on the table. Indeed! Leidemit could see a photograph of a galloping horse. "But please, don't let me interrupt your reading, I'm sure there'll be plenty of time to talk about it later," he said.

Without a word, the other man took up the paper again and remained hidden for the next fifteen minutes. Leidemit too skimmed through a number of papers. But he lacked Rubnicek's composure and couldn't manage to concentrate fully on any one article. So it came as quite a relief when the other man finally asked him what this business with the driving school was all about. Leidemit explained to him that Pohanka needed to learn to drive urgently and had just phoned him for that reason, to ask whether he knew of a driving school where he

could get lessons, quickly, and at a convenient time which wouldn't clash with his work.

"And that's what he was phoning you about just then?" asked Rubnicek.

"Yes. He thought I might know someone here in the café who works at a driving school."

"He must be in a hurry then."

"He wants to do it in three weeks."

"I see," Rubnicek spoke slowly. "Your successor, isn't he?"

"Possibly. I don't know anything about it."

"And what did you tell him?"

"I said, of course, I'd do my best to find him a suitable course at a suitable time."

"Do you know anyone who works at a driving school?"

"No, but I have to sell my car anyway and I'll ask the dealer. I've known him for a number of years now."

Rubnicek shook his head, his hands rested on the papers which lay scattered across the table, light smoke snaked from the cigar between his fingers. Behind his spectacles, his eyes were blinking and a multitude of tiny lines creased the corners of his eyes

"That is not altogether wise," he said, "I have a better solution. Leave it to me. I know a driving school which would only be too happy to help us."

VII

Kitty sat in the living room, reading. She had been out tilling the fields with Russian peasants and mixing with the wealthy in their castles, she had revelled in the boisterous festivities and been captivated by the sumptuous entertainment, and even if there was a fair bit she didn't understand, if some of the metaphors went over her head while she hungrily followed the line of action and the build-up of tension, still the story held her attention. At first all the names, foreign ones at that, had confused her, and when at times they had threatened to bury the plot, she had almost given the whole thing up. Sometimes she even skipped a few pages. What on earth were these people up to and how long was it going to take to work out what was going on? There was even a Kitty in the book, she was rich of course, and a princess. But that was the sort of thing she liked, she liked reading about princesses, to think that one of them had her name, she'd have to tell her mother, maybe she'd give in and finally call her Kitty, like every one at work did.

Yes she had to talk to her mother anyway. But not right now. She raised her head and listened.

"I know, every Friday, not a penny, and his poor wife with all those children!" she heard Frau Eichsteiner's voice in the kitchen. Frau Eichsteiner's apartment was just three doors along towards the stairwell and she had come to borrow a cup of semolina off Kitty's mother. She had been there for half an hour now, and while Frau Mislowsch kept clicking her knitting needles, Frau Eichsteiner kept standing at the door, her hand on the latch - thank you, she couldn't possibly come in, she had so much to do - telling her neighbour all about the woes of Frau Berger.

Kitty stared at the brown door. The etched glass panels were partly hidden by net curtains gathered in the middle by a ribbon. She stared at the strip of linoleum, patterned like an oriental rug, leading from her seat at the dressing table to the door, stared at the old pendulum-clock hanging precariously on the badly plastered wall, and at the oval

table set against one of the walls with its collection of preserving jars filled with fruit. Kitty knew that their number would slowly increase until Father would finally get around to stacking them up on top of the wardrobe. There was a lot of French spoken, no, not in the kitchen, in the novel, about Kitty and her Papa. Maybe she should start saying Papa too? At least when she spoke to Herrn Leidemit. She would start today, when she called him, much easier on the telephone, when you're not face to face, don't have to look the other person in the eye, or have him look you up and down.

She tried it out immediately, "Mama will be happy to supervise the children on Sunday." No, even better - "Mama would be delighted to look after the children for you on Sunday." Very cultured. Why did she have to bleat on and on about that drunkard of a neighbour like that? Never stops talking. Everyone already knows that he calls his wife a whore. I must say I'm always glad I'm safe in here whenever I hear him starting up.

She read on, crystal chandeliers, silken wall coverings and gold braid, long journeys and magnificent country estates and stables, then there were passages on religion and that kind of thing. She skimmed through most of those.

The wardrobe stood next to the window with the bedside table beside it and then her parents' beds and then another bedside table and then the wardrobe and then the other wall with the photograph of her first Holy Communion. The bedroom at Frau Eichsteiner's looked the same, the exact same arrangement, and at Frau Pospisil's it was the same thing again.

Crystal chandeliers and shiny parquet floors, a chaise longue covered in brocade, three chairs and a servant bowing as he presented with the silver tray bearing the visiting card to Mama.

Kitty could hear the knitting needles clicking against each other. How long was she going to stay here, the nosy old bag? Who knows, maybe all she wants is to tempt Mother into saying something bad about Berger. She'll have her work cut out for her. Oh, no, we haven't heard a thing! Of course he's beating her. It's her own bloody fault, why doesn't she just leave him? The children? What good does he ever do them? Nothing but beatings. Easy enough to find someone else like him. Funny, the way people live their lives.

The girl looked back at the novel, read a few lines and had to admit that she didn't know what they meant. She closed the book and went out to the kitchen.

"Guten Tag,," she said and, turning to her mother: "Do you know where my green blouse is?"

"Which one?" asked Frau Mislowitsch.

The woman at the door smiled at Kitty. "Of course, our young lady here wants to get all dressed up. I suppose you want to go out, that's all right, I was just leaving anyway. I just wanted to make sure, Frau Mislowitsch, what we've just been talking about, it's just between us, strictly confidential. You know what I mean, don't you?"

"Of course, Frau Eichsteiner, no question about it."

"Are you going to the pictures?" asked the woman. Her hand was still on the latch, but now she turned towards Kitty.

Kitty would have liked to have kicked her out the door then and there. "No," she said shortly, turned around and went back into the living room. She flung the wardrobe open with a bang. Her mother put down her knitting and rolled her eyes in the direction of the living-room. Frau Eichsteiner nodded indulgently. Ah yes, the young people these days, always in such a hurry. She finally opened the door, said her farewells, and slipped out into the corridor. Her shadow could be seen scuttling past the corridor windows. She moved without making a sound, like a phantom, or a fiend.

"Which green blouse were you looking for?" asked Frau Mislowitsch as she entered the living room.

Kitty was standing in front of the wardrobe, doors flung wide open. Her underwear sat folded in neat piles, held together by ribbons. The shelves were full, a gentle scent of lavender wafted from the wardrobe.

"Has she gone?" asked the girl.

"Yes."

Kitty closed the doors with a bang "How can you bear to talk to her for so long. She's awful. Nothing but gossip."

"I could hardly just throw her out." Her mother's tone was reproachful.

"Why not? Nosy old bag."

"She's got no one, Kathy, she's all alone. You don't understand yet what that's like. She likes to have someone to talk to, someone to

listen to her. I must say I'm not particularly interested in the sorts of things she has to tell me, but at least it makes her feel better."

"And always running down all the other tenants. Just imagine what she tells everyone else about us."

"But we don't do anything wrong. What could she possibly say about us?"

Kitty's mother wasn't thinking about the time the priest had given that sermon about looking after the sick and the lonely, priests and their messages couldn't have been further from her mind. And if anyone had told her that what she was doing right here, right now, living out the priest's words to the letter, she would have been astonished, thought they were making a mountain out of a molehill. Loneliness was something she knew about instinctively, she knew that a lonely person seized on any opportunity to talk to someone, to talk about things which didn't necessarily have to mean anything, you didn't need to remember what was said, you just needed to bear witness that there was a person there, a person capable of speech, thought, hearing, bear witness that a human being still existed.

They hadn't moved from the wardrobe. Her mother was about to open the doors again.

"Now which blouse were you looking for," she began.

"I wasn't. I just wanted Eichsteiner gone."

The girl went back to the dressing-table, took up her comb and hairbrush and concentrated her attention on her hair, even though it was in perfect condition. Perhaps she felt a little uncomfortable, perhaps it was just habit. She thought of the other Kitty, the princess, and the power a princess would have to keep bothersome people at bay. She thought hard about the possibilities open to a princess in general, she thought about how differently she would have behaved in Kitty's place. Why wasn't she a princess? Why had she been brought up in this poky little two-room flat? Father, a conductor at the railways. Mother, a simple country girl. Allows herself to be led up the garden path, Eichsteiner. So, she could hardly just say no, could she? Very well then, she wouldn't be able to say no to the engineer either.

"What did you really want?" asked the woman.

Kitty turned around. "Well, our boss, the one in the laboratory, he asked me today whether I knew of anyone who would be free to look after three children on Sunday. Three little girls, I think, their mother

wants to go and see her husband who's been working somewhere on a construction site for quite a while now, a colleague of his. They live in a summer house, on the outskirts of town, with a garden. It wouldn't be much work, he said. I thought of you immediately."

"Where is it?"

"Out near the public baths. He told me what they'd pay too. It wasn't bad money!

"How do you get there? Is there a long walk from the tram station?"

"He said he'd drive you out there himself on Sunday morning and bring you back to town that evening."

No harm in thinking about it, thought the woman, Sunday, father would be working. Who knows, the garden might be beautiful at this time of the year. Children. She had always loved children.

"Why doesn't the woman take the children with her?" she asked.

"I'm not sure exactly, I think the engineer said something about the drive being too tiring for them. They're quite little."

Kitty thought of Herrn Leidemit and then of Pohanka. What if they were Albert's children? But why should they be? Didn't his wife believe him when he said that he'd taken over the supervision of the construction site? Did she want to surprise him? Or did she really want him that much? But how would that be any business of Leidemit's? Good friends, weren't they? Was he after his friend, the woman, the children? How should I know what he's up to?

"I'm supposed to phone him this evening, to say whether you can come."

The woman smiled. She saw her daughter in the mirror of the dressing-table, she saw the back of her body too, and her thoughts drifted back to herself, as a young woman, always impatiently awaiting the return of her husband. Three, four days at a time, away on the express trains, ah, I know what it's like when you're young, but it has its advantages too, and three children, just like me. But all girls. The man probably hasn't been home for weeks. Look at that skirt Kathy is wearing. Leaves nothing to the imagination. I really must tell her. I can understand how it must be, they'll be wanting to sleep together again and the children would only get in the way. Well, as long as they're not too wild, the children, they're girls after all, and a garden too.

"It's all right, phone him. I'll do it." She watched as the mirror image of her daughter disappeared.

As Kitty went past she turned briefly towards her mother: "Maybe I'll come and visit you out in the garden, bringing Heini with me."

Her mother still had more she wanted to say but Kitty was already in the kitchen and a moment later, she had slipped out the door.

That was on the Friday. While all this was going on, Leidemit was carefully packing up all the things he wanted to take with him. The beautiful painting, he had a separate case for it, the vase, careful now, a small ivory relief, the Renaissance cup. Here he is, riding triumphantly, he thought and the pathetic little human still struggling in the mouth of the great fish, Cupid on his back, right behind the big dorsal fin, riding along! On top of the world, that was probably the reason behind Rubnicek's love of the sport. Domination over the animals. But what about the animal inside the man? And now the cupid too was being packed up in wood-wool and wrapped between soft cloths. The little boy with his strong thighs, mastering the ravenous monster. Cupid! I'm being mastered, mastered even as I ride. Cupid? The strong little thighs were the last thing he saw of the little god before he disappeared in a sea of packing material. Leidemit thought of Eveline. She'd be waiting for him already! He looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past six.

One wall hanging after the other disappeared into the crates. Finally Leidemit sat down on the edge of his bed and looked around. Wherever he looked, empty white walls stared back at him. The chest of drawers and the easy chairs were still there, off to one side, but when he looked towards the door, looked in the direction from which he would leave and never return, the room took on the appearance of a monk's cell. In front of him, there were the roughly sawn timber crates, behind them, on the wall next to the entrance, hung the last piece of his movable inventory, the weighty ancient crucifix. He hadn't got around to exchanging it for a painting as he had intended. Maybe he hadn't been single-minded enough in carrying out his plan, he'd delayed his visit to the antique dealer, not for any particular reason, out of complacency probably, and maybe even a touch of reluctance. Now it was too late. He hesitated even now to take the valuable work off the wall, linden-tree wood, the body lightly painted, from the Salzburg area, maybe the Tyrol. Should he even take it with him? Should he take all that suffering with him? Suffering? Wouldn't

there be suffering enough where he was going? What about the poor, the lepers, the hungry, the illiterate people exploited by their employers, the small tenants driven into debt, the mothers despairing of their scrofulous children, the black girls infected with syphilis, the exiled Indians, didn't they know already all too well what suffering meant? But he was a gentleman, and a gentleman travelled by air and employed his own chauffeur (yes, he wouldn't even have to drive anymore) and played the casino. A gentleman sent his children to a convent school, observed the holidays and supported the church. Yes, he would take it after all. People were very religious there. It would make a good impression.

The telephone rang. At last! thought Leidemit. He got up, and went out to the entrance hall where the telephone was.

When he returned to the living room, he was smiling. Everything was all right now. So the girl had turned out to have her uses after all. No need for her to be so inquisitive though.

A short while later, the engine of the blue car in front of the house started up, with Leidemit at the wheel. It accelerated off into the distance.

Kitty left the telephone box slowly, even pensively. She had imagined the conversation would flow differently somehow. But why? It couldn't have been simpler, really. He had asked her something and she had given him an answer, what more could she expect? But that had always been the way with her, even the most trivial conversation with a man tended to lead her to expect something special. But why? It was silly and it served her right when she found herself disappointed time after time. Funny, with Pohanka it was different somehow. She made her way along the street, reached a dress shop, stopped in front of the window and looked at the summer fashion on display. Even his work-related instructions were given in such a warm, friendly tone. Those pleats wouldn't be very practical, and turtlenecks, now, with warm weather like this? No, you wouldn't catch me buying something like that. He's always so cold and distant. And why didn't he want to tell me the address? He's going to take me along with Mother after all! He hesitated, apparently he'd forgotten the address, him, a man who knows everything off by heart, all those figures, all those diagrams, all those measurements in all those confusing tables, no, I don't believe him, it's just an excuse, it's obvious, he can't fool me, Frau Eva, I'm not sure, look, they've got children's

clothes too, of course, she's got three I know that much, but is her name Eva, I don't know her name, delighted to have the pleasure of your company in my car, he said. Sounds like the hairdresser, I look forward to having the pleasure of serving you again, Fräulein Mislowitsch.

She looked at her watch. The film started at a quarter to seven. She had arranged to meet at half past six, that gave her a good quarter of an hour to spare. Dusk was already falling and the shop windows were lit by bright neon lights. Her face and her figure could be seen reflected in the illuminated glass and sometimes a young man would stop next to her and look at her image in the windowpane. In most cases she would move swiftly on to the next window. She didn't feel like playing the game today, she wasn't in the mood to observe the thousand little rules which in the end led to nothing and finally dissolved in a smile, an arrogant gesture or the lifting of an eyebrow. And as she stared into a window showcasing a top-of-the-line sports car, she suddenly realised that it wasn't so much the blue car, the apartment, or the well-paid job that made him so attractive but something quite different. She pondered what it could be, noticed a small fig tree in the window in front of her, stared at the shiny irregular leaves and took no notice at all of the large car in the middle of the showroom floor. She didn't know what was wrong. But she was angry and her anger was somehow directed at him. She was angry that he had treated her just like the hairdresser or shopkeeper treated her. She had adjusted her stocking on the staircase and her red hair had fallen into her face, but he had simply brushed past her, thumbing through a book of figures and tables, and it would be a pleasure to have her company in the car with her mother, with Frau Mama... he'd said, of course she'd said Mama too, with the stress on the second a, like in the book, but he'd taken no notice, pity she hadn't been able to see his face, but he hadn't moved a muscle when she mentioned Tolstoy either, he never showed any expression at all whenever someone else was concerned. But when she'd told him about Herrn Rubnec his facial expression had been very different. Then again, the call was probably about him. I wonder why? It was all so confusing, I should have asked Pohanka. I'm glad to see that you've been paying attention, he'd said, and nothing more, not even later, and whenever she thought she might have somehow penetrated the shield he surrounded himself with, she was forced to admit she was wrong.

Pohanka had never been like that, not even before they'd been to the wine cellar together.

She wondered whether it was her duty to tell him about Herrn Leidemit's plans. But what could she tell him? What did she actually know? That the boss was going to drive some woman to see her husband on Sunday, a woman with three children. And even if it were Frau Pohanka, what about it? Maybe he really was driving her out to see her husband, and they wanted to surprise him. What a surprise! Well, she would see.

When she looked at her watch again, there were only five minutes left before she was due at the cinema. She took a good long look at the little green tree in the shop window and set off back in the direction she'd come from. On the other side of the street, she could already see the lights of the cinema. LUX-CINEMA, LUX-CINEMA, flashing red, LUX-CINEMA, white, LUX-CINEMA, red and white, over and over, red and white, LUX-CINEMA. He was waiting there, she knew he'd always be waiting there, he would wait even if she stood him up again today, even if she didn't go out with him on Sunday, he would wait, wait at the spot where the red and white signal flashed over and over, at the LUX-CINEMA, amidst a crowd of people, somewhere in front of a shop window, alone, or at the factory gate when all the others had left. Why? Why didn't he try Susi from the transformer assembly-line or Berta from the tool department, or Lisa, she had red hair too and she'd be up for a ride on his motorbike. He ought to spread his wings a bit, he doesn't even know anyone else, he was always after her, he'd even met her mother, and in the end she might take him, yes, she might and he would regret it forever.

"Hallo, Kitty," a young man came towards her from the brightly-lit entrance to the cinema.

"Hallo," said the girl as they shook hands.

"I thought you mightn't come after all."

"Why not?" asked Kitty and looked at her watch. "It isn't that late. Twenty-five to." "Yes, yes, I know," said Heini, fiddled with the knot of his tie, slid his right hand under Kitty's arm and guided her to the entrance. Bright light flooded across them. "You know," Heini continued, "they're talking about you, in the factory, I hear."

"So what?" she said. The words came out as a hiss and she pulled away from his arm. "And because those silly cows whisper some

poisonous bit of gossip in your ear, you think I wasn't going to keep my word?" She brushed the strands of red hair off her face and looked at him wildly, almost angrily.

"No, no, I didn't believe them, not a word," said the young man quietly, soothingly. He tried to take hold of Kitty's arm again with his large hand. "But I can see for myself, you have to work so much overtime these days, I could understand if something came up, something connected with your work..."

What a pathetic excuse, thought the girl, but she wasn't really angry. She looked round the foyer of the cinema, over there, those had to be the stills of the film they were going to see today. "Have you got the tickets yet?" she asked while she walked towards the brightly-lit showcases.

"Of course," said Heini. His voice was still quiet, but the fact he already had the tickets seemed to give him some sense of confidence again.

They stood in front of the large showcase and looked at the colour pictures. "Oh, it's got Vivian Leigh in it. I didn't know that." While Kitty was concentrating on the stills, the man next to her evaporated into nothingness, and as she looked at Clark Gable's face she thought she saw the face of Herr Leidemit reflected in the glass. She turned around and looked up. Heini's broad face grinned down at her.

"Let's go," he said and shepherded the girl through the crowd of people, all moving towards the entrance of the theatre.

They had hardly taken their seats when the first jingles started up and the first colourful advertisements lit up the screen. The eyes of the audience immediately turned towards the front, mesmerised by the bright light, and the images. The two young people sat in the second to last row. Heini put his arm around Kitty's waist. She fought for a few moments against the lure of the advertisements, but they swallowed up more and more of her concentration, her senses became gradually captivated by the bath salts and the preserving agents, the bathing costumes and the frilly underwear. In the short interval leading up to the weekly news she thought again of the engineer, and when the large aircraft took off with its thundering engines, she thought she recognised Leidemit's face in one of the windows, then the band played the national anthem, and the president put on his hat and then all the new-born little monkeys in the city zoo jumped from one tree to the next in their enclosure, the diagrams had to be taken to

U-Block, to the assembly hall, to the first, the third, the fourth floor, to one of the leading fashion designer's catwalks, with and without jackets, and while Heini's hand rested on her hip bone and began to glide slowly across the muscle of her thigh and hesitantly tried to find its way upwards, reached her first rib, the victims of the most recent mining catastrophe were brought up to the surface, accompanied by the wailing of their relatives. The hand stopped, as if in shock. Only when the images were replaced by those of a children's home did it start moving again, very slowly. But then, the lights came on again, the latecomers were allowed in to hurry to their seats and Kitty began to tell the young man about her new job.

"Time just flies, I can't believe it when I think back to the assembly hall, where I used to look at my watch every ten minutes to see whether the day was almost over! Now I hardly feel as if I've even begun and all of a sudden it's five o'clock."

"Really?" said Heini and stared straight ahead at the white expanse of screen, as if he could still see, or was just about to see the images changing in rapid sequence. Through the open door of the theatre came the revving of a passing motorbike.

"What shall we do on Sunday?" he asked.

"The head engineer, you see, his name is Leidemit, you might know him, he just doesn't put up with anything less than the best from anyone."

"They say the water is really warm out at Zicksee."

"I've started working for another engineer now, he's taught me so much and he's much more patient than the boss."

Why is she going on about work like that, thought Heini, who gives a damn? "I haven't been there yet," he said, "but Karli, one of the machine-operators, and Erika from the third floor, the blond one, they were down there last Sunday, they were the ones who told me about it."

"Erika from the transformer section?"

The two had to get up to let another couple past. When they sat down again, Kitty continued.

"I think he helped me get the promotion."

Of course, it was partly my doing as well, I made sure I impressed him, but he acts so differently to other men, even in the wine cellar, too bad it's happening to him, if only I could help, but do I even *know* anything for certain? Kitty sat, lost in her own thoughts, oblivious to

Heini's voice. All she caught was his last sentence - "They've got ping-pong tables out there too."

She had already heard about the lake. People said it was beautiful. I've always wanted to go there. Ping-pong? Well, I'm not really that keen on ping-pong. Erika, yes! But the lake, pure, clear water, what do I care about that woman's relationships? What's it got to do with me, it's none of my business whether he goes to see her or not, that tall, blond man, wonder what she looks like? I'd like to see her, just once, but I couldn't trust Heini with something like that, no way, but he might be able to help me, I suppose. He'd be happy to.

And while the lights slowly dimmed and the first images appeared on the screen, she saw herself sitting behind Heini on his motorbike, sweeping between hills covered in prairie grass, past herds of galloping wild horses, all the way up to the door of Pohanka's summer house.

The young man next to her fell silent too. This time his hand roamed a little higher around her body. She allowed the tips of his fingers to touch her breast, but as the story up on the screen progressed his fingers became more and more sluggish, until they finally stopped altogether, resting motionless under the firm curve.

After the film had finished they hung around the street corner for a while and talked about what they had just seen. When they reached Heini's motorbike, there was a short embarrassed silence and neither of them really knew what was going to happen next. The man thought he'd been made a fool of again because Kitty hadn't responded to his suggestion of a trip on Sunday, she on the other hand was expecting him to ask her if she wanted a ride on his motorbike. Finally she had enough, got up on the pillion, which came as a complete surprise to him, and asked him if he wanted a bit of fresh air. Of course he did, it was what he'd always wanted, but up till now she'd never accepted any of his invitations.

It didn't take long before they could see the swinging lights on the bridge mirrored in the flowing water. The dark hulls of the ships, moored to the riverbank with long ropes, lay heavy and mysterious on the shimmering silvery water. A buoy hovered in the middle of the current. Further downstream, one could see the black cloud of a tug as she slowly made her way upriver. But the pair on the bike were oblivious to all that tonight. Something seemed to be vibrating inside them. Never before had they heard the engine underneath them

roaring and working like it was tonight, never before had they had the feeling, as they did tonight, of racing into a soundless realm of zero gravity. The shadows of the trees lining the alleyway seemed to engulf them, and they merged into their blackness. Dark and mute stood the old willows, poplars and linden trees, and now, when they slowed down a little, they could hear the wind roaring in the treetops. The two of them turned down a road which led to the gardens. In the distance, they could see the large shimmering surface of the waters of the Old Danube. The silhouette of a weeping willow stood, alone and melancholy against the shimmering background. Heini knew of a bench further on, in the shadow near the water. He could already see it. But Kitty saw something quite different. She saw a blue car parked on one of the side streets. She held fast to Heini. Ah yes, the tall blond man! So that's where he was, lying next to the woman, the woman whose image was constantly changing, now she saw strong thighs, the beautiful slim hand digging into the soft, white buttocks, thought of drooping, wobbly breasts with shrivelled nipples, plump, fat fingers, a pursed mouth.

They drove slowly past the blue car. Heini, who hadn't noticed anything, stopped the engine, and they coasted a few metres along the water's edge before the bike stopped, and they dismounted underneath the tree whose shadow encased the bench.

It was of course not the first time that they had sat together on a hidden bench at such a late hour and he had been allowed to caress her. Many times she had leaned against him and her red hair had touched his cheek, but when he'd tried for more than kisses, more than a game with hands and knees and skin, wanted to explore her body, she'd always turned away. Now the large choir of frogs, or toads, or whatever they were, was singing its eternally repeating song. Legs spread, each tiny singer floated in the water, only the small head with its shimmering dark eyes was visible, only the protruding bulge of its eyes, its invisible ears and its large, continuously croaking mouth remained above the surface of the water, and sometimes it too they disappeared and then there was one voice fewer in the choir. But no listener would ever notice the loss, there were still plenty remaining, the others all continued their even song, only every now and then did an old one suddenly let fly with an especially low croaking, or a sudden gurgling was heard and they all stopped at once, paused for a few bars, only to continue with even more vigour. Hazy, indefinite

human voices could be heard wafting across from one of the garden houses, helplessly lost in the vast stream of the song of praise which rose from the swamp. Because this was what it sounded like, a song praising the night, praising the fertile swamp, a thousand-fold hymn of praise to the life which renewed itself a thousand times. And while Heini sat on the bench, feeling the firm muscles of Kitty's legs, an image of his childhood swam up before his inner eye, he might have been eight or ten years old then, and he had always wanted to tell the girl about it, but something had always got in the way, and he had forgotten it again, but now it was there again, clear as day. His aunt had slammed the door behind her with a crash and stalked angrily out into the kitchen. Just like his mother, just like his mother, he had heard her muttering to herself, and now he was sitting by himself in his little room with a preserving jar on the table in front of him. In the jar, between the blades of grass and lettuce leaves, a small tree-frog sat blinking at him. But there were fat tears in his eyes and every now and then one of them would roll its way down his cheek. He felt sorry for the little animal. Outside in the garden, on the nearby river-bank, it could jump from leaf to leaf, from twig to twig, search freely for its food and join the great choir of its family, but in the jar it was restricted, dependent on food from a paper bag. Those delicate, long fingers, he imagined them feeling their way from one leaf to the next, imagined the flexible thighs bending and stretching, the small head turning to and fro, the heart just below the neck beating clearly, visibly. But it was the eyes which really fascinated him and, clouded by tears, he saw the little frog's eyes reflected in his own. He saw his fingers lengthen, always grasping at the same things. He saw them feeling their way through the tiny space, always in the end pushing up against a glass wall. His eyes bulged and he was forced to blink but that changed nothing, there were the same bundles of grass and the same green lettuce leaves and a puddle of cool water down below. He laid one of his hands on the wall of the jar, his long middle finger was slightly bent, he tapped with the tip of his finger here and there. Everywhere he turned, there was something he couldn't see, and which wouldn't let him past. He climbed up the bundle of grass, it hardly gave way at all under his insignificant weight, and he reached the lid with the few air holes punched in. He could peer through, tiny windows opened up to him and he could look through them to the outside, to the sky, incomprehensibly distant, with flies swarming to

and fro. But if he let himself fall, down onto a leaf at the bottom of the jar, part of him touched the water with the frog and he knew that this water was hard, and empty, not like the water in the ponds over by the river, he could smell them even in his tiny prison, those pools were populated with thousands and thousands of creatures, impregnated with plants, dead and alive, they became warmer and warmer as the daylight hours grew larger each day. This water on the other hand was cold, and he drew his long legs up against his body for protection. His breathing was irregular and heavy, he sat quietly and stared with large, silent eyes though the gleaming glass wall. Were his eyeballs really so large, so protruding, did they really gleam that much? He refocused his gaze to see his slightly distorted mirror reflection in the curve of the jar. Now a large face appeared in front of him and the frog, the jar and the leaves became hazy, almost invisible. But next to the face he could see part of the wardrobe and the flowers on top, of the wardrobe, flowers in a jar, and next to them there was a large empty wall with a single picture hanging on it. It was a portrait of his parents, the only one he had. His mother, a beautiful, fragile woman, was standing in front of a bowl of fruit, while his father smiled jovially opposite her. He saw himself clearly in the glass, tears in his eyes, standing next to his mother, looking up at the man. He could see the man's sister coming and going, bringing ever-more preserving jars, handing paper to the man to close off the hot, sterile jars, old family heirlooms handed down from Father's mother and from her mother and from who knows who else. The jars were piled on top of each other along the wall, beside each other and on top of each other, fruit and vegetables from Father's family's garden. He handed his mother an apple and together they admired its smoothness, its roundness. But then it was swiftly cut up and sliced into the jar. His mother caressed the delicate skin of a peach, but all too quickly the soft skin was ripped from the fruit's body. He admired the distant, sweet blue of the damsons Mother had gathered in a bowl but quickly, quickly, the fruit were taken up by busy hands and squeezed into a liquid pulp. It was his aunt, she had always wanted the best for her brother, but he saw the sadness and the sorrow in his mother's face and it caused the bitter tears to start in his eyes. When he had quietened down, he crept through the entrance hall, past the kitchen into the garden. He held the jar firmly under his arm and ran towards the nearby river-meadow.

But all this lasted only a moment. The closeness of the other body was overwhelming. Kitty had put her arm firmly around his neck, now wasn't the time for talking about things like that, maybe another time, maybe later, afterwards. But no, he didn't tell her later either, not even when he felt the loneliness gnawing away at his soul, not even then, living alongside another human being and feeling the loneliness nevertheless, it might have been the same loneliness his mother had felt, he had never ever in all his life told another soul about it. But now he could feel her breath, feel her slightly parted lips, her gently trembling body, her muscles vibrating like a three-year old filly just before the gun, when all is expectation and tension and impatience and wild desire.

It might have been half an hour later, that they saw the big fish... The three-year old filly had been resting quietly in the crook of his arm, her head lying sleepily on his shoulder. She was lying across his lap, a strange but somehow logical reversal of the pietà. It's always the woman after all, who redeems, gives herself, gives up her personality, sacrifices herself. Formed by nature to give anew, even when she receives, formed to give something greater, formed to redeem, without her redemption men become angry, stubborn and arrogant, suffer delusions of grandeur. The two of them looked up into the night sky, the lights of the city were far away, and in the darkness, all the constellations seemed close. Decades later, she would remember those stars, important moments would bring them close to her again. When she gave birth to her first child, when her mother died and – much later, hazy and pale, but still present – when her daughter got married. Not that she could find or remember by name the constellations that Pohanka had shown and explained to her on their way home from the wine cellar. She knew the Great Bear and the Little Bear, but she'd known them without Pohanka's astronomy lesson. Vega, Lyra, Andromeda on the other hand... she could remember neither the names nor their positions.

Only Orion she remembered, and with that name the whole star-lit sky of the night would be set singing and ringing, the singing of Orion was there when she was in labour, giving birth to little Wolfgang, the singing of Orion sounded at the grave of her mother, the singing of Orion, and the singing was suddenly interrupted by a loud splash from the direction of the water as if someone had thrown something large into it. They both jumped and looked around, but there was nothing to

be seen other than the darkness and the silhouettes of the summer houses and the trees, and in front of them, the dully gleaming surface of the water. They strained their ears, listening attentively into the blackness. From far away came the roaring of motorbikes, the rumbling of trams, somewhere a locomotive was whistling, a distorted piece of music wafted through the air from a speaker in a house nearby. But across the water it was silent, eerily quiet. Then they heard it again, that splashing on the surface of the water, and now they could see it too. It was a huge fish, which propelled itself right up above the surface of the water and then fell back into its wet element. A huge sense of relief washed over them, it's true, but the song of Orion had stopped. They got up and together they walked the few steps to the riverbank. Now it was the choir of frogs again, the toads, or whatever animals they were, that echoed through the night.

They drove slowly on the way back, watched the lights in the river under the bridge, saw the large, dark hulls of the moored boats and the tug labouring slowly upstream, cool air came up from the water and the girl had to smooth her dress down against her body. Heini still couldn't believe it, that the very thing he had given up hoping for had fallen into his lap so easily. He watched the dancing lights happily, not noticing the gradual but deadly certainty with which they were shattered, smashed, and swallowed up by the dark vehicle, the tug, neither did he notice the lonely man on the black boat flying its foreign flag, a lonely man with callused hands and a hard, weather-beaten face and a wife and two children somewhere down there in Yugoslavia. A man whose life on the black tug melted away in the endless, laborious upstream journey of black loneliness.

Standing outside Kitty's house, they agreed that Heini should pick her up on Sunday and that together they would drive out to the garden where her mother was looking after the three little girls. The young man had completely forgotten that he had suggested they go out with Karli and Eva to swim in the Zicksee.